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Cite this: *Chem. Sci.*, 2017, 8, 1282

# Co/NHPI-mediated aerobic oxygenation of benzylic C–H bonds in pharmaceutically relevant molecules†

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A simple cobalt(II)/*N*-hydroxyphthalimide catalyst system has been identified for selective conversion of benzylic methylene groups in pharmaceutically relevant (hetero)arenes to the corresponding (hetero)aryl ketones. The radical reaction pathway tolerates electronically diverse benzylic C–H bonds, contrasting recent oxygenation reactions that are initiated by deprotonation of a benzylic C–H bond. The reactions proceed under practical reaction conditions (1 M substrate in BuOAc or EtOAc solvent, 12 h, 90–100 °C), and they tolerate common heterocycles, such as pyridines and imidazoles. A cobalt-free, electrochemical, NHPI-catalyzed oxygenation method overcomes challenges encountered with chelating substrates that inhibit the chemical reaction. The utility of the aerobic oxidation method is showcased in the multigram synthesis of a key intermediate towards a drug candidate (AMG 579) under process-relevant reaction conditions.

Received 26th August 2016  
Accepted 6th October 2016

DOI: 10.1039/c6sc03831j

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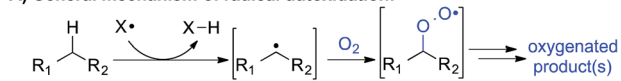
## Introduction

Liquid-phase radical-chain autoxidation reactions are amongst the largest-scale oxidation reactions performed in industry (Scheme 1).<sup>1</sup> Prominent examples include the Co/Mn/Br-

catalyzed oxidation of *p*-xylene to terephthalic acid in variations of the Mid-Century process (Scheme 1B),<sup>2</sup> autoxidation of cumene *en route* to phenol and acetone in the Hock process (Scheme 1C)<sup>3</sup> and radical-chain autoxidation of cyclohexane to a mixture of cyclohexanone and cyclohexanol (“KA oil”, Scheme 1D).<sup>4</sup> In contrast to these prominent large-scale applications, aerobic oxidations and radical autoxidation reactions, in particular, are rarely used for the production of pharmaceuticals or related complex molecules.

A number of groups have recently reported methods for aerobic oxygenation of benzylic C–H bonds<sup>5,6</sup> (Scheme 2A). The reactions are often compatible with heterocycles and other heteroatom-containing functional groups, suggesting they could be well suited for use in pharmaceutical applications.

### A) General mechanism of radical autoxidation:



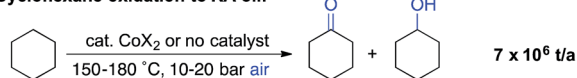
### B) Terephthalic acid synthesis (Mid-Century process):



### C) Cumene hydroperoxide synthesis:



### D) Cyclohexane oxidation to KA oil:



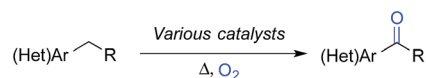
Scheme 1 Summary of major industrial radical autoxidation processes.

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Screening data, experimental protocols, characterization data. See DOI: 10.1039/c6sc03831j

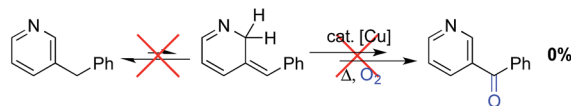
### A) Aerobic benzylic oxygenations



### B) Implications of heterolytic C–H cleavage pathway (cf. Maes, ref. 4e):



2-benzylpyridine: Imine-enamine tautomerization precedes oxygenation



3-benzylpyridine: Tautomerization inaccessible

Scheme 2 Recent work on aerobic benzylic oxygenation.





Table 2 highlights the potential utility of the new conditions. Poor yields and mass balances were obtained using two Mid-Century-type radical autoxidation methods (entries 1 and 2),<sup>14</sup> in which a bromine radical is proposed to participate in the H-atom abstraction step. We also tested representative catalyst systems<sup>6e</sup> for “heterolytic” aerobic C–H oxygenation, corresponding to the methods noted in Scheme 2. As expected from the precedents, 3-ethylpyridine **1a** is not a viable substrate with these catalyst systems (entries 3 and 4).<sup>15</sup>

The optimized reaction conditions were then tested for aerobic oxygenation of a number of pharmaceutically relevant (hetero)arene substrates (Table 3).<sup>16</sup> In general, pyridines are well tolerated, with good-to-excellent yields obtained for products **2a–f**. This collection of substrates includes 3-substituted pyridine derivatives (**1a**, **1c**, **1f**), which are ineffective with heterolytic C–H oxygenation methods, as well as 2- and 4-substituted pyridines, which are compatible with the heterolytic methods. Excellent yields were obtained for the benzimidazole derivatives **1g** and **1h**. Ethylbenzene derivatives bearing remote heteroatom-containing functional groups, including a pyridyl, an imidazole and an acetamide group (**1i**, **1j** and **1k**), also underwent successful oxygenation.

