Chinese Chemical Letters 27 (2016) 623–626

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Chinese Chemical Letters

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cclet

Original article

Amino acid derivatives of pyropheophorbide-*a* ethers as photosensitizer: Synthesis and photodynamic activity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 January 2016
Received in revised form 21 February 2016
Accepted 8 March 2016
Available online 19 March 2016

Keywords:
Photodynamic therapy (PDT)
Photosensitiser
Pyropheophorbide-*a*
Chlorin
Antitumor

ABSTRACT

Ten new water-soluble amino acid conjugates of pyropheophorbide-*a* ethers **4a–4j** were synthesized and investigated for their *in vitro* photodynamic antitumor activity. The results showed that all compounds exhibited higher phototoxicity and lower dark toxicity against three kinds of tumor cell lines than BPD-MA. In particular, the most phototoxic compound **4d** and **4j** individually showed IC_{50} values of 41 nmol/L and 33 nmol/L against HCT116 cell, which represented 7.8- and 9.7-fold increase of antitumor potency compared to BPD-MA, respectively, suggesting that they were promising photosensitizers for PDT applications because of their strong absorption at long wavelength ($\lambda_{max} > 650$ nm), high phototoxicity, low dark cytotoxicity and good water-solubility.

1. Introduction

Photodynamic therapy (PDT) now is a well recognized approach to cancer therapy for the selective destruction of tumors by visible light in presence of a photosensitizer (PS) and cell oxygen [1]. It is based on the principle that the interaction between light and PS in tumor tissues generates cytotoxic reactive oxygen species (ROS) created through either electron transfer (type I) or energy transfer (type II) reactions to inactivate the tumor cells [2].

Porfimer sodium, the first clinically approved porphyrin-type PS for the treatment of bladder cancer in the world, has suffered some drawbacks such as its complex component, inefficient absorption ($\varepsilon = 1170$ L mol^{-1} cm^{-1}) at long wavelength ($\lambda_{max} = 630$ nm), prolonged cutaneous phototoxicity up to 4–6 weeks due to its slow clearance in skin tissues [3].

In the recent decade, the so-called second generation chlorin-type PSs such as natural chlorophyll-*a* derivatives have generated interest due to its low skin phototoxicity, rapid clearance from tissues and strong absorption at long wavelengths ($\lambda_{max} > 650$ nm) to take full advantage of greater tissue penetration [4–6]. Among them, talaporfin [7] and verteporfin (BPD-MA) [8] were approved for PDT applications (Fig. 1).

Pyropheophorbid-*a* (**2**), the one of chlorophyll-*a* derivative as chlorin-type PS, has poor water solubility to hamper its clinical development. Introducing amino acid at 17^3-position and alkoxy at 3^1-position was reported to individually improve the water solubility and the biological activity of chlorin-based derivatives [9–12]. In this regard, a series of novel water-soluble amino acid conjugates of pyropheophorbide-*a* ethers **4a–4j** were synthesized (Scheme 1) and investigated their *in vitro* photodynamic antitumor activity against three kinds of tumor cell lines.

2. Experimental

2.1. Chemicals and instruments

Melting points were measured on a XRD micro melting point apparatus and uncorrected. ^{1}H NMR spectra were recorded on Bruker MSL-300 or MSL-600 using TMS as the internal reference. Mass spectra were collected on an API-3000 LC-MS spectrometer. UV absorption spectra were measured on an Agilent UV 8453 spectrophotometers. Elemental analysis was carried out using a PE2400 II instrument. Column chromatography was performed on silica gel (size 10–40 μm, Qingdao Haiyang Chemical, China). All

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cclet.2016.03.019
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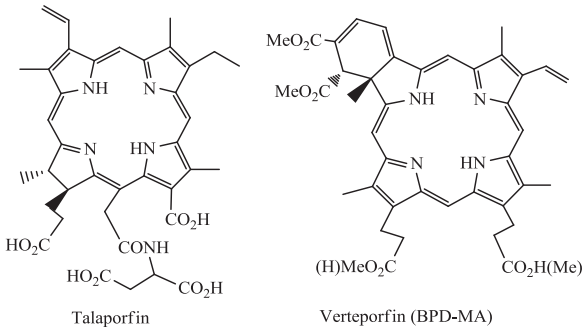


Fig. 1. Two clinical available semisynthetic chlorin-type photosensitizers.

reagents and solvents purchased from commercial vendors and were used without further purifications. The key intermediate pheophorbide-*a* (**1**) was obtained *via* cond. aqueous HCl degradation of chlorophyll-*a* in Et_2O (Scheme 1) by the methodology developed in our laboratory using crude chlorophyll extracts in silkworm excrements [13].

