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Dual H-bond activation of NHC–Au(I)–Cl complexes with amide functionalized side-arms assisted by H-bond donor substrates or acid additives†

 Otto Seppänen,^{ib ‡a} Santeri Aikonen,^{ib ‡a} Mikko Muuronen,^{§a} Carla Alamillo-Ferrer,^b Jordi Burés,^{ib b} and Juho Helaja^{ib *a}

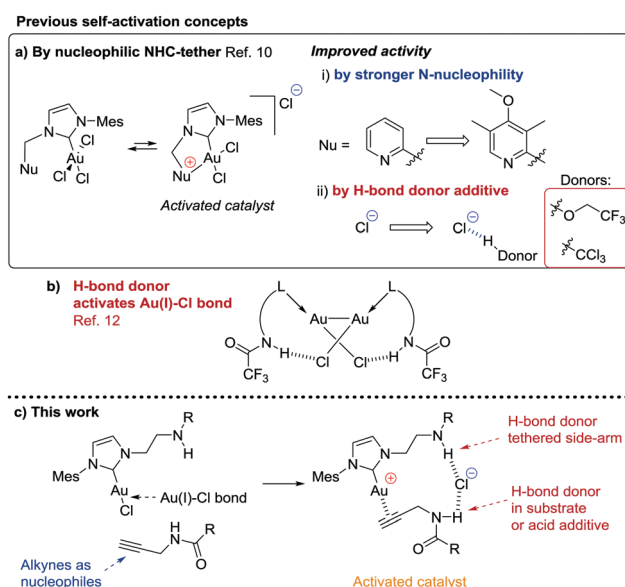
Novel approach with amide-tethered H-bond donor NHC ligands enabled Au(I)-catalysis via H-bonding. The plain NHC–Au(I)–Cl complex catalysed conversions of terminal N-propynamides to oxazolines, and enyne cycloisomerization with an acid additive, in DCM at RT. DFT calculations enlightened the function of the side-arm in the activation.

Phosphine and N-heterocyclic carbene (NHC) ligands (L) have brought about adjustable stability, activity, and selectivity for homogeneous gold-catalysed carbon–carbon π -bond activations.^{1,2} To access the active cationic gold catalyst from ligated gold–chloride salt (LAuCl), the precatalyst is usually activated with AgX salts by exchanging the Cl[−] counterion to a non- or weakly coordinating one, e.g., BF₄[−], OTf[−], NTF₂[−], PF₆[−], SbF₆[−].³ Many of the activated LAuX catalysts are also commercially available, but these salts are often hygroscopic. *In situ* activation, on the other hand, brings an extra step of removing the precipitate or alternatively carrying out the reaction in the presence of AgCl. The precipitating AgCl residues are non-innocent in gold-catalysis⁴ and multiple roles have been assigned for the counter ions.^{5,6} Silver-free activations of LAuCl have been reported with sodium salts, e.g., Na[BAR^F₄],⁷ and with strong acid, HBF₄.⁸

Multifunctional NHC-ligands have shown to be capable to deliver additional designed functions for homogeneous TM catalysis.⁹ Recently, ambiphilic ligand Au(I/III) activation strategies have been developed to generate active catalyst without the need of ion exchange. We¹⁰ and others¹¹ have utilised a pyridine side-arm to replace one chloride ion from the Au(III)

centre with a hemilabile N–Au σ -coordination (Scheme 1a). Additionally, we noted that higher activity was achieved with a more nucleophilic pyridine moiety and in the presence of H-bond donor solvent or additive,¹⁰ which helped to stabilise the cleaved chloride. Previously, Sen and Gabbai integrated the H-bond donor moiety into a phosphine ligand and observed N–H...Cl interactions in the dimer together with aurophilic interaction (Scheme 1b).¹² The dimer equipped with NHCOCF₃ tethered ligand proved to be catalytically active for cyclization of propargylamides, while under same conditions bare PPh₃AuCl with PhNHCOCF₃ additive was inactive.¹²

Inspired by these findings, we hypothesised that amide-based H-bond donor tethers in NHC ligands would help to activate the Au(I)–Cl bond directly with alkynes *via* N–H...Cl interactions, see Scheme 1c. The approach would circumvent



Scheme 1 Ambiphilic ligand Au-catalyst activation modes.

