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Non-equilibrium cobalt(III) “click” capsules†

P. R. Symmers,^a M. J. Burke,^a D. P. August,^a P. I. T. Thomson,^a G. S. Nichol,^a
M. R. Warren,^b C. J. Campbell^a and P. J. Lusby^{*a}

Cobalt(III) tetrahedral capsules have been prepared using an assembly-followed-by-oxidation protocol from a cobalt(II) precursor and a readily derivatizable pyridyl-triazole ligand system. Experiments designed to probe the constitutional dynamics show that these architectures are in a non-equilibrium state. A preliminary investigation into the host–guest chemistry of a water-soluble derivative shows it can bind and differentiate a range of different neutral organic molecules. The stability of this ensemble also permits the study of guest-binding at high salt concentrations.

Introduction

The chemistry of molecular container species continues to thrive, not least because of applications from storage, sensing and separation, through drug delivery to catalysis.¹ In the last twenty years, self-assembled systems have appeared, a few that rely on exclusively weak non-covalent interactions such as hydrogen bonding² and many which use metal–ligand interactions.³ Whilst using coordination complexes as structural elements greatly increases the palate of molecular building blocks, the real advantage of these systems is that the reversibility of these interactions facilitates thermodynamic self-assembly, often producing discrete architectures in quantitative yield. However, this same facet can be viewed as a double-edged sword, with the dynamics of these systems providing a hurdle to many potential applications.⁴ A strategy that has been used to generate inert coordination based systems is to use metal–ligand interactions that are substitutionally non-labile at room temperature and only become dynamic when heated.⁵ The problem with this method is that (a) longer reaction times and templates are often required,^{5b} leading to lower yields and/or kinetically trapped intermediates⁶ and (b) it invariably requires the use of more expensive/more toxic third-row transition metals. An alternative way to circumvent these problems is to alter the characteristics of the transition metal center following self-assembly, most obviously through a change in the oxidation state. In this regard, cobalt would appear an ideal choice, because although Co(II) is labile, it can be readily oxidized

without a change in the coordination geometry preference to give inert Co(III).⁷ Herein we report the synthesis of highly cationic Co(III)₄L₆¹²⁺ tetrahedral capsules⁸ using an assembly-followed-by-oxidation protocol. These systems have the characteristics of fully covalent capsules⁹ in that they appear constitutionally non-dynamic, as evidenced by scrambling experiments. Host–guest studies with a water soluble derivative have revealed that the capsule can bind a range of neutral organic guests, and is further able to differentiate structurally similar molecules. The kinetic inertness of this system has also allowed the study of guest binding at high salt concentrations.

Results and discussion

Design strategy and synthesis

The ligand system, **L**, that we targeted to explore the assembly-followed-by-oxidation protocol is constructed in a modular fashion (see the ESI†), using the popular copper catalyzed azide-alkyne cycloaddition (Cu-AAC) reaction (Scheme 1).¹⁰ Our motives for targeting this system were multiple. Firstly, the resultant *N,N*-donor pyridyl-triazole units are more synthetically accessible than, for example, a classic 2,2'-bipy motif.¹¹ Secondly, this motif facilitates *exo*-functionalization of the capsule with different chemical groups thus facilitating various applications.¹² Thirdly, the ligand itself is constitutionally robust, which is essential for creating non-equilibrium capsules based on substitutionally inert transition metal ions. In this regard, it can be viewed as an alternative approach to the very elegant work to recently come out of Jonathan Nitschke's laboratory.^{1c,8e,g,h,14b}

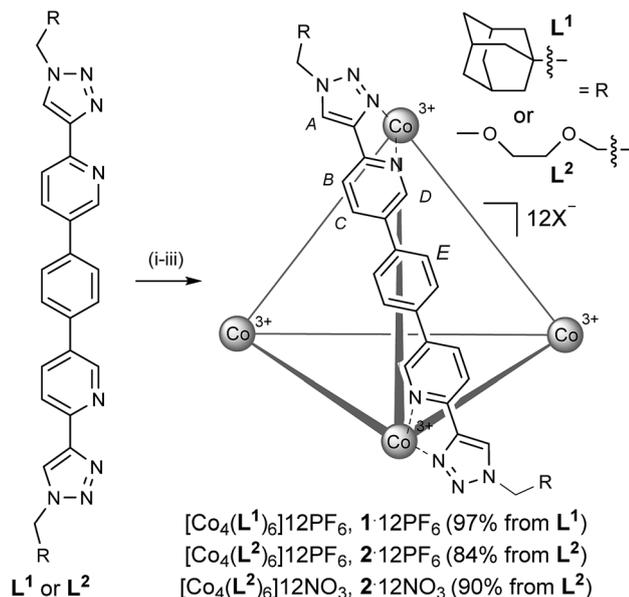
Although **L**¹ showed poor solubility in all solvents, when it was reacted with Co(ClO₄)₂·6H₂O in CH₃CN, dissolution occurred over several hours at 323 K (Scheme 1, step (i)). When a small portion of this reaction was analyzed, the broadness and the position of the chemical shifts in the ¹H NMR spectrum were strongly indicative of a Co(II) species, while n-ESI-MS (nanoelectrospray mass spectrometry) showed predominant

