

Biotechnology and synthetic chemistry—routes to clinically important compounds

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Abstract: The combination of plant cell culture methodology with synthetic chemistry affords an attractive route to the synthesis of complex natural products and related compounds of industrial importance. Plant cell cultures which often provide "unique" enzyme systems can be employed effectively as "reagents" in the biotransformation of synthetic substrates to desired end products. Such conversions are often superior to those utilizing chemical reagents with the result that the overall synthetic route is more efficient. Alternatively, the use of plant cell culture derived enzymes in the evaluation of biosynthetic pathways can often afford important information for synthetic design. The overall strategy illustrating such an approach is presented herein with specific examples.

INTRODUCTION

The plant kingdom has provided a wide variety of natural products with diverse chemical structures and a vast array of biological activities, many of which have found applications in the health sciences. For years, synthetic chemists have been afforded the challenge of developing syntheses of such components but often due to structural complexity the resulting multi-step syntheses rarely find application in large scale production as required in the pharmaceutical drug industry. As a result, starting materials for such drug production, or indeed the final clinical drug, are frequently obtained from tedious and often costly extraction from the living plant. This latter solution is often fraught with the well known problems: a) active agent present in minute amounts in the plant extract; b) separation of target compound may be difficult and, in turn, expensive; c) varying concentrations of the target compound depending on seasons during which plant collection is performed; d) desired plant species growing in geographically or politically inaccessible regions, etc.

Appropriate solutions to at least some of the above difficulties are possible by the use of plant cell culture methodology particularly when such studies are coupled with chemical methods. The advantages of plant cell cultures over living plants, in terms of secondary metabolite production, are clear: a) growth conditions are laboratory controlled, therefore, reproducible yields of end product are achieved; b) growth parameters such as pH, changes in nutrient media, temperature, etc. can be optimized to achieve metabolite production in yields significantly higher than in the living plant; c) separation of target compounds is much easier due to lower complexity of extract; d) plant cell cultures are an excellent source of enzymes, much superior to living plants where isolation often leads to enzyme denaturation. With enzyme availability, the opportunity to perform biosynthetic and/or biotransformation experiments related to metabolite production, is clear.

The present discussion will summarize studies performed in the author's laboratories, in several select areas, in order to portray to the potential reader the various avenues of research that such an interdisciplinary program can achieve.

AVENUES OF RESEARCH

For the purpose of this lecture, our program can be conveniently divided into several sections and the discussion following will present studies within these areas.

*Lecture presented at the International Conference on Biodiversity and Bioresources, Phuket, Thailand, 23-27 November 1997. Other presentations are published in this issue, pp. 2065–2145.

- Section 1. Plant Cell Cultures as "Reagents" in Organic Syntheses.
- Section 2. Use of Plant Cell Cultures to Produce Higher Levels of Pharmaceutically Interesting Compounds.
- Section 3. Use of Plant Cell Cultures to Separate Pharmacological Activities in Complex Herbal Medicine Extracts.

Section 1. Plant Cell Cultures as "Reagents" in Organic Synthesis.

Frequent criticism levelled against the use of plant cell culture methods for production of secondary metabolites relates to the normally long periods (generally 2-3 weeks) associated with the synthesis of such natural products if production is desired directly within the nutrient media utilized for cell growth and/or propagation. An approach which alleviates this problem concerns the use of developed cell culture lines as "reagents" wherein the enzymes present within the culture, or isolated from the culture, can serve to biotransform "precursors" to suitable end products. Such enzyme-catalyzed processes should generally complete in short time periods (minutes - hours) and should provide respectable yields of desired end products. An extensive program in our laboratory with well developed cell lines derived from the plant *Catharanthus roseus* (ref. 1-6), *Podophyllum peltatum* (ref. 1, 3, 7), *Tripterygium wilfordii* (ref. 8, 9), and *Nicotiana sylvestris* (ref. 10-12) has revealed that the enzyme systems present in such cell cultures do indeed possess considerable versatility. Such enzymes are capable of biotransforming "foreign" precursors, that is, substrates not normally produced in the plants from which the cultures are derived, to novel end products. It is appropriate to illustrate this approach with some examples taken from our overall program.

1.1. Studies with the *Podophyllum peltatum* cell line

The podophyllotoxin family (1, Fig. 1) has been well studied over the years. Excellent reviews of the investigations pertaining to their chemistry and synthesis are available (ref. 13, 14) and the studies concerning their pharmacological properties, particularly the clinical importance of the anti-cancer drug etoposide (3) have been also reviewed (ref. 13 - 16). The present route to this drug requires the isolation of podophyllotoxin, via extraction of *Podophyllum peltatum* plants, and subsequent utilization of this natural product as a starting material to afford etoposide. In brief, podophyllotoxin is converted, via a two step chemical process, to 4'-demethylepipodophyllotoxin (2, Fig. 1) and the latter, via a five step process to attach the carbohydrate unit, finally completes the commercial synthesis of this important drug.

