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Short communication

Biological and structural characteristics of the binding peptides from the sporozoite proteins essential for cell traversal (SPECT)-1 and -2

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ABSTRACT

The sporozoite microneme proteins essential for cell traversal, SPECT-1 and SPECT-2, are considered attractive pre-erythrocytic immune targets due to the key role they play in crossing of the malaria parasite across the dermis and the liver sinusoidal wall, prior to invasion of hepatocytes. In this study, the sequences of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 were mapped using 20 mer-long synthetic peptides to identify high-activity binding peptides (HABPs) to HeLa cells. 17 HABPs with enzyme sensitive bindings to HeLa cells were identified: 3 predominantly α-helical in SPECT-1, and 10 α-helical and 4 β-turns/random coils in SPECT-2. Immunofluorescence assays (IFA) with antibodies raised in rabbits against chemically synthesized B-cell epitopes suggests the presence of these two proteins in the micronemes and in sporozoite membrane. ^{1}H NMR studies showed that HABPs located in the membrane-attack complex/perforin (MACPF) domain of SPECT-2 share high similarity with the 3D structure of C8α. Altogether, the results highlight the potential of including HABPs from SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 as components of a fully effective multistage, multiepitopic, minimal subunit-based synthetic vaccine against *Plasmodium falciparum* malaria.

1. Introduction

During the development of the most lethal form of human malaria, a disease causing around 500 million cases and more than 3 million deaths worldwide each year [22], different forms of the *Plasmodium falciparum* parasite recognize and invades at least two types of human cells: liver cells and red blood cells (RBCs) [5,12] through a process that involves using a wide variety of parasite proteins [17,20].

The pathogen's life cycle begins when an infected *Anopheles* mosquito injects 100–1000 sporozoites (larvae like structures, as seen in Fig. 1A) into the skin of the human host during a blood meal. These sporozoites have to go across the dermis to reach blood vessels, travel to the liver via the bloodstream and cross the sinusoidal wall by passing through the Kupffer cells (the macrophages of the liver) to finally invade hepatocytes, in a process mediated by specific interactions between host–cell receptors and parasite proteins [5,12,27]. To date, the most studied pre-erythrocytic invasins are the circumsporozoite protein (CSP) [12,27] and the thrombospondin-related anonymous protein (TRAP) [1] both involved in traversal of mammalian cells and sporozoite invasion of hepatocytes.

Two recently described parasite proteins are essential for sporozoite traversal of the dermis and Kupffer cells, namely SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 [8,9]. The 28 kDa SPECT-1 and 95 kDa SPECT-2 (also known as *Plasmodium* perforin-like protein-1 or PPLP-1) are stored in the micronemes and later on translocated to the sporozoite's membrane during the infection of the vertebrate host. Targeted disruption of both genes has been shown to affect sporozoite infectivity *in vivo*, and completely abolish traversal of HeLa cells *in vitro*, suggesting that SPECT molecules are important for the parasite's ability to cross cell barriers, particularly for the progression of the sporozoite from the dermis to the hepatocyte, as elegantly shown by Amino et al. [2]. Interestingly, no effect has been observed on the gliding motility, crossing of blood and lymphatic vessels of the dermis or hepatocyte infection capacity of *spect-1* (−) and *spect-2* (−) knock-down parasites *in vivo*, while depletion of Kupffer cells in mice restores parasite infectivity to hepatocytes back to normal levels, suggesting that they could be arrested by phagocytic cells in the dermis [2] and Kupffer cells of the liver [8,9].

Although the mechanisms by which SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 participate in cell traversal of sporozoites is still unknown, the presence of a membrane-attack complex/perforin (MACPF) domain in SPECT-2 [8,11] has suggested a pore formation mechanism, similar to that of the mammalian C8α complement cascade MACPF protein

