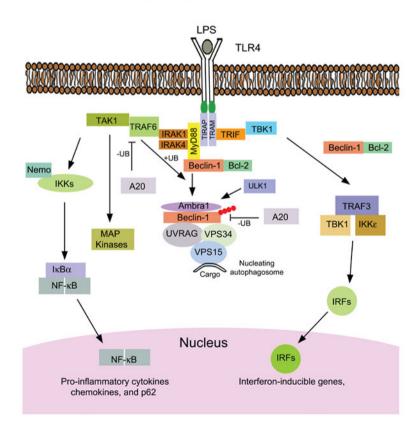
# AUTOPHAGY

### CANCER, OTHER PATHOLOGIES, INFLAMMATION, IMMUNITY, INFECTION, AND AGING

VOLUME 6

**EDITED BY** 

M. A. HAYAT





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# CANCER, OTHER PATHOLOGIES, INFLAMMATION, IMMUNITY, INFECTION, AND AGING

### VOLUME 6

Edited by

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### Dedication

To:

Julio A. Aguirre-Ghiso, Patrice Codogno, Eduardo Couve, Ana Maria Cuervo, Guido R. Y. De Meyer, Vojo Deretic, Fred J. Dice, William A. Dunn, Jr, Eeva-Lisa Eskelinen, Sharon Gorski, Tomotake Kanki, Daniel J. Klionsky, Guido Kroemer, Beth Levine, Noboru Mizushima, Yoshinori Ohsumi, Brinda Ravikumar, David Rubinsztein, Isei Tanida, Sharon A. Tooze, Herbert W. Virgin, Eileen White, Tamotsu Yoshimori, and others.

The men and women involved in the odyssey of deciphering the molecular mechanisms underlying the complexity of the autophagy process that governs our lives.

### Mitophagy and Biogenesis

mTOR and nutrient sensors control Autophagy processes in all of our cells; Dozens of proteins must play each their role To enable engulfment of bad organelles.

Those who are young may mistakenly think one Is safe and immune to the dangers of aging But if you are lacking in proper PINK1 Mitochondrial fires are already raging.

For insight and knowledge some turn to the fly; Drosophila's genes can help us discover The causes of aggregates seen in the eye, And even find drugs to help us recover.

Ubiquitin's role in degeneration Is to set out red flags on relevant cargo Marking the junk that needs degradation At a pace that is presto rather than largo.

Mitochondria fear Parkin known as PARK2 Whose ubiquitin tags on two mitofusins Determine the fate of one or a slew, For a lonely short life of network exclusion.

Their fate is ensured by sequestosome 1 Who recruits membranes rich with LC3-II Autophagosome to lysosome a perfect home run Cellular housekeeping momentarily through.

But the work isn't over and the job isn't done Unless Paris is tagged with ubiquitin too Then repression is lifted from PGC1 So biogenesis starts and mitos renew!

Roberta A. Gottlieb

Life in the Balance, Longevity the Goal
Self-eating, recycling, cash-for-your clunkers:
Trade up to the mitochondrial equivalent Prius.
The road to rejuvenation is paved with destruction
For clearing the rubble precedes reconstruction
But remember that life's circular dance
Depends on opposite forces in balance
Excess destruction, too much biogenesis,
Brings heart failure, cancer or neurodegeneries.

Roberta A. Gottlieb

### Autophagy and Cancer

When speaking of cancer, autophagy's good
By culling mitochondria and clearing deadwood
Autophagy limits the radical chain
That breaks DNA and mutates a gene
That makes a cell double, so careless and mean
In order for cells to malignant transform
They lose mitochondria except for a few
Using glycolysis as the source of their fuel
How they achieve mitochondrial decimation
Is nothing more than autophagic elimination

Then one cell is many, an ominous mass
Demanding more glucose, hungry and crass,
Directing formation of artery and vein
'Til capsular fibers give way under strain
Then cancer cells spread so far and so wide
They demand blood vessels the body provide
But until those are patent the tumor cells strive
To rely on autophagy to neatly survive
The hurdles required for metastasis
Until blood flow's established for cancerous bliss.

Blocking autophagy sends them over the brink
And how chloroquine works, we think
But tumors are slowed by statin's effects
Which induce autophagy and tumor cell death
Autophagy's good, autophagy's bad
The confusion's enough to drive us all mad
So study we must, and learn ever more
'Til enlightenment finally opens the door
Oncologists must heed the tumor's agenda
And decide whether autophagy is a friend or foe.

Roberta A. Gottlieb

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### Foreword

It is with great pleasure that I introduce Volume 6 of the impressive seven-volume series on autophagy edited by M.A. (Eric) Hayat. This volume addresses a number of mechanistic advances in our understanding of the regulation of autophagy, particularly the importance of nutrient availability. Regulatory mechanisms through micro-RNAs and cross-talk with other protein degradation pathways are presented. Several chapters cover the expanding role of autophagy in host immunity and the ways in which various intracellular pathogens repurpose the pathway for their own benefit. Finally, this volume addresses selective autophagy for degradation of mitochondria and endocytosed gap junctions.

The importance of autophagy in host defense represents an exciting emerging field. Autophagy facilitates antigen presentation, participates in thymic development, and shares many regulatory nodes with innate immunity, including cross-talk with Toll-like receptors, reflecting its important role in

regulating the immune response. Autophagy is also a participant in the dynamic struggle between intracellular pathogens and the host. While cells often use autophagy to eliminate intracellular pathogens and to activate innate and adaptive immunity, bacterial and viral pathogens have evolved defensive mechanisms, enabling them to subvert autophagy for their own purposes. As mitochondria can be viewed as domesticated intracellular bacteria, it is not surprising that autophagy plays a significant role in their removal.

The state of current knowledge on these important topics is summarized in the chapters of Volume 6, with contributions from experts from around the world. Researchers in immunology and infectious disease will find this volume to be particularly valuable, as well as those interested in selective autophagy and its regulation.

Roberta A. Gottlieb M.D. Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute

### Preface

It is becoming clear that cancer is an exceedingly complex molecular network, consisting of tumor cells at different stages of differentiation and noncancerous cells from the tumor microenvironment, both of which play a role in sustaining cancer progression. The latter cells maintain a proinflammatory environment conducive to cancer progression through induction of angiogenesis and evasion of the innate immune system. Although induction of cancer cell death by apoptosis, autophagy and necroptosis has been the main system exploited as anticancer strategies, an understanding of the role of the alterations in cellular metabolism is necessary for the development of new, more effective anticancer therapies. For example, it is known that cancer cells switch towards aerobic glycolysis from mitochondrial oxidative phosphorylation.

Autophagy, on the other hand, also possesses mechanisms that can promote cancer cell survival and growth of established tumors. Regarding cell survival, tumor cells themselves activate autophagy in response to cellular stress and/or increased metabolic demands related to rapid cell proliferation. Autophagy-related stress tolerance can enable cell survival by maintaining energy production that can lead to tumor growth and therapeutic resistance. Tumors are often subjected to metabolic stress due to insufficient vascularization. Under these circumstances, autophagy is induced and localized to these hypoxic regions where it supports survival of tumors. Aggressive tumors have increased metabolic demands because of their rapid proliferation and growth. Thus, such tumors show augmented dependency on autophagy for their survival.

Defective autophagy causes abnormal mitochondria accumulation and reduced mitochondrial function in starvation, which is associated with reduced energy output. Because mitochondrial function is required for survival during starvation, autophagy supports cell survival. The recycling of intracellular constituents as a result of their degradation serves as an alternative energy source for tumor survival, especially during periods of metabolic stress. In this context, in tumor cells with defective apoptosis, autophagy allows prolonged survival of tumor cells. However, paradoxically, as mentioned above, autophagy is also associated with antitumorigenesis. Autophagy induced by cancer therapy can also be utilized by cancer cells to obtain nutrients for their growth and proliferation. Therefore, such treatments are counterproductive to therapeutic efficacy.

