

Siderocalins: siderophore-binding proteins of the innate immune system

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Received: 30 October 2008 / Accepted: 12 January 2009 / Published online: 30 January 2009
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Abstract Recent studies have revealed that the mammalian immune system directly interferes with siderophore-mediated iron acquisition through siderophore-binding proteins and that the association of certain siderophores, or siderophore modifications, with virulence is a direct response of pathogens to evade these defenses.

Keywords Siderophores · Siderophore-binding proteins · Bacterial virulence · Bacterial iron acquisition · Innate immunity

Introduction

Siderocalin [Scn; also referred to as lipocalin 2, neutrophil gelatinase-associated lipocalin (NGAL), 24p3 and uterocalin] was first identified as a component of human neutrophil granules, found there in several forms: a monomer, a disulfide-linked homodimer and a disulfide-linked heterodimer with matrix metalloproteinase 9 (MMP-9; also gelatinase-B) (Triebel et al. 1992; Kjeldsen et al. 1994, 2000; Goetz et al. 2002). Siderocalin is a member of the

functionally diverse lipocalin family of proteins, with representatives distributed across many phyla. While also diverse in sequence (beyond characteristic motifs), lipocalins display a highly conserved structural fold shared by Scn: an eight-stranded anti-parallel β -barrel, which encloses a cup-shaped binding site, or calyx, with accessory α - and 3_{10} -helices. Lipocalins are prototypically binding proteins and the function of a particular lipocalin is tied to the ligand bound, with the shape and the chemical character of the lining of the calyx defining ligand specificity. The Scn calyx is uncharacteristically lined with polar and positively-charged residues, where most lipocalin calyces have distinctly hydrophobic linings. The Scn calyx is highly sculpted, with three prominent pockets (1, 2 and 3) defined by the positions of the side-chains of three positively-charged residues, namely Arg81, Lys125 and Lys134 (Fig. 1; Goetz et al. 2000).

Scn ligands

Building on the observation that Scn co-purifies with a dark red chromophore when expressed in bacteria, Goetz and coworkers identified ferric enterochelin (FeEnt; also enterobactin), the primary siderophore of many enteric bacteria, as a candidate ligand. Siderophores are low molecular weight, virtually ferric-specific chelators involved in microbial receptor-mediated iron acquisition. Iron is an essential, but

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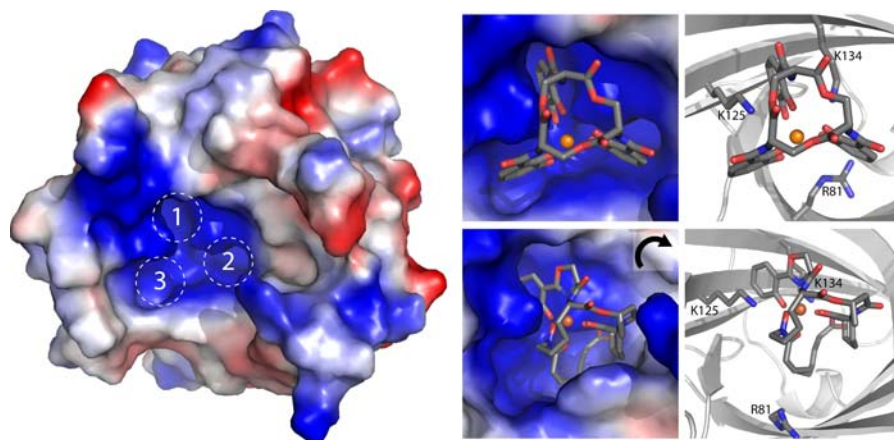


Fig. 1 Crystal structures of Scn. On the *left* is the overall surface energy representation highlighting the prominent features of the calyx and its three sculpted binding pockets. On the *right* are views of the calyx bound to FeEnt (*top*) and CMB (*bottom*)

