Cyclic Peptidic Mimetics of Apollo Peptides Targeting Telomeric Repeat Binding Factor 2 (TRF2) and Apollo Interaction

Xia Chen,[†] Liu Liu,[‡] Yong Chen,^{||} Yuting Yang,[§] Chao-Yie Yang,[‡] Tianyue Guo,[†] Ming Lei,^{⊥, #} Haiying Sun,^{*, †} and Shaomeng Wang^{*, ‡}[†]Jiangsu Key Laboratory of Drug Design and Optimization, Department of Medicinal Chemistry, China Pharmaceutical University, Nanjing 210009, China[‡]Department of Medicinal Chemistry, Department of Internal Medicine, Comprehensive Cancer Center, and [§]Department of Anesthesiology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109, United States^{||}State Key Laboratory of Molecular Biology, National Center for Protein Science, Shanghai Science Research Center, CAS Center for Excellence in Molecular Cell Science, Shanghai Institute of Biochemistry and Cell Biology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, 333 Haik Road, Shanghai 201210, China[⊥]Ninth People's Hospital, Shanghai Jiaotong University School of Medicine, 639 Zhizaoju Lu, Shanghai 200011, China[#]Shanghai Institute of Precision Medicine, Shanghai 200125, China

S Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Telomeric repeat binding factor 2 (TRF2) is a telomere-associated protein that plays an important role in the formation of the 3' single strand DNA overhang and the "T loop", two structures critical for the stability of the telomeres. Apollo is a 5'-exonuclease recruited by TRF2 to the telomere and contributes to the formation of the 3' single strand DNA overhang. Knocking down of Apollo can induce DNA damage response similar to that caused by the knocking down of TRF2. In this Letter, we report the design and synthesis of a class of cyclic peptidic mimetics of the TRFH binding motif of Apollo (Apollo_{TBM}). We found conformational control of the C terminal residues of Apollo_{TBM} can effectively improve the binding affinity. We have obtained a crystal structure of a cyclic peptidic Apollo peptide mimetic (34) complexed with TRF2, which provides valuable guidance to the future design of TRF2 inhibitors.

KEYWORDS: Telomere, TRF2, Apollo, peptidic mimetics, protein–protein interaction

Shelterin is a telomere protecting complex consisting of six telomere proteins, including POT1, TPP1, TIN2, TRF1, TRF2, and Rap1. Among these six components, TRF2 plays an important role in the formation of the 3' single strand DNA overhang and the "T loop", two structures critical for the stability of the telomere.^{1–10} Knocking down TRF2 can cause end-to-end joining of DNA, induce DNA damage response, and eventually lead to cell senescence and apoptosis.^{11–13} Small molecules, which can interact with TRF2 and modulate its functions, are valuable tools in studies of shelterin and telomeres. A series of stapled peptides, which can potently bind to TRF2 and block its interaction with Rap1, have been reported recently,¹⁴ but small molecule inhibitors of TRF2 with different mechanism of inhibition are still urgently needed.

TRF2 can recruit a number of accessory proteins whose functions are also critical for the protection of telomeres.^{15,16} One of these proteins is Apollo, a member of the mammalian SNM1/Pso2 family of nucleases.^{17,18} Apollo contributes to the formation of the single-stranded 3' telomere overhang, and its deletion induces DNA damage response similar to that caused by

the knocking down of TRF2.^{19–21} The crystal structure of an Apollo peptide (residues 496–532) in a complex with the TRFH domain of TRF2 has been determined.¹⁰ In this structure (Figure 1) the electron density of the N-terminal 12 residues (amino acids 498–509), the so-called TRFH binding motif of Apollo (Apollo_{TBM}), is clearly shown. Based on this structure, Zhou et al. built a peptide library by replacing the amino acids that have been shown in the crystal structure to interact with the TRF2 protein with various natural amino acids. They found that TRF2, through its TRFH domain, can selectively recognize peptides containing a [Y/F]XL sequence.²² From this library, they identified a consensus peptide, which binds potently to TRF2. Expression of this peptide in tandem repeats in human cancer HTC-75 cells promotes formation of telomere dysfunction-induced foci (TIF) and induces DNA damage response, suggesting that small molecular ligands, which block the interactions between TRF2

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Figure 1. Crystal structure of Apollo_{TBM} in a complex with the TRFH domain of TRF2 (PDB 3bua).

and its associated proteins, such as Apollo, can modulate the functions of TRF2.

