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Evaluating the thermal behaviour of
benzimidazolylidene sources for thin-film
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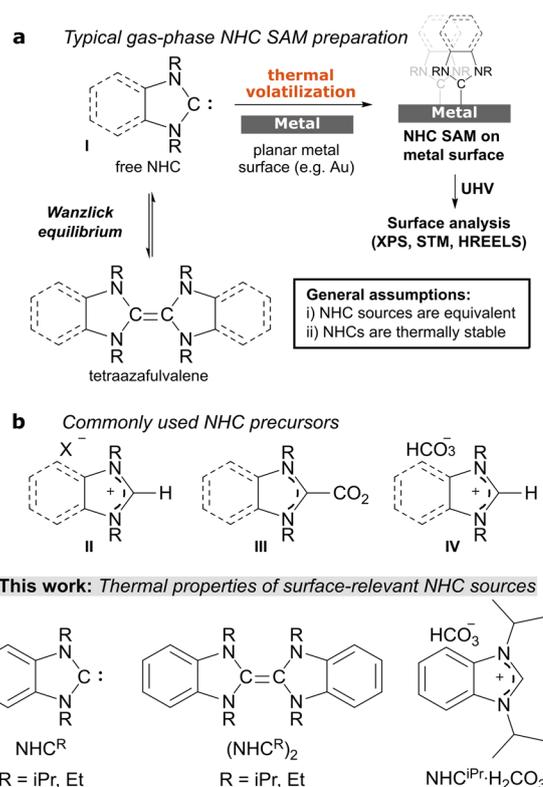
We show that the N-heterocyclic carbene precursor employed has a significant influence on the purity of the resulting films prepared by vapour-phase deposition. 1,3-Diisopropylbenzimidazolylidene is stable up to 363 K, before undergoing thermal decomposition to 1,2-diisopropylbenzimidazole as the major product. Various minor products arising from wing-tip loss are also observed. Kinetic and thermochemical analyses indicate that this reaction is second-order with respect to the carbene and proceeds through a transient tetraazafulvalene.

N-Heterocyclic carbenes (NHCs, **I**) are an important class of ligands in molecular chemistry with emerging applications in materials chemistry.¹ As exceptional σ -donors, NHCs are capable of binding strongly to gold and other metal surfaces and the resulting monolayers possess high chemical and thermal stability.² Self-assembled monolayers (SAMs) of NHCs have been formed on Cu,³ Au,^{1,2} Ag,^{3a} Pt,⁴ and Mg surfaces,⁵ and have shown promise in applications such as biosensing,⁶ surface patterning,⁷ and metal oxide etching.⁸ Among NHC SAMs published to date, 1,3-diisopropylbenzimidazolylidene (benzNHC^{iPr}) has received considerable attention. Flanking isopropyl groups (wing-tip groups) reinforce an upright binding mode and promote long-range order,⁹ essential properties for NHC SAMs to be effective in material science applications.

Vapour deposition methods are commonly used to prepare NHC monolayers and overlayers, and enable the use of ultra-high vacuum (UHV) surface science analytics.^{3,4a,8,10a}

Furthermore, vapour-phase deposition can be advantageous for high-volume manufacturing (HVM) applications since it removes the need to recycle or replace a solvent system, leading to lower production costs and environmental impact.

While preparing these films, the free NHC **I** can be employed after preparation *via* deprotonation of the salt **II**, but is more commonly generated *in situ* thermally from either carboxylate **III** or hydrogen carbonate salt **IV** (Scheme 1).¹⁰ It is generally



Scheme 1 (a) Typical workflow for studying NHC SAMs on metallic surfaces. (b) Common and surface-relevant NHC precursors and NHC sources examined here.

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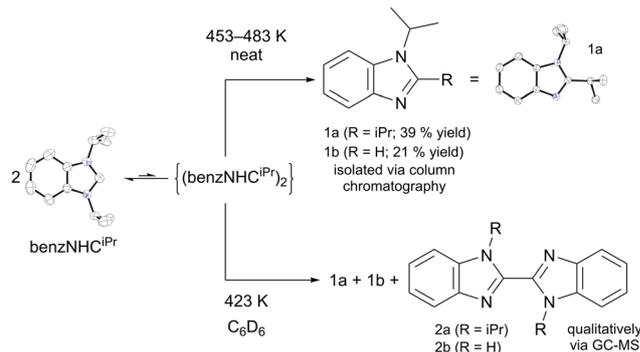
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assumed that differences between NHC sources are minimal such that the resulting SAMs formed during volatilisation are equivalent. While preparing NHC overlayers with $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ and its precursor hydrogen carbonate salt $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}} \cdot \text{H}_2\text{CO}_3$, it became apparent from X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) that this was not true, prompting us to study the thermochemistry of several important NHC SAM precursors by thermogravimetric analysis (TGA). Herein, we provide a comprehensive thermochemical study on $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$, its precursor hydrogen carbonate salt $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}} \cdot \text{H}_2\text{CO}_3$ and the related tetraazafulvalene $(\text{benzNHC}^{\text{Et}})_2$. The results shed light on optimal precursor choice, decomposition products, likely mechanisms of decomposition and the effect of decomposition products on surface analysis.

