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Complete List of Authors:	Xing, Yalan; Harvard University, Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology Hande, Sudhir; Harvard University, Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology Kishi, Yoshito; Harvard University, Chemistry and Chemical Biology

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# Photochemistry of Mycolactone A/B, the Causative Toxin of Buruli Ulcer

Yalan Xing,<sup>†</sup> Sudhir M. Hande,<sup>†</sup> and Yoshito Kishi\*

Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138 kishi@chemistry.harvard.edu

**ABSTRACT:** Photochemistry of mycolactone A/B and related unsaturated fatty acid esters is reported. On exposure to visible light, mycolactone A/B gave a mixture of four photo-mycolactones. Pentaenoates and tetraenoates, representing the unsaturated fatty acid portion of mycolactone A/B, were found to show the reactivity profile parallel with that of mycolactone A/B. The structure of the four photo-mycolactones was elucidated via (1) structure determination of the four photo-products in the tetraenoate series; (2) their transformation to the photo-products in the pentaenoate and then mycolactone series. Triplet quenchers did not affect the photochemical transformation, thereby indicating an event at the singlet state. A concerted, photochemically allowed [ $4\pi s + 2\pi a$ ] cycloaddition was suggested to account for the observed result. This study provided the structurally defined and homogeneous material, which allowed demonstration that photo-mycolactones exhibit significantly reduced cytotoxicity, compared with mycolactone A/B.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

**Background.** Buruli ulcer is a severe and devastating skin disease caused by *Mycobacterium ulcerans* infection, yet it is one of the most neglected diseases.<sup>1</sup> Infection with *M. ulcerans* results in progressive necrotic lesions that, if untreated, can extend to 15% of a patient's skin surface. Surgical excision/skin grafting was the only method for treatment of Buruli ulcer. Encouragingly, it has recently been reported that most patients respond to combination treatments with rifampin and streptomycin.<sup>2</sup>

In 1999, Small and co-workers isolated and characterized two polyketide-derived macrolides, named as mycolactones A and B, from *M. ulcerans* 1615.<sup>3</sup> Mycolactones A and B were shown to exhibit cytotoxic and immunosuppressive activities and also reproduce the natural pathology of Buruli ulcer on a guinea pig model.<sup>4</sup> The gross structure of mycolactones A and B was elucidated with spectroscopic methods, whereas the stereochemistry was predicted *via* the universal NMR database approach and confirmed by total synthesis.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> Under standard laboratory conditions, mycolactones A and B exist as a rapidly equilibrating 3:2 mixture of  $\Delta^{4,5}$ -*Z* (major) and  $\Delta^{4,5}$ -*E* (minor) isomers, and are referred to as mycolactone A/B in this paper (Scheme 1).

Because of the slow-growing and pathogenic nature of *M. ulcerans*, it was a challenging task to secure mycolactones in quantity by cultivation. With the development of convergent, scalable, and flexible syntheses, we now have access to the mycolactone as a structurally defined material in quantity. We have been interested in the chemical and biological properties of mycolactones and initiated the study on their chemical stability. Coincident with this activity, we learned from Professor Britton, Karolinska University Hospital, Stockholm, that natural mycolactone A/B, on exposure to light for 30 minutes, completely loses its toxicity on keratinocytes.<sup>9</sup> A literature search revealed an interesting history on light-irradiation of mycobacteria, including *M. ulcerans*, for potential medical applications.<sup>10</sup>

*Scheme 1.* Structure of Mycolactone A/B. Mycolactone A/B exists as a rapidly equilibrating 3:2 mixture of  $\Delta^{4',5'}$ -Z (major) and  $\Delta^{4',5'}$ -E (minor) geometric isomers under standard laboratory conditions.



