Heme Polymerase Activity and the Stage Specificity of Antimalarial Action of Chloroquine

AUGUSTINE U. ORJIH

MLS Department, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, Kuwait University, Sulaibikhat 90805, Kuwait, Arabian Gulf

Accepted for publication March 6, 1997

ABSTRACT

Plasmodium falciparum lysate, prepared from $2.7 \times 10^7$ ring-infected erythrocytes and incubated with hemoglobin in sodium acetate at pH 5, incorporated a mean of 1.6 nmol of ferrirhophorpyrin IX (FP) into hemozoin in 18 to 22 hr. A similar preparation of trophozoite lysate incorporated a mean of 3.6 nmol of FP into hemozoin in 4 to 6 hr. These findings indicate differences between heme polymerase activity (hemozoin production) at the ring and trophozoite stages of malaria parasites. Intracellular hemozoin production was 90% inhibited at the ring and trophozoite stages by 0.5 and 7 nmol of chloroquine/10^6 infected erythrocytes, respectively. The inhibition killed the rings but not the trophozoites, suggesting that mature parasites may have a mechanism for protecting themselves against chloroquine-FP toxicity.

Shortly after the invasion of erythrocytes, the protozoan parasite Plasmodium enters its ring stage of development and begins to ingest and digest hemoglobin as it grows to trophozoite and schizont stages (Olliaro and Goldberg, 1995). In the 48-hr asexual life cycle of P. falciparum, these developmental stages cover the first 20 to 24 hr, the next 12 to 18 hr and the remaining period, respectively (Yayon et al., 1983). The rate of hemoglobin catabolism is highest at the trophozoite stage (Orjih et al., 1994). Heme polymerase is located in the acidic food vacuole of the parasite and uses FP that has been released from hemoglobin as substrate for biosynthesis of hemozoin (Chou and Fitch, 1992; Slater and Cerami, 1992). In this process, FP is polymerized to β-hematin (the principal component of hemozoin) and stored in the food vacuole (Fitch and Kanjananggulpan, 1987; Slater et al., 1991). Incorporation of FP into hemozoin is believed to be a protective measure by the parasite against self-destruction. Nonpolymerized FP has been shown to be highly toxic, damaging proteases and cell membranes (Chou and Fitch, 1980; Gluzman et al., 1994; Orjih et al., 1981; Vander Jagt et al., 1987). It also binds chloroquine with high affinity, which may account for the selective accumulation of this drug in parasitized erythrocytes (Chou et al., 1980). Chloroquine promotes but can also delay FP toxicity (Orjih et al., 1981).

Consistent with a proposed mechanism of the antimalarial action of chloroquine (Orjih et al., 1981), various studies have shown that the drug inhibits FP polymerization (Chou and Fitch, 1992, Egan et al., 1994; Slater and Cerami, 1992). However, chloroquine kills P. falciparum, specifically at the ring stage of development (Orjih et al., 1994; Ter Kuile et al., 1993; Zang et al., 1986), although it has been shown in cell-free preparations that it inhibits the heme polymerase activity of trophozoites (Slater and Cerami, 1992).

The present study presents a comparison of the heme polymerase activity in P. falciparum rings and trophozoites, measurement of chloroquine inhibition of this activity in parasitized erythrocytes and determination of the effect of the inhibition on the viability of the parasites. The findings of the study may provide plausible explanations for the stage specificity of the antimalarial action of chloroquine.

Materials and Methods

Parasite cultures. RPMI 1640 medium was used for growing malaria parasites and washing them after concentration through saponin hemolysis (Orjih, 1996). It was prepared and supplemented with 4-(2-hydroxyethyl)-1-piperazineethanesulfonic acid, sodium bicarbonate and 10% human serum (blood group O-positive) according to Jensen and Trager (1977). Each liter was supplemented with 2 g of glucose, 50 mg of hypoxanthine and 19.2 mg of gentamicin sulfate (1.62 mg/ml concentration of doubly distilled water). The malaria parasite studied was the chloroquine-susceptible HB-3 strain of P. falciparum. The parasites were grown in stored blood group O-positive human erythrocytes by the conventional method, with incubation in a gas mixture containing 3% O₂, 3% CO₂ and 94% N₂.

