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## COMMUNICATION

COMMUNICATION Imine-functionalised protic NHC complexes of Ir:  
Direct formation by C-H activation

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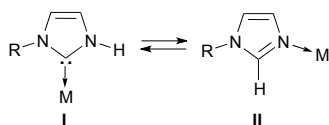
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**N-arylimine-functionalised protic NHC (pNHC) Ir(I) and Ir(III) complexes are obtained directly from neutral or cationic Ir(I) imidazole complexes using excess [Ir(cod)(μ-Cl)]<sub>2</sub> or TlPF<sub>6</sub>, respectively. N-arylimine-functionalised imidazolium salts lead to imidazole or pNHC complexes by competing N-H or C-H bond activation depending on the type of the imidazolium counterion.**

The landmark isolation of stable NHCs of the imidazole type made use of bulky N-substituents for the successful kinetic and thermodynamic stabilisation of the reactive carbene species.<sup>1</sup> Since then, bulky alkyl and aryl substituents have been used routinely in the NHC coordination chemistry, exerting also subtle electronic and steric tuning of the C<sub>NHC</sub>-metal interactions. In contrast, 1H-imidazol-2-ylidene, the simplest parent (R = H) imidazol-type protic NHC (pNHC) has only recently been stabilised by coordination to transition metals (**I**),<sup>2</sup> and the resulting carbene complex may be transformed to its imidazole tautomer (**II**).<sup>3</sup>



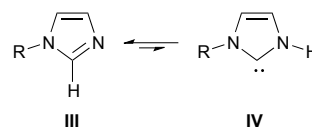
**Scheme 1** Tautomerism/metallotropism involving protic NHC (pNHC) and imidazole ligands (M = metal, R = H, alkyl, aryl, functional group).

pNHCs constitute versatile spectator ligands, which, in addition to their strong  $\sigma$ -donor character, provide the option of secondary interactions, (*i.e.* H-bonding), that could be of importance in the design of bifunctional catalysts,<sup>4</sup> substrate recognition<sup>5</sup> and of relevance to biological systems.<sup>6</sup>

The coordination chemistry of pNHCs is a topical area of interest, thanks to the successful development of versatile synthetic methodologies based on building the C-bound heterocycle at the metal coordination sphere,<sup>7</sup> or using suitable N-protecting groups that are removed after coordination,<sup>8</sup> or by facilitating kinetic formation of the M-C<sub>NHC</sub> bond by C-X bond (X = halide) oxidative-

addition of halo-imidazoles.<sup>2a,9</sup> Conceptually simpler is the *direct* pNHC formation.

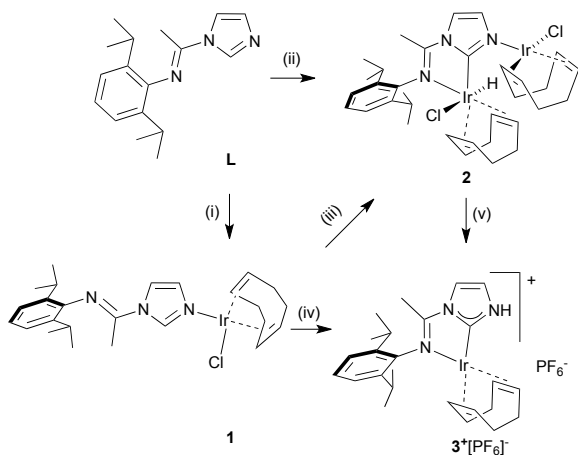
It has been established computationally that 1H-imidazole is more stable than the tautomeric 1H-imidazol-2-ylidene by *ca.* 30 kcal/mol.<sup>3a</sup> However, this energy difference can be suppressed and reversed on metal coordination of the 1H-imidazol-2-ylidene. Analogous comments apply to 1R-imidazole (**III**) and tautomeric pNHCs 1R-imidazol-2-ylidenes (**IV**).



