Immunocytochemical Localization of Two Retinoid-binding Proteins in Vertebrate Retina

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ABSTRACT The recent discovery and characterization of several proteins that purify with endogenous, bound retinoid have given rise to the suggestion that these proteins, which are abundant in retina, perform a role in transport and function of vitamin A. Immunocytochemical techniques were used to localize two retinoid-binding proteins in the retina of four species. Antisera to cellular retinal-binding protein (CRALBP) and an interphotoreceptor retinoid-binding protein (IRBP) were obtained from rabbits immunized with antigens purified from bovine retina. Antibodies from each antiserum reacted with a single component in retinal homogenates and supernatants which corresponded to the molecular weight and charge of the respective antigen (non-SDS and SDS PAGE, electrophoretic transfer to nitrocellulose, immunochemical staining). Immunocytochemistry controls were antibodies from nonimmune serum and antibodies absorbed with purified antigen. Antigens were localized on frozen-sectioned bovine, rat, monkey, and human retina using immunofluorescence and the peroxidase-antiperoxidase technique. Specific staining with anti-IRBP was found in the space that surrounds photoreceptor outer segments, with heaviest labeling in a line corresponding to the retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) apical surface. Cone outer segments were positive. Staining with anti-CRALBP was found in two cell types in all species: the RPE and the Müller glial cell. Within the RPE, labeling filled the cytoplasm and was heaviest apically, with negative nuclei. Labeling of Müller cells produced Golgi-like silhouettes with intense staining of all cytoplasmic compartments. Staining of the external limiting membrane was heavy, with labeled microvilli projecting into the interphotoreceptor space. Localization of IRBP to this space bordered by three cell types (RPE, photoreceptor, and Müller) is consistent with its proposed role in transport of retinoids among cells. Localization of CRALBP in RPE corroborates previous biochemical studies; its presence in the Müller cell suggests that this glial cell may play a hitherto unsuspected role in vitamin A metabolism in retina.

The low solubility of retinol leads to its nonspecific interaction with surfaces, lipids, and apolar regions of proteins. Transport of vitamin A to target cells is accomplished by serum retinol-binding protein which serves to solubilize and enhance the stability of the vitamin and to prevent its nonspecific absorption (22). Vitamin A appears to be delivered to only cells with surface receptors for serum retinol-binding protein (3, 18, 33). The problems associated with insolubility, as well as toxicity of free vitamin A, do not end with its delivery to a target cell by serum retinol-binding protein. In the eye, for example, the vitamin must be transported repeatedly between the retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) and photoreceptors, depending on the amount of visual pigment bleached (4, 10, 48). In addition, vitamin A must undergo enzymatic processing, including oxidation/reduction, esterification, de-esterification, and geometrical isomerization (5, 9). The recent discovery and characterization of several retinoid-binding proteins from retina suggest that they may be involved in these processes, perhaps as transport proteins or enzyme substrate carrier proteins (5, 9, 36, 38).

In addition to the photopigment rhodopsin, three cellular proteins have been purified from bovine retina and shown to carry endogenous retinoid: cellular retinol-binding protein, cellular retinoic acid-binding protein, and cellular retinal-binding protein (CRALBP) (37). Recently several laboratories have described the existence of an extracellular protein capable of binding interphotoreceptor retinoid-binding protein; PAP, peroxidase-antiperoxidase; RPE, retinal pigment epithelium.
ble of binding retinoids as well as other hydrophobic substances (1, 2, 5, 9, 24, 28, 29). This protein has been termed interstitial retinol-binding protein (5), interphotoreceptor retinol-binding protein (9), 7S protein (9), and 290,000-dalton retinol-binding protein (1). We have independently isolated a protein that appears to be identical to those described by the other laboratories. The term we employ for this protein, interphotoreceptor retinoid-binding protein (IRBP), refers to its extracellular localization in the retina and its ability to bind a number of vitamin A derivatives (retinoids). Cellular retinol-binding protein and cellular retinoic acid-binding protein have been isolated from non-ocular tissues as well as retina and may be involved in systemic functions of vitamin A (31, 32, 34). In contrast, CRALBP and IRBP have been found only in extracts of retina and/or RPE (15). This restricted localization of CRALBP and IRBP to the retina-RPE complex suggests that they may subserve functions of vitamin A specific to its role in vision.

