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# Tuning the selectivity of P<sub>4</sub> reduction at alkaline-earth metal centres†

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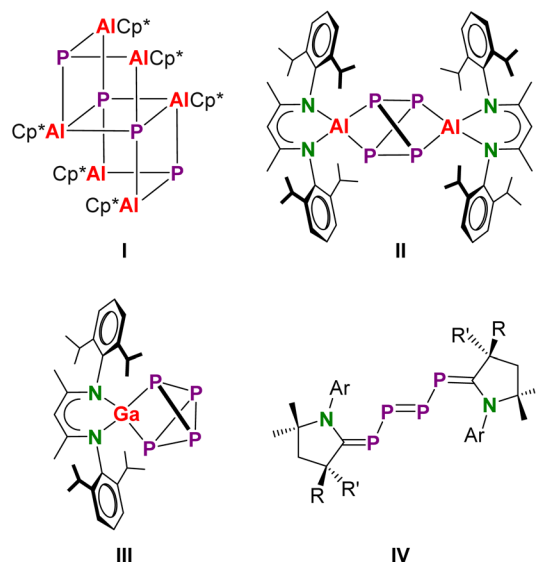
Reduction of P<sub>4</sub> with β-diketiminate Mg<sup>I</sup> complexes, (BDI)MgMg(BDI), depends strongly on the bulk of the ligand. Whereas superbulky BDI ligands gave selective reduction to P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> in a butterfly conformation, reduction with a less bulky ligand gave various products among which P<sub>8</sub><sup>4−</sup> had a realgar-type structure. The selectivity of P<sub>4</sub> reduction can also be controlled by metal choice. Reduction of P<sub>4</sub> with Ca<sup>I</sup> synthons of general type (BDI\*)Ca–X–Ca(BDI\*) in which BDI\* is a superbulky ligand and X is a bridging dianion (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>6</sub><sup>2−</sup> < *p*-xylene<sup>2−</sup> < N<sub>2</sub><sup>2−</sup>) led to reduction of P<sub>4</sub> to the very common, stable Zintl anion P<sub>7</sub><sup>3−</sup>. Monitoring this process with <sup>31</sup>P NMR shows that *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> is an intermediate en route to P<sub>7</sub><sup>3−</sup>. Conversion rates increase with increasing reducing power: X = C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>6</sub><sup>2−</sup> < *p*-xylene<sup>2−</sup> < N<sub>2</sub><sup>2−</sup>. A complex with the weakly reducing DBA<sup>2−</sup> dianion led to selective P<sub>4</sub> reduction to *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> (DBA = 9,10-dimethyl-diboraanthracene). DBA inhibits P<sub>4</sub>-to-P<sub>7</sub> conversion, most likely by capturing the electron needed for further P<sub>4</sub> reduction by radical processes. Experimental investigations are supported by crystal structure determinations and a computational DFT study which also shows that the nature of metal–P<sub>4</sub> bonding (covalent or ionic) determines the preference for formation of butterfly-shaped P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> or planar 6π-electron aromatic *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup>.

## Introduction

White phosphorus (P<sub>4</sub>) is a commodity reagent for the production of industrially relevant P-containing products. While traditional bulk processes convert P<sub>4</sub> with highly corrosive Cl<sub>2</sub> to PCl<sub>3</sub> for further functionalization with polar organometallic reagents, current research initiatives aim for catalytic protocols to directly convert P<sub>4</sub> to organophosphorus compounds.<sup>1</sup> In this light, the activation and chemical breakdown of P<sub>4</sub> is an important research field. Being a highly strained molecule, P<sub>4</sub> can be easily oxidized or reduced and shows diverse reactivity. Reacting either as an electrophile, nucleophile, or as an e-donor/acceptor, it could be seen as a chameleon in P-chemistry.<sup>2</sup>

Although P<sub>4</sub> is inherently highly reactive, reaction pathways often remain unclear and selective conversions are difficult to achieve. Numerous groups have reported on P<sub>4</sub> activation using the rich redox reactivity of the transition metals.<sup>3–6</sup> Recent developments in low-valent p-block chemistry stimulated P<sub>4</sub> activation with reagents that, due to small HOMO–LUMO gaps,

show transition metal-like reactivity.<sup>7–9</sup> Earlier highlights of this work include the insertion of (Me<sub>3</sub>Si)<sub>3</sub>CGa in three P–P bonds of P<sub>4</sub> by Uhl and coworkers<sup>10</sup> or the complete reduction of P<sub>4</sub> by Cp\*Al to give a P<sup>3−</sup> containing cluster (Cp\*Al)<sub>6</sub>(P)<sub>4</sub> (I, Scheme 1) by the Schnöckel group.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the bulkier β-diketiminate complex (BDI)Al reacted to give a complex of the P<sub>4</sub><sup>4−</sup> anion



Scheme 1 Selected products of P<sub>4</sub> activation by low-valent main group compounds.

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(II), formed by 4e-reduction and cleavage of two edges in the  $P_4$  tetrahedron; BDI is herein defined as  $HC[C(Me)-N(DIPP)]_2$  (DIPP = 2,6-diisopropylphenyl). Reaction with the softer reducing agent (BDI)Ga led only to 2e-reduction and cleavage of one P–P edge (III).<sup>12</sup> The valence isoelectronic cyclic alkyl amino carbenes (CAACs) have also been shown to activate  $P_4$  (IV),<sup>13</sup> whereas silylenes show either 4e-reduction giving  $P_4^{4-}$ , like in II, or 2e-reduction resulting in  $P_4^{2-}$ , like in III.<sup>14</sup>

Given the plethora of important breakthroughs in low-oxidation state s-block metal chemistry,<sup>15–17</sup> it is remarkable that there is a complete lack of research on  $P_4$  reduction with these highly reactive early main group metal complexes. The reduction chemistry of one of the first  $Mg^I$  complexes, (BDI)MgMg(BDI),<sup>18</sup> has been extensively investigated<sup>15</sup> but we are unaware of reactivity studies with  $P_4$ . However, this mild reducing agent has been reported to reduce the  $P_5^-$  ring in  $Cp^*Fe(P_5)$ .<sup>19</sup> The far majority of  $P_4$  activation studies with s-block metal reagents exploit their superb nucleophilicity. Classical examples include P–P bond cleavage in  $P_4$  by nucleophilic addition of RLi or Grignard reagents.<sup>20</sup> An interesting case of nucleophilic activation of  $P_4$  is its reaction with nucleophilic hydride reagents like  $[(BDI)Ca(\mu_2-H)]_2$  which after subsequent  $H_2$  release gave the reduction-like product  $[(BDI)Ca]_3(P_7)$ , containing the Zintl  $P_7^{3-}$  ion.<sup>19</sup> In this example, the calcium hydride complex reacts as a synthon for the hitherto unknown  $Ca^I$  complex (BDI)CaCa(BDI). Such reductive reactivity of group 2 metal hydride complexes is well-established.<sup>21</sup>

We herein report a systematic study on the reduction of  $P_4$  with  $Mg^I$  complexes or  $Ca^I$  synthons, *i.e.*  $Ca^{II}$  complexes containing electron-rich ligands that can react like the corresponding  $Ca^I$  species.<sup>22–24</sup> We demonstrate that selectivity is largely dependent on metal choice, ligand bulk or the nature of the electron-rich ligand delivering the electrons for  $P_4$  reduction.

