



Cite this: *Chem. Commun.*, 2017, 53, 4919

Received 22nd March 2017,
Accepted 5th April 2017

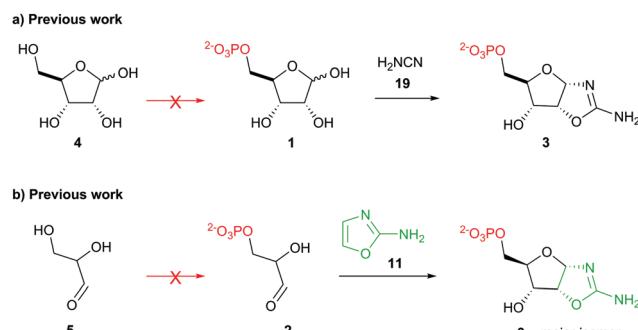
DOI: 10.1039/c7cc02183f

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RNA is essential to all life on Earth and is the leading candidate for the first biopolymer of life. Aminooxazolines have recently emerged as key prebiotic ribonucleotide precursors, and here we develop a novel strategy for aminooxazoline-5'-phosphate synthesis in water from prebiotic feedstocks. Oxidation of acrolein delivers glyceraldehyde (90%), which directs a regioselective phosphorylation in water and specifically affords 5'-phosphorylated nucleotide precursors in up to 36% yield. We also demonstrated a generational link between proteinogenic amino acids (Met, Glu, Gln) and nucleotide synthesis.

Phosphorylation is a key step in nucleotide synthesis, however, elucidating the chemical origins of biological phosphorylation remains an unmet challenge.¹ Biology universally requires nucleotide-5'-phosphates but known prebiotic nucleotide syntheses yield 2',3'-cyclic phosphates.² This dichotomy between prebiotic synthesis and biochemical structure warrants investigation of prebiotic nucleotide-5'-phosphate synthesis.

Stepwise nucleotide synthesis from ribose-5-phosphate (**1**) or glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate (**2**) furnishes the key intermediate ribose aminooxazoline-5'-phosphate (**3**) (Scheme 1),³ which can be converted into the corresponding pyrimidine β -ribonucleotides.^{3,4} However, neither **1** nor **2** are prebiotically plausible substrates.^{5–7} Ribose (**4**) is notoriously unstable and is only synthesised as a minor component of complex mixtures.⁸ Additionally, prebiotic phosphorylations of **4** afford 1-, 2-, or 3-phosphates but not 5-phosphate **1**.⁵ Equally, the highly facile (E1cB) elimination of phosphate hinders the prebiotic synthesis and the utility of **2**,^{6,9} and prebiotic phosphorylation of glyceraldehyde (**5**) yields the 2-phosphate isomer rather than the desired 3-phosphate isomer **2**.^{5,7} Accordingly, the synthesis of **3** remains a key unmet goal for origins of life research. Therefore, we set out to develop a selective prebiotic synthesis of **3** in water.



Scheme 1 (a) Synthesis of ribose aminooxazoline-5'-phosphate (**3**) from prebiotically inaccessible (red arrow) pentose-5-phosphate (**1**).^{3a} (b) Synthesis of **3** from prebiotically inaccessible (red arrow) glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate (**2**).^{3b}

We recently developed a prebiotically plausible reaction network to access all the key intermediates of the core metabolic pathway of triose glycolysis.⁷ Importantly our strategy bypassed the unstable aldehyde-3-phosphate **2**, which suggested that prebiotic nucleotide-5'-phosphate syntheses employing related strategies should be investigated. Accordingly, we turned our attention to oxidative phosphorylation and hypothesised that the constitutional simplicity and prebiotic versatility of acrolein (**6**)^{10,11} presented a novel solution to the phosphorylation of nucleotide precursor **3**.

