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Synthesis of Diversely Functionalised 2,2-Disubstituted Oxetanes: Fragment Motifs in New Chemical Space

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Di-, tri- and tetra-substituted oxetane derivatives with combinations of ester, amide, nitrile, aryl, sulfone and phosphonate substituents are prepared as fragments or building blocks for drug discovery. The synthesis of these novel oxetane functional groups, in new chemical space, is achieved via rhodium-catalysed O–H insertion and C–C bond forming cyclisation.

Recent years has seen considerable enthusiasm for exploring new chemical motifs in medicinal chemistry that enter unexplored chemical and intellectual property (IP) space.^{1,2} Oxetanes motifs have gained significant traction as desirable modules for drug discovery.³ Carreira, Rogers-Evans, Müller and co-workers demonstrated that 3,3-disubstituted oxetanes constitute polar replacements for *gem*-dimethyl groups, and often afford improved solubility and physicochemical properties.⁴ Subsequently, oxetane motifs have been adopted widely in medicinal chemistry programs.^{5,6} 3-Substituted oxetane motifs have been examined in particular, exploiting oxetan-3-one^{3,4} and 3-iodooxetane⁷ as building blocks. New spirocycles,⁸ peptidomimetics⁹ and other oxetane analogues of important compounds have been prepared (e.g. Fig 1).^{10,6}



Examples of 2-substituted oxetanes remain less studied; Pfizer reported a class of 2-oxetanyl containing γ -secretase inhibitors that possessed improved properties relative to tetrahydrofuran and carbocyclic derivatives.⁶ However, oxetanes bearing functional groups on the ring are unexplored and could provide fascinating new structural units for use ay medicinal chemists. The synthesis of functionalised oxetanes continues to be a challenge. Cyclisation by intramolecure Williamson etherification is most common,³ but 2-functionalit, is often precluded due to unstable oxyanionic intermediates Also, epoxide-opening and ring-closure methods usin, sulfoxonium ylides are not tolerant of sensitive electrophil functionality.¹¹ On the other hand, the photochemical Paterno–Büchi reaction can introduce functionality from a alkene component, but is often restricted to very highly substituted oxetanes, with undesirable properties f(r medicinal chemistry.^{12,13,14}

We have targeted new oxetane derivatives due their sma , polar nature and well-defined 3-D shape.¹⁵ We recently reported the preparation of 2-sulfonyl oxetanes, forme 1 through a novel anionic C–C bond forming cyclisation (Scheme 1A).¹⁶ These fragments displayed good pH stability, an stability to liver microsomes.^{16b} We have also established a efficient synthesis of oxetane 2,2-dicarboxylates involving O–H insertion using diazomalonates, and C–C bond forming cyclisation (Scheme 1B).¹⁷



Here we report the synthesis of unusual oxetane moti s bearing medicinally relevant functional groups directly on the ring (Scheme 1C). Diversely functionalised oxetanes in ne (chemical space are prepared in a facile manner from

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⁺ Electronic Supplementary Information (ESI) available: Experimental procedures, characterisation data, ¹H and ¹³C NMR spectra; details of reaction optimisation and calculated molecular properties. See DOI: 10.1039/x0xx00000x

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functionalised diazo compounds by O–H insertion and C–C bond forming cyclisation. These simple but highly functionalised motifs provide interesting shape and physicochemical properties for fragments or building blocks for drug discovery that cannot be prepared by other methods.

Targeting 2,2-difunctionalised oxetanes, our investigations initially focused on a range of unsymmetrical acceptoracceptor diazo compounds, with which to examine O–H insertion with 2-bromoethanol (Scheme 1C and Table 1).^{18,19} A series of diazo compounds **1a-g** bearing amide, sulfone, phosphonate, and nitrile groups were prepared from the methylene precursors using TsN₃ or TfN₃.^{18,20,21} We first examined amide-ester diazo **1a** (entry 1). Pleasingly, using catalytic Rh₂(OAc)₄ (0.5 mol%) in benzene at 80 °C successfully mediated O–H insertion of the carbene derived from diazo **1a** into 2-bromoethanol in 75% yield.

Table 1. Scope of 2,2-disubstituted oxetanes varying diazo 1a-g

E ² E ¹	kyN₂ HO Bi	Rh ₂ (OAc). (0.5 mol%) PhH. 80 °(or CH ₂ Cl ₂ , <i>O</i> – <i>H</i> insert	C rt ion	E ² E ¹	Br Cyclisatio	$\xrightarrow{e^2}_{E^1} \xrightarrow{e^1}_{E^1}$
entry	E	E ²		yield 2 (%) ^a	yield 3 (%) ^b	oxetane 3
1	o T	CO ₂ Et	а	75	93 ^c	
2	o N-Me MeO	CO₂Et	b	51	96 ^c	EtO ₂ C
3	SO₂Ph	CO₂Et	с	92	87 ^d	EtO ₂ C PhO ₂ S
4	PO(OEt) ₂	CO ₂ Et	d	77 ^e	70 ^{<i>d</i>}	EtO ₂ C
5 6	CN	CO₂Bn	e	85 ^f 93 ^{f,g}	88 ^d 93 ^{d,h}	BnO ₂ C
7	O (N) NBoc	CN	f	67 ⁱ	87 ^{<i>d</i>}	
8	o LN-	PO(OEt)₂	g	84	72 ^d	(EtO) ₂ OP

