

# Mechanistic insights into the triazolylidene-catalysed Stetter and benzoin reactions: role of the *N*-aryl substituent†

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The *in situ* observation, isolation and reversible formation of intermediate 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts derived from NHC addition to a range of substituted benzaldehydes is probed. Equilibrium constants for the formation of these 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts, as well as rate constants of hydrogen–deuterium exchange ( $k_{ex}$ ) at C( $\alpha$ ) of these intermediates for a range of *N*-aryl triazolylidenes is reported. These combined studies give insight into the preference of *N*-pentafluorophenyl NHCs to participate in benzoin and Stetter reaction processes.

## Introduction

*N*-Heterocyclic carbenes (NHCs) have been widely employed as organocatalysts,<sup>1</sup> with the triazolylidene molecular class showing remarkable activity in a diverse range of catalytic processes that proceed through acyl anion,<sup>2</sup> azolium enolate,<sup>3</sup> azolium homoenolate,<sup>4</sup> acyl azolium<sup>5</sup> or  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated acyl azolium intermediates.<sup>6</sup> Within the triazolylidene family, the *N*-aryl substituent plays a decisive role in determining catalytic reactivity and selectivity,<sup>7</sup> with 2,6-substituted *N*-aryl units showing unique reactivity profiles.<sup>8</sup> For example, *N*-mesityl (*N*-Mes) triazolylidenes are preferred for transformations utilising  $\alpha$ -functionalised aldehydes,<sup>9</sup> while *N*-pentafluorophenyl (*N*-C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub>) derivatives usually exhibit increased catalytic activity in Stetter and benzoin processes.<sup>10</sup> Insightful studies from Bode have ascribed the *N*-Mes effect to irreversible addition of the *N*-Mes substituted NHC to the  $\alpha$ -functionalised aldehyde, accelerating the formation of the Breslow intermediate (Fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> To date, a mechanistic rationale for the enhanced performance of electron-deficient *N*-aryl triazolylidenes (*N*-C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub> or *N*-2,4,6Cl<sub>3</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>2</sub>) in Stetter and benzoin processes has yet to be offered.<sup>7</sup>

Central to the observed catalytic activity in the benzoin and Stetter reactions is the formation of a common enaminol or Breslow intermediate **4**. Nucleophilic addition of NHC **1** to

aldehyde **2** gives tetrahedral intermediate **3**, with deprotonation at C( $\alpha$ ) leading to **4**. Onward reaction with an electrophilic Michael acceptor **5**, followed by proton transfer and catalyst regeneration, leads to the product **6** (Scheme 1).<sup>12</sup> While intermediates of the imidazolylidene<sup>13</sup> and thiazolylidene<sup>14</sup> promoted benzoin reaction similar to **3** have been observed, only limited related studies of triazolylidene-catalysed reactions have been made.<sup>15</sup> Enders and Teles have isolated the 3-(hydroxymethyl)azolium salt addition product of formaldehyde and an NHC,<sup>16</sup> but the concentrations of this intermediate during the reaction have not been monitored. Notably, related structural studies of intermediates in the Stetter reaction have not been established, although mechanistic studies from Rovis *et al.* indicate that proton transfer from the tetrahedral intermediate **3** is a kinetically significant and irreversible step.<sup>17</sup>

As part of our studies regarding NHC-catalysed reaction processes,<sup>18</sup> this manuscript describes the *in situ* observation,

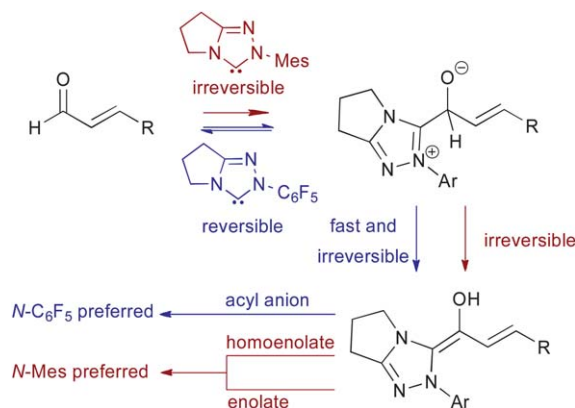
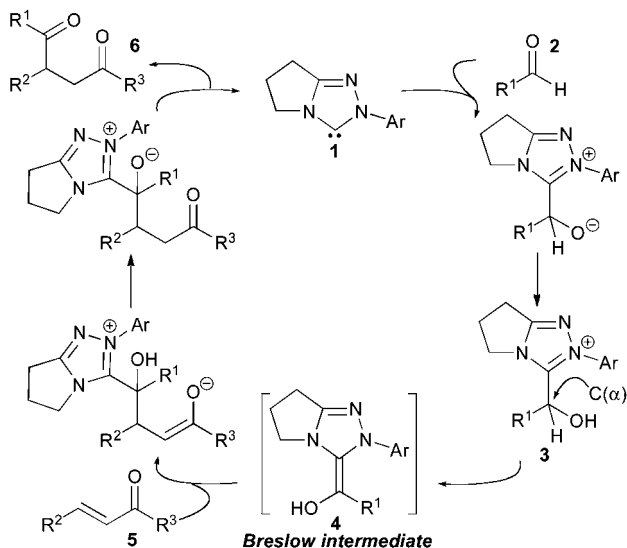


Fig. 1 Bode's work: the *N*-Mes effect in NHC-mediated processes.

