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ERAP1 allotypes shape the epitope repertoire of virus-specific CD8+ T cell responses in acute hepatitis C virus infection

Graphical abstract

Highlights
- ERAP1 polymorphisms are strongly linked with HLA class I-associated autoinflammatory disorders.
- We identified 2 hypoactive ERAP1 allotypes in an HLA-B*27:05+ individual with acute HCV infection.
- These ERAP1 allotypes modified the HCV-specific CD8+ T cell epitope repertoire in vivo, leading to altered immunodominance patterns.
- Altered immunodominance patterns potentially contributed to the failure of antiviral immunity.

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Lay summary
Endoplasmic reticulum aminopeptidase 1 (ERAP1) plays a key role in antigen presentation. Genetic variants of ERAP1 (leading to distinct allotypes) are linked with specific autoinflammatory disorders, such as ankylosing spondylitis and Behçet's disease. We found that ERAP1 allotypes modified the repertoire of virus-specific CD8+ T cell epitopes in a patient with hepatitis C virus, leading to an altered pattern of immunodominance that may have contributed to the failure of antiviral immunity in this patient.

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ERAP1 allotypes shape the epitope repertoire of virus-specific CD8+ T cell responses in acute hepatitis C virus infection

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Background & Aims: Endoplasmic reticulum aminopeptidase 1 (ERAP1) polymorphisms are linked with human leukocyte antigen (HLA) class I-associated autoinflammatory disorders, including ankylosing spondylitis and Behçet’s disease. Disease-associated ERAP1 allotypes exhibit distinct functional properties, but it remains unclear how differential peptide trimming in vivo affects the repertoire of epitopes presented to CD8+ T cells. The aim of this study was to determine the impact of ERAP1 allotypes on the virus-specific CD8+ T cell epitope repertoire in an HLA-B*27:05*1 individual with acute hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection.

Methods: We performed genetic and functional analyses of ERAP1 allotypes and characterized the HCV-specific CD8+ T cell repertoire at the level of fine epitope specificity and HLA class I restriction, in a patient who had acquired an HCV genotype 1a infection through a needle-stick injury.

Results: Two hypoactive allotypic variants of ERAP1 were identified in an individual with acute HCV infection. The associated repertoire of virus-derived epitopes recognized by CD8+ T cells was uncommon in a couple of respects. Firstly, reactivity was directed away from classically immunodominant epitopes, preferentially targeting either novel or subdominant epitopes. Secondly, reactivity was biased towards longer epitopes (10–11-mers). Despite the patient exhibiting favorable prognostic indicators, these atypical immune responses failed to clear the virus and the patient developed persistent low-level infection with HCV.

Conclusions: ERAP1 allotypes modify the virus-specific CD8+ T cell epitope repertoire in vivo, leading to altered immunodominance patterns that may contribute to the failure of antiviral immunity after infection with HCV.

Keywords: Epitope repertoire; ERAP1; Hepatitis C virus; HLA-B*27; T cells.

Lay summary: Endoplasmic reticulum aminopeptidase 1 (ERAP1) plays a key role in antigen presentation. Genetic variants of ERAP1 (leading to distinct allotypes) are linked with specific autoinflammatory disorders, such as ankylosing spondylitis and Behçet’s disease. We found that ERAP1 allotypes modified the repertoire of virus-specific CD8+ T cell epitopes in a patient with hepatitis C virus, leading to an altered pattern of immunodominance that may have contributed to the failure of antiviral immunity in this patient.

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Introduction

Endoplasmic reticulum aminopeptidase 1 (ERAP1) trims peptides to an optimal length (usually 8 or 9 amino acids) for presentation in the context of human leukocyte antigen (HLA) class I molecules.1-2 Genome-wide association studies have identified single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in ERAP1 as important risk factors in several HLA class I-associated autoinflammatory disorders,3 including ankylosing spondylitis,4 especially in conjunction with HLA-B*27.5,6 and Behçet’s disease, which is strongly linked with HLA-B*51.6 In addition, SNPs in ERAP1 can combine to encode discrete allotypes with composite functional properties that further increase the risk of disease.2 Biochemical analyses have revealed differential peptide trimming among ERAP1 allotypes, with hypoactive forms typically generating longer fragments (10–12-mers), and hyperactive forms typically generating shorter fragments (7–8-mers).5,8-10 However, the impact of specific ERAP1 allotypes on the naturally presented repertoire of peptide epitopes is currently unclear.11

