Kissing of the Two Predominant Hairpin Loops in the Coxsackie B Virus 3' Untranslated Region Is the Essential Structural Feature of the Origin of Replication Required for Negative-Strand RNA Synthesis

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Higher-order RNA structures in the 3' untranslated region (3'UTR) of enteroviruses are thought to play a pivotal role in viral negative-strand RNA synthesis. The structure of the 3'UTR was predicted by thermodynamic calculations using the STAR (structural analysis of RNA) computer program and experimentally verified using chemical and enzymatic probing of in vitro-synthesized RNA. A possible pseudoknot interaction between the 3D polymerase coding sequence and domain Y and a "kissing" interaction between domains X and Y was further studied by mutational analysis, using an infectious coxsackie B3 virus cDNA clone (domain designation as proposed by E. V. Pilipenko, S. V. Maslova, A. N. Sinyakov, and V. I. Agol (Nucleic Acids Res. 20:1739–1745, 1992). The higher-order RNA structure of the 3'UTR appeared to be maintained by an intramolecular kissing interaction between the loops of the two predominant hairpin structures (X and Y) within the 3'UTR. Disturbing this interaction had no effect on viral translation and processing of the polyprotein but exerted a primary effect on viral replication, as was demonstrated in a subgenomic coxsackie B3 viral replicon, in which the capsid PI region was replaced by the luciferase gene. Mutational analysis did not support the existence of the pseudoknot interaction between hairpin loop Y and the 3D polymerase coding sequence. Based on these experiments, we constructed a three-dimensional model of the 3'UTR of coxsackie B virus that shows the kissing interaction as the essential structural feature of the origin of replication required for its functional competence.

Coxsackie B viruses are small RNA viruses with a genome of approximately 7,500 bases (47). Replication is initiated in the cytoplasm of the host cell by the synthesis of a complementary RNA strand of negative polarity (41). This double-stranded RNA intermediary is subsequently encapsidated by vesicles derived from the rough endoplasmatic reticulum (7) to produce the replication complex, a membranous double-stranded RNA complex containing virally encoded proteins and cellular factors (6). The 5' untranslated region (5'UTR) contains regions with functional domains for positive-strand RNA synthesis (2, 35). Andino et al. (3) have recently described the existence of a ribonucleoprotein complex formed at the 5' end of poliovirus RNA which contained a cloverleaf-like structure formed by the first part of the 5'UTR interacting with the virus 3CD precursor and a cellular factor. They proposed a trans-initiation model for the synthesis of positive-strand RNA in which the synthesis of a newly formed positive-strand RNA molecule allows a new cloverleaf-like structure to form, with the subsequent formation of a new ribonucleoprotein complex which can then catalyze the initiation of the next positive-strand RNA (3). The 3Dpol catalyzes both positive-strand as well as negative-strand RNA synthesis, and it is thought that VPg is uridylated for negative-strand RNA synthesis to form an uridylated VPg-uuU which subsequently acts as a primer for the initiation of negative-strand RNA synthesis (44). Higher-order RNA structures in the 3'UTR are thought to play a role in the initiation of negative-strand RNA synthesis. Several attempts have been made to elucidate the structure of the enterovirus 3'UTR (13, 27). The secondary structures predicted for the enterovirus 3'UTR all seem to point to a conformation consisting of two (X and Y) to three (X, Y, and Z) hairpin structures, in which the poly(A) tract is partly included (13, 27). Although the functional aspects of these secondary structures have not yet been elucidated, it has been suggested that interactions occur either between the two predominant loops (X and Y) within the 3'UTR (27) or between one hairpin loop (Y) and the flanking coding sequences of the 3D RNA polymerase (13), forming two higher-order tertiary RNA structures. However, the actual existence of either one of these higher-order RNA structures has yet to be proven.

