

Biomedicine and Diseases: Review

Assembling the human immunodeficiency virus type 1

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Abstract. Retroviral assembly proceeds through a series of concerted events that lead to the formation and release of infectious virion particles from the infected cell. Upon translation, structural proteins are targeted to the plasma membrane where they accumulate. There, the nascent particle forces the plasma membrane to form a bud,

which pinches off releasing the virion particle from the cell. In this review we describe the molecular mechanisms now known to be behind the process of virion assembly. In particular, we focus on the human immunodeficiency virus type 1, the prototype member of the lentivirus subfamily of the Retroviridae.

Key words. Retrovirus; HIV-1; Gag virion assembly; raft.

Introduction

In the following review, we will describe the molecular mechanisms by which infectious virion particles are formed and released from an infected cell, the process of virion assembly. We will focus on what is now known about the assembly of the human immunodeficiency virus type 1 (HIV-1), the prototype member of the lentivirus subfamily of the Retroviridae. Throughout, we shall keep in mind that most of the major steps described here for HIV-1 are also shared by other retroviruses. For the sake of clarity, we have chosen to introduce the HIV-1 life cycle and genomic structure first and then to describe in detail the formation of virion-like particles, those formed by a single viral structural polyprotein, Gag. This discussion will illustrate the major problems in virion assembly. Finally, and for simplicity, we will add to the picture only a few of the known components that contribute to determine the infectivity of the virion particle.

HIV-1 life cycle, genomic structure and structural genes

The life cycle of HIV-1

The life cycle of HIV-1 begins when an infectious particle encounters a cell bearing the appropriate receptor (CD4) and coreceptor (CCR5 or CXCR4) [see ref. 1 for review and citations] (fig. 1). Following recognition between viral envelope glycoproteins and cell receptors, membrane fusion is triggered and the viral core carrying the dimeric RNA genome penetrates into the cytoplasm of the cell. The single-stranded genomic RNA is then converted into double-stranded proviral DNA by reverse transcriptase (RT) with the aid of the nucleocapsid protein (NC). Subsequently, proviral DNA is transported into the nucleus and integrated into the host genome, via the viral enzyme integrase (IN). As their name suggests, reverse transcription of RNA into DNA is a characteristic and distinctive feature of retroviruses. Once proviral DNA is integrated, transcription of viral mRNA occurs from the viral long terminal repeat (LTR) via the host cell RNA polymerase II [see ref. 2 for a comprehensive review of the life cycle of retroviruses]. Provirus integration is a hallmark of successful replication of a retrovirus.

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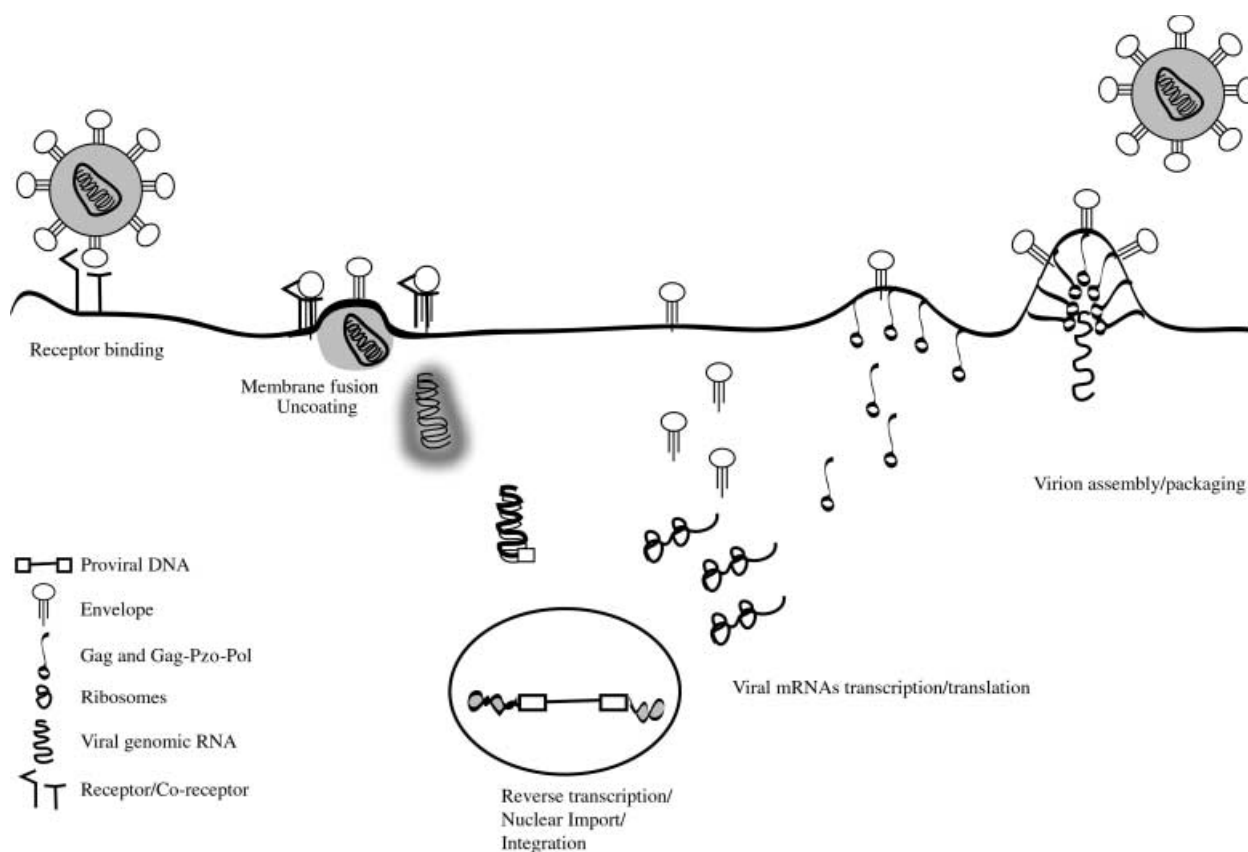


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the retroviral life cycle. Early events in the viral life cycle begin with attachment of the virus to the surface of a cell bearing the appropriate receptor/s. Reverse transcription of viral genomic RNA begins in the cytoplasm, although some indications suggest it may have already started in the virion particle, and is completed in the nucleus. Early events in the viral life cycle culminate in the integration of the proviral DNA into the host genome. Late events in the viral life cycle lead to the formation of infectious virion particles that are released from the cell. In this scheme, accumulation of structural proteins occurs directly on the plasma membrane, as is the case for type C retroviruses, like HIV-1.