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) has infected approximately 71 million people worldwide. Persistent infection ensues in 50–80% of cases, with a high risk of liver disease, which may progress to cirrhosis, liver failure, and hepatocellular carcinoma.12 Virus-specific CD8+ T cells are thought to play a key role in immune protection against HCV.13 This consensus is predicated on associative studies that have linked viral
clearance with potent and broadly directed CD8+ T cell responses and the presence of certain HLA class I allotypes.\textsuperscript{14} In particular, up to 80% of HLA-B*27+ individuals clear HCV spontaneously, contrasting with only 20–50% of individuals in the general population.\textsuperscript{15} We previously attributed this protective effect to the immunodominant HLA-B*27-restricted CD8+ T cell epitope NS5B<sub>2841-2849</sub> (ARMILMTHF), which is targeted in almost all HLA-B*27+ individuals during acute infection with HCV.\textsuperscript{16,17}

In this study, we performed a comprehensive analysis of ERAP1 allotypes and virus-specific CD8+ T cell responses in an HLA-B*27:05+ individual with acute HCV infection. Despite a symptomatic presentation, expression of HLA-B*27, and a favorable interleukin 28B (IL28B)/interferon lambda 4 (IFNL4) genotype, all of which predict viral clearance, this individual progressed to chronic infection, with low-level viremia (mostly <100 IU/ml) throughout a follow-up period of 20 months before the initiation of antiviral therapy. In-depth genetic, biochemical, and immunological analyses revealed the presence of ERAP1 allotypes with hypoactive trimming functions, which shaped the epitope repertoire to elicit atypical HCV-specific CD8+ T cell responses.

**Patients and methods**

**Samples**

A donor (MM) with acute HCV genotype 1a infection acquired via needle-stick injury was recruited after providing written informed consent in line with federal guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethik-Kommission der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg (#524/14). Venous blood samples (50 ml per draw) were collected in ethylene diamine tetraacetic acid (EDTA)-anticoagulated tubes at longitudinal time points. Peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) were isolated using lymphocyte separation medium density gradients (PAA Laboratories, Austria) and resuspended in Roswell Park Memorial Institute (RPMI) 1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum, 1% streptomycin/penicillin, and 1.5% HEPES buffer 1 M (complete medium; all additives from Thermo Fisher Scientific, Austria) and resuspended in Roswell Park Memorial Institute (RPMI) 1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum, 1% streptomycin/penicillin, and 1.5% HEPES buffer 1 M (complete medium; all additives from Thermo Fisher Scientific, Germany).

**Peptides, antibodies, and multimers**

Overlapping peptides (mostly 15 amino acids each, overlapping by 11 amino acids) spanning the entire polyprotein of HCV strain H77 (genotype 1a) were obtained from BEI Resources (Manassas, VA, USA) via the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (Bethesda, MD, USA). Additional peptides were synthesized with a free amine NH<sub>2</sub> terminus and a free acid COOH terminus using standard Fmoc chemistry (Genaxxon Bioscience, Germany). The viability dye 7-aminoactinomycin D (7-AAD) and the directly conjugated monoclonal antibodies anti-CD8-BV421 (clone RPA-T8), and anti-IFN-γ-FITC (clone 2842) were generated via the incorporation of an additional nucleotide (EcoRI) into the cloning site of pcDNA3.1. Amplification of the ERAP1 allotype 5' and 3' sequences was followed by the clone for allotype sequences.\textsuperscript{17} The amplicon was cloned into pCDNA3.1<sup>TM</sup> (Invitrogen, UK) and sequenced to identify both chromosomal allotypes of ERAP1. Sequences from donor MM were compared with the prototype (PT) ERAP1 using DNAdynamo alignment software (Blue Tractor Software, UK).

