Liver sinusoidal endothelial cells constitute a major route for hemoglobin clearance

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Abstract

Mild hemolysis of senescent erythrocytes occurs physiologically in the spleen resulting in Hb release, whereas pathologic erythrocyte rupture characterizes several diseases. Iron recycling from Hb and Hb detoxification have been attributed to the sequestration of Hb-haptoglobin complexes by macrophages. However, it remained unclear whether other efficient routes of Hb clearance exist. We identified liver sinusoidal endothelial cells (LSECs) as the primary cells responsible for Hb uptake, a process that involves macropinocytosis and operates independently of the Hb-haptoglobin receptor CD163. We found that LSECs show high iron content and proteomic signatures indicative of adaptation to Hb turnover, hallmarked by high protein levels of enzymes involved in heme catabolism and antioxidant defense, ferritins, macropinocytosis regulators, and expression of hepcidin-controlled ferroportin. Erythrocyte transfusion assays further demonstrated that while splenic red pulp macrophages are adept at erythrophagocytosis, liver Kupffer cells and LSECs mainly clear erythrocyte ghosts and Hb, respectively, hemolysis products transported from the spleen to the liver via the portal circulation. High-dose Hb injections resulted in transient hepatic iron retention and early activation of the gene encoding heme-catabolizing heme oxygenase 1 specifically in LSECs. This response was associated with the transcriptional induction of the iron-sensing angiokine *Bmp6*, culminating in hepcidin-mediated transient plasma hypoferremia. Injection of Hb and iron citrate elicited distinct transcriptional signatures in LSECs, and the *Bmp6* induction was phenocopied by erythrocyte lysis upon phenylhydrazine. Collectively, we propose that LSECs provide a key mechanism for Hb clearance, establishing the spleen-to-liver axis for physiological iron recycling from Hb and contributing to heme detoxification during hemolysis, coupled with the induction of the BMP6-hepcidin axis to restore iron homeostasis.

Introduction

Internal iron recycling from senescent red blood cells (RBCs) satisfies most of the body's iron needs[1,2] and relies chiefly on phagocytic clearance of aged RBCs by the splenic red pulp macrophages (RPMs).[3,4] However, recent evidence suggests that some aged RBCs escape erythrophagocytosis and lyse locally in the spleen, thus releasing hemoglobin (Hb).[5] Several inherited and acquired disorders, including hereditary anemias, autoimmune hemolytic diseases, or infections, are characterized by compromised erythrocyte stability and increased risk of hemolysis.[6,7] Free Hb is captured by the acute phase plasma protein haptoglobin.[8] The Hb-haptoglobin complexes are sequestered via CD163,[9] a receptor that is highly expressed by both splenic RPMs and liver macrophages, Kupffer cells (KCs).[1,5] However, the role of these macrophage populations in Hb uptake has not been well characterized. Interestingly, pharmacokinetic studies in non-rodent mammals have shown that the clearance rate of the Hb-haptoglobin complex is significantly slower than that of free Hb,[10] and that Hb sequestration may occur independently of haptoglobin and/or CD163.[11,12] These observations are clinically relevant as enhanced erytrophagocytosis and prolonged erythrolytic conditions lead to the partial loss of the CD163-expressing iron-recycling macrophages[3,13] and are characterized by depletion of the plasma haptoglobin pool.[7,14,15] Collectively, this evidence suggests that macrophages may be dispensable for Hb clearance. It is well established that free Hb undergoes renal glomerular filtration.[16,17] However, it remains unclear whether other specialized routes of extra-renal and macrophage-independent Hb clearance operate in the body.

The liver receives approximately 25% of the cardiac output and is exposed to the blood from the portal circulation, which drains the gastrointestinal tract and the spleen.[18] The hepatic capillary network, composed of venous sinusoids, is specialized in monitoring and filtering the blood components. Liver sinusoidal endothelial cells (LSECs), along with KCs, confer the most efficient dual scavenging system in the body.[19] While KCs engulf large particles, LSECs remove macromolecules and nanoparticles, a function that protects the body from waste by-products and noxious blood factors.[20,21] The maintenance of appropriate iron homeostasis adds to the growing spectrum of homeostatic functions of LSECs. Importantly, LSECs are the sensors of body iron levels and the major producers of the inducible angiokine bone morphogenetic protein 6 (BMP6), and the homeostatic BMP2.[22,23] BMPs function as upstream activators of hepcidin, a key iron-regulatory hormone produced by liver hepatocytes. Hepcidin suppresses iron release into the bloodstream via the sole known iron exporter ferroportin (FPN), thereby limiting iron availability under iron-rich conditions.[24] However, it remains unclear how

different types of iron signals are sensed and detoxified in the liver microenvironment, and whether the emerging scavenging functions of LSECs cross-talk with their role in maintaining iron homeostasis. Here, we show that LSECs constitute a major route for Hb clearance. They contribute to steady-state iron recycling from spleen-derived Hb that enters the liver via the portal vein and participate in heme detoxification during hemolysis, timely coupled with the induction of the iron-sensing BMP6-hepcidin axis.

Results

LSECs engage macropinocytosis to sequester Hb

Studies using radiolabeled Hb showed that the clearance of injected hemoglobin is rapid[16] and mainly mediated by the liver, kidney, and spleen.[16,17] To address the involvement of macrophages in Hb uptake we first performed experiments using clodronate liposomes, a well-established strategy that depletes tissue macrophages, including hepatic KCs. Using a whole-organ imaging system, we observed that regardless of the KCs' presence, the liver emerged as the major organ sequestering fluorescently-labeled mouse Hb (Fig. 1A and S1). Using flow cytometry and confocal microscopy imaging, we next identified LSECs as the major hepatic cell type that takes up Hb, surpassing KCs, hepatocytes, and monocytes (Fig. 1B and C, see Data Supplements for gating strategies). To better understand the mechanism of Hb uptake we used primary cell cultures of NPCs, which fully recapitulated a higher capacity of LSECs than KCs in Hb uptake, as validated by confocal microscopy and flow cytometry (Fig. 1D and Fig. S2A). Interestingly, in contrast to KCs, LSECs were negative for the Hb-haptoglobin complex receptor, CD163 (Fig. 1E), and free Hb was taken up more robustly than the haptoglobin-bound Hb (Fig. 1F). We, therefore, hypothesized that LSECs may sequester Hb in a receptor-independent manner, possibly via macropinocytosis, a non-specific internalization of extracellular fluid.[25] Staining of primary LSECs with an early endosome marker, EEA1, identified many constitutively formed intracellular vesicles of macropinosome size (1-2 μm) (Fig. 1G and S2B). Fluorescently-labeled Hb was predominantly, though not exclusively, entrapped within such vesicles (Fig. 1G and S2B), and co-localized with high-molecular-weight dextran, a known macropinocytic cargo (Fig. 1H and S2C).[26,27] Consistently, a well-established blocker of macropinocytosis, ethylisopropyl amiloride (EIPA), in contrast to an inhibitor of clathrin-mediated endocytosis, chlorpromazine (CPZ), abolished Hb uptake (Fig. 1I and S2D) and increasing dose of Hb did not saturate its sequestration, implying a receptor-independent entry route (Fig. S2E). Likewise, Hb internalization was partially dependent on actin remodeling and Cdc42 activity, both important for macropinosome formation,[26] and canonical

Wnt signaling via β-catenin, a pathway that is active in LSECs[28] and has previously been shown to activate macropinocytosis (Fig. 1I).[29,30] Noteworthy, Hb uptake was not altered by the micropinocytosis blocker, nystatin (Fig. 1I). Confirming the high macropinocytic capacity of LSECs *in vivo*, we demonstrated their ability for efficient uptake of fluorescently-labeled albumin, another known macropinocytic cargo (Fig. 1J).[27] Taken together, our data identify LSECs as efficient scavengers of both free and haptoglobin-bound Hb and implicate macropinocytosis as the pathway for Hb uptake.

