# Processing and secretion of rat α₁-microglobulin-bikunin expressed in eukaryotic cell lines

Tomas Bratt*, Tommy Cedervall, Bo Åkerström

*Section of Molecular Signaling, Department of Medical and Physiological Chemistry, Lund University, Box 94, S-221 00 Lund, Sweden*

**Abstract** The precursor protein $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin was cleaved to the same degree whether expressed in CHO cells or in mutated CHO cells, RPE.40 cells, suggested to lack a functional form of the intracellular protease furin. Thus, $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin probably is not cleaved in vivo by furin. However, simultaneous overexpression of the precursor and furin in COS, CHO and RPE.40 cells increased the cleavage, suggesting that compartmentalisation and concentrations of protease and precursor are important for the cleavage, besides the in vitro specificity. Expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and bikunin alone gave different protein patterns on SDS-PAGE as compared to expression of the precursor and subsequent cleavage, suggesting that the precursor protein is important for the post-translational handling of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and bikunin.

*Key words:* Furin; Precursor; COS cell; CHO cell; RPE.40 cell; Post-translational modification

## 1. Introduction

Rat $\alpha_1$-microglobulin is a brown-coloured 28 kDa glycosylated plasma protein with immunoregulatory properties. $\alpha_1$-microglobulin is a member of the lipocalin superfamily, which comprises nearly twenty different proteins with a predicted three-dimensional structure of two anti-parallel $\beta$-sheets surrounding a hydrophobic pocket [1].

The mRNA for $\alpha_1$-microglobulin also codes for bikunin [2], and an $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor protein is synthesized in rat liver cells [3], and cleaved late in the Golgi apparatus [4]. Bikunin is the light chain of the high molecular weight plasma proteins inter-$\alpha$-inhibitor, formerly inter-$\alpha$-trypsin inhibitor [5], and pre-$\alpha$-inhibitor [6], and responsible for the antiproteolytic activities of these proteins. After cleavage of the precursor, $\alpha_1$-microglobulin is secreted in free form into the bloodstream [4]. Bikunin is glycosylated and sulphated, most likely before cleavage of the precursor [7], and the resulting glycosaminoglycan crosslinks the inhibitor complexes [8]. In the precursor protein, the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and bikunin parts are separated by a tetrapeptide conforming to a consensus sequence with basic amino acids in positions $-4$, $-2$ and $-1$ relative to the cleavage site [9,10]. This sequence is found in several different proproteins, such as complement and coagulation factors, receptors, virus envelope proteins and growth factors [10], and is thought to be a recognition site for an intracellular endoprotease family, including furin [11] (also given the systematic name PACE1) as the most well characterized.

Two questions concerning the processing of the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor were addressed in this article. First, the role of furin in the processing was investigated by expressing DNA coding for $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin alone or together with DNA coding for furin in cell lines with no endogenous $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin production. Secondly, the

co-expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and bikunin as a precursor protein is enigmatic as the two proteins do not have any apparent functional connection. In an effort to find the reasons for the co-expression, DNA fragments encoding either the full precursor protein or the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin- or bikunin-parts alone were expressed in the same cell system, and the protein products compared.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Materials

CHO-K1 (referred to as CHO) and RPE-40 cells were generous gifts from Dr. T. Moehring, Vermont Cancer Center, Burlington, USA. Restriction enzymes *Sac*I and *Xho*I and Endoglycosidase F were purchased from Boehringer Mannheim, Germany and *Sal*I, *Xba*I, *Sma*I, *Bam*HI, DNA polymerase (Klenow fragment), T4 DNA ligase, Lipofectin, RPMI 1640, Optimem and foetal calf serum (FCS) from Gibco BRL, Gaithersburg, USA. Taq polymerase and *f*mol sequencing kit was obtained from Promega, Madison, USA. pBluescript containing human furin was a gift from Chiron Co., Emeryville, USA. Primers were purchased from Biomolecular Resource Facility, University of Lund, Sweden. Rabbit anti-rat $\alpha_1$-microglobulin [12] and goat anti-rabbit IgG [13] were prepared as described. Chemicals were from Merck, Darmstadt, Germany, if not indicated otherwise.

