SHORT THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (PHD)

H2A.Z-nucleosomes are stabilized by the superhelicity-dependent DNA binding of the C-terminal tail of the histone variant

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INTRODUCTION

1. Nucleosome stability and dynamics

1.1.Structure of the nucleosome core particle

The chromatin structure is established by a repeating fundamental unit called nucleosome. The X-ray crystal structure of the nucleosome core particle (NCP) reveals the assembly of the histone protein octamer and the organization of 146 bp of DNA into a superhelix wrapped in 1.65 turns surrounding it. The histone octamer has two copies each of the core histones H2A, H2B, H3, and H4. Each core histone contains a conserved motif called the histone-fold, an essential structural component consisting of three alpha helices: α1, α2, and α3. The helices are interconnected by two loops, L1 and L2. The DNA is contacted where the minor groove at 10-bp intervals faces the protein, via its arginine residues, while keeping the major groove accessible to molecular interactions involved in various cellular processes. The path of the DNA superhelix is distorted through bends at several positions. Through channels formed by the minor groove, long unstructured positively charged N-terminal and C-terminal tails protrude out from the nucleosome core, interacting with particular surfaces of a neighboring nucleosome or with nuclear proteins and the DNA, both nucleosomal and linker.

The histone tails also mediate nucleosome-nucleosome interactions, resulting in the compact, higher-order structure of chromatin. The interactions between histone tails and nucleosomal DNA determine the thermal stability of mononucleosomes while having no role in the resistance of nucleosomal structure to salt treatment below 700 mM, demonstrating that stability features depend upon the nature of challenging conditions applied in the stability assays. Posttranslational modifications (PTMs) occurring on the tails alter their charge and/or molecular configuration and are recognized by specialized reader proteins. Such modifications appear to influence the accessibility of nucleosomal DNA and the stability of chromatin fibers, although to varying degree.

1.2.Nucleosome dynamics and gene regulation

Since the nucleosome structure fundamentally limits DNA accessibility to DNA-targeting enzymes like RNA polymerase (RNAP) II and to most transcription factors, nucleosome dynamics

is a crucial element in transcriptional machinery. The dynamics of chromatin structure is tightly regulated through multiple mechanisms superimposed on each other, including nucleosome remodeling (see above), covalent histones modification within the nucleosome, or replacement of core histones with histone variants. Certain modifications may directly influence nucleosome stability, like acetylation, while others are recognized by regulatory proteins, or disturb higher-order structures.

Posttranslational modifications (PTMs) on histone tails or within the globular core domains, e.g. acetylation, methylation, ubiquitination, and phosphorylation, creates binding sites for particular proteins. The N-terminal tail of histone H4 facilitates inter-nucleosomal interactions, which are essential for the condensation of chromatin. Its acetylation (H4K16Ac) directly decreases these inter-nucleosome interactions involving the tail and a particular charged surface of the nucleosomes, the acidic patch of a neighboring nucleosome. The acidic patch region is primarily formed by the clustering of eight acidic residues on histones— six from H2A (E56, E61, E64, D90, E91, E92) and two from H2B (E102, E110) — which together create a negatively charged binding interface on the nucleosome surface, serving as a critical interaction site for chromatin-associated proteins and neighboring histone tails. H4K16Ac may also regulate gene transcription by modulating the interaction of the acidic patch with non-histone proteins. H3K4me3, H3K27me3, and H3K9me3 are key methylation marks with different functional consequences. H3K4me3 is typically enriched at the promoters of most active genes and has been associated with open chromatin and transcriptional activity. H3K27me3, attached by the Polycomb Repressive Complex 2 (PRC2), marks repressed genes contributing to the formation of facultative heterochromatin. H3K9me3 is mostly located in constitutive heterochromatin, particularly in the pericentromeric regions of the chromosomes, where it promotes stable gene silencing and repression of transposable elements by the recruitment of HP1 proteins. These modifications establish a histone code that precisely ensures accurate gene regulation during key cellular processes.

In addition to modifications, core histones can also be replaced with histone variants, with functional effects. For instance, H2A.Z non-randomly replaces H2A contributing to transcriptional regulation by decreasing nucleosome stability at transcription start sites (TSS) as suggested by the enhancement of nucleosomal DNA mobility. H2AX is phosphorylated during DNA break repair

in long stretches of chromatin surrounding the lesion H3.3 gets incorporated into the chromatin of non-dividing cells at the promoters of active genes, often together with H2A.Z.

1.3.Methods to study nucleosome stability

Diverse biophysical and biochemical methods have been developed to study the structure and stability of nucleosomes. *In vitro* techniques are generally performed on purified nucleosomes or reconstituted chromatin in test tubes, among those: **thermal denaturation assay** which measures their resistance to thermal stress thought to reflect the strength of histone-DNA interactions; **salt-induced dissociation assay** is used to determine the NaCl concentration required for nucleosome disassembly, interfering with the electrostatic interactions involved in their assembly; **the Micrococcal Nuclease (MNase) digestion assay** evaluates the accessibility of DNA wound around the histone octamer, where less stable nucleosomes have increased sensitivity to enzymatic digestion, hence representing the relative accessibility and stability of nucleosomes; **single-molecule force spectroscopy techniques**, such as optical and magnetic tweezers, along with single-molecule fluorescence resonance energy transfer (smFRET), provide insights on the mechanical stability of individual nucleosomes and precisely measure the force necessary for their unspooling and disassembly pathways, and additionally allowing real-time monitoring of nucleosome unwrapping and rewrapping.

Conversely, *in vivo* or *in situ* approaches aim to investigate nucleosome stability within the native cellular conditions inside living cells, or intact nuclei under near-native conditions. This involves **chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP)-based approaches** which detect histone occupancy at specific genomic loci, and live-cell imaging methodologies such as following the mobility of photoactivated labeled histones by **Fluorescence Recovery After Photobleaching (FRAP)**.

Our group has developed a versatile and robust quantitative imaging-based method using salt/intercalator elution performed on agarose-embedded nuclei, allowing the study of nucleosome stability within intact nuclei. In this *in-situ* method named **Quantitative Imaging of Nuclei after Elution with Salt/Intercalators (QINESIn)** nucleosome stability is assessed by treating chromatin, prepared by the treatment of the agarose-embedded live cells with nonionic detergents, with different concentrations of salt or intercalator agents, leading to a differential effect on nucleosome stability depending on their histone composition and PTMs marking the nucleosomes.

When histones are eluted from nucleosomes using salt, mainly the electrostatic interactions keeping the nucleosome together are challenged, measuring what will be alluded to as intrinsic stability, while exposure to DNA binding intercalators is used to assess DNA superhelicity-dependent stability features. Intercalators destabilize nucleosomes by extending and unwinding the DNA double-helix. The retained, chromatin-bound histones are detected within individual nuclei using histone type- or PTM-specific antibodies, followed by automated quantitative imaging by laser scanning cytometry (LSC).

2. DNA supercoiling and chromatin topology

As mentioned before, nucleosomes typically function as barriers for polymerases and other enzymes involved in DNA-based cell biological processes. Nevertheless, they are dynamic and are influenced by different factors such as thermal fluctuations, DNA supercoiling, PTMs of histones, the activity of chromatin remodelers, and linker histones, possibly among many other factors. These mechanisms regulate nucleosome stability and, consequently, chromatin structure, also in the sense that they influence the stacking of nucleosomes in chromatin fibers creating an additional barrier for the drivers of disassembly, hence influencing gene regulation.

