Using machine learning to dissect host kinases required for _Leishmania_ internalization

and development

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Abstract

The *Leishmania* life cycle alternates between promastigotes, found in the sandfly, and

amastigotes, found in mammals. When an infected sandfly bites a host, promastigotes are

engulfed by phagocytes (*i.e.*, neutrophils, dendritic cells, and macrophages) to establish

infection. When these phagocytes die or break down, amastigotes must be re-internalized to

survive within the acidic phagolysosome and establish disease. To define host kinase regulators

of *Leishmania* promastigote and amastigote uptake and survival within macrophages, we

performed an image-based kinase regression screen using a panel of 38 kinase inhibitors with

unique and overlapping kinase targets. We also targeted inert beads to complement receptor 3

(CR3) or Fcγ receptors (FcR) as controls by coating them with complement/C3bi or IgG

respectively. Through this approach, we identified several host kinases that regulate receptor-

mediated phagocytosis and/or the uptake of *L. amazonensis*. Findings included kinases

previously implicated in *Leishmania* uptake (such as SRC family kinases (SFK), Abl family

kinases (ABL1/c-Abl, ABL2/Arg), and spleen tyrosine kinase (SYK)); we also uncovered many

novel kinases. These methods also predicted kinases necessary for promastigotes to convert to

amastigotes or for amastigotes to survive within macrophages. Overall, our results suggest that

the concerted action of multiple interconnected networks of host kinases are needed over the

course of *Leishmania* infection, and that the kinases required for the parasite's life cycle

substantially differ depending on which receptors are bound and the life cycle stage that is

internalized. In addition, using our screen, we identified kinases that preferentially regulate the

uptake of parasites over beads, indicating that the methods required for *Leishmania* to be

internalized by macrophages differ significantly from generalized phagocytic mechanisms. Our

findings are intended to be used as a hypothesis generation resource for the broader scientific

community studying the roles of kinases in host-pathogen interactions.

1. Introduction

Leishmania is an obligate intracellular parasite of phagocytic cells that causes either cutaneous or visceral disease, depending on the infecting parasite species and the immunological status of the host [1, 2]. Since millions of patients are affected worldwide, and drugs for leishmaniasis are both ineffective and have notable host toxicity, new anti-leishmanial drugs are needed. Further research into the mechanisms driving *Leishmania* pathogenesis is essential to identify new avenues for therapeutic development.

Targeting the process through which *Leishmania* is internalized by phagocytic cells represents a potential therapeutic strategy. By blocking this process, the initial infection step and subsequent spread of *Leishmania* within the host could be prevented. To this end, several host cell receptors on macrophages have previously been identified as critical in *Leishmania* binding, internalization, and subsequent survival within host cells [3]. As described in the literature, the fibronectin receptor (integrin $\alpha 5\beta 1$) [4], mannose receptor [5], third complement receptor CR3 [6], and first complement receptor CR1 [7] facilitate promastigote identification. Additionally, CR3, heparin binding protein, and the Fc receptor (FcγR) mediate amastigote recognition [8]. Ligation of these specific receptors is known to elicit downstream activation of signaling pathways necessary for phagocytosis; however, the exact mechanisms of how *Leishmania* modulates these signaling pathways and their contribution to the phagocytosis process have yet to be elucidated.

Our ongoing efforts have been directed at identifying the host cell signaling pathways that permit *Leishmania* internalization by mammalian macrophages. To this end, we have employed a multi-color immunofluorescence assay to define *L. amazonensis* promastigotes or amastigotes that have been internalized by, or are surviving within, macrophages [9, 10]. By directing subsequent experiments at known signaling partners of previously-identified kinases in other biological systems, we have defined a Src-Abl/Arg-Syk related signaling pathway that

governs *Leishmania* uptake and resulting disease manifestations in mouse models [10-13].

Such studies have been fruitful but are limited by what is known about interactions with each

identified kinase in other systems. Therefore, using a broader yet systematic screening

approach would provide a more complete picture of the signaling pathways used by *Leishmania*

to enter and survive in macrophages.

We have previously used a machine learning approach named kinase regression (KiR) to

identify host kinases responsible for malaria liver-stage infection [14], blood-brain barrier

integrity [15, 16] and dengue infection in hepatocytes [17]. By incorporating cellular phenotypic

data from a small panel of kinase inhibitors with existing biochemical data of these inhibitors

against 291 human protein kinases, KiR can make predictions on the key kinase regulators

driving that phenotype using an elastic net regularization algorithm [18].

Therefore, in this study, we used KiR to identify the most important host kinase regulators of

L. amazonensis uptake and development. A subset of these predictions was empirically

confirmed. Collectively, our predictions have identified important host cell regulators of *L.*

amazonensis infection, which vary depending on the entry receptor and form of the parasite.

These findings are shared here for the broader parasitology community and offer promising

insights into defining effective host-based targets for antiparasitic treatment.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Mice

C57BL/6 mice were purchased from Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, ME). The Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee at UT Southwestern approved all experimental protocols.

2.2 Cell culture

For the initial kinase screen, cells were harvested from the tibias and femurs of mice and differentiated into bone-marrow-derived (BM) primary macrophages over 7 days by growing them in DMEM supplemented with 10% FBS and 20% supernatant from L929 cells. Differentiation into BM macrophages was confirmed previously by fluorescence-activated cell sorter (FACS) using antibodies to F4/80 and C11b (eBioscience, San Diego, CA); over 98% of differentiated cells were positive for both markers. For confirmation screens with trametinib, RAW 264.7 cells, a murine macrophage-like cell line, were used.

