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Identification of aromatic amino acid residues in conserved region VI of the large polymerase of vesicular stomatitis virus is essential for both guanine-N-7 and ribose 2'-O methyltransferases

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Keywords:
mRNA cap methyltransferase
Vesicular stomatitis virus
RNA methylation, replication and gene expression

Introduction

Eukaryotic mRNAs possess at their 5'- terminus a 7mGpppN cap structure that is essential for mRNA stability and efficient translation (Furuichi et al., 1977; Furuichi and Shatkin, 2000). Formation of the cap structure usually requires four enzymatic reactions. First, an RNA triphosphatase hydrolyses the 5'- triphosphate end of the nascent mRNA to yield a diphosphate (5' ppN). Second, the diphosphate RNA end is capped with GMP by an RNA guanylyltransferase via a covalent enzyme-RNA intermediate to yield the GpppN cap structure. Third, the N-7 position of guanine cap is methylated by a guanine-N-7 (G-N-7) MTase to yield 7mGpppN. Finally, for some eukaryotic mRNA, the cap structure can be further methylated by a ribose-2'-O (2'-O) MTase to yield 7mGpppN\(^n\). The mRNA capping and methylation reactions are conserved among all eukaryotes (Shuman and Schwer, 1995; Furuichi and Shatkin, 2000; Shuman, 2001). In this conventional cap methylation reaction, two methylase activities are carried out by separate enzymes, each containing its own catalytic site and the binding site for the methyl donor, S-adenosyl-l-methionine. Unlike conventional mRNA cap methylation, the 2'-O methylation of VSV proceeds subsequent G-N-7 methylation. In this study, we found that individual alanine substitutions in two conserved aromatic residues (Y1650 and F1691) in region VI of L protein abolished both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylation. However, replacement of one aromatic residue with another aromatic residue did not significantly affect the methyltransferase activities. Our studies provide genetic and biochemical evidence that conserved aromatic residues in region VI of L protein essential for both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylations. In combination with the structural prediction, our results suggest that these aromatic residues may participate in RNA recognition.
full-length antigenic RNA, which in turn results in the synthesis of genomic RNA. How polymerase complex controls these two distinct RNA synthesis is still poorly understood.

The VSV L protein is a 241-kDa multifunctional protein. Structure has not been determined for any portion of L protein within NNS RNA viruses. In addition to the polymerase function, the L protein possesses all the enzymatic activities for mRNA processing such as capping, methylation and polyadenylation (Abraham et al., 1975; Moyer, 1981; Hercyk et al., 1988; Poch et al., 1990; Li et al., 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009; Galloway and Wertz, 2008; Ogino et al., 2010). In recent years, many breakthroughs have been made in VSV mRNA processing. These discoveries were facilitated by the ability of purified VSV to synthesize RNA in vitro (Baltimore et al., 1970) and the ability of highly purified L protein to modify short virus-specific mRNA in vitro (Ogino and Banerjee, 2007; Li et al., 2008; Rahmeh et al., 2009).

Recent studies revealed that the mechanism of mRNA capping reaction in VSV is distinct from that of all other known capping reactions. Specifically, capping of VSV mRNA is achieved by a novel polyribonucleotidyltransferase (PRNTase) which transfers a monophosphate RNA onto a GDP acceptor through a covalent L-RNA intermediate (Ogino et al., 2010). In vitro-synthesized short RNA, it was demonstrated that 2'-O methylation of VSV mRNA cap structure is also unique. Specifically, capping of VSV mRNA is achieved by a novel polyribonucleotidyltransferase (PRNTase) which transfers a monophosphate RNA onto a GDP acceptor through a covalent L-RNA intermediate (Ogino and Banerjee, 2007; Li et al., 2008; Ogino et al., 2010).

However, all other known capping reactions are catalyzed by RNA guanylyltransferase, which transfers GMP derived from GTP onto a diphosphate acceptor RNA (Furuichi and Shatkin, 2000). Previously, we demonstrated that a new motif, GxxT[n]HR, in conserved region V (CRV) of the L protein is essential for PRNTase activity (Li et al., 2008). A biochemical study showed that it is the H residue in GxxT[n]HR motif involved in the formation of the covalent L-RNA intermediate (Ogino et al., 2010). In addition, it was shown that mRNA capping reaction of Chandipura virus, another member within the family Rhabdoviridae, utilizes the same mechanism (Ogino and Banerjee, 2010). Whether this unconventional mechanism is conserved in other families of NNS RNA viruses is not known.

Like the unconventional capping mechanism, methylation of the VSV mRNA cap structure is also unique. Specifically, the G-N-7 and 2'-O methylations of VSV mRNA are accomplished by a single protein: the conserved domain VI of the L protein (Grdzelishvili et al., 2005; Li et al., 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008; Galloway and Wertz, 2008; Galloway et al., 2008; Rahmeh et al., 2009). Sequence alignment and structure prediction identified a putative 2'-O MTase in conserved region VI of the L protein (Bujnicki and Rychlewski, 2002; Ferron et al., 2002). Alterations to the MTase catalytic motif (K-D-K-E) in conserved domain VI of VSV L protein abolished both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylation, suggesting that a single active site is essential for both methylation activities (Li et al., 2005). This is in contrast to all other known MTases, in which the two activities are catalyzed by either separate proteins (Shuman and Schwer, 1995; Furuichi and Shatkin, 2000) or two different regions in one protein (Reinisch et al., 2000).

