

Transglycosylation in the Modification and Isotope Labeling of Pyrimidine Nucleosides

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 ABSTRACT: Transglycosylation of pyrimidine nucleosides is demonstrated in a one-pot synthesis of uridine derivatives under microwave irradiation. Inductive activation of 2',3',5'-tri-O-acetyl uridine with a 5-nitro group produces a more-reactive glycosyl donor. Under optimized Vorbrüggen
 Image: R1 or R1 or

produces a more-reactive glycosyl donor. Under optimized Vorbrüggen conditions, the 5-nitrouridine facilitates a reversible nucleobase exchange with a series of 5-substituted uracils. The protocol is also exemplified in a gram-scale reaction under thermal heating. The strategy provides easy access to isotopically labeled uridine.



ucleoside derivatives have shown therapeutic potential in the development of anticancer and antiviral agents.^{1,2} Various synthetic approaches to nucleosides are available.³ The most common method makes use of the Vorbrüggen glycosylation,⁴ which couples silvlated nucleobases with glycosyl donors in the presence of a Lewis acid. Ribose acetates are the prevailing glycosyl donors for glycosylation. Other activated riboses, Lewis acids, and silvlating reagents have also been reported.^{5–7} Transglycosylation is an extremely efficient strategy for late-stage incorporation of modified nucleobases.⁸⁻¹⁰ Kinetically controlled enzymatic transglycosylation has been used commonly in the biosynthesis of nucleosides.¹¹ Enzyme-guided specific nucleobase exchange from cytosine to thymine in RNA has been reported for gene editing.¹² Thermodynamically controlled chemical transglycosylation within or between purines and pyrimidines has also been reported.¹³ Recently, bridge-locked thymine nucleosides were effectively transglycosylated to adenine, guanine, and methylcytosine nucleosides.¹⁴ However, transglycosylation of 3',5'-dibenzoyl-2'-deoxy-L-uridine with excess silylated 5fluorouracil afforded low yields of the corresponding α - and β -deoxyfluorouridines,¹⁵ which could be attributed partially to the weak reactivity of the starting deoxyuridine and the poor nucleophilicity of the fluoropyrimidine base.

For nucleosides containing complex ribose parts, the conventional glycosylation approach with ribose acetates as glycosyl donors may face greater challenges requiring significant investment in either the synthesis of unnatural ribose acetates or derivatization of natural/simple nucleosides. It would be ideal if a readily available and less-reactive parent nucleoside could be activated via a simple chemical derivatization. The resulting activated nucleoside, in turn, could act as a better glycosyl donor and undergo the thermodynamically more favored transglycosylation with a target nucleobase to form a desired nucleoside. The proposed activation exchange may be applied as an alternative to the conventional approach in the late-stage or final-stage modification of nucleosides. In this paper, 2',3',5'-tri-O-acetyl uridine (1a) was used as the starting nucleoside for a proof-of-concept study. A nitro activating group was selected for its well-known strong inductive effect. The inductive activation was realized via a simple nitration^{16,17} of uridine 1a with nitrosyl tetrafluoroborate (NOBF₄) to 5-nitrouridine 1b (see eq 1).



Based on the known mechanism of transglycosylation^{10a} (Scheme 1), it is reasonable to envision that, under Vorbrüggen glycosylation conditions, the silylated form of uridine **1a** or nitrouridine **1b** equilibrates with a neighboring 2'-O-acyl group participated dioxolenium intermediate and a silyloxy-pyrimidine or silyloxy-nitropyrimidine in the presence

