Connexin Membrane Protein Biosynthesis Is Influenced by Polypeptide Positioning within the Translocon and Signal Peptidase Access*

We reported previously (Falk, M. M., Kumar, N. M., and Gilula, N. B. (1994) J. Cell Biol. 127, 343–355) that the membrane integration of polytopic connexin polypeptides can be accompanied by an inappropriate cleavage that generates amino-terminal truncated connexins. While this cleavage was not detected in vivo, translation in standard cell-free translation/translocation systems resulted in the complete cleavage of all newly integrated connexins. Partial cleavage occurred in heterologous expression systems that correlated with the expression level. Here we report that the transmembrane topology of connexins generated in microsomal membranes was identical to the topology of functional connexins in plasma membranes. Characterization of the cleavage site and reaction showed that the connexins were processed by signal peptidase immediately downstream of their first transmembrane domain in a reaction similar to the removal of signal peptides from pre-proteins. Increasing the length and hydrophobic character of the signal anchor sequence of connexins completely prevented the aberrant cleavage. This result indicates that their signal anchor sequence was falsely recognized and positioned as a cleavable signal peptide within the endoplasmic reticulum translocon, and that this mispositioning enabled signal peptidase to access the cleavage sites. The results provide direct evidence for the involvement of unknown cellular factors in the membrane integration process of connexins.

Translocation of membrane proteins is a complex process. It involves recognition and targeting of the proteins to the endoplasmic reticulum (ER), their insertion into the lipid bilayer with their correct transmembrane (TM) orientation without interrupting the permeability barrier of the membrane bilayer, and finally, their maturation into functional proteins that includes co- and post-translational processes such as signal peptidase (SPase) cleavage of ER target signal sequences, folding, disulfide bridge formation, glycosylation, and other post-translational modifications, and eventually oligomerization. A large portion of the current knowledge on the synthesis and translocation of secretory and membrane proteins has been obtained by synthesizing these proteins in translation competent cell lysates supplemented with ER-derived membrane vesicles (microsomes) (1). Since the lysate system has been found in many cases to accurately reproduce the steps involved in translation, translocation, and co- and post-translational modifications, it has become a standard assay system to study these processes. Many secretory and predominantly single spanning TM proteins have been investigated using this assay system, and a large body of information on the mechanisms involved in the membrane translocation of these protein types has been accumulated (reviewed in Refs. 2–4). However, little is known about the synthesis of polytopic membrane proteins that traverse the membrane bilayer more than once. This holds true in particular for membrane channel proteins that bear charged amino acid residues within their TM domains to allow the formation of a hydrophilic pore within the membrane bilayer. Experimental evidence indicates that secretory, as well as TM proteins use the same translocation machinery, and that many of the steps that are involved in the biogenesis of both protein types are closely related (3, 5, 6). However, several recent discoveries indicate that the current understanding of membrane protein translocation is quite incomplete, and it may be much more versatile than previously expected (reviewed in Ref. 4).

We used connexin (Cx) polypeptides as model proteins to study the steps involved in the synthesis of channel forming membrane proteins. Cxs are the proteins that form gap junctions, TM channels providing direct cell-to-cell communication. They are nonglycosylated, polytopic plasma membrane (PM) proteins (class III membrane proteins) that traverse the membrane bilayer four times with NH2 and COOH termini located in the cytoplasm (Ncyt-Ccyt orientation). This TM topology was suggested by hydrophy analyses of the primary amino acid sequences and is supported by many other topological analyses (cited in Ref. 7). More than a dozen different Cxs have been cloned and sequenced from rodents, and all represent structurally conserved members of a multigene family that mainly differ in the length of their COOH-terminal domains. To form a gap junction channel, 6 Cxs oligomerize into a ring-shaped structure with a central hydrophilic pore, termed connexon. Two connexons, each provided by two neighboring cells then pair in the adjacent PMs to form the transcellular, double-membrane channel (reviewed in Refs. 8 and 9).

We found that the translation of Cx polypeptides in standard cell-free translation/translocation systems supplemented with ER-derived microsomes resulted in a complete, but inappropriate proteolytic processing that affected all Cx polypeptides upon their membrane integration (reported in this study and in

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§ The abbreviations used are: ER, endoplasmic reticulum; Cx, connexin; FM, plasma membrane; SA, signal anchor; PAGE, polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis; SP, signal peptide; SPase, signal peptidase; TM, transmembrane; wt, wild type; CAPS, 3-(cyclohexylamino)ethylmaleimide; PL, prolactin.

