ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Antinociceptive grayanane-derived diterpenoids from flowers of *Rhododendron molle*

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Received 25 July 2019; received in revised form 23 August 2019; accepted 24 October 2019

**KEY WORDS**
Rhododendron molle; Diterpenoid; Grayanane; Dimeric; Antinociceptive; Analgesic

**Abstract** Twelve new grayanoids (1–12) along with five known compounds were isolated from flowers of *Rhododendron molle*. Their structures were fully characterized using a combination of spectroscopic analyses, computational calculations, and single crystal X-ray diffraction. Rhomollone A (1) possesses an unprecedented 5/6/6/5 tetra-cyclic ring system (B-nor grayanane) incorporating a cyclopentene-1,3-dione scaffold. Rhodomollein XLIII (2) is a dimeric grayanoid, containing a novel 14-membered heterocyclic ring with a C₂ symmetry axis. The antinociceptive activities of compounds 3, 4, 6, 7, and 12–17 were evaluated by an acetic acid-induced writhing test. Among them, compounds 3, 7, 12, 15 and 16 displayed significant antinociceptive activities at a dose of 20 mg/kg with inhibition rates ranging from 41.9% to 91.6%. Compounds 6 and 13 inhibited 46.0% and 39.4% of the acetic acid-induced writhes at a dose of 2 mg/kg, while compound 17 inhibited 34.3% of the writhes at a dose of 0.4 mg/kg.

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Peer review under responsibility of Institute of Materia Medica, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and Chinese Pharmaceutical Association.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apsb.2019.10.013

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1. Introduction

The flowers of *Rhododendron molle* (naoyanghua) have a long history of application in China and are still used for the alleviation of rheumatism arthralgia, migraine headache, and other pain symptoms. Our previous investigations have revealed several grayanane-type diterpenoids from the roots of *R. molle*, exhibiting highly potent antinociceptive activity. *R. molle* has been regarded as a prolific source of grayanane and related diterpenoids. Recently, we have reported studies on the chemical composition of the roots and fruits of *R. molle* in a series of papers, revealing the occurrence of new grayanane-related carbon skeletons, such as 1,10:2,3-disecograyanane, mollane (C-nor-D-homo-grayanane), and rhodomollane (D-homo-grayanane). Furthermore, Yao et al. have also discovered C-nor-grayanane, 2,3:5,6-disecograyanane, and mollebenzylane from the leaves of this herb.

In our continuing efforts to identify structurally unique and biologically interesting diterpenoids from rhododendrons, 17 compounds, including rhomollone A and rhodomollein XLIII, were obtained from the flowers of *R. molle*, collected in Guangxi province, China. Herein, we report the isolation, structural elucidation, and bioactivity of the compounds as well as a plausible biosynthetic pathway for 1.

2. Results and discussion

Rhomollone A, [α]_D^20_-5.0 (c 0.1, MeOH), was isolated as a white powder. Its molecular formula, C_{19}H_{26}O_{5}, was established by HR-ESIMS: m/z 357.1676, Calcd. for [M+Na]^+ 357.1672, indicating seven degrees of unsaturation. The IR spectrum suggests the presence of a hydroxy group (3256 cm⁻¹) and α,β-unsaturated ketone (1689 cm⁻¹) groups in 1. The ^1H NMR data (C_5D_5N, Table 1) of 1 display diagnostic signals for four tertiary methyls (δ_H 0.91, 2.96, 5.02, and 85.5 ppm), which are typical for grayanane derivatives.

![Figure 1](image-url) Structures of compounds 1–17 isolated from flowers of *R. molle*.
The analysis of the 1H−1H COSY spectrum of 1, aided by an HSQC experiment, revealed the connectivity of CH(9)−CH(11)−CH(12)−CH(13)−CH(14) (fragment a, bolded in Fig. 2). In the HMBC (heteronuclear multiple bond correlation) spectrum of 1 (Fig. 2), correlations from two gem-dimethyl singlets (H2-7 and H3-19) to carbons C-3 (dC 207.2), C-4 (dC 47.8), and C-5 (dC 206.4); from H2-7 to C-1 (dC 157.0), C-2 (dC 154.4), and C-3; and from H3-20 to C-1 allows a 2,2-dimethyl-4-cyclopentene-1,3-dione substructure (ring A in Fig. 1) to be defined. A six-membered ring (ring B in Fig. 1) was determined by the HMBC correlations from H2-7 to C-1, C-2, C-3, C-8, and C-9 as well as the correlations from H2-20 to C-1, C-9, and C-10. In the same way, the structures of rings C and D were established by the HMBC correlations from H2-7 and H2-15 to C-9 and C-14 (two ends of fragment a), which are the same as those of typical grayananes. Thus, the planar structure of 1 was determined to possess an unprecedented 5/6/6/5-fused ring system incorporating a cyclopentene-1,3-dione scaffold.

The relative stereochemistry for 1 was established by analysis of its NOESY (nuclear overhauser effect spectroscopy) spectrum. NOE correlations of H-14/H-12 and H-12/H-13 indicate the chair conformation of ring C, also suggesting the 1,3-diaxial orientation of H-12 and H-14 and the equatorial orientation of H-13. NOE correlation between H-9 and H-15b suggests that H-9 is equatorial because C-15 and C-16 must adopt a 1,3-diaxial orientation to form a bicyclo[3.2.1]octane ring system. In contrast, H3-17 correlates with H-12b, which means that C-17 is in the β-orientation. Therefore, key NOEs of H-14/H-12, H-12/H-13, H-9/H3-20, H-9/H-7b, H-9/H15b, H-15b/H3-17, and H-12b/H17 indicates that H-9, CH2-20, H-7b, H-15b, and CH3-17 are co-facial (Fig. 2).