To gain insight into the mechanisms involved in virus negative-strand RNA synthesis, we have further characterized the enterovirus 3'UTR by predicting its secondary and tertiary structures using thermodynamics-based structure calculations, verifying it by chemical and enzymatic probing, and introducing site-directed mutations in an infectious coxsackie B3 virus cDNA clone. The effect of these mutations on virus viability and growth characteristics, RNA synthesis, and viral protein synthesis and processing were determined, and based on the...
structure, a three-dimensional model of the 3'UTR was developed.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Prediction of the enterovirus 3'UTR structure.** To calculate the secondary structure of the coxsackie B virus 3'UTR, we employed the STAR (structural analysis of RNA) computer algorithm (1). The STAR program simulates RNA folding by stepwise addition of stems to the structure formed at the preceding steps. The predicted structure starts with the stem-loop with the lowest free energy and then adds new stem-loops that are consistent with those already incorporated, according to their stability. These include base pair interactions of nucleotides in a loop with complementary nucleotides in single-stranded regions, as well as nucleotides in other loops. Stabilization caused by stacking of double helices is also taken into account. STAR is therefore able to predict not only secondary structures but also aspects of tertiary structures (1). Part of the 3D polyadenylation region was determined already with the complete 3'UTR and the poly(A) tract (nucleotides [nt] 7271 to 7410) to develop a model of the structure of the coxsackie B virus.

**Oligonucleotide-directed site-specific mutagenesis.** A full-length DNA copy of coxsackie B virus cDNA (pCB3/T7) which was cloned behind a T7 RNA polymerase promoter was used in the experiments (15). The XhoI (nt 4947) to XhoI (MCS pCB3/T7) fragment was subcloned into phagemid pALTER-1, and mutations were introduced using the Altered Sites in vitro mutagenesis system (Promega) according to the manufacturer's recommendations. Synthetides (Isogen Biotechnology, Maarssen, The Netherlands) were used to introduce site-specific mutations (Table 1).

The nucleotide sequences of the mutated cDNAs were verified by dideoxy chain termination sequencing (15) and the DNA with oligonucleotide 5'-GGTTATCTGGTGCGGTTAGCAC-3' was cloned in pCB3/T7-A7353 for further characterization.

**Chemical and enzymatic probing of coxsackie B virus 3'UTR.** Chemical and enzymatic probing was performed on wild-type and mutant viruses with dimethyl sulfate (DMS), RNase H, and cobra venom nuclease V, and 10% fetal bovine serum (GIBCO). After infection, the cells were fed with MEM supplemented with 100 mg/ml of streptomycin and 40 mg/ml of gentamicin, and incubated at 33°C for 4, 8, and 16 h after transfection and lysed in 400 l of lysis buffer, and the luciferase activity was measured in a liquid scintillation counter, using the Luciferase Assay System according to the recommendations of the manufacturer (Promega). In vitro translation reactions. Copy RNA transcripts were synthesized and translated in T7 TNT Rabbit Reticulocyte Lysate (Promega), a coupled transcription-translation system, according to the manufacturer's recommendations. The translation products (20 l) were washed three times with phosphate-buffered saline at 0, 4, 8, and 16 h after transfection and lysed in 400 l of lysis buffer, and the luciferase activity was measured in a liquid scintillation counter, using the Luciferase Assay System according to the recommendations of the manufacturer (Promega).
indicating that it is double stranded. The flanking sequence in this hairpin loop (A_{7351}) showed a moderate single-stranded signal (Fig. 3A). Some subtle differences in the probing pattern of coxsackie B3 virus domain X compared to that obtained by the analysis described previously have been observed (27). These differences are due to the fact that in the previous report all single-strand-specific signals were indicated, very weak signals being marked by open symbols (27). In Fig. 3A, only strong and moderate signals are shown.

To verify the double-strand sensitivity of the hairpin loop of domain Y, we constructed pCB3-3'UTR:ACCG_{7349-7352}UGGC by altering the double-strand-sensitive sequence in the loop of domain Y (CCG_{7350-7352}) to the complementary bases (Fig. 3B). This construct showed sensitivities to single- and double-stranded probes, as did the wild-type sequence, except that the double-strand-sensitive sequence in the hairpin loop of the Y domain now showed a very strong sensitivity for

