Phosphorylation of tobacco eukaryotic translation initiation factor 4A upon pollen tube germination

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Received February 2, 1998; Revised and Accepted March 20, 1998

ABSTRACT

Eukaryotic translation initiation factor eIF-4A is a member of the DEAD box family of RNA helicases and RNA-dependent ATPases. In tobacco, eIF-4A is encoded by a gene family with one isoform, eIF-4A8, being exclusively expressed in pollen. This pollen-specific isoform is a candidate for mediating translational control in the developing gametophyte. Here we show that eIF-4A is barely phosphorylated in mature pollen, but during pollen tube germination, two isoforms of eIF-4A become phosphorylated. Phosphoamino acid analysis indicated phosphorylation of threonine. In order to determine whether pollen-specific eIF-4A is among the phosphorylated isoforms, we raised transgenic tobacco plants overexpressing eIF-4A8 containing a histidine tag. Hereby, we could show that indeed eIF-4A8 is modified through phosphorylation. The biological relevance of the phosphorylation of eIF-4A is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Eukaryotic translation initiation factor 4A (eIF-4A) is an RNA helicase with RNA-dependent ATPase activity, which, in conjunction with eIF-4B, is thought to remove secondary structures in the 5′-untranslated region (UTR) of the mRNAs. This facilitates the binding of the 40S ribosomal subunit to the mRNA and the subsequent migration of the preinitiation complex to the AUG start codon (1,2).

Translation is an important site of regulation of gene expression, and the initiation stage is the most commonly observed target for physiological control (2). In particular, the phosphorylation of initiation factors is thought to regulate translation rates (3). The regulation of translation by the phosphorylation–dephosphorylation of eIF-4E (4,5), of the eIF-4E-binding protein (6) and of eIF-2α (7–9) has been well documented. Concerning eIF-4A, however, there is no evidence for phosphorylation in yeast or in mammalian systems (3). In contrast, it was shown that eIF-4A becomes phosphorylated upon oxygen deprivation in maize root tips (10), and upon heat shock in wheat (11). In both cases, the phosphorylation of eIF-4A correlates with a reduction in translation rates, and thus, eIF-4A is a potential candidate for regulating translation initiation in plants.

The eIF-4A gene family has been studied extensively in tobacco (12–16). In tobacco leaves, there is a minimum of 10 expressed genes, which fall into two highly divergent gene families (NeIF-4A2 and 3; 13). This is different from the situation in yeast (17) and mouse (18), where duplicate genes code for identical or highly similar proteins. The large number and the divergence of the plant eIF-4A genes suggests that they may have plant specific functions or that they might translate various mRNAs with different efficiencies. One isoform, NeIF–4A8, was found to be specifically expressed in tobacco pollen, and it was proposed to be a possible candidate for mediating translational control in the developing male gametophyte (14).

During male germ line development in tobacco, the products of meiosis, the microspores, undergo a highly asymmetric mitotic division. The resulting bicellular microspores dehydrate and mature into metabolically dormant pollen grains (19). When the pollen grain lands on a compatible pistil, water is rapidly taken up, metabolism resumes at a high rate, and a pollen tube is formed. During the pollen tube growth a further mitotic division occurs. The now tricellular pollen forms an ∼4 cm long pollen tube and the double fertilization typical of flowering plants takes place in the ovule (20). Gene expression during plant male germ line development has several unique aspects. First, many novel proteins must be synthesized at different stages of development (21,22). Second, metabolic rates vary strongly and rapidly over time (21,23,24). Third, the ionic environment is highly variable and, in particular during dehydration, specific proteins must be synthesized in a cytoplasm estimated to contain ∼300 mM KCl (25). Thus, the highly specialized haploid phase of the male life cycle puts very specific and unusual requirements on the gene expression machinery. In contrast to well-studied animal systems, pollen carry out transcription in the haploid phase of the life cycle. Some of the mRNAs are translated directly, while others are thought to be stored and translated at various times after pollen tube germination (21,26,27). In fact, the first stage of pollen germination up to the second mitotic division can take place in the presence of RNA polymerase inhibitors, indicating that this initial phase can proceed through translation of RNAs synthesized before dehydration (23,28,29). An interesting example of translational regulation is provided by the pollen-specific lat52 mRNA. The 5′-UTR of this mRNA enhances translation relative to control 5′-UTRs during the final stages of pollen maturation in a pollen-specific and strictly developmentally regulated manner (30). The mechanism underlying this pollen-specific translational enhancement is unknown, but it seems reasonable to assume that it is mediated through specific interactions between 5′-UTRs and...
regulatory proteins. The pollen-specific eIF-4A8 is an attractive candidate for mediating this selective translation.

