Recent Developments in the Biosynthesis of the Tropane Alkaloids

Edward Leete

1 Presented in part at the 37th Annual Congress of the Gesellschaft für Arzneipflanzenforschung, September 5–9, 1989, Braunschweig, FRG
2 Natural Products Laboratory, Department of Chemistry, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455, U.S.A.

Received: August 28, 1989

Abstract

Recent work on the biosynthesis of the tropane moiety of cocaine, hyoscamine, scopolamine, and related alkaloids is reviewed. Revision of the generally accepted biosynthetic pathway to these alkaloids is now proposed in the light of new discoveries. New information on the biosynthesis of some of the acid moieties (benzoic, tiglic and tropic acid) of the tropane ester alkaloids is also discussed.

Key words

Biosynthesis, tropane alkaloids, cocaine, hyoscyamine, scopolamine, tropane ester alkaloids.

Introduction

There are currently about 10,000 alkaloids of known structure (1). Over the last 40 years much has been learned about the biosynthesis of this group of secondary natural products. They arise from a relatively small number of organic compounds which are found in almost all living systems (acetic acid, anthranilic acid, arginine, lysine, mevalonic acid, nicotinic acid, ornithine, phenylalanine, tryptophan, and tyrosine). Fig. 1 illustrates, in abbreviated form, the metabolic relationship of alkaloids to these precursors. Unlike some classes of natural products, such as the terpenes, alkaloids are formed by many diverse biosynthetic routes.

Once the biosynthetic route to a certain alkaloid has been elucidated it is tempting to generalize this result to include other alkaloids of the same class. Thus it is now considered that most indole alkaloids containing a monoterpenic residue are modifications of strictosidine (3) derived from tryptamine (1) and secologamin (2), as illustrated in Fig. 2 (2, 3), even though experimental biosynthetic work has been carried out on only a small fraction of the known monoterpenic indole alkaloids. However there can be variations in the way in which an alkaloid skeleton is assembled. This is true of the tropane alkaloids and the recent modifications to the generally accepted biosynthesis of this ring system will be discussed in this article. Several significant discoveries have been made since our last review on this subject (4). Some of these advances have been recorded recently in accounts of the chemistry and biochemistry of the tropane alkaloids (5–7).

Structural Variations in the Tropane Alkaloids

By definition, the bicyclic heterocyclic compound 8-azabicyclo[3.2.1]octane (4) is present in all the tropane alkaloids. Tropane (5) is its 8-methyl derivative. The six-membered piperidine ring is usually depicted in the chair form (as in 6), however in some of its reactions it adopts the boat conformation (as in 7). Over 150 (7) alkaloids are known which contain the bicyclic ring system 4. Some of these alkaloids are depicted in Fig. 3. The absolute configuration of the more common alkaloids has been elucidated and the chirality, using the (R), (S) symbolism, is indicated on the structural formulas. The numbering of the tropane nucleus in hyoscyamine will be used for all the tropane alkaloids so that their biosynthetic relationship can be more easily understood. According to IUPAC rules, scopolamine should be numbered with the (R)-bridgehead carbon as C-1 (R having a higher priority than S in such a symmetrical molecule). The majority of the tropane alkaloids are esters of hydroxytropanes with a wide variety of carboxylic acids (7), some of which are unique to this class of alkaloid [e.g. (S)-tropic acid]. Others, such as cinnamic acid and benzoic acid, are more widespread in nature and are found in other types of natural products.

Biosynthesis of the 1-Methyl-Δ1-
pyrrolinium Salt

All the experimental evidence is consistent with the 1-methyl-Δ1-pyrrolinium salt (30) being a precursor of the tropane nucleus. The various biosynthetic routes which have been established for its formation are summarized in Fig. 4. Initially it was thought that the double bond in the iminium salt could isomerize between its C-2 and C-5 positions, which would result in the scrambling of any isotopic label (e.g. 14C) which might be present at either of these positions. However this was shown not to occur in either acidic or basic media (8). Deprotonation of 30 affords...
Fig. 1 Biosynthetic relationships of natural products.

Fig. 2 The first step in the biosynthesis of the mono-terpene indole alkaloids.

Fig. 3 Structural features of some tropane alkaloids.
Recent Developments in the Biosynthesis of the Tropane Alkaloids

1-methyl-\(\Delta^2\)-pyrroline (31) which is in equilibrium with 30. The iminium salt 30 is also a precursor of the N-methylpyrrolidine rings of nicotine (32) (8, 9), hygrine (33) (10, 11), and cuscohygrine (34) (12) as well as hyoscyamine and other tropane alkaloids. The iminium salt is formed by the cyclization of 4-methylaminobutanal (26) via the carbinolamine, 2-hydroxy-1-methylpyrrolidine (29). 1-Methyl-2-pyrrolidinone (28) has been detected in Atropa belladonna (13, 14) and is plausibly formed by oxidation of the carbinolamine. 1-Methylpyrrolidine (35) which is a minor alkaloid of Atropa belladonna (15) and tobacco (16) is presumably formed by the reduction of the iminium salt 30. Labeled 4-methylaminobutanal was detected in Datura stramonium plants which had been fed [2-\(^{14}\)C]ornithine (9).