^aEaStCHEM School of Chemistry, University of Edinburgh, The King's Buildings, David Brewster Road, Edinburgh EH9 3FJ, UK. E-mail: Paul.Lusby@ed.ac.uk

^bDiamond Light Source Ltd, Diamond House, Harwell Science and Innovation Campus, Didcot, Oxfordshire OX11 0DE, UK

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Scheme 1 Synthesis of non-equilibrium Co(III) capsules: (i) $\text{Co}(\text{ClO}_4)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$, CH_3CN , 50°C , 17 h; (ii) cerium ammonium nitrate, CH_3CN , RT, 2.5 h; (iii) (a) NH_4PF_6 , H_2O , CH_3CN , RT, 0.5 h or (b) CG-400 resin, H_2O , CH_3CN , RT, 2.5 h and then AgNO_3 , H_2O , RT, 16 h.

peaks that could be ascribed to $[[\text{Co}_2^{\text{II}}(\text{L}^1)_3]n\text{ClO}_4]^{(4-n)+}$ but, interestingly, no obvious indication of a $\text{Co}(\text{II})_4(\text{L}^1)_6$ species. Subsequent slow addition of cerium ammonium nitrate (Scheme 1, step (ii)) resulted in an orange precipitate that was isolated by filtration. This intermediate mixed counteranion species was then treated with NH_4PF_6 (Scheme 1, step (iii) (a)) to give an orange product in 97% from L^1 . The ^1H NMR spectrum of this revealed the formation of a single, highly symmetric, diamagnetic species, while analysis by n-ESI-MS showed a series of highly charged species that matched the predicted isotopic distribution for $[[\text{Co}_4(\text{L}^1)_6]n\text{PF}_6]^{(12-n)+}$ (see the ESI†).

Single crystals of $[\text{Co}_4(\text{L}^1)_6]12\text{PF}_6$, **1**· 12PF_6 , suitable for XRD were grown from diisopropyl ether diffusion into saturated acetonitrile solutions. However, these crystals suffered severely from immediate and rapid solvent loss when removed from the mother liquor, such that early attempts to collect data resulted in only poorly resolved structures. Using the combination of capillary mounting in the mother liquor and a synchrotron radiation source (see the ESI†), a fully refined structure was finally obtained, which confirms a homochiral, M_4L_6 tetrahedral species (Fig. 1).¹³ Notably, only two PF_6^- counteranions per asymmetric unit (*i.e.* per metal ion) could be identified, however, the Co–N bond lengths for the two crystallographically distinct Co environments range from 1.881(8)–2.037(8) Å (see the ESI†), completely consistent with a Co(III) structure (as is all the other characterization data).

2· 12PF_6 has also been accessed using the same assembly-followed-by-oxidation and anion metathesis conditions (see the ESI†). Most probably because of the conformational flexibility of the peripheral PEG groups, we have been unable to obtain XRD-quality crystals for this compound. However, a comparison of the ^1H NMR DOSY spectra of **1**· 12PF_6 and **2**· 12PF_6 showed very

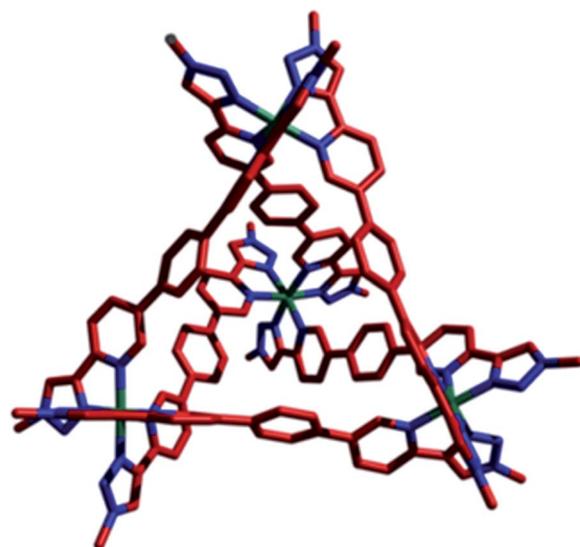


Fig. 1 X-ray crystal structure of **1**· 12PF_6 . For clarity, PF_6^- counteranions and the peripheral adamantyl groups have been removed. Color code: Co, green; C, red; N, blue.

