Characterization of Neuronal Tau Protein as a Target of Extracellular-signal-regulated Kinase

Haoling Qi¹, Sudhakaran Prabakaran², François-Xavier Cantrelle¹, Béatrice Chambraud³, Jeremy Gunawardena², Guy Lippens¹, Isabelle Landrieu¹

From:¹ Lille University, CNRS UMR8576, F-59000 Lille, France.² Department of Systems Biology, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA 02115, USA.³ INSERM UMR1195 Paris SUD University, Le Kremlin Bicêtre, France

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To whom correspondence should be addressed: Dr Isabelle Landrieu, RMN, IRI Building (CNRS) Parc scientifique de la Haute Borne 50, avenue de Halley, 59650 Villeneuve d'Ascq FRANCE Telephone:+33362531702 E-mail: isabelle.landrieu@univ-lille1.fr

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ABSTRACT

Tau neuronal protein has a central role in neurodegeneration and is implicated in Alzheimer disease development. Abnormal phosphorylation of Tau impairs its interaction with other proteins and is associated with its dysregulation in pathological conditions. Molecular mechanisms leading to hyperphosphorylation of Tau in pathological conditions are unknown. Here, we characterize phosphorylation of Tau by Extracellular-Regulated Kinase (ERK2), a Mitogen-activated kinase (MAPK) that responds to extracellular signals. Analysis of in vitro phosphorylated Tau by activated recombinant ERK2 with nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy (NMR) reveals phosphorylation of 15 Ser/Thr sites. In vitro phosphorylation of Tau using rat brain extract and subsequent NMR analysis identifies the same sites. Phosphorylation with rat brain extract is known to transform Tau into an Alzheimer disease-like state. Our results indicate that phosphorylation of Tau by ERK2 alone is sufficient to produce the same characteristics. We further investigate the mechanism of ERK2 phosphorylation of Tau. Kinases are known to recognize their protein substrates not only by their specificity for a targeted Ser or Thr phosphorylation site but also by binding to linear-peptide motifs called docking sites. We identify two main ERK2 docking sites in Tau sequence using NMR. Our results suggest that ERK2 dysregulation in Alzheimer disease could lead to abnormal phosphorylation of Tau resulting in the pathology of the disease.

INTRODUCTION

Tau is an intrinsically disordered protein whose primary sequence is divided into several functional domains: an N-terminal region, a Proline-Rich Domain (PRD), a MicroTubule Binding Domain (MTBD) constituted of partially repeated sequences R1 to R4, and a C-terminal region (Fig. 1A). Both PRD and MTBD are involved in microtubule stabilizing activity of Tau (1, 2). Phosphorylation of Tau is an essential process to regulate its physiological function(s); however, abnormal phosphorylation of Tau has been linked to neuronal dysfunction (3–5). In Alzheimer disease (AD) Tau is hyperphosphorylated and aggregated (6). The longest Tau protein isoform (441-residue) has 80 Threonine (T) or Serine (S) residues. These residues are exposed as Tau is an intrinsically disordered protein, subject to modification by numerous kinases (7). Mass spectrometry (MS) analyses have identified around 45
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phosphorylated sites on Tau aggregates extracted from AD patients with a typical paired helical filament (PHF) morphology (8, 9), compared to 15 to 30 phosphorylation sites in soluble Tau extracted from mice (10) or normal human brain (11). Monoclonal antibodies such as AT8 (recognizing pS202/pT205, (12)) or PHF1 (pS396/pS404, (13)) are often used to detect abnormal phosphorylation of Tau (5). Proline-directed kinases, with a S/T-P phosphorylation consensus motif, such as Cyclin-dependant kinase 5 (CDK5, (14, 15)) with its activator protein p25, glycogen synthase kinase (GSK3β,(16)), stress-activated protein kinases (JNK, (17) and p38, (18)) and extracellular-signal-regulated kinase (ERK1/2, (19)), are considered as potential therapeutic targets to prevent Tau hyperphosphorylation (20). A clear understanding of the mechanism of abnormal phosphorylation of Tau leading to neuronal dysregulation is still lacking. Characterization of the kinases involved in the phosphorylation of Tau and the related specific patterns of phosphorylation are therefore of interest to develop new strategies to counteract the pathological processes.

ERK2 belongs to the mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPKs) family and is activated by dual phosphorylation on a Thr-X-Tyr sequence in its activation loop by MAP kinase kinases (MKK) (21–23). Human ERK2 is phosphorylated on Thr183 and Tyr185 by MEK kinase. MAP kinases have a classical kinase structure with a N-terminal lobe folded as a beta sheet associated to a larger C-terminal domain constituted of alpha-helices (24). The activation loop is located at the hinge between these domains and shows a large conformational change upon phosphorylation (25). Mechanisms regulating specificity and efficiency of kinases are not fully understood but involve the binding of kinase docking grooves to binding motifs on their substrates, made up of a linear peptide (26, 27). Interaction regions distinct from the catalytic pocket were found to be involved in the recognition of both ERK1/2 upstream regulators and downstream substrates (28). ERK docking site is targeted by proteins that contain a linear motif called D-recruitment site (DRS or D-site), defined by a loose consensus of about 10 amino acid residues Y1-3 X3-7 F (Ψ, Φ, and X refer to positively charged, hydrophobic, or any intervening residues, respectively, and subscripts refer to the number of residues, (30). Interactions of the conserved D motifs with the MAP kinase docking site has been characterized at the atomic level in complexes of ERK2 with peptide fragments from several protein partners (30–33). In addition, another docking motif was identified, called F-recruitment site (FRS or F-site) that recognizes a Phe-X-Phe motif (34). ERK1/2 activation in AD brain is well documented (35–37). Results from previous studies indicate that ERK1/2 is able to transform Tau into an AD-like state, but this is mainly documented by the detection of the epitope recognized by the AT8 antibody (19). To better define the phosphorylation sites involved in the transformation of Tau as present in AD (19), we used NMR spectroscopy. We observed that 14 out of the 17 S/T sites which are followed by proline (S/T-P sites) and likely to be recognised by proline-directed ERK1/2 are phosphorylated by activated recombinant ERK2 in vitro. Another well-known in vitro model of Tau hyperphosphorylation is obtained by incubation of Tau with rat brain extracts along with phosphatase inhibitor okadaic acid (38). We compared the phosphorylation pattern of Tau obtained using rat brain extract with that obtained using the in vitro activated recombinant ERK2. A similar pattern of Tau phosphorylation was indeed observed, which strongly suggests that ERK2 is sufficient for hyperphosphorylation of Tau. We then studied Tau-ERK2 interaction. We mapped the interaction sites of ERK2 along the Tau sequence and identified two docking sites in the MTBD, which is distal to the PRD containing most
of the ERK phosphorylated sites of Tau. We therefore conclude that Tau and ERK2 form a dynamic complex. Our study indicates that Tau could be the first example of an ERK2 substrate with multiple docking sites. These conclusions expand our view on the potential role of ERK2 in neurodegeneration pathway in AD involving Tau and shed light on the molecular mechanisms leading to pathological Tau formation.

