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Arene-Bridged Dithorium Complexes: Inverse Sandwiches Supported by a δ Bonding Interaction

Chao Yu, Jiefeng Liang, Chong Deng, Guillaume Lefèvre, Thibault Cantat, Paula L. Diaconescu,* and Wenliang Huang*

ABSTRACT: A series of arene-bridged dithorium complexes was synthesized via the reduction by potassium graphite of a Th(IV) precursor in the presence of arenes. All these compounds adopt an inverse-sandwich structure, with the arene bridging two thorium centers in a $\mu$-$\eta^5$-$\eta^5$/6-mode. Structural and spectroscopic data support the assignment of two Th(IV) ions and an arene tetraanion, which is an aromatic structure according to Hückel’s rule. Arene exchange reactions revealed that the stability of the corresponding compounds follows the series naphthalene $\ll$ toluene $<$ benzene $\approx$ biphenyl. Reactivity studies showed that they function as four-electron reductants capable to reduce anthracene, cyclooctatetraene, alkynes, and azobenzene, while a mononuclear thorium anthracene complex could reduce benzene. Density functional theory calculations unveiled that the bonding interactions consist of $\delta$ bonds between thorium 6d and Sf orbitals and arene $\pi^*$ orbitals, showing a significant covalent character, able to stabilize highly reduced arene ligands.

f-Element arene interactions$^{1-3}$ proved critical in f-element catalysis$^{4-7}$ and stabilizing novel oxidation states.$^{8-12}$ Among f-element arene complexes, arene-bridged dinuclear compounds with an inverse-sandwich structure are arguably the most studied.$^{13-15}$ Examples include benzene-bridged dinuclear lanthanide complexes,$^{13-16}$ tetraanionic biphosphoryl-bridged dinuclear rare-earth metal complexes,$^{16}$ and, most notably, a large number of arene-bridged diuranium complexes.$^{17}$ The remarkable robustness of the inverse-sandwich diuranium arene motif was emphasized by a ready exchange of the ancillary ligand,$^{18}$ a facile change of metal oxidation states,$^{19-21}$ and C–H borylation of the arene.$^{22}$ In-depth experimental and computational studies elucidated that the unusual stability of the uranium-arene interaction should be attributed to the formation of two $\delta$ bonds between uranium Sf$_6$ orbitals and arene $\pi^*$ orbitals, which lie lower in energy than the nonbonding Sf orbitals.$^{22}$ Inverse-sandwich diuranium arene complexes were employed as low valent uranium synths to obtain novel compounds,$^{23,24}$ which would otherwise be difficult to synthesize, as well as inspired the incorporation of arene in a supporting ligand framework$^{25,26}$ resulting in an unprecedented redox reactivity.$^{27-29}$

However, despite the many precedents of inverse-sandwich diuranium arene complexes, and the close analogy between thorium and uranium,$^{30-32}$ there is no example of an inverse-sandwich dithorium arene complex. Even thorium complexes of reduced arenes are rare: only three structurally characterized thorium reduced napthalene complexes, in which Th(IV) was bound to a distorted napthalene diadion in an $\eta^4$-mode, were reported by Gambardella et al.$^{33,34}$

We previously reported a series of inverse-sandwich rare-earth metal biphosphoryl complexes $[(\text{NN} \text{TBS})\text{M}]_2(\mu-\eta^5\eta^5/6,\text{C}_6\text{H}_6\text{Ph})\text{K(}\text{solvvent})]_2$, (M$_2$-biph-K$_2$, NN$^{\text{TBS}}$ = fc- (NS$^\text{t}$ BuMe$_2$)$_2$, fc = 1,1'-ferrocenediyl, M = Sc, Y, La, Lu, Gd, Dy, Er$^{18,19}$ and the inverse-sandwich diuranium toluene complex $[(\text{NN} \text{TBS})\text{U}]_2(\mu-\eta^5\eta^5\text{-C}_6\text{H}_5\text{Me})\text{U}_2$-tol)$^{25}$ Encouraged by these results, we sought to pursue the analogous inverse-sandwich dithorium arene complexes. Herein, we report their synthesis and characterization together with reactivity studies and a computational analysis of their electronic structure and bonding interaction.

