Identification and Overexpression in Escherichia coli of a 
Mycobacterium leprae Gene, pon1, Encoding a High-Molecular-Mass
Class A Penicillin-Binding Protein, PBPI

JOYOTI BASU,1 SEABABRTA MAHAPATRA,1 MANIKUNTALA KUNDU,1 SANJAY MUKHOPADHYAY,1
MARTINE NGUYEN-DISTÈCHE,2 PHILIPPE DUBOIS,2 BERNARD JORIS,2 JOZEF VAN BEEUMEN,3
STEWARD T. COLE,4 PARUL CHAKRABARTI,4 AND JEAN-MARIE GHUYSEN2,4

Department of Chemistry, Bose Institute, Calcutta 700009, India;1 Centre d’Ingénierie des Protéines, Institut de Chimie, Université
de Liège, B-4000 Sart Tilman (Liège 1),2 and Vakgroep Biochimie, Fysiologie en Microbiologie, Rijksuniversiteit-Gent, B-9000 Ghent,3 Belgium; and Unité de Génétique Moléculaire Bactérienne, Institut Pasteur, F-75724 Paris Cedex 15, France4

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Cosmid B577, a member of the collection of ordered clones corresponding to the genome of Mycobacterium leprae, contains a gene, provisionally called pon1, that encodes an 821-amino-acid-residue high-molecular-mass class A penicillin-binding protein, provisionally called PBPI. With similar amino acid sequences and modular designs, M. leprae PBPI is related to Escherichia coli PBPIa and PBPIb, two enzymatic proteins with transglycosylase and transpeptidase activities. When produced in E. coli, His tag-labelled derivatives of M. leprae PBPI adopt the correct membrane topology, with the bulk of the polypeptide chain on the surface of the plasma membrane. They defy attempts at solubilization with all the detergents tested except cetyltrimethylammonium bromide. The solubilized PBPI derivatives can be purified by affinity chromatography on Ni2+-nitrilotriacetic acid agarose. They have low affinities for the usual penicillins and cephalosporins.

Synthesis of the bacterial cell wall peptidoglycan involves a set of membrane-bound monofunctional (low-molecular-mass) and multimodal (high-molecular-mass) penicillin-binding proteins (PBPs) and an assortment of cell cycle proteins that do not bind penicillin (7). The PBP patterns of Mycobacterium smegmatis (1) and Mycobacterium fortuitum (5) have been described elsewhere, and a low-molecular-mass PBP of M. smegmatis has been described elsewhere.

Mycobacterium leprae, the causative agent of leprosy, is an obligatory intracellular gram-positive bacillus. It is not cultivable, and it has an extremely long generation time of 2 weeks or more in experimentally infected animals. An M. leprae project has been launched, the aim of which is to obtain an ordered cosmid library that covers the entire chromosome and, ultimately, to obtain the complete nucleotide sequence (3, 6, 10, 16).

As shown below, cosmid B577 (3), after correction for a frameshift, contains a gene, provisionally called pon1, that encodes a class A multimodal PBP. M. leprae PBPI has been produced in Escherichia coli, and its properties were studied.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Strains, oligonucleotides, and plasmids. The transformations were carried out in E. coli DH5α. The expression of the modified pon1 genes was carried out in E. coli BL21 (DE3). Oligonucleotides A, B, and C (Fig. 1) were from Pharmacia, Biotech Benelux, Roosendaal, The Netherlands.

The plasmids (Fig. 2) were constructed as follows.

(i) pDML901. Cosmid B577 was amplified in E. coli DH5α and digested with BamHI and EcoRI, and the excised 6,078-bp fragment was cloned into the high-copy-number plasmid pUC18. pDML901 served as the source of the M. leprae PBPI-encoding pon1.

(ii) pDML904. pET-28a (+) (Novagen, Madison, Wis.) was digested with NdeI and NotI, and the excised 72-bp fragment was replaced by oligonucleotide A.

(iii) pDML905. pDML901 was digested with BamHI and SalI, and the excised 3,232-bp fragment (purified with the Gibco BRL Life Technologies Glassmax kit) was digested partially with HindIII. The 2,698-bp HindIII-SalI fragment (encoding the truncated PBPI devoid of the 14 amino-terminal amino acid residues) was inserted between HindIII and ScaI into pDML904.

