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Perspective

Phagocytosis of mycobacteria by zebrafish macrophages is dependent on the scavenger receptor Marco, a key control factor of pro-inflammatory signalling

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ABSTRACT

Scavenger receptors on the cell surface of macrophages play an important role in host defence through their ability to bind microbial ligands and induce phagocytosis. Concurrently, signal transduction pathways are initiated that aid in defence mechanisms against the invading microbe. Here we report on the function of scavenger receptor Marco (*Ma*crophage *r*eceptor with *co*llagenous structure) during infection of zebrafish embryos with *Mycobacterium marinum,* a close relative of *M. tuberculosis.* Morpholino knockdown demonstrates that Marco is required for the rapid phagocytosis of *M. marinum* following intravenous infection. Furthermore, gene expression analysis shows that Marco controls the initial transient pro-inflammatory response to *M. marinum* and remains a determining factor for the immune response signature at later stages of infection. Increased bacterial burden following *marco* knockdown indicates that this scavenger receptor is important for control of *M. marinum* growth, likely due to delayed phagocytosis and reduced pro-inflammatory signalling observed under conditions of Marco deficiency.

1. Introduction

Scavenger receptors (SRs) comprise a large family of transmembrane cell surface glycoproteins and are mainly expressed in macrophages, dendritic cells and endothelial cells (Murphy, 2005). Originally these receptors were characterised by their ability to recognise and internalise modified low-density lipoproteins (LDLs), such as oxidised LDL and acetylated LDL, thereby making these susceptible to degradation (Goldstein et al., 1979). For this reason they have been extensively studied in relation to development of atherosclerosis (Kzhyshkowska et al., 2012). However, SRs also have many other important functions, for example in pathogen clearance, in transport of cargo within the cell, and in lipid transport (Dorrington et al., 2013; Pollock et al., 2010; Xu et al., 1997).

Class A SRs in vertebrates consist of three proteins: SR-AI, SR-AII and MARCO (*ma*crophage *r*eceptor with *co*llagenous structure). SR-AI and SR-AII are both encoded by the macrophage scavenger receptor 1 (*MSR1*) gene (Emi et al., 1993) but differ in structure due to alternative splicing of the gene product. SR-AI contains a C-terminal cysteine-rich domain which is lacking in SR-AII (Krieger and Herz, 1994). The trimeric membrane-bound MARCO protein has short intracellular and transmembrane domains, as well as a large extracellular domain that consists of a spacer domain, a long collagenous domain, and a C-terminal scavenger receptor cysteine-rich domain (SRCR domain V) (Elomaa et al., 1995). In un-inflamed tissues, expression of mouse and human *MARCO* is restricted to macrophages of the splenic marginal zone, medullary cords of the lymph nodes, and alveolar macrophages of the lung (Elomaa et al., 1995; Kraal et al., 2000; Palecanda et al., 1999). Under inflammatory conditions caused by bacterial infection or lipopolysaccharide (LPS) injection, *MARCO* expression can be rapidly up-regulated (van der Laan et al., 1997, 1999) and its expression profile extends to the splenic macrophages of both red and white pulp, dendritic cells (Granucci et al., 2003), and Kupfer cells in the liver (Kraal et al., 2000). Deficiency of MARCO in mouse models and patients is linked with autoimmune diseases such as systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), which is most likely due to its role in the binding to and clearance of apoptotic cells, which are considered to be a major source for autoantigens (Podack et al., 2007; Rogers et al., 2009; Tas et al., 2006; Wermeling et al., 2007). The first indication for a role of MARCO in anti-bacterial defence was that monoclonal antibodies inhibited capturing of heat-killed bacteria by macrophages in the marginal zone areas of the spleen in mice (van der Laan et al., 1999).

Recent findings supporting the immunological role of MARCO in human infections are that single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in *MARCO* are associated with increased susceptibility to pulmonary tuberculosis (TB) in humans (Bowdish et al., 2013; Ma et al., 2011). *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* is the causative agent of TB, a common and frequently lethal infectious disease. After being

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phagocytosed by macrophages, mycobacteria are capable of inhibiting the phagosome-lysosome fusion by interfering with the Rab-controlled membrane trafficking, allowing them to reside and proliferate in a safe environment (Vergne et al., 2004). Increased phagocytic activity of *M. tuberculosis* has been observed in mouse macrophages deficient in autophagy-related gene 7 (ATG7), which display higher expression levels of *MARCO* and *MSR1* (Bonilla et al., 2013). MARCO has been shown to assist in the phagocytosis of *M. tuberculosis* in mice via specific binding to the cell wall glycolipid trehalose 6,69-dimycolate (TDM) of this bacteria and to cooperate with TLR2/CD14 signalling in activating cytokine responses (Bowdish et al., 2009). TDM is capable of inducing many elements of *M. tuberculosis* pathogenesis and is predicted to be present in *M. marinum*, a natural fish pathogen and a close relative of *M. tuberculosis* (Tobin and Ramakrishnan, 2008). *M. marinum* causes an infection in zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) that shares pathological hallmarks with human TB disease, including the formation of caseating granulomas and development of latency (Parikka et al., 2012; Swaim et al., 2006).

The early life stages of the zebrafish, which are transparent, have proven extremely useful to study the early events in mycobacteria–host interactions, from phagocytosis to early granuloma formation (Cambier et al., 2014; Clay et al., 2007; Tobin et al., 2010; van der Vaart et al., 2013). We have previously shown that a zebrafish homologue of *MARCO* is expressed in embryos, downstream of the transcription factor Spi1/Pu.1 that is required for myeloid cell development (Zakrzewska et al., 2010). Furthermore, others have demonstrated expression of *marco* in macrophages and dendritic cells of adult zebrafish (Wittamer et al., 2011). Here we report on a functional study of the zebrafish *marco* gene.

We demonstrate that Marco is required for the rapid phagocytosis of *M. marinum* in zebrafish and is an essential player in the establishment of an initial transient pro-inflammatory response to this pathogen. Furthermore, we show that Marco is important for mycobacterial growth control.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Zebrafish husbandry

Zebrafish were handled in compliance with the local animal welfare regulations and were maintained according to standard protocols (zfin.org). The culture was approved by the local animal welfare committee (DEC) of the University of Leiden and all protocols adhered to the international guidelines specified by the EU Animal Protection Directive 2010/63/EU. Zebrafish lines used in this study included AB/TL, *Tg(mpeg1:EGFP)*^{gl22} (Ellett et al., 2010), *Tg(mpeg1:mCherry)*^{UMSF001} (Bernut et al., 2014), *Tg(mpeg1:Gal4-VP16)*^{gl24} (Ellett et al., 2010), *Tg*(*mpx*:*GFP*)^{i114} (Renshaw et al., 2006), and *Tg(UAS-E1b:NTR-mCherry)*^{i149} (Gray et al., 2011). Embryos were grown at 28.5 °C in egg water (60 μg/ml Instant Ocean sea salts). For the duration of bacterial injections and imaging, embryos were kept under anaesthesia in egg water containing 200 μg/ml tricaine (Sigma-Aldrich). Embryos used for stereo fluorescence imaging were kept in egg water containing 0.003% 1-phenyl-2-thiourea (Sigma-Aldrich) to prevent melanisation.

