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Chiral Lewis base/Lewis acid/Brønsted acid cooperative catalysis enabled regio- and enantioselective electrophilic sulfenylation/semipinacol rearrangement of allenols

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A chiral sulfide/B(C₆F₅)₃/phosphoric acid co-catalyzed highly regio- and enantioselective tandem electrophilic sulfenylation/semipinacol rearrangement of allenols is developed for the first time. A variety of chiral organosulfur compounds bearing all-carbon quaternary stereocenters are efficiently synthesized *via* this cooperative catalysis. The products enable the facile synthesis of trisubstituted alkenes and thioester compounds through a one-step derivatization process. Mechanistic experiments demonstrate that B(C₆F₅)₃ and phosphoric acid cooperate to form a Lewis acid-assisted Brønsted acid (LBA) system, which significantly enhances catalytic reactivity. Density functional theory (DFT) calculations indicate that π⋯π and C–H⋯π interactions play a crucial role in determining the observed enantioselectivity.

Introduction

Catalytic asymmetric electrophilic addition/functionalization reactions of unsaturated hydrocarbons represent important synthetic strategies for constructing complex chiral compounds.^{1–5} These transformations enable the efficient formation of chiral stereocenters while simultaneously introducing two distinct functional groups. A prominent example is the catalytic asymmetric electrophilic sulfenofunctionalization of unsaturated hydrocarbons, which serves as a direct and effective approach for generating chiral organosulfur compounds.^{6,7} In particular, the catalytic asymmetric sulfenofunctionalization of alkenes has been extensively studied and well developed by Denmark,^{8–12} Zhao,^{13–15} Chen^{16–20} and other groups^{21–23} (Scheme 1a). In contrast, the catalytic asymmetric sulfenofunctionalization of allenes, which enables access to synthetically valuable organosulfur compounds containing both alkenes and chiral stereocenters simultaneously, remains undeveloped. Although Zhao's group attempted to explore this transformation in 2021, they were unable to achieve enantioselective control (Scheme 1b).²⁴ We believe that this reaction presents the following three challenges. First, the sulfenium ion may form a thiiranium ion intermediate with the allenes in

a regioselective manner.^{25,26} Second, the resulting thiiranium ion intermediate differs from that formed with alkenes; it tends to be less stable and more susceptible to racemization, thereby hindering enantioselectivity.²⁴ Third, different allene substrates may undergo varying reaction mechanisms. For example, an allene bearing four distinct substituents might proceed through a kinetic resolution pathway, which could significantly influence both reaction efficiency and selectivity.²⁷ Therefore, achieving highly enantioselective sulfenofunctionalization of allenes remains a significant challenge in asymmetric catalysis (Scheme 1b).

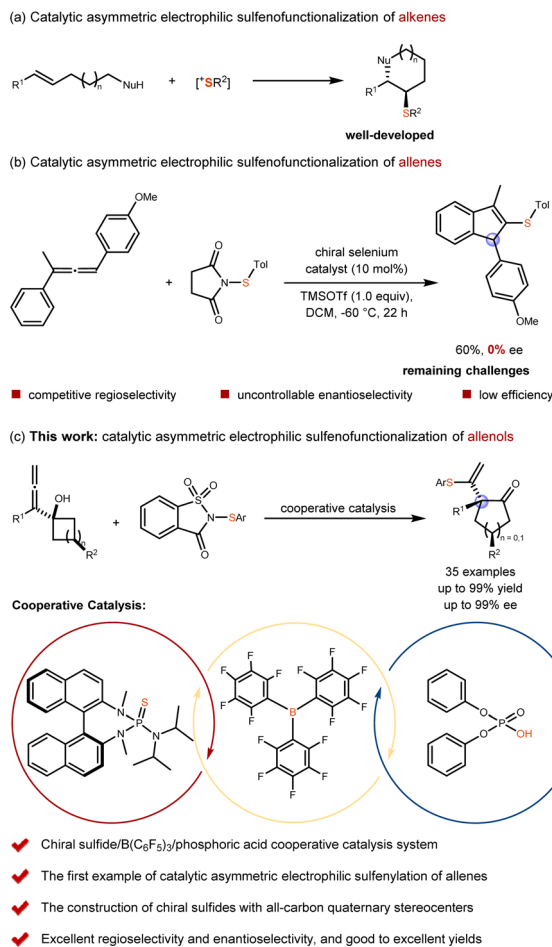
Our research group has been engaged in the investigation of catalytic asymmetric electrophilic sulfenylation addition^{16–20} and electrophilic sulfenylation substitution reactions^{28–32} involving unsaturated hydrocarbons, as well as selenylation addition and substitution reactions.^{33–36} For example, we have recently achieved the organocatalytic asymmetric selenylation/semipinacol rearrangement of allenols.³⁵ Building upon these research interests, we aim to explore the catalytic asymmetric electrophilic sulfenofunctionalization of allenes. We believe that the key challenges associated with this reaction can be effectively addressed through the following three strategies. First, selecting a suitable allene substrate, such as a terminal allene can help simultaneously avoid issues related to regioselectivity and unclear reaction mechanisms, particularly those involving kinetic resolution processes. Second, developing a mild and synergistic catalytic system with high efficiency is crucial. Such a system would not only prevent substrate decomposition and undesirable side reactions but also facilitate the formation of enantioselective and stable thiiranium ion

