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Intrinsic membrane association of the cytoplasmic tail of influenza virus M2 protein and lateral membrane sorting regulated by cholesterol binding and palmitoylation

**Bastian Thaa^{*}, Ilya Levental[†],
Andreas Herrmann[‡], Michael Veit^{*§}**

^{*} Free University Berlin, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Institute of Immunology and Molecular Biology, Philippstraße 13, 10115 Berlin, Germany

[†] Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics, Pfotenhauerstraße 108, 01307 Dresden, Germany

[‡] Humboldt University, Institute of Biology, Molecular Biophysics, Invalidenstraße 42, 10115 Berlin, Germany

§: corresponding author: Michael Veit, PhD, Immunology and Molecular Biology
Vet.-Med. Faculty of the Free University, Philippstr. 13, 10115 Berlin, Germany
phone: +493020936272, Fax: +493020936171, e-mail: mveit@zedat.fu-berlin.

Synopsis

The influenza virus transmembrane protein M2 is a proton channel, but also plays a role in the scission of nascent virus particles from the plasma membrane. An amphiphilic helix in the cytoplasmic tail (CT) of M2 is supposed to insert into the lipid bilayer thereby inducing curvature. Palmitoylation of the helix and binding to cholesterol via putative CRAC (cholesterol recognition/interaction amino acid consensus) motifs are believed to target M2 to the edge of rafts, the viral budding site.

We tested preconditions of this model, i.e. that the CT interacts with membranes and that acylation and cholesterol binding affect targeting of M2. M2-CT, purified as a glutathione-*S*-transferase fusion protein, associated with [³H]-photocholesterol and with liposomes. Mutation of tyrosines in the CRAC motifs prevented [³H]-photocholesterol labelling and reduced liposome binding. M2-CT fused to the yellow-fluorescent protein localized to the Golgi in transfected cells; membrane targeting was dependent on CRAC and (to a lesser extent) on palmitoylation. Preparation of giant plasma membrane vesicles from cells expressing full-length M2-GFP showed that the protein is partly present in the raft domain. Raft-targeting required palmitoylation, but not the CRAC motifs. Thus, palmitoylation and cholesterol binding affect the intrinsic membrane binding of the amphiphilic helix differentially.

Short title:

Membrane association of influenza virus M2 amphiphilic helix

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M2
Cholesterol binding
CRAC motif
Palmitoylation
Membrane raft
Giant plasma membrane vesicle

Introduction

The assembly and budding of influenza virus particles is organised in membrane raft domains in the apical plasma membrane of infected cells [1, 2]. Membrane rafts are dynamic lateral plasma membrane nanodomains enriched in cholesterol and sphingolipids; they can be coalesced into larger, more stable platforms by protein–protein and protein–lipid interactions to specifically include certain proteins and exclude others [3]. Raft-targeting of the transmembrane glycoproteins of influenza virus, haemagglutinin (HA) and neuraminidase (NA), defines the site of assembly and budding, the “viral budozone”, a stabilized and large raft domain [4, 5]. However, the third viral transmembrane protein, the proton channel M2, is assumed to be excluded from membrane raft domains. It does not associate with detergent-resistant membranes, the controversial biochemical correlate of membrane rafts [6], and does not cluster with small, unstable rafts when expressed in the absence of other viral proteins [7]. Accordingly, M2 is largely excluded from mature virus particles [8].

However, numerous reports point to a role of M2 in assembly, budding and scission of nascent virus particles, independent of its proton channel activity [9–13]. Thus, at least some M2 molecules have to associate with the viral budozone in the process of virus assembly. In line with this proposal, M2 was found to localize to the base of budding virus particles [14] and to cluster with HA, even in the absence of other viral proteins [7].

M2 is a homotetramer of 97 amino acids/monomer with the first 24 residues oriented towards the outside (ectodomain), the next 19 residues forming a transmembrane domain (TMD), and the remaining 54 residues (44–97) constituting the cytoplasmic tail (CT) [8]. The CT contains a binding site (residues 71–73) for the viral matrix protein M1, the main organizer of virus assembly [9]. The interaction with M2 is probably required for transport of M1 from internal membranes, where it accumulates in the absence of other virus proteins, to the viral budozone [15, 16].

The TMD of M2 is followed by a stretch of basic and hydrophobic amino acids (residues 51–60) that is thought to form an amphiphilic helix. Two partly conflicting nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) structures of the TMD region plus adjacent helix have been published. The structure of detergent-solubilised M2 revealed that the amphiphilic helices form a tetrameric bundle that would extend into the cytoplasm [17]. In contrast, when the structure of membrane-embedded M2 was determined, the part adjacent to the TMD (47–50) formed a tight loop and the amphiphilic helices were located in the interfacial region of the lipid bilayer [18], as shown in **Fig. 1a**. The latter structure is also consistent with electron paramagnetic resonance measurements [19] which indicate that the most hydrophobic residues of the helix are membrane-embedded, whereas the basic residues are water-exposed.

Neither of these NMR structures comprise the two lipid modifications of the amphiphilic helix, *S*-acylation (“palmitoylation”) at cysteine residue 50 [20, 21] and binding of cholesterol. Full-length M2 was described to co-purify with cholesterol in stoichiometric amounts [22]. It was proposed that cholesterol binding is mediated by a “cholesterol recognition/interaction amino acid consensus” (CRAC) motif (L/V–X_{1–5}–Y–X_{1–5}–R/K) [23], which is present up to four times in the amphiphilic helix region of the M2’s cytoplasmic tail, dependent on the virus strain [22, 24], see **Fig. 1b**. However, it has not been determined experimentally whether cholesterol binds to the CRAC motifs alone and/or whether the transmembrane region is required.

