C–H Insertion as a key step to spiro-oxetanes, scaffolds for drug discovery

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Abstract: A new route to spiro-oxetanes, potential scaffolds for drug discovery, is described. The route is based on the selective 1,4-C–H insertion reactions of metallocarbenes, generated from simple carbonyl precursors in flow or batch mode, to give spiro-β-lactones that are rapidly converted into spiro-oxetanes. The three-dimensional and lead like-properties of spiro-oxetanes is illustrated by the conversion of the 1-oxa-7-azaspiro[3,5]nonane scaffold into a range of functionalized derivatives.

Modern drug discovery programs drive an appetite for new, low molecular weight bioactive molecules. In support of the well-established drug discovery process, strategies such as diversity-oriented synthesis (DOS), lead-oriented synthesis (LOS), biology-oriented synthesis (BOS), and fragment based drug discovery (FBDD) have recently emerged as tools to accelerate the search for new drug candidates. Nevertheless, access to compounds with desirable properties by chemical synthesis remains challenging. For example, the power of transition metal-catalyzed sp²-sp² cross coupling reactions has inadvertently led to large numbers of (hetero)aromatic-rich fragments, despite evidence that such compounds are susceptible to attrition in the later stages of drug development due to inappropriate physicochemical properties. As a result, there is now a desire to develop robust synthetic methods that will provide ready access to diverse collections of lead-like, sp²-atom rich, low molecular weight and often densely functionalized molecules, ideally creating molecular complexity from simple starting materials in a few steps.

One contemporary initiative, the European Lead Factory (ELF) was established with the precise goal of identifying compound libraries that fulfil the above criteria. As part of our work under the ELF programme, we were intrigued by the recent interest in spiro-oxetanes and identified the little known 1-oxa-7-azaspiro[3,5]nonane ring system (Figure 1) as an ideal scaffold for drug discovery. Spirocycles incorporating a small ring, such as an oxetane, have relatively rigid structures, and can be densely functionalized, with the substituent vectors clearly defined in their three-dimensional arrangement. Evidence that the 1-oxa-7-azaspiro[3,5]nonane scaffold does indeed allow access to lead-like properties came from analysis of a virtual library generated using the open access LLAMA tool (see Supporting Information for details). When one functionalization was considered, 42% of the molecules in the virtual library fell within lead-like space (MW < 350, logP < 3) (Figure S1), and all were compliant to Lipinski’s ‘rule of five’. In addition, current medicinal chemistry space is well populated with “disc-like” molecules. In contrast, the spiro-oxetanes occupy the “rod-like” area of molecular space (see Figure S2).

Since the original report highlighting the potential of oxetanes in medicinal chemistry, this small ring system has attracted considerable attention, not only due to its low steric bulk, but also because of the advantageous effect on physicochemical parameters. Originally conceived as polar replacements for lipophilic gem-dimethyl groups, oxetanes also act as surrogates for carbonyl groups, and in bioisosteres for morpholine. We now report a new approach to spiro-oxetanes, using reactive metallocarbene intermediates, generated from simple ketone precursors via diazo compounds, to access high-energy, strained products by selective 1,4-C–H activation.

Access to 2,2-spiro-oxetanes can be achieved by the Williamson ether synthesis or the Paterno-Büchi reaction (Scheme 1A, B), although recent developments such as the gold-catalyzed rearrangement of propargylic alcohols (Scheme 1C) can also be used. Some recent approaches to 3,3-spiro-oxetanes are also noteworthy. Our approach features a selective metal carbene C–H activation strategy to give a key β-lactone intermediate that can be converted into the target oxetane through a short reaction sequence.
The reactions of metallocarbenes, readily derived from the metal-catalysed reactions of diazocarbonyl compounds, have become an established tactic in synthesis over the last two decades. Although such reactions constitute an attractive route to a variety of compound types, significant worries about the hazards involved in preparing and using diazo compounds have precluded their widespread adoption. However, the direct handling of potentially hazardous materials can be minimized by their generation and use in flow chemistry. We recently described a new protocol for the preparation of diazo compounds by oxidation of hydrazones based on the reagent N-iodo p-toluenesulfonamide potassium salt (TsNIK), and based on the efficiency of this method, we developed a recyclable, polystyrene-supported version of the oxidant (PS-TsNIK), and demonstrated its use in the generation of a wide range of diazo compounds under flow conditions. This method allows the safe generation of highly reactive diazo compounds and enables their use to access higher energy, strained materials such as β-lactones. Therefore we initially investigated the intramolecular C-H activation reactions of aryl diazoacetates derived in flow from ketoesters via hydrazones where the ester O-alkyl group contains a suitably positioned tertiary C-H bond. The starting hydrazones 8 – 14 were prepared from the corresponding ketoesters 1 – 7 in near-quantitative yields by treatment with hydrazine hydrate under acidic conditions (AcOH or PhCO₂H) as previously described, and subsequently oxidized in flow as a dichloromethane solution using a column packed with PS-TsNIK. Oxidation of the hydrazones on the resin was fast, with complete conversion being seen with a residence time of 5-10 minutes. The flow output was directly exposed to dirhodium(II) octanoate catalyst in dichloromethane at reflux in standard equipment, resulting in the formation of the desired spiro β-lactones 15 – 19 (Scheme 2). The relative stereochemistry of β-lactone 18 derived from trans-4-tert-butylcyclohexanol was established by X-ray crystallography (Figure S3, Supporting Information), confirming that, as expected, insertion occurs with retention of stereochemistry into the axial C-H bond. Similarly the hydrazone 12 derived from N-Boc-4-hydroxypiperidine gave the spiro β-lactone 19, the key intermediate in our proposed route to the 1-oxa-7-azaspiro[3,5]nonane core structure.