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Ref. 7). Functional Cxs organized in gap junction plaques at the PM are not processed in this manner (10, 11). This difference in Cx membrane integration in vitro and in vivo suggested that the membrane integration process of Cxs somehow differs from the membrane integration of previously studied membrane proteins and may require additional factors which are absent in the cell-free translation system. Further analysis showed that a comparable cleavage product was also detectable in the ER membranes of different cell types that overexpress Cxs. There, the amount of cleaved Cx polypeptides correlated with the expression level (7). The cleavage reaction clipped off an NH$_2$-terminal portion of the Cx polypeptides, and appeared to be similar to the cleavage of target signal peptides (SP) from pre-proteins synthesized on the ER membrane. Further characterization indeed suggested a cleavage by SPase (12), the enzyme that normally cleaves NH$_2$-terminal ER target SPs from secretory and certain TM pre-proteins oriented with their NH$_2$ terminus located in the lumen of the ER. Cxs, however, are oriented with their NH$_2$ terminus facing the cytoplasm, and no NH$_2$-terminal SP is encoded within their NH$_2$ terminus. Instead, internal hydrophobic signal anchor (SA) sequences have been characterized in N$_H$$^\alpha$-oriented membrane proteins, such as the Cxs, that function in their membrane targeting and anchoring (reviewed in Refs. 2–4). Consequently, Cxs should not be cleaved by this enzyme upon their membrane integration.

Here we report the TM topology of Cxs generated in ER membranes, and that a modified TM orientation is not causing this inappropriate cleavage. Furthermore, we performed an extensive characterization of the cleavage site, reaction, and conditions that are associated with this proteolytic processing. The results indicated that the SA sequence of Cxs was improperly recognized and positioned within the ER translocon when Cxs were translocated in vitro, and that this mis-positioning allowed SPase to access the cleavage sites in the Cx sequences. The results provide direct evidence that additional, unknown cellular factors are involved in the successful membrane integration of Cx polypeptides in vitro that are absent or not functional in standard cell-free translation/translocation systems.

**EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

**cDNA Clones, Chimeras, and Mutagenesis of Cx Polypeptides—**For the in vitro transcription of efficiently translated synthetic Cx RNAs, rat α$_1$ (Cx43), and human β$_1$ (Cx32) cDNAs were cloned into the transcription vector pSP64T (13) as described in Falk et al. (7). Site-directed mutagenesis of the Cx sequences was performed using overlap extension polymerase chain reaction as described in Falk et al. (14), except that proofreading FPU polymerase (Stratagene, La Jolla, CA) was used. Plasmids pSP64Tα$_1$ and β$_1$ were cut with NheI, dephosphorylated, and the wt sequences were replaced with the Nhel-cut polymerase chain reaction amplified mutagenic cDNA fragments. For rapid identification of mutated clones, nucleotide exchanges were chosen that, in addition to the desired amino acid substitution, created new endonuclease restriction sites. Clones with correctly oriented inserts were determined by restriction endonuclease mapping, and selected constructs were verified by DNA sequencing.

**N-Glycosylation consensus sites with the general amino acid sequence X(S/T)X(S/T)-(P/S) for Cx sequences were determined using the P27112 of various Cx constructs.**

(a) Cx membrane domains with the help of Odyssey software. 
(b) Cx mutant constructs were created by using the respective single site mutants as template DNAs. 
(c) Cx constructs that were inserted into the Arg-32 residue in the hydrophobic (h) core region of TM1 with leucine (Leu), and/or three additional leucine codons were inserted immediately downstream of the Arg-32 codon into the TM1 domain.

A Bluescript-based plasmid containing the wild type synaptophysin cDNA was generously provided by R. Scheller (Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Stanford, CA). To increase in vitro translation efficiency, the synaptophysin cDNA was recloned into the in vitro transcription vector pSP64T (14). Bluescript KS-based plasmids pCSR2, pCSR3, pCSR4, and pCSR5, encoding β$_1$ Cx(synaptophysin) chimeras, in which the Cx sequence is progressively replaced by synaptophysin sequence, were provided by R. Leube (University of Mainz, Mainz, Germany). Construction of the chimeras is described in Leube (16). The pSP64T-based plasmid pBP4 encoding bovine preprolactin was kindly provided by D. Zopf and P. Walter (University of California, San Francisco, CA). A pSP64T-based plasmid encoding rat lens membrane protein MP26 was kindly provided by N. M. Kumar (The Scripps Research Institute, La Jolla, CA).

**In Vitro Transcription, Translation, and Membrane Translocation Assay—**All plasmids used for in vitro transcription were linearized, phenol/chloroform extracted, and ethanol precipitated prior to RNA synthesis. Transcription reactions were performed using T3, T7, or SP6 RNA polymerase (Promega Biotech, Madison, WI). The quality and amount of synthesized RNA was determined by analyzing aliquots on agarose gels. Synthetic RNAs were either used immediately or stored in aliquots at −70 °C.

