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## From haemoglobin to single-site hydrogenation catalyst†

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Iron-based single-site catalysts hold immense potential for achieving highly selective chemical processes, with the added advantage of iron being an earth-abundant metal. They are widely explored in electrocatalysis for oxygen reduction and display promising catalytic activity for organic transformations. In particular, FeN<sub>x</sub>@C catalysts are active for the reduction of nitroarene into aromatic amines. Yet, they are difficult to mass-produce, and most preparation methods fail to avoid single site aggregation. Here we prepared FeN<sub>x</sub>@C catalysts from bio-derived compounds, xylose and haemoglobin, in a simple two-step process. Since haemoglobin naturally contains FeN<sub>x</sub> single-sites, we successfully repurposed them into hydrogenation catalytic centers and avoided their aggregation during the preparation of the material. Their single-site nature was demonstrated by aberration-corrected transmission electron microscopy and X-ray absorption techniques. They were shown to be active for transfer hydrogenation of nitroarenes into anilines, with excellent substrate selectivity and recyclability, as demonstrated by the preserved yield across seven catalytic cycles. We also showed that FeN<sub>x</sub>@C could be used to prepare 2-phenylbenzimidazole through a reduction/condensation tandem. Our work shows for the first time the viability of biomass precursors to prepare Fe single-site hydrogenation catalysts.

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## Introduction

Nitroarene reduction into aniline derivatives is the main method to obtain aromatic amines in the chemical industry.<sup>1</sup> Most processes rely on stoichiometric reduction using Fe<sup>0</sup>/HCl (Béchamp process), or more commonly heterogeneous metallic hydrogenation catalysts (Pd, Ni, Cu, Mn, or Fe).<sup>2</sup> Since Corma and Serna's breakthrough using Au/TiO<sub>2</sub>,<sup>3</sup> a wide variety of nanocatalysts have been reported to date.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, in order to circumvent the use of flammable H<sub>2</sub> gas, alternative hydrogen donors such as iPrOH, HCO<sub>2</sub>H, or silanes have been investigated. Indeed, many metals, ranging from precious metals (Au, Pt, Pd) to more abundant metals (Fe, Ni, Co) have been reported to be catalytically active in nitroarene transfer hydrogenation reactions.<sup>5</sup> Among these, Fe, while standing as the second most abundant transition metal in the earth crust,

has emerged as a highly efficient catalyst.<sup>6–10</sup> Since the pioneering work of Beller and co-workers in using Fe-phenanthroline pyrolysed over carbon for nitroarene hydrogenation,<sup>11–14</sup> many nitrogen/carbon-supported Fe catalysts have since emerged (Fig. 1A).<sup>14–18</sup> In most reports, Fe was found as an ill-defined mixture of nanoparticulate species (metals, oxides, carbides and nitrides), without formal evidence of single sites. This mixture could lead to potential issues such as catalytic selectivity and metal leaching.

Single-site catalysts, with their well-defined atomic sites, can allow maximum metal usage while achieving high activity/selectivity.<sup>19–22</sup> There has been few examples of single-site FeN<sub>x</sub>@C-catalysed hydrogenation: Cheong *et al.* reported a SBA-15-templated material, using Fe(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub> and glucosamine as precursors, whereas Yun and Lu *et al.* opted for a MOF-encapsulated Fe precursor (Fig. 1B).<sup>23–25</sup> While all three catalysts were reported to be highly active and selective for nitroarene transfer hydrogenation reactions, the processes deployed highly carcinogenic hydrazine as a hydrogen source. In this work, we report a single-site FeN<sub>x</sub>@C catalyst for highly-selective reduction of nitroarenes to anilines, using isopropanol as a hydrogen source.

In this work, the single-site catalyst FeN<sub>x</sub>@C was prepared using haemoglobin as a bio-derived N/C precursor (Fig. 1C). As a waste product from the meat industry, haemoglobin contains a low Fe content (0.35 wt%) of FeN<sub>4</sub> heme units, which we

