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Koelewijn, J.M.; Lutz, M.; Detz, R.J.; Reek, J.N.H.

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Anode Preparation Strategies for the Electrocatalytic Oxidation of Water Based on Strong Interactions between Multiwalled Carbon Nanotubes and Cationic Acetylammonium Pyrene Moieties in Aqueous Solutions

Jacobus M. Koelewijn,[a] Martin Lutz,[b] Remko J. Detz,[a] and Joost N. H. Reek*[a]

A strategy is reported for the immobilization of iridium-based water oxidation catalyst 3 onto fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) anodes evaluated for the electrocatalytic oxidation of H2O. The strategy is based on noncovalent π–π interactions between multiwalled carbon nanotubes (MWCNTs) and the cationic acetylammonium pyrene moiety (Pyr+5Me+) covalently attached to a NHC IrCpCl2, catalytically active center (NHC = N-heterocyclic carbene, Cp* = C5Me5). The dispersive properties of the Pyr+ moiety in compound 3 leads to the formation of stable MWCNT dispersions in aqueous solutions. In addition, the MWCNT/3 assembly shows activity in the Ce4+-driven oxidation of H2O. FTO/MWCNT/3 anodes show increased current densities when used as a working electrode for the electrocatalytic oxidation of H2O. At higher anodic polarizations initially high current densities were achieved; however, these currents prove to be non-sustained due to delamination and degradation of the catalytically active surface. The immobilization strategy is limited to applications below 1.4 V vs normal hydrogen electrode (NHE) as oxidation of the pyrene backbone is evident at higher potentials.

Introduction

The electrocatalytic activity of molecular catalysts that drive the oxidation of H2O, strategies are required that involve the surface immobilization of water oxidation catalysts (WOCs) onto anodes used for the electrolytic splitting of water. Molecularly anchored catalysts are mostly explored for ruthenium-based systems.[1–12] Other reports describe the electrocatalytic activity of molecular complexes based on nickel,[13] iron,[14] copper,[15–24] and cobalt[25–28] as well as their corresponding metal oxide films.[29–41] For iridium, very few well-defined molecular systems exist.[42–46] High current densities at low overpotentials are readily obtained by electrodes modified with IrO2 films.[46–49] However, surface-immobilized “homogeneous” molecular catalysts have, in comparison to heterogeneous metal oxide films, the advantage that they can be fine-tuned by synthetic modification, for example in terms of the redox properties of the catalytically active site. In addition, active intermediates and mechanistic pathways can be studied in a more facile way. In economic terms, the use of a thin monolayer of a highly active molecular catalyst can have the advantage of a reduction in lower material costs. This paper describes an immobilization strategy based on noncovalent π–π interactions between the pyrene-functionalized NHC IrCpCl2 water oxidation catalyst 3 (NHC = N-heterocyclic carbene, Cp* = C5Me5; Figure 1) and the graphene surface of multiwalled carbon nanotubes (MWCNTs). The strategy makes use of the properties of the cationic acetylammonium pyrene compound 1 (Pyr+), which has been reported to facilitate the formation of stable dispersions/solutions of carbon nanomaterials in aqueous systems.[50–52] In aqueous systems the pyrene moiety acts as a hydrophobic anchor that binds to the graphene-type surface through π–π interactions and the ammonium moiety acts as a hydrophilic solubilizer. Reports on the application of compound 1 and related structures have been limited.[52–69] The compound has been used as a strong fluorescent marker but often the cationic nature of the acetylammonium pyrene scaffold 1 has been used for the electrostatic anchoring of polyamionic moieties such as DNA, quantum dots, tetrathiafulvalene, and (metallo)-porphyrins to graphene, single-walled carbon nanotubes (SWCNTs), MWCNTs, or even carbon nanohorns (CNHs).[60–66]