Efforts to determine the absolute configuration of compound 1 using the modified Mosher’s method were undertaken. The reaction of 1 with the (S)- and (R)-MTPA acid chlorides gave the Mosher esters 1a and 1b, respectively. 1D and 2D NMR data allow assignment of the proton signals for 1a and 1b. Analysis of the ∆δex,R values for the two diastereomeric esters 1a and 1b (Fig. 3) enabled assignment of the absolute configuration at C-14 as R. Then, 8S, 9R, 10R, 13R, 14R, and 16R configurations could be assigned to 1 on the basis of relative configuration.

Fortunately, a crystal of 1a was obtained from MeOH/H2O. The crystal structure was obtained by X-ray diffraction (Fig. 4) with a Flack parameter of −0.2(4). The crystallographic data of 1 have been deposited (deposition number 1885773) at the Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre (CCDC, Cambridge, UK). The X-ray crystallographic data corroborated the planar structure and provided independent confirmation of the absolute configuration assignment of 1, obtained by the modified Mosher’s method.

Rhomollone A (1) is the first example of a rearranged grayanane skeleton with unique 5/6/6/5 tetra-cyclic ring system. We named this new skeleton “rhomollane”. The plausible biosynthetic origin of the rhomollane skeleton could be traced back to a grayanane precursor (rhodojaponin VI) as shown in Scheme 1. In the pathway we proposed, key steps involving oxidation, oxidative ring-opening, and intramolecular aldol condensation lead to the production of intermediate iv. Then, intermediate iv undergoes dehydration and decarboxylation steps to afford 1.

Rhomollone XLIII (2) [α]20D −11.0 (c 0.1, MeOH), was obtained as a white amorphous powder. The molecular formula of 2 was established to be C30H48O12 by HR-ESIMS data at m/z 735.4313 [M−H]− (Calcd. 735.4325) corresponding to 3 out of 7 degrees of unsaturation, indicating four additional rings in the structure of 1.
degrees of unsaturation. The $^1$H and $^{13}$C NMR data of 2 (Table 1) provide evidence for half of the expected proton and carbon resonances, which are assigned as belonging to four methyls, four methylenes, seven methines (including four oxygenated at $\delta_C$ 76.1, 81.8, 84.6, and 86.7), and five quaternary carbons (including three oxygenated at $\delta_C$ 77.3, 79.4, and 85.5). The above data are consistent with the feature of typical grayanoids.

Further structure elucidation based on $^1$H--$^1$H COSY, HSQC, and HMBC experiments (Fig. 5) reveal a high degree of similarity with those previously reported for rhodojaponin VI. However, a peculiar correlation from the signal at $\delta_H$ 5.57 (H-14) to the signal at $\delta_C$ 84.6 assigned to the carbon C-2 (actually C-2') was observed in the HMBC spectrum allow us to assume that the compound had a dimeric structure, in which C-14 and C-2' as well as C-2 and C-14' are linked via oxygen bridges.

The relative configuration of 2 was assigned mainly using NOESY correlations (Fig. 5). Key NOEs of H-1/H-14, H-1/H-6, H-6/H-18, and H-3/H-18 establish the $\alpha$-orientation for H-1, CH$_3$-18, H-14, H-6, and H-3. Similarly, the NOE correlations of OH-3/H$_3$-19, H$_b$-11/H$_3$-17, H-2/H$_2$-20, OH-5/H$_3$-19, OH-5/H$_3$-20, OH-10/H$_a$-11, and OH-5/H$_3$-9 indicate that OH-3, H-2, CH$_3$-19, CH$_3$-17, CH$_2$-20, OH-5, and H-9 are $\beta$-oriented.

Upon treatment of 2 with 1 equiv. of 4-bromobenzoyl chloride in pyridine, a 4-bromobenzoic acid ester 2a was obtained as the major product. The HR-ESIMS data establish the molecular formula of 2a as C$_{47}$H$_{67}$BrO$_{13}$ ([M$-$H]$^-$, Calcd. 917.3692), which is consistent with the result expected for a monoacylated product. In addition, the signal for H-3 is shifted significantly downfield (from $\delta_H$ 4.07 to 5.46) relative to that of 2, indicating that the hydroxyl group at C-3 is acylated in 2a. HMBC and HSQC data were obtained for 2a to verify the proposed structure. The HMBC correlations observed from H-3 to ester carbonyl at $\delta_C$ 165.7 confirm the acylation site at C-3. A systematic conformational analysis was performed for 2a-1 (one of the possible enantiomers of 2a, Fig. 6) using the MMFF94 molecular mechanics force field calculation, which afforded two major conformers (Supporting Information).

The ECD (electronic circular dichroism) calculation was performed after optimization of the selected conformers using the ZINDO method. The experimental ECD spectrum of 2a agrees well with the calculated ECD of 2a-1 (1S,2R,3R,5R,6R,8S,9R,10R,13R,14R,16R) and is the opposite of that of 2a-2 (Fig. 6). Thus, the absolute configuration of 2 is established. Rhodomollein XLIII (2) is a dimeric grayanoid with a C$_2$ symmetry axis, containing a novel 14-membered heterocyclic ring.

Scheme 1 Proposed biosynthetic pathway for 1.

Figure 5 Selected $^1$H--$^1$H COSY, HMBC, and NOE correlations for compound 2.