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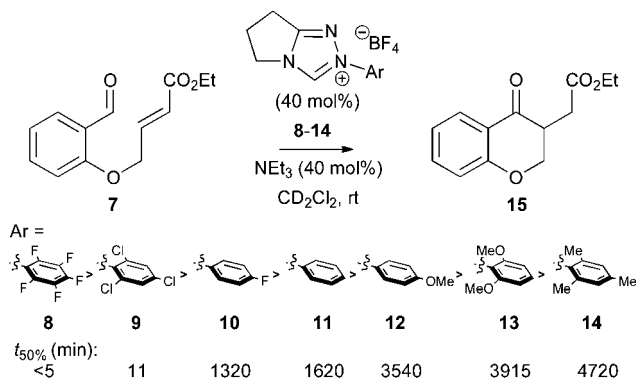


**Scheme 1** Mechanism of the Stetter reaction.

isolation and reversible formation of intermediate 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts derived from NHC addition to aldehydes. Equilibrium constants for the formation of these 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts, as well as rate constants of hydrogen-deuterium exchange ( $k_{ex}$ ) at C( $\alpha$ ) of these intermediates for a range of *N*-aryl triazolynylidenes is reported. These combined studies give insight into the preference of *N*-C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub> NHCs to participate in benzoin and Stetter reaction processes.

### *In situ* NMR studies: 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt observation and equilibrium values

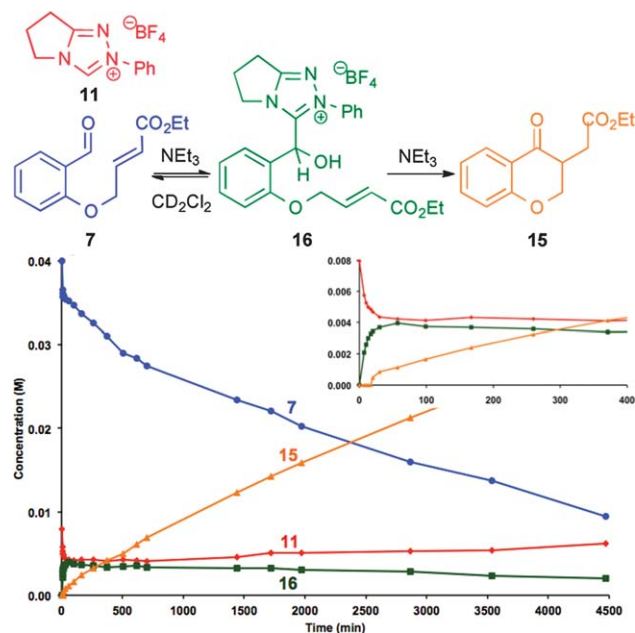
To demonstrate the varying catalytic activity of a series of *N*-aryl triazolynylidenes, initial *in situ* <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectroscopic studies of the Stetter reaction simply monitored the rate of formation of product **15** from **7** with variation of the *N*-aryl group of the triazolium salt precatalyst (Fig. 2).<sup>19</sup> Under catalytic conditions using NEt<sub>3</sub> as a base, electron-deficient *N*-aryl triazolium precatalysts give markedly superior rates of product formation (Ar = C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub> > 2,4,6-Cl<sub>3</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>2</sub> > 4-FC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>4</sub> > Ph > 4-OMeC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>4</sub> > 2,6-OMeC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub> > Mes).<sup>20</sup>



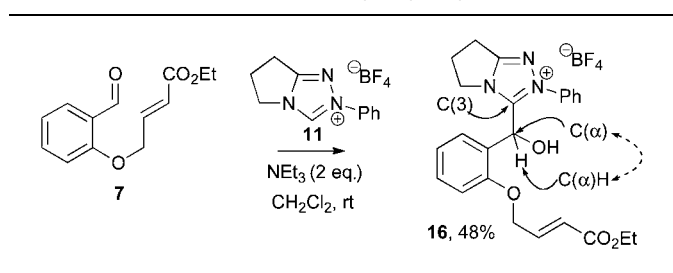
**Fig. 2** Time taken to reach 50% conversion ( $t_{50\%}$ ) of **7** to **15** with variation of *N*-aryl triazolium substituent.

Further studies utilised <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectroscopic analysis to follow the course of the Stetter reaction of **7** (0.04 M) employing sub-stoichiometric quantities (0.008 M) of *N*-phenyl triazolium precatalyst **11**. Monitoring the reaction in anhydrous CD<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> using NEt<sub>3</sub> (0.008 M) as the base showed the initial rapid appearance of an intermediate 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt **16**, with slower subsequent formation of product **15** over time (Fig. 3).<sup>21</sup> Unambiguous structural determination of **16** was obtained by simply mixing equimolar quantities of triazolium precatalyst **11** with **7** and NEt<sub>3</sub>, giving, after 10 minutes, **16** that could be isolated by silica chromatography in 48% yield (Table 1).<sup>22</sup> The tetrahedral C( $\alpha$ ) geometry within **16** was confirmed by HSQC correlation, complementing the keto tautomer of the Breslow intermediate characterised by NMR spectroscopic analysis by Berkessel and co-workers, who generated this species using a free isolated NHC in THF.<sup>23</sup> Although a small number of related 3-(hydroxybenzyl) thiazolium and imidazolium salts have been prepared by analogous routes,<sup>13,14</sup> it is notable that **16** can be isolated from synthetically relevant conditions.

