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# High resolution photoelectron imaging of cryogenically cooled alkaline-earth metal complexes with the $\text{BO}_2$ superhalogen, $\text{MBO}_2^-$ ( $\text{M} = \text{Ca}, \text{Sr}, \text{Ba}$ )

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The  $\text{BO}_2$  molecule is a superhalogen with a very high electron affinity, resulting in an extremely stable  $\text{BO}_2^-$  anion suitable as a building block to form ionic compounds. Here we report the generation of  $\text{M}(\text{BO}_2^-)$  ( $\text{M} = \text{Ca}, \text{Sr}, \text{Ba}$ ) complexes and the investigation of their structures and bonding using high-resolution cryogenic photoelectron imaging. All three  $\text{M}(\text{BO}_2^-)$  alkaline-earth complexes are found to have linear  $\text{M}(\text{O}-\text{B}-\text{O}^-)$  ( $^1\Sigma^+$ ) structures. Photodetachment removes an electron from the alkaline-earth metal atom and produces the neutral  $\text{M}^+(\text{O}-\text{B}-\text{O}^-)$  ( $^2\Sigma^+$ ) ionically bonded ground state. The change of the charge state on the metal center induces a significant reduction of the  $\text{M}-\text{O}$  bond length in the neutral final state, resulting in an extensive  $\text{M}-\text{O}$  stretching vibrational progression in all the photoelectron spectra. The electron affinities of  $\text{MBO}_2$  are measured to be 1.574 eV, 1.487 eV, and 1.291 eV and the  $\text{M}-\text{O}$  stretching frequencies are measured to be  $411\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ,  $339\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , and  $290\text{ cm}^{-1}$  for  $\text{M} = \text{Ca}, \text{Sr},$  and  $\text{Ba}$ , respectively. The strong electron-withdrawing power of  $\text{BO}_2$  leads to the ionically bonded ground state for  $\text{MBO}_2$  ( $^2\Sigma^+$ ), resulting in a single electron localized on the metal center. The ionic interaction between  $\text{M}^+$  and  $\text{BO}_2^-$  in  $\text{MBO}_2$  makes their low-lying electronic excitations resemble atomic transitions, rendering  $\text{MBO}_2$ -type molecules promising candidates for laser cooling.

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## 1 Introduction

The  $\text{BO}_2$  molecule is electron-deficient. Adding an electron to  $\text{BO}_2$  gives rise to a very stable  $\text{BO}_2^-$  anion, which is isoelectronic with  $\text{CO}_2$ . The electron affinity (EA) of  $\text{BO}_2$  was measured by photoelectron spectroscopy (PES) to be 4.46 eV,<sup>1</sup> making it a member of the superhalogen family.<sup>2</sup> The highly stable  $\text{BO}_2^-$  anion has been used as a building block to design novel ionic complexes and compounds.<sup>3–5</sup> Recently, the alkaline-earth metal complexes with  $\text{BO}_2^-$ ,  $\text{M}^+(\text{BO}_2^-)$ , have attracted interest as promising molecular candidates for laser cooling and ultracold chemistry.<sup>6</sup> Laser cooling relies on repeated photon cycling to slow the translational motion of the molecule. Unlike atoms, however, molecules can be lost from the cooling cycle due to vibrational branching. Thus, the key requirement of a laser-coolable molecule is highly diagonal Franck–Condon factors (FCFs).<sup>7–9</sup> The high EA of  $\text{BO}_2$  can take one electron away from the alkaline-earth metal  $\text{M}$ , leaving an isolated  $\text{M}^+$  with an unpaired s electron and an  $\text{M}^+(\text{BO}_2^-)$  ionically bonded ground state. Low-lying electronic excitations in  $\text{MBO}_2$  involve essentially the atomic transitions of the metal cation  $\text{M}^+$ , with the

$\text{BO}_2^-$  ligand being a spectator. To maximize diagonal FCFs, the unpaired electron on  $\text{M}^+$  should be as localized as possible, favouring ligands with strong electron-withdrawing power and little covalent interaction with the metal. Recent theoretical calculations show that, among many commonly considered ligands,  $\text{BO}_2$  has the highest EA and the strongest electron-withdrawing ability.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the  $\text{MBO}_2$  species exhibit the smallest  $\text{M}-\text{O}$  bond length changes upon electronic excitations – the condition to produce diagonal FCFs. However, alkaline-earth  $\text{MBO}_2$  complexes have not been studied experimentally and their spectroscopic properties are not known.

