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Received 00th January 20xx,
Accepted 00th January 20xx

DOI: 10.1039/x0xx00000x

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Marcus-type Driving Force Correlations Reveal the Mechanism of Proton-Coupled Electron Transfer for Phenols and $[\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3]^{3+}$ in Water at Low pH

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Proton-coupled electron transfer (PCET) from tyrosine and other phenol derivative in water is an important elementary reaction in chemistry and biology. We examined PCET between a series of phenol derivatives and photogenerated $[\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3]^{3+}$ in low pH (≤ 4) water using a laser flash-quench technique. From an analysis of the kinetic data using a Marcus-type free energy relationship, we propose that our model system follows a stepwise electron transfer-proton transfer (ETPT) pathway with a pH independent rate constant at low pH in water. This is in contrast to the concerted or proton-first (PTET) mechanisms that often dominate at higher pH and/or with buffers as primary proton acceptors. The stepwise mechanism remains competitive despite a significant change in the pKa and redox potential of the phenols which leads to a span of rate constants from 1×10^5 to $2 \times 10^9 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$. The results support our previous studies which revealed separate mechanistic regions for PCET reactions and that assigned phenol oxidation by $[\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3]^{3+}$ at low pH to a stepwise PCET mechanism.

Introduction

Proton-coupled electron transfer (PCET) reactions are ubiquitous in chemistry and biology. PCET is a term given to a wide array of reactions where proton transfer accompanies electron transfer.¹⁻⁵ Various mechanistic regimes such as sequential electron-proton transfer (ETPT or PTET), concerted electron-proton transfer (CEP) and hydrogen atom transfer (HAT) reactions fall under the umbrella of PCET reactions.^{5, 6} In many cases the stepwise and concerted mechanisms compete with each other, as has been found in model compounds as well as complex systems (polypeptides, enzymes) and therefore the ability to distinguish between the mechanisms is of prime importance. However, the intermediate species of the step-wise reactions are usually very short-lived and cannot be directly detected. In the majority of cases instead thermodynamic-kinetic arguments are used to judge whether a step-wise mechanism is possible, *i.e.* if observed rate constants or activation energies are consistent with expected differences in E^0 or pKa between the reagents. Also, high H/D kinetic isotope effects (KIEs) are used to support assignment to a CEP reaction, but the value is often moderate, KIE ≈ 2 .⁷⁻¹³ More rarely, rate constants vs. driving

force correlations are used to support a mechanistic assignment. In one example, direct measurements of all the limiting ET, PT and CEP rate constants were made for the PCET oxidation of $[\text{W}(\text{Cp})(\text{CO})_3\text{H}]$ to conclude that CEP is the operating mechanism when both the oxidants and the bases are weak.¹⁴

Tyrosine and other phenol derivatives constitute the most studied class of compounds for PCET reactions, in synthetic systems as well as in proteins. The role of H_2O in PCET reactions of phenolic compounds is topical with reference to natural photosynthetic membranes and other protein systems. Therefore the mechanism of PCET in water at different pH ranges remains an active area of intense investigation and debate.^{10, 12, 15-29, 48} However, in aqueous systems it is often even more difficult to distinguish step-wise and concerted reactions. Differences in reactant pKa and E^0 values are often less extreme than in organic solvents, and observed H/D KIEs may be affected by solvent KIEs of the $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{D}_2\text{O}$ exchange.

A prototypical PCET reaction is the oxidation of phenol by $[\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3]^{3+}$ derivatives with water as primary proton acceptor. At neutral and alkaline solution the mechanism has been assigned to CEP, or PTET involving OH^- .^{10, 15, 17, 30} In some literature reports the pH-independent PCET mechanism at low pH (2-4), when OH^- was not the primary acceptor, was assigned to a CEP reaction based on the kinetic isotope effect KIE = 2.^{15, 17} Irebo *et al.*¹⁰ instead assigned it to an ETPT reaction, as a pathway with different kinetic characteristics (e.g. KIE = 3.0) that dominated at neutral pH was already assigned to CEP; however, they did not exclude a CEP mechanism also at low pH. It should be noted that none of these