The stability and reversibility of **16** was then probed using control studies that showed tetrahedral intermediate **16** is stable under either acidic or neutral conditions in CD<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>. However, treatment of **16** with NEt<sub>3</sub> facilitated rapid equilibration to a mixture of aldehyde **7**, precatalyst **11** and **16**, with relatively slow onwards formation of product **15** (Fig. 4).<sup>19</sup> Performing this experiment with **16** (0.008 M) in the presence of additional aldehyde **7** (0.032 M), gave rise to a similar reaction profile to that obtained starting from **7** (0.04 M) and **11** (0.008 M). These observations indicate that **16** is a reversibly formed intermediate from the addition of NHC to the aldehyde, with

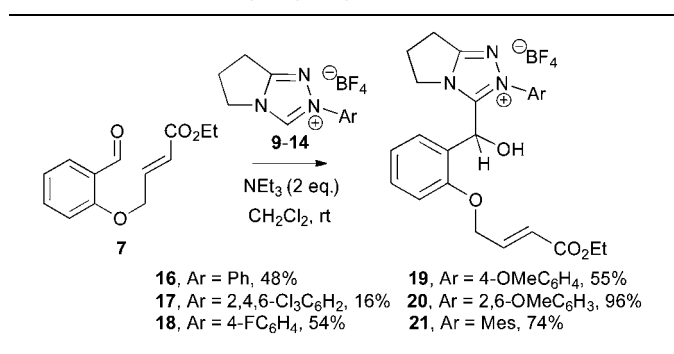


**Fig. 3** Reaction profile of the Stetter reaction of **7** (0.04 M), catalysed by NHC precursor **11** (0.008 M) with NEt<sub>3</sub> (0.008 M). Inset: expansion of initial time period (<400 min).

**Table 1** Preparation and isolation of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt **16**

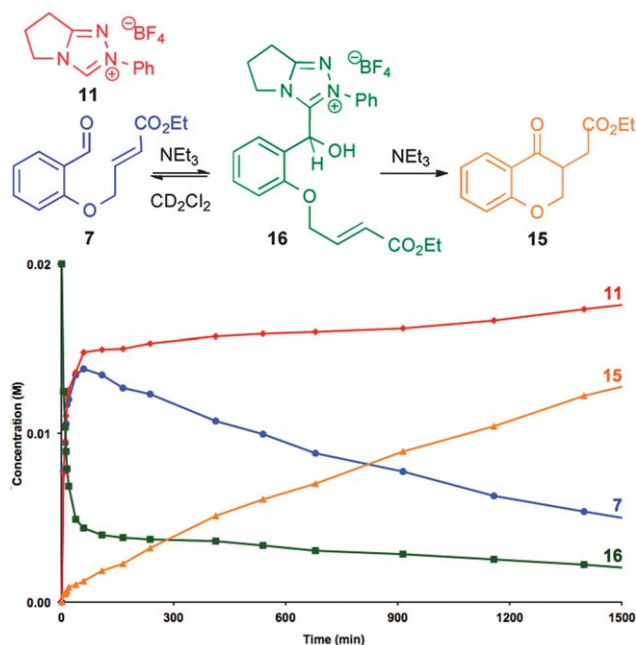
Solvent	$\delta_{\text{H}}$ C( $\alpha$ )H <sup>a</sup>	$\delta_{\text{C}}$ C( $\alpha$ ) <sup>a</sup>	$\delta_{\text{C}}$ C(3) <sup>a</sup>
CD <sub>2</sub> Cl <sub>2</sub>	6.30 (s)	63.2	152.2
DMSO	6.33 d, ( <i>J</i> = 5.4)	63.2	152.0
CD <sub>3</sub> OD/DCl	6.36 (s)	65.0	153.7

<sup>a</sup> HSQC correlation (CD<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>)  $\delta_{\text{H}}$  6.30– $\delta_{\text{C}}$  C( $\alpha$ ) 63.2.

**Table 2** Preparation of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts

(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt products **16–21** was next investigated. In all cases, starting from either the parent azolium salt precatalyst or 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt, formation of an equilibrium mixture of the corresponding azolium salt, aldehyde **7** and the 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium was observed, before relatively slow subsequent onwards reaction to give product **15** (Fig. 5, representative example shown using *N*-Mes substituted 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt **21**).

