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# Isothiurea-catalyzed formal enantioselective conjugate addition of benzophenone imines to $\alpha,\beta$ -fluorinated $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated esters†

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The isothiurea-catalyzed formal enantioselective conjugate addition of 2-hydroxybenzophenone imine derivatives to  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated *para*-nitrophenyl esters has been developed. Investigations of the scope and limitations of this procedure showed that  $\beta$ -electron withdrawing substituents within the  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated ester component are required for good product yield, giving rise to a range of  $\beta$ -imino ester and amide derivatives in moderate to good isolated yields with excellent enantioselectivity (20 examples, up to 81% yield and 97:3 er).

The development of methods for the enantioselective synthesis of  $\beta$ -amino acid derivatives<sup>1a</sup> is of widespread importance due to the prevalence of this structural motif in natural products and medicinally relevant compounds.<sup>1</sup> Among the synthetic methods that have been developed for the preparation of  $\beta$ -amino acid derivatives, arguably the most simple and elegant involves the asymmetric conjugate addition of an ammonia equivalent to an  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated carbonyl motif. As an example of this approach, the conjugate addition of enantiomerically pure lithium amide derivatives to  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated esters has been developed and exploited extensively by Davies and co-workers. Conjugate addition of lithium *N*-benzyl-*N*- $\alpha$ -methylbenzylamide to an  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated ester gives the corresponding  $\beta$ -amino ester with high diastereoselectivity (>95:5 dr), with *N*-deprotection through hydrogenolysis giving the corresponding  $\beta$ -amino ester derivatives (Scheme 1a).<sup>2</sup>

Over the last two decades, several enantioselective organocatalytic approaches to amine conjugate addition have been introduced. To date, these successful approaches rely upon enals,<sup>3</sup> enones,<sup>4</sup> *N*-acyl pyrazoles,<sup>5</sup> and nitro-olefins<sup>6</sup> as Michael acceptors, with the use of bifunctional thiourea<sup>4a,5b,7,8a-c,e</sup> or squaramide<sup>4,5c,8a,b,e</sup> organocatalysts, or Lewis basic pyrrolidines<sup>3,8</sup> commonplace. Catalytic enantioselective amine conjugate additions to  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated esters are rare, reflecting the recognized


 Scheme 1 Synthesis of  $\beta$ -amino ester derivatives.

recalcitrance of  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated esters as Michael acceptors (Scheme 1b). To date, the current state-of-the-art organocatalytic approach is represented by Seidel and co-workers<sup>9</sup> demonstration of the conjugate addition of cyclic secondary amines to  $\beta$ -alkyl- $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated benzyl esters using a selenourea-thiourea catalyst **1** (Scheme 1c). Although limited to  $\beta$ -alkyl substituted Michael acceptors, this impressive methodology was applicable to a range of cyclic amines and the kinetic resolution of ( $\pm$ )-cyclic 2-arylamines.

Our approach to enantioselective amine conjugate addition focused upon the use of imines as nucleophiles. The conjugate addition of (diphenylmethylene)amine to  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated esters, nitriles and ketones in racemic form has been demonstrated by de Meijere *et al.* MeOH was optimal as a solvent and

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Scheme 2 Previous imine conjugate additions and this work.

a basic additive (such as NEt<sub>3</sub>) led to effective product formation (Scheme 2a).<sup>10</sup> In 2018, Alemán and co-workers successfully demonstrated an enantioselective aza-Michael addition of nucleophilic imines to enals using secondary amine catalyst **2** (Scheme 2b).<sup>11</sup> Trapping of the resultant  $\beta$ -imino aldehydes with a phosphorane gave the corresponding  $\delta$ -imino esters in good yield and enantioselectivity. Notably, 2-hydroxybenzophenone imines showed increased reactivity and enantioselectivity compared with the parent benzophenone imine, attributed to an increase in acidity of the imine proton caused by intramolecular hydrogen bonding.<sup>12,13</sup> In previous work, we and others have demonstrated a range of enantioselective Michael-addition processes of *in situ* generated  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated acyl ammonium species.<sup>14,15</sup> Building on these precedents, we report herein the formal isothiurea-catalyzed enantioselective addition of 2-hydroxybenzophenone imines to  $\beta$ -fluorinated  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated *para*-nitrophenyl esters *via* an  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated acyl ammonium intermediate, giving products in up to 98 : 2 er (Scheme 2c).

