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Aggregation and Degradation of White Phosphorus Mediated by N-Heterocyclic Carbene Nickel(0) Complexes

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Dedicated to Professor Maurizio Peruzzini on the occasion of his 65th birthday

Abstract: The reaction of zerovalent nickel compounds with white phosphorus (P₄) is a rarely explored route to binary nickel phosphide clusters. Here, we show that coordinatively and electronically unsaturated N-heterocyclic carbene (NHC) nickel(0) complexes afford unusual cluster compounds with P₆, P₈, P₁₃, and P₁₅ units. Using [Ni(IMes)₂], [IMes = 1,3-bis(2,4,6-trimethylphenyl)imidazolin-2-ylidene], electron-deficient Ni₃P₆ and Ni₅P₆ clusters have been isolated, which can be described as superhypercloso and hypercloso clusters according to the Wade–Mingos rules. Use of the bulkier NHC ligand were identified as additional products.

Reactions of transition metal complexes with white phosphorus present a powerful strategy to access binary metal phosphide frameworks, and the structural motifs of the resulting compounds are highly diverse. On the one hand, degradation of P₄ to products containing one to four phosphorus atoms is of tremendous industrial relevance, in order to improve the processes used in the production of organophosphorus compounds. On the other hand, the aggregation of P₄ to polyphosphorus compounds with five or more phosphorus atoms is essential for understanding the structure and bonding in metal phosphides.

The use of nickel as a metal for P₄ activation may result in unique nickel phosphide clusters. Besides a few reactions of P₄ with Ni¹⁺ species, for example, the formation of the sandwich compound [(triphos)Ni₂(μ₁,η³,P₃)₂BF₄] (triphos = Me(2,6-diisopropylphenyl)amine) containing an intact, end-on coordinated P₄ tetrahedron. Moreover, Le Floch and Mézailles reported on the use of [Ni(cod)₂] (cod = 1,4-cycloocta-1,5-diene) for the synthesis of nickel phosphide nanoparticles.[9] Recently, the group of Radius reported the synthesis of the butterfly compound [(Ni(IMes)₂)₂(μ₁,η³,P₃)] (C, IMes) fragments with P₄. While these examples demonstrate both the coordination and degradation of P₄ by 14 valence electron (VE) and 18 VE Ni²⁺ compounds, examples of P₄ aggregation using Ni²⁺ appear to be unknown.

In contrast to Ni¹⁺ compounds, only a few examples of P₄ activation using Ni⁰ sources have been reported (Figure 1). In seminal work dating back to 1979, Sacconi and co-workers reported the formation of the complex [k⁺-P₃P₃N₃]Ni(η₁-P₃) (A, N₃ = tris(2-diphenylphosphinophenyl)amine) containing an intact, end-on coordinated P₄ tetrahedron.[10] Moreover, Le Floch and Mézailles reported on the use of [Ni(cod)₂] (cod = 1,4-cycloocta-1,5-diene) for the synthesis of nickel phosphide nanoparticles.[9] More recently, the group of Radius reported the synthesis of the butterfly compound [(Ni(IMes)₂)₂(μ₁,η³,P₃)] (C, IMes) fragments with P₄. While these examples demonstrate both the coordination and degradation of P₄ by 14 valence electron (VE) and 18 VE Ni²⁺ compounds, examples of P₄ aggregation using Ni²⁺ appear to be unknown.

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**Figure 1.** a) Overview of products resulting from P₄ activation using Ni²⁺ sources.[9,10] b) P₄ activation and aggregation products described herein.
Building on our previous work on P₄ activation with N-heterocyclic carbene (NHC) nickel(I) complexes,[7,12] we recently became interested in studying the reactivity of related NiII complexes. NHC complexes seemed promising because they can be stabilised by various labile ligands, for example, the carbones themselves, alkenes, and arenes. After synthesising a range of known NHC compounds, including the bis(carbene) complexes [Ni(NHC)₂],[11] trimethylvinylsilane complexes [NHC]Ni(η²-H,C=CHSiMe₃),[14] (NHC = IMes, IPr) and the toluene complex [(IPr)Ni(η²-toluene)],[15] we proceeded to systematically study the reactivity of these compounds toward P₄. Reactions of [(NHC)Ni(η²-H,C=CHSiMe₃)], (NHC = IMes, IPr) with different amounts of P₄ afforded black, insoluble material that was not characterised any further. We next turned our attention from nickel complexes comprising labile alkene ligands to the less reactive [Ni-(IMes)₂]. Gratifyingly, the 31P[1H] NMR spectrum of the reaction of [Ni(IMes)₂] with P₄ (0.5 equivalents) in toluene suggested formation of a major product, characterised by two main signals in a 1:1 ratio (Scheme 1). A single-crystal X-ray diffraction (XRD) study of large block-shaped crystals grown from toluene revealed the formation of the trinuclear nickel phosphorous complex [(IMes)₂NiP₂] (1) (Figure 2).