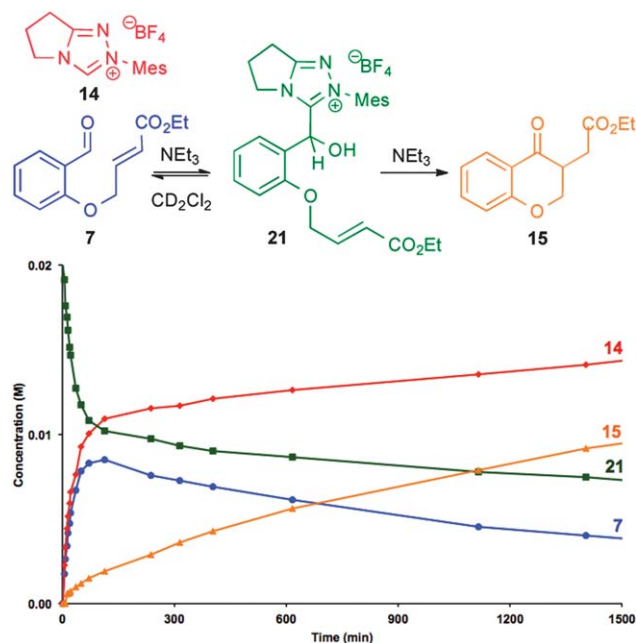
From the resultant reaction profiles, values for *K* (the equilibrium constant for the formation of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt) were calculated before significant (<5%) product formation (Table 3).<sup>24</sup> These results show that reversible addition is observed in this system even with the *N*-Mes triazolylidene. Notably, significantly larger equilibrium constants are observed using NHC-precatalysts bearing 2,6-substituted *N*-aryl units (*N*-Mes, *N*-2,6-OMeC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub> and *N*-2,4,6-Cl<sub>3</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>2</sub>), whilst electronic variation of the 4-substituent leads to minimal perturbation of *K*.<sup>25</sup> Despite the large equilibrium concentration of the *N*-Mes and *N*-2,6-OMeC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub> 3-(hydroxybenzyl)

**Fig. 4** Reaction profile of the reaction of *N*-Ph 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt **16** (0.02 M) with NEt<sub>3</sub> (0.02 M).

slower subsequent onwards reaction, presumably through the expected Breslow intermediate, generating product **15**.<sup>19</sup>

To probe the generality of these studies, the synthesis and isolation of a range of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts was investigated. Treatment of a series of *N*-aryl triazolium precatalysts and aldehyde **7** (1 : 1) with excess NEt<sub>3</sub> gave the corresponding 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts **17–21** in 16–96% yield (Table 2). Using the *N*-C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub> triazolium precatalyst, the desired tetrahedral intermediate could not be isolated due to rapid conversion into product under these reaction conditions, although electron-deficient *N*-2,4,6-Cl<sub>3</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>2</sub> and *N*-4-FC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>4</sub> analogues **17** and **18** could be isolated and characterised.

*In situ* reaction monitoring of the model Stetter transformation using NHC precursors **9–14**, as well as their 3-

**Fig. 5** Reaction profile of the reaction of *N*-Mes 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt **21** (0.02 M) with NEt<sub>3</sub> (0.02 M).

**Table 3** Equilibrium constants of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts<sup>a</sup>

	Ar	$K$ ( $M^{-1}$ )
	2,4,6-Cl <sub>3</sub> C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>2</sub>	336
	4-FC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>4</sub>	28
	Ph	27
	4-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>4</sub>	31
	2,6-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>3</sub>	1283
	Mes	140

<sup>a</sup> Starting concentrations: 7 0.04 M, NHC 0.008 M, NEt<sub>3</sub> 0.008 M.

azolium salts, the rates of product formation are slower than with NHC precatalysts **8–12**.

Whilst this proved instructive, the effect of the *N*-C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub> substituent upon the equilibrium values could not be evaluated within this system due to rapid onwards reactivity to product. Given the typical recalcitrance of 2-substituted benzaldehydes to participate in homo-benzoin processes,<sup>10c,10d</sup> a series of model 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts **22–27** were prepared from 2-methoxybenzaldehyde, allowing an evaluation of their  $K$  values (Table 4).<sup>26</sup> Using precatalysts **8**, **9** and **11–14** a similar trend was observed, with 2,6-substituted *N*-aryl NHCs yielding significantly larger  $K$  values. The use of *N*-C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub> precatalyst **8** also led to a high  $K$  value, suggesting that both steric effects from 2,6-substituents and electron-withdrawing electronic effects within the *N*-aryl substituent lead to increased  $K$  values. This increase in  $K$  reflects the relative stabilities of the respective 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt in comparison to the starting materials. Simplistically, we assume that 2,6-*N*-aryl substitution within the NHC forces the *N*-aryl ring to adopt an essentially orthogonal orientation with respect to the triazole ring.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in all 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts the *N*-aryl group presumably adopts a non-coplanar conformation with the triazole in order to minimize 1,2-steric interactions, with orthogonality enforced with 2,6-*N*-aryl substitution. 3-(Hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt formation may then be favoured

**Table 4** Equilibrium constants of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts<sup>a</sup>

	Ar	$K$ ( $M^{-1}$ )
	C <sub>6</sub> F <sub>5</sub>	521
	2,4,6-Cl <sub>3</sub> C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>2</sub>	601
	Ph	56
	4-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>4</sub>	46
	2,6-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>3</sub>	741
	Mes	143
<b>22</b> , Ar = C <sub>6</sub> F <sub>5</sub>	<b>25</b> , Ar = 4-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>4</sub>	
<b>23</b> , Ar = 2,4,6-Cl <sub>3</sub> C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>2</sub>	<b>26</b> , Ar = 2,6-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>3</sub>	
<b>24</b> , Ar = Ph	<b>27</b> , Ar = Mes	

<sup>a</sup> Starting concentrations: 2-methoxybenzaldehyde 0.01 M, NHC 0.002 M, NEt<sub>3</sub> 0.002 M.

for 2,6-*N*-aryl substituted NHCs due to better accommodation of the 3-(hydroxybenzyl) substituent by the *N*-aryl unit. Furthermore, the reverse process may then deviate from expected leaving group ability, being more favourable for non-2,6-*N*-aryl substituted NHCs. Further work will generate additional mechanistic insight by quantifying the rates of the individual processes.