Acrolein (**6**) is readily oxidised to glyceraldehyde (**7**) by treatment with hydrogen peroxide¹²—a prebiotically simple and robust oxidant.^{7,13} Hydrolysis of **7** yields glyceraldehyde (**5**) and provides a direct generational link to sugars, but we suspected that the reaction of **7** in phosphate solution would lead to direct nucleophilic phosphorylation and transient access to **2** (Scheme 2). Eschenmoser and co-workers previously reported that oxirane **8** reacts with 2 M phosphate (pH 10.5) to afford glycolaldehyde-2-phosphate cyanohydrin (**9**) in 70% yield.¹⁴ Consequently, we suspected that **7**—which, unlike **8**, can be facilely prepared under prebiotically plausible conditions—would be an ideal prebiotic substrate to direct phosphorylation in water.

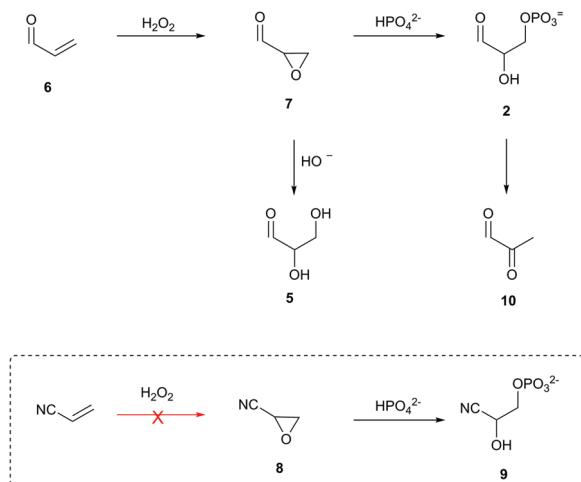
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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: 10.1039/c7cc02183f

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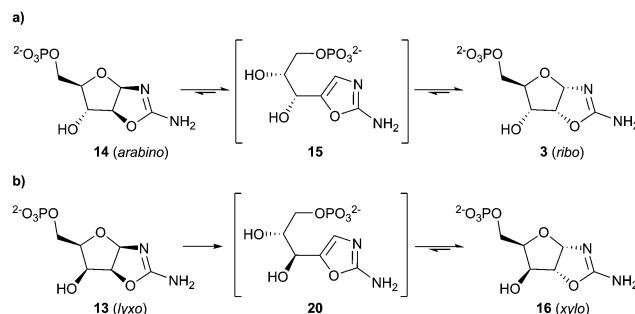
Scheme 2 Acrolein (**6**) as a three-carbon-atom precursor of glyceraldehyde (**5**) and glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate (**2**). Box: Reaction of prebiotically inaccessible (red arrow) oxirane nitrile (**8**) with 2 M phosphate (pH 10.5) to yield glycolaldehyde-2-phosphate cyanohydrin (**9**).

To test our hypothesis, we incubated **6** with hydrogen peroxide (140 mM, pH 8.5) and obtained **7** in 90% yield. We then incubated **7** (250 mM) in 1 M phosphate (room temperature, pH 8.5) and were pleased to observe the formation of **2** (61% by NMR). However, as anticipated, only transient access to **2** was observed followed by rapid elimination to methyl glyoxal (**10**).

Intrigued by the predisposed chemical activation of **7** towards terminal phosphorylation in water and its simple prebiotically plausible synthesis, we set out to resolve the elimination problem encountered during synthesis of **2**. Pleasingly, we found that incubation of **7** (86 mM) and 2-aminooxazole (**11**; 103 mM)^{15,16} for 18 h yielded **12** (78%) (Scheme 3).

Compound **12** retains its epoxide moiety, and therefore is an appropriate substrate for 5'-phosphorylation. Indeed, incubation of epoxide **12** in 1 M phosphate (pH 7.0) gave pentose aminooxazoline-5'-phosphate (36% over two steps from **7**). This method bypasses both ribose **1** and aldehyde-phosphate **2**, and provides a regio- and diastereoselective prebiotic synthesis of oxazoline **3**. This phosphorylation strategy exploits the intrinsic nucleophilicity of inorganic phosphate to achieve 5'-phosphorylation in water.