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Scheme 1. Mechanism-Based Inductive Activation Strategy



of trimethylsilyl trifluoromethansulfonate (TMSOTf). The strong electron-withdrawing ability of the 5-nitro group can make the outgoing silyloxy-nitropyrimidine a better leaving group and the departed silyloxy-nitropyrimidine a weaker nucleophile.¹⁸ The equilibrium constant $K_{\rm nitro}$ (R¹ = NO₂) should be greater than K_H (R¹ = H). The common cation intermediate can react reversibly with any silylated nucleobase to form a new glycoside with an equilibrium constant $K_{\rm Base}$. The thermodynamically controlled equilibrium is determined by the ratio of $K_{\rm H}$: $K_{\rm Base}$ or $K_{\rm nitro}$: $K_{\rm Base}$. The inductive activation by a 5-nitro group should drive the competition toward transglycosylation ($K_{\rm nitro}$: $K_{\rm Base} > K_{\rm H}$: $K_{\rm Base}$).¹⁰c Microwave (μ W) irradiation¹⁹ was used in this research and

Microwave (μW) irradiation¹⁹ was used in this research and compared with thermal heating. The equilibrium conditions for one-pot transglycosylation of 5-nitrouridine **1b** with uracil (**2a**) to uridine **1a** and 5-nitrouracil (**2b**) in acetonitrile were screened (see Table 1). Quenching of each reaction occurred

Table 1. One-Pot Transglycosylation Equilibrium Conditions

AcO AcO Ib	$ \begin{array}{c} $	Aco Aco ⁵ OAc	$\frac{O_2N}{H} + \frac{O_2N}{HN} + \frac{O_2N}{NH}$
entry	1b:2a:BSA:TMSOTf ^a	time (h)	yield ^b (%)
1	1:1:3:1.5	1 ^c	41 (45)
2	1:1:3:1.5	2 ^c	58 (63)
3	1:1:3:1.5	3 ^c	59 (68)
4	1:1:3:1.5	1^d	67 (71)
5	1:1:3:1.5	2^d	65 (80)
6	1:1:2.5:1.3	1^d	61 (69)
7	1:1:3:0.5	1^d	23 (26)
8	1:1:1.5:1.5	1^d	17 (17)
9	1:1:4.5:1.5	1^d	36 (98)
10	1:2:4.5:1.5	1^d	43 (48)
11	1:2:5:3	1^d	80 (88)
12	2:1:3:3	1^d	88 (60) ^e

^{*a*}0.10 mmol **1b**, 1.0 mL CH₃CN. ^{*b*}HPLC yield of **1a**. Conversion of **1b** given in parentheses. Calibrated with **1a** and **1b** standards. ^{*c*}In a preheated oil bath. ^{*d*}Under μ W. ^{*e*}**2a** as the limiting reagent.

during reverse-phase quantitative HPLC analysis.²⁰ The yield of **1a** and conversion of **1b** were calibrated with authentic **1a** and **1b** standards. At a **1b:2a** ratio of 1:1, 3 equiv of *N*,*O*-bis(trimethylsilyl)acetamide (BSA) and 1.5 equiv of TMSOTf gave a peak yield (58%) of **1a** within 2 h under an 80 °C oil bath (Table 1, entries 1 and 2). Under microwave heating at 80 °C, the yield improved (67%) within 1 h (Table 1, entry 4).

Prolongation of the reaction time (Table 1, entries 3 and 5) increased the conversion of 1b; however, it did not improve the yield of 1a. Microwave heating resulted in a slightly improved yield while reducing the heating time (Table 1, entry 4 vs entry 2) and, hence, was used in the further optimization of reaction conditions. Slight reduction of BSA from 3 equiv to 2.5 equiv and TMSOTf from 1.5 equiv to 1.3 equiv was tolerated (Table 1, entry 6). Further reduction of TMSOTf to 0.5 equiv (Table 1, entry 7) or BSA to 1.5 equiv (Table 1, entry 8) decreased the yield of 1a and conversion of 1b sharply. Increasing BSA to 4.5 equiv (Table 1, entry 9) resulted in the reduction of 1a (36%) and the almost-complete loss of 1b (98%). The presence of excessive BSA caused deglycosylation by *N*-glycosylation of BSA^{5a} and competed with the transglycosylation.

