

# Epidermal growth factor-binding protein activates soluble and receptor-bound single chain urokinase-type plasminogen activator

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**Abstract** Epidermal growth factor-binding protein (EGF-BP) is a serine proteinase that reversibly associates with epidermal growth factor (EGF). We analyzed the reaction of EGF-BP with urokinase type plasminogen activator (u-PA), a serine proteinase that promotes pericellular proteolysis and cellular migration. EGF-BP cleaved single chain u-PA (scu-PA) between Lys<sup>158</sup> and Ile<sup>159</sup>, converting the zymogen into enzymatically active two-chain u-PA (tcu-PA), as shown by SDS-PAGE, N-terminal sequence analysis, and enzymatic assay. The  $k_{cat}$  and  $K_m$  of the activation reaction were  $(5.6 \pm 0.6) \times 10^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$  and  $2.0 \pm 0.3 \mu\text{M}$ , yielding a catalytic efficiency of  $2.8 \times 10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ . EGF-BP also activated scu-PA bound to receptors on U937 monocytes as demonstrated by the generation of amidase activity against a tcu-PA-specific fluorogenic substrate. By activating scu-PA, EGF-BP may initiate u-PA-dependent cell surface proteolysis and therefore enhance EGF activities that require cellular migration and/or tissue remodeling.

**Key words:** Urokinase-type plasminogen activator; Urokinase-type plasminogen activator receptor; Epidermal growth factor binding protein; Epidermal growth factor

## 1. Introduction

Urokinase type plasminogen activator (u-PA) is the primary enzyme responsible for plasminogen activation at the cell surface (reviewed in [1]). u-PA, while bound to its cellular receptor, urokinase type plasminogen activator receptor (uPAR), activates cell-associated plasminogen, generating plasmin. Cell-associated plasmin directly degrades glycoproteins of the extracellular matrix and activates metalloproteinases that digest extracellular matrix collagen. This u-PA-dependent cell-surface proteinase cascade promotes cellular migration and extracellular matrix remodeling during several biological processes including chemotaxis, angiogenesis, neurite outgrowth, and wound repair [1].

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**Abbreviations:** EGF, epidermal growth factor; EGF-BP, EGF-binding protein; NGF- $\gamma$ , nerve growth factor- $\gamma$ ; scu-PA, single chain urokinase type plasminogen activator; tcu-PA, two chain urokinase type plasminogen activator; uPAR, urokinase type plasminogen activator receptor; PPACK, D-phenylalanyl-L-prolyl-arginine chloromethyl ketone; S-2444, L-pyroglutamyl-glycyl-arginine-p-nitroanilide hydrochloride; S-2251, H-D-valyl-L-leucyl-L-lysine dihydrochloride; PMA, phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate; PNPGB, p-nitrophenyl p'-guanidinobenzoate hydrochloride; EGR-AMC, glutamyl-glycyl-arginine-7-amino-4-methyl coumarin; S.E.M., standard error of the mean.

Cells synthesize u-PA as an  $M_r$  55,000 single chain zymogen (scu-PA) that demonstrates little or no activity against chromogenic substrates or plasminogen [2,3]. Plasmin is a potent scu-PA activator that converts the zymogen into a two-chain form (tcu-PA) that is highly active against chromogenic substrates and plasminogen [3]. Since plasmin is present in biological fluids as an inactive zymogen (plasminogen), a critical question remains regarding initiation of u-PA-dependent cell surface proteolysis. Several proteinases other than plasmin activate scu-PA, including plasma kallikrein, tumor-associated trypsin, cathepsin B, cathepsin L, nerve growth factor- $\gamma$  (NGF- $\gamma$ ), mast cell tryptase, and human T cell-associated serine proteinase [4–10]. Although these proteinases activate scu-PA less efficiently than plasmin, they may initiate the u-PA dependent proteinase cascade which can then undergo self-amplification.

Cytokines and growth factors including epidermal growth factor (EGF), induce u-PA synthesis [11–14]. EGF is a small ( $M_r$  6,000), widely distributed mitogen for cells of epithelial origin [15]. Beyond its mitogenic activity, EGF accelerates wound healing, enhances keratinocyte growth and migration, and functions as a chemoattractant for certain cell types [15–20]. In mice, EGF associates noncovalently with an Arg/Lys specific serine proteinase termed EGF-binding protein (EGF-BP) [21,22]. The multimeric complex, high molecular weight-EGF (HMW-EGF), has the stoichiometry  $(\text{EGF})_2(\text{EGF-BP})_2$  [21,22]. The primary function of EGF-BP probably involves proteolytic processing of EGF precursors [23]; other functions of EGF-BP are less well characterized.

