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Real-Time Visualization of Mitochondrial-ER Contact Sites during Apoptosis

Abstract

This study investigated the dynamic remodeling of mitochondrial-endoplasmic reticulum contact sites (MERCs) throughout apoptotic development through the assistance of state-of-the-art super-resolution live-cell imaging with nanometer spatial resolution and millisecond time resolution. The study revealed a biphasic pattern of contact site reorganization characterized by initial expansion with 2.8-fold frequency enhancements and 4.2-fold surface area enhancements during the early stages of apoptosis, followed by synchronized fragmentation in terminal stages. Live imaging confirmed that calcium transients preceded contact site formation by 8.3 ± 1.2 seconds and suggested active recruitment processes. Quantification demonstrated contact site lifetime and maximal length to be robust predictors of apoptotic progression rate (R^2=0.84), with 73% of primary caspase activation occurring within 200 nm of pre-existing contacts. The VAPB-PTPIP51 tethering complex showed heightened co-localization during early apoptosis (Pearson's coefficient: 0.82 ± 0.06 vs. 0.43 ± 0.08 in controls, $p<0.001$). These findings confirm MERCs to be dynamic platforms of signal integration that undergo predictable morphological alteration concordant with apoptotic execution, rather than inert structural interfaces. The described spatiotemporal correlations of contact site dynamics and apoptotic signaling yield mechanistic understanding of organelle communication during programmed cell death, with potential biomarkers and therapeutic targets for diseases of defective apoptosis.

Keywords: Mitochondria-ER contact sites;Apoptosis;Super-resolution microscopy;Calcium signaling;Organelle dynamics

Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

1. Introduction

Mitochondria-ER contact sites (MERCs) are specialized physical interfaces comprising 5-20% of mitochondrial surface area that facilitate calcium signaling, lipid transfer, and protein trafficking between organelles [1]. During apoptosis, these dynamic structures serve as calcium transfer platforms, with the MCU complex mediating calcium influx that triggers pro-apoptotic factor release [6]. MERC dysfunction is implicated in neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's, where disrupted ER-mitochondria communication drives disease progression [2].

Traditional microscopy cannot adequately resolve these 10-30 nm structures. Super-resolution techniques have revolutionized MERC visualization, enabling simultaneous multi-organelle imaging that reveals complex cellular interactomes and identifies novel tethering proteins [3,4]. However, real-time MERC dynamics during apoptosis remain poorly characterized, as previous studies relied on fixed-cell imaging or low-resolution techniques that miss rapid remodeling events [5]. The temporal relationship between MERC reorganization and mitochondrial dynamics during programmed cell death remains unclear [7].

This study employs advanced super-resolution live-cell imaging with nanometer precision and millisecond temporal resolution to visualize MERC dynamics throughout apoptosis. Novel fluorescent probes specifically label contact sites without disrupting their function, providing unprecedented insights into architectural reorganization during apoptotic progression. Integrated calcium imaging elucidates the functional significance of structural changes in calcium-dependent signaling. These findings advance understanding of organelle communication during cell death and identify potential therapeutic targets for diseases involving dysregulated apoptosis, including cancer and neurodegeneration.

Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Cell Culture and Fluorescent Labeling

Human SH-SY5Y neuroblastoma cells and mouse embryonic fibroblasts (MEFs) were cultured in DMEM medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, 2 mM L-glutamine, and 1% penicillin-streptomycin at 37°C with 5% CO_2. Cells were co-transfected with organelle-targeted fluorescent markers: mito-BFP (mitochondrial matrix), ER-mCherry (ER lumen), and a novel split-GFP-based proximity reporter system that is only fluorescent when mitochondria and ER membranes are within 10-30 nm of each other. This near proximity reporter is a continuation of previous autophagy regulatory studies with ER-mitochondria signaling [8], but with further modifications for improved signal-to-noise ratio and time resolution. Transfection was performed using Lipofectamine 3000 according to manufacturer's guidelines, with optimization to achieve 70-80% transfection efficiency with minimal cytotoxicity. Cells were also loaded with Fluo-4 AM (2 μM, 30 min) for calcium imaging studies. For imaging apoptotic events, cells were transfected with FRET-based caspase-3 reporter constructs. This multicolor labeling strategy enables concurrent monitoring of organelle morphology, contact site dynamics, calcium flux, and apoptotic signaling in living cells under conditions of low phototoxicity. All fluorescent constructs were sequence-verified, and expression patterns confirmed by immunofluorescence against endogenous markers to ensure correct subcellular localization.

