Abstract—Lipases are enzymes particularly amenable for immobilization by entrapment methods, as they can work equally well in aqueous or non-conventional media and long-time stability of enzyme activity and enantioselectivity is needed to elaborate more efficient bioprocesses. The improvement of Pseudomonas fluorescens (Amano AK) lipase characteristics was investigated by optimizing the immobilization procedure in hybrid organic-inorganic matrices using ionic liquids as additives. Ionic liquids containing a more hydrophobic alkyl group in the cationic moiety are beneficial for the activity of immobilized lipase. Silanes with alkyl- or aryl nonhydrodizable groups used as precursors in combination with tetramethoxysilane could generate composites with higher enantioselectivity compared to the native enzyme in acylation reactions of secondary alcohols. The optimal effect on both activity and enantioselectivity was achieved for the composite made from octyltrimethoxysilane and tetramethoxysilane at 1:1 molar ratio (60% increase of total activity following immobilization and enantiomeric ratio of 30). Ionic liquids also demonstrated valuable properties as reaction media for the studied reactions, comparable with the usual organic solvent, hexane.

Keywords—Ionic liquids, lipase, enantioselectivity, sol-gel immobilization

I. INTRODUCTION

Industrial or “white” biotechnology can be defined as the application of biotechnology for the processing and production of chemicals, materials and energy. Based on a very impressive development in the last decade, it is able now to ensure new opportunities to chemical and life-science industries by using enzymes and microorganisms to produce valuable building blocks and materials that previously have been accessible only through complicated synthetic routes [1].

Cristina Zarcula is PhD student of the “Politehnica” University of Timisoara, Faculty of Industrial Chemistry and Environmental Engineering (e-mail: Cristina.Zarcula@chim.upt.ro).

Ramona Croitoru is PhD student of the “Politehnica” University of Timisoara, Faculty of Industrial Chemistry and Environmental Engineering (e-mail: croitoru@naramona@yahoo.com).

Livia Corici is PhD student of the “Politehnica” University of Timisoara, Faculty of Industrial Chemistry and Environmental Engineering (e-mail: livia.corici@yahoo.com).

Carol Csunderlik is Professor of Organic Chemistry in “Politehnica” University of Timisoara, Faculty of Industrial Chemistry and Environmental Engineering (e-mail: Carol.Csunderlik@chim.upt.ro).

Francisc Peter is Professor of Industrial Biotechnologies in “Politehnica” University of Timisoara, Faculty of Industrial Chemistry and Environmental Engineering, C. Telbisz 6, 300001 Timisoara, Romania (Corresponding author: phone: +40-256-404216, fax: +40-256-403060, email: Francisc.Peter@chim.upt.ro).

Optically active intermediates: alcohols, amines, and carboxylic acids are important building blocks for the synthesis of pharmaceutical and agrochemical products. Around 80% of the active compounds manufactured by pharmaceutical companies are chiral, and this percentage is estimated to increase in the next period [2]. Using a pure enantiomer instead of racemic mixture allows lower dosage and improved efficacy of the product, but the availability of these compounds at large scale was limited. New technologies were needed and biocatalytic processes started to play an emerging role in this context. The excellent specificity and selectivity (including enantioselectivity) properties of enzymes have been employed to carry out processes of high complexity in less harmful experimental and environmental conditions [3]. There are several tools, as protein engineering, available to improve the enzyme characteristics, but some drawbacks associated with use of soluble enzymes like high price, product contamination, difficulty of separation from the reaction mixture, and insufficient operational stability may reduce the industrial application possibilities. In these circumstances, is not astonishing to see a revival of immobilization techniques, as they could enhance the stability, activity, specificity or selectivity of enzymes, if properly designed. Enzyme engineering by immobilization techniques was demonstrated to be perfectly compatible with other chemical or biological approaches to improve enzyme function [4]. However, the immobilization protocols should be tailored to every enzyme and reaction and is difficult to develop generic methods [5].

