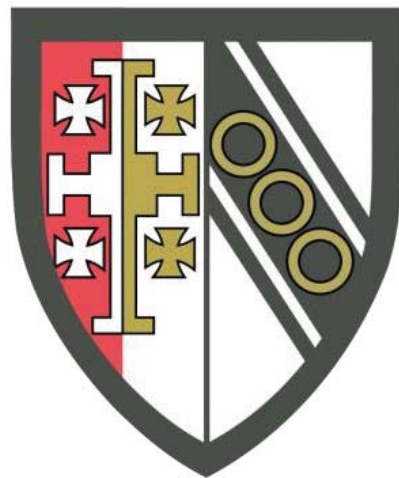
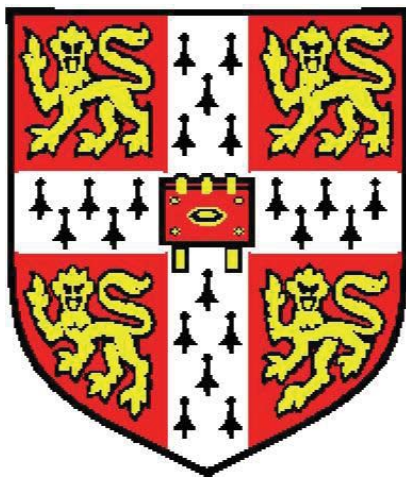


**Applying recombinant protein technology to
study *Plasmodium falciparum* erythrocyte receptor-ligand
interactions and their potential as therapeutic targets**

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The Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute**

*This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
September 2013*

This PhD thesis is dedicated to

Anna,

my dearest friend who passed

away in November 2012...

DECLARATION

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

This thesis does not exceed the word limit of 60,000 as set by the Degree Committee for the Faculty of Biology.

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ABSTRACT

Plasmodium falciparum is the causative agent of the most severe form of malaria, a serious infection accounting for an estimated one million deaths annually. Currently, there is no licenced malaria vaccine available. Erythrocyte invasion by the blood stage of the parasite, the merozoite, is a critical step in parasite's lifecycle and has long been targeted for the development of therapeutics. However, the development of a highly efficacious blood stage malaria vaccine has been challenged by the highly polymorphic nature of merozoite ligands, as well as by functional redundancy of the receptor-ligand pairs involved in the invasion process. The identification of cell surface receptor-ligand interactions which are essential for erythrocyte invasion by merozoite has been hampered by the difficulties in recombinant expression of *Plasmodium* spp. proteins, and by the technical challenges in systematically identifying interacting partners for cell surface proteins.

In earlier work from our laboratory, BSG and Semaphorin7A were identified as the erythrocyte receptors for merozoite RH5 and MTRAP, respectively. Importantly, the interaction between RH5 and BSG is the only one known so far that is essential and universally required for erythrocyte invasion. Antibodies against either RH5 or BSG could potentially inhibit erythrocyte invasion in all *P. falciparum* strains tested; therefore, the blockade of RH5-BSG interaction can be exploited for therapeutic purposes, for the treatment of *P. falciparum* infected individuals.

Most of the work described in this thesis is aimed at the development of a humanised or chimeric anti-BSG antibody as a potential anti-malarial therapeutic. For this purpose, a plasmid system, which enables the recombinant expression of engineered antibodies, was established. By using this versatile plasmid system, two anti-BSG monoclonals, MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 (obtained from a published report), were successfully humanised by Complementarity Determining Region (CDR) grafting. The therapeutic potential of huMEM6-M/4 and huMEM6-M/8 was hindered by the low affinity of these antibodies for BSG. To obtain a higher potency antibody, a panel of hybridoma lines secreting anti-BSG antibodies was generated by directly immunising animals. A monoclonal antibody, m6D9, secreted by one of the generated hybridoma clones, demonstrated high efficacy in inhibiting erythrocyte invasion in parasite culture, and was selected for chimerisation. The chimeric antibody, ch6D9, retained its high affinity for BSG and blocked erythrocyte invasion

at very low concentrations in all parasite lines tested. Furthermore, ch6D9 displayed reduced binding to FcγRIIA and C1q *in vitro*, suggesting that this antibody may have reduced ability to trigger antibody effector functions. Attempts to fully humanise this antibody were unsuccessful.

