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1,5-Disubstituted-1,2,3-triazoles as inhibitors of the mitochondrial Ca<sup>2+</sup> -activated F<sub>1</sub> F<sub>0</sub> -ATP(hydrolyase) and the permeability transition pore

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# 1,5-Disubstituted-1,2,3-triazoles as inhibitors of the mitochondrial Ca<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATP(hydrol)ase and of the permeability transition pore

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## Abstract

The permeability transition pore (mPTP), an high-conductance channel triggered by a sudden Ca<sup>2+</sup> concentration increase, involves the F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase. Since mPTP opening leads to mitochondrial dysfunctions, which feature many diseases, a great pharmacological challenge is to find mPTP modulators. In this study the effects of two 1,5-disubstituted 1,2,3-triazole derivatives, five-membered heterocycles with three nitrogen atoms in the ring and capable of forming secondary interactions with proteins, is investigated. Compounds **3a** and **3b** were selected among a wide range of structurally-related compounds, due to their chemical properties and their effectiveness in preliminary studies. In swine heart mitochondria both compounds inhibit the Ca<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase without affecting the F-ATPase activity sustained by the natural cofactor Mg<sup>2+</sup>. The inhibition is mutually exclusive, probably because of their shared enzyme site, and uncompetitive with respect to the ATP substrate, since they only bind to the enzyme-ATP complex. Both compounds show the same inhibition constant (*K*'<sub>i</sub>), but compound **3a** has a doubled inactivation rate constant compared to compound **3b**. Moreover, both compounds desensitize mPTP opening without altering mitochondrial respiration. The results strengthen the link between the Ca<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase and the mPTP and suggest that these inhibitors can be pharmacologically exploited to counteract mPTP-related diseases.

**Keywords:** triazole derivatives; mitochondria; F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase; permeability transition pore; calcium.

**Short title:** Triazole compounds effect on F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase and mPTP

## 1. Introduction

The mitochondrial permeability transition pore (mPTP) is a channel of the inner mitochondrial membrane (IMM), whose persistent formation induces abnormalities in the mitochondrial bioenergetic parameters (membrane depolarization, ion homeostasis loss, cessation of oxidative phosphorylation).<sup>1</sup> Lastly, mitochondrial swelling and rupture of the outer mitochondrial membrane cause different forms of cellular death.<sup>2</sup> Since the mPTP is increasingly involved in a variety of pathologies associated with mitochondrial dysfunctions, the molecular bioarchitecture that participates in mPTP formation represents a potential drug-target to counteract diseases featured by  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  rise and cell death, including ischaemia-reperfusion injury, childhood neuromuscular diseases and age-related neurodegenerative diseases.<sup>3</sup> The mPTP was suggested to stem from the  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase(s), even if it is still controversial if the monomeric or the dimeric  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase form opens the pore.<sup>4,5</sup> The  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase is a bi-powered enzymatic engine that by means of the membrane embedded  $\text{F}_0$  domain uses the electrochemical gradient of  $\text{H}^+$  obtained by mitochondrial respiration to synthesize ATP from ADP and Pi on hydrophilic  $\text{F}_1$  domain.<sup>6</sup> The  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase can also work in reverse as  $\text{H}^+$  pump and exploit the phosphoanhydride bond energy released by ATP hydrolysis to polarize the inner mitochondrial membrane.<sup>7</sup> The torque generation of the  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase rotor couples ATP synthesis/hydrolysis in the  $\text{F}_1$  domain to  $\text{H}^+$  translocation in the  $\text{F}_0$  domain.<sup>8</sup> However, this bi-functional activity, unique in nature, is only sustained by the natural cofactor  $\text{Mg}^{2+}$ ,<sup>9</sup> while the substitution of  $\text{Mg}^{2+}$  by  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  only allows the oligomycin-sensitive ATP hydrolysis, namely the coupling between  $\text{F}_1$  and  $\text{F}_0$ .<sup>10</sup> The abrupt increase in matrix  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  concentration associated with oxidative stress under physio-pathological conditions activates the  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase catalytic site, hydrolyzes CaATP and triggers mPTP formation.<sup>11,12</sup> These features make the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase an intriguing therapeutic target.<sup>13</sup> Any compound which inhibits the mPTP can address drug design and also provide new insights into the mPTP structure. Nowadays, the only accepted positive regulator of mPTP opening is the cyclophilin D (CyPD), a *cys-trans* peptidyl-prolyl isomerase in the mitochondrial matrix.<sup>14</sup> Cyclosporine A (CsA) and analogues which bind the CyPD are CyPD-dependent mPTP inhibitors,<sup>3</sup> which act by inhibiting CyPD and consequently mPTP. However, in CyPD knocked-out cells the CsA-mediated mPTP inhibition mechanism is abolished and the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  threshold required for mPTP opening is strongly increased.<sup>14</sup> Thus, CsA effect is limited by its target availability, which determines its efficacy. The failed clinical success of CsA and derivatives is also due to the physicochemical properties, *i.e.* poor hydrosolubility and high molecular weight, associated with cytotoxicity, undesired biological targets and poor blood-brain barrier permeability.<sup>3,15</sup>

The 1,2,3-Triazoles are a relevant class of five-membered N-heterocycles with intriguing biological activities, including antibacterial, anticancer and antiviral efficacy.<sup>16</sup> Their chemical structure with three vicinal nitrogen atoms in the ring and their aromatic nature make this class of compounds resistant to many reactions such as to oxidation, reduction and acid or basic hydrolysis.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, triazoles have the same capability of forming hydrogen bonds as well as dipole-dipole and  $\pi$ -stacking interactions with various biological targets. These interactions can become even more relevant when several substituents are present on the backbone of these molecules.<sup>18</sup> For the synthesis of substituted 1,2,3-triazoles, the classical 1,3-dipolar cycloaddition of Huisgen between terminal alkynes and azides provides a mixture of 1,4- and 1,5-disubstituted triazoles.<sup>19</sup> This reaction was overcome from the introduction of copper or ruthenium salts as catalysts, obtaining the 1,4- or 1,5-regioisomer, respectively.<sup>20,21</sup> More recently, new synthetic procedures were realized by eliminative azide-olefin cycloaddition (EAOC) between substituted azides as dipole and electron deficient alkenes as dipolarophile, bypassing the problems that result from the use of only terminal alkynes.<sup>22,23</sup> In particular, nitroolefins received good deal of attention for their ability to furnish triazoline intermediates in high yields that readily decompose to triazoles,<sup>24,25</sup> while enaminones were a very good starting material to synthesize 1,4,5-trisubstituted triazoles, improving the properties deriving by multiple substituents on triazole ring.<sup>26</sup>