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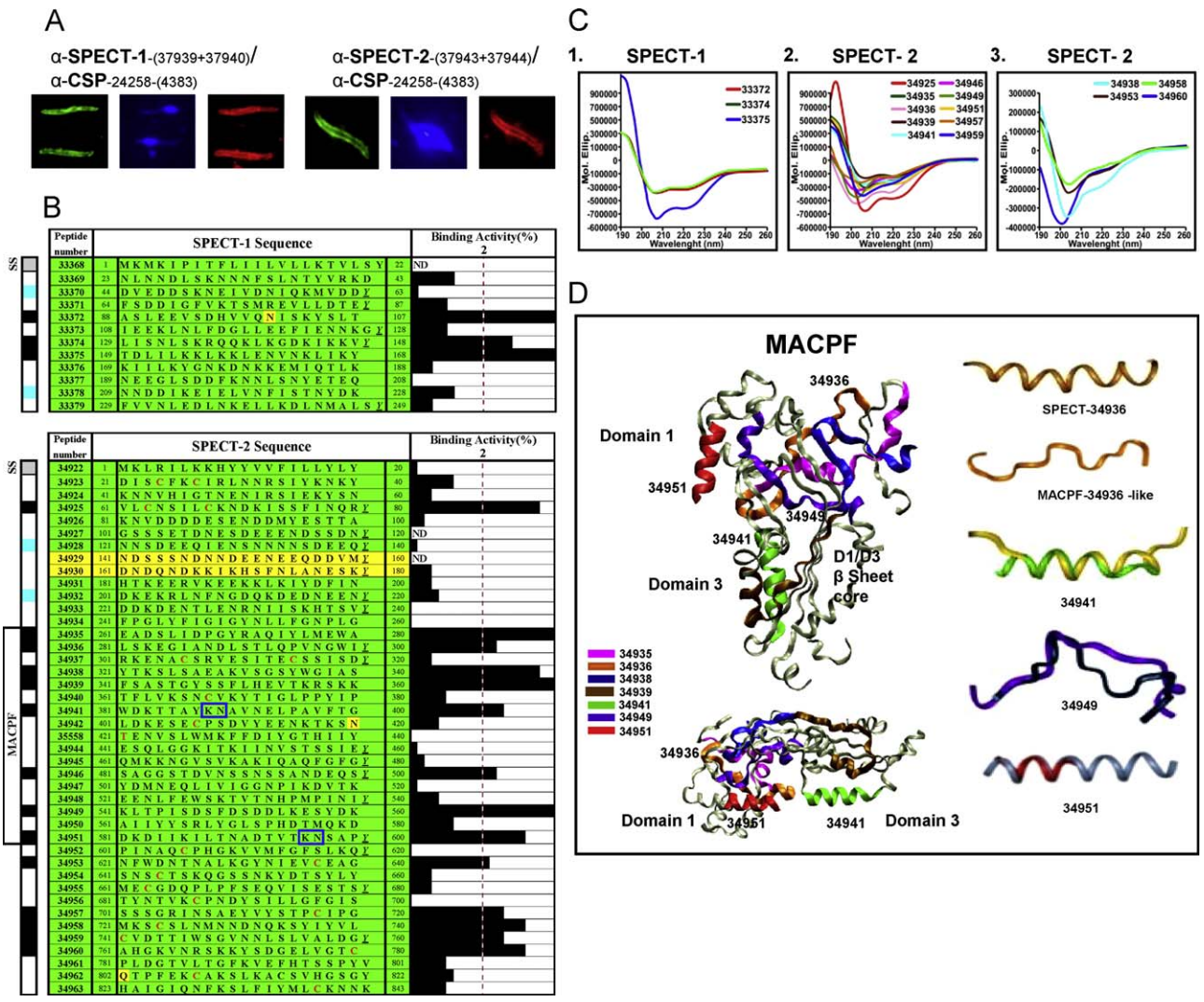

Fig. 1. (A) Immunofluorescence assays with rabbit anti-SPECT-1 (peptides A mixture) and anti-SPECT-2 (peptides B mixture) antisera, showing a peripheral and punctuate-like immunofluorescence pattern in sporozoites, characteristic of membrane and micronemal sporozoite proteins presence (green fluorescence). In co-localization studies anti Pf. CSP *Aotus* sera show the same membranal and micronemal pattern (red fluorescence). In the central picture, bright blue colour corresponds to DAPI staining of the sporozoite's nuclei. Pre-immune sera showed no reactivity (data not shown). (B) Binding profiles of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 synthetic peptides (numbered according to our institute serial number) to HeLa cells. Binding activities are represented by the length of the horizontal black bars. Schematic representations of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 are shown to the left of each binding profile, showing the localization of the membrane-attack complex/perforin (MACPF)-related domain, signal sequences (SS; gray boxes), HABPs (black boxes) and polymeric peptides inoculated in rabbits to obtain antisera (pale blue boxes). In the aminoacids sequences, cysteines (red), sulfate-binding KN sequences (boxed), conserved sequences (green), and variable regions (yellow) are indicated. ND = Not determined. In the SPECT-2 peptide 35558, a C residue was replaced by T (shown in red). (C). Circular dichroism spectra of SPECT-1 (1) and SPECT-2 HABPs in 30% TFE. SPECT-2 spectra were grouped according to their structural features: (2) alpha helix and (3) random coil. (D). Frontal and lateral view of C8α MACPF 3D structure determined by X-ray crystallography (PDB code 2QQH), showing the theoretical localization of the SPECT-2 HABPs 34935, 34936, 34938, 34939, 34941, 34949 and 34951 in the C8α MACPF molecule. HABPs are colored according to the color code shown below. It is also shown the superimposition of the 3D structures of HABPs (determined by ^{1}H NMR) and the C8α MACPF domain, colored according to the color code shown below.

family, structurally and functionally very similar to the family of pore-forming toxins, also named cholesterol-dependent cytolysins or CDCs.