^a Department of Chemistry, University of Helsinki, A. I. Virtasen aukio 1, P.O. Box 55, 00014, Finland. E-mail: juho.helaja@helsinki

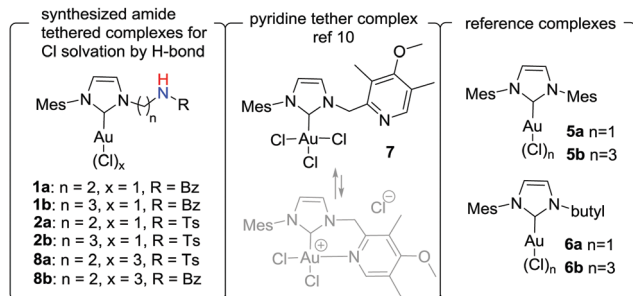
^b The University of Manchester, School of Chemistry, Oxford Road, M13 9PL Manchester, UK

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‡ These authors have equal contributions.

§ M. M. current address: BASF SE, Carl-Bosch-Str. 38, 67056 Ludwigshafen, Germany.





Scheme 2 Studied complexes for catalysis. (Mes = mesityl).

the need to create the vacant site with a hemilabile ligand, thus offering a straightforward approach to activated gold(I)-catalysts.

To probe this hypothesis, we synthesized Au(I) NHC complexes **1a–2b** with benzoyl and tosyl amide tethers bridged with ethyl and propyl linkers (Scheme 2). We selected the cycloisomerization of *N*-(prop-2-yn-1-yl)benzamide **3a** to oxazoline **4a** as a test reaction to investigate the catalytic efficiency due to its popularity in gold catalysis studies.¹³

In catalysts screening (Table 1), the ethyl amide tethered NHC–Au(I) complex **1a** yielded a clean 73% conversion of **3a** to **4a**, while the corresponding tosyl functionalized amide **2a** gave an excellent 95% yield after 3 h monitoring period. Elongating the ethyl arms to propyls lowered the yields to 58% and 67% for Bz (**1b**) and Ts (**2b**) functionalized NHC–Au(I) catalysts, respectively.

The NHC gold complexes without H-bond donors (**5a–6b**) proved to be inactive, while the same complexes gave modest (8%) to decent (68%) yields of **4a** with AgOTs (entries 5–8). Surprisingly, our previously developed self-activated Au(III) complex **7**¹⁰ showed only negligible activity for the reaction, as well as the gold(III)-catalysts **8a** and **8b** (entries 9–11). Although AgOTs or TsOH additives promoted the reaction with **8a** and **8b**, the catalysts were gradually reduced to the respective Au(I)-complexes (see **8b** + TsOH the reaction NMR monitoring in ESI[†]). The solvent screening (Table S2, ESI[†]) exposed that chlorinated solvents CD₂Cl₂ and CDCl₃ favour the catalysis, while the performance was sluggish in acetone-*d*₆, CD₃CN and CD₃OD.

Table 1 Catalysts screening

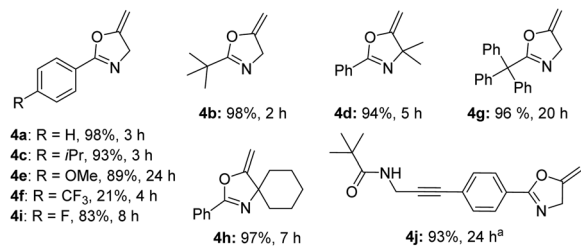
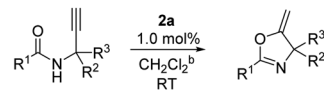
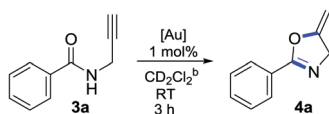
| Entry | [Au] | Yield ^a [%] of 4a | Entry | [Au] | Yield ^a [%] of 4a |
|-------|-----------|-------------------------------------|-------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | 1a | 73 | 7 | 6a | 0 (68) ^c |
| 2 | 2a | 95 | 8 | 6b | 0 (30) ^c |
| 3 | 1b | 58 | 9 | 7 | Trace |
| 4 | 2b | 67 | 10 | 8a | 20 |
| 5 | 5a | 0 (55) ^c | 11 | 8b | 5 |
| 6 | 5b | 0 (8) ^c | 12 | IPrAuNTf ₂ | 58 |

^a Determined by ¹H NMR using trimethoxybenzene as internal standard. ^b Water content 150 ppm. ^c With 1 mol% of AgOTs.

