

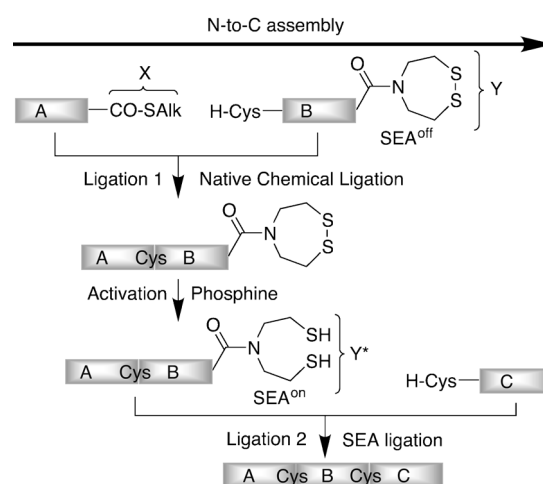
A One-Pot Three-Segment Ligation Strategy for Protein Chemical Synthesis**

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Protein chemical synthesis by native peptide ligation of unprotected peptide segments is an interesting complement and potential alternative to the use of living systems for producing proteins.^[1] Actually, tremendous efforts are focused on the design of one-pot strategies allowing the assembly of three peptide segments.^[2–5] The goal is to get rapid access to small proteins (less than 150 amino acid residues), while saving intermediate purification steps and obtaining the products in good yield. Such methods are gaining increasing significance for the study of protein function and appear as a potential option for producing various protein-based therapeutics currently under development.

To date, proteins were mainly assembled by sequential native chemical ligation (NCL)^[6] or extended methodologies^[7] in the C-to-N direction (for recent achievements, see Refs. [8,9]). NCL involves the chemoselective ligation of a C-terminal peptide thioester, usually an alkylthioester, with an N-terminal cysteine (Cys) peptide. The one-pot sequential C-to-N ligation of three peptide segments designed by Kent et al.^[3] is increasingly used for synthesizing proteins.^[9,10]

Methods that enable the assembly of peptide segments in the reverse N-to-C direction are rare.^[2,5,11] Fundamentally, the combination of N-to-C and C-to-N assembly techniques is at the basis of the convergent total synthesis of proteins.^[2] The general principle of the one-pot assembly of three peptide segments in the N-to-C direction is illustrated in Scheme 1. Ligation of peptide segments A-X and H-Cys-B-Y yields segment A-Cys-B-Y (Scheme 1, ligation 1). Group Y must ideally be inert during ligation 1 or at least be significantly less reactive than group X to avoid oligomerization or cyclization of segment B. Activation of group Y into Y* subsequently allows the ligation with the third segment H-Cys-C (Scheme 1, ligation 2). For designing a one-pot process work-



Scheme 1. Total protein synthesis by one-pot assembly of three peptide segments in the N-to-C direction. The first step is a native chemical ligation between thioester segment A and Cys segment B, during which the cyclic disulfide SEA^{off} acts as a blocked thioester group (SEA = bis(2-sulfanylethyl)amido). Activation of SEA^{off} into SEA^{on} by reduction with a phosphine and addition of the third Cys segment C triggers the second ligation step.

ing in the N-to-C direction, this activation must be carried out in situ after ligation 1 by using reagents compatible with ligation 2. Furthermore, the Y* group must enable an efficient ligation with the Cys segment C.

To date only few one-pot strategies have been described that work in the N-to-C direction and enable the coupling of three peptide segments.^[2,5,12] Fundamentally, these methods, such as kinetically controlled ligation,^[2] rely on the differential reactivity of X and Y groups for peptide-bond formation. In other words, the purity of the target polypeptide is highly dependent on the C-terminal residues of A and B segments and more generally on the accessibility of the reactive ends.

Clearly, a strategy in which Y is inert during the first ligation step would bypass these limitations and constitute a critical advance. Herein we show that the combination of NCL and SEA ligation (Scheme 1) permitted design of a solution to this important problem.

