

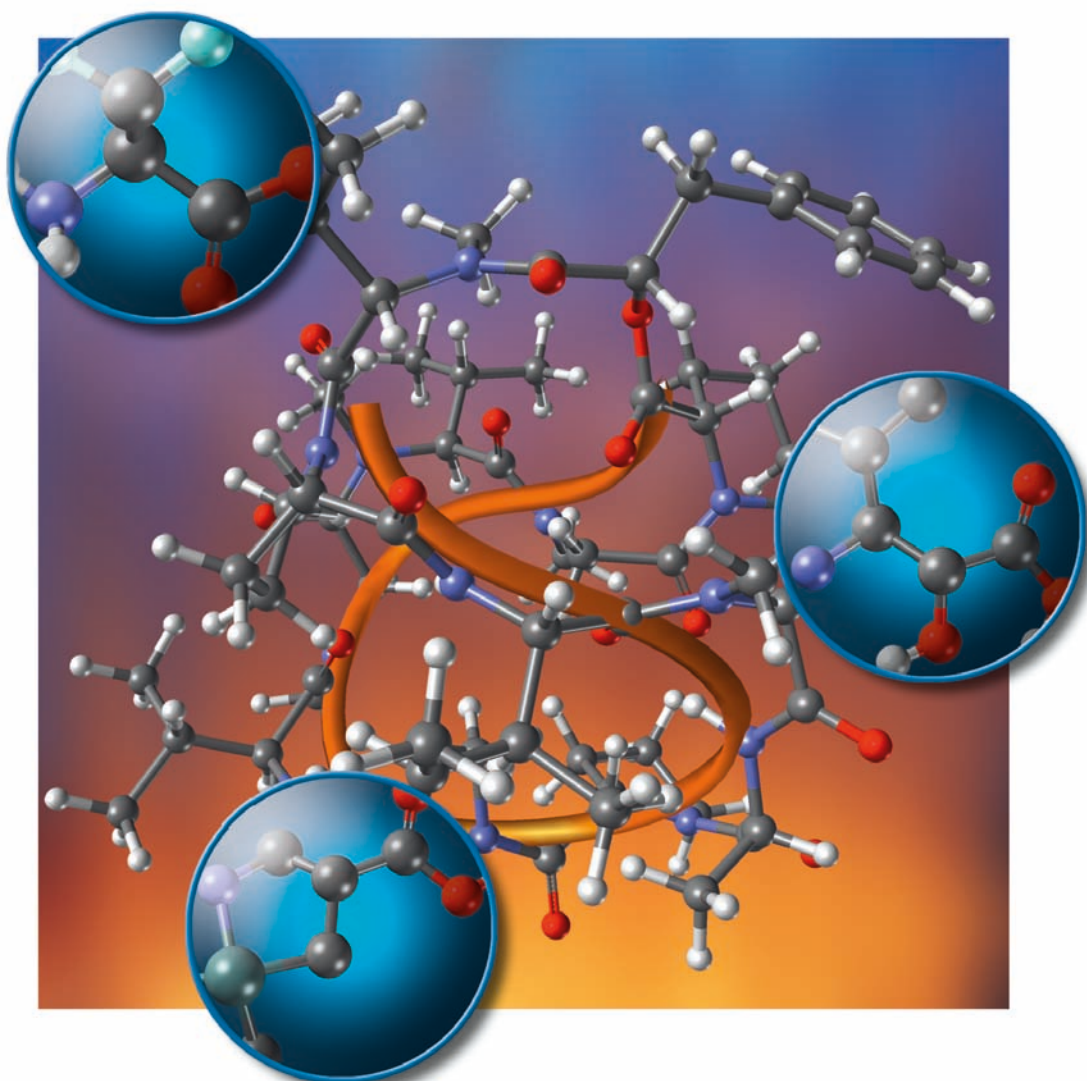
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# Amino Acids, Peptides and Proteins in Organic Chemistry

Volume 4

Protection Reactions, Medicinal Chemistry,  
Combinatorial Synthesis





*Edited by*  
*Andrew B. Hughes*

**Amino Acids, Peptides  
and Proteins in  
Organic Chemistry**

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## **Amino Acids, Peptides and Proteins in Organic Chemistry**

Volume 4 - Protection Reactions, Medicinal Chemistry,  
Combinatorial Synthesis



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## Contents

### List of Contributors XVII

<b>1</b>	<b>Protection Reactions</b>	<b>1</b>
	<i>Vommina V. Sureshbabu and Narasimhamurthy Narendra</i>	
1.1	General Considerations	1
1.2	$\alpha$ -Amino Protection ( $N^\alpha$ Protection)	4
1.2.1	Non-Urethanes	4
1.2.1.1	Acyl Type	4
1.2.1.1.1	Monoacyl Groups	5
1.2.1.1.2	Groups Cleavable via Lactam Formation	6
1.2.1.1.3	Diacyl Groups	7
1.2.1.2	Phosphine-Type Groups	10
1.2.1.3	Sulfonyl-Type Groups	10
1.2.1.4	Alkyl-Type Groups	11
1.2.1.4.1	Triphenylmethyl (Trityl or Trt) Group	11
1.2.1.4.2	Benzhydryl Groups	12
1.2.1.4.3	<i>N,N</i> -Bis-Benzyl Protection	12
1.2.1.4.4	Vinyl Groups	12
1.2.1.5	Sulfanyl-Type Groups	13
1.2.2	Urethanes (Carbamates or Alkylloxycarbonyl Groups)	14
1.2.2.1	Formation of the Urethane Bond	16
1.2.2.2	Urethanes Derived from Primary Alcohols	16
1.2.2.2.1	Benzyloxycarbonyl (Cbz or Z) Group	16
1.2.2.2.2	Urethanes Cleaved by $\beta$ -Elimination	19
1.2.2.2.3	Urethanes Cleaved via Michael-Type Addition	24
1.2.2.2.4	Allyloxycarbonyl (Aloc) Group	25
1.2.2.3	Urethane Groups Derived from Secondary Alcohols	25
1.2.2.4	Urethanes Derived from Tertiary Alcohols	25
1.2.2.4.1	<i>tert</i> -Butoxycarbonyl (Boc) Group	25
1.2.2.4.2	Boc Analogs	28
1.2.2.5	Other Aspects of Urethane Protectors	29