The standard reaction conditions in Table 3 proved to be ineffective for certain substrates,<sup>17</sup> and two different approaches were identified to address some of these limitations. In the first case, the simple hydrocarbon, *n*-butylbenzene (**1l**) (Table 4), as well as the sulphur-containing heterocyclic substrates **1m**, **1n** and **1o** (Table 5) led to poor results (42%, 3%, 7% and 31% yields, respectively). In the reaction of **1l**, benzoic acid was observed as the major side product, arising from cleavage of the alkyl chain. Subsequent empirical studies showed that use of pyridine as a co-solvent attenuated this alkyl chain cleavage and enabled higher yields and mass balance in the oxygenation of **1l**. The optimal 7 : 3 BuOAc : pyr solvent mixture (77% yield of

Table 4 Enhanced selectivity for formation of **2l** in the presence of pyridine cosolvent<sup>a</sup>

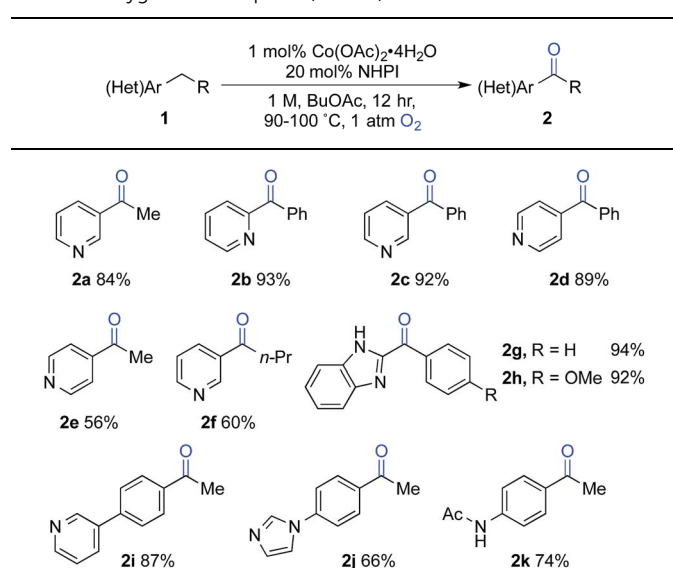
Entry	Vol% pyr	Conv. <sup>b</sup> (%)	Yield <sup>b</sup> (%)
1	0	>99	42
2	10	98	74
3	20	95	76
4	30	90	77
5	40	84	73
6	50	74	66

<sup>a</sup> 1 mmol scale, orbital mixing. <sup>b</sup> GC yields with benzonitrile as an internal standard.

**2l**, entry 4) proved to be similarly beneficial for the oxygenation of the sulphur-heterocycle substrates **1m**, **1n** and **1o**, as well as the *N*-methylated benzimidazole **1p** (Table 5).<sup>18</sup> The latter substrates underwent oxygenation in 65%, 50%, 72% and 94% yields, respectively. The reactions with pyridine co-solvent have a dark red color, consistent with pyridine coordination to cobalt.<sup>19</sup> We speculate that this coordination might attenuate unproductive cobalt-mediated side reactions in these substrates.

The second case involved 2-ethylpyridine (**1q**) and 2-ethylbenzimidazole (**1r**), in which the benzylic C–H bonds of the ethyl substituent is directly adjacent to a coordinating group. Under the standard conditions, the benzylic ketones **2q** and **2r** were obtained in only 48% and 15% yields, respectively (Scheme 4A). This poor reactivity contrasts the good reactivity observed with analogous doubly benzylic substrates **1b**, **1g** and **1h** in Table 3. We hypothesized that, in these reactions, the product could chelate the cobalt co-catalyst and inhibit further product formation. To test this hypothesis, we investigated the reaction of an effective substrate, 4-ethylpyridine **1e**, in the presence and absence of 4-acetylpyridine **2e** or 2-acetylpyridine **2q**

Table 3 Oxygenation of polar (hetero)arenes<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> 1 mmol scale, isolated yields.

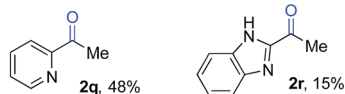
Table 5 Use of pyridine co-solvent for improved selectivity<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> 1 mmol scale. Yields were determined by <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectroscopy. Isolated yields in parentheses.