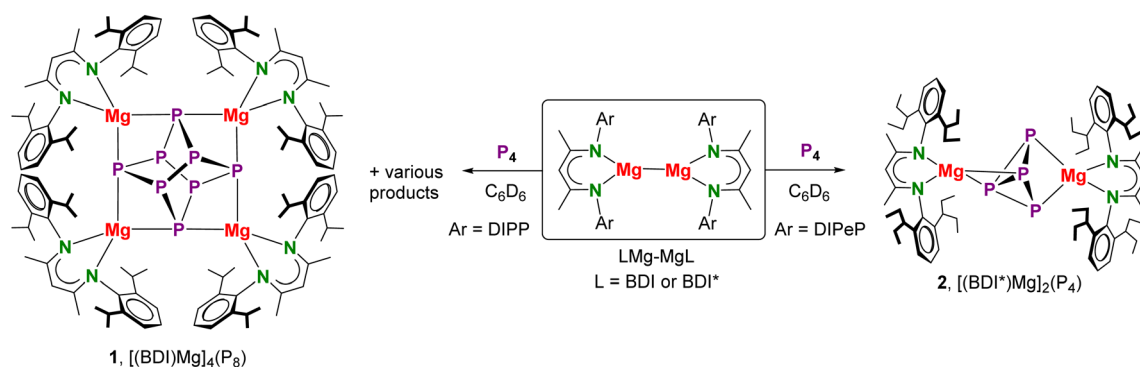
## Results and discussion

### $P_4$ activation with $Mg^I$ complexes

The direct reduction of  $P_4$  with  $\beta$ -diketiminate  $Mg^I$  complexes of type (BDI)MgMg(BDI) has so far not been described in the literature. This could be because  $^1H$  and  $^{31}P\{^1H\}$  NMR monitoring of an equimolar mixture of  $[(BDI)Mg]_2$  and  $P_4$  in  $C_6D_6$  at

room temperature showed a highly unselective conversion (Scheme 2 and Fig. S37/S38†). Various side-reactions may originate from the poor solubility of the reactants and the heterogeneity of the reaction mixture. However, we found that gently heating the mixture for three days at 60 °C leads to further conversion and selective crystallization of a most insoluble reaction product  $[(BDI)Mg]_4(P_8)$  (1) in 10% yield (Fig. 1a). This minor product shows  $^{31}P$  NMR resonances at +68.3 and +145.0 ppm which were not observed in the crude product of the room temperature  $[(BDI)Mg]_2/P_4$  conversion. This means that 1 was formed after thermal treatment. The  $P_8^{4-}$  unit is isostructural and valence isoelectronic to  $\alpha$ - $P_4S_4$ , which is of the realgar-type,<sup>25</sup> and flanked by four  $[(BDI)Mg]^+$  fragments at the corners with each Mg atom bound to two P atoms. Despite the high symmetry of the  $P_8^{4-}$  anion, the complex shows no crystallographic symmetry. Although this structure is unprecedented in s-block metal chemistry, a few examples for  $P_8^{4-}$  formation are known from transition metal,<sup>26–28</sup> lanthanide,<sup>29</sup> and gallium mediated  $P_4$  activation.<sup>30</sup> Similar realgar-type polystibides  $Sb_8$  have been isolated as the corresponding  $[(BDI)Mg]_4(Sb_8)$  complexes with different BDI ligands.<sup>31</sup> The Mg–P distances in 1 are in the narrow range of 2.599(1)–2.692(1) Å with P–Mg–P bite angles varying from 73.92(3)° to 74.79(3)°. In contrast to  $[(BDI)Mg]_4(Sb_8)$  which exhibits an almost linear Mg–Sb–Mg arrangement, the Mg–P–Mg angles in 1 deviate slightly from linearity: 164.26(3)–168.05(3)°. Within the  $P_8^{4-}$  anion in 1 there are two types of P–P bonds. The P–P bonds between three-coordinate P atoms, P2–P6 (2.2868(8) Å) and P4–P8 (2.2751(8) Å), are slightly elongated compared to the remaining P–P bonds ranging from 2.1999(7) to 2.2188(8) Å. The P–P–P angles range from 92.60(3)° to 102.67(3)°. These structural features are in agreement with those reported for the  $Sm^{III}$  cluster  $(Cp^*_2Sm)_4(P_8)$ .<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, reaction of  $P_4$  with the more sterically hindered  $Mg^I$  complex  $[(BDI^*)Mg]_2$ ,<sup>32</sup> featuring a considerably elongated Mg–Mg interatomic distance,<sup>33</sup> gave at room temperature overnight highly selective conversion; BDI\* is defined as  $HC[C(Me)-N(DIPeP)]_2$  (DIPeP = 2,6-(Et<sub>2</sub>CH)-phenyl). In contrast to the unselective  $[(BDI)Mg]_2/P_4$  conversion (Fig. S37/S38†), the crude product of the  $[(BDI^*)Mg]_2/P_4$  conversion showed a  $^{31}P$  { $^1H$ } NMR spectrum with only two triplet resonances in a 1 : 1 ratio (Fig. S41†). Despite the high selectivity of this reaction, the



Scheme 2 Activation of  $P_4$  by  $\beta$ -diketiminate  $Mg^I$  complexes.

