Solvent-Free Indoles Addition to Carbonyl Compounds Promoted by CeCl₃·7H₂O–NaI–SiO₂: An Efficient Method for the Synthesis of Streptindole

Giuseppe Bartoli, a Marcella Bosco, a Gioia Foglia, b Arianna Giuliani, b Enrico Marcantoni, a Letizia Sambri a

a Dipartimento di Chimica Organica ‘A. Mangini’, Università di Bologna, v.le Risorgimento 4, 40136 Bologna Italy
b Dipartimento di Scienze Chimiche, Università di Camerino, v. S. Agostino 1, 62032 Camerino (MC), Italy
Fax +39(0737)402297; E-mail: enrico.marcantoni@unicam.it

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Abstract: Efficient electrophilic substitution reactions of indoles with various carbonyl compounds proceed easily in solvent-free conditions using CeCl₃·7H₂O–NaI–SiO₂ system promoter, to afford the corresponding bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkanes in high yields. The synthetic value of the present procedure is demonstrated by the synthesis of streptindole (9), human intestinal bacteria metabolite.

Key words: addition reactions, carbonyl complexes, indoles, lanthanides, Lewis acids, natural products

In the last years several researchers have reported many examples of new natural products in which the bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkane structure is present.1 This unit has been recently found to exhibit important biological activity,2 and, therefore, the synthesis of these moieties has become an interesting target to synthetic organic chemists. In particular, there has been an interesting emphasis on pharmacological activity, and a direct synthesis of 3,3′-bis(indolyl)alkanes is desired.1 The plethora of ingenious methods developed to obtain these bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkane derivatives is a clear testimony to their paramount importance, and several procedures have been reported in the literature using Lewis acid4 or protic acid5 promoters for the addition of indole to carbonyl compounds. Unfortunately, most of these procedures require rather harsh acidic conditions, often incompatible6 with other sensitive functions present in the substrates. In the last decade, milder protocols have emerged based upon the use of catalytic amounts of Lewis acids,6c,f,7 but the long reaction time and complicated manipulation, along with the use of environmentally harmful organic solvents, limited their extension from the environmentally friendly viewpoint. More recently, these electrophilic substitution reactions of indoles with various aldehydes and ketones have been carried out using I₂ in organic solvents7 or in ionic liquids without additional catalyst.8 Thus, there is a general interest in a simple and efficient synthetic access to compounds containing a bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkane moiety.

Although performing organic synthesis in an aqueous medium is a current challenge that will attract considerable attention in the coming years,9 from the point of view of green chemistry it would be even more convenient to avoid the use of any solvent.10 The solvent-free approach11 is particularly appealing when one reagent is a liquid and available in large quantities, such as carbonyl compounds. Our studies in this area include Michael reactions of 1,3-dicarbonyl compounds12 and amines13 to α,β-enones. Lately, during the course of some synthetic studies directed towards the preparation of alkaloids embodying an indolyl moiety, we had the opportunity to examine the addition of indoles to electron-deficient alkenes promoted by a cerium(III) chloride heptahydrate (CeCl₃·7H₂O) and sodium iodide (NaI) combination supported on silica gel (SiO₂). Thus, due to the current challenge for developing solvent-free and environmentally benign synthetically systems14 and to extend our interest in the applications of CeCl₃·7H₂O for various organic transformations,15 we have described a simple, general and efficient protocol for the synthesis of β-indol-3-ylketones by Michael addition of indoles to α,β-enones.16 However, in the case of α,β-unsaturated aldehydes the procedure suffers from regiochemical restriction caused by a competing 1,2- versus 1,4-addition. Attention was then focused on the use of the CeCl₃·7H₂O–NaI system in the addition of indoles to saturated carbonyl compounds on a silica gel surface under solvent-free17 conditions (Scheme 1).

