REVISED Cross-Dehydrogenative Couplings between Indoles and β-Keto Esters: Ligand-Assisted Ligand Tautomerization and Dehydrogenation via a Proton-Assisted Electron Transfer to Pd(II)

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ABSTRACT: Cross-dehydrogenative coupling reactions between β-ketoesters and electron-rich arenes, such as indoles, proceed with high regiochemical fidelity with a range of β-ketoesters and indoles. The mechanism of the reaction between a prototypical β-ketoester, ethyl 2-oxocyclopentanonecarboxylate and N-methylindole, has been studied experimentally by monitoring the temporal course of the reaction by 1H NMR, kinetic isotope effect studies, and control experiments. DFT calculations have been carried out using a dispersion-corrected range-separated hybrid functional (ωB97X-D) to explore the basic elementary steps of the catalytic cycle. The experimental results indicate that the reaction proceeds via two catalytic cycles. Cycle A, the dehydrogenation cycle, produces an enone intermediate. The dehydrogenation is assisted by N-methylindole, which acts as a ligand for Pd(II). The computational studies agree with this conclusion, and identify the turnover-limiting step of the dehydrogenation step, which involves a change in the coordination mode of the β-keto ester ligand from an O,O′-chelate to an α−C-bound Pd enolate. This ligand tautomerization event is assisted by the π-bound indole ligand. Subsequent scission of the β′−C−H bond takes place via a proton-assisted electron transfer mechanism, where Pd(II) acts as an electron sink and the trifluoroacetate ligand acts as a proton acceptor, to produce the Pd(0) complex of the enone intermediate. The coupling is completed in cycle B, where the enone is coupled with indole. Pd(TFA)₂ and TFA-catalyzed pathways were examined experimentally and computationally for this cycle, and both were found to be viable routes for the coupling step.

INTRODUCTION—Dehydrogenative cross-couplings, or cross-dehydrogenative couplings between two partners with C−H bonds, constitute an attractive strategy in chemical synthesis.1 In particular, when the reaction partners include sp³ C−H bonds, the reactions can be used to generate molecular complexity in three dimensions, and at the same time allow functionalization in remote positions. Although there have been significant advances in this field in recent years,2,3 dehydrogenative functionalization reactions involving remote sp³ C−H groups are still rare.4 In part, this might be due to the fact that the mechanisms of dehydrogenative cross-couplings are only partially understood.

Herein, we present a full account on the mechanistic investigation and the scope of the selective Pd(II)-catalyzed dehydrogenative cross-coupling reaction between indoles and β-keto esters.5 This reaction is an example of a cross-dehydrogenative coupling between sp³ and sp² C−H bonds. Besides indoles, the reaction also accepts electron-rich aromatics and phenols as the coupling partner,6 and also allows for a three-component coupling between arylboronates, indoles and β-keto esters (Scheme 1).7

Scheme 1. Development of Dehydrogenative β′−C(sp³)−H C(sp³)−H Coupling Reaction
Results and Discussion

In our initial communication, we presented two possible mechanistic scenarios for this reaction (Scheme 2). The first, a “late indole”, scenario involves a Saegusa oxidation of 1a to enone intermediate A followed by a Friedel-Crafts-type Pd-catalyzed conjugate addition of indole 2a. The second, an “early indole”, scenario starts with the well-established C3-palladation of indole B in which a C3-palladated indole species B is involved in the dehydrogenation step, followed by reductive elimination. Our early mechanistic investigations could not distinguish between these two mechanistic possibilities. The key initial observations were: 1) Isolated enone 4a also afforded the coupling product with indole 2a, at a rate that was comparable to the overall reaction rate, and 2) without indole 2a, only very slow formation of enone 4a was observed. These observations suggested that if enone 4a was an intermediate, its formation might be dependent on the assistance of indole.

Scheme 2. Palladium-Catalyzed Dehydrogenative β′-Functionalization of β-Keto Ester with Indole and Originally Proposed Reaction Mechanism

In our early studies, the progress of the reaction was monitored by withdrawing aliquots from the reaction mixture. In this work, we envisioned that the use of online NMR methods to monitor the temporal progress of the reaction would be most beneficial to reveal any fleeting intermediates, and to allow the simultaneous monitoring of several species, including the oxidant.