Localization of these proteins to specific cell types within the retina would aid considerably in understanding their roles in metabolism and function of vitamin A. Some information has been obtained from biochemical studies: CRALBP has been purified from both RPE and retina and found to carry different endogenous retinoids in these two tissues (37); it is absent in isolated outer segments. IRBP was initially obtained from buffer washes of intact retinas, suggesting that this protein might be found in an extracellular compartment of the retina, probably the interphotoreceptor matrix (1, 2, 5, 28, 29). In this report we describe the immunocytochemical localization of these two proteins, CRALBP and IRBP, in the retina of four vertebrates.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Preparation of Binding Proteins: CRALBP from bovine retina and RPE was purified as described previously (35). An additional high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC)-anion exchange step was included in some preparations. Fractions containing CRALBP from a hydroxylapatite column (35) were pooled, concentrated, dialyzed against 0.1 mol NaCl, pH 7.5. 1 M EDTA, 0.1 mol dithiothreitol and applied to a Synchrom AX-300 anion exchange column (25 cm x 1 cm; Synchrom, Inc., Linden, NJ) equilibrated in the same buffer. After washing the column with an equilibration buffer for 2-3 column volumes (flow rate 1 ml/min), CRALBP was eluted from the column by linearly increasing the concentration of NaCl from 0 to 1 mol over 30 min. Fractions containing CRALBP were collected, pooled, concentrated, and stored at 80°C. IRBP was purified from bovine retinal washes according to the procedure of Adler and Kuczmik (2) or from retinal homogenates by a combination of gel filtration, ion exchange, and affinity chromatography.

Purification of CRALBP by Reverse-phase HPLC: Samples of purified CRALBP were analyzed by reverse-phase HPLC on a Vydac C8 column (The Separations Group, Hesperia, CA) (5-μm particle size, 0.3 x 25 cm). The column was equilibrated with 0.1% trifluoroacetic acid in H2O with a flow rate of 1 ml/min. Samples of CRALBP (90 μg in 250 μl) in 20 mM Tris, pH 7.5, were injected onto the column which was developed with a series of linear gradients of acetonitrile (0-95% acetonitrile, 0.15 M NaCl, 1% BSA). Transfer of binding proteins to nitrocellulose was quantitative in 1 h at 0.8-1.2 A as judged by staining of the gel with Coomassie Blue after transfer.

Fixation of Tissue: Bovine and monkey (Macaca fascicularis) retinas were obtained immediately after death; human retinas were obtained from surgically enucleated eyes; albino rat (Sprague-Dawley) eyes were enucleated after intracardiac perfusion of fixative. Only the tapetal region of the bovine retina was used for these studies so that melanin granules in the RPE would not interfere with the PAP staining. Eye cups were fixed for 2-12 h at room temperature in one of the following solutions: 4% methanol-free formaldehyde (prepared from paraformaldehyde in 0.13 M phosphate buffer) in 0.13 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4), 4% formaldehyde and 0.1% glutaraldehyde in 0.13 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4), 2% formaldehyde in 0.01 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4), 2% formaldehyde in 0.01 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4), 0.75% lysisin in 0.073 M phosphate buffer (pH 6.2) (30) or 2% formaldehyde and 0.2% picric acid in 0.13 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4; 6 h fixation only) (41). Retinas were dissected, sunk overnight in 30% sucrose in 0.13 M phosphate buffer, frozen-sectioned at 20-40-μm thickness and collected in 10% sucrose in 0.13 M phosphate buffer. Immunofluorescence: 20-μm sections were mounted on chrome alum-gelatin coated slides and air-dried overnight at room temperature. Plastic rings (0.75-cm diam) were mounted around the sections using fingernail polish.

