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Osteoclast Formation from Mononuclear Phagocytes:
Role of Bone-forming Cells

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ABSTRACT In a previous study, using co-cultures of embryonic bone rudiments stripped of
periosteum, and mononuclear phagocytes of various sources, we found that multinucleated
mineral-resorbing osteoclasts developed in vitro from radiosensitive mouse bone marrow
mononuclear phagocytes (BMMP). (Burger, E. H., J. W. M. van der Meer, J. S. van de Gevel,
C. W. Thesingh, and R. van Furth, 1982, J. Exp. Med. 156:1604-1614). In the present study,
this co-culture technique was used to analyze the influence of bone-forming cells on osteoclast
formation and bone resorption by BMMP or peritoneal exudate cells (PEC). BMMP or PEC
were co-cultured with liver or dead bone, i.e., in the presence or absence of liver bone-
forming cells. Mineral resorption and osteoclast formation were monitored via 45Ca release
from prelabeled live or dead bone followed by histology.

Osteoclasts developed from precultured BMMP as indicated by [3H]thymidine labeling, but
only in live and not in dead bone. They formed readily from BMMP but only erratically, and
after a longer culture period, from PEC. Macrophages from BMMP and PEC invaded live and
dead bone rudiments but did not resorb the intact mineralized matrix. In contrast, ground
bone powder was resorbed avidly by both cell populations, without formation of osteoclasts.

We conclude that live bone-forming cells are required for osteoclast formation from
progenitors. Live bone is only resorbed by osteoclasts, and not by macrophages. Osteoclast
progenitors are abundant in cultures of BMMP but scarce in PEC, which makes a direct
descendence of osteoclasts from mature macrophages unlikely.

The nature of the mononuclear precursor cell of the osteoclast
and the interactions between bone-forming and bone-resorbing
cells are the subject of many recent studies (1, 2). In an
erlier paper we presented evidence that multinucleated min­
eral resorbing osteoclasts will develop in vitro from cultures
of proliferating bone marrow mononuclear phagocytes
(BMMP)† (3). This was demonstrated by co-culturing adult
mouse BMMP with noninvasive embryonic mouse long bones
that had been stripped of adhering periostium-perichondrium
to remove the endogenous pool of osteoclast precursor cells
(4). As the bones were dissected and stripped before cartilage
invasion and osteoclast formation had occurred, the stripped
bone rudiments essentially contained only chondrocytes and
some osteoblasts and osteocytes. By co-culturing such stripped
bones with several populations of adult mouse cells, we demon­
strated that proliferating cells of the mononuclear phagocy­
type series from bone marrow will form mineral-resorbing
osteoclasts, but that nonproliferating bone marrow cultures,
monocytes, or macrophages do not, at least not within 7 d of
co-culture (3).

On the other hand, many in vivo studies in animals as well
as in man have shown that mononuclear osteoclast precursors
may be disseminated through the body via the blood vascular
system (5–9). This has led several investigators to study the
capacity of blood monocytes or tissue macrophages to resorb
bone mineral by co-culturing them with devitalized bone
tissue or particles of dried, ground bone (10–14). Although
both cell types were able to resorb bone matrix, they did not
form osteoclasts (10, 13, 14). However, in man chronic in­
flammatory lesions in or near bone tissue, as for instance in
periodontal disease, may lead to localized bone loss (15). The capacity of monocytes and macrophages to resorb dead bone in vitro has opened up the possibility that they play a role in such pathological bone destruction (10).

In the present paper we studied the role of bone-forming cells in the process of osteoclast formation from phagocytic cells. For this purpose the osteoclast-forming capacity of proliferating BMMP and peritoneal exudate cells (PEC) was studied in long-term co-culture experiments with either viable intact bone rudiments, devitalized intact bone rudiments, or devitalized bone powder. The origin of the in vitro formed osteoclasts was determined by [3H]thymidine labeling.

**RESULTS**

**Bone Rudiments with BMMP**

Co-culture of live stripped bone rudiments with BMMP enhanced the release of 45Ca from the bone tissue, starting after 4 d of co-culture and steadily increasing from then on (Fig. 1a). Killing the bone tissue by freezing and thawing completely inhibited this process (Fig. 1a).

Histology of the live stripped bones co-cultured with BMMP showed many multinucleated osteoclasts in the eroded center of the rudiment, but not in the stripped control bones that had been cultured without BMMP (Fig. 2, a-c). The osteoclasts of the 11-d BMMP co-cultures were usually quite large and seemed to contain more nuclei than in 7-d co-cultures (3), but no attempt was made to assess this quantitatively. In many cases the calcified bone collar around the center of the rudiment had also been eroded (Fig. 2, b and c). There was a strong positive rank correlation (r = 0.8378) between the number of osteoclasts in 11-d co-cultures and the amount of 45Ca released during the culture period (Fig. 3).

