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TBHP-promoted direct oxidation reaction of benzylic C_{sp}³–H bonds to ketones†

Jiajing Tan,^{*a} Tianyu Zheng,^a Yuqi Yu^c and Kun Xu^{*b}

A metal-free oxidation system employing *tert*-butyl hydroperoxide (TBHP) has been developed for selective oxidation of structurally diverse benzylic sp³ C–H bonds. This low-cost methodology allows for rapid generation of synthetically and biologically valued arylketones in good to excellent yields from readily available alkylarenes and diarylmethanes.

C–H bond activation reactions have become one of the most important classes of reactions in organic synthesis, the synthetic scope and utility of which has advanced considerably during the past decade.¹ Undoubtedly, there are fundamental benefits for integrating such a strategy in organic synthesis, especially from the vantage point of environmental benignity and high atom/step economy. Furthermore, the construction of complex organic molecules nowadays can be designed in a more direct and effective fashion as these C–H functionalization transformations are an established piece in synthetic organic chemists' toolbox.¹ Among this progress, the direct oxidation of C–H bonds for the synthesis of functionalized molecules has been of great interest in both academic and industrial settings.² Many C–H oxidation methods have thus been developed to date.

Aryl ketones are widely recognized as key functional and structural motifs in a large plethora of significant molecules, including natural products, active pharmaceutical ingredients, agrochemicals and advanced materials (Fig. 1). Also, they frequently serve as useful precursors for the synthesis of complicated organic molecules.³ The classical methods to assemble such motifs involve the Friedel–Crafts acylation⁴ and transition metal catalyzed coupling reactions,⁵ which often suffer from poor selectivity and require harsh reaction conditions as well as toxic or expensive metal salts. In this way, direct benzylic C_{sp}³–H oxidation reactions, as we proposed, could be a more ideal synthetic pathway.⁶ However, the literature survey suggested that most of the existing methods relied on less sustainable oxidants, such as potassium permanganate or chromium acid derivatives.⁷ The resulting vast metal residue not only caused operational challenges upon scale-up, but were

also known as potential carcinogens, and long-term exposure to those hazardous metals might lead to central nervous system disorders.⁸ Consequently, less toxic, cost-effective and sustainable oxidants like peroxides or molecular oxygen, have drawn increasing research interest.

In recent years, considerable progress has been made in this field.⁹ The group of Pandey and Lei independently reported a C–H aerobic oxidation approaches *via* photo-redox chemistry to synthesize aryl ketones.¹⁰ In addition, Li and Wang's group achieved the benzylic C–H oxidation by developing a recyclable TEMPO catalyst.¹¹ Moreover, in 2016, Stahl *et al.* employed the electrochemical *N*-hydroxyphthalimide (NHPI) system to achieve benzylic oxygenation reaction to prepare (hetero)aryl ketones.¹² Very recently, our group also reported a simple and efficient potassium *tert*-butoxide promoted (hetero)benzylic C–H oxidation reaction using oxygen as oxidant.¹³ Our approach provided a ready access to versatile diarylketones under mild conditions. While similar to most of other benzylic oxidation protocols, alkylbenzenes were unfortunately not amenable substrates in that report.¹⁴ Therefore, further research is highly necessary, as direct oxidative C–H functionalization of diverse substrates are still challenging and reported examples are limited in terms of substrate types. Since one of our lab's long-term goal is to

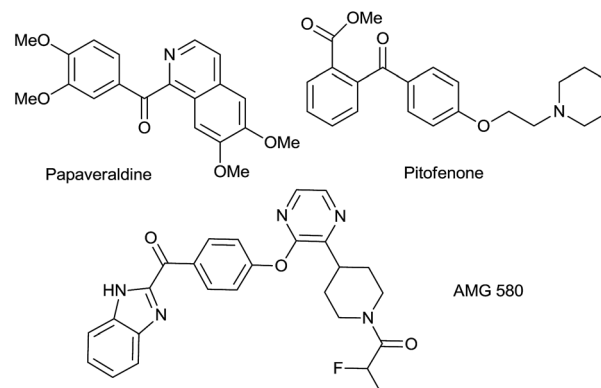


Fig. 1 Selected aryl ketones.