Carbene $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ was prepared following a known literature procedure,¹¹ and purified by vacuum distillation to remove trace iodide contaminants. To examine films prepared from the free carbene, neat $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ prepared and purified as above was sublimed at 373 K onto a copper wafer. Decomposition of the residual NHC (distillate) was evident from a colour change to orange from colourless, and from ^1H NMR spectroscopic analysis. Analysis of the resulting NHC-modified copper surface using XPS indicated that although a $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ overlayer was present, decomposition products were also transferred to the copper surface, evident by a broad peak with bimodal distribution in the N 1s region (Fig. 1b). This prompted further study of the thermal stability of the isolated carbene $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$.

To gain further insights, we carried out a bulk thermolysis reaction of $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$. Using a sand bath heated between 453–483 K, neat $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ was thermolysed over 4 h in a sealed vessel (Scheme 2). The resulting dark brown-coloured oil was purified by column chromatography, yielding 1,2-diisopropylbenzimidazole (39%, **1a**) and 1-isopropyl-benzimidazole (21%, **1b**) as the major and minor products, respectively. The structures of $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ and **1a** were determined using single



Scheme 2 Proposed thermal decomposition of $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ through its transient tetraazafulvalene. For full crystallographic details, see ESI†

crystal X-ray diffraction (Scheme 2, see ESI† for details). Benzimidazole **1a** is a structural isomer of $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ and was also characterised using ^1H and ^{13}C $\{^1\text{H}\}$ NMR spectroscopy and elemental analysis (see ESI†). Benzimidazole **1b** has been previously described,¹¹ arising from the loss of a wing-tip group from $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$. Its structure was verified using ^1H NMR spectroscopy.

The thermolysis reaction of $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ was repeated in a C_6D_6 solution at 423 K, and subsequent qualitative analysis using GC-MS revealed that in addition to **1a** and **1b**, 2,2'-bibenzimidazoles **2a** and **2b** are produced. Lappert and coworkers previously demonstrated the conversion of 1,2-dibenzylbenzimidazole to bibenzimidazoles,^{12a} so **1a** was examined by TGA to test for further decomposition (Fig. 3a).

Using a 10 mM 1,2-dichloroethane solution, **1a** was deposited onto a copper surface and studied using XPS. In the N 1s XPS region, **1a** exhibits two peaks each fit using a single component at 399.4 eV and 400.9 eV for amine and imine moieties, respectively (Fig. 1c). These peaks are similar in binding energy to the ones observed from vapor deposition of $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$, suggesting that benzimidazole contaminants likely co-deposited with free NHC. Due to overlap in the N 1s binding energies for organic compounds, benzimidazole **1b** or 2,2'-bibenzimidazoles **2a** and **2b** cannot be discounted as surface contaminants and will be indistinguishable in these studies.

Similar decomposition reactions are known for NHCs and their heteroatom congeners bearing allyl, imino and benzyl wing-tip groups.¹² Radicals and tetraazafulvalenes (or related carbene dimers) have been implicated in these rearrangements, the latter accessible *via* the Wanzlick equilibrium.¹³ The dimerisation of benzimidazolylidenes is highly sensitive to the steric properties of the wing-tip substituents,¹⁴ such that formation of $(\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}})_2$ is unexpected.^{14c}

Evidence for the formation of $(\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}})_2$ during thermal decomposition was provided by solution-phase kinetics measurements in C_6D_6 between 423–453 K (Scheme 2, see ESI† for details). The concentration of $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ was monitored by ^1H NMR spectroscopy and examined using first, second and third-order integrated rate laws. Both second-order (Fig. 2a) and third-order (Fig. S10, ESI†) rate laws yielded linear relationships, suggesting a complicated thermal mechanism. While

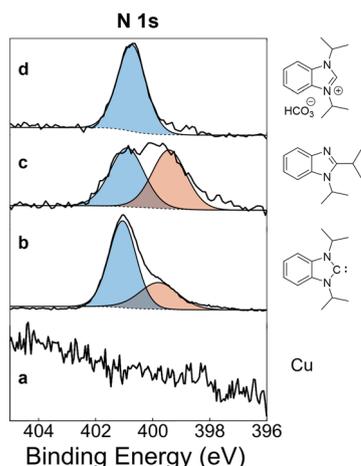


Fig. 1 N 1s XPS studies for (a) a cleaned copper surface, (b) a copper surface treated with sublimed $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}}$ (373 K), (c) a copper surface treated with 10 mM solution of **1a** in 1,2-dichloroethane, and (d) a copper surface treated with sublimed $\text{benzNHC}^{\text{iPr}} \cdot \text{H}_2\text{CO}_3$ (373 K).



