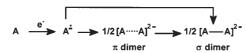
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## Electrochemistry

## Evidence for a $\pi$ Dimer in the Electrochemical Reduction of 1,3,5-Trinitrobenzene: A Reversible N<sub>2</sub>-Fixation System\*\*

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Couplings between two radical anions<sup>[1]</sup> or two radical cations<sup>[2]</sup> are common outcomes in electrochemical reactions and give rise to a doubly charged  $\sigma$ -bonded dimeric species. In the case of delocalized  $\pi$  systems such as 9-cyanoanthracene, formation of a  $\pi$ -dimer intermediate before collapse of the two radical anions into a σ-bonded species has been proposed, [2a-b] although the same event has been explained by one-step radical-anion dimerization<sup>[2c-d]</sup> (Scheme 1).



Scheme 1. Dimerization of the radical anion of 9-cyanoanthracene (A).

Moreover, the formation of radical-anion dimers in the solid state, such as that of 7,7,8,8-tetracyanoquinodimethane (TCNQ), is well established.<sup>[3]</sup> Furthermore, it is known that the nucleophilic aromatic substitution (S<sub>N</sub>Ar) mechanism involves addition compounds (σ complexes) as intermediates.[4] For this reaction, UV and NMR spectroscopic experiments suggested the existence of a  $\pi$ -complex intermediate prior to σ-complex formation.<sup>[5]</sup> Definitive evidence was provided by the isolation of the  $\pi$ -complex intermediate in the S<sub>N</sub>Ar reaction of indole-3-carboxylate with 1,3,5-trinitrobenzene.  $^{[6]}$  Thus, the formation of  $\pi$ -dimer intermediates in the σ dimerization of radical anions remains controversial.

In the reduction of 1,3,5-trinitrobenzene (1), Bock and Lechner-Knoblauch observed an irreversible wave, which was explained by formation of 1,3-dinitrobenzene and nitrite anion.<sup>[7]</sup> However, by bulk electrochemical reduction of **1** in acetone, Sosokin et al. isolated the σ-bonded dimer 1,1'-

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Supporting information for this article is available on the WWW under http://www.angewandte.org or from the author.

dihydrobis(2,4,6-trinitrocyclohexadienyl) (3, Scheme 2) as its tetraethylammonium salt.<sup>[8]</sup> We report herein on a complete electrochemical (cyclic voltammetry and bulk electrolysis), spectroscopic, and synthetic investigation of the reduction of 1, providing conclusive evidence for the formation of a  $\pi$ dimer intermediate prior to formation of the  $\sigma$  dimer and the reaction of this  $\pi$  dimer with  $N_2$  to give an organic  $N_2$ -fixation

The electrochemical behavior of 1 is definitely different from those of nitrobenzene or dinitrobenzenes (see the Supporting Information).<sup>[9]</sup> Figure 1a shows that, at low scan rates, 1 has one chemically irreversible reduction wave at -0.56 V versus SCE in acetonitrile (CH<sub>3</sub>CN, 0.1M nBu<sub>4</sub>NBF<sub>4</sub>, Ar atmosphere, 10 °C). The resulting follow-up product is oxidized at +0.23 V. This oxidation wave only appears after a first reduction scan. The reduction wave becomes reversible at scan rates higher than  $1800 \text{ V s}^{-1}$  ( $E^{\circ}$  = -0.57 V,  $k_s = 0.01 \text{ cm s}^{-1}$ ). Peak-potential analysis of the reduction wave at low and high scan rates indicates a oneelectron process. The shape of the voltammograms (peak width) suggests fast electron transfer with kinetic control by chemical reaction. [10] The peak potential is concentrationdependent (22 mV per unit log c) and scan rate-dependent  $(23 \text{ mV per unit } \log v)$  in the concentration range 2–10 mm. These cyclic voltammetric data indicate dimerization of the radical anion of 1 through a second-order reaction pathway ([E+C2(Arr)] mechanism) to form 2, which is responsible for the oxidation wave at +0.23 V (Scheme 2).<sup>[11]</sup> A dimerization rate constant of  $k_2 = (1.80 \pm 0.05) \times 10^5 \, \text{Lmol}^{-1} \, \text{s}^{-1}$  was determined by simulation of the experimental curves with the DigiSim software.[12]