Kinetic Studies. Initially, the standard reaction of β-keto ester 1a with 1-methylindole (2a) was monitored by 1H NMR spectroscopy (Figure 1). The results show that [4a] builds up and decays during the initial stage of the reaction, and product formation ([3a]) follows a sigmoidal curve. The consumption of indole 2a also plots a reverse sigmoidal curve. These results strongly suggested that enone 4a is an intermediate, and indeed the rate of formation of 3a peaks close to the concentration peak of 4a. The sigmoidal shape of the curve for [4a] is characteristic of a delay caused by the buildup of the intermediate in a consecutive reaction. The initial rate for the consumption of β-keto ester 1a (-5.7 mM min⁻¹) is also close to the initial rate of the consumption of the oxidizer tBuOOBz (-5.1 mM min⁻¹).

Figure 1. Monitoring of the temporal progress of the coupling by 1H NMR spectroscopy. Reaction conditions: [1a]₀ = 0.476 M, [2a]₀ = 0.318 M, [tBuOOBz]₀ = 0.413 M, 10 mol% Pd(TFA)₂, 4:1 [D₅]-dioxane/AcOH, 300 K. The reported rates are averages of three experiments. Rate₀ and rate₅₃ refer to the initial rate and the rate at t = 53 min, respectively.

Using separately prepared enone 4a, the reaction between enone 4a and indole 2a was investigated under two sets of conditions. The initial concentration of 4a was set to 0.12 M, close to the peak concentration of 4a obtained under the standard oxidative coupling conditions (Figure 1). With Pd(TFA)₂ as the catalyst, the reaction between 2a and 4a (Scheme 3) progresses at a rate comparable to the peak rate obtained under the standard conditions (1.7 mM min⁻¹ for both cases). In contrast, TFA alone as the catalyst allowed the reaction to proceed, but at a significantly slower rate (1.7 mM min⁻¹ with Pd(TFA)₂ vs. 0.26 min⁻¹ with TFA, see Scheme 3). These results indicated that Pd(II) also plays a role in the second
coupling step, with a possible acid-catalyzed background reaction.

Scheme 3. Reactions of Indole 2a and Enone 4a

Table 1. Effect of TFA on the Reaction Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>TFA (mol%)</th>
<th>Rate 3a (mM min⁻¹)</th>
<th>Rate 4a (mM min⁻¹)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rates were obtained by monitoring the temporal progress of the coupling by ¹H NMR spectroscopy. Reaction conditions: 0–40 mol% TFA, [1a]=0.476 M, [2a]=0.318 M, [t-BuOOBz]=0.413 M, 10 mol% Pd(OAc)₂, 4:1 [D₆]-Dioxane/AcOH, 300 K. In control experiments without Pd(OAc)₂, or with Co(OAc)₂ (20 mol%) or Fe(OAc)₃ (20 mol%), no 4a or 3a was produced.

Interestingly, although TFA alone was an inefficient catalyst, the effect of additional TFA to the overall reaction rate was beneficial (Table 1). With added TFA, the reaction proceeded at a reasonable rate even when using Pd(OAc)₂ as the Pd(II) source.

Kinetic Isotopic Effects and Deuterium Labeling. Although the above experiments established that enone 4a is indeed a viable intermediate for the reaction, control experiments without indole 2a clearly demonstrated that enone formation is very slow in the absence of indole. The reaction progress method allowed us to obtain kinetic isotope effect (KIE) data for all key reaction components, using deuterium-labeled starting materials.

The first KIE experiment involved a comparison of C2-H vs C2-D-labeled indole (Figure 2 a). All reaction components displayed significant inverse KIEs in this experiment (Figure 2). These results indicate that D-2a accelerates the formation of the enone 4a. The increased rate of product formation (3a) might be due to increased rate of the formation of the intermediate.

A second set of KIE experiment was conducted with deuterium-labelled β-keto ester D₆-1a (Figure 2 b). In this case, unfortunately, the formation of the corresponding enone could not be reliably monitored. Although the rate of consumption of D₆-1a appears to display an inverse KIE, possible initial H/D exchange and/or differences in the rates of the formation of the Pd(II) complexes of 1a could also account for this observation. Indeed, the overall rate of the reaction did not exhibit any KIE (3a: k_H/k_D = 0.98), and the initial rate of the consumption of the oxidant indicated a small normal KIE (k_H/k_D = 1.07). Since the consumption of the oxidant is most likely correlated with the concentration of the enone 4a, these results suggest that the dehydrogenative reaction that produces 4a is unlikely to exhibit a KIE, although this step must involve the breaking of the β-H bond of 1a.
Figure 2. Temporal progress of the coupling by $^1$H NMR spectroscopy with deuterated starting materials. Reaction conditions: a): $[1a]_0 = 0.476$ M, $[D_8-2a]_0 = 0.318$ M, $[2a]_0 = 0.318$ M. For both experiments: $[tBuOOBz]_0 = 0.413$ M, 10 mol% Pd(TFA)$_2$, 4:1 [D$_8$]-Dioxane/AcOH, 300 K. Rates and $k_D/k_H$ are averages of three experiments (a) or two experiments (b). Rate$_i$ and rate$_{xx}$ refer to the initial rate and the rate at $t = xx$ min, respectively.