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

Molecular cloning cDNA encoding peptides Tau[220-240] and Tau[271-294] were amplified from Tau full length cDNA by PCR. The cDNA were cloned by a ligation independent protocol into vector pETNKHisSUMO3-LIC (39).

Preparation of recombinant proteins The longest isoform of Tau (441 amino acid residues) and the Tau fragments Tau[165-245], and Tau[244-372] (K18) were expressed and purified as recombinant proteins from Escherichia coli B121(DE3) (New England Biolabs) using pET15b plasmid (Invitrogen) under the control of T7lac promoter. Tau fragment Tau[220-240], Tau[271-294] were expressed as N-terminal fusion with the SUMO protein presenting a N-terminal HisTag from a modified pET vector (39).

Bacteria were grown in LB medium at 37°C and recombinant protein production induced with 0.4mM Isopropyl-1-thio-β-D-galactopyranoside. Isotope labeling was performed using a modified M9 medium containing in addition to the M9 salts, MEM vitamin mix 1X (Sigma), 1g of 15N NH4Cl and 4g of glucose or 2g of 13C glucose and 200mg of complete medium powder (Celtone Complete Medium, Cambridge Isotope Laboratories) per liter of bacterial culture. Briefly, Tau protein, Tau[165-245] and Tau[244-372] fragments were purified by first heating the bacterial extract 15 minutes at 75°C. Purification next consisted in cation exchange chromatography with a sodium phosphate buffer at pH 6.5 (Hitrap SP sepharose FF, 5 ml, GE healthcare) for Tau and Tau[165-245] and Ni-chelating chromatography for Tau[244-372] (Hitrap Ni-sepharose FF, 5 ml, GE healthcare). Full length Tau protein and Tau fragments were then buffer exchanged against ammonium bicarbonate (Hiload 16/60 desalting column, GE Healthcare) for lyophilisation. His-SUMO Tau[220-240], His-SUMO Tau[271-294] were purified by affinity chromatography on Ni-NTA resin following the manufacturer’s protocols. The fusion proteins were buffer-exchanged using a PD-10 column (G25 resin, cut-off of 7kDa, GE Healthcare) against NMR buffer.

Recombinant His6-tagged p42 MAP kinase (ERK2) from Xenopus laevis was prepared by growing bacteria transformed with an ERK recombinant T7 expression plasmid in LB medium until induction by 1mM IPTG of the protein production for a period of 4 hours, at 37°C. His-ERK2 was purified using Ni-NTA based affinity chromatography following the manufacturer’s protocols. After analysis on SDS-PAGE, the pooled fractions were buffer-exchanged using a PD-10 column (GE Healthcare) against conservation buffer 50mM Tris-HCl, 150mM NaCl, 0.1mM EGTA, 50% glycerol, pH 7.5 and kept frozen at -80°C. His6-tagged D321N-D324N ERK2 was prepared in the same manner. Activated-ERK2 was prepared as previously described by in vitro incubation with activated MEK (40).

To label Tau with CF3 attached on its native Cys residues (C291 and C322), 100µM 15N Tau or 15N Tau[244-372] in 50mM ammonium bicarbonate were first thoroughly reduced by incubation for 2H at 22°C with 1mM Tris (hydroxymethyl) phosphine reducing agent. The protein samples were next incubated with 2mM 2-iodo-N-trifluoroethyl acetamide (EnamineStore) in dimethyl sulfoxide at 22°C for 3 H. The excess of 2-iodo-N-trifluoroethyl acetamide was removed by desalting. The 15N CF3-Tau samples were lyophilized.
In vitro phosphorylation of Tau protein. 15N-labelled recombinant Tau was used as substrate to assay the activity of activated ERK2. 100µM of 15N Tau or 15N Tau[165-245] is incubated with 1 µM of ERK2 enzyme at 37°C during 3H in 200µL of phosphorylation buffer 50mM Hepes pH 8.0, 50mM NaCl, 12.5mM MgCl2, 2.5mM ATP, 2mM DTT, 1mM EDTA, 2mM EGTA and protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche, Complete Inhibitors without EDTA). To identify the phosphorylation sites by NMR spectroscopy, 15N, 13C-doubly labeled Tau was incubated in the same conditions overnight with the activated recombinant ERK2. Enzymatic incubation was terminated by heating the reaction mixture for 15 min at 75°C followed by centrifugation. Phosphorylation mixture was buffer-exchanged using desalting centrifugal devices (0.5ml bed of G25 resin, cut-off of 7KDa, Thermo Scientific Zeba Desalting Columns) against NMR buffer (50mM deuterated-Tris, pH 6.65, 25mM NaCl, 2.5mM EDTA, 1mM DTT and 10% D2O). Phosphorylation of the Tau[165-245] by ERK2 followed the same protocol. For the time course of phosphorylation, 100µM 15N-Tau was incubated for 15, 30, 60, 120 and 180 min with 1µM activated-ERK2, as described above. The reaction was stopped by heating the sample at 75°C for 15 min. The experiment was repeated three times.

