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# Spectroscopic investigation of photophysics and tautomerism of amino- and nitroporphycenes†

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Parent, unsubstituted porphycene and its two derivatives: 2,7,12,17-tetra-*n*-propylporphycene and 2,7,12,17-tetra-*t*-butylporphycene were substituted at the *meso* position with amino and nitro groups. These two families of porphycenes were characterized in detail with respect to their spectral, photophysical, and tautomeric properties. Two *trans* tautomers of similar energies coexist in the ground electronic state, but only one form dominates in the lowest excited singlet state. Absorption, magnetic circular dichroism (MCD), and emission anisotropy combined with quantum-chemical calculations led to the assignment of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  transitions in both tautomers. Compared with the parent porphycene, the  $S_1$ – $S_2$  energy gap significantly increases; for one tautomeric form, the effect is twice as large as for the other. Both amino- and nitroporphycenes emit single fluorescence; previously reported dual emission of aminoporphycenes is attributed to a degradation product. Introduction of bulky *t*-butyl groups leads to a huge decrease in fluorescence intensity; this effect, arising from the interaction of the *meso* substituent with the adjacent *t*-butyl moiety, is particularly strong in the nitro derivative.

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## Introduction

Porphycene (**Pc**), the first reported constitutional isomer of porphyrin,<sup>1</sup> is an important molecule for fundamental research and various possible applications. Spectral and photophysical parameters of porphycenes, such as strong absorption in the red part of the visible range and considerable triplet population yield, make this class of compounds promising agents in photodynamic therapy of cancer<sup>2</sup> or photoinactivation of microbes.<sup>3,4</sup> Other possible uses include application of porphycenes as artificial heme components,<sup>5</sup> building blocks in molecular electronics,<sup>6</sup> catalysts,<sup>7–10</sup> or liquid crystals.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding fundamental studies, porphycenes have been widely utilized as model systems for intramolecular hydrogen bond (HB) and tautomerism involving single or double hydrogen transfer.<sup>12</sup> The rectangular shape of the inner cavity composed of four nitrogen atoms leads to strong HBs, and,

in consequence, low tautomerization barriers. Under such conditions, tautomerization in solution is very fast (femto- and picoseconds);<sup>13</sup> moreover, it is governed by tunneling, both “deep” (occurring from the vibrational ground state) and thermally activated after excitation of specific vibrational modes.<sup>14</sup> Tautomerization in porphycenes has been studied in various experimental regimes: ensemble studies in condensed phases,<sup>13–24</sup> investigations of ultracold molecules isolated in supersonic jets<sup>25,26</sup> or helium nanodroplets,<sup>27</sup> and, finally, single molecule techniques involving fluorescence,<sup>28–31</sup> Raman,<sup>32,33</sup> and scanning probe microscopy.<sup>34–40</sup>

It has been demonstrated that photophysics of porphycenes and their tautomeric properties are strongly related. Even though most porphycene derivatives are good or moderate emitters, some spectacular exceptions have been reported. For instance, substitution with alkyl groups at the four *meso* positions (9,10,19,20-) lowers the fluorescence quantum yield by three orders of magnitude,<sup>20</sup> whereas 9,20-doubly substituted porphycenes do not reveal such an effect.<sup>24</sup> Fluorescence can be recovered by placing the chromophore in a rigid environment,<sup>20</sup> which suggests that rapid  $S_1$  radiationless deactivation involves a large amplitude geometry distortion. A good correlation was found between the fluorescence quantum yield of porphycenes and the distance between the nitrogen atoms linked by the intramolecular H-bond.<sup>23</sup> The latter is a reliable measure of the HB strength. Similar behavior has been reported for other porphycenes.<sup>41</sup>

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Interestingly, large changes in photophysics caused by modification of the geometry of the inner cavity can be induced even by “mild” substituents, *e.g.*, fluorine or alkyl. This raises a question of the influence on the photophysics of strong electron donating and electron accepting substituents, such as amino or nitro groups. Several amino-substituted porphycenes have been reported in the literature.<sup>19,42–45</sup> Nonell and coworkers studied 9-amino derivatives of porphycenes tetra-substituted at the  $\beta$  positions (2,7,12,17-) with phenyl,<sup>19,43,44</sup> propyl,<sup>45</sup> or methoxyethyl<sup>45</sup> moieties. They reported dual fluorescence, which was attributed to two *trans* tautomeric forms. Different decay times (in the range of a few nanoseconds), as well as different excitation spectra, indicated lack of excited state equilibrium between the two excited species. In particular, slow excited state tautomerization from the higher energy form was a rather unexpected result, given the rates previously reported for other porphycenes.

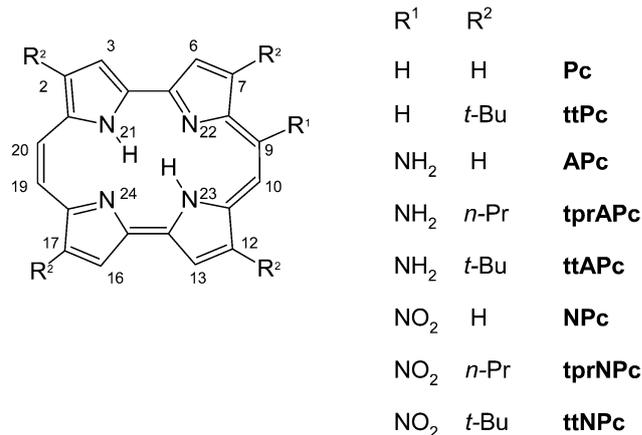
Nitro-substituted porphycenes have not been explored much. Absorption spectra are available for 9-nitro-2,7,12,17-tetra-*n*-propylporphycene<sup>46</sup> and 9-nitro-2,7,12,17-tetraphenylporphycene,<sup>43</sup> and 9-acetoxy-19-nitro-2,7,12,17-tetra-*n*-propylporphycene.<sup>46</sup> Arad *et al.* reported a single emission of 9-nitro-2,7,12,17-tetraphenylporphycene.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, while the decay time of 3.9 ns is only 2.5 times shorter than that reported for bare porphycene in the same solvent (toluene), the difference in fluorescence quantum yield is dramatic: the emission is 15 times stronger in the parent, unsubstituted compound.

The photophysical data reported for 9-aminoporphycenes bearing different substituents at the  $\beta$  positions indicate that the photophysical parameters can be strongly affected by the substituents. For example, fluorescence quantum yield in toluene is over an order of magnitude stronger in the tetrapropyl derivative<sup>42</sup> than in the tetraphenyl analogue<sup>43</sup> (0.06 *vs.* 0.004, respectively). Therefore, in order to accurately determine the influence of nitro and amino derivatives, singly substituted porphycenes are required. This was our motivation for the present work. We have synthesized 9-aminoporphycene (**APc**) and 9-nitroporphycene (**NPc**), as well as their corresponding 2,7,12,17-tetra-*n*-propyl derivatives (**tprAPc** and **tprNPc**, respectively), and determined their spectral and photophysical parameters. In order to assess the additional role of bulky substituents at the  $\beta$  positions on the spectra and photophysical parameters, tetra-*t*-butyl analogs of **APc** and **NPc** (**ttAPc** and **ttNPc**, respectively, see Scheme 1) have also been investigated and characterized. Combination of the experimental results with DFT modeling was used to understand the spectral and tautomeric properties of these two classes of compounds.