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Scheme 1 Design of organocatalytic regio- and enantioselective sulfenylation/semipinacol rearrangement of allenols.

intermediates. Third, accelerating the nucleophilic capture process while minimizing racemization is essential for achieving high enantioselectivity in the desired products. For example, intramolecular small-ring expansion processes are known to proceed rapidly under suitable conditions.^{37–48}

Herein, we report a tandem electrophilic sulfenylation/semipinacol rearrangement of allenols, catalyzed synergistically by chiral sulfide, $B(C_6F_5)_3$, and phosphoric acid. This novel and mild synergistic catalytic system enables both high enantioselectivity and reaction efficiency (Scheme 1c).

Results and discussion

Reaction condition optimization

Under standard reaction conditions, allenyl cyclobutanol **2a** was selected as the model substrate, and saccharin-derived 2-(trifluoromethyl)phenylthio compound **3a** served as the sulfenylating reagent. The chiral BINAM-derived sulfide (*S*)-**1a** was employed as the Lewis base catalyst, while tris(pentafluorophenyl)borane $B(C_6F_5)_3$ and diphenyl phosphate (DPP) were used as acid catalysts. Additionally, 5 Å molecular sieves (MS) were incorporated as an additive, and chlorobenzene (PhCl) was utilized as the solvent. The reaction was

conducted at 0 °C for 12 hours under an argon atmosphere, affording the desired product **4a** in 99% yield with 96% enantiomeric excess (ee) (Table 1, entry 1).

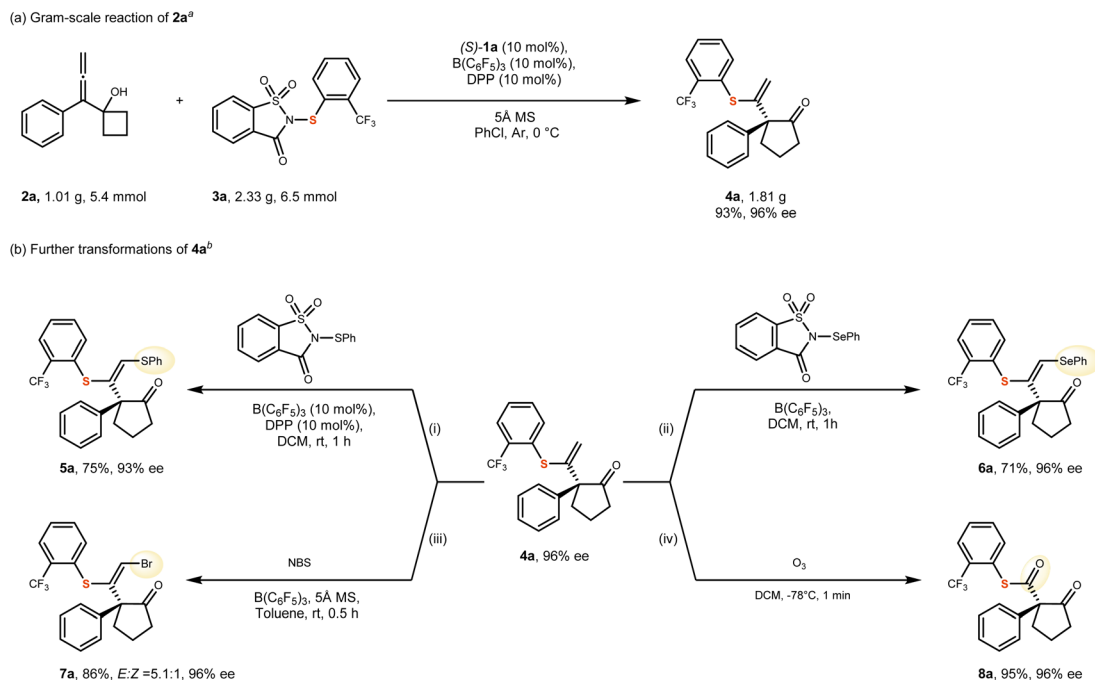
A control experiment revealed that the reaction did not proceed in the absence of $B(C_6F_5)_3$, confirming its essential role in promoting the transformation (entry 2). When alternative Lewis acids were employed in place of $B(C_6F_5)_3$, a substantial decrease in the yield of **4a** was observed (entries 3 and 4). Similarly, the omission of DPP also led to a significant reduction in product yield (entry 5). Subsequently, chiral phosphoric acids (*R*)-CPA and (*S*)-CPA were tested as substitutes for DPP, resulting in a slight improvement in the enantioselectivity of **4a** (entries 6 and 7). However, the use of *p*-toluenesulfonic acid (pTSA) instead of DPP caused a marked decrease in the yield of **4a** (entry 8). Optimization of the Lewis acid and Brønsted acid components demonstrated that the combination of $B(C_6F_5)_3$ and DPP significantly enhances reactivity, albeit with a minor impact on enantioselectivity. Based on previous studies,^{49–54} we propose that this reaction proceeds *via* a Lewis acid-assisted Brønsted acid (LBA) catalytic mechanism, wherein the acidity

