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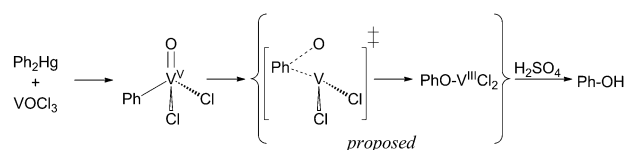
## A homolytic oxy-functionalization mechanism: intermolecular hydrocarbyl migration from M–R to vanadate oxo†

Mu-Jeng Cheng, Robert J. Nielsen\* and William A. Goddard III

A new mechanism for generating C–O bonds from metal-hydrocarbyls involving homolytic, intermolecular migration of the hydrocarbyl group to a vanadium oxo is reported. Responsible for the C–O bond in phenol formed by the reaction of  $\text{OVCl}_3$  with  $\text{HgPh}_2$ , it may provide air-regenerable metal oxos a role in aerobic alkane oxidations.

The formation of carbon–oxygen bonds from metal-hydrocarbyl species is a central challenge to developing radical-free catalytic cycles for alkane functionalization. Several catalytic reactions have been developed in which alkane C–H bonds are activated by strongly electrophilic metals such as  $\text{Pt}^{\text{II}}$ ,<sup>1</sup>  $\text{Hg}^{\text{II}}$ ,<sup>2</sup>  $\text{Pd}^{\text{II}}$ ,<sup>3</sup> and  $\text{Au}^{\text{III}}$  (ref. 4) followed by reductive functionalization from  $\text{M}^{\delta-}\text{R}^{\delta+}$  intermediates. Unfortunately these systems are inhibited by water and alcohol products and can require oxidants stronger than  $\text{O}_2$ . Thus the high electrophilicity of these metals, which facilitates CH activation and reductive elimination, makes them commercially impractical. In contrast, the intramolecular migration of hydrocarbyl groups across metal–oxo bonds is a known mechanism for oxy-functionalizing hydrocarbyl groups on electropositive metals.<sup>5</sup> In a few experiments, direct evidence of such migrations (labeled as Intra- $\text{M}^{2e}$  to indicate intramolecular migration that results in a two-electron reduction) has been shown.<sup>5,6</sup> Intra- $\text{M}^{2e}$  was also proposed to be responsible for C–O bond formation in the generation of phenol from  $\text{OVCl}_3$  and  $\text{HgPh}_2$  in cyclohexane (Scheme 1).<sup>7</sup>

We studied this reaction with quantum mechanics (density functional theory, M06//B3LYP<sup>8</sup> see ESI†) including Poisson–Boltzmann implicit solvation.<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly, we find that the oxidation of V–Ph to V–OPh does *not* proceed through Intra- $\text{M}^{2e}$  but rather through *intermolecular phenyl migration to a separate metal–oxo*. This is a new oxidation mechanism, Inter- $\text{M}^{1e}$ , that leads to a one-electron reduction of both reactants, in contrast



Scheme 1 Mechanism for the formation of phenol by the reaction of  $\text{Ph}_2\text{Hg}$  and  $\text{VOCl}_3$  proposed by Reichle *et al.*<sup>7</sup>

to previous (intra- and intermolecular) mechanisms that result in a two-electron reduction of either the M–R complex or oxidants.<sup>5,6,10</sup>