### 2.2. DNA constructs

DNA encoding $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin, $\alpha_1$-microglobulin or bikunin, including the natural signal peptide of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin, were constructed (Fig. 1) by the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) technique, using a rat liver library (Clontech Lab., Palo Alto, USA) as a template source and primers containing suitable restriction enzyme sites for ligation in the pSVL SV40 late promotor expression vector (Kabi-Pharmacia AB, Uppsala, Sweden). The primers used for $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin amplification was primer 1 (AAGTCTCTAG AAT-GCAGGGT CTCGGGCCCT GTT) and primer 2 (CGACGAGCTC TCATCTTGCA AATGAAGTGG ACTC), for $\alpha_1$-microglobulin amplification primer 1 and primer 3 (AAGTCGAGCT CTCAACTGCG TGTTAGCTCC TCGTAC) and for bikunin with signal sequence primer 4 (CTGCCTGCCT CACTTTGAAG GCTGCAGTGC TGC-CCCAAGA GAATGA) and primer 2 in the first step and primer 5 (AATCTAGAAT GCAGGGTCTC GGGGCCCTGT TCTTGTTG-CT GACTGCCTGC CTCACTTTGA AGGCTGCAGT GCT) and primer 2 in the second step. The PCR conditions were as follows: 94°C for 3 min, 25 cycles with 50°C for 1 min, 72°C for 1 min and 94°C for 30 s, and ending with 72°C for 10 min. The products were purified by 1.0% agarose gel electrophoresis, where the bands of interest were cut out and the agarose slices centrifuged on top of dimethyldichlorosilane-

*Corresponding author. Fax: (46) (46) 104022.
E-mail: tomas.bratt@medkem.lu.se

treated glass wool (Alltech, Deerfield, USA) at 4,000 × g for 10 min. To faciliate restriction enzyme cleavage, the PCR-products were made blunt-ended by treatment with DNA polymerase (Klenow fragment) and, after heat inactivation at 68°C, cut with restriction enzymes XbaI and SacI. The fragments were ligated in pSVL, which previously had been cut with the same restriction enzymes. Ligation was performed with T4 DNA ligase using an insert/vector ratio of 3/1(molar) for 1 h in 23–26°C. pBluescript furin was cleaved by the restriction enzyme SalI and made blunt-ended with the Klenow fragment. The product was cleaved by XbaI and the furin fragment was ligated, as above, into pSVL which had been cut by XbaI and SmaI. Unless otherwise indicated, protocols from Maniatis et al. [14] were used. All DNA constructs except furin were sequenced after insertion in pSVL using the fmol sequencing kit according to the dideoxy method [15].

### 2.3. Expression of α₁-microglobulin-bikunin

COS cells were grown on an 8.5 cm Petri dish (NUNC, Roskilde, Denmark) in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% FCS. The adherent cells were trypsinated after reaching confluency, washed once with PBS and transfected with pSVL containing DNA coding for α₁-microglobulin, bikunin and α₁-microglobulin-bikunin with or without pSVL coding for furin (100 pmol of each plasmid) by electroporation (Biorad, Hercules, USA) at 500 μF and 0.3 kV according to the manufacturer. All transfections described were done at least in duplicate. The cells were immediately sown out in 8.5 cm dishes in RPMI 1640 supplemented by 10% FCS and left at 37°C for 48 h.The medium was changed to Optimem and the cells and medium were harvested after 24 h. The cells were solubilized with 5 ml 0.1 M Tris-HCl (pH 8.0), 5 mM NaEDTA, 0.15 M NaCl, 0.1 mM N-ethylmaleimide, 10 mg Triton X-100/ml, 1 μg pepstatin/ml, 5 μg antipain/ml and 10 μg leupeptin/ml. For the ³⁵SO₄-labelling of bikunin, the cells were transfected as above, sown out and four days later washed with EMEM low sulphate medium

