The Asymmetric Synthesis of Hydratropic Acid and Amino-acids by Homogeneous Catalytic Hydrogenation

By T. P. DANG and H. B. KAGAN*
(Laboratoire de Synthèse Asymétrique, Faculté des Sciences, 91-Orsay, France)

Summary A new optically active diphosphine-rhodium(1) catalytic system has been used in several asymmetric reductions giving optical yields of up to 72%.

The first asymmetric reduction of ethylenic compounds using chiral rhodium complexes has been recently described.1-3 We now report a new catalytic system for the asymmetric reduction of unsaturated prochiral acids giving the highest optical yields so far obtained in homogeneous asymmetric catalysis.

We have prepared in situ complexes represented as [Rh(I)(P-P)ClS], where P-P is a chiral diphosphine and S the solvent. These complexes are prepared by adding 2 mol of the diphosphine to a benzene-ethanol solution of [Rh-(cyclo-octene)Cl]. These solutions catalyse the hydrogenation of ethylenic compounds at room temperature and atmospheric pressure. We have studied the use of the asymmetric diphosphine (2), m.p. 87°, [α]D = -12.3° (c 4-57, C6H6), which is prepared from (+)-ethyl tartrate. The PPh2 groups are introduced by treating the ditosylate4 (1) with sodium diphenyl phosphide.

Reduction of atotropic acid (4) (3m~) in the presence of the rhodium complex [RhI(2)ClS] (0.1 mM) and triethylamine (0.3 mM) in benzene-ethanol (1:2) gives quantitatively (S)-hydratropic acid (5) with an optical purity of 63%. The asymmetric reduction of (4) has been previously described1 using an optically active phosphine [P*Me-(Ph)Pr]-rhodium complex to give an optical purity of 28%.

Hydrogenation of the methyl ester of (4) in the presence of our catalyst produces methyl hydratropate of low optical purity (7%), but having the (R)-configuration.

α-Acetamidocinnamic acid (6) (50 mM) is reduced quantitatively and rapidly in the presence of 0.1 mM of the complex [Rh(2)Cl] to give (R)-N-acetylphenylalanine (7) with an optical yield of 72%, the chemical yield being 95%.

Hydrogenation of the methyl ester of (4) in the presence of our catalyst produces methyl hydratropate of low optical purity (7%), but having the (R)-configuration.

The optical rotations of the isolated compounds were measured without recrystallization in order to avoid alteration of the enantiomeric purity.†

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† Optical yields are calculated from the specific rotations of the pure enantiomers which are reported in the literature: ref. 6 for (5); ref. 7 for (7); ref. 8 for (10).