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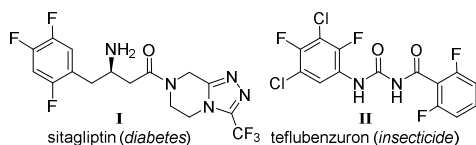
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Room Temperature Regioselective Catalytic Hydrodefluorination of Fluoroarenes with *trans*-[Ru(NHC)₄H₂] via a Concerted Nucleophilic Ru-H Attack Pathway

Mateusz K. Cybulski,^[a] David McKay,^[b] Stuart A. Macgregor,^{*,[b]} Mary F. Mahon^[a] and Michael K. Whittlesey^{*,[a]}

Abstract: The efficient and highly selective room temperature hydrodefluorination (HDF) of fluoroarenes by the *trans*-[Ru(IME₄)₂H₂] catalyst, **3**, is reported. Mechanistic studies show **3** acts directly in catalysis without any ligand dissociation and DFT calculations indicate a concerted nucleophilic attack mechanism. The calculations fully account for the observed selectivities which corroborate earlier predictions regarding the selectivity of HDF.

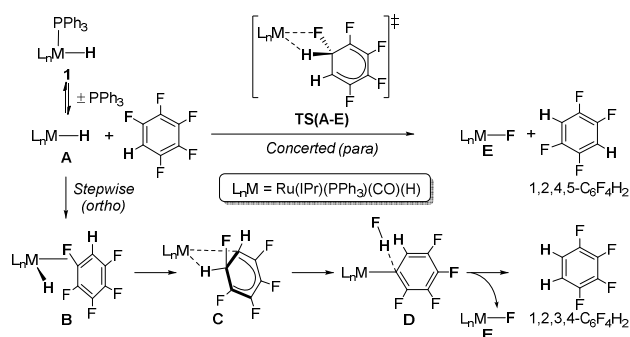
The presence of partially fluorinated aromatic rings in many high value pharmaceuticals and agrochemicals (e.g. **I** and **II**, Scheme 1)^[1] has fuelled interest in the use of catalytic hydrodefluorination (HDF) as a route to such functionalities by F/H substitution of perfluorinated substrates.^[2-4] However, to achieve this the development of more active and more selective HDF catalysts is still required, as highlighted by the very specific substitution patterns in **I** and **II**. This is challenging as HDF becomes increasingly difficult as the number of fluorine substituents decreases, and this difficult process must be achieved with a high degree of regiocontrol. Chemoselectivity is also an issue, as selective C-F activation must be targeted over potentially deactivating C-H activation pathways.



Scheme 1. Examples of commercially important fluorinated molecules.

In previous work on HDF catalysis using N-heterocyclic carbene (NHC) ruthenium hydride complexes we have combined experimental and computational data to develop a mechanistic framework for the logical design of new catalysts with improved activity and regiocontrol. While our first catalyst system, [Ru(IPr)(PPh₃)₂(CO)H₂] (**1**)^[5,6], showed only modest activity, catalytic HDF of C₆F₆ at 70 °C did proceed with a remarkably high and very unusual *ortho*-regioselectivity to give 1,2,3,4-C₆F₄H₂. DFT studies on the HDF of C₆F₅H characterised two mechanisms based on the nucleophilicity of a hydride ligand in the 5-coordinate intermediate **A** formed via PPh₃ loss from **1** (Scheme 2).^[7,8] These were

a concerted pathway in which F/H exchange occurred in a single step, or, after fluoroarene coordination (**B**), a stepwise pathway featuring insertion into the Ru-H bond, HF elimination and protonolysis of Ru-aryl intermediate **D** to release C₆F₄H₂ and Ru-F species **E**. These two pathways exhibited different kinetic selectivities, the concerted mechanism leading to the *para*-HDF product 1,2,4,5-C₆F₄H₂, while the stepwise process favoured *ortho*-HDF and formation of 1,2,3,4-C₆F₄H₂. Overall, the stepwise pathway proved more accessible and so accounted for the observed regioselectivity.