(Nordvacc, Sweden) also containing leucine 52 mg/l and then incubated for 24 h in this medium supplemented with 10% FCS and 0.1 MBq ³⁵SO₄/ml (Amersham Life Science, Amersham, England). CHO and RPE.40 cells were grown on 8.5 cm Petri dishes in RPMI 1640 medium. pSVL coding for α₁-microglobulin-bikunin with or without pSVL coding for furin were transfected to the cells on the dish by adding a mixture of the plasmids (20 pmol) with 30 μl Lipofectin and 3 ml Optimem. 3 ml Optimem supplemented with 10% FCS were added 6 h after transfection. The medium was changed 30 h after transfection and the cells and medium harvested 72 h after transfection.

### 2.4. Affinity chromatography

Media and cell solubilisates were purified on a column packed with monoclonal anti-α₁-microglobulin Sepharose. The anti-rat α₁-microglobulin, designated BN11.6, was prepared and purified as described [16] and 5 mg were immobilized to 1 ml CNBr-activated Sepharose [17] according to the description supplied by Kabi-Pharmacia AB, Uppsala, Sweden. The columns were eluted with 0.1 M glycine-HCl, pH 2.2.

### 2.5. Analysis of α₁-microglobulin and bikunin

α₁-microglobulin (30 μg/ml), purified by affinity chromatography, was treated with Endoglycosidase F (1 mU/μg α₁-microglobulin) for 48 h at 37°C as described previously [4]. α₁-microglobulin and goat anti-rabbit IgG were labelled with ¹²⁵I (Svensk Radiofarmaka, Stockholm, Sweden) by chloramin T-oxidation [18] to a specific activity of 0.3–1.0 MBq/μg. Proteins were separated by 12% SDS-PAGE according to Laemmli [19], transferred to Immobilon membranes [20] (Millipore, Bedford, USA) and blotted with rabbit polyclonal anti-rat α₁-microglobulin antibodies and ¹²⁵I-goat anti-rabbit IgG as described [21]. Detection of proteins were done by autoradiography at −70°C using Kodak X-Omat S films (Kodak, Rochester, USA), or in a Fujix BAS
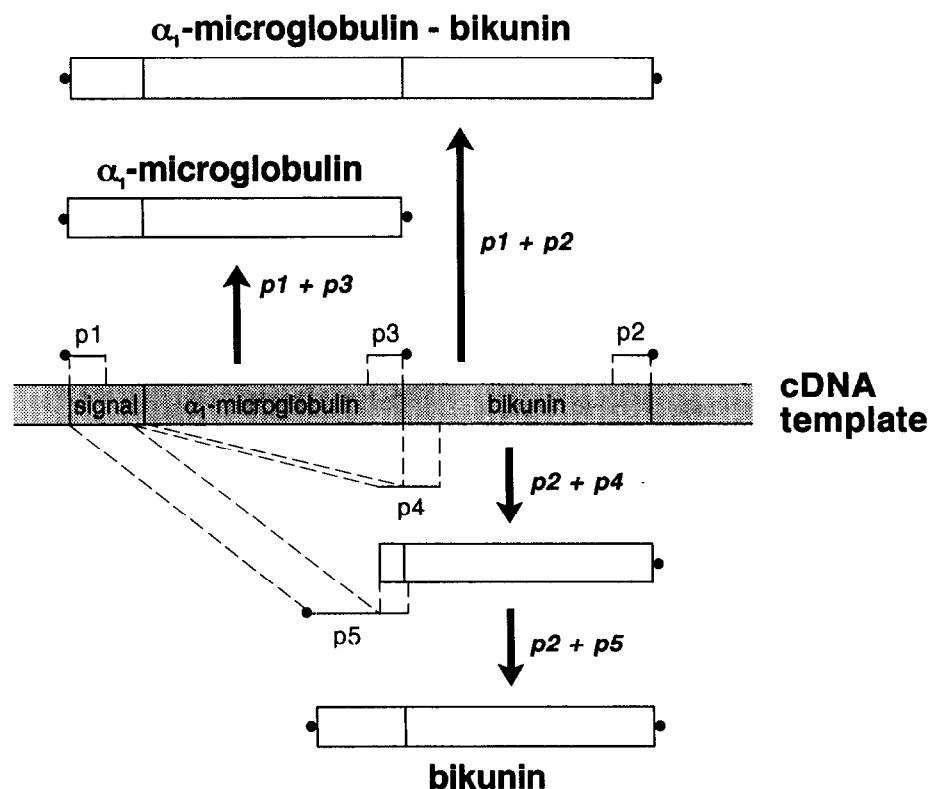