Increasing the ratio of **1b:2a** alone from 1:1 (Table 1, entry 9) to 1:2 (Table 1, entry 10) had less effect on the yield of **1a**. However, it normalized the conversion of **1b** from 98% to 48% by scavenging the excessive amount of BSA with **2a**. Further adjustment of BSA to 5 equiv and TMSOTf to 3 equiv (Table 1, entry 11) improved the yield of **1a** to 80%. Reversely, at a **1b:2a** ratio of 2:1, the yield of **1a** reached 88%, after the amounts of both TMSOTf and BSA were set at 3 equiv (Table 1, entry 12).

The transglycosylation from **1b** to **1a** was regio (N³-) and anomerically (β -) selective, which was in agreement with *N*glycosylation of uracils using known glycosyl donors, since the same reactive dioxolenium intermediate was involved in the glycosylation.^{10a} Trace N¹,N³-bisglycoside byproduct^{6b} of **2a**, which represented 0.9% of the total HPLC peak area at 254 nm from the reaction described in entry 4 in Table 1, was detected by liquid chromatography–mass spectroscopy (LC–MS), but not isolated for further characterization. Increasing the amount of **2a** reduced bisglycosidation, while increasing the amount of **1b**, and prolonging the reaction time increased bisglycosidation.

The reactivity of uridines $1(R^1)$ and the nucleophilicity of uracils $2(\mathbf{R}^2)$ on the equilibration were further examined (see Table 2). Under the standard conditions for a $1(R^1):2(R^2)$ ratio of 1:1, uridine 1a was less reactive with less nucleophilic 5-nitrouracil (2b) and 5-bromouracil (2c). The equilibration disfavored 5-nitrouridine 1b (Table 2, entry 1) and 5bromouridine 1c (Table 2, entry 3) with an equilibrated molar ratio of 1:3.0 for 1b:1a and 1:3.3 for 1c:1a. Conversely, 1b (Table 2, entry 2) and 1c (Table 2, entry 4) equilibrated favorably toward 1a with a ratio of 1:2.3 for 1b:1a and 1:3.3 for 1c:1a. The constant 1c:1a ratios in entries 3 and 4 in Table 2 reflected the establishment of the equilibration. The lower 1b:1a ratio in entry 1 in Table 2 (1:3.0) than in entry 2 in Table 2 (1:2.3) indicated that more deglycosylation of 1b occurred. The glycosyl donating ability of 1b was comparable to 1c, as reflected by the similar yields of 1a in entries 2 and 4 in Table 2. The inductive activation plateaued under tested conditions. 1b and 1c reached an equilibrium in almost 1:1 ratio (Table 2, entry 5). Besides 5-nitro group, a 5-halo group (Br, Cl, or I) could also be easily introduced into uridine 1a via direct halogenation²¹ for potential activation and transglycosylation applications.

At a $1(\mathbb{R}^1):2(\mathbb{R}^2)$ ratio of 1:2, the equilibrium in entry 6 in Table 2, as expected, was driven further by 2a from 1b to 1a. However, more deglycosylation of 1a and 1b occurred with less nucleophilic 2b in entry 7 in Table 2. Transglycosylation of 1a (Table 2, entry 8) and 1b (Table 2, entry 9) with more pubs.acs.org/OrgLett

Table 2. Reactivity and Nucleophilicity on Equilibration

AcO AcO	R ¹ OAc 1(R ¹)	+ NH + NH 2(R ²)	BSA TMSOTf CH ₃ CN µW 80 °C		$Ac = \frac{2(R^1)}{2(R^1)}$
ontar	$1(\mathbf{P}^1)$	$2(\mathbf{P}^2)$	$1(\mathbf{p}^2)$	yield ^a	$1(\mathbf{P}^2), 1(\mathbf{P}^1)^d$
entry	$I(\mathbf{K})$	$2(\mathbf{K})$	$I(\mathbf{K})$	(70)	$I(\mathbf{K}):I(\mathbf{K})$
1	1a (H)	$2b(NO_2)$	$1b(NO_2)$	22 ⁶	1:3.0 (1b:1a)
2	$1b(NO_2)$	2 a(H)	1a (H)	67 ^b	2.3:1 (1a:1b)
3	1 a(H)	2c(Br)	1c (Br)	19 ^b	1:3.3 (1c:1a)
4	1c(Br)	2 a(H)	1 a(H)	63 ^b	3.3:1 (1a:1c)
5	1c(Br)	$2b(NO_2)$	$1b(NO_2)$	48 ^b	1:1.1 (1b:1c)
6	$1b(NO_2)$	2a(H)	1 a(H)	79 [°]	11:1 (1a:1b)
7	1 a(H)	$2b(NO_2)$	$1b(NO_2)$	19 ^c	1:2.1 (1b:1a)
8	1 a(H)	$2d(CH_3)$	$1d(CH_3)$	73 [°]	2.9:1 (1d:1a)
9	$1b(NO_2)$	$2d(CH_3)$	$1d(CH_3)$	82 ^c	12:1 (1d:1b)