### Rates constants of exchange ( $k_{ex}$ ) for 3-(hydroxybenzyl)- or 3-(methoxybenzyl)azolium salts

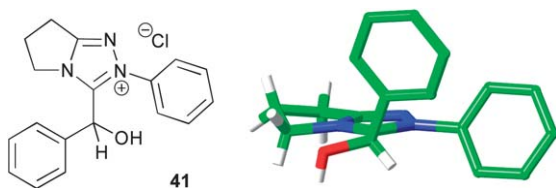
Given the proposed kinetic relevance of the deprotonation step to generate the Breslow intermediate in the Stetter reaction,<sup>17,28</sup> the relative rate constants of deuterium exchange ( $k_{ex}$ , s<sup>-1</sup>) at the C( $\alpha$ )-H position were investigated by <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectroscopy using either KOD solutions or triethylamine buffers in D<sub>2</sub>O/CD<sub>3</sub>OD. For Stetter derived 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts **16–21**, C( $\alpha$ )H exchange could only be monitored alongside competitive dissociation to aldehyde and NHC,<sup>29</sup> while attempted *O*-methylation of **16** led to extensive decomposition. To circumvent these issues a series of alternative model 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts was prepared by triazolinylidene addition to benzaldehyde and a number of substituted benzaldehyde derivatives (Table 5). Only low isolated product yields of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium products were obtained for triazolinylidene addition to either benzaldehyde or 4-substituted benzaldehydes (<10%), with products **28–31** isolated by preparative LC. Despite these poor yields, crystallisation from DCl/D<sub>2</sub>O allowed unambiguous structure determination of chloride salt **41** by X-ray crystal structure analysis (Fig. 6).<sup>30</sup> NHC addition to 2-(benzyloxy)benzaldehyde gave higher isolated yields and showed increased stability to chromatographic purification, furnishing reasonable to excellent isolated yields (up to 94%) of aldehyde–NHC addition products **32–38**. This

**Table 5** Synthesis of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts<sup>a</sup>

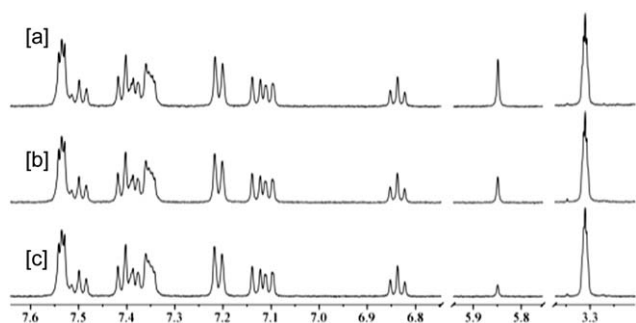
<b>28</b> , R = H, Ar = Ph, 3%	<b>32</b> , Ar = C <sub>6</sub> F <sub>5</sub> , 94%
<b>29</b> , R = Me, Ar = Ph, 3%	<b>33</b> , Ar = 2,4,6-Cl <sub>3</sub> C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>2</sub> , 90%
<b>30</b> , R = F, Ar = Ph, 2%	<b>34</b> , Ar = 4-F-C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>4</sub> , 55%
<b>31</b> , R = H, Ar = Mes, 9%	<b>35</b> , Ar = Ph, 66%
	<b>36</b> , Ar = 4-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>4</sub> , 64%
	<b>37</b> , Ar = 2,6-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>3</sub> , 76%
	<b>38</b> , Ar = Mes, 74%
<b>39</b> , 66%	<b>40</b> , 99% <i>dr</i> 75:25

<sup>a</sup> Experimental conditions: NHC precursor (1 equiv.), aldehyde (1 equiv.), NEt<sub>3</sub> (2 equiv.), CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, rt, 5 min to 1 h.





**Fig. 6** Representation of the X-ray crystal structure of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium chloride **41** (chloride counterion and water of crystallisation not shown for simplicity).



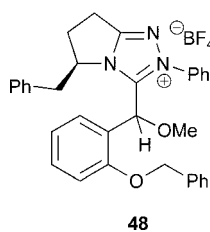
**Fig. 7** Deuterium exchange of C( $\alpha$ )H (5.85 ppm) relative to CD<sub>3</sub>OD (3.31 ppm) of **44** (5 mM) in NEt<sub>3</sub> buffer in 6.5 : 1 D<sub>2</sub>O : CD<sub>3</sub>OD at pD 10.9 and 25 °C [a]  $T = 9$  min. [b]  $T = 109$  min. [c]  $T = 252$  min.

synthetic route was extended to morpholine-containing NHC precursors, giving **39**, while a chiral NHC precursor gave **40** as a 75 : 25 mixture of diastereoisomers in an excellent 99% yield.<sup>31</sup> 3-(Hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts **28**, **32**, **33**, **35**, **37**, **38** and **40** were subsequently *O*-methylated<sup>32</sup> to facilitate an evaluation of their rates of deuterium exchange.

