Cytoskeletal Organization of the Presynaptic Nerve Terminal and the Acetylcholine Receptor Cluster in Cell Cultures

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ABSTRACT Whole-mount stereo electron microscopy has been used to examine the cytoskeletal organization of the presynaptic nerve terminal and the acetylcholine receptor (AChR) clusters in cultures of *Xenopus* nerve and muscle cells. The cells were grown on Formvar-coated gold electron microscope (EM) finder grids. AChR clusters were identified in live cultures by fluorescence microscopy after labeling with tetramethylrhodamine-conjugated α-bungarotoxin. After chemical fixation and critical-point drying, the cytoplasmic specializations of identified cells were examined in whole mount under an electron microscope. In the presynaptic nerve terminal opposite to the AChR cluster, synaptic vesicles were clearly suspended in a lattice of 5–12-nm filaments. Stereo microscopy showed that these filaments directly contacted the vesicles. This lattice was also contiguous with the filament bundle that formed the core of the axon. At the AChR cluster, an increased cytoplasmic density differentiated this area from the rest of the cytoplasm. This density was composed of a meshwork of filaments with a mean diameter of 6 nm and irregularly shaped membrane cisternae 0.1–0.5 μm in width, which resembled the smooth endoplasmic reticulum. These membrane structures were interconnected via the filaments. Organelles that were characteristic of the bulk of the sarcoplasm such as the rough endoplasmic reticulum and the polysomes, were absent from the cytoplasm associated with the AChR cluster. These results indicate that the cytoskeleton may play an important role in the development and/or the maintenance of the neuromuscular synapse, including the release of transmitter in the nerve terminal and the clustering of AChRs in the postsynaptic membrane.

One of the striking features of the structural specializations at the chemical synapse is an exact registration of the transmitter release mechanism at the presynaptic nerve terminal and the concentration of receptor molecules at the postsynaptic membrane (18). In the formation of neuromuscular junctions, such a registration is established very early (4). During subsequent stages of synaptogenesis, the relationship between the initially established pre- and postsynaptic elements appears to be stable (8). Thus there must be a mechanism to ensure the stabilization of these structures once they are formed.

The stability of the postsynaptic specialization, viz. the acetylcholine receptor (AChR)1 clusters, has been demonstrated in cultured muscle cells. Diffusely distributed AChRs move freely in the plane of the plasma membrane (1, 27). However, when they are aggregated into clusters, this lateral mobility becomes severely restricted (1). The cluster often remains at the same location on the cell for extended period of time (20). This stability is maintained even when the cell is extracted with nonionic detergent Triton X-100 (28). This indicates that the cytoskeleton may be involved in the stabilization of AChR clusters. Morphologically, components of the cytoskeleton, in the form of cytoplasmic filaments, have been observed in close association with the AChR clusters in electron microscopic studies using thin-sectioning or freeze-etching techniques (5, 6, 12, 14, 26). In thin-section studies, one is limited to a two-dimensional image due to the small section thickness. Thus it is difficult to appreciate the relationship between the structural specializations associated with the AChR cluster and the overall cytoskeleton of the cell. In freeze-etching studies, the cells often need to be extracted so that the cytoplasm becomes etchable. Thus one is confronted with an inevitable loss of cytoplasmic organelles due to the extraction procedure.

The involvement of cytoskeleton in the organization of the...
presynaptic nerve terminal has also been indicated in recent 
studies. In adrenal medulla Kondo et al. (17), using poly- 
ethylene glycol (PEG)-embedding method, has shown that 
the chromaffin granules appear to be suspended in a lattice 
composed of 3–12-nm filaments. Previous works on neuromus-
cular junctions (NMJs) have also suggested the existence of 
such a lattice in the cholinergic nerve terminal (11, 14). 
However, because of the tight packing of synaptic vesicles at 
adult NMJs, the filamentous connections between synaptic 
vesicles have not been resolved.