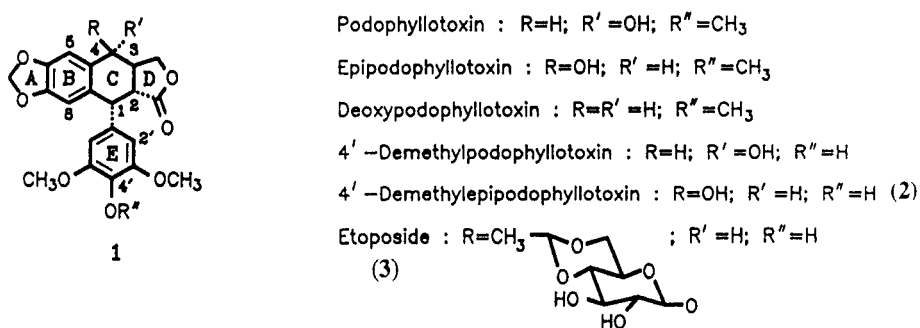


Fig. 1. The podophyllotoxin family of compounds.

In our program concerning the combined utilization of plant cell cultures and synthetic chemistry, we focussed our attention on deriving an efficient route to 2. Such a strategy would eliminate the dependence on plant extraction and hopefully, some chemical conversions, to afford a more direct synthesis of 2. If the subsequent attachment of the carbohydrate unit to 2, so as to obtain the clinical drug, could be similarly improved through biotechnological methods, to be studied later, a highly attractive sequence to etoposide would be on hand. In order to ascertain which synthetic "precursors"

may be suitable for biotransformation to **2** with the "reagent" enzymes present in the *P. peltatum* cell line, an understanding of the pertinent features of a proposed biosynthetic pathway leading to the podophyllotoxins is desirable. Dewick and coworkers (ref. 17) have published detailed studies in this area and have suggested that dibenzylbutanolides could act as substrates in enzyme-catalyzed oxidative cyclization reactions to the corresponding podophyllotoxins. Since our *P. peltatum* cell line had already provided several podophyllotoxins as metabolites (ref. 18), it was reasonable to assume that such substrates may be appropriate for the enzyme-catalyzed cyclizations with this cell line.

A requirement for this study involved the development of a versatile synthetic route to the requisite dibenzylbutanolides, for example, from commercially available starting materials. Indeed, such a route from the readily available aromatic aldehydes was completed (ref. 7). A typical and versatile route to the required dibenzylbutanolides is summarized in Fig. 2. Studies with these substrates were undertaken.

