

Research Article

Mitochondrial biogenesis in brown adipose tissue is associated with differential expression of transcription regulatory factors

J. A. Villena, M. C. Carmona, M. Rodríguez de la Concepción, M. Rossmeisl[‡], O. Viñas, T. Mampel, R. Iglesias, M. Giralt and F. Villarroya*

Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, University of Barcelona, Diagonal 645, 08028 Barcelona (Spain), Fax + 34 93 4021559, e-mail: gombau@porthos.bio.ub.es

[‡] Present address: Institute of Physiology, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Videnska 1083, 14 20 Prague 4 (Czech Republic)

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Abstract. The differentiation of brown adipocytes during late fetal development or in cell culture is associated with enhanced mitochondrial biogenesis and increased gene expression for components of the respiratory chain/oxidative phosphorylation system. We have shown that this is due to a rise in mitochondrial DNA abundance and the corresponding increase in mitochondrial genome transcripts and gene products, as well as to the coordinate induction of nuclear-encoded genes for mitochondrial proteins. We studied how the expression of key components of the transcriptional regulation of mitochondrial biogenesis

is regulated during this process. Changes in the expression of nuclear respiratory factor-2/GA-binding protein α and peroxisome proliferator-activated-receptor gamma coactivator-1 (increase) were opposite to those of nuclear respiratory factor-1 and Sp1 (decrease) during the developmental and differentiation-dependent induction of mitochondrial biogenesis in brown fat. These results indicate that the relative roles of transcription factors and coactivators in mediating mitochondrial biogenesis ‘in vivo’ are highly specific according to the cell type and stimulus that mediate the mitochondriogenic process.

Key words. Brown adipose tissue; mitochondria; nuclear respiratory factor; Sp1; peroxisome proliferator; activated receptor gamma; coactivator-1.

The synthesis of components of the mitochondrial respiratory chain/oxidative phosphorylation (OXPHOS) system in mammalian cells results from the coordinate expression of the mitochondrial genome and nuclear genes for OXPHOS components. Changes in transcriptional rates are considered a major mechanism regulating nuclear gene expression for OXPHOS components [1], although post-transcriptional mechanisms can also be involved [2]. Analysis of the transcriptional regulation of OXPHOS genes in cultured cells led to the identification of transcription factors specifically involved in the control of nuclear genes for mi-

tochondrial proteins which were named nuclear respiratory factors (NRFs). NRF-1 is related to developmental regulatory transcription factors [3]. NRF-2/GABP is a multi-subunit transcription factor that contains the DNA-binding NRF-2/GABP α subunit, a member of the ETS family of transcription factors, and non-DNA-binding subunits, such as NRF-2/GABP β , which modulate the binding affinity of the overall complex to DNA [4]. NRFs not only control the transcription of multiple genes encoding OXPHOS components, they also regulate gene expression for Tfam, the nuclear-encoded transcription factor determining mitochondrial genome replication and transcription [5]. Many mammalian OXPHOS gene promoters are regulated by

* Corresponding author.

NRFs, but they usually contain additional regulatory elements that depend on Sp1, a ubiquitous transcription factor [6]. Certain OXPHOS genes do not even contain NRF-1- or NRF-2-dependent regulatory sites and rely on regulation by Sp1. Depending on the OXPHOS target gene and cellular environment, Sp1 acts as an activator or repressor of OXPHOS genes [6, 7]. Moreover, PGC-1, a coactivator capable of interacting with NRF-1 and nuclear hormone receptors, has also been reported to promote mitochondrial biogenesis and OXPHOS gene expression when over-expressed in brown adipocytes or myoblasts [8, 9]. However, the involvement of each of these regulatory factors in the control of mitochondrial biogenesis during developmental processes of tissues and organs is poorly understood.

Brown adipose tissue (BAT) is a mammalian tissue specialized in non-shivering thermogenesis. This function relies on the presence in the brown adipocyte of a large number of mitochondria that are naturally uncoupled owing to the presence of the brown-fat-specific uncoupling protein-1 [10]. When brown adipocytes differentiate, they show the lipid accumulation characteristic of adipose cells and acquire a large content of mitochondria while OXPHOS gene expression is enhanced [11]. This process takes place during late fetal development, in the absence of environmental thermogenic stress, or when precursor cells differentiate into brown adipocytes in cell culture [12, 13]. The study of BAT fetal ontogeny provides an optimal model to identify the molecular mechanisms of mitochondrial biogenesis and OXPHOS gene expression.

In the present study, we determined changes in gene expression of nuclear respiratory factors, Sp1 and the coactivator PGC-1 during BAT ontogeny and brown adipocyte differentiation 'in vitro' and their association with the enhancement of mitochondrial biogenesis during brown fat cell differentiation.

Materials and methods

Swiss female mice were mated with adult males and the day of pregnancy was determined by the presence of vaginal plugs. Fetuses were obtained by Caesarian section of pregnant mice on days 16 and 18 of gestation. Pups remained with their mothers after spontaneous delivery and were killed just after parturition, before they had initiated suckling (birth). Adult mice (2 months old) were also used. Animals were killed by decapitation and interscapular BAT was removed.

Brown adipocytes were differentiated in culture from precursor cells as described elsewhere [14]. Stromal vascular cells were isolated from the interscapular, cervical and axillary depots of BAT of 3-week-old Swiss mice. They were plated (5000 cells/cm²) and grown in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (Ham's F12 medium (1:1, v/v) supplemented with 10% (v/v) fetal calf serum, 20 nM in-

sulin, 2 nM T3 and 100 μ M ascorbate). Cells were harvested after 4, 7 or 10 days of culture.

