

Chemical Science

Volume 12
Number 33
7 September 2021
Pages 10961-11238

rsc.li/chemical-science



ISSN 2041-6539

EDGE ARTICLE

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Cite this: *Chem. Sci.*, 2021, 12, 10985

All publication charges for this article have been paid for by the Royal Society of Chemistry

Received 10th May 2021

Accepted 19th July 2021

DOI: 10.1039/d1sc02560k

rsc.li/chemical-science

Spontaneous and induced chiral symmetry breaking of stereolabile pillar[5]arene derivatives upon crystallisation†

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Stereolabile pillar[5]arene (P[5]) derivatives, which are dynamic racemic mixtures in solution on account of their low inversion barriers, were employed as platforms to study chiral symmetry breaking during crystallisation. In the solid state, we showed that crystal enantiomeric excess of a conglomerate-forming P[5] derivative can be obtained by handpicking and Viedma ripening without the intervention of external chiral entities. On the other hand, in the presence of ethyl D/L-lactate as both optically-active solvents and chiral guests, the handedness of P[5] derivative crystals, either forming racemic compounds or conglomerates upon condensation, can be directed and subsequently inverted in a highly controllable manner.

Introduction

Chirality, the geometric property of a rigid object of being non-superimposable on its mirror image, is omnipresent in nature.¹ Since the days of Biot and Pasteur, crystallography and chirality have been two deeply intertwined scientific disciplines.² Resolution by crystallisation, originating from the manual separation of hemihedral crystals of sodium ammonium tartrate,³ has also evolved into a variety of techniques that are of both significant academic and industrial interest.⁴ In principle, the yield of isolating an enantiomer by resolving the corresponding racemate is 50% at best. Nonetheless, compounds that undergo rapid racemisation in solution,⁵ when coupled with the occurrence of conglomerate formation (*vide infra*), offer the opportunity to achieve chiral symmetry breaking, or total spontaneous resolution, deviating from the racemic equilibrium in favour of one handedness.⁶

Pillar[5]arenes⁷ (P[5]s) are a class of macrocyclic compounds exhibiting rich conformational isomerism and dynamic stereoisomerism. Enantiomeric P[5] conformers⁸ are interconvertible to each other through a series of oxygen-through-the-annulus flipping motions of their aromatic units.⁹ By

introducing either bulky substituents on the rims,¹⁰ or mechanically-interlocked structures using P[5]s as the ring component,¹¹ the inversion processes of P[5]s can be completely inhibited, therefore enabling the isolation of two types of atropisomers by classical resolution methods or with the help of HPLC with chiral stationary phases. On the other hand, stereolabile P[5]s with low-to-moderate inversion barriers exist in solution as optically-inactive ensembles of fluxional conformers. The chiroptical characterisation and resolution of these P[5] derivatives showing rapid enantiomerisation¹² can be non-trivial.¹³

A general method to transform stereolabile P[5]s into enantiopure compounds of either handedness is still lacking. We envisioned that chiral crystal formation followed by topochemical reactions¹⁴ might be a viable approach to achieve absolute asymmetric synthesis of chiral P[5]s. Although the spontaneous resolution phenomenon of P[5]s, *i.e.* the formation of mechanical mixtures of enantiopure conglomerate crystals, was already observed,¹⁵ no further exploration beyond X-ray crystallography has been described to date. Herein, we report our investigation into P[5] conglomerates including conventional triage and Viedma ripening.¹⁶ Chiral induction through co-crystallization with chiral guest molecules was also attempted on P[5]-based conglomerates and racemic compounds. In both cases, chiroptical characterisation and X-ray crystallography confirmed that crystal enantiomeric excess (CEE) was successfully obtained.

Results and discussion

Resolution by triage

It is well-known that racemic mixtures can be condensed (Fig. 1) in the solid state as racemic compounds, racemic

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Experimental procedures and additional data of the synthesised compounds. CCDC 2073655, and 2073656. For ESI and crystallographic data in CIF or other electronic format see DOI: 10.1039/d1sc02560k



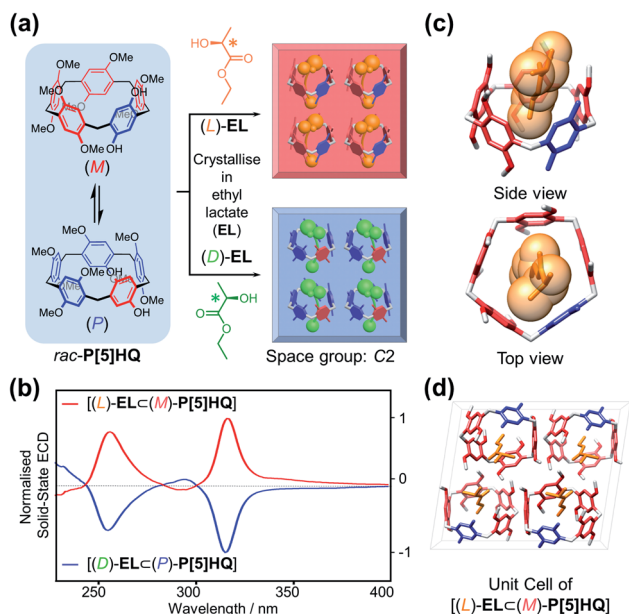


Fig. 3 (a) Schematic representation of the crystallisation of P[5]HQ in (d)- and (l)-EL, respectively, forming homochiral crystals of opposite handedness. (b) Normalised solid-state ECD spectra of [(l)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]HQ] and [(d)-EL⊂(P)-P[5]HQ] crystals. Single crystal structures of (c) [(l)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]HQ] inclusion complex. (d) Unit cell of [(l)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]HQ].