Since palmitoylation is a typical raft-targeting feature of proteins [25], and cholesterol is the decisive lipid component of membrane rafts [26], it was proposed that M2 might accumulate at the edge of rafts. The fatty acid moiety and cholesterol might associate with the raft domain, but the relatively short transmembrane region of M2 prevents complete immersion of the protein in the more ordered, hence thicker, raft domains [22]. Moreover, amphiphilic helices are typical membrane remodelling structures as they can intrude like a wedge into the membrane and thereby induce curvature [27, 28]. Thus, the amphiphilic helix of M2 could be involved in curvature formation during budding and ultimately in scission of the nascent virus particle from

the membrane [22]. Very recently, it was shown that a peptide encompassing the amphiphilic helix of M2 can specifically lead to the formation of vesicles in model membrane systems, providing evidence for a role of this region in the scission process [29].

However, proof of this concept in the context of virus infection produced ambiguous results. Neither the CRAC motifs nor acylation are absolutely essential for the production of virus particles: there are virus strains in which the acylation site or intact CRAC motifs are lacking, and recombinant viruses in which Cys-50 [30, 31] or parts of the CRAC motifs [32] were replaced grew similarly well as the corresponding wildtype virus, at least in cell culture. Five hydrophobic residues in the hydrophobic part of the amphiphilic helix of the M2-CT had to be mutated to observe an effect on virus shape, virus titre, and vesicularisation capacity; mutation of less residues had no effect [14, 29]. Thus, the contribution of acylation and the CRAC motifs on virus reproduction is probably subtle and possibly compensated for by other viral factors.

Here, we have analyzed whether the purified cytoplasmic tail of M2 binds cholesterol and whether this binding is affected by mutations in the CRAC motifs. The proposed role of the amphiphilic helix in membrane remodelling and scission depends on efficient membrane association. Hence, we sought to determine whether the cytoplasmic tail of M2 has an intrinsic propensity to associate with membranes, both *in vitro* and in transfected cells, and analyzed to what extent this is influenced by palmitoylation and the CRAC motifs. Furthermore, we analyzed whether authentic M2 associates with large raft domains produced in a novel model membrane system and how palmitoylation and/or CRAC could modulate intrinsic lateral sorting of M2.

Experimental

Plasmids

The open reading frames of M2 from Influenza A/Duck/Ukraine/1/63 (H3N8), wildtype sequence and encoding the replacement of Tyr-52 and Tyr-57 by serines (Y52S, Y57S), were synthesised *in vitro* (ATG Biosynthetics, Merzhausen, Germany). From these, the sequence encoding the cytoplasmic tail of M2 (M2-CT), corresponding to amino acids 44–97, was amplified by PCR and subcloned into pGEX-6P-1 (GE Healthcare, Freiburg, Germany) using the *EcoRI* and *NotI* restriction sites, or into pEYFP-N1 (Clontech, Saint Germain-en-Laye, France) using *SacII* and *AgeI*, for the expression of the glutathione-S-transferase (GST) fusion protein GST–M2-CT in *E. coli* and the M2-CT fused to the yellow-fluorescent protein (YFP) in CHO cells, respectively. M2–GFP expression plasmids were generated by subcloning the full-length ORF encoding M2 into pEGFP-C1 using *AgeI* and *NbeI*. The nucleotides encoding Cys-50 (TGT) were replaced by a serine codon (TCA) in the M2-wt and the M2-Y52S, Y57S sequence by site-directed mutagenesis using overlap extension PCR [33], yielding M2-C50S and M2-C50S, Y52S, Y57S, respectively. All constructs were checked for correctness by sequencing (GATC, Konstanz, Germany).

Expression and purification of GST–M2-CT

Recombinant proteins (GST–M2-CT wt, GST–M2-CT Y52S, Y57S, and unmodified GST) were produced in *E. coli* BL21(DE3) transformed with the respective expression plasmids. After growing the bacteria in yeast-tryptone (YT) medium (Invitrogen, Karlsruhe, Germany) containing 100 µg/mL ampicillin at 37 °C to an OD₆₀₀ of approx. 0.5, expression was induced by addition of 100 µM isopropyl-1-thio-β-D-galactopyranoside (IPTG), growth was continued at 21 °C for 6 h, cells were harvested by centrifugation, and pellets were stored at –20 °C. Cells were lysed by sonication (Misonix XL-2000, Misonix, Farmingdale, NY, USA; six 10-second pulses of 15 W) in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) supplemented with 1 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride (PMSF), 1 mM dithiothreitol (DTT), DNase I (Roche, Mannheim, Germany), and protease inhibitor cocktail (Serva, Heidelberg, Germany). After clearing by centrifugation (Beckman Ti-45, 40,000× *g*, 45 min, 4 °C), the lysate was loaded onto a GSTrap affinity chromatography column (volume 5 mL, GE Healthcare, Freiburg, Germany). After washing with PBS, the GST-containing protein was eluted with 50 mM Tris·HCl, pH 7.5 containing 10 mM reduced glutathione (Sigma-Aldrich, Taufkirchen, Germany) and concentrated using an Amicon Ultra filter (molecular weight cut-off: 10 kDa, Millipore, Schwalbach, Germany). Purity of the protein preparation was checked by sodium dodecyl sulphate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE), the protein concentration was determined spectrophotometrically (NanoDrop 1000, Peqlab, Erlangen, Germany). Protease inhibitors (mix G, Serva, Heidelberg, Germany) were present throughout the purification.

[³H]-photocholesterol crosslinking

[³H]-photocholesterol was synthesised and complexed with methyl-β-cyclodextrin (MβCD) as described [34]. For labelling, purified recombinant protein (20 µg) in 50 mM Tris·HCl, pH 7.5, was incubated with 10 µCi MβCD-complexed [³H]-photocholesterol for 30 min at 4 °C, followed by illumination with ultraviolet light (wavelength: 320–365 nm, power: 8 W) for 20 min. The samples were then separated by SDS-PAGE and fluorography as described below.