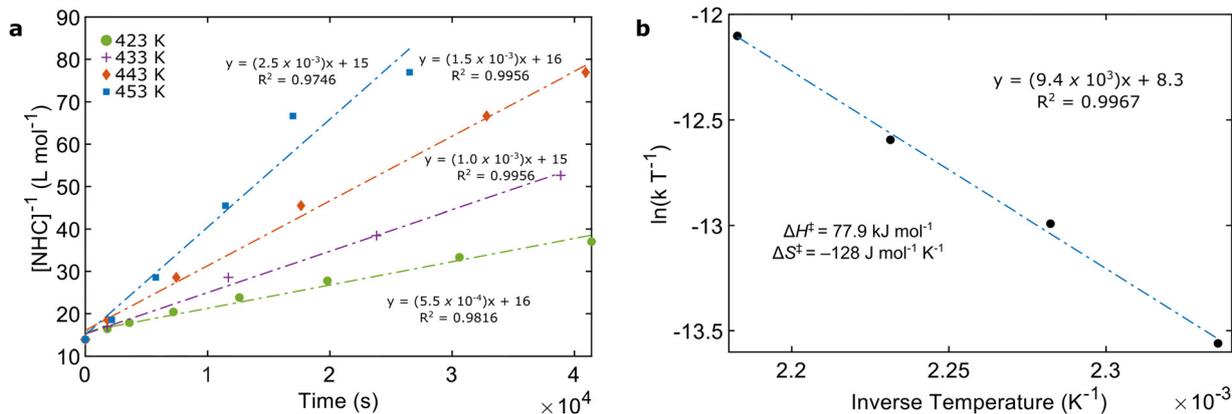


Fig. 2 (a) Summary of kinetic measurements performed for benzNHC^{iPr} (423–453 K) in C₆D₆ (sealed NMR tube, 0.072 M benzNHC^{iPr}, 0.086 M toluene as an internal standard). (b) Eyring–Polanyi plot derived from the kinetics measurements in (a); ΔH^\ddagger and ΔS^\ddagger were derived from the slope and intercept of the linear regression, respectively.

trimolecular reactions are uncommon, our data may indicate the establishment of a monomer/dimer pre-equilibrium during thermal decomposition.^{14d,e} Assuming that the rate-determining transition state is bimolecular with respect to benzNHC^{iPr}, an Eyring–Polanyi plot (Fig. 2b) yields the activation enthalpy ($\Delta H^\ddagger = 77.9$ kJ mol⁻¹) and entropy ($\Delta S^\ddagger = -128$ J mol⁻¹ K⁻¹). For comparison, the enthalpy (ΔH°) and entropy (ΔS°) of dissociation for the equilibrium between benzNHC^{Et} and its dimer are 57.3 kJ mol⁻¹ and 127 kJ mol⁻¹ K⁻¹, respectively.^{14b} Compared to the dimerisation of benzNHC^{Et}, the sign and magnitude of ΔS^\ddagger supports the formation of (benzNHC^{iPr})₂ during thermal decomposition while sterically larger iPr groups increase ΔH^\ddagger and suppress dimerisation.

Since (benzNHC^{iPr})₂ is fleeting and could not be isolated, (benzNHC^{Et})₂ was prepared instead and studied using TGA (Fig. 3a).^{14b} For (benzNHC^{Et})₂, an onset of mass loss occurs around 453 K, which is 130 K higher than benzNHC^{iPr} and is a consequence of increased molecular weight upon dimerisation. An inflection was observed around 493 K, which is likely related to the conversion of (benzNHC^{Et})₂ to its monomer.^{14b}

For comparison, the thermogram of benzNHC^{iPr} (Fig. 3b) shows an onset of mass loss at 323 K (i), coincident with the melting point of benzNHC^{iPr} (322 K) determined using differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) (point a, yellow region). At 453 K, an inflection is observed (ii) which can be attributed to sample volatilisation. However, DSC measurements indicate that decomposition begins around 363 K (point b, purple region), culminating in a major exothermic event around 453 K (point c, red region), coincident with the observed inflection point ii from TGA, suggesting that volatilisation and decomposition occur over a similar temperature regime. A second thermal inflection is found at 483 K in the DSC curve (point d, green region), suggesting that an ongoing, complicated thermal decomposition continues as the temperature is increased. Using neat samples of benzNHC^{iPr} and (benzNHC^{Et})₂, a thermal scrambling experiment was completed using our thermolysis conditions. The mixture of products