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† Experimental details, phenol reduction potentials and pKa values, and example kinetic and electrochemical data are provided in the Electronic Supplementary Information (ESI): See DOI: 10.1039/x0xx00000x

two mechanisms could be excluded based on thermodynamic limits, as discussed above for organic solvents. Also, while KIEs around 2 are often taken as evidence for a CEP reaction, even pure ET reactions may show a significant solvent KIE when H₂O and D₂O are compared.^{10, 31-33}

In order to investigate the PCET mechanism for this important case study reaction at low pH, we employed a series of phenols with varying redox potentials and pK_a's (Chart 1; Table S3), which were oxidized by laser-flash generated [Ru(bpy)₃]³⁺. We investigated the correlation of experimental rates of phenol oxidation and the ones predicted for the CEP and stepwise mechanisms. Similar correlations were previously established by Mayer *et al.*³⁴ to test the PCET mechanisms in phenolic systems with organic bases.^{3, 35-37} Reports have appeared where oxidation of phenol derivatives in organic solvents by [Ru(2,2'-bipyrazine)₃]²⁺ has been studied.^{38, 39} However, this is the first example of this method for deducing PCET mechanism where water is acting as the proton acceptor.

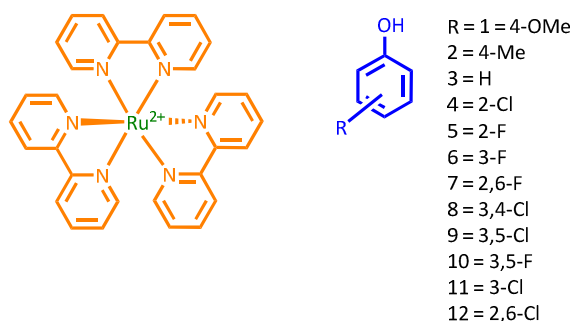


Chart 1. Structural formulae of [Ru(bpy)₃]²⁺ and phenol derivatives. Phenols 8-12 were included only in the electrochemical analysis (see supplementary material).

Results and discussion

The PCET reaction was studied by the 'flash-quench' method. The reaction was initiated by irradiation of [Ru(bpy)₃]²⁺ at 460 nm using a 10 ns laser flash in the presence of an electron acceptor, [Co(NH₃)₅Cl]₂ or methylviologen (MV²⁺), which resulted in generation of a photooxidized [Ru(bpy)₃]³⁺ species on a 100 ns time scale. The [Ru(bpy)₃]³⁺ then oxidized the phenol on a much longer time scale, leading to a recovery of the [Ru(bpy)₃]²⁺ bleach around 450 nm and phenoxyl radical absorption around 410 nm (figure 1).

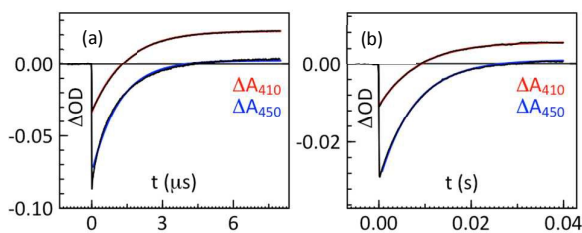
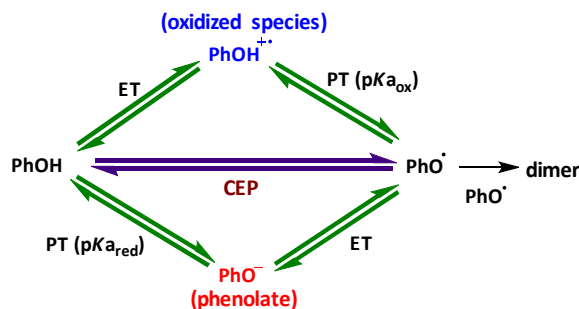


Figure 1. Representative kinetic traces at 450 and 410 nm for the oxidation of (a) phenol 1 (4-MeO) and (b) phenol 7 (2,6-F). The remaining traces are shown in the supplementary material (Figure S1).