In another approach, two anti-RH5 monoclonals (2AC7 and 9AD4; Douglas *et al.*, 2013) were successfully chimerised. Both ch2AC7 and ch9AD4 preserved their high affinity for RH5 and inhibited erythrocyte invasion in parasite culture, but with much higher IC₅₀ as compared to ch6D9. The variable regions of ch2AC7 and ch6D9 were combined in an anti-RH5 and anti-BSG bi-specific antibody: 2AC7-6D9 DVD-Ig. 2AC7-6D9 DVD-Ig was capable of simultaneous binding to RH5 and BSG but its affinity for BSG decreased in comparison to ch6D9. When tested in a *P. falciparum* growth inhibition assay, 2AC7-6D9 DVD-Ig was more efficient than ch2AC7, but less than ch6D9 in blocking erythrocyte invasion.

Finally, in a parallel project, I aimed to identify novel receptor-ligand pairs involved in erythrocyte invasion. For this purpose, I expanded an existing *P. falciparum* merozoite recombinant protein library by 26 proteins, which were chosen based on transcription microarray data, and information available in the literature. The new members of the *P. falciparum* protein library were recombinantly expressed and systematically screened against an equivalent library consisting of erythrocyte receptors. The screen identified a putative interaction (PF13_0125 – P4HB). Further characterisation of the identified interaction provided inconclusive results, and more experiments are required to confirm its validity. The recombinant *P. falciparum* merozoite proteins reported in this project should prove to be a useful tool for the deeper understanding of erythrocyte invasion, and *P. falciparum* biology in general.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures.....	xii
List of Tables.....	xv
<u>CHAPTER 1. Introduction</u>	1
1.1 Summary and Aims.....	2
1.2 General structure and properties of antibodies.....	2
1.3 Antibody classes	3
1.4 How do antibodies function?	6
1.4.1 Direct neutralisation of microbes and microbial toxins.....	6
1.4.2 Antibody effector functions.....	6
1.4.2.1 Antibody effector functions mediated by Fc receptors	6
1.4.2.1.1 Antibody Dependent Cellular Phagocytosis (ADCP)	9
1.4.2.1.2 Antibody Dependent Cell mediated Cytotoxicity (ADCC)	9
1.4.2.2 Complement dependent cytotoxicity.....	9
1.5 The interactions between IgG Fc portion and C1q or Fc γ receptors have been characterised	10
1.6 The discovery of hybridoma technology and the emergence of antibody therapeutics ..	11
1.7 Malaria is a significant global health problem	13
1.8 Five species of <i>Plasmodium</i> are infective to humans	13
1.9 <i>P. falciparum</i> has a complex lifecycle.....	14
1.10 Erythrocyte recognition and invasion are critical steps in the <i>P. falciparum</i> lifecycle....	16
1.10.1 Merozoite structure	16
1.10.2 Erythrocyte invasion is a multistep process	19