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3 Recently, triazole derivatives, obtained by replacing the isoxazole core in analogue compounds, have been  
4 considered as second-generation inhibitors of the mPTP. Accordingly, this chemical modification was proven  
5 to improve plasma stability.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, drugs with a short half-life ( $t_{1/2}$ ) in plasma risk to be degraded prior to  
6 be able to exert any biological effect. Thus, small molecules as substituted 1,2,3-triazoles represent  
7 interesting compounds to evaluate the structure-activity relationship focusing on the  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase activity,  
8 the major playmaker of mPTP event, and to clarify their effect on the mPTP by via CyPD-independent  
9 mechanism. Among a wide variety of structurally-related compound, compounds **3a** and **3b** were selected  
10 for their chemical properties, which make them prone to interact with proteins and produce biological  
11 effects, and for their promising effectiveness on the  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase activity shown in our preliminary studies.  
12 The aim is to establish if these compounds, by interacting with the  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase complex, are able to block  
13 mPTP formation and preserve the  $Mg^{2+}$ -activated  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase functionality, namely the ATP building  
14 capability, without exerting mitochondrial toxicity.  
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## 23 2. Materials and Methods

### 24 2.1. Chemicals and reagents

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26 Fura-FF and oligomycin were purchased from Vinci-Biochem (Vinci, Italy).  $Na_2ATP$  was obtained from Sigma-  
27 Aldrich (Milan, Italy). All other chemicals were reagent grade and used without purification. Quartz double-  
28 distilled water was used for all reagent solutions, except when differently stated. Reactions were monitored  
29 by TLC using silica plates 60-F264 commercially available from Merck.  $^1H$  and  $^{13}C$  NMR spectra were recorded  
30 at 300 and 75 MHz, respectively, in  $CDCl_3$  using tetramethylsilane (TMS) as the internal standard (Bruker  
31 (Billerica, MA, USA) ACP300MHz). Chemical shifts are given in parts per million and coupling constants in  
32 Hertz. LC-MS analyses were carried using an Agilent 6540 UHD Accurate—Mass Q-TOFLC-MS fitted with an  
33 electrospray ionization source (DualAJSESI) operating in positive ion mode. Chromatographic separation was  
34 achieved using a C18 RP analytical column (Poroshell 120, SB-C18, 50×2.1mm, 2.7mm) at 30°C with an elution  
35 gradient from 5% to 95% of B over 13 min, a being  $H_2O$  (0.1%FA) and B  $CH_3CN$  (0.1%FA). Flow rate was  
36 0.4 mL min<sup>-1</sup>.  
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### 43 2.2. Synthesis of 1-methyl pyridinium trifluoromethanesulfonate ([mpy]OTf)

44 1-Methyl pyridinium trifluoromethanesulfonate ([mpy]OTf) was prepared by halide-free direct synthesis as  
45 reported in literature.<sup>28–30</sup>  
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### 50 2.3. General procedure for the synthesis of 1,5-disubstituted-1,2,3-triazoles **3a** and **3b**

51 In a two-necked round bottom flask, equipped with bubble condenser and magnetic stir bar, [mpy]OTf (5  
52 mL),  $FeCl_3$  (20 mol %), (*E*)-nitrostyrene derivative (**1a-1b**) (1 eq) and phenylazide **2** (2 eq) were placed. The  
53 reaction was conducted at 100°C. The crude was extracted with dichloromethane (3×5mL) and the combined  
54 organic layer was evaporated under vacuum. The crude product was purified on a flash silica gel column by  
55 using hexane/ethyl acetate (9:1 v/v) to obtain the desired product. Complete characterization of products **3a**  
56 and **3b** is reported in Supplementary Materials.  
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59 **1-benzyl-5-phenyl-1,2,3-triazole (3a)**. White solid (mp. 69.7-70.2°C),  $\gamma=95\%$ .  
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<sup>1</sup>H-NMR (CDCl<sub>3</sub>, 300 MHz): δ (ppm) 5.55 (s, 2H, CH<sub>2</sub>), 7.03-7.13 (m, 2H, Ar), 7.22-7.32 (m, 5H, Ar), 7.37-7.46 (m, 3H, Ar), 7.75 (s, 1H, CH). <sup>13</sup>C-APT NMR (CDCl<sub>3</sub>, 75 MHz): δ (ppm) 51.83, 126.95, 127.17, 128.16, 128.84, 128.91, 128.97, 129.52, 133.30, 135.53, 138.17. ESI(+)-MS: m/z [M + H] calcd for C<sub>15</sub>H<sub>14</sub>N<sub>3</sub> 236.1182, found: 236.0952

**1-benzyl-5-(2-nitrophenyl)-1,2,3-triazole (3b).** Pale Yellow solid (mp. 82.5-83.4°C),  $\gamma$ =91%.

<sup>1</sup>H-NMR (CDCl<sub>3</sub>, 300 MHz): δ (ppm) 5.42 (s, 2H, CH<sub>2</sub>), 6.90-6.97 (m, 2H, Ar), 7.00 (d, 1H, J=7.67Hz, Ar), 7.14-7.29 (m, 3H, Ar), 7.55 (t, 1H, J=7.50Hz, Ar), 7.60-7.64 (m, 1H, Ar), 7.66 (s, 1H, CH), 8.12 (d, 1H, J=8.15Hz, Ar). <sup>13</sup>C-APT NMR (CDCl<sub>3</sub>, 75 MHz): δ (ppm) 52.76, 122.14, 124.83, 127.68, 128.34, 128.64, 130.96, 132.99, 133.02, 133.17, 133.84, 134.30, 148.45. ESI(+)-MS: m/z [M + H] calcd for C<sub>15</sub>H<sub>13</sub>N<sub>4</sub>O<sub>2</sub> 281.1033, found: 281.1016.

#### 2.4. Preparation of the mitochondrial fractions

Immediately after slaughter, hearts from adult swine (*Sus scrofa domesticus*) were collected at a local abattoir and transported to the lab within 2 h in ice buckets at 0–4°C. After removal of fat and blood clots as much as possible, approximately 30–40 g of heart tissue were rinsed in ice-cold washing Tris-HCl buffer (medium A) that consists of 0.25 M sucrose, 10 mM Tris(hydroxymethyl)-aminomethane (Tris), pH 7.4. The tissue was finely chopped into fine pieces with scissors, gently dried on blotting paper and weighted. Each preparation was made from one heart. The chopped tissue was homogenized in a buffer (medium B) consisting of 0.25 M sucrose, 10 mM Tris, 1.0 mM EDTA (free acid), 0.5 mg/mL BSA, pH 7.4 with HCl at a ratio of 10 mL medium B per 1 g of fresh tissue. After a preliminary gentle break up by Ultraturrax T25, the tissue was carefully homogenized by a motor-driven teflon pestle homogenizer (Braun Melsungen Type 853202) at 650 rpm with 3 up-and-down strokes. To obtain the mitochondrial fraction by stepwise centrifugation (Sorvall RC2-B, rotor SS34), the homogenate was centrifuged at 1,000 g for 5 min, thus yielding a supernatant and a pellet. The latter was re-homogenized under the same conditions of the first homogenization and re-centrifuged at 1,000 g for 5 min. The supernatants from these two centrifugations gathered and filtered through four cotton gauze layers, were centrifuged at 10,500 g for 10 min to yield the raw mitochondrial pellet that was resuspended in medium A and further centrifuged at 10,500 g for 10 min to obtain the final mitochondrial pellet. The latter was resuspended by gentle stirring using a Teflon Potter Elvehjem homogenizer in a small volume of medium A, thus obtaining a protein concentration of 30 mg/mL.<sup>31</sup> All steps were carried out at 0–4°C. The protein concentration was determined according to the colorimetric method of Bradford<sup>32</sup> by Bio-Rad Protein Assay kit II, using bovine serum albumin (BSA) as standard. The mitochondrial preparations were then stored in liquid nitrogen until the evaluation of F-ATPase activities.