(iv) pDML906. The DraIII-AviNI segment of pET-22b (+) (Novagen) containing the ampicillin resistance determinant was replaced by the DraIII-AviNI segment of pET-28a (+) containing the kanamycin resistance determinant, yielding pET22b/kan. The 67-bp MscI-XhoI segment of pET22b/kan was replaced by oligonucleotide B.

(v) pDML907. pDML905 was digested with EcoRV (with elimination of the segment encoding the 9 amino-terminal amino acid residues of PBPI) and RsalI (with elimination of the sequence encoding the 4 carboxy-terminal amino acid residues of PBPI). The excised 2,338-bp EcoRV-RsalI fragment was inserted between ScaI and RsalI into pDML906.

(vi) pDML908. pDML907 was digested with Ascl and RsalI, and the excised 314-bp segment was replaced by oligonucleotide C.

Preparation and protease treatment of spheroplasts of E. coli transformants. E. coli cells were pelleted and resuspended in 15 mM Tris-HCl (pH 8.0) containing 12.5% (wt/vol) sucrose at a concentration of 2 × 1010 cells/ml. The suspension was then treated with lysozyme (2 mg/ml)-EDTA (5 mM) in the same buffer for 25 min at 30°C. Under these conditions, all the cells were converted to spheroplasts.

Spheroplasts were incubated at 30°C for 25 min with proteinase K at final concentrations ranging from 0.016 to 2 mg/ml. Digestion was stopped by adding 100 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride. Lysis was not observed during this treatment. Samples were then denatured and fractionated on 10% sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS) gels. The proteins were electrophoretically transferred to a nitrocellulose membrane.

Preparation of plasma membranes of E. coli transformants. E. coli cells collected from 250-ml isopropyl-d-thiogalactopyranoside (IPTG)-induced cultures (optical density at 600 nm of about 1.0) were resuspended in 10 ml of 10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.4)-1 mM MgCl2. The suspensions were supplemented with 1 μg of DNase per ml and sonicated at 200 W for 2 min. After centrifugation at 10,000 × g for 15 min to remove the unbroken cells and debris, the membranes were isolated by centrifugation at 100,000 × g for 30 min. They were washed twice and stored at −20°C in the above buffer at a concentration of 20 mg of total proteins per ml.

Purification of membrane-bound His tag-labelled PBPI derivatives. Membranes (20 mg of total proteins) were suspended in 20 ml of 30 mM potassium phosphate (pH 7.6)-0.5 M NaCl-2% cetyltrimethylammonium bromide (CTAB) and maintained for 30 min with 37°C with occasional shaking. After centrifugation at 100,000 × g for 30 min, the supernatant was loaded on a 2-ml Ni2+-nitrilotriacetic acid (NTA) agarose column (Afliland, Liège, Belgium) equilibrated with the above phosphate-CTAB-NaCl buffer. The column was washed with 30 mM imidazole, pH 7.4. Elution was carried out with 100 mM imidazole buffer (pH 7.4) containing 2% CTAB.
**RESULTS**

Amino acid sequence and molecular organization of *M. leprae* PBP1. The sequence of cosmid B577 (4a) was corrected for a frameshift at nucleotide 3437 by dye-deoxy sequencing reactions using the 21-mer T365-T385 oligonucleotide, an automated laser fluorescent DNA sequencer, and internal labelling with fluoro-dATP. The corrected nucleotide sequence contained an open reading frame, called pon1, that encoded the 821-amino-acid-residue multimodular class A PBP1 (Fig. 3).

PBP1 consisted of an M1-I39 pseudo-signal peptide (the membrane anchor), fused to an S40-A336 non-penicillin-binding (n-PB) module; then-PB module was fused to an A337-A674 penicillin-binding (PB) module, and the PB module was fused to an M675-D821 carboxy-terminalextension. Then-PB module contained motifs 1 to 4 common to the multimodular class A PBPs, and the PB module contained motifs 5 to 7 characteristic of the penicilloylnine transferase superfamily. S-398 of motif 5 was assumed to be the active-site serine. Motif 6 was ambiguous, being either S454MN or S464PN. By analogy with the monofunctional penicilloylnine transferases, the PB module was assumed to start about 60 residues upstream from S-398 of motif 5 and to terminate about 60 residues downstream from G-615 of motif 7.