Interestingly, substitutions to the SAM binding site of VSV MTase disrupted methylation at the guanine-N-7 (G-N-7) position or both at the G-N-7 and ribose-2'-O (2'-O) positions of the mRNA cap, suggesting that the two methylation activities share one SAM binding site, and methylation of the G-N-7 position is not required for 2'-O methylation (Li et al., 2006). Using purified recombinant L protein and in vitro-synthesized short RNA, it was demonstrated that 2'-O methylation of VSV precedes and facilitates subsequent G-N-7 methylation, and two methylation activities require different RNA sequence and length in methylation (Rahmeh et al., 2009). Therefore, VSV cap methylation is mechanistically different from all other known mRNA cap methylation reactions.

Although VSV mRNA MTase has been genetically and biochemically characterized, the mechanism by which a single region VI of L protein catalyzes two methylations is not fully understood. To acquire methylation, the MTase usually directly or indirectly contacts RNA.
substrate (Lockless et al., 1998; Hu et al., 1999; Quiocio et al., 2000; Shuman, 2001; Li et al., 2004; Cowling, 2010). However, this putative substrate binding site has not been suggested for any of the NNS RNA viruses. In this study, we performed further sequence alignment and structure prediction of VSV MTase that suggested several aromatic residues in region VI of VSV L protein as the putative RNA binding site. Subsequently, we performed a systematic mutagenesis analysis of this putative substrate binding site and determined its role in mRNA cap methylation. We demonstrated that the mutation to the aromatic residue abolished both G-N-7 and 2’-O methylations. Although RNA binding has not been directly measured in this study, combined with the structural prediction, our results suggest that these aromatic residues may participate in RNA recognition.

Results

Prediction of putative substrate binding site in VSV MTases and mutagenesis strategy

Based on sequence alignment and structure modeling, domain VI of the L protein in NNS RNA viruses shares homology with known 2’-O-MTases such as vaccinia virus VP39 and Escherichia coli. RRMJ (Bujnicki and Rychlewski, 2002; Ferron et al., 2002). To acquire methylation, the RNA substrate must come in contact with the MTase. RNA cap recognition often requires stacking between the base of the methylation, the RNA substrate must come in contact with the MTase.

In an attempt to identify the putative cap recognition site in VSV MTases, our strategy was to select conserved residues in region VI of L proteins of NNS RNA viruses that are physicochemically similar to those involved in substrate recognition in VP39. Sequence alignment showed that there are a number of aromatic residues that are highly conserved in the MTase domain of L proteins (Fig. 1). Aromatic residues at positions 1650 (Y), 1691 (F or Y), and 1835 (Y) are highly conserved in L proteins of NNS RNA viruses although there are some exceptions. For example, these aromatic residues are not conserved in nuclear BDV; 1691 (F or Y), and 1835 (Y) are absent in plant rhabdovirus; and 1650 (Y) is not conserved in HRSV (Fig. 1). Aromatic residues at positions 1742 (W), 1744 (Y), 1745 (F) and 1816 (F) are conserved in the L proteins of Rhabdoviridae and Filoviridae. Therefore, these aromatic residues were selected as putative equivalents of Y22, F180, and Y204 in VP39. Unfortunately, there is no amino acid precisely aligned with D182 and E233 in VP39. With the exception of two acidic amino acids in the catalytic site (K1651-D1762-K1795-E1833), position E1764 is also conserved in all L proteins. In addition, D1735 is highly conserved although it is W in L protein of some viruses, such as measles virus (Fig. 1). Actually, residue D1735 is a part of the SAM binding motif (GxGxG........D). Previously, we have shown that an alanine substitution for D1735 diminished both G-N-7 and 2’-O methylations to 35% of the level of rVSV (Li et al., 2006). Thus, we targeted E1764 as a candidate for the role of VP39 residues D182 and E233. Finally, other highly conserved aromatic amino acid residues (N1692, S1693, P1709, L1757 and S1827) within L proteins. In addition, D1735 is a part of the SAM binding motif (GxGxG........D). Therefore, these aromatic residues were also selected for mutagenesis. Previously, a serine residue has been shown to be involved in RNA-protein interaction of E. coli. 2’-O MTase, RRMJ (Hager et al., 2004). Therefore, we selected the most conserved serine residues (S1693 and S1827) for mutagenesis.

Recovery of recombinant viruses with L gene mutations

To test our prediction, we first performed alanine scanning mutagenesis in the putative RNA substrate binding site. All of the above amino acid residues were mutated into alanine individually in the L gene of an infectious clone of VSV. Recombinant VSV carrying these mutations were recovered from cDNA clone as described in Materials and methods. As shown in Fig. 2A, each of the L gene mutations yielded viable recombinant virus. However, most viruses showed defects in viral growth as judged by their plaque morphology.