2.3 Parasite culture

Leishmania amazonensis promastigotes (strain MHOM/BR/767/LTB0016) were grown at 26°C in Schneider's Drosophila medium supplemented with 15% heat-inactivated, endotoxin-free FBS and 10 µg/ml gentamicin. For macrophage invasion, promastigotes were incubated at stationary phase for 7 days to maximize infective metacyclic promastigotes. *L. amazonensis* amastigotes were grown axenically (outside of macrophages) at 32°C in M199 (Invitrogen) at pH 4.5 supplemented with 20% FBS, 1% penicillin-streptomycin, 0.1% hemin (25 mg/ml in 50% triethanolamine), 10 mM adenine, 5 mM L-glutamine, 0.25% glucose, 0.5% Trypticase, and 40 mM sodium succinate.

2.4 Phagocytosis assays

Primary macrophages were incubated overnight in M-CSF-starved media. One hour prior to phagocytosis, macrophages were activated with PMA (Sigma) for 1 h. Experiments were

performed at ~50% confluence. For drug screening experiments, macrophages were

preincubated in 500 nM of each kinase inhibitor or DMSO (Sigma) for 2 h. For experiments with

C3bi-opsonized particles, 2-μm-diameter latex yellow-green beads (Sigma) were coated with

human IgM (Sigma) at 1:100 for 1 h at 37°C. They were then incubated in freshly isolated

mouse serum diluted 1:2 in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) for 1 h at 37°C, which allowed

C3bi opsonization. For IgG experiments, beads were incubated with rabbit IgG (Sigma) diluted

1:250 for 1 h at 37°C. Macrophages were incubated with a ratio of 10 to 15 particles per cell for

the indicated timepoints at 37°C. For survival assays of 24 and 72 h, macrophages were

washed with fresh media and then given fresh media to remove any beads that had not been

taken up. Coverslips were rinsed, fixed with 3% paraformaldehyde for 15 min, and blocked with

2% bovine serum albumin (BSA) without permeabilization. Coverslips with C3bi-coated beads

were incubated with rabbit anti-human IgM (Sigma) at 1:250. All coverslips were labeled with

A568-conjugated goat anti-rabbit secondary antibody (Invitrogen) at 1:250. Coverslips were

permeabilized with 0.25% Triton for 10 min, and stained with DAPI (4′,6-diamidino-2-

phenylindole) (Invitrogen). This process, termed a "three-color immunofluorescence assay",

allowed us to distinguish the beads that were internalized from those that remained outside

cells. As experiments were performed in 96 well plates, 25% formaldehyde was added directly

to wells to make a final dilution of 3% formaldehyde, and cells were again fixed for 15 min. The

experiment then proceeded as listed above.

2.5 *Leishmania* uptake assays

Primary mouse bone marrow-derived macrophages were employed for all assays.

Macrophages were grown on black 96-well plates and were incubated with 500 nM kinase

inhibitors (screening assays) or 1 μM trametinb (confirmation assays) for 2 h prior to parasite

addition. Macrophages were also activated with PMA for 1 h prior to experiments. For C3bi

opsonization experiments, promastigotes and amastigotes were incubated with freshly isolated

mouse serum for 1 h. For IgG opsonization, amastigotes were coated with anti-P8–

proteoglycolipid complex (monoclonal antibody IgG1) for 1 h. Because promastigotes are

unlikely to encounter specific antibodies during an animal infection (it is not a biologically

relevant condition if an animal has not been previously infected), IgG opsonization of

promastigotes was not performed. Promastigotes were incubated at a ratio of 10 parasites : 1

macrophage and amastigotes were incubated at a ratio of 5 parasites : 1 macrophage. For

experiments performed in 96-well plates, 25% formaldehyde was added directly to wells to

make a final dilution of 3% paraformaldehyde. External promastigotes were labeled with mouse

anti-gp46, while external amastigotes were labeled with mouse anti-P8. All coverslips and plates

were labeled with A594-conjugated goat anti-mouse secondary antibody (Invitrogen). After

permeabilization, promastigotes were relabeled with mouse anti-gp46, and amastigotes were

relabeled with mouse anti-P8 and A488-conjugated goat anti-mouse secondary antibody

(Invitrogen); samples were co-stained with DAPI. For all experiments, at least 10 randomly

selected, distinct fields were visualized containing at least 100 macrophages and at least 100

parasites per experimental determination. All experiments were performed 3 times unless

otherwise indicated.

2.6 Parasite survival assays

For parasite survival assays, macrophages were treated as above, except longer timepoints

of 24 h and 72 h were employed. At the 24 h mark, cells were washed with media, and fresh

media was given. For experiments on coverslips, macrophages were fixed with 3%

paraformaldehyde and for experiments performed in 96-well plates, 25% formaldehyde was

added directly to wells to make a final dilution of 3% paraformaldehyde. After permeabilization,

promastigotes had switched to amastigotes based on morphological changes and binding of

amastigote-specific antibodies, and amastigotes were labeled with mouse anti-P8 and A488-

conjugated goat anti-mouse secondary antibody (Invitrogen); samples were co-stained with

DAPI. For all experiments, at least 10 randomly selected, distinct fields were visualized

containing at least 100 macrophages and at least 100 parasites per experimental determination.

All experiments were performed 3 times unless otherwise indicated.