The molecular structure of 1 is reminiscent of the distorted kite-like cyclo-P₄ complex ([CpFe-μ-P₄]) reported by Walter and co-workers.[8,9] However, 1 can be described as a bicapped trigonal bipyramid featuring a Ni₃ triangle with one short Ni₂–Ni₃ bond (2.3720(3) Å) and two long nickel–nickel bonds (Ni1–Ni2: 2.7533(3) Å and Ni1–Ni3: 2.6528(3) Å). Ni1 triangles are a common structure motif, for example, in carbenyl- or phosphine-stabilised clusters.[17] The Ni3 triangle is capped by two phosphorus atoms P1 and P4. The P4 atom is part of a P₄-chain with P–P bond lengths of 2.1671(5) Å (P2–P3) and 2.1754(5) Å (P3–P4), which are in the range commonly observed for P–P single bonds. Notably, the P1 plane and the Ni3 plane are almost perpendicular with a plane twist angle of 89.6°.

Compound 1 can be isolated in pure form as a black crystalline solid in 20% yield. As expected from analysis of the initial reaction mixture, 31P[1H] NMR measurements of Ni(IMes)₃ dissolved in C6D₆ revealed two signals at chemical shifts of 463.1 ppm (P1/P4) and 105.6 ppm (P2/P3), averaged JPP = 67.0 Hz, which are assigned to 1. Notably, the observation of just two 31P[1H] NMR resonances is in apparent contrast with the presence of four distinct P atom positions in the solid-state XRD structure of 1. An additional minor signal is observed at 134.0 ppm. This signal is assigned to an unidentified species, which may be an isomer of 1. A variable temperature (VT) NMR study showed that the integral ratio of signal P1/P4 to P2/P3 remains constant at 1:1 whereas the intensity of the signal at 134.0 ppm increases with higher temperatures and disappears upon cooling the solution to 283 K (see the Supporting Information for spectra). In order to understand this dynamic behaviour, DFT calculations were performed on a truncated model compound, where the mesityl substituents at the NHC moieties were replaced by phenyl groups. The calculations reproduce the asymmetric molecular structure of 1, but also reveal an isomeric Ni1N2N3P4 core (see the Supporting Information for details). The fluxional behaviour observed by NMR spectroscopy can presumably be attributed to an exchange process between P1/P4 and P2/P3, which proceeds via this asymmetrical isomer or a symmetrical transition state with a low energy (∆E = 2.6 kcal mol⁻¹). The 1H NMR spectra are in good agreement with these findings, exhibiting three different signal sets for the IMes ligand and similar thermal dependence of the integral ratios.

Analysis of 1 by liquid field ionisation desorption mass spectrometry (LIFDI-MS) revealed a molecular ion peak at m/z = 1212.2952 in good agreement with the calculated molecular ion peak (1212.2784). The cyclic voltammogram of 1 (THF/[nBu4N][PF₆], Figure S18, Supporting Information) features two reversible redox events at E₁/₂ = −1.07 and −2.76 V (vs. Fe/Fc⁺), which may be assigned to the reversible oxidation and reduction of the complex, respectively.

The bonding situation in 1 was analysed by means of localised orbitals. In particular, intrinsic bond orbitals (IBO)
were constructed starting from a BP86/def2-TZVP wavefunction. Looking at the composition of those orbitals, six filled orbitals involving multicentre bonds between the Ni and P atoms could be identified along with a 3d\(^{10}\) configuration for each Ni atom (see the Supporting Information for a depiction). This is consistent with classical electron-counting rules.\[^{[18]}\] Thus, the cluster may be defined as a superhypercloso-cluster \((12 = 2(n-1), n = 7, \text{ number of cluster atoms})\).