1.2.2.5.1	Formation of Dipeptide Impurities during the Introduction of Urethanes and Protocols to Overcome It	29
1.2.2.5.2	Introduction of Urethanes via Transprotection	30
1.2.2.5.3	Protection of the Nitrogen of $\alpha$ -Amino Acid <i>N</i> -Carboxy Anhydrides (NCAs)	31
1.2.2.5.4	$N^\alpha$ - $N^\alpha$ -bis-Protected Amino Acids	32
1.2.3	Other $N^\alpha$ -Protecting Groups	32
1.2.3.1	$\alpha$ -Azido Acids as $\alpha$ -Amino Acid Precursors	33
1.2.3.2	One-Pot $N^\alpha$ Protection and $C^\alpha$ Activation	33
1.2.3.3	Effect of $N^\alpha$ -Protecting Groups in the Synthesis of NMAs	33
1.3	Carboxy Protection	34
1.3.1	Methyl and Ethyl Esters	35
1.3.1.1	Substituted Methyl and Ethyl Esters	36
1.3.2	Benzyl Ester	36
1.3.2.1	Cleavage	36
1.3.3	Substituted Benzyl Esters	38
1.3.4	<i>tert</i> -Butyl Ester	38
1.3.5	Other Acid-Labile Esters	39
1.3.6	Temporary $\alpha$ -Carboxy Protection	39
1.3.7	$\alpha$ -Carboxy Protectors as Precursors to Useful Amino Acid Derivatives: Formation of Acid Hydrazides	41
1.4	Side-Chain Protection	41
1.4.1	$\omega$ -Amino Group of Diamino Acids	41
1.4.2	Guanidino Group of Arg	43
1.4.2.1	Protection Through Protonation	43
1.4.2.2	Nitration	44
1.4.2.3	Arg Precursors	45
1.4.3	Imidazole Group of His	45
1.4.4	Indole Group of Trp	48
1.4.5	$\omega$ -Amido Group of Asn and Gln	49
1.4.6	$\beta$ -Thiol Group of Cys	50
1.4.6.1	Common Side-Reactions with S-Protected Cys Derivatives	51
1.4.6.1.1	Racemization	51
1.4.6.1.2	$\beta$ -Elimination	51
1.4.6.1.3	Oxidation	51
1.4.6.2	Synthesis of Peptides Using Cystine as "Self-Protected" Cys	51
1.4.7	Thioether Group of Met	53
1.4.8	Hydroxy Group of Ser, Thr, and the Phenolic Group of Tyr	54
1.4.9	$\omega$ -Carboxy Group of Asp and Glu	55
1.4.9.1	Aspartimide Formation	55
1.5	Photocleavable Protections	57
1.6	Conclusions	58
1.7	Experimental Procedures	59
1.7.1	Protection Reactions	59
1.7.1.1	General Procedure for the Preparation of Tfa-Arg-OH	59



1.7.1.2	General Procedure for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Phthaloyl Amino Acids using <i>N</i> -(Ethoxycarbonyl)phthalimide	59
1.7.1.3	General Procedure for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Trt-Amino Acids	59
1.7.1.4	General Procedure for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Ns-Amino Acids	60
1.7.1.5	General Procedure for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Z-Amino Acids	61
1.7.1.5.1	Method A: Using Z-Cl	61
1.7.1.5.2	Method B: Using Z-OSu	62
1.7.1.6	General Procedures for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Fmoc-Amino Acids	62
1.7.1.6.1	Method A: Using Fmoc-OSu	62
1.7.1.6.2	Method B: Using Fmoc-Cl and <i>N,O</i> -bis-TMS-Amino Acids	62
1.7.1.6.3	Method C: Using Fmoc-Cl in the Presence of Zinc Dust	63
1.7.1.6.4	Method D: Using Fmoc- $N_3$	63
1.7.1.7	General Procedure for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Nsc-Amino Acids	64
1.7.1.8	General Procedure for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Bsmoc-Amino Acids	64
1.7.1.9	General Procedure for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Aloc-Amino Acids	65
1.7.1.10	General Procedures for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Boc-Amino Acids	65
1.7.1.10.1	Method A: Using $(Boc)_2O$	65
1.7.1.10.2	Method B: Using Boc-ON	65
1.7.1.10.3	Method C: Using Boc- $N_3$	66
1.7.1.11	General Procedure for the Preparation of <i>N,N'</i> -di-Boc-Amino Acids	66
1.7.1.12	General Procedure for the Preparation of $N^\alpha$ -Bpoc-Amino Acids	67
1.7.1.13	General Procedures for the Preparation of Amino Acid Methyl Esters	68
1.7.1.13.1	Preparation of Amino Acid Methyl Ester Hydrochloride Salts	68
1.7.1.13.2	Isolation of Amino Acid Methyl Esters: Deprotonation of the Hydrochloride Salt Using Zinc Dust	69
1.7.1.13.3	Glutamic Acid $\alpha$ -Methyl, $\gamma$ - <i>tert</i> -Butyl Diester Using Diazomethane	69
1.7.1.13.4	Z-Glu-OMe via Methanolysis of Cyclic Anhydride	69
1.7.1.14	General Procedure for the Preparation of Amino Acid Ethyl Esters	69
1.7.1.15	General Procedure for the Preparation of Amino Acid Benzyl Ester <i>p</i> -Toluenesulfonate Salts	70
1.7.1.15.1	Preparation of Amino Acid Benzyl Ester <i>p</i> -Toluenesulfonate Salts Under Microwave Irradiation	70
1.7.1.16	General Procedure for the Preparation of <i>tert</i> -Butyl Esters of $N^\alpha$ -Unprotected Amino Acids Using Isobutene	71
1.7.1.16.1	Preparation of Z-Phe-O <i>t</i> Bu by the Silver Salt Method	71
1.7.1.17	General Procedure for Concomitant Protection and Activation of Amino Acids Using Pentafluorophenyl Carbonate	80

1.7.2	Deprotection Reactions	81
1.7.2.1	Removal of the Phth Group by Hydrazinolysis	81
1.7.2.2	Removal of the Nps Group	81
1.7.2.3	Removal the Z-group	82
1.7.2.3.1	Protocol A: Employing CH	82
1.7.2.3.2	Protocol B: Employing Silylhydride	82
1.7.2.3.3	Protocol C: Through CTH using 1,4-Cyclohexadieneas Hydrogen Donor	83
1.7.2.4	Cleavage of the Fmoc Group	83
1.7.2.4.1	Method A: Using TAEA [67]	83
1.7.2.4.2	Method B: Using DEA: Simultaneous Removal of the Fmoc Group and 9-Fluorenylmethyl Ester	83
1.7.2.5	Cleavage of the Boc Group	84
1.7.2.5.1	Protocol A: Removal of the Boc group with TFA in the Presence of Scavengers	84
1.7.2.5.2	Protocol B: Cleavage of Boc Group with TMS/Phenol	84
1.7.2.6	Transprotection of $N^{\alpha}$ -Protecting Groups: Fmoc-Met-OH to Boc-Met-OH	84
1.7.2.7	Selective Methyl Ester Hydrolysis in the Presence of the $N^{\alpha}$ -Fmoc Group	84
1.7.2.8	Cleavage of <i>tert</i> -Butyl Ester Using $\text{BF}_3 \cdot \text{Et}_2\text{O}$	84
1.7.2.9	Selective Cleavage of Phenacyl Ester in the Presence of the $N^{\alpha}$ -Nosyl Group	85
1.7.2.10	Removal of the Trt Group (Iodolysis)	85
1.7.2.11	Deprotection of the Pbf Group from Z-Arg(Pbf)-OH	85
1.7.2.12	Removal of the Phenoc Group through Photolysis	85
1.7.2.13	Conversion of the DCHA Salt of $N^{\alpha}$ -Protected Amino Acids into Free Acids	85
	References	86

