Tetrahedron Letters 57 (2016) 2660–2663

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Tetrahedron Letters

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

A mild and selective protecting and reversed modification of thiols

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 9 April 2016
Revised 5 May 2016
Accepted 9 May 2016
Available online 9 May 2016

Keywords:
Thiols
Bromomaleimide
Protecting
Deprotecting
Selective

ABSTRACT

One selective thiol-protecting study has been investigated for a wide range of thiols including general thiols and thiols containing multiple functional groups. The reactions of bromomaleimides and thiols under the mild condition afforded the protected products in excellent yields. The thiols can be recovered very quickly using dithiothreitol (DTT) under the mild condition.

Thiols are the most important nucleophilic residues for studying peptides and proteins in chemical biology.[1] Synthesis of thiol-containing biomolecules is an important, yet challenging work which usually was puzzled by the formation of disulfide bond and unexpected acetylation or alkylation.[2,3] In the past few decades, selective chemical modification, fluorescent labeling, and detection of thiols in proteins is widely used in a range of fundamental biological and biophysical studies.[4] Significant research efforts have been realized that the optical probes for various biological thiols to achieve high sensitivity, low cost, and ease of detection have been developed.[4] Meanwhile, identification of reagents that enable blocking or labeling of protein thiols with high selectivity and conversion yields has attracted great attention.[5] Common thiol-protecting groups such as thioethers (trityl, benzyls, and *t*-butyl),[6] thioesters,[7] and disulfides[8] have limited scope of applications due to either unsatisfactory stability profiles or the harsh deprotecting conditions. The acetamidomethyl (Acm) protecting group developed by Hirschmann and co-workers has been shown to be useful in the synthesis of peptides.[9] Unfortunately, the reagents could be dimmed by the use of toxic heavy metals in deprotection process. For the purpose of protecting Cys side chain in peptides and proteins, Liu and co-workers developed a thiol protecting group called Hqm group.[10] It's a good-quality protecting group, however, several synthetic steps were required for synthesis and protecting processes. In order to protect the thiols in peptide condensation reactions, phenacyl and *N*-methylphenacyloxycarbamidomethyl were developed to improve thioether-based thiol-protecting groups by Hojo and co-workers.[11] Nevertheless, the carbonyl of these protecting groups may react with amino residues of peptides, which need to be protected before the thiol-protecting process. Other protecting groups such as *p*-toluenesulfonylacetylene[12] and quinolone[13] have limited utilization due to the instability in the presence of amino or the high protecting temperature.

Maleimides have been proved to be one of the most widely used reactive motifs for cysteine modification.[1] Bromomaleimides, developed by Baker and co-workers, react rapidly with protected cysteine to afford thiomaleimides.[14] Recently, bromomaleimides have been successfully applied in the synthesis of polymers,[15] protein labeling,[16] and peptide platforms[17] with protected cysteines. All cysteines used in these methods were protected cysteines. To the best of our knowledge, the efficient protecting and reversed modification of general thiols or thiols with active functional groups has not been studied. Herein, we wish to focus on bromomaleimides as selective thiol-protecting reagents to a wide range of thiols. Furthermore, DTT has been applied to an efficient deprotecting reagent of protected thiols under the mild condition.

The protecting group bromo-*N*-R-maleimide **1** could be easily synthesized from the corresponding *N*-R-maleimides in two steps.[18] In the initial experiment, bromo-*N*-methylmaleimide **1a**

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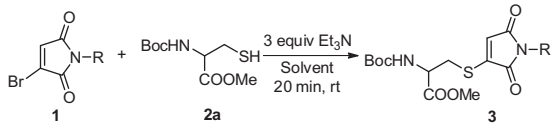
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tetlet.2016.05.027
0040-4039/

Table 1
Optimization of reaction conditions[a]



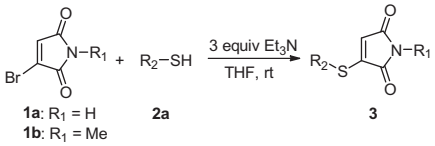
Entry	R	Solvent	Yield[b] (%)
1	Me	THF	99
2	Me	MeOH	96
3	Me	Toluene	93
4	Me	CH_2Cl_2	95
5[c]	Me	H2O	91
6	H	THF	97
7	Et	THF	92
8	Ph	THF	83
9	Bn	THF	77

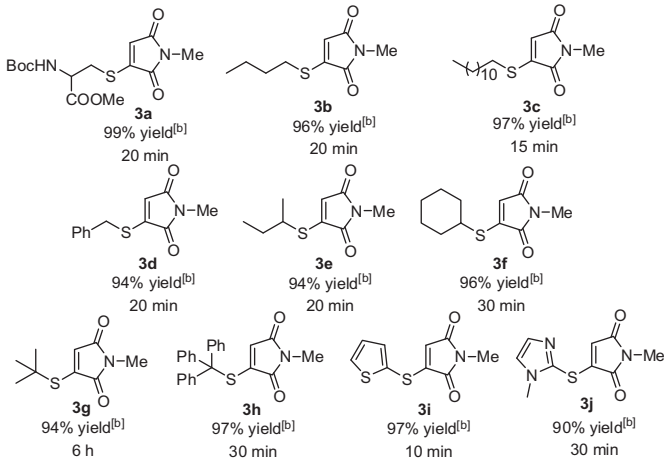
[a] Reaction condition: to a solution of **2a** (61.8 mg, 0.263 mmol) in solvents (5 mL) was added Et_3N (0.789 mmol) and **1** (0.263 mmol) and the resulting mixture was stirred for 20 min at rt.
[b] Isolated yields.
[c] 0.5 mL DMF as base and 4.5 mL H_2O was used.

