Ma, X-F., Farndon, J., Young, T., Fey, N., & Bower, J. (2017). A Simple and Broadly Applicable CN Bond Forming Dearomatization Protocol Enabled by Bifunctional Amino Reagents. *Angewandte Chemie - International Edition, 56*(46), 14531-14535. https://doi.org/10.1002/anie.201708176

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A Simple and Broadly Applicable C–N Bond Forming Dearomatization Protocol Enabled by Bifunctional Amino Reagents

Xiaofeng Ma, Joshua J. Farndon, Tom A. Young, Natalie Fey, and John F. Bower*

Dedicated to the memory of István E. Markó

Abstract: A C–N bond forming dearomatization protocol with broad scope is outlined. Specifically, bifunctional amino reagents are used for sequential nucleophilic and electrophilic C–N bond formations, with the latter effecting the key dearomatization step. Using this approach, γ-arylated alcohols are converted to a wide range of differentially protected spirocyclic pyrrolidines in just two or three steps.

Electrophile-triggered dearomatization processes enable the direct conversion of readily prepared planar molecules to synthetically valuable three-dimensional scaffolds,[1] often with the concomitant provision of functionality primed for diversification. C–C bond forming processes of this type now offer exceptional utility,[2,3] but related C–N bond forming dearomatizations have not reached the same level of sophistication (Scheme 1A). Within this context, predominant methods rely on nitrenium ions and are limited to lactam products equipped with specific N-protecting groups.[3] Oxime-based processes, which provide dihydropyrroles, are also of note, although competing Beckmann rearrangement is often problematic.[4] As far as we are aware, the direct synthesis of pyrrolidines using electrophilic nitrogen triggered dearomatizations has not been achieved. Ciufolini and co-workers have pioneered a conceptually distinct approach involving oxidation of an arene to its corresponding cation in advance of trapping by a nitrogen nucleophile.[5] Although often effective, the process requires specific N-protecting groups (carbamates are not tolerated), is most efficient under strongly acidic conditions (e.g. TFA as solvent) and can suffer from competing oxidation processes involving the arene.[5e] Given the limitations associated with the state-of-the-art, we reasoned that the development of a C–N bond forming dearomatization platform with broad scope would represent a significant and useful advance. Specifically, we sought to circumvent the requirement of a strong external oxidant, and, at the same time, provide a pyrrolidine synthesis that can accommodate a variety of N-protecting groups (especially synthetically flexible carbamates) and a range of nucleophilic arenes (e.g. phenols, naphthols, indoles). As outlined below, we have been able to achieve this by developing a suite of bifunctional amino reagents (Scheme 1B). This unique approach is efficient, mild (no external oxidant) and operationally simple, offering exceptionally wide scope with respect to both the arene and N-protecting group. The spirocyclic pyrrolidine products obtained by this method are core motifs in many natural products and are also recognized as privileged scaffolds in drug discovery.[6] Accordingly, we anticipate that the strategy described herein will find broad utility in synthetic settings.

Our studies in this area stemmed from ongoing efforts to exploit electrophilic nitrogen sources for N-heterocycle synthesis.[7] Specifically, we envisaged that initial exploitation of the nucleophilic character of 2 for Mitsunobu alkylation with alcohols 1 would provide precursors 3. At this stage, the electrophilic character of the nitrogen center would be harnessed to trigger the dearomatization step (to 4). The overall approach offers several distinct advantages: 1) pre-installation of the O-based leaving group on nitrogen

Scheme 1.

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Angew. Chem. Int. Ed. 2017, 56, 1 – 6
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facilitates the Mitsunobu step and avoids protecting group manipulations,[8] 2) readily prepared enantiopure secondary alcohols can potentially be used as a starting point,[7] 3) the use of an N–O bond as a mild internal oxidant should minimize competing oxidation processes involving the arene, 4) the leaving group derived byproduct (HOR) should be easy to remove during work-up, and 5) a wide range of N-protecting groups should be tolerated because the dearomatization step relies on the electrophilicity of the nitrogen center, rather than on its nucelophilicity.

