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Synthesis of 5-aminolevulinic acid with nontoxic reagents and renewable methyl levulinate†

Yuxia Zai,^a Yunchao Feng,^a Xianhai Zeng,^a  *^{abc} Xing Tang,^a  ^{abc} Yong Sun^{abc} and Lu Lin^{abc}

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Synthesis of 5-aminolevulinic acid (5-ALA) was presented with novel bromination of biobased methyl levulinate (ML), followed by ammoniation and hydrolysis. Copper bromide (CuBr₂) was employed as the bromination reagent with higher selectivity and activity instead of the conventional liquid bromine (Br₂). 5-ALA was obtained in a high yield (64%) and purity (>95%) by optimum design, which is of great potential in industrialization.

5-Aminolevulinic acid (5-ALA) is generally known as an essential precursor molecule for tetrapyrrole synthesis such as porphyrin, heme, chlorophyll and vitamin B12.¹ It has been widely applied in localizing and photodynamic therapy for various cancers.^{2–4} It has also been used as a selective biodegradable insecticide, herbicide, salt tolerance agent or plant growth regulator in agricultural fields.⁵

To date, 5-ALA was mainly synthesized by microbial production methods,⁶ but the long-time and high-cost course restrict its scaled applications. On the other side, chemical routes using 2-hydroxypyridine, tetrahydrofurfurylamine and furfurylamine as starting materials involved in numerous bottleneck including toxic intermediates and rigorous reaction conditions.^{7,8} Thus, to develop a new pathway for 5-ALA production is of great significance, especially one that is a green and sustainable.

Biomass is an appealing starting material in value-added chemicals synthesis because of its advantages of renewability, sustainability and availability.⁹ Several biomass-derived platform compounds such as 5-hydroxymethylfurfural (HMF), 5-chloromethylfurfural (CMF), levulinic acid (LA) or its esters have been reported as efficient raw materials in the production of 5-ALA.^{10,11} However, the industrial manufacture of furan-type HMF and CMF cannot currently be achieved easily due to the high production and environment costs.^{12,13} Furthermore, conversion of furan-type chemicals to 5-ALA also suffers the economic problems concerning the use of expensive oxidants in the ring-opening stage. Unlike CMF and HMF, LA and its esters can be easily produced both from hemicellulose and cellulose, and its yearly tonnage is therefore available *via* the acidic

processing of biomass at a competitively low price.^{14–16} Thus, to synthesize 5-ALA from LA or its esters is exceptionally promising. Typically, 5-ALA can be effectively prepared from levulinates *via* a three-stage process including bromination, ammoniation and acidolysis.¹⁷ However, the bromination of levulinates with Br₂ in this course has low selectivity to 5-bromo derivatives. Besides, Br₂ is hazardous and environmentally unfriendly. Hence, a crucial step of the production of 5-ALA from levulinates is to explore a safe bromide agent with higher selectivity and activity.

CuBr₂, a green and low toxic brominated reagent, was usually used for the synthesis of α -bromination of cyclopentenone derivatives and its closest analogues-indanone of carbonyl compounds for its advantages of short reaction times, high selectivity of the products, high yields and easily handle procedures.^{18,19} In this content, various unsymmetrical aliphatic ketones including levulinic acid, methyl levulinate, ethyl levulinate, 5-hydroxy-2-pentanone and 2-butanone was attempted for bromizing with CuBr₂ (Table 1). Interestingly, the yields of bromination products were different, depending on the source of aliphatic ketones.

In this work, we present the synthesis of 5-ALA from biomass derived methyl levulinate (ML) under mild conditions using CuBr₂ as a greener bromine donor, and a high yield of 5-bromolevulinic acid (M5B) up to 85% was achieved. Furthermore, a detailed discussion of ammoniation and acidolysis was also presented, corresponding a high total 5-ALA yield over 64% (Scheme 1).

The first attempt to screen the reaction conditions for the bromination of ML with CuBr₂ are shown in Table 2. An encouraging yield of the desired product (50%) is indeed obtained using CuBr₂ as bromide agent in CH₃OH at 40 °C for 3 h (Table 2, entry 1). The investigation of the solvent indicated that CH₃OH–CHCl₃ mixed solvent was superior to ethyl acetate (EA), CHCl₃, CH₃OH, CH₃OH–EA and EA–CHCl₃ (Table 2, entry 2–6). The results may due to the fact that CH₃OH can improve the selectivity of M5B and haloalkanes are favourable to

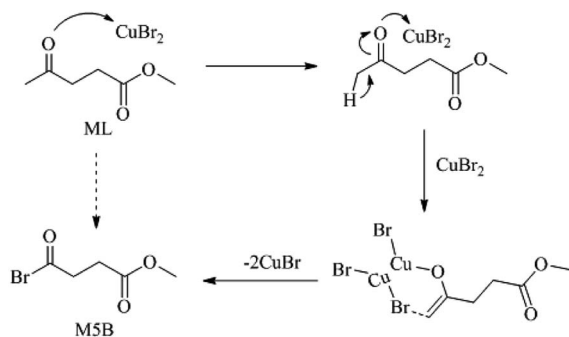
^aCollege of Energy, Xiamen University, Xiamen 361102, China. E-mail: xianhai.zeng@xmu.edu.cn; Fax: +86-592-2880701; Tel: +86-592-2880701

^bFujian Engineering and Research Centre of Clean and High-valued Technologies for Biomass, Xiamen 361102, China

^cXiamen Key Laboratory of Clean and High-valued Utilization for Biomass, Xiamen 361102, China

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Scheme 2 The proposed mechanism of conversion of ML to M5B with CuBr_2 .

a key chemical that has been widely applied in medical and agricultural areas. CuBr_2 was applied as both catalyst and bromine atom donor and was demonstrated to be of higher selectivity and activity than the conventional hazardous Br_2 in ML bromination. Each stage proceeds in high ($\sim 85\%$) yield and affords 5-ALA in 95% purity, giving a process that could be commercially viable.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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