**DNA constructs**

The pCDNA3.1 minigenes (ES)-SHL8 and (ES)-X-SHL8 were engineered to encode an endoplasmic reticulum (ER) targeting signal sequence.\textsuperscript{19} The pCDNA3.1-(ES)-SRG-SHL8 construct was generated via the incorporation of an additional nucleotide sequence encoding serine, arginine, and glycine (SRG) in pCDNA3.1-(ES)-SHL8, engineered using the primers 5'CTTGCGGCAGTGCAGCCGAGCTGGCCGCTCATCAACTCTTGAGCCAC-3' and 5'-AGCCGCTGGATATGCTGCGCCGGTCGCTGCAAG-3'. Three HCV epitope-specific constructs were generated via the insertion of oligonucleotides into the EcoRI/Xbal sites of pCDNA3.1, encoding an ER translocation signal sequence followed by the amino acid sequences GRASSGKRY, SRGGRAAICGKY, or GRAAICGKYLF. Plasmid constructs encoding PT ERAP1, E280A non-functional ERAP1, and HLA-B*27:05 were described previously.\textsuperscript{17} All constructs were sequence-verified using DNAdynamo alignment software (Blue Tractor Software, UK).

**Cell lines and transfections**

ERAP1 knock-out 293T (293T E1KO) cells were transfected using the FuGENE 6 Transfection Reagent (Promega, UK).\textsuperscript{17} For assessment of ERAP1 trimming activity, 293T E1KO cells were transfected with 1 μg total DNA, consisting of 0.5 μg PT ERAP1,
0.5 µg E320A non-functional ERAP1, or 0.25 µg of each MM allotype-encoded ERAP1, together with 0.25 µg H2-Kb and 0.25 µg SHL8 or the extended precursor SRG-SHL8. For assessment of ERAP1 amino acid specificity, 293T E1KO cells were transfected with 0.1 µg total DNA, consisting of 0.05 µg MM allotype-encoded ERAP1, 0.025 µg H2-Kb, and 0.025 µg X-SHL8. All transfected cells were incubated for 24 h at 37 °C. Presentation of trimmed SHL8 and activation of the LacZ-inducible B3Z T cell hybridoma were assessed by measurement of intracellular LacZ activity using the substrate chlorophenol red-β-d-galactopyranoside (Roche, UK).10

Activation of donor MM T cells
The 293T E1KO cells were transfected with 1 µg total DNA, consisting of 0.5 µg ERAP1, 0.25 µg HLA-B*27:05, and 0.25 µg GRAICGKY, SRGGRAICGKY, or GRAICGKYLFL. Transfected cells were incubated for 24 h, harvested, and cultured for a further 24 h with donor MM T cells at an effector-to-target ration of 3:1. Activation of donor MM T cells was determined by IFN-γ staining as described.

Statistical analysis
Differences among multiple groups were evaluated for significance using a 1-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s post hoc test implemented in GraphPad Prism (www.graphpad.com).

For further details regarding the materials used, please refer to the CTAT table and supplementary information.

Results
Persistent low-level viremia after infection with HCV despite multiple predictors of spontaneous viral clearance
Donor MM experienced an accidental needle-stick injury from an HCV genotype 1a-infected patient and developed symptomatic HCV infection over a period of 20 months (Fig. 1). Seven weeks after the needle-stick injury, alanine aminotransferase peaked at 1,307 U/L, viremia peaked at 1.15 × 10^{7} IU/ml, and HCV-specific antibodies became detectable in the serum, and the donor suffered from fatigue, nausea, and moderate jaundice (bilirubin peaked at 5.3 mg/dl). Further virological analyses confirmed infection with HCV genotype 1a. Genetic analyses revealed that donor MM had the favorable IFNL4 (previously named IL28B) genotype CC (SNP rs12979860) and expressed the HLA class I molecules A*01:01, A*26:01, B*08:01, and B*27:05. Three positive predictors of spontaneous viral clearance were therefore present in this individual, namely symptomatic infection,22 IFNL4 genotype CC,23 and HLA-B*27.15 However, donor MM continued to display moderately elevated liver enzymes and remained positive for HCV RNA, albeit below the lower level of quantification (LLOQ, 12 IU/ml). In addition, donor MM suffered from oscillating complaints, including subfebrile temperatures and flu-like symptoms. After 20 months, treatment was initiated with direct-acting antivirals (DAAs), leading to normalization of liver enzymes, clearance of the virus (negative HCV RNA 12 and 24 weeks after discontinuation of DAAs) and resolution of symptoms.