Fig. 2. Recovery of recombinant VSV with mutations in the L gene. (A) The plaque morphology of each of the recombinant viruses is shown compared to rVSV. Plaques were developed after 24 h of incubation. Recombinants Y1650A and F1691A did not form plaques. (B) Viral titer of recombinant VSV in BSR77 cells. BSR77 cells were inoculated with each of the indicated viruses at an MOI of 3, and the viral yield was determined at 24 hpi by plaque assay. (C) Single-step growth curve of recombinant VSV in BHK-21 cells. Confluent BSR77 cells were infected with individual viruses at a TCID50 of 20. After 1-h incubation, the inoculum was removed, the cells were washed with DMEM, and fresh medium (containing 2% fetal bovine serum) was added, followed by incubation at 37 °C. Samples of supernatant were harvested at the indicated intervals over a 48-h time period, and the virus titer was determined by TCID50. Titers are expressed as the mean ± the standard deviation of three independent single-step growth experiments.
After 24 h of incubation, rVSV formed plaques that were 4.3±0.8 mm in diameter. However, alterations to amino acid residues S1693, W1742, F1745, E1764, S1827, and Y1835 resulted in formation of significantly smaller plaques. After 48 h of incubation, the average plaque diameter was 0.6±0.2 mm for S1693A, 2.3±0.4 mm for W1742A, 1.9±0.4 mm for F1745A, 1.3±0.4 mm for E1764A, and 0.9±0.2 mm for S1827A, 2.8±0.4 mm for Y1835A (Fig. 2A). Most interestingly, two recombinant viruses F1691A and Y1650A did not form plaques in either Vero or BSRT7 cells, although they were able to produce significant cytopathogenic effect (CPE) in both cell lines. This suggests that these two recombinants had a defect in cell-to-cell spread. Therefore, the viral titer for these two viruses was determined by TCID50 method in BSRT7 cells. The entire L gene of each virus was amplified by RT-PCR, sequenced, and the presence of the desired mutation was confirmed in all of the viruses. With the exception of the F1816A-mutated virus, no additional mutations were identified. Virus F1816A contained one additional nucleotide change G10177T which resulted in coding change M1815I. Thus, this virus was named F1816AD. Subsequently, we isolated a fresh F1816A from an independent transfection, and sequence confirmed that no additional changes were present within the L gene.

To examine the effect of these mutations on viral growth, we determined the virus yield in infected cells. Briefly, BSRT7 cells were infected with each virus at a MOI of 3 and the viral titer was determined at 24 h after inoculation. Recombinants E1764A, N1692A, S1693A and Y1835A resulted in formation of significantly smaller plaques. After 48 h of incubation, the average plaque diameter was 0.6±0.2 mm for S1693A, 2.3±0.4 mm for W1742A, 1.9±0.4 mm for F1745A, 1.3±0.4 mm for E1764A, and 0.9±0.2 mm for S1827A, 2.8±0.4 mm for Y1835A (Fig. 2A). Most interestingly, two recombinant viruses F1691A and Y1650A did not form plaques in either Vero or BSRT7 cells, although they were able to produce significant cytopathogenic effect (CPE) in both cell lines. This suggests that these two recombinants had a defect in cell-to-cell spread. Therefore, the viral titer for these two viruses was determined by TCID50 method in BSRT7 cells. The entire L gene of each virus was amplified by RT-PCR, sequenced, and the presence of the desired mutation was confirmed in all of the viruses. With the exception of the F1816A-mutated virus, no additional mutations were identified. Virus F1816A contained one additional nucleotide change G10177T which resulted in coding change M1815I. Thus, this virus was named F1816AD. Subsequently, we isolated a fresh F1816A from an independent transfection, and sequence confirmed that no additional changes were present within the L gene.

To examine the effect of these mutations on viral growth, we determined the virus yield in infected cells. Briefly, BSRT7 cells were infected with each virus at a MOI of 3 and the viral titer was determined at 24 h after inoculation. Recombinants E1764A, N1692A, S1693A and S1827A had a 3 logarithmic growth defect compared with rVSV (Fig. 2B). Since recombinant F1691A and Y1650A were not able to form plaques, we monitored the kinetics of release of infectious virus by single-step growth assay in BSRT7 cells using TCID50 assay by Reed–Muench method (Reed and Muench, 1938). Briefly, BSRT7 cells were infected with 20 TCID50 of each of the indicated recombinants and viral replication was determined at time points from 0 to 48 h post-infection. As shown in Fig. 2C, both F1691A and Y1650A had significant defects in viral replication as compared to that of rVSV. Wild type rVSV reached peak titer (109.8 TCID50/ml) at 12 h post-infection. However, both Y1650A and F1691A reached peak titer (106.4 TCID50/ml) at 30 h post-infection. Taken together, these results demonstrate that amino acid substitutions in the putative RNA binding site significantly diminished viral replication.

Identification of amino acids in the putative RNA substrate binding site that are essential for G-N-7 methylation

To examine the effect of amino acid substitutions in the putative RNA binding site on mRNA cap methylation, in vitro transcription reactions were performed as described previously (Li et al., 2005). Briefly, 20 μg of virus was activated with detergent and incubated with nucleoside triphosphates supplemented with [α-32P]GTP as described in Materials and methods. Total RNA was extracted, purified, and analyzed by acid-agarose gel electrophoresis as described previously (Li et al., 2005). All of the recombinant viruses were able to synthesize similar amounts of mRNA except for F1691A and Y1650A. These two recombinants synthesized approximately 50%
of the level of the rVSV mRNA (Fig. 3A and B). To compensate for these defects in mRNA synthesis, the amount of these viruses used in the in vitro transcription reactions was increased to 40 μg.

