

Metabolism, cytoskeleton and cellular signalling in the grip of protein N^ε- and O-acetylation

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Acetylation of the ε-amino group of lysine residues (N^ε-acetylation) is a reversible post-translational modification with the potential to rival phosphorylation. In addition to histones and many transcription factors such as p53, regulators of DNA repair, replication and recombination are subject to N^ε-acetylation. This modification is also important for governing the activities of various enzymes, including histone acetyltransferases, histone deacetylases, bacterial and mammalian acetyl-CoA synthases, kinases, phosphatases, the ubiquitin ligase murine double minute 2 and the chaperonin heat shock protein 90. Furthermore, lysine acetylation occurs in cellular structure proteins such as α-tubulin, actin, cortactin and p120 catenin. Strikingly, the *Yersinia* outer protein YopJ promotes O-acetylation of crucial serine and threonine residues that are required for activation of the MAPK/ERK kinase and IκB kinase families, which precludes their phosphorylation and blocks signal transduction. Thus, N^ε- and O-acetylation are becoming recognized as two prominent mechanisms for regulating protein functions in diverse organisms.

Keywords: multisite modification; lysine acetylation; methylation; ubiquitylation; molecular barcode

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Introduction

Among the 20 common amino-acid residues, lysine is unique as its ε-amino group is subject to different modifications (Fig 1A). One of them is acetylation, which is also known as N^ε- or lysine acetylation. This modification was identified initially on core histones (Vidali *et al*, 1968) and then on high mobility group protein 1 (HMG1; Sterner *et al*, 1979), α-tubulin (L'Hernault & Rosenbaum, 1985; Piperno & Fuller, 1985) and the tumour suppressor p53 (Gu & Roeder, 1997). During the past decade, the prevalence of N^ε-acetylation has been extensively characterized for core histones and more than 60 transcription factors (reviewed by Kouzarides, 2000; Sterner & Berger, 2000; Yang, 2004a; Glozak *et al*, 2005; Nightingale *et al*, 2006). Recent studies have identified acetyl-lysine residues in

many other proteins, including regulators of DNA repair and replication, histone acetyltransferases and deacetylases, metabolic enzymes, kinases, phosphatases and cellular structure proteins. It is noteworthy that this reversible covalent modification is different from N^ε-acetylation, which targets the amino terminus of a protein and is mainly co-translational. O-acetylation has been recently identified as a third type of protein acetylation (Mittal *et al*, 2006; Mukherjee *et al*, 2006). It was found that *Yersinia* outer protein J (YopJ) acetylates the side-chains of serine and threonine residues in two families of protein kinases (Fig 1B). In this review, we highlight the importance of N^ε-acetylation in various cellular processes, briefly discuss the regulatory potential of O-acetylation, and emphasize how these two types of acetylation interplay with other modifications such as phosphorylation, methylation, ubiquitylation and sumoylation to form dynamic regulatory programmes for the spatiotemporal control of protein function in different organisms.

Lysine acetylation in RNA and DNA metabolism

In the past decade or so, many proteins with intrinsic histone acetyltransferase (HAT) or histone deacetylase (HDAC) activity have been identified and characterized. As with histones, these enzymes themselves are targets of N^ε-acetylation. Autoacetylation of p300 within its HAT domain leads to activation (Thompson *et al*, 2004; Karanam *et al*, 2006), whereas acetylation of two residues upstream of the HAT domain blocks sumoylation (Girdwood *et al*, 2003). Multiple deacetylases—including sirtuin 1 (SIRT1), HDAC1 and HDAC3—are involved in p300 deacetylation (Bouras *et al*, 2005; Chuang *et al*, 2006; Grégoire *et al*, 2007). Autoacetylation of p300/CBP-associated factor (PCAF; CBP for CREB-binding protein) promotes its nuclear localization (Santos-Rosa *et al*, 2003). Other HATs, such as monocytic leukaemia zinc finger protein (MOZ) and regulation of retrotransposition 109 (Rtt109), are also autoacetylated (Yang, 2004b; Driscoll *et al*, 2007; Han J *et al*, 2007), although the functional impact of this is still unclear. Furthermore, p300 acetylation of HDAC1 inhibits its deacetylase activity (Qiu *et al*, 2006), and acetyl-lysine is also present in non-catalytic subunits of HDAC and HAT complexes (Buscaino *et al*, 2003; Morales *et al*, 2004; Kim *et al*, 2006). In addition to these enzymes and numerous transcription factors, regulators of RNA processing are subject to this modification (Table 1; Shimazu *et al*, 2007).

