**Mycobacterium smegmatis** biofilm formation and sliding motility are affected by the serine/threonine protein kinase PknF

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**Abstract**

Eighteen 'eukaryotic-like' serine/threonine kinases are present in the *Mycobacterium smegmatis* genome. One of them encoded by the ORF 3677 demonstrates high similarity to the *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* protein kinase PknF. A merodiploid strain was generated, which showed reduced growth associated with irregular cell structure. The merodiploid strain displayed altered colony morphology, defective sliding motility and biofilm formation. These data indicate a role for PknF in biofilm formation, possibly associated with alterations in glycopeptidolipid composition.

**Introduction**

Serine/threonine protein kinases (STPKs) are highly conserved key mediators of cellular signaling in eukaryotes and have a similar role in many prokaryotes (Cozzone, 2005). While the genome of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* contains 11 putative STPKs (Cole et al., 1998), the genome of *Mycobacterium smegmatis* is predicted to encode 18 putative STPKs (www.tigr.org) (supplementary Table S1). Most of the annotated STPKs in *M. tuberculosis* have several homologues in *M. smegmatis* and a few kinases in *M. smegmatis* do not have homologues in *M. tuberculosis*. MSMEG3677 of *M. smegmatis* was identified as the closest homologue (64%) to PknF of *M. tuberculosis* (Fig. 1).

In this study, an attempt was made to decipher the role of *M. smegmatis* pknF. *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* PknF has been shown to be involved in cell growth, septum formation and glucose transport (Deol et al., 2005) and to phosphorylate fork head associated domains of the proteins encoded by the ORFs Rv1747 and Rv0020 (Molle et al., 2004; Grundner et al., 2005). Sequence comparison showed that Ms-PknF possesses the previously unnoticed GXGXXGEV subdomain I of kinases, which are capable of covering and anchoring the nontransferable phosphates of ATP. We have cloned the gene encoded by ORF 3677 (designated as Ms-pknF in this study), and overexpressed the protein in *M. smegmatis* mc²155 under the control of an inducible acetamidase promoter, and studied the effect on growth and cell morphology of the merodiploid strain. The observed differences in colony morphology prompted studies on sliding motility and biofilm formation. This is the first report on the functional analysis of a putative STPK from *M. smegmatis* and provides new information about the control of biofilm formation by kinases in mycobacteria.

**Materials and methods**

**Molecular biological procedures**

Standard molecular biology procedures were followed for the DNA manipulations as described earlier (Sambrook et al., 1989). Electroporation in mycobacteria was carried...
out following the published protocols (Snapper et al., 1990). All restriction and modifying enzymes were purchased from New England Biolabs and all chemicals were procured from Sigma (Sigma-Aldrich). The DNA sequence of all PCR products was confirmed by automated sequencing (Applied Biosystem Genetic Analyzer, model 3100).

**Bacterial strains and growth conditions**

*Mycobacterium smegmatis* mc²155 was grown in Luria–Bertani (LB) broth with 0.05% Tween80 and plated in the same medium with 1.5% agar supplemented with appropriate antibiotics (100 µg mL⁻¹ of hygromycin and 20 µg mL⁻¹ of kanamycin, wherever applicable) unless otherwise indicated. *Escherichia coli* DH5α or TOP10 cells (Invitrogen Inc.) were grown in LB medium with appropriate antibiotics (150 µg mL⁻¹ of hygromycin and 40 µg mL⁻¹ of kanamycin, wherever applicable).

**DNA manipulations**

The 1.4-kb coding region of MSMEG3677 was PCR amplified from the genomic DNA of *M. smegmatis* mc²155 using oligomer pair 5' CGCGGATCCGGATGCCACTTGCCC GCTGGGGAGGA-3' (with BamHI overhang) and 5'-GGGGGAGA-3' (with Tgo DNA polymerase (Roche). The amplified product was purified and cloned into the BamHI and EcoRV site of pSD26 (Daugelat et al., 2003), an *E. coli*–*Mycobacterium* shuttle vector containing the acetamidase promoter to create pRGS5. The MSMEG3677 gene was cloned without its stop codon in frame to the His-tag preceding the stop codon in pSD26.

Replacement of the ATP-binding domain lysine (K) at position 41 to methionine (M) was performed using a Quik-Change site directed mutagenesis kit (Stratagene) following the supplier's instructions. The primers used for creating lysine to methionine mutation were 5'-GACTGC GATGCATGGTGCTGCC-3' and 5'-GGAGCATCCAATGAGGC GACG-3'. The resulting plasmid was designated as pRGS5-K41M.