The rat brain extract was prepared by homogenizing a brain (about 2g) in 5ml of homogeneizing buffer (10mM Tris.Cl pH 7.4, 5mM EGTA, 2mM DTT, 1µM okadaic acid (Sigma) supplemented with 20µg/ml Leupeptin and 40mM Pefabloc (38). Ultracentrifugation was next performed at 100000g for 1 hour at 4°C. The supernatant was directly used for its kinase activity. Total protein concentration was estimated to be 7mg/ml by Bradford colorimetric assay. The 15N-Tau protein (1-1.5mg) was dissolved at 10cM in 2.5mL of phosphorylation buffer (2mM ATP, 40mM Hepes.KOH pH 7.3, 2mM MgCl2, 5mM EGTA, 2mM DTT complemented with a protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche) and 1µM okadaic acid (Sigma). The phosphorylation reaction was performed at 37°C for 24H with 500µl of brain extract. Enzymatic incubation was terminated by heating the reaction mixture for 15 min at 75°C followed by centrifugation. Phosphorylation mixture was buffer-exchanged against 50mM Ammonium bicarbonate before lyophilization. Phosphorylation of the Tau[165-245] by rat brain extract kinase activity followed the same protocol. The samples were prepared by solubilizing the lyophilized powder into NMR buffer. Each set of experiment was independently repeated two or three times.

NMR Spectroscopy Analysis of the phospho-Tau samples by NMR spectroscopy was performed at 293K or 298K on Bruker 600MHz and 900MHz spectrometers equipped with a triple resonance cryogenic probehead (Bruker, Karlsruhe, Germany). TMSP (Trimethylslyl propionate) was used as the reference (0 ppm, part per million). 100µM 15N Tau in volume of 200µl in 3mm tubes was sufficient to obtain the 2D 1H, 15N HSQC (Heteronuclear Single Quantum Correlation) spectra with 32 scans. HSQC 2D experiments to map the interaction between Tau protein and recombinant ERK2 were recorded at 293K on a 900MHz Spectrometer with 64 scans per increment, as a complex matrix of 2048x416 complex points for 14x25 ppm spectral widths in the proton and nitrogen dimensions, respectively. 3D HNCAANH spectra were recorded for 15N, 13C phospho-Tau obtained both with rat brain extract and recombinant ERK2 with a standard Bruker pulse sequence. A 3D HNcaNNH spectrum (41) was additionally used in the assignment. 3D HNCACB experiments were acquired to confirm the assignment of the Tau residues in 15N, 13C His-SUMO Tau[220-240] and 15N, 13C His-SUMO Tau[271-294]. For Fluor NMR experiments, the lyophilized 15N CF3-Tau and 15N CF3-Tau[244-372] were suspended in Phosphate NMR Buffer consisting in Phosphate Buffer Saline,
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pH 7.4, 2.5 mM EDTA and 2 mM DTT. 50 µM of CF3-Tau or CF3-Tau[244-372] in 200 µl Phosphate NMR buffer were titrated with increasing concentration of His-ERK2 (25 µM, 50 µM, 100 µM, 125 µM, 162 µM and 220 µM). The 1D 19F spectra were recorded at 293 K, with 1024 scans, on a Bruker 600MHz Avance NMR spectrometer equipped with a 5mm CPQCI 1H/19F-13C/15N cryogenic probehead (Bruker). The chemical shifts in 1D 19F spectra were referenced by using the fluor resonance of external Trifluoracetic acid at -76.55 ppm.

**NMR data processing** Spectra were processed with Bruker TopSpin 3.1 software. Data analysis, peak picking and calculation of peak volumes were done with Sparky 3.114 software (T. D. Goddard and D. G. Kneller, SPARKY 3, University of California, San Francisco). Assignment of resonances of pT and pS phosphorylated residues is based on the typical Cα and Cβ chemical shifts of these residues (42). pS and pT resonances were assigned to a specific residues in phospho-Tau primary sequence using as additional information the 15N, Cα and Cβ chemical shifts of their N-terminal residue (43-45) (Table 1). Resonance integration was performed in 2D spectra by summing all the intensities over a box enclosing the peak of interest. To account for variations between spectra, integration volumes were normalized to the integration value of the resonance of E62 residue, which is isolated in the spectrum and not influence by the phosphorylation(s). To estimate level of phosphorylation at each site, we first estimated the level of phosphorylation on T153 residue using the resonances of A152. A152 has two distinct resonances in the 2D 1H, 15N spectrum depending on the phosphorylation status of T153 residue. The ratio of the integration volumes of these A152 resonances gives an estimation of the phosphorylation degree of T153. We next use this value to correlate integration volumes of resonances with phosphorylation level of the corresponding phapo-residue.

**In vitro aggregation assay** Tau aggregation assays were performed at 0.25 mg/ml (5 µM) Tau (incubated overnight with activated recombinant ERK2 kinase in absence of ATP) or phosphorylated Tau in MES buffer consisting of 100mM MES, pH 6.9; 2mM EGTA; 1mM MgCl2 and 0.3mM of freshly prepared DTT. The samples were incubated at 35°C with shaking at 300 rpm. After 2H of incubation, the insoluble fraction was collected by centrifugation at 16500 g and the pellet was suspended in 50 µL.