Electrophoresis and Electrotrotransfer to Nitrocellulose: PAGE systems employed were those of Fairbanks et al. (12), with or without SDS, Laemmli (23) and Weber and Osborn (46). CRALBP was charged with 11-cis-retinal as previously described (36), and analyzed by non-SDS PAGE under deep red illumination (ruby red bulbs, Westinghouse Electric Corp., Pittsburgh, PA) to prevent photoisomerization of bound chromophore. Conditions for transfer of proteins from gels to nitrocellulose sheets were those described by Towbin et al. (44) as modified by Burnette (8). Transferred antigen was demonstrated using the peroxidase-antiperoxidase technique (PAP) (W. Stahl, University of Washington, personal communication). The immunoglobulin fraction was precipitated from serum with ammonium sulfate and an IgG fraction was purified by chromatography on a DE-52 column. Conditions of elution were specified in the text.
to form incubation wells. The sections were treated for 10 min at room temperature with 1% goat serum and 4% BSA in PBS, followed by overnight incubation at 4°C in primary antibody (1:200 in PBS containing 0.3% Triton X-100). Control sections were treated identically with either an IgG fraction from nonimmune or preimmune rabbit serum or specific antibody absorbed with purified antigens (concentration 10−25 μg/ml IRBP or CRALBP). Sections were washed twice (15 min each) with PBS at room temperature and incubated for 30 min at room temperature in the dark in goat anti-rabbit IgG-fluorescein isothiocyanate (Cappell Laboratories), diluted 1:50 in PBS with 0.3% Triton X-100. After two 15 min washes in phosphate buffer, the plastic rings were removed and the sections were coverslipped with 80% glycerol in 0.13 M phosphate buffer containing 5% n-propyl gallate (17). The sections were examined with a Zeiss microscope equipped for epifluorescence.

PAP: 40-μm free-floating sections or 20-μm sections mounted on slides as above were incubated overnight at room temperature in primary antibody diluted 1:200 in PBS with 0.3% Triton X-100 and 1% normal sheep serum. Controls consisted of an IgG fraction from nonimmune or preimmune serum and specific antibody absorbed with purified antigen. The sections were washed three times, 1 h each, with 0.2 M Tris buffer (pH 7.4) at room temperature and then incubated in sheep anti-rabbit IgG (Cappell Laboratories) diluted 1:10 in PBS for 30 min at 37°C. The sections were washed three times, 1 h each at room temperature with Tris buffer and then incubated in rabbit PAP (42) diluted 1:50 in PBS for 30 min at 37°C. Following three washes, 1 h each at room temperature with Tris buffer, the sections were reacted with diaminobenzidine and H2O2 in Tris buffer, pH 7.4 for 30 min at room temperature, washed 30 min with Tris buffer at room temperature, and some sections were mounted on glass slides in glycerol with 1% formaldehyde. Other sections were postfixed in 1% OsO4 in 0.13 M phosphate buffer and processed in EPON. Sections were examined by light and electron microscopy with no counterstain.

The cytochemical control was treatment of all samples (sections treated initially with immune, preimmune, or antigen-absorbed antibody), with diaminobenzidine solution lacking H2O2.

RESULTS

Characterization of Antibodies

CRALBP and IRBP were examined with several SDS- and non-SDS PAGE systems before use as antigens. No evidence was found for heterogeneity. Retinal homogenates and supernatants were prepared and analyzed in duplicate sets by SDS PAGE and non-SDS PAGE. The separated proteins from one half of a gel were electrophoretically transferred to nitrocellulose and analyzed by the PAP technique with specific antibody. The other half of the gel was stained with Coomassie Blue. Fig. 2 illustrates the results obtained with antibody to CRALBP and retinal supernatants. One band was produced by staining with the specific antibody whether the retinal supernatant proteins were separated by size (SDS PAGE, Fig. 2A) or charge and size (non-SDS PAGE, Fig. 2B). An identical result was obtained when retinal homogenates were analyzed by SDS PAGE. This result indicates that anti-CRALBP recognizes a single component in retinal homogenates and supernatants which corresponds to the size and charge of purified CRALBP. A similar result was obtained when anti-IRBP was used for the analysis (Fig. 3, A and B) indicating that this antibody recognizes a single component in retinal homogenates and supernatants which corresponds in size and charge to purified IRBP.

Immunofluorescence

The best preservation of retinal morphology was achieved with the formaldehyde-picric acid fixative but this yielded virtually no specific labeling. The formaldehyde-glutaraldehyde mixture yielded acceptable morphology but weak labeling. Formaldehyde alone gave relatively poor preservation, with prominent ballooning of photoreceptor inner segments, but slightly better specific immunofluorescence with the anti-CRALBP and the strongest reactivity with the anti-IRBP. Finally, the formaldehyde-lsine-periodate fixative produced the strongest specific labeling with anti-CRALBP but usually gave relatively poor preservation of morphology, with frequent detachment of the retina from the RPE-choroid.
plex. The formaldehyde-lysine-periodate fixative gave rather weak labeling with anti-IRBP, possibly because this antigen is a glycoprotein (1, 5) and the sugar moieties, which are altered by the formaldehyde-lysine-periodate (30), may be antigenic determinants.

