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Hydrogen peroxide-triggered gene silencing in mammalian cells through boronated antisense oligonucleotides

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Hydrogen peroxide-triggered gene silencing in mammalian cells through boronated antisense oligonucleotides†

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Hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) is a reactive oxygen species (ROS) involved in various diseases, including neurodegeneration, diabetes, and cancer. Here, we introduce a new approach to use H₂O₂ to modulate specific gene expression in mammalian cells. H₂O₂-responsive nucleoside analogues, in which the Watson–Crick faces of the nucleobases are caged by arylboronate moieties, were synthesized. One of these analogues, boronated thymidine (dT^B), was incorporated into oligodeoxynucleotides (ODNs) using an automated DNA synthesizer. The hybridization ability of this boronated ODN to complementary RNA was clearly switched in the off-to-on direction upon H₂O₂ addition. Furthermore, we demonstrated H₂O₂-triggered gene silencing in mammalian cells using antisense oligonucleotides (ASOs) modified with dT^B. Our approach can be used for the regulation of any gene of interest by the sequence design of boronated ASOs and will contribute to the development of targeted disease therapeutics.

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Introduction

Nucleic acids are fundamental molecules for biological processes as they are responsible for the storage, regulation, and expression of genetic information. Modulating the biological activities of nucleic acids is of value for therapeutic and diagnostic applications. Antisense oligonucleotides (ASOs) are among the most promising oligonucleotides for the down-regulation of specific genes.¹ ASOs hybridize with complementary mRNA to inhibit translation and reduce specific gene expression through the RNase H degradation process or to modulate mRNA splicing pathways. Several antisense drugs have been approved by the US FDA in recent years.^{2–5} However, although ASOs are promising tools to control specific gene expression, a considerable drawback of the technology is the inability to regulate the activity of ASOs in a designated manner. If the activities of ASOs could be strictly controlled, as required for therapeutic use, their dosage could be reduced while maintaining their efficiency, and lesion specific knockdown of the target gene would be realized, reducing the off-target effect.

Photo-caging technology represents an effective means to the development of the spatial and temporal control of ASO activity.^{6–16} In particular, nucleobase-caged ASOs have been systematically investigated, thus facilitating the manipulation of biological phenomena by photo-irradiation.^{17–22} However, the use of other stimuli, such as small molecule-responsive caged ASOs, remain largely unexplored.²³ The chemical environment in our body, as well as inside cells, differs in space and over time. The ability of caged nucleic acids to alter their properties under a specific biomarker in a lesion would provide new options for nucleic acid therapeutics.

Some diseased cells, such as inflamed cells²⁴ and cancer cells,²⁵ exhibit elevated intrinsic oxidative stress, and the amounts of reactive oxygen species (ROS) are increased. Thus, the development of molecular probes toward ROS is one of the best intriguing research fields.²⁶ Hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) is an ROS that exhibits good reactivity and is present in significant concentrations *in vivo*, and is thus an ideal candidate as a biomarker of tumours. Compared with normal cells, cancer cells have increased levels of H₂O₂ of up to 0.5 nmol/10⁴ cells per h.²⁵ There is therefore great interest in developing ASOs that are activated by excess H₂O₂. We designed a series of boronated nucleosides (dT^{Bpin}, dA^{Bpin}, dC^{Bpin} and dG^{Bpin}) for the H₂O₂-triggered activation of ASOs (Fig. 1a). Arylboronic acids and their esters can effectively temporally mask their molecular activity. They are oxidized to phenol derivatives by H₂O₂ and subsequent 1,6-elimination releases the active molecule (Fig. 1b). Boronated small molecules have been used for the fluorescent detection of H₂O₂,²⁷ selective gene activation,²⁸ and as cancer therapeutics.^{29–31} To adapt H₂O₂-responsive small