Figure 6 Calculated and experimental ECD spectra of 2a.
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Table 2 ¹H NMR spectroscopic data for compounds 3–7 in pyridine-d₅ (δ in ppm, J in Hz).

| No. | 3' δ | 4' δ | 5' δ | 6' δ | 7' δ |
|-----|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1   | 3.72, d (10.8) | 3.84, d (9.0) | 2.78, d (10.2) | 2.17, m | 3.01, d (7.2) |
| 2   | 4.98, m | 5.06, dd (9.0, 3.0) | 5.15, ddd (10.2, 7.2, 3.6) | 4.84, dd (9.0, 3.0) | 4.57, dd (8.8, 7.2) |
| 3   | 4.11, d (4.2) | 4.07, d (3.0) | 4.00, ddd (7.2, 5.4) | 4.10, d (3.0) | 4.61, d (8.8) |
| 4   |      |      |      |      |      |
| 5   |      |      |      |      |      |
| 6   | 4.50, brd (6.6) | 5.79, brd (4.5) | 5.01, m | 4.55, brd (10.5) | 4.29, brd (4.8) |
| 7   | 2.83, d (12.0) | 2.81, dd (16.0, 5.5) | 2.50, dd (13.2, 10.8) | 2.73, brd (14.0) | 1.88, dd (14.4, 4.8) |
|     | 2.98, m | 2.90, brd (16.0) | 3.00, dd (13.2, 4.8) | 3.05, dd (14.0, 10.5) | 2.78, brd (14.4) |
| 8   |      |      |      |      |      |
| 9   |      |      |      |      | 2.14, m |
| 10  |      |      |      |      | 3.33, m |
| 11  | 2.37, m | 2.29, m | 1.62, m | 5.29, brs | 1.48, m |
|     | 2.72, dd (14.4, 6.6) | 2.63, m | 2.17, m |      | 1.62, m |
| 12  | 1.49, m | 1.46, m | 1.73, m | 2.25, m | 1.68, m |
|     | 1.73, m | 1.76, m | 2.71, m | 2.34, m | 1.74, m |
| 13  | 2.42, brs | 2.42, m | 2.54, brs | 2.55, brd (3.5) | 2.26, brd (7.2) |
| 14  | 4.09, d (6.0) | 4.03, brs | 5.11, brd (7.2) | 4.56, brs | 4.96, brs |
| 15  | 2.45, d (15.6) | 2.39, d (15.0) | 2.18, d (14.4) | 2.16, d (13.5) | 1.95, d (14.0) |
|     | 2.94, d (15.6) | 2.73, d (15.0) | 2.33, d (14.4) | 2.29, d (13.5) | 2.34, d (14.0) |
| 16  |      |      |      |      |      |
| 17  | 1.45, s | 1.62, s | 1.56, s | 1.49, s | 1.49, s |
| 18  | 1.07, s | 1.21, s | 4.11, dd (10.8, 5.4) | 1.45, s | 1.51, s |
|     |      |      | 4.25, dd (10.8, 3.6) |      |      |
| 19  | 1.38, s | 1.48, s | 1.79, s | 1.81, s | 1.48, s |
| 20  | 2.32, s | 2.14, s | 1.96, s | 1.65, d (7.0) | 1.58, s |
| 1'  | 5.88, s |      |      |      |      |
| 2'  |      | 1.94, s |      |      |      |
| 3'  | 7.65, brs |      |      |      |      |
| 4'  |      |      |      |      |      |
| 5'  |      |      |      |      |      |
| 6'  |      |      |      |      |      |
| 7'  | 7.33, brd (8.0) |      |      |      |      |

*Recorded at 500 MHz. †Recorded at 600 MHz. ‡Recorded at 800 MHz. – Not applicable.

Compound 3 (rhodomollein XLIV) was obtained as an amorphous solid and had the molecular formula C₂₀H₂₆O₆ based on the HR-ESIMS data, acquiring an index of hydrogen deficiency (IHD) of 10. The ¹H, ¹³C, and DEPT NMR spectroscopic data of 3 (Tables 2 and 4) display signals assignable to a grayanane attached with a 1,3,5-trisubstituted aromatic moiety [δH 7.65 (brs), 7.33 (brd, J = 8.0 Hz), and 7.25 (brd, J = 8.0 Hz)]. The ¹H and ¹³C NMR data of 3 are similar to those of a known diterpenoid, rhodomicleanol B.¹³ The only difference is that it was inferred that the acetyl group is attached at C-6. The HR-ESIMS of compound 5 (rhodomollein XLV) gives a molecular formula of C₂₀H₂₆O₆. The ¹H and ¹³C NMR data of 5 closely resemble those for rhodapopin V.¹⁳ The major difference between the two compounds is that a methyl of 5 is substituted by a hydroxyl group. The hydroxyl is placed at C-18 by the HMBC correlations from H₂-18 to C-3, C-4, C-5, and C-19.

