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Construction and Use of New Cloning Vectors for the Rapid Isolation of Recombinant Proteins from *Escherichia coli*

C. R. Rocco¹, K. L. Dennison², Vadim A. Klenchin², I. Rayment², and J. C. Escalante-Semerena¹

¹Department of Bacteriology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, USA

²Department of Biochemistry, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, USA

Abstract

We describe the construction and use of two sets of vectors for the over-expression and purification of protein from *E. coli*. The set of pTEV plasmids (pTEV3, 4, 5) directs the synthesis of a recombinant protein with a N-terminal hexahistidine (His₆) tag that is removable by the tobacco etch virus (TEV) protease. The set of pKLD plasmids (pKLD66, 116) directs the synthesis of a recombinant protein that contains a N-terminal His₆ and maltose-binding protein tags in tandem, which can also be removed with TEV protease. The usefulness of these plasmids is illustrated by the rapid, high-yield purification of the 2-methylcitrate dehydratase (PrpD) protein of *Salmonella enterica*, and the 2-methylaconitate isomerase (PrpF) protein of *Shewanella oneidensis*, two enzymes involved in the catabolism of propionate to pyruvate via the 2-methylcitric acid cycle.

Keywords

TEV protease-cleavable tags; rapid protein purification; propionate catabolism; 2-methylcitric acid cycle enzymes; 2-methylaconitate isomerase; 2-methylcitrate dehydratase

INTRODUCTION

The synthesis of the first biologically functional bacterial plasmid (Cohen *et al.*, 1973) signaled the beginning of molecular cloning and recombinant DNA technology. With the advent of recombinant DNA technology, researchers were first able to selectively increase the expression of single genes, which in turn increased yields of protein purifications. However purification of proteins in their native form is still a difficult and time-consuming process.

Not until the advent of affinity tag purification did protein purification become a faster and more efficient process. Development of affinity tags such as the maltose-binding tag (di Guan *et al.*, 1988; Maina *et al.*, 1988), the polyhistidine tags of the pET vector series, (Rosenberg *et al.*, 1987; Studier & Moffatt, 1986; Studier *et al.*, 1990), and the IMPACT® intein chitin-

Correspondence should be sent to Jorge C. Escalante-Semerena, Department of Bacteriology, University of Wisconsin, 1550 Linden Dr, Madison, WI 53706 USA; E-mail: escalante@bact.wisc.edu, phone: (608) 262-7379, fax: (608) 265-7909 or to Ivan Rayment, Department of Biochemistry, University of Wisconsin, 433 Babcock Dr, Madison, WI, 53706; E-mail: Ivan_Rayment@biochem.wisc.edu, phone: (608) 262-0437.

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binding tag (Chong *et al.*, 1997; Chong *et al.*, 1998) allowed for more efficient and rapid purification of diverse proteins at yields much higher than would have been possible through native purification. The development of instruments such as the Maxwell™ 16 Instrument and the Maxwell™ 16 Polyhistidine Protein Purification Kit (Promega), have taken protein purification a step further by now allowing for the automated purification of up to 16 polyhistidine tagged proteins in less than one hour.

While the addition of affinity tags allow for ease of purification, it does render the protein into a non-native state and the affinity tag can often hamper subsequent work with the protein. While the IMPACT® system requires cleavage of the protein from the tag as an elution step, other systems require a subsequent cleavage and purification to remove the affinity tag. One method of tag removal is through the use of the tobacco etch virus (TEV) protease. TEV protease has become one of the proteases of choice for cleaving fusion proteins due to its high degree of specificity, its resistance to many protease inhibitors used in protein purification, and the ease of separation of both the protease and affinity tag from the protein of interest (Parks *et al.*, 1994). Additionally, improvement to the ability to purify large amounts of TEV protease (Blommel & Fox, 2007; Lucast *et al.*, 2001; van den Berg *et al.*, 2006) can make the TEV protease a relatively inexpensive option for cleavage of fusion proteins when compared to other commercially available options.

Previous work has established that various protein fusion vectors featuring rTEV protease cleavage sites are viable for the purification of high levels of recombinant protein through high-throughput approaches (Dummler *et al.*, 2005; Korf *et al.*, 2005) or via ligation independent cloning (Cabrita *et al.*, 2006). Here we report on the construction of two new series of vectors to the growing family of rTEV-cleavable protein fusion vectors that allow for efficient purification of recombinant bacterial proteins. The pTEV series is based off the Novagen pET vector series and incorporates a TEV protease cleavage site as well as an improved variety of restriction endonucleases sites to increase cloning options. The pKLD series utilizes the pET vector backbone while incorporating both a polyhistidine tag as well as the maltose binding tag from the New England Biolabs pMAL vector series. The pKLD series also have a TEV protease cleavage site and improved multiple cloning sites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