## Results

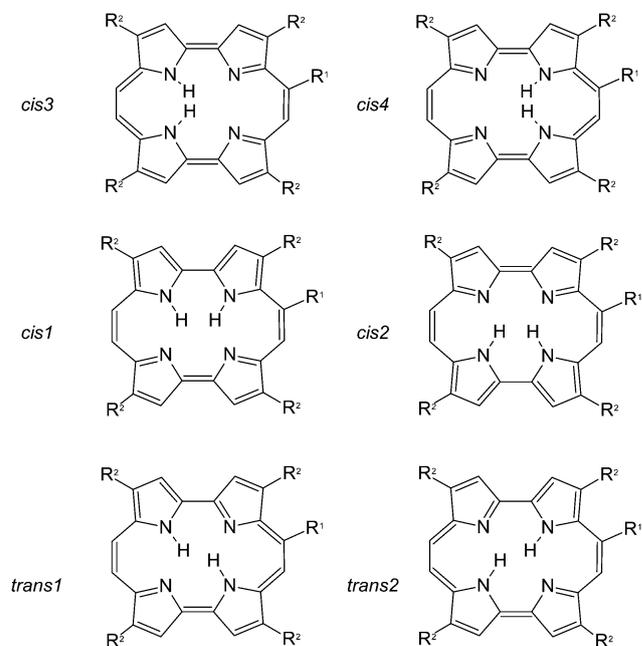
### Theoretical predictions of the relative energies of tautomeric forms

Six possible tautomeric forms are possible for porphycenes (Scheme 2), pairwise degenerate in **Pc** and **ttPc**, but not in the 9-substituted derivatives. While discussing relative stabilities in



Scheme 1 Structures of porphycenes and the acronyms used.

the ground state, we do not take into account the nonplanar *cis3* and *cis4* forms, whose energy is estimated to be much higher. DFT calculations predict that in the ground electronic state the two lowest energy forms in both amino and nitro derivatives are nearly degenerate: two *trans* tautomers are separated by less than 0.5 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup> (Tables 1 and 2). One should note, however, that the predicted energy ordering changes: the lowest energy tautomeric species correspond to *trans1* and *trans2* in the amino and nitro derivatives, respectively. Upon excitation to S<sub>1</sub>, the *trans2*–*trans1* energy difference becomes large, more than ten times that of S<sub>0</sub> for the **APc** and five times for **NPc**. Moreover, the *cis2* form of **APc** and the *cis1* form of **NPc** are calculated for S<sub>1</sub> at a lower energy than that of the less stable *trans* species. One should therefore consider a possible presence of the *cis* species, in particular in the lowest excited state.



Scheme 2 Possible tautomeric forms.



**Table 1** Calculated relative energies (kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>) and permanent dipole moments of the tautomeric forms of porphycene (**Pc**), 9-aminoporphycene (**APc**), and 9-nitroporphycene (**NPc**)

	S <sub>0</sub> <sup>a</sup>	S <sub>1</sub> <sup>b</sup>	μ(S <sub>0</sub> ) [D]	μ(S <sub>1</sub> ) <sup>bc</sup> [D]
<b>Pc</b>				
<i>trans</i>	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) 0.00 (0.00)	0.00	0.00
<i>cis</i>	2.30 (1.74)	1.99 (1.67) 2.13 (1.55)	1.31	1.20
<b>APc</b>				
<i>trans1</i>	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) 0.00 (0.00)	2.30	3.63 3.14
<i>trans2</i>	0.28 (0.24)	3.20 (2.69) 3.01 (2.37)	2.47	3.79 3.39
<i>cis1</i>	2.03 (1.51)	5.54 (4.36) 5.40 (4.22)	2.99	3.95 3.45
<i>cis2</i>	2.55 (1.91)	2.01 (1.67) 2.15 (1.77)	2.40	3.72 3.63
<b>NPc</b>				
<i>trans1</i>	0.42 (0.37)	2.35 (2.08) 2.12 (2.00)	6.54	6.77 6.38
<i>trans2</i>	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) 0.00 (0.00)	6.85	8.68 7.70
<i>cis1</i>	2.60 (1.98)	2.29 (1.85) 2.43 (1.98)	6.66	8.23 7.06
<i>cis2</i>	2.16 (1.64)	3.76 (3.10) 3.78 (2.90)	7.05	7.72 7.67

<sup>a</sup> In parentheses, ZPVE-corrected values. <sup>b</sup> First row, B3LYP/6-31+G(d,p), second row, CAM-B3LYP/6-31+G(d,p) results. <sup>c</sup> Calculated for the optimized S<sub>1</sub> geometries.

**Table 2** Calculated relative energies (kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>) and permanent dipole moments of the tautomeric forms of 2,7,12,17-tetra-*t*-butyl substituted porphycene (**ttPc**), 9-aminoporphycene (**ttAPc**), and 9-nitroporphycene (**ttNPc**)

	S <sub>0</sub> <sup>a</sup>	S <sub>1</sub> <sup>b</sup>	μ(S <sub>0</sub> ) [D]	μ(S <sub>1</sub> ) <sup>bc</sup> [D]
<b>ttPc</b>				
<i>trans</i>	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) 0.00 (0.00)	0.00	0.00 0.00
<i>cis</i>	2.07 (1.53)	1.68 (1.28) 1.90 (1.28)	1.44	1.19 1.63
<b>ttAPc</b>				
<i>trans1</i>	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) 0.00 (0.00)	2.09	3.04 2.50
<i>trans2</i>	0.06 (0.00)	3.22 (2.82) 3.06 (2.88)	2.40	3.41 3.03
<i>cis1</i>	1.63 (1.14)	5.26 (4.21) 5.29 (4.16)	2.98	3.39 3.11
<i>cis2</i>	2.10 (1.53)	1.69 (1.50) 1.90 (1.65)	2.39	3.14 3.03
<b>ttNPc</b>				
<i>trans1</i>	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.55 (-0.69) 0.12 (-0.07)	6.91	7.96 7.39
<i>trans2</i>	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) 0.00 (0.00)	6.89	8.43 7.61
<i>cis1</i>	2.20 (1.72)	1.84 (1.34) 1.96 (1.36)	6.66	8.12 7.24
<i>cis2</i>	1.51 (1.15)	1.40 (0.88) 1.70 (1.06)	7.32	8.49 8.39

<sup>a</sup> In parentheses, ZPVE-corrected values. <sup>b</sup> First row, B3LYP/6-31+G(d,p), second row, CAM-B3LYP/6-31+G(d,p) results. <sup>c</sup> Calculated for the optimized S<sub>1</sub> geometries.

According to the theoretical predictions, adding four propyl groups at the β positions does not lead to significant changes in

the relative tautomer energies and their dipole moments (Table S1, ESI<sup>†</sup>). Also the calculations performed for the *t*-butyl derivatives yield for **ttAPc** the same pattern as for **APc**. Interestingly, for **ttNPc** the theory suggests that the two *trans* species retain similar energies in S<sub>1</sub>.

### Absorption and MCD spectra

**Aminoporphycenes.** Since the two lowest energy forms – *trans1* and *trans2* tautomers – are predicted to be nearly degenerate, one can expect that the absorption should correspond to the sum of approximately equal contributions from both species. Calculations of the transition energies in the region of Q bands (S<sub>1</sub> and S<sub>2</sub> states, Table 3) indicate that the lowest energy band should correspond to the absorption from *trans1*, followed by a somewhat stronger transition from *trans2*, located *ca.* 900 cm<sup>-1</sup> higher. The opposite pattern is obtained for the absorption to the second excited singlet electronic state. Now, the lower energy, weaker transition should occur from *trans2*, whereas the corresponding band of *trans1* is expected to lie about 700 cm<sup>-1</sup> higher.