Autoradiography of co-cultures of [3H]thymidine-labeled BMMP and nonlabeled stripped bones showed that most nuclei of the in vitro formed osteoclasts were labeled. Table I summarizes the results. Cartilage nuclei usually contained zero or one grain per nuclear profile, which corresponded to background labeling. 50% of the BMMP-derived mononuclear cells and 89% of the osteoclast nuclei were labeled. In the killed bone rudiments, co-culture with (live) BMMP did not cause formation of osteoclasts or release of 45Ca. Mononuclear phagocytes did adhere to the dead bone surface

**Materials and Methods**

**Stripped Bone Rudiments:** Pregnant Swiss albino mice were subcutaneously injected with 30 µCi 45Ca (sp act, 17.6 mCi/mg of Ca) on the 16th day of gestation. The next day the metatarsal rudiments of the 17-d-old fetuses were dissected and rigorously stripped of adhering perichondrium-periosteum by a combination of collagenase and mechanical treatment until all periosteal cells had been removed. As the 17-d-old metatarsal rudiments had not yet been invaded by blood vessels or any type of mononuclear or multinuclear cells, the stripped rudiments only consisted of a solid rod of cartilage (two noncalcified epiphyses and a diaphysis of noninvaded calcified cartilage without a primitive marrow cavity) surrounded by a thin layer of bone matrix with a few osteocytes (3, 4). Some of the stripped bones were killed by repeated freezing and thawing and subsequently severed in the center to expose the calcified cartilage as well as the calcified bone collar.

**Bone Powder:** Male albino rats weighing 100 g were injected subcutaneously on alternate days with 100 µCi 45CaCl₂ for 14 d. At death, the long bones were removed, cleaned of adhering tissue, fragmented to expose bone marrow, and washed three times in sterile saline. After air-drying for 1 wk at 45°C, the fragments were ground to a coarse powder in a ball mill (Retch Inc., Federal Republic of Germany). Particles < 20 µm diameter were collected by passing the powder through a sieve (Wilten, Etten Leur, The Netherlands). Before use the powder was sterilized by exposure to ultraviolet light, washed in 70% ethanol, and suspended in 10% rat serum in Earle's balanced salt solution (EBSS).

**BMMP:** Bone marrow cells from femora of 6-wk-old Swiss male mice were preincubated for 7 or 8 d in Teflon culture bags (Teflon FEP film, 25-µm gauge, Jansens M. and L., St. Niklaas, Belgium) in liquid culture medium consisting of Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (Gibco Laboratories, Grand Island, NY) with 20% horse serum (Flow Laboratories, Inc., Irvine, Scotland) and 20% embryonic mouse fibroblast conditioned medium as the source of colony-stimulating factor (3, 16). Before co-culture with bone cells the cultures were harvested, counted, and taken up in 10% rat serum in EBSS.

**[3H]Thymidine Labeling:** [3H]Thymidine (0.1 µCi/ml, 0.05 Ci/ mmol), (Amersham International, Amersham, England) was added to BMMP cultures for the last 16 h of the 8-d preincubation period. The cells were washed three times in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium with 10% fetal calf serum and co-cultured with nonlabeled stripped bone rudiments for 7 d as described below. The co-cultures were fixed for 3 h in 1.5% glutaraldehyde in 0.1 M Sorensen's phosphate buffer, decalcified in a saturated solution of EDTA in Tris buffer, pH 7, and postfixed for 1 h in 1% OsO₄ in phosphate buffer. After embedding in Epon, 1-µm-thick sections were cut and exposed unstained for 10 wk to [3H]thymidine-labeled BMMP and peritoneal exudate cells (PEC) was studied in long-term co-culture experiments with either viable intact bone rudiments, devitalized intact bone rudiments, or devitalized bone powder. The origin of the in vitro formed osteoclasts was determined by [3H]thymidine labeling.
Figure 2 Central parts of live, stripped metatarsal bone rudiments cultured for 11 d in the absence (a) or presence (b and c) of BMMP phagocytes or PEC (d and e). (a) In the absence of extra cells, no osteoclasts develop in stripped bone rudiments. (b) In the presence of BMMP many osteoclasts (arrowheads) develop which erode the calcified center of the bone. (c) Detail of osteoclasts from the upper right part of b; two osteoclasts are in the process of resorbing remnants of the bone collar (arrowhead). (d) Three osteoclasts (arrowheads) have developed from PEC and have started to resorb the mineralized bone center. (e) In this case no osteoclasts have developed from peritoneal exudate cells. (a, b, d, e) Bar, 50 μm; × 210. (c) Bar, 20 μm. × 520.
numbers of osteoclasts per bone