Among these factors the contribution of DNA supercoiling to the regulation of gene expression is probably the least understood. Supercoiling refers to the over- or under-twisting of the right-handed DNA double helix in relation to its standard 10.4 bp per helical repeat (turn). This occurs to the nucleosomal DNA during the formation of the nucleosomal structure itself in S phase, constraining negative supercoiling, while the internucleosomal linker DNA regions get over- or underwound in processes such as replication and transcription. During transcription, RNAP creates high torsional stress, generating positive supercoils ahead and negative supercoils behind, yielding net overall supercoiling levels depending on the selective elimination of positive or negative supercoils by topoisomerases based on their preferences. The positive torsion is thought to destabilize nucleosomes ahead of the RNA polymerase, whereas the negative torsion behind facilitate nucleosome reassembly.

Supercoiling influences the three-dimensional organization of chromatin, enabling or influencing long-range interactions between distant genomic elements such as enhancers and promoters. It also alters the DNA geometry, which affects its interaction with regulatory and structural proteins, thereby modulating transcription.

3. The H2A.Z histone variant

3.1. Structural features of H2A.Z variant

The H2A.Z histone variant has two isoforms, H2A.Z.1 and H2A.Z.2.1, which differ only by three amino acids and are encoded by separate genes. Alternative splicing of H2A.Z.2.1 creates a different version known as H2A.Z.2.2, which is shorter than H2A.Z.1 or H2A.Z.2 by 14 amino acids. This hypervariant conspicuously destabilizes nucleosomes compared to H2A.Z.1 or H2A. H2A.Z exhibits approximately 60% amino acid sequence identity to the canonical H2A.

As mentioned before, the nucleosomal structure is in general repressive for transcription, replication, and repair. Hence, eukaryotic cells regulate these processes by de- repression through the destabilization or mobilization of particular nucleosomes. Beside the canonical H2A, several variants exist, including H2A.X, H2A.Bbd, MacroH2A, and H2A.Z, with varying functions and stability features. In the case of H2A.Z, there appears to be no consensus in the field whether the presence of H2A.Z in nucleosomes increases or decreases nucleosome stability. Regardless of remaining controversies, the observations suggesting a destabilizing role appear to have received more attention. For instance, the presence of H2A.Z destabilizes local nucleosome structure in embryonic stem cells, resulting in reduced nucleosome occupancy and enhanced chromatin accessibility, especially at promoters and enhancers, has received over 200 citations in PubMed. In concert with this finding, the presence of ANP32E, a chaperone that binds the C-terminal tail of H2A.Z, prevents H2A.Z deposition and consequential appearance of wide ATAC-Seq positive promoter regions throughout the genome of mouse fibroblasts. Recent findings from MNase-X-ChIP-seq experiments indicate reduced unwrapping of the +1 nucleosomes containing also another variant, H3.3 following H2A.Z depletion, confirming earlier data on H2A.Z/H3.3-containing unstable nucleosomes at the TSS of transcriptionally active promoters. On the other hand, recent cryo-EM studies of H3.3/H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes could confirm the destabilizing effect of H2A.Z only. However, such studies may be too myopic: investigating nucleosomes in their chromatin context using a differential MNase digestion method has indicated that H2A.Z nucleosomes located upstream or downstream of the TSS exhibit a much higher resistance to MNase compared to those at the TSS. Moreover, H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes are also present in transcriptionally repressed facultative and constitutive heterochromatin, which likely possesses

different stability characteristics from those of the euchromatic regions, suggesting that the different findings may also reflect the possible intranuclear heterogeneity of H2A.Z nucleosomes.

The stability of H2A.Z containing nucleosomes may also be modulated by the H2A.Z1, Z2 isotype composition, the PTMs that mark H2A.Z, and the presence or absence of the C-terminus binding reader protein PWWP2A, which facilitates the recruitment of the deacetylase subcomplex M1HR to H2A.Z-containing chromatin, resulting in modifications in histone acetylation levels. These factors may all modulate the stability of H2A.Z nucleosomes.

In human cells, the incorporation of H2A.Z into chromatin is mediated by the action of ATP-dependent chromatin remodeling complexes, primarily Tip60/p400 and SRCAP, while its removal or eviction is facilitated by the histone chaperone ANP32E and the INO80 remodeling complex. Additionally, members of the ISWI and CHD chromatin remodelers have also been implicated in the regulation of H2A.Z dynamics under replication-independent conditions. These remodeling activities operate alongside, and potentially modulate, the intrinsic and DNA superhelicity-dependent stability characteristics of H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes.

3.2.H2A.Z functions in health and disease

The diverse functions of this histone variant appear to depend on several factors: organismal context (H2A.Z differs between species, e.g., its knockout is lethal in mice but not in yeast), nucleosome composition (how many and which of the isotypes are incorporated into a nucleosome), protein interactome (whether transcriptional activators or repressors are recruited), genomic location (its presence at promoters, enhancers or heterochromatin), and H2A.Z PTMs (for instance, acetylated H2A.Z is often linked to active transcription, while ubiquitination is associated with gene repression). With all this complexity, H2A.Z is an essential player in the regulation of transcription, DNA replication, DNA repair, and 3D chromatin structure, and it is implicated particularly in embryonic development, cellular differentiation, neurodevelopment, and brain function.

Role in gene transcription: H2A.Z appears to be an essential factor in RNAPII initiation and pause release as well as re-loading of certain pre-initiation complex components. RNAPII pauses 20–60 bp downstream from the TSS in early elongation, the release from this paused state being a

key regulatory step in gene expression. The first (+1) nucleosome is considered a major barrier for transcription in vivo. The role of H2A.Z in pause release appears to be complex: although the presence of the variant seemed to anticorrelate with height of the barrier for RNAP II in one report, it was also found that H2A.Z.1 depletion results in faster release of RNAPII pausing towards elongation and increases nascent RNA and H2A.Z at the TSS correlates with paused RNAPII. In addition to the absence or presence of the variant in nucleosomes of strategic significance, H2A.Z-binding proteins can also influence transcription. For instance, PWWP2A binds H2A.Z and promotes transcription at highly expressed genes; on the other hand, its depletion reduces NuRD recruitment and histone deacetylation.

3.3.The C-terminal H2A.Z tail

In *Schizosaccharomyces pombe* (fission yeast), as in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* (budding yeast), H2A.Z is loaded into chromatin by the Swr1C complex at promoters of low expressing genes, highlighting a conserved deposition mechanism across eukaryotes. However *S. pombe* Swr1C has an additional subunit, Msc1, which prevents mislocalization of H2A.Z to centromeric and subtelomeric regions. In *S. cerevisiae*, the HTZ1 (also known as HTA3) gene encodes the H2A.Z variant, a member of the H2A gene family. Although HTZ1 is not essential in budding yeast, its disruption leads to slow growth and increased sensitivity to formamide, indicating a significant functional role. Comparison using the plasmid shuffle technique revealed that the major H2A genes (HTA1 and HTA2**)** and HTZ1 cannot substitute for each other's essential functions. This demonstrates that H2A.Z has a function distinct from that of the major H2As. Moreover, the H2A.Z gene from *Tetrahymena thermophila* (a protozoan) can rescue the HTZ1 deletion phenotype, confirming that H2A.Z functions are evolutionary highly conserved across distant eukaryotes.