Liposome binding assay

Large unilamellar vesicles (LUVs) were produced by extrusion. The required lipids (egg-phosphatidylcholine and cholesterol, Sigma-Aldrich, Taufkirchen, Germany) solubilised in chloroform/methanol (3:1) were mixed in a glass tube, the solvent was evaporated under nitrogen flow, the lipid film was dried under vacuum and subsequently resolubilised (lipid concentration: 1 mg/mL) in 50 mM Tris·HCl, pH 7.5, for 1 h at 22 °C, followed by

ultrasonication for 10 min and 15 extrusion steps through a polycarbonate filter (pore size, 100 nm) using a mini-extruder (Avanti Polar Lipids, Alabaster, AL, USA), yielding LUVs with a mean diameter of 100 nm. To detect protein binding, the LUVs (1.5 mM) were incubated with purified recombinant protein (6 μ M) in a reaction volume of 80 μ L for 30 min at 22 °C, then mixed with 240 μ L of 105 % (w/v) Nycodenz (Sigma-Aldrich) in 50 mM Tris·HCl, pH 7.5, and overlaid with 720 μ L of 58 % (w/v) Nycodenz and 240 μ L of 8 % Nycodenz and subjected to ultracentrifugation (Beckman TLA-100.2 rotor, 100,000 \times *g*, 4 h, 4 °C). Following this, the gradient was divided into four fractions of equal size from top to bottom, subjected to protein precipitation with 10 % (w/v) trichloroacetic acid and analysed with SDS-PAGE and Coomassie Brilliant Blue G-250 staining. Densitometric analysis of bands was accomplished using Bio 1D software (Vilber-Lourmat, Eberhardzell, Germany) after imaging of the gel with a Fusion SL camera system (PeqLab, Erlangen, Germany).

Cells and transfections

Chinese hamster ovary (CHO)-K1 cells (ATCC CCL-61) were cultured in DMEM + 10 % foetal bovine serum (FBS) at 37 °C, 5 % CO₂, using standard techniques; rat basophilic leukaemia (RBL) cells (ATCC CRL-2256) were grown in 30 % DMEM + 60 % RPMI-1640 + 10 % FBS supplemented with 2 mM L-glutamine, 100 U/mL penicillin, and 100 μ g/mL streptomycin. Transient transfections of CHO cells were performed in 35-mm dishes (Greiner Bio-One, Frickenhausen, Germany) using Lipofectamine-2000 (Invitrogen, Karlsruhe, Germany) or TurboFect (Fermentas, St. Leon-Rot, Germany) in OptiMEM medium (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's instructions. RBL cells were transfected using an Amaxa nucleofactor (Lonza, Verviers, Belgium), program T-30.

Immunofluorescence and confocal microscopy

To assess subcellular localisation, the protein in question was expressed as a YFP fusion protein. The cells, grown on coverslips, were fixed 24 h after transfection with 3 % (w/v) paraformaldehyde in PBS for 10 min, permeabilised with 0.5 % (w/v) Triton X-100 in PBS for 3 min, blocked (3 % BSA in PBS, 1 h), incubated with primary antibody in blocking solution for 45 min (marker for the ER: rabbit-anti-calreticulin (Calbiochem/Merck, Darmstadt, Germany), marker for the Golgi apparatus: mouse-anti-membrin (Abcam, Cambridge, United Kingdom), at the recommended dilutions), treated with Alexa568-labelled secondary antibody for 45 min (anti-rabbit and anti-mouse, respectively, Molecular Probes/Invitrogen, Karlsruhe, Germany, 1:1000), and mounted on microscope slides. Washing with PBS (3 \times 2 min) was performed between each step.

Confocal laser-scanning microscopy was carried out with an Olympus FluoView 1000 microscope using an UPLSAPO 60 \times oil immersion objective (numeric aperture, 1.35). YFP fluorescence was excited with a 515-nm argon laser and recorded at 535–575 nm, excitation of Alexa568 fluorescence was performed using the 559-nm line of a HeNe laser, the emission was detected between 580 and 664 nm. Images were processed and assessed for co-localisation using ImageJ and Adobe Photoshop 7.0.

Metabolic labelling with [³H]-palmitate, immunoprecipitation

To biochemically test for δ -acylation of proteins, metabolic labelling was performed according to described methodology [33]. Cells were washed with PBS 24 h after transfection and then incubated with 250 μ Ci [³H]-palmitic acid (Hartmann Analytic, Braunschweig, Germany, administered in 10 μ L ethanol to 500 μ L of DMEM without serum) for 4 h at 37 °C, 5 % CO₂. Following this, cells were washed with PBS, lysed with 600 μ L radioimmunoprecipitation assay (RIPA) buffer (50 mM Tris·HCl, pH 7.4, 150 mM NaCl, 10 mM EDTA, 10 mM iodoacetamide, 0.1 % (w/v) sodium-dodecylsulphate (SDS), 1 % (w/v) Triton X-100, 1 % (w/v) sodium-deoxycholate, Serva protease inhibitor mix G) on ice for 15 min and centrifuged (20,000 \times *g*, 20 min, 4 °C). The supernatant was treated with 1.6 μ g of anti-GFP antibody (Molecular

Probes/Invitrogen, Karlsruhe, Germany), incubated for 16 h at 4 °C under shaking (600 revolutions per minute), mixed with 40 µL of a 1:1 slurry of protein A–sepharose (Sigma-Aldrich) in RIPA buffer to precipitate antibody–protein complexes. After 2.5 h of shaking (600 rpm) at 4 °C, the samples were centrifuged (800× *g*, 3 h, 25 °C) and washed four times with RIPA buffer, followed by treatment of the resulting pellets with non-reducing SDS-PAGE loading buffer. After SDS-PAGE, gels were treated with fixing solution (10 % (v/v) acetic acid, 10 % (v/v) ethanol in water, 16 h, 22 °C), water (2× 15 min) and 1 M salicylate in water (30 min), and then dried with a gel dryer (UniEquip, Martinsried, Germany). A Kodak BioMax XAR film (Sigma-Aldrich) was put on the dried gel, exposed for up to 3 months and then developed using Kodak GBX developing/fixing solutions (Sigma-Aldrich).