This is the sixth volume of the seven-volume series, *Autophagy: Cancer, Other Pathologies, Inflammation, Immunity, Infection and Aging.* This series discusses in detail almost all aspects of the autophagy machinery in the context of cancer and certain other pathologies. Emphasis is placed on maintaining homeostasis during starvation or stress conditions by balancing the synthesis of cellular components and their degradation by autophagy.

Both autophagy and ubiquitin-proteasome systems degrade damaged and superfluous proteins. Degradation of intracellular **XX** PREFACE

components through these catabolic pathways results in the liberation of basic building blocks required to maintain cellular energy and homeostasis. However, less than or more than optimal protein degradation can result in human pathologies. An attempt is made in this volume to include information on the extent to which various protein degradation pathways interact, collaborate or antagonize one another.

It is known that conditions resulting in cellular stress (e.g., hypoxia, starvation, pathogen entry) activate autophagy, but dysregulation of autophagy at this stage might result in pathological states including cancer. MicroRNAs are non-protein-coding small RNAs that control levels of transcripts and proteins through post-transcriptional mechanisms. Current knowledge of micro-RNA regulation of autophagy is presented in this volume.

Autophagy (macroautophagy) is strictly regulated and the second messenger Ca<sup>+2</sup> regulates starvation-induced autophagy. Withdrawal of essential amino acids increases intracellular Ca<sup>+2</sup>, leading to the activation of adenosine monophosphate-activated protein kinase and the inhibition of the mTORC1, which eventually results in the enhanced formation of autophagosomes. The importance of this signaling pathway and other pathways (AMPK, AKT) within the autophagy signaling network is emphasized in this volume.

Recent discoveries of autophagic receptors that recognize specific cellular cargo have opened a new chapter in the autophagy field. Receptors are indispensable for the initiation and finalization of specific cargo removal by autophagy. For example, BNIP3L/NIX mediates mitochondrial clearance, which is discussed in this volume. It is pointed out that, in the absence of such clearance, accumulation of ROS can severely damage the mitochondrial

population within the neuron and ultimately cause apoptosis of the affected neurons. Mitochondrial dysfunction is implicated in Parkinson's disease. Toll-like receptors (TLRs) play critical roles in host defense by recognizing specific molecular patterns from a wide variety of pathogens. In macrophages, TLR signaling induces autophagy, limiting the replication of intracellular pathogens. How TLRs activate autophagosome formation in macrophages and enhance immunity is discussed in this volume.

Autophagy plays an important role during viral and bacterial infection. Autophagy can act either as a part of the immune defense system or as a pro-viral or pro-bacterial mechanism. In other words, although autophagy suppresses the replication of some viruses, it enhances the replication of others. Several examples of the latter viruses are discussed in this volume. For example, Herpes viridae family members encode autophagy-regulating proteins, which contribute to the host antiviral defenses, either by enhancing innate immunity or by helping antigen presentation. Herpes viruses have also evolved proteins that are able to inhibit this cellular mechanism. Positive or negative impact of autophagy on viral infection is explained in this volume.

Another example of the role of a virus in inducing autophagy is varicella-zoster virus (VZV); this human herpes virus causes chickenpox. Infected cells show a large number of autophagosomes and an enlarged endoplasmic reticulum (ER) indicating its stress, which is a precursor to autophagy through the inositol requiring enzyme-1 pathway and PERK pathway. Hepatocellular  $\beta$  virus (HBV) also activates the autophagic pathway while avoiding lysosomal, protein degradation.

As in the case of VZV, ER stress also plays a positive role in HBV replication.

PREFACE XXI

The possible effect of autophagy on HBV-induced hepatocarcinogenesis is also included in this volume. *Staphylococcus aureus* pathogen not only induces an autophagic response in the host cell (localizing in LC3 decorated components), but also benefits from that state.

Although inflammatory responses are essential for eradicating intracellular pathogens and tissue repair, they can be detrimental to the host when uncontrolled. Therefore, inflammation needs to be tightly controlled to prevent excessive inflammation and collateral damage. Cytokine IL-1β (produced by microglia in the CNS) is one of the pro-inflammatory mediators. The pivotal role of autophagy in regulating the production and secretion of the IL-1 family members is explained in this volume. Atg6L1, an essential component of autophagy, suppresses pro-inflammatory signaling. Better understanding of the role of the autophagy-lysosomal pathway in the maturation and secretion of IL-1 should provide a new strategy for targeting inflammation in various pathological conditions.

Excess adiposity contributes to the development of obesity-associated metabolic disturbances such as insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes, or metabolic syndrome. It is pointed out that imbalance between ghrelin (a gut-derived hormone) and tumor necrosis factor in states of insulin resistance may contribute to altered apoptosis and autophagy found in the adipose tissue of patients with type 2 diabetes.

By bringing together a large number of experts (oncologists, physicians, medical research scientists and pathologists) in the field of autophagy, it is my hope that substantial progress will be made against terrible diseases that inflict humans. It is difficult for a single author to discuss effectively

and comprehensively various aspects of an exceedingly complex process such as autophagy. Another advantage of involving more than one author is to present different points of view on various controversial aspects of the role of autophagy in health and disease. I hope these goals will be fulfilled in this and future volumes of this series.

This volume was written by 46 contributors representing 11 countries. I am grateful to them for their promptness in accepting my suggestions. Their practical experience highlights the very high quality of their writings, which should build and further the endeavors of the readers in this important medical field. I respect and appreciate the hard work and exceptional insight into the role of autophagy in disease provided by these contributors.

It is my hope that subsequent volumes of this series will join this volume in assisting in the more complete understanding of the complex process of autophagy and eventually in the development of therapeutic applications. There exists a tremendous urgent demand by the public and the scientific community to develop better treatments for major diseases. In the light of the human impact of these untreated diseases, government funding must give priority to researching cures over global military superiority.

I am grateful to Dr. Dawood Farahi and Phillip Connelly for recognizing the importance of medical research and publishing through an institution of higher education. I am thankful to my students for their contributions to the final preparation of this volume.

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### Abbreviations and Glossary

**1AP** inhibitor of apoptosis protein

**3-MA** 3-methyladenine, an autophagy inhibitor

**3-methyladenine** an autophagic inhibitor

**5-Fu** 5 fluorouracil

**AAP** protein that mediates selective autophagy

ACF aberrant crypt foci

aggrephagy degradation of ubiquitinated protein aggregates

aggresome inclusion body where misfolded proteins are confined and

degraded by autophagy

AIF apoptosis-inducing factor
AIM Atg8-family interacting motif

Akt protein kinase B regulates autophagy
Alfy autophagy-linked FYVE protein
ALIS aggresome-like induced structures
ALR autophagic lysosome reformation

**AMBRA-1** activating molecule in Beclin 1-regulated autophagy

AMP adenosine monophosphate

**amphisome** intermediate compartment formed by fusing an

autophagosome with an endosome

AMPK adenosine monophosphate-activated protein kinase

**aPKC** atypical protein kinase C

APMA autophagic macrophage activation apoptosis programmed cell death type 1 ARD1 arrest-defective protein 1

ASK apoptosis signal regulating kinase

AT1 Atg8-interacting protein

ATF5 activating transcription factor 5
ATF6 activating transcription factor 6
Atg autophagy-related gene or protein
Atg1 serine/threonine protein 1 kinase
Atg2 protein that functions along with Atg18
Atg3 ubiqitin conjugating enzyme analogue