First we studied Intra- $\text{M}^{2e}$  rearrangement of  $\text{O}=\text{VCl}_2\text{Ph}$  (**1**), a known intermediate generated by aryl transfer from  $\text{HgPh}_2$  to  $\text{O}=\text{VCl}_3$ ,<sup>7</sup> and compared the free energy surface to those of  $[(\text{HBpz}_3)\text{Re}^{\text{VII}}\text{O}_2(\text{Ph})]\text{OTf}$  (**2**) and  $(\text{HBpz}_3)\text{Re}^{\text{V}}\text{OPhCl}$  (**3**) ( $\text{HBpz}_3$  = hydrotris(1-pyrazolyl)borate,  $\text{OTf}$  = triflate). Intra- $\text{M}^{2e}$  from  $\text{Re}^{\text{VII}}$  (**2**) is thermally accessible,<sup>5c</sup> whereas that from  $\text{Re}^{\text{V}}$  (**3**) is known to proceed photochemically.<sup>5a,b</sup> Indeed, we find that Intra- $\text{M}^{2e}$  of **2** poses a much lower barrier (19.1 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>, Fig. 1) than that of **3** (53.7 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>), consistent with the experiments. However, the barrier for **1** is calculated to be 40.7 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>, indicating that this reaction is not thermally accessible. This suggests that Intra- $\text{M}^{2e}$  is not the pathway responsible for the oxidation of V–Ph to V–OPh. Indeed, Thiele *et al.* synthesized and isolated **1**, and found no formation of phenoxides when **1** decomposes.<sup>11</sup> In the experiments phenol was detected only when an excess of  $\text{OVCl}_3$  was added to react with  $\text{HgPh}_2$  ( $\text{OVCl}_3/\text{HgPh}_2 > 2$ ).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we considered the possibility that the unreacted  $\text{OVCl}_3$  might serve as an oxidant and that V–Ph bonds are oxidized to V–OPh by transferring Ph intermolecularly from **1** to  $\text{OVCl}_3$ , similar to the oxidation of  $\text{CH}_3\text{ReO}_3$  by  $\text{OsO}_4$ <sup>10c</sup> and the transfer of carbanions to  $\text{TpOs}(\text{N})\text{Cl}_2$ .<sup>12</sup>

We investigated this possibility and located a transition state in which phenyl migrates intermolecularly from  $\text{OVCl}_2\text{Ph}$  to the oxo of  $\text{O}=\text{VCl}_3$  (Fig. 2). This reaction pathway poses a Gibbs free energy barrier of only 19.2 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>, consistent with the experiments, which show this to be a room-temperature reaction and absent of free radicals.<sup>7</sup> In the transition state **1,7-TS**, the phenyl carbon

Materials and Process Simulation Center (139-74), California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA 91125, USA. E-mail: smith@wag.caltech.edu;  
Fax: +1 626 585 0918; Tel: +1 626 395 8140

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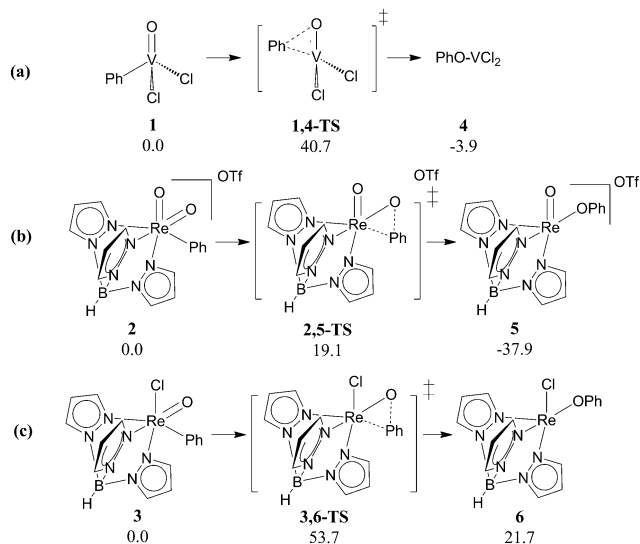


Fig. 1 The comparison of three intramolecular phenyl metal-to-oxo migrations (Intra- $M^{2e}$ , free energies in  $\text{kcal mol}^{-1}$ ,  $T = 298 \text{ K}$ ). The ground states of **1,4-TS**, **4**, and **6** are triplets.

