

Modification of N-Terminal α -Amine of Proteins via Biomimetic ortho-quinone-mediated Oxidation

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Article

Keywords:

Posted Date: September 2nd, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-64642/v1>

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Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published at Nature Communications on April 15th, 2021. See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-22654-7>.

1 **Modification of N-Terminal α -Amine of Proteins via Biomimetic *ortho*-quinone-**
2 **mediated Oxidation**

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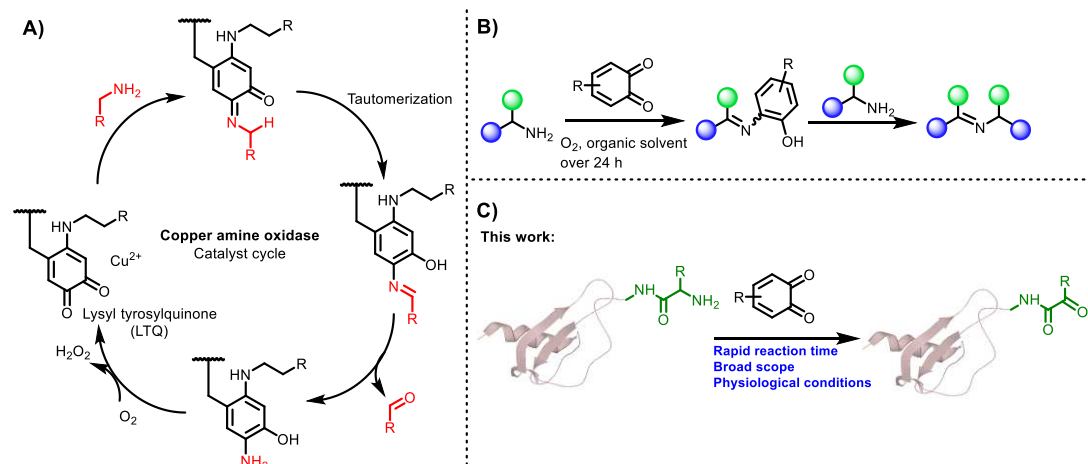
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15 **ABSTRACT**

16 **Naturally abundant quinones are important molecules, which play**
17 **essential roles in various biological processes due to their reduction potential. In**
18 **contrast to their universality, the reactions between quinones and proteins remain**
19 **sparse. Herein, we report the development of unprecedented strategy to protein**
20 **modification via a biomimetic quinone-mediated oxidation at the N-terminus. By**
21 **exploiting unique reactivity of an *ortho*-quinone reagent, the α -amine of protein**
22 **N-terminus was oxidized to generate aldo or keto handle for orthogonal**
23 **conjugation. Its applications have been demonstrated using a range of proteins,**
24 **including myoglobin and ubiquitin. The effect of this method was further**
25 **highlighted via the preparation of a series of 17 MIP-1 β analogs, followed by**
26 **preliminary anti-HIV activity and cell viability assays, respectively. This method**
27 **offers a fast, efficient and complementary approach to existing strategies for**
28 **protein N-terminus modification.**



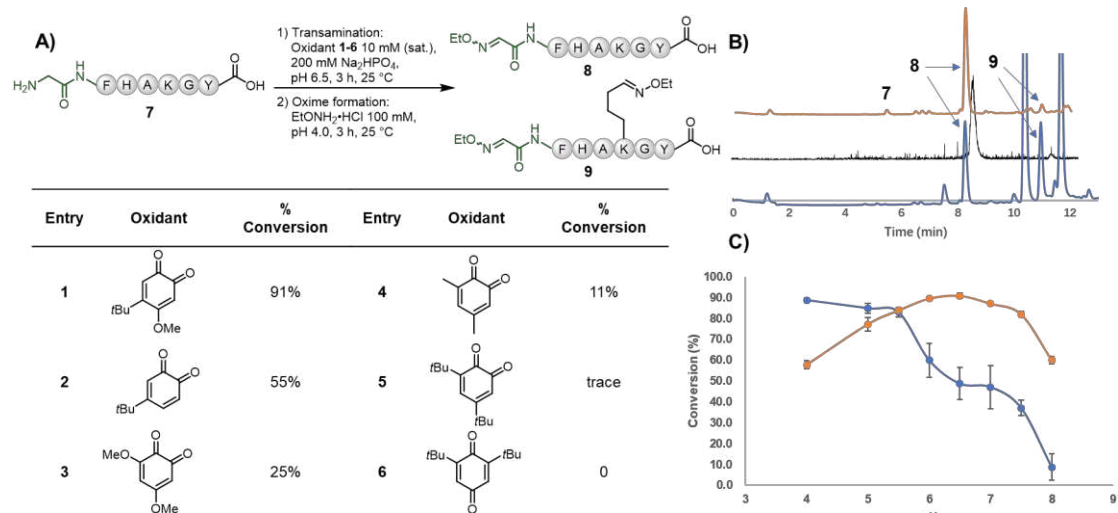
29
 30 **Figure 1: Development of protein N-terminus modification via quinone-mediated**
 31 **transamination:** A) Natural catalytic cycle of CuAOs, B) Oxidation of primary amines
 32 with ortho-quinone to form imines, C) Biomimetic quinone-mediated transamination
 33 inspired by CuAOs.

34 Oxidation reactions play an important role in organic chemistry and are widely
 35 involved in crucial biological transformations.¹⁻² In line with the broad interest in the
 36 development of more selective and mild oxidation reactions, *ortho*-quinone cofactors
 37 of copper amine oxidases (CuAOs) have been extensively studied due to their high
 38 catalytic efficiency. In the catalytic cycle, the Tyr side chain is converted into lysyl
 39 tyrosylquinone, which can readily oxidize primary amines into aldehydes *via*
 40 a quinone-mediated transamination pathway using O₂ as a co-oxidant to complete the
 41 catalytic cycle (Fig. 1A).³⁻⁴ Recently, significant progress has been achieved toward the
 42 design of quinone-based catalysts with major contributions from Corey,⁵ Fleury,⁶
 43 Kobayashi,⁷ Stahl⁸⁻¹⁰ and Luo (Fig. 1B).¹¹⁻¹³ These biomimetic quinone-based catalysts
 44 show specific chemoselectivity toward the dehydrogenation of primary, secondary,
 45 tertiary amines or other reactions.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ The applications of quinone oxidation have been
 46 largely limited to small molecule transformations despite the significant progress in this
 47 area of research.¹⁷⁻¹⁸ On the other side, in nature, the interactions between quinones and
 48 proteins are important but complex in fundamental process of life. Early work was
 49 provided by Mason in 1955, who reported that *o*-quinones can react with proteins to
 50 form a colored complex *via* the N-terminal residue.¹⁹ In addition, many research studies
 51 have been carried out on the role of quinone in protein cross-linking.²⁰⁻²² However, the

52 relationships between quinones and proteins have not been fully elucidated on a
53 molecular level. Nevertheless, the intrinsic design of quinones may provide an effective
54 opportunity to modify proteins under physiological conditions.