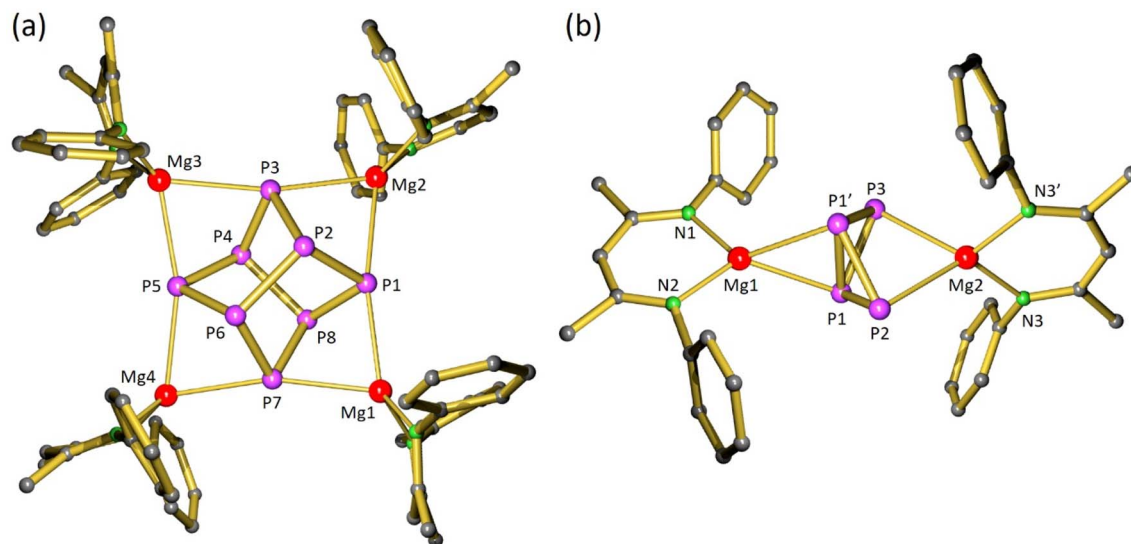


Fig. 1 (a) Crystal structure of  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Mg}]_4(\text{P}_8)$  (1) in which *i*Pr-groups and H atoms are omitted for clarity and a view of the  $\text{Mg}_4\text{P}_8$  core. (b) Crystal structure of  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Mg}]_2(\text{P}_4)$  (2); the  $\text{Et}_2\text{CH}$ -groups and H atoms are omitted for clarity. A crystallographic mirror plane runs through the atoms  $\text{Mg1}$ ,  $\text{Mg2}$ ,  $\text{P2}$ ,  $\text{P3}$ .

very good solubility induced by the  $\text{Et}_2\text{CH}$ -substituents allowed for isolation of crystalline  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Mg}]_2(\text{P}_4)$  (2) in only 34% yield.

In agreement with two triplet signals in  $^{31}\text{P}\{^1\text{H}\}$  NMR, inspection of the crystal structure revealed a  $\text{P}_4^{2-}$  dianion in a butterfly conformation which is bridging two  $(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Mg}^+$  units in an unusual  $\eta^2, \eta^2$ -fashion. Butterfly-shaped  $\text{P}_4^{2-}$  anions usually bridge metals in  $\eta^1, \eta^1$ -fashion.<sup>34</sup> Recently, Aldridge and co-workers isolated an odd example of  $\text{P}_4^{2-}$  bridging between Al and K in  $\eta^2, \eta^1$ -fashion<sup>35</sup> while Hill and co-workers reported bridging in  $\eta^2, \eta^3$ -fashion.<sup>36</sup> Complex 2 could also be considered to consist of a magnesate anion  $(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Mg}(\text{P}_4)^-$  with two polar Mg–P bonds to the two-coordinate P atoms ( $\text{P2}$ ,  $\text{P3}$ ) of 2.573(4)–2.694(4) Å, charge-balanced by a  $(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Mg}^+$  cation that interacts with Mg–P interactions of circa 2.606(4) Å with both three-coordinate P-atoms ( $\text{P1}$  and  $\text{P1}'$ ). Due to disorder of the bridging  $\text{P}_4^{2-}$  anion (Fig. S62†) a more accurate discussion of the crystal structure is not possible.

#### $\text{P}_4$ activation with $\text{Ca}^{\text{I}}$ synthons

Although  $\beta$ -diketiminato stabilized  $\text{Ca}^{\text{I}}$  complexes are currently unknown, we reported a range of  $(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca-X-Ca}(\text{BDI}^*)$  complexes with various bridging  $\text{X}^{2-}$  anions that react like a low-valent  $\text{Ca}^{\text{I}}$  complex ( $\text{X} = \text{N}_2$ , benzene, *p*-xylene).<sup>22,24</sup> Their reducing ability is directly related to the 2e-oxidation of the bridging anion,  $\text{X}^{2-} \rightarrow \text{X} + 2\text{e}^-$ , and therefore to the reduction potential of X.

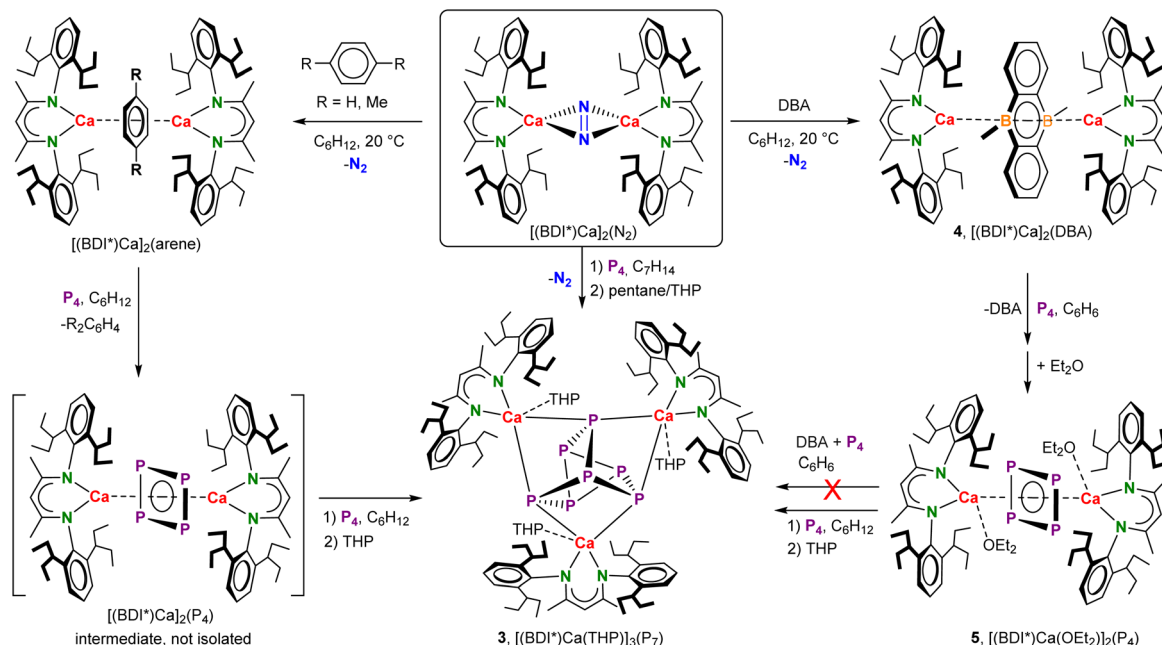
Since the most reducing  $\text{Ca}^{\text{I}}$  synthon  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca}]_2(\text{N}_2)$  is unstable in aromatic solvents,<sup>22</sup> the reaction with  $\text{P}_4$  was carried out in methylcyclohexane (Scheme 3). Reaction of the  $\text{Ca}^{\text{I}}$  synthon with a methylcyclohexane solution of  $\text{P}_4$  at room temperature led to immediate  $\text{N}_2$  evolution and a colour change from dark brown to dark orange. Analysis of the crude reaction mixture by  $^{31}\text{P}\{^1\text{H}\}$  NMR spectroscopy revealed after 30 minutes a sharp low-field singlet at 458.4 ppm and a rather broad high-

field singlet at –85.3 ppm in a ratio of 0.09 : 0.91, respectively (Fig. S42†). Continued stirring for another 4 hours showed the selective formation of one species corresponding to the broad high-field signal at –85.3 ppm (Fig. S43†). Layering a saturated methylcyclohexane/pentane solution with a few drops of tetrahydropyran (THP) resulted in the isolation of yellow crystals of composition  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca}(\text{THP})]_3(\text{P}_7)$  (3) in a 28% yield.