1.10.3 The initial attachment to erythrocytes is primarily mediated by proteins displayed on the merozoite cell surface.....	19
1.10.3.1 Merozoite Surface Proteins (MSPs) are important components of merozoite cell surface.....	22
1.10.3.2 Members of the Serine Rich Antigen (SERA) family of proteins are exposed on the merozoite cell surface	24
1.10.4 EBL and RH are two protein families with major roles in erythrocyte invasion.....	25
1.10.4.1 EBLs and RHs mediate alternative invasion pathways	28
1.10.5 The formation of the tight junction and the role of AMA1, MTRAP and RON proteins in mediating erythrocyte invasion.....	30
1.10.6 The interaction between RH5 and Basigin is essential and universally required for erythrocyte invasion.....	32
1.10.6.1 RH5 is a merozoite ligand, required for erythrocyte invasion	32
1.10.6.2 Basigin is a multifunctional transmembrane glycoprotein	33
1.10.6.2.1 Physiological functions of Basigin	33
1.10.6.2.2 Basigin based anti-cancer therapies	35
1.10.6.2.3 The value of Basigin as a target for the treatment of Graft versus host disease.....	36
1.11 The importance of antibodies in malaria immunity.....	37
1.11.1 Merozoite cell surface proteins are targets of protective antibodies of the naturally acquired malaria immunity.....	39
1.12 Malaria prevention and control	40
1.13 The development of and effective malaria vaccine is a challenging problem	41
1.13.1 Transmission blocking vaccines.....	42
1.13.2 Pre-erythrocytic vaccines.....	43
1.13.2.1 The RTS,S vaccine	45
1.13.3 Blood stage vaccines.....	47
1.14 Host oriented approaches for treatment of various infectious diseases	49
1.15 Aims of this thesis	50
1.15.1 Development of a humanised or chimeric anti-BSG monoclonal antibody as a potential anti-malarial therapeutic.....	50
1.15.2 Identification of novel receptor-ligand pairs involved in erythrocyte invasion.....	51
CHAPTER 2. Materials and Methods.....	53
2.1 Production of recombinant cell surface and secreted <i>P. falciparum</i> and erythrocyte proteins.....	54

2.1.1 Design and construction of protein expression plasmids.....	54
2.1.2 Recombinant protein expression by transient transfection of protein expression plasmids	58
2.1.3 Purification of His-tagged recombinant proteins by using ÄKTExpress purification system.....	58
2.1.4 Purification of His-tagged recombinant proteins by using the Protein Press.....	59
2.2 Production of humanised or chimeric recombinant antibodies and DVD-Igs.....	60
2.2.1 Immunisation of animals	60
2.2.2 Cell culture and hybridoma generation	60
2.2.3 Antibody screening	60
2.2.4 RNA preparation and amplification of antibody variable regions	61
2.2.5 Identification of Complementarity Determining Regions (CDRs) and antibody humanisation by CDR grafting	61
2.2.6 Design and construction of antibody and DVD-Ig expression vectors	62
2.2.6.1 Design and generation of anti-Basigin antibody expression vectors	62
2.2.6.2 Design and construction of anti-RH5 expression vectors.....	63
2.2.6.3 Design and generation of 2AC7-6D9 DVD-Ig expression vectors.....	64
2.2.7 Site directed mutagenesis of hu6D9	65
2.2.8 Recombinant antibody and DVD-Ig expression by transient transfection of expression plasmids.....	65
2.2.9 Purification of antibodies by affinity chromatography on protein G loaded column ..	66
2.2.10 Purification of antibodies with ammonium sulfate.....	66
2.2.11 Antibody isotyping.....	67
2.3 Enzyme-linked-immunosorbent assays (ELISAs).....	67
2.4 Immunoreactivity of recombinant merozoite proteins.....	68
2.5 Normalisation of β -lactamase tagged membrane protein ectodomains.....	68
2.6 Avidity-based extracellular interactions screen (AVEXIS).....	69
2.7 High-throughput screen for the identification of glycan binding specificities of merozoite membrane and secreted proteins.....	70
2.8 Agarose gel electrophoresis.....	70
2.9 SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE)	70
2.10 Western blotting	70
2.11 <i>In vitro</i> biotinylation of antibodies and DVD-Igs	71
2.12 Surface plasmon resonance (SPR)	71