## Part One Amino Acid-Based Peptidomimetics 99

<b>2</b>	<b>Huisgen Cycloaddition in Peptidomimetic Chemistry</b>	<b>101</b>
	<i>Daniel Sejer Pedersen and Andrew David Abell</i>	
2.1	Introduction	101
2.2	Huisgen [2 + 3] Cycloaddition Between Azides and Acetylenes	102
2.3	Mechanistic Consideration for the Cu-Huisgen and Ru-Huisgen Cycloadditions	103
2.4	Building Blocks for the Synthesis of Triazole-Modified Peptidomimetics	106
2.5	Cyclic Triazole Peptidomimetics	109
2.6	Acyclic Triazole Peptidomimetics	113
2.7	Useful Experimental Procedures	121

2.7.1	Monitoring Huisgen Cycloadditions and Characterizing Triazoles	121
2.7.2	General Procedure for the Synthesis of 1,4-Triazoles Using Cu-Huisgen Cycloaddition	122
2.7.3	General Procedure for the Synthesis of 1,5-Triazoles Using Ru-Huisgen Cycloaddition	123
	References	124
<b>3</b>	<b>Recent Advances in <math>\beta</math>-Strand Mimetics</b>	<b>129</b>
	<i>Wendy A. Loughlin and David P. Fairlie</i>	
3.1	Introduction	129
3.1.1	$\beta$ -Strands	129
3.1.2	$\beta$ -Sheets	130
3.1.3	Differences in Strand/Sheet/Turn/Helix Recognition	130
3.1.4	Towards $\beta$ -Strand Mimetics	131
3.2	Macrocyclic Peptidomimetics	133
3.3	Acyclic Compounds	135
3.4	Aliphatic and Aromatic Carbocycles	136
3.5	Ligands Containing One Ring with One Heteroatom (N)	137
3.6	Ligands Containing One or Multiple Rings with One Heteroatom (O, S)	138
3.7	Ligands Containing One Ring with Two Heteroatoms (N,N)	139
3.8	Ligands Containing One Ring with Two Heteroatoms (N,S) or Three Heteroatoms (N,N,S or N,N,N)	140
3.9	Ligands Containing Two Rings with One Heteroatom (N or O)	140
3.10	Ligands Containing Two Rings with Two or Three Heteroatoms (N,N or N,S or N,N,N)	141
3.11	Conclusions	142
	References	143
<b>Part Two</b>	<b>Medicinal Chemistry of Amino Acids</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Medicinal Chemistry of <math>\alpha</math>-Amino Acids</b>	<b>151</b>
	<i>Lennart Bunch and Povl Krosggaard-Larsen</i>	
4.1	Introduction	151
4.2	Glutamic Acid	151
4.3	Conformational Restriction	153
4.3.1	Synthesis – General Considerations	154
4.3.2	Case Study: Synthesis of DCAN	155
4.3.3	Case Study: Synthesis of LY354740	157
4.3.4	Case Study: Synthesis of ABHD-V and ABHD-VI	158
4.4	Bioisosterism	159
4.4.1	Case Study: Design and Synthesis of AMPA	160
4.4.2	Case Study: Design and Synthesis of Thioibotenic Acid	161
4.5	Structure–Activity Studies	162

4.5.1	Case Study: AMPA Analogs	162
4.5.2	Case Study: 4-Substituted Glu analogs	163
4.6	Conclusions	168
	References	169
<b>5</b>	<b>Medicinal Chemistry of Alicyclic <math>\beta</math>-Amino Acids</b>	<b>175</b>
	<i>Nils Griebenow</i>	
5.1	Introduction	175
5.2	Five-Membered Alicyclic $\beta$ -Amino Acids	175
5.3	Six-Membered Alicyclic $\beta$ -Amino Acids	183
	References	186
<b>6</b>	<b>Medicinal Chemistry of <math>\alpha</math>-Hydroxy-<math>\beta</math>-Amino Acids</b>	<b>189</b>
	<i>Zyta Ziora, Mariusz Skwarczynski, and Yoshiaki Kiso</i>	
6.1	Introduction	189
6.2	$\alpha$ -Hydroxy- $\beta$ -Amino Acids	189
6.2.1	$\alpha$ -Hydroxy- $\beta$ -Amino Acids Occurring in Natural Products	189
6.2.2	Synthesis of $\alpha$ -Hydroxy- $\beta$ -Amino Acids	191
6.2.2.1	Isoserine	191
6.2.2.2	Isothreonine	193
6.2.2.3	Phenylisoserine	197
6.2.2.4	Norstatines	197
6.2.2.5	3-Amino-2-Hydroxydecanoic Acid and its Analogs	204
6.2.2.6	Synthetic Demands	205
6.3	Antibacterial Agents	205
6.4	Inhibitors of Aminopeptidases	207
6.5	Aspartyl Proteases Inhibitors	211
6.5.1	Renin Inhibitors	212
6.5.2	HIV-1 Protease Inhibitors	216
6.5.3	HTLV-I Inhibitors	220
6.5.4	Plasmepsin II Inhibitors	222
6.5.5	BACE-1 Inhibitors	224
6.6	Paclitaxel and its Derivatives	228
	References	234
<b>7</b>	<b>Peptide Drugs</b>	<b>247</b>
	<i>Chiara Falciani, Alessandro Pini, and Luisa Bracci</i>	
7.1	Lights and Shades of Peptide and Protein Drugs	247
7.2	Peptide Drugs Available on the Market	249
7.2.1	Natriuretic Peptide (Nesiritide)	249
7.2.2	Oxytocin	249
7.2.3	Vasopressin	250
7.2.4	Desmopressin	251
7.2.5	Blood Coagulation Inhibitors	251
7.2.5.1	Bivalirudin	251

7.2.5.2	Integrilin (Eptifibatide)	251
7.2.6	Gonadotropin-Releasing Hormone Agonists and Antagonists	251
7.2.6.1	Gonadorelin	251
7.2.6.2	Lupron(Leuprolide)	252
7.2.6.3	Cetrorelix	253
7.2.6.4	Degarelix	253
7.2.7	Antihyperglycemics	254
7.2.7.1	Symlin (Pramlintide)	254
7.2.7.2	Exendin-4	254
7.2.7.3	Liraglutide	255
7.2.8	Icatibant	255
7.2.9	Sermorelin	256
7.2.10	Calcitonin	256
7.2.11	Parathyroid Hormone	256
7.2.12	Cyclosporine	257
7.2.13	Fuzeon	257
7.3	Approved Peptides in Oncology	258
7.3.1	Bortezomib	259
7.3.2	Actinomycin D	259
7.3.3	Marimastat	260
7.3.4	Octreotide	260
7.3.5	Vapreotide	261
7.3.6	Octreoscan	262
7.4	Antimicrobial peptides	263
7.4.1	Polymyxin	265
7.4.2	Daptomycin	266
7.4.3	Gramicidin S	267
7.5	Perspectives	267
7.5.1	Branched Peptides as Tumor-Targeting Agents	268
7.5.2	Branched Peptides as Antimicrobials	270
	References	271
<b>8</b>	<b>Oral Bioavailability of Peptide and Peptidomimetic Drugs</b>	<b>277</b>
	<i>Arik Dahan, Yasuhiro Tsume, Jing Sun, Jonathan M. Miller, and Gordon L. Amidon</i>	
8.1	Introduction	277
8.2	Fundamental Considerations of Intestinal Absorption	277
8.3	Barriers Limiting Oral Peptide/Peptidomimetic Drug Bioavailability	279
8.4	Strategies to Improve Oral Bioavailability of Peptide-Based Drugs	280
8.4.1	Chemical Modifications	280
8.4.1.1	Prodrug Approach	280
8.4.1.2	Structural Modifications	281