Hemozoin synthesis in hemolysates. Infected erythrocytes concentrated through saponin hemolysis were used in preparing hemolysates at both ring and trophozoite stages of parasite development. After concentration, a suspension of the ring-infected erythrocytes was prepared in culture medium, and 2-ml aliquots, each containing a total of $2.7 \times 10^7$ parasitized erythrocytes, were prepared in sterilized high-speed Oak Ridge centrifuge tubes. For he-
Chloroquine Inhibition of Hemozoin 109

Results

In this study, the parasitemia levels in unconcentrated cultures of *P. falciparum* rings were 2% to 8%, and after concentration by saponin hemolysis, the levels were 90% to 99%. The concentration procedure was necessary for heme polymerase activity and chloroquine accumulation experiments to avoid uninfected erythrocytes complicating the results.

**Heme polymerase activity.** The total quantities of hemozoin produced in ring and trophozoite lysates are shown in figure 1. Values represent mean ± S.E.M. of triplicate experiments. Before hemolysate preparation, the quantity of hemozoin was 2 ± 0.2 nmol of FP in ring-infected erythrocytes and 13 ± 1.5 nmol of FP in trophozoites; after incubation, the values increased to 3.6 ± 0.1 and 16.4 ± 1.6 nmol of FP, respectively. The difference between the mean quantities of FP incorporated into β-hematin in the two hemolysates is statistically significant (P < .03 by the paired t test).

**Chloroquine accumulation.** The total number of infected erythrocytes used in the chloroquine accumulation study was ~2.6 × 10⁷ in both ring and trophozoite cultures. The experiments were done three times. At a steady state of accumulation, after 1 hr of incubation, extracellular (i.e., unbound) chloroquine concentrations decreased, depending on the parasite stage and initial drug concentration added to the medium (fig. 2). For example, when 53 nM chloroquine was added to the medium, the concentration decreased by 28% in ring cultures and 66% in trophozoite cultures; when 318 nM chloroquine was added to the medium, the decrease was 6% in the ring and 70% in the trophozoite cultures.

Generally, chloroquine accumulation by *P. falciparum*-infected erythrocyte was a saturable process, reaching a maximum at ~0.8 nmol/10⁶ ring-infected erythrocytes and 7 nmol/10⁶ trophozoite-infected erythrocytes (fig. 3). In cultures containing 106 nM of added chloroquine, ring-infected erythrocytes accumulated 80% less than that accumulated by trophozoites, and this difference did not change much when the added chloroquine was 318 nM. As shown in figure 3, the difference between chloroquine accumulation by uninfected erythrocytes and ring-infected erythrocytes was not as noticeable as it was with trophozoites; nevertheless, it was statistically significant (P = .0001 by the two-tailed paired t test). The use of highly concentrated infected erythrocytes improved the sensitivity of drug accumulation measurement.

**Antimalarial action of hemozoin inhibition by chloroquine.** Various studies by other investigators have shown that chloroquine inhibits β-hematin synthesis in cell-free conditions for 4 to 6 hr. Each lysate was prepared from 2.7 × 10⁷ erythrocytes. The total amounts of hemozoin produced were calculated in nM of FP, and mean ± S.E.M. values of three experiments are shown.