similar diffusion coefficients under the same conditions ($\log D = -9.33$ and $-9.34 \text{ m}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$, respectively), thus indicating that the assembly-followed-by-oxidation protocol with L^2 also gives an M_4L_6 species. A preliminary electrochemical investigation has also been carried out using **2**· 12PF_6 in CH_3CN (see the ESI†), which shows a reversible reduction at -791 mV (*vs.* SCE). This single chemically-reversible reduction, which we attribute to the Co(III)/Co(II) couple, shows that the metal centers behave independently, and is fully chemically-reversible irrespective of scan rate, down to 50 mV s^{-1} . This would indicate that the tetrahedral capsule 2^{8+} appears stable and does not undergo rearrangement (as perhaps could be expected with coordinatively flexible, high spin d^7 metal vertices¹⁴). Electrochemical experiments also show an irreversible reduction in the region of -1300 – 1500 mV . These have previously been observed for pyridyl-triazole complexes, and are a result of ligand-based reduction.¹⁵

In order to assess whether these assemblies are in a non-equilibrium state, we have combined equimolar quantities of **1**· 12PF_6 and **2**· 12PF_6 in CD_3CN and monitored this mixed solution as a function of time using both ^1H NMR spectroscopy and n-ESI-MS. Similar experiments have previously been used to demonstrate that metallocsupramolecular species are constitutionally dynamic; even for systems which exhibit pronounced kinetic stability, brought about by the cooperative effects of multiple metal–ligand interactions, entropy-driven scrambling of components still happens at room temperature over a few days.¹⁶ In contrast, we observe no ligand exchange after a week at room temperature. Only through prolonged heating of the same sample, first at 50°C (1 week), then at 60°C (1 week) and then finally at 70°C , could any mixed component species be identified, but even then the ^1H NMR spectrum remained largely unchanged and only minor peaks were observed by MS (see the ESI†). This indicates that these Co(III) tetrahedra are constitutionally non-dynamic.



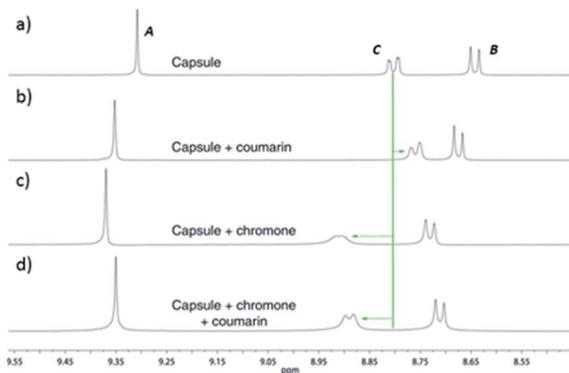


Fig. 4 ^1H NMR spectra (500 MHz, D_2O , 298 K) showing the preferential binding of chromone in the presence of coumarin. (a) $2 \cdot 12\text{NO}_3$ only; (b) $2 \cdot 12\text{NO}_3$ in the presence of coumarin; (c) $2 \cdot 12\text{NO}_3$ in the presence of chromone; (d) $2 \cdot 12\text{NO}_3$ in the presence of 1 : 1 coumarin and chromone.

solvent, consistent with being encapsulated and experiencing (time-averaged) shielding effects from the capsules' aromatic struts. Furthermore, for the majority of these guests, the direction in which the capsules' signals $\text{H}_{\text{A-E}}$ shift are consistent, also similar to what is observed for TIPSOH encapsulation, thus indicating that guests bind in a conserved fashion within 2^{12+} (or otherwise cause a similar binding-induced re-organization). Interestingly, the molecules that act as guests could collectively be described as weakly amphiphilic. These general observations points to a mode of binding in which a specific guest functional group–cage interaction(s) is(are) supplemented by the hydrophobic effect.^{17d} A preliminary investigation into the relative affinities of some of the guests shown in Fig. 3 reveal that the regioisomeric compounds coumarin and chromone possess binding constants with a ten-fold difference, 120 M^{-1} and 1200 M^{-1} , respectively (see the ESI[†]). This data is also supported by a competition binding experiment involving these two guests. Whereas coumarin-only binding causes an upfield shift in the H_{C} environment (Fig. 4b) with respect to free 2^{12+} (Fig. 4a), chromone encapsulation causes the same signal to become deshielded (Fig. 4c). In the presence of a 1 : 1 mixture of both analytes (Fig. 4d), this same signal is similarly deshielded, indicating the capsule is able to preferentially bind chromone in the presence of coumarin, showing that the capsule can differentiate molecules based on shape or the relative positioning of functional groups and not solely on the basis of more bulk descriptors.

Conclusions

Coordination capsules almost always provide an opportunity to explore chemical equilibria, both at the level of the architecture self-assembly process and also due to their reversible interactions with guest molecules. Here we have reported a rare example of a coordination capsule which is not in equilibrium with its disassembled state. Similarly rare are coordination capsules which exhibit non-equilibrium guest binding properties.²³ The development of metal-based (and fully organic)

assemblies that are both constitutionally non-dynamic and also possess non-reversible guest binding properties,²⁴ coupled with stimuli-responsive release mechanisms, could lead to improved function for a range of applications. As is the case in the field of synthetic molecular machines,²⁵ we envisage that systems able to operate far away from equilibrium will be able to perform tasks not currently possible for their thermodynamic equivalents.

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