Its life cycle can be thus divided into events that precede or follow integration, defined as early and late steps of the viral life cycle, respectively.

The HIV-1 genome

The HIV-proviral genome is flanked by two LTRs and encodes the structural genes *gag*, *pro*, *pol* and *env* and the non-structural genes *tat* (for trans-activator), *rev* (for regulator of expression of virion protein), *nef* (for negative factor), *vif* (for virion infectivity), *vpr* and *vpu* (for viral proteins R and U, respectively). The presence of such a large number of non-structural proteins sets lentiviruses apart from other classes of retroviruses (fig. 2). In addition, the viral genome contains a number of cis-acting sequences, such as the Tat-acting region (TAR), the primer-binding site (PBS), the dimer initiation site (DIS), the packaging sequence (*psi*), the polypurine tract (PPT located at the 3' end of the genome and a second cPPT present at the center of the genome) and the Rev-responsive element (RRE). These sequences participate in a large

number of events during the viral life cycle, such as transcription (TAR), translation and nuclear export (RRE), packaging (*psi*), dimerization of viral genomic RNA (DIS) and reverse transcription (PBS, PPT and cPPT) [reviewed in ref. 2].

Viral transcripts originate from a single promoter in the U3 region of the 5' LTR. Basal transcription activity from the viral promoter is modulated by the provirus site of integration and by the activation state of the cell. Thus, the steady-state level of viral RNAs in the cell can be low or high depending on the availability of specific host cell factors acting on the LTR [reviewed in refs 3–7]. The first transcripts to appear in the cytoplasm of infected cells are multiply spliced mRNAs from which the non-structural proteins Tat, Rev and Nef are translated (the so-called 2-kb mRNAs). Upon translation, Tat reaches the nucleus and trans-activates viral RNA transcription. This is accomplished not by binding to the viral promoter but rather by allowing elongation of nascent RNA molecules [the mechanism of Tat action is reviewed in refs 8, 9]. However, it is Rev that allows the regulation of viral gene

and a 51-kDa subunit) and the integrase (IN) are released from the precursor.

While the genomic RNA is translated by cytoplasmic ribosomes, *env* mRNA is translated on rough endoplasmic reticulum (RER)-associated ribosomes. Thus, the Env precursor enters the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) where it becomes glycosylated (hence its name gp160) and cleaved by cellular proteases such as furin into its subunits gp120 (SU, for surface) and gp41 (TM, for transmembrane). The two glycosylated protein products remain associated, and through the Golgi reach the plasma membrane where they are incorporated on the virion surface.

Overview of the retroviral assembly process

Electron microscopy studies have revealed the existence of two morphologically distinct mechanisms of assembly for retroviruses [14–18]. Virion particles can be performed in the cytoplasm and transported to the plasma membrane (morphogenesis of type B and D), or they can assemble directly on the plasma membrane (morphogenesis of type C). HIV-1 virion particles follow the second modality of assembly. Viral structural proteins accumulate under the plasma membrane, multimerize and ultimately force the membrane into a curvature that protrudes from the cell and eventually pinches off, releasing the virion particle [for reviews see refs 12 and 13]. Given these events, which are easily observed by electron microscopy, the aim of those studying virion assembly is the dissection of the molecular mechanisms behind the process. Thus, we study the mechanism responsible for targeting particle assembly to the plasma membrane rather than intracellular membranes and try to understand how viral proteins come together to form higher-order multimeric structures that are finally released from the cell. As Gag is the main structural constituent of virions and is able to form virion-like particles in the absence of other viral products, we will mainly focus our discussion by describing the assembly of Gag.

The assembly of Gag

Expression of the retroviral Gag polyprotein by itself is sufficient for the formation and release of virion-like particles [19–24]. Thus, Gag contains all the information and the domains required to assemble into virion-like – albeit not infectious – particles, and can truly be considered the major player in the entire virion assembly process. To schematize the series of events that occurs during virion assembly, one can think of newly synthesized Gag molecules present in the cytoplasm as facing three major problems: where to go (targeting), when and

how to interact with other similar molecules (multimerization) and how to exit the cell (budding).

Targeting to the plasma membrane

Early studies on HIV-1 demonstrated that mutations that abolished plasma membrane targeting of Gag prevented the formation of virion particles [17, 25–31]. These results showed that targeting of Gag to the plasma membrane is a leading event during virion assembly. They also revealed the presence at the N terminus of retroviral Gag polyproteins of a conserved region, the function of which is to target Gag to the plasma membrane; this region has been termed the M domain [32].

