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Auto/Cross-Regulation of Hoxb3 Expression in Posterior Hindbrain and Spinal Cord

Tai On Yau,* Chung Tin Kwan,* L. Martin Jakt,* Nicole Stallwood,† Sabine Cordes,† and Mai Har Sham*1

*Department of Biochemistry, The University of Hong Kong, Faculty of Medicine Building, 21 Sassoon Road, Pokfulam, Hong Kong, China; and †Samuel Lunenfeld Research Institute, Mount Sinai Hospital, 600 University Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1X5, Canada

The complex and dynamic pattern of Hoxb3 expression in the developing hindbrain and the associated neural crest of mouse embryos is controlled by three separate cis-regulatory elements: element I (region A), element IIIa, and the r5 enhancer (element IVa). We have examined the cis-regulatory element IIIa by transgenic and mutational analysis to determine the upstream trans-acting factors and mechanisms that are involved in controlling the expression of the mouse Hoxb3 gene in the anterior spinal cord and hindbrain up to the r5/r6 boundary, as well as the associated neural crest which migrate to the third and posterior branchial arches and to the gut. By deletion analysis, we have identified the sequence requirements within a 482-bp element III482. Two Hox binding sites are identified in element III482 and we have shown that in vitro both Hoxb3 and Hoxb4 proteins can interact with these Hox binding sites, suggesting that auto/cross-regulation is required for establishing the expression of Hoxb3 in the neural tube domain. Interestingly, we have identified a novel GCCAGGC sequence motif within element III482, which is also required to direct gene expression to a subset of the expression domains except for rhombomere 6 and the associated neural crest migrating to the third and posterior branchial arches. Element III482 can direct a higher level of reporter gene expression in r6, which led us to investigate whether kreisler is involved in regulating Hoxb3 expression in r6 through this element. However, our transgenic and mutational analysis has demonstrated that, although kreisler binding sites are present, they are not required for the establishment or maintenance of reporter gene expression in r6. Our results have provided evidence that the expression of Hoxb3 in the neural tube up to the r5/r6 boundary is auto/cross-regulated by Hox genes and expression of Hoxb3 in r6 does not require kreisler. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA)

Key Words: Hoxb3; hindbrain; rhombomere; kreisler; neural crest; cis-regulation.

INTRODUCTION

During embryogenesis, the vertebrate hindbrain develops a transient series of repeated morphological units called rhombomeres. The segmentation of the hindbrain into cell lineage-restricted rhombomeres is a crucial process in the specification of structures developing in the hindbrain (Fraser et al., 1990; Lumsden and Krumlauf, 1996). In the neural tube, there is segment-specific differentiation of neuronal cell types (Lumsden and Keynes, 1989; Clarke and Lumsden, 1993; Theil et al., 2002); through the segmental specification and migration of neural crest cells to the branchial arches, craniofacial structures are developed

1 To whom correspondence should be addressed. Fax: (852)-2855-1254. E-mail: mhsham@hkucc.hku.hk.
Transgenic regulatory analyses of cis-elements show that the transcription factors Krox20, kreisler, and Hox proteins play crucial roles in directly regulating the rhombomeric expression of multiple Hox genes. The zinc finger transcription factor Krox20 is required for the development and maintenance of r3 and r5 (Schneider-Maunoury et al., 1993, 1997; Swiatek and Gridley, 1993; Giudicelli et al., 2001), and it directly regulates the transcription of Hoxa2 and Hoxb2 in these two rhombomeres through specific Krox20-binding sites (Sham et al., 1993; Nonchev et al., 1996a,b; Vesque et al., 1996; Maconochie et al., 2001). The kreisler gene which encodes a Maf/basic leucine zipper protein Krml1 is necessary for the formation of r5 in the mouse and it directly regulates the expression of Hoxa3 and Hoxb3 in this rhombomere using kreisler-binding sites in their r5 enhancer elements (Cordes and Barsh, 1994; Manzanares et al., 1997, 1999a,b). In r5, where the expression of Krox20 and kreisler overlap, these two factors cooperate synergistically to activate the Hoxb3 r5 enhancer (Manzanares et al., 2002). In addition, auto- and cross-regulatory interactions among Hox genes have been demonstrated to be important mechanisms in maintaining the spatial patterns of Hox genes expression in the hindbrain and spinal cord. Auto- and/or cross-regulation have been described for Hoxb4, Hoxa1, Hoxb1, Hoxb2, and Hoxa3 together with other cofactors such as Pbx and Meis/Prep (Ferretti et al., 2000; Gould et al., 1997, 1998; Maconochie et al., 1997; Manzanares et al., 2001; Pöpperl et al., 1995). Interestingly, expression of Krox20 is also regulated by Hox genes. In r5, the expression of Krox20 is initially repressed by Hoxa1 and Hoxb1, expression of Krox20 occurs in r5 only after they have retreated from the hindbrain at around 8 dpc (Barrow et al., 2000; Wilkinson et al., 1989). It has been shown that, in r3, there is synergy between Hoxa1 and Krox20 in controlling rhombomere patterning (Helmbacher et al., 1998). Therefore, there are intricate interactive loops among the transcription factors Krox20, kreisler and Hox proteins in the developing hindbrain to control the segmentation and specification processes.

