Filament Proteins in Central, Cranial, and Peripheral Mammalian Nerves

PETER F. DAVISON and RANDY N. JONES
Department of Fine Structure Research, Boston Biomedical Research Institute, and Department of Ophthalmology, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts 02114

ABSTRACT

Several classes of 10-nm filaments have been reported in mammalian cells and they can be distinguished by the size of their protein subunit. We have studied the distribution of these filaments in nerves from calves and other mammals. From the display on polyacrylamide electrophoretic gels of proteins in extracts from fibroblast and central, cranial and peripheral nerves, we cut the appropriate stained bands and prepared iodinated peptide maps. The similarities between the respective maps provide strong evidence for the presence of vimentin in cranial and peripheral nerves. The glial fibrillary acidic protein was found in axon preparations from the central nervous system, but was not identified in distal segments of some cranial nerves, nor in peripheral nerve.

The Journal of Cell Biology
VOLUME 88 JANUARY 1981 67-72
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0021-9525/81/01/0067/06 $1.00

Electron microscopy has revealed filaments of 10-nm diameter in a wide variety of cell types. Extensive arrays of such filaments have been demonstrated by detergent treatment of cells cultured on thin films for electron microscopy (5, 35). Because the filaments are relatively insoluble, they have been named "cytoskeletal filaments" but the name carries implications of a structural function for the filaments; in fact, their function is at present unknown. Chemical studies have shown that such filaments from different types of cells have different protein subunits (2, 9, 22, 25, 26, 36); it seems that they may have different functions.

In nervous tissue, astrocytes and neurons contain 10-nm filaments but the classes from the two cells have been distinguished morphologically (38) and immunologically (26, 30). The chemical characterization of these filaments has been attended by controversy. Aqueous extracts of areas of brain gliosis yield a protein preparation that was attributed to the glial filament and was called the glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) (18, 37). Direct immunochemical staining subsequently confirmed that the filaments in astrocytes react with antibody to GFAP (17, 29). A protein of similar size (~49,000-51,000 daltons) extractable only with denaturants from isolated segments of myelinated axons (13) was deduced to be the subunit of the neurofilament (12, 33), but subsequent studies have shown that this is a buffer-insoluble form of GFAP and is derived from glial filaments contaminating the axon segments (16). The direct isolation of human glial filaments has been described more recently and the similarity of the subunit to GFAP reported (20).

Labeling studies on axoplasmic proteins led Hoffman and Lasek (21, 24) to identify a triplet of proteins (~70,000, 160,000 and 200,000 daltons) as the components of the neurofilament. Recently, further observations have supported this conclusion because the same protein triplet is obtained on the dissolution of both peripheral and central nerve neurofilaments (1, 26, 27, 32). Thus, it appears that in the mammalian nervous system the 10-nm filaments in neurons are built from a triplet of proteins while another type of filament built from GFAP, a 50,000-dalton protein, is restricted to fibrous and protoplasmic astrocytes and some ependymal cells (4, 14). Histology has shown that astrocytes are found only in the central nervous system and along the 1st and 2nd and proximal reaches of the VIIIth and other cranial nerves (3, 34). However, in a previous study (8) we detected a GFAP-like protein in dog sciatic nerve where astrocytes are not found. At that time we identified that protein with the neurofilament; interpreted from the present viewpoint, that finding was either wrong or it implies the presence of GFAP outside the central nervous system. We describe here experiments reexamining our earlier observation: we have analyzed by peptide mapping a protein having the same electrophoretic mobility as GFAP in bovine IIIrd, Vth, and VIth cranial nerves and the canine sciatic. In addition, we have analyzed in the nerves a protein with the same mobility as the cytoskeletal protein (22) (or vimentin [19]). This protein has been identified repeatedly in cultured fibroblasts but only in a few cells in differentiated tissues (19). We found that GFAP is limited to the proximal segments of some of the cranial nerves, and that the 50,000-dalton protein in distal
segments and the sciatic nerve yields a different fingerprint. Vimentin is present along all the cranial nerves studied.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cranial nerves were dissected from calf brains that were obtained within 2 h of slaughter and from dogs and rabbits obtained immediately after exsanguination under anesthesia. The nerves were dissected at, or 2-3 mm beyond, the brain or brain stem surface, placed in ice, phosphate-buffered saline (0.14 M NaCl, 0.01 M phosphate, pH 7.4) containing 0.1 mM phenylmethanesulfonyl fluoride (PMSF), and cleaned of blood vessels and loose connective tissue. Sciatic and peryoneal nerves were taken from dogs and rabbits: these nerves and the optic nerves were dissected free of epineurium.

