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Copper(II) triflate-mediated synthesis of 1,3,5-triarylpyrazoles in [bmim][PF₆] ionic liquid and evaluation of their anticancer activities

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Abstract—A simple, efficient, and environmentally friendly protocol for the synthesis of 1,3,5-triarylpyrazole in [bmim][PF₆] ionic liquid mediated by Cu(OTf)₂ is described. The reaction protocol gave 1,3,5-triarylpyrazoles in good to high yields (71-82%) via a one-pot addition-cyclocondensation between hydrazines and halchalcones, and oxidative aromatization without requirement for an additional oxidizing reagent. The catalyst can be reused up to four cycles without much loss in the catalytic activity. The pyrazoles (4a-o) and pyrazolines (3a-n) were evaluated for antiproliferative activity in SK-OV-3, HT-29, and HeLa human cancer cells lines. Among all compounds, 3b inhibited cell proliferation of HeLa cells by 80% at a concentration of 50 μM.

Pyrazoles and their derivatives are well recognized as an important class of heterocyclic compounds that have found with extensive use in the pharmaceutical, material, and agrochemical industries. Compounds containing pyrazole moiety have exhibited diverse biological activities. For example, 4-substituted 1,5-diaryl-1H-pyrazole-3-carboxylate derivatives can act as cannabinoid-1 (CB1) receptor antagonists,2-7 Ikβ kinase β (IKKβ or IKK-2) inhibitors,8 and anti-inflammatory agents.9 Pyrazole derivatives have been shown to have good binding affinity towards estrogen receptor.10-12 Some of the pyrazole derivatives have been reported to possess antidepressant, anticonvulsant,13 anti-inflammatory, and arthritic14 activities. Pyrazole scaffold constitutes the basic framework of several drug molecules such as celecoxib (a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug14) and rimonabant (an anorectic antiobesity drug) (Figure 1).

![Chemical structures of drug molecules, celecoxib and rimonabant containing pyrazole scaffold.](image)

Because of their diverse bioactivities, pyrazoles have received considerable attention of chemists. Thus, a number of synthetic strategies have been developed for their synthesis.15, 16 The most common approach for synthesis of substituted pyrazoles is the condensation of α,β-unsaturated carbonyl compounds with hydrazines. However, this strategy results in the formation of 4,5-dihydro-1H-pyrazoles (pyrazolines) that need to be further oxidized to corresponding pyrazoles. For this oxidative aromatization of pyrazolines to pyrazoles, various reagents have been employed such as I₂,17 Bi(NO₃)₃,5H₂O,18 MnO₂,19 DDQ,20 Pd/C,21 NaOEt,22 Phl(OAc)₂,23 and TBBDA.24 However, many of these oxidative methods suffer from relatively high oxidant loading, use of strong oxidants and chlorinated organic solvents, harsh conditions, poor yields, and longer reaction time. Thus, the development of environmentally benign processes with the use of alternative solvents such as ionic liquids in place of organic solvent and a catalytic amount of ecofriendly catalysts that avoid harsh oxidizing reagents are desirable.

As part of our ongoing work on the development of novel reaction methodologies using metal triflates,25-27 and evaluation of small molecules as anticancer agents,28-30 herein we report copper (II) triflate-mediated protocol for the synthesis of pyrazoles by one-pot reaction of hydrazines with α,β-unsaturated ketones in 1-butyl-3-methylimidazolium hexafluorophosphate ([bmim][PF₆]) ionic liquid (Scheme 1) and evaluation of antiproliferative activity against different cancer cell lines.

In the standardization experiment, when 4-tert-butylphenylhydrazine hydrochloride (2) and 1,2-diphenylprop-2-en-1-one (1) were reacted in ethanol at 130 °C in the presence of Cu(OTf)₂ (20 mole %), 1-(4-tert-butylphenyl)-3,5-diphenyl-4,5-dihydro-1H-pyrazole (3a) was obtained in 62% yield (Table 1, entry 8).
Further optimization of reaction condition was carried out by changing solvents, catalysts, and catalyst loading. As shown in Table 1, the use of 20 mol% Cu(OTf)₂ in [bmim][PF₆] gave the desired product 4a in excellent yield (82%) (Table 1, entry 2). When Cu(OTf)₂ was changed with other catalysts such as pTSA, Sc(OTf)₃, Ce(OTf)₃, Zn(OTf)₂, AgOTf, or Yb(OTf)₃, a mixture of 3a and 4a was observed. Use of Ce(OTf)₃ in [bmim][PF₆] resulted in 75% of 3a along with 10% of 4a whereas pTSA in [bmim][PF₆] gave 69% of 3a (Table 1, entry 11-12). There was not much increase in yield of 4a on changing the amount of Cu(OTf)₂ from 20 mol% to 30 mol%. However, reducing the amount of Cu(OTf)₂ to 10 mol% decreased the yield of 4a to 64% along with the formation of 3a in 15% (Table 1, entries 1-3). These data indicate that Cu(OTf)₂ was involved in aerobic oxidation of 3a to 4a. It is necessary to mention that 4a was not formed in the absence of Cu(OTf)₂ in [bmim][PF₆] ionic liquids, and only 3a was isolated along with starting material.