ESI[†]) an ECD spectrum with positive Cotton effects at circa 255 and 315 nm. In contrast, crystallisation of P[5]HQ in ethyl *D*-lactate ((d)-EL) yielded solid samples exhibiting (Fig. 3b and S9, ESI[†]) inverted ECD signals.

X-ray crystallographic analysis was performed (Fig. 3c) for P[5]HQ single crystals obtained in (L)-EL to further reveal the absolute configuration, host-guest interactions, and packing modes in the solid state. It turned out that crystallisation of P[5]HQ in (L)-EL exclusively forms the [(L)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]HQ] inclusion complex. The chiral solvents sit in the cavities of the P[5]HQ macrocycles, forming 1 : 1 complexes on account of several C-H⋯π interactions between the ethyl groups of EL and the aromatic units of P[5]HQ. Intermolecular hydrogen bonds can be found between the hydroxyl group of (L)-EL and a methoxy group on one of the nearby P[5]HQ rings (OH⋯O distance = 2.43 Å, Fig. S11, ESI[†]), providing additional stabilisation for the overall superstructure. The inclusion of guest molecules does not change the overall packing, as the (L)-EL solvomorph features an identical unit cell in the C2 space group with lattice constants similar to that of the original P[5]HQ crystal structure crystallised in CH₂Cl₂ (Fig. 3d). In the ¹H NMR spectrum of the dissolved [(L)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]HQ] crystal sample, proton signals of the (L)-EL ethyl moiety show (Fig. S12, ESI[†]) minor upfield shifts (Δδ = -0.13 and -0.10 ppm for the methyl and methylene protons, respectively), indicating that the host-guest interaction between P[5]HQ and EL occurs in solution. The chirality transfer from EL presumably starts from the formation of diastereomeric complexes with P[5]HQ in solution, which subsequently leads to enantioselective crystallisation.

After discovering that P[5]HQ conglomerates can be turned into homochiral crystals of either handedness, depending on the choice of the crystallisation solvent, the same approach was applied to a structurally similar compound P[5]Q,¹⁹ which contains a quinone unit instead of hydroquinone in the scaffold but instead crystallises as a racemic compound in the P2₁/c space group (Fig. 4a). X-ray crystallographic analysis of a single crystal sample carefully cured in (L)-EL revealed (Fig. 4b) that the [(L)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]Q] inclusion complex was successfully obtained. The ethyl group of (L)-EL is also stabilised in the middle of the P[5]Q macrocycle by C-H⋯π interactions. It is noteworthy that when P[5]Q crystallised in EL, the solid-state packing changed completely to a non-centrosymmetric structure. Coincidentally, the [(L)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]Q] complex crystallises (Fig. 4c and S13, ESI[†]) in the C2 space group with almost identical unit cell parameters, packing, and hydrogen bonding patterns (OH⋯O distance = 2.13 Å, Fig. S13, ESI[†]) to those of P[5]HQ. The homochirality of both [(L)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]Q] and [(D)-EL⊂(P)-P[5]Q] was confirmed by the solid-state ECD spectral analysis. Typical antipodal ECD curves were observed (Fig. 4d) with Cotton effects at 321, 370, and 520 nm, respectively.

In order to further explore the chiral induction effects of (d)/(l)-EL as both crystallisation solvents and chiral guests, as well as devising a scalable method to produce P[5]-based homochiral crystalline materials, *rac*-P[5]HQ solids were stirred in (d)/(l)-EL aqueous solutions with different concentrations ranging from 0.1 to 4.5 M under ambient conditions for 24 h. The crystalline samples were tested by solid-state ECD (Fig. S16, ESI[†]). The ECD signal intensity increased with the concentration of the EL solution up to 2.6 M. Beyond this, the magnitude of the Cotton effects plateaued, indicating that the maximum (≈100%) CEE