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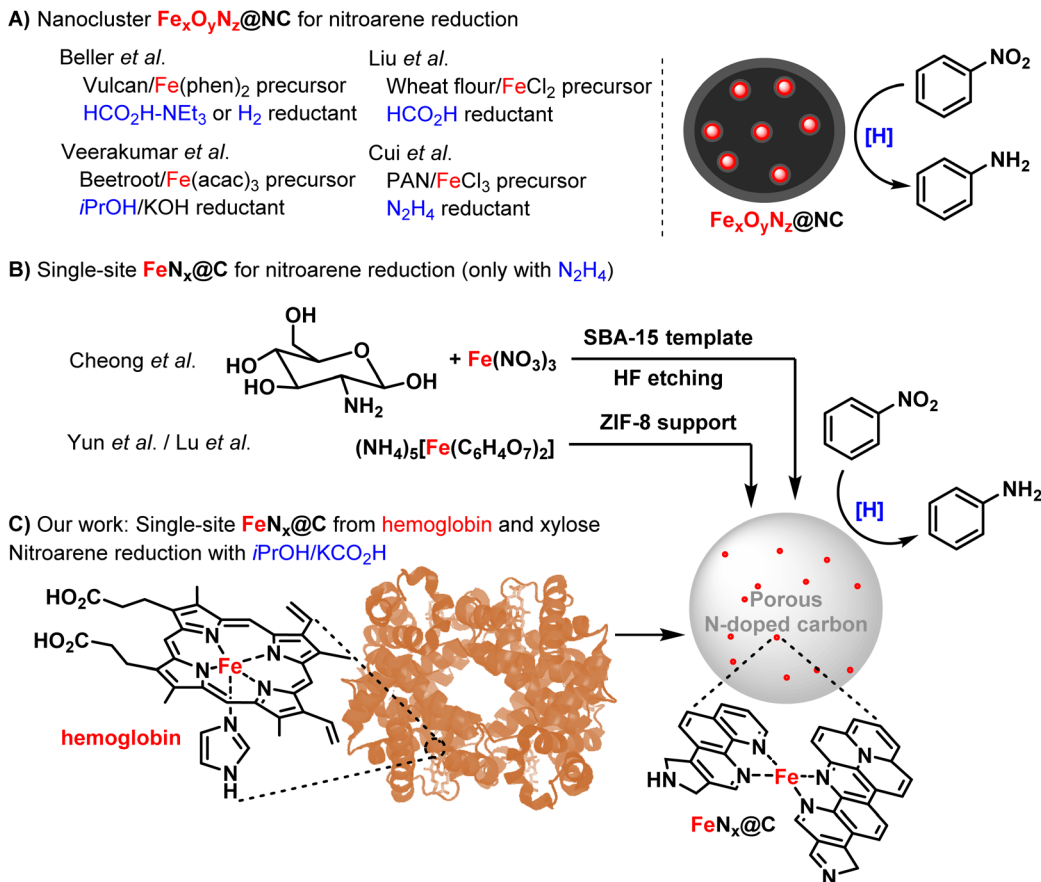
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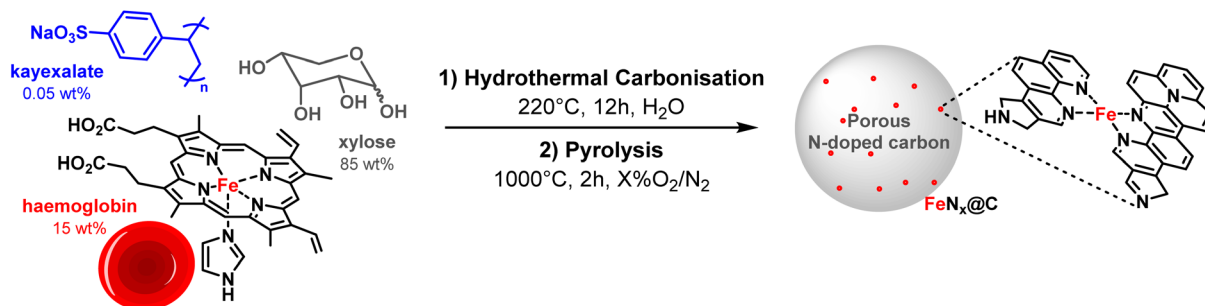


**Fig. 1** Fe-Based catalysts for nitroarene reduction using (A)  $\text{Fe}_x\text{O}_y\text{N}_z$  nanoclusters (B) using single-site  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}$ , and (C) our system using single-site  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}$  prepared from haemoglobin and using  $i\text{PrOH}/\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  reductants.

repurposed into catalytic sites. It has been explored previously to prepare fuel cell cathode catalysts, by direct pyrolysis<sup>26–31</sup> or templated by  $\text{MgCl}_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ .<sup>32,33</sup> To the best of our knowledge, it has not been applied as a heterogeneous catalyst material. The present work will report a two-step preparation of a  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}$  catalyst, using only biomass starting materials derived from haemoglobin and xylose as a carbon source. The latter was selected due to its capacity as a C5 sugar to form polymerisable furans, and its availability from non-edible lignocellulosic biomass.<sup>34</sup>

## Results and discussion

The catalyst was prepared in a two-step fashion (Scheme 1). Firstly, an aqueous solution of haemoglobin and xylose was subjected to hydrothermal carbonisation treatment (HTC) using kayexalate (poly(sodium 4-styrenesulfonate)) as a structure-directing agent.<sup>35</sup> HTC is a biomass carbonisation method, which entails the heating of aqueous solutions containing typically sugar-like molecules at 180–250 °C in a sealed autoclave.<sup>36</sup> The combination of heat and the autogenous



**Scheme 1** Preparation of  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}$ .



pressure triggers sugar dehydration into furanic intermediates, followed by their polymerisation into carbon microspheres (2–5  $\mu\text{m}$ ).<sup>37</sup> This approach is based on a procedure developed previously within our research group, for the preparation of nitrogen-doped carbons from glucose and albumin protein.<sup>38,39</sup>

In a second step, the material obtained from HTC (named  $\text{Fe}_{\text{HTC}}$ ) was thermally treated in a furnace under different atmospheres of varying oxygen/nitrogen ratios (0–10%  $\text{O}_2$  in  $\text{N}_2$ ). We measured the Fe concentration by ICP-MS through the catalyst preparation, showing that it increased from 580 ppm in the initial mixture to 1600 ppm after the HTC step, and to 2300–4000 ppm after pyrolysis depending on the oxygen content. The highest value (4000 ppm) was found at 6% oxygen. Throughout the HTC/pyrolysis sequence, we were able to increase the iron concentration relative to the other elements (C,N,O) from waste protein and biomass – while obtaining a nanoporous material.<sup>40</sup>

The preparation also resulted in an increase in the specific surface area of all the materials (from 40  $\text{m}^2 \text{g}^{-1}$  for  $\text{Fe}_{\text{HTC}}$  to 70–740  $\text{m}^2 \text{g}^{-1}$ , Fig. 2A and Table S1†), with pores <5 nm in diameter (Fig. 2B). Conducting the synthesis of the catalyst without the template increased the specific area to 610  $\text{m}^2 \text{g}^{-1}$  after pyrolysis.