limiting resource in the environment for many micro-organisms (due to the insolubility of $\text{Fe}(\text{OH})_3$), and many bacteria and fungi secrete siderophores in a competition to scavenge this scarce resource (Neilands 1981, 1995; Ratledge and Dover 2000; Winkelmann 2002). Siderophores are highly diverse as well, but can be divided into three broad classes depending on the chemistry of chelation: hydroxamates, phenolates/catecholates or α -hydroxycarboxylates—though other liganding chemistries can be used. Siderophore affinities for iron III can exceed 10^{50} M^{-1} , making them the strongest known iron chelators. Scn was subsequently shown to not only tightly bind FeEnt ($K_D = 0.4 \pm 0.1 \text{ nM}$) but also a range of related catecholate-type siderophores including parabactin, bacillibactin, 2,3-dihydroxybenzoic acid (DHBA) and, most surprisingly, the quite distinct, mixed catecholate/hydroxamate, soluble siderophores of *Mycobacterium*: carboxymycobactins (CMBs; $K_D = 0.6 \pm 0.04 \text{ }\mu\text{M}$) (Goetz et al. 2002; Holmes et al. 2005). Scn binds FeEnt and related siderophores by intercalating the side-chains of the three positively-charged calyx residues (Arg81, Lys125 & Lys134) between the three catecholate rings of FeEnt (Fig. 1), generating a novel hybrid of ionic and cation- π interactions (Ent is uncharged, but FeEnt carries a net -3 charge) (Raymond et al. 1984; Goetz et al. 2002). Electrostatic and cation- π bonds both contribute to binding, with retention of significant affinity even with net uncharged ferric complexes of Ent-analogs. Scn binds CMB using similar principles, recognizing the only common element between these two distinct classes of

compounds, a highly-polarized phenyl group, while accommodating distinct features, such as the fatty-acid tail of CMB, in sub-pockets unfilled by Ent-like siderophores in an otherwise essentially rigid calyx. Therefore, Scn does not employ induced-fit mechanisms to enable this recognition degeneracy.

Unfortunately, there is extremely limited information about how Ent and Ent-like siderophores are recognized by bacterial siderophore binding proteins. The *Escherichia coli* receptor FepA structure has been determined in the presence of FeEnt, but the ligand and the surrounding protein residues were disordered in the structure (Buchanan et al. 1999). The only other directly relevant structure, CeuE (the *Campylobacter jejuni* FeEnt periplasmic binding protein), was determined in complex with a synthetic Ent analog (MECAM) (Muller et al. 2006). While this complex structure shows some similarities to the Scn/Ent recognition mechanism, with cation- π interactions mediating binding to the catechol rings of MECAM, the FeMECAM ligand shows an unusual bridging interaction, forming an unnatural M_2L_2 complex with iron that dimerizes CeuE, distorts the geometry of the siderophore and likely prevents or limits the closure of the protein over the ligand typical of other periplasmic binding proteins.

Scn, iron and disease

Within the body, the majority of iron is bound up in hemoglobin, though other proteins bind iron directly,

including transferrin, lactoferrin and ferritin. As part of the innate immune response to infection and cancer, available iron in the body, normally tightly controlled, is further reduced to slow or stop the growth of pathogens and tumors through depletion of this necessary resource (Weinberg 1984; Jurado 1997). Lactoferrin is understood to be a bacteriostatic agent, also released from neutrophil granules at sites of inflammation, directly inhibiting the growth of infecting pathogens by sequestering iron (Ellison 1994). The ligand specificity of Scn therefore highlights the complementary role this protein plays in innate immune responses: a neutrophil granule protein, secreted in response to infection or inflammation, that sequesters iron as ferric siderophore complexes rather than free iron, away from microbial pathogens, thus limiting their growth and virulence. Scn complements the activity of lactoferrin by binding ferric siderophore complexes rather than iron directly, therefore targeting iron already earmarked for bacterial use (Goetz et al. 2002). During inflammation, concentrations of Scn can approach 30 nM in the serum, adequate to presumably bind all iron in ferric siderophore complexes (Xu and Venge 2000). Confirming this hypothesis, Scn is a potent bacteriostatic agent in vitro against *E. coli* cultured in iron-limiting conditions; this effect is solely through its affinity for FeEnt and not other bacteriostatic mechanisms (Goetz et al. 2002). Mice are dramatically susceptible to infections by virulent strains of *E. coli* when the Scn gene is knocked-out (Flo et al. 2004; Berger et al. 2006).