55 Existing methods used to modify proteins are mainly confined to nucleophilic
56 amino acids, such as Cys and Lys, and hence result in heterogeneous conjugates because
57 of the high frequency of these amino acids.²³⁻²⁵ In this context, the emergency of
58 selective modification of the N-terminus of proteins has led to the single site
59 functionalization of proteins.²⁶⁻³⁰ Although significant progress has been made, many
60 current methods relied on assistance of a side-chain functional group, such as β -
61 nucleophilically-functionalized Cys³¹⁻³⁵ or Ser/Thr.³⁶⁻³⁸ Transamination reactions
62 performed under physiological conditions have been elegantly developed by Francis
63 and co-workers utilizing pyridoxal-5-phosphate (PLP)³⁹⁻⁴⁶ or N-methylpyridinium-4-
64 carboxaldehyde benzenesulfonate salt (Rapoport's salt)⁴⁷ as oxidants, which can
65 convert the N-terminus of proteins into aldo or keto functionalities for oxime ligation
66 or other bio-conjugation reactions.⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ However, the efficiency of these methods relies
67 on the specific N-terminal sequence⁵¹ and prolonged reaction times in the presence of
68 PLP can potentially result in denaturation.⁵² Thus, given the generality of quinone and
69 its derivatives in the effective oxidation of amines, we hope to investigate whether or not
70 the quinones may be suitable for the selective oxidation of the N-terminal α -amine of
71 protein to aldehyde or ketone with fast kinetics as well as a wide scope of amino acids.
72 Herein, we report a selective, efficient and rapid method for modifying the N-terminus
73 of proteins *via* a quinone-mediated oxidation of N-terminal α -amine of complex
74 peptides and proteins under physiological conditions (Fig. 1C). Several examples have
75 been demonstrated using a range of peptides and proteins, including ubiquitin and
76 myoglobin. Moreover, we prepared a library of macrophage inflammatory protein-1 β
77 (MIP-1 β)⁵³⁻⁵⁴ analogues using a combination of native chemical ligation and quinone-
78 mediated transamination, where the late-stage modification of the N-terminus of MIP-
79 1 β can lead to a 20-fold increase in its anti-HIV-1 activity.

80 To begin our journey, a range of quinone derivates **1–6** were prepared with
81 different functionalities with an aim toward fine-tuning their reactivity to be selective
82 for the α -amine selective rather than the ϵ -amine of Lys, as well as other functionalities.^{7,}
83 ¹¹⁻¹² We tested the transamination reaction of model peptide **7** (1 mM) with the sequence
84 of GFHAKGY in an aqueous solution buffered at pH 6.5 using 10 mM (saturated) of
85 each of the quinone (**1–6**) as the oxidant (Fig. 2A). The oxidized product was
86 subsequently reacted with EtONH₂ to form its corresponding oxime **8**. 4-*tert*-Butyl-5-
87 methoxy-4-*tert*-butyl-*o*-benzylquinone **1** achieved near quantitative conversion (>90%)
88 to generate product **8** at pH 6.5 in 3 h with <2% Lys oxidation observed *via* LCMS due
89 to the extraordinary low pK_a of the N-terminal amine compared to that of the Lys side
90 chain amine.²⁶ 4-*tert*-Butyl-*o*-benzylquinone **2** could also achieve 55% conversion at
91 pH 6.5; the major by-product **9** was attributed to the undesired Lys side chain oxidation
92 (>40%) (Fig. 2B). Further optimization of the pH of the transamination reaction with
93 either quinone **1** or **2** showed that methoxyquinone **1** has an optimal pH range of 6.0–
94 6.5, while the side reaction during using quinone **2** can be minimized by lowering
95 reaction pH to 4.0 (90% conversion to give target product **8**) (Fig. 2C). Thus,
96 methoxyquinone **1** serves as the most effective oxidant (see Section 8 in the SI for the
97 discussion of the mechanism). A time-course monitoring study was performed to verify
98 that the reaction reached to completion in 3 h at room temperature (see section 3.1.3. in
99 the SI). Although an early work demonstrated that using Cu²⁺ salts is necessary for N-
100 termini oxidation with glyoxylate as reagent,⁵⁵ addition of Cu²⁺ in this reaction did not
101 increase the yield of the oxidative product formed. Interestingly, when compared with
102 such reactions with small molecules, quinone-mediated transamination can readily push
103 towards completion (90% conversion) without formation of the imine derivative of the
104 starting material, which may potentially quench the reaction.

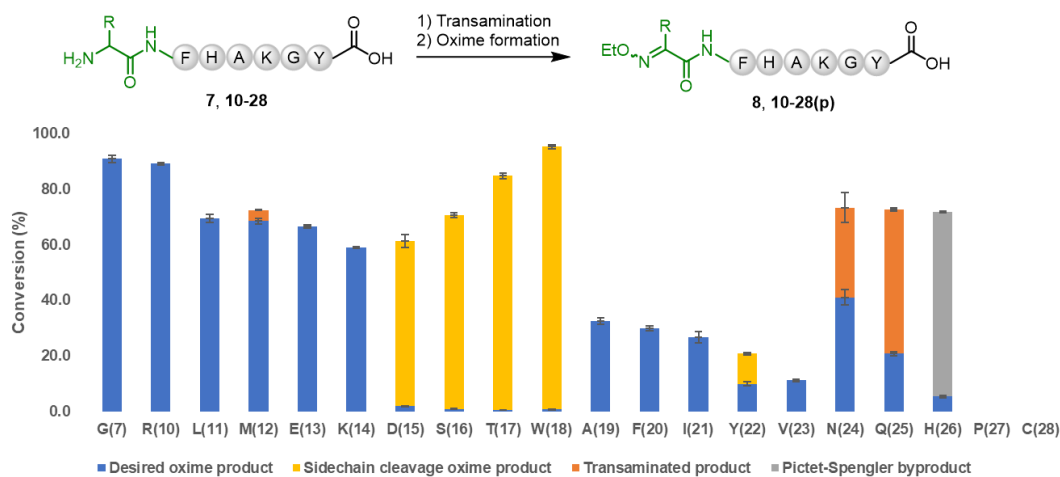


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106 **Figure 2. Optimization of the reaction conditions used in the biomimetic**
 107 **transamination reaction.** A) Screening of oxidants **1-6** used for the transamination
 108 reaction with model peptide **7**; B) LC trace obtained for the transamination
 109 reaction using quinone **1** (in yellow) or **2** (in blue); C) Optimization of the pH of the
 110 transamination reaction using quinone **1** (in yellow) or **2** (the rate of conversion was
 111 calculated by integrating the related peaks of the LC trace measured at 280 nm, although
 112 TIC showed a >99% conversion rate of product **8**).