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**FIG. 1. Structure of coxsackie B3 virus 3'UTR.** Shown is a model predicted by STAR. The 3'UTR consists of three hairpin structures indicated as X, Y, and Z. The Z hairpin is not present in the poliovirus-like enteroviruses. The structure is closed by the interaction of the poly(A) with a U stretch overlapping the 3'UTR and the 3D coding region, indicated as the S domain. The pseudoknot (P) and kissing (K) interactions between domain Y and the 3D polymerase coding region and domains X and Y, respectively, are represented by intercon-
RESULTS

Models of the 3'UTR of coxsackie B3 virus. The structure of the 3'UTR of different enteroviruses was predicted by STAR. The 3'UTR is highly conserved, and based on the size of the 3'UTR, the enteroviruses can be divided into a poliovirus-like subgroup containing 65 nt and a coxsackie B virus-like subgroup that is approximately 100 nt long. Both enterovirus subgroups possess two common domains that can both form a stem-loop structure (domains X and Y [Fig. 1]). The coxsackie B virus-like subgroup contains a third domain (domain Z [Fig. 1]), located upstream of domain Y, that is also capable of forming a stem-loop, resulting in a final secondary structure that looks like a cloverleaf (Fig. 1). All enteroviruses contain a short poly(U) stretch prior to the termination codon. This poly(U) stretch can base pair with residues from the poly(A) tract and, hence, form element S (Fig. 1). An interaction between domain Y (nt 7343 to 7352) and sequences within the 3D coding region (nt 7282 to 7290), forming a classical pseudoknot structure, and another interaction between the same region in the loop of domain Y (nt 7349 to 7354) and the loop of domain X (nt 7390 to 7395), forming a loop-loop intramolecular “kissing” RNA interaction, appeared to be possible (Fig. 1). In contrast to the pseudoknot, the kissing interaction is limited to the 3'UTR. The model could be employed for all enteroviruses sequenced so far, indicating that it is phylogenetically conserved as well (data not shown).

The model was experimentally verified, using probes specific for single- and double-stranded RNA regions (Fig. 2). The results obtained with the enzymatic and chemical probing were in reasonable accord with the predicted secondary structure of the model (Fig. 3). Concerning the tertiary structural elements, the CCG_{7350-7352} stretch in the loop of domain Y indeed showed a strong sensitivity for cobra venom nuclease V_{1}, in-

FIG. 2. Chemical and enzymatic probing of the coxsackie B3 virus 3'UTR. The virus RNAs were treated with B. cereus, Phy M, RNase T_{1} (T1), DMS, and cobra venom nuclease V_{1} (CV) as described in Materials and Methods, and then they were used as templates for the oligonucleotide-primed cDNA synthesis by reverse transcriptase. Lane RNA corresponds to the nontreated RNA samples. Lanes G, C, A, and U correspond to the samples containing untreated RNA templates and appropriate terminators for DNA synthesis. (A) Part of the primary data obtained by the probing of the wild-type virus; (B) part of construct pCB3-3'UTR:ACCG_{7349-7352}—UGGC.
The coding region is altered such that a possible pseudoknot is fully restored. This mutation, however, had no effect on the double-strand nature of the CCG loop sequence in the loop-sensitive domain Y, arguing against a tertiary interaction between the loop in domain Y and the sequences within the RNA polymerase coding region (Fig. 3E). The double-mutated pCB3-3'UTR:ACCGGUCGUACAGUGAGG-GCCA did not further affect the probing results (Fig. 3F).

**Experimental verification of the pseudoknot interaction.** To verify the existence of a pseudoknot interaction between domain Y (G7314-G7355) and the 3D polymerase coding region (U7352-C7391), two mutations were induced and introduced in the infectious cDNA clone pCB3/T7. Construct pCB3-3'UTR:GUGC734-7346-CAGG/GUAC736-7368→CUUG creates a mirror image of the part of the Y stem and should disturb the interaction with the 3' end of the 3D polymerase coding region, and construct pCB3-3'UTR:UGGU726-7268→CUU, in which the leucine codon UUG in the 3D polymerase coding region was replaced by the leucine codon CUU, should disturb the
formation of the pseudoknot while the 3D polymerase amino acid sequence remains intact. The effect of the mutations on virus viability was studied by transfection of Vero cells with copy RNA transcripts. A CPE was observed with both mutants at 48 to 72 h after transfection, which is similar to that obtained with wild-type pCB3/T7. Moreover, both mutations yielded virus viability at 33, 36, and 39°C (Fig. 4). Sequence analysis of the 3D polymerase-3'UTR region of these mutant viruses showed that the mutations introduced by site-directed mutagenesis were retained in the viral RNA and that no other mutations had occurred. These results are in accordance with those from the chemical and enzymatic probing, and therefore, no evidence was found for the presence of this pseudoknot interaction.