Among the immobilization methods described in the literature, bioencapsulation looks particularly valuable while direct linkage of the enzyme and support, frequently associated with activity loss, is avoided. A large diversity of natural or synthetic organic polymers, possessing a broad variety of available functional features, has been already studied for entrapment of biomolecules. They can fulfill several requirements needed for a highly efficient biocatalyst, but mechanical strength and chemical stability are often not appropriate [6]. Inorganic materials could be a solution for support matrices of improved quality for biomolecule entrapments, and silica gels are particularly suitable for this purpose. Silica has been widely used as an inert and stable matrix for enzyme immobilization owing to its high specific surface area and controllable pore diameters, which can be tailored (as microporous, mesoporous or macroporous silica) to the dimension of a specific enzyme. Since most enzymes
are of 3 to 6 nm in diameter, mesoporous materials (2–50 nm pore size) were most commonly employed [7]. Among the immobilization techniques based on silica gels, sol-gel encapsulation has proved to be a versatile alternative for a large variety of biomolecules. Sol-gel matrices are formed by hydrolytic polymerization of silane precursors, principally alcohoxides. The first step is the hydrolysis to silicic acid, followed by condensation reactions to yield silica. Silica particles grow progressively as condensation proceeds, leading to the formation of colloidal solutions (sols) and gels. These gels can be partially dried at room temperature, giving a porous network of hydrated amorphous silica (called xerogel) with pores ranging typically between 1 and 10 nm in diameter [8].

The sol-gel process is particularly important because it allows the low-temperature synthesis of silica and simultaneous entrapment of the enzyme throughout the gelation phase. Furthermore, silanes holding a non-hydrolyzable alkyl- or aryl group were used together with tetraalkoxysilanes, leading to more hydrophobic sol-gel matrices that have been proved particularly efficient in the case of lipases, facilitating their interfacial activation [9], [10]. Several other materials can be also incorporated during the sol-gel process as additives or templates, to obtain organic-inorganic hybrid materials with better characteristics. Organic molecules can be simply embedded or chemically linked within the silica matrix. Many additives such as polyethylene glycol, glycerol, polyvinylalcohol, sugars, cyclodextrins, etc. have been tested [11]. A new and promising possibility could be the utilization of ionic liquids as template compounds for the sol-gel entrapment of enzymes [12].

The aim of this study was to investigate the feasibility of ionic liquids as additives for sol-gel entrapment of microbial lipases and the influence of precursor and ionic liquid nature on activity and enantioselectivity, examined for acylation reactions of aliphatic secondary alcohols.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Lipase AK “Amano” 20 (from Pseudomonas fluorescens) was donated by Amano Enzyme Inc. (Japan). Silane precursors propyl- (PrTMOS), octyl- (OcTMOS), and vinyltrithoxysilane (PhTMOS), sodium fluoride, and vinyl acetate were purchased from Fluka. Methyltrimethoxysilane (MeTMOS), tetramethoxysilane (TMOS), n-hexane (98%), isopropyl alcohol (99.7%), and racemic secondary alcohols: 2-butanol, 2-pentanol, 2-hexanol, 2-heptanol, and 2-octanol were purchased from Fluka, 2-nonanol was supplied by Merck. All these reagents were of analytical grade and have been used without further purification. Hexadecane (99%, Merck) and decane (>99%, Aldrich) were used as internal standards for the chromatographic analysis.

Ionic liquids 1-ethyl-3-methyl-imidazolium hexafluorophosphate [Bmim]PF₆, 1-ethyl-3-methyl-imidazolium trifluoroacetate [Bmim]OOCF₃, were purchased from Merck, 1-octyl-3-methyl-imidazolium tetrafluoroborate [Omin]BF₄ from Fluka. 1-Propyl-3-methyl-imidazolium tetrafluoroborate [Pmim]BF₄, 1-ethyl-3-methyl-imidazolium acetate [Emim]OOCCH₃, 1-ethyl-3-methyl-imidazolium octylsulfate [Emim]OCsO₄, were provided by the University of Bremen (Germany).