The molecular formula of compound 6 (rhodomollein XLVI) was deduced as C₂₀H₂₆O₆ by HR-ESIMS with an IHD of 5. Analysis of the NMR spectra showed that compound 6 has a typical grayanane skeleton with one double bond (δH 5.29; δC 113.8 and 157.2). The double bond was determined to be at δC 113.8 (157.2) by HMBC correlations from H-2 to C-10, H-7 to C-9, as well as H₃-20 to C-9 and C-10. The key NOESY correlation between H-1' and H-6 suggested that H-1' is also α-oriented.¹³

Compound 4 (rhodomollein XLVII) was obtained as a white powder with the molecular formula of C₂₀H₂₆O₆ on the basis of (+)-HR-ESIMS ion peak at m/z 433.2202 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C₂₀H₂₆O₆Na, 433.2197) and ¹³C NMR data (Table 4), suggesting that 4 possessed 6 degrees of unsaturation. A comparison of its ¹H and ¹³C NMR spectra with those of rhodomicleanol XXVI reveals the two structures to be closely related. The only difference is the presence of signals at δH 170.8, 21.8 and δC 1.94 corresponding to an additional acetyl group in 4. In the HMBC spectrum, cross-peaks due to the signals for H-6 (δH 5.79) with the carbon signals at δC 170.8 (C-1') were observed, and consequently it was inferred that the acetyl group is attached at C-6.

The HR-ESIMS of compound 5 (rhodomollein XLVI) gives a molecular formula of C₂₀H₂₆O₆. The ¹H and ¹³C NMR data of 5 closely resemble those for rhodajaponin V.¹³ The major difference between the two compounds is that a methyl of 5 is substituted by a hydroxyl group. The hydroxyl is placed at C-18 by the HMBC correlations from H₂-18 to C-3, C-4, C-5, and C-19.

The molecular formula of compound 6 (rhodomollein XLVII) was deduced as C₂₀H₂₆O₆ by HR-ESIMS with an IHD of 5. Analysis of the NMR spectra shows that compound 6 has a typical grayanane skeleton with one double bond (δH 5.29; δC 113.8 and 157.2). The double bond was determined to be at δC 113.8 (157.2) by HMBC correlations from proton at δH 5.29 to C-8, C-9, C-10, and C-13. A group of methyl protons appears as a doublet and correlated with C-1, C-9, and C-10 in the HMBC spectrum, suggesting that the C-10 position is unhydroxylated. Key NOESY correlations of H₁₀/H-7b and H₁₅b/H-7a indicate the α-configuration for H-7b and H-10.

Compound 7 (rhodomollein XLVIII) exhibits a molecular formula of C₂₀H₂₆O₆, as deduced from its HR-ESIMS data, which indicate an IHD of 5. Its NMR spectroscopic data are comparable to those of principinol B with exception of absence of the double bond and the C-2 and C-16 of compound 7 are hydroxylated. In the NOESY spectrum, key correlations of H₂-18/H-19, H₃-18/H-19, H₁-1/H-14, H₆/H₂, H-9/H₁₅a, and H₁₅a/H₁₂-17 suggest a β-configuration for H-2 and H₁₂-17.
Compound 8 (rhodomollein XLIX) gives a molecular ion peak at m/z 523.2517 [M+Na]+ in the HR-ESIMS (Calcd. 523.2514), corresponding to the molecular formula C25H40O10 (6 IHD). A comparison of the NMR data of 8 with those of rhododecorumin III indicates that the two compounds have the same structures, except for the mono-methyl succinate group\(^2\). The mono-methyl succinate group is located at C-2 based on the HMBC correlations from H-9, H-13, and H-14 to C-12. However, signals for an additional acetyl group are observed. In the HMBC spectrum, the H-6 proton shows a correlation with the carbonyl carbon of the acetyl group (\(\delta_C\) 170.2), confirming the location of the acetyl group at C-6.

The molecular formula of 9 (rhodomollein L) was determined to be C22H34O7 by HR-ESIMS. The \(^1\)H and \(^13\)C NMR data of 9 are similar to those of rhodomollone \(^\text{X14}\). However, signals for an additional acetyl group (\(\delta_C\) 21.9 and 170.2) in 9 were observed. In the HMBC spectrum, the H-6 proton shows a correlation with the carbonyl carbon of the acetyl group (\(\delta_C\) 170.2), confirming the location of the acetyl group at C-6.

Compound 10 (rhodomollein LI) was determined to have the molecular formula C28H32O6, from the HR-ESIMS (m/z 391.2106 [M+Na]++, Calcd. 391.2091) and NMR spectra, implying 5 IHD. The NMR data of 10 are similar to those of seco-rhodomollone 14 with two exceptions\(^15\). First, the carbonyl group in 10 is located at C-3 instead of C-5, which is supported by the HMBC correlations from H-1 and H-2 to C-3 (\(\delta_C\) 215.2). Second, compound 10 has an additional hydroxyl group at C-12, and this assignment is supported by the HMBC correlations from H-9, H-13, and H-14 to C-12 (\(\delta_C\) 75.6). The NOE correlations of H-12/H3-17 and H-12/H-9 indicate that the OH-12 is \(\alpha\)-oriented.

The molecular formula of 11 (rhodomollein LI) is defined as C22H34O7, indicating an IHD of five. The NMR data of 11 are similar to those of rhododecorumin III\(^16\). Further structural analysis via 2D NMR data indicates that 11 has a 10-OH group instead of the terminal double bond at \(\Delta^{10,12}\). The NOE correlations of H-1/H-9, HO-3/H-1, H-6/H17-18, and H-6/H20-20 indicate that HO-3, H-1, and H-9 are \(\beta\)-oriented and that H-6, CH3-17, and CH3-20 are \(\alpha\)-oriented.

Compound 12 (rhodomollein LIII) was obtained as white powder. The molecular formula, deduced to be C28H34O5, is similar to those of rhododecorumin III\(^16\). Further structural analysis via 2D NMR data indicates that 12 has a 10-OH group instead of the terminal double bond at \(\Delta^{10,12}\). The NOE correlations of H-1/H-9, HO-3/H-1, H-6/H17-18, and H-6/H20-20 indicate that HO-3, H-1, and H-9 are \(\beta\)-oriented and that H-6, CH3-17, and CH3-20 are \(\alpha\)-oriented.