The addition reaction of indole (1) with isobutyraldehyde (2a) in the presence of 0.3 equivalents of cerium salt and 0.3 equivalents of NaI supported on SiO₂ (0.5 g/mmol carbonyl compound) proceeds well giving bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkane 3a in good yield for indole/aldehyde ratios larger than 2.0. The results are summarized in Table 1, which shows the addition reaction of aliphatic and aromatic aldehydes and ketones with indole in solvent-free conditions. Our initial observation has been that the indole

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nitrogen did not require protection. Furthermore, the data from entries 3–7 reflect the electronic effects of a substituent group at 4-position of aryl aldehydes towards the reaction. The consequences suggest that aromatic aldehydes with an electron-withdrawing substituent (i.e. NO$_2$, CF$_3$) react much faster than benzaldehyde or aldehydes with an electron-donating substituent (i.e. OCH$_3$), and again, an opposite chemoselective outcome with respect to other Lewis acids$^3$ has been observed. Otherwise, the present reaction of indole with ketones required longer reaction times compared to aldehydes (entry 9). Also, the efficiency of the procedure is influenced by the ring size of cycloalkanones (entries 10 and 12), and the reaction fails with seven-membered ring ketones.

The use of a SiO$_2$ support facilitates the workup of the reaction mixture$^{19}$ and gave a better yield of products even though the reaction has also been observed in its absence. Presumably, silica gel acts as a carrier to increase the surface area in this heterogeneous reaction and it is very probable as well that the cerium salt interacts with hydroxyl or even oxide groups at the surface of the support forming new active sites with possible silica gel local structures. However, the fact that our methodology is clean and the adducts have been obtained in high yields without formation of any side products such as dimers or trimers, normally observed under the influence of strong acids,$^{20}$ exclude the existence in the solid of a distribution of sites containing simultaneously Brønsted and Lewis sites.$^{21}$ Furthermore, the CeCl$_3$·7H$_2$O–NaI–SiO$_2$ system has been used for the addition of indole to benzaldehyde (2c) in the presence of 2,6-di-tert-butyl-4-methylpyridine,$^{22}$ and, as expected, our Lewis acid promoter has afforded bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkane 3e in high yield and with absolute purity.

It should be noted that neither CeCl$_3$ nor NaI alone could effect the addition even after one week. Undoubtedly, the presence of NaI is essential for the reaction too. Therefore, a substoichiometric amount of the CeCl$_3$·7H$_2$O–NaI system adsorbed on silica gel is an efficient Lewis acid promoter for the addition of indoles to carbonyl compounds, and the procedure allowed us to adopt a very simple workup process for the recovery of the bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkane products. Indeed, the reaction mixture has been treated with an organic solvent (Et$_2$O) able to dissolve the organic material, while the CeCl$_3$–NaI silica gel support could be removed by filtration. Unfortunately, attempts to directly reuse the solid supported catalyst in a new addition reaction have been unsuccessful as catalytic activity is lost. The solid support, nevertheless, is regenerated by new treatment with the CeCl$_3$·7H$_2$O–NaI combination, and the CeCl$_3$·7H$_2$O–NaI–SiO$_2$ system prepared with used SiO$_2$ shows the same catalytic activity affording the adduct in almost identical yield.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Carbonyl Compound</th>
<th>Time (h)</th>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Yield (%)</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3a</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2d</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3d</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Addition of Indole 1 to Carbonyl Compounds Promoted by CeCl$_3$·7H$_2$O–NaI (30%) Supported on SiO$_2$ at Room Temperature$^a$

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
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<th>Product$^b$</th>
<th>Yield (%)$^c$</th>
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<td>72</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="" /></td>
<td>24$^d$</td>
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</table>

$^a$ Reactions performed in the presence of 30 mol% of CeCl$_3$·7H$_2$O and 30 mol% of NaI supported on silica gel.

$^b$ All products were identified by their IR, NMR and GC/MS spectra.

$^c$ Yields of products isolated by column chromatography.

$^d$ Starting materials recovered.
It has been observed that the substitution on the indole nucleus occurs exclusively at the 3-position. The fact that different ratios of reactants principally give bis(indolyl) adducts 3 led us to the suggestion that the reaction probably follows the pathway indicated in Scheme 2. The carbonyl compound is first activated by the Lewis acid promoter system, and carries out an electrophilic addition reaction at C-3 of the indole giving intermediate 4. After loss of water, an azafulvene derivative 5 is generated which reacts further with a second molecule of indole to form bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkanes 3.