The crystal structure of 3 (Fig. 2a) revealed that  $\text{P}_4$  had been reduced to the polyphosphide  $\text{P}_7^{3-}$  Zintl ion, encapsulated by three  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca}(\text{THP})]^+$  fragments. A similar product,  $[(\text{BDI})\text{Ca}]_3(\text{P}_7)$ , has been obtained by Roesky and co-workers by reduction of  $\text{P}_4$  with  $[(\text{BDI})\text{Ca}(\mu_2\text{-H})]_2$ .<sup>19</sup> However, in contrast to this previous report which describes a major side-product with a  $^{31}\text{P}$ -resonance at –241.3 ppm, the reduction of  $\text{P}_4$  with the  $\text{Ca}^{\text{I}}$  synthon is highly selective.

Although the structure of 3 is close to being  $C_3$ -symmetric, the complex does not show crystallographic symmetry. The Ca metal centres have shortest interactions to the three two-coordinate P atoms ( $\text{P4-P6}$ ) in  $\text{P}_7^{3-}$  which formally carry a negative charge (Ca–P: 3.0557(7)–3.1163(6) Å). These bonds are considerably longer than the corresponding Ca–P bonds in  $[(\text{BDI})\text{Ca}]_3(\text{P}_7)$  which vary from 2.8667(9) to 2.9346(9) Å.<sup>19</sup> The long Ca–P contacts in 3 are mainly due to the bulkier  $\text{BDI}^*$  ligand and the additional THP coordination. While in 3 there are no Ca–P contacts to the apical P atom  $\text{P7}$ , the formally neutral three-coordinate P atoms in the  $\text{P}_3$ -triangle ( $\text{P1-P3}$ ) show long contacts (Ca–P: 3.3253(7)–3.4611(5) Å). The P–P bond lengths in the  $\text{P}_7$ -cage (2.1601(6)–2.2610(4) Å) are in the range of previous reported Zintl ions.<sup>37</sup> Reports of group 2 metal based Zintl ions are particularly rare and especially their selective formation from  $\text{P}_4$  remains difficult. Hill and co-workers isolated a Mg flanked  $\text{P}_7$  Zintl cluster that is structurally very similar to  $[(\text{BDI})\text{Ca}]_3(\text{P}_7)$ . However, this product could only be



Scheme 3 Activation of  $P_4$  by  $Ca^I$  synthons.

obtained in poor yields as a minor side product by fractional crystallization of the raw product.<sup>38</sup>

Whilst the  $^{31}P\{^1H\}$  NMR spectrum of  $[(BDI^*)Ca(THP)]_3(P_7)$  at room temperature showed one very broad singlet at  $-85.28$  ppm due to fast exchange between the three different P positions in the  $P_7^{3-}$  anion, at  $-90^\circ C$  this resonance was split into seven broad but distinct signals (Fig. S22<sup>†</sup>), partially with visible magnetic coupling (ppm:  $-147.6$ ,  $-130.4$ ,  $-111.6$ ,  $-75.7$ ,  $-69.2$ ,  $-45.1$ , and  $-38.2$ ). This behaviour differs from other reports on the dynamics of  $P_7^{3-}$  which generally describe splitting in only three signals in a ratio of 1 : 3 : 3 upon cooling.<sup>19,37</sup> These can be assigned to the apical position, the  $P_3$  basal triangle and the three connecting P atoms. Our observed splitting into seven signals at low temperature can only be rationalized by a loss of trigonal symmetry by different coordination geometries at the Ca centres, making each P atom magnetically inequivalent.

The central  $2e^-$ -donor X in  $(BDI^*)Ca-X-Ca(BDI^*)$  influences the synthon's stability and reactivity.<sup>22–24</sup> In order to evaluate the effect of the central  $X^{2-}$  anion on  $P_4$  reduction, the most reducing  $Ca^I$  synthon,  $[(BDI^*)Ca]_2(N_2)$  was converted to the corresponding arene complexes by reaction with benzene or *p*-xylene which led to  $N_2$  release. These binuclear arene complexes were further reacted with equimolar quantities of  $P_4$  in cyclohexane- $d_{12}$  and conversion was monitored with  $^{31}P\{^1H\}$  NMR. Similarly to  $P_4$  reduction with  $N_2^{2-}$ , two signals were observed: a sharp low-field resonance at  $458.4$  ppm and a rather broad high-field singlet at  $-85.3$  ppm, corresponding to the  $P_7^{3-}$  Zintl anion. Over time, the sharp low-field resonance at  $458.4$  ppm disappeared and clean formation of the  $P_7$  complex was observed. This suggests that the species with a  $^{31}P$  resonance at  $458.4$  ppm is an intermediate on the way to formation of the  $P_7$  complex. The only difference is the rate at which this happens

which seems to be related to the reducing power of the central  $X^{2-}$  anion:  $N_2^{2-} > p\text{-xylene}^{2-} > \text{benzene}^{2-}$ . While in the case of the  $N_2$  complex, the intermediate species was nearly fully converted to the  $P_7$  complex after an hour, the less reducing benzene complex required stirring overnight (Fig. S45<sup>†</sup>). As we were not able to isolate the intermediate, we sought a weaker  $Ca^I$  synthon to slow the reaction further.

Reaction of  $P_4$  with  $(BDI^*)Ca\text{-(anthracene)-}Ca(BDI^*)$ <sup>23</sup> gave a myriad of products of which one could be recognized as the  $P_7$  complex (**3**) by  $^{31}P$  NMR analysis (Fig. S48<sup>†</sup>). This prompted us to look further for a suitable bridging ligand. Due to aromaticity in its dianionic state, the boron-doped 9,10-dimethyldiboranthracene (DBA) dianion is less reducing and has markedly different electronic properties.<sup>39–41</sup> Recently, first lanthanide triple-decker complexes featuring  $DBA^{2-}$  ligands were reported.<sup>42</sup> Reduction of DBA with the  $Ca^I$  synthon  $[(BDI^*)Ca](N_2)$  in cyclohexane resulted in gas evolution and immediate precipitation of a microcrystalline orange solid (Scheme 3).  $^1H$  NMR showed selective formation of the target complex  $[(BDI^*)Ca]_2(DBA)$  (**4**) which could be isolated in 88% yield (Fig. S49<sup>†</sup>). Unlike  $(BDI^*)Ca\text{-(}C_6H_6\text{)-}Ca(BDI^*)$ , which in benzene shows reductive benzene coupling ( $C_6H_6^{2-} + C_6H_6 \rightarrow \text{biphenyl}^{2-}$ ),<sup>43</sup>  $[(BDI^*)Ca]_2(DBA)$  is even at  $60^\circ C$  remarkably stable in aromatic solvents. Its  $^{11}B$  NMR spectrum did not show a clear signal, even when quartz NMR tubes were used. Bright orange crystals suitable for single crystal X-ray diffraction were obtained by recrystallization from a cyclohexane/*n*-pentane mixture at room temperature.