The nerve segments were frozen on solid carbon dioxide, transversely sliced, and then crushed in a Dounce homogenizer (Kontes Co., Vineland, N. J.) first with 0.1 M NaCl, 0.01 M EDTA, 0.01 mM PMSF, pH 7.0. The extract was centriufuged at 30,000 g for 15 min. The precipitate was then extracted in 3 M guanidine hydrochloride, 0.01 M EDTA, pH 8.0, again with homogenization, and the mixture was centrifuged. The insoluble residue was homogenized in 6 M guanidine hydrochloride, 0.01 M mercaptoethanol, 0.01 M phosphate pH 8.0, and the dissolved components in this third extract were recovered by centrifugation. The extracts were centrifuged repeatedly (diluted with water if necessary) until clear of lipid, and then all the guanidine salts were eliminated by dialysis. SDS was added to all the extracts to 1% by weight for electrophoresis.

For the isolation of the protein from the cytoskeletal fila-ments of fibroblasts (5, 22), primary explants were established from fetal bovine dermis and rabbit corneas. They were grown under 5% CO₂ in air in Dulbecco's modification of minimum Eagle's medium, 10% newborn calf serum with antibiotics. After the fourth splitting of the cultures they appeared to contain solely fibroblasts, and single T25 flasks with confluent cells were used for each preparation. The cells were washed in physiological saline, then treated with the same saline with 0.2% Triton X-100, 2 mM EDTA, 1 mM PMSF. The cells were scraped from the flask in this medium and the suspension was centrifuged for 10 min at 20,000 g. The supernatant solution was discarded and the precipitate was extracted with 3 M guanidine hydrochloride or 1% SDS to provide a sample for electrophoresis.

Two iodination procedures were used. The 0.5- to 1.0-mg samples in 1% SDS, 0.1 M sodium phosphate, pH 8.2, were reduced and carboxymethylated with mercaptoethanol and iodoacetic acid, dialyzed, and then treated with 100-400 μCi ¹²⁵I (New England Nuclear, Boston, Mass.) and chloramine T, followed by sodium metabisulfite: they were then dialyzed against 0.1% SDS. The samples were adjusted with Tris buffer and glycerol before applying them to polyacrylamide gel slabs. These procedures have been described previously (7). The appropriate stained bands were cut from the gel and either the radioactive protein was eluted, precipitated, and then digested with trypsin or chymotrypsin (7), or the slices were washed for 30 min in 50% methanol and then lyophilized before being rehydrated in 0.1% trypsin or chymotrypsin solutions in 0.1 M ammonium bicarbonate, pH 8. After 3- to 8-h proteolysis at 37°C, the slices were extracted with ammonium bicarbonate and the solutions were lyophilized. The ¹²⁵I level in the peptide digests was determined and appropriate aliquots were applied to thin-layer plates of silica gel.

The second iodination procedure involved the iodination of the protein in bands cut from a gel. The procedure was modified only in detail from those described by Elder et al. (15) and Bryant et al. (6). Resolution of the iodinated peptides on the plates was improved by running them first in 30% ammonia in propanol, drying the plate, and then rerunning in the same solvent.

Gel electrophoresis was conducted in 7% polyacrylamide gel slabs in a discontinuous buffer system (23). The gels were stained with Coomassie Blue and scanned with a densitometer (Joyce, Loebl and Co., Ltd., Gateshead-on-Tyne, England).

