Dendritic transport of tick-borne flavivirus RNA by neuronal granules affects development of neurological disease

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Neurological diseases caused by encephalitic flaviviruses are severe and associated with high levels of mortality. However, little is known about the detailed mechanisms of viral replication and pathogenicity in the brain. Previously, we reported that the genomic RNA of tick-borne encephalitis virus (TBEV), a member of the genus *Flavivirus*, is transported and replicated in the dendrites of neurons. In the present study, we analyzed the transport mechanism of the viral genome to dendrites. We identified specific sequences of the 5′ untranslated region of TBEV genomic RNA that act as a *cis*-acting element for RNA transport. Mutated TBEV with impaired RNA transport in dendrites caused a reduction in neurological symptoms in infected mice. We show that neuronal granules, which regulate the transport and local translation of dendritic mRNAs, are involved in TBEV genomic RNA transport. TBEV genomic RNA bound an RNA-binding protein of neuronal granules and disturbed the transport of dendritic mRNAs. These results demonstrated a neuropathogenic virus hijacking the neuronal granule system for the transport of viral genomic RNA in dendrites, resulting in severe neurological disease.

tick-borne encephalitis virus | flavivirus | neuropathogenicity | neuronal granule | dendritic mRNA

Flavivirus is a genus in the family *Flaviviridae*, and has a single-stranded RNA with positive polarity serving as an mRNA for translation (1). The genome encodes one polyprotein, which is posttranslationally cleaved into three structural and seven nonstructural (NS) proteins within a single long coding sequence (CDS). The structural and NS proteins form a virus particle and a viral replication complex, respectively. The 5′ and 3′ untranslated regions (UTRs) are involved in the stability, translation, and replication of the genomic RNA (2, 3). The genus *Flavivirus* contains more than 70 members, many of which are arthropod-borne pathogens distributed all over the world (4). Many outbreaks have been reported, and flaviviruses have been attracting global attention as the cause of emerging or reemerging infectious diseases (5, 6).

Some pathogenic flaviviruses, such as Japanese encephalitis virus, West Nile virus (WNV), and tick-borne encephalitis virus (TBEV), are neurotropic and cause encephalitic disease (4). The encephalitic flaviviruses histologically induce typical nonsuppurative encephalitis (4, 7). However, differences in neurological symptoms were observed in the flaviviruses, and neurological manifestations such as photophobia, irritability, and sleep disorders are characteristically observed following TBEV infection (8, 9). These differences in symptoms have suggested that the pathogenic mechanism in neurons may differ in the encephalitic flaviviruses. Previously, we reported that the genomic RNA of TBEV was specifically transported from the cell body to dendrites and replicated locally in dendrites in primary cultures of mouse neurons (10). Genomic RNA transport and local replication are thought to be important in the pathogenesis of neurological diseases that are a result of TBEV infection, although their detailed mechanisms are not well-understood.

It has been reported that mRNAs are transported and locally translated in neuronal dendrites (11). Specific mRNAs form a complex, called a neuronal granule, with several RNA-binding proteins (RBPs), and are transported along microtubules to dendrites in a kinesin-dependent manner. Transport of the mRNA and local translation in neuronal dendrites has been shown to be important for neurogenesis and the plasticity of the synaptic communication (12, 13). Furthermore, disruption of the neuronal granule system has been shown to be involved in mental retardation and neurodegenerative diseases, such as fragile X syndrome (14), autism spectrum disorder (15), and Alzheimer's disease (16). We hypothesized that the genomic RNA of TBEV is also transported by neuronal granules, resulting in the severe neurological symptoms caused by TBEV infection.

In this study, we investigated the mechanism of TBEV genomic RNA transport to the dendrites in neurons. We identified a *cis*-acting element in the viral genomic RNA important for transport. Genomic RNA transport contributed to the development of neurological symptoms following TBEV infection. TBEV genomic RNA interacted with an RBP of neuronal granules and disturbed transport dendritic mRNAs using neuronal granules for dendritic transport.

Results

5′ UTR of TBEV Is a *cis*-Acting Element Important for RNA Transport to Neurites. PC12 cells differentiate into neuronal phenotypes and form neurites in the presence of neuronal growth factors. To examine whether the genomic RNA of TBEV is transported to

Significance

Flaviviruses represent a significant threat to public health worldwide, and several cause severe neurological disease in humans and animals. However, no specific treatment has been developed, due to the lack of information about their detailed pathogenic mechanisms. In the current study, we reveal that the transport of viral RNA of tick-borne flavivirus in neuronal dendrites is involved in the development of neurological disease. The virus hijacked the transport system of host mRNA in dendrites, which is important for neuronal functions such as neurogenesis and the plasticity of the synaptic communication. Our finding of this unique virus–host interaction will promote the study of neurodegenerative diseases caused by disruption of dendritic mRNA transport and the development of their treatment.