As a control for expression and immunoprecipitation, labelling with [³⁵S]-methionine/-cysteine was performed in parallel. Twenty-four hours after transfection, the cell culture medium was replaced by DMEM not containing methionine and cysteine (PAN, Aidenbach, Germany). After 2 hours of incubation at 37 °C, 5 % CO₂, 50 µCi of Tran35S-Label (MP Biomedicals, Heidelberg, Germany) was added and incubation was continued for 4 h, followed by cell lysis and immunoprecipitation as described above.

Giant plasma membrane vesicles (GPMV)

GPMVs were generated according to Levental et al. 2010 [35]. Briefly, RBL-cells (grown in 25-cm² flasks) were washed with GPMV buffer (10 mM HEPES, pH 7.4, 150 mM NaCl, 2 mM CaCl₂, 2 mM NEM) 24 h after transfection with M2-GFP and subsequently incubated with GPMV buffer plus 2 mM *N*-ethyl-maleimide (NEM) at 37 °C for 1 h with gentle shaking (60 rpm). The GPMV rich supernatant was then transferred to a microscopy chamber for temperature-controlled imaging. Phase separation into raft-like and non-raft phase was induced by cooling the vesicles below ~7°C. To label the non-raft phase, rhodamine-phosphatidylethanolamine (RhPE, 3.75 µg/mL) was applied to the cells seven minutes preceding GPMV production. GPMVs were analysed by epifluorescence microscopy as described [35]. The raft-partitioning coefficient C_R was calculated by dividing the background subtracted peak intensity of M2-GFP in the raft phase by that of the non-raft phase, as described [35].

Results and discussion

The CRAC motifs in the amphiphilic helix of M2 bind cholesterol

Fig. 1b shows a helical wheel plot (<http://heliquet.ipmc.cnrs.fr/>) of the amphiphilic helix formed by amino acids 48–61 of M2. One side of the helix contains a cluster of basic amino acids, which, as observed in the NMR-structure of M2 [18], point outward such that they could interact with negatively charged phospholipids abundant at the inner leaflet of the plasma membrane. The other side of the helix shows large hydrophobic amino acids, such as phenylalanine, isoleucine and leucine, which in principle could interact with the hydrophobic interior of lipid bilayers. Both sides of the helix are bordered by tyrosines, which can associate with the interfacial region of a bilayer. The algorithm used to create the helical wheel plot also calculates a mean hydrophobicity of 0.318, a hydrophobic moment of 0.51 and a net charge of +6 for the M2 helix. A comparison of these three biophysical parameters with those of 21 different lipid binding amphiphilic helices reveals that the M2 helix has the highest similarity with Arf1 and endophilinA1, components of the vesicular transport machinery known to induce membrane curvature, and with the antibacterial peptide magainin 2, which forms pores in membranes [27].

A unique property of the amphiphilic helix of M2 is the presence of two specific lipid association features: palmitoylation and putative cholesterol binding CRAC motifs (L/V-X₁₋₅-Y-X₁₋₅-R/K). The modification of cysteine 50 with palmitate, another potentially membrane-anchoring moiety [36], is peculiar since there is only other amphiphilic helix known to be acylated (in Arf1, which contains myristate at the *N*-terminal glycine residue [27]). To our knowledge, cholesterol binding has not been described for any amphiphilic helix.

There are up to four possible CRAC motifs in M2, depending on the virus strain; in some rare cases—such as for the filamentous strain Udorn—, the M2 sequence does not fit the consensus [22, 24]. In order to disrupt all four possible CRAC motifs in the M2 of Influenza virus A/Duck/Ukraine/63/1 (H3N8), we replaced the two tyrosine residues (Tyr-52 and Tyr-57) by serines, yielding the mutant M2 Y52S, Y57S (**Fig. 1** shows the location of the tyrosines within the amphiphilic helix). The same strategy impeded cholesterol association in other CRAC motif-containing proteins [37, 38]. Importantly, performing the helical wheel plot with the mutated M2-sequence revealed that the mean hydrophobicity was reduced to 0.265, but the overall organisation of the helix as well as the hydrophobic moment (0.55), a measure of the amphiphilicity of a helix [39], remained virtually unchanged.

First, we checked whether the cytoplasmic tail of M2 (M2-CT, residues 44–97) binds cholesterol and whether the tyrosine residues of the CRAC motifs are directly involved. To this end, we used [³H]-photocholesterol, which can be covalently cross-linked to various cellular cholesterol-binding proteins upon UV illumination [34, 40–42]. We expressed the M2-CT fused to glutathione-*S*-transferase (GST-M2-CT), as wild type (wt) or Y52S, Y57S mutant, in *E. coli*, purified proteins by affinity chromatography, and incubated with the cholesterol probe [34] which was administered in a complex with methyl- β -cyclodextrin (M β CD) owing to the poor solubility of cholesterol in water and to avoid artifacts from the potential formation of [³H]-photocholesterol micelles. Illumination with ultraviolet light, SDS-PAGE and fluorography revealed that [³H]-photocholesterol cross-linking occurred for GST-M2-CT wt, but not for the Y52S, Y57S mutant (**Fig. 2, black arrow**). The cross-linking was specific for the M2-CT since free GST, which was also present in the GST-M2-CT preparations, was not labelled by [³H]-photocholesterol (**Fig. 2, grey arrow**). The identity of two other [³H]-signals (marked with asterisks) is unclear as they cannot be assigned to any of the protein bands detectable by Coomassie staining of the gel. Not only does this finding corroborate that the M2-CT binds to cholesterol, it furthermore provides the first experimental evidence that Tyr-52 and/or Tyr-57, the central amino acids in the CRAC motifs, are critical for this interaction. The limited availability of the material did not allow further analysis of the binding site. However, note that neither the transmembrane domain (TMD) nor palmitoylation at Cys-50 were needed for cross-

linking of GST–M2–CT to the cholesterol probe because proteins expressed in *E. coli* are generally not acylated [36].