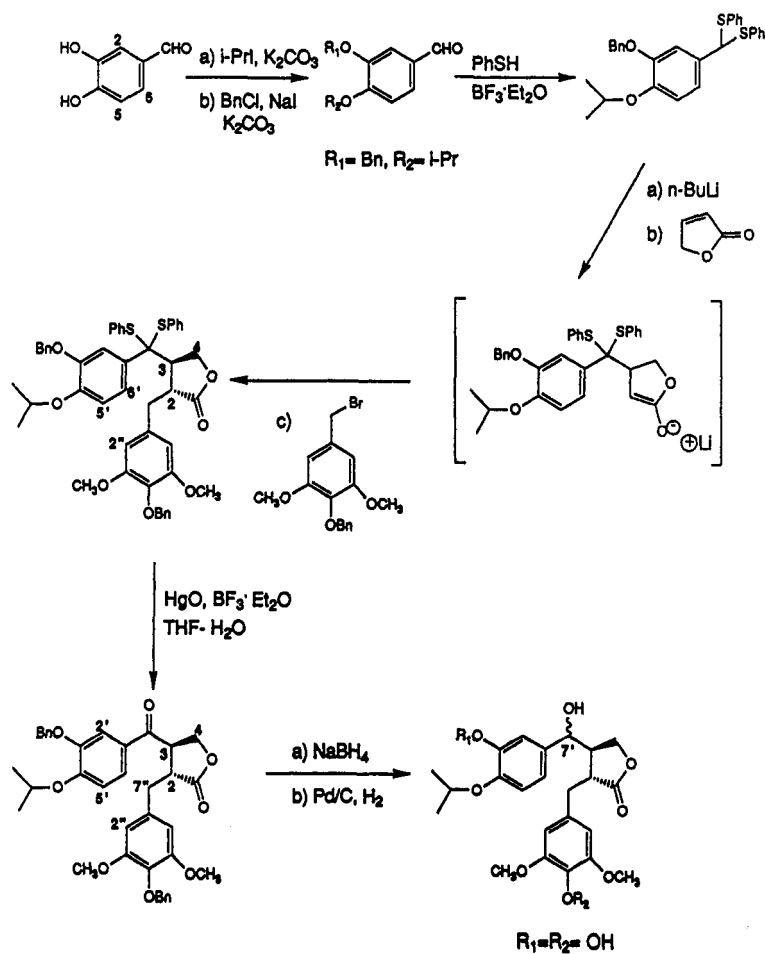


Fig. 2. Synthesis of a dibenzylbutanolide for biotransformation studies.

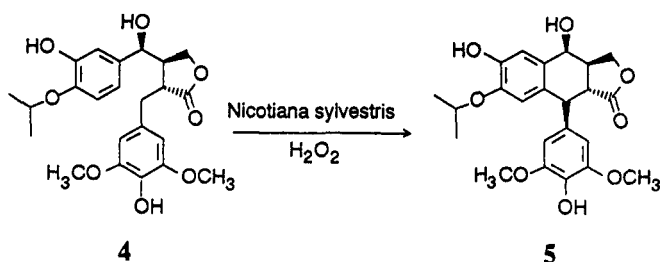
1.1.1 Studies with whole cell fermentations - Semi-continuous process provides a "biological factory". With a successful cell culture of *P. peltatum* which afforded podophyllotoxin, deoxypodophyllotoxin and 4'-demethylepipodophyllotoxin (Fig. 1) on hand (ref. 18), it was appropriate to evaluate the enzyme-catalyzed cyclization of the above-noted synthetic substrates. For the sake of brevity, one particular study involving the butanolide **4** and a semi-continuous process will be presented. In this approach, the fermentation broth, after a certain incubation period with **4**, would be withdrawn under aseptic conditions, new medium, and a new batch of **4** added, and the process repeated over a number of cycles. Obviously, if successful, one batch of cell culture could be utilized for successive

productions of **5** (Fig. 3), and this "biological factory" could afford a highly attractive approach toward multigram quantities of end products. Indeed, a successful approach has been developed in our laboratory (ref. 7). In brief, one batch of cells maintains the necessary enzymatic activity to biotransform **4** to **5** for several months during which time 16 batches of **4** had been added (yield of **5**, 50%, not optimized). In summary, the semi-continuous process, once optimized, will afford a highly attractive route to various analogues of the podophyllotoxin series.

Finally, it should be noted that an efficient process in removing the isopropyl group in **5** and regeneration of the methylenedioxy function as required in **2** (Fig. 1) has already been completed in our laboratory.

1.2 Studies with the *Nicotiana sylvestris* cell line.

While the above studies were underway, we developed a stable cell line of *N. sylvestris* (ref. 10, 11) and were able to demonstrate, via the appropriate enzyme assay, that this cell line produces high levels of "peroxidases" which are excreted into the broth. It was therefore of interest to determine whether such peroxidases are capable of biotransforming these dibenzylbutanolide precursors to the desired cyclic products. Figure 3 summarizes the conditions which provided an 87% yield of **5** in a short time period (40 min). Although conditions have not been optimized, it is clear that this cell line provides a highly attractive route for gram scale production of podophyllotoxins. A summary of the most pertinent results has been published (ref. 12).



Biotransformation conditions:

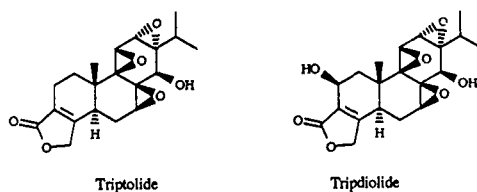
Substrate	0.67 g/L
Enzyme source	broth from cell culture of <i>Nicotiana sylvestris</i> (10 day old)
Peroxidase	50 units/mmol substrate (pyrogallol method)
Cofactor (H ₂ O ₂)	1.0 equivalents
Phosphate buffer, pH 6.3	6.7 mM
Temperature	14°C
Biotransformation time	40 min.
Yield of product	87 %

Possibility of Large Scale Biotransformation:

Broth from 80 L *Nicotiana* cell culture contains sufficient peroxidase enzyme to convert 1 000 g of the above substrate to 870 g of ring closed product

Fig. 3. Biotransformation of a dibenzylbutanolide with the cell culture of *Nicotiana sylvestris*.