In our transgenic regulatory analysis to investigate the cis-acting components that direct the dynamic pattern of Hoxb3 expression in mouse embryos, we identified three separate elements which direct gene expression in different domains in the neural tube (Kwan et al., 2001; element I (region A) shared between Hoxb3 and Hoxb4 controls posterior neural tube expression up to the r6/r7 boundary in the hindbrain (Aparicio et al., 1995; Gould et al., 1997, 1998; Morrison et al., 1995; Whiting et al., 1991); element IIIa directs expression in anterior spinal cord and hindbrain up to r5/r6 boundary (Kwan et al., 2001); and element IVa regulates the most anterior expression specifically in a single rhombomere r5 (Manzanares et al., 1997, 1999a,b). Comparing the group 3 paralog members Hoxb3 and Hoxa3, it is interesting to note that, although their expression patterns are similar at 9.5 dpc, there are subtle differences in the regulation of their segmental expression in the hindbrain. Hoxa3 is upregulated by kreisler in both r5 and r6 by the same cis-regulatory element, but Hoxb3 is upregulated by kreisler only in r5 (Manzanares et al., 1997, 1999a,b; Kwan et al., 2001). The expression of Hoxb3 in r6 is controlled by a separate cis-regulatory element IIIa, which is located more than 4 kb upstream of the r5 control region (Fig. 1A). This raises the interesting question of whether kreisler will be able to act on element IIIa and regulate Hoxb3 expression in r6.

In this study, we examined the Hoxb3 cis-acting regulatory element IIIa by transgenic and mutational analysis to determine the upstream trans-acting factors and mechanisms that are involved in controlling the expression of mouse Hoxb3 in the anterior spinal cord and hindbrain. By in vitro and transgenic in vivo analysis, we have shown that the expression of Hoxb3 in the element IIIa domains is dependent on Hox auto- and/or cross-regulation as well as other trans-acting factors, but it is independent of kreisler.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Generation of DNA Constructs**

Transgenic constructs III and IIIa were described in Kwan et al. (2001). Construct IIIa contains a SacI–Stul fragment of construct III. Construct III482 was generated by cloning the 482-bp Sau3A fragment of construct IIIa (Fig. 1A; GenBank Accession No. AF529307) into the BamHI site of the lacZ reporter cassette pB42A (Whiting et al., 1991). This 482-bp Sau3A fragment was also cloned into pBlueScript KS (Stratagene) to generate pTY1, which was used as template for all subsequent PCR amplifications. Construct III264 was generated by inserting a 264-bp PCR fragment as indicated in Fig. 1A into the HindIII-XbaI sites of pB42A, which is similar to pB42A but with a linker of restriction enzyme sites. The primers used for the amplification of the 264-bp fragment were: 5'-CGC TCT AGA ACT AGT GGA TTG GGC CTC ACT GCT C-3' and 5'-TAT AAG CTT GGG CCT GTC TGC C-3'. To generate constructs 1, 2, and 3, which contained mutant binding sites, 393-bp DNA fragments (see Figs. 2 and 4A) were amplified by PCR using primers 5'-GCC TCT AGA ACT GGA TC-3' and 5'-TAT ACA CCT GCT GCT C-3'. The mutant sites were introduced by PCR-based site-directed mutagenesis using the following mutant oligonucleotides (only forward primers are shown here, mutated nucleotides are underlined): for construct 1, 5'-ATT TAC TAC TCA GAC GGT ACC ATC CAT CCA AAA ATA GCA C-3' (nucleotide position 159–197 of element III482) and 5'-TGC TCA GTG GTG AAT TCG GAA ACA GTG TAT TCC CAA GAG G-3' (positions 305–344); construct 2, 5'-GGG CCC TAC AAG CCG CCG CCT TAC TCA GAC TGC TGC-3' (positions 141–179); construct 3, 5'-GGT AGA AGA AGA TCG TGT TGG TAC AAT GGG CCT TGT GGT ATG GCC T-3' (positions 67–106). The DNA fragments containing the desired mutations as illustrated in Figs. 2 and 4A were cloned into pB42A to generate constructs 1, 2, and 3. The DNA sequences of all the constructs were confirmed by sequencing reactions.

