Tracing the Development of Single Memory-Lineage B Cells in a Highly Defined Immune Response

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Summary

To study the development of B lymphocyte memory, we identified and isolated splenic B cells expressing a highly defined antibody variable region that constitutes a reproducible and predominant component of the memory antibody response to p-azophenylarsonate (Ars). Isolation was achieved during the primary immune response by surface staining and flow cytometry using a specific anti-idiotypic antibody called E4, which recognizes this canonical V region, encoded by one set of V gene segments. The isolated E4 + cells displayed all of the phenotypic characteristics of germinal center centrocytes, including a low level of surface Ig, a lack of surface IgD, a high level of receptor for peanut agglutinin, and expression of mutated antibody V genes.

E4 + B cells were first detected in the spleen 7–8 d after primary immunization, reached peak numbers from days 10–13, and waned by day 16. Surprisingly, at their peak, E4 + cells comprised only 40,000 of all splenocytes, and half of these failed to bind Ars. Using this number, we estimate the total number of Ars-specific memory-lineage cells in the spleen to be no more than 50,000 (0.1%) at any one time, and presumably far fewer that are committed to the memory pool. Chromosomal copies of rearranged V genes from single E4 + cells were amplified by nested PCR, and the amplified products were sequenced directly without cloning, using standardized conditions that disclose virtually no Taq polymerase errors. V gene sequence analyses of E4 + cells isolated from single mice confirmed their canonical nature and revealed that they were derived from few precursors. In the average mouse, the E4 + pool was derived from fewer than five canonical precursors. Somatic mutations were found within the V genes of almost all cell isolates. At day 13, a significant fraction of E4 + cells had mutations known to increase antibody affinity for Ars, suggesting they were products of at least one cycle of post-mutational antigen-driven selection. However, the lack of shared mutations by clonally related cells indicated that the selective expansion of mutant subclones typical of memory responses had not yet taken place. This was supported by the observation that half of the E4 + cells failed to bind Ars. Collectively, our results indicate that the memory compartment is a highly selected entity, even at relatively early stages of the primary immune response when somatic mutation and clonal selection are still in progress. If germinal centers are the source of memory B cells, our data suggest that B cell memory may be derived from only a small fraction of all germinal centers.

The development of memory B cells is strongly influenced by two antigen-dependent processes. One of these is a poorly defined somatic hypermutation mechanism that targets rearranged antibody variable region genes expressed by immune participants (1–12). The second is an intense selection process that recruits into the memory compartment rare B cell mutants expressing antibodies with improved affinity for antigen (reviewed in reference 13). Together, these processes appear to be necessary for the maturation of antibody affinity, which is observed in memory or T cell–dependent antibody responses. However, neither somatic mutagenesis nor the dynamics of cell selection leading to recruitment into the memory B cell compartment are understood in any significant detail.

Recent molecular studies have provided concrete evidence that the anatomic site of somatic hypermutation and affinity-based selection is the germinal center (GC) (14–20). GC B cells have been isolated by microdissection of frozen

Abbreviations used in this paper: Ars, p-azophenylarsonate; GC, germinal center; PNA, peanut agglutinin.
spleen sections, and by flow cytometry using labeled antigen and peanut agglutinin. In these studies, hapten-specific GC B cells were found to comprise ~1–2% of all splenocytes during the second week after immunization (18, 21). PCR-based sequencing studies of their expressed V genes indicated that they contained somatic mutations, sometimes including specific mutations associated with affinity improvements (17, 18). In contrast, few or no observable mutations have been seen in V genes of B cells isolated from other anatomic sites in secondary lymphoid tissues (14, 18).