To analyze the G-N-7 methylation, 8.8 μl of each in vitro-synthesized mRNA was treated by TAP. TAP specifically cleaves the pyrophosphate bond of the GpppN cap to yield Gp or, if the cap structure is methylated, 7mGp. These products are resolved by TLC on polyethyleneimine (PEI) cellulose F sheets. For rVSV, when transcription reactions were performed in the presence of 1 mM SAM, a fully G-N-7 methylated cap (7mGp) was detected after TAP digestion (Fig. 3C, lane 1). This radioactive spot co-migrated with the marker 7mGp as visualized by UV shadowing. However, an unmethylated cap (Gp) was detected when the transcription reaction was performed in the presence of 100 μM SAH (Fig. 3C, lane 2). Quantitative analysis of three independent experiments showed that the total of 14 mutants can be classified into three different groups (Fig. 3C and D). Viruses in the first group abolished G-N-7 methylation. These viruses included Y1650A, F1691A, and E1764A, which yielded 6.5%, 5.5%, and 8.8% of G-N-7 methylated cap, respectively. Viruses that had a moderate defect in G-N-7 methylation were classified into group 2. These viruses included N1692A, S1693A, F1745A, and S1827A, which yielded 30-60% of G-N-7 methylated cap. Viruses that did not have a significant defect in G-N-7 methylation were classified into group 3. This group includes P1709A, W1744A, L1757A, F1816A, F1816AD, and Y1835A. These data clearly demonstrate that alterations to two aromatic amino acid residues (Y1650A and F1691A) and one acidic residue (E1764A) abolish G-N-7 methylation.

Identification of amino acids in the putative RNA substrate binding site that are essential for both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylation

To examine the effect of these mutations on both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylations, in vitro transcription reactions were performed in the presence of [3H]SAM. Total RNAs were extracted, purified, and subjected to nuclease P1 digestion followed by TLC on PEI cellulose F sheets. Nuclease P1 cleaves the bond between the 3'-hydroxyl and 5'-phosphoryl group of adjacent nucleosides. Theoretically, digestion of VSV mRNAs by P1 should yield 7mGpppA (double methylated), GpppA (only 2'-O methylated), 7mGpppA (only G-N-7 methylated), or GpppA (unmethylated), depending on the extent of cap methylation. The standard markers for these products were visualized by UV shadowing. For rVSV, when transcription reactions were performed in the presence of 50 μM of [3H]-SAM, a doubly methylated cap (7mGpppA) was detected after P1 digestion (Fig. 4A, lane 1). However, no detectable products were observed when 1 mM of SAH was included in the reaction, confirming that both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylations were completely inhibited (Fig. 4A, lane 2). Phenotypes of a total of 14 mutants are shown in Fig. 4A.

Quantitative analysis of three independent experiments showed that these mutants fall into three categories (Fig. 4C). Recombinants Y1650A, F1691A, and E1764A reduced both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylations to an undetectable level (Fig. 4A and C). Recombinants N1692A, S1693A, F1745A, and S1827A were able to synthesize doubly methylated cap. However, the abundance of a fully methylated cap was diminished 30-60%. Viral mutants defective in G-N-7 methylation
were also equally defective in 2’-O methylation. Recombinants P1709A, W1744A, L1757A, F1816A, and F1816AD, and Y1835A yielded similar amounts of doubly methylated cap compared to that of rVSV, confirming that they did not affect either G-N-7 or 2’-O methylation (Fig. 4A and C). Interestingly, none of the viral mutants was defective only either in G-N-7 or 2’-O methylation. To further confirm these results, we performed additional cap hydrolysis. The RNA samples from rVSV, Y1650A, F1691A and E1764A were digested by RNase T2 and TAP. RNase T2 is an endoribonuclease that cleaves the phosphodiester bonds on the 3’ side of A residues. Digestion of the VSV mRNA cap structure with RNase T2 should yield 7mGpppAmA if the cap structure was doubly methylated. Further digestion of this product by TAP would yield 7mG and AmA. As shown in Fig. 4D, double digestion of RNA synthesized from rVSV yielded two radioactive spots. The first spot comigrated with the 7mGp marker, representing G-N-7 methylation. Presumably, the second spot was AmA, representing 2’-O methylation. The identity of these spots was also consistent with our previous publications (Li et al., 2005, 2006). However, these two spots were undetectable in RNA synthesized from each mutant. A primer extension assay was performed to detect the first 130 nt of N mRNA. As shown in Fig. 4B, the amount of RNA used for cap hydrolysis is indistinguishable for each mutant. Therefore, these results further confirmed that Y1650A, F1691A, and E1764A lack both G-N-7 and 2’-O methylations.

To further confirm the extent of cap methylation, the amount of [3H]-SAM incorporated into the viral mRNA was measured by scintillation counting and the dpm normalized to the amount of RNA synthesized. As shown in Fig. 4E, the amount of [3H]-SAM for recombinants Y1650A, F1691A and E1764A was about 5–10% that of rVSV. The amount of [3H]-SAM incorporation for recombinants N1692A, S1693A, F1745A, and S1827A was about 30–50% of that of rVSV. Recombinant P1709A, W1744A, L1757A, F1816A, and F1816AD, and Y1835A viruses showed comparable levels of [3H]-SAM incorporation to that of rVSV. Again, these results are consistent with cap hydrolysis by nuclease P1 digestion. Taken together, these experiments demonstrate that alanine substitutions for two aromatic residues (Y1650A and F1691A) and an acidic residue (E1764A) in VSV MTase abolish both G-N-7 and 2’-O methylation.