113 Next, to investigate the scope of the N-terminal residue, we expanded the N-
 114 terminal residue of peptide **7** to the remaining 19 amino acid residues **10-28**. As it shows
 115 in Fig. 3, Arg peptide **10**, Leu peptide **11**, Met peptide **12**, Glu peptide **13** and Lys
 116 peptide **14** reacted cleanly and gave satisfactory conversion (>60%) in 3 h to afford
 117 their desired products without any significant observation of the expected side-products.
 118 Asp peptide **15** underwent decarboxylation during the oxidation and thereafter formed
 119 the methylated product (R = Me, see SI). Ser peptide **16**, Thr peptide **17** and Trp peptide
 120 **18** were oxidized, but all formed the side-chain cleaved oxime product **8**. Peptides **19-**
 121 **23** (containing Ala, Phe, Ile, Tyr and Val as N-termini, respectively) can also be
 122 converted into their desired oxime products, but with lower conversions. Asn peptide
 123 **24** and Gln peptide **25** were oxidized in the first step, but the resulting side-chain
 124 cyclized ketal product could not be effectively reopened using ethoxyamine, which
 125 caused a decrease in conversion to the desired oxime product. His peptide **26** failed to
 126 be oxidized due to the quinone oxidant **1** remaining bonded to the peptide, which was

127 in line with that previously reported and attributed to a Pictet-Spengler-type side
 128 reaction.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, Pro peptide **27** was not oxidized as a secondary amine. For
 129 comparison, Cys peptide **28** decomposed (see section 3.2. in the SI for predicted
 130 structures of all by-products).



131

132 **Figure 3. Landscape for the transamination of 20 canonical amino acids attached**
 133 **on the N-terminal residue of the model peptides.** Reaction conditions: 1)
 134 Transamination: oxidant **1** (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.5, 3 h, 25 °C; 2)
 135 Oxime formation: EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3 h, 25 °C.

136 After screening the scope of N-terminal residue in the reaction, we next applied
 137 this method to more complex therapeutic peptides and proteins. The first target chosen
 138 was COVID-19 spike protein 319-347 fragment, which was located in its receptor
 139 binding domain. The peptide has an Arg residue at its N-terminus and a free cysteine
 140 residue, which originally forms a disulfide bond with another Cys in the spike protein.
 141 However, the free Cys residue was not tolerated under our oxidative conditions. An
 142 AcM group was introduced to the peptide during this stage. Due to the low solubility of
 143 this peptide, the transamination step was carried out in 2 M Gn·HCl buffer with all the
 144 other reaction conditions unchanged with the exception of the reaction time, which was
 145 also extended to 6 h. The reaction proceeded smoothly to afford the oxime product **29**
 146 with 85% conversion (Fig. 4A). Tetracosactide, a therapeutic peptide bearing an N-
 147 terminal Ser, one Met and four Lys residues in its sequence, was successfully oxidized

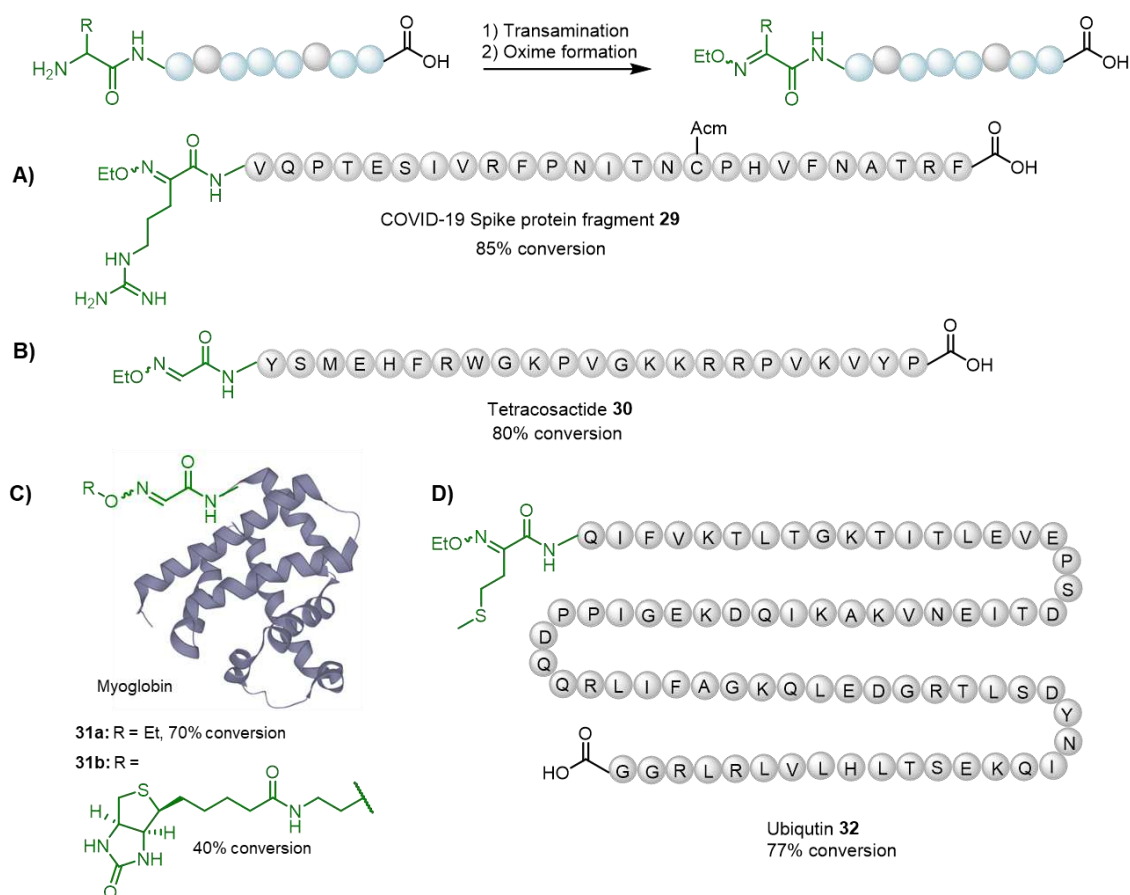
148 under the standard reaction conditions in 3 h. The desired oxime product **30** was formed
149 with 80% conversion monitored by LCMS (Fig. 4B).

