Sequence analysis

A novel CHHC Zn-finger domain found in spliceosomal proteins and tRNA modifying enzymes
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Received on May 21, 2008; revised on August 12, 2008; accepted on August 13, 2008
Advance Access publication August 14, 2008
Associate Editor: Ivo Hofacker

ABSTRACT
Summary: We report a previously uncharacterized CHHC Zn-finger domain identified in spliceosomal U11-48K proteins, tRNA methyltransferases TRM13 and gametocyte specific factors. We show that this domain behaves as an independent folding unit and that it stoichiometrically binds zinc in a one-to-one ratio. Based on the conserved sequence features we predict that this domain may function as a RNA recognition and binding module.

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Supplementary information: Supplementary data are available on Bioinformatics online.

1 INTRODUCTION
Pre-mRNA splicing is an essential step in gene expression. In higher eukaryotes pre-mRNA introns are removed by two distinct spliceosomes. The majority of introns are excised by the U2-dependent (major) spliceosome that consists of five small ribonucleoprotein particles (snRNPs) U1, U2, U4, U5, U6 and a large number of protein splicing factors. A subset of eukaryotic organisms contains a second class of introns, the so-called U12-introns. Although the U12-introns constitute a small fraction of all introns (<1%), they have been identified in various genes implicated in splice site recognition.

Both major and minor spliceosomes share similar assembly pathways and catalytic mechanisms. Despite these similarities, the two splicing systems display several fundamental differences. In contrast to U1 and U2 snRNPs, U11 and U12 exist mainly as an 18S U11/U12 di-snRNP complex. The U2-dependent spliceosome assembly is initiated by the interaction of U1 snRNP with the 5′ splice site followed by the association of U2 snRNP with the branch point site of the pre-mRNA. In the U12-dependent assembly, the 18S U11/U12 di-snRNP binds simultaneously to the 5′ splice and branch point site (Frilander et al., 1999).

Both splicing systems share common protein components, but there are proteins that are unique to the minor spliceosome (Will et al., 2004). These include seven proteins with molecular weight 20, 25, 31, 35, 48, 59 and 65 kDa. Four of them (25K, 35K, 48K and 59K) have been shown to associate with the 125 U11 snRNP and probably play a role in the U11/U12 snRNP assembly and/or 5′ splice site recognition.

In contrast to the major spliceosome, the U12-dependent spliceosome is less extensively studied and limited information is available about its protein components and their function. Here, we show that the minor spliceosomal protein U11-48K contains a genuine CHHC Zn-finger domain. We also demonstrate that this domain is similar and probably evolutionarily related to the Zn-finger domains identified in the TRM13 tRNA modifying enzymes and gametocyte specific factors.

2 METHODS
Protein sequence comparisons and database searches were performed with BLAST suite v.2.2.18 (Altschul et al., 1997). Pattern search was carried out with PHI-BLAST (Zhang et al., 1998). Two-step PSI-BLAST searches were performed as described before (Andreeva et al., 2008). TBLASTN was used to scan nucleotide and EST databases at NCBI and ENSEMBL in order to identify additional protein homologs. Initial clustering of protein sequences was performed using BLASTCLUST. Multiple sequence alignments were constructed and analysed using Jalview (Clamp et al., 2004). Analysis of protein disorder and compositionally biased regions were performed with PONDR (Romero et al., 2001) and SEG (Wootton et al., 1996), respectively.

The DNA encoding the second exon of human U11-48K corresponding to residues 53–87 (the CHHC Zn-finger domain) was cloned into a pRSET-derived vector containing an N-terminal fusion of His6-tag, lipoyl domain and TEV protease cleavage site to generate the plasmid pHLF-ZnF U11-48K. The plasmid was transformed in Escherichia coli C41 cells (Miroux and Walker, 1996) and the protein was expressed for 12 h at 22°C. The U11-48K Zn-finger domain was first purified using Ni-affinity chromatography followed by TEV protease cleavage. The next steps of purification included a second Ni-column to separate the cleaved fusion partner and a final gel filtration. Protein homogeneity and purity was assessed using mass spectrometry and SDS-PAGE.

