Mitochondrial DNA Ligases of *Trypanosoma brucei*

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The mitochondrial DNA of *Trypanosoma brucei*, termed kinetoplast DNA or kDNA, consists of thousands of minicircles and a small number of maxicircles catenated into a single network organized as a nucleoprotein disk at the base of the flagellum. Minicircles are replicated free of the network but still contain nicks and gaps after rejoining to the network. Covalent closure of remaining discontinuities in newly replicated minicircles after their rejoining to the network is delayed until all minicircles have been replicated. The DNA ligase involved in this terminal step in minicircle replication has not been identified. A search of kinetoplastid genome databases has identified two putative DNA ligase genes in tandem. These genes (*LIG kα* and *LIG kβ*) are highly diverged from mitochondrial and nuclear DNA ligase genes of higher eukaryotes. Expression of epitope-tagged versions of these genes shows that both *LIG kα* and *LIG kβ* are mitochondrial DNA ligases. Epitope-tagged *LIG kα* localizes throughout the kDNA, whereas *LIG kβ* shows an antipodal localization close to, but not overlapping, that of topoisomerase II, suggesting that these proteins may be contained in distinct structures or protein complexes. Knockdown of the *LIG kα* mRNA by RNA interference led to a cessation of the release of minicircles from the network and resulted in a reduction in size of the kDNA networks and rapid loss of the kDNA from the cell. Closely related pairs of mitochondrial DNA ligase genes were also identified in *Leishmania major* and *Crithidia fasciculata*.

*Trypanosoma brucei* is a parasitic protozoan and the etiologic agent of severe diseases of humans and livestock in sub-Saharan Africa (2). Understanding the fundamental biology of these early diverging eukaryotes is important for both public health and economic growth in these areas. *T. brucei* has also proved to be a valuable model system for understanding basic eukaryotic cell biology (11). Several important cellular processes described first for *T. brucei* either have been found in other eukaryotes, e.g., glucosyl phosphatidylinositol anchoring of proteins (15) and RNA editing (28), or are still apparently unique to kinetoplastids and give an indication of evolutionary divergence, e.g., their unique form of mitochondrial DNA (19).

The mitochondrial genome of these parasites is highly unusual. It is termed the kinetoplast DNA (kDNA) and consists of 25 to 35 circular DNA molecules (maxicircles) and, in addition, several thousand smaller circular molecules (minicircles). The minicircles encode guide RNAs utilized in editing of maxicircle transcripts by a mechanism involving the insertion and/or deletion of U residues (20, 29). Minicircles are catenated into a large network through which the maxicircles are interwoven (19). The complex of interwoven circles of DNA are compacted together to form a disk shape, the thickness of which is roughly equivalent to the length of a minicircle stretched taut (16).

Current understanding of the process of kDNA replication has come from studies carried out largely with *Crithidia fasciculata* and *T. brucei*. Minicircles are released from the network in a vectoral manner prior to replication (6), and free minicircles are detected on the flagellar side of the kDNA disk. Molecular analysis of replication intermediates indicates that minicircle replication occurs in a unidirectional manner from a single origin of replication (although in *C. fasciculata* there are two origin sites per minicircle) (4). Several DNA polymerases have been localized to the mitochondrion recently, and one or more of these are likely to be involved in the replication of the kDNA minicircles (17). Rejoining of nascent minicircles to the kDNA network occurs at antipodal sites flanking the kDNA disk (9, 25) and involves a kinetoplast-specific DNA topoisomerase (21). An RNase HI-like enzyme structure-specific endonuclease I localizes to antipodal sites (7) and has been implicated in RNA primer removal (14). DNA polymerase β is also found at the antipodal sites and is implicated in filling the gaps left after primer removal (14). These nicked and gapped minicircles are reattached to the network by the topoisomerase II. However, a single nick or gap remains at the minicircle origin until all the minicircles have been duplicated (23, 24). Minicircles are removed from the interior of the disk and replicated free of the network (8). Thus, as replication of the disk continues, the newly replicated minicircles accumulate at the antipodal sites of reattachment, but in *T. brucei*, the nascent minicircles do not distribute around the perimeter of the network as in the case of *C. fasciculata* (10, 25, 26). When all of the minicircles have been replicated, all of the nicks in the minicircles are covalently closed and the disk is then segregated into two daughter networks by unknown mechanisms (24).