150 The scope of this transformation was next examined using myoglobin, which
151 contains 18 Lys residues in the sequence (Fig. 4C). This reaction was conducted in
152 aqueous buffer at pH 6.0 to minimize over-oxidation of the Lys side chain and thus the
153 reaction time was extended to 5 h. Due to the limitation of the chromatographic
154 techniques used, total ion counts (TICs) were used to determine the conversion rate
155 after a simple workup procedure (see section 3.5 in the SI). The desired ethyl oxime
156 product **31a** was observed with 70% conversion, 15% unreacted starting material and
157 15% of the over-oxidized by-product. Furthermore, a biotinylated tag was synthesized
158 and incorporated to myoglobin. However, due to the low reactivity of this tag, an excess
159 of oxidant 1 could not be quenched immediately, which then led to further oxidation
160 during the oxime formation step. To address this issue, once the first transamination
161 reaction was complete, an ethyl acetate extraction step was carried out to remove the
162 excess oxidant. The resulting solution underwent the oxime formation step overnight
163 to afford a 40% conversion of biotinylated protein **31b**.

164 In nature, many proteins are expressed with Met as their N-terminus. Therefore,
165 we examined this transformation with ubiquitin, which contained an N-terminal Met.
166 In 2 M Gn·HCl buffer, ubiquitin was easily converted into its oxime product **32** with
167 77% conversion (Fig. 4D).

168 With all the examples above, we confirmed that ortho-quinone 1 was able to
169 oxidize peptides or proteins with various N-termini. Therefore, it can serve as an
170 alternative strategy to existing methods and used to expand the application of
171 transamination in biological research.

172 Considering the fast kinetics and wide N-termini tolerance of our transamination
173 reaction, we applied this methodology to a medicinal target, macrophage inflammatory



175 **Figure 4. Site selective peptide modification via quinone-mediated**
 176 **transamination reaction.** A) Reaction conditions for COVID-19 spike protein
 177 fragment **29**: 1) Transamination: 2 M Gn·HCl, oxidant **1** (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM
 178 Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.5, 6 h, 25 °C; 2) Oxime formation: EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3
 179 h, 25 °C. B) Reaction conditions for tetracosactide **30**: 1) Transamination: oxidant **1**
 180 (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.5, 3 h, 25 °C; 2) Oxime formation:
 181 EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3 h, 25 °C; C) Reaction conditions for myoglobin
 182 **31a-b**: 1) Transamination: oxidant **1** (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.0, 5 h,
 183 25 °C; 2) Oxime formation for **31a**: EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3 h, 25 °C; oxime
 184 formation for **31b**: extraction with EtOAc (2 x 1.0 mL), then biotinylated tag **S4** (100
 185 mM), pH 4.0, 16 h, 25 °C. D) Reaction conditions for ubiquitin **32**: 1) Transamination:
 186 2 M Gn·HCl, oxidant **1** (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.5, 3 h, 25 °C; 2) Oxime
 187 formation: EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3 h, 25 °C.

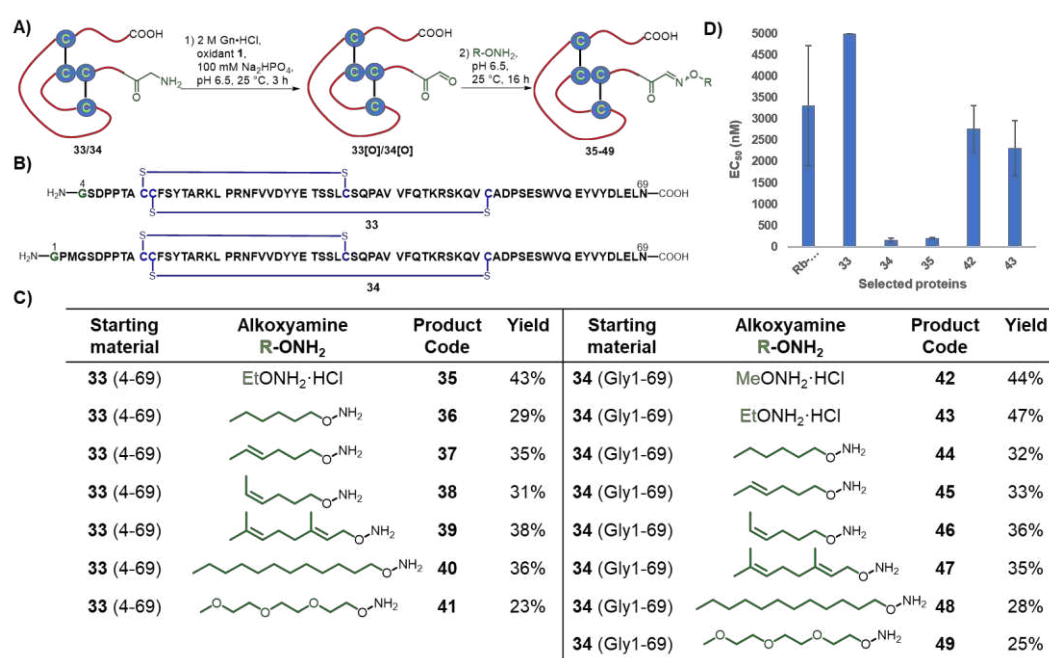
188 protein-1β (MIP-1β). MIP-1β (CCL4)⁵⁶ exhibits potent anti-HIV-1 activity⁵⁷ by binding
 189 to the hydrophobic transmembrane helix bundle of CCR5 *via* its N-terminal domain.⁵⁸⁻
 190 ⁶¹ Due to the increasing viral resistance and inefficient therapies, the discovery of new
 191 HIV-1 inhibitors is still highly coveted.⁶²⁻⁶³ Therefore, diversification of the N-terminal
 192 region of CCLs can be greatly beneficial toward the development of new peptide HIV-

193 1 inhibitors.⁶⁴⁻⁶⁷ However, current methods rarely facilitate such direct modifications
194 of its N-termini. Thus, the late-stage modification of CCL N-termini will afford an ideal
195 strategy for this area of research.