In the HMW-EGF complex, EGF-BP remains inactive due to association of the enzyme's active site with the C-terminal arg residue of EGF [21,22]. Dilution and changes in pH cause HMW-EGF dissociation, releasing active proteinase and growth factor in the same micro-environment [21,22]. However, it is not clear whether EGF-BP and EGF activity are coordinated in any manner. In this investigation, we show that EGF-BP activates scu-PA both in solution and at the cell surface. We hypothesize that by activating scu-PA, EGF-BP may initiate u-PA-dependent cell surface proteolysis and therefore enhance EGF-dependent activities that require cellular migration and/or tissue remodeling.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Reagents

H-D-Valyl-L-leucyl-L-lysine-p-nitroanilide dihydrochloride (S-2251) and L-pyroglutamyl-glycyl-arginine-p-nitroanilide hydrochloride (S-2444) were from Kabi Vitrum (Stockholm, Sweden). D-Phenylalanyl-L-prolyl-L-arginine chloromethyl ketone (PPACK) was from Chemica Alta (Edmonton, Alberta). Glutamyl-glycyl-arginine-7-amino-4-methyl coumarin (EGR-AMC) was purchased from Enzyme Systems (Livermore, CA). Phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate (PMA) and p-nitrophenyl p'-guanidinobenzoate hydrochloride (PNPGB) were from

Sigma. Na<sup>125</sup>I was from Amersham International. Iodo-beads were from Pierce (Rockford, IL). Unless otherwise stated, reactions were conducted in buffer A (50 mM Tris-HCl, 100 mM NaCl, pH 7.4).

## 2.2. Proteins

EGF-BP was purified from male mouse submaxillary glands (Pel Freeze, Rogers, AZ) according to the method of Taylor et al. [21] and active site titrated with PNPGB by the method of Chase and Shaw [24]. In the presented experiments, the indicated EGF-BP concentrations are those obtained by active site titration. Dr. Jack Henkin of Abbott Laboratories provided the recombinant human scu-PA used in these studies. The scu-PA contained less than 0.5% active tcu-PA as determined by velocity of S-2444 hydrolysis. scu-PA was radiolabeled with Na<sup>125</sup>I and Enzymobeads according to the manufacturer's instructions. Desalting was performed on Sephadex G-25 (Pharmacia). Specific activities ranged from 1–3  $\mu\text{Ci}/\mu\text{g}$ .

## 2.3. Inhibition of EGF-BP by PPACK

EGF-BP (5.5–22 nM) was incubated with 1 mM S-2251 in the sample cuvette of a Hewlett Packard 8450A diode array spectrophotometer. Reactions were conducted at 37°C in buffer A. The absorbance at 406 nm was determined at 2 s intervals. After 200 s, PPACK (final concentration 60  $\mu\text{M}$ ) was added and absorbance monitoring continued. Absorbance measurements were transformed with the first derivative function ( $dA_{406}/dt$ ) to yield substrate hydrolysis velocities that are directly proportional to the concentration of active enzyme at any given time.

## 2.4. Cleavage of scu-PA by EGF-BP

EGF-BP (22 nM–0.44  $\mu\text{M}$ ) was incubated with scu-PA (10.9  $\mu\text{M}$ ) in buffer A for 30 min at 37°C. Reactions were terminated with PPACK (0.4 mM final concentration) and the products subjected to SDS-PAGE (8% slabs) under reducing conditions as described previously [8].

## 2.5. Identification of the EGF-BP cleavage site in scu-PA

scu-PA (10.9  $\mu\text{M}$ ) was digested with EGF-BP (0.4  $\mu\text{M}$ ) in buffer A for 30 min at 37°C. The reaction was terminated with PPACK (0.4 mM final concentration) and the products analyzed by SDS-PAGE under reducing conditions [8]. Proteins were electrotitrated to Immobilon P membranes and stained with Coomassie blue (0.1% w/v). Staining revealed two new bands (33 kDa and 22 kDa). The 33 kDa band was excised and subjected to N-terminal sequence analysis (5 cycles) using an Applied Biosystems 470A gas-phase sequencer equipped with a model 120A on-line analyzer.

