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Uncatalyzed Michael addition of indoles: synthesis of some novel 3-alkylated indoles via a three-component reaction in solvent-free conditions

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Abstract—Synthesis of some novel 3-alkylated indoles via an uncatalyzed Michael addition of indoles using three components in one-pot solvent-free conditions is reported. The mechanism was established by performing the reaction in two steps. The reaction was also studied in different solvents and an important solvent effect was noticed.
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The importance of indoles is well recognized by synthetic as well as biological chemists.[1] The most ubiquitous of the known bioactive alkaloids are based on the indole moiety.[2] Medicinal chemists repeatedly turn to indole-based compounds as a target pharmacophore for the development of therapeutic agents.[3] The prevalence of this motif in natural and bioactive products continues to be a vector in the development of new methodology to find useful compounds.[4] Michael addition of indoles to α,β-unsaturated systems is an efficient approach to indole-containing molelcules.[5] Owing to the total atom efficiency these reactions are inherently green.[6] The regioselectivity in the addition of indoles to electron-deficient alkenes is strongly controlled by the reaction conditions: N-alkylation under alkaline conditions and C-3-substitution in acid-catalyzed reactions. Besides protic acids, a number of Lewis acid catalyzed methodologies for the C-3 alkylation of indoles by Michael addition have been reported[7] and the use of lanthanide triflates[8] represents an attractive alternative to their classical competitors such as $AlCl_3$ and $SnCl_4$. Unfortunately, lanthanide triflates are rather expensive and their use in large-scale synthetic methodology is very limited. Recently $CeCl_3{\cdot}7H_2O$–NaI supported on silica gel was successfully utilized for the Michael addition of indoles to an α,β-unsaturated system.[9]

Barbituric acids are an important class of compounds that constitute the basic moiety of a number of clinically used hypnotic drugs of the barbiturate class (5-alkylated barbituric acids), for example, Veronal, Seconal, Phenobarbital and Luminal.[10]

Development of new solid-phase (solvent-free) reactions and transferring solution-phase reactions to solid-phase are subjects of recent interest in the context of generating libraries of molecules for the discovery of biologically active leads and also for the optimization of drug candidates.[11] One-pot multi-component reactions (MCRs), by virtue of their convergence, ease of execution and generally high yields of products have attracted considerable attention.[12] In the past decade there have been tremendous developments in three- and four-component reactions and great efforts have been and continue to be made to find and develop new MCRs.[13]

In our continued interest in the synthesis of diverse heterocyclic compounds of biological importance,[14] we report here the synthesis of some novel 3-alkylated indoles via a three-component reaction in solvent-free conditions. The reaction, which gave access to 5-alkylated barbituric acids also demonstrated an uncatalyzed Michael addition of indoles to an α,β-unsaturated system (Scheme 1).

Utilizing equimolar amounts of indole **1a** benzaldehyde **2a** and *N*,*N*-dimethylbarbituric acid **3a** in the absence of solvents at 95 °C for 15 min afforded[15] after work-up,

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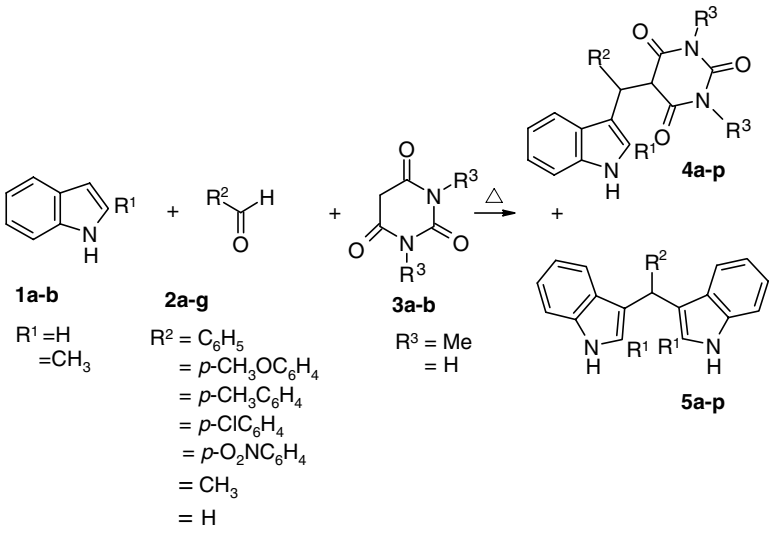


Scheme 1.