The M domain

The M domain of HIV-1 has been precisely mapped to the first 31 amino acids of Gag [31]. This domain is sufficient to target heterologous proteins to the plasma membrane and has counterparts in similar domains present on cellular proteins [reviewed in ref. 33]. The M domain of HIV-1 is a bipartite membrane-targeting domain that relies on acylation and basic residues, both being required for its function [17, 25–31]. As the first methionine of Gag is removed cotranslationally, Gag is modified by the covalent addition of a fatty acid, myristate, to its first glycine residue [27, 34, 35]. Myristoylation is accomplished by cellular enzymes which recognize the consensus sequence Met-Gly-x-x-x-Ser/Thr [interestingly, present also in Nef, reviewed in ref. 33]. Basic amino acids are clustered in a region between residues 17 and 31 of HIV-1 MA. Although the features of the HIV-1 M domain are shared by other retroviruses, several exceptions exist. For example, in the Rous sarcoma virus, the M domain is modified by addition of an acetyl group to the first methionine rather than by myristoylation on glycine and basic residues are dispersed in as much as 80 amino acids [36, 37]. This evidence raises the possibility that M domains of certain retroviruses may be regulated differently from that of HIV-1.

The biophysical features of the two-signal plasma membrane-binding motif (myristate plus basic residues) have been determined [31, 38–40]. The myristate inserts hydrophobically into the lipid bilayer and the basic amino acids form electrostatic interactions with the headgroups of acid phospholipids on the inner leaflet of the membrane bilayer. Both interactions are needed to provide enough binding energy to anchor Gag into the membrane. Nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy and X-ray crystallography of HIV-1 MA support this model by showing that basic residues form an amphipatic β sheet and are exposed on the top surface of the molecule where they can interact with membrane phospholipids [41, 42].

But not all membranes are equivalent, and Gag has recently been shown to accumulate in specific micro-

domains of the plasma membrane, the rafts. Since rafts are becoming an area of increasing interest for virologists, immunologists and cell biologists, we will introduce them below.

Rafts

Rafts are discrete domains within the plasma membrane enriched in sphingomyelin, glycosphingolipids, cholesterol and glycosyl-phosphatidylinositol (GPI)-anchored proteins. Due to their composition, rafts are resistant to extraction with cold non-ionic detergents such as Triton X-100 or NP-40 and can thus be isolated from soluble and non-raft membrane proteins. Their unique lipid composition makes rafts a docking site for a number of cellular proteins that are thus enriched at these sites. As a consequence, the raft becomes the site of choice in which specific cellular processes take place, as best shown in the case of T and B cell receptor engagement [43–49]. Interestingly, protein access to rafts seems regulated by acylation; myristoylation, as in the case of HIV-1 Gag and Src, palmitoylation, or both, as in Ras [reviewed in ref. 33].

Recognition of the liaison between viruses and rafts is relatively new but is becoming a common theme in virology. Viruses as diverse as influenza, measles, Ebola and Sendai seem to utilize rafts to assemble virion particles [50–54]. Retroviruses seem no exception, since MoMuLV, HTLV-I and HIV-1 structural proteins (and HIV-1 Nef) are enriched in rafts [55–57]. In support of the hypothesis that assembly may occur preferentially in rafts, virion particles have high cholesterol and sphingomyelin content [58–60] and incorporate a number of proteins present in rafts [55, 61–63].

Mechanism of M domain function

The mechanism of raft association of Gag is still unclear. As cellular proteins modified similarly to Gag are recruited into rafts, the lipid composition of rafts in itself may be responsible for the specific targeting of Gag to the plasma membrane, acting as a sort of intracellular receptor on the membrane. However, Gag itself, once on the plasma membrane, may contribute to the formation of the raft *de novo*.

In addition, the dynamics of the association between Gag and rafts need further investigation. Gag associates within minutes of its synthesis with the plasma membrane [64], but in any given experiment, only 20–30% of the total Gag protein is present in rafts, while the majority is present on detergent-soluble plasma membrane [55–57, 65–67]. Clearly, a comprehensive kinetic study of the association between Gag and membrane may help clarify the picture.

The M domain of HIV-1 is sufficient to target heterologous proteins to the plasma membrane, but is insufficient for their targeting into rafts [65]. This suggests that other

domains of Gag may be needed to promote raft association and/or organization. Recent evidence suggests that the latter is promoted by the multimerization of Gag [65, 66], which by itself does not influence the ability of Gag to bind the plasma membrane [31, 68, 69]. If this were true, we could hypothesize a dynamic scenario in which the interaction between Gag and the plasma membrane occurs first, followed by recruitment of Gag into rafts, as recently suggested [66]. Recruitment may occur by lateral clustering of membrane-bound Gag molecules and may be influenced by Gag-Gag interactions [65, 66]. This hypothesis is very attractive, because lateral clustering is thought to be a major mechanism by which rafts are formed [reviewed in ref. 44]. To complicate the issue, provocative evidence is emerging suggesting that rafts are a heterogeneous population characterized by distinct sensitivity to detergent and even containing distinct GPI proteins [70, 71]. Thus Gag may in the future be found on one raft type rather than another.

The second issue to consider is suggested by studies on HIV replication in murine cells. HIV-1 replication in murine cells is hindered at multiple steps: at virus entry, in proviral expression and in virion assembly. When the first two defects are corrected for, HIV-1 Gag is produced and myristoylated, but virion particles form on the plasma cell membrane very inefficiently [72]. Thus, there is in murine cells a plasma membrane-targeting defect of HIV-1 Gag, which can be rescued by exchanging the MA of HIV-1 for that of MLV [73, 74]. Because of this targeting defect and similar to defects in other M domain mutants, Gag processing, which reflects the proper activation of the viral protease, does not occur. Recent heterokaryon studies have suggested that the membrane-targeting domain of HIV-1 Gag may need a cellular factor to function properly [75]. In view of recent data on raft localization, this factor may be a component of the raft itself that is either missing or expressed in low amounts in murine cells or it may be a factor that chaperones Gag specifically to the plasma membrane. Taken together, these data suggest that selection of the site of assembly is a complex event and is likely to be influenced not only by the M domain but also by other domains of Gag and/or possibly by specific cellular factors.