Cell-free translation reactions were performed as described previously (7, 17). Nuclease-treated rabbit reticulocyte lysates were purchased from Promega Biotech and programmed with synthetic RNA. Typically 0.5–1 μg of RNA was used per 25-μl reaction volume. RNAs were transcribed in the presence of [35S]methionine (35 S; Amersham Corp.), Translation reactions were supplemented co-translationally with canine pancreas-derived rough microsomes, which were either obtained from Promega Biotech or prepared as described by Walter and Blobel (18). Typical concentrations were 0.5–1 Eq/10-μl reaction volume (18). Translation reactions were incubated at 30–35 °C for 30–60 min except as otherwise stated. Membrane bound proteins were harvested by pelleting the microsomes through a 0.5 μm sucrose cushion, using an Airfuge ultracentrifuge (Beckman Instruments, Inc., Palo Alto, CA), as described in Falk et al. (7). To remove N-linked carbohydrates from the N-glycosylated Cx constructs, 10-μl aliquots of the corresponding translocation reactions were incubated with 1 unit of endoglycosidase H (Boehringer Mannheim) for 2 h at room temperature prior to immunoprecipitation. To test a possible influence of the pH on the cleavage reaction, increasing volumes of 50 mM NaCl or NaOH solutions were added to the translocation reactions.

**Pretreatment of Microsomal Vesicles—**Microsomal vesicles were depleted of their luminal proteins by perfusing them at high pH as described (19), except that CAPS (pK$_a$ 10.4) was replaced with CHES (pK$_a$ 9.3). 100-μl microsome aliquots were diluted 10-fold with either 50 mM CAPS buffer, pH 7.4 (final concentration) or CHES buffer, pH 9.5 and pH 10.2, and incubated on ice for 30 min. Microsomes were neutralized and collected as described (19), and stored on ice until used. Depletion of their soluble, luminal proteins was monitored by analyzing the protein content in the supernatants on Coomasie Blue-stained SDS-PAGE gels. To ensure protease inhibitor access to the lumen, microsomes were perforated as described (17) with N-ethylmaleimide (0.25 and 1.0 mM final concentration), iodoacetamide (1 mM final concentration), EDTA (1 mM final concentration), EGTA (1 mM final concentration), or diisopropyl fluorophosphate (2 mM final concentration) (Sigma) by adding these inhibitors to the perforation buffers.

**Radiosequencing of α$_1$ and β$_1$ Cx—**For radiosequencing, Cxs were labeled with $\gamma$-[3H]phenylalanine (37 MBq/ml, Amersham Corp.). One complete amino acid mixture (1 mM final concentration) lacking phenylalanine (Phe) was prepared from amino acid calibration markers (Sigma). A standard translation reaction (60 μl) consisted of 30 μl of reticulocyte lysate, 3 μl of 1 mM amino acid mixture without Phe, 15 μl of [3H]Phe, 1–3 μg of synthetic RNA, and 6–8 equivalents of microsomes. After translation the reaction was loaded on SDS-PAGE gels, and the areas containing the α$_1$ or β$_1$ Cx polypeptides were excised, cut into smaller pieces, and placed into the chamber of an ELUTRAP elution device (Schleicher & Schuell, Keene, NH). The elution buffer (0.1% SDS, 20 mM NH$_4$CO$_3$, 1 mM thioglycolic acid, 0.1% dithiothreitol) was continuously mixed by pumping the buffer from the negative pole to the positive pole with a peristaltic pump (Bio-Rad). Proteins were radioanalyzed overnight at 100 V. The eluate (1 ml) was dried using a Speedvac at 80 °C. The dried sample was redissolved in 385 μl of 1% SDS solution and protein corresponding to ~100,000–200,000 cpm were applied to a Polybrene-treated glass fiber filter for 20–25 cycles of amino acid sequence analysis in an Applied Biosystems 470A gas-phase sequenator (Foster City, CA). Individual cycles were collected before on-line high performance liquid chromatography analysis. 50-μl
Connexin Membrane Protein Integration