2.2. Chemical synthesis

Pyropheophorbide-*a* (**2**): A suspension of **1** (2.0 g, 3.38 mmol) in HOAc (100 mL) was refluxing under an atmosphere of N_2 for 4 h. The reaction mixture was poured into H_2O (1 L) and then extracted with CH_2Cl_2. The organic layer was washed with water, dried over anhydrous Na_2SO_4, and evaporated. The residue was purified on a silica gel column (CH_2Cl_2:CH_3COCH_3:CH_3OH:HCO_2H = 60:1:1:0.1 as eluent) to obtain **2** (1.5 g, 83.1%) as bright black solid. Physical and spectroscopic characterization data of compound **2** was given in Supporting information.

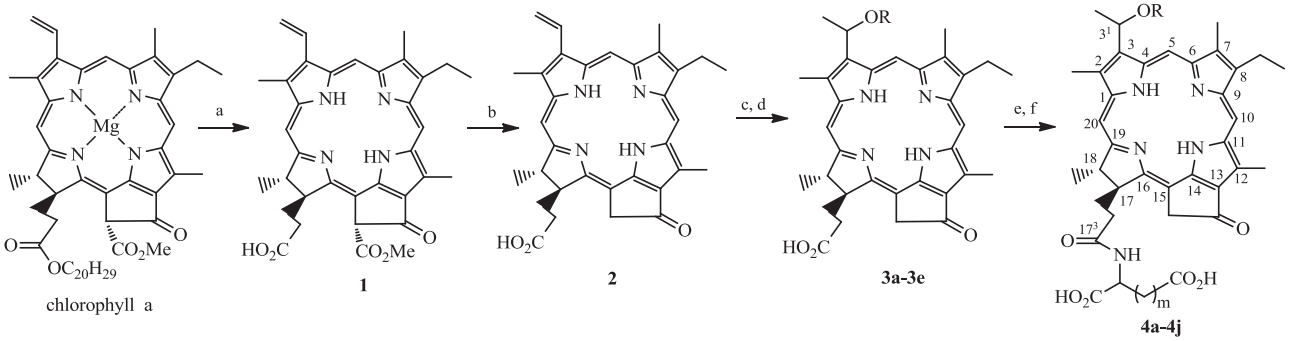
Pyropheophorbide-*a* ether derivatives (**3a**–**3e**): A suspension of **2** (0.5 g, 0.94 mmol) in 33% HBr–HOAc (50 mL) was stirred overnight at room temperature and then evaporated. The residue was added dissolved in CH_2Cl_2 (50 mL). K_2CO_3 (1.0 g) and the appropriate alcohol donors (10 mL) were then added and allowed to stir at room temperature for 2 h. The reaction mixture was added H_2O (300 mL) and then extracted with CH_2Cl_2. The organic layer was washed with water, dried over anhydrous Na_2SO_4, and evaporated. The residue was purified on a silica gel column (CH_2Cl_2:CH_3COCH_3:CH_3OH:HCO_2H = 80:1:1:0.1 as eluent) to give compounds **3a–3e** as bright black solid in yield of 42.3%–69.0%. Physical and spectroscopic characterization data of compounds **3a–3e** were given in Supporting Information.

Amino acid conjugates of pyropheophorbide-*a* ethers (**4a–4j**): To a solution of compounds **3a**–**3e** (0.40 mmol) in anhydrous CH_2Cl_2 (100 mL) was individually added 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)-carbodiimide hydrochlorate (EDCI) (0.48 mmol, 1.2 equiv.) and 1-hydroxybenzotriazole (HOBt) (0.48 mmol l, 1.2 equiv.) to stir until completely dissolved under in ice-salt bath. After 30 min, L-Asp(OBut)$_2$·HCl or L-Glu(OBut)$_2$·HCl (0.48 mmol 1.2 equiv.) and *N*,*N*-diisopropylethylamine (DIPEA) (0.48 mmol l, 1.2 equiv.) were mixed in CH_2Cl_2 (30 mL) and poured into above reaction mixture. The mixture was allowed to stir at room temperature overnight under nitrogen. It was diluted with CH_2Cl_2 (150 mL) and then washed with 5% aqueous citric acid, brine and water, respectively. The organic layer was dried over anhydrous Na_2SO_4 and evaporated. The residue was dissolved in dry CH_2Cl_2/TFA (1:1, 30 mL) and stirred at room temperature for 2 h. The resulting mixture was diluted with CH_2Cl_2 and adjusted to pH 5–6 with 10% $NaHCO_3$ and purified on a silica gel column (CH_2Cl_2:CH_3COCH_3:CH_3OH:HCO_2H = 80:1:1:0.1 as eluent) to give the target compounds **4a**–**4j**.