Next, the catalytic activity of all of the prepared  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$  samples was tested in the reduction of nitroarenes (Table 1). 4-Nitrotoluene was selected as a model substrate, using *i*PrOH both as a solvent and a reductant, in the presence of  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$  and  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  as additives at 150 °C. While temperature conditions are considerably higher than for other single-site iron-based systems (25–60 °C), we strived to use safer reagents and solvents compared to the previous systems (comprising hydrazine, THF,  $\text{NEt}_3$ ).  $\text{Fe}_{\text{HTC}}$ , and both the material treated with no template or no oxygen (Table 1, entries 1–3) were catalytically inactive (0% yield). With 2% oxygen thermal treatment, the yield increased to 7% (Table 1, entry 4), and increased to 56 and 75% yield at 4% and 6% oxygen treatment, respectively

**Table 1** Catalyst screening for 4-nitrotoluene transfer hydrogenation

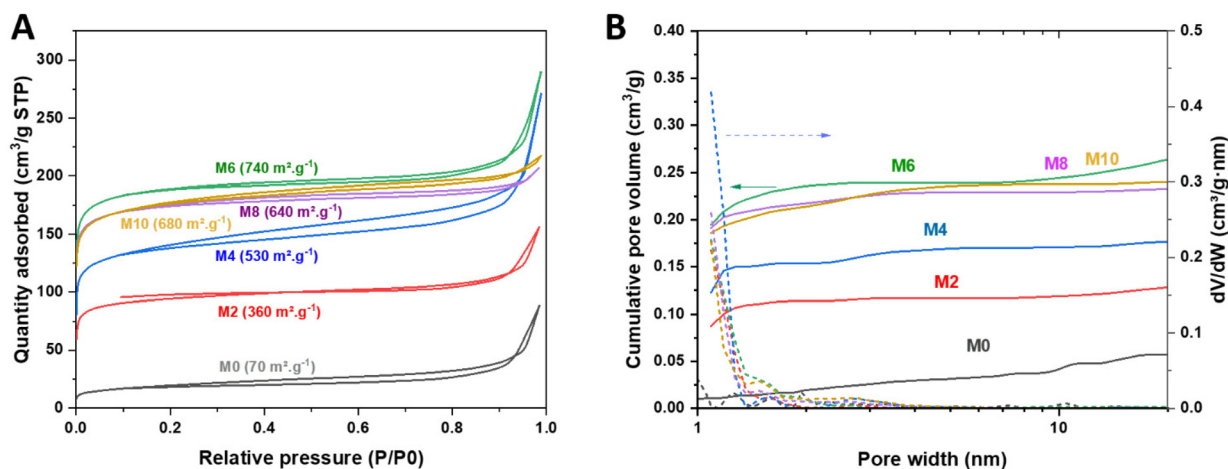
Entry	Catalyst	TOF ( $10^{-3} \text{h}^{-1}$ )	Yield (%)
1	$\text{Fe}_{\text{HTC}}$	0	0
2	Same than $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$ , without template	0	0
<b>Oxygen % during pyrolysis</b>		<b>TOF (<math>10^{-3} \text{h}^{-1}</math>)</b>	<b>Yield (%)</b>
3	0	0	0
4	2	82	7
5	4	719	56
6	6	770	75
7	8	249	20
8	10	111	1

Reaction conditions: 4-Nitrotoluene (12.4, 88  $\mu\text{mol}$ ),  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$  (6.1 mg, 0.5 equiv.),  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  (3.7 mg, 0.5 equiv.), catalyst (50 mg), isopropyl alcohol (2.0 mL), Ar, 150 °C, 24 h.

(Table 1, entries 5 and 6). Upon further increasing the oxygen content to 8% and 10%, the yield decreased to 20 and 1% respectively (Table 1, entries 7 and 8). Thus, 6% oxygen treatment proved to be the most active catalyst, with a turnover frequency of  $770 \times 10^{-3} \text{h}^{-1}$  (assuming a full utilisation of the Fe atoms as single sites), in line with its higher BET specific surface area and highest Fe loading.

In Fig. 3 we have summarised the various parameters explored so far. We will thus keep the material at 6% oxygen throughout the rest of the manuscript, and refer to it as  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$ .

X-ray Photoelectron Spectroscopy (XPS) showed a significant amount of surface oxygen (7.57 at%), along with 2.54 at% nitrogen and 0.05 at% Fe, the rest being carbon (analysis of



**Fig. 2** (A)  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption–desorption isotherm and (B) cumulative pore volume distributions for samples with different oxygen percentages during pyrolysis (the number after M indicates the oxygen percentage during pyrolysis).



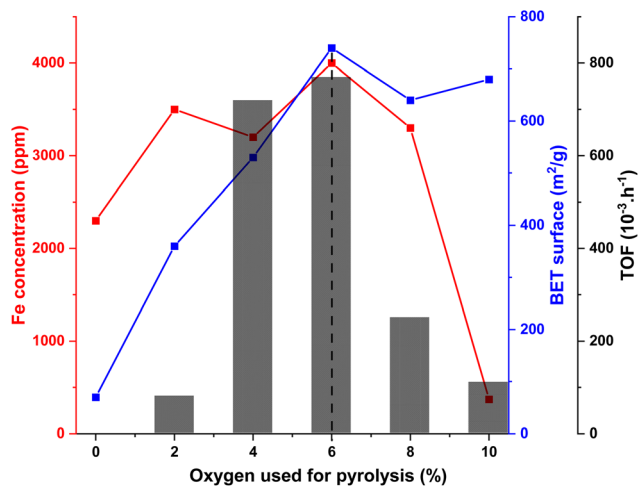


Fig. 3 Fe ICP-MS concentration, BET specific surface area and turnover frequency for the various materials prepared.

signals deconvolution is given Table S2 and Fig. S9 in ESI†). Raman and X-ray diffraction respectively showed that the carbon is amorphous (with an  $I_G/I_D$  ratio of 0.94), with no trace of crystalline iron oxide domain (Fig. S10 and S11†).