The diastereoselectivity of the reaction of **7** and **11** was observed to favour the *ribo*-stereochemistry of **3** (*ribo/arabino* 2.8 : 1) more strongly than the reaction of **5** with **11** (*ribo/arabino* 1.1 : 1).¹⁵ Additionally, *lyxo*-**13** was not observed during the



Scheme 4 *ribo/xylo*-Selective C2'-epimerisation of pentose aminooxazoline-5'-phosphates. (a) C2'-Epimerisation of arabino aminooxazoline-5'-phosphate **14** and ribose aminooxazoline-5'-phosphate **3**. (b) C2'-Epimerisation of lyxose aminooxazoline-5'-phosphate **13** and xylose aminooxazoline-5'-phosphate **16**.

synthesis of **3** from **7**. The propensity of **7** to yield the *ribo*-configuration was observed upon both alkaline hydrolysis of epoxide **12** at pH 12.0 (ESI,† Fig. S6) and nucleophilic phosphorylation of epoxide **12** at pH 7.0 (ESI,† Fig. S7). However the kinetic *ribo* selectivity, observed during alkaline hydrolysis, is further augmented by phosphate-catalysed stereochemical inversion of *arabino*-**14** → *ribo*-**3** (Scheme 4) during nucleophilic phosphorylation.¹⁷

Incubation of **14** in 1 M phosphate (40 °C, pH 7.0, 5 d) gave **3** (58%) as the major aminooxazoline product, whereas incubation of **3** returned only a moderate amount of **14** (10%) after 5 d. Furthermore, at room temperature, incubation of **14** yielded **3** (50% after 20 d), whereas under comparable conditions incubation of **3** established an equilibrium with oxazole **15**, but not **14**, which allowed selective transformation of *arabino* → *ribo* stereochemistry.

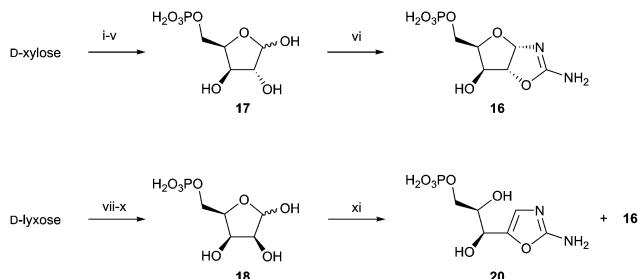
It is of note that the free sugar ribose (**4**) isomerises within 13 d at 25 °C, pH 7.0 to yield 75% arabinose, 6% ribulose, and only 19% ribose (**4**);¹⁸ therefore, thermodynamic selection against the ribose is observed in the free sugar, whereas thermodynamic selection for *ribo*-stereochemistry is observed in aminooxazoline-5'-phosphates. Several groups have suggested mineral stabilisation of **4** under prebiotic constraints,¹⁹ therefore it is notable that ribose aminooxazoles are (at least) 70 times more stable than riboseborate.^{16,20} These observations suggest that prebiotic nucleotide synthesis pathways that avoid the free sugars will be a key element in elucidating the chemical origins of life.⁸

We suspected that the same C2'-epimerisation pattern would be reflected in the *lyxo*-**13** and *xylo*-**16**,²¹ and was responsible for **13** not being observed during our synthesis of pentose aminooxazoline-5'-phosphates. To test this xylose-5'-phosphate (**17**)²² and lyxose-5'-phosphate (**18**) were synthesised (Scheme 5), and their reactivity with cyanamide (**19**) was investigated. *xylo*-**16** was readily synthesised and incubation in 1 M phosphate (40 °C, pH 7.0) gave oxazole **20** by reversible dehydration, but *lyxo*-**13** was not observed. The reaction of **18** with cyanamide (**19**) gave a mixture of oxazole **20** and *xylo*-**16**, but again *lyxo*-**13** was not observed (ESI,† Fig. S21), which supported the observation that *lyxo*-**13** was not obtained from the reaction of epoxide **12** and phosphate.