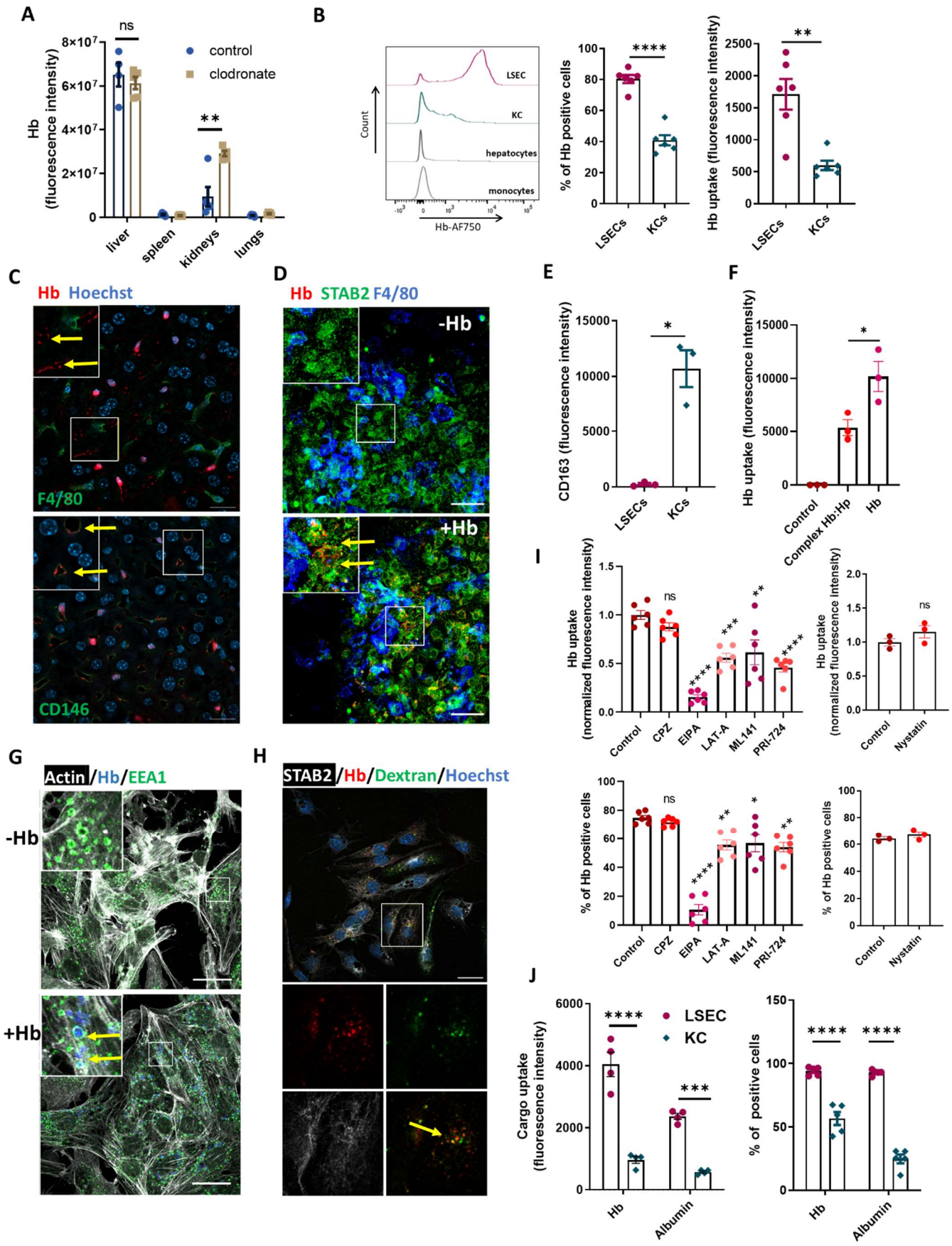
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Figure 1. **LSECs engage macropinocytosis to sequester Hb**
Hemoglobin (Hb) distribution in control and macrophage-depleted mice (clodronate) injected with Alexa Fluor 750-labeled Hb (Hb-AF750, 10 µg/mouse), imaged with Bruker *in vivo* Imaging System. Results are presented as total fluorescent counts from the region of interest. (B) AF750 fluorescence from particular liver cell populations isolated from Hb-AF750-injected mice was analyzed with flow cytometry. (C) Frozen liver slices from mice injected with Hb-AF647 (red) were processed and stained for Kupffer cells (KCs) (F4/80, green) or LSECs (CD146, green) and nuclei (blue). Arrows indicate Hb presence in the LSEC. (D) Hb-AF750 uptake *in vitro* was imaged in liver nonparenchymal cells (NPCs) treated with Hb-AF750 (0.5 µg/ml) and stained for F4/80 (blue) and the LSEC marker STAB2 (green). Arrows indicate Hb-AF750 (red) presence in the LSEC. (C, D) - areas in the highlighted rectangles are shown at higher magnification (left upper corner), scale bars, 20 µm. (E) Cell-surface expression of the CD163 receptor on LSECs and KCs was measured by flow cytometry and presented as fluorescence intensity. (F) Uptake of Hb in the presence of haptoglobin, Hp [(Hb-AF750:Hp, 0.5 µg : 16 µg) /ml] in NPCs *in vitro* cultures was measured with flow cytometry. (G) Hb-AF647 vesicle localization was imaged with microscopy in NPCs *in vitro* cultures depleted from macrophages. Arrows indicate Hb-AF647 (blue) presence in the EEA-1$^+$ (green) and Actin$^+$ (white) vesicles. Areas in the highlighted rectangles are shown at higher magnification (left corner). Scale bars, 20 µm. (H) Co-localization of Hb-AF647 (red) with rhodamine-dextran (green) was imaged with microscopy in STAB2$^+$ LSECs (white). Arrow indicates colocalization of Hb and rhodamine-dextran. The area in the highlighted rectangle is shown at higher magnification in separate channels below. Scale bar, 20 µm. (I) NPCs were pre-treated with the clathrin-mediated endocytosis inhibitor chlorpromazine (CPZ), the macropinocytosis blocker EIPA, actin polymerization blocker latrunculin A (LAT-A), inhibitor of Cdc42 GTPase ML141, β-catenin inhibitor PRI-724 and with micropinocytosis blocker nystatin before Hb-AF750 treatment for 10 min. Flow cytometry was used to determine Hb uptake by the LSECs. (J) Mice were injected for 1 h with Hb-AF750 or albumin-AF750, both at 10 µg/mouse. The fluorescence intensity of AF750, the percentage of AF750$^+$ LSECs, and KCs populations were measured with flow cytometry. Microscopic images were acquired using confocal microscopes LSM 800 or LSM710 (Zeiss) equipped with an EC Plan-Neofluar 40x/1.30 or 63x/1.4 Oil DIC M27 oil objectives and T-PMT detectors and acquisition software ZEN 2.6/ZEN2009. The images were processed using ImageJ or Adobe Photoshop with linear gamma adjustments of contrast and brightness. Numerical data are expressed as mean ± SEM, each data point represents one biological replicate. Welch's unpaired t-test was used to determine statistical significance in B and E, one-way ANOVA with Tukey's Multiple Comparison tests was used in A, F, and J; while two-way ANOVA with Tukey's Multiple Comparison tests was used in I; ns - not significant, *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$ and ****$p<0.0001$

