Isolation of β-asarone, an antibacterial and antihelmintic compound, from *Acorus calamus* in South Africa

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Received 30 November 2000, accepted in revised form 8 March 2001

The aromatic rhizomes of *Acorus calamus* L. are used extensively in traditional medicine worldwide. They reportedly relieve stomach cramps, dysentery and asthma, and are used as anthelmintics, insecticides, tonics and stimulants. Alcoholic rhizome extracts of *A. calamus* growing in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, were previously found to have anthelmintic and antibacterial activity. Using bioassay-guided fractionation, the phenylpropanoid β-asarone was isolated from the rhizome. This compound was shown to possess anthelmintic and antibacterial activity. It has previously been isolated from *A. calamus*, and a related species, *A. gramineus*. Different varieties of *A. calamus* exhibit different levels of β-asarone, with the diploid variety containing none of the compound. Mammalian toxicity and carcinogenicity of asarones has been demonstrated by other researchers, supporting the discouragement of the medicinal use of *Acorus calamus* by traditional healers in South Africa.

Introduction

Over the last few hundred years, many introduced plants have been incorporated into traditional medicine in southern Africa. One such example is the now extensive use of *Acorus calamus*, or calamus as it is known. *Acorus calamus*, of the family Araceae, is a reed-like, semi-aquatic, perennial plant with a stout aromatic rhizome. The inconspicuous flowers are compactly arranged on a long, fleshy axis, surrounded by a large leaf-like spathe. All parts of the plant have a pungent, not unattractive smell. It is indigenous to South East Asia, but is now widely distributed in Europe, eastern North America and parts of Africa (Van Wyk et al. 1997). It has been cultivated in South Africa for many years and has become a popular component of Zulu medicine.

The plant is used extensively in traditional medicine worldwide. Rhizomes have been used as carminatives, stomachics and to treat dysentery in southern Africa, Europe and Asia (Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk 1962). They are used as tonics, stimulants and aphrodisiacs, and to treat rheumatism, toothache and respiratory ailments (Hutchings et al. 1996). In the Cape, the use of the rhizome as a carminative and diarrhoea remedy has been recorded (Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk 1962). In India, the powdered rootstock and rhizome are used as an antispasmodic, anthelmintic and insecticide (Watt and Breyer-Brandwijk 1962). The fragrant oils obtained from the rhizome are also used as flavourants in alcoholic beverages and as fragrant essences in perfumes and sacred oils (Motley 1994).

Essential oils are found in the leaves, rhizomes and roots, tannins occur in the rhizome and roots, and ascorbic acid is found in the leaves and rhizomes (Pamukyte-Jukneviene 1971, cited by Hutchings et al. 1996). Owing to its previous wide usage as a crude drug, much research has been undertaken on the constituents of the oil. The major chemical constituents of the essential oils are phenylpropanes, monoterpenes and thermolabile sesquiterpenoids (Röst and Bos 1979, cited by Motley 1994). Methyleugenol, cis-methyleugenol, β-asarone, geranylacetate, β-farnesene, shobunone, epishobunone and isoshobunone are the most abundant chemical compounds, constituting about 20% of the essential oil (Röst and Bos 1979, cited by Motley 1994). Other chemical components include α-asarone, γ-asarone, calamenene, asaronaldehyde, acorenone, calamenone, n-heptanoic acid, calamandiol, many sesquiterpenes, and trace amounts of other compounds (Mazza 1985). The proportion of each chemical constituent of the oil, particularly in the case of β-asarone, varies between the varieties of *A. calamus*, corresponding to the ploidy (Röst and Bos 1979, cited by Schmidt and Streliske 1994). The diploid caryotype grows in North America and in parts of Asia (Siberia), and the rhizomes contain little or no β-asarone (Röst and Bos 1979, cited by Schmidt and Streliske 1994). In the triploid caryotype, present in central Europe and Kashmir, the β-asarone content of the rhizomes varies from 9–13%, while in the tetraploid caryotype, found in India,
east Asia and Japan, the essential oil of the rhizomes is 70–96% β-sarone (Roel and Bos 1979, cited by Schmidt and Straloke 1994). The ploidy of African plants has not to our knowledge been investigated.

The compound β-sarone is known to be toxic (Abel 1987, Lander and Schreier 1990), and there is evidence that it may induce duodenal and liver cancer in rats (Haberman 1971, cited by Goggelman and Schimke 1983). As a result, many countries have discontinued the use of Acorus in digestive medicines. Calamus has been banned by the FDA as a food additive and within the last few years many herbal shops have stopped recommending or dispensing it. Although calamus and its products are banned in the United States, they are authorised in Europe, where the highest acceptable concentration in foods and beverages is 0.1 mg kg⁻¹ in alcoholic beverages, 1 mg kg⁻¹ (Lander and Schreier 1990).