Control sections treated with antibodies from preimmune serum or antibodies absorbed with purified antigen showed only the autofluorescence of retina (Figs. 4A and 5B). This was strongest with the paraformaldehyde-picric acid fixative and consisted of a weak green fluorescence of the neural retina, particularly in the zones rich in mitochondria (inner and outer plexiform layers and photoreceptor ellipsoids). Lipofuscin granules in the RPE showed a bright yellow-orange autofluorescence.

Specific labeling was found only in sections that had been treated with anti-CRALBP or anti-IRBP in all retinas examined. The fluorescence after anti-CRALBP was confined to two cell types, the RPE and the Müller cells of retina (Fig. 4, B and C). Within the RPE, labeling filled the cytoplasm and was concentrated in the apical portion of the cells; RPE nuclei were negative. In occasional sections where the retina was partially detached from the RPE, the labeled RPE apical processes adhered to the photoreceptor outer segment tips (Fig. 5A).

Labeling of the Müller cells produced a Golgi-like silhouette, with intense fluorescence of the basal end feet, triangular somata in the inner nuclear layer, and fine cytoplasmic processes that surround neuronal elements in the plexiform and nuclear layers. Müller cell nuclei were negative. The presence of CRALBP in astrocytes could not be excluded due to the heaviness of labeling of Müller end feet. In monkey, the fluorescence was intense at the external limiting membrane, with tufts of labeled microvilli projecting into the interphotoreceptor space (Figs. 5C and 7D). Labeled microvilli of rat Müller cells were inconspicuous, in agreement with previous anatomical descriptions (45). Labeling by anti-CRALBP of the following retinal elements was never observed: outer or inner segments of rods and cones, photoreceptor or other neuronal somata, or the interphotoreceptor space located beyond the Müller apical microvilli.

Specific immunofluorescence with anti-IRBP was restricted to the interphotoreceptor space that surrounds the photoreceptor outer segments (Fig. 6, A and B). Heaviest labeling occurred in a line corresponding to the RPE apical surface, which was accentuated in the PAP sections (Fig. 6C). No labeling of any intracellular compartment was found, although cone outer segments were positive (see Fig. 11 below).

**Immunoperoxidase**

Control sections that had been treated with preimmune or antigen-absorbed antibodies showed very light tan staining of the plexiform layers, photoreceptor ellipsoids, and Müller end feet against the internal limiting membrane; erythrocytes were stained dark brown owing to endogenous peroxidase activity (Figs. 7A and 8A). Cytochemical controls that had been treated with anti-CRALBP and reacted with diaminobenzidine but no 

H₂O₂ showed no tan or brown coloration, with the exception of melanin in the RPE and choroid of human, monkey, and bovine, and an occasional brown premelanosome in the otherwise melanin-free bovine RPE (Fig. 7B).

Specific peroxidase activity was found only in those retinas that had been incubated with anti-CRALBP or anti-IRBP. As found by immunofluorescence, specific PAP staining due to
anti-CRALBP was restricted to two cell types, RPE and Müller cells of the retina (Figs. 7 C and 8 B). Reaction product filled the cytoplasm but was absent from the nuclei of both cell types. The increased sensitivity of the PAP technique enabled resolution of labeled Müller cell microvilli extending beyond the external limiting membrane into the interphotoreceptor space (Figs. 7 D and 9) as well as RPE apical microvilli which interdigitate with photoreceptor outer segments (Fig. 10).

As found by immunofluorescence, reaction product due to anti-IRBP was localized in the interphotoreceptor space that surrounds rod and cone outer segments and the apical surfaces of inner segments (Fig. 6 C). By electron microscopy, peroxidase label surrounded rod and cone inner segments and filled the intralamellar spaces of cone outer segments (Fig. 11). This extracellular staining stopped abruptly at the external limiting membrane and the surfaces of Müller microvilli were heavily stained. Staining was pronounced in a band along the RPE apical margin; by electron microscopy, this labeled band was resolved as heavily labeled IRBP coating the RPE microvilli.

