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Platinum Trimethyl Bipyridyl Thiolates – New, Tunable, Red- to Near IR Emitting Luminophores for Bioimaging Applications

Harriet L. Steel,a Sarah L. Allinson,a Jane Andre,a Michael P. Coogan,b,* and James A. Platts,c

Synthetic, spectroscopic, computational and biological imaging studies of platinum trimethyl bipyridyl thiolate complexes of the general formula [PtMe₃(bpy)SR] reveal these to be easily accessed, tunable bioimaging agents which feature an unusual \( \sigma \rightarrow \pi^* \) Inter-Ligand Charge Transfer (ILCT) transition, and in some cases emit into the Near infra-red (NIR).

Platinum (IV) trimethyl iodide exists as a cubic tetramer which reacts with a large range of ligands to give stable octahedral complexes of the general formula fac-[Pt(Me)₃(L)₂I] which have been extensively studied. In the case of chelating bis-heterocyclic ligands such as bipyridine, the derived complexes, e.g. fac-[Pt(Me)₃(N^N)I] 1, are luminescent, showing room temperature phosphorescence from excited states assigned as \(^3\)IL \( \pi-\pi^* \). The photochemistry of these units has been widely explored, with photo-reduction to the square-planar Pt(II) species typically observed, but there are few applications of Pt(IV)Me₃ complexes in luminescence, while there is much data on cyclometallated Pt(II) complexes as lumophores.

The analogous fac-[Re(CO)₃(N^N)L] complexes are widely applied lumophores in which systematic variations in the (N^N) unit tune the absorption and emission characteristics, while variations in \( L \) (usually substituted pyridines) control solubility and other physical characteristics. It is generally the case that substituted complexes, in which \( L \) is a nitrogen heterocycle, have attractive photophysical properties and stability while the precursor halido-complexes are unstable and tend to be toxic in biological work due to halide lability. Therefore, an investigation was undertaken of the synthesis and photophysical characteristics of a series of fac-Pt(Me)₃ complexes of chelating and monodentate ligands. Reaction of PtIMe₃ with substituted bipyridines gave analogues of 1 with electron donating (OMe, complex 2) and withdrawing (CO₂Me, complex 3) groups in the 4,4' positions (Scheme 1). These complexes showed the respective blue- and red-shifted absorptions and emissions which would be predicted from the electronic structures (Table 1). Complexes of the general formula fac-[Pt(Me)₃(bpy)L], where \( L \) is a substituted pyridine, were easily synthesised by the reaction of 1 with the appropriate pyridine in the presence of KPF₆ to give complexes 4-6 (Scheme 1). However, the yellow colour of 1 had been lost, and while these complexes were luminescent (see Table 1) u.v. excitation was required. Reaction of 1 with triphenyl phosphate or aniline gave complexes 7 and 8, but these complexes too required u.v. excitation. As it seemed that substituting the iodide led to loss of the low energy band responsible for visible absorption and excitation, a re-examination of the nature of this band was required. It is not clear why substitution of iodide for N- and P- donor ligands leads to complete loss of this transition, which has previously been assigned as a formally disallowed \(^3\)IL \( \pi-\pi^* \) transition.
Table 1. Photophysical data of complexes 1-10.

<table>
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<th>$\lambda_{\text{max}}^{\text{abs}}$</th>
<th>$\lambda_{\text{max}}^{\text{ex}}$</th>
<th>$\lambda_{\text{max}}^{\text{em}}$</th>
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<td>10</td>
<td>310, 350</td>
<td>500</td>
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<td>560</td>
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a) Strongest bands >275 nm; b) Lowest energy band / shoulder; c) Relative to [Ru(bpy)$_3$]$_2$PF$_6$ aerated solution, $\Theta$=0.018$^{17}$. 