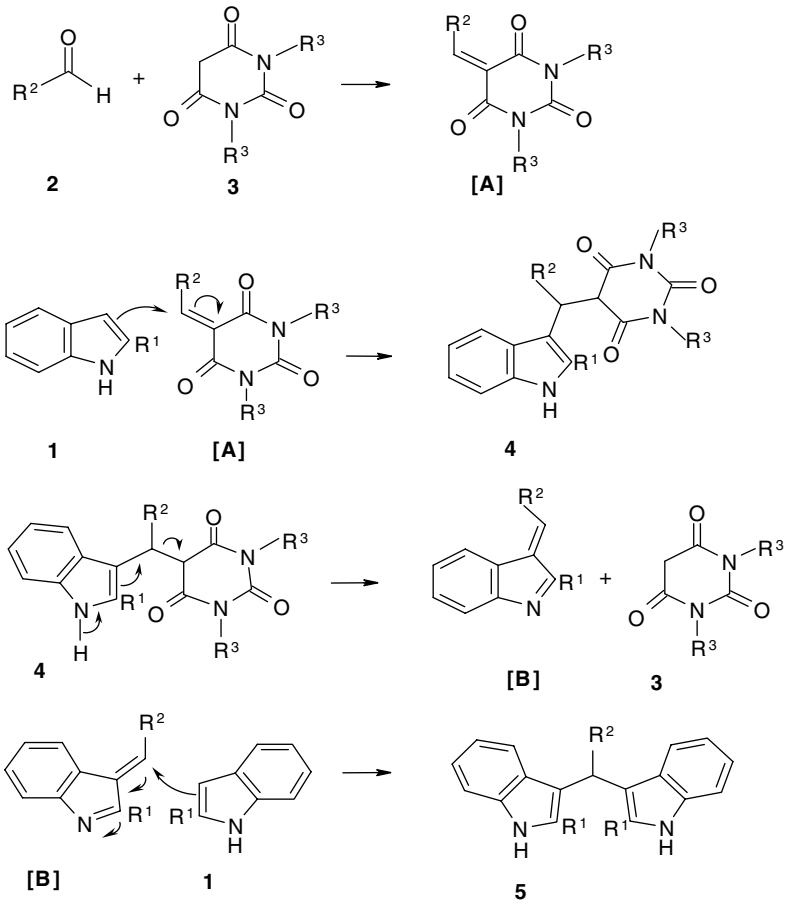
67% of 3-alkylated indole **4a** as a crystalline compound, the structure confirmed from the spectroscopic data and elemental analysis. In addition to the Michael adduct, we isolated 15% of 3,3′-bisindolylmethane **5a**, with physical and spectroscopic data comparable in all respects to those of an authentic sample.[16] Similarly compounds **4b**–**p** and **5b**–**p** were synthesized from **1**–**3** and characterized. The reaction is equally applicable to aliphatic aldehydes. The three-component reactions and our observations are recorded in Table 1. 2-Methylindole was found to be highly reactive and the formation of compounds **4** and **5** to depend on the reaction time. Thus, we obtained a maximum yield of compound **4** in 10 min, while a reaction time above 15 min maximized the yield of bisindolylmethanes **5**. However, we obtained **4** as a minor compound and **5** as a major compound when **3b** was utilized in the three-component reactions.

A reasonable mechanism for the formation of 3-alkylated indoles from the three-component reaction is outlined in Scheme 2. The sequence starts with the formation of Knoevenagel product [**A**] from **2** and **3** under thermal condition which then suffers a nucleophilic attack by indole **1** to give Michael adduct **4**. The formation of minor bisindolylmethane **5** can be explained by the formation of small amount of [**B**] from product **4** with the elimination of barbituric acid **3** under thermal conditions.[17] The intermediate [**B**] then adds a second indole to give **5**. Comparatively easy formation of intermediate [**B**] might be the reason for small yields of the compounds **4n**–**p** and hence the maximum formation of bisindolylmethanes **5n**–**p**.

We confirmed the mechanism by performing the transformations in two steps. First we synthesized the α,β-unsaturated system [**A**] by condensing aldehydes **2** with barbituric acids **3** following our own method[18] and then reacted [**A**] with indole at 85 °C for 10–25 min in the absence of solvent.[19] As expected we obtained 3-alkylated indoles **4** as a major product and bisindolylalkanes **5** as a minor product (Table 2). The small amounts of barbituric acids **3** eliminated during the process were isolated and characterized. However,

Table 1. Three-component reactions of **1**–**3** in solvent-free conditions and synthesis of 3-alkylated indoles **4** and bisindolylmethanes **5**