Scheme 2. Nucleophilic hydride attack mechanism in [Ru(IPr)(PPh₃)₂(CO)H₂] catalysed HDF.

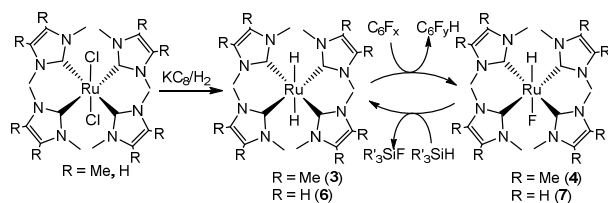
Having identified hydride nucleophilicity as a key element in these Ru-catalysed HDF reactions we turned to the more electron-rich, *trans*-dihydride complex [Ru(IEt₂Me₂)₂(PPh₃)₂H₂] (**2**).^[9,10] This did indeed give higher activity, with C₆F₆ being converted to difluorobenzene through four HDF cycles at 90 °C. However, this was counterbalanced by poorer regioselectivity, with both the 1,2- and 1,4-isomers of C₆F₂H₄ being formed. We reasoned that this may reflect the lability of the PPh₃ ligands in this system, resulting in a mixture of 5- and 6-coordinate Ru species in solution. The former could access both stepwise and concerted pathways, while for the latter, the concerted process would be the only option. We now report on catalytic HDF with a new catalyst, *trans*-[Ru(IME₄)₂H₂] (**3**).^[11] In this system the use of four strongly bound NHC ligands aims both to enforce coordinative saturation and enhance hydride nucleophilicity. We show that **3** is capable of taking C₆F₆ to 1,4-C₆F₂H₄ at room temperature; moreover the intermediate steps all occur in a highly selective fashion. DFT calculations rationalise the observed outcomes.

The *trans*-dihydride complex **3** (Scheme 3) was reported previously by Wolf upon reduction of [Ru(IME₄)Cl₂] with LiAlH₄, although it could only be obtained as an impure solid in low yield.^[12] If KC₈/H₂ is instead used as the reductant, **3** can be isolated as an analytically pure yellow microcrystalline solid in high (80%) yield (Scheme 3). The high

[a] Mr M. K. Cybulski, Dr M. F. Mahon, Prof. M. K. Whittlesey
Department of Chemistry, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath,
BA2 7AY, UK. E-mail: m.k.whittlesey@bath.ac.uk

[b] Dr D. McKay, Prof. S. A. Macgregor
Institute of Chemical Sciences, Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh,
EH14 4AS, UK. E-mail: S.A.Macgregor@hw.ac.uk
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symmetry of the molecule led to a very simple ^1H NMR spectrum consisting of just three resonances at $\delta = 3.37$, 1.97 and -8.14 ppm in a 24:24:2 ratio.



Scheme 3. Synthesis and hydrodefluorination chemistry of *trans*-[Ru(NHC)₄H₂].

Upon addition of a stoichiometric amount of C₆F₆ to a benzene solution of **3** at room temperature, rapid HDF took place to afford [Ru(IME₄)₄HF] (**4**) and C₆F₅H.^[13] The X-ray structure of **4** (ESI) confirmed the same *trans*-H-Ru-F geometry as found in [Ru(IEt₂Me₂)₂(PPh₃)₂HF] (**5**), albeit with a lengthening of the Ru-F distance (2.3070(18) Å vs 2.264(2) Å). **4** exhibits approximate C₄ molecular symmetry around the H-Ru-F axis. The presence of the weakly coordinated fluoride ligand *trans* to hydride is reflected in the low frequency of the Ru-H chemical shift of **4** ($\delta = -23.19$ ppm). Addition of 5 eq Et₃SiH to **4** brought about the rapid and clean reformation of **3** at room temperature (Scheme 3).^[14]

