Sulfoxonium ylides for direct methylation of N-heterocycles in water

Prithwish Ghosh  
Sungkyunkwan University

Na Yeon Kwon  
Sungkyunkwan University

Saegun Kim  
Sungkyunkwan University

Sangil Han  
Sungkyunkwan University

Suk Hun Lee  
Sungkyunkwan University

Won An  
Sungkyunkwan University

Neeraj Mishra  
Sungkyunkwan University

Soo Bong Han  
Korea Research Institute of Chemical Technology

In Su Kim (✉ insukim@skku.edu)  
Sungkyunkwan University  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2665-9431

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Abstract

The direct methylation of N-heterocycles is an important transformation for the advancement of pharmaceuticals, agrochemicals, functional materials, and other chemical entities. Herein, the unprecedented C(sp2)–H methylation of iminoamido N-heterocycles as nucleoside base analogues is described. Notably, trimethylsulfoxonium salt was employed as a methylating agent under aqueous conditions. A wide substrate scope and excellent level of functional group tolerance were attained. Moreover, this method can be readily applied to the site-selective methylation of azauracil nucleosides. The feasibility of gram-scale reactions and various transformations of the products highlight the synthetic potential of the developed method. Combined deuterium-labeling experiments aided the elucidation of a plausible reaction mechanism.

Introduction

Methylation is one of vital processes in biological systems because DNA and histone methylation is responsible for gene expression without affecting the gene sequence\(^1\)–\(^2\). For example, the C(sp\(^2\))–H methylation of uracil of deoxyuridine-5’-monophosphate (dUMP) by thymidylate synthase is a well-known metabolic process for DNA biosynthesis and RNA post-translational modification\(^3\)–\(^4\). In addition, methylation of cysteine can affect signaling pathways by disrupting ubiquitin-chain sensing in NF-κB activation\(^5\). Methylation is also an important modification in medicinal chemistry and drug discovery, as physical and pharmacological properties of lead candidates can be favorably or adversely affected with the mere addition of a methyl group\(^6\). To address this challenge, number of synthetic strategies have been explored to install methyl and alkyl groups on N-heterocyclic molecules\(^7\)–\(^9\). In particular, alkylation beyond monoazines, i.e., that of diazines and triazines, has emerged as a hot topic in this area due to the relevance of a number of bioactive molecules\(^10\)–\(^14\).

The conventional approach is the transition-metal-catalyzed cross-coupling reactions between halogenated N-heterocycles and organometallic reagents (Fig. 1a)\(^15\)–\(^16\). Minisci-type alkylations using alkyl radicals\(^17\)–\(^22\) and metal-catalyzed C–H alkylations\(^23\)–\(^30\) of N-heterocycles constitute the current established protocols. Alternative routes including the metal-free C–H alkylations of preactivated N-heterocycles have been also developed\(^31\)–\(^34\). Recently, our group described the reductive C2-alkylation of heterocyclic N-oxides using phosphonium ylides (Fig. 1b)\(^35\)–\(^36\). In this reaction, a concerted [3+2] cycloaddition between a 1,3-dipolar fragment of pyridine N-oxides and zwitterionic phosphonium ylides provides aza-oxaphospholane intermediates, which subsequently undergo aromatization to afford C2-alkylated pyridines. A key driving force might be the formation of a strong P=O bond (bond dissociation energy of \(\text{Ph}_3\text{P}=\text{O} = 529 \text{kJ/mol}\)).
Since the landmark discovery by Johnson, Corey, and Chaykovsky in the 1960s\textsuperscript{37–39}, sulfoxonium ylides have been widely employed as methylene surrogates in epoxidations, cyclopropanations, and aziridinations via intermolecular nucleophilic addition into electron-deficient \( \pi \)-unsaturated compounds, such as carbonyls, \( \alpha,\beta \)-unsaturated compounds, and imines\textsuperscript{40–43}. However, there are no reports on the direct alkylation of \( N \)-heterocyclic compounds using alkyl sulfoxonium ylides. Moreover, previous reports related to sulfoxonium ylides predominantly rely on the use of organic solvents, which preclude them as environmentally benign processes\textsuperscript{44–48}. Herein, we describe the unprecedented \( \text{C}(\text{sp}^2)\text{–H} \) alkylation of iminoamido diazines and triazines as nucleoside base analogues with alkyl sulfoxonium salts. Of particular importance is the unconventional mechanistic pathway for the imino alkylation in aqueous media, which can provide novel insights into Corey-Chaykovsky reagents (Fig. 1c). Moreover, the amenability of this protocol to the pharmaceutical industry is attributed to the use of H\( _2 \)O as the greenest solvent and KOH as an economical reagent.