^aDepartment of Organic Chemistry, Faculty of Science, Beijing University of Chemical Technology, Beijing 100029, China. E-mail: tanjj@mail.buct.edu.cn

^bCollege of Chemistry and Pharmaceutical Engineering, Nanyang Normal University, Nanyang, Henan 473061, P. R. China. E-mail: xukun@nynu.edu.cn

^cChina Academy of Engineering Physics, P. O. Box 919, Mianyang, Sichuan, 621900, China

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ketone **2g** and **2o** in good yields. Noteworthy, these pyridine-containing substrates often showed poor reactivity under metal-mediated benzylic oxidation reaction, which is probably due to the product inhibition *via* chelation.¹² Finally, these optimized reaction conditions were examined for the oxygenation of pharmaceutically relevant imidazole substrates. 2-Benzoyl-1*H*-benzimidazole (**2p**), the core structural motif of potent phosphodiesterase inhibitor AMG 580, could be directly prepared in 70% yield.^{3f}

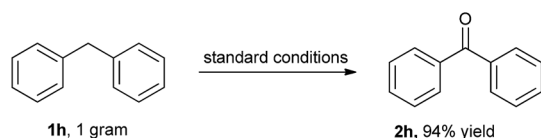
To expand the synthetic utility of this oxidative protocol, we then tested other benzylic sp³ C–H compounds as substrates. Under the identical reaction conditions, 2-phenylacetophenone (**2q**) underwent the oxidation reaction to give the benzoic acid (**3q**) instead of the desired benzyl product in 70% isolated yields (Scheme 2).^{10b}

The scale-up synthesis of **2h** also highlighted the utility and operational simplicity of this procedure. When the reaction was run at one-gram scale with diphenylmethane (**1h**), the product (**2h**) could still be obtained in a comparable 94% isolated yield (Scheme 3).

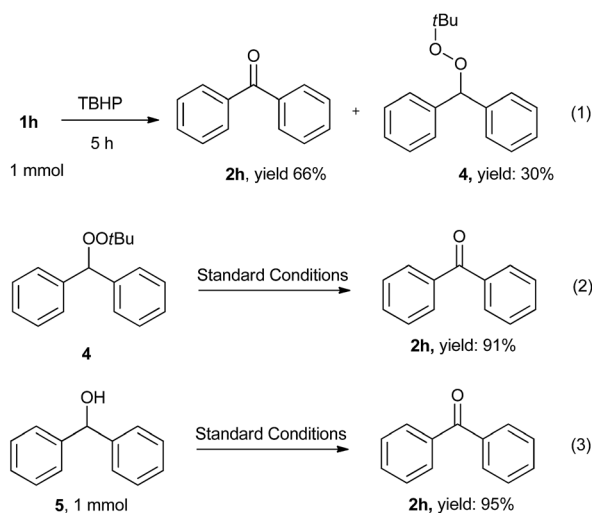
To gain insight into this oxidative reaction, control experiments were employed as shown in Scheme 4. Firstly, the reaction



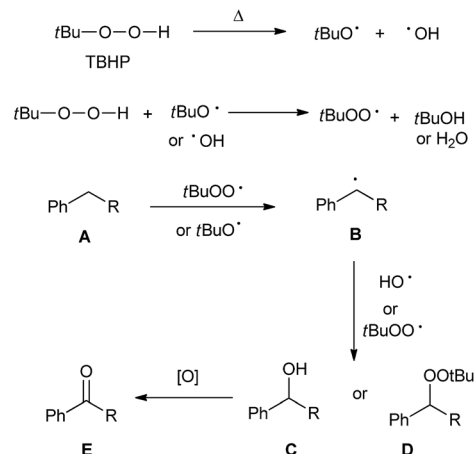
Scheme 2 Oxidative reaction of 2-phenylacetophenone.



Scheme 3 Scale-up synthesis.



Scheme 4 Control experiments.



Scheme 5 Proposed mechanism.

was stopped after 5 hours, the oxidation product **2h** and radical adducts **4** were both observed in 66% and 30% yields respectively. When intermediate **4** was subjected to the standard reaction conditions, the corresponding product **2h** was also obtained in 91% yield. When the diphenylmethanol (**5**) was subjected to the standard reaction conditions, the desired ketone product **2h** was also obtained with 95% yield. These results indicated that this transformation might involve benzylic peroxides and/or benzylic alcohols as the reaction intermediates.

On the basis of the above-mentioned experimental results and previous reports,¹⁷ a plausible reaction mechanism was proposed in Scheme 5. First, the decomposition of TBHP generated the oxygen-based radicals, which then underwent hydrogen abstraction of substrate **A** to generate intermediate **B**. The radical intermediate **B** can either react with ·OH or ·OO*t*Bu to form the oxygenated intermediate **C** or **D**. The intermediate **D** either eliminated one molecule of *t*BuOH to directly form ketone **E**, or transformed into the benzyl alcohol **C**, which then underwent further oxidation to give final aryl ketone product **E**.

Conclusions

In summary, a simple metal-free TBHP system has been identified for direct oxidation of benzylic methylene groups to the corresponding aryl ketones. The radical-based reaction pathway tolerates a large variety of benzylic C–H bonds, giving the desired product in good to excellent yields. More importantly, the methodology is amenable to challenging heterocyclic substrates, such as pyridines and imidazoles. The synthetic utility of this protocol was further showcased in the gram-scale synthesis of diphenylketone. Further studies on both reaction scope and reaction mechanism are currently under investigation in our group.

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