RESULTS

Our initial objective was to extract from peripheral and cranial nerves the subunits of the 10-nm filaments in order to compare their distributions. Neurofilaments are such prominent constituents of axons when viewed in the electron microscope that it was anticipated that the proteins corresponding to them would be major components of the extracts and could be satisfactorily resolved by one-dimensional gel electrophoresis. Therefore we crushed cleaned lengths of various nerves from humans, hogs, dogs, rabbits, and calves and extracted the proteins. In many instances the mixture of proteins was too complex for simple interpretation of the array of bands on the SDS gels. Much of this complexity is probably contributed by the satellite cells and connective tissue in the endoneurium. A resolution of this difficulty was offered by the solubility characteristics of the 10-nm filaments; it was known that several classes of these filaments are insoluble in physiological saline and nonionic detergents, but are soluble in denaturants. Therefore we adopted a procedure of extracting the sliced and crushed nerves (stripped wherever possible of epineurium) successively with neutral buffer, then 3 M and finally 6 M guanidine hydrochloride. The proteins in such extracts are exemplified in Fig. 1. These successive extracts have the advantage of displaying separately certain overlapping protein populations; in particular, the aqueous extract removed most of the prominent 68,000-dalton protein described by Schlaeffer and initially attributed by him to the peripheral neurofilament (31). With its removal the 70,000-dalton component of the neurofilament is revealed in the guanidine extracts. Collagen chains were extracted by 6 M guanidine hydrochloride but only minimally by 3 M. They were readily recognized on the gel both by the reddish color the stained band assumes on prolonged destaining and by comparison with authentic acid-soluble or pepsin-solubilized samples (10). Previous experiments had shown that gial filaments, neurofilaments, cytoskeletal protein (vimentin), and desmin (or skeleton) are soluble in 3 M guanidine hydrochloride so this extract, referred to as 3GX, was of greatest interest.

Comparison of SDS-gel electropherograms of the major proteins in the 3GX preparations from the rabbit sciatic nerve and calf axon segments shows several similarities. The triplets...
of neurofilament proteins are marked in Fig. 1 by arrowheads; the differences in the mobilities of the “200,000” and “160,000”-dalton proteins of rabbit and calf belie their homology that is revealed by their peptide maps (11). Both extracts also contain: actin (a protein present in each extract, and whose identity has been confirmed by peptide mapping that is not shown here); a smaller peak that may be tubulin, incompletely extracted by the treatment with neutral buffer (compare to the buffer extract); and a peak between the latter two and labeled G. In the 3GX preparation from the axon segments, this G is the 50,000-dalton protein identified as GFAP (17). The presence of a protein in the sciatic nerve extract with this mobility we reported previously (8). We obtained from extracts of dog sciatic nerve electropherograms essentially similar to those from the rabbit nerve shown in Fig. 1.

Similar successive extracts were made from calf cranial nerves, and the electrophoretic distribution of the proteins in these extracts is shown in Fig. 2. Again, the 3GX samples show a relatively simple pattern with prominent bands which include the neurofilament triplet, the 50,000-dalton protein, actin (A) and component C whose mobility matched that of the cytoskeletal protein, vimentin, extracted from bovine fibroblasts cultured in vitro.

The objective of our experiments now became the identification of protein band C and the 50,000-dalton proteins from the cranial and peripheral nerves. We elected to use thin-layer chromatography of peptide digests of the iodinated proteins as a criterion for the similarity of proteins migrating at the same rates on gel slabs. This peptide mapping procedure yields autoradiograms that can be compared between different proteins and is sensitive enough to be used with ~1 μg of protein, the content of a faint band on a Coomassie Blue-stained gel (7, 15).

Iodine reacts with thiol and tyrosyl groups most readily. To block reaction with thiols (the content of which could vary with the state of oxidation of the protein), the nerve extracts were reduced and carboxymethylated. In many but not all instances this treatment resulted in the appearance of two bands instead of one in the 70,000-dalton neurofilament band, band C, and the 50,000-dalton band. Both bands were analyzed when they appeared.

