

Additive-Free Formic Acid Dehydrogenation Catalyzed by a Cobalt Complex[†]

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ABSTRACT: The reversible storage of hydrogen through the intermediate formation of Formic Acid (FA) is a promising solution to its safe transport and distribution. However, the common necessity of using bases or additives in the catalytic dehydrogenation of FA is a limitation. In this context, two new cobalt complexes (**1** and **2**) were synthesized with a pincer PP(NH)P ligand containing a phosphoraminate moiety. Their reaction with an excess FA yields a cobalt(I)-hydride complex (**3**). We report here the unprecedented catalytic activity of **3** in the dehydrogenation of FA, with a turnover frequency (TOF) of 67 min⁻¹ measured in the first minute and a turnover number (TON) of 454, without the need for bases or additives. A mechanistic study reveals the existence of ligand-metal cooperativity with intermolecular hydrogen bonding, also influenced by the concentration of formic acid.

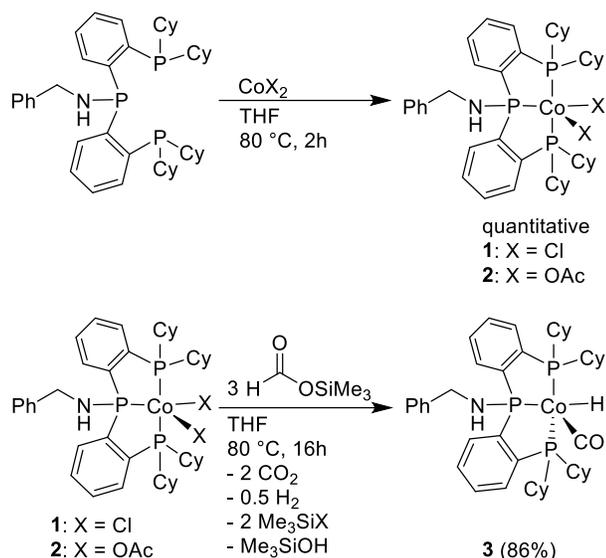
The share of renewable energies in the European energetic mix has never been higher, reaching 13.9 % in 2017.¹ However, with their increased penetration, the long-term storage of intermittent energies becomes more and more urgent, in order to accommodate for seasonal variations in production and consumption.² Hydrogen is a promising energy carrier for that purpose, as it is readily available and has a high energy density; but its storage as a compressed gas is still problematic.³ Chemicals such as Formic Acid (FA) can act as Liquid Organic Hydrogen Carriers (LOHCs) through hydrogenation and dehydrogenation cycles.⁴⁻⁸

The catalytic dehydrogenation of FA has been extensively studied during the past decade. Several homogeneous complexes, based on noble metals such as iridium,⁹⁻¹¹ rhodium,¹²⁻¹⁴ molybdenum,¹⁵ ruthenium¹⁶⁻¹⁹ and osmium²⁰ have been reported as catalysts for this reaction. These studies demonstrated that the ligand architecture has a crucial impact on the catalyst activity and stability and therefore governs the catalysts turnover number (TON) and turnover frequency (TOF). In parallel, several groups developed catalysts based on the use of 3d group metals as a promising alternative to expensive and potentially rare noble metals. Yet, this substitution often comes at the price of a decrease reactivity and stability.²¹ Beller *et al.* pioneered the use of iron complexes in 2010, and a number of PNP pincer ligands chelated to an iron centre have been reported since.²²⁻³¹ Manganese complexes have also been reported to be active in this reaction, as reported by Boncella and Tondreau *et al.*, and Beller *et al.*³²⁻³⁴ The activity of other 3d metals was assessed over the past few years, using nickel (Junge, Enthaler *et al.* and Parkin *et al.*),^{35, 36} copper (Correa *et al.*),³⁷ and cobalt (Beller *et al.* and Onishi *et al.*).^{38, 39} Group 13 compounds were also investigated, namely aluminium by the group of Berben in 2014,⁴⁰ and boron by our group.⁴¹