[a] Dr. J. M. Koelewijn, Dr. R. J. Detz, Prof. Dr. J. N. H. Reek
Van ’t Hoff Institute for Molecular Sciences
University of Amsterdam
Science Park 904, 1098 XH Amsterdam (The Netherlands)
E-mail: j.n.h.reek@uva.nl
[b] Dr. M. Lutz
Crystal and Structural Chemistry Bijvoet Center
Biomolecular Research
Utrecht University
Padualaan 8, 3584 CH Utrecht (The Netherlands)
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The group of Prato reported that photoexcitation of a Zn-porphyrin-based molecular sensitizer electrostatically bound to SWCNT/Pyr+ or MWCNT/Pyr+ assemblies results in long-lived radical ion pairs. Within this configuration, the carbon nanotube acts as the electron acceptor and the assembly as a whole forms a donor–acceptor nanohybrid, with Pyr+ 1 as an essential part in the formation of the charge-separated state.[62,63,67,68] The assembly was used in a strategy for the preparation of photoanodes based on molecular compounds for the conversion of solar energy to electrical energy.[69–71] The Prato group also reported a similar strategy for the electrostatic immobilization of a ruthenium-based polyoxometalate on the surface of MWCNTs.[72,73] With respect to the use of MWCNTs as a support, Sun reported the immobilization and use of a pyrene-functionalized Ru2(L)(pic) water oxidation catalyst (pic = 4-picoline) onto indium tin oxide (ITO) electrodes coated by acid-treated MWCNTs.[74,75] Strategies involving carbon nanotubes for the fabrication of anodes have also been reported for inorganic electrocatalysts using the oxides of manganese, cobalt, and nickel[61,76–81] and in some cases CNTs are active electrocatalysts themselves.[23,76] Also electrochemical reduction of protons or CO2 using a pyrene-functionalized catalyst anchored onto CNTs has been reported.[69–71] There are, however, no examples of molecular-based iridium water oxidation catalysts that, combined with MWCNTs, provide stable and efficient anodes that are active in the electrocatalytic oxidation of H2O. In this report the properties of compound 1 as a dispersing agent for MWCNTs in aqueous solutions combined with the excellent catalytic properties of NHC IrCp*Cl2 are discussed.[84–87] This is realized by the direct covalent attachment of the catalyst to the pyrene anchor to obtain the novel catalytic precursor 3. The propyl alcohol modified pyrene anchor 2 serves as a control for studying the adsorptive and electrocatalytic properties of MWCNT/Pyr+ assemblies formed in aqueous solutions. In addition, compound 4 was designed as an electrochemical probe to study the stability of the MWCNT/Pyr+ assemblies in operando, when immobilized onto fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO)- and DropSens (DS)-based anodes, with respect to the electrocatalytic oxidation of H2O.

**Results and Discussion**

Compound 1 (Pyr+ Br−) was readily prepared following a published procedure by introducing an excess of trimethylamine gas through a solution of 1-(bromoacetyl)pyrene in dry THF.[52] The yellow precipitate formed was isolated in quantitative yield by filtration. Compound 2 (Pyr+−OH Br−) was prepared by adding 2 equivalents of commercially available 3-dimethylamino-1-propanol to a solution of 1-(bromoacetyl)pyrene in dry THF after which the precipitate was filtered off. The solid was washed with Et2O and dried under vacuum to provide a pure yellow amorphous compound in quantitative yield. For compound 3 (Pyr+-Ir Br−), the NHC backbone was first functionalized with an alkyl(dimethyl)amine linker before complexation with IrCp*Cl2 and attachment to the pyrene scaffold in the final step (Scheme 1). Starting from 3-dimethylamino-1-propa-
hindrance caused by the methyl groups on the Cp* moiety of the IrCl₂ complex (Figure S4). Compounds 1–4 were poorly soluble in a variety of organic solvents; however, anion exchange with PF₆⁻ (see the Supporting Information) greatly improved the solubility of 2 and 3 in acetone. Anion exchange is desirable as the presence of Br⁻ could interfere when one studies the electrocatalytic properties of 3 with respect to the oxidation of H₂O₂ as Br⁻ is easily oxidized (1.07 V vs NHE). In contrast to the bromide salts, the PF₆⁻ salts of compound 2 and 3 were insoluble in H₂O. Needle-like crystals of Pyr⁺−OH PF₆⁻ 2 and Pyr⁺−Ir PF₆⁻ 3 were grown by carefully layering pentane on top of a concentrated solution of the respective compound in acetone. The molecular structures of compound 2 and compound 3 were confirmed by X-ray crystal structure determination[88] (Figure S2 and Figure 2). The solid-state structure of compound 3 shows an iridium center with one coordinated DMSO solvent molecule and a coordinated halogen atom. Substitutional disorder indicates that the halogen is a mixture of chlorine and bromine in an approximate ratio of 1:1 (Figure S3). Modification of the NHC backbone does not induce significant changes in the coordination geometry of the catalytic center.[89] Compound 2 and compound 3 were reacted with cerium ammonium nitrate (CAN) used as a chemical oxidant to detect the formation of oxygen according to Equation (1).