For transmission electron microscopy analysis (TEM), cultured cells were harvested in phosphate-buffered saline and pelleted by centrifugation at 500 g, for 5 min. Cell pellets and BAT samples were fixed in 2.5% glutaraldehyde, 2% paraformaldehyde in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) and post-fixed in 1% osmium tetroxide and 0.8% FeCNK in phosphate buffer. After dehydration in a graded acetone series, samples were embedded in Spurr resin. Ultrathin sections were stained with uranyl acetate and lead citrate, and examined with a Hitachi H600AB transmission electron microscopy at 75 kV.

RNA was extracted by a guanidine thiocyanate-based method [15]. For Northern blot analyses, 25 μ g of total RNA was denatured, electrophoresed on 1.5% formaldehyde-agarose gels and transferred to nylon membranes (N+; Boehringer Mannheim, Germany). Equivalent amounts of ribosomal RNA in the samples were checked by ethidium bromide UV visualization. Pre-hybridization and hybridization were performed at 55°C in a 0.25 M Na₂HPO₄ (pH 7.2), 1 mM EDTA, 20% SDS, 0.5% blocking reagent (Boehringer Mannheim) solution [16]. Blots were hybridized using mtDNA fragments as probes for detection of the mtDNA-encoded cytochrome oxidase subunit I (COI) and 16S mitochondrial rRNA, as reported elsewhere [17]. The murine cDNAs for the nuclear-encoded COIV (ATCC, Rockville, Md.), NRF-1 [18], NRF-2/GABP α , NRF-2/GABP β 1 [19], PGC-1 [8] and the cDNA for human Sp1 [20] were also used as hybridization probes. The size of the mRNA species detected for every gene was the same as previously reported in murine tissues. Relative mtDNA abundance was assessed as described elsewhere [17]. DNA from interscapular BAT was prepared and digested with *Eco*RI endonuclease. Twenty micrograms of DNA was analyzed by Southern blot and hybridized with the murine mtDNA fragment encoding 16S rRNA, thus leading to a 3.0-kb hybridization signal for mtDNA. As a control for equal loading of nuclear DNA, blots were rehybridized with the murine C/EBP β probe, which reveals a 4.5-kb band for the corresponding nuclear gene fragment. The DNA probes were labelled using [α^{32} P]dCTP by the random oligonucleotide-priming method. Hybridization signals were quantified using a Molecular Image System GS-525 (BioRad, USA).

Crude protein extracts from isolated mitochondria or nuclei were obtained as reported for developmental studies of brown fat [17, 21]. BAT was homogenized in 10 mM Hepes, pH 7.6, 15 mM KCl, 2 mM EDTA, 0.5 mM dithiothreitol, 0.5 mM phenylmethanesulphonyl fluoride, 2.5 mM benzamidine, 10 μ g/ml aprotinin, 1 μ g/ml leupeptin, 1 μ g/ml pepstatin, 0.24 M sucrose. After centrifugation at 1500 g for 10 min, pellets were resuspended in the homogenization buffer and centrifuged at 5000 g for 10 min (nuclear protein extract) whereas the supernatants

were centrifuged for 10 min at 8500 g (mitochondrial extracts). Nuclei were lysed and resuspended in the homogenization buffer containing 10% (v/v) glycerol. Protein concentrations were determined by the micromethod of Bio-Rad, using BSA as a standard. Equal amounts of proteins (usually 40 µg) were mixed with 1/5 vol of a solution containing 50% glycerol, 10% SDS, 10% 2-mercaptoethanol, 0.5% bromophenol blue and 0.5 M Tris (pH 6.8), incubated at 90°C for 5 min and electrophoresed on 0.1% SDS/12% (nuclear protein extracts) or 15% (mitochondrial protein extracts) polyacrylamide gels. Proteins were transferred to polyvinylidene difluoride membranes (Millipore, USA). Coomassie Blue staining of gels was performed systematically to check for similar patterns of the major proteins in the various extracts, indicative of a similar overall quality. Blots with mitochondrial protein preparations were probed with monoclonal antibodies for cytochrome oxidase subunits I

and IV (A-6403 and A-6409; Molecular Probes). Blots with nuclear protein extracts were probed with rabbit antisera against NRF-2/GABP α , NRF-2/GABP β (gifts of Dr. S. McKnight) or Sp1 (Santa Cruz, USA). Immunoreactive material was detected by the enhanced chemiluminescence (ECL) detection system (Amersham, UK) and quantified by densitometric analysis (Phoretix; Millipore). The sizes of the proteins detected were estimated using protein molecular-mass standards (Bio-Rad).

Results

Brown adipocytes differentiate in the late fetal development of mouse. From day 16 of fetal life to birth, they acquire the characteristic morphology of a differentiated brown adipocyte: the appearance of lipid vacuolae and an increase in the amount of mitochondria (fig. 1). En-

