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Endosome-mitochondria juxtaposition during apoptosis induced by *H. pylori* VacA

Running title: VacA and BAX in cell trafficking and apoptosis

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Abstract

The vacuolating cytotoxin VacA is an important virulence factor of *Helicobacter pylori* with pleiotropic effects on mammalian cells, including the ability to trigger mitochondria-dependent apoptosis. However, the mechanism by which VacA exerts its apoptotic function is unclear. By using a genetic approach, here we show that killing by VacA requires the proapoptotic Bcl-2 family members BAX and BAK at the mitochondrial level, but not adequate endoplasmic reticulum Ca^{2+} levels, similarly controlled by BAX and BAK. A combination of subcellular fractionation and imaging shows that wild type VacA, but not mutants in its channel forming region, induces the accumulation of BAX on endosomes and endosomes-mitochondria juxtaposition that precedes the retrieval of active BAX on mitochondria. Of note, in *Bax*, *Bak* deficient cells VacA is unable to cause endosomes-mitochondria juxtaposition and is not retrieved in mitochondria. Thus, VacA causes BAX/BAK dependent juxtaposition of endosomes and mitochondria early in the process of cell death, revealing a new function for these proapoptotic proteins in the regulation of relative position of organelles.

Key words: *Helicobacter pylori*, VacA, apoptosis, mitochondria, BAX

Abbreviations: Cyt, cytosol; CS, culture supernatant; DKO, double knockout; EE, early endosomes; ER, endoplasmic reticulum; Hp, *Helicobacter pylori*; LE, late endosomes; MEFs, mouse embryonic fibroblasts; Mt, mitochondria; mtBAX, mitochondria-targeted BAX; NP, nuclear pellet; PNS, post nuclear supernatant; SERCA, sarco/endoplasmic reticulum Ca^{2+} -ATPase; VacA, vacuolating cytotoxin A.

Introduction

The vacuolating cytotoxin A (VacA) is one of the major virulence factors produced by *Helicobacter pylori* (Hp), the Gram negative bacterium which infects more than 50% of the human population. Hp causes peptic ulcer disease and is an early risk factor for gastric cancer.¹ VacA is not only the toxin responsible for vacuolization of cells exposed to *H. pylori* culture filtrates,² but also displays pleiotropic effects on mammalian cells.^{3,4} VacA is produced as a 140 kDa precursor, which is cleaved during secretion from the bacterium into a 87-95 kDa mature toxin. The latter can be further cleaved into an amino-terminal p37 domain and a carboxy-terminal p58 domain, which remain non-covalently linked. Secreted VacA is a flower-shaped oligomer, formed by 6 or 7 monomers. After a short exposure to acidic or basic pH, the oligomer is disassembled and VacA becomes able to interact with lipid bilayers. Interaction with biological membranes triggers restoration of the oligomers to form anion-selective, voltage-dependent channels.⁵ The membrane channel-forming ability of VacA resides in its amino-terminal portion and single amino acid substitutions (P9A and G14A) in the p37 domain completely abrogate it.^{6,7} Vacuolization of epithelial cells by VacA is strictly dependent on the formation of anion-selective membrane channels, which are targeted to late endosomes following internalization of the toxin.^{3,5,8,9} Indeed, once bound to the cell surface, VacA is rapidly internalized by a pinocytic mechanism that involves F-actin but is independent of clathrin, dynamin, and of the ARF6 GTPase. Then it is routed to early endosomes before reaching late endosomes.^{10,11}

H. pylori has been associated with increased level of apoptosis in human gastric mucosa.¹²⁻¹⁵ It has been proposed that loss of specialized cells (especially the gastric parietal cells) resulted in alterations of crucial cellular cross-talk pathways, eventually leading to disturbed differentiation and to the initiation of the metaplasia/dysplasia/carcinoma sequence.¹⁶ Although multiple *H. pylori* factors including

products of *cag* pathogenicity island¹⁷ and lipopolysaccharide¹⁸ are likely to be involved, VacA is *per se* sufficient to induce cell death.^{19,20}

Apoptosis is a genetically controlled, evolutionarily conserved pathway in which intracellular organelles play a major regulatory role. Mitochondria, in particular, integrate and amplify diverse apoptotic signals by releasing into the cytosol cytochrome *c* and other co-factors required for the activation of the effector caspases, which then dismantle the cellular structures. The release of cytochrome *c* is controlled by BCL-2 family members, which include both anti- and pro-apoptotic proteins. In a widely accepted model, the so-called “BH3-only” proapoptotic members of the family sense the damage signal and transmit it to the so-called “multidomain proapoptotics” BAX and BAK, required for the activation of the mitochondrial pathway of apoptosis. Once activated by BH3 only proteins, BAX and BAK provide a physical pathway for the efflux of cytochrome *c* from mitochondria. Additionally, they dictate steady state Ca^{2+} levels in the ER, thus controlling the response to Ca^{2+} -mediated death stimuli.²¹

Apoptosis induced by VacA might follow the activation of the mitochondrial pathway of apoptosis, as suggested by the ability of VacA to lower mitochondrial membrane potential ($\Delta\psi_m$)²² and to release cytochrome *c*.²³ Accordingly, both a fusion protein between the N-terminal fragment of VacA (p37) and GFP, and the purified toxin localize to mitochondria.²⁴ Loss of $\Delta\psi_m$ and cytochrome *c* release require the channel-forming domain of VacA.^{7,24,25} This led to the hypothesis that $\Delta\psi_m$ dissipation and/or cytochrome *c* release were a direct consequence of a VacA channel in the mitochondrial inner membrane, independently from host factors.²⁶ However, VacA activates the multidomain proapoptotic proteins BAX and BAK before the release of cytochrome *c*.²⁷ This complicates the picture and leaves us with a number of open questions: is VacA targeted to mitochondria? How? Does it require BAX and BAK to kill? Does it rely on adequate ER Ca^{2+} levels or on the direct mitochondrial function of BAX and BAK?

Here we used a genetic approach to investigate the mechanisms of apoptosis induced by VacA. VacA requires BAX and BAK at the mitochondrial level to kill. Unexpectedly, active VacA also induces the translocation of BAX to endosomes, in parallel with the co-segregation of endosomal and mitochondrial membranes. Co-segregation and cell death strictly depend on the channel-forming domain of the toxin and on the presence of BAX and BAK. Thus, the program of VacA-induced apoptosis includes an unexpected subroutine of BAX- and BAK-dependent endosomal juxtaposition to mitochondria, extending the known roles played by these proapoptotic proteins.

Results

Apoptosis by VacA requires integrity of its channel-forming domain and BAX and BAK

We evaluated whether apoptosis induced by *H. pylori* culture supernatant (CS) in mouse embryonic fibroblasts (MEFs) required the multidomain proapoptotics BAX and BAK. MEFs doubly deficient for *Bax* and *Bak* (DKO)²⁸ were resistant to apoptosis induced by the *H. pylori* supernatant, as compared to their wild-type (wt) counterparts (Figure 1a and b). We then verified if apoptosis occurring in wt cells required the channel forming activity of VacA. CS obtained from two isogenic mutants of *H. pylori* carrying a point mutation in the VacA gene (P9A and G14A) that renders the toxin unable of forming anion channels^{7,29} were greatly ineffective in inducing cell death (Figure 1a and Supplementary Figure 1a). When we measured vacuolization of wt and DKO MEFs in response to the CS of *H. pylori* wt, we found that DKO were much more responsive, reaching maximal vacuolization after 5 h (Figure 2), whereas wt cells displayed little or no vacuolization until 24 h (not shown). As expected DKO cells did not vacuolated after exposing to the CS of the *H. pylori* mutant strain (not shown). Thus, vacuolization and apoptosis appear to be independent, with the former even stimulated by the lack of BAX and BAK. In conclusion, the pro-apoptotic proteins BAX and BAK are required for VacA-induced apoptosis, which relies on its VacA channel properties.

