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Introduction

Azulene is a bicyclic aromatic hydrocarbon with a deep blue colour and a dipole moment of about 1.08 D.¹ Such properties are in striking contrast with those of the isomeric naphthalene that is colourless and has a dipole moment of 0 D. The polarity of azulene and in turn the appearance of the blue colour can be explained by the charge-separated resonance structure in which the bicyclic core of azulene is regarded as a fusion of 6 π -electron cyclopentadienyl anion and 6 π -electron tropylum cation.

Owing to the unique structural and photophysical properties of the azulene core, a number of azulene-based advanced organic materials² has been developed targeting the applications in sensors,³ bioimaging,⁴ non-linear optics (NLO),⁵ optoelectronics,⁶ molecular electronics⁷ and so on. Furthermore, azulene derivatives have been successfully incorporated in solar cells⁸ and organic field-effect transistors (OFETs)^{8c,d,9} demonstrating high potential for further exploration in this type of devices.

Consequently, this sparked a growing interest in the development of novel synthetic methodologies for azulene construction¹⁰ and functionalization¹¹ with a special emphasis being given to the assembly of azulene-fused heterocycles,¹² azulene-heterocycle conjugates¹³ and azulene-containing polymers.^{8a,c,d,14}

Several recent methodologies for azulene functionalization involve one-pot and/or multicomponent approaches.¹⁵ On the other hand, in recent years, a number of multicomponent transformations have been developed based on the ability of aryl glyoxals to react with 1,3-dicarbonyl compounds and additional nucleophiles resulting in the formation of structurally diverse (heterocyclic) adducts.¹⁶ We decided to take an advantage of this strategy towards the synthesis of azulene derivatives through exploration of the nucleophilic potential of the five-membered ring of azulene core.

Results and discussion

Knowing that the treatment of an aryl glyoxal **2** with a 1,3-dicarbonyl compound **3** results in the Knoevenagel condensation,¹⁶ we envisaged that the presence of an azulene **1** would trigger the Michael addition of **1** onto the Knoevenagel adduct **A**. A subsequent proton transfer in the intermediate **B** would produce the desired azulene derivative **4** (Scheme 1). After conducting a brief screening of the reaction conditions (see ESI†), we were pleased to find that such a three-component transformation could be successfully accomplished at the elevated temperature of 80 °C using isopropanol as a solvent.

The scope of the resulting process is outlined in Scheme 1. In order to evaluate the reactivity of a 1,3-dicarbonyl component **3**, several barbituric acid derivatives and cyclic 1,3-diketones were reacted with unsubstituted azulene and phenyl glyoxal monohydrate resulting in the formation of products **4a–f** with the yields ranging from 37% to 91%. Interestingly, according to

^aCollege of Chemistry, Chemical Engineering and Materials Science, Soochow University, Dushu Lake Campus, Suzhou, 215123, P. R. China. E-mail: olga@suda.edu.cn; vsevolod@suda.edu.cn

