Mammalian gametogenesis and embryogenesis are associated with extensive tissue remodeling and cellular migrations. Such processes require temporally and spatially regulated degradation of extracellular matrices and experimental evidence has accumulated suggesting that extracellular proteases are indeed involved in ovulation (Eppley, 1974; Beers, 1975; Beers et al., 1975), sperm maturation (Lacroix et al., 1979), fertilization (Stambaugh, 1978; Saling, 1981; Bleil et al., 1981; Mollier and Wassarman, 1989), and embryo implantation (Denker, 1972; Strickland et al., 1976; Glass et al., 1983). Though the proteases susceptible of participating in these various conditions have not been fully identified, plasminogen activators (PAs) are known to be secreted during gametogenesis (Beers, 1975; Lacroix et al., 1981; Huarte et al., 1985, 1987a; Vihko et al., 1989) and early embryonic development (Strickland et al., 1976; Marotti et al., 1982; Axelrod, 1985). PAs are serine proteases that catalyze the conversion of plasminogen into plasmin, an active protease of broad specificity capable of degrading, directly or indirectly, i.e., through the activation of metalloprotease zymogens, all components of the extracellular matrix (Reich, 1978; Danø et al., 1985). The two known PAs, urokinase-type (u-PA) and tissue-type (t-PA) plasminogen activators, are the product of two distinct genes; they are synthetically and secreted by a wide spectrum of cell types and are generally thought to play a central role in regulating extracellular proteolysis in physiological and pathological conditions, precisely where tissue disruption and cellular migration are prominent (Danø et al., 1985). In the mouse ovary, u-PA is produced by granulosa cells under the control of gonadotropins (Canipari et al., 1987), while t-PA is the first protease to have been identified in murine oocytes (Huart et al., 1985); plasmin-mediated proteolysis facilitates follicular disruption (Beers, 1975) and could also be involved in oocyte migration in the oviduct. Trophoblasts are the first cell type to differentiate in mammalian embryos: they are transiently endowed with marked invasive and migrating properties, to achieve embryo implantation via the penetration of the uterine mucosa. Cultured mouse blastocysts and trophoblasts have been shown to produce PA activity, with a timing that corresponds to the period of trophoblastic invasiveness in vivo (Strickland et al., 1976). These cumulative observations suggest that PAs may act as catalysts of the extracellular proteolysis accompanying gametogenesis and embryo implantation; however, they are based on in vitro analyses and limited information is presently available concerning PA synthesis in vivo.

This prompted us to perform in situ hybridizations, using specific cRNA probes for mouse u-PA and t-PA mRNAs to assess the cellular distribution of PA synthesis during oogenesis and early phases of embryo implantation. We report here that cell types engaged in follicular disruption and in uterine...
invasion, such as granulosa cells of preovulatory follicles and trophoblast cells, express high levels of u-PA mRNA in a time-dependent fashion compatible with the postulated participation of the PA-plasmin system in physiological events of tissue remodeling and cell migration.

**Materials and Methods**

**Materials**

Ovaries were collected from adult NMRI virgin females (Kleintierfarm Maddring, Basel); preovulatory ovaries were obtained from pregnant mare serum primed females, injected 46 h later with human chorionic gonadotropins, and killed 5 h after the last injection (5 IU of pregnant mare serum; i.e., 4 h after ovulation). Ovaries were dissected, embedded in Tissue-Tek (Miles Ames Div., Elkhart, IN), frozen down in precooled methylbutane and stored at −70°C. Four to six ovaries were analyzed for each condition.

Adult NMRI female mice were caged with males in the evening and monitored for the appearance of a vaginal plug the following morning. On the 4th day of gestation, blastocysts were flushed from the uteri of NMRI females with F11 medium supplemented with 5% FCS, and then cultured for 4 d in F11 medium supplemented with 10% FCS. At the end of the culture, the trophoblast outgrowths were collected and pooled in groups of 10 embryos before analysis.