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Full experimental details, ¹H, ¹³C and ³¹P spectra of all new compounds, HPLC charts, ESI-MS spectra of all new ODNs and representative UV melting data. See DOI: 10.1039/c7sc04318j

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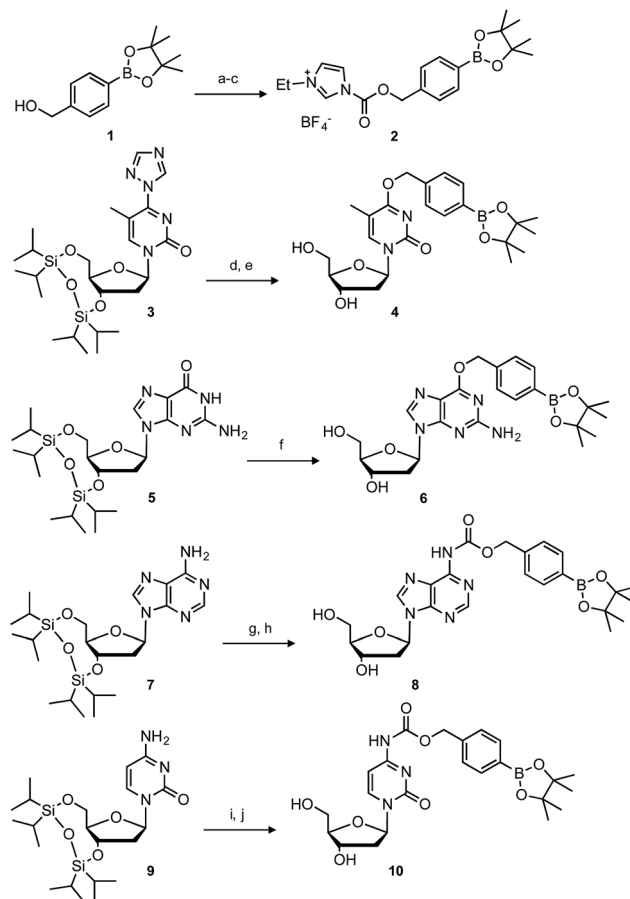
Fig. 1 (a) Chemical structure of boronated 2'-deoxyribonucleoside analogues synthesized in this study. (b) Schematic of H_2O_2 -triggered molecule activation. (c) Gene silencing triggered by H_2O_2 through inactive boronated ASOs.

molecule technology to ASOs, we masked the Watson–Crick face of the nucleobase with pinacol borane. The sterically hindered arylboronate groups will interfere with duplex formation between the ASO and target mRNA. In the presence of H_2O_2 , the boronate group will be swiftly removed, resulting in gene silencing through hybridization of the ASO to the target mRNA (Fig. 1c).

Results and discussion

Synthesis of boronated nucleosides

The synthesis of boronated nucleosides was started from suitably silylated sugars (Scheme 1). The H_2O_2 responsive pinacol borane moiety was introduced through a benzylic linker by $\text{S}_{\text{N}}\text{Ar}$ reaction of a triazolyl nucleoside derivative³² for **dT** and by Mitsunobu reaction for **dG**. The removal of TIPDS by TBAF afforded boronated nucleoside **dT**^{Bpin} (**4**) and **dG**^{Bpin} (**6**). In contrast, **dA**^{Bpin} and **dC**^{Bpin} have an arylboronate moiety linked *via* a carbamate spacer on their nucleobase. 4-(Hydroxymethyl) phenylboronic acid pinacol ester **1** was converted to the imidazole derivative in 2 steps. The imidazole was exposed to Meerwein reagent to prepare highly reactive imidazolium salt **2** *in situ*, then reacted with TIPDS-protected dC or dA. TBAF treatment caused degradation of the carbamate moiety, and therefore we used HF-pyridine or TASF for silyl deprotection to afford **dA**^{Bpin} (**8**) and **dC**^{Bpin} (**10**) (Scheme 1).



