**ika1 and rag1 as Markers for the Development of the Zebrafish Immune System**

Maitreya Dunham  
*Biology Department, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139*  
*Work conducted in the laboratory Lisa Steiner*

### Non-Scientific Abstract

The immune system is responsible for defending the body against bacteria and viruses which can cause illness. Immune cells in the blood can destroy infections, protecting animals against diseases. By studying the way the immune system works, scientists can design more effective ways to fight illnesses. One way to study the immune cells is to research how they develop in an embryo. Genes in a developing embryo are turned on and off to make some cells decide to become immune cells. Our lab is studying some of these genes in zebrafish. Because zebrafish are small and easy to study, we are using them to research genes that would be harder to study in mice or humans. In this paper, we describe cloning *ika1*, one of these genes.

### Scientific Abstract

Zebrafish are useful vertebrates in which to carry out large-scale mutagenic screens to identify developmentally important genes. In order to follow the development of the zebrafish immune system, we previously isolated and characterized the recombination activating genes, *rag1* and *rag2*. This paper describes the cloning and characterization of another such marker, *ika1*, which encodes a zinc finger transcription factor necessary for early lymphocyte differentiation. Whole mount *in situ* hybridization revealed expression of *ika1* in 24 hr embryos in the intermediate cell mass, the first site of hematopoiesis (Weinstein et al., 1996), and the head. We also report the continuing efforts to create transgenes with the green fluorescent protein-coding region under the control of the promoters of *rag1* and *ika1*. Fish containing these transgenes could then be mutagenized and screened quickly and easily for mutations in the immune system.

### Introduction

Zebrafish are appropriate for research in developmental biology for a number of reasons. Their large brood size, relatively short generation time, and modest space requirements make them easier to breed than many other vertebrates. Also, their embryos are clear and develop outside of the mother, facilitating easy screening for visual abnormalities that might occur during development. Therefore, zebrafish are good organisms for genetics, including screens for mutations in genes affecting development. Genetic tricks such as the creation of haploids or gynogenotes could also facilitate screening (reviewed in Driever et al., 1994). A large scale mutagenic screen in Boston and Tübingen, Germany, recently identified more than 400 genes important to zebrafish embryogenesis (Driever et al., 1996; Haffter et al., 1996).

The development of the zebrafish immune system is of particular interest to our laboratory. In order to use the full potential of zebrafish in detecting immune system mutations, it is necessary to develop markers and describe the early development of the immune system. For these purposes, the lab previously cloned the recombination activating genes, *rag1* and *rag2* (Willett et al., 1997a). These genes are expressed primarily in the thymus, a structure which becomes visible by whole mount *in situ* hybridization on day four of development (Willett et al., 1997b).

We would like to have an additional marker for lymphoid cells which is expressed earlier than the *rag* genes. We decided to clone *ika1*. In mice, Ikaros is a zinc finger transcription factor essential for the development of all lymphoid lineages. The gene is expressed in mice in T and B lymphocytes and natural killer cells as well as their progenitor cells (Georgopoulos et al., 1992; Georgopoulos et al., 1994). Thus, *ika1* is expected to be expressed somewhat earlier in the lymphoid lineages than the *rag* genes. We therefore cloned the *ika1* genomic DNA and used a PCR fragment to do *in situ* hybridization in zebrafish embryos.

This paper also describes initial attempts to isolate the promoter regions of the *rag1* and *ika1* genes and fuse them to the coding region of GM2, a variant of the green fluores-
cent protein (GFP) gene. These reporter constructs will then be used to create two lines of transgenic fish. These fish could be quickly and easily screened for expected expression of the transgenes simply by looking at them under a FITC light filter, a method which will hopefully be not only quicker, but also more sensitive than screening by in situ hybridization, with the additional benefit that live fish can be screened. Similar constructs with gta1 and gta2 have been shown to produce specific expression of the transgene, and fish containing the transgene are able to pass it through the germ line (Long et al., 1997; Meng et al., 1997).

Materials and Methods

Animals
Wild type Danio rerio embryos were obtained from Nancy Hopkins and reared in beakers in a 28°C water bath.