VacA-induced apoptosis involves BAX-dependent regulation at the mitochondrial level

Since BAX and BAK regulate apoptosis at multiple levels,³⁰ we reasoned that the insensitivity of DKO cells to VacA-induced apoptosis could reflect their down-regulation of Ca²⁺ levels in the ER. To test this possibility, we turned to a model of DKO MEFs whose multiple defects were genetically and selectively corrected: the mitochondrial ones by

targeting BAX exclusively to mitochondria, the ER one by over-expressing SERCA,³⁰ the Ca^{2+} -ATPase responsible for the uptake of Ca^{2+} from the cytosol into the ER lumen.³¹ Expression of mitochondria-targeted BAX (mtBAX) restored the sensitivity of DKO MEF cells to VacA-induced apoptosis, although cells remained more viable than their wt counterparts (compare Figure 3a with 1a), probably because of the lack of BAK. Conversely, the overexpression of SERCA had no effect (Figure 3b). This indicates that VacA falls into the category of stimuli which require mitochondria-based multidomain proapoptotics and can proceed despite depleted intracellular Ca^{2+} stores. As expected, CS from the *H. pylori* VacA P9A channel mutant was unable to trigger apoptosis also in mtBAX corrected DKO cells. In conclusion, VacA recruits the so called “mitochondrial gateway” of apoptosis to kill intoxicated cells.

VacA induces BAX activation and its recruitment to mitochondria

In resting cells the multidomain proapoptotic protein BAX resides as a monomer in the cytosol or loosely attached to intracellular membranes. Once cells are stressed by an apoptotic stimulus, BAX becomes active, exposes its C-terminal α -9 helix, and translocates to mitochondria.³²⁻³⁴ This conformational change can be monitored by following the exposure of new epitopes using specific antibodies. The wt *H. pylori* CS induced BAX activation and the parallel staining with anti-VacA antibodies revealed a partial, but significant, colocalization between the two proteins (Figure 4a). No BAX activation was observed after administrating the CS of the mutant strain, again underlining the central role of the VacA channel-forming activity. The weaker VacA staining observed in the latter case was probably due to a less efficient entry of the toxin into the cell. We therefore waited until 48 h, when the staining of VacA increased; yet, BAX did not become activated (not shown). Furthermore, mitochondria purified from cells incubated for 24 h with wt CS revealed a clear-cut recruitment of BAX that was completely absent in

untreated cells or in cells exposed to the mutant strain (Figure 4b). This was not a consequence of an increase in total BAX, as measured by specific immunoblotting in lysates of cell exposed to wt and mutant CS (data not shown).

The channel-forming region of VacA is required for its localization to mitochondria

Whether during apoptosis VacA is targeted to mitochondria, or is retained in late endosomes, remains an open question.^{23,24,27} Given the requirement of the mitochondrial gateway to induce apoptosis, we investigated the subcellular localization of VacA from its entry into the cell to the induction of apoptosis. In a preliminary set of experiments we verified that our subcellular fractionation of cells yielded pure mitochondrial, early and late endosomal fractions (Figure 5). We therefore monitored by immunoblotting the accumulation of VacA in purified mitochondrial, early and late endosomal subcellular fractions from cells incubated for 24 h with wt or with VacA P9A *H. pylori* CS. Wt VacA was present in both endosomal compartments, as expected for a toxin which enters the cells by endocytosis, and interestingly, in part also in the mitochondrial fraction (Figure 6a). Conversely, VacA P9A accumulated in endosomal compartments without reaching mitochondria (Figure 6a). Moreover, the mutated toxin was internalized less efficiently than the wt one, despite a similar concentration in the CS (not shown). A gel overloaded with endosomal and mitochondrial proteins, purified from VacA P9A intoxicated cells, permitted to exclude that the absence of the protein in mitochondrial fraction was due to its less efficient internalization (Figure 6a). The role of the channel activity of VacA in its targeting to mitochondria was further confirmed by applying to the cells the other channel-defective mutant, VacA G14A:⁷ it accumulated in endosomes as well as the wt counterpart, but it did not reach mitochondria (Supplementary Figure 1b). We further confirmed the subcellular localization of VacA by confocal microscopy using anti-VacA antibodies in MEFs expressing a mitochondrially targeted red fluorescent protein. While in cells treated with

the mutated VacA the distribution of the toxin-positive vesicles was clearly distinct from that of mitochondria, in cells incubated for 24 h with wt VacA several toxin positive spots appeared closely apposed to mitochondria (Figure 6b). Thus, association of VacA with mitochondria appears to require the same domain involved in channel formation.

In VacA intoxicated cells, endosomes are juxtaposed to mitochondria

Our previous experiments left open the question of how VacA transited from endosomes to mitochondria, leading to BAX activation. We therefore decided to follow the subcellular localization of VacA in infected wt and DKO cells in parallel with BAX activation in the former. The wt toxin accumulated in the endosomal fractions as early as 2 h 30 after infection, although a small portion of the protein was already detectable in the mitochondrial fraction. After 12 h, wt VacA was extensively retrieved in the mitochondrial fraction, while endosomes exclusively remained positive for the mutated toxin (devoid of channel activity). Unexpectedly, in cells treated with the active *H. pylori* CS, after as soon as 2 h 30, BAX was retrieved in the early endosomes fraction, devoid of contamination by cytosol, as confirmed by the absence of the cytosolic marker GAPDH (Supplementary Figure 2b). The major proportion of BAX recruited on endosomes was not membrane integral, as confirmed by its sensitivity to alkali extraction (Supplementary Figure 2a). Notably, no recruitment of active BAX was detected on endosomal and mitochondrial fractions in cells exposed to mutated VacA, as well as in untreated cells (Figure 7). Furthermore, wt VacA induced a progressive accumulation of early (EEA1) and late (LAMP1) endosomal markers in the mitochondrial fraction (Figure 7). In contrast, when cells were incubated with the mutant in the channel-forming region of VacA (P9A mutant), both markers were confined to their correspondent fraction and did not co-purify with mitochondria (Figure 7). Similarly, neither endosomal markers nor BAX were found associated to mitochondria in cells exposed to the other channel-defective mutant, VacA

G14A (Figure 8a). Importantly, the endosomal fractions of wt VacA-treated cells were not positive for a mitochondrial marker (Figure 8b), indicating that the retrieval of BAX in endosomes was not an epiphenomenon of the accumulation of mitochondrial fragments within the endosomal fraction. Thus, VacA induces a major alteration in vesicular traffic that results in co-segregation of early and late endosomes with mitochondria, a situation similar to that reported in Fas-activated T cells.³⁵ This early alteration occurs around the same time of the accumulation of active BAX in the early endosomes fraction, well before its retrieval on mitochondria. Of note, no endosomal recruitment of the already mitochondrial BAK was observed (not shown).