The presence of participative ligands is a consistent feature in the majority of the reported examples, to include an internal base in the coordination sphere of the catalyst to activate FA.⁴²⁻⁴⁵ A second feature of interest, especially in the case of 3d group metals, is that an external base or additives such as BF₄ salts are

often necessary to retain a catalytic activity. We recently reported a new ligand featuring an N–H moiety on a triphosphane backbone that helped stabilizing copper hydride complexes.⁴⁶ This chelating ligand presents a phosphoraminate function (R₂P–NHR') together with two phosphines, which can act as a pendant amine and a participative ligand. It is hence an excellent platform to design catalysts for the dehydrogenation of formic acid. Herein, we report the coordination properties of this new PP(NH)P ligand with cobalt, and describe the synthesis of two PP(NH)P–Co(II) complexes, **1** and **2**, and a PP(NH)P–Co(I)–H complex, **3**. The catalytic activity of all three complexes in the dehydrogenation of formic acid was investigated, and a theoretical mechanistic study unveiled the role of the ligand in the remarkable activity of **3**.

The PP(NH)P ligand was prepared following the literature procedure,⁴⁶ and its coordination was investigated with two different cobalt precursors (Scheme 1): cobalt(II) chloride or cobalt(II) acetate were readily coordinated by the PP(NH)P ligand in a THF solution at 80 °C, to yield complexes **1** and **2** respectively, which were isolated quantitatively as brown powders. Both complexes are paramagnetic,⁴⁷ which prevented any conclusive NMR analysis, but single crystals of **1**·THF were obtained from the evaporation of a saturated THF solution (Figure 1a). All efforts towards crystallization of **2** remained unfruitful. In the molecular structure of **1**, the cobalt atom adopts a distorted square pyramidal geometry ($\tau = 0.18$)⁴⁸ with a chlorine atom in the axial position and the phosphine and second chlorine ligands in the basal positions. An hydrogen bond was observed between one chlorine atom and the phosphoraminate hydrogen, as expected for such a participative ligand.



Scheme 1: Synthesis of Co-complexes **1**, **2** and **3**.

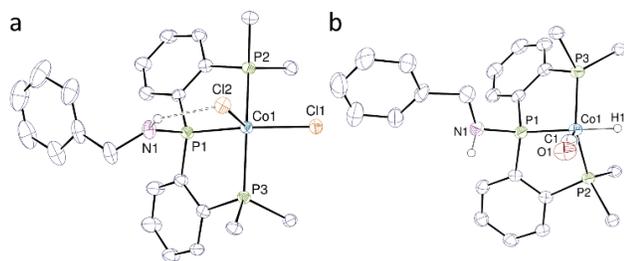


Figure 1: (a) Molecular structure of **1**. Carbon-bound hydrogen atoms and cyclohexyl rings have been omitted. The hydrogen bond is shown as a dashed line. Selected bond distances (Å) and bond angles (°): P1–N1 1.660(4); P1–Co1 2.1397(12); P2–Co1 2.2444(12); P3–Co1 2.2775(12); Cl1–Co1 2.2526(11); Cl2–Co1 2.4132(11); Cl1–Co1–Cl2 98.24(4); Cl1–Co1–P1 167.45(5); Cl1–Co1–P2 91.90(4); Cl1–Co1–P3 92.30(4); Cl2–Co1–P1 94.30(4); Cl2–Co1–P2 100.08(4); Cl2–Co1–P3 102.36(4); P2–Co1–P3 156.32(5); P1–Co1–P2 86.28(4); P1–Co1–P3 84.59(4). (b): Molecular structure of **3**. Carbon-bound hydrogen atoms and cyclohexyl rings have been omitted. Selected bond distances (Å) and bond angles (°): P1–N1 1.705(2); P1–Co1 2.1224(7); P2–Co1 2.1528(7); P3–Co1 2.1540(7); H1–Co1 1.46(3); C1–Co1 1.731(3); C1–O1 1.163(3); C1–Co1–H1 91.4(11); C1–Co1–P1 104.71(8); C1–Co1–P2 111.99(8); C1–Co1–P3 120.07(8); H1–Co1–P1 163.4(11); H1–Co1–P2 82.3(11); H1–Co1–P3 87.9(10); P2–Co1–P3 127.16(3); P1–Co1–P2 87.74(3); P1–Co1–P3 87.60(3).