**α₁-microglobulin - bikunin**

**α₁-microglobulin**

p1 + p2

p1 + p3

p1          p3          p2

signal    α₁-microglobulin    bikunin          cDNA template

p4

p2 + p4

p5

p2 + p5

**bikunin**

Fig. 1. DNA constructs. Different α₁-microglobulin- or bikunin-encoding DNA constructs (empty bars) were produced from a rat liver cDNA library (hatched bar) using PCR (arrows) and five different primers (unbroken lines) containing sequences from various sites of the α₁-microglobulin-bikunin DNA and restriction enzyme sites (dots). α₁-microglobulin was produced with primer 1, which was coding for a XbaI site and the 5′ end of the signal sequence of α₁-microglobulin, and primer 2, with a SacI site and the 3′ end of bikunin. α₁-microglobulin was produced using primer 1 and primer 3, coding for the 3′ end of α₁-microglobulin, a stop codon and a SacI site. Bikunin was produced using primer 4, which codes for the 3′ part of the natural signal sequence of the precursor and the 5′ part of bikunin, and primer 2. This product was purified and then used in a reaction with primer 5, coding for most of α₁-microglobulin's signal sequence and primer 2.
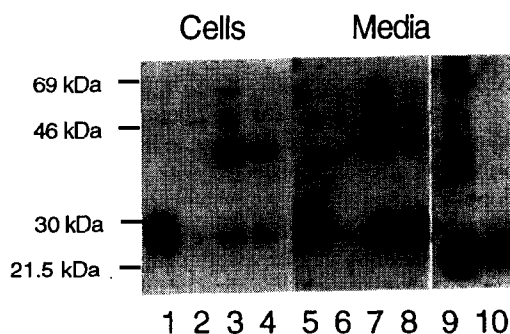
Cells    Media



Fig. 2. Expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin forms in COS cells. COS cells were transfected with plasmids carrying DNA inserts coding for $\alpha_1$-microglobulin, bikunin, $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin or furin and medium was collected 72 h later. The cells were washed with PBS and solubilised with Triton X-100. Media and cell solubilisates were applied to an anti-rat $\alpha_1$-microglobulin Sepharose column. The eluates were separated by SDS-PAGE and blotted with anti-rat $\alpha_1$-microglobulin. Cell solubilisate from the COS cells after $\alpha_1$-microglobulin transfection is shown in lane 1; cell solubilisate after bikunin transfection in lane 2; cell solubilisate after $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin transfection in lane 3; cell solubilisate after $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin and furin transfection in lane 4. Medium from the COS cells after $\alpha_1$-microglobulin transfection is shown in lane 5; medium after bikunin transfection in lane 6; medium after $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin transfection in lane 7; medium after $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin and furin transfection in lane 8. Medium after $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin transfection and Endoglycosidase F treatment in lane 9; medium after $\alpha_1$-microglobulin transfection and Endoglycosidase F treatment in lane 10.