4-Methylaminobutanal is formed by the oxidation of N-methylputrescine and the enzyme which catalyzes this oxidation has been isolated from Nicotiana tabacum (17–21), Datura stramonium (20), and Hyoscyamus niger (22). The enzyme, N-methylputrescine oxidase, isolated from tobacco roots, was not specific for N-methylputrescine. Other diamines such as putrescine and cadaverine (1,5-diaminopentane) were oxidized to 4-aminobutanal and 5-aminopentanal, respectively.

The stereochemistry of the oxidation of N-methylputrescine has been studied in Nicotiana tabacum (23) and it was established that it is the pro-S hydrogen which is lost from the carbon carrying the primary amino...
group, during its oxidation to the aldehyde. This result was deduced by using \([1R-2H] \text{putrescine (36)}\), as a substrate. The location of deuterium in the ultimate nicotine was determined by \(^2\text{H}-\text{NMR spectroscopy.} \) \(N\)-Methylputrescine has been established as a direct precursor of the iminium salt and the alkaloids derived from it (24–26). As expected, it is incorporated unsymmetrically into the ultimate alkaloids. For example, \([1,^{13}\text{C}, ^{14}\text{C}, 1-^{15}\text{N}] \text{-N-methylputrescine (37)}\) afforded nicotine which was labeled solely at its C-5' position with \(^{13}\text{C}\) and \(^{14}\text{C}\) and with \(^{15}\text{N}\) on its pyrrolidine nitrogen. This same precursor was incorporated unsymmetrically into the tropane moiety of scopolamine in \(Datura innoxia\) (24). However, the method used to determine the location of the \(^{13}\text{C}\) (NMR spectroscopy) did not establish whether the \(^{13}\text{C}\) was at C-1 or C-5. Another established source of \(N\)-methylputrescine is \(\delta-N\)-methylornithine (21). However, the status of this methylated amino acid as an authentic natural product is in doubt. It was found that the administration of \([2-^{14}\text{C}, N\text{-methyl-}^{14}\text{C}] \text{-} \delta-N\text{-methylornithine to} \ Datura stramonium\) plants (by hydroponics) afforded radioactive hyoscyamine which was labeled at its C-1 and N-methyl positions (the ratio of activity at these two positions was the same as the ratio of the analogous positions in the \(\delta-N\)-methylornithine (27).

However for several reasons, to be discussed, I now consider that this formation of \(N\)-methylputrescine by decarboxylation of \(\delta-N\)-methylornithine is an aberrant biosynthetic reaction. It is proposed that a non-specific \(\alpha\)-amino acid decarboxylase catalyzes this reaction. This is definitely the case in \(Nicotiana\) species (28) since the nicotine derived from the \([2-^{14}\text{C}, N\text{-methyl-}^{14}\text{C}] \text{-} \delta-N\text{-methylornithine was labeled only at its C-2' and N-methyl positions, (Fig. 6). This result is inconsistent with feedings of unsymmetrically labeled ornithine to tobacco. In all cases the pyrrolidine ring of nicotine was labeled symmetrically (29). These results indicate that unsymmetrically labeled ornithine such as \([2-^{14}\text{C}]\text{ornithine is decarboxylated to putrescine prior to} \ N\text{-methylation. Attempts to show the presence of} \ \delta-N\text{-methylornithine in} \ Datura \text{species have also been unsuccessful (30). It also could not be detected in labeled form when} [5-^{14}\text{C}]\text{ornithine was administered to a root culture of} \ Hyoscyamus albus\) (31).

Fig. 5. Stereochemistry of the oxidation of \(N\)-methylputrescine.

Fig. 6. The mode of incorporation of \(\delta-N\)-methylornithine into nicotine and hyoscyamine.
25 is demethylated to yield ornithine, which decarboxylates to yield putrescine. Methylation of putrescine from the C-1 pool then affords N-methylputrescine and then to nicotine via 30 as illustrated in Fig. 7. As expected from such a proposed metabolism, the ratio of $^{14}$C activity on the N-methyl group of nicotine to the activity at C-2 + C-5 is different from that in the analogous positions of the administered α-N-methylornithine. The absolute incorporation of the α-N-methylornithine into nicotine was much lower than that of its δ-isomer.