Pregnant mice were sacrificed on the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 11th days of gestation to obtain 5.5-, 6.5-, 7.5-, 8.5-, and 10.5-d-old embryos. Segments of uteri were dissected, embedded, and stored as above. The preovulatory stages were confirmed histologically using Thesier's description (1989). 8.5-d-old embryos were at the three to seven somites stage and 10.5 d of development corresponded to the 28–34 somites stage. For each time point, four to six whole embryos were analyzed, and 10–40 tissue sections were prepared per embryo.

**Enzymatic Analyses**

Protein extractions, immunoprecipitation, gel electrophoresis, and zymography were performed as described (Huarte et al., 1985).

**Plasmid Constructions and In Vitro Transcriptions**

The u-PA antisense probe pSP64-MU containing the 658-bp Pst I–Hind III fragment of the mouse u-PA cDNA clone pDB29 (Belin et al., 1985), the direction and the t-PA antisense probe pSP64-MT3 containing the 726-bp Pvu II–Spe I fragment of the mouse t-PA cDNA clone pUC9-A33 (Rickles et al., 1988) were transcribed in vitro, as previously described (Huarte et al., 1987a). mRNA remained localized in oocytes and predominantly localized in the outer part of the follicles and RNAse treatments. In each hybridization, control tissue sections of the vas deferens and the oviduct were included. These organs have a similar anatomical organization but they contain respectively and predominantly u-PA and t-PA mRNA (see Fig. 3). An optimal distinction between u-PA and t-PA mRNAs was achieved by including a wash at low ionic strength and RNAse treatments. In each hybridization, control tissue sections of the vas deferens and the oviduct were included.

**Northern Blot Analyses**

Total RNAs from vas deferens, oviduct, and ovaries were extracted as described elsewhere (Busso et al., 1986). Blastocyst cell RNA was prepared as described (Huarte et al., 1987b). RNAs were denatured with glyoxal, electrophoresed in 1.2% agarose gels, and transferred overnight onto Biodyne nylon membranes (Pall Corp., Glen Cove, NY). Prehybridizations, hybridizations, and posthybridizations washes were performed as previously described (Huarte et al., 1987a,b).

**In Situ Hybridizations**

5-μm cryostat tissue sections were mounted on poly-L-lysine (Sigma Chemical Co., St. Louis, MO) coated microscope slides, fixed in 1% paraformaldehyde in PBS for 1–2 min, rinsed in PBS, and stored in 70% ethanol at 4°C until analyzed. Fixed sections were rinsed in 2× SSC (1× SSC = 150 mM NaCl, 15 mM Na-citrate, pH 7.0), acetylated with 0.25% (vol/vol) acetic anhydride in 0.1 M triethanolamine, pH 8.0, at room temperature for 10 min, incubated in 0.1 M Tris-hydrochloride, pH 7.0, 0.1 M glycine at room temperature for 30 min, and prehybridized in 2× SSC, 50% formamide at 50°C for 15 min. 10–20 ng of H-labeled RNAs were applied to each section in 20 μl of hybridization mixture (2× SSC, 50% formamide, 1 ng/ml BSA (RNAse-free; Sigma Chemical Co.), 1 mg/ml Escherichia coli rRNA (Boehringer Mannheim GmbH, Mannheim, FRG), 10 mM DTT and 5% dextran sulfate) at 50°C for 3 h. Slides were subsequently washed in 2× SSC, 50% formamide and 0.1× SSC, 50% formamide, at 50°C for 30 min each. Unhybridized transcripts were digested with 10 μg/ml ribonuclease A (a-PA probe) or 5 μg/ml ribonuclease T1 (t-PA probe), at 37°C for 30 min. The slides were washed again in 2× SSC, 50% formamide at 50°C for 15 min dehydrated in graded ethanol and air-dried. Finally, they were immersed in NTB-2 emulsion (Eastman Kodak Co., Rochester, NY), diluted 1:1 in deionized water. After 4–5 wk exposure, they were developed in Kodak D-19 developer, fixed in 30% Na thiosulfate, and counterstained in methylene blue.

Microphotographs were taken with a Zeiss photomicroscope (Zeiss, Oberkochen, FRG), equipped with an immersion dark-field condensor, using Kodak Ektachrome 50 color film.