Atg4 cysteine protease

Atg5 protein containing ubiquitin folds

Atg6 component of the class III PtdIns 3-kinase complex

Atg7 ubiquitin activating enzyme homologue

Atg8 ubiquitin-like protein
Atg9 transmembrane protein

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#### ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

Atg10 ubiquitin conjugating enzyme analogue

Atg11fungal scaffold proteinAtg12ubiquitin-like protein

Atg13 component of the Atg1 complex

Atg14 component of the class III PtdIns 3-kinase complex

Atg15 vacuolar protein

**Atg16** component of the Atg12-Atg5-Atg16 complex

Atg17 yeast protein

Atg18protein that binds to PtdInsAtg19receptor for the Cvt pathwayAtg20PtdIns P binding proteinAtg21PtdIns P binding proteinAtg22vacuolar amino acid permease

Atg23 yeast protein

Atg24PtdIns binding proteinAtg25coiled-coil proteinAtg26sterol glucosyltransferaseAtg27integral membrane protein

Atg28 coiled-coil protein Atg29 protein in fungi

Atg30 protein required for recognizing peroxisomes

Atg31 protein in fungi

Atg32 mitochondrial outer membrane protein Atg33 mitochondrial outer membrane protein

Atg101 Atg13-binding protein

ATM ataxia-telangiectasia mutated protein lysosomal associated membrane protein 2

**autolysosome** formed by fusion of the autophagosome and lysosome,

degrading the engulfed cell components

autophagic bodythe inner membrane-bound structure of the autophagosomeautophagic fluxthe rate of cargo delivery to lysosomes through autophagyautophagosomedouble-membrane vesicle that engulfs cytoplasmic contents

for delivery to the lysosome

autophagosome events occurring post-autophagosome closure followed

maturations by delivery of the cargo to lysosomes autophagy programmed cell death type 2

AV autophagic vacuole

axonopathydegradation of axons in neurodegenerationBADBcl-2 associated death promoter proteinBafilomycininhibitor of the vacular-type ATPase

Bafilomycin A1(BAF-A1)an autophagy inhibitorBAGBcl-2-associated athanogeneBAG3Bcl-2-associated athanogene 3BAKBcl-2 antagonist/killer

Barkor Beclin 1-associated autophagy-related key regulator

BATS Barkor/Atg14(L) autophagosome targeting sequence

BAX Bcl-2-associated X protein Bcl-2 B cell lymphoma-2

**Beclin 1** mammalian homologue of yeast Atg6, activating

macroautophagy

Beclin 1Bcl-2-interacting protein 1BH3Bcl-2 homology domain-3BH3-only proteinsinduce macroautophagy

**BHMT** betaine homocysteine methyltransferase protein found in the

mammalian autophagosome (metabolic enzyme)

BID BH3-interacting domain death agonist

Bif-1 protein interacts with Beclin 1, required for macroautophagy

Bim Bcl-2 interacting mediator pro-apoptotic protein

**BNIP3 protein** required for the HIF-1-dependent induction of

macroautophagy

**bortezomib** selective proteasome inhibitor

**CaMKK**β **protein** activates AMPK at increased cytosolic calcium concentration

CaMK calcium/calmodulin-dependent protein kinase

**CASA** chaperone-assisted selective autophagy caspase cysteine aspartic acid specific protease

CCI-779 rapamycin ester that induces macroautophagy

**CD46 glycoprotein** mediates an immune response to invasive pathogens chloroquine an autophagy inhibitor which inhibits fusion between

autophagosomes and lysosomes

**c-Jun** mammalian transcription factor that inhibits starvation-

induced macroautophagy

Clg 1 a yeast cyclin-like protein that induces macroautophagy

CMA chaperone-mediated autophagy

**COG** functions in the fusion of vesicles within the Golgi complex

COP1 coat protein complex1
CP 20S core particle
CRD cysteine-rich domain
CSC cancer stem cell

CTGF connective tissue growth factor Cvt cytoplasm-to-vacuole targeting

DAMP damage-associated molecular pattern molecule/danger-

associated molecular pattern molecule

DAP1 death-associated protein 1
DAPK death-associated protein kinase
DAPK1 death-associated protein kinase 1

**DDR** DNA damage response

**DEPTOR** DEP domain containing mTOR-interacting protein

DFCP1 a PtdIns (3) P-binding protein death-inducing signaling complex

XXVIII ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

DMV double-membrane vesicle

DOR diabetes- and obesity-regulated gene damage-regulated autophagy modulator

**DRAM-1** damage-regulated autophagy modulator 1 induces autophagy

in a p53-dependent manner.

DRC desmin-related cardiomyopathy
DRiP defective ribosomal protein
DRP1 dynamin-related protein 1

**DUB** deubiquitinases that accumulate proteins into aggresomes

E2F1a mammalian transcription factorefferocytosisphagocytosis of apoptotic cellsEGFRepidermal growth factor receptor

EIF2α eukaryotic initiation factor 2 alpha kinase

**endosomes** early compartments fuse with autophagosomes to generate

amphisomes

ERAA endoplasmic reticulum-activated autophagy

**ERAD** endoplasmic reticulum-associated degradation pathway

ERK extracellular signal regulated kinase ERK1/2 extracellular signal regulated kinase 1/2

**ERT** enzyme replacement therapy

**ESCRT** endosomal sorting complex required for transport

everolimus mTOR inhibitor

FADD Fas-associated death domain FKBP12 FK506-binding protein 12

**FoxO3** Forkhead box O transcription factor 3 FYCO1 FYVE and coiled domain containing 1

**GAA** acid  $\alpha$ -glucosidase

GABARAP gamma-aminobutyric acid receptor-associated protein

GAS group A streptococcus

GATE-16 Golgi-associated ATPase enhancer of 16 kDa

**GFP** green fluorescent protein

**glycophagy** degradation of glycogen particles **GPCR** G protein-coupled receptor

GSK-3β glycogen synthase kinase 3 beta regulates macroautophagy GST-BHMT BHMT fusion protein used to assay macroautophagy in

mammalian cells

HAV heavy autophagic vacuole

HCV hepatitis C virus
HDAC histone deacetylase
HDAC6 histone deacetylase 6
HIF hypoxia-inducible factor
HIF1 hypoxia-inducible factor 1
HMGB1 high mobility group box 1

HR-PCD hypersensitive response programmed cell death

Hsc70 heat shock cognate protein

**HSP** heat shock protein Hsp90 heat shock protein 90

**HspB8** heat shock cognate protein beta-8

Htraz high temperature requirement factor Az is a pro-apoptotic

protein

I13P phosphatidylinositol

IAPinhibitor of apoptosis proteinIKKinhibitor of nuclear factor κΒ

IL3 interleukin-3

IM isolation membrane

inflammasome an intracellular protein complex that activates caspase-1

**IRF** interferon regulatory factor

**IRGM** immunity-associated GTPase family M

IRS insulin receptor substrate

JNK/SAPK c-Jun N-terminal kinase/stress-activated protein kinase KRAS an oncogene that induces autophagy in cancer cells

LAMP lysosome-associated membrane protein

LAMP1 lysosome marker, lysosome-associated membrane protein 1

LAMP2 lysosomal-associated membrane protein 2 LAMP-2A lysosomal-associated membrane protein 2A

