

Molecular Parasitology

EDITED BY

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Preface

John Jacob Abel was the first professor of pharmacology and experimental therapeutics in what was then called The Johns Hopkins Medical School. A pioneer in many fields of biochemical research and teaching, Professor Abel was the first to crystallize insulin at a time when proteins were not expected to exhibit such a defined structure or hormonal action. He was also the first to introduce, for what he called “vividdiffusion,” an artificial kidney from which today’s hemodialysis machines were directly developed.

The rapidly developing field of molecular parasitology provides an exciting focus for the Third John Jacob Abel Symposium on Drug Development. The topic is especially fitting because the chemotherapy of trypanosomiasis was another of Professor Abel’s particular interests. The trivalent thioglycollate salts of antimony which he developed and tested in rats, rabbits, and a celebrated donkey were a mainstay of the antiparasitic armamentarium for many years.

Professor Abel described his work in the 1910 volume of the *Journal of Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics*; a warm and amusing account of the donkey experiments was published by his collaborator, Professor Leonard G. Rowntree, in the *Bulletin of the Johns Hopkins Hospital* almost 50 years later. The donkey, called Maud, was experimentally infected and treated by intrajugular injections. Treatment was complicated because she bucked and struggled every time Professor Abel signaled by saying “Now” that he was ready to inject. One day, after a long series of futile attempts over a period of about half an hour, Professor Rowntree discovered that the stable boy took Professor Abel’s cue as a signal to jab a spike into Maud’s belly.

The trivalent antimonials were tried in a variety of conditions and were widely used to treat several serious parasitic infections, including schistosomiasis. The drug’s mechanism of action against schistosomes, inhibition of the parasite’s phosphofructokinase to interfere with its energy metabolism was demonstrated decades

after Professor Abel's original work by Professor Ernest Bueding, whom we are fortunate to include as one of the participants in the present Symposium.

Like Professor Abel, Professor Bueding is a pioneer in several areas of biochemical research. He was among the first to successfully attack the difficult problems of parasite metabolism and has made important contributions to unraveling the mechanisms by which certain drugs exert carcinogenic side effects. He has also introduced several methods by which these carcinogenic effects can be prevented without compromising the drug effects that are desired.

We are pleased and proud to dedicate this present book to the honor of Professor Ernest Bueding, and to the memory of Professor John Jacob Abel.

J. THOMAS AUGUST

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J. THOMAS AUGUST

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I. Biochemistry and Molecular Biology of Trypanosomes

TRYPANOSOME SURVIVAL MECHANISMS. BIOLOGICAL BASIS OF TRYPANOSOME ANTIGENIC VARIATION

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Trypanosomes lead extremely hazardous lives. There can be few unicellular eukaryotes which have to cope with such dramatic changes in their environment and respond with such feats of endurance as these tiny flagellates. In recent years we have learned a lot about how the African trypanosomes, in particular, survive the dangers that assail them as they pursue a life cycle through two different hosts—a mammal and a tsetse fly (*Glossina* spp).

Trypanosoma brucei, the species about which we know most, naturally infects a variety of mammalian hosts including antelopes and other game animals, domestic animals, and man. Only certain genetic variants can infect man, however, and these are given separate sub-specific names according to the character of the disease, sleeping sickness, that they induce—*T. b. gambiense* for the chronic West African illness, *T. b. rhodesiense* for the more acute East African disease. *T. b. brucei* refers to non-man-infecting stocks of the species. All three subspecies live in the blood, lymphatics, and connective tissues of their mammalian hosts. They can traverse the walls of blood and lymph capillary vessels and at a later stage of infection cross the choroid plexus into the brain and cerebrospinal fluid. Multiplication by binary fission occurs in long slender forms of the parasite in all sites, but non-dividing short stumpy forms arise in the blood and lymph, and these appear to be the forms which survive when ingested by the tsetse fly vector. The complicated cycle of development in the vector is shown in Fig. 1. After multiplication in the midgut as the so-called procyclic form, a fortunate few (and it may be only one) take a marathon swim back through the mouth parts and up the salivary duct to the salivary glands. Here a further bout of multiplication while attached to the gland epithelium takes place with the release of the mammal-infective, metacyclic stage into the lumen of the gland for discharge with the fly's saliva when it bites another mammal.

In addition to *T. brucei*, two other tsetse-transmitted trypanosome species are of importance in Africa, *T. congolense* and *T. vivax*. Apart from their initial multiplication at the site of fly bite, these trypanosomes are intravascular parasites, *T. congolense* multiplying while attached to the capillary endothelia of its host, *T. vivax* free in the blood. Their developmental cycle in the fly is simpler as their final metacyclic-generating phase is in the proboscis of the vector, not

the salivary glands, and T. vivax manages to avoid the initial round of development in its vector's midgut. We know far less about these trypanosomes than about T. brucei because satisfactory replication of their life cycle in the laboratory is more difficult than it is for that species.

