Opinion piece

Evolutionary conservation of mechanisms for neural regionalization, proliferation and interconnection in brain development

Comparative studies of brain development in vertebrate and invertebrate model systems demonstrate remarkable similarities in expression and action of developmental control genes during embryonic patterning, neural proliferation and circuit formation in the brain. Thus, comparable sets of developmental control genes are involved in specifying the early brain primordium as well as in regionalized patterning along its anteroposterior and dorsoventral axes. Furthermore, similar cellular and molecular mechanisms underlie the formation and proliferation of neural stem cell-like progenitors that generate the neurons in the central nervous systems. Finally, neural identity and some complex circuit interconnections in specific brain domains appear to be comparable in vertebrates and invertebrates and may depend on similar developmental control genes.

Keywords: brain development; pattern formation; proliferation; neural circuitry

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the extensive history of investigations on the brain, which reaches back over two millennia, fundamental insight into the nature and origin of the brain remained elusive until the nineteenth century when two central theories of the biological sciences were first proposed. These unifying theories were the cell theory of Schleiden and Schwann, which states that all living organisms are composed of and derived from cells, and the evolutionary theory of Darwin, which explains the origin of organismal complexity and diversity through the action of natural selection (Schwann 1839; Darwin 1859). The subsequent successful application of both theories to the analysis of vertebrate brains uncovered fundamental similarities in the neural organization of different vertebrate brains, arguing for a common evolutionary origin of major brain elements in all vertebrates. By contrast, when the nervous systems of vertebrates were compared with those of invertebrates, apparent differences in neuroanatomy were found in both adult structure and embryonic morphogenesis. Based on these differences, a number of investigators proposed an independent evolutionary origin for the nervous systems of vertebrate and invertebrate animals (gastroneuralia–notoneuralia concept; e.g. Brusca & Brusca 1990).

Contrasting with this notion, and in support of earlier ideas (reviewed by Arendt & Nübler-Jung 1994), are more recent neurogenetic analyses carried out in several vertebrate and invertebrate model systems that reveal striking similarities in the expression and action of regulatory genes that control brain development. Indeed, comparable developmental genetic mechanisms appear to operate in invertebrates and vertebrates during all major stages of brain development from the early specification of the neuroectoderm to the formation of neural circuitry (for recent reviews see Lichtneckert & Reichert 2005; Arendt et al. 2008). In the following, I consider four key aspects of brain development as well as the underlying molecular genetic control elements that appear to be conserved.

2. GENERATION OF THE NEUROECTODERM

At the earliest stage of brain development, a conserved molecular signalling system polarizes the embryonic ectoderm into a neuroectoderm, from which the central nervous system (CNS) develops, and into a ‘non-neural’ ectoderm (De Robertis 2008). A key element in this signalling system is the Dpp/Bmp protein, a member of the TGFβ gene family, which is thought to exert an antineurogenic effect that represses neural identity and limits the extent of the neuroectoderm to one side of the embryo. The expression of active Dpp/Bmp on this side is prevented by a second key element in the conserved signalling system, the Sog/Chordin protein, which antagonizes the action of the Dpp/Bmp morphogen. Whenever a CNS develops, in vertebrates or in invertebrates, it is always formed on the side of the body that does not express Dpp/Bmp, be it ventral in invertebrates, or dorsal in vertebrates (Arendt et al. 2008).

After specification and limitation of the neuroectoderm, a second set of conserved developmental control genes is activated in the neuroectoderm. These are the proneural genes that encode bHLH transcription factors that promote the transition of neuroectodermal cells into neural stem cells (Egger et al. 2008; Guillemot 2007). In Drosophila, the proneural genes include achete, scute and lethal of scute and in mammals they include Mash1, Ngn1 and Ngn2. In both cases, these genes are required for acquisition of neural stem cell properties and initiation of neurogenesis; in mammals they also act in neural differentiation. In Drosophila, the evolutionarily conserved Notch signalling pathway subsequently restricts proneural gene expression such that cells expressing proneural genes at high levels adopt a neural stem cell fate whereas adjacent cells adopt alternative fates (Bray 1998). Notch signalling components also act in the embryonic neuroepithelium of mammals, and mutational inactivation or misexpression of these components results in defects in neural stem cell development. Interestingly, both Drosophila and mammalian neural stem cells come to lie in a unique cellular microenvironment (‘niche’), which may provide important molecular cues for the differentiation of these progenitors (Doetsch 2003; Dumstrei et al. 2003).
3. SELF-RENEWAL AND PROLIFERATION OF NEURAL STEM CELLS

Following their generation, neural stem cells initiate proliferation by self-renewing and producing neural progeny. There are remarkable similarities in the action of specific developmental control genes during this process in vertebrate and invertebrate brains (Doe 2008). For example, the Activin, Notch, Hedgehog and Fibroblast growth factor signalling pathways are active and have comparable roles in maintaining neural stem cell self-renewal and/or proliferation in the developing CNS of Drosophila and mouse. Moreover, the molecular components that regulate the asymmetric nature of the neural stem cell divisions, including regulators of cell polarity and determinants of daughter cell fates, have highly conserved counterparts in invertebrates and mammals (Knoblich 2008; Zhong & Chia 2008).

In addition to these molecular biological similarities, there are striking parallels in the cell biology of neural stem cell proliferation in vertebrates and invertebrates.