#### 2.5. Mitochondrial F-ATPase activity assays

Immediately after thawing, mitochondrial preparations were used to evaluate the F-ATPase activity. The ATP hydrolysis capability was assayed in a reaction medium (1 mL) containing 0.15 mg mitochondrial protein and 75 mM ethanolamine-HCl buffer pH 9.0, 6.0 mM Na<sub>2</sub>ATP and 2.0 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub> for the Mg<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase assay, and in the same buffer at pH 8.8 plus 3.0 mM Na<sub>2</sub>ATP and 2.0 mM CaCl<sub>2</sub> to evaluate the Ca<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase activity. After 5 min preincubation at 37°C, the reaction, carried out at the same temperature, was started by adding the substrate Na<sub>2</sub>ATP and stopped after 5 min by adding 1 mL of ice-cold 15% (w/w) trichloroacetic acid aqueous solution. Once the reaction was blocked, vials were centrifuged for 15 min at 3,500 rpm (Eppendorf Centrifuge 5202). The concentration of inorganic phosphate (Pi) hydrolyzed by known amounts of mitochondrial protein in the supernatant, which indirectly detects the F-ATPase activity, was spectrophotometrically evaluated.<sup>33</sup> To this aim, 1.0 μL from a mother solution of 3.0 mg/mL oligomycin in dimethylsulfoxide (DMSO) was directly added to the reaction mixture before starting the reaction. The total ATPase activity was calculated by the Pi evaluation in control tubes run in parallel and



containing 1.0  $\mu\text{L}$  DMSO per mL reaction system. Control tubes were alternated to the condition to be tested in each set of experiments. The dose of 3.0 mg/mL oligomycin, specific inhibitor of F-ATPase which selectively blocks the  $F_0$  subunit, which is currently used in F-ATPase assays,<sup>34</sup> ensured maximal F-ATPase inhibition. The  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase activity, routinely measured by subtracting, from the Pi hydrolyzed by total ATPase activity, the Pi hydrolyzed in the presence of oligomycin,<sup>35</sup> was expressed as  $\mu\text{mol Pi}\cdot\text{mg protein}^{-1}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$  in all experiments.

## 2.6. Kinetic analyses

The inhibition mechanism of **3a** and **3b** triazole derivatives on the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ - or  $\text{Mg}^{2+}$ -activated  $F_1F_0$ -ATPases was explored by the graphical methods of Dixon and Cornish-Bowden plots, which complement one another.<sup>36</sup> To this aim, the  $1/v$  (reciprocal of the enzyme activity) in Dixon plot or the  $S/v$  ratio in Cornish-Bowden plot were plotted as a function of **3a** or **3b** concentration. In all plots the enzyme specific activity was taken as the expression of  $v$ . To build these plots, different experimental sets were designed in which the F-ATPase activity was evaluated in the presence of increasing triazole derivative concentrations at two ATP concentrations, keeping the metal cofactor ( $\text{Mg}^{2+}$  or  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ) concentration constant. The values of  $K'_i$ , which represent the dissociation constant of the ternary *ESI* complex, were calculated as the abscissa (changed to positive) of the intercept of the straight lines obtained in the Cornish-Bowden plots.

To obtain time-course plots the F-ATPase reaction was carried out in the presence of 1 mM **3a** or **3b** triazole derivative, previously solubilized in DMSO, (directly added with the ATP substrate) in the reaction system and stopped after different time intervals (1-5 min) by TCA. Enzyme activity data were then plotted as percentages of the residual F-ATPase activity in the presence of 1 mM triazole derivative (**3a** or **3b**) ( $\theta$ ) versus the incubation time of the same compound. In this plot 100% F-ATPase activity corresponded to the initial enzyme activity ( $\theta_i$ ), assuming that the compound under study is not bound to the enzyme. By fitting the data in a semilogarithmic plot, straight lines were obtained according to the equation:

$$\log \theta = -\frac{k_{inact}}{2.3}t + \log \theta_i$$

In these plots the slope of each straight line corresponds to  $-k_{inact}/2.3$  (angular coefficient) and the  $y$ -axis intercept to  $\log \theta_i$ . Thus, the inactivation rate constant ( $k_{inact}$ ) for each triazole derivative was calculated from the slope ( $k_{inact} = \text{slope} \cdot 2.3 \cdot 60^{-1}$ ) and expressed as  $\text{s}^{-1}$ .<sup>37,38</sup>

Kinetic studies on the mutual exclusion of different inhibitors on the same F-ATPase activity were carried out in order to cast light on the possible interaction on  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase between triazole derivative **3a** and **3b**. To build Dixon-like plots, in which the reciprocal of enzyme activity data ( $1/v$ ) ( $y$  axis) were plotted versus the concentration of triazole **3b** ( $x$  axis) at a constant ATP substrate concentration and in the absence and in the presence of one fixed concentrations of triazole **3a**.<sup>34</sup> According to the graphical method employed,<sup>39</sup> when the straight lines are parallel, namely they have the same slopes, the enzyme inhibition mirrors the binding of either **3a** or **3b** to the enzyme and the two compounds mutually exclude.

## 2.7. Mitochondrial respiration assay

Immediately after thawing, the mitochondrial fractions were used to evaluate the mitochondrial respiration. The experiments on freeze-thawed mitochondria primarily aimed at clarifying the effects of the selected triazole compounds effects on mitochondrial respiratory chain enzyme activities and on the  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase. The experimental conditions adopted ruled out any potential concomitant effect of changes in the transmembrane electrochemical gradient of  $\text{H}^+$ . To detect mitochondrial respiratory activities, the oxygen