pTEV plasmids direct the synthesis of proteins fused to a hexahistidine (H₆) N terminal tag

pTEV vectors used to overproduce proteins with TEV-cleavable N-terminal His₆ tags were constructed by modifying the Novagen ketosteroid isomerase (KSI) fusion plasmid pET-31b (+). The KSI coding sequence was removed by digestion restriction enzymes *Nde*I and *Bpu*1102I (*Esp*I). A hexahistidine (His₆) tag coding sequence, a seven amino acid spacer sequence, and a *Spe*I site were introduced at the *Nde*I and *Bpu*1102I sites with the rTEVLink1 DNA fragment (Table 1, supplemental material). This temporary plasmid was designated pKLD35. A rTEV protease cleavage site was inserted into plasmid pKLD35 at the *Spe*I and *Bpu*1102I sites with the rTEVLink2 DNA fragment (Table 1, supplemental material). The resulting plasmid was named pTEV4 (Figure 1). If the *Nhe*I site is used for cloning the coding sequence of the gene of choice, after TEV protease cleavage the resulting protein only has three additional amino acids (Gly-Ala-Ser) attached to the N-terminus (Figure 1).

To increase the usefulness of plasmid pTEV4, the number of restriction sites available in the multiple cloning site (MCS) was increased. The TEV MCS DNA fragment (Table 1) was ligated into plasmid pTEV4 at the *Nhe*I and *Bpu*1102I (*Esp*I) restriction sites. The resulting plasmid was named pTEV3 (Figure 1).

Moving genes from pET vectors into pTEV plasmids

The *NdeI* site of pTEV3 was inactivated thorough digestion and end filling. A new *NdeI* site was introduced with the TEVStartMCS DNA fragment (Table 1, supplemental material) at the *NheI* and *EcoRI* restriction sites. This final plasmid was given the name pTEV5 (Figure 1). Use of the *NdeI* site as a 5' cloning site results in four additional residues (Gly-Ala-Ser-His) at the N-terminus of the protein after TEV protease cleavage (Figure 1). While the use of this site adds several additional residues, the *NdeI* site is a common 5' cloning site in other pET vectors and addition of it to the pTEV vectors allows for the quick removal of an insert from pET vectors and insertion into the pTEV vector series.

Use of His₆-TEV vectors to isolate the 2-methylnaconitate isomerase (PrpF) enzyme of *Shewanella oneidensis*

To assess the usefulness of pTEV plasmids, we expressed the *prpF* gene from *Shewanella oneidensis* after cloning it into the *NheI* and *NcoI* sites of plasmid pTEV4. The resulting plasmid (pPRP196) was transformed into *E. coli* strain B121(λDE3) (New England Biolabs), a strain widely used to overproduce recombinant proteins.

His₆-PrpF was purified from clarified cell-free extracts using the Novagen His-Bind® nickel affinity chromatography kit following manufacturer's instructions and the results can be seen in Figure 2. Enzymatic assays were performed to determine that the protein was active and the average yield of protein from purification, after rTEV cleavage, was 15 mg per gram of wet cells. The purity of the protein was not determined as no contaminating bands could be observed in SDS-PAGE gels, so the protein was assumed to be greater than 95% pure.

Along with pTEV4, both pTEV3 and pTEV5 have been used to purify large amounts of highly purified protein with an average protein yield after removal of the tag, varying from 10–20 mg protein per gram of wet cells, depending upon the individual protein purified. These proteins have been used in both enzymatic and crystallographic studies which helps demonstrate the functionality of these plasmids (Garvey *et al.*, 2007; Gray & Escalante-Semerena, 2007; Lewis & Escalante-Semerena, 2007; St Maurice *et al.*, 2007).

Construction of His-MBP-TEV vectors

In addition to the modified pET vectors, we engineered a maltose binding protein (MBP) fusion vector to include a rTEV protease cleavage site. First, a His₆ tag was introduced 5' from the *malE* gene in vector pMAL-c2x (NEB). The pMALHisMut DNA fragment (Table 1, supplemental material) was ligated to the plasmid 5' to the *MalE* gene. This temporary plasmid was given the name pKLD54. To introduce a rTEV cleavage site and amino acid spacer downstream from the *malE* gene, plasmid pKLD54 was cut with restriction endonucleases *SacI* and *XbaI* and the DNA fragment MCSInsert (Table 1, supplemental material) was ligated into the plasmid. The resulting plasmid was named pKLD55. pKLD55 was cut with restriction endonucleases *NdeI* and *HindIII* to remove the His₆-*malE*-TEV fragment, which was inserted into pET21a(+) at the same sites. The resulting plasmid was named pKLD66 (Figure 3). To increase the number of restriction sites in the multiple cloning site, the NEW66 DNA fragment (Table 1, supplemental material) was ligated into plasmid pKLD66 at the *SacI* and *SbfI* sites. The resulting plasmid was named pKLD116 (Figure 3). In plasmid pKLD66, use of the *KpnI* restriction site as a 5' cloning site results in recombinant protein with two additional residues (Gly-Thr) at the N-terminus of the protein (Figure 3). The *StuI* site in plasmid pKLD116 permits blunt-end cloning at the 5' end and can, depending on the restriction enzyme used to cut the insert, result in a single glycine added to the N-terminus of the protein.