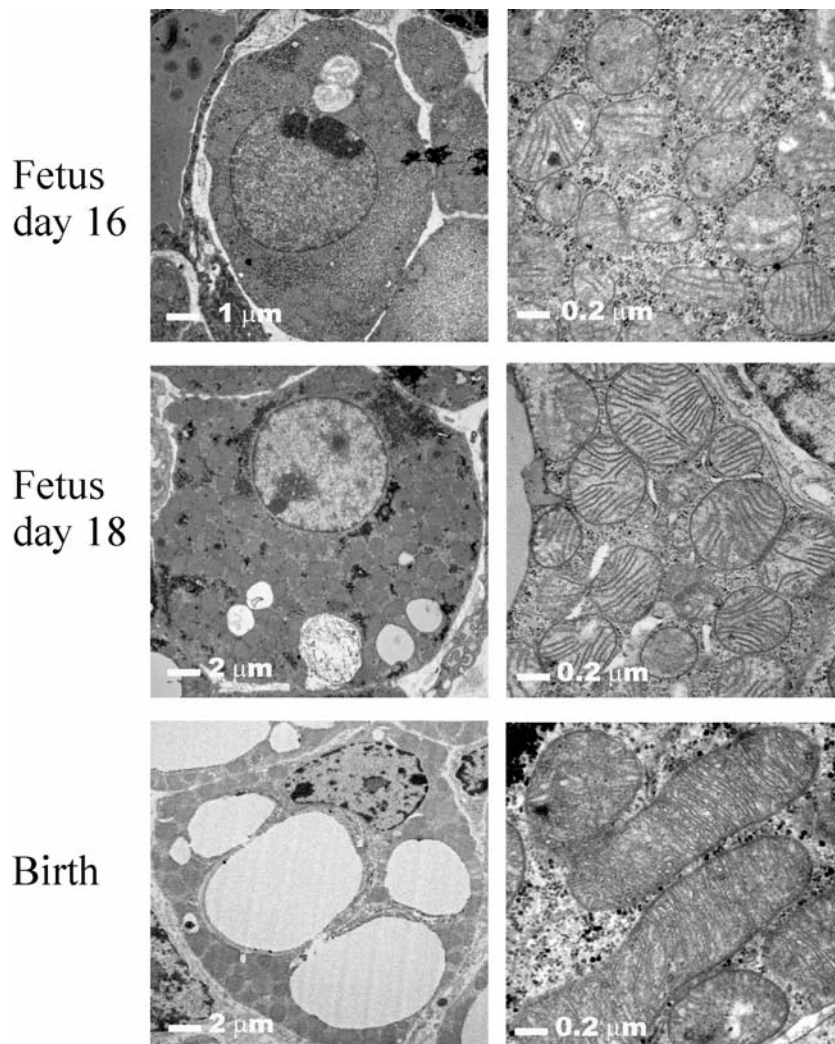


Figure 1. Morphology of brown adipocytes and mitochondria in BAT during fetal development. Transmission electron microscopy analysis of brown adipocytes (left) and mitochondria (right) in BAT of mice at days 16 and 18 of fetal life and at birth. Scale bars show magnification.

