Dualistic Nature of the Mechanism of the Morita–Baylis–Hillman Reaction Probed by Electrospray Ionization Mass Spectrometry

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Received November 20, 2008

The Morita–Baylis–Hillman (MBH) reaction (Scheme 1) constitutes a broad range, synthetically useful chemical transformation allowing chemists to construct, via efficient formation of new C–C bonds, a myriad of densely functionalized α-methylene-β-hydroxy derivatives.1–3 These derivatives are known as MBH adducts and are formed by coupling an electrophile (an aldehyde or an imine) with an activated

Introduction

The Morita–Baylis–Hillman (MBH) reaction (Scheme 1) constitutes a broad range, synthetically useful chemical trans-
SCHEME 1. General Scope and First Catalytic Cycle Proposed by Hoffmann/Hill and Isaacs for the Morita–Baylis–Hillman Reaction

General scope

Heterocyclic compounds

Drugs

Pheromones

X = O, NTS, NCOR, NSO₂Ph
R¹ = alkyl or aryl
R² = H
EWG = CO₂R, CN, P(ΟEt)₂, CHO, COR, SO₃Ph

Hoffmann/Hill-Isaacs first proposed mechanism


(nearly with an electron-withdrawing group) alkene in the presence of a Lewis base catalyst (most often DABCO). The MBH reaction has been used to form building blocks for the total synthesis of many heterocycles, natural products, and drugs. Based on its atom economy and feasibility, the MBH reaction is currently regarded as one of the most efficient transformations in organic chemistry.

Hoffmann, in 1983, was the first to propose a mechanism for the MBH reaction, which was refined from kinetic data by Hill and Isaacs and others (Scheme 1). The first step I involves 1,4-addition of the catalytic tertiary amine to the activated alkene to generate the zwitterionic aza-enolate 3. In step II, 3 forms intermediate 5 by adding to aldehyde 4 via an aldol addition reaction. Step III involves intramolecular proton shift within 5 to form 6, which in step IV forms the final MBH adduct 7 via E2 or E1cb proton-transfer in the presence of a Lewis base. The last step IV returns 1 to the catalytic cycle. Due to the low kinetic isotopic effect (KIE = 1.03 ± 0.1, using acrylonitrile as nucleophile for the MBH reaction) measured by Hill and Isaacs and the dipole increase by charge separation, 1 was initially considered as the MBH rate-determining step (RDS, Scheme 1).

Recently, McQuade et al. and Aggarwal et al. re-evaluated the MBH mechanism using kinetics and theoretical studies, focusing on the proton-transfer step. According to McQuade, the MBH reaction is second order relative to the aldehyde and shows significant kinetic isotopic effect (KIE: kD/kH = 5.2 ± 0.6 in DMSO). Interestingly, regardless of the solvents (DMF, MeCN, THF, CHCl₃), the KIE were found to be greater than 2, indicating the relevance of proton abstraction on the rate-determining step. Based on these new data, McQuade et al. proposed a new mechanism view for the proton-transfer step (Scheme 2), suggesting IV as the RDS. Soon after, Aggarwal, also on the basis of kinetic studies, proposed that the reaction kinetic is second order in relation to the aldehyde but only at its beginning (≤ 20% of conversion), then becoming autocatalytic. Apparently, the MBH adducts 7 may act as a proton donor.

new propositions about the proton-transfer step of the MBH reaction just discussed have therefore stimulated us to perform complementary investigations on the MBH reaction mechanism via ESI-MS/(MS) aiming to interpret and characterize the new intermediates postulated for the dualist nature of the key RDS proton-transfer step.