As clearly established for transcription, histone acetylation affects other chromatin-based processes such as DNA replication,

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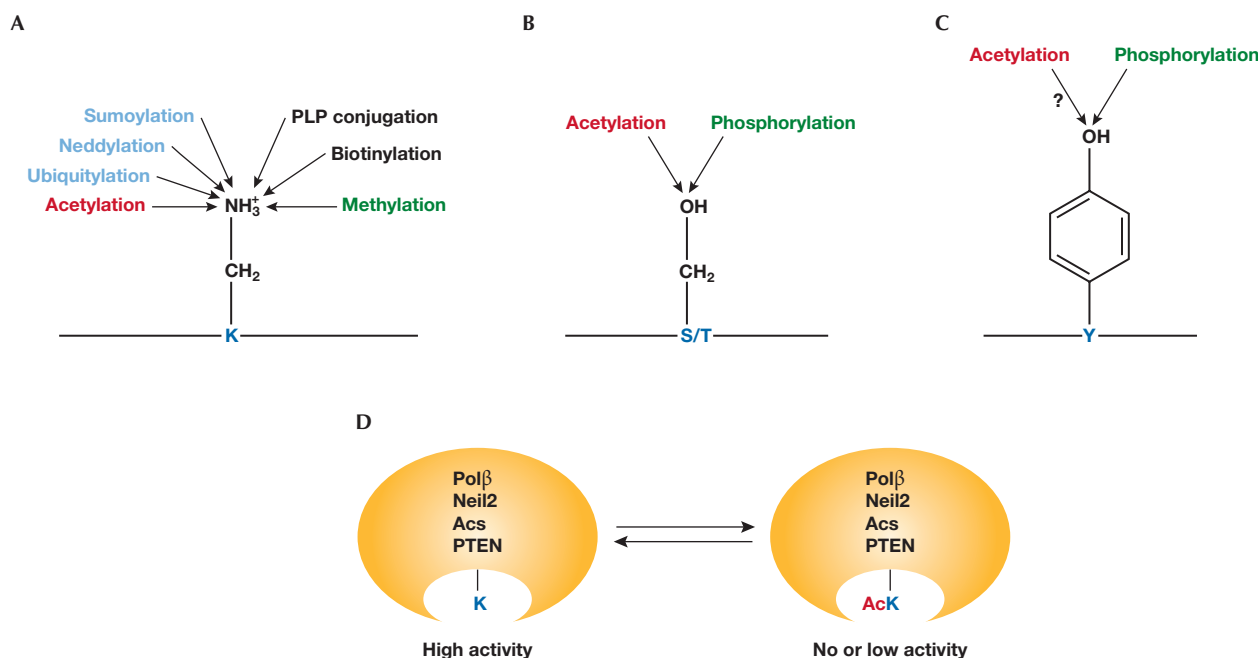


Fig 1 | Mechanistic impact of N^ϵ - and O-acetylation. (A) The amino group of a lysine (K) residue is subject to acetylation and other covalent modifications. Acetylation precludes other modifications, and vice versa. Pyridoxal 5'-phosphate (PLP) is a biologically active form of vitamin B6 (Huq *et al*, 2007). Other, as yet unidentified, lysine modifications, such as propionylation and butyrylation, might exist. (B) The hydroxyl group of a serine (S) or threonine (T) residue is the target of mutually exclusive phosphorylation and acetylation. (C) The hydroxyl group of a tyrosine (Y) residue is the target of competitive phosphorylation and acetylation. (D) Acetylation of a crucial lysine residue in the catalytic centre of DNA polymerase β (Pol β), Neil2, acetyl-CoA synthase (Acs) or the phosphatase and tensin homologue (PTEN) completely or partly inhibits enzymatic activity. AcK, acetyl-lysine.