LAP LC3-associated phagocytosis
LAV light autophagic vacole

LC3 (MAP1LC3B) autophagosome marker microtubule-associated protein 1 light

chain 3B

LC3 microtubule-associated protein light chain 3

LET linear energy transfer

**lipophagy** selective delivery of lipid droplets for lysosomal degradation

LIR LC3 interacting region

LKB liver kinase B

LSD lysosomal storage disorder

**lysosomotropic agent** compound that accumulates preferentially in lysosomes

macroautophagy autophagy

macrolipophagy regulation of lipid metabolism by autophagy

MALS macroautophagy–lysosome system MAPK mitogen-activated protein kinase

MARF mitofusion mitochondrial assembly regulatory factor

MCU mitochondrial calcium uptake uniporter pore

MDC monodansylcadaverine to measure autophagic flux *in vivo* 

MEF mouse embryonic fibroblast

MFN2 mitofusin 2, a mitochondrial outer membrane protein involved

in fusion/fission to promote mitochondrial segregation and

elimination

MHC major histocompatibility complex

MHC-II major histocompatibility complex class II

MiCa mitochondrial inner membrane calcium channel

micropexophagy or

macropexophagyperoxisome degradation by autophagic machineryMIPAmicropexophagy-specific membrane apparatus

mitofusion mitochondrial fusion-promoting factor mitophagy degradation of dysfunctional mitochondria

MOM mitochondrial outer membrane

MPS mucopolysaccharide

MPT mitochondrial permeability transition mPTP mitochondrial permeability transition pore

MSD multiple sulfatase deficiency MTCO2 mitochondrial marker

MTOC microtubule organizing center

mTOR mammalian target of rapamycin, which inhibits autophagy

and functions as a sensor for cellular energy and amino acid

levels

mTORc1 mammalian target of rapamycin complex 1
MTP mitochondrial transmembrane potential
MTS mitochondrial targeting sequence

MVBmultivesicular bodyNBR1neighbor of BRCA1 gene 1NDP52nuclear dot protein 52 kDa

NEC-1 necrostatin-1

**necroptosis** a form of programmed cell death by activating autophagy-

dependent necrosis

**Nix** a member of the Bcl-2 family required for mitophagy

NLR NOD-like receptor

NOD nucleotide-binding oligomerization domain

NOS nitric oxide synthase NOX NADPH oxidase Nrf2 nuclear factor 2

**OCR** oxygen consumption rate

omegasome PI(3)P-enriched subdomain of the ER involved in

autophagosome formation

**OMM** outer mitochondrial membrane

OPA1 mitafusin 1 is required to promote mitochondrial fusion Ox-LDL oxidized low density lipoprotein is a major inducer of ROS,

inflammation, and injury to endothelial cells

p62 an autophagy substrate

p62/SQSTM1 sequestosome 1

**PAMP** pathogen-associated molecular pattern molecule

PAS pre-autophagosomal structure
PB1 domain
Phox and Bem1 domain

PCD programmed cell death
PDI protein disulfide isomerase
PE phosphatidyl ethanolamine

**PERK** protein kinase-like endoplasmic reticulum kinase

**PFI** proteasome functional insufficiency

**phagophore** a cup-shaped, double membraned autophagic precursor

structure

**PI(3)K-PKB-FOXO** a growth factor that inhibits autophagy and increases

apoptosis by regulating glutamine metabolism

PI3K phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase

PI3KC3 phosphatidylinositol-3-kinase class III

PINK1 PTEN (phosphatase and tensin homologue deleted on

chromosome 10)-induced putative kinase 1

PKA protein kinase A
PKB protein kinase B
PKC polyQ polyglutamine

**PQC** protein quality control

**prion disease** transmissible spongiform encephalopathy

PRR pathogen recognition receptor

**PS** phosphatidyl serine

**PSMB5** proteasome subunit beta type-5

PtdIns phosphatidylinositol

PTGS post-transcriptional gene silencing
PUMA p53 upregulated modulator of apoptosis

R1G retrograde signaling pathway

Rag GTPase that activates TORC1 in response to amino acids

**RAGE** receptor for advanced glycation end product

rapamycin a well-known autophagy inducer by suppressing mTOR

**RAPTOR** regulatory-associated of mTOR

**RE** recycling endosome

residual body lysosome containing undegraded material reticulophagy degradation of endoplasmic reticulum

ribophagydegradation of ribosomesRIPreceptor-interacting proteinRISCRNA-induced silencing complex

RLS reactive lipid species
RNAi RNA interference
RNS reactive nitrogen species
ROS reactive oxygen species

**ROT** rottlerin used as a protein kinase C-delta inhibitor

**RP** 19S regulatory particle

**Rubicon** RUN domain and cysteine-rich domain-containing Beclin

1-interacting protein

selective autophagy selective recruitment of substrates for autophagy

**sequestosome 1** an autophagy substrate

**sequestosome 1** a multifunctional adapter protein implicated in tumorigenesis

(p62/SQSTM1)

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#### ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

sequestosome (SQSTMI)1 p62 protein, a ubiquitin-binding scaffold protein

SESN2 sestrin-2

shRNA small/short hairpin RNA siRNA small interference RNA

sirt 1 sirtuin 1 class III histone deacetylase, prevents Alzheimer's

disease

SMIR small molecule inhibitor of rapamycin

SNARE soluble N-ethylmaleimide-sensitive factor attachment receptor

**SNP** single nucleotide polymorphism

SQSTM1 sequestosome 1 Syt1 synaptotagmin 1 T1DM type 1 diabetes mellitus

TAKA transport of Atg9 after knocking-out Atg1
TASCC TOR-autophagy spatial coupling compartment

TCN trans-Golgi network
TCR T cell receptor

**TECPR1** tectonin beta-propeller repeat containing 1

tensirolimus mTOR inhibitor
TFEB transcript factor EB

**TGF** $\beta$  transforming growth factor  $\beta$  that activates autophagy

TGN trans-Golgi network

TIGR TP53 (tumor protein 53)-induced glycolysis and apoptosis

regulator

TK tyrosine kinase

TKI tyrosine kinase inhibitor
TLR Toll-like receptor
TMD transmembrane domain

TMEM166 transmembrane protein 166 that induces autophagy

TNF tumor necrosis factor TNF- $\alpha$  tumor necrosis factor alpha ATP-competitive mTOR inhibitor

TRAIL tumor necrosis factor-regulated apoptosis-inducing ligand

TSC tuberous sclerosis complex TSC2 tuberous sclerosis complex 2

TSP thrombospondin

UBA domain ubiquitin-associated domain UBAN ubiquitin-binding domain

**ubiquitin** a small protein that functions in intracellular protein

breakdown and histone modification

**ubiquitination** a well-established signal for inducing autophagy of protein

aggregates

Ubl ubiquitin-like

ULK Unc-51-like kinase complex

ULK1 putative mammalian homologue of Atg1p

**UPR** unfolded protein response

**UPS** ubiquitin–proteasome system

UVRAG UV-irradiation resistance-associated gene VAchT vesicular acetylcholine transporter VAMP vesicle-associated membrane protein

VCP/p97 valosin-containing protein involved in endosomal trafficking

and autophagy

VEGF vascular endothelial growth factor

**VEGFR** vascular endothelial growth factor receptor

VMP1 vacuole membrane protein 1, promotes formation of

autophagosomes

VPS15 vacuolar protein sorting 15 homologue

VTA vascular targeting agent

VTC vacuolar transporter chaperone

wortmannin an autophagic inhibitor

**XBP1** a component of the ER stress response that activates

macroautophagy

**xenophagy** degradation of invading bacteria, viruses and parasites

YFP yellow fluorescent protein

zymophagy lysosomal degradation of zymogen granules (digestive

enzymes)

See also Klionsky, D. J., Codogno, P., Cuervo, A. M. et al. (2010). A comprehensive glossary of autophagy-related molecules and processes. *Autophagy* 6, 438–448.

