

Activation of Chromium Catalysts by Photoexcited Hantzsch Ester for Decarboxylative Allylation of Aldehydes with Butadiene

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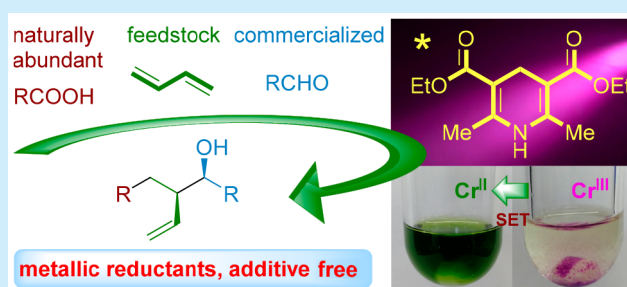
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ABSTRACT: Metallaphotocatalysis often needs light-absorbing metal-polypyridyl complexes, semiconductors, or organic dyes, which can modify the oxidation state of metal catalysts. Here, we first report that photoexcitation of Hantzsch ester can directly activate chromium reagents through a single-electron transfer process. The synthetic application was demonstrated through a photoredox decarboxylative allylation of aldehydes with feedstock butadiene without exogenous photocatalysts, metallic reductants, or additives.



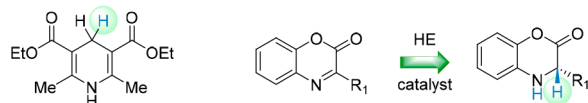
In recent years, metallaphotocatalysis has become a powerful tool in organic synthesis and witnessed a rapidly growing number of newly discovered reaction modes under eco-friendly conditions.^{1–5} The success of the metallaphotocatalysis depends on a light-absorbing photocatalyst, which can remove an electron from or donate an electron to an active metal and thus modulate its oxidation state. However, the high cost of photocatalysts, which are commonly precious metal-polypyridyl complexes or synthetically elaborated organic dyes, impedes their further application for large-scale industrial processes.

Hantzsch esters (HEs) are well understood as hydride (H^-) sources and sacrificial electron donors in their ground state (Figure 1a).^{6,7} Recent studies found that these low-cost and easily available photoactive compounds can serve as strong single-electron photoreductants upon light irradiation for small

molecule transformations.^{8–10} Utilization of the photoreduction ability of excited HE* for metallaphotocatalysis is highly appealing but scarcely developed. Recently, Melchiorre reported a leading example in which photoexcited 4-alkyl-HEs* can act as an organic photoreductant to produce catalytically active Ni(0) bypassing exogenous photocatalysts.¹¹ Meanwhile, Molander showed another elegant example in which HE* can activate Ni(0) species in conjunction with decarboxylation of NHPI ester for $C(sp^3)-C(sp^2)$ bond formation.¹² Given that the redox potential of HE* was estimated to be -2.28 V versus SCE,¹⁰ the reduction of Cr^{III} ($E_p Cr^{III/II} = -0.51$ V vs SCE in DMF)¹³ by HE* should be thermodynamically feasible. Herein, we report that photoexcitation of HE can directly activate Cr catalysts (Figure 1b), avoiding stoichiometric metal reductants such as Zn and Mn that are usually used to reduce Cr^{III} to Cr^{II} in various reactions.^{14–16} This novel activation model enabled a three-component decarboxylative allylation of aldehydes with feedstock butadiene and naturally abundant alkyl acids for the synthesis of value-added homoallylic alcohols.^{17–20}

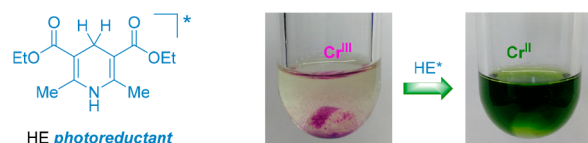
Butadiene is one of the most convenient industrial raw materials and frequently used for organic synthesis.^{21,22} Recently, transition metal-catalyzed three-component allylation of carbonyls with butadiene has attracted a great deal of attention due to its overall synthetic efficiency and environ-

a) hydride (H^-) sources and sacrificial electron donors in the ground state of HE



HE hydride (H^-) sources

b) this work: photoreduction of Cr by HE*, unprecedented



HE photoreductant

Figure 1. (a) Reduction of imines by HE in the ground state. (b) Concept for photoreduction of $CrCl_3$ by HE*.