Scheme 1. Synthetic approaches to 2,2-spiro-oxetanes.

Scheme 2. Synthesis of spiro-oxetanes.

1, 8 Ar = Ph, R = c-C₃H₇; 2, 9 Ar = Ph, R = c-C₃H₇; 3, 10 Ar = Ph, R = c-C₆H₄-OH; 4, 11 Ar = Ph, R = 4-t-Butylcyclohexanol (trans); 5, 12 Ar = 4-Br-C₆H₄, R = N-Boc-4-piperidinyl; 6, 13 Ar = Ph, R = CH₂-N-Boc-2-pymidinyl; 7, 14 Ar = Ph, R = CH₂-c-C₆H₄; 15, 21 61% from hydrazone 8; 16 32% from hydrazone 9; 17 70% from hydrazone 10; 18 68% from hydrazone 11; 19 58% from hydrazone 12; 20 56% from hydrazone 13; 21 47% from hydrazone 14.
Scheme 2. [oct = octanoate; Ar = 4-bromophenyl] Synthesis of diazoesters from oxidation of hydrazones in flow and subsequent intramolecular C–H insertion reactions to give spiro-β- and γ-lactones.

The selectivity of intramolecular metalallocarbene C–H insertion reactions has been widely studied, and although the formation of 5-membered rings is generally favoured, the presence of heteroatoms or suitably positioned tertiary C–H bonds can often override this preference and lead to the formation of 4-membered rings. This has been exemplified by β-lactone formation, following the early work by Lee et al.[17] using dirhodium(II) catalysis.[18] Hence our synthesis of spiro-β-lactones follows the expected selectivity trends for preferential insertion into a tertiary C–H bond rather than a CH₂ group. In accord with this selectivity, oxidation of the prolinol-derived hydrazone 13 and treatment with the dirhodium(II) catalyst gave the spiro-γ-lactone 20, isolated as a single diastereomer. The structure and stereochemistry were confirmed by X-ray crystallography (Figure S4, Supporting Information). Likewise, the hydrazone 14 derived from cyclobutylmethanol gave the spiro-γ-lactone 21 (47%) (Scheme 2), again emphasizing the preference for insertion into tertiary C–H bonds.

The diazoesters can be also be formed by more conventional diazo transfer protocols as illustrated for the aryl diazoacetates 27 – 31, and their subsequent conversion into β-lactones (Scheme 3). Using this route, the synthesis of β-lactones 19 and 32 – 35 was undertaken starting from the corresponding arylacetates on multi-gram scale, and the product isolated without chromatography over the 3-step sequence.

With a range of spiro-β-lactones available, their conversion into the corresponding oxetanes was investigated. The conversion of β-lactones into the corresponding oxetanes in a single step is an unknown chemical transformation. Although a number of protocols are available for the direct reduction of higher lactones to the corresponding cyclic ether in one step,[19] these failed to give any oxetane products when applied to our β-lactones. Therefore, we used a procedure involving reduction and etherification.[20] Reduction of β-lactone 17 to the corresponding diol 36 proved more difficult than expected, and common reduction conditions led to decomposition of the

Scheme 3. Synthesis of spiro-β-lactones in batch mode (yields for diazoesters are over two steps from the aryl acetic acid).
substrates, mainly via a retro-aldol reaction. A number of reaction conditions were investigated (Table S1, Supporting Information) including borane reduction of the carboxylic acid hydrolysis product of 17, reduction using lithium triethylborohydride, lithium aluminium hydride or diisobutylaluminium hydride (DIBAL-H). Optimization of the reaction conditions using β-lactone 17 led to diol 36 in 68% yield when DIBAL-H was used in dichloromethane (Scheme 4).

Scheme 4. Reduction of β-lactone 17 to diol 36.

Cyclization of the diol 36 to the oxetane 38 proceeded readily using tosyl chloride and potassium tert-butoxide in THF at reflux, presumably via an initial sulfonylation of the primary alcohol, followed by the alkylation of the tertiary alcohol. Alternatively the diol can be briefly isolated, and without purification, simply treated with tosyl chloride to give oxetanes 37 and 39 – 43 in 44 – 80% yield (Scheme 5). The structure of oxetanes 39 and 43 were confirmed by X-ray crystallography (Figure 2).