The complex crystallized in the  $P\bar{1}$  space group with two independent  $[(BDI^*)Ca]_2(DBA)$  (**4**) inverse sandwich complexes in the asymmetric unit (Fig. 2b). The structure shows a planar  $(\mu^2-\eta^6:\eta^6\text{-DBA})^{2-}$  ligand of which the central  $B_2C_4$ -ring is sandwiched between the two  $(BDI^*)Ca^+$  fragments with  $Ca\text{--}$



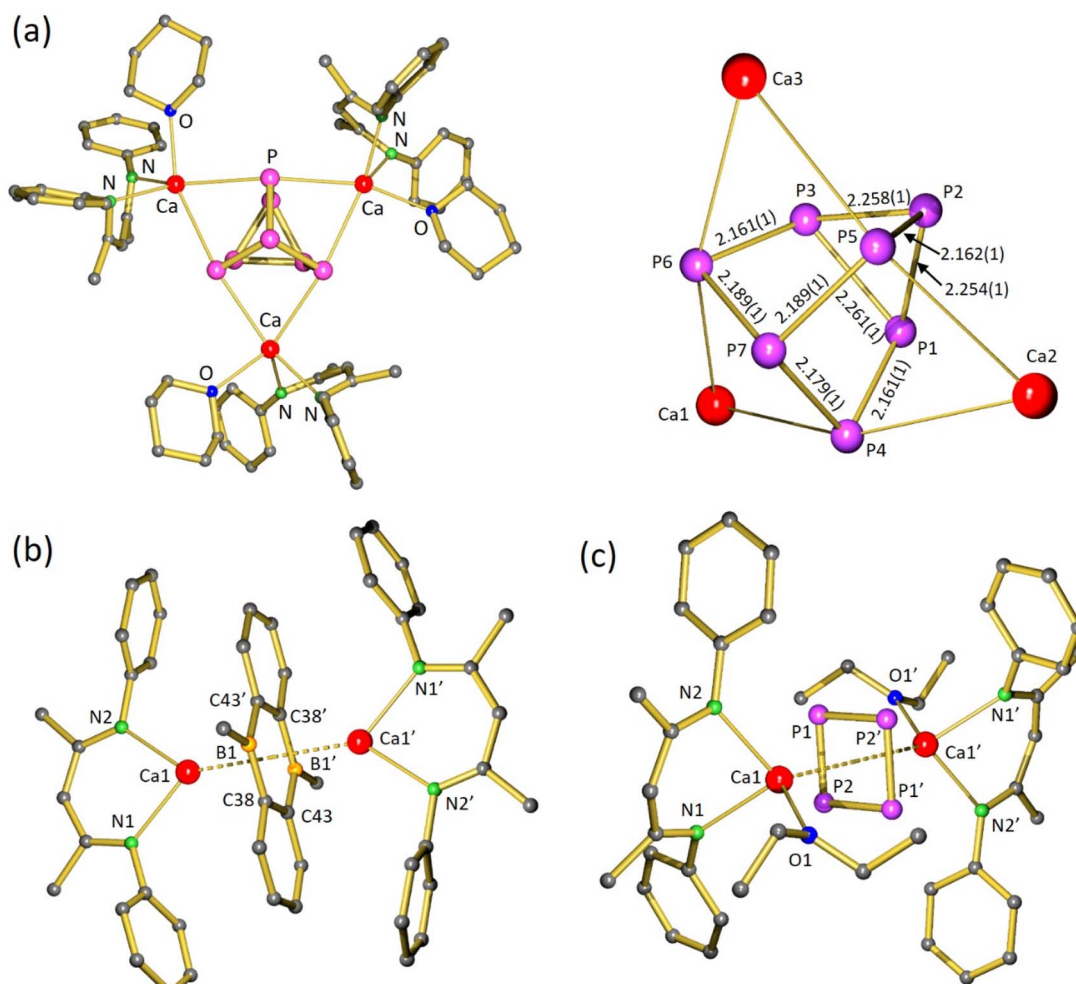


Fig. 2 (a) Crystal structure of  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca}(\text{THP})]_3(\text{P}_7)$  (3) and a view of the  $\text{Ca}_3\text{P}_7$  core. (b) Centrosymmetric crystal structure of  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca}]_2(\text{DBA})$  (4). (c) Centrosymmetric crystal structure of  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca}(\text{OEt}_2)]_2(\text{cyclo-P}_4)$  (5). In all figures the H atoms and  $\text{Et}_2\text{CH}$ -groups have been omitted for clarity.

ring<sub>centre</sub> distances ranging from 2.3552(4) to 2.3786(4) Å. Preference for metal coordination to the central  $\text{B}_2\text{C}_4$ -ring was also observed in alkali metal complexes:  $\text{M}(\text{THF})_n(\text{DBA})\text{--M}(\text{THF})_n$  complexes ( $\text{M} = \text{Li}, \text{Na}, \text{K}$ ).<sup>40,44</sup> Like in these alkali metal inverse sandwiches, the planar  $\text{DBA}^{2-}$  anion in 4 is isoelectronic to anthracene and shows in its central ring C–C bond distances of 1.466(3)–1.468(2) Å and B–C bond distances of 1.530(3)–1.541(3) Å, specifying the extended aromatic nature of this dianion. Computational investigation of 4 shows that Ca ligand bonding is highly ionic. NPA charges:  $(\text{BDI}^*) -0.88$ ,  $\text{Ca} +1.79$ ,  $\text{DBA} -1.87$  (Fig. S67†).

A  $\text{C}_6\text{D}_6$  solution of  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca}]_2(\text{DBA})$  (4) and one equivalent of  $\text{P}_4$  was stirred overnight at room temperature resulting in a colour change from orange to bright yellow. The  $^{31}\text{P}\{^1\text{H}\}$  NMR spectrum showed a sharp singlet at 453.9 ppm indicative for exclusive formation of the hitherto unidentified intermediate (Fig. S51†) whereas the high field signal at  $-85$  ppm for  $\text{P}_7^{3-}$  formation is missing. In addition,  $^1\text{H}$ ,  $^{11}\text{B}$ , and  $^{13}\text{C}$  NMR confirmed the release of neutral DBA (Fig. S52–S54†). The sharp low-field singlet of this intermediate could be assigned to the