Combatting Trypanosome Survival Mechanisms

An understanding of the trypanosome's survival mechanisms is, of course, relevant to the design of means of destroying the parasite by chemotherapy or immunoprophylaxis. The most obvious advantages of trypanosomes over more sluggish parasites are their capacity for speedy movement and ability to penetrate endothelia to invade new environments. Both depend upon flagellar activity and the maintenance of a streamlined shape which, in turn, depend upon the organisms' ability to construct cytoplasmic microtubules. These structures reinforce the cortex of the trypanosome, maintaining its elongated shape; they also form the doublets in the flagellar axoneme, and flagellar bending results from the sliding of adjacent microtubule doublets in relation to one another. Both α - and β -tubulins which compose the microtubules have now been characterized for trypanosomatids and have been found to differ significantly in their drug-binding properties (1). Suitable microtubule inhibitors might prevent movement or division and upset the critical surface area/volume ratio of the parasite, and the affinity of benzimidazole derivatives for unicellular eukaryote tubulins may provide a possible chemotherapeutic lead (2).

Although the trypanosome's swimming activity can be vital for completion of its migration in the fly or its escape into the tissues from the bloodstream, the question whether its incessant movement in circulating blood represents a wanton wastage of energy has been justifiably raised. The same query might be raised over the flagellar beating of both T. brucei attached in the tsetse salivary glands and T. congolense attached to the capillary vessel walls. It is likely, however, that the flagellar beating, in addition to providing propulsive force, may also serve to circulate the surrounding medium (as in the crowded vector midgut or salivary gland) or make for a throughput of medium in the pocket at the base of the flagellum. It is from this pocket that serum proteins are pinocytosed (3) and into it that the remains of parasite autophagic processes are ejected (4), so frequent replacement of its contents through the rotary pump-like action of the flagellum in the pocket is probably necessary. The principal drug used in treating human sleeping sickness--Suramin--enters the parasite by pinocytosis bound to serum albumin (5). It would be worth investigating the action of anti-flagellar spermicides with a view to their use in the chemotherapy of African trypanosomiasis on account of the importance of flagellar activity in trypanosome survival. The design

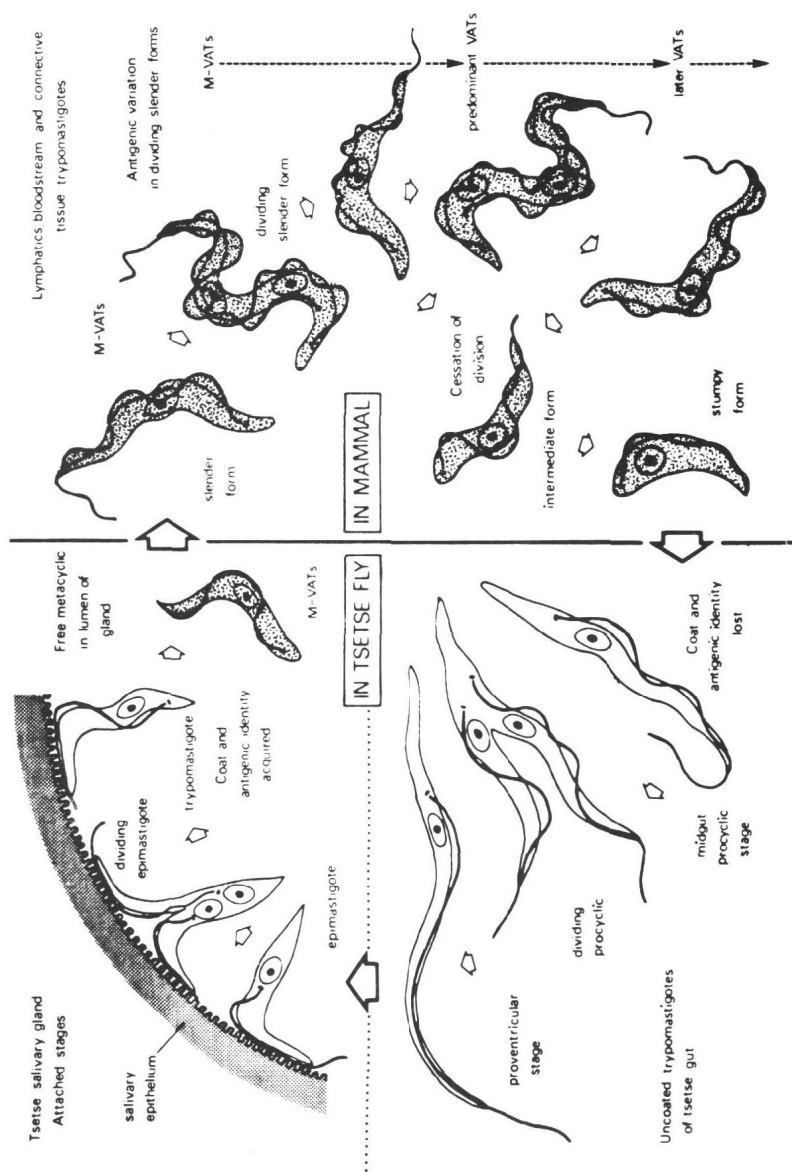


Fig. 1. Diagram of life cycle *Trypanosoma brucei*. Stages possessing the variable antigen-containing surface coat are shaded. Modified from "Immunology of Parasitic Infections," Sidney Cullen and Kenneth Warren, eds. (1982). Blackwell Scientific Publications, Oxford, England.