On the other hand, there have been extensive studies on the spectroscopy of metal complexes of the isoelectronic  $\text{CO}_2$  molecule.<sup>10,11</sup> These complexes are especially interesting as simple models to understand  $\text{CO}_2$  activation at the atomic level.<sup>12–26</sup> Negatively charged metal ions, such as  $\text{Cu}^-$ ,  $\text{Ag}^-$ ,  $\text{Au}^-$ ,  $\text{Ni}^-$ ,  $\text{Pd}^-$ ,  $\text{Pt}^-$ , and  $\text{Bi}^-$ , can form complexes with  $\text{CO}_2$  by attaching to the carbon atom.<sup>13–20</sup> In contrast, positively charged metal ions, such as  $\text{Mg}^+$ ,  $\text{Ca}^+$ ,  $\text{V}^+$ , and  $\text{Co}^+$ , bind with  $\text{CO}_2$  to form weakly bound, linear  $\text{M}^+(\text{O}-\text{C}-\text{O})$  complexes.<sup>21–26</sup> In addition, cyclic structures, in which metals bind simultaneously to both oxygen atoms, have also been observed for neutral alkali metals with  $\text{CO}_2$  in low-temperature matrices.<sup>27,28</sup> Despite the rich structures that metal- $\text{CO}_2$  complexes can form, the chemistry of isoelectronic metal- $\text{BO}_2^-$  complexes was much less explored.

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Only a few low-resolution PES studies have been reported on  $MBO_2^-$  complexes with  $M = Cu, Ag, Au, Fe, Al, Na,$  and  $Li$ .<sup>3,29–34</sup>

Motivated by the potential applications of the alkaline-earth metal  $MBO_2$  species in laser cooling and the interest in understanding their structures and bonding, we present a high-resolution photoelectron imaging (PEI) study of  $MBO_2^-$  ( $M = Ca, Sr, Ba$ ). In our PEI experiment, an electron is detached from the  $MBO_2^-$  anion, yielding spectroscopic information about the  $MBO_2$  neutral final states. Our high-resolution PEI apparatus was recently equipped with a cryogenic ion trap to create cold cluster anions produced from a laser vaporization source.<sup>35</sup> Cold anions are critical for high-resolution PEI, as demonstrated in recent studies on boron-related clusters.<sup>36–40</sup> In the current work, we have obtained vibrationally resolved photoelectron (PE) spectra for all three  $MBO_2^-$  alkaline-earth complexes. Both the anion and the neutral species are shown to be linear. In addition to measuring accurate EAs, we are able to obtain vibrational information for the M–O stretching mode and the B–O stretching modes in the  $BO_2$  moiety. The observation of extensive M–O stretching progression in each case confirms electron detachment from the metal to yield an ionically bonded neutral  $MBO_2$ , *i.e.*,  $M^+(BO_2^-)$ . Experimental and theoretical evidence is presented to show that the atomic nature of  $M^+$  is maintained with  $BO_2^-$  being a spectator, which is a key feature of good molecular candidates for laser cooling.

## 2 Experimental and theoretical methods

### 2.1 Photoelectron imaging

The experiment was carried out using a high-resolution PEI apparatus recently equipped with a cryogenically cooled 3D Paul trap.<sup>35</sup> Details of the PEI apparatus were described previously.<sup>41</sup> In this study, the  $MBO_2^-$  ( $M = Ca, Sr, Ba$ ) complexes were produced by laser vaporization of cold-pressed  $M/^{11}B$  targets, made from the respective metal and  $^{11}B$ -enriched boron powders. Oxygen impurities always existed on the target surface, which could give strong  $MBO_2^-$  mass signals especially for fresh targets. To produce stable and consistent  $MBO_2^-$  complexes, we employed a helium carrier gas seeded with 0.1%  $O_2$ . Clusters formed inside the nozzle were entrained by the carrier gas and underwent a supersonic expansion. After passing through a skimmer, the collimated cluster beam travelled directly into the downstream 3D Paul trap cooled to 4.2 K using a two-stage closed-cycle helium refrigerator. The buffer gas (helium with 20%  $H_2$ ) was pulsed into the Paul trap on the arrival of the clusters. Negatively charged clusters were trapped and cooled by collisions with the buffer gas. After a 45 ms trapping/cooling time, the cold clusters were extracted into a time-of-flight mass spectrometer. Clusters of interest were mass-selected and intercepted by a detachment laser in the interaction zone of a velocity map imaging system. Photo-detachment was performed using the output of a dye laser pumped using a Nd:YAG laser. Photoelectrons were projected onto a microchannel plate coupled with a phosphor screen and the images were recorded using a charge-coupled device

