Catalysis Communications 106 (2018) 92–95

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Catalysis Communications

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

Short communication

Ruthenium complexes of the general formula $[RuCl_2(PHOX)_2]$ as precatalysts in propargylic substitution reactions

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Propargylic substitution reactions
Homogeneous catalysis
Ruthenium phosphinooxazoline complexes
Nucleophiles

ABSTRACT

After activation by chloride abstraction utilizing NaBArF as an activator (BArF = tetrakis(3,5-bis(trifluoromethyl)phenyl)borate), a complex of the general formula $[RuCl_2(PHOX)_2]$ was utilized as a catalyst in propargylic substitution reactions, where PHOX is a phosphinooxazoline ligand. Oxygen and nitrogen-centered nucleophiles could be employed in the substitution of a propargylic acetate to obtain the corresponding propargylic substitution products in 87% to 9% isolated yields (45 °C, 16 h reaction time, toluene solvent, 1–2 mol% catalyst loading, 1–2 mol% activator).

1. Introduction

Propargylic alcohols are valuable starting materials in the synthesis of complex organic molecules such as pharmaceuticals or natural products [1–3]. They are easily accessible on small and large scales [4], and enantioselective syntheses of propargylic alcohols are known [5,6]. Propargylic alcohols have a complex reaction landscape and can rearrange [7], thus allowing a plethora of derivatizations to occur with the potential for a quick increase of molecular complexity. The versatility of propargylic alcohols can lead to multiple products from given starting materials [8]. As a consequence, the transformations of propargylic alcohols are in many cases catalyzed by transition metals to reduce the number of side products [9].

Among a number of transition metal complexes [10–13], ruthenium complexes [14,15] are widely employed to catalyze propargylic substitution reactions of the OH group by a nucleophile. Ruthenium complexes are known to form allenylidene complexes from propargylic alcohols [16], and these species can potentially function as intermediates for the substitution of the OH group of propargylic alcohols by nucleophiles [1–3]. Consequently, ruthenium-catalyzed transformations of propargylic alcohols have been intensively investigated by us [17–20] and others [1,3,14,15,21], and have resulted in a variety of catalyst systems for the transformation.

However, a drawback of some catalyst systems is that they require higher reaction temperatures than 60 °C [17,19]. These high reaction temperatures are undesired, not only due to the energy demand but the difficulties in achieving enantiomeric excesses and in addition to increasing the number of potential side reactions which lower the overall yields. Despite optimization efforts, catalyst systems investigated in our research group did not result in lower reaction temperatures where temperatures as high as 75 to 90 °C were required for the reactions of terminal propargylic alcohols to proceed within reasonable time frames [17,19]. We recently published a number of ruthenium complexes of the general formula $[RuCl_2(PHOX)_2]$, where PHOX refers to bidentate phosphino oxazoline ligands [22]. Two examples are shown in Fig. 1. These complexes did not show catalytic activity in the activation of propargylic alcohols, but after chloride abstraction with $AgSbF_6$, they were catalytically active in the Mukaiyama aldol reaction. The ruthenium complex with R = Me, which was used for this study, will subsequently be referred to as $[RuCl_2(PHOX)_2]$.

It appeared to us that the modification of the mono-nuclear ruthenium complexes did not result in catalyst systems that would perform propargylic substitution reactions at lower temperatures. To achieve this goal and to support the principle that ruthenium complexes should be able to activate propargyl units at lower temperatures, we investigated whether propargylic acetates could be employed in the title reaction. We found that, after activation by chloride abstraction, the complex $[RuCl_2(PHOX)_2]$ is catalytically active for propargylic substitution reactions of a propargylic acetate employing oxygen- and nitrogen-centered nucleophiles.

2. Experimental

Experimental details and characterization data are given in the Supplementary information.

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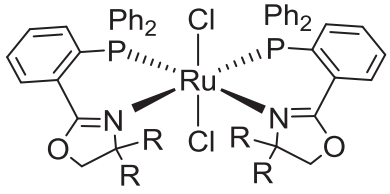
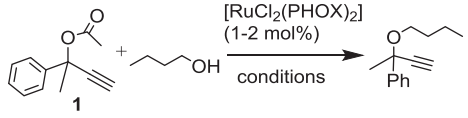
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.catcom.2017.12.014
Received 2 December 2017; Received in revised form 22 December 2017; Accepted 22 December 2017
Available online 24 December 2017



$[RuCl_2(PHOX)_2]$
R = H, Me

Fig. 1. Ruthenium PHOX complexes.

Table 1
Screening reactions.



