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Molecular analysis of the gene encoding α -lytic protease: evidence for a preproenzyme

(Recombinant DNA; extracellular serine protease; *Lysobacter enzymogenes*; cloning in *E. coli*; S1 mapping; sequencing high GC DNA; subtilisin)

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SUMMARY

A 1.7-kb *Eco*RI fragment containing the structural gene for α -lytic protease has been cloned from *Lysobacter enzymogenes* 495 chromosomal DNA: the first example of a gene cloned from this organism. The protein sequence deduced from the nucleotide sequence encoding this serine protease matches the published amino acid sequence [Olson et al., Nature 228 (1970) 438–442] precisely. Sequence analysis and S1 mapping indicate that, like subtilisin [e.g., Wells et al., Nucleic Acids Res. 11 (1983) 7911–7925] α -lytic protease is synthesized as a pre-pro protein (41 kDa) that is subsequently processed to its mature extracellular form (20 kDa). This first finding of a large N-terminal protease precursor in a Gram-negative bacterial protease strengthens the hypothesis that large precursors may be a general property of extracellular bacterial proteases, and suggests that the N- or C-terminal location of the precursor segment may be significant.

INTRODUCTION

The serine proteases comprise one of the best-characterized group of enzymes, and constitute one of the most convincing examples of convergent evolution. These proteases are characteristically divided into two major evolutionary families on the basis of their three-dimensional structural similarity: the subtilisin family, and the trypsin family. In spite of large variations in amino acid sequence, and a diverse

array of sources, enzymes from these two families share the same basic mechanism of action, using an Asp, His, Ser catalytic triad. Among the bacterial representatives of the trypsin family, α -lytic protease, an extracellular enzyme of the Gram-negative soil bacterium *Lysobacter enzymogenes* 495, is of particular interest. It is easily purified from the native source (Whitaker, 1970); its x-ray crystal structure has been determined to high resolution both as a free enzyme

Abbreviations: aa, amino acid(s); bp, base pair(s); Δ , deletion; DEAE, diethylaminoethyl; Ig, immunoglobulin; IPTG, isopropyl- β -D-thiogalactopyranoside; kb, kilobase(s) or 1000 bp; mRNA, messenger RNA; nt, nucleotide(s); RF, replicative form; SSC, 0.15 M NaCl, 0.015 M Na₃·citrate, pH 7.4; XGal, 5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl- β -D-galactopyranoside.

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(Brayer et al., 1979; Fujinaga et al., 1985) and as enzyme-inhibitor complex (Bone et al., 1987); and the presence of a single histidine residue, located in the active site, makes it amenable to spectroscopic studies of catalytic mechanism (Robillard and Shulman, 1974; Bachovchin et al., 1981; Bachovchin and Roberts, 1978). As our interests lie in dissecting the relationship between three-dimensional structure and function in this protein, we have cloned and sequenced the gene for α -lytic protease in preparation for expression and site-specific mutagenesis. Examination of the predicted protein sequence upstream from the start of the mature protein suggests that α -lytic protease is expressed as a large precursor (approx. 41 kDa) which is subsequently processed to yield the mature, extracellular form of the enzyme (20 kDa). Northern and S1 nuclease analyses of *Lysobacter* mRNA directly support this hypothesis.

There are several examples of secreted bacterial proteases that are known to be synthesized as large precursors. The subtilisins (Stahl and Ferrari, 1984)* and the neutral proteases of various *Bacillus* species (Yang et al., 1984; Shimada et al., 1985; Tagaki et al., 1985); and the mammalian-like A and B proteases of *Streptomyces griseus* (Henderson et al., 1987) have large N-terminal propeptides. All of these enzymes are serine proteases and are secreted by Gram-positive bacteria. Among the proteases secreted by Gram-negative bacteria only two examples were previously known to be synthesized as precursors: the IgA protease of *Neisseria gonorrhoea* (thought to be a thiol protease, Pohlner et al., 1987) and the extracellular serine protease of *Serratia marcescens* (Yanagida et al., 1986) which are both extremely large proteases (169 kDa and 112 kDa, respectively) with C-terminal extensions of approx. 60 kDa.