Lack of viral clearance associated with altered HCV-specific CD8+ T cell responses
To determine the immunological correlates of persistent infection in donor MM, we performed a comprehensive analysis of HCV-specific CD8+ T cell responses, which are thought to play a key role in viral clearance.13 We used 460 overlapping peptides (OLPs) spanning the complete HCV genotype 1a protein and performed IFN-γ ELISpot assays in a matrix format.24,25 Positive responses were confirmed individually by intracellular staining for IFN-γ. Using this approach, we identified 6 HCV-specific CD8+ T cell responses in donor MM (OLP-77, OLP-203, OLP-209/210, OLP-211, OLP-323/324, and OLP-450/451; Fig. 2 and Table 1).

The responses elicited by OLP-209/210, OLP-211, and OLP-450/451 potentially targeted previously described epitopes restricted by HLA-A*26:01 (NS3^{1283-1291}, EVIKGGRHL),26 HLA-B*08:01 (NS3^{1295-1303}, HSKKKCDEL),27,28 and HLA-B*27:05 (NS5B^{2936-2944}, GRAICGKYLFL). We therefore tested these optimal 9-mer epitopes in peptide-specific cell lines. Unexpectedly, we only observed a response to NS3^{1295-1303} (HSGKKCDEL), corresponding to OLP-211 (Fig. 2). Responses to NS3^{1283-1291} (EVIKGGRHL) and NS5B^{2936-2944} (GRAICGKYLFL) were either absent or very weak (Fig. 2). Using Epstein-Barr virus-immortalized B cell lines partially matched for HLA class I, we confirmed that CD8+ T cells targeting OLP-209/210 were restricted by HLA-A*26:01 (Fig. 3A and 3B), and that CD8+ T cells targeting OLP-450/451 were restricted by HLA-B*27:05 (Fig. 3C). These findings suggested that CD8+ T cells from donor MM were specific for length variants of NS3^{1283-1291} (EVIKGGRHL) and NS5B^{2936-2944} (GRAICGKYLFL). We therefore performed in vitro analyses using peptides of different lengths. For both reactivities, the cognate epitopes were defined by 11-mer peptides (Fig. 3D and 3E; Table 2). The immunodominant response to the extended HLA-B*27:05-restricted 11-mer peptide GRAICGKYLFL was further confirmed using HLA-B*27:05/peptide multimers. In dual staining experiments, the HLA-B*27:05/GRAICGKYLFL multimer identified substantially higher frequencies of cognate CD8+ T cells among PBMCs from donor MM at week 10 and week 32 post-infection compared with the HLA-B*27:05/GRAICGKYLFL multimer (Fig. 3F, upper panel), whereas the HLA-B*27:05/GRAICGKYLFL multimer identified substantially higher frequencies of cognate CD8+ T cells among PBMCs from 2 HLA-B*27:05+ donors with resolved HCV infection compared with the HLA-B*27:05/GRAICGKYLFL multimer (Fig. 3F, lower panel).

The responses elicited by OLP-77, OLP-203, and OLP-323/324 did not correspond with previously described HCV-specific

![Fig. 1. Clinical course of HCV infection in donor MM. The needle-stick injury was set as day 0. HCV, hepatitis C virus; LLOQ, lower level of quantification (12 IU/ml); ULN, upper limit of normal (50 U/L).](image-url)
CD8\(^+\) T cell epitopes. \textit{In silico} and \textit{in vitro} analyses revealed 3 novel reactivities: (i) OLP-77 – HLA-A\(^*\)01:01-restricted 10-mer epitope (E2\(^{511-527}\), PTVVVTIDRSGAPTY; \(\text{Fig. S1A and S1B}\)); (ii) OLP-203 – HLA-A\(^*\)26:01-restricted 11-mer epitope (NS3\(^{1383-1399}\), EVIKGGRHLIFCHSKKK); and (iii) OLP-323/324 – HLA-B\(^*\)27:05-restricted 11-mer epitope (NS5A\(^{2124-2141}\), ELDGVRLHRFAPPCKPL); and (iii) OLP-323/324 – HLA-B\(^*\)27:05-restricted 11-mer epitope (NS5B\(^{2841-2849}\), ARMILMTHF).