Results and Discussion

Our investigation began with the ESI-MS monitoring of the reaction of methyl acrylate with an excess of benzaldehyde (4a, Scheme 3) catalyzed by DABCO without solvent. 21 DABCO (1 equiv), methyl acrylate (1 equiv) and benzaldehyde (3 equiv) were mixed without additional solvent. Aliquots of the reaction medium (0.05 µL) were taken, diluted in acetonitrile with a trace of formic acid, and injected directly to the ESI source. Although neutral zwitterionic species participate in MBH reactions, in solution they are in equilibrium with their protonated or cationized forms and in such cationic forms may be detected by ESI-MS.13 Just after mixing the reagents for the reaction outlined in Scheme 3, an aliquot was taken and the reaction stopped by addition of 100 µL of acetonitrile acidified with traces of formic acid. As before,13 the ESI-MS (Figure 1a) of such a reaction solution intercepts three covalently bonded cationic species directly related to the MBH catalytic cycle (Scheme 4): [1a + H]+ of m/z 113, [3a + H]+ of m/z 199, and [6a + H]+ of m/z 305. But for the first time, due to high concentration, two new species are also intercepted and putatively assigned to [11 + K]+ of m/z 323 and [12 + K]+ of m/z 409.22 The formation of covalent species is indicated by the relatively high kinetic energy set for the extraction of gas-phase ions from the ESI source into the mass spectrometer (accelerating cone voltage of 20–30 V) and the optimized declustering properties of the ESI source. Under such conditions, loosely bonded species should not survive.

The ions of m/z 113 [1a + H]+ and m/z 199 [3a + H]+ have been fully characterized in our previous investigation (see also...
For structural characterization of the new species, the ions of $m/z$ 323, $m/z$ 305, and $m/z$ 409 were individually selected for collision-induced dissociation (CID) with argon via tandem mass spectrometric (ESI-MS/MS) experiments (Figure S1, Supporting Information). The $[11 + K]^+$ ion of $m/z$ 323 forms the...
After 10 min, another aliquot of the MBH reaction solution was diluted in acetonitrile and its ESI-MS collected (Figure 1b). To our delight, it seems that ESI-MS intercepted now intermediate \(8a\) proposed by McQuade\(^9\) from the nucleophilic attack of the MBH alkoxyde to the aldehyde (Scheme 5) as the \([8a + Na]^+\) ion of \(m/z\) 433. Using freshly distilled benzaldehyde, the analogous protonated species of \(m/z\) 411 was also detected and characterized by ESI-MS/(MS) (see the Supporting Information).

Ion \([8a + Na]^+\) of \(m/z\) 433 shows a characteristic and unique dissociation pattern via ESI-MS/(MS). It loses (most probably) \(Ph\)-C=O-'Na' (128 Da) and PhCHO (106 Da) to afford the protonated form of the \(aza\)-enolate of \(m/z\) 199 as well as forms protonated DABCO of \(m/z\) 113 (Figure 2).\(^{23}\)

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Ion \([8a + Na]^+\) of \(m/z\) 433 shows a characteristic and unique dissociation pattern via ESI-MS/(MS). It loses (most probably) \(Ph\)-C=O-'Na' (128 Da) and PhCHO (106 Da) to afford the protonated form of the \(aza\)-enolate of \(m/z\) 199 as well as forms protonated DABCO of \(m/z\) 113 (Figure 2).\(^{23}\)
Considering Aggarwal’s proposal for proton sources, we monitored the MBH reaction performed with the same experimental protocol but added an additional 3 equiv of \( \text{\textbeta}\)-napthol (an external proton source). Immediately after the reagents were mixed, an aliquot of the reaction solution was subjected to ESI-MS (Figure S2, Supporting Information), and again a new species \([10a + \text{H}]^+\) of \( m/z 449 \) was detected whereas the ions of \( m/z 305 \) and 433 were nearly absent. The ESI-MS(\text{MS}) of this new ionic species of \( m/z 449 \) was collected (Figure 3), showing the ion to dissociate by the sequential losses of \( \text{\textbeta}\)-napthol and benzaldehyde to afford \([3a + \text{H}]^+\) of \( m/z 199 \). The interception and characterization of \([10a + \text{H}]^+\) agrees therefore with Aggarwal’s proposition that a proton source participates in the proton-transfer step by assisting the removal of the base.