^aHPLC yield of $1(\mathbb{R}^2)$. Calibrated with the corresponding $1(\mathbb{R}^2)$ standards. ^b0.10 mmol $1(\mathbb{R}^1)$, $1(\mathbb{R}^1):2(\mathbb{R}^2):BSA:TMSOTf =$ 1:1:3:1.5, 1 h. ^c0.20 mmol $1(\mathbb{R}^1)$, $1(\mathbb{R}^1):2(\mathbb{R}^2):BSA:TMSOTf =$ 1:2:5:3, 2 h. ^dEquilibrated molar ratio. Calculated from the yield of $1(\mathbb{R}^2)$ and the remaining $1(\mathbb{R}^1)$.

nucleophilic thymidine 2d gave good yields of 5-methyluridine 1d and a marginally better yield from 1b. Higher 1a:1b ratio (11:1) in entry 6 in Table 2 and 1d:1b ratio (12:1) in entry 9 in Table 2 reflected higher reactivity of 1b under the reaction conditions.

Under the now-optimized conditions stated in Scheme 2, the scope of uracils $2(R^2)$ as nucleobases for the one-pot transglycosylation with 5-nitrouridine 1b as the glycosyl donor was then examined. Uracil (2a), along with 5-methyl, 5-ethyl, 5-phenyl, 5-trifluoromethyl, and 5-fluoro uracils (2d–2h), gave the corresponding uridines 1a, 1d-1h in moderate to good isolated yields (49%-76%). Uracils functionalized with 5ethynyl, 5-morpholino, 5-methoxy, 5-ethoxycarbonyl, 5-acetyl, and 5-hydroxymethyl (2i-2n) gave the desired uridines (1i-1n) in 41%–75% isolated yields. The conversions of 1b, in all cases, were generally >80%. The competing deglycosylation side reactions affected the vields at variable rates. However, some functional groups were not well-tolerated under the standard conditions. 5-Cyanouracil (20) gave a mixture containing both desired 5-cyanouridine 10 and carboxamide byproduct from partial hydrolyzation of the cyano group. 5-Vinyluracil (2p) gave a complicated mixture with poor yield (<10%) of desired 5-vinyluridine 1p, because of the chemical reactivity of the 5-vinyluracil moiety.²² The stereochemistry on the 1' position in product uridines $1(R^2)$ was confirmed by matching NMR data with either published or authentic standards.

From the perspective of a practical synthetic application, a gram-scale reaction of 5-nitrouridine **1b** (2.4 mmol) with thymine (**2d**) was performed at 80 °C in an oil bath for 5 h under the conditions in Scheme 3. An isolated yield of 83% of 5-methyluridine **1d** was obtained after aqueous desilylation and silica column purification, which matched the previous yield from a smaller scale (0.20 mmol) microwave (2 h) reaction at the same temperature.

Isotopically labeled nucleosides have been synthesized and used as tool compounds for various applications.^{23–26} Direct exchange of uridine **1a** with 1 equiv of uracil isotopologue

Scheme 2. Scope of Transglycosylation^a



^a0.20 mmol 1b, $1b:2(\mathbb{R}^2):BSA:TMSOTf = 1:2:5:3, 2.0$ mL of CH₃CN. Isolated yield.