## 2.6. Amidase activities

Hydrolysis of S-2244 (0.125–3 mM) by EGF-BP (28 nM) was monitored at 406 nm (4 s intervals) for 500 s. Reactions were conducted at 37°C in buffer A. An extinction coefficient of  $10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \cdot \text{cm}^{-1}$  was used to determine the concentration of *p*-nitroaniline generated from S-2444 hydrolysis.

## 2.7. Activation of scu-PA in solution

scu-PA activation by EGF-BP was demonstrated with a coupled enzyme assay that detects the generation of tcu-PA amidase activity [8]. Briefly, scu-PA (0.3–3  $\mu\text{M}$ ) and S-2444 (1 mM, in buffer A) were equilibrated at 37°C in the spectrophotometer sample cuvette. Reactions were initiated by the addition of 28 nM EGF-BP. Absorbance readings at 406 nm were taken at 4 s intervals for 200–500 s. Absorbance measurements were transformed with the first derivative function ( $dA_{406}/dt$ ) to yield S-2444 hydrolysis velocities that are directly proportional to the concentration of active tcu-PA at any given time. Rates of scu-PA activation were determined from the slopes in graphs of tcu-PA concentration against time [8].

Kinetic parameters ( $k_{\text{cat}}$ ,  $K_m$ ) for the activation reaction were determined from double-reciprocal plots of velocity and concentration. Since EGF-BP demonstrates a low level of amidase activity against S-2444 (see section 3), S-2444 acts as a weak competitive inhibitor of EGF-BP in the coupled enzyme assay described above. Therefore, we corrected the apparent  $K_m$  value for scu-PA activation by EGF-BP with the following expression:

$$K_M = \frac{K_{M_{\text{app}}}}{\left(1 + \frac{[I]}{K_I}\right)}$$

[I] is the concentration of S-2444.  $K_I = K_m$  for the hydrolysis of S-2444 by EGF-BP.

## 2.8. Cell culture

U937 monocyte-like cells [25] were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection and cultured as described previously [8]. Cells were treated with 150 nM PMA for 72 h before use. This treatment caused greater than 90% of the cells to become adherent. PMA also increases the number of u-PA receptors on the surfaces of U937 cells [26].

## 2.9. Cleavage and activation of cell-associated scu-PA by EGF-BP

Cleavage of cell associated scu-PA by EGF-BP was analyzed after binding [<sup>125</sup>I]scu-PA to U937 monocytic cells [8]. Briefly, PMA-stimulated U937 cells were treated with binding buffer (Earles Balanced Salt Solution containing 2 mg/ml BSA and 20 mM HEPES pH 7.4) containing 10 mM  $\epsilon$ -aminocaproic acid and 1000 units/ml aprotinin to dissociate any endogenously bound plasmin(ogen). The cells were subsequently treated with 50 mM glycine, 100 mM NaCl, pH 3.0 for 15 min at 22°C to remove endogenously bound scu-PA. Cells were washed three times with binding buffer and then equilibrated to 37°C. [<sup>125</sup>I]scu-PA (5 nM) was incubated with the cells for 20 min at 37°C. After washing, cells were treated with EGF-BP (2–200 nM) for 15 min at 37°C. Reactions were terminated with PPACK. Cells were then washed twice with binding buffer, lysed, and subjected to SDS-PAGE (reducing conditions) and autoradiography. Cleavage of scu-PA by EGF-BP was quantitated by slicing the gels into 3 mm sections and counting the slices in a gamma counter [8].

To detect activation of cell-associated scu-PA by EGF-BP, we used the fluorogenic assay described by Wolf et al. [8]. PMA-stimulated U937 cells were treated to remove endogenously bound plasmin(ogen) and u-PA. scu-PA (5 nM) was then incubated with the cells for 20 min at 37°C. After washing to remove unbound scu-PA, 25 nM EGF-BP was added for 15 min at 37°C. The cells were washed again and cell-associated active tcu-PA was detected by the rate of hydrolysis of EGR-AMC (0.5 mM in buffer A) using a CytoFluor Fluorescence Measurement System. Excitation was at 380 nm and emission was at