The fraction of GC cells that will ultimately end up in the memory B cell compartment, however, is unknown and has been difficult to assess using model anti-hapten immune responses in which the primary response is dominated by clonotypes that constitute only a minor fraction of the memory response. For example, in both the anti-oxazolone and anti-NP immune responses, B cells expressing particular VH/VL pairs dominate early, but wane in frequency as the response progresses (7, 22). In the primary immune response to NP, V gene sequences derived from germinal center B cells revealed that only one of several germinal centers examined contained B cells with a diagnostic affinity-improving somatic mutation (14–16). This suggests that B cells from most germinal centers are not destined to enter the memory compartment in which mutant cells expressing high-affinity antibodies typically accumulate. In addition, phylogenetic analyses of hybridoma cells have indicated that progeny of relatively few precursor B cells dominate any given memory immune response (10–12, 23, 24). These observations suggest that relatively few of the developing clones in the primary immune response contribute to the pool of memory B cells.

To study the development of presumably rare memory-lineage B cells, we exploited the antibody response of A/J mice to p-azophenylarsonate (Ars), which has been extensively characterized (25, 26). Hybridoma sampling studies have revealed that ~50% of anti-Ars memory B cells express a dominant idiotype (IdCR), and the majority of these (~80%) express a defined “canonical” combination of V gene segments (VμIdCR, Dμβ1, Jμ2; and VδIdCR, Jκ1) (5, 8, 27–29), with two specific junctional residues that are necessary for Ars binding; serine at position 99 in the Vμ-Dμβ1 junction (30); and arginine at position 96 in the Vκ-Jκ1 junction (31) (see Fig. 1). Two variable junctional residues (at the Vμ-Dμ and the Dμ-Jμ junctions) are the only sources of variability in unmutated canonical V regions (Fig. 1). Results of hybridoma sampling studies have shown that canonical Ars-specific B cells are only a minority of all Ars-specific cells participating in the primary immune response, but they emerge to dominate the secondary or memory immune response, when they comprise ~40% of all Ars-specific cells (8). Their emergence appears to be the consequence of an affinity-driven selection process. Most canonical hybridomas isolated late in the primary immune response or in the memory response carry V gene somatic mutations that confer affinity improvements upon the antibody product. In addition, many of them carry specific recurrent somatic mutations that are known to enhance affinity for Ars (32). These include threonine to isoleucine and lysine to threonine changes at positions 58 and 59, respectively, in Vμ CDR2 (33). As such, the mutated canonical V region is the most reproducible component of the memory immune response.

A second advantage in studying memory development to Ars is the availability of a monoclonal anti-idiotype called E4, which recognizes canonical V regions almost exclusively in a hapten-inhibitable manner (34, 35). In this study, we used E4 to identify and isolate cells belonging to the memory lineage during the primary immune response. Vμ and Vκ genomic templates were amplified from single isolated cells and directly sequenced to preclude artifacts associated with PCR amplification of multiple homologous templates and with cloning of PCR products (36). The results indicate that, already at 13 d after a primary immunization, the potential pool of memory cells is small, heterogeneous with respect to antigen binding, and derived from very few precursors despite ongoing selection.

Materials and Methods

Immunization, Splenocyte Staining, Flow Cytometry and Cell Sorting Specific pathogen-free A/J mice (8–12 wk old) were immunized i.p. with Ars-KLH or KLH (100 μg) emulsified in incomplete Freund’s Adjuvant. 6–24 d later, erythrocyte-depleted splenocytes were stained with biotinylated E4 (10 μg/ml) followed by Streptavidin-PE (0.1 μg/ml; Becton Dickinson, San Jose, CA). Splenocytes were also stained with FITC-anti-Mac1 (M1/70, 5 μg/ml) and FITC-anti-IgD (JA12.5, 3 μg/ml) to identify and exclude macrophages, antigenically naive B cells, and cells with a propensity to stain nonspecifically. In some experiments, FITC-conjugated to peanut agglutinin (PNA, 1 μg/ml; Sigma) or anti-B220 (RA3-6B2, 10 μg/ml) was used to identify germinal center B cells. Conjugation of antibodies with biotin or FITC was based on described methods (37). During and after staining, cells were kept in an ice-chilled and sterile-filtered buffer (Staining Buffer) of calcium-free Dulbecco’s PBS (GIBCO BRL, Gaithersburg, MD) supplemented with heat-inactivated FCS (2%; HyClone, Logan, UT) and sodium azide (0.1%) before cell sorting to minimize surface receptor capping and internalization. To demonstrate the receptor-specific nature of E4 staining, control samples of splenocytes were pretreated with a competitive inhibitor consisting of Ars conjugated to BSA (ArsBSA: 200 μg/ml) for 15 min before E4 staining.