LSECs outperform other endothelial and macrophage populations in Hb uptake

Similarly to the liver, sinusoidal endothelial cells are also present in the spleen and bone marrow,[20] organs that perform critical functions in systemic iron metabolism due to the presence of CD163$^+$ iron-recycling RPMs and erythroblastic island macrophages, respectively. Therefore, we sought to accurately compare the Hb-scavenging capacity of endothelial and macrophage populations from the spleen and bone marrow with that of hepatic LSECs and KCs over a wide range of Hb doses. We used 1 µg of Hb, an amount below the binding capacity of circulating haptoglobin (10-20 µg/ml plasma), an intermediate dose of 10 µg, and 100 µg (injected together with 10 mg of unlabeled Hb), which saturates the haptoglobin pool and mimics hemolytic conditions. We also injected mice with 1 ug of Hb bound to haptoglobin. Myeloid cells or ECs of the bone marrow were not capable of efficient Hb sequestration (Fig.

S3A). Strikingly, we observed the extraordinary ability of LSECs to internalize Hb as compared to the other cell types analyzed as exemplified by 70-99% of Hb-positive cells depending on the dose (Fig. 2A) and the highest intensity of the Hb signal per cell as compared to KCs, splenic ECs, or RPMs (Fig. 2B, D, F, H). The scavenging capacity of KCs and splenic ECs was gradually increased with the Hb dose, (Fig. 2C-F), whereas RPMs contributed, albeit slightly, to the Hb clearance only at the highest dose, mimicking hemolysis (Fig. 2G and H). Finally, using flow cytometry and whole organ imaging, we did not detect Hb accumulation in the aorta, lined by non-sinusoidal ECs (Fig. S3B and C). In conclusion, our data suggest that LSECs outperform other cell types in Hb clearance over a wide range of circulating Hb concentrations.

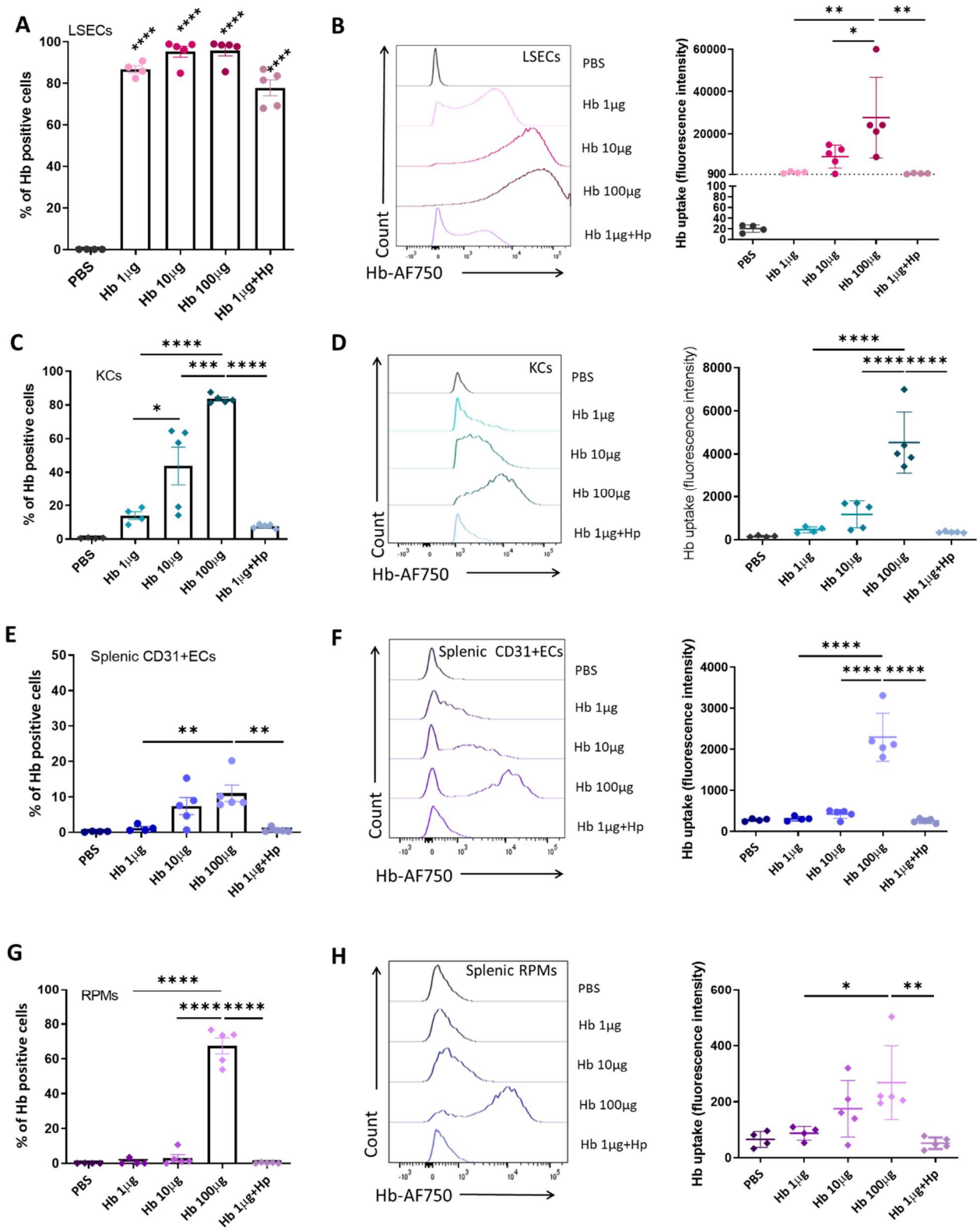

Figure 2. LSECs outperform other endothelial populations and macrophages in Hb uptake.
Percentage of Hb-AF750 uptake by (A) LSECs, (C) KCs, (E) splenic endothelial cells (ECs), and (G) RPMs. Fluorescence intensity of Hb-AF750 in (B) LSECs, (D) KCs, (F) splenic endothelial cells, and (H) RPMs. Both parameters were analyzed with flow cytometry. Data are expressed as mean ± SEM and each data point represents

one biological replicate. One-way ANOVA with Tukey's Multiple Comparison tests was used to determine statistical significance; ns - not significant, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001 and ****p<0.0001