The resulting transient absorption trace was subjected to a single exponential fit to extract the pseudo first order rate constants for oxidation of phenol (k_{obs}). To nullify the effect of recombination

between MV⁺ and [Ru(bpy)₃]³⁺, [Co(NH₃)₅Cl]³⁺ was used as sacrificial acceptor instead of MV²⁺, which ensured that even the slowest PCET rates could be observed. To avoid interference from irreversible phenol degradation, phenol was added in great excess of [Ru(bpy)₃]²⁺ and fresh, deoxygenated solutions were used that were protected from ambient light. Separate experiments were performed for phenols with faster rates (*i.e.* 1-3) using the reversible acceptor MV²⁺ to ensure that the PCET rates are independent of the choice of external oxidant. At 450 nm and pH 2 the rate constants of $1.94 \times 10^9 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ and $3.69 \times 10^5 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ were obtained for phenols 1 and 3, respectively. This rules out any interference from by-products of the cobalt complex as rate constants of $1.9 \times 10^9 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ and $3.8 \times 10^5 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$, respectively, were obtained when [Co(NH₃)₅Cl]₂ was used as an external electron acceptor.

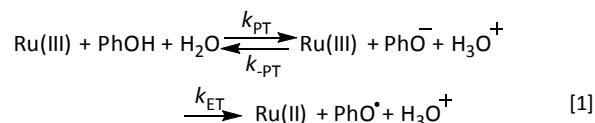
The rate of phenol oxidation depends upon pH of the medium due to the presence of a pH dependent, very reactive phenolate ion (PhO⁻) species. However, in the low pH range of 0 – 2 (pH = 0 in case of 3F and 2,6-F) the rate of phenol oxidation is entirely due to the protonated (PhOH) species, as seen by a pH-independent reaction rate. Phenols 8-12 did not show pH independent rates even at pH = 0 and were excluded from the correlations of Figure 2. The PCET mechanistic studies were performed in neat water as solvent to ensure that water is the only proton acceptor in the system. The pH was adjusted using HCl or H₂SO₄ and NaOH. At this low pH the buffer capacity of water is sufficient for convenient pH stability.



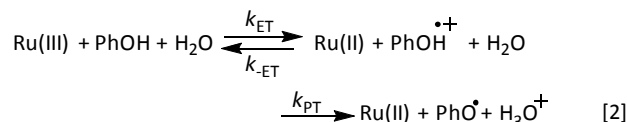
Scheme 1. The mechanism of phenol oxidation via ETPT, PTET and CEP pathways.

The mechanism can be deduced by analysis and comparison of the observed variation in PCET rate constant for the series of phenols with that predicted for the respective mechanism of ETPT and CEP (Figure 2). As customary for ET and PCET reactions with homologous series of reactants we assume that the stability constant of the precursor and successor complexes is invariant,^{34, 40} and that the variation in reorganization energy (λ) between the phenols is small; the aqueous λ value of PhOH – PhOH⁺ for 1 and 3 has indeed been reported to be equal within 5%.⁴¹ In the following paragraphs we derive the predicted variations before we comment on the result of Figure 2.

At pH = 0-2, phenol deprotonation will occur by water (H₂O) and not by OH⁻ (eq. 1). Because of the large ΔpK_a between the conjugate acid H₃O⁺ (pK_a = 0) and phenol (pK_a = 10) PTET where water is a proton acceptor is too slow to be consistent with the observed rate constant ($k_{\text{PT}} = 10^{11-pK_a} = 10 \text{ s}^{-1}$).⁴²⁻⁴⁴ Moreover, the phenols with lower pK_a values give slower k_{obs} , in contradiction with a PTET mechanism. Therefore, the PTET mechanism can be ruled out of discussion.



In the case of ETPT (Eq 2), the rate constant is not pH dependent, as $\text{p}K_a < -1$ for all the $\text{PhOH}^{\bullet+}$ studied, but rather it depends upon the substituents on the phenol. This mechanism can be studied in terms of two separate stepwise mechanistic regimes, namely, irreversible ETPT and reversible ETPT.