Parent porphycene and 2,7,12,17-tetraalkyl-substituted derivatives exhibit a characteristic absorption pattern, consisting of three main bands in the Q region. The lowest energy band corresponds to the origin of the S<sub>1</sub> transition, the highest energy one to a vibronic feature of S<sub>2</sub>, while the middle band contains contributions from the origin of S<sub>2</sub> and the vibronic transitions of S<sub>1</sub>. These contributions could be distinguished by measuring the spectra in rare gas matrices.<sup>47</sup> One can therefore expect for **APc** a quite complex absorption pattern, consisting of (possibly overlapping) features due to different tautomers and different electronic states. In order to reliably assign the electronic transitions observed in absorption, we combined two

**Table 3** Calculated transition energies (cm<sup>-1</sup>) and oscillator strengths (in parentheses) of the tautomeric forms of **Pc**, **APc**, and **NPc**

	S <sub>1</sub> ← S <sub>0</sub> <sup>a</sup>	S <sub>1</sub> → S <sub>0</sub> <sup>b</sup>	S <sub>2</sub> ← S <sub>0</sub> <sup>a</sup>
<b>Pc</b>			
<i>trans</i>	17 904 (0.13)	17 084 (0.15) 16 649 (0.22)	18 804 (0.21)
<i>cis</i>	17 935 (0.14)	16 883 (0.16) 16 638 (0.23)	18 804 (0.18)
<b>APc</b>			
<i>trans1</i>	15 792 (0.18)	14 801 (0.18) 14 621 (0.23)	18 810 (0.16)
<i>trans2</i>	16 718 (0.25)	15 904 (0.25) 15 733 (0.33)	18 081 (0.10)
<i>cis1</i>	16 927 (0.22)	16 133 (0.22) 16 054 (0.30)	18 435 (0.13)
<i>cis2</i>	15 746 (0.17)	14 491 (0.17) 14 183 (0.23)	18 375 (0.14)
<b>NPc</b>			
<i>trans1</i>	17 616 (0.09)	16 560 (0.12) 16 433 (0.19)	18 126 (0.12)
<i>trans2</i>	17 085 (0.10)	15 876 (0.10) 15 986 (0.15)	18 464 (0.19)
<i>cis1</i>	17 146 (0.11)	15 603 (0.12) 15 692 (0.18)	18 160 (0.17)
<i>cis2</i>	17 559 (0.09)	16 466 (0.10) 16 718 (0.16)	18 414 (0.09)

<sup>a</sup> Optimized S<sub>0</sub> geometry. <sup>b</sup> Optimized S<sub>1</sub> geometry, first row: B3LYP/6-31+G(d,p), second row: CAM-B3LYP/6-31+G(d,p).



techniques that rely on polarized light: magnetic circular dichroism (MCD) and fluorescence anisotropy. For the assignments of electronic transitions, MCD spectroscopy is of great help. Porphycenes are “hard” chromophores,<sup>48</sup> of which the (+,−) MCD signal pattern of the lowest two electronic transitions is retained upon substitution or intramolecular tautomerization. Therefore, a positive/negative MCD sign indicates the  $S_1/S_2$  absorption, independent of which tautomer it comes from. Moreover, MCD allows to separate the vibronic components of  $S_1$  from the origin of  $S_2$ , since the vibronic features usually exhibit the same MCD sign as the electronic origin.

Using emission anisotropy, we exploit two characteristic features of the transition moments in porphycenes: (a) for each of *trans* tautomers, the  $S_0-S_1$  and  $S_0-S_2$  transitions are nearly orthogonally polarized; (b) the transition moments in *trans1* and *trans2* form a large angle, both for  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ . Therefore, for the emission occurring from *trans1*, positive anisotropy values indicate that the initially excited species corresponds to either  $S_1(\text{trans1})$  or  $S_2(\text{trans2})$ ; negative anisotropy implies  $S_1(\text{trans2})$  or  $S_2(\text{trans1})$ . We note, however, that for some unsymmetrically substituted porphycenes the situation may be more complicated; in particular, the transition moment directions in *trans1* and *trans2* need not form a large angle in  $S_1$  or  $S_2$ . Such behavior, first discussed for 9-amino-2,7,12,17-tetraphenylporphycene,<sup>19</sup> was confirmed by calculations of the presently studied amino derivatives (Fig. S1–S3, ESI<sup>†</sup>). It makes the distinction between two *trans* tautomeric forms based on emission anisotropy rather difficult. On the other hand, the calculations indicate that the pattern of nearly orthogonal  $S_0-S_1$  and  $S_0-S_2$  transition moments is retained after amino substitution.

The theoretical predictions are in excellent agreement with the experiment (Fig. 1). Even though the calculations overestimate the  $S_1 \leftarrow S_0$  and  $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$  transition energies (as is also the case for bare **Pc**), the calculated absorption pattern matches exactly the observed one. The lowest transition is observed (in toluene) at  $13755\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ; the next, more intense band is located at  $14760\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . Weak bands at  $15800$  and  $16860\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are barely observed in absorption, but they can be readily detected by emission anisotropy and MCD. Finally, an intense transition is observed at  $17650\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . These three bands exhibit negative MCD signals, indicating that they belong to  $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$  transitions. The negative emission anisotropy at  $17650\text{ cm}^{-1}$  leaves little doubt about the assignment to *trans1*. Since it is well known that the vibronic feature in the  $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$  absorption in porphycenes is more intense than the 0-0 transition, the band at  $17650$  is assigned to the vibronic feature of  $S_2(\text{trans1})$ . The energy difference between the  $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$  bands observed at  $17650$  and  $16860\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ,  $790\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , is in perfect agreement with theoretical prediction of the difference between  $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$  transitions in *trans1* and *trans2*. We therefore assign the band at  $16860\text{ cm}^{-1}$  to the vibronic feature of  $S_2(\text{trans2})$ . The determination of the positions of the electronic origin of  $S_2$  in *trans1* and *trans2* is not straightforward, since both the MCD and anisotropy show complex character, indicating mixing of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  spectral features from both tautomers. Assuming that the dominant vibronic features lie, similarly as in other porphycenes, about  $900\text{ cm}^{-1}$  to the blue from the  $S_2$

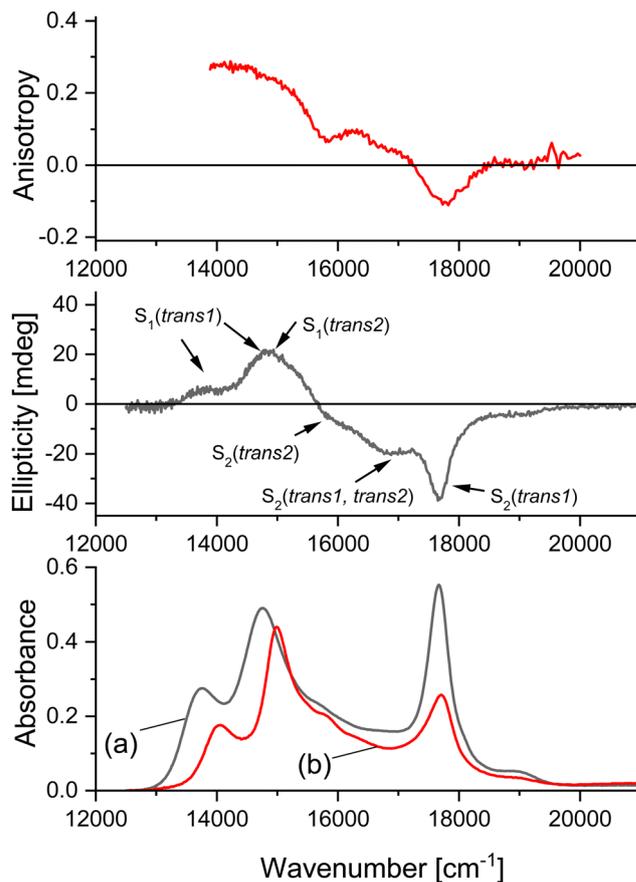


Fig. 1 Bottom, absorption of **APC** in toluene (a) and of **ttAPC** in paraffin (b). Middle, MCD of **APC** in toluene. Top, anisotropy of fluorescence excitation of **ttAPC** in paraffin, monitored at  $735\text{ nm}$ .

origin, we estimate the  $S_2(0-0)$  energies of *trans1* and *trans2* as  $16750$  and  $15960\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , respectively. The latter value is close to the shoulder observed at  $15900\text{ cm}^{-1}$  in the MCD spectrum. Regarding the former, it is difficult to find a spectral feature that would clearly correlate with this value. The negative MCD indicates the  $S_2$  origin. Small positive anisotropy values in this spectral region suggest contributions from both, the origin of  $S_2(\text{trans1})$  and the vibronic features of  $S_1(\text{trans2})$ .