Gag multimerization

Multimerization of retroviral Gag molecules is at the basis of the virion particle structure and, provided that nucleic acid is present, multimerization is an intrinsic property of the Gag molecule, since purified Gag can form virion-like particles *in vitro* [23, 76–82]. Particles formed *in vitro* are similar to those formed in cells in that they contain approximately 1200 molecules of Gag per virion and 5–8% of their mass is nucleic acid [83]. As the virion is a complex and dynamic structure, multimeriza-

tion is the result of multiple contacts among Gag molecules and involves different domains of Gag.

The interaction domains

Several domains responsible for Gag-Gag interaction have been identified following a number of biochemical assays including *in vitro* binding assays [84], yeast two-hybrid systems [85], and copackaging of mutant Gag proteins into wild-type virions *in vivo* [68, 84]. Finally, although the structure of the entire Gag polyprotein precursor is not yet available, that of its single domains, corresponding to the mature viral proteins, has shed light on how each among the MA, CA and NC domains contributes to Gag multimerization. As we will discuss below, the major contribution to Gag-Gag interaction lies in the NC domain, so that NC is often referred to as the I domain [86]. However, since multiple domains contribute to Gag-Gag interaction, we prefer to refer to them collectively as interaction domains.

A role for MA in Gag multimerization has been recently reported [84]. In support of this hypothesis, the crystal structure of MA is trimeric [41, 87] and Gag trimers dependent on MA can be found in solution [88]. Similar results are obtained when SIVmac MA is examined, indicating that trimerization may be conserved among lentiviruses [89]. The role of MA trimerization in virion assembly has not been clearly determined. The entire MA can be substituted by a heterologous membrane-targeting domain suggesting that the main function of MA is to target Gag to the plasma membrane and that trimerization of MA might be dispensable for assembly [29, 90, 91]. On the other hand however, certain mutations in MA that span the proposed trimerization interface affect virion assembly, so, although minor, MA-MA interactions may truly influence Gag multimerization [26, 92].

A second domain involved in Gag multimerization is the capsid protein. CA is the major determinant of the viral core, as purified CA or CA-NC fusion proteins can form core-like structures *in vitro* [93–99]. The crystal structure of the individual N and C termini of CA is available [100–102], as is the structure of the entire CA complexed with a Fab [103]. These studies have allowed for image reconstruction of viral cores and have revealed that the N-terminal part of CA shapes core structure by organizing into hexameric rings, while the C-terminal part dimerizes, connecting the different rings [104]. Consistent with these results, mutations within the N terminus of CA generally affect virion morphology, while mutations at the C terminus affect virion assembly [105]. Interestingly, even though all the different domains of Gag can be fairly well substituted with heterologous proteins or portions thereof, the C-terminal domain of CA with SP1 is the only portion so far absolutely required for the proper assembly of virion particles [90, 91]. This most probably re-

flects the important role played by the C terminus of CA in shaping the structure of the virion particle itself. In proximity to its dimerization region, but not contributing to it, CA contains a stretch of 20 amino acids conserved in all retroviruses, called the major homology region (MHR). Although the functions of the MHR are unclear at the moment, this region is certainly important, as evidenced by its conservation and by the phenotype of mutations in the MHR that affect core structure and assembly [105–109].

The third domain involved in Gag-Gag interactions maps in NC. Deletions of NC strongly reduce Gag-Gag interaction *in vitro* and *in vivo* [68, 84, 85] and impair virion assembly and production, although this defect can be mitigated in high-level expression systems [20, 110–113]. Mutations in NC have, in addition to effects on assembly, the most diverse effects on virion structure [114–119], viral RNA packaging [115, 120, 121] reverse transcription [114, 115, 118, 122, 123] and possibly integration [118, 122, 124, 125], reflecting the multiple roles of NC during the viral life cycle. We shall deal with some of these roles later in the review.

Retroviral NC proteins are characterized by the presence of Cys-His boxes (either one or two as in HIV-1, with the sole exception of spumaviruses which have none) and of a large number of basic residues distributed throughout the protein [for reviews see refs 13, 126, 127]. NC is the major viral RNA-binding protein and its interaction with the RNA has been shown to be highly complex. As part of Gag, the NC domain plays the major role in packaging of the viral genomic RNA through specific interactions between the Cys-His boxes and a packaging sequence present *in cis* on the genomic RNA (termed ψ), but it also extensively coats the viral genome once it is incorporated into the particle. Thus, NC can associate with RNA specifically as in the case of packaging but also in a rather non-specific manner all along the genomic RNA. Structural studies of NC alone or complexed with small portions of the HIV packaging sequence, ψ , have provided structural explanations for these findings and have revealed both specific interactions of Cys-His boxes with guanosine residues of the RNA and non-specific electrostatic interaction of certain basic residues of NC with the phosphate groups of the RNA molecule [128–135].

Mechanism of Gag multimerization

Given the properties of the domains involved in multimerization, what mechanism is responsible for Gag-Gag interactions? Examples from other viruses show that nucleocapsid assembly may rely uniquely on protein-protein interactions [136–139] or may be strictly driven by protein-RNA interactions, as best shown for alphaviruses and plant viruses [140–144]. In HIV-1, both protein-protein and protein-RNA interactions seem to be important

for assembly. Protein-protein interactions are suggested by structural studies and clearly involve both MA-MA and CA-CA interactions and may also involve hydrophobic NC-NC interactions, as NC multimers are observed in solution once NC is bound to large RNAs [132, 135, 145], although not in NMR studies conducted so far with small RNAs [128–130, 133, 134]. Furthermore, in the Gag-Pol precursor, additional IN-IN, PR-PR and RT-RT interactions do occur [146–153].