repair and recombination (Peterson & Côté, 2004; Groth *et al*, 2007). Recent studies have also identified acetyl-lysine in many components of the base excision repair pathway (Table 1; reviewed by Peterson & Côté, 2004), including Flap endonuclease 1 (FEN1; Hasan *et al*, 2001), DNA polymerase β (Pol β ; Hasan *et al*, 2002), DNA glycosylases (Tini *et al*, 2002; Bhakat *et al*, 2004; Mohan *et al*, 2007), apurinic/apyrimidinic (AP) endonuclease (Bhakat *et al*, 2003), proliferating cell nuclear antigen (PCNA; Naryzhny & Lee, 2004), DNA ligase III (Bhakat *et al*, 2004) and Werner helicase (Blander *et al*, 2002). DNA damage induced by exposure to ultraviolet light, oxidative stress and ionizing radiation regulates acetylation of these and other repair regulators. Acetylation of catalytic lysine residues of Pol β and the DNA glycosylase Neil2 inactivates these enzymes (Fig 1D; Bhakat *et al*, 2004), whereas acetylation of thymine DNA glycosylase precludes sumoylation (Mohan *et al*, 2007). Ataxia telangiectasia mutated (ATM), FEN1, Ku70, PCNA and Werner helicase are acetyl-proteins that also have important roles in the double-strand break and nucleotide excision repair pathways (Table 1; Cohen *et al*, 2004; Peterson & Côté, 2004; Sun *et al*, 2005). Acetylation of PCNA is cell cycle-dependent and stimulates its binding to Pol β and Pol δ (Naryzhny & Lee, 2004), suggesting that the acetylated form of PCNA also participates in DNA replication. Similar to PCNA, Ku70 and Werner helicase regulate both DNA repair and replication. Werner helicase has an additional role in DNA recombination, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) integrase is subject to acetylation (Blander *et al*, 2002;

Cereseto *et al*, 2005). Furthermore, minichromosome maintenance 3-associated protein (MCM3AP) acetylates MCM3 (Takei *et al*, 2001). Thus, N^ϵ -acetylation is a common mechanism for the regulation of nuclear processes in eukaryotic cells. As discussed below, this modification also has prominent roles in the cytoplasm and various bacteria.

Acetylation of acetyl-CoA synthases

An unexpected discovery made several years ago was that acetyl-CoA synthase (Acs) from *Salmonella enterica* is acetylated at lysine (Lys) 609 within its catalytic centre (Starai *et al*, 2002). This residue is crucial for synthesis of the acetyl-AMP intermediate from acetate and ATP, so its acetylation inactivates the enzyme (Fig 1D). Lys 609 is evolutionarily conserved from bacteria to humans, suggesting that acetylation might be important for controlling the activity of various Acs enzymes. This idea has received direct support from recent studies of the Acs orthologues in *Bacillus subtilis* and mammals (Gardner *et al*, 2006; Hallows *et al*, 2006; Schwer *et al*, 2006). Distinct acetylation/deacetylation systems are known to maintain the dynamic acetylation of bacterial Acs—the protein acetyltransferase (Pat) and the CobB sirtuin deacetylase (Starai & Escalante-Semerena, 2004), and the acetoin utilization A (AcuA) and AcuC proteins (Gardner *et al*, 2006). Related to CobB, mammalian SIRT1 and SIRT3 deacetylate and inactivate Acs1 and Acs2 (Hallows *et al*, 2006; Schwer *et al*, 2006). Notably, both Acs2 and SIRT3 localize to mitochondria. AcuA and AcuC are two products