A. Immobilization Method 1

A previously described [13] procedure has been used, modified by replacing polyethylene glycol as additive with ionic liquid. Lipase AK (100 mg/mL) was suspended in TRIS/HCl 0.1 M, pH 8.0 buffer, stirred at room temperature for 30 min, centrifuged, and the supernatant used for immobilization. In a 4 mL glass vial, Lipase AK filtrate (780 µL), ionic liquid (200 µL), 1M NaF (100 µL), and isopropyl alcohol (200 µL) were mixed. By continuous stirring, a mixture of silane precursors (total 6 mmoles) was added. The resulting mixture was magnetically stirred at room temperature until the gelation started. The gel was kept for 24 h at room temperature to complete polymerization. The bulk gel was washed with isopropyl alcohol (10 mL), TRIS/HCl buffer solution 0.1M, pH 8.0 (10 mL), isopropyl alcohol again (10 mL) and hexane (10 mL), and dried at room temperature for 48 hrs. Finally, it was crushed in a mortar and kept in the refrigerator.

B. Immobilization Method 2

This method was employed only for preparations made from MeTMOS and TMOS silane precursors, as those prepared according to Method 1 exhibited very low activities, probably as a result of a too dense structure of the sol-gel. In a 4 mL vial, the silane precursors (total 6 mmoles) and ethanol (0.5 mL) were mixed for 15 minutes to form a homogeneous sol. In a second 4 mL vial lipase AK (75 mg) was suspended in TRIS/HCl 0.1 M, pH 8.0 buffer (1.1 mL), then 200 µL ionic liquid was added and mixed for 15 min. Subsequently, the two previous solutions were mixed, and magnetically stirred until gelation occurred. The resulting gel was kept at room temperature for 24 hrs to complete polymerization. The bulk gel was washed and dried as described in Method 1.

C. Transesterification Procedure

For the acylation studies, 4 mL capacity glass vials were charged with a mixture of secondary alcohol (1 mmole), vinyl acetate (3 mmole), reaction medium (hexane or ionic liquid, 2 mL) and free (5 mg) or sol-gel immobilized (25 mg) Lipase AK. The mixture was shaken at 300 strokes/min and 40°C (MIR-S100 orbital shaker, Sanyo E&E, Japan). Samples taken at different time intervals were analyzed for conversion and enantiomeric excess by a Dani 86.10 gas chromatograph (Dani Instruments S.p.A., Italy) equipped with flame ionization detector, using a 30 m x 0.32 mm CYDEX-B chiral column (SGE, Australia). The analysis conditions were set as follows: oven temperature: 50 to 120°C with 10°C/min heating.
rate, injector temperature 240°C, detector temperature 280°C, carrier gas (helium) flow 0.6 mL/min. Decane and hexadecane have been used as internal standards for quantitative determination of alcohol conversion. Only the enantiomers of the ester products have been separated on this column. All assays have been run at least in duplicate.

Transesterification activities were calculated based on the alcohol conversion at 24 hrs and expressed as the average amount of the forming 2-acetyoxy-alcohol (in micromole) per hour by 1 mg of free or immobilized enzyme. Based on previous data [13] it was assumed that Lipase AK is (R)-specific in the acylation reaction of the tested secondary alcohols, therefore the main product is the (R)-ester. Enantiomeric excess (ee p) of the resulted ester product was determined based on the enantiomers peak area. The enantiomeric ratio (E) has been calculated using the relation [14]:

\[ E = \frac{\ln(1 - C) - C(1 + ee_p)}{\ln(1 - C) - C(1 - ee_p)} \]

where C represent the conversion at 24 hrs.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ionic liquids attracted interest in the last period especially as “green” reaction media, because of their lack of vapour pressure and high thermal stability. In biocatalysis, ionic liquids with 1,3-dialkylimidazolium or N-alkylpyridinium cation and a non-coordinating anion have been most frequently used, as their polarity and hydrophobicity properties were found appropriate to ensure selectivity and operational stability even higher than in traditional media [15].