2.2. Marco sequence and morpholino knockdown

A cDNA clone of *marco* (EST CO929777) was obtained from GenomeCube. The full length sequence was determined by the sequencing service of BaseClear (Leiden, Netherlands) and submitted to GenBank (accession number BankIt1734081 Marco KJ955494). Protein domains were detected with SMART analysis. Amino acid identity and similarity percentages were determined using UniProt CLUSTAL O(1.2.0) multiple sequence alignment. Splice blocking morpholino oligonucleotides were designed based on the alignment of the cDNA sequence with the genomic sequence from Ensembl gene ENSDARG00000059294 (Supplementary Fig. S1A). Two morpholinos were obtained from Gene Tools, morpholino 1 targeting the intron 15-exon 16 boundary and morpholino 2 targeting the exon 9-intron 9 boundary (Mo1: 5′ACGGACCACTGATGAAGAAAAA CAA3′; 0.02 mM and Mo2: 5′TAACTAAAAGTACCTTGGCTTCCAC3′; 0.3 mM). Morpholinos were diluted to the desired concentration in 1× Danieau buffer (58 mM NaCl, 0.7 mM KCl, 0.4 mM $MgSO_4$, 0.6 mM $Ca(NO_3)_2$, 5.0 mM HEPES; pH 7.6) containing 1% phenol red (Sigma-Aldrich) and 1 nl was injected into the yolk at the 1–2 cell stage using a Femtojet injector (Eppendorf). As a control the standard control oligonucleotide from Gene Tools was used.

2.3. Chemical treatments

For nitroreductase-dependent macrophage ablation, metronidazole, (10 mM, 2 hours treatment, Sigma-Aldrich, M3761) was administered via the egg water to 3 days post fertilisation (dpf) embryos. Copper sulphate ($CuSO_4$, 10 uM, 2 hours treatment, Merck, #1027910250) was administered via the egg water to induce cell death of neuromast hair cells and a subsequent inflammatory response (d'Alençon et al., 2010). After copper sulphate treatment the embryos were briefly washed three times with egg water and fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS.

2.4. Infection experiments

Mycobacterium marinum infections were performed using the Mma20 strain expressing mCherry in a pSMT3 vector (van der Sar et al., 2004) or the *Salmonella typhimurium* strain SL1027 carrying the DsRed expression vector pGMDs3 (van der Sar et al., 2003). Embryos were staged at 24 hours post fertilisation (hpf) by morphological criteria (Kimmel et al., 1995) and manually dechorionated. Bacteria were prepared and injected into the blood circulation at 28 hpf (Benard et al., 2012) and PBS or 2% Polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP40) in PBS (w/v) was used as a mock injection. In experiments for fluorescent bacterial pixel count and qPCR analysis, 200 colony forming units (cfu) of *M. marinum* was used. In experiments for phagocytosis analysis, 180 cfu *M. marinum* or *S. typhimurium* was injected into the blood circulation at 30 hpf. This stage of development was used because the Duct of Cuvier is located more laterally over the yolk sac compared to 28 hpf which facilitates imaging purposes for quantification. Infected embryos were fixed at 5, 10, 20 and 30 minutes post infection (mpi) in 4 °C 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS. Leukocytes were immuno-labelled and the number of intra- and extra-cellular bacteria was counted over the yolk sac.

2.5. Fluorescence-activated cell sorting

Macrophages and neutrophils were isolated by FACS from 6 dpf *Tg(mpeg1:mCherry)*^{UMSF001} (Bernut et al., 2014) and *Tg*(*mpx*:GFP)^{i114} (Renshaw et al., 2006) zebrafish larvae, respectively. The procedure is described in detail in Rougeot et al. (2014). In short, larvae were dechorionated using pronase treatment, rinsed in calcium-free Ringer solution, and digested with 0.25% trypsin. The obtained cell suspension was centrifuged, rinsed with PBS and resuspended in Leibovitz medium L15 without phenol red, 1% fetal calf serum, 0.8 mM CaCl2, penicillin 50 U/ml and streptomycin 0.05 mg/ml. The single cell suspension was subjected to FACS at room temperature using a FACSAria (Becton Dickinson) with the BD FACSDiva software version 5.0.3 and a Coherent Sapphire solid state laser 488 nm with 13 mW power. The GFP+ and GFP– cell fractions were collected as above but with 10% fetal calf serum and RNA was isolated using the RNAaqueous Micro Kit (Ambion).

2.6. RNA isolation, cDNA synthesis, and expression analyses

Whole embryo RNA isolation, removal of residual genomic DNA, cDNA synthesis and quantitative RT-PCR (qPCR) analysis was performed as described in Stockhammer et al. (2009). qPCR results were analysed using the ΔΔCt method. All reactions were performed as technical duplicates and data were normalised to the expression of *peptidylprolyl isomerase A like* (*ppial*) for whole embryo samples and to *eukaryotic translation initiation factor 4A, isoform 1B* (*eif4a1b*) for cells isolated by FACS. Primer sequences for *ppial* and *marco* are described in Zakrzewska et al. (2010), primer sequences for *mmp9* and *il1b* are described in Stockhammer et al. (2009), and primer sequence for *eif4a1b* are: FW: 5′TTCAGAAACTCAGTACTAGCATACA3′; REV: 5′GTGACA TCCAACACCTCTGC3′. Knockdown of *marco* with morpholino 1 was verified by qPCR and to validate the knockdown of morpholino 2, the SuperScript® One-Step RT-PCR System (Invitrogen, #10928-034) was used with 50 ng DNAse treated RNA template. RT-PCR primers for *marco* knockdown verification were FW: 5′GACAGACAGGAGATCCTGG3′; REV: 5′CTCCACGCTCACCTTTGAGAC3′. The following adjustments were made to the PCR settings: 59.4 °C for 30 seconds for the annealing step of the PCR amplification with 30 cycles.

RNA for deep sequencing analysis was isolated using QIAzol lysis reagent and purified using the Rneasy MinElute Cleanup kit (QIAGEN Benelux B.V., Venlo, Netherlands). RNA sequencing was performed as previously described (Veneman et al., 2013). The Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) database accession for RNASeq: GSE58230 can be accessed online.

2.7. Immunohistochemistry

Identification of neutrophils and macrophages was done by immuno-labelling with a leukocyte specific L-plastin antibody and Alexa568/488-conjugated secondary antibody, combined with neutrophil specific staining for myeloperoxidase activity (Cui et al., 2011).

2.8. Imaging

Stereo fluorescence images were taken with a Leica MZ16FA stereo fluorescence microscope equipped with a DFC420C digital colour camera. Overlay images of bright field and fluorescence stereomicroscopy were made using Fiji (Schindelin et al., 2012).