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neurites in differentiated PC12 cells, as observed in primary neurons (10, 17), PC12 cells were infected with TBEV. Accumulations of viral antigen and fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) signal for TBEV genomic RNA were observed in neurites (Fig. S1), as seen in the dendrites of primary neurons.

To analyze the RNA region required for transport, plasmids expressing RNA for a luciferase CDS fused with partial sequences of TBEV were constructed (Fig. 1*A*). Expressed RNA with TBEV UTRs was detected in neurites but RNAs with any of the CDSs for the viral proteins were not (Fig. 1 *B* and *C*), indicating that the UTRs of TBEV, but not viral proteins, were important for the transport of mRNA to neurites.

In our previous study, we observed the viral antigen accumulations in dendrites of cells infected with tick-borne flaviviruses but not in those infected with mosquito-borne WNV (10). We hypothesized that this difference could be caused by differences in the UTRs, and constructed plasmids expressing luciferase mRNA with the UTRs of TBEV or WNV (Fig. 1*D*). The mRNAs expressed with the 5′ UTR of TBEV were localized to neurites, while those with the 5′ UTR of WNV were not, regardless of the 3′ UTR sequences (Fig. 1 *E* and *F*). Complete deletion of the 3′ UTR drastically reduced the expression of the RNAs in the reporter assay, indicating that the 3′ UTR was involved in the stability of the RNAs (Fig. S2*A*). These data suggest that the 5′ UTR of TBEV contains a motif required for the transport of mRNA to neurites.

There are two stem-loop (SL) structures (SL-1, nucleotides 4 to 103; SL-2, nucleotides 107 to 128) predicted in the 5′ UTR of TBEV (18) (Fig. 2*A* and Fig. S3). A plasmid with a deletion of SL-1 or SL-2 in the 5′ UTR was constructed to analyze the importance of these structures in transport (Fig. 2*A*). The mRNA with deletion of SL-1 was still detected in the neurites, while deletion of SL-2 abolished the localization (Fig. 2 *B* and *C*). These data indicated that the SL-2 region of TBEV 5′ UTR is required for mRNA transport.

To further analyze the role of SL-2, we introduced mutations into the SL-2 region of pCMV-Luc (5′ TBEV/3′ TBEV). The mutations of SL-2 loop G-U and C-U were designed without affecting formation of the stem structure. The mutations of the SL-2 stem were designed to dissociate the stem structure (Fig. 2*D*). After transfection of PC12 cells, the mutation of SL-2 loop G-U or SL-2 stem slightly decreased the signals in the neurites. However, the mRNAs with the mutation were still detected in the neurites, and showed no significant difference from those of TBEV wild type (WT). The mRNAs with the SL-2 loop C-U mutation were not detected in the neurites completely (Fig. 2 *E* and *F*). These indicated that C at nucleotide position 120 in SL-2 is the most important in the transport of mRNA to neurites.

Mutation-Impeding Genome Transport to Dendrites Attenuated the Neurological Symptoms of TBEV. To construct a mutant TBEV lacking the ability to transport the genome in dendrites, a C-to-U mutation at nucleotide position 120 in the 5′ UTR was introduced into the infectious clone of TBEV. The recovered mutant virus (SL-2 loop C-U) grew relatively more slowly until 24 h postinfection (h.p.i.), but caught up with that of TBEV WT by 48 h.p.i. in primary cultures of mouse neurons (Fig. S4). Viral genomic RNA was detected in dendrites infected with TBEV WT, but the signal in dendrites was weak in SL-2 loop C-U–infected cells (Fig. 3*A*). The amount of viral antigen accumulation in the dendrites also decreased significantly in cells infected with SL-2 loop C-U (Fig. 3 *A* and *B*), indicating that the C-U mutation of the SL-2 loop significantly decreased the transport of genomic RNA to dendrites.

To evaluate the effects of TBEV genome transport on pathogenesis in mice, C57BL/6 mice were inoculated with TBEV WT or SL-2 loop C-U intracerebrally. No differences in morbidity or mortality were observed between the two groups (Fig. 3*C*).

