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# Electrocatalytic Asymmetric Nozaki–Hiyama–Kishi Decarboxylative Coupling: Scope, Applications, and Mechanism

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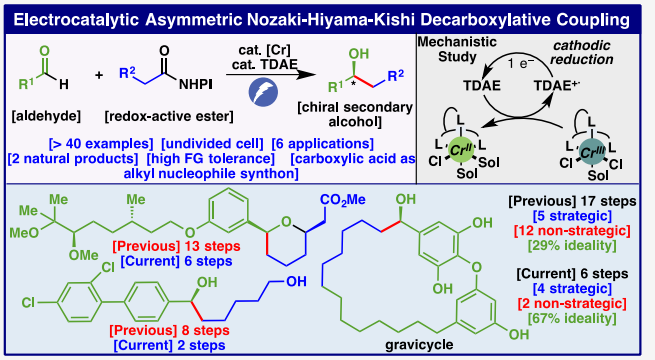
**ABSTRACT:** The first general enantioselective alkyl-Nozaki–Hiyama–Kishi (NHK) coupling reactions are disclosed herein by employing a Cr-electrocatalytic decarboxylative approach. Using easily accessible aliphatic carboxylic acids (via redox-active esters) as alkyl nucleophile synthons, in combination with aldehydes and enabling additives, chiral secondary alcohols are produced in a good yield with high enantioselectivity under mild reductive electrolysis. This reaction, which cannot be mimicked using stoichiometric metal or organic reductants, tolerates a broad range of functional groups and is successfully applied to dramatically simplify the synthesis of multiple medicinally relevant structures and natural products. Mechanistic studies revealed that this asymmetric alkyl e-NHK reaction was enabled by using catalytic tetrakis(dimethylamino)ethylene, which acts as a key reductive mediator to mediate the electroreduction of the $Cr^{III}$/chiral ligand complex.




## INTRODUCTION

The synthesis of chiral secondary alcohols has been a subject of intense study for more than 40 years (Figure 1A).[1] Retrosynthetically, two main pathways to access aryl-alkyl substituted secondary alcohols employ either nucleophilic addition to an aldehyde[2] or asymmetric reduction[3] of the corresponding ketone. Early catalytic manifestations of the former process date back to the work of Noyori[4] on highly stereocontrolled organozinc additions to aldehydes, whereas the latter strategy originated from the findings of Landor[5] ultimately leading to modern methods such as the venerable CBS[6] reduction. The Nozaki–Hiyama–Kishi (NHK) reaction, first discovered in 1977[7] and formalized in 1986[8] usually involves the cross-coupling of an alkenyl halide with an aldehyde through the use of stoichiometric Cr and catalytic Ni to afford an allylic alcohol product.[9] The corresponding alkyl-variant of this reaction is seldom employed with a variety of alkyl nucleophile surrogates being disclosed over the years, such as alkyl iodides,[10] carboxylic acids [via redox-active esters (RAEs)],[11] olefins,[12] or even unactivated C–H bonds[13] (Figure 1B). These variants, however, have not been employed in a catalytic, highly enantioselective fashion. In 2021, an electrocatalytic decarboxylative variant of the NHK reaction was disclosed by this team demonstrating a racemic proof of concept for such a bond forming strategy.[14] In this article, we disclose a broadly useful method that now achieves synthetically useful yields and enantiomeric excesses through a combination of fine-tuned electrochemical parameters, enabling additives, and an optimized chiral ligand.[15] The high functional group tolerance of this reaction combined with the versatility of using RAE-based alkyl donors can enable simplified access to enantioenriched alkyl-aryl alcohols in a variety of different contexts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The development of the asymmetric variant of decarboxylative electrocatalytic NHK took place in a bifurcated fashion, as outlined in Table 1A on substrates **1** and **2**. Thus, parallel optimizations were carried out to maximize reactivity in an electrochemical setting and to maximize ee in a purely chemical system. By separating the challenges of maximizing electrochemical reactivity and ee, the research teams could cover ground more rapidly as it was practically simpler to explore >50 chiral ligands using superstoichiometric Cr loading under low yielding chemical conditions as only the ee measurement was relevant. At the same time, a variety of electrochemical parameters (>150 conditions screened) were

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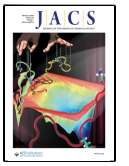






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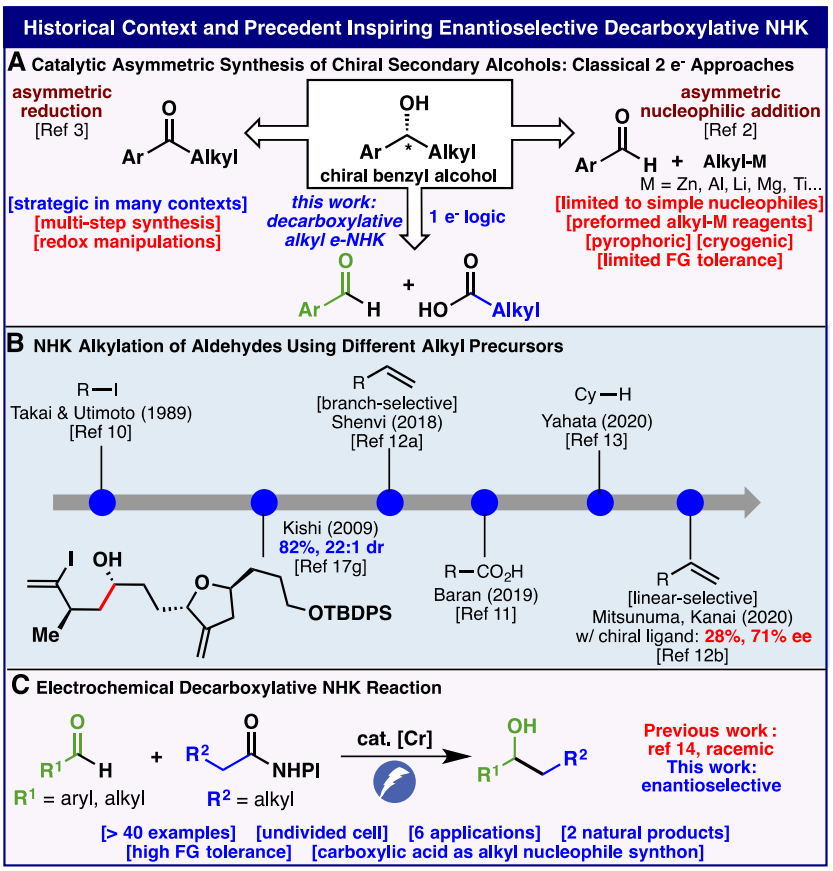


