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Isolation and structural characterisation of rhodium(III) η^2 -fluoroarene complexes: experimental verification of predicted regioselectivity[†]

Matthew R. Gyton, (1) ‡ Amy E. Kynman, (1) ‡ Baptiste Leforestier, (1) Angelo Gallo, (1) Józef R. Lewandowski (1) and Adrian B. Chaplin (1) *

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 η^2 -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(III) pincer complexes $[Rh(CNC-Me)(biph)(\eta^2-arene)]^+$ (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.

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

Scheme 1 Intermediacy of η^2 -adducts in the C–H bond activation of fluoroarenes. [B(3,5-(CF₃)₂C₆H₃)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(tBu₂PCH₂PtBu₂)] and halide abstraction in CH₂Cl₂ (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 CD₂Cl₂ 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, ΔS^{\ddagger} = +80 ± 5 J K⁻¹ mol⁻¹, $\Delta G_{298K}^{\ddagger}$ = 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 ¹⁹F MAS NMR spectroscopy and dissolution in CD₂Cl₂; with one equivalent of the respective free arene observed by ¹H and ¹⁹F NMR spectroscopy (see ESI).†

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Department of Chemistry, University of Warwick, Gibbet Hill Road, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK. E-mail: a.b.chaplin@warwick.ac.uk

[†] 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

[‡]These authors contributed equally.



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 wB97X-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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