Bacterial pixel counts were obtained on stereo fluorescence images and analysed using dedicated software (Nezhinsky and Verbeek, 2012). Quantification of phagocytosis was performed on an Axiovert 100M microscope with a W Plan-APOCHROMAT 40× 1.0 NA objective. Confocal images were taken on a Leica TCS SPE with an HCX APO 40× 1.0 NA objective and the Nikon Ti Eclipse with a plan apo 20× NA 0.75 WD 1 mm with V (violet) correction.

2.9. Statistical analysis

All data (mean ± SEM) were analysed using unpaired, two-tailed t-tests for comparisons between two groups and one-way ANOVA with Tukey's multiple comparison method as a post-hoc test for other data ($^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$).

3. Results

3.1. The zebrafish marco gene is expressed in larval macrophages and is up-regulated during infection

Sequencing of a cDNA clone of the zebrafish *marco* gene revealed that the predicted protein shows more than 60% similarity with murine and human MARCO and has a highly conserved protein domain structure (Fig. 1A–C, Supplementary Table S1A). The similarity is highest (ca. 85%) in the C-terminal cysteine-rich domain, which is essential for the binding of bacteria (Elomaa et al., 1998) (Supplementary Table S1B). To confirm the expression of *marco* in macrophages of zebrafish larvae, we used a transgenic macrophage reporter line, *Tg(mpeg1:mCherry)* to isolate macrophages by FACS at 6 days post fertilisation (dpf). We found the expression of *marco* to be highly enriched in the fluorescent macrophage cell fraction compared to the fluorescent-negative background (Fig. 1D). In addition, *marco* expression is lowly expressed in neutrophils sorted from 6 dpf *Tg*(*mpx*:*GFP*) transgenic larvae (Fig. 1E). We previously observed that *marco* is induced during *S. typhimurium* infection in zebrafish embryos (Kanwal et al., 2013), therefore, we sought to determine whether zebrafish *marco* is regulated in a similar manner during infection with *M. marinum*, the natural mycobacterial pathogen for fish. qPCR analysis showed that *marco* is induced at 4 hours post infection (hpi) (Fig. 1F); however, no difference in expression level could be observed at 4 days post infection (dpi) (Fig. 1G), a time point when the embryos are severely infected and contain granuloma-like structures.

3.2. Marco functions in the phagocytosis of M. marinum

The conserved protein domain structure of zebrafish Marco allows us to hypothesise that it functions as a phagocytic scavenger receptor, similar to mammalian MARCO. To test this hypothesis, we set up an *in vivo* assay to determine the percentage of phagocytosed *M. marinum* at various time points. The assay consists of microinjecting a single cell suspension of fluorescently labelled *M. marinum* into the blood circulation at the site of the blood island, fixing the embryos at 5, 10, 20 and 30 mpi, immuno-labelling leukocytes with L-plastin antibody (Mathias et al., 2007), and counting of intra- and extra-cellular *M. marinum* at the site of the Duct of Cuvier under a fluorescence microscope (Fig. 2A). Following intravenous injection *M. marinum* is phagocytosed specifically by macrophages (Clay et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2012) and neutrophils are known to be unable to efficiently phagocytose bacteria in liquid compartments such as the blood circulation (Colucci-Guyon et al., 2011), Therefore, we considered the L-plastin labelled leukocytes with internalised *M. marinum* as macrophages. The Duct of Cuvier was used as the counting site because it is distant from the site of injection, thereby avoiding interfering wounding effects, and it is located close to the surface, which facilitates imaging. Two sources of *M. marinum* can be used for this assay: a glycerol stock or a 7H9 liquid culture stock grown to logarithmic phase (Benard et al., 2012). By injecting aliquots of a glycerol stock of *M. marinum* the dose could be kept constant throughout experiments; however, the injected glycerol stock bacteria showed a faster rate of phagocytosis (97% at 30 mpi) (Fig. 2B,C) compared to the liquid culture bacteria (65% at 30 mpi) (Fig. 2D) in the control embryos.

We used an antisense morpholino oligonucleotide approach to block intron-exon splicing events for zebrafish *marco* (Supplementary Fig. S1B,C). Morpholino-mediated knockdown of *marco* did not affect leukocyte development (Supplementary Fig. S1D,E). The ability of leukocytes to migrate towards a local inflammation site was also not affected. This was verified by performing a chemically induced inflammation (ChIN) assay (d'Alençon et al., 2010) in which copper-induced damage of neuromast hair cells was capable of attracting both macrophages and neutrophils in the *marco* morphants similar as in the control group (Supplementary Fig. S1F). Injection with equal numbers of glycerol stock bacteria in the *marco* morphants (Supplementary Fig. S1G) showed that the morphants have a significant reduction in the phagocytosis of *M. marinum* (Fig. 2B) at time points up to 20 min after injection. By 30 min after injection the difference was no longer significant, indicating that phagocytosis of *M. marinum* in *marco* morphants is delayed but not abolished.

