Clonal Deletion Induced by Either Radioresistant Thymic Host Cells or Lymphohemopoietic Donor Cells at Different Stages of Class I-restricted T Cell Ontogeny

By Daniel E. Speiser, Hanspeter Pircher, Pamela S. Ohashi, Diego Kyburz, Hans Hengartner, and Rolf M. Zinkernagel

From the Laboratory for Experimental Pathology, Institute of Pathology, University Hospital, CH-8091 Zürich, Switzerland

Summary

Major histocompatibility complex (MHC) products and self-antigens expressed in the thymus determine the repertoire of mature α/β T cells. While positive selection of self-MHC–restricted T cells is directed by MHC molecules expressed by thymic epithelial cells, negative selection depends to a large extent on self-antigens presented by lymphohemopoietic cells. However, radioresistant components of the thymus also influence negative selection, but it remains controversial whether this is accomplished by clonal deletion, clonal anergy, or other mechanisms. In this study, T cell development in mice expressing a transgenic T cell receptor (TCR) specific for lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV) plus H-2Db was analyzed in the presence or absence of the viral antigen. A novel approach to analyze the thymic tissue requirements for negative selection was possible by comparing thymocyte selection in H-2Db versus H-2Db<sup>bm13</sup> mice, since the latter allowed positive selection but not LCMV-specific deletion of transgenic TCR-expressing thymocytes. In irradiation bone marrow chimeras expressing the restriction element for negative selection (H-2D<sup>b</sup>) on host tissue, we show that radioresistant recipient cells in the thymus deleted developing T cells at an early stage of differentiation. In contrast, chimeras expressing H-2D<sup>b</sup> on lymphohemopoietic donor cells showed clonal deletion at a later stage during ontogeny.

The thymus provides a highly efficient environment for differentiation of T lymphocytes (1, 2). Engagement of the α/β TCR in immature T cells plays a critical role both in inducing the development of T cells bearing receptors specific for foreign antigen presented by self-MHC molecules (positive selection), and the deletion of potentially harmful self-reactive T cells (negative selection). The sequence of thymocyte developmental stages and the cellular interactions may provide important clues to understand how T cells “learn” to discriminate self from nonself. The cells involved in thymic selection have been analyzed extensively. It has become clear that positive selection is largely controlled by thymic epithelial cells (3–13).

Negative selection, however, is influenced by both bone marrow–derived cells and thymic epithelia (5–7, 14–27). It has been demonstrated that antigens presented by lymphohemopoietic cells induce tolerance (reviewed in references 5, 6, 14, and 15). For example, clonal deletion of T cells specific for I-E<sup>+</sup> (28–30), Mls-1<sup>+</sup> (31, 32), Mls-2/3<sup>+</sup> (33), or staphylococcal enterotoxin B (SEB) (34) is induced by bone marrow–derived thymic cells (7, 21–23). In contrast, the role of thymic epithelial cells in negative selection is less defined. While early investigations using thymus grafting failed to demonstrate negative selection by the MHC molecules displayed on thymic epithelium (35–37), other studies in chimeras and/or transgenic mice indicate that tolerance may be induced by thymic epithelial cells (16–22, 24–27). Often it was not possible to determine whether nonresponsiveness was due to deletion, anergy, or other mechanisms. Recently, it has been postulated that a nondeletional mechanism such as clonal anergy may occur when lymphocytes encounter their specific self-antigen on thymic epithelia (21, 22, 24, 25). However, while some authors claimed that thymic epithelial cells induced anergy of Mls-1<sup>+</sup>-specific T cells (21, 22), our comparative analysis indicated that Mls-1<sup>+</sup>-specific anergy was induced by lymphohemopoietic cells (23).