**Transgenic Mice Analysis**

Transgenic mice were generated as described in Kwan et al. (2001). Fertilized oocytes obtained from F1 (CBA × C57BL/10) mice were used for DNA microinjection. Transgenic mice were geno-
FIG. 1. Transgenic deletion analysis of Element III. (A) Schematic diagram to illustrate the location of the multiple regulatory elements and Elements III, IIIa, III482, and III264 in Hoxb3. Exons 2, 3, and 4 (Ex2, 3, and 4) of Hoxb3 are indicated as open boxes; homeobox in exon 4 is represented by a filled box; the promoter P1 is indicated by an arrow. Yellow ovals, mesodermal-specific enhancers; blue oval, r5 enhancer; red oval, Element IIIa, which directs gene expression in the neural tube up to r5/6 boundary and in mesodermal derivatives. Exp, number of transgenic embryos showing consistent expression pattern of lacZ reporter; tg, number of transgenic embryos. Restriction sites: B, BamHI; S, Sau3A; Sa, SacI; St, Stul. (B–E) Whole-mount lacZ staining of 8.5 (B), 9.5 (C), 12.5-dpc (D) transgenic embryos carrying Element III482; and 10.5 dpc (E) transgenic embryos carrying Element III264. Arrowhead, postotic sulcus; fg, foregut; mg, midgut; r5/6, rhombomeres 5 and 6; 3 and 4, branchial arches 3 and 4. (F–H) Dark-field illumination showing lacZ staining (pink) of sagittal (F), coronal (G), and transverse (H) sections of 9.5-dpc transgenic embryos carrying Element III482. Arrows indicate migrating neural crest cells; b1, b2, b3, and b4, branchial arches 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively; r6, rhombomere 6; pp2, pharyngeal pouch 2; se, surface ectoderm; nt, neural tube; da, dorsal aorta; fg, foregut. (I) Transverse section showing neurofilament immunohistochemical staining of lacZ-stained 10.5-dpc transgenic embryo carrying Element III482. drg, dorsal root ganglion; mn, motor neuron; cn, commissural neuron; fp, floor plate.

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typed by PCR using DNA extracted from yolk sac. The β-galactosidase activity of transgenic embryos was analyzed by whole-mount staining as described in Kwan et al. (2001). Briefly, embryos were fixed in 1% formaldehyde, 0.2% glutaraldehyde, 2 mM MgCl₂, 5 mM EGTA, 0.02% NP40 in PBS at 4°C for 30–90 min, depending on their size. The embryos were then washed in three changes of PBS with 0.02% NP40 at room temperature for 30 min each and stained in the dark with 1 mg/ml X-gal, 5 mM K₃Fe(CN)₆, 5 mM K₄Fe(CN)₆, 2 mM MgCl₂, 0.01% sodium deoxycholate, 0.02% NP40 in PBS at room temperature. For preparation of paraffin sections, X-gal-stained embryos were postfixed in 4% paraformaldehyde overnight at 4°C, dehydrated, and embedded in paraffin wax before sections (6 μm) were prepared and counterstained with eosin.

For immunohistochemistry with anti-neurofilament antibody 2H3 (Developmental Studies Hybridoma Bank), X-gal-stained embryos were refluxed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 2 h and rinsed in PBS three times before the whole-mount immunostaining procedure as described in Mark et al. (1993). After color developing with DAB substrate, the double-stained embryo was further processed by paraffin sectioning as above.

**Electrophoretic Mobility Shift Assays (EMSA)**

Oligonucleotides were designed with 5'-overhangs after annealing with their complementary strands. Oligonucleotides were labeled with [α-32P]dCTP (PB10205; Amersham) by end-filling 5'-overhangs using Klenow fragment. For analysis of the kreisler

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**FIG. 2.** (A) Sequence of mouse Element III482 and potential transcription factor binding sites. ap, GCCAGGC sequence motif; hs1 and hs2, Hox binding sites 1 and 2; kr1 and kr2, Krm1 binding sites 1 and 2; arrows indicate the boundaries of the enhancer elements (III264, III482 and constructs 1, 2, and 3) inserted into the lacZ reporters used in this study. (B) Sequence alignment of potential Krm1 binding sites. r5-kr1 and r5-kr2, Krm1 binding sites found in the r5-specific Element IVa of Hoxb3 (Manzanares et al., 1997, Kwan et al., 2001); III-kr1 and III-kr2, Krm1 binding sites in Element III482 of Hoxb3. Dashes indicate nucleotides that are identical to the consensus. (C) Sequence alignment of AP-2-like binding site. Hoxa2-ap, AP-2 binding site found in Hoxa2 (Maconochie et al., 1999); III-ap, GCCAGGC sequence motif in Element III482. (D) Sequence alignment of Hox binding sites. Hox binding consensus is boxed in rectangle and Pbx binding consensus is circled in oval. LNE-hs, Hox/Pbx binding sites found in the late neural enhancer (LNE; Gould et al., 1997) of Hoxb4; III-hs, Hox binding sites found in Element III482.
binding reaction contained 20,000 cpm probe, 500 ng poly(dIdC- 
dIdC), protein (GST-Hoxb3, 0.2-1.6 μg; GST-Hoxb4, 2-50 ng), 20 
mM Hepes-KOH (pH 7.9), 100 mM KCl, 0.25 μg/ml BSA, 2 mM 
DTT, 1 mM EDTA, 12% glycerol. The binding reaction was 
incubated at 24°C for 30 min. The samples were run in a 6% 
acrylamide glycerol gel (6% acrylamide, 2.5% glycerol, 0.075% 
APS, 0.5x TBE) in 0.5x TBE.