The comparison of the H2A.Z histone variant across eukaryotic species, summarizes the conservation and divergence of H2A.Z across species, highlighting the high sequence conservation within mammals and the greater divergence observed in lower eukaryotes, particularly in the C-terminal docking domain, while core functional regions remain preserved. This level of conservation is indicative of a common evolutionary origin and the retention of conserved core regions essential for function. Importantly, the evolutionary conservation of H2A.Z across diverse

species indicates a preserved structural and functional role throughout evolution and further highlights its fundamental role in chromatin organization and gene regulation.

H2A.Z possesses subtle differences in specific regions that likely underlie its distinct identity and functions. One notable structural divergence is the L1 loop, where two H2A.Z molecules within the nucleosome can interact. However, a major structural and functional divergence resides in the C-terminal "docking domain" which shows less than 40% amino acid identity with H2A and has been identified as providing an interaction surface for H3/H4 and likely serves as a binding platform for nucleosome remodeling activities. Research, including a high-throughput technique for detecting epistasis (where the effect of one gene depends on the presence or absence of another gene) by systematically mapping genetic interactions, called E-MAP (Epistatic MiniArray Profile) analysis in *S. cerevisiae*, demonstrates the critical role of the C-terminal region in cellular growth under genetic stress (when certain genes are compromised). The finding that the H2A.Z (1–114) truncation, which excludes the last 20 amino acid segment, compromises vital H2A.Z functions in genotoxic stress resistance, heterochromatin restriction, GAL1 gene activation, and chromatin anchoring underscores the functional importance of this domain. These findings indicate that the functional effects of the H2A.Z C-terminal tail arise from specific molecular interactions mediated by this region. Among its molecular partners, the histone chaperone ANP32E specifically recognizes the H2A.Z–H2B dimer through interaction with the C-terminal H2A.Z tail, facilitating its eviction from chromatin, similarly to the Chz1 chaperone of_S. cerevisiae. In human cells, H2A.Z incorporation into chromatin is primarily mediated by Tip60/p400 and SRCAP complexes, while its removal by ANP32E is strictly regulated during DDR. Moreover, ANP32E prevents H2A.Z deposition at promoter regions throughout the genome of mouse fibroblasts, underscoring the functional significance of molecular interactions involving the C-terminal tail in gene regulation and genome stability.

A previous study identified H2A.Z.2.2**,** an alternatively spliced variant of H2A.Z.2.1 that is shorter than any of the H2A.Z isoforms by 14 amino acids, lacking its C-terminus. This hypervariant markedly destabilizes nucleosomes compared to those containing H2A.Z.1 or canonical H2A. The destabilized state of these nucleosomes lacking the C-terminal H2A.Z tail suggests that nucleosome stability might be tail-dependent and crucial for nucleosome stability and dynamics. Thus the C-terminal H2A.Z tail appears to be a key determinant of H2A.Z nucleosome stability

and may provide a means to modulate chromatin structure and function through interactions involving this region. To investigate the tail's role in nucleosome stability and identify the molecular interactions involved, we employed QINESIn, a nucleosome stability assay developed in our lab. The chromatin of the agarose-embedded nuclei used in the assay is devoid of loosely bound proteins like H1 and HMGB1, small molecules like polyamines or nucleotides including ATP, thus its state may represent the most basic conformational features of the nucleosomes the activity of chromatin modifying enzymes act upon.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1. To establish a cyclodextrin-based method for introducing a synthetic tail peptide resembling the C-terminal tail of H2A.Z into live HeLa and melanoma cells

2. To confirm the C-terminal tail-dependent stability of H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes using an independent approach, intercalator elution, that challenges nucleosome integrity by inducing torsional stress.
3. To determine, using fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS), if the binding of the tail peptide to DNA is superhelicity-dependent by comparing its binding to supercoiled and relaxed plasmid DNA.
4. To assess whether the absence of the C-terminal H2A.Z tail affects the biological behavior of cells

SPECIAL METHODS

Introduction of peptides into live cells

500,000 HeLa or MEL1617 melanoma cells were seeded in a 35 mm cell culture Petri dish and grown overnight before peptide treatment. The formation of cyclodextrin/peptide complex required a mixture of 30 μM peptide and 300 μM SBECD (Sulfobutylether-β-Cyclodextrin; CycloLab, Budapest, Hungary) diluted in colorless, serum-free RPMI1640, followed by a 1 h incubation at RT. 2 ml SBECD/peptide complex were given to the cells and incubated for 2 h at 37 °C in 5% CO2 atmosphere. Following incubation, the cells were washed once with complete RPMI medium and subsequently cultured overnight prior to agarose embedding.

Embedding live cells into low melting point agarose and permeabilization

Embedding of cells into 8-well microscopic chambers (Ibidi, Martinsried, Germany) coated with 1% (m/V) low melting point (LMP) agarose. Briefly, after washing with 500 µl ice-cold PBS/EDTA 3 times for 3 minutes each, the cells were permeabilized by treatment with 500 µl of ice-cold 1% (V/V) Triton X-100 dissolved in PBS/EDTA (5 mM EDTA in PBS) twice for 10 minutes each.

Treatment of the embedded nuclei with salt (histone eviction by salt)

After permeabilization, nuclei were washed with 500 µl ice cold PBS/EDTA 3 times for 3 min and were treated with different concentrations of NaCl on ice. Nuclei were incubated with 500 µl of ice cold salt for 1 hour. After this treatment, nuclei were washed with 500 µl ice cold PBS/EDTA 3 times for 3 min. Since NaCl was diluted in PBS/ EDTA, the salt concentrations indicated on the X axes of the graphs in the relevant figures show the total NaCl concentrations together with NaCl present in the PBS buffer. For the analysis of the elution curves SigmaPlot12.0 software was used.

Treatment of the embedded nuclei with intercalators, immunostaining

After permeabilization, nuclei were washed 5 times with 500 µl ice cold PBS/EDTA for 3 minutes each. Ethidium bromide (EBr) treatment was performed using concentrations ranging from 0 to 100 µg/ml in PBS/EDTA containing 750 mM salt for 1 hour on ice followed by washing 3 times with 500 µl ice cold PBS/EDTA for 10 minutes each. H2A.Z was stained by overnight incubation at 4°C with the primary antibody (anti-H2A.Z Rabbit Polyclonal Antibody, Abcam ab97966; anti-H2A Rabbit Polyclonal Antibody, Abcam ab18255; anti-H2A.X Rabbit Polyclonal Antibody, Abcam ab20669; anti-H3 Rabbit Polyclonal Antibody, Abcam ab1791; anti-H3K27me3 mouse monoclonal antibody and H3K9me3 mouse monoclonal antibody, both provided by Prof. Hiroshi Kimura, diluted 1:800 in 1% BSA in PBS/EDTA. After 4 sequential washes (quick, 10, 30, and 60 minutes) with 500 µl ice cold PBS/EDTA, nuclei were incubated at 4°C in the dark with a secondary antibody (Alexa Fluor 488 Goat Anti-Rabbit, Invitrogen A11008 or Alexa Fluor 647 Goat Anti-Mouse, Invitrogen 21235) diluted 1:800 in 1% BSA in PBS/EDTA. When biotin-

labeled Doxorubucin (Dox-biotin) was used as an intercalator, the washed nuclei were incubated with 200 µl of 1 µM Dox-Biotin dissolved in PBS/EDTA (from Zutao Yu, Cambridge University, UK) for 2 hours on ice in the dark, followed by 3 washes with 500 µl ice cold PBS/EDTA (10 minutes each). Samples were stained overnight at 4°C in the dark with 150 µl of the primary antibody (mouse anti-biotin, Sigma B7653), and after 4 washes (as above), were incubated with the secondary antibody (Alexa Fluor 647 goat anti-mouse, Invitrogen A21235) under the same conditions.