Experimental verification of the kissing interaction. To investigate the existence of a kissing interaction, further site-specific mutations were introduced. Constructs pCB3-3'UTR:G7392→C and pCB3-3'UTR:C7331→G disturbed the tertiary interaction, resulting in no virus being produced after transfection (and passage) of the copy RNAs of these mutations to Vero cells at either 33 or 36°C. When both mutations were generated simultaneously to yield pCB3-3'UTR:C7392→G/G7331→C, the tertiary interaction was restored and the virus obtained exhibited the growth characteristics of the wild-type virus, as examined by single-cycle growth analysis at 33, 36, and 39°C (Fig. 5). Replacing the cytosine at position 7392 with uracil yielded pCB3-3'UTR:C7392→U, in which a U7392/G7331 base pair in the tertiary interaction was generated, which proved unstable and resulted in a temperature-sensitive virus (Fig. 5). Replacing the G7331 with adenosine in construct pCB3-3'UTR:G7392→A led to an A7392/C7331 mismatch in the tertiary interaction which proved lethal. Introducing both substitutions in construct pCB3-3'UTR:C7392→U/G7331→A restored the interaction and generated a viable but temperature-sensitive virus which exhibited growth characteristics similar to those of virus pCB3-3'UTR:C7392→U (Fig. 5). The double mutation in construct pCB3-3'UTR:U7391→G and pCB3-3'UTR:A7331→C disturbed the tertiary interaction and resulted in viable but temperature-sensitive viruses (Fig. 5). Sequence analysis of the 3'UTR of these mutant viruses showed that the mutations introduced by site-directed mutagenesis were retained in the viral RNA and that no other mutations had occurred. The results obtained by the mutagenic analysis are in accordance with the probing results. Thus, an RNA-RNA tertiary interaction exists between the hairpin loops X and Y, forming an intramolecular kissing interaction which is essential for virus reproduction.

Biological function of the kissing interaction in virus reproduction. In vitro translation reactions were performed to investigate whether the mutations affected translation or processing of the polyprotein. Figure 6 shows that the protein patterns obtained with the mutated constructs were similar to those of the wild-type virus, indicating that disturbing the kissing interaction caused no defects in the synthesis and processing of the virus polyprotein.

In a previous study (45), a chimeric subgenomic replicon, pCB3/T7-LUC, which carries the luciferase gene in place of the PI capsid protein coding region, was constructed and used to study the effects of mutations on RNA replication. After transfection of pCB3/T7-LUC copy RNA, a triphasic pattern of luciferase accumulation that reflects virus RNA replication can be observed. First, luciferase activity increases as the result of translation of the input copy RNA (phase I); then the activity remains constant until the fifth hour after transfection in which replication occurs (phase II); and finally, the activity shows a second increase as a result of the translation of newly synthesized chimeric RNA strands (phase III). Figure 7 shows this triphasic pattern after transfection of wild-type pCB3/T7-LUC. A similar pattern was obtained with construct pCB3-3'UTR/T7-LUC:GUC7341-7346/CAGG/GUAC7356-7364→CUUG, in which the pseudoknot was disturbed although the virus obtained showed wild-type growth characteristics, and with construct pCB3-3'UTR/T7-LUC:C7392→G/G7331→C, in which the kissing interaction was restored. To study whether some of the mutations in the 3'UTR were lethal because of a replication defect, the mutations were introduced in the rep-
FIG. 5. Single-cycle growth curves of the mutants involved in the kissing interaction. Vero cells were infected with wild-type and mutant viruses at an MOI of 1 TCID₅₀ per cell. The cells were grown at 33, 36, and 39°C for 4, 6, and 8 h. Virus titers were determined as described in Materials and Methods. The mutant viruses are indicated in the figure.