![FIGURE 3. ESI-MS(\text{MS}) of the ion of \( m/z 449 \).](image)

![FIGURE 4. ESI(\text{+})-MS(\text{MS}) spectrum of the ion of \( m/z 337 \).](image)


To collect additional evidence for the action of an external proton source, we repeated the MBH reaction using methanol as solvent. Just after the reagents were mixed, an aliquot of the reaction solution was subjected to ESI-MS (Figure S3, Supporting Information). A new ion of \( m/z \) of 337 [10b + H]\(^+\) was intercepted and characterized via ESI-MS/MS (Figure 4). As expected from its more loosely bonded nature, the ion lost methanol to yield the fragment of \( m/z \) 305, which subsequently dissociated by the loss of benzaldehyde and methyl acrylate to form protonated DABCO of \( m/z \) 113.

**Conclusions**

New intermediates of the MBH reaction (8a, 10a–b, 11, and 12) have been, for the first time, successfully intercepted and structurally characterized via ESI-MS/MS monitoring. Intermediates 8a and 10a–b provide the first structural evidence supporting the mechanistic propositions recently made by McQuade et al.\(^9\) and Aggarwal et al.\(^10\) for the key RDS proton-transfer step IV of MBH reactions. The “fishing” and structural characterization of these key intermediates exemplifies the complex equilibriations occurring during MBH reactions, and the interception of intermediates 8a and 10a–b confirms the dualistic nature of the RDS proton-transfer step. These findings may also help develop general asymmetric versions of MBH reactions, which should consider all major equilibria and use a fast and efficient proton-transfer promoter.

**Experimental Section**

**General Procedures.** All reagents were used without purification. ESI mass and tandem mass spectra in the positive-ion mode were acquired using a Micromass (Manchester, UK) QTof instrument of ESI-QToF configuration with 5.000 mass resolution and 50 ppm mass accuracy in the TOF mass analyzer. The following typical operating conditions were used: 3 kV capillary voltage, 8 V cone voltage, and desolvation gas temperature of 100 °C. Tandem ESI-MS/MS were collected after 4–32 eV collision-induced dissociation (CID) of mass-selected ions with argon. Mass-selection was performed by Q1 using a unitary \( m/z \) window, and collisions were performed in the rf-only hexapole collision cell, followed by mass analysis of product ions by the high-resolution orthogonal reflectron TOF analyzer.

The monitored Morita–Baylis–Hillman was carried out as follows: To a mixture of benzaldehyde (70 mg, 0.66 mmol) and DABCO (25 mg, 0.22 mmol) was added methyl acrylate (19 mg, 0.22 mmol). The resulting mixture was stirred at room temperature for 6 h. Aliquots from this reaction medium were taken at different times and diluted in a mixture of acetonitrile with a tiny amount of formic acid.

**Acknowledgment.** We acknowledge the São Paulo State Science Foundation (FAPESP) and the Brazilian National Science Council (CNPq) for financial support. F.C. and M.N.E. thank CNPq and G.W.A., H.M.S.M. and B.G.V. thank FAPESP for research fellowships. B.R.V.F. thanks Unicamp for a fellowship.

**Supporting Information Available:** ESI-MS/MS for products intercepted in the MBH reaction of methyl acrylate with benzaldehyde (Figure S1); ESI-MS of the Morita–Baylis–Hillman reaction in the presence of \( \beta \)-naftol (Figure S2); ESI-MS of the Morita–Baylis–Hillman reaction in the presence of methanol (Figure S3); ESI-MS/MS of the ion of \( m/z \) 423 obtained in the Morita–Baylis–Hillman reaction carried out with benzaldehyde-\( d_6 \) (Figure S4); ESI-MS/MS of the ion of \( m/z \) 311 obtained in the Morita–Baylis–Hillman reaction carried out with benzaldehyde-\( d_6 \) (Figure S5); ESI-MS/MS of the ion of \( m/z \) 411 obtained in the Morita–Baylis–Hillman reaction carried out with distilled benzaldehyde and recrystallized DABCO (Figure S6). This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

J0802578T