2.7 Microscopy

For the initial kinase screen, fluorescence was visualized in the UT Southwestern High

Throughput Screening Core on a InCell Analyzer 6000 (GE Healthcare Life Sciences) at 20X. At

least 10 randomly selected fields from multiple technical replicates were visualized for a total of

at least 100 macrophages per experimental determination. The mean phagocytic index (PI), the

number of particles internalized per 100 mammalian cells, was calculated for each experiment

using a pipeline from CellProfiler (https://cellprofiler.org, Broad Institute). The phagocytic index

for control cells was taken as the maximum value (100%) for each experiment. Means ±

standard errors (SE) were calculated, and each biological experiment was performed at least

three times. One-sample Student's t tests were performed to assess statistical significance.

Confirmation assays using trametinib were performed similarly, except that samples were

visualized on a Cytation 5 (BioTek), and analysis was performed using the system's automated

software [12].

2.8 Kinase regression

The elastic net regularization algorithm used for this study was published previously [15].

The kinase regression (KiR) approach exploits the polypharmacology of a small panel of kinase

inhibitors and makes predictions on kinases important for specific cellular phenotypes and the

effect of untested kinase inhibitors on the phenotypes based on the linear combination of the

contributions of kinases to the phenotypes [18]. For this study, the mean number of internal

parasites per 100 mammalian cells upon kinase inhibitor treatment was normalized to the

phagocytic index upon DMSO treatment as control. The normalized phagocytic indices, together

with the biochemical data of the panel of 38 kinase inhibitors against 300 recombinant protein

kinases, were input into the elastic net regularization algorithm with a condition-specific cross-

validation strategy. The glmnet package (https://github.com/bbalasub1/glmnet_python, version

2.2.1) in Python (https://www.python.org, version 3.7.6) was used to perform elastic net

regularization, with the elastic net mixing parameter of 0.8.

2.9 Network generation

To build the phosphosignaling network for a set of KiR-predicted kinases, the shortest paths

between any pair of kinases within that set was identified using the kinase-substrate

phosphorylation database on PhosphoSitePlus® as the background network, and all the paths

were combined to form the phosphosignaling network that describes the paths through which

the signals may propagate. Searches for the shortest paths between kinases were done using

NetworkX (https://github.com/networkx/networkx), a Python package for analyzing complex

network structures.

2.10   Visualization

Schematics were created with BioRender.com. Phosphosignaling networks were visualized

using Cytoscape (https://cytoscape.org, version 3.9.1), with the hierarchic layout from yFiles

layout algorithms (https://www.yworks.com/products/yfiles-layout-algorithms-for-cytoscape).

3. Results

3.1 A broad-scale, overlapping-target kinase inhibitor screen implicates many host cell kinases in *Leishmania* uptake of macrophages and intracellular development

Leishmania infection of macrophages can be initiated with promastigotes, the form developed in the female sandfly's digestive tract, or with amastigotes that replicate within phagolysosomes of mammalian host cells [19]. We can also grow *L. amazonensis* amastigotes in the laboratory outside of host cells (axenically) in rich, low pH media. As indicated above, multiple surface protein receptors, including complement receptor CR3, facilitate promastigote uptake; both CR3 and Fc receptor (FcR) permit amastigote uptake [20, 21]. We hypothesized that if *Leishmania* promastigotes and amastigotes bound different extracellular receptors prior to internalization, these receptors might influence the signaling pathways facilitating parasite uptake by and survival within macrophages. To test this hypothesis and study the effects of binding different receptors, we cultured *L. amazonensis* promastigotes and axenic amastigotes [10, 20, 21]; promastigotes were opsonized with C3bi and amastigotes were coated with C3bi or IgG (Fig. 1A). We did not coat promastigotes with IgG because antibody opsonization of promastigotes is unlikely to be physiologically relevant (unless a host organism were infected with *Leishmania* parasites multiple times). We simultaneously pre-treated bone marrow-derived macrophages with a panel of 38 kinase inhibitors to probe for kinase regulators responsible for *Leishmania* uptake and intracellular development. Four different co-incubation timepoints were employed to broadly characterize *Leishmania* uptake into and survival within macrophages: 0.5 hour for initial parasite uptake, 3 hours to encapsulate the end of parasite uptake and trafficking to the parasitophorous vacuole (PV), 24 hours to demonstrate transition from promastigote to amastigote forms, and 72 hours to assess intracellular replication of amastigotes (Fig. 1B). Hence, we exposed coated promastigotes and amastigotes to macrophages at a ratio of 10:1 and 5:1, respectively, for 0.5, 3, 24 and 72 hours before fixation with formaldehyde. We then

processed samples for immunofluorescence without permeabilization so that extracellular and

intracellular parasites could be differentiated. In brief, external promastigotes were labeled with

mouse anti-gp46 antibody and external amastigotes were labeled with mouse anti-P8 antibody,

followed by secondary staining with A568-conjugated goat anti-mouse secondary antibody (Fig.

1C). After permeabilization, parasites were visualized by labeling promastigotes with mouse

anti-gp46 antibody or amastigotes with mouse anti-P8 antibody followed by secondary staining

with A488-conjugated goat anti-mouse secondary antibody (Fig. 1C). We found that our 38

screened kinase inhibitors had a diverse impact on *Leishmania* uptake and development in

macrophages at different timepoints, life cycle stages, and when parasites had bound different

cell surface receptors (Fig. 1D, Table S1).