Reversible ETPT: In the case where reversible ET is followed by PT ($k_{ET} \gg k_{PT}$), the overall rate constants can be derived from pre-equilibrium kinetics, which yields; $k_{\text{obs}} = k_{ET}/k_{-ET} \cdot k_{PT}$. Here k_{ET}/k_{-ET} is decreased by a factor of 10 for each 59 meV increase in ΔG_{ET}^0 . Deprotonation of an Eigen acid in water follows $k_{PT} \approx 10^{11-\text{p}K_a} \text{ s}^{-1}$.⁶ This results in the following rate constant expression for reversible ETPT ($\text{p}K_a$ refers here to the $\text{PhOH}^{\bullet+}$ species):

$$k_{ETPT_{\text{rev}}} = A \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{\Delta G_{ET}^0}{RT}\right) \cdot 10^{11-\text{p}K_a} \quad [3a]$$

$$k_{ETPT_{\text{rev}}(\text{rel.})} = \exp\left(-\frac{\Delta \Delta G_{ET}^0}{RT}\right) \cdot 10^{-\Delta \text{p}K_a} \quad [3b]$$

where $k_{ETPT_{\text{rev}}(\text{rel.})} = k_{ETPT_{\text{rev}}}/k_{ETPT_{\text{rev}}(\text{phenol } 3)}$, $\Delta \Delta G$ and $\Delta \text{p}K_a$ is the value relative to phenol 3, A is a pre-exponential factor and the $\text{p}K_a$ values can be obtained from the literature (Table S2). Eq. 4 was employed to obtain the driving force for the ET step, ΔG_{ET}^0 with an assumption that the Coulombic interaction between the involved species is negligible.

$$\Delta G_{ET}^0 = -zF(E_{\text{Ru(III)/II}}^0 - E_{\text{PhOH}^{\bullet+}/\text{PhOH}}^0) \quad [4]$$

Here, z is the number of electrons transferred, $E_{\text{Ru(III)/II}}^0 = 1.26 \text{ V vs NHE}^{45}$ and $E_{\text{PhOH}^{\bullet+}/\text{PhOH}}^0$ is the pH-independent potential of the substituted phenol obtained from the literature or experimentally determined in this work (Table S3).

Irreversible ETPT: Following eq 2, the oxidation of phenol leads to significant drop in its $\text{p}K_a$ to around -2. As a result the $\text{PhOH}^{\bullet+}$ species is rapidly deprotonated which could make electron transfer the rate limiting step ($k_{-ET} \ll k_{PT}$ in addition to $k_{ET} \ll k_{PT}$). This results in $k_{\text{obs}} = k_{ET}$. The rate of irreversible ETPT can thus be determined by a standard Marcus-type rate expression (eq. 5). The value relative to that for phenol 3 was calculated using eq. 5b;⁴⁶ this assumes that $|\Delta G_{ET}^0| \ll \lambda_{ET}$, which is reasonable as ΔG_{ET}^0 varies from -0.34 to 0.00 eV in the series of phenols 1-7.

$$k_{ETPT_{\text{irr}}} = k_{ET} = A \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{(\Delta G_{ET}^0 + \lambda_{ET})^2}{4\lambda_{ET}RT}\right) \quad [5a]$$

$$\frac{\partial \ln k_{ET}}{\partial \Delta G_{ET}^0} = -\frac{1}{2RT} \left(1 + \frac{\Delta G_{ET}^0}{\lambda_{ET}}\right) \approx -\frac{1}{2RT} \quad [5b]$$

Here A is the pre-exponential factor and λ_{ET} is the reorganizational energy for the electron transfer step, which is assumed to be constant for the series of phenols. Eq. 5b gives the predicted dependence of $\ln k_{ETPT_{\text{irr}}} (= \ln k_{ET})$ on the driving force for the series of phenols.

Concerted mechanism (CEP): In this mechanism, electron and proton transfer occurs in a single kinetic step (eq 6).