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3 consumption rates were polarographically evaluated by Clark-type electrode using a thermostated Oxytherm  
4 System (Hansatech Instruments) equipped with a 1 mL polarographic chamber. The reaction mixture (120  
5 mM KCl, 10 mM Tris-HCl buffer pH 7.2), maintained under Peltier thermostataion at 37°C and continuous  
6 stirring, contained 0.25 mg mitochondrial protein.<sup>35</sup>  
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8 To evaluate the NADH-O<sub>2</sub> oxidase activity, the mitochondrial oxidation was run under saturating substrate  
9 conditions (75 μM NADH) after 2 min of stabilization of oxygen signal. Preliminary tests assessed that under  
10 these conditions O<sub>2</sub> consumption was suppressed by 2.5 μM rotenone, known inhibitor of Complex I.<sup>40</sup> The  
11 succinate-O<sub>2</sub> oxidase activity by Complex II was determined by the succinate oxidation in the presence of 2.5  
12 μM rotenone. The reaction was started by the addition of 10 mM succinate after 2 min of stabilization of  
13 oxygen signal. Also in this case preliminary tests assessed that, under the conditions applied, succinate  
14 oxidation was suppressed by of 1 μg/mL antimycin A, selective inhibitor of complex III.<sup>40</sup>  
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17 To evaluate the effects of the compounds under study, the mitochondrial suspensions were added at the  
18 same time as the triazole **3a** or **3b** solutions of adequate concentrations, to the polarographic chamber  
19 before starting the reaction at 37°C. Triazole solutions of adequate concentrations were prepared  
20 immediately before the experiments by dissolving the compounds in DMSO. The mitochondrial respiratory  
21 rate was automatically evaluated by O<sub>2</sub>view software and expressed as nmoles O<sub>2</sub>·mg protein<sup>-1</sup>·min<sup>-1</sup>.  
22 Polarographic assays were run at least in triplicate on mitochondrial preparations obtained from distinct  
23 animals.  
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### 29 2.8. mPTP evaluation

30 Immediately after the preparation of swine heart mitochondrial fractions, fresh mitochondrial suspensions  
31 (1mg/mL) were energized in the assay buffer (130 mM KCl, 1 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 20 mM HEPES, pH 7.2 with TRIS),  
32 incubated at 37°C with 1 μg/mL rotenone and 5 mM succinate. To evaluate triazole effect, selected **3a** or **3b**  
33 doses were added to the mitochondrial suspensions before mPTP evaluation. mPTP opening was induced by  
34 the addition of low concentrations of Ca<sup>2+</sup> (10 μM) as CaCl<sub>2</sub> solution at fixed time intervals (1 min). The  
35 calcium retention capacity (CRC), whose lowering indicates mPTP opening, was spectrofluorometrically  
36 evaluated in the presence of 0.8 μM Fura-FF. The probe has different spectral properties in the absence and  
37 in the presence of Ca<sup>2+</sup>, namely it displays excitation/emission spectra of 365/514 nm in the absence of Ca<sup>2+</sup>  
38 (Fura-FF low Ca<sup>2+</sup>) and shifts to 339/507 nm in the presence of high Ca<sup>2+</sup> concentrations (Fura-FF high Ca<sup>2+</sup>).  
39 mPTP opening, was evaluated by the increase in the fluorescence intensity ratio (Fura-FF high Ca<sup>2+</sup>)/(Fura-FF  
40 low Ca<sup>2+</sup>) which indicates a decrease in CRC. All measurements were processed by LabSolutions RF software.  
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### 45 2.9. Statistical analysis

46 The data represent the mean ± SD (shown as vertical bars in the figures) of the number of experiments  
47 reported in the figure captions and table legends. In each set of biochemical experiments, the analyses were  
48 carried out on at least three distinct mitochondrial preparations. The differences between the enzyme  
49 activity data in differently treated mitochondria were evaluated by one way ANOVA followed by Dunnett's  
50 test when *F* values indicated significance (*P*≤0.05).  
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## 3. Results and discussion



### 3.1. Synthesis of triazole compounds

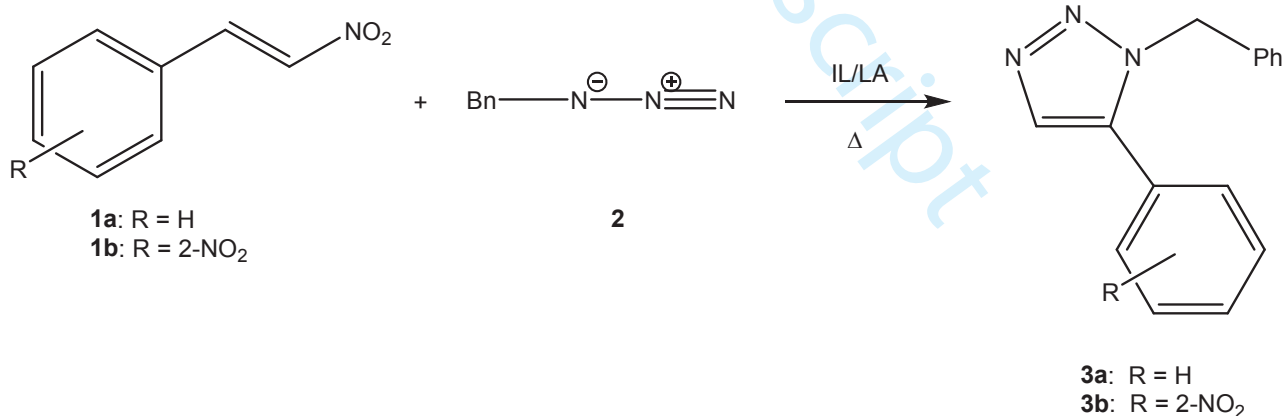
1,2,3-Triazole derivatives have good stability and high aqueous solubility in biological systems. In addition, they have structural similarity (*i.e.* planarity, size, hydrogen bond properties and dipole moment) with amide bond of enzymes,<sup>42</sup> which make them isosteres with the *s-trans* and *s-cis* rotamers in the conformational equilibrium of the peptide bond (Fig. 1).

Although various synthetic procedures to regioselectively produce 1,4- and 1,5-disubstituted triazoles are described in literature,<sup>43–45</sup> in this paper we chose to prepare 1,5-disubstituted-1,2,3-triazoles because of their larger dipolar moment than 1,4-disubstituted triazoles (5.06 debyes versus 4.31 debyes, respectively). Accordingly, most likely the inhibition of an enzyme may be affected by dipole-dipole interactions and strong hydrogen bonds with the employed substrate (Fig. 2).

More specifically, these compounds can act as hydrogen bond acceptors by exploiting the N2 and N3 nitrogen atoms of the aromatic ring and also as hydrogen bond donors *via* a CH bond. Moreover, the triazole aromatic core may be responsible for  $\pi$ -stacking interactions with aromatic side chains of amino acids in the active site of the enzyme target. These interactions may also be amplified by the presence of aromatic substituents on the triazole backbone.

For this reason, on considering our overt experience on the synthesis of heterocycles by 1,3-dipolar cycloaddition reaction and on the chemical interactions involved in substrates/enzyme processes,<sup>46–48</sup> we chose to synthesize two specific triazole derivatives, 1-benzyl-5-phenyl-1,2,3-triazole (**3a** and 1-benzyl-5-(2-nitrophenyl)-1,2,3-triazole **3b**, aiming at increasing the  $\pi$ -stacking and the dipole-dipole interactions by molecular moieties different from the triazole aromatic core. Accordingly, phenyl rings and nitro group are especially suitable for forming  $\pi$ - $\pi$  and dipole-dipole interactions, respectively. In addition, the presence of the methylene group of N1-benzyl increases the degrees of freedom, allowing several interactions with the enzyme substrate.

