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Isolation and structural characterisation of rhodium(III) η²-fluoroarene complexes: experimental verification of predicted regioselectivity†

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The isolation and solid-state characterisation of complexes featuring partially coordinated benzene, fluorobenzene and all three isomers of difluorobenzene are described. Supported by a DFT analysis, this well-defined homologous series demonstrates the preference for η^2 -coordination of fluoroarenes via the HC=CH sites adjacent to a fluorine substituent.

Partially fluorinated benzenes are chemically robust and weakly coordinating substrates, for which there is a paucity of late transition metal π -complexes.¹ Whilst well-defined examples can be found in the literature they are almost exclusively limited to half sandwich formulations, where the arene adopts an η^6 -coordination mode. 1,2 The formation of η2 -arene complexes is notably invoked in C–H bond oxidative addition of partially fluorinated benzenes to late transition metals (Scheme 1),^{3,4} but to the best of our knowledge isolation of mononuclear species of this nature is limited to coinage metal examples.⁵ Computational studies indicate a coordination site preference in the order $HC=CH > HC=CF$ $>$ FC=CF, with the strongest η^2 -arene complexes formed at the HC=CH positions adjacent to a fluorine substituent.⁶ Building on our work employing the high trans-influence 2,2'-biphenyl (biph) ancillary ligand, 7,8 we herein present the synthesis and solid-state characterisation of rhodium (m) pincer complexes [Rh(CNC-Me)(biph)(η²-arene)]⁺ (Scheme 1; arene = C_6H_6 , 1a; FC_6H_5 , 1b; 1,2- $F_2C_6H_4$, 1c; 1,3- $F_2C_6H_4$, 1d; $1,4-F_2C_6H_4$, **1e**) that corroborate this conclusion experimentally. COMMUNICATION

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To enable systematic synthesis of the target complexes, $[\mathrm{Rh(CNC\text{-}Me})(\mathrm{biph})(\kappa^1\text{-}ClCH_2Cl)]^+$ 2 was ultimately identified

Scheme 1 Intermediacy of η^2 -adducts in the C-H bond activation of fluoroarenes. $[B(3,5-(CF_3)_2C_6H_3)_4]$ ⁻ anion omitted for clarity.

as the most convenient well-defined precursor and prepared using a silver-based transmetallation procedure involving reaction of $[Ag(CNC-Me)]^+$ with $[Rh(biph)Cl(tBu_2PCH_2PtBu_2)]$ and halide abstraction in CH_2Cl_2 (80% yield; see ESI† for solid-state structure, Rh–Cl = 2.5932(7) Å).[†] Dichloromethane is labile and not retained on dissolution of 2 in CD_2Cl_2 or neat fluoroarene, with the organometallic displaying time averaged C_{2v} symmetry at 298 K consistent with formulation as a five-coordinate complex in solution and rapid pseudorotation of the biphenyl ligand on the NMR time scale (ΔH^{\ddagger} = 75 ± 1 kJ mol⁻¹, Δ S^{\ddagger} = +80 ± 5 J K⁻¹ mol⁻¹, Δ G_{298K}^{\ddagger} = 52 ± 3 kJ mol⁻¹ in CD₂Cl₂).⁶ In the latter case, selective removal of $CH₂Cl₂$ in vacuo and subsequent recrystallisation from the neat fluoroarene enabled isolation of the corresponding η^2 . arene complexes 1b–e in 61–81% yield. Benzene is a poor solvent for cationic species of this nature, but 1a was prepared in a similar manner using a 1:1 molar mixture of benzene – 1,2-difluorobenzene in 77% yield. Crystals suitable for analysis by X-ray diffraction were obtained in all cases (Fig. 1), with bulk purity confirmed using a combination of combustion analysis, solid-state 19 F MAS NMR spectroscopy and dissolution in CD_2Cl_2 ; with one equivalent of the respective free arene observed by ${}^{1}H$ and ${}^{19}F$ NMR spectroscopy (see ESI).†

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[†]Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Full experimental and computational details, including NMR and IR spectra and ETS-NOCV deformation density plots (PDF), and optimised geometries (XYZ). CCDC 1988128–1988133. For ESI and crystallographic data in CIF or other electronic format see DOI: 10.1039/d0dt01137a

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Fig. 1 Solid-state structures of η^2 -arene complexes 1a–e (top) and calculated binding energies (kJ mol⁻¹, bottom). Solid-state structures drawn with thermal ellipsoids at 50% probability, minor disordered components (local symmetry equivalent F atom in 1b) and [B(3,5-(CF₃)₂C₆H₃)4]⁻ anion omitted for clarity.

The rigid chelates of the biph and CNC pincer ligands provide a framework for pseudo-octahedral metal geometries in **1a–e**, where η^2 -arene coordination [Rh–(C=C) = 2.622(2)– $2.643(2)$ Å completes the coordination sphere and enables attainment of 18 VE configurations. The observed selectivity for coordination of the fluoroarenes via the HC=CH sites adjacent to a fluorine substituent, notably vindicates computational trends in binding energy previously established for neutral rhenium cyclopentadienyl fragments⁶ and those determined as part of this study for 1a–e at the ωB97X-D3/ def2-TZVP(-f) level of theory (Fig. 1). The absolute magnitudes of the calculated arene binding energies are considerably lower than the corresponding rhenium systems (69.0–73.8 vs. 87.0–99.3 kJ mol⁻¹ for the lowest energy regioisomers), consistent with the cationic nature of 1 and reconciling the entropically unfavourable coordination inferred in solution. Moreover, the relative binding energies of 1a/c are supported by the aforementioned (competition) experiment involving dissolution of 2 in a 1:1 molar mixture of benzene $-$ 1,2-difluorobenzene, yielding exclusively 1a. DFT-based energy decomposition analysis of the metal-arene bonding interactions using the ETS-NOCV method, as implemented in ORCA $4.1.2$,⁹ suggests these interactions are dominated by arene to metal σ-donation with only minor metal to arene π-backbonding contributions (see ESI).† The former are sufficient to explain the observed regioselectivity for all but 1c, where subtle differences in π-backbonding are decisive.

In summary, we have exploited a planar NHC-based pincer ligand and the high trans-influence 2,2′-biphenyl ancillary to prepare an unprecedented homologous series of rhodium (m) complexes featuring η^2 -coordinated benzene and fluoroarenes. Supported by a DFT analysis, these complexes provide evidence for preferential η^2 -coordination of fluoroarenes via the HC=CH sites adjacent to a fluorine substituent; an important finding relevant to the selective C–H activation of these valuable fluoroaryl synthons.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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