Deuterium exchange studies were carried out upon **36** and **38** and 3-(methoxybenzyl)azolium salts **42–48**. In all cases deuterium catalysed exchange of C( $\alpha$ )–H for deuterium could be monitored without any detritic side reactions (Fig. 7).<sup>33</sup> The fastest exchange was observed with electron-deficient *N*-aryl triazolium derivatives (Ar = C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub> > 2,4,6-Cl<sub>3</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>2</sub> > Ph > 4-OMeC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>4</sub> > Mes > 2,6-OMeC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub>, Table 6).<sup>34</sup> For **48**, the rate constant of exchange for both diastereoisomers could be evaluated, with the minor diastereoisomer exhibiting an enhanced  $k_{\text{ex}}$  value.<sup>35</sup> Within this system, the rate of exchange with variation of *N*-aryl substitution generally parallels the rate of observed product formation in the Stetter transformation.<sup>36</sup> This presumably reflects the increased acidity of C( $\alpha$ )–H of the intermediate 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium species with increasing electron-withdrawing *N*-aryl substituents, and is consistent with rate determining deprotonation of this species, as postulated by Rovis.<sup>17</sup>

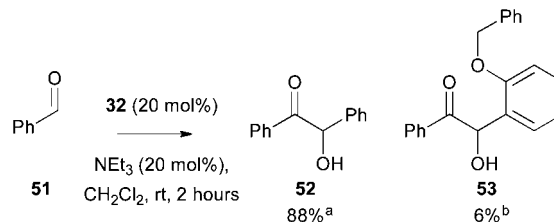
**Table 6** Relative acidities of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts

	Ar	R <sup>1</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>	pD	$k_{\text{ex}}$ (s <sup>-1</sup> )
<b>36</b>	4-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>4</sub>	D	OBn	11.9	$6.02 \times 10^{-5}$
<b>38</b>	Mes	D	OBn	11.9	$5.11 \times 10^{-5}$
<b>42</b>	C <sub>6</sub> F <sub>5</sub>	Me	OBn	10.9	$2.03 \times 10^{-3}$
<b>43</b>	2,4,6-Cl <sub>3</sub> C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>2</sub>	Me	OBn	10.9	$7.30 \times 10^{-4}$
<b>44</b>	Ph	Me	OBn	10.9	$9.60 \times 10^{-5}$
<b>45</b>	2,6-OMeC <sub>6</sub> H <sub>3</sub>	Me	OBn	10.9	$2.32 \times 10^{-6}$
<b>46</b>	Mes	Me	OBn	10.9	$2.61 \times 10^{-5}$
<b>47</b>	Ph	Me	H	10.9	$3.06 \times 10^{-4}$



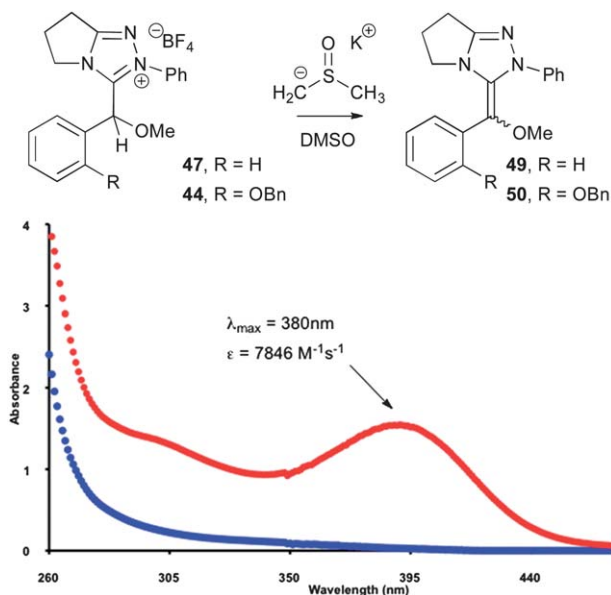
	pD	$k_{\text{ex}}$ (s <sup>-1</sup> ) major	$k_{\text{ex}}$ (s <sup>-1</sup> ) minor
<b>48</b>	10.9	$1.36 \times 10^{-4}$	$1.94 \times 10^{-4}$

Although the formation of the Breslow intermediate is implied by these NMR hydrogen–deuterium exchange studies, its direct observation was not possible due to its transient nature in the protic solvent conditions. The direct isolation of Breslow intermediates such as **4** is a widely recognised challenge, although Jordan and co-workers have characterised an *O*-protected thiazolinyldene-derived enamine using NMR spectroscopy<sup>37</sup> and Goldup has reported the observation of an *O*-benzylated intermediate in an imidazolium-mediated transesterification.<sup>38</sup> Most recently, Rovis and co-workers have described the isolation of nitrogen analogues of the Breslow intermediate using 2,6-substituted NHC precursors.<sup>39</sup> Mayr has similarly reported the isolation and reactivity of a range of *O*-methylated Breslow intermediates,<sup>40</sup> whilst Berkessel has