2.12.1 Regeneration scouting by using SA chip.....	71
2.12.2 Analysis of protein-protein interactions by using CAP chip.....	72
2.13 Erythrocyte binding assay	72
2.14 C1q binding assay.....	72
2.15 FcγRIIA binding assay.....	73
2.16 <i>P. falciparum</i> culture, and invasion assays.....	73

CHAPTER 3. Establishment of a plasmid vector system for recombinant antibody expression.....78

3.1 Summary and Aims.....	79
3.2 Introduction	79
3.2.1 The recombinant antibody technology has revolutionised the application of antibodies.....	79
3.3 Results.....	80
3.3.1 Design of a vector system for recombinant antibody expression in HEK293 cells ...	80
3.3.2 Functional expression of two exemplar recombinant antibodies	81
3.4 Discussion.....	83

CHAPTER 4. Development and characterisation of an anti-Basigin chimeric antibody, as a putative anti-malarial therapeutic.....87

4.1 Summary and Aims.....	88
4.2 Introduction	89
4.2.1 Surface Plasmon Resonance-A valuable tool for measuring the affinity of antibodies and other molecules to their targets.....	89
4.2.2 Antibody humanisation approaches	92
4.2.3 Combination therapies and the value of bi-specific agents.....	94
4.3 Results.....	96
4.3.1 Characterisation of MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 anti-BSG monoclonal antibodies ...	96
4.3.2 MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 inhibit the RH5-BSG interaction <i>in vitro</i> , in AVEXIS assay, when used at high concentrations	99
4.3.3 MEM-M6/4 is able to stain human erythrocytes <i>in vitro</i> and to inhibit erythrocyte invasion in parasite culture	101

4.3.4 Development of humanised MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 anti-BSG monoclonal antibodies.....	102
4.3.5 Expression and characterisation of humanised MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 monoclonal antibodies.....	104
4.3.6 Biophysical characterisation of mouse and humanised MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 anti-BSG monoclonal antibodies.....	107
4.3.6.1 Identifying the appropriate condition for regenerating the sensor chip surface	110
4.3.6.2 Measurement of affinity and kinetic parameters of mouse and humanised MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 antibodies	114
4.3.7 Selection of a mouse anti-BSG monoclonal antibody.....	117
4.3.8 Characterisation of m6D9 anti-BSG monoclonal antibody.....	120
4.3.9 Development of hu6D9, a humanised anti-BSG monoclonal antibody	123
4.3.10 Characterisation of hu6D9 humanised anti-BSG antibody	126
4.3.11 Development and characterisation of ch6D9, a chimeric anti-BSG monoclonal antibody.....	127
4.3.11.1 Ch6D9 demonstrates reduced binding to FcγRIIA and C1q.....	128
4.3.11.2 Epitope mapping of ch6D9 on BSG	131
4.3.11.3 Biophysical characterisation of mouse and chimeric 6D9	136
4.3.12 Development and characterisation of a two chimeric anti-RH5 monoclonal antibodies.....	136
4.3.13 Development and characterisation of bi-specific 2AC7-6D9 DVD-Ig	144
4.4 Discussion.....	147
4.4.1 MEM-6/4 and MEM-M6/8 inhibit the RH5-BSG interaction <i>in vitro</i> but not in parasite culture	147
4.4.2 The affinity of MEM-6/4 and MEM-M6/8 for BSG is lower than previously reported	151
4.4.3 MEM-6/4 and MEM-M6/8 were successfully humanised.....	151
4.4.4 Development and humanisation of m6D9, a high efficacy anti-BSG antibody	152
4.4.5 Ch6D9 is a high affinity anti-BSG chimeric antibody which binds to BSG domain 1	153
4.4.6 Ch6D9 demonstrates reduced binding to C1q and FcγRIIA.....	153
4.4.7 The potency of ch6D9 in inhibiting erythrocyte invasion is higher than ch2AC7, ch9AD4, or 2AC7-6D9 DVD-Ig	154
4.5 Conclusions	155