The Th(IV) precursor (NN$^{\text{TBS}}$)ThCl$_2$(THF) (ThCl$_2$) was prepared from ThCl$_4$(DMF)$_2$ and (NN$^{\text{TBS}}$)K$_2$(OEt)$_2$ ($\text{THF}$) (Scheme 1a). Following the protocol for Y$_2$-biph-K$_2$, the addition of 2.5 equiv of KC$_8$ into a precooled THF solution of ThCl$_2$ resulted in an immediate color change to black (Scheme 1b). The $^1$H NMR spectrum of the crude reaction mixture showed diamagnetic peaks similar to those of Y$_2$-biph-K$_2$ X-ray crystallography confirmed the product to be $[(\text{NN} \text{TBS})\text{Th}(\text{THF})]_2(\mu-\eta^5\eta^5\text{-C}_6\text{H}_5\text{Ph})\text{(Th}_2\text{-biph})$. The other Th$_2$-arene complexes were prepared analogously (Th$_2$-nap, Th$_2$-benezene, Th$_2$-tol, Scheme 1c–e).

All Th$_2$-arene compounds feature an inverse-sandwich structure with both thorium ions bound to the same phenyl ring in a symmetric $\mu$-$\eta^5\eta^5$-fashion (Th$_2$-benezene, Figure S34; Th$_2$-tol, Figure S35; Th$_2$-biph, Figure S36; Th$_2$-nap, Figure S37). The structures of Th$_2$-tol and Th$_2$-nap are shown as representatives (Figure 1) and will be discussed for comparison. For Th$_2$-tol, the average Th–C$_\text{ring}$ distance of

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Scheme 1. Synthesis of (a) ThCl₄; (b) Th₂-biph; (c) Th₂-naph; (d) Th₂-benzene; (e) Th₂-tol

![Th₂-arene complexes diagram](https://dx.doi.org/10.1021/jacs.0c11215)

Figure 1. Thermal-ellipsoid (50% probability) representations of Th₂-tol (a) and Th₂-naph (b). Hydrogen atoms were omitted for clarity.

2.62 Å and the average Th–Ccentroid distance of 2.18 Å are comparable to the corresponding values in U₂-tol when taking account of the difference between their ionic radii. 47 The C–C distances of the bound ring range from 1.441(7) to 1.459(7) Å with an average of 1.45 Å. These values are close to those of U₂-tol (1.44(1) to 1.47(1) Å with an average of 1.45 Å). 25 The average Th–N distance of 2.37 Å is 0.10 Å longer than that of 2.27 Å in ThCl₄, but comparable to the average U–N distance of 2.31 Å in U₂-tol. 25 This elongation was also observed in Y₂-biph-K₂, when it was attributed to the weakening of the Y–N bond rather than a change in the metal’s oxidation state. 18 In addition, a close contact between the ferrocene backbone and thorium was present in Th₂-tol, indicating a donor–acceptor type interaction between these fragments. 48

Despite crystallizing with a coordinating THF molecule per thorium, the structural parameters for Th₂-tol resemble those of Th₂-tol. An intriguing feature is the alternating C–C distances of the unbound ring (1.454(1), 1.351(1), 1.429(1), 1.357(1), and 1.437(1) Å), implying a diene-like character, in accord with the distinct ¹³C NMR chemical shifts of the unbound ring carbon atoms at 125.6 and 98.9 ppm. A similar dearomatization was observed in inverse-sandwich diuranium naphthalene complexes. 49 The Th–Ccentroid distances for Th₂-arene, ranging from 2.177 to 2.241 Å, are much shorter than those for Th(IV) neutral arene complexes (2.655 to 2.95 Å), and also shorter than those of 2.463(7) and 2.497(7) Å in the thorium complexes with partially reduced arene backbones. In addition, the average Th–C distances of 2.62–2.65 Å in Th₂-arene are significantly shorter than the average Th–C distances of 2.72–2.73 Å in mononuclear Th(IV) reduced naphthalene complexes. 43,44 Overall, the Th–arene interaction in Th₂-arene should be stronger than that in previously reported thorium arene complexes but comparable to that in the inverse-sandwich diuranium and rare-earth metal arene complexes. 18