The reason for first proposing the N-methylornithines as intermediates in the biosynthesis of the tropane alkaloids, was to rationalize the unsymmetrical incorporation of DL-[2-$^{14}$C]ornithine into hyoscyamine (11), all the $^{14}$C being at the C-1 bridgehead carbon. These experiments were carried out with intact Datura stramonium plants (33, 34). The administration of [2-$^{14}$C]ornithine to a root culture of Datura stramonium also yielded hyoscyamine labeled solely at its C-1 position (35). We now suggest that the integrity of the C-2 and C-5 carbons of ornithine is maintained by the mechanism illustrated in Fig. 4. Ornithine is decarboxylated to afford a "bound-form" of putrescine (18). This bound form is then methylated to afford a bound form of N-methylputrescine (22). Pyridoxal phosphate is the coenzyme involved in the decarboxylation of α-amino acids and this could be an integral part of this bound form of putrescine as illustrated in Fig. 8. By this route, [2-$^{14}$C]ornithine affords [4-$^{14}$C]-1-methylamino-4-aminobutane. Other labeled compounds which yielded unsymmetrically labeled hyoscyamine in the indicated species were [5-$^{14}$C]proline (Datura metel root culture) (36) and sodium [1-$^{14}$C]acetate (Datura stramonium root culture) (37). The latter compound enters the Krebs cycle via acetyl coenzyme A ultimately affording [1,5-$^{14}$C]-α-ketoglutaric acid. This then affords [1,5-$^{14}$C]ornithine as illustrated in Fig. 4. The ultimate hyoscyamine is then labeled at C-5 with no activity at C-1. Radioactivity was also found in the three-carbon bridge but this was to be expected since these carbons are acetate derived.

It has recently been discovered that hyoscyamine formed in a root culture of Erythroxylum coca plants which were fed [5-$^{14}$C]ornithine was also labeled symmetrically in its pyrrolidine rings. This result is illustrated in Fig. 9.

In summary, ornithine is incorporated into the pyrrolidine rings unsymmetrically in Datura innoxia, Datura metel, and Datura stramonium. In Nicotiana, Erythroxylum coca, Duboisia leichhardtii, Hyoscyamus albus, and Nicandra physaloides, a symmetrical intermediate is involved. A considerable amount of free putrescine was isolated from root cultures of Hyoscyamus albus, along with the
polyamines, spermidine (39) and spermine (40), which are formed from putrescine and decarboxylated S-adenosyl-l-methionine as illustrated in Fig. 10 (42). Even though all the evidence precludes free putrescine as an intermediate between ornithine and the tropane alkaloids in *Datura* species, it has been found that the administration of [1,4-14C]putrescine to *Datura* plants afforded labeled tropane alkaloids (43–45). It is proposed that its incorporation is another example of an aberrant biosynthesis, entering the normal biosynthesis via the bound form of putrescine (18, Fig. 3). In the species in which free putrescine is an intermediate between ornithine and the iminium salt 30, the methylation to N-methylputrescine involves reaction with S-adenosyl-l-methionine. The enzyme which catalyzes this reaction is putrescine N-methyl transferase. It has been isolated from *Nicotiana* species (18, 46, 47), *Datura stramonium* (46), and *Hyoscyamus albus* (31). It is paradoxical that this enzyme should be found in *Datura stramonium*, when all the current evidence is against the intermediacy of free putrescine in this species. It may be that the main function of this enzyme in *Datura* is to catalyze the methylation of the bound form of putrescine.

The formation of putrescine by the decarboxylation of ornithine has been widely investigated and the enzyme which catalyzes this reaction is ornithine decarboxylase (E.C. 4.1.1.17). This enzyme had been isolated from tobacco (18, 48, 49), *Hyoscyamus albus* (31), and several other unrelated plant species (50, 51). Arginine (27) can also serve as a precursor of putrescine. Arginine decarboxylase (E.C. 4.1.1.19) catalyzes the formation of agmatine (24) which is converted to putrescine via carbamoylputrescine (20). The activity of the arginine decarboxylase in a root culture of *Hyoscyamus albus* was twice that of ornithine decarboxylase (31). DL-[2,3-3H]Arginine when fed to this root culture also resulted in labeling of putrescine, N-methylputrescine, and hyoscyamine (31). α-Difluoromethylornithine (41, Fig. 11), is a suicide inhibitor of ornithine decarboxylase (51). It was thus found that this compound reduced significantly the incorporation of label from [5-14C]ornithine into putrescine, N-methylputrescine, and hyoscyamine in *Hyoscyamus albus* roots (31). This compound also inhibited the formation of nicotine in a *Nicotiana* callus tissue (52). However the inhibition of nicotine formation was greater with α-difluoromethylarginine (42). This compound is a selective inhibitor of arginine decarboxylase, and this result suggests that the major pathway to putrescine, at least in this tobacco callus tissue, is from arginine rather than ornithine. Although it seems like a circuitous route it is possible that putrescine is
Recent Developments in the Biosynthesis of the Tropane Alkaloids