Entry[a]	Conditions	Yield (%)[b]
1	$ClCH_2CH_2Cl$, NaBArF, 45 °C, 16 h	100
2	CH_2Cl_2, NaBArF, 45 °C, 16 h	67
3	THF, NaBArF, 45 °C, 16 h	69
4	*n*-BuOH, NaBArF, 45 °C, 16 h	0
5	toluene, NaBArF, 45 °C, 16 h	100
6	$NaPF_6$, toluene, 45 °C, 16 h	0
7	$NaBF_4$, toluene, 45 °C, 16 h	0
8	NH_4PF_6, toluene, 45 °C, 16 h	0
9	NaBArF, no catalyst, 45 °C, 16 h	0

[a] Reaction conditions: propargylic acetate (**1**, 0.250 mmol), alcohol nucleophile (1 mmol), 2 mol% catalyst, 2 mol% activator, solvent (0.5 mL).
[b] Determined by GC.

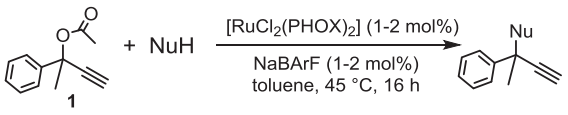
3. Results and discussion

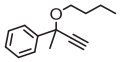
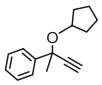
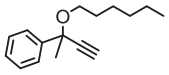
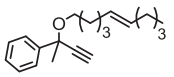
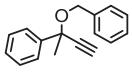
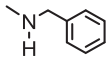
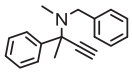
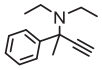
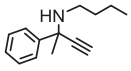
As mentioned, the complex $[RuCl_2(PHOX)_2]$ itself did not show catalytic activity in the activation of propargylic acetates, presumably due to the fact that it does not contain open coordination sites. However, we observed catalytic activity in the test reaction between the known [23] propargylic acetate **1** and *n*-BuOH when the complex was activated by chloride abstraction (Table 1).

Initial screening of the catalyst system, utilizing the test reaction in Table 1, revealed that the yield strongly depended on the solvent and the activator utilized. As can be seen in Table 1, CH_2Cl_2 and THF were not efficient solvents, whereas in $ClCH_2CH_2Cl$, complete conversion of the acetate starting material to the product was observed by GC. However, in order to avoid chlorinated solvents, we utilized toluene, which worked equally well. Pure *n*-BuOH as the solvent (and the nucleophile) shut down the reaction completely (entry 4); presumably, the strongly coordinating *n*-BuOH permanently occupies open coordination sites on the ruthenium complex when utilized as a solvent. Some sodium and ammonium salts turned out to be inefficient as activators (entries 6–8), which we tentatively ascribed to the lower solubility of the salts in non-polar solvents. We found that NaBArF (BArF = tetrakis (3,5-bis(trifluoromethyl)phenyl)borate) is the most efficient activator [24]. The activator itself did not catalyze the reaction (entry 9). We also optimized the reaction temperature; the reaction was very slow at room temperature, but at 45 °C, the reaction in Table 1 went to completion after 16 h. Analysis of the reaction mixtures by GC revealed that only small amounts of side products had formed; only starting materials and/or products were observed after reaction.

Under optimized reaction conditions (45 °C, 16 h reaction time, toluene solvent, NaBArF activator), we then employed a number of propargylic alcohol nucleophiles in the etherification of propargylic acetate **1** (Table 2) utilizing a number of alcohols as the nucleophiles.

Table 2
Isolated yields.



Entry[a]	NuH	Product	Yield (%)[b]
1	CH_3OH		77
2	EtOH		83
3	*i*-PrOH		68
4[c]	*n*-BuOH		87
5[c]	*sec*-BuOH		73[d]
6			80
7	Cyclopentanol		74
8[c]	*n*-Hexanol		77
9	(*E*)-dec-5-en-1-ol		77
10	$PhCH_2OH$		74
11[e,f]			45
12[c,e]	$HNEt_2$		9
13[c,e]	H_2NBu		13

[a] Isolated yields.
[b] General conditions: Propargylic acetate (0.25 or 0.5 mmol) and nucleophile (1 or 2 mmol) in toluene (0.5 or 1 mL) catalyzed by $[RuCl_2(PHOX)_2]$ (2 mol%) and NaBArF activator (2 mol%) at 45 °C for 16 h. The products were isolated utilizing preparative column chromatography.
[c] 1 mol% catalyst load.
[d] Isolated as a 1:1 mixture of diastereomers, as determined by NMR.
[e] General conditions: Propargylic acetate (0.53 mmol), nucleophile (2.1 mmol) and Cs_2CO_3 (1.1 mmol) in toluene (1 mL) catalyzed by $[RuCl_2(PHOX)_2]$ (1,5 mol%) and NaBArF activator (1.5 mol%) at 45 °C for 16 h. The products were isolated utilizing preparative column chromatography.
[f] 3 mol% catalyst load.

As can be seen from the table, the propargylic ethers were isolated in 87 to 68% isolated yields (entries 1 to 10). Experimental details and spectroscopic characterization data are listed in the supporting information. Primary and secondary alcohols could be employed as the nucleophiles and unsaturated alcohols worked as well (entries 6 and 9).

Overall, the reaction worked at lower reaction temperatures compared to other catalyst systems reported by us [17,19] and others [25], where propargylic alcohols were employed as starting materials. As established by GC, the propargylic acetate starting material was