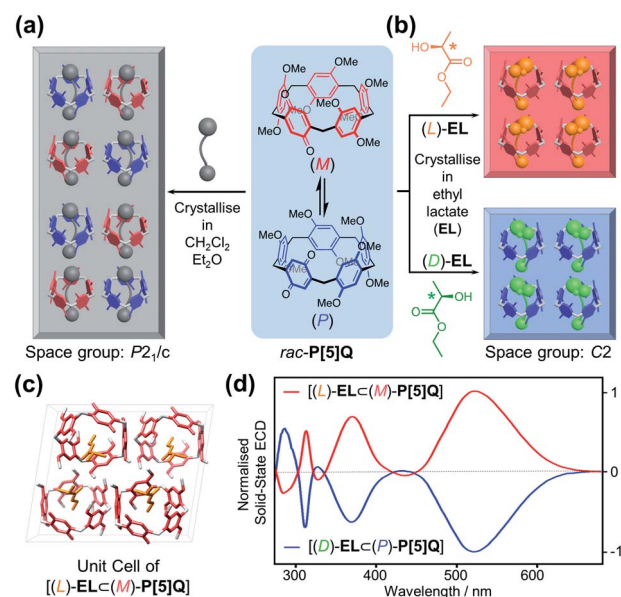


Fig. 4 Schematic representation of *rac*-P[5]Q crystallising in (a) achiral solvents, forming a racemic compound, and (b) chiral solvents, leading to the exclusive formation of homochiral crystals. (c) Unit cell of [(L)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]Q]. (d) Normalised solid-state ECD spectra of [(L)-EL⊂(M)-P[5]Q] and [(D)-EL⊂(P)-P[5]Q] crystals.



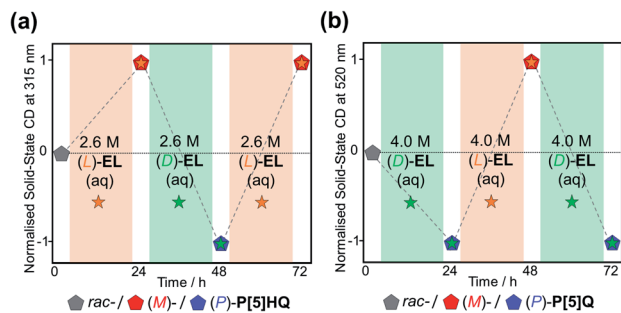


Fig. 5 Chiral induction and inversion of (a) P[5]HQ and (b) P[5]Q in (D)- and (L)-EL aqueous solutions, monitored by the changes of ECD signals at 315 and 520 nm, respectively.

value was already reached. Analogous experiments were also conducted for P[5]Q, which was stirred in (D)/(L)-EL aqueous solutions with different concentrations ranging from 0.5 to 5.0 M. The ECD signal intensity increased with the concentration of the EL solution up to 4.0 M (L)-EL aqueous solutions for 24 h. Interestingly, all samples showed obvious ECD signals with consistent Cotton effect signs as those crystalline samples directly crystallised in pure (D)/(L)-EL, confirming the formation of [(L)-EL ⊂ (M)-P[5]HQ] and [(D)-EL ⊂ (P)-P[5]HQ] complexes. Taking advantage of this approach, both *rac*-P[5]Q and *rac*-P[5]HQ can be selectively turned into homochiral crystals of either handedness depending on the choice of the (D)/(L)-EL aqueous solutions (Fig. 5). These facile and green processes can be repeated for many rounds without loss of fidelity.

Conclusions

In summary, we have successfully demonstrated that scalemic mixtures or enantiopure compounds of stereolabile pillar[5]arene derivatives could be obtained through crystallisation, with and without the aid of chiral substances. A stereolabile pillar[5]arene derivative P[5]HQ that forms conglomerates in the solid state was resolved by triage, and its crystal enantiomeric excess could be enhanced through attrition-enhanced chiral symmetry breaking. Chiroptical properties of the resulting crystalline solids were characterised qualitatively by solid-state electronic circular dichroism spectroscopy. A versatile chiral induction approach, employing ethyl D/L-lactate as the chiral source, was also proved to be highly effective. Both X-ray crystallography and ¹H NMR spectroscopy confirmed that these optically-active solvents transfer chiral information to the pillar[5]arene-based macrocycles through host-guest interactions. This method was not only applied to P[5]HQ, which forms conglomerates in the solid state, but also to a racemic compound P[5]Q. Overall, this work provides new strategies to manipulate the handedness of inherently chiral pillar[5]arene macrocycles. These pillararene-based chiral crystalline materials will be of interest for further studies of symmetry breaking during crystallisation,²⁸ new routes to absolute asymmetric synthesis,¹⁴ and their chiroptical, pyroelectric, or piezoelectric properties.²⁹

Author contributions

A. C. H. S and C. Z. identified the pillararene-based conglomerates. T. U. T. and H. W. synthesised all compounds employed in this study and performed the experiments. W. Y. and C. Z. solved the crystal structures. K. K. B. performed the simulation of ECD spectra. A. C. H. S. conceptualised the study. A. C. H. S., H. W., C. Z. and T. U. T. wrote the manuscript. All authors read and commented on the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by the 973 National Basic Research Program of China (2015CB856500) and the National Science Foundation of China (21871208). The authors thank Professor Jay Siegel of Tianjin University for helpful discussions.

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