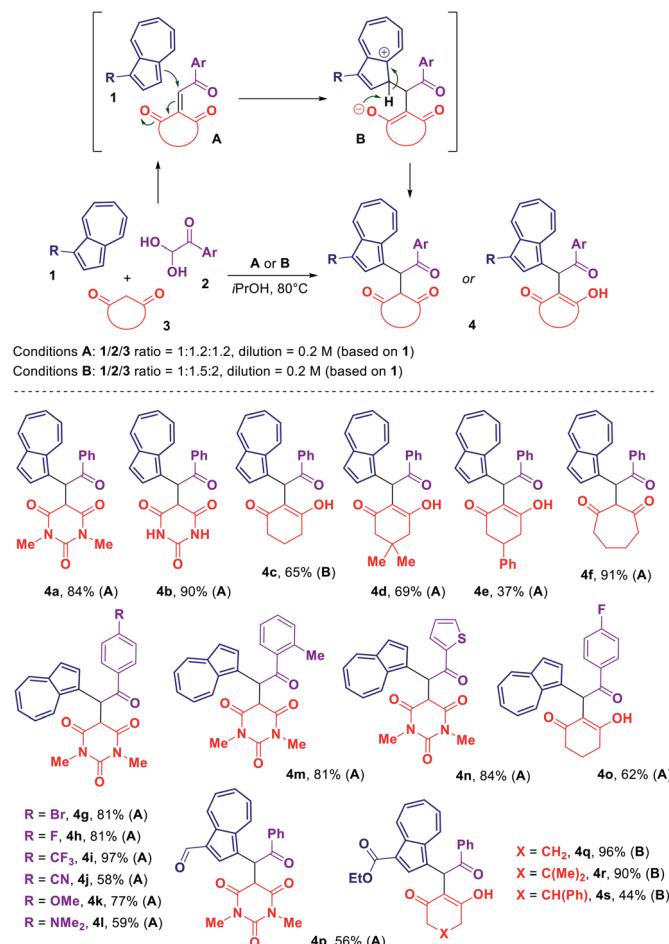
^bDepartment of Chemistry, School of Sciences and Humanities, Nazarbayev University, 53 Kabanbay Batyr Ave, Block 7, Nur-Sultan 010000, Republic of Kazakhstan. E-mail: olga.pereshivko@nu.edu.kz; vsevolod.peshkov@nu.edu.kz

^cDepartment of Chemistry, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, 215123, P. R. China

^dThe Environment and Resource Efficiency Cluster (EREC), Nazarbayev University, Nur-Sultan, Republic of Kazakhstan

† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Detailed experimental procedures, products characterization, X-ray crystallographic data and copies of UV/vis absorption and NMR spectra. CCDC 1974555. For ESI and crystallographic data in CIF or other electronic format see DOI: 10.1039/d0ra00356e

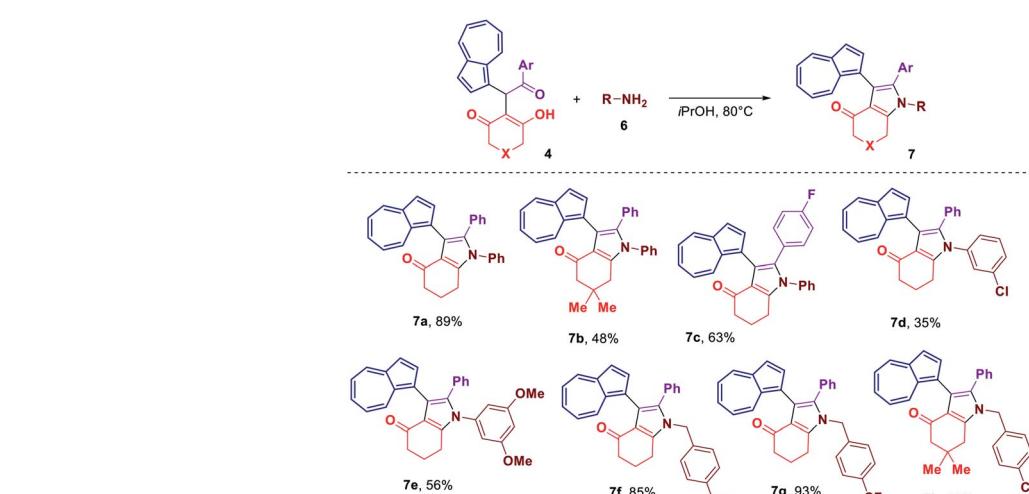




Scheme 1 Scope of the three-component reaction of azulene 1, aryl glyoxal monohydrate 2 and 1,3-dicarbonyl compound 3.



Scheme 2 Synthesis of azulene-tetrahydrocinnolin-5-one conjugates 5.



Scheme 3 Synthesis of azulene-dihydroindol-4-one conjugates 7.

NMR analysis, products **4a**, **b**, **f** derived from either barbituric acids or cycloheptane-1,3-dione were observed in a keto form in solution (CDCl_3 for **4a** and **4f**, $[\text{D}_6]\text{DMSO}$ for **4b**). In contrast, products **4c-e** obtained using various cyclohexane-1,3-diones were observed in an enolized form, with the compound **4e** existing as a mixture of two interconvertible diastereomeric enol forms.