Scheme 1 Synthesis of boronated nucleoside analogues. Conditions: (a) triphosgene, Na_2CO_3 , toluene, rt; (b) imidazole, toluene, rt, 87% over 2 steps; (c) Et_3OBF_4 , DCM, rt; (d) **1**, DBU, MeCN, rt, 98%; (e) TBAF, THF, $0\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, 72%; (f) **1**, DIAD, PPh_3 , 1,4-dioxane, rt, then TBAF, 10%; (g) **2**, DCM, $0\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ to rt, 91%; (h) TASF, DMF, $0\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, 62%; (i) **2**, DCM, $0\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ to rt, 92%; (j) HF-pyridine, $60\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, 52%.

H_2O_2 -decaying of boronated nucleosides

With the caged nucleoside monomers in hand, we determined their conversion yields to the corresponding natural nucleosides by H_2O_2 treatment using HPLC analysis. Exposed to the equimolar equivalent of H_2O_2 in sodium phosphate buffer (pH = 7.2), virtually all of **dT**^{Bpin} was converted to thymidine within 20 min (96% yield, Fig. 2a). Other boronated nucleosides were also promptly converted to the corresponding nucleosides in 67–88% yields (Fig. 2b and ESI[†]). The lower yield of **dG**^{Bpin} was due to the generation of a side product, possibly the 8-oxo-dG analogue.^{33,34} Of the synthesized nucleoside analogues, **dT**^{Bpin} showed the best reaction yield and kinetics for H_2O_2 -decaying. To provide further insights into the decaying mechanism, we examined the inducible reactivity of **dT**^{Bpin} toward other ROS, such as *tert*-butyl-hydroperoxide (TBHP), hypochlorite (ClO^-), hydroxyl radical, *tert*-butoxy radical, superoxide (O_2^-), and nitric oxide. We found that the decaying reaction of **dT**^{Bpin} was highly selective for H_2O_2 over the other ROS (Fig. 2c). The selective reaction of **dT**^{Bpin} with H_2O_2 is consistent with the observations of other groups.^{28–31} We also checked the reactivity





Fig. 2 (a) HPLC chromatograms of dT^{Bpin} after H_2O_2 addition at different time points. (b) Conversion rate of each boronated nucleoside analogue to the corresponding natural nucleoside. (c) H_2O_2 -selectivity of dT^{Bpin} toward other ROS.

of dT^{Bpin} toward peroxynitrite (ONOO^-), which is reported to be a potential oxidant of arylboronic acid moieties.³⁵ However, in the same reaction conditions, almost no conversion to thymidine was observed (see HPLC chromatograms in ESI†). The half-life of ONOO^- in neutral buffer is extremely short³⁶ and an equimolar equivalent of ONOO^- may not be sufficient for dT^{Bpin} decaying.

Boronated ODN synthesis

Although the introduction of arylboronate groups into oligodeoxynucleotides (ODNs) is very interesting due to their characteristic function,^{37,38} the direct incorporation of arylboronic acid moieties using solid phase synthesis is challenging because of their hygroscopicity. Wang and co-workers reported the synthesis of arylboronic acid-modified ODNs using a post-synthetic approach.³⁸ However, this strategy limits the design of boronated ODNs. We predicted that phosphoramidites modified with pinacol borane would be less hygroscopic and could be applied to direct DNA synthesis.

We incorporated dT^{Bpin} into ODN to take into account both the decaying efficiency and stability of the ODN under DNA synthesis conditions. Fortunately, phosphoramidite **11**, prepared from dT^{Bpin} nucleoside **4** (see ESI† for the synthesis), could be incorporated into the ODN using standard solid phase synthesis procedures. After cleavage from the solid support with ammonium hydroxide, the protecting groups were removed by exposure to 50 mM K_2CO_3 in methanol (Fig. 3a). Subsequent HPLC purification afforded highly pure **ODN14** in which the pinacol ester group of dT^{Bpin} was hydrolysed (see MALDI-TOF and ESI MS analysis in ESI†). **ODN14** was observed as the

dehydrated form on ESI MS that corresponds to Wang's report.³⁸ To the best of our knowledge, this is the first example of the incorporation of the arylboronic acid group into an ODN without the need to use a post-synthetic approach.