Protein-RNA interactions mediated by NC are implied by the requirement for nucleic acid in the assembly of purified Gag or CA-NC proteins *in vitro* [23, 77, 78, 81, 94, 154]. In addition they are suggested by the strict correlation existing between the ability of NC to associate with RNA and the ability of the virus to assemble in cells [114, 155]. This suggests that one of the major functions of NC during the assembly process is to bind RNA and, indeed, NC can be functionally substituted by heterologous RNA-binding domains [112, 119, 156]. While this evidence shows that NC-RNA interactions are indispensable for virion assembly, we must remember that purified NC bound to nucleic acid will form aggregates but not virion particles *in vitro* [131, 135, 145]. Thus, protein-protein interactions are also important and most likely shape the virion structure itself.

Given all this information, we may hypothesize that by binding to RNA, NC concentrates Gag molecules onto one or more RNA molecules, a process known as nucleation. By increasing the local concentration of Gag, this nucleation event can favor protein-protein interactions among the different domains of Gag, which then shape the structure of the particle. In support of this hypothesis, the nucleation event can be achieved by substitution of NC with leucine zippers, that is by protein-protein interaction modules that effectively increase the local concentration of Gag [90, 119]. This model of virion assembly argues that RNA molecules or rather NC-RNA complexes act as a recruitment platform, a scaffold, onto which Gag molecules accumulate. Under this assumption, RNA may be considered a structural element of the virion particle, as recently suggested [157]. The RNA involved need not be of viral origin given that virion assembly occurs in the absence of either Cys-His boxes or ψ [118, 158–162]. Thus, whether the various ribosomal and cellular RNAs found in retroviral particles are incorporated via NC because they serve a structural role during assembly, or non-specifically, remains to be determined. Examination of the RNA content of a minimal Gag mutant, in which NC has been substituted by a leucine zipper (dimeric or trimeric), may help clarify the issue, as this mutant should theoretically achieve nucleation without RNA [90, 119].

Another important point to consider is at what point during the assembly process, Gag multimerization occurs. Myristoylation-deficient Gag proteins (which are thus

cytosolic) can be incorporated into wild-type virions, but this rescue does not discriminate when the wild-type and mutant molecules interact. More specifically, this assay of copackaging does not distinguish whether the two molecules associate while both are in the cytosol or when the wild-type Gag is already bound to the plasma membrane. The existence of cytosolic Gag complexes resistant to detergent extraction has been suggested [163, 164]. Interestingly, these complexes were also obtained with a myristic mutant of Gag, indicating that they may represent true cytosolic complexes. If these are true assembly intermediates that reach the plasma membrane, or if they represent dead ends of the assembly process, is not yet known.

Late stages of assembly

The last event to take place during the assembly process is budding. Mutants blocked at this stage accumulate Gag into virion-like particles that do not detach from the plasma membrane and remain tethered to each other [20, 90, 165–169]. As this event occurs very late during virion assembly [166, 167], the region responsible for this defect has been named the L domain [32].

L domain

In HIV-1 Gag, the L domain maps to a conserved P(T/S)AP motif in p6 [166, 167]. Slightly different conserved motifs are present in other retroviruses such as a YxxL domain in equine infectious anemia virus (EIAV) and a PPxY motif in Mason-Pfizer monkey virus, murine leukemia virus and Rous sarcoma virus [reviewed recently in ref. 170]. Retroviral L domains can functionally replace each other regardless of their location in the Gag molecule, indicating that retroviruses use a common pathway for budding and suggesting that the L domain is not providing structural information [171].

The mechanism of budding

Clues to the mechanism of budding came very recently from the identification of cellular partners that interact with the L domain of different retroviruses. These cellular partners include the AP-2 complex involved in clathrin-mediated endocytosis for EIAV [172], a member of the family of E3 protein ubiquitin ligases for RSV [the neuronal precursor cell-expressed developmentally down-regulated 4, Nedd4; ref. 173] and an homologue of the E2 ubiquitin-conjugating enzymes for HIV-1 [tumor susceptibility gene 101, Tsg101; refs 116, 174]. Although the exact mechanism of budding remains to be elucidated, strong evidence suggests that the function of the L domain may indeed be to recruit the endocytosis machinery to the site of budding. In support of this hypothesis, all the L domain-interacting proteins belong to the endocytic pathway and, more importantly, expression of Gag causes a redistribution of Tsg101 to the site of assembly [175]. Among

the L domain-interacting proteins, Tsg101 might provide a particularly instructive example to elucidate how budding occurs. Tsg101 is part of the vacuolar protein-sorting pathway which sorts membrane-bound proteins for degradation in the lysosome [for a review see ref. 176]. Proteins can enter this pathway either via endocytosis from the plasma membrane or via vesicular trafficking from the Golgi. Deletion of the Tsg101 orthologue in yeast blocks vacuolar protein sorting from the Golgi, a process that topologically resembles the budding of virion particles from the cell (protrusion from a membrane).

A second player that has come into focus in recent years and that may contribute to our understanding of the mechanism of budding is ubiquitin. Ubiquitin was initially found to be incorporated in avian retrovirus particles [177] and later in HIV-1 virions, both in a free form and as monoconjugate to a fraction of p6 [178]. The link between ubiquitin and virion assembly came when proteasome inhibitors, by preventing recirculation of ubiquitin and by lowering its intracellular concentration, were shown to cause a defect similar to that of L domain mutants, albeit much reduced in magnitude [168, 179].

The role of Gag ubiquitination in assembly is not clear. In particular, whether ubiquitination of p6 is required for recruitment of other cellular factors, as recently proposed for Tsg101 [165], or whether it is the indirect reflection of the presence of a ubiquitin ligase activity [180] has yet to be determined. The fact that the two ubiquitin acceptor lysines in p6 can be modified without apparent defects in virion assembly [181], does not argue against one or the other hypothesis, because the ubiquitin ligase activity can target adjacent lysines in the absence of those in p6. However, the presence of mono-ubiquitinated p6 is particularly interesting in view of the recent findings mentioned above. Mono-ubiquitination is clearly different from poly-ubiquitination, whose role in protein degradation is well known. Indeed, a number of studies have shown that mono-ubiquitination is a signal for receptor endocytosis [recently reviewed in ref. 182], raising the possibility that ubiquitin may truly contribute to the budding process.