LSECs constitutively express proteins critical for iron recycling from heme

We were intrigued by the fact that LSECs efficiently scavenge low doses of Hb. To further explore their specialization, we examined data from single-cell RNA sequencing of ECs from different mouse organs.[31] Interestingly, both *Hmox1* [encoding heme oxygenase 1 (HO-1)] and *Blrvb* (encoding biliverdin reductase b, BLRVB), genes important for heme catabolism, together with important antioxidant enzymes such as *Gclc*, *Gpx4* and *Nqo1*, were identified as metabolic markers exclusively specific for liver EC. Using EC Atlas, we visualized the expression levels of *Hmox1* and *Blvrb,* as well as of *Slc40a1*, the gene encoding the iron exporter FPN, and found a clear signature for the high expression of these transcripts in liver ECs as compared to other organs (Fig. S4A). Consistently, by employing dedicated single-cell RNA-seq databases we observed high expression levels of *Slc40a1*, *Hmox1,* and *Hmox2* in pig liver ECs and *Slc40a1* in human LSECs (Fig. S4B and C).[32,33] Confirming sequencing data, we detected clear protein expression of FPN, HO-1, and BLVRB in primary mouse LSECs (Fig. 3A). To obtain comprehensive information on LSEC adaptation to Hb clearance, we performed label-free proteomic profiling of FACS-sorted LSECs in comparison to iron recycling macrophages (RPMs and KCs) and splenic and heart ECs. This analysis identified 418 protein groups significantly more abundant in LSECs than in splenic and cardiac ECs (Fig. 3B, Table S1). Aside from well-established LSEC markers (STAB1, STAB2, CD206), intriguingly, these included L and H ferritin, HO-1 and BLVRB, heme binding protein HEBP1, and enzymes involved in antioxidant response (e.g., NQO1, GCLC or PRDX1). Interestingly, the hits included also several known macropinocytosis effectors, such as Rabankirin-5, ATP6V0A1, RAB5 or septin 2, and several putative ones identified by previous RNAi screens [34] (Table S1). This proteomic signature of LSEC, implying their active steady-state involvement in Hb uptake and iron recycling from heme, was consistent with their relatively high labile iron levels as compared to other ECs (Fig. 3C). Further flow cytometric measurements revealed a clear expression of cell-surface FPN on LSECs, reaching approx. 40% of cells, albeit remaining at lower levels compared to KCs (Fig. 3D). FPN was robustly induced in LSECs under conditions of systemic iron deficiency caused by iron-restricted feeding (Fig. 3E), suggesting a tight control of LSECs' FPN by circulating hepcidin. Confirming the iron-exporting function of LSEC FPN, we detected a significant increase in labile iron in LSECs in response to mini-hepcidin PR73 injection (Fig. 3F).[35] Collectively, these data indicate that LSECs are equipped

with a protein machinery that drives iron recycling from heme, suggesting their role in a steady-state iron turnover.