**RESULTS**

Identification of a Minimal Enhancer for Posterior Hindbrain and Spinal Cord

We have previously identified a 1.3-kb cis-acting enhancer element IIIa which can direct reporter gene expression in the hindbrain with an anterior limit at r5/r6, anterior spinal cord, and the associated neural crest (Kwan et al., 2001). In order to define the specific sequences that can mediate the expression, we investigated a 482-bp Sau3A fragment within element IIIa by transgenic mice analysis using the lacZ reporter construct III482 (Fig. 1A). In 8.5-dpc transgenic embryos, expression of the lacZ gene was restricted to the anterior neural tube, with an anterior limit at the developing hindbrain at the posterior rhombomeric sulcus (Fig. 1B). In 9.5-dpc embryos, construct III482 was able to mediate lacZ gene expression in the hindbrain up to rhombomere 6, in anterior spinal cord, and the associated neural crest which migrated ventrally to the mesenchyme of the third, fourth, and posterior branchial arches as well as to the foregut (Figs. 1C, 1F-1H). At this stage, the level of lacZ expression was higher in rhombomere 6 than in the rest of the neural tube (Figs. 1C and 1F); a small number of cells at posterior r5 also expressed lacZ (Fig. 1F). Histological sections of the branchial region of 9.5-dpc transgenic embryos showed that the lacZ reporter is expressed in the neural crest cells populating the third, fourth, and posterior branchial arches, but not in the surface ectoderm (Figs. 1F and 1G). Transverse section of a transgenic embryo at the trunk level showed that the neural crest cells migrating ventrally to the dorsal aorta and the foregut also expressed the lacZ gene (Fig. 1H). Similar expression patterns were maintained in 10.5-dpc transgenic embryos; at this stage, the lacZ-marked vagal neural crest cells migrating to the
FIG. 4. Functional study of Krr1, Hox, and GCCAGGC binding sites by site-directed mutagenesis and transgenic mice analysis. (A) Summary of the mutant constructs generated by site-directed mutagenesis used in transgenic analysis. Sites mutated: green rectangle, GCCAGGC sequence binding site; red triangles, Hox binding sites; gray ovals, Krr1 binding sites. Tg, total number of transgenic embryos; Exp, number of transgenic embryos showing consistent expression pattern of lacZ reporter; brackets indicate transgenic embryos showing only subset of expression domains directed by Element III482. (B–I) lacZ-stained 10.5-dpc transgenic embryos generated with constructs containing wildtype and mutant binding sites. (B, D, F, H) Lateral view. (C, E, G, I) Dorsal view. (B, C) Transgenic embryos carrying Element III482. (D, E) Transgenic embryos carrying construct 1, with both kr1 and kr2 sites mutated. (F, G) Transgenic embryos carrying construct 2, with both hs1 and hs2 sites mutated. (H, I) Transgenic embryos carrying construct 3, with the GCCAGGC site mutated. r5/6, rhombomeres 5 and 6 boundary; 3, branchial arch 3; 4, branchial arches 4 and posterior branchial arches, fg, foregut.
foregut could be observed (see Fig. 4B). By 12.5 dpc, lacZ expression in the neural tube was completely downregulated, but in the midgut, the reporter gene continued to express in the neural crest derivatives (Fig. 1D). Immuno-histochemical analysis of lacZ-stained 10.5-dpc embryo using the neurofilament-specific antibody 2H3 in histological sections showed that the neurofilament and lacZ staining overlapped in the ventral half of the neural tube as well as in the dorsal root ganglia (Fig. 1). Therefore, element III482 could direct reporter gene expression in the neural tube and the associated neural crest, contributing to the central and peripheral nervous systems.

The transgene expression patterns directed by construct III482 were similar to those of element III or IIIa (Kwan et al., 2001), except for the absence of lacZ expression in the surface ectoderm of the branchial arches at 9.5 dpc and the absence of transient expression in posterior somites at 8.5 dpc. Therefore, this 482-bp fragment contained sequences necessary for directing gene expression to the neural tube and associated neural crest. We have examined the activity of a smaller fragment of 264 bp (construct III264, Fig. 1A) in transgenic embryos and found that among four transgenic embryos only one of them expressed the reporter, the patterns of expression at 10.5 dpc were identical to those derived from construct III482 (Fig. 1E). Hence, this 264-bp fragment represented the minimal enhancer region.