Reaction of a peptide featuring a C-terminal bis(2-sulfanylethyl)amido group, called SEA^{on} hereafter (Scheme 1), with a Cys peptide results in the formation of a native peptide bond in water at pH 7.^[13] This reaction probably proceeds via

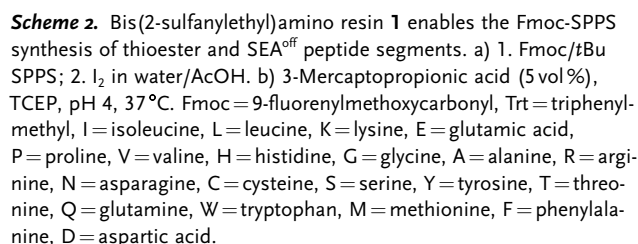
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[**] This work was supported by PICS 4862 (CNRS, CNRST), Institut Pasteur de Lille, Université Lille Nord de France, Cancéropôle Nord Ouest, Région Nord pas de Calais, and European Community.

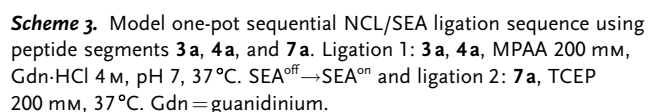
Supporting information for this article is available on the WWW under <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/anie.201105837>.

Our study began with the observation that the SEA^{off} group was stable at pH 7 in the presence of (4-carboxymethyl)thiophenol (MPAA).^[14] NCL with C-terminal peptide alkylthioesters is usually carried out in the presence of an aromatic thiol such as thiophenol or MPAA.^[14,15] The aromatic thiol plays a critical role, because it maintains Cys thiols in a reduced form, activates the alkylthioester by thiol-thioester exchange, and allows the reversal of unproductive thioesters formed by thiol-thioester exchange with internal cysteine residues.

The syntheses of thioester segments A (**3**) and of SEA^{off} segments B (**4**) are shown in Scheme 2. Both segments were synthesized by using Fmoc-based solid-phase peptide synthesis (SPPS)^[18] on the bis(2-sulfanylethyl)amino solid support **1**.^[13] When present, Cys residues were incorporated as *tert*-butylsulfenyl-protected derivatives during the peptide elongation step to facilitate the subsequent oxidative cyclization of SEA^{on} into SEA^{off}. Deprotection and cleavage from the resin in trifluoroacetic acid furnished the crude SEA^{on} peptides with a *tert*-butylsulfenyl group still attached to Cys-side-chain thiols. SEA^{on} was switched off with iodine. Cys residues protected with *tert*-butylsulfenyl groups remained unaffected during this step, which was carried out in a few seconds prior to the HPLC purification step.^[19] This procedure furnished the SEA^{off} peptides **2** and **4** in a straightforward manner.



In a preliminary approach, we undertook a proof-of-concept study with model thioester peptide **3a** (segment A), SEA^{off} peptide **4a** (segment B), and Cys peptide amide **7a** (segment C, Scheme 3). To establish the stability of the SEA^{off} group in the mixture used for ligation 1, peptide **4a** was dissolved at 37°C in a pH 7.5 phosphate buffer containing MPAA (200 mM). LC-MS analysis of the mixture (see the Supporting Information) showed the formation of depro-



tected peptide H-CHHLEPGG-SEA^{off} **5a** and of the mixed disulfide H-C(MPAA)HHLEPGG-SEA^{off} between the Cys residue of **5a** and MPAA. Notably, incubation of the mixture for up to 48 h showed no significant evolution. In particular, polymerization or cyclization side reactions that could arise from the partial reduction of SEA^{off} into SEA^{on} by MPAA were not observed. We have verified that, when TCEP and MPAA were present in the mixture, cyclization of peptide **5a** occurred by native peptide ligation of the N-terminal Cys residue with the C-terminal SEA^{on} group after in situ reduction of both disulfides. The stability of the SEA^{off} group in the presence of MPAA led us to examine the first ligation step between segments **3a** and **4a** under the same experimental conditions. LC-MS analysis of the reaction mixture showed the successful formation of peptide **6a** featuring a SEA^{off} group at the Cterminus, together with 30 % of the mixed disulfide between the internal Cys residue of **6a** and MPAA. Disulfide-bond formation between the Cys residue of segment **5a** and MPAA was reversible in the presence of an excess of MPAA and did not disturb the ligation process. The ligation product **6a** and the mixed disulfide accounted for more than 90 % of the total absorbance (see the Supporting Information), thereby showing the efficiency of the first ligation step. Here again, the SEA group remained in the off state, and no side-product formation was observed even for extended reaction times.

Next, ligation 2 was started by the addition of TCEP and of Cys segment **7a** to the reaction mixture. We observed clean formation of the target peptide **8a**, which was isolated in good yield (59 % overall).