Surprisingly, we did not observe HCV-specific CD8\(^+\) T cell responses to overlapping peptides incorporating the previously defined immunodominant epitopes NS3\(^{1436-1444}\) (ATDALMTGY, CD8\(^+\) IFN\(_\gamma\) negative PMA/Iono; Table 2).

Table 1. Summary of responses to OLPs and previously described HCV-specific epitopes in donor MM.

| Peptide  | HCV location | Peptide aa sequence          | HLA restriction |
|----------|--------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| OLP77    | E2\(^{511-527}\) | PSPVVVTIDRSGAPTY              | A\(^*\)01:01    |
| OLP203   | NS3\(^{1383-1399}\) | AETAGARLVVLATATPG              | A\(^*\)26:01    |
| OLP209   | NS3\(^{1376-1393}\) | YGKAIPLEVIKGGRHLIF            | A\(^*\)26:01    |
| OLP210   | NS3\(^{1383-1399}\) | EVIKGGRHLIFCHSKKK             |                |
| predescribed NS3\(^{1389-1406}\) | RHLIFCHSKKKDELAKK             | B\(^*\)08:01    |
| OLP211   | NS3\(^{1395-1403}\) | HSKKKDEL                      |                |
| OLP323   | NS5A\(^{2124-2141}\) | ELDCGVRHHRFAPCKPL             | B\(^*\)27:05    |
| OLP324   | NS5A\(^{2111-2148}\) | HRFAPCKPLREEEVSFR             |                |
| predescribed NS5P\(^{2841-2849}\) | ARMILMTHF                    | B\(^*\)27:05    |
| OLP450   | NS5B\(^{2936-2953}\) | GRAAICGYFNFWAVRTK             |                |
| OLP451   | NS5B\(^{2936-2953}\) | GRAAICGY                       |                |

Optimal epitopes are indicated in bold. HCV, hepatitis C virus; OLPs, overlapping peptides.
restricted by HLA-A*01:01), NS5A/B2416-2424 (DVVCCSMSY, restricted by HLA-A*26:01), or NS5B2841-2849 (ARMILMTHF, restricted by HLA-B*27:05).17,26,27 To confirm the absence of these epitope-specific responses, we tested the optimal 9-mer peptides in intracellular IFN-γ staining assays. A weak response was detected against ARMILMTHF (Fig. 2), but no responses were detected against ATDALMTGY or DVVCCSMSY (Fig. S2).

Our detailed analysis of HCV-specific CD8+ T cell responses in donor MM therefore revealed that: (i) reactivity was directed away from typically immunodominant epitopes, preferentially targeting either novel or subdominant epitopes; and (ii) reactivity was biased towards longer epitopes (10–11-mers) (Table 2).

**Altered immunodominance associated with hypoactive variants of ERAP1**

The immunoreactivity patterns identified in donor MM suggested either that the previously described optimal epitopes were not presented or that the longer targeted epitopes were more abundant on the surface of infected cells. We therefore hypothesized a determinative role for hypoactive allotypes of ERAP1, which allow surface expression of C-terminally extended peptides in the context of HLA class I.