Cap methylation requires maintenance of two aromatic residues

It has been demonstrated that RNA cap recognition typically requires stacking between the base of the cap and aromatic rings from a protein (Lockless et al., 1998; Hodel et al., 1998; Hu et al., 1999; Quiocho et al., 2000; Egloff et al., 2002; Decroly et al., 2008). If aromatic residues are, indeed, involved in RNA cap recognition, maintenance of the aromatic ring may be essential for mRNA cap methylation. To further demonstrate the role of aromatic residues F1691 and Y1650 in VSV mRNA cap methylation, each of these two aromatic residues were changed to two other possible aromatic residues (Y, W or F) in the VSV infectious clone. A total of four possible mutants (F1691Y, F1691W, Y1650F, and Y1650W) were generated. As shown in Fig. 5A, each of these mutations yielded viable recombinant virus. Interestingly, changing from one aromatic residue to another aromatic residue did not significantly affect the size of viral plaques.
All these viruses replicated to high titer in BSRT7 cells, indistinguishable from that of rVSV (Fig. 5B). In sharp contrast, alanine substitutions for these aromatic residues resulted in recombinant viruses that did not form plaques (Fig. 2A) and significantly diminished viral replication (Fig. 2C). These data suggest that maintenance of an aromatic residue at positions 1691 and 1650 is essential for viral replication.

To examine G-N-7 methylation, in vitro transcription reactions were performed in the presence of [$\alpha$-32P]GTP. The RNA was purified as described, the cap structure was hydrolyzed with TAP, and the products were analyzed by TLC on PEI-F cellulose sheets. TAP digestion demonstrated that F1691Y and F1691W mutants exhibited 85% and 82% of the rVSV G-N-7 methylation, respectively (Fig. 5C). Y1650F and Y1650W mutants showed 88% and 90% of the rVSV G-N-7 methylation, respectively (Fig. 5C and D). Thus, changing from one aromatic residue to another aromatic residue does not significantly affect G-N-7 methylation.

To examine 2'-O methylation, the in vitro transcription reaction was performed using purified viruses and mRNA cap methylation was analyzed as described above. As shown in Fig. 6C, these recombinant viruses are defective in G-N-7 methylation compared to rVSV. Quantitative analysis showed that E1764D, E1764Q and E1764K yielded 22%±5%, 17%±8%, and 15%±6% of 7mGpppAm, respectively (Fig. 6D). Nuclease P1 digestion showed that E1764D, E1764Q and E1764K had a significant reduction in both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylation (Fig. 6E), yielding 19%±6%, 15%±9%, and 16%±8% of 7mGpppAm, respectively (Fig. 6G). Equivalent amounts of RNA were synthesized from each mutant as confirmed by primer extension (Fig. 6F). Therefore, changing of residue E at position 1764 to any other amino acids, even the very conservative change to D, suggest that VSV mRNA cap methylation may require the stacking interaction between the base of the cap and an aromatic residue at position 1650 and 1691.

The role of E1764 in VSV mRNA cap methylation

To further characterize the role of E1764 in VSV mRNA cap methylation, we mutated this residue to D (maintenance of charge), Q (maintenance of size) or K (changing charge). Using reverse genetics, recombinant viruses carrying these mutations were successfully recovered. As shown in Fig. 6A, the plaque sizes of E1764D, E1764Q and E1764K-mutated viruses were significantly diminished as compared to that of rVSV. These recombinants have a moderate defect (2-3 log viral yields) in replication in BSRT7 cells (Fig. 6B).
significantly diminished both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylation. These data suggest that E1764 is critical for both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylation.

Y1835A requires a higher SAM concentration and it is more sensitive to MTase inhibitor

There are a total of 7 aromatic residues that were selected for mutagenesis. Mutants Y1650A and F1691A abolished G-N-7 and 2'-O methylation. F1745A had a moderate reduction in methylation. Other aromatic residues (W1742, Y1744, F1816 and Y1835) did not have a significant impact on mRNA cap methylation. To further characterize the role of these amino acids, we monitored the effect of SAM and SAH concentration on mRNA cap methylation of these mutants. Briefly, an increasing amount of either SAM or SAH was added to the in vitro transcription reaction in the presence of [α-32P]GTP. RNAs were purified and treated with TAP. For rVSV, a full G-N-7 methylation was achieved when the reaction was performed in the presence of 100 μM of SAM (Fig. 7A and B). In contrast, Y1835A requires a much higher SAM concentration (1 mM) to achieve full G-N-7 methylation (Fig. 7A and B). For rVSV, G-N-7 methylation was completely inhibited when 200 μM of SAH was added to the reaction (Fig. 7C). However, Y1835A was much more sensitive to SAH inhibition and G-N-7 methylation was almost completely inhibited by the addition of 20 μM of SAH (Fig. 7C). Thus, these experiments show that Y1835A requires higher SAM concentration for methylation and it is more sensitive to an MTase inhibitor. In contrast, alterations to other three aromatic residues (W1742, Y1744 and F1816) resulted in viruses with properties similar to rVSV (data not shown). These results suggest that an alanine substitution for Y1835 alters the affinity of SAM and SAH in mRNA cap methylation.

Discussion

Prior to this study, the putative RNA substrate recognition site had not been suggested for any MTase in the L protein of NNS RNA viruses. Using the prototype rhabdovirus VSV as a model, we performed a systematic mutagenesis analysis of a putative substrate binding site in the MTase region of L polymerase and determined the effect of these mutations on VSV mRNA cap methylation. Based on the predicted structural model for the VSV MTase (amino acid residues 1644–1842 in the L protein) (Galloway et al., 2008), the residues Y1650 and F1691 are located far from each other with a distance of 17.3 Å between their alpha carbon atoms. Y1650 is located in the middle of the first helix, and the F1691 is at the very C-terminal of the second helix (Fig. 8A). Perhaps, a stacking interaction with one aromatic residue causes a conformational and structural change in the VSV methylase, which results in the interaction with another aromatic acid residues in VSV methylase are essential for both G-N-7 and 2’-O MTases and may function as a putative RNA recognition site.