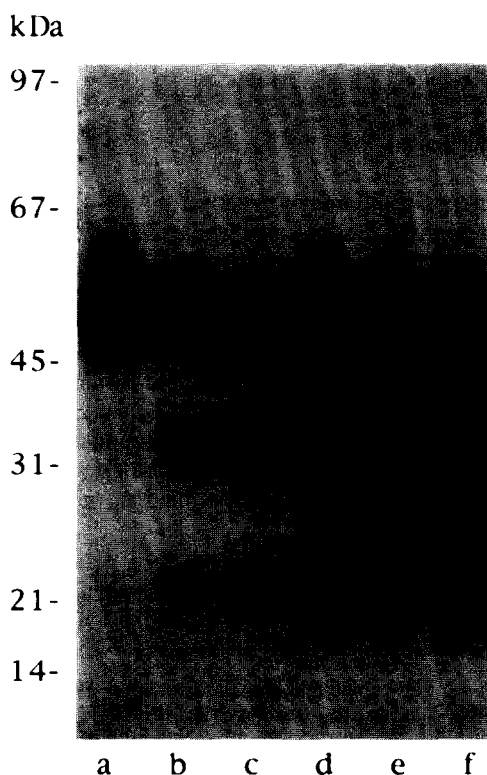


Fig. 1. Cleavage of scu-PA by EGF-BP in solution. scu-PA (10.9  $\mu\text{M}$ ) was reacted with EGF-BP for 0.5 h at 37°C. The products were analyzed by SDS-PAGE on 8% slabs under reducing conditions. The concentrations of EGF-BP were 0 nM (lane a), 22 nM (lane b), 44 nM (lane c), 0.11  $\mu\text{M}$  (lane d), 0.22  $\mu\text{M}$  (lane e), and 0.44  $\mu\text{M}$  (lane f).

480 nm (slit widths of 5 nm). Fluorescence was monitored at 1 min intervals for 12 min at 22°C. Background fluorescence (determined in the absence of scu-PA) was subtracted.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Inhibition of EGF-BP by PPACK

To determine if PPACK inhibited EGF-BP, we monitored S-2251 hydrolysis by EGF-BP in the absence and presence of the inhibitor. EGF-BP (5.5–22 nM) cleaved S-2251 at 37°C with substrate hydrolysis rates of 166 to 467 nM·s<sup>-1</sup>. Addition of 60 μM PPACK completely inhibited EGF-BP amidase activity within the time required for mixing (2–3 s) in 3 separate experiments. We subsequently employed PPACK to rapidly inhibit EGF-BP in the experiments that follow.

#### 3.2. Cleavage of scu-PA by EGF-BP

EGF-BP cleaved scu-PA into a two-chain form as demonstrated by SDS-PAGE under reducing conditions (Fig. 1). The molecular masses of the two new u-PA chains were 33 kDa and 22 kDa. 22 nM EGF-BP cleaved significant amounts of scu-PA within 30 minutes. Almost complete scu-PA digestion was achieved with 0.44 μM EGF-BP. There was no evidence for secondary EGF-BP cleavage sites or further digestion of the 33- and 22-kDa products, even at the higher EGF-BP concentrations. Prior incubation of EGF-BP with PPACK completely prevented scu-PA degradation (not shown).

#### 3.3. Cleavage of scu-PA by EGF-BP occurs between Lys<sup>158</sup> and Ile<sup>159</sup>

To identify the EGF-BP cleavage site(s), we subjected the 33 kDa digestion product to N-terminal sequence analysis. After five cycles, the only N-terminal sequence obtained was Ile-Ile-Gly-Gly-Glu. The initial yield was 21 pmol and the repetitive yield was 90%. No secondary cleavage sites were detected. By comparison with the known sequence of scu-PA [27,28], this new N-terminal sequence resulted from cleavage of Lys<sup>158</sup>–Ile<sup>159</sup>, which is the same peptide bond cleaved when plasmin activates scu-PA [2].

