Cα–H Oxidations of Amines to Amides: Expanding Mechanistic Understanding and Amine Scope through Catalyst Development

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Abstract This highlight provides a general overview of Cα–H oxidations of amines to form amides. Initial as well as recent examples are reviewed with a particular focus on existing challenges regarding substrate scope and reaction conditions. Finally, one very recently established catalyst system is described in detail which achieves the iron-catalyzed, Cα–H oxidation of amines under mild conditions.

1 Introduction

Amide substructures can be found in a wide variety of chemical target compounds, such as pharmaceuticals, natural products, and materials (e.g., in nylon) that are critical to our society. Although many well-established synthetic methodologies exist that afford amides,1 the majority of these protocols suffer from shortcomings such as low atom economies, harsh conditions, and the generation of stoichiometric amounts of chemical waste. These deficiencies have not gone unnoticed in the pharmaceutical industry, which heavily relies on amide syntheses. Thus, several of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies participating in the ACS Green Chemistry Roundtable have called for research to discover more efficient — preferably catalytic — methodologies for amide formations and define it as one of the most important and challenging problems in the industry.2

As an alternative to classical coupling reactions, transition-metal-catalyzed C–H oxidations have recently been employed for the synthesis of amides. This approach is highly attractive due to the inherently high atom economies that are possible (Scheme 1) when employing sustainable oxidants (e.g., O2 or air).

-Marion H. Emmert received her PhD from the University of Münster (Germany) working with Gerhard Erker on model compounds for zirconium-based polymerization catalysts. Following postdoctoral work at the University of Michigan with Melanie Sanford as a DFG (German Research Foundation) and NSF CCI CENTC postdoctoral fellow, she joined the faculty at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in 2011 as assistant professor of chemistry, with joint appointments in Materials and Chemical Engineering since 2012. Her research interests focus on the development of sustainable reactions and processes. Current projects include nondirected C–H functionalizations, aerobic oxidations at low oxygen concentrations, catalyst development for biomass deconstruction, and recovery processes for rare-earth materials.

Scheme 1 Transition metal (TM)-catalyzed Cα–H oxidation of amines to form amides
2 First C–H Oxygenations

Methodologies for transition-metal-catalyzed, high-yielding Cα–H oxidations of amines were first reported by Murahashi and coworkers.3,4 These systems typically utilize ruthenium catalysts to achieve methyl Cα–H oxidation and are effective at oxidizing aniline derivatives (Scheme 2,A). In the same year (Scheme 2,B), a ruthenium-catalyzed oxidation of tert-butoxycarbonyl (Boc)-protected primary amines was reported (Scheme 2,B).5 Although these early examples did not result in direct amide formation, they pioneer new procedures for amine Cα–H oxidation and established that it is feasible to oxidatively install C–O bonds in these positions.

An even earlier example of the Cα–H oxidation of amines has been reported using the Gif IV oxidation system (FeCl3, Zn, pyridine, O2) and achieves formation of amides.6 However, in contrast to the Murahashi system, the obtained yields are very low (<15%) and the oxidations do not proceed chemoselectively, providing side products of methylene oxygenation.

3 State of the Art: Oxidations of Primary, Secondary, Cyclic, Benzylic, and Aromatic Amines

In more recent years, significant progress has been made in an effort to establish efficient, transition-metal-catalyzed amide syntheses; however, many of the known methodologies have significant limitations. Examples for this are the use of expensive transition-metal catalysts based on ruthenium7–9 or gold.10 For example, RuCl3 has been employed in the Cα–H oxidation of glycine residues for peptide backbone modification (Scheme 3).7 This methodology affords high amide yields, but only one substrate type can be oxidized. Other protocols use supported, heterogeneous catalysts [Ru(OH)x/Al2O3; Scheme 4]8 or a pincer-type ruthenium catalyst 1 (Scheme 5).9 Although more versatile than RuCl3-catalyzed reactions, these methodologies also suffer from relatively narrow substrate scopes (primary aryl amines and secondary cyclic amines, respectively). Lastly, both systems require high temperatures.

Generally, gold-catalyzed amine Cα–H oxidations require lower temperatures, but even these protocols are limited by their ability to oxidize only cyclic secondary amines (Scheme 6).10,11 Furthermore, these methodologies employ heterogeneous catalysts whose rational optimization based on mechanistic studies is more challenging than in homoge-
neous systems. Lastly, industrial applications of costly gold catalysts seem even more unlikely than the use of ruthenium-based systems.

As a major improvement towards the use of more earth-abundant catalysts, manganese oxide octahedral molecular sieves (OMS-2) have been reported to oxidize Cα–H bonds of primary benzylic amines aerobically (Scheme 7). However, like many other examples of amide formation via transition-metal-catalyzed amine Cα–H oxidation, this protocol requires high temperatures, and lacks substrate versatility. Moreover, due to the heterogeneous nature of the used catalysts, improvements based on mechanistic understanding of catalytic pathways are challenging.