In conclusion, we assign the bands observed at  $13755$  and  $14760\text{ cm}^{-1}$  to the origins of transitions to  $S_1$  in *trans1* and *trans2* forms, respectively. The corresponding values for  $S_2$  are  $16750$  and  $15900\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . The least accurate is the value of  $16750\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ; we estimate that the maximum error in this assignment should not exceed  $\pm 200\text{ cm}^{-1}$ .

As mentioned below, these assignments are in perfect agreement with the calculated  $S_1-S_2$  energy splittings. An observation that strongly reinforces the assignments is a much higher MCD intensity in *trans2* than in *trans1*, an effect clearly seen in the comparison of relative absorption and MCD intensities of the bands at  $16860$  and  $17650\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . It is caused by the smaller  $S_1-S_2$  energy separation in *trans2*, which leads to a larger MCD signal. A similar effect has been recently reported for 9-fluoroporphycene.<sup>22</sup>

Our assignments agree with the results of a theoretical paper in which the absorption of 9-amino-2,6,12,17-tetraphenylporphycene



**Table 4** Calculated transition energies ( $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ) and oscillator strengths (in parentheses) of the tautomeric forms of **ttPc**, **ttAPc**, and **ttNPc**

	$S_1 \leftarrow S_0^a$	$S_1 \rightarrow S_0^b$	$S_2 \leftarrow S_0^a$
<b>ttPc</b>			
<i>trans</i>	17 539 (0.15)	16 496 (0.18) 16 180 (0.23)	18 564 (0.26)
<i>cis</i>	17 493 (0.15)	16 314 (0.18) 16 209 (0.24)	18 635 (0.25)
<b>ttAPc</b>			
<i>trans1</i>	15 837 (0.21)	14 588 (0.21) 14 208 (0.26)	18 548 (0.20)
<i>trans2</i>	16 786 (0.31)	15 826 (0.30) 15 692 (0.41)	17 868 (0.11)
<i>cis1</i>	16 991 (0.26)	15 903 (0.24) 15 833 (0.36)	18 118 (0.16)
<i>cis2</i>	15 816 (0.21)	14 352 (0.21) 13 889 (0.26)	18 162 (0.18)
<b>ttNPc</b>			
<i>trans1</i>	16 543 (0.12)	13 283 (0.11) 13 665 (0.18)	17 421 (0.13)
<i>trans2</i>	16 373 (0.12)	14 015 (0.13) 14 074 (0.19)	17 914 (0.26)
<i>cis1</i>	16 260 (0.13)	13 930 (0.14) 14 132 (0.21)	17 831 (0.24)
<i>cis2</i>	16 437 (0.11)	13 807 (0.11) 14 295 (0.16)	17 928 (0.10)

<sup>a</sup> Optimized  $S_0$  geometry. <sup>b</sup> Optimized  $S_1$  geometry, first row: B3LYP/6-31+G(d,p), second row: CAM-B3LYP/6-31+G(d,p).

has been modelled using the nuclear ensemble method.<sup>49</sup> The authors concluded that the first absorption band originates from *trans1*, but the second band is dominated by transition from *trans2*.

DFT calculations performed for **ttAPc** (Table 4) yield a pattern very similar to that obtained for **APc**. The experiment (Fig. 1 and Fig. S4, ESI<sup>†</sup>) confirms the strong similarity of absorption and MCD in the two molecules. The tetra-*t*-butyl derivative exhibits in  $S_1$  a small blue shift with respect to **APc** for both *trans* forms. In  $S_2$ , a red shift is observed for *trans2*, whereas for *trans1* the transition energy remains the same within experimental error. Except for the latter, these shifts are correctly predicted by calculations. We assign the transitions observed in toluene at 14 000 and 17 650  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  to the  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  transitions in *trans1*, whereas the corresponding bands in *trans2* are located at 14 915 and 16 950  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ . Based on the analysis carried out for **APc**, the  $S_2$  values most likely correspond to the vibronic features.

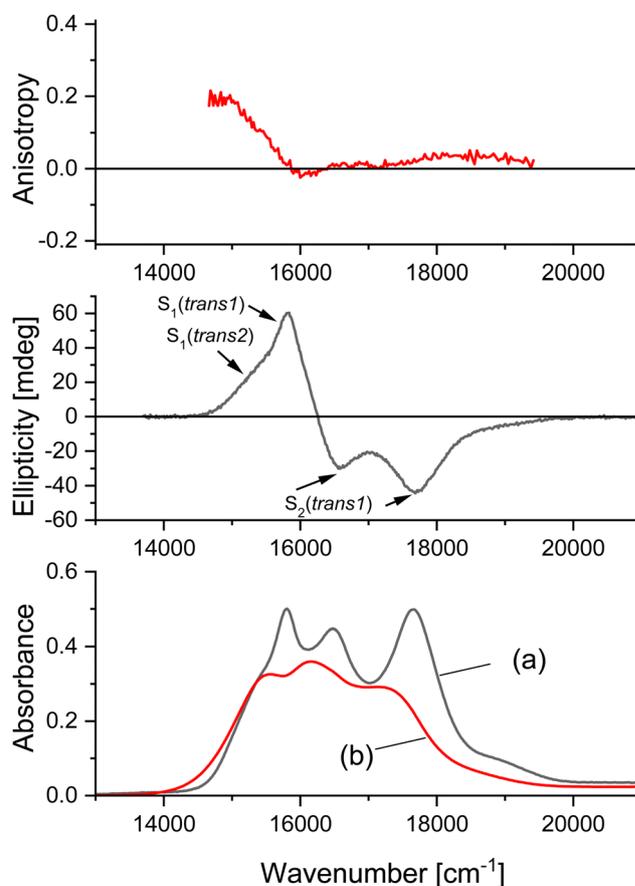
Absorption of **tprAPc** strongly resembles that of **ttAPc**; the positions of the main bands differ by  $\sim 100 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  or less (Fig. S4, ESI<sup>†</sup>); such behavior is also predicted by calculations (Table S2, ESI<sup>†</sup>). The intensity ratio of the bands assigned to  $S_1(\text{trans2})$  and  $S_2(\text{trans1})$  increases somewhat in the order: **APc**, **tprAPc**, **ttAPc**, suggesting a slightly higher population of *trans2* in the alkylated derivatives. In **APc**, the population of *trans2* seems to increase in a polar solvent, as indicated by the relative increase of the 16 860  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  peak, assigned to  $S_2(\text{trans2})$ . The intensity of this transition is stronger in acetonitrile and methanol than in toluene or *n*-hexane.

**Nitroporphycenes.** Theory predicts that, similarly as in aminoporphycenes, the lowest energy structures correspond to two nearly degenerate *trans* tautomers, with *trans2* now

being slightly more stable (Tables 1 and 2, Fig. S1, ESI<sup>†</sup>). The replacement of the amino by the nitro group leads to the reversal in the relative transition energies in the two forms (Tables 3 and 4, Fig. S2, ESI<sup>†</sup>). The lowest energy now corresponds to the *trans2* species, whereas the  $S_1 \leftarrow S_0$  origin in *trans1* is calculated to lie 535  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  higher. These predictions agree with the experiment (Fig. 2 and Fig. S5, ESI<sup>†</sup>): in both, absorption and MCD spectra a shoulder appears around 15 300  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , followed by the maximum at 15 810 (in toluene). The same pattern is observed in acetonitrile solution. The anisotropy of fluorescence excitation rapidly decreases between 15 300 and 15 810  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , corroborating the assignment of these two bands to the  $S_1$  transition in two different tautomeric forms.