Significant amounts of VacA accumulate in the mitochondrial fraction after 12 h from intoxication (Figure 7), when apoptosis is still not measurable, suggesting that targeting precedes induction of death. To confirm this, we turned to DKO cells, where we expected to recapitulate the targeting to mitochondria of VacA and their cofractionation with endosomes, in the complete absence of apoptosis. Surprisingly, in these cells VacA did not colocalize at all with mitochondrial markers, nor it induced a co-segregation of endosomal and mitochondrial membranes within 12 h of intoxication (Figure 7). At 24 h, a small portion of VacA appeared to be targeted to mitochondria, even if endosomal markers did not reach the mitochondrial fraction.

We wished to confirm that mitochondria and endosomes become closer in cells intoxicated with VacA. Immunofluorescence analysis of cells exposed to VacA further substantiated the ability of the wt toxin to promote juxtaposition between early/late endosomes and mitochondria (Figure 9), and suggested an association of endosomal vesicles (containing VacA) with mitochondria. **Of note, the relocalization of endosomes in proximity to mitochondria was not observed in cells exposed to intrinsic or extrinsic apoptotic stimuli, such as staurosporine, etoposide and TNF- α (Supplementary Figure 3). This suggests that juxtaposition of endosome to**

mitochondria occurs specifically in cell exposed to VacA and is not a general feature of apoptosis.

Immunoelectron microscopy analysis performed on intoxicated MEF cells further corroborated this finding. Intoxication of wt MEFs with CS from Hp wt strain, but not from the mutant one, for 2 h 30 triggered the juxtaposition of endosomal compartments (positive to the late endosomal marker LBPA) to mitochondria (Figure 10a and quantification in b), At the same time endosomal area remained the same in wt VacA-intoxicated and untreated cells (Figure 10c). Unfortunately, any attempt to visualize early endosomes-positive structures failed as a consequence of the very poor immunoreactivity of the EEA1 antibody in our immunoelectron microscopy protocol (not shown).

In conclusion, the combination of subcellular fractionation, imaging and immunoelectron microscopy indicates that in cells intoxicated with VacA mitochondria and endosomes are in close proximity. Notably, at longer time points the juxtaposition evolves in the engulfment of mitochondria in autophagosomes (not shown).³⁶

Discussion

Here we report that in cells intoxicated with the *H. pylori* cytotoxin VacA endosomes are retrieved in close proximity to mitochondria, in parallel with the accumulation of the toxin in the latter organelle. The endosomal markers EEA1 (specific for early endosomes) and LAMP1 (more typical of late endosomes) are enriched in the mitochondrial fraction after as early as 2 h 30 from intoxication. Hence, the co-localization of VacA with Rab7 reported by Yamasaki et al.²⁷ could reflect the same membrane mistargeting documented here. We suggest that VacA targets mitochondria in virtue of the cross-talk between these organelles that may be enhanced during apoptosis induction.³⁵ In support of this conclusion, in *Bax/Bak* DKO cells that show no accumulation of endosomal markers in mitochondria, VacA remains confined at the endosomal level. The co-segregation of VacA and endosomal markers with mitochondria is not a mere consequence of apoptosis induction, because it occurs before any detectable cell death.

Convergent traffic between endosomes and mitochondria has been previously documented in TNF- α exposed hepatocytes,³⁷ Fas-activated T cells³⁵ and also reticulocytes, in which a direct shuttling of iron from one organelle to the other occurs without any cytosolic intermediary.³⁸ In addition, changes in the intracellular localization of mitochondria and generation of clusters of organelles has been reported in a variety of apoptotic settings.³⁹ Although this inter-organelle membrane traffic may be specific to some cellular contexts, the possibility that such a traffic pathway is constitutively present in other cell types deserves further investigation.

Previous results showed that VacA induced activation of the pro-apoptotic protein BAX and BAK.²⁷ However, the main pro-apoptotic “multi-domain” proteins BAX and BAK control not only the physical permeabilization of the outer membrane of mitochondria,²⁸ but also the levels of ER Ca²⁺ and hence the susceptibility to Ca²⁺-dependent death stimuli.³⁰ Our results lend support to a model in which VacA engages the so called “mitochondrial

gateway” of apoptosis. Cells lacking both *Bax* and *Bak* intoxicated with VacA do not die, indicating the requirement of these key mediators of apoptosis in the death by VacA. Re-expression of a BAX mutant exclusively targeted to mitochondria significantly restored cell sensitivity to the toxin, while the genetic correction of the reduced ER Ca^{2+} levels of the *Bax*, *Bak* deficient cells did not restore their susceptibility to VacA.

During apoptosis BAX can be targeted to different intracellular membranes, from mitochondria to ER to Golgi.⁴⁰ However, to the best of our knowledge, BAX has never been reported to localize on endosomes. More importantly, these organelles could serve as platforms for BAX recruitment onto mitochondria. Our data would be consistent with two models: (i) BAX is recruited to early endosomes in a VacA-dependent process; BAX activated on endosomal membranes then drags the whole organelles to mitochondria in virtue of its affinity for the outer mitochondrial membrane; (ii) alternatively, while a fraction of BAX is directly recruited to the mitochondrial membrane as a consequence of VacA intoxication, another fraction of BAX reaches the mitochondria through membrane trafficking involving endosomes. This latter model is consistent with the observation that the amount of BAX associated with mitochondria after 12 h of incubation with VacA is significantly greater than would be expected solely from its recruitment following intermixing of mitochondria with endosomes. The selectivity of BAX recruitment to early (rather than late) endosomes is not clear. Co-immunoprecipitation did not reveal any interaction between VacA and the pro-apoptotic protein. However this is not indicative that the two proteins do not interact: for example, co-immunoprecipitation between BID and BAX is similarly negative as the interaction occurs in the membrane.⁴¹ This envisions a scenario where VacA is responsible for the mis-targeting of endosomal membranes close to the mitochondria. This appears to be an essential step for accumulation of VacA and BAX in mitochondria, thereby dictating the final amount of this pro-apoptotic protein accumulated in this organelle during VacA intoxication.

The VacA-induced endosome relocation, as well as the BAX recruitment onto these organelles requires the channel-forming domain of VacA: mutations in this region arrested the toxin in late endosomes, abrogated recruitment of BAX to endosomes and mitochondria, and eliminated the proapoptotic effect of the toxin.

Surprisingly, DKO cells are much more susceptible to vacuolization after VacA intoxication than their wt counterpart, demonstrating that vacuolization and apoptosis are two genetically distinguishable processes, despite the requirement of channel-forming domain for both. Since the different vacuolization does not result from an increased entry of the toxin in DKO cells, it raises the intriguing possibility that BAX and BAK are involved in an intracellular traffic of membranes. In this scenario, the absence of BAX/BAK would result in larger endosomes, explaining the pronounced effect of VacA on size and extent of vacuoles in DKO cells (Supplementary Figure 2). If the constitutive pathway of endosomal remodelling is somehow blunted by the lack of these multidomain proapoptotics, more membrane would be available for vacuolization by VacA. Consistently, VacA is unable to induce the co-fractionation of endosomes and mitochondria in DKO cells.

In conclusion, our work shows that apoptosis induced by VacA requires BAX and BAK and is Ca^{2+} independent. Furthermore, it elucidates the route used by VacA to target mitochondria in the course of apoptosis and indicates an unexpected new function for the key pro-apoptotic proteins BAX in the dynamics of intracellular organelles.