### Autophagy: Volume 1 – Contributions

- Mechanisms of Regulation of p62 in Autophagy and Implications for Health and Diseases
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- Autophagy and Crohn's Disease: Towards New Therapeutic Connections
- The Role of Autophagy in Atherosclerosis
- Treatment of Diabetic Cardiomyopathy through Upregulating Autophagy by Stimulating AMP-Activated Protein Kinase
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# Introduction to Autophagy: Cancer, Other Pathologies, Inflammation, Immunity, Infection, and Aging, Volume 6

M.A. Hayat

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#### **Abstract**

Autophagy plays a direct or indirect role in health and disease. A simplified definition of autophagy is that it is an exceedingly complex process which degrades modified, superfluous (surplus) or damaged cellular macromolecules and whole organelles using hydrolytic enzymes in the lysosomes. It consists of sequential steps of induction of autophagy, formation of autophagosome precursor, formation of autophagosomes, fusion between autophagosome and lysosome, degradation of cargo contents, efflux transportation of degraded products to the cytoplasm, and lysosome reformation.

This chapter discusses specific functions of autophagy, the process of autophagy, major types of autophagy, influences on autophagy, and the role of autophagy in disease, immunity, and defense.

#### INTRODUCTION

Aging has so permeated our lives that it cannot be stopped, but it can be delayed. Under the circumstances, time is our only friend. Because the aging process is accompanied by disability and disease (for example, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's conditions) and cannot be prevented, it seems that slow aging is the only way to have a healthy longer life. In general, aging can be slowed down by not smoking or chewing tobacco, by preventing or minimizing perpetual stress (anger, competition), by abstinence from alcoholic beverages, by regular exercise, and by having a healthy diet. There is no doubt that regular physical activity is associated with a reduced risk of mortality and contributes to the primary and secondary prevention of many types of diseases. Discipline is required to attain this goal.

# 19

# Autophagy Degrades Endocytosed Gap Junctions

## Matthias M. Falk

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#### Abstract

Four principal categories of cell-cell junctions connect cells in vertebrates and form the basis for shaping distinct tissues and organs. Gap junctions (GJs), one of the four junction types, provide direct cell-to-cell communication by mediating passive diffusion of small hydrophilic signaling molecules between neighboring cells. Gap junction mediated intercellular communication (GJIC) has been shown to play a crucial role for all aspects of multicellular life, including embryonic development, tissue function, and cellular homeostasis; and mutations in the GJ forming proteins, connexins (Cxs), have been linked to severe human diseases that include inherited and sporadic nonsyndromic hearing loss, neuropathies, eye lens cataracts, cardiac diseases, craniofacial malformations, and a number of acute skin disorders. Clearly, biosynthesis and degradation significantly contribute to GJ function and need to be controlled precisely. We have previously shown that GJs are removed from the plasma membrane via the internalization of entire GJ plaques (or portions thereof) in a cellular process that resembles clathrin-mediated endocytosis. GJ endocytosis results in

the formation of double-membrane vesicles (termed annular gap junctions [AGJs] or connexosomes) in the cytoplasm of one of the coupled cells. A set of recent independent studies consistent with earlier ultrastructural analyses demonstrate the degradation of endocytosed AGJs by autophagy. Some other reports, however, describe AGJ degradation by endo-/lysosomal pathways in cells that were treated with TPA. Here, I summarize evidence that supports the concept that autophagy serves as the principal cellular degradation pathway for internalized GJs under physiological and pathological conditions.

#### INTRODUCTION

#### Gap Junction Structure and Function

Cells in vertebrates including humans are linked together by four principal types of cellcell junctions to form tissues and organs. Each type of cell-cell junction is considered to fulfill a special function (Figure 19.1A). Tight junctions (TJs) form a net-like belt of branched ridges of transmembrane proteins (claudins, occludins, tricellulin) around cells that tightly link cells together to separate apical from baso-lateral membrane domains, or (in case of epithelia and vascular endothelia) to separate outside from inside, or the lumen of blood vessels from the surrounding body, respectively. Desmosomes and adherens junctions (AJs) form patchy cell-cell contacts that connect cytoskeletal elements (intermediate and actin filaments, respectively) of neighboring cells to provide tissue strength, aid in tissue morphogenesis during development, and to maintain proper tissue organization. Gap junctions (GJs) consist of clusters of double-membrane spanning hydrophilic channels that provide direct cell-to-cell communication by allowing the passage of signaling molecules, ions, and electrical currents. Epithelia and endothelia, sheets of polarized single-cell layers that coat the outside and inside surface of organs such as the intestine, liver, kidneys, or the vasculature, are particularly rich in cell-cell junctions and exhibit a well-organized hierarchical architecture of these structures (Figure 19.1A).

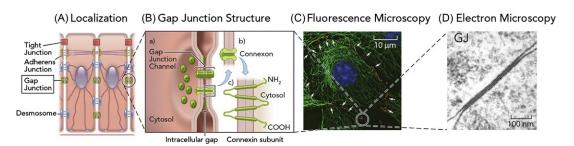


FIGURE 19.1 Cellular location and structure of gap junctions (GJs). (A) GJs are assemblies of double-membrane spanning hydrophilic channels termed "plaques" that bridge the apposing plasma membranes of neighboring cells to provide direct cell-to-cell (or intercellular) communication as shown here for epithelial cells. (B) GJ channels form by the head-on docking of two hemi-channels or "connexons" each assembled and trafficked to the plasma membrane by one of the two contacting cells. Connexons are assembled from six four-pass trans-membrane proteins termed "connexins" (Cxs). (C) GJs can be detected by immunofluorescence light microscopy when stained with fluorescence-tagged antibodies, such as the ones shown here in T51B liver cells assembled from endogenously expressed Cx43 protein. (D) GJs also appear as structures with unique morphology in ultrathin sections when examined by electron microscopy (EM).

RESULTS 275

Direct cell-to-cell communication is a pivotal cellular function of multicellular organisms. It is established by GJ channels, which bridge apposing plasma membranes of neighboring cells. Typically, tens to thousands of GJ channels cluster into densely packed two-dimensional arrays, termed GJ plaques, that can reach several micrometers in diameter (Figure 19.1B). GJ channels are assembled from a ubiquitously expressed class of four-pass trans-membrane proteins, termed connexins (Cxs), with connexin 43 (Cx43) being the most abundantly expressed Cx type. Six Cx polypeptides oligomerize into a ring to form a hexameric trans-membrane structure with a central hydrophilic pore, called a hemi-channel or connexon. Once trafficked to the plasma membrane, two connexons, one provided by each of two neighboring cells, dock head-on in the extracellular space to form the complete double-membrane spanning GJ channel that is completely sealed off to the extracellular space (Thévenin *et al.*, 2013) ((Figures 19.1, 19.2). Recruitment of additional GJ channels along the outer edge enlarges the GJ plaques, while simultaneous removal of older channels from plaque centers balances GJ channel turnover (Falk *et al.*, 2009; Gaietta *et al.*, 2002; Lauf *et al.*, 2002).

#### **RESULTS**

### Gap Junction Endocytosis Generates Cytoplasmic Double-Membrane Vesicles

Goodenough and Gilula (1974), and Ghoshroy et al. (1995) found that connexons, once docked, appear inseparable under physiological conditions (Ghoshroy et al., 1995; Goodenough and Gilula, 1974), suggesting that cells may endocytose and degrade GJ plagues in whole. Indeed, we found that cells endocytose their GJs as complete doublemembrane structures via a combined endo-/exocytic process (endocytic for the receiving cell, exocytic for the donating cell) (Baker et al., 2008; Falk et al., 2009; Gilleron et al., 2008; Gumpert et al., 2008; Piehl et al., 2007) (Figure 19.3, steps 1–5). Internalization was found to occur preferentially into one of two coupled cells, indicating a highly regulated process (Falk et al., 2009; Piehl et al., 2007). Further analyses indicated that GI internalization utilizes well-known components of the clathrin-mediated endocytosis (CME) machinery, including the classical endocytic coat protein clathrin, the clathrin-adaptors AP-2 and Dab2, the GTPase dynamin2, the retrograde actin motor myosin VI (myo6), as well as the process of actin polymerization (Gumpert et al., 2008; Piehl et al., 2007) (Figure 19.3, steps 1–4). A recent analysis from our lab revealed that two AP-2 binding sites are present in the C-terminus of Cx43 that cooperate to mediate GI endocytosis (Fong et al., 2013), suggesting a mechanistic model for clathrin's ability to internalize these large plasma membrane structures.