^{*a*}O–H insertion: **1** (1.1 equiv), 2-bromoethanol (1.0–2.0 mmol), Rh₂(OAc)₄ (0.5 mol%), PhH, 0.1 M, 80 °C. ^{*b*}Cyclisation: **2** (0.3–0.6 mmol), NaH (1.2 equiv), DMF, 0.025 M. ^{*c*}O °C for 1 h; then 25 °C for 1 h. ^{*d*}O °C for 1 h. ^{*e*}1.5 equiv diazo **1d**. ^{*f*}Run in CH₂Cl₂, 0.1 M at 25 °C for 17 h. ^{*a*}10 mmol scale. ^{*h*}B mmol scale. ^{*i*}1.2 equiv diazo **1f**.

Cyclisation was then effected by treatment of **2a** with NaH (1.2 equiv, 0 °C, 1 h, then 25 °C, 1 h) to afford 2-amido-2-esteroxetane **3a** in excellent yield forming the C(2)–C(3) bond. Using Weinreb amide **1b** (entry 2), a slightly reduced yield was obtained for the O–H insertion (51%), but an excellent yield was obtained on cyclisation of **2b** to oxetane **3b**. Sulfone-ester diazo **1c** smoothly underwent O–H insertion, followed by cyclisation in just 1 h at 0 °C to provide a new type of sulfonyl oxetane (entry 3).¹⁶ Phosphonate-ester diazo **1d** proceeded similarly, to yield the first example of $a_{iev}2\pi 0.8648$ http: phosphonate, 3d.²² Interestingly, the use of hittile/ester/diable **1e** led to side reactions under the conditions for O–H insertion with the carbenoid undergoing competitive insertion into the benzene solvent (1.2:1–2.4:1 O–H insertion: π -insertion). In prevent this unwanted side product, the reaction was performed in CH₂Cl₂ (25 °C, 17 h), and bromide **2e** was isolate 1 in 85% yield (entry 5). Cyclisation at 0 °C afforded nitrile oxetane **3e** after 1 h. The sequence was also successful on a larger scale affording >1.5 g of oxetane **3e** in excellent yielo (entry 6). Mixed nitrile-amide and phosphonate-amide diazo compounds were also successful under the same condition, providing oxetanes **3f** and **3g** respectively (entries 7 and 8. The wide variety of substituted oxetanes that can be readif, accessed demonstrates the versatility of this approach.

Substituted bromohydrins were then investigated to for tri- and tetrasubstituted oxetane derivatives (Table 2). T reaction sequence successfully formed oxetanes with 4-alkyr (**5a**) and 4-aryl substituents (**5b-e**) in good yields using sin reaction conditions. The additional substituent had little influence on the O–H insertion step. However, elevated temperature and increased reaction times were required for cyclisation of all substituted examples, requiring 16 h at 25 °C for complete conversion.



Conditions: i) O–H insertion: **1** (1.1 equiv), β -bromohydrin (0.5–1.3 mmol), Rh₂(OAc)₄ (0.5 mol%), PhH, 0.1 M, 80 °C. ii) Cyclisation: **4** (0.3–0.5 mmol), NaH (1.2 equiv), DMF, 0.025 M, 25 °C, 16 h. ^{*a*}dr determined by ¹H NMR of crude reaction mixture. ^{*b*} β -Chlorohydrin used. ^COxetane isomers separated by silica chromatography. ^{*d*}1.5 equiv diazo. ^{*e*}Run in CH₂Cl₂, 0.1 M at 25 °C for 17 h. ^{*f*}1.2 equiv diazo. ^{*g*} Major diastereoisomer indicated (see ref 23).

For oxetanes **5a** and **5b**, a ~1:1 mixture of diastereoison visors was obtained due to the sterically similar ester-sulfone or ester-phosphonate groups.²³ Diazo compounds with a less sterically demanding nitrile group (**1e**, **1h**, **1i**) gave increase 1 diastereoselectivity (up to 3:1 *dr*). The incorporation of a 3-Pn group gave the 2,2,3-substituted derivative **5f** (*dr* = 56:44 . 2,2,4,4-Tetrasubstituted oxetane **5g** was prepared from the commercially available chlorohydrin (1-chloro-2-methyl- propanol) in moderate yields. The synthesis of novel fuece

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bicyclic oxetane scaffold **5h** started by treating *N*-Boc-3pyrroline with NBS and H₂O to provide 3-bromo-4-hydroxypyrrolidine, which gave ether **4h** on O–H insertion. Cyclisation then afforded the bicyclic oxetane **5h** as a 83:17 mixture of separable diastereoisomers in 95% combined yield.^{21,23}

