A modular tyrosine kinase deoxyribozyme with discrete aptamer and catalyst domains†

Victor Dokukin and Scott K. Silverman*

We assess the utility of integrating a predetermined aptamer DNA module adjacent to a random catalytic DNA region for identifying new deoxyribozymes by in vitro selection. By placing a known ATP aptamer next to an N₄₀ random region, an explicitly modular DNA catalyst for tyrosine side chain phosphorylation is identified. The results have implications for broader identification of deoxyribozymes that function with small-molecule substrates.

Deoxyribozymes are specific DNA sequences with catalytic activity.¹ All known deoxyribozymes have been identified by in vitro selection² from random-sequence DNA pools. For deoxyribozymes that function with oligonucleotide substrates (e.g., for RNA cleavage³), much of the catalyst–substrate binding interaction—and therefore the corresponding binding energy—is provided by Watson–Crick contacts, which are straightforwardly preprogrammed. These pre-programmed binding contacts enable the in vitro selection process to focus upon finding initially random DNA sequences that are tasked primarily with catalysis. However, for small-molecule substrates that inherently cannot engage in extensive Watson–Crick interactions, the initially random DNA region (e.g., N₄₀) must instead simultaneously bind the substrate and catalyze the desired reaction, rather than solely participate in catalysis (Fig. 1A). Therefore, here we consider an explicitly modular approach to deoxyribozyme catalysis, in which a predefined aptamer (binding) domain engages in aptamer-like non-Watson–Crick contacts with the small-molecule substrate, allowing a distinct “catalytic” (enzyme) domain, subsequently identified through in vitro selection in the presence of the aptamer domain, to be devoted to catalysis (Fig. 1B). Many natural protein enzymes are functionally modular,⁴ and the group I intron ribozyme is modular in binding its RNA substrate.⁵ The present study had two major goals. First, we wished to determine whether providing a predefined aptamer module can lead to deoxyribozymes that make functional use of this module during catalysis. Second, we sought to assess whether the availability of the aptamer module provides more robust access by in vitro selection to new deoxyribozymes for a particular chemical reaction (e.g., leads to more numerous or faster DNA catalysts).

To achieve these goals, we used a known 27-nucleotide Mg²⁺-dependent ATP DNA aptamer domain⁶ that has been structurally characterized⁷ and is the basis for a wide range of experiments that involve sensors⁸ or other applications.⁹ Here, this ATP aptamer was integrated near N₅₀, N₄₀, and N₅₀ DNA random regions, and in vitro selection was performed for tyrosine kinase activity towards a DNA-anchored CAAYAA hexapeptide substrate. The hexapeptide was connected to the DNA anchor by a hexa(ethylene glycol), or HEG, tether. Kinase activity by nucleic acid

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Preparative details, in vitro selection procedure, selection progression, metal ion dependence, and mass spectrometry data. See DOI: 10.1039/c4cc04253k

Department of Chemistry, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 600 South Mathews Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801, USA. E-mail: scott@cs.illinois.edu

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Fig. 1 Nonmodular and modular deoxyribozymes, illustrated with tyrosine kinase activity for a DNA-anchored peptide substrate and ATP as the phosphoryl donor. (A) A nonmodular DNA catalyst, for which the initially random DNA region (e.g., N₄₀; green) both binds the small-molecule substrate and performs catalysis. The two fixed sequences (brown) are required for PCR amplification during selection. The fixed sequence on the 5’-side of the random region can also contribute to substrate binding and catalysis. (B) A modular DNA catalyst. A predefined ATP aptamer region (gold) is located adjacent to the initially random region, which is responsible for catalysis.
enzymes has been studied extensively for oligonucleotide substrates.\textsuperscript{10} We recently reported the first tyrosine kinase deoxyribozymes, which phosphorylate the tyrosine side chain of a peptide substrate and were identified from N\textsubscript{30}–N\textsubscript{50} random regions that lack any predefined aptamer domain.\textsuperscript{11} Our current experiments were performed analogously, using the previously identified 8VP1 deoxyribozyme\textsuperscript{12} as the “capture” catalyst to enable the selection process (Fig. 2). The phosphorylation yield of 14JS101 was optimized to 52% by incubation in 40 mM Tris, pH 7.5, 1 mM ZnCl\textsubscript{2}, 10 mM MnCl\textsubscript{2}, 40 mM MgCl\textsubscript{2}, 150 mM NaCl, and 30 \mu M ATP at 37 °C (Fig. 3A). These optimized conditions were adopted for all further assays. The identity of the DNA-anchored hexapeptide phosphorylation product was validated by MALDI mass spectrometry (Fig. S5, ESI\textsuperscript{†}). By mutational analysis, we assessed whether the ATP aptamer domain of 14JS101 contributes functionally to its catalysis. The study in which the ATP aptamer domain was initially identified also evaluated the importance of many individual nucleotides to the ATP binding.\textsuperscript{6} From those data, we chose five mutations anticipated to be deleterious for ATP binding and three mutations that should be innocuous, if the aptamer domain of 14JS101 contributes to catalysis by binding ATP. Each of these eight mutations was made separately in 14JS101, and the kinase activity of each mutant was determined (Fig. 3A). An additional mutant of 14JS101 in which the entire 27-nucleotide aptamer domain sequence was scrambled was also examined. For all but one mutant, the activity (or lack thereof) supported the conclusion that the ATP aptamer domain contributes directly to 14JS101 catalysis. For the A20C mutant, no activity was anticipated on the basis of the prior report,\textsuperscript{6} yet we observed substantial 14JS101 catalysis. Noting that the A20G mutation of the same adenosine nucleotide is both expected\textsuperscript{6} and (here) observed to allow substantial activity, we surmise that the A20C mutation is simply not as deleterious in the 14JS101 deoxyribozyme context as in the isolated ATP aptamer. Replacing the ATP aptamer module of 14JS101 with the variant MB-1 aptamer that binds only a single molecule of ATP (versus two ATP molecules for the parent aptamer)\textsuperscript{13} resulted in no 14JS101 activity under the same assay conditions (<0.5%; data not shown).

