

Early lymphocyte development in bone marrow and thymus

Antonius G. Rolink, Steffen Massa, Gina Balciunaite, Rod Ceredig

Department of Clinical and Biological Sciences, University of Basel

Summary

Haematopoietic stem cells (HSCs), a very rare cell type in the bone marrow, are responsible for the life-long production of all cells of the blood including T and B cells. Until recently, it was thought that the differentiation of HSCs into the various haematopoietic cells was rather hierarchical in that differentiation along a given lineage was associated with a progressive loss of potential to give rise to other blood cell lineages. The recent development of very sensitive and quantitative in vitro assays,

together with the identification of new progenitor subpopulations, has challenged this idea. Thus, lymphocyte progenitors can be shown to keep their developmental potential to give rise to myeloid, dendritic and NK cells until just prior to their final commitment stage. Here we review these new findings and concepts.

Key words: stem cells; bone marrow; thymus; T cell progenitors; B cell progenitors

Introduction

HSCs are responsible for the lifelong production of the various blood cells. Thanks to work from several laboratories the phenotype, as well as the relative numbers, of HSCs in the mouse and human BM are well established [1–3]. Thus, in mice HSCs are characterised by the cell-surface expression of Thy 1, c-kit and Sca 1 and the absence of B220, Gr-1, Ter119 and CD3, 4, 5, 8 and 11b. *In man, although the frequency of HSC is apparently lower, their absolute number would seem to be similar to that of mice [3]. Human HSCs express Thy, c-kit and variably CD34 [4–6] and do not express CD10, 14, 15, 16, 19 and 20 [2, 8]. In mice, HSCs comprise about 0.01% of all nucleated bone marrow cells and transplantation of single HSC has unambiguously demonstrated that they are able to produce all cells of the blood long-term [8, 9]. Clearly, these experiments are impossible in man.*

Differentiation of HSCs into the various haematopoietic lineages is usually pictured in a hierarchical fashion, in that cells develop first into progenitors and then into precursors, with decreasing pluripotency and increasing commitment to a single differentiation pathway. This idea was supported by the identification of a common lymphoid progenitor (CLP) [10] and a common myeloid progenitor (CMP) [11]. CLP could differentiate into T, B, and natural killer (NK) cells but not into myeloid cells. CMP, on the other hand, could give rise to various cells of the myeloid lineage but not to the lymphoid lineage. However,

recent findings have challenged this hierarchical model of blood cell development. Probably the best examples showing that haematopoietic development has much more plasticity are studies performed in mice deficient for the transcription factor Pax5. Thus the *Pax5*^{-/-} mouse has an absolute block in B cell development at the pro B cell stage. The pro B cells present in the bone marrow of *Pax5*^{-/-} mice express RAG-1 and RAG-2 and transcripts for the B cell specific genes $\lambda 5$, *VpreB*, and *Ig α* and *Ig β* and have their Ig heavy chain loci D-J rearranged. *Rearrangement of D-J IgH and TCR β genes are not hallmarks of B or T cell commitment respectively. Some time ago, IgH rearrangements were found in developing thymocytes [12], and we have recently shown TCR β rearrangements in macrophages derived from progenitor thymocytes [13].* Moreover, like wild type pro-B cells, *Pax5*^{-/-} pro-B cells can be grown in vitro on stromal cells in the presence of IL-7 for long periods of time. However, and in marked contrast to wild type cells, *Pax5*^{-/-} progenitor B cells can develop into myeloid, NK, and T cells both in vitro and in vivo [14–16]. Recently, Busslinger and colleagues showed that even wild type precursor B cells regain this multilineage developmental potential upon conditional inactivation of the *Pax5*^{-/-} gene [17]. These findings indicate that haematopoietic differentiation has much more plasticity than previously anticipated, i.e. progenitor cells on the way to differentiating into a given lineage remain able to give rise to other cell

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Table 1

Cell-surface markers expressed by early lymphocyte progenitors in bone marrow.

	c-kit CD117	FLT3 (CD135)	CD93	B220	IL-7Ra (CD127)	CD44	CD25
CLP	+	+	++	–	+	+	–
EPLM	+	+	++	+	+	+	–
ProB	+	–	+++	++	+	+	–

Table 2

Developmental potential of early lymphocyte progenitors in the bone marrow.