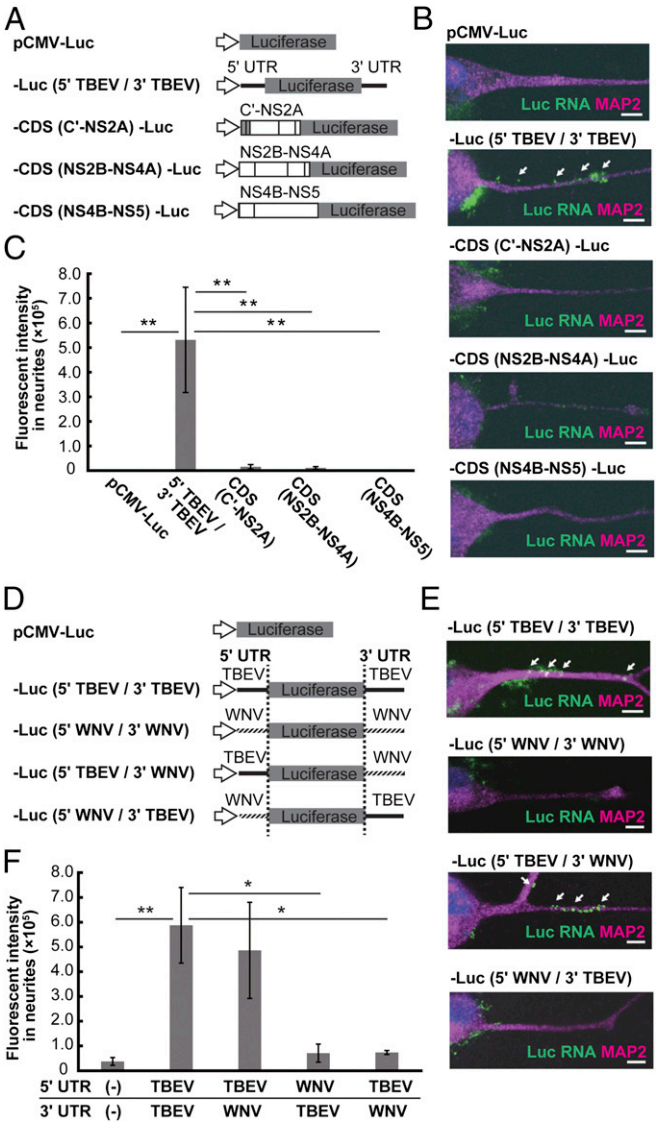

Fig. 1. The 5′ untranslated region of tick-borne encephalitis virus functions as a signal of RNA transport to the neurites of PC12 cells. Differentiated PC12 cells were transfected with plasmids expressing the RNA of luciferase with TBEV sequences (*A*–*C*) or TBEV/WNV UTRs (*D*–*F*). Following fixation, the cells were hybridized with a fluorescent RNA probe for the *luciferase* gene (green), and stained with DAPI (blue) and antibodies against microtubule-associated protein 2 (MAP2; magenta). Fluorescence in situ hybridization signal in the neurites was analyzed from *Z*-stack images from five independent microscopic fields. (*A*) A coding sequence for *luciferase* (gray rectangles) was cloned with or without the partial sequence for TBEV replicon RNA. (*B*, *C*, *E*, and *F*) Fluorescent images (*B* and *E*) and fluorescence intensity (*C* and *F*) in PC12 neurites. (*D*) A CDS for luciferase was cloned with or without the 5′ and 3′ UTRs of TBEV (black lines) and WNV (striped lines). (Scale bars, 5 μm.) White arrows indicate the FISH signal for luciferase RNA in the neurites. Error bars represent SEM; $^{**}P < 0.02$ and $^{*}P < 0.05$.

Slightly prolonged survival time [TBEV WT, 7.9 ± 0.46 d postinfection (d.p.i.); SL-2 loop C-U, 8.9 ± 0.68 d.p.i.; $P < 0.02$] was observed in the mice infected with SL-2 loop C-U. The number of mice showing severe neurological symptoms was reduced (TBEV WT, 70%; SL-2 loop C-U, 30%), and the level of cerebellar ataxia of infected mice was scored and found to be significantly lower from 5 to 7 d.p.i. in mice infected with SL-2 loop C-U (Fig. 3*D*). The virus titer was lower in the brain infected with SL-2 loop C-U at 3 d.p.i., but caught up with TBEV WT at