The amphiphilic helix binds the cytoplasmic tail of M2 to large unilamellar vesicles

Membrane binding, especially via the amphiphilic helix, is a prerequisite for the suggested role of the M2–CT in membrane remodelling and virus particle scission. The authentic M2 protein is stably membrane-anchored by its transmembrane region and thus possible membrane interactions of its cytoplasmic tail cannot be analyzed in that context. Therefore we sought to determine whether the cytoplasmic tail alone has the capacity to interact with membranes. We incubated purified GST–M2–CT (wt or Y52S, Y57S mutant) with large unilamellar vesicles (LUVs), either made from phosphatidylcholine (PC from egg), resembling the major constituent of cell membranes, or from PC plus cholesterol (molar ratio 60:40). Samples were then centrifuged in a density gradient, which was subsequently divided into four fractions. The amount of protein in each fraction was evaluated by SDS-PAGE and Coomassie staining. In the absence of LUVs, proteins remain at the bottom of the gradient, in fractions c and d, which were therefore defined as unbound protein (**Fig. 3a, lowermost panel**). In the presence of LUVs, which float to the top of the density gradient, proteins are partly or predominantly present in fractions a and b (**Fig. 3a, upper panels**).

Densitometric quantification of four independent experiments (**Fig. 3b**) revealed that GST alone has a low intrinsic membrane interaction capacity - approx. 20 % of total protein was present in the top fractions of the gradient. In contrast, almost 80 % of GST–M2–CT wild type is detectable in fractions a and b (compare black and white columns), indicating that the cytoplasmic tail of M2 has a strong propensity to associate with membranes. The Y52S, Y57S mutant bound less strongly (40 % in the top fractions) to LUVs than the corresponding wild type protein, but still significantly stronger than free GST (grey columns). This might indicate that cholesterol binding via the CRAC motifs enhances membrane binding of M2–CT. However, omission of cholesterol in the LUVs did not change the percentage of membrane-bound molecules, neither of wild-type M2–CT nor of the Y52S, Y57S mutant.

In summary, the cytoplasmic tail of M2 has the capacity to interact with artificial membranes. This interaction is likely mediated by the amphiphilic helix, given that the remaining part of the cytoplasmic tail is highly hydrophilic and contains numerous negatively charged amino acids that are unlikely to interact with membranes. The results indicate that the tyrosines in the amphiphilic helix directly associate with the interfacial region of the bilayer, but cholesterol was not required for membrane association of M2–CT in this assay.

The amphiphilic helix binds the cytoplasmic tail of M2 to cellular membranes

In the next set of experiments we analyzed the membrane interaction capacity of the cytoplasmic tail of M2 in eukaryotic CHO cells. M2–CT was fused to the *N*-terminus of the yellow-fluorescent protein (YFP), yielding M2–CT–YFP. YFP, when expressed alone, has no membrane targeting features and thus localises to the cytosol and especially to the nucleus; however, it is known that the attachment of peptides with membrane targeting information leads to redistribution of YFP, especially and most obviously visible, to exclusion from the nucleus[43]. The diversity of membrane targeting features, such as myristoylation, palmitoylation and/or polybasic regions then define the cellular membranes at which the constructs preferentially accumulate [43].

In contrast to bacteria, CHO cells can perform *S*-acylation, a hydrophobic modification implicated in membrane binding, especially of intrinsically hydrophilic proteins. We therefore tested whether M2–CT–YFP is acylated despite the absence of the M2–TMD. CHO cells expressing M2–CT–YFP were labelled with [³H]-palmitic acid or [³⁵S]-methionine/-cysteine for 4 hours, followed by immunoprecipitation with an anti-GFP antibody, SDS-PAGE and fluorography (**Fig. 4a**). **Fig. 4b** shows that wild-type M2–CT–YFP incorporated the radioactively labelled fatty acid. Since *S*-acylation is a post-translational event and (almost) always occurs on

cellular membranes, the cytoplasmic tail of M2 must have membrane recognition features to become a substrate for palmitoylation. Disruption of the CRAC motifs (Y52S, Y57S) did not impede acylation—thus, the tyrosine residues replaced in the CRAC motif mutant are not essential for initial membrane targeting and subsequent palmitoylation.

Next we examined the subcellular localisation of M2-CT-YFP by fluorescence microscopy. In transfected CHO cells M2-CT-YFP wt was (mostly) excluded from the nucleus and redistributed to intracellular compartments, especially to a perinuclear region (see **Fig. 5a**, top left). This was identified as the Golgi apparatus by co-localisation using marker antibodies against membrin, a Golgi-specific t-SNARE (**Fig. 5c**, bottom row). Some cells expressing wild type M2-CT-YFP showed fluorescence distributed throughout the cytoplasm. Since it did not overlap with calreticulin, a marker for the endoplasmic reticulum (ER, **Fig. 5c**, top row), the signal is considered to be caused by soluble, cytosolic protein.

Upon expression of mutants of M2-CT-YFP with a deleted acylation site (C50S), with replaced tyrosine residues (Y52S, Y57S) or with both lipid binding sites deleted simultaneously (C50S, Y52S, Y57S), accumulation of fluorescence at the Golgi apparatus was less prominent and even localisation to the nucleus was observed, especially for the mutants with disrupted CRAC motifs (**Fig. 5a**, blue arrow). Since variation in the intracellular distribution of the fluorescence between individual cells occurred (see **Fig. 5a**, especially evident for M2-CT with disrupted CRAC motifs), a (semi)quantitative analysis of micrographs was performed. Upon visual inspection of at least 125 cells the fluorescence distribution in each cell was either considered as predominantly nuclear (see blue arrow in **Fig. 5a**), perinuclear (Golgi, red arrow in **Fig. 5a**), cytosolic (see **Fig. 5c**, top row) or, if no clear accumulation could be observed, uniform (cytosol plus nucleus, grey arrow in **Fig. 5a**). This analysis demonstrated that M2-CT-YFP wt was localised to the Golgi apparatus (and, occasionally, to the plasma membrane) in 79 % of the investigated cells. In the remaining cases, the protein was present in the cytosol or uniformly distributed. The non-acylated mutant C50S was still found at the Golgi apparatus or the plasma membrane, but in only 52 % of the cells. Cytosolic accumulation of the protein was increased accordingly to 35 %. Thus, palmitoylation of the amphiphilic helix stabilises the intrinsic propensity of M2-CT to associate with the Golgi.