	B	T	Myeloid	NK
CLP	+++	++	++	+
EPLM	+++	++	++	+
ProB	+++	–	–	–

[27]. No myeloid development of EPLM *in vivo* has thus far been observed. In the light of these findings we strongly favour the idea that under physiological conditions the developmental fate of

EPLM is mainly to become B cells. Since in our hands CLPs have a very similar developmental potential to EPLMs, these cells should probably also be regarded as very early B cell progenitors [27]. Table 1 summarises the surface marker used to distinguish the early lymphocyte progenitor in the bone marrow.

Table 2 summarises the developmental potential of these early lymphocyte progenitors in the bone marrow.

Early stages of T cell development in the thymus

Early stages of T cell development in the thymus are characterised by the differential expression of the markers CD44 and CD25 and the absence of CD4, 8 and 3. Because they do not express either CD4 or CD8, these cells are usually called double negative (DN) thymocytes. DN thymocytes can be subdivided into four populations called DN1–4. DN1s are CD44⁺CD25[–], DN2s are CD44⁺CD25⁺, DN3s are CD44[–]CD25⁺ and DN4s are CD44[–]CD25[–]. However, B, NK, myeloid and dendritic cells are also present in the thymus and most of them would have DN1-like phenotype. Hence the inclusion of c-kit (CD117) as a marker to define bona fide DN1 cells is absolutely crucial. DN1 and DN2 cells express high levels of c-kit, while DN3 cells express intermediate levels and DN4 cells are negative [29]. *The thymus produces T cells expressing T cell receptor heterodimers of TCR $\alpha\beta$ or TCR $\gamma\delta$ chains. Although cells expressing TCR $\gamma\delta$ chains arise earlier in development and have particular cell tropisms, the exact cellular origin of TCR $\gamma\delta$ cells within the progenitor compartment is still controversial [30]. However, the recent advent of transgenic mice containing a reporter gene within the TCR δ locus should help clarify this long-standing issue [31].*

Because the thymus does not harbour HSCs, a constant influx of progenitor cells from the bone marrow into the thymus is required to maintain T cell production. Over the last few years a whole series of papers have been published dealing with the phenotype and developmental potential of the bone marrow progenitor cell that enters the thymus [25, 32–39]. Studies by Radtke and colleagues showed unquestionably that signalling via the Notch1 receptor was an absolutely crucial event in early T cell commitment and development [36]. Thus, these authors showed that in Notch1 deficient mice the earliest thymocyte subpopulation was absent and that the thymi contained B cell progenitors and precursors. On the basis of these find-

ings it was concluded that the thymus is seeded by a bone marrow precursor that still possesses B cell developmental potential and would lose this potential upon Notch signalling. However, several groups, including our own, have sought in vain in the adult thymus for progenitor cells with B developmental potential [13, 34, 35]. It should also be noted, however, that other groups have found low frequencies of cells able to give rise to B cells in the thymus [32, 33, 37, 39]. Recently Sambandam and colleagues [37] showed that a small fraction of the DN1 population also expresses CD135 and that it is this (DN1.1) subpopulation that contains B lineage potential. Moreover, these cells also appear to express the chemokine receptor CCR9, which may be the receptor that guides progenitor cell homing to the thymus [34].

We have recently been able to confirm this finding. In our hands CD135 is expressed by about 20% of DN1 cells and it has been proposed that CD135-positive DN1 cells are the precursors of the CD135-negative subpopulation. In our schemes of thymocyte development (see figure) we therefore subdivide DN1 cells into CD135⁺ DN1.1 and CD135[–] DN1.2 cells. Limiting dilution analysis revealed that 1 in 1000 CD135⁺ DN1.1 cells from adult mice were able to generate B lineage cells and these cells are TSP. In numerical terms this means that the adult thymus only harbours about 5 cells with B cell developmental potential. In marked contrast, about 1 in 10 CD135⁺ DN1.1 cells from newborn mice were able to generate B lineage cells, indicating that the thymus at this age has about 300 of these precursors. Thus the thymus may indeed be colonised by precursors with T and B as well as NK and myeloid (see below) developmental potential. However, the number of these precursors in the adult is very low. Using thymus grafting experiments, Jotereau and colleagues [40, 41] had previously shown that the

