

Letter

Rh-Catalyzed Aziridine Ring Expansions to Dehydropiperazines

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introduce stereochemical complexity into the ring. To expand access to these scaffolds, we report Rh-catalyzed ring expansions of aziridines and N-sulfonyl-1,2,3-triazoles to furnish dehydropiperazines with excellent diastereocontrol. Productive ring expansion proceeds via a pseudo-1,4-sigmatropic rearrangement of an



aziridinium ylide species. However, the structural features of the carbene precursor are important, as pyridotriazoles undergo competing cheletropic extrusion to furnish ketimines.

lides are unique molecules with a negatively charged carbon atom directly attached to a positively charged heteroatom.^{1,2} The first example, a phosphorus ylide, was reported in 1894 (Figure 1A);³ however, their full synthetic



Figure 1. Ylide development and types of N-ylides.

utility was not recognized until 1953, when Wittig utilized them to prepare alkenes from aldehydes and ketones.^{4–6} Since then, phosphorus ylide chemistry has provided powerful tools to construct C-C and C-heteroatom bonds.^{7,8} Sulfur ylides are popular for the synthesis of cyclopropanes, epoxides, and aziridines.⁹⁻¹¹ Other Group 5 and 6 ylides based on O,¹¹ As,¹² Se,^{10b,13} and Te^{10,13} are known; however, these are less synthetically useful.

The importance of nitrogen in bioactive molecules has stimulated significant interest in the chemistry of nitrogen ylides. N-Ylides are typically less stable than their S- and P- ylide counterparts and are generated in situ; however, they display an array of interesting reactivities. Common N-ylides (Figure 1B) include ammonium,^{1,11} azomethine,¹⁴ pyridinium,¹⁵ and triazolium ylides.¹⁶ While ammonium ylides have been widely employed, versions generated specifically from aziridines, termed "aziridinium ylides", are underexplored. Aziridinium ylides are conveniently generated from the reaction of aziridines with metal-supported carbenes; the potential to harness the reactivity of these intermediates to furnish diverse N-heterocycle scaffolds inspired the studies described in this communication.

One reason aziridinium ylides have not been extensively investigated is the difficulty in controlling the ultimate fate of the intermediate. In 1972, Watanabe attempted to convert an aziridinium ylide to an azetidine via Cu-catalyzed addition of an electron-rich aziridine to a diazoester.¹⁷ Instead of ring expansion, ethylene and an α -imino ester were observed, suggesting cheletropic extrusion competes (Scheme 1A).¹⁸ In 2004, Rowlands suppressed cheletropic extrusion in favor of a [2,3]-Stevens rearrangement of an aziridinium ylide generated by adding a vinyl aziridine to a Cu-supported carbene (Scheme 1A); however, a competing [1,5]-H shift resulted in only a 21% yield of the heterocycle.¹⁹ In 2017, we reported aziridinium ylides generated from strained aziridines, and Rhsupported carbenes undergo concerted [2,3]-Stevens rearrangement to give methyleneazetidines in good yields and dr with broad scope.^{20,21} More recently, we also reported an intermolecular carbene transfer between Rh-bound vinyl



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Scheme 1. Divergent Reactivities of Aziridinium Ylides

carbenes and aziridines via a pseudo-[1,4]-sigmatropic rearrangement to furnish dehydropiperidines in excellent yields and dr.²²

Inspired by the lack of structural diversity in piperazines and related heterocycles generated from known methods, we first attempted to prepare fused piperazines. Pyridotriazole 2 (Scheme 2A) is known to form α -imino Rh-supported carbenes upon heating;²³ unfortunately, reaction between 1a and 2 gave ketimine 3 instead of the desired 4. The preference for the formation of 3 over 4 was computationally explored (Scheme 2B). Focus was placed on the fate of the metal-free ylide INT2-pyr, formed upon nucleophilic addition of the aziridine to the dirhodium carbene, followed by dissociation of the Rh₂ catalyst. Ylide INT2-pyr can evolve into alkene 3' (the Et group in 3 was replaced by a Me in the calculations) via **TS2-pyr** in a highly exergonic transformation ($\Delta G_{\rm R} = -47.5$ kcal/mol). This saddle point resembles that located for the cheletropic extrusion pathway involving ylide TS2 (Figure 2, vide infra) and is associated with the concerted rupture of both aziridine C-N bonds. Interestingly, calculations indicate that the subsequent aza-Diels-Alder reaction is unfeasible in view of the high barrier computed for this cycloaddition ($\Delta G^{\ddagger} > 45$ kcal/mol). This can be mainly ascribed to the loss of aromaticity of the pyridine moiety, which is also reflected in the computed endergonicity of the process ($\Delta G_{\rm R}$ = +1.1 kcal/ mol), despite the formation of two new C–N bonds.