RESULTS

Cell-free Expression of Cxs—For the analysis of the Cx biogenesis described in this study, the two most abundant Cx isoforms, heart Cx α1 (Cx43) and liver Cx β1 (Cx32), were used. As we reported previously, Cx polypeptides can be expressed efficiently as full-length proteins in reticulocyte lysates or wheat germ extracts in the absence of microsomes. Synthetic Cx RNAs produced translation products that migrated with an electrophoretic mobility on SDS-PAGE gels that corresponded to their predicted molecular weights (Fig. 1, lane 1, shown for α1 Cx; see also Ref. 7). However, translation in the presence of pancreatic microsomes resulted in the generation of cleaved Cxs with a faster mobility on SDS-PAGE gels (Fig. 1, lane 2) that were retained in the microsomal membrane fraction after pelleting the microsomes through a 0.5 M sucrose cushion (Fig. 1, lanes 3 and 4). All Cx isotypes examined thus far were aberrantly processed in this manner (7). Full-length Cx polypeptides also generated in the presence of microsomes (Fig. 1, lane 2) were not membrane-associated and remained in the supernatant fraction (Fig. 1, lane 3), indicating that they were synthesized by free ribosomes that failed to bind to the membranes. Other secretory and transmembrane proteins, such as prolactin (PL), MP26, and synaptophysin (Syn), translated in parallel reactions in the presence of microsomes gave results as reported previously, namely SP cleavage of pre-prolactin (20), membrane integration of MP26 without SP cleavage or glycosylation (21), and membrane integration and N-glycosylation of Syn (22), respectively (Fig. 1, lanes 5–10).

The TM Topology of Cxs Integrated into ER Membranes Was Identical to Their Topology in the PM—The TM topology of Cxs integrated into microsomes was determined by N-glycosylation site tagging. N-Glycosylation consensus sequences were introduced into the extracellular loops (E1 and E2), and into the intracellular loop (I-loop) described to be located on both sides of the PM (Fig. 2A). While the β1 mutants with the consensus sites in the extracellular loop E1 (designated β1E1K48N and β1E1LL65S), or E2 (designated β1E2L655N/K167S) were efficiently glycosylated resulting in a reduced mobility on SDS-PAGE gels (Fig. 2B, lanes 5, 8, and 14), the mutant with the consensus site in the I-loop (designated β1I-loopH126N) was not glycosylated (Fig. 2B, lane 11). Endoglycosidase H (endoH) digestion removed the carbohydrate side chains and shifted their electrophoretic mobility back to the mobility of the wt protein (Fig. 2B, lanes 6, 9, and 15). Protease protection assays have shown previously that the COOH-terminal domain of the Cxs is located correctly outside the microsomes (7). Taken together, these results demonstrated that the TM topology of Cx polypeptides integrated into ER membranes (microsomes) was identical to their topology in the PM, and therefore, a hypothetical aberrant TM topology could not be responsible for the cleavage.

Polypeptide Translocation Was Required for Cx Cleavage—To determine whether Cx polypeptides have to be translocated into the lumen of the microsomes to be cleaved, we translated Cxs in the presence of microsomes that were preincubated with 0.25 and 1 mM NEM. This alkylating agent was previously reported to prevent protein translocation (23). To verify inhibition of protein translocation by NEM, Syn and PL were translated in parallel as control proteins. 0.25 mM NEM allowed the translocation of a portion of the control proteins, as indicated by a reduction in glycosylation of Syn, and a reduction of cleavage of pre-PL into PL. 1 mM NEM, however, completely abolished glycosylation of Syn, as well as cleavage of pre-PL, respectively (Fig. 3, lanes 1–3, middle and bottom panels). Successful targeting and binding of the newly translated polypeptides to the membrane was indicated by their recovery with the membranes after pelleting the microsomes through a 0.5 M sucrose cushion. Cx cleavage was completely abolished under the conditions described above (Fig. 3, lanes 1–3, top panel), indicating that membrane targeting was not sufficient for the Cx processing, but requires the translocation of the nascent Cx polypeptides into the membrane bilayer and into the lumen of the microsomes. Translocation and cleavage was also abolished when microsomes were preincubated at 30 °C for 30–90 min. This treatment resulted in the complete inactivation of the microsomal translocation activity (Fig. 3, lanes 5–7).

Cxs Were Aberrantly Cleaved by SPase upon Integration into Microsomes—A direct inhibitor for eucaryotic signal peptidases is not known, however, indirect experimentation reported in Falk et al., (7) suggested a cleavage by SPase. To obtain additional evidence for a SPase-mediated cleavage, microsomes