**Figure 3** Correlation between release of $^{45}$Ca and development of osteoclasts in culture. Viable, $^{45}$Ca-labeled periostless bone rudiments were cultured for 11 d without other cells (a), with BMMP (b), or with PEC (c). We determined the $^{45}$Ca released during culture and processed the bones for histology. The total number of osteoclasts per bone was counted in serial sections. Number of determinations: (Group a) 26; (group b) 17; (group c) 16. The coefficient of rank correlation of all determinations (number of osteoclasts versus $^{45}$Ca release) was 0.8378 ($n = 59$) according to Spearman’s rank correlation test, corrected for ties. Enhanced release of $^{45}$Ca in co-cultures with BMMP or PEC always coincided with formation of osteoclasts above background values.

### Table I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cell type</th>
<th>Labeling index*</th>
<th>n*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Osteoclasts</td>
<td>88.6</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chondrocytes</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mononuclear phagocytes</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A minimum of six grains per nuclear profile was taken as a criterion for “labeling” compared with backgrounds of zero or one grain per nucleus.

* All 141 osteoclast nuclei and 200 chondrocyte and mononuclear phagocyte nuclei of four co-cultures were evaluated. Labeled and nonlabeled nuclei could be found within the same osteoclast.

and invaded the severed calcified stump, but osteoclasts were not formed.

**Bone Rudiments with PEC**

Co-culture of live, stripped bone rudiments with PEC enhanced the release of $^{45}$Ca by the end of the co-culture period (Fig. 1b). This enhancement occurred in only 5 of the 16 cultures (Fig. 1b gives mean values of all 16 determinations), and started after a lag time of 8 d. In the histological sections osteoclasts were only present in those bones that also showed enhanced release of $^{45}$Ca (Figs. 2, d and e and 3). The osteoclasts were similar in appearance to those developed from BMMP in that they contained several nuclei and many vacuoles and were found closely apposed to mineralized matrix, usually in an eroded space. In bones that had not shown enhanced release of $^{45}$Ca during co-culture, no osteoclasts were found (Fig. 3).

As with BMMP, killing of the bone tissue inhibited osteoclast formation and mineral resorption (Fig. 1b). Here too, mononuclear phagocytes invaded the severed zone of calcified cartilage but this did not result in stimulated release of $^{45}$Ca or formation of osteoclasts (Fig. 4).

**Bone Powder with BMMP or PEC**

BMMP and PEC avidly resorbed particles of devitalized powdered bone (Fig. 5). The resorption was similar for the two populations both in magnitude and time course. Contrary to resorption of live rudiments it started immediately without a lag phase, and was very substantial after 4 d in vitro (500% increase over controls).

However, histology of the 11-d co-cultures revealed no evidence of osteoclast formation from either BMMP or peritoneal cells. In both cases the bone particles became surrounded by cells that were much smaller than osteoclasts and contained only one or occasionally two nuclei. (Fig. 6). Cells comparable to osteoclasts in size and number of nuclei were not encountered.

**DISCUSSION**

**Origin of In Vitro-formed Osteoclasts**

The high labeling index of the osteoclast nuclei in the autoradiographic experiments, when $[^3H]$thymidine was used...
as a nuclear marker of BMMP, indicates that the in vitro formed osteoclasts developed from co-cultured cells rather than from endogenous cells of the stripped bone. A descendant from the stripped rudiment itself is highly unlikely, in view of the absence of cartilage labeling in the autoradiographs and the absence of osteoclast formation in live, stripped bones cultured without added cells. Quail mouse chimera studies, which made use of the specific nuclear morphology of quail cells as marker, have led to a similar conclusion (4). The finding of a higher labeling index of osteoclast nuclei than of co-cultured mononuclear phagocytes is remarkable and may indicate that osteoclasts are selectively derived from the proliferating fraction of the BMMP population. This conclusion is also supported by the earlier finding (3) that osteoclasts develop from the radiosensitive, weakly adherent fraction of BMMP cells. Alternatively, the data may reflect an expansion of the osteoclast precursor pool during the co-culture time.