*E. coli* PBP1a and PBP1b contain 850 and 844 amino acid residues, respectively. They are regarded as prototypes of the multimodular class A PBPs because they are the only PBPs which have been identified as biynamatic polypeptides per-forming, in vitro, transglycosylase (the n-PB module) and transpeptidase (the PB module) activities on isolated disaccharide-peptide lipid II precursors. In contrast to *M. leprae* PBP1, *E. coli* PBP1a contains large inserts occurring at the junctions between the n-PB and PB modules and between motifs 6 and 7 of the PB module. Similarly, *E. coli* PBP1b contains large inserts immediately upstream and downstream from the membrane anchor (7).

For comparison purposes, the inserts and carboxy-terminal extensions were eliminated from the amino acid sequences. As a result, the n-PB modules of *M. leprae* PBP1, *E. coli* PBP1a, and *E. coli* PBP1b contained 296 (S-40 to A-336), 277 (V-42 to P-319), and 273 (M-186 to P-459) amino acid residues, respectively, and the corresponding PB modules contained 322 (A-337 to M-659), 309 (Q-412 to P-775 minus the insert from D-263 to T-677), and 299 (L-461 to P-760) amino acid residues, respectively. Multisequence amino acid alignment of the n-PB modules revealed identities of 30% for the PBP1-PBP1a pair and 27% for the PBP1-PBP1b pair in comparison with 37% for the PBP1a-PBP1b pair. Alignment of the PB modules revealed 19 to 20% identity for the PBP1-PBP1a and PBP1-PBP1b pairs in comparison with 29% identity for the PBP1a-PBP1b pair. In addition, the triad S464PN, not the triad S454MN, of motif 6 of PBP1 aligned with the triad S524KN of PBP1a and the triad S571MN of PBP1b.

Expression of pon1 in *E. coli* and properties of PBP1. As *M. leprae* PBP1, the n-PB module of PBP1a and PBP1b contained 850 and 844 amino acid residues, respectively.
leprae is not cultivable. PBP1 is inaccessible to direct investigation. PBP1, with its genuine membrane anchor, was produced in E. coli, the peptidoglycan of which is of the same meso-diaminopimelic acid type as that of Mycobacterium sp. To facilitate the purification, PBP1 was labelled with a polyhistidine[Histag] sequence fused to the amino end of the protein (plasmid pDML905 encoding[Histag]PBP1). Expression of the modified pon1 in E. coli BL21 (DE3)/pDML905 was IPTG inducible and under the control of the T7 promoter and lac operator. Transformants were grown at 37°C in Luria broth containing 50 μg of kanamycin per ml. When an optical density at 600 nm of 0.5 to 0.6 was reached, 1 mM IPTG was added and the culture was allowed to grow for 1 more h. Cell lysis did not occur. The overproduced membrane-bound [His tag]PBP1 represented about 20% of the total membrane proteins.

The membrane-bound [His tag]PBP1 had a low affinity for β-lactam antibiotics. The antibiotic concentrations required to achieve half-saturation at 37°C were 5 × 10⁻⁵ M for ceftriaxone, 5 × 10⁻⁴ M for ampicillin, amoxycillin, and cefoxitin, and >10⁻³ M for ticarcillin, temocillin, and cephaloridine. The value of the second-order rate constant of acylation by benzylpenicillin was 5 to 10 M⁻¹ s⁻¹ in comparison with values of 800 M⁻¹ s⁻¹ for E. coli PBP1a and 150 M⁻¹ s⁻¹ for PBP1b. The penicilloyl-PBP1 intermediate decayed spontaneously with a first-order rate constant of about 1.7 × 10⁻⁴ s⁻¹ and therefore had a relatively short half-life of about 90 min. The penicillin-binding activity of PBP1 had a high thermostability comparable to that of the E. coli PBP1b, with no loss after 10 min at 60°C.