Replacing the CRAC motif tyrosines lowered the proportion of perinuclear localisation of M2-CT-YFP further to 34 %. **Fig. 5d** shows that this accumulation was not due to aggregation or precipitation of mutated protein since it co-localised with the Golgi marker. Likewise, the staining pattern considered as cytosolic did not overlap with the ER marker. Importantly, a strong nuclear signal was observed for M2-CT-YFP Y52S, Y57S in 27 % of the cells, indicative of the inability of this mutant to prevent nuclear accumulation of YFP. Lastly, expression of the mutant in which both the palmitoylation site and the CRAC motifs were disrupted (C50S, Y52S, Y57S) yielded only very few cells with Golgi accumulation of M2-CT (6 %). Rather, fluorescence was either observed throughout the cytoplasm (19 %) or uniformly distributed over the whole cell (27 %); predominant nuclear localisation was seen in nearly half of the cells (48 %).

Taken together, these results indicate that the M2-CT has the capacity to interact with cellular membranes, especially with the Golgi. Anchorage of M2-CT-YFP to the Golgi apparatus was most likely due to membrane association of the amphiphilic helix, since mutations in this region weakened Golgi localisation with a pronounced contribution of both acylation and, even more strongly, the cholesterol binding motifs, most effectively in combination. In the absence of the TMD, which functions as a signal-anchor domain in the authentic M2 protein [44], M2-CT is synthesized as soluble protein on cytosolic ribosomes. The insertion of the tyrosines into the bilayer then probably mediates the attachment of the amphiphilic helix to the cytoplasmic leaflet of membranes, presumably intensified by the association with cholesterol, which is particularly abundant in the Golgi and the plasma membrane. Likewise, there might be a contribution to membrane attachment by the basic amino acids in the amphiphilic helix interacting with negatively charged phospholipids such as phosphatidylserine, which is accumulated in the cytosolic leaflet of the Golgi and the plasma membrane. Palmitoylation, which is likely to occur at

the Golgi apparatus [45, 46], probably stabilises membrane attachment of M2-CT-YFP. This allows the protein to enter the secretory pathway, but in contrast to other palmitoylated peripheral membrane proteins [45, 47], targeting of M2-CT-YFP to the plasma membrane was observed only rarely. Since palmitoylation is potentially reversible [48], it can be assumed that the fatty acids are rapidly cleaved from the M2 construct. Since the stoichiometry of acylation cannot be inferred from metabolic labelling experiments (**Fig. 4**), it is possible that only a small subfraction of all M2-CT-YFP molecules carry a fatty acid under steady state conditions and therefore acylation contributes little to membrane binding of the protein. Surprisingly, mutations at the CRAC motif had a stronger effect on Golgi localisation than removal of the palmitoylation site. Since palmitoylation at the adjacent cysteine was not impaired upon removal of the tyrosines (**Fig. 4**), the hydrophobic residues directly affect membrane binding, i.e. by insertion into the lipid bilayer. In line with that, binding of the (non-acylated) purified cytoplasmic tail of M2 to liposomes was largely reduced by exchange of the bulky tyrosines with smaller serine residues (**Fig. 3**).

M2 associates with both raft and non-raft domains in giant plasma membrane vesicles

M2-CT-YFP was only infrequently targeted to the plasma membrane. Thus, the M2 parts missing in the construct, especially the transmembrane domain, probably govern plasma membrane transport of M2. Accordingly, full-length M2 fused at its C-terminus to the green-fluorescent protein (GFP) was efficiently transported to the plasma membrane in transfected cells; mutating the palmitoylation site and/or the CRAC motifs did not inhibit plasma membrane transport (**Fig. 6a**). Thus, in authentic M2, neither palmitoylation nor the CRAC motifs are required for transport of the protein to the plasma membrane, in line with previous studies by others [14, 20].

We used these constructs to decipher the intrinsic propensity of M2 to associate with raft-like membrane phases. Using FLIM-FRET we have previously shown that an identical construct (M2-YFP) does not associate with a double acylated probe, a marker for small rafts present at the inner leaflet of bilayers [7]. However, the HA-containing viral budzone is larger and therefore regarded as a stabilised, coalesced raft domain [4, 5]. Coalesced raft phases can be produced in a cell-derived membrane model system, giant plasma membrane vesicles (GPMVs). GPMVs are micron-scale blebs that can be formed from the plasma membrane of cells and thus contain the whole diversity of membrane lipids and proteins, but are detached from the cortical cytoskeleton. Upon cooling, large-scale phase separation into an ordered, raft-like and a disordered, non-raft phase (here also designated “liquid-ordered” (Lo) and “liquid-disordered” (Ld), respectively) is induced. [49]. In contrast to plasma membrane spheres [50], GPMVs derived with NEM do not require cross-linking of compounds to reveal phase separation and protein partitioning in these membranes thus resembles more closely that of the uninduced state of plasma membrane domains [35]. GPMVs were formed from the plasma membrane of RBL cells transiently expressing M2-GFP with a new method that preserves labile fatty acid linkages [35] and were visualised by epifluorescence microscopy (**Fig. 6b**). Staining of the non-raft phase with rhodamine-phosphatidylethanolamine (RhPE) showed large scale phase separation. However, wildtype M2-GFP was uniformly distributed over the whole GPMV membrane, implying no pronounced preference for either Lo or Ld phase. This conclusion was further substantiated by calculating a “raft partitioning coefficient” (C_R , ratio of the M2-GFP fluorescence intensities in Lo and Ld, respectively) from at least 12 GPMVs, which yielded a mean value of 0.83 (**Fig. 5c**). Using the same model system, it was shown that the transferrin-receptor, a classical non-raft protein, is completely excluded from the raft domain, whereas typical raft-markers, a GPI-linked protein and LAT (linker for T-cell activation), are exclusively or predominantly present in the raft domain [35]. Thus, assuming that authentic M2 has the same distribution than M2-GFP, we conclude that M2 has an intermediate affinity for rafts in that model system. However, enrichment of M2-GFP at the boundary between the raft and non-raft-phase was not observed.