With respect to an aryl glyoxal component 2, a number of variously substituted phenyl glyoxal monohydrates along with a heteroaromatic thiophen-2-yl glyoxal monohydrate have been tested allowing to acquire an array of azulene-containing adducts **4g-o** (Scheme 1). It was found that the presence of either electron-withdrawing or electron-donating substituent in the phenyl ring of glyoxal could be well tolerated.

Blocking one of the azulene's reactive positions with an electron-withdrawing group did not shut down the reactivity of the azulene core towards our transformation. Thus, we were able to prepare a series of 1,3-disubstituted azulene derivatives **4p-s** starting from either azulene-1-carbaldehyde or ethyl azulene-1-carboxylate.

Considering that some of the obtained azulene derivatives, such as for example **4c** and **4d** comprised a 1,4-diketo unit, we decided to probe their reactivity in the condensations with nitrogen nucleophiles towards the formation of azulene-heterocycle conjugates. To our delight, reacting **4c** and **4d** with hydrazine monohydrate in methanol at rt produced azulene-tetrahydrocinnolin-5-one conjugates **5a** and **5b** in high yields of 94% and 93%, respectively (Scheme 2). Encouraged by these results, we went on exploring the potential of our 1,4-diketones in a Paal-Knorr synthesis of pyrroles.¹⁷ Gratifyingly, the treatment of **4c**, **4d** and **4o** with aniline in isopropanol at 80 °C allowed to prepare azulene-dihydroindol-4-one conjugates **7a-c** in moderate to good yields (Scheme 3). The molecular structure of representative azulene-dihydroindol-4-one derivative **7b** has been resolved through the X-ray crystallographic analysis (Fig. 1, see ESI† for details). The above synthetic strategy was also found to be amenable to a variation of an amine component **6**. Examining different aromatic and



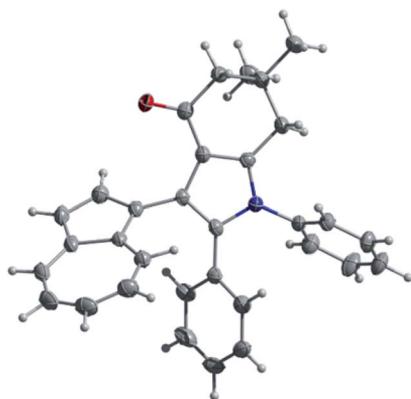
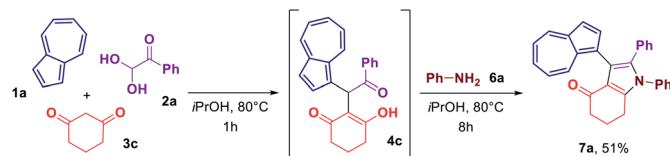


Fig. 1 Molecular structure of **7b**, showing thermal displacement ellipsoids at the 50% probability level. The dimethyl formamide (DMF) molecule acquired during the crystallization process and present in the crystal packing is not shown.

benzylic amines in the reactions with **4c** or **4d** delivered expected azulene-substituted dihydroindol-4-ones **7c–h** in up to 93% yield (Scheme 3).



Scheme 4 One-pot synthesis of azulene-dihydroindol-4-one conjugate **7a**.

In an attempt to streamline the access towards azulene-heterocycle conjugates, we have conducted a one-pot synthesis of compounds **7a** (Scheme 4). Reacting azulene (**1a**), phenyl glyoxal monohydrate (**2a**) and cyclohexane-1,3-dione (**3c**) in isopropanol at 80 °C for 1 h lead to the formation of acyclic adduct **4c**. Once the formation of **4c** was confirmed by the TLC analysis, the aniline (**6a**) was added and the reaction was continued for another 8 h allowing to obtain the desired azulene-substituted dihydroindol-4-one **7a** in 51% overall yield.