To establish that the bulk of the polypeptide chain of the membrane-bound [His tag]PBP1 was exposed in the periplasm, E. coli transformants grown and induced at 37°C were converted to sphero-plasts and the sphero-plasts were treated with increasing concentrations of proteinase K for 25 min at 30°C. The amount of PBP1 left intact in the protease-treated sphero-plasts was estimated by SDS-PAGE and Western blotting using anti-PBP1 antibodies (Fig. 4). The result was that at a certain concentration of proteinase K, PBP1 could be totally degraded in intact sphero-plasts, showing that the overproduced PBP1 adopted the expected membrane topology.

To check the effects of various levels of pon1 expression on

FIG. 3. Nucleotide sequence of the M. leprae pon1 gene and amino acid sequence of PBP1. Vertical lines define the membrane anchor, the n-PB module, and the PB module and carboxy-terminal extension of PBP1, respectively. Conserved motifs 1 to 4 (n-PB module) and 5 to 7 (PB module, with some ambiguity for motif 6) are underlined.
the folding of PBP1, E. coli transformants were grown under the same conditions as described above, except that the induction with IPTG was carried out at 20°C, causing a 50% decrease in production of PBP1 in the membrane from that obtained at 37°C. The result was that the membrane topology and the low penicillin affinity of PBP1 were independent of the level of gene expression. [His tag]PBP1 could not be extracted from the membranes by treatment with 2% Triton X-100, 1% Genapol X-100, 1% Nonidet P-40, 1% octylglucoside, 1% deoxycholate, or 1% Sarkosyl. It was solubilized by 2% CTAB–0.5 M NaCl in 10 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.4. The CTAB-solubilized PBP1 had the same penicillin affinity as the membrane-bound PBP1. It was adsorbed on a Ni²⁺-NTA agarose column (Fig. 5). After elution with 100 mM imidazole in Tris-HCl (pH 7.4)–2% CTAB and aceton precipitation (7 volumes), SDS-PAGE revealed the presence of a single protein with the expected molecular mass. The purified protein bound penicillin with the same low affinity as the membrane-bound [His tag]PBP1. Upon storage, degradation products were observed.

Attempts at obtaining water-soluble, truncated forms of PBP1 in the periplasm of E. coli were made. The pseudo-signal peptide M1-I39 was replaced by the PelB leader peptide, and the His tag label was fused to the carboxy end of the protein (plasmid pDML907 encoding PelB[ΔM1-I39]PBP1[His tag]). In addition, the pseudo-signal peptide was replaced by the PBP1 leader peptide, the last 100 amino acid residues of the carboxy-terminal extension were eliminated, and the His tag label was fused at the carboxy end of the truncated protein (plasmid pDML908 encoding PelB[ΔM1-I39][ΔG722-D821][His tag]). Upon induction at 37°C, the E. coli transformants produced large amounts of PBPs, but contrary to the expectations, the truncated forms of PBP1 each remained bound or associated with the plasma membrane. Amino acid sequencing of the doubly truncated [ΔM1-I39][ΔG722-D821][His tag], purified by chromatography on Ni²⁺-NTA agarose, showed that the PelB leader sequence was not processed.

**DISCUSSION**

It is known that proteins having 25% or more of their sequences in common adopt the same folded structures. At the same time, an increasing number of proteins that have similar folds but statistically insignificant sequence similarity are being revealed. In consequence, a classification which extends the sequence-based superfamilies to include proteins with similar three-dimensional structures but no sequence similarity has been proposed (13).