The conversion of coordinated R-imidazole to pNHC (**II**  $\rightarrow$  **I**) was firstly demonstrated experimentally by the acid-catalyzed rearrangement of Ru-imidazol to Ru-pNHC<sup>10</sup> and, more recently, by the deprotonation with an external base of imidazoles coordinated to mononuclear, inert 6-coordinate d<sup>6</sup> Re(I) and Mn(I) carbonyls<sup>11</sup> and Fe(NO)<sub>2</sub>(CO),<sup>6a</sup> followed by quenching of the resultant imidazolate with a suitable acid. Conversely, transformation of Ru-coordinated NHC following N-C bond activation to a mixture of coordinated imidazole and pNHC tautomers was studied by experimental and computational means.<sup>3b,3c</sup> Similar rearrangements involving related benzimidazole<sup>12</sup> or pyridine<sup>13</sup> heterocycles have been observed, and associated with catalytic transformations.

From these limited available examples, it appears that the elementary steps involved in C-H and N-H bond cleavage/formation, which may be responsible for tautomerism, may be mechanistically diverse. Furthermore, the presence of functionalities capable of stabilising and directing C vs. N metalation has not been thoroughly examined, except in the context of the formation of heteroatom-functionalised NHC spectator ligands.<sup>14</sup>

Herein, we report preliminary studies aiming at the synthesis of N-arylimine-functionalised imidazole and pNHC complexes of iridium (type **I**, R = arylimino, M = Ir), and at gaining insight into the elementary steps that may operate during imidazole to pNHC tautomerism (from **II** to **I** in Scheme 1). The arylimino functional group was selected by virtue of its comparable donor characteristics with the  $\kappa^1$ -N-imidazole ligand and the possible *reversible* formation of chelates.



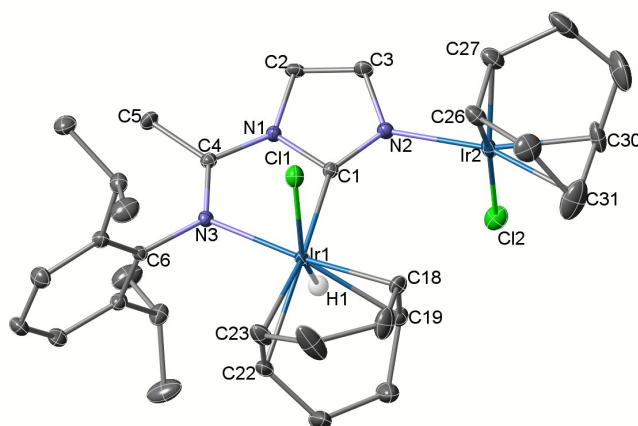
**Scheme 2** Synthesis of complexes **1**, **2** and  $3^+[\text{PF}_6]^-$ . Reagents and conditions: (i) 0.5 equiv. of  $[\text{Ir}(\text{cod})(\mu\text{-Cl})_2]$ , THF, RT, 97% yield; (ii) 1.0 equiv. of  $[\text{Ir}(\text{cod})(\mu\text{-Cl})_2]$ , THF, RT, 86% yield; (iii) 0.5 equiv. of  $[\text{Ir}(\text{cod})(\mu\text{-Cl})_2]$ , THF, RT, 86% yield; (iv) 1.0 equiv. of  $\text{TIPF}_6$ ,  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$  or MeCN, RT, 85% yield; (v) 1.0 equiv. of  $\text{TIPF}_6$ , -0.5 equiv.  $[\text{Ir}(\text{cod})(\mu\text{-Cl})_2]$ ,  $\text{CD}_2\text{Cl}_2$ , RT.

Reaction of **L** with 0.5 equiv. of  $[\text{Ir}(\text{cod})(\mu\text{-Cl})_2]$  in THF led to the isolation of **1** (Scheme 2). Both analytical and spectroscopic ( $^1\text{H}$ - $^{13}\text{C}\{^1\text{H}\}$ -NMR and IR) data point to the presence of a N-bound  $\text{Ir}(\text{cod})\text{Cl}$  fragment (see ESI for synthetic details and full characterisation). Particularly diagnostic is a broad peak at  $\delta$  8.88 assignable to the C2-*H* (*cf*  $\delta$  8.11 in **L**). N-coordination was further corroborated crystallographically (Figure S1 in ESI). $\ddagger$  Importantly, the arylimino functional group (in *E* configuration in **1**) is dangling.