CHAPTER 5. Systematic screening for extracellular receptor-ligand interactions involved in erythrocyte recognition and invasion by <i>P. falciparum</i>.....	156
5.1 Summary and Aims.....	157
5.2 Introduction.....	158
5.2.1 Systems for recombinant expression of <i>Plasmodium</i> spp. proteins.....	158
5.2.2 Studying extracellular protein-protein interactions between merozoite and erythrocytes- the AVEXIS assay.....	160
5.3 Results.....	163
5.3.1 Compilation of a list of candidate <i>P. falciparum</i> merozoite cell surface or secreted proteins.....	163
5.3.2 Recombinant expression of an expanded <i>P.falciparum</i> merozoite protein library..	166
5.3.3 Biochemical characterisation of the recombinant merozoite protein library.....	170
5.3.3.1 Members of the merozoite cell surface protein library contain heat-labile epitopes.....	170
5.3.3.2 <i>In vitro</i> interaction of RIPR with RH5.....	171
5.3.3.3 EBA165 demonstrates differential glycan binding in comparison to other Erythrocyte Binding Ligands (EBLs).....	171
5.3.4 Recombinant expression of a human erythrocyte cell surface protein library.....	175
5.3.5 The AVEXIS screen identified a putative interaction.....	180
5.3.6 SPR analysis of the putative novel interactions identified by using AVEXIS.....	187
5.4 Discussion.....	188
5.4.1 Recombinant expression of recombinant merozoite proteins.....	188
5.4.2 Recombinant merozoite proteins are biochemically active.....	189
5.4.3 PF13_0125, PFA0135w, Prolactin and P4HB participated in the three interactions with the highest z-scores.....	190
5.5 Conclusions.....	192
CHAPTER 6. Discussion.....	195
6.1 Summary and Aims.....	196
6.2 The affinity of huMEM-M6/4 and huMEM-M6/8 for BSG can potentially be restored ...	196
6.3 The identification of structurally important amino acid residues within V region, may facilitate the restoration of hu6D9 affinity for BSG.....	197
6.4 Future directions for 2AC7-6D9 DVD-Ig.....	198

6.5 Ch6D9 – Future directions	200
6.5.1 Epitope mapping refinement	200
6.5.2 Further investigation of the (in)ability of ch6D9 to stimulate antibody effector functions.....	200
6.5.3 Testing the safety, efficacy and pharmacokinetics of ch6D9 <i>in vivo</i>	202
6.5.4 Possible complications of using ch6D9 <i>in vivo</i> in man	202
6.6 Improving recombinant protein expression levels by molecular chaperones.....	204
6.7 Future directions for the recombinant merozoite protein library	204
6.8 Further investigation of the putative interaction between P4HB- PF13_0125 is required	205
6.9 <i>PfEBA-165</i> – a merozoite cell surface ligand with possible implications in <i>Plasmodium</i> host specificity?.....	205
6.10 Concluding remarks	207
<u>CHAPTER 7. Bibliography</u>	205

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

Figure 1.1	Structure and properties of antibodies.	4
Figure 1.2	The Fcγ family of receptors.	8
Figure 1.3	The lifecycle of <i>Plasmodium falciparum</i> .	15
Figure 1.4	Merozoite structure.	17
Figure 1.5	Erythrocyte invasion is a multistep process.	20
Figure 1.6	Cell surface Proteins involved in erythrocyte invasion.	26
Figure 1.7	Structure of Basigin gene and protein isoforms.	34

CHAPTER 2

Figure 2.1	Design of recombinant protein expression vectors.	55
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CHAPTER 3

Figure 3.1	The episomal vectors which were developed for recombinant antibody expression.	82
Figure 3.2	Recombinant expression and functional assessment of two exemplar recombinant monoclonal antibodies.	84