The single-site nature of  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$  was then confirmed by means of electron microscopy (Fig. 4). SEM showed the spherical macrostructure of the carbon (2–10  $\mu\text{m}$ , Fig. 4A and S8†). With TEM, no Fe particles were detected within the amorphous carbon matrix even at high magnification, excluding the presence of Fe species aggregates (Fig. 4B). Finally, aberration-corrected high resolution HAADF-STEM, showed sparse bright spots within the material (highlighted with red arrows), indicative of Fe single sites (Fig. 4C and D, Fig. S2–S4 in ESI†). More Fe single sites are embedded in the porous carbon matrix, which are difficult to image owing to the thickness of the carbon spheres.

Unlike for other  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$  examples, no acid washing was required since no Fe-based nanocluster was detected by HAADF-STEM, XRD or X-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS, *vide infra*). Indeed, the catalyst showed the same catalytic activity and Fe content with or without acid washing. We surmise that both the pre-coordination of Fe in heme sites along with their very low concentration contributed synergistically to avoid metal aggregation.<sup>41</sup>

Cryo (5K) X-band EPR was used to selectively probe  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  sites within the catalyst, with potential  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Fe}^{4+}$  sites typically being EPR silent (Fig. 5).<sup>42</sup> The Fe precursor, haemoglobin, gives a clear signal at  $g \sim 5.8$  and  $g \sim 4.3$  which relates to high spin ( $S = 5/2$ ) Fe in methaemoglobin and transferrin impurity, respectively. Additionally, a broad signal centered around  $g \sim 2.1$  derives from ferritin, with this signal more evident at higher EPR temperatures. The sharp signal at  $g = 2$  originates from organic radicals, with some potential contribution from the EPR tube or resonator. Interestingly, only a very small signal at  $g \sim 4.3$  was found in the  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$  catalyst, assigned to non-specifically bound high spin  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  with large

rhombic zero field splitting, possibly due to some leftover traces transferrin.<sup>42,43</sup> EPR sensitivity is typically in the order of  $\mu\text{M}$ ,<sup>44</sup> while the Fe concentration in the catalyst is in the order of mM, suggesting  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  in any significant proportion should be detected. Thus, the limited EPR response indicates that Fe exists almost entirely in the  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  or  $\text{Fe}^{4+}$  state.

Having confirmed the single-site nature of  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$ , we then investigated the role of each reaction component by conducting a series of control experiments (Table 2), starting with the use of base additives. In previous reports of both heterogeneous and homogeneous Fe catalysis, it has also been shown that the addition of a base helps activate the metal complex.<sup>45,46</sup> Typically, 1.0–5.0 equivalents of corrosive hydroxide salts (NaOH, KOH) are required. Only a few examples of base-free Fe catalysts have been reported for the transfer hydrogenation of nitroarenes ( $\text{Fe}(\text{BF}_4)_2/\text{HCO}_2\text{H}$ ,<sup>47</sup>  $\text{FeBr}_2/\text{PhSiH}_3$ ,<sup>48</sup>  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3/\text{HCO}_2\text{H}$ <sup>49</sup>), but they all required costly phosphine ligands.

In our system, removing  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$  decreased the yield from 75% to 10% (Table 2, entry 1), showing the essential role of adding a base. Removing  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  led to a similar conversion of the starting material (75%), but with half of the product being the hydrazine intermediate (34% of amine, 38% of 1,2-di-*p*-tolylhydrazine were formed, Table 2, entry 3). This shows that  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  helps cleave the N–N bond of the hydrazine intermediate. Indeed, at no other point of the investigation this intermediate was detected when  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  was present in the mixture. This indicates that the reduction occurs probably through the indirect nitroarene reduction pathway (see further details in ESI, Fig. S17 and S18†). As expected, the reaction did not proceed in the absence of catalyst, confirming the catalyst-base-reductant synergy (Table 2, entry 4). Substituting  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$  with  $\text{Na}_2\text{CO}_3$  decreased the yield to 31%, in consistency with other reports on nitroarene transfer hydrogenation, with  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$  having a better solubility in alcohols (Table 2, entry 5).<sup>50</sup> KOH or  $\text{NEt}_3$  decreased the yield to 36 and 16%, respectively (Table 2, entries 6 and 7). Replacing  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  with  $\text{NH}_4\text{CO}_2\text{H}$  gave no yield (Table 2, entry 8), although some product was detected upon increasing the amount of  $\text{NH}_4\text{CO}_2\text{H}$  to 1 and 1.5 equivalents (23 and 25% yield, Table 2, entries 9 and 10). Finally, we used different Fe salts directly as catalysts in our optimal conditions.  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  sources, such as  $\text{Fe}(\text{acac})_3$  and  $\text{FeCl}_3$ , were inactive for the reaction (Table 2, entries 11 and 12), while  $\text{FeCl}_2$  gave a 14% yield, hinting at  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  as the active species (Table 2, entry 13). Iron(II) phthalocyanine ( $\text{FePc}$ , Table 2, entry 14) was catalytically inactive, although this could be attributed to it being insoluble in *i*PrOH.<sup>51</sup> In comparison, a low level of catalytic activity was observed using the pure haemoglobin precursor (6% yield, Table 2, entry 15). Due to the chemical complexity of the precursor, we cannot exclude that its catalytic activity comes from the residual ferritin or the transferrin impurity in the sample (*vide supra* for the EPR analysis).