Further reaction of **1** with  $[\text{Ir}(\text{cod})(\mu\text{-Cl})_2]$  (0.5 equiv.) or reaction of **L** with 1.0 equiv. of  $[\text{Ir}(\text{cod})(\mu\text{-Cl})_2]$  (THF, RT) gave **2** (Scheme 2). Its  $^1\text{H}$  NMR spectrum (THF- $d_6$ ), contains a hydride signal at  $\delta$  -14.74 and in the  $^{13}\text{C}$  NMR spectrum, signals at  $\delta$  166.6 and 158.7 are assignable to  $C_{(\text{imine})}$  and  $C\text{-}2_{(\text{NHC})}$ , respectively. The IR  $\nu(\text{Ir-H})$  band is observed at  $2200\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . The structure of **2** (Fig. 1) revealed a binuclear complex comprising one N-bound Ir(I) centre (*cf.* **1**), and one C2-bound Ir(III) center, formally originating from the second equivalent of  $[\text{Ir}(\text{cod})(\mu\text{-Cl})_2]$ ; crucially, the N-arylimino group is also coordinated to Ir(III) as part of a 5-membered chelate. One can thus consider the N-bound  $\text{Ir}(\text{cod})\text{Cl}$  moiety as a  $\text{N}_{(\text{imidazole})}$  'metalla protecting and activating group', which in cooperation with the directing effect of the N-arylimine, facilitates C2 metalation. The latter may involve C-H oxidative addition, $^{16}$  in line with the observed *cis* Ir-C and Ir-H bond disposition.

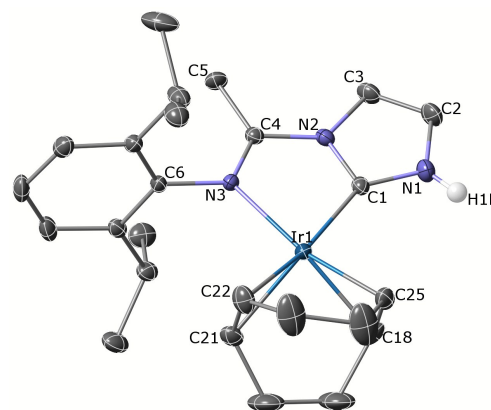
With the hope to access a pNHC Ir complex by tautomerism of a more reactive species (*e.g.*  $[\text{1-Cl}]^+$ ), **1** was treated with the chloride abstracting  $\text{TIPF}_6$  (in  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$  or MeCN, RT) and, gratifyingly, this led to the isolation of the salt  $3^+[\text{PF}_6]^-$ . Its  $^1\text{H}$  NMR spectrum contains a characteristic new broad singlet at  $\delta$  10.36, and the signal of the C2-*H* of the starting material has disappeared, while in the  $^{13}\text{C}$  NMR spectrum the N-CN and C=N signals have shifted considerably downfield (from  $\delta$  138.3 and 148.9 to 173.6 and 168.0, respectively). The IR absorptions at  $3359$  and  $1613\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are assignable to N-H $^{8a}$  and coordinated C=N, respectively.

The structure of  $3^+[\text{PF}_6]^-$  was elucidated crystallographically (see Fig. 2 for the cation and ESI for details). $\ddagger$  The Ir adopts a distorted square-planar coordination geometry defined by a  $\kappa^2(\text{N,C})$ -bound novel imino-functionalised pNHC and a cod ligand.