GJ internalization generates characteristic cytoplasmic double-membrane GJ vesicles, termed annular GJs (AGJs) or connexosomes (Figures 19.2, 19.3). Note that the outer membrane of the generated AGJ vesicles corresponds to the plasma membrane of the host cell, while the inner membrane and the vesicle lumen correspond to plasma membrane and cytoplasm of the neighboring donor cell (Figures 19.2, 19.3, steps 1–5). Extensive further analyses revealed that cells turn over their GJs constitutively (Falk *et al.*, 2009; Piehl *et al.*, 2007), and efficiently after treatment with inflammatory mediators such as thrombin and endothelin (Baker *et al.*, 2008); mitogens such as EGF and VEGF (Fong and Falk, and Nimlamool and Falk, unpublished); in response to treatment with the nongenomic

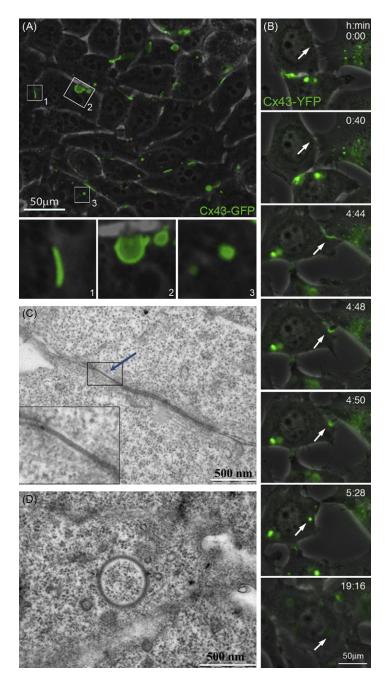


FIGURE 19.2 Gap junctions and endocytosed gap junctions. (A) HeLa cells transfected with Cx43-GFP efficiently express and assemble GJs in the adjacent plasma membranes of transfected cells (visible as green fluorescent lines and puncta such as the one shown in insert 1). Over time, GJs bulge inward (insert 2), detach from the plasma membrane and form endocytosed cytoplasmic annular gap junction (AGJ) vesicles or connexosomes (insert 3). (B) Selected still images of a time-lapse recording of stably transfected Cx43-YFP expressing HeLa cells showing the formation of a GJ, its endocytic internalization into the cytoplasm of one of the previously coupled cells, and final degradation of the generated AGJ vesicle, indicated by the loss of its fluorescence (marked with arrows). Combined phase contrast and fluorescence images are shown in (A) and (B). Transmission electron micrographs of a gap junction (C) and an annular gap junction (D) in mouse embryonic stem cells.

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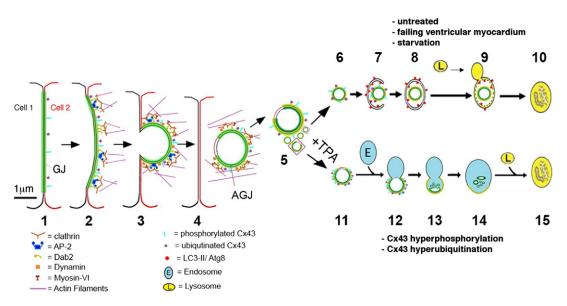


FIGURE 19.3 Mechanisms of gap junction endocytosis and degradation. Schematic representation of proposed steps that lead to GJ internalization (steps 1–3), cytoplasmic AGJ vesicle formation and fragmentation (steps 4, 5), and AGJ vesicle degradation by phago-/lysosomal (steps 6–10) and endo-/lysosomal pathways (steps 11–15) based on the previous work by others and us. Note the proposed nonjunctional membrane domains missing the green GJ label (shown in steps 4, 5, 11, 12), and the increased phosphorylation and ubiquitination on AGJ vesicles that fuse with endosomes (steps 11, 12 versus 6, 7).

carcinogen lindane (Gilleron *et al.*, 2008); and under pathological conditions such as in the failing canine ventricular myocardium (Hesketh *et al.*, 2010). Constitutive and acute endocytosis of GJ plaques correlates with the described short half-life of connexins of only 1–5 hours (Beardslee *et al.*, 1998; Berthoud *et al.*, 2004; Falk *et al.*, 2009; Fallon and Goodenough, 1981; Gaietta *et al.*, 2002).

## Endocytosed Gap Junctions are Degraded by Autophagy

Four recent studies by Hesketh *et al.* (2010), Lichtenstein *et al.* (2011), Fong *et al.* (2012), and Bejarano *et al.* (2012) report the degradation of endocytosed AGJ vesicles via autophagy (Figure 19.3, steps 6–10). Hesketh *et al.* (2010) report loss of GJs from the plasma membrane, and GJ endocytosis and AGJ degradation by autophagy in pacing-induced failing canine ventricular myocardium. Lichtenstein *et al.* (2011) report that autophagy contributes to the degradation of endogenously (NRK cells, mouse embryonic fibroblasts) and exogenously (HeLa cells) expressed Cx43 protein, and of wild-type and cataract-associated mutant Cx50 proteins in both un-induced cells and in cells in which autophagy was induced by starvation (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2011). Fong *et al.* (2012) report the autophagic degradation of AGJ vesicles in normal, untreated HeLa cells that express exogenous fluorescently tagged Cx43; and in primary porcine pulmonary artery endothelial cells (PAECs) endogenously

expressing Cx43. Bejarano *et al.* (2012) report the Nedd4-mediated ubiquitin-dependent autophagic degradation of internalized GJs *in situ* (mouse liver) as well as in starved and fed cultured cells expressing Cx43 endogenously and exogenously (mouse embryonic fibroblasts, NIH3T3, COS7, and NRK cells).

In all four studies cytoplasmic AGJ vesicles were detected inside phagophores by ultrastructural analyses. Autophagosomes exhibit a highly characteristic, clearly recognizable double-membrane structure on ultra-thin sections (Figure 19.2D), making conventional electron microscopy a very reliable technique for the characterization of autophagosomes (Mizushima, 2004). Also, in all studies AGJs were observed to co-localize with the autophagy marker protein, LC3-II/Atg8, known to be one of the most useful generic marker proteins for the characterization of autophagosomes (Kabeya *et al.*, 2000). Microtubule-associated protein light chain 3 (LC3, the mammalian homologue of the yeast autophagic protein Atg8) is an abundant soluble cytoplasmic protein. It is proteolytically processed by the removal of a few N-terminal amino acid residues shortly after translation that generates LC3-I. LC3-I is recruited to developing phagophores, is covalently conjugated to phosphatidyl-ethanolamine (PE) of the phagophore membrane (termed LC3-II), and remains on autophagosomes for most of their lifetime (Kabeya *et al.*, 2000; Mizushima, 2004).