The finding that α -lytic protease is synthesized as a larger precursor strengthens the evidence that pre-

cursors are a general motif of extracellular bacterial proteases. Furthermore, this is the first example of a large N-terminal precursor in a Gram-negative bacterial protease.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

(a) Enzymes

All restriction enzymes were purchased from commercial sources. The Klenow fragment of DNA polymerase I was obtained from Boehringer Mannheim or Amersham. T4 DNA ligase and S1 nuclease were purchased from New England Biolabs. T4 polynucleotide kinase was purchased from Pharmacia. Boehringer Mannheim calf intestinal alkaline phosphatase was purified by Sephadex G-75 column chromatography (Efstratiadis et al., 1977). All enzymes were used in accordance with the manufacturers' instructions.

(b) Strains, plasmids, and media

Lysobacter enzymogenes 495 (ATCC29487) was the generous gift of F.D. Cook. Liquid cultures were grown in modified Whitaker's medium (Hunkapiller et al., 1973). JM105 (Yanisch-Perron et al., 1985) and DG98 (*thi-1, hsdR17, endA44, supE44, lacI^q, lacZ Δ M15, proC::Tn10* [F' *lacI^q, lacZ Δ -M15, proC⁺*]) (D. Gelfand, Cetus Corp., Emeryville, CA) were used to grow M13mp18 and M13mp19 (Norlander et al., 1983) clones. XGal and IPTG were added to YT (Miller, 1972) top agarose when appropriate. Transformation of *E. coli* strains was accomplished by the calcium chloride method (Hershfield et al., 1974).

(c) Oligodeoxynucleotide probe

The 51 base long oligodeoxynucleotide (51-mer) used to identify and isolate α -lytic protease sequences was a generous gift of Dr. John Richards, California Institute of Technology. The oligodeoxynucleotide sequence (5'-TACCAGTGCGGC-ACCATCACGGCCAAGAACGTGACCGCG-AACTACGCGGAG-3') was deduced from the known sequence of aa 109-126 of α -lytic protease,

* Evidence for propeptides of approx. 77 aa have been found in all subtilisins whose genes have been cloned. These include subtilisin from *Bacillus amyloliquefaciens* (Wells et al., 1983; Vasantha et al., 1984), subtilisin E from *B. subtilis* (Stahl and Ferrari, 1984), and subtilisin Carlsberg from *B. licheniformis* (Jacobs et al., 1985). Subtilisin E has been the best studied example with respect to precursor function (Ikemura et al., 1987), therefore we will use subtilisin E as our prototype for discussions of this enzyme.

with codon bias reflecting the G + C-rich (69 mol %) nature of *Lysobacter* chromosomal DNA (Christensen and Cook, 1978) (see Fig. 2).

Nitrocellulose filters from Southern blots or plaque lifts were hybridized with 10^6 cpm/ml end-labeled probe (10^8 cpm/ μ g), in standard buffer (Southern, 1975; Benton and Davis, 1977), with 2 μ g/ml of poly(rA) (to reduce background) for 12–24 h at 37°C (non-stringent conditions). Washing stringency was established by sequential incubation of chromosomal Southern blots at increasing temperatures in $5 \times$ SSC until only unique bands remained. Once established, 60 min at 60°C was used routinely. Filters were exposed on Kodak XAR 5 film with an intensifying screen at -70°C .

(d) DNA and RNA purification and analysis

Lysobacter chromosomal DNA was purified for Southern blotting and cloning by a simplification of the method of Saito and Miura (1963). For Southern blotting, 5–10 μ g of DNA were used per digest, and agarose gels varied in concentration from 0.65 to 1.0%. For *Sau3A* fragment isolation, 50 μ g of restricted DNA was resolved on a 6% polyacrylamide gel, and the region between 350 and 550 bp was excised and the DNA electroeluted. *EcoRI*-digested DNA (75 μ g) was fractionated on 0.5% agarose, the 2-kb region was concentrated onto and eluted from DEAE paper (Dretzen et al., 1981). M13 RF DNA was prepared by alkaline lysis (Birnboim and Doly, 1979).

