Biomimetic Flavin-Catalyzed Aldehyde Oxidation

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ABSTRACT

The oxidation of alkyl and aryl aldehydes to their corresponding carboxylic acids has been achieved through the action of a biomimetic bridged flavin catalyst. The reaction uses readily available 35% aqueous hydrogen peroxide and is operationally simple. The oxidation is a green and sustainable reaction, obviating chlorinated solvents with minimal byproducts.

Bacterial bioluminescence has attracted significant interest, with flavoenzyme monooxygenases now known to mediate light production.1 Extensive mechanistic studies have identified that an enzyme-bound flavin hydroperoxide I undergoes nucleophilic addition to a fatty aldehyde electrophile, forming peroxo-hemiacetal II. It is the collapse of II to hydroxy flavin III and the fatty carboxylic acid that effects the ejection of a photon. Arguably, most studies have concentrated on the mechanism of luminescence as opposed to the synthetic potential of a “green” flavin-catalysed aldehyde oxidation.2

Scheme 1. Flavoenzymatic Bacterial Bioluminescence Mediated by Aldehyde Oxidation

The molecular understanding of flavin monooxygenase chemistry has, to a large extent, been elucidated through the study of simplified small-molecule flavin models. For instance, flavinium perchlorate salt I has been key in demonstrating that many oxygen transfer reactions mediated by flavin monooxygenases do so via flavin...
hydroperoxide intermediates, as modeled by hydroperoxide 2. Indeed, Bruce has been successful in demonstrating chemiluminescence with 2 and benzaldehyde. However, this was only accomplished on an analytical scale, with benzoic acid only recovered in a 2% yield.3

![Figure 1. Flavins and Hydroperoxides Relevant to this Study](image)

Many oxidation reactions mediated by flavin-hydroperoxide intermediates do so with electrophilic behaviour, i.e. oxygen is transferred to a nucleophile with representative examples being oxygen transfer to sulfides, 3° amines and phosphines to form sulfoxides, N-oxides and phospine oxides respectively.4 However, there are examples of synthetically useful flavin-catalysed reactions which operate through a nucleophilic flavin hydroperoxide.5,6 Key amongst these oxidations are flavin-catalysed Baeyer-Villiger reactions which use H2O2 as terminal oxidant. Accordingly, we felt there to be scope to examine a biomimetic oxidation of aldehydes.

We and others have further examined the synthetic utility of Sayre’s ethylene-bridged flavin catalysts (3a-c, Table 1)7 in oxidative8 and reductive transformations.9 These catalysts are readily prepared in three steps, without recourse to intermediate purification and therefore offer themselves as thermally stable and versatile organocatalysts.

We initially chose to examine the flavin-catalysed oxidation of 4-nitrobenzaldehyde 4a to 4-nitrobenzoic acid 5a mediated by aqueous hydrogen peroxide. Reasonable oxidation with catalyst 3a was only observed when heating to 85 °C in acetonitrile as solvent (entries 1-3).10 There is some sensitivity to the exact structure of the catalyst with 7-CF3-substituted catalyst 3c offering improvement over 3a and 3b (entries 3-5). Increasing the reaction time also was beneficial (entry 6). Intriguingly, we have observed that the reaction offers an improved reaction as gauged by an improved final conversion after 3 hours when catalyst loading was lowered to 2.5 and 1 mol% (entries 7-8). Full conversion can be achieved by conveniently raising the loading of oxidant and allowing the reaction to proceed to a longer duration (entry 11). Finally, minimal background reaction is observed, confirming both a catalytic role but also the presence of minimal background oxidation mediated solely by H2O2 (entry 12).

![Table 1. Biomimetic oxidation of 4-nitrobenzaldehyde 4a.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>3 (mol%)</th>
<th>H2O2 (equiv)</th>
<th>Temp (°C)</th>
<th>Time (h)</th>
<th>Conv (%)</th>
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<td>23</td>
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<tr>
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<td>85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>b (5)</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>85</td>
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<td>66</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>85</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
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</table>

* NMR conversion; assayed by relevant 1H NMR integrals. †Isolated yield = 89%.