\[2\text{H}_2\text{O} + 4\text{Ce}(\text{IV}) \rightarrow \text{O}_2 + 4\text{H}^+ + 4\text{Ce}(\text{III})\]  

(1)

The reaction was performed in the chamber of a Clark-type electrode to selectively detect oxygen. A solution of 130 µM 3 in 0.1 m HNO₃ at pH 1 was reacted with 50 mM CAN and compared to the reaction of 2 under the same experimental conditions. After an induction period of 10 seconds, O₂ formation is detected for 3 and is absent for 2 (Figure 3). This shows that the iridium center in 3 remains active for the catalytic oxidation of H₂O₂.[87]

Electrochemical measurements were performed for Pyr⁺ Br⁻ compounds 2–4 dissolved in acetonitrile to study the potential window in which the organic framework is stable. It was found for all compounds that oxidation of the pyrene moiety occurs around 1.4 V vs NHE (Figure S5). To study compound 3 with respect to the electrocatalytic oxidation of H₂O₂ in comparison to compound 2, anodes were prepared by loading either compound 2 or 3 onto commercially available DropSens (DS) electrodes, which were used as the working electrode in a conventional three-electrode setup (see the Supporting Information). The DS working electrode consists of a screen-printed, carbon electroactive surface modified with MWCNTs. In this way the interaction of the Pyr⁺ anchor with the MWCNT surface could be explored (Figure S1).

Figure 3. Proof of the catalytic activity of the iridium center in 3. 130 µM solutions of 3 and 2 were reacted with 50 mM CAN in 0.1 m HNO₃, which generated oxygen (Eq. (1)). Duplo means that the reaction was repeated under identical conditions, leading to two almost overlapping oxygen formation curves.

Figure 4 shows the current–potential (I–V) curves of a typical experiment. First a DS electrode was used in a blank measurement using a 0.1 m phosphate buffer solution at pH 2.0. After rinsing with demineralized water and drying, the same DS anode was loaded by dropcasting 100 µL of an 0.2 mM solution of compound 2 or 3 in MeCN onto the electroactive surface area of the DS anode after which the DS anode was submerged in the 0.1 m phosphate buffer solution and the potential swept to 1.8 V vs NHE (Figure 4). For compound 2 (Figure 4a) after the first anodic scan, two irreversible oxidation waves are observed with an onset potential of 1.09 V and 1.37 V vs NHE, corresponding approximately to the oxidation potentials of the Br⁻ anion and the pyrene moiety measured with respect to ferrocene as shown in Figure S5. Both waves decrease in intensity upon sequential scanning of the DS/2 anode and a second reversible redox wave appears at the
second and third scan with a well-defined $E_{1/2}$ potential of 0.54 V vs NHE (Figure 4a, inset). For Pyr$^+$ Br$^{-}$ 3 (Figure 4b) the I–V curve shows a feature evident for a catalytic wave with a current density of 4.9 mA cm$^{-2}$ at 1.8 V vs NHE. After the initial anodic sweep a similar feature with an $E_{1/2}$ potential of 0.54 V vs NHE grows in intensity (Figure 4b, inset) while the total current density at 1.8 V vs NHE decreases. This feature found for 2, 3, and 4 is assumed to correspond to the degradation of the molecular framework adsorbed on the electrode surface after oxidation of the pyrene moiety has occurred (Figures S5–S9). The decrease in current density after successive scanning can be explained by the desorption of 3 from the DS anode during the experiment as the bromide salt of compound 3 is moderately soluble in H$_2$O. To confirm this, two DS anodes were dropcast with 30 µL 0.2 mM 3 and one of these was submerged in a 0.1 M phosphate buffer solution for 60 min prior to the first anodic sweep. Figure 5 shows that no desorption has occurred within 60 min, as no significant decrease in current density is observed at the initial scan compared to the DS/3 anode that was not submerged in the phosphate buffer solution (Figure 5). This indicates that the decrease in intensity as observed in Figure 4b is not due to direct desorption of the catalytic precursor. It is therefore most likely due to degradation of the Pyr$^+$ anchor at high anodic potentials followed by desorption of degradation products of compound 3. However, catalyst deactivation or leaching of the oxidized pyrene or activated (higher oxidized) iridium species cannot be ruled out at this point. The absence of desorption of catalytic precursor 3 from the DS anode indicates that the molecular precursor remains adsorbed to the DS/MWCNT surface. In addition, experiments performed with electrochemical probe 4 showed that spontaneous adsorption of the Pyr$^+$ moiety to the MWCNT surface occurs when a blank DS anode was submerged overnight in an 0.2 mM aqueous solution of 4 (Figure S8). Both experiments confirm the strong interaction of the Pyr$^+$ moiety with the DS/MWCNT surface in an aqueous environment.