The reaction of [Ni(IMes)] with P\(_4\) is significantly less selective when THF is used as a solvent instead of toluene. Besides 1, two other products formed could be identified by \(\text{\textsuperscript{31}P}\{\text{\textsuperscript{1}H}\}\) NMR spectroscopy and X-ray crystallography. After work-up, brown crystals of the trinuclear cluster \([\text{IMes}]_3\text{Ni}_3\text{P}_6\) (2) were obtained from n-hexane (Figure 3). Structural analysis of 2 reveals a distorted tricapped trigonal prism (or, equivalently, two facial Ni\(3\text{P}_3\) octahedra sharing a common Ni\(_3\) face). Notably, compounds featuring picotogen (P, As) prisms with iron or cobalt are usually stabilised by anionic cyclopentadienyl ligands.\[^{[19]}\] Similar to 1, an unsymmetrical Ni\(_3\)-triangle is observed (Ni\(_1\)–Ni\(_2\) 2.4835(3) Å, Ni\(_1\)–Ni\(_3\) 2.4882(3) Å, Ni\(_2\)–Ni\(_3\) 2.6429(3) Å). The P–P bond lengths range from 2.055(4) to 2.2700(4) Å consistent with P–P single bonds. The \(\text{\textsuperscript{31}P}\{\text{\textsuperscript{1}H}\}\) NMR spectrum in C\(_6\)D\(_6\) shows a broad resonance at –8.6 ppm. The bonding situation in 2 was analysed similarly to that in cluster 1. In accordance with electron-counting rules, nine doubly occupied orbitals of Ni\(_3\) 2.4883(3) /C\(_{138}\), Ni\(_2\) 2.4835(3) /C\(_{138}\), Ni\(_1\) 2.6429(3) /C\(_{138}\) were constructed starting from a BP86/def2-TZVP wavefunction. Looking at the composition of those orbitals, six filled orbitals involving multicentre bonds between the Ni and P atoms could be identified along with a 3d\(^{10}\) configuration for each Ni atom (see the Supporting Information for a depiction). This is consistent with classical electron-counting rules.\[^{[18]}\] Thus, the cluster may be defined as a superhypercloso-cluster \((12 = 2(n-1), n = 7, \text{ number of cluster atoms})\).

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Moreover, we were able to identify [IMes]_3Ni_6P_6 (3a) as a side product. This compound co-crystallises with 2 from the mother liquor of the reaction mixture of [Ni(IMes)] with P\(_4\). Structural analysis of crystals of the composition \([\text{IMes}]_3\text{Ni}_3\text{P}_6\cdot[\text{IMes}]_2\text{Ni}_2\text{P}_5\) (2.3a) revealed that compound 3a features a dinuclear inverse sandwich structure in the solid state with a bridging cyclo-P\(_3\)-ligand (Figure 3). The Ni1–Ni1’ distance is 2.6339(15) Å and the P–P bond lengths range from 2.182(8) to 2.211(9) Å, which is in the common range observed for dinuclear 3d transition metal complexes with bridging cyclo-P\(_3\)-ligands.\[^{[20,21]}\] The pentaphosphacyclopentadienyl ligand is frequently observed in transition metal mediated P\(_4\) activation.\[^{[1]}\] However, most complexes comprising such a cyclo-P\(_3\)-ligand feature group 8 metals and there are only a few examples of other transition metal complexes.\[^{[21]}\] Furthermore, all known cyclo-P\(_3\)-complexes additionally contain cyclopentadienyl ligands, while complex 3a is stabilised by an L-type ligand.

Having established the ability of [Ni(IMes)] to act as a precursor to interesting Ni/P clusters, we proceeded with performing the analogous reactions using the bulkier carbene complex [Ni(IPr)] in order to examine if there is any difference in product distribution (Scheme 2). And, indeed, in contrast to observations made using [Ni(IMes)], \(\text{\textsuperscript{31}P}\{\text{\textsuperscript{1}H}\}\) NMR spectroscopy revealed no resonances. Nevertheless, the \(\text{\textsuperscript{1}H}\) NMR spectrum clearly showed the formation of free IPr and one new distinct diamagnetic IPr environment.