Isolation of 2-methylcitrate dehydratase (PrpD) protein of *Salmonella enterica* using His-MBP-TEV vectors

To assess the usefulness of the MBP tag in the isolation of recombinant proteins, the 2-methylcitrate dehydratase gene (*prpD*) gene of *Salmonella enterica* was cloned into the *KpnI* and *NotI* sites of plasmid pKLD66 to yield plasmid pPRP222. The latter was introduced by transformation into *E. coli* strain Bl21(λDE3), the *prpD* gene was expressed, and the fusion protein was purified (Figure 4).

The yield of purified protein was high (~ 25 mg of recombinant protein per gram of wet cells) and could be increased based on the large amount of recombinant protein that was visible in the column flow through (Figure 4, Lane 4). Other experiments have shown that this protein was soluble and active, suggesting that in all probability the binding capacity of the column used in this experiment was exceeded. Recombinant protein was digested with rTEV protease, purified as described by Blommel and Fox (Blommel & Fox, 2007), and the resulting PrpD protein was purified from the His₆-MBP tag and His₆-rTEV (Figure 5). Approximately 90% of PrpD protein was recovered from the rTEV digestion reaction, and assays indicated that the enzyme was active. The high yield of recovery of cleaved PrpD protein indicated that the cleavage of the MBP tag and recovery was a very efficient process.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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pTEV4

NdeI MCS Bpu1102I NdeI
 CAT ATG TCG TAC TAC CAT CAC CAT CAC CAT CAC GAT TAC GAT ATC CCA ACT AGT GAA AAC CTG TAT TTT CAG GGC
 NheI NcoI Bpu1102I
 GCT AGC GCG CCC ATG GGG CGC TGA GC

pTEV3

NdeI MCS Bpu1102I NdeI
 CAT ATG TCG TAC TAC CAT CAC CAT CAC CAT CAC GAT TAC GAT ATC CCA ACT AGT GAA AAC CTG TAT TTT CAG GGC
 NheI NcoI AseI EcoRI SmaI NotI Bpu1102I
 GCT AGC GCG CCC ATG GCG ATT AAT GAA TTC TCG AGC TCC CGG GAT CCG CGG CCG CTG AGC
 XhoI SacI BamHI SacII

pTEV5

Dead NdeI MCS Bpu1102I NdeI
 CA TAT ATG TCG TAC TAC CAT CAC CAT CAC CAT CAC GAT TAC GAT ATC CCA ACT AGT GAA AAC CTG TAT TTT CAG GGC
 NheI NdeI EcoRI SmaI NotI Bpu1102I
 GCT AGC CAT ATG GCC ATG GAA TTC TCG AGC TCC CGG GAT CCG CGG CCG CTG AGC
 XhoI SacI BamHI SacII

Figure 1. Map of pTEV plasmids

Plasmid schematic is shown with relevant genetic elements. Plasmid sequence between the *NdeI* and *Bpu1102I* restrictions sites is shown below for each individual plasmid.

Figure 2. Purification of rTEV-cleavable His-Tagged 2-methylnitrate isomerase (PrpF) enzyme
 A culture of the over expression strain was grown at 37°C in LB supplemented with ampicillin to an OD₆₅₀ of ~0.6 and induced with IPTG (0.3 mM) for approximately 18 h. Cells were harvested and protein was purified using Novagen's His-Bind® Kit and manufacturer's procedures. A 12% SDS-PAGE gel was loaded with 20 µg of lysed cells (Lane 2), soluble cell free extract (Lane 3), column flow-through (Lane 4), and 10 µg of wash fraction (Lane 5) and eluted protein (Lane 6). Bio-Rad's Precision Plus Protein™ Standard were loaded in lane 1. The gel was stained with Coomassie Brilliant Blue.