**kreisler Is Not Required for the Activity of the 482-bp Enhancer**

We determined the sequence of the 482-bp enhancer and identified a number of transcription factor binding sites, including those with sequence homology to consensus Krml1 and Hox, as well as a GCCAGGC motif which resembles binding site for AP-2 family of transcription factors (Fig. 2). Two potential Krml1 binding sites with homology to the consensus T-MARE site as well as kreira-binding sites in the Hoxb3 r5 enhancer (Figs. 2A and 2B) (Manzanares et al., 1997) could be identified. The kr1 site is located within the 264-bp minimal region; and kr2 is out of the minimal enhancer (Fig. 2A). As Krml1 is essential for upregulating Hoxb3 expression in r5 and for Hoxa3 in both r5 and r6 (Manzanares et al., 1999a,b, 2001), we tested by in vitro and in vivo experiments whether Krml1 could also regulate Hoxb3 in r6. We first examined whether the Krml1 protein could bind to the kr1 and kr2 sites by EMSA. We found that the DNA-binding region of the Krml1 fusion protein (MBP-Kr) could form specific complex with double-stranded oligonucleotides containing sequences of either the kr1 site (Fig. 3A) or the kr2 site (Fig. 3B). The binding of the Krml1 fusion protein to these two sites was blocked by addition of an excess of oligonucleotides containing a consensus binding site for Maf proteins (Fig. 3, T-MARE), but was not affected by the addition of excess random oligonucleotides (Figs. 3A and 3B). The results of the EMSA experiment suggested that Krml1 protein could interact specifically with both the kr1 and kr2 sites in vitro.

We then carried out site-directed mutagenesis experiments and tested the mutated kr1 and kr2 sites in the context of a 393-bp subfragment within enhancer III482 by transgenic mice analysis. Using the reporter construct 1 (Fig. 4A), we generated 12 transgenic embryos and 3 of them expressed lacZ in the hindbrain, spinal cord, and branchial arches; the expression patterns at 10.5 dpc were unaffected by the mutant sites and were the same as the normal control (Figs. 4D and 4E). Therefore, the activity of enhancer III does not require any of the two Krml1 sites, and we conclude that these sites are not required for the activity of enhancer III482 to direct gene expression in r6.

**Hox Binding Sites Suggest Auto- and Cross-Regulation**

Based on sequence analysis, we identified two consensus Hox binding sites (TAATT) which are 7 bp apart; we designated these two sites hs1 and hs2 (Figs. 2A and 2D). Compared with the binding sites in the LNE (late neural enhancer) of Hoxb4 (Gould et al., 1997), the hs1 site here is almost identical to the Hoxb3 binding site in LNE, but the hs2 site only weakly resembles the Hox/Pbx complex binding site (Fig. 2D). We have investigated the protein binding activity of the hs1 and hs2 sites further by in vitro EMSA and DNase footprinting analyses. Using oligonucleotides containing both hs1 and hs2 sites (Fig. 5E, wt), we tested the binding of two recombinant Hox proteins, GST-Hoxb3 and GST-Hoxb4. When GST-Hoxb3 was used in EMSA, we found that specific complex was formed in a concentration-dependent manner (Fig. 5A, lanes 2–5). Addition of excess unlabeled wild type oligonucleotides could compete out the binding (Fig. 5A, lanes 6–8); but oligonucleotides containing mutated binding sites (Fig. 5E, ms12) could not compete with the labeled wild type oligonucleotides for complex formation (Fig. 5A, lane 11). This indicated that the GST-Hoxb3 protein could bind to the predicted Hox protein binding sites hs1 and hs2. To test the relative binding specificity of the two sites hs1 and hs2, we used oligonucleotides with either hs1 site mutated (ms1) or hs2 site mutated (ms2) in the EMSA experiment. We found that either ms1 or ms2 could inhibit complex formation between wild type oligonucleotides and the GST-Hoxb3 protein at a similar concentration, with ms1 being slightly more effective in competing out the binding (Fig. 5A, lanes 9 and 10).

When the same EMSA experiment was performed by using the GST-Hoxb4 protein in similar conditions, a specific complex clearly formed (Fig. 5B, lanes 4 and 5) which could be competed out by wild type oligonucleotides (Fig. 5B, lanes 6–8) but not by mutant ones (lane 11). When either mutant oligonucleotide ms1 or ms2 was added to the assay mixture, complex formation between wild type oligonucleotides and the GST-Hoxb4 protein was greatly reduced (Fig. 5B, lanes 9 and 10), suggesting that the GST-Hoxb4 protein could bind to hs1 or hs2 sites with similar affinity.
In addition to EMSA experiments using oligonucleotides, we performed DNAase I footprinting analysis using the 393-bp DNA fragment within element III482. When DNA fragment with the sense strand end-labeled was used, a single region covering 21 bp was protected by both the GST-Hoxb3 and the GST-Hoxb4 proteins (Fig. 5C). When the antisense strand was...
end-labeled, two regions separated by a single G nucleotide and spreading over the same 21 bp were protected by both GST-Hoxb3 and GST-Hoxb4 proteins (Fig. 5D). The 21-bp protected region, as shown in Fig. 5E, overlapped exactly with the predicted Hox binding sites hs1 and hs2.