Having developed an effective oxidation protocol, as optimised on 4a, we looked to examine the scope with other aromatic aldehydes (Scheme 2). This protocol works well with electron deficient aryl aldehydes, as seen with regioisomeric nitro- and chlorobenzaldehydes 4a-f. The heteroaromatic substrate picolinaldehyde 4n also demonstrates this point. In contrast, decreasing levels of aldehyde electrophilicity result in a more sluggish oxidation as seen with the regioisomeric anisaldehydes 4j-l (Scheme 2). The presence of the strong-electron donating groups in ortho- and para-positions led to the formation of phenol byproducts, consistent with a competitive Dakin oxidation.

(4) For a review of the synthetic chemistry of flavin hydroperoxides, see: Gelalcha, F. G. Chem. Rev. 2007, 107, 3338.

(10) See Supporting Information for full reaction optimisation.
Scheme 2. Substrate Scope. *Performed with 5 equiv H₂O₂.

Dakin oxidation phenol observed in ¹H NMR of crude product (38%) *Dakin oxidation phenol observed in ¹H NMR of crude product (31%) *tert-butanol observed in ¹H NMR of crude product (40%).

This flavin-catalysed reaction is also generally excellent for the oxidation of alkyl aldehydes, with high yields observed in many instances. Interestingly, diminished yields were observed with aldehydes bearing non-conjugated aryl groups (4v-w). It is unclear exactly why this is the case, however, ¹H NMR analysis of the crude reaction mixture of 5w appears to support the presence of a stable peroxy hemiacetal. This observation suggests a slow formation of carboxylic acid in this instance.

The mechanism we propose for this flavin-catalysed oxidation is outlined in Scheme 3. Flavin-catalyst 3e reacts with H₂O₂ to form hydroperoxide 6. The C10¹ regioselectivity of peroxide addition is that proposed by Sayre as a result of extensive ¹³C NMR studies in the reaction of these bridged-flavins and benzylamine. This hydroperoxide now acts as a nucleophile, reacting with an aldehyde substrate to form peroxyhemiacetal 7. This adduct now undergoes thermal collapse via 1,2-hydride migration with resultant O-O bond cleavage to form carboxylic acid 5 and hydrated flavin 8. This flavin undergoes dehydration to regenerate catalyst 3.

The nature of the aldehyde group is important. When this group is an electron rich aryl or a 3° alkyl group, migration of these groups becomes competitive resulting in the formation of a formate ester which hydrolyses under the reaction conditions. Such a flavin-catalysed Dakin oxidation has very recently been reported.

It is noteworthy that chloral hydrate 9 does not undergo oxidation using this protocol (Scheme 4). This is supportive of the aldehyde acting as as an electrophile for a nucleophilic hydroperoxide. In this context, flavoenzyme choline oxidase has been extensively studied with respect to the oxidation of betaine aldehyde (10 Scheme 4) to glycine betaine.¹¹,¹² This oxidation proceeds through the flavin co-factor acting as a hydride acceptor from an aldehyde hydrate, with this assertion also supported by the lack of enzymatic activity on the isosteric analogue 4r. As noted already, 4r acts as particularly good substrate in this reaction under our conditions, again suggesting the absence of an aldehyde hydrate mechanism.

(12) For a general discussion of oxygen activation in flaviprotein oxidases, see: Gadda, G. *Biochemistry*, 2012, 51, 2662.
In conclusion, ethylene-bridged flavin organocatalysts are competent catalysts for the activation of hydrogen peroxide in the oxidation of aldehydes to carboxylic acids. The oxidation does not require chlorinated solvents, and with low loadings of H$_2$O$_2$, represents a clean oxidation protocol.

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