In this study transgenic mice were used carrying the P14 TCR α/β chains (V<sub>α</sub>2-J<sub>α</sub>TA31, V<sub>β</sub>8.1-DJβ82.4) specific for the lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV) glycopro-
tein epitope amino acids (aa) 32-42 presented in the context of H-2D\(^{b}\) (38). Positive selection of transgenic T cells has been shown to depend on the presence of the H-2\(^{b}\) molecule, while clonal deletion occurred in H-2\(^{b}\) LCMV carrier mice (38). The virus carrier state (established by virus infection either neonatally or during immunosuppression) was associated with ubiquitous virus expression, including thymic epithelia and lymphohemopoietic cells (39, 40). In this study the respective roles of the host’s thymus versus lymphohemopoietic donor cells in clonal deletion was evaluated by investigating thymocyte maturation in LCMV carrier bone marrow chimeras. The results show that transgenic T cells were clonally deleted at different stages of development depending upon expression of the viral antigen restriction element H-2D\(^{b}\) either on host-derived radioresistant or donor-derived lymphohemopoietic cells.

**Materials and Methods**

**Animals.** Inbred BALB/c (H-2\(^{d}\)) and C57BL/6 (H-2\(^{b}\)) mice were purchased from the Institute for Zuchthygiene (Tierspital, University of Zürich, Switzerland). Breeders of the two C57BL/6 H-2D\(^{b}\) mutant inbred mouse strains B6.C-H-2\(^{bm13}\) and B6.C-H-2\(^{bm14}\) (41, 42) (referred to as H-2\(^{bm13}\) and H-2\(^{bm14}\) mice) were kindly provided by Dr. Cornelis J. Mellei (The Netherlands Cancer Institute, Amsterdam, Holland). H-2\(^{bm13}\) mice express a mutated H-2D\(^{b}\) molecule with three amino acid changes at the bottom of the peptide antigen binding groove (\(\beta\)-pleated sheet) at positions 114 (Leu \(\rightarrow\) Gin), 116 (Phe \(\rightarrow\) Tyr), and 119 (Glu \(\rightarrow\) Asp). The mutated H-2D\(^{bm14}\) molecule has a single amino acid changed on the helix of the TCR binding site at position 70 (Gln \(\rightarrow\) His) (42). The transgenic mouse line 327 expressing the \(\alpha/\beta\) TCR derived from the cytotoxic T cell clone P14 specific H-2D\(^{b}\) plus LCMV glycoprotein peptide as 32-42 was generated by coinjection of the P14 TCR \(\alpha\) and \(\beta\) chain gene constructs into (C57BL/6 x DBA/2)\(\times\)F\(_{1}\) fertilized eggs (38). The male founder 327 bearing 10-20 copies of both \(\alpha\) and \(\beta\) transgenes integrated at the same chromosome was backcrossed to C57BL/6 mice. \(\alpha/\beta\) TCR transgenic (tg) H-2\(^{d}\) and H-2\(^{bm13}\) mice were obtained by backcrossing to BALB/c and B6.C-H-2\(^{bm11}\), respectively. Characteristics of the strains relevant to the present study are summarized in Table 1.

**Chimeras.** Bone marrow recipients were lethally irradiated (950 rad, 117 rad/min, \(^{111}\)Cs source) and reconstituted 1 d later with 1-2 x 10\(^{7}\) T cell–depleted bone marrow cells as described (3). To establish a LCMV carrier state, chimeras were infected intravenously with 5 x 10\(^{6}\) PFU of LCMV-WE strain 4-14 h after bone marrow transfer. For the following 5 wk, chloramphenicol (0.4 g/liter) was added to the drinking water. Both infected and noninfected chimeras had a survival rate of 85-100%. Analysis was performed between 8 and 12 wk after reconstitution. Chimerism was monitored by flow cytometry with mAbs specific for the transgenic TCR domains V\(\alpha\)2 (B20.1) and V\(\beta\)8.1 (KJ16). A strong reduction of thymocytes expressing the transgenic TCR was observed in F1 chimeric mice reconstituted with either H-2\(^{b}\) or H-2\(^{d}\) transgenic bone marrow (Fig. 1 c and d). The extent of deletion was comparable with nonchimeric virus carriers published previously (38) and similar to the deletion described in other class I–restricted \(\alpha/\beta\) TCR transgenic mouse models (8, 9). In contrast, thymocytes from uninfected control chimeras expressed transgenic V\(\alpha\)2 (Fig. 1, a and b) and V\(\beta\)8.1 (not shown) at high levels. Lymph node cells in uninfected chimeras were \(\sim\)40% V\(\alpha\)2+CD8+, whereas in chimeric virus carriers <2% were V\(\alpha\)2+CD8+. In summary, the data suggest that radioresistant thymic cells expressing the appropriate restriction element H-2D\(^{b}\) in H-2\(^{d}\)-H-2\(^{bm13}\) carrier mice induced clonal deletion of virus-specific CTL precursors.