Currently, we are using this one-pot strategy for synthesizing domains of the hepatocyte growth factor (HGF). HGF is the ligand of the MET tyrosine kinase receptor, which is frequently deregulated in human tumors.^[20] The role of individual HGF domains for MET activation is still under debate.^[21] Protein total synthesis will allow HGF-domain analogues to be produced and thus allow the role of individual domains as well as the mechanism of action of this growth factor to be deciphered. Herein we describe the synthesis of the K1 domain of HGF, which is part of HGF's high-affinity binding site for

MET^[22] but acts as a weak agonist.^[21] K1 is composed of 85 amino acid residues (HGF 125–209) and is stabilized by three intrachain disulfide bridges. K1 was assembled from HGF segments 125–148 (**3b**), 149–176 (**4b**), and 177–209 (**7b**, Figure 1a). Assembly of the K1 domain started by ligation of thioester segment **3b** with SEA^{off} segment **4b** (ligation 1, Lys–Cys (K–C) junction). The reaction led to the successful formation of SEA^{off} segment **6b** after 20 h at 37 °C. TCEP and Cys peptide amide segment **7b** were then added to the reaction mixture, thereby triggering the second ligation step (ligation 2, Tyr–Cys (Y–C) junction) in a one-pot process. This process led to the successful formation of linear K1 HGF domain **8b** after 48 h of reaction. The LC-MS analysis of the reaction mixture highlights the high quality of the crude product (Figure 1b left). The linear K1 HGF domain was purified by reversed-phase HPLC to give homogeneous material (11.5 mg, 39 % overall, Figure 1b, right). The linear K1 domain was folded successfully by using the glutathione–glutathione disulfide redox system and dialyzed (Figure 1c).