In detail, the synthesis of 1,5-disubstituted triazoles **3a** and **3b** consists of an eliminative azide-olefin 1,3-dipolar cycloaddition (EAO) between nitroolefins **1a-1b** as electron-deficient dipolarophile and benzylazide **2** as dipole in presence of ionic liquid 1-methyl pyridinium trifluoromethanesulfonate ([mpy]OTf) as solvent and FeCl<sub>3</sub> as Lewis acid catalyst (Scheme 1).<sup>45</sup>



**Scheme 1.** Pattern of 1,5-disubstituted- 1,2,3-triazole **3a** and **3b** synthesis

In detail, we selected the reusable [mpy]OTf/FeCl<sub>3</sub> system because the strong coordination of the NO<sub>2</sub> group to the Fe-catalyst has a large impact to the regiocontrol of the reaction, by only yielding the 1,5-regioisomer. Furthermore, the strong stabilization of reaction intermediates due to the use of the [mpy]OTf allows the formation of the instable triazoline intermediate and favours its transformation in more stable triazole compounds by eliminative mechanism. The compounds **3a** and **3b**, recovered by simple extraction in

dichloromethane and purified by flash chromatography and obtained in 95 and 91% yield respectively, were used as model compounds for subsequent biological investigations.

### 3.2. 1,5-Disubstituted- 1,2,3-triazole effects on mitochondrial bioenergetics

Energy production in mitochondria in the form of ATP depends on the respiratory chain activity and ADP phosphorylation efficiency by the  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase.<sup>49</sup> The effects of the compounds under study on these two matched potential targets were evaluated in parallel. The effect of triazole derivatives **3a** and **3b** on mitochondrial respiration was evaluated in NADH- and succinate-energized mitochondria. Triazoles **3a** and **3b** did not significantly affect the NADH- $O_2$ /succinate- $O_2$  oxidase activity (Fig. 3).

The titration curve by triazole derivatives on the  $Ca^{2+}$ - and  $Mg^{2+}$ -activated  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase(s) shows that both the compounds tested did not affect the  $Mg^{2+}$ -activated enzyme (Fig. 4B,D). Conversely, when the effect of the same compounds was tested on the  $Ca^{2+}$ -activated  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase activity, a significant enzyme inhibition was shown from 0.25 mM compound **3a** and 0.2 mM compound **3b** onwards (Fig. 4A,C). Most likely, the different effect on the two differently activated  $F_1F_0$ -ATPases depends on the enzyme conformations promoted by the cofactor(s) bound to the catalytic and/or non catalytic sites of  $F_1$  domain.<sup>10,12,31</sup> The capability of different divalent cations to drive the  $F_1$ -ATPase mechanochemical coupling in mitochondria from different biological sources remains to be ascertained. However, in mammals  $Ca^{2+}$ -binding to the catalytic  $\beta$  subunit has been proposed as the chemical event which triggers the mPTP.<sup>11</sup> In the  $F_1$  catalytic site  $Mg^{2+}$  is directly linked by  $\beta$ Thr-163 of the P-loop and the phosphate oxygens of ATP or ADP and coordinated with three water molecules to the  $\beta$ Arg-189,  $\beta$ Glu-192,  $\beta$ Asp-256 residues.<sup>50</sup> The higher  $Ca^{2+}$  radius than  $Mg^{2+}$  implies a more flexible coordination geometry characterized by irregular bond distances and angles in the  $\beta$  subunit catalytic sites, and the coordination geometry changes to accommodate eight ligands.<sup>51</sup> On these bases, the modified catalytic structure which alters the  $Ca^{2+}$ -driven catalytic mechanism of ATP hydrolysis makes the  $Ca^{2+}$ -activated  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase susceptible to triazole inhibition.

### 3.3. 1,5-Disubstituted- 1,2,3-triazole inhibition mechanism on the mitochondrial $F_1F_0$ -ATPase

To understand the triazole derivatives **3a** and **3b** inhibition mechanism on the  $Ca^{2+}$ -activated  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase, further information can be obtained by kinetic studies which can lead to define the features of the enzyme-inhibitor complex in the presence or in the absence of the ATP substrate. As far as we are aware, up to now no study has considered triazole derivative effects on the  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase activity independently of potential perturbations of IMM potential and structure. Therefore, namely to detect triazole effects on these enzyme activities, uncoupled mitochondria obtained by freeze-thawing were used for kinetic analysis. Both the 1,5-disubstituted- 1,2,3-triazole (**3a** and **3b**) tested exert an uncompetitive inhibition (Fig. 5) by binding to the enzyme-ATP complex and forming the tertiary complex *ESI* (enzyme-substrate-inhibitor). This inhibition type cannot be overcome by increasing ATP concentration. Thus, both compounds do not affect the ATP binding site, but they may interfere with a binding region which modifies the  $Ca^{2+}$ -dependent catalytic mechanism of ATP hydrolysis. Moreover, the Cornish-Bowden (Fig. 5B,D) plots show that the dissociation constant of the *ESI* complex ( $K'_i$ ) of the  $Ca^{2+}$ -activated  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase is  $1.09 \pm 0.04$  mM for compound **3a** and  $1.07 \pm 0.05$  mM for compound **3b** (Table 1). These similar values indicate that the *ESI* complex formation is independent of the triazole structure. However, since the inactivation rate constant is  $1.93 \times 10^{-3} \pm 0.26 \times 10^{-3} \text{ s}^{-1}$  for **3a** and  $0.86 \times 10^{-3} \pm 0.14 \times 10^{-3} \text{ s}^{-1}$  for **3b** (Fig. 6A), the former inhibitor shows a higher propensity to react than the latter, which implies a more rapid bond with the enzyme. The potency of a mechanism-based inhibitor, taken as  $k_{inact}/K'_i$  ratio, is a measure of the inhibitor efficiency on the  $Ca^{2+}$ -activated  $F_1F_0$ -ATPase. Since triazole derivative **3a** shows a  $k_{inact}/K'_i$  ratio 2.2 order of magnitude higher than triazole derivative **3b** (Table 1), the former inhibitor is much more powerful than the latter. Consistently, even if the two compounds show the same propensity

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3 to form the ternary complex as reported by  $K'_1$  values, **3a** reacts with the enzyme more quickly, resulting in a  
4 more efficient  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase inhibition, probably because the two compounds establish  
5 different interactions with the enzyme even if they bind on the same site on the  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase. Indeed, the  
6 inhibition by binary mixtures of triazole derivatives **3a** and **3b**, tested by the diagnostic plot for the mutual  
7 exclusion, suggests that the  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase can combine with either **3a** or **3b**, but non with both compounds  
8 (Fig. 6B). The different chemical structure of triazole derivatives resides in a nitro group in compound **3b**,  
9 which apparently does not affect the affinity for the  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase, but may require some more time to  
10 establish interactions with the enzyme.  
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### 13 14 15 3.4. mPTP sensitivity to **3a** and **3b** triazole derivatives 16