8.4.2	Formulation Technologies	284
8.4.2.1	Absorption Enhancers	284
8.4.2.2	Coadministration with Protease Inhibitors	285
8.4.2.3	Formulation Vehicles	285
8.4.2.4	Site-Specific Delivery	286
8.5	Conclusions	287
	References	287
<b>9</b>	<b>Asymmetric Synthesis of <math>\beta</math>-Lactams via the Staudinger Reaction</b>	<b>293</b>
	<i>Monika I. Konaklieva and Balbina J. Plotkin</i>	
9.1	Introduction	293
9.2	Staudinger Reaction	293
9.3	Influence of the Geometry of the Imine on Stereoselectivity in the Reaction	294
9.4	Influence of the Polarity of the Solvent on Stereoselectivity of the Reaction	296
9.5	Influence of the Isomerization of the Imine Prior to its Nucleophilic Attack onto the Ketene Stereoselectivity in the Reaction	296
9.6	Influence of the Order of Addition of the Reactants to the Reaction	297
9.7	Influence of Chiral Substituents on the Stereoselectivity of the Reaction	298
9.8	Asymmetric Induction from the Imine Component	298
9.9	Asymmetric Induction from the Ketene Component	305
9.10	Double Asymmetric Cycloinduction	308
9.11	Influence of Catalysts on the Stereoselectivity of the Reaction	309
9.11.1	General Procedure for $\beta$ -Lactams 106 with Proton Sponge	312
9.11.2	General Procedure for the Tandem Nucleophile/Lewis Acid-Promoted Synthesis of $\beta$ -Lactams 110	312
9.11.3	General Procedure for Catalytic Asymmetric Synthesis of <i>Trans</i> - $\beta$ -Lactams 113	314
9.11.4	Example for Kinugasa Reaction with Cu (II) Catalyst	316
9.11.4.1	General Procedure for Catalytic Asymmetric Synthesis of $\beta$ -Lactams 122	316
9.12	Conclusions	316
	References	317
<b>10</b>	<b>Advances in <i>N</i>- and <i>O</i>-Glycopeptide Synthesis – A Tool to Study Glycosylation and Develop New Therapeutics</b>	<b>321</b>
	<i>Ulrika Westerlind and Horst Kunz</i>	
10.1	Introduction	321
10.2	Synthesis of <i>O</i> -Glycopeptides	324
10.2.1	Synthesis of Mucin-Type Glycopeptides	325

10.2.1.1	Synthesis of Tumor-Associated Glycopeptides and Glycopeptide Vaccines	325
10.2.1.1.1	Synthesis of Tn, T, Sialyl-Tn, and Sialyl-T Glycosylated Amino Acid Building Blocks	325
10.2.1.1.2	Synthesis of Tn, T, Sialyl-Tn, and Sialyl-T Glycopeptides and Vaccines	329
10.2.1.2	Synthesis of Glycopeptide Recognition Domain of P-Selectin Glycoprotein Ligand-1	331
10.2.1.2.1	Synthesis of a Core 2 sLe <sup>x</sup> Amino Acid Building Block Including a sLe <sup>x</sup> Mimic	332
10.2.1.2.2	Synthesis of Unsulfated and Sulfated Core 2 sLe <sup>x</sup> and Core 2 sLe <sup>x</sup> Mimic PSGL-1 Glycopeptides	334
10.2.1.2.3	Chemoenzymatic Synthesis of Unsulfated and Sulfated sLe <sup>x</sup> PSGL-1 Glycopeptide	336
10.2.2	Synthesis of Other Types of O-Glycopeptides	339
10.2.2.1	Synthesis of Fmoc-GlcNAc-Ser/Thr Amino Acids	340
10.2.2.2	Synthesis of Estrogen Receptor Peptides for Conformational Analysis	340
10.3	Synthesis of N-Glycopeptides	342
10.3.1	Synthesis of RNase C Glycoprotein	343
10.3.2	Synthesis of Erythropoietin N-Glycopeptide Fragment 1–28	346
10.3.2.1	Synthesis of Biantennary Dodecasaccharide	346
10.3.2.2	Synthesis of N-Glycopeptide Fragment 1–28	348
10.3.3	Chemoenzymatic Synthesis of a HIV GP120 V3 Domain N-Glycopeptide	350
10.3.3.1	Synthesis of the Oxazoline Tetrasaccharide Donor	350
10.3.3.2	Synthesis of Fmoc-GlcNAc-Asn Amino Acid Building Block	351
10.3.3.3	Synthesis of V3 Cyclic GlcNAc Peptide and Endo A Coupling with Man <sub>3</sub> GlcNAc Oxazoline Donor	352
	References	353

## 11 Recent Developments in Neoglycopeptide Synthesis 359

*Margaret A. Brimble, Nicole Miller, and Geoffrey M. Williams*

11.1	Introduction	359
11.2	Neoglycoside and Neoglycopeptide Synthesis	361
11.2.1	S-Glycosides	361
11.2.2	N-Glycosides	362
11.2.3	O-Glycosides	364
11.2.4	C-Glycosides	365
11.2.5	C=N Linkage	365
11.3	Protein Side-Chain Modifications	366
11.3.1	Modifications of Cysteine Side-Chains	366
11.3.2	Modifications of Lysine Side-Chains	369
11.3.3	Other Side-Chain Modifications	370
11.4	Cu(I)-Catalyzed Azide–Alkyne “Click” Cycloaddition	372

11.4.1	General Aspects of Cu(I)-Catalyzed Azide–Alkyne cycloaddition	372
11.4.2	Neoglycoside and Neoglycopeptide Synthesis via CuAAC	373
11.4.3	CuAAC and Neoglycoproteins	376
11.5	Cross-Metathesis	378
11.6	Application of Neoglycopeptides as Synthetic Vaccines	380
11.7	Enzymatic, Molecular, and Cell Biological Techniques	384
11.7.1.1	Enzymatic Glycoprotein Synthesis	385
11.7.2	Molecular and Cell Biological Techniques	385
	References	386

### Part Three Amino Acids in Combinatorial Synthesis 393

<b>12</b>	<b>Combinatorial/Library Peptide Synthesis</b>	<b>395</b>
	<i>Michal Lebl</i>	
12.1	Introduction	395
12.2	High-Throughput Synthesis of Peptides	396
12.2.1	Parallel Peptide Synthesis	396
12.2.2	Directed Sorting	400
12.3	Synthesis of Peptide Arrays	402
12.4	Peptide Libraries	406
12.4.1	Synthesis of Peptide Mixtures	406
12.4.2	Synthesis of Peptides on a Mixture of Particles	409
12.4.2.1	Determination of the Structure of a Peptide on an Individual Bead	416
12.4.3	Solution-Based Screening of OBOC Libraries	418
12.5	Future of Peptide Libraries	421
12.6	Synthetic Protocols	421
12.6.1	Pin Synthesis	421
12.6.2	SPOT Synthesis	422
12.6.3	Synthesis in Tea-Bags	422
12.6.4	Synthesis on Cotton	423
12.6.4.1	Modification of the Cotton Carrier	423
12.6.5	Split-and-Mix Synthesis of OBOC Noncleavable Libraries	424
12.6.6	Preparation of Dual-Layer Beads	425
12.6.7	Preparation of Library of Libraries	426
12.6.8	Preparation of OBOC Libraries for Testing in Solution	426
12.6.8.1	Synthesis of Multicleavable Linker	426
12.6.8.2	Synthesis of the Library	428
12.6.8.3	Quality Control of the Doubly Releasable Library	428
12.6.8.4	Two-Stage Release Assay in 96-Well Microassay Plates	429
12.6.9	Synthesis of the Positional Scanning Library	430