pKLD66

NdeI 6 His Tag MalE
 CATATGGGCAGCCATCACCATCACCATCACCATCGGTTAAATCGAA-----CAGACTAATTCGAGCTCGAGCGGAACCGCCTCGGGCGGTGCA
 TEV recognition site KpnI SalI SbfI HindIII NotI
 ACCACGTCAAGAAATCTCTACTTCCAAGGTTACCTCGGACTCTAGAGTCGACCTGCAGGCAAGCTTGGCGCCGC

pKLD116

NdeI 6 His Tag MalE
 CATATGGGCAGCCATCACCATCACCATCACCATCGGTTAAATCGAA-----CAGACTAATTCGAGCTCGAGCGGAACCGCCTCGGGCGGTGCAA
 TEV recognition site DdeI AatII SmaI NheI NcoI SbfI HindIII NotI
 CCACTAGTGAAGAAATCTCTACTTCCAAGGCTTAGCAGGTGCATGTGGACGTCCCGGCTAGCCATGGCTGCAGGCAAGCTTGGCGCCGC

Figure 3. Map of pKLD plasmids

Plasmid schematic is shown with relevant genetic elements. Plasmid sequence between *NdeI* and *NotI* restriction sites is shown for each individual plasmid. The *male* gene is shown in a truncated form for space considerations.

Figure 4. Purification of MBP-tagged 2-methylcitrate dehydratase (PrpD) protein

Cells were grown in LB supplemented with ampicillin at 37°C to an OD₆₅₀ of ~0.7 and induced with IPTG for 16 h. Cells were harvested by centrifugation and broken with Novagen's BugBuster® plus lysozyme (1mg/ml). Protein was purified using Bio-Rad Laboratories Amylose Resin High Flow as per manufacturer's protocols. A 12% SDS PAGE gel was loaded with 20 µg of cell slurry (lane 2), cell-free extract (lane 3), and column flow-through (lane 4), column wash fraction (lane 5) and 3 µg of eluted protein (lane 6). Bio Rad's Precision Plus Protein™ Standards were loaded in lane 1. The gel was stained with Coomassie Brilliant Blue.

Figure 5. Cleavage and purification of recombinant His₆-MBP-PrpD protein

Lane 1: Bio-Rad Precision Plus Protein™ Standards; lane 2: recombinant His₆-MBP-PrpD protein; lane 3: PrpD protein after rTEV cleavage; lane 4: purified PrpD protein. Cleavage of recombinant His₆-MBP-PrpD with rTEV protease was performed at a 50:1 mg:mg ratio during overnight dialysis at 4°C against Tris•HCl buffer (20 mM, pH 7.9 at 25°C) containing NaCl (200 mM), DTT (5 mM). DTT was removed by dialysis Tris•HCl buffer (20 mM, pH 7.9 at 25°C) containing 400 mM NaCl and the cleaved protein was purified by running over a Novagen His-Bind® Resin column to remove both the His₆-MBP tag and His₆-rTEV protease.

Table 1**Oligonucleotides used to construct pTEV plasmids**

The *Spe*I sites in rTEVLink1F and rTEVLink1R are in bold type. The sequence introduced into pMAL–c2x with the pMALHisMut mutagenic oligonucleotides is underlined; all other sequence is complementary.

Name	Sequence 5' → 3'
rTEVLink1F	TATGTCGTACTACCATCACCATCACCATCACGATTACGATATCCCA ACTAGT GGCGC
rTEVLink1R	TCAGCGCC ACTAGT TGGGATATCGTAATCGTGATGGTGATGGTGATGGTAGTACGACA
rTEVLink2F	CTAGTGAAAACCTGTATTTTCAGGGCGCTAGCGCGCCCATGGGGCGC
rTEVLink2	TCAGCGCCCATGGGCGCGCTAGCGCCCTGAAAATACAGGTTTCA
TEV MCS 1	CATGGCGATTAATGAATTCTCGAGCTCCCGGGATCCGCGGCCGC
TEV MCS 2	TGAGCGGCCGCGGATCCCGGGAGCTCGAGAATTCATTAATCGC
TEV Start MCS 1	CTAGCCATATGGCCATGG
TEV Start MCS 2	AATTCCATGGCCATATGG
pMALHisMutF	CCAACAAGGACCATAGCATATGGGCAGCCATCACCATCACCATCACTCCGGTAAATCGAAGAAGGTAAACTGG
pMALHisMutR	CCAGTTTACCTTCTTCGATTTT ACCGGAGTGATGGTGATGGTGATGGCTGCC CATATGCTATGGTCCTTGTGG
MCSInsertF	CGAGCGGAACCGCCTCGGGCGGTGCAACCACGTCAGAGAATCTCTACTTCCAAGGTACCTCGGACT
MCSInsertR	CTAGAGTCCGAGGTACCTTGGGAAGTAGAGATTCTCTGACGTGGTTGCACCGCCCGAGGCGGTTCGGCTCGAGCT
NEW66f	CGAGCGGAACCGCCTCGGGCGGTGCAACCACTAGTGAGAATCTCTACTTCCAAGGCCTTAGCAGGT
NEW66r	GCATGTGGACGTCCCGGGCTAGCCATGGCCTGCA