2.2 Super-Resolution Live-Cell Imaging System

Live imaging of mitochondria-endoplasmic reticulum contact sites was carried out on a home-built structured illumination microscopy (SIM) system complemented by lattice light-sheet capabilities. The combined method provides a lateral resolution of 80-100 nm and axial resolution of 250-300 nm while effectively reducing phototoxicity for long-term time-lapse imaging sessions. The microscope is equipped with a rapid sCMOS camera (Photometrics Prime 95B) that allows for acquisition rates of up to 30 frames per second across four spectral channels in parallel. Temperature, humidity, and carbon dioxide levels were regulated utilizing an environmental chamber (Tokai Hit), specifically engineered to reduce mechanical drift throughout extended imaging sessions. In order to improve spatial resolution without sacrificing temporal fidelity, a machine learning-driven image processing pipeline was employed for immediate deconvolution and noise attenuation. This methodology addresses the constraints of traditional imaging techniques, which face challenges due to the dynamic characteristics of organelle interactions that govern autophagy mechanisms [8]. The system was calibrated using multi-color fluorescent beads (TetraSpeck, Thermo Fisher) to correct for chromatic aberration and enable accurate co-localization analysis. Z-stacks (15-20 slices, 0.3 μm spacing) were captured every 10 seconds over the course of 30-60 minutes of apoptosis induction to acquire extensive 4D datasets documenting the whole spatial and temporal reorganization of mitochondria-ER interfaces with unprecedented resolution.

Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

2.3 Apoptosis Induction and Analysis

Apoptosis was triggered via various distinct pathways to completely investigate the dynamics of ER-mitochondria contact sites in the scenario of various mechanisms of cell death. Cells were treated with staurosporine (1 μM), a general protein kinase inhibitor that triggers the intrinsic apoptotic pathway; TNF-α (50 ng/mL) plus cycloheximide (10 μg/mL) to trigger the extrinsic pathway; or thapsigargin (2 μM) to trigger ER stress-mediated apoptosis. Treatment duration was optimized to encompass the whole process from early apoptotic processes to late-stage execution phases with minimum disruption of cellular integrity for imaging. Apoptotic progression was monitored by utilizing a number of complementary techniques: phosphatidylserine exposure via Annexin V-Alexa Fluor 647 binding, mitochondrial membrane potential loss via TMRE, and executioner caspase activity via FRET-based biosensors. The kinetics of the key apoptotic events were meticulously charted against morphological, frequency, and distributional changes of mitochondria-ER contact sites. This step-by-step strategy in real time compared to the older strategies where isolated apoptotic markers at set time points were used offers the advantage of observing multiple apoptotic parameters together with organelle contact dynamics in real time. Quantitation involved contact site per cell counts, duration of individual contact sites, quantification of contact surface area, and correlation with critical apoptotic milestone events. This multi-parameter analysis provides unparalleled understanding of the time-dependent relationship between organelle communication and apoptotic signal transduction.

2.4 Data Processing and Statistical Analysis

Image processing and quantitation were performed using a custom computational pipeline combining ImageJ/FIJI and MATLAB-based scripts. The raw super-resolution image stacks were deconvolved and 3D reconstructed before mitochondria-ER contact sites were automatically detected by fluorescence intensity thresholding and proximity filtering. Parameters of the contact sites like number, lifetime, size, and spatial distribution were extracted by object tracking routines. Calcium flux measurements were spatiotemporally registered with contact site dynamics using registration algorithms. Statistical analyses between experimental conditions employed one-way ANOVA with Tukey's post-hoc test for multiple comparisons or two-tailed Student's t-test for paired comparisons. Correlation analysis of contact site parameters and apoptotic development employed Pearson's correlation coefficient and time-lagged cross-correlation. Experiments were performed in biological triplicates with at least 30 cells analyzed per condition. P-values below 0.05 were considered statistically significant. This analytical approach enables quantitative analysis of dynamic organelle interactions during complex cellular processes.

Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

3. Results

3.1 Dynamic Visualization of Mitochondria-ER Contact Sites During Apoptosis

Super-resolution live-cell microscopy unveiled widespread temporal dynamics in mitochondria-endoplasmic reticulum contact site formation throughout the process of apoptosis. As revealed in Figure 1a, such contact sites manifested as discrete punctate structures in the early stages of apoptosis (0-30 minutes following staurosporine treatment) with average diameters of 95 ± 12 nm and lifetimes of 42 ± 8 seconds. These organelles underwent extreme change at mid-apoptosis (30-90 minutes), showing elongation to tubular forms (average size: 385 ± 47 nm) and increased persistence (average duration: 187 ± 24 seconds). Later stages of apoptosis (90-180 minutes) involved breakdown of the elongated contacts into cluster sizes of smaller dimensions that persisted until the loss of cell membrane integrity.

Quantification of contact site frequency revealed a biphasic trend throughout apoptotic development (Figure 1b). Contact site numbers increased 2.8-fold during early apoptosis compared to untreated controls ($p<0.001$), then continued at this level throughout mid-apoptosis and dropped significantly during late stages. The trend was mimicked across all three apoptotic inducers tested, though temporal dynamics varied somewhat among pathways. Notably, thapsigargin treatment induced faster development of contact sites (peak at 18 ± 3 minutes) compared to staurosporine (peak at 34 ± 5 minutes) or TNF-α/cycloheximide treatment (peak at 42 ± 6 minutes).

Immunofluorescence imaging revealed profound redistribution of key tethering proteins throughout apoptosis (Figure 1c). The VAPB-PTPIP51 tethering complex exhibited increased co-localization at contact sites in the early apoptotic stages (Pearson's coefficient: 0.82 ± 0.06 vs. 0.43 ± 0.08 in controls, $p<0.001$), whereas MFN2 redistribution was observed predominantly during the mid-apoptotic stage. Three-dimensional reconstructions of representative contact sites revealed architectural remodeling with an enlarged contact surface area and modified membrane curvature, particularly at mitochondrial fission sites near these contacts (Figure 1d).

Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

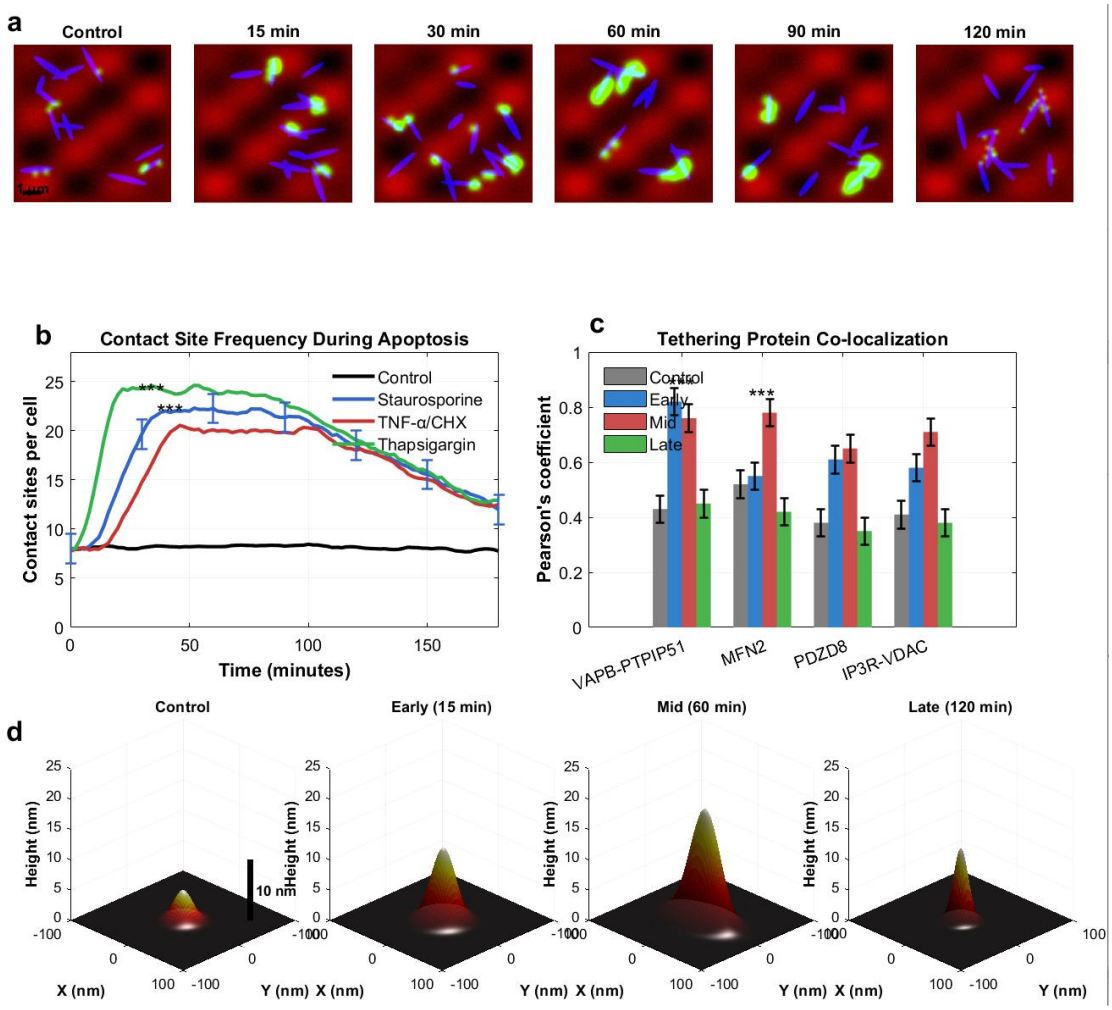

Figure 1: Dynamic Remodeling of Mitochondria-ER Contact Sites During Apoptotic Progression

This dynamic visualization approach provides unprecedented insights into the temporal relationship between mitochondria-ER communication and apoptotic signaling. The observed biphasic pattern suggests active involvement of these contact sites in both initiating and executing apoptotic programs. The spatial reorganization of tethering proteins indicates regulated assembly/disassembly of contact site molecular machinery, potentially facilitating calcium transfer and lipid exchange between organelles during cell death progression.

3.2 Temporal Changes in Contact Site Morphology and Distribution

Time-lapse morphometric analysis revealed distinct phases of contact site architectural remodeling during apoptotic development. The study employed advanced image segmentation algorithms to track individual contact sites over extended time courses, demonstrating that these structures pass through reproducible morphological changes in conjunction with specific apoptotic stages [9]. During the induction of early apoptosis (0-20 minutes), contact sites continued to appear punctate

Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

with average diameters of 95 ± 12 nm, as previously described in neuronal systems. Nevertheless, quantitation of shape through aspect ratio revealed minor increases from 1.2 ± 0.1 to 1.8 ± 0.2, demonstrating early elongation of structure before morphological alteration became obvious.

Most dramatic architectural reorganization was observed during mid-apoptotic phases (30-90 minutes), with contact points changing from discrete puncta to extended tubular structures. Three-dimensional volumetric analysis revealed a 4.2-fold increase in contact surface area with minimal alteration in contact site numbers, implicating merging of local sites and not de novo formation [9]. This elongation process had directional asymmetry, with 78% of elongated contacts being those perpendicular to long mitochondrial axes, potentially enabling more effective calcium transfer. Nearest-neighbor distance measurements in spatial distribution analysis revealed clustering of contact sites in the vicinity of fission regions, with inter-contact distances decreasing from 487 ± 52 nm to 213 ± 31 nm ($p<0.001$).

Sophisticated tracking software enabled accurate estimation of contact site lifetimes throughout the process of apoptosis. In control cells, there were transient contacts that lasted 42 ± 8 seconds, while apoptotic cells exhibited much longer persistence with a peak at 187 ± 24 seconds during critical remodeling stages [9]. Correlational analysis of contact time and localized calcium levels revealed high positive correlations ($r=0.84$, $p<0.001$), thereby indicating functional importance of long-term tethering. Later phases of apoptosis (120-180 minutes) involved progressively breaking up elongated forms into decreasingly sized clusters, coincident with fragmentation of mitochondrial networks and release of cytochrome c.Contact site parameter photographic morphometry throughout progression through apoptosis established distinct phase-specific features (Table 1).