**Fig. 1** Molecular structure of **2**. H atoms are omitted for clarity. Thermal ellipsoids are at the 30% level.

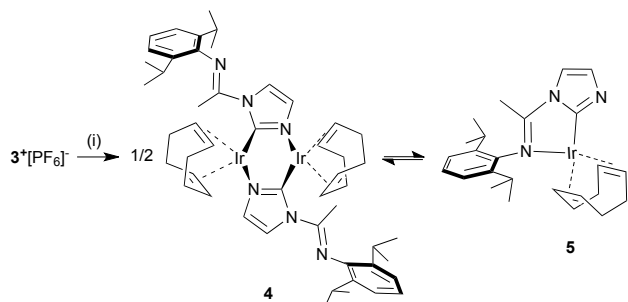
The Ir-C<sub>pNHC</sub> bond distance (1.984(3) Å) is shorter than the average found in other Ir(I)-NHC complexes $^{17}$  (2.038 Å, range 1.895 Å–2.194 Å, with shorter bond lengths associated with chelating NHC ligands), probably due to the chelate formation and the small hydrogen substituent at N1 atom. The closest N-H $\cdots$ F( $\text{PF}_6$ ) distances of 2.37(5) and 2.49(5) Å are consistent with hydrogen bonding interactions.



**Fig. 2** Molecular structure of the cation in  $3^+[\text{PF}_6]^-$ . H atoms are omitted for clarity, except H1(N1). Thermal ellipsoids are at the 30% level.

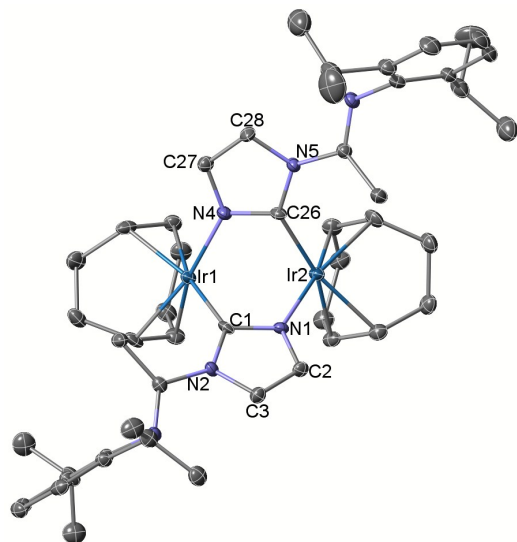
The tautomerism (**II**  $\rightarrow$  **I** in Scheme 1) of the transient  $[\text{1-Cl}]^+$  to  $3^+$ , which provides an alternative to the recently reported metalation of 2-chloro-benzimidazole heterocycles and the formation of anionic and pNHC ligands, $^{9b}$  may involve concerted, dyotropic-type metalation/H transfer and be driven by the thermodynamic stability of  $3^+$  due to Ir-C bond or/and chelate ring formation. $^\ddagger$  It has been reported that the increased electrophilicity (going from Ir(I) to Ir(III) and Ir-Cl to Ir $^+$ ) favours the formation of the pNHC over imidazole complexes. $^{3a}$  Interestingly, abstraction with 1.0 equiv. of  $\text{TIPF}_6$  of a chloride ligand in **2**, most likely from the Ir(III) centre, also gave  $3^+[\text{PF}_6]^-$ , together with  $[\text{Ir}(\text{cod})(\mu\text{-Cl})_2]$  which originates from the N-bound  $\text{Ir}(\text{cod})\text{Cl}$  moiety, in quantitative NMR yield (Scheme 2).

In attempts to establish experimentally whether discrete deprotonation/protonation steps may model the reverse reaction, *i.e.* the transformation from pNHC to N-imidazole, the pNHC in  $3^+$  was deprotonated with 1.0 equiv. of  $\text{NaOt-Bu}$  (Scheme 3).



**Scheme 3** Synthesis of **4** and **5**. Reagents and conditions: (i) 1.0 equiv. of NaO*t*-Bu, CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, 0 °C, 70% yield.