12.6.10	Synthesis of the Dual Defined Iterative Hexapeptide Library	430
12.6.11	Acylation Monitoring by Bromophenol Blue	431
	References	432
<b>13</b>	<b>Phage-Displayed Combinatorial Peptides</b>	<b>451</b>
	<i>Renhua Huang, Kritika Pershad, Malgorzata Kokoszka, and Brian K. Kay</i>	
13.1	Introduction	451
13.1.1	Types of Phage Vectors	452
13.1.2	Generation of Combinatorial Peptide Libraries	455
13.1.3	Identifying Peptide Ligands to Protein Targets	458
13.1.4	Mapping Protein–Protein Interactions	461
13.1.5	Identifying Peptide Ligands Binding to Cell Surfaces	463
13.1.6	Mapping Protease Specificity	464
13.1.7	Identifying Peptide Ligands to the Surfaces of Inert Materials	464
13.2	Conclusions	465
	References	466
<b>14</b>	<b>Designing New Proteins</b>	<b>473</b>
	<i>Michael I. Sadowski and James T. MacDonald</i>	
14.1	Introduction	473
14.1.1	Why Design New Proteins?	473
14.1.2	How New is “New?”	474
14.2	Protein Design Methods	475
14.2.1	Computational Design	476
14.2.1.1	Computational Enzyme Design	477
14.2.1.2	Results of Computational Design Experiments	478
14.2.2	Directed Evolution Methods	480
14.2.2.1	Randomization Strategies	480
14.2.2.2	Expression Systems and Assays	481
14.2.3	Design of Protein Interfaces	482
14.3	Protocol for Protein Design	484
14.4	Conclusions	486
	References	487
<b>15</b>	<b>Amino Acid-Based Dendrimers</b>	<b>491</b>
	<i>Zhengshuang Shi, Chunhui Zhou, Zhigang Liu, Filbert Totsingan, and Neville R. Kallenbach</i>	
15.1	Introduction	491
15.2	Peptide Dendrimer Synthesis: Divergent and Convergent Approaches	491
15.2.1	Synthesis of the First Peptide Dendrimers: Polylysine Dendrimers	493
15.2.2	Glutamic/Aspartic Acid, Proline, and Arginine Dendrimers	494

15.2.3	Synthesis of MAPs	497
15.2.4	Synthesis of Peptide Dendrimers Grafted on PAMAM and other Peptide Dendrimers	500
15.3	Applications of Peptide Dendrimers	502
15.3.1	Initial Efforts on MAPs	502
15.3.2	Peptide Dendrimers as Antimicrobial Agents	502
15.3.3	Peptide Dendrimers as Protein/Enzyme Mimics	504
15.3.4	Peptide Dendrimers as Ion Sensors and MRI Contrast Agents	505
15.3.5	Peptide Dendrimers as DNA/RNA Delivery Vectors	507
15.3.6	Other Application of Peptide Dendrimers	512
15.4	Conclusions	513
	References	514

<b>Index</b>	519
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## 1

**Protection Reactions**

Vommina V. Sureshbabu and Narasimhamurthy Narendra

## 1.1

**General Considerations**

Peptides, polypeptides, and proteins are the universal constituents of the biosphere. They are responsible for the structural and functional integrity of cells. They form the chemical basis of cellular functions that are based on highly specific molecular recognition and binding, and are involved as key participants in cellular processes. A peptide or a protein is a copolymer of  $\alpha$ -amino acids that are covalently linked through a secondary amide bond (called a peptide bond). They differ from one another by the number and sequence of the constituent amino acids. Generally, a molecule comprised of few amino acids is called an oligopeptide and that with many amino acids is a polypeptide (molecular weight below 10 000). Proteins contain a large number of amino acids. Due to the vitality of their role for the function as well as survival of cells, peptides and proteins are continuously synthesized. Biosynthesis of proteins is genetically controlled. A protein molecule is synthesized by stepwise linking of *unprotected* amino acids through the cellular machinery comprised of enzymes and nucleic acids, and functioning based on precise molecular interactions and thermodynamic control. Thousands of proteins/peptides are assembled through the combination of only 20 amino acids (referred to as coded or proteinogenic amino acids). Post-translational modifications (after assembly on ribosomes) such as attachment of nonpeptide fragments, functionalization of amino acid side-chains and the peptide backbone, and cyclization reactions confer further structural diversity on peptides.

The production of peptides via isolation from biological sources or recombinant DNA technology is associated with certain limitations *per se*. A minor variation in the sequence of a therapeutically active peptide isolated from a microbial or animal source relative to that of the human homolog is sufficient to cause hypersensitivity in some recipients. Further, the active drug component is often not a native peptide but a synthetic analog, which may have been reduced in size or may contain additional functional groups and non-native linkages. The development of a drug from a lead peptide involves the synthesis (both by conventional and combinatorial methods) and screening of a large number of analogs. Consequently, the major proportion of the

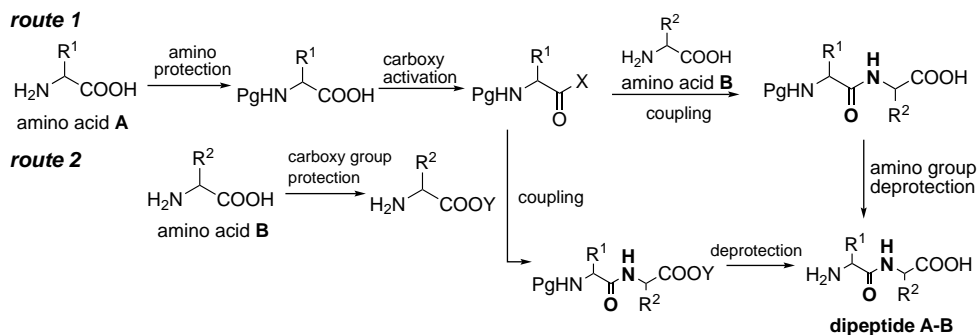
demand for peptides is still met by chemical synthesis. Chemical synthesis is also crucial for synthesizing peptides with unnatural amino acids as well as peptide mimics, which by virtue of the presence of non-native linkages are inaccessible through ribosomal synthesis.