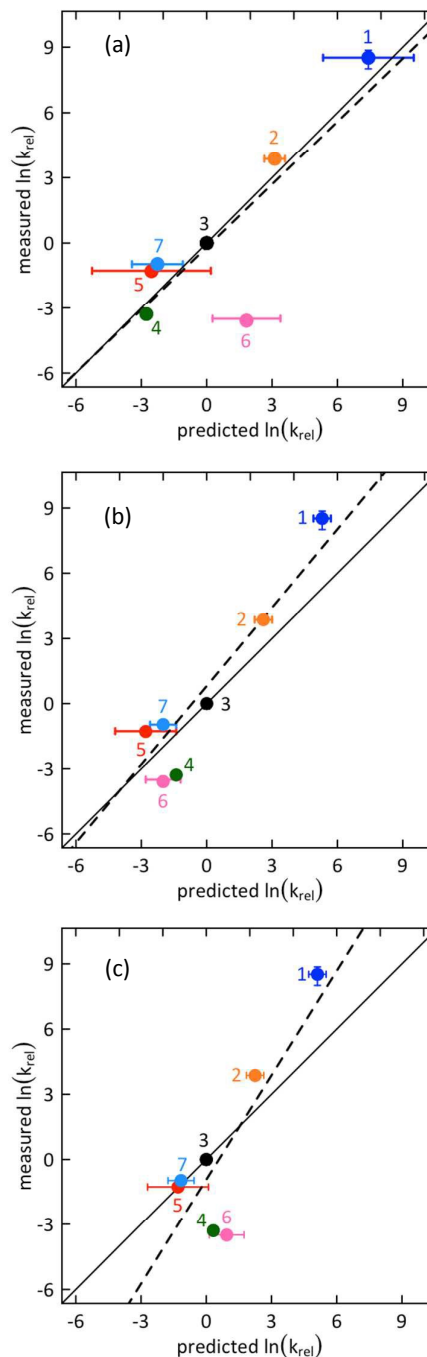
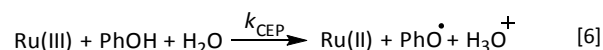


Figure 2. Correlation plots for measured against predicted values of the second order PCET rate constant $\ln(k_{\text{rel}})$, relative to that for phenol 3, for (a) reversible ETPT ($r^2 = 0.91$) (b) irreversible ETPT ($r^2 = 0.86$) and (c) CEP ($r^2 = 0.71$) reaction mechanism (r^2 values relate to the solid line). The broken line shows a linear fit to the data

points and the solid line is drawn along the diagonal representing an ideal correlation of slope = 1. The numbering of phenols follows Chart 1. The vertical error bars represent the 95% confidence interval (Table S1). The horizontal error bars reflect the variation in literature values for E_{red}^0 and pK_a (Table S3).

The driving force for CEP with water as acceptor is equal to the sum of driving forces for oxidation to $\text{PhOH}^{+\bullet}$ (eq. 4) and its subsequent deprotonation (upper path in Scheme 1):

$$\Delta G_{\text{CEP}}^0 = -zF \left(E_{\text{RuIII/II}}^0 - E_{\text{PhOH}^{+\bullet}/\text{PhOH}}^0 \right) + RT \ln(10) \left(pK_a(\text{PhOH}^{+\bullet}) - pK_a(\text{H}_3\text{O}^+_{\text{(aq)}}) \right) \quad [7]$$

with $pK_a(\text{H}_3\text{O}^+_{\text{(aq)}}) = 0$. Analogous to ETPT_{irr} , the rate constant for CEP can be determined by using Marcus-type rate expression (eq. 8), assuming $|\Delta G_{\text{CEP}}^0| \ll \lambda_{\text{CEP}}$ in eq. 8b.^{46,47} We note that a value of $\lambda_{\text{CEP}} = 0.45$ eV for the reaction between $[\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3]^{3+}$ and **3** in water has been suggested⁸; however, the use of that value to predict relative values of k_{CEP} resulted in a poor correlation with experimental data, with a curvature that clearly suggests that the value of λ_{CEP} should be significantly larger than 0.45 eV, see Figure S4.

$$k_{\text{CEP}} = A \cdot \exp \left(-\frac{(\Delta G_{\text{CEP}}^0 + \lambda_{\text{CEP}})^2}{4\lambda_{\text{CEP}}RT} \right) \quad [8a]$$

$$\frac{\partial \ln k_{\text{CEP}}}{\partial \Delta G_{\text{CEP}}^0} = -\frac{1}{2RT} \left(1 + \frac{\Delta G_{\text{CEP}}^0}{\lambda_{\text{CEP}}} \right) \approx -\frac{1}{2RT} \quad [8b]$$