Dianion 2 was synthesized as its tetraethylammonium salt (Et<sub>4</sub>N)<sub>2</sub>-2 by bulk electrolysis of 1. A fresh solution of this salt in CH<sub>3</sub>CN (0.1 m nBu<sub>4</sub>NBF<sub>4</sub>, Ar, 10 °C) shows, at low scan rates, a two-electron process for the characteristic oxidation peak at +0.23 V. The characteristic reduction peak of **1** at  $-0.56 \,\mathrm{V}$  is observed only after the potential is set above +0.23 V (Figure 1b), which means that the oxidation product of 2 is 1. Furthermore, 1 is recovered in 100% yield after exhaustive electrolysis of 2 at +0.40 V. If the cyclic voltammogram is recorded 5 min after preparing the solution, a new oxidation peak rises at +0.56 V, while the height of the peak at +0.23 V decreases in comparison with the initial value. In less than one hour, only the peak at +0.56 V remains in the cyclic voltammogram, and the peak at +0.23 V is no longer visible. This new peak at +0.56 V is assigned to 3 (Scheme 2).

The tetraethylammonium salt of dianion 3 was isolated and characterized by aging a solution of 2 in CH<sub>3</sub>CN.<sup>[13]</sup> A freshly prepared solution of the salt of 3 in CH<sub>3</sub>CN (0.1<sub>M</sub> nBu<sub>4</sub>NBF<sub>4</sub>, Ar atmosphere, 10 °C) shows, at low scan rates, a



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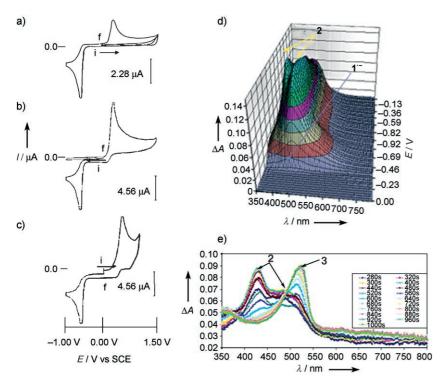
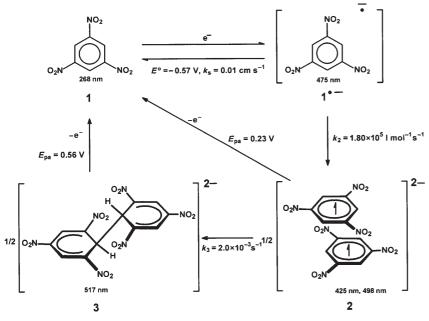


Figure 1. Cyclic voltammetry (CV) at 4.0 mm in CH<sub>3</sub>CN with 0.1 m  $nBu_4NBF_4$  at 10 °C. Scan rate 1.0 Vs<sup>-1</sup>, glassy carbon disk electrode (0.05 mm diameter). a) 1 in the potential range 0.00/1.50/–1.00/0.00 V (two cycles). b) 2 in the potential range 0.00/–1.00/1.50/0.00 V (two cycles). c) 3 in the potential range 0.00/1.00/0.00 V. d) Spectrocyclovoltammogram of 1 (0.5 mm) with scan rate 0.1 Vs<sup>-1</sup> in the potential range 0.00/–1.00/0.00 V; 60 spectra were recorded during the scan. [15] e) In situ UV/Vis spectra during electrolysis of 1 (0.5 mm) at –1.00 V vs. Ag/AgCl in a spectroelectrochemical cell with Pt minigrid as working electrode. [15]



Scheme 2. Detailed mechanism for reduction of 1 under an Ar atmosphere.

two-electron oxidation process for the peak at +0.56 V (Figure 1c). Again, the characteristic reduction peak of 1 at -0.56 V only arises after the oxidation of 3, which indicates

that **1** is the oxidation product of **3**. This is corroborated by exhaustive electrolysis (+1.30 V) of **3**, which gives **1** in 100% yield. The oxidation peak of **3** (+0.56 V) is in the range of oxidation potentials found for the  $\sigma$  complexes formed in  $S_N$ Ar reactions (0.60-1.00 V), whereas **2** is oxidized at a lower potential (+0.23 V), which is consistent with a  $\pi$  dimer.