One enzyme activity that is essential for the completion of DNA replication and is missing from this description is DNA ligase. There are two stages in the minicircle replication process at which DNA ligase is required. The first is in sealing Okazaki fragments in the discontinuously synthesized DNA strand. The second is in the final sealing of minicircles that
marks the end of kDNA replication and immediately precedes segregation of the daughter kDNA disks. We have recently described a novel DNA ligase (which we now call LIG κ) from *C. fasciculata* that localizes to the antipodal sites of the kDNA (30). This protein coimmunoprecipitates with DNA polymerase β, suggesting that it is involved in the repair of Okazaki fragments in nascent minicircles at the antipodal sites. In this report, we describe the T. brucei homologue of LIG κ and a second T. brucei DNA ligase (LIG λ) that localizes throughout the kDNA. Upon RNA interference (RNAi) knockdown of LIG λ, there is a rapid cessation of cell division, a depletion of the pool of free covalently closed mini- circlcs, and an accumulation of nicked or gapped minicircles within the networks. The inhibition of ligation of discontinuities in the minicircles is followed by loss of the kDNA. We suggest that LIG λ may be responsible for the final sealing of minicircles before segregation of the replicated DNA.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Gene discovery and cloning.** An open reading frame (ORF) identified as a DNA ligase (LIG λ gene) was discovered in a GenDB contig (Tb07.29K4.760) along with another DNA ligase-like ORF (LIG κ gene) located immediately downstream of it (Tb07.29K4.770). Both coding regions were amplified from genomic DNA (from *T. brucei* 29-13 cells) and cloned into a RNAI vector (pZDM) (34) and into expression vectors (pND1 and pND2). pND1 is a derivative of pHD496 (12) that has had the endogenous XbaI site mutated and the 12CA5 antithemagglutinin (anti-HA) (1:250) (BabCo), were allowed to bind to the coverslips in this blocking solution for 1 h at 37°C followed by washing four times in PBS containing 0.05% Tween 20. Coverslips were then incubated with secondary antibodies, Alexa Fluor 488-conjugated goat anti-mouse immunoglobulin G (1:750; Molecular Probes, Eugene, Oreg.) and Alexa Fluor 568-conju- gated goat anti-rabbit immunoglobulin G (1:1,000; Molecular Probes), and washed as described above. Coverslips were then stained for 3 min in 3 μg of DAPI/ml, washed twice in PBS, and mounted in ProLong mounting medium (Molecular Probes). Images were taken with a 100×/1.4 Planapo lens on a TCS-SP MP confocal and multiphoton inverted microscope (Leica, Heidelberg, Germany) equipped with argon (488-nm blue excitation) and 561-nm (green) diode lasers and a two-photon laser setup consisting of a Spectra-Physics Mille- nia X 532-nm green diode pump laser and a Tsunami Ti-Sapphire picosecond-pulsed infrared laser tuned at 768 nm for UV excitation.

**Analysis of cell growth and mRNA levels during RNAi induction.** To monitor cell growth after RNAi induction, cultures were initiated at 2×10^6 cells/ml. Cultures were divided, and tetracycline was added to one culture at 1 μg/ml. Cells were counted daily by using a Z1 particle counter (Beckman-Coulter, Miami, Fla.). When cultures reached late log phase, they were diluted to 2×10^6 cells/ml. Growth curves are presented which account for these dilutions. Cells were washed once with 1 ml of 10 mM Tris–1 mM EDTA (pH 7.6) and resuspended in 50 μl of 10 mM Tris (pH 8.0) and lysed with 1% sodium dodecyl sulfate. The samples were digested with proteinase K and RNase A and extracted with 1:1 phenol–chloroform–isoamyl alcohol (25:24:1). The DNAs were ethanol precipitated and resuspended in 50 μl of 10 mM Tris–HCl (pH 8.0)–1 mM EDTA.