Competition Studies. To obtain further insight into the reaction mechanism, the KIEs were also assayed via competition studies.\textsuperscript{12} As shown in Scheme 4, an intermolecular competition reaction between substrates 2a and D-2a, starting with 1a, gives a product distribution $P_H/P_D = 1:2.22$. If 2a is not dissociated from Pd after the first stage of the reaction (formation of enone 4a), then the observed KIE could be explained by the more rapid rate of enone formation with D-2a. However, the fact that a significant concentration of free enone can be observed during the reaction (Figure 1) suggests that the catalytic cycle responsible for the coupling of enone 4a and indole 2a is at least partially separated from the first dehydrogenation cycle that produces enone 4a. Therefore, the observed KIE in Scheme 4a could be related to the C–C formation step. To assay this possibility, intermolecular competition experiments with 2a and D-2a were conducted using enone 4a as the substrate. These experiments gave a $P_H/P_D$ that was much closer to unity under both Pd(II) catalysis and TFA catalysis (Scheme 4b), suggesting that the KIE observed with 1a (Scheme 4a) originates from the dehydrogenation step and that 4a may not be fully dissociated from the Pd complex that eventually leads to the product 3a.

Scheme 4. Competition Studies between 2a and D-2a

Finally, in an intramolecular competition experiment, the mono-β’-deuterated D$_2$-1a gave rise to product 3a that exhibited a 48.6:51.4 H/D ratio (Scheme 5). The absence of a KIE in

Scheme 5. Intramolecular Competition Between D$_2$-1a and 1a in the Coupling Process

In the competition reaction between 1a and D$_2$-1a, the non-deuterated 1a reacts faster than the deuterated D$_2$-1a (Scheme 5). This result is in agreement with the small normal KIE observed for oxidant consumption with D$_2$-1a in the parallel experiment (Figure 2 b), suggesting that D$_2$-1a is dehydrogenated at a slower rate than 1a. Interestingly, some H/D exchange appears to take place in this experiment, producing D4-3a (Scheme 5).
this experiment suggests that the \( \beta' \)-H bond cleavage is not turnover-limiting for the dehydrogenation cycle (see below for further discussion).

**Scheme 6. Intramolecular Competition Studies with \( \beta' \)-Monodeuterated D1-1a**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{O} & \quad \text{O} \\
\text{PD} & \quad \text{Me}
\end{align*}
\]

\[\text{[D1-1a]}: 0.476 \text{ M} \quad \text{[2a]}: 0.318 \text{ M}\]

**Scheme 7. Intermolecular Competition Between 1a and 1b in the Coupling Process**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{O} & \quad \text{O} \\
\text{Me} & \quad \text{CF}_3
\end{align*}
\]

\[\text{[1a]}: 0.238 \text{ M} \quad \text{[1b]}: 0.238 \text{ M}\]

The effect of the electron-withdrawing alkyl ester was studied using \( \beta \)-keto ester 1b. Under the standard conditions, the reaction between 1b and 2a was significantly slower than the standard reaction between 1a and 2a (0.52 mM min\(^{-1}\) with 1b vs. 1.7 mM min\(^{-1}\) with 1a). This rate difference was also confirmed by an intermolecular competition between 1a and 1b (P\(_2\)/P\(_3\) value of 3, see Scheme 7). These rates reflect the measured rates of the dehydrogenation step (rate of formation of enone: 1.6 mM min\(^{-1}\) for 4b (4b is enone derived from 1b) vs. 4.4 mM min\(^{-1}\) for 4a).\(^{14}\)

In summary, these kinetic experiments revealed that 1) the reaction likely proceeds in two stages, via an enone intermediate (4a), 2) the formation of enone is dependent on indole, and 3) the C–C bond formation step can proceed under both acid catalysis as well as under Pd(II) catalysis. In parallel with these experiments, the intimate details of the mechanism were subjected to a computational study.