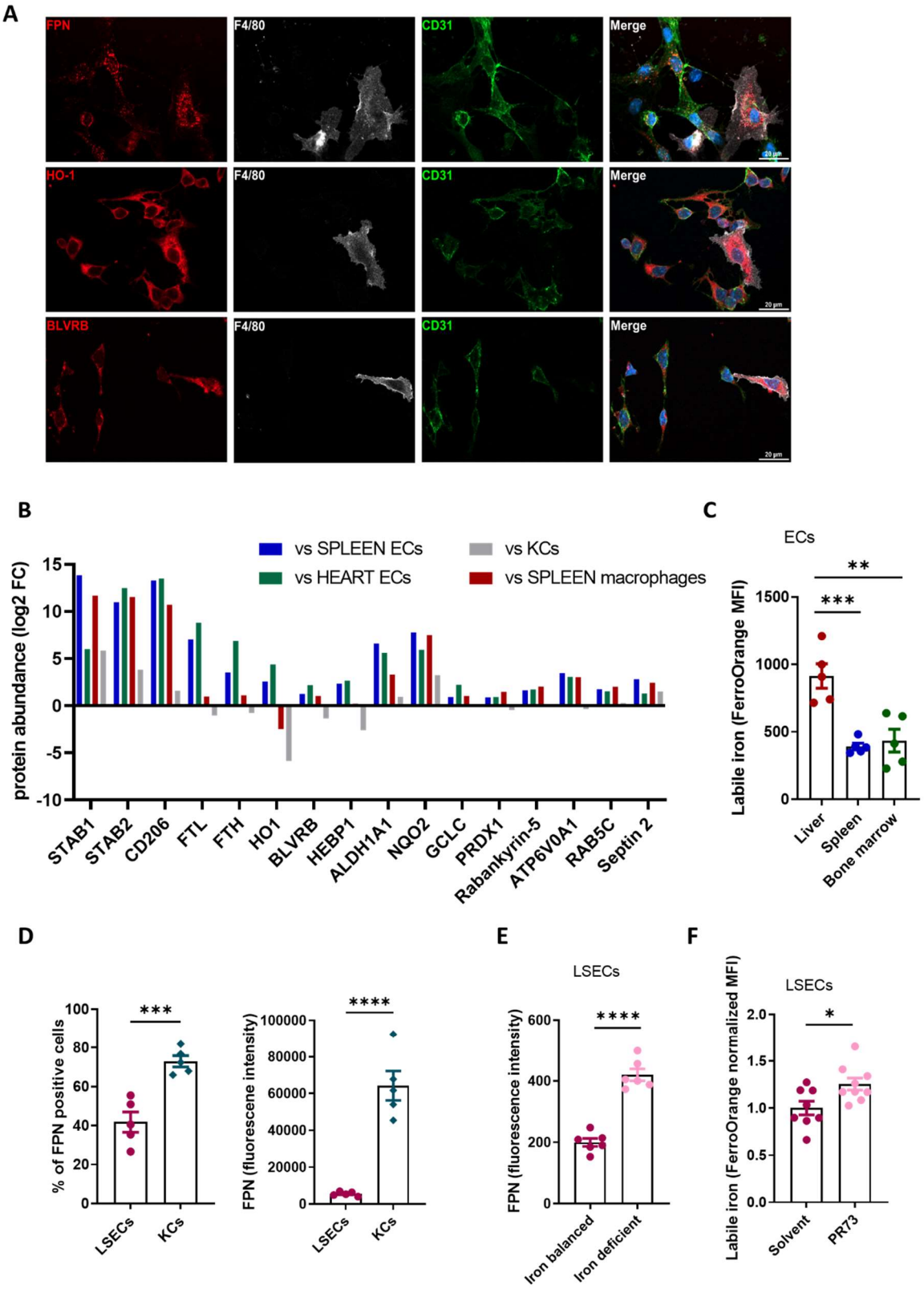

Figure 3. LSECs constitutively express proteins critical for iron recycling and macropinocytosis
(A) HO-1, BLVRB, and FPN (red) presence in F4/80^{+} (white) KCs and CD31+ endothelial cells (green) imaged by microscopy in NPC *in vitro* cultures. Nuclei (blue), scale bars, 20 µm. (B) Shown are selected proteins significantly more abundant in FACS-sorted LSECs than in spleen and heart endothelial cells. Log2 fold change versus indicated cell types is presented. (C) Cytosolic ferrous iron (Fe^{2+}) content in endothelial cells was measured with a FerroOrange probe. (D) Flow cytometry analysis of FPN expression in LSECs and KCs. (E) Flow cytometry analysis of FPN expression in LSEC isolated from mice maintained on balanced or iron-deficient diets. (F) Cytosolic ferrous iron (Fe^{2+}) content was measured with a FerroOrange probe in LSECs derived from mice injected with mini hepcidin (PR73). Microscopic images were acquired using a confocal microscope LSM 800 (Zeiss) equipped with an EC Plan-Neofluar 40x/1.30 Oil DIC M27 oil objective and T-PMT detectors. Acquisition software: ZEN 2.6. The images were processed using ImageJ software with linear gamma adjustments of contrast and brightness. Numerical data are expressed as mean ±SEM and each data point represents one biological replicate. Welch's unpaired t-test was used to determine statistical significance in D, E, and F; one-way ANOVA with Tukey's Multiple Comparison tests was used in C; ns - not significant, *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$ and ****$p<0.0001$.

LSECs and KCs support iron recycling by removing hemolysis products from the spleen

We next sought to understand how LSECs might be involved in physiological iron recycling. The hemolysis-driven iron recycling model proposed by Klei et al. implied that RPMs likely sequester spleen-derived Hb via highly-expressed CD163.[5] However, CD163 knock-out mice do not show major differences in systemic and splenic iron parameters (Fig. S5). We hypothesized that hepatic cells may play a role in the clearance of splenic hemolytic products via portal circulation. We, therefore, extended previously reported studies by quantifying the contributions of splenic and hepatic myeloid and endothelial cells to the uptake of intact RBCs, RBCs devoid of cytoplasm (so-called RBC ghosts), and free Hb. To this end, we injected mice with temperature-stressed RBCs, derived from Ubi-GFP transgenic mice and stained with the membrane label PKH26 (Fig. 4A and B). This approach revealed that RPMs outperformed other splenic cell types, F4/80^{high} CD11b^{high} pre-RPMs, CD11c^{+} dendritic cells (DCs), monocytes, and splenic ECs in the sequestration of PKH26^{+}GFP^{+} intact RBCs. An equal percentage of RPMs (approximately 30% of the population) were effective in removing PKH26^{+}GFP^{-} RBC ghosts, a function that was efficiently supported by splenic pre-RPMs, and to a lesser extent by DCs, monocytes, or ECs. Interestingly, we found that in the liver phagocytosis of intact RBCs by KCs was less efficient than the uptake of RBC ghosts (Fig. 4B). No erythrophagocytosis of intact RBCs was detected in hepatic DCs and LSECs, but they showed some capacity for the sequestration of RBC membranes, albeit lower than KCs. Injection of fluorescently-labeled RBC ghosts along with free Hb confirmed that KCs and LSECs, respectively, rather than RPMs or splenic ECs, are specialized in the clearance of these two major hemolysis products (Fig. 4C and D). Corroborating these data, we detected an increase in heme levels in the portal vein plasma and we identified hemoglobin α (HBA) and β (HBB) chains as top proteins upregulated

in LSECs' at the proteome-wide level after injection of stressed RBCs compared to control PBS-injected mice (Fig. 4E and F). Interestingly, among only 5 proteins that were significantly increased along with HBA and HBB in LSECs following RBC transfusion, we detected two dehydrogenases ALDH1A1 and ALDH1L1, the latter with established roles in detoxification of aldehydes formed by lipid peroxidation.[36]

We next sought to determine whether the activity of LSECs to sequester Hb could be modulated by the altered capacity of splenic RPMs to fully execute erythrophagocytosis. First, we observed that LSECs became more effective at Hb uptake in response to macrophage depletion after clodronate injection (Fig. 4G). Second, we took advantage of the physiological difference in iron parameters between BALB/c and C57BL/6J (BL/6J) mice. We observed the lower erythrophagocytic capacity of RPMs from BALB/c mice compared to BL/6J mice (Fig. 4H), which was likely underlain by reduced RPM FPN expression (Fig. 4I),[37] and led to heme accumulation in extracellular space of the spleen and portal plasma (Fig. 4J and K). This phenotype was coupled with higher levels of labile iron and greater FPN expression in LSECs of BALB/c mice (Fig. 4L and M), indicating their higher activity in iron-recycling from Hb. Taken together, our findings support a physiological role for LSECs in the sequestration of endogenous spleen-derived Hb, thereby establishing a spleen-liver axis for effective iron recycling from senescent RBCs.