10 µl samples were applied on 400-mesh hexagonal Formvar-coated copper grids for 45 sec. The sample-loaded grids were washed twice by ion-free water and drained. The grids were next negatively stained with 2% urinyl acetate solution for 60 sec. The observation was performed by transmission electron microscopy (Hitachi H7500 at 80 kV and JEOL JEM-2100 at 200 kV).

**Interaction of ERK2 with Tau, Tau fragments and Tau peptides** ERK2 buffer-exchange after storage was done using desalting centrifugal devices (1.5 ml bed of G25 resin, cut-off of 7 kDa, Thermo Scientific Zeba Desalting Columns). ERK2 protein in Tris NMR buffer was then concentrated to a volume of 200 µl using a centrifugal concentrator (0.5 ml, 30 kDa membrane, Amicon Ultra) up to 250 µM. The concentrated enzyme solution was directly used to suspend lyophilized 15N Tau, 15N Tau[244-372] (K18) and 15N Tau[165-245] to a final concentration of 50-80 µM labeled samples. For the interaction with Tau peptides, 15N His-Sumo Tau[220-240] peptide or 15N His-SUMO Tau[271-294] peptide were directly mixed with ERK2 in the NMR buffer to a final concentration of 50 µM labeled peptides. The ERK2 samples were prepared freshly prior to the NMR experiments due to the tendency of the ERK2 protein to precipitate in the NMR buffer conditions.
RESULTS

Identification of Tau amino acids phosphorylated in vitro by ERK2 - We used NMR spectroscopy to identify phosphorylation sites of Tau modified in vitro by activated ERK2. On incubation with MEK-activated recombinant ERK2 (doubly phosphorylated on T183/Y185), several additional resonances were observed in the $^{1}$H, $^{15}$N 2D spectrum for the resulting phospho-Tau, compared to the spectrum of the unphosphorylated Tau (compare Fig. 1 B and C). These resonances are typical for the HN amide resonances of pS and pT residues (42, 44), indicating that Tau is indeed phosphorylated at many sites by ERK2. Phosphorylation sites were identified using 3D triple resonance NMR spectroscopy on a $^{15}$N, 13C-labelled Tau sample phosphorylated in vitro by activated ERK2. Of the 17 S/T-P sites 14 sites along the Tau sequence were found to be phosphorylated by ERK2 (Fig. 2A, B, Table 1). ERK2 phosphorylates T50, T153, T175, T181, T205, T231, S235, S404 and S422 with a stoichiometry over 50%, estimation based on peak integration (45)(Fig. 2B, Table 1). In addition, a minor phosphorylation is observed for S191 which is not a Pro-directed site (Fig. 2, Table 1). Phosphorylation by ERK2 of a Tau[165-245] fragment encompassing the PRD of Tau allowed to confirm the identification of the phosphorylation sites located in this domain (Fig. 2C). Comparison with previous assignments of the NMR amide cross peaks corresponding to Tau Proline-directed phosphorylation sites, generated by CDK2/CycA3 or GSK3 kinases (46, 47), further confirmed identifications of the ERK2 phosphorylation sites located in the PRD and C-terminal region. Kinetic experiments were next performed to define the order of the multiple phosphorylations of Tau by recombinant ERK2. SDS-PAGE analysis of Tau during a time-course of phosphorylation by activated ERK2 showed a gradual decreased mobility associated with a global increase of Tau phosphorylation level (Fig. 3A). A series of 2D spectra was then acquired corresponding to various incubation times to get insight at site-specific time-dependent modification of Tau by ERK2. The level of modification at each identified phosphorylation site was estimated by the integral of the corresponding resonance. The fastest observed phosphorylation was found for S235, S404 and S422, followed by T50, T181 and T205 (Fig. 3 B-D). The time-dependent phosphorylation increase for these residues can be fitted with an exponential function, with rate constants ranging from 10 to 85 minutes. Slower modification was observed for residues S46, T69, T153, T175, S191, S199, T231 and S396 that rather showed a linear trend of phosphorylation increase during the 3-hour time course of Tau incubation with activated-ERK2.

Comparison of ERK2-phosphorylated Tau with an hyperphosphorylation model of Tau

Phosphorylation of S/T residues corresponding to 12 to 15 sites has similarly been reported after incubation of Tau with rat brain extract (12, 38, 48). The site-specific, precise pattern of the hyperphosphorylation of Tau by rat brain extract was however never investigated. We therefore use NMR spectroscopy to establish the map of Tau amino acid residues phosphorylated by kinases in rat brain extract and compare with those phosphorylated by ERK2. Rat brain extracts were used to in vitro phosphorylate recombinant $^{15}$N-labelled Tau. The corresponding $^{1}$H, $^{15}$N 2D spectrum of the phosphorylated Tau showed additional resonances in the region for pT and pS residues, compared to the spectrum of the unphosphorylated Tau (Fig. 1, compare D and B). Comparison of 2D spectra of Tau phosphorylated by either activated ERK2 or rat brain extracts shows that many resonances assigned to the ERK2 phosphorylated sites have a match in the brain extract phosphorylated Tau (Fig. 2A and B). To confirm that the similarity in the phospho-Tau spectra reflects a shared
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Phosphorylation sites were identified using 3D triple resonance NMR spectroscopy on a 15N, 13C-labelled Tau phosphorylated in vitro by rat brain extract. The major modified sites of Tau correspond to pS46, pT50, pT153, pT175, pT181, pS202, pT205, pS208, pT231, pS262, pS356, pS396, pS404, and pS422 (Fig. 2). This analysis confirmed that the overlapping resonances in the 2D spectra indeed correspond to the same phosphorylated residues. The level of phosphorylation for these residues is also similar between Tau phosphorylated by the rat brain extract or the activated ERK2 (Fig. 2B). A few additional Tau phosphorylation sites are also identified exclusively from the incubation with the rat brain extract including pS208, pS262 and pS356 that are not proline-directed sites (Fig. 2B). Phosphorylation with the brain extract of Tau[165-245] fragment, corresponding to the PRD, resulted in detection in the corresponding 2D 1H, 15N HSQC of resonances corresponding to phosphorylated residues. These phosphorylated sites matched those found in the PRD embedded in the full-length phosphorylated Tau protein (Fig. 2D), confirming the assignment. The data showed that the pattern of phosphorylation obtained solely by ERK2 activity is similar to the one of the hyperphosphorylated Tau obtained by incubation with rat brain extract.