In this paper, we characterize the isoforms of eIF-4A occurring in pollen. We demonstrate that eIF-4A is phosphorylated in tobacco and that pollen tube germination is accompanied by a rapid increase in the phosphorylation of eIF-4A.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Plant growth conditions**

Plants of *Nicotiana tabacum* cv. Samsun were grown in the greenhouse, under a 16:8 h light:dark cycle and a temperature of at least 18°C. Mature pollen was harvested using a 35 µm mesh filter connected to a vacuum cleaner. Pollen was germinated in 25 mM MES–KOH (pH 5.9), 0.3 M sucrose, 3.0 mM Ca(NO₃)₂, 1.6 mM H₂BO₃, 1.0 mM KNO₃, 0.8 mM MgSO₄, 30 µM CuSO₄, 0.1% (w/v) casein hydrolysate and 1.5 µM quercetin (31). For *in vivo* labelling of phosphoproteins, 500 µCi H₃²PO₄ (8500 Ci/µmol, Amersham, further referred to as 32P) was added per ml medium.

**Two-dimensional electrophoresis/western analysis**

Total soluble proteins were isolated by grinding and extracting in 50 mM Tris–HCl (pH 8.0), 1% Triton X-100, 1% β-mercapto-ethanol and 1% polyvinyl-polypyrrolidion (PVPP). The samples were desalted using Centricron 10 concentrators (Amicon). Samples (10 µg) of total protein were loaded on the acidic side of IEF tube gels [4.5% acrylamide/bisacrylamide (30:1.8), 8.3 M urea, 4.8% ampholytes (Bio-Rad, 5/7:3/10 = 2:1), 2% CHAPS (pH 6.8), 1% DTE, 3% SDS and 10% glycerol. The proteins were after equilibration of the tube gel for 15 min in 62.5 mM Tris–HCl medium allowing pollen tube germination in the presence of 32P. After electrophoresis, the plates were stained with 0.2% ninhydrin in acetone and autoradiographed.

Phosphoamino acid determination

Phosphorylated serine, tyrosine and threonine the sample was vacuum dried. The pellet, containing ~200 d.p.m., was dissolved in 2 µl of running buffer (pH 1.9) and separated by two-dimensional thin layer electrophoresis on cellulose plates (Merck) according to Boyle et al. (33). The first dimension was run for 25 min at 1.3 kV using a buffer of pH 1.9 [formic acid (88%):glacial acetic acid:H₂O = 25:78:897]; the second dimension was run for 16 min at 1.3 kV using a buffer of pH 3.5 (glacial acetic acid:pyridine:H₂O = 50:5:945). After electrophoresis, the plates were stained with 0.2% ninhydrin in acetone and autoradiographed.

**RESULTS**

**eIF-4A is phosphorylated in tobacco pollen**

Since translational control is thought to be of prime importance during pollen tube germination (21,26), we were interested to investigate the phosphorylation status of eIF-4A during this developmental stage. Dry pollen was suspended in a synthetic medium allowing pollen tube germination in the presence of 32P. After various time points, eIF-4A was isolated by immunoprecipitation and visualized by SDS–PAGE and autoradiography (Fig. 1A). After 60 min, a signal could be observed at ~46 kDa, the size of eIF-4A. However, phosphorylation of eIF-4A may occur much earlier, considering the time delay caused by uptake, dilution by the internal phosphate pool and incorporation of 32P in AT³P (or GT³P). Therefore, it appears conceivable that phosphorylation of eIF-4A takes place soon after pollen hydration. Phosphorylation of eIF-4A in tobacco pollen confirms and extends results by previous workers, who also observed phosphorylation of plant eIF-4A (10,11). The immunoprecipitated phosphorylated eIF-4A was cut from a PVDF membrane and hydrodysed as described in Materials and Methods. Two-dimensional separation of the phosphoamino acids by TLC-electrophoresis showed that eIF-4A is phosphorylated primarily on a threonine residue or
Figure 1. Analysis of eIF-4A phosphorylation. (A) Autoradiogram of immunoprecipitated eIF-4A which was separated by SDS–PAGE and subsequently blotted on a nitro-cellulose membrane. Pollen was incubated in germination medium containing 500 µCi 32P i/ml for the times indicated before extracting protein. (B) After hydrolysis of immunoprecipitated eIF-4A, the phosphorylated amino acids were separated by two-dimensional TLC-electrophoresis.