Stained splenocytes were analyzed first for size (forward scatter) and granularity (side scatter), then for color (PE and FITC) using a flow cytometer (EPICS 751; Coulter, Hialeah, FL) equipped with an argon-ion laser (λ = 488 nm), a neutral density filter, and Cicero Data Acquisition software (Cytomation, Fort Collins, CO). In general, 15,000 events in the two-color gate were analyzed for each sample. In some experiments, cells were sorted into an Eppendorf tube containing Dulbecco’s PBS supplemented with FCS (15%) and ArsBSA (200 μg/ml) to inhibit cell aggregation and to prolong B cell survival in vitro. Cells were analyzed at a rate of ~600 events/s and sorted at a rate of ~1,500 events/s, yielding about 3,500 collected cells in 2 h with an approximate collection efficiency of 50%.

Determining Cell Size. The diameters of larger and smaller splenocytes, and B-hybridoma cells were determined by photographing cell samples mixed with Latex Microspheres (Coulter
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E4 + cells. Similarly, the R5 gate was adjusted empirically

Results

Flow Cytometric Analysis of Memory-lineage B Cells during the Primary Anti-Ars Response. To identify and isolate potential memory-lineage B cells during their development, we exploited a monoclonal anti-idiotype (E4) that recognizes the canonical V region product of the dominant memory population of Ars-specific B cells (Fig. 1). Using flow cytometry, E4 + cells were analyzed in Ars-immunized mouse samples obtained 6, 8, 10, 13, 16, 20, and 24 d after immunization. Splenocytes were initially gated on the basis of size and granularity in order to separately analyze the larger, activated lymphocytes (Region 1 or R1) and the smaller, presumably resting lymphocytes (R2), while excluding macrophages and RBC’s (Fig. 2 a). R1 and R2 cells were then analyzed using PE-stained cells that were Mac1− and slgD− (R5). The R1 gate was determined empirically. Increasing the size of this gate to include additional larger cells only decreased the frequency of E4 + cells. Similarly, the R5 gate was adjusted empirically using the pattern of stained splenocytes from mice immu-

A similar B220 re-analysis of sorted E4 + cells revealed that 80% of the large E4 + cells and 61% of the small E4 + cells were B220+ (Fig. 2 b). Since most splenocytes are B220+ (e.g., 60% of total splenocytes stained with B220), this finding does not indicate a significant enrichment of B220+ cells in the sorted populations. However, it confirms that the majority of sorted cells were B220+ B cells, and correlates well with the percentage of sorted cells that were PNAhi.

Isolated E4 + Cells Carry Rearranged Canonical V\textsubscript{H}, V\textsubscript{K}, J\textsubscript{H}, and J\textsubscript{K} genes. To confirm that the cells identified by flow

Figure 1. The “canonical” configuration of V gene segments and junctions that encodes the dominant V region of the memory antibody response of A strain mice to p-azophenylarsonate. X and Y represent the only codons that vary among unmutated versions.
Figure 2. Flow cytometric analysis of E4+ splenocytes during the primary antibody response to Ars. (A) A representative flow cytometric analysis of splenocytes obtained from A/J mice 13 d after primary immunization with ArsKLH. Splenocytes were first assessed by size (forward scatter) and granularity (side scatter) to identify larger (R1, 13.8% of total splenocytes) and smaller (R2, 49.2%) cells for separate two-color analyses. Of particular interest in the two-color gates are the E4+ (PE), Mac1- and slgD- (FITC) cells of region 5 (R5). In this example, tk5 cells comprise 0.5% of the larger splenocytes of R1, and 0.04% of the smaller splenocytes of R2. To determine the background for E4 staining, a cell sample from a carrier (KLH)-only immunized mouse was simultaneously analyzed; the R5 percentage for this sample is shown as R5(KLH). E4+ cell frequencies adjusted for background were reported as tk5 - R5(KLH). (B) PNA and B220 staining of E4+ splenocytes. Sorted large E4+, Mac1- and IgD-negative splenocytes were stained with FITC-PNA or FITC-anti-B220 and reanalyzed by flow cytometry. In each diagram, the stained sorted sample (filled graph) is compared with a simultaneously stained, but unsorted sample (solid line) from the same mouse. Results pertaining to the bracketed regions of positively stained cells are tabulated below each flow cytometric diagram.