Synthetic peptides have to be chemically as well as optically homogenous to be able to exhibit the expected biological activity. This is typically addressed by using reactions that furnish high yields, give no or minimum side-products, and do not cause stereomutation. In addition, the peptide of interest has to be scrupulously purified after synthesis to achieve the expected level of homogeneity. The general approach to synthesize a peptide is stepwise linking of amino acids until the desired sequence is reached. However, the actual synthesis is not as simple as the approach appears to be due to the multifunctional nature of the amino acids. Typically, a proteinogenic amino acid (except Gly) contains a chiral carbon atom to which is attached the amino ( $\alpha$ -amino), carboxy, and alkyl group (referred to as the side-chain). Gly lacks the alkyl substitution at the  $\alpha$ -carbon atom. Also, the side-chains of many of the amino acids are functionalized.

A straightforward approach to prepare a dipeptide A–B would be to couple the carboxy-activated amino acid A with another amino acid B. However, this reaction will yield not only the expected dipeptide A–B, but also an A–A (through self-acylation) due to the competing amino group of A. The so-formed dipeptides can further react with A since they bear free amino groups and form oligopeptides A–A–B, A–A–A, or A–A–A–A, and the reaction proceeds uncontrollably to generate a mixture of self-condensation products (homopolymers) and oligopeptides of the type  $A_nB$ . The process becomes even more complicated when reactive functional groups are present in the side-chains of the reacting amino acid(s). The uncontrolled reactivity of multiple groups leads to the formation of a complex mixture from which it becomes a Sisyphean task to isolate the desired product, which would have been formed, mostly, in low yield. The solution to carry out peptide synthesis in a chemoselective way is to mask the reactivity of the groups on amino acids that will not be the components of the peptide bond prior to peptide coupling step. This is done by converting the intervening functional group into an unreactive (or less reactive) form by attaching to it a new segment, referred to as a protecting group (or protection or protective function). The chemical reactions used for this purpose are known as protection reactions. The protecting groups are solely of synthetic interest and are removed whenever the functional group has to be regenerated. In other words, the protection is *reversible*. In the light of the concept of protection, the steps involved in the synthesis of the above dipeptide A–B are depicted in Figure 1.1.

Protections are employed for  $\alpha$ -amino, carboxy, and side-chain functional groups (Figure 1.2). Since peptide synthesis is a multistep and repetitive process, the longevity of different protecting groups on the peptide under synthesis varies. In the present and widely followed approach of assembling peptides, wherein the peptide chain extension is from the carboxy- to amino-terminus (C  $\rightarrow$  N direction), the  $\alpha$ -amino protection is removed after each peptide coupling step to obtain a free amino group for subsequent acylation and, hence, this protection is temporary. The carboxy and side-chain protections are generally retained until the entire sequence



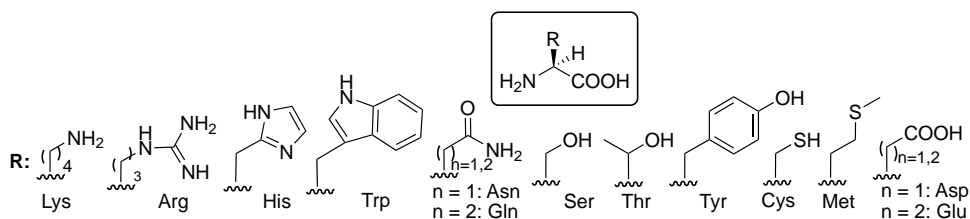


**Figure 1.1** Illustration of synthesis of a dipeptide using  $\alpha$ -amino and carboxy protections.

is assembled, and are removed simultaneously in a single step at the end of the synthesis. Hence, they can be regarded as semipermanent groups. The transient  $\alpha$ -amino protection should be removed using reagents/conditions that do not affect the stability of semipermanent groups and, importantly, the newly assembled peptide bond(s). Consequently, it should be orthogonal to semipermanent groups with respect to its susceptibility to a particular cleavage reaction. Sometimes it may be required to remove only the carboxy protection or a particular side-chain protection in order to obtain a  $N^\alpha$ -protected peptide acid or to regenerate a side-chain functional group (for site-selective peptide modification). In such cases, the  $\alpha$ -amino and semipermanent groups have to be orthogonal to one another.

In practice, the orthogonality among protecting groups is achieved by either differential reactivities or different rates of reaction of protective units towards a particular cleavage reagent. The compulsion for the requirement of semipermanent groups can be lifted especially with respect to the protection of side-chain functionalities if there is no possibility of an undesired reaction from the unprotected group during coupling or deprotection of the  $\alpha$ -amino group. Hence, the degree of protection can widely vary (from maximum to minimum) depending upon the synthetic design and the choice of chemistry.

An ideal protecting group should be quantitatively introduced and removed (desirably using mild reagents/conditions), should leave no residue nor form a byproduct that is difficult to separate from the product, should not be prematurely deblocked or modified during synthesis, and should not cause side-reactions including stereomutation. In addition, it should not influence the reactivity of the adjacent groups or, if it does, it should be in predictable ways.



**Figure 1.2** Side-chain functional groups of amino acids that entail protection.

In this chapter, various  $\alpha$ -amino, carboxy, and side-chain protecting groups are presented. The general features of each type of protecting groups, methods of introduction and removal, and improved analogs are discussed. Typical and widely used preparative methods are mentioned under each category of protecting groups. The reader may refer to many earlier works for accounts on the development of protecting groups and for detailed discussions on different aspects of protecting group chemistry in peptide synthesis [1].

## 1.2

### $\alpha$ -Amino Protection ( $N^\alpha$ Protection)

The  $\alpha$ -amino group is protected to reduce its nucleophilicity. In addition to the general properties of a protecting group, an ideal  $\alpha$ -amino protection is expected to possess more properties unique to itself. Deblocking of the  $N^\alpha$  protection should take place with a high degree of selectivity so that there will be no progressive loss of the semipermanent groups with repetitive deblocking steps as the peptide chain is elongated. The  $N^\alpha$  protection should not sterically or electronically disfavor the reactions at the carboxy group by virtue of its proximity. It should not be involved or promote side-reactions, including those that lead to stereomutation. Further, it should form stable and crystallizable amino acid derivatives. Indeed, due to such stringent requirements for a  $\alpha$ -amino protecting group, the success in the development of a good  $N^\alpha$  protection has always been critical to progress in the development of efficient coupling methods and, in turn, to the overall growth of the field of peptide synthesis.

The  $\alpha$ -amino protections are of different types and they can be categorized using different approaches. However, based on the criteria of the magnitude of the present utility of each type, the groups can be classified into non-urethane- and urethane-type  $N$  protections. Presently, the latter are the extensively used  $N^\alpha$ -protecting groups for both solution and solid-phase peptide synthesis (SPPS) due to reasons that will be discussed later. The extent of the utility of the non-urethane-type amino protectors in peptide synthesis is currently comparatively lesser. Only a few groups of this category have been demonstrated to be efficient as  $N^\alpha$ -protectors for general applications. Nonetheless, they are useful as protecting groups for side-chain functions as well as for the protection of the  $\alpha$ -amino group for the synthesis of peptide mimics and unnatural amino acids. Their importance in peptidomimetic synthesis owes much to the vast diversity in chemistry required for accomplishing a wide range of backbone modifications of peptides leading to novel nonpeptidic molecules.