**Development of Osteoclasts from PEC**

The few cases where osteoclasts developed from PEC indicate that osteoclast precursors are potentially present among the cells that assemble in the peritoneal cavity as a result of inflammation. However, osteoclast formation needed a longer lag time and occurred erratically in comparison with BMMP. This probably means that osteoclast precursor cells are present, but at a considerably lower concentration among PEC than among BMMP. The longer lag time is similarly explained: in previous studies (3, 18) we showed by radiation experiments and \[^{3}\text{H}\text{]thymidine autoradiography that proliferation of osteoclast progenitors does occur at the surface of bone. A scarcity of precursor cells in peritoneal exudates is compatible with a longer period of cell proliferation to obtain the minimal density of precursor cells required for fusion and osteoclast formation. In precultured bone marrow the osteoclast-forming cells must be sought in the pool of proliferating macrophage precursors (3). Such cells are scarce in PEC populations (19–21) but abundant in 7-d-old bone marrow cultures (22), which is in line with the observed difference in osteoclast-forming capacity. Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that as in BMMP, the osteoclast-forming cells of PEC are not mature macrophages, but immature macrophage progenitors. This view, when applied to the in vivo situation, would indicate that neither mature tissue macrophages nor their direct precursors in the blood, the monocytes, will form osteoclasts. Interestingly, in a recent in vivo study (23) no correlation was found between the kinetics of \[^{3}\text{H}\text{]thymidine labeling of monocytes and of osteoclast nuclei, arguing against a direct development of osteoclasts from blood monocytes.

**Role of Bone-forming Cells during Osteoclast Formation**

The strong positive correlation between resorption of live bone rudiments and formation of osteoclasts indicates that in live tissue, mineral resorption and osteoclast formation go hand in hand, and argues strongly for the osteoclast as the only cell type capable of resorbing mineral in live bone. Osteoclast formation was inhibited by killing the bone tissue, i.e., the cartilage cells and few osteoblasts-osteocytes that the stripped rudiment contained. Killing the bone did not inhibit PEC or BMMP from making contact with the mineralized surface, and macrophages were even found in the lacunae of the chondrocytes of the calcified zone. Still, osteoclasts were not formed. Thus it seems that the presence of mineralized matrix is in itself insufficient for osteoclast formation and that viable mineral-forming cells are required as well, probably as regulators of osteoclast differentiation. Interactions between bone-forming and bone-resorbing cells have been postulated to play a role in both normal bone (re-)modeling and in parathyroid hormone-stimulated bone resorption (2, 24, 25). A regulatory role for mineral-forming cells during the formation of multinucleated osteoclasts from mononucleated precursors is also in keeping with the highly ordered sequence of formative and resorptive processes during normal bone development and in normal and experimental bone remodeling (26, 27).

**Resorption of Dead Bone**

Devitalized bone was only resorbed when the bone mineral was ground to a powder, and not when the killed tissue was left intact. However, the absence of a time lag, the similarity of the response of BMMP and PEC, and the absence of large, truly multinucleated cells even after 11 d of co-culture with BMMP indicate that this type of resorption is different from osteoclast-mediated resorption. Others (12, 13) have shown that it is effected by mature macrophages, which compose some 50% of both PEC and BMMP, as determined in cytocentrifuge preparations stained either with Giemsa or for nonspecific esterase (data not shown).

Since the ground bone particles were approximately the same size as the spicules of mineralized matrix in the intact bone rudiments, the large difference in resorption of the two types of dead bone cannot be explained by differences in size. Rather, the intactness of the mineralized matrix seems to be important. In the intact, killed rudiment the mineral phase was still protected against digestion by macrophages, probably by an organic component of the matrix. In this respect the lamina limitans as described by Scherft (28) may be important. This organic electron-dense layer is found around areas of calcified cartilage and bone matrix (28, 29) and is the first structure to disappear in osteoclast-mediated resorption (28). If its intact presence protects bone mineral from digestion by macrophages, then the grinding of bone to produce bone...
powder will, by rupturing this barrier, expose the mineral to macrophage recognition and digestion.

Localized Bone Loss and Inflammation

In the previously mentioned studies on devitalized bone, some authors (11, 12) have interpreted the contact-mediated resorption of bone powder by macrophages as indicating that macrophages might be capable of transforming into osteoclasts. However, others (10, 13, 14) have stressed the differences between macrophage-mediated and osteoclastic bone resorption, and have linked macrophage-mediated resorption with localized bone loss that occurs in areas of chronic inflammation, on the argument that such lesions always contain an accumulation of mononuclear phagocytes. We have found no evidence for a direct transformation of macrophages into osteoclasts. Our experiments suggest yet another explanation for increased bone loss at inflammatory sites: in such lesions the population of blood-derived inflammatory cells contains an increased number of osteoclast progenitor cells which, when in contact with bone mineral and bone-forming cells, transform into osteoclasts. The demonstration of such cells in actual sites of inflammation must, however, await further investigation.

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