**Figure 1.** Historical context and precedent inspiring enantioselective decarboxylative NHK.

explored, such as solvent, electrolyte, additives, current density, concentration, and electrode material (see Supporting Information for the complete summary of both endeavors). Early in those studies it was verified that the ee measurements observed using purely chemical conditions could be translated to nonoptimized electrochemical conditions. With relatively optimized conditions and chiral ligand candidates identified, final reaction development commenced with alkyl aldehyde **3** and redox-active ester **4** (Table 1B). The extensive electrochemical screening campaign outlined above uncovered an optimal combination of chromium(II) chloride as the chromium source (along with catalytic proton sponge to enhance complex formation), TDAE[16]/TESCl asthe additives, Al/Ni electrode materials, $TBAClO_4$ electrolyte, and a high concentration (0.5 M) in $CH_3CN$. Of the chiral ligands explored, a unique sulfonamide-based structure (**L7**)[17] emerged as the optimum ligand. This final set of conditions provided a 51% isolated yield of benzylic alcohol **6** with a 90% enantiomeric excess (Table 1B). Replacing $CrCl_2$ with air-stable $CrCl_3$ led to a comparable yield but decreased the enantioselectivity (entry 1). The addition of tetrakis(dimethylamino)ethylene (TDAE) significantly increased the reaction efficiency without impacting the enantioselectivity (entry 2). TESCl was found to be superior to $Cp_2ZrCl_2$ in terms of trapping the chromium alkoxides and regenerating the catalyst (entry 3). As for the electrochemical parameters, solvent choice was important, wherein replacing $CH_3CN$ with DMF (entry 4) led to diminished enantioselectivity, presumably due to undesired competing coordination. Constant voltage (entry 5), alternative anode (entry 6) or cathode (entry 7) materials, as well as the identity of the electrolyte (entry 8) decreased the observed reaction yield. Notably, classic batch conditions with or without external reducing agents (entries 9 and 10) displayed far lower reactivity for this transformation.

A wide variety of chiral ligands reported in asymmetric NHK reactions were evaluated (Table 1B, top right, see Supporting Information for full listing), including salen ligand **L1**,[18] Nakada's ligand **L2**,[19] and BOX ligand **L3**.[20] We were pleased to determine that the chiral sulfonamide ligands (**L4**–**L9**) initially introduced by Kishi et al. gave the most promising asymmetric induction. As a result of extensive screening of Kishi-type ligands (>40 ligands, See Supporting Information), the R substituent on aniline was found to play a crucial role, wherein the (+)-menthol substituent (**L6**) enhanced the ee value to 67% compared to a simple methyl group (**L4**, 1% ee) or a cyclohexyl group (**L5**, 16% ee). Thus, we evaluated several larger substituents at this position, including (+)-8-phenylmenthol[21] (**L7**), which dramatically improved the ee value to 90%. However, an even more hindered variant containing a 2-naphthyl substituent (**L8**) did not form the required complex, presumably due to its inability to coordinate to the Cr(II) center.

With the optimal conditions in hand, the scope of this electrocatalytic enantioselective NHK decarboxylative coupling was explored, as summarized in Table 2. With regard to the redox-active esters, which were derived from readily available aliphatic carboxylic acids, we were pleased to find that aside from simple alkyl chains (**7**, **8**, **9**, **11**), a wide variety of function groups could be tolerated, such as terminal alkenes (**10**), internal alkenes (**28**, **29**), aryl halides (**13**, **26**), esters (**14**), alkyl chlorides (**15**, **27**), silyl ethers (**6**), carbamates