Table 1 Reaction optimization^a

Entry	Variation of standard conditions	Yield (%)	ee (%)
1	Standard conditions	99	96
2	No $B(C_6F_5)_3$	N.R.	—
3	$BF_3 \cdot Et_2O$ instead of $B(C_6F_5)_3$	37	95
4	$Sc(OTf)_2$ instead of $B(C_6F_5)_3$	24	93
5	No DPP	18	89
6	(<i>R</i>)-CPA instead of DPP	97	97
7	(<i>S</i>)-CPA instead of DPP	84	97
8	pTSA instead of DPP	45	95
9	No (<i>S</i>)- 1a	N.R.	—
10	(<i>S</i>)- 1b instead of (<i>S</i>)- 1a	N.R.	—
11	(<i>S</i>)- 1c instead of (<i>S</i>)- 1a	34	20
12	(<i>S</i>)- 1d instead of (<i>S</i>)- 1a	N.R.	—
13	DCM instead of PhCl	17	88
14	CH_3CN instead of PhCl	N.R.	—
15	No 5 Å MS	49	95

^a Standard conditions: the reaction was performed with **2a** (0.05 mmol), **3a** (0.06 mmol), (*S*)-**1a** (0.005 mmol), $B(C_6F_5)_3$ (0.005 mmol), DPP (0.005 mmol), and 5 Å MS (15 mg) in PhCl (1 mL) at 0 °C for 12 h under Ar. Isolated yields are shown. The ee values were determined by Supercritical Fluid Chromatography (SFC).





Scheme 3 Gram-scale reaction and synthetic applications. Unless otherwise noted, isolated yields are shown, and the ee values were determined by SFC. For detailed conditions, please refer to SI. ^aReaction conditions: the reaction was performed with **2a** (5.4 mmol), **3a** (6.5 mmol), (*S*)-**1a** (0.54 mmol), $B(C_6F_5)_3$ (0.54 mmol), DPP (0.54 mmol), and 5 Å MS (810 mg) in PhCl (54 mL) at 0 °C for 23 h under Ar. ^bFurther transformations of **4a**. Reaction conditions: (i) **4a** (0.1 mmol), **3e** (0.12 mmol), $B(C_6F_5)_3$ (0.1 mmol) and DPP (0.1 mmol) in DCM at rt for 1 h; (ii) **4a** (0.1 mmol), **3i** (0.12 mmol) and $B(C_6F_5)_3$ (0.1 mmol) in DCM at rt for 1 h; (iii) **4a** (0.1 mmol), NBS (0.105 mmol), $B(C_6F_5)_3$ (0.1 mmol) and 5 Å MS (810 mg) in toluene at rt for 0.5 h; (iv) **4a** (0.1 mmol) in DCM was bubbled with ozone at -78 °C for 1 minute.