Much work has been done on investigating the biological activity of Acorus calamus, particularly in India and Europe. Extracts from the plant show larvicidal activity (Chavan et al. 1976, cited by Hutchings et al. 1996). The anticonvulsant activity of β-sarone is potentially useful in insect control (Saxena et al. 1977). The ethanolic extract has shown anti-secretagogue, anti-ulcer and cytoprotective properties in rats (Rafatullah et al. 1994), supporting the use of calamus for the treatment of gastric ailments in traditional medicine. Rhizomes and roots have sedative, hypotensive, analgesic and hallucinogenic effects (Agarwal et al. 1956, Sharma and Dandiya 1969). The active hallucinogenic principles are presumed to be α-sarone (chemically similar to mescaline), a psychoactive alkaloid and the cis-isomer β-sarone (chemically similar to myristicin and kava alkaloids) (Lewis and Elwin-Lewis 1977).

Fungicidal effects of A. calamus have been reported (Alankararao and Rajendra Prasad 1981, Vashish and Patel 1987, Saxena et al. 1990, Jaliatienn and Jalsitienn 1999). An anti-mycotic principle was identified as β-sarone, with α-sarone displaying a similar level of activity (Ohmoto and Sung 1982). The essential oil and alcoholic extracts of the rhizomes have been shown to have antibacterial activity against many Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria (Kar and Jain 1971, Alankararao and Rajendra Prasad 1981, Vashish and Patel 1987). The compounds responsible for the antibacterial activity have not to our knowledge been investigated.

The dried rhizome gave positive results as an antiamoebic agent when tested on Paramecium caudatum (Chopra et al. 1957). Alcoholic extracts of the rhizomes were active against the human affecting nematode Ascaris lumbricoides (Kaleysa Raj 1974) and the rhizome oil was active against larvae of the root knot nematode Meloidogyne incognita (Singh et al. 1991). Both forms of asarone showed a dual effect on the larvae of the nematode Toxocara canis (Sugimoto et al. 1995). The first was a fast acting temporary paralytic effect, and the other was a slowly-emerging killing effect. Anthelmintic and pesticidal activity of a related species, Acorus gramineus, have been reported to be associated with the phenylphenylpropanoïds α- and β-sarone (Perrett and Whitfield 1995). Both isomers of asarone, particularly the β form, have therefore been associated with a wide range of biological activity.

Extracts of Acorus calamus rhizomes have previously been found to be active in antibacterial, antihelmintic and anti-amoebic tests (McGaw et al. 2000a). This provided impetus for a further study attempting to isolate the active compound(s) using bioassay-guided fractionation, with the antibacterial agar overlay technique (lusarekono et al. 1989) and an anthelmintic assay (Rasoolalvand and Raisinmamgani-Urvag 1993) as the test bioassays.

Materials and Methods

Plant extraction

Acorus calamus L. plants were collected from a shallow (approximately 0.3 m deep) pond at Silverglenn Nursery in Durban, South Africa in October 1998. A voucher specimen (McGaw47Nu) was deposited at the herbarium of the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg. The leaves, roots and rhizomes were separated and dried at 50°C. The dried, powdered plant parts (4.33 g, 13.27 g and 17.56 g for the leaves, roots and rhizomes respectively) were extracted separately with 100 ml ethanol. Extraction was performed by sonication for 30 min in a Julabo ultrasound bath, followed by overnight maceration. The extracts were filtered through Whatman No. 1 filter paper and the procedure was repeated twice with the same plant material. The filtrates were air-dried and stored at -20°C.

Antibacterial assays

The antibacterial activity of fractions resulting from each purification stage was tested using the bioautographic assay (lusarekono et al. 1989). An inoculated layer of agar was poured over a developed TLC plate, and lack of bacterial growth in certain areas identifies the presence and location of antibacterial compounds on the TLC plate. Tzc (2,3,5-triphenyltetrazolium chloride) at 0.1% (w/v) was included in the agar mixture, as an indicator of bacterial growth. The inhibition of bacterial growth by compounds separated on the TLC plate is visible as white spots against a deep red background. The test organism was Staphylococcus aureus.