DISCUSSION

The enteroviruses can be divided into two main groups according to serological tests and genetic analysis, one subgroup containing the polioviruses and most coxsackie A viruses and the other consisting of coxsackie B viruses, enterovirus 71, the echoviruses, and some coxsackie A viruses (5, 49). With respect to the 3′UTR, the polio virus-like subgroup was found to have an approximately 28-nt deletion, representing a full hairpin structure, when compared to members of the coxsackie B virus-like subgroup. As also found in this study, the secondary structures predicted for the enterovirus 3′UTR all seem to point to a conformation consisting of two or three stem-loops (domains X, Y, and Z), in which part of the poly(A) tract is included (domain S) (5, 13, 27). The model we employed was based on the thermodynamics and appeared to be similar to that described by Pilipenko et al. (27), in which a phylogenetic comparison was used for the RNA folding. Minor differences were predicted in the stem of domain Z, the corresponding multibranched loop, and the size of the stem of domain X. Minor differences were also predicted between the model described here and that developed by Jacobson et al. (13), who also used a thermodynamic approach. However, the fact that each group independently proposed the same secondary structure for the enterovirus 3′UTR makes the actual ex-
The predicted secondary structure of the 3'UTR was in reasonable agreement with structure of the 3'UTR in the first one, classical coding region is normal whereas the second predicted a loop.

Two alternative structures were possible for the terminal 5'UTR.