camera. The raw images were analysed using the MEVELER method to retrieve the electron kinetic energy distributions.<sup>42</sup> A high resolution of  $1.2\text{ cm}^{-1}$  could be achieved for very slow electrons, while for fast electrons, the relative kinetic energy ( $E_k$ ) resolution ( $\Delta E_k/E_k$ ) was approximately 0.6%.<sup>41</sup>

PEI also yields information about the photoelectron angular distributions (PADs), which are characterized by the anisotropy parameter  $\beta$ . Under the electric dipole approximation, when an electron is ejected from an s atomic orbital with zero angular momentum ( $l = 0$ ), the outgoing electron is a p wave ( $l = 1$ ) with  $\beta = 2$ . When an electron is ejected from a p atomic orbital ( $l = 1$ ), the outgoing electron carries a mixture of s ( $l = 0$ ) and d ( $l = 2$ ) partial waves with  $\beta = -1$ .<sup>43</sup> While the  $\beta$  value is non-trivial to interpret for electron detachment from molecular orbitals (MOs), it provides qualitative information about the symmetries of the MOs.<sup>44</sup>

### 2.2 Theoretical methods

Structure searches were done for the  $MBO_2^-$  species using the ABCluster software.<sup>45</sup> For each system, many initial structures were generated and subsequently optimized using density functional theory (DFT) at the PBE0/def2-SVP level<sup>46,47</sup> for both singlet and triplet states. The low-lying isomers were further optimized at the PBE0/def2-TZVP<sup>46,47</sup> level, as presented in Fig. S1. The EAs were computed using the energy differences between the optimized neutral and the anion of the global minimum (GM) structures at the PBE0/def2-TZVP level. Single-point calculations at the CCSD(T)/def2-TZVP level of theory were also performed on the GM structures and the corresponding neutrals to obtain more accurate EAs. Frequency calculations were carried out to compare with the experiment and to ensure that the optimized structures were true minima. All electronic structure calculations were done using the Gaussian 09 package.<sup>48</sup> FCF calculations were performed using the ezFCF package.<sup>49</sup>

## 3 Experimental and theoretical results

### 3.1 PEI and PES of $CaBO_2^-$

High-resolution PE images and spectra of  $CaBO_2^-$  are measured at 1.599 eV, 1.727 eV, and 1.905 eV, as shown in Fig. 1. The 1.905 eV spectrum (Fig. 1c) reveals extensive vibrational structures. The series of peaks, labelled as  $0_0^0$ , a, b, and d, display similar spacings, which define a vibrational progression. Next to peak d, there is a discernible feature, which is labelled as peak c. Two weak peaks, e and f, are also observed at higher binding energies. The spacing between peaks e and f is similar to the vibrational progression defined by peaks  $0_0^0$ , a, b, and d, suggesting that peak e is due to a high frequency mode and peak f is its combinational level. A weak hot band, labelled as hb, is also observed on the lower binding energy side of the  $0_0^0$  peak. The hot band yields a vibrational frequency of  $331\text{ cm}^{-1}$  for the  $CaBO_2^-$  anion. In the 1.727 eV spectrum (Fig. 1b), peaks  $0_0^0$ , a, and b are better resolved. In the 1.599 eV spectrum (Fig. 1a), the  $0_0^0$  peak, which corresponds to the transition from





Fig. 1 Photoelectron images and spectra of  $\text{CaBO}_2^-$  at (a) 1.599 eV, (b) 1.727 eV, and (c) 1.905 eV. The double arrow below the images indicates the laser polarization.