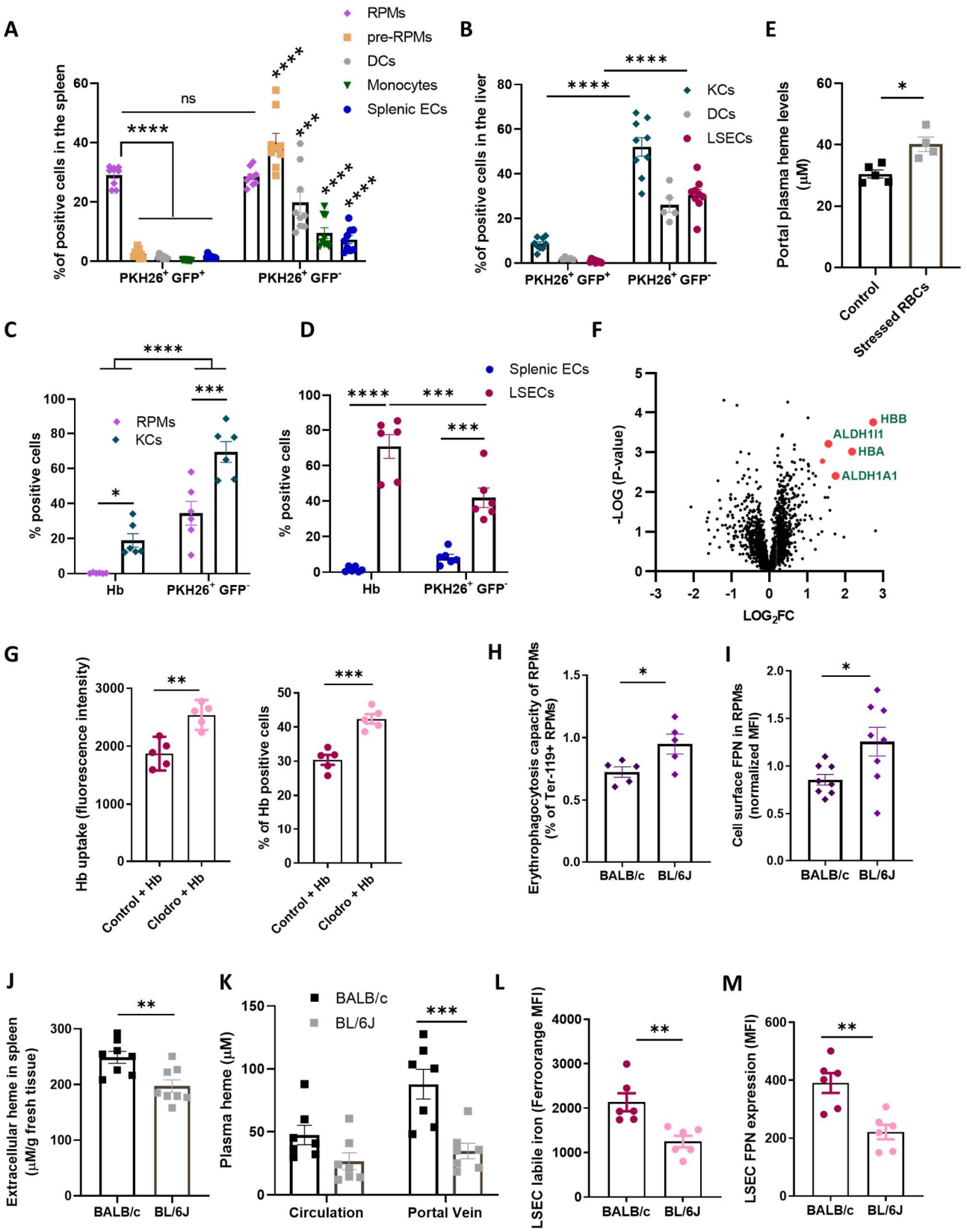

Figure 4. LSECs and KCs support iron recycling by removing hemolysis products from the spleen
(A-D) Mice were administered i.v. with (A-B) stressed GFP$^+$ RBCs stained with a membrane marker PKH26 or (C-D) Hb-AF750 and PKH26$^+$ RBCs devoid of cytoplasm (RBC ghosts). Splenic and liver cells were isolated, stained, and analyzed by flow cytometry. (A) The percentage of cells positive for markers of intact RBCs

($PKH26^+GFP^+$) and RBC ghosts ($PKH26^+GFP^-$) in splenic RPMs, pre-RPMs, dendritic cells (DCs), monocytes, and endothelial cells (ECs). (B) The percentage of $PKH26^+GFP^+$ and $PKH26^+GFP^-$ cells in liver KCs, dendritic cells (DCs), and LSECs. (C-D) The percentage of cells positive for Hb (AF750) and RBC ghosts. (E) Heme levels from the portal vein plasma of control mice and mice transfused with temperature-stressed RBCs, measured by Heme Assay Kit. (F) Volcano plot illustrating the changes in the proteome of FACS-sorted LSECs 90 min after i.v. transfusion of stressed RBCs. Proteins significantly upregulated are marked in red. (G) Hb-AF750 uptake by LSECs derived from control and macrophage-depleted mice (Clodro). (H-M) BALB/c and C57BL/6J (BL/BJ) mice phenotype comparison. (H) The capacity of endogenous erytrophagocytosis was assessed by intracellular staining of the erythrocytic marker (Ter-119) in RPMs. (I) FPN surface levels in RPMs measured by flow cytometry. (J) Extracellular heme content in the spleen and (K) heme levels in the portal vein and circulation plasma were measured with Heme Assay Kit. (L) Cytosolic ferrous iron (Fe^{2+}) levels in LSECs were measured with a FerroOrange probe. (M) FPN levels in LSECs measured by flow cytometry. Data are expressed as mean ± SEM and each data point represents one biological replicate. Welch's unpaired t-test was used to determine statistical significance in E, H-J, and L-M; while two-way ANOVA with Tukey's Multiple Comparison tests was used in A-D and K; ns - not significant, *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$ and ****$p<0.0001$.

LSECs detoxify hemoglobin upon hemolysis and trigger the iron-sensing BMP6 angiokine

We next set out to investigate the response of LSECs to hemolytic conditions. To this end, we first injected mice with 10 mg of mouse Hb (equivalent to the RBC fraction in approximately 100 µl of blood) in a time-course manner. We observed a transient increase in iron levels in the liver, but not in the spleen, which was normalized by the 24-hour endpoint (Fig. 5A and S6A). Notably, the kidney also accumulated iron that could not be mobilized and remained elevated throughout the experiment (Fig. S6B). Hemoglobin clearance in the liver resulted in a strong transcriptional induction of the heme catabolizing enzyme *Hmox1*, a response that could be attributed specifically to LSECs (Fig. 5B and C). Hemoglobin challenge rapidly increased the hepatic expression of the iron-sensing gene *Bmp6*, attributable to FACS-sorted LSECs, accompanied by the upregulation of the BMP target gene hepcidin (*Hamp*) in the liver (Fig. 5D-F). As expected, induction of the BMP6-hepcidin axis caused serum hypoferremia at the 15 h time point which also normalized after 24 h (Fig. 5G), reflecting the changes in liver iron content (Fig. 5A). The rapid induction of *Hmox1* in LSECs upon intravenous Hb delivery was phenocopied by injecting the mice with the hemolytic agent phenylhydrazine (PHZ) and exceeded by far the response of KCs, splenic cells and aorta (Fig. 5H and I). PHZ also caused a significant, albeit mild, iron accumulation in the liver (Fig. 5J), but not in other organs (Fig. S6C and D), and activation of *Bmp6* transcription (Fig. 5K).

Finally, we aimed to determine whether LSECs induce a specific response when exposed to Hb compared to non-heme iron. To this end, we performed RNA sequencing to assess global gene expression signatures upon injection of 10 mg of Hb and compared these to a previously reported response to a quantitatively matched dose of iron citrate.[38] Both stimuli induced *Bmp6* at very comparable levels, and induced an ETS1-controlled transcriptional program, as

previously reported to iron citrate response [38] (Fig. S7). Still, the two iron sources elicited different responses of LSECs at the transcriptome-wide level (Fig. 5L). While only 64 genes, mainly attributable to the response to oxidative stress and iron were co-induced by Hb and iron citrate (Fig. 5L), as many as 372 and 202 genes up-regulated their expression specifically upon Hb and iron citrate injection, respectively. These differences were reflected by a largely distinct functional enrichment within the Hb- and iron-induced transcriptional signature (Fig. 5M). Interestingly, Hb-exposed LSECs specifically induced genes associated with immune and inflammatory responses, such as the phagocyte marker *Cd68*, the chemokines *Ccl24*, *Ccl6,* and *Ccl9*, and importantly, *Il18*, a cytokine implicated in the pathogenesis of the hemolytic sickle cell disease.[39] Furthermore, Hb ingestion activated gene expression signatures associated with phagocytosis, the PI3K-Akt pathway, growth factor activity, and intracellular signaling, enriched categories with several links to actin remodeling and, in some cases, directly to macropinocytosis. Indeed, several genes induced by Hb, such as the receptors *Axl, Csf1r,* and *Met*, the growth factors *Hgf* and *Pdgfa*, or the actin cytoskeleton-interacting factors *Evl* and *Coro1a* are known to play a role in the regulation and/or execution of macropinocytosis.[26,40-42] Collectively, these findings support the role of LSECs in Hb clearance and demonstrate their high capacity to trigger the iron-sensing *Bmp6* angiokine in response to excessive Hb, along with specific pro-inflammatory markers and factors associated with actin remodeling.