Scn binding properties also contribute to the explanation of the long-known but previously mysterious association of certain siderophores with bacterial virulence. The pathogenesis islands of many bacteria including species of *Yersinia*, *Shigella*, *Klebsiella*, *Salmonella* and *Neisseria*, encode proteins either associated with siderophore synthesis or uptake (Moss et al. 1999; Vokes et al. 1999; Zhou et al. 1999; Klee et al. 2000; Carniel 2001). Biosynthesis of the siderophores aerobactin (Warner et al. 1981) or yersiniabactin (Carniel 2001), for instance, contributes to virulence for many bacteria. Research has shown that Scn has no appreciable affinity for aerobactin (Goetz et al. 2002) or pyochelin (Holmes et al. 2005) and due to the similarity to pyochelin, Scn very likely has limited affinity for yersiniabactin as well. These siderophores thus confer virulence by allowing these bacteria to evade Scn-mediated iron

sequestration. This hypothesis explains the apparent conundrum (Crosa 1989; Ratledge and Dover 2000) of why production of a second, seemingly less efficient siderophore aerobactin, one with a considerably lower affinity for iron (III) than Ent, would contribute to virulence. In support of this explanation, the relative susceptibility of Scn knock-out versus wild-type mice to *E. coli* infection is only apparent with bacterial strains unable to synthesize aerobactin; strains that can secrete aerobactin do equally well in culture and in in vivo infections in the presence or absence of added Scn (Flo et al. 2004; Berger et al. 2006). There is also no difference in outcome when wild-type or knock-out mice are infected with *Staphylococcus aureus*; comparable mortality occurs in both contexts. This is consistent with the utilization of siderophores by *S. aureus* (including staphyloferrin) that are predicted to evade Scn binding, a prediction made on the basis of structural homology to siderophores, such as rhizoferrin, that have been directly shown to not bind Scn (Holmes et al. 2005).

Salmonella and uropathogenic strains of *E. coli* are also able to modify Ent by glucosylation (Fischbach et al. 2004) yielding the salmochelins, siderophores that do not bind Scn because of significant steric clashes in the calyx (Abergel et al. 2006a, b; Fischbach et al. 2006). Intriguingly, the CeuE/MECAM complex structure shows pockets large enough to accommodate at least one glucose adduct, potentially showing one mechanism by which a virulence-associated siderophore can evade the Scn defense while still supporting bacterial iron acquisition. Scn-mediated anti-mycobacterial responses may also be limited by the high selectivity of Scn for particular CMB isoforms, with varying fatty acid tail lengths, shown by the structural analysis of Scn/CMB complexes (Holmes et al. 2005; the preferred isoform is shown in Fig. 1). Scn may be able to tolerate binding of CMB variants plus or minus one or perhaps two methylene groups in the fatty acid moieties from the optimum, though likely with concurrent reductions in affinity, but it seems unlikely that Scn could accommodate the extremes of the reported CMB spectrum, at least while retaining the overall ligand orientation seen in the co-crystal structures. Therefore, CMB variation may also reflect mycobacterial responses to Scn-mediated defenses, evidenced by the obvious success of mycobacteria as human pathogens.

Pleiotropic functions of Scn

Scn has also been implicated in diverse cellular processes seemingly unrelated to anti-bacterial activities, such as apoptosis (Devireddy et al. 2001; Kamezaki et al. 2003) and kidney cell differentiation (Yang et al. 2002, 2003). Supporting alternate activities is the evidence for mammalian cell-surface Scn receptors reported in at least two different systems (Devireddy et al. 2001; Yang et al. 2002) with two candidate receptor proteins identified: Megalin (Hvidberg et al. 2005) and 24p3R (Devireddy et al. 2005). Megalin, a member of the low-density lipoprotein family and an extracellular matrix component (Saito et al. 1994), also interacts with lactoferrin (Willnow et al. 1992; Meilinger et al. 1995) and other lipocalins: retinol binding protein, α_1 -microglobulin/Hc, mouse major urinary protein and odorant binding protein (Flower 2000). Megalin binds Scn in the presence or absence of bound ferric siderophores and can mediate its cellular uptake (Hvidberg et al. 2005), though the physiological role of this interaction remains speculative. Megalin also seems to bind lipocalins indiscriminately. Devireddy and coworkers have also reported the cloning of a highly-conserved, multi-pass integral membrane receptor for Scn completely unrelated to Megalin, 24p3R, which can mediate Scn endocytosis (Devireddy et al. 2005).

Murine Scn, in a murine tissue culture system, also acts as an iron delivery protein, acting in concert with transferrin to convert mesenchymal progenitors into tubular epithelium, forming kidney nephrons (Yang et al. 2002). The effect is dependent upon iron bound by Scn as a complex with a chromophore, which is presumed to be an endogenous 'siderophore'. In this system, murine Scn recycles through sub-cellular endosomal compartments distinct from the intracellular trafficking of transferrin. Passage through these low-pH intracellular compartments correlates with release of iron. If mammals do synthesize siderophores that are used to shuttle iron or act as growth factors, Scn may participate in a wide variety of cellular processes by playing a role in regulating their transport, thus potentially explaining Scn's association with tumorigenesis and apoptosis. The existence of an endogenous siderophore confounds proposals to use siderophores and siderophore analogs as therapeutics, either as antibiotics (Roosenberg et al.