While the above studies were underway, a parallel series of experiments in the chemical laboratory were undertaken. Figure 4 summarizes the overall sequence from the readily available 1,3-dithiane derivative of piperonal to the target molecule, 4'-demethylepipodophyllotoxin (**2**) and its C-1 epimer (**6**).



approach selected was to synthesize appropriate “substrates” and subsequently to incubate these in whole cell fermentations and/or in the presence of TRP4a cell line derived enzymes, in order to achieve biotransformation to novel end products.

Synthetic routes to various diterpene analogues from the readily available dehydroabietic acid were developed and biotransformation experiments were conducted. The results obtained in the biotransformation of one of these substrates, isotriptophenolide (7), are summarized in Fig. 5.

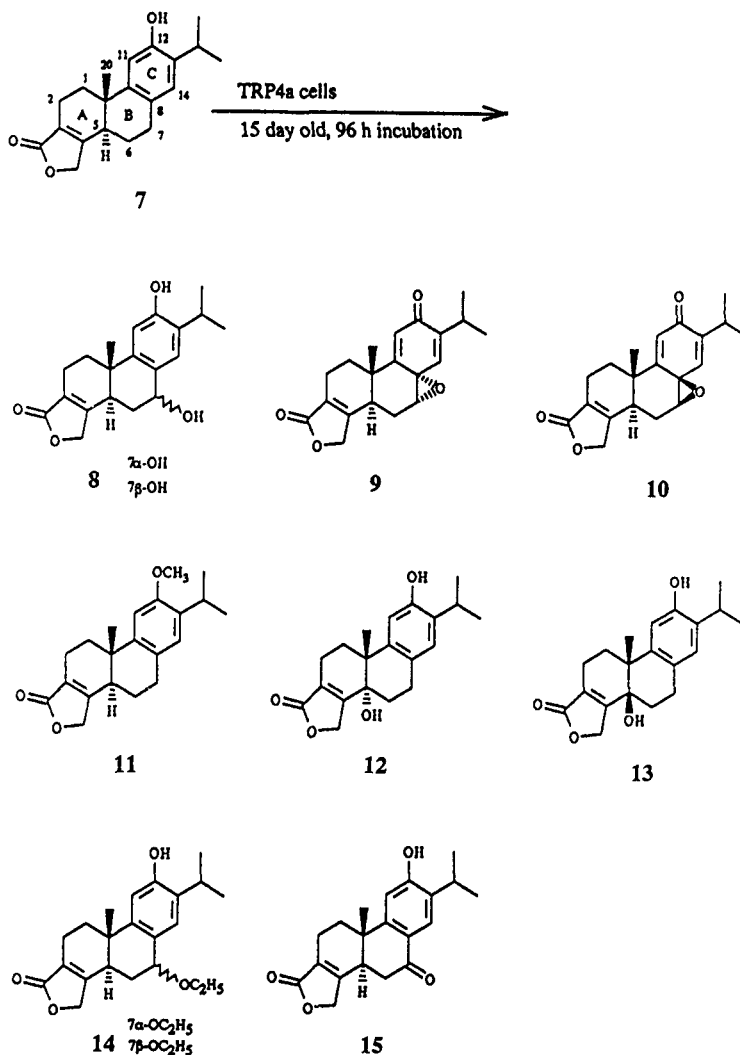


Fig. 5. Biotransformation of isotriptophenolide (7) with TRP4a cells.

The biotransformation of 7, dissolved in ethanol, was investigated with 21 day old TRP4a cells with incubation times varying from 96 h to 7 days, and the two isomeric epoxides **9** and **10** were obtained in

a combined yield of 54%. It should be noted that reaction conditions were not optimized. The other compounds **8**, **11-15**, were minor products. Pharmacological evaluation is currently underway.

In order to develop a family of novel diterpene epoxides so as to afford a structure-activity relationship within this series of pharmacologically interesting compounds, a combination of biotechnology and synthetic chemistry program was undertaken. Figure 6 exemplifies the advantages of this strategy. *T. wilfordii* cell cultures are first utilized to afford the novel epoxides **9** and **10**, the latter being inaccessible via chemical methods in spite of numerous unsuccessful chemical experiments to obtain **9** and **10** from **7**. These epoxides are then subjected to epoxidation in the chemical laboratory to afford **16** and **17** for pharmacological screening.