Table 1 | Acetyl-proteins involved in regulating RNA and DNA metabolism

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| <i>Transcription & RNA processing</i> |
| DNA-binding transcription factors (>60) |
| Transcription coregulators (>15) |
| General transcription factors: TFIIB, TFIIE, TFIIIF |
| RNA processing: CFIm, Poly(A) polymerase |
| <i>DNA repair</i> |
| Pol β , FEN1, Glycosylases (3), AP endonuclease, DNA ligase III α , PCNA, Ku70, Werner helicase, ATM kinase, Rtt109 |
| <i>Replication</i> |
| Cellular replication: PCNA, MCM3, FEN1, Ku70, Werner helicase, HBO1-ING4 complex, Rtt109 |
| Viral integration: HIV integrase, SV40 large T |
| <i>Recombination</i> |
| Recombination: Werner helicase, Rtt109 |
| Viral replication: HIV integrase |
| AP endonuclease, apurinic/apyrimidinic endonuclease; ATM, ataxia telangiectasia mutated; CFIm, cleavage factor Im; FEN1, Flap endonuclease 1; HBO1, HAT bound to DNA replication origin complex (ORC) 1; HIV, human immunodeficiency virus; ING4, inhibitor of growth 4; MCM3, minichromosome maintenance 3; PCNA, proliferating cell nuclear antigen; Pol β , DNA polymerase β ; Rtt109, regulation of retrotransposition 109; SV40 large T, SV40 large T antigen; TFII, transcription factor II. |

of a three-gene operon in *B. subtilis* and show some sequence similarity to yeast Gcn5 and Hda1, respectively (Gardner *et al.*, 2006), raising the question of whether Gcn5, Hda1 and related proteins regulate acetylation of eukaryotic Acs enzymes.

Acetyl-lysine has been found in many other metabolic enzymes, including catalase, enolase and 6-phosphofructo-2-kinase, although the functional significance remains to be established (Dihazi *et al.*, 2005; Iwabata *et al.*, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2006). In addition, expression of metabolic enzymes is tightly controlled by acetylation of PPAR γ co-activator 1 α (PGC1 α ; Rodgers *et al.*, 2005). During fasting, murine SIRT1 is activated, deacetylates PGC1 α and induces gluconeogenic gene expression; conversely, in the presence of sufficient nutrients, GCN5 acetylates PGC1 α and inhibits its transcriptional potential (Lagouge *et al.*, 2006; Lerin *et al.*, 2006). Thus, N^ε-acetylation is important for regulating amino-acid, glucose and energy metabolism.

Acetylation of cytoskeleton and structural proteins

Acetylation of α -tubulin was mapped to Lys40 (LeDizet & Piperno, 1987). This residue is conserved from humans to lower eukaryotes, such as *Chlamydomonas*, and its acetylation is preferentially associated with stable microtubules (Hubbert *et al.*, 2002; Matsuyama *et al.*, 2002; North *et al.*, 2003; Zhang *et al.*, 2003; reviewed by Boyault *et al.*, 2007). A subset of acetylated microtubules was found to be necessary for correct organization of the immune synapse, and tubulin acetylation seemed to affect HIV infection of CD4⁺ cells (Serrador *et al.*, 2004; Valenzuela-Fernandez *et al.*, 2005). A recent study showed that this modification stimulates kinesin 1 binding and transport (Reed *et al.*, 2006). Other cytoskeleton proteins such as actin and cortactin are also acetylated (Kim *et al.*, 2006; E. Seto, unpublished data). Acetylation of many lysines on cortactin affects actin dynamics and cell motility. Furthermore, p120 catenin is acetylated on at least three lysines, affecting dendrite formation.

Catenins are found in complexes with cadherin adhesion molecules and link adherens junctions to actin filaments. Related to this, acetylation of Rho GDP-dissociation inhibitor (RhoGDI) might affect the formation of actin stress fibres (Kim *et al.*, 2006), suggesting that acetylation may act through microtubules and actin fibres to regulate cell motility. Furthermore, acetyl-lysine is present in nuclear lamins (Kim *et al.*, 2006), and acetylation of crystallins occurs in an age-dependent manner (Lin *et al.*, 1998). Therefore, although functional consequences await further analysis, N^ε-acetylation occurs in different types of structural protein.