In the mammalian embryonic CNS, neural stem cells can self-renew while producing secondary progenitors that each divide once to form two post-mitotic neurons (Götz & Huttner 2005). This corresponds to the proliferation of insect neural stem cells (‘neuroblasts’) that can also self-renew while producing secondary progenitors (‘ganglion mother cells’) that divide once to form two neurons (Egger et al. 2008). However, in mammalian brain development, neural stem cells can also self-renew and generate amplifying intermediate progenitors, each of which retains some self-renewal potential and can generate multiple neural progeny (Kriegstein et al. 2006; Merkle & Alvarez-Buylla 2006). Remarkably, a similar mode of amplifying neural stem cell proliferation has recently been discovered in Drosophila. Specific brain neuroblasts in the fly brain divide asymmetrically in stem cell mode to self-renew and generate intermediate progenitors that subsequently divide multiple times in stem cell mode, thus amplifying the number of progeny produced (Bello et al. 2008).

4. PATTERNING THE DEVELOPING BRAIN

During early embryogenesis, the brain primordium in vertebrates and invertebrates is subdivided into compartment-like domains by the regionalized expression of developmental control genes (figure 1). This regionalization is especially prominent along the anteroposterior axis of the developing brain. Posterior parts of the brain primordium are patterned by control genes such as the segmentation genes, exemplified by the otd/Otx cephalic gap gene family (Simeone et al. 2002; Acampora et al. 2005). Functional studies carried out in Drosophila and mouse indicate that otd/Otx gene activity is essential for the formation of the anterior brain primordium; in the absence of these genes, formation of the anterior brain is severely defective (figure 1).
Underscoring the functional conservation of otd/Otx genes are cross-phylum genetic rescue experiments in which the endogenous gene in one animal group can be replaced in a functionally equivalent manner by the homologous gene from the other animal group (Reichert & Simeone 2001).

Three sets of homeobox genes control the formation of columnar domains along the dorsoventral axis (Cornell & Ohlen 2000). In Drosophila these are the vnd, ind and msh genes, which are expressed in adjacent longitudinal columns and are required for the formation and specification of neural stem cells and their progeny in the ventral nerve cord. These genes also have comparable expression domains and functional roles in the developing brain (Urbach & Technau 2003; Sprecher et al. 2006). In vertebrates, gene homologues belonging to the Nkx (vnd), Gsh (ind) and Msx (msh) gene families are expressed in comparable columnar domains in the neural plate and neural tube, and are involved in controlling regional identity in these domains. Recent studies also provide evidence for conserved expression of Pax6 and Pax3/7 genes in columnar domains of the developing CNS in the annelid Platynereis and in vertebrates (Denes et al. 2007).

5. MAKING NEURONS AND NEURAL CIRCUITS IN THE BRAIN

In some cases, neurons that emerge from neural stem cells with comparable molecular genetic coordinates are similar in vertebrates and invertebrates. For example, in insects, nematodes and vertebrates, somatic motor neurons exhibit the same transcription factor signature involving the hb9, lim3 and islet1/2 genes (Thor & Thomas 2002). Moreover, in vertebrates and in Platynereis, cholinergic motor neurons come from the Pax6/Nkx6-expressing progenitor domains while pioneering serotonergic projection neurons emerge from the Nkx2-expressing medial columns (Denes et al. 2007). Similarly, in zebrafish and Platynereis early differentiation of vasotocinergic and RFaminergic neurons are comparable in terms of morphology and cell type-specific gene expression including expression of a tissue-specific microRNA (Tessmar-Raible et al. 2007).

Could the development of neural circuits in the brain also be controlled by similar genetic elements in vertebrates and invertebrates? Initial evidence for this possibility comes from studies of the olfactory system, which manifests a remarkable similarity in circuit organization in insects and mammals (figure 2a). In both insects and mammals, genes of the ems/Emx family act early in patterning of the CNS, like the otd/Otx genes, and are also important for the later development of specific olfactory neurons, namely the projection neurons in insects and the mitral cells in mammals. In Drosophila, the ems gene is expressed in neural stem cells that produce the projection neurons and is required for correct cell number and dendritic targeting of these neurons (Lichtneckert et al. 2008). In the absence of ems, the number of projection neurons is severely reduced and the remaining projection neurons innervate inappropriate olfactory glomeruli (figure 2b). In the mouse, the Emx1/2 genes are expressed in developing mitral cells, and the loss of these genes leads to marked defects in the mitral cell layer (Mallamaci et al. 1998; Bishop et al. 2003). Similar roles of the ems/Emx genes in the development of second-order olfactory neurons, together with a comparable requirement of ems/Emx genes in olfactory sense organ development, argue for evolutionarily
conserved roles of the ems/Emx genes in olfactory system development in insects and mammals. If this is the case, then the similar circuit organization of the olfactory system in insects and mammals may not only be the result of functional convergence but could also reflect the conservation of molecular mechanisms for olfactory system development.

6. CONCLUSIONS
Comparative studies of different aspects of brain development in vertebrates and invertebrates reveal remarkable similarities in expression and function of key developmental control genes. Indeed, vertebrates and invertebrates share a complex set of control genes and molecular genetic interactions that are responsible for neural induction, regionalized patterning, progenitor proliferation and circuit formation in the developing brain. This suggests that many of the molecular mechanisms involved in building the brains of extant bilaterians may already have been present in their common urbilateral ancestor.

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