This study was focused on the utilization of ionic liquids as nonstructural template additives for sol-gel immobilized lipases. The beneficial influence of ionic liquids as additives to protect the inactivation of lipase by the released alcohol and shrinking effect throughout the formation and drying of gel was recently described [16]. We studied the influence of ionic liquid structure, immobilization parameters and substrate structure on the activity and enantioselectivity of Pseudomonas fluorescens (AK “Amano” 20) lipase immobilized by sol-gel entrapment. The examined reaction was the irreversible transesterification of aliphatic secondary alcohols using vinyl acetate as acyl donor. Generation of acetaldehyde by tautomerization of the vinyl alcohol side product makes the reaction irreversible.

Transformations of racemic substrates catalyzed by enzymes are frequently enantioselective, and in optimal conditions only one enantiomer is converted in reaction product, leaving the unreacted enantiomer in optically active form. Acylation of a secondary alcohol is such a reaction, but usually the discrimination between the two isomers is not absolute, yielding enriched optical isomers instead of pure enantiomers (Fig. 1).
Ionic liquids with the same anion, tetrafluoroborate, enhanced the transesterification activity of the sol-gel immobilized lipase in accordance with the increasing chain length and hydrophobicity of the alkyl group from the cationic part. According to Zhou et al. [17], ionic liquids with the same anion, tetrafluoroborate, act as templates for preparation of mesoporous nanostructures in which hydrogen bonds between tetrafluoroborate anion are responsible for the formation of a well ordered mesoporous composite. The explanation should be again the different effect of hydrophobic group excess.

As concerns ionic liquids with the same cation and different anions, large substituents in the anionic part decrease both the effective activity and enantioselectivity of the sol-gel/immobilized lipase. Tables II and III show the results obtained for acylation reactions of 2-hexanol with vinyl acetate catalyzed by sol-gel entrapped lipase obtained with [Omim]BF₄ and [Bmim]PF₆ as additives, respectively. All immobilizations have been carried out according Method I (see Materials and Methods part), excepting those with MeTMOS where Method 2 was used. Although the lower effective activities for immobilized lipases compared to the native enzyme, the total activities were higher for several preparates, up to 60% increase for the preparate made with OcTMOS and TMOS precursors at 1:1 molar ratio and [Omim]BF₄ as ionic liquid additive. Activity values for preparates obtained from the same precursors were slightly higher when the ionic liquid additive was [Omim]BF₄, than for [Bmim]PF₆. The nature of the second silane precursor (besides TMOS) was more influential on activities. Increasing the alkyl group density resulted in enhanced activities, but it seems to be a limit of this positive influence. Lipases are well known as enzymes being activated in hydrophobic environments and the hydrophobic groups from the immobilization matrix could act in this way. At 1:1 molar ratios of TMOS and the silane with non-hydrolizable alkyl group, the activities increased with the length of the alkyl chain, from methyl to octyl. Increasing the amount of alkyl-containing silane in the immobilization mixture (2:1 molar ratio), the highest activities were recorded for the preparates with propyl groups. The explanation is a possible negative effect of hydrophobic group excess.

### TABLE I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additive</th>
<th>Activity¹</th>
<th>Relative total activity</th>
<th>e.e. (％)</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.446</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Effective activity, expressed in (μmol·h⁻¹·mg⁻¹)

### TABLE II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Silane precursor (molar ratio)</th>
<th>Activity¹</th>
<th>Relative total activity</th>
<th>e.e. (％)</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.446</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Effective activity, expressed in (μmol·h⁻¹·mg⁻¹)
Pending alkyl groups cannot be part in the building of the gel network and their excess would avoid the formation of a well-ordered mesoporous silica matrix which is needed for a highly active composite.