#### 1.2.1

##### Non-Urethanes

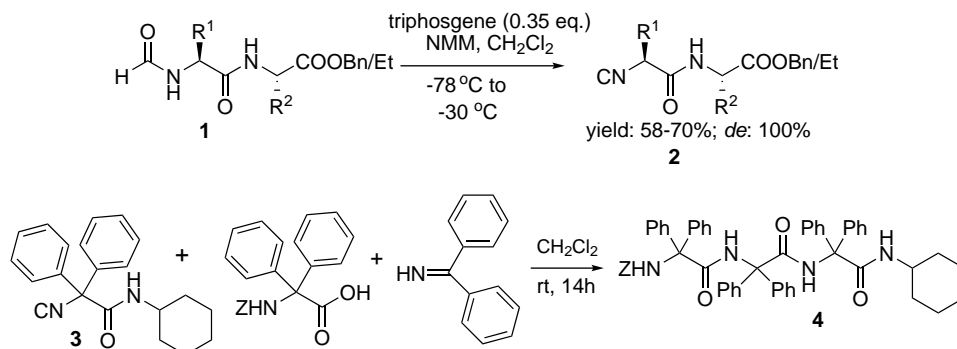
##### 1.2.1.1 Acyl Type

Reaction of amino acids with alkyl or aryl carboxylic acid derivatives yields  $N$ -acyl amines or amides. Acyl groups were the first generation of  $N^\alpha$ -protecting groups used for peptide synthesis. The necessity for the protection of the  $\alpha$ -amino group for

successful peptide synthesis was identified as early as 1900s by the two distinguished chemists of the time, Emil Fischer and Theodor Curtius, who mostly employed formyl (For), acetyl (Ac), and benzoyl (Bz) groups for this purpose. However, it was soon realized that the selective removal of these protections from peptides was not successful. The acyl groups present two synthetic difficulties in general – difficulty in the removal of the group without destroying the meticulously assembled peptide bonds and a high degree of racemization of  $N^\alpha$ -acyl-protected amino acid derivatives. The only mode of deprotection of an acyl-protected amine is the fission of the acyl-nitrogen ( $\text{CO-NH}$ ) bond. However, since the peptide bonds (secondary amides) are chemically similar to the amide bond (of the protective function), they are often simultaneously cleaved. Although selective removal of the  $N^\alpha$ -acyl group has been attempted through special methods such as the enzymatic and  $\text{CNBr}$ -mediated cleavage of N-terminal Z-Arg and Met peptides, respectively, these protocols have not found widespread application. However, if the  $N^\alpha$ -acyl group contains an electron-withdrawing substitution (e.g.,  $\text{CF}_3\text{CO-}$ , trifluoroacetyl (Tfa) group), then the amide carbonyl of the protective function becomes more susceptible to nucleophilic substitution relative to the peptide carbonyl and thus the amino group can be selectively deprotected under acceptable conditions. Selectivity can also be achieved by using groups that can be modified (postcoupling) into units, which can be eliminated through processes such as lactam formation. Barring these examples, simple acyl groups do not find established applications as  $\alpha$ -amino protections for conventional peptide synthesis. Nonetheless, the For protection can be attributed with a unique application. The  $N^\alpha$ -formyl group of protected amino acid esters/amides and peptide esters **1** can be readily dehydrated into the isocyno group and the resulting  $\alpha$ -isocyno esters/amides **2** can be used as key components to synthesize peptides and peptide libraries through multicomponent reactions (MCRs). MCRs have been shown to be particularly useful to assemble peptides linked by sterically hindered amino acids such as  $\alpha,\alpha$ -dialkylamino acids. For instance, an extremely difficult sequence **4** with three successive  $\alpha,\alpha$ -diphenylglycine (Dph) units has been assembled through a modified Ugi reaction of isonitrile **3** with Z-Dph-OH and diphenylmethanimine (Figure 1.3) [2]. Mild and racemization free conversion of  $N^\alpha$ -For-protected amino acid and peptide derivatives into isonitriles can be carried out by the treatment with triphosgene in dichloromethane (DCM) at  $-75$  to  $-30^\circ\text{C}$  (Figure 1.3) or Burgess reagent [3].

#### 1.2.1.1.1 Monoacyl Groups

**Trifluoroacetyl (Tfa) Group** Tfa is of special interest as a monoacyl-type protecting group. Due to the negative inductive effect of the  $-\text{CF}_3$  substitution, the trifluoroacetamides readily undergo hydrolysis in mild alkaline conditions to which peptide bonds and most carboxy esters are largely stable, not withstanding methyl and ethyl esters (which are susceptible to saponification). Optically pure  $N^\alpha$ -Tfa-amino acids are prepared by treating amino acids with trifluoroacetic anhydride (TFAA) in anhydrous trifluoroacetic acid (TFA) solvent at  $-10$  to  $+10^\circ\text{C}$  [4]. The method can also be successfully used to obtain  $N^\alpha$ -Tfa-Lys/Orn from Lys/Orn. The acidity of the

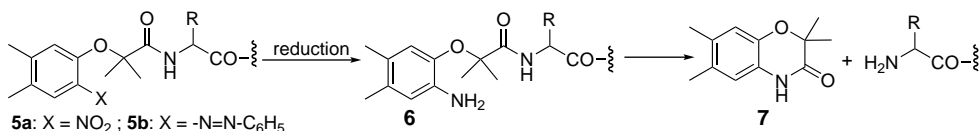


**Figure 1.3** Synthesis of isocyanato peptides from *N*-For-protected peptide esters and the Ugi four-component reaction of  $\alpha$ -isocyanato esters.

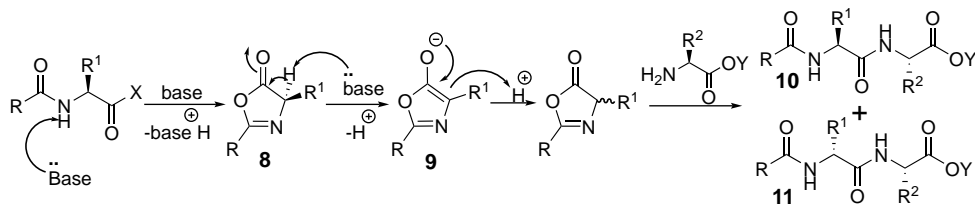
medium protonates the more basic  $\omega$ -amino group of Lys/Orn into the ammonium form, which do not undergo acylation. However, the strong acidic condition is disadvantageous in the case of preparation of Tfa-Ser-OH and Tfa-Thr-OH as these hydroxy amino acids are dehydrated into unsaturated amino acids. Trifluoroacetylation can also be carried out using ethyl thioesters and phenyl/alkyl esters of TFA such as ethyl trifluoroacetate [4] or reagents such as 1-(trifluoroacetyl)imidazole. The  $N^\alpha$ -Tfa group is cleaved by the action of 0.2 N NaOH [5] or  $\text{Ba}(\text{OH})_2$  or by dilute  $\text{NH}_3$  solution. Piperidine [6] and  $\text{NaBH}_4$  in EtOH can also be employed. The group is resistant to acids except for Tfa-Ser/Thr derivatives in which it is cleaved by mild acidic reagents. However, strong acidic conditions such as boiling methanolic HCl can cleave the group.