The Minimal Inhibitory Concentration (MIC) value of the pure compound was determined against the Gram-positive Bacillus subtilis (ATCC 6051) and Staphylococcus aureus (ATCC 12600) and the Gram-negative Escherichia coli (ATCC 11775) and Klebsiella pneumoniae (ATCC 13880). The microplate method of Elhoh (1998) in 96-well microtiter plates was used. The pure compound was dissolved in ethanol and serially diluted twofold with water in microtiter plate wells. The antibiotic neomycin and extract-free solutions were included as standard and blank controls. An equal volume (100 μl) of bacterial culture (approximately 10⁵ bacteria ml⁻¹) was added to each well. Quantification of the bacterial inoculum was carried out as previously described (McGaw et al. 2000a). The microtiter plates were covered and incubated overnight at 37°C. As an indicator of bacterial growth, 40 μl of 0.2 mg ml⁻¹ p-dichlorotetrazolium bromide (INT) solution were added to each well and incubated at 37°C for 30 min. The colourless tetrazolium salt is reduced to a red-coloured product by biological activity, so inhibition of
bacterial growth is visible as a clear well. MIC values were recorded as the lowest concentration resulting in complete inhibition of bacterial growth.

Antimicrobial assay

The antimicrobial activity of extracts, fractions and the pure compound was determined by incubating the sample (at a concentration of 1 mg ml⁻¹) with Caenorhabditis elegans var. Bristol (N2) nematodes at 25°C for 2 h (Rasanoaivo and Ratsimamanga-Urberg 1993, modified by McGaw et al. 2000b). Solvent blanks, and levamisole as a standard antimicrobial drug, were included. The percentage and movement of live nematodes after incubation with the plant extracts was recorded and compared to that of the controls.

Isolation

Thin Layer Chromatography (TLC) analysis was used to compare the chemical composition of the crude ethanol extracts of Acorus leaves, roots and rhizomes. Bioassay-guided fractionation was subsequently performed using the rhizome extract. The ethanolic rhizome extract (1.14g) was separated by vacuum liquid chromatography (VLC) over silica gel (Merck 230–400 mesh) using a hexane-ethyl acetate gradient solvent system of increasing polarity. A column 13cm in length and with an internal diameter of 2cm was packed with 20g silica. The gradient solvent system was increased by 5% increments from 100% hexane to 60% hexane in ethyl acetate, and subsequently by 10% increments to 100% ethyl acetate. At each concentration, 100ml solvent was flushed through the column. Bioautography established that the most active fraction (270mg) was eluted with 10% ethyl acetate in hexane. This fraction was further separated by TLC on three silica gel plates (Merck Silica gel 60 F₂₅₄, 0.25mm thick) using toluene-ethyl acetate (93:7) to yield 15.6mg of active compound. The purity of this compound, a yellow oil, was confirmed by TLC using various solvent systems.

Identification of isolated compound

High Resolution Mass Spectrometry (MS) using a VG70SEQ spectrometer was performed. Nuclear Magnetic Resonance Spectroscopy (¹H NMR and ¹³C NMR) was carried out to confirm the structure of the compound. A Varian Unity Inova 500MHz spectrometer was used. The MIC values of the isolated β-asarone against the four previously mentioned test bacteria were determined.

Results

The leaf, root and rhizome ethanol extracts of Acorus calamus exhibited antibacterial and antimicrobial activity. The rhizome extract possessed a lower Minimal Inhibitory Concentration (MIC) than the leaf and root extracts (Table 1). Against Bacillus subtilis and Staphylococcus aureus. Therefore, the rhizome extract was selected to perform bioassay-guided fractionation for isolation of active compound(s). Additionally, TLC and bioautography displayed fewer compounds, other than the target active compound, in the rhizome extract than in the leaf and root extracts. The activity-directed fractionation of 1.14g of rhizome extract yielded 15.6mg of oily yellow β-asarone, representing 1.4% of the extract and 0.05% of the rhizome. The pure compound possessed antibacterial and antimicrobial activity. The MIC values for the isolated β-asarone against the test bacteria are presented in Table 1. The antimicrobial activity of the crude rhizome extract and isolated β-asarone was very similar, both resulting in the death of 60–70% of nematodes after incubation. No other fractions resulting from the fractionation of the rhizome extract exhibited antimicrobial activity. The structure of β-asarone is presented in Figure 1.