Samples were fixed in 200 µl of 1% formaldehyde overnight at 4°C in the dark. The next day, formaldehyde was removed, and the samples were washed 3 times with 500 µl ice cold PBS/EDTA for 5 minutes each before staining with 12.5 µg/ml propidium iodide (PI) for 1 hour on ice. After 3 additional washes with 500 µl ice cold PBS/EDTA for 3 minutes each, fluorescence intensity distributions were recorded in an iCys Laser Scanning Cytometer (LSC). The data were analyzed using the iCys0.7 software, and statistical analyses were performed in GraphPad Prism V8.2.1.

Fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS)

The native plasmid DNA was either nicked or linearized using 1 U of Nb.BsmI (ER2051) or 1 U of EcoRI (ER0275), respectively, in a 20 µl reaction volume, for 1 hour at 37˚C. Both enzymes were from Thermo Scientific, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA. Equal amounts of supercoiled, nicked and linearized plasmid DNA were mixed and loaded into wells of a 1% agarose gel. The bands were cut from the get and the DNA was isolated and purified using a Promega kit (Wizard® Plus SV Minipreps DNA Purification Systems, A1460).

In FCS, the fluorescence intensity fluctuations of molecules diffusing across the sub-femtoliter detection volume illuminated by a focused laser beam is measured in a confocal arrangement. The temporal autocorrelation function (ACF) of the fluorescence intensity gives information about the mobility, absolute concentration and aggregation state as well as the photophysical properties of the molecules. FCS was used to assess the binding of CF-C9 and CF-SCR peptides to superhelical or relaxed plasmid DNA (pCMV-EGFP-4X) based on the FCS-derived mobility of the peptides/peptide-DNA complexes.

For sample preparation, all solutions were kept on ice. A freshly prepared 1 M stock of the antioxidant vitamin C was made by dissolving 176 mg of vitamin C powder in 1 ml of deionized water and vortexing until fully dissolved. For calibration, 20 nM of Alexa Fluor 488 (A488) was made from a 10 µM stock, which was centrifuged at 14,000 rpm for 10 min at 4°C, then dissolved in ice-cold TE buffer (10 mM Tris, 0.1 mM EDTA, pH 7.4). 400 nM of the carboxyfluorescein labeled C9 peptides CF-C9 and CF-SCR (scrambled) were made from 2 mM stock, which were diluted stepwise in ice-cold PBS under thorough vortexing, then centrifuged at 14,000 rpm for 10 min at 4°C. A base solution was prepared by mixing 3.992 ml of TE buffer (pH 7.4, 4 µl of 1 M vitamin C (1 mM), and 4 µl of 10% NP-40 detergent (0.01%). FITC (control) were measured by FCS at a final concentration of 20 nM (in 10 mM Tris-EDTA buffer, pH 7.4), while the peptides CF-C9 and CF-SCR were added at 40 nM in PBS. The peptides were either measured alone or in combination with 10 µg/ml plasmid DNA (pCMV-EGFP-4X) in a supercoiled form or relaxed by nickase using Nb.BsmI (Thermo Scientific ER2051, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA.). FCS measurements were performed using 8-well microscopic chambered cover slips (Ibidi, Martinsried, Germany) with a sample volume of 200 µl at RT (22.5 °C), using a Carl Zeiss LSM 880 confocal microscope (Carl Zeiss, Jena, Germany), equipped with a 60× water immersion objective and a photon counting detector. Fluorescence of the CF-tagged peptide was excited by the 488 nm laser line and its emission was detected between 500–550 nm.

Evaluation of raw FCS data

FCS measurements consisted of 5 × 20 s runs, and each sample was measured at least 3 times at each condition. FCS data were evaluated by using the QuickFit3 software ((JW. Krieger, J. Langowski (2015): QuickFit 3.0 (status: beta, compiled: compiled: Jan 5, 2015, SVN: 3695): A data evaluation application for biophysics, [web page] http://www.dkfz.de/Macromol/quickfit/ [Accessed on Jan 5, 2015]).). Autocorrelation functions from each run were inspected, and those displaying artefacts due to large fluctuations caused by aggregates were excluded. The remaining runs were averaged, and the resulting correlation curve was fitted to different models using a simulated annealing algorithm with box constraints weighted by the standard deviations of the runs. We tested normal (free Brownian) and anomalous diffusion models with a two-component normal diffusion model for measurements of Plasmid + CF-C9 (or CF-SCR) and a one-component model for the CF-C9 (or CF-SCR) alone to fit ACFs.

Laser scanning cytometry (LSC)

Automated microscopy imaging was done using an iCys laser scanning cytometer (Research Imaging Cytometer; CompuCyte, Westwood, Massachusetts, USA). The instrument is based on an Olympus IX-71 inverted microscope equipped with four lasers, photodiodes (detecting light loss and scatter) and four photomultiplier tubes (PMTs). The 488 nm Argon ion laser was used to excite Alexa 488 and PI and the 633 nm HeNe laser was applied in the case of Alexa 633. Fluorescence signals were collected via an UPlan FI 20× NA 0.5 objective. Alexa 488 fluorescence was detected through a 530/30 nm bandpass filter, while Alexa 647 and PI were detected through a 650/LP filter. Data analysis was performed using the iCys 7.0 software, and graphs were prepared using SigmaPlot 11.0.

RESULTS

1. Epigenetic modulation via the C-terminal tail of H2A.Z variant

Our studies focused on exploring the role of the C-terminal H2A.Z tail in determining the stability of H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes. We thought that we could take advantage of QINESIn, the nucleosome stability assay developed in our lab to study the role of the tail in determining the stability of these nucleosomes, benefiting also from a collaboration with Prof. Harata's lab (Sendai, Japan) who provided us with a DT40 cell line pair expressing either human H2A.Z1 (DKO/Z1) or its C-terminally truncated version (DKO/ΔC).

In QINESIn (see Introduction), histones remaining in the nuclei after treatment with increasing NaCl concentrations (or intercalators, used as described in the chapter 2) were detected by immunofluorescence or directly in the case of histones tagged with fluorescent proteins, followed by automated quantitative imaging with a laser scanning microscope (LSC). In the salt elution assay, salt ions (Na^+, Cl^-) perturb electrostatic forces and weaken the interactions responsible for nucleosome integrity. Elevated salt concentrations disrupt not only DNA-histone interactions, but also those acting among the histones themselves, as well as interactions between the two DNA strands (by affecting the equilibrium between double-stranded and denatured states), thereby influencing nucleosome stability. At moderate salt concentrations, this leads to the dissociation of

the peripheral H2A-H2B dimers, while the central H3-H4 tetramer remains associated with DNA. At high NaCl concentrations, even the H3-H4 tetramer is disrupted, ultimately resulting in full nucleosome disassembly. The dissociated nucleosomal components diffuse out from the nuclei embedded into agarose. The Triton X100 treatment used to prepare permeabilized nuclei is expected to remove the cytoplasm and the nuclear envelope, leaving the nuclear pores and the nuclear lamina intact, representing barrier to diffusion above 20 nm particles. This approach allows us to evaluate how DNA unwrapping and histone dissociation occur in specific nucleosomes.