**Analysis of free and network-associated minicircles during RNAi induction.** Cells (3×10^7) were harvested and washed once with PBS. The cells were then resuspended in 100 mM NaCl–100 mM EDTA–10 mM Tris (pH 8.0) and lysed with 1% sodium dodecyl sulfate. The samples were digested with proteinase K and RNase A and extracted with 1:1 phenol–chloro- form and with phenol–chloroform–isoamyl alcohol (25:24:1). The DNAs were ethanol precipitated and resuspended in 50 μl of 10 mM Tris–HCl (pH 8.0)–1 mM EDTA.
The bacterial cells were harvested and resuspended in 20 mM Tris-HCl (pH 8.0) and protease inhibitor cocktail (Novagen). Lysozyme was added to 1 mg/ml and incubated at 30°C for 15 min. Triton X-100 was added to 1%, and NaCl was added to 0.5 M. After passage through an 18-gauge needle several times, the lysate was centrifuged at 15,000 g for 1 h. The cleared lysate was loaded onto a His-Bind column (Novagen) and washed with 5 column volumes of 60 mM imidazole–0.5 M NaCl–20 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.9). The protein was eluted in 1-ml aliquots with 0.3 M imidazole. The two peak fractions were pooled and passed over a G25 desalting column. Glycerol was added to the eluate (now in 20 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.6), 10 mM MgCl₂, 5 mM dithiothreitol, and 1 mM ATP. Either His-column-purified LIG kα, L. major LIG kα, C. fasciculata LIG kα, T. brucei LIG kβ, L. major LIG kβ, or an equal volume of the G25 column buffer was added to the reaction mix, and the mixture was incubated at room temperature for 2 h. The products were separated on a 6 M urea–8% polyacrylamide gel (19:1 acrylamide-bisacrylamide), which was then subsequently dried and exposed to X-ray film for autoradiography.

RESULTS

Identification of DNA ligase genes. A search of the Leishmania major GeneDB database revealed two ORFs that had been annotated as DNA ligases. The amino terminus of each ORF showed a potential mitochondrial localization signal. These sequences were used to identify homologues in both Homo sapiens (human) and T. brucei (T. brucei). The amino terminus of the T. brucei ligase, LIG III (18), also encodes the mitochondrial DNA ligase. The amino terminus of the T. brucei LIG kα was compared with the human DNA ligases, LIG I and IV. Both human LIG I and IV are nuclear proteins. Again, the T. brucei LIG kα and LIG kβ have no significant identity with the human LIG I and IV (<10%). Comparison of human LIG I and IV with the equivalent protein sequences from other metazoans (Xenopus laevis, mouse) shows high conservation of sequence (>75% identity). As a control for these comparisons across a large evolutionary distance, the T. brucei LIG I was compared with the human LIG I and shows an identity of 35%. Therefore, while T. brucei LIG I has a common ancestry with human LIG I, T. brucei LIG kα and LIG kβ are not closely related to any of the DNA ligases described for humans. We suggest that T. brucei LIG kα and LIG kβ represent a new class of cellular DNA ligases, which we term DNA ligase k, referring to their localization in the plastid.