Materials and methods

Materials

Mouse Embryonic Fibroblasts (MEFs) were cultured as described by Scorrano et al., 2003.³⁰ Transfection was performed using Transfectin Lipid Reagent (Bio-Rad, Richmond, CA) following the manufacturer's instructions. All chemicals, unless specified, were from Sigma (St. Louis, MO). *H. pylori* G14A strain was provided by Novartis (Siena, Italy). Protease inhibitor cocktail was from Roche (Penzberg, Germany). **TNF- α was from Alexis Biochemicals (Lausen, Switzerland).** Plasmid pCDNA3.1 encoding a Red Fluorescent Protein targeted to mitochondria (mtRFP) was a gift from M. Zaccolo (University of Glasgow, UK). Polyclonal antibody anti-VacA was provided by Novartis (Siena, Italy); polyclonal antibodies anti-LAMP1 and anti-EEA1 were from AbCam (Cambridge, UK); monoclonal antibody anti-BAX (clone 6A7) was from Biosource (Camarillo, CA); polyclonal antibody anti-BAX and monoclonal antibody anti-COX II were from Upstate (Lake Placid, NY). **Monoclonal and polyclonal antibody anti-Rab5** were a gift from M. Zerial (Max Planck Institute, Berlin, Germany); monoclonal antibody (clone 6C4) anti-LBPA (lysobisphosphatidic acid) was kindly provided by J. Gruenberg (University of Geneva, Switzerland); polyclonal antibody anti-TOM20 was from Santa Cruz Biotechnology Inc. (Santa Cruz, CA), **monoclonal antibody anti-Complex II subunit 70 kDa** was from MitoSciences (Eugene, OR) and monoclonal antibody anti-GAPDH was from Merck (Nottingham, UK).

Bacteria and culture conditions

Helicobacter pylori strain SPM 326, which encodes an s1m1-type VacA⁴² and two isogenic *vacA* mutant strains carrying the point mutations P9A²⁹ and G14A,⁷ were maintained in 5% CO₂ at 37°C on Columbia agar plates supplemented with 5% horse blood. Colonies were

inoculated into brain heart infusion broth containing 5% FBS and were cultured for 2 days in rotary shaking at 180 rpm at 37°C under microaerophilic conditions.

Proteins of supernatant from broth culture, diluted to an optical density at 600 nm (OD₆₀₀) of 0.8, were precipitated with 50% ammonium sulfate and resuspended in 20 mM Hepes pH 7.4 in 1/15 of the initial volume as described by Skibinski et al.⁴³ Concentrated supernatants were dialysed against the same buffer. A western blot analysis carried on the bacterial supernatant from either wt or from the mutant *H. pylori* strain, revealed that the toxin content was equivalent between the two preparations and accounted for approximately 4% of the total protein.

Cell intoxication

For all the experiments *H. pylori* supernatants 326 wild type, 326 P9A and 326 G14A were prepared as described above; after a 4-folds dilution in Dulbecco Modified Eagle's Medium (DMEM) 2% FBS, they were administrated to the cells for the indicated time points.

Cell vacuolization assay

7.5×10^4 /ml MEF cells were seeded in 96-well plates in Dulbecco modified Eagle's medium containing 10% FBS and 2 mM glutamine at 37°C, 5% CO₂ 18 h before the assay. Cells were exposed to *H. pylori* supernatants diluted in Dulbecco modified Eagle's medium containing 2% FBS and 5 mM ammonium chloride. At different time points the extent of vacuolization was determined quantitatively by measuring the uptake of neutral red dye.⁴⁴ Briefly, cells were incubated for 8 min in PBS 0.05% neutral red and washed three times with PBS 0.2% bovine serum albumin (BSA). After addition of 100 µl of 70% ethanol in water containing 0.37% HCl, absorbance was measured with a Packard Fusion microplate reader at 540 nm with subtraction of adsorbance at 405 nm.

Immunofluorescence

MEF cells seeded on coverslips (2.5×10^4 / ml wild type MEF cells seeded in 24-wells plates) were transfected with the plasmid pCDNA 3.1 encoding for mtRFP; after 18 h cells were exposed to *H. pylori* supernatants in DMEM containing 2% FBS for the indicated times. Cells were then fixed with 3.7% formaldehyde in PBS for 30 min, permeabilized with 0.01% Nonidet P40 for 20 min at room temperature and blocked with a PBS 0.5% BSA. VacA was stained with a polyclonal anti-VacA antibody⁴⁵ followed by a Fluorescein IsoThioCyanate-conjugated (FITC) anti-rabbit secondary antibody. BAX was stained with a monoclonal anti-BAX antibody specific for the active form of the protein (clone 6A7) followed by a Tetramethyl Rhodamine Iso-ThioCyanate-conjugated (TRITC) anti-mouse secondary antibody. Endosomal proteins Rab5 and LBPA were labeled with monoclonal anti-Rab5 and anti-LBPA antibodies, followed by FITC anti-mouse secondary antibodies; mitochondrial protein TOM20 was labeled with a polyclonal anti-TOM20 antibody, followed by a TRITC anti-rabbit secondary antibody. **In cells exposed to etoposide (Supplementray Figure 3) Rab5 was labeled with a rabbit polyclonal antibody and mitochondria were identified by a monoclonal antibody anti-Complex II subunit 70 kDa.** Cells were visualized with a 63X oil immersion objective on a laser-scanning confocal microscope and images were acquired with a LAS-AF software (Leica TCS-SP5, Leica microsystems, Wetzlar, Germany). Images were then processed using ImageJ software. Mander's coefficient for colocalization analysis was calculated by using Mander's coefficient plug-in of ImageJ (NIH) as previously described.⁴⁶ **The quantification by Manders' colocalization coefficient was performed in a blinded fashion.**

Subcellular fractionation

MEF cells were seeded at the density of 10^5 /ml in 10 cm diameter tissue culture dishes and were grown in DMEM containing 10% FBS at 37°C in 5% CO₂ for 48 h. Endosomes

were isolated at 4°C as described in Genisset et al.²⁹ Briefly, cells were washed with ice-cold PBS, detached with a cell scraper and pelleted by centrifugation (500 g, 10 min). They were then washed in 3 ml of Homogenization Buffer (HB-EDTA, 0.25 M sucrose (8%) 3 mM imidazole, 0.5 mM EDTA pH 7.4), pelleted (1300 g, 10 min), resuspended in 0.7 ml of HB-EDTA and homogenized by 10 passages through a 22-gauge 1 [1/4] needle. After centrifugation (1300 g, 10 min), post nuclear supernatant (PNS) was collected and its sucrose concentration increased up to 40.6% by slow addition of 62% sucrose in HB-EDTA. PNS was then carefully layered on a cushion of 1.5 ml of 35% and 1 ml of 25% sucrose in EDTA. Tubes were filled with HB, and centrifuged at 35000 rpm for 1 h at 4°C in a SW60 Ti rotor (Beckman Instruments, Fullerton, CA). Late endosome-enriched fraction and early endosome-enriched fraction were collected at the interface between the 25% sucrose and HB and between the 35% and 25% sucrose, respectively.