In the development of a multistage, multiantigenic, minimal subunit-based, chemically synthesized antimalarial vaccine, we have finely mapped a large number of parasite proteins in order to identify their high-activity binding peptides (HABPs) to different host cells targeted by *P. falciparum* [5,13,17,20], and have used these peptides to design potential components of a fully effective antimalarial vaccine [14]. Based on the relevance of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 for the cell-traversal activity of sporozoites *in vivo* and *in vitro*, 20 mer-long non-overlapping synthetic peptides spanning the entire sequences of these proteins were tested using the highly robust, sensitive and specific methodology previously described [20], to identify which sequences specifically interact with HeLa cells. Structural characteristics relevant for performing appropriate modifications to render these HABPs into highly immunogenic protection-inducing peptides were determined by ^{1}H NMR, and the so obtained structures were superimposed on the 3D structure of the C8α MACPF domain, displaying a high degree of similarity at the atomic level.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Peptide synthesis and radiolabeling

Fifty four non-overlapping peptides covering the amino acid sequences of the *P. falciparum* 3D7 SPECT-1 (MAL13P1.212) and SPECT-2 (PFD0430c) proteins were synthesized using t-Boc solid phase peptide synthesis system [7]. A tyrosine residue (shown in

italics and underlined through the text and in Fig. 1B) was added to the C-terminus of those peptides lacking it to allow radiolabeling, as thoroughly described [5,13,20]. To predicted B-cell epitopes (see below) CG and GC residues were added at the N and C termini, respectively, to obtain peptide polymers by oxidation, as described elsewhere [3,4,14,16].

2.2. Production of anti-SPECTs antibodies in rabbits

The complete sequences of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 were analyzed with the BCPREDS (http://ailab.cs.iastate.edu/bcpred/index.html) and BcePred (http://www.imtech.res.in/raghava/bcepred/) prediction servers in order to identify specific B-cell epitopes. Two New Zealand rabbits were subcutaneously inoculated with one of the following 2 mixtures of polymeric peptides: mixture A, containing SPECT-1 peptides 37339 (CG^{44}DVEDDSKNEIVDNIQKMVDD^{63}GC) and 37340 (CG^{209}NNDDIKEIELVNFISTNYDK^{228}GC), or mixture B, containing SPECT-2 peptides 37343 (CG^{121}NNSDEEQIENSNNNNSDEEQ^{140}GC) and 37344 (CG^{201}DKEKRLNFNGDQKDEDNEEN^{220}GC) (Fig. 1B, in blue). Peptides were emulsified in Freund's complete adjuvant for the first dose delivered on day 1, and in incomplete Freund's adjuvant for the second and third doses delivered on days 21 and 41, respectively. Serum samples were collected pre-immunization and 40 and 60 days later, to evaluate antibody production.

2.3. Indirect immunofluorescence assays (IFA)

The reactivity of rabbits antisera against SPECT-1 (mixture A) or SPECT-2 (mixture B) peptides, used as the first antibody, was characterized by IFA analysis using *P. falciparum* sporozoites (3D7 strain) kindly provided by Dr. Patricia de la Vega (Naval Institute Bethesda, MD, USA), as previously described [3,5,16]. Their reactivities were detected with goat-antirabbit IgG, affinity purified and conjugated with Fluoresceine Isothiocyanate (FITC), emitting a green fluorescent color under UV microscopy. Co-localization was performed with *Aotus* monkey's anti CSP 24258 modified peptide (derived from 4383 conserved HABP) [3] used as second antibody, and detected with goat anti *Aotus* IgG; the F(ab)2 fragment was affinity purified and conjugated with Rhodamine Isothiocyanate (RITC), which gives a red color in the fluorescence microscope (Fig. 1A).

2.4. Production of HeLa cells

HeLa cells were grown as a confluent monolayer in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (Gibco). Cells were detached from the tissue-culture flask using 0.05% EDTA–PBS solution, washed with incomplete medium, stained with trypan blue and counted in a Neubauer chamber.