| Ligase       | % Identity with protein sequence from: |
|--------------|---------------------------------------|
|              | T. brucei LIG kα | T. brucei LIG kβ | T. brucei LIG I | Homo sapiens LIG I | Homo sapiens LIG III | Homo sapiens LIG IV |
| T. brucei LIG kα | 100           | 100             | 8              | 8                  | 100               | 100               |
| T. brucei LIG kβ | 30            | 30              | 35             | 35                 | 100               | 100               |
| T. brucei LIG I | 8             | 8               | 8              | 8                  | 100               | 100               |
| Homo sapiens LIG I | 6            | 6               | 6              | 6                  | 100               | 100               |
| Homo sapiens LIG III | 7           | 8               | 8              | 8                  | 100               | 100               |
| Homo sapiens LIG IV | 5            | 7               | 9              | 9                  | 100               | 100               |
DNA ligase motifs. GTP-dependent capping enzymes and ATP-dependent DNA ligases make up a superfamily of covalent nucleotidyltransferases with six characteristic motifs (32). Figure 1 shows an alignment of these motifs in mitochondrial DNA ligases from vertebrates and kinetoplastid protozoa. The adenylated moiety is covalently bound to the lysine residue within a conserved KxDG element in motif I. Even around the active site lysine, the kinetoplastid ligases show limited sequence similarity to those of the mitochondrial ligases of vertebrates.

Kinetoplast localization of ligase proteins. Epitope tagging was used to confirm the mitochondrial localization of T. brucei LIG kα and LIG kβ. The coding region of LIG kα was cloned into pND2, a derivative of the pLEW100 expression vector (35) containing three copies of the HA epitope tag. Stably integrated 29-13 cell lines containing pND2:LIGkα were cloned, expression was induced, and cells were immunostained with anti-HA monoclonal antibodies and polyclonal antibodies against the C. fasciculata topoisomerase II (Fig. 2). The anti-HA antibodies show staining that overlaps the DAPI fluorescence of the kDNA, suggesting that the LIG kα is present throughout the kDNA disk. We note that the localization of the two points of fluorescence due to that of topo II here is not at the opposite edges of the kDNA disk as seen for C. fasciculata (21) but appears closer to the flagellar face of the disk and with a separation slightly less than the width of the disk. The ORF for LIG kβ was introduced into pND1, a derivative of the pH496 expression vector (3) containing three copies of the HA epitope tag, used to stably transfet YTAT1.1 cells with the linearized construct (pND1:LIGkβ), and then cloned. Immunofluorescence localization of LIG kβ in these cells with anti-HA monoclonal antibodies shows antipodal localization of LIG kβ at the edges of the kDNA disk but overlapping the localization of topo II only slightly (Fig. 3). This localization of LIG kβ differs from that of the C. fasciculata DNA LIG kβ, where the ligase was found to localize to the antipodal sites and, to a lesser extent, to the faces of the kDNA disk (30).

RNA interference. In light of the kinetoplast localization of these ligase proteins, their function was analyzed by eliminating gene expression with RNAi. Each gene was found to be single copy by Southern blot analysis (data not shown), and the entire coding region of each gene was cloned into the tetracycline-inducible RNAi vector pZJM (34). The resulting plasmids pZJM:LIGkα and pZJM:LIGkβ were linearized and electroporated into procyclic 29-13 cells. After selection, limiting dilution produced clonal cell lines. Several clones were examined for their ability to induce RNAi. Figure 4A shows the growth curve and Northern blot analysis of a typical clone for pZJM:LIGkβ. Clearly, there is no effect on either the growth or even levels of the LIG kβ mRNA upon induction with tetracycline (Fig. 4A, inset). This insensitivity to RNAi

FIG. 1. Conservation of DNA ligase motifs in mitochondrial DNA ligases. Six colinear sequence elements conserved in ATP-dependent DNA ligases are compared between trypanosomatid and vertebrate mitochondrial DNA ligases. The aligned sequences are from human ligase IIIα (Hu3α), mouse ligase IIIα (Mu3α), Xenopus ligase IIIα (Xl3α), T. brucei ligase kα (Tbkα), T. brucei ligase kβ (Tbkβ), L. major ligase kα (Lmkα), L. major ligase kβ (Lmkβ), C. fasciculata ligase kα (Cfkα), and C. fasciculata ligase kβ (Cfkβ). Conserved amino acid residues are indicated by shading.