Zinc binding of U11-48K was determined using the PAR/PMPS assay as previously described (Hunt et al., 1985). For a detailed description of this method and other biophysical methods used in this study, refer to the Supplementary Material.

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3 RESULTS

3.1 Domain identification and phyletic distribution

Multiple sequence alignment constructed from U11-48K homologs revealed a highly conserved region containing four invariant Cys and His residues. Using a consensus pattern C-P-X(4)-H-X(9)-H-X(3)-C derived from the alignment and the conserved region of human U11-48K as a query sequence we performed a PHI-BLAST search (E-value threshold of 200) against NR database. The pattern search retrieved similar segments from ∼190 proteins. Some of these proteins produced two distinct matches, suggesting that this region is tandemly repeated. Despite the insignificant PHI-BLAST scores, all identified fragments had a high sequence identity (>30%) with the query sequence.

In order to evaluate the significance of the PHI-BLAST results, we initially clustered the full-length sequences matching the pattern. Multiple alignments generated for each distinct cluster were evaluated for the presence of common sequence motifs. Based on the observed conserved features we further refined and merged the initial clusters. In addition, we performed iterative PSI-BLAST searches (profile inclusion threshold of 0.01) against the NR database using representative sequences from each cluster as queries. These searches yielded the identification of new homologs with similar separation of the Cys- and His-residues (full list of the identified sequences is provided in the Supplementary Material). The profile searches also indicated a number of false positives (7.8% of all PHI-BLAST hits) in some singleton clusters and they were excluded from further consideration.

As a result, we obtained three clusters corresponding to three distinct protein families. Besides the U11-48K family, these include the families of tRNA methyltransferase TRM13 and gametocyte specific factors GTSF (also known as UPF0224), both named after their only experimentally characterized members. The TRM13 family is typified by the yeast protein YOL125w (Genbank identifier gi:74676591) that catalyses the 2′-O-methylation of ribose in the position 4 of tRNA3′Pro,His,Gly (Wilkinson et al., 2007). Apparently, this modification is highly conserved in eukaryotes, including humans, and can account for the high conservation and wide distribution of TRM13 enzymes.

GTSF homologs were found in two protozoan, Tetrahymena thermophila and Paramecium tetraurelia, and a vast number of metazoan genomes. No orthologs were identified in fungi and plants. In most of the genomes, the predicted GTSF gene is present in multiple copies, but some lineages have a single copy of this gene (Supplementary Material). The P. tetraurelia, for instance, possesses three predicted GTSF homologs, whereas T. thermophila has only one. A recent analysis of the P. tetraurelia genome suggests that Paramecium lineage probably underwent at least three whole-genome duplications (Aury et al., 2006). Thus the presence of two or more GTSF copies in the genomes can account for a gene duplication event that had happened early in the eukaryotic evolution. This also suggests a plausible evolutionary scenario that includes an early duplication and fusion of the Zn-finger domain followed by multiple gene duplications. The metazoan GTSF-like proteins formed two paralogous subfamilies (named GTSF-FamA and GTSF-FamB) with distinct sequence motifs and predicted gene structure. The duplicated CHHC Zn-finger motif in GTSF-FamA corresponds to a single exon, whereas each Zn-finger domain in GTSF-FamB is encoded by an individual exon. Similar domain-exon correlation was observed in all U11-48K homologs. These findings suggests that the Zn-finger domain might be a minimal unit of evolution and events such as exon shuffling may have contributed to the architectural and functional diversity observed in the CHHC Zn-finger containing proteins.

3.2 Domain features and architectures

The CHHC Zn-finger does not show sequence similarity to any known or previously characterized Zn-finger domain. Multiple alignment of all identified CHHC Zn-finger domains indicated several conserved residues, some of which may contribute to the fold stability (Fig. 1 and Supplementary Material, Fig. 1). Besides the strictly conserved Cys- and His-residues, residues with hydrophobic side-chains tend to occupy positions 1, 2, 6, 14, 19 and 23. Highly conserved are a Pro residue at position 5 and Asp/Asn (Asx) at position 7. Asx and Pro are usually found in turns. The high conservation of these residues in the CHHC Zn-finger domains may reflect a requirement for a specific backbone conformation. The multiple alignment also revealed several clusters of positively charged residues that may have a functional role. In Znf1-GTSF, all vertebrate U11-48K and nearly all TRM13 Zn-finger domains these residues were located near the C-termini. The amoebobozoan TRM13 and the Znf2-GTSF Zn-finger domains had very distinct patterns of basic residues that could account for different function.