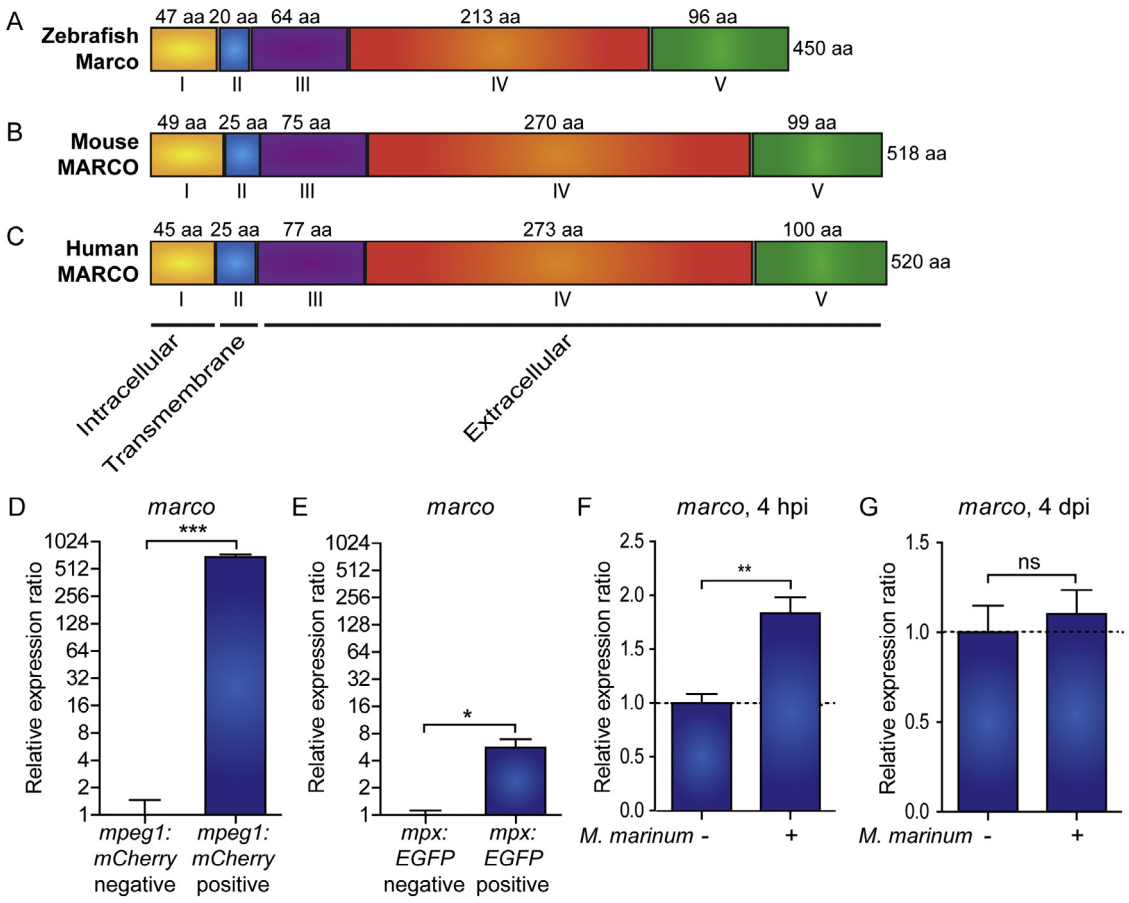

Fig. 1. Zebrafish *marco* encodes a macrophage specific protein with conserved domains and is induced during early *M. marinum* infection. Comparison of the predicted (A) zebrafish Marco protein structures with (B) murine and (C) human MARCO. The cytoplasmic domain (I), transmembrane domain (II), short spacer domain (III), collagenous domain (IV), and C-terminal cysteine-rich domain (V) are conserved domains detected by SMART analysis. The domains are indicated by Roman numbers; the amino acid (aa) residue lengths of the subunit chains are indicated above their corresponding domains; and the total protein lengths are indicated to the right. The predicted cellular location of each region is indicated below. (D–E) Zebrafish *marco* is expressed in macrophages. Expression of *marco* in (D) macrophages and (E) neutrophils. qPCR analysis was performed on RNA from fluorescence-positive cell fractions obtained by cell sorting of 6 dpf larvae transgenic reporter lines for macrophages (*Tg(mpeg1:mCherry)*) and neutrophils (*Tg(mpx:EGFP)*). Expression was compared against the fluorescence-negative cell fraction of each transgenic line. (F–G) *marco* is up-regulated during early *M. marinum* infection. qPCR analysis was performed on RNA from (F) 4 hpi and (G) 4 dpi mock injected and *M. marinum* (200 cfu) injected AB/TL embryos. All graphs show data combined from three biological replicates (n = 15 per group, pooled per replicate).

This delay in phagocytosis of *M. marinum* was phenocopied with a second morpholino targeting another intron–exon boundary (Fig. 2C). In addition, a delay in phagocytosis was also observed in the *marco* morphants injected with *M. marinum* from liquid culture (Fig. 2A,D). In this experiment, the reduction of phagocytosis was significant at time points between 10 and 30 min after injection.

To investigate whether other scavenger receptors have a similar function in aiding phagocytosis of *M. marinum* we chose to knock down *cd36*, a class B scavenger receptor that is down-regulated during *M. marinum* infection at 4 days post infection (dpi) (data not published) and is shown to play a role in phagocytosis of bacteria such as *Staphylococcus aureus* (Sharif et al., 2013). The results showed that Cd36 does not influence the phagocytosis of *M. marinum* in zebrafish embryos (Fig. 2A,E). Furthermore, in another study we similarly knocked down *mpeg1*, a different macrophage specific gene with no suggested function in phagocytosis and found that this gene also does not influence the phagocytosis of *M. marinum* (Benard et al., 2014). To test whether Marco plays a role in the phagocytosis of other intracellular pathogens we performed the phagocytosis assay with *Salmonella typhimurium*. A significant reduction of phagocytosed bacteria was observed in *marco* morphants at 30 and 60 min post injection (Supplementary Fig. S2), indicating that Marco is not merely specific for phagocytosis of *M. marinum*. At 2 h post injection the complete dose of injected bacteria had been phagocytosed both in *marco* morphants and in the control embryos, indicating that Marco deficiency delays but does not abolish phagocytosis of *S. typhimurium*, similar as observed for *M. marinum* (Supplementary Fig. S2). Since both the scavenger receptor Cd36 and the macrophage specific Mpeg1 do not affect phagocytosis, we conclude that Marco plays a specific role in bacterial phagocytosis by macrophages.

3.3. marco *knockdown has no detectable effect on the phagocytosis of ablated cells*

After identifying a direct antimicrobial phagocytic function of Marco, we further sought to define whether Marco also plays a role in a different phagocytic process, namely phagocytosis of dying cells. Previous research has shown that murine MARCO is capable of binding to apoptotic cells, indicating a function in the phagocytosis and clearance of dead cells (Rogers et al., 2009; Wermeling et al., 2007). Specific collective cell death at a controlled time-point can be achieved in zebrafish larvae by using nitroreductase-mediated ablation. We created a double transgenic line of *Tg(mpeg1:EGFP)* and *Tg(mpeg1:Gal4-VP16)/Tg(UAS-E1b:NTR-mCherry)* in which all macrophages express GFP and a subpopulation expresses nitroreductase