The Km for ATP of 14JS101 was determined by initial-rate kinetics to be ca. 10 \mu M (Fig. 3B). This value is in accord with the 6 \mu M Ka value for the isolated ATP aptamer,\textsuperscript{6} consistent with direct contribution of the aptamer domain to 14JS101 catalysis. The Km( ATP) was also determined for each of the active mutants. In each case, the Km value was 11–32 \mu M, suggesting at most a minor perturbation in the ability to bind ATP. Importantly, when 14JS101 was tested with any of GTP, CTP, or UTP, no activity was observed, whereas dATP could successfully replace ATP (Fig. 3C). These findings are also
consistent with direct involvement of the ATP aptamer domain, which binds only ATP/dATP.\(^6\)

From these findings, we conclude that 14JS101 is a truly modular tyrosine kinase deoxyribozyme, in which the ATP aptamer domain binds the small-molecule ATP substrate while the separate, initially random (N\(_{40}\)) region is responsible for catalysis. An early ribozyme selection experiment attempted to include a predefined ATP aptamer domain to achieve polynucleotide kinase activity. However, the resulting aptamer domain became mutated during the selection process, and most of the corresponding ribozymes were unlikely to make functional use of the aptamer domain.\(^{13,14}\) Similarly, selection for a self-alkylating ribozyme using a biotinylated small-molecule substrate and a predefined biotin aptamer domain led to ribozymes that do not appear to use the (mutated) aptamer.\(^{14}\) In contrast to these older results, the present work establishes unequivocally that nucleic acid enzymes can use discrete aptamer and catalyst domains that together enable catalytic function. The mechanistic basis for the collaborative operation of the aptamer and catalyst domains cannot be determined from the present data. Such insights likely require high-resolution structure information, which is currently unavailable for any deoxyribozyme.\(^{15}\) The ATP aptamer used to identify 14JS101 binds two molecules of ATP.\(^6,7\) The available data do not establish conclusively whether or not 14JS101 requires binding of two ATP molecules. We speculate that if 14JS101 binds two ATP molecules, then only one of these molecules is properly oriented to serve as the phosphoryl donor.

A parallel goal of the present work was to evaluate whether including a predefined aptamer module leads to more robust identification of DNA catalysts. Although these experiments did successfully lead to 14JS101 as a single, explicitly modular kinase deoxyribozyme, a broader range of modular DNA catalysts was not found. Indeed, we found no deoxyribozymes at all from the analogous N\(_{10}\) and N\(_{50}\) modular selections, whereas our previous efforts with N\(_{80}\) and N\(_{80}\) random regions (but no aptamer domain) did provide DNA catalysts.\(^{11}\) Moreover, the k\(_{\text{cat}}\) of 0.2 h\(^{-1}\) for 14JS101 is the same as the k\(_{\text{obs}}\) of 0.2 h\(^{-1}\) for the fastest NTP-dependent deoxyribozyme in our previous report.\(^{11}\) Therefore, including a predefined aptamer module, while successful specifically for finding the 14JS101 deoxyribozyme, does not appear to be an especially helpful principle on which to design DNA catalyst selection strategies, at least for the kinase activity examined here. This conclusion is meaningful in the context of ongoing efforts to identify new deoxyribozymes that function with a wide range of small-molecule substrates. On the basis of experiments such as those reported here, we are not focusing our current efforts on identifying aptamers for small-molecule substrates followed by integrating these aptamers into DNA catalyst selections. Instead, we are primarily using random DNA regions that are tasked with simultaneously performing binding and catalysis, an approach that has been successful for a growing range of catalytic activities.\(^{13,14}\) However, our findings do establish experimentally that explicitly modular deoxyribozymes are possible, and for some purposes, pursuing such modularity may be advantageous.

This research was supported by grants to S.K.S. from the National Institutes of Health (R01GM065966), the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (HDTRA1-09-1-0011), and the National Science Foundation (CHE0842534). V.D. was partially supported by NIH T32GM070421. Mass spectrometry was performed on a
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Bruker UltrafleXtreme MALDI-TOF spectrometer purchased with NIH support [S10RR027109A].

Notes and references

† The deoxyribozyme was named as 14JS101 because 14 is the round number, JS1 is the systematic alphanumeric designation for the particular selection, and 01 is the clone number. The 14JS101 sequence was 5′-ACCTGGGGGAATGGCAGGACGGACAGAGGGTGAGCCCTTGCGAGAGACATG-GTCAGGACGGACAGAGGGATGCTTCATAG-3′, where the boldface segment is the predefined ATP aptamer, the middle segment is the initially random region (40 nt), and the underlined segment is the binding arm where the DNA anchor binds.