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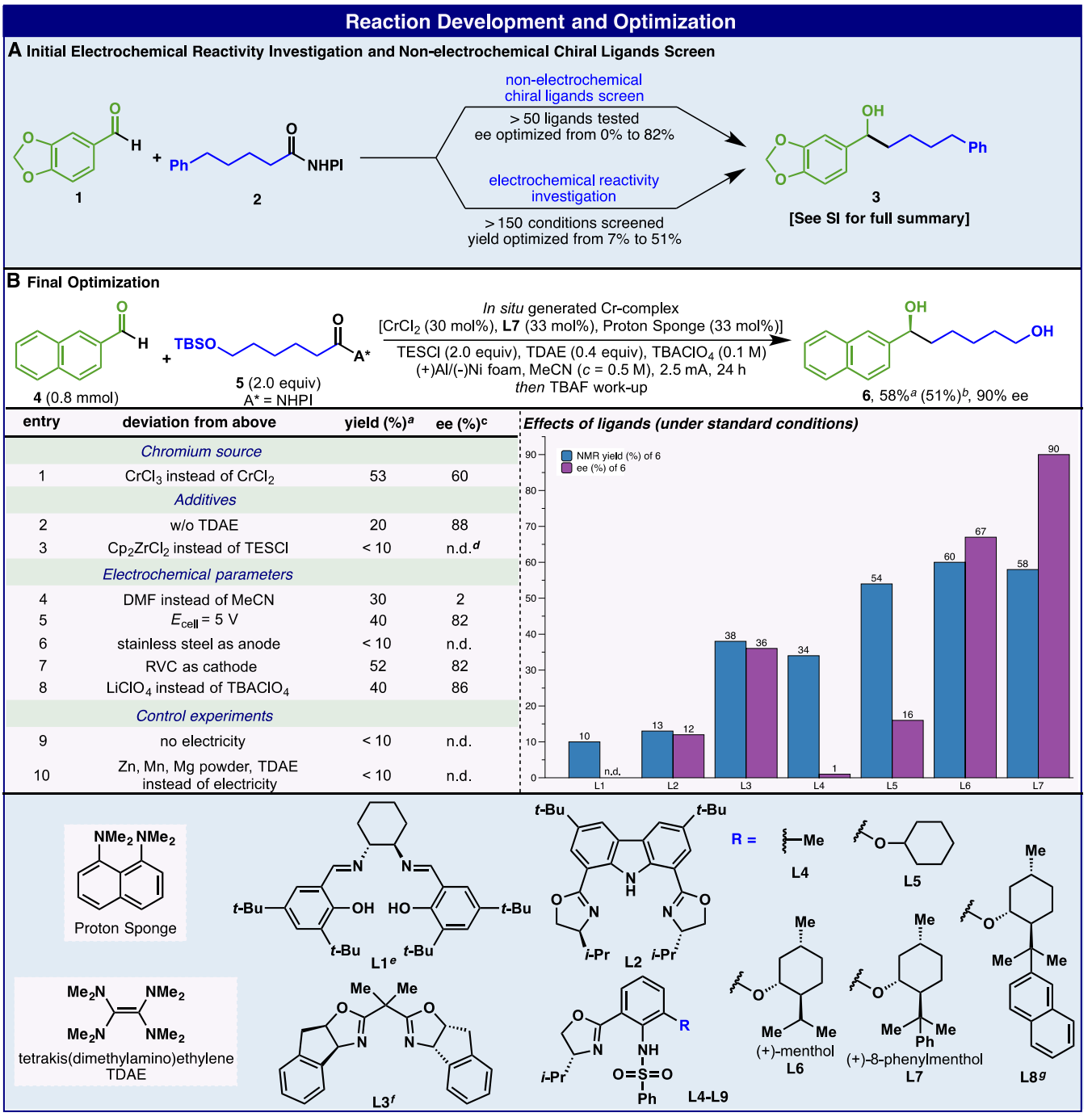
Table 1. Reaction Development and Optimization




| entry | deviation from above | yield (%)[a] | ee (%)[c] |
|---|---|---|---|
| | *Chromium source* | | |
| 1 | $CrCl_3$ instead of $CrCl_2$ | 53 | 60 |
| | *Additives* | | |
| 2 | w/o TDAE | 20 | 88 |
| 3 | $Cp_2ZrCl_2$ instead of TESCl | < 10 | n.d.[d] |
| | *Electrochemical parameters* | | |
| 4 | DMF instead of MeCN | 30 | 2 |
| 5 | $E_{cell}$ = 5 V | 40 | 82 |
| 6 | stainless steel as anode | < 10 | n.d. |
| 7 | RVC as cathode | 52 | 82 |
| 8 | $LiClO_4$ instead of $TBAClO_4$ | 40 | 86 |
| | *Control experiments* | | |
| 9 | no electricity | < 10 | n.d. |
| 10 | Zn, Mn, Mg powder, TDAE instead of electricity | < 10 | n.d. |

[a]Yields were determined by $^1$H NMR using 1,3,5-trimethoxybenzene as the internal standard. [b]Isolated yields after TBAF workup. [c]Enantiomeric excess (ee) was determined by chiral SFC analysis. [d]Not determined. [e]2 equiv proton sponge was used. [f]Without proton sponge. [g]Cr(II)-**L8** complex not formed.

(**16**), imides (**17**), heterocycles (**18**, **19**, **20**), ethers (**21**, **24**, **25**, **26**), acetates (**22**), boronate ester (**25**), a trifluoromethyl group (**24**), and tertiary amines (**27**). An array of aromatic aldehydes proved to be suitable coupling partners, providing synthetically useful yields and enantioselectivity. The main byproducts are decarboxylative reduction products from the RAEs and benzyl alcohols derived from the direct reduction of aromatic aldehydes. In general, substituents at the meta-position of the aromatic aldehydes give higher enantioselectivity than ortho- and para-substituents, and the electronic properties of substituents have little impact on both yields and ee values. The functional group tolerance is also broad with respect to the aldehyde coupling partner, including aryl halides (**30**, **40**, **41**, **43**, and **44**), ethers (**32**, **33**, **34**, **35**, **3**, **46**, and **47**), thioethers (**36**), heterocycles (**38**, **45**), and esters (**46**, **47**). It is worth noting that in the case of a substrate bearing a remote stereocenter, the stereochemistry in the products was fully controlled by the stereochemistry of ligands (**L7**, *ent*-**L7**) rather than that of the substrate (**46**, **47**).