Purified mitochondria were obtained from the nuclear pellet (NP) discharged during the purification of endosomes.³⁵ Briefly, NP was re-homogenized in assay buffer (0.12 M mannitol, 0.08 M KCl, 1 mM EDTA, 20 mM K-Hepes, pH 7.4), and centrifuged at 600 g. The supernatant was layered onto a cushion of 1 M mannitol in assay buffer. Tubes were filled with 2% BSA in assay buffer. After centrifugation at 9000 g for 15 min at 4°C, pellet was resuspended in 0.5 ml of assay buffer, centrifuged at 10000 g for 10 min, and finally resuspended in 25 µl of assay buffer. Protein concentration of all subcellular fractions was determined by Bradford assay.⁴⁷

To obtain the cytosolic fraction, PNS collected from 24 h-intoxicated cells was centrifuged 3 times at 8000 g for 10 min at 4°C as described above. Mitochondria-free supernatant was centrifuged at 100000 g for 1 h at 4°C in a 100 Ti rotor (Beckman Instruments, Fullerton, CA) and the supernatant was collected as cytosolic fraction.

Immunoprecipitation, Alkali extraction, Immunoblotting

Co-immunoprecipitation of VacA and BAX was performed as indicated by Sawada et al.⁴⁸

1 mg of purified mitochondria were lysed in NP40 buffer (142.5 mM KCl, 5 mM MgCl₂, 1 mM EGTA, 10 mM Hepes, pH 7.4, 0.2% Nonidet P40) supplemented with protease inhibitors (1:10 dilution of Protease Inhibitor Cocktail). After pre-clearing of the sample with 20 µl Protein A-Sepharose at 4°C for 2 h, lysed mitochondria were added to the beads in presence of 4 µg of anti-BAX polyclonal antibody. After a 16 h-incubation at 4°C, beads were extensively washed with NP40 buffer plus 0.03% BSA. Proteins were finally solubilised from beads in SDS-PAGE loading buffer, before being analysed by western blot.

For alkali extraction, early endosomes purified from cells incubated with Hp wt CS for 24 h were exposed to alkali treatment as described.⁴⁹ Briefly, early endosomes were centrifuged at 100000 g for 1 h at 4°C in a 100 Ti rotor (Beckman Instruments, Fullerton, CA) and 15 µg were resuspended in 1 ml of 100 mM Na₂CO₃ pH 11.5, incubated for 30 min on ice, and centrifuged at 100000 g for 1 h at 4°C. The supernatant, containing alkali solubilised proteins, was collected and neutralized by HCl 1 M. Pellet, containing membrane integral proteins, was solubilized and proteins in both fractions were separated by SDS-PAGE and analysed by western blot.

For immunoblotting, the following antibodies were used: anti EEA1, LAMP1 BAX, VacA, TOM20 and COX II (dilution 1:1000). Antibodies anti-EEA1 and LAMP1 were used instead of anti-Rab5 and LBPA (applied in immunofluorescence) for identify early endosomal and late endosomal fractions respectively, because the quality of the signals was significantly improved.

Genetic correction of DKO MEF cells

Genetic correction of DKO SERCA and mtBAX DKO MEF cells was described in Scorrano et al.³⁰ GFP-BAX was reconstituted into *Bax*, *Bak* doubly deficient MEFs using an MSCV retroviral vector (Clontech, Mountain View, CA). Stable clones expressing BAX-fusion protein were generated by limiting dilution. Full-length murine BAX was fused with an 11 amino acid N-terminal hemagglutinin (HA) tag to generate HA-BAX. Mitochondria targeted HA-BAX (mtBAX) was constructed by fusing the 29 amino acid mitochondrial targeted sequence from subunit VIII of human cytochrome c oxidase (COX VIII) onto the N-terminal end of HA-BAX and was present on the outer mitochondrial membrane surface. Full-length rabbit SERCA-2 and mtBAX were cloned into pcDNA3 for transient expression experiments and into a retroviral vector (MFIG) containing loxP-flanked green fluorescence protein (GFP) preceded by an internal ribosomal entry site (IRES) for stable expression. Stable clones were established by limiting dilution and selected on the basis of GFP expression by FACS analysis. Protein expression levels of gene products were confirmed by immunoblot.

Measurement of cell death

MEF cells were incubated with the phosphatidylserine-binding protein Annexin-V conjugated to Alexa 568 (Bender MedSystem, Burlingame, CA) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Viability was measured by flow cytometry (FACSCalibur, BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA) as the percentage of Annexin-V-negative events in the gated population. For the viability evaluation of genetically corrected double knock out MEF cells (DKO SERCA or mtBAX) the percentage of Annexin-V-negative events was performed in the GFP positive gated population.

Electron microscopy

Immunoelectron microscopy was performed according to the conventional protocol of Tokuyasu⁵⁰ adapted by Slot and Geuze,⁵¹ MEF cells were fixed with 2% paraformaldehyde and 0.2% glutaraldehyde in PBS for 2 h at room temperature, embedded in 12% gelatin and cooled at 4°C for 10 min. Convenient blocks were cut and infiltrated in 2.3 M sucrose overnight and then frozen in liquid nitrogen. Ultrathin cryosections (60 nm) were cut and picked up in 1:1 2.3 M Sucrose and 2% Methylcellulose. Cryosections were immediately immunolabeled for LBPA with mouse anti-LBPA (dilution 1:20), and detected with a rabbit anti-mouse antibody and Protein A gold 15 nm as previously described.⁴⁸

Statistical analysis

Data were expressed as mean values \pm standard deviation. Student's *t*-test was used for statistical analysis of differences between Hp wt CS-treated cells vs P9A or G14A Hp CS-intoxicated cells/untreated cells. A *p*-value equal or below 0.05 was considered as significant.

Acknowledgements

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Supplementary Information accompanies the paper on Cell Death and Differentiation website (<http://www.nature.com/cdd>)

Conflict of interest

Authors declare that no conflict of interest exists.

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Titles and legends to figures

Figure 1. VacA-induced cell death requires pro-apoptotic proteins BAX and BAK. (a) Wt MEF cells were incubated with Hp CS, either wt or P9A mutant. After 6, 18, 24, 48 and 72 h the Annexin-V Assay was performed following the manufacturer's instructions. Viability was determined cytofluorimetrically as the percentage of Annexin-V-Alexa 568-negative cells. (b) *Bax/Bak* DKO MEF cells were incubated and assayed for viability as above. Cells not exposed to Hp CS are defined as untreated cells. Data represent mean \pm SD of twenty independent experiments. Significance was determined by Student's *t* test for paired data of CS-intoxicated cells vs untreated cells; ***, $p < 0.01$.

Figure 2. VacA induces vacuolization in DKO, but not in wt MEFs. Wt and DKO MEFs were incubated with Hp wt CS. After 5 h, the extent of vacuolization was measured by neutral red uptake assay. Results are expressed as difference between the OD values obtained at 540 and 405 nm and are the mean \pm SD of three independent experiments.

Figure 3. VacA-induced cell death involves the mitochondrial apoptotic gateway. DKO MEF cells were genetically and selectively corrected: the mitochondrial defect by targeting BAX exclusively to mitochondria (a) the ER defect by overexpressing SERCA (b). Cells were incubated and assayed for viability as in Figure 1. Cells not exposed to Hp CS are defined as untreated cells. Data represent mean \pm SD of twenty independent experiments. Significance was determined by Student's *t* test for paired data of CS-intoxicated cells vs untreated cells; **, $p < 0.02$; ***, $p < 0.01$.