H_2O_2 -activation of boronated ODN

Next, we analysed the H_2O_2 reactivity of dT^{B} -modified **ODN14** by HPLC (Fig. 3b). When **ODN14** was exposed to an excess amount of H_2O_2 at rt, the **ODN14** peak at 8.8 min completely disappeared and another peak appeared within 30 min in the HPLC profile. The resulting ODN, with a retention time of 2.0 min, was shown by MALDI-TOF MS spectrometry to be **ODN14** in which the boronic acid moiety of dT^{B} was absent (see MALDI-TOF MS analysis in SI). The oxidation of dT^{B} by H_2O_2 remained clean and rapid.

The duplex-forming ability of **ODN14** toward its complementary RNA (cRNA) strand was measured in the presence and absence of H_2O_2 . Under the H_2O_2 -free condition, the modified duplex **ODN14**:cRNA (Fig. 3c: blue line) was significantly destabilized compared with the unmodified **ODN15**:cRNA duplex (Fig. 3c: green line) ($\Delta T_m = 14^\circ\text{C}$). The stabilities of the base pairs formed between T^{Bpin} and other nucleobases (G, U, and C) were also lower than the T:A base pair (Table S1†). These results indicate that the boronic acid moiety effectively inhibits complementary base pairing, probably due to steric hindrance. The T_m of **ODN14**:cRNA in the presence of H_2O_2 (Fig. 3c: red line) was comparable to that of **ODN15**:cRNA ($\Delta T_m = 1^\circ\text{C}$). The mismatch discrimination ability of **ODN14** was not decreased by H_2O_2 addition (Table S1†). These excellent hybridization properties of **ODN14** were also seen toward complementary DNA (Table S2†). These results suggest that dT^{B} -modified ODNs enable switching of their hybridization to complementary strand in the off-to-on direction upon H_2O_2 treatment.

H_2O_2 -triggered gene silencing in mammalian cells

The T_m results prompted us to use the H_2O_2 -responsive caged ODNs in biological systems. We incorporated dT^{B} into the gap region of ASO targeting *Mus Scarb1* mRNA (Fig. 4a). *Scarb1* has been implicated in several tumours,³⁹ and targeted ASOs may provide a novel cancer therapeutic approach. S_0 includes phosphorothioate and locked nucleic acid (LNA) modifications to increase nuclease resistance and affinity toward the target mRNA, respectively. To determine the effect of boronate caging groups on antisense potency, we synthesized a set of three ASOs S_1 – S_3 containing 1–3 dT^{B} units. Hepa-1c1c7 cells, a line derived from mice hepatoma, were treated with the ASOs by simple addition to the medium with CaCl_2 (ref. 40) and incubated for 48 h in the absence or presence of H_2O_2 (10 μM). *Scarb1* mRNA levels were then quantified using qRT-PCR (Fig. 4b). Under the H_2O_2 free condition, the knockdown efficiency of target mRNA by S_1 was almost the same as that by S_0 (positive control). On the other hand, S_2 and S_3 showed low antisense efficiency, similar to S_A (negative control). This result indicates that at least two dT^{B} units are necessary to mask the gene silencing potency of the ASO. In contrast, when exposed to 10 μM H_2O_2 , the antisense efficiencies of S_2 and S_3 are comparable to that of S_0 . The