The  $S_2$  assignment is more challenging. Two peaks are observed at 16 475 and 17 650  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ . Both exhibit a negative MCD signal, indicating that they correspond to  $S_2$ . The same pattern is observed in bare porphycene, where the higher energy peak corresponds to the vibrational feature of the  $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$  transition.<sup>47</sup> In fact, except for low energy shoulder in **NPc**, absorption spectra of **Pc** and **NPc** are very similar with respect to the location and intensity of the bands.

Absorption spectra of **tprNPc** and **ttNPc** are analogous to that of **NPc** (Fig. S5, ESI<sup>†</sup>). The bands in the spectra of **ttNPc** are



**Fig. 2** Bottom, absorption of **NPc** in toluene (a) and of **ttNPc** in paraffin (b). Middle, MCD of **NPc** in toluene. Top, anisotropy of fluorescence excitation of **ttNPc** in paraffin, monitored at 710 nm.



distinctively broader than in **NPc** and **tprNPc**, but the overall shape remains similar. The low energy shoulder, visible in **NPc**, is not observed, in agreement with calculations that predict that in **ttNPc** the  $S_1$  origins of *trans1* and *trans2* forms are spaced by less than  $200\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . The experiment also confirms the theoretically predicted red shifts of transition energies in the *t*-butyl derivative.

Fig. 3 summarizes the  $S_1 \leftarrow S_0$  and  $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$  transition energies obtained experimentally and predicted by theory. It is evident that nitro and amino substitutions lead to different spectral patterns and excited states ordering. The lowest energy transition corresponds to *trans1* in the amino and to *trans2* in the nitro derivatives. In aminoporphycenes, the  $S_1$ – $S_2$  energy gap is larger in *trans1* than in *trans2*, whereas the opposite occurs in nitroporphycenes. It should be recalled that the reversal of relative tautomer energies is predicted also for the ground electronic state, but the effect becomes much stronger upon excitation (Table 1). Based on the predicted relative energies in the *trans1* and *trans2* forms, one could expect the dominance of only one tautomer in  $S_1$ . As shown below, this is indeed the case, but, since in  $S_0$  the other species is also

present, the dynamics of its conversion into the lower energy form should also be observed.

**Aminoporphycenes.** Samples of **APc**, **tprAPc**, and **ttAPc**, measured several weeks after the synthesis, exhibit a similar, complicated fluorescence pattern (Fig. 4). To facilitate comparison with the literature data, we present the emission spectra in the wavelength scale. The main, most intense fluorescence ( $F_1$ ) in **APc** has a maximum at 727, 749, 756, and 762 nm in *n*-hexane, toluene, acetonitrile, and methanol, respectively. In addition to  $F_1$ , two bands of weak intensity appear at higher energies, peaking (in acetonitrile) at 668 nm ( $F_2$ ) and 635 nm ( $F_3$ ). The  $F_1/F_2$  and  $F_2/F_3$  intensity ratios depend on solvent and excitation wavelength, indicating that these emissions occur from different species. The excitation spectrum of  $F_1$  practically coincides with the absorption. The excitation spectra of  $F_2$  and  $F_3$  look similar, but the former is red-shifted by *ca.* 20 nm (Fig. S6, ESI<sup>†</sup>). Both spectra exhibit typical features of porphyrin absorption.

Previous studies of derivatives of 9-aminoporphycene, substituted at the  $\beta$  positions with phenyl, propyl or methoxyethyl groups,<sup>44,45</sup> reported  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  (but not  $F_3$ ) emissions of comparable intensity. These emissions were assigned to *trans1* and *trans2* tautomers, respectively. Our present results suggest a different interpretation. We noticed that for freshly prepared samples (measured one or two days after synthesis or just after sample purification by chromatography), the  $F_2$  and  $F_3$  emissions are barely observable. However, their intensity steadily grows with time (Fig. S7, ESI<sup>†</sup>) and, for samples that are a few weeks old,  $F_2$  and  $F_3$  bands become (for certain excitation wavelengths) comparable or even stronger than  $F_1$ . These results leave no doubts that  $F_2$  and  $F_3$  do not originate from **APc**. The final proof was provided by applying chromatography for a sample of **tprAPc**. In addition to the main spot, two other ones were observed on the chromatographic plate. Fluorescence spectra recorded for the species present in these additional spots coincided with  $F_2$  and  $F_3$  emissions. In a separate HPLC experiment carried out for **APc**, we separated, in addition to the main component, two other species, each of them showing single emission corresponding to  $F_2$  and  $F_3$ . We conclude that the previous assignment of  $F_2$  emission in aminoporphycenes to the *trans2* tautomer has to be abandoned. Regarding  $F_1$ , the assignment to *trans1* seems safe. Still, time-resolved measurements reported below show that the high energy portion of  $F_1$  contains a fraction of short-lived fluorescence from *trans2*.

All three aminoporphycenes exhibited qualitatively the same behavior, but the appearance of  $F_2$  and  $F_3$  was significantly slower in the alkylated derivatives than in **APc**. We also noticed that  $F_3/F_2$  ratio seemed to be smaller in nonpolar toluene or paraffin than in polar acetonitrile. The origin of the species responsible for  $F_2$  and  $F_3$  is now under investigation and will be a subject of a separate article.

When excited into the lowest energy absorption band, the  $F_1$  decay in **APc** is monoexponential ( $2.6 \pm 0.1$  ns in *n*-hexane,  $2.00 \pm 0.05$  ns in toluene,  $1.40 \pm 0.05$  ns in acetonitrile, and  $1.00 \pm 0.05$  ns in methanol). Similar behavior was found for **tprAPc** ( $2.40 \pm 0.05$  ns in toluene,  $1.90 \pm 0.05$  ns in acetonitrile). When

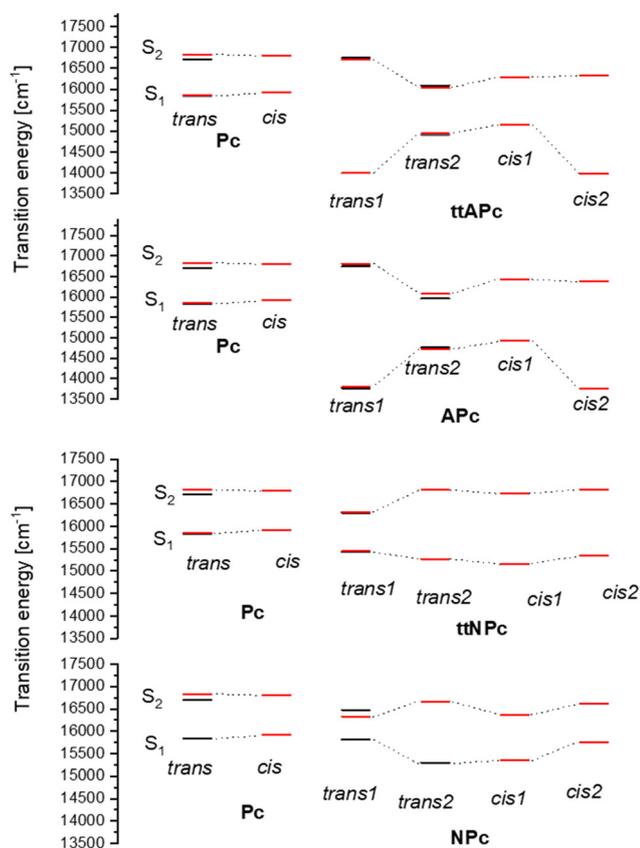


Fig. 3 Comparison of calculated (red bars) and experimentally observed (black bars)  $S_1 \leftarrow S_0$  and  $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$  transition energies in different tautomeric forms of **Pc** and its amino and nitro derivatives. The calculated values (see Tables 3 and 4) have been shifted to lower energies, so that the experimental and calculated values of the  $S_0$ – $S_1$  transition coincide within less than  $50\text{ cm}^{-1}$ .