formed from ornithine by the sequence: ornithine → δ-carbamoylornithine → arginine → agmatine → carbamoylputrescine → putrescine. This route apparently operates in a root culture of *Senecio vulgar* (53). This species contains seneconine-N-oxide, a pyrrolizidine alkaloid which is derived from two molecules of putrescine. It was found that α-difluoromethylarginine completely inhibited the incorporation of radioactivity from [14C]arginine and [14C]ornithine into this alkaloid and the polyamines, spermidine and spermine which are also found in this root culture. On the other hand α-difluoromethylornithine, the inhibitor of ornithine decarboxylase, had no effect on the incorporation of [14C]arginine or [14C]ornithine into these alkaloids.

![Fig. 11 Inhibitors of ornithine and arginine decarboxylase.](image1)

**Incorporation of the 1-Methyl-Δ1-pyrrolinium Salt into the Tropane Alkaloids**

It has been shown that acetic acid is incorporated into carbons 2, 3, and 4 of the tropine moiety of hyoscyamine (54, 55) and these results were interpreted as illustrated in Fig. 12. Two molecules of acetyl coenzyme A (derived from acetic acid) condense to yield acetoacetyl coenzyme A (43). This β-keto thioester then condenses at its C-2 position with the 1-methyl-Δ1-pyrrolinium salt 30 to yield the intermediate 46. Hydrolysis of this ester then affords hygrine-1'-carboxylic acid (47). Expected facile decarboxylation of this β-keto acid then yields hygrine (50). Attempts to demonstrate an enzymatic condensation between the iminium salt 30 and acetoacetic acid or its esters, using a cell-free extract of *Duboisia leichhardtii*, were unsuccessful (56). Hygrine synthesis did indeed occur, however its formation was probably non-enzymatic, since it also occurs with denatured enzyme. A non-enzymatic reaction was also presumably involved when a *Nicotiana tabacum* root culture was incubated with acetoacetic acid or acetone-1,3-dicarboxylic acid. These compounds apparently reacted with the endogenous 1-methyl-Δ1-pyrrolinium salt present in the tobacco roots (56). Hygrine is not an alkaloid normally found in tobacco roots. The biomimetic synthesis of hygrine from the iminium salt 30 and acetonederacobic acid or ethyl acetoacetate has been studied extensively (8, 57–59). Reaction of ethyl [2-13C]acetoacetate (44, R = C2H5) with the iminium salt 30 in aqueous ethanol yielded hygrine in which all the excess 13C was located at the C-1' position of the side chain (60). Feeding experiments carried out in *Nicandra physaloides* were in agreement with this biomimetic result (61). A chemical degradation of the radioactive hygrine, obtained after feeding sodium [4-14C]acetoacetate (44, R = Na) to this species, indicated that it had all its activity at C-2' or C-3' (presumably the latter position). This result should be interpreted with caution, since the labeled hygrine could have arisen by a non-enzymatic reaction occurring in the plant.

The biosynthetic route to cocaine was initially thought to involve the intermediate 46 in which C-1 of the acetoacetate ultimately becomes C-9 of cocaine. Feeding experiments carried out in *Erythroxylum coca* with sodium [1-14C]acetate were consistent with this hypothesis (62). The bulk of the 14C was at C-3 (48%) and C-9 (38%) with smaller amounts (4%) at C-1 and C-5. The incorporation into the bridgehead carbons being in agreement with the formation of [1,5-14C]ornithine via Krebs cycle intermediates.

Labeled hygrine served as a precursor of the tropine moiety of hyoscyamine and other tropane alkaloids (10, 36, 63–65). In *Datura inoxia* the (2R)-hygrine (50, depicted in Fig. 12) was a more efficient precursor of hyoscyamine (by a factor of 5) than its (2S)-isomer (63). In this species the (2R)-hygrine was also a better precursor of other tropane alkaloids (scopolamine and 3α,β-dihydroxytropane) than the (2S)-isomer. In other species (*Atropa belladonna*, *Hyoscyamus*, and *Physalis alkekengi*) both isomers of hygrine were equally efficient precursors of the tropone skeleton. As pointed out before (4) hygrine is readily racemized in alkaline solution. The previously discussed observations on the unsymmetrical incorporation of ornithine into hyoscyamine in *Datura* species requires that the (2R)-isomer of hygrine is the precursor of the tropone nucleus. Thus the sequence from [2-14C]ornithine is → [4-14C]-N-methylputrescine → [1-14C]-1-methyl-Δ1-pyrrolinium salt → [2-14C]-1-methyl-Δ1-pyrrolinium salt → (2R)·[2-14C]hygrine → (1R)·[2-14C]tropine, as depicted in Fig. 12.