1.1. The intrinsic stability of H2A.Z-nucleosomes is C-terminus- dependent

When comparing the salt elution profiles of various histone proteins, including H2A, H2A.X, H2A.Z and H3-GFP within HeLa nuclei, it was observed that H2A.Z demonstrates an unusually stable association with chromatin, exhibiting salt elution profiles similar to those of H3 or H4, as compared with canonical H2A or H2A.X, across all phases of the cell cycle. Surprisingly, a higher salt concentration was necessary to elute H2A.Z compared to H2A, which was coeluted with histone H3. Furthermore, in the salt elution curves, almost 10% of H2A.Z remains in the nucleus even with exposure to the maximum salt concentration. As detailed above, spurred mainly by the destabilized nature of the H2A.Z.2.2 isoform, experiments were performed utilizing DT40 cells expressing human H2A.Z.1 with a deletion of the last 9 amino acids at the C-terminus (between residues 119–128) in a double H2A.Z.1, H2A.Z.2 knockout (DKO) background (The same experimental system was used in the intercalator elution studies described in chapter 2). The H2A.Z nucleosomes of DKO/ΔC cells were less stable compared to those of the control DKO/Z1 cells. Notably, the intranuclear localization pattern of H2A.Z nucleosomes was significantly influenced by the C-terminus. In the DKO/ΔC cells, the localization of H2A.Z, as identified by ZAbA antibody, changed from peripheral to a more dispersed pattern within a similar DKO background. Interestingly, the distribution of H3K9me3-marked nucleosomes was also altered, as evidenced by the decreased degree of colocalization between H2A.Z and H3K9me3 in DKO/ΔC nuclei relative to DKO/Z1 nuclei. Based on their salt elution features, three categories of H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes could be distinguished: the unusually salt-stable nucleosomes associated with peripheral heterochromatin, termed H2A.Z^{hc}, the more centrally positioned and dispersed H2A.Z-nucleosomes exhibiting stability characteristics akin to canonical nucleosomes resembling

euchromatin, termed H2A.Z^{eu} and a third category, H2A.Z^{lmn} that appears to be tightly associated with the nuclear lamina and is referred to as H2A.Z^{lmn}.

These observations were made on isolated nuclei, using the salt elution format of QINESIn, i.e. exposing chromatin to challenging conditions that are non-physiological and the simultaneous eviction of H2A.Z and H3 left us with the impression that H2A.Z may be bound to H3. Further experiments revealed that the chromatin of DKO/ΔC nuclei is more sensitive to different nucleases and their nucleosomes are unstable relative to those of the DKO/Z1 nuclei through the spectacles of salt elution. Based on the above observations a synthetic peptide corresponding to the last 9 amino acids of the H2A.Z C-terminus was tested as to its possible effects on nuclear architecture and nucleosome stability when added to agarose-embedded HeLa nuclei expressing normal H2A.Z1. In these experiments all the features of the DKO/ΔC DT40 nuclei were recapitulated. My role in the project was to establish a cyclodextrin-based procedure for the introduction of the peptide into live cells, and to further investigate the role of the C-terminus in determining nucleosomal stability using the other format of the QINESIn assay, intercalator elution.

1.2. The effects of C9 peptide introduced into live cells

The destabilized state of the nucleosomes containing C-terminally truncated H2A.Z and their altered intranuclear localization suggested that these characteristics are a direct result of molecular interactions involving this specific tail region. To further explore this, the synthetic peptide (C9) corresponding to the last nine amino acids of the C-terminus was added to HeLa nuclei and also introduced into live HeLa and Melanoma (MEL1617) cells under conditions that did not significantly affect cell viability.

I first assessed the cytotoxicity of the cyclodextrin derivative sulfobutyl ether β-cyclodextrin sodium salt (SBECD), commonly used in pharmaceuticals to enhance the solubility of poorly water-soluble drugs, in both HeLa and MEL1617 cells. Cell viability was measured using the Alamar Blue assay, which evaluates cellular metabolic activity by quantifying the reduction of a non-fluorescent dye (resazurin) into a highly fluorescent product (resorufin), providing a reliable estimation of the number of viable cells in the measured well. In HeLa cells, the exposure to SBECD did not reduce the viability at any of the tested incubation time points compared to the SBECD-untreated controls, as indicated by stable absorbance values across increasing

concentrations up to 300 µM. Similar results were obtained for MEL1617 cells. To further evaluate the cytotoxic threshold, cells were treated with increasing SBECD concentrations and cell numbers were quantified by direct cell counting. In both HeLa and MEL1617 cells, a clear dose-dependent reduction in cell number was observed, indicating that SBECD exerts cytotoxic effects at concentrations above 300 µM. These data establish 300 µM as the upper safe concentration for SBECD use in peptide delivery. Next, I investigated the kinetics of peptide uptake in HeLa cells using flow cytometry, measuring cell-associated total fluorescence of the C9 peptide labeled with carboxyfluorescein (CF) following its co-incubation with SBECD at RT for varying time points to allow the formation of peptide-SBECD complexes. The peptide was mixed with the cyclodextrin at a molar ratio of 1:10 to ensure that all the SBECD molecules become loaded with the peptide. The flow cytometric data showed that both CF-C9 and CF-C6 (containing only the last 6 amino acids of the C-terminal tail) exhibited time-dependent uptake by the cells. Notably, fluorescence intensity increased over time, reaching a maximum at 2 h, indicating progressive cellular uptake of the peptide-SBECD complexes. Peptide localization was visualized in HeLa cells using confocal microscopy. Both CF-C6 and CF-C9, were observed in the nuclei of HeLa cells after fixation with1% formaldehyde, CF-C9 showing a higher accumulation. These observations confirmed that SBECD facilitates efficient cellular uptake and nuclear delivery of the peptides.

The confocal microscopy images showed intracellular accumulation of CF-C9 following treatment with either 30 µM or 90 µM peptide concentrations. The fluorescence signal was present in the nucleus, indicating efficient cellular uptake and nuclear localization of the peptide. The CF-C9 accumulation slightly increased with higher peptide concentration, suggesting a dose-dependent internalization. Flow cytometric analysis further confirmed these observations. Cells treated with the SBECD/CF-C9 complex exhibited an upward shift in the size-fluorescence scattergrams compared to untreated controls, consistent with peptide uptake. The fluorescence signal was slightly higher in cells exposed to 90 µM CF-C9 than those treated with 30 µM, in accordance with the microscopy data. However, since the difference was minimal, subsequent experiments were conducted using 30 µM CF-C9 for practical reasons. Similarly to the cyclodextrin alone, the SBECD/C9 complexes did not decrease cell viability at the SBECD concentration used neither in HeLa nor in MEL1617 cell lines. These results demonstrate that the peptide delivery system is well tolerated under the tested conditions and does not exert cytotoxic effects on either cell line.

Collectively, these findings define a functional concentration range of 300 µM SBECD and 30 µM C9 that maintains cell viability and demonstrates the capacity to mediate efficient peptide uptake and nuclear delivery in both HeLa and melanoma cells.