Table 1 summarizes the results of catalytic HDF with **3** (5 mol%) in benzene with a silane as reductant. C₆F₆ underwent two HDF cycles within ca. 5 min (TOF > 480 h⁻¹) at room temperature to give the *para*-HDF product, 1,2,4,5-C₆F₄H₂. The reaction is therefore notable not only for taking place at room temperature,^[15] but also in that **3** exhibits a different regioselectivity to **1**. 1,2,4,5-C₆F₄H₂ continued to react further, albeit far more slowly, undergoing another two HDF cycles over ca. 1 month to ultimately give 1,4-C₆F₂H₄ (entry 1). When the HDF of C₆F₆ was performed at 90 °C, full conversion to 1,4-C₆F₄H₂ was complete in 10 h (entry 1). The formation of low fluorine-content products was investigated using a range of less fluorinated substrates (entries 2-5). HDF of 1,2,4,5-C₆F₄H₂ first formed 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃, which then reacted onwards to give 1,4-C₆F₂H₄ (entries 2 and 3). No further reduction of 1,4-C₆F₂H₄ to C₆FH₅ was observed, although fluorobenzene could be formed from both the 1,2- and 1,3-isomers of C₆F₂H₄ (entries 4 and 5). No reduction to benzene was observed.^[16]

Variation of the silane reductant (entries 6-10) established that those with mixed aryl/alkyl substituents (PhMe₂SiH, Ph₂MeSiH), as well as secondary alkyl silanes (Et₂SiH₂), performed similarly to Et₃SiH, although lower reactivity was found with aryl silanes (Ph₃SiH, Ph₂SiH₂).^[14] Replacement of the IME₄ ligand by the less donating 1,3-dimethylimidazol-2-ylidene (IME₂) ligand (Scheme 3) also had a noticeable effect, [Ru(IME₂)₄H₂] (**6**; ESI) displaying lower activity than **3** (entries 11 and 12). This appeared to result from the relatively poor solubility of the corresponding hydride fluoride complex, [Ru(IME₂)₄HF] (**7**; ESI) in solution; even at 90 °C, a fine yellow precipitate of **7** could be observed in catalytic HDF reactions.

Given the coordinative saturation of both **3** and **5**, the potential for dissociation of an NHC from either ruthenium complex was probed. The strength of metal-NHC bonds^[17] has led to carbenes being considered as innocent spectator ligands which do not dissociate readily from metal centres.^[18] Indeed, no exchange between **3** and free IEt₂Me₂ (3 eq) was observed at room temperature, and so any involvement of unsaturated species such as [Ru(IME₄)₃H₂] can be ruled out in the HDF reactions in Table 1 conducted at room temperature. However, upon heating at 90 °C,

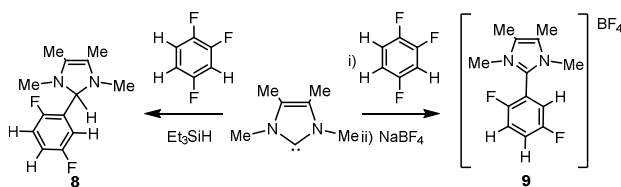
Table 1. [Ru(NHC)₄H₂] catalysed hydrodefluorination.^a

Entry	Cat	Substrate	Reductant	Product	T [°C]	t [h]	TON
					25	740	80
1	3	C ₆ F ₆	Et ₃ SiH	1,4-C ₆ F ₂ H ₄	25/90 ^b	10	80
2	3	1,2,4,5-C ₆ F ₄ H ₂	Et ₃ SiH	1,4-C ₆ F ₂ H ₄	90	10	40
3	3	1,2,4-C ₆ F ₃ H ₃	Et ₃ SiH	1,4-C ₆ F ₂ H ₄	90	9	20
4 ^c	3	1,2-C ₆ F ₂ H ₄	Et ₃ SiH	C ₆ FH ₅	120	157	20
5 ^c	3	1,3-C ₆ F ₂ H ₄	Et ₃ SiH	C ₆ FH ₅	120	539	20
6	3	C ₆ F ₆	PhMe ₂ SiH	1,4-C ₆ F ₂ H ₄	25	740	80
7	3	C ₆ F ₆	Ph ₂ MeSiH	1,4-C ₆ F ₂ H ₄	90	17	80
8 ^d	3	C ₆ F ₆	Ph ₃ SiH	C ₆ F ₅ H (79%) + 1,2,4,5-C ₆ F ₄ H ₂ (21%)	25	740	18.5
9	3	C ₆ F ₆	Et ₂ SiH ₂	1,4-C ₆ F ₂ H ₄	25/90 ^b	9	80
10	3	C ₆ F ₆	Ph ₂ SiH ₂	1,2,4,5-C ₆ F ₄ H ₂	25	264	40
11	6	C ₆ F ₆	Et ₃ SiH	1,2,4,5-C ₆ F ₄ H ₂	25	6	40
12	6	C ₆ F ₆	Et ₃ SiH	1,4-C ₆ F ₂ H ₄	90	103	80

