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Synergistic Catalysis of Tandem Michael Addition/Enantioselective Protonation Reactions by an Artificial Enzyme

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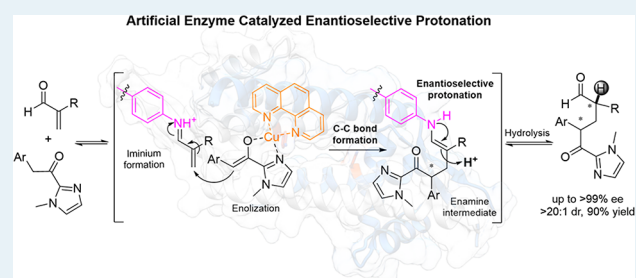
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Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Enantioselective protonation is conceptually one of the most attractive methods to generate an α -chiral center. However, enantioselective protonation presents major challenges, especially in water. Herein, we report a tandem Michael addition/enantioselective protonation reaction catalyzed by an artificial enzyme employing two abiological catalytic sites in a synergistic fashion: a genetically encoded noncanonical *p*-aminophenylalanine residue and a Lewis acid Cu(II) complex. The exquisite stereocontrol achieved in the protonation of the transient enamine intermediate is illustrated by up to >20:1 dr and >99% ee of the product. These results illustrate the potential of exploiting synergistic catalysis in artificial enzymes for challenging reactions.

KEYWORDS: artificial enzymes, enantioselective protonation, synergistic catalysis, noncanonical amino acids, Lewis acid catalysis, stop-codon suppression



Tertiary carbon stereocenters are ubiquitous in biologically active natural products and pharmaceuticals. Enantioselective protonation is conceptually one of the most efficient methods for generating a tertiary carbon stereocenter.^{1–4} However, enantioselective transfer of a proton presents tremendous challenges, especially in aqueous solvents: protons are difficult to control due to their small size, protons in water are highly mobile, proton transfer is generally very fast, and the products can be prone to racemization.^{5–7} Nature has evolved several efficient enzymes such as decarboxylases and esterases that catalyze enantioselective protonation reactions.^{8–11} Approaches for nonenzymatic enantioselective protonation mainly rely on the stereoselective protonation of prochiral enolates. These are either preprepared or formed *in situ* in transition-metal-catalyzed or organocatalytic conjugate addition reactions, which are mostly performed in organic solvents.^{12–17} Complementary to enolate chemistry, enantioselective protonation of enamine intermediates is an attractive alternative.^{18–21} Here, we report tandem Michael addition/enantioselective protonation reactions in water catalyzed by an artificial enzyme with excellent enantioselectivity in proton transfer to an enamine intermediate. Key to the activity and stereoselectivity of the artificial enzyme is the simultaneous activation of both the Michael donor and acceptor by two abiological catalytic groups.

Artificial enzymes are proteins that contain abiological catalytic groups. They have emerged as a promising approach toward the biocatalysis of reactions that have no equivalent in nature.^{22–26} The well-defined secondary coordination sphere around the catalytic sites and substrates provided by the protein offers fascinating opportunities to optimize both the catalytic activity and selectivity of the artificial enzymes. Some examples

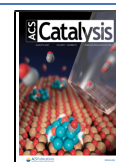
of tandem Friedel–Crafts alkylations/enantioselective protonation reactions catalyzed by artificial metalloenzymes have been reported, albeit with moderate ee values.^{27–29}

Recently, we have introduced a novel artificial enzyme design that involved combining two abiological catalytic sites capable of synergistic catalysis of Michael addition reactions in a single protein.³⁰ Synergistic catalysis is a powerful concept that involves simultaneous activation of two reacting substrates by separate catalytic groups.^{31–33} The synergistic artificial enzyme was based on the Lactococcal multidrug resistance Regulator (LmrR).^{34–36} It contained a noncanonical *p*-aminophenylalanine (pAF) residue, introduced using expanded genetic code methods, that can function as a nucleophilic catalyst³⁷ and a Lewis acidic Cu(II) complex of the ligand 1,10-phenanthroline (Cu(II)-phen), bound between the indole rings of two tryptophan residues in the hydrophobic pore of LmrR.^{29,38} The simultaneous action of these two catalytic sites, which are in close proximity and in a well-defined orientation with respect to each other, resulted in a high catalytic activity and excellent enantioselectivity in Michael addition reactions. Having established the power of the synergistic catalysis concept in artificial enzymes, we sought to apply this concept to the

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catalysis of the challenging tandem Michael addition/enantioselective protonation reaction in water.