Next, the catalytic study was extended to other nitroarene substrates (Table 3). We first investigated steric hindrance surrounding the – nitro group. In comparison with the 85% yield



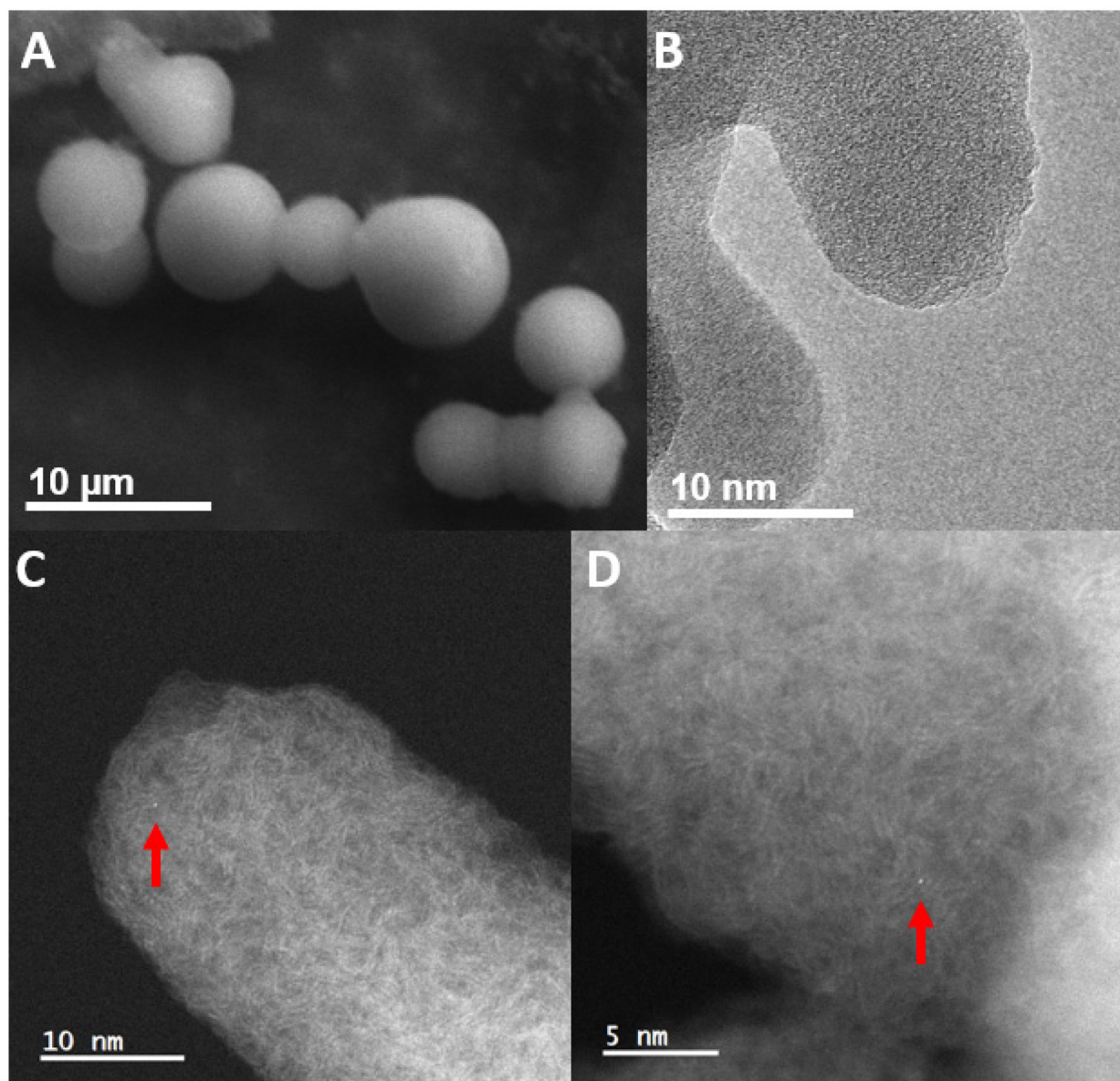


Fig. 4 (A) SEM image (B) TEM image (C) and (D) HAADF-STEM images of  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$  (6% oxygen treatment, single site Fe are indicated with a red arrow).

obtained in the reduction of nitrobenzene (Table 3, entry 2), more sterically hindered substrates such as 2-ethylnitrobenzene or 1,3-dimethyl-2-nitrobenzene required a slightly increased Fe loading (5 mol%) to maintain high yields (69 and 77%, Table 3, entries 3 and 4). This is consistent with the predominantly nanoporous nature of the catalyst, making the catalytic site more difficult to access for bulkier substrates.