Aggregation propensity of Tau phosphorylated by rat brain extracts or activated ERK2 Tau phosphorylated by rat brain extract was shown to be able to self-assemble, without the addition of an exogenous compound such as heparin (48). Given the similarity in the phosphorylation pattern of Tau phosphorylated by the rat brain extract or activated ERK2, we next evaluated the aggregation propensity of the later. Phosphorylated Tau samples by either rat brain extract or ERK2 were incubated at 35°C and the insoluble fraction of the sample was observed by electron microscopy. In both cases, fibers of phosho-Tau were observed, already after 2 hour incubation (Fig. 4). Filaments with diameter of 15-20 nm and length of several µM long are observed in both ERK2 or rat brain extract phosphorylated Tau aggregated samples. The fibers showed the typical helical appearance reported for PHF (49, 50). (Fig. 4A, C). The aggregation is specific for the phosphorylated Tau samples as only rare isolated oligomers can be found in the control Tau sample incubated at 35°C (Fig. 4E). However, the aggregated phospho-protein only corresponded to a small fraction of the incubated samples and was therefore not positive for thioflavin detection, a fluorophore that detects amyloid fibril formation. We conclude that ERK2 by itself can generate a phosphorylated protein whose aggregation properties resemble those of the rat brain phosphorylated protein. However, in our experimental conditions, a robust aggregation of the rat brain extract-generated phospho-Tau is not observed.

Identification of ERK2 docking site(s) on the Tau protein MAP kinases recognize their substrates not only by the phosphorylation S/T-P motifs but also by docking motifs. We thus next investigated the mechanism of Tau recognition by ERK2. In order to map potential docking sites, 2D spectra of 15N-Tau mixed with recombinant ERK2 were compared to a reference spectrum from the 15N-Tau protein free in solution (Fig. 5A, D). The resonances in these spectra are sensitive to their chemical environment and the local protein dynamics, an interaction affecting their chemical shifts and/or intensities. At a 1:5 15N Tau/ERK2 molar ratio, an interaction indeed translates into an important broadening for numerous resonances compared to the reference spectrum (Fig. 5A, D). Assignment of the Tau protein resonances has been previously completed by us and others (51, 52) and was used to map the interaction region(s) based on the 2D spectra perturbations. Peak intensities were compared for 187 resonances corresponding to residues dispersed along the 441 amino-acid residue...
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Tau sequence (Fig. 5F). The data showed interaction of ERK2 localized mainly in the MTBD of Tau (Tau[244-372]) (also called K18 (1)). To increase the resolution, the interaction experiment was repeated with Tau fragments, Tau[165-245] corresponding to the PRD and Tau[244-372] corresponding to the MTBD (Fig. 5, Fig. 6). Addition of ERK2 to the 15N-Tau[165-245] resulted in minor perturbations of the resonances in the corresponding 2D spectrum (Fig. 5B) while an interaction of ERK2 with Tau[244-372] is clearly observed as the intensity of several resonances in its spectrum is affected (Fig. 5C,E, Fig. 6A). The intensity of the resonances corresponding to amino-acids included in Tau[274-288] and Tau[306-318] segments strongly decreased in presence of ERK2 (Fig. 6A, I/I0 below 40%). These ERK2 docking sequences also correspond to respectively the PHF6* (V275QIINK280) and PHF6 (V306QIVYK311) peptides described as nuclei of Tau aggregation (53). Only the sequence of Tau[274-288] can accommodate a canonical D-site K274VQIINKKLDL284. (Fig. 6B). Resonance intensities of residues in Tau[346-358] segment also showed a decrease upon ERK2 interaction but to a lesser extent (Fig. 6A, I/I0 below 60%). This region could correspond to a secondary binding site of interaction, although it is not clear if it fits a classical ERK2 docking site.

Because the PHF sequences respectively located in R2 and R3 repeated regions of the MTBD share similarities, it is likely that these peptides would have the same binding mode to ERK2. Yet only the PHF6* peptide can be matched to a D-site sequence. To verify whether Tau interaction with ERK2 indeed involves a canonical D-site, a mutated ERK2 was used in our NMR binding assay. Replacement of two aspartic residues (D321N-D324N), in the D-site peptide binding pocket of ERK2 by asparagine residues disrupts the recognition of the positively charge residue ψ of the D-site docking peptide. The mutated D321N-D324N ERK2 has consequently a reduced affinity for the D-site peptides (28). However, we did not observe major differences in the NMR intensity profiles of 15N Tau[244-372] in presence of ERK2 or D321N-D324N mutated-ERK2 (Fig. 6A), indicating no major impact of the mutations on the interaction.