N^ε-acetylation of signalling regulators

Besides metabolic enzymes and structural proteins, acetyl-lysines are present in protein kinases. PCAF and p300/CBP acetylate the tyrosine kinase c-Abl at Lys730, which inhibits its nuclear localization and promotes myogenic differentiation (di Bari *et al.*, 2006). HDAC3 associates with the Rous sarcoma (Src) tyrosine kinase at the plasma membrane (Longworth & Laimins, 2006), and a Src-related kinase has just been identified as an N^ε-acetylated protein (Kim *et al.*, 2006). In response to DNA damage, Tat-interactive protein 60 kDa (TIP60) interacts with, acetylates and activates the ATM kinase (Sun *et al.*, 2005). PCAF acetylates the phosphatase and tensin homologue (PTEN) at two residues within the catalytic cleft, impairing phosphatase activity and promoting phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase signalling (Fig 1D; Okumura *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, acetylation of insulin receptor substrate 1 stimulates tyrosine phosphorylation and cellular signalling (Kaiser & James, 2004). Acetyl-lysines have also been found in other signalling regulators, including phospholipase C, p120 catenin, RhoGDI, murine double minute 2 (MDM2), Ku70, signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 (Stat3), Sma- and Mad-related protein 7 (Smad7) and heat shock protein 90 (Hsp90). Among these, acetylation of MDM2 impairs its ability to promote p53 ubiquitylation (Wang *et al.*, 2004), Ku70 acetylation promotes apoptosis (Cohen *et al.*, 2004), Stat3 acetylation stimulates dimerization for cytokine signalling (Yuan *et al.*, 2005), Smad7 acetylation increases stability to block transforming growth factor β (TGF β) signalling (Kume *et al.*, 2007), and Hsp90 acetylation regulates its association with client proteins such as the glucocorticoid receptor (Kovacs *et al.*, 2005; Scroggins *et al.*, 2007). Thus, N^ε-acetylation is an additional method of regulation for various signalling pathways.

Interplay of N^ε-acetylation with other modifications

N^ε-acetylation can act through many different mechanisms (reviewed by Kouzarides, 2000; Sterner & Berger, 2000; Yang, 2004a; Glozak *et al.*, 2005), five of which are noteworthy here. First, acetylation of catalytic lysine residues can abolish or reduce enzymatic activity (Fig 1D). Second, N^ε-acetylation can generate specific sites for docking bromodomain proteins such as GCN5, TAF_{II}250 (TBP-associated factor) and Brg1 (Brahma-related gene 1) to promote complex assembly for transcriptional activation (Seet *et al.*, 2006). Third, as shown for p53 and histone H3 (Fig 2), functional consequences of multisite acetylation can be position-dependent. Such an effect has been well documented for Lys16 acetylation of histone H4 (Shogren-Knaak *et al.*, 2006). Fourth, acetylation competes with other modifications such as methylation, ubiquitylation and sumoylation at the same lysine residue (Fig 1A). This has been documented for histone H3, p53, Smad7, specificity protein 3 (Sp3), sterol regulatory element-binding protein 1 α

(SREBP1 α), p300 and others (reviewed by Brooks & Gu, 2003; Caron *et al*, 2005; Glozak *et al*, 2005; Huang *et al*, 2006; Kim *et al*, 2006; Stankovic-Valentin *et al*, 2007; Yang, 2004a; Zheng & Yang, 2005). In this regard, acetylation and methylation of histone H3 at Lys9 are mutually exclusive and mark genes for activation and repression, respectively (Fig 2B; reviewed by Jenuwein & Allis, 2001; Margueron *et al*, 2005; Nightingale *et al*, 2006). Acetylation and methylation of histone H3 at Lys36 preclude each other, but mark promoters and coding regions of active genes, respectively (Morris *et al*, 2007), suggesting that same-site modifications might not always yield completely opposite effects. This is also true for two pairs of p53 modifications (Fig 2A). At Lys320, both acetylation and polyubiquitylation stimulate transcription (Knights *et al*, 2006; Le Cam *et al*, 2006). Similarly, at Lys273, both acetylation and mono-methylation lead to transcriptional activation (Chuikov *et al*, 2004). In the above two cases, the competitive modifications affect distinct sets of genes, revealing a new way for one transcription factor to selectively regulate different gene expression programmes.