Identification of amino acids residues essential for mRNA cap recognition

The structure of several cellular and viral mRNA 2’-O MTases has been determined (Hodel et al., 1996; Hager et al., 2002; Egloff et al., 2002; Zhou et al., 2007). To achieve 2’-O methylation, RNA substrate contacts with the cap recognition site requires stacking between the base of the cap and aromatic rings from a MTase (Bugl et al., 2000; Lockless et al., 1998; Hu et al., 1999; Quiocho et al., 2000; Egloff et al., 2002; Decroly et al., 2008). Vaccinia VP39 is one of the best characterized 2’-O MTases. In VP39, it was found that the recognition of a methylated base is achieved by stacking between two aromatic residues (Y22 and F180) (Hodel et al., 1996; Hu et al., 1999). Based on structure modeling and mutagenesis analysis, it was shown that residue F24 in West Nile virus (WNV) methylase (NS5) (Dong et al., 2007) and Y29 and F173 in feline coronavirus 2’-O MTase (nsp16) (Decroly et al., 2008) may play an equivalent role to residue Y22 in VP39. The cellular cap binding protein eIF4E recognizes the cap by stacking between W56 and WI02 (Marcotrigiano et al., 1997). In all known cases, aromatic residues are involved in cap binding and substrate recognition.

Sequence alignment and structure prediction suggest that domain VI of VSV L protein shares homology with known 2’-O MTases. We are particularly interested in the highly conserved aromatic amino acids since they may be involved in cap recognition. Among 7 aromatic residues we selected, Y1650 and F1691 were the most critical amino acids essential for mRNA cap methylation. Specifically, alanine substitutions for Y1650 and F1691 abolished both G-N-7 and 2’-O methylation (Fig. 3C and D). However, replacement of one aromatic residue with another aromatic residue (Y1650F, Y1650W, F1691Y, and F1691W) did not significantly affect the methyltransferase activities (Fig. 5C and E), suggesting that maintenance of the aromatic residue is required for RNA substrate recognition and methylation. Similar to other known 2’-O MTases, these two residues may have a stacking interaction with the mRNA cap that lead to correct positioning of capped RNA into the catalytic site. Based on the predicted structural model for the VSV MTase (amino acid residues from 1644 to 1842 in the L protein) (Galloway et al., 2008), the residues Y1650 and F1691 are located far from each other with a distance of 17.3 Å between their alpha carbon atoms. Y1650 is located in the middle of the first helix, and the F1691 is at the very C-terminal of the second helix (Fig. 8A). Perhaps, a stacking interaction with one aromatic residue causes a conformational and structural change in the VSV methylase, which results in the interaction with another aromatic
or K abolished both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylations (Fig. 6). The role of D182 and E233 in VP39. Substitution of E1764 to A, D, Q cap. In addition, we also found that other amino acid substitutions such as N1692A, S1693A and S1827A affected mRNA cap methylation (Fig. 3C). Interestingly, S197 in RM1J has been shown to be involved in RNA-protein interactions (Hager et al., 2004). Further functional and structural studies of the VSV MTase will be necessary to define the exact role of these amino acids in mRNA cap methylation.

Model for mRNA cap recognition in a dual MTase

Our structure prediction and mutagenesis is guided by the homology of VSV MTase with 2'-O MTases. If Y1650 and F1691 are the cap recognition site for VSV 2'-O MTase, why does alteration in these amino acid residues also abolish G-N-7 methylation? Perhaps, the simplest explanation is that the order of VSV mRNA cap methylation is unique in which 2'-O methylation is required for G-N-7 methylation (Li et al., 2006; Rahmeh et al., 2009). Thus, inhibition of 2'-O methylation would likely also prevent the G-N-7 methylation. Another model is that aromatic residue Y1650 and F1691 also make contact with the mRNA cap during G-N-7 methylation. Previously, it was thought that no amino acid residue was in direct contact with the guanine-N-7 nucleophile, the SAM methyl carbon, or the SAH sulfur leaving group (Fabrega et al., 2004). Rather, cap G-N-7 methylation is accomplished by optimally orienting the substrates in proximity to facilitate methyl transfer (Fabrega et al., 2004). However, a recent structural study of vaccinia G-N-7 MTase revealed that aromatic residues (Y555 and F556) play a critical role in G-N-7 methylation (De la Pena et al., 2007; Zheng and Shuman, 2008a,b). These aromatic amino acids stabilize binding to the catalytic site and facilitate the precise positioning of the methyl donor. Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility that Y1650 and F1691 play a role in stabilizing the binding of VSV MTase to the cap during G-N-7 methylation.