Molecular cloning revealed the presence of 2 ERAP1 allotypes in this donor (Fig. 4A): (i) ERAP1*001 (P127, V349, R528, N575, Q725, E730), a known hypoactive variant;2 and (ii) a previously
described allotype (Hap7) designated here as ERAP1*014 (K56, P127, R528, E730). To determine the trimming function of these 2 ERAP1 allotypes individually and in combination, we used the well characterized SIINFEHL (SHL8) murine model system, in which an ER-targeted N-terminally extended precursor of SHL8 was transfected into 293T E1KO cells alongside each or both allotypes of ERAP1. The expression of trimmed SHL8 presented by H2-Kb on the cell surface was measured via stimulation of the SHL8-specific LacZ reporter T cell hybridoma B3Z. We further related these experiments to the poor immunogenicity of GRAAICGKY in donor MM by using an N-terminally extended version of SHL8 (SRG-SHL8) corresponding to the predicted precursor peptide generated via proteasomal cleavage of the parent protein NS5B (SRG-GRAAICGKY). As shown in Fig. 4B and 4C, both ERAP1 allotypes expressed by donor MM were hypoactive, with trimming activities between those of the negative control (a non-functional ERAP1 variant known as E320A, which carries a mutation in the active-site GAMEN motif) and the prototype (PT) control (ERAP1*002). Similar trimming efficiencies were observed with both allotypes in combination (Fig. 4B and 4C). To analyze the effect of these allotypes on trimming in the context of other HCV-derived epitopes, we

Table 2. Epitopes targeted in donor MM and previously described HCV-specific CD8+ T cell epitopes restricted by the HLA class I alleles present in donor MM.

| HLA allele | Described HCV-specific epitopes (immunodominant epitopes in bold) | Epitopes targeted in donor MM (dominant responses in bold) |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| A*01:01 NS31436-1444 | AIDALMTGY 9-mer | E2218-2227, NS31436-1433 |
| A*26:01 NS31383-1391 | EVIKGHRHL 9-mer | TTDGSAPTY EVIKGHRHL-IF 10-mer |
| NS31582-1590 | EVNYPLVAY 9-mer | NS31436-1433 |
| NS3/4A1654-1662 | EVYTVSTWVL 9-mer | NS31436-1433 |
| NS5A/B2146-2242 | DVVCCMSY 9-mer | NS31436-1433 |
| B*08:01 NS31395-1403 | HSKKCDREL 9-mer | NS31436-1433 |
| NS31402-1410 | ELAAKLYL 9-mer | NS31436-1433 |
| NS3/4A1011-1018 | LRLKKPL 8-mer | NS31436-1433 |
| B*27:05 P7280-288 | GRWVPGFY 9-mer | NS31436-1433 |
| NS3/4B1242-1250 | ARMLMTIHF 9-mer | NS5B2841-2849 |
| NS5B2841-2849 | GRAAICGKY 9-mer | NS5B2841-2849 |
| NS5B2936-2944 | GRAAICGKY-LF 11-mer | NS5B2841-2849 |
| NS5A2131-2141 | HRFAPPCKP-LL 11-mer | NS5B2841-2849 |

HCV, hepatitis C virus.

**Fig. 4. Hypoactive trimming function of ERAP1 allotypes expressed in donor MM.** (A) ERAP1 allotypes expressed in donor MM vs. the PT control allotype ERAP1*002 and their frequency in the central European (CEU) population. (B, C) The 3 amino acid N-terminally extended epitope precursor SRG-SIINFEHL (SRG-SHL8) was transfected into 293T E1KO cells together with the ERAP1 allotypes ERAP1*002 (PT), ERAP1*001 (expressed in donor MM), ERAP1*014 (expressed in donor MM), both donor ERAP1 allotypes (labelled MM), or E320A (a non-functional active-site mutant of ERAP1). The expression of trimmed SHL8 presented by H2-Kb on the cell surface was measured via stimulation of the SHL8-specific T cell hybridoma B3Z. (B) A representative titration curve showing activation of B3Z with increasing numbers of target cells. (C) Results normalized to ERAP1*002 activity. Bars show results pooled from 3 independent experiments ± SEM. 1-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s post hoc test was performed. ***p <0.0003, **p <0.001. (D) The ability of combined donor MM allotypes to generate the optimal SHL8 peptide from precursors with different N-terminal extensions (X-SHL8). Results are normalized to the response observed with SHL8, which does not require trimming by ERAP1. Bars show results pooled from 3 independent experiments ± SEM.
quantified the generation of SHL8 from precursors with different N-terminal extensions (X-SHL8). The combined ERAP1 allotypes of donor MM again performed suboptimally in most cases (Fig. 4D), displaying marked hierarchical differences compared with the trimming activity of ERAP1*002. The altered immunodominance pattern in donor MM therefore correlated with the expression of 2 hypoactive variants of ERAP1.