3.2 *Leishmania* uptake and intracellular development is differentially impacted by host

244   kinases depending upon life cycle stage and the entry receptor

To examine how inhibition of various kinases varied outcomes under different entry

conditions, we assessed correlations of phagocytic indexes across the panel of 38 kinase

inhibitors between amastigote uptake via CR3 and FcR, and between promastigote and

amastigote uptake via CR3. We observed little association (r: 0.14 – 0.31) between the

inhibition of C3bi- and IgG- mediated entry mechanisms (Fig. 1E, top), and also, little correlation

(r: -0.066 – 0.20) between promastigote and amastigote forms entering macrophages via a

C3bi-mediated mechanism (Fig. 1E, bottom). The lack of correlation between these different

scenarios suggested that different kinase regulators and kinase signaling pathways control

Leishmania invasion via different entry mechanisms, and furthermore, that even if they employ

the same entry mechanisms, different life cycle stages of *Leishmania* require different sets of

kinase regulators and kinase signaling for successful invasion and development in

macrophages.

3.3 Kinase regression predicts that kinases required for *Leishmania* infection of

macrophages can either overlap or diverge from kinases implicated in phagocytosis of

coated, inert beads

In the past, there had been a prevailing belief in the *Leishmania* research community that

early signaling events involved in *Leishmania* internalization closely resemble generalized

phagocytic mechanisms [7, 22]. This belief has largely stemmed from older studies that focused

on host cell responses to cytoskeleton-active agents [7]. This hypothesis contrasts with other

intracellular parasites such as *Toxoplasma* and *Trypanosoma cruzi*, where cell invasion is

predominantly reliant on parasitic machinery [22]. However, this historical belief has been

evolving over time. Given the unique pattern of kinase inhibitor effects observed across different

entry mechanisms and parasite forms (Fig. 1D, E), we hypothesized that distinct kinase

regulatory processes would regulate C3bi or IgG-opsonized bead uptake (generalized

phagocytosis) compared to promastigote or amastigote infection (*Leishmania* internalization).

Therefore, next, we sought to understand the similarities and differences between the kinase

regulatory program governing host control of *Leishmania* infection and the mechanisms that

regulate phagocytosis in general.

To understand the core kinases that control *Leishmania* invasion and development in

macrophages, we used a machine learning approach called kinase regression (KiR), which

utilizes the kinase screen data on *Leishmania* infection along with existing biochemical data of

these kinase inhibitors against 291 human kinases [23] to make predictions on the kinases

important for the phenotype of interest (Fig. 2A). In addition to making predictions on kinase

regulators, KiR also predicts the effect of untested kinase inhibitors in the screen on *Leishmania*

infection for inhibitors with biochemical data available. For each experimental condition, KiR was

performed on the data taken at the respective stages of infection. Known and novel kinase

regulators were predicted to modulate *Leishmania* invasion and intracellular development. A full

list of kinases predicted to facilitate or inhibit bead and *L. amazonensis* uptake and persistence

are shown in Table S2.

To study if and how the mechanism of *Leishmania* uptake by macrophages is different from

phagocytosis, as well as how signaling events change over time for this intracellular parasite,

we compared KiR predictions between *Leishmania* and bead uptake by, and persistence within,

macrophages. We reasoned that three distinct options were feasible. (1) If early infection was

mediated strictly by host regulators of phagocytosis, we would observe a high degree of overlap

in kinases predicted to regulate C3bi-coated bead versus parasite uptake and IgG-coated bead

versus amastigote uptake, which would then diverge as parasites changed their host

requirements at later (survival) time points. (2) In contrast, if significant overlap existed

throughout infection at both early and late timepoints, we reasoned that phagocytic uptake

would intrinsically shape the host regulators of infection throughout the process. (3) Finally, if

little overlap in host kinases for parasites versus beads were present early on during infection,

we reasoned that distinct mechanisms would dominate entry.

Interestingly, for the three parasite uptake mechanisms we tested and compared to bead

uptake, we observed examples of all three patterns described above. Kinase predictions of IgG-

mediated amastigote and bead uptake suggested modest overlap through the entire parasite

lifecycle at early and late time points (Fig. 2B), most similar to model (2) above. Despite this,

most KiR-predicted kinases were unique to amastigote + IgG infection throughout the time

course. Interestingly, when comparing promastigotes and beads, both treated with C3bi, we

observed less overlap between the two lists of kinase predictions than would be predicted by

chance (Fig. 2C). We interpret this finding to suggest that C3bi-promastigotes have largely

unique kinase regulatory requirements from beads that enter strictly by phagocytosis, more

similar to the model described in point (3) above. Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, we saw a

dramatic similarity in the overlap between kinases predicted to regulate early time points of

amastigotes and beads treated with C3bi. This overlap waned as time progressed, most similar

to model (1) above (Fig. 2D). The significant overlap of kinase regulators between C3bi-

amastigote and bead uptake suggested that internalization of amastigotes via a C3bi-mediated

mechanism is more phagocytosis-driven than other methods. However, once an amastigote

successfully invades macrophages, non-phagocytic-associated signaling becomes essential for

its intracellular development. These results suggested that the mechanism and receptor driving

the initial uptake of *Leishmania* parasites often but does not always influence its ultimate cellular

fate, which is consistent with a subset of prior literature [7, 24].