To evaluate the feasibility of the approach outlined in Scheme 1B, we targeted initially a range of differentially protected reagents 2a–f, equipped with either OTs or O'Bz leaving groups (see below) (see Table 1, box). In the event, these reagents were easily prepared on multi-gram scale and showed good levels of stability (see the Supporting Information). Mitsunobu alkylation of 2a–f, with 3-(1H-indol-3-yl)propan-1-ol as the pro-electrophile, provided targets 3a–f in an efficient manner (57–86% yield, see the Supporting Information). Despite the lack of direct precedent, C–N bond forming deactivation of O'Bz system 3a was achieved using a very simple protocol: exposure to catalytic quantities of K$_2$HPO$_4$ (15 mol %) at 140°C in n-BuCN resulted in spirocyclization to provide 4a in 44% yield (Conditions A). Under the same conditions, spirocyclization of Mbs protected system 3b generated 4b in 65% yield. With the aim of accessing N-tosyl protected pyrrolidines more efficiently, we investigated the cyclization of OTs system 3a’. Optimization studies revealed that the desired process could be achieved under much milder conditions (K$_2$CO$_3$, TFE, 80°C) than for 3a, and this enabled access to 4a in 75% yield (Conditions B). The relative facility of Conditions A vs. B is reflective of the leaving group ability of pentafluorobenzoate vs. tosylate (pK$_a$ values in H$_2$O at 25°C: FBzOH 1.75, TsOH 0.7).[9] Although OTs systems offer higher reactivity, we have found that an O'Bz leaving group can be beneficial in certain cases as the substrates are more stable, and this increased stability can translate into enhanced deactivation yields. Indeed, O'Bz precursor 3c was more efficient than OTs precursor 3c’ for accessing N-Cbz system 4c (82% vs. 70% yield). Conversely, an OTs leaving group was most effective for the formation of methyl and tert-butyl carbamate products 4d and 4e. Satisfactory results were achieved for Alloc-protected system 4f using Conditions B. The results in Table 1 are significant as they show that the method tolerates a wide range of synthetically useful N-protecting groups and that it is also mild enough for efficient deactivation of the oxidatively

| Table 1: Evaluation of electrophilic aminating agents for the C–N bond forming deactivation process (FBz = pentafluorobenzoyl, Mbs = p-methoxybenzensulfonyl). |
|---|
| **Conditions A** (R = F-Bz): K$_2$HPO$_4$ (15 mol%), n-BuCN (0.1 M), 140 °C |
| **Conditions B** (R = Ts): K$_2$CO$_3$ (200 mol%), TFE (0.07 M), 60 or 80 °C |
| 3a’-f |
| 3a, R = F-Bz |
| 3b, R = F-Bz |
| 3c, R = F-Bz |
| 3d, R = F-Bz |
| 3e, R = F-Bz |
| 3f, R = Ts |
| 3a’, R = Ts |
| 3b’, R = Ts |
| 3c’, R = Ts |
| 3d’, R = Ts |
| 3e’, R = Ts |
| 3f’, R = Ts |
| 4a-f |
| 4a, 64% Yield (A) |
| 4b, 63% Yield (B) |
| 4c, 63% Yield (A) |
| 4d, 44% Yield (A) |
| 4e, 46% Yield (A) |
| 4f, 49% Yield (A) |
| 5a-f |
| 5a, 30% Yield (B) |
| 5b, 20% Yield (B) |
| 5c, 20% Yield (B) |
| 5d, 20% Yield (B) |
| 5e, 20% Yield (B) |
| 5f, 20% Yield (B) |

| Bifunctional amino-reagents employed in this study: |
|---|
| RO$_2$—Ts |
| 2a, R = F-Bz |
| 2b, R = F-Bz |
| 2c, R = F-Bz |
| 2d, R = F-Bz |
| 2e, R = F-Bz |
| 2f, R = F-Bz |
| 2a’, R = Ts |
| 2b’, R = Ts |
| 2c’, R = Ts |
| 2d’, R = Ts |
| 2e’, R = Ts |

| Notes |
|---|
| [a] K$_2$HPO$_4$ (200 mol %) was used. [b] Synthesized from enantiopure 3a (92% ee). |

Table 2: C–N bond forming deactivation of indole-based systems.

| Conditions A (R = F-Bz) |
|---|
| 4g, 84% Yield (A) |
| 4h, 82% Yield (A) |
| 4i, 43% Yield (PG = Cbz, A) |
| 4j, 76% Yield (PG = Alloc, B) |
| Conditions B (R = Ts) |
| 4k, 60% Yield (A) |
| 4l, 56% Yield (A) |
| 4m, 74% Yield (B) |

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sensitive indole core; C–N bond forming dearomatizations of this unit to provide spirocyclic pyrrolidine products have not been reported previously.[4,10–12]

With efficient protocols in hand, we chose initially to evaluate scope with respect to indole-based systems, primarily because of the lack of complementary methods for achieving this type of dearomatization (Table 2). The method is largely insensitive to substitution on the indole ring, with a variety of substrates 3g–p undergoing dearomatization to provide spirocyclic imines 4g–p in moderate to excellent yield. The exact reaction conditions were selected on a case-by-case basis, although, in general, Conditions B were preferable for processes involving Boc-protected amines. The method also provides access to systems with additional substitution on the pyrrolidine ring. Modest diastereoselectivity was observed for C-3 substituted system 4q, but high levels of diastereoselectivity were achieved for C-2 (4r) and C-4 (4s–u) substituted variants. The alcohol precursor for 3s was accessed in high enantiospecificity via chiral iminium ion catalyzed enantioselective addition of indole to crotonaldehyde (see the Supporting Information).[13] and this allowed access to product 4s in 92% ee. The stereocchemical assignments of the major diastereomers of 4r–u were determined by nOe experiments, and the structure of 4u was confirmed unambiguously by single crystal X-ray diffraction.[14]