Table 1 The measured binding energies (BEs), assignments, and shifts relative to the  $0_0^0$  peak for the vibrational features resolved in the spectra of  $\text{CaBO}_2^-$

|         | BE (eV) <sup>a</sup> | Assignment         | Shift (cm <sup>-1</sup> ) | $\beta$ <sup>b</sup> |
|---------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| hb      | 1.533(3)             | $3_1^0$            | -331                      |                      |
| $0_0^0$ | 1.574(1)             | $2\Sigma^+(0_0^0)$ | 0                         | 1.7                  |
| a       | 1.625(3)             | $3_0^1$            | 411                       | 1.6                  |
| b       | 1.675(1)             | $3_0^2$            | 815                       | 1.3                  |
| c       | 1.722(5)             | $2_0^1$            | 1194                      |                      |
| d       | 1.727(5)             | $3_0^3$            | 1234                      |                      |
| e       | 1.823(3)             | $1_0^1$            | 2008                      |                      |
| f       | 1.872(3)             | $1_0^1 3_0^1$      | 2404                      |                      |

<sup>a</sup> The numbers in the parentheses represent the uncertainty in the last digit. <sup>b</sup> The  $\beta$  values are obtained from the 1.905 eV spectrum.

the vibrational ground state of the anion to that of the neutral ground state, defines an accurate EA of 1.574 eV for  $\text{CaBO}_2$ . The PADs of all the observed vibrational peaks exhibit distinct p wave characters, implying that the detached electron originates from an s or  $\sigma$ -type orbital. Note that the  $\beta$  values depend on the electron kinetic energies (Table 1). The  $\beta$  value of 1.7 for the  $0_0^0$  transition is very close to the ideal value of 2 for electron detachment from atomic s orbitals, indicating the near atomic-like highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) of  $\text{CaBO}_2^-$ , from which an electron is removed in the PEI experiment. The binding energies of all the vibrational peaks, their shifts relative to peak  $0_0^0$ , their assignments, and  $\beta$  values are given in Table 1.

### 3.2 PEI and PES of $\text{SrBO}_2^-$

High-resolution PE images and spectra of  $\text{SrBO}_2^-$  measured at 1.510 eV, 1.602 eV, and 1.792 eV are presented in Fig. 2. The



Fig. 2 Photoelectron images and spectra of  $\text{SrBO}_2^-$  at (a) 1.510 eV, (b) 1.602 eV, and (c) 1.792 eV. The double arrow below the images indicates the laser polarization.

1.792 eV spectrum (Fig. 2c) exhibits a vibrational progression closely resembling that for  $\text{CaBO}_2^-$ . The main progression is represented by peaks  $0_0^0$ , a, b, and c, with similar spacings. Similarly, peak d suggests a high frequency mode and peak e indicates its combinational level. A vibrational hot band (labelled hb) is also observed, giving a vibrational frequency of 258 cm<sup>-1</sup> for the anion. The 1.602 eV spectrum (Fig. 2b) resolves peaks  $0_0^0$ , a, and b better and the 1.510 eV spectrum (Fig. 2a) defines an accurate EA of 1.487 eV for  $\text{SrBO}_2$ . All observed vibrational peaks exhibit distinct p wave angular distributions with the  $\beta$  values close to 2 for atomic s orbitals, similar to that in  $\text{CaBO}_2^-$ , suggesting electron detachment from an s or  $\sigma$ -type orbital. The binding energies of all the observed peaks, their shifts relative to peak  $0_0^0$ , their assignments, and  $\beta$  values are given in Table 2.

Table 2 The measured binding energies (BEs), assignments, and shifts relative to the  $0_0^0$  peak for the vibrational features resolved in the spectra of  $\text{SrBO}_2^-$

|         | BE (eV) <sup>a</sup> | Assignment         | Shift (cm <sup>-1</sup> ) | $\beta$ <sup>b</sup> |
|---------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| hb      | 1.455(3)             | $3_1^0$            | -258                      |                      |
| $0_0^0$ | 1.487(1)             | $2\Sigma^+(0_0^0)$ | 0                         | 1.6                  |
| a       | 1.529(3)             | $3_0^1$            | 339                       | 1.6                  |
| b       | 1.568(1)             | $3_0^2$            | 653                       | 1.3                  |
| c       | 1.611(5)             | $3_0^3/2_0^1$      | 1000                      |                      |
| d       | 1.734(3)             | $1_0^1$            | 1992                      |                      |
| e       | 1.774(3)             | $1_0^1 3_0^1$      | 2315                      |                      |

<sup>a</sup> The numbers in the parentheses represent the uncertainty in the last digit. <sup>b</sup> The  $\beta$  values are obtained from the 1.792 eV spectrum.