**Results**

**Early Deletion by Host Radioresistant Cells of Maturing Thymocytes in LCMV Carrier Bone Marrow Chimeras.** (C57BL/6 x BALB/c)\(\times\)F\(_{1}\) mice were lethally irradiated and reconstituted with T cell–depleted P14 \(\alpha/\beta\) TCR transgenic bone marrow from either H-2\(^{b}\) or H-2\(^{d}\) mice. To establish a virus carrier state, chimeras were infected with 5 x 10\(^{6}\) PFU of LCMV strain WE (LCMV-WE) between 4 and 14 h after irradiation and bone marrow reconstitution. Livers and spleens obtained up to 30 wk after infection contained \(\sim\)10\(^{6}\) LCMV per gram organ (data not shown), confirming that these mice were virus carriers. Between 8 and 12 wk after bone marrow transplantation, T cell maturation was analyzed by flow cytometry with mAbs specific for the transgenic TCR domains V\(\alpha\)2 (B20.1) and V\(\beta\)8.1 (KJ16). A strong reduction of thymocytes expressing the transgenic TCR was observed in F1 chimeric virus carriers reconstituted with either H-2\(^{b}\) or H-2\(^{d}\) transgenic bone marrow (Fig. 1 c and d). The extent of deletion was comparable with nonchimeric virus carriers published previously (38) and similar to the deletion described in other class I–restricted \(\alpha/\beta\) TCR transgenic mouse models (8, 9). In contrast, thymocytes from uninfected control chimeras expressed transgenic V\(\alpha\)2 (Fig. 1, a and b) and V\(\beta\)8.1 (not shown) at high levels. Lymph node cells in uninfected chimeras were \(\sim\)40% V\(\alpha\)2+CD8+, whereas chimeric virus carriers <2% were V\(\alpha\)2+CD8+. In summary, the data suggest that radioresistant thymic cells expressing the appropriate restriction element H-2D\(^{b}\) in H-2\(^{d}\)-H-2\(^{bm13}\) carrier mice induced clonal deletion of virus-specific CTL precursors.
bone marrow chimeras or the engraftment of thymectomized mice with parental thymus implants. However, positive selection of the transgenic α/β TCR depended on the expression of H-2D^b by the thymic epithelium, thus excluding the possibility to study negative selection in H-2D^b-negative thymi. This experimental problem could be circumvented as follows.

H-2^bmt3 mice express a mutated H-2D^b molecule with three amino acid changes at the bottom of the peptide antigen binding groove (42). The P14 transgenic α/β TCR can be positively selected in the context of H-2D^bmt3 products (P. S. Ohashi and H. P. Pircher, manuscript in preparation). However, H-2D^bm13 molecules are unable to present the viral epitope (LCMV glycoprotein aa 32–42) to the transgenic TCR. Furthermore, transgenic H-2^bmt3 LCMV carrier mice are unable to clonally delete the transgenic TCR (Table 1) (unpublished results). Finally, H-2^bm14 mice, another H-2^d mutant mouse strain, neither promote positive nor negative selection of the P14 transgenic α/β TCR, and were therefore ideally used as closely related controls.