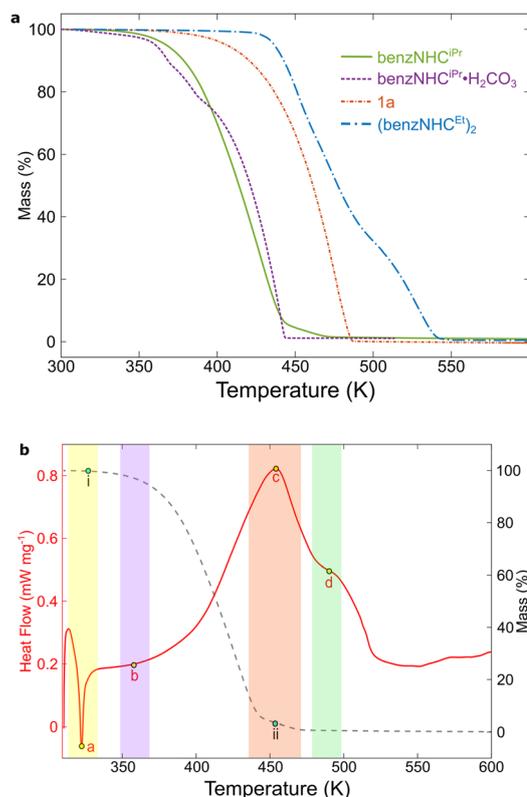


Fig. 3 (a) Stack TGA plot for benzNHC^{iPr} (green), benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃ (violet), **1a** (orange) and (benzNHC^{Et})₂ (blue); Ramp: 10 °C min⁻¹, Mass loading: 10 ± 2 mg. (b) TGA (grey) and DSC (red) curves for benzNHC^{iPr}. Areas of interest shown in coloured bars.

obtained could not be resolved by ¹H NMR spectroscopy; however, cross-over products containing both ethyl and isopropyl wing-tips were detected by ESI-MS (see ESI[†]) providing further qualitative evidence that the thermolysis of NHC proceeds bimolecularly.

As an alternative to often air-sensitive free carbenes, azolium hydrogen carbonate salts have been used as effective, air-stable precursors for vapour phase depositions of NHCs onto Cu, Au



and Pt surfaces.^{3b,4a,15} When heated, these salts liberate H₂O and CO₂, generating free NHCs in the process (eqn (1)).¹⁶ To examine the preparation of NHC overlayers with this precursor, we heated benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃ to 373 K in the presence of a copper wafer. The successful formation of an NHC overlayer was indicated by a single symmetric peak in the N 1s XPS region, fit using one component centred at 400.7 eV (Fig. 1d). XPS analysis indicated that films prepared using benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃ had a clean monomodal distribution in the N 1s region, unlike the bimodal distribution for free benzNHC^{iPr}.



TGA was performed for benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃ to understand these differences (Fig. 3a, purple). The thermogram shows that water and carbon dioxide are lost by 395 K indicating the *in situ* formation of free benzNHC^{iPr}.^{16a}

With increasing temperature, a smooth exponential decay to zero residual mass was observed, consistent with clean volatilisation, unlike free benzNHC^{iPr}, which has an inflection before coming to zero residual mass. The thermogram of benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃ was insensitive to heating rate or added KI, the latter a possible contaminant in benzNHC^{iPr} arising from its preparation. Co-mixing benzNHC^{iPr}·HI and benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃ produced a similar curve as those found in the literature,^{16b} suggesting that incomplete anion exchange may have occurred in previous studies. Co-mixing of benzNHC^{iPr}·HI and benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃ also reproduced the TGA inflection observed for free benzNHC^{iPr}, suggesting possible acid-catalysis involved in the decomposition (see ESI†).^{14d,e} Since the thermolysis of benzNHC^{iPr} is likely bimolecular, differences in thermal behaviour between benzNHC^{iPr} and benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃ likely arise from the kinetics of the release of carbene. The use of benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃ in NHC generation results in a lower flux of benzNHC^{iPr} at any given time, which minimises thermal decomposition.

In summary, TGA and DSC measurements have shown that benzNHC^{iPr} thermally decomposes during volatilisation above 363 K. This reaction proceeds through the transient tetraazafulvalene (benzNHC^{iPr})₂ to primarily afford benzimidazoles 1 and 2. Analysis of N 1s XPS suggests that these decomposition products can persist on copper surfaces and complicate peak fitting. These impurities were not observed in films prepared under similar conditions using benzNHC^{iPr}·H₂CO₃, illustrating that selecting the right NHC source is an important consideration for thermal applications. As on-surface applications of NHCs are being rapidly discovered, detailed thermochemical analyses of NHCs have become a necessary part of the toolkit for proper qualitative and quantitative surface analysis.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Acknowledgements

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