Fig. 3 Photoelectron images and spectra of  $\text{BaBO}_2^-$  at (a) 1.432 eV and (b) 1.579 eV. The double arrow below the images indicates the laser polarization.

Table 3 The measured binding energies (BEs), assignments, and shifts relative to the  $0_0^0$  peak for the vibrational features resolved in the spectra of  $\text{BaBO}_2^-$

|         | BE (eV) <sup>a</sup> | Assignment         | Shift (cm <sup>-1</sup> ) | $\beta$ <sup>b</sup> |
|---------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| hb      | 1.261(3)             | $3_1^0$            | -242                      |                      |
| $0_0^0$ | 1.291(3)             | $2\Sigma^+(0_0^0)$ | 0                         | 1.6                  |
| a       | 1.327(3)             | $3_0^1$            | 290                       | 1.5                  |
| b       | 1.362(3)             | $3_0^2$            | 573                       | 1.4                  |
| c       | 1.399(3)             | $3_0^3$            | 871                       |                      |
| d       | 1.436(5)             | $3_0^4$            | 1170                      |                      |
| e       | 1.540(5)             | $1_0^1$            | 2008                      |                      |

<sup>a</sup> The numbers in the parentheses represent the uncertainty in the last digit. <sup>b</sup> The  $\beta$  values are obtained from the 1.579 eV spectrum (Fig. 3b).

### 3.3 PEI and PES of $\text{BaBO}_2^-$

High-resolution PE images and spectra of  $\text{BaBO}_2^-$  at 1.432 eV and 1.579 eV are presented in Fig. 3. An extensive vibrational progression is revealed, similar to those of  $\text{CaBO}_2^-$  and  $\text{SrBO}_2^-$ . The main progression is represented by peaks  $0_0^0$ , a, b, c, and d with nearly equal spacing. The  $0_0^0$  transition defines an EA of 1.291 eV for  $\text{BaBO}_2^-$ . The weak hot band (labelled hb) gives an anion vibrational frequency of 242 cm<sup>-1</sup>. All observed vibrational peaks also exhibit distinct p wave angular distributions with  $\beta$  values close to 2 for s atomic orbitals, similar to those of  $\text{CaBO}_2^-$  and  $\text{SrBO}_2^-$ , indicating detachment from an s or  $\sigma$ -type orbital. The two PE spectra for  $\text{BaBO}_2^-$  in Fig. 3 each show a sharp threshold peak, probably due to threshold enhancement of part of a threshold vibronic transition, possibly involving the sequence bands of the hot band transitions. The binding energies of the observed vibrational peaks, their shifts relative to peak  $0_0^0$ , their assignments, and  $\beta$  values are given in Table 3.

### 3.4 Theoretical results

Structure searches (Fig. S1) find that the closed-shell linear M-O-B-O<sup>-</sup> structure with  $C_{\infty v}$  symmetry ( $1\Sigma^+$ ) is overwhelmingly



Fig. 4 The optimized structures of  $\text{CaBO}_2^-$ ,  $\text{SrBO}_2^-$ ,  $\text{BaBO}_2^-$  and their neutrals at the PBE0/def2-TZVP level. The optimized structure of  $\text{BO}_2^-$  is also shown for comparison. The point group symmetries and electronic states are also given. The bond lengths are given in Å.

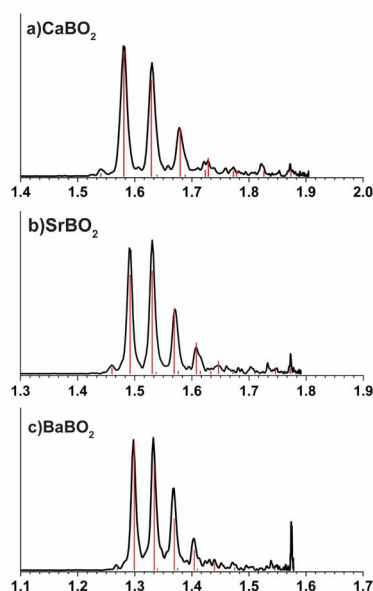
Table 4 The experimental EAs and vibrational frequencies compared with the calculated values for  $\text{MBO}_2$  (M = Ca, Sr, Ba)