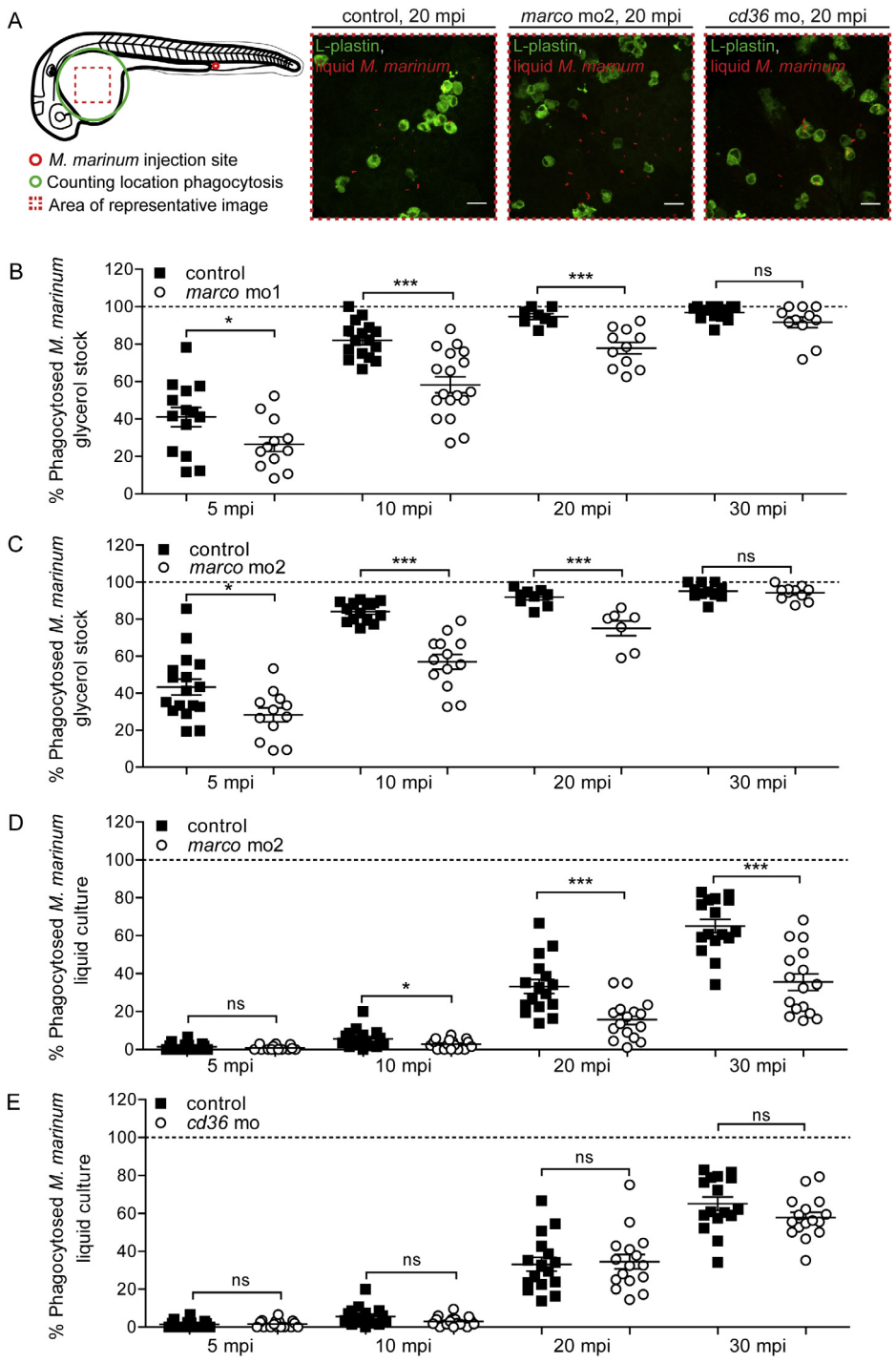

Fig. 2. Marco functions in the phagocytosis of *M. marinum*. Quantification of *M. marinum* phagocytosis. (A) Schematic overview of the phagocytosis quantification process and representative images of infected control embryos, *marco* morphants (mo2), and *cd36* morphants at 20 mpi. (B–D) Morphants of *marco* ((B) morpholino 1 and (C,D) morpholino 2) show a delayed phagocytosis of *M. marinum* (B,C) glycerol stock and (D) 7H9 liquid culture. (E) Morphants of *cd36* show no difference in phagocytosis of *M. marinum*. Each data point represents the percentage of phagocytosed *M. marinum* in an individual embryo.

mCherry. Not all GFP-positive macrophages in this line express mCherry due to silencing of the UAS promoter (Akitake et al., 2011). Cell death was induced in this subpopulation of macrophages expressing nitroreductase by treating the embryos with metronidazole, which is metabolised into a toxic product (Gray et al., 2011; Pisharath and Parsons, 2009). At 120 minutes post treatment (mpt) the nitroreductase-positive subpopulation of macrophages started dying; between approximately 150 and 260 mpt the dead cells became phagocytosed by healthy GFP-positive macrophages, which then continued to migrate away from the site of phagocytosis between 260 and 280 mpt (Fig. 3). In simultaneously time lapse recordings of 4 embryos per group, we detected 4–6 phagocytosis events in each of the *marco* morphants and control embryos (Supplementary Fig. S2B). Therefore, this analysis did not reveal a significant effect of *marco* knockdown on phagocytosis of chemically ablated cells.