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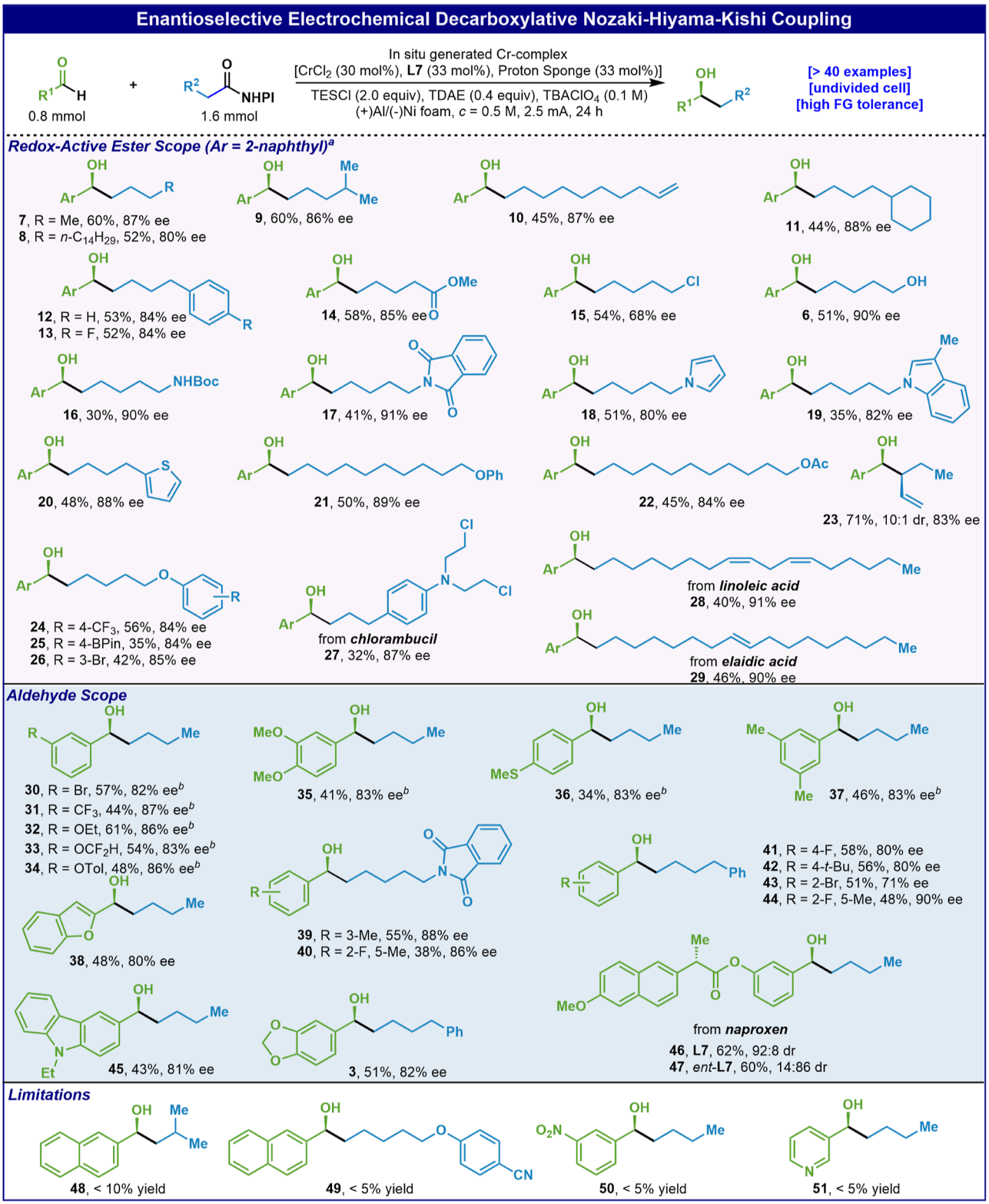
**Table 2. Scope of Enantioselective Electrochemical Decarboxylative NHK Coupling**




[a]Isolated yields after TBAF workup. [b]20 mol % $CrCl_2$, 22 mol % **L7**, and 22 mol % proton sponge were used.[16]

Of all compounds listed in Table 1, only **7** has been previously prepared in an enantioselective fashion, all of which require pyrophoric nucleophiles (alkyl lithium and Grignard species).[22] Alcohols **30**, **35**, and **38** have been previously prepared in racemic fashion through Grignard additions.[23] It is advantageous in many cases to use carboxylic acid inputs from both a chemoselectivity standpoint and synthetic simplicity as several of the requisite alkyl halides would need to be derived either from alcohol halogenation or Hunsdiecker decarboxylation[24] (i.e., compounds **27**, **28**, and **29**).