**Controls of Specificity**

They were performed as previously described (Huarte et al., 1987a) and included the use of sense RNA probes and dot blot analysis under conditions of in situ hybridizations. As compared to our previous report (Huarte et al., 1987a), the stringency conditions of hybridizations and posthybridizations were increased, according to results obtained in preliminary experiments comparing the signals obtained with the u-PA and t-PA probes on tissue sections of the vas deferens and the oviduct. These organs have a similar anatomical organization but they contain respectively and predominantly u-PA and t-PA mRNA (see Fig. 3). An optimal distinction between u-PA and t-PA mRNAs was achieved by including a wash at low ionic strength and RNAse treatments. In each hybridization, control tissue sections of the vas deferens and the oviduct were included.

**Results**

**t-PA mRNA in Oocytes and u-PA mRNA in Ovarian Granulosa and Thecal Cells**

In ovaries from unstimulated females, t-PA mRNA was detected in the cytoplasm of a fraction of the oocytes; the positively labeled oocytes were observed in medium and large size follicles (Fig. 1, A and B). The distribution of t-PA mRNA remained localized to oocytes in preovulatory and postovulatory ovaries (not shown), although, as expected, the number of large follicles was increased in gonadotropin-treated animals. In unstimulated ovaries, moderate amounts of u-PA mRNA were confined to the granulosa cells of large follicles (not shown). In postovulatory ovaries, the u-PA signal was comparable to that obtained in unstimulated ovaries and predominantly localized in the outer part of the follicles (Fig. 1 C). In preovulatory ovaries, the concentration of u-PA mRNA in granulosa cells was greatly increased (Fig. 1 D) and, in addition, some thecal cells were also found to express abundant u-PA mRNA (Fig. 1 E). The exclusive distribution of t-PA mRNA in oocytes and of u-PA mRNA in follicular cells corroborated in vitro observations (Huarte et al., 1987b; Canipari et al., 1987) and confirmed the respective specificities of the t-PA and u-PA cRNA probes.

**Synthesis of u-PA by Cultured Trophoblast Cells**

Previous studies have demonstrated the secretion of PA enzymatic activity by cultured mouse trophoblasts (Strickland et al., 1976). However, the type of PA has not been reported. To identify the type of PA produced by trophoblast cells, we...
assayed extracts of isolated trophoblasts from cultured blastocysts for PA activity and mRNA content. One single type of PA was revealed by zymography after SDS-PAGE, and immunoprecipitation with specific antibodies showed that this PA is indistinguishable from the 48,000-M, u-PA (Fig. 2). Preparations of total RNA were analyzed by Northern blot hybridizations. The detection of u-PA mRNA, but not of t-PA mRNA, confirmed the exclusive synthesis of u-PA by cultured trophoblast cells (Fig. 3, A and B).

**Localization of u-PA mRNA in Invasive and Migrating Trophoblast Cells**

To localize u-PA and t-PA mRNAs in vivo, we analyzed implanting embryos by in situ hybridizations. In 5.5-d-old em-
Figure 2. Characterization of the proteolytic activity of trophoblast cells by SDS-PAGE and zymography. Extracts of 10 trophoblast outgrowths were analyzed directly (lane 1) or after immunoprecipitation with anti-murine u-PA IgG (lane 2) or irrelevant IgG (lane 3). Eluates of the S. aureus-bound immune complexes formed with anti-murine u-PA IgG (lane 4) and irrelevant IgG (lane 5) were also analyzed. Murine u-PA standard (lane 6). The photograph was taken after 28 h of incubation at 37°C.

Figure 3. Northern blot analysis of u-PA (A) and t-PA (B) mRNA in adult tissues and cultured blastocysts. 2 µg of total RNA was prepared from the following tissues: vas deferens (lane 1), ovary (lane 2), and oviduct (lane 3); total RNA was obtained from 30 primary oocytes (lane 4), from the inner cell masses (lane 5), and trophoblast outgrowths (lane 6) of 10 embryos.