The formation of the tropone nucleus from hygrine is considered to proceed via the 5-acetonyl-1-methyl-Δ1-pyrrolinium salt (49). The final cyclization is a Mannich reaction affording tropine (52). The iminium salt 49 has not yet been isolated from plant sources. However circumstantial evidence which favors its intermediacy was the isolation of two alkaloids from *Datura inoxia*, which are apparently diastereoisomers which were assigned the structure 54, 4-(1-methyl-1-pyrrolidinyl)hygrine (66). A plausible biosynthesis of this alkaloid is illustrated in Fig. 13. Loss of a proton from the iminium salt 49 yields 53. Reaction with a molecule of 30 yields 55 which is then reduced to afford structure 54.

We (67) have achieved a biomimetic synthesis of tropinone by the oxidation of hygrine with mercuric acetate in boiling 2% acetic acid. Another compound produced in this reaction is 2,1'-dehydrohygrine (58). The mechanism is considered to proceed via the quaternary ammonium ion 56 which eliminates a proton yielding 49 or 57. These compounds then yield tropinone and the new dehydrohygrine as illustrated in Fig. 14.

The biosynthetic route to 2-methoxy carbonyl-3-tropine (51), the established precursor of cocaine (68), was formerly considered to proceed by a similar sequence of reactions. Oxidation of 46 yields the iminium salt 45 which cyclizes to the tropinone derivative 48. Conversion of the thioester to the methyl ester affords 2-methoxy carbonyl-3-tropine. However when [2-14C]-1-methyl-Δ1-pyrrolinium chloride or [1-14C], [15N]-4-methylaminobutanal diethyl acetal (this acetal is considered to undergo hydrolysis to 4-methylaminobutanal in the
Acid conditions (pH 4.6) prevailing in the leaves of the coca plant was fed to Erythroxylum coca, the resultant cocaine was labeled with $^{13}$C or $^{14}$C at its C-5 position, not the C-1 position as would be required by the hypothesis illustrated in Fig. 12 (69). This surprising result was established by $^{13}$C-NMR spectroscopy and confirmed by a chemical degradation. If acetoacetate was involved in the biosynthesis of cocaine this result would mean that a reaction had to take place between the iminium salt 30 and C-4 of the acetoacetate. This reaction has no chemical or biochemical precedence. We were thus led to propose a new biosynthetic scheme for cocaine which is illustrated in Fig. 15. It is suggested that the iminium salt 30 reacts with one molecule of acetyl coenzyme A (possibly activated by carboxylation to malonyl coenzyme A as in fatty acid biosynthesis) to yield the coenzyme A thioester of 1-methylpyrrolidine-2-acetic acid (59). Reaction with a second molecule of acetyl coenzyme A then affords the $\beta$-keto thioester 60. Oxidation then produces the iminium salt 62 which by a Mannich reaction
Recent Developments in the Biosynthesis of the Tropane Alkaloids

**Biomimetic synthesis of tropinone from hygrine.**

Fig. 14 Biomimetic synthesis of tropinone from hygrine.

Yields the tropinone derivative 48. Ester interchange produces 2-methoxycarbonyl-3-tropinone (51) which is reduced to methyl ecgonine (63) and thence to cocaine by benzylation. One piece of evidence in favor of this new biosynthetic scheme was the isolation of radioactive 1-methylpyrrolidine-2-acetic acid (61) from the Erythroxylum coca plants which had been fed [2-14C]-1-methyl-L-Pyrrolinium chloride. This 1-methylpyrrolidine-2-acetic acid had all its 14C located at the C-2 position (70) consistent with this scheme. The methyl ester of the (2S)-isomer of 61 has been isolated from the plant Solanum sturtianum (71) providing circumstantial evidence in favor of the intermediacy of 61 or its thioester in the biosynthesis of cocaine.

It remains an open question as to whether hygrine is formed by a similar biosynthetic route in species such as Datura, Hyoscyamus, or Nicandra. Mechanistically it would be quite reasonable for intermediate 60 to undergo hydrolysis to the corresponding β-keto acid which on decarboxylation would yield hygrine.

No biosynthetic work has been carried out on alkaloids such as isobellendine (13). Speculations have been made on the biosynthesis of these alkaloids (7). Based on our new knowledge of the biosynthesis of cocaine, two alternate biosynthetic routes, illustrated schematically in Fig. 16, are plausible. Route A is analogous to the old biosynthetic scheme for hygrine. In route B, the iminium salt 30 serves as a "starter unit" for a polyketide involving four acetate units. I intuitively favor the latter route.