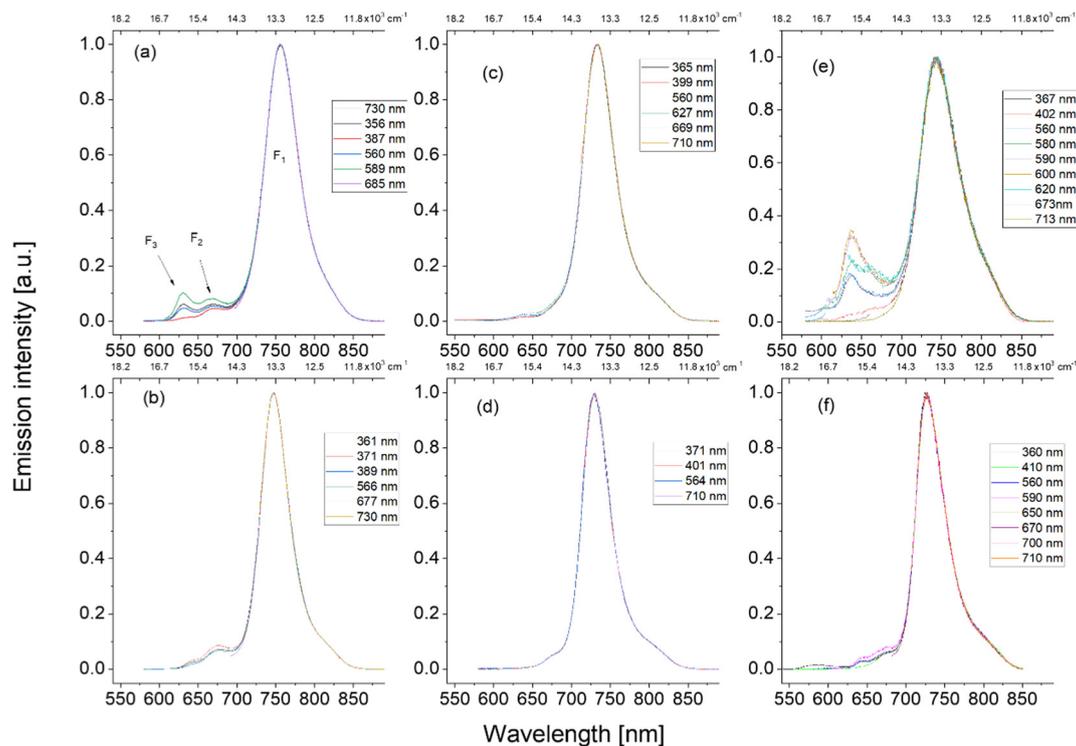


Fig. 4 Room temperature fluorescence spectra: **APc** (a), **tprAPc** (c), and **ttAPc** (e) in acetonitrile, **APc** (b) and **tprAPc** (d) in toluene, and **ttAPc** (f) in paraffin. The spectra were normalized to the  $F_1$  maximum. Excitation wavelengths have been color-coded.

the fluorescence was probed at its high energy edge (670 nm), both molecules demonstrated the same kinetic feature (Fig. S8 and S9, ESI<sup>†</sup>): in addition to the main component, identical to that obtained for monitoring the low energy part, a short decay was found, indicating a rapid excited state transformation. It is natural to assign this component to *trans2* → *trans1* tautomerization, since *trans2*, upon excitation, is destabilized with respect to *trans1*. Such interpretation allows to explain the coincidence of  $F_1$  excitation spectrum with that of absorption (which contains contributions from *trans1*, *trans2*, and,

possibly, also *cis1*). The unusual behavior results from the fact that most of the excited population finally ends in the  $S_1$  state of *trans1*, which emits the dominant fluorescence.

The behavior of **ttAPc** is qualitatively similar to that of **APc** and **tprAPc**, but the fluorescence quantum yield is lower (Table 5) and the decay time is shorter. Interestingly a large difference is found between the decay times in toluene ( $0.15 \pm 0.03$  ns) and paraffin ( $1.01 \pm 0.05$  ns). The longer decay in more viscous solvent indicates a radiationless channel involving a large amplitude motion, such as distortion from planarity. Similar viscosity dependence has been reported for other porphycenes.<sup>20</sup>

**Nitroporphycenes.** **NPc** emits fluorescence (Fig. 5) peaking at 669 nm in toluene and 665 nm in acetonitrile. The spectral shift to the blue with increasing solvent polarity is in line with the absorption (Fig. S5, ESI<sup>†</sup>). Fluorescence excitation spectra coincide with the absorption. The emission decay is monoexponential and becomes faster with increasing solvent polarity. The values of fluorescence lifetimes obtained at room temperature are:  $4.4 \pm 0.2$  ns (*n*-hexane),  $3.4 \pm 0.2$  ns (toluene),  $2.7 \pm 0.2$  ns (acetonitrile), and  $2.2 \pm 0.1$  ns (acetonitrile:water 80:20 v/v).

The emission of **ttNPc** is shifted to the blue with respect to **NPc** (by about 15 nm). The quantum yield is extremely low: the **NPc:ttNPc** intensity ratio is  $\sim 200$  (Table 5). The decay time, a few tens of picoseconds, was too short to be accurately measured with our setup. We also observed that the shape of the emission varies somewhat for different excitation wavelengths. This may indicate the presence of various conformers, but we cannot exclude contribution from impurities, since the

Table 5 Fluorescence quantum yields (293 K). For aminoporphycenes, the values are calculated from  $F_1$  emission only

	Solvent	$\phi_f^a$
<b>APc</b>	Toluene	0.03
	Acetonitrile	0.01
<b>tprAPc</b>	Toluene	0.04
	Acetonitrile	0.02
<b>ttAPc</b>	<i>n</i> -Hexane	$3.6 \times 10^{-3}$
	Acetonitrile	$6 \times 10^{-4}$
<b>NPc</b>	Toluene	0.10
	Acetonitrile	0.06
<b>tprNPc</b>	Toluene	0.03
	Acetonitrile	0.009
<b>ttNPc</b>	<i>n</i> -Hexane	$4 \times 10^{-4}$
	Toluene	$3 \times 10^{-4}$
	Acetonitrile	$6 \times 10^{-4}$
	Ethanol	$3 \times 10^{-4}$
	DMSO	$5 \times 10^{-4}$

<sup>a</sup> Estimated maximum error:  $\pm 20\%$  for  $\phi_f > 10^{-2}$ ,  $\pm 30\%$  for lower values.



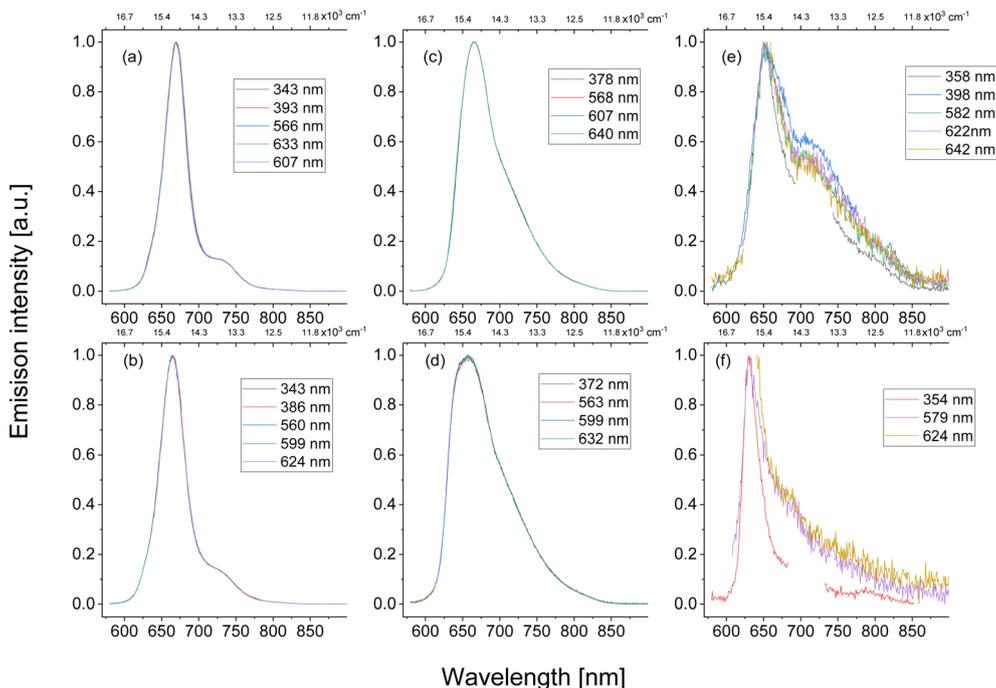


Fig. 5 Room temperature fluorescence spectra: NPC, tprNPC, and ttNPC in toluene (a, c and e) and acetonitrile (b, d and f). Excitation wavelengths have been color-coded.

fluorescence of ttNPC is extremely weak, which precludes reliable analysis of excitation spectra monitored at different emission wavelengths.