CHAPTER 4

Figure 4.1	Surface Plasmon Resonance.	90
Figure 4.2	Characterisation of MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 anti-BSG, mouse monoclonal antibodies.	97
Figure 4.3	Expression of recombinant RH5-BLH and BSG-BLFH.	100
Figure 4.4	A flow chart summarising the strategy that was devised for recombinant humanised antibody development.	103
Figure 4.5	Sequence analysis and humanisation of MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 variable regions.	105
Figure 4.6	Characterisation of humanised MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 antibodies.	108
Figure 4.7	Regeneration scouting of SA chip.	112
Figure 4.8	CAP chip provides consistent responses after repeated analyte binding and regeneration cycles.	113

Figure 4.9	Biophysical analysis of the binding of mouse and humanised MEM-M6/4 and MEM-M6/8 to BSG, by using Surface Plasmon Resonance.	115
Figure 4.10	Overview of the procedure followed for creation and establishment of the hybridoma line m6D9 which secretes an anti-BSG monoclonal antibody.	118
Figure 4.11	Characterisation of m6D9 monoclonal antibody.	121
Figure 4.12	Sequence analysis and humanisation of m6D9 by CDR grafting.	124
Figure 4.13	Development and characterisation of ch6D9 chimeric anti-BSG monoclonal antibody.	129
Figure 4.14	Epitope mapping of ch6D9 on BSG.	133
Figure 4.15	Chimpanzee (<i>Pan troglodytes</i>) gorilla (<i>Gorilla gorilla</i>) and marmoset (<i>Callithrix jacchus</i>) orthologues of human (<i>Homo sapiens</i>) BSG.	135
Figure 4.16	Biophysical analysis of mouse and chimeric 6D9 using SPR.	137
Figure 4.17	Development and characterisation of ch2AC7 and ch9AD4, two chimeric anti-RH5 monoclonal antibodies.	140
Figure 4.18	Biophysical characterisation of mouse and chimeric 2AC7 and 9AD4 using SPR.	142
Figure 4.19	Generation and biophysical characterisation of a dual specificity 2AC7-6D9 DVD-Ig.	145
Figure 4.20	ch6D9 is much more potent than ch2AC7 or 2AC7-6D9 DVD-Ig, in blocking erythrocyte invasion.	148
<u>CHAPTER 5</u>		
Figure 5.1	The AVEXIS assay.	162
Figure 5.2	The merozoite cell surface proteins that were chosen for recombinant expression.	165
Figure 5.3	Quantitation of merozoite cell surface protein library by ELISA.	168
Figure 5.4	The majority of recombinant merozoite extracellular proteins were expressed at the expected size.	169
Figure 5.5	Members of the merozoite cell surface protein library are reactive against hyperimmune sera obtained from previously malaria exposed Malawian adults.	172
Figure 5.6	RIPR binds RH5 in AVEXIS.	174
Figure 5.7	EBA-165 demonstrates differential binding to a glycan panel, in	

	comparison to other members of the EBL family of proteins	176
Figure 5.8	The erythrocyte cell surface receptor library.	178
Figure 5.9	Expression and activity assessment of erythrocyte receptor preys.	179
Figure 5.10	The systematic screen between the merozoite and erythrocyte protein libraries resulted in three interactions with z-score>1.5.	181
Figure 5.11	The interactions between PF13_0125, PFA0135w and P4HB, and between PF13_0125 and Prolactin had z scores>1.5.	183
Figure 5.12	The interactions between PF13_0125, PFA0135w and P4HB are independent of bait-prey orientation.	184
Figure 5.13	Biophysical analysis of the putative interactions between PF13_0125, PFA0135w and P4HB, and between PF13_0125 and Prolactin, by Surface Plasmon Resonance.	185
Figure 5.14	The false positive and negative rate in AVEIXIS is dependent on prey activity.	193
<u>CHAPTER 6</u>		
Figure 6.1	Kabat and IMGT numbering systems have different definitions for CDRs and FRs.	199

List of Tables

CHAPTER 2

Table 2.1 The primers that were used in this study.

75