![Fig. 1. Heme polymerase activity (incorporation of FP into hemozoin) in cell-free preparations. Hemolysates of normal and *P. falciparum* ring-infected erythrocytes were incubated in sodium acetate at pH 5 for 18 to 22 hr, whereas those of trophozoites were incubated at the same conditions for 4 to 6 hr. Each lysate was prepared from 2.7 × 10⁷ erythrocytes. The total amounts of hemozoin produced were calculated in nM of FP, and mean ± S.E.M. values of three experiments are shown.](https://jpet.aspetjournals.org/content/1997/1/109/F01.large.jpg)
preparations. However, to demonstrate the therapeutic significance of this inhibition, the study must be carried out with viable parasites (Asawamahasakda et al., 1994; Orjih et al., 1994; Orjih and Fitch, 1993). When ring-infected erythrocytes were incubated for 20 hr in 106 nM nonradioactive chloroquine, producing an intracellular drug concentration of 0.5 nmol/106 ring-infected erythrocytes, hemozoin synthesis was inhibited by 90% (fig. 4), and parasite growth was arrested. After an additional 20 hr of exposure, the drug was washed away, and the cells were maintained for an additional 3 days in normal medium to see whether the parasites would recover. They did not, indicating that the parasites had died.

Antimalarial action of hemozoin inhibition on trophozoites was evaluated somewhat differently from that on the ring stage. The question here was whether the trophozoites would complete their life cycle and produce infective merozoites. For this purpose, parasite growth was synchronized at the ring stage, and the culture was incubated for 20 hr to produce trophozoites. The mean parasitemia in the culture was 3.5%, leaving sufficient uninfected erythrocytes in the culture for invasion by newly released merozoites. The trophozoites were then incubated for 20 hr in culture medium containing 106, 212, 318 or 636 nM nonradiolabeled chloroquine. The steady state amounts of chloroquine accumulated by trophozoites from these drug concentrations (fig. 3) have been compared with the antimalarial action of chloroquine (table 1). It shows that in all the chloroquine concentrations tested, trophozoites were able to complete their life cycle and infect new erythrocytes. Total parasitemia was, however, highest in the culture without chloroquine, indicating that some of the parasites have been killed or inhibited in growth by the drug. The lowest total parasitemia (20–40% of the control; data not shown) was observed in cultures that contained the highest amount of chloroquine (636 nM in medium or 7 nmol/106 trophozoites).

**Discussion**

In this study, some differences between heme polymerase activity in rings and trophozoites of *P. falciparum* have been detected. Although equal numbers (2.7 × 107) of infected erythrocytes were used, mean hemozoin synthesis in ring hemolysate was only 50% of that in trophozoites. The initial quantity of hemozoin in the lysates was also lower in the rings than in the trophozoites, but Slater and Cerami (1992) have shown that hemozoin by itself does not have heme polymerase activity. They showed that heme polymerase activity increased linearly with protein concentration in parasite lysate. Obviously, hemoglobin-free *P. falciparum* para-
sites are expected to contain less protein at the ring than at the trophozoite stage, and this may account for the differences in hemozoin synthesis observed in the present study. However, Dorn et al. (1995) have shown that protein-free hemozoin can promote formation of additional hemozoin. In the present study, there was more preexisting hemozoin in the trophozoite lysates than in the ring lysates, and this may have contributed to the differences in the results.

The nature of heme polymerase is still unresolved. Sullivan et al. (1996a) reported that recombinant or native histidine-rich proteins of P. falciparum promoted the formation of hemozoin in cell-free preparations, but Bendiat et al. (1996) found that phospholipids caused rapid FP polymerization. Future studies with histidine-rich proteins and lipids from rings and trophozoites of malaria parasites may help clarify the role of these molecules in hemozoin synthesis.

To demonstrate the pharmacological importance of heme polymerase, Slater and Cerami (1992) added various antimalarial drugs to hemolysates of P. falciparum trophozoites and found that ~1 mM chloroquine was necessary to cause ~90% inhibition of hemozoin production. This drug concentration is on the high side and carries the risk of not acting selectively. High concentrations of chloroquine inhibit other metabolic processes, such as DNA replication and protein synthesis, and kill bacteria (Ciak and Hahn, 1966). Excess chloroquine may also delay, rather than promote, the toxicity of FP (Orjih and kill bacteria (Ciak and Hahn, 1966). Excess chloroquine may also delay, rather than promote, the toxicity of FP (Orjih et al., 1981), the effector molecule that is expected to kill malaria parasites when hemozoin production is inhibited.