![Scheme 1. Synthesis of substituted 1,3,5-triarylpyrazoles.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Catalyst</th>
<th>Mol (%)</th>
<th>Solvent</th>
<th>Yield (3a) (%)</th>
<th>Yield (4a) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cu(OTf)₂</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>[bmim][PF₆]</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cu(OTf)₂</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][PF₆]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cu(OTf)₂</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>[bmim][PF₆]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cu(OTf)₂</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][BF₄]</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cu(OTf)₂</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][BF₄]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>DMF</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>62</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Cu(OTf)₂</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>PEG</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Cu(OTf)₂</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][Br]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sc(OTf)₃</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][PF₆]</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ce(OTf)₃</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][PF₆]</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>pTSA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][PF₆]</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Zn(OTf)₂</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][PF₆]</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>AgOTf</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][PF₆]</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Yb(OTf)₃</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>[bmim][PF₆]</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compd | R¹ | R² | R³ | Time (Min.) | Yield (%)
-------|----|----|----|-------------|----------
4a     | H  | H  | 4-C(CH₃)₃ | 120 | 82
4b     | H  | H  | 2-CH₃    | 120 | 81
4c     | H  | H  | 3,4-Cl   | 180 | 80
4d     | H  | H  | 3-Cl, 4-CH₃ | 150 | 72
4e     | 4-OMe | H | 3,4-Cl   | 120 | 71
4f     | 4-OMe | H | 3-Cl, 4-CH₃ | 120 | 77
4g     | 3-OMe | 4-CH₃ | 3,4-Cl | 120 | 79
4h     | 4-CH₃ | 4-CH₃ | 3,4-Cl | 120 | 74
4i     | 4-CH₃ | 4-CH₃ | 3,4-CH₃ | 120 | 77
4j     | 4-CH₃ | 4-CH₃ | 3,4-CH₃ | 105 | 77
4k     | 2-F  | 4-Cl | 4-CH₃ | 120 | 84
4l     | 2-F  | 4-Cl | 2-CH₃ | 120 | 82
4m     | 4-NO₂ | 4-OMe | 4-CH₃ | 60 | 75
4n     | 4-NO₂ | 4-OMe | 3,4-CH₃ | 60 | 81
4o     | H  | H  | 4-OMe | 90 | 78

Isolated yield
In four consecutive recycle experiment 4a was observed in 82, 80, 78, and 79% yield, respectively.

Table 2. Synthesized 1,3,5-triarylpyrazoles (4a-o).

By monitoring the model reaction between 1,2-diphenylprop-2-en-1-one (1) and tert-butylphenylhydrazine hydrochloride (2) in the presence of 20 mol% Cu(OTf)₂ in [bmim][PF₆] at different time interval it was found that in first 30 minutes pyrazoline (3a) was the major product, which got oxidized to pyrazole in the reaction as time progresses. We thus decided to synthesize the pyrazolines using this protocol in order to evaluate them in our biological assay. The reaction of 1
and hydrazines 2 afforded 1,3-pyrazolines 3a–o via a one-pot addition–cyclodehydration process in good to high yields (60–84%). Several α,β-unbraced unsaturated carbonyl compounds with both electron-rich and electron-deficient arenes were successfully applied to this reaction. The results of pyrazoline synthesis are summarized in Table 3. The chemical structures of all synthesized compounds were elucidated by 1H NMR, 13C NMR, and high-resolution mass spectroscopy (Supporting information).

Table 3. Synthesized 1,3,5-triarylpyrazolines (3a–n).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compd</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>Time (Min.)</th>
<th>Yield (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3a</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>4-C(CH3)3</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>2-CH3</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3c</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>3,4-Cl</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3d</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>3-Cl, 4-CH3</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3e</td>
<td>OMe</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>3,4-Cl</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3f</td>
<td>OMe</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>3-Cl, 4-CH3</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3g</td>
<td>3-OMe</td>
<td>4-CH3</td>
<td>3,4-Cl</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3h</td>
<td>4-CH3</td>
<td>4-CH3</td>
<td>3,4-Cl</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3i</td>
<td>4-CH3</td>
<td>4-CH3</td>
<td>3-Cl, 4-CH3</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3j</td>
<td>4-CH3</td>
<td>4-CH3</td>
<td>4-C(CH3)3</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3k</td>
<td>2-F</td>
<td>4-Cl</td>
<td>4-C(CH3)3</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>63</td>
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<tr>
<td>3l</td>
<td>2-F</td>
<td>4-Cl</td>
<td>2-CH3</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>65</td>
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<tr>
<td>3m</td>
<td>4-NO2</td>
<td>4-OMe</td>
<td>4-C(CH3)3</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3n</td>
<td>4-NO2</td>
<td>4-OMe</td>
<td>3-Cl, 4-CH3</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Isolated yield.