**Results**

**Investigation of reaction conditions.** Optimization of reaction conditions commenced with the coupling between pyrazinone 1a and trimethylsulfoxonium iodide (2a), as shown in Table 1. The formation of C3-methylated pyrazinone 3a was achieved with the use of KO\text{t-Bu} in THF at 100 °C (entry 1). This reaction could likewise be performed in protic solvents, such as MeOH (entry 3). Surprisingly, aqueous media accelerated the coupling reaction between 1a and 2a to afford 3a in 84% yield within 2 h (entry 4). It should be noted that the aziridine compound generated from the imine functionality by the Corey-Chaykovsky aziridination was not observed in all cases, suggesting that the reaction pathways of the Corey-Chaykovsky reaction and the \( \text{C}(\text{sp}^2)\text{–H} \) methylation reported herein are distinct. More importantly, this reaction was successful with the use of KOH, a cost-efficient base, to provide 3a in 91% yield (entry 5). Screening of other bases yielded inferior results (entries 6 and 7). Control experiments revealed that the loading amount of KOH and reaction temperature were crucial for increasing the yield of 3a (entries 8 and 9) (see Table 1 in the Supplementary Files).

**Substrate scope with respect to pyrazinones.** With the optimized reaction conditions in hand, the substrate scope of pyrazinones was examined (Table 2). A wide range of \( N \)-alkylated and \( N \)-benzylated pyrazinones 1b–1f were found to be suitable substrates for this transformation, providing the corresponding C3-methylated pyrazinones 3b–3f in high yields. Substrates 1c–1f produced the corresponding products in low yields in H\( _2 \)O, presumably due to the presence of hydrophobic substituents. After careful screening of reaction conditions, it was established that protic solvents, such as EtOH and \( i \)-PrOH, resulted in higher levels of conversion. Notably, \( N \)tetrahydropyranyl and \( N \)benzyl groups are readily removable via conventional protocols for further elaboration of the free-(NH)-amido group. In addition, we observed the successful methylation of \( N \)-arylated pyrazinones 1g–1l. Halogen-substituted and electron-rich \( N \)-aryl groups (1g and 1j) displayed good reactivity, whereas electron-deficient \( N \)-aryl groups (1h, 1i, 1k and 1l) were relatively less reactive. The electronic effect on this transformation was likewise observed for the C4-arylated pyrazinones 1m–1p. The tolerance of cyano
and bromo groups presents valuable opportunities for further versatile synthetic transformation. Moreover, tri-substituted pyrazinone adduct \( 3q \) was formed smoothly in 73% yield. Furthermore, the site-selective methylation of \( 1r-1t \) was successfully achieved under the standard reaction conditions, affording the corresponding products \( 3r-3t \) in high yields. (see Table 2 in the Supplementary Files)

**Substrate scope with respect to sulfoxonium salts.** Having established the broad scope of pyrazinones, the scope of sulfoxonium salts \( 2b-2e \) was then evaluated. In the case of ethylation and propylation, trialkyl sulfoxonium chlorides were employed as alkylating agents to afford the corresponding products \( 3u \) (70%) and \( 3v \) (77%). The current protocol could be implemented using Johnson’s sulfoxonium salts\(^{49} \) \( 2d \) and \( 2e \) to furnish cyclopropylated pyrazinone \( 3w \) (45%) and methylated pyrazinone \( 3a \) (35%), respectively.