Hox Binding Sites Are Required for Controlling Neural Expression

Both the EMSA and DNase footprinting experiments have shown that Hoxb3 and Hoxb4 proteins could bind to the hs1 and hs2 sites in vitro. To test whether these Hox binding sites are required for controlling gene expression in vivo, we tested the activities of these binding sites using lacZ reporter constructs (Fig. 4). In the lacZ reporter construct 2, both hs1 and hs2 sites are mutated by site-directed mutagenesis. Among 29 transgenic embryos we generated and analyzed, 8 of them expressed the reporter gene in the 3rd, 4th, and posterior branchial arches; some cells in the developing foregut and the dorsal root ganglia were also positively stained (Fig. 4F), suggesting that the reporter gene was expressed in the neural crest cells originated from the posterior hindbrain and adjacent spinal cord domain. However, no lacZ expression could be detected in the neural tube of the transgenic embryos; the normal activity of this DNA fragment in rhombomeres 6, 7, and 8 and anterior spinal cord was abolished when the Hox binding sites were mutated. Our in vivo transgenic experiment clearly showed that the Hox binding sites are required for gene expression in the neural tube, but are not necessary for mediating gene expression in neural crest derived tissues. Other separate regulatory sequences will be required to control gene expression in the neural crest.

GCCAGGC Binding Site Is Required for Neural Tube but Not Neural Crest Expression

It has been shown that the Hoxa2 enhancer has an AP-2 binding site which can mediate rhombomere independent

FIG. 6. Multiple transcription factor binding sites are required for regulating the expression patterns mediated by Element III482. The schematic line on the top represents Element III482; green rectangle, AP-2-like binding site GCCAGGC; red triangles, hs1 and hs2 sites; gray ovals, kr1 and kr2 sites. Blue color represents β-galactosidase activities detected in the neural tube and migratory neural crest (blue arrows) in transgenic embryos carrying Element III482; dark blue represents stronger β-galactosidase activity in r6. The green blocks, pointed out by green arrows, represent the neural tube and neural crest expression domains which are dependent on the GCCAGGC site; the red block, pointed by the red arrow, represents expression domains which are dependent on functional Hox binding sites hs1 and hs2, hence auto-/cross-regulated; the kreisler-binding sites kr1 and kr2 are not required for regulating gene expression mediated by Element III482. ba1, branchial arch 1; VNC, vagal neural crest.

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gene expression in the neural crest (Maconochie et al., 1999). Within the III482 enhancer, we have identified a GCCAGGC sequence which resembles the AP-2 binding site in Hoxa2 (Figs. 2A and 2C). To test the importance of this potential AP-2 binding site in directing gene expression in the neural crest, we performed in vivo transgenic assay using a mutant construct in which the potential binding site was changed to GAGATCT (Fig. 4A, construct 3). Among 15 transgenic embryos generated using this construct, there were 4 which expressed the lacZ reporter gene. Interestingly, in all 4 transgenic embryos, the expression of lacZ was maintained in the neural crest of the third and posterior branchial arches, and only in rhombomeres 6 in the neural tube. When the GCCAGGC binding site was mutated, no lacZ expression could be detected in rhombomeres 7 and 8 and adjacent anterior spinal cord, nor in neural crest in the more posterior region. Our results suggest that the GCCAGGC sequence is important for controlling the segmental expression of reporter gene in r7, r8, and the more posterior neural tube and associated neural crest domain, but it is not a neural crest-specific regulatory site. Also, previous studies had indicated that AP-2 family members of proteins would only bind to consensus sequence of GCCN(3/4)GGC (Mohibullah et al., 1999). Therefore, based on cellular specificity and sequence characteristics, it is possible that the activity of this GCCAGGC site may not be mediated by the AP-2 family of proteins. Other yet-to-be-identified factors would be involved in mediating the activity of this site.

DISCUSSION

In this study, our analysis on the cis-acting enhancer element III has identified the sequence requirements for Hoxb3 gene expression in the posterior hindbrain and adjacent spinal cord domain, as well as the associated neural crest encompassing the cardiac and vagal neural crest cells (summarized in Fig. 6). We have provided evidence that the reporter gene expression in the neural tube is dependent on Hox binding sites, and in vitro both Hoxb3 and Hoxb4 proteins can interact with the Hox binding sites, suggesting that autoregulation is required for establishing the expression of Hoxb3 in the hindbrain up to the r5/r6 boundary and in the anterior spinal cord. We have identified a GCCAGGC sequence motif which is required for directing gene expression in r7, r8, and spinal cord as well as the migratory neural crest. As illustrated in Fig. 6, for controlling the reporter gene expression in the posterior hindbrain at r7, r8, and the adjacent spinal cord (the domain where the red and green overlap), either the Hox binding sites or the GCCAGGC sequence motif will need to be intact and functional. Mutation of either of the two sequences will abolish reporter gene expression in this neural domain, suggesting that these two sequence regions cannot functionally compensate for each other and they are both required. We have also identified two kreisler binding sites, kr1 and kr2. However, our transgenic and mutational analysis has indicated that these kreisler binding sites are not required for the establishment or maintenance of reporter gene expression in r6. Our results further confirm previous findings on the differential regulatory mechanisms for Hoxa3 and Hoxb3 expression in r5 and r6 by kreisler (Manzanares et al., 1997, 1999a,b, 2001).