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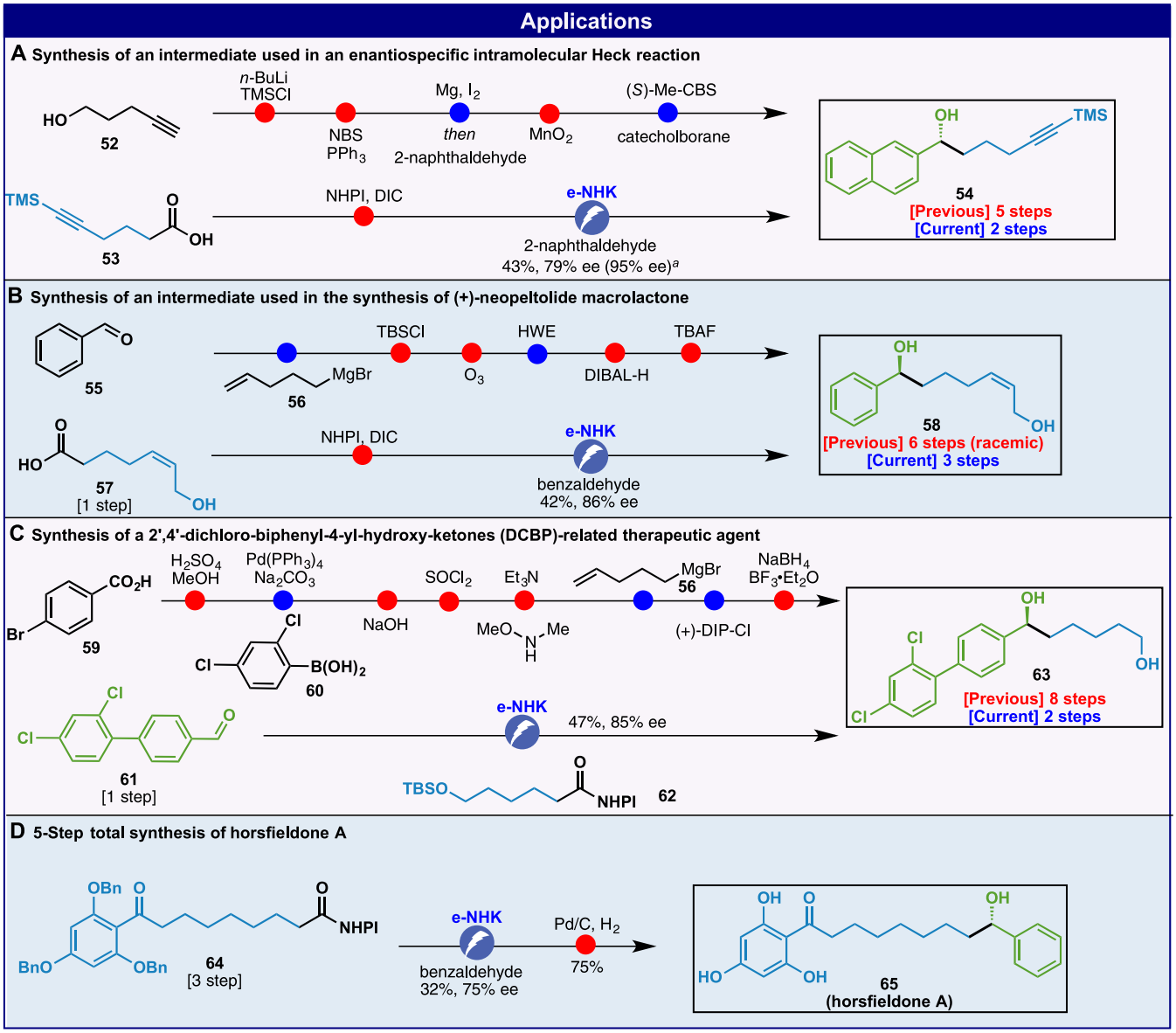


**Figure 2.** Applications. Short synthesis of four bioactive aryl-alkyl substituted secondary alcohols. a. After recrystallization.

Regarding the limitations of this method, nitro groups, benzonitriles, and pyridine-containing aldehydes are not suitable coupling partners (**49**–**51**). Beta-branched primary RAEs such as **48** also lead to a poor yield. In addition, RAEs derived from secondary and tertiary aliphatic carboxylic acids failed to give any desired coupling products (see Supporting Information for details). Utilizing aliphatic aldehydes instead of aromatic ones led to significant losses in both yields and enantioselectivities (see Supporting Information for details).

## APPLICATIONS

The electrocatalytic asymmetric NHK decarboxylative coupling disclosed herein, when applied strategically, can have a dramatically simplifying impact on synthesis, as outlined in Figures 2 and 3. This is due to the radical retrosynthetic logic[25] employed that departs from the conventional $2e^-$ strategies that are universally employed to access such substrates. For instance, alkyne **54**, which previously[26] required five steps involving nonstrategic redox fluctuations, functional group interconversions, and pyrophoric nucleophiles, could be prepared in only two steps commencing from **53** (Figure 2A). Diol **58**, an intermediate previously prepared as a racemic mixture (six steps) in a natural product total synthesis,[27] could be prepared in only three steps in high ee (Figure 2B). The medicinally relevant diol **63**[28] that required an 8-step route could be truncated to only two steps (Figure 2C). The first total synthesis of horsfieldone A[29] (**65**) was completed in 2 simple steps from the easily accessed RAE **64** (Figure 2D). Even more complex applications were designed and implemented, as documented in Figure 3. For example, the herboxidiene analogue **70**, previously required a 13-step route with many concession steps.[30] In contrast, starting from aldehyde **68** (four steps), an e-NHK coupling followed by cyclization led to the same compound in only 6 total steps. As a testament to the chemoselectivity of this reaction, RAE **69**, bearing an electrophilic acrylate moiety, could be employed. Finally, a substantially truncated route to gravicycle[31] (**78**) was developed using a series of enabling electrocatalytic couplings. The prior route[32] to this natural product relied on inefficient Bi-based *O*-arylation, pyrophoric reagents, numerous redox-