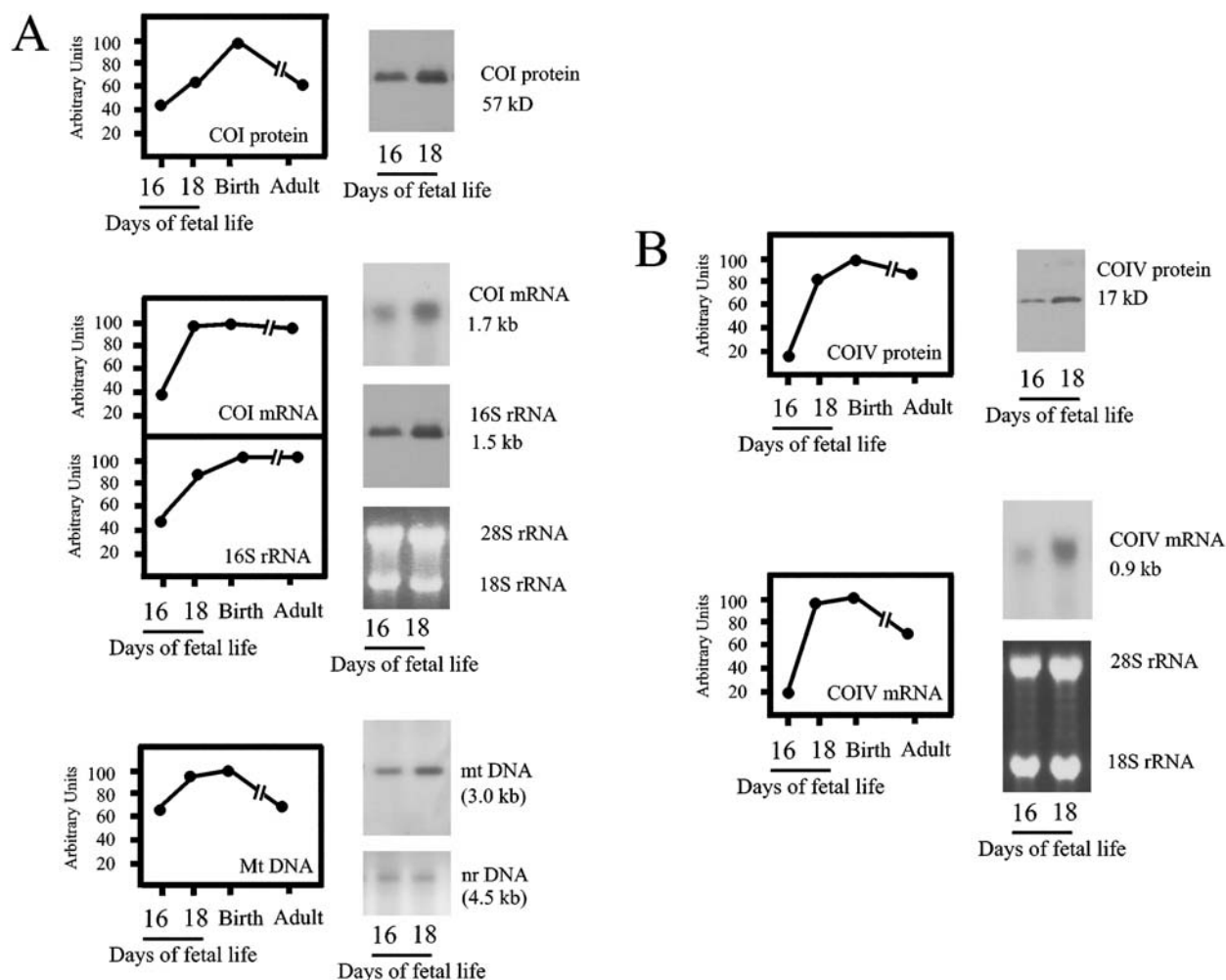


Figure 2. Expression of the mitochondrial genome and nuclear-encoded OXPHOS genes in developing BAT. Points in left panels are means of two to three independent experiments from every time point of development tested and are expressed as percentages of the mean value at the time of maximal expression, which was set to 100 (arbitrary units). (A) Mitochondrial genome expression pattern in developing BAT. Top, relative abundance of COI protein as determined by Western blot analysis of 20 μ g of mitochondrial protein extracts, with a representative Western blot shown on the right; middle, relative abundance of the mitochondrial transcript COI mRNA and 16S rRNA as determined by Northern blot analysis of 25 μ g of RNA, with representative Northern blots and control of RNA loading (nuclear-encoded 28S rRNA and 18S rRNA) are shown on the right; bottom, relative abundance of mitochondrial DNA as determined by Southern blot analysis (see Material and methods), with a representative Southern blot for mitochondrial DNA and control of equal loading of nuclear DNA (nr DNA) shown on the right. (B) Expression of the nuclear-encoded OXPHOS gene COIV in developing brown fat. Top, relative abundance of COIV protein as determined by Western blot analysis of 20 μ g of mitochondrial protein extracts, and a representative Western blot shown on the right; bottom, relative abundance of COIV mRNA, with representative Northern blots and control of RNA loading (nuclear-encoded 28S rRNA and 18S rRNA) shown on the right.

hanced mitochondrial biogenesis is shown both by an increase in the number of mitochondria in the cell and their increase in size, the development of internal membranes (cristae) and the acquisition of a parallel orientation characteristic of mature brown adipocytes (fig. 1, right). The enrichment in mitochondria content in the cells appeared to take place mostly between days 16 and 18, whereas from day 18 to birth, the major changes were the enlargement of mitochondria and the accumulation of lipid droplets in the adipocyte.

Expression of the mitochondrial genome is modified in brown fat during the process of mitochondrial biogenesis

(fig. 2A). The relative amount of mtDNA with respect to nuclear DNA almost doubled from day 16 of fetal life to day 18. Similar changes in the abundance of COI mRNA and 16S rRNA, indicative of messenger and ribosomal transcript products of the mitochondrial genome, were detected: a two- to threefold rise from day 16 to day 18 followed by a further increase until birth for 16S rRNA. This overall induction of mtDNA and mitochondrial transcripts had a direct consequence on the relative amount of mitochondrial genome products, which was also increased when monitored by changes in the mitochondrial COI protein (fig. 2A, top). The time-course of the increase in

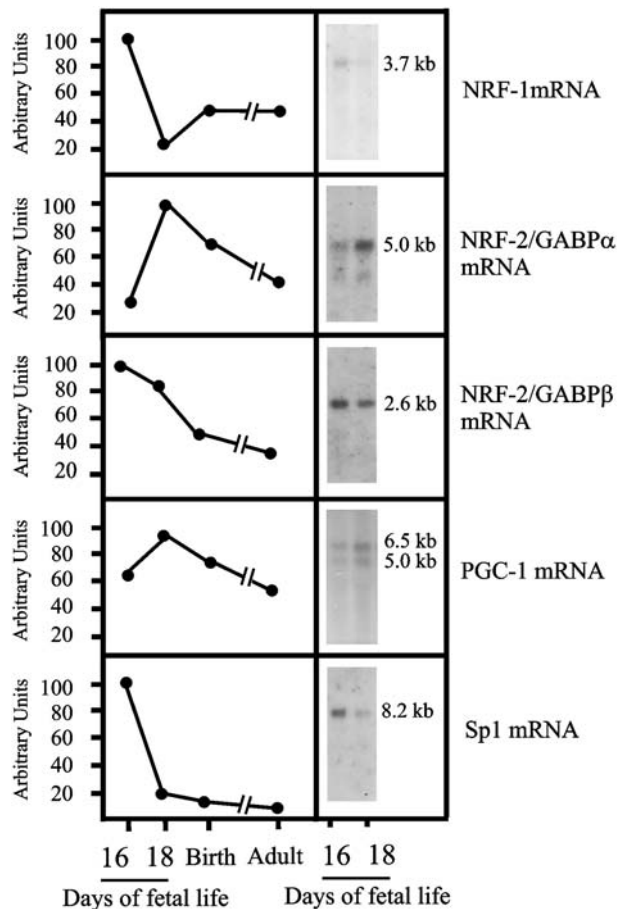


Figure 3. Expression of the mRNAs for transcription factors involved in OXPHOS gene regulation in developing BAT. Points in left panels are means of two to three independent experiments for every time point of development and are expressed as percentages of the mean value at the time of maximal expression, which was set to 100 (arbitrary units). They show the relative abundance of the corresponding mRNAs as assessed by Northern blot analysis of 25 μ g of RNA from the interscapular BAT of mice at the indicated stages of development. Representative Northern blots are shown on the right.

the COI protein compared with that of COI mRNA was slightly delayed. The behaviour of COIV protein and COIV mRNA expression, as representative of a nuclear OXPHOS gene, was similar to mitochondrial genome expression but changes were more dramatic: around a five-fold induction was detected between days 16 and 18.