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Fig. 1.** Cell-free integration of Cxs and other secretory and membrane proteins into microsomal membranes. α1 Cx (lanes 1 and 2), PL (lanes 5 and 6), MP26 (lanes 7 and 8), and Syn (lanes 9 and 10) were translated in reticulocyte lysates programmed with the respective synthetic RNAs in the absence (−) and presence (+) of microsomes. [35S]Methionine-labeled translation products were analyzed by SDS-PAGE and visualized by autoradiography. α1 Cx translocation reactions were separated into membrane integrated (p), and non-membrane integrated polypeptides (a) by pelleting the microsomes through sucrose cushions (lanes 3 and 4). Fainter migrating, aberrantly cleaved Cx translation products were generated in the presence of microsomes. Predicted translation products were obtained with secretory (PL) and other membrane protein RNAs (MP26 and Syn) that were translated in parallel reactions. Corresponding topology schemes including the respective co- and post-translational modifications are shown. The position of molecular mass protein standards (in kDa) are indicated on the right in Figs. 1, 2, and 6.
were depleted of their soluble luminal proteins by preincubating them at high pH (pH 9.5 and 10.2), using the protocol of Nicchitta and Blobel (19), followed by centrifugation through a 0.5M sucrose cushion. However, protein depletion had little effect on the cleavage reaction (Fig. 3, lanes 8–10), indicating that the Cxs were not cleaved by a soluble, ER luminal protease. Note that non-membrane integrated full-length Cxs generated as a by-product in the presence of microsomes (described above) were not removed prior to analysis, and therefore, are present on the gels shown in Fig. 3, lanes 8–12, and Figs. 5–7.

To exclude the possibility that the Cxs were cleaved by a different membrane-anchored ER protease, Cxs were translocated into microsomes that were preloaded at high pH with different class-specific protease inhibitors to ensure access of the chemicals to the microsomal lumen. While alkylating agents such as iodoacetamide (1 mM final concentration), or chelating agents such as EDTA (1 mM final concentration) efficiently blocked protein translation under the conditions described, preincubation of the microsomes in diisopropyl fluorophosphate (2 mM final concentration) or EGTA (2 mM final concentration), allowed translation, but had no significant influence on the cleavage reaction (Fig. 3, lanes 11 and 12). Furthermore, the cleavage was relatively independent of pH (pH 5.5–9.0), temperature (30–41 °C), and RNA concentration (0.05–1 µg/10-µl reaction volume) (not shown). All these results provided additional strong evidence for a cleavage performed by SPase, and argued against a cleavage by any other known protease involved in protein degradation, such as “rapid ER degradation” (24) or “quality control” (25, 26).

Cxs Were Cleaved at SPase “Cleavage Site Motifs” in Their First Extracellular Domain—The exact location of the cleavage site was mapped for cell-free expressed α1 and β1 Cx polypeptides by NH2-terminal amino acid radiosequencing after translating the Cxs in the presence of labeled phenylalanine (Fig. 4A). Phenylalanine was chosen because of its unique distribution within the NH2-terminal portion of the Cx polypeptide. While no Phe residues are present in the NH2-terminal domain, two Phe residues separated by an isoleucine (Ile) are present in the first TM domain (Phe-29 and Phe-31 in β1 Cx, and Phe-30 and Phe-32 in α1 Cx). Finally, single or double Phe residues are present in the first extracellular loop (E1) (Phe-51 and Phe-68/Phe-69 in β1 Cx, and Phe-52 and Phe-70 in α1 Cx; Fig. 4B). Radioactive peak releases in the individual degradation cycles (cycle 11 in the β1 Cx and cycle 6 in the α1 Cx sequencing reaction) best matched the distribution of Phe residues in the Cx sequences when aligned with Phe-51 of β1 Cx and Phe-52 of α1 Cx, respectively (Fig. 4A). This analysis identified two cleavage sites separated by five amino acid residues from each other. Both sites were located within the border region between TM1 and E1, between alanine (Ala) 40 and glutamic acid (Glu) 41 in β1 Cx, and glycine (Gly) 46 and aspartic acid (Asp) 47 in α1 Cx, respectively (Fig. 4A). Both cleavage sites are homologous to natural SPase cleavage site motifs, small, uncharged amino acid residues in positions −3 and −1 with respect to the cleavage site (27), which are conserved in all Cx isotypes at these positions (see Fig. 4B).

The correct location of the cleavage site was confirmed by a
**FIG. 4. Determination of the cleavage site in Cx.** A, the precise location of the cleavage sites was determined in cell-free integrated [3H]phenylalanine-labeled, $\alpha_1$ and $\beta_1$ Cx (lower protein bands generated in the presence of microsomes (+) shown on the gel insets) by sequential NH$_2$-terminal amino acid radiosequencing. In $\beta_1$ Cx the peak activity was obtained in cycle 11 that best matched the phenylalanine (F) distribution when aligned with Phe-51, identifying the cleavage site between alanine 40 (A) and glutamic acid 41 (E). In $\alpha_1$ Cx the peak activity...
site-directed amino acid substitution approach in the \( \alpha_1 \) Cx sequence. Specific amino acid residues located within the \(-3/-1\) motif identified in the \( \alpha_1 \) Cx sequence (Fig. 5A, mutants 1–4), the \( \beta_1 \) Cx sequence (Fig. 5A, mutants 5–7), or within both cleavage site motifs (Fig. 5A, mutants 8–11), were exchanged with aromatic (Phe and Tyr), charged (Arg), large polar (Gln), or proline (Pro) residues. Residues with these characteristics are normally not present at these positions in wt precursor proteins naturally processed by SPase (27). Amino acid residue substitutions reduced proteolytic processing by 17.8–62.2% when compared with the processing efficiency of the wt Cx proteins (Fig. 5B and C, lanes 2–11). However, none of the amino acid substitutions inhibited the cleavage reaction completely, indicating that the introduced amino acid residues were only reducing, but not completely inactivating SPase cleavage activity.