Of course, it would be of great interest to test whether mutations to aromatic residues influence binding of the RNA substrate in vitro. In an attempt to demonstrate the RNA binding activity, we expressed and purified the recombinant L mutant carrying both F1961A and Y1650A, and their RNA binding activities were determined by a gel shift assay. Unfortunately, these amino acid changes did not affect the RNA binding activity in vitro (data not shown). It is likely that these RNA binding sites in the 240-kDa L protein and a single point mutation in MTase may not affect the RNA-protein complex.
analogs specifically which the G-N-7 methylated cap is repositioned to the cap binding methylations through a substrate-repositioning mechanism, in single domain in viral polymerase proteins. Most recently, it was of WNV, although both of them encode dual MTase activities in a methylation (Li et al., 2006). Interestingly, none of the mutants were G1672A) in the SAM binding site were defective in G-N-7, but not 2'-O,2005; Galloway and Wertz, 2008). Some of the mutants (G1670A and SAM binding sites (Li et al., 2005, 2006, 2007; Grdzelishvili et al., et al., unpublished observation). Previously, we and others have G-N-7 and 2'-O methylations. In agreement with this hypothesis, GTP is unlikely that the RNA substrate binding site functions as a switching sites (Dong et al., 2007).

In this study, we found that there is another striking difference in the cap recognition site between VSV and WNV MTases. In WNV MTase, the cap recognition site is essential for 2'-O, but not G-N-7 methylation (Dong et al., 2008). Consistent with this, GTP and cap analogs specifically inhibited 2'-O, but not G-N-7 methylation (Dong et al., 2008). It was proposed that WNV MTase catalyzes two methylations through a substrate-repositioning mechanism, in which the G-N-7 methylated cap is repositioned to the cap binding site for 2'-O methylation upon binding (Dong et al., 2008). However, it is unlikely that the RNA substrate binding site functions as a switching point for VSV MTase since substitutions to this site abolished both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylations. In agreement with this hypothesis, GTP and cap analogs did not affect VSV mRNA cap methylation in vitro (Li et al., unpublished observation). Previously, we and others have performed extensive mutagenesis analysis in the MTase catalytic and SAM binding sites (Li et al., 2005, 2006, 2007; Grdzelishvili et al., 2005; Galloway and Wertz, 2008). Some of the mutants (G1670A and G1672A) in the SAM binding site were defective in G-N-7, but not 2'-O methylation (Li et al., 2006). Interestingly, none of the mutants were specifically defective in 2'-O, but G-N-7 methylation. Most likely, the cap recognition site in VSV MTase plays an essential role in stacking the cap of the RNA substrate during 2'-O methylation and possibly stabilizes the RNA-MTase complex during G-N-7 methylation. Overall, the mechanism of VSV mRNA cap methylation is significantly different that of WNV, although both of them encode dual MTase activities in a single domain in viral polymerase proteins. Most recently, it was found that capping of flavivirus RNA is catalyzed by conventional RNA guanylyltransferase via a covalent GMP-enzyme intermediate (Issur et al., 2009). However, VSV capping is catalyzed by a novel polyribonucleotidyltransferase (PRNTase) (Ogino and Barnerjee, 2007; Li et al., 2008; Ogino et al., 2010; Koonin and Moss, 2010). These studies suggest that VSV and perhaps other NNS RNA viruses have evolved a unique mechanism to add the cap to their mRNA and to methylate the cap structure.

In summary, we examined the potential RNA substrate recognition site in VSV methylase and determined its role in mRNA cap methylation. We identified two aromatic amino acid residues that are essential for both G-N-7 and 2'-O methylation and may play a critical role in the stacking interaction with mRNA cap. Clearly, unraveling of the crystal structure of VSV MTase will provide more mechanistic insight to this unusual mRNA cap methylation. We also showed that mutations to the putative RNA substrate recognition site significantly diminished viral replication. These findings suggest that mRNA cap methylation is an attractive antiviral target for NNS RNA viruses.

Materials and methods

Plasmid construction and site-directed mutagenesis

Plasmids encoding VSV N (pN), P (pP), and L (pL) genes, and an infectious cDNA clone of the viral genome, pVSV1(+), were generous gifts from Dr. Gail Wertz (Whelan et al., 1995). Using pVSV1(+) as a template, the coding sequence in the L gene was modified by site-directed mutagenesis using the QuikChange methodology (Stratagene, La Jolla, CA). The presence of the desired mutation was confirmed by sequence analysis of a 2-kb region of pVSV1(+) that spanned from FseI to an HindIII site. The pVSV1(+) variants were digested with FseI and HindIII, and the resulting 2-kb fragment was subcloned back into pVSV1(+) at the same sites. This approach ensured that no other sequence alterations were introduced during the mutagenesis reaction. Using this method, a total of sixteen L gene mutations was generated.