An alternative sigmatropic rearrangement pathway involving NMs-ylide INT2-pyr was located. Instead of a direct pathway leading to 3', computations showed a stepwise process which first transforms INT2-pyr into the zwitterion INT4-pyr (via TS2'-pyr), followed by a ring-closure reaction (through TS3'-pyr). From the data in Scheme 2B, it is apparent that this

Scheme 2. Cheletropic Extrusion with Pyridotriazole 2^{a}

A Competing cheleotropic extrusion with pyridotriazoles



^{*a*}Computed reaction profile with relative free energies (ΔG , computed at 298.15 K and 1 M) and bond distances in kcal/mol and Å, respectively. All data are computed at the SMD-B3LYP-D3/ def2-SVP level.

alternative pathway is not competitive due to the higher barrier required to reach TS2'-pyr (and TS3'-pyr), as compared to the chelotropic extrusion pathway via TS2-pyr.

Interestingly, the barrier computed for INT2-pyr \rightarrow TS2'pyr is much higher than that computed for the analogous process involving INT2 (Figure 2, *vide infra*), which can be, at least in part, ascribed to the loss of aromaticity of the pyridine ring. This is supported by markedly different C···N bond distances in the corresponding transition states TS2' (Figure 2) and TS2'-pyr. While in the former saddle point the computed C···N distance is 2.741 Å, a much longer distance of 2.898 Å is computed in the latter species. This indicates TS2' pyr does not benefit from a significant C···N interaction, although TS2' does. As a result, the INT2-pyr \rightarrow TS2'-pyr reaction not only is kinetically less favored but also proceeds in a stepwise fashion.

We hypothesized the use of *N*-sulfonyl-1,2,3-triazoles might alter the ultimate fate of the aziridinium ylide, as the nucleophilicity of the α -imino group of metallocarbenes derived from these precursors could bias the reaction toward ring expansion (Scheme 1B). Differences in the electrophilicities of Rh-supported carbenes formed from *N*-sulfonyl-1,2,3-triazoles vs pyridotriazoles, as well as varying steric congestion and ability of the ylide to delocalize charge, could also play roles in dictating the outcome. In addition, the requirement for slow addition of typical diazoesters might be overcome by the use of more robust *N*-sulfonyl-1,2,3-triazole carbene precursors. Ideally, an intermediate α -imino rhodium carbene would be generated, followed by nucleophilic addition



Figure 2. Computed reaction profile for the process involving 1a' and dirhodium-bound carbene $5-Rh_2$. Relative free energies (ΔG , computed at 298.15 K and 1 M) and bond distances are given in kcal/mol and angstroms, respectively. All data have been computed at the SMD-B3LYP-D3/ def2-SVP level.

Table 1. Reaction Optimization for Aziridine Expansion

			Ph 5a	x mol % Rh ₂ L _n	Ms ⁻ N Et 6aa		
entry	cat (mol %)	<i>T</i> (°C)	yield (%)	entry	cat (mol %)	T (°C)	yield (%)
1	$Rh_2(OAc)_4$ (6)	25	0 ^{<i>a</i>}	6	$Rh_2(esp)_2(3)$	70	78
2	$Rh_2(OAc)_4$ (6)	70	33 ^a	7	$Rh_2(esp)_2(1)$	70	79
3	$Rh_2(oct)_4$ (6)	70	51 ^a	8	$Rh_2(esp)_2$ (0.5)	70	79
4	$Rh_2(TPA)_4$ (6)	70	44 ^{<i>a</i>}	9	$Rh_2(esp)_2$ (0.1)	70	72
5	$Rh_2(esp)_2$ (6)	70	79 ^a (75)				
^{a1} H NMR viel	d using mesitylene Al	l other vields are i	solated vields				

of a bicyclic aziridine to the electrophilic carbene center to furnish the aziridinium ylide. Ring expansion then yields the dehydropiperazine.

In initial attempts, treatment of *cis*-1a with 5a and $Rh_2(OAc)_4$ at room temperature gave no conversion to the desired 6aa (Table 1, entry 1). However, a 33% NMR yield of 6aa was obtained when the reaction was heated to 70 °C (entry 2). Other commercially available rhodium catalysts known to promote carbene transfer were also tested (entries 3–5). Increased yields were observed in moving to the bulkier catalysts $Rh_2(oct)_4$, $Rh_2(tpa)_4$, and $Rh_2(esp)_2$. $Rh_2(esp)_2$ was selected as the optimal catalyst, and loadings gradually decreased to identify a good balance between yield and reaction time (entries 5–9). Although the loading of $Rh_2(esp)_2$ could be dropped to 0.1 mol % for 6aa, other substrates required longer reaction times; thus, scope studies were carried out using 0.5 mol % of $Rh_2(esp)_2$.

With the optimized reaction conditions in hand, the aziridine scope was explored (Scheme 3, top). Silver-catalyzed nitrene transfer conditions developed in our group were used to prepare aziridines **1a**–**f** from the corresponding homoallylic carbamates.²⁴ Linear alkyl-substituted aziridines **1a** and **1c** gave dehydropiperazines **6ab** and **6cb** in good yield and excellent dr

of >19:1. Increasing branching in the aziridine substituent of **1b** furnished **6bb** in good yield, suggesting this system tolerates steric pressure. Heteroatoms in the aziridine scaffold were well-tolerated, including an alkyl chloride in **1d** and a silyl-protected alcohol in **1e** to deliver **6db** and **6eb** in good yields as single diastereomers. Substitution on the aziridine precursor is not necessary, as **6fb** was produced in good yield and dr.