The TM1 Domain and First Extracellular Loop (E1) Were Essential for Cx Polypeptide Processing—To determine which portion of the Cx polypeptides contains the information that enables SPase to access the cleavage sites, translation products of chimeric \( \beta_1 \) Cx/Syn proteins (designated pCSR2 to pCSR5 in Fig. 6) (16) were analyzed after their translation in the presence of microsomes (+) were analyzed by SDS-PAGE and autoradiography. C, cleavage efficiency (in %) was determined for each mutant by densitometric comparison of the amount of full-length versus cleaved polypeptides that were integrated into the microsomes.

**Fig. 5.** Mutational analysis of the cleavage site. A, specific amino acid residues adjacent to the cleavage sites determined in \( \alpha_1 \) and \( \beta_1 \) Cx were substituted in the \( \alpha_1 \) Cx sequence with aromatic (F and Y), charged (R), large polar (Q), or proline (P) residues (mutants 1–11) which are not present at these positions in naturally SPase processed secretory and TM precursor proteins. A schematic representation of the \( \alpha_1 \) Cx protein, including the location and amino acid sequence adjacent to the determined SPase cleavage sites are shown above. B, translation products obtained in the presence of microsomes (+) were analyzed by SDS-PAGE and autoradiography. C, cleavage efficiency (in %) was determined for each mutant by densitometric comparison of the amount of full-length versus cleaved polypeptides that were integrated into the microsomes.

was obtained in cycle 6 that best matched the phenylalanine distribution when aligned with Phe-52, identifying the cleavage site between glycine 46 (G) and aspartic acid 47 (D). B, amino acid sequence alignment of the NH2-terminal, TM1, and E1 domains of five different Cx isotypes, including \( \alpha_1 \) and \( \beta_1 \) Cx (underlayed in gray). The cleavage sites determined in \( \alpha_1 \) and \( \beta_1 \) Cx are indicated by arrows. The hydrophobic core region of TM1 (18 amino acid residues interrupted by a central arginine (R)) is boxed. Charged amino acid residues are marked with + and −. Phenylalanine residues (F) and small, uncharged amino acid residues of the \(-3/-1\) cleavage site motifs conserved in all Cx isotypes at the indicated sites are marked in bold type.

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FIG. 6. Translocation of chimeric β1 Cx/Syn fusion proteins. β1 Cx/Syn chimeras (pCSR2-pCSR5), wt β1 Cx, and wt Syn were translated in reticulocyte lysates in the presence of microsomes (+), and translation products were analyzed for SPase cleavage and N-glycosylation by SDS-PAGE and autoradiography. In control, translation products obtained in the absence of microsomes (−) were analyzed to indicate the electrophoretic mobility of non-glycosylated, full-length polypeptides. In the chimeras the Cx sequence (shown in gray in the topology schemes) was progressively replaced from the COOH terminus by Syn sequence (shown in black). While wt β1 Cx and chimeras pCSR2 and 3 were cleaved (lanes 2, 4, and 6), pCSR4, pCSR5, and wt Syn were not cleaved (lanes 8, 10, and 12). Further replacement of TM1 resulted in addition in the N-glycosylation of pCSR5 (lane 10), as in wt Syn (lane 12).

second TM domain (TM2) and the first extracellular domain (E1) by Syn sequence abolished the cleavage completely (pCSR5; Fig. 6, lane 8). Also, no cleavage was observed for the chimera pCSR5 that consisted entirely of Syn sequence except its NH2-terminal domain (Fig. 6, lane 10), and in the wt Syn protein (Fig. 6, lane 12). N-Glycosylation of the Syn authentic glycosylation sequence located within its first luminal loop (22) occurred in wt Syn (Fig. 6, lane 12), and in the chimera pCSR5 (Fig. 5, lane 10) that both contain the first TM domain of Syn. However, glycosylation did not occur in the chimera pCSR4 (Fig. 5, lane 8) that also encodes the Syn authentic glycosylation sequence, but instead contains the first TM domain of the β1 Cx. Taken together the results indicated that both, the TM1 and E1 domain, play an essential role for the access of SPase to the cleavage sites in the wt Cxs.