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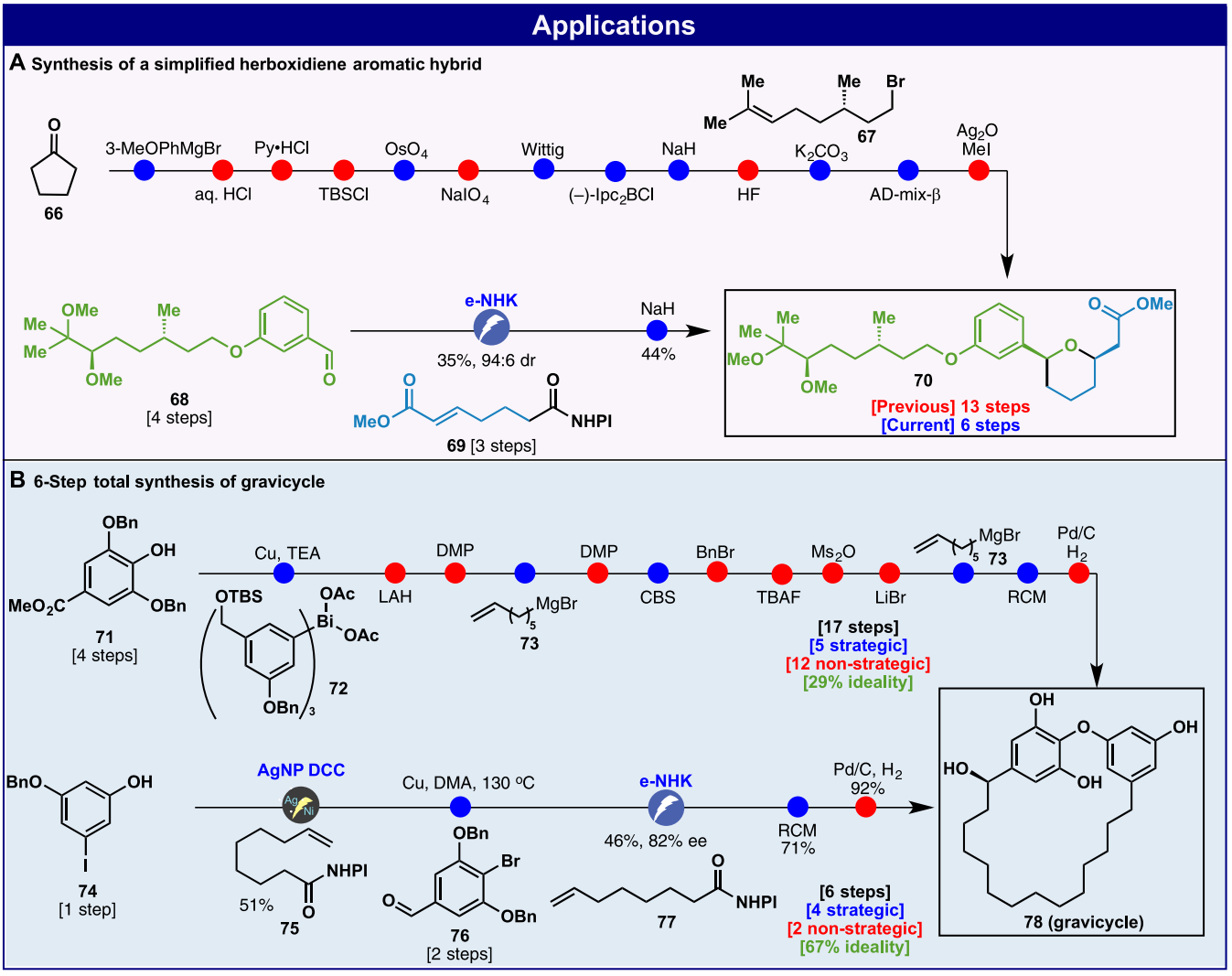


**Figure 3.** Applications. Simplifying the synthesis of a herboxidiene aromatic hybrid and gravicycle.

fluctuations, and functional group manipulations as part of a 17-step route. In contrast, the simple aryl iodide **74** could be subjected to electrocatalytic DCC-arylation[33] with RAE **75**, Ullman coupling with **76**,[34] e-NHK with RAE **77**, RCM, and deprotection to furnish **78** in only 6 steps.

## MECHANISTIC STUDIES

Given that the addition of TDAE proved important for obtaining good yields in the enantioselective e-NHK, mechanistic studies were carried out to determine the role of this additive. During the optimization process, a stoichiometric condition utilizing excess Cr(II) complex was found to give ee values comparable to the electrocatalytic system (Figure 4B). Addition of an acidic deuterium source to this reaction mixture led to the formation of deuterated alkane **79** consistent with other reports of alkylative NHK-type reactions.[35] The consistent ee between the stoichiometric system and the electrochemical system suggests that both the stoichiometric and catalytic conditions involve the formation of the same putative alkylchromium species and that TDAE is not required for formation of this intermediate. We hypothesized that in the electrochemical system, TDAE mediates the reduction of the **L7**·$Cr^{III}$. This process might be more important with **L7**-coordinated Cr if the sterically encumbered chiral ligand imposes an additional kinetic barrier to reduction at the electrode surface.

To investigate the key electron transfer steps in the electrochemical system, cyclic voltammetry (CV) was performed (Figure 4C). To simplify the experimental setup, the **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ complex was independently synthesized by treatment of **L7** with NaH (1.0 equiv) in THF followed by the direct addition of solid $CrCl_3$·3THF to give a purple-green solid.[17a] **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ exhibited quasireversible behavior with a large peak-to-peak separation (1.84 V) and a cathodic peak potential of −1.53 V vs $Fc/Fc^+$ at 100 mV/s (compared to ∼−1.42 V for the unligated $CrCl_3$·3THF complex) [Figure 4C(i)]. Both $CrCl_3$ and **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ exhibited scan-rate-dependent shifts in the cathodic peak potential with large half-peak to peak separation, suggesting that reduction at the cathode is kinetically slow. When compared to $CrCl_3$, the cathodic peak current of the **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ catalyst is approximately 110 mV more negative, with an onset potential that is 150 mV more cathodic, suggesting that the ligand increases the reduction potential of the complex or that it imposes an increased overpotential. Finite element simulation of the CV supported sluggish kinetics for the direct reduction of **L7**·$Cr^{III}$, as the voltammetry was best fit with a low heterogeneous electron transfer rate constant of $1 \times 10^{-5}$ cm $s^{-1}$ (for comparison, fast reversible redox couples typically