Apparent K_D values were calculated to further characterize the Tau/ERK2 interaction, using fluor NMR spectroscopy (54) to confirm that the main binding is located in the MTBD (Fig. 7). The Tau protein and Tau[244-372] (MTBD) were labelled with fluor attached on the native Cys residues C291 and C322 along the sequence (Fig. 6B). Chemical shift value perturbation of the fluor signal along titration of the ERK2 protein on the labelled Tau or Tau fragment showed a saturation behaviour typical of an interaction (Fig. 7). The similar apparent K_D values of 73µM for Tau and 179µM for Tau[244-372] fragment indicated that the main binding indeed occurs within the Tau[244-372] segment. The data demonstrate that the main binding sites of Tau for ERK2 are localized in the MTBD of Tau, in the Tau[244-372] segment, outside of the regions containing ERK2 phosphorylation sites. The interaction is not mediated by a classical D-site interaction and shows a moderate affinity, similarly to interaction of ERK2 by a minimal docking sequence reported for some of its protein partners (55).

**Tau peptides interaction with ERK2 kinase** Two peptides were next chosen to confirm whether they interact individually, or not, with the ERK2 docking site. The first peptide derived from the Tau sequence, Tau[220-240] in the PRD, contains several ERK2 phosphorylation sites but no interaction site for ERK2. On the other hand, F[271-294]Tau contains the Tau[274-284] sequence here above defined as an ERK2 phosphorylation sites. The interaction is not mediated by a classical D-site interaction and shows a reduced affinity for the Tau peptide signals was limited and therefore allowed a
correct analysis of Tau resonances (Fig. 8). Overlay of the 2D $^1$H, $^{15}$N HSQC of the fusion peptides alone or mixed with ERK2 confirms that the resonance perturbations affected only those resonances corresponding to Tau peptides and not to SUMO fusion protein (Fig. 8). Resonances corresponding to Tau residues in SUMO-Tau[220-240] are only slightly affected by addition of ERK2 (Fig. 8A, C). To the contrary, addition of the kinase to the SUMO-Tau[271-294] affected peak intensities of most of the resonances and principally residues 274 to 284 (Fig. 8B, D). The peptides Tau[220-240] and Tau[271-294] behaved in their interaction with ERK2 in the same manner embedded in the protein or isolated from their context. The data confirmed the sequence K274 to L284 as a docking site of ERK2. Despite the presence in the Tau[220-240] of a predicted D docking site consensus sequence (Fig. 6B), no binding to ERK2 is observed.

**DISCUSSION**

Using NMR spectroscopy, we have identified Tau phosphorylation sites modified *in vitro* by the activated ERK2 and rat brain extracts. We demonstrate that Tau phosphorylation patterns observed with *in vitro* phosphorylation by ERK2 and rat brain extracts are similar, with most of the 17 S/T-P motifs modified. Incorporation of 14 to 16 phosphates on S/T-P sites per Tau molecule was reported by the MAPK activity purified from the brain extract (19). Our previous analysis of Tau phosphorylation patterns obtained *in vitro* by several other kinases showed that none of them has the capacity to modify such a large number of phosphorylation sites (43, 46, 47, 56). Phosphorylation by brain extracts is a method to obtain *in vitro* phosphorylated Tau (12, 38) with AD-like characteristics (48), such as a reduced electrophoretic mobility on SDS-PAGE and positive immunodetection of the AT8 epitope (12, 38) and the pS396/pS404 epitope (57). Our work shows that ERK2 by itself has also the potential to modify Tau into a phosphorylation state resembling Tau present in pathological AD state.

Early work by Iqbal et al. showed that a Tau protein purified from AD brain or hyperphosphorylated *in vitro* by rat brain extract on 12-15 sites can form PHF-like aggregates (48). We observed fibers, with morphology typical of the helical pattern described for the PHF, in both the activated ERK2 and rat brain extract phosphorylated Tau samples incubated at 35°C for 2 hours. Tau phosphorylated solely by ERK2 on 15 phosphorylation sites, dispersed along the Tau sequence, behaved similarly as the rat brain extract phosphorylated Tau in the aggregation assays. This aggregation propensity is specific to the phosphorylated Tau sample as we did not detect any PHF-like structures in the control Tau samples. However, the amount of fibers observed in our samples is small and could only be detected by electron microscopy performed on the pellet of our aggregation samples. Compared to the aggregation induced by addition of heparin (58), the aggregation of the *in vitro* phosphorylated Tau affects only a small fraction of the sample. In agreement with this observation, a Tau protein phosphorylated on about 10 or 20 phosphorylation sites in insect sf9 cells was recently reported to form oligomers and only a small fraction of fibrils (59). That the *in vitro* aggregation propensity under near physiological conditions of the *in vitro* phosphorylated Tau is low does not exclude it could be a trigger in a cellular context, in which the aggregation process takes place on a long time scale (60). Nevertheless, there are only a few studies, here above discussed, that have explored the relationship between phosphorylation and aggregation. That phosphorylation is a causative event of Tau aggregation should be stated with more caution in regard of the data presented here by us and recently by others (59).

Our analytical characterization of Tau phosphorylation showed that ERK2 is promiscuous as most of Tau S/T-P motifs
were phosphorylated. The question of how MAP kinases recognize specific substrates is only partially answered. We investigated interaction of ERK2 with Tau and identified that it is mediated by two main docking sites. To our knowledge, Tau is the first example of ERK2 protein substrate to contain a combination of docking sites. A similar combination of 3 D-docking sites was described in the regulatory disordered N-terminal region of MKK7 used for the specific recognition by the JNK MAP kinase (61, 62). Another type of a modular system of recognition was previously proposed consisting of a combination of the D-docking site and F-docking site, although in this case it corresponds to two distinct binding grooves of ERK2 (34). Two binding sites on the substrates for one recognition groove of ERK2 allows the formation of a dynamic complex (63), defined as involving more than 2 transient interfaces between the binding partners. Presence of high number of interaction sites on a flexible ligand such as Tau, termed allovalency, increases the probability of the rebinding of the protein partner (64).