After a single dose of C9 peptide delivered via SBECD, several changes were detected in the nuclei of HeLa cells within one day. Peripheral H2A.Z-containing heterochromatin was reorganized relative to H3K9me3. Comparable although less obvious alterations were observed in the nuclei of two melanoma cell lines (WM35 and MEL1617), emphasizing the specific effect of the C9 peptide compared to the control peptide, SCR (see Materials and Methods). In addition, other data detected a decrease in nucleosome stability and an increase in nuclease (e.g. nickase) sensitivity upon C9 treatment. Overall, the findings made possible by the successful introduction of the peptide to live cells recapitulated the effects detected when C9 was added to agarose-embedded nuclei and both reminded of the differences observed between the nuclear architecture and nucleosome stability features of the DKO/ΔC-DKO/Z1 DT40 cell pair, in support of the complex role of the C-terminal H2A.Z tail in determining nuclear architecture and the stability of the H2A.Z-nucleosomes in vivo as well as providing an experimental tool to modulate chromatin structure and function.

We were intrigued to further investigate whether the stability of nucleosomes appears to be tail-dependent also when assessed in more physiological conditions. To address this, an alternative approach is to challenge nucleosome structure by altering the superhelicity of the DNA wrapped around them, as well as interconnecting them**,** rather than perturbing ionic and hydrogen bonds with salt. This approach proved to be sensitive to somewhat different aspects of nucleosome stability as compared with the salt elution and provides an independent means to assess nucleosome stability. Alterations in DNA superhelicity do occur in vivo during processive enzymatic activities in the nucleus like transcription, suggesting that differences in nucleosome stability revealed by this assay may have direct biological significance.

2. Superhelicity-dependent DNA binding of the H2A.Z C-terminal tail stabilizes nucleosomes containing this variant

2.1. Characterization of H2A.Z nucleosome stability by intercalator-induced histone elution

We employed an assay that differs from salt elution and affects nucleosomal structure by modulating DNA superhelicity. We used different intercalating agents that unwind the DNA double-helix, including ethidium bromide (EBr), a widely used DNA-binding probe becoming fluorescent (being shielded from quenching by water when intercalated between the base-pairs of the DNA) upon binding to DNA, and doxorubicin (Dox), a well-known antibiotic and anticancer drug. The latter is fluorescent by itself but the quantum efficiency decreases upon DNA binding, unlike for EBr, therefore its biotinylated derivative was applied in my experiments, made available for us by Dr. Zutao Yu (Cambridge, UK). These intercalators unwind and extend the DNA without directly perturbing ionic or hydrogen bonds. This structural perturbation alters the wrapping of DNA around the histone core, leading to histone eviction that reflects nucleosome stability under conditions in which intercalator-induced DNA unwinding mimics the local changes occurring during physiological processes such as transcription.

In our initial experiments, ethidium bromide (EBr) was applied. EBr is able to evict nucleosomes only in the presence of at least 750 mM NaCl solution. Up to this salt concentration, the core histones stay almost 100% chromatin-bound, yet the H2A-H2B dimers become loosely attached to nucleosome core and begin to dissociate as EBr concentration increases. A large subpopulation of H2A.Z was retained in the nuclei unlike the H2A, H2A.X, or H3 nucleosomes, suggesting that the H2A.Z nucleosomes are relatively resistant to the changes of superhelicity evoked by the intercalator. In the confocal images, the localization of the EBr-resistant H2A.Z nucleosomes has changed characteristically, the dispersed distribution of H2A.Z in the untreated (control) HeLa nuclei was transformed into a perinuclear-perinucleolar topography after treatment with 100 µg/ml EBr. The H2A.Z nucleosomes behaved differently when compared to others in the EBr elution assay regardless of the cell cycle phases as well as the H2A.Z isotypes in HeLa cells.

Conversely to the salt elution data, where H2A.Z and H3 exhibited similar behavior, approximately 50% of all detected H2A.Z has dissociated while H3 remained associated with chromatin. At higher intercalator (EBr) concentrations, most of the H3 was eluted, whereas H2A.Z remained in HeLa nuclei suggesting that H2A.Z is not bound to bulk H3. The above results

showing the resistance of H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes to EBr and their nuclear distribution, suggest that it might be localized at the heterochromatin, what was confirmed in similar experiments focusing on facultative and constitutive heterochromatin.

To investigate whether the sensitivity of H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes to EBr, is C-terminus dependent, I performed experiments using the two DT40 cell lines (DKO/Z1 expressing the full-length H2A.Z1, and the DKO/ΔC expressing its C-terminal truncated version). The data demonstrated a strong and clear dependence on the histone variant's C-terminal tail, as the intercalator sensitivity of the H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes differed significantly between the two cell lines. When the agarose-embedded nuclei of these cells were pretreated with 0.5 U/ml nickase prior to EBr treatment, we found that upon DNA relaxation by nickase treatment, the EBr elution profile of H2A.Z nucleosomes (DKO/Z1-nicked) was shifted to the left compared to the untreated nucleosomes (DKO/Z1), signifying destabilization. Furthermore, the DKO/Z1-nicked sample exhibited a behavior similar to those lacking their C-terminal tail (DKO/ΔC) in the EBr elution, indicating that the effect of the DNA nicking and the C-terminal tail truncation are similar in terms of intercalator sensitivity. These finding highlights the critical role of the C-terminal tail in modulating the sensitivity of H2A.Z-nucleosomes in the assay based on intercalator elution and raise the possibility that DNA superhelicity might be also a key factor in the stability of the H2A.Z-nucleosomes.

To further validate our findings, I used another intercalator, Doxorubicin (Dox), an anthracyclin commonly employed in cancer chemotherapy. Dox was particularly useful because of its property of facilitating nucleosome eviction without requiring the addition of salt, according to our previous experience, providing a clearer view of its effect on nucleosome stability in a near-physiological environment. The following experiments were performed using Dox at a concentration of 1 μM unless otherwise specified. This concentration is ~10x smaller than the peak serum cc. of the drug reached in cancer patients. When H2A.Z nucleosome eviction was compared in the two DT40 cell lines, we found that the exposure to the intercalator Dox resulted in a higher degree of H2A.Z release in the nuclei prepared from tail-less H2A.Z cells (DKO/ΔC) compared to those obtained from control cells (DKO/Z1) showing a similar effect to EBr. At the same time, the co-labeled H3K27me3-marked facultative heterochromatin exhibited similar behavior in both DKO/Z1 and DKO/ΔC nuclei. To further confirm these data, I investigated whether the higher level of H2A.Z

elution in DKO/ΔC nuclei corresponds with a higher level of DNA binding by the intercalator, using biotin-labeled doxorubicin (Dox-biotin). I first needed to determine if there was a difference in the amount of nucleosome-free DNA (i.e. nucleosome content) between the two cell lines. The agarose embedded nuclei were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde prior to Dox-biotin treatment then both Dox-biotin binding and the amount of immunolabeled H3 were measured. The results showed that the intercalator-treated and untreated DKO/Z1 and DKO/ΔC cells have the same levels of nucleosome-free DNA and also they have similar nucleosome content. Thus, any difference we might see without fixation would reflect a differential effect of Dox-biotin on the H2A.Z-nucleosomes of the two cell lines. Indeed, significantly more Dox-biotin was bound to the DNA of the DKO/ΔC nuclei compared to the control. This demonstrated that the H2A.Z nucleosomes lacking the C-terminal tail are more readily susceptible to intercalator-induced eviction, confirming that the tail contributes to nucleosome stability.