Further scope studies revealed that the approach can be extended to para-phenol and para-naphthyl systems 5a–e, providing carbamate protected products 6a–e that are not accessible using the oxidative C–N bond forming dearomatization approach of Ciufolini and co-workers (Table 3A).[5a–e,15] In each case, dearomatizing spirocyclization occurred cleanly and 6a–e were isolated in uniformly high yields. Similar efficiencies were observed for C–N bond forming dearomatizations of ortho-phenols and naphthols; this provides access to enone products where the spirocyclic pyrrolidine is located adjacent to the newly unveiled ketone (Table 3B). Thus, the method is generally applicable to the dearomatization of a key range of aromatic nucleophiles, with excellent efficiencies observed in all cases.

The spirocyclic products accessed in this study are diverse, with each embodying electrophilic functionality that can be modified further (Figure 1). For example, reduction (NaBH₄)

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1.** Derivatizations of the dearomatization products.

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**Scheme 2.** Preliminary mechanistic studies.  

11b lack a pendant arene, and so the results in Scheme 2B do not rule out the possibility of N–O homolysis by intramolecular electron transfer from the indole or phenol unit. Nevertheless, at the current stage we favor a mechanistic pathway in line with that depicted in Scheme 1B, wherein dearomatization occurs by direct nucleophilic attack of the arene onto the electrophilic nitrogen center. Nucleophilic substitution at N(sp2)–OR and N(sp3)–OR centers is unusual but has been invoked in other contexts. Of particular relevance is the recent work of Wang and co-workers, who disclosed intermolecular C3 aminations of indole anions using O-sulfonyl activated N-hydroxy amides and carbamates. In the current processes, the mild base (K₂CO₃ or K₂HPO₄) presumably enhances the nucleophilicity of the aromatic unit by deprotonating it before or during the C–N bond forming dearomatization step. Preliminary density functional theory (DFT) calculations support the viability of an SN₂-like mechanism. The dearomatizing spirocyclization of 5a-Me (the methyl-carbamate equivalent of 5a) to 6a-Me was modelled and the computed free energy barrier ($ΔG_{olv}^{\ddagger} = 25.1 \text{kcal mol}^{-1}$) is consistent with the reaction time required for complete conversion under Conditions B (93% yield after 9 hours at 60°C, see the Supporting Information) (Scheme 2C). For Conditions A, fast protodecarboxylation of the pentafluorobenzoate leaving group to afford pentafluorobenzene regenerates the base (K₂HPO₄) and allows catalytic quantities of this component to be used. We have confirmed the formation of pentafluorobenzene by GCMS analysis of crude reaction mixtures, and our previous studies have shown that the protodecarboxylation process is facile. Under both Conditions A and B, minimal conversions are observed in the absence of base and hindered organic variants (e.g. 2,6-di-tert-butylpyridine) are not suitable. These observations suggest an involved role for the base beyond simply sequestering the acid byproduct (TsOH, FBzOH) and this may provide an avenue for the future realization of enantioselective processes.

In summary, we outline a conceptually simple approach to C–N bond forming dearomatization, wherein nucleophilic attack of an arene onto an electrophilic nitrogen center generates differentially protected spirocyclic pyrrolidines. The protocol offers unprecedented scope, encompassing indoles, phenols and naphthols as the nucleophilic component, and tolerating a range of N-protecting groups; the ability to use synthetically flexible carbamates is particularly significant. The substrates are accessed directly using bifunctional amino reagents that incorporate the functionality required for the subsequent dearomatization step; this occurs under mildly basic conditions and avoids external oxidants. The spirocyclic pyrrolidine products obtained by this method are well recognized as privileged scaffolds in drug discovery, and the ability to access them in a flexible and direct manner is likely to be of wide interest.

**Acknowledgements**

We thank the Bristol Chemical Synthesis CDT, funded by EPSRC (EP/G036764/1) for a studentship (J.J.F.), the Royal Society for a URF (J.F.B.) and the European Research Council for financial support via the EU’s Horizon 2020 Programme (ERC grant 639594 CatHet). The Centre for Computational Chemistry is thanked for computational resources.

**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Keywords:** C–N bond · dearomatization · spirocyclic pyrrolidine

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Manuscript received: August 9, 2017
Accepted manuscript online: September 19, 2017
Version of record online: ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
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