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A new Keggin-like niobium-phosphate cluster that reacts reversibly with hydrogen peroxide†

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Polyoxoniobate clusters that are stable in acidic solutions are rare and particularly useful in industrial processes. Here we report a new penta-phosphate niobate polyoxometalate cluster (TMA)₉H₃Nb₉P₅O₄₁·28H₂O (Nb₉P₅) that is stable over a wide pH range and that can be converted reversibly into the peroxo form.

The layered niobium-phosphate hydrate (NbOPO₄·xH₂O) is a useful catalyst for biomass conversion, such as the conversion of sugars to 5-hydroxymethylfurfural (HMF) and other dehydration reactions.¹ Its structure consists of corner-shared NbO₆ and PO₄ units² and the coexistence of both basic and acidic sites in NbOPO₄·xH₂O is responsible for its catalytic activity.³ Although niobium phosphate is widely used as a catalyst, its solution chemistry is rarely studied. Among the previous Keggin-type polyoxoniobates,⁴ Nyman *et al.* reported phosphate-decorated lacunary Keggin-type polyoxoniobate as an insoluble sodium salt, Na₁₅[(PO₂)₃PNb₉O₃₄]·22H₂O (Nb₉P₄), which was characterized by crystallography and MAS NMR.⁵ Recently we synthesized sets of peroxoniobophosphate clusters as water-soluble precursors for electron-beam-patterned niobium-phosphate films.⁶ Among them, the [HNb₄P₂O₁₄(O₂)₄]^{5−} cluster (peroxo-Nb₄P₂) is stable over a wide pH range, spanning into acidic conditions, which is remarkable in itself because polyoxoniobates are generally only stable and soluble in neutral to basic solutions. We here report the synthesis, structure and characterization of a Keggin-like mixed niobium-phosphate cluster as a highly soluble tetramethylammonium (TMA) salt, (TMA)₉H₃Nb₉P₅O₄₁·28H₂O (Nb₉P₅). The new cluster Nb₉P₅ features a central phosphate and four additional phosphates in the outer layers.

The Nb₉P₅ cluster was synthesized by hydrothermal reaction of hydrous niobium oxide, TMAOH and phosphoric acid.

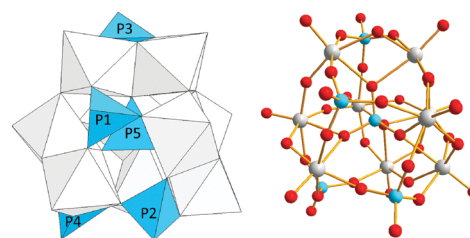


Fig. 1 Polyhedral (left) and ball-and-stick (right) drawing of Nb₉P₅ cluster (Nb: gray, P: blue, O: red).

The solution pH is a key factor for the formation of Nb₉P₅. In the given synthesis condition (see ESI†), Nb₉P₅ forms exclusively and the solution pH = 9 after reaction. When a larger amount of TMAOH was used to make pH = 10 after reaction, a mixture of Nb₉P₅ and Keggin-type [PNb₁₄O₄₂]^{9−} cluster (PNb₁₄) formed,⁷ as we determined by electrospray-ionization mass spectrometry (ESI-MS). The PNB₁₄ dominated when the pH of the reaction solution was higher than 11.

The shape of Nb₉P₅ is similar to the Keggin-type cluster, but it possesses no symmetry [Fig. 1]. There are some irregularly shaped polyoxoniobate clusters reported previously.⁸ Symmetry is lost in Nb₉P₅ because of the multiple substitutions of PO₄ groups for the different NbO₆ sites in the normal Keggin structure. The structure of Nb₉P₅ is significantly different from Nb₉P₄, which possesses pseudo-C₃ symmetry.⁵ The previous Nb₉P₄ structure has three neighboring phosphate groups bound to the lacunary-Keggin PNB₉ unit and there are two coordinating Na⁺ ions between the phosphate groups. Examples of similar mixed-addenda polyoxometalates with group 15 elements include an arsenate-containing polyoxovanadate.⁹ In the structure of Nb₉P₅, there are four metal-oxo triads bonded to the central phosphate. The basal plane of the Nb₉P₅ cluster in Fig. 1 (farthest from the viewer) is a regular Nb₃O₁₃ triad, which is a common building unit in Keggin ions. The other three triads are Nb₂PO₁₂ moieties. The two Nb₂PO₁₂ triads are in a similar orientation, with P3 and P4 coordinating the basal Nb₃O₁₃ triad, while the other Nb₂PO₁₂ triad that contains P2 is rotated about 120° counterclockwise relative to