**Reduction of Tropinone and Related Compounds**

Tropinone (52) is a key intermediate in the biosynthesis of many of the more complex tropane alkaloids. It has been found in Nicandra physaloides (72), Atropa belladonna (13), Cyphomatra betacea (73), and Crossostylis biflora (74). Reduction of tropinone affords tropine (8) or ψ-tropine (9, Fig. 3). The major tropane alkaloid hyoscyamine, is an ester of tropine with (5)-tropic acid. However many tropane alkaloids are esters of ψ-tropine and its derivatives. A recent investigation of the alkaloids of Datura innoxia (66) revealed the presence of both tropine and ψ-tropine along with various esters of both isomers. It was proposed (65) that perhaps tropine could be formed from hygrine without involving tropinone as an intermediate, as illustrated in Fig. 17. In this scheme hygrine is reduced to hygroline (64) followed by a rather implausible cyclization affording tropine (8). This hypothesis was tested by feeding [2'-14C, 2'-3H]hygroline (a mixture of four stereoisomers) to Datura innoxia plants (75). The resultant alkaloids (hyoscyamine, scopolamine, and 3α,6β-ditigloyltropan-7β-ol) were labeled with 14C but only retained about 10% of the 3H. The location of the residual tritium was not determined, but I suggest that it is at C-3 of the tropine moiety of these alkaloids. These results indicate that hygrine is not a direct precursor of tropine. Its incorporation probably proceeds by oxidation to hygrine with NAD⁵ or NADP⁶. These coenzymes will then become labeled with tritium at their C-4 positions. The [2-14C]hygrine is then incorporated into...
The administration of [N-methyl-$^{14}$C]tropinone to the roots of intact *Datura innoxia* plants growing in hydroponics, afforded labeled hyoscyamine and scopolamine, specifically labeled at their N-methyl groups (76). The reduction of tropinone has also been studied in cell-free systems (76–78). The results so far obtained are contradictory. This could be due to different sources of the tropinone-reductase. Also none of the studies have progressed to the stage where a pure enzyme can be claimed. A cell-free extract obtained from a root culture of *Datura stramonium* was dependent on NADPH as a coenzyme and the sole product obtained was tropine (78). These same authors were unable to detect this enzyme activity in a root culture of *Atropa belladonna*. Yamada and coworkers (77) obtained a cell-free system from a root culture of *Hyoscyamus niger* which in the presence of NADPH catalyzed the reduction of tropinone to $\psi$-tropine. In later work (79) Yamada reported that their system did produce some tropine (10–30%) but the major product was $\psi$-tropine. Both these research groups monitored their crude enzymes by measuring the change in UV adsorption when NADPH is oxidized to its pyridinium form (NADP$^+$). We have obtained a cell-free system from the roots of intact *Datura innoxia* plants which were grown either in hydroponics or soil in a greenhouse (76). With NADPH as a coenzyme and [N-methyl-$^{14}$C]tropinone as a substrate we also found that $\psi$-tropine was the main product, with a smaller amount of tropine. When NADH was used as a coenzyme the production of tropine was favored over $\psi$-tropine. This interesting result suggests that probably two different enzymes are involved in the reduction of tropinone, one catalyzing the formation of tropine and the other $\psi$-tropine.

In intact plants or root cultures the reduction of tropinone is not apparently reversible. [N-methyl-$^{14}$C, 3$\beta$-$^{3}$H]tropinone was fed to *Datura meteloides* for seven days. The tropine was incorporated into hyoscyamine, scopolamine, 3$\alpha$,$6\beta$-ditigloytropan-7$\beta$-ol, and meteloidine with no loss of tritium. Also tropine reisolated at the end of the experiment had retained all its $^{3}$H, even though its specific activity was reduced ten times (80). When [N-methyl-$^{14}$C]tropinone and [N-methyl-$^{14}$C]-$\psi$-tropine were fed independently to a root culture of *Hyoscyamus niger*, only the former labeled compound yielded radioactive hyoscyamine and scopolamine (81). This result indicates that no oxidation of $\psi$-tropine to tropinone occurred in the course of the feeding experiment.
The penultimate step in the biosynthesis of cocaine is the reduction of 2-methoxycarbonyl-3-tropinone (51) to methyl egonine, in which the hydroxyl group at C-3 is β as in γ-tropine. Preliminary studies (82) using leaf disks of *Erythroxylum coca* and [9-14C]-2-methoxycarbonyl-3-tropinone as a substrate have demonstrated the accumulation of labeled methyl egonine. The greatest amount of this compound (relative to cocaine) was obtained in a prolonged incubation, when presumably the source of the benzoyl moiety (probably benzoyl coenzyme A) was depleted. An alternate biosynthetic route to cocaine is illustrated in Fig. 18.