**Substrate scope with respect to quinoxalinones.** Meanwhile, the scope of quinoxalinones \( 4a-4l \) was explored (Table 3). \( N \)-Alkylated quinoxalinones \( 4a-4c \) and \( N \)-benzylated quinoxalinone \( 4d \) were successfully reacted with \( 2a \) to provide C3-methylated quinoxalinone adducts \( 5a-5d \) in excellent yields. Additionally, quinoxalinones \( 4e \) and \( 4f \) were coupled with \( 2a \) to afford \( 5e \) (94%) and \( 5f \) (32%), respectively. The reaction also readily proceeded with \( N \)-arylated quinoxalinones \( 4g-4k \), furnishing the corresponding products \( 5g-5k \). Notably, the electronic property of the quinoxalinone or \( N \)-aryl rings had a profound effect on this transformation. For example, the methylation of highly electron-deficient quinoxalinone derivatives \( 4f, 4h \) and \( 4k \) was less efficient. Finally, pyrido-pyrazinone \( 4l \) also participated in the methylation reaction to provide \( 5l \) in 78% yield. (see Table 3 in the Supplementary Files)

**Substrate scope with respect to azauracils and azauracil nucleosides.** Azauracil, an azapyrimidinone analogue of uracil, is of interest in medicinal chemistry due to its potential to inhibit various species of microorganisms. The ribonucleosides of 6-azauracil have been shown to display diverse biological profiles such as antiviral, antitumor, and antifungal activities\(^{50-53} \). Based on the methylation of uracil in nature, we envisioned the direct alkylation of 6-azauracils and 6-azauracil nucleosides (Scheme 4). \( N \)-Substituted azauracil \( 6a \) was smoothly alkylated with \( 2a-2c \) to afford the corresponding products \( 7a-7c \) in satisfactory yields. In addition, triazinones \( 6b-6e \) were compatible with this process. It is noteworthy that hydroxyl and 2-pyranosyl groups in \( 7e \) and \( 7g \) were also tolerable. Direct C(sp\(^2\))–H methylation of 2’-deoxy-6-azauridine nucleoside \( 6f \) was successfully achieved by using K\(_2\)PO\(_4\) as a base, providing \( 7h \) in 94% yield. Moreover, azauracil ribonucleoside \( 6g \) was also methylated with \( 2a \) to afford \( 7i \) in 91% yield.

**Mechanistic investigation and proposed reaction mechanism.** To garner mechanistic insights into this process, a series of deuterium-labeling experiments were performed (Fig. 2a). Treatment of \( 1a \) with KOH in the presence of D\(_2\)O resulted in 45% and 94% deuterium incorporation at the C3 and C6 positions, respectively. Partial deuteration (20%) on the N–Me group was also observed. These results indicate that a hydroxide anion possibly undergo nucleophilic addition onto imino functionality of pyrazinone \( 1a \) to generate a nitrogen anion intermediate, which can undergo a deuteration/deprotonation equilibrium reaction at the C3 and C6 positions (see the Supporting Information for the proposed mechanism). The reaction of \( 1a \) with \( 2a \) in the presence of D\(_2\)O under otherwise identical reaction conditions provided 93%
deuteration at the benzylic CH\(_3\) moiety as well as 73% deuteration at the C6 position, suggesting C3-methylation by sulfoxonium ylide on 1a followed by subsequent deproto-deuteration at the benzylic position. Benzylic deuteration was further confirmed by the reaction of 3a in aqueous KOH solution. To evaluate the unique reactivity of pyrazinones as cyclic iminoamides, control experiments were performed with N-aryl 2-pyridone and 2\(H\)-benzo[b][1,4]oxazin-2-one. No formation of methylated adducts under the standard reaction conditions was observed, revealing that the cyclic iminoamide backbone is crucial for the C(sp\(^2\))–H methylation (see the Supporting Information for the details). Based on the deuterium-labeling experiment results and previous literature related to sulfoxonium ylides\(^8\), we propose a plausible reaction mechanism (Fig. 2b). Sulfoxonium ylide A, derived from 2a and KOH, undergoes nucleophilic addition onto the imine moiety of 1a, generating intermediate B. Under basic aqueous conditions, protonation of the nitrogen anion and E2 elimination of intermediate B spontaneously occur to deliver intermediate C and DMSO. The release of DMSO was detected by GC-MS analysis of the crude reaction mixture. Finally, protonation of the exo-olefin in C occurs to afford the C3-methylated pyrazinone 3a.