2000; Budzikiewicz 2001) or, through the bound iron, as oxygen radical scavengers in various clinical settings, such as the treatment of ischemia associated with congestive heart failure (Horwitz et al. 1998).

Scn and cancer

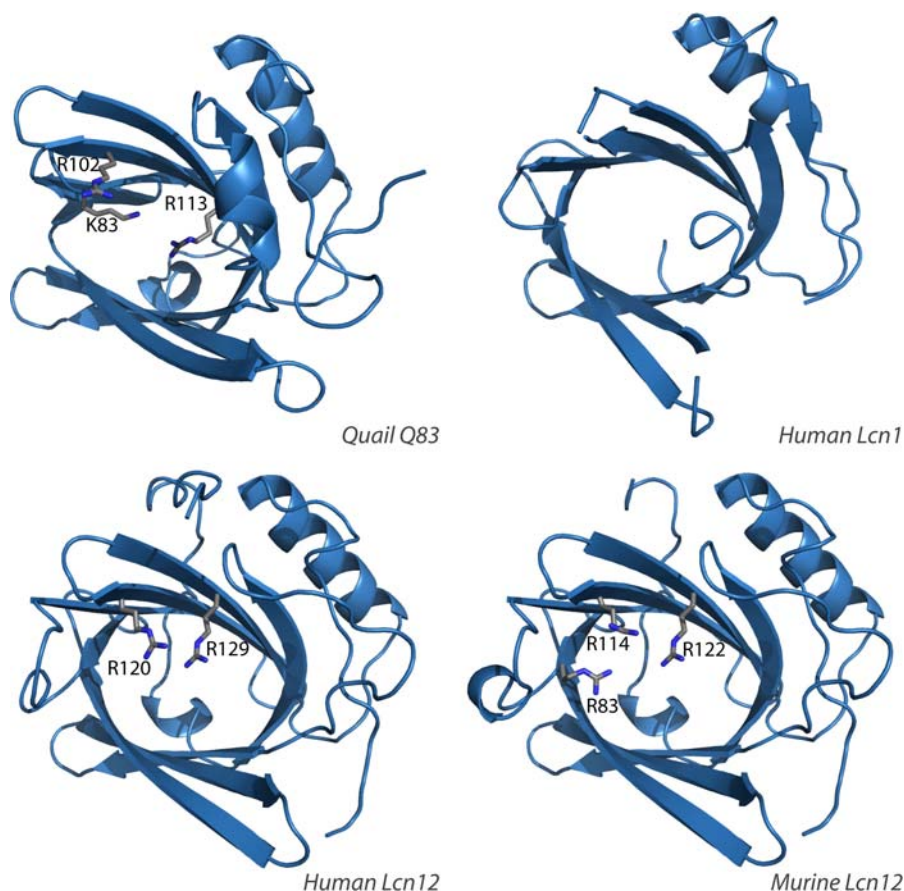
Scn is also induced in several human cancers and elevated Scn expression levels have been correlated with poor prognosis (Devarajan 2007). The most direct evidence linking Scn with disease progression comes from the Bcr/Abl-induced mouse model of chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML). Suppression of normal hematopoiesis in Bcr/Abl-induced leukemia, leading to mortality, is an active process involving secretion of Scn by mouse leukemia cells, likely through an apoptotic mechanism (Lin et al. 2005). The putative Scn receptor, 24p3R, is also upregulated in Bcr/Abl mice and CML patients (Devireddy et al. 2005) and a shorter splice-variant of 24p3R is expressed in human esophageal cancers (Fang et al. 2007). While the exact molecular mechanisms underlying the role of Scn in tumorigenesis and malignancy are currently unknown, Devireddy and coworkers proposed a model where 24p3R mediates the endocytosis of extracellular Scn/ferric siderophore complexes to donate iron to cells and prevent apoptosis. In contrast, the internalization of apo-Scn by cells is proposed to lead to iron efflux, by binding to and exocytosing intracellular ferric siderophores, resulting in apoptosis and cell death mediated by the pro-apoptotic protein Bim. The effect of apo-Scn is therefore akin to the action of cytotoxic iron chelators, which bind to iron and induce apoptosis (Richardson 2005). This hypothesis requires both functional, endogenous siderophores and an internalizing receptor, like 24p3R. We have evaluated whether bacterial siderophores, like Ent, could serve this role. Scn retains binding to FeEnt at pHs below those expected in endocytic vesicles, consistent with the primary function of Scn to sequester and clear bacterial ferric siderophores in order to halt infections. However, this would be inconsistent with functional endogenous iron transport, leaving the identity of the endogenous siderophore activity unknown (Abergel et al. 2008).