Figure 4. VacA triggers BAX activation and its translocation to mitochondria. (a) Representative confocal images of wt MEF cells incubated for 24 h with Hp CS, either wt or P9A mutant. Cells were immunostained with a rabbit anti-VacA antibody and a

secondary FITC anti-rabbit antibody. BAX was detected with a murine monoclonal primary antibody specific for its activated form (clone 6A7) and a secondary TRITC anti-mouse antibody. The images are representative of 60 cells examined from 5 separate experiments. Scale bars: 10 μ m. Mander's coefficient for VacA and activated BAX colocalization was 0.21 ± 0.0231 in wt Hp CS-intoxicated cells vs 0.09 ± 0.00198 in P9A mutant CS-treated ones (n=5 independent experiments, 60 cells per experiment). **(b)** Mitochondria were purified from wt MEF cells incubated with wt or P9A mutant Hp supernatants for the indicated time points; 15 μ g of mitochondrial proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE and immunoblotted; BAX was revealed with a rabbit anti-BAX antibody. An anti-COX II monoclonal antibody was used as control for equal loading. Cells not exposed to Hp CS are defined as untreated cells.

Figure 5. Distribution of EEA1, LAMP1 and TOM20 in endosomal and mitochondrial fractions purified from wt MEF cells. EE, LE and mitochondria were separated as described and 15 μ g of protein were separated by SDS-PAGE and immunoblotted with the indicated antibodies.

Figure 6. VacA targets mitochondria. **(a)** Wt MEF cells were incubated for 24 h with wt or P9A mutant Hp supernatants, harvested and sub-fractionated as described. Fifteen or 50 μ g of early endosomal (EE), late endosomal (LE) and mitochondrial (Mt) proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE and immunoblotted using the indicated antibody. **(b)** Wt MEF cells, transfected with plasmid encoding for mtRFP, were incubated with wt or P9A mutant Hp CS. After 24 h of incubation, cells were fixed and the toxin was stained with a rabbit anti-VacA antibody followed by a secondary FITC anti-rabbit antibody. Images are representative of 60 cells examined from 3 separate experiments. Scale bars, 10 μ m. **(c)** Mean \pm SD (n = 3, 20 cells per independent experiment) of co-localization data from **(b)**.

Significance was determined by Student's *t* test for paired data of wt Hp CS- vs P9A Hp CS-treated cells; ***, $p < 0.01$.

Figure 7. VacA induces co-segregation of endosomal and mitochondrial membranes. Wt or DKO MEF cells were incubated with Hp CS, either wt or P9A mutant; at the indicated time points subcellular fractionation was performed and 15 μ g of early endosomal (EE), late endosomal (LE) and mitochondrial (Mt) proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE and immunoblotted; VacA, BAX, EEA1 and LAMP1 were revealed by specific antibodies. Cells not exposed to Hp CS are defined as untreated cells.

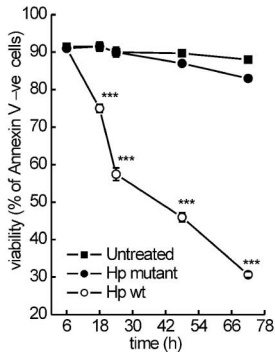
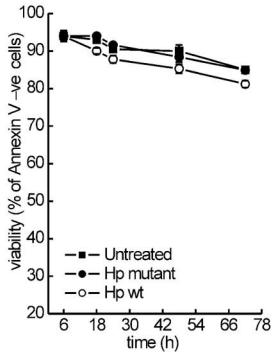
Figure 8. (a) VacA G14A does not induce endosomal hijack on mitochondria. Mitochondria were purified from cells intoxicated for 24 h with Hp CS (either wt or G14A mutant). 15 μ g of proteins were then separated by SDS-PAGE and membranes were probed with polyclonal anti-EEA1, anti-LAMP1 and anti-BAX antibodies. COX II was used as marker of equal loading for mitochondria.

(b) Distribution of COX II in endosomal and mitochondrial fractions purified from intoxicated wt MEFs. Fifteen μ g of early endosomes (EE), late endosomes (LE) and mitochondria (Mt) proteins purified from wt MEF cells untreated, treated with wt Hp CS, or with the mutant P9A one, were loaded in SDS-PAGE and immunoblotted. The exclusive localization of COX II in mitochondria permits to exclude any contamination of endosomes by fragment of mitochondria during the subcellular fractionation.

Figure 9. Early and late endosomes are close to mitochondria in VacA toxicated cells. Wt MEF cells were incubated for 12 h with Hp CS either wt or P9A mutant, before being processed for immunofluorescence. Left panels: anti-Rab5 (green staining) and anti-TOM20 (red staining) antibodies were used to label early endosomal and mitochondrial

membranes, respectively. Right panels: anti-LBPA (green staining) was used to label late endosomal membranes. Scale bars, 10 μm . Squares containing a magnification of a detail show the evident co-localization between endosomal and mitochondrial markers in cells exposed to the wt toxin. Cells not exposed to Hp CS are defined as untreated cells. All these images are representative of 60 cells per condition examined from 3 separate experiments. Mean \pm SD ($n = 3$, 20 cells per experiment) of co-localization data is reported. Significance was determined by Student's t test for paired data of wt CS-intoxicated cells vs untreated cells/cells exposed to 326 P9A. ***, $p < 0.01$.

Figure 10. Endosomal membranes cofractionate with mitochondria in cells toxicated with VacA. Wt MEF cells were incubated for 2 h with Hp CS either wt or P9A mutant, before being processed for immunoelectron microscopy. (a) anti-LBPA antibody was used to label late endosomal membranes in cells exposed to P9A mutant (left panel) or to wt type CS (right panel) respectively. N, nucleus; arrowheads point to mitochondria; gold particles identify late endosomes. Scale bar corresponds to 0.84 μm for the left panel and to 0.47 μm for the right panel. (b) Morphometry analysis of MEF treated and processed as in panel A. The number of mitochondria located within 5.25 μm from the endosomal surface was counted (22.37 ± 1.1 in untreated cells, 46.74 ± 2.33 in 326 P9A treated cells and 90.63 ± 4.53 in 326 wt treated cells). Numbers refer to mitochondria identified in a total area of 65 square microns around endosomes. (c) Morphometry analysis of MEF cells treated and processed as in panel A. The total cell area occupied by late endosomes was measured (an average of 12 endosomes were considered for each condition).

a**wt MEFs****b****DKO MEFs****Fig 1**

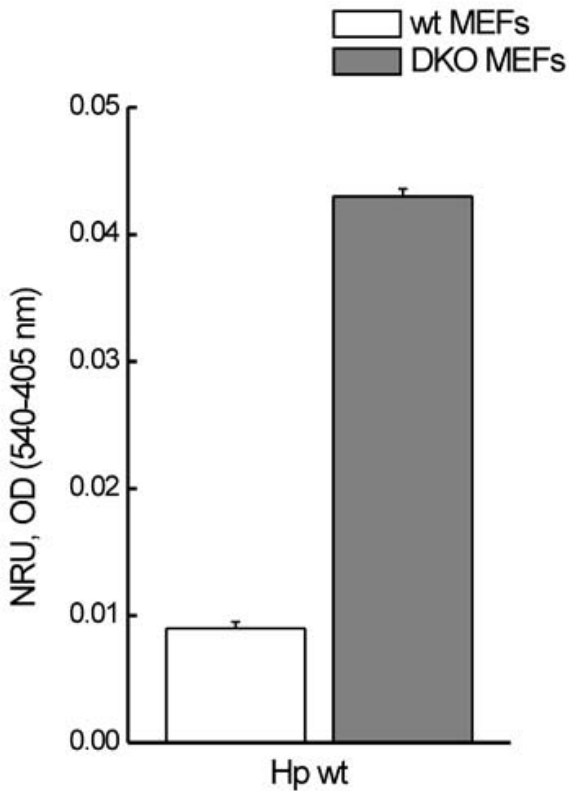
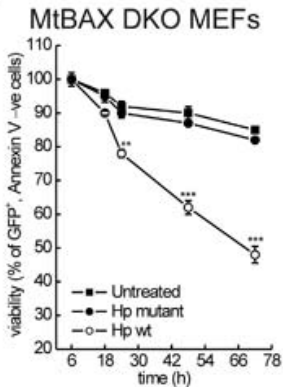
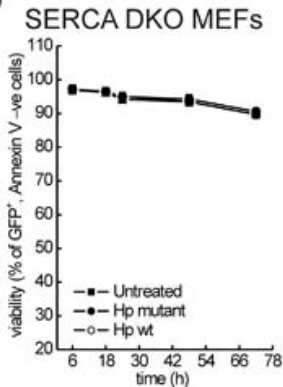