R^1 of **1**	R^2 of **2**	R^3	Time (min)	Temperature (°C)	Product **4**	Yield (%)	Product **5**	Yield (%)
H	C_6H_5	CH_3	15	95	**4a**	67	**5a**	15
H	4-MeC_6H_4	CH_3	15	85	**4b**	65	**5b**	12
H	4-$MeOC_6H_4$	CH_3	15	85	**4c**	68	**5c**	10
H	4-ClC_6H_4	CH_3	15	85	**4d**	61	**5d**	14
H	4-$O_2NC_6H_4$	CH_3	15	110	**4e**	70	**5e**	12
CH_3	C_6H_5	CH_3	12	80	**4f**	73	**5f**	10
CH_3	4-MeC_6H_4	CH_3	10	80	**4g**	70	**5g**	12
CH_3	4-$MeOC_6H_4$	CH_3	10	80	**4h**	74	**5h**	10
CH_3	4-ClC_6H_4	CH_3	15	80	**4i**	74	**5i**	10
CH_3	4-O_2N–C_6H_4	CH_3	15	80	**4j**	74	**5j**	11
H	CH_3	CH_3	25	80	**4k**	64	**5k**	15
H	H	CH_3	25	100	**4l**	74	**5l**	10
CH_3	H	CH_3	20	120	**4m**	75	**5m**	8
H	C_6H_5	H	25	120	**4n**	22	**5a**	59
CH_3	C_6H_5	H	25	150	**4o**	24	**5f**	65
H	4-MeC_6H_4	H	25	150	**4p**	23	**5b**	62
				150				



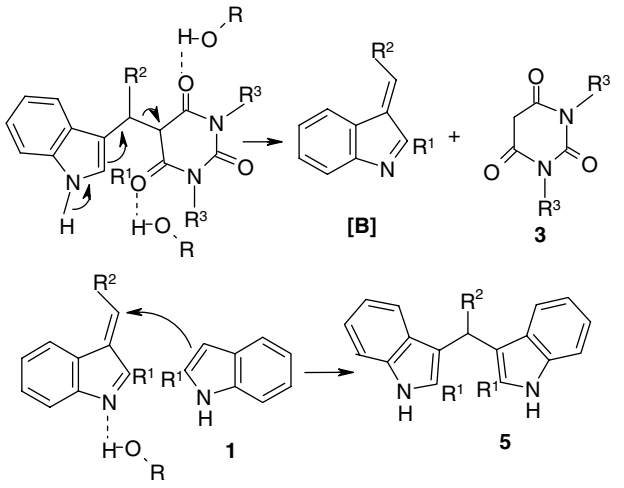
Scheme 2.

Table 2. Two-component reactions of **1** & [**A**] in solvent-free/in solvent (acetonitrile) and synthesis **4** and **5**

Entry	Solvent free/(in solvent) Time (min/h), Temperature (°C)	Product **4**	mp (°C)	Yield (%)	Product **5**	Yield (%)
1	15 min, 85 (11 h), (rt)	**4a**	175–176	65 (64)	**5a**	10 (8)
2	15 min, 85 (11 h), (rt)	**4b**	156–158	72 (75)	**5b**	7 (5)
3	15 min, 85 (10 h), (rt)	**4c**	171–173	74 (71)	**5c**	5 (4)
4	15 min, 85 (11 h), (rt)	**4d**	161–162	70 (70)	**5d**	8 (5)
5	15 min, 80 (9 h), (rt)	**4e**	148–150	65 (70)	**5e**	11 (7)
6	5 min, 80 (9 h), (rt)	**4f**	177–178	70 (72)	**5f**	10 (8)
7	5 min, 80 (9 h), (rt)	**4g**	171–173	72 (70)	**5g**	10 (7)
8	7 min, 80 (9 h), (rt)	**4h**	103–106	68 (72)	**5h**	12 (5)
9	8 min, 85 (10 h), (rt)	**4i**	179–181	68 (70)	**5i**	12 (10)
10	5 min, 85 (10 h), (rt)	**4j**	189–190	55 (52)	**5j**	20 (12)
11	40 min, 85 (13 h), (rt)	**4k**	163–164	63 (65)	**5k**	8 (5)
12	30 min, 85 (9 h), (rt)	**4l**	175–176	74 (75)	**5l**	—
13	30 min, 85 (9 h), (rt)	**4m**	173–174	67 (72)	**5m**	—
14	40 min, 85 (13 h), (rt)	**4n**	163–164	23 (22)	**5a**	60 (55)
15	30 min, 85 (9 h), (rt)	**4o**	175–176	26 (19)	**5f**	69 (62)
16	30 min, 85 (9 h), (rt)	**4p**	173–174	21 (20)	**5b**	58 (55)

in the case of formaldehyde, 3-alkylated indoles were obtained as the sole product. The reason is that unlike aromatic and aliphatic aldehydes containing an α-hydrogen, the intermediate is not stabilized by either resonance or hyperconjugation.