2.5. Binding assays with SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 peptides

Binding assays to HeLa cells were performed according to described protocols [5,20]. Briefly, HeLa cells (1.2×10^6 cells) were incubated with increasing concentrations of radiolabeled SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 peptides, in the absence (total binding) or the presence (unspecific binding) of high concentrations (400×) of unlabeled peptide for 1 h. Then, the reaction mixture was centrifuged at $15{,}000 \times g$ for 3 min through a 60:40 dioctyl phthalate/dibutyl phthalate cushion (1.015 g/mL density), the supernantant was discarded and the cell-associated radioactivity was quantified in a gamma counter (Gamma Counter Cobra II). All assays were performed in triplicate. Those peptides having an activity greater than or equal to 2% (0.02 ratio) were considered high-activity binding peptides (HABPs), according to previously established criteria [3–5,17,20].

In addition, a modified binding assay employing a wider range of radiolabeled peptide concentrations was performed to determine the dissociation constant (K_d), number of binding sites per cell (BSC) and Hill coefficients (n_H) [5,20] of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs.

2.6. Binding assays with enzymatically treated HeLa cells

HeLa cells (4×10^4 cells/μL) suspended in HBS were treated for 1 h at 37 °C with 750 μU/mL of one of the following enzymes: Heparinase I (HI; CAS 9025-39-2, Sigma), Heparinase II (HII; CAS 149371-12-0, Sigma), chondroitinase AC (CAC; CAS 9047-57-8, Sigma) and chondroitinase ABC (CABC; CAS 9024-13-9, Sigma) [19], according to the manufacturer's instructions. Cells were then washed and used to perform conventional binding assays with SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs. Untreated cells were used as control (100% binding).

2.7. CD spectroscopy

Circular dichroism spectra of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs in 30% (v/v) trifluoroethanol (TFE) were recorded at 20 °C using a Jasco J-810 (JASCO INC.) equipment. Spectra were acquired by averaging three sweeps taken at 20 nm/min. Data were processed using Spectra Manager software and analyzed with CONTINLL, SELCON, and CDSSTR deconvolution programs [23].

2.8. NMR analysis

Ten milligrams of 34936, 34938, 34941, 34949 and 34951 SPECT-2 HABPs, theoretically localized in the MACPF 3D structure's domain, were dissolved in 500 μL TFE-d3/H_2O (30/70, v/v) to record their spectra in a BRUKER DRX-500 spectrometer at 295 K. The basic NMR structure determination protocol was as follows: proton spectra were assigned by DQF-COSY, TOCSY, and NOESY; TOCSY and DQF-COSY spectra were then used to identify individual spin systems (amino acids) and NOESY (400 ms mixing time) to identify stretches of amino acids within a given primary (sequential assignment) and secondary structure. TOCSY spectra recorded at different temperatures (285–315 K) were used to obtain amide temperature coefficients for predicting hydrogen bonds ($-\Delta\delta H^N/\Delta T$, ppb/K), as thoroughly described before [26].

2.9. Structure calculations

NOESY peak signals were classified as strong (1.8–2.5 Å), medium (2.5–3.5 Å), and weak (3.5–5.0 Å), according to their relative intensity. Hydrogen bond constraints were introduced for low amide temperature coefficients: only <4 and $-\Delta\delta H^N/\Delta T$, ppb/K were used in structure calculations. Distance ranges involving these likely NH–O hydrogen bonds were set at 1.8–2.5 Å, between a residue acceptor oxygen ($i-4$) and a residue donor amide hydrogen (i). A family of 50 structures was obtained using Distance Geometry software (DGII) and then refined using simulated annealing protocol (DISCOVER software), to select those having reasonable geometry and fewer violations.

3. Results

3.1. Anti-SPECT-1 and Anti-SPECT-2 sera recognize surface and micronemal-contained molecules

Immunofluorescence assays with anti-SPECT-1 (mixture A) or anti-SPECT-2 (mixture B) rabbit sera detected a protein on the parasite's surface and in small intracytoplasmic granules (green fluorescence); suggestive of its micronemal origin and further translocation to the sporozoite's membrane (Fig. 1A).

Pre-immune sera did not show any fluorescence (data not shown). Co-localization with *Aotus* sera produced against the *P. falciparum* CSP modified HABP, displayed the same Immunofluorescence pattern on the sporozoite's membrane, as well as the small intracytoplasmic structures (red), suggesting once more the micronemal origin and membranal translocation of these molecules.