Fifth, acetylation crosstalks with neighbouring modifications such as phosphorylation and methylation (Fig 2). Deacetylation of histone H3 at Lys9 and histone H2B at Lys11 cooperates with serine (Ser) 10 phosphorylation (Fig 2B,C; Ahn *et al*, 2006; Li *et al*, 2006). By analogy, acetylation of p53 at Lys120, Lys370 and Lys372 might cooperate with phosphorylation of adjacent serine residues (Fig 2A). For cooperative actions on Lys9 and Ser10 of histone H3, HDAC3 associates with Aurora B kinase (Li *et al*, 2006). Reminiscent of this, HDACs form complexes with phosphatases (Canetti *et al*, 2003; Zhang *et al*, 2005). Similarly, ubiquitin protease 8 (Ubp8) associates with Gcn5 (Daniel *et al*, 2004; Henry *et al*, 2003). Furthermore, HDAC6 has a zinc-finger domain for ubiquitin interaction, allowing the recognition and transport of ubiquitylated proteins, and controlling polyubiquitin-chain turnover (Seigneurin-Berny *et al*, 2001; Hook *et al*, 2002; Boyault *et al*, 2006). The deacetylase and ubiquitin-binding activities of HDAC6 are both required for correct management of misfolded proteins (Kawaguchi *et al*, 2003; Iwata *et al*, 2005). Furthermore, an O-linked N-acetylglucosamine (O-GlcNAc) transferase has a HAT domain (Toleman *et al*, 2004), which might promote crosstalk between acetylation and glycosylation. Therefore, in the context of multisite modification, N^ε-acetylation might exert its effect through an interplay with phosphorylation, methylation, ubiquitylation and other modifications to form concerted regulatory programmes.

These programmes have characteristics of dynamic molecular barcodes (reviewed by Yang, 2005). In terms of multisite modification, p53 and core histones have clusters of acetylation and other modification sites in their regulatory regions. An important question is whether principles drawn from modifications of p53 and core histones can be extended to other proteins such as Ku70, p300 and DNA methyltransferase 1 (DNMT1), which are known to have many acetylation sites in their regulatory loops (Cohen *et al*, 2004; Thompson *et al*, 2004; Kim *et al*, 2006). If so, studies of p53 and core histones shall form informative conceptual frameworks for understanding the regulation of many other N^ε-acetylated proteins.

Competition of O-acetylation with phosphorylation

YopJ is a virulence factor of *Yersinia pestis*, the cause of the plague centuries ago; two other *Yersinia* species cause septicaemic and gastrointestinal disorders. YopJ compromises the host's defence systems by blocking the mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK)