The artificial enzyme was assembled as described previously.³⁰ In this study, we used the variant LmrR_V15pAF, which contains a pAF residue at position 15. pAF was introduced indirectly: first *p*-azidophenylalanine was introduced via amber stop-codon suppression using the pEVOL-pAzF plasmid, followed by a Staudinger reduction of the azide to the amine with TCEP during purification.^{37,39} We have found before that this indirect method gives rise to higher yields of LmrR_V15pAF in comparison to using direct pAF incorporation.³⁷ The Lewis acidic Cu(II)-phen complex was then introduced via self-assembly with LmrR_V15pAF in a buffered solution.³⁸ In this design, iminium ion formation with the aniline side chain of pAF results in activation of the α -substituted acrolein, while the nucleophilic enolate is generated by activation of the Michael donor by Cu(II)-phen. This results in a Michael addition to the activated acrolein derivative, followed by an enantioselective proton-transfer reaction to the transient enamine intermediate to give the chiral aldehyde product (Figure 1).

Initial reactivity tests were performed with 2-acylimidazole (1a) as the Michael donor and methacrolein (2a) as the Michael acceptor. LmrR_V15pAF/Cu(II)-phen was prepared by combining Cu(II)-phen (6 mol %) with LmrR_V15pAF (5 mol %), in MES buffer at pH 6.5 for 1 h. No catalytic activity was observed when one of the components was omitted from the artificial enzyme or when the combination of wild type LmrR, without a pAF residue, and Cu(II)-phen was used (Table 1,

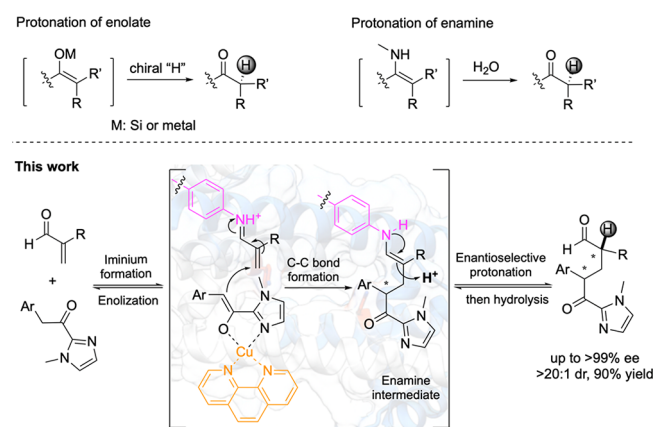
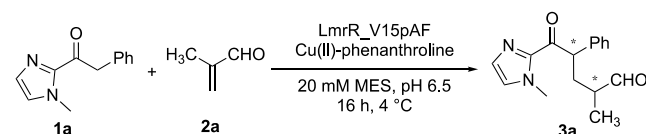


Figure 1. (top) Enantioselective protonation of enolate or enamine intermediates. (bottom) Tandem Michael addition and enantioselective protonation catalyzed by an LmrR-based artificial enzyme that combines a noncanonical pAF residue, which activates the α -substituted enal via iminium ion formation, and a Lewis acidic Cu(II) complex catalyzing the enolization of the Michael donor. After the Michael addition reaction, the resulting enamine intermediate undergoes enantioselective protonation.

entries 1–3). When the artificial enzyme was used, the Michael addition/enantioselective protonation product 3a was obtained in 26% yield, 3:1 dr, and 89% and 32% ee for the major and minor diastereomer, respectively (Table 1, entry 4).⁴⁰ At shorter reaction times higher diastereoselectivity and enantioselectivity were obtained, suggesting that a slow epimerization of the chiral product occurs over time (Table 1, entry 5). This is well-known for ketones and aldehydes containing a stereocenter at the α position.

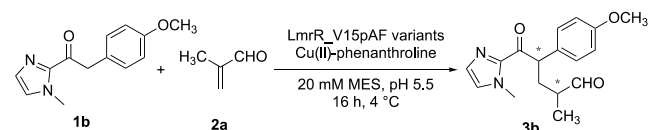
Table 1. Results of the LmrR_V15pAF/Cu(II)-phen Catalyzed Tandem Michael Addition/Enantioselective Protonation Reactions^a



entry	catalyst		yield (%) ^b	dr ^c	ee (%) ^{c,d}
	enzyme	Cu(II)-phen			
1	LmrR_pAF		<1	ND	ND
2		Cu(II)-phen	<1	ND	ND
3	LmrR	Cu(II)-phen	<1	ND	ND
4	LmrR_pAF	Cu(II)-phen	26 ± 3	3:1	89 ± 0/32 ± 1
5 ^e	LmrR_pAF	Cu(II)-phen	14 ± 2	6:1	93 ± 0/24 ± 2