FIG. 2. Localization of epitope-tagged DNA LIG kα. Cloned cells expressing HA-tagged DNA LIG kα were fixed and permeabilized on coverslips and then incubated with anti-HA monoclonal antibodies (12CA5) and rabbit polyclonal antibodies against the C. fasciculata kinetoplast topo II. The cells were then incubated with secondary antibodies (goat anti-mouse Alexa 488 and goat anti-rabbit 568). The coverslips were washed, incubated with DAPI, and then mounted with mounting medium. The images were captured on a Leica TCS-SP MP confocal and multiphoton inverted microscope. The LIG kα (green) and topo II (red) localizations are shown relative to those of the nuclear and kinetoplast DNAs (blue).
was found for 10 independent clones. The basis for this insensitivity has not yet been investigated.

Similar experiments were performed with clones of the pZJM:LIGk/H9251 transfection. Figure 4B (upper inset) shows a Northern blot analysis of clonal cells that had been either mock treated or treated with tetracycline for 48 h. The blot was reprobed with α-tubulin coding sequence to compare loading of the lanes (lower inset). Despite approximately twofold overloading of the RNA from induced cells, a clear decrease (>90%) in LIG kα mRNA can be seen compared to that of the uninduced cells. Figure 4B also shows the growth curve of clonal pZJM:LIGkα cells in the absence or presence of tetracycline. While cells grow normally in the absence of tetracycline, within 3 days of treatment with tetracycline, cell growth is arrested, indicating that LIG kα is an essential gene. The onset of inhibition of cell division was detectable within six doublings. This rapid onset of growth phenotype also suggests that the protein may be rapidly turned over.

Loss of kDNA by silencing of LIG kα. Cells were also examined by fluorescence microscopy during RNAi induction. Cells were removed from the culture every 24 h and stained with DAPI to allow visualization of both the nucleus and kinetoplast. Cells demonstrated a variety of typical phenotypes that can be designated as one of 4 groups, normal (containing 1k/1n, 2k/1n or 2k/2n), anucleate (containing 1k/0n), no kDNA (1n, 2n), or monster (more than 2k and/or 2n). Within the normal group was a subset in which the kDNA appeared much smaller than usual. These cells were only seen with a single kinetoplast (for example, the second normal cell in Fig. 5A). The percentage of each phenotype is shown in Fig. 5B. The relative proportion of each phenotype was the same in wild type 29-13 cells as in the uninduced clonal cells (data not shown). However, within 24 h of induction, the number of cells with no detectable kDNA had started to increase and by 48 h equaled the number of normal cells. Beyond this point, the number of cells lacking any detectable kinetoplast reached as much as 85% of the population. The rapid loss of kDNA mirrors the cessation of growth in the culture. One caveat is that some of these cell phenotypes (especially the anucleate cells) may not survive long. Therefore, it is possible that the frequencies of these phenotypes (especially the anucleate cells) may not survive long. Therefore, it is possible that the frequencies of these phenotypes (especially the anucleate cells) may not survive long. Therefore, it is possible that the frequencies of these phenotypes (especially the anucleate cells) may not survive long. Therefore, it is possible that the frequencies of these phenotypes (especially the anucleate cells) may not survive long. Therefore, it is possible that the frequencies of these phenotypes (especially the anucleate cells) may not survive long. 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Accumulation of form II minicircles in kDNA networks. In light of the loss of the kDNA upon induction of LIG kα RNAi, the populations of free and network-associated minicircles were examined in clonal cells treated with tetracycline. At 0, 24, and 48 h after the addition of tetracycline, cells were removed from the culture and total DNA (with and without treatment with topoisomerase II) from equivalent numbers of cells was analyzed by Southern blotting (Fig. 6). kDNA networks do not enter the gel, and consequently, in the untreated samples only free minicircles migrate through the gel and are detected by Southern blotting. In samples treated with topoisomerase II, the network-associated minicircles are also released and detected on the blot. A chromosomal DNA signal near the top of the gel was used as a loading control to ensure that similar cell equivalents were present in each lane. Prior to RNAi induction (day 0), the free minicircles are observed as covalently closed circles (form I) and nicked circles (form II). Linear molecules (form III) are also seen in the control DNA in lane 1. In the topoisomerase-treated samples from uninduced cells (lane 4), the network-associated minicircles are present in the lane in addition to the free minicircles. The higher bands in lane 4 represent catenanes. After 1 day of induction of RNAi, free form I minicircles are no longer present and the amount of free form II minicircles is greatly reduced. The relative amounts of network-associated form I and form II minicircles can be estimated by subtracting the amounts of each form in the untreated lanes from the amounts of the corresponding form in the treated lanes (assuming that the relative amounts of form I and form II in the catenanes is the same as that of the released minicircles). Form I minicircles accounted for 66% of the network-associated minicircles prior to induction of RNAi. By 1 day of induction, there were no longer any free form I minicircles and form I minicircles represented only 28% of the network-associated