Spectroscopic data also agreed with the electronic structure of tetraanionic arenes and thorium(IV). The ¹H and ¹³C NMR spectra of Th₂-arene displayed signals in the diamagnetic region, implying a closed-shell ground state. Chemical shifts of ¹³C NMR spectra assigned to the coordinating phenyl ring in Th₂-arene complexes (Th₂-benzene: 78.6 ppm; Th₂-tol: 88.4, 85.1, 80.8, 80.6 ppm; Th₂-biph: 82.0, 77.5, 69.5, 66.1 ppm; Th₂-naph: 76.2, 73.8, 69.4 ppm) are at higher fields compared to those of neutral arenes (for example, 128.6 ppm for benzene and 137.9, 129.3, 128.5 ppm for toluene), indicating a highly reduced nature of the arene ligands in Th₂-arene. Moreover, the ¹³C NMR chemical shifts of the bound phenyl ring in Th₂-arene were similar to those of Y₂-biph-K₂, implying the arenes were quadruply reduced (Table S1). The UV–vis–NIR absorption spectra of Th₂-arene showed a broad and intense band between 400 and 600 nm (Figures S46–S51); however, no characteristic peaks of Th(III) around 700 and 800 nm were observed. 39 Furthermore, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (Table S2) and the absence of an electron paramagnetic resonance signal also support a formal oxidation state of +4 for thorium in Th₂-arene.

It is worth mentioning that Th₂-benzene is the first metal complex that contains the parent tetraanionic benzene, which is the prototypical 6C, 10π-electron aromatic system. 50 In addition, the fact that the arene rather than thorium was reduced during the formation of Th₂-arene is also in line with the formation of M₂-biph-K₂ (M = Sc, Y, La, Lu, Gd, Dy, Er, Sm). 51,52

Arene exchange reactions were previously observed in inverse-sandwich diuranium arene complexes. 20,22,32 Arene exchange is also accessible with Th₂-arene and we observed a slow exchange when heating Th₂-benzene or Th₂-tol in C₆D₆, while no exchange was observed for Th₂-biph in C₆D₆. A competitive reaction to synthesize Th₂-benzene and Th₂-tol starting with an equal molar mixture of
benzene and toluene resulted in a product ratio of 10:1 for Th$_2$-benzene and Th$_2$-tol.

For Th$_2$-naph, a rapid exchange with C$_6$D$_6$ was observed (Scheme 2a). This result seems counterintuitive since benzene is considered more difficult to reduce than naphthalene based on their reduction potentials. However, the dearomatization of the unbound ring in Th$_2$-naph may account for this abnormal reactivity. Moreover, an arene exchange was observed between Th$_2$-naph and biphenyl and between Th$_2$-tol and biphenyl. Therefore, the arene exchange study established the stability of Th$_2$-arene as Th$_2$-naph ≪ Th$_2$-tol < Th$_2$-benzene ≈ Th$_2$-biph.

The low stability of Th$_2$-naph prompted us to investigate the reduction of ThCl$_2$ in the presence of anthracene, which is known to form a stable dianion upon reduction. This reaction led to the formation of a mononuclear thorium complex of dianionic anthracene, [(NNTBS)Th(THF)](9,10-η$_2^-$C$_14$H$_{10}$) (Th-anth). Intriguingly, when heating in C$_6$D$_6$, Th-anth reduced benzene to form Th$_2$-benzene (Scheme 2b). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first confirmed benzene reduction by a well-defined metal anthracene complex, although such compounds were proposed as intermediates.$^{27}$ While the reverse reaction of Th$_2$-benzene and anthracene did not take place, Th$_2$-naph could reduce anthracene to yield Th-anth (Scheme 2c). The arene exchange reactivity highlights the higher stability for nonfused arenes over more readily reducible fused arenes in the inverse-sandwich diuranium arene complexes.