3.4 Additional kinase regression analysis predicts that several kinases are required for

316   both *Leishmania* infection of macrophages and phagocytosis

To better understand the portion of network-level kinase signaling that overlapped with

phagocytosis during *Leishmania* infection, we built phosphosignaling networks from the

predicted kinases overlapping between *Leishmania* and bead uptake conditions, using the

kinase-substrate phosphorylation database on PhosphoSitePlus® as the background network

(Fig. 2E). PhosphoSitePlus® is a dynamically updated knowledgebase that integrates both low-

and high-throughput data sources into a single reliable and comprehensive resource for

studying experimentally observed post-translational modifications in the regulation of biological

processes [25]. These kinase phosphosignaling networks revealed many additional kinases that

were not predicted by KiR but were predicted to serve as intermediates, connecting KiR-

predicted kinases. For instance, at 3 h of infection where amastigotes have finished internalizing

into the cell and start trafficking to PV, the model predicted that MAPK signaling plays an

important role in amastigote-initiated uptake as well as IgG-bead uptake (Fig. 2E). As further

evidence of the importance of MAPK in early phagocytosis and *Leishmania* infection, a

canonical MAPK signaling architecture (MAP3K-MAP2K-MAPK) was also implicated in the

network built from the kinases shared between promastigote and bead uptake via a C3bi-

mediated mechanism at 3 h of infection (Fig. S2A). Similarly, another canonical MAPK signaling

architecture, MAP2K-MAPK-MAPKAPK, was inferred by the network built from the shared

kinases between promastigote and bead uptake at the early stage of invasion (Fig. S2B). To

experimentally evaluate these predictions, we assessed infection of macrophages by IgG-

opsonized amastigotes and IgG-coated beads at multiple timepoints in the presence of

trametinib, a MEK (MAP2K) inhibitor (3 h data shown in Fig. 2F; additional timepoints and

promastigotes can be found in [13]). Overall, our network analysis suggests that a subset of

phagocytic pathways is required for *Leishmania* infection. However, there are more non-

phagocytic-associated signaling pathways essential for establishing *Leishmania* infection in

macrophages, which are analyzed further in the following sections.

3.5 Both differential and overlapping kinase signaling pathways are predicted to be

343   associated with amastigote versus promastigote infection of macrophages

Both *Leishmania* promastigotes (insect stage) and amastigotes (mammalian stage) can be

internalized by macrophages. Promastigotes and amastigotes differ in their morphology,

proteomes, and membrane constituents. Given the distinct origins and characteristics of these

two parasite life cycle stages, it is reasonable to hypothesize that different sets of host kinase

regulators are involved in the uptake and subsequent regulation of parasite survival within the

host cell. Our KiR model indeed predicted the involvement of different kinases for promastigote

invasion into macrophages compared to amastigotes, including several novel kinases not

previously implicated in *Leishmania* infection and kinases unrelated to phagocytosis (Fig. 3A).

Interestingly, a small set of kinases were predicted to be important for intracellular development

for both promastigotes and amastigotes via a C3bi-mediated entry mechanism, and this overlap

was statistically significant compared to random selections from the pool of 291 kinases in the

screen (Fig. 3A). Since promastigotes transition to amastigotes forms approximately 24 h after

macrophage infection, the increased overlap of predicted kinases between promastigote- and

amastigote-initiated infection at 24 h and 72 h post-infection may be attributed to this transition

within macrophages at later infection stages. Nonetheless, the significant number of kinases

predicted to be uniquely essential for promastigote- or amastigote-initiated infection suggests

that distinct kinase signaling pathways regulate the establishment of *Leishmania* parasites in

macrophages during and after life cycle stage conversion.

To further capture the molecular details of kinase signaling that are unique to promastigote-

initiated infection, we built phosphosignaling networks from KiR-predicted kinases unique to the

uptake of promastigotes but not uptake of amastigotes or beads via a C3bi-mediated entry

mechanism. For example, at 24 h post infection, when internalized promastigotes transition to

amastigotes, MAPK signaling was once again enriched in the phosphosignaling network built

from kinases predicted to exclusively regulate promastigote-initiated infection, with 12 out of 58

kinases in this network belonging to the MAP kinase family (Fig. 3B, hypergeometric test p-

value of 0.0046). This pathway analysis suggests that different kinase signaling pathways are

required for establishing promastigote- and amastigote-initiated infection in macrophages, which

is consistent with some prior literature characterizing differences between these [7].

3.6 Differential kinase signaling is predicted to drive C3bi- versus IgG-mediated *Leishmania*

373   uptake and survival versus that of coated inert beads

The uptake of *Leishmania* parasites is facilitated by various host cell surface protein

receptors, such as complement receptors and Fc receptors, and different parasite forms

primarily interact with different receptors for their successful invasion [6-8]. As suggested in

section 3.3, binding different receptors may trigger different downstream host signaling

pathways that regulate *Leishmania* survival and intracellular development. For example, *L.*

amazonensis binding to CR3 is known to trigger Rho GTPase recruitment and cytoskeletal

rearrangement. Phagocytic vesicles formed post-CR3-mediated uptake exhibit a snug fit, and

phagolysosome maturation is delayed, which accompanies impaired accumulation of LAMP-1

and cathepsin-D. CR3 binding also hampers IFN-γ-induced pro-inflammatory signaling and

reduce IL-12-mediated H_2O_2 production [7]. Conversely, when *Leishmania* binds FcR, it triggers

Rac GTPase recruitment and cytoskeletal rearrangement. Rac, in turn, activates NADPH

oxidase, and the resulting phagocytic vesicles formed after FcR-mediated uptake are expansive.

However, the kinases that govern *Leishmania* uptake and survival based on differential

opsonization are less well described, although some studies do exist in the literature; for

example, IgG opsonization of amastigotes has been shown to modulate Rac-1 activation during

uptake [24].