2.2. The C-terminal H2A.Z tail binds to DNA in a superhelicity-dependent manner

The significant differences in the behavior of H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes in DKO/Z1 and DKO/ΔC nuclei in intercalator elution, in intercalator binding, and also in their response to nickase treatment raised the possibility that the H2A.Z C-terminal tail might bind to DNA in a superhelicity-dependent manner. To investigate this hypothesis, I used fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS) to assess the binding of the carboxyfluorescein-labeled tail peptide (CF-C9) to circular plasmid DNA in its different topological forms (superhelical and relaxed), prepared as described in Materials and Methods. Supercoiled, nicked (relaxed) and linearized plasmid DNA mixtures were run on a 1% agarose gel. The appropriate DNA bands were excised from the agarose gel, purified, and used for subsequent FCS measurements.

The diffusion constant *(D)* for both CF-C9 and CF-SCR (used as a negative control) peptides in solution as determined by FCS was around 200 $\mu m^2/s$. In the presence of native plasmid DNA two diffusing components were observed: a fast component represented by the diffusion coefficients D_1 corresponding to freely diffusing CF-C9 and CF-SCR ($D_1 \sim 200\ \mu m^2/s$) and a slow component represented by the diffusion coefficient D_2 ($D_2 \sim 3\ \mu m^2/s$), which is interpreted as a complex formation (DNA-bound CF-C9). The FCS results showed that CF-C9 preferentially bound to the

supercoiled plasmid, unlike the control peptide (CF-SCR). As expected, the fast diffusion constant *(D_1)* of the dye-labeled peptides (CF-C9 and CF-SCR) was lower than that of the fluorescent dye (FITC) alone, while the diffusion constant of the slow component *(D_2)* of CF-C9 in the presence of the Sh plasmid was even lower.

The D value characterizing the motion of the center of mass of superhelical plasmids was found to be proportional to the -2.2th power of the plasmid length; based on this model and on the *D* value of a 5.9 kb supercoiled plasmid determined by differential dynamic microscopy (0.44 $\mu m^2/s$), the predicted *D* value of our 4.48 kb supercoiled plasmid would be 0.81 $\mu m^2/s$. The FCS-determined D_2 of the slow component was ~2-3 $\mu m^2/s$. Considering that the plasmid exhibits internal motion superimposed on the motion of the center of mass thereby increasing the apparent *D*, this value can be attributed to the motion of the DNA-bound CF-C9. As a conclusion, the CF-labeled nonapeptide representing the C-terminal end of H2A.Z preferentially binds to the superhelical plasmid DNA as compared with the relaxed plasmid, suggesting that the C-tail of the native protein may also engage with the DNA in chromatin in a superhelicity-dependent manner.

2.3.The effect of the C-terminal H2A.Z tail on cell proliferation

The superhelicity-dependent binding of the C-terminal H2A.Z tail to DNA, or its absence due to shielding e.g. when bound to a reader protein, may have significant biological importance. To address this possibility, I investigated the effect of the C-terminal tail on cell proliferation using cell growth assays. I compared the proliferation of DKO/Z1 and DKO/ΔC by counting cell numbers at different time points, immediately after splitting and at 24 h and 48 h of culture. At 24 h, DKO/ΔC cells displayed a significantly smaller cell count compared to the control DKO/Z1 cells. At 48 h, although both cells continued to proliferate, DKO/ΔC cells consistently showed lower cell numbers, suggesting an impaired proliferative capacity.

To confirm the difference between the growth rates, I compared the cell cycle distribution using flow cytometric measurement of their DNA content based on PI staining. The DNA distribution histograms revealed marked differences between the two cell lines. The truncation of the C-terminal H2A.Z tail in DKO/ΔC cells showed a smaller altered fraction of S, and G2/M cells compared to DKO/Z1 cells, indicating that the DKO/ΔC cells spend longer time in G1 implying

an impaired cell cycle progression. To directly assess S-phase, I used the EdU (5-ethynyl-2′-deoxyuridine) incorporation assay. EdU is a specially derivatized thymidine analogue that is incorporated into DNA during active DNA replication, and its detection via click chemistry using a fluorescent azide allows the quantification of cells which are in S-phase during the period of EdU incubation. In line with the cell counting and cell cycle analysis, when I compared these cells at 4h and 24h after splitting, I found that DKO/ΔC cells exhibited a significantly reduced fraction of EdU-positive cells (20.88%) relative to DKO/Z1 (40.41%) at 4h. At 24 h, although the percentage of EdU-positive cells increased in both cell lines, DKO/Z1 cells still showed a higher fraction (45.23%) relative to DKO/ΔC (36.48%). This indicates that the absence of the C-terminal H2A.Z tail leads to a significant proliferation deficiency. This suggests that this histone variant domain is essential for cell cycle progression and proliferative capacity, confirming that the C-terminal H2A.Z tail contributes not only to chromatin organization but also to the biological behavior of the cells.

DISCUSSION

Several independent lines of evidence show that the stability of H2A.Z-nucleosomes is dependent upon the C-terminal tail of the histone variant

To investigate the role of the unstructured C-terminal tail of H2A.Z in determining nucleosome stability, we examined the H2A.Z-nucleosomes in HeLa and melanoma nuclei and live cells, as well as in the nuclei of a DT40 cell line pair expressing either the full-length human H2A.Z1 (DKO/Z1) or its C-terminally truncated version (DKO/ΔC). These experiments were performed using the QINESIn assay developed in our lab, recording elution curves indicative of the off-rate of specific histones released from nucleosomes *in situ* upon exposure to salt (mainly the work of IL) and to intercalators (mainly my work).

The behavior of H2A.Z nucleosomes in HeLa under increasing concentrations of EBr, exhibited remarkable differences relative to H2A, H2A.X, or H3 containing. In particular, H2A.Z nucleosomes remained notably stable even at high EBr concentrations, suggesting resistance to superhelical alterations induced by the intercalator. The effect of H2A.Z C-terminal tail on nucleosome stability was also reproducible in the intercalator elution assay using the DT40 system.

Nucleosomes containing full-length (DKO/Z1) or truncated H2A.Z C-terminal tail (DKO/ΔC) displayed distinct behaviors upon exposure to EBr, with or without nickase pretreatment, consistent with the salt elution data. In this assay, the EBr was applied together 750 mM NaCl solution, based on the titration of the salt concentration sufficient to allow EBr destabilize nucleosomes, in line with the critical salt concentration where a major conformational change occurs in the nucleosomes involving mainly the dimers. In contrast, the use of a different intercalator, Dox, does not require the addition of salt, as it is particularly effective in facilitating nucleosome eviction, according to our previous studies. This property enabled the assessment of the impact of the H2A.Z C-terminal tail on nucleosome stability under near-physiological conditions, thereby validating our previous results from the EBr elution assay and confirming the tail dependent effect on nucleosome stability. These findings were further confirmed when I showed that the increased level of H2A.Z eviction upon C-terminal tail deletion in DKO/ΔC cells correlates with a higher level of DNA binding by Dox-biotin.

Where does the tail bind in chromatin?