The propensity of the cationic pyrene anchor to disperse MWCNTs in aqueous solutions, reported for Pyr$^+$ Br$^{-}$ 1, was also observed for Pyr$^+$ Br$^{-}$ 2, Pyr$^+$ Br$^{-}$ 3, and Pyr$^+$ Br$^{-}$ 4. For Pyr$^+$ Br$^{-}$ 3, this observation was used to devise a strategy for constructing FTO anodes for the electrolytic splitting of H$_2$O. In a typical experiment a vial filled with 5 mL of 0.2 mM 3 was left to stir overnight in the presence of 5 mg MWCNTs. After ultrasonification of the mixture a stable black dispersion of the MWCNTs in water is obtained as shown in the left vial in Figure S8a. The catalytic iridium center of 3 is now immobilized on the MWCNT surface while the cationic Pyr$^+$ anchor of compound 3 prevents the MWCNTs to conglomerate. The adsorption conditions were selected to ensure full adsorption of Pyr$^+$ Br$^{-}$ 3 to the MWCNTs so to minimize traces of leftover compound 3 in the supernatant solution (Figures S10–S12). The MWCNT/3 assembly was isolated after centrifugation of the mixture and decantation of the supernatant solution. The successful immobilization of 3 on the MWCNT surface is demonstrated when it is reacted with CAN in the reaction chamber.

**Figure 4.** I–V curves for experiments comparing the electrocatalytic activities of 2 and 3. a) 100 µL 0.2 mM 2 and b) 100 µL 0.2 mM 3 in MeCN dropcast onto a DS electrode. The electroactive surface area of the DS anode is 0.1 cm$^2$. A Pt coil was used as the counter electrode and an Ag/AgCl (3 M KCl) electrode was used as a reference electrode with ($E’$ (V vs Ag/AgCl) = +0.21 V vs NHE).

**Figure 5.** I–V curves for experiments showing the desorption of 3 from a DS anode. DS/3 working electrode was prepared by dropcasting 30 µL 0.2 mM 3 in MeCN applied directly (black trace) and the second electrode was subsequently submerged for 60 min in an 0.1 M phosphate buffer solution (gray trace). A Pt coil was used as the counter electrode and an Ag/AgCl (3 M KCl) electrode was used as a reference electrode with ($E’$ (V vs Ag/AgCl) = +0.21 V vs NHE).
of a Clark-type electrode, in analogy to the experiments presented in Figure 3. Rapid visible evolution of \( \text{O}_2 \) was observed in contrast to experiments with pristine MWCNTs exposed to the same CAN concentration (Figure 6). When the isolated MWCNT/3 assemblies are dispersed by ultrasonification, the activity is higher than that observed for nondispersed MWCNT/3 assemblies, which were simply isolated by decantation of the supernatant prior to the ultrasonication step. Dispersion of the assembly probably ensures full exposure of catalytically active sites. When lower concentrations of CAN were employed (not in Figure 6), no \( \text{O}_2 \) formation was observed.