Chemoselectivity is a major challenge in nitroarene reduction,<sup>52</sup> since hydrogenation catalysts can also cleave weak bonds (such as carbon-halogen bonds), or reduce unsaturated bonds ( $\text{C}=\text{C}$ ,  $\text{C}=\text{O}$ ). Therefore, bifunctional nitroarenes bearing cleavable bonds or reducible groups were also included in the substrate study. The C-O ether bond in 1,2-(methylenedioxy)-4-nitrobenzene was preserved while keeping

a high yield (85%, Table 3, entry 5). Although yields were lower, 4-iodonitrobenzene and 1,2,3-trichloro-5-nitrobenzene were successfully reduced while fully preserving the C-I and C-Cl bonds (58 and 46%, Table 3, entries 6 and 7). As for nitroanilines, the three isomers were reduced in high yields (97, 93 and 53%, Table 3, entries 8–10). Similarly,  $\text{C}=\text{C}$ ,  $\text{C}\equiv\text{C}$ ,  $\text{C}\equiv\text{N}$  bonds remained unaffected: 3-nitrostyrene gave a 71% yield (Table 3, entry 11), whereas 4-nitrobenzotrile and 1-ethynyl-4-nitrobenzene gave only 41 and 37% yields respectively (Table 3, entries 12 and 13). In the case of 4-nitrobenzotrile, standard conditions gave a mixture of 4-aminobenzotrile and 4-nitrobenzylamine (26% and 10% respectively), while only the former was produced when  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  was removed. Overall, we showed the excellent chemoselectivity of



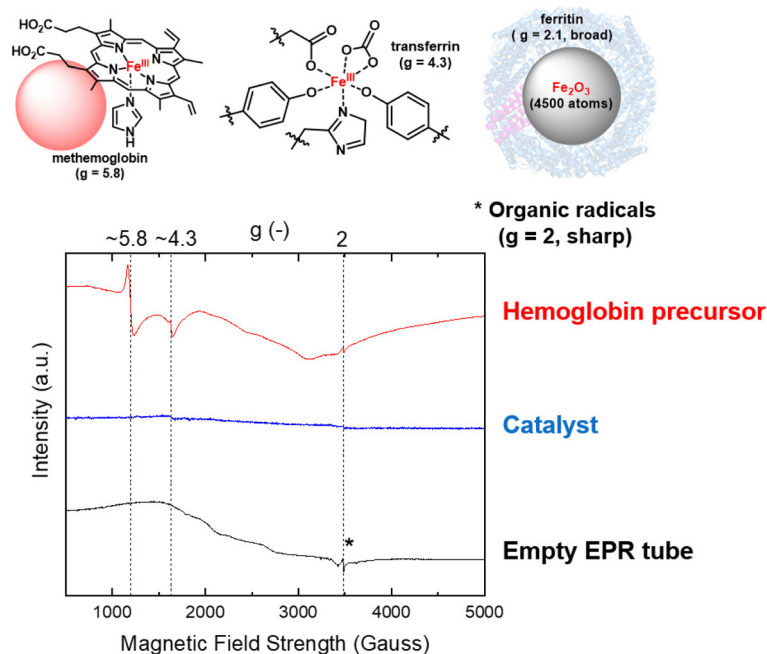
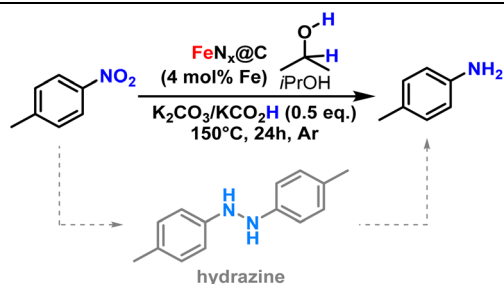


Fig. 5 X-band EPR spectrum of haemoglobin (red),  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$  (blue) and empty tube (black).

Table 2 Control reactions for 4-nitrotoluene transfer hydrogenation



Entry	Deviation from standard conditions		Yield (%)
1	None		75
2	<b>Removal</b>	No $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$	10
3		No $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$	34 <sup>a</sup>
4		No catalyst	0
5	<b>Base</b>	$\text{Na}_2\text{CO}_3$	31
6		KOH	36
7		$\text{NEt}_3$	16
8	<b>Reductant</b>	$\text{NH}_4\text{CO}_2\text{H}$ (0.5 equiv.)	0
9		(1 equiv.)	23
10		(1.5 equiv.)	25
11	<b>Iron source</b>	$\text{Fe}^{3+}$	0
12		$\text{Fe}(\text{acac})_3$	0
13		$\text{Fe}^{2+}$	14
14		FePc	0
15	<b>Pristine haemoglobin</b>		6

Standard reaction conditions: 4-nitrotoluene (12.4 mg, 88  $\mu\text{mol}$ ), base and additive (0.5 equiv. each), Fe source (4 mol% Fe), isopropyl alcohol (2.0 mL), Ar, 150  $^\circ\text{C}$ , 24 h. <sup>a</sup> 38% of 1,2-di-*p*-tolylhydrazine was formed.

our catalytic system can be achieved, with the exception of nitrobenzaldehydes and nitrovinyls (see ESI for details, Fig. S16<sup>†</sup>).

With this methodology, we were also able to prepare 2-phenylbenzimidazole, an important scaffold involved in anti-cancer drugs, in a one-pot reduction/cyclisation tandem reaction from 2-nitroaniline.<sup>53</sup> For this, we replaced isopropanol with benzyl alcohol, which generates an equivalent of benzaldehyde byproduct in the reduction of 2-nitroaniline into *ortho*-phenylenediamine. The two products can then undergo condensation into the desired heterocycle with 64% yield (Fig. 6).