## Discussion

### Absorption spectra

The large difference between the absorption spectra of amino and nitroporphycenes can be understood using the calculated pattern of frontier electronic orbitals (Fig. 6). Substitution of porphycene with the electron donating amino moiety results in

the destabilization of orbital energies; the strongest effect is induced in the HOMO-1 orbital, which has the largest LCAO coefficient at position 9. The other occupied orbital is only weakly affected, as it has a node at this position. In consequence, the two occupied orbitals, nearly degenerate in parent Pc, become split in APc by a significant amount, 0.4 eV. In addition, their ordering is reversed, as the more affected, destabilized orbital (HOMO in APc) corresponds to HOMO-1 in Pc.

Substitution by the electron-accepting nitro group leads to the stabilization of all the orbitals. The most affected orbitals are the unoccupied ones, but the HOMOs also shift to lower energies. The energy ordering is not inverted, and the spacing increases in comparison with Pc. Still, the effect is much weaker than in APc, resulting in the observed  $S_1$ - $S_2$  splittings of  $665\text{ cm}^{-1}$  in *trans1* and  $1500\text{ cm}^{-1}$  in *trans2*.

The above analysis explains the increasing spectral range of the Q absorption upon passing from Pc to NPC and APc. One should note that simple consideration of orbital energies cannot account for different splittings of transition energies in *trans1* and *trans2*. On the other hand, DFT calculations accurately reproduce the experimental results (Fig. S10, ESI<sup>†</sup>).

### Photophysical properties

The radiative rate constant of  $S_1$  depopulation in Pc has been previously measured for different solvents. After correction for the square of the refractive index, the same value of  $(2.3 \pm 0.1) \times 10^7\text{ s}^{-1}$  is obtained for each solvent.<sup>24</sup> We obtained practically the same values for *n*-hexane solutions of APc  $(2.3 \pm 0.2) \times 10^7\text{ s}^{-1}$  and NPC  $(1.9 \pm 0.2) \times 10^7\text{ s}^{-1}$ . On the other hand, the sum of nonradiative rate constants in APc  $(3.4 \pm 0.4) \times 10^8\text{ s}^{-1}$

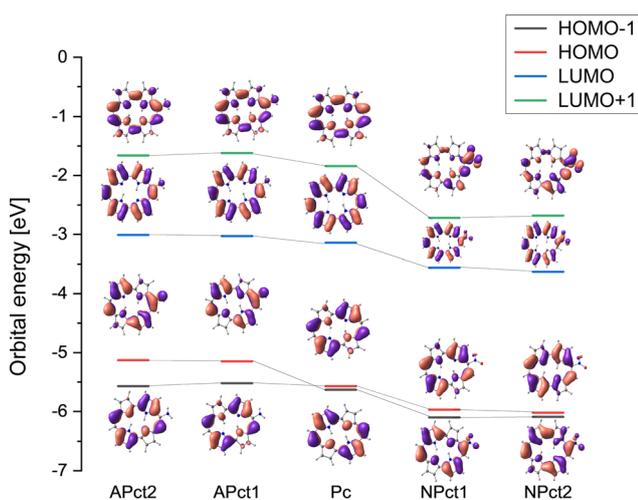


Fig. 6 Calculated frontier orbital energy patterns. Suffixes t1 and t2 indicate *trans1* and *trans2* tautomers, respectively.



and **NPc**  $(1.8 \pm 0.2) \times 10^8 \text{ s}^{-1}$  is definitely higher than in **Pc**  $(5.7 \pm 0.6) \times 10^7 \text{ s}^{-1}$ . The radiative rate constants do not seem to change significantly in the alkyl derivatives, but a large increase of nonradiative deactivation rate is observed for **ttAPc** (about an order of magnitude) and **ttNPc** (more than two orders of magnitude). Sevenfold difference in the fluorescence lifetimes measured for **ttAPc** in toluene (0.15 ns) and paraffin (1.01 ns) indicates that the efficient nonradiative process may be associated with geometry changes in  $S_1$ , an effect reported for other porphycenes.<sup>24</sup> In order to analyze this process in more detail, we compare the optimized geometries in the ground and lowest excited singlet states. The macrocycle of **NPc** is predicted to be planar in  $S_0$  and  $S_1$  (Fig. S11, ESI†). However, the  $\text{NO}_2$  plane forms an angle of  $38^\circ$  (*trans1*) or  $30^\circ$  (*trans2*) with the plane of the macrocycle. Upon excitation to  $S_1$ , coplanarity is predicted for *trans2*, which is also the emitting form. Interestingly, *trans1* retains its  $S_0$  structure in the  $S_1$  state. Introduction of *t*-butyl substituents that leads to **ttNPc** (Fig. S12, ESI†) induces non-planarity already in  $S_0$ , but the distortion becomes much larger in  $S_1$ . In both states, the effect is stronger in *trans1*.

For **APc**, planar macrocycle is obtained for both  $S_0$  and  $S_1$ , with a slightly less pyramidalized amino group in the excited state (Fig. S13, ESI†). **ttAPc** is slightly nonplanar in  $S_0$ . The distortion increases in  $S_1$  and consists of the deviation of the pyrrole ring closest to the amino group from the macrocycle plane (Fig. S14, ESI†). The effect is definitely stronger for the (emitting) *trans1* tautomer.

The above results show that the huge decrease in fluorescence quantum yield in **ttNPc** is associated with steric interactions between *t*-butyl and nitro moieties. In agreement with experiment, a similar, but less pronounced effect is expected for **ttAPc**. The finding that geometry distortions are different for different tautomers brings up an interesting issue: the possibility of influencing the tautomerization rate by changing the rigidity of the environment.

We finally note that, upon geometry optimization of the  $S_1$  state of the *cis3* form, a conical intersection was found for both **ttAPc** and **ttNPc**, which may explain the low emission intensity.

### Tautomeric equilibria

Photophysical studies demonstrate that both, amino and nitroporphycenes behave similarly to other unsymmetrically substituted porphycenes, such as 9-acetoxy<sup>18,50</sup> or 9-fluoro<sup>22</sup> derivatives. In the ground electronic state, two *trans* tautomers of similar energy coexist, whereas in  $S_1$  the equilibrium is shifted towards the structure which was already more stable in  $S_0$  (*trans1* in amino-, *trans2* in nitroporphycenes).

Excited state tautomerization is a unidirectional “downhill” process leading to the most stable form. Determination of the rates requires techniques with better time resolution than used in the present work; we estimate, based on the value of the fast component appearing in the emission probed at its blue edge, that the double hydrogen transfer in  $S_1$  takes a few tens of picoseconds.

The mechanisms of tautomerization can be quite complex. In the ground electronic states, three different pathways should

be considered for *trans2*  $\rightarrow$  *trans1* conversion. The first two involve *cis1* and *cis2* as intermediates in the stepwise process. The third is the concerted asynchronous transfer of two hydrogens; a synchronous process is very unlikely due to lack of symmetry. In the lowest excited singlet state, tautomerization may be even more complicated, possibly involving high energy *cis3* and *cis4* species, because their energy is calculated as being close to that of the  $S_1$  energies of the other four species.