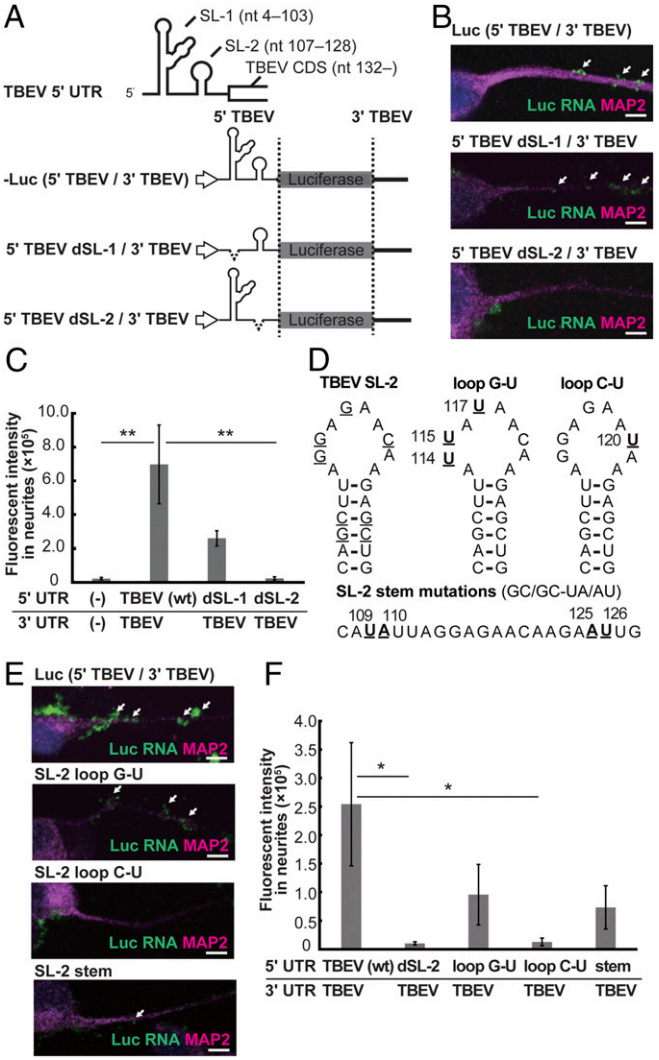

Fig. 2. Analysis of the roles of the stem-loop structure of the TBEV 5′ UTR in genome transport. Differentiated PC12 cells were transfected with plasmids expressing the mRNA of luciferase with the UTRs of TBEV with deletion (*A*–*C*) or mutation (*D*–*F*) of the 5′ UTR. Following fixation, the cells were hybridized with a fluorescent RNA probe for the *luciferase* gene (green), and stained with DAPI (blue) and antibodies against MAP2 protein (magenta). FISH signal in the neurites was analyzed from *Z*-stack images from five independent microscopic fields. (*A*) Schematic diagram of the predicted RNA secondary structure (*Upper*) and the constructs expressing mRNA with a deletion (*Lower*) are shown. The 5′ UTR has a predicted branched stem-loop structure (SL-1) and single-SL structure (SL-2). The SL-1 or SL-2 regions were deleted in pCMV-Luc (5′ TBEV/3′ TBEV). (*B*, *C*, *E*, and *F*) Fluorescent images (*B* and *E*) and fluorescence intensity (*C* and *F*) in PC12 neurites. (*D*) Schematic diagrams of the sequence and RNA secondary structure of TBEV SL-2 and the constructs used to analyze the role of SL-2 in transport. G-to-U and C-to-U in the loop, or four mutations in the stem, were introduced into pCMV (5′ TBEV/3′ TBEV). (Scale bars, 5 μm.) White arrows indicate the FISH signal for luciferase RNA in neurites. Error bars represent SEM; $^{**}P < 0.02$ and $^{*}P < 0.05$.

6 d.p.i. (Fig. 3*E*). No reversion or compensatory mutation in the 5′ UTR was found in the mice infected with SL-2 loop C-U. Thus, preventing the transport of the genome did not affect the lethality after viral multiplication, but attenuated the neurological symptoms of TBEV in mice.

Role of Neuronal Granules in Viral Genome Transport. Neuronal granules have been shown to regulate the transport of mRNAs and local protein translation in neuronal dendrites (11). We hypothesized that neuronal granules are involved in the transport of TBEV genomic RNA and local viral replication. Colocalization of viral proteins and RNA to RBPs in neuronal granules, such as fragile X mental retardation protein (FMRP), RNA granule protein 105 (RNG105), and Staufen, was analyzed in primary neurons infected with TBEV WT or SL-2 loop C-U. Viral antigen accumulation, viral RNA, and RBPs were detected in the same neurites infected with TBEV WT (Fig. 4 and Figs. S5 and S6), suggesting that TBEV genomic RNA was transported via the neuronal granule. However, their detailed localizations varied. FMRP colocalized with viral antigen and was recruited to the site of the viral antigen in the dendrites. Signals of FMRP in the neurites increased significantly in neurons infected with TBEV WT (Fig. 4 and Fig. S5). In contrast, RNG105 surrounded the accumulation of viral antigen but did not completely colocalize with the viral protein (Fig. 4 and Fig. S5).

To further analyze the interaction of the neuronal granule RBPs and viral genomic RNA, binding of FMRP to the genomic RNA of TBEV was examined. In vitro synthesized RNAs of the full-length TBEV genome were mixed with Flag-tagged FMRP expressed in human embryonic kidney 293T cells. RNAs that coimmunoprecipitated with FMRP were detected by reverse transcription (RT-)PCR. RNAs for TBEV WT coimmunoprecipitated with FMRP, while