#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Photochemistry of Mycolactone A/B. With this background, we began the photochemical study of synthetic mycolactone A/B (UV (MeOH)  $\lambda_{max}$  362 nm (log  $\epsilon$  4.35)). On exposure to light through a 365 nm filter in acetone at rt, we observed a clean transformation of mycolactone A/B to "photomycolactone". Spectroscopic studies (MS and <sup>1</sup>H-NMR) proved: (1) "photo-mycolactone" consisted of four closely related compounds, (2) all of them were isomers of mycolactone A/B, and (3) all of them had the C2'-C3' and C10'-C11' olefins intact. Based on these data, we speculated that the photo the total value of the total some relation was due to a  $[4\pi + 2\pi]$ cycloaddition on the central triene-moiety (Scheme 2). The photochemically induced transformation of vitamin D->suprasterols is a historical example for this class of reactions (Scheme 2).<sup>11,12</sup> There are some natural products known to contain the bicyclo[3,1,0]hexene structure, including crispatene reported by Scheuer and then by Faulkner.<sup>13,14</sup> Faulkner proposed the triene as the possible biosynthetic precursor and suggested a photochemical  $6\pi$  conrotatory and  $[\sigma 2a + \pi 2a]$  electrocyclizations for the biosynthetic pathway. Notably, Faulkner isolated the 1,3-cyclohexadiene-containing natural product as a co-occurring metabolite and demonstrated its photochemical transformation into the bicyclo[3,1,0]hexene structure.

## Scheme 2. Possible Pathway for Photochemically Induced $[4\pi + 2\pi]$ Cycloaddition and Relevant Examples



In order to facilitate the stereochemistry assignment, we attempted to separate the four photo-mycolactones, but with only limited success. Under this circumstance, we examined the photochemical behavior of several different substrates, including TBS protected and non-protected methyl pentaenoates **2a,b** and TBS protected and non-protected ethyl tetraenoates **3a,b** (Scheme 3).<sup>15</sup>

#### Scheme 3. Four Unsaturated Fatty Acid Esters Studied



**Photochemistry of Unsaturated Fatty Acid Esters.** On exposure to light through a 365 nm filter or sunlight, all of the substrates exhibited a very similar reactivity, namely a rapid  $E \leftrightarrows Z$  isomerization of olefinic bonds, followed by cyclization,

to yield a mixture of four products. With silica gel chromatography, the four products were first separated into **A**- and **B**subgroups.<sup>16</sup> However, it was challenging to separate two compounds present in each subgroup. After many attempts, we were able to achieve the separation of the four photo-products in the tetraenoate series as summarized in Scheme 4.

Scheme 4. Separation and Structure of the Four Stereoisomers Obtained in the Photochemistry of Tetraenoate 3a. Note that the major and minor products in the B-series are tentatively assigned as 4-B2 and 4-B1, respectively.



Stereochemistry of the Four Photo-Products in the Tetraenoate Series. With the four separated stereoisomers in hand, we were able to address their stereochemistry. In the Aseries, periodate-oxidation of 4-A1 and 4-A2 yielded the same aldehyde 5, but in levorotatory and dextrorotatory forms, respectively. This experiment established 4-A1 and 4-A2 to be remote diastereomers where the absolute configuration differed at each of the stereogenic centers in the C4'-C9' portion of the structure, while being the same in the C12'-C15' subunit (Scheme 5).<sup>17</sup> The relative stereochemistry of 5 was deduced from NOE experiments, cf., double-headed arrows to show the proton-connectivity relevant to this assignment. We attempted a few methods to establish its absolute stereochemistry, but were unable to secure the definitive evidence. Meanwhile, we were able to obtain the tri-*p*-bromobenzoate of 4-A1 in a crystalline form, the X-ray analysis of which established the structure of 4-A1, and consequently 4-A2, as shown in Schemes 4 and 5.

Similarly, the major and minor diastereomers in the **B**-series were subjected to periodate-oxidation, to give aldehyde 7 in dextrorotatory and levorotatory forms, respectively. Once again, NOE experiments established the relative stereochemistry of 7, thereby showing that aldehyde 7 was the C4' diastereomer of aldehyde 5. This experiment demonstrated that the major remote diastereomer corresponds to either **4-B1** or **4-B2**, and the minor to the other (Scheme 6).