The other known compounds isolated were identified as 2-O-methylrhodojaponin VI \(\text{13}^\text{14}\), 2-O-methylrhodomollein XI \(\text{14}^\text{2}\), rhodomollein XI \(\text{15}^\text{14}\), seco-rhodomollone \(\text{16}^\text{15}\), and kalmanol \(\text{17}^\text{15}\) by comparison of experimental and reported spectroscopic data.

The antinociceptive activities of compounds 3, 4, 6, 7, and 12–17 were evaluated by an acetic acid-induced writhing test, as

| Table 3 \(^1\)H NMR spectroscopic data for compounds 8–12 in pyridine-\(d_5\) (\(\delta\) in ppm, \(J\) in Hz). |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. | 8\(^a\) | 9\(^a\) | 10\(^a\) | 11\(^a\) | 12\(^a\) |
| 1 | 3.27, d (4.0) | 3.02, d (7.5) | 5.28, dd (9.0, 5.0) | 2.68, m | 2.44, dt (13.0, 3.5) |
| 2 | 6.19, brd (4.0) | 5.13, m | 2.42, m | 2.30, m | 1.53, m |
| 3 | 3.99, brd (4.5) | 3.98, brs | — | 4.20, brs | 3.50, brd (8.0) |
| 4 | — | — | — | — | — |
| 5 | — | — | 4.26, brs | — | 3.95, brd (2.5) |
| 6 | 4.72, brs | 5.83, dd (11.5, 4.5) | 4.97, m | 2.81, dt (12.0, 3.0) | 1.97, m |
| 7 | 2.61, m | 2.40, dd (13.5, 11.5) | 2.51, m | 1.82, m | 1.92, m |
| 8 | 2.96, dd (13.5, 4.0) | 2.69, dd (13.5, 4.5) | 2.22, m | 2.58, m | — |
| 9 | 2.19, brd (6.5) | 2.18, m | 2.24, m | 1.69, m | 1.81, m |
| 10 | — | — | — | — | — |
| 11 | 1.69, m | 1.74, m | 1.96, m | 1.89, m | 1.97, m |
| 12 | 2.01, dd (14.5, 6.5) | 2.17, m | 2.57, dd (15.0, 7.0) | 2.62, m | — |
| 13 | 1.64, m | 1.55, m | 4.07, m | 2.04, m | 2.05, m |
| 14 | 2.61, m | 2.53, m | 3.13, m | — | 2.14, dd (13.0, 7.0) |
| 15 | 5.07, brd (7.0) | 5.15, m | 3.14, m | 2.05, m | 2.12, d (10.5) |
| 16 | — | — | — | — | — |
| 17 | 1.54, s | 1.77, s | 1.84, s | 1.45, s | 1.49, s |
| 18 | 1.48, s | 1.38, s | 1.74, s | 1.21, s | 1.51, s |
| 19 | 1.74, s | 1.58, s | 1.57, s | 1.50, s | 0.94, s |
| 20 | 1.90, s | 1.94, s | 1.69, s | 1.61, s | 1.53, s |
| 21 | — | — | — | — | — |
| 22 | 2.63, m | 1.98, s | — | — | — |
| 23 | — | — | — | — | — |
| 24 | — | — | — | — | — |
| 25 | 5.39, s | — | — | — | — |

\(^a\)Recorded at 500 MHz. —Not applicable.
Table 4 $^{13}$C NMR spectroscopic data for compounds 3–12 in pyridine-$d_5$ (6 in ppm).