residues (Fig. 1B). Longer exposure showed a weak signal at the position of phosphoserine as well (result not shown).

Pollen contain at least two phosphorylated isoforms

Pollen of tobacco contain at least three different eIF-4A mRNA transcripts, one of which is pollen specific (14). To identify which of the multiple isoforms is phosphorylated, eIF-4A was immunoprecipitated from pollen germinated in a medium containing 32P i. After two-dimensional gel electrophoresis and western blotting, the phosphorylated isoforms were visualized by autoradiography (Fig. 2). Six different isoforms could be separated in extracts from germinated pollen (see also Fig. 3). The different isoforms fall into three groups: isoforms 1 and 2 have the lowest mobility, isoform 3, 4 and 5 have an intermediate MW and isoform 6 has the lowest MW. Comparison of the western blot with the corresponding autoradiogram shows that two of the isoforms, namely isoforms 1 and 3, have incorporated 32P i and thus represent phosphorylated forms of eIF-4A. These isoforms have the lowest pI, as could be expected. Since tobacco contains multiple transcripts of eIF-4A, it is not possible to conclude that the proteins with the same size (i.e. isoforms 1 and 2 or isoforms 3 and 4) arise by phosphorylation of the same protein.

eIF-4A is phosphorylated during pollen germination

We wanted to establish if the phosphorylation status of eIF-4A changes during pollen germination. The only way to label maturing pollen in vivo is to feed whole plants with radioactive phosphate. This is a rather cumbersome method and moreover, because internal phosphate pools may change during germination, changes in signal intensity may not reflect changes in phosphorylation status. By comparing western blots from germinating pollen with the corresponding autoradiograms, it is possible to identify the phosphorylated isoforms of eIF-4A. In Figure 2A, spots 1 and 3 represented phosphorylated eIF-4A (see above). Now it became possible to assess the changes in phosphorylation of eIF-4A by two-dimensional gel electrophoresis/western analysis with total protein extracts (Fig. 3). In dry mature pollen, only a small amount (~1–3% of total eIF-4A) of the phosphorylated eIF-4A isoform 1 was present, whereas isoform 3 was entirely absent. After 2.5 h of germination, there are approximately equal amounts of

Figure 2. Determination of radioactively labelled eIF-4A isoforms. Protein was extracted from pollen which was germinated in medium containing 500 µCi 32P i/ml. eIF-4A was isolated by immunoprecipitation, separated by two-dimensional electrophoresis/western analysis and visualized using immunodetection (top). The western blot was used for autoradiography to detect the radiolabeled isoforms (bottom). Schematic diagrams are shown on the left. The individual isoforms are numbered 1–6. The arrows indicate the radiolabeled isoforms.

Figure 3. Two-dimensional gel electrophoresis/western analysis of eIF-4A from dry and germinated pollen. Samples (10 µg) of total protein were separated by two-dimensional gel electrophoresis, blotted onto nitro-cellulose and eIF-4A isoforms were visualized by immunodetection. The individual isoforms are numbered 1–6 as in Figure 2.
phosphorylated isoform 1 and non-phosphorylated isoform 2. The amount of phosphorylated isoform 3 was found to be 25–35% compared to isoform 4. We conclude that in mature pollen hardly any eIF-4A is phosphorylated and that during pollen tube growth ∼15–20% of total eIF-4A becomes phosphorylated.