Increasing the Hydrophobic Character of the First TM Domain (TM1) of Cxs Prevented Their Inappropriate Cleavage by SPase—The hydrophobic core region (h-region) of the TM1 domain of Cxs has a length of only 18 amino acid residues, and in addition, it is interrupted by an arginine (Arg) residue in its center that further reduces the hydrophobic character of this region (see Fig. 4B). To determine if the weak hydrophobic character of this domain might be responsible for the Cx cleavage, three β1 Cx mutants were constructed in which the hydrophobicity of the TM1 domain was increased. In the mutant β1R32L, the central Arg-32 residue was substituted with leucine (Leu). In the mutant β1+3L, three additional Leu residues were introduced immediately adjacent to the central Arg-32 residue. In the mutant β1R32L+3L, the central Arg-32 residue was replaced by leucine, and three additional Leu residues were introduced. Cleavage of the mutants β1R32L, and β1+3L was significantly reduced (Fig. 7, lanes 4 and 6) compared with the wt β1 protein (Fig. 7, lane 2), and cleavage of the mutant β1R32L+3L was completely abolished (Fig. 7, lane 8). Membrane insertion and correct transmembrane topology of the mutants were verified by their association with the microsomal membranes after pelleting the microsomes through sucrose cushions, and by their N-glycosylation after introducing N-glycosylation consensus sites into the extracellular loops E1 and E2 of the β1R32L+3L mutant (not shown).

DISCUSSION

In this study we report that the synthesis of polytopic Cx membrane proteins in standard cell-free translation/translocation systems resulted in an aberrant proteolytic cleavage within their amino acid sequence that affected the entire pool of newly membrane integrated Cxs. These truncated Cxs differed from functional Cxs synthesized in tissues. This difference in Cx membrane integration in vitro and in vivo demonstrates that the membrane integration process of Cxs somehow differs from the membrane integration of other TM proteins.

The inability of the lysate system to generate normal, full-length membrane integrated Cx polypeptides was unexpected since this system has been found previously to accurately reproduce the biosynthesis of many other membrane proteins including several examples of structurally and functionally
related polytopic membrane proteins, such as ion channel subunits (28–31), aquaporins (32–34), and membrane pumps (35, 36). Subcellular Cx distribution studies (7, 37, 38) have indicated that Cxs follow the secretory pathway from the ER, to the Golgi and PM, suggesting that the ER-derived microsomal membranes used in the cell-free expression system as target membranes represent the appropriate intracellular membranes for Cx translocation. Also, the cleavage cannot be explained by arguing that the microsomes were derived from an inadequate source, since pancreatic acinar cells, from which the microsomes were prepared (18), synthesize endogenous Cx polypeptides (39, 40) and are able to integrate these proteins without aberrant cleavage into their ER membranes (7). Finally, N-glycosylation site tagging of α2 and β1 Cx (this study) combined with protease protection assays (7) demonstrated that the TM topology of Cxs integrated in vitro into microsomes corresponded to their natural TM topology with NH2 and COOH termini correctly located outside the microsomal vesicles (in the cytoplasm) and the two extracellular loops located correctly inside the lumen of the microsomes. Therefore, an inappropriate membrane topology can also be excluded as a possibility that would lead to the Cx cleavage.

Amino acid sequencing of the cleaved Cxs identified cleavage sites at the COOH-terminal end of the TM1 domain, located in the border region between TM1 and the first extracellular loop (E1). Therefore, the NH2-terminal domain and the TM1 domain was removed from the rest of the Cx polypeptide sequence by this cleavage. Analysis of the amino acid sequence adjacent to the cleavage sites showed that the sites had homology to known cleavage site motifs (small, uncharged amino acid residues in position –3 and –1 to the cleavage site) of SPase (12, 27). They were identified at the COOH-terminal ends of NH2-terminal ER targeting SP sequences of secretory and transmembrane proteins (27) which are cleaved behind these motifs by this protease. Several such –3/–1 motifs are conserved in the Cx polypeptide isotypes in the border region between the TM1 and the E1 domains (compare Fig. 4B).