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mental sustainability.^{23–26} In particular, a radical-based Cr-catalyzed three-component allylation was first reported by Takai and further developed by Zhang and Glorius using fluoroalkyl iodides or 4-alkyl-HEs as radical precursors.^{27–29} Carboxylic acids are highly attractive feedstocks in organic synthesis due to their excellent features, such as their low cost, abundance, easy operation, and large structural diversity. Photocatalytic radical decarboxylative functionalization through redox-active esters [*N*-hydroxyphthalimide (NHPI) esters] by forming an electron donor–acceptor complex has achieved great success.^{30–33} Specifically, in this work, the multiple roles of HE are to reduce redox-active esters to deliver alkyl radicals, to activate Cr catalysts, and to break the Cr–alkoxy bond, thereby bypassing exogenous photocatalysts, metallic reductants, and additives.

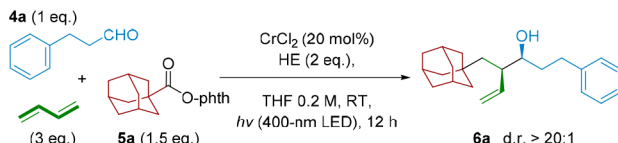
The studies were started by examining butadiene, aliphatic aldehyde **4a**, and NHPI ester **5a** derived from 1-adamantancarboxylic acid as radical precursors. After a systematic study of various reaction parameters, we successfully found the favorable conditions under which a mixture of **4a** (1 equiv), **5a** (1.5 equiv), HE (2 equiv), and CrCl₂ (20 mol %), in a butadiene solution of THF, irradiated with a 400 nm LED lamp for 12 h, afforded homoallylic alcohol **6a** in a satisfactory yield of 93% with exceptional regio- and diastereoselectivity [*dr* > 20:1 (Table 1, entry 1)]. A reasonable yield of 86% can

(S4 of the Supporting Information).³⁴ The preparation of **6a** was performed on a gram scale, and a pleasing yield of 83% was obtained, demonstrating the scalability of the reaction.

After optimizing the allylation reaction conditions, we further investigated the scope of the substrates. Remarkably, the reaction went well with various primary, secondary, and tertiary alkyl acids derived NHPI esters and abundant aliphatic/aromatic aldehydes, affording the homoallylic alcohols in generally good yields with excellent regio- and diastereoselectivity control (Scheme 1). Sterically hindered tertiary alkyl acids, such as bicyclo[2.2.2]octane acid **6i** and adamantane acid **6a**, worked efficiently and produced homoallylic alcohols in excellent yields. We were pleased to find that secondary cyclic alkyl acids, including strained three-, four-, five-, and six-membered rings participated in the allylation reaction affording good yields (**6n–6r**). Remarkably, under current conditions, the highly reactive primary radical generated from primary alkyl acids can add to butadiene and successfully produce alcohols in satisfactory yields. It was also found that the aryl substituent effect of aromatic aldehydes has no obvious effect on the reaction, including -OMe, -H, -F, -Cl, and -Br (**6d–6h**, respectively). The sterically hindered trimethylbenzaldehyde **6o** was successfully allylated. Heteroatoms, such as oxygen (**6t**), sulfur (**6v**), and protected amine (**6aa**) did not interfere with the catalytic cycle. In addition, this dual catalysis system was also compatible with various heteroarenes, including furan **6w** and thiophene **6v**, which are widely used as core structures in pharmaceutical synthesis. Three-membered ring **6n** and four-membered ring **6o** with ring tension were also successfully allylated. The fluorine atoms in **6u** remained intact under the current conditions. To illustrate the potential applicability of our strategy in late-stage functionalization, several drugs derivatives were used and the desired products **6ah–6ak** were obtained in good yields. In particular, the 1,3-disubstituted bicyclo[1.1.1]pentane (BCP)-derived NHPI ester can be introduced into the three-component allylation of **6ai** and **6aj**, and the remaining ester group can be further elaborated. This is quite useful as BCP motifs have been widely used in medicinal chemistry as pharmaceutical bioisosteres of benzene rings. Additionally, natural amino acids alanine and methionine were successfully used as radical sources to afford alcohols **6al** and **6am**, respectively, which are difficult to obtain from alkyl iodides. Additionally, the current photoreduction system is also suitable for asymmetric catalysis.^{28,29} In the preliminary studies under non-optimized conditions, the reaction proceeded well and the desired product **6a**, **6b**, and **6w** were obtained in satisfactory yields and enantioselectivities (for details, see section S5b). Overall, the allylation reactions proceeded quite efficiently without the use of any exogenous photocatalysts or additives.