196 Thus, a merging of late-stage oxidation and state-of-the-art peptide ligation
197 method will allow the fast generation of a protein library for the rapid screening of
198 potential drugs. We synthesized a truncated MIP-1 β 4-96 protein **33**, which contained
199 Gly4 and the full-length form of MIP-1 β **34** with the mutation of Ala1 to Gly for
200 oxidation (Fig. 5B). Both proteins were chemically synthesized *via* native chemical
201 ligation⁶⁸⁻⁶⁹ and re-folded using Cys/Cys₂ redox⁷⁰ buffer (see SI) on a >30 mg scale (see
202 section 4 for the synthesis of MIP-1 β variants **33** and **34**).

203 Having established a facile protocol to prepare MIP-1 β proteins on a large-scale,
204 we next performed the protein N-terminal transamination-oxime ligation reaction to
205 modify the protein. Various alkyl alkoxyamines were chosen to optimize the anti-HIV-
206 1 activity of MIP-1 β due to their hydrophobicity (Fig. 5A). Hexyl, (*E*)-hexyl, (*Z*)-hexyl,
207 geranyl and decyl hydroxylamine were used to investigate the influence of the
208 hydrocarbon chains with different conformation or chain lengths toward fine-tuning the
209 bioactivity (Fig. 5C). In addition, we also synthesized PEGylated hydroxylamine as a
210 hydrophilic tag for comparison. The oxidation reactions were performed in 2 M
211 guanidine buffer, because this concentration of guanidine can solubilize target proteins
212 without denaturing them. Oxidant **1** was added into the target protein **33** or **34** in buffer
213 solution at pH 6.5 and the solution was incubated at 25°C for 3 h. Subsequently, after
214 the addition of the alkoxyamine, the mixture was readjusted to pH 6.5 and reacted for
215 a further 16 h to afford modified proteins **35-49** (Fig. 5C). Because MIP-1 β proteins
216 and MeONH₂·HCl or EtONH₂·HCl were dissolved well in this buffer solution, the
217 ligations proceeded smoothly and gave high isolated yields (43% for **35**, 44% for **42**
218 and 47% for **43** respectively). Reactions with fatty alkoxyamines became biphasic due
219 to their poor solubility. Therefore, vigorous stirring was necessary during these
220 reactions. After 24 h of reaction, a small amount of starting material was still present

221 (~20% by HPLC analysis), which suggested that these lipo-hydroxylamines did not mix
 222 well even in an aqueous buffer and hence resulted in a decreased yield (28–38%).
 223 PEGylated variants (**41** and **49**) were extremely low yielding (23 and 25%, respectively)
 224 due to unknown side reactions. Transamination with quinone **1** is fully compatible with
 225 the disulfide bonds in these proteins without disrupting their biological activity, as
 226 shown by HPLC-MS and the anti-HIV-1 assay.



227

228 **Figure 5. Late-stage modification of MIP-1β proteins via quinone-mediated**
 229 **selective oxidation of N-terminal amine.** A) Reaction scheme for the transamination
 230 of MIP-1β protein **33** and **34**; B) The sequences of protein **33** and **34**; C) A summary
 231 of the transamination/oxime ligation of protein **33** and **34** and the isolated yields for all
 232 reactions; D) Anti-HIV-1 activity of selected MIP-1β analogs with EC₅₀ <5000 nM.

233 With all the modified MIP-1β variants in hand, we performed an anti-HIV-1
 234 activity assay to evaluate their inhibitory activity. Recombinant MIP-1β (**Rh-CCL4**)
 235 was used as the primary standard with a measured half maximal effective concentration
 236 (EC₅₀) value of 3.3 μM (Fig. 5D). Protein **33** (4-69) resulted in a complete loss of anti-
 237 HIV-1 activity within the concentration range studied (up to 5 μM). Interestingly,
 238 ethylated variant **35** regained its activity with an EC₅₀ value of 200 nM. Full-length
 239 Gly1-69 protein **34** also displayed increased inhibitory activity with an EC₅₀ value of

240 157 nM upon substitution of Ala1 with Gly, which suggested that a branched methyl
241 group decreases the binding affinity between MIP-1 β and CCR5. Further extension of
242 full-length protein **34** with methoxyamine and ethoxyamine showed comparable
243 activities against HIV-1 by an order of magnitude (**42**: EC₅₀ = 2.7 μ M and **43**: EC₅₀ =
244 2.3 μ M), whereas all the lipo-variants and PEGylated variants exhibited no activity
245 within the concentration range studied (all EC₅₀ > 5 μ M, see SI). Besides, a cell viability
246 assay with MTT was also performed to explore the cytotoxicity of the synthetic proteins
247 toward Tzm-bl cells. In our investigations, all the synthetic proteins exhibited
248 cytotoxicity with 50% cytotoxic concentration (CC₅₀) values of > 50 μ M (see SI), which
249 indicated that the proteins showed no cytotoxic behavior. In our future studies, we will
250 further optimize the N-terminal domain with hydroxyamines bearing other
251 functionalities and thereafter explain the exact mechanism of how these modified
252 proteins exhibit their inhibitory activity against HIV-1 both *in vitro* and *in vivo*.

253 CONCLUSION

254 In summary, we have demonstrated a highly selective and mild method for
255 modifying the N-terminus of protein *via* a biomimetic quinone-based transamination
256 reaction. The key features of this reaction include rapid reaction time, high selectivity
257 and a broad scope of amino acids. Covid-19 spike protein fragment (Arg),
258 tetracosactide (Ser), myoglobin (Gly) and ubiquitin (Met) along with a range of model
259 peptides were given as examples. Furthermore, the preparation of several MIP-1 β
260 analogs *via* native chemical ligation and late-stage N-terminal modification has
261 demonstrated its potential utility in medicinal chemistry. We believe this method will
262 be a useful tool for protein modification and medicinal chemistry studies.

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481

482 **Supplementary Information:** Detailed synthetic procedures, compound
483 characterization and NMR spectra are provided.

484 **Acknowledgements:** Financial support for this work was gratefully received from the
485 National Natural Science Foundation of China (91753102, 21672146 and 21907064),
486 the Shanghai Committee of Science and Technology (17JC1405300) and the Strategic
487 Priority Research Program of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Grant No.
488 XDA12020227).