Thus, we next inquired if differential kinase signaling would mediate C3bi- versus IgG-

mediated amastigote uptake and survival. Comparing the KiR-predicted kinase regulators

between C3bi- and IgG-amastigotes during infection, we observed limited overlap in the

regulatory kinases predicted in each condition (Fig. 4A). In fact, overlap between predicted

regulatory kinases at 3 and 24 h post-infection exhibited a higher number of kinases than

predicted by chance alone. These KiR predictions support the hypothesis that the uptake of

amastigotes through a C3bi-mediated mechanism engages a different set of host kinases

compared to those regulating entry through an IgG-mediated mechanism. Moreover, distinct

sets of host kinases are likely required for the subsequent intracellular replication of *Leishmania*.

Furthermore, we considered the possibility that the uptake of *Leishmania* may necessitate host

kinase signaling pathways distinct from those regulating phagocytosis. Therefore, we utilized

our data to identify regulatory factors essential exclusively for *L. amazonensis* infection. To

achieve this, we initially compared our KiR-predicted kinase regulators between C3bi- and IgG-

mediated uptake of inert beads as controls (Fig. 4B). As anticipated, akin to the uptake of

amastigotes, distinct sets of kinases were implicated in regulating C3bi- and IgG-mediated

phagocytosis, with the most pronounced differences observed during the initial uptake phase

(0.5 h) between these two phagocytic pathways (Fig. 4B). We then built phosphosignaling

networks from KiR-predicted kinases that were unique to uptake of amastigotes via a C3bi-

mediated mechanism, but were not involved in either of the phagocytosis pathways. In addition

to MAPK signaling pathways, multiple other kinase-kinase connections were implicated in the

network built during initial uptake (0.5 h) (Fig. 4C). For instance, network analysis suggested

that AKT serine/threonine kinase 1 (AKT1) and glycogen synthase kinase 3 beta (GSK3B)

signaling is important for amastigote-initiated infection via a C3bi-mediated mechanism.

Interestingly, previous studies have shown that activation of GSK3B suppresses IL-10

production for a protective immune response against *Leishmania* infection [26, 27]. Our model

also predicted that SRC-mediated signaling associated with transforming growth factor beta

receptor (TGF-βR) is essential for uptake of amastigotes via binding to complement receptors.

Consistent with this prediction, both field and *in vitro* studies conducted by others have reported

that TGF-βRs are involved in *Leishmania* infection, although these were done with different

Leishmania strains other than *L. amazonensis* [28, 29]. Overall, our results demonstrate the

potential of using KiR and network-level analysis to systematically dissect key kinase regulators

and underlying signaling pathways associated with *Leishmania* infection.

4. Discussion

Here, we conducted an image-based kinase regression screen to define host kinase regulators of *L. amazonensis* promastigote and amastigote uptake and survival within macrophages. Furthermore, to define kinases required for general phagocytic mechanisms, we coated inert beads with C3bi or IgG, respectively, to target them to CR3 or FcγR. Our findings are presented as a tool for the scientific community to engender further studies of *Leishmania* uptake by, and survival within, mammalian macrophages. Our approach identifies several host kinases that regulated receptor-mediated phagocytosis and/or the uptake of *Leishmania*. In addition, we delineate kinases necessary for promastigotes to convert to amastigotes or for amastigotes to survive within macrophages. Our data demonstrate that the host kinases required for these processes differ depending on which *Leishmania* life cycle stage is internalized and which cell surface receptors are bound. We also identify kinases that preferentially regulate the uptake of parasites over opsonized beads, indicating that the methods required for *Leishmania* to be internalized by macrophages differ substantially from generalized phagocytic mechanisms.

The kinase regression approach has been successfully implemented in several other biological systems to dissect key host kinase regulators important for phenotypes of interest. KiR utilizes small-scale kinase inhibitor screens, along with known biochemical information on the kinase inhibitors against hundreds of protein kinases, to make predictions on the kinases regulating the cellular phenotypes screened for and on the impact of untested kinase inhibitors on the phenotypes, simply through an elastic net regularization algorithm. Although our KiR methodology does not consider factors such as protein abundance, subcellular localization, translation, degradation, and dephosphorylation, which are all vital for comprehending cell signaling driven by post-translational modifications, it provides the capability to connect kinases with cellular phenotypes in an unbiased and systematic manner. In turn, this allows it to

elucidate the functionality of kinase regulators associated with particular phenotypes. By

building phosphosignaling networks, we expanded the scope from the 291 kinases in the

biochemical dataset used for KiR to the entire human kinome and connected functional kinases

within a network structure that describes the pathways through which the phosphosignals

propagate. Thus, our approach provides insights on the underlying kinase signaling

mechanisms controlling *Leishmania* uptake and intracellular development.

Established literature would suggest that *Leishmania* uptake by macrophages involves

generalized phagocytic mechanisms [7], even though this complex organism possesses

substantial structural and proteomic differences from other commonly-phagocytosed particles.

In our experiments, if early infection were mediated strictly by host regulators of phagocytosis,

we would predict that the kinases governing C3bi-coated promastigote/amastigote or IgG-

coated amastigote uptake would overlap significantly with similarly opsonized beads. However,

except for kinases predicted to regulate early time points of C3bi-amastigote and bead uptake,

we instead find that the kinases required for *Leishmania* IgG-opsonized amastigote and C3bi-

opsonized promastigote uptake by macrophages are predicted to be significantly different than

those required for phagocytosis of coated beads. Our ongoing studies presented here and

elsewhere have begun to experimentally validate this finding (*e.g.,* through inhibition of MAP

kinases, see [13]). Thus, our findings challenge prior hypotheses in the field and suggest that

further studies of the internalization process will not only uncover novel mechanisms for

Leishmania entry into macrophages, but could also suggest novel host-active agents that could

be specific to treat leishmaniasis.