cytometry carried canonical V gene segments characteristic of anti-Ars memory B cells, we isolated E4+ cells from four mice immunized with Ars-KLH. Larger cells were obtained from 2 mice at day 13, and one mouse at day 10; smaller and larger cells were also obtained from one mouse at day 13. Single E4+ cells were visualized microscopically and manually aspirated into tubes using strict conditions and controls to prevent and assess for contamination. Chromosomal VH and VK genes from single E4+ cell isolates were individually amplified (~10^14-fold) in a nested PCR protocol specific for rearranged canonical V genes (38). Aliquots of PCR reactions were analyzed by agarose gel electrophoresis.

From these four mice, a high frequency of E4+ B cells carried rearranged VHidCR and/or VKidCR genes. 53/175 (30%) single cells yielded one or both canonical PCR products: 48 VHidCR, 34 VKidCR, 28 both VHidCR and VKidCR (Table 1). Furthermore, the amplified VHidCR and VKidCR products were ~650 and 780 bp long, respectively, which is consistent with rearrangements to ca-
noncanonical JH2 and JK1 gene segments. Only one PCR product was smaller than expected, consistent with a noncanonical VκIdCR-Jκ2 rearrangement (Table 1). No PCR products were obtained from 37 negative control microdrops in these experiments. It is not surprising that some of the cell isolates yielded no PCR products, given limitations on the efficiency of sorting such a small fraction of spleen cells.

### Table 1. Rearranged Canonical V Genes in Single E4+ B Cells

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mouse*</th>
<th>Single cell isolates</th>
<th>Single cell VH or VK product</th>
<th>VH product</th>
<th>VK product</th>
<th>Both VH and VK controls</th>
<th>No cell controls*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-day 10</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10^6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-day 13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-day 13</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-day 13</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*PCR results from single E4+ cells obtained from four mice on the indicated days following immunization. Cells that utilized rearranged VκIdCR and VκIdCR-Jκ2 genes gave single amplified bands 647 and 782 base pairs long, which are consistent with canonical VκIdCR-Jκ2 and VκIdCR-Jκ1 rearrangements, respectively.

*Numbers in this column indicate control microdrops without cells that were subjected to the same PCR tests. None of them yielded PCR products.

*One of these 10 products was a smaller size, consistent with a noncanonical VκIdCR-Jκ2 arrangement.

**Figure 3.** Emergence of E4+ splenocytes during the primary antibody response to Ars. (A) Timecourse demonstrating the peak emergence and duration of the subpopulation of large E4+ R5 cells (10 ± 1 μm in diameter). The percentages of these cells in the spleen were adjusted for background E4 staining and reported as R5-R5(R5(KLH)) (see Fig. 2 A). Mean values are shown (solid line). To quantify the Ars-specific fraction of E4+ cells, similar calculations were derived for samples pretreated with ArsBSA to block E4 staining. Mean values for these samples adjusted for background [RS(ArsBSA) − RS(ArsBSA/KLH)] are also represented (dashed line). SEMs for day 10 and day 13 are shown. (B) Timecourse for small E4+ R5 cells (6 ± 1 μm in diameter), using calculations and terminology described above.

