REVISION OF THE EARLY STEPS OF RETICULINE BIOSYNTHESIS

R. Stadler, T. M. Kutchan, S. Loeffler, N. Nagakura,†
B. Cassels and M. H. Zenk*

Lehrstuhl für Pharmazeutische Biologie, Universität München,
Karlstrasse 29, D-8000 München 2, West Germany
†Kobe Women's College of Pharmacy, Kobe 658, Japan

Abstract: Precursor feeding experiments to Annona reticulata leaves demonstrated that
coclaurine and reticuline are both derived from the common intermediate norcoclarine;
furthermore (S)-coclaurine was found to be the specific precursor to the major classes of
isoquinoline alkaloids: protoberberines, benzophenanthridines and morphinandienones.

Reticuline (1) is firmly established as the biosynthetic precursor of a vast number of
isoquinoline alkaloids [1,2]. Norlaudanosoline (2) has up till now been assumed the universal
precursor for reticuline [3,4]. This compound was proposed purely on chemical reasoning as
precursor for isoquinoline alkaloids already in 1910 by Winterstein and Trier [5] and later
by R. Robinson [6,7], representing the first major contribution to biogenetic hypothesis
[8]. This tetrahydroxybenzylisoquinoline derivative (2) is supposed to be formed by the
enzyme catalyzed stereospecific condensation of dopamine (3) with 3,4-dihydroxyphenylacetaldehyde (4). For both building blocks tyrosine (5) is an amply demonstrated precursor,
however, 3,4-dihydroxyphenylalanine (6) or its amine (3) which already possess the
required 3,4-dihydroxy-configuration in the aromatic rings label only the isoquinoline and
not the benzylic portion of the alkaloids [8,9]. These findings prove that the two C6-C2
units derived from tyrosine (5) differ from one another. Recently it was demonstrated that
not only (5), but in addition tyramine (7), can serve as precursor of the benzylic portion
of these alkaloids [10,11]. Since monohydroxylated (7) but not dopamine (3) enters this
part of the alkaloids [8], it could not be excluded that 4-hydroxyphenylacetaldehyde (8)
and therefore norcoclarine (9) and coclarine (10) are the true precursors of reticuline
(1) and not norlaudanosoline (2) as hitherto assumed.

In order to test this possibility, mature leaves of greenhouse grown Annona reticulata
L., which contain both (S)-reticuline (1, 0.09% dwt) [12] and (S)-coclaurine (10, 0.06%
dwt) [13], were fed with a mixture of L-[2,6-3H]tyrosine and L-[ring-U-14C]tyrosine in a
ratio of 7.4 : 1. Both (10) and (1) were isolated, purified to constant specific activity
and methylated (diazomethane) to laudanosine (11) (ratio found 6.3 : 1) and 4'-0-methyl-
norarmepavine (12) (ratio 5.5 : 1), respectively. A theoretical ratio of 5.5 : 1, calculated
on the basis that one tritium atom of dopamine (3) is removed during the condensation
of the amine (3) with a phenylacetaldehyde [14,15] was expected. Within experimental
limits, these results demonstrate that both benzylisoquinoline derivatives (10,1) are
formed from tyrosine as predicted and no degradation of tyrosine [16] occurs in this
plant. Since both (R,S)-[3-14C]-norlaudanosoline and (R,S)-[3-14C]-norcoclaurine were not incorporated into the alkaloidal fraction but instead led to browning of the leaf base indicative of oxidation of these compounds, (S)-[6-O-14CH3]-coclaurine (10) was fed to the plant. Good incorporation (2.6%) into (S)-reticuline (1) was observed. Methylation of this compound yielded laudanosine (11) (2716 dpm/µmole) which was subjected to ceric ammonium nitrate oxidation [17]. The resulting veratraldehyde (13) corresponding to the benzylic portion of (11) was devoid of any radioactivity, while the 6,7-dimethoxy-2-methyl-1,2,3,4-tetrahydroisoquinoline (14) was labelled (2784 dpm/µmole), demonstrating that (S)-coclaurine (10) is specifically incorporated into reticuline (1). (R)-[6-O-14CH3]-Coclaurine was not incorporated into (1) showing that no racemisation occurs during this transformation and that the (S)-derivative is the true precursor. The incorporation of labelled (S)-(10) into (S)-reticuline (1) was confirmed using calli of Fumaria capreolata (0.87% incorporation). In addition, (S)-(10) labelled the entire set of benzylisoquinoline alkaloids present in this culture [18].