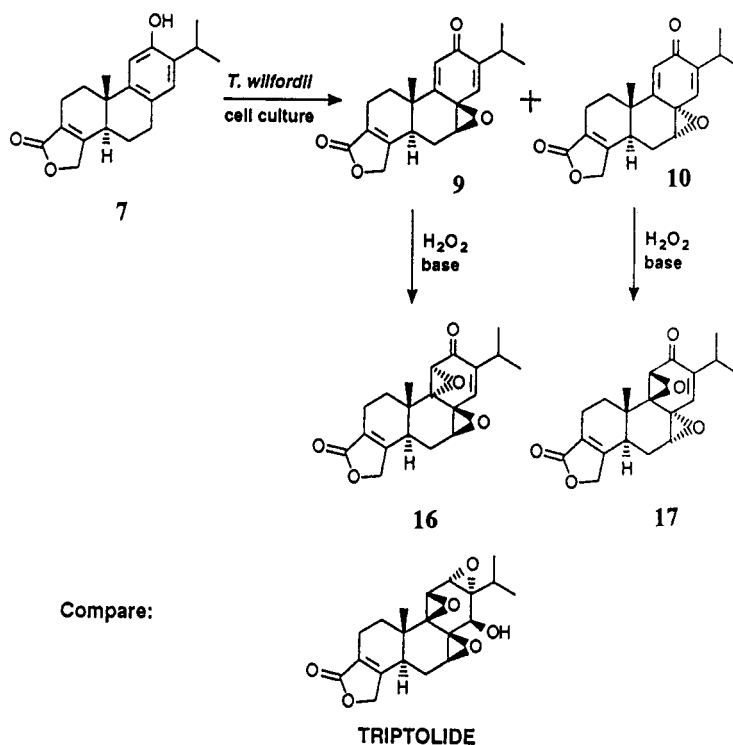


Fig. 6. Combination of biotechnology with synthetic chemistry affords a versatile route to novel diterpene epoxides.

Section 3. Use of Plant Cell Cultures to Separate Pharmacological Activities in Complex Herbal Medicine Extracts.

As noted above, *T. wilfordii* plant extracts have revealed interesting pharmacological properties in the treatment of various diseases in man. The obvious advantages of plant cell culture versus living plants in terms of providing higher yields, a less complex and more easily handled mixture of metabolites, afford an attractive route to separate the pure components and assess their pharmacological properties. As noted earlier, studies with our TRP4a cell line allowed the separation of pure compounds and subsequent evaluation will shed some light on the properties of *T. wilfordii* derived herbal mixtures. A brief summary is presented here.

(i) Immunosuppressive activity. In developing drugs of potential interest in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, immunosuppression is considered as a significant parameter. For this reason, various metabolites from the TRP4a cell line were submitted for such assays, for example, lymphocyte proliferation, and in comparison with cyclosporine. The diterpene triepoxides, triptiolide and triptolide, were highly active (95-99% immunosuppression at 100 picograms/ml) and further studies are clearly required to establish structure-activity relationships.

(ii) *Cytotoxic activity.* In *in vitro* tests conducted recently against a spectrum of human cancer cell lines, the above-noted triepoxides have revealed significant growth inhibition at nanogram levels and their potential in cancer chemotherapy is of interest.

(iii) *Male contraceptive activity.* Clinical data, available from extensive studies in China (ref. 19) have shown that triptolide and triptolide possess significant anti-spermatogenic activity in human males. Triptolide chlorohydrin, triptolide, is presently in clinical trials.

Conclusion

The above discussion has revealed that the interplay between plant cell culture methodology and synthetic chemistry provides a unique opportunity for entertaining areas of interest related to a broad spectrum of scientists. The results obtained afford information of interest to synthetic and medicinal chemists, pharmacologists and enzymologists and finally scientists involved in the commercial production and development of drugs. Of particular significance, this interdisciplinary approach has afforded efficient routes for the commercial production of several clinical anti-cancer drugs, vinblastine, vincristine, and Etoposide. To be specific: (1) studies with the cell cultures (enzymes) of *Catharanthus roseus* afforded important biosynthetic information concerning the plant biosynthesis of vinblastine. This information was then utilized to develop a commercially attractive "one-pot" process to vinblastine and vincristine. This process is presently undergoing development for commercial production of these drugs (see ref. 1-3); (2) studies with the cell cultures of *Podophyllum peltatum* and *Nicotiana sylvestris*, in combination with synthetic chemistry, has afforded commercially attractive routes to the commercial precursor, 4'-demethylepipodophyllotoxin (2), for large scale production of Etoposide. The dependence on *P. peltatum* plants as a source of podophyllotoxin (1) and, in turn 2, is now eliminated (see Figs. 2-4).

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges financial support from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. He is also grateful to Professor George R. Pettit and his colleagues at the Arizona Cancer Institute, Tempe, Arizona, for cytotoxicity studies of our compounds, and to Dr. Jan Glinski, Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals Inc., Ridgefield, Connecticut, for data relating to immunosuppressive activity.

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