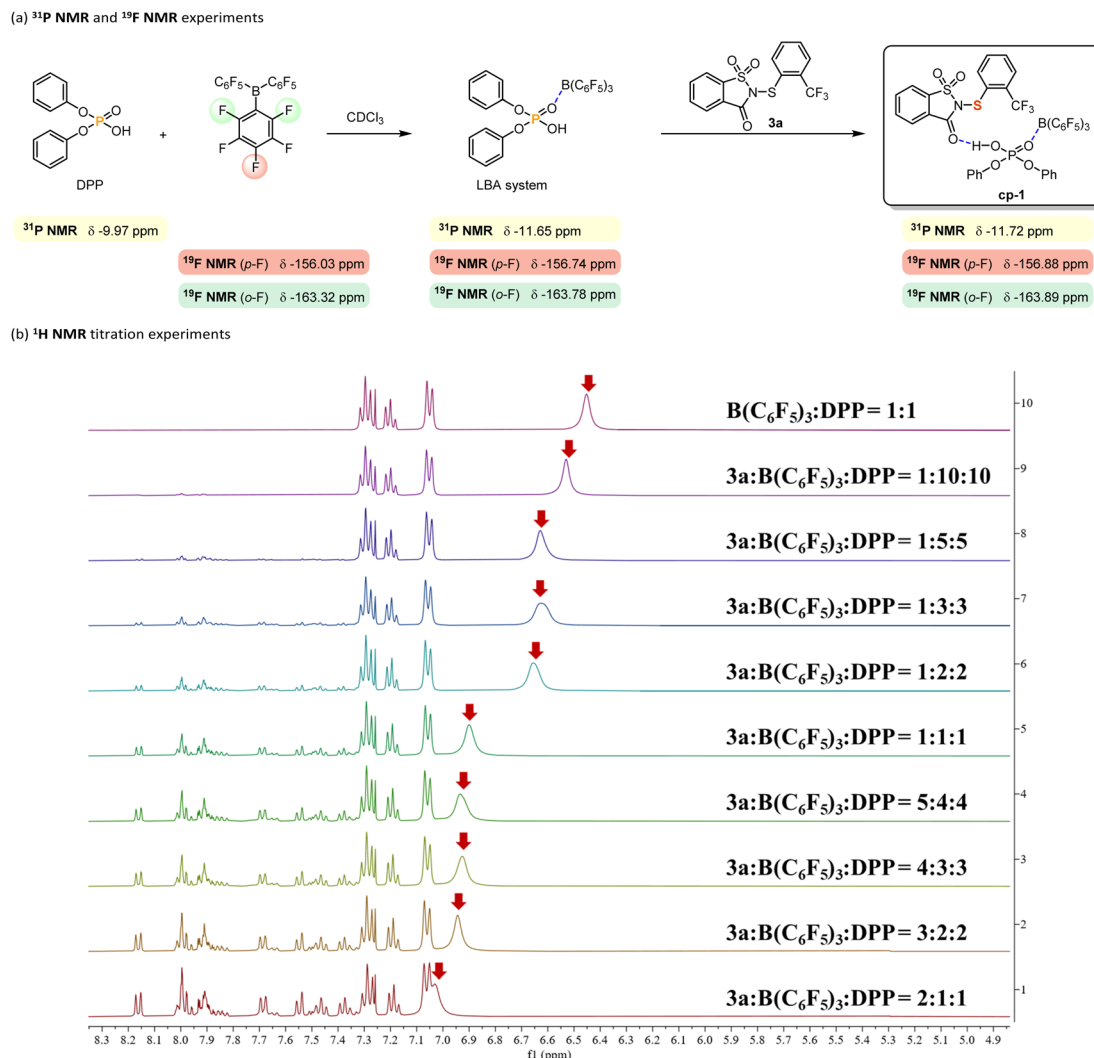
chlorobenzene as the optimal solvent. Moreover, the exclusion of 5 Å molecular sieves led to a considerable decrease in yield, indicating that the additive plays a beneficial role in enhancing reactivity (entry 15). Based on these findings, the optimized reaction conditions were established for further substrate scope investigations (For additional condition screening, please refer to SI).