FIG. 5. Cell phenotype during LIG kα RNAi induction. Cells were induced with tetracycline, and on subsequent days, samples were removed, fixed, and stained with DAPI. Cells were scored by kDNA and nuclear phenotype. (A) Examples of phenotypes scored are as follows: anucleate, cells with no nucleus but with a kinetoplast; normal, cells with a nucleus and kinetoplast; no kDNA, cells with a nucleus but no kinetoplast; monster, cells with multiple nuclei and/or kinetoplasts. (B) Graph representing the observed frequency of each phenotype. The number of cells with a particular phenotype is expressed as a percentage of the total cells for that time point. Grey, anucleate; black, normal; white, no kDNA; diagonal stripes, monster.
By day 2, form I minicircles represented only approximately 18% of the network-associated minicircles. We interpret these results to indicate that free minicircles continue to be reattached to the network in the absence of L1G k/H9251 function and that, as nascent network-associated minicircles fail to be covalently closed, the amount of form I minicircles is quickly diminished and the networks accumulate form II minicircles.

Shrinkage of kDNA. The loss of kDNA was examined further by FACS analysis of cells stained with dihydroethidium. Dihydroethidium is taken up by the mitochondria and oxidized to ethidium and, consequently, specifically stains the kDNA (33). FACS analysis of cells treated with tetracycline for different amounts of time and stained with dihydroethidium is shown in Fig. 7. Relative fluorescence intensity is on the x axis and is directly proportional to the amount of kDNA. The y axis measures the number of cells counted at a particular fluorescence intensity. The stained cells show a broad peak representing a range of kDNA sizes in the exponential culture. The staining intensity pattern for uninduced cells approximates the staining intensity pattern for stained 29-13 cells (data not shown). By day 3 of tetracycline treatment, the peak of fluorescence has moved to approximately half the value of the day 0 cells, indicating a reduced content of kDNA in the cells. By day 5, the major peak is almost as low as that of unstained 29-13 cells (data not shown), indicating that most of the treated cells have little or no kDNA. These observations are consistent with our microscopic examination of DAPI-stained cells showing shrinkage and loss of kDNA during RNAi induction.

FIG. 7. FACS analysis of LIG k/H RNAi induced cells. Cells from 0, 3, and 5 days of induction were stained with dihydroethidium and analyzed on a BD LSR analytical flow cytometer. The resulting plot shows the relative fluorescence intensity versus the relative cell count.
poly(dA) strand hybridized to $^{32}$P-labeled oligo(dT) was used to assay the activity following desalting by chromatography on Sephadex to purify by metal chelate chromatography and to assay for inclusion bodies. There was, however, enough protein soluble for biochemical analysis. Although the tagged protein was strongly induced, almost all of the protein was contained in protein for biochemical analysis. Although the tagged protein was strongly induced, almost all of the protein was contained in.