Our studies implicate that host kinase signaling pathways change over time as *Leishmania*

parasites establish their intracellular niche, which has been demonstrated by others [7].

However, our data suggest that even signaling events that are related to parasite survival and

subsequent development taking place hours to days after internalization can be influenced by

the initial receptor that is bound. Our results both complement and add to prior literature

suggesting that activating different cell surface receptors on phagocytes affects the eventual

fate of this intracellular parasite.

In addition, we find that different life cycle stages of *L. amazonensis* trigger different host

kinase signaling events during their uptake by and survival within macrophages. Given the

remarkable differences between parasite size and composition in these two life cycle stages,

perhaps this is not altogether surprising. However, we simultaneously demonstrate that the host

macrophage receptor to which a *Leishmania* amastigote initially binds often affects later

signaling events while the parasite resides within the macrophage. For example, our predictions

of kinases required for IgG-mediated amastigote and bead uptake suggest modest overlap

through the entire parasite life cycle at early and late time points, which diverges from C3bi-

mediated amastigote uptake. We anticipate that in turn, these differential signaling pathways

would then affect the parasite's eventual fate and survival, which we will test directly in our

future work.

In conclusion, our studies implicate many host kinases in *L. amazonensis* promastigote and

amastigote internalization by macrophages as well as generalized phagocytosis. We have also

described host kinase signaling pathways seen while promastigotes convert to amastigotes

within the macrophage or are activated while *Leishmania* survives within the acidic

phagolysosome. Interestingly, there are many differences between the kinases that play roles in

Leishmania versus bead internalization, promastigote versus amastigote uptake and survival,

and CR3 versus FcR-activated pathways. As these mechanisms may also differ based on the

infecting species of *Leishmania*, further studies will be directed at identifying differences in

kinase signaling pathways between entry and survival of these life cycle stages in different

parasite species. Uncovering the kinases that control the internalization of *Leishmania* by

macrophages and its subsequent growth and development in phagocytes may lead to novel

host-based targets for new antimicrobials.

Data availability

Data generated in this study are available in the main text or the supplementary information.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ling Wei: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. **Umaru Barrie:** Investigation, Validation, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. **Gina M. Aloisio:** Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Formal Analysis. **Francis T. H. Khuong:** Validation, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing. **Nadia Arang:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis. **Arani Datta:** Validation, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Investigation, Writing –

Review & Editing. **Alexis Kaushansky:** Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Supervision,

Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing. **Dawn M. Wetzel:** Conceptualization,

Methodology, Formal Analysis, Resources, Funding Acquisition, Supervision, Project

Administration, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Figures

Fig. 1. Host-targeted kinase inhibitors modulate infection of *Leishmania* in macrophages.

(A) Invasion of *Leishmania* parasites is initiated by C3bi-opsonized promastigotes or

amastigotes interacting with complement receptors (*e.g.*, CR3) on macrophages, or amastigotes

entering macrophages via an IgG-mediated mechanism by binding to Fc receptors. **(B)** Four

representative stages of *Leishmania* infection in macrophages were studied: 30 min to

characterize initial parasite uptake, 3 h to assess the end of parasite uptake and trafficking to

the parasitophorous vacuole (PV), 24 h to visualize the transition from promastigote form to the

amastigote form, and 72 h to identify kinases needed for intracellular replication of amastigotes.

(C) Microscopy images showing that the multicolored fluorescence assay allows labeling of all

parasites (green channel) and parasites outside of macrophages (red channel). DAPI was used

to label cell nuclei (blue channel). See Materials and Methods for details on fluorescent labeling

and microscopy. **(D)** Cluster map showing the impact of a panel of 38 kinase inhibitors on

Leishmania infection in macrophages. *Leishmania* infection was quantified by phagocytic index -

the number of internalized particles per 100 mammalian cells, at 0.5, 3, 24, and 72 h post

infection. Phagocytic indices for kinase inhibitor-treated cells were normalized to the phagocytic

index of DMSO-treated control cells. Three independent experiments were performed. **(E)**

Correlations of normalized phagocytic index upon kinase inhibitor treatment between

amastigote-initiated infection via C3bi- and IgG-mediated mechanisms (top) and between

amastigote- and promastigote-initiated infection via C3bi-mediated mechanism (bottom).

Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is shown in each plot.

Fig. 2. Host kinases regulate *Leishmania* infection through mechanisms independent of

phagocytosis. (A) Workflow of using kinase inhibitor screen and machine learning algorithm to

identify host kinase regulators important for *Leishmania* infection in macrophages. **(B)** Left:

Venn diagrams showing the number of kinases predicted to modulate IgG-mediated uptake of

amastigotes and beads at different stages of infection. Right: black squares represent the