If it is assumed that (S)-coclaurine (10) is the biosynthetic precursor of (S)-reticuline (1), identical ratios of C6-C2 units derived from tyrosine should be found in the two halves of both the coclaurine (10) and reticuline (1) molecules. L-[Ring-u-14C]-tyrosine was fed to Annona leaves, (10) and (1) were purified to constant specific activity, methylated and subjected to Ce4+ oxidation as described above. 4'-O-Methylnorarmpavine (12) showed a ratio of isoquinoline: benzyl portion of 1 : 4.90 while laudanosine (11) yielded a ratio of 1 : 4.71. Within experimental error, these results demonstrate that both compounds must have one and the same biogenetic origin. Two C6-C2 units, namely dopamine (3) and 4-hydroxyphenylacetaldehyde (8) condense in a stereospecific manner to (9). 6-O-Methylation yields (S)-coclaurine (10) which is transformed by 3'-hydroxylation and subsequent 4'-0- as well as N-methylation to reticuline (1) as shown in the Scheme.

Scheme

\[ \text{Scheme} \]

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It is of interest to note that clearly the majority of label from tyrosine was found in the lower (benzylic) half of (10) and (1) which has not been observed previously [8,9]. Chemical examination of the leaf tissue revealed the presence of an exceedingly large pool of dopamine (3) (ca.35 mM, 3.03% dwt) while only trace quantities of tyramine were observed. This fact indicates that unlike 4-hydroxyphenylacetaldehyde (8), labelled dopamine (3) derived from (6) will be highly diluted prior to incorporation into norcoclaurine (9). This most plausibly explains the higher levels of radioactivity found in the lower halves of (10) and (1).

Reticuline (1) is the building block for protoberberines, benzophenanthridines and morphinandienones [2] as well as many other alkaloid species. If coclaurine (10) is truly the biosynthetic precursor for reticuline (1), then (S)-(10) should also be specifically incorporated into these classes of reticuline derived alkaloids. (S)-Coclaurine (10) is indeed incorporated into the target molecules. In Berberis stolonifera calli [19], (S)-[6-0-14CH3]-(10) is not only incorporated into the bisbenzylisoquinoline alkaloid berbamunine (15, 1.73%), but also into the protoberberines columbamine (16, 2.18%) and jatrorrhizine (17, 5.94%). Demethylation (HBr) of the acetylated tetrahydroprotoberberine showed that only 3.5% of the original radioactivity remained in the tetrahydroxypseudoberberine skeleton. Good incorporation (4.6%) of (S)-(10) into the benzophenanthridine alkaloid macarpine (18) was also observed in cell cultures of Eschscholzia californica. Finally, (S)-[6-0-14CH3]-(10) was an excellent precursor (5.7% incorporation) in seedlings of Papaver somniferum of the morphinandienone alkaloid, thebaine (19), a known precursor of codeine and morphine. Label from the precursor was exclusively located in the 6-0-methyl position of thebaine (19) as shown by mild and selective demethylation [20]. The resultant codeinone was unlabelled. Repetition of the feeding experiments with the (R)-enantiomer of [6-0-14CH3]-coclaurine (10) showed absolutely no incorporation into protoberberines, benzophenanthridines or morphinandienone alkaloids with the exception of berbamunine (15) where (R)-(10) was incorporated (1.92%) predominantly (82.1%) into the (R)-half of this molecule.

On the basis of these experiments we conclude that coclaurine and reticuline derived alkaloids have not, as previously assumed, two different precursors, norcoclaurine (9) and norlaudanosoline (2), but instead have a common origin, namely norcoclaurine (9). The revision of the biosynthetic pathway leading to the central intermediate, reticuline (1), is shown in the Scheme. All of the enzymes involved in the (S)-reticuline pathway have been discovered [10] except for the hydroxylase which introduces the 4'-hydroxyl group into the coclaurine (10) skeleton. This proposed pathway is consistent with experimental data in the literature which until now have been difficult to interpret.

Acknowledgement:
Supported by SFB 145 of Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn, and by Fonds der Chemischen Industrie. B. Cassels is grateful for receiving a von Humboldt-fellowship.
References:
4. For a review see E. Haslam, Nat. Prod. Reports 1, 217 (1986).

(Received in Germany 18 December 1986)