The unique property of H-2D^bm13 molecules allowing positive but not negative selection of the transgenic TCR offered a new methodological approach to overcome the known problem of radioresistant or 2'-deoxyguanosine-resistant residual lymphohemopoietic cells “contaminating” the thymus of irradiation bone marrow chimeras or thymus-transplanted mice. To study the capacity of the thymic epithelium for clonal deletion, irradiation chimeras were generated by injection of transgenic T cell–depleted bone marrow into either H-2^b × bm13 or H-2^bm13 × bm14 F1 hosts. When analyzed 8–12 wk later, uninfected control chimeras revealed high levels of transgenic Vα2+ and Vβ8.1 + thymocytes (Table 2 and Fig. 2, a, b, and c). Chimeric virus carriers clonally deleted transgenic T cells resulting in low levels of both TCR^hi thymocytes as well as of mature cells in the periphery (Table 2 and Fig. 2, b and f). Interestingly, in H-2^b → H-2^bm13 × bm14 virus carriers, a subpopulation of thymocytes expressing the transgenic TCR at low (TCR^lo) density was found (Fig. 2 d) that was absent in H-2^b-expressing hosts (Figs. 1 d and 2 f). In H-2^b → H-2^bm13 × bm14 carriers, clonal deletion was induced by lymphohemopoietic tissue, since the restriction element H-2D^b capable of viral antigen presentation causing deletion was not expressed by host radioresistant cells. Thus, deletion induced by lymphohemopoietic cells occurred at a later stage of T cell differentiation and was therefore distinguishable from deletion induced by host radioresistant cells. Thymocytes from the various chimeras showed similar forward light scatters (not shown), indicating that they were of similar size. This permitted direct comparison of the TCR expression levels measured.

To assess the tolerance status of transgenic T cells from

| Table 1. Characteristics of α/β TCR Transgenic (tg) Mice Used in This Study |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| H-2 compatible mouse strain   | H-2             | Positive selection of the tg TCR |
| nontransgenic                 | K   | I   | D   |                 |
| tg H-2^b                      | C57BL/6 | b   | b   | b   | +              |
| tg H-2^bm13                   | B6.C-H2^bm13   | b   | b   | bm13 | +              |
| tg H-2^bm14                   | B6.C-H2^bm14   | b   | b   | bm14 | −              |
| tg H-2^d                      | BALB/c         | d   | d   | d   | −              |

In uninfected mice, the P14 tg α/β TCR is positively selected in the context of both H-2^b and H-2^bm13 resulting in high TCR expression (~95% of T cells express the transgenes) and skewing to the CD8 lineage. In congenitally or neonatally infected LCMV carrier mice expressing the viral antigen in the thymus (39, 40), negative selection of the transgenic TCR is due to thymic clonal deletion occurring in association with H-2^b but not H-2^bm13 or H-2^bm14 (38, and P. S. Ohashi and H. P. Pircher, manuscript in preparation).
Table 2. TCR Expression and Proliferative/Cytotoxic Responses of TCR tg Lymphocytes from Parent→F~ Chimeric Controls and Carriers

| Tissue                  | Uninfected carrier | LCMV Carrier | Uninfected carrier | LCMV Carrier | Uninfected carrier | LCMV Carrier |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|
| Percent cells positive for: | Thymus             | Lymph node   | Thymus             | Lymph node   | Thymus             | Lymph node   |
| Vα2low                  | 43.0 ± 8.1         | 38.7 ± 3.9   | 30.1 ± 3.1         | 4.3 ± 2.7    | 38.7 ± 3.9         | 43.9 ± 3.9   |
| Vβ8.1low                | 30.1 ± 3.1         | 2.1 ± 0.6    | 10.9 ± 3.2         | 2.1 ± 0.6    | 12.1 ± 3.2         | 1.2 ± 0.6    |
| Vα2hi                   | 43.4 ± 6.9         | 32.1 ± 1.9   | 6.0 ± 0.3          | 3.1 ± 0.6    | 32.1 ± 1.9         | 3.1 ± 0.6    |
| Vβ8.1hi                 | 34.4 ± 5.6         | 2.9 ± 0.3    | 2.7 ± 1.1          | 1.7 ± 0.2    | 2.9 ± 0.3          | 1.7 ± 0.2    |
| Proliferative responses (cpm) |                 |              |                    |              |                    |              |
| to LCMV infected         | 37.0 × 10³         | 56.2 ± 1.2   | 72.7 × 10³         | 58.3 ± 3.3   | 44.6 × 10³         | 1.2 ± 2.5    |