Enzymatic activity of LIG $k\alpha$. Because the LIG $k\alpha$ RNAi induction showed such a strong effect on mitochondrial DNA maintenance, it was important to confirm the ligase activity of LIG $k\alpha$. The LIG $k\alpha$ was expressed in E. coli as a His-tagged recombinant protein to allow purification of the trypanosomal protein for biochemical analysis. Although the tagged protein was strongly induced, almost all of the protein was contained in inclusion bodies. There was, however, enough protein soluble to purify by metal chelate chromatography and to assay for activity following desalting by chromatography on Sephadex G25. A radiolabeled synthetic substrate consisting of a poly(dA) strand hybridized to $^{32}$P-labeled oligo(dT) was used to assay ligation of the adjacent oligo(dT) molecules into higher-molecular-weight products by using ATP as cofactor. Possible contamination of the recombinant protein by E. coli ligase is excluded based on the purification by metal chelate chromatography and the requirement for NAD as a cofactor by E. coli DNA ligase. Figure 8 shows the result of adding increasing amounts of the recombinant protein to the ligase reaction mixture. The reaction mix was separated on a denaturing polyacrylamide gel, allowing the identification of ligated multimers of the oligo(dT).

**DISCUSSION**

The present model (22) for trypanosomal mitochondrial DNA (kDNA) replication implies the existence of two kinetoplast DNA ligase activities, separated by both location and time of functioning. The first activity would be antipodal on the kDNA disk, colocalizing with other replication and repair enzymes and involved in the joining of Okazaki fragments on nascent minicircles. The second would be localized throughout the network and involved in the closure of discontinuities at minicircle replication origins prior to the cleavage of the double-size kDNA network. While it would be possible for these activities to be carried out by the same protein, in this report we have described two new and unique DNA ligases localized to the kDNA disk of T. brucei. The localization of each protein is consistent with separate roles in kDNA replication.

The genome databases for several trypanosomatid species are fast nearing completion, and the initial annotation is a rich new source of data to be analyzed. Despite a lack of overall sequence similarity between these new DNA ligase sequences ($LIG$ $k\alpha$ and $LIG$ $k\beta$) and other ligase genes, there is enough homology in the conserved ligase motifs to allow identification. The evolutionary distance between these and other DNA ligases allows for large sequence drift in regions of the proteins not constrained by specific functional needs, e.g., the active site lysine and adjacent residues required for adenylation. It should be noted that additional kDNA-associated DNA ligases could be present in trypanosomatids. Although the two proteins we describe are sufficient for the present model of kDNA replication, we have only to look at the case of DNA polymerases to see a precedent for numerous genes. There are at least 4 DNA polymerase I-like proteins localized to the mitochondrial complex of replication proteins and then reattached to the kDNA disk, colocalizing with other replication and repair enzymes and involved in the closure of discontinuities at minicircle replication origins prior to the cleavage of the double-size kDNA network. While it would be possible for these activities to be carried out by the same protein, in this report we have described two new and unique DNA ligases localized to the kDNA disk of T. brucei. The localization of each protein is consistent with separate roles in kDNA replication.

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As with all database identification, it is essential to confirm the activity of the protein by biochemical assay. This activity of $LIG$ $k\beta$ has been demonstrated recently for the C. fasciculata protein (30). The ligase activity of the $T. brucei$ LIG $k\alpha$ has been demonstrated here based on its ability to ligate oligo(dT) molecules annealed to a poly(dA) backbone.