The major events of coordinate induction of mitochondrial genome and nuclear OXPHOS gene expression in brown fat occurred between days 16 and 18 of fetal development. We next determined how the expression of transcription factors involved in OXPHOS gene regulation was modified during this process (fig. 3). NRF-1 mRNA was down-regulated between days 16 and 18, and remained low at birth and in adults. In contrast, NRF-2/GABP α was dramatically up-regulated from day 16 to day 18 of fetal life, followed by a further reduction. NRF-

2/GABP β mRNA levels were not essentially modified between days 16 and 18 and declined thereafter. The mRNA of the coactivator PGC-1 increased from day 16 to day 18 and also showed a further reduction at birth and in adult mice. Northern blot hybridization with the Sp1 probe yielded a 8.2-kb signal corresponding to Sp1 mRNA in brown fat from fetuses at day 16 of development. This signal was very low in fetuses at day 18 and almost undetectable in adult brown fat.

The changes in NRF-2/GABP α , NRF-2/GABP β and Sp1 protein abundance in brown fat during the late fetal development of mice were assessed by Western blot analysis (fig. 4). The sizes of the proteins detected using specific antibodies against those transcription factors are in agreement with previous findings in murine tissues [20, 22]. The profiles of changes in the relative abundance of NRF-2/GABP α and NRF-2/GABP β in nuclear extracts of BAT at the stages of fetal development studied were essentially parallel to those found for the respective mRNAs. Similarly, Sp1 levels were high in fetuses at day 16 and fell dramatically in the last days of fetal life to practically undetectable values in adults. No specific antibodies against NRF-1 are available at present, which precludes the analysis of protein abundance. Western blot analysis of PGC-1 using commercially available antibodies (SC-5816, SC-5815 from Santa Cruz, AB 3242 from Chemicon) did not provide reliable signals for assessment of the relative abundance of this protein in fetal brown fat.

To further establish the extent to which the changes in the expression of transcription factors were associated with the process of mitochondrial biogenesis in the brown adipocyte, an 'in vitro' approach based on cell culture was undertaken. Pre-adipocytes from BAT depots of adult mice were obtained and cultured in conditions leading to brown adipocyte differentiation and the evolution of changes in mitochondrial biogenesis and gene expression were monitored during this process. TEM analysis indicated that, on day 4 of culture, cells lacked the morphological signs of the brown adipocyte phenotype: there were no lipid droplets and mitochondria were scarce and poorly developed (fig. 5). After 3 days of culture (day 7), cells acquired the typical brown adipocyte morphology, as shown by the accumulation of lipid droplets and, in particular, by enrichment in the content of mitochondria and their development. Additional culturing for 3 more days (day 10 of culture) merely revealed an increase in the size and amount of lipid droplets but no further modifications in cell morphology or mitochondrial biogenesis (data not shown). Parameters related to OXPHOS gene expression were coordinately induced during this period: relative mtDNA abundance almost doubled between days 4 and 7, similar inductions were observed for the abundance of the mitochondrial transcripts COI mRNA and 16S rRNA and a similar rise took place for the nuclear-

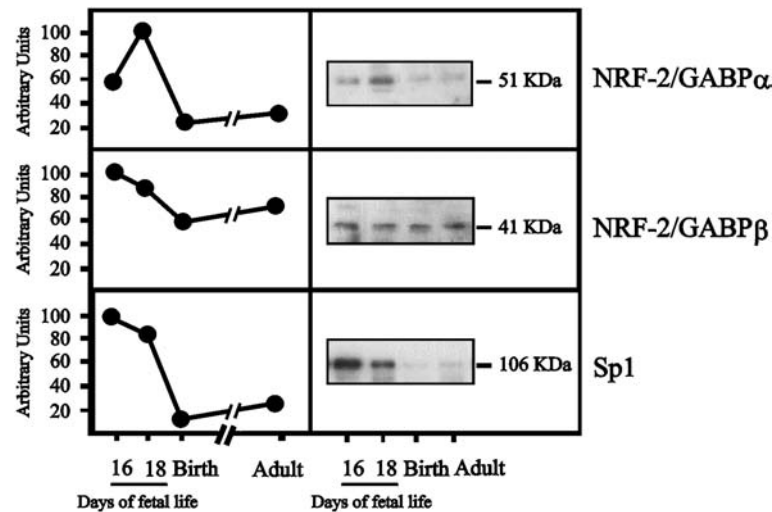


Figure 4. Content of NRF-2/GABP α , NRF-2/GABP β and Sp1 in developing BAT. Forty micrograms of nuclear protein extracts from interscapular BAT of mice at the indicated stages of development analysed by Western blot using specific antibodies for the indicated proteins. Results (left) are means of two to three independent analyses from different samples and are expressed as percentages of the mean value at the time of maximal expression which was set to 100. Representative Western blot analyses showing the sizes of the proteins detected are depicted on the right.