Substrate scope

With the optimized reaction conditions established, we proceeded to investigate the scope of allenols and sulfenylating reagents. Most of the corresponding products were obtained in excellent yields and enantioselectivities (Scheme 2). Our observations indicated that electron-withdrawing groups and weakly electron-donating groups at the *para*-position of the aromatic moiety exerted only minor effects on enantioselectivity (**4a–4i**). However, strongly electron-donating groups, such as the methoxy group, significantly diminished the enantioselectivity (**4j**). It was observed that electron-rich substrate **2j** undergoes racemic background reaction, which may constitute the primary factor contributing to the decrease in enantioselectivity (For the details, please refer to SI). Notably, the absolute configuration of product **4d** was determined to be (*R*) by X-ray crystallography.⁵⁵ Subsequently, we found that substituents such as -F, -OCF₃, and -OMe located at the *meta*-position of the aromatic ring afforded products with good yields and enantioselectivities (**4k–4m**). Additionally, multi-substituted aromatic groups, including 2-naphthyl allenols, also provided favorable

results (**4n–4p**). Due to the electron-donating nature of the 1,3-benzodioxole group, the corresponding product **4o** was only obtained with 89% ee. Notably, the reaction conditions were compatible with heterocyclic systems such as 2-thiophene, affording product **4q** in 99% yield and 84% ee. The observed sluggish reactivity in substrates **2g**, **2k**, and **2n** can be attributed to the presence of electron-withdrawing groups, which diminish the electron density on the allene moiety. This reduction hinders the formation of the thiiranium ion intermediate, consequently leading to a decrease in the overall reaction rate. Furthermore, substrates bearing substituents on the cyclobutanol moieties were also evaluated. Since these substrates exist as mixtures of diastereoisomers, the corresponding products also exhibited diastereomeric ratios. Nevertheless, the major diastereomers were obtained in moderate to good yields and with high enantioselectivity (**4r–4y**). The absolute configuration of product **4t** was determined to be (*R, S*) by X-ray crystallography.⁵⁵ However, the cyclopropanol substrate was found to be less suitable, resulting in the formation of product **4z** in 78% yield and 47% ee. Notably, sulfenylating reagents bearing *meta*- and *para*-trifluoromethyl substituents showed a marked decrease in enantioselectivity, highlighting the importance of steric effects in influencing the stereochemical outcome (**4aa–4ab**). Therefore, we examined a sulfenylating reagent containing 2,6-bis(isopropyl) groups and obtained product **4ac** in 85% yield and 98% ee. In contrast, using the most common sulfenylating reagent without any substituent on the phenyl ring resulted in product **4ad** with only





Scheme 4 Mechanistic experiments.

43% yield and 67% ee, further supporting the role of steric hindrance in enhancing enantioselectivity. The relatively low yield can be attributed to the formation of a disulfenylated by-product **4ad'** within the system (For the details, please refer to SI). However, when alkyl substrate **2aa** was employed with an *ortho*-trifluoromethyl-substituted sulfenylating reagent, the reaction failed to proceed, likely due to steric hindrance from the trifluoromethyl group. Through systematic optimization studies on alkyl substrates (For the details, please refer to SI, Table S2), we identified the 3,5-difluorosubstituted sulfenylating reagent as an effective sulfur source, affording a range of the corresponding alkyl-substituted products with moderate to good yields and high enantioselectivity (**4ae–4ai**).