Scheme 2

Since the synthesis of bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkanes constitutes an important reaction in organic synthesis and to evaluate better the usefulness of the present methodology, we focused our attention on the synthesis of a biologically active bis(indole), such as streptindole (9), for its broad range of pharmacological activity.23 It has been isolated from intestinal bacteria Streptococcus faecium IB37 and causes DNA lesions in Bacillus subtilis cells. Previous syntheses of this genotoxic metabolite have been carried out by several groups, however, these routes are either laborious, comprised of steps of low yield, or require harsh reagents that may lead to degradation of the indole nucleus.24,25 Consequently, we have been interested in preparing this compound, and we report thereafter an improved route to Streptindole by utilizing relatively eco-friendly reaction conditions. The strategy proceeds through known intermediates but via a new route and provides the highest overall yield of indole to date. For this purpose (Scheme 3), we started the reaction from indole (1) and ethyl glyoxylate (6) to give ethyl di-1H-indol-3-ylacetate (7) which is reduced to the corresponding alcohol 8 by action of lithium aluminium hydride. Finally, alcohol 8 is O-acetylated in the presence of a Lewis acid catalyst to afford streptindole (9). This acylation reaction is facilitated by the action of dried Mg(CIO4)2 as a useful alternative to metal triflate promoters.26

In conclusion, we have shown that bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkanes can be synthesized by a simple and highly efficient addition of indoles to carbonyl compounds using a CeCl3·7H2O–NaI combination supported on silica gel. The mildness of the reaction conditions and low cost of the reagents should make the present methodology synthetically useful. This search for new methods for the construction of organic molecules allows us to develop a new protocol for the synthesis of a natural product with biological activity. This result also suggests that the design of new synthetic applications should be possible, which will allow the already significant utility of cerium(III) salts to be developed further. Additional investigations of our Lewis acid promoter system in new schemes of synthesis for the preparation of other biologically important substances are in progress in our laboratories.

Scheme 3

All starting materials were commercial products. CeCl3·7H2O and NaI were purchased from Aldrich, and were used without further purification. All the obtained bis(1H-indol-3-yl)alkanes were characterized by IR, GC/MS, 1H and 13C NMR spectroscopy. Compounds 3a,25a 3c,25e 3e,25f 3f,27 3g,28 3h,29 3i,5b 3j,5c and 3k26 are all known and their structures were consistent with their published physical data. 1H and 13C NMR spectra were recorded with a Varian VXR 300 spectrometer and referenced to the solvent as internal standard. Mass spectra were recorded on a Hewlett-Packard 5988 gas chromatography with a mass-selective detector MSD HP 5790 MS, utilizing electron ionization (EI) at an ionizing energy of 70 eV. Microanalyses were performed with a Perkin-Elmer Analyzer 2400 CHN. Infrared spectra were recorded on Perkin-Elmer FTIR Paragon 500 spectrometer using thin films on NaCl plates. Only the characteristic peaks are quoted. Analytical GC was performed with a capillary fused silica column (0.32 mm × 25 m), stationary phase OV1 (film thickness 0.40–0.45 μm). Solutions were evaporated under reduced pressure with a rotary evaporator and the residue was chromatographed on a Baker silica gel (230–400 mesh) column using an EtOAc–hexanes mixture as eluent. Analytical thin layer chromatography was performed using pre-coated glass-backed plates (Merck Kieselgel 60 F254) and visualized by UV light, Von’s reagent, KMnO4 or iodine stain.

Synthesis of bis(1H-Indol-3-yl)alkanes; Typical Procedure

(Table 1, entry 1)

Silica gel (0.5 g) was added to a mixture of CeCl3·7H2O (0.113 g, 0.3 mmol) and NaI (13.4 mg, 0.3 mmol) in CH3CN (7 mL) and the mixture was stirred overnight at r.t. The solvent was removed and
to the resulting mixture was added indole (1, 0.234 g, 2 mmol) and isobutyraldehyde (2a, 0.072 g, 1 mmol). The reaction mixture was then stirred at r.t. until the disappearance of the starting indole (2 h, checked by TLC and GC analyses). After addition of Et2O the mixture was passed through a short pad of Celite and the filtrate was concentrated under reduced pressure. The crude product was purified by flash column chromatography (EtOAc–hexanes, 25:75) to give 0.283 g (97% yield) of adduct 3a.

