

DOI: 10.1002/cbic.201200231

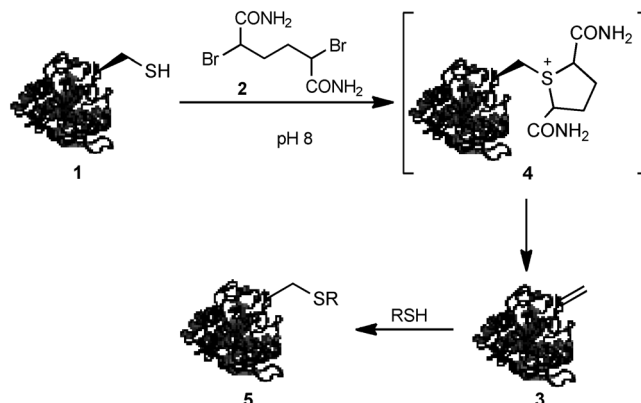
Bioconjugation of Green Fluorescent Protein via an Unexpectedly Stable Cyclic Sulfonium Intermediate

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The development of methods for the modification of peptides and proteins under benign aqueous conditions has received a great deal of attention from both industrial and academic laboratories.^[1] The ability to introduce a range of functional post-translational modifications, either natural or synthetic, to recombinantly expressed proteins, such as sugars, lipids, fluorophores, affinity tags or radionuclides, has been exploited to gain further insight into a plethora of biological processes.^[2] A number of strategies for protein modification through manipulation of the amino or carboxy terminus have been developed.^[3] However, the vast majority of approaches rely on the reactivity of naturally occurring amino acid side chains such as lysine, tyrosine or cysteine.^[4]

One bioconjugation approach exploits the elimination of cysteine to dehydroalanine, which can then be modified by adding suitable nucleophiles. A number of reagents have been developed to convert both peptide- and protein-based cysteines to dehydroalanine, for example *O*-mesitylenesulfonylhydroxylamine and hexamethylphosphorous triamide.^[4b,5] However, the majority of currently used reagents require harsh conditions that limit their application. Recently, Davis has described the elegant use of 1,4-bishaloalkanes for the β -elimination of cysteine to effect protein modification under mild conditions.^[6] An illustrative example is the treatment of a single cysteine mutant of subtilisin from *Bacillus lentus* SBL(S156C) (1) with 2,5-dibromohexanediamide (2) at pH 8, which afforded intermediate dehydroalanine 3, presumably via the transient formation of sulfonium 4 (Scheme 1). Dehydroalanine 3 could be subsequently functionalised with a nucleophile to give modified protein 5.

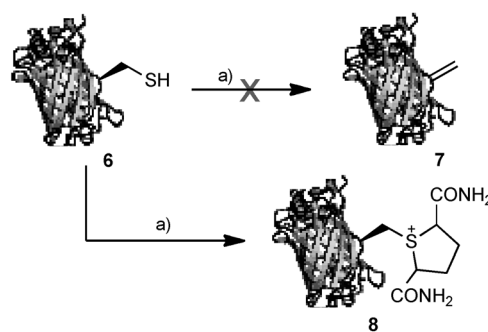
Intrigued by the potential application of the Davis double-alkylation methodology, we explored its applicability to a range of biological systems. Herein, we report preliminary studies on the modification of a cysteine mutant (S147C) of "superfolder" green fluorescent protein (GFP) bearing a single surface-accessible cysteine. We were able to synthesise unusually stable cyclic sulfonium species and to employ these in a novel bioconjugation that is complementary to current dehydroalanine-based technologies for substrates for which dehydroalanine formation is not facile. Although the presence of sulfonium



Scheme 1. Modification of SBL(S156C) by cysteine β -elimination.

ions in peptides and proteins derived from the alkylation of methionine is well established,^[7] to our knowledge this represents the first evidence for the formation of a stable cysteine-sulfonium on a protein.

We treated GFP(S147C) (6) with 2 under Davis' conditions (1500 equiv, 37 °C, 2 h, pH 8; Scheme 2).^[6] Unexpectedly the product was not the corresponding GFP dehydroalanine 7, rather electrospray (ES) MS indicated quantitative conversion to a species with a molecular weight equivalent to that of sulfonium 8 (29486 calcd, 29488 obs.). Indeed, throughout this study, we observed no evidence for the formation of dehydroalanine 7, or products derived therefrom, even upon incubation of sulfonium 8 for prolonged periods (*vide infra*). The isolation of this sulfonium species as a stable adduct and its reluctance to undergo elimination to give the corresponding dehydroalanine product 7 was noteworthy and we embarked upon further studies to understand and exploit this unexpected mode of reactivity.