The position of proteins and positions are indicated on the right. An arrow shows which was used to displace the start codon. The position of proteins and positions are indicated on the right. An arrow shows which was used to displace the start codon. The position of proteins and positions are indicated on the right. An arrow shows which was used to displace the start codon. The position of proteins and positions are indicated on the right. An arrow shows which was used to displace the start codon.
loop intramolecular kissing interaction between nucleotides in the loop structure of domain Y and domain X. Using mutational analysis, Pierangeli et al. (24) also suggested the existence of a tertiary interaction in the 3'UTR, although they were not able to locate this specific interaction. Although the nucleotide stretch \((ACCG_{7340-7352})\) in domain Y is single stranded in the secondary structure model, it showed sensitivity for the double-strand-specific cobra venom nuclease VI or only moderate single-stranded hits by chemical and enzymatic probing, indicating its involvement in tertiary base pairing. When this double-strand-sensitive region was replaced in the loop of domain Y with the complementary sequence \((ACCG_{7340-7352})\), it showed a very strong sensitivity for single-stranded probes. Replacing the possible interacting bases in the loop of domain X with the complementary sequence \((ACCG_{7340-7352})\) resulted in a strong sensitivity for single-stranded probes of the CCG_{7350-7352} stretch in the loop of domain Y. In the double mutation, the kissing interaction was restored, and probing this construct indeed restored the double-strand sensitivity of the CCG_{7350-7352} stretch in the loop of domain Y. The absence of a cobra venom nuclease \(V_1\)-induced cleavages in the loop of domain X may be due to the limitations of the method. In fact, \(V_1\) RNase does not induce cleavages in all double-stranded regions (Fig. 3A). Digestion with single-stranded-specific probes in the loop sequence of domain X may be due to two reasons. (i) There is an equilibrium between two spatial foldings (with and without the kissing interaction). Thus, the single-stranded signals appeared when the tertiary structure is in the second state. (ii) These observed signals are the secondary cleavages. When the primary single-strand-specific cleavage occurs in the loop of domain Y, two RNA molecules may disperse. Hence, the kissing interaction may be destabilized, resulting in the observed single-stranded signals. Construct pCB3-3'UTR:UGGU_{7251-7258}→GCCA, in which the 3D coding sequence involved in a possible pseudoknot interaction was replaced with the complementary sequence, did not affect the double-stranded nature of the corresponding sequence in the loop of domain Y. Also, the double-stranded nature of the nucleotide stretch CCG_{7350-7352} was not restored in pCB3-3'UTR:ACCG_{7340-7352}→UGGC/UGGU_{7251-7258}→GCCA. A kissing interaction between the hairpin loops of Y and X rather than a pseudoknot interaction between hairpin loop Y and sequences in the 3D coding region is therefore favored. This is in contrast to the findings of Jacobson et al. (13), who described experimental evidence for the existence of such a pseudoknot interaction in the poliovirus 3'UTR using a temperature-sensitive mutant (3NC202), isolated previously by Sarnow et al. (36), which has an 8 nt insertion within the loop of domain Y, directly downstream of the stem structure. The mutant 3NC202 showed wild-type levels of virus yields at a low temperature and decreased yield when grown at 39.5°C. They subsequently isolated eight revertants that synthesized wild-type levels of RNA at 39.5°C, of which six could reform a wild-type pseudoknot structure. However, this cannot be considered proof for such a structure, since mutant 3NC202 itself was capable of forming a pseudoknot structure that was almost identical to the wild-type structure (13). Therefore, we constructed pCB3-3'UTR:GUUG_{7340-7347}→CGAG/GUAC_{7356-7363}→CUUG to create a mirror image of the top part of the Y stem and disturbed the interaction with the 3' end of the 3D polymerase coding region, and we also generated pCB3-3'UTR:UGGU_{7251-7258}→CUU, in which the leucine codon CUU in the 3D coding region replaced UUG and succeeded in disturbing the formation of the pseudoknot while keeping the 3D amino acid sequence intact. Both mutants yielded a virus which exhibited growth characteristics identical to those of the wild-type virus. We therefore could find no evidence to support the presence of this pseudoknot interaction. This is in agreement with the results described by Rohll et al. (34) and Pierangeli et al. (24), who found that insertions (up to 1,000 nt) just downstream of the termination codon, resulting in a very low probability to form a pseudoknot, did not influence the RNA replication of the virus DNA. The kissing interaction showed a remarkable resemblance to the tertiary structure predicted by Plipienko et al. (27), which was based on phylogenetic comparisons. Our experimental evidence suggest that a kissing interaction between the loop structures of domains X and Y does indeed exist. Replacement of the double-strand-sensitive G_{7352} in the loop of domain Y with a cytosine (pCB3-3'UTR:G_{7352}→C) introduced a C_{7352}/C_{7352} mismatch and a disturbance of the kissing interaction. This mutation appeared to be lethal. Replacement of the complementary C_{7352} in the loop of the X domain with a guanosine (pCB3-3'UTR:C_{7352}→G) also resulted in a lethal mutation. However, when both mutations were introduced simultaneously (pCB3-3'UTR:C_{7352}→G/G_{7352}→C), the kissing interaction was restored and the resultant virus exhibited the growth characteristics of the wild-type virus. When the cytosine at position 7392 was replaced with uracil, a U_{7392}/G_{7392} base pair was generated in the kissing interaction, resulting in a temperature-sensitive virus which could produce only 5% of the wild-type virus yield at 39°C, most probably due to the less stable U/G base pairing (39). Replacement of the complementary G_{7352} in the loop of domain Y into an adenosine, resulting in an A_{7352}/C_{7352} mismatch in the kissing interaction, also proved to be lethal. The simultaneous introduction of both mutations, resulting in

FIG. 8. Tertiary structure model of the coronavirus B3 virus 3'UTR. The specific domains X, Y, Z, and S are indicated as shown in Fig. 1. The X domain represents the kissing interaction. For further details, see the text.
pCB3-3′UTR:C7352→U/G7353→A, produced a viable but temperature-sensitive virus and at 39°C yielded only 13% of that produced by the wild-type virus. The growth characteristic of this latter mutant is similar to that of mutant vCB3-3′UTR: C7352→U and might be accounted for by similar stabilities of U/G and A/U base pair interactions (39). The importance of the moderately single-strand-sensitive A7355, in the loop of domain Y was studied in pCB3-3′UTRA7355→C and pCB3-3′UTR:A7351→G. Both mutations produced temperature-sensitive viruses with virus yields of 0.002 and 0.2% of that of wild-type virus at 39°C, respectively. When both mutations were introduced simultaneously, the resultant mutant virus had wild-type virus growth characteristics at 39°C, clearly indicating that this base pair is involved in the kissing interaction as well.