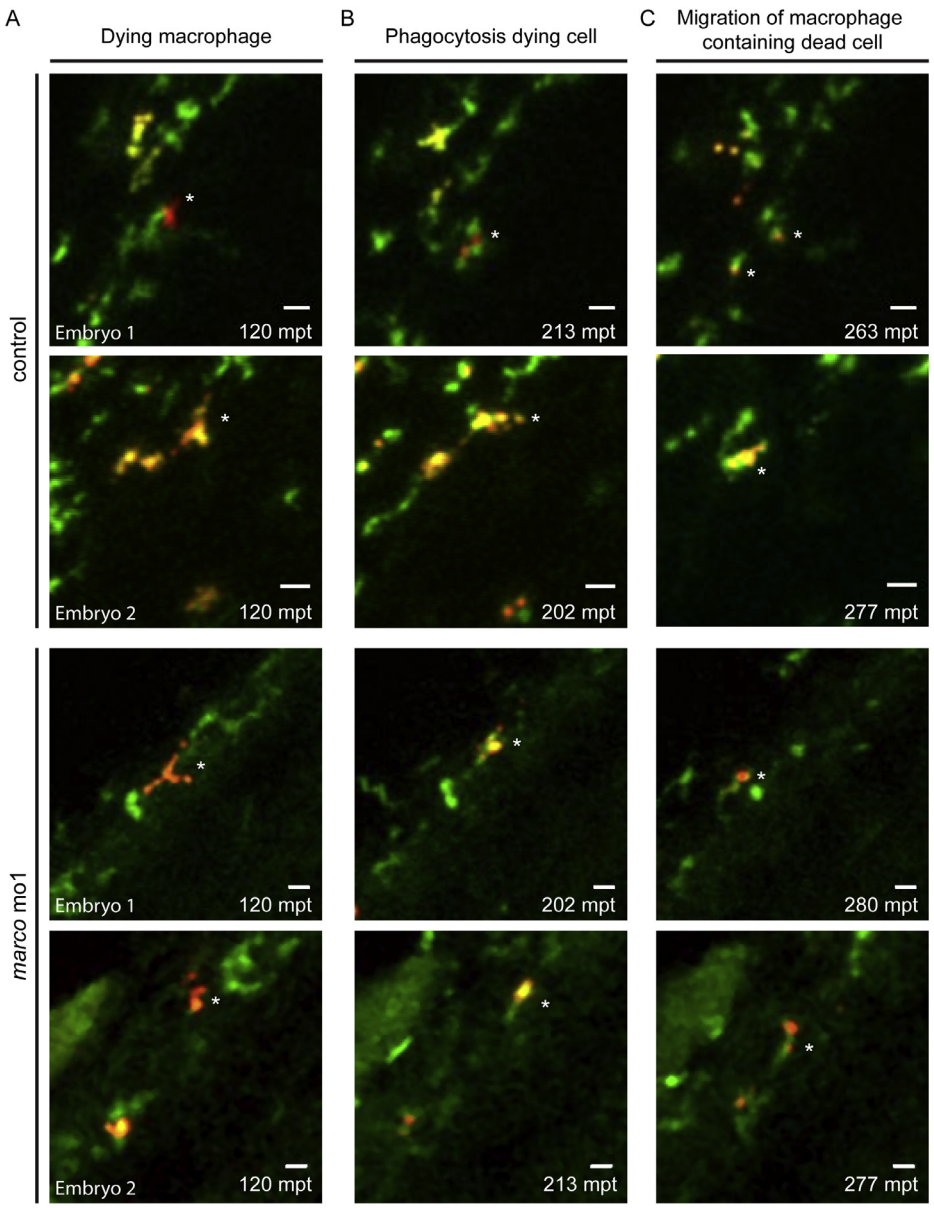

Fig. 3. Morphants of *marco* are capable of phagocytosing dead cells. Phagocytosis of dying cells by macrophages was monitored in time. *marco* morphants and their controls were imaged after metronidazole treatment which induces nitroreductase-mediated cell ablation in a subpopulation of macrophages (mCherry positive cells). All macrophages express GFP. Time points represented are (A) time of nitroreductase-positive cells undergoing cell death, (B) phagocytosis of the dying cells by healthy GFP-positive macrophages and (C) migration of the macrophage containing the dead cell. Time lapse recordings were made of 4 embryos per group and examples of phagocytosis are shown for 2 control embryos en 2 *marco* morphants. Quantification of phagocytosis events are shown in Supplementary Fig. S2B. Asterisks indicate the phagocytosing macrophage; mpt: minutes post treatment.

3.4. *Marco is required for a pro-inflammatory response following phagocytosis of* M. marinum

The host immune response to mycobacteria includes production of pro-inflammatory cytokines induced by TLR2 detection of pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs), and MARCO has been proposed to function cooperatively with this receptor (Bowdish et al., 2009). After identifying that Marco facilitates bacterial phagocytosis, we then investigated whether zebrafish Marco also plays a role in inducing a pro-inflammatory cytokine response to *M. marinum*. Therefore, we analysed the gene expression levels of *il1b, il8* and *mmp9* to *M. marinum* at 4 hpi based on a time-course analysis that showed significant up-regulation of cytokine and matrix metalloproteinase gene expression in our infection model (data not shown). As expected, all the genes were significantly up-regulated in the control embryos at 4 hpi; however, upon knockdown of *marco*, these genes were no longer significantly up-regulated at this time-point (Fig. 4A–C). Subsequently, we investigated whether the *marco* morphants completely lacked this pro-inflammatory response during time or whether there was merely a delay in response, similar to the delay in phagocytosis of *M. marinum*. Expression levels of *il1b* were determined every hour from 2 hpi until 6 hpi (Fig. 4D). As expected, the control embryos showed significant *il1b* up-regulation, of which the peak (5-fold) was at 3 hpi in this experiment. At this time-point the *marco* morphants had a significantly lower level of *il1b* up-regulation (2-fold). After the peak at 3 hpi, the *il1b* expression response in the controls declined and became non-significant at 6 hpi. At none of the time point tested, did *marco* morphants reach the same peak level of *il1b* up-regulation as observed in the control group. This led us to conclude that Marco is an essential player in

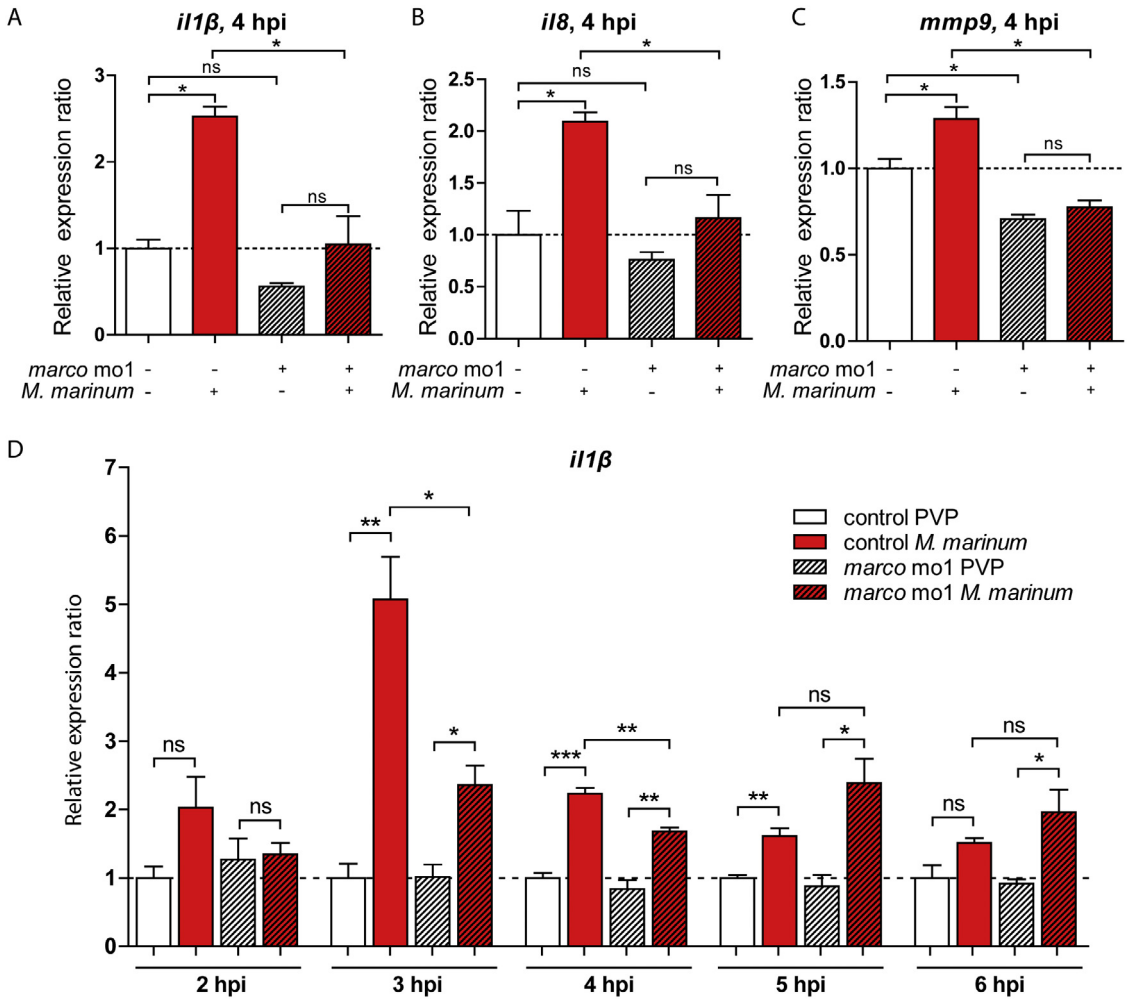

Fig. 4. Morphants of *marco* have suppressed induction of pro-inflammatory cytokine response to *M. marinum*. (A–C) Effect of *marco* knockdown on the response of *il1b, il8* and *mmp9* to *M. marinum* infection. Expression levels of (A) *il1b*, (B) *il8* and (C) *mmp9* were determined by qPCR for marco morphants and their control embryos at 4 hpi after infection with *M. marinum* (200 cfu) and mock PVP injected controls; (D) Effect of *marco* knockdown on *il1b* expression in time (2–6 hpi). Expression was compared against the control PVP sample of each time point. All graphs show data combined from three biological replicates (n = 15 per group, pooled per replicate).

the establishment of an initial transient pro-inflammatory response to *M. marinum* infection.