Plasmids and Probes
RGM2 (kindly provided by S. Lin) contains 4.7 kilobases (kb) of the rag1 5′ region fused to the GM2 coding sequence followed by an SV40 polyadenylation signal. The backbone is pBluescript S/K- (Stratagene, La Jolla, CA). The ika1 probe is a 600-bp PCR product generated by S. Lin using degenerate oligonucleotides on zebrafish genomic DNA. The fragment, located approximately 60 bases into exon seven, was cloned into Litosm29 (NEB, Beverly, MA), and designated IkPCR. A DNA probe was generated by random-primed labeling of the PCR fragment with [α-32P] dCTP using a labeling kit (Boehringer-Mannheim, Indianapolis, IN). RNA antisense probe was transcribed from a BamHI digestion of IkPCR using T7 polymerase and labeled with digoxigenin using a labeling kit (Boehringer-Mannheim).

A λ clone containing the rag1 and rag2 coding regions was previously isolated (Willett et al., 1997). The most 5′ 3.5 kb SacI fragment (relative to rag1 transcription) of this clone was designated clone 10. To screen for rag1 upstream sequences, we used DNA probe generated from clone 10 by random priming as described above.

Cloning ika1 and the rag1 5′ Region
A zebrafish genomic library was obtained from S. Statchel (University of California, Berkeley). The library is a Sau3A partial digest of genomic DNA from 72 hr whole fish cloned into λ Fix II (Stratagene). 500,000 plaques were lifted and probed with the insert from IkPCR. Several positive clones were obtained, one of which, IK4A, was selected for further study. The 17.6 kb insert was digested with SaeI and the fragments subcloned into pBluescript S/K- (Stratagene). A genomic clone containing rag1 upstream sequences was obtained by screening a λ Fix II genomic library (Stratagene) with the insert from clone 10. 500,000 plaques were lifted, and several positive clones were obtained, one of which was selected for further study.

Southern Blotting
One μg of the ika1 λ clone was cut with various restriction enzymes, run on a 1% agarose gel, and transferred to a Nytran nylon membrane (Schleisher and Schull, Keene, NH) in 3 M NaCl and 8 mM NaOH. The membrane was probed with the IkPCR DNA probe and hybridized overnight at 65°C in 5X SSC [1X SSC: 0.15 M NaCl, 15 mM sodium citrate, pH 7.0], 1% blocking reagent (Boehringer-Mannheim), 1% N-
lauroyl sarcosine, and .2% SDS. The blot was washed once with .2X SSC/.1% SDS, twice with .1X SSC/.1% SDS, and once with .05X SSC/.1% SDS for 15 minutes each at 65°C.

**Sequencing**

DNA sequencing was performed using [35S]dATPαS and the Sequenase kit (USBiochemicals, Cleveland, OH). IkPCR was sequenced using primers M13 universal and M13 reverse from Litmus29. Both strands were completely sequenced. Subclones of IK4A were sequenced with EX15 and EX16 from the vector, and internal primers Ik5’ (TTGA TGCGGTGA TCCA TCAC) and Ik3’ (TCA TCTAC-CTGACCAACCAC).

**Whole Mount in situ Hybridization**

Whole mount in situ hybridization was performed essentially as described (Willett, et al., 1997 a). Embryos were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde/PBS (.16 M NaCl, .027 M KCl, .02 M sodium phosphate, pH 7.3) overnight at 4°C and dehydrated in methanol. After stepwise rehydration, they were refixed in 4% PFA for 20 minutes, rinsed with PBST [PBS plus .1% Tween (Sigma, St. Louis, MO)], and prehybridized in 50% formamide, 5X SSC, 50 μg/ml heparin, 500 μg/ml tRNA, .1% Tween-20, and 9.2 μl/ml 1.0 M citric acid (pH 6.0). The embryos were hybridized at 65°C overnight in 5.0 μg/ml probe. Embryos were blocked in 2% newborn calf serum and 2 mg/ml BSA for one hour at room temperature before antibody incubation. Anti-digoxigenin Fab fragments (Boehringer-Mannheim) were diluted 1:400 in PBST and pre-absorbed to the same number and age of embryos as those being stained. The antibody was diluted again to a final dilution of 1:4000 for incubation. The embryos were stained in 3.5 μl 5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indoyl-phosphate and 4.5 μl 4-nitroblue tetrazolium chloride (both from Boehringer-Mannheim) per ml of alkaline phosphatase buffer [100 mM Tris HCl (pH 9.5), 50 mM MgCl2, 100 mM NaCl, .2% Tween-20, .2% Triton-X 100, 1.2 mg/ml fresh Levamisol]. Staining in the ICM was visible after approximately three hours at room temperature. Fish were then refixed in 4% PFA and photographed in 3% methyl cellulose.