The scope of the N-sulfonyl-1,2,3-triazoles was examined with 1a (Scheme 3, bottom). Mesyl- and tosyl-protected triazoles 5a and 5b furnished 6aa and 6ab in good yields. Due to easier removal of the N-tosyl group, a series of phenylsubstituted N-tosylated triazoles were explored to understand how the electronics and sterics of the triazole impact the reaction outcome. Triazoles 5h-j and 5g, substituted with electron-donating substituents, delivered 6ah-j and 6ag in good yield. The trifluoromethyl-substituted triazole 5c gave 6ac in a 48% yield, suggesting that electron-poor carbene precursors are not as effective for ring expansion, although an aryl bromide was tolerated to deliver 6ad. Finally, carbene transfer with triazole 5i was successful to furnish 6ai. Demonstration of the scalability of the ring expansion was carried out on a 3.54 mmol scale using 1a and 5b to give a 75% yield of 6ab.





^{*a*}Conditions: 0.5 mol% of Rh₂esp₂, 0.05 M CHCl₃, 70 °C. ^{*b*}Conducted on 0.5 g (3.5 mmol scale) of 1a, 75%.

The dehydropiperazine synthesis was streamlined via a onepot Cu-catalyzed azide—alkyne cycloaddition, followed by Rhmediated carbene transfer/ring expansion (Scheme 4). Under



CuTC-catalyzed conditions, treatment of p-TsN₃ with phenylacetylene gave full conversion to **5b**. Addition of **1a** and Rh₂(esp)₂ to this mixture gave **6ab** in 79% yield and >19:1 dr. Similarly, *p*-methoxyphenylacetylene ultimately furnished **6ah** in 71% yield and excellent dr.

To gain a better understanding of the mechanism of the ring expansion, computational studies were carried out (Figure 2). The process involving *cis*-bicyclic aziridine 1a' and dirhodium carbene 5-Rh₂, formed from 5a and Rh₂(OAc)₄, was explored. Similar to transformations involving related bicyclic aziridines (Scheme 1A),^{20–22} the process begins with the exergonic ($\Delta G_{\rm R} = -10.8$ kcal/mol) nucleophilic addition of the aziridine nitrogen atom to the electrophilic carbene carbon atom of 5-Rh₂ via the transition state TS1 ($\Delta G^{\ddagger} = 8.1$ kcal/mol). This step forms ylide INT1, which evolves into the metal-free ylide INT2 by the dissociation of the Rh₂ catalyst ($\Delta G_{\rm R} = -1.8$ kcal/mol). A similar barrierless Rh₂ dissociation was found by

us in the processes involving related aziridines^{21,22} and by others in the fates of related transition metal ylides.²² Intermediate INT2 may undergo a cheletropic extrusion similar to that observed initially by Watanabe (see Scheme 1A) to produce the alkene intermediate INT3. This highly exergonic reaction ($\Delta G_{\rm R}$ = -20.6 kcal/mol) proceeds with a relatively low activation barrier ($\Delta G^{\ddagger} = 10.5 \text{ kcal/mol}$) via TS2, a saddle point associated with the rupture of both aziridine C-N bonds in a concerted manner. INT3 is ideally suited to undergo [4 + 2] cycloaddition to produce the corresponding dehydropiperazine 6aa'. This final aza-Diels-Alder reaction is also highly exergonic ($\Delta G_{\rm R} = -32.6$ kcal/ mol) and occurs in a concerted fashion through TS3 with a barrier of 23.5 kcal/mol, which is fully compatible with the temperatures (70 °C) used in this reaction. Despite this, an alternative reaction pathway was identified which directly produces the dehydropiperazine 6aa' from ylide INT2. As shown in Figure 2, INT2 undergoes a facile (ΔG^{\ddagger} = 4.5 kcal/ mol) sigmatropic rearrangement via TS2' which involves the concomitant, yet highly asynchronous, breaking of the aziridine C-N bond and formation of the new C-N bond involving the NM moiety. Therefore, although both pathways are feasible within the experimental reaction conditions, our calculations suggest that the direct path involving TS2' is kinetically preferred over the stepwise mechanism involving TS2 and TS3.

In conclusion, we have shown that the fate of aziridinium ylide intermediates depends on the structural features of the carbene precursor. Our initial attempt to prepare piperazine scaffold using a pyridotriazole carbene precursor gave an aziridinium ylide that preferentially underwent cheletropic extrusion to furnish a ketimine, as opposed to the desired ring expansion. Computations show this is due to the loss of aromaticity of the pyridine ring in the expansion pathway. By changing the nature of the carbene precursor to *N*-sulfonyl-1,2,3-triazoles, effective aziridine ring expansion provided access to densely substituted dehydropiperazines in excellent yields and diastereoselectivity. Computations suggest the mechanism involves a [1,4]-sigmatropic rearrangement of the key aziridinium ylide.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.orglett.0c01124.

Experimental procedures, computational details, and characterization data for all new compounds (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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