**1.2.1.1.2 Groups Cleavable via Lactam Formation** 2-(4,5-Dimethyl-2-nitrophenoxy)-2-methylpropionyl group **5a** and its phenyldiazonyl analog **5b** are introduced by the reaction of the corresponding acid chlorides with amino acids. Cleavage is accomplished in two steps (Figure 1.4). The first step is the reduction of the nitro group into an amino group by catalytic hydrogenation or catalytic transfer hydrogenation (CTH). Step 2 is the cyclization of the resulting amino compound **6** into a lactam **7** at neutral pH with concomitant elimination of the protected amine [7]. A similar process also cleaves **5b** [8]. Nevertheless, incomplete reduction and cyclization steps have been the major concerns for a broad application of these groups in spite of selective and acceptable cleavage conditions.

**Racemization** The high degree of racemization of  $N^\alpha$ -acyl-protected amino acids has been attributed to the facile formation of optically labile azlactone intermediates



**Figure 1.4** Cleavage of  $N^\alpha$  protection via lactam formation.



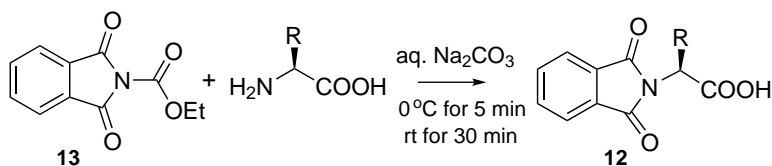
**Figure 1.5** Racemization of  $N^\alpha$ -acyl- $\alpha$ -amino acid derivatives.

8. Activated  $N^\alpha$ -acyl amino acids readily undergo base-catalyzed ring closure to azlactones (2,4-disubstituted oxazol-5(4*H*)-ones). Enolization of the latter to oxazol-5-ol **9** in the presence of a base results in the loss of chirality at the  $\alpha$ -carbon atom. Azlactones can acylate amines, but the resulting product will be a mixture of epimeric peptides (**10** and **11**, Figure 1.5). In the case of  $N$ -methyl- $\alpha$ -amino acids (NMAs), the oxazolium intermediate can be formed even in the absence of base, due to the electron-releasing effect of the  $N$ -alkyl substitution. Hence,  $N^\alpha$ -acyl,  $N^\alpha$ -alkylated amino acid derivatives are extremely sensitive to racemization during coupling. Base-catalyzed enolization of the activated amino acid derivatives with the abstraction of the  $\alpha$ -proton also contributes to racemization.

Racemization can also take place during the introduction of  $N^\alpha$ -acyl protection because of the *in situ* activation of the carboxy group by acid anhydrides and acid chlorides (used as reagents for acylation of  $\alpha$ -amino group) followed by cyclization to azlactones. For instance, the  $N^\alpha$ -Tfa-amino acids prepared by the treatment of amino acids with an excess of TFAA in the absence of TFA have been found to be contaminated with the *D*-isomer. This is due to the activation of Tfa-amino acids by TFAA to unsymmetrical or symmetrical anhydrides, which rearrange with racemization to the corresponding Tfa-azlactones.

**1.2.1.1.3 Diacyl Groups** Reaction of amino acids with 1,2-dicarboxylic acid derivatives yields imides that are stable to acids and also to hydrogenolysis, thus making the diacyl-type protection suitable for usage in diverse synthetic conditions. These groups are cleaved by nucleophilic substitution by hydrazine or thiols. The aromatic 1,2-dicarboxylic acid, phthalic acid, is employed for  $N^\alpha$  protection, whereas the alkyl counterpart  $N$ -maleoyl group has been replaced by the dithiasuccinoyl (Dts) group.

**Phthaloyl (Phth) Group**  $N^\alpha$ -Protected Phth-amino acids **12** are prepared under mild and racemization-free conditions by using phthaloylating reagents (Figures 1.6 and 1.7) such as *N*-(ethoxycarbonyl)phthalimide **13**, monoethyl phthalate **14** [9], and



**Figure 1.6** Preparation of  $N^\alpha$ -Phth-amino acids.

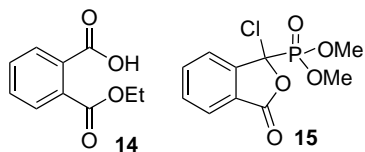


Figure 1.7 Phthaloylating reagents.

3-chloro-3-(dimethoxyphosphoryl)isobenzofuran-1(3*H*)-one **15** [10]. *N*-Phthaloylation by these reagents has almost completely replaced the original and harsh route of fusing amino acids with phthalic anhydride, which invariably caused racemization. An improvement in the method was achieved by using solvents such as benzene, dioxane, and so on, but could not overcome the racemization problem completely.

The  $N^\alpha$ -Phth group is normally removed by means of hydrazinolysis by treatment with hydrazine hydrate in refluxing MeOH or EtOH [11]. Alternatively, a two-step procedure, which involves a reductive ring opening, followed by an acid-catalyzed lactonization of the resulting hydroxy compound (**17**) with concomitant fission of acyl-nitrogen bond, has also been developed (Figure 1.8) [12]. Interestingly, Phth protection cannot be removed by treatment with alkali. The alkali opens the five membered ring to a monoacyl amide of phthalic acid **18** (*O*-carboxybenzoyl amide) which is stable to hydrazine and to bases, thus representing an irreversible protection. Hence, saponification cannot be used as a method to cleave esters of  $N^\alpha$ -Phth-protected peptide acids. On the other hand, treatment with  $\text{SOCl}_2$  or methanolic HCl converts **18** back to phthalimide. In fact, this cyclization has been used as the basis for the development of a mild protocol for preparation of phthalimides. Tetrachlorophthaloyl group is an improved analog of Phth and can be removed under mild conditions by treatment with 15% hydrazine in *N,N'*-dimethylformamide (DMF) for 1 h at room temperature [13].

**Groups Removed by Reductive Cleavage** Dithiasuccinoyl (Dts) imides are stable to acids and to photolysis, and are cleaved by reductive thiolysis.  $N^\alpha$ -Dts-amino acids **19** are prepared through a multistep route, which involves the reaction of the *tert*-butyl esters of amino acids with alkyldithiocarbonate or trithiodicarbonate to form

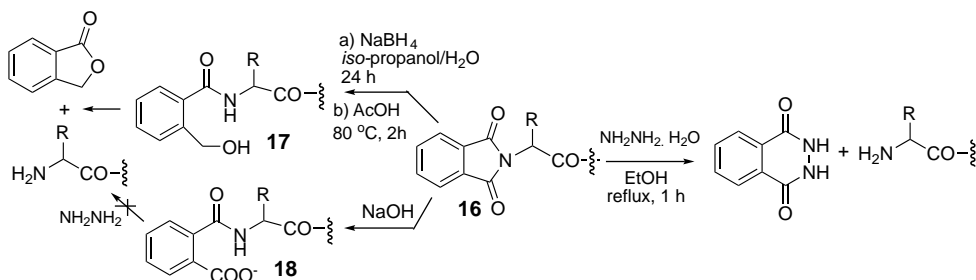


Figure 1.8 Cleavage of the  $N^\alpha$ -Phth group.