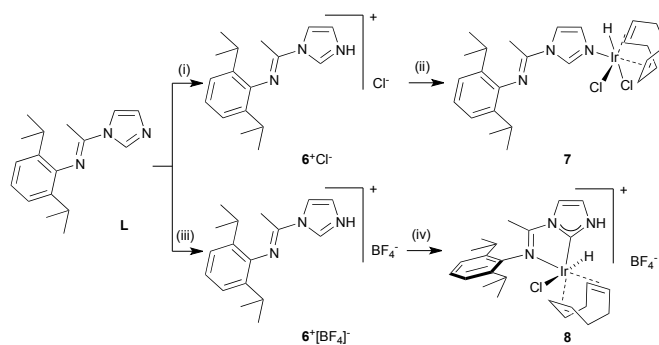
A complex with coordinated ‘anionic’ imidazolidine<sup>9b,14a</sup> was not obtained, but rather a mixture of two different iridium species (in a ratio of *ca.* 25:75 by <sup>1</sup>H NMR in CD<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> at RT). The <sup>13</sup>C NMR spectrum of the mixture showed signals due to NCN and C=N at δ 174.8 and 156.2, δ 179.3 and 166.3, respectively. Attempts to separate the mixture by crystallisation led to the isolation of **4** (the <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectrum of which is assignable to the minor component of the mixture) in the form of dark red crystals (Fig. 3). Its structure features a diiridium core with two bridging monoanionic imidazolides in a symmetrical ‘boat-like’ conformation and no direct Ir-Ir interaction (*d*(Ir-Ir) = 3.1844(3) Å). ‡



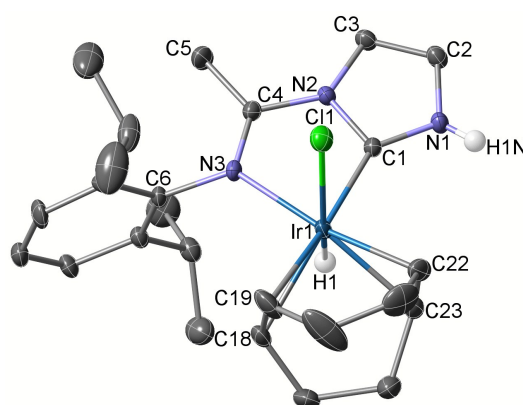
**Fig. 3** Molecular structure of **4**. H atoms are omitted for clarity. Thermal ellipsoids are at the 30% level.

Both Ir centres adopt a square planar coordination geometry, defined by the olefinic bonds of the cod ligand, one carbon atom and one nitrogen atom of the imidazolide. Interestingly, the N-arylimine functionality has become dangling. In the supernatant solution after isolation of **4** the same ratio of species was observed (by NMR), and dissolution of crystals of **4** resulted again in the same mixture. This points to the presence of a chemical equilibrium with another (major) partner, the nature of which can be inferred by NMR spectroscopy: on the basis of the general appearance of the spectrum and since the chemical shift of C=N of the major partner is similar to the corresponding value for **3**<sup>+</sup>, we suggest that this partner is the neutral, mononuclear complex **5** depicted in Scheme 3. Attempts to protonate the mixture **4** and **5** or deprotonate **1** led to intractable product mixtures.

The role of the ‘[Ir(cod)]<sup>+</sup>’ fragment in [1-Cl]<sup>+</sup> as ‘metalla-protecting and -directing group’ for the direct metallation of the C2-H imidazole, raised the question whether non-metal electrophiles, such as a proton, could undertake similar roles. In preliminary experiments, the simple imidazolium salts LH<sup>+</sup>X<sup>-</sup> (**6**<sup>+</sup>Cl<sup>-</sup> and **6**<sup>+</sup>[BF<sub>4</sub>]<sup>-</sup>) (see ESI for synthetic details and full characterisation data) were reacted with [Ir(cod)(μ-Cl)]<sub>2</sub> (Scheme 4).