Other components needed for the formation of an infectious virion

The steps that lead to the formation of Gag particles describe the virion assembly process, but they do not exhaust the subject, because Gag particles are not infectious. We have chosen to describe here only a few components that contribute to virion infectivity: viral RNA which allows us to introduce the problem of packaging; Env, through which we will deal with the problem of envelope incorporation, and two accessory proteins, Vpu and Vif, that influence virion release and virion infectivity, respectively (fig. 3).

Viral genomic RNA packaging

Viral genomic RNA packaging is mediated by specific binding between the Cys-His boxes of NC and a ψ sequence composed of four stem-loops, named SL1–4, present only on the complete viral genomic RNA [for reviews see refs 126, 127]. As a result of this interaction, two copies of viral genomic RNA are selected from the pool of viral and cellular RNAs and incorporated into virion particles. Viral genomic RNA is found in virion particles in the form of a dimer [183–186]. Dimerization is initiated at a stem-loop structure named the dimerization initiation site (DIS). The DIS of HIV-1 corresponds to a highly conserved structure with a self-complementary loop sequence, which is involved in the formation of a typical loop-loop ‘kissing’ complex [187–194]. RNA has been suggested to be packaged into nascent virions in a dimeric form that undergoes maturation (a conformational change that makes the RNA dimer more resistant to heat denaturation) after the virus is released from the cell [195, 196]. Dimer maturation is driven by NC [195–199]. A certain number of studies suggest that the dimeric form of the genomic RNA positively influences reverse transcription and recombination among the two molecules of genomic RNA [200, 201], although some disagree [202; reviewed in refs 203, 204].

Although the biochemical features involved in the Gag-genomic RNA interaction have been well characterized *in vitro*, some of the aspects of the process of viral genomic RNA packaging *in vivo* remain elusive. In particular, we do not know when this interaction takes place during assembly nor do we know the relationship existing between packaging and Gag multimerization. If viral genomic RNA contributes to the formation of an RNA scaffold for the accumulation of Gag molecules, then packaging should begin with Gag multimerization. According to this hypothesis, since Gag multimers can be found in the cytoplasm of infected cells [163, 164], selection of viral genomic RNA may already occur in the cytoplasm. Alternatively, packaging may proceed independently of Gag multimerization, and genomic RNA may be included later in the virion particle formation, when Gag is already bound to the plasma membrane.

A second issue to consider is the interplay between packaging and translation. A translating mRNA with moving ribosomes may be a problem for incoming Gag molecules that want to associate with it. To circumvent this problem, the existence of two functional pools of RNA was suggested, one competent for translation, the other for packaging. However, evidence for the existence of such pools is lacking in lentiviruses [205]. Alternatively, upon its translation, Gag might associate with the translating genomic RNA, due to its proximity and to its local concentration, as recently suggested for HIV-2 [205]. In the process, Gag may even associate with other RNA molecules present during translation, which are in fact found