A potential-step experiment in a UV/Vis-electrochemical cell<sup>[15]</sup> facilitates measuring the disappearance of **2** by monitoring the absorption band at 425 nm and the appearance of a new band at 517 nm (Figure 1e; for technical details, see the Supporting Information). [16] From these data, it is possible to deduce that the absorption of **2** (425 and 498 nm) grows rapidly in the beginning, while **1** is totally consumed (about 400 s). Later, the absorption bands of **2** decrease, with concomitant development of the new absorption of **3** (517 nm). Highly accurate kinetic data, gathered by monitoring the appearance of the new absorption band at 517 nm over time, led to  $k_3 = 2 \times 10^{-3} \, \text{s}^{-1}$  for the isomerization process **2** $\rightarrow$ **3** (see the Supporting Information)

The tetraethylammonium salt of dianion **2** was synthesized as a paramagnetic crystalline solid by electrolyzing a solution of **1** in CH<sub>3</sub>CN under argon with Et<sub>4</sub>NBF<sub>4</sub> as supporting electrolyte. <sup>[17]</sup> The needle-shaped, conducting crystals grew on a graphite cathode (Figure 2).

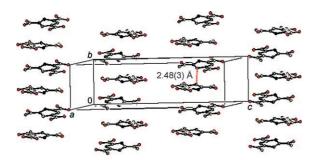
X-ray analysis of **2** shows a  $\pi$ -stacked structure in the solid state (Figure 3). The radical-anion units are not parallel to each other; instead, the stack shows a smooth zigzag motif through a short contact (2.48(3) Å) between C2 of one unit and C4<sup>i</sup> (i: -x,  $y+^1/_2$ ,  $-z+^1/_2$ ) of the next. The dihedral angle between the mean planes of two neighboring units is 34.5(8)° and the ring slippage is 1.85(3) Å. This tilted structure could be preserved in solution until the shortest C–C distance collapses to give a  $\sigma$  bond when  $\pi$  dimer **2** evolves into **3**.

Furthermore, **2** is a biradical in solution, as shown by the EPR spectrum of frozen DMF solutions (77 K) of **2** (see the Supporting Information). The spectrum is the result of an S=1 entity having axial symmetry with an isotropic g factor ( $g=2.0075\pm0.0005$ ) and a zero-field splitting parameter of  $D=323.1\pm0.5$  MHz.<sup>[19]</sup> The central signal corresponds to a two-photon  $\Delta M_s=\pm2$  transition.<sup>[20]</sup> Moreover, solutions of the paramagnetic species **2** in CH<sub>3</sub>CN show fluorescence ( $\lambda_{\rm emission}=608$  nm,  $\Phi=0.25$ , irradiation at 428 nm; see the Supporting Information).<sup>[21]</sup> Neither fluorescence nor an EPR signal was observed for  $\sigma$  complex **3**.

When the electrochemical reduction of  ${\bf 1}$  is performed in  $N_2$  atmosphere instead of Ar, neither the oxidation waves of  ${\bf 2}$  (+0.23 V vs. SCE) nor those of  ${\bf 3}$  (+0.56 V vs. SCE) are observed in the cyclic voltammogram.



Figure 2. Crystal growing on the graphite electrode surface when electrolysis of 1 is performed at -0.60 V.



**Figure 3.** Crystal structure of  $(Et_4N)_2$ . The dashed line shows the shortest distance between two aromatic rings  $C2\cdots C4^i$  ( $i: -x, y + \frac{1}{2}, -z + \frac{1}{2}$ ). Tetraethylammonium counterions are omitted for clarity.