The catalyst was easily recycled by centrifugation, and retained its activity for up to 7 cycles without a significant decrease in yield for the reduction of 4-nitrobenzene (Fig. 7).

The recovered material (after one catalytic cycle) was subjected to HAADF-STEM analysis, showing no appearance of  $\text{Fe}_x\text{O}_y$  aggregates, and we were still able to identify single-site Fe bright dots (Fig. 8, and Fig. S5–S6<sup>†</sup>), implying that the catalytic sites were retained.

Information on  $\text{FeN}_x$  coordination before and after reaction was also obtained by XAS. As shown in Fig. S12,<sup>†</sup> the Fe-K-edge X-ray absorption near-edge spectroscopy (XANES) for the catalyst before and after the reaction ( $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$  and  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}_{\text{AR}}$  respectively) is similar to that of the FePc reference sample.  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}_{\text{AR}}$  showed an increased pre-edge intensity (at 7113 eV), which indicates that Fe has a more symmetric coordination pattern than in  $\text{FeN}_x\text{@C}$ .<sup>54</sup> The Fourier transform (FT) of the extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS) spectrum for Fe-before and Fe-after samples showed a main peak at 1.5  $\text{\AA}$  and 1.4  $\text{\AA}$  (phase uncorrected), corresponding to the

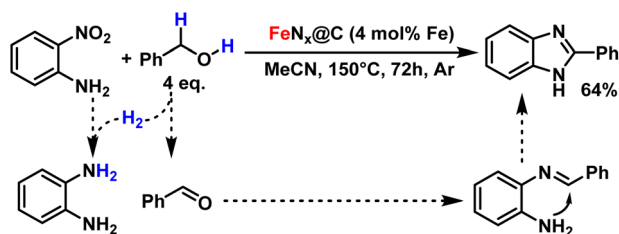


**Table 3** Nitroarene reduction substrate scope (reduced nitro group is highlighted in blue, and the other reducible/cleavable functional groups are highlighted in purple)

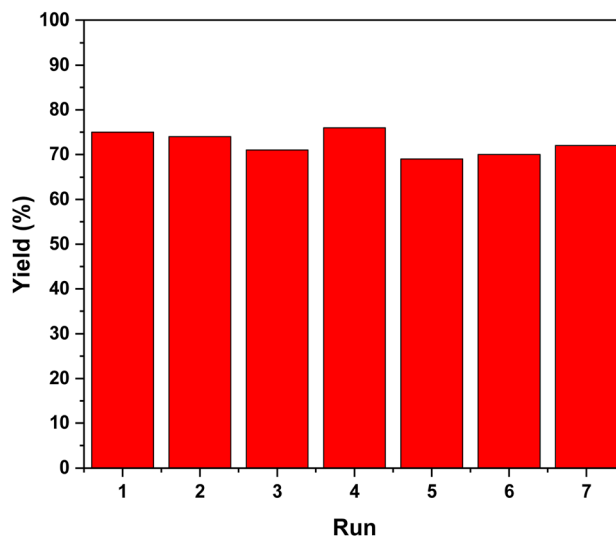
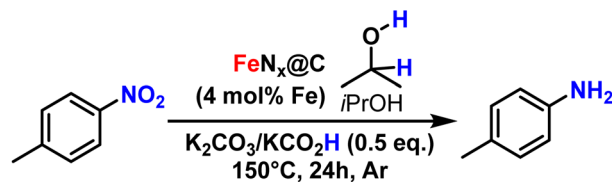
Entry	Product	Yield (%)
1		75
2		85
3		69 <sup>a</sup>
4		77
5		84
6		58
7		46
8		97 <sup>a</sup>
9		93 <sup>a</sup>
10		57 <sup>a</sup>
11		71
12		41 <sup>b</sup>
13		37 <sup>a</sup>

Ortho-  
Meta-  
Para-

Standard reaction conditions: nitroarene (88  $\mu\text{mol}$ ),  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$  (6.1 mg, 0.5 equiv.),  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  (3.7 mg, 0.5 equiv.),  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}$  (50 mg, 4 mol% Fe), isopropyl alcohol (2.0 mL), Ar, 150  $^\circ\text{C}$ , 24 h. <sup>a</sup> 5 mol% Fe was used by adjusting substrate amount to 70  $\mu\text{mol}$ . <sup>b</sup>  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$  was not added.



**Fig. 6** One-pot preparation of 2-phenylbenzimidazole.



**Fig. 7** Recycling of the catalyst.

first shell Fe–N or Fe–O (Fig. S12E<sup>†</sup>). The shorter first shell bond distance for  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}_{\text{AR}}$  suggests a change in the local coordination environment. A comparison with Zitolo *et al.*'s spectra (Fig. S14<sup>†</sup>) indicates the similarities of our samples ( $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}$  and  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}_{\text{AR}}$ ) with their  $\text{FeN}_4\text{-O}$  and  $\text{FeN}_4\text{-O}_2$  samples. Together with the pre-edge features, we propose a  $\text{FeN}_4\text{-O}$  structure for  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}$  and  $\text{FeN}_4\text{-O}_2$  for  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}_{\text{AR}}$ , respectively.<sup>55</sup> Wavelet transform (WT) EXAFS was employed to visualise the nearby atoms by providing the radial distance and  $k$  space resolutions. As shown in Fig. S15,<sup>†</sup> WT of  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}$  and  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}_{\text{AR}}$  showed one prominent peak at  $\sim 4.7 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$  and  $4.2 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ , respectively, which is very close to that in the reference  $\text{FePc}$  ( $\sim 4.2 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ ). Moreover, they are different from the  $\text{FeO}$ ,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ , and  $\text{Fe}$  foil reference samples, suggesting the dominant iron species in both samples is  $\text{FeN}_4$  sites, at least at the resolution of this experiment. Due to the similar bond distance, it is difficult to distinguish the difference between Fe–N and Fe–O in single sites. However, together with XPS, EPR, and STEM, we propose that Fe–N is the main species on the first shell.