Gram-scale reaction and synthetic applications

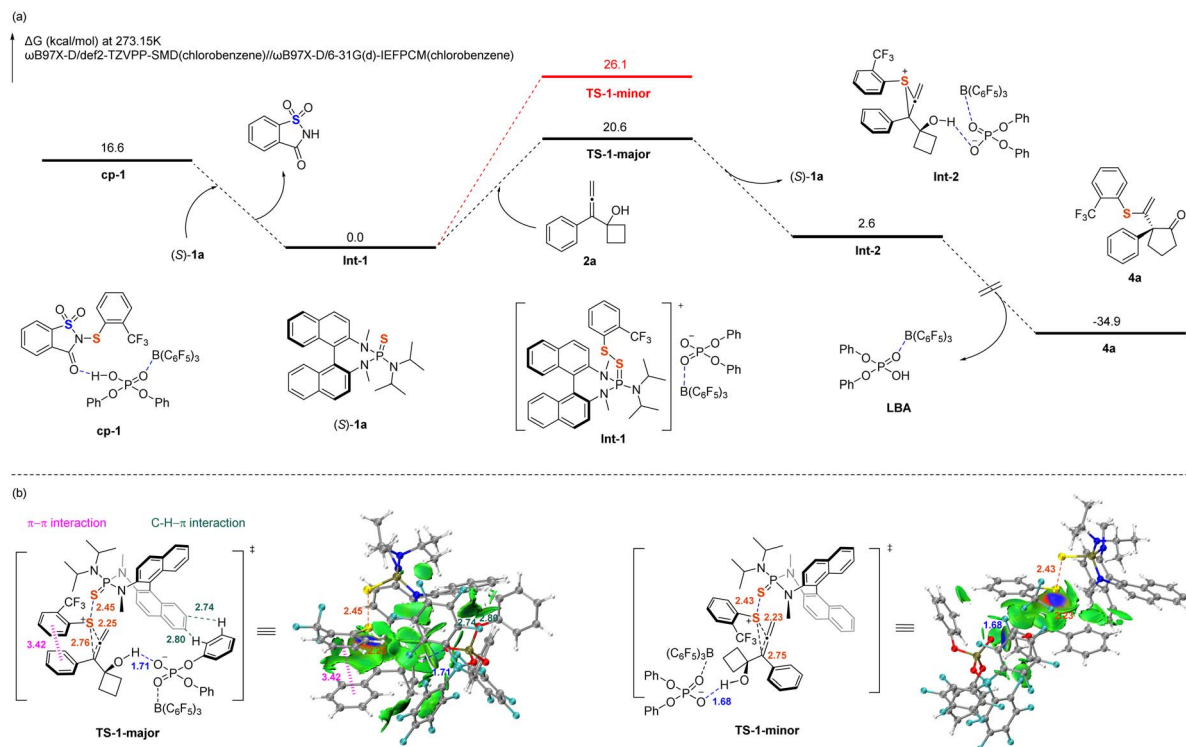
To demonstrate the synthetic applicability of this catalytic system, a gram-scale reaction employing substrate **2a** was conducted under standard conditions, affording product **4a** in 93% yield and 96% ee (Scheme 3a). Subsequently, structural modifications were carried out on the terminal alkenes moiety of **4a**

(Scheme 3b). Electrophilic sulfenylation, selenylation, and bromination reactions of the alkenes were successfully performed, yielding the corresponding trisubstituted alkene derivatives in moderate yields (compounds **5a–7a**). However, a slight decrease in enantioselectivity was observed for compound **5a**. We hypothesize that this reduction may be attributed to the preferential conversion of the (*S*)-configured enantiomer of **4a** into a disulfenylated side product. The configuration of the trisubstituted alkene in the products was determined to be of the (*E*)-configuration, based on single-crystal X-ray structural analysis of the racemic compound **7a** (For the details, please refer to SI).⁵⁵ Furthermore, ozonolysis of the olefin efficiently afforded the 1,3-dicarbonyl thioester compound **8a** in 95% yield with 96% ee.

Mechanistic studies

Based on previous studies of the Lewis acid-assisted Brønsted acid (LBA) system⁵⁴ and electrophilic sulfenylation reactions,⁶ a plausible intermediate **cp-1** is proposed in Scheme 4. To verify the formation of **cp-1**, ^{31}P NMR and ^{19}F NMR analyses (Scheme





Scheme 5 Computational studies on the reaction pathway and the origin of enantioselectivity. (a) Gibbs free energies profiles. (b) Independent Gradient Model based on Hirshfeld partition (IGMH) weak interaction analysis of two transition states. Bond lengths are given in Å. Pink dashed line: π - π interaction. Blue dashed line: hydrogen-bonding interaction. Green dashed line: C-H \cdots π interaction.