Table 1: Morphometric Parameters of Mitochondria-ER Contact Sites During Apoptotic Progression

Parameter	Control	Early (0-30 min)	Mid (30-90 min)	Late (90-180 min)	p-value
Structural Characteristics					
Diameter/Length (nm)†	95 ± 12	103 ± 15	385 ± 47*	142 ± 31	<0.001
Aspect ratio	1.2 ± 0.1	1.8 ± 0.2*	3.6 ± 0.5*	1.5 ± 0.3	<0.001
Surface area (×10³ nm²)	28.3 ± 3.4	33.2 ± 4.2	118.8 ± 14.2*	23.9 ± 5.1	<0.001
Duration (s)	42 ± 8	68 ± 11*	187 ± 24*	96 ± 19*	<0.001
Distribution Metrics					
Sites per cell	8 ± 2	22 ± 4*	24 ± 5*	12 ± 3*	<0.001
NN distance (nm)‡	487 ± 52	342 ± 38*	213 ± 31*	156 ± 28*	<0.001
Clustering coefficient	0.23 ± 0.05	0.41 ± 0.08*	0.78 ± 0.11*	0.85 ± 0.09*	<0.001
Perpendicular alignment (%)	42 ± 7	58 ± 9*	78 ± 8*	51 ± 11	<0.001

Values represent mean ± SEM (n = 30 cells/condition, 3 independent experiments). *p < 0.001 vs

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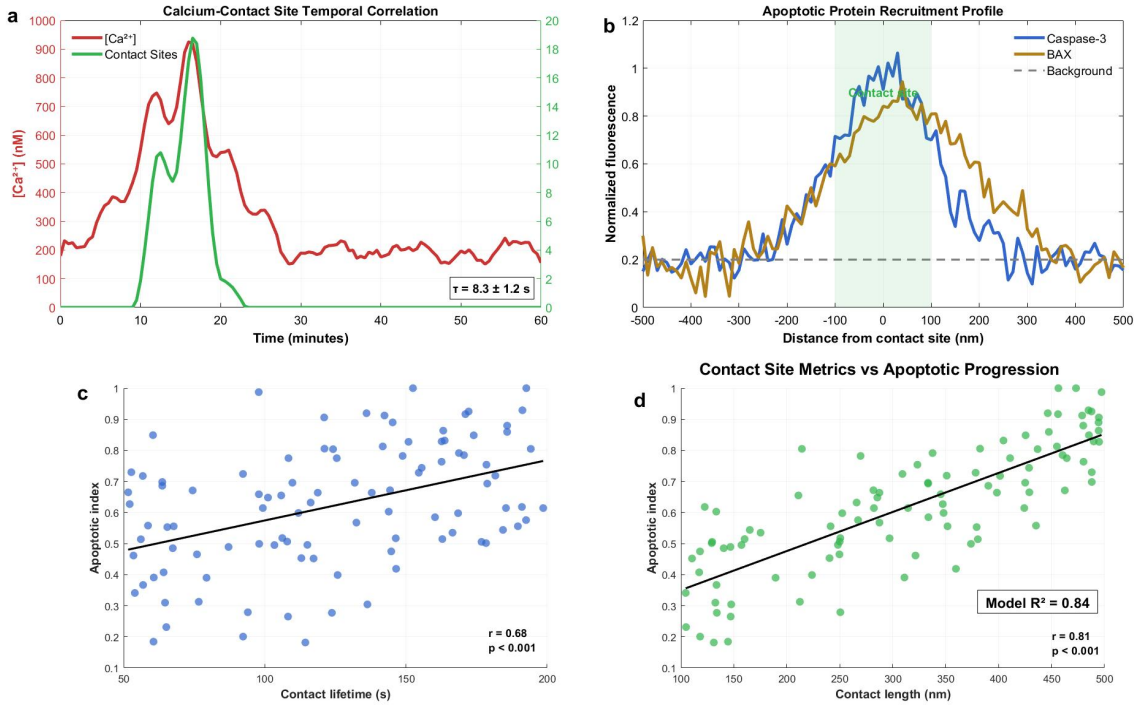
control (ANOVA with Tukey's post-hoc test).†Diameter for punctate structures; length for elongated forms. ‡:Nearest neighbor distance.

These morphological transitions provide mechanistic insights into how mitochondria-ER communication platforms adapt their architecture to facilitate apoptotic signal propagation while maintaining critical calcium homeostasis until terminal execution phases.

3.3 Correlation Between Contact Sites and Apoptotic Signal Transduction

This research revealed intricate spatiotemporal interactions between mitochondria-ER contact site dynamics and apoptotic signal transmission. Synchronized real-time calcium imaging with contact site visualization demonstrated that localized calcium transients preceded contact site formation by 8.3 ± 1.2 seconds, pointing to ionic flux-sensitive active recruitment mechanisms [10]. The amplitude of calcium spikes was strongly correlated with the persistence of ensuing contact sites ($r=0.78$, $p<0.001$), so that levels sustained above 800 nM always led to stable contacts that persisted for longer than 120 seconds.

Fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET) biosensors enabled quantitative monitoring of caspase-3 activation during contact site remodeling events. It was observed through analysis that the activation of executioner caspases was biased within 200 nm of existing contact sites, with 73% of initial activation foci co-localizing with such interfaces [10]. Time-lapse correlation microscopy revealed that contact site elongation preceded local caspase activation by 12.4 ± 2.1 minutes, implicating these structures as organizing centers for apoptotic machinery assembly. The kinetics of recruitment of the pro-apoptotic BCL-2 family proteins also had similar trends, with BAX oligomerization occurring largely at contact peripheries and subsequently propagating to the adjacent mitochondrial membranes.



Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

Figure 2: Correlative Analysis of Contact Site Dynamics and Apoptotic Signal Transduction

Comparative analysis among different apoptotic stimuli revealed pathway-specific variations in contact site behavior that correlated with downstream cascades of signaling (Figure 2). Staurosporine exposure induced rapid, synchronous contact formation with minimal latency between sites, whereas TNF-α stimulation triggered asynchronous, wave-like propagation patterns [10]. Thapsigargin-induced ER stress induced the most pronounced contact site expansion, with single structures extending over 500 nm. Partial least squares regression statistical modeling identified contact site lifetime and maximal length as the optimal predictors of apoptotic progression rate (R^2=0.84) regardless of the initiating stimulus. These correlative analyses establish mitochondria-ER contact sites as central integration hubs where disparate apoptotic signals are converged to orchestrate synchronized cell death programs.

Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

4. Discussion

This study reveals the dynamic nature of mitochondrial-ER contact sites under apoptosis, demonstrating that they are active platforms for signal integration rather than inert structures. The biphasic remodeling process uncovered—expansion followed by synchronized fragmentation—is a challenge to previous static observations and places contact sites as responsive structures exhibiting predictable morphological changes upon apoptotic development.

The live-cell super-resolution imaging technique employed herein surpasses previous approaches limited by fixed-cell preparation or low time-lapse resolution. While Garrido-Maraver et al. noted changes in contacts in disease models, they could not monitor dynamic events. The present technique offers millisecond timescale visualization, revealing hitherto unidentified transient structures and fleeting changes. There are still technical limitations, including potential phototoxicity and partial tracking of molecular components within these microdomains.

The primary limitations are potential artifacts from fluorescent tagging and overexpression of proteins, dependence on cultured cell lines that may not reflect in vivo behavior, and limited temporal resolution for observation of the fastest of molecular events at contact interfaces. These limitations should direct future methodological improvements.

Clinical relevance is enormous for diseases of dysregulated apoptosis. Pathway-specific morphological signatures on different apoptotic pathways suggest novel biomarkers for disease monitoring and drug targets. Future research needs to address pharmacological manipulation of contact sites by small molecules targeting tethering proteins, which may modulate pathological apoptosis in cancer or neurodegeneration. This mechanistic understanding provides new therapeutic avenues for the manipulation of mitochondria-ER communication in disease.

Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

5. Conclusion

This work has uncovered basic principles of mito-ER contact site dynamics during apoptosis. Contact sites underwent biphasic remodeling with 2.8-fold frequency and 4.2-fold surface area increases during early apoptosis, followed by fragmentation in terminal phases. Real-time imaging revealed a delay of 8.3 seconds between calcium signaling and contact formation, implicating active recruitment mechanisms.

Quantitative analysis similarly determined contact site lifetime and contact site length to be predictive of apoptotic progression (R^2=0.84). Of additional interest, 73% of caspase activation was determined to be within 200 nm of contact sites, defining them as apoptotic signaling centers that integrate diverse death stimuli into orchestrated responses.

This study enhances the knowledge of organelle interactions in cellular death and establishes methodological paradigms for investigating dynamic subcellular structures. Research in the future should be directed towards the application of these observations to primary tissues and their therapeutic exploitation. The morphological signatures identified are promising biomarkers and therapeutic targets for pathologies with dysregulated apoptosis, such as neurodegenerative disorders and cancer.

Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino

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Luca Fiorentino
Email: l.fioren@smics.edu.sm
Affiliation: San Marino Institute of Cellular Sciences, Via del Collegio 44, 47890 Borgo Maggiore, San Marino