**Few Splenic Memory Progenitors Two Weeks Post-immunization.** We can estimate the size of the hapten-specific memory cell compartment in the spleen based on flow cytometric analyses of E4-specific cells. At day 13, the size of the large E4+ cell compartment was ~0.30% × 10^9 (larger splenocytes) × (5 × 10^7) cells/spleen = ~5,000 large E4+ B cells/spleen. A similar calculation reveals an equivalent estimate for the number of small E4+ B cells/spleen (~0.05% × 50% × [5 × 10^7] = ~15,000). Considering that our flow cytometric analyses excluded ~25% of all B cells, we adjusted the estimate to ~40,000 total E4+ B cells/spleen. Finally, since E4 identifies ~40% of the memory response to Ars, as observed in serologic and hybridoma sampling studies (8, 26), the size of the complete Ars-specific memory cell compartment presumably does not exceed 100,000 cells/spleen. This is an upper-end estimate for actual memory cells because only half of the E4+ cells bound Ars, and an unknown fraction presumably bound Ars with reduced affinity due to somatic mutagenesis. Such cells are almost certainly destined for exclusion from the memory pool, based on hybridoma sampling studies (8, 26).

Since our sorting procedure excluded any cell that stained specifically with anti-IgD or anti-Mac1 or that might have stained nonspecifically (e.g., via Fc receptors), we were concerned that the low frequencies of canonical cells observed might be misleading. For example, our E4+ B cell frequencies were at least 10-fold less than the hapten-specific frequencies described by McHeyzer-Williams et al. (18) in the anti-NP response. To test our numerical conclusions, we estimated the number of cells in unfrac-
tionsated spleen from immunized mice that could possibly be expressing the canonical set of V gene segments. Total spleen cell suspensions were prepared 13 d following immunization with either Ars-KLH or KLH. PCR amplifications for rearranged canonical V\textsubscript{H}ldCR genes were performed on lysates derived from groups of 100 or 150 splenocytes (Table 2). From the ArsKLH and the KLH-immunized control mice, we found that \(\sim1/1,000\) and \(\sim1/850\) cells yielded a V\textsubscript{H} PCR product of the appropriate size for a V\textsubscript{H}ldCR-J\textsubscript{H}2 rearrangement, respectively. This is in good agreement with random hybridoma sampling studies of Manser et al. (45) who found that \(\sim1/350\) LPS-generated hybridomas expressed the V\textsubscript{H}ldCR gene with any J\textsubscript{H} gene segment. To further assess whether these V\textsubscript{H} gene PCR products were indeed canonical, we sequenced five products each from ArsKLH and KLH-only immunized mice. All 10 products encoded a J\textsubscript{H}2 gene segment; however, only 5 of 10 used the canonical V\textsubscript{H}ldCR gene segment, while the other five encoded identical V\textsubscript{H} gene segments similar to V\textsubscript{H}ldCR. Furthermore, 0 of 10 used the canonical D\textsubscript{H}16,1 gene segment, reinforcing our view that canonical B cells do not dominate the immune response because of precursor frequency considerations, and that the cells we are examining represent a highly selected subset that are preferentially expanded as the response progresses.

**E4\textsuperscript{+} B Cells Carry a Rearranged Canonical D Gene Segment, Have Critical Junctional Residues and Somatically Mutated V Genes.** PCR-amplified V gene products of single E4\textsuperscript{+} cells were directly sequenced using a method that was previously standardized with hybridomas (38). For the four mice described above, 78 of 82 PCR products (95%) obtained from 53 E4\textsuperscript{+} cells were entirely canonical (Table 3). Two exceptions (sample no. 3-26H and no. 4-$27H) contained a D gene segment other than the canonical D\textsubscript{H}16,1 (Fig. 5); a third PCR product did not contain the canonical arginine codon at the V\textsubscript{K}-J\textsubscript{K} junction (sample no. 2-22K has a V\textsubscript{K} junctional TGG codon encoding a tryptophan residue); a fourth product described in Table 1 was smaller than expected and consistent with a non-canonical V\textsubscript{K}ldCR-J\textsubscript{K}2 rearrangement. These data demonstrate that the large majority of the isolated E4\textsuperscript{+} cells producing at least one V\textsubscript{H} or V\textsubscript{K} amplification product were using entirely canonical V gene segments and junctions. We interpret this result to indicate that most of the E4\textsuperscript{+} cells visualized by flow cytometry were also expressing the canonical V region of the anti-Ars memory response.