Differential generation of the GRAAICGKYLF epitope by allotypic variants of ERAP1
To extend these findings, we transfected 293T E1KO cells with: (i) HLA-B*27:05; (ii) minigenes expressing the 9-mer GRAAICGKY, the 11-mer GRAAICGKYLF, or an N-terminally extended 12-mer precursor of the 9-mer epitope (SRG-GRAAICGKY); and DNA encoding (iii) the non-functional ERAP1 variant (E320A), the active PT control ERAP1*002, or the donor MM allotypes ERAP1*001 and ERAP1*014. Presentation of the 11-mer epitope by HLA-B*27:05 was assessed by measuring IFN-γ production after stimulation of a GRAAICGKYLF-specific CD8+ T cell line from donor MM. We first confirmed that CD8+ T cells from donor MM failed to recognize the 9-mer epitope, irrespective of the N-terminal sequence and the expressed ERAP1 allotype (Fig. 5A, 5C, and 5D). As expected, transfection of the 11-mer peptide minigene with inactive ERAP1 generated a strong response (Fig. 5B, left panel), whereas cells expressing the PT control ERAP1*002 elicited a significantly weaker response, consistent with overtrimming and destruction of GRAAICGKYLF (Fig. 5B, middle panel). Interestingly, cells expressing the ERAP1 allotypes from donor MM also elicited a strong response, indicating preservation of GRAAICGKYLF (Fig. 5B, right panel). The immunodominant 9-mer epitope was therefore generated from an N-terminally extended precursor, but not from a C-terminally extended precursor, in the presence of functional ERAP1. In the presence of hypoactive ERAP1, however, the N-terminally extended precursor was not trimmed to the optimal length, hence the absence of the usual 9-mer peptide, whereas the C-terminally extended 11-mer version escaped destruction to prime and activate virus-specific CD8+ T cells.

Additional factors that may impact immunodominance patterns
Immunodominance patterns can be influenced by factors other than antigen presentation. Donor MM was infected with a viral strain that contained nonsynonymous mutations in 4 of the previously described epitopes restricted by HLA-A*01:01, HLA-A*26:01, HLA-B*08:01, or HLA-B*27:05 (Table S1). However, the typically immunodominant HLA-B*27:05-restricted epitope NS5B2841-2849 (ARMILMTHF) incorporated a conservative isoleucine to valine switch at position 4 (ARMVLMTHF), which did not affect immune recognition (Fig. S3), consistent with a previous report. In contrast, the typically immunodominant HLA-A*01:01-restricted epitope NS31436-1444 (ATDALMTGF) incorporated a tyrosine to phenylalanine switch at the C-terminus (ATDALMTGF), which has been shown previously to escape immune recognition. Therefore, the lack of ATDALMTGF-specific CD8+ T cells in donor MM likely reflected sequence variation in the infecting viral strain rather than SNPs in ERAP1. Competition among epitopes and cognate CD8+ T cell avidity can also affect immunodominance patterns. In donor MM, epitopes restricted by HLA-B*08:01, an HLA allele that usually restricts dominant CD8+ T cell responses in HCV infection, were only weakly targeted. The immunodominant HLA-B*27:05-restricted epitope NS5B2936-2946 (GRAAICGKYLF), however, was targeted with relatively high avidity (Fig. S4), but it remains to be determined if this attribute contributed to the numerical dominance of GRAAICGKYLF-specific CD8+ T cells. It is also important to point out, however, that the virus-specific CD8+ T cell responses in donor MM decreased in strength over