3.2. SPECT-1/-2 peptides specifically interact with HeLa cells

Binding assays were conducted to identify the binding regions of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2, interacting specifically with HeLa cells. Three peptides showing high specific binding activities (therefore denoted as HABPs) were localized in the central region of SPECT-1 (HABPs 33372 ^{88}ASLEEVSDHVVQNISKYSLT^{107}, 33374 ^{129}LISNLSKRQQKLKGDKIKKV*Y*^{148} and 33375 ^{149}TDLILKKLKKLENVNKLIK*Y*^{168}) (Fig. 1B), while 14 (Fig. 1B) were identified in SPECT-2.

In SPECT-2, the HABPs defined three regions of high specific binding activity: a first cysteine-rich region, encompassing residues 21–260 and containing HABP 34925 (^{61}VLCNSILC KNDKISSFINQR*Y*^{80}) (Fig. 1B), a second region, spanning residues 261–600 and containing 8 HABPs included within the MACPF-related domain (HABPs 34935 ^{261}EADSLIDPGYRAQIYLMEWA^{280}, 34936 ^{281}LSKEGIANDLSTLQPVNGWI*Y*^{300}, 34938 ^{321}YTKSLSAEAKVSGSYWGIAS^{340}, 34939 ^{341}FSASTGYSSFLHEVTKRSKK^{360}, 34941 ^{381}WDKTTAYKNAVNELPAVFTG^{400}, 34946 ^{481}SAGGSTDVNSSNSSANDEQS*Y*^{500}, 34949 ^{541}KLTPISDSFDSDDLKESYDK^{560}, 34951 ^{581}DKDIIKILTNADTVTKNSAP*Y*^{600}); this region has been associated with the sporozoite cell-traversal activity mediated by SPECT-2 [8,9,11], and finally a third cysteine-rich region, extending from residue 601 to 842 (Fig. 1B) and containing 5 HABPs (34953 ^{621}NFWDNTNALKGYNIEVCEAG^{640}, 34957 ^{701}SSSGRINSAEYVYSTPCIPG^{720}, 34958 ^{721}MKSCSLNMNNDNQKSYIYVL^{740}, 34959 ^{741}*C*VDTTIWSGVNNLSLVALDG*Y*^{760}, 34960 ^{761}AHGKVNRSKKYSDGELVGTC^{780}), each of which contained one cysteine residue (shown in italics above).

SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs recognized between 80,000 and 300,000 binding sites per cell, showed K_d values within the nanomolar range and n_H values higher than 1.0, as determined by Hill analysis (Table 1).

3.3. SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs interact with sulfated proteoglycans

The nature of the receptor(s) for SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs was analyzed in binding assays with enzymatically treated HeLa cells. In SPECT-1, binding of HABP 33372 was only affected by treatment with CABC, while HI and HII had a more prominent effect on the interaction of HABP 33374 with HeLa cells. Strikingly, HABP 33375 binding was dramatically affected by all enzymatic treatments (Table 1).

In SPECT-2, treatment of HeLa cells with HI and CAC diminished (in some circumstances almost abolished) most interactions with HABPs (except for HABP 34951 and 34960). Treatment with CABC also diminished binding of SPECT-2 HABPs 34939 and 34951, while binding of HABP 34949 was highly reduced by all enzymatic treatments (Table 1).

3.4. CD spectroscopy

CD studies conducted to analyze the secondary structures of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs showed a high content of α-helical elements in HABPs 33372, 33374 and 33375 structures from SPECT-1, as indicated by the two typical minima at 206 and 221 nm. The majority of SPECT-2 HABPs showed typical α-helical spectra, except for HABPs 34938, 34953, 34958 and 34960, which showed displacements associated with the presence of some other structural elements, such as β-turns and/or random coils (Fig. 1C). These results were in agreement with deconvolution analyses for SPECT-1 and most of SPECT-2 HABPs (data not shown).

3.5. NMR assignment

Cross-peaks between NH and CHα protons were identified by analyzing COSY spectra acquired in 30% TFE-d3/H_2O. TOCSY spectra were used to correlate side-chain spin-systems with NH–CHα cross-peaks, following Wüthrich's methodology for the assignments [26]. In each HABP, strong and medium NOEs were found for $d_{\alpha N}$ (i, $i+1$) connectivities throughout the whole peptide chain (Supplemental Material).