The full characterization of the kissing interaction is now in progress. We assume that it consists of six base pairs, which is also phylogenetically acceptable, since it can be applied to all enteroviruses sequenced so far (data not shown). Furthermore,
six residues are essential to have residue A7391 to gap the major groove of the superdomain and fold back from domain K to domain X (Fig. 8). Based on these findings, we constructed a three-dimensional model of the 3' UTR using computer assisted molecular modelling (Fig. 9). Filipenko et al. (27) proposed that the final three-dimensional structure of the 3'UTRs of the poliovirus-like and coxsackie B virus-like subgroups were similar in their overall organization to tRNA species. Indeed, a tRNA-like conformation of the 3'UTR has earlier been found in some alpha-like RNA plant viruses (32, 33). However, these virus RNAs can be amidonucleated (19), a feature that is unknown for the 3'UTR of enteroviruses. Comparisons of the three-dimensional structure of the enterovirus 3'UTR with the crystallographic structures of tRNA molecules (16, 40) showed that the structures were dissimilar (data not shown), since the enterovirus 3'UTR does not have the typical L-shaped formation found in tRNA (Fig. 9). Disruption of the tertiary interaction had no effect on virus translation and processing, since wild-type protein patterns were found using in vitro translation assay. However, disturbing the kissing interaction resulted in a defect in virus RNA replication, as was demonstrated with a subgenomic coxsackie B3 virus replicon. Very recently, it has been demonstrated that in the poliovirus 3'UTR, an intramolecular kissing interaction is also essential for virus replication (28).

The importance of RNA structures in RNA-protein interactions is generally known, and the tertiary RNA structure can be essential for stabilizing the structure for the subsequent interaction with proteins (11). As in the case of other complex higher-order RNA structures like pseudoknots, it is reasonable to assume that the kissing interaction in the enterovirus 3'UTR acts as a specific binding site for viral and/or cellular proteins involved in the initiation of negative-strand RNA synthesis (23, 42). Indeed, Harris et al. (12) have described the formation of a 3'-terminal ribonucleoprotein complex composed of a 3AB-3CD interaction with the 3'UTR. The subsequent proteolysis of 3CDpro releases the 3D polymerase. Protein 3AB then acts as a specific binding site for viral and/or cellular proteins as well. We propose that the kissing interaction is the essential structural feature of the origin of replication required for its functional competence in virus negative-strand RNA synthesis.

The presence of such a tertiary structure in the 3'UTRs of both the coxsackie B virus- and poliovirus-like viruses makes the exchange of the 3'UTR between these viruses and the subsequent replication of the chimeras understandable, since the binding sites are identical (34). On the other hand, the rhinovirus genus has a 3'UTR which consists of a single stem-loop structure which cannot form a kissing interaction. However, a poliovirus chimaera containing the rhinovirus 14 3'UTR was still capable of initiating poliovirus negative-strand RNA synthesis (34), which is difficult to explain. One explanation might be that this occurs because ribonucleoprotein complex formation occurs differently in the rhinovirus 3'UTR, although formation of the complex as such is sufficient to initiate replication. Rohll et al. (34) also found replication in a poliovirus replicon containing the hepatitis A virus 3'UTR, which is also unable to form a kissing structure. However, these results could not be confirmed in vivo using a full-length infectious poliovirus cDNA clone containing the hepatitis A virus 3'UTR (23).

An intermolecular kissing interaction has also been postulated to describe the mechanism of antisense RNA-targeted drug duplex formation for the replication control of plasmid R1 (20-22). Hitherto, the existence and biological importance of an intramolecular kissing interaction between two RNA hairpin loops has only been postulated to take place in a variety of RNA molecules such as signal recognition particle RNA (30), Escherichia coli 4.5S RNA (38), archaeabacterial 7S RNA (14), and also in human immunodeficiency virus (8). We have now demonstrated that these interactions do exist and might even be a general feature in the higher-order structures of RNA that are essential for it to function effectively.

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