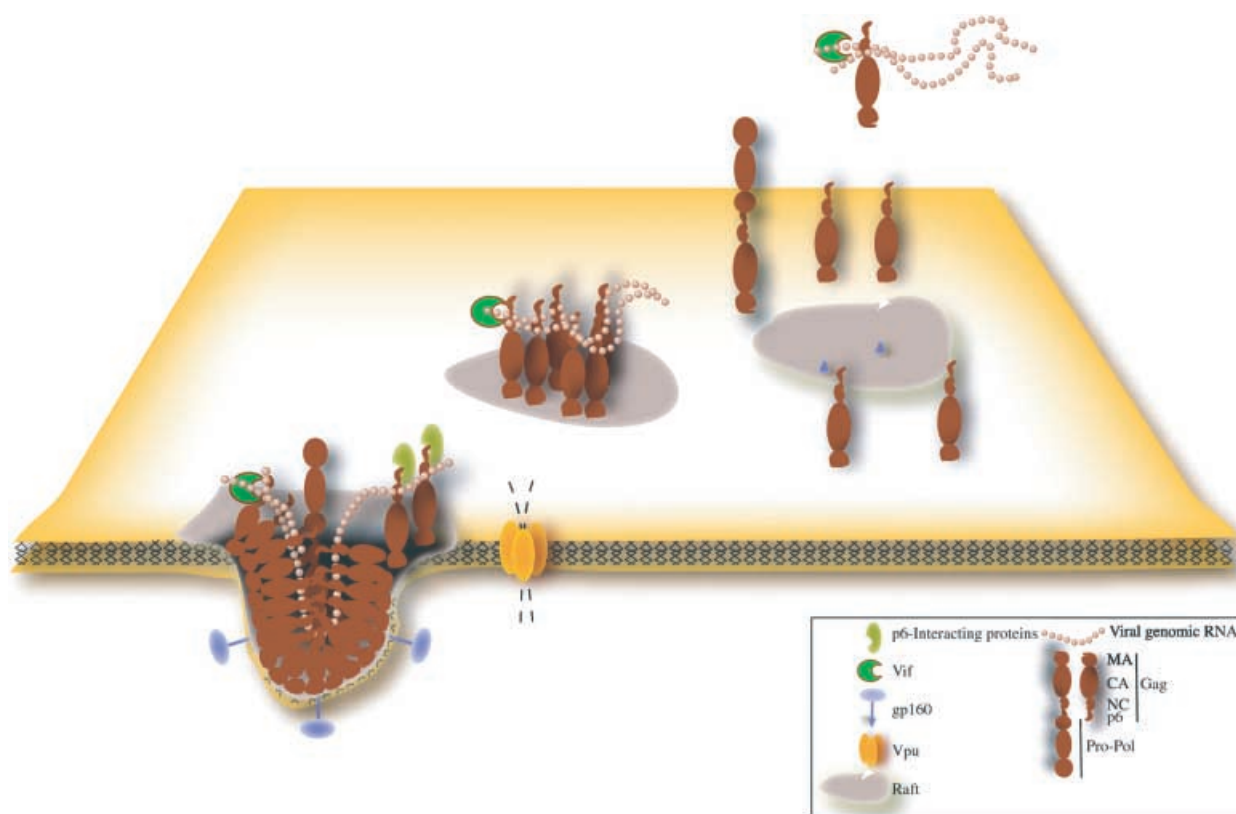


Figure 3. Focus on the assembly process of infectious particles of HIV-1. The figure shows the steps of virion assembly occurring on the cytoplasmic face of the plasma membrane. The viral Gag polyprotein reaches the plasma membrane shortly after translation (right portion of the figure). For simplicity, Gag multimerization is shown to occur directly on rafts (center portion of the figure), although there is evidence for its prior occurrence in the cytoplasm. Accumulation onto rafts is driven by Gag multimerization. Gag-Gag interactions are represented here as being induced by the dimer form of the viral genomic RNA that acts to nucleate Gag molecules. However, cellular RNAs can and do serve similar purposes with respect to Gag nucleation. The presence of Env in rafts (the cytoplasmic tail of gp41 is shown protruding from the rafts inside the cytoplasm, right portion of the figure) may serve to attract Gag molecules onto the site of assembly. On the plasma membrane, Vpu influences virion release by an unknown mechanism that may involve its ability to form ion channels which in turn may influence membrane permeability or even raft formation. Vif is shown here to chaperone viral genomic RNA, together with Gag, protecting it from the action of a yet unknown cellular factor. At a late step during the assembly process, p6 attracts Tsg101, and possibly other cellular factors, for the conclusion of assembly and the release of infectious particles from the cell.

incorporated into virion particles. This would reconcile the RNA-binding properties of the NC domain with the need for an RNA scaffold during Gag assembly. The overlap that exists between sequences involved in packaging (ψ) and the site of translation initiation of Gag further strengthens the hypothesis for a subtle interplay between packaging and translation [206–208].

Envelope

A long-standing question in virion assembly is whether Env is passively incorporated onto virions simply because of its presence on the plasma membrane or if it plays an active role during the assembly process. Interaction between the cytoplasmic tail (CT) of gp41 (TM) and MA was suggested by the proximity of the two proteins on the plasma membrane. Now, evidence indicates that Gag and Env do interact. This includes mutations in MA

or gp41 that block Env incorporation [209–214], direct binding between Env and Gag [215, 216], structural studies [41, 42, 87, 88] and, more importantly, the rescue of Env incorporation in CT mutant virion particles by compensatory mutations in MA [217]. Structurally, the cytoplasmic tail of gp41 of primate lentiviruses is unusually long compared with that of other retroviruses (around 150 as opposed to 30–50 residues) and the spaces between MA trimers seen in the crystal structure seem tailored to fit such tails. However, while this is evidence that HIV-1 Env and Gag interact, it does not imply an active role of Env in the assembly process. In fact, Env may be passively incorporated into virions solely because of its presence in rafts [55, 65, 218–219], because other surface molecules present in rafts such as major histocompatibility complex class II molecules, CD59 and even Env of other viruses can also be incorporated onto the virion surface [62, 63]. The latter phenomena, called Env-

pseudotyping, is the strongest evidence for a passive mechanism of Env incorporation, since structurally diverse membrane proteins can become virion associated. Although virion assembly does occur in the absence of Env, Env may still play a role when present during the assembly process, for example in the selection of the site of virion assembly. This is certainly the case in polarized epithelial cells. These cells are characterized by the presence of two functionally distinct plasma membrane domains, the apical and the basolateral, which are separated by well-defined tight junctions. When Gag is expressed alone in these cells it assembles from both surfaces, but in the presence of Env, assembly occurs only from the basolateral surface, where Env is normally localized [220, 221]. In this system, disruption of the CT of gp41 completely abolished Gag relocalization, strongly suggesting that Gag-Env interactions play an active role during virion assembly. The finding that Env may redirect Gag assembly is all the more interesting in view of the fact that Gag and Env accumulate in rafts. Env targeting to rafts is promoted by palmitoylation at two cysteine residues at position 764 and 837 of the CT of gp41, and mutation of these residues impairs both Env partitioning into rafts and Env incorporation into virion particles [219, 222].

We may hypothesize that accumulation of Env into rafts increases the affinity of Gag for the rafts, possibly due to the presence of palmitate, leading to constant recruitment of Gag into these small membrane domains. Gag recruited into rafts may on the one hand attract new Gag molecules (by lateral clustering due to multimerization, as suggested by Lindwasser et al. [65] and on the other, by interacting with Env, may protect the latter from endocytosis. In this respect, trimerization of MA may play a role in these events by both contributing to Gag-Gag interactions and by protecting the CT of gp41. This may occur either by directly displacing the adaptin complex or by protecting the adaptin-binding site in the CT of gp41 [see the following references for HIV-1 Env endocytosis: 223–227]. In support of this hypothesis, mutations expected to disrupt Gag-Env interaction result in down-regulation of Env from the cell surface [224–228]. A prediction of this model is that once the recruitment reaction starts at a particular location, that location becomes an assembly factory where multiple budding events occur, because accumulated Gag attracts more Gag molecules. The observation that multiple virion particles tethered together can be visualized in L domain mutants seems to suggest the existence of such sites [165, 166, 168, 179].