**Computational Studies and Revision of the Mechanism.**

Based on our experimental findings, we envisioned that the Pd-catalyzed dehydrogenative cross-coupling reaction between \( \beta \)-ketoester 1a and indole 2a takes place via two distinct catalytic cycles (Scheme 8) corresponding to the formation of the enone intermediate (cycle A) followed by the C–C bond formation process with indole (cycle B). As indicated in Scheme 8, the Pd(TFA)\(_2\)(2a) species may represent a common intermediate of the two cycles. We carried out DFT calculations with the main aim at identifying and characterizing the key elementary steps of these cycles.\(^{5}\)

**Scheme 8. Schematic view of Catalytic Cycles for the Dehydrogenation and the C–C bond Formation Steps**

Dehydrogenation: Cycle A. In accordance with previous studies on Pd-catalyzed dehydrogenation reactions, we considered a sequence of C–H-activation/\( \beta' \)-hydride elimination steps in cycle A. The assistance of indole was clearly demonstrated in our experiments, therefore we assumed that 2a acts as a co-ligand along the entire reaction pathway.

The calculations indicate that the deprotonation of 1a at the \( \alpha \)-carbon atom can occur easily via a tetracordinate Pd(II) complex involving two TFA ligands and both substrates bound to the metal center (intermediate Pd(TFA)\(_2\)(1a)/2a)). This complex is predicted to be at -0.1 kcal/mol with respect to Pd(TFA)\(_2\)(2a) + 1a.\(^{16}\) The transition state identified for the deprotonation is depicted in Figure 3a and it represents only a small activation barrier (9.9 kcal/mol). It is apparent that the C–H bond of 1a is activated by a neighboring TFA ligand resulting in a Pd-enolate intermediate, which is stabilized by the dissociation of the TFAH molecule. This latter reaction intermediate (int\(_1\) in Figure 3b) lies slightly below the reference level (at -3.4 kcal/mol), and it is characterized by chelating coordination of the enolate ligand through the two carbonyl moieties (\( \eta^1(\text{O},\text{O}) \) complex).\(^{17}\)

For the \( \beta' \)-hydride elimination step, the \( \beta \)-hydrogen should be accessible by the metal center, therefore, ligand rearrangement is expected as a next step along the reaction pathway. The simplest transformation would be an internal rearrangement of the bonding between Pd and enolate preserving the same stoichiometry, but other pathways (including various dissociation/association steps) are also feasible. Our attempts to explore these transformations pointed to several transition states lying higher in free energy than TS\(_{\text{step}}\). For instance, the transition state connecting int\(_1\) with an \( \eta^1 \)-Pd-enolate intermediate (i.e. displacement of the ester group from the coordination sphere, see TS\(_{\text{early}}\) and int\(_2\) in Figure 4) is predicted to be at 16.9 kcal/mol, giving rise to a barrier of 20.3 kcal/mol (relative to int\(_1\)).\(^{18}\)
Additional ligand rearrangement can lead to an intermediate involved directly in the β-hydride elimination step (see intΔ in Figure 5). In this species, the enolate is bound covalently to Pd via the α-carbon atom (η1(C) complex) and it displays characteristic β-agostic interactions with the metal center. This complex is computed to be at +3.2 kcal/mol on the free energy scale. Surprisingly, the Pd-mediated C–H bond cleavage does not yield the expected palladium-hydride species, because the located transition state (TSrear in Figure 5) describes a direct hydrogen migration to the free oxygen of the TFA ligand without the formation of a palladium-hydride intermediate (PdH species could only be identified computationally as very unstable structures).11

Figure 3. Transition state located for the substrate deprotonation step of cycle A (a) and the corresponding product state intermediate (b). Relative Gibbs free energies (in kcal/mol, with respect to Pd(TFA)2(2a) + 1a) are shown in parenthesis. Metal-ligand bonds are indicated by dashed lines. For clarity of figures, hydrogen atoms are omitted, except those involved in dehydrogenation.

Figure 4. Decoordination of the ester group in intermediate intΔ: a) transition state, b) product state of rearrangement.

Figure 5. The proton-coupled electron transfer (PCET) transition state of cycle A and the corresponding reactant and product state intermediates.

The population analysis carried out for the transition state and the corresponding intermediates reveals that this elementary step can be characterized as a concerted proton-coupled electron transfer (PCET) process involving proton migration to TFA occurring in concert with 2e− electron transfer to the metal center.1120 This reaction step results in a Pd(0)(TFAH)(2a)(4a) complex as an intermediate (intΔ in Figure 5) lying at 6.4 kcal/mol. The computed activation barrier of the PCET step is 16.9 kcal/mol with respect to the low-lying intΔ intermediate, i.e. much lower than that of the ligand rearrangement step (20.3 kcal/mol, TSrear with respect to intΔ). After this step, the catalytic cycle involves the oxidation of Pd(0) and the elimination of the enone molecule. These transformations were not examined computationally in the present work.