|                 | EA (eV) |                   | Frequency (cm <sup>-1</sup> ) <sup>a</sup> |      |
|-----------------|---------|-------------------|--|------|
|                 | Exp.    | Cal. <sup>b</sup> | Exp. <sup>c</sup>                          | Cal. |
| $\text{CaBO}_2$ | 1.574   | 1.52              | 411 ( $\nu_3$ )                            | 372  |
|                 |         |                   | 1193 ( $\nu_2$ )                           | 1105 |
|                 |         |                   | 2008 ( $\nu_1$ )                           | 1978 |
| $\text{SrBO}_2$ | 1.487   | 1.45              | 339 ( $\nu_3$ )                            | 300  |
|                 |         |                   | 992 ( $\nu_2$ )                            | 1093 |
|                 |         |                   | 1992 ( $\nu_1$ )                           | 1990 |
| $\text{BaBO}_2$ | 1.291   | 1.23              | 290 ( $\nu_3$ )                            | 275  |
|                 |         |                   | 2008 ( $\nu_1$ )                           | 1998 |

<sup>a</sup> Calculated frequencies at the PBE0/def2-TZVP level are scaled by a factor of 0.96. The vibrational displacement vectors are shown in Fig. S2. <sup>b</sup> At the CCSD(T)/def2-TZVP level. The EAs computed at the PBE0/def2-TZVP level are 1.48, 1.35, and 1.22 eV for M = Ca, Sr, and Ba, respectively. <sup>c</sup> The experimental uncertainty is estimated to be  $\pm 10$  cm<sup>-1</sup>.

the global minimum for all  $\text{MBO}_2^-$  species, as shown in Fig. 4. The B-O bond lengths are all similar to those in bare  $\text{BO}_2^-$  (shown in Fig. 4 for comparison): the B-O bond close to the metal is slightly elongated while the B-O bond away from the metal is slightly shortened. The molecular orbitals (MOs) for  $\text{MBO}_2^-$  are given in Fig. S2. The HOMO of  $\text{MBO}_2^-$  is essentially the valence s orbital on the metal atom, polarized only slightly by the  $\text{BO}_2^-$  ligand. Removing an electron from the HOMO gives rise to the doublet  $2\Sigma^+$  ground state of neutral  $\text{MBO}_2$  (Fig. 4). The B-O bond lengths remain almost the same in the neutral as in the anion, but the M-O bond length is significantly shortened, which should induce a large vibrational progression in the PE spectra in the M-O stretching mode. The calculated EAs for  $\text{MBO}_2$  (M = Ca, Sr, Ba), using single-point energies calculated at the CCSD(T)/def2-TZVP level for the linear GM structures, are compared with the corresponding experimental values in Table 4. The calculated vibrational frequencies for the stretching modes of neutral  $\text{MBO}_2$ , scaled by a factor of 0.96,<sup>50</sup> are also compared with the experimental data in Table 4.





Photodetachment from the HOMO of the  $\text{MBO}_2^-$  anion, which is essentially the metal valence  $s$  orbital, leads to the  $^2\Sigma^+$  neutral ground state, leaving one  $s$  electron localized on the alkaline-earth metal cation. Natural charge analyses indicate that, in the neutral  $\text{MBO}_2$  complexes, the metal carries nearly a unit positive charge (Fig. 6 and Table S1), while the  $\text{BO}_2^-$  ligand retains its unit negative charge. Thus, neutral  $\text{MBO}_2$  is a completely ionic molecule between  $\text{M}^+$  and  $\text{BO}_2^-$ , leading to the significantly shortened M–O bond length compared to that in the anion due to the strong Coulombic interaction. This large bond-length contraction gives rise to the pronounced M–O stretching progressions in the PE spectra. We analysed the spin densities of  $\text{MBO}_2$ , showing that the unpaired spin is nearly completely localized on the metal (Table S1). The ionic bonding nature between  $\text{M}^+$  and  $\text{BO}_2^-$  in  $\text{MBO}_2$  is further supported by the Wiberg bond indices (Table S2), which indicate negligible covalent bonding between the  $\text{M}^+$  and  $\text{BO}_2^-$  fragments. It is interesting to note that ionization of the valence  $s$  electron from  $\text{M}$  in  $\text{M}(\text{BO}_2^-)$  requires much less energy in comparison to the ionization energies of the bare metal atoms (6.11 eV for Ca, 5.69 eV for Sr, and 5.21 eV for Ba) due to the Coulombic repulsion from the negatively charged  $\text{BO}_2^-$  ligand.