| No. | 3$^a$ | 4$^a$ | 5$^a$ | 6$^a$ | 7$^a$ | 8$^a$ | 9$^a$ | 10$^a$ | 11$^a$ | 12$^a$ |
|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1   | 50.2  | 52.9  | 54.8  | 57.8  | 59.7  | 60.3  | 59.1  | 122.8 | 50.3  | 42.0  |
| 2   | 82.0  | 82.2  | 78.4  | 83.8  | 77.8  | 84.7  | 80.1  | 34.2  | 29.2  | 44.6  |
| 3   | 88.1  | 88.2  | 81.5  | 90.4  | 84.1  | 85.6  | 86.6  | 215.2 | 78.0  | 80.5  |
| 4   | 46.3  | 47.9  | 53.9  | 48.2  | 46.9  | 51.1  | 49.7  | 52.2  | 50.6  | 38.8  |
| 5   | 93.6  | 84.9  | 82.2  | 85.4  | 89.0  | 85.9  | 83.5  | 78.4  | 216.1 | 77.0  |
| 6   | 77.1  | 71.6  | 74.4  | 72.4  | 76.9  | 74.6  | 78.2  | 71.6  | 45.6  | 37.4  |
| 7   | 38.8  | 39.4  | 44.9  | 35.7  | 32.6  | 44.9  | 37.2  | 39.9  | 41.0  | 29.8  |
| 8   | 57.2  | 57.2  | 52.6  | 52.5  | 47.1  | 52.9  | 55.8  | 84.9  | 41.1  | 41.7  |
| 9   | 138.1 | 138.7 | 56.1  | 157.2 | 57.5  | 55.5  | 49.4  | 50.0  | 54.6  | 55.2  |
| 10  | 124.9 | 124.2 | 78.5  | 31.3  | 83.7  | 77.9  | 79.3  | 140.4 | 75.0  | 75.1  |
| 11  | 26.8  | 26.5  | 22.5  | 113.8 | 19.4  | 22.9  | 23.1  | 42.1  | 20.8  | 21.0  |
| 12  | 27.1  | 27.0  | 27.7  | 30.7  | 25.2  | 27.3  | 25.1  | 75.6  | 34.6  | 34.7  |
| 13  | 54.6  | 54.2  | 57.1  | 55.0  | 52.9  | 57.0  | 56.8  | 65.1  | 81.0  | 81.1  |
| 14  | 88.6  | 88.6  | 79.8  | 80.8  | 79.2  | 79.7  | 79.8  | 55.9  | 43.7  | 43.9  |
| 15  | 60.6  | 59.3  | 60.8  | 59.3  | 62.1  | 60.9  | 132.0 | 52.4  | 36.6  | 56.8  |
| 16  | 82.6  | 82.6  | 80.3  | 81.6  | 79.8  | 80.2  | 138.5 | 80.8  | 76.6  | 76.7  |
| 17  | 24.5  | 24.6  | 24.5  | 27.6  | 25.3  | 24.4  | 16.0  | 24.2  | 22.2  | 22.3  |
| 18  | 27.1  | 25.9  | 68.7  | 26.3  | 23.9  | 23.1  | 25.5  | 24.3  | 25.7  | 25.9  |
| 19  | 18.6  | 18.6  | 16.8  | 21.5  | 17.5  | 20.8  | 21.1  | 22.5  | 22.8  | 25.3  |
| 20  | 19.3  | 19.3  | 30.3  | 18.8  | 23.0  | 29.6  | 29.9  | 12.2  | 21.3  | 21.9  |
| 1'  | 104.9 | 170.8 | —     | —     | —     | —     | 172.6 | 170.2 | —     | —     |
| 2'  | 131.0 | 21.8  | —     | —     | —     | —     | 30.4  | 21.9  | —     | —     |
| 3'  | 117.4 | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | 29.8  | —     | —     | —     |
| 4'  | 147.8 | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | 173.2 | —     | —     | —     |
| 5'  | 149.0 | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | 52.0  | —     | —     | —     |
| 6'  | 116.4 | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     |
| 7'  | 120.7 | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     | —     |

$^a$Recorded at 125 MHz. $^b$Recorded at 150 MHz. $^c$Recorded at 200 MHz. — Not applicable.

Figure 7 Antinociceptive activities of the compounds (acetic acid-induced writhing test). Morphine (morph) was used as the control. Each bar and vertical line represent the mean ± SEM of the values obtained from 8 mice. $^*P < 0.05$, $^{**}P < 0.01$, $^{***}P < 0.001$, represent statistically significant differences between the test compound groups or the control groups and the vehicle group (veh) (one-way ANOVA followed by the Bonferroni test).

described earlier. Compounds 1 and 2 were not tested due to the lack of quantities after completing the structural determination. As shown in Fig. 7, compounds 3, 7, 12, 15 and 16 displayed significant antinociceptive activities at a dose of 20 mg/kg with inhibition rates ranging from 41.9% to 91.6% [inhibition rates: (average number of writhes in the vehicle group)/average number of writhes in the experimental group]. Among them, compounds 12 and 15 exhibited the highest potency with inhibition rates of 89.0% and 91.6%, respectively. Compounds 6 and 13 inhibited 46.0% and 39.4% of the acetic acid-induced writhes at a dose of 2 mg/kg, while compound 17, with a kalmane skeleton, was found to be active at a dose of 0.4 mg/kg (with inhibition rate of 34.3%). Compound 13, without an acetyl group at C-6, showed higher antinociceptive activity, compared with compound 14 with an acetyl group at C-6, which were inactive. This finding suggests that the acetyl group at C-6 might hamper the antinociceptive activity of grayanane-derived diterpenoids. In addition, compound 14, in which OH-2 was methylated, was less potent than 15. This result suggests that methylation at OH-2 might reduce the antinociceptive activity.

3. Conclusions

The present investigation of the flowers of R. molle has yielded 17 diterpenoids including 12 new compounds (1–12). Among them, rhomollone A (1) possesses an unprecedented 5/6/6/5 tetra-cyclic ring system (B-nor grayanane) incorporating a cyclopetenene-1,3-dione scaffold while rhodomollein XLIII (2) is a dimeric grayanoid, containing a novel 14-membered heterocyclic ring with a C$_2$ symmetry axis. Compounds 3, 7, 12, 15 and 16 showed significant antinociceptive activities at a dose of 20 mg/kg with inhibition rates ranging from 41.9% to 91.6%. Compounds 6 and 13 inhibited 46.0% and 39.4% of the acetic acid-induced writhes at a dose of 2 mg/kg, while compound 17 inhibited 34.3% of the writhes at a dose of 0.4 mg/kg. These results support the use of this plant in traditional Chinese medicine for migraine headache, and other pain symptoms.
4. Experimental

4.1. General experimental procedures

Optical rotations were measured on a PE model 343 polarimeter (PerkinElmer, Waltham, MA, USA). CD spectra were recorded on a JASCO-815 CD spectrometer (JASCO, Tokyo, Japan). IR spectra were recorded on a Nicolet 5700 FT-IR microscope instrument (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). NMR spectra were obtained on INOVA-500 (Varian, Palo Alto, CA, USA) and Bruker AV600-III (Bruker, Billerica, MA, USA) spectrometers, in CD$_3$OD with solvent peaks used as references. ESIMS were measured on an Agilent 1100 Series LC/MSD Trap mass spectrometer (Agilent, Santa Clara, CA, USA). HR-ESIMS data were measured using an Agilent 6520 Accurate-Mass Q-TOF LC/MS spectrometer (Agilent). Preparative HPLC was performed on a Shimadzu LC-6AD instrument with SPD-20A and RID-10A detectors (Shimadzu, Kyoto, Japan) using an YMC Pack ODS-A column (250 mm × 20 mm, 5 μm, YMC, Kyoto, Japan). Macroporous resin (D101 type, the Chemical Plant of NanKai University, Tianjin, China) was used for column chromatography (CC). TLC was carried out with glass precoated Si gel GF254 plates (Qingdao Marine Chemical Factory). Spots were visualized under UV light or by spraying with 10% H$_2$SO$_4$ in EtOH/H$_2$O (95:5, v/v) followed by heating.