By day 13, 37 of 41 E4\textsuperscript{+} cells (90%) had acquired point substitution mutations in their rearranged canonical V genes, while 10 of 12 (83%) cells isolated on day 10 had acquired mutations. The mutation frequency calculated from data on all cells was 255/30917 = 0.82%. This was \(\sim80\)-fold higher than the previously determined error frequency of our V gene amplification and sequencing method (1/7590 or 0.01%) (38), supporting the interpretation that the vast majority of observed mutations were not artifacts of amplification. The mutation frequency at day 13 for V\textsubscript{H} and V\textsubscript{K} genes was 212 mutations/22705 sequenced bases or 0.93%. The day 10 mutation frequency of 43/8212 or 0.52% was slightly lower than that of day 13.

The pattern and idiosyncrasies of the observed mutations was consistent with the interpretation that they are products of the physiologic V gene mutation mechanism. 57% of the mutations were transition substitutions, especially G to A, while 43% were transversions (random substitution mutations would favor transversions to transitions 2:1). These biases, which are typical of hybridoma V gene mutations (46, 47), were maintained when only non-coding mutations (i.e., silent and flanking regions), that are presumably free of selection pressures, were examined. High frequencies of somatic mutations were observed at positions 31 and 105 in canonical heavy chain genes, as is also true of V\textsubscript{H} genes expressed by sampled hybridomas (data not shown). Position 31 appears to be an intrinsic "hotspot" for the mutation mechanism as described by Betz et al. (47), and recent work from our laboratory has identified position 105 as intrinsically highly mutable, based on an analysis of nu-

**Table 2. Frequency of Canonical Heavy Chain Rearrangements in Unsorted Splenocytes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ars 1*</th>
<th>Ars2*</th>
<th>Ars3**</th>
<th>KLH15</th>
<th>KLH25</th>
<th>KLH35</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of groups tested</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of groups with an appropriate size PCR fragment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of PCR products/number of splenocytes</td>
<td>2/1600</td>
<td>1/1600</td>
<td>7/7200</td>
<td>3/1600</td>
<td>1/1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of canonical V\textsubscript{H}ldCR-J\textsubscript{H} genes/number of PCR products sequenced</td>
<td>0/5</td>
<td>0/5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Splenocytes prepared from three A/J mice immunized with Ars-KLH 13 d earlier.
* For these two mice, each tested group contained 150 unsorted splenocytes. Five PCR products from each mouse were sequenced to determine the frequency of canonical gene segment usage.
* Splenocytes prepared from three A/J mice immunized with KLH-only 13 d earlier.
* Each group containing 100 unsorted splenocytes were subjected to PCR amplification to detect B cells using rearranged V\textsubscript{H}ldCR-J\textsubscript{H}2 genes.
* The V\textsubscript{H}ldCR-J\textsubscript{H}2 rearrangement produces a single amplified fragment of \(\sim650\) base pairs.

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Table 3. Canonical V Gene Segment and Junction Usage by Single E4⁺ B Cells