Based on the intermediate formed (3a) and structure of the product (4a) as analyzed by NMR, the reaction is proposed to proceed through the sequential steps as shown in Scheme 2. The first step is believed to be 1,4-addition of hydrazine to chalcone mediated by copper (II) triflate. The 3-hydrazino ketone undergoes nucleophilic addition followed by elimination to give 1,3,5-triarylpyrazolines derivative. 1,3,5-Triarylpyrazolines derivatives undergo oxidative aromatization in the presence of copper (II) triflate to yield corresponding 1,3,5-triarylpyrazole derivatives. It appeared that ionic liquid helps in stabilization of charged intermediate generated by coordination of Cu(OTf)2 to carbonyl of chalcone and thereby increases electrophilicity of chalcone.

Further, we investigated the possibility of recycling of the catalyst. After performing the first cycle, the product was extracted with ethyl acetate/hexane mixture, and Cu(OTf)2 in ionic liquid was properly dried under pressure. Furthermore, the fresh chalcone and 4-tert-butyl phenylhydrazine hydrochloride were charged under same conditions. The above procedure was repeated four times to give 4a in high yields (82, 80, 78, and 79%) without much loss of catalytic activity.

Scheme 2. Proposed mechanism for synthesis of 1,3,5-triarylpyrazole.

To evaluate the anticancer activity of synthesized compounds, all derivatives (4a–o and 3a–n) were evaluated for their inhibitory activity on the proliferation of human ovarian adenocarcinoma (SK-OV-3), human colon adenocarcinoma (HT-29), and human cervical adenocarcinoma (HeLa) cells. Doxorubicin (Dox) and DMSO were used as positive and negative controls, respectively. The antiproliferative activity results of compounds 4a–o and 3a–n at 50 µM after 72 h incubation are shown in Figures 2 and 3, respectively.

Figure 2 shows that among all 1,3,5-triarylpyrazoles derivatives, compounds 4c, 4e, 4f, 4g, 4h, 4i, and 4k inhibit the proliferation of HeLa cells by 50%, 55%, 45%, 39%, 54%, 42%, and 50%, respectively. However, they did not exhibit significant inhibitory potency in HT-29 and SK-OV-3 cells.

![Figure 2. Antiproliferative activity of 4a–o.](image-url)
Furthermore, 1,3,5-triarylpyrazolines derivatives (3a-n) were examined for their inhibitory activity against the proliferation of HT-29, SK-OV-3, and HeLa cells. Most of the derivatives showed cell specific dependent inhibitory activity. Several derivatives showed high to weak antiproliferative activity against HeLa cells after 72 h incubation. Compounds 3c, 3d, 3e, 3k, 3l, and 3m inhibited the proliferation of HeLa cells by 62%, 50%, 35%, 58%, 23%, and 40%, respectively. 2-Methylsubstituted compound 3b showed the highest potency by 80% inhibition of HeLa cells. 1,3,5-Triarylpyrazolines derivative showed modest to weak potency in SK-OV-3 and HT-29 cells. Among all derivatives, compound 3b showed comparable potency to Dox in HeLa cells. Further modification on the chemical structure of this derivative could lead to the synthesis of a promising candidate that selectively target HeLa cells.

In summary, we have developed a simple and efficient and environmentally friendly protocol for the synthesis of 1,3,5-triarylpyrazole in [bimm][PF6] ionic liquid mediated by Cu(OTf)$_2$. The reaction protocol exhibited tolerance with different functional groups, generating pyrazoles in good to high yields (71-82%) without any requirement for additional reagent for the oxidation of in situ generated pyrazolines. The catalyst can be reused up to five cycles without much loss in catalytic activity. The pyrazoles (4a-o) and pyrazolines (3a-n) were evaluated for antiproliferative activity. Compound 3b inhibited cell proliferation of HeLa cells by 80% at a concentration of 50 µM. All other synthesized derivatives exhibited a modest inhibition against the proliferation of SK-OV-3, HT-29 and HeLa cells. Further structure-activity relationship studies are required for optimizing antiproliferative activities of these classes of compounds.

Acknowledgments

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Supplementary data

Supplementary data containing experimental procedures for cell culture, and physical and spectral for compounds (4a-o and 3a-n) can be found in the online version of this article.

References and notes