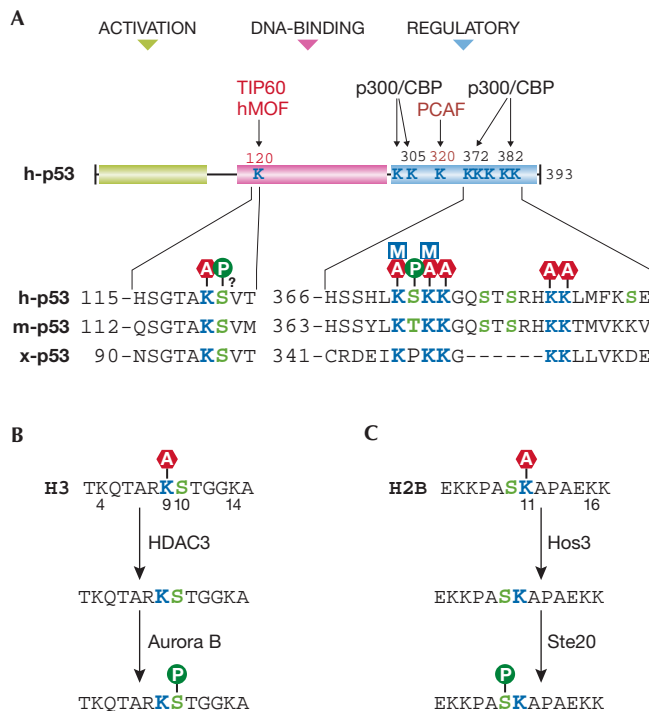


Fig 2 | Interplay of acetylation with methylation and phosphorylation in p53 and histones. (A) Domain organization of human (h) p53, with its sequence around lysine (Lys; K) 120 and Lys 370 aligned with the corresponding regions of murine (m) and *Xenopus* (x) orthologues. Note the potential interplay of acetylation of these two residues with same-site or neighbouring modifications such as methylation and phosphorylation. Also shown are site-specific actions of various acetyltransferases, including TIP60, hMOF, PCAF and p300/CBP (Sykes *et al*, 2006; Tang *et al*, 2006; reviewed by Brooks & Gu, 2003). Note that Lys 120 and Lys 373, but not Lys 320, Lys 370 or Lys 372, are conserved in *Drosophila* p53 (Knights *et al*, 2006; Tang *et al*, 2006). Mammalian p53 is also subject to various other modifications (reviewed by Appella & Anderson, 2001; Brooks & Gu, 2003). P in circle, phosphorylation; A in hexagon, acetylation; and M in square, methylation. (B) At the initial stage of mitosis, HDAC3 removes the acetyl group from Lys9 of histone H3 and facilitates phosphorylation of serine (Ser; S) 10 by Aurora B. (C) In response to oxidative stress, yeast Hos3 deacetylates Lys11 of histone H2B and promotes phosphorylation of Ser10 by Ste20 kinase. CBP, CREB-binding protein; HDAC3, histone deacetylase 3; hMOF, human male-absent on the first; Hos3, histone deacetylase one-similar 3; PCAF, p300/CBP-associated factor; Ste20, sterile 20; TIP60, Tat-interactive protein of 60 kDa.

and nuclear factor κ B (NF κ B) signalling pathways (reviewed by Worby & Dixon, 2006). Two groups recently reported that YopJ catalyses O-acetylation to inhibit these pathways (Mittal *et al*, 2006; Mukherjee *et al*, 2006). It acetylates MAPK/ERK kinase (MEK) 6 (or MKK6) at the activation-loop residues Ser207 and threonine (Thr) 211, the phosphorylation of which is required for kinase activation (Mukherjee *et al*, 2006). This indicates that O-acetylation precludes phosphorylation and inhibits MAPK signalling (Fig 3). Two other members of the MEK family are similarly acetylated. Furthermore, YopJ acetylates I κ B kinase (IKK) α and β at two serine residues equivalent to Ser207 and Thr211 of MEK6, and the acetylation blocks NF κ B activation (Fig 3; Mittal *et al*, 2006;

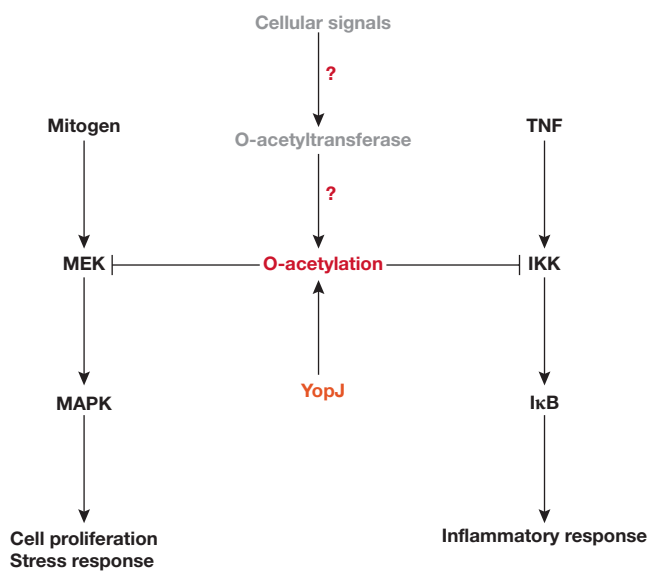


Fig 3 | Negative regulation of the MAPK/ERK kinase and IκB kinase families by *Yersinia* outer protein J. IκB, inhibitor of NFκB; IKK, IκB kinase; MAPK, mitogen-activated protein kinase; MEK, MAPK/ERK kinase; TNF, tumour necrosis factor; YopJ, *Yersinia* outer protein J.