The experiments demonstrate that assemblies of 3 and MWCNTs can be formed in aqueous solutions which, when isolated, remain catalytically active for the \( \text{Ce}^{4+} \)-driven oxidation of \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \) (Figure 7). The maximum loading reached corresponds to a total loading of approximately 0.25 mmol \( \text{Pyr}^+ / \text{g MWCNT} \), which is unaffected by changes in pH or ionic strength in the case of aqueous solutions yet strongly shifts in MeOH solutions (Figures S10 and S11).

FTO anodes were prepared by dropcasting 100 \( \mu \text{L} \) of black aqueous dispersions of MWCNTs prepared using either \( \text{Pyr}^+ \text{Br}^- \) or \( \text{Pyr}^+ \text{PF}_6^- \), according to the previously described procedure, thereby completely covering the FTO surface without loss of the dropcast volume. After dropcasting, the FTO anodes were left to dry in air for a few hours (Figure 8b). To compare the effect of additional layering, after the drying step, a subsequent layer was applied by dropcasting 100 \( \mu \text{L} \) of the supernatant, and this step was repeated to provide FTO anodes with various layer thicknesses (prepared by dropcasting 100–300 \( \mu \text{L} \) of the respective dispersions. Delamination is readily observed for MWCNT/3 \( \text{PF}_6^- \)). SEM image of the FTO/MWCNT/3 \( \text{Br}^- \) anode surface, 20.0 kV, 3.0 Spot 25 000 x.}

**Figure 6.** \( \text{O}_2 \) evolution curves measured using a Clark-type electrode of MWCNT/3 in 0.1 \( \text{M HNO}_3 \) at pH 1.0.

**Figure 7.** Proposed immobilization of 3 on the MWCNT surface and \( \text{O}_2 \) generation (see Figure 6).

**Figure 8.** a) Black stable suspension obtained for MWCNT/Pyr\(^+\) Br\(^-\) 3 assembly in deionized \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \) (left) and the absence of a stable suspension for MWCNT/Pyr\(^+\) PF\(_6\)^-. (right). b) FTO substrates after dropcasting of 100 \( \mu \text{L} \) of the respective dispersions. Delamination is readily observed for MWCNT/3 \( \text{PF}_6^- \). c) SEM image of the FTO/MWCNT/3 \( \text{Br}^- \) anode surface, 20.0 kV, 3.0 Spot 25 000 x.
FTO anodes prepared via this strategy with Pyr$^+$ Br$^-$ 4 display good electrochemical communication between the molecular probe present in the MWCNT/4 assembly and the electrode, as a proper response of the ferrocene redox couple in 4 is observed upon successively sweeping the anode potential between 0.0 V and 0.6 V vs Ag for more than 50 times (Figure S9).

FTO/MWCNT/2 and FTO/MWCNT/3 anodes prepared with MWCNT/Pyr$^+$ layers of various thicknesses (prepared by drop-casting 100 to 300 μL of the dispersion) were used directly as the working electrode in a three-electrode configuration with a Ag/AgCl (3 M KCl) reference electrode and a Pt-coil counter electrode submerged in a 0.1 M phosphate buffer solution at pH 2.0. The cyclic voltammogram (CV) for FTO/MWCNT/2 (Figure 9a) shows the onset for the oxidation of pyrene at ca. 1.4 V vs NHE. The signal intensity increases in accordance with the anticipated increase in the thickness of the MWCNT/2 layer deposited on the FTO surface by using higher drop-casting volumes. This clearly indicates that the molecular identity of 2 attached to the MWCNT surface is retained. Repeated scanning (Figure 9b) resulted in a minor reduction in current density accompanied by the disappearance of the pyrene oxidation wave and the appearance of the redox wave with $E_{1/2} = 0.54$ V vs NHE. As previously discussed for the experiments using the DS anodes, this wave is ascribed to decomposition products formed once oxidation of the pyrene moiety has occurred (Figure S9). For FTO/MWCNT/3 (Figure 9c) a similar trend is observed and the current density is significantly increased compared to that of FTO/MWCNT/2 (from ca. 0.5 mA cm$^{-2}$ to ca. 1.5 mA cm$^{-2}$) determined at 1.5 V vs NHE for the first scan of the anode prepared with the highest layer thickness (300 μL). This increased current density of FTO/MWCNT/3 is attributed to the electrocatalytic oxidation of H$_2$O by 3. In some of the experiments, delamination upon immersion of the modified FTO anodes in the electrolyte solution was observed, indicating that multiple layering of the FTO anode by simple drop-casting is not a suitable method for the preparation of robust functional anodes. Therefore from this point onward, anodes prepared by depositing one layer (100 μL) of the respective dispersions are used.