Scheme 3. Gram-Scale Reaction under Oil Bath Heating



 $[{}^{13}C, {}^{15}N_2]2a$ (Table 3, entry 1) produced 50% enriched isotopologue $[{}^{13}C, {}^{15}N_2]1a$ in 42% yield (diluted with 50% unconverted and inseparable 1a). Equal mass peak areas of $[{}^{13}C, {}^{15}N_2]1a$ and 1a were observed in LC–MS analysis. When 1a reacted with 2 equiv $[{}^{13}C, {}^{15}N_2]2a$ (Table 3, entry 2), the yield of 66% enriched $[{}^{13}C, {}^{15}N_2]1a$ improved to 61% (diluted with 34% 1a), where mass peak area ratio of 2:1 for $[{}^{13}C, {}^{15}N_2]1a:1a$ was confirmed by LC–MS.

For high or full isotopic enrichment, activation-exchange approach becomes a viable option. The reaction of 5-nitrouridine 1b with 1 equiv of $[^{13}C, ^{15}N_2]2a$ produced fully

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Table 3. Isotope Labeling via Base Exchange



^a1(**R**¹):BSA:TMSOTf = 1:3:1.5, 2 h. ^b1(**R**¹):BSA:TMSOTf = 1:5:3, 2 h. ^c1b:BSA:TMSOTf = 2:3:3, 1 h. ^dHPLC yield. Calibrated with 1a standard. ^eCalculated from a 50% enriched isotopic mixture of [¹³C,¹⁵N₂]1a and 1a. ^fCalculated from a 66% enriched isotopic mixture. ^gIsolated yield. ^hBased on [¹³C,¹⁵N₂]2a. ⁱEquilibrated molar ratio. Determined by mass peak area ratio of $1a:[^{13}C,^{15}N_2]1a$ in LC–MS.

enriched $[{}^{13}C, {}^{15}N_2]1a$ in 63% yield (Table 3, entry 3). Minor unreacted 1b was separable from $[{}^{13}C, {}^{15}N_2]1a$. An isolated yield of 68% was achieved when 2 equiv of $[{}^{13}C, {}^{15}N_2]2a$ was used (Table 3, entry 4). An even higher isolated yield (74%) was obtained when 2 equiv of 1b was used (Table 3, entry 5). 5-Nitrouridine 1b not only improved the exchange yield, but also prevented the isotopic dilution from direct usage of 1a in entries 1 and 2 in Table 3.

The potential isotopic effects on the equilibration were evaluated from the equilibrated $1a:[^{13}C, ^{15}N_2]1a$ ratios via LC-MS analysis. The observed 1:1 ratio of $1a:[^{13}C, ^{15}N_2]1a$ in entry 1 in Table 3 and the 1:2 ratio in entry 2 in Table 3 indicated the absence of any significant isotopic effect. The marginal difference between the isolated yields of 1a in Scheme 2 and $[^{13}C, ^{15}N_2]1a$ in entry 4 in Table 3 reflected experimental variations between two reactions.

In summary, the above work has demonstrated the viability of an activation-exchange approach for the modification of pyrimidine nucleosides via inductive activation of parent uridine **1a** to 5-nitrouridine **1b** as a more reactive glycosyl donor, followed by transglycosylation with substituted uracils. The reactivity of uridines, nucleophilicity of uracil nucleobases, and reaction conditions on exchange equilibration were investigated under microwave irradiation. The optimized Vorbrüggen conditions were used in the synthesis of 5substituted uridine derivatives. The one-pot protocol was illustrated successfully in a gram-scale conversion under thermal heating. The approach also enabled the fully isotope labeling of the parent uridine **1a**. The strategy and developed conditions provide convenient access to nucleoside analogues and isotopologues that can be otherwise difficult to synthesize.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

3 Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.orglett.0c01941.

Experimental procedures, characterization data, ¹H and ¹³C NMR spectra of all the isolated compounds, and a representative HPLC chromatogram of transglycosylation reaction (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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