#### Scheme 5. Stereochemistry Assignment of 4-A1 and 4-A2



In spite of considerable efforts, we were unable to secure a crystal suitable for an X-ray analysis in the B-series. Thus, we relied on the spectroscopic method and examined the <sup>1</sup>H and <sup>13</sup>C chemical shift differences, i.e.,  $\Delta \delta = \delta_{A \text{ major}} - \delta_{A \text{ minor}}$  vs.  $\Delta \delta = \delta_{\mathbf{B} \text{ major}} - \delta_{\mathbf{B} \text{ minor}}$ . For illustration, Figure 1 shows the <sup>1</sup>H  $\Delta\delta$  between the A- and B-series.<sup>18</sup> Our interest was to deduce the relative stereochemistry between the pre-existing C12'-C15' subunit and the newly formed bicyclo[3,1,0]hexene moiety. Interestingly, the C7'-, C8'-, and C9'-protons in Panel B exhibited the  $\Delta\delta$  in the opposite sign of those in Panel A, thereby suggesting that 4-A1 and 4-B2, and 4-A2 and 4-B1, share the same relative stereochemistry with respect to these two subunits. Thus, we tentatively assigned the major and minor diastereomers as 4-B2 and 4-B1, respectively.

#### Scheme 6. Relative Stereochemistry of Aldehyde 7 derived from the Major and Minor Diastereomers in the B-series



Figure 1. Difference in proton chemical shifts between the TBS-protected major and minor products in the A and B series, respectively. Panel A:  $\Delta\delta (\delta_{A \text{ major}} - \delta_{A \text{ minor}})$  and Panel B:  $\Delta \delta (\delta_{B \text{ major}} - \delta_{B \text{ minor}}).$ 



Related to the reported photochemically induced  $[4\pi + 2\pi]$ cycloaddition, we quote the stereoselective, Lewis acid promoted  $[4\pi + 2\pi]$  cyclization reported by Trauner (Scheme 7).<sup>19</sup> For this case, the  $4\pi$ - and  $2\pi$ -components are inverse to those in the photochemical cycloaddition.

Scheme 7. Lewis Acid Promoted [4 + 2] Cycloaddition Reported by Trauner



Mechanistic Considerations. The transformation reported appeared to involve a photochemically induced  $[4\pi + 2\pi]$  cycloaddition. Unlike pentaenoates and mycolactone A/B, we anticipated that tetraenoates would be stable under the standard laboratory conditions and, therefore, are better suited for studying the process.<sup>20</sup> On exposure to light through a 365 nm filter for 2.5 hours at 30 °C in acetone, tetraenoate 3a gave an approximately 2:7:1:1 mixture of geometrical isomers free from the cyclization products.<sup>21</sup> As hoped, these products were stable and separable with HPLC. Spectroscopic studies, including NOESY NMR experiments, allowed us to conclude 4'E,6'E,8'E,10'E (2 parts), 4'Z,6'E,8'E,10'E (7 parts), 4'E,6'Z,8'E,10'E (1 part), and 4'Z,6'Z,8'E,10'E (1 part), respectively.<sup>15</sup> An accumulation of 4'E, 6'Z, 8'E, 10'E and 4'Z,6'Z,8'E,10'E tetraenoates indicated the rate-limiting step of transformation to be the  $[4\pi + 2\pi]$  cycloaddition, rather than the  $E \leftrightarrows Z$  isomerization to form 6'Z-olefins required for the cycloaddition. The 2:7:1:1 ratio of geometrical isomers seemed to represent the ratio at the photochemical steady state, as an approximately same ratio was observed at the 40% and 70% completion of cycloaddition. The A- and B-subgroup products were derived from the 4'E,6'Z- and 4'Z,6'Z-isomers, respectively, and the 3:1 ratio of two-subgroup products seemed to reflect the relative cycloaddition-rate from the 4'E,6'Z- and 4'Z,6'Z-isomers to each cyclization product.

We note an interesting, additional observation. Due to the stereogenic centers at the C12'-C15' moiety, we expected to observe a 1:1 mixture of two remote diastereomers, because the photo-cyclization site was remote from the pre-existing stereogenic centers. However, the experimental results showed that the remote stereogenic centers affected the direction of the

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tetraenoates coiling in the photo-cyclization process.<sup>22</sup>

Intriguingly, this photochemistry showed a temperature dependency; the transformation completed in 105, 48, 33, 35 hours at 10, 20, 30, and 40 °C, respectively. We would attribute that the observed temperature dependency relates to the specific coiled-conformation required for the tetraenoates to enter into the  $[4\pi + 2\pi]$  cycloaddition.<sup>23</sup>

The transformation proceeded well in acetone, tetrahydrofuran, ethyl acetate, and acetonitrile, but not in methylene chloride, chloroform, and benzene. In addition, the transformation took place smoothly in methanol and aq glyme (glyme:H<sub>2</sub>O = 5:1), to give the four photo-products, with the improved **A/B**subgroup selectivity (6:1 in methanol and 10:1 in aq glyme), but the unaffected remote diastereomers selectivity between the C4'-C9' and C12'-C15' subunits (3:2).

