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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 $\text{HC}=\text{CH}$ sites adjacent to a fluorine substituent.

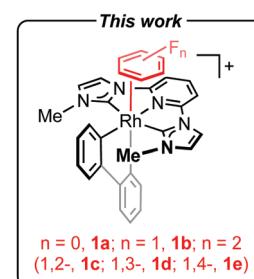
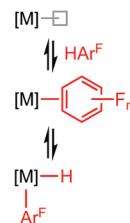
Partially fluorinated benzenes are chemically robust and weakly coordinating substrates, for which there is a paucity of late transition metal π -complexes.¹ Whilst well-defined examples can be found in the literature they are almost exclusively limited to half sandwich formulations, where the arene 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 $\text{HC}=\text{CH} > \text{HC}=\text{CF} > \text{FC}=\text{CF}$, with the strongest η^2 -arene complexes formed at the $\text{HC}=\text{CH}$ 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 $[\text{Rh}(\text{CNC-Me})(\text{biph})(\eta^2\text{-arene})]^+$ (Scheme 1; arene = C_6H_6 , **1a**; FC_6H_5 , **1b**; 1,2- $\text{F}_2\text{C}_6\text{H}_4$, **1c**; 1,3- $\text{F}_2\text{C}_6\text{H}_4$, **1d**; 1,4- $\text{F}_2\text{C}_6\text{H}_4$, **1e**) that corroborate this conclusion experimentally.

To enable systematic synthesis of the target complexes, $[\text{Rh}(\text{CNC-Me})(\text{biph})(\kappa^1\text{-ClCH}_2\text{Cl})]^+$ **2** was ultimately identified

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

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C–H bond activation of fluorobenzenes



Scheme 1 Intermediacy of η^2 -adducts in the C–H bond activation of fluoroarenes. $[\text{B}(3,5-(\text{CF}_3)_2\text{C}_6\text{H}_3)_4]^-$ anion omitted for clarity.

as the most convenient well-defined precursor and prepared using a silver-based transmetalation procedure involving reaction of $[\text{Ag}(\text{CNC-Me})]^+$ with $[\text{Rh}(\text{biph})\text{Cl}(\text{tBu}_2\text{PCH}_2\text{PtBu}_2)]$ and halide abstraction in CH_2Cl_2 (80% yield; see ESI[†] for solid-state structure, $\text{Rh}-\text{Cl} = 2.5932(7)$ 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 ($\Delta E^\ddagger = 75 \pm 1$ kJ mol⁻¹, $\Delta S^\ddagger = +80 \pm 5$ J K⁻¹ mol⁻¹, $\Delta G_{298\text{K}}^\ddagger = 52 \pm 3$ kJ mol⁻¹ in CD_2Cl_2).⁶ In the latter case, selective removal of CH_2Cl_2 *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 CD_2Cl_2 ; with one equivalent of the respective free arene observed by ¹H and ¹⁹F 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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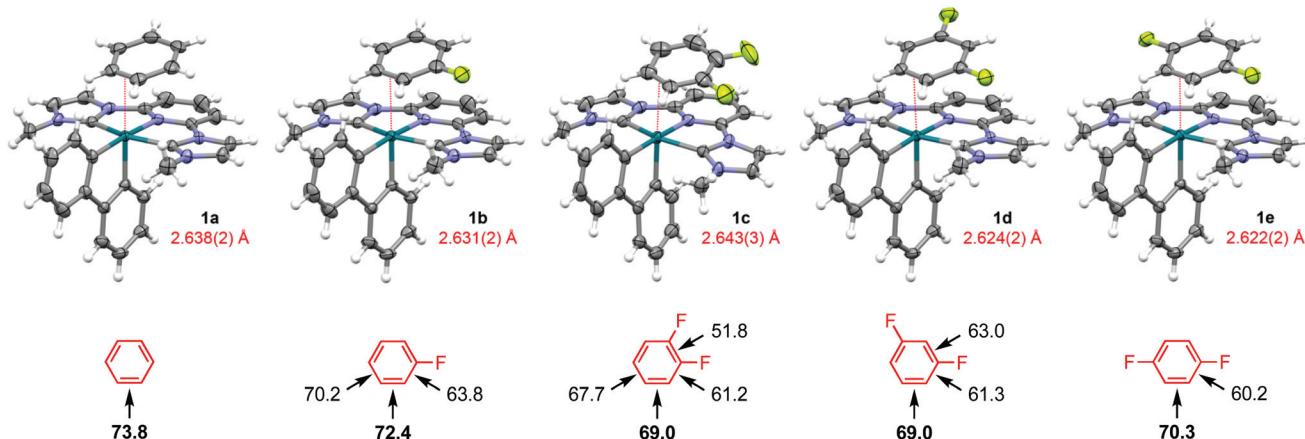


Fig. 1 Solid-state structures of η^2 -arene complexes **1a–e** (top) and calculated binding energies (kJ mol⁻¹, bottom). Solid-state structures drawn with thermal ellipsoids at 50% probability, minor disordered components (local symmetry equivalent F atom in **1b**) and $[\text{B}(3,5-(\text{CF}_3)_2\text{C}_6\text{H}_3)_4]^-$ anion omitted for clarity.

The rigid chelates of the biphen and CNC pincer ligands provide a framework for pseudo-octahedral metal geometries in **1a–e**, where η^2 -arene coordination [$\text{Rh}-(\text{C}=\text{C}) = 2.622(2)$ – $2.643(2)$ Å] completes the coordination sphere and enables attainment of 18 VE configurations. The observed selectivity for coordination of the fluoroarenes *via* the $\text{HC}=\text{CH}$ 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 $\omega\text{B97X-D3/def2-TZVP(-f)}$ 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/e** 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(III) 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 $\text{HC}=\text{CH}$ 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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