Auto/Cross-Regulation of Hoxb3 Gene Expression

From the element III482 sequence, we have identified two closely linked Hox binding sites with the TAAT core sequence (Figs. 2A and 2D); these binding sites are highly conserved among the mouse, human, and zebrafish Hoxb3 loci (data not shown). In our transgenic mutational study, we have demonstrated that the hs1 and hs2 sites are essential for controlling gene expression in the neural tube (Figs. 4F and 4G). In the absence of functional hs1 and hs2 sites, no reporter gene expression could be detected in the hindbrain and spinal cord, but gene expression in the neural crest cells migrated from the same neural domain are not affected (Figs. 4F, 4G, and 5). Therefore, separate elements are required to regulate gene expression in the neural crest. Although it was previously believed that the Hox gene identity of the neural crest is preprogrammed, carrying positional information acquired in the hindbrain to the neural tube. Recent neural crest cell transposition experiments have clearly shown that cranial neural crest is not prepatterned but complex cellular and tissue interactions are involved in craniofacial development (Trainor and Krumlauf, 2000, 2001; Trainor et al., 2002). Here, we showed that, in terms of cis-regulatory mechanism, the expression of Hoxb3 in the neural tube is Hox-dependent, but the establishment and maintenance of gene expression in the migratory cardiac and vagal neural crest are not dependent on the Hox auto/cross-regulatory circuit. Our results further support the idea that the functional maintenance of Hox gene identity in the neural crest is independent from the neural tube.

To explain how Hox proteins recognize and regulate their target genes, including Hox genes in auto- and cross-regulation through cis-acting elements, two models have been proposed. The "widespread binding" model suggests that Hox proteins bind to multiple monomer sites and cooperatively increase their binding and occupancy of cis-regulatory elements. On the other hand, the "co-selective binding" model suggests that Hox proteins could interact with protein cofactors that increase their DNA binding affinities for larger compound binding sites (Biggin and McGinnis, 1997; Phelan et al., 1995; Galant et al., 2002). Most of the vertebrate auto- and cross-regulated Hox gene cis-regulatory elements have been shown to involve Hox/PBC complexes (Chan et al., 1997; Ferretti et al., 2000; Frasch et al., 1995; Gould et al., 1997; Li and McGinnis, 1999; Maconochie et al., 1997; Manzanares et al., 2001; Pöpperl et al., 1995). Although we have identified within element III482 two functional Hox binding sites and the hs2
site has some homology to a Hox/PBC consensus sequence, the sequences of the hs1 and hs2 sites are more similar to a consecutive series of Hox binding sites with TAAT motif (Figs. 2A and 2D). In the DNase I footprinting experiments, we have shown that the entire hs1 and hs2 region was fully protected by Hoxb3 and Hoxb4 proteins (Figs. 3C-3E). Therefore, in element III482, Hox proteins may interact with the multiple Hox-binding sites in a “widespread binding” model, similar to the cis-regulation of some of the Hox genes in Drosophila (Beachy et al., 1993; Galant et al., 2002).

In examining the functions of members of paralogous group 3 by targeted gene replacement and mutations, it has been shown that the three group 3 genes, Hoxa3, Hoxb3, and Hoxd3, can functionally compensate for each other (Condie and Capel, 1993; Greer et al., 2000; Manley and Capel, 1995, 1997, 1998). Each of the group 3 gene members may not have a unique role, but individual functional specificity is dictated by the subtile differences in their expression domains (Greer et al., 2000). In the developing hindbrain, the expression patterns of members of the paralogous groups 2, 3, and 4 are overlapping with the expression domains driven by element III482, suggesting that these Hox members could be involved in the auto/cross-regulation of Hoxb3 gene expression through interactions with the Hox binding sites in element III482.

dreams is Not Required for Hoxb3 Expression in r6

The dynamic changes of Hoxb3 expression patterns in the hindbrain rhombomeres from 9.25 to 11 dpc (Sham et al., 1992; Kwan et al., 2001) suggest that there are critical temporal controls on the activities of cis-regulatory elements resulted in changes in levels of gene expression in the rhombomeres at different stages. For the upregulation of Hoxb3 in r5 at 9.25 dpc, the temporal regulation is contributed by the transient overlapping expression of two trans-acting factors, Krox20 and kreisler, in r5 at this stage of embryogenesis. Detailed analysis of the complex binding sites in the Hoxb3 r5-element has demonstrated the synergistic interaction of Krox20 and kreisler proteins in the upregulation of Hoxb3 expression in r5 (Manzanares et al., 2002). This upregulated r5 domain of Hoxb3 expression last for a duration of about 1 day, during which time the expression of all three genes overlap. By 10.5 dpc, when the expression of Krox20 and kreisler are both downregulated, the level of Hoxb3 expression in r5 is much reduced (Gould et al., 1997).