In common with other peptides, Apollo and its analogues have intrinsic drawbacks such as poor cell permeability and poor stability, and consequently, we have tried to design peptide mimetics of Apollo_{TBM} to overcome these drawbacks while maintaining or improving their binding affinity. In this Letter, we report our work on the design of Apollo_{TBM} mimetics as inhibitors of TRF2.

To evaluate the binding affinity of our compounds to TRF2, we designed a fluorescent tracer (compound 2, Figure 2) based

Figure 2. Design of the fluorescent tracer for TRF2.

on Apollo_{TBM} and established a fluorescence polarization based binding assay. In the crystal structure of Apollo_{TBM} complexed with the TRFH domain of TRF2 (Figure 1), R498 of Apollo is exposed to the solvent and has no interaction with the TRF2 protein. Consequently, in our design, the R498 residue was replaced with a linker to which the fluorescence label 5-carboxy-fluorescein (5-FAM) is attached. Compound 2 has a K_d value of 179 nM, consistent with the K_d value of Apollo_{496–532} in an ITC assay (K_d 120 nM).¹⁰ The corresponding 11-mer peptide 3 (Table 1) has a K_i of 380 nM in our FP based binding assay, thus proving the effectiveness of our assay.

We then performed truncation studies at both the *N*-terminal and *C*-terminal regions of the 11-mer peptide (3) with the purpose of identifying the shortest peptide sequence that can maintain a reasonable binding affinity to Apollo, and the results are summarized in Table 1. Of the *N*-terminal truncations,

Table 1. Truncation Studies for Apollo Peptide

compd	peptides	K_i (μ M)
3	GLALKYLLTPV	0.38 ± 0.12
4	LALKYLLTPV	2.2 ± 0.34
5	AcLALKYLLTPV	0.34 ± 0.08
6	ALKYLLTPV	22.8 ± 2.6
7	LKYLLTPV	26.8 ± 3.2
8	KYLLTPV	122.6 ± 8.4
9	AcLALKYLLTP	1.89 ± 0.23
10	AcLALKYLLT	26.3 ± 2.7
11	AcLALKYLL	98.0 ± 9.6
12	AcLALKYL	461 ± 34

removal of the G499 residue decreases the binding by about 7-fold (4 vs 3). In the crystal structure, this residue has no interaction with the protein, but its carbonyl group forms an intramolecular hydrogen bond with the α -amino group of K503 of Apollo. To assess the importance of this hydrogen bond, we designed compound 5 in which the G499 residue in 3 is replaced by an acetyl group. With a K_i of 0.34 μ M, compound 5 is as potent as 3, indicating that the conformation controlled by this hydrogen bond is critical to the binding. The side chain of L500 in 5 binds to a large but shallow hydrophobic pocket in the TRF2 protein, and removal of this residue decreases the binding by about 7-fold (6 vs 4). In the crystal structure, the methyl group of A501 can be seen to occupy a small hydrophobic pocket in the TRF2 protein, while the side chain of the neighboring residue, L502, is exposed to the solvent and has no interaction with the protein. Our truncation studies, however, indicate that removal of A501 does not influence the binding affinity (7 vs 6), but removal of L502 decreases the binding by about 5-fold (8 vs 7). These results suggest that these truncated peptides could bind to the TRF2 protein with a conformation different from that of the original peptide 3. Compound 8 (KYLLTPV) binds only weakly to TRF2 with a K_i of 122 μ M, so further truncation of this end of the peptide was not pursued.

C-terminal truncations started from compound 5, which is as potent as 3. The crystal structure of Apollo_{TBM} complexed with TRF2 indicates that the C-terminal residues of the peptide have multiple hydrophobic interactions with the protein. The side chain of V509 has a hydrophobic interaction with M122 in TRF2, and we found that removal of this residue decreases the binding affinity by a factor of about 5-fold (9 vs 5). The pyrrolidine ring of P508 has a hydrophobic interaction with Phe120 of TRF2, and Lei et al. found that mutation of Phe120 to alanine completely abolishes the binding of TRF2 to Apollo, indicating that this hydrophobic interaction is critical. We found that, consistent with the previous mutation study, removal of P508 reduces the binding affinity by about 14-fold (10 vs 9). Notwithstanding the apparent absence of interaction between T507 and the Apollo protein, removal of T507 causes about a 4-fold decrease in binding affinity (11 vs 10), possibly because of conformational changes. The side chain of L506 binds to a deep hydrophobic pocket in TRF2, and mutation studies performed by Lei et al. have confirmed that this is the most important interaction in the binding of the Apollo protein to TRF2. Our own truncation study supports this in that after removal of L506 the resulting 5-mer peptide (compound 12) retains only a very weak binding affinity to TRF2 with a K_i of 461 μ M. Overall, our truncation studies confirm the structure–activity relationships (SAR) information obtained from the Apollo_{TBM}–TRF2 crystal structure and indicate that, among all the truncated peptides, only the