The proteins were iodinated either by reacting the whole 3GX samples with 125I and chloramine T and then applying the mixture to the electrophoresis gel, or by iodinating the proteins in each band sliced from the gel. The latter procedure gave the higher specific labeling. The two methods did not yield identical peptide maps. The conditions of iodination differed so that tyrosyl residues presumably were exposed to substitution to different degrees. Moreover, both methods introduced artifact bands that were derived from reagents or impurities in the gels (15). Nevertheless, similar proteins could be effectively compared by one or the other procedure.

Most of our experiments involved calf proteins. Fig. 3 compares the one-dimensional peptide maps obtained from GFAP (extracted with 3 M guanidine hydrochloride from an axon segment preparation) with the protein in the 50,000-dalton band from mixed extracts from calf Vth and VIth cranial nerves. Two or three artifact bands were found to be common to all peptide maps, and these were not eliminating by using ultrapure reagents at all stages of the electrophoresis. They are indicated by arrowheads on each figure. The remaining bands
may be used to assess qualitatively the similarities between the proteins under comparison.

The tryptic and chymotryptic maps from the two proteins are very similar and suggested that GFAP was present in segments of cranial nerve beyond 2 mm from the brain stem. To check our conclusion that GFAP was not restricted to the central nervous system, we repeated the analysis of proteins in successive segments of the Vth cranial nerve of the calf. Fig. 4 shows densitometric traces from a gel loaded with the 3GX proteins from such an experiment. The content of the 50,000-dalton protein is significantly diminished somewhere between 5 and 12 mm from the brain stem. Histology showed a zone of transition in this region where the cell populations changed abruptly in their staining characteristics, despite the obvious continuity of the axons. This is the region of glial/Schwann cell transition described by Berthold and Carlstedt (3) and others. Nevertheless there was present in the extracts from more distal nerve segments a protein band similar to GFAP. This protein appeared as two bands on reduction and carboxymethylation. A similar pair of bands was present in dog and rabbit sciatic nerve 3GX extracts.

Both of these pairs of bands were treated to prepare peptide maps. The results are illustrated in Fig. 5. Both bands that are generated from the single band by reduction and carboxymethylation give the same maps but they are not identical with the maps from GFAP.

The identity of the C band was pursued by isolating the 58,000-dalton band from a gel electropherogram of the cytoskeletal proteins from calf fibroblasts. Peptide maps from this protein and the C band from calf cranial nerve are shown in Fig. 6. To give a sense of the discrimination that the mapping procedure can provide, we placed maps of bovine brain actin and bovine and canine desmin (smooth muscle filament protein [25]) on either side of the cytoskeletal protein map. The two desmin maps are very similar, indicating homology between the species; protein C and fibroblast vimentin give essentially identical maps. A similar comparison of rabbit corneal fibroblast vimentin and protein C from rabbit sciatic nerve is shown in Fig. 7. We conclude that vimentin is present in the calf Vth cranial nerve and in greater amount in segments not proximal to the brain. The same protein is present in the sciatic nerve and, because similar protein complements were seen in all the cranial and peripheral nerve extracts, we presume that vimentin is common to them all.

**DISCUSSION**

We have examined extracts from the IInd, Vth, VIth and XIth cranial nerves and sciatic nerves. From these nerves from calves, dogs, and rabbits we obtained by 3-M guanidine hydrochloride extraction the proteins that comprise the neurofilament triplet and two proteins with the solubility and the electrophoretic characteristics of GFAP and vimentin. To identify the proteins in these latter bands in the electrophoretic gels, we undertook peptide mapping.