17 Recent advances strongly indicate that the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase is the lethal functional mode of the  
18 mitochondrial enzyme that triggers the mPTP.<sup>12</sup> The formation of this non-selective channel in functional  
19 and intact mitochondria, that normally accumulate  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  when  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  is stepwise provided, can be evaluated as  
20 calcium retention capacity (CRC), which decreases when the mPTP opens. According to the fluorimetric  
21 method employed, the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  release from mitochondria ascribed to mPTP opening is revealed by an increase  
22 in the fluorescence intensity ratio (Fura-FF high  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ )/(Fura-FF low  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ). Consistently with the selective  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -  
23 ATPase inhibition by compounds **3a** and **3b** when the natural cofactor  $\text{Mg}^{2+}$  is replaced by  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  (Fig. 4), the  
24 mPTP formation in triazole-treated mitochondria is inhibited (Fig. 7). Accordingly, the increase in CRC upon  
25 subsequent 10  $\mu\text{M}$   $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  additions at fixed time intervals, shown by the rise in the (Fura-FF high  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ )/(Fura-  
26 FF low  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ) ratio, indicates that in presence of the compounds tested, mitochondria attain a higher threshold  
27 value of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  concentration to trigger mPTP formation (Fig. 7A); in other words more  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  additions are  
28 required to promote mPTP opening (Fig. 7B). Noteworthy, the two compounds behave differently as mPTP  
29 inhibitors. Accordingly, triazole **3a** attains a lower CRC value (high Fura-FF ratio) than triazole **3b** when mPTP  
30 opens. We can speculate that the different effects on mPTP of the two compounds under study are due to  
31 the onset of different kinds of interactions on the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase which affect the mPTP size<sup>52</sup>  
32 even if their have the same binding region (Fig. 6B). On these bases, a lower CRC value would mirror a larger  
33 mPTP size. Moreover, the sharp increase in fluorescence followed by a less sharp decline as mitochondria  
34 take up calcium in presence of triazole **3a** has a gradual increase of baseline with each  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  pulse. We could  
35 assert that the trend could be due to an inhibitory effect of the mitochondrial calcium uniporter uptake.<sup>53</sup>  
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## 45 4. Conclusions

46 The link between the inhibition power of the bioactive triazoles and their chemical structure could draw the  
47 road to address further developments in pharmacology, which can be helpful in medical chemistry to fight  
48 mPTP-related human pathologies. Consistently, the  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase as main candidate component of mPTP  
49 should be a mitochondrial target of these compounds to lessen or block the mPTP formation. Since the  
50 different selectivity and interaction rate of structurally different compounds on the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -  
51 ATPase is not directly related to their mPTP inhibition efficiency, most likely the 1,5-disubstituted- 1,2,3-  
52 triazoles tested mainly act on the subunits of  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase(s) involved in the mechanism of mPTP formation.  
53 On balance, the slowdown of mPTP formation (desensitization) could be indirectly due to changes in the  
54 conformational transmission mechanism from  $\text{F}_1$  to  $\text{F}_0$  that opens the mPTP.  
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## Figure legends

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42 **Figure 1.** Peptide conformational equilibrium s-trans/s-cis and 1,5-disubstituted triazole isosteres.

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47 **Figure 2.** Summary of potential binding interactions for 1,4- and 1,5-disubstituted-1,2,3-triazoles.

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55 **Figure 3.** 1,5-Disubstituted- 1,2,3-triazole effect on mitochondrial respiration. A) NADH-O<sub>2</sub> (green vertical bars) and Succinate-O<sub>2</sub> (red vertical bars) oxidase activity were evaluated without and with 1 mM of triazole derivatives **3a** and **3b**. Data expressed as column chart represent the mean ± SD from three experiments carried out on different mitochondrial preparations. B) Representative traces of the respiration recordings by NADH (up traces) and by succinate addition (down traces). The arrows indicate the addition of the substrates.

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60 **Figure 4.** Effect of triazole derivatives **3a** and **3b** on activity of mitochondrial Ca<sup>2+</sup> and Mg<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase. Ca<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase (○) and Mg<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase activities (●) in the presence of increasing concentrations of compound **3a** (A,B) and compound **3b** (C,D). Data represent the mean ± SD from



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three independent experiments carried out on distinct mitochondrial preparations. \* indicates significant differences with respect to the control without triazoles ( $P \leq 0.05$ ).

**Figure 5.**  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase inhibition by triazole derivatives **3a** and **3b**. Dixon (A, C) and Cornish–Bowden (B, D) plots obtained at 1 mM (○) or 3 mM (●) ATP for the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase (A,B); 3 mM (□) or 6 mM (■) ATP for the  $\text{Mg}^{2+}$ - $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -activated ATPase (C, D) and designing the experiments as detailed in Section 4.2.4. All points represent the mean  $\pm$  SD (vertical bars) of four distinct experiments carried out on distinct mitochondrial preparations.

**Figure 6.** Kinetics of the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase inhibition by triazole derivatives **3a** and **3b**. A) Time course plot of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase to obtain the inactivation rate constant ( $k_{\text{inact}}$ ) as detailed in Section 4.2.4 with 1 mM of compound **3a** (□) and 1 mM of compound **3b** (■). B) Multiple inhibitor analysis by Dixon plots for the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase inhibition by compound **3b**. The  $\text{F}_1\text{F}_0$ -ATPase assay were carried out in the absence (○) or in the presence of 0.5 mM compound **3a** (●). Each point represents the mean value  $\pm$  SD (vertical bars) of at least three experiments carried out on distinct mitochondrial preparations.

**Figure 7.** Evaluation of mPTP opening. Representative curves (A) of the calcium retention capacity (CRC) expressed as Fura-FF ratio ( $\text{Fura-FF high Ca}^{2+}/\text{Fura-FF low Ca}^{2+}$ ), evaluated in response to subsequent 10  $\mu\text{M}$   $\text{CaCl}_2$  pulses (shown by the triangles), as detailed in Section 4.2.6, in untreated mitochondria (Control), and in the presence of 2 mM MgADP, 1.0 mM compound **3a**, 1.0 mM compound **3b**. B) Quantitation of the mPTP is expressed as the ratio of the number of calcium pulses required to induce the mPTP in MgADP inhibited ( $\text{CRC}_i$ ) and untreated ( $\text{CRC}_o$ ) mitochondria. Data represent the mean  $\pm$  SD from three independent experiments carried out on distinct mitochondrial preparations. \* indicates significant differences with respect to the control ( $P \leq 0.05$ ).