**Transgenic plants overexpressing eIF-4A8 containing a histidine-tag**

We showed that pollen contain multiple isoforms of eIF-4A, two of which are phosphorylated. However, the complexity of the eIF-4A gene family makes it hard to ascertain which gene product becomes phosphorylated. In particular, we would like to know whether the pollen-specific eIF-4A8 is phosphorylated and whether its phosphorylation status changes during pollen tube germination. To be able to study this specific isoform in vivo we generated transgenic plants expressing eIF-4A8 containing a histidine-tag at the C-terminus (eIF-4A8his). Total protein from pollen from wild-type and transgenic plants were extracted and histidine-tagged proteins were isolated with His-Tag binding resin. After separation on a 10% SDS–PAGE gel and western blotting, a signal was obtained from transgenic pollen, but not from wild-type pollen (Fig. 4). Thus, we were able to isolate eIF-4A8his free from other eIF-4A isoforms. To study eIF-4A8his expression in transgenic pollen, total protein extracts from eIF-4A8his overexpressing pollen were separated by two-dimensional gel electrophoresis and western blotting. One additional isoform appeared compared to wild-type pollen, but not from wild-type pollen (Fig. 4). Thus, we were able to isolate eIF-4A8his free from other eIF-4A isoforms. To study eIF-4A8his expression in transgenic pollen, total protein extracts from eIF-4A8his overexpressing pollen were separated by two-dimensional gel electrophoresis and western blotting. One additional isoform appeared compared to wild-type pollen extracts (Fig. 5A, the additional isoform is indicated by an arrow with an open circle). The additional isoform has a pI near the predicted pI for eIF-4A8his (pI = 6.45). In the diagram, the additional isoform is indicated as isoform 7. To confirm that this isoform is eIF-4A8his, we mixed wild-type protein extracts with isolated eIF-4A8his. After two-dimensional gel electrophoresis and western blotting, the same pattern was obtained (Fig. 5B) as in transgenic pollen (Fig. 5A). From this we conclude that isoform 7 represents eIF-4A8his.

**DISCUSSION**

In this report we have shown that at least two isoforms of eIF-4A are phosphorylated in tobacco pollen, and one of them is the pollen-specific eIF-4A8. An increase in the phosphorylation status of eIF-4A was observed during pollen tube germination, a developmental stage characterized by extraordinarily high growth rates and hence high translational activity (21,27). So far, eIF-4A phosphorylation has only been documented for plants (10,11), and thus a function in a plant-specific process seems plausible. We suggest three possible functions for eIF-4A phosphorylation in pollen. First, eIF-4A phosphorylation might activate protein synthesis during pollen tube germination, i.e. when the demand for new proteins is very high. In this case, phosphorylation...
would be expected to activate protein synthesis. Second, it could enable the translation of mRNAs during dehydration, when a concentration of KCl estimated to be ~300 mM, would preclude normal protein synthesis. In particular, the stabilization of secondary RNA structures due to these high salt concentrations might require additional unwinding activity (26,30). This activity could be provided through regulation of eIF-4A activity. After pollen hydration, conditions return to more physiological levels and a fraction of eIF-4A would not be required. The excess of eIF-4A could be inactivated by phosphorylation. In this case, the non-phosphorylated form would be the active form, similar as proposed for eIF-4A during protein synthesis in hypoxic maize roots (10) and in heat shock treated wheat seedling leaves (11).

Third, eIF-4A8 might play a role in the translation of pollen specific mRNAs such as the lat52 mRNA. eIF-4A8 could be recruited into lat52 specific initiation complexes. The 5′-UTR of lat52 increases translation efficiency during pollen maturation when eIF-4A8 is poorly phosphorylated. Inactivation of eIF-4A8 by phosphorylation could reduce the synthesis of Lat52 after a burst of synthesis during pollen tube germination. For *Xenopus* embryos, it was also suggested that a specific eIF-4A, eIF-4AIII, can regulate changes in cell fate through selective mRNA translation (36). In order to test these hypotheses it will be necessary to develop pollen-based *in vitro* and *in vivo* systems in which the function of (non-)phosphorylated eIF-4A can be studied.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank Drs I.Dupuis, D.Reinhardt and M.Altmann for critically reading the manuscript and S.Frutiger for technical advice on two-dimensional gel electrophoresis. This work was financially supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

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