Fig 2

a**b****Fig 3**

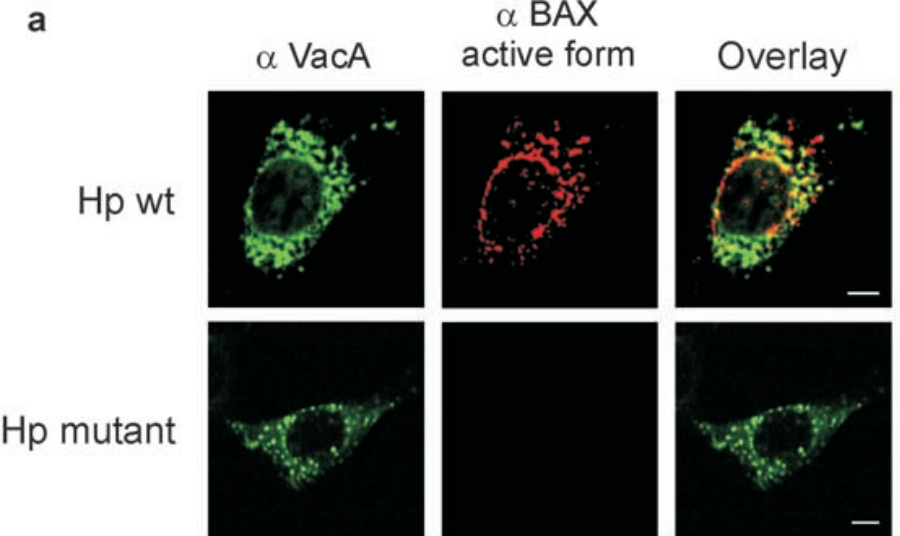


Fig 4

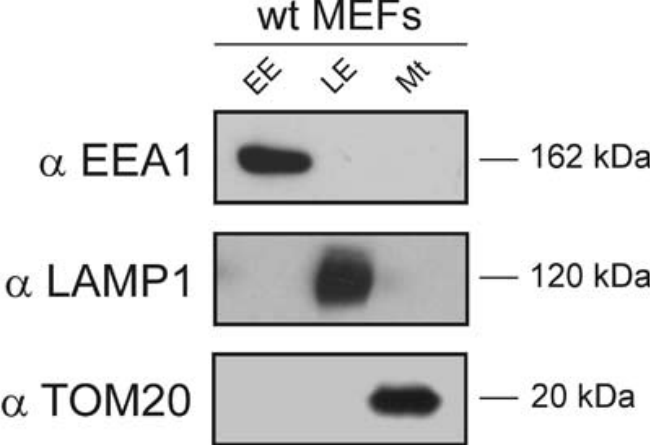


Fig 5

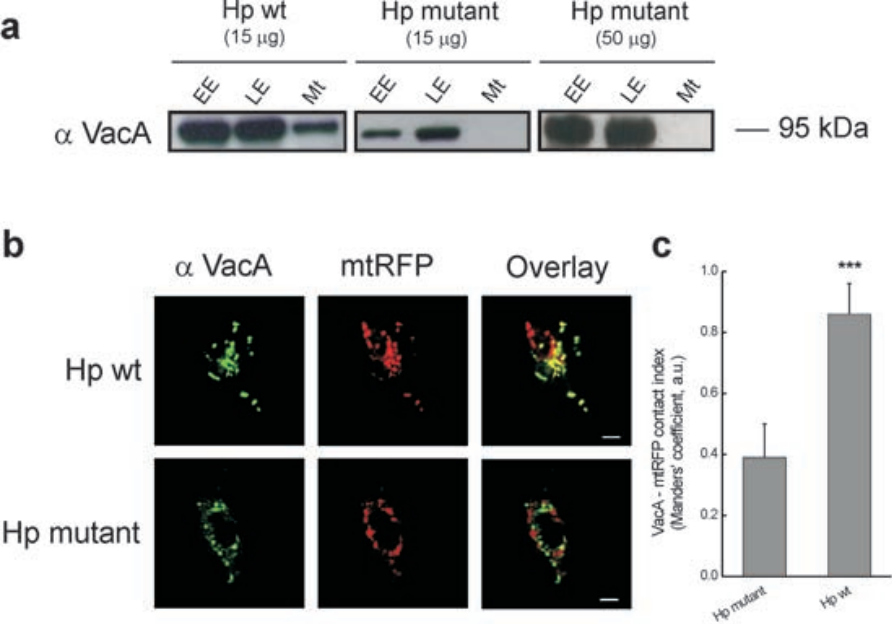


Fig 6

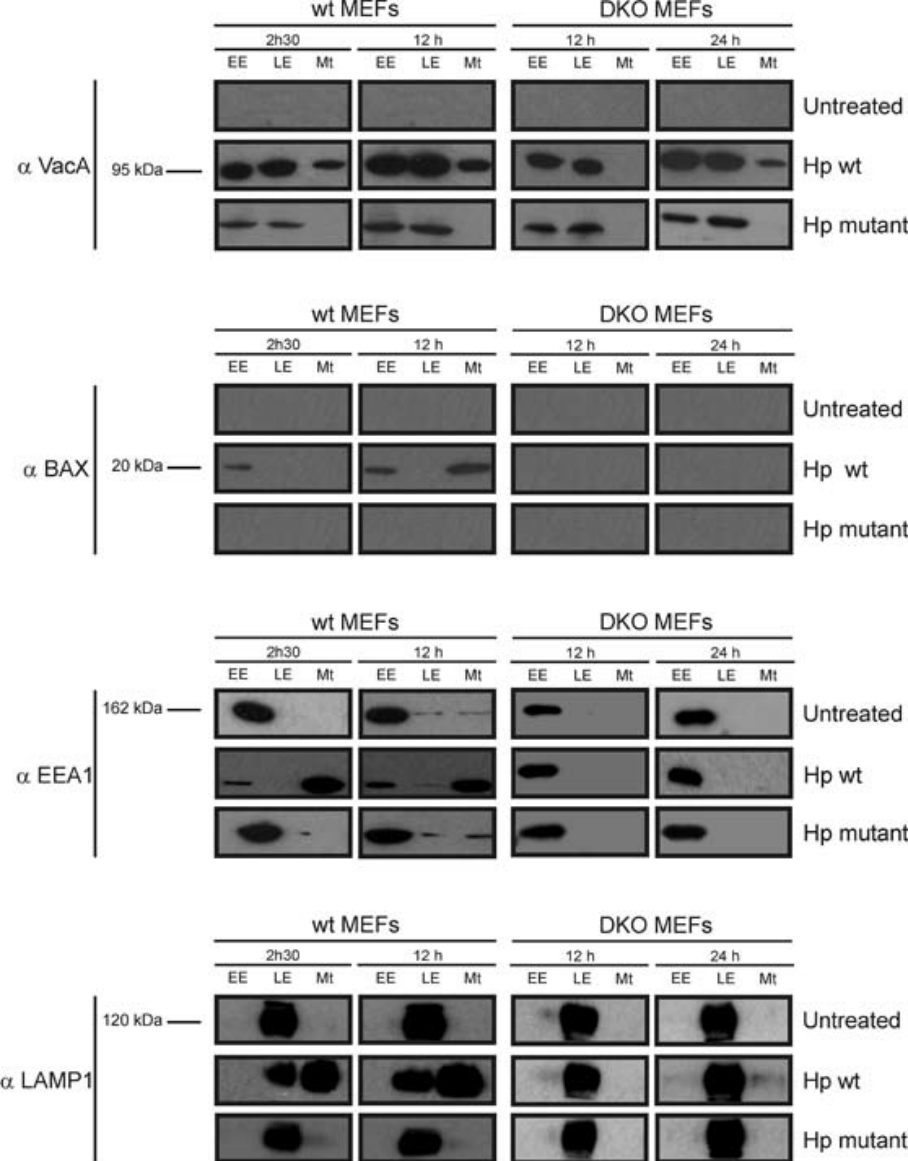
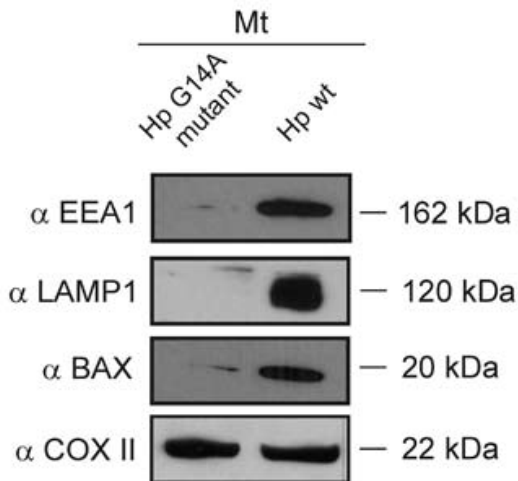
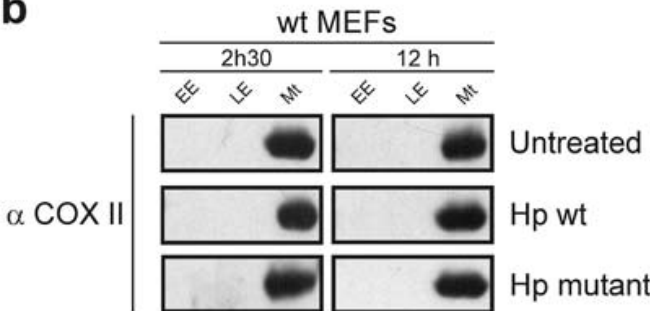
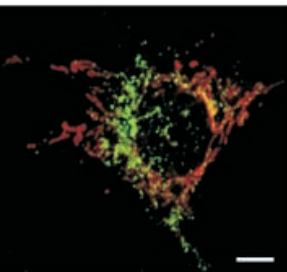


Fig 7

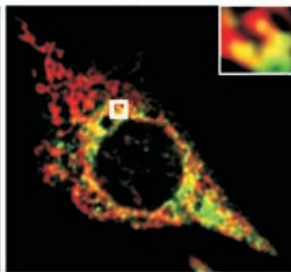
a**b****Fig 8**

Rab5 (green) TOM20 (red)

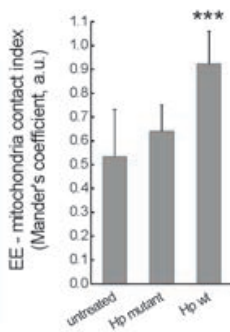