3.3'-Pentane-1,1-diylbis-1H-indole (3b)

Colorless oil.

IR (neat): 3043, 1609, 1457 cm⁻¹.

1H NMR (300 MHz, CDCl₃): δ = 0.85 (s, 3 H), 0.93 (s, 3 H), 1.27–1.53 (m, 4 H), 1.71–1.76 (m, 1 H), 2.11–2.40 (m, 3 H), 2.91–2.98 (m, 1 H), 6.83–6.89 (m, 3 H), 7.04–7.19 (m, 2 H), 7.24–7.35 (m, 3 H), 7.49 (d, 1 H, J = 8.1 Hz), 7.67 (d, 1 H, J = 8.1 Hz), 7.77 (br s, 1 H), 8.02 (br s, 1 H).

13C NMR (75 MHz, CDCl₃): δ = 23.6, 28.8, 32.2, 38.5, 46.0, 51.0, 109.1, 117.2, 119.7, 120.3, 123.1, 124.8, 126.0, 140.3.

MS (EI, 70 eV): m/z (%) = 390 [M⁺], 313, 271 (100), 130, 116, 57.

Anal. Calcd for C₁₀H₁₆N₂O₂: C, 75.44; H, 5.66; N, 10.13. Found: C, 75.80; H, 5.8; N, 10.13.

1H NMR (300 MHz, CDCl₃): δ = 1.29 (t, 3 H, J = 7.1 Hz), 4.27 (q, 2 H, J = 7.1 Hz), 5.23 (s, 1 H), 6.89 (d, 2 H, J = 2.2 Hz), 7.09–7.28 (m, 6 H), 7.67 (d, 2 H, J = 7.3 Hz), 7.96 (br s, 2 H).

13C NMR (75 MHz, CDCl₃): δ = 14.9, 40.9, 61.4, 113.6, 117.9, 119.5, 119.7, 122.2, 123.7, 126.9, 136.6, 173.9.

2,2-Di-IH-indol-3-ylethanol (8)

A solution of 7 (0.80 g, 2.51 mmol) in anhyd Et₂O (23 mL) was added drop-wise to a stirred and cooled (0 °C) suspension of LiAlH₄ (0.22 g, 5.93 mmol) in anhyd Et₂O (18 mL) under a nitrogen atmosphere. The resulting mixture was vigorously stirred at r.t. for 1 h, then quenched by addition of 10% aq solution of potassium and sodium tartrate (25 mL). The product was extracted with CHCl₃ and the combined organic layers were washed with H₂O and brine dried (MgSO₄). The solvent was evaporated giving crude alcohol 8 that was used in the next stage of preparation without purification.

Yield: 0.50 g (72%); mp 49–51 °C.

IR (neat): 3043, 1336, 1629 cm⁻¹.

1H NMR (300 MHz, CDCl₃): δ = 1.71 (br s, 1 H), 4.30 (d, 2 H, J = 5.8 Hz), 4.80 (t, 1 H, J = 5.8 Hz), 6.98–7.23 (m, 6 H), 7.36 (dd, 2 H, J = 8.1, 0.7 Hz), 7.62 (d, 2 H, J = 7.7 Hz), 8.04 (br s, 2 H).

13C NMR (75 MHz, CDCl₃): δ = 29.6, 65.3, 110.9, 118.3, 119.8, 120.9, 126.3, 130.4, 138.2.

MS (EI, 70 eV): m/z (%) = 276 [M⁺], 258 (100), 245, 130, 116, 31.

Anal. Calcd for C₁₀H₁₄N₂O₂: C, 72.84; H, 5.84; N, 10.14. Found: C, 72.80; H, 5.82; N, 10.13.

Streptindole (9)

To a round-bottomed flask and under nitrogen atmosphere were added Ac₂O (0.174 mL, 1.71 mmol), Mg(ClO₄)₂ (3.8 mg, 0.0171 mmol), and 1H NMR (300 MHz, CDCl₃): δ = 1.04 g, 85% yield) as oil.

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