The compound identified as β-asarone was a yellow oil, C₁₃H₁₈O₂ [M]+ 208.11016. EIMS m/z (rel. int.): 208 [M]+ (100), 193 (47), 177 (3), 165 (27), 152 (12), 150 (6), 134 (3), 103 (4), 91 (11), 77 (7), 69 (5), 51 (2). The ¹H NMR spectra in CDCl₃ were 6 1.84 (3H, dd, J = 7.3Hz and 1.8Hz, -CH₃-CH₂-CH₃), 3.81, 3.83 and 3.89 (each 3H, s, three OCH₃), 6.76 (1H, d, J = 12Hz and 6.8Hz, H-2), 6.49 (1H, d, J = 11.4Hz and 1.83Hz, H-1), 6.53 (1H, s, H-3) and 6.84 (1H, s, H-6). The ¹³C NMR spectra were recorded in CDCl₃, 6 151.5 s (C-4), 148.5 s (C-2), 142.3 s (C-1), 125.8 d (C-1'), 124.7 d (C-2'), 118.0 s (C-5), 114.1 d (C-6), 56.2 q, 56.4 q, 55.0 q (OCH₃), 14.6 q (C-3).

Discussion

The isolated active compound β-asarone has been isolated previously by others from Acorus calamus growing in Europe and Asia (Baxter et al. 1960), but has not been evaluated for antibacterial and antimicrobial activity before. This paper demonstrates both the antibacterial and antimicrobial activity of β-asarone. The antimicrobial activity of the isolated β-asarone was very similar to that of the crude rhizome extract. The crude extract and isolated compound were both tested at the same concentration (1 mg ml⁻¹). It was expected that the isolated β-asarone would display higher antimicrobial activity than the original extract as it would be present in a higher concentration. However, this was not the case, and a possible explanation may be the instability of β-asarone after isolation, as some breakdown of the compound was visible after TLC analysis. No other antimicrobial compounds were apparent in the VLC fractions.

The antibacterial activity of the isolated β-asarone was lower than that of the crude extract. This may again be partly attributed to the stability of the isolated compound. Also, several other compounds with antibacterial activity in the VLC fractions of the crude extract were visualised in the bioautography assay. They made up such a small part of the overall composition that their identification was not attempted. β-Asarone appeared to be the major component of the crude extract (from TLC analysis, and with its yield of 1.4% of the extract). However, if it were the major antibacterial compound, it would be expected to have a much lower MIC value. This was not the case, so other minor compounds may well have significantly higher antibacterial activity, contributing to a greater proportion of the overall activity even though they are not present in such high quantities as β-asarone. Unfortunately, it is not possible to quantify antibac-
Table 1: Comparison of MIC values obtained using a microplate method (Elordi 1988) for Acarus calamus ethanol extracts, isolated β-asarone and the antibiotic neomycin against various bacteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Micro-organism tested</th>
<th>Crude ethanol extract MIC (mg ml⁻¹)</th>
<th>Compound (MIC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rhizome</td>
<td>Root</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacillus subtilis (ATCC 6051)</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escherichia coli (ATCC 11775)</td>
<td>-¹</td>
<td>-¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klebsiella pneumoniae (ATCC 13883)</td>
<td>-¹</td>
<td>-¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staphylococcus aureus (ATCC 12600)</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-¹ = extract not tested

Figure 1: Structure of β-asarone

The data was obtained from a bioautography assay, where the inhibition spot is by nature a positive/negative response, and does not reveal detail about the degree of activity of a compound.

The mass spectrometry, IH and 13C NMR data were consistent with those previously reported for β-asarone (Patra and Mitra 1981, Mazza, 1985, Nigam et al. 1990, Oprean et al. 1998). Asarone has been synthesized by two different methods (Sharma and Dandiy 1969).

The evidence presented indicates that if the Acarus calamus tested in this study is representative of that found in southern Africa, then the South African Acinus is likely to be triploid or tetraploid, as these are cytotypes of A. calamus are known to contain β-asarone (Host and Bos 1979, cited by Schmidt and Strelke 1994). Also, its origins possibly lie in Asia or Europe. Of some concern is the evidence implicating β-asarone in causing duodenal and liver cancer in test animals. Owing to the possible carcinogenic and toxic effects, the use of Acinus in digestive medicines has been discontinued in most countries. In South Africa, Acarus calamus is widely used by Zulu traditional healers to treat a variety of ailments, including gastrointestinal disorders. The content of β-asarone substantiates the use of this plant as an anthelmintic and antibacterial remedy, but owing to the toxicity of the active compound, it is recommended that the use of the plant is restricted to external application for antibacterial use, or discontinued altogether.

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Acknowledgements — The National Research Foundation and the University of Natal Research Fund are thanked for financial assistance. Silvergian Nursery in Durban is thanked for providing plant material.


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Edited by JN Ello

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