**Results**

**Sequencing IkPCR insert**

The DNA sequence of the IkPCR insert was determined and translated (Figure 1). The amino acid sequence was compared to exon 7 sequences from human (hik), chicken (cik), and trout (tk). The 22 amino acid region of no homology (lower case letters) at the 3’ end of the zebrafish sequence is probably an experimental artifact.

**Cloning ika1**

The IkPCR fragment was used to screen a genomic library. A 17.6 kb clone containing exon seven was identified and mapped by restriction digests (Figure 3). The region corresponding to the probe was identified by Southern blotting of several restriction digests. The orientation of the fragment was determined by PCR with internal primers and vector primers (Figure 3). The insert was then subcloned into pBluescript S/K- as three SacI fragments, and an additional set of EcoRI/XhoI fragments. Sequencing of the ends of EX15 and EX16 (Figure 3) failed to identify any upstream exons of ika1.
Expression of ika1

Whole mount in situ hybridization on 24 hr embryos showed ika1 expression in the intermediate cell mass (Figure 4) and the head. Previous studies have mapped and identified the ICM as an early site of hematopoiesis (Weinstein et al., 1996). Expression in other ages of fish has not yet been reliably characterized.

Cloning the rag1 5' region

The most 5' 3.5 kb of the previously obtained rag1 clone (clone 10; Figure 1 of Willett et al., 1997 a) was used as a probe to isolate another clone, designated 10C, containing more insert 5' of the rag1 coding region. Restriction mapping is currently being carried out on this clone.

Construction of rag1 promoter-GFP fusion

Injection of the RGM2 construct yields minimally specific transgene expression in the thymus with significant expression in muscle (S. Lin, personal communication). It is likely that RGM2 is missing crucial regulatory regions of the rag1 gene. Therefore, we are adding putative regulatory regions to RGM2, including an additional 3.5 kb upstream sequence that is contained on the original λ clone. We are also adding the rag1/rag2 intergenic region 3' to GFP. In case this is not sufficient, we will add sequence from the upstream clone, 10C, described above.

Discussion

We have cloned the zebrafish ika1 gene as a marker for early immune system development. Expression can be detected in a specific pattern at 24 hr by whole mount in situ hybridization. We hope to further refine the in situ conditions in order to remove background and non-specific staining. We will continue to investigate ika1 expression in embryos of different ages.

We have shown that ika1 can be used as a marker for early hematopoietic development. Previously, we showed that rag1 can be used to study later development. Armed with these assays for different developmental stages, we are now prepared to assay for mutations affecting
hematopoiesis. The cloning of the genes identified in the Driever et al. and Haffter et al. screen is currently difficult because it relies on positional cloning methods. The lab of Nancy Hopkins at MIT is undertaking a complementary screen which would aid in isolating developmentally important genes. Using virus-mediated insertional mutagenesis, they will screen for mutations up to day five of development. A pilot screen of 217 insertions has already identified three genes and facilitated the cloning of two of them (Gaiano et al., 1996; Allende et al., 1996). We plan to screen insertionaly mutagenized embryos by whole mount in situ hybridization with ika1 at 24 hours and rag1 at five days.

An additional method to identify mutations in such screens is the use of transgenic fish. Fish with the ika1 or rag1 promoter controlling the expression of a GFP reporter gene might facilitate quick and sensitive screening. Such fish have already been created using gta1 (Long et al., 1997) and gta2 (Meng et al., 1997) promoters. In order to make the rag1 transgenic fish, we have obtained additional rag1 upstream sequences which can be used to reprobe a genomic library and walk to the promoter. We are also using 5' RACE (Rapid Amplification of cDNA Ends) to reach the promoter regions of both ika1 and rag1. We plan to use the transgenic fish to identify mutants affecting specific pathways. This could be done in separate screens by chemical mutagenesis.

References