and commercially available *N*-Boc-Cys-OMe **2a** were tested in the model reaction (Table 1). Treatment of **2a** (0.263 mmol) and **1a** (0.263 mmol) with 3 equiv of Et_3N in THF (5 mL) resulted in a rapid and complete reaction in 20 min with excellent yields (99%, Table 1, entry 1). Different solvents and bases were tested for the reactions. The reactions in other solvents, such as MeOH, toluene, CH_2Cl_2, and water, also gave the products in excellent yields (>93%) within 20 min (Table 1, entries 2–4). To our delight, it was convinced that the protecting process was easy to implement at room temperature, which even took place in water as solvent and DMF as base (Table 1, entry 5). Other organic or inorganic bases, such as DMAP, DIPEA and $NaHCO_3$ were also suitable for this reaction. On the basis of these exploratory studies, we probed various bromomaleimides derived thiol-protecting groups with *N*-Boc-Cys-OMe under the treatment of Et_3N in THF. It was found that the reactions with small protecting groups, such as H, Me and Et, took place very quickly to give the products in high yields (Table 1, entries 1, 6 and 7). In contrast, the bromomaleimide with bigger substitutes, such as bromo-*N*-phenylmaleimide **1d** and bromo-*N*-benzylmaleimide **1e**, afforded the corresponding products in lower yields (Table 1, entries 8 and 9). Longer reaction time could not raise the reaction yields. We envisioned that both steric and electronic effects of substituents account for the yield differences. Based on the above results, the optimized reaction condition was found: THF as solvent, Et_3N as base, bromo-*N*-methylmaleimide **1a** or bromomaleimide **1b** as the protecting reactants.

With the optimal reaction condition in hand, we turned our attention to probing the scope of different thiols (Table 2). Satisfactorily, almost all reactions finished within half an hour to give the protected products in excellent yields (Table 2). Linear thiols reacted smoothly and finished in 20 min to afford the products in excellent yields (**3b**–**3d**). Branched isobutylthiol had similar reactivity as linear thiols (**3e**). Steric effect had great effect on this reaction. Bulky cyclohexanethiol gave high yields while longer reaction time was needed (**3f**). More bulky *t*-butylthiol needed 6 h to finish the reaction (**3g**). Interestingly, triphenylmethylthiol reacted much faster than *t*-butylthiol under the same reaction condition even though its steric effect was greater than *t*-butylthiol (**3h**, 30 min). The heterocyclicthiols, such as thiophene-2-thiol and 1-methyl-1*H*-imidazole-2-thiol, afforded the corresponding products with high yields (**3i**–**3j**).

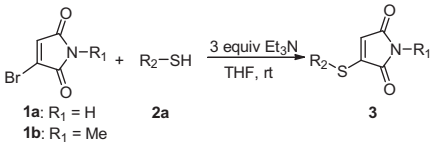
Table 2
Thiol-protecting reactions for general thiols[a]

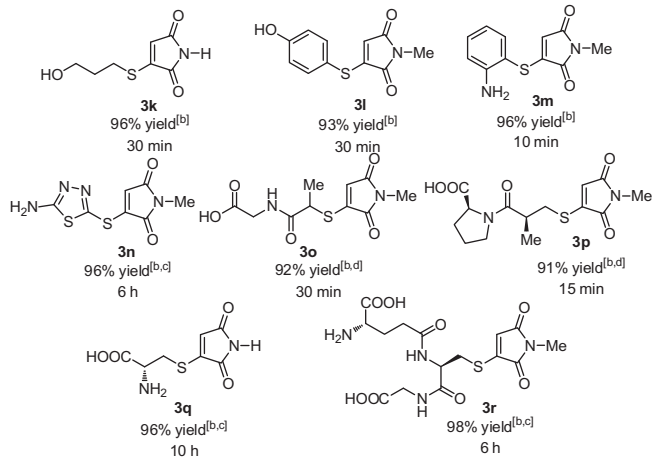




[a] Reaction condition: To a solution of **2** (0.263 mmol) in THF (5 mL) was added Et_3N (0.789 mmol) and **1** (0.263 mmol) and the mixture was stirred for the indicated time at rt.
[b] Isolated yields.

Table 3
Thiol-protecting reactions for thiols with functional groups[a]





[a] Reaction condition: To a solution of **2** (0.263 mmol) in THF (5 mL) was added Et_3N (0.789 mmol) and **1** (0.263 mmol) and the mixture was stirred for the indicated time at rt.
[b] Isolated yields.
[c] H_2O was used as solvent without the addition of Et_3N.
[d] $NaHSO_4$ (2.63 mmol) and anhydrous $MgSO_4$ (1 g) was added into the mixture.