^aConditions used: LmrR_V15pAF or LmrR (5 mol %; 50 μ M), 1.2 equiv of Cu(II)-phen (6 mol %; 60 μ M), 1a (1 mM), 2a (10 mM), in MES buffer (20 mM, pH 6.5), NaCl (150 mM), at 4 °C for 48 h, unless noted otherwise. Yields and ee values are the averages of independent experiments, performed at least in triplicate. ^bDetermined by HPLC analysis. ^cdr and ee values were determined by chiral HPLC. ^dee values of major diastereomer. ^eReactions carried out for 16 h. Errors represent standard deviations based on at least three independent experiments. ND = not determined.

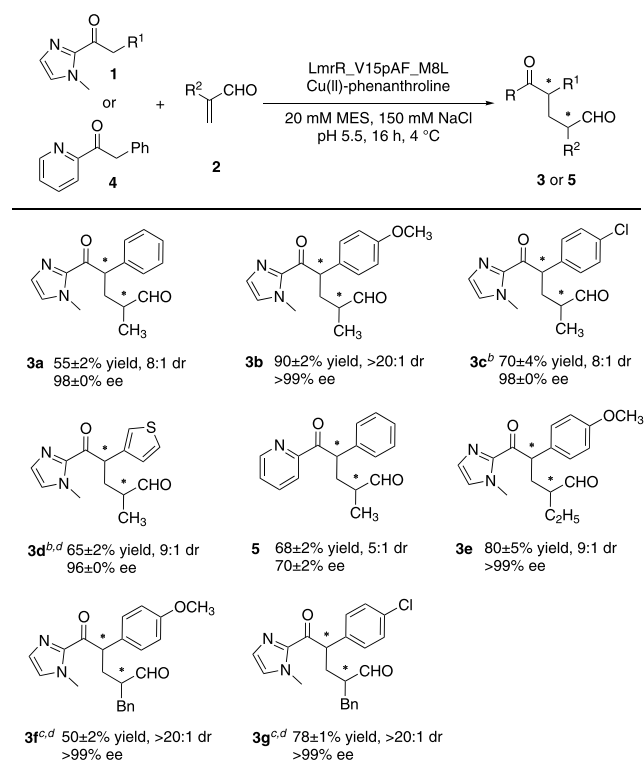
Table 2. Study of Reaction Conditions and Effect of LmrR Mutations^a



entry	enzyme + Cu(II)-phen	yield (%) ^b	dr ^c	ee (%) ^{c,d}
1 ^e	LmrR_V15pAF	44 ± 2	10:1	99 ± 0
2	LmrR_V15pAF	28 ± 3	10:1	99 ± 0
3 ^f	LmrR_V15pAF	16 ± 1	9:1	99 ± 0
4	LmrR_V15pAF_W96A	5 ± 1	3:1	18 ± 1
5	LmrR_V15pAF_M8W	40 ± 1	15:1	99 ± 0
6	LmrR_V15pAF_M8I	58 ± 3	18:1	>99
7	LmrR_V15pAF_M8L	65 ± 2	20:1	>99
8 ^g	LmrR_V15pAF_M8L	33 ± 2	5:1	99 ± 0
9 ^h	LmrR_V15pAF_M8L	88 ± 1	8:1	99 ± 0
10 ^e	LmrR_V15pAF_M8L	90 ± 2	>20:1	>99

^aConditions used: LmrR_V15pAF or mutants (2.5 mol %; 25 μ M), 1.2 equiv of Cu(II)-phen (3 mol %; 30 μ M), 1b (1 mM), 2a (10 mM), in MES buffer (20 mM, pH 5.5), NaCl (150 mM), at 4 °C for 16 h, unless noted otherwise. Yields and ee values are the average of independent experiments, performed at least in triplicate. ^bDetermined by HPLC. ^cdr and ee values were determined by chiral HPLC. ^dee values for major/minor diastereomer. In cases where the dr was high, the ee of the minor diastereomer was not determined. ^e5 mol % of LmrR_V15pAF variant and 6 mol % of Cu(II)-phen. ^f1 mol % of LmrR_V15pAF and 1.2 mol % of Cu(II)-phen. ^gReaction performed at 18 °C. ^hReaction performed for 48 h. Errors represent standard deviation based on independent experiments performed at least in triplicate. The ee of the minor diastereomers are not shown in this table but in Table S2 of the Supporting Information.