The reaction was now studied in acetonitrile, dioxane, methanol and ethanol, and in all the cases the desired compounds **4** were not formed even under refluxing conditions. However, in protic solvents we observed the formation of bisindolyl-methanes **5** as the sole products, which can be reasonably explained by our recent study.[14b] We also studied the two-component reactions in various solvents. Accordingly, when equimolar amounts of indoles and intermediates [**A**] were reacted in acetonitrile at room temperature for 9–13 h, we obtained (19–75%) of the Michael addition products **4** and (4–62%) of bisindolylmethanes **5**, while in refluxing



Scheme 3.

acetonitrile these reactions required 1 h to give similar results (Table 2).[20] As in the three-component reactions, in entries 14–16 we obtained **4** as minor and **5** as major products. However, in EtOH or MeOH, we obtained bisindolylmethanes **5** as major products (70–75%) and Michael adducts **4** as minor compounds, as rationalized by the mechanism shown in Scheme 3. The protic solvents help the elimination of **3** and thus enhance the formation of intermediate [**B**]. This was further confirmed by refluxing Michael adduct **4** with an equimolar amount of indole **1** in MeOH for 0.5 h which afforded 80% of bisindolyl methane **5**. In the case of formaldehyde, when the Michael adduct and indole were heated in methanol, bisindolylmethane was not formed. Thus, the non-formation of intermediate [**A**] in the three-component reactions in different solvents is the reason for the non-formation of product **4**.

In conclusion we have reported the synthesis of some novel 3-alkylated indoles via three-component reactions in solvent-free conditions. Moreover, the results demonstrated a novel uncatalyzed Michael addition of indoles to an α,β-unsaturated system in a one-pot three-component reaction under solvent-free conditions. The mechanism of the three-component reaction was established by synthesizing the proposed intermediate and by performing the overall transformation in two steps.

Acknowledgements

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15. An equimolar amount indole **1a** (117 mg, 1 mmol), benzaldehyde **2a** (106 mg, 1 mmol) and *N*,*N*-dimethylbar-

bituric acid **3a** (156 mg, 1 mmol) were heated at 95 °C for 15 min. The reaction mixture was cooled to rt and petroleum ether:ethanol (4:1) (5 ml) added. After few minutes a solid appeared and was filtered off and recrystallized from ethanol:chloroform (3:1) (241 mg, 67%) m.p = 175–176 °C. IR (KBr): 3436 (NH stretch), 3148 (w), 3048 (w), 2956 (w), 1748 (w), 1693 (s), 1677 (s), 1665 (s), 1378 (m), 740 (m) cm^{-1}. ^1H NMR (300 MHz, $CDCl_3 + CD_3COCD_3$) δ 3.00 (s, 3H, NMe), 3.11 (s, 3H, NMe), 4.36 (d, 1H, $J = 2.85$ Hz), 5.24 (d, 1H, $J = 2.7$ Hz), 6.98–7.41 (m, 10H), 8.21 (s, 1H, NH). ^{13}C NMR (75 MHz, $CDCl_3 + CD_3COCD_3$) δ 28.6, 28.7, 48.8, 55.0, 111.6, 114.6, 119.5, 120.0, 122.7, 124.2, 126.9, 128.3, 128.4, 128.8, 136.5, 138.8, 151.4, 168.2, 169.2: *m/z* 362 $(M+H)^+$. Anal. Calcd for $C_{21}H_{19}N_3O_3$: C, 69.80; H, 5.26; N, 11.63. Found: C, 70.25; H, 5.17; N, 11.52.

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19. Equimolar amounts of indole **1a** (117 mg, 1 mmol) and [**A**] (244 mg, 1 mmol) were mixed till homogeneous and heated at 85 °C for 15 min. The reaction mixture was cooled to rt and added petroleum ether:chloroform (4:1) (5 ml). The solid obtained was filtered off and recrystallized from a mixture of ethanol:chloroform (3:1). The compound was identified as **4a** from the spectroscopic data and elemental analysis. Yield = 234 mg (65%). The filtrate was evaporated to dryness and bisindolylmethane **5a** isolated from the residue by column chromatography on silica gel column (eluent:hexane) and characterized.
20. Equimolar amounts of indole **1a** (117 mg, 1 mmol) and [**A**] (244 mg, 1 mmol) in acetonitrile (15 ml) were stirred for 11 h (or refluxed for 1 h). The solvent was removed under reduced pressure and added petroleum ether:chloroform (4:1) (5 ml). The solid obtained was filtered off and recrystallized from a mixture of ethanol:chloroform (3:1). The compound was identified as **4a** by spectroscopic and elemental analyzes. Yield = 230 mg (64%). The filtrate was evaporated to dryness and the bisindolylmethane **5a** isolated from the residue by column chromatography on silica gel column (eluent:hexane) and characterized.