The reactivity of both Co(II) complexes **1** and **2** was investigated with 5 equivalents of formic acid for 2 h at 150 °C. ^1H NMR showed the total consumption of formic acid, together with the formation of a new diamagnetic complex, **3**, featuring two singlets at 97.2 and 159.7 ppm in $^{31}\text{P}\{^1\text{H}\}$ NMR and a characteristic doublet of triplet at -10.91 ppm in ^1H NMR, indicative of a cobalt(I) hydride complex. In addition, GC analysis of the headspace showed the selective consumption of FA into CO_2 and H_2 , and no CO could be detected. Although **3** could not be isolated pure from stoichiometric reactions between **1** or **2** and 2 equiv. FA, it was successfully prepared by replacing FA

with a surrogate which cannot undergo dehydrogenation reactions: trimethylsilylformate. Complexes **1** and **2** both reacted with 3 equiv. TMS-OCHO, to give, after 16h at 80 °C, Co^I complex **3** as an orange solid in 86% yield (Scheme 1). Crystals of **3**·2.5dioxane were obtained from a saturated 1,4-dioxane solution (Figure 1b) and confirmed the presence of the hydride, together with a carbonyl ligand. In the molecular structure of **3**, the cobalt atom adopts a distorted trigonal bipyramidal geometry ($\tau = 0.60$) with the central phosphorus and the hydride in the axial positions (H1–Co1–P1 = 163.4(11) °) and the remaining phosphines and carbon monoxide in the equatorial positions, similar to previously reported hydrido carbonyl cobalt complexes.^{49–51} The Co1–H1 and Co1–C1 bonds are typical of such structures, with lengths of 1.46(3) and 1.731(3) Å respectively and comparable to those found in $[\text{Co}(\text{CO})\text{H}(\text{PPh}_3)_3]$ (1.41(9) and 1.704(17) Å).⁴⁹

The catalytic activities of complexes **1**, **2** and **3** were finally investigated in the dehydrogenation of FA at 80 °C in 1,4-dioxane, with 0.5 mol% loading (Figure 2). While **1** was found inactive at 80 °C, **2** reached a production of 79 mL of gas after 20 min, corresponding to a TON of 165. On the other hand, **3** reached full conversion after only 10 min of reaction. Interestingly, an induction period was observed with **2** in the first minute of the catalysis, suggesting that **2** might be converted to the active species, supposedly **3**, according to the reactivity noted hereabove. In fact, **3** was observed as the major species, after decomposition of FA with **2**. Both **2** and **3** have unprecedented activities for homogeneous cobalt complexes with $\text{TON}_{1\text{h}} = 165$ and 200, compared to the MACHO ligand-bound cobalt-based catalyst reported by Beller *et al.* in the absence of any additive (no activity reported) or base ($\text{TON}_{1\text{h}} = 29$ with 2 equiv. of $\text{Na-BEt}_3\text{H}$ with respect to the complex).³⁹

Catalyst **3** reached a full conversion of FA within the first 10 min of the reaction with a TOF of 67 min^{-1} (Table 1, entry 1). The catalyst was not only active in dioxane, but also in toluene ($\text{TON}_{1\text{h}} = 154$, $\text{TOF}_{1\text{min}} = 4 \text{ min}^{-1}$) or even in protic solvents, incl. water ($\text{TON}_{1\text{h}} = 102$, $\text{TOF}_{1\text{min}} = 13 \text{ min}^{-1}$), although a diminished stability and activity were noted in both cases (Table 1, entries 1, 2 and 3). The impact of the solvent on the activity and stability of **3** might result from its influence on the solubility of the complexes as well as heterolytic bond cleavage and stabilization of ionic intermediates.^{52, 53} Finally, halving or doubling the FA concentration led to decreased kinetics with lower $\text{TOF}_{1\text{min}}$ (19 or 13 min^{-1} respectively, vs. 67 min^{-1} at 1M) (Table 1, entries 1, 4 and 5), suggesting either a complex rate order for FA or an intermolecular decomposition pathway.

Table 1. FA dehydrogenation catalysed by **3**.

Entry	Solvent (Conc mol.L ⁻¹)	V _{1min} (mL)	V _{1h} (mL)	TON _{1h}	TOF _{1min} (min ⁻¹)
1	1,4-dioxane (1)	32	96	200	67
2	Water (1)	6	49	102	13
3	Toluene (1)	2	74	154	4
4	1,4-dioxane (2)	6	49	106	13
5	1,4-dioxane (0.5)	9	79	169	19

Conditions: FA (2 mmol) in solvent and **3** (0.5 mol%) at 80 °C.