The MSMEG3677 gene with acetamidase promoter was subcloned from pRGS5 and pRGS5-K41M into mycobacterial integrative vector pMV306 (Stover et al., 1991) to create pRGS7 and pRGS7-K41M, respectively. The control plasmid pAce-306 was created by introducing the acetamidase promoter into pMV306.

**Overexpression of Ms-PknF by acetamide induction**

The plasmids (Table 1) were introduced into *M. smegmatis* mc²155 by electroporation and strains were designated as indicated. For the induction experiments, 0.2% acetamide (final concentration) was added to broth or solid medium containing 0.05% Tween80. Lysate was prepared using glass beads (106 µm and finer) as described previously (Hatfull & Jacobs, 2000). The concentration of total cellular protein was estimated with a BCA protein assay reagent kit (Pierce) and equal amounts (0.5 µg) of protein was separated on 10% SDS-PAGE and transferred onto polyvinylidene difluoride membranes. Blots were incubated with 1:5000 anti-His C-terminal horseradish peroxidase antibody for 1 h at room temperature. Positope was included as the positive control for the antibody (Invitrogen Inc.). The blots were processed using the Western Lightning Chemiluminescence Reagent Plus (Perkin Elmer) following the manufacturer’s instructions.

**In vitro growth kinetics of *M. smegmatis* strains**

Fresh mid log-phase cultures of control, strains overexpressing Ms-PknF and its kinase mutant Ms-PknF-K41M were diluted in LB (supplemented with 0.05% Tween80) to an initial OD₆₀₀ₙ₉ of 0.05. One set of cultures was induced with acetamide and the other set was left untreated. Aliquots of 1 mL were removed at 3 h intervals up to 24 h and growth was monitored by measuring OD₆₀₀ values. The experiment was performed in triplicate.

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**Fig. 1.** Dendrogram of a multiple sequence alignment of all the STPKs from *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and *Mycobacterium smegmatis*. Sequences of *M. tuberculosis* (designated as Pkn's) and *M. smegmatis* (designated by locus number) kinases obtained from the Tuberculist and TIGR database respectively were aligned using CLUSTALW and the dendrogram displayed using TREEVIEW (version 1.6.6). The scale bar indicates a distance of 0.1 amino acid substitutions per position in the sequence. Closest homologues between *M. tuberculosis* and *M. smegmatis* kinases are shaded in gray.
Scanning electron microscopy (SEM)

Strains overexpressing Ms-PknF and Ms-PknF-K41M as well as control strain grown in LB medium (supplemented with 0.05% Tween80) with or without acetamide were subjected to SEM as described earlier (Vilcheze et al., 2000). The samples were examined at 6000× in a JEOL-JSM6400 SEM (Peabody, MA) using an accelerating voltage of 10 kV.

Colony morphology of merodiploid strains

Control, strains overexpressing Ms-PknF and Ms-PknF-K41M were grown in 7H9 media (supplemented with 1% glucose and 0.05% Tween80) and 10 μL of each strain was spotted onto 7H9 agar plates with or without acetamide (supplemented with 0.5% glycerol and 0.05% Tween80). Plates were incubated at 37°C for 2–3 days.

Sliding motility of mycobacteria

The three M. smegmatis strains (control and strains overexpressing Ms-PknF and Ms-PknF-K41M) grown on 7H9 agar plates with acetamide were inoculated via sterile toothpicks onto 7H9 agar plates with or without acetamide (supplemented with 0.5% glycerol and 0.05% Tween80). Plates were incubated at 37°C for 2–3 days.

Determination of biofilm formation

Mycobacterium smegmatis strains were inoculated as 10 μL of a saturated culture onto 1 mL of M63 medium supplemented with 0.5% Casamino acids, 1 mM MgSO4 and 0.7 mM CaCl2 with acetamide. Cells were grown in a 24-well flat bottom plate (polystyrene) and incubated at 30°C without disturbance for 4–5 days. Strains overexpressing Ms-PknF, and Ms-PknF-K41M, and control were grown and induced in 24-well plates and stained with crystal violet (CV) as described previously. Quantitation of biofilm was carried out by extracting the CV with 95% ethanol and measuring OD570 nm (Recht et al., 2000).