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mouse*</th>
<th>V&lt;sub&gt;H&lt;/sub&gt;ΔCDR</th>
<th>Pos. 99 serine</th>
<th>J&lt;sub&gt;H&lt;/sub&gt;2</th>
<th>V&lt;sub&gt;K&lt;/sub&gt;ΔCDR</th>
<th>Pos. 99 arginine</th>
<th>J&lt;sub&gt;K&lt;/sub&gt;1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-day 13</td>
<td>8/8</td>
<td>8/8</td>
<td>8/8</td>
<td>8/8</td>
<td>9/9</td>
<td>9/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-day 13</td>
<td>15/15</td>
<td>15/15</td>
<td>14/15</td>
<td>15/15</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>6/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-day 13</td>
<td>14/14</td>
<td>14/14</td>
<td>13/14</td>
<td>14/14</td>
<td>9/9</td>
<td>9/9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>48/48</td>
<td>46/48</td>
<td>48/48</td>
<td>33/33</td>
<td>32/33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>1</sup>Sequence analysis of E4⁺ B cells from four mice (described in Fig. 2 and Table 1) revealed that V gene segment and junction usage in 78 of 81 V gene products derived from 53 cells was restricted to the specific canonical combination illustrated in Fig. 1.
<sup>2</sup>Numerator indicates number of canonical PCR products. Denominator indicates total number of PCR products.
<sup>3</sup>One cell that yielded a smaller than expected V<sub>K</sub> PCR product, consistent with a non-canonical V<sub>k</sub>ΔCDR-<sub>JK2</sub> rearrangement (see Table 1), was not sequenced and was excluded from this table.

Figure 4. V<sub>H</sub> CDR2 mutations in E4⁺ B cells. (A) Nucleotide sequences of V<sub>H</sub> CDR2 regions from large E4⁺ B cells obtained 10 and 13 d after immunization revealed that these junctions were limited in diversity, suggesting common encoded sequence (5). Mutations resulting in amino acid changes (replacement mutations) are in bold. The boxed nucleotides produce amino acid changes (position 58 ACT to ATT, Thr to Ile; and position 59 AAG to ACG, Lys to Thr) that are known to increase binding affinity for Ars (32). Sample designations are consistent with other figures and tables (e.g., 1-4H: mouse no. 1, sample no. 4, H chain). (B) Nucleotide sequences of V<sub>k</sub> CDR2 regions from small and large E4⁺ B cells obtained from the same mouse, 13 d post-immunization. Parameters used to describe these samples and their sequences are the same as in the previous figure. All large and small cells from this mouse were apparently derived from the same germline precursor, based on junctional sequences in V<sub>H</sub> CDR3 (see Fig. 5).
Discussion

E4+ B Cells Belong to Memory Lineages. Our interpretation that E4+ splenocytes belong to lineages destined for the memory compartment is based in part on previous serologic and hybridoma sampling studies. A large fraction of Ars-specific hybridomas isolated during the secondary (memory) immune response express mutated versions of a highly defined canonical set of V gene segments. In this study, more than 90% of primary-response E4+ cells that were subjected to sequencing analysis carried V genes with all of the canonical structural hallmarks including: (a) a specific set of 5 V gene segments; (b) codons for two specific junctional residues; (c) a uniform Vκ CDR3 length; and (d) acquisition of point mutations. In addition, large E4+ cells had a high frequency of specific affinity-improving mutations. The kinetics of emergence of this population of cells carrying mutated antibody V genes was also consistent with the kinetics of germinal center development and with results of other investigators (18, 21), who have shown that somatic hypermutation appears to be confined to PNAhi germinal center B cells. E4+ cells also displayed other phenotypic characteristics of germinal center centrocytes, including a low level of surface Ig (40, 43, 48), an absence of surface IgD (43, 49, 50), a high level of receptors for PNA (39-44), and enrichment among larger cells (10 μm in diameter). We have also recently observed that E4+ cells do not secrete antibody, as determined using an ELISPOT assay (data not shown). The basis of the bimodal staining with B220 is unknown. Presumably the stained cells do not include plasma cells which are PNAhi, germinal center B cells. 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cells, whereas the secondary immune response to NP is dominated by kappa-expressing B cells (22). Further, relatively few lineages of NP-specific B cells dominate the secondary immune response in a given animal (23). This indicates that the lambda-expressing clonotypes are superseded by minor kappa-bearing populations that are preferentially recruited and expanded into the memory pool. Thus, the early domination by lambda-bearing B cells could be due to an inordinately high frequency of precursor cells.