Our transgenic analysis of the Hoxb3 element III482 showed that the expression of reporter gene is at a higher level in r6, and we showed that there are two kreisler binding sites, kr1 and kr2, within the element which could bind to recombinant krml1 protein in vitro. However, our transgenic mutational study clearly demonstrated that these two kreisler binding sites are not required in vivo for the activity of element III482 and will not be involved in regulating Hoxb3 expression in r6. Our results agree with previous analysis of gene expression in a double transgenic embryo carrying Hoxb3 element III in a homzygous kreisler mutant background, which demonstrated that the expression of the reporter gene in r6 was not affected by the absence of functional kreisler (Manzanares et al., 1999b; Kwan et al., 2001).

Although kreisler is expressed in both r5 and r6 (Cordes and Barsh, 1994), the characteristic segmentation process for these two rhombomeres appears to be different. Analysis of the phenotype of kreisler mutant has demonstrated that the mouse kreisler gene is involved in the formation of r5, but the generation of a definitive r6 territory is independent of both kreisler and r5 (Manzanares et al., 1999a,b). This segmentation mechanism is different from that of the zebrafish valentino mutant in which val is required for subdividing a prorhombomere into two distinct rhombomeres r5 and r6 (Moens et al., 1998, Prince et al., 1998). Therefore, in the mouse embryo, kreisler has distinct roles in r5, which is independent of its function in r6. kreisler is active only in r5 for upregulating its target Hoxb3 expression, and it will not interact with the binding sites in element III to maintain Hoxb3 expression in r6. For the paralogous member Hoxa3, a different mechanism is operated; upregulation of Hoxa3 expression in both r5 and r6 at 9.5 dpc is dependent on kreisler as the same r5/r6 enhancer is able to read out the presence of kreisler in these two rhombomeres. Also, for Hoxa3, only kreisler is necessary and Krox 20 is not required (Manzanares et al., 1999a, 2002).

Additional Factors Controlling Hoxb3 in Posterior Hindbrain and Spinal Cord

Our transgenic analysis of reporter gene expression directed by element III482 has shown that this element controls gene expression in both the neural tube and the associated neural crest cells which migrate and populate the third and posterior branchial arches as well as the cardiac and vagal neural crest cells. Previous study on cis-regulation of the Hoxa2 gene, which demonstrated that the AP-2 family of transcription factors are involved in regulating Hoxa2 expression in the cranial neural crest cells independent from the control of rhombomere expression (Maconochie et al., 1999), has led us to examine whether the AP-2 family members could also be regulating Hoxb3 expression in the neural crest. Our examination of the element III482 sequence has identified a GCCAGGC motif which is similar to the Hoxa2 AP-2 binding site GTGGGCC (Figs. 2A and 2C; Maconochie et al., 1999) but is different from the consensus binding site GGCN (3/4)GGC in having only a single A instead of three or four nucleotides between the GC blocks (Mohibullah et al., 1999). Our analysis from the TRANSFAC transcription factor database has shown that, overlapping with this GCCAGGC motif, the sequence of GTGAGAAGGCCCCAGG also resembles the binding site sequence of GaaNGAAGGala/aAGG (lower-case indicates mismatches) for the Krüppel-box transcr-
tion factor KLF4, which has been identified to be a downstream target gene of AP-2α (Pfister et al., 2002). In addition, overlapping with this same GCCAGGC motif, there is also sequence homology with binding sites for retinoid receptors, including those for RAR, RXRα, RARγ, and RARβ (TRANSFAC Database Accession Nos. 100040, 100038, 100405, and 100401). It is not clear whether these or some other factors yet to be identified are involved in the transactivation of gene expression through the GCCAGGC motif in element III482. However, our results have shown that this GCCAGGC motif is essential for regulating the segmental gene expression in r7, r8 of the hindbrain, and spinal cord together with the associated neural crest.

A study of the conserved cis-regulatory elements in the amphioxus Hox complex has identified a control region Element 3B from AmphioHox-3. In transgenic mice, this element is shown to direct reporter gene expression in the neural tube and hindbrain up to r6, with lower level of expression in r6 than in r7, r8, and the spinal cord (Manzanares et al., 2000). The expression patterns driven by amphioxus Element 3B in the neural tube of transgenic mice are remarkably similar to the expression domains controlled by the GCCAGGC motif in mouse Hoxb3 element III482, except for the expression in the neural crest (see green box in Fig. 6). Considering that migratory neural crest cells have not been reported from amphioxus, the amphioxus Element 3B may lack sequence information for mediating gene expression in the neural crest in the mouse. Therefore, through an evolutionary conservation approach, it may be possible to identify the trans-acting factor(s) which mediate the activity of element III482 in the more posterior hindbrain domains by comparing conserved cis-regulatory elements from more diverse species.

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