4.2. Animals

All animal care and experimental procedures were in accordance with the current guidelines of the National Institutes of Health (NIH, USA). Animal experiments were approved by the Ethics Committee of Institute of Materia Medica, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and Peking Union Medical College (Beijing, China). All experiments were carried out with both male and female Kunming mice (Institute of Laboratory Animal Sciences, Chinese Academy of Institute of Materia Medica, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and Peking Union Medical College, Beijing, China) weighing 18–22 g each (approximately 6 weeks old). The animals were housed for at least 3 days (before use) at a temperature of 22 ± 1 °C, under a 12 h cycle of light-dark, with free access to food and water. The dose for each trial was determined from the current guidelines of the National Institutes of Health (NIH, USA) and Bruker AV600-III (Bruker, Billerica, MA, USA) and measured using an Agilent 6520 Accurate-Mass Q-TOF LC/MS spectrometer (Agilent, Santa Clara, CA, USA) and Bruker AV600-III (Bruker, Billerica, MA, USA). CD spectra were recorded on a JASCO-815 CD spectrometer (JASCO, Tokyo, Japan). IR spectra were recorded on a Nicolet 500 FT-IR microscope instrument (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). NMR spectra were obtained on INOVA-500 (Varian, Palo Alto, CA, USA) and Bruker AV600-III (Bruker, Billerica, MA, USA) spectrometers, in CD$_3$OD with solvent peaks used as references. ESIMS were measured on an Agilent 1100 Series LC/MSD Trap mass spectrometer (Agilent, Santa Clara, CA, USA). HR-ESIMS data were measured using an Agilent 6520 Accurate-Mass Q-TOF LC/MS spectrometer (Agilent). Preparative HPLC was performed on a Shimadzu LC-6AD instrument with SPD-20A and RID-10A detectors (Shimadzu, Kyoto, Japan) using an YMC Pack ODS-A column (250 mm × 20 mm, 5 μm, YMC, Kyoto, Japan). Macroporous resin (D101 type, the Chemical Plant of NanKai University, Tianjin, China) was used for column chromatography (CC). TLC was carried out with glass precoated Si gel GF254 plates (Qingdao Marine Chemical Factory). Spots were visualized under UV light or by spraying with 10% H$_2$SO$_4$ in EtOH/H$_2$O (95:5, v/v) followed by heating.

4.3. Plant material

Flowers of *R. molle* were collected in Xingan, Guangxi province, China, in November 2012 and positively identified by Prof. Songji Wei of Guangxi Traditional Medical College. A voucher specimen (ID-s-2446) was preserved in the herbarium at the Department of Medicinal Plants, Institute of Materia Medica, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences (Beijing, China).

4.4. Extraction and isolation

The air-dried flowers of *R. molle* (74 kg) were extracted by EtOH (95:5, v/v) at reflux for three times (2 h each time). The crude extract (not completely dried, 9.85 kg) was extracted successively with petroleum ether, CH$_2$Cl$_2$, EtOAc, and MeOH on a Soxhlet extractor. The EtOAc extract (650 g) was separated on a macroporous resin column and eluted sequentially with 70:30, 55:45, 40:60, and 5:95 (v/v) H$_2$O/EtOH solutions. The 30% EtOH fraction (150.9 g) was further separated on an MCI gel column and eluted in a gradient of MeOH/H$_2$O (1:9–10:0, v/v) to obtain 13 fractions (F$_1$–F$_{13}$). Fraction F$_1$ (11 g) was further separated on a Sephadex LH-20 column eluted with MeOH/H$_2$O (40:60, v/v) to yield 11 fractions (F$_{1S}$–F$_{1S}$). Fraction F$_{1S}$ (2.6 g) was separated with ODS column and eluted with MeOH/H$_2$O (1:9–10:0, v/v) to yield 10 fractions (F$_{1S}$–F$_{2S}$). Fraction F$_{1S}$ was further purified by semi-preparative HPLC with MeOH/H$_2$O (48:52, v/v, 3.5 mL/min) to yield compound 1 (8.7 mg). Fraction F$_{2S}$ was further purified by semi-preparative HPLC with MeOH/H$_2$O (52:48, v/v, 3.5 mL/min) to yield compound 10 (3.8 mg) and 15 (168.4 mg). Fraction F$_{10}$ (29 g) was further separated on a Sephadex LH-20 column eluted with MeOH/H$_2$O (40:60, v/v) to yield 5 fractions (F$_{10}$–F$_{10}$). Fraction F$_{10}$ (3.1 g) was separated with ODS column and eluted with MeOH/H$_2$O (1:9–10:0, v/v) to yield 8 fractions (F$_{10}$–F$_{10}$). Fraction F$_{10}$ was further purified by semi-preparative HPLC with MeOH/H$_2$O (45:55, v/v, 3.5 mL/min) to yield compounds 8 (3.9 mg), 13 (27.0 mg), and 17 (34.3 mg). Fraction F$_{10}$ was further purified by semi-preparative HPLC with MeOH/H$_2$O (45:55, v/v, 3.5 mL/min) to yield compounds 4 (8.9 mg) and 7 (27.1 mg). Fraction F$_{10}$ was further purified by semi-preparative HPLC with MeOH/H$_2$O (22:78, v/v, 6 mL/min) to yield compound 11 (3.0 mg), 12 (18.2 mg), and 14 (84.6 mg). Fraction F$_{10}$ was further purified by semi-preparative HPLC with MeOH/H$_2$O (25:75, v/v, 3.5 mL/min) to yield compounds 2 (9.3 mg), 3 (62.7 mg), 5 (1.6 mg), 6 (13.6 mg), and 9 (25.0 mg).