A reaction was conducted in the absence of Cr and aldehydes. In this case, dimerized product **9** and its isomers were obtained in 67% yield (Figure 2a; for details, see section S5c). This result indicated that the NHPI esters can be directly reduced by HE via the formation of an electron donor–acceptor (EDA) complex.³² Additionally, excited HE* are reported to reduce ketone, resulting in ketyl radical. However, in this case, 2-phenylcyclopropane-1-carboxaldehyde **11** can be allylated successfully (Figure 2b) without the ring opening of cyclopropane. This suggested that excited HE* does not interact with carbonyls under the current conditions, and the ketyl radical intermediates are not likely involved in the reaction (Figure 2b). On the basis of these results and the

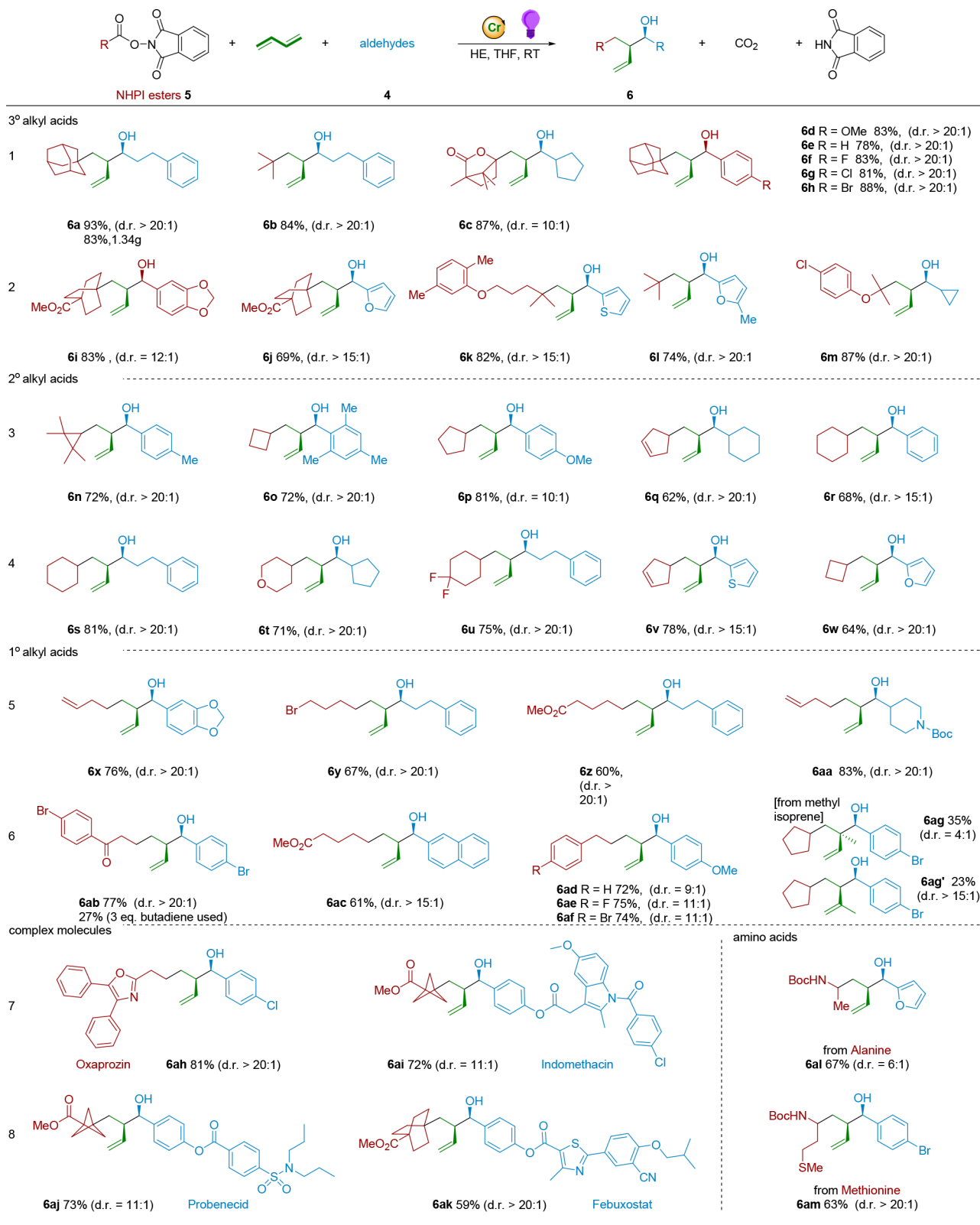
Table 1. Reaction Optimization for Aldehydes^a