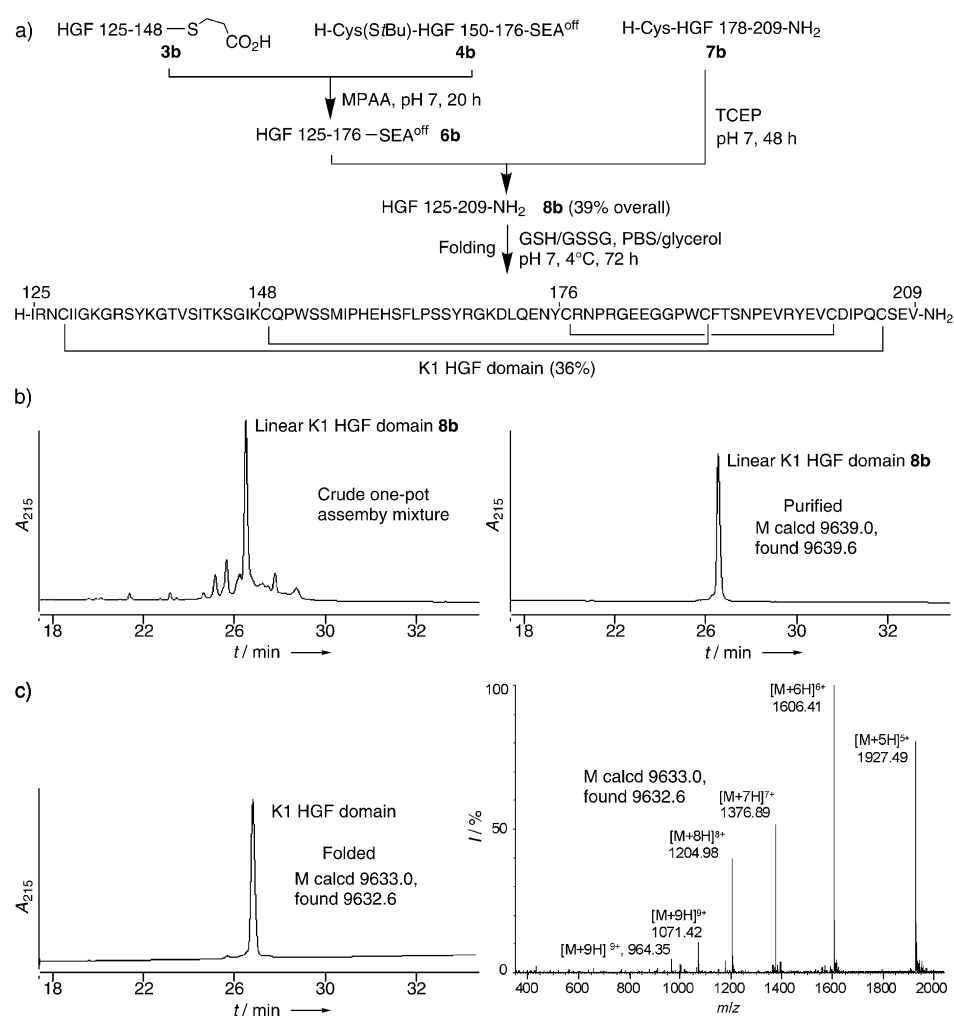


Figure 1. Total synthesis of the K1 HGF domain. a) One-pot assembly and folding of the K1 domain. b) LC-MS chromatograms the crude (left) or HPLC-purified (right) linear K1 domain **8b** with detection by UV/Vis absorption at 215 nm. c) LC-MS chromatogram and spectrum of the folded K1 domain (left: reversed-phase HPLC trace, right: MS data). GSH/GSSG = glutathione redox system. PBS = phosphate-buffered saline.

The cysteine pairing in the K1 domain is established with certainty based on the crystal structure of NK1, a naturally occurring fragment of HGF.^[23] Proteomic analysis of the synthetic K1 domain using enzymatic digestion and subsequent mass-spectrometry analysis of the formed peptide fragments revealed the formation of the native disulfide-bridge pattern during folding (see the Supporting Information).

Finally, the structural integrity and functionality of K1 were confirmed through the study of its biological activity. The treatment of MET-expressing cells with HGF triggers intracellular MET-tyrosine-kinase phosphorylation in a few minutes and subsequent recruitment of adaptors that mediate intracellular signal transduction. In cell culture HGF triggers very pronounced phenotypes and in particular the scattering phenotype on epithelial cells.^[20] Therefore, we have evaluated the ability of synthetic K1 to promote MET activation and scattering of Madin–Darby Canine Kidney cells (MDCK, Figure 2), which are considered as the reference model for HGF-induced MET activation, as well as of other epithelial

domains is in progress to elucidate the mechanisms underlying HGF–MET signaling.

Received: August 18, 2011

Published online: November 16, 2011

Keywords: growth factors · native chemical ligation · proteins · solid-phase synthesis · synthetic methods

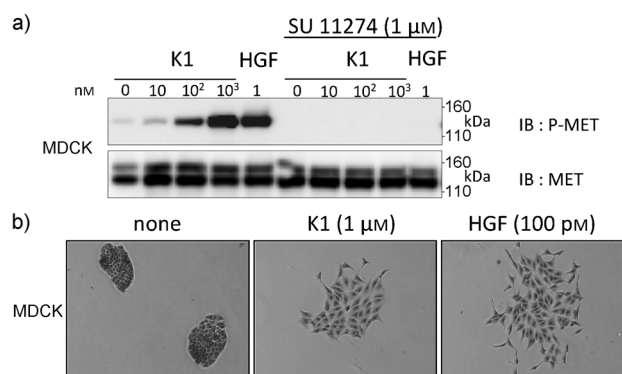


Figure 2. Cellular MET activation by synthetic K1. a) MDCK cells were treated with mature HGF or K1 domain in the absence or presence of MET kinase inhibitor SU 11274. Cell lysates were next analyzed by specific total MET or phospho-MET immunoblot (IB). b) MDCK cell islets were incubated in presence of culture media (none), 1 μ M K1, or 100 pM HGF (magnification $\times$ 100).

cell lines (see the Supporting Information). Western blot analysis showed that K1 induced MET phosphorylation in a dose-responsive manner (Figure 2a). In the scattering assay (Figure 2b), K1 induced the disruption of compact islets and cell migration. The specificity of K1-induced MET activation was verified by using the MET-selective inhibitor SU 11274,^[24] which inhibited both K1-induced MET phosphorylation (Figure 2a) and scattering of MDCK cells (see the Supporting Information).

In summary, the stability of the SEA^{off} group in the conditions used for NCL and the possibility to easily switch on the SEA group with a phosphine permitted the one-pot assembly of three peptide segments in the N-to-C direction. Both ligations were performed under neutral conditions in aqueous solution. This strategy permitted the successful synthesis of biologically active K1 domain from HGF. The total synthesis of K1-domain variants and of other HGF

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not affected during the very short exposure to iodine. The product is then purified by HPLC.

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