Other methodologies utilize copper catalysts to achieve amide formations via Cα–H oxidation as shown in Scheme 8, and Scheme 9. Although these methodologies utilize copper – a far cheaper alternative to ruthenium or gold – and molecular oxygen as oxidant (a mild alternative to more harsh chemical oxidants such as t-BuOOH), both protocols suffer from high reaction temperatures, a narrow substrate scope (benzylic primary or cyclic tertiary amines) and a lack of mechanistic understanding. The latter, Cul-catalyzed methodology produces a variety of different oxidation products, suggesting that the chemoselectivity is difficult to control under the established conditions.

Based on the described state-of-the-art examples, we conclude that relatively few methodologies for efficient Cα–H oxidation of amines to form amides are known. Typical drawbacks are mostly associated with high reaction temperatures, lack of chemoselectivity, limited substrate scopes (primary, secondary, or cyclic tertiary amines), often low yields, and a lack of mechanistic information.

4 General Iron-Catalyzed C–H Oxidations under Mild Conditions

Thus, research in our group has been aimed at addressing these shortcomings to develop a versatile and mild methodology for oxidative amide synthesis. Using an iron catalyst, our work has achieved general Cα–H oxidations of acyclic tertiary amines to afford amides in synthetically useful yields (Scheme 10). In addition to expanding the substrate scope of catalyzed amine oxidation protocols, our system uses an iron-based system as a cheap and relatively nontoxic catalyst and temperatures well below 100 °C, which increases the overall sustainability of the reaction. Additionally, we have demonstrated our system’s ability to oxidize the pharmaceutical drug lidocaine (3), which showcases the versatility of the new protocol (Scheme 11).
the reaction mixture had to be optimized for each substrate independently in order to achieve the reported yields. Furthermore, exclusion of water from the reaction afforded no trace of amide products even under aerobic conditions. A study using 18O-labeled water suggested that the source of the newly introduced O atom in the amide products is H2O and not the oxidant (Scheme 12). In contrast, a background study exposing the independently synthesized amide product to H218O did not result in significant 18O incorporation.

We hypothesized that the addition of CN– as nucleophile to the developed system would analogously trap a potential iminium intermediate and enable Cα–CN bond formations with tertiary amine substrate. Thus, KCN was added to the reaction mixture, which resulted in traces of the desired α-amino nitrile. However, in the presence of 18-crown-6 to increase the solubility of KCN, Cα–H cyanation of dimethylaniline was observed in high yield (Scheme 14). In addition to expanding the versatility of the established catalytic system, this result suggests that different nucleophiles can react with a common reaction intermediate and further supports our hypothesis that iminium ions are accessible under the reaction conditions.

Finally, the proposed mechanism suggests that dealkylated amines should be accessible through decomposition of hemiaminal intermediates. This is a particularly relevant reaction when considering that Cα–H oxidation of amines to amides and oxidative dealkylation are both reactions that are often observed in the metabolism of drugs, which is catalyzed by cytochrome P450 and other enzymes. Therefore, establishing a general methodology to synthetically access oxidative metabolites of amines is an important challenge for the pharmaceutical chemistry community.

The proposed iminium ion intermediate would be a highly useful synthetic intermediate, as its reaction with a variety of different nucleophiles could be imagined. Indeed, several methodologies in the literature are known that realize such amine Cα–H functionalizations to form new Cα-alkyl, Cα-alkynyl, Cα-Ar, Cα-Ac, and Cα-CN bonds.
centration of the reaction mixture (Scheme 15). Remarkably, product selectivity behaves as predicted, forming dialkylamine more selectively with rising H2O concentrations.

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, catalytic systems that enable Cα–H oxidations of amines provide a versatile platform for functionalizing the Cα–H bonds in amine substructures. Many advancements have been made in recent years to improve catalytic efficiencies, understand catalytic mechanisms, increase yields, and enable milder reaction conditions. Thus, newly designed protocols, including the herein highlighted iron-catalyzed system, allow for broadly applicable functionalizations of Cα–H bonds mimicking oxidative, enzyme-catalyzed transformations such as the ones found in metabolic pathways. In order to further broaden the scope of these reactions, a thorough understanding of the nature of the used transition-metal catalysts would be highly desirable, in particular, since changes in the ligand framework of the catalysts can be expected to modulate and control reactivity achieved with these systems. Major challenges that can be addressed through such catalyst design approaches would be the typically low yields achieved with sterically bulky amines, site selectivity of Cα–H oxidation for nonsymmetric amines, and the application of these catalytic systems in complex molecule settings.

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References and Notes

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