[a] Reaction conditions: 0.1 M fluoroarene, 0.5 M silane, 5 mol% **3** or **5**, 0.5 mL C₆H₆, conversions determined by ¹⁹F NMR spectroscopy. [b] Temperature raised to 90 °C after ca. 5 min at 25 °C. [c] Solvent = toluene. [d] Product distribution is % of main products/total % of all HDF products.

new hydride resonances were observed in the same $\delta = -8$ ppm hydride region of the proton NMR spectrum as **3**, suggesting that carbene dissociation and exchange is possible at higher temperature.^[19]

To address whether any dissociated IME₄ could therefore play a similar role to that recently found for alkylphosphines in catalysing HDF,^[20] free IME₄ was heated between 70-90 °C with 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃ in the presence of Et₃SiH. The addition product **8** (ESI) and Et₃SiF were formed in a 1:1 ratio (Scheme 4). Activation at the 2-position (i.e. *para* to H rather than *para* to F) was confirmed by structural characterisation of the imidazolium salt **9**, which was formed when IME₄ and 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃ were heated together in the absence of any silane (ESI).^[21] Crucially, heating **7** at 90 °C in both the presence and absence of Et₃SiH resulted in <15% conversion to 1,4-C₆F₄H₂ upon fluoroarene elimination. This shows there is only a low level of the NHC-mediated stoichiometric HDF and confirms the need for Ru in the reactions of **3**. Moreover, the absence of **8** at the end of catalytic runs with **3** shows that 16e [Ru(IME₄)₃H₂] is not catalytically relevant even in the high temperature HDF runs.



Scheme 4. Stoichiometric C-F activation reactions of 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃ with IMe₄.

DFT calculations were used to account for the selectivity of the various HDF reactions in Table 1.^[22] As a stepwise HDF process based on initial NHC/fluoroarene substitution can be ruled out experimentally, the calculations focused on the concerted mechanism and applied this to the full range of fluoroarenes C₆F_{6-n}H_n (n = 0-5). The results obtained with 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃ are typical and details are provided in Figure 1. The lowest energy pathway involves attack of the hydride ligand at the C2 position of the arene and proceeds with a free energy barrier (relative to **3** + free 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃) of 16.2 kcal/mol. The transition state involved, **TS(3-4)_{2F}**, features a near-linear {Ru...H^a...C2} moiety (171.9°) and elongated Ru...H and C2-F2 distances of 1.90 Å and 1.41 Å respectively. As this occurs, the new C2-H^a bond begins to form (1.64 Å) and a shortening of the *trans* Ru-H^b distance is seen (1.65 Å) in response to the weakening of the Ru-H^a interaction. The orientation of the approaching fluoroarene (as defined by the C₆ plane) is offset by approximately 40° relative to the best-fit plane containing Ru and the four C2 carbons of the IMe₄ ligands. **TS(3-4)_{2F}** exhibits a Meisenheimer-type geometry with elongation of the *Cipso-Cortho* bonds (see inset, Figure 1), although H-transfer onto C is more progressed than the C-F bond cleavage, the C2-F2 bond being only 0.06 Å longer than in free 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃. The Ru...F2 distance is also rather long (3.70 Å), but characterisation via IRC calculations confirms that F2 does move onto the metal centre to generate **4** and release the 1,4-C₆F₄H₂ product all in one step.^[23] This HDF process is extremely exergonic (ΔG = -49.9 kcal/mol).