We also explored the reactivity of Th$_2$-arene toward unsaturated substrates. Th$_2$-arene functioned as four-electron reductants to reduce cyclooctatetraene (Scheme 2d) or azobenzene (Scheme 2e) to form (NNTBS)Th(THF)(η$_5^-$C$_5$H$_5$) (Th-COT) (Th-COT) or (NNTBS)Th(THF)$_2$(η$_2^-$N$_2$Ph$_2$) (Th-N$_2$Ph$_2$), respectively, in a similar fashion as the inverse-sandwich diuranium arene complexes.$^{20,21,23}$ The outcome of the alkyn reduction reactions were dependent on the nature of the alkyn. While all Th$_2$-arene could reduce diphenylacetylene (Scheme 2f) to form a five-membered metalloccycle (NN$^{188}$)Th(THF)(η$_5^-$C$_5$Ph$_5$) (Th-C$_5$Ph$_5$), the reduction of bis(trimethylsilyle)acetylene took place only with the most reactive Th$_2$-naph (Scheme 2g) and resulted in the formation of a rare actinide metallacyclopropene.$^{53−55}$ (NNTBS)Th(THF)$_2$(η$_2^-$C$_5$SiMe$_3$)$_2$ which could further react with diphenylacetylene to generate Th-C$_7$Ph$_7$ (Scheme 2h).

Density functional theory (DFT) calculations of Th$_2$-arene show that the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) and HOMO−1 of Th$_2$-benzene (Figure 2; see Figures S60−62).

Figure 2. HOMO and HOMO−1 (isovalue 0.03) of Th$_2$-benzene. Hydrogen atoms are omitted for clarity.
We also compared the \( \delta \) bonding interactions in \( \text{Th}_2\text{-arene} \) with those in the inverse-sandwich diuranium and rare-earth metal arene complexes. The contributions from thorium orbitals in \( \delta \) bonds are slightly under 30%, in between the values for \( \text{Y}_2\text{-biph-K}_2 \) (ca. 20% Y orbitals)\(^\text{18}\) and those of inverse-sandwich diuranium arene complexes (ca. 50% U orbitals).\(^\text{22,32}\) These values indicate that the thorium–arene interaction is more covalent than the rare-earth metal–arene interaction but less covalent than the uranium–arene interaction, in line with the general trend of covalency for \( f \) elements. Moreover, the contribution of Th 6d orbitals is higher than that of \( 5f \) orbitals, in contrast to the case of the inverse-sandwich diuranium arene complexes, in which the contribution of U \( 5f \) orbitals is more than double that of 6d orbitals.\(^\text{22}\) This trend is in accordance with the relative energies for actinide 6d and \( 5f \) orbitals.\(^\text{50}\)

In summary, we synthesized and characterized the first inverse-sandwich dithorium arene-bridged complexes with benzene, toluene, biphenyl, and naphthalene. The structural and spectroscopic parameters are consistent with a bridged tetraanionic arene and thorium(IV) centers, analogous to our findings for the corresponding bridged tetranionic arene rare-earth metal complexes. The arene exchange reaction established the relative stability of \( \text{Th}_2\text{-arene} \), and reactivity studies showed their use as low valent thorium synths. DFT calculations unveiled the presence of a \( \delta \) bonding interaction in these compounds, in analogy to relevant uranium and rare-earth metal complexes. These compounds possess high synthetic utility, in particular, enabling multielectron redox chemistry for thorium. Moreover, they provide insight into the electronic structures of thorium complexes in comparison to those of uranium and rare-earth metals. Further reactivity studies and an in-depth analysis of the electronic structure and bonding interactions of \( \text{Th}_2\text{-arene} \) are currently ongoing.

**ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

**Supporting Information**
The Supporting Information is available free of charge at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/jacs.0c11215.

Synthetic procedures, NMR spectra, and other characterizations and DFT calculation details (PDF)

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**Notes**

The authors declare no competing financial interest. The crystal structures were deposited with the Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre (CCDC) with deposition numbers 2031028–2031037.

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