Figure 6. Gibbs free energy diagram computed for the dehydrogenation process.

The Gibbs free energy diagram of the reaction route explored for the dehydrogenation process is depicted in Figure 6.
These results point towards a reasonable mechanism for the dehydrogenation process; however, they indicate that the $\eta^2(\text{O}, \text{O}')$ to $\eta^1(\text{C})$ rearrangement of the enolate ligand, and not the PCET step, might be rate-determining in cycle A.

**Indole-Assisted Dehydrogenation.** To assess the role of indole in the dehydrogenation cycle, we examined analogous reaction pathways using a model with a TFAH co-ligand replacing the indole. We find that the activation barriers are notably higher than those presented above. The largest difference was obtained for the ester decoordination step (the barrier increased to 24.2 kcal/mol) indicating that indole coordination is clearly beneficial in terms of the reaction rate. Interestingly, the PCET mechanism of C-H bond cleavage is maintained in the absence of indole as well, although the barrier of this step is predicted to be slightly higher in this case (15.0 kcal/mol).

To rationalize the results of KIE experiments with 2a, we calculated the KIE values based on the relative barriers with the different isotopomers of 2a. With D-2a, the calculated KIE is 0.85 considering that $\text{TS}_{\text{rearr}}$ is the turnover-determining transition state. The calculated value is very close to the experimental KIE (0.77-0.85, see Figure 2). The magnitude of the KIE is similar to cases where hybridization changes from C(sp$^2$) to C(sp$^3$), suggesting that the steric environment of C2 of 2a becomes significantly more crowded in the turnover-determining transition state $\text{TS}_{\text{rearr}}$ compared to the turnover-determining intermediate. This result suggests that 2a assists the tautomerization step by coordinating more tightly (primarily via its 2,3-$\pi$-bond) to Pd(II) in the transition state $\text{TS}_{\text{rearr}}$. Indeed, computations indicate that the bond distance between the C2 atom of the coordinated indole and the Pd atom is considerably shortened in the $\text{TS}_{\text{rearr}}$ compared to the related reactant state ($\text{int}_1$) (the computed Pd-C2 bond lengths are 2.28 and 2.34 Å, respectively). The need for indole assistance in this step may result from increased electron deficiency of the Pd(II) center in $\text{TS}_{\text{rearr}}$ due to decoordination of $\text{int}_1$.

To test this hypothesis, we also experimentally explored other electron-rich ligands which would not react with 4a but would nevertheless be able to withstand the oxidative conditions. In addition to sulfoxides (DMSO and PhSOMe), 1,2,3-trimethylindolone and 1,3-dimethylindolone were able to significantly accelerate the dehydrogenation step (see the SI). If the PCET step, where the $\beta^\prime$-H bond is cleaved, would be the turnover-determining step in cycle A, a much larger KIE would be expected than that observed experimentally with $\beta^\prime$-deuterated 1a variants (the experimental KIE is close to 1, see Figure 3 and Scheme 6). The calculated KIE for the PCET step is quite large (7.06), and it is in sharp contrast with the value obtained from the intramolecular competition experiment (Scheme 6), which is expected to be most sensitive to any KIE in the product-determining step. The fact that no primary KIE is observed even under these conditions can be rationalized by considering that the different hydrogen isotopes are not in an equal environment after the turnover-limiting step (i.e. $\text{TS}_{\text{rearr}}$). The choice between $\beta^\prime$-H vs. $\beta^\prime$-D abstraction has already been made in the turnover-determining ligand rearrangement step which leads to the formation of C-bound enolate $\text{int}_3$. The effect of deuterium substitution in the $\beta^\prime$ position of the ligand on the ligand rearrangement step is expected to be small, resulting in a negligible primary KIE.

The finding that the turnover is determined by the ligand tautomerization step (from a $\text{O},\text{O}'$-chelate $\text{int}_1$ to C-bound $\text{int}_3$) is interesting. $\alpha$-Substituted $\beta$-dicarbonyl compounds are known to be unproductive in $\alpha$-arylation reactions, and our results suggest that such low reactivity might have a kinetic origin. Specifically, if the barrier for the formation of the C-bound enolate from the $\text{O},\text{O}'$-chelate intermediate is too high, this would prevent both dehydrogenation and $\alpha$-arylation reactions. In a control experiment, methyl dimethylmalonate (5), a very sluggish substrate for $\alpha$-arylation, failed to give any coupling products with 2a under the standard reaction conditions (eq 1).