The NOESY spectra of SPECT-2 HABPs 34936, 34941 and 34951 showed medium range $d_{\alpha\beta}$ (i, $i+3$), $d_{\alpha N}$ (i, $i+3$), $d_{\alpha N}$ (i, $i+4$) NOE connectivities, suggesting the presence of α-helical structures. HABP 34936 showed three short α-helical fragments between residues K3–I6, D9–T12 and V16–W19, while HABP 34941 showed an α-helix between A6 and E13, and HABP 34951 between K2 and Y18. HABP 34949 displayed $d_{\alpha N}$ (i, $i+3$), $d_{\alpha N}$ (i, $i+4$) but not $d_{\alpha\beta}$ (i, $i+3$) NOE connectivities, indicating a random structure as suggested by CD studies, with the presence of a distorted α-helix between S6 and F9. HABP 34938 had a totally extended form due to the absence of medium range signals (Supplementary material).

Table 1
Binding constants of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs and percentage binding activities to HeLa cells treated with different enzymes.

	Binding constants[a,b]				Binding to treated cells[a,c] (%)			
	HABP	K_d (nM)	n_H	BSC	HI	HII	CAC	CABC
SPECT-1	33372	850	1	84,000	105	104	190	**48**
	33374	750	1.4	241,000	62	54	91	70
	33375	750	1.7	281,000	**19**	**22**	**21**	**23**
SPECT-2	34925	680	2.9	36,000	**0.1**	132	**0.0**	140
	34936	ND	ND	ND	54	98	**46**	101
	34938	770	1.9	19,000	ND	ND	ND	ND
	34939	870	1.7	360,000	**0.1**	118	**0.0**	**47**
	34949	750	1.1	68,000	12	46	43	**47**
	34951	ND	ND	ND	77	84	78	**37**
	34958	460	1.8	34,000	**49**	62	**15**	180
	34959	600	1.8	30,000	**34**	170	**18**	115
	34960	ND	ND	ND	**49**	99	85	87

[a] All standard deviations were below 10%.
[b] K_d: Dissociation constants; n_H: Hill coefficients; BSC: binding sites per cell.
[c] Bindings that were significantly affected by a particular enzymatic treatment are shown in bold ND: non-assessed peptide.

3.6. Structure calculations

Fifty structures were initially calculated for SPECT-2 HABPs 34936, 34941, 34949 and 34951 and the best-fitting backbone (N, Cα, C) atom superimpositions, showing no distance violations greater than 0.3 Å and ω angles greater than 1.5°, were selected (see Section 2.9). The previously described structural features were confirmed by the medium-range NOEs and by the dihedral Φ and Ψ angles of each residue in the helical region adopting equal values (approximately −60° and 45°, respectively). The carboxy and amino terminal regions were flexible (Fig. 1D).

4. Discussion

Traversal of Kupffer cells in the liver is critical for sporozoite invasion of hepatocytes. Among the set of surface proteins involved in this process, the sporozoite micronemal proteins SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 are extremely important, since the cell-traversal activity is completely abolished when parasites are genetically knocked down in these proteins [1,2,8,9,11,27].

Here, we have determined the binding profiles of the peptides encompassing the complete sequences of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2, with the aim of identifying specific HABPs for HeLa cells that might be directly involved in the cell traversal ability of sporozoites [1,8,9,11,27]. As a result, three HABPs were identified in the central region of SPECT-1 and 14 were found to define three binding regions in SPECT-2 (Fig. 1B), as described in Section 3.2. The high affinity interactions between SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs and HeLa cells were demonstrated by their nanomolar K_d and the recognition of 80,000–300,000 binding sites per cell in saturation assays. In addition, Hill analyses (Table 1) indicated that there is positive cooperativity in the binding interactions of all HABPs, as suggested by their n_H values, higher than 1.0.

Remarkably, there is high sequence conservation in SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs among the different parasite strains available in the PlasmoDB server (http://plasmodb.org/plasmo/), with only SPECT-1 HABP 33372 showing a limited genetic variability. This high degree of conservation makes them attractive targets for a fully effective antimalarial vaccine design, able to overcome undesirable strain-specific immune responses.

The immunological potential of SPECT HABPs was analyzed in IFA assays, using rabbit anti-SPECT-1 and anti-SPECT-2 antisera produced against chemically synthesized B cell epitopes. The surface and micronemal distribution observed with both antisera (Fig. 1A), as well as the co-localization studies with anti-CSP antibodies agree with the previously reported micronemal localization of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2, as well as with their further translocation to sporozoite surface after leaving the mosquito's salivary glands to mediate hepatocyte invasion, as described for CSP and TRAP [8,11,14]. Unfortunately, recombinant SPECT-1 or SPECT-2 proteins are not available to us to perform confirmatory Western blot analyses.