Recovery and purification of recombinant VSV

Recovery of recombinant VSV from the infectious clone was performed essentially as described previously (Whelan et al., 1995). Briefly, recombinant VSV was recovered by co-transfection of pVSV (+), pN, pP, and pL into BSRT7 cells infected with a recombinant vaccinia virus (vTF7-3) expressing T7 RNA polymerase (Fuerst et al., 1986). At 96 h posttransfection, cell culture fluids were collected, filtered through 0.2 μm filter, and recombinant virus was further amplified in BSRT7 cells. Subsequently, the viruses were plaque purified. Viral plaque assay was performed in Vero cells as described previously (Whelan et al., 1995). Individual plaques were isolated, and seed stocks were amplified on BSRT7 cells. To generate large stocks, plaque purified viruses were inoculated into 10 confluent T150 flask BSRT7 cells at a multiplicity of infection (MOI) of 0.01 in a volume of 2 ml of Dulbecco modified Eagle medium (DMEM). At 1 h postadsorption, 15 ml of DMEM (supplemented with 2% fetal bovine serum) was added to the cultures, and infected cells were incubated at 37 °C for 24 to 48 h. Cell culture fluids were harvested when extensive cytopathic effect (CPE) was observed. Cell culture fluids were clarified by centrifugation at 3,000×g for 10 min. Virus was concentrated by centrifugation at 40,000×g for 90 min at 4 °C in a Ty 50.2 rotor. The pellet was resuspended in NTE buffer (100 mM NaCl, 10 mM Tris, 1 mM EDTA [pH 7.4]) and further purified through 10% sucrose NTE by centrifugation at 150,000g for 1 h at 4 °C in an SW50.1 rotor. The final pellet was resuspended in 0.3 ml of NTE buffer. The virus titer was determined by plaque assay in Vero cells, and the protein content was measured by the Bradford assay (Sigma Chemical Co., St. Louis, MO). The L genes of the purified viruses were sequenced again, and these stocks were used for in vitro transcription reactions.

Single-cycle growth curves

Confluent BSRT-7 cells were either infected with individual viruses at an MOI of 3 or infected with 20 TCID50 of viruses. After 1 h of adsorption, the inoculum was removed, the cells were washed twice with DMEM, fresh DMEM (supplemented with 2% fetal bovine serum) was added, and infected cells were incubated at 37 °C. Aliquots of the cell culture fluid were removed at the indicated intervals, and virus
titers were determined by plaque assay in Vero cells or a TCID50 assay using Reed–Muench method in BSR77 cells (Reed and Muench, 1938).

Transcription of viral RNA in vitro

Viral RNA was synthesized in vitro essentially as described previously (Baltimore et al., 1970; Ball and White, 1976; Li et al., 2005, 2006, 2007). 20 μg of purified recombinant VSV was activated by incubation with detergents for 5 min at room temperature. RNA synthesis reactions were performed in the presence of nucleoside triphosphates (1 mM ATP and 0.5 mM each of CTP, GTP, and UTP) and actinomycin D. Where indicated, reactions were supplemented with 1 mM SAM or S-adenosylhomocysteine (SAH) or with 15 μCi of [α-32P]GTP (3,000 Ci/mmol) or 15 μCi of [3H]SAM (85 Ci/mmol; Perkin-Elmer, Wellesley, MA). After incubation at 30 °C for 5 h, total RNA was purified by RNase purification kit (Qiagen). Purified RNA was analyzed by electrophoresis on acid-agarose gels as described previously (Li et al., 2005), and the products were detected by phosphomimic analysis.

Analysis of mRNA cap methyltransferase

For G-N-7 MTase assay, in vitro transcription reactions were performed in the presence of 15 μCi of [α-32P]GTP and 1 mM SAM or SAH. The RNAs were purified and digested with 2U of tobacco acid pyrophosphatase (TAP; Epicenter, Madison, WI) and the products were resolved by thin-layer chromatography (TLC) on PEI-F cellulose sheets (EM Biosciences). For the ribose-2′-O-MTase assay, in vitro transcription reactions were performed in the presence of 15 μCi of [3H]SAM. The purified RNAs were digested with 5U of nuclease P1 (Sigma) or double digested by 10U of RNase T2 and 2U of TAP, and the products were spotted onto a TLC plate. The TLC plate was developed using 1.2 M LiCl, dried in 70 °C incubator, and the radioactive spots were detected by using a phosphorimagery (GE Healthcare, Typhoon). Markers 7mGpppA and GpppA were purchased from New England Biolabs, and GpppAm and 7mGcpppAm were purchased from P-L Biochemicals. Marker 7mGpG and Gp were generated by TAP digestion of 7mGpppA and GpppA. All the markers were visualized by UV shadowing at 254 nm.

 Primer extension assays

A primer extension assay was used to quantify the amount of mRNA synthesized in vitro (Li et al., 2006, 2007). Briefly, a minus sense oligonucleotide, nucleotides 130–115 of the VSV genome, was end-labeled using [γ-32P]ATP and T4 polynucleotide kinase (Invitrogen). The labeled primer was purified, and 7.5 pmol was annealed with 1/25 the total RNA from an in vitro transcription reaction and extended by Superscript III reverse transcriptase (Invitrogen) at 50 °C. Products were analyzed by electrophoresis on denaturing 6% polyacrylamide gels and detected by phosphomimic analysis.

 Scintillation counting

To further analyze mRNA cap methylation, aliquots of purified RNA from [3H] SAM experiments were mixed with 4 ml of ReadySafe scintillation mixture (Beckman Coulter), and dpm were measured by using a TriCarb Model 314X liquid scintillation counter (Packard Instrument Company).

 Quantitative and statistical analysis

Quantitative analysis was performed by either densitometric scanning of autoradiographs or by using a phosphorimagery (GE Healthcare, Typhoon) and ImageQuant TL software (GE Healthcare, Piscataway, NJ). Each experiment was done three to six times. Statistical analysis was performed by a paired Student’s t test. A value of p < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Acknowledgments

We thank Gail Wertz for her generous gift of VSV infectious clone. We thank Lijun Liu for structural modeling of VSV MTase. We thank Sean Whelan, Ronald Iorio, and Ashley Predmore for critical reviews of the manuscript. X.Z. was supported by a fellowship from the Jiang University, China. Part of this study was supported by a grant (2010-65119-20602) from the USDA Agricultural and Food Research Initiative to J.L.

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