**DISCUSSION**

Previous biochemical studies from this laboratory have provided information concerning the cellular localization of...
CRALBP. The protein was purified from RPE in substantial amounts (~0.7 nmol per bovine retina) and found to carry endogenous 11-cis-retinal (37). The present study corroborated this finding with localization of CRALBP to RPE cytoplasm by immunocytochemistry. Its presence in RPE apical processes is particularly interesting in view of the known exchange of retinoid between RPE and photoreceptor cells (4, 10, 48). CRALBP has also been purified from retina in substantial amounts (~1 nmol per bovine retina). Moreover, the endogenous retinoid content of CRALBP from retina (11-cis-retinal and 11-cis-retinol) differs from that of CRALBP purified from RPE (11-cis-retinal only; [37]) suggesting that two distinct populations of CRALBP may be localized in different cell types. In view of the known unique involvement of 11-cis-retinoids in the visual cycle, it seemed reasonable to assume that CRALBP would be found in the photoreceptor cell. However, most surprisingly, photoreceptors did not react with the antibody and the Müller cell stained for the binding protein. To our knowledge, this is the first evidence that this glial cell might be involved in vitamin A metabolism in the

FIGURE 6 Localization of IRBP; formaldehyde-glutaraldehyde fixation. (a) Bovine retina after treatment with anti-IRBP which had been absorbed with purified IRBP. Only autofluorescent lipofuchsin granules of the retinal pigment epithelium are apparent. C, chorioid. (b) Bovine retina following treatment with anti-IRBP. The space delineated by the apex of the retinal pigment epithelium (∗•) and the external limiting membrane (•+) is brightly fluorescent. Note negative image of cone inner segment (above c) and vertical striations in the interphotoreceptor space, corresponding to staining of external surfaces of rod outer segments. (c) Bovine retina reacted with the immunoperoxidase technique to demonstrate localization of IRBP in the interphotoreceptor space (S). Staining is most intense in a line (••) just apical to the retinal pigment epithelium; *, external limiting membrane; M, melanin in a solitary cell of the pigment epithelium; arrows, erythrocytes. × 380 (a and b); × 100 (c).

FIGURE 7 Monkey retina reacted by the immunoperoxidase technique for demonstration of CRALBP; formaldehyde-lysine-periodate fixation. (a) Control section treated with anti-CRALBP absorbed with CRALBP, followed by all steps in the PAP technique. Observe light tan staining of photoreceptor ellipsoids (E) and plexiform layers (P) presumably due to mitochondrial cytochrome activity. Erythrocytes (arrows) are stained dark brown due to endogenous peroxidase activity. The retinal pigment epithelium has artifactually detached. (b) Control section that had been incubated with anti-CRALBP and processed by the PAP method with the omission of H2O2 in the final cytochemical step. There is no endogenous coloration of the retina. (c) Specific staining with anti-CRALBP results in dark brown reaction product in Müller end feet (F), the row of Müller somata (m), the line of Müller processes which ramify in the external plexiform layer (p) and the external limiting membrane (+). The retinal pigment epithelium has detached, but remnants of its heavily stained microvilli (arrow) adhere to the tips of unstained outer segments (0). (d) Higher magnification of c to demonstrate tufts of labeled Müller microvilli (arrows) extending into the interphotoreceptor space from the beaded external limiting membrane (+). × 230 (a–c); × 570 (d).
FIGURE 8 Bovine retina reacted by the PAP technique for the localization of CRALBP; formaldehyde-lysine-periodate fixation. (a) Control section treated with CRALBP-absorbed antibodies. There is light tan staining of Müller end feet (F) and the photoreceptor layer (P). Endogenous coloration is due to premelanosomes (arrows) in the retinal pigment epithelium. T, unstained tapetum. (b) Bovine retina as in a following incubation with anti-CRALBP. Note intense staining of retinal pigment epithelium (⊕) and Müller cells, including foot processes (F) and somata (arrows) in the inner nuclear layer. Photoreceptor inner and outer segments (P) as well as retinal blood vessels (B) and the tapetum (T) are unstained. × 170.

The validity of this study depends on the purity of the antigen, CRALBP. The presence of a Müller cell contaminant in our preparations could be responsible for the result we have obtained. However, several lines of evidence and reasoning suggest that the antibodies are directed solely against CRALBP: (a) Antisera prepared against three different preparations of CRALBP (each injected into three rabbits for a total of nine rabbits) produced staining of both RPE and Müller cells. (b) Staining of both cell types was eliminated by adding CRALBP (purified by both our normal procedures and by an additional reverse-phase HPLC step (Fig. 1)) to antiserum before immunocytochemistry. (c) Antibodies used in this study were prepared against CRALBP from retina, yet staining of both RPE and Müller cells was abolished when CRALBP purified from RPE was added to the antibodies before immunocytochemistry. It is unlikely that CRALBP from these two sources would contain the same contaminants. (d) Immunostaining of nitrocellulose electrobLOTS prepared after both SDS PAGE and non-SDS PAGE of retinal supernatants showed a single band, indicating that CRALBP was the only antigen recognized. (e) The presence of CRALBP in a cell type of the retina was not unexpected since it had been purified from this tissue (35). Therefore the presence of a second antigen in addition to CRALBP in our preparation is unlikely; such a second antigen would have to co-purify with CRALBP and have charge and size properties identical to CRALBP in all gel systems and reverse-phase HPLC systems we have employed. Our interpretation of the data is that CRALBP is present in the cytoplasm of both Müller and RPE cells.