Mukherjee *et al*, 2006). These findings raise two exciting issues: whether MEKs, IKKs and other mammalian proteins are subject to O-acetylation under physiological conditions (Table 1); and whether this modification occurs in other bacteria. If so, this would take signalling research and bacterial pathology to new and totally uncharted territory.

Conclusions and perspectives

Studies of N^ε-acetylation have gradually expanded from histones and transcription factors to other proteins, including DNA repair regulators, metabolic enzymes, structural proteins and signalling modulators. Most of these acetylation events were identified by the biased-candidate approach. Three proteomic studies have recently taken a more systematic approach and identified a diverse array of N^ε-acetylated proteins (Iwabata *et al*, 2005; Kim *et al*, 2006; Xie *et al*, 2007). Although acetylation of these proteins awaits further substantiation by different experimental means, it is reasonable to conclude that additional N^ε-acetylated proteins have yet to be identified and characterized. This idea is also consistent with the following considerations. First, given the dynamic nature of N^ε-acetylation and the low abundance of various cellular proteins, such as signalling regulators, acetyl-lysine in many proteins might have evaded identification. Second, it occurs in different bacteria, so this modification could be a rather ancient regulatory mechanism and various prokaryotic proteins might be subject to such regulation. Third, different substrates might exist for many uncharacterized plant proteins that are related to p300/CBP and class II HDACs (Han SK *et al*, 2007). Fourth, there are atypical N^ε-acetyltransferases, including bacterial Pat and AcuA (Gardner *et al*, 2006), yeast establishment of cohesion 1 (Eco1; Ivanov *et al*, 2002) and Rtt109 (Driscoll *et al*, 2007; Han J *et al*, 2007), and a mammalian glycosylation enzyme with a lysine acetyltransferase domain (Toleman *et al*, 2004). Such

atypical enzymes might act on novel substrates. Finally, TIP60 and HDAC3 target signal transduction pathways through unusual mechanisms (Zhang *et al*, 2002; Ceol & Horvitz, 2004). One possibility is that TIP60 and HDAC3 directly modify the signalling regulators involved. Thus, it will be important to complete the catalogue of N^ε-acetylated proteins—that is, the N^ε-acetyl proteome—and to characterize the functional impact on metabolism, cytoskeleton dynamics, signalling and other cellular processes. In this regard, it is noteworthy that N^ε-acetylation often does not act alone but interplays with other covalent modifications to form dynamic regulatory programmes for orchestrated regulation of protein functions *in vivo* (Fig 2). If there is a protein modification code, N^ε-acetylation must be an important element in the coding system.

Besides this modification, cellular proteins might be subject to O-acetylation of serine, threonine and perhaps tyrosine residues (Fig 1B,C). An important issue to address is whether there are intrinsic enzymatic systems to govern protein O-acetylation in eukaryotic cells. If so, this modification would compete with phosphorylation for the same residues and, as protein phosphorylation is crucial to cellular signalling, this would revolutionize our fundamental view of cellular regulation. It is notable that acetyl salicylic acid (Aspirin) promotes O-acetylation of cyclooxygenase enzymes. In addition, N^ε-deacetylase inhibitors and activators are being actively evaluated in clinical trials as new therapeutic agents for cancer, heart diseases and neurodegenerative disorders. Thus, studies of protein N^ε- and O-acetylation not only are for fundamental research and intellectual curiosity, but also will provide vital information on how to use related enzymes and substrates as new molecular targets for developing preventive, diagnostic and therapeutic strategies against various diseases.

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