2000 Bio-imaging analyzer (Fuji films Co., Japan). $^{35}SO_4$-containing samples were separated under non-denaturing conditions on a 4–27% acrylamide gradient electrophoresis [22]. The gel was washed in water, soaked in 1.3 M sodium salicylate, dried and analysed by fluorography [23]. $\alpha_1$-microglobulin concentrations were determined by a RIA procedure previously described [24], based on a competitive binding of labelled and unlabelled rat $\alpha_1$-microglobulin to polyclonal rabbit anti-$\alpha_1$-microglobulin, followed by precipitation of immune complexes with 10% polyethylene glycol 6000.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. DNA construction

DNA fragments coding for $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin, $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and bikunin were constructed as described in Fig. 1. All three DNA fragments contained the code for the natural signal sequence of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin. The $\alpha_1$-microglobulin encoding fragments also included the sequence R-A-R-R situated N-terminally of the cleavage site. These constructs and DNA coding for furin were ligated into pSVL plasmids. The plasmids were subjected to restriction enzyme cleavage and agarose electrophoresis and the sizes of the DNA fragments were the expected from inserts adequately incorporated (not shown). All PCR constructs were sequenced and found to be identical to the previously published sequence [3].

### 3.2. Expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin in COS cells

To determine if furin can cleave the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor protein under natural conditions, $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin was expressed in COS cells, with or without concomitant expression of furin. SDS-PAGE and anti-$\alpha_1$-microglobulin blotting demonstrated the presence of at least

two high molecular mass forms (40 and 42 kDa) and two low molecular mass forms (28 and 30 kDa) in the cell lysates (Fig. 2, lanes 3 and 4) and media (lanes 7 and 8). As shown previously, the 40 and 42 kDa forms represent the precursor protein $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin with one or two N-linked oligosaccharides, and the 28 and 30 kDa forms probably correspond to non-sialylated or sialylated free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin which were present in rat liver cells as 26 and 28 kDa, respectively [4]. Less of the precursor protein and more free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin was seen when furin was co-expressed with $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin in the cells (lane 4) and media (lane 8), suggesting that furin is capable of cleaving the precursor with free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin as one of the products. Substantial amounts of free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin also appeared when $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin was expressed without furin (lanes 3 and 7), suggesting that an endogenous protease with specificity for $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin is present in the COS cells. A 65 kDa band and a heterogeneous staining between 40 and 65 kDa were also observed when $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin was transfected without furin. Finally, a 50 kDa band was seen in all lanes as part of the background.

### 3.3. Expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin in a protease deficient cell line

A CHO-derived cell strain called RPE.40, which is unable to cleave viral membrane glycoprotein precursors [25], probably due to a mutation in the furin gene, was used for expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin alone or together with furin. For both CHO and RPE.40 cells, transfection with $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin yielded both the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor and free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin (Fig. 3, lanes 2 and 4), suggesting that enzymes capable of cleaving $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin are present in both cell lines. The degree of cleavage, i.e. the ratio of precursor to free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin, was approximately the same for the two cell lines, indicating that the mutation events in the RPE.40 cells do not involve the enzymes cleaving $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin. Transfection of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin together with furin gave a higher degree of cleavage in
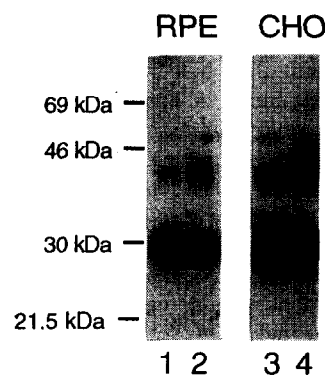
RPE    CHO