Other ‘siderocalins’

While degenerately binding both Ent-like siderophores and CMBs, Scn fails to bind to many bacterial siderophores and essentially all types of fungal siderophores. Therefore, the narrow range of Scn siderophore specificity leaves many holes in this potent innate immune defense, raising the question of whether there are other siderophore-binding proteins or peptides with complementary specificities. Scn is the first non-bacterial siderophore-binding protein characterized. Therefore, our attempts to identify other non-bacterial siderophore-binders have focused on lipocalins related to Scn (Holmes et al. 2005). Typical of the lipocalin family, sequence identities rapidly plummet as the alignments move from Scn itself. However, it is possible to identify candidate, non-orthologous siderophore-binding lipocalins (siderocalins) that display hallmark positively-charged side-chains in the calyx associated with siderophore binding in Scn (Fig. 2; Holmes et al. 2005).

Murine lipocalin 12 (Lcn12) is expressed in the epididymis (Suzuki et al. 2004), but little else is known about its function; its human ortholog has only been identified through analysis of the human genome sequence (Strausberg et al. 2002). Simplistic homology modeling (based on the Scn structure) of Lcn12 reveals a triad of positively charged side-chains in the murine Lcn12 calyx (two in human Lcn12) arranged analogously to Scn (Holmes et al. 2005). The next most-related candidate siderocalins are the highly-homologous proteins chicken Ex-FABP (Descalzi Cancedda et al. 2000) and quail Q83 (Hartl et al. 2003). Ex-FABP is expressed during chicken embryo development in hypertrophic cartilage, muscle fibers and granulocytes and is also a component of egg whites. In chondrocyte and myoblast cultures, Ex-FABP expression is induced by inflammatory agents and inhibited by anti-inflammatory agents. Q83 is a protein strongly induced in v-myc-transformed avian fibroblasts, though no specific candidate ligands or functions have been proposed. The NMR structure of

Fig. 2 Structures of other potential siderocalins. Q83 and Lcn1 were solved by NMR and X-ray crystallography, respectively, while human and murine Lcn12 structures are models based on the structure of Scn



Q83 (Hartl et al. 2003) again shows a triad of positively-charged amino acids in the calyx (conserved in Ex-FABP) very reminiscent, in arrangement and character, of the key siderophore-binding residues of Scn. This arrangement is also echoed in the calyx of an even more distantly-related lipocalin, C8 γ , a well-studied member of the complement cascade, however, subsequent structural studies showed that C8 γ binds peptide ligands and not siderophores (Ortlund et al. 2002; Lovelace et al. 2008).

Yet another lipocalin, Lcn1, also known as tear lipocalin, is even more distantly removed in sequence space but is also reported to function as a siderocalin. Lcn1 broadly inhibits the growth of bacteria and fungi through ferric siderophore sequestration. The nature of the recognition mechanism has yet to be elucidated, but the measured dissociation constants, in the millimolar range, are surprisingly weak (Fluckinger et al. 2004), contrasting the nanomolar dissociation constants for Scn/siderophore interactions. The structure of Lcn1 (Breustedt et al. 2005), though partially disordered, shows no immediately recognizable structural similarity to Scn in the calyx. Lcn1/siderophore complex structures also have yet to be reported. Lastly, it is possible that there are short, but structured peptides that also bind siderophores. Hepcidin, an anti-bacterial and -fungal peptide hormone 20–25 residues in length (McGrath and Rigby 2004), is involved in regulating iron homeostasis through interactions with ferroportin (Nemeth et al. 2004). The structure of Hepcidin (Hunter et al. 2002) also displays a triad of positively-charged side-chains (Arg16, Lys18 & Lys24) on its concave surface almost exactly superimposable on the positively-charged, ligand-interacting calyx residues of Scn. Therefore, the possibility exists that siderophore recognition in eukaryotic systems is much broader, with multiple implications for physiological processes, then heretofore appreciated.

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