The optical properties of all acquired azulene derivatives **4**, **5** and **7** have been assessed by measuring their UV/Vis absorption

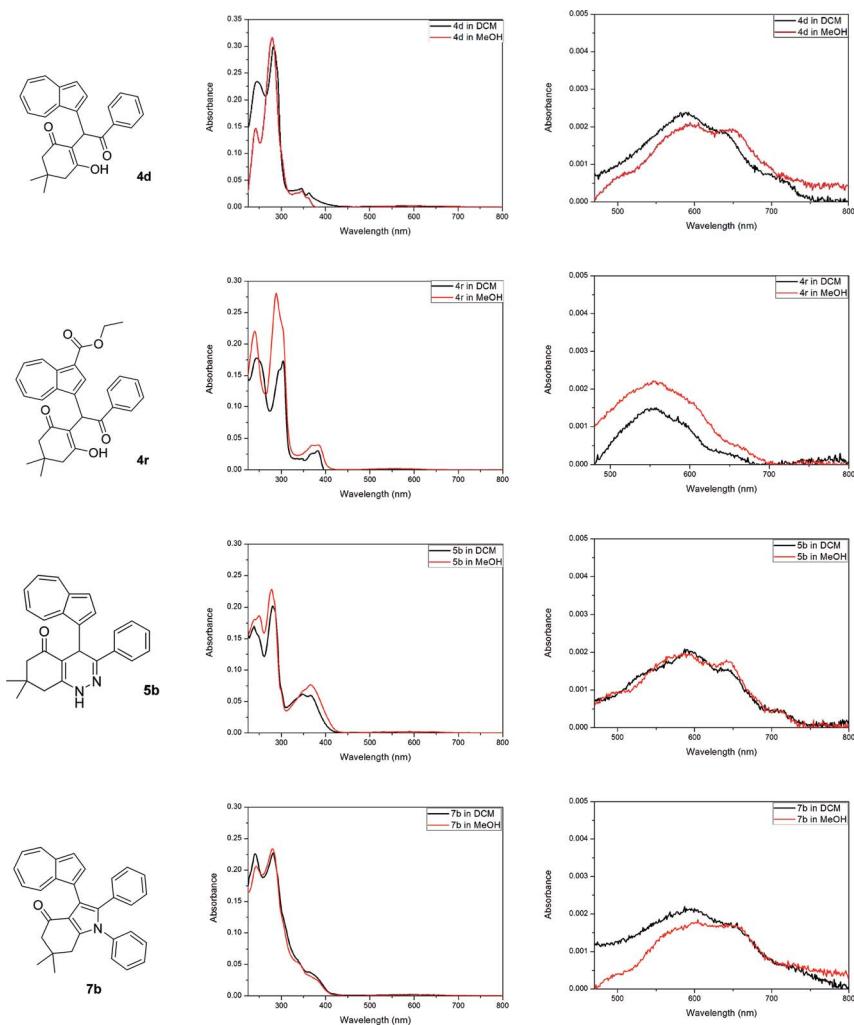


Fig. 2 UV/Vis absorption spectra of **4d**, **4r**, **5b** and **7b** measured in dichloromethane and in methanol (both at $c \approx 5 \times 10^{-6}$ M, left column); magnified visible region of UV/Vis absorption spectra of **4d**, **4r**, **5b** and **7b** (right column).



in dichloromethane and in methanol (both at $c \approx 5 \times 10^{-6}$ M, see ESI†).‡ The UV/Vis absorption spectra of representative azulene-containing products **4d**, **4r**, **5b** and **7b** are shown in Fig. 2. Similarly to most of simple azulene derivatives, all prepared compounds **4**, **5** and **7** were characterized by a strong absorbance in the UV region and a relatively weak absorbance in the visible region, with the latter being responsible for the colouration of their solutions.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we have developed a novel multicomponent protocol for the azulene derivatization through the reaction with an aryl glyoxal and a 1,3-dicarbonyl compound. The scope of the process has been briefly explored resulting in generation of a small set of branched azulene-containing adducts. Some of these adducts could be further upgraded into azulene-heterocycle conjugates through the post-MCR condensations with nitrogen nucleophiles. Collectively, these methodologies provide a straightforward access to three distinct types of azulene derivatives.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Acknowledgements

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‡ UV/Vis absorption of **7b** was measured only in methanol due to poor solubility in dichloromethane.



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