entry	variation from standard conditions	yield (%)
1	none	93
2	CrCl ₂ (10 mol %), HE (3 equiv), 5a (2 equiv), 24 h	86
3	CrCl ₃ instead of CrCl ₂	71
4	white LED instead 400 nm LED	<5
5	450 nm or 530 nm LED instead of 400 nm LED	<5
6	DIPEA (or TEA) instead of HE	0
7	DCE instead of THF	78
8	DMF/MeCN/toluene instead of THF	0

^aReaction conditions: **4a** (0.5 mmol, 1 equiv, 0.2 M THF), **5a** (0.75 mmol, 1.5 equiv). Yields were determined by ¹H NMR spectroscopy vs an internal standard. Diastereomeric ratios were determined by ¹H NMR spectroscopy.

be obtained by using only 10 mol % CrCl₂ catalyst for a longer time (entry 2). When the bench stable CrCl₃ was used instead of CrCl₂, the reaction afforded the product in a slightly lower yield of 71% (entry 3). Importantly, the reaction is highly sensitive to the wavelength of light. For example, irradiation with a white LED, a 450 nm LED, or a 530 nm LED instead of a 400 nm LED resulted in very low yields of product (entries 4 and 5). Other organic electron donors such as *N,N*-diisopropylethylamine (DIPEA) or triethylamine (TEA), instead of HE, were tested and produced no product (entry 6). Different solvents, including dimethylformamide (DMF), acetonitrile (MeCN), and toluene, were evaluated, and they all afforded no product (entry 8). Notably, the allylation did not proceed without HE, chromium, or visible light. Condition-based sensitivity screening showed that the allylation is sensitive to H₂O and a high oxygen concentration (section

Scheme 1. Scope of Alkyl Esters and Aldehydes for Allylation Reactions^{a-c}

^aReactions were performed on a 0.5 mmol scale with **4** (1 equiv, 0.1 M THF), **5** (2 equiv), CrCl₂ (20 mol %), HE (2 equiv), butadiene, and a 400 nm LED for 20 h (for details, see section S5a). ^bWhen the product and Hantzsch pyridine cannot be completely separated, yields were determined by ¹H NMR spectroscopy vs an internal standard. ^cDiastereomeric ratios were determined by ¹H NMR spectroscopy. ^dButadiene (10 equiv) and HE (3 equiv) used for primary NHPI esters.