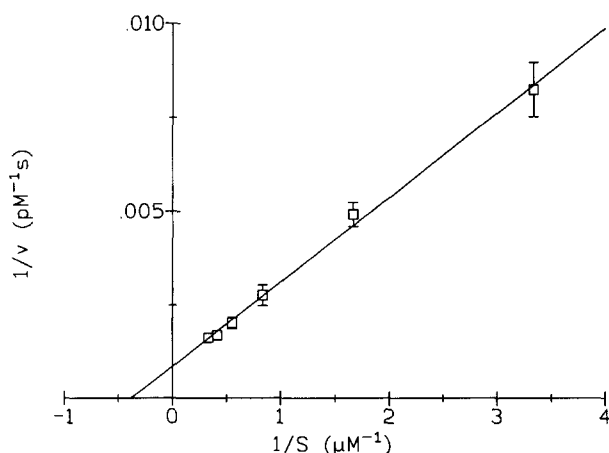


Fig. 2. Activation of scu-PA by EGF-BP. scu-PA was activated at 37°C in 50 mM Tris-HCl, 100 mM NaCl, pH 7.4 containing 1 mM S-2444. The concentration of active EGF-BP was 28 nM. Each value represents the avg ± S.E.M. ( $n = 6$ ).

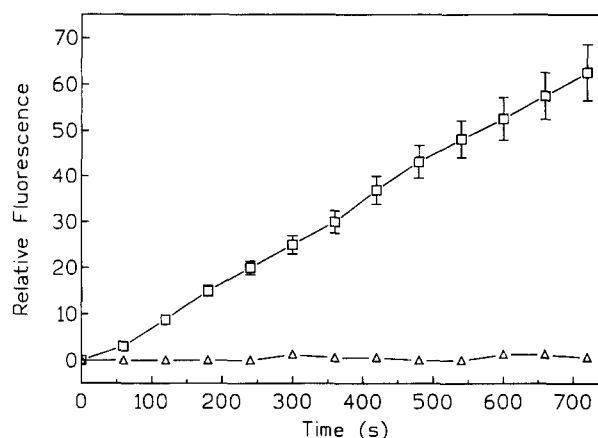


Fig. 3. Activation of receptor-bound scu-PA by EGF-BP. scu-PA was bound to PMA-stimulated U937 cells as described in section 2. Cells that were treated with 20 nM EGF-BP for 15 min at 37°C (□) or untreated cells (Δ) were washed two times with binding buffer. Subsequently, 0.5 mM EGR-AMC was added to each well. Fluorescence was monitored at 480 nm at 1 min intervals for 12 min at 22°C. Each value represents the avg ± S.E.M. ( $n = 3$ ).

#### 3.4. S-2444 Hydrolysis by EGF-BP

EGF-BP demonstrated a low level of amidase activity against S-2444 in control experiments. Double reciprocal plots of S-2444 hydrolysis velocities versus S-2444 concentration were linear, indicating that EGF-BP cleaved S-2444 according to simple Michaelis–Menten kinetics (not shown). The  $k_{cat}$  and  $K_m$  for this reaction were  $5.0 \pm 0.1$  s<sup>-1</sup> and  $0.84 \pm 0.08$  mM, respectively, yielding a catalytic efficiency ( $k_{cat}/K_m$ ) of  $5.8 \times 10^3$  M<sup>-1</sup>·s<sup>-1</sup>. scu-PA hydrolyzes S-2444 with a catalytic efficiency over 150-fold greater than with EGF-BP under identical conditions [8]. We accounted for the low level of EGF-BP activity against S-2444 in the activation studies discussed below.

#### 3.5. Activation of scu-PA by EGF-BP

Cleavage of scu-PA by EGF-BP resulted in u-PA activation as demonstrated by the generation of amidase activity. The linear Lineweaver-Burke plot shown in Fig. 2 indicates that EGF-BP activates scu-PA according to simple Michaelis–Menten kinetics in the substrate concentration range studied. The  $k_{cat}$  and  $K_m$  for the activation reaction were  $(5.6 \pm 0.6) \times 10^{-2}$  s<sup>-1</sup> and  $2.0 \pm 0.3$  μM, yielding a catalytic efficiency ( $k_{cat}/K_m$ ) of  $2.8 \times 10^4$  M<sup>-1</sup>·s<sup>-1</sup> (Table 1). Table 1 also shows the kinetic parameters for the activation of scu-PA by NGF-γ and plasmin under identical conditions [8]. Plasmin activated scu-PA with a catalytic efficiency 20-fold greater than that demonstrated

Table 1  
Kinetic parameters (avg ± S.E.M.,  $n = 6$ ) for the activation of scu-PA by EGF-BP, NGF-γ, and plasmin<sup>a</sup>