In general, scanning at higher potentials leads to decomposition at a molecular level (Figure S9). Therefore freshly prepared FTO/MWCNT/3 anodes were scanned to a maximum of 1.6 V and 1.4 V vs NHE and the results are depicted in Figure 10a,b respectively. Scanning to 1.6 V shows that the initially high current density of 1.7 mA cm$^{-2}$ rapidly decreases and the degradation products of 3 again become apparent at 0.54 V vs NHE. Scanning to 1.4 V the potential remains just below the oxidation potential of pyrene. A small decrease in the current density is still apparent, yet the buildup of decomposition products increases to a smaller extent as depicted in the inset of Figure 10b. Freshly prepared anodes of FTO/MWCNT/2 and FTO/MWCNT/3 were subjected to extended use.
by applying subsequent on/off cycles at 1.8 V vs NHE to study
the stability of the prepared anodes in terms of the observed
current density (Figure 11). The difference in current density
observed for the initial on/off cycles between FTO/MWCNT/2
and FTO/MWCNT/3 is attributed to water oxidation catalysis.
This significant change in current density decreases with each
successive cycle as the current density of FTO/MWCNT/3 de-
creases while the current density in FTO/MWCNT/2 remains
consistent. This decrease in current density after repeated, suc-
cessive scanning is in line with leaching of the catalytically
active center after decomposition of the linker. Similar experi-
ments at pH 6.8 show that the catalyst is not sufficiently active
under these conditions, but suggest that the anchoring strategy
can be used at this pH.

In a control experiment, the prolonged activity of FTO/
MWCNT/3 in a phosphate buffer solution at pH 2.0 was com-
pared at 1.4 V and 1.8 V vs NHE (Figure 12). At 1.8 V vs NHE
the formation of bubbles was clearly observed on the anode’s
surface in contrast to the experiment at 1.4 V vs NHE. Bubble
formation halted after ca. 800 seconds, in accordance with the
decrease in current density.

Conclusion

A water oxidation catalyst (NHC IrCp*Cl₂) has been successfully
attached to a cationic pyrene anchor. This system acts as an ef-
cient dispersing agent of multiwalled carbon nanotubes in
aqueous solutions by the formation of MWCNT/Pyr⁺ assem-
bles under neutral and acidic conditions. The MWCNT/Pyr⁺ as-
sembly was deposited onto FTO surfaces and evaluated as a
working electrode for the electrocatalytic oxidation of H₂O.
When the electrode was loaded with nanotubes that contain
precursor 3, initially high current densities were observed at
pH 2.0, which are ascribed to water oxidation. Although the
high current density is very promising, the degradation of the
FTO/MWCNT/Pyr⁺ anode by oxidation of the pyrene anchoring
group was also observed at potentials above 1.4 V vs NHE, lim-
iting the use of the current system. For the future design of re-
lated systems the anchoring group should be more stable
under these oxidative conditions.

Figure 10. FTO/MWCNT/3 used as the working electrode in 0.1 m
phosphate buffer solution at pH 2.0 at scanspeed 0.1 Vs⁻¹; a) scans
up to 1.6 V, b) scans up to 1.4 V.

Figure 11. Stability of FTO/MWCNT/2 and FTO/MWCNT/3 anodes subjected
to repeated on/off cycles at 1.8 V vs NHE in 0.1 m phosphate buffer solu-
tion at pH 2.0.

Figure 12. Prolonged activity of FTO/MWCNT/3 at 1.4 and 1.8 V vs NHE in
0.1 m phosphate buffer solution at pH 2.0.

Figure 12. Prolonged activity of FTO/MWCNT/3 at 1.4 and 1.8 V vs NHE in
0.1 m phosphate buffer solution at pH 2.0.
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