Preliminary investigations used  $\beta$ -CF<sub>3</sub>-substituted  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated *para*-nitrophenyl ester **4** (1.0 equiv.) in toluene as standard. Given the moderate reactivity of  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated acyl ammonium ions, imine **3** (2.0 equiv.) bearing an electron donor 4-OMe-substituent was postulated to enhance nucleophilicity (Table 1). Attempted isolation of the *para*-nitrophenyl ester product led to low and irreproducible product yields, so addition of pyrrolidine to give the isolable amide **5** was adopted. Screening of isothiurea catalysts **6–8** (10 mol%) at 1 : 2 substrate ratio of ester **4** : imine **3** (entries 1–3) showed that tetramisole **6** and BTM **7** gave promising product yield (~50%) whereas HyperBTM **8** showed poor catalytic activity (<10% yield). Excellent enantioselectivity (96 : 4 er) was observed using BTM **7**. Altering the

Table 1 Reaction optimisation

Entry	Catalyst (mol%)	Temp. (°C)	Solvent	3 : 4	Yield <sup>a</sup> (%)	er <sup>b</sup>
1 <sup>c</sup>	<b>6</b> (10)	rt	Toluene	1 : 2	50	12 : 88
2 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (10)	rt	Toluene	1 : 2	54	96 : 4
3 <sup>c</sup>	<b>8</b> (10)	rt	Toluene	1 : 2	<10	68 : 32
4 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (10)	rt	Toluene	1 : 1.5	42	95 : 5
5 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (10)	rt	Toluene	1.5 : 1	38	97 : 3
6 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (10)	40	Toluene	1 : 2	52	94 : 6
7 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (10)	60	Toluene	1 : 2	47	91 : 9
8 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (2.5)	rt	Toluene	1 : 2	<10	91 : 9
9 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (5.0)	rt	Toluene	1 : 2	18	96 : 4
10 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (20)	rt	Toluene	1 : 2	71 <sup>d</sup>	96 : 4
11 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (20)	rt	THF	1 : 2	31	96 : 4
12 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (20)	rt	Et <sub>2</sub> O	1 : 2	30	96 : 4
13 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7</b> (20)	rt	CH <sub>2</sub> Cl <sub>2</sub>	1 : 2	37	96 : 4
14 <sup>e</sup>	<b>7</b> (20)	rt	Toluene	1 : 2	31	98 : 2
15 <sup>f</sup>	<b>7</b> (20)	rt	Toluene	1 : 2	42	96 : 4
16 <sup>g</sup>	<b>7</b> (20)	rt	Toluene	1 : 2	36	96 : 4

<sup>a</sup> Using <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectroscopic analysis and 1,3,5-trimethoxybenzene as internal standard. <sup>b</sup> Ratio of (R) : (S) enantiomers determined by HPLC analysis on a chiral stationary phase. <sup>c</sup> Ar = 4-NO<sub>2</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>4</sub>. <sup>d</sup> Isolated yield. <sup>e</sup> Ar = 2,4,6-Cl<sub>3</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>2</sub>. <sup>f</sup> Ar = C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub>. <sup>g</sup> Ar = 3,5-(CF<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub>.

reaction stoichiometry (entries 4 and 5) led to reduced product yield. A detrimental effect on product enantioselectivity (91 : 9 er) was observed when the reaction temperature was increased to 40 °C or 60 °C (entries 6 and 7). Lowering the catalyst loading showed a significant decrease in product yield and enantioselectivity (entries 8 and 9), while using 20 mol% BTM **7** gave increased yield (71% yield, 96 : 4 er, entry 10). Screening of an alternative solvents gave high product enantioselectivity but reduced yields (entries 11–13). Further optimisation probed the effectiveness of alternative electron-deficient aryl esters. Comparison of *para*-nitrophenyl with 2,4,6-trichlorophenyl, pentafluorophenyl, and 3,5-bis(trifluoromethyl)phenyl esters (entries 14–16) showed that excellent enantioselectivities were observed in each case (up to 98 : 2 er), with the *para*-nitrophenyl ester leading to the best product yield (71%).