**Scheme 4** Reactions of (LH<sup>+</sup>)X<sup>-</sup> with [Ir(cod)(μ-Cl)]<sub>2</sub>. Reagents and conditions: (i) 1.0 equiv. of HCl (a solution in Et<sub>2</sub>O), Et<sub>2</sub>O, RT, 85% yield; (ii) 0.5 equiv. of [Ir(cod)(μ-Cl)]<sub>2</sub>, THF, RT, 85% yield; (iii) 1.0 equiv. of HBF<sub>4</sub>·Et<sub>2</sub>O, Et<sub>2</sub>O, RT, 73% yield; (iv) 0.5 equiv. of [Ir(cod)(μ-Cl)]<sub>2</sub>, THF, RT, 82% yield.



**Fig. 4** Molecular structure of **8**<sup>+</sup> in **8**<sup>+</sup>[BF<sub>4</sub>]<sup>-</sup>. H atoms are omitted for clarity, except H1(N1). Thermal ellipsoids are at the 30% level.

Unexpectedly, the selectivity of the reactions is dependent on the nature of X<sup>-</sup>. The reaction of **6**<sup>+</sup>Cl<sup>-</sup> with 0.5 equiv. of [Ir(cod)(μ-Cl)]<sub>2</sub> in THF at room temperature gave the Ir hydride complex **7**, formally a product from the oxidative addition of the N-H bond to Ir(cod)Cl (*Ir-H* at δ -12.10 in CD<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, ν(Ir-H) at 2206 cm<sup>-1</sup>). In contrast, the reaction of **6**<sup>+</sup>[BF<sub>4</sub>]<sup>-</sup> with 0.5 equiv. of [Ir(cod)(μ-Cl)]<sub>2</sub> under the same conditions, yielded the Ir hydride complex salt **8**<sup>+</sup>[BF<sub>4</sub>]<sup>-</sup> (*Ir-H* at δ -14.50 in CD<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, ν(Ir-H) at 2211 cm<sup>-1</sup>, ν(N-H) at 3241 cm<sup>-1</sup>). The cation **8**<sup>+</sup> (Fig. 4) ‡ formally arises from the oxidative-addition of the C2-H bond to Ir(I). Similarly to the Ir(III) centre in **2**, the Ir in **8**<sup>+</sup> is in a distorted octahedral coordination geometry defined by a κ<sup>2</sup>(C,N) pNHC-imino chelate, one cod ligand and *trans* hydride and chloride ligands. The presence of a N-H⋯F(BF<sub>3</sub>) hydrogen bond can also be deduced from the metrical data (N-H⋯F distance 2.721(3) Å). The underlying reason behind the anion-dependent selectivity is under investigation but it is clear that the presence of a coordinating anion (Cl<sup>-</sup> vs. BF<sub>4</sub><sup>-</sup>) favors a monodentate behaviour of ligand L.

In conclusion, we have isolated and characterised novel Ir(I) and Ir(III) intermediates involved in the formation of N-arylimine-

functionalised pNHC complexes of Ir by the direct C-H activation of the corresponding imidazoles and imidazolium salts. These results highlight the importance of the imidazole pre-coordination or the use of the imidazolium salts for successful pNHC isolation. In the former case, binuclear or cationic Ir species are implicated in the C2-H metalation, in the latter, counterion effects influence the selectivity for N-H vs. C-H activation. The insight provided may be useful in understanding subtle mechanistic details and developing simpler synthetic methodologies relevant to pNHC complex formation. These targets are being further pursued in our laboratory.

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## Notes and references

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† The role of chelate ring formation in addition to the difference or Ir-N vs. Ir-C bond energies may be important in rationalising the relative thermodynamic stability of the complexes studied. To estimate these key factors, we initiated the study of the N to C rearrangement in Ir(I) complexes with 1,4-di(arylimino)imidazoles; preliminary experimental results support that Ir-C bond strength is an important factor contributing to the thermodynamic stability.

‡ Electronic Supplementary Information (ESI) available: Experimental and X-ray crystallographic data. CCDC 1039710-1039714. See DOI: 10.1039/c000000x/

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