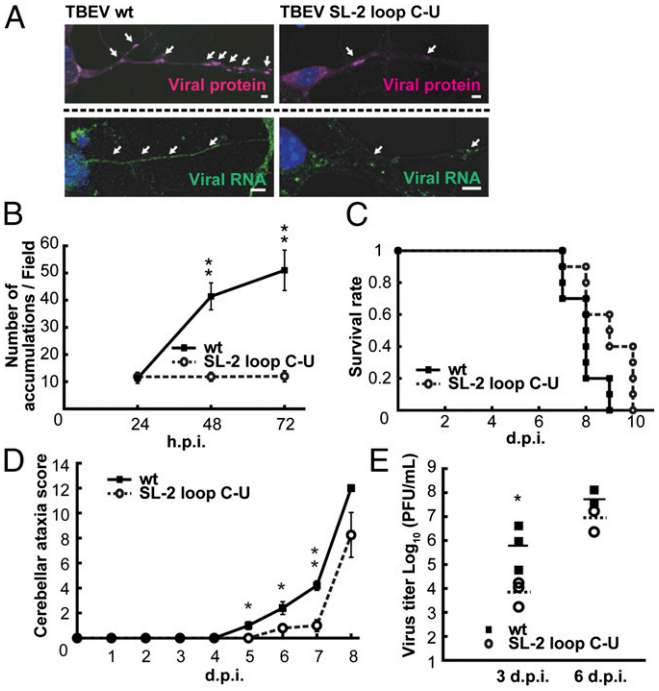

Fig. 3. Mutation impeding genome transport to dendrites attenuated the neurological symptoms caused by TBEV infection. (*A* and *B*) Primary mouse neurons were infected with TBEV wild type (black squares with continuous lines) or SL-2 loop C-U (white circles with broken lines) at a multiplicity of infection (MOI) of 0.1. (*A*) The cells were fixed at 48 h.p.i. and the viral proteins and viral genomic RNAs were stained by indirect immunofluorescence assay (*Upper*; magenta) and FISH (*Lower*; green), respectively. (Scale bars, 5 μm.) White arrows indicate viral antigen accumulation or the viral genome in dendrites. (*B*) Viral antigen accumulation was counted at 24, 48, or 72 h.p.i. in five independent microscopic fields. (*C*–*E*) Five-week-old male C57BL/6 mice were inoculated with 100 plaque-forming units (PFUs) of TBEV WT or SL-2 loop C-U intracerebrally. (*C*) The Kaplan–Meier survival estimate was calculated ($n = 10$). (*D*) The neurological score of the mice ($n = 5$) was examined until 8 d.p.i. (*E*) The mice were killed at 3 or 6 d.p.i. ($n = 3$), and the viral titer in the brain was analyzed. Continuous and broken lines indicate the average of viral titer in the brain infected with TBEV WT and SL-2 loop C-U, respectively. Error bars represent SEM; $^{**}P < 0.02$ and $^{*}P < 0.05$.

