



Total synthesis of incargranine A†

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Patrick D. Brown and Andrew L. Lawrence *

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Synthetic studies into the origins of the alkaloid incargranine A have resulted in the development of a four-step (longest linear sequence) total synthesis. This synthesis has been scaled-up to provide gram-scale quantities of material, which would alternatively require extraction of several metric-tons of dried-whole Chinese Trumpet-Creeper plants (*Incarvillea mairei* var. *grandiflora*).

In 2009 Zhang and co-workers isolated the alkaloid incargranine A (**1**) from *Incarvillea mairei* var. *grandiflora*, a Bignonia plant more commonly known as the Chinese Trumpet-Creeper plant (Scheme 1).¹ Incargranine A (**1**) has not yet succumbed to total synthesis and represents a particularly scarce natural product, constituting just 0.0000002% by weight of the dried whole plant. Therefore, a practical – *i.e.*, efficient and scalable – chemical synthesis of incargranine A (**1**) might advance a

better understanding of its biological function. The novel framework of incargranine A (**1**) contains a synthetically daunting bridged-cyclohexane ring, in which all six-carbon atoms are stereogenic. Nevertheless, we were hopeful that if we could gain insight into how nature synthesizes this alkaloid a step-economical biomimetic strategy could be developed.

Our biosynthetic analysis, shown in Scheme 1, reveals incargranine A (**1**) is likely constructed from two shikimate-derived C₆C₂ units linked together by an ornithine-derived C₄N unit. Our previous biomimetic studies on related phenylethanoid alkaloids provide important clues as to the potential origins of incargranine A (**1**).² We recently proposed that a network of pathways, all originating from a simple biosynthetic precursor, diamine **2**, could account for the formation of several structurally distinct phenylethanoid natural products (Scheme 2).^{2d} In our proposal, diamine **2** can participate in a pair of divergent oxidative pathways (Scheme 2; pathways 1 and 2). As shown in Scheme 2, pathway 1 terminates in the formation of incarviditone (**3**)³ and incarvilleatone (**4**),⁴ via the intermediacy of cornoside (**5**)⁵ and rengyolone (**6**),⁶ whereas pathway 2 results in the production of incargranine B (**7**).^{2a-c,7} It was proposed that these two divergent pathways could re-converge to give millingtonine (**8**),⁸ via a crossed-dimerization of cornoside **5**, from pathway 1, and a PLP (pyridoxal phosphate) derived enamine **9**, from pathway 2 (Scheme 2; pathway 3).^{2d} The chemical feasibility of this re-convergent pathway was demonstrated in our seven-step biomimetic total synthesis of millingtonine (**8**).^{2d} Herein, we propose that an additional re-convergent pathway could give rise to incargranine A (**1**) (Scheme 2; pathway 4). Thus, a Michael reaction between PLP-enamine **9** and rengyolone (**6**) would give an intermediate imine **11**, which would ring-close through a condensation/Mannich reaction sequence to give incargranine A (**1**).⁹ To investigate the feasibility of this second re-convergent pathway, and in the hope of establishing a practical solution to the supply problem associated with incargranine A (**1**),¹ we decided to pursue the development of a biomimetic synthetic strategy.



Scheme 1 Structure and biosynthetic analysis of incargranine A.

EaStCHEM School of Chemistry, University of Edinburgh, Joseph Black Building, David Brewster Road, Edinburgh, EH9 3FJ, UK. E-mail: a.lawrence@ed.ac.uk

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diol **18**, whilst avoiding formation of the seemingly intractable ring-closed aglycone **22**. Vaino and Szarek have reported iodine in methanol as mild reaction conditions for the cleavage of *tert*-butyldimethylsilyl ethers.¹⁴ Unexpectedly, however, exposure of *syn*-dimer **21** to iodine in methanol did not result in the formation of diol **18**, nor ring-closed aglycone **22**, but instead gave (\pm)-incargranine A (**1**) directly. Thus, in a single step, 2 new bonds, 2 new rings and 3 new stereogenic centres are formed in an impressive 84% yield. This synthetic sequence was readily scaled-up to provide gram-scale quantities of (\pm)-incargranine A (**1**), which compares very favorably to the effort required to obtain this material from the natural source; over four metric-tons of dried *Incarvillea mairei* var. *grandiflora* would need to be extracted to isolate one gram of natural incargranine A (**1**).¹

Zhang and co-workers reported an optical rotation for natural incargranine A (**1**), $[\alpha]_D^{22} = +2$ ($c = 0.175$, CHCl_3).¹ However, given our biosynthetic speculation and the small magnitude of the reported optical rotation value, we consider it likely that natural incargranine A (**1**) exists as a racemic mixture. Unfortunately, no authentic sample was available to validate this hypothesis.¹⁵ In all other respects, however, the spectroscopic data for our synthetic material matched that reported for natural incargranine A (**1**).^{1,15} We propose that this successful synthesis provides new evidence in support of the proposal that dia-millingtonine (**10**) is a natural product.^{2d,16} In fact, it is possible that incargranine A (**1**) is only produced from dia-millingtonine (**10**) during the extraction and isolation process. This would not necessarily mean that incargranine A (**1**) is an unimportant artifact of human intervention.¹⁷ It is known, for example, that plants can use glycosidic-metabolites as chemical defense systems, wherein damage to the plant brings glycosidase enzymes into contact with the glycosides to release the active aglycones.¹⁸

Conclusions

In just three-linear steps from 4-aminophenethyl alcohol **12** we have selectively formed 2 new C–N bonds, 2 new C–C bonds, 2 new rings, and 6 new contiguous stereogenic centres, in 56% overall yield.¹⁹ Key to the development of this efficient synthetic strategy has been the probing and refinement of a biosynthetic proposal using chemical synthesis. Ultimately, this has led to new evidence in support of the notion that dia-millingtonine (**10**) is an as-yet-undiscovered natural product.¹⁶ Practical quantities of these metabolites are now available for interested parties to study their biological function.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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