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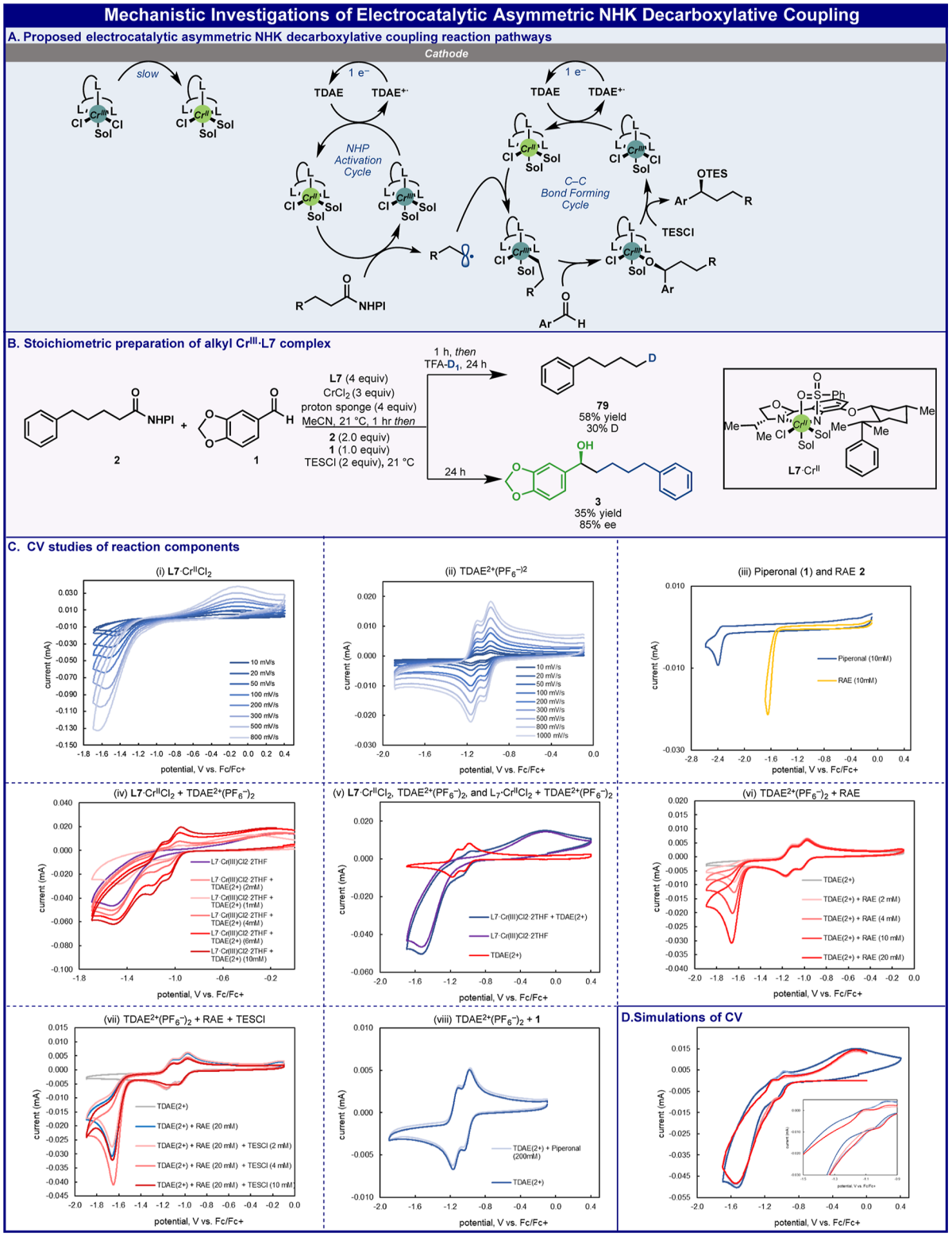


**Figure 4.** Mechanistic investigations. (A) Proposed electrocatalytic cycle. (B) Stoichiometric Cr-mediated reaction between **1** and **2** in the presence and absence of TFA-$D_1$. (C) CV studies. All CVs were acquired in MeCN using a 0.1 M $TBAClO_4$ supporting electrolyte. Unless otherwise noted, the experiment was carried out with a 100 mV/s scan rate. (i) [**L7**·$Cr^{III}Cl_2$·2 THF] = 8.55 mM. (ii) [$TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$] = 0.001 M. (iii) [**1**] = 0.01 M, [**2**] = 0.01 M. (iv) [**L7**·$Cr^{III}Cl_2$·2 THF] = 8.55 mM. [$TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$] varied from 0.002 to 0.01 M. (v) **L7**·$Cr^{III}Cl_2$·2 THF [*X* M], $TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$ [0.01 M], and **L7**·$Cr^{III}Cl_2$·2 THF [8.55 mM] and $TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$ [0.002 M]. (vi) [$TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$] = 0.002 M, [**2**] varied from 0.002 to 0.02 M. (vii) [$TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$] = 0.002 M, [**2**] varied from 0.002 to 0.02 M, and [TESCl] varied from 0.002 to 0.02 M. (viii) [$TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$] = *X* M in the presence and absence of **1** [0.2 M]. (D) Finite element simulation of CV of [**L7**·$Cr^{III}Cl_2$·2 THF] = 8.55 mM. [$TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$] = 0.002 M. Dark blue trace: experimental CV. Light blue trace: simulation of no interaction between $TDAE^{+\bullet}$ and **L7**·$Cr^{III}Cl_2$·2 THF. Red trace: simulation of $TDAE^{+\bullet}$ complexation with [**L7**·$Cr^{III}Cl_2$·2 THF]. Pink trace: simulation of $TDAE^{+\bullet}$ complexation with [**L7**·$Cr^{III}Cl_2$·2 THF] followed by chemical regeneration of $TDAE^{2+}$.



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exhibit rate constants near 0.1 cm $s^{-1}$).[36] RAE **2** has a peak potential of −1.63 V vs $Fc/Fc^+$ under the same CV conditions [Figure 4C(iii)]. This value lies close to the peak potential of **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ (−1.53 V), which could result in the direct reduction of **2** at the cathode competing with reduction of **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ given the challenging nature of the direct reduction of the $Cr^{III}$ species. Thus, TDAE-mediated reduction of **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ could allow the reaction to proceed more rapidly and at less-negative potentials, which could then avoid a possible deleterious direct reduction of RAE **2**.