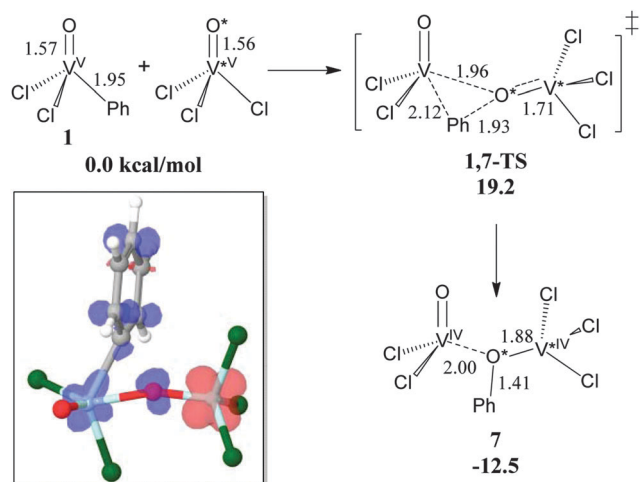


Fig. 2 The free energy surface of the phenyl intermolecular migration from  $\text{OVPhCl}_2$  to the oxo of  $\text{O}=\text{VCl}_3$  ( $\text{kcal mol}^{-1}$ ). The polarized spin density in the transition state (red and blue showing up and down spin) is shown in the inset.

is  $2.12 \text{ \AA}$  away from V and  $1.93 \text{ \AA}$  away from  $\text{O}^*$ , while  $\text{V}^*=\text{O}^*$  is elongated from  $1.56$  to  $1.71 \text{ \AA}$ , and  $\text{O}^*$  is loosely coordinated to V with a bond distance of  $1.96 \text{ \AA}$ , longer than the normal  $\text{V}-\text{O}$  single bond length ( $1.76 \text{ \AA}$ ). Importantly, this transition state is described by an open-shell singlet (OSS) wavefunction with two unpaired, antiferromagnetically coupled electrons. One localizes at the  $\text{V}^*$  of the oxidant, while the other is delocalized among V,  $\text{O}^*$ , and the phenyl carbon (Fig. 2). The product **7** has  $R(\text{V}-\text{O}^*) = 2.00$ ,  $R(\text{C}-\text{O}) = 1.41$ , and  $R(\text{V}^*-\text{O}^*) = 1.88 \text{ \AA}$ . The tetrahedral coordination of both metals is maintained in the product. The wavefunction of the product is also described as an OSS state with two unpaired electrons localized at two  $\text{V}^{\text{IV}}$ . The triplet state of **7** is  $0.1 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$  uphill, suggesting there is slight superexchange interaction between the two metallic centers.

Significantly, comparing to Intra- $M^{2e}$ , we find that the barrier of the Inter- $M^{1e}$  oxidation (where “ $1e$ ” denotes the one-electron change in oxidation states) is  $21.5 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$  lower. This can be rationalized by the relative stability of  $\text{V}^{\text{IV}}$  with respect to  $\text{V}^{\text{V}}$  and  $\text{V}^{\text{III}}$  evident in the Pourbaix diagrams of vanadium.<sup>13</sup> For illustration, the redox potentials of  $\text{V}^{\text{IV}}/\text{V}^{\text{V}}$  and  $\text{V}^{\text{III}}/\text{V}^{\text{IV}}$  couples in aqueous solution at  $\text{pH} = 0$  ( $1.0$  and  $0.36 \text{ V vs. NHE}$ , respectively)<sup>14</sup> show that the comproportionation reaction  $\text{V}^{\text{V}} + \text{V}^{\text{III}} \rightarrow 2\text{V}^{\text{IV}}$  is exergonic by  $15 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ .

To investigate substrate scope, we considered the reaction of **1-Me** with  $\text{OVCl}_3$  (Fig. 3). In contrast to **1**, two transition states (TS) were located: the first (**1,7-TS-Me**) has a triangular  $\text{V}-\text{C}-\text{O}$  motif resembling **1,7-TS**, and the second (**1,7-TS'-Me**) has a linear  $\text{V}-\text{C}-\text{O}$  motif (including inversion of the methyl group) similar to the transition state for methyl transfer from  $(\text{CO})_5\text{ReMe}$  to  $\text{SeO}_2$ .<sup>15</sup> The most energetically favorable pathway is through **1,7-TS-Me** with a barrier of  $27.3 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ , which is still  $8.1 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$  higher than that of **1**. This lower migratory aptitude of methyl is also observed in several other systems.<sup>16</sup> The reaction through **1,7-TS'-Me** poses a much higher barrier of  $38.7 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ . This is presumably the result of forming the undercoordinated vanadium product  $\text{OVCl}_2$ .