Both the LIG $k\alpha$ and LIG $k\beta$ proteins are transported to the mitochondrion of $T. brucei$. The LIG $k\beta$ showed discreet localization at the antipodal sites of the kDNA similar to that observed with the LIG $k\beta$ of C. fasciculata but does not also show additional localization to the faces of the kDNA as seen in C. fasciculata (30). Since the localization of LIG $k\beta$ in C. fasciculata involved episomal expression of the epitope-tagged protein, we cannot exclude the possibility that localization to the faces of the kDNA disk resulted as a consequence of possible overexpression of LIG $k\beta$. It is of particular interest to note here that the $T. brucei$ LIG $k\beta$ and topo II do not colocalize. These proteins appear to be in adjacent structures or complexes at the opposite edges of the kDNA disk. The spatial separation of these proteins could have a functional purpose. Perhaps nascent minicircles must be processed through a complex of replication proteins and then reattached to the kDNA network by an adjacent complex containing the topoisomerase.
Such a conveyor belt type of mechanism could assure that nascent minicircles are only reattached to the network following their replication.

The use of inducible RNAi is now common practice in the analysis of gene function in T. brucei (31). This approach allows the analysis of potentially essential genes by knocking down expression of the mRNA in the cell. Several different strategies exist for the expression of the double-stranded RNA. We have chosen to utilize the opposing promoter plasmid pZJM created by Wang et al. (34). This construct allows the insertion of the gene of interest between two opposing T7 promoters that are controlled by tetracycline repressors. Here we have described attempts to knockdown expression of the LIG kα and LIG kβ genes. Unfortunately, despite screening 10 clones transfected with the pZJM:LIGkβ vector, no reduction of LIG kβ mRNA was observed upon addition of tetracycline. The reason for the lack of an effect of RNAi in this case is unclear and remains to be investigated.

On the other hand, RNAi effectively knocked down the mRNA for the LIG kα. Northern blot analysis showed a reduction in mRNA of at least 90% within 48 h of induction with tetracycline. The effect appears to be extremely rapid, as the molecular phenotype of LIG kα depletion was apparent within 24 h. Although the growth curve suggests that cells will continue to grow at a normal rate for 3 days, there are significant changes in both the free minicircle population and the kDNA content of the cells sooner.

LIG kα appears to be present throughout the kDNA. Since the nicked and gapped daughter minicircles in a network preparing for division exist throughout the network, the localization of LIG kα is consistent with a role in the final sealing of the form II minicircles prior to division of the network. The accumulation of form II minicircles in the kDNA networks in cells in which LIG kα expression has been knocked down is also consistent with this possibility. The rapid loss of form I minicircles from both the free minicircle pool and from the kDNA networks suggests that as form I minicircles are released from the network and replicated they become reattached to the networks as form II minicircles, leading to the accumulation of form II minicircles in the networks and depletion of form I in both the pool of free minicircles and network-associated minicircles.

The average size of the kinetoplasts, based on FACs analysis, is also reduced following induction of RNAi against LIG kα. This result suggests that cells having an incompletely repaired kDNA network can nonetheless continue to divide, at least in the short term. The observation that RNAi-induced cells continue to divide and, in the process, segregate the incompletely repaired kDNA suggests that the inhibition of ligation of discontinuities in the reattached minicircles isn’t required for division of the kDNA network. Division of the kDNA networks in the absence of continued kDNA replication would halve the amount of kDNA in each daughter cell. Microscopic examination of the kinetoplasts by DAPI staining of the cells after RNAi induction shows that the kinetoplasts quickly become reduced in size and are lost from the cells. The rapid appearance of cells with no detectable kDNA may result from an asymmetric division in which one cell retains the kinetoplast and the other daughter cell lacks a kinetoplast. A minimum size of the kinetoplast may be necessary for its division, and below that size, perhaps only one of the daughter cells retains the kinetoplast at cell division.

Such observations are consistent with earlier observations with T. brucei cells in which topoisomerase II expression was silenced (33). Network shrinkage occurred and was followed by asymmetrical division of the networks, leading to one of the daughter cells having insufficient kDNA to provide the complete repertoire of minicircles encoding guide RNAs essential for RNA editing.

In addition to confirming the presence of two DNA ligases associated with the kinetoplast, the description of the LIG kα protein may open new avenues for addressing the mechanisms of control for the terminal steps in replisome turnover of the kDNA network. Protein interaction studies should allow identification of proteins involved in this process.

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