Table 1. List of plasmids and strains used in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plasmid/Strain</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plasmids</td>
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<tr>
<td>pMV306</td>
<td>Integration proficient E. coli–Mycobacterium shuttle vector</td>
<td>Stover et al. (1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pSD26</td>
<td>E. coli–Mycobacterium shuttle vector carrying acetamidase promoter.</td>
<td>Daugelat et al. (2003)</td>
</tr>
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<td>pRG5S</td>
<td>pSD26 harbouring 1482-bp Ms-PknF</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pRG5S-K41M</td>
<td>pSD26 harbouring 1482-bp Ms-PknF bearing a K to M mutation at position 41</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pAce-306</td>
<td>pMV306 derivative harbouring acetamidase promoter from M. smegmatis</td>
<td>This study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pRG57</td>
<td>pMV306 carrying the acetamidase promoter driving Ms-PknF</td>
<td>This study</td>
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<tr>
<td>pRG57-K41M</td>
<td>pMV306 carrying the acetamidase promoter driving Ms-PknF bearing a K to M mutation at position 41</td>
<td>This study</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strains</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>mc2 155</td>
<td>Laboratory strain</td>
<td>Snapper et al. (1990)</td>
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<tr>
<td>mc2 4808</td>
<td>M. smegmatis bearing integrated pAce-306; Control strain</td>
<td>This study</td>
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<tr>
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<td>M. smegmatis bearing integrated pRG57 overexpressing Ms-PknF</td>
<td>This study</td>
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<tr>
<td>mc2 4816</td>
<td>M. smegmatis bearing integrated pRG57-K41M overexpressing Ms-PknF-K41M</td>
<td>This study</td>
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</table>

Results and discussion

PknF of M. tuberculosis was shown to be involved in glucose transport and cell division (Deol et al., 2005). In this work, we identified MSMEG3677 gene from M. smegmatis as a homologue to pknF of M. tuberculosis (Fig. 1). We have analyzed the role of Ms-PknF by overexpressing it in M. smegmatis under the control of an inducible promoter and studied its physiological role.

Cloning and overexpression of the M. smegmatis pknF homologue

To study the physiological role of MSMEG3677 in mycobacteria, we have cloned and overexpressed the MSMEG3677 gene and a K41M kinase dead mutant in M. smegmatis mc2151 using an inducible acetamidase promoter. We used a K41M point mutation because this lysine residue, located in subdomain II of STPKs, is highly conserved and is essential for the kinase activity (Hanks et al., 1988). Loss of the kinase function by a mutation of lysine to methionine has been described earlier (Molle et al., 2003; Deol et al., 2005) and we included this strain to establish whether the observed phenotype was due to the kinase function or overexpression of protein. Expression of the recombinant M. smegmatis PknF homologue was confirmed by visualization of an ~56-kDa band by Western blotting against the C-terminal His-tag of the recombinant protein (Fig. 2a).
In vitro growth kinetics of the merodiploid strain

*Mycobacterium smegmatis* merodiploid strain expressing recombinant Ms-PknF showed growth retardation compared with control and the strain overexpressing the K41M mutant of Ms-PknF upon induction with acetamide. The difference in growth in liquid media was prominent as soon as 9 h after acetamide treatment and increased with time. The retardation of growth started at early exponential phase (9 h after induction), indicating that PknF interferes with early cell growth during the period of active cell division. Following 24 h of induction, a more than twofold reduction in growth was observed, with the induced cells overexpressing Ms-PknF compared with Ms-PknF-K41M and parental strain controls (Fig. 2b). In *M. tuberculosis*, overexpression of PknF resulted in slow growth, and the strain bearing a lysine to methionine mutation in subdomain II failed to show any phenotype associated with the merodiploid strain (Deol et al., 2005).

Clumping of cells was observed with Ms-PknF overexpression, but not with Ms-PknF K41M, when grown beyond 24 h. Hence, growth was plotted only during the time that cultures were dispersed. Extensive clumping observed with sustained acetamide induction suggested a possible role for Ms-PknF in fatty acid metabolism and/or other pathways involved in the regulation of cell structure. Mycobacterial mutants that were defective in the synthesis of glycopeptidolipids (GPLs) have been shown to be associated with extensive clumping in liquid culture (Etienne et al., 2002).

**Morphology of merodiploid strains**

Possible morphological variations, due to overexpression of Ms-PknF, were studied as individual cells and colonies. SEM was carried out on cells following 21 h of induction and compared with bacteria grown without induction. The strain overexpressing Ms-PknF following acetamide induction had irregular cell structure marked with bulb-like protrusions along the length or the ends of the cell, indicating abnormal or defective cell shape. However, neither induced nor uninduced cells expressing Ms-PknF-K41M showed such phenotypes (Fig. 3). Similarly, PknF of *M. tuberculosis* when disrupted or overexpressed had a comparatively small cell size with bulbous structures at one or both ends of the cells, indicating cell-deviant cell division (Deol et al., 2005). This further indicated a functional homology among these kinases. However, further studies are required to delineate the stimuli these kinases perceive in vivo.