The Inter- $M^{1e}$  mechanism is unique compared to previous oxidation mechanisms.  $\text{M}-\text{C}$  bonds have been oxy-functionalized by:

- organometallic Baeyer-Villiger oxidations,<sup>10a,b</sup> in which the oxidation state of the metal in the  $\text{M}-\text{R}$  complex remains unchanged;
- electrophilic attack on carbon,<sup>10c,15</sup> in which the oxidation state of the metal in the  $\text{M}-\text{R}$  complex remains unchanged, while the oxidant is reduced by two electrons;
- Intra- $M^{2e}$ ,<sup>5,6</sup> in which the metal of the  $\text{M}-\text{R}$  complex is reduced by two electrons; or
- nucleophilic attack (or reductive elimination),<sup>17</sup> in which the metal in the  $\text{M}-\text{R}$  complex is formally reduced by two electrons.

For the current system we observe Inter- $M^{1e}$  (Fig. 2), in which both metals in the  $\text{M}-\text{R}$  complex and oxidant are formally reduced by one electron. This mechanism will prove useful if integrated as the  $\text{C}-\text{O}$  formation step in a complete catalytic cycle for hydrocarbon oxidation, and its electronic structure suggests advantages over known functionalization routes. Firstly, in a process in which the oxidant is to be regenerated by triplet

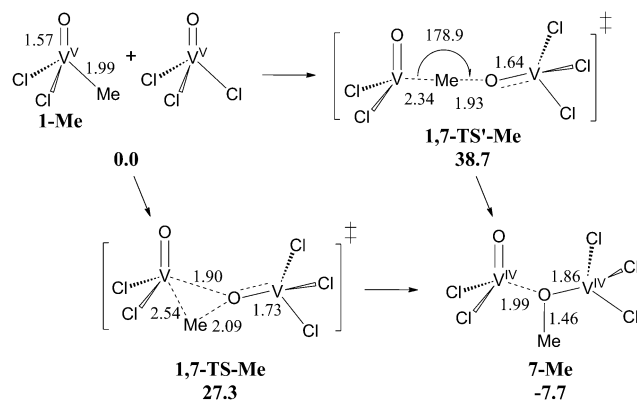


Fig. 3 The free energy surface of the intermolecular methyl migration from  $\text{VOMeCl}_2$  to the oxo of  $\text{VOCl}_3$  (free energies at  $1 \text{ M}$  in  $\text{kcal mol}^{-1}$ ,  $T = 298 \text{ K}$ , bond lengths in  $\text{\AA}$ ).

dioxygen, the open shell character and oxidation potential of  $V^{IV}$  (1.0 V vs. NHE calculated for  $O=V^{IV}Cl_3^{-1}(aq.)$ ) offer kinetic and thermodynamic advantages over oxidants like  $[PtCl_6^{2-}]^{18}$  and peroxides,<sup>3a,b,19</sup> respectively. These advantages have already been demonstrated by known, air-regenerable catalysts based on vanadium, other metals and polyoxometalates.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, stoichiometric reactions involving the formal transfer of a hydrocarbyl anion to an oxidant have not been incorporated into catalytic cycles for alkane oxidation. These mechanisms have involved electropositive metals incompetent for CH activation (e.g. MTO and Grignard reagents) or strong oxidants (e.g. peracids,  $N_2O$ ).<sup>21</sup> The electropositivity that promotes these reactions also makes catalysts based on such metals susceptible to unwanted oxidation prior to CH activation.<sup>22</sup> In contrast the Inter- $M^{1e}$  mechanism requires the CH activation catalyst to be formally reduced by one electron, so we are now exploring its application to 'M-R' substrates of metals that are simultaneously competent for non-radical C-H activation and tolerant of more oxidizing conditions.

Instead of the expected intramolecular phenyl metal-to-oxo migration, we find that the oxy-functionalization of  $VOPhCl_2$  proceeds through an intermolecular phenyl migration to the oxo of a separate  $VOCl_3$ . This mechanism can be verified experimentally by a pseudo first-order kinetic study, in which a high concentration of  $VOCl_2Ph^{11}$  is reacted with controlled concentration of  $VOCl_3$ . The two electrons in the initial V-C bond are decoupled during the reaction, leading to two vanadium centers which have been reduced to the +4 state. Therefore, we categorize this as a new oxy-functionalization mechanism involving two one-electron reductions.

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