Analysis of the cleavage reaction further indicated that the cleavage was indeed performed by SPase. SPase is known to be present and active in microsomes (41). In Falk et al. (7) we reported that the cleavage occurred concomitant with the Cx polypeptide membrane integration, was strictly dependent on active, signal recognition particle-mediated protein translocation, and was restricted to the microsomal lumen. Here we report that the translocation of Cx/synaptophysin chimeras indicated that the TM1 domain and/or the first extracellular loop (E1) of the Cx sequence contained the cleavage signal and were essential for the cleavage reaction. Pretreatment of the microsomes with NEM, an alkylating agent that has been shown previously to prevent nascent chain translocation (23) indicated that insertion of the Cx polypeptides into the membrane was required for cleavage. Targeting and binding to the membrane bilayer was not sufficient. Depletion of the microsomes of their luminal proteins had little effect on the cleavage reaction, suggesting that the cleavage was performed by a membrane-bound ER protease. Finally, several class-specific protease inhibitors had no effect on the cleavage reaction, even under conditions where direct access of the inhibitors to the lumen of the microsomes was ensured. SPase, in contrast to other known ER luminal proteases is not affected by known protease inhibitors, a property attributed to its unusual cleavage mechanism (42). All these properties are indicative of a cleavage by SPase falsely performed on the Cx polypeptide sequence by this enzyme in vitro. Inappropriate uncovering and processing of “cryptic” SPase cleavage sites has been reported previously for some membrane proteins after modifying the amino acid sequence in or near the hydrophobic core region of their signal sequences (43–46). However, no inappropriate processing of a wt protein, as in the case of the Cxs, has been reported. Why then is the lysate system not able to generate full-length membrane integrated Cx polypeptides, and SPase efficiently recognizes and cleaves the Cx polypeptides within their functional sequence when they are translocated in vitro?

In the Cxs, the TM1 domain functions as an internal SA sequence, suggesting that the cleavage could be due to an incorrect recognition of this domain as a cleavable SP sequence. Sequence comparison indicated a principal structural similarity between cleavable SP sequences and internal SA sequences. Both sequences consist of a short, positively charged NH2-terminal region (n-region), a central hydrophobic core region (h-region), and a more polar COOH-terminal region (c-region) (47, 48); and many SA sequences of membrane proteins are followed by one or more –3/–1 cleavage site motifs, although they are not processed in detectable amounts by SPase in vitro or in vivo. However, an obvious difference between SP and SA sequences is the considerably longer h-region of the latter. While h-regions of cleaved SP sequences are typically 7–15 residues long and are rarely longer than 17 residues, the h-regions of uncleaved SA sequences range from 20 to 30 residues in length (48, 49). Nilsson et al. (48) found that the length of the h-region is directly decisive for its recognition as a SP or SA sequence. The different length results in a different positioning of SP and SA sequences within the translocon during the translocation process, allowing SPase to access and cleave NH2-terminal SP sequences, while the cleavage of internal SA sequences is prevented. A sequence of 17–19 hydrophobic residues was determined as the critical length (48). In Cxs the hydrophobic core of the TM1 domain has a length of only 18 residues. In addition, it contains an arginine residue in its center that interrupts the hydrophobic character of this domain (see Fig. 4B).

To test the hypothesis that the relatively weak hydrophobic character of the Cx TM1 domain may cause its false recognition and positioning, β1 Cx mutants with an increased hydrophobic character of their TM1 domain were generated. Replacing the central arginine residue with leucine, or elongating the h-region by 3 leucine residues to 21 residues already drastically

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2 M. Falk, unpublished data.
reduced the cleavage efficiency. Increasing the hydrophobicity further by replacing the central arginine, and in addition, elongating the h-region by 3 leucine residues into a homogenous stretch of 21 hydrophobic residues completely abolished the cleavage (Fig. 7). These results indicate that the SA sequence of wt Cxs is inappropriately recognized and positioned as a cleavable SP sequence when translated in vitro, due to its relatively weak hydrophobic character. The inappropriate cleavage can be overcome by increasing the hydrophobic character and the length of this domain (represented schematically in Fig. 8, A and B).

These findings, however, do not explain why the SA sequence of Cxs was not appropriately recognized in vitro. A mechanism that would explain this phenomenon is that a specific factor, such as a chaperone that normally is involved in the membrane integration of Cxs and, for example, binds to the Cx polypeptide sequence to aid in their correct positioning within the ER translocon (represented schematically in Fig. 8C), is absent or not functional in the cell-free expression system. This hypothesis is supported by our findings obtained with the expression of Cxs in transfected tissue culture cells (7). Overexpression of Cxs in different cell types resulted in the cleavage of a portion of the newly synthesized Cx polypeptides upon their translocation into the ER membranes that correlated with the expression level. This result suggests that a factor involved in their proper membrane integration has only a limited availability within the cell. Further experimentation will be aimed at the determination of the components that provide an appropriate positioning of the Cx polypeptides in the translocon to facilitate the synthesis of full-length membrane integrated Cxs in vivo.

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