Next we examined aryl-ester (donor-acceptor) diazo compounds,²⁴ to generate 2-aryl-oxetane-2-carboxylates (Table 3). Such aryl-substituted heterocycles offer attractive features for fragment screening and are little studied in medicinal chemistry.²⁵ To our delight, the O-H insertion conditions were effective for the phenyl-ester diazo 6a with an excellent 86% yield using reduced Rh₂(OAc)₄ loading (0.25 mol%, entry 1). The O-H insertion was successful across varied aryl groups (entries 3-8), including the chloropyridyl diazo 6f. However, using the NaH in DMF conditions for cyclisation gave variable yields and oxetane 8a and bromide 7a proved inseparable. Alternative bases and conditions were examined, $^{\rm 21}$ and the use of LiHMDS (1.4 equiv) in THF was found to give quantitative conversion to oxetane 8a with a 93% isolated yield (entry 1). This reaction sequence was similarly successful on a larger scale (entry 2). The modified cyclisation conditions worked well for substituted aryl derivatives including halogenated (entries 4-5), and pyridyl derivatives (entry 8). However, the electron rich p-methoxy phenyl substrate (entry 6) led to low conversion and isolated yield. Using a larger excess of LiHMDS (2 equiv) gave an improved yield of 41% (entry 7). The cyclisation conditions were also effective for aryl-amide ether 7g (entry 9). This approach provided direct access to compounds that conform well to fragment guidelines for fragment screening.²¹

As a more divergent approach to similar compounds, hydrolysis of ester oxetane 8a was examined (Scheme 2a). Using NaOH afforded sodium salt 9 as an attractive oxetane containing building block. Amide coupling with morpholine, directly from the salt,²⁶ gave amide **10** in a good yield over two steps. Finally, we prepared additional 2-nitrile oxetane derivatives. The nitrile group is receiving considerable attention in drug discovery, 27,28 being metabolically robust and a strong hydrogen bond acceptor. Therefore, we considered that the combination with an oxetane motif could present a fascinating structure for medicinal chemistry.^{13,29} From nitrileoxetane benzyl ester 3e, ester hydrolysis was best achieved using LiOH to afford lithium salt 11 (Scheme 2b). Amide bond formation gave nitrile amide oxetanes 12 and 13 in 30-35% yields over 2 steps. Importantly, treatment of oxetane 3f with TFA promoted Boc deprotection, 14, without other degradation, providing encouraging preliminary information on acid stability (Scheme 2c; 10 equiv TFA, 22 h).

In summary, we have developed a versatile strategy to prepare diversely functionalised oxetane derivatives, involving O–H insertion and C–C bond forming cyclisation. A wide variety of functional groups have been introduced on the oxetane ring, accessing new chemical space. We believe these oxetane motifs will provide interesting new structural elements for medicinal chemistry programs as well as synthesis. Efforts towards enantioselective synthesis and studies on the stability and medicinal chemistry properties of the new oxetane derivatives will be reported in due course. We gratefind acknowledge EPSRC (CAF, EP/J001538/19,9mpace Acceleration Account, EP/K503733/1), and Imperial College London. W thank EPSRC National Mass Spectrometry Facility, Swansea.

Table 3. Scope of 2-aryl-oxetane 2-carboxylates										
E	Ar HO	Rh ₂ (O (0.25 m PhH. 8 Br	Ac)₄ nol%) → 80 °C	E O Ar	LiHMI (1.4 eq THF Br	$ \begin{array}{c} OS \\ uiv \\ \hline \\ \hline \\ \hline \\ \\ \hline \\ \\ \\ \\ \\ \\ \\ \\ \\ \\ $				
entry	Ar	E		yield 7 (%) ^a	yield 8 (%) ^b	oxetane 8				
1 2	Ph	CO₂Et	а	86 80 [°]	93 76 ^d	EtO ₂ C				
3	Ph	CO₂iPr	b	87 ^e	72	iPrO ₂ C				
4	3-ClPh	CO₂Et	с	69	97	EIO ₂ C				
5	4-CF₃Ph	CO₂Et	d	64	77					
6 7	4-MeOPh	CO₂Et	e	86	22 41 ^f	EtO ₂ C				
8		CO₂Et	f	54	76					
9	3-ClPh	o T _N	g	73	90					

^aO–H insertion: **6** (1.1–1.5 equiv), 2-bromoethanol (0.4–2.0 mmol), $Rh_2(OAC)_4$ (0.25 mol %), PhH, 0.1 M, 80 °C. ^bCyclisation: **7** (0.3–0.5 mmol), LiHMDS (1.4 equiv), THF, 0.025 M, 0 °C, 1 h. ^cReaction on 7.5 mmol scale. ^dReaction on 5.0 mmol scale. ^e0.5 mol % $Rh_2(OAC)_4$. ^f2.0 equiv LiHMDS.



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