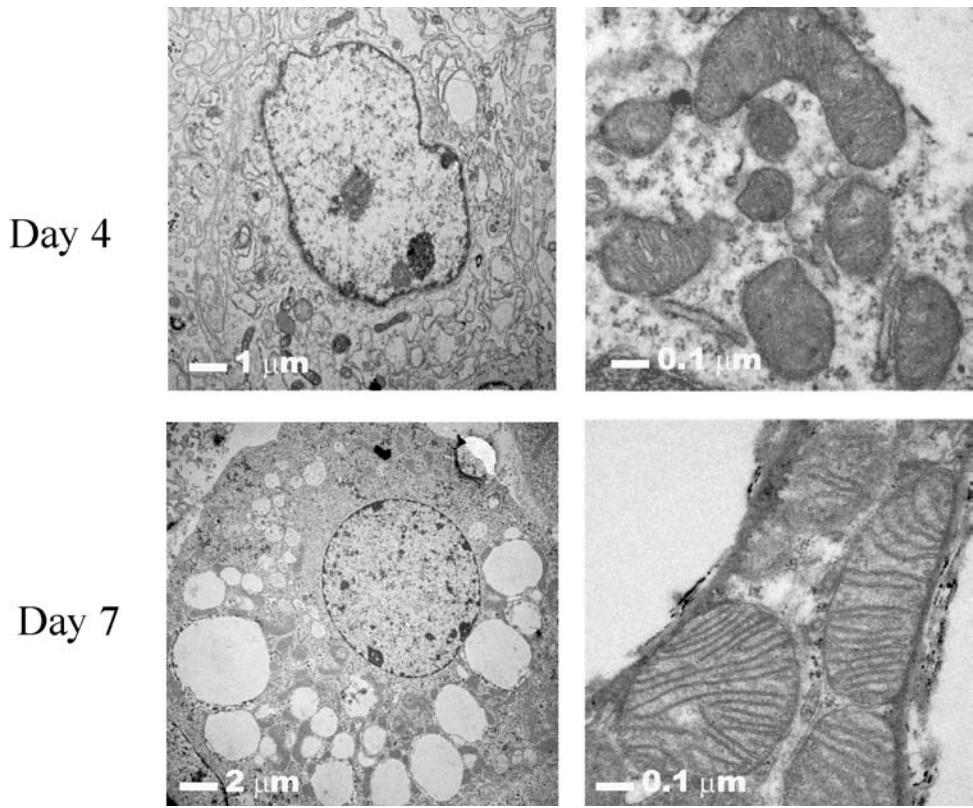


Figure 5. Morphology of cells and mitochondria in brown adipocytes differentiating in culture. Transmission electron microscopy analysis of murine brown adipocyte precursor cells (left) and mitochondria (right) after 4 or 7 days of culture. Scale bars show magnification.

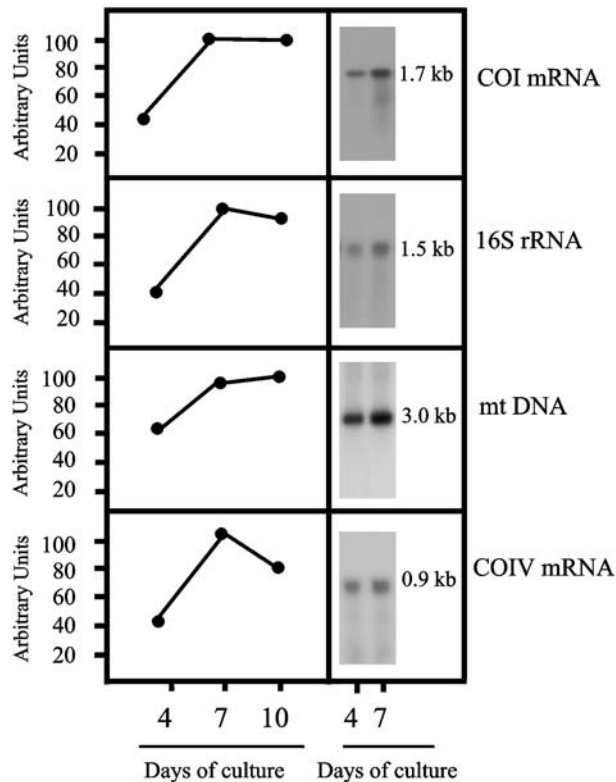


Figure 6. Expression of the mitochondrial genome and nuclear-encoded OXPHOS genes in brown adipocytes differentiating in culture. Points in left panels are means of two to three independent experiments from every time point of culture and are expressed as percentages of the mean value at the time of maximal expression, which was set to 100 (arbitrary units). The relative abundance of the mitochondrial transcripts COI mRNA and 16S rRNA and the nuclear-encoded transcript COIV mRNA was determined by Northern blot analysis of 25 μ g RNA; representative Northern blots are shown on the right. Controls of equal loading of RNA by ribosomal RNA staining were established as in figure 2. The relative abundance of mtDNA was determined by Southern blot analysis (see Material and methods); a representative Southern blot for mtDNA is shown on the right. Controls of equal loading of nuclear DNA were established as in figure 2.

encoded OXPHOS transcript (fig. 6). OXPHOS gene expression was not further enhanced from day 7 to day 10. When gene expression for transcription factors was determined between days 4 and 7 of cell culture, the profile of reciprocal changes observed was similar to that found in BAT differentiating in vivo during fetal life: NRF-1 mRNA and Sp1 mRNA abundance was reduced from day 4 to day 7, whereas NRF-2/GABP α and PGC-1 mRNAs were up-regulated and NRF-2/GABP β mRNA was essentially not modified (fig. 7).

Discussion

The present TEM results show that mitochondrial biogenesis is mostly induced in BAT in a precise period of