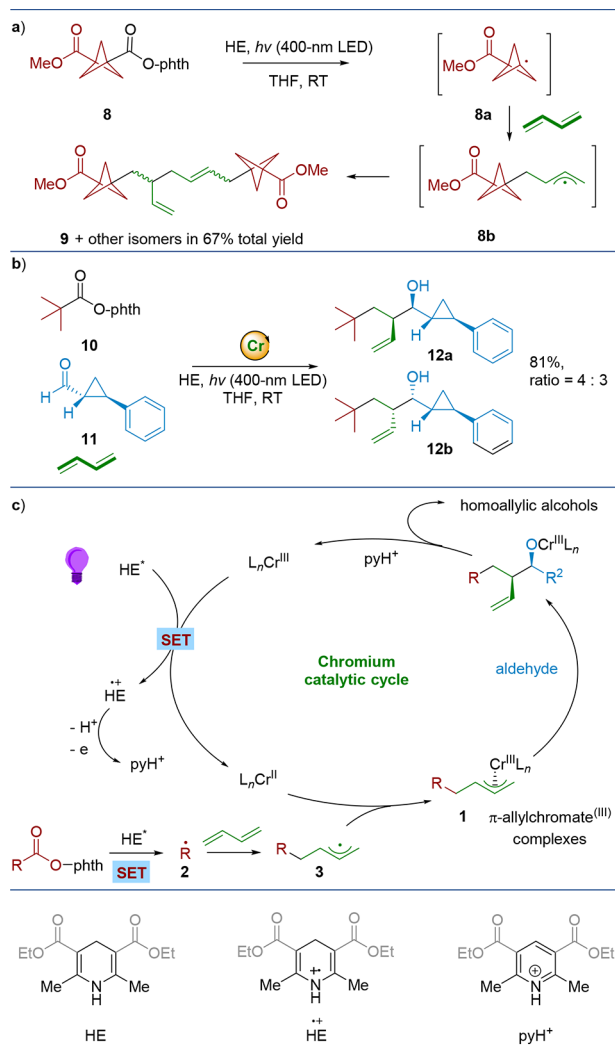


Figure 2. (a) Photoreduction of NHPI esters by excited HE* and the presence of an allyl radical **8b** and its dimerization. (b) Radical clock experiments. (c) Proposed catalytic mechanism.

previous reports,^{27–29} the proposed catalytic cycle is as follows (Figure 2c). First, Cr^{III} is reduced to Cr^{II} by excited HE* via a SET process. The resulting HE^{•+} can further participate in electron transfer events and eventually produce pyH⁺. Simultaneously, NHPI esters are reduced by another excited HE* via an EDA complex to produce alkyl radical **2**. Radical **2** rapidly adds to butadiene to produce allyl radical **3** (secondary and tertiary alkyl radicals can form reversible alkyl–Cr complexes). Then allyl radical **3** is trapped by Cr^{II} to produce nucleophilic **1**, which further couples with aldehydes. After hydrolysis of the O–Cr bond by pyH⁺, the alcohols and free Cr^{III} species are released. The observed selectivity can be explained by the Zimmerman–Traxler transition state.¹⁷

In summary, this study first reported that photoexcitation of HE with 400 nm irradiation can directly reduce Cr^{III} to active Cr^{II} through a SET process, which is unprecedented in the literature. The synthetic application was demonstrated through a photoredox decarboxylative allylation of aldehydes with feedstock butadiene, without the need for exogenous photocatalysts, stoichiometric metal reductants, or additives. This eco-friendly and operationally easy method affords rapid access to various structurally diverse homoallylic alcohols.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.orglett.1c03098>.

Detailed experimental procedures, absorption and emission spectra, HPLC spectra, characterization of new compounds, and copies of NMR spectra (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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