This result could be rationalized by the Lewis basicity of the ester oxygens in 5, which might result in a $\text{O},\text{O}'$-chelated intermediate that would be too stable to undergo the tautomerization to the C-bound enolate. Since ligands such as indole are able to assist the tautomerization step, we can speculate that perhaps more efficient $\pi$-donor ligands might overcome these limitations.

**The C–C Coupling Process.** According to the experimental evidence, the C–C coupling process (cycle B) could proceed either via acid catalysis or Pd(II) catalysis under acidic conditions. The reaction between 2a and 4a could conceivably take place via either Lewis acid catalysis (Pd**II**), C-palladation of 2a, or Brønsted acid catalysis, among other possibilities. We therefore examined these reaction routes computationally, and plausible pathways were identified for these scenarios. For brevity, herein we discuss only the C-palladation mechanism in detail, which is predicted to have the lowest activation barrier among the investigated pathways. The alternative pathways are presented in the Supporting Information.

The C-palladation pathway begins with the formation of a Pd(TFA)$_2$(2a)(4a) complex, which involves both coupling partners (indole 2a and enone 4a). Although this complex lies fairly high in free energy (11.8 kcal/mol with respect to Pd(TFA)$_2$(2a) + 4a), it can undergo C–H activation (concerted metalation-deprotonation) via transition state $\text{TS}_{\text{CH}}$ to yield intermediate $\text{int}_{\text{CH}}$ (Figure 7). The located transition state is computed to be at 19.7 kcal/mol, and the resulting intermediate is predicted to be at 8.9 kcal/mol. In $\text{int}_{\text{CH}}$, the indole is covalently bound to Pd, whereas enone 4a is $\pi$-coordinated.

Facile C–C bond formation may take place from $\text{int}_{\text{CH}}$ (Figure 8). The located transition state ($\text{TS}_{\text{CC}}$) lies notably lower in free energy than $\text{TS}_{\text{CH}}$. The product state of the coupling process ($\text{int}_{\text{CC}}$) is a very stable species, wherein the adduct 3a is bound by multiple bonds to the metal center. Protonation of the carbonyl oxygen followed by the dissociation of the enolic form of the product is found to be a reasonable scenario for the completion of the cycle, but other product elimination routes may exist too.
It should be emphasized that the alternative C–C bond formation mechanisms cannot be entirely ruled out either. For example, for a Brønsted acid catalyzed pathway (TFA as the catalyst), calculations predict a barrier very similar to that obtained for the C-palladation pathway (19.9 kcal/mol). Furthermore, a Lewis acid catalyzed pathway, involving Pd(TFA)$_2$ was found to have a slightly higher barrier (22.3 kcal/mol). Although there are close literature precedents involving Pd(II) as a Lewis acid in Friedel–Crafts reactions between indoles and α,β-unsaturated carbonyl compounds, it should be noted that the reaction conditions (aprotic solvents, such as CH$_2$Cl$_2$ and noncoordinating counterions, such as SbF$_6$) are quite different to those studied here (trifluoroacetate counterions, polar /proton solvent).

The Resting State of the Catalyst. Although the computations give reasonable barriers for the C–C bond forming step starting from Pd(TFA)$_2$, the stability of the product complex int$_{CC}$ suggests that recycling Pd(II) requires further assistance, e.g. from the acidic solvent and/or β-ketoesters. We were able to crystallographically characterize a dinuclear [Pd$_2$(TFA)$_2$(3a)$_2$] complex from a reaction conducted with 100 mol% of Pd(TFA)$_2$. In this complex, 3a is a bidentate ligand for Pd(II), with a binding geometry that is strikingly similar to int$_{CC}$. This complex could also be characterized computationally, and the experimentally and computationally derived structures are presented in Figure 9. The isolability of this complex suggests that Pd(II)-3a complexes are stable intermediates, and their decomplexation might even limit the turnover of the reaction.

As a test for this hypothesis, we found that addition of dimethyl methylmalonate 5 (50 mol%) to the reaction mixture results in a marked increase in the rate of formation of both 3a and 4a (Scheme 9), pointing towards a possible assistance of 5 in releasing Pd(II). Alternatively, 5 could act as a ligand for dehydrogenation, but we find this scenario less likely as β-ketoester 1a alone cannot effectively promote the dehydrogenation without the assistance from indole. We cannot, however, rule out a third possibility that 5 assists in cycle B as a co-ligand.