Proteinase	$K_m$ (μM)	$k_{cat}$ (s <sup>-1</sup> )	$k_{cat}/K_m$ (M <sup>-1</sup> ·s <sup>-1</sup> )
EGF-BP	$2.0 \pm 0.3$	$(5.6 \pm 0.6) \times 10^{-2}$	$2.8 \times 10^4$
NGF-γ <sup>b</sup>	$2.3 \pm 0.4$	$(4.1 \pm 0.6) \times 10^{-2}$	$1.3 \times 10^4$
Plasmin <sup>b</sup>	$4.6 \pm 1.4$	$2.6 \pm 0.8$	$6.2 \times 10^5$

<sup>a</sup> Substrate cleavage was at 37°C in 50 mM Tris-HCl, 100 mM NaCl, pH 7.4 in the presence of 1 mM S-2444.

<sup>b</sup> These values are taken from [8].

Table 2  
Cleavage of cell-associated scu-PA by EGF-BP (avg  $\pm$  S.E.M.,  $n = 3$ )<sup>a</sup>

	EGF-BP		
	2.0 nM	20 nM	200 nM
% scu-PA cleaved	2.6 $\pm$ 0.1	6.5 $\pm$ 0.9	16.7 $\pm$ 0.5

<sup>a</sup> [<sup>125</sup>I]scu-PA was bound to PMA-stimulated U937 cells. The cells were then washed and treated with the indicated concentrations of EGF-BP for 15 min at 37°C. Reactions were terminated with PPACK. Cells were washed again and then lysed with sample buffer. Cleavage of scu-PA was assessed by SDS-PAGE and autoradiography. The % scu-PA was determined by slicing the gels and counting the sections in a gamma counter.

with EGF-BP. Therefore, EGF-BP is probably not a significant scu-PA activator once substantial levels of plasmin are generated. By contrast, EGF-BP demonstrated a 2-fold greater catalytic efficiency than the related proteinase NGF- $\gamma$  (Table 1) and over a 10-fold greater catalytic efficiency than mast cell tryptase ( $2.4 \times 10^3 \text{ M}^{-1} \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$ , [9]). Comparison of EGF-BP with other scu-PA activating enzymes such as plasma kallikrein, tumor-associated trypsin, and cathepsins B and L, is difficult since formal kinetic parameters ( $k_{\text{cat}}$ ,  $K_m$ ) have not been determined for these enzymes [4–7]. Since all these proteinases activate scu-PA less efficiently than plasmin, they most likely function in the initiation of the u-PA-dependent cascade and not in the amplification phase.

### 3.6. Cleavage and activation of cell-associated scu-PA by EGF-BP

Since activation of receptor-bound scu-PA is essential for pericellular proteolysis, we examined the possibility that EGF-BP might also activate cell-associated scu-PA. EGF-BP cleaved cell-associated scu-PA, generating products that were identical to those formed when the scu-PA was free in solution. The extent of scu-PA cleavage was EGF-BP concentration-dependent (Table 2). We obtained similar results with undifferentiated U937 cells in suspension (not shown).

EGF-BP activated cell-associated scu-PA as shown by the generation of amidase activity against the scu-PA specific fluorogenic substrate EGR-AMC (Fig. 3). After incubation with EGF-BP, significant substrate hydrolysis was observed within 5 min at 22°C. In the absence of EGF-BP, u-PA activity was equal to background levels. Treatment of EGF-BP with PPACK prevented scu-PA activation at the cell surface (not shown). These data show that EGF-BP activates scu-PA both in solution and at the cell surface. Besides EGF-BP, only plasmin, cathepsin B, and NGF- $\gamma$  are known to activate cell-associated scu-PA [2,6,8].

Growth factors, proteinases, and proteinase inhibitors act in a concerted fashion to mediate the extensive cellular proliferation, cellular migration, and tissue remodeling necessary for wound healing. EGF plays a pivotal role in this process by promoting keratinocyte proliferation, migration, and u-PA synthesis [14,18,19]. Keratinocyte uPAR selectively localizes the increased levels of u-PA secreted during wound healing to the leading edge of migrating keratinocytes [29–33]. We hypothesize that by activating keratinocyte scu-PA, EGF-BP may initiate u-PA-dependent cell surface proteolysis and thus potentiate EGF activity during wound healing by promoting cellular migration and tissue remodeling.

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