RNA was harvested from a single colony of *Lysobacter* grown overnight in 50 ml broth at 27°C. Pellets from 10 ml of cells were processed using the guanidinium isothiocyanate-hot phenol method (Feramisco et al., 1982) and RNA was purified from DNA by precipitation out of guanidinium·HCl (Strohman et al., 1977).

(e) Nucleotide sequencing

Both strands of the cloned 1741-bp *EcoRI* fragment were sequenced by the dideoxy chain-termination method (Sanger et al., 1977), using either [α - ^{35}S]dATP or [α - ^{32}P]dCTP (> 1000 , > 3000 Ci/mmol, Amersham). M13 subclones of convenient restriction fragments were primed by the Pharmacia sequencing primer and, when necessary, oligodeoxy-

nucleotides were used to extend the sequence. A variety of modifications helped to reduce the often severe compression problems due to secondary structure. When the Klenow fragment was used, 7-deazaGTP was substituted for dGTP (Barr et al., 1986), 20 μ g of T4 gene 32 protein (O'Farrell, 1987) (a gift of Jack Barry, UCSF) were added per 1 μ g template, and sequencing gels included 25% formamide (final concentration). The greatest resolution was achieved with United States Biochemicals (USB) modified T7 polymerase (Sequenase) kit, substituting dITP mixes for dGTP, and adding 5 μ g of *E. coli* single-stranded binding protein (USB) per 0.5 μ g template (USB sequencing handbook).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

(a) Isolation and characterization of a clone containing the α -lytic protease gene

Our strategy for cloning the structural gene for α -lytic protease was to use the known amino acid sequence (Olson et al., 1970) to generate an optimal, unique hybridization probe. This approach is based on the fact that, on average, at least two out of every three bases can be guessed correctly. As discussed by Anderson and Kingston (1983), if the probe is sufficiently long (86 nt), a single copy gene can be identified as a unique band on a mammalian genomic Southern blot and subsequently cloned. Prior knowledge of codon usage or G + C content can be used to improve the accuracy of the probe sequence. We found that with the considerably smaller *Lysobacter* genome, a 51-mer was long enough to identify a single band on a genomic Southern blot. By contrast, a 40-mer probe to the same region hybridized to three bands.

Initially, we were concerned that a foreign bacterial protease cloned into *Escherichia coli* would be lethal. To insure that the cloned gene be inactive, genomic Southern blotting was used to identify a fragment smaller than the known size of the mature protease (600 bp). For this reason, an approx. 500-bp *Sau3A* restriction fragment was initially cloned by ligating size-selected, gel-isolated fragments in *Bam*HI-cut M13mp18 DNA. The ligation mixture was transformed into JM105, plated in top

agarose with IPTG and XGal, and screened with labeled 51-mer. Interestingly, the one positive plaque of the 450 screened, and shown by sequencing to encode an out-of-frame fragment of α -lytic protease, was a blue plaque.

To obtain the full sequence, the 51-mer was again used to screen a size-selected library of 2-kb *EcoRI* fragments cloned into M13mp18. Positive clones from this screening were mapped and were found to have 0.8 kb of upstream DNA and 0.4 kb of DNA beyond the expected end of the protein-coding sequence (Fig. 1).