four chemically equivalent phosphorus atoms of the *cyclo-P*<sub>4</sub> dianion, in the form of an inverse sandwich complex. Comparing to few reports in literature, the  $^{31}\text{P}$  NMR chemical shift of the *cyclo-P*<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> ring is sensitive to its environment:  $[(^{\text{DIPP}}\text{Form})_2\text{Sm}]_2(\text{cyclo-P}_4)$  with  $\delta = +453$  ppm<sup>45</sup> ( $^{\text{DIPP}}\text{Form} = \text{HC}(\text{N-DIPP})_2$ ),  $\text{Cs}_2\text{P}_4 \cdot 2\text{NH}_3$  with  $\delta = +348$  ppm,<sup>46</sup>  $[(\text{NON})\text{Sm}(\text{THF})_2]_2(\text{cyclo-P}_4)$  with  $\delta = +480$  ppm (NON = 4,5-bis(2,6-diisopropylphenyl-anilido)-2,7-di-*tert*-butyl-9,9-dimethyl-xanthene),<sup>47</sup>  $[(\text{NON})\text{Yb}(\text{THF})_2]_2(\text{cyclo-P}_4)$  with  $\delta = +382$  ppm,<sup>47</sup> and a U complex with  $\eta^2, \eta^2$ -bridging *cyclo-P*<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> with  $\delta = +718$  ppm.<sup>48</sup> Despite this considerable range in chemical shifts, all values are considerably downfield shifted, substantiating the  $6\pi$ -electron aromatic character of this dianion.

Crystallization from a saturated pentane solution, layered with drops of  $\text{Et}_2\text{O}$ , allowed for isolation and structural characterization of  $[(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca}(\text{OEt}_2)]_2(\text{cyclo-P}_4)$  (5) by X-ray diffraction. The crystal structure of 5 confirms the formation of an inverse sandwich complex with a bridging *cyclo-P*<sub>4</sub> dianion (Fig. 2c). The  $6\pi$ -electron aromatic *cyclo-P*<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> ring bridges in  $\eta^4, \eta^4$ -fashion between two cationic  $(\text{BDI}^*)\text{Ca}^+$  fragments with

Ca–P<sub>4</sub>(centroid) bond lengths of 2.6460(5) Å and Ca–P bond lengths between 3.0446(9) and 3.0682(8) Å. The P<sub>4</sub> ring is disordered over two positions which are rotated in respect to each other around the Ca...Ca' axis by circa 45°. The P–P bond lengths range from 2.156(1) Å to 2.158(1) Å and internal P–P–P angles are close to 90° (P2–P1–P2' 89.40(4)°, P1'–P2–P1 90.60(4)°). Hence, the aromatic P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> ring is almost perfectly square planar. The P–P bond lengths of the phosphorus ring are in the range of reported examples and seems independent of the metal atoms which sandwiches this ring (Sm: 2.144(1)–2.162(1) Å,<sup>45</sup> U: 2.149(2)–2.152(2) Å,<sup>48</sup> Cs: 2.146(1)–2.148(1) Å).<sup>46</sup> It is of interest to note that the geometry of P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> depends strongly on the metals that sandwich this dianion. The ring structure of 6π-electron aromatic *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> in the Ca inverse sandwich **5** contrasts strongly with the butterfly structure of P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> in the Mg inverse sandwich **2**. A detailed discussion on these differences follows below (*vide infra*).

It is noteworthy, that the reduction of P<sub>4</sub> with [(BDI\*)Ca]<sub>2</sub>(DBA) (**4**) exclusively led to formation of the aromatic (*cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub>)<sup>2−</sup> dianion. Even with a large excess of P<sub>4</sub> and using forcing reaction conditions (60 °C), only the P<sub>4</sub> complex **5** was formed. This represents the first example of a quantitative reduction of P<sub>4</sub> to (*cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub>)<sup>2−</sup> mediated by s-block metals. Treatment of P<sub>4</sub> with Cs in THF followed by solvation in liquid ammonia led to the formation of Cs<sub>3</sub>P<sub>7</sub>·3NH<sub>3</sub> as major product and the desired cyclotetraphosphide Cs<sub>2</sub>P<sub>4</sub>·2NH<sub>3</sub> was only a by-product.<sup>46</sup>

In order to evaluate its role as an intermediate in polyphosphide formation, crystalline [(BDI\*)Ca(OEt<sub>2</sub>)<sub>2</sub>](*cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub>) (**5**) and one equivalent of P<sub>4</sub> were suspended in cyclohexane-*d*<sub>12</sub> (Scheme 3). Monitoring the reaction with <sup>31</sup>P{<sup>1</sup>H} NMR showed after 2 hours at room temperature slow conversion of the (*cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub>)<sup>2−</sup> complex into the (P<sub>7</sub>)<sup>3−</sup> complex (P<sub>4</sub>:P<sub>7</sub> = 0.63:0.37). Complete, selective conversion to the P<sub>7</sub> product was achieved after two days at room temperature (Fig. S55†).

Two observations need further attention. (1) The DBA complex **4** cannot be converted to a P<sub>7</sub> complex and reacts with excess white phosphorous only to the P<sub>4</sub> product. (2) Once crystallized in presence of ether and isolated, **5** selectively reacts with P<sub>4</sub> to the P<sub>7</sub> complex. Although at first sight contradicting, these combined observations can only lead to one conclusion. The neutral DBA that is released in reaction of **4** with P<sub>4</sub> must be an inhibitor for the P<sub>4</sub>-to-P<sub>7</sub> conversion.

Indeed, whereas the reaction of crystalline [(BDI\*)Ca(OEt<sub>2</sub>)<sub>2</sub>](*cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub>) (**5**) with P<sub>4</sub> in cyclohexane-*d*<sub>12</sub> showed slow but selective conversion to the P<sub>7</sub> complex, addition of DBA to **5** inhibited P<sub>4</sub>-to-P<sub>7</sub> conversion. With catalytic quantities of DBA as low as 5 mol% no conversion was observed, even after one day at room temperature. However, after 30 hours at 60 °C a small amount of the P<sub>7</sub> complex was observed (Fig. S58†). The mechanism of this inhibitor effect are still unclear but leave room for speculation (*vide infra*).

### P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup>: butterfly or aromatic ring?

The geometry of P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> depends strongly on the metals that sandwich this dianion. Captured between two (BDI\*)Mg<sup>+</sup> cations it takes the form of a butterfly with η<sup>2</sup>,η<sup>2</sup>-bridging (**2**)

but between (BDI\*)Ca<sup>+</sup> a η<sup>4</sup>,η<sup>4</sup>-bridging 6π-electron aromatic *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> dianion (**5**) is favoured. These intriguing differences in geometry and coordination modes may be understood by Density Functional Theory (DFT) calculations.