While the Lichtenstein *et al.* and Bejarano *et al.* studies were aimed more broadly at a potential role of autophagy contributing to Cx and GJ degradation in general, the Fong *et al.* and the Hesketh *et al.* studies were aimed specifically at investigating the fate of internalized AGJ vesicles that others and we had characterized previously (Baker *et al.*, 2008; Gumpert *et al.*, 2008; Jordan *et al.*, 2001; Piehl *et al.*, 2007). To further support their findings, Lichtenstein *et al.* and Bejarano *et al.* knocked down the autophagy-related proteins Atg5 and Atg7 in cells expressing either endogenous or exogenous Cx43, and used the drugs chloroquine and 3MA to inhibit autophagy. Fong *et al.* knocked down expression of the autophagy related proteins Beclin-1 (Atg6), LC3 (Atg8), LAMP-2 and p62/sequestosome 1 (SQSTM1), and used the drugs 3MA, Wortmannin, and Bafilomycin A1 in Cx43-GFP expressing HeLa cells.

As mentioned previously in the Lichtenstein *et al.*, Fong *et al.*, and Bejarano *et al.* studies the ubiquitin-binding protein p62/SQSTM1 was identified as a protein that targets internalized GJs to autophagic degradation. Knocking down p62/SQSTM1 protein levels as performed by Fong *et al.* resulted in a significantly increased accumulation of cytoplasmic AGJs (av. 55%, n = 4) and a significantly reduced co-localization (av. 69.5%, n = 3) of AGJs with autophagosomes. In summary, all four complementary studies (Bejarano *et al.*, 2012; Fong *et al.*, 2012; Hesketh *et al.*, 2010; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2011) compellingly show that under physiological and pathological conditions GJ plaques are endocytosed from the plasma membrane, and that the generated AGJ vesicles are degraded by autophagy.

## Structural Elements Warrant the Autophagic Degradation of Endocytosed Gap Junctions

Since cytoplasmic vesicles normally can fuse with endosomes, at first glance, autophagic degradation of AGJ vesicles might not appear intuitive. However, considering the GJ internalization process that generates double-membrane vesicles in which both membranes are tightly linked to each other (not single membrane vesicles that typically are formed by the

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endocytosis of cargo molecules on the plasma membrane), the structural organization of AGJ vesicles (multiprotein complexes with paracrystalline surface packing), and their cytoplasmic location, autophagic degradation emerges as the most apparent cellular degradation pathway. Finally, the unique structural composition of AGJ vesicles with lumen and inner membrane derived from the neighboring cell (being foreign to the AGJ-receiving host cell) may further direct AGJs to autophagic degradation. Taken together, the structural and functional characteristics of AGJ vesicles, along with the fact that autophagy serves as the generic degradation pathway for cytoplasmically localized structures (organelles and protein aggregates), renders autophagic degradation the most obvious cellular AGJ degradation pathway.

### Potential Other Degradation Pathways for Endocytosed Gap Junctions

Interestingly, a recent paper by Leithe et al. (2009) reports that in TPA-treated cells (a structural analogue of the secondary messenger molecule diacylglycerol [DAG]), internalized GJs may be degraded by the endo-/lysosomal and not the autophagosomal pathway (Figure 19.3, steps 11–15). Recently, the Leithe lab identified the protein Smurf2 (the HECT E3 ubiquitin ligase smad ubiquitination regulatory factor-2) as a critical factor that regulates GJ internalization and endo-/lysosomal targeting in TPA-treated cells (Fykerud *et al.*, 2012). DAG is a known potent activator of protein kinase C (PKC), and PKC is known to phosphorylate and promote ubiquitination of Cx43 (Leithe et al., 2009; Leithe and Rivedal, 2004b; Postma et al., 1998). Based on these and our own results, it is tempting to speculate that cells might be able to regulate by which pathway (endo-/lysosomal versus phago-/lysosomal) specific cargo is sequestered and processed (e.g., endo-/lysosomal and phago-/lysosomal pathways might process internalized GJs in different ways). Furthermore, the level of cargo-phosphorylation and/or ubiquitination might determine which of these pathways is ultimately chosen (basic phosphorylation/ubiquitination signaling autophagic AGJ vesicle degradation; elevated phosphorylation/ubiquitination signaling endo-/lysosomal AGI vesicle degradation) (see Figure 19.3, steps 6–10 versus 11–15).

Endo-/lysosomal degradation of AGJs as observed in TPA-treated cells by Leithe *et al.* (2009) of course raises an important question: How is it structurally possible for a double-membrane vesicle that consists of tightly bonded membrane layers and densely packed GJ channels to fuse with a single-membrane endosome? The Rivedal and Leithe laboratories suggest that subsequent to GJ internalization and AGJ formation, the inner AGJ membrane splits and peels away from the outer AGJ membrane, generating a single-membraned cyto-plasmic AGJ vesicle that then can fuse with a single-membraned endosome (Kjenseth *et al.*, 2010, 2012; Leithe *et al.*, 2009, 2012). However, since docked GJ channels cannot split into undocked connexons under physiological conditions (Ghoshroy *et al.*, 1995; Goodenough and Gilula, 1974) – which appears to be the apparent reason for double-membrane GJ endocytosis – it is not clear how membrane separation could be initiated in the AGJ vesicles shortly after their generation. Clearly low pH, a characteristic of late endosomes and lysosomes, and a potential initiator of GJ splitting, can be excluded because AGJ vesicle membrane-separation needs to occur before AGJ/endosome fusion.

Interestingly, by electron microscopic (EM) examination, we found that AGJ vesicles examined by electron microscopy (EM) appear to include a small region where the two membranes are void of GJ channels and are not docked or linked to each other (Falk et al., 2012;

Piehl et al., 2007) (shown schematically in Figure 19.3, steps 4, 5, 11 and 12). Similar small AGI membrane separations were also observed in classical ultrastructural analyses of GJs and AGJ vesicles (see, e.g., Mazet et al., 1985). Possibly, these nonjunctional membrane domains consist of plasma membrane that is derived from both neighboring cells, and we postulated that these areas might originate from plasma membrane regions that were located immediately adjacent to the GI plaques and were internalized as well. To gain further support for this hypothesis, we incubated inducible stably Cx43-YFP expressing HeLa cells for 2-4 hours with a fluorescently tagged lectin, Alexa594-wheat germ agglutinin (WGA), and examined AGJ vesicles by high-resolution fluorescence microscopy. WGA binds specifically to sialic acid and N-acetylglucosaminyl carbohydrate moieties commonly found on extracellular-exposed carbohydrate side-chains of plasma membrane proteins. Due to its relatively large size (~38 kDa), WGA is not able to traverse the plasma membrane in living cells. However, WGA will bind to and label the extracellular surface of plasma membranes, and subsequently will be endocytosed and then will also label intracellular membrane compartments. Interestingly we found that a significant portion of AGJ vesicles ( $\sim$ 50%, n = 80; the ones that likely were generated during the WGA-incubation period), exhibited red-fluorescent WGA-puncta (Falk et al., 2012). These results support our hypothesis that the undocked membrane domains we detected by EM indeed represent plasma membrane areas that were located in the immediate vicinity of GJ plaques and were concomitantly internalized in the AGJ endocytosis process. It is very likely that these nonjunctional membrane domains provide the single membrane areas that allow double-membrane AGJ vesicles to fuse with single-membrane endosomes.