N-(3-Devinyl-3-(1-methoxy)ethylpyropheophorbide-*a*-17^3-acyl)-L-aspartic acid (**4a**): Yield 54.2%, mp 168–169 °C; ^{1}H NMR (300 MHz, DMSO-d_6): δ 12.10 (s, 2H, 2× CO_2H), 9.65 (s, 1H, 10-H), 9.38 (s, 1H, 5-H), 8.88 (s, 1H, 20-H), 8.20 (m, 1H, CONH), 6.02 (q, 1H, J = 6.8 Hz, 3^1-H), 5.22 (d, 1H, J = 21.0 Hz, 13^2-H$_b$), 5.10 (d, 1H, J = 21.0 Hz, 13^2-H$_a$), 4.56–4.59 (m, 1H, 17-H), 4.28–4.32 (m, 1H, 18-H), 3.82 (m, 1H, CONHCHCO), 3.69 (q, 2H, J = 7.2 Hz, 8^1-CH_2), 3.62 (s, 3H, 12-CH_3), 3.42 (s, 3H, 3^1-OCH_3), 3.35 (s, 3H, 7-CH_3), 3.17 (s, 3H, 2-CH_3), 2.22–2.03 (m, 6H, 17^2-CH_2 + 17^1-CH_2 + CONHCHCH_2), 2.02 (d, 3H, J = 6.8 Hz, 3^2-CH_3), 1.76 (d, 3H, J = 7.2 Hz, 18-CH_3), 1.59 (t, 3H, J = 7.2 Hz, 8^2-CH_3), −2.04 (s, 1H, NH); MS (ESI$^+$) m/z: 682.57 [M+H]$^+$ (100%); Anal. Calcd. for $C_{38}H_{43}N_5O_7$:C 66.94, H 6.36, N 10.27; Found: C 67.14, H 6.31, N 10.33.

N-(3-Devinyl-3-(1-propoxy)ethylpyropheophorbide-a-17^3-acyl)-L-aspartic acid (**4b**): Yield 55.8%, mp > 300 °C; ^{1}H NMR (300 MHz, DMSO-d_6): δ 9.80 (1H, splitted s, 10-H), 9.76 (s, 1H, 5-H), 8.83 (s, 1H, 20-H), 7.95 (m, 1H, CONH), 6.0 (q, 1H, J = 6.8 Hz, 3^1-H), 5.23 (d, 1H, J = 21.0 Hz, 13^2-H$_b$), 5.09 (d, 1H, J = 21.0 Hz, 13^2-H$_a$), 4.51–4.58 (m, 1H, 17-H), 4.28 (m, 1H, 18-H), 3.74 (m, 1H, CONHCHCO), 3.70 (q, 2H, J = 7.3 Hz, 8^1-CH_2), 3.63 (s, 3H, 12-CH_3), 3.49 (m, 2H, 3^1-OCH_2), 3.39 (s, 3H, 7-CH_3), 3.22 (s, 3H, 2-CH_3), 2.12–2.30 (m, 6H, 17^2-CH_2 + 17^1-CH_2 + CONHCHCH_2), 2.02 (d, 3H, J = 6.8 Hz, 3^2-CH_3), 1.76 (d, 3H, J = 7.6 Hz, 18-CH_3), 1.63 (t, 3H, J = 7.3 Hz, 8^2-CH_3), 0.82–0.93 (m, 5H, 3^1-$OCH_2CH_2CH_3$), −1.98 (s, 1H, NH); MS (ESI$^+$) m/z: 710.56 [M+H]$^+$ (100%); Anal. Calcd. for $C_{40}H_{47}N_5O_7$: C 67.68, H 6.67, N 9.87; Found: C 67.89, H 6.61, N 9.92.

N-(3-Devinyl-3-(1-pentyloxy)ethylpyropheophorbide-*a*-17^3-acyl)-L-aspartic acid (**4c**): Yield 60.1%, mp > 300 °C; ^{1}H NMR (300 MHz, DMSO-d_6): δ 9.80 (splitted s, 1H, 10-H), 9.75 (s, 1H, 5-H), 8.83 (s, 1H, 20-H), 7.95 (m, 1H, CONH), 5.98 (q, 1H, J = 6.8 Hz, 3^1-H),



Scheme 1. Synthetic route for the titled compounds **4a**–**4j**. Reagents and conditions: (a) *cond.* aqueous HCl–Et_2O, 0–5 °C, 30 min; (b) HOAc, reflux, 4 h; (c) 33% HBr–HOAc, 24 h; (d) alcohol, CH_2Cl_2, K_2CO_3, 2 h; Alcohol donors: R = CH_3 (**3a**), *n*-C_3H_7 (**3b**), *n*-C_5H_{11} (**3c**), *n*-C_6H_{13} (**3d**), *n*-C_8H_{17} (**3e**); (e) L-Asp(OBu^t)$_2$ or L-Glu(OBu^t)$_2$, EDCI, HOBt, DIPEA, CH_2Cl_2, r.t., 12 h; (f) CH_2Cl_2–TFA (1:1), r.t., 2 h. Alcohol donors and amino acid residues: m = 1 and R = CH_3 (**4a**), *n*-C_3H_7 (**4b**), *n*-C_5H_{11} (**4c**), n-C_6H_{13} (**4d**), *n*-C_8H_{17} (**4e**); m = 2 and R = CH_3 (**4f**), *n*-C_3H_7 (**4g**), *n*-C_5H_{11} (**4h**), *n*-C_6H_{13} (**4i**), *n*-C_8H_{17} (**4j**).