Scheme 2. Reaction of GFP(S-147C) (100 μ L, 1 mg mL⁻¹ in H₂O, pH 8, 100 mM phosphate) with dibromodiamide (2). a) 2 (1500 equiv; 10 μ L, 340 mM in DMF), 37 °C, 2 h.

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Supporting information for this article is available on the WWW under <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/cbic.201200231>.

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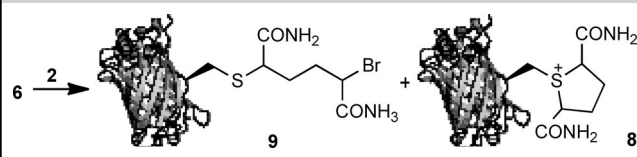
In order to gain further evidence for the site of reaction between GFP(S147C) and 2,5-dibromohexanediamide, sulfonium **8** was treated with *N*-methylbromomaleimide (1 equiv).^[4d] No reaction was observed with **8**, whereas **6** reacted cleanly, thus suggesting that **2** had reacted exclusively on cysteine to generate **8** (see the Supporting Information).

Optimisation of the formation of **8** was achieved by varying a number of parameters including the number of equivalents of **2**, reaction temperature and reaction time (Table 1). Treatment of GFP(S147C) with 10 equivalents of **2** afforded no sulfonium **8** after 5 h; nevertheless, clear evidence for the formation of thioether **9** (29566 calcd, 29563 obs.) was apparent by LCMS (Table 1, entry 2). However, a prolonged incubation time, 20 h, afforded **8** as the only identifiable product in 53% conversion (Table 1, entry 3). Increasing the concentration of 2,5-dibromohexanediamide afforded, as expected, more rapid formation of **8**, with complete conversion of **6** at 21 °C with 25 or 50 equivalents of **2** within 20 h (Table 1, entries 4–9). At 4 °C, no sulfonium formation is apparent after 20 h even using 25 equivalents of 2,5-dibromohexanediamide (Table 1, entries 10 and 11). However, formation of sulfonium **8** at 4 °C is observed at higher concentrations of **2** (Table 1, entry 12). At 37 °C with 50 equivalents of **2** complete conversion of **6** to **8** could be rapidly achieved (Table 1, entry 13).

We then sought to establish the stability and reactivity profile of sulfonium **8**. After preparation of sulfonium **8** under our optimised conditions (50 equiv **2**, 37 °C, 2 h) excess **2** could be readily removed by repeated dialysis into fresh buffer. Sulfonium **8** was found to be stable in the absence of nucleophiles at 21 °C for 24 h and at 4 °C for 1 month; although, significant decomposition was observed at 37 °C after 4 h (vide supra). Treatment of **8** with β -mercaptoethanol (1000 equiv, 37 °C, 2.5 h) afforded bithioether **10a** (29564 calcd, 29566 obs.) in complete conversion, presumably through ring opening of the cyclic sulfonium (Scheme 3).

We then evaluated the reactivity of **8** with a range of simple nucleophiles. Treatment of **8** with the sodium salt of 1-thio- β -D-glucose (10 equiv) afforded the expected GFP–thiogluco conjugate **10b** as the sole product, with complete conversion after 5 h (Table 2, entry 1). Similarly, treatment of **8** with glutathione was also successful at both 21 and at 37 °C, generating the corresponding GFP–glutathione adduct **10c** in excellent conversion (entries 3–5). We also