Table 3

Cell-surface markers expressed by early thymocytes.

	c-kit CD117	FLT3 (CD135)	CD93	B220	IL-7Ra (CD127)	CD44	CD25
TSP	+++	+	ND	-	-	+++	-
DN1.1	+++	+	-	-	-	+++	-
DN1.2	+++	-	-	-	-	+++	-
DN2	+++	-	-	-	+	++	++
DN3	+	-	-	-	+	+/-	++

Table 4

Developmental potential of early thymocytes.

	B	T	Myeloid	NK
TSP	+	+++	++	++
DN1.1	-	+++	++	++
DN1.2	-	+++	++	++
DN2	-	+++	++	++
DN3	-	+++	-	-

perinatal mouse thymus was colonised by a wave of precursor cells. Our finding that these multi-lineage cells are much more abundant in the newborn mouse supports this idea. Table 3 summarises the cell surface markers used to distinguish early thymocyte subpopulations.

Recently we have shown that DN1 and 2 thymocytes require Notch, IL-7 and c-kit signalling for their continued T lineage differentiation [42, 43]. Moreover, we have provided evidence that expression of c-kit in DN1 and DN2 cells is under the direct control of Notch signalling [43]. DN1 and 2 cells are not committed to the T cell lineage since they can still efficiently give rise to NK and myeloid cells. For progression to T cell development, DN3 cells require Notch but not IL-7 and c-kit signalling. Even though growth of DN3 cells is still dependent on continued Notch signalling, this signalling is no longer capable of maintaining c-kit expression by DN3 cells. This probably means that Notch downstream signalling is altered

at this important transition from DN2 to DN3 cells, a transition that also involves complete T cell commitment. Table 4 summarises the developmental potential of early thymocytes.

The advent of the OP9-DL1 culture system has revolutionised our understanding of early T cell development. The plating efficiency of this culture system for almost completely committed T cell progenitors approaches 100%. Using this culture system the phenotypic properties of progenitors with T cell developmental potential, as well as their growth requirements in terms of soluble factors and signalling molecules, can be studied in detail. EPLMs cultured under "B cell conditions" reconstitute the B cell compartment, whereas the same cells cultured under "T cell conditions" reconstitute the T cell compartment. The implications of being able to reconstitute either the B or T cell compartment from the same pool of EPLM are currently being explored.

*Correspondence:**Antonius Rolink**Center for Biomedicine**Molecular and Developmental Immunology**Mattenstrasse 28**CH-4058 Basel**E-Mail: antonius.rolink@unibas.ch***References**

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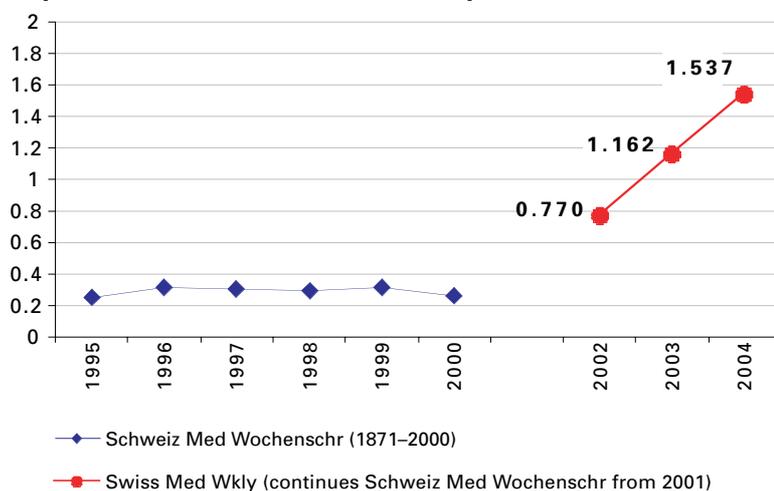
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