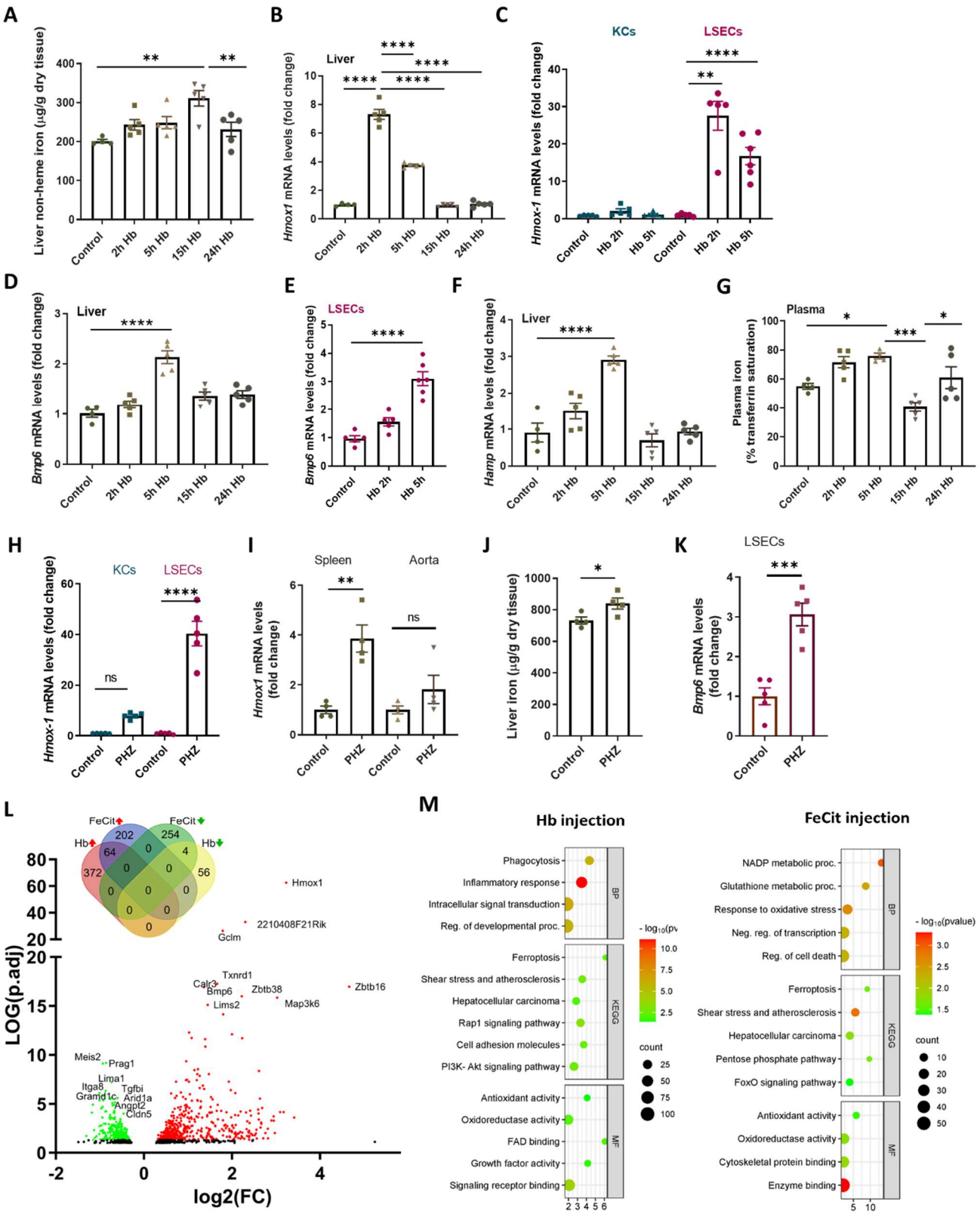

Figure 5. LSECs detoxify hemoglobin upon hemolysis and trigger the iron-sensing BMP6 angiokine
(A-G) Mice were injected with native hemoglobin (Hb, 10 mg/mouse) and analyzed at indicated time points. (A) Non-heme iron content in the liver was measured by bathophenanthroline colorimetric assay. (B and C) *Hmox1* gene expression measurement by RT-PCR in (B) the liver and (C) FACS-sorted KC and LSEC populations. (D,

E) *Bmp6* and (F) *Hamp* gene expression measured by RT-qPCR in whole livers or sorted LSECs, as indicated. (G) Plasma iron levels were determined by transferrin saturation measurements. (H-K) Hemolysis was induced in mice by i.p. injection of phenylhydrazine (PHZ, 0.125 mg/g) 6 h before analysis. *Hmox1* gene expression in (H) FACS-sorted cell populations of KCs and LSECs, and (I) spleen and aorta. (J) Non-heme iron content in the liver. (K) *Bmp6* expression in FACS-sorted LSECs. Data are expressed as mean ± SEM and each data point represents one biological replicate. (L-M) Mice were injected with Hb (10 mg) or Ferric citrate (FeCit, 150 µg) for 5 h. (L) A volcano plot of differentially regulated genes identified by the RNA-seq transcriptomic analysis in FACS-sorted LSECs. The green color indicates negatively, and the red color positively-regulated genes. Venn diagram shows genes regulated by Hb and FeCit. (M) functional enrichment among genes induced by Hb or FeCit. The x-axis represents the fold of enrichment. The y-axis represents GO terms of biological processes (BP), Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes terms (KEGG), and GO terms of molecular function (MF). The size of the dot represents the number of genes under a specific term. The color of the dots represents the adjusted P-value. Welch's unpaired t-test was used to determine statistical significance in J-K, one-way ANOVA with Tukey's Multiple Comparison tests was used in A-G; while two-way ANOVA with Tukey's Multiple Comparison tests was used in C, H, and I; ns - not significant, *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$ and ****$p<0.0001$.

Discussion

Recent advances have revealed the critical role of the specialized hepatic sinusoidal endothelium in maintaining systemic and liver homeostasis. The scavenging activity of LSECs is essential for the hepatic clearance of biological macromolecules, such as denatured collagen, glycans/glycation end products, modified low-density lipoproteins, small immune complexes, lipopolysaccharides or viruses.[20,21,43-45] In addition, LSECs regulate the vascular tone in the liver, balance the tolerogenic immune milieu with the onset of immune responses, ensure physiological zonation of hepatic immune cells,[45,46] and control iron balance by producing the angiokines BMP2 and BMP6.[22,23] Our study identifies the novel homeostatic role of LSECs in the clearance of free Hb, an activity where their scavenging and iron-regulatory functions converge..

The clearance functions of LSECs have been attributed to their extraordinary endocytic activity and the surface expression of scavenger receptors.[20] We discovered that LSECs have a remarkable and constitutive capacity for macropinocytosis, similar to that of macrophages, which use this pathway for antigen presentation, and in contrast to the inducible macropinocytosis of cancer cells, which is critical for nutrient acquisition.[25,27] We show that this capability distinguishes LSECs from ECs of other organs, thus significantly expanding the scarce knowledge on the macropinocytic activity of ECs[47] and assigning physiological significance to early observations that LSECs can engage macropinocytosis for antigen capture.[48] We propose that macropinocytosis of LSECs likely contributes to their scavenging function. While this possibility merits future studies, macropinocytosis has recently been identified as a major driver of LDL uptake by macrophages, leading to foam cell formation in atherosclerosis.[49] Hence, our findings aid in shifting the paradigm from the sole role of

scavenger receptor-mediated endocytosis in the clearance of blood-borne macromolecules, emphasizing the importance of macropinocytic uptake. Further studies would be required to address mechanistic details of how β-catenin signaling supports macropinocytosis of LSECs and whether its pharmacological blockade would impair liver clearance functions.