The entire nucleotide sequence of the *EcoRI* fragment was determined (Fig. 2). When translated, the nucleotide sequence encoding the mature enzyme matched the published amino acid sequence exactly, and was immediately followed by a stop codon (UGA) and a putative RNA termination signal (Rosenberg and Court, 1979). A large open reading frame extended 5' from the known N terminus of the mature protein. In fact, all three reading frames were open for greater than 300 nt before the enzyme's protein-coding sequence, as stop codons are statistically quite rare in high-G + C content genomes. More intriguing, however, was the translated sequence of amino acids just preceding the N terminus; the number and distribution of polar and charged amino acids did not fit the hydrophobic nature expected of a signal sequence (Watson, 1984).

To determine if α -lytic protease might be produced as part of a larger precursor molecule, like subtilisin E (Stahl and Ferrari, 1984), we examined the upstream sequence. In addition to several possible ATG and many possible GTG start codons, a potential ribosome-binding site and promoter region were also identified (Fig. 2). These putative transcriptional and translational control regions were situated an appropriate distance upstream from one of the

ATG codons (nt 248), making it an ideal candidate for a start codon. Initiating at the next available ATG codon (nt 323) would interrupt the very hydrophobic stretch of amino acids comprising the putative signal sequence (aa -182 to -166; Fig. 2), providing further support for the choice of start codon. However, it is important to note that no other gene has been cloned from this microorganism, which by 16S RNA sequence analysis is phylogenetically very distant from *E. coli* (Stackebrandt and Woese, 1981). Furthermore, using affinity-purified α -lytic protease antibodies, no immunologically cross-reacting material to α -lytic protease could be detected in *E. coli* strains carrying the *EcoRI* fragment (not shown). For these reasons, we felt that the unknown nature of *Lysobacter* transcriptional and translational control regions made them unreliable indicators for the start of the α -lytic gene. A direct determination was required.

(b) Northern-blot and S1 analysis

The hypothesis that α -lytic protease is biologically synthesized as a larger precursor was substantiated by both Northern-blot (not shown) and S1 nuclease analysis (Fig. 3). These experiments indicated that the mRNA was approx. 1.4 kb, and that the message started at nt 118, within 7 nt of the putative -10 sequence, and more than 700 nt before the start of the mature protein sequence. This evidence, in addition to the position of the putative ribosome-binding site and signal peptide sequence, makes the ATG at nt 248 the most likely start codon.

(c) Codon usage

This is the first report of a gene cloned from the Canadian soil bacterium *L. enzymogenes* 495. The

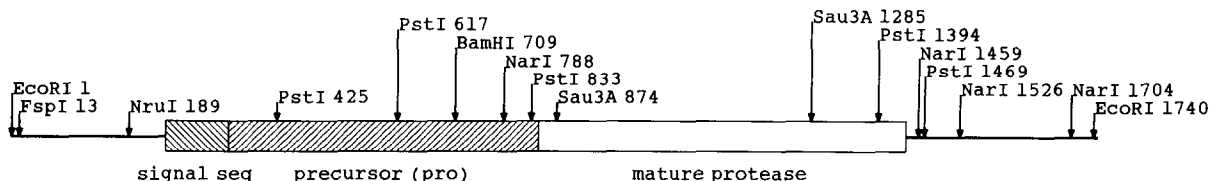


Fig. 1. Restriction map of the cloned 1.7-kb *EcoRI* fragment. The fragment contains the coding sequence for the mature protease (open box) and upstream regions corresponding to the proposed signal sequence and precursor (pro) regions (hatched boxes). All sites shown were confirmed by nucleotide sequence determination (see MATERIALS AND METHODS, section e, and Fig. 2). Only two *Sau3A* sites in the mature coding region (RESULTS, section a), and the *FspI* site (base 13) used for S1 mapping (Fig. 3, legend), are shown.