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the others. These three $\text{Nb}_2\text{PO}_{12}$ triads are connected by an additional phosphate (P1) at the top of the Nb_9P_5 cluster (closest from viewer). In the crystal structure, nine TMA counteranions are found and this number of TMA agrees with elemental analysis result. Thus three charge-balancing protons should be bound on the cluster to make the formula as $[\text{H}_3\text{Nb}_9\text{P}_5\text{O}_{41}]^{9-}$. The positions of the protons could not be determined, by either crystallography nor by bond-valence sum calculation of the oxygen atoms.

The ESI-MS of the Nb_9P_5 cluster [Fig. S1, ESI†] exhibit a relatively complex multi-peak pattern when compared to simpler spectra of other substituted polyoxoniobate clusters that we have synthesized.^{6,7,10} There are multiple side peaks near the assigned peaks, which could be due to loss or addition of water from the Nb_9P_5 cluster during the ionization or drying steps in the ESI-MS analysis. Multiple side peaks in ESI-MS were also observed for $[\text{H}_2\text{Mn}^{\text{IV}}\text{Nb}_{10}\text{O}_{32}]^{8-}$ cluster.¹¹ There are also some unassigned peaks between $800 < m/z < 950$, which must be due to fragmentation of Nb_9P_5 .

The ^{31}P NMR spectrum of an aqueous Nb_9P_5 solution shows four phosphate peaks assignable to the cluster [Fig. 2]. The integrated peak areas, from left to right, are approximately 1:2:1:1, which agree with five different phosphate groups in the cluster stoichiometry. We hypothesized that the average P–O lengths within PO_4 groups [Fig. S2, ESI†] and ^{31}P chemical shifts are related. Assuming that the chemical shift depends on the average P–O lengths to the nucleus, we assign the peak at -1.2 ppm as the central phosphate (P5), the peak at -3.8 ppm as P1 and P4. These P1 and P4 have similar average P–O lengths, so the merged peak in the NMR spectra is understandable if the chemical shieldings were also similar. Accordingly, we assign the peak at -6.4 as P2, and the most upfield peak at -11.3 ppm as P3. The peak assignment is also in agreement with the peak widths. The P3 has the widest range of P–O lengths in the X-ray structure, and also the broadest peak in the NMR spectra, and the central P5 has the most regular P–O lengths and correspondingly the sharpest peak. The correlation suggests that asymmetry of the ^{31}P nuclei are reflected in the spectra. The ^{31}P MAS NMR spectra shows three overlapping peaks (-1.6 , -2.4 , and -3.2 ppm) in the more downfield region and a broader upfield peak at -10.1 ppm [Fig. 2]. Deconvolution and integration of the peaks gives approximate ratios of 1:2:2 for (-1.6 ppm and -2.4 ppm): -3.2 ppm: -10.1 ppm peaks. The peaks at -1.6 and -2.4 ppm are assigned to the central P5.

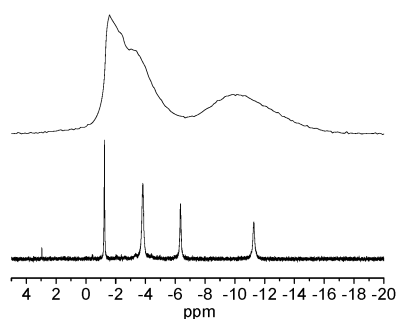


Fig. 2 ^{31}P MAS-NMR (top) and ^{31}P solution NMR (bottom, 30 mM in D_2O) spectra of Nb_9P_5 .