### 4.3 Implications for laser cooling

The alkaline-earth  $\text{MBO}_2$  complexes are promising laser cooling candidates because of the superhalogen property of  $\text{BO}_2$  that results in an ionic  $\text{M}^+(\text{BO}_2^-)$  species and leaves a single isolated  $s$  electron on the alkaline-earth metal cation  $\text{M}^+$ . Thus, the cycling transition happens on the metal centre with highly diagonal FCFs while the  $\text{BO}_2^-$  ligand is a spectator. Note that the current PEI experiments do not directly probe the  $\text{MBO}_2$  excited states within the cycling transition; the extensive FCFs observed in the current study correspond to photodetachment transitions from the  $\text{MBO}_2^-$  anion to neutral  $\text{MBO}_2$ . Nevertheless, the PEI experiment provides valuable information about the structures and vibrational frequencies of the  $\text{MBO}_2$  neutral ground state and the nature of the atomic-like HOMO on the metal site. The observed large M–O stretching progression confirms the cationic nature of  $\text{M}^+$  and its dominating ionic interaction with  $\text{BO}_2^-$ . The angular distributions of the PE images and the  $\beta$  values show that the photodetachment transition comes from a nearly ideal  $s$  orbital on the metal site, because of the electrostatic nature of the metal–ligand interactions in both  $\text{MBO}_2^-$  and  $\text{MBO}_2$ . It is expected that the electrostatic interaction in  $\text{M}^+(\text{BO}_2^-)$  would not be affected significantly upon the  $s$  to  $p$  cycling transition, making the  $\text{MBO}_2$  systems excellent laser cooling targets. Indeed, recent theoretical calculations predict that the alkaline-earth  $\text{MBO}_2$  complexes exhibit very small M–O bond length changes upon  $s$  to  $p$  excitation,<sup>6</sup> conducive to yielding highly diagonal FCFs. Additionally, the current study shows that the  $\text{MBO}_2$  complexes can be readily generated in a laser vaporization cluster source. The number density of the neutral  $\text{MBO}_2$  species from the laser vaporization source is expected to be much higher than that of the  $\text{MBO}_2^-$  anions used for the current PEI experiments.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, we report an investigation of  $\text{CaBO}_2^-$ ,  $\text{SrBO}_2^-$  and  $\text{BaBO}_2^-$  and their corresponding neutrals ( $\text{MBO}_2$ ) using high-resolution photoelectron imaging. The electron affinities of neutral  $\text{CaBO}_2$ ,  $\text{SrBO}_2$ , and  $\text{BaBO}_2$  are measured to be 1.574 eV, 1.487 eV and 1.291 eV, respectively. Vibrationally resolved photoelectron imaging, combined with computational chemistry, confirms that the  $\text{MBO}_2^-$  anions have linear M–O–B–O<sup>−</sup> structures with a singlet  $^1\Sigma^+$  ground state and the  $\text{MBO}_2$  neutrals all have ionically bonded linear  $\text{M}^+[\text{O}=\text{B}=\text{O}]^-$  structures with a doublet ( $^2\Sigma^+$ ) ground state. Chemical bond analyses show that the  $\text{MBO}_2^-$  anion consists of essentially a neutral alkaline-earth atom weakly interacting with a  $\text{BO}_2^-$  ligand. Photodetachment removes an electron from the metal atom, resulting in the  $\text{M}^+(\text{BO}_2^-)$  ionic compound for neutral  $\text{MBO}_2$ . The M–O stretching vibrational frequencies for all three  $\text{MBO}_2$  complexes are measured, and in the case of  $\text{CaBO}_2$ , both the B–O symmetric and asymmetric stretching frequencies are also measured. The atomic nature of the HOMO in  $\text{MBO}_2$  is also revealed from the angular distributions of the photoelectron images. The current study confirms the recent theoretical study that suggests that alkaline-earth  $\text{MBO}_2$  complexes are ideal molecular systems for laser cooling.

## Author contributions

J. H. led the experiment. H. W. G. and X. Y. Z. helped with the experiment. J. H. did the calculations. H. W. G. and J. H. analysed the data. H. W. G. led the writing of the manuscript. L. S. W. guided and advised the project and revised and finalized the manuscript.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Data availability

The data that supports the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author upon request.

Supplementary information (SI) is available. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d5sc07306e>.

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