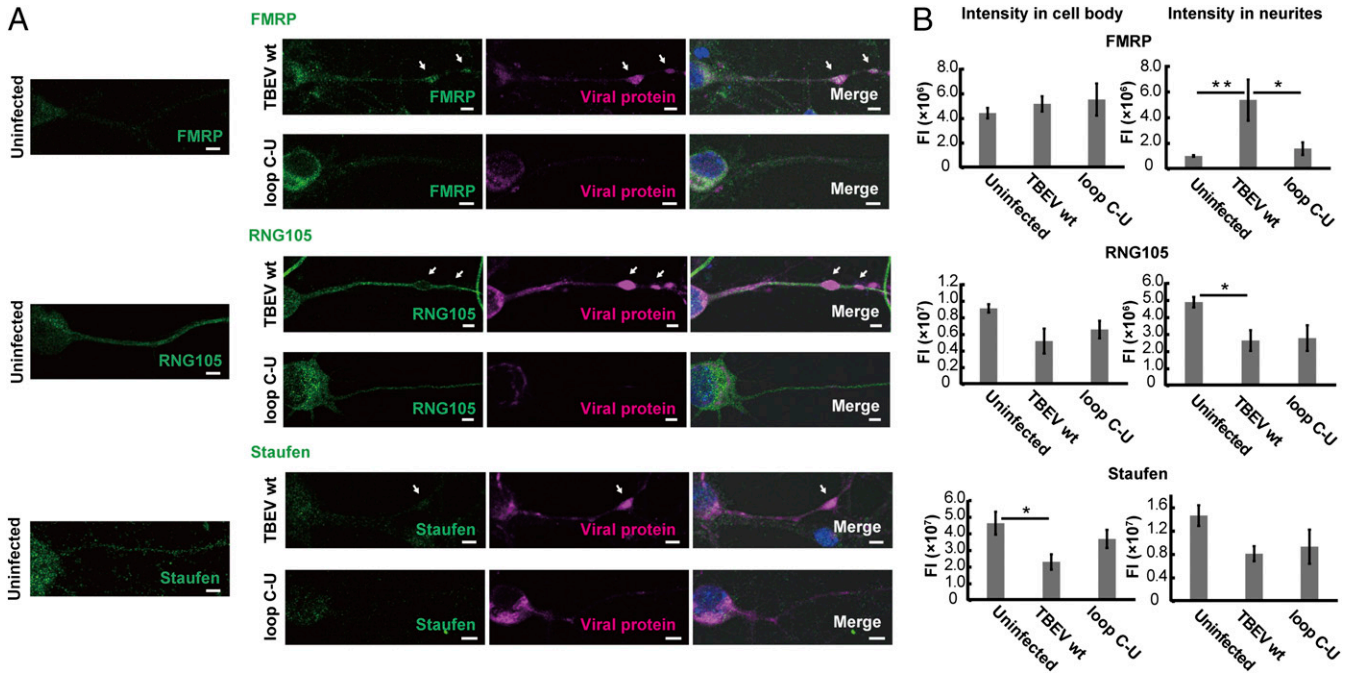

Fig. 4. Localization of the RNA-binding proteins of a neuronal granule in a neuron infected with TBEV. Primary mouse neurons were uninfected or infected with TBEV WT or SL-2 loop C-U at an MOI of 0.1. The cells were fixed at 48 h.p.i. and stained with antibodies against fragile X mental retardation protein, RNA granule protein 105, or Staufen (green), and antibodies against viral proteins (magenta). (*A*) Fluorescent images of the neurons. (*B*) The signals of RBPs in the cell body or neurites were analyzed in *Z*-stack images of five microscopic fields. FI, fluorescence intensity. Error bars represent SEM; $^{**}P < 0.02$ and $^{*}P < 0.05$.

RNAs with C-to-U mutation at nucleotide 120 in the SL-2 region showed decreased binding (Fig. 5*A*). A missense mutation (I304N) was identified in the second K homology domain of the *FMRP* gene of a fragile X syndrome patient and shown to be involved in altered RNA binding and transport (19, 20). This mutation was found to drastically reduce the binding of FMRP to TBEV genomic RNA (Fig. 5*B*). These results indicated that the SL-2 region of the TBEV 5′ UTR, important for transport, is also critical for binding to an RBP of a neuronal granule, FMRP. It was also shown that the transported TBEV genomic RNA altered the distribution of bound FMRP in neuronal granules.

To evaluate the effect of TBEV genome transport on neuronal function, the distribution and expression of host mRNAs for Arc, brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), and Ca^{2+}/calmodulin-dependent protein kinase II α (CaMKIIα) were examined in primary neurons infected with TBEV WT or SL-2 loop C-U. The mRNA signals in dendrites, especially the mRNA of BDNF, decreased significantly in neurons infected with TBEV WT but not in those infected with SL-2 loop C-U (Fig. 6). The expression of the mRNAs was reduced more by infection of TBEV WT than SL-2 loop C-U (Fig. S7). These results indicate that the transport of TBEV genomic RNA disturbed that of host dendritic mRNAs.

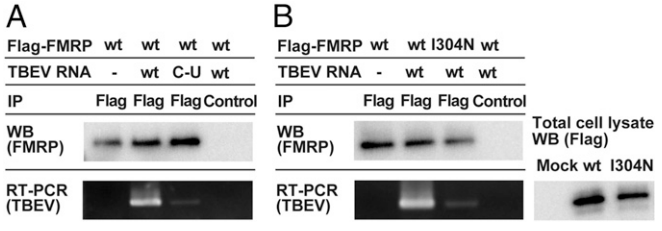

Fig. 5. Interaction between the RBP of a neuronal granule and the genomic RNA of TBEV. Full-length RNAs of TBEV WT or SL-2 loop C-U (*A*) was mixed with cell lysate expressing Flag-FMRP WT or I304N (*B*). The mixture was immunoprecipitated (IP) with beads with anti-Flag antibody (Flag) or beads only (Control), and precipitated protein and RNA were detected by Western blotting (WB) and RT-PCR, respectively. (*B*, *Right*) Expression of the FMRP WT or I304N in total cell lysate.

Discussion

The transport of TBEV genomic RNA occurred independent of viral proteins and differed from that of other neurotropic viruses. Dendritic and axonal transport of viral genomes has been reported in several neurotropic DNA and RNA viruses (21). The genomic DNA of herpes simplex virus types 1 and 2 (*Herpesviridae*) undergoes anterograde or retrograde transport through the binding of viral proteins with host motor proteins (22). Virions of poliovirus (*Picornaviridae*) are known to be incorporated into synaptic vesicles during anterograde transport (23). Complexes of nucleoprotein and genomic RNA of rabies virus (*Rhabdoviridae*) are transferred via retrograde processes (24). The genomes of these viruses require their viral proteins for transport, while our data showed that the transport of TBEV genomic RNA in dendrites occurs independent of the viral proteins and is regulated by the UTR of the genomic RNA itself (Figs. 1 and 2). Besides, the viral genome of reported neurotropic viruses usually replicated in the neuronal cell body. However, transported TBEV genomes replicate locally in the dendrites, which has not been reported in other neurotropic viruses.