Table 2. Structure–Activity Relationship Studies for Compound 5

Peptides	R ₁	R ₂	R ₃	R ₄	Binding affinity to TRF2 (K _i , μM)
13	methyl				3.2±0.40
14					3.4±0.52
15					0.72±0.13
16			methyl		>100
17			propyl		4.7±0.34
18			isopropyl		61.2±5.80
19					11.3±1.80
20					6.1±0.77
21			cyclopentyl		0.51±0.08
22			cyclohexyl		0.21±0.09
23					1.4±0.21
24					8.5±0.67
25				methyl	0.24±0.08

acetylated 10-mer peptide (5) maintains good binding affinity. Consequently, this peptide was used as the lead compound in further modifications.

To gain additional SARs for this class of peptides, we performed mutation studies for several residues that have been shown to be critical to the binding affinity, and the results are reported in Table 2. The Apollo_{TBM}-TRF2 crystal structure indicates that the ϵ -amino group of K503 and the hydroxyl group of Y504 of Apollo have electrostatic interactions with Glu94 of TRF2 (Figure 1). In order to explore the significance of these interactions, we designed three mutated peptides 13–15. In 13, K503 was replaced with an alanine, while in 14 and 15 the side chain of Y504 was replaced with benzyl or a 4-aminobenzyl, respectively. Compounds 13 and 14 are about 10 times less potent than 5 with K_i values of 3.2 and 3.4 μM, respectively, suggesting that the electrostatic interactions from both K503 and Y504 are important to the binding affinity. Compound 15, with a K_i of 0.72 μM, is only two times less potent than 5 and about five times more potent than 14, confirming the importance of the electrostatic interaction between 15 and the Glu94 residue in the protein. Because the hydrophobic interaction of the side chain of L506 with a deep hydrophobic pocket in TRF2 has been shown to be the most critical to the binding affinity, we performed extensive modifications to this residue, replacing it with a series of natural and unnatural amino acids containing different hydrophobic groups. Among all the amino acids tested, the binding affinity is maintained or slightly improved only when L506 is replaced with cyclopentyl glycine (21) or cyclohexyl glycine (22). All other modifications at this site result in a decrease in the binding affinity. T507 has no interaction with the protein, but the hydroxyl group in this threonine residue can cause some synthetic inconvenience due to the need for

protection and deprotection. Accordingly, we replaced this residue with an alanine and found the resulting compound (25) is as potent as 5; therefore, subsequently, 25 was used as the new lead compound for further modifications.

From the crystal structure, we observed that the six *N*-terminal residues GLALKY in 3 are part of an α -helix, while the five *C*-terminal residues LLTPV form a flexible loop (Figure 1). In α -helix, the peptide bonds are all involved in intramolecular hydrogen bonds, with only the side chains participating in the interactions with the proteins, so for *N*-terminal residues we planned to replace the helical peptide with a nonpeptide scaffold to which different substituent groups could be attached to mimic the side chains of the residues that interact with the protein. For the *C*-terminal residues, the conformational flexibility is a disadvantage for modification because it can compromise the SAR, and thus, we sought to constrain the conformational flexibility of these residues. In the crystal structure, the side chains of L505 and V509 are very close to one another (Figure 1). Therefore, we proposed that these two residues could be linked to form a conformationally constrained cyclic peptide.

To test this strategy, we first designed and synthesized a cyclic peptide 27 (Figure 3) by replacing the side chains of L505 and V509 in the *C*-terminal 5-mer Apollo peptide (26) with a linker containing seven methylene groups corresponding to the

Figure 3. Design of cyclic Apollo peptide mimetics.

Figure 4. Structures and activities of cyclic peptide mimetics of Apollo peptides.

distance between these two side chains in the crystal structure. In our FP based binding assay, compound 27 with a K_i of 115 μM , is at least three times more potent than the 5-mer peptide 26 ($K_i > 500 \mu\text{M}$).

