Aromatic ring cleavage of 4,6-di(tert-butyl)guaiacol, a phenolic lignin model compound, by laccase of *Coriolus versicolor*

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It was found that 2,4-di(tert-butyl)-4-(methoxycarbonylmethyl)-2-buten-2-olide (II) was formed as an aromatic ring cleavage product of a phenolic lignin model compound, 4,6-di(tert-butyl)guaiacol (I), by laccase of *Coriolus versicolor*. Based on isotopic experiments with 18O, and H218O, the mechanism of formation of II from I is discussed.

Laccase; Aromatic ring cleavage; Lignin model compound; Phenoxy radical; (*Coriolus versicolor*)

1. INTRODUCTION

We [1,2] previously found that laccase from *Coriolus versicolor* catalyzed not only alkyl-aryl cleavage and CO oxidation but also Cα-Cβ cleavage of the side chain of β-1 lignin substructure model compounds. Here, we examined the possibility of aromatic ring cleavage of the phenolic lignin model compound, 4,6-di(tert-butyl)guaiacol (I), by laccase from *C. versicolor*. The substrate I was found to be degraded by laccase to form an aromatic ring cleavage product, muconolactone derivative II (chemical structures shown in fig.1). The following tracer experiments with H218O and 18O2 demonstrated the incorporation of 18O from 18O2 into the product II.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Syntheses of substrate and authentic compound

4,6-Di(tert-butyl)guaiacol (I) was prepared using the method of Ley and Müller [3]. However, the product contained the isomer, 3,5-di(tert-butyl)guaiacol, of which the chemical properties are identical with those of I (Rf value on TLC, retention time in GC, 1H-NMR and mass spectra). When the product containing both isomers was treated with acetic anhydride and pyridine at room temperature for 24 h, one isomer [3,5-di(tert-butyl)guaiacol] was acetylated, but the other was not. The non-acetylated form was selected as the target compound (I), since the phenolic hydroxyl group of I is not susceptible to acetylation with acetic anhydride owing to steric hindrance by the neighboring bulky tert-butyl group.

Aromatic ring cleavage product II was synthesized from 4-(tert-butyl)pyrocatechol (Nakarai Chemicals) via the following steps: (i) introduction of the tert-butyl group into pyrocatechol with tert-butanol and H2SO4 in acetic acid at room temperature [4]: 3,5-di(tert-butyl)pyrocatechol; (ii) aromatic ring cleavage of 3,5-di(tert-butyl)pyrocatechol to III with ferric acetylacetonate and approx. 8% peracetic acid [5] in acetic acid at room temperature (modified method of Pandell [6]), III being recrystallized from petroleum ether; and (iii) methylolation of III with CH32 in diethyl ether at room temperature. 1H-NMR (CDCl3) δ (ppm): 0.98(9H,s,tert-butyl), 1.24(9H,s,tert-butyl), 2.80(1H,dd,J = 13.8 Hz, >C-CH=CH-), 2.96 (1H,dd,J = 13.8 Hz, >C-CH=CH-), 3.59 (3H,s,OCH3), 6.97(1H,s, >C=CH-). 13C-NMR (CDCl3) δ (ppm): 25.2(q), 28.0(q), 31.5, 37.6, 37.8(t), 51.8(q), 88.4, 143.5, 146.0(d), 169.7, 171.2. EIMS m/z (intensity, %): 268(M+, missing), 213(12), 212(M+-C4H8.09100), 198(11), 197(95), 153(64), 137(15), 109(13). CIMS (intensity, %): 270(16), 269(MH+, 100), 198(11), 197(95), 153(64), 137(15), 109(13). CIMS (intensity, %): 270(16), 269(MH+, 100). IR (KBr) ν = 1746, 1733 cm⁻¹, ν = 1639 cm⁻¹.

Deuterated II (H-D) was prepared from III by treatment with C2H5OD (99.5%, CEA) in the presence of trifluoroacetic anhydride at 35°C. CIMS (intensity, %): 272(MH+), 100, 269(4.5).

2.2. Enzyme preparation

Crude laccase from *C. versicolor* was prepared by the method of Fröhne and Reihsmann [7]. Nystatin was added to the
4-day-old culture as an inducer of laccase. After 8 days, cultures (3I) were filtered and concentrated to about 100 ml using a Millipore ultrafiltration system (10 kDa pore size). The concentrated solution was saturated with ammonium sulfate and cooled to 4°C overnight. The precipitate was separated by centrifugation (10000 x g, 20 min, 4°C), redissolved in 70 ml of 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 6.0) and used as a crude laccase solution. This solution showed an activity of 1.2 x 10⁻⁴ kat/ml with syringaldazine as substrate [2], but did not oxidize veratryl alcohol to veratraldehyde in the presence of H₂O₂.

2.3. Enzyme reaction

Enzyme solution (3 ml) and substrate (2 μmol in 5 μl acetone solution) were placed in a flask and the reaction mixture was incubated for 2 h at 30°C. In a control experiment, enzyme was replaced by 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 6.0).