4a) as well as ^1H NMR titration experiments (Scheme 4b) were conducted. When DPP and $\text{B}(\text{C}_6\text{F}_5)_3$ were mixed in a 1 : 1 molar ratio in deuterated chloroform (CDCl_3), new resonances appeared in both the ^{31}P and ^{19}F NMR spectra, indicating interactions between $\text{B}(\text{C}_6\text{F}_5)_3$ and DPP and suggesting the possible formation of an LBA system. Upon addition of equimolar amounts of DPP, $\text{B}(\text{C}_6\text{F}_5)_3$, and **3a** in CDCl_3 , only minor chemical shifts were observed for the phosphorus atom of DPP and for the fluorine atoms at the ortho and para positions of $\text{B}(\text{C}_6\text{F}_5)_3$, implying interactions among the three components. Building upon our previous findings,^{28,32} we hypothesize the presence of hydrogen bonding between **3a** and the LBA system. To investigate this interaction, ^1H NMR titration experiments were performed. With the concentration of $\text{B}(\text{C}_6\text{F}_5)_3$ and DPP held constant at a 1 : 1 ratio, incremental addition of **3a** resulted in a consistent downfield shift of the resonance signal corresponding to the proton of DPP (indicated by the red arrow), which indicates the presence of hydrogen bonding. Collectively, these results support the likely presence of **cp-1** in the catalytic system.

To elucidate the origin of the high enantioselectivity observed in the reaction, DFT calculations were performed on the reaction pathways at the $\omega\text{B97X-D}/\text{def2-TZVPP-SMD}/\omega\text{B97X-D}/6-31\text{G(d)}\text{-IEFPCM}$ level of theory,⁵⁶⁻⁵⁹ using **3a** as the model sulfonylating reagent (the computational details are provided in SI). As shown in Scheme 5, the chiral catalyst (*S*)-**1a** initially engages **cp-1** through a chalcogen bond, forming the activated intermediate **Int-1**. Electrophilic sulfonylation

subsequently occurs at the *Re*-face of substrate **2a**, proceeding *via* transition state **TS-1-major** to yield the thiiranium ion intermediate **Int-2**, which exhibits high regioselectivity and enantioselectivity. It is followed by a rapid intramolecular ring-expansion rearrangement that affords the desired product **4a** and concurrently regenerates the LBA system. The computed transition state structure **TS-1-major**, which leads to the major enantiomer of product **4a**, is more stable than **TS-1-minor** by 5.5 kcal mol^{-1} ; this is consistent with the experimentally observed enantioselectivity. Independent Gradient Model based on Hirshfeld partition (IGMH) weak interaction analysis⁶⁰⁻⁶³ revealed the presence of a π \cdots π interaction⁶⁴ between the aryl ring of the sulfonylating reagent and that of substrate **2a** in **TS-1-major**, along with C-H \cdots π interactions between the aryl ring of LBA and the naphthalene ring of (*S*)-**1a**. In contrast, in **TS-1-minor**, this π \cdots π interaction is disrupted due to steric repulsion between the *ortho*-trifluoromethyl substituent and (*S*)-**1a**. Additionally, the C-H \cdots π interactions are absent owing to the unfavorable orientation of the hydroxy group in **2a** relative to the naphthalene ring of (*S*)-**1a**.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have successfully developed a highly regio- and enantioselective electrophilic sulfonylation/semipinacol rearrangement of allenols, which is enabled for the first time through cooperative catalysis involving a chiral Lewis base, an achiral Lewis acid, and an achiral Brønsted acid. This method



allows for the synthesis of a wide range of chiral organosulfur compounds containing all-carbon quaternary stereocenters, with high yields and excellent enantioselectivity. The sulfur-substituted terminal alkene moiety present in the products can be readily converted into trisubstituted alkenes and thio-ester derivatives. DFT studies indicate that steric repulsion between the *ortho*-trifluoromethyl substituent of the sulfenylating reagent and the catalyst plays a crucial role in achieving high enantioselectivity. Additionally, studies on other sulfenylation and selenylation reactions based on this cooperative catalytic system are currently underway in our laboratory.

Author contributions

Z.-M. Chen directed the project. Z.-W. Wei completed the reaction optimization, substrate scope exploration, mechanistic studies and synthetic applications. L.-M. Yang, Y.-X. Huo, and Z.-L. Li helped to synthesize various substrates and analyze the data. Q.-Y. Cai and X.-Q. Gong achieved DFT calculations. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Data availability

CCDC 2471687 (**4d**), 2471686 (**4t**), 2473436 ((rac)-**7a**), 2473437 (**8a**) contain the supplementary crystallographic data for this paper.^{55a-d}

Supplementary information: Full experimental details, ¹H, ¹³C, ¹⁹F NMR, SFC spectra, HPLC spectra, X-ray data and DFT calculations. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d5sc06981e>.

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