However, a new oxidation wave occurs at +1.09 V versus SCE and corresponds to a two-electron transfer process (Figure 4). By analogy with the electrochemical behavior of 1 under Ar, the oxidation wave at +1.09 V can be assigned to dimer 4. This species was quantitatively formed in solution by electrolysis of 1 at -0.60 V versus SCE (20 mm, CH<sub>3</sub>CN, 0.1m  $nBu_4NBF_4$ ,  $N_2$ ) after passing 1 F. The electrogenerated species again shows an oxidation wave at 1.09 V versus SCE. The characteristic reduction peak of 1 at -0.56 V is observed only after the potential is set above +1.09 V (Figure 1a), that is, the oxidation product of 4 is 1. Furthermore, 1 is recovered in a 100% yield after exhaustive electrolysis of 4 at +1.20 V (Scheme 3, path B).

To establish whether the new species  $\bf 4$  arises from the reaction of  $\bf 2$  or  $\bf 3$  with  $N_2$ , the tetraethylammonium salt of  $\bf 2$  was dissolved in CH<sub>3</sub>CN and a flow of nitrogen was

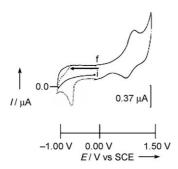


Figure 4. CV of (Et<sub>4</sub>N)<sub>2</sub>-4 (0.5 mm) in CH<sub>3</sub>CN with 0.1 m  $nBu_4NBF_4$  at 10 °C. Scan rate 1.0 Vs<sup>-1</sup>, glassy carbon disk electrode ( $\varnothing$  0.5 mm). The potential ranges were 0.00/-1.00/1.50/0.00 V (first scan, solid line) and 0.00/-1.00/0.00 V (second scan, dotted line).

immediately passed through the solution and maintained for 10 min. Electrochemical analysis of the resulting solution showed an identical I–E curve to that of electrogenerated **4**, that is, a two-electron oxidation wave at +1.09 V. The fact that no difference was observed when  $N_2$  was bubbled through a solution of **3** unequivocally showed that the new product **4** arises from the reaction of biradical **2** with one molecule of  $N_2$  (Scheme 3, path B). Further evidence for this composition was provided by electrospray-ionization mass spectrometry (ESI $^-$ ) analysis of an electrogenerated solution of the tetraethylammonium salt of **4**; the peaks at 713.4  $[M-H]^-$ , 357.2  $[M]^{2-}$ , and 213.0  $[M-28]^{2-}$  show appropriate isotopic distribution.

All attempts to isolate a salt of **4** by direct electrochemical reduction of **1** under  $N_2$  failed. However, we were able to isolate single crystals of the tetraethylammonium salt of **4** by exposing the green crystals of the tetraethylammonium salt of **2** to an  $N_2$  flow for one week. This unusual solid–gas reaction at room temperature affords the tetraethylammonium salt of **4** as a red-orange crystalline material. A fresh solution of these crystals in CH<sub>3</sub>CN under Ar shows an identical CV to electrogenerated solutions of **4**. The <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectrum of **4** shows two singlets at  $\delta = 8.40$  and 6.41 ppm (2:1), which are significantly shifted with respect to those of the  $\sigma$  complex **3** at  $\delta = 8.15$  and 5.53 ppm.