Importantly, the complexes **1a–2b** showed comparable or superior activity in comparison to the 58% yield of **4a** with commercially available IPrAuNTf₂ (entry 12). The performance of catalysts **1a–2b** was also better than what has been reported for other NHC or P ligands in homogeneous gold-catalytic conversion with weakly or non-coordinative counter ions (Table S1, ESI[†]).

Next, we studied the substrate scope for the catalytic alkynyl amide oxazoline conversion (Scheme 3) with 1 mol% loading of **2a** in DCM at RT. Several propynamides; ^tBu (**3b**), electroneutral and rich aryls (**3a, c–e**) provided excellent yields of oxazolines **4a–e**, though an extended reaction time of 24 h was necessary for 4-methoxy-phenyl oxazoline **4e**. Curiously electron deficient 4-CF₃-phenyl amide (**3f**) provided an unclear reaction and a poor yield of product **4f**, while the 4-F-phenyl oxazoline **4i** was isolated in high 83% yield. Interestingly, bulky functional groups such as triphenylmethyl as R¹ substituent (**4g**) and spirocyclohexyl as R² substituent (**4h**) were well tolerated and excellent yields of 96% and 97%, respectively, were received after longer reaction times. Unlike complexes without functional group tethers,¹⁴ the catalyst **2a** proved to be chemoselective towards terminal alkynes as terminally functionalised alkynes **3k** and **3l**, see ESI[†] were unreactive. Similarly, in the case of substrate **3j** that is equipped with both types of alkynes, the terminal alkynylamide cyclised selectively producing **4j** with 93% yield. Additionally, the catalyst was not active for 6-*exo*-dig cyclisation in oxazoline **4m** synthesis (ESI[†]). In the case of terminally substituted alkynes **3j, 3k**, and **3l**, the computational study indicated that steric hindrance between the ligand and the alkynes' terminal substituent limited the reactivity (see Fig. S5, ESI[†]).

The effect of the concentration of water in DCM for the activation of the catalyst (**2a**) became a relevant issue, since aqueous media was previously found necessary for Brønsted acid self-activated ligands (Scheme 1a).¹¹ We studied the effect of small amounts of water in the solution for the catalytic activity of **2a** in the conversion of **3a** to **4a** in ¹H NMR, see Fig. 1. The results clearly show that even in the absence of water (0 ppm), the catalyst **2a** is activated. The gradual increase of the water content (Fig. 1 and ESI[†]) up to 200 ppm increased the rate and the yield of the reaction, but a higher water content of 250

Scheme 3 Substrate scope in oxazoline synthesis with isolated yields. ^aCatalyst loading 3.0 mol%. ^bWater content in all reactions 150 ppm.

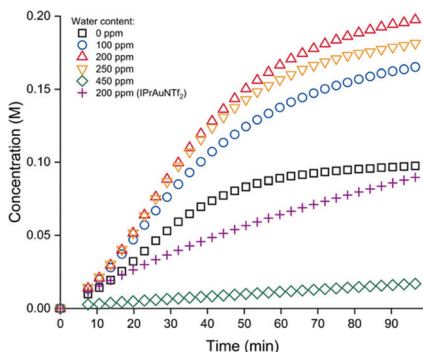


Fig. 1 Kinetic monitoring of **2a** catalysed conversion of **3a** to **4a** conversion in various water contents. [**3a**] = 0.226 M, and [**2a**]/IPrAuNTf₂] = 0.0023 M, in CD₂Cl₂ at 25 °C.

and 450 ppm decreased the rate or even inhibited the reaction, respectively. A plausible explanation for the behaviour is that the small amount of water could assist in the anion solvation (see ESI[†]) or in the proton transfer,^{15–17} meanwhile higher amount of water lowers the proton's acidity.¹⁵ An alternative interpretation is that H-bonding interactions between the amide tether and chloride anion are weakened by the water content above 200 ppm thus inhibiting the activation step.