Next, the *p*-methoxy-substituted ketone 1b was used as a Michael donor, as in our previous study this substrate was found to be more reactive (Table 2).³⁰ After optimization of the reaction conditions, using a combination of 2.5 mol % of LmrR_V15pAF with 3 mol % of Cu(II)-phen, a higher dr value

Table 3. Substrate Scope^a

^aConditions used: LmrR_V15pAF_M8L (5 mol %; 50 μM), 1.2 equiv of Cu(II)-phen (6 mol %; 60 μM), 1 or 4 (1 mM), 2 (10 mM), in MES buffer (20 mM, pH 5.5), NaCl (150 mM), at 4 °C for 16 h, unless noted otherwise. Yield and ee values are the average of independent experiments, performed at least in triplicate. Error values represent the standard deviations. ^bReactions for 7 h. ^cReaction with 1 (1 mM), 2 (2 mM), in MES buffer (20 mM, pH 5.5), NaCl (150 mM), at 4 °C for 24 h. ^dee and dr values were determined after conversion by a Wittig reaction. The ee of the minor diastereomers are not shown in this figure but in Scheme S1 in the Supporting Information.

and excellent ee values of 99% and 72% for the major and minor diastereomers, respectively, were obtained (Table 2, entry 2). Using 1 mol % of LmrR_V15pAF did not affect the stereoselectivity of the reaction (Table 2, entries 1 and 3). When LmrR_V15pAF_W96A, which is lacking the Cu(II)-phen binding site, was used, a strong decrease in the yield and stereoselectivity was observed. This shows that the precise positioning of the Cu(II)-bound enolate in relation to the activated enal is of key importance to catalysis (Table 2, entry 4).

Mutations of the methionine at position 8 were known to potentially improve the catalytic activity of the artificial enzyme.^{29,30} Hence, some M8 mutants of LmrR_V15pAF were evaluated in catalysis (Table 2, entries 5–7). The variant LmrR_V15pAF_M8L exhibited both improved stereoselectivity and reactivity in comparison to LmrR_V15pAF with a 65% yield, >20:1 dr, and >99% ee for the major diastereomer. Higher reaction temperatures and longer reaction times were found to have a negative effect on the diastereoselectivity and reactivity (Table 2, entries 8 and 9). Using a slightly higher concentration of artificial enzyme improved the reaction, resulting in >99% ee, >20:1 dr, and 90% yield (Table 2, entry 10).

The substrate scope of the tandem Michael addition/enantioselective protonation was investigated using various α -

substituted enals and 2-acylimidazoles or 2-acylpyridine with LmrR_V15pAF_M8L/Cu(II)-phen, using the optimized conditions (Table 3). Using the *p*-chlorophenyl (1c)- and 3-thiophene-containing (1d) 2-acylimidazoles gave the products 3c and 3d, respectively, with excellent enantioselectivities, albeit with a slightly lower dr in comparison to 3a and 3b. Replacing the 2-acylimidazole moiety with 2-acylpyridine (4) gave the product 5 with moderate results. In addition to methacrolein, α -benzyl- and α -ethylacrolein were also well tolerated in this reaction, giving products 3f, 3g, and 3h, respectively, with excellent ee, dr, and yield.

Generally, it was found that both the diastereoselectivity and enantioselectivity decreased somewhat with a longer reaction time, indicative of epimerization of the product (Table S3). This was not unexpected in view of the known lability of α stereocenters. Control experiments involving incubating enantioenriched 3g with protein LmrR_V15pAF_M8L, LmrR, and pH 5.5 MES buffer separately suggested that both the artificial enzyme and the medium contribute to the epimerization process.

In conclusion, here we have shown that the tandem Michael addition/enantioselective protonation reaction in water is catalyzed efficiently by an LmrR-based artificial enzyme that exploits synergistic catalysis by two abiological catalytic groups. The combination of using a genetically encoded noncanonical amino acid to activate the electrophile and a supramolecularly bound metal complex to activate the nucleophile and deliver it with high precision to one prochiral face of the activated electrophile makes it possible to perform challenging reactions, such as the reaction presented here, with excellent diastereo- and enantioselectivities. These results illustrate the power of synergistic artificial enzymes, and we envision this concept to be broadly applicable for the biocatalysis of new-to-nature reactions.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acscatal.1c02298>.

Complete experimental procedures and methods, tables and a scheme as described in the text, protein sequences, HPLC chromatograms, and NMR spectra (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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