The molecular structure of dianion 4 is shown in Figure 5. [22] It consists of two trinitrobenzene units linked by an azo group through two sp<sup>3</sup> carbon atoms (C6 and C12). Thus, the C6-C1, C6-C5, C12-C7, and C12-C11 bonds (av 1.484(3) Å) are longer than the remaining C-C distances in the rings. Furthermore, distances between the sp<sup>2</sup> carbon atoms are consistent with a quinonic structure for the rings, since C1-C2, C4-C5, C7-C8, and C10-C11 are significantly shorter (av 1.358(5) Å) than C2-C3, C3-C4, C8-C9, and C9-C10 (av 1.402(3) Å). The C-N distances are within the normal range, but the N=N distance (1.481(5) Å) is longer than those reported for other azo compounds. Moreover, the angles around the azo fragment are severely distorted: the C6-N14-N13 and C12-N13-N14 angles are only 107.5(3)° and 107.3(3)°, respectively, and the dihedral angle around the N=N bond (C6-N14-N13-C12) is 131.5(4)°. All these structural data indicate significant single-bond character for this azo bond. Interestingly, each of the nitrogen atoms lies within a short, nonbonding distance of two oxygen atoms of two ortho-nitro groups (N13···O62 3.046(7),N14···O11 3.028(5) Å). Since the oxygen atoms carry a significant fraction of the negative charge of the dianion, donation from these atoms into the  $\pi^*$  bond of the N=N fragment cannot be ruled out. This could be the reason for the observed N=N bond lengthening, as well as the pyramidalization around the N atoms. The close resemblance between the packings of the structures of 2 and 4 suggests that dinitrogen molecules diffuse into solid 2 and bind two neighboring trinitrobenzene radicals without making major changes in the crystal structure or changing the space group. However, the two trinitrobenzene fragments in 4 are no longer related by crystallographic symmetry. Therefore, the volume of the unit cell of **4** (3434(2)  $Å^3$ ) is about twice that of **2** (1646.4(5)  $Å^3$ ). Furthermore, the symmetry elements in the crystal are

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Scheme 3. Mechanism for the reversible dimerization of 1 under Ar (path A) or N2 (path B).

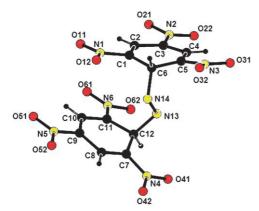


Figure 5. Molecular structure of dianion 4.[22]

rearranged between **2** and **4**. While in **2** the  $\pi$  stack of trinitrobenzene molecules runs along a  $2_1$  axis, parallel to the crystallographic b axis, the column of azo dimers in **4** is generated by a c-glide plane parallel to the c axis (Figure 6).

In summary, the radical anion of 1 dimerizes to form biradical  $\pi$  dimer 2, which forms a  $\pi$ -stacked structure in the solid state. The reversible conversion between the monomeric and dimeric species (2 and 3) provides a new example of a molecular switch (Scheme 3, path A) under Ar atmos-

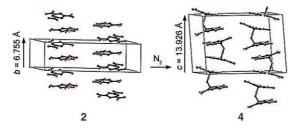


Figure 6. Comparison of the unit cells of the tetraethylammonium salts of 2 and 4. Cations are omitted for clarity.

phere.<sup>[23]</sup> Whereas there are numerous examples of dinitrogen coordinating to transition metal systems,<sup>[24]</sup> we have shown for the first time that an organic molecule, namely, **2**, can reversibly bind N<sub>2</sub> at room temperature in an electrochemically controlled process under N<sub>2</sub> atmosphere (Scheme 3, path B). The different behaviors of the reduction product of 1,3,5-trinitrobenzene (1) under N<sub>2</sub> or an inert gas such as Ar provides the basis for building sensor devices for dinitrogen.