Pearson correlation coefficients calculated from the normalized phagocytic index upon kinase

inhibitor treatment between amastigote-initiated infection via C3bi- and IgG-mediated

mechanisms; green circles represent the p-values from hypergeometric test performed on KiR-

predicted kinases between amastigote and bead uptake via IgG-mediated mechanism; green

dashed line corresponds to p-value of 0.05. **(C)** Left: Venn diagrams showing the number of

kinases predicted to modulate C3bi-mediated uptake of promastigotes and beads at different

stages of infection. Right: black squares represent the Pearson correlation coefficients

calculated from the normalized phagocytic index upon kinase inhibitor treatment between

promastigote-initiated infection and bead uptake via a C3bi-mediated mechanism. Orange

circles represent the p-values from hypergeometric test performed on KiR-predicted kinases

between promastigote and bead uptake via C3bi-mediated mechanism. Orange dashed line

corresponds to p-value of 0.05. **(D)** Left: Venn diagrams showing the number of kinases

predicted to modulate C3bi-mediated uptake of amastigotes and beads at different stages of

infection. Right: black squares represent the Pearson correlation coefficients calculated from the

normalized phagocytic index upon kinase inhibitor treatment between amastigote-initiated

infection and bead uptake via C3bi-mediated mechanism. Brown circles represent the p-values

from hypergeometric test performed on KiR-predicted kinases between amastigote and bead

uptake via C3bi-mediated mechanism. Brown dashed line corresponds to p-value of 0.05. **(E)**

Phosphosignaling network built from the overlapping kinases predicted in IgG-mediated uptake

of amastigotes and beads at 3-hour time point. Kinases predicted by KiR are in green. **(F)**

Targeting the ERK pathway using a MEK inhibitor (trametinib) reduced macrophage uptake of

amastigotes via an IgG-mediated mechanism (left), as well as the phagocytosis of IgG-coated

beads (right). The phagocytic index, the number of intracellular amastigotes or beads per 100

macrophages, was calculated for each trametinib-treated biological replicate and normalized to

the DMSO-treated biological replicate (100%). Shown is the normalized phagocytic index at 3-

hour post internalization (n = 4 biological replicates for amastigotes; 3 biological replicates for

beads). One of trametinib's targets, MAP2K1/MEK1, is highlighted in dark green in (E).

Fig. 3. Host kinases differentially regulate *Leishmania* promastigote and amastigote

infection in macrophages. (A) Left: Venn diagrams showing the number of kinases predicted

to modulate C3bi-mediated uptake of promastigotes, amastigotes, and beads at different stages

of infection. Kinases predicted to regulate both promastigote and amastigote infection but not

bead uptake are listed. Right: black squares represent the Pearson correlation coefficients

calculated from the normalized phagocytic index upon kinase inhibitor treatment between

promastigote- and amastigote-initiated infection via C3bi-mediated mechanism; purple circles

represent the p-values from hypergeometric test performed on KiR-predicted kinases between

promastigote and amastigote infection via C3bi-mediated mechanism; purple dashed line

corresponds to p-value of 0.05. **(B)** Phosphosignaling network built from the kinases predicted

to exclusively regulate promastigote-initiated infection at 24 h post infection (labeled in

magenta), using the kinase-substrate phosphorylation database on PhosphoSitePlus® as the

background network.

Fig. 4. Host kinases differentially regulate *Leishmania* infection via C3bi- and IgG-

mediated entry mechanisms. (A) Left: Venn diagrams showing the number of kinases

predicted to modulate C3bi- and IgG-mediated uptake of amastigotes at different stages of

infection. Right: black squares represent the Pearson correlation coefficients calculated from the

normalized phagocytic index upon kinase inhibitor treatment between C3bi- and IgG-mediated

uptake of amastigotes; light blue circles represent the p-values from hypergeometric test

performed on KiR-predicted kinases between C3bi- and IgG-mediated uptake of amastigotes;

light blue dashed line corresponds to p-value of 0.05. **(B)** Left: Venn diagrams showing the

number of kinases predicted to modulate C3bi- and IgG-mediated uptake of beads at different

time points. Right: black squares represent the Pearson correlation coefficients calculated from

the normalized phagocytic index upon kinase inhibitor treatment between C3bi- and IgG-

mediated uptake of beads; gold circles represent the p-values from hypergeometric test

performed on KiR-predicted kinases between C3bi- and IgG-mediated uptake of beads; gold

dashed line corresponds to p-value of 0.05. **(C)** Phosphosignaling network built from the kinases

predicted to exclusively regulate amastigote-initiated infection via C3bi-mediated mechanism at

0.5 h post infection (labeled in blue), using the kinase-substrate phosphorylation database on

PhosphoSitePlus® as the background network.

Supplemental Figures

Fig. S1. Correlations of normalized phagocytic index upon kinase inhibitor treatment

between different conditions. (A) Correlation between amastigote and bead uptake via IgG-

mediated mechanism. **(B)** Correlation between promastigote and bead uptake via C3bi-

mediated mechanism. **(C)** Correlation between amastigote and bead uptake via C3bi-mediated

mechanism. **(D)** Correlation of bead uptake between IgG- and C3bi-mediated mechanisms.

Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is shown in each plot.

Fig. S2. Phosphosignaling networks built from the overlapping kinases predicted in C3bi-

mediated uptake of promastigotes and beads. Networks were built at 3 h (A) and 0.5 h (B)

post internalization. Kinases predicted by KiR are in orange.

Supplemental Tables

Table S1. Normalized phagocytic indexes (with respect to DMSO (100%)) from kinase

inhibitor screens. Three biological replicates were performed at each condition. This is a

Microsoft Excel workbook containing 5 spreadsheets.

Table S2. List of kinases predicted by KiR. This is a Microsoft Excel workbook containing 5

spreadsheets. Kinases predicted to inhibit or promote uptake/survival are in blue or red,

respectively.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4