Since specific interactions between highly relevant sporozoite proteins like CSP and TRAP with host's cell surface proteoglycans have been clearly established [12,19,24], the nature of the HeLa surface receptors for SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs was explored by analyzing the effect of treating cells with HI, HII, CAC or CABC on the capacity of HABPs to bind HeLa cells. These enzymes act differentially on specific cell surface proteoglycans: HI and HII cleave heparin-like oligosaccharides with high or low content of sulfate groups, respectively, while CAC acts on chondroitin-6-sulfate, chondroitin-4-sulfate and chondroitin-4,6-sulfate, and CABC cleaves chondroitin-containing molecules plus dermatan sulfate [19].

Regarding SPECT-1, the diminished binding activity of HABP 33372 caused by CABC suggests its interaction with dermatan-containing receptors, while the sensitivity of the HABP 33374–HeLa cell interaction to HI and HII could be associated with binding to surface molecules containing heparin-like (Table 1). Moreover, binding of HABP 33375 is likely to be recognizing heparin-like, chondroitin-like and/or dermatan-sulfate oligosaccharides on the surface of HeLa cells [19], since its binding is affected by all enzymatic treatments (Table 1).

On the other hand, a marked sensitivity was evidenced in practically all SPECT-2 HABPs binding to HeLa cells treated with HI and CAC (only the binding activities of HABPs 34951 and 34960 were resistant) (Table 1), which could be suggesting specific interactions with heparin high- and chondroitin sulfate-carrying surface molecules. Furthermore, HABPs 34939, 34949 and 34951 could also be associated with receptors containing dermatan-like [19] since their binding activities were also affected by CABC (Table 1).

These results, together with the ones previously described for CSP [19], strongly suggests that SPECT-1, SPECT-2 and CSP could be using similar host cell surface receptors to mediate cell traversal processes. Additionally, the different behaviors shown in assays with heparinase- and chondroitinase-treated cells might be related to the use of alternative pathways for cell recognition and traversal, but this should be further explored.

Studies conducted with the aim of designing a fully effective antimalarial vaccine with the most important *P. falciparum* merozoite (the RBC invasive form of the parasite) proteins, and more recently with the leading antimalarial candidates CSP [3] and TRAP [16], the sporozoite and liver stage antigen (SALSA) and the liver stage antigen-1 (LSA-1) [4], have lead to establish the undeniable relevance of conducting structural analysis on all *P. falciparum* non-immunogenic conserved HABPs, since they can become new and very potent protection inducing vaccine components, once being specifically modified [14,17]. Accordingly, CD deconvolution studies were performed on SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs, finding a high content of α-helical features in SPECT-1 HABPs, while some SPECT-2 HABPs displayed α-helical structures and others displayed different structural features (β-turns and/or random coils) (Fig. 1C).

The MACPF domain, originally identified by its amino-acid sequence homology within the Complement cascade proteins C6, C7, C8α, C8β, C9 and perforin complex, is present in a large family of evolving ancient disparate proteins, using a similar architecture to damage membranes, which include the cholesterol dependent cytolisins (CDCs) of Gram-positive or Gram-negative bacteria, the BCL family of apoptosis regulator and the MACPF family of the apicomplexa parasites (malaria, Toxoplasma, Babesia) among others [10].

The membrane damage is characterized in the CDCs proteins by oligomerization and assembly of the individual subunits into a ring-shaped-pore that inserts into membranes to form a large amphipatic transmembrane β barrel. Although MACPF and CDCs are very divergent at the aminoacid sequence level, they display a common fold and a very similar membrane disruption mechanism [21].

The MACPF/CDC canonical 3D structure posses an N-terminal region of variable length, followed by the centrally located MACPF domain of ∼40 kDa, ending in a β-pleated-rich domain, unique to apicomplexa. These parasitic MACPF-like-containing proteins (among them *P. falciparum* SPECT-2) are localized in the micronemes, to be translocated to the parasite membrane during host cell invasion. The recently described C8α MACPF and CDC 3D structures by X-ray crystallography, revealed that they share specific structural characteristics such as being flattened with a central kinked four-stranded β sheet core region, surrounded by α-helix and β-turns that define different domains, [6,25]. Among these four domains (D1 to D4) of the CDC structure, D4 binds to

membranes, while D2 links D1 to D3, the last two mediating membrane insertion and pore formation [6] (Fig. 1D, left panel, MACPF lateral and frontal views). MACPF-domain containing proteins also share special signatures like the Y/WGT/SHF xxxxxxGG (present in SPECT-2 peptides 35558 and 34944) and KN motives (present in HABPs 34941 and 34951), suggested to be involved in host's cell membrane binding.