Comparison of the Tau interacting peptides with the degenerate ERK2 recognition sequence Ψ1-3x3-7ϕxxϕ (with Ψ for Arg/Lys residues, x for any residue and ϕ for hydrophobic residues, the indices corresponding to the number of residues (29, 30) shows that only the first peptide Tau[274-284] corresponds to predicted classical D-docking (Fig. 6B). We additionally showed that a mutated ERK2 with 2 Asp residues replaced by Asn residues in its docking pocket (D321N/D324N) to compromise interaction with the Ψ residue in the D-peptide (28) still binds Tau[244-372] in the same manner as the wild type ERK2 (Fig. 6A). Some docking interactions of ERK2 have been reported to be limited to the hydrophobic pocket in the D-peptide binding site (31). This is the case of the PEA-15 protein, as seen in the crystal structure of PEA15-ERK2 complex. The structure also reveals a C-to-N reverse binding compared to the classical D-peptide interaction. This type of docking interaction is also characterized by a weaker affinity, with a dissociation constant of 18µM reported for the PEA15/ERK2 interaction (31). This value is closer to the 10-µM range that we here found for the Tau/ERK2 interaction than the submicromolar range values reported for the canonical docking interaction of ERK2 with D-site peptides (30, 55). It was proposed that the minimal interaction mediated by the hydrophobic pocket of ERK2 is a hallmark of moderate affinity regulatory interactions (31). We showed that Tau[165-245] fragment does not contain a docking site for ERK2. Nevertheless, phosphorylation of Tau[165-245] by activated ERK2 showed a similar pattern and level of phosphorylation as with the full length Tau substrate (Fig. 2). This suggests that the enzymatic activity is not affected by the docking and that the phosphorylation of the PRD might not require the ERK2 docking in the MTBD, at least in the equilibrium conditions of our experiments. The essentiality of docking sites for ERK2 to exert its efficient kinase activity is not established (29, 66, 67). Kinetic studies demonstrate that docking sites that interact with either the DRS or the FRS have little effect on the intrinsic catalytic activity of ERK2 (66). In a proteomic study, a D-docking peptide was found only on 17% of the substrates within 20 amino acid of the phospho-site (67). However, a peptide-based study shows to the contrary that a docking site is necessary to mimic a ERK2 substrate (29). It might be in the case of Tau that the docking sites are crucial to manage formation of regulatory complexes in a cellular context rather than to stimulate activity towards the protein partners (31).

Activation of ERK1/2 is increased in AD neurons (68), is found in association with abnormally phosphorylated early Tau deposits (69) and is linked to the progression of the neurofibrillary degeneration through the Braak stages of AD (35, 60). Activation
of ERK1/2 also responds to fibrillar amyloid beta deposits in mature hippocampal neuronal culture (70), to an increase activity of IPTKB (37) and oxidative stress (71), all affecting Tau phosphorylation. ERK1/2 phosphorylation of Tau could thus take place in cells upon stress-signaling or once the phosphorylation fails to be counteracted by an efficient dephosphorylation. ERK is thus accordingly considered as a Tau kinase that could be involved in AD patho-physiology. We have reinforced this view by showing that ERK2 has the capacity by itself to phosphorylate Tau on many sites. These results support the hypothesis that ERK activation under stress conditions might have a detrimental effect for Tau function and participate in AD physio-pathology.

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Author contributions: H.Q., S.P., and I.L. conducted most experiments, F-X.C. conducted most NMR data acquisition, H.Q. and I.L. performed NMR data analysis, B.C. conducted experiments to prepare rat brain extract and advised on the manuscript, I.L., S.P., G.L., J.G. and H.Q. wrote the manuscript I.L., S.P., G.L. and J.G. conceived the idea for the project. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.
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**FOOTNOTES**

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The abbreviations used are: AD, Alzheimer disease; ERK2, Extracellular-regulated kinase2; MTBD, microtubule binding domain; PHF, paired helical filament; PRD, proline rich domain.
FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1. Phosphorylation of Tau. A Scheme of the domain organization of Tau protein, limits of the domains are indicated by the amino acid number in the sequence, MTBD is the Microtubule Binding Domain B to D. 1H, 15N HSQC 2D spectra of B Tau C Tau phosphorylated by MEK-activated recombinant ERK2 D Tau phosphorylated by rat brain extract kinase activity. The region of the spectrum containing resonances corresponding to phosphorylated S/T residues is boxed in C and D spectra. Detailed annotation of the resonances corresponding to phosphorylated residues is provided in Fig. 2B.

Figure 2. Comparison of Tau phosphorylation by activated recombinant ERK2 and rat brain extracts. A Overlayed details of 1H, 15N HSQC 2D spectra of phosphorylated Tau by activated ERK2 (in red) or by rat brain extract (in black). The enlarged region corresponds to the boxed region in Fig. 1C and D. Resonances corresponding to assigned phosphorylated Tau residues are annotated. B Level of phosphorylation for each pS/pT Tau residue presented as black bars for Tau phosphorylated by the rat brain extract, and red bars by activated ERK2. Each experiment was repeated twice, standard deviation around average value is shown by error bars. Level of phosphorylation is estimated based on the integrals of resonance peaks, as described in methods. C and D. 1H, 15N HSQC 2D spectrum of Tau[165-245] modified by incubation at 37°C C for 3 hours with activated recombinant ERK2 or D overnight with rat brain extract. The annotated resonances were assigned to phosphorylation sites by comparison with the 1H, 15N HSQC 2D of Tau protein phosphorylated by activated recombinant ERK2 or rat brain extract, in the same conditions.