3.5. *Marco deficiency also leads to an altered immune response at the granuloma stage of* M. marinum *infection*

Since *marco* morphants showed a reduced pro-inflammatory response in the first hours after infection, we next studied whether the morphants have a differently regulated immune response to *M. marinum* at a later stage of infection, when characteristic granulomatous lesions have formed. For this purpose we analysed RNA sequencing (RNA-Seq) profiles of pools of uninfected and infected *marco* morphants and controls at 4 dpi. Although the morpholino effect is likely to have diluted out over time, an RNA-Seq profile at this stage should reveal if *marco* knockdown has a longer lasting effect. We had previously identified a gene set showing robust and reproducible up-regulation at this stage of the infection (Benard et al., 2014). As shown in Fig. 5A (and Supplementary Table S2), several genes from this signature set display an altered response in infected *marco* morphants compared to infection in the control group. Under conditions of *marco* knockdown we observed a significantly higher up-regulation (2-fold or higher) of genes such as *mmp9, mmp13a, moxd1, steap4, tcap,* and *timp2b.* In addition, a non-coding RNA (*si:ch211-243g18.3*) showed approximately 20-fold higher up-regulation. Conversely, expression levels of other genes, such as *cyp1a, cyp24a*, and *hmox1*, appeared to be significantly lower in infected *marco* morphants compared with infected controls. The level of *il1b* up-regulation was similar in both infected groups, in contrast to the reduced up-regulation of this gene in *marco* morphants during the first hours of infection. In conclusion, at the late stage of infection, knockdown of *marco* causes an altered immune response, but pro-inflammatory signalling is not impaired.

3.6. *Marco is important for mycobacterial growth control*

Our observations that knockdown of *marco* (i) delays phagocytosis of *M. marinum*, (ii) suppresses the initial pro-inflammatory response to this infection, and (iii) affects the expression signature of larvae with mycobacterial granulomas, suggest that Marco contributes to controlling *M. marinum* growth. We therefore investigated the bacterial burden of *marco* morphants during *M. marinum* infection. Control embryos and *marco* morphants were infected with *M. marinum* at 28 hpf and the bacterial fluorescent pixels per embryo were analysed at 4 dpi. The results show that Marco deficiency leads to a significant increase in *M. marinum* bacterial burden (Fig. 5B,D) and this effect could be verified by using a second splice-blocking morpholino of *marco* (Fig. 5C,E). This increased infection level of

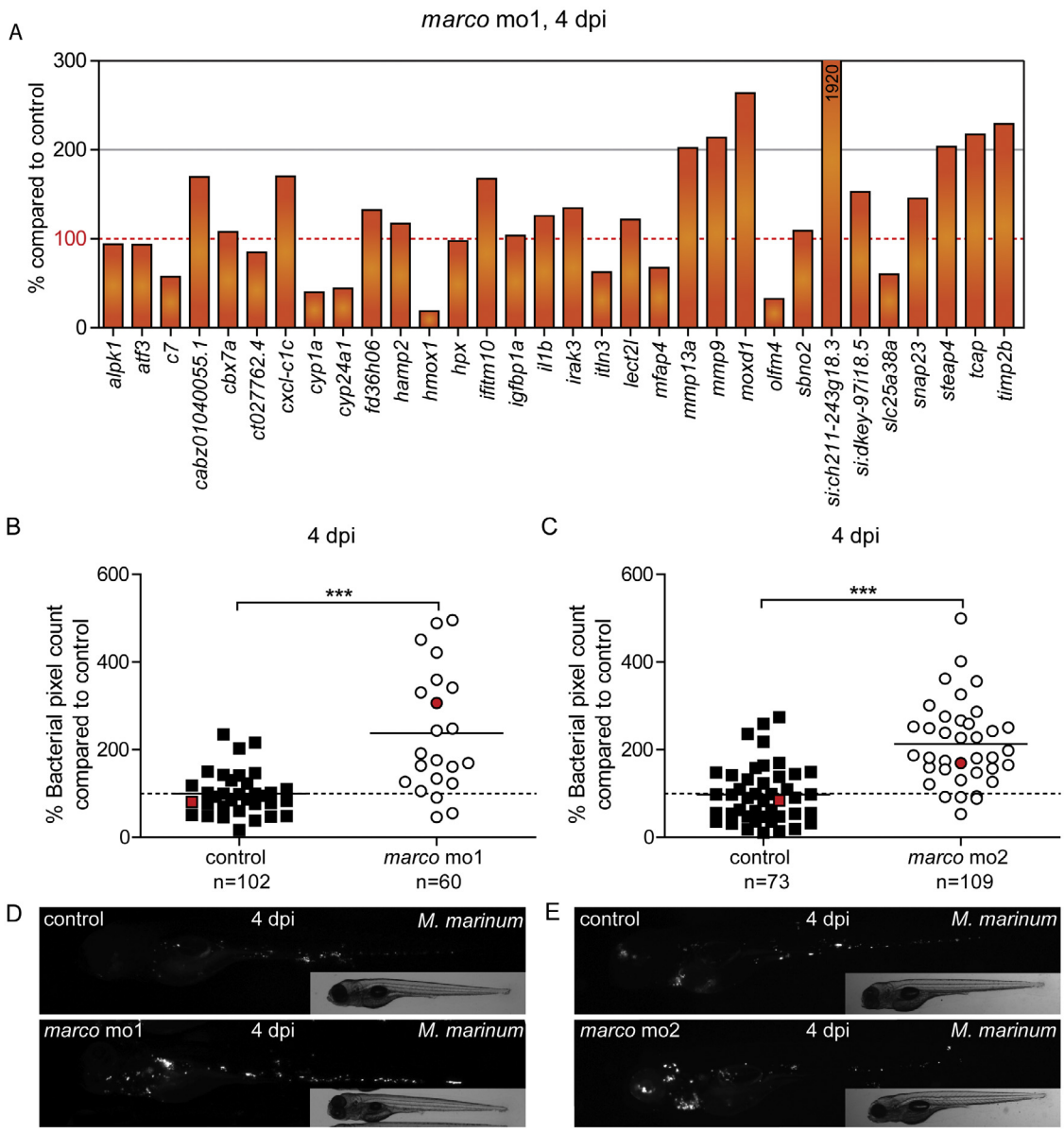

Fig. 5. Effect of *marco* knockdown on the innate immune response and control of *M. marinum* infection. (A) Graph of the percentage of expression levels of infected *marco* mo1 morphants compared to infected control embryos on a set of 32 genes that showed reproducible induction by *M. marinum* infection in control embryos. The expression level of these genes under conditions of *marco* deficiency is expressed as the percentage of the expression level in the corresponding control. Results are based on RNA-Seq analysis of pools of 30 infected and 30 uninfected embryos for each group. Embryos were injected with *M. marinum* (200 cfu) or mock injected with 2% PVP, and RNA-Seq analysis was performed at 4 dpi. (B–E) *marco* knockdown impairs control of *M. marinum* infection. AB/TL embryos were injected with two different splice blocking morpholinos against (A–D) *marco* or with control morpholino, subsequently injected with mCherry-expressing *M. marinum*, and infected embryos were imaged at 4 dpi. (B,C) Bacterial burden was quantified by determining the number of fluorescent bacterial pixels and (D,E) representative stereo fluorescent images are shown below the graph of each experiment. Red symbols indicate which individuals are shown below as representative images. Graphs show combined results of 3 repeated independent experiments. Each data point represents an individual embryo.

marco morphants indicates that Marco plays a protective role in innate host defence against mycobacterial infection.