Fig. 3. Expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin with and without concomitant expression of furin in RPE.40 and CHO cells. The experiment was essentially performed as described for Fig. 2. Lane 1 represent medium from RPE.40 cells transfected with $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin and furin, lane 2 medium from RPE.40 cells transfected with $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin, lane 3 medium from CHO cells transfected with $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin and furin, lane 4 medium from CHO cells transfected with $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin.
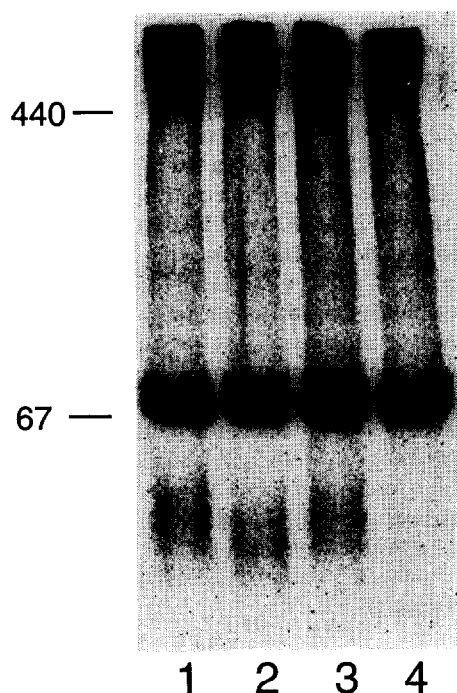
Fig. 4. Expression of $^{35}SO_4$-containing proteins in COS cells. COS cells were transfected with plasmids carrying DNA inserts coding for $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin, furin, $\alpha_1$-microglobulin or bikunin and cultivated in medium containing $^{35}SO_4$. Twenty-four hours later, medium was collected, and the cells washed with PBS and solubilised with Triton X-100. The media were separated by 4–27% acrylamide gradient electrophoresis, the gel treated with sodium-salicylate and dried. Lane 1 represents medium from COS cells transfected with $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin and furin, lane 2 medium from COS cells transfected with bikunin, lane 3 medium from COS cells transfected with $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin and lane 4 medium from COS cells transfected with $\alpha_1$-microglobulin.

both cell types (lanes 1 and 3), again suggesting that furin is able to cleave the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor.

### 3.4. Expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin or bikunin

Transfection of DNA encoding the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin part yielded similar amounts of free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin as transfection with DNA encoding the whole $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor (typically around 0.6 $\mu g/ml$), as determined by RIA. However, when $\alpha_1$-microglobulin was expressed alone a different protein band pattern was seen (Fig. 2, lanes 1 and 5). Transfection with the bikunin part alone yielded no $\alpha_1$-microglobulin (Fig. 2, lanes 2 and 6).

To investigate the role of carbohydrates in the multiple forms of free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin, media from COS cells after expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin or $\alpha_1$-microglobulin without bikunin were treated with Endoglycosidase F, removing N-glycosides. After SDS-PAGE, the molecular masses of the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin bands were reduced, but several different forms were still seen (Fig. 2, lanes 9 and 10). This suggests that the multiple forms of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin are not caused by N-glycosides.

Bikunin can be seen in the crude culture medium of rat hepatocytes as a $^{35}SO_4$-containing broad band with a molecular mass of 35–45 kDa upon SDS-PAGE, due to the addition of

a sulphated, heterogeneous glycosaminoglycan to the bikunin peptide [26]. Transfection of COS cells with DNA encoding $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin with ot without furin or bikunin alone yielded a similar sulphated and heterogeneous molecule, most likely free bikunin (Fig. 4, lanes 1–3). This band was not present in control cells transfected with DNA encoding $\alpha_1$-microglobulin alone (lane 4). As evident, expression of bikunin alone (lane 2) gave a smaller molecule than expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin with or without furin, suggesting a difference in post-translational handling of bikunin. Treatment of the culture media (containing bikunin) with chondroitinase [26] resulted in the disappearance of the broad $^{35}SO_4$-containing bands (not shown).

The effects of free intracellular bikunin, a protease inhibitor, on the protein synthesis in the cells was investigated by expressing bikunin alone in the presence of [$^{35}S$]methionine. After SDS-PAGE of the medium, no difference was seen in protein secretion (not shown). Furthermore, the COS cells, regardless of the identity of the transfected plasmids, appeared identical under the microscope.

### 4. Discussion

The cleavage of the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor by the proprotein processing enzyme furin was examined in this work. Furin, a homologue to the yeast protease Kex2, was the first mammalian enzyme shown to have a cleavage specificity for intracellular proproteins with cleavage sites consisting of several basic amino acid residues also found in the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor. Furin, which has a ubiquitous expression, is thus a strong candidate for the cleavage of the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor in liver cells.