The 5′ UTR of TBEV was demonstrated to have a function in RNA transport in addition to protein translation and genome replication. The UTRs of flaviviruses are important for many functions in viral multiplication. The complementary sequences in the 5′ and 3′ UTRs cyclize the viral genome, which is essential for viral genome replication (2, 3, 18). SL-1 in the 5′ UTR is thought to recruit nonstructural protein 5 (NS5) for genome replication (3, 25). The loop C-U mutation introduced into the recombinant TBEV overlapped with the cyclization sequences and therefore may affect genome cyclization, resulting in delayed viral growth and decreased neurological symptoms (Fig. 3 *D* and *E* and Fig.

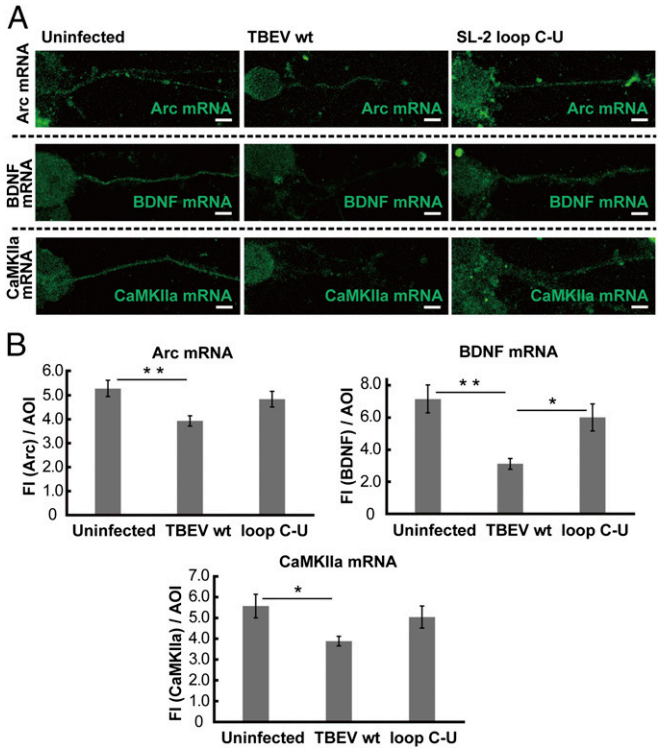

Fig. 6. TBEV infection and transport of viral RNA disrupted the localization of dendritic mRNAs. Primary mouse neurons were infected with TBEV WT or SL-2 loop C-U at an MOI of 0.1. (*A*) The cells were fixed at 48 h.p.i., and mRNA for Arc, brain-derived neurotropic factor, or Ca^{2+}/calmodulin-dependent protein kinase II α was stained by FISH (green). (Scale bars, 5 μm.) (*B*) Fluorescent signal of the mRNA for Arc, BDNF, or CaMKIIα in dendrites was measured in 10 areas of interest (AOIs). Error bars represent SEM; $^{**}P < 0.02$ and $^{*}P < 0.05$.

S4). However, RNA with the TBEV 5′ UTR and WNV 3′ UTR, which could not cyclize the RNA, was efficiently transported to the neurite, indicating that transport was independent of the TBEV 3′ UTR and genome cyclization (Fig. 1 *D*–*F*). In addition, reporter assays revealed that, regardless of the transport of the genome, the mutations introduced into the 5′ UTR did not affect RNA stability or translation efficiency, but the deletion of the 3′ UTR drastically reduced stability (Fig. S2). These results suggest that genome transport via the SL-2 region is independent of other known functions of the 5′ UTR and that the TBEV 3′ UTR was not directly involved in the transport, although it stabilized the RNA.

SL-2 in the 5′ UTR of TBEV genomic RNA was shown to be a unique viral *cis*-acting element important for the transport of mRNA. Mutant RNA that cannot form the stem structure (SL-2 stem) was still transported to dendrites (Fig. 2 *D*–*F*). The mutation in the SL-2 loop region that reduced transport also resulted in reduced binding to an RBP in neuronal granules (Fig. 5*A*). These results indicated that the transport signal may be regulated by the intact sequence of the SL-2 region via the binding to RBPs. Several studies have reported signals of transport and recognition by an RBP(s) of some dendritic mRNAs, such as CaMKIIα (26), postsynaptic density protein 95 (PSD-95) (27), and BDNF (28). However, the consensus sequence or motif for mRNA transport has not been elucidated, and the SL-2 sequence does not contain sequences similar to known transport signals. The transport of TBEV genomic RNA reduced the transport of dendritic mRNA, especially BDNF mRNA (Fig. 6). The genomic RNA of TBEV and dendritic mRNA may share competing RNA sequences or structures required for transport. This information regarding the viral signal element will contribute to further understanding of the transport mechanism of dendritic mRNA, which is important for neuronal functions.