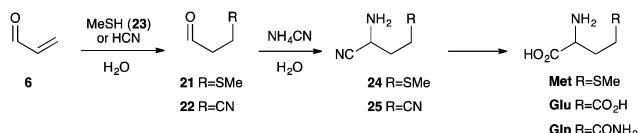


Scheme 3 Synthesis of pentose aminooxazoline **3** from prebiotically accessible glycidaldehyde (**7**) and 2-aminooxazole (**11**), exploiting the epoxide moiety and inorganic phosphate to deliver highly regioselective 5'-phosphation in water.





Scheme 5 Synthesis of D-xylose-5-phosphate (**17**) and D-lyxose-5-phosphate (**18**) and their reaction with cyanamide (**19**). D-XYlose-5-phosphate **17**: (i) CuSO_4 , H_2SO_4 , $(\text{CH}_3)_2\text{CO}$, 4 d, r.t. (ii) 0.1 M HCl , 3 h, r.t., 44% over two steps. (iii) $(\text{PhO})_2\text{POCl}$, CH_2Cl_2 , pyridine, 7 h, 0 °C, 90%. (iv) H_2 , PtO_2 , MeOH , 16 h, r.t. 97%. (v) H_2O_2 , 16 h, 50 °C, quant. (vi) **19**, NH_4OH , H_2O , 64% isolated yield (>95% NMR yield). D-Lyxose-5-phosphate **18**: (vii) H_2SO_4 , $(\text{CH}_3)_2\text{CO}$, 2 h, r.t. 93%. (viii) $(\text{PhO})_2\text{POCl}$, CH_2Cl_2 , pyridine, 6 h, 0 °C, 92%. (ix) H_2 , PtO_2 , MeOH , 18 h, r.t. quant. (x) H_2O_2 , 16 h, 50 °C, quant. (xi) **19**, NH_4OH , H_2O , (70% (**20**) and 30% (**16**) NMR yield).



Scheme 6 Prebiotic synthesis of amino acids methionine (**Met**), glutamine (**Gln**), and glutamic acid (**Glu**) from acrolein (**6**).

Finally, given the close biochemical relationship between amino acids and nucleotides, we turned our attention to prebiotic amino acid synthesis. Analysis of the proteinogenic amino acids suggested a clear link between glyceraldehyde (**7**) and the amino acids methionine (**Met**), glutamic acid (**Glu**) and glutamine (**Gln**).

Met, **Gln** and **Glu** can be synthesised from 3-(methylthio)propanal (**21**) and 3-(cyano)propanal (**22**), which are in turn accessed from **6** by Michael addition of methanethiol (**23**) or cyanide, respectively (Scheme 6).^{10,11} Therefore, we incubated **6** (140 mM) in water at room temperature with **23** (saturated, pH 7.0) or potassium cyanide (700 mM, pH 9.2). Pleasingly, we observed smooth conversion of **6** to aldehyde **21** (94%) and the cyanohydrin of aldehyde **22** (95%), respectively. Subsequently, aldehydes **21** and **22** were readily converted to aminonitriles **24** and **25** via Strecker reaction in water.

These studies demonstrate the first prebiotically plausible synthesis of amino-oxazoline-5'-phosphates in water by a facile nucleophilic phosphorylation. Importantly, we demonstrate that acrolein (**6**) provides a generational link between a key nucleotide precursor **3** and proteinogenic amino acids (**Met**, **Gln** and **Glu**), this new generational link supports the unified origins of these two distinct classes of metabolite.

The EPSRC (EP/K004980/1) and the Simons Foundation (318881) supported this work.

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