489 **Author Contributions:** P. W. supervised the project and wrote the manuscript. Y. T.
490 supervised the project. S. W., Q. Z. and X. P. made contributions to the project design
491 and prepared the supporting information. # these three authors contributed equally to
492 this project. Y. L. synthesized some of the peptides used in this project. R. L. and L. M.
493 conducted anti-HIV assays for all CCL4 variants.

494 **Competing interests:** There are no competing financial interests in this work.
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Figures

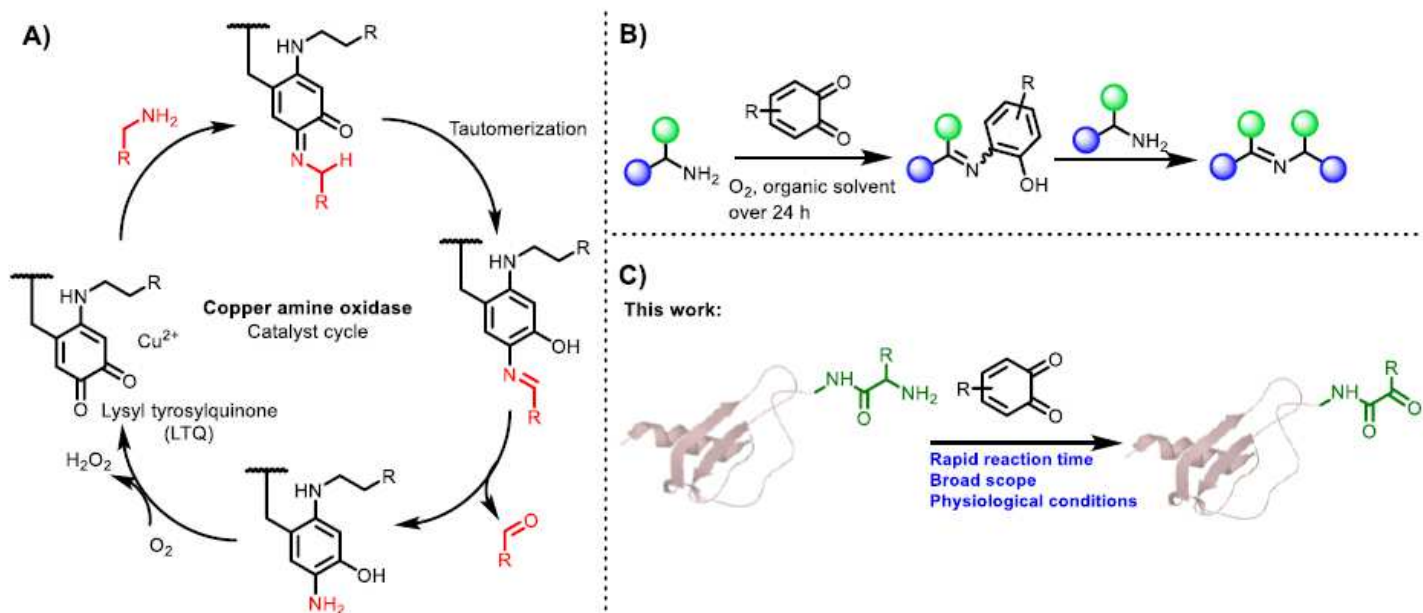


Figure 1

Development of protein N-terminus modification via quinone-mediated transamination: A) Natural catalytic cycle of CuAOs, B) Oxidation of primary amines with ortho-quinone to form imines, C) Biomimetic quinone-mediated transamination inspired by CuAOs.

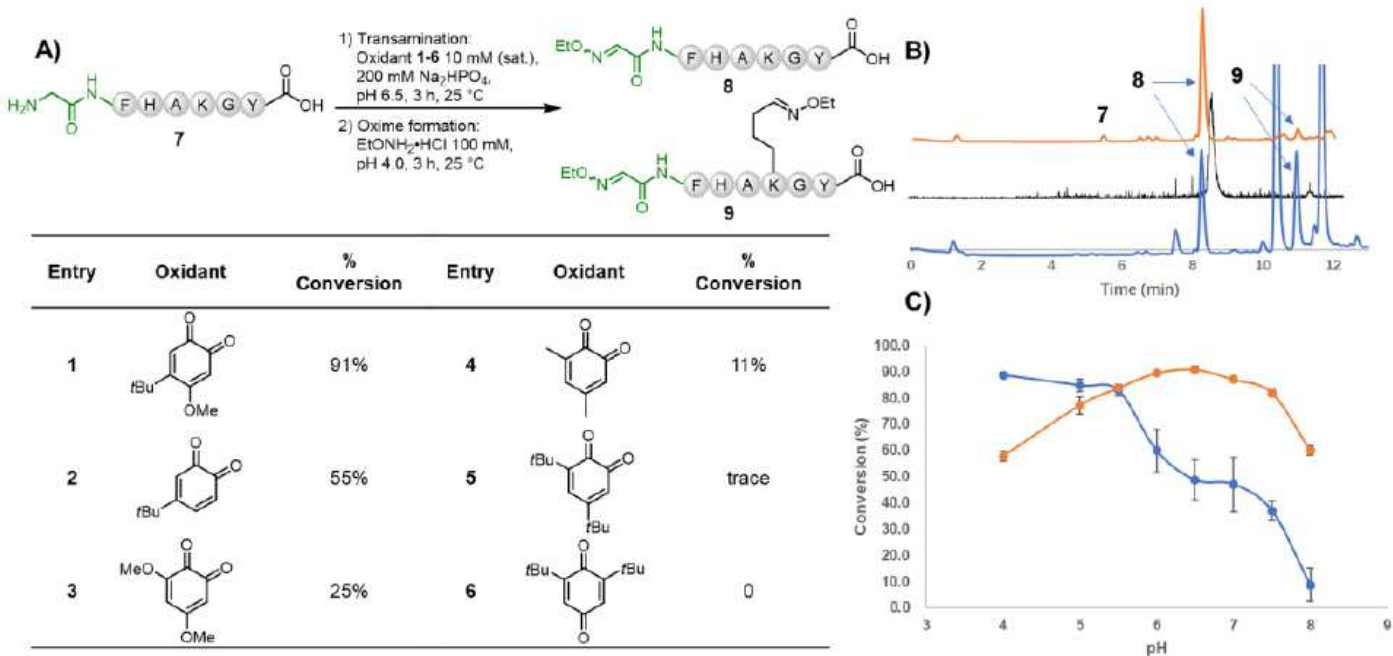


Figure 2

Optimization of the reaction conditions used in the biomimetic transamination reaction. A) Screening of oxidants 1-6 used for the transamination reaction with model peptide 7; B) LC trace obtained for the

transamination reaction using quinone 1 (in yellow) or 2 (in blue); C) Optimization of the pH of the transamination reaction using quinone 1 (in yellow) or 2 (the rate of conversion was calculated by integrating the related peaks of the LC trace measured at 280 nm, although TIC showed a >99% conversion rate of product 8).