**Scheme 9. Effect of Malonate Ester 5**

**Reaction Scope and Asymmetric Variants of the Coupling Reaction.** Although clarifying the mechanistic picture of the coupling reaction was the main focus of this study, we also present here the full scope of the transformation and an asymmetric variant of the reaction. As described in our original communication, the reaction readily tolerated electron-rich, electron-poor, and sterically demanding indole-substrates, and both free indole N-H as well as N-methyl and N-benzyl indoles are tolerated. However, sulfonyl or carbamate protecting groups are not tolerated on the indole nitrogen. Furthermore, a range of β-keto esters, including cyclic 5-, 6-, and 7-membered β-keto esters, can be used. Additional substrates that were not described in the initial communication are shown in Scheme 10. The full scope is presented as a Chart in the Supporting Information.

For the development of an asymmetric version of the reaction, we have focused on using a chiral ester auxiliary. Although the use of chiral acids and/or chiral anions might conceivably induce enantioselectivity via either the Pd(II)- or acid-catalyzed C–C bond formation pathways, our previous experiments with chiral acids and chiral Pd phosphates were not very encouraging. Instead, 8-phenylmenthyl esters exhibited useful levels of diastereoselectivity.

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**Figure 7.** C–H activation of indole 1a.

**Figure 8.** Pd-catalyzed C–C coupling via a C3-palladated indole species.

**Figure 9.** Structure of the Pd$_2$(TFA)$_2$(3a)$_2$ complex: a) X-ray structure, b) overlay of X-ray (blue) and computed (red) structures.

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**Scheme 10.** Asymmetric Variants of the Coupling Reaction.
Scheme 10. Additional Substrates for the Indole - β-Keto Ester Oxidative Coupling

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{R}^1 \quad \text{OEt} \\
&\text{R}^2 \\
&\text{R}^3 \\
&\text{R}^4 \\
\end{align*}
\]

Isolated yields of pure products are reported. Conditions: 1 (1.5 equiv), 2 (0.4 mmol, 1.0 equiv), \(t\)-BuOObz (1.3 equiv), \(\text{Pd(TFA)}_2\) (0.1 equiv), \(i\)-PrOH/AcOH (4:1, 0.5 mL) at 25 °C.

Scheme 11 presents the scope of the transformation with different 8-phenylmenthyl β-keto esters. In general, the diastereoselectivities were good. The exception was 3i, which afforded only moderate 2:1:1 dr. The reaction also tolerates bromine substituents in the indole nucleus (3g - 3i); this is a useful feature for further functionalization of the products. The observed sense of diastereoselection is in full accordance with literature precedents and the model shown in Scheme 11 (inset).

Scheme 12. Revised Catalytic Cycles

Krapcho decarboxylation of 3aj provided the corresponding ketone 6 in 62% yield (eq 1) and 98:2 er (eq 2).
Conclusions. β-Keto esters and indoles can be dehydrogenatively cross-coupled with a high regioselectivity under very mild conditions with Pd(II) catalysis. With the combined information obtained from online NMR monitoring experiments, kinetic isotope effects, and computational studies, the previously proposed reaction mechanism was revised. The revised mechanism is presented in Scheme 12.

The reaction involves indole already at the early stage of the catalytic process as a π-bound ligand for Pd(II) that assists the O→C tautomerization of β-keto ester 1a. This is the turnover-determining step of the dehydrogenation cycle. The assistance of indole ligand in the tautomerization step is evident both from the secondary kinetic isotope effects observed for the rate of the dehydrogenation with 2-deuterated N-methylindole and from the computational studies. The dehydrogenation of the β-keto ester is completed by a proton-assisted electron transfer reaction where Pd(II) is simultaneously reduced to Pd(0) and trifluoroacetate ligand accepts a proton from the β-carbon. No Pd hydride intermediate could be characterized by the computations. For the C–C bond forming step, three plausible pathways involving either acid catalysis or Pd(II) catalysis were identified by computations. Experimentally, Pd(II) was found to accelerate the C–C bond formation, and computationally the most feasible Pd(II)-catalyzed pathway involves the palladation of indole at C3. However, Lewis acid catalysis by Pd2+ cannot be excluded. Finally, the synthetic utility of the protocol was expanded to include additional substrates, and an asymmetric version of the reaction could be realized with 8-phenylmenthyl esters.