Strikingly, when SPECT-2 HABPs showing similar amino acid sequences were structurally compared to their corresponding segments in the C8α MACPF domain, they also displayed similar structural elements, as indicated by deconvolution analyses of CD spectra (Fig. 1C2 and C3) or when their ^{1}H NMR 3D structures were superimposed onto their analogous MACPF sequences (Fig. 1D).

In this way, the 3D structure of the fragment containing HABP 34938 (dark blue, Fig. 1D, left panel) displays an extended configuration similar to the random structure shown by CD (Fig. 1C3), while the α-helical configuration shown by HABP 34939 in deconvolution analysis correlates very well with the 3D structural element determined in the C8α segment (brown, Fig. 1D, left panel), located at the beginning of the MACPF central β sheet-rich region.

More convincing, the α-helical A6–E13 region of HABP 34941 (yellow ribbon, Fig. 1D, right panel) determined by ^{1}H NMR displays an RMSD of 0.81 when being superimposed with the corresponding C8α MACPF fragment (green, Fig. 1D, left panel). Similarly, the 3D structure of HABP 34951 (gray ribbon, Fig. 1D, right panel), helical between K2–Y18 when superimposed onto the C8α MACPF 3D structure (red ribbon, Fig. 1D, left panel), displays an RMSD of 0.52, demonstrating almost identical structure between HABPs 34941 and 34951 with the C8α MACPF regions, mediators of membrane insertion and pore formation. HABP 34949 (dark blue, Fig. 1D, right panel) can be superimposed with its corresponding C8α MACPF portion (purple, Fig. 1D, right panel) with an RMSD of 4.5, suggesting similar but not identical structural characteristics.

Some structural differences between SPECT-2 and C8α MACPF could only be observed in HABP 34935 (pink in the 3D structure, Fig. 1D, left), which showed a short α-helix in the 3D C8α MACPF structure, while being completely α-helical in CD analyses (Fig. 1C2), and HABP 34936 (orange structure obtained by ^{1}H NMR, Fig. 1D, right), which displayed a high α-helical content in contrast to the partially α-helical and random coil structures found in the C8α MACPF 3D structure. Unfortunately, the C8α MACPF region corresponding to SPECT-2 HABP 34946, being α-helical by CD analysis, was not elucidated in the C8α structure determined by X-ray crystallography. Interestingly, HABPs 34941 and 34951 (both α-helical) contain the KN sequence (boxed in Fig. 1B), a putative sulfate binding sequence described for CDCs [18], which could be associated with the interaction of SPECT-2 with highly sulfated proteoglycans on the surface of mammalian host cells (chondroitin and dermatan sulfate receptors), as corroborated by the enzymatic sensitivity of the binding capacity of SPECT-2 HABPs (Table 1).

We have recently shown that in conserved HABPs (like 34941 and 34951), those residues (like KN) specifically interacting with receptor molecules, are the critical binding residues that need to be modified to render these non-immunogenic, non-protection inducer, functionally relevant conserved HABPs into sterile immunity inducer peptides [15], making these two SPECT-2 HABPs excellent candidates to be included as components of a fully effective antimalarial vaccine. Other HABPs like 34949, embedded in the MACPF structure, could be also excellent prospects, due to the demonstrated high sensitivity to all enzymatic treatments (Table 1).

The amino acid sequence similarity (13% identity plus 30% similarity) between the SPECT-2 and C8α MACPF homologue domains, together with the high similarity at the secondary and tridimensional structural level (Fig. 1D) in their functionally relevant segments, lead us to suggest a 3D structural conservation of the SPECT MACPF domain and their homologue C8α MACPF and CDC membrane-pore-forming proteins, which could be associated with the previously reported function of this domain and SPECT-2 in pore formation and cell traversal mechanisms [8,9,11].

We have shown here the identification of sequences derived from the cell traversal-associated SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 proteins with specific binding activity to HeLa cells, most of which display high affinity for heparin and chondroitin sulfate-containing receptors, as determined by enzymatic treatments, same as reported for other sporozoite proteins involved in cell traversal. SPECT-2 MACPF-related HABPs display high similarity at the primary, secondary and tertiary structure with the C8α and CDC pore-forming protein family (as shown here), highlighting the potential of SPECT-1 and SPECT-2 HABPs as attractive targets to be further included as antigens in the search of a multi-stage, multi-antigenic, minimal subunit-based, chemically synthesized fully effective vaccine against *P. falciparum* malaria.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.peptides.2010.09.026.

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