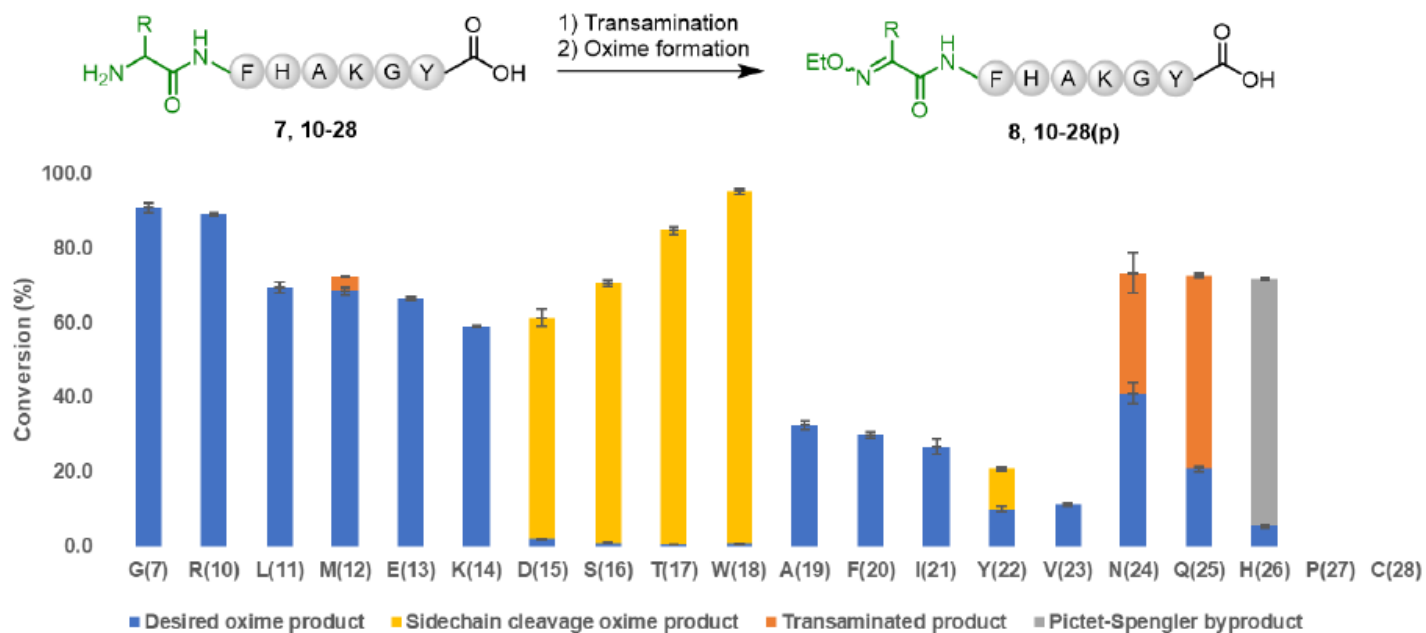


Figure 3

Landscape for the transamination of 20 canonical amino acids attached on the N-terminal residue of the model peptides. Reaction conditions: 1) Transamination: oxidant 1 (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.5, 3 h, 25 °C; 2) Oxime formation: EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3 h, 25 °C.