The calculations (Fig. 7) indicate similar barriers for stepwise *trans1*–*trans2* conversions involving either *cis1* or *cis2* in the ground electronic state of both **APc** and **NPc**. The barrier for the first step is always higher than for the second one. This is also true for  $S_1$ . This means that the experimental observation of the *cis* form (which would demonstrate a stepwise mechanism) may be difficult, as the decay of this intermediate species would be faster than its formation.

The barriers for concerted transfer are about 50% higher than those obtained for the stepwise process. A similar pattern was obtained for **Pc** and its other symmetrically substituted derivatives. However, the experimental evidence in the case of **Pc** favors the concerted mechanism, involving activation of a specific, low frequency vibrational mode.<sup>12</sup> It remains to be checked whether the symmetry lowering in amino and nitro derivatives leads to the change in the tautomerization path. It seems likely, since the calculations predict that the two intramolecular H-bonds are no longer equivalent. The difference between the HB strengths is both substituent- and tautomer-specific. It can also vary between  $S_0$  and  $S_1$ . For instance, in the ground electronic state of *trans1* tautomer of **APc**, the  $\text{N21H} \cdots \text{N24}$  HB is predicted to be stronger than the other one,  $\text{N22H} \cdots \text{N23}$ , as evidenced by the calculated values of the NH stretching frequencies, 2917 and 2944  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , respectively. The opposite occurs for *trans2* (2861 vs. 2844  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ). Electronic excitation enhances these patterns: the  $S_1$  frequencies calculated for *trans1* are 2945 and 3090  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , whereas for *trans2* we obtain 2894 and 2761  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ . For the *trans1* tautomer of **NPc**, the  $S_0$  frequencies are 2876 and 2973  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , whereas the  $S_1$  calculation yields the values of 2923 and 2999  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ . Thus, contrary to the case of **APc**, the difference between the two HBs decreases in  $S_1$ . Finally, in the *trans2* form of **NPc**, the two HBs are different in  $S_0$  (2892 vs. 2848  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ), but in  $S_1$  both protons participate in the antisymmetric and symmetric combinations of NH stretches, separated by only 2  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (2911 and 2913  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , respectively). This result suggests an attractive possibility to switch from stepwise to concerted tautomerization mechanism by a suitable combination of structure, tautomeric form, and electronic state.

However, the predictive power of calculations of unsymmetrical porphycenes seems to be lower than in the case of symmetrical derivatives. In particular, the correlation between the parameters that characterize the HB strength, which has been very useful for symmetrically substituted porphycenes,<sup>13</sup> becomes rather weak. As an example, the plot of calculated NH stretching frequencies vs. the N–N distances (Fig. S15, ESI†) shows that for practically the same N–N separation (266.1–266.3 pm), frequencies that differ by more than 200  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  are



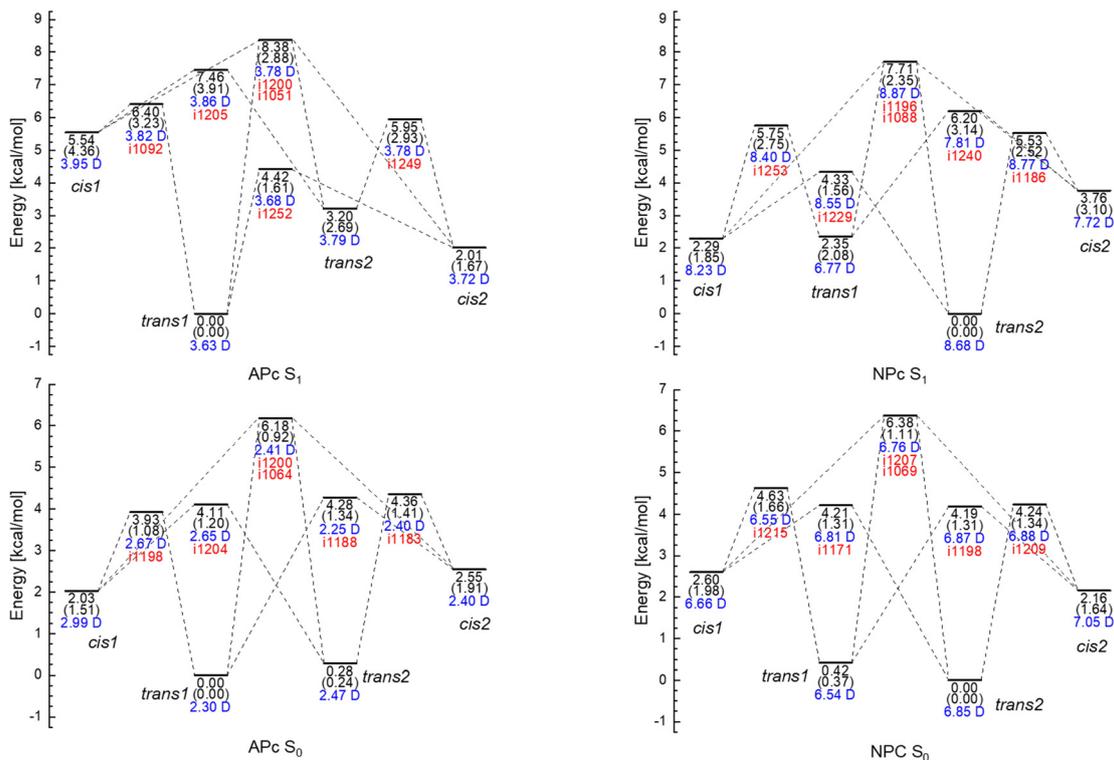


Fig. 7 Calculated relative energies ( $\text{kcal mol}^{-1}$ ) of four tautomeric forms of **APc** (left) and **NPc** (right) in the ground (bottom) and lowest excited singlet (top) states, and of the transition states involved in tautomerization. In parentheses, zero-point-vibrational-energy corrected values. In red, imaginary frequencies ( $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ); in blue, calculated permanent dipole moments (D).

obtained. Evidently, the distance between the HB donor and acceptor is no longer a good index when the electron density distribution is not symmetrical. This is true even when considering two HBs of the same tautomeric form in the same electronic state.

## Summary and conclusions

Substitution of porphycene at the *meso* position with the amino or nitro group leads to spectral changes that can be rationalized by the shifts of frontier orbital energies caused by electron donating or accepting moieties. The spacing between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  states, *ca.*  $900 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  in unsubstituted **Pc**, increases to  $3000 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  in the *trans1* form of **APc** and to  $1500 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  in the *trans2* tautomer of **NPc**. For the other *trans* species the  $S_2$ - $S_1$  separation is about two times smaller in both, amino and nitro derivatives.

Two *trans* tautomers of similar energies coexist in the ground state. Upon electronic excitation, one form (*trans1* in **APc**, *trans2* in **NPc**) is strongly stabilized with respect to the other. The least stable species rapidly converts into the lower energy one. As a result, fluorescence occurs mainly from one tautomeric form. Support for one-way rapid excited state *trans-trans* conversion is provided by a fast-decaying component in the blue part of the emission.

**APc** and **NPc**, as well as their 2,7,12,17-tetrapropyl derivatives emit with moderate quantum yields, but fluorescence

becomes very weak for tetra-*t*-butyl substituted porphycenes. The effect is the strongest for the nitro derivative and is most likely caused by the steric repulsion between the nitro and *t*-butyl moieties.

The two classes of porphycenes studied in this work are attractive models for more detailed studies of ground and excited state tautomerization mechanisms. Unfortunately, such investigation may be difficult to perform because of instability, which is a problem especially in the case of aminoporphycenes. Our ongoing studies focus on the identification of the species produced both in the dark and after photoirradiation.

## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Acknowledgements

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