**Table 1.** Inhibition kinetic parameters of the Ca<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>F<sub>0</sub>-ATPase activity by triazole compounds

	Compound <b>3a</b>	Compound <b>3b</b>
$K_i$ (mM)	1.09±0.04	1.07±0.05
$k_{\text{inact}}$ (s <sup>-1</sup> )	1.93x10 <sup>-3</sup> ±0.26x10 <sup>-3</sup>	0.86x10 <sup>-3</sup> ±0.14x10 <sup>-3</sup>
$k_{\text{inact}}/K_i$ (mM <sup>-1</sup> ·s <sup>-1</sup> )	1.77x10 <sup>-3</sup>	0.80x10 <sup>-3</sup>

The  $K_i$  values (dissociation constant of the  $ESI$  complex) were graphically obtained from the Cornish plots drawn in Fig. 5B,D as detailed in Section 2.6. The  $k_{\text{inact}}$  values (inactivation rate constant) were graphically obtained from the plots in Fig. 6A as detailed in the section 2.6. Data are the mean values obtained from three sets of experiments carried out on distinct mitochondrial preparations.

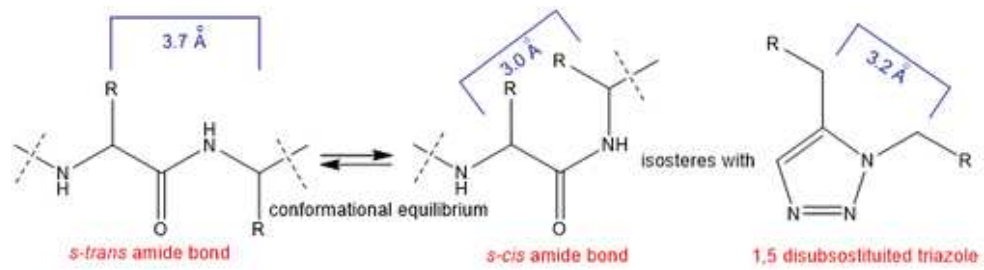


Figure 1. Peptide conformational equilibrium *s-trans*/*s-cis* and 1,5-disubstituted triazole isosteres.

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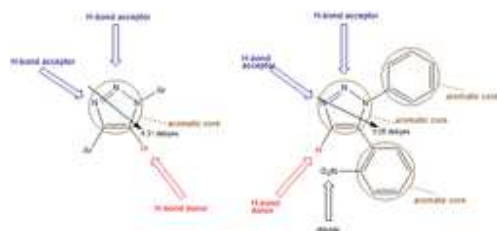


Figure 2. Summary of potential binding interactions for 1,4- and 1,5-disubstituted-1,2,3-triazoles.

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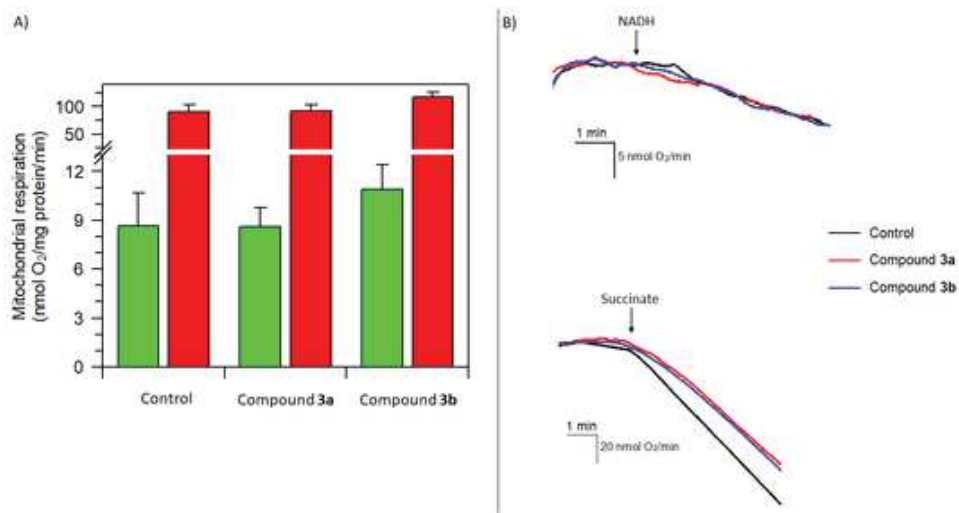


Figure 3. 1,5-Disubstituted- 1,2,3-triazole effect on mitochondrial respiration. A) NADH-O<sub>2</sub> (green vertical bars) and Succinate-O<sub>2</sub> (red vertical bars) oxidase activity were evaluated without and with 1 mM of triazole derivatives 3a and 3b. Data expressed as column chart represent the mean  $\pm$  SD from three experiments carried out on different mitochondrial preparations. B) Representative traces of the respiration recordings by NADH (up traces) and by succinate addition (down traces). The arrows indicate the addition of the respective substrate.

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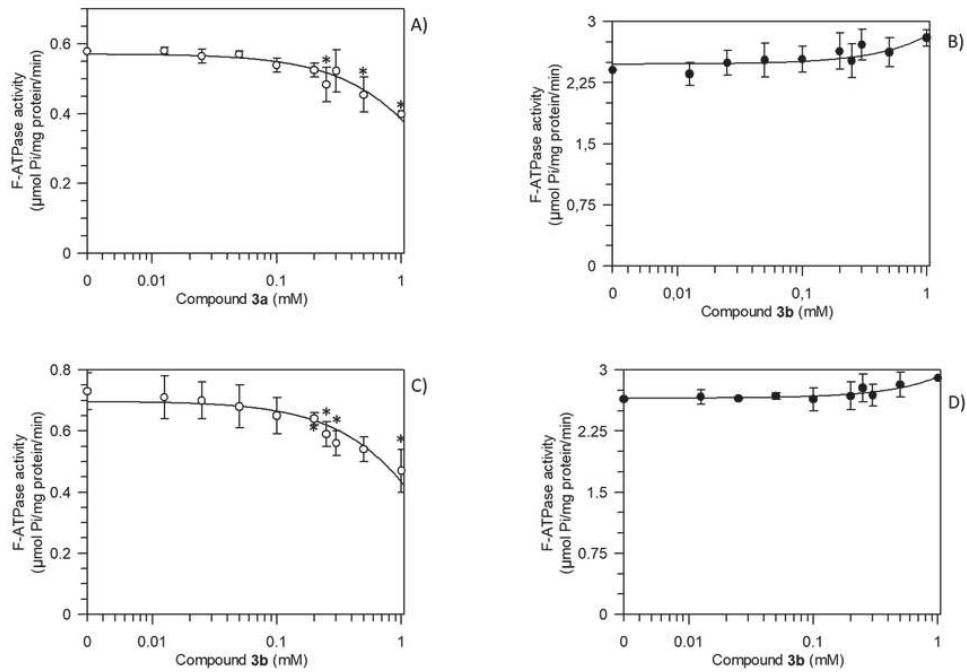


Figure 4. Effect of triazole derivatives 3a and 3b on activity of mitochondrial Ca<sup>2+</sup> and Mg<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>FO-ATPase. Ca<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>FO-ATPase (○) and Mg<sup>2+</sup>-activated F<sub>1</sub>FO-ATPase activities (●) in the presence of increasing concentrations of compound 3a (A,B) and compound 3b (C,D). Data represent the mean  $\pm$  SD from three independent experiments carried out on distinct mitochondrial preparations. \* indicates significant differences with respect to the control without triazoles ( $P \leq 0.05$ ).