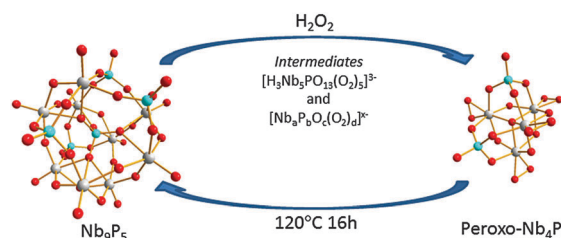
Similarly to the solution ^{31}P NMR peak assignment, the -3.2 ppm peak is assigned to P1 and P4, and the peak at -10.1 ppm is assigned to P2 and P3. In the ^{31}P MAS NMR study of Nb_9P_4 , two broad peaks were observed at 6.1 and 1.4 ppm, and these are assigned to outer phosphate and central phosphate groups, respectively.⁵ We speculate that the considerable downfield shift of the outer phosphate group in Nb_9P_4 compared to Nb_9P_5 can be due to the coordination of Na^+ .

The Nb_9P_5 was also characterized *via* FT-IR and Raman spectroscopy [Fig. S3, ESI†]. The FT-IR spectra show multiple P–O bands in the range of 1000 – 1200 cm^{-1} , which arise from different PO_4 groups. The $\text{Nb}=\text{O}$ band is located at 900 cm^{-1} and weaker M–O–M bands are observed below 800 cm^{-1} . In the Raman spectra, multiple overlapping $\text{Nb}=\text{O}$ bands near 900 cm^{-1} are observed, possibly due to the asymmetric structure of Nb_9P_5 . We assign the weak bands in 950 – 1100 cm^{-1} to different PO_4 groups.

The stability of the Nb_9P_5 cluster in different pH conditions was examined by using ESI-MS [Fig. S4, ESI†]. The pH of the 6 mM solution of Nb_9P_5 was 7.3, and the cluster was apparently kinetically stable in solution for many months. The Nb_9P_5 cluster was stable until pH 12 when titrated with TMAOH. The cluster was also kinetically stable when titrated with HCl until pH 3. The solution at $\text{pH} < 3$, however, became a transparent hydrogel after a few days, which indicates a slow proton-induced charge neutralization, rearrangement and condensation.

The key point is that this Nb_9P_5 cluster provides another example of an aqueous niobate cluster that can be processed in acidic solutions. This stability in acidic region was also observed for the peroxoniobophosphates,⁶ but most of other polyoxoniobate clusters tend to precipitate as hydrous niobium oxide below $\text{pH} \leq 4$ –5.

We found that the Nb_9P_5 cluster could be reversibly converted to the peroxo- Nb_4P_2 cluster [Scheme 1] when H_2O_2 is added. The conversion process was monitored *via* ESI-MS and ^{31}P NMR after addition of the stoichiometric amount of H_2O_2 . In the ESI-MS, we observed a set of new complex peaks with lower intensity in the m/z regions near those of the Nb_9P_5 [Fig. 3]. These new peaks persist for many hours after adding H_2O_2 . This persistence suggests that peroxo- Nb_9P_5 or similar peroxo-Keggin-like species form. We failed to isolate these transient species for crystallization. Other new peaks centered at $m/z = 288.8$ grew and diminished in an hour after adding H_2O_2 . We assign this putative new species as $[\text{H}_3\text{Nb}_5\text{PO}_{13}(\text{O}_2)_5]^{3-}$, based on m/z value [Fig. 3]. The evolution of ESI-MS peaks show that the peroxo- Nb_4P_2 forms exclusively with time. To further understand the



Scheme 1 The interconversion reaction between Nb_9P_5 and peroxo- Nb_4P_2 .



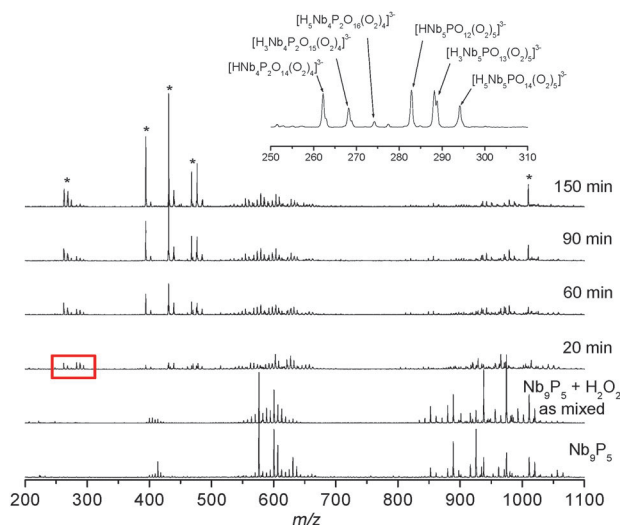


Fig. 3 Time-dependent ESI-MS spectra of Nb_9P_5 solution after adding 2 equivalents of H_2O_2 . The inset shows more detailed peak assignments. The peaks marked with asterisks correspond to peroxo- Nb_4P_2 .