Tissue culture of neurons and muscle cells has greatly 
contributed to our understanding of synaptogenesis. Our 
previous studies on cultured *Xenopus* myotomal muscle cells 
have indicated that these cells are sufficiently thin such that 
their cytoskeletal organization could be resolved with whole-
mount electron microscopy (25). In this study, we used this 
method to examine the three-dimensional cyto-architecture 
associated with the nerve terminal and the AChR clusters in 
cell cultures.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Cell Cultures:** Myotomal muscle cells were isolated from stage 20–22 
*Xenopus laevis* embryos according to previous methods (15, 23). They were 
cultured on gold EM grids as detailed below in Steinberg's solution, consisting 
of 60 mM NaCl, 0.7 mM KCl, 0.4 mM Ca(NO3)2, 0.8 mM MgSO4, and 10 
mm N-2-hydroxyethylpiperazine-N'-2-ethanesulfonic acid (HEPES), pH 7.4, 
supplemented with 10% L-15 (Leibovitz) medium and 1% fetal bovine serum 
(Gibco Laboratories, Grand Island, NY). For nerve-muscle co-cultures, the 
myotomal cells were cultured together with isolated neural tube cells. The 
cultures were maintained at 22°C. The grid used as culture substrate were prepared according to 
the method of Wolosiewicz and Porter (35). Briefly, 100-mesh gold EM finder grids 
(Emmet F. Fullam, Inc., Schenectady, NY) were coated with Formvar and 
picked up on no. 1 coverglass squares (18 mm × 18 mm), one grid per 
coverglass. The coverglass bearing the grid was then lightly shadowed with 
carbon and sterilized under UV.

**Mapping the AChR Clusters:** To locate the AChR clusters, the culture on the grid was labeled with tetramethylrhodamine-conjugated a-
bungarotoxin (R-BTX) prepared according to Ravdin and Axelrod (29). Then 
the sites of AChR clusters were determined. A chromaffin granule could locate the sites of AChR clusters as shown in Fig. 2 b 
and a third faintly fluorescent cluster were located along the 
length of the axon (see Fig. 5).

**Presynaptic Nerve Terminal**

Two kinds of nerve-muscle contacts were observed: the 
synapse was either located at a terminal bouton (Fig. 2) or 
along the length of the axon (see Fig. 5).

**RESULTS**

During the course of this work, 300 muscle cells in more than 
10 different cultures were examined by fluorescence microscopy 
followed by whole-mount EM. 20 cells were sufficiently thin 
for EM imaging. These cells were carefully photographed 
and the whole-mount images of the AChR cluster sites were 
compared with their fluorescence images. The criteria for the 
sample selection are as follows. On the AChR clusters, the 
area of the cytoplasmic specialization as seen in the whole-
mount EM image at low magnification (see Fig. 8 c) has to 
match the area of R-BTX fluorescence image (see Fig. 8 b) 
both in size and in shape. On the presynaptic specialization, 
the nerve terminal has to be immediately adjacent to a 
postsynaptic AChR cluster as shown by R-BTX fluorescence 
(Figs. 2 h and 5 h) and synaptic vesicles, which are defined as 
spherical, membrane-bound structures ~50–60 nm in diameter 
basal on previous thin-sectioning data (24), must be 
readily present in the terminal (see Figs. 3 and 6) in whole-
mount images. Since cell thickness tends to increase with the 
culture age, the observation was restricted to cultures 1–2 d 
old. The details of three cells are present in this report, two 
on the presynaptic nerve terminal and one on the AChR 
cluster. However, the same types of specializations were seen 
in all other preparations selected according to above criteria.
FIGURE 2 A nerve-muscle contact which was associated with AChR clusters. (a) Phase contrast; (b) fluorescence; (c) whole-mount EM. The cells were outlined in b. Small arrows in a point to the neuritic path. The nerve crossed the muscle at the left of a and, as it emerged from the other side, became associated with three AChR clusters as shown by R-BTX fluorescence (b). The positions of terminals 1 and 2 in c are pointed out in a and b. Terminal 1 was in direct contact with the muscle cell whereas terminal 2 was not. Arrowheads in c point to the sites of closest nerve-muscle contact. N, nerve; M, muscle. (a and b) x 960. (c) x 6,500.

this terminal made contact with the muscle.