To understand the side-arm's mechanistic role in the Au–Cl bond activation, we compared the computational free energy profiles for catalysts **1a**, **2a**, and **5a** (Fig. 2). Noteworthy, both benzoyl and tosyl amide side-arms lowered the activation free energy barrier in the alkyne addition to the gold, **TS1**, by 2.2 and 3.6 kcal mol^{−1}, respectively, compared to **5a** (Fig. 2). The chloride was hydrogen bonded to the side-arm's NH with both **1a** and **2a** while the NH of the substrate coordinated side-arm's sulfonyl oxygen with **2a** (Fig. 2) and the chloride with **1a**. Similar bidentate coordination to chloride in **2a-TS1'** (ESI[†]) was close in energy to **1a-TS1**: 14.0 kcal mol^{−1}, whereas the

barrier was 18.2 kcal mol^{−1} in the absence of substrate's hydrogen bond coordination in **2a-TS1''** (see ESI[†]).

All catalysts then converged to a tricoordinate complex **B**, from which the chloride spontaneously cleaves (**TS2s** in Fig. 2). The chloride anion hydrogen bonded with NH of the substrate, and with the side-arm's NH if the catalyst was **1a** or **2a** (**Cs** in Fig. 2). The bidentate hydrogen bond donation from the NHs of substrate and side-arm to chloride stabilised **B**, **TS2**, and **C**, over the monodentate hydrogen bonding with **5a** and the stabilisation was stronger with a better H-bond donor, tosyl amide (Fig. 2). Importantly, bidentate H-bonding with **1a** and **2a** favoured the bicoordinate gold-complex over tricoordinate by 1.3 and 2.0 kcal mol^{−1}, respectively, whereas the ΔG was thermoneutral between **B** and **C** for **5a**.

The rate limiting step of the reaction can either be the C–O bond formation or the protodeauration step for the catalyst **2a**. This will depend on whether the chloride anion is bound to the catalytic complex by hydrogen bonds or solvated by small water cluster. In the former case, the rate-determining step is the protodeauration with 21.3 kcal mol^{−1} activation free energy barrier. In the latter case, the rate-determining step is significantly faster with an activation free energy barrier of 17.2 kcal mol^{−1} for the C–O bond formation (ESI[†]). This agrees with the observed water effect in Fig. 1. The barriers for **5a** are systematically higher, see ESI[†].

Beyond the oxazoline synthesis, we investigated how **2a** performed in other classic catalytic L-Au(i) transformations. Echavarren and co-workers have originally reported L-Au(i) catalysed cycloisomerization of enynes (**9** → **10** + **11**, Table 2) and observed no reactivity with bare [PPh₃AuCl] complex, but exchange of coordinative chloride counterion to SbF₆[−] or BF₄[−] allowed smooth catalytic cycloisomerization at RT.¹⁸ In our case, the enyne **9** was unreactive with 2 mol% loading of **2a** alone (entry 1 in Table 2). However, a 5 mol% addition of mono- and dichloroacetic acid additive gave selectively isomer **10** with