On acetamide induction, the strain overexpressing Ms-PknF revealed different colony morphology on agar media, showing partially rough cells that tend to cluster towards the center of the colony. In contrast, strains overexpressing Ms-PknF-K41M and control showed smooth well-spread colonies (Fig. 4a).

**Analysis of sliding motility and biofilm formation of merodiploid strains**

Previous studies have shown that GPL-defective mutants like mps [coding for nonribosomal peptide synthetase (Billman-Jacobe et al., 1999; Recht et al., 2000)] and mtf1 [coding for methyl transferase (Recht & Kolter, 2001)] had rough colony formation.
morphology. Differences in colony morphology were also shown to be associated with sliding motility (Martinez et al., 1999; Recht & Kolter, 2001; Etienne et al., 2005) and biofilm formation (Recht & Kolter, 2001). We examined the same by assessing the surface spreading assay and attachment of mycobacterial cells to polystyrene surface. The motility of the strain overexpressing Ms-PknF was reduced when compared with the strain overexpressing Ms-PknF-K41M and control strain (Fig. 4b). The measurement of the diameter of the halo formed on 0.3% agarose plates indicated a reduction in the sliding motility of the strain overexpressing Ms-PknF compared with control strains (Table 2). Colonies of Ms-PknF overexpressing strain grown on rich media showed no reduction in diameter (Fig. 4a) as compared with growth on minimal media (no carbon source) (Fig. 4b). Interestingly, overexpression of *gtf3*, a glycosyl transferase, had colonies grown on rich media displaying slightly increased diameter with rough morphology. However, the same study showed a reduction in sliding motility (Deshayes et al., 2005). GPLs are found on the cell surface and are important for sliding on minimal media, and no such difference is observed when grown in rich media.

Using an assay to determine biofilm formation (Recht & Kolter, 2001), we found that *M. smegmatis* was able to cover polystyrene surface and formed biofilms on media with acetamide. However, *M. smegmatis* overexpressing Ms-PknF showed clumping and failed to spread on the surface of the polystyrene plate following acetamide induction (Fig. 4c). CV staining revealed that strains overexpressing Ms-PknF fail to form biofilm while the control strains are spread on the surface of the polystyrene plate (Fig. 4d). Quantitative estimation of CV staining also showed a significant reduction with Ms-PknF overexpression compared with Ms-PknF-K41M overexpression and control (Fig. 4e).

Ms-PknF overexpression was associated with reduced sliding motility and defective biofilm formation, which is an intermediate phenotype but not a complete nonsliding phenotype. Supporting this observation was a report on *atf1* mutant (*atf1* coding for a protein involved in GPL acetylation) that displayed intermediate phenotypes for sliding motility, biofilms and colony morphology (Recht & Kolter, 2001). A previous study proposed a model for the role of GPLs in sliding motility and biofilm formation based on interaction between the mycobacterial cell surface and either hydrophilic (agarose) or hydrophobic (polystyrene) surfaces (Recht et al., 2000). Preliminary studies using thin layer chromatography showed an alteration in the GPL profile in strains overexpressing Ms-PknF (data not shown), suggesting a possible role for Ms-PknF in GPL metabolism. Ms-PknF being a kinase with an extracellular domain could sense the external signals and play a role in altering GPLs, resulting in observed phenotypes that are normally associated with the absence/alterations of GPLs. However, it has yet to be determined whether the slow growth and altered cell morphology observed is the direct result of changes in GPL composition or attributable to some other function of the kinase. This has also
been reported earlier for the PknF of *M. tuberculosis* (Deol et al., 2005).

In conclusion, our results indicated that overexpression of Ms-PknF affected cell structure in *M. smegmatis* and controlled its sliding motility and biofilm formation. The sliding properties reported in our study are pivotal for pathogenic mycobacterial species for colonizing surfaces in the environment and host under nutrient depletion conditions. Cell wall architecture gains importance in this regard for pathogenesis of the mycobacteria. Further work lies in understanding the GPLs involved in this Ms-PknF signaling and environment cues perceived by this kinase to bring about alterations in GPLs.

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**References**


Protein Kinase F affects biofilm formation in M. smegmatis

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Supplementary material

The following supplementary material is available for this article online:

Table S1. List of kinases from M. smegmatis.

Fig S1. Alignment of PknF kinase from mycobacteria.

This material is available as part of the online article from: http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1574-6968.2007.00989.x. (This link will take you to the article abstract).

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