The scope and limitations of the developed process was explored through variation of the nucleophilic imine reaction component (Fig. 1). Variation of the electronic bias of the 4-aryl substituent within the imine component showed that decreased product yield was observed upon changing from an electron-donating 4-MeO- (**5**, 70% yield) to 4-Me (**9**, 49% yield), 4-H (**11**, 36% yield) and electron-withdrawing 4-Br substituent (**10**, 24% yield) all with >96 : 4 er. This is consistent with increasing





Fig. 1 0.10 mmol scale. Isolated product yield; er determined by HPLC analysis on a chiral stationary phase; [a] 40 °C for step i; [b] DMAP 20 mol% in step ii.

electron density within the imine component leading to increased product yield. Interestingly, comparing the yield and er of products **11** and **12** indicates that the 2-hydroxy-substituent within the imine is essential for high product er, but does not affect product yield. The incorporation of an additional electron-donating 4-MeO substituent led to product **13** in reduced yield but maintained high product er. Variation of the  $\beta$ -substituent within the  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated ester indicated that the incorporation of polyhalogenated or ester electron-withdrawing groups was necessary for reactivity as alkyl, aryl, ketone and amide substituted acceptors gave no significant product formation. For example, the introduction of halogenated ( $\text{CF}_2\text{H}$ ) and polyhalogenated



Scheme 3 Gram scale synthesis of product **5**.

substituents ( $\text{CF}_2\text{Cl}$ ,  $\text{CF}_2\text{Br}$ , and  $\text{C}_2\text{F}_5$ ) led to products **14–17** in up to excellent yields with high enantioselectivity (40% to 81%; >96:4 er), while the incorporation of ester substituents gave **18–19** in poor 20% product yield in up to 96:4 er. Variation of the post catalysis nucleophilic component (Nuc-H) to incorporate alcohols as well as cyclic secondary and acyclic primary amines gave a range of ester and amide products **20–24** in good yield (42% to 64%) and excellent enantioselectivity ( $\geq 96:4$  er).

To further demonstrate the synthetic utility of this transformation, it was applied to the gram-scale synthesis of product **5** with consistent yield and enantioselectivity (67%, 96:4 er, Scheme 3). Hydrolysis gave the free  $\beta$ -amino amide product **26** in high yield and enantioselectivity (95%, 96:4 er).<sup>16</sup>

A proposed mechanism of this transformation is shown in Scheme 4. Reversible acylation of the isothiourea with the  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated ester **1a** generates the key  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated acyl isothiouronium ion pair **26**.



Scheme 4 Proposed reaction mechanism.



An intramolecular chalcogen 1,5-S··O interaction ( $n_{\text{O}} \rightarrow \sigma^*_{\text{S-C}}$ )<sup>17</sup> provides a plausible stabilising effect and conformational lock. Hydrogen bonding between the 2-hydroxy-substituent and the imine N serves to conformationally restrict this functionality and facilitate deprotonation.<sup>11–13</sup> Subsequent conjugate addition to the *s-cis* conformation of the  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated acyl isothiuronium **26 anti**- to the stereodirecting phenyl substituent of the isothiurea catalyst generates the ammonium enolate intermediate **27**. Proton transfer generates the  $\beta$ -imino acyl isothiuronium intermediate **28**, with catalyst turnover facilitated by the aryloxide counterion to form the product and release the isothiurea catalyst BTM **7**.<sup>18</sup>

In summary, enantioselective organocatalytic conjugate addition of 2-hydroxybenzophenone imines to  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated esters using the isothiurea BTM as an organocatalyst gives enantioenriched  $\beta$ -imino amides in modest to good yield (20–81%) and excellent enantioselectivity (typically >95:5 er).<sup>19</sup>

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interests to declare.

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