Mean ± SEM are from FACS analyses of unseparated cell preparations of three to five chimeras per group. Examples of FACS profiles from one chimera per group are shown in Fig. 2. The percentages for low or int/hi positive cells, respectively, refer to the regions given in Fig. 2. Percent Vα2+CD8+ or percent Vβ8.1+CD8+ indicate the percentages of lymph node cells expressing both the transgenic TCR variable regions and CD8. Proliferative responses were measured by [3H]thymidine uptake (10 h) after stimulation with LCMV-infected peritoneal macrophages (3 d). Cytotoxicity was analyzed 4 d after intravenous infection with 10⁶ PFU LCMV-WE. Chimerism assessed with mAb K7-309 (K b specific, positively staining all lymph node cells) and mAb H141-31 (D b specific, staining H-2D b+ cells strongly but H-2D brat3+ lymphocytes only at low fluorescence intensities; reference 47) showed that ~90% of lymph node cells were of donor type.

the various chimeras, proliferation and cytotoxic T cell responses were tested (Table 2). While noncarrier chimeras responded vigorously to LCMV-infected stimulator or target cells, both LCMV-specific proliferative responses and cytotoxic T cell activities were low in the chimeric carrier mice (Table 2). Thus, all the noncarrier chimeras were T cell competent against LCMV and all the carriers were nonresponsive correlating with presence or absence of mature transgenic T cells in thymus and periphery.

Discussion

In the past, the technical difficulty to completely eliminate lymphohemopoietic cells from thymic tissue while preserving its capacity to promote T cell maturation has been a limiting factor to experimentally determine whether thymic epithelial cells can induce clonal deletion. Therefore, we studied negative selection in H-2D b mutant mice. Since H-2bm13×bm14 mice selected the transgenic TCR positively but not negatively (P. S. Ohasi, manuscript submitted for publication), it was not essential that lymphohemopoietic cells were completely eliminated by irradiation to assess the contribution of donor lymphohemopoietic cells to negative selection. In chimeric H-2b→H-2bm13×bm14 virus carriers, clonal deletion induced by lymphohemopoietic cells was at the TCRlow stage of thymocyte ontogeny. In contrast, only transgenic TCR-negative lymphocytes remained in virus carriers expressing H-2D b on radiation-resistant thymic cells. Therefore, these cells probably including thymic epithelial cells are apparently capable to induce clonal deletion at an early stage of ontogeny.

An alternative explanation based on the assumption that deletion can only be induced by lymphohemopoietic cells can be postulated. The presence of TCRlow cells in H-2b→H-2bm13×bm14 carrier chimeras could possibly be due to "delayed" deletion caused by insufficient repopulation of the thymic microenvironment by donor cells. However, this assumption would imply that deletion in H-2d→H-2b×d or H-2bm13→H-2bm13×bm14 carriers was due to low amounts of remaining lymphohemopoietic cells. Accordingly, one would also expect a complete and early deletion in H-2b→H-2bm13×bm14 carrier chimeras, where donor cells had repopulated the thymus (45). Thus, since we did not find early deletion in H-2bm13×bm14 carriers where deletion was induced by lymphohemopoietic cells, we con-
include that the early deletion in H-2^d \rightarrow H-2^b \times d or H-2^{bm13} \rightarrow H-2^b \times bm13 carriers was induced by radioresistant thymic host cells, presumably the thymic epithelium.

The results imply that the thymic epithelium may be involved in both positive and negative selection. Subpopulation of the different epithelial cells within the thymic cortex and medulla may exhibit distinct self antigens and functions (24–27, 37, 46). Alternatively, different affinity thresholds may regulate positive or negative selection (5). One may argue that our transgenic T cells were deleted early due to presumably high avidity interactions with radioresistant thymic cells. It is also possible that the observed differences in deletion may be because thymocytes first encounter epithelial cells and only later interact with lymphohemopoietic cells.

Our findings support the notion that T cells may be susceptible to clonal deletion over an extended period of thymic differentiation. Furthermore, several of the various thymic cell components may induce negative selection. Thus, the immune system may have developed a variety of ways to increase the probability of self-specific lymphocytes encountering self-antigens in order to assure efficient induction and maintenance of immunological tolerance.

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Address correspondence to Daniel E. Speiser, Experimentelle Pathologie, Institut für Pathologie, Universitätsspital Zürich, Sternwartstrasse 2, CH-8091 Zürich, Switzerland.

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