Furthermore, a single-crystal X-ray diffraction study on crystals grown from toluene revealed the formation of ([IPr]Ni_3P_6) (4), an 11-vertex closo-cluster with 24 cluster electrons, adopting an octadecahedral geometry similar to the undecaborane anion \([\text{B}_{11}\text{H}_{11}]^-\) (Figure 4).\[^{[22]}\] The homoquadricyclane-like P\(_6\) framework is reminiscent of the P\(_6\) subunits in Hittorf’s phosphorus and can be seen as a formal insertion product of Ni in one of the P–P bonds of such a subunit.\[^{[23]}\] Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first example of such a P\(_6\) framework in an isolated molecular compound.\[^{[24]}\] The structure of compound 4 again comprises three Ni atoms, but the Ni–Ni distances are significantly longer than in complexes 1 and 2 [Ni1–Ni2 3.3246(18) Å and Ni2–Ni2’ 3.636(2) Å]. Ni1 is coordinated by six P atoms (P1, P1’, P2, P2’, P3, P3’) and Ni2Ni2’ are coordinated by five P atoms (P1, P2, P3, P4 P4’ for Ni2 and P1’, P2’, P3’, P4’) for

\[\text{Scheme 2. Reactivity of [Ni(IPr)] and ([IPr]Ni[n\text{-toluene}]) toward P}_4.\]
Unquestionably, separation of free IPr from compound 4 proved to be challenging. The use of [(IPr)Ni(η²-toluene)] as an attractive precursor was therefore pursued and led to the isolation of pure 4 as a dark green powder in 41 % yield. The cyclic voltammogram of 4 (THF/[nBu4N]PF6, Figure S20) shows one reversible oxidation wave at $E_{\text{1/2}} = -0.76$ V (vs. Fe/C)$. Analysis of the IBO reveals 12 orbitals that involve bonding between the cluster atoms again in accordance with established electron-counting rules. Thus 4 obeys the \(2(n + 1)\) \((n = 11)\) electron count rule of a 11-vertex closo-cluster (see the Supporting Information for a depiction of the IBO). The same analysis additionally allows for the assignment of a \(d^8\)-configuration for the NiI atom and \(d^{10}\)-configurations for Ni2/Ni2'.

Apart from 4, the reaction of [(IPr)Ni(η²-toluene)] with P4 also affords green crystals of [(IPr)Ni(η₃-P₄)] (3b), which were obtained from the \(n\)-hexane washing solution and identified by X-ray crystallography. Complex 3b is isostructural with 3a and features similar Ni–Ni and P–P bond lengths (see the Supporting Information for further details).

The electronic structure of a slightly truncated model complex 3' \([(IPh)Ni(η₃-toluene)]\) was calculated at the TPSSH/IGLO-III (CP(PPP) on Ni) level of theory.\(^{[23]}\) This method was chosen since it has proven to yield reliable results for the calculation of magnetic properties. Significant interactions between the Ni atoms (Mayer bond order: 0.8) as well as the Ni atoms and the aromatic P₃ ring were found (Mayer bond order: 0.5). The X-band EPR spectrum of 3b (Figure 6) recorded in a toluene glass at 20 K reveals an axial signal pattern for an \(S = \frac{1}{2}\) system showing hyperfine interactions with all five phosphorus atoms. A satisfactory simulation of the experimental spectrum was obtained assuming hyperfine interactions with five equivalent phosphorus atoms \((g_{\text{1/2}} = g_{\text{11}} = 2.186\ (2.11), g_{\text{33}} = 1.987\ (2.01), A_{\text{31P}} = 30.0\) MHz \((27.5\) MHz, averaged value, DFT-calculated values of 3' in parentheses; see the
obviously complex, and the details of the initial P4 activation presumably facilitate the formation of monocarbene nickel complexes with \( \text{P}_2 \) afford unprecedented nickel phosphorus clusters. These reactions clearly show an impact of the size of the NHC ligand on the products obtained. Upon increasing the steric demand from IMes, di- and trinuclear complexes with \( \text{Ni}_2\text{P}_4 \) (1), \( \text{Ni}_3\text{P}_6 \) (2) cores as well as \( \text{Ni}_3\text{P}_6 \) (3a) were obtained. Notably, 3a represents the first nickel pentaphosphacyclopentadienyl complex. The bulky NHC IPr again changes the outcome of the reaction to afford a \( \text{Ni}_3\text{P}_6 \) (4) closo-cluster with a novel homoquadricyclane-like \( \text{P}_8 \) framework. Bulky substituents on the NHC ligands presumably facilitate the formation of monocarbene nickel fragments observed in the molecular structures of 1–4. However, the mechanism of formation of these products is obviously complex, and the details of the initial \( \text{P}_2 \) activation process and the subsequent transformations of the resulting intermediates must be revealed by further studies. Moreover, we are currently investigating the use of 1–4 as single-source precursors for the preparation of nickel phosphides as electrocatalysts for hydrogen evolution.\[23\]

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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[24] Heating up the solution of \( \text{D}_2 \)toluene to temperatures above 313 K led to decomposition to unidentified products.


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