Scheme 8. Proposed  $[4\pi s + 2\pi a]$  Cycloaddition



The photochemistry of **3a** was not affected by triplet quenchers such as azulene, ferrocene, and rubrene in tetrahydrofuran and acetonitrile. On the other hand, the photochemistry in the presence of a triplet sensitizer benzophenone in acetonitrile gave only unidentified products, but no photoproducts **4-A,B**. These results indicate that this photochemically induced transformation took place at the singlet state.<sup>24</sup> Coupled with its stereospecificity, we suggest a concerted [4 $\pi$ s + 2 $\pi$ a] cycloaddition for the cyclization (Scheme 8).

Related to the proposed  $[4\pi s + 2\pi a]$  cycloaddition, we comment on the work by Baldwin and coworkers (Scheme 9).<sup>25</sup> For the biosynthesis of photodeoxytridachione, they suggested all trans polyene as the biosynthetic precursor, which is transformed into the bicyclo[3,1,0]hexene structure via photochemically induced double-bond isomerization,  $6\pi$  conrotatory cylcization, and  $[\sigma 2a + \pi 2a]$  cyclization. Notably, they isolated the 1,3-cyclohexadiene intermediate and demonstrated that it was quantitatively converted to the bicyclo[3,1,0]hexane under the photochemical condition. For two reasons, however, we believe it to be unlikely that the photochemical transformation reported here follows this pathway. First, despite the product analysis at early and late stage of photochemistry, we did not detect the 1,3-cyclohexadiene in a reaction mixture (<sup>1</sup>H NMR). Second, we used a 365 nm filter (cut-off wave-length: ~340 nm) for the photochemistry so that the 1,3cyclohexadiene chromophore is unlikely excited.

### Scheme 9. Two-Step Photochemical Rearrangements Reported by Baldwin



Transformation of the Tetraenoate Photo-products into the Pentaenoate and then Mycolactone Photo-products. In order to correlate the photo-products in the tetraenoate series with those in the pentaenoate and mycolactone series, we carried out the transformations outlined in Scheme 10. The efficiency of synthetic sequence was excellent and the final products, as well as the synthetic intermediates, were isolated and fully characterized. Importantly, this experiment not only furnished structurally defined and homogeneous photomycolactones, but also provided us with the opportunity of demonstrating that the product distribution in the tetraenoate series nicely matched that in the pentaenoate as well as mycolactone series, including the ratio of A/B-subgroup products and remote diastereomers.

The availability of structurally defined materials allowed us to search for unique characteristics to differentiate the photomycolactones from mycolactone A/B and also from each other. Indeed, it was rather straightforward to differentiate them by <sup>1</sup>H NMR chemical shifts and HPLC retention times.<sup>15</sup>

However, we should note that mycolactone A/B and photomycolactones were indistinguishable in MS spectroscopy, including MS/MS spectra, thereby presenting a challenge to monitor the photochemical isomerization in a living system.<sup>26</sup> Also, because of the lack of pentaenoate chromophore, the HPLC detection sensitivity of photo-mycolactones is not as high as that of mycolactone A/B, thereby posing the same challenge.<sup>27</sup>

The availability of structurally defined and homogeneous photo-mycolactones also allowed us to study their biological property. As noted in the introduction, natural mycolactone A/B was reported to exhibit cytotoxic and immunosuppressive activities. Thus far, we studied the cytotoxicity against 5 cell-lines, thereby demonstrating that all of the four photo-mycolactones exhibit significantly reduced toxicity.<sup>28</sup> This result hints at a possibility of detoxifying mycolactones with irradiation of visible light. In the opposite direction, it suggests a possible structure modification, for example reduction of the C6'-C7' double bond, to avoid the photo-cycloaddition and maintain the cytotoxicity of mycolactones.

### *Scheme 10.* Correlation of the Tetraenoate Series with the Pentaenoate and Mycolactone Series

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Lastly, we comment on a recent paper reporting the photodegradation of natural mycolactone A/B.<sup>29</sup> Notably, the disclosed spectroscopic data (MS, <sup>1</sup>H NMR) indicate that none of the photo-mycolactones from the current study corresponds to the photo-degradation product reported.