Fig. 3. S1 nuclease mapping of α -lytic protease message. The strand-specific probe (Burke, 1984) as well as the dideoxy nucleotide sequence ladder were synthesized from M13 clones using the oligodeoxynucleotide 5'-CTCCTAGAGGAATC-TTTC-3', which hybridizes to the coding strand in the region of the putative ribosome-binding site (base 248). The probe was delineated at the 3' end by an *Fsp*I digestion (base 13, see Fig. 1), and separated from its complementary strand on an alkaline agarose gel. 5×10^5 cpm of probe was hybridized with 50 μ g total RNA at 62°C in 80% formamide (Berk and Sharp, 1977). The sample was digested with 1000 units of S1 nuclease (lane a), and the products were resolved on a 6% denaturing polyacrylamide gel. The RNA transcription start point is indicated by the asterisk.

those codons that utilize G or C in the third position (Table I). Interestingly, the charged amino acids Glu, Asp, and Lys are exceptions, showing, respectively, only 50%, 57%, and 73% bias towards G or C in the third position.

(d) Conclusion

The discovery of a precursor for α -lytic protease reinforces the speculation that 'pro' sequences are a common feature of prokaryotic serine proteases, just as zymogen forms are common in their mammalian counterparts. However, the large size of these precursors suggests either a more complicated mechanism of temporary inactivation than in the mammalian proteases or a more complex role for the precursor. Indeed, in the two cases where the role of the propeptide has been studied, it was either essential for the production of active protein and was probably involved in the correct folding of the mature domain (subtilisin E; Ikemura et al., 1987); or it was necessary for the selective secretion of the protease (IgA protease; Pohlner et al., 1987).

Preliminary experiments using the cloned gene of α -lytic protease expressed in *E. coli* indicate that, as for subtilisin E (Ikemura et al., 1987), the precursor domain is necessary for proper folding of the mature domain (manuscript in preparation). The apparent similarities in the requirement of an N-terminal precursor domain for proper folding of such evolutionarily unrelated, but functionally similar, proteins from two different classes of bacteria suggests a common role for these precursor sequences. Furthermore, the discovery of an N-terminal precursor on a Gram-negative protease indicates that the difference between proteases having N- and C-terminal precursors is not simply related to differences in export between the two families of bacteria. Future experiments with α -lytic protease will address these issues.

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TABLE I

Codon usage for the α -lytic protease gene of *Lysobacter enzymogenes*^a

No.	Codon	aa	No.	Codon	aa	No.	Codon	aa	No.	Codon	aa
0/	UUU/	phe	0/	UCU/	ser	0/	UAU/	tyr	0/	UGU/	cys
12/	UUC/	phe	4/	UCC/	ser	8/	UAC/	tyr	8/	UGC/	cys
0/	UUA/	leu	0/	UCA/	ser	0/	UAA/	OC	1/	UGA/	OP
0/	UUG/	leu	15/	UCG/	ser	0/	UAG/	AM	4/	UGG/	trp
0/	CUU/	leu	1/	CCU/	pro	0/	CAU/	his	2/	CGU/	arg
7/	CUC/	leu	1/	CCC/	pro	2/	CAC/	his	22/	CGC/	arg
1/	CUA/	leu	0/	CCA/	pro	0/	CAA/	gln	0/	CGA/	arg
18/	CUG/	leu	8/	CCG/	pro	23/	CAG/	gln	2/	CGG/	arg
0/	AUU/	ile	1/	ACU/	thr	1/	AAU/	asn	1/	AGU/	ser
12/	AUC/	ile	21/	ACC/	thr	17/	AAC/	asn	19/	AGC/	ser
0/	AUA/	ile	0/	ACA/	thr	3/	AAA/	lys	0/	AGA/	arg
6/	AUG/	met	4/	ACG/	thr	8/	AAG/	lys	0/	AGG/	arg
1/	GUU/	val	3/	GCU/	ala	6/	GAU/	asp	4/	GGU/	gly
20/	GUC/	val	22/	GCC/	ala	8/	GAC/	asp	42/	GGC/	gly
1/	GUA/	val	1/	GCA/	ala	6/	GAA/	glu	0/	GGA/	gly
18/	GUG/	val	27/	GCG/	ala	6/	GAG/	glu	1/	GGG/	gly

^a Columns "No." specify how many times a given codon is used in the enzyme-coding gene.

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