The alternative HDF at the C1 and C4 positions of 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃ proceed via transition states **TS(3-4)_{1F}** and **TS(3-4)_{4F}** at +19.7 kcal/mol and +21.4 kcal/mol respectively. These display similar geometries to **TS(3-4)_{2F}**, although with somewhat longer Ru...H^a and shorter C1/C4...H^a distances. These later geometries (in terms of H-transfer) are consistent with the higher computed barriers which indicate a clear kinetic preference for HDF at the 2-position, in line with experiment where only that process is observed (Table 1, entry 3).

The DFT study was extended to the HDF of other fluoroarenes by **3** starting with C₆F₆. Results are shown in Figure 2(a) as calculated barriers (relative to **3** and the appropriate fluoroarene in each case) for each HDF step. As seen previously,^[7b] there is a general increase in the barrier as the number of F-substituents is reduced and this is reflected in the more forcing conditions that are required experimentally to achieve HDF with lower fluorinated substrates. The pattern of the F-substituents also directs the selectivity. We have previously shown that the concerted mechanism is favoured most by the presence of *ortho*-F substituents which cause a weakening of the target C-F bond; *meta*-F substituents also reduce barriers (although to a lesser extent), while *para*-F substituents can actually cause a slight increase in the barrier.^[7b] These patterns are borne out here, with C₆F₅H reacting at the 4-position (this having two *ortho*-F and two *meta*-F substituents) and, as seen in Figure 1, 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃ reacts at the 2-position (its *ortho*-F and *meta*-F substituents trumping the 1-position which has one *ortho*-F and one *para*-F substituent). HDF of 1,4-C₆F₂H₄ has a high predicted barrier of 25.6 kcal/mol and so,

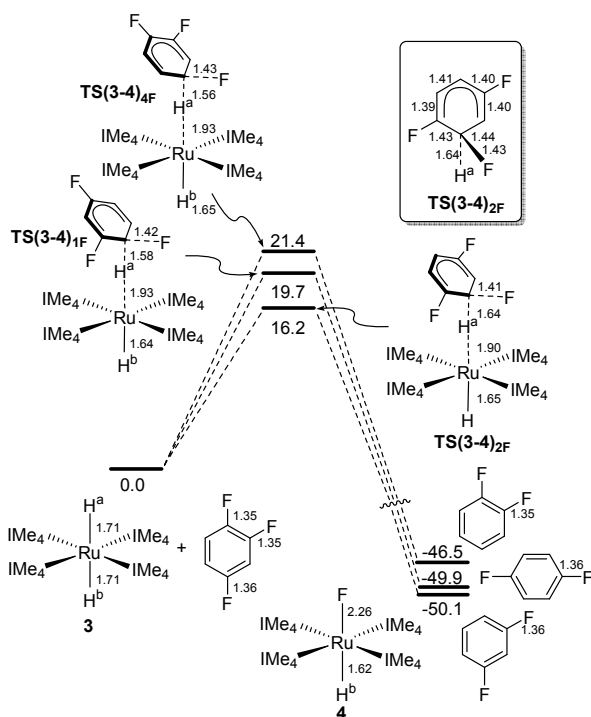


Figure 1. Computed profiles (ωB97xD//BP86, free energies in benzene, kcal/mol) for the HDF of 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃ by [Ru(IMe₄)₄H₂], **3**. Selected distances are shown in Å and the inset provides additional information for **TS(3-4)_{2F}**.