Our experimental strategy should first be justified. O'Farrel (28) has shown clearly that what appears as one band on a
diffuse background. The peptides recovered from the denatur-
more minor proteins should contribute little more than a protein should dominate the map, and peptides from one or its identification, because large peptides from the major predominated in any band, then peptide mapping should per-
some may arise from the presence of various substituents on a methodological artifact and some of this heterogeneity can be. However, we recognize that our technique may not reveal on the peptide chain possible substituents (e.g., various levels of phosphorylation) that may have functional significance.

We believe the experimental results have justified our choice of method. The peptide maps in Figs. 3, 5, and 6 illustrate both the discrimination between dissimilar proteins and suggestive resemblances between others. Indeed the similarities between the peptide maps from the nerve protein C and fibroblast vimentin are so great that we conclude confidently that the same protein (or overlapping proteins) is present in fibroblasts and in cranial and peripheral nerve. There is a protein with both the solubility and electrophoretic characteristics of GFAP that is present in distal segments of the IIIrd and Vth calf and dog cranial nerves and the dog and rabbit sciatic nerves, but its peptide map is not the same as GFAP. This may be the 50,000-dalton protein whose antibody stained neurons selectively in experiments reported by Schachner, et al. (30). Our findings do not substantiate our earlier report that indicated the presence of GFAP in the sciatic nerve by the criterion of peptide mapping.

In successive segments of the calf Vth cranial nerve the content of GFAP and vimentin appear to vary reciprocally (Fig. 4) (the band labeled G in the proximal segments must be GFAP to produce peptide maps shown in Fig. 3). We have not localized vimentin in the sciatic nerve (in which extracts it is a prominent component) or cranial nerves; immunofluorescent staining with our rather weak guinea pig antibody to calf fibroblast vimentin gave equivocal results. However, S.-H. Yen and K. L. Fields (manuscript submitted for publication) have found intense reaction with a-antivimentin in the Schwann cell sheaths. There is a large protein band with the mobility of vimentin in extracts of the optic (IIInd cranial) nerve (Fig. 2). We have not yet examined its peptide map. We conclude tentatively that the 10-nm filaments observed in Schwann cells are, at least in part, vimentin.

These experiments confirm that GFAP is largely restricted to the proximal segments of cranial nerves and are compatible with the common conclusions that GFAP is restricted to astrocytes and with the repeated histological observation that astrocytes are restricted to the central nervous system, the olfactory and optic nerves, and the proximal regions of the other cranial nerves. The presence of GFAP could not be demonstrated by peptide mapping of proteins from more distal segments. Nevertheless, immunofluorescent staining with rabbit anti-GFAP on longitudinal cryostat sections of cranial and sciatic nerves showed that patches of fluorescent streaks were visible and that bundles of such streaks penetrated beyond the glial/Schwann cell cone in the calf Vth nerve, for example. Whether this staining is artifactual (e.g., selective adsorption or cross reaction with a different protein) or signifies the local presence of GFAP in other cells or in astrocytes penetrating beyond the zone of transition, is not clear. Our failure to produce a peptide map from GFAP in peripheral nerve does not mean that it is absent, only that it is not a major component of the band analyzed.

In summary, the cell populations in cranial and peripheral nerves contain at least three types of 10-nm filaments, glial, cytoskeletal, and neurofilaments. The triplet of proteins associated with the neurofilaments was found in all the extracts; the GFAP and vimentin show, at least in part, a reciprocal distribution.
The peptide mapping technique identified an experimental artifact of unknown origin. The appearance of two bands on the gel in place of one after reduction and carboxymethylation is not indicative of the resolution of two proteins that before substitution were overlapping, because they yield identical peptide maps. The two bands appeared inconsistently and could not be caused by carbamylation because they appeared whether urea or SDS was used to denature the protein before reaction with iodoacetamide. At present we have no explanation for this artifact of unknown origin. The appearance of two bands on the gel is not an artifact caused by cross-contamination of the samples or by the peptides being derived from different sources.

We thank P. Neil Davison for technical assistance. This work was supported by grants NS 11122 and RR 5711 from the National Institutes of Health.

Received for publication 7 March 1980, and in revised form 11 August 1980.

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