**Synthetic applications.** To illustrate the synthetic potential of the developed protocol, gram-scale experiments were first performed (Fig. 3a). The reaction of pyrazinone 1a (2 g, 10.8 mmol) with 2a afforded 3a in 90% yield. In addition, a gram-scale reaction of quinoxalinone 4d was also successfully performed, providing 5d in 95% yield. It is noteworthy that both products 3a and 5d were isolated by simple filtration instead of column chromatography, indicating the capability of the developed method in process chemistry. Next, various transformations of the synthesized C3-methylated products were performed (Fig 3b). The Ni(II)-catalyzed cross-coupling reaction between 3a and benzyl alcohol gave 8a in 82% yield. Benzylic oxidation of 3a with SeO\(_2\) followed by reductive amination with 1-adamantylamine provided 8b in 40% yield. In addition, benzylic bromination of 5a and subsequent O-nucleophilic substitution with estrone furnished 8c in 50% yield. To demonstrate the utility of the N-protecting group, the tetrahydropyranoyl group on 3d was removed under acidic conditions to provide the free-(NH)-pyrazinone adduct in 90% yield, which further reacted with arylsulfonyl chloride to deliver 8d in 60% yield.

**Synthesis of tetra-substituted pyrazine.** To further demonstrate the utility of the developed methodology, the sequential transformation of N-benzylated pyrazinone 9a was performed (Fig. 4). Pyrazinone 9a was smoothly methylated with 2a to provide 9b in 82% yield. Removal of the benzyl group of 9b followed by treatment with PhPOCl\(_2\) afforded chloropyrazine 9c in 79% yield. Finally, Suzuki cross-coupling reaction between 9c and 2-thiophene boronic acid under Pd(II) catalysis provided tetra-substituted pyrazine 9d in 70% yield.

**Discussion**

In conclusion, we presented an unprecedented protocol for the direct C–H alkylation of N-heterocycles, including pyrazinones, quinoxalinones, and azauracils, using sulfoxonium salts as the alkylating agents. The use of aqueous solvent in the coupling reaction and the selective methylation of azauracil nucleosides under the developed reaction conditions are noteworthy. The synthetic applicability of this
method was demonstrated by successful gram-scale reactions and valuable synthetic transformations of
the methylated products, as well as by the synthesis of a tetra-substituted pyrazine via sequential
transformations. The findings of this study are expected to be of significant interest to organic and
medicinal chemists because of the synthetic simplicity, broad substrate scope, high efficiency, excellent
chemoselectivity, and environmentally benign nature of the developed methodology.

Methods

General methods. For the synthetic procedure and $^1$H, $^{13}$C and $^{19}$F NMR specta of all compounds in this
manuscript, see Supplementary Informations.

General procedure for the methylation of 3a. To an oven-dried sealed tube charged with 1-methyl-5-
phenylpyrazinone (1a) (37.6 mg, 0.2 mmol, 1.0 equiv.), KOH (33.6 mg, 0.6 mmol, 3.0 equiv.), and
trimethylsulfoxonium iodide (2a) (132.0 mg, 0.6 mmol, 3.0 equiv.) was added H$_2$O (1 mL) at room
temperature under air. The reaction mixture was allowed to stir at 100 °C for 2 h. The reaction mixture
was cooled to room temperature and filtered through a bed of Na$_2$SO$_4$. The solid bed was washed with a
mixture of CH$_2$Cl$_2$ and MeOH (9:1). The filtrate was concentrated under reduced pressure. The residue
was purified by flash chromatography (CH$_2$Cl$_2$/acetone = 97:3) to afford 36.0 mg of 3a in 90% yield.

Declarations

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Author Contributions

I.S.K. conceived and designed the experiments. I.S.K. and P.G. wrote the manuscript. P.G., N.Y.K., S.K. and
S.H. performed experiments and prepared the Supplementary Information. S.H.L., W.A., N.K.M. and S.B.H.
helped collecting some starting materials. P.G. and N.Y.K. contributed equally on this work. All authors
discussed the results and commented on the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional Information

Supplementary Information is available for this paer at https://

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to I.S.K.
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Tables

Due to technical limitations the Tables are available as a download in the Supplementary Files.

Figures
**Figure 1**

Direct C(sp2)−H alkylations. a Classification of N-heterocycle alkylations. b Methylation of activated N-heterocycles with phosphonium ylide. c Direct methylation of N-heterocycles with sulfoxonium ylide.
Figure 2

Insight into the reaction mechanism. a Mechanistic investigations using deuterium-labeling experiments. b Proposed reaction mechanism.
Figure 3

Synthetic applications. a Gram-scale reactions. b Synthetic transformations.
Figure 4

Synthesis of tetra-substituted pyrazine.

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