The structures of **2** and ether-free **5** were optimized at the PBE0/def2-SVP level of theory. The calculated structure of **2** fits reasonably well with that from the crystal structure (Fig. S66†), indicating a sufficient level of theory. The aromaticity of **5** has been investigated before, and differs from that in classical aromatic hydrocarbons like in benzene.<sup>49</sup> It can be noticed that the P–P bonds in *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> in **5** (calculated: 2.173–2.184 Å) are not much different from the single P–P bonds in P<sub>4</sub> (calculated: 2.201 Å). Electron Localization Function (ELF) analyses showed that the P–P bonds in *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> have P–P single bond character and show no sign of the high electron delocalization as found in benzene.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the high population in C–C bonds of benzene, ELF analysis does not show a high population in the P–P bonding orbitals. Instead, a high population was found in the P lone-pairs in *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup>. Hence, the concept of “lone-pair aromaticity” was defined. In contrast to benzene, for which a circle within the C<sub>6</sub>-ring depicts aromaticity, for *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> a circle around the P<sub>4</sub>-ring has been proposed.<sup>49</sup>

The question remains why the P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> dianion can have two different appearances, butterfly or cyclic structure, depending on the metal that sandwich this entity. The answer may lie in the character of metal–P<sub>4</sub> bonding. Based on electronegativity differences (Mg: 1.31, Ca: 1.00, P: 2.19),<sup>50</sup> Mg–P<sub>4</sub> bonding in **2** should be slightly more covalent than Ca–P<sub>4</sub> bonding in **5**. The rather low Wiberg Bond Indices (WBI's) for Mg–P<sub>4</sub> bonding (0.11/0.17) and Ca–P<sub>4</sub> bonding (0.05/0.06) show that both bonds have ionic character but the Mg–P<sub>4</sub> bonds are somewhat more covalent (Fig. 3a). Natural Population Analysis (NPA) indeed shows a significantly higher negative charge on the *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub> unit in Ca complex **5** (−1.74) than that on butterfly P<sub>4</sub> unit in Mg complex **2** (−1.56); see Fig. 3a. This corresponds to higher positive charges on the Ca cations (+1.74) compared to the Mg cations (average: +1.67). The butterfly form of P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> shows two different P atoms. The two-coordinate P atoms that carry most of the negative charge (−0.55) shows strong bonding to Mg and feature WBI's of 0.17. The three-coordinate P atoms with charges of −0.23 have weaker bonds to Mg (WBI: 0.11). This confirms the view that **2** can be seen as a magnesate anion (BDI\*)Mg(P<sub>4</sub>)<sup>−</sup> with a total NPA charge of −0.82 that interacts with a (BDI\*)Mg<sup>+</sup> cation carrying a charge of +0.82. The WBI's for the P–P bonds (0.94/0.98) are close to those for a covalent single bond.

In comparison, the NPA charges on the P atoms in *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub> are more similar (−0.38/−0.49) and intermediate to those in butterfly P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> (−0.23/−0.55). Charge differences are likely dictated by their different environments. Atoms-In-Molecules (AIM) analyses show that the P<sub>4</sub><sup>2−</sup> dianions in **2** and **5** are also involved in weak P...H–C bonding with organic fragments of the BDI\* ligands (Fig. S72 and S74†). In agreement with more ionic character of the Ca complex, the WBI's for Ca–P<sub>4</sub> bonding (0.05/0.06) are smaller than for Mg–P<sub>4</sub> bonding (0.11/0.17). However, the WBI's for the P–P bonds in *cyclo*-P<sub>4</sub> (1.23/1.25)



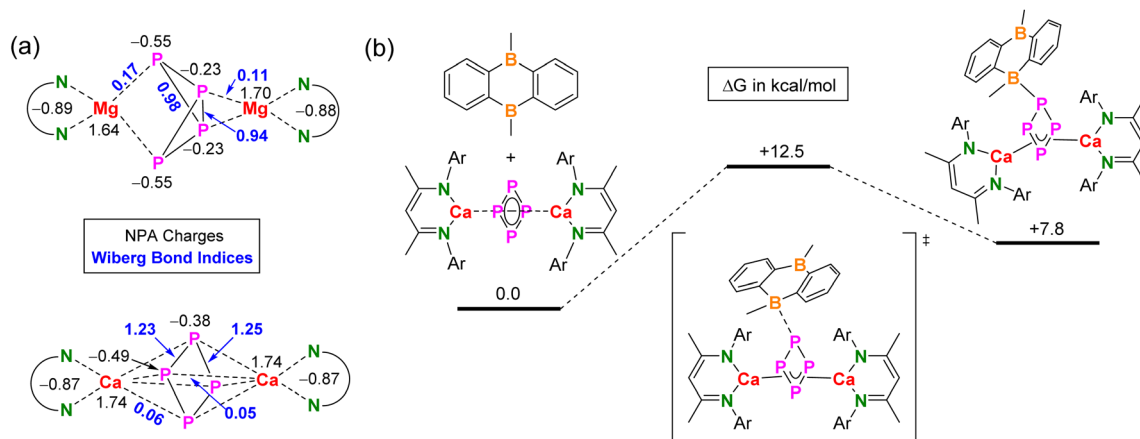


Fig. 3 Computational studies at the PBE0-D3BJ(PCM = cyclohexane)/def2-TZVP level of theory. (a) NPA charges and WBI's for  $[(BDI^*)Mg]_2(P_4)$  and  $[(BDI^*)Ca]_2(cyclo-P_4)$ . (b) Energy profile for the reaction of  $[(BDI^*)Ca]_2(cyclo-P_4)$  with DBA.

are slightly larger than that expected for a single bond. This is in agreement with some extent of aromaticity (*vide supra*).

The differences observed in bonding of the  $P_4^{2-}$  dianion in Mg and Ca complexes are comparable to differences observed in bonding of the  $C_6H_6^{2-}$  dianion (V and VI, Scheme 4). Bonding in the Mg complex  $(BDI^*)Mg-(C_6H_6)-Mg(BDI^*)$  is more covalent than that in the corresponding Ca complex. The  $C_6H_6^{2-}$  in the Mg complex shows the typical boat form with strong localized Mg-C bonding to bow and stern and much weaker Mg-C interactions to the C=C bonds.<sup>33</sup> Similarly as for 2, the complex can be seen as a magnesate anion  $(BDI^*)Mg(C_6H_6)^-$  interacting with a  $(BDI^*)Mg^+$  cation through unusual Mg-alkene coordination for which we recently found ample proof.<sup>51–53</sup> In contrast,  $(BDI^*)Ca-(C_6H_6)-Ca(BDI^*)$  shows a nearly flat  $C_6H_6^{2-}$  dianion and  $\eta^6, \eta^6$ -bridging between the  $Ca^{2+}$  ions.<sup>22</sup> These parallels between  $C_6H_6^{2-}$  and  $P_4^{2-}$  bonding in Mg or Ca sandwich complexes find their origins in the more covalent nature of the Mg-ligand bond but could also be related to the considerably larger size of the  $Ca^{2+}$  cation compared to the  $Mg^{2+}$  cation. This explanation is in agreement with the occurrence of  $P_4^{2-}$