Fig. 5. The 11-mer GRAAICGKYLF epitope is not destroyed by ERAP1 allotypes expressed in donor MM. 293T E1KO cells were transfected with: (i) HLA-B*27:05; (ii) minigenes expressing the 9-mer GRAAICGKY (A), the 11-mer GRAAICGKYLF (B), or the N-terminally extended 12-mer precursor of the 9-mer epitope SRC-GRAAICGKY (C); and DNA encoding (iii) a non-functional ERAP1 mutant (E320A), the PT allotype ERAP1*002 (middle column), or the donor MM allotype combination from donor MM (right column). Presentation of the 11-mer peptide by HLA-B*27:05 was assessed by measuring IFN-γ production after stimulation of a GRAAICGKYLF-specific CD8+ T cell line established from donor MM. (A–C) Representative dot plots. (D) Summary of 3 independent experiments ± SEM. 1-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s post hoc test was performed. **p <0.0039, *p <0.05, n.s., not significant.

1078 Journal of Hepatology 2019 vol. 70 | 1072–1081
time, while their immunodominance pattern remained unchanged even at week 68 after infection (Fig. S5).

Discussion
ERAP1 has garnered interest as a consequence of genetic associations with several autoimmune and inflammatory disorders, such as ankylosing spondylitis, birdshot chorioretinopathy, psoriasis, and Behçet’s disease. Epistatic interactions between variants of ERAP1 and the corresponding disease-linked HLA alleles further implicate peptide handling in the immunopathology of these disorders. Much effort has therefore been dedicated to understanding the impact of ERAP1 polymorphisms on the naturally presented epitope repertoire. However, previous studies have not addressed the physiological relevance of these effects on the immune response to exogenous antigens, for example in the context of viral infections. We identified 2 hypoactive ERAP1 allotypes in a donor with acute HCV infection. Donor MM expressed 4 distinct HLA class I allotypes (A*01:01, A*26:01, B*08:01, and B*27:05), all of which have been shown to present HCV-derived peptides that reproducibly elicit hierarchical CD8+ T cell responses. In contrast to these classical immune profiles, CD8+ T cells from donor MM targeted either longer versions of the typically immunodominant 9-mer epitopes or novel 10-mer or 11-mer epitopes, characterized here for the first time. These results suggested that the relative subtle effects of ERAP1 polymorphisms in vitro profoundly influenced the antigen-specific CD8+ T cell repertoire in vivo.

Presentation of the B*27:05-restricted 11-mer epitope GRAAICGKYLF was reduced only slightly in 293T E1KO cells harboring active prototype control ERAP1*002 relative to 293T E1KO cells expressing the hypoactive donor MM allotypes ERAP1*001 and ERAP1*014. Nonetheless, GRAAICGKYLF-specific CD8+ T cells vastly outnumbered GRAAICGKY-specific CD8+ T cells in donor MM. These divergent in vitro and in vivo observations suggested a degree of leakiness in the ERAP1 system, enabling the presentation of epitopes spanning different lengths, which subsequently elicit a highly focused CD8+ T cell response. Minor differences in antigen presentation were therefore sufficient to invert the archetypal immunodominance hierarchy in donor MM. In clinical terms, donor MM had no history of severe autoimmune inflammatory disorders, but suffered from a protracted viral infection during childhood and developed mild psoriasis on completion of this study. It therefore remains to be determined how the corresponding ERAP1 allotypes impact adaptive immunity beyond the context of HCV.

Despite the presence of several favorable prognostic indicators (symptomatic course of infection, IL28B/IFNL4 genotype CC, and expression of HLA-B*27), donor MM failed to clear the virus and developed persistent low-level HCV infection, thereby supporting the general concept that peptide handling underlies the immunopathogenesis of HLA class I-associated autoimmune disorders. Further studies are therefore warranted to explore similar phenomena in other clinical settings, especially where disease susceptibility has been genetically linked with functional polymorphisms in ERAP1.

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Conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflicts of interest that pertain to this work.

Please refer to the accompanying ICMJE disclosure forms for further details.
Research Article

Viral Hepatitis

Authors’ contributions
J.K., E.R., T.H., D.A.P., M.H., R.T., E.J., and C.N.H. developed the concept and designed the study; J.K., E.R., K.N., V.W., F.E., E.G., and A.W. performed experiments and procedures; J.K., E.R., K.N., J.T., D.A.P., M.H., R.T., E.J., and C.N.H. wrote the manuscript.

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