The most prominent feature of this nerve terminal was the presence of numerous synaptic vesicles (arrowheads in Fig. 3), which had a mean diameter of 54 nm (SD = 13 nm, n = 21). They appeared to be evenly distributed throughout the terminal, without particular clustering at the nerve-muscle contact. These vesicles were clearly suspended in a lattice composed of cytoplasmic filaments (Fig. 3). In stereo (Fig. 4), one can see that these filaments made direct contact with the vesicles. The diameter of the filaments ranged from 5-12 nm (mean = 9 nm, SD = 2.5 nm, n = 17) and each filament segment was 0.1 to 0.2 μm in length. They interconnected the vesicles and also made attachments to the cell margin (Fig. 3).

A different type of synapse, by which the nerve contacted the muscle cell along its length, is shown in Fig. 5. The nerve made contact with the muscle cell at two places (Fig. 5a) and each was associated with an AChR cluster (Fig. 5b). The corresponding EM image is seen in Fig. 5c. The second synaptic position was located at a thick portion of the muscle cell and therefore was not further imaged. Fig. 6 shows the first contact at a higher magnification. This neurite made a varicosity at the nerve-muscle contact and the presynaptic membrane partially overlapped the muscle at this synapse. The AChR cluster measured 8 μm in length, which was approximately equal to the length of the neurite where synaptic vesicles were seen (Figs. 5c and 6). The core of the axon was occupied by a bundle of longitudinally oriented filaments which measured 11-14 nm in diameter (Figs. 6 and 7). Away from the presynaptic membrane, the varicosity was much simpler in organization and appeared quite transparent (Fig. 6).

The synaptic vesicles with a mean diameter of 65 nm (SD = 10 nm, n = 22) were concentrated at the site where the nerve made a close contact with the muscle (Figs. 6 and 7), immediately adjacent to an AChR cluster. These vesicles were suspended in a lattice composed of 5-12-nm filaments (Fig. 7). Direct contacts between these filaments and the vesicles were clearly observed (Fig. 7). This filamentous lattice was seen throughout the area where synaptic vesicles were located.

**ACh Receptor Clusters**

In most of the nerve-muscle contacts we have examined, there was an overlap between the pre- and postsynaptic membranes (e.g., Fig. 6). This overlap obscured the fine structures of the postsynaptic specializations. Thus we chose to examine the ultrastructure of the AChR clusters not in contact with the nerve, the "hot spots."

Fig. 8a and b show an AChR cluster located along the edge of a muscle cell opposite to a melanocyte as evidenced by R-BTX labeling. Its whole-mount EM image is shown in Fig. 8c, which is at eight times the magnification of Fig. 8a and b. Even at this relatively low magnification, an area of increased cytoplasmic density that corresponds both in size and in shape with the AChR cluster (Fig. 8b) can be observed. Thus, in such areas where the thickness of the cell was minimal, the location of the AChR cluster could be unambiguously identified in these electron micrographs.
Fig. 9 shows a portion of the sub-AChR cluster cytoplasm in stereo. It is apparent that this cytoplasmic area was occupied by two components: a meshwork of filaments and a set of membrane-bound cisternae. These cisternae, having a width of 0.1 to 0.5 μm, resembled smooth endoplasmic reticulum (SER). In fact, they often extended beyond the area occupied by the AChR cluster as defined by the fluorescent R-BTX image. They were interconnected to each other either through a membranous extension or via a filamentous linkage as shown in this high voltage electron micrograph (Fig. 9). Fig. 10 is a conventional 100 kV micrograph that shows the filaments and the cisternae in a better contrast. One can see

Figures 3 and 4  Fig. 3: Stereo view of the entire terminal 1 as shown in Fig. 2c. This terminal synapsed with the muscle at the bottom and was continuous with its axon toward the top. Arrowheads point to synaptic vesicles. Tilt angle = 30°. Fig. 4: Stereo view of a portion of terminal 1 in Fig. 2c. Synaptic vesicles (arrowheads) are suspended in a filamentous lattice. These filaments often made direct contacts with the vesicles as indicated by small arrows. Tilt angle = 15°. Fig. 3, x 32,500; Fig. 4, x 65,000.