It was proposed that the enol of 2-methoxycarbonyl-3-tropinone (67) was benzoylated to yield 2,3-dehydrocaine (68). Cocaine would then result from cis-addition of two hydrogens to 68. This hypothesis was shown to be invalid by feeding (RS)-3-[4'-3H]benzoyloxy-2-[carbonyl-13C, 14C]-methoxycarbonyl-2-tropene (68) to *Erythroxylum coca*. The resultant cocaine was labeled with both 14C and 3H, but their ratio was significantly different from the 3H/14C in the administered compound, and varied with the duration of the feeding experiment (3 and 15 days). The results were interpreted by postulating hydrolysis of the dehydrocaine to 2-methoxycarbonyl-3-tropinone and benzoic acid (or its coenzyme A thioester) followed by utilization of these pieces as illustrated in Fig. 18.

**Origin of the Acid Moieties of the Tropane Ester Alkaloids**

Some of the acids which are present in the esters of the hydroxytropanes are very common in nature (formic, acetic, propanoic, and butanoic acid) and their biosynthesis requires no comment. Table 1 lists the acids found in tropane alkaloids whose biosynthesis has been studied, usually by feeding potential precursors, isotopically labeled, to intact plants. Very little work, if any, has been carried out on the origin of these acids in cell-free systems.

The administration of [4'-3H]phenylalanine to *Erythroxylum coca* plants afforded labeled cocaine in which essentially all the tritium was located on the para position of its benzoyl moiety (62). This result is in agreement with earlier work in which it was shown that [3-14C]phenylalanine yielded cocaine with all of its activity located on the benzoyl moiety (89). The biosynthetic route from L-phenylalanine (39) to benzoyl coenzyme A, the presumed immediate precursor of the benzoyl moiety of cocaine, is illustrated in Fig. 19. The enzyme phenylalanine ammonia lyase (PAL) catalyzes the elimination of ammonia from phenylalanine to yield trans-cinnamic acid (70). Hydrolysis of the cinnamic acid affords 3-hydroxy-3-phenylpropionic acid (73) which is then oxidized to 72 (benzoylacetic acid in which the carboxyl group is esterified with coenzyme A to inhibit decarboxylation). Benzoyl coenzyme A (74) then arises by cleavage of this β-keto thioester. Benzoyl coenzyme A (74) then arises by cleavage of this β-keto thioester. This sequence is analogous to the reactions involved in the β-oxidation of fatty acids. We found that the N-acetylcysteamine thioester of benzoyl acid (75) was an excellent precursor (10% specific incorporation) of the benzoyl moiety of cocaine when fed to intact *Erythroxylum coca* plants (90). Thus the incorporation of 75, labeled with 13C at the benzoyl carbonyl, into cocaine was easily established by 13C-NMR spectroscopy of the enriched alkaloid. The cinnamoylcocaines (71, 76) are minor alkaloids of coca. It is proposed that trans-cinnamoylcocaine (71) is the initially formed alkaloid which on photolysis (by sunlight) is partially converted to cis-cinnamoylcocaine (76). This reaction is probably not controlled by an enzyme since we have obtained essentially the same mixture of cis- and trans-isomers

**Table 1** Origin of the acid moieties of some tropane alkaloids whose biosynthesis has been studied.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acid</th>
<th>Alkaloid in which the acid is present</th>
<th>Precursor</th>
<th>Ref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benzoylic acid</td>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>Phenyllactic acid</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m-Hydroxybenzoylic acid</td>
<td>Cochlearine</td>
<td>Phenyllactic acid</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenyllactic acid</td>
<td>Littorine</td>
<td>Phenylpyruvic acid</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiglic acid</td>
<td>Metatiglic acid</td>
<td>Phenylalanine</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(S)-Tropic acid</td>
<td>Hyoscynamine</td>
<td>Phenyllactic acid</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scopolamine</td>
<td>Norhyoscyamine</td>
<td>Phenyllactic acid</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norscopolamine</td>
<td>Norscopolamine</td>
<td>Phenyllactic acid</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6β-Hydroxyhyoscyamine</td>
<td></td>
<td>Phenyllactic acid</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- This list is not inclusive, only representative examples are recorded.

Fig. 18 Failure of 2,3-dehydrocaine to serve as a direct precursor of cocaine.
Fig. 19 Biosynthesis of benzoyl coenzyme A from phenylalanine.