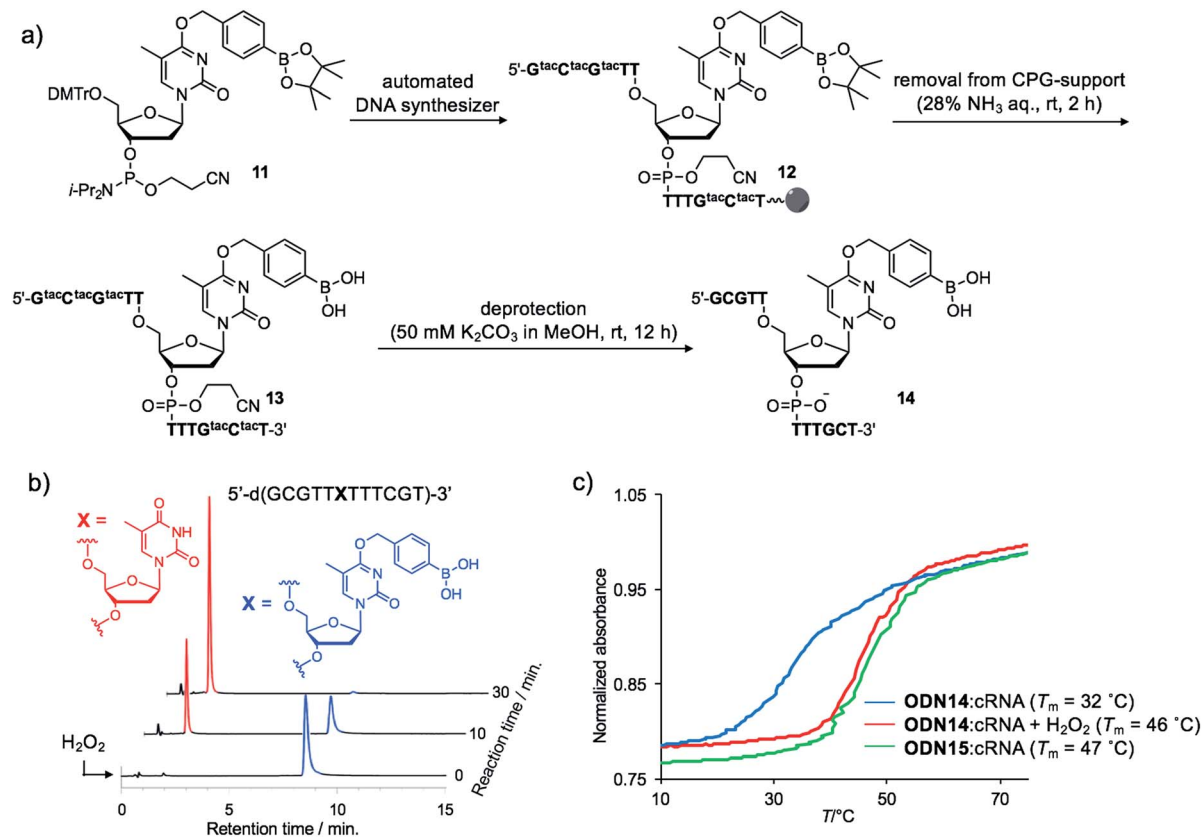


Fig. 3 (a) Synthetic scheme of boronated ODN. tac = *tert*-butylphenoxycetyl. (b) HPLC chromatograms of ODN14 after H_2O_2 addition at different time points. (c) Thermal melting curves of the duplex formed between ODN14 and complementary RNA in the presence or absence of H_2O_2 .

negligible change in gene silencing upon H_2O_2 treatment without ASO indicates that $10 \mu\text{M}$ H_2O_2 does not affect the expression level of *Mus Scarb1* mRNA. However, S_A showed

about 15% lower mRNA expression after H_2O_2 treatment, suggesting the combination of the modified oligonucleotide and H_2O_2 may affect the *Scarb1* mRNA expression level. Targeting other mRNAs or applying other chemical modifications could help to obtain further insights for this phenomenon. Taken together, these results clearly demonstrate that the ASOs S_2 and S_3 enable excellent off-to-on switching of gene silencing in mammalian cells triggered by H_2O_2 .