Figure 1: Occupied (bottom) and unoccupied (top) orbitals of 1, 4, Pt(Me)$_3$(bipy)SH and 9 involved in low energy absorption bands.
Complex 9 is air- and water stable, resistant to ligand substitution of the coordinated thiolate under physiological conditions, and with visible excitation, a Stokes shift of over 200 nm and red emission is an ideal candidate for fluorescence imaging experiments.

Complex 8 bearing electron withdrawing ester substituents was likewise converted to the methyl 4-mercaptobenzoate complex 10 and showed a low energy absorption band centred at ca. 500 nm (DFT prediction 532 nm), and an excitation maximum at 490 nm, (Figure 2) confirming that the photophysics of these complexes is susceptible to significant variations accessible by ligand variations. However, unexpectedly the emission maximum of 10 was blue-shifted in comparison to that of 9 indicating that simple assumptions regarding substituent effects can be misleading, especially in the case of emission from triplet states where the Stokes shift is a function of energy losses through relaxation into triplet geometries, the magnitude of which cannot be estimated intuitively from electron donating/withdrawing arguments.

As a preliminary assessment of the potential for applications of complexes such as 9, a study of cellular uptake was undertaken by flow cytometry and fluorescence microscopy. This used the well characterised HeLa human cervical carcinoma cell line, and was performed at 0-4 °C to inhibit endocytosis. Flow cytometry detecting between 655-735 nm (Fig. 3, PerCP-Cy5.5) appeared to indicate little increase in fluorescence over background at < 125 µg/mL, then a dramatic increase in uptake due to interference from autofluorescence at lower concentrations. However, taking advantage of the emission band of 9 which extends well into the NIR, detection between 750 and 810 nm (Fig. 3, PerCP-Cy7) clearly showed good uptake of 9 with a dose-dependent response with the number of cells showing enhanced intensity of emission increasing as a function of concentration.

Confocal microscopy of HeLa S3 cells confirmed the dose-dependent cellular uptake observed in the flow cytometry correlated with uptake in intact cells (Fig. 4). The luminescence from 9 formed a punctate pattern of discrete staining of compartments in the perinuclear region of the cytoplasm at 25 µg / mL, and at 125 µg / mL more generalised staining of the cytoplasmic region was observed. 9 was not designed with any of the features associated with a preference for localisation in a particular organelle, but is a prototype of this new class of lumophores, so it was pleasing that it appeared not to be retained in the plasma membrane but is capable of permeating the cytoplasm, which bodes well for the design of targeted imaging agents. While some deformations of the membrane surfaces were observed in confocal microscopy even at 25 µg, flow cytometry forward scatter and side scatter profiles indicate cells remained largely intact, even at 125 µg/ml (see ESI). The combination of NIR detection and the ability to penetrate the cell membrane without causing cell lysis is an indication that these complexes have promise as lumophores in cell imaging. While Pt(II) complexes have previously been applied in cellular imaging,19-21 and have a well-established role in therapy,22 we believe this to be the first application of Pt(IV) species in fluorescence microscopy.23 The possibility of theranostic approaches with a Pt(IV) imaging agent of low cytotoxicity, which could be tailored through imaging studies to target organisms and organelles of interest, and reduced, or photoactivated, to a highly cytotoxic Pt(II) species is particularly interesting.

In summary, complexes of the general structure [PtMe2(N^N)SR], where (N^N) represents a bisimine ligand such as 2,2′bipyridine, are visible absorbing, red or NIR emitting lumophores which are easily synthesised in a few steps from commercially available materials. DFT data indicate that absorption and excitation stems from promotion of an electron localised in the S-Pt bond into the N→Pt* orbital on bipyridine. Absorption and emission profiles are therefore tuneable through simple ligand substitutions. Preliminary experiments show that biological applications as fluorescent
agents are possible with these complexes. The NIR emission can be used to differentiate agent-based emission from autofluorescence even at low levels of uptake and emission intensity.

Notes and references
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9 Gaussian 09, Revision C.01, M. J. Frisch et al., Gaussian, Inc., Wallingford CT, 2010.