The observations involving the anthracyclin raised an important question: How do intercalators destabilize nucleosomes if they mainly bind to internucleosomal DNA, as shown in the case of Dox-biotin? Thus, although EBr or Dox can also intercalate within nucleosomal DNA, thereby altering its superhelicity (Katalin Toth, DKFZ/UD; oral communication), since differences in Dox sensitivity between full-length and truncated C-terminal H2A.Z nucleosomes were observed at both low (1 µg/ml) and high (9 µg/ml) Dox concentrations, we suggest that the tail binds to superhelical internucleosomal DNA. Since the plectonemic structure of the nucleosome-free DNA at the promoters resembles best the supercoiled plasmid of my FCS experiments, and because the superhelical density of the internucleosomal linker DNA is highly variable according to the twin-supercoil model, the primary target of the tail might be the promoter.

The mechanism of nucleosome destabilization by intercalators

The superhelicity of nucleosomal DNA meets the steric and topological requirements of its winding around the histone core more than once, approximately 1.6 times. When the DNA is negatively superhelical, the dynamic equilibrium between nucleosome formation and eviction favors nucleosome formation. When the DNA is relaxed by intercalation of planar DNA dyes (EBr

or Dox) or relaxed by nicking, this winding is no longer supported by the favorable changes in free energy and entropy that accompany nucleosome formation in intact DNA, thereby disturbing the equilibrium. As a result, nucleosomes are more likely to dissociate, as the balance between the on-rate and off-rate of nucleosome formation shifts toward eviction.

Our FCS data revealed that the H2A.Z C-terminal tail (experimentally represented by the C9) binds to superhelical DNA; however, the exact binding sites in chromatin are yet to be determined. These possible interaction sites are illustrated in a graphical model considering potential binding sites in the internucleosomal linker DNA, nucleosomal DNA or DNA within nucleosome-free regions. Nucleosomal DNA, wound around the octamer core, has a toroidal superhelicity structure with varying twist values (toroid writhe), whereas DNA in nucleosome-free regions is typically plectonemic (plectonemic writhe) upon nucleosome eviction. In internucleosomal linker DNA, superhelicity changes dynamically during transcription of a particular chromatin loop (topological unit). If the C-terminal tail binds to linker DNA, this interaction would be transcription-sensitive and preferentially target the underwound DNA (negatively supercoiled) regions, like those upstream of the RNA polymerase. At plectonemic, nucleosome-free regions (e.g. promoters), the tail could bind, unless the same regions get relaxed by topoisomerases or transient DNA breaks arising in any other plausible mechanism would be expected to prevent tail binding. These dynamics offer an intriguing model for the behavior of H2A.Z-containing nucleosomes during transcription. Since the superhelical state of the plasmid DNA we used in our FCS resembles best the plectonemic structure that emerges following nucleosome eviction at the promoters, we favor this model, rather than models where the peptide would bind to the internucleosomal DNA or the DNA of the nucleosome that forms toroid rather than plectonemic supercoils. This model demonstrates the alternative mechanistic explanation that appears to be most consistent with our observations on nucleosome stability, nuclear architecture, and chromatin accessibility.

Biological significance of the DNA superhelicity-dependent molecular interaction demonstrated

The general role of the C-terminal H2A.Z tail in overall chromatin architecture and nucleosome stability demonstrated under close-to-native conditions draws attention to its potential impact on the biological behavior of cells. This view was supported by our cell proliferation studies, which revealed that deletion of the C-terminal tail led to altered cell cycle progression and a marked

decrease in cell growth and proliferation, consistent with previous studies. This interaction may involve H2A.Z in the heterochromatic nucleosomes, while those in euchromatin, being prevented from the stabilizing interaction due to reader protein binding, would be allow the tail-independent stability-lowering effects of the variant become manifest.

Our results highlight the possibility that superhelicity-dependent interactions between DNA and certain histone tails may be exploited by the cell for regulatory functions. Although its role in gene regulation are generally accepted as of great significance, the concrete examples of experimental observations implying that the superhelical state of DNA could be sensed by a molecular interaction and potentially translated into regulatory cues are rare. One such example is the Far Upstream Element of the c-myc oncogene (FUSE) and its interaction of the regulatory protein FBP. The superhelicity-dependent binding of H2A.Z to the DNA, substantiated in our work, may be a further example worthy of further investigations in this direction.

Conclusions

We have presented several independent lines of evidence demonstrating that the stability of H2A.Z-nucleosomes is dependent on the C-terminal tail. Multiple complementary assays, including EBr elution, Dox elution, and quantification of Dox-biotin binding to DNA, consistently revealed decreased stability in nucleosomes lacking their C-terminal H2A.Z tail. Together with the previously reported salt-elution results, we provide four independent methodological approaches supporting the conclusion that the H2A.Z C-terminal tail has an essential role in nucleosome stability. These findings are also supported by my FCS data, which validate the pivotal role of the C-terminal tail in stabilizing nucleosomes and reveal that the tail mediates molecular interactions through preferential binding to superhelical rather than relaxed DNA.

The findings my work contributed to fit the scenario of the three categories of H2A.Z nucleosomes identified: **(H2A.Zhc)**-stable nucleosomes in which the C-terminal tail binds to superhelical DNA; **(H2A.Zeu)**-less stable nucleosomes where the tail primarily interacts with molecular partners rather than DNA; and **(H2A.Zlmn)**-the most stable fraction, in which the tail establishes strong associations with the nuclear lamina.

SUMMARY

Using an *in situ* assay of nucleosome stability called QUINESIn, developed in our lab, recording elution curves indicative of the off-rate of specific histones released from nucleosomes *upon exposure to* salt or intercalator, I studied the stability of the nucleosomes containing the histone variant H2A.Z. The distinct stability features of H2A.Z nucleosome were found to be dependent on the C-terminal H2A.Z tail in the salt-elution format of QUINESIn, which assesses intrinsic nucleosome stability. Moreover, the stability features of H2A.Z-nucleosomes could be modulated when we introduced a synthetic peptide resembling the C-terminal H2A.Z tail into live cells using a cyclodextrin-based procedure. These findings were further validated with an alternative approach, the intercalator-elution format of QUINESIn, using the intercalating agents EBr and Dox, a assessing nucleosome stability by altering DNA superhelicity, rather than disrupting ionic and hydrogen bonds with salt. Importantly, the changes in DNA superhelicity naturally occur *in vivo* during e.g. transcriptional processes, suggesting that the differences in nucleosome stability detected by this assay may have direct biological significance. Using a DT40 cell line pair expressing either the full-length human H2A.Z1 or its C-terminally truncated version, we found that nucleosome stability is tail-dependent also through the spectacles of intercalator sensitivity. This conclusion was confirmed in experiments studying the binding of Dox-biotin to DNA. Fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS) also supported these findings, when I revealed that the H2A.Z-tail nonapeptide preferentially binds to supercoiled rather than relaxed-plasmid DNA. The DNA topology-dependent binding of the unstructured C-terminal tail of H2A.Z, by modulating nucleosome stability, may be functionally significant in various roles of the histone variant as shown in our cell proliferation studies. Our work demonstrates the interplay between DNA topology and nucleosome stability and opens new avenues for further studies on how it may be exploited by the cell for regulatory functions.

New finding

This study reveals that the stability of nucleosomes containing H2A.Z histone variant is dependent on the C-terminal tail of H2A.Z, in the intercalator-elution format of QUINESIn. The C-terminal H2A.Z tail binds preferentially to supercoiled DNA by which modulates nucleosome stability in a DNA topology–dependent manner.

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