### C. Influence of Substrate Structure

Six aliphatic secondary alcohols with increasing alkyl chains, from 2-butanol to 2-nonanol, have been investigated as substrates for transesterification reactions catalyzed by sol-gel immobilized Amano AK lipase composites. Hexane was used as reaction medium at 40°C, OctT莫斯 and TMOS as silica precursors (1:1 molar ratio), and [Omim]BF₄ as ionic liquid additive. The activity results are shown in Table IV, compared to the native lipase.

The substrate specificity of Amano AK lipase is not significantly influenced by the secondary alcohol alkyl chain length. The immobilization was demonstrated to be beneficial especially for secondary alcohols with longer alkyl chain, 2-octanol and 2-nonanol. It must be noticed the important activation effect, reflected in more than twofold increase of total activity following immobilization.

The enantioselectivity was enhanced for most of the immobilized sol-gel biocatalysts compared to the native lipase, as results from Fig. 2.

### D. Influence of Reaction Medium

The subject of biocatalytic reactions in non-conventional reaction media, including organic solvents and ionic liquids, is very well documented in the scientific literature [19]. It was not an objective of this work to investigate in detail the influence of reaction media in the studied transesterification reactions. However, a preliminary study was realized to show the influence of ionic liquids as both additives and reaction media.
media. The results are shown in Table 5, compared to hexane, the organic reaction medium used is the previous experiments. Two immobilized preparations have been evaluated, the first obtained from PrTMOS and TMOS precursors (at 1:1 molar ratio) with [Bmim]PF₆ ionic liquid additive, and the second from OcTMOS and TMOS at the same molar ratio with [Omim]BF₄ additive. The same ionic liquids, [Omim]BF₄ and [Omim]BF₆ were tested as reaction media of 2-hexanol transesterification by vinyl acetate at 40°C.

Table V

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Silane precursors (ionic liquid additive)</th>
<th>Reaction medium</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Relative total activity</th>
<th>e.e. (%)</th>
<th>E</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>n-hexane</td>
<td>2.446</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(native enzyme)</td>
<td>[Bmim]PF₆</td>
<td>2.605</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Omim]BF₆</td>
<td>2.247</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PrTMOS:TMOS ([Bmim]PF₆)</td>
<td>n-hexane</td>
<td>0.474</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Bmim]PF₆</td>
<td>0.541</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Omim]BF₆</td>
<td>0.492</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OcTMOS:TMOS ([Omim]BF₆)</td>
<td>n-hexane</td>
<td>0.507</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Bmim]PF₆</td>
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<td></td>
<td>[Omim]BF₆</td>
<td>0.511</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Effective activity, expressed in (μmol·h⁻¹·mg⁻¹)*

Compared to hexane, the most commonly used organic solvent, the ionic liquids demonstrated comparable or slightly higher activities. The enantioselectivity was higher when [Omim]BF₆ has been used as reaction medium and lower for the other ionic liquid. Thus, the appropriate ionic liquid must be selected for every application. The primary importance of ionic liquids as reaction media in biocatalytic reactions is related to their reduced vapour pressure and lower toxicity compared to volatile organic solvents, but at this moment their high price is a serious drawback for large-scale biotechnological applications.

IV. CONCLUSION

The sol-gel technique is an emerging procedure for immobilization of biomolecules. Improvement of enzyme characteristics as activity and enantioselectivity is the most important aim for every biocatalytic process. Selecting the appropriate precursors, additives and template compounds is fundamental to obtain solid-phase biocatalysts with higher efficiency and operational stability. Ionic liquids could have an important function in this issue, as they contribute to the formation of the sol-gel framework and can also facilitate the enzymatic reaction by their hydrophilic or hydrophobic nature. The results of this study provide that fine tuning of ionic liquid and silane precursor structure can result in entrapped lipase composites with higher activity and enantioselectivity than the native enzyme. However, several other aspects are yet to be improved, as avoiding sol-gel matrix shrinkage and enzyme aggregation during the immobilization process. More detailed studies on different substrates, also involving the relation between structure of additive and nature of the most effective reaction medium will be completed, to extend the application possibilities of this topic.

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