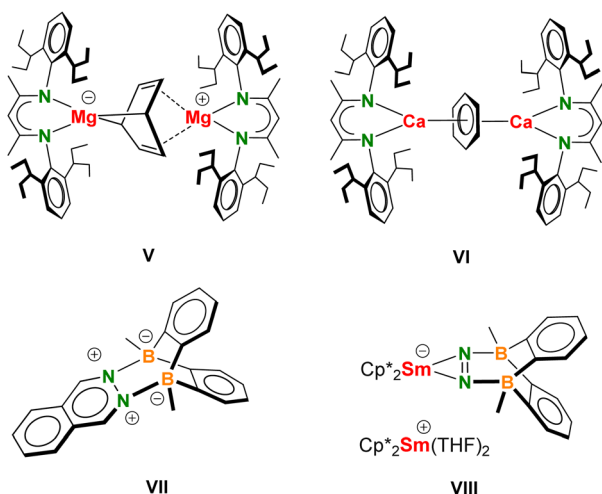
butterfly structures in Al, Ga, Si or Ni complexes which are even more covalent in character than the Mg complex.<sup>12,14,34–36</sup>

### How does diboranthracene (DBA) inhibit $P_4$ to $P_7$ conversion?

Whilst  $[(BDI^*)Ca(OEt_2)]_2(cyclo-P_4)$  (5) reacts selectively with  $P_4$  to the  $P_7$  complex, addition of DBA inhibited this conversion. Initially, we sought an explanation in possible interaction of DBA with the  $P_4$  reactant. It is known that the electrophilic diborane DBA can interact with bidentate electron-rich ligands like 1,2-diazines (*e.g.* in VII)<sup>54</sup> and even assists in  $N_2$  fixation with  $Cp^*_2Sm$  (VIII) ( $Cp^*$  = 1,2,3,4,5-penta-methyl-cyclopentadienyl).<sup>55</sup> However,  $^1H$  and  $^{31}P$  NMR spectra of a mixture of DBA and  $P_4$  did not show any changes in the chemical shifts when compared to the pure species. This excludes significant  $DBA \cdots P_4$  interaction. Attempts to optimize the structure of potential  $DBA \cdots P_4$  complexes by DFT calculation also only led to separation of these molecules.

Alternatively, DBA can interact with the  $P_4$  complex  $[(BDI^*)Ca]_2(cyclo-P_4)$ , thus inhibiting further reactivity with  $P_4$ . DFT calculations indeed show that this complex is able to interact with DBA by formation of a P-B bond (Fig. 3b; for structures see Fig. S78†). Although the activation free energy for this process is only  $\Delta G_{298}^\ddagger = 12.5 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ , the adduct is  $\Delta G_{298} = 7.8 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$  higher in energy than the unbound molecules. This implies a fast equilibrium that lies mainly on the side of free  $P_4$  and  $[(BDI^*)Ca]_2(cyclo-P_4)$ . This means that, although complexation of DBA with  $cyclo-P_4^{2-}$  is possible, this cannot be a reason to inhibit further reactivity towards the formation of  $P_7$  complex. Especially, when one considers that also small, catalytic quantities of DBA already work as inhibitor.

Reaction mechanisms that give rise to higher nuclearity clusters are in general poorly understood.<sup>37</sup> However, it seems reasonable to assume that reduction of  $P_4$  with s-block metal reducing agents starts with electron-transfer. As we could show that the  $P_4^{2-}$  dianion is a likely intermediate en route to  $P_7^{3-}$ , the first step of this transformation could be a single electron transfer (SET) process. As DBA is a molecule with a low-lying



Scheme 4 Formulas V–VIII.

LUMO and can be easily reduced, its mode of inhibiting the  $P_4$ -to- $P_7$  conversion may simply be a reversible electron-capture process. The high affinity of DBA for electrons inhibits SET to  $P_4$ . Using DFT, we found that reduction of DBA is indeed much more facile than reduction of  $P_4$ . The reaction,  $DBA^- + P_4 \rightarrow P_4^- + DBA$ , was calculated to be highly endothermic (in cyclohexane:  $\Delta H = +23.5 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ ). This is also in agreement with the observation that catalytic quantities of DBA function as a stabilizer for the  $P_4^{2-}$  dianion and would explain the highly selective formation of the  $P_4$  complex 5.

## Conclusion

We achieved first  $P_4$  reductions with low-valent  $\beta$ -diketiminato  $Mg^I$  complexes and found the selectivity to be greatly dependent on the bulk of the ligand. Using a superbulky BDI ligand with DIPEP substituents (BDI\*) led to highly selective formation of a butterfly-shaped  $P_4^{2-}$  dianion bridging two (BDI\*) $Mg^+$  fragments in a unique  $\eta^2, \eta^2$ -fashion. The same complex with Ca instead of Mg features a *cyclo*- $P_4^{2-}$  dianion bridging (BDI\*) $Ca^+$  fragments in an  $\eta^4, \eta^4$  mode. This difference finds its origin in the more covalent nature of the  $Mg$ -( $P_4$ ) bond but could also be related to the considerably larger size of the  $Ca^{2+}$  cation compared to the  $Mg^{2+}$  cation, favouring a delocalized *cyclo*- $P_4^{2-}$  dianion.

Reaction of low-valent  $Ca^I$  synthons selectively gave products with the  $P_7^{3-}$  Zintl anion: [(BDI\*) $Ca$ ] $_3$ ( $P_7$ ). Monitoring these reactions by NMR shows first unambiguous proof that  $P_7^{3-}$  formation proceeds through a *cyclo*- $P_4^{2-}$  intermediate. The kinetics of the  $P_4 \rightarrow \textit{cyclo}\text{-}P_4^{2-} \rightarrow P_7^{3-}$  conversion depends strongly on the reducing power of the  $Ca^I$  synthon: [(BDI\*) $Ca$ ] $_2$ (X) in which X is dianionic  $N_2^{2-}$  or arene $^{2-}$ . Conversion is faster along the row  $X = \text{benzene}^{2-} < p\text{-xylene}^{2-} < N_2^{2-}$ .

In case of  $Ca^I$  synthons, using 9,10-dimethyldiboranthracene (DBA) as a bridging dianion led to exclusive formation of the *cyclo*- $P_4^{2-}$  product. Even with excess  $P_4$  and forcing reaction conditions no further  $P_4 \rightarrow P_7$  conversion was observed in the time frame conducted. As addition of trace quantities of DBA already inhibited and considerably retarded further reactivity of the *cyclo*- $P_4^{2-}$  dianion, it is proposed that DBA prevents radical reactivity by functioning as a reversible electron trap.

These first investigations on  $P_4$  reduction with low-valent Ae metal complexes show that selectivities depend on the bulk of the BDI ligand, the metal and the presence of inhibitors for radical reactivity. We continue our research with investigations on  $P_4$  reduction with heavier low-valent Ae metal synthons.

## Data availability

Crystallographic data has been deposited with the Cambridge Structural Database.

## Author contributions

S. Thum: conceptualization, investigation, validation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, visualization. O. P. E.

Townrow: investigation, validation, formal Analysis. J. Langer: formal analysis, validation. Sjoerd Harder: conceptualization, writing – original draft – review and editing, visualization, validation, supervision, project administration.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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