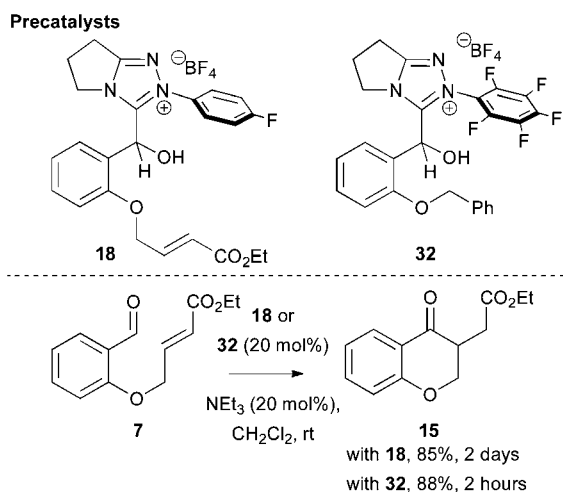


**Fig. 10** Use of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt **32** as precatalyst in the benzoin condensation. <sup>a</sup> Isolated yield. <sup>b</sup> Approximate yield by <sup>1</sup>H NMR.

reported the isolation of Breslow intermediates derived from free imidazolium NHCs and benzaldehydes.<sup>41</sup> Despite not being able to observe species such as **4** in these studies, treatment of *O*-methylated derivative **47** with a 10-fold excess of potassium dimsyl in DMSO allowed the acquisition of a UV-Vis spectrum of the enamine with a characteristic  $\lambda_{\text{max}}$  at 380 nm and an extinction coefficient ( $\epsilon$ ) of  $7846 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ , which is consistent with the more extended conjugated system present in **49** relative to the precursor (Fig. 8).<sup>42</sup> Under these conditions, this absorbance decayed to zero over  $\sim 20$  min, presumably due to reprotonation of **49** by adventitious water. Under analogous conditions, *O*-methylated derivative **44** exhibited a  $\lambda_{\text{max}}$  at 395 nm and an extinction coefficient of  $5423 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ .



**Fig. 8** UV-Vis spectra of a 0.2 mM solution of 3-(methoxybenzyl)azolium salt **47** (blue) and **49** (red).



**Fig. 9** Use of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts as precatalysts in the Stetter reaction.

### Hydroxybenzylazolium salts as precatalysts

Consistent with these mechanistic studies, the validity of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salts **18** and **32** as precatalysts for the Stetter reaction was investigated (Fig. 9). As expected, treatment of **7** with **18** or **32** (20 mol%) and  $\text{NEt}_3$  (20 mol%) in  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$  at rt gave **15** in excellent isolated yield, with the rate of product formation using the electron deficient  $N\text{-C}_6\text{F}_5$  salt **30** significantly faster than the  $N\text{-4-FC}_6\text{H}_4$  salt **18**. Notably, no homo- or crossed-benzoin products were observed in the reaction employing either **18** or **32** as precatalyst.

Similarly, the use of **32** as a precatalyst for the benzoin reaction was probed through performing a crossover reaction with benzaldehyde (Fig. 10). Treatment of **32** (20 mol%) with benzaldehyde and  $\text{NEt}_3$  (20 mol%) gave preferentially the homo-benzoin product **52**, along with only 6% of the crossed benzoin product **53**. The small yield of the observed crossed product is consistent with current literature, due to the poor reactivity of the 2-substituted aldehyde as an electrophilic component in benzoin type processes.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the isolation and *in situ* spectroscopic observation of aldehyde-NHC addition product intermediates of the Stetter and benzoin reactions is reported. Reaction profiles indicate these intermediates are reversibly formed (irrespective of the *N*-aryl substitution pattern), followed by relatively slow onwards reaction to yield Stetter product. Estimated  $K$  values suggest that the equilibrium constant is affected by both electronic and steric effects of the *N*-aryl unit, with 2,6- and electron-withdrawing *N*-aryl substitution resulting in significantly larger

$K$  values. By contrast, electronic variation of the 4-substituent leads to minimal perturbation of  $K$ . The relative acidities ( $k_{\text{ex}}$ ) at C( $\alpha$ ) of 3-(methoxybenzyl)azolium salts provided insight into the effect of catalyst architecture on the key Breslow intermediate-forming step. Despite  $N$ -2,6-OMeC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub> and  $N$ -Mes NHC precursors **13** and **14** exhibiting enhanced  $K$  values (285- and 5-fold vs.  $N$ -Ph congener **11** respectively in the Stetter reaction), slow and presumably rate determining deprotonation<sup>17</sup> (as indicated by  $k_{\text{ex}}$ ) inhibits their use as precatalysts in the Stetter reaction. In contrast  $N$ -C<sub>6</sub>F<sub>5</sub> and  $N$ -2,4,6-Cl<sub>3</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>2</sub> substituted NHCs benefit from both high  $K$  values and rapid  $k_{\text{ex}}$  values (21- and 8- fold respectively vs.  $N$ -Ph), rationalising why 2,6-electron withdrawing  $N$ -substituents are preferred in benzoin and Stetter type processes.<sup>44</sup> Further work from our laboratories towards developing a full kinetic understanding of these and other NHC-catalysed reaction processes are underway.