EXAFS fittings were performed to get more insight on the coordination environment (Fig. S12<sup>†</sup>). All fittings are in good consistency with experimental data. The best fit values (Table S3<sup>†</sup>) of  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}$  gave an average coordination number of 4.85 for Fe–N at 2.04  $\text{ \AA}$ , 2.10 for Fe–C at 2.35  $\text{ \AA}$ , while the coordination number for  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}_{\text{AR}}$  was 5.95 for Fe–N at 1.91  $\text{ \AA}$ , 2.63 for Fe–C at 2.28  $\text{ \AA}$ , and 0.77 for Fe–Fe at 2.52  $\text{ \AA}$ . A minor Fe–Fe peak arising from  $\text{FeN}_x@\text{C}_{\text{AR}}$  sample might originate from trace amount  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  from Celite used for filtration



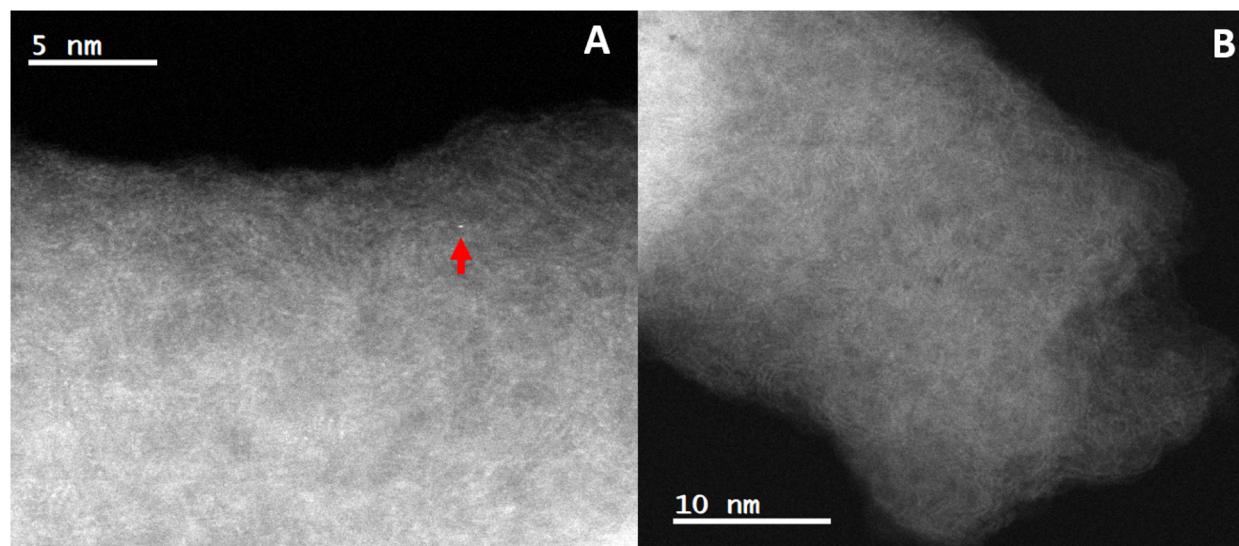


Fig. 8 (A) and (B) Post-reaction HAADF-STEM image of  $\text{FeN}_x@C_{AR}$  (single site Fe are indicated with a red arrow).

or traces Fe in  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$  (see notes in ESI†).<sup>56</sup> As shown in Fig. S8d,† an increased coordination number and decreased bond length could be seen in the  $\text{FeN}_x@C_{AR}$ . Together with XANES pre-edge features, we propose a  $\text{FeN}_4$  structure coordinated to one axial ligand before reaction, while  $\text{FeN}_x@C_{AR}$  exhibits a  $\text{FeN}_4$  structure coordinated to 2 axial ligands with a more symmetric structure. The nature of the axial ligand is still uncertain, although at least one is most likely an oxygen molecule, or some leftover nitrogen-containing product from the reaction.

## Conclusions

In summary, we have shown for the first time the potential of haemoglobin-derived Fe catalysts for organic transformations. Unlike most reports, only biomass precursors were used (xylose and haemoglobin) and no Fe aggregation was observed, avoiding a commonly-used washing step in the preparation. Its single-site nature was demonstrated by high-end techniques (XAS, HAADF-STEM), and remained stable throughout the catalytic cycles. We have shown it to be highly selective towards a number of substrates, and active at low Fe loading (4–5 mol%), with isopropanol,  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$  and  $\text{KCO}_2\text{H}$ . We believe that this work will pave a way for pure biomass-based catalysts applied to organic reactions, while setting a high standard for single-site material characterisation for thermal catalysis.

## Author contributions

A. Y. L. designed the project, prepared the materials and performed all the catalytic tests, the ICP-MS and  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption experiments. H. L. performed the TEM/SEM images and assisted for HAADF-STEM analysis. J. F. and H. L. performed the XAS analysis. A. P. performed the EPR analysis. J. B.

performed the XPS analysis. J. R. performed the Raman and the XRD analysis and helped for  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption result interpretation. M. M. T. and K. K. H. supervised the study. The manuscript was written through contributions of all authors. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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