Our study employed *in vivo* approaches to verify the role of macrophages in Hb uptake and revealed that LSECs qualitatively and quantitatively outcompete CD163-expressing KCs and RPMs in this task. These provocative findings may be explained by the fact that the role of CD163 in Hb uptake has been mainly investigated by its ectopic expression in non-macrophage cells and by using polyclonal blocking anti-CD163 in cultured macrophages.[9,11,50] Our study does not exclude the contribution of iron-recycling macrophages to Hb uptake in hemolytic conditions, nor does it imply that other tissues/endothelial cells are unaffected by prolonged and pathological exposure to free Hb and heme.[51] It remains to be determined to what extent LSEC-mediated Hb uptake protects other organs in hemolytic disorders, such as sickle cell disease or thalassemia, and whether and how LSEC functions are impaired in such conditions. Noteworthy, CD163-expressing macrophages play important anti-inflammatory roles, for example in the tumor microenvironment or arthritis, but these tissue-specific roles do not appear to be related to Hb clearance.[52-54] Finally, even though the clearance of free circulating Hb was much faster than that of Hb-haptoglobin complexes in dogs,[10] consistent with our model, the CD163-independent uptake of Hb by LSECs would need to be verified in human cells.

Most importantly, our study defines and quantifies the individual contribution of splenic and hepatic cell types to physiological iron recycling. Consistent with previous studies,[3,4] we provide evidence that RPMs are efficient at phagocytosis of intact stressed RBCs, whereas the liver is the site of scavenging steady-state hemolytic products. KCs are efficient in the uptake of RBC ghosts and outperform RPMs in the Hb uptake. LSECs, due to their anatomical location, exceptional macropinocytic activity, and expression of the iron-recycling proteins, emerge as a novel cell type involved in the maintenance of iron homeostasis, specialized for the removal of spleen-derived Hb. Consistent with this newly proposed role of LSECs, it has been reported that endothelial-specific FPN knock-out mice exhibit marked iron deficiency, develop anemia, and show iron loading in liver NPC.[55] Further studies using cell-type specific genetic deletions of proteins involved in iron recycling would be crucial to quantify the exact contribution of RPMs, KCs, and LSECs to the circulating plasma iron pool and thus assess their relative involvement in iron recycling from RBCs.

Methods

Mice and *in vivo* procedures

Female BALB/c mice (8-10 weeks old) were obtained from the Experimental Medicine Centre of the Medical University of Bialystok or the Mossakowski Medical Research Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Female C57BL/6-Tg(UBC-GFP)30Scha/J (UBI-GFP/BL6) mice were kindly provided by Aneta Suwińska (Faculty of Biology, University of Warsaw, Poland). Female and male (8-12 weeks old) WT C57BL/6J and *Cd163*$^{-/-}$ mice were kindly provided by Anders Etzerodt (Department of Biomedicine, Aarhus University, Denmark). For the dietary experiment, C57BL/6J females (4 weeks old) were obtained from the Experimental Medicine Centre of the Medical University of Bialystok. Mice were fed with a standard iron diet of 200 mg/kg (control) or a low iron diet containing <6 mg/kg (iron deficient) for 5 weeks before analysis. All mice were maintained at the SPF facility under standard conditions (20°C, humidity 60%, 12-h light/dark cycle). All animal experiments were conducted following the guidelines of European Directive 2010/63/EU and the Federation for Laboratory Animal Science Associations. The procedures were approved by the local ethical committee in Warsaw (No. WAW2/150/2019, WAW2/138/2019, WAW2/137/2020, WAW2/137/2021, WAW2/179/2021, and WAW2/094/2021), or for the dietary experiment by the local ethical committee in Olsztyn No. 26/2018.

Proteins or their conjugates were dissolved in PBS and administered intravenously (*i.v.*) at the dose indicated in the particular figure legend. For macrophage depletion, mice received *i.v.* solution of liposomes containing clodronic acid (LIPOSOMA, #C-SUV-005) (5 ml/kg) or control empty liposomes for 24 h. A sterile aqueous iron citrate (FeCit, 150 µg/mouse) solution (Sigma-Aldrich-Aldrich, #F3388) or sterile citric acid buffer (0.05 M, Sigma-Aldrich, #251275) were normalized to pH 7.0 and administered *i.v.* for 5 h. Mini-hepcidin (PR73, 50 nmol/mouse) (kind gift from Elizabeta Nemeth, UCLA, USA) was injected intraperitoneally (*i.p.*) for 4 h. To induce hemolysis, a sterile solution of phenylhydrazine (PHZ) (Sigma-Aldrich, #P26252) in PBS was administered *i.p.* at a dose of 0.125 mg/g of body weight for 6 h. PKH26-stained (Sigma Aldrich, #PKH26GL-1KT) temperature-stressed UBI-GFP RBCs were resuspended to 50% hematocrit in HBSS (Capricorn, #HBSS-1A) and administered *i.v.* for 1.5 h. PKH26-stained RBCs ghosts were mixed with fluorescently labeled Hb (10 µg/mouse) and administered *i.v.*for 1.5 h.

Cell-based and biochemical assays

Isolation of non-parenchymal liver cells (NPCs) for primary cell cultures together with cell treatments and immunofluorescence are described in the Data Supplements. Isolation of cells from the spleen, heart, bone marrow, and aorta, flow cytometry, FACS-sorting, liver tissue immunofluorescence, heme/iron measurements, preparation of conjugated mouse Hb, stressed RBCs, and RBC ghosts, and real-time quantitative PCR (RT-qPCR) were performed as previously reported,[37] or/and described in detail in Data Supplements.

RNA sequencing and proteomics

Transcriptome analysis of LSECs was conducted using the AmpliSeq method and proteomics was performed by label-free quantification with mass spectrometry as described in the Data Supplements. Data for iron citrate injection were deposited previously in the GEO repository under accession no GSE235976, whereas for Hb injection under no GSE240270 (with a token: uhkrgywyhledjmj to allow for review). Proteomics data were deposited to the ProteomeXchange Consortium via the PRIDE partner repository with the dataset identifier PXD051274 (username: reviewer_pxd051274@ebi.ac.uk; password: 0QJOAbzS for review).

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Authorship Contributions

KMS, GZ, TPR, ZS, and MMia conceived and planned the experiments; ZS, GZ, AJ, PS, RM, MC, IR, KJ, RS and MMo performed research; GZ, ZS, AJ, PS, RM, MC, MK, RS analyzed data; GZ, ZS, AJ, PS, RM, MC, KJ, KMS, MMik, visualized data; AE provided critical models; MMik and RS curated data; KMS, TPR supervised the study; TPR, AJ, MMia and AE edited the manuscript; KMS, GZ, and ZS wrote the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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