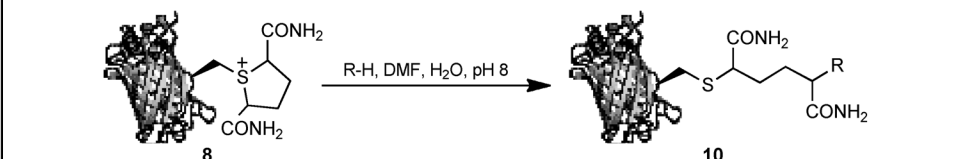
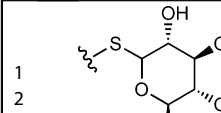
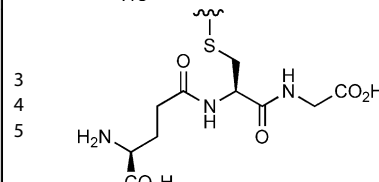
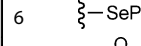
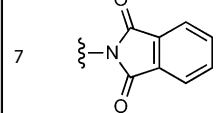
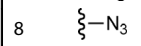
Table 1. Optimisation of formation of sulfonium **8**.^[a]

						
	2 [equiv]	<i>T</i> [°C]	<i>t</i> [h]	6 [%] ^[b]	9 [%] ^[b]	8 [%] ^[b]
1	10	21	2	> 95	0	0
2			5	91	9	0
3			20	47	0	53
4	25	21	2	81	19	0
5			5	50	17	33
6			20	0	0	> 95
7	50	21	2	56	23	21
8			5	27	25	48
9			20	0	0	> 95
10	10	4	20	> 95	0	0
11	25		20	80	20	0
12	50		20	56	24	20
13	50	37	2	0	0	> 95

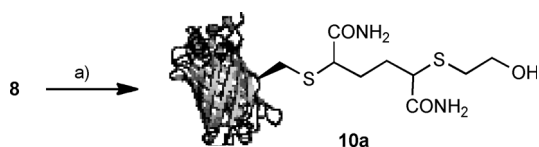
[a] Conditions: **6** (100 μ L, 1 mg mL⁻¹ in H₂O) at pH 8 (100 mM phosphate), **2** (10 μ L in DMF). [b] Determined by ratio of peak heights in deconvoluted mass spectrum.

confirmed that these reactions could be carried out effectively at room temperature (21 °C) in 5 h, or more rapidly at 37 °C or with increased concentrations of the nucleophile (entries 2, 4 and 5). Treatment of sulfonium **8** with phenyl selenol

Table 2. Conjugation of nucleophiles with GFP sulfonium **8**.^[a]

						
	R–H	Equiv	<i>T</i> [°C]	<i>t</i> [h]	Conv. 8 [%] ^[b]	Product
1		10	37	5	> 95	10b
2		100	21	5	> 95	
3		10	37	5	> 95	10c
4		100	21	5	> 95	
5		200	37	2	> 95	
6		100	37	5	> 95	10d
7		1000	37	2.5	40	10e
8		1000	37	2.5	> 95	10f

[a] Conditions: **8** (100 μ L, 1 mg mL⁻¹ in H₂O) at pH 8 (100 mM phosphate), NuH (see the Supporting Information). [b] Determined by ratio of peak heights in deconvoluted mass spectrum.



Scheme 3. Reactivity of GFP(S147C) sulfonium **8** (100 μL , 0.9 mg mL^{-1} in $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{DMF}$ 10:1, pH 8, 100 mM phosphate) with β -mercaptoethanol (5 μL , 680 mM in H_2O). a) $\text{HSCH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{OH}$ (1000 equiv), 37 $^\circ\text{C}$, 2.5 h, DMF, H_2O , pH 8 (phosphate), >95% conversion.

(100 equiv) afforded the mixed thio/seleno bisether **10d** in excellent conversion (entry 6). Although the conversion from reaction between **8** and phthalimide to give **10e** was only modest (entry 7), we were delighted to observe clean reaction in high conversion upon treatment of **8** with sodium azide (1000 equiv) to generate azide-labelled GFP **10f** (entry 8).

In conclusion, we have shown that treatment of superfolder GFP with bis-alkylating agents can be used to prepare highly stable, yet synthetically useful cyclic protein sulfonium adducts. These species undergo clean addition reactions to allow the introduction of a variety of useful chemical motifs. We envisage that the stability of the generated cysteine-derived sulfonium is presumably strongly correlated to the chemical environment of the alkylated cysteine. This new bioconjugation technique could provide a useful entry into multiply functionalised proteins and further work will be directed toward extending these findings to other systems.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge EPSRC (EP/E000754/1), UCL, the Wellcome Trust (090145/Z/09/Z), UCLB and GSK for support of our programme.

Keywords: alkylation · bioconjugation · cysteine · protein modifications · sulfonium

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Received: March 1, 2012

Published online on May 25, 2012