reaction, ^{31}P NMR spectra were collected after adding H_2O_2 [Fig. 4]. The ^{31}P NMR peaks of Nb_9P_5 shift and split after addition of hydrogen peroxide, which indicates that a range of different peroxo- Nb_9P_5 or similar compounds form as transient intermediates. Chemical shifts of the transient species are not much different from Nb_9P_5 , which suggests to us that the structures of the transient species can be similar to Nb_9P_5 , but perhaps decorated differently with peroxo groups that affect the ^{31}P chemical shifts. This observation is consistent with the ESI-MS results that the transient ^{31}P NMR peaks show partial dissociation and rearrangement of the molecule, but not wholesale destruction. The sharp transient peak at -1 ppm is tentatively assigned to $[\text{H}_3\text{Nb}_5\text{PO}_{13}(\text{O}_2)_5]^{3-}$, which was suggested by ESI-MS.

We note that well resolved ^{31}P NMR peaks are observable only when a stoichiometric amount of H_2O_2 is added; only a few broad peaks are observed during the reaction when more H_2O_2

is added, possibly due to fast speciation changes and disorder upon peroxidation. The reaction is complete after one day when slight excess H_2O_2 is added, but the reaction is faster when a larger excess of H_2O_2 is added. The growing peak of peroxo- Nb_4P_2 shifts upfield to -1 ppm during the reaction, which might be due to an increasing concentration of peroxo- Nb_4P_2 . When the reaction is complete, only the peak of peroxo- Nb_4P_2 and a small phosphate peak near 1 ppm are observed [Fig. 4].

The reverse reaction, converting peroxo- Nb_4P_2 to Nb_9P_5 , can be achieved by hydrothermal treatment of a solution of peroxo- Nb_4P_2 at 120°C overnight. It is not surprising that heat destroys the peroxide moieties, but the Nb_9P_5 forms readily because both clusters have a similar Nb:P ratio and because Nb_9P_5 is stable at near-neutral conditions ($\text{pH} \sim 7$). The sensitivity of the peroxide moieties to heat suggests a strategy for laser-patterning of films.

In summary, a new niobium-phosphate cluster is described that is stable over a wide range of solution pH. This cluster thus adds to the small library of polyoxoniobate compounds that can be processed in acidic solutions. Most interestingly, the cluster can reversibly interconvert to and from the peroxo- Nb_4P_2 , which suggests an easy means of patterning. This new cluster may be viewed as a molecular form of the solid niobium-phosphate catalyst that is so useful in industrial applications.

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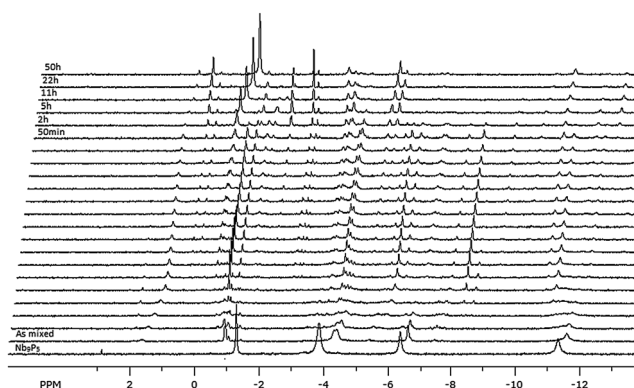


Fig. 4 Change of ^{31}P NMR spectra of Nb_9P_5 (30 mM) as a function of time after the addition of one equivalent of H_2O_2 . The spectra are slightly offset to x-axis to show the peak changes more clearly. The spectra were taken every 3 minutes after addition of H_2O_2 for 1 hour and the last spectrum was taken 50 hours later.



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