experimentally, the catalytic HDF of C₆F₆ proceeds to, but stops at, 1,4-C₆F₂H₄. Figures 2(b) and (c) consider a range of other fluoroarene substrates. Both 1,2,3,4- and 1,2,3,5-C₆F₄H₂ are predicted to form 1,2,4-C₆F₃H₃ and hence 1,4-C₆F₂H₄ (Figure 2(b)). Figure 2(c) shows that HDF of both 1,2,3- and 1,3,5-C₆F₃H₃ is predicted to be accessible (barriers of 15.4 kcal/mol and 18.6 kcal/mol respectively), and that both species will form 1,3-C₆F₄H₂. The *meta*-disposition of the F-substituents in this isomer (compared to the unfavourable *para*-arrangement in 1,4-C₆F₂H₄) makes HDF to C₆FH₅ possible via a barrier of 21.9 kcal/mol. As expected, the *ortho* F atom arrangement in 1,2-C₆F₂H₄ makes HDF even more accessible (ΔG[‡] = 20.3 kcal/mol) and so fluorobenzene can also be accessed via this route, as is indeed observed experimentally. HDF of fluorobenzene has a significantly higher barrier of 26.1 kcal/mol and is not observed.

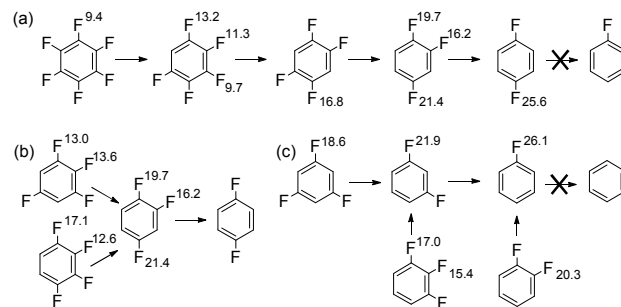


Figure 2. Selectivity of HDF for a range of fluoroarene substrates: (a) C₆F₆ gives 1,4-C₆F₂H₄; (b) 1,2,3,4-C₆F₄H₂ and 1,2,3,5-C₆F₄H₂ give 1,4-C₆F₂H₄; and (c) 1,3,5-

C₆F₃H₃, 1,2,3-C₆F₃H₃ and 1,2-C₆F₂H₄ give C₆FH₅. In each case the calculated barrier is indicated in kcal/mol (ωB97XD/BP86, free energies in benzene).

In summary, room temperature, selective catalytic HDF of C₆F₆ to 1,4-C₆F₂H₄ has been demonstrated with the *trans*-[Ru(IME₄)₂H₂] catalyst, **3**. Fluorobenzene can also be accessed from 1,3,5-C₆F₃H₃ and 1,2,3-C₆F₃H₃. The highly electron rich character of **3** promotes the HDF reaction, which DFT calculations show proceeds via a concerted nucleophilic attack mechanism. Experimental studies indicate that **3** acts directly in catalysis and that alternative pathways based on initial ligand loss are not relevant. This also accounts for the high selectivity observed experimentally, in contrast to earlier mixed NHC/PR₃ catalysts.^[9] Our findings corroborate earlier work that predicted the effects of the presence of other F-substituents on selectivity.^[7b] Thus controlling the mechanism also controls the synthetic outcome and this insight will hopefully allow for the development of new HDF catalysts that have greater utility in synthesis.

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Keywords: hydrodefluorination • ruthenium • NHC • catalysis • DFT calculations

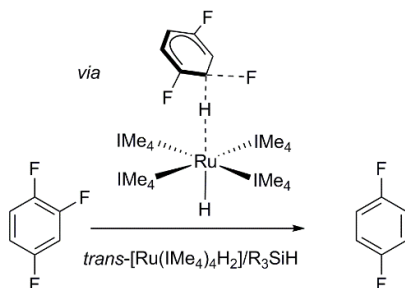
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Hydrodefluorination

Mateusz K. Cybulski, David McKay,
Stuart A. Macgregor,* Mary F. Mahon
and Michael K. Whittlesey* _____
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Room Temperature Regioselective
Catalytic Hydrodefluorination of
Fluoroarenes with $\text{trans-}[\text{Ru}(\text{NHC})_4\text{H}_2]$
via a Concerted Nucleophilic Ru-H
Attack Pathway.



Efficient and selective hydrodefluorination of fluoroarenes by a $\text{trans-}[\text{Ru}(\text{NHC})_4\text{H}_2]$ catalyst is reported. DFT calculations indicate that the observed selectivities are fully consistent with a concerted nucleophilic attack mechanism without any prior ligand dissociation.