4.4.1. Preparation of (R)-MTPA ester 1\text{a}

To a solution of 1 (2 mg, 0.006 mmol) in anhydrous pyridine (1 mL) was added (S)-MTPACl (1.5 mg, 0.006 mmol). After stirring at room temperature for 4 h, water was added. The reaction mixture was evaporated to dryness, and subjected to semi-preparative HPLC using ACN in H$_2$O (60:40) as the mobile phase to give 1\text{a} (0.9 mg). Compound 1\text{a}: HR-ESIMS *m/z*: 549.2111 [M–H]$^-$ (Calcld. 549.2106 for C$_{29}$H$_{32}$O$_7$F$_3$).

4.4.2. Preparation of (S)-MTPA ester 1\text{a}

To a solution of 1 (2 mg, 0.006 mmol) in anhydrous pyridine (1 mL) was added (R)-MTPACl (1.5 mg, 0.006 mmol). After stirring at room temperature for 4 h, water was added. The reaction mixture was evaporated to dryness, and subjected to semi-preparative HPLC using ACN in H$_2$O (60:40) as the mobile phase to give 1\text{b} (0.6 mg). Compound 1\text{b}: HR-ESIMS *m/z*: 549.2110 [M–H]$^-$ (Calcld. 549.2106 for C$_{29}$H$_{32}$O$_7$F$_3$).

4.4.3. Preparation of 2-O-(4-bromobenzoyl)-rhodomollein XLIII (2\text{a})

Compound 2 (4 mg, 0.0054 mmol) was transferred into a dry flask; 4-bromobenzoyl chloride (1.2 mg, 0.0054 mmol) was added into the flask, to which was immediately added 1 mL of anhydrous pyridine. The solution was stirred at room temperature for 4 h. After the reaction, water was added. The majority of solvent was evaporated and some MeOH was added to this solution. The solution was separated by reversed-phase preparative HPLC using ACN in H$_2$O (40:60) as the mobile phase to give 2\text{a} (1.1 mg). 2-O-
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4.4.6. Rhodomollein XLIV (2a). HR-ESIMS m/z 917.3674 [M − H]− (Calcd. 917.3692 for C27H40BrO15).

4.4.7. Rhodomollein XLIII (4a). HR-ESIMS m/z 884 cm−1; 1H and 13C NMR data, Table 1; HR-ESIMS m/z 433.2197 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C20H32NaO6, 433.2202).

4.4.8. Rhodomollein XLVII (6a). HR-ESIMS m/z 735.1676 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C19H26NaO5, 357.1672).

4.4.9. Rhodomollein XLIII (2a). HR-ESIMS m/z 391.2096 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C20H32NaO5, 391.2097).

4.4.10. Rhodomollein L (9a). HR-ESIMS m/z 1033.2037 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C25H40NaO10, 1033.2037).

4.4.11. Rhodomollein LI (10a). HR-ESIMS m/z 1057.2055 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C25H42NaO10, 1057.2056).

4.4.12. Rhodomollein L (9a). HR-ESIMS m/z 329.1977 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C19H26NaO5, 329.1979).

4.4.13. Rhodomollein LI (10a). HR-ESIMS m/z 342.2011 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C20H32NaO5, 342.2012).

4.4.14. Rhodomollein LI (11a). HR-ESIMS m/z 377.2296 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C20H32NaO5, 377.2298).

4.4.15. Rhodomollein LI (12a). HR-ESIMS m/z 377.2296 [M+Na]⁺ (Calcd. for C20H32NaO5, 377.2298).

4.5. Acetic acid-induced writhing test

Control groups and test groups were set up, each group consisted of 8 mice. Twenty minutes after administration (the control group received 0.9% NaCl, 5 mL/kg, i.p.), mice were injected with 0.8% v/v acetic acid solution (injection volume: 0.1 mL/g). The mice were placed in separate glass boxes. The writhing events of these animals were counted for 20 min. For scoring purposes, a writh is defined as abdominal extension and simultaneous stretching of at least one hind limb19.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by grants from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Nos. 21572274 and 21732008) and the CAMS Innovation Fund for Medical Sciences (No. 2016-I2M-1-010, China).

Author contributions

Shishan Yu and Yong Li designed the study. Shihan Yu supervised the project. Yong Li, Yunbao Liu, Jing Qu, and Shuanggang Ma performed the bioassay-guided isolation, structure analysis, and the analgesic compounds. Yuxun Zhu and Zhaoxin Zhang performed the antinociceptive tests. Li Li completed the ECD calculation. Shishan Yu and Yong Li wrote the paper. All authors contributed to the discussion and interpretation of the results.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supporting data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apsb.2019.10.013.

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