Figure 2 shows the correlation of experimental vs. calculated rate constants relative to the value for unsubstituted PhOH; hence PhOH is distinctly represented in the centre of all plots. The relative rate constants for the three mechanisms were calculated according to eqs. 3, 5 and 8, respectively, using reduction potentials and pK_a values of phenol derivatives (Table S3). The horizontal error bars on data points are associated with the uncertainty in the literature values for E^0 and pK_a of the studied phenols.⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ The operative mechanism under the present conditions should be revealed by a good correlation between experimental and predicted values. We point out that the plots for irreversible ET and CEP (Figure 2b and 2c, respectively) are identical to their respective Marcus plots of $\ln k$ vs. ΔG^0 , with a linear transformation of the x-axis according to eq. 5b and 8b, respectively (1 ln-unit = 50 meV driving force), and the solid line shows the slope of 1/(50 meV) predicted by eqs. 5b and 8b.

A simple inspection of the three correlation plots (figure 2) indicates that the best agreement between experimental and predicted relative rate constants is in the case of ETPT, while for CEP the correlation is comparatively poor. More precisely, a linear regression analysis reveals that in the case of reversible ETPT (figure 2a) the data points obey linearity with respect to the unsubstituted phenol (point 3) with a slope of ≈ 1 . This is illustrated by the nearly perfect overlap between the linear fit (dashed line) and ideal correlation (solid line). The irreversible ETPT mechanism (figure 2b) shows the second best correlation with a slope of 1.2 and some deviation of the data points from the reference diagonal line. On the other hand, the slope of 1.6 for the CEP mechanism (figure 2c) shows a strong deviation from the typical Marcusian rate dependence on the CEP driving force. Phenols with both the highest and lowest observed rate constants deviate substantially from the predicted values in this case.

From the above comparison of the correlations in Figure 2, we draw the conclusion that the PCET reaction for this series of phenols with $[\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3]^{3+}$ in water follows a step-wise, ETPT mechanism. Regarding which of the two kinetic limits is most likely, we note that reversible ETPT (Figure 2a) shows a slightly better agreement with predictions than the irreversible ETPT (Figure 2b). On the other hand, this would require that the reverse ET in the solvent cage is faster than deprotonation of the $\text{PhOH}^{+\bullet}$ intermediate, which occurs with $\tau = 0.1 - 1$ ps ($k_{\text{PT}} \approx 10^{11-pK_a} \text{ s}^{-1}$).⁸ While this cannot be excluded, it is questionable that this would hold for the entire series of phenols with different potentials and pK_a values. It is of course possible that the mechanism gradually changes between ETPT_{rev} and $\text{ETPT}_{\text{irrev}}$ within the series. In the absence of clearer proof, we leave it as an open question whether the step-wise ETPT mechanism follows an irreversible or reversible pathway.

Conclusions

A central conclusion that can be drawn at this juncture is that the oxidation of the series of phenols by $[\text{Ru}(\text{bpy})_3]^{3+}$ shows a stepwise ETPT mechanism to be most likely at low pH with water as proton acceptor. This conclusion is based on rate correlations of phenols yielding rate constants that vary from 1×10^5 to $2 \times 10^9 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$. The results are in line with our previous assignment for intramolecular PCET in a Ru-Tyrosine complex, where at low pH a stepwise ETPT mechanism was proposed when water is the proton acceptor.¹⁰ In contrast the Marcus-type analysis suggests that the operating mechanism under the conditions investigated is not a concerted reaction (CEP), as was suggested before, and as a consequence that the reorganization energy value of 0.45 eV reported is not correct.⁸ This impacts our understanding of the competition between concerted and step-wise PCET mechanisms of tyrosine and other phenols in water. The mechanistic investigation using Marcus-type relationship offers a successful tool to discern among these PCET mechanisms. This study provides insights from a model system into mechanisms of PCET for the working of various biological processes where phenoxyl radicals play a pivotal role.

Acknowledgment

J.S. would like to thank Dr. Starla D. Glover for help in electrochemistry measurements. This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council, the Swedish Energy Agency, and the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation.

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TOC graphic