Do palmitoylation and cholesterol-binding affect the phase partitioning behaviour of M2? The M2-GFP mutant with disrupted CRAC motifs (Y52S, Y57S) showed a comparable picture and a similar mean C_R value of 0.77. However, M2-GFP lacking the palmitoylation site (C50S) was clearly enriched in the non-raft, Ld phase ($C_R = 0.43$). Both mutations in combination did not lead to a further decrease in raft-phase partitioning of the protein ($C_R = 0.38$). Thus, the propensity of M2-GFP to associate with these raft phases depends on cysteine 50, but not on the tyrosines in the CRAC motifs. This leads to the conclusion that cholesterol binding seems to be dispensable for the raft association capability of M2, while palmitoylation is needed. Palmitoylation-dependent raft-partitioning was also observed for a variety of other transmembrane proteins when GPMVs were prepared with the same method [35]. In summary, we have shown that (i) the CRAC motifs in the cytoplasmic tail of M2 bind cholesterol, that (ii) the amphiphilic helix interacts with membranes, both *in vitro* and inside cells, and that (iii) M2 has the propensity to associate with large raft domains. The latter property is dependent on palmitoylation, but not on intact CRAC motifs, whereas both features are required for efficient membrane association of the M2-CT.

In cholesterol-binding transmembrane proteins such as the β_2 -adrenergic receptor [51] and the peripheral-type benzodiazepin receptor [38], the membrane-spanning helices build a cleft that accommodates cholesterol. Arginine or lysine located at the beginning of the transmembrane segment form electrostatic interactions with the hydroxyl group of cholesterol, whereas aromatic residues, such as tryptophan or tyrosine, and long and hydrophobic residues (*e.g.*, valine, isoleucine or leucine), both located in the hydrophobic region of the bilayer, interact with the planar sterol ring of cholesterol. These interactions lead to a parallel orientation of cholesterol and the transmembrane helices and thus align cholesterol perpendicular to the membrane bilayer. In contrast, binding of cholesterol to M2 does not require a transmembrane region, since the cytoplasmic tail alone was cross-linked to [3 H]-photocholesterol (**Fig. 2**). Thus, the orientation of the cholesterol relative to the membrane bilayer might be different compared to cholesterol-binding transmembrane proteins. Nevertheless, tyrosines (or other aromatic amino acids, such as tryptophan) as part of the cholesterol-binding moiety have been shown to be essential for cholesterol binding in all hitherto analyzed cholesterol-binding proteins [38, 51]. It is conceivable that M2 sequesters cholesterol by means of its CRAC motifs and thereby lowers the local membrane cholesterol content. This could help in the ultimate budding step, the scission of nascent virus particles, which occurs at the phase boundary between the cholesterol-rich budzone and the (non-raft) bulk membrane. In accordance with that assumption is the observation that M2-mediated budding of vesicles into giant unilamellar vesicles (GUVs) occurs only if the cholesterol content in the GUV membrane is relatively low [29].

Not only are the tyrosines of the CRAC motifs involved in cholesterol binding, but they also contribute to membrane association of the amphiphilic helix. Golgi localisation of M2-CT fused to YFP in transfected cells was substantially reduced when both tyrosines were deleted (**Fig. 5**). This was probably not (only) due to an interaction with cholesterol, since association of purified, non-acylated M2-CT with LUVs was not enhanced by cholesterol, but substantially reduced by replacing the tyrosine residues (**Fig. 3**). Thus, the amphiphilic helix of M2 has an intrinsic propensity to associate with membranes, which does not depend on acylation and cholesterol binding. The tyrosine residues, possibly in combination with surrounding basic residues, could interact with the interfacial region of membranes, whereas this interaction is greatly reduced when the tyrosines are exchanged by serines [52].

Acylation is not strictly required for membrane binding, although a slight effect on Golgi localization of M2-CT-YFP was observed in transfected cells. However, palmitoylation is absolutely essential for M2-GFP to associate with the raft-like phase in GPMVs, whereas disruption of the CRAC motifs had no effect in that system (**Fig. 6**). Since palmitoylation is a (at least potentially) reversible modification [48], addition and removal of fatty acids might regulate the lateral organisation of M2 in the membrane. In order to mediate pinching-off of virus particles, it has been proposed that M2 must associate with the periphery of membrane rafts [22].

In virus-infected cells localisation of M2 to the base of budding filaments (hence, to the edge of the raft-like budzone) was seen [14, 29]. However, we did not see accumulation of the M2 probe at the periphery of the coalesced raft phase. Therefore, there are probably additional viral or cellular factors, for example the cytoskeleton [7], not accounted for in our GPMV model that lead to peripheral association of M2 with the budzone in virus-infected cells. Yet, M2 has the *intrinsic* propensity to partially partition into a large, more ordered membrane phase. Thus, the key requirements of the proposed model for the function of M2 in particle scission—membrane association of the cytoplasmic tail and (at least partial) raft-association—, are in principle fulfilled.

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Abbreviations

ATCC: American Type Culture Collection
CHO: Chinese hamster ovary (cells)
C_R: raft partitioning coefficient
CRAC: cholesterol recognition/interaction amino acid consensus
CT: cytoplasmic tail
DMEM: Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium
DRM: detergent-resistant membrane
DTT: dithiothreitol
GFP: green-fluorescent protein
GPMV: giant plasma membrane vesicle
GST: glutathione-*S*-transferase
GUV: giant unilamellar vesicle
HA: haemagglutinin
IPTG: isopropyl-β-D-thiogalactopyranoside
Ld: liquid-disordered
Lo: liquid-ordered
LUV: large unilamellar vesicle
MβCD: methyl-β-cyclodextrin
NA: neuraminidase
NEM: *N*-ethyl-maleimide
PBS: phosphate-buffered saline
PC: phosphatidylcholine
PMSF: phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride
RBL: rat basophilic leukaemia (cells)
RPMI: Roswell Park Memorial Institute Medium
SDS-PAGE: sodium dodecyl sulphate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis
TMD: transmembrane domain
YFP: yellow-fluorescent protein
YT: yeast-tryptone

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Figure Legends

Fig. 1: Structure of M2 and its amphiphilic helix.