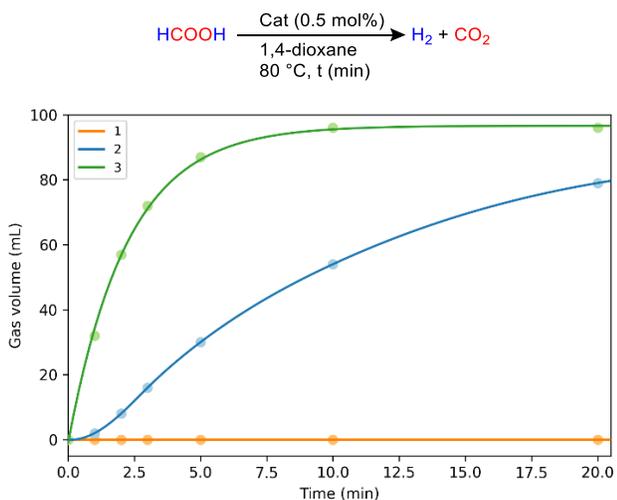
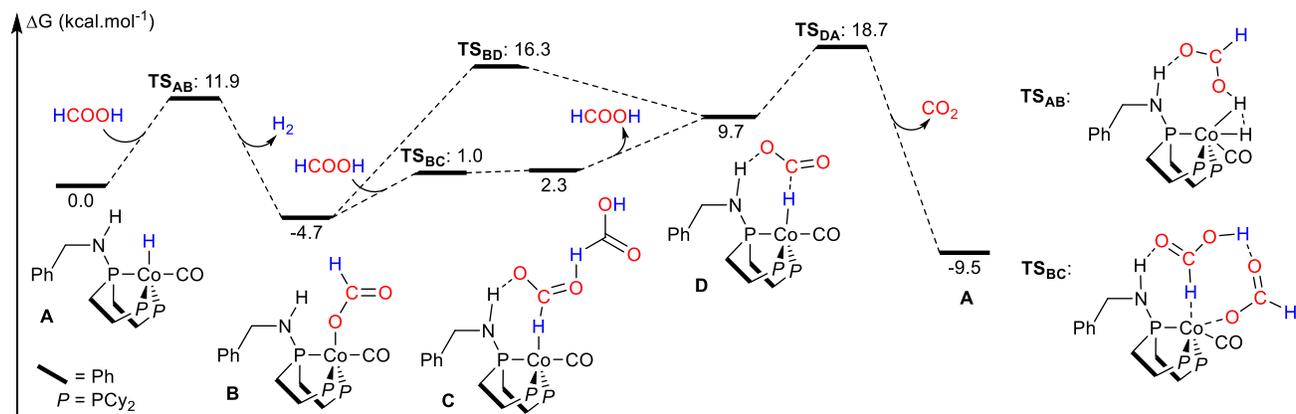


Figure 2: Kinetic profile dehydrogenation of FA catalyzed by complexes **1**, **2** and **3**. Reaction conditions: FA (2 mmol) in 1,4-dioxane (2 mL) and catalyst (0.5 mol%) at 80 °C. Gas evolution was measured with a graduated cylinder (see ESI for details).

To get a deeper insight into the mechanism, the reaction was computed, and the most favoured pathway is depicted in Scheme 2. Cobalt complex **A**, an isomer of **3** (see ESI), deprotonates an incoming molecule of FA and releases H₂ through **TS_{AB}**, to yield the intermediate formate complex **B** (**TS_{AB}**: 11.9 kcal.mol⁻¹, ΔG = -4.7 kcal.mol⁻¹). The decarboxylation of **B** to regenerate **A**, after release of CO₂, involves in contrast several steps. While a direct β-H elimination can be considered (**TS_{BD}**, 16.3 kcal.mol⁻¹), formate complex **B** was found to readily insert a second molecule of FA in the Co–OCHO bond, via **TS_{BC}** (1.0 kcal.mol⁻¹). The resulting complex **C** then includes a formate ligand, which is coordinated to the Co^I ion *via* its C–H bond and stabilized through H-bonding with the N–H moiety of the phosphorammine ligand and a FA molecule. **C** is 2.3 kcal.mol⁻¹ higher in energy than **A**. After release of FA, intermediate **D** is formed, which features an H-bound formate complex, H-bonded to the participative ligand. A complex similar to **D** has also been described by Hazari, Schneider *et al.*²⁶ The subsequent decarboxylation of the formate ligand in **D** occurs