During the next 24 h, the embryo expands considerably and in 8.5-d-old embryos, corresponding to the three to seven somites stage, the peripheral trophoblast cells enlarge to form a loose network of cells, attached to the maternal tissues and adherent to Reichert's membrane. These giant trophoblast cells contained large amounts of u-PA mRNA (Fig. 6, A and B), a signal comparable in intensity to that observed in the ectoplacental trophoblasts at 5.5 and 6.5 d of development. High levels of u-PA mRNA were also observed in the ectoplacental cone; though they were of smaller size than peripheral trophoblasts, the positively labeled cells had prominent nuclei, were localized predominantly at the front edge of the ectoplacental cone, and contained glycogen granules, indicating they were trophospongium precursors (Fig. 6, C and D).

Finally, in 10.5-d-old embryos, corresponding to the 30–34 somites stage, the giant trophoblast cells surrounding the embryo were not labeled by the u-PA cRNA probe, whereas the numerous maternal venous sinuses were lined...
with cells expressing u-PA mRNA (Fig. 7, A and B). These cells constitute probably the outer layer of the hemotrichorial murine placenta (Enders, 1965). Hybridizations with the t-PA cRNA probe revealed a weak positive signal over a few cells localized in the labyrinth (not shown). The identity of these cells cannot be ascertained, but they could represent the embryonic endothelial cells.

**Discussion**

In mammals, considerable experimental evidence has linked production of PAs to normal and pathological conditions involving tissue destruction and cell migration (Reich, 1978; Danø et al., 1985). For example, PAs are thought to play a role in regulating extracellular proteolysis associated with gametogenesis, fertilization, and early embryonic development (Beers, 1975; Lacroix et al., 1979; Strickland et al., 1976; Huarte et al., 1985, 1987a; Vihko et al., 1989). However, most studies have relied on in vitro observations to substantiate the potential implications of PAs in physiological processes of tissue remodeling. Though a few immunohistochemical studies on mouse tissue have been reported for u-PA (Larsson et al., 1984) and t-PA (Kristensen et al., 1985), only very limited information concerning the cellular sites of PA synthesis in vivo is presently available. Indeed, secondary interactions of these secreted proteins with components of extracellular matrices (Hoylaerts et al., 1982; Salonen et al., 1984), cell surface receptors (Vassalli et al., 1985; Stoppelli et al., 1985), or inhibitors (Baker et al., 1980; Loskutoff et al., 1983; Lecander and Astedt, 1986; Wohlwend et al., 1987) can result in erroneous interpretations of results based on their immunological or enzymatic localization. By using in situ hybridization, a method that allows unambiguous identification of potential cellular sites of synthesis for a given protein, we have localized t-PA and u-PA mRNAs in the mouse ovary and implanting embryo. t-PA mRNA was present in the cytoplasm of oocytes, in agreement with previous biochemical studies showing that dormant t-PA mRNA accumulates in growing oocytes and is translated in oocytes undergoing meiotic maturation (Huarte et al., 1987b). In contrast, we detected u-PA mRNA in granulosa cells of medium size follicles, confirming recent work reporting the production of u-PA by mouse granulosa cells in vitro (Canipari et al., 1987). We also observed that hormonal stimulation increases u-PA mRNA in both granulosa and thecal cells, whereas in the rat, gonadotropins stimulate production of t-PA by granulosa cells and of u-PA by thecal cells (Canipari and Strickland, 1985). The differential
distribution of u-PA and t-PA synthesis in the mouse ovary may be related to the functional differences attributed to these two enzymes. t-PA activity is enhanced in presence of fibrin (Hoylaerts et al., 1982; Suenson et al., 1984), heparin, and proteoglycans (Andrade-Gordon and Strickland, 1986), and t-PA is produced by endothelial cells (Levin, 1983; Kristensen et al., 1984). The primary function of t-PA could thus be to catalyze fibrinolysis. In this view, t-PA synthesized and released by maturing oocytes might prevent premature clot formation in the ovarian stigma and egg adhesion to fibrin deposits in the oviduct before implantation (Canipari and Strickland, 1985; Huarte et al., 1985). In contrast, u-PA catalyzed pro-
Theolysis is generally associated with tissue remodeling and cellular migration processes, including inflammatory reactions and organ involutions (Unkeless et al., 1974; Vassalli et al., 1976; Ossowski et al., 1979). The high levels of u-PA mRNA in granulosa and thecal cells of preovulatory follicles are compatible with the postulated participation of the enzyme in follicular remodeling. Indeed, maturing follicles are complex structures that display considerable fluctuations in...
their cellular content, with marked preovulatory cell proliferation, followed by rupture and complete reorganization after ovulation. Our observations support a role for u-PA in the focalized extracellular proteolysis required for follicular rupture and/or the redistribution of granulosa and thecal cells to achieve luteal differentiation, and add to the evidence that u-PA is implicated in physiological conditions characterized by hormonally mediated tissue remodeling (Ossowski et al., 1979).