Viral protease

By processing the Gag and Gag-Pro-Pol polyprotein precursors, the viral protease promotes a profound reorganization of the virion structure that leads to virion maturation. Processing occurs in a relatively ordered manner,

dictated mostly by the primary sequence of the processing sites on the polyproteins [see refs 12 and 13 for review]. A long-standing question is whether protease activity and its characteristic kinetics of cleavage are subjected to regulation. Several lines of evidence suggest that the protease itself is a limiting factor for its activation. PR acts as a dimer and is synthesized in HIV-1 as part of the Gag-Pro-Pol precursor, so that PR activation and processing occur only in sites where Gag and Gag-Pro-Pol molecules accumulate. Indeed, the products of PR activity are observed at the late stages of assembly, either at the plasma membrane or early in the released virion particle [150, 153]. If PR is overexpressed as a dimer, intracellular processing of Gag is forced and virion assembly impaired [229–233]. Interestingly however, virions of type B/D morphology assemble immature nucleocapsids in the cytoplasm, and protease activation does not take place until they reach the plasma membrane [234]. This may suggest a second level of control that relies on the overall structural accessibility of Gag to the viral protease. The latter may be triggered by the binding of Gag to the plasma membrane or by Gag multimerization. Protease processing of an NC-p6 substrate is positively influenced by the presence of RNA *in vitro* [235, 236]. Although, based on these studies, a direct effect of RNA on protease activity has been proposed, the effect of RNA on the viral protease may be indirect. Indeed, RNA may mediate multimerization among NC-p6 molecules, thereby influencing their conformation and/or accessibility to the protease itself.

Vif

Vif is a phosphoprotein of about 23 kDa abundantly expressed in infected cells where it is mainly localized in the cytoplasm and associated with the cytoskeleton [237–239]. A small amount of Vif appears to be incorporated into HIV-1 virion particles [61, 238, 240, 241], where it is resistant to detergent extraction [242, 243]. However, the specificity of Vif packaging has been questioned, since Vif can be incorporated into MLV particles [61] and its levels in virions generally mirror the ones in producing cells [61, 238, 241, 244].

Vif *per se* does not affect virion assembly but its absence results in the production of virions that are 10- to 100-fold less infectious than wild type [245–248]. This defect is clearly cell type dependent, so that cells can be classified as permissive or non-permissive depending on their requirement for Vif [247, 249–253]. Vif-deficient virions are impaired in their ability to reverse transcribe [61, 253–255] and compromised in the stability of their core [243]. These defects are apparently not irreversible because high levels of dNTPs can, to a certain extent, rescue the defect in reverse transcription of Vif-deficient virions [256].

The mechanism by which Vif influences the reverse transcription process is unclear. Recent evidence suggests that Vif may associate with viral genomic RNA and NC. Indeed, Vif associates with viral RNA as shown by UV-cross-linking in the cytoplasm of infected cells [257]. Although the specificity of this association is not yet clear since Vif can also associate with cellular RNAs [257, 258], that Vif packaging into virions is severely compromised in the absence of viral genomic RNA is intriguing [242]. This suggests that Vif is chaperoning the viral genomic RNA into particles. Recent data using heterokaryon studies suggest that the function of Vif is to overcome an endogenous inhibitor [250, 252]. Such an inhibitor may be part of some, still unspecified, mechanism of cell defense that targets viral genomic RNA.

Vpu

Vpu is an ~16-kDa membrane-spanning protein unique to HIV-1 and to the related chimpanzee lentivirus SIV cpz [259–261]. It is phosphorylated and not incorporated into virion particles [262–265]. Vpu has two known and distinct functions: it binds CD4 molecules in the ER and targets them for degradation through the proteasome-proteolysis pathway [for more appropriate reading see refs 266–268 and references within], and increases the efficiency of virion release [83, 269–273]. Its two properties have been shown to be distinct and mediated by different portions of the molecule.

The mechanism by which Vpu augments virion production is not known but appears not to be specific to HIV-1, as budding of other retroviruses is also increased in the presence of Vpu [269]. In addition, the magnitude of this effect varies greatly depending on the cell type used [274, 275] or on the cell growth rate [276].

Recent studies have revealed that Vpu has an ion channel-forming ability [277–282]. Ion channels are integral membrane proteins that can form pores in membranes through which ion flux occurs. Recently, a number of viral proteins that influence different steps in the viral life cycle by altering membrane permeability have been described, the best studied of which is the influenza virus M2 protein. These proteins have thus been termed viroporins [for a review see ref. 283]. Vpu shares striking structural similarities with previously described viroporins, and by altering membrane potential in producing cells Vpu may modify the structure of the plasma membrane domains where assembly takes place. An interplay between ion flux and rafts has been recently suggested [284, 285], and determining if Vpu associates with rafts would be valuable. Interestingly, Vpu functions may be provided by the cytoplasmic tail of gp41 in HIV-2 and SIV mac, which lack *vpu* [286, 287].

Concluding remarks and future prospects

As a brief conclusion to our review, we can say that a number of events leading to the assembly of virion particles have now been identified. As questions become more focused, we hope that the study of the viral life cycle will give us new insights, not only into the viral life cycle, but into conserved cellular pathways as well. We do believe this will be the case for raft biology as well as for the mechanism of endocytosis, both of which are called upon by assembling Gag molecules.

Deeper characterization of the molecular aspects of virion assembly will certainly benefit from determination of the structure of the entire Gag polyprotein. This may clarify the importance and modalities by which each domain of Gag contributes to the construction of Gag virion-like particles. This information may potentially lead to the discovery of new anti-viral drugs that inhibit Gag multimerization, budding or binding to the plasma membrane. On the other hand, this wealth of information could be used for the construction of a new class of lentiviral vectors further reduced in their viral genome content to be used in gene therapy. Functional replacement of one domain of Gag with cellular domains of similar functions is now possible. This replacement strategy could be used to effectively diminish the amount of viral component in virion particles and may lead to the construction of lentiviral-derived vectors with much improved biosafety.

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