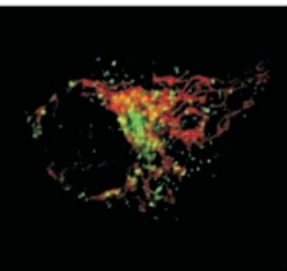
Untreated



Hp wt

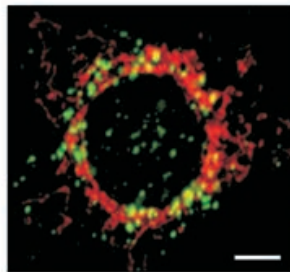


Hp mutant

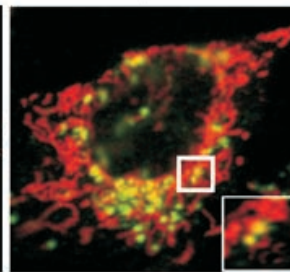


LBPA (green) TOM20 (red)

Untreated



Hp wt



Hp mutant

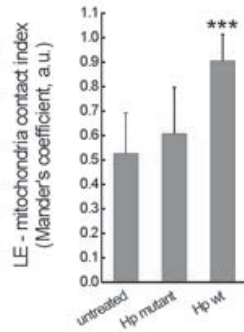
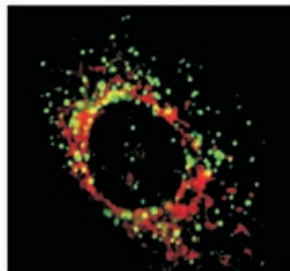
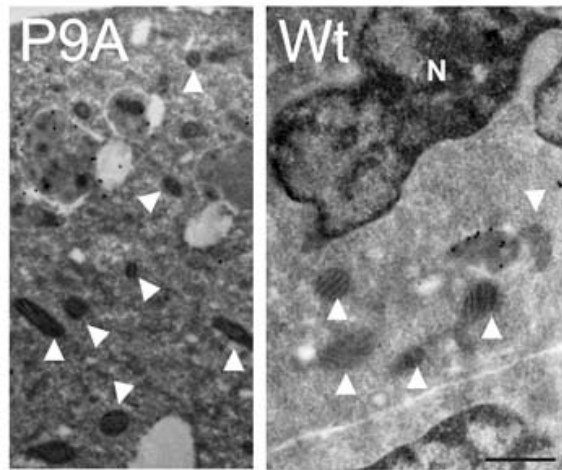
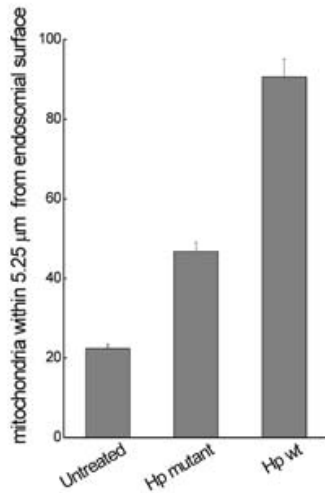
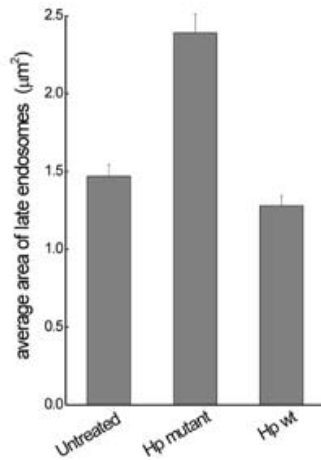


Fig 9

a**b****c****Fig 10**