With the exception of TRM13, the other two protein families had very simple domain architectures with one or two Zn-finger domains as their only globular domains (Supplementary Material, Fig. 2). We found that the amino acid composition of U11-48K proteins have been identified in some protists and fungi, but we were unable to detect U11-48K relatives in these genomes.

In contrast to U11-48K, the TRM13 family is more ubiquitous and present in protozoa, fungi, plants and metazoa. We found that in some amoebobozoan genomes, in particular Entamoeba dispar and Entamoeba histolytica, the TRM13 gene is duplicated. The yeast TRM13 is responsible for the 2′-O-methylation of ribose in the position 4 of tRNA3′Pro,His,Gly (Wilkinson et al., 2007).
Novel CHHC Zn-finger domain

3.3 Biochemical characterization

We have cloned and expressed the CHHC Zn-finger of the human U11-48K protein. The CD spectrum indicates that the purified domain is partly structured. The 1D-NMR spectrum shows several resonances beyond 8.5 p.p.m. (up to 9.3 p.p.m.), which clearly demonstrates that the domain is folded and thus provides evidence that the CHHC Zn-finger can exist as an independent folding unit (Supplementary Material, Fig. 3). By using colorimetric zinc-binding assay, we confirm that the predicted CHHC Zn-finger domain indeed binds zinc. Our results show that it stoichiometrically binds zinc ions in a one-to-one ratio (Fig. 2).

3.4 Probable biological function

The CHHC Zn-finger motif may possess a RNA binding function. This prediction arises from the fact that this domain is present in two proteins known to bind RNA (U11-48K and TRM13) and that it contains the sequence determinants that can mediate this function.

Yeast TRM13 catalyzes the methylation of a ribose 2′OH in position 4 of tRNAPro, tRNAHis and tRNAGly. This is one of the few modifications found in the middle of duplex RNA and one of only four modifications that occur in the acceptor stem of the tRNA. Binding to tRNA is crucial for the enzyme selectivity and substrate recognition. TRM13 binds with high affinity to its cognate substrates but exhibits no detectable binding to other tRNA species (Wilkinson et al., 2007). It is conceivable that the CHHC Zn-finger domain may mediate this selective binding by recognizing a specific shape or particular structure of the cognate tRNAs. It may also contribute to the correct positioning of the substrate tRNA in the enzyme active site.

During the preparation of this article, Turunen et al. (2008) reported that U11-48K protein contacts the 5′ splice site in the early spliceosomal complex and that this interaction requires U11-5′ss base-pairing as a prerequisite. Besides the conserved Zn-finger
The CHHC Zn-finger is a novel domain present in spliceosomal U11-of U11-48K with the 5′ splice site and the U12-type introns, two hypotheses can account for the interaction. The CHHC Zn-finger domain may directly contact the 5′ globular region of U11-48K mediates this interaction. Alternatively, the domain may function as a RNA recognition and binding module. Based on the conserved sequence features, we predict that this domain is a genuine Zn-binding module that in isolation behaves as an independent folding unit. Future analysis will aim to structurally characterize this domain and to elucidate its molecular function.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The CHHC Zn-finger is a novel domain present in splicesomal U11-48K proteins, TRM13 enzymes and gametocyte specific factors. Our experimental analysis confirms that this domain is a genuine Zn-binding module that in isolation behaves as an independent folding unit. Based on the conserved sequence features, we predict that this domain may function as a RNA recognition and binding module. Future analysis will aim to structurally characterize this domain and to elucidate its molecular function.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Drs Alexey Murzin and Kiyoshi Nagai for the careful reading of the article and helpful suggestions, Dr Maria Garcia-Alai for advice on the Zn-binding assay and Dr Trevor Rutherford for help with the NMR experiment. A.A. thanks Prof. Sir Alan Fersht for the continuing financial support.

Funding: Trinity College Junior Research Fellowship to H.T.

Conflict of Interest: none declared.

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