#### CONCLUSION

We reported photochemistry of mycolactone A/B and related unsaturated fatty acid esters. On exposure to visible light, mycolactone A/B gave a mixture of four photo-mycolactones. We found that pentaenoates and tetraenoates, representing the unsaturated fatty acid portion of mycolactone A/B, show the reactivity profile parallel with that of mycolactone A/B. The structure of the four photo-mycolactones was elucidated via (1) structure determination of the four photo-products in the tetraenoate series; (2) their transformation to the photoproducts in the pentaenoate and then mycolactone series. Triplet quenchers did not affect the photochemical transformation, thereby indicating an event at the singlet state. A concerted, photochemically allowed  $[4\pi s + 2\pi a]$  cycloaddition was suggested to account for the observed result. This study provided the structurally defined and homogeneous material, which allowed demonstration that photo-mycolactones exhibit significantly reduced cytotoxicity, compared with mycolactone A/B.

#### ASSOCIATED CONTENT

**Supporting Information.** Experimental procedures, characterization data, copies of spectra, and crystallographic data (CIF). This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <u>http://pubs.acs.org</u>.

#### **AUTHOR INFORMATION**

#### **Corresponding Author**

kishi@chemistry.harvard.edu

#### **Author Contributions**

<sup>†</sup>These authors contributed equally to the work.

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#### ADDED AT REVISION

By a total synthesis, we have recently established that the major and minor remote diastereomers in the B series indeed correspond to **4-B2** and **4-B1**, respectively: Li, X.; Kishi, Y. unpublished work.

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<sup>9</sup> The first e-mail exchange took place on May 5-7, 2011. We ran the photochemistry of mycolactone A/B in acetone on May 17, 2011, and isolated a mixture of the photo-mycolactones, which was sent to Professor Britton on May 25, 2011, for the biological tests.

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<sup>15</sup> For experimental details, see Supporting Information.

<sup>16</sup> We referred to the major- and minor-product groups as **A**and **B**-subgroups, unrelated to mycolactones A and B.

<sup>17</sup> In the universal NMR database study, we introduced this term to describe a diastereomer due to stereogenic centers present outside a self-contained box. For example, see: (a) Kobayashi, Y.; Tan, C.-H.; Kishi, Y. *Helv. Chim. Acta* **2000**, *83*, 2562. (b) Higashibayashi, S.; Czechtizky, W.; Kobayashi, Y.; Kishi, Y. *J. Am. Chem. Soc.* **2003**, *125*, 14379.

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<sup>20</sup> The absorption of *E*, *E*, *E*, *E*-isomer in methanol was  $l_{max}$  330 nm (log  $\varepsilon$  4.87). For the absorption spectra of other geometrical isomers, see Supporting Information.

<sup>21</sup> The ratio was estimated from the peak-intensity of <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectrum and HPLC chromatogram. For details, see Supporting Information.

<sup>22</sup> For an example related to this case in a broad sense, see: Budt, K.-H.; Vatele, J.-M.; Kishi, Y. *J. Am. Chem. Soc.* **1986**, *108*, 6080. We tested (*S*)-1,2-dimethoxypropane, but found no significant effect on the ratio of remote diastereomers.

The observed acceleration appeared to reach the plateau at around 35 °, which is interestingly near to the body temperature of humans, the host of *M. ulcerans* infection.

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<sup>27</sup> The HPLC detection limit of mycolactone A/B was ca. 5 ng per injection (UV detector), whereas that of photo-mycolactones was ca. 250 ng (Waters 2424 ELS detector).

<sup>28</sup> For example, **10-A1** gave the following growth inhibition against 5 cell lines: L929 (GI<sub>50</sub> = 2,020 nM (**10-A1**) vs. 13 nM (**1**)), Hek-293 (2,510 vs. 3.3), Sk-Mel-5 (3,600 vs. 12), Sk-Mel-28 (470 vs. 4.5), and A549 (3,820 vs. 4.7). Hande, S. M.; Xing, Y.; Burgett, A.; Shair, M. D.; Kishi, Y. details of this study shall be reported elsewhere.

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