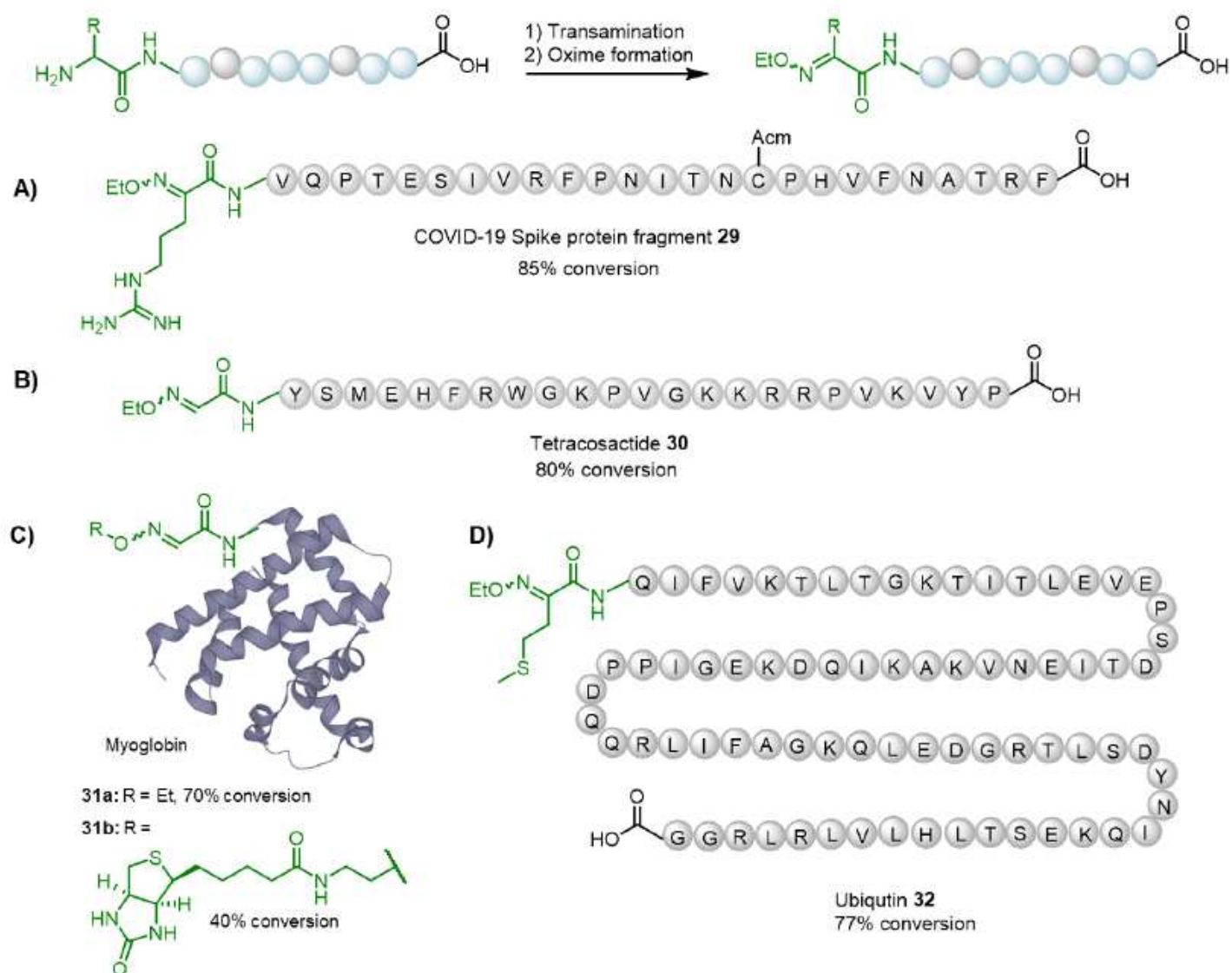


Figure 4

Site selective peptide modification via quinone-mediated transamination reaction. A) Reaction conditions for COVID-19 spike protein fragment 29: 1) Transamination: 2 M Gn·HCl, oxidant 1 (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.5, 6 h, 25 °C; 2) Oxime formation: EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3 h, 25 °C. B) Reaction conditions for tetracosactide 30: 1) Transamination: oxidant 1 (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.5, 3 h, 25 °C; 2) Oxime formation: EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3 h, 25 °C; C) Reaction conditions for myoglobin 31a-b: 1) Transamination: oxidant 1 (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.0, 5 h, 25 °C; 2) Oxime formation for 31a: EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3 h, 25 °C; oxime formation for 31b: extraction with EtOAc (2 x 1.0 mL), then biotinylated tag S4 (100 mM), pH 4.0, 16 h, 25 °C. D) Reaction conditions for ubiquitin 32: 1) Transamination: 2 M Gn·HCl, oxidant 1 (10 mM, sat.), 200 mM Na₂HPO₄, pH 6.5, 3 h, 25 °C; 2) Oxime formation: EtONH₂·HCl (100 mM), pH 4.0, 3 h, 25 °C.

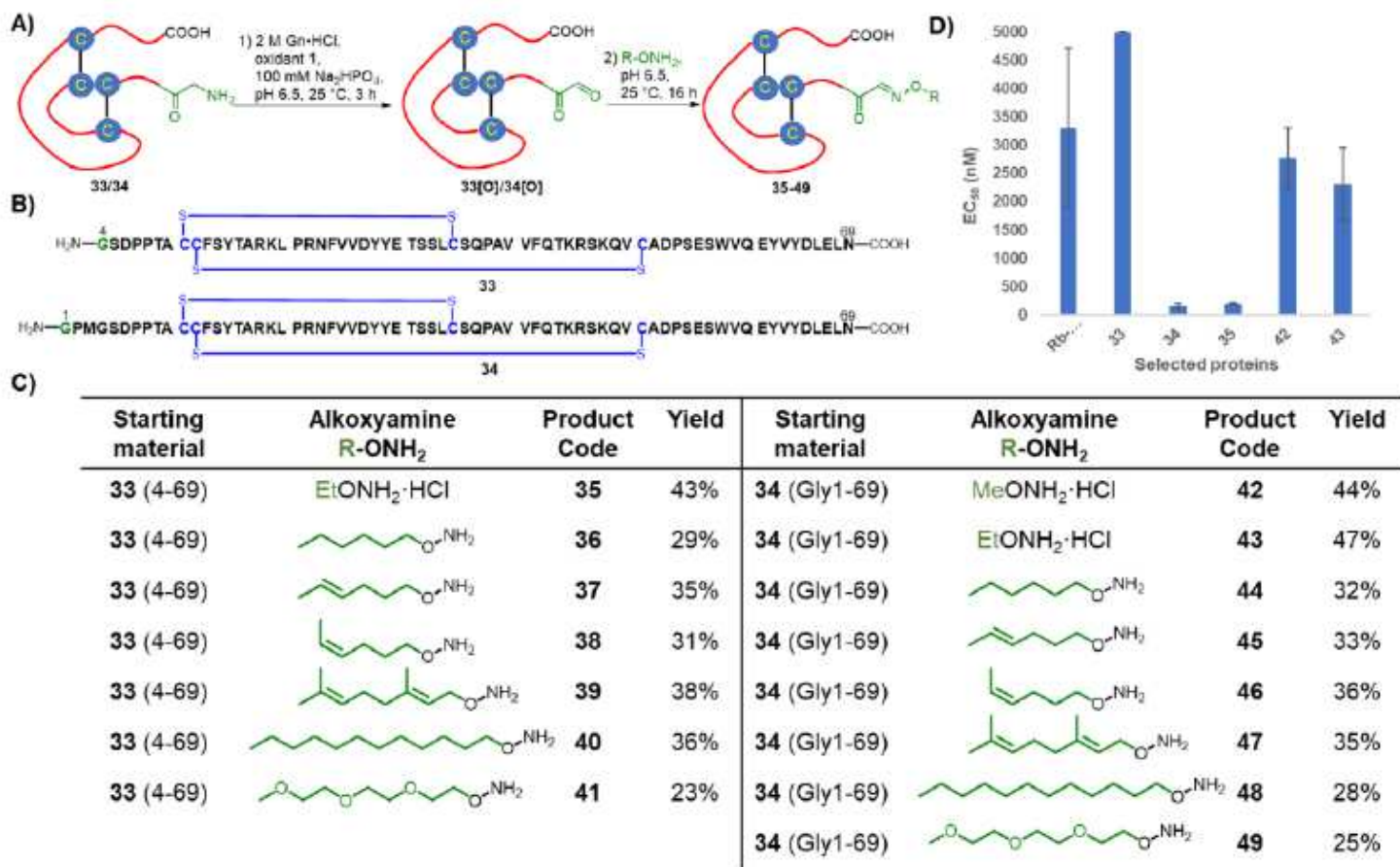


Figure 5

Late-stage modification of MIP-1 β proteins via quinone-mediated selective oxidation of N-terminal amine. A) Reaction scheme for the transamination of MIP-1 β protein 33 and 34; B) The sequences of protein 33 and 34; C) A summary of the transamination/oxime ligation of protein 33 and 34 and the isolated yields for all reactions; D) Anti-HIV-1 activity of selected MIP-1 β analogs with EC₅₀ < 5000 nM.

Supplementary Files

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