Scheme 2: Computed reaction profile for the **Co-1** catalyzed formic acid dehydrogenation reaction. Computations parameters: Gaussian 16 Rev C.01; ω-B97X-D/Def2-TZVP (Co), 6-311+G(d,p) (mobile H) 6-31G(d) (other atoms), SMD (Solvent: 1,4-dioxane).

through **TS_{DA}** (18.7 kcal.mol⁻¹, ΔG_{DA} = -19.2 kcal.mol⁻¹) and closes the catalytic cycle, while the overall dehydrogenation reaction is exergonic (ΔG = -9.5 kcal.mol⁻¹). The total energetic span of the reaction, 23.4 kcal.mol⁻¹, is defined by the resting state **B** and the decarboxylation step (**TS_{DA}**), which is the rate-determining step. This value is consistent with our observations of a fast reaction at 80 °C. Moreover, the non-trivial influence of the concentration in FA on the reaction rate can be rationalized with the necessity to involve two molecules of FA in the process, the first one being involved in the dehydrogenation and the second one in the decarboxylation. Interestingly, in this mechanism, the participative ligand is never deprotonated, and only acts as hydrogen bond donor.

Finally, in order to push the reaction towards a maximum TON while keeping high TOF throughout the reaction by a control of the amount of FA, a reloading experiment was set up using **3** in 1,4-dioxane (Figure 3). We observed the deactivation of the catalyst through a simultaneous decrease in TON and TOF upon each refill (TOF_{1min} were 67, 50 and 13 min⁻¹ at each FA loading). It was however possible to reach a total TON of 458 over the course of a 4 hour reaction.

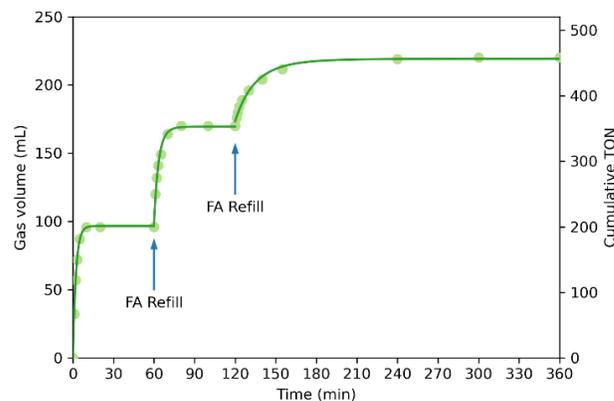


Figure 3: Kinetic profile for the dehydrogenation of FA catalysed by **3**. Reaction conditions: FA (2 mmol) in 1,4-dioxane (2 mL) and **3** (0.5 mol%) at 80 °C. The reaction was refilled twice with FA (2 mmol).

In conclusion, we described herein the synthesis of new cobalt(II) and cobalt(I) complexes, supported by a chelating participative ligand possessing a phosphoraminate arm. The activity of the complexes was tested in the dehydrogenation of FA. The cobalt(I) hydrido carbonyl complex **3** was found highly reactive, pushing further the activity of homogeneous 3d metal, by reaching TOF values of 67 min⁻¹ and a TON_{max} of 458. It is, to the best of our knowledge, the first report of a cobalt catalyst active in the dehydrogenation of FA without addition of bases or additives. DFT calculations helped rationalizing the importance of the participative ligand and the concentration of FA, in accordance with the experimental results.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website.

Synthesis, characterizations, crystal structure refinements and computational investigations (PDF).

Cartesian coordinates of all computed structures (XYZ file)

ACCESSION CODES

‡ CCDC numbers: 2011895 and 2011896 contain 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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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors acknowledge for financial support of this work: CEA, CNRS, CINES (project sis6494), the CHARMMAT Laboratory of Excellence, the European Research Council (ERC Consolidator Grant Agreement no. 818260), ADEME (fellowship to AA). This research was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement no. 768919, Carbon4PUR project.

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