Figures 5 and 6  Fig. 5: A synapse formed along the length of the axon. (a) Phase contrast; (b) fluorescence; (c) whole-mount EM. Two AChR clusters were formed along the nerve-muscle contacts (b). The top contact is imaged in c. Two yolk granules (asterisks in a and c) were used as landmarks to locate precisely the position of this AChR cluster. N, nerve; M, muscle. Fig. 6: Stereo view of the nerve-muscle contact shown in Fig. 5c. The axon made a varicosity at this site. Within the varicosity, the cytoplasm was rather transparent. The core of the axon (A) was occupied by a bundle of 11–14-nm filaments. Opposite to the varicosity was the presynaptic area which contained many synaptic vesicles. This area is directly opposite to an AChR cluster as shown in Fig. 5. Arrowheads point to the boundary of the neurite. The presynaptic area partly overlapped the postsynaptic area. mi, mitochondrion. Tilt angle = 20°. Fig. 5: (a–b) × 960; (c) × 6,500. Fig. 6 × 14,500.
that the filaments often converged onto the cisternae. Although the rough endoplasmic reticulum (RER) and poly-

somes were commonly observed in the cytoplasm away from

the AChR clusters (Fig. 11), they were absent from the cyto-

plasm at the cluster (Fig. 9).

The filaments forming the meshwork at the AChR cluster

ranged from 3 nm to 10 nm in diameter with a mean of 6

nm (SD = 2.7 nm, n = 10). The complex meshwork formed

by these filaments, together with the membrane cisternae,

contributed to the increased cytoplasmic density observed at

the AChR cluster in whole-mount (Fig. 8c).

Coated vesicles or pits with a diameter of 0.1 μm were also

observed in the area occupied by the AChR cluster (Fig. 9).

The “coat” was often associated with the filament meshwork
described above (Fig. 9).

As a control, we have examined areas of the same cell not

in association with the AChR cluster. One such area is shown

in Fig. 11. The cytoplasmic organization was much less com-

plicated than at the AChR cluster. SER, RER, and polysomes

were present. Bundles of 6-8-nm filaments were observed

both in the cytoplasm as well as in association with the cell
cortex and intermediate (10 nm) filaments were also present.
The cytoplasm between the organelles was occupied by a

lattice composed of 3-4-nm filaments, which appears to be

similar to the microtrabeicular lattice observed in nonmuscle

cells (34).

DISCUSSION

In this study we have demonstrated that a three-dimensional
cytoskeletal lattice exists both in the presynaptic nerve ter-

tinal and at the AChR cluster in developing nerve-muscle
cocultures. Although we were unable to obtain images of the

postsynaptic specializations due to the overlapping of the pre-

and postsynaptic structures, the AChR cluster should provide

a close analogy. Structures typically associated with the post-

synaptic area at the neuromuscular junction, e.g., the mem-

brane-associated cytoplasmic density, the basal lamina, and

the concentration of cholinesterase, are also observed at the

AChR clusters (3, 26, 33).

Whole-mount EM of chemically fixed, critical point-dried

specimens were examined in this study. Since the cells were

not extracted with detergent, presumably a larger portion of

the cytoskeleton was left intact than the extracted prepara-

tions. Fluorescence microscopy with R-BTX enabled us to

identify the sites of synaptic structures yet without obscuring

their fine details under electron microscopy. In this respect,

our attempt to demonstrate these synaptic specializations by

whole-mount EM in conjunction with horseradish peroxidase

(HRP)-conjugated α-bungarotoxin (19) was not successful,

mainly due to the lack of a high specificity of this label to the

AChRs and the fact that the electron density of the reaction

product often obscured the underlying structures.
Presynaptic Specializations

In this study, we relied on the fluorescence of R-BTX staining to indicate the functionality of the nerve-muscle synapse (Figs. 2 and 5). Although the physiology of synaptic transmission was not tested, it is known that functional synapses develop quickly in these *Xenopus* nerve-muscle cocultures (24) and Kidokoro et al. (16) have shown that AChR clustering is always associated with miniature endplate potentials. Thus, the neuromuscular contacts which were AChR cluster-positive (Figs. 2 and 5) should have been physiologically functional, despite a lack of clustering of synaptic vesicles at the presynaptic membrane (Fig. 3). Other studies (21, 24) using thin-sectioning and physiological methods, have also shown that the onset of neuromuscular transmission precedes the presynaptic clustering of vesicles.