a)

ASO	Sequence (5'-3')
S_0	$\text{TC}^m\text{agtc}^m\text{catgactTC}^m$
S_1	$\text{TC}^m\text{agt}^{\text{B}}\text{catgactTC}^m$
S_2	$\text{TC}^m\text{agt}^{\text{B}}\text{cat}^{\text{B}}\text{gactTC}^m$
S_3	$\text{TC}^m\text{agt}^{\text{B}}\text{cat}^{\text{B}}\text{gact}^{\text{B}}\text{TC}^m$
S_A	$\text{GC}^m\text{attggatTC}^m\text{A}$

$\text{t}^{\text{B}} =$

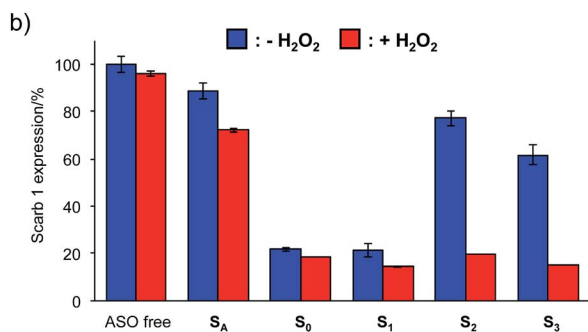


Fig. 4 (a) Sequences of ASOs. n = DNA, N = LNA (C^m = LNA-5-Me-cytidine), all internucleosidic linkages are phosphorothioated. (b) Intercellular gene silencing triggered by H_2O_2 using boronate ASOs. Three independent experiments were averaged and the error bars represent standard deviation.

Conclusions

We designed and synthesized arylboronate-modified nucleosides which are promptly degraded and converted to natural nucleosides by H_2O_2 . The boronated thymidine dT^{Bpin} phosphoramidite could be directly used in automated DNA synthesis and a $\text{T}^{\text{B}}:\text{A}$ base pair in the duplex could be employed as a temporary mismatch until H_2O_2 addition. Moreover, dT^{B} -modified ASOs were demonstrated to be H_2O_2 switches that can control target mRNA expression. H_2O_2 is known to be involved in various diseases such as cancer, neurodegeneration,⁴¹ and diabetes.⁴² Our results indicate that boronated ASOs are promising tools to control target gene expression in a designated manner and as a prodrug-type nucleic acid therapeutic for selective disease treatment. Furthermore, the design of boronated nucleotides can be easily adapted to other nucleic acid



Evaluation of the *in vitro* activity of dT^B-modified ASOs in the absence or presence of H₂O₂

Hepa-1c1c7 cells were seeded at 5.0×10^3 cells per well in 96-well plates (Corning, New York, NY, US) containing 10% FBS/DMEM. After 24 h, 100 nM ASO was added and the cells were cultured in medium supplemented with 9 mM CaCl₂ in the absence or presence of H₂O₂ (10 μM). After 48 h, total RNA was isolated using a QIAGEN RNeasy kit (QIAGEN, Valencia, CA, USA). Reduction of target mRNA expression was determined by real time qRT-PCR using a One Step SYBR PrimeScript PLUS RT-PCR kit (Takara Bio Inc., Kusatsu, Japan) and analysed with a StepOnePlus system (Applied Biosystems; Foster City, CA, USA). The primers used in this study were specific for the mouse *Scarb1* gene (forward: 5'-TGACAACGACACCGTGTCTCT-3'; reverse: 5'-ATGCGACTTGTGTCAGGCTGG-3') and for the mouse *GAPDH* gene (forward: 5'-TGCACCACCAACTGCTTAG-3'; reverse: 5'-GATGCAGGGATGATGTTC-3'). The level of target (*Scarb1*) gene expression was normalized to that of *GAPDH* in the absence of H₂O₂.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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