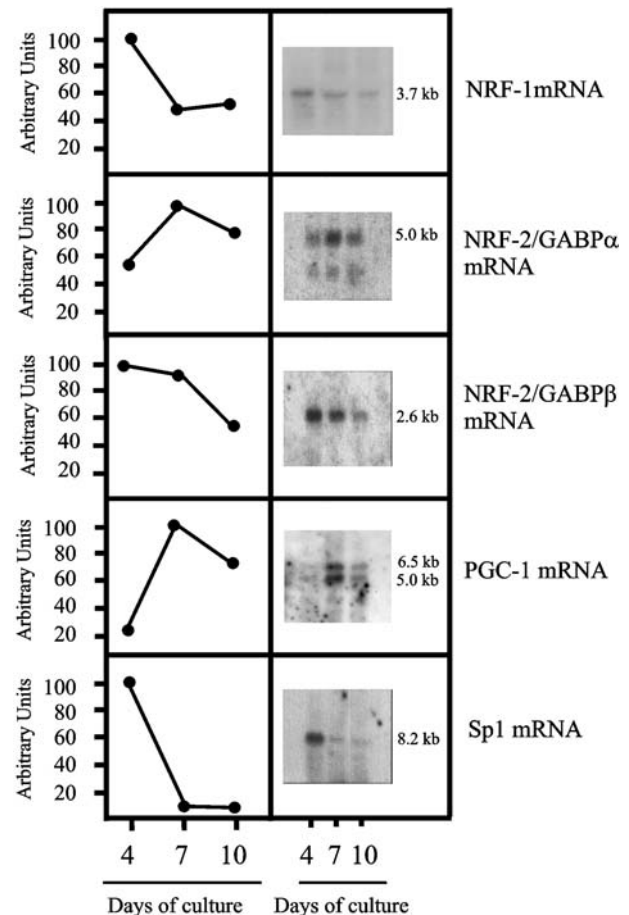


Figure 7. Expression of the mRNAs for transcription factors involved in OXPHOS gene regulation in differentiating brown adipocytes. Points in left panels are means of two to three independent experiments for every time point of culture and are expressed as percentages of the mean value at the time of maximal expression, which was set to 100 (arbitrary units). They show the relative abundance of the corresponding mRNAs as assessed by Northern blot analysis of 25 μ g of RNA. Representative Northern blots are shown on the right. Controls of equal loading of RNA by ribosomal RNA staining were established as in figure 2.

mouse development, between days 16 and 18 of fetal life. This is associated with a rise in the relative abundance of mtDNA and in mitochondrial-genome-encoded transcripts. The increase in transcript abundance was slightly higher than in mtDNA abundance, thus suggesting that enhanced mitochondrial DNA replication accounts for most of the rise in the expression of mitochondrial genome products. Several physiological and experimental models of enhanced mitochondrial genome expression in mammals have shown that multiple mechanisms can be used to induce regulatory changes in mtDNA expression. For example, when mtDNA expression in the liver is triggered by the stress of birth [23] or after a cold-environment exposure [24], enhanced mtDNA transcription increases mtDNA gene product synthesis without changes in mtDNA replication. In contrast, electric stim-

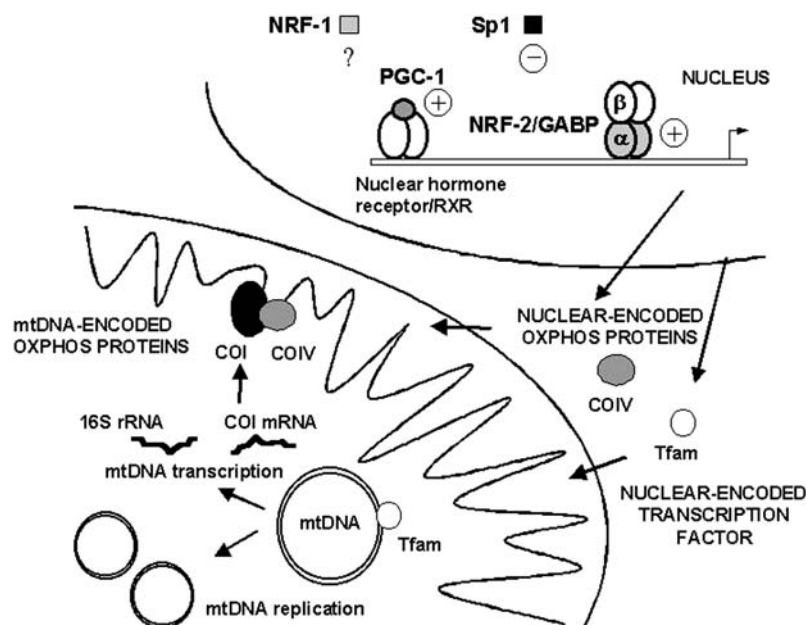


Figure 8. Model of the transcriptional regulation of mitochondrial biogenesis in differentiating brown adipocytes. NRF-2/GABP, as a transcription factor, and PGC-1 as a co-activator of nuclear hormone receptors, induce the transcription of genes for OXPHOS proteins, such as COIV, and for Tfam. Tfam induces mtDNA gene replication and transcription thus leading to enhanced synthesis of mtDNA-encoded proteins, such as COI. In this situation, Sp1 and NRF-1 levels would be low and do not interact with OXPHOS or Tfam gene promoters. The putative repressor role of Sp1 on these promoters would be relieved.

ulation of skeletal muscle raises the relative mtDNA content, which, at a similar rate of transcription, accounts for an overall increase in mitochondrially encoded protein synthesis [25]. Regulation of mitochondrial genome expression in differentiating brown adipocytes appears to be closer to this last mechanism. In this regard, lactation-induced mitochondrial hypotrophy in BAT and PGC-1-induced mitochondrial biogenesis in brown adipocytes are associated with a reduction and an increase, respectively, in the relative amount of mtDNA [8, 26]. The molecular mechanisms determining whether mtDNA replication or transcription is regulated to meet the need of higher mtDNA expression in a given physiological situation or cell type are not known, as the major transcription factor involved, the nuclear-encoded Tfam protein, participates in the control of both processes [27]. In any case, this process parallels the enhancement of nuclear-encoded OXPHOS gene expression, which suggests the involvement of NRFs or other transcriptional regulators in the control of OXPHOS nuclear genes and, through Tfam, of mitochondrial DNA replication.

The transcriptional regulators whose expression was up-regulated in association with enhanced OXPHOS gene expression in differentiating brown adipose cells were NRF-2/GABP α and the co-activator PGC-1. NRF-2/GABP β , the accessory subunit of the NRF-2/GABP complex, was not modified in the key periods of enhanced OXPHOS and NRF-2/GABP α gene expression. In fact, the subunits of the NRF-2/GABP complex that

limit building of the functionally active NRF-2/GABP transcription factor have not been identified in any cell type, but the present findings suggest that regulation of the α subunit is mostly associated with differentiation, at least in the brown adipocyte.