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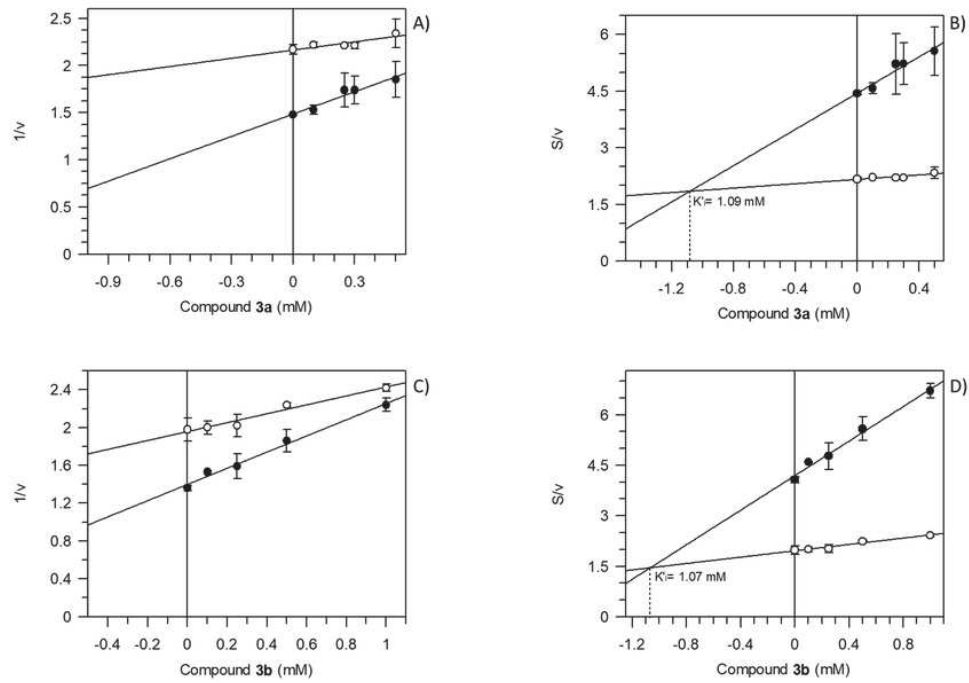


Figure 5.  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated F1FO-ATPase inhibition by triazole derivatives 3a and 3b. Dixon (A, C) and Cornish-Bowden (B, D) plots obtained at 1 mM ( $\circ$ ) or 3 mM ( $\bullet$ ) ATP for the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated F1FO-ATPase (A,B); 3 mM ( $\square$ ) or 6 mM ( $\blacksquare$ ) ATP for the  $\text{Mg}^{2+}$ -F1FO-activated ATPase (C, D) and designing the experiments as detailed in Section 4.2.4. All points represent the mean  $\pm$  SD (vertical bars) of four distinct experiments carried out on distinct mitochondrial preparations.

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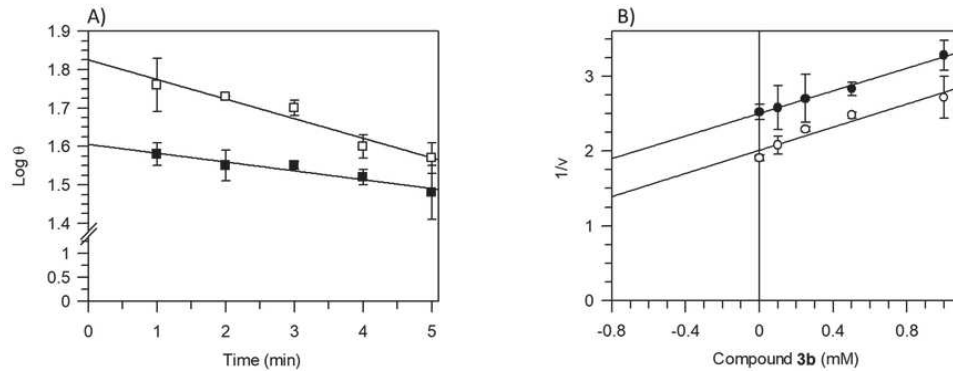


Figure 6. Kinetics of the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated F1FO-ATPase inhibition by triazole derivatives 3a and 3b. A) Time course plot of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated F1FO-ATPase to obtain the inactivation rate constant ( $k_{\text{inact}}$ ) as detailed in Section 4.2.4 with 1 mM of compound 3a (□) and 1 mM of compound 3b (■). B) Multiple inhibitor analysis by Dixon plots for the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated F1FO-ATPase inhibition by compound 3b. The F-ATPase assay were carried out in the absence (○) or in the presence of 0.5 mM compound 3a (●). Each point represents the mean value  $\pm$  SD (vertical bars) of at least three experiments carried out on distinct mitochondrial preparations.

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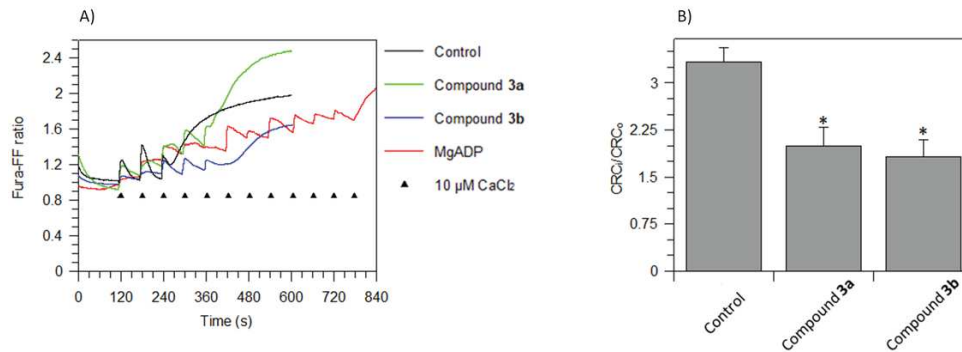


Figure 7. Evaluation of mPTP opening. Representative curves (A) of the calcium retention capacity (CRC) expressed as Fura-FF ratio (Fura-FF high Ca<sup>2+</sup>)/(Fura-FF low Ca<sup>2+</sup>), evaluated in response to subsequent 10 μM CaCl<sub>2</sub> pulses (shown by the triangles), as detailed in Section 4.2.6, in untreated mitochondria (Control), and in the presence of 2 mM MgADP, 1.0 mM compound 3a, 1.0 mM compound 3b. B) Quantitation of the mPTP is expressed as the ratio of the number of calcium pulses required to induce the mPTP in MgADP inhibited (CRC<sub>i</sub>) and untreated (CRC<sub>o</sub>) mitochondria. Data represent the mean ± SD from three independent experiments carried out on distinct mitochondrial preparations. \* indicates significant differences with respect to the control (P ≤ 0.05).

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