For the inhibition by chloroquine of heme polymerase activity to be biologically relevant, drug concentrations in the test system should be comparable to those that have been found to inhibit intracellular hemozoin production. In the present study, ~90% inhibition of hemozoin production was observed when intracellular chloroquine concentration was 0.5 nmol/10^6 ring-infected erythrocytes or 7 nmol/10^8 trophozoite-infected erythrocytes, suggesting that the mechanism, possibly heme polymerase activity, that is responsible for hemozoin formation is more sensitive to chloroquine in rings than in trophozoites. Chloroquine accumulates selectively in the food vacuoles of malaria parasites, and Yayon et al. (1985) assumed that the amount accumulated was directly proportional to the volume of the food vacuole. However, it has recently been demonstrated that chloroquine accumulation in P. falciparum-infected erythrocytes is dependent on the rate of FP generation (i.e., hemoglobin catabolism) by the parasites (Orjih et al., 1994). The volume of a food vacuole increases with parasite maturation, reaching a maximum at late schizont stage (Langreth et al., 1978); in contrast, hemoglobin catabolism and chloroquine accumulation reach their peaks at the trophozoite stage and decrease dramatically thereafter (Orjih et al., 1994). It has been recently reported that quinoline drugs bind to hemoglobin, possibly in complex with FP (Sullivan et al., 1996b); nevertheless, hemoglobin by itself may not account for drug accumulation in parasitized erythrocytes. Schizonts contain more hemoglobin than do trophozoites, whereas trophozoites accumulate more chloroquine than do schizonts (Orjih et al., 1994).

This study has also shown that the therapeutic effect of hemozoin inhibition is dependent on the developmental stage of P. falciparum, being more lethal to rings than to trophozoites. Although some dead parasites were observed when hemozoin production in trophozoites was inhibited by 90%, the surviving trophozoites were able to complete their life cycle and infect other erythrocytes. When a comparable level of inhibition of hemozoin production was induced at the ring stage, none of the parasites completed the life cycle. How intracellular FP kills malaria parasites in the presence of chloroquine has not yet been established, but it is becoming evident that some metabolic processes taking place in the food vacuole, as well as this organelle itself, are susceptible (Ginsburg, 1996; Olliaro and Goldberg, 1995). When added externally, FP and FP/chloroquine complex lyse cells (Chou and Fitch, 1980; Orjih et al., 1981), and in cell-free preparations, they have been shown to inhibit proteases (Gluzman et al., 1994; Vander Jagt et al., 1987).

The above observations suggest the following explanations for the stage-specificity of antimalarial action of chloroquine. Hemozoin formation, a requirement for continued utilization of hemoglobin as nutrient source, is readily inhibited by chloroquine at the ring stage of intraerythrocytic malaria parasite development. The excessive accumulation of chloroquine in mature parasites may be in part due to diversion of drug/FP complexes into hemozoin (Sullivan et al., 1996b), away from the actual targets of antimalarial action. Also, at later stages of parasite development, excess nutrients have accumulated in the host erythrocyte (Zarchin et al., 1986), and there are parasitophorous ducts through which extracellular macromolecules may be imported (Pouville et al., 1991).

Acknowledgments

This work was done in part in the laboratories of Prof. C. D. Fitch (St. Louis University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO).

References


Orjih, A. U. and Fitch, C. D.: Hemozoin production by Plasmodium falcipa-


Send reprint requests to: Dr. Augustine U. Orjih, Kuwait University, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, MLS Department, P.O. Box 31740, Sulaibikhat 90805, Kuwait, Arabian Gulf.