Trophoblast cells exemplify a cell type capable of major tissue disruption (Schlafke and Enders, 1975); they are the first cells to differentiate in mammalian embryos and are generally considered as playing a pivotal role in embryo implantation, by acquiring invasive and migratory properties. Cultured trophoblast cells are known to produce PA activity, during a time period corresponding to their invasive phase in utero (Strickland et al., 1976). However, the type of PA they secrete had not been characterized; most importantly, numerous cell lines produce PAs in vitro, and it was essential to determine whether trophoblast cells do express PAs genes in vivo. Our investigations identify u-PA as the enzyme produced by mouse trophoblast cells in culture and establish the synthesis of u-PA mRNA by trophoblast cells in vivo. From fertilization to day 4 of development, i.e., before implantation begins, the embryos do not contain detectable u-PA activity (Strickland et al., 1976; Huarte et al., 1985). Trophoblasts display a first wave of high u-PA mRNA content between the 5th and 7th days of gestation, corresponding to the period when they penetrate the uterine wall. After a transient reduction, u-PA mRNA synthesis resumes in the peripheral giant trophoblast cells that surround the embryo at the three to seven somites stage; this second wave of u-PA mRNA production is also limited in time and coincides with a period of major embryonic expansion. These findings give support to the proposed role for u-PA in tissue remodelling: they document a developmental modulation of the u-PA synthetic potential in a highly invasive and migrating cell type. The synthesis of u-PA provides trophoblast cells with an efficient mechanism to trigger the localized production of plasmin, a protease that can catalyze the degradation of all components of the extracellular matrix, such as is needed for the endometrial disruption accompanying implantation and early growth of the embryo. Interestingly, we also localized u-PA mRNA in the cells that are lining the maternal venous sinuses and which are thought to derive from the outer layer of trophoblasts (Enders, 1965); as u-PA mRNA was detected in these cells during the development and enlargement of venous sinuses, the enzyme may play a role in preventing coagulation and in maintaining the patency of these vascular structures.

The production of u-PA by trophoblast cells is in agreement with the concept of shared phenotypic similarities with neoplastic cells (Yagel et al., 1988). Like trophoblasts, malignant cells are endowed with proliferative and migrating properties and have the ability to invade neighboring tissues. Transformed cell lines and tumors frequently produce u-PA (Danø et al., 1985) and experimental evidence suggests that the enzyme is essential to their invasive properties (Ossowski and Reich, 1983); though correlations between enzyme production and metastatic behavior have been found only in some cases, it has been proposed that u-PA may promote the metastatic dissemination of malignant cells via the dissolution of basement membranes (Danø et al., 1985; Sappino et al., 1987). The presence of u-PA mRNA in implanting trophoblasts in vivo provides novel evidence for a contribution of the enzyme to developmental processes involving tissue destruction and cell migration.

We thank Dr. G. Lazarus for helpful discussions; B. Baumann and D. Ducrest for technical assistance; and P. Rumbeli and M. Baumann for photographic work. This work was supported by grants 3.736-0.83 and 3.590-0.87 from the Swiss National Science Foundation and by the Georg Waechter Memorial Foundation.

Received for publication 5 May 1989 and in revised form 3 July 1989.

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