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- 22 One referee correctly questioned whether **16** (or any other hydroxybenzylazolium salt in this manuscript) was actually the tetrafluoroborate salt as represented, or the corresponding ylido/alkoxide and Et<sub>3</sub>NH<sup>+</sup>. While we are unable to distinguish these possibilities *in situ*, the product **16** isolated after chromatographic purification contained <sup>19</sup>F NMR resonances at δ<sub>F</sub>-153.4 and δ<sub>F</sub>-153.5, consistent with it containing a tetrafluoroborate counterion. Similar <sup>19</sup>F NMR data was obtained for **18** and **22** and so for simplicity we represent all compounds as the tetrafluoroborate counterion.
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- 25 Glorius postulated that *ortho*-substituted *N*-aryl substituents would destabilise the initial tetrahedral adduct formed between an NHC and an aromatic aldehyde due to steric effects (see M. Schedler, R. Frohlich, C. G. Daniliuc and F. Glorius, *Eur. J. Org. Chem.*, 2012, 4164–4171; N. E. Wurtz, C. G. Daniliuc and F. Glorius, *Chem.–Eur. J.*, 2012, **18**, 16297–16301). Whilst we believe the enhanced formation of 3-(hydroxybenzyl)azolium salt observed in the case of the *N*-2,6-disubstituted triazolium catalysts results from a more favourable orientation of the *N*-aryl ring (due to the presence of two *ortho*-substituents), more bulky *ortho*-substituents do not appear to show this effect. Analogous studies of the benzoin condensation using *N*-Mes and *N*-(2,6-diisopropylphenyl)imidazolium catalysts resulted in the appearance of hydroxybenzyl adduct only in the case of the mesityl catalyst, whilst no reaction was observed using the more sterically hindered 2,6-diisopropylphenyl catalyst (See ESI† for full details).
- 26 *K* values were determined as previously described, see ESI† for full details. During the course of the experiment, none of the crossed benzoin product was observed, presumably due to the poor reactivity of 2-substituted benzaldehydes in the benzoin reaction, consistent with literature studies (see L. Baragwanath, C. A. Rose, K. Zeitler and S. J. Connon, *J. Org. Chem.*, 2009, **74**, 9214–9217; S. E. O'Toole and S. J. Connon, *Org. Biomol. Chem.*, 2009, **7**, 3584–3593).
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- 30 **41** and the chloride salts of **29** and **30** (**54** and **55** respectively) were characterised by single-crystal X-ray diffraction of their D<sub>2</sub>O monosolvates which are mutually isotopic (isomorphous).†
- 31 Treatment of the isolated major diastereoisomer to the reaction conditions led to a 75 : 25 mix of diastereoisomers, suggesting the obtained *dr* is a result of a thermodynamic equilibrium.
- 32 3-(Methoxybenzyl)azolium salts **42–48** were synthesised from methylation of **28**, **32**, **33**, **35**, **37**, **38** and **40** using diazomethane or TMS-diazomethane. See ESI† for further details. For these compounds, exchange could be monitored without dissociation or decomposition.
- 33 Experiments were carried out at a substrate concentration of 5 mM at 25 °C and *I* = 1 (KCl) in 6.5 : 1 D<sub>2</sub>O/CD<sub>3</sub>OD. Exchange was monitored for two half lives and a semi-logarithmic plot of the fraction of unexchanged substrate (*f*<sub>s</sub>) against time gave *k*<sub>ex</sub>, the pseudo-first order rate of exchange at that *pD*. In the case of **36** and **38**, measurements at other *pD* values were not possible due to competing dissociation to aldehyde and NHC at lower *pD* values and ring opening at higher *pD* values. See ESI† for full details.
- 34 It is assumed that deprotonation by deuteroxide is significantly slower than deuteration of the Breslow intermediate in all cases so that *k*<sub>ex</sub> reflects the rate constant for formation of the solvent equilibrated enaminal/enamine. Using stopped flow spectrophotometry Jordan has measured rate constants for the reprotonation of O-methylated thiazolylidene-derived enamine derivatives in the range of 300–540 s<sup>-1</sup> (G. L. Barletta, Y. Zou, W. P. Huskey and F. Jordan, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 1997, **119**, 2356–2362), which are 10<sup>7</sup>-fold higher than corresponding rate constants for formation of the intermediate at *pH* 10.5 (~*pD* 10.9).
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- 36 The only exception to this is the 2,6-OMeC<sub>6</sub>H<sub>3</sub> substituted analogue **45**, which exhibits a lower *k*<sub>ex</sub> value than **46**, despite displaying a faster rate of product formation in the Stetter reaction. We presume that the greatly enhanced *K* value (Table 3) compensates for the slower rate of deprotonation, giving a faster overall rate of reaction. Jordan has reported a second order rate constant, *k*<sub>H<sub>2</sub>O</sub> = 0.019 M<sup>-1</sup> s<sup>-1</sup> for hydroxide ion deprotonation of the 2-(methoxyphenylmethyl)-3,4-dimethylthiazolium salt to the corresponding enamine using stopped-flow spectrophotometry (G. L. Barletta, Y. Zou, W. P. Huskey and F. Jordan, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 1997, **119**, 2356–2362). Using this value, we can calculate a first order rate constant for deprotonation by hydroxide at *pH* 10.5 (~*pD* 10.9) of 8 × 10<sup>-6</sup> s<sup>-1</sup>, which is 3–250-fold smaller than any of the *k*<sub>ex</sub> values in Table 6 at an equivalent *pD*.
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