Encouraged with the improved binding affinity for 27 over 26, we then designed compounds 28 and 29 by introducing a Tyr or Phe to the amino group of 27 (Figure 4). Compounds 28 and 29 were found to have comparable binding affinity to TRF2 with K_i values of 58 and 41 μM , respectively, and are three to four times more potent than 27, suggesting that the hydroxyl group in 28 may fail to interact with Glu94 in the TRF2 protein. We have explored the influence of the length of linker to the binding affinity of the cyclic peptides by designing compounds 30 and 31 (Figure 3) by replacing the 7-methylene linker in 29 with a spacer containing six or eight methylene groups, respectively. The peptide 30 is three times less potent than 29, but 31 is as potent as 29, indicating that linkers with 7 or 8 methylene groups are more optimal for cyclic peptides. In order to confirm that a cyclic peptide can be used to replace the C-terminal five residues in compound 25, we designed the 7-mer analogue 32 and the 10-mer analogue 33 by reintroduction of the appropriate Apollo_{TBM} N-terminal residues to 28. Compound 32 binds to TRF2 with a K_i of 18 μM and is seven times more potent than the 7-mer peptide 8, while 33 binds to TRF2 with a K_i of 90 nM and is three times more potent than the 10-mer peptide 5, proving that conformational control of the C-terminal residues can effectively improve the binding affinity.

We also examined N-terminal modifications of 29. Compound 34, in which a (S)-3-amino-4-phenylbutyric acid was introduced to the free amino group of 29, has a K_i of 14.7 μM and is about three times more potent than 29. The synthetic cyclic peptide mimetics have been screened by cocrystallization with the TRF2 TRFH domain protein. The complex of 34 with TRF2 gave a crystal structure with a resolution of 2.05 Å (Figure 5). In this crystal structure, 34 can be seen to bind to the same area in the TRFH domain of TRF2 as the C-terminal five residues of Apollo_{TBM}. The conformation of the protein is very close to that of Apollo_{TBM} with TRF2, with the exception of the helix containing Glu94. When binding to the wild type peptide, this helix is distorted because of the interactions of Glu94 with the ϵ -amino group in K503 and the OH group in Y504 (Figure 1).

Figure 5. Crystal structure of compound 34 in a complex with TRF2.

However, when binding to 34, Glu94 flips back and has no interaction with the compound, suggesting that the interaction between Glu94 and the amino group in 34 is not sufficient to cause the distortion of the helix. This also explains why the Tyr-containing compound 28 is as potent as the Phe-containing compound 29. The amino group of (S)-3-amino-4-phenylbutyric acid is exposed to the solvent, while its phenyl group binds to a large hydrophobic area where the N-terminal residues bind.

Based on this crystal structure, we designed compound 35 (Figure 4) by introduction of a 3-phenylpropanoic acid to the amino group of 29. This compound has a K_i of 11.2 μM , indicating that introduction of a hydrophobic group to the N-terminal indeed improves the binding affinity. This crystal structure thus provides the foundation for our future design.

In summary, we have designed a fluorescent tracer based on the crystal structure of Apollo_{TBM} in a complex with the TRFH domain of TRF2 and developed a competitive binding assay based on fluorescence-polarization for this domain of TRF2. Through truncation and mutation studies, we identified an acetylated 10-mer peptide (25), which can bind to TRF2 with a

binding affinity comparable to that of Apollo_{TBM}. Based on the C-terminal five residues in **25**, we designed and synthesized a series of cyclopeptidic mimetics and found that replacement of the five C-terminal residues in **25** with our designed cyclic peptide can effectively improve the binding affinity. Our study has yielded a cyclic peptide **33**, which binds to TRF2 with a K_i value of 90 nM. We solved the crystal structure of one of our cyclic peptide analogues (**34**) in a complex with TRF2 and found that this compound binds to the same site in TRF2 as the original Apollo_{TBM} peptide. Further optimizations to these cyclic peptides are in progress, and the results will be reported subsequently.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/acsmchemlett.8b00152.

Procedure and experimental detail for solid phase synthesis of the truncated and mutated peptides, chemical synthesis of the cyclic peptidic mimetics, saturation binding experiment to determine dissociation constant (K_d) of the tracer, competitive binding experiment to determine the binding affinities of the synthesized compounds, crystallization of the complex of **34** with TRF2, and structural determination of the crystal (PDF)

■ AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Authors

*E-mail: haiyings1969@gmail.com.

*E-mail: shaomeng@med.umich.edu.

ORCID

Chao-Yie Yang: 0000-0002-5445-0109

Haiying Sun: 0000-0001-5380-5329

Shaomeng Wang: 0000-0002-8782-6950

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Notes

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