In the axon, a system of cross connections among membranous organelles, microtubules, and neurofilaments has been documented (7, 13, 30). This work has shown that such a cross-linker system also extends to the presynaptic nerve terminal (Fig. 3 and 4). Within the terminals, this system cross-links the synaptic vesicles. The function of such connections is unknown. However, this system should now be taken into consideration in our understanding of the translocation of synaptic vesicles during transmission at neuromuscular junctions.
FIGURES 9 and 10  Fig. 9: Stereo view of a portion of the AChR cluster shown in Fig. 8. Membrane cisternae (arrowheads) and a meshwork of filaments (arrows) together contributed to the cytoplasmic specialization. A bundle of thin filaments (MF) was located along the margin of the cell. Two coated vesicles or pits (CV) can be seen in this field. Tilt angle = 10°; acceleration voltage = 1,000 kV. Fig. 10. An enlarged view (rotated 90°) of Fig. 9. This 100 kV image offers a better contrast of the filament meshwork than Fig. 9. The filaments (arrows) and the membrane cisternae (arrowheads) were often interconnected. Tilt angle = 10°. Fig. 9, x 50,000. Fig. 10, x 82,500.
AChR Clusters

We have also shown that a three-dimensional meshwork of filaments is associated with the AChR cluster. Although this meshwork is contiguous with the cytoskeleton of the cell, it is unique to the area of the receptor cluster. In the cluster-free area the organization of the cytoskeleton is much simpler (Fig. 11). Our work, however, has not shown how individual receptors within the cluster are linked to the filament meshwork. In freeze-etching studies on the postsynaptic membrane of anteroventral cochlear nucleus (AVCN), Gulley and Reese (9) provided evidence that the putative receptor intramembranous particles are associated with 4-nm filaments on the cytoplasmic side. In thin-section studies on AChR clusters in cultured Xenopus muscle cells, Peng and Cheng (see Fig. 9, inset, in reference 26) have also observed that putative AChR particles are associated with 3-5-nm cytoplasmic filaments. Perhaps these filaments provide the link between the membrane-embedded receptors and the meshwork of filaments reported here.

A submembranous meshwork of filaments has also been demonstrated by a variety of other techniques in a number of different postsynaptic membranes, including adult neuromuscular junctions (6, 14), Torpedo (12), and AVCN (9). Current evidence indicates that it is the prime candidate for the machinery that restricts the lateral mobility of clustered receptors within the plane of the membrane. Diffuse AChRs, which reside in the cluster-free area of the membrane in cultured muscle cells, have a high lateral diffusion coefficient (1, 27) and correspondingly are not associated with such a filamentous meshwork (Fig. 11).

Our work has also revealed that, in addition to cytoplasmic filaments, a system of interconnected membranous cisternae (Figs. 9 and 10) is also an integral component of the AChR cluster-associated specializations. These structures often form the loci for the attachment of filaments (Fig. 10). Previously, Orneg and Reese (22) have provided evidence for the existence of such membrane cisternae in the subsynaptic cytoplasm of skeletal muscle. Their data suggested a Ca²⁺ sequestering role for these membrane-bound structures.

The identity of the filaments in the meshwork is unknown. The average sizes of these filaments in this work (6 nm) and in others works (5–10 nm in reference 12; 8–9 nm in reference 9) indicate that they could be actin filaments. Hall et al. (10), with immunofluorescence techniques using an antibody against cytoplasmic actin, have shown that actin is concentrated at the endplates. This further suggests that the meshwork may be composed of F actin. A meshwork of F actin also exists at the leading edge of migrating nonmuscle cells (2, 31, 32), where the cell engages in motility-oriented activities such as membrane ruffling. Thus, in addition to the stabilization of individual receptors, the filamentous meshwork associated with the AChR cluster may also be involved in receptor movements during synaptogenesis.

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