NRF-2/GABP regulates multiple nuclear OXPHOS genes [28], e.g. expression of the ATP synthase β -subunit gene during brown adipocyte differentiation depends on NRF-2/GABP interaction with the gene promoter [12]. Thus, our present results strongly suggest that a rise in NRF-2/GABP leads to enhanced OXPHOS gene expression and mitochondriogenesis during BAT differentiation. This regulatory role of NRF-2/GABP may be specific for BAT, at least when considering the other mammalian cell type in which differentiation is mostly associated with enhanced mitochondrial biogenesis, i.e. muscle cells. In these cells, there is no evidence for active NRF-2/GABP cis-acting elements in OXPHOS promoters [29] and no changes in NRF-2/GABP subunit expression have been detected in the transition from myoblasts to myotubes [30].

PGC-1 up-regulation, in association with mitochondria enrichment in brown adipocytes, is consistent with the known effects of PGC-1 over-expression in these cells or in myoblasts in culture promoting mitochondrial biogenesis [8, 9]. As a co-activator, PGC-1 can trigger the high expression of OXPHOS genes by interacting with NRF-1 [9], by inducing NRF-2 [9] or by interacting with thyroid hormone receptors [31], which can mediate the mito-

chondriogenic effect of thyroid hormones. Although none of these three mechanisms can be ruled out, opposite regulation of PGC-1 and NRF-1 mRNA expression when mitochondrial biogenesis is enhanced during BAT fetal development or in cell culture suggests a major relevance of the last two mechanisms. Thyroid hormone receptors and thyroid hormone accumulate in brown fat between days 16 and 18 of mouse fetal development [17] or in equivalent periods of rat fetal development [32], which indicates that thyroid-mediated mechanisms for mitochondrial biogenesis may be highly relevant in this period and that PGC-1 induction may contribute to this effect. On the other hand, thyroid hormones induce NRF2/GABP α gene transcription [33] pointing to cross-talk between hormones and transcription factors in the control of brown-fat mitochondrial biogenesis during late fetal life. Moreover, PGC-1 stimulates gene transcription of the brown-fat-specific protein UCP-1 [8] and the rise in PGC-1 mRNA expression parallels the initiation of UCP1 gene transcription during BAT ontogeny [17]. In addition to the up-regulation of NRF-2/GABP α and PGC-1, we observed that NRF-1 and Sp1 gene expression were down-regulated. The parallel reduction in NRF-1 mRNA expression during BAT differentiation in the fetal period and in cell culture was an unexpected finding, because it suggests that NRF-1 expression is not only unrelated but even opposite to mitochondrial biogenesis in the brown adipocyte. Multiple OXPHOS gene promoters are regulated by NRF-1, whose expression is transiently induced in skeletal muscle [34] and cardiac myocytes in culture [35] when exposed to stimuli leading to mitochondrial biogenesis. Either the specific program of mitochondrial biogenesis in the brown fat cell does not require high levels of NRF-1 or the levels of NRF-1 gene expression at day 16 of fetal life or day 4 of cell culture are high enough to trigger the mitochondriogenic process, although they are immediately down-regulated upon mitochondrial biogenesis. In fact, the targeted disruption of NRF-1 is lethal in the very early process of mouse embryogenesis and a more general role in embryo development and cell growth has been proposed for NRF-1 in addition to its function as regulator of mitochondrial biogenesis [36].

Although Sp1 is considered a highly ubiquitous, poorly regulated, transcription factor, the data from the two models of brown adipocyte differentiation studied indicate a strong regulation. Sp1-binding sites are regarded as major regulatory elements when OXPHOS gene promoters are analysed in the context of transformed cells [6, 7] and, for certain OXPHOS genes like cytochrome c, lacking NRF-dependent regulation, it is the only transcriptional regulator identified so far [6]. Moreover, cell transformation enhances Sp1 expression [37]. This would be consistent with a major role for Sp1 in determining the high expression of OXPHOS gene mRNAs characteristic of

transformed cells [38] but not when the expression of OXPHOS genes is enhanced owing to the differentiation to a specialized cell type such as the brown adipocyte. In this regard, the levels of Sp1 are high in cells differentiating to brown adipocytes only when they proliferate and initiation of differentiation is associated with Sp1 down-regulation. Moreover, Sp1 has also been shown to inhibit the expression of some OXPHOS gene promoters [6], consistent with the down-regulation of Sp1 and enhanced mitochondrial biogenesis. On the other hand, the role of Sp1 in gene regulation is more widespread than the control of OXPHOS genes. For example, Sp1 has been reported to repress the adipogenic program of differentiation in white adipocytes in cell culture [39] and present findings of Sp1 down-regulation agree with a parallel role during brown adipocyte differentiation. The adipogenic and mitochondriogenic programs of differentiation in the brown adipocyte are closely related. For example, fetal BAT mitochondrial biogenesis is impaired in mice lacking C/EBP α , an essential adipogenic transcription factor which does not trans-activate OXPHOS genes, and this is associated with reduced expression of NRF-2 and PGC-1 [17].

In summary, we have established that enhanced mitochondrial biogenesis in BAT is related to an increase in mtDNA content and the subsequent rise in the expression of mtDNA-encoded gene products, as well as to the coordinate induction of nuclear-encoded OXPHOS gene expression. This process is associated with reciprocal changes in the expression of NRF-2 and PGC-1 (increase) compared with NRF-1 and Sp1 (decrease) (see fig. 8). This pattern of behaviour is a common feature of brown adipose cells upon differentiation during fetal development or in cell culture. These results suggest that the relative roles of transcription factors and co-activators in mediating mitochondrial biogenesis 'in vivo' are highly specific for the cell type and stimuli that mediate the mitochondriogenic process.

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