To investigate the ability of TDAE to serve as a mediator, $TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$ was prepared by aerobic oxidation of TDAE in the presence of TMSBr (see Supporting Information). CV of $TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$ in MeCN revealed two freely diffusing reversible single-electron redox features at −1.05 and −1.13 V vs $Fc/Fc^+$, consistent with previous literature reports [Figure 4C(ii)].[37] Upon addition of **L7**·$Cr^{III}$, the cathodic peaks corresponding to $TDAE^{2+}$ reduction increase in current, and there is concomitant loss of the anodic features associated with the $TDAE^0/TDAE^{+\bullet}$ and $TDAE^{+\bullet}/TDAE^{2+}$ oxidations, consistent with loss of $TDAE^{+\bullet}$ by chemical reaction with **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ (EC mechanism) [Figure 4C(iv,v)]. The reduction of $TDAE^{2+}$ is less cathodic than that of both substrates (**1** and **2**) and **L7**·$Cr^{III}$, consistent with a scenario where $TDAE^{2+}$ undergoes preferential cathodic reduction. Additional CV studies were carried out to evaluate whether TDAE can also mediate the reduction of either RAE **2** or aldehyde **1**. Addition of up to 10 equiv of RAE **2** to $TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$ in the absence of TESCl led to a negligible current increase [Figure 4C(vi)]. An increase in current was observed in the presence of TESCl [Figure 4C(vii)]; however, this feature disappeared after the first scan in a manner consistent with a trace impurity in TESCl, which we ascribe to HCl. In a recent review, Waldvogel notes the challenges of CV studies of silyl halides being due to their facile hydrolysis to generate HCl.[38] We have previously reported that the combination of TDAE and silyl halides induces reductive decarboxylation of NHP esters but that TDAE/TESCl was determined to reduce benzylic NHP esters at rates that are slow relative to other silyl halides.[39] No significant current increase were observed upon addition of aldehyde **1** (100 equiv) to $TDAE^{2+}(PF_6^-)_2$ [Figure 4C(viii)]. This mechanistic scheme was further supported by finite element simulations of voltammetry [Figure 4D(ix)]. Simulations of both $TDAE^{2+}$ and **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ in solution with no mediation step provided a simulated CV with a clear shoulder at −1.13 V vs $Fc/Fc^+$ corresponding to the $TDAE^+/TDAE^0$ couple, a feature that is completely absent in the experimental CVs. Incorporation of an association step between $TDAE^+$ and **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ into the simulation provided a voltammogram with no associated $TDAE^+/TDAE^0$ wave, providing evidence of a reaction between reduced $TDAE^+$ and the Cr complex. Finally, incorporation of a turnover step (generating the reduced **L7**·$Cr^{II}$ and regenerating $TDAE^{2+}$) once again resulted in the $TDAE^+/TDAE^0$ wave, leading to the conclusion that dissociation of $TDAE^+$ is slow but still orders of magnitude faster than the direct reduction of **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ (full simulation details can be found in the Supporting Information). TDAE is known to form charge-transfer complexes with organic molecules and metal surfaces.[40] Collectively, these results are consistent with TDAE serving as an electrochemical mediator to reduce **L7**·$Cr^{III}$. It is also possible that TDAE can scavenge trace impurities such as HCl or $O_2$ that could decompose intermediates in the catalytic cycle.[41] The latter observation is corroborated by the generally improved performance of TDAE over $TDAE^{2+}$ in the reaction, which may result from the capability of TDAE to scavenge trace impurities before electrolysis is commenced.

In principle, if TDAE mediates the reduction of **L7**·$Cr^{III}$, then it should be possible to use stoichiometric TDAE to drive the reaction with **L7**·$Cr^{II}$ in the absence of current. Indeed, TDAE has been used as the stoichiometric reductant for Cr-catalyzed addition of alkenyl bromides and allyl bromides to aldehydes.[42] However, during the optimization process, <10% yield of **3** was observed using stoichiometric TDAE and no electricity (see Table 1, entry 10). Based on a recent report by Wenger and co-workers in which $TDAE^{+\bullet}$ was invoked as an H atom source, we hypothesized that with high concentrations of $TDAE^{+\bullet}$ (as under the stoichiometric conditions), hydrogen atom transfer (HAT) to the primary alkyl radical derived from **2** outcompetes addition of this species to **L7**·$Cr^{II}$ to generate the alkyl $Cr^{III}$ species.[43] In contrast, prior work from the Reisman lab showed that benzylic radicals undergo radical−radical dimerization faster than HAT in the presence of $TDAE^{+\bullet}$.[39] We ascribed this difference in reactivity to the difference in the stability of the primary and benzylic radicals. This also highlights the enabling nature of using catalytic TDAE under electrochemical conditions; while $TDAE^{+\bullet}$ can mediate reduction of **L7**·$Cr^{III}$, its presence in high concentrations can intercept the radical generated from the RAE and prevent productive coupling. This is a distinct challenge for the alkyl NHK, which proceeds via formation of highly reactive alkyl radicals, relative to prior work.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, an enantioselective alkyl e-NHK has been developed. This reaction allows the addition of simple, primary alkyl substrates to aldehydes to give secondary alcohols with high enantioselectivity. This class of substrates has not previously been rendered enantioselective for NHK reactions driven by canonical metal dust reductants. This asymmetric alkyl e-NHK was enabled by using TDAE as a key reductive mediator. CV studies and stoichiometric experiments suggest that the role of TDAE is to mediate reduction of the **L7**·$Cr^{III}$ complex, which in the previous, nonasymmetric alkyl e-NHK, was found to be the rate-determining step. This is especially beneficial for the asymmetric reaction, in which the chiral ligand is proposed to kinetically slow the reduction of the catalyst at the electrode. The ability to use a catalytic TDAE mediator is critical to avoid competing HAT processes between the alkyl radical and $TDAE^{+\bullet}$. The usefulness of this method is demonstrated by multiple synthetic campaigns, which highlight the strategic deployment of the asymmetric alkyl e-NHK to increase synthetic ideality and reduce the step count.

## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/jacs.3c13442.

All experimental procedures, analysis, and compound characterization data (PDF)



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### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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