Localization of CRALBP in the Müller cell suggests that this glial cell may play a hitherto unsuspected role in vitamin A metabolism in the retina. Other suggested functions for the Müller cell include secretion and/or maintenance of the internal limiting membrane and vitreous humor, ion exchange and participation in neurotransmitter metabolism, and structural support of the various layers of the retina (14, 20, 45). The Müller apical processes terminate as numerous fine microvilli (39) which "may serve to exchange metabolites with the pigment epithelium as well as to maintain a homeostatic environment in the region of the photoreceptor outer segments" (40), that is, the interphotoreceptor space.

IRBP was localized to this interphotoreceptor space in all species examined, corroborating previous biochemical evidence for its extracellular location, since it was isolated from retinae by washing techniques developed initially to extract interphotoreceptor matrix (1, 2, 5, 28, 29). Other investigators have proposed that IRBP is involved in transport of retinol between RPE and retina based on its intercellular localization, ability to bind retinoids and content of endogenous retinoid (1, 9, 24, 28). Our findings strengthen this suggestion since we have demonstrated here that IRBP is confined to the interphotoreceptor space across which such transport occurs. Use of the PAP technique at the fine structural level enabled resolution of the structural correlate of the heavily labeled retina.
Differences in the properties of IRBP and CRALBP must be kept in mind when considering the functional roles of the two proteins. CRALBP displays a high degree of specificity; of the compounds tested so far, only retinoids bind to the protein, and among the retinoids, only retinols and retinals of the 11-cis-configuration are bound (16). Direct binding of other cis-isomers has not yet been investigated. In addition, CRALBP purifies with its binding site saturated with 11-cis-retinoid (37), a relatively strong indication that the protein is involved in vitamin A metabolism. IRBP, on the other hand, is nonspecific in its binding properties. Not only does the protein bind all retinoids tested to date (retinoic acid, retinal, retinol, retinyl acetate, retinyl palmitate) but also binds exogenous vitamin E and palmitate (J. C. Saari, unpublished observations and references 5, 28, and 29). Thus the physiologically important ligand (if any) carried by IRBP has not yet been established.

A fortuitous observation in this study prompts cautious interpretation of results from biochemical experiments purporting to isolate proteins from RPE or retina. In sections where the retina had detached from the RPE, labeled RPE apical processes adhered to outer segments (Fig. 5A). If similar incomplete cleavage occurs during dissection of retinas for biochemical studies, some CRALBP in retinal homogenates may originate from RPE. It is possible that this is the source of 11-cis-retinal in CRALBP isolated from retina and that CRALBP derived solely from retina contains only 11-cis-retinol. Further experiments are required to resolve this question.

In summary, two separate binding proteins with different specificities for vitamin A have been localized in the retina-RPE complex of four species of vertebrates (Fig. 12). Neither has been found in photoreceptors, where vitamin A forms an integral component of rod and cone photopigments. Rather, the two binding proteins have been found in the three compartments which surround photoreceptors, the RPE (CRALBP), the interphotoreceptor matrix (IRBP), and the Müller cell (CRALBP). These two cell types have not been considered functionally similar, although certain anatomic
similarities have been noted between the two (14, 20), including an abundance of smooth endoplasmic reticulum in the cytoplasm (45) (as found in other cell types specialized for lipid synthesis); intimate association with the two sources of blood supply to the retina, the choriocapillaris (RPE) and retinal capillaries (Müller cells); and apical microvilli which extend into the interphotoreceptor matrix and surround the distal ends of outer segments (RPE) and inner segments (Müller cells). Since microvilli function to increase surface membrane area of cells for absorption and/or secretion, their extension from both RPE and Müller cells into the interphotoreceptor compartment, which is filled with a second binding protein (IRBP), is consistent with a physiologic transfer, mediated by this protein, of different forms of vitamin A among RPE, Müller, and photoreceptor cells.

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