4. Discussion

Phagocytosis of bacteria is an essential host defence mechanism carried out by macrophages and scavenger receptors are a key component of this process. MARCO is a scavenger receptor that has been shown to bind the cell wall component TDM of *M. tuberculosis* (Bowdish et al., 2009). Here we have used a zebrafish model for tuberculosis and show that Marco mediates phagocytosis of *M. marinum* and that the initial pro-inflammatory response to this infection is dependent on Marco. We also observed a higher bacterial burden of *M. marinum* infection under conditions of *marco* knockdown.

M. marinum circulating in the blood of zebrafish embryos is rapidly phagocytosed by macrophages (Davis et al., 2002). When *marco* was knocked down with a targeted morpholino oligonucleotide approach we observed a delay in phagocytosis of *M. marinum*. Similarly, we found that phagocytosis of intravenously injected *S. typhimurium* bacteria is also delayed under *marco* knockdown conditions. This *M. marinum* phagocytosis delay is specific for *marco* deficiency because it was repeatedly observed with two morpholinos targeting different exon–intron boundary sites and knockdown of control genes *cd36*, encoding a class B scavenger receptor, and *mpeg1*, encoding a macrophage-specific perforin, has no effect on

phagocytosis. That *marco* deficiency does not completely abolish phagocytosis was not unexpected. One explanation might be that we used morpholinos, which generally produce a partial knockdown. A second explanation is that there are multiple receptors that can initiate phagocytosis of mycobacteria, such as the complement receptors (CRs) CR1, CR3, and CR4 that phagocytose opsonised *M. tuberculosis* (Hirsch et al., 1994; Schlesinger, 1993; Schlesinger et al., 1990), and the mannose receptors that interact with lipoarabinomannan (LAM) in the mycobacterial cell wall (Schlesinger et al., 1994, 1996). Therefore, it is remarkable that knockdown of a single scavenger receptor, Marco, causes a significant delay in the phagocytosis of *M. marinum*. This indicates that apparently other receptors cannot fully compensate for the reduction of Marco.

When trying to establish whether Marco also plays a role in the phagocytosis of apoptotic or necrotic macrophages infected with *M. marinum*, we found image quantification of this process extremely difficult due to the sporadic occurrence and the varying location of these events. This prompted us to create an inducible system in which we could provoke cell death of a subpopulation of macrophages. Using this system, we found no evidence for a function of Marco in phagocytosis of dead cells resulting from toxification. However, it is possible that a null mutant of *marco,* which is currently not available, might reveal a stronger phenotype. Furthermore, we cannot exclude that Marco may still play a scavenging role during infection-induced cell death.

Studies using macrophages isolated from MARCO$^{-/-}$ mice have demonstrated that MARCO is preferentially utilised to "tether" mycobacterial TDM to the macrophage and to activate the TLR2 signalling pathway in response to this virulence factor (Bowdish et al., 2009). This signalling not only requires MARCO and TLR2 but also CD14, which functions as a co-receptor. CD14 is suggested to enhance the physical proximity of bacterial lipopeptides to the TLR1/2 heterodimers, without binding directly to the receptor complex (Brightbill et al., 1999; Manukyan et al., 2005; Nakata et al., 2006). However, CD14 alone cannot facilitate the TLR1/2-mediated response to bacterial lipopeptides because an additional co-receptor, such as MARCO, is needed (Bowdish et al., 2009). Macrophages from MARCO$^{-/-}$ mice also produced markedly lower levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines in response to infection with virulent *M. tuberculosis*. In addition, MARCO has been shown to function in the non-opsonic recognition of *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, which leads to increased Nod2- and TLR2/CD14-dependent chemokine and cytokine production and, ultimately, the recruitment of effector monocytes/macrophages (Dorrington et al., 2013). Here we confirm the finding that Marco functions as an essential player in the establishment of a pro-inflammatory response to mycobacteria in an *in vivo* infection model. However, the accessory molecule CD14 that is shown to interact with MARCO during this signalling process in mice does not exist in the zebrafish genome (Iliev et al., 2005). Our results therefore indicate that zebrafish Marco is capable of functioning independently of the co-receptor CD14 in mediating a pro-inflammatory response to *M. marinum*. Since Tlr2 is conserved within fish and is capable of recognising (myco)bacterial ligands (Meijer et al., 2004; Ribeiro et al., 2010), it is still likely that Marco functions as a co-receptor of Tlr2 in the recognition and phagocytosis of *M. marinum*.

5. Conclusion

Other interactions between scavenger receptors and TLR signalling are also known. Macrophages of mice have been shown to up-regulate *Marco* via LPS-induced TLR4 signalling, which can be a mechanism to increase phagocytic activity (Chen et al., 2010). Similarly, when we infect zebrafish with *S. typhimurium*, an LPS-containing pathogen, we observe induction of *marco* (Kanwal et al., 2013). In the present study, we have demonstrated that *marco* is also induced during the early stage (4 hpi) of *M. marinum* infection. The up-regulation of *marco* at this stage coincides with the time point during which the host produces a Marco-dependent pro-inflammatory response to *M. marinum*.

In this study we show that Marco is important for rapid phagocytosis of *M. marinum*, a process that most likely reoccurs during the development of granuloma-like structures when bacteria are released from necrotic cells. Marco is also is essential for the maximum induction of the initial pro-inflammatory response towards *M. marinum* infection, and remains a determining factor for the immune response signature at later stages of infection. All these factors probably contribute to the fact that *marco* deficiency leads to increased *M. marinum* growth in the zebrafish infection model. The broad range of functions that scavenger receptors have is not only a result of the many ligands that they recognise, but also of the various co-receptors that they partner with. This combination enables them to mount a highly versatile response. The fact that CD14, one of the co-receptors of MARCO that has been proposed to aid in the cytokine response regulation, is missing in zebrafish highlights the necessity of future work to unravel the signal transduction pathway associated with Marco in zebrafish.

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Appendix:Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at doi:10.1016/j.dci.2014.07.022.

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