The reaction mixture was then extracted with 10 ml ethyl acetate. The organic layer was washed with saturated NaCl solution, dried over anhydrous Na₂SO₄ and evaporated under reduced pressure. The extract was separated by TLC (Kieselgel 60 F₂⁵⁴ Merck; solvent, ethyl acetate/hexane, 1:10) to give a fraction of Rf value approximately equal to that of II. The fraction was analyzed using a gas chromatograph-mass spectrometer (GC-MS, Shimadzu capillary column HiCap CRP1-W17-100 (methyl silicone), 12 m x 0.53 mm (i.d.), column temperature, 120-140°C, 5°C/min).

The amount of II formed was calculated quantitatively by the stable isotope dilution method. 2 pg II-D as an internal standard (2H₂O dioxane solution) was added to a flask before extraction, and the fraction containing II and II-D was separated and analyzed by GC-MS (mass chromatography).

2.4. Isotopic experiments

2.4.1. Tracer experiment with ¹⁸O₂

The experiment under ¹⁸O₂ (¹⁸O: 98.58 atom%, CEA) was performed according to [2]. The reaction was carried out in a total volume of 3 ml, containing 100 μl enzyme, 2 μmol substrate and 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 6.0). The reaction mixture was incubated for 3 h at 30°C.

2.4.2. Tracer experiment with H₂¹⁸O

To a flask containing lyophilized enzyme (300 μl), 150 μl of H₂¹⁸O (¹⁸O: 97 atom%, CEA), 150 μl water and 2 μmol substrate were added, and the reaction mixture was incubated for 3 h at 30°C.

2.5. Instruments

¹H- and ¹³C-NMR spectra were recorded on a Varian XL-200 FT-NMR spectrometer (200 MHz). Mass spectra were measured on a Shimadzu GC-MS QP-1000 gas chromatograph-mass spectrometer (EI-MS (70 eV) and CI-MS (reagent gas, isobutane)). IR spectra were registered using a Hitachi 260-30 infrared spectrophotometer. Enzyme activity was determined with a Hitachi model 200-20 double-beam spectrophotometer.

3. RESULTS

It was confirmed by GC-MS analysis that II was formed as an aromatic ring cleavage product by laccase from substrate I, which was not completely degraded in 2 h. The mass spectra (EI and CI) and retention time of the degradation product II were identical with those of the authentic compound. Furthermore, quantification by the stable dilution method showed that 2 x 10⁻² pmol (5.4 μg) of II was formed as degradation product from 2 μmol (472.7 μg) of I, while the amount of II produced nonenzymatically was 1.5 x 10⁻³ pmol (0.4 μg).

Other products were observed by TLC, but their structures were not determined.

Incorporation of ¹⁸O from ¹⁸O₂ or H₂¹⁸O into II
was investigated by use of GC-MS. Fig.2 shows mass chromatograms of the MH$^+$ region of II. Analysis showed that H$_2^{18}$O was not incorporated into II (fig.2C), while one (22%) or two (11%) atoms of $^{18}$O were incorporated into II from molecular oxygen (fig.2B).

4. DISCUSSION

Our investigation showed that monomeric lignin degradation phenols, vanillyl alcohol, syringyl alcohol, etc., were mostly converted to polymerized and/or quinone-type compounds by lactase (not shown). It appeared rather difficult to identify the structures of the aromatic ring cleavage products without having synthetic authentic compounds available, even if a small amount of such products could be obtained from these substrates. Therefore, as substrate for lactase we synthesized 4,6-(di(t-butyl)guaiacol (I), in which the ortho and para positions for the phenolic hydroxyl group were blocked with bulky t-butyl groups to prevent coupling and side chain reactions of phenoxy radical(s), and succeeded for the first time in identifying a ring cleavage product, muconolactone derivative (II), by lactase compared with the authentic compound.

Fig.3 depicts two possible mechanisms of formation of II. The substrate (I) is oxidized by lactase to form the phenoxy radical, which is subsequently attacked by molecular oxygen. The resulting hydroperoxide reacts with nucleophilic oxygen species. Since isotopic experiments showed that H$_2$O was not incorporated into II, formation of II via pathway B was ruled out. However, mass spectrometric analysis showed that two $^{18}$O atoms from $^{18}$O$_2$ were incorporated into a part of product II. These results are in accordance with the contention that the hydroperoxide group of an intermediary O$_2$ adduct reacts with the adjacent carbonyl group to form a cyclic peroxide (pathway A), which is converted to a muconate derivative. The muconate compound then undergoes cyclization to yield lactone II. Further investigations are now in progress to elucidate the details of the pathways for formation of lactone II.

Muconolactone derivative II was isolated previously as a product in photosensitized [4] and alkaline-oxygen [8,9] oxidations of the same substrate.

It is known that aromatic ring cleavage of phenolic compounds by microorganisms is generally catalyzed by dioxygenase. However, the present investigation showed that in addition to side chain cleavage of phenolic $\beta-1$ lignin structure compounds [1,2], aromatic ring cleavage of phenolic lignin model compounds is catalyzed by laccase from C. versicolor. Although laccase cannot oxidize nonphenolic compounds, the cleavage reactions of phenolic lignin model compounds by laccase proceed via one-electron oxidations as in the oxidation of phenolic and nonphenolic lignin model compounds by lignin peroxidase [10–13]. Thus, it is concluded that on cleavage of the side chain and aromatic ring of lignin, both lignin peroxidase and laccase could be involved as initial enzymes.

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