The reaction between indoles and β-ketoesters appears to be possible only because indoles can serve the double role of a substrate and a ligand in the ligand-assisted tautomerization step, the turnover-determining step of the dehydrogenation cycle. This finding should encourage researchers to look for similar effects in other dehydrogenation and cross-dehydrogenative coupling reactions.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT  
Supporting Information. Experimental procedures, additional experiments pertaining to the mechanism, characterization data, computational details, and copies of NMR spectra and GC chromatograms.

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11. See the Supporting Information for details.
13. C3-deuterated 2a rapidly exchanged the deuterium label with AcOH, with and without Pd(TFA)₂ catalyst. In contrast, the deuterium label at C2 was preserved with D₂O under the reaction conditions.
15. Most of the DFT calculations (geometry optimizations, vibrational analysis, estimation of solvent effects) were carried out at oB97X-D/SDDP level of theory. For each located structure, we carried out additional single-point energy calculations using the same functional, but a larger basis set (supplemented by diffusion functions). The reported energetics refers to relative solution-phase Gibbs free energies. For further details, see Supporting Information.
16. The Pd(TFA)₂(2a) + 1a state was arbitrarily chosen as a reference level for the estimation of relative Gibbs free energies since the experimental evidence indicated involvement of 2a in the dehydrogenation of 1a.
17. For an early review on coordination chemistry of β-dicarbonyl compounds, see: Kawaguchi, S. Coord Chem.


20. For studies describing metal-catalyzed C–H bond cleavage reactions in terms of the PCET mechanism, see: (a) Seu, C. S.; Appel, A. M.; Doud, M. D.; DuBois, D. L.; Kubik, C. P. Energy Environ. Sci. 2012, 5, 6480; (b) Nielsen, R. J.; Goddard III, W. A. J. Am. Chem. Soc. 2006, 128, 9651. Note that in the latter work, this mechanism is referred to as reductive β-hydride elimination. The computed charges of the int2, TS_PCE and int3a stationary points indicate that a proton, and not a hydridic or radical H is transferred in the present hydrogen migration step, and therefore we think the use of the PCET term is justified here (for details of population analysis, see the SI).

21. The identity of the catalyst resting state (i.e., the turnover-determining intermediate – see Kozuch, S.; Shaik S. Acc. Chem. Res. 2011, 44, 101) is uncertain. In the KIE calculations, it was assumed that the resting state does not involve 2a as the ligand. For more details about the KIE calculations, see the SI.


24. The system studied herein is different to the scenarios discussed in ref 12b. In the 5th scenario of this paper, the absence of KIE in an intramolecular competition experiment is attributed to the reversibility of the C–H bond cleavage step, since in this particular example the C–H and C–D bonds would otherwise be equally accessible in the product-determining step. This is not the case in this mechanistic scenario.

25. For accounts describing the scope of α-arylation with α-dicarbonyl compounds, see: (a) Kawatsonura, M.; Hartwig, J. F. J. Am. Chem. Soc. 2013, 121, 1473. (b) Fox, J. M.; Huang, X.; Chieffi, A.; Buchwald, S. L. J. Am. Chem. Soc. 2000, 122, 1360. For a discussion of ligand effects on α-arylation of β-dicarbonyl compounds, see: ref 17c. The authors propose that bulky ligands assist in the reductive elimination step, but no mention is made of the ligand effects on the tautomerization step.


28. We cannot rule out the involvement of dinuclear Pd(II) species in the C=C bond forming process. For an example of palladation in a dinuclear Pd(II) species, see: Sanhueza, I. A.; Wagner, A. M.; Sanford, M. S.; Schoenebeck, F. Chem. Sci. 2013, 4, 2767.

29. In addition to $S$, addition of DMPU also increases the overall reaction rate ($r_{\text{max}} = 2.0 \text{ mM min}^{-1}$ for 3a with 50 mol% of DMPU vs. $1.7 \text{ mM min}^{-1}$ under the standard conditions).


31. The diastereoselective version also tolerates cyclic 6-membered β-keto esters, but the products could not be obtained in pure form.

32. The absolute stereochemistry of the products was determined by X-ray analysis of 3aj. Other products were assigned by analogy. See the SI for details.
Experimental + Computational Studies ⇒ Mechanism

\[
\text{cat. Pd(TFA)$_2$· } t\text{-BuOOBz (oxidative coupling)}
\]

- Indole assists tautomerization of β-ketoester ligand, leading to dehydrogenation via proton-coupled electron transfer

\[
\text{enone intermediate}
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