## A) Results under standard conditions (cf. Table 3)



## B) Product inhibition studies

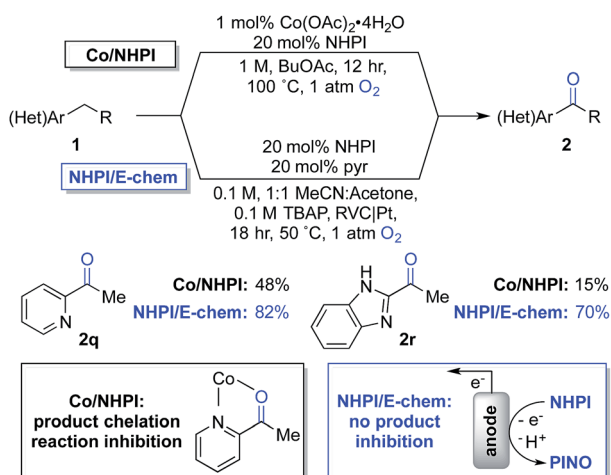


entry	conditions <sup>a</sup>	conv. (%) <sup>b</sup>	yield 2e (%) <sup>b</sup>
1	no additive	82	66
2	0.1 M 2e	79	63
3	0.25 M 2e	74	57
4	0.1 M 2q	11	7
5	0.25 M 2q	3	1

Scheme 4 Product-inhibition studies in Co/NHPI-catalyzed oxygenation. <sup>a</sup>1 mmol scale, orbital mixing. <sup>b</sup>GC yields with chlorobenzene as an internal standard.

(Scheme 4B). The results show that 2e has minimal impact on the reaction (Scheme 4B, entries 1–3), whereas the presence of 2q significantly lowers the yield in the oxygenation of 1e (Scheme 4B, entries 1, 4 and 5).

The observations in Scheme 4 prompted us to consider cobalt-free electrochemical aerobic oxygenation reactions, originally reported by Masui and coworkers in the 1980s.<sup>20,21</sup> These methods generate PINO *via* electrochemical oxidation of NHPI (*i.e.*, in the absence of cobalt ions) and, therefore, should not be susceptible to chelate-inhibition by the product. Preliminary studies validated this hypothesis. Optimization of Masui's reported electrochemical conditions with 1q and 1r enabled formation of the ketone products 2q and 2r in 82% and 70% yields, respectively. These results represent substantial improvements over those obtained with the chemical conditions (Scheme 5). Further studies will be needed to explore the full scope and limitations of the electrochemical method.

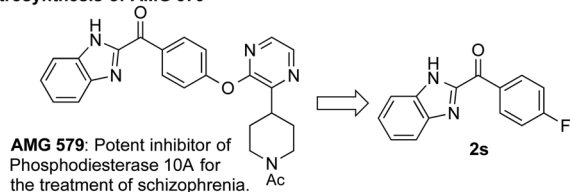


Scheme 5 Overcoming a limitation in Co/NHPI chemistry through the electrochemical generation of PINO.

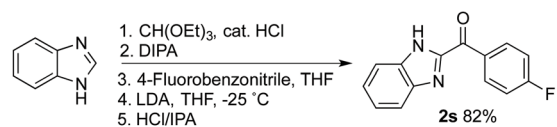
Preliminary studies with other substrates (*e.g.*, with 1b and 1g) suggest that the chemical conditions will be superior to the electrochemical conditions in other cases. These observations together with the ease of reaction set up and performance of the Co/NHPI/O<sub>2</sub> oxygenations suggest that the aerobic reactions will be advantageous in most cases. Nonetheless, the results with the oxygenation of 1q and 1r demonstrate that electrochemical NHPI-mediated reactions could be a valuable complement to Co/NHPI reactions in strategic situations.

The standard Co/NHPI/O<sub>2</sub> conditions developed here exhibit a number of features that are appealing from a process chemistry perspective, including a low cobalt catalyst loading and a high reaction concentration, which minimizes solvent volume. The relatively high NHPI loading (20 mol%) is offset by its extraordinarily low cost (<\$5 per kg on commercial scale). In an effort to demonstrate the potential utility of this method for larger-scale applications, we targeted a streamlined route to the heterocyclic ketone 2s (Scheme 6A), an intermediate *en route* to AMG 579.<sup>22</sup> The latter compound is a clinical candidate for the treatment of neurological conditions such as schizophrenia and Huntington's disease. The reported multi-step route to 2s is effective, but it is operationally complex and requires careful

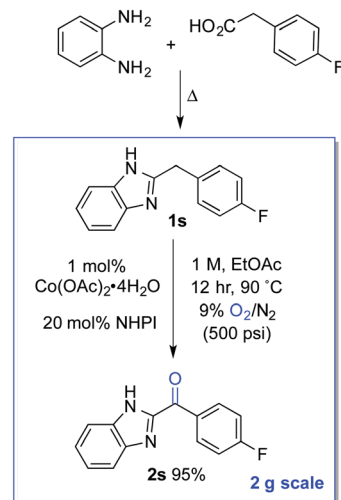
## A) Retrosynthesis of AMG 579



## B) Amgen process route to access the ketone 2s



## C) Co/NHPI oxygenation route to 2s



Scheme 6 Streamlined synthetic route toward AMG 579 *via* Co/NHPI-catalyzed benzylic oxygenation.





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