Isoleucine is a well established precursor of tiglic acid (79) (4). By carrying out feeding experiments with isoleucine, stereospecifically labeled with tritium, it was established (85) that the dehydrogenation of the intermediate (S)-2-methylbutanoic acid (78) is anti-periplanar (i.e. trans). This result is illustrated in Fig. 20 in which the precursor was (2RS,3S,4S)-[2-14C,4-3H]isoleucine (77). The tiglic acid obtained by hydrolysis of the 3α,6β-ditigloyloxytyropane isolated from Datura innoxia plants retained all its tritium relative to 14C. A complementary experiment was carried out with (3S,4R)-[2-14C,4-3H]isoleucine. The resultant meteloidine (66, Fig. 17) isolated from Datura meteloides had lost essentially all of its tritium relative to 14C.

Since our previous review (4) on the origin of (S)-tropic acid (80), it has been discovered that the carbonyl group of phenylalanine undergoes the 1,2-migration from C-2 to C-3 with retention of configuration (88). At the same time the displaced hydrogen at C-3 moves to C-2 and ultimately becomes part of the hydroxymethyl group of tropic acid (87). These results were obtained by the use of stereospecifically labeled phenylalanines as illustrated in Fig. 21. Independently, Haslam and coworkers (86) fed...
(2S,3R)- and (2S,3S)-[14C,3,3-H]phenylalanine to *Datura stramonium* plants. They considered that their results were consistent with a stereospecific loss of the pro-R hydrogen at C-3 of phenylalanine, the carboxyl group migrating with inversion of configuration at this position. This conclusion is the direct opposite of the one illustrated in Fig. 21. However, the authors apparently failed to realize that tritium located at the chiral center of tropic acid is very labile. The mixture of alkaloids was hydrolyzed by refluxing with aqueous 10% sodium hydroxide for 30 min, conditions which would cause racemization of tropic acid. It was reported that this tropic acid derived from (2S,3R)-[14C,3,3-H]phenylalanine (88% enantiomeric excess at C-3) had lost 88–93% of its tritium relative to carbon-14. The tropic acid derived from (2S,3S)-[14C,3,3-H]phenylalanine (83% enantiomeric excess at C-3) lost 30–35% of the tritium. These experimental results are thus entirely consistent with ours, the retention of tritium in the tropic acid derived from the [3S-3H]phenylalanine being due to its migration to the hydroxymethyl group, and not because it remained at the chiral center of tropic acid. These concurrent 1,2-migrations in opposite directions are analogous to the biochemical conversion of methylmalonyl coenzyme A (81) to succinyl coenzyme A (82) also illustrated in Fig. 21. In this conversion the thioester group moves with retention of configuration and is intramolecular. The migration of the hydrogen is intermolecular (92) in this transformation. The migration of the carboxyl group in the formation of tropic acid is intermolecular (93), but it is not known whether the migration of hydrogen from C-3 to C-2 is inter- or intramolecular. The stereochemistry of the migrated hydrogen in the pro-chiral methylene of the hydroxymethyl group is also unknown. The actual mechanism of the migration of the carboxyl group remains a mystery. It was shown that 3-hydroxy-3-phenylpropanoic acid (73, Fig. 19) is not a precursor of tropic acid (94). The microbial transformation of 81 to 82 is catalyzed by coenzyme B12. However the presence of this coenzyme in higher plants is quite tenuous. There is one isolated report that it is found in comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) (95).

**Conversion of Hyoscyamine to Scopolamine**

Recent results of Yamada and his coworkers (5) are now consistent with the biosynthetic scheme illustrated in Fig. 22. An enzyme preparation has been obtained from cultured roots of *Hyoscyamus niger* which catalyzes the formation of 6β-hydroxyhyoscyamine (83) from hyoscyamine (11) (96, 97). This hydroxylation occurs with retention of configuration and requires 2-ketoglutaric acid and oxygen as cofactors. The next step is not a dehydration to 6,7-dehydrohyoscyamine (84) as was previously considered (98). Thus 18O was retained in the scopolamine isolated from a shoot culture of *Duboisia myoporoides* and the parent plant and cultured on a large scale in fermentors. Such cultures have been obtained from *Datura stramonium* (101) and *Duboisia myoporoides* (102). The production of alkaloids in these cultures was comparable to the amounts found in the intact plants.

**Acknowledgements**

Our investigations on the biosynthesis of the tropane alkaloids has been supported by research grants from the National Institutes of Health (GM-13246) and the National Science Foundation (CHE-8620345). I also appreciate the enthusiasm and dedication of my numerous coworkers who are cited in the references. My wife, Sheila, helped in the preparation of the figures.

**References**


Hashimoto, T., Mitan, N., Yamada, Y., unpublished work, cited in Ref. (5).