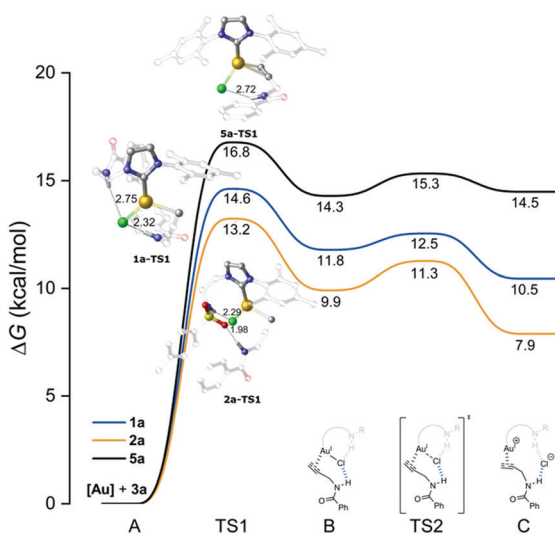


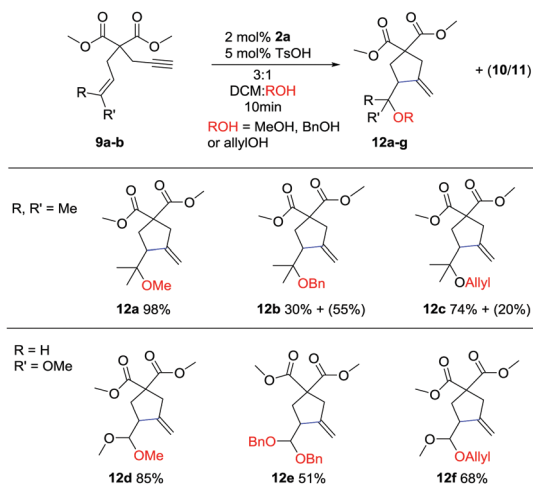
Fig. 2 Free energy profiles for Au–Cl bond activation with catalysts **1a** (blue line), **2a** (yellow line), and **5a** (black line). Full computational details are in ESI[†].

Table 2 Screening of additives for enyne cycloisomerization

| Entry | Additive | pK _a ^a | ΔG(Au–X) ^b | t | Yield ^c 10 : 11 (%) |
|-------|----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|--|
| 1 | — | — | — | 1 h | Trace : 0 |
| 2 | TFE | 73.2 | — | 1 h | Trace : 0 |
| 3 | AcOH | 59.3 | −0.5 | 1 h | Trace : 0 |
| 4 | ClCH ₂ COOH | 54.5 | 4.2 | 1 h | 50 : 0 |
| 5 | Cl ₂ CHCOOH | 50.7 | 7.2 | 1 h | 99 : 0 |
| 6 | Cl ₃ CCOOH | 48.4 | 9.3 | 40 min | 99 : 0 |
| 7 | TFA | 46.2 | 9.4 | 15 min | 99 : 0 |
| 8 | MsOH | 41.4 | 12.0 | 15 min | 45 : 54 |
| 9 | <i>p</i> -TsOH | 41.3 | 14.1 | 10 min | 66 : 33 |
| 10 | <i>p</i> -TsOH + 5a | 41.3 | 14.1 | 1 h | Trace : 0 |

^a Computed pK_a values in DCM, see ESI for details. ^b Au–X bond strength with the conjugate base relative to Au–Cl in kcal mol^{−1}, see ESI for details. ^c Determined by ¹H NMR using trimethoxybenzene as an internal standard.





Scheme 4 Substrate scope in enyne cycloisomerization, with isolated yields. Yield in parenthesis is the combined yield of products **10** and **11**.

50% and 99% yields, respectively. When TsOH was used as an additive a complete conversion to mixture of isomers **10** and **11** took place in 10 min.¹⁹ The acid additive was unable to activate the non-functionalized complex **5a** in similar efficiency and only traces of product was observed after 1 h (entry 10).

Because chloride's gold-affinity is higher²⁰ compared to all of the tested acid-additives (Table 2), we reason that the acidity of the additive is important. Inspection of Table 2 reveals that as the acidity of the additive approaches HCl's $pK_a(\text{DCE}) = 45.2$,²¹ chloride anion exchange takes place forming an active catalyst for enyne **9** cycloisomerization. Based on the activation mechanism of **2a** in Fig. 2 and in ESI,[†] we reason that the activation of Au–Cl bond with enyne **9** is too high in energy since the enyne substrate has no H-bond donors. Therefore, an acid-additive is needed to help in the activation *via* H-bonding, subsequent protonation and release of HCl, and generation of a loosely coordinating counterion (RCO_2^- or RSO_3^-).

The developed acid-assisted activation mechanism was then utilised in enyne cycloisomerization and nucleophilic alcohol (ROH) addition cascade reaction, following previous L-Au(I) catalysis reports (Scheme 4 and Table S3, ESI[†]).^{18,22} Full conversion was achieved for each case, and MeOH delivered the best yield of 98% for **12a** while allyl and benzyl alcohols gave lower yields. Similarly, good yields were obtained for OMe-substituted vinyl enyne substrates (**9d–9f**), but benzyl alcohol nucleophile substituted the methoxy group in the product **12e**.

In conclusion, we have developed H-bond donor tethered NHC-ligands for *in situ* activated L-Au(I)Cl catalysis. Ethyl tosyl amide functionalised Au(I) complex **2a** catalysed the oxazole synthesis selectively from terminal alkynes, and successful enyne cycloisomerization was accomplished with an acid additive. Computational analysis supports the dual H-bond donor assisted Au–Cl bond activation mechanism.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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