(a) Structure of the M2 tetramer (residues 22–62) according to solid-state nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy [18]. One monomer is highlighted in dark grey. Potential raft-targeting features in the membrane-parallel amphiphilic helix (residues 48–61) are shown as sticks: the palmitoylation site cysteine-50 (a serine is present in the M2 analyzed by NMR); and tyrosine-52 and tyrosine-57 (a histidine is present at position 57 in the M2 analyzed by NMR) as part of the cholesterol recognition/interaction amino acid consensus (CRAC) motifs. Figure generated with PyMOL from pdb 2L0J.

(b) Helical wheel plot (axial view) of the amphiphilic helix formed by amino acids 48–61 of M2 from Influenza A/Duck/Ukraine/63/1 (H3N8), generated with HeliQuest (<http://heliquest.ipmc.cnrs.fr/>). Hydrophobic residues are represented in light grey, hydrophilic residues in dark grey. The arrow indicates the direction of the calculated hydrophobic moment [39]. However, in the figure the helix is orientated with respect to the plane of the membrane according to the NMR structure [18]. The residues that were replaced in this study (C50, Y52, Y57) are labelled with asterisks. The sequence of amino acids 45–63 in the M2 analyzed in this study and the position of the four CRAC motifs are indicated in the bottom part of the figure.

Fig. 2: Cross-linking of GST–M2-CT to [³H]-photocholesterol.

Purified GST, GST–M2-CT wt or GST–M2-CT Y52S, Y57S were incubated with M β CD-complexed [³H]-photocholesterol, UV-cross-linked, separated by SDS-PAGE and subjected to Coomassie staining (left) and fluorography (right). Black arrow: GST–M2-CT; grey arrow: GST; asterisks: unassigned bands. Molecular weight marker on the left.

Fig. 3: GST–M2-CT binds to large unilamellar vesicles (LUVs).

Purified GST–M2-CT wt, GST–M2-CT Y52S, Y57S or GST alone were incubated with LUVs composed of 60% (mol/mol) egg-phosphatidylcholine (PC) + 40% cholesterol, with 100% PC LUVs, or without LUVs, and subjected to floatation analysis on a Nycodenz density gradient, which was divided into four equal fractions (a–d from top to bottom). (a), SDS-PAGE and Coomassie staining of protein present in each fraction in one experiment; (b), densitometric quantification of four independent experiments; protein in fraction a and b was defined as bound to LUVs. The percentage of membrane association \pm SEM (band intensity in fractions a+b/(a+b+c+d)) is shown. *, statistically significantly different according to two-tailed, unpaired Student's *t* test (*P*<0.05). Note the relatively large variability of membrane-associated protein between experiments, especially evident for GST–M2-CT wt. Since integral membrane proteins are present only in the uppermost fraction of the gradient in such an experiment [15], the distribution of M2-CT through many fractions indicates that membrane binding is not stable, but a transient and dynamic event.

Fig. 4: Acylation of M2-CT–YFP.

CHO cells were transfected with M2-CT–wt or Y52S, Y57S as indicated or left untransfected (\emptyset), labelled with [³⁵S]-methionine/-cysteine (a) or [³H]-palmitate (b) for four hours and subsequently lysed, followed by immunoprecipitation using anti-GFP antibodies, SDS-PAGE and fluorography. The arrows mark M2-CT–YFP (black) and YFP (grey), which is cleaved for M2-CT during sample preparation. Mobility of molecular weight markers is indicated in the middle.

Fig. 5: Subcellular localisation of M2-CT-YFP, wild type and mutants.

(a) Representative micrographs of CHO cells transfected with M2-CT-YFP wt and the indicated mutants thereof. Red arrow: cell with predominant signal at the Golgi apparatus (*cf.* Fig. 5c/d), blue arrow: nuclear localisation, grey arrow: uniform distribution of fluorescence over the whole cell, including nucleus.

(b) Quantification of the subcellular localisation of the indicated M2-CT-YFP constructs: at least 125 transfected cells were assessed for predominant localisation of YFP fluorescence in the nucleus (blue), the cytosol (yellow), or at the Golgi and the plasma membrane (red, *cf.* Fig. 5c/d). grey: uniform distribution.

(c and d) Co-localisation of M2-CT-YFP wt (c) or Y52S, Y57S (d) with marker antibodies for the ER (anti-calreticulin, top row) or the Golgi (anti-membrin, bottom row) by indirect immunofluorescence. YFP is pseudocoloured green and secondary antibodies are pseudocoloured red, colocalisation appears yellow in the corresponding merged image.

Fig. 6: Partitioning of M2-GFP in the raft-like liquid-ordered (Lo) phase of giant plasma membrane vesicles (GPMVs).

(a) Expression of M2-GFP and the indicated mutants thereof in rat basophilic leukemia (RBL) cells.

(b) GPMVs were produced from RBL cells transfected with M2-GFP (wt or one of the indicated mutants), stained with rhodamine-phosphatidylethanolamine (RhPE) as a marker for the liquid-disordered (Ld) phase, cooled to 4 °C and visualised by epifluorescence microscopy. Representative images are shown.

(c) Evaluation of raft partitioning: the GFP fluorescence intensity in the Lo and Ld phases of at least 12 GPMVs was determined and the “raft partitioning coefficient” (C_R) calculated as GFP intensity in Lo/GFP intensity in Ld and displayed as mean \pm SD. Values >1 indicate preference for Lo. *, statistically significant from wt according to one-tailed, unpaired Student's *t* test ($P < 0.01$).

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