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- [16] a) The spectra of 1 and 3 show maximum absorption at 268 and 517 nm, respectively, in accordance with the literature; [4a,8] b) The maximum absorption of 2 was determined in our laboratory.
- [17] The tetraethylammonium salt of biradical bis(1,3,5-trinitrobenzene) dianion **2** was obtained by cathodic electrolysis of **1**. Potential-controlled electrolysis at -0.60 V vs. SCE of **1** (20 mm, CH<sub>3</sub>CN, 0.1m Et<sub>4</sub>NBF<sub>4</sub>, Ar, 10 °C) quantitatively produces **2** on a graphite working electrode after passage of 1 F. This dark green solid was isolated as a tetraethylammonium salt. Elemental analysis (%) of **2**, calculated for a dimeric structure (C<sub>28</sub>H<sub>46</sub>N<sub>8</sub>O<sub>12</sub>): N 16.37, C 48.98, H 6.71; found: N 15.94, C 48.60, H 6.72.
- [18] a) Crystal structure analysis of  $(Et_4N)_2$ -2  $(C_{14}H_{23}N_4O_6,\ M_r=343.36\ gmol^{-1})$ : A green needle was rapidly mounted under Paratone-8277 on a glass fiber and immediately placed in a cold nitrogen stream at  $-80\,^{\circ}\text{C}$  on a Bruker diffractometer with SMART CCD area detector. Crystal size  $0.28\times0.05\times0.03\ \text{mm}$ ; monoclinic, space group  $P2_1/c$ ; a=11.657(2), b=6.7546(14), c=23.262(4) Å,  $\beta=115.988(7)^{\circ}$ , V=1646.4(5) ų, Z=4;  $\rho_{\text{calcd}}=1.671\ \text{g cm}^{-3}$ ;  $\mu=0.109\ \text{mm}^{-1}$ ;  $2\theta_{\text{max}}=56.6^{\circ}$ ,  $\lambda(\text{Mo}_{\text{K}a})=0.71073$  Å. 9295 reflections collected (1535 unique reflections,

- $R_{\rm int} = 0.1131$ ). Data were corrected for absorption with the SADABS<sup>[18b]</sup> program. The structure was solved by direct methods and refined (218 parameters) by full-matrix leastsquares techniques on F2 (Bruker-AXS, SHELXTL-NT[18c] version 5.10). All non-hydrogen atoms were refined with anisotropic displacement parameters. Hydrogen atoms were included in idealized positions. The structure was refined to goodness-of-fit and final agreement factors of GoF=1.211,  $R1(I>2\sigma(I)) = 0.1086$ , wR2(all data) = 0.2376, residual electron density  $\pm 0.39 \text{ e}^{-}\text{Å}^{-3}$ . CCDC-616742 contains the supplementary crystallographic data for this paper. These data can be obtained free of charge from The Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre via www.ccdc.cam.ac.uk/data\_request/cif; b) The SADABS program is based on the Blessing method: R. H. Blessing, Acta Crystallogr. Sect. A 1995, 51, 33; c) SHELXTL NT: Structure Analysis Program, version 5.10, Bruker-AXS, Madison, WI. 1995.
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- [22] Crystal structure analysis for  $(Et_4N)_2$ -4  $(C_{28}H_{46}N_{10}O_{12}, M_r$ = 714.75 g mol<sup>-1</sup>) was perfored on a Nonius Kappa CCD diffractometer. Crystal size  $0.16 \times 0.07 \times 0.05$  mm; monoclinic, space group  $P2_1/c$ ; a=13.131(5), b=19.359(5), c=13.926(5) Å,  $\beta$ = 104.043(5)°,  $V = 3434(2) \text{ Å}^3$ , Z = 4;  $\rho_{\text{calcd}} = 1.382 \text{ g cm}^{-3}$ ;  $\mu =$ 0.109 mm<sup>-1</sup>;  $2\theta = 54.7^{\circ}$ ;  $\lambda(Mo_{K\alpha}) = 0.71073 \text{ Å}$ , T = 293(2) K. 42967 reflections collected (7606 unique reflections,  $R_{\rm int}$  = 0.1286). The structure was solved by direct methods and refined (452 parameters) by full-matrix least-squares methods on  $F^2$ with the SHELXTL package. [18c] Hydrogen atoms were calculated and placed in idealized positions. The structure was refined to goodness-of-fit and final agreement factors of GoF = 1.023,  $R1(I>2\sigma(I)) = 0.1058$ , wR2(all data) = 0.3592, residual electron density +0.86 and  $-0.32 e^{-} Å^{-3}$ ). CCDC-195183 contains the supplementary crystallographic data for this paper. These data can be obtained free of charge from the Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre via www.ccdc.cam.ac.uk/data request/cif.
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