## Signals that Prime Gap Junctions for Endocytosis and Direct them to Autophagic Degradation

Post-translational modification of proteins is a widespread mechanism to fine-tune the structure, function, and localization of proteins. One of the most versatile and intriguing protein modifications is the covalent attachment of ubiquitin (Ub) or Ub-like modifications to target proteins. Ub is a small, 76-amino acid protein, and either single or multiple Ub moieties can be conjugated to lysine amino acid residues of target proteins. An incredible diversity of mono- and poly-Ub chains (in which Ub moieties can be linked to each other via the Ub residues Met1-, Lys6-, Lys11-, Lys27-, Lys29-, Lys33-, Lys48-, and Lys63-) conjugated to target proteins have been characterized that can range in function from protein activation to protein degradation (Fushman and Wilkinson, 2011). Multiple mono-Ubs, and Lys48- and Lys63-linked poly-Ubs, have been recognized as important signals for protein degradation. For example, conjugation of Ub moieties to proteins has been recognized as a signal for both proteasomal targeting (addition of Lys48-linked poly-Ub chains) and more recently as a sorting signal for internalized vesicles of the late endocytic pathway. This is achieved through the addition of multiple mono-Ub moieties or of Lys63-linked poly-Ub chains, which ultimately lead to degradation by lysosomes (Hicke, 2001; Hicke and Dunn, 2003; Schnell and Hebert, 2003). In addition, Lys-63-linked polyubiquitination can act as an internalization signal for clathrin-mediated endocytosis (CME) (Belouzard and Rouille, 2006; Geetha et al., 2005). Lys63-polyubiquitinated target proteins are recognized by specific CME machinery protein components that associate with a subset of Ub-binding proteins, specifically Epsin1 and Eps15 (Barriere et al., 2006; Hawryluk et al., 2006; Madshus, 2006). Further

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work has shown that the Ub-binding protein p62/SQSTM1 recognizes and interacts via its UBA-domain with polyubiquitinated proteins (Ciani et al., 2003; Seibenhener et al., 2004) and delivers polyubiquitinated (Lys63-linked) oligomeric protein complexes to the autophagic degradation pathway (Bjorkoy et al., 2005; Pankiv et al., 2007). Ubiquitination of Cx43-based GJs has been described previously (Catarino et al., 2011; Girao et al., 2009; Leithe et al., 2009; Leithe and Rivedal, 2004b). The findings that Cx43-based GJs can become ubiquitinated (e.g., Lys63-polyubiquitinated; Kells and Falk, unpublished), the known affinity of p62/ SQSTM1 for ubiquitinated protein complexes, its co-localization with plasma membrane GJs in HeLa, COS7, and PAE cells (Bejarano et al., 2012; Fong et al., 2012; Lichtenstein et al., 2011), and its apparent involvement in targeting AGJ vesicles to autophagic degradation (Fong et al., 2012) suggest that ubiquitination of Cx43 (and at least Cx50), besides serving as a likely signal for GJ internalization, may also serve as the signal for targeting AGJ vesicles to autophagic degradation. Future research will be required to determine the potentially numerous types (multiple mono-Ubs, Lys48- and Lys63-linked poly-Ubs, etc.) and functions of connexin ubiquitination (see Kjenseth et al., 2010; Leithe et al., 2012; Su and Lau, 2012 for recent reviews that discuss Cx-ubiquitination). Very recently, Kjenseth et al. (2012) described an additional, Ub-like post-translational modification of Cx43, SUMOylation (SUMO, small ubiquitin-like modifier) that appears to be involved in regulating GJ stability and turnover. The small Ub-like protein SUMO was found to be conjugated to lysines 144 and 237 of the Cx43-C-terminal domain, further widening the role of Ub and Ub-like signals in the maintenance and degradation of GJs.

#### DISCUSSION

Cells have developed three principal degradation pathways: the proteasomal, the endo-/lysosomal, and the phago-/lysosomal system (termed macroautophagy or simply autophagy), and all three have been implicated previously at various steps in the regulation of GJ stability and Cx degradation (Hesketh et al., 2010; Laing et al., 1997; Leach and Oliphant, 1984; Leithe and Rivedal, 2004a; Musil et al., 2000; Pfeifer, 1980; Qin et al., 2003). While the two latter ones utilize the lysosome for final degradation and are designed for the degradation of protein aggregates, multiprotein complexes and cytoplasmic organelles, the proteasomal system is designed for the degradation of single polypeptide chains that require unfolding to be inserted into the tubular core of the cytoplasmically located proteasome. Since AGI vesicles are highly complex multi-subunit protein assemblies, their degradation by the proteasome is highly unlikely, and no evidence appears to exist that would suggest a proteasome-mediated degradation of GJs or AGJ vesicles. Similarly, lysosomal inhibitors such as leupeptin, chloroquine, NH<sub>4</sub>Cl, and E-64, which previously have been used to gain evidence for endo-/lysosomal degradation of GJs (Berthoud et al., 2004; Laing et al., 1997; Musil et al., 2000; Qin et al., 2003), will also inhibit autophagic GJ degradation, and thus obtained results may not have been interpreted correctly. Experimental approaches that specifically target the autophagosomal degradation pathway that were used by others and us compellingly demonstrate that endocytosed GJs are degraded by autophagy.

Historically, autophagy has been known as a lysosomal degradation pathway that becomes essential to cell survival following nutrient depletion. However, substantial research over

the past decade has indicated that autophagy, besides its well-known function in organelle degradation during starvation, represents a much more common and highly conserved autonomous lysosome-based cellular degradation pathway that is specifically designed to remove and degrade protein aggregates, multiprotein complexes, organelles, and invading pathogens from the cytoplasm (Bjorkoy et al., 2005; Hung et al., 2009; Pohl and Jentsch, 2009; Ravikumar et al., 2008). Recent studies have further shown that protein aggregates, such as the ones formed by huntingtin and β-amyloid protein, and cellular structures such as the midbody ring, a mitotic cytokinesis leftover multiprotein complex, are all degraded by autophagy (Bjorkoy et al., 2005; Hung et al., 2009; Pohl and Jentsch, 2009; Ravikumar et al., 2008). Clearly, these cellular structures are degraded by autophagy independent of starvation. In addition, autophagosomal degradation of membranous/vesicular organelles, as for example malfunctioning mitochondria, is common. Since the catabolic activity of lysosomes is used in this process, degradation-prone structures first need to be separated from the cytoplasm. This is necessary due to the destructive activity of lysosomal enzymes, which cannot be released directly into the cytoplasm. Thus, cytoplasmic structures targeted for degradation are first engulfed in double-membrane vesicles (autophagosomes) that allow lysosomal fusion, degradation, and subsequent recycling of the phagosome cargo and the phagosome membrane.

#### CONCLUSION

In this article, I have summarized recent experimental results and discussed structural and functional considerations that all support the concept that autophagy serves as the default degradation pathway for endocytosed GJs. Indeed, in several classical ultrastructural analyses of various cells and tissues in situ including heart, dermis, and liver (Leach and Oliphant, 1984; Mazet et al., 1985; Pfeifer, 1980; Severs et al., 1989), autophagic degradation of GJs had been suggested. However, surprisingly back then not much attention was attributed to this evidently fundamental GJ degradation pathway. Autophagic degradation of GJs plays a significant role in the regulation of GJ function, as inhibition of cellular autophagy increases GJIC, prevents internalization of GJs, slows down the degradation of Cxs, and causes cytoplasmic accumulation of internalized GJ vesicles in situ, and in cells that either express endogenously or exogenously connexin proteins (Bejarano et al., 2012; Fong et al., 2012; Lichtenstein et al., 2011). Hence, it is likely that certain disease-causing mutations in Cx proteins will impair physiological levels of GJ endocytosis and autophagosomal turnover, and that this will cause a detrimental misregulation of GJ function. Future research also will need to address the signals that specifically modify the Cx proteins to initiate GJ endocytosis and degradation. Post-translational modifications, such as phosphorylation, ubiquitination, and acetylation, the binding/release of regulatory proteins (e.g., ZO-1), and specific conformational changes of the Cx43-C-terminus that regulate access of modifying enzymes are all enticing possibilities.

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