Figure 3. Site-specific time course of in vitro Tau phosphorylation by activated ERK2. A 10% SDS-PAGE analysis of Tau incubated with activated ERK2 for increasing time periods. C Build-up of resonance integrals corresponding to Tau phosphorylated residues, expressed as fraction of maximum value reached during the 3 hours reaction time frame. Each data point is an average of three experiments from two independent samples. Standard deviation is indicated by bars at each time point. Data are fitted with a mono-exponential function 1-(e^(-t/T0)) with time t and rate constant T0 in minutes (see Table B). Correlation was calculated between the fit and the average experimental data. D Detail of 1H, 15N HSQC 2D spectrum of Tau incubated with activated ERK2 for 60 minutes. The enlarged region corresponds to the boxed region in Fig. 1C,D. Resonances corresponding to assigned phosphorylated Tau residues are annotated.

Figure 4. Self-assembly of in vitro phosphorylated Tau. Representative electron micrographs of the pellets of various Tau samples at 5μM, incubated at 35°C for 2 hours A and B phospho-Tau, modified by activated ERK2 C and D phospho-Tau, modified by rat brain extract kinase activity E unphosphorylated Tau (incubated in phosphorylation mix without ATP), large field view. The scale bars, in the lower right corners, correspond to 500 nm.

Figure 5. ERK interacts with the MTBD of Tau. A-C Overlayed 2D spectra corresponding to A free Tau (black) and Tau with 5 molar excess of ERK (superimposed in red), C free Tau[165-245] or PRD (black) and Tau[165-245] with 1 molar equivalent of ERK2 (superimposed in green) C free Tau[244-372] or MTBD (black) and Tau[244-372] with 1 molar excess of ERK2 (superimposed in blue). Boxed regions in A and C are enlarged and annotated in D and E. F Relative intensities I/I0 of corresponding resonances in the 2D
spectra of Tau with 5 molar excess of ERK (I, red in A) or free in solution (I0, black in A), for residues along the Tau sequence.

**Figure 6.** ERK2 main interaction sites A relative intensities I/I0 of corresponding resonances in the 2D spectra of Tau[244-372] with 1 molar excess of ERK2 (I, blue diamonds) or D321N-D324N ERK2 (I, violet diamonds), versus free in solution (I0). Double arrows indicate the interaction regions along the sequence: Tau[274-288], Tau[306-318] and Tau[346-358]. B Sequence of Tau. Perturbations of resonance intensities are coloured coded as red for residues with a I/I0 below 0.5 and as orange below 0.6. Residues with no information for the corresponding resonance are in gray. Tau[244-372] or MTBD is indicated by green arrows along the sequence, Tau[220-240] and Tau[271-294] peptides (Fig. 8) by red and black arrows, respectively. The PHF6* and PHF6 peptides in the R2 and R3 repeats, respectively, are boxed.

**Figure 7.** Determination of K_D of Tau/ERK interaction. A Superimposed 1D Fluor NMR spectra of CF3-Tau[244-372] upper panel and CF3-Tau lower panel B Saturation curves based on the chemical shift perturbation of the Fluor signal of CF3-Tau and CF3-Tau[244-372]. The signal of only one CF3-Cys was monitored along the titration, the second one being broadened.

**Figure 8.** Interaction of Tau peptides with ERK2 A-B Detail of overlayed 1H, 15N HSQC 2D spectra of A 15N His-SUMO Tau[220-240] and B 15N His-SUMO Tau[271-294] free in solution (in black) or with 1 molar excess of ERK2 (superimposed in red). Relative intensities ratio I/I0 for corresponding resonances in these spectra are shown in C and D, respectively.

**Table 1** Sequence specific assignment of resonances corresponding to phosphorylated residues in ERK phospho-Tau. 1H, 15N, CA, CB columns correspond to the chemical shifts (in ppm) of atoms from the assigned phospho-residues indicated in column 1. The amino-acid type at the direct N-terminus of each phospho-residue is displayed in column i-1 residue type and the chemical shifts of the corresponding CA and CB atoms in CA-1 and CB-1 columns.
### Table 1

| 15N | 1H | CA | CB | CA-1 | CB-1 | I-1 residue type |
|-----|----|----|----|------|------|-----------------|
| pS46 | 120.4 | 8.86 | 56.1 | 64.9 | 57.4 | 30.9 | Glu |
| pT50 | 123.5 | 9.36 | 61.1 | 72.2 | 55.6 | 30.2 | Glu |
| pT65 | 122.5 | 9.12 | 60.7 | 72.2 | 58.4 | 64.1 | Ser |
| pT125 | 121.8 | 9.35 | 61.1 | 72.2 | 52.4 | 19.4 | Ala |
| pT175 | 125.1 | 9.59 | 61.5 | 72.4 | 55.7 | 33.3 | Lys |
| pT181 | 124.5 | 9.49 | 61.3 | 72.4 | 55.9 | 33.3 | Lys |
| pS199 | 119.0 | 9.04 | 58.3 | 65.6 | 56.0 | 33.3 | Lys |
| pS199 | 120.6 | 8.71 | 56.0 | 65.0 | 57.7 | 64.3 | Ser |
| pS202 | 117.9 | 8.54 | 55.7 | 65.3 | 45.0 | -- | Gly |
| pT205 | 117.1 | 8.62 | 60.4 | 71.8 | 45.0 | -- | Gly |
| pT231 | 123.0 | 9.33 | 60.9 | 72.2 | 55.8 | 31.0 | Arg |
| pS235 | 120.0 | 8.85 | 55.8 | 65.2 | 56.5 | 33.3 | Lys |
| pS286 | 121.8 | 8.86 | 56.5 | 64.5 | 56.5 | 34.1 | Lys |
| pS404 | 120.4 | 8.66 | 55.9 | 70.0 | 61.7 | 70.0 | Thr |
| pS422 | 118.2 | 8.65 | 56.2 | 65.0 | 54.3 | 41.6 | Asp |
Figure 1
Figure 2
Figure 3
Figure 4
Figure 5

Phosphorylation of Tau by ERK2
Phosphorylation of Tau by ERK2

Figure 6
Figure 7
Figure 8