The aforementioned analysis of the three-dimensional and lead like-properties of compounds based on the 1-oxa-7-aza-spiro[3,5]nonane spiro-oxetane core highlighted the potential of the scaffold as a platform for drug discovery. Therefore a number of transformations were carried out on oxetane 39 (Scheme 6) to exemplify the range of functionality that could be incorporated. Initially Suzuki-Miyaura and Buchwald-Hartwig coupling reactions of the aryl bromide gave the spiro-oxetanes 44 and 49 in excellent yield, whilst conversion into the carboxylic acid 46 was efficiently achieved by palladium-catalyzed carbonylation reaction with phenyl formate followed by hydrolysis of the ester 45 (Scheme 6).[21] Amides 50 – 52 were prepared from carboxylic acid 46 under standard conditions, and further functionalized at the piperidine nitrogen to give 53 – 55.

Scheme 5. Conversion of β-lactones into oxetanes.

Likewise, non-cryogenic metallation of the bromide followed by quenching with DMF gave the aldehyde 47.[22] Aldehyde 47 was used in reductive amination chemistry followed by optional acylation to give 56 – 58, which were further functionalized at the piperidine nitrogen to exemplify potential library synthesis reactions with compounds 59 – 61.

Figure 2. X-ray crystal structure of spiro-oxetanes (A) 39 and (B) 43.
Scheme 6. [Ar = 4-bromophenyl] Synthesis of an array of spiro-oxetane-piperidines. Reagents and conditions: 62 a.) \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2, \text{aq. NaOH, THF, r.t., 3 h, quant} \); b.) \( \text{MeI, K}_2\text{CO}_3, \text{DMF, r.t., 15 h, 80%} \); c.) hydroxylamine-O-sulfonic acid, aq. NaOH, MeCN, r.t., 16 h, 69%; d.) i. AgOTf, NaOH, MeOH, 0 °C, 0.5 h; ii. Selectfluor\textsuperscript{®}, 3Å MS, acetone, r.t., 1 h, 69%; e.) Cu(phen)CF\textsubscript{3}2, KF, DMF, 50 °C, 18 h, 94%; f.) CuCl\textsubscript{2}, H\textsubscript{2}O:MeOH (1:1), 90 °C, 5 h, 74%. Miyaura borylation\textsuperscript{[23]} gave the pinacol boronate 48 that could be functionalized to further increase molecular diversity of the scaffold. Hydrolysis of boronate 48 under standard conditions (\( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2/\text{NaOH} \)) provided the phenol 62, which was readily alkylated with methyl iodide to scaffold 63. The corresponding aniline 64 was prepared utilizing the transition metal-free conditions developed by Voth \textit{et al.} using hydroxylamine-O-sulfonic acid,\textsuperscript{[24]} providing the aniline 64 in 95% yield. Pinacol boronate 48 can also be readily converted into two fluorinated scaffolds. Metallation of the pinacol boronate to the organosilver followed by treatment with Selectfluor\textsuperscript{®} yielded the aryl fluoride 65 in 69% yield.\textsuperscript{[25]} Trifluoromethylation was achieved using the conditions developed by Hartwig using (1,10-phenanthroline)(trifluoromethyl)copper(I).\textsuperscript{[26]} This exquisite transformation provided the trifluoromethyl oxetane 66 in 94% yield. Copper-catalyzed chlorination was also performed under Hartwig conditions to give the aryl chloride 67.\textsuperscript{[27]} These diverse transformations highlight the robustness of the scaffold to further functionalization to provide a wide range of functional groups of interest for medicinal chemistry as illustrated by the analysis of the virtual library.
Under the auspices of the European Lead Factory (ELF),[3][3] the spiro-oxetane scaffolds prepared herein have been developed for inclusion in the Joint European Compound Library (JECL).[20] A total of 478 compounds was synthesized by our ELF partner Synature Discovery Ltd.

In conclusion, we have described a short route to spiro-oxetanes that features a selective metallocarbene C–H insertion to generate β-lactones as a key step. Diazocarbonyl compound precursors were either generated in-flow and used without isolation or prepared by batch methods. Conversion of β-lactones into oxetanes was readily carried out, and the whole sequence was amendable to scale up. A number of functional group interconversions on the spiro-oxetane products illustrates the potential of this motif as a fragment of interest in drug development programmes.

Experimental Section

For full details of all experiments, and copies of 1H and 13C NMR spectra, see the Supporting Information.

Acknowledgements

We thank the EPSRC (Grant EP/G027919/1) (H.E.B.) and the University of Nottingham (S.M.N.) for support. A.N.’s contribution was carried out within the European Lead Factory and has received support from the Innovative Medicines Initiative Joint Undertaking under grant agreement n°115489, sources of which are composed of financial contribution from the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) and EFPIA companies’ in-kind contribution. S.M.N. and A.N. contributed equally.

Keywords: oxygen heterocycles • nitrogen heterocycles • C–H activation • spiro compounds• drug discovery