We calculated that the E4 + cells isolated 13 d after immunization originated from only 1 to 11 clonal precursors, and thus the complete Ars-specific memory cell compartment was probably derived from 1 to 28 precursors. This indicates that clone sizes varied from ~4,000 to ~40,000 cells at day 13. This precursor estimate is in agreement with the observation, based on hybridoma sampling studies, that late primary or secondary immune responses are generally dominated by relatively few clones of B cells (10-12, 23, 24). However, it is substantially lower than the 300–500 germinal centers estimated to develop in response to the hapten NP (21). Since germinal centers are the sites of memory B cell development (16, 18-20, 43, 44, 54), our estimate suggests one of two possibilities to reconcile these differences: only a small minority of germinal centers ultimately contribute to the memory B cell repertoire, or a small number of clonal precursors populate numerous germinal centers in a given animal.

E4 + Cells Are Phenotypically Diverse and Represent an Intermediate Stage in Memory Development. E4 + B cells sampled 13 d after Ars immunization manifested an intermediate degree of hypermutation and clonal expansion when compared with their secondary response counterparts. Anti-Ars memory B cells typically reveal a frequency of V gene mutations in the range of 2-8% when sampled after secondary exposure to antigen (reviewed in 13, 51). Furthermore, silent or noncoding mutations are often shared by memory B cells in a way that reveals the genealogy of their clonal development (10, 11). In contrast, the frequency of somatic mutations in our E4-specific cells was only ~0.5-1.0%. While some replacement mutations and, in particular, affinity-improving mutations, were shared, there was no sharing of silent mutations among clonally related members. Thus, the E4 + cells had apparently sustained an intermediate degree of somatic mutagenesis and selection by 13 d after immunization.

Evidence for ongoing selection was also supported by heterogeneity within the E4 + population. We found that the presence of ArsBSA in the staining buffer reduced the frequency of cells that stained with E4 by ~50%. This suggests that many of the canonical cells had acquired V gene mutations that diminished or abolished the capacity of their antibody products to bind Ars, and that antigen-based selection was in progress at the time of cell sampling. We infer that these presumed deleterious somatic mutations were recently acquired because antigen binding loss variants are short-lived without the benefit of antigen-based selection (8, 52, 53, 55).

Evidence for heterogeneity could also be seen between large and small E4 + cells. Clonally related E4 + cells from one mouse were found among both large and small cells. Interestingly, the small cells had VJH CDR2 and CDR3 that were more heavily mutated than those of the large cells, yet they were nearly devoid of the specific mutations associated with affinity improvements (for binding to Ars) and positive selection. Perhaps the small E4 + cells, without the benefit of affinity-improving mutations, were undergoing apoptosis, an early sign of which is a contraction in cell volume (56).

It is possible that some of the E4 + cells were mutating their antibody V genes at the time of isolation. Of those that produced amplified canonical gene products (derived from chromosomal DNA), ~50% yielded only a heavy or a light chain product. In contrast, the concordance between amplified heavy and light chain gene products was ~90% for hybridoma cells (38). One possible explanation for this difference is that some of the E4 + cells may have sustained cuts within their V gene templates, perhaps due to the process of somatic mutagenesis. Any interruption between primer sites would preclude successful amplification. Jacob et al. (16) observed a high frequency of PCR hybrid products derived from groups of sampled germinal center cells and also suggested that this might be an indication of DNA modification. DNA nicking has been proposed to be necessary in several models of V gene hypermutation, although no direct evidence for this has been reported to date (51).

Finally, the 255 observed mutations included six ambiguous bases where signals were seen in two lanes of sequencing ladders. Five of the six mutations were transition substitution mutations, which is consistent with the pattern of somatic hypermutation. While this frequency is close to the expected frequency of Taq polymerase errors (~4 Taq errors/30917 sequenced bases), four of the five ambiguous transition mutations were G to A (three) or C to T (one), while Taq Polymerase misincorporations tend to be A to G or T to C transitions (57-59). Thus, the observed single base differences between complementary DNA strands of the same V gene product could be the result of newly acquired point mutations.

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