RBPs, such as FMRP (14, 29), Staufen (12), and RNG105 (13), are primary components of the neuronal granule and regulate RNA transport and local translation. Our data showed that FMRP interacted with the genomic RNA of TBEV and accumulated at the site of local TBEV replication (Figs. 4 and 5 and Figs. S5 and S6), while Staufen and RNG105 did not. It is possible that this unusual localization of FMRP disrupted the local translation of host dendritic mRNAs bound to FMRP in dendrites, resulting in the development of neurological disease.

The neurological symptoms of TBEV in mice were exacerbated by genome transport and local replication in dendrites. The defect of the transport of the TBEV genomic RNA did not affect the lethality after viral encephalitis, but was involved in the attenuation of neurological symptoms (Fig. 3). Neurological symptoms caused by the RNA transport might be somehow independent of the lethality of encephalitis. Recent studies have shown that disruption of the transport and local translation of dendritic mRNAs is involved in many neurodegenerative disorders. In fragile X syndrome, mutations and silencing of the *FMRP* gene caused dysregulation of the local translation of dendritic mRNAs such as the metabotropic glutamate receptor and CaMKIIα, resulting in abnormalities of morphology and dendritic function (14, 29). BDNF mRNA and its signaling pathway in dendrites have been shown to be involved in Alzheimer's disease (30). In this study, we showed that TBEV infection caused the unusual localization of FMRP in dendrites (Fig. 4) and that TBEV genomic RNA transport reduced the expression and transport of host dendritic mRNAs by neuronal granules (Fig. 6 and Fig. S7). It was reported that neuronal RNA granules and FMRP were involved in mRNA stability (31). It is possible that TBEV genomic RNA disturbed the binding of FMRP to dendritic mRNAs, and that the unbound RNAs were not transported by neuronal granules, resulting in their degradation. These data indicated that the disturbed transport of host dendritic mRNA by TBEV caused neuronal dysfunction, exacerbating the neurological symptoms in TBEV-infected mice. Our previous report (10) showed that the local replication of TBEV altered the membrane structure in dendrites, suggesting that dendritic degeneration caused by this membrane alteration may also be involved in neuronal dysfunction.

The sequence of the SL-2 region is completely conserved among tick-borne flaviviruses but not among mosquito-borne viruses (Fig. S8). Our previous study showed that various tick-borne flaviviruses replicate locally in dendrites (10). In the transmission cycle of tick-borne flaviviruses, ticks get infected through the blood sucking of viremic mammals or cofeeding of infected ticks. Viral infection and replication in the central nervous system of mammals are considered nonessential processes for transmission (4). A recent study showed that the UTR sequence that regulates the innate immune system was important for the epidemiological fitness of dengue virus in a human epidemic (32). It has also been suggested that the tick FMRP ortholog is involved in the tick RNAi pathway (33). Binding of SL-2 to the tick FMRP or a related protein might be important for tick-borne flaviviruses to evade the RNAi pathway, resulting in conservation of the sequences.

In this study, we revealed the mechanism of transport of TBEV genomic RNA in neuronal dendrites and demonstrated the involvement of this transport in the development of neurological diseases caused by TBEV infection. We propose a model of viral replication and neuronal dysfunction in dendrites caused by TBEV infection (Fig. S9). The genomic RNA of TBEV is transported with RBPs in a neuronal granule. Transport of the viral RNA disturbed that of the host dendritic mRNAs and disrupted the distribution of the components of neuronal granules, such as FMRP. Local replication of the viral genomic RNA in dendrites

causes degeneration of the dendrites, as shown in our previous study (10). The transport and local replication of the viral RNA may result in neuronal dysfunction, leading to the neurological symptoms observed with TBEV infection. Our study demonstrated the hijacking of the neuronal granule system by a neuropathogenic virus for the transport of viral genomic RNA in dendrites. The description of this unique virus–host interaction will improve further understanding of the molecular mechanisms of viral replication and the pathogenicity of neurotropic viruses. It will also promote the study of neurodegenerative diseases caused by disruption of dendritic mRNA transport, and could lead to the development of treatment options with virus-based vectors that can transport and express target genes locally in dendrites.

Materials and Methods

Localization Analysis. Differentiated PC12 cells or primary neuronal cultures of mouse embryos were infected with TBEV or transfected with RNA expression plasmids. The localizations of the RNAs and proteins were analyzed by indirect immunofluorescence assay and FISH.

Animal Model. C57BL/6 mice were inoculated with 100 plaque-forming units of TBEV. Surviving mice were monitored for 14 d, and levels of paralysis and neurological symptoms were evaluated. The president of Hokkaido University approved all animal experiments after review by the Animal Care and Use Committee of Hokkaido University (approval no. 13025).

RNA-Binding Assay. In vitro synthesized RNAs for the TBEV genome were mixed with Flag-FMRP expressed in 293T cells. Following immunoprecipitation with anti-Flag antibody, coprecipitated TBEV RNA was detected by RT-PCR.

Method details are described in *SI Materials and Methods*.

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