On the basis of the percentages of identities that they contain, one can be confident that the n-PB module of M. leprae PBP1 and the n-PB (transglycosylase) module of E. coli PBP1a and PBP1b adopt a similar fold. The percentages of identities between the PB modules are below the cutoff borderline of statistically significant similarity, but the motifs characteristic of the penicilloyl serine transferases are conserved along the sequences. In all likelihood, the PB module of the M. leprae PBP1 also has a folded structure similar to that of the PB (transpeptidase) module of E. coli PBP1a and PBP1b. E. coli PBP1a and PBP1b possess inserts that are not present in M. leprae PBP1, the three PBPs each have different carboxy-terminal extensions, the inserts and extensions are large enough to form additional modules having their own folds, and there is no cross-reaction between E. coli PBP1a or PBP1b and anti-M. leprae PBP1 antibodies or between M. leprae PBP1 and anti-E. coli PBP1b antibodies. Possibly the inserts and extensions are exposed at the surface of the proteins. They may affect, one way or another, the transglycosylase and transpeptidase activities of the PBPs. As a corollary, the functioning of PBP1 in cell wall peptidoglycan synthesis in M. leprae may be different from that of PBP1a and PBP1b in E. coli.

It is not possible to measure the penicillin affinity of the wild-type PBP1 in M. leprae. Consequently, PBP1 has been overproduced in E. coli, with the bulk of the polypeptide chain exposed on the outer face of the membrane, i.e., with the correct membrane topology. However, solubilization of the membrane-bound PBP1 requires CTAB, a denaturing agent of many PBPs. It raises the possibility that the overexpression of pon1 may result in the formation of some inclusion bodies. As discussed below, the bulk of observations and experimental data support the view that the low penicillin affinity of PBP1 is not due to the misfolding of the polypeptide chain but, rather, is a property of the wild-type PBP1.

During membrane preparation of the E. coli transformants, the cell lysates are first centrifuged at 10,000 × g, and therefore, the membrane preparations (used to measure the penicillin affinity of PBP1) must be devoid of any inclusion bodies. The penicillin affinity of PBP1 is independent of the level of gene expression; it is exactly the same when expression is carried out at 37 and 20°C. The low penicillin affinity of PBP1 is comparable to that of PBP5 in Enterococcus hirae and PBP2' in Staphylococcus aureus (4). Overexpression of the gene en-
coding the enterococcal low-affinity PBP5 in laboratory mutants and in *E. coli* (using expression vectors identical to those used for *pon1*) does not alter the penicillin-binding fold topology of the overproduced PBP; its penicillin affinity is the same as that of the wild-type PBP (13a).

The mode of binding of the PBPs to the membrane bilayer and the effects of the detergents are species specific. CTAB solubilizes the low-molecular-mass PBP (with D,L-transpeptidase activity) of *Streptomyces* sp. strain K15 with preservation of the penicillin-binding fold topology; the value of the first-order rate constant of acylation by penicillin is exactly the same (150 M⁻¹ s⁻¹) for the wild-type membrane-bound enzyme and the CTAB-extracted enzyme (11). X-ray crystallography studies suggest that a secondary structure at the surface of the protein might function as a membrane association site (1a). *E. coli* PBP1b also possesses at least one membrane association site in addition to the amino-terminal transmembrane anchor (12). PBP1b is stable and active in Sarkosyl, a denaturing detergent for the other PBPs.

Classical β-lactam antibiotics are not effective agents for the treatment of leprosy. Yet, in the mouse footpad model, cefoxitin has low 90% inhibitory dose values (15), and ampicillin in combination with a β-lactamase inhibitor prevents growth of *M. leprae* strains, including strains resistant to dapsonse or rifampin (14). The fact that PBP1 has a low penicillin affinity does not necessarily contradict these observations, since *M. leprae* may possess other essential PBPs that may be susceptible to penicillin action. A gene that is provisionally called *pon2* and encodes a second high-molecular-mass class A PBP is present in cosmid L222 of the *M. leprae* library (unpublished data). This situation is reminiscent of *ponA* (encoding PBP1a) and *ponB* (encoding PBP1b) in *E. coli*. Deletion of *ponA* and *ponB* is fatal, but deletion of either *ponA* or *ponB* is tolerated, suggesting that one PBP can compensate for the other (17). Counterparts of the multimodular class B PBP2 and PBP3 of *E. coli* may also be present in *M. leprae*. These PBPs are key components of morphogenetic networks involved in cell septation and cell shape maintenance (7). In *E. coli*, PBPs are major killing targets of β-lactam antibiotics.

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