The $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor was successfully expressed and partly cleaved into its constituents $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and bikunin in the cell lines CHO and RPE.40. The RPE.40 cells, which are mutated CHO cells, were shown to be unable to cleave provirus proteins, a function which could be restored by transfection with furin-encoding DNA [25]. A very similar processing defect was discovered in LoVo cells, which are derived from a human colon carcinoma, and in these cells a mutation of furin was demonstrated to be the cause of the defective proprotein processing [27]. This suggests that furin is also deactivated in the RPE.40 cell line, whereas the enzyme is intact in the CHO cells. The results of this work showed that there is no difference in the degree of cleavage of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin between the two cell lines (Fig. 3, lanes 1 and 3). The most likely conclusion of this experiment is that furin is not the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin cleaving enzyme in these cells.

Furin- and $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin-encoding DNA were expressed in COS cells, CHO cells and RPE.40 cells. The results clearly showed an increased cleavage of the precursor as compared to expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin alone (Fig. 2 and 3). This shows that furin is *capable* of cleaving $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin, even if the precursor is not a natural substrate of this enzyme. Overexpressed furin was recently shown to have a broader specificity than endogenous furin [28]. The increased intracellular cleavage of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin could be explained by an over-expression or an unnatural compartmentalisation of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin and furin in these in vitro expression systems, suggesting that these factors are of importance besides the specificities of the processing

enzymes in the regulation of the cleavage of various propro-teins. Other proteases with similiar specificity as furin [29–31], which could be candidates for cleavage of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin have been discovered. But no attempt to differentiate between these endoproteases has been done in this work.

Expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin without bikunin in COS cells lead to the secretion of free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin with different molecular masses than produced after expression of the full-length $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor. The code for the cleavage peptide located between $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and bikunin in the precursor, R-A-R-R, was included in the DNA fragment encoding $\alpha_1$-microglobulin without bikunin. It has been shown previously that the three C-terminal amino acid residues, A-R-R, have been removed in mature $\alpha_1$-microglobulin [32]. One possibility is therefore that this peptide is eliminated to a much lower degree if free $\alpha_1$-microglobulin is produced by direct translation instead of cleavage from the $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor. Treatment with Endoglycosidase F (Fig. 2), which removes N-glycosides, could not eliminate the different appearance on SDS-PAGE between $\alpha_1$-microglobulin ex-pressed alone and as the precursor. An alternative possibility is therefore that the protein is also O-glycosylated, and that this process depends on the presence of the precursor $\alpha_1$-microglob-ulin-bikunin.

Interestingly, expression of bikunin without $\alpha_1$-microglob-ulin gave a smaller molecule than expression of the whole $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin precursor (Fig. 4). The difference was not caused by the presence of uncleaved sulphated $\alpha_1$-microglobulin-bikunin since no precursor was present after co-expression of furin (lane 2), and the $^{35}SO_4$-activity was not removed by anti-$\alpha_1$-microglobulin affinity chromatography (not shown). This observation thus suggests that the glycosyla-tion and sulphation of bikunin, and perhaps also the cross-linking of bikunin to the heavy chains of pre- and inter-$\alpha$-inhibitor which involves the sulphated glycosaminoglycan of bikunin [8], are regulated by the presence of the $\alpha_1$-microglob-ulin part of the precursor.

The reason for the co-expression of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and bikunin is not known. The two proteins do not have any appar-ent functional connection as mature plasma proteins. It is pos-sible that the explanation instead can be found in a functional interaction between the proteins before secretion. One such explanation is that the co-translation is needed to achieve a correct translation or secretion of either $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and bikunin or both. However, the results of this work indicate that this is not the case since both proteins were translated and secreted to approximately the same level when expressed alone as when expressed via the precursor. Another possibility is that the co-translation ascertains a correct post-translational proc-essing of either protein. Indeed, the results indicate a difference in glycosylation or exoprotease processing of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin and glycosylation/sulphation of bikunin, when expressed alone.

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