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Total Synthesis of Cribrostatin 6**

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Abstract

The total synthesis of antimicrobial and antineoplastic cribrostatin 6 was accomplished in only four steps in the longest linear sequence and five total steps from commercially available starting materials. The key step employed a tandem 4- π electrocyclic ring opening, radical cyclization, and homolytic aromatic substitution sequence to afford the tricyclic core of the natural product, which was converted to cribrostatin 6 via a subsequent, one-pot oxidation.

Keywords

cribrostatin 6; total synthesis; natural products; cyclobutendione; quinone; rearrangement

The spread and increase of multi-drug resistant Gram-positive bacteria has spurred the search for novel structural classes of antibiotics. Resistant strains of enterococci and *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, and *Streptococcus pneumoniae* are emerging with troubling frequency. Indeed, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, which is the most common bacterial cause of acute respiratory infection and otitis media, causes millions of deaths each year.^[1] It is thus significant that in 2003, Pettit and coworkers reported the isolation and characterization of cribrostatin 6 (**1**) from the blue-colored marine sponge *Cribrochalina* sp.^[2] Although cribrostatin 6 was found to inhibit the growth of a number of antibiotic-resistant Gram-positive bacteria and pathogenic fungi, it was most active against *S. pneumoniae*.^[1] In addition to its potent antimicrobial activity, **1** displayed antineoplastic activity against murine and human cancer cell lines at micromolar concentrations (P388 ED₅₀ 0.3 μ g/mL).^[2]

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1: cribrostatin 6

Owing to its important biological activity and its tricyclic imidazo[5,1-*a*]isoquinolinedione architecture, which is unique amongst known natural products, cribrostatin 6 (**1**) has inspired interest in its synthesis. Indeed the groups of Nakahara^[3] and Kelly^[4] have each completed the total synthesis of **1**, although the syntheses were somewhat lengthy requiring 16 steps and 13 steps (15 steps total), respectively. In the context of several ongoing projects, it occurred to us that we might be able to develop a more concise, and hopefully more efficient route to **1**, that might also be amenable for the facile preparation of analogs for further biological evaluation. We now report the realization of this goal and the completion of a concise synthesis of cribrostatin 6 (**1**).

Our approach to cribrostatin 6 (**1**) is outlined in retrosynthetic format in Scheme 1 and features a novel application of chemistry pioneered some years ago by Moore.^[6] In particular, we envisioned that it might be possible to effect the one-pot conversion of the squarate derivative **5** into **1** via a sequence involving ring opening of **5** to give the ketene **4** that would cyclize to generate the putative diradical **3**. Spontaneous cyclization of **3** by an intramolecular homolytic aromatic substitution reaction would then produce the penultimate intermediate **2**,^[7] oxidation of which would generate cribrostatin 6 (**1**). The conversion of squarate derivatives into benzenoid compounds by ring opening/cyclization is well known.^[6,8] There is also some precedent for the cyclizations of benzenoid intermediates generated from enynyl ketenes having pendant alkenyl and alkynyl groups.^[9] However, we are aware of only two closely related reports of cyclizations of benzenoid diradicals derived from enynyl ketenes and having substituents bearing aryl groups to give tricyclic products.^[10] Hence, successful reduction of our strategy to practice would significantly expand the utility of such processes. Assembly of

the key intermediate **5** would only require known 3-ethoxy-4-methylcyclobutene-1,2-dione (**6**)^[5] and the commercially available 3-butyne-1-ol (**7**) and 2-methylimidazole (**8**).

Turning our attention to the forward synthesis, alcohol **6** was transformed into known tosylate **9**^[11] in 95% yield by slight modification of the literature procedure (Scheme 2). Initial attempts to generate alkyne **10** from 2-methylimidazole (**8**) and **9** in the presence of additional bases such as *t*-BuOK, Cs₂CO₃, and NaH did not afford significant amounts of the desired **10**. However, we discovered that reaction of **9** simply with excess imidazole provided the alkyne **10** in 92% yield. Deprotonation of **10** with *n*-BuLi and subsequent addition of the acetylide anion thus formed to the squarate **6**^[5] delivered the desired key intermediate **5**.

With the key intermediate **5** in hand, the stage was set to investigate its conversion into cribrastatin **6**. In the event, a dilute solution of **5** was heated in CH₃CN (0.001 M) to give a mixture containing a compound whose ¹H NMR spectral characteristics corresponded to those expected for the hydroquinone **2** (Scheme 3). However, it was not possible to isolate pure **2** from this mixture owing to its facile oxidation to quinone **11**. When **5** in CH₃CN (0.001 M) was heated under reflux for 35 min and the resulting solution stirred overnight at room temperature open to the air, a mixture (2:1) of **11** and **1** was obtained in 24% yield. Heating this mixture in the presence of 10% Pd/C led to complete dehydrogenation of **11** and formation of **1** in 69% yield. The synthetic **1** thus obtained gave ¹H and ¹³C NMR spectral data consistent with those reported for the natural product.^[2–4] A simple expedient of this experimental protocol was then developed in order to generate **1** in a single operation from **5**. Namely, **5** was first heated in CH₃CN (0.001 M); the majority of the solvent was evaporated, 10% Pd/C was added, and the mixture was heated at 80 °C to furnish **1** in 26% overall yield.

All attempts to improve the yield of this sequence by varying solvent, concentration, and temperature were unavailing. For example, when a more concentrated solution of **5** (0.01 M) was heated in CH₃CN and then stirred in a flask open to the air overnight, a mixture (1:1) of quinones **11** and **12** was obtained. Upon heating a solution of **5** in PhCl (0.02 M), quinone **12** was isolated as the sole product in ca. 25% yield. This result seems to suggest that the intermediate diradical **3** can undergo not only cyclization to the desired tricycle, but can also suffer intermolecular hydrogen atom transfer to deliver a hydroquinone that is readily oxidized to **12**.^[9b,c]

In order to probe the generality of this new approach to imidazo[5,1-*a*]isoquinolinediones, **15**, an analog of cribrastatin **6** was prepared (Scheme 4). Toward this goal, the substituted squarate **14** was synthesized by coupling the anion of the acetylenic imidazole **10** with commercially available diethyl squarate (**13**). Although **14** was stable to heating under reflux in CH₃CN (0.001 M), heating it at 120 °C in anisole (0.001 M), followed by oxidation as before gave **15** in 18% overall yield from **14**.

In summary, we have accomplished a concise and novel total synthesis of cribrastatin **6** (**1**) in 14.1% overall yield via a sequence that employed no protecting groups and required only four steps in the longest linear sequence and five total steps from commercially available starting materials. In the key step, squarate **5** underwent a tandem 4- π electrocyclic ring opening, radical cyclization, and homolytic aromatic substitution to afford the tricyclic core of the target molecule, which was directly oxidized to the natural product in one pot. This approach to tricyclic products from readily available squarate derivatives thus represents a significant extension of chemistry originally developed by Moore. Moreover, the synthesis of these compounds is highly modular so that modification of the inputs will lead to related compounds for biological testing. In this context, the versatility of the approach was demonstrated by preparing analog **15**. Extension of this chemistry to the facile preparation of additional analogs of **1** is currently underway and will be reported in due course.

Supplementary Material

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Scheme 1.
Retrosynthetic analysis of cribrostatin 6 (1).

Scheme 2.
Synthesis of key intermediate **5**.

Scheme 3. Key cyclization and synthesis of cribrastatin 6 (**1**).

Scheme 4.
Synthesis of a cribrostatin 6 analog **15**.