CHEMISTRY A European Journal



Accepted Article

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This manuscript has been accepted after peer review and appears as an Accepted Article online prior to editing, proofing, and formal publication of the final Version of Record (VoR). This work is currently citable by using the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) given below. The VoR will be published online in Early View as soon as possible and may be different to this Accepted Article as a result of editing. Readers should obtain the VoR from the journal website shown below when it is published to ensure accuracy of information. The authors are responsible for the content of this Accepted Article.

To be cited as: Chem. Eur. J. 10.1002/chem.201704388

Link to VoR: http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/chem.201704388

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Deltamides and croconamides: expanding the range of dual Hbond donors for selective anion recognition

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Abstract: Dual H-bond donors are widely used as recognition motifs in anion receptors. We report the synthesis of a library of dual H-bond receptors, incorporating the deltic and croconic acid derivatives, termed deltamides and croconamides, and a comparison of their anion binding affinities (for monovalent species) and Brønsted acidities to those of the well-established urea and squaramide dual Hbond donor motifs. For dual H-bond cores with identical substituents, the trend in Brønsted acidity is croconamides > squaramides >deltamides > ureas, with the croconamides found to be 10-15 pK_a units more acidic than the corresponding ureas. In contrast to the trends displayed by ureas, deltamides and squaramides, N,N'-dialkyl croconamides displayed higher binding affinity to chloride than the N,N'-diaryl derivatives, which was attributed to partial deprotonation of the N,N'-diaryl derivatives at neutral pH. A number of differences in anion binding selectivity were observed upon comparison of the dual H-bond cores. Whereas the squaramides display similar affinity for both chloride and acetate ions, the ureas have significantly higher affinity for acetate than chloride ions and the deltamides display higher affinity for dihydrogenphosphate ions than other oxoanions or halides. These inherent differences in binding affinity could be exploited in the design of anion receptors with improved ability to discriminate between monovalent anions.

Introduction

The development of molecular receptors capable of the selective recognition, sensing or transport of anionic species has numerous potential applications, and this has led to an increasing interest in anion receptor chemistry over the past two decades.¹ While several types of interactions including electrostatic interactions, coordination bonds with metal ions and, more recently, halogen bonds have been employed for anion recognition, hydrogen bond donors such as (thio)ureas and squaramides (Figure 1) are of particular interest in this regard, as they can form two hydrogen bonds to an anionic guest and provide an excellent geometric

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match for Y-shaped anions such as carboxylates.³ Dual hydrogen bond donors have also been shown to have superior hydrogen bond donicity to monodentate hydrogen bond donors of similar acidity,⁴ providing improved anion binding capacity, together with a decreased propensity for the receptor to be deprotonated by basic anions. This latter property is of particular importance in the development of new anion binding motifs, since if a hydrogen bond donor is too acidic, it is no longer effective at binding to anions at neutral pH.⁵ Finding dual hydrogen bonding motifs with the right balance between hydrogen bond donicity and Brønsted acidity should provide improved anion receptors and allow them to be tailored towards specific anions.

Squaramides, which are derivatives of the cyclic oxocarbon family,⁶ are widely recognized as having higher hydrogen bond donicity than the analogous ureas (Figure 1), leading to higher binding affinities for halide ions.⁷⁻⁹ This increase in affinity is attributed to an increase in the aromaticity of the squaramide ring upon anion binding¹⁰ and the ability to delocalize charge density across both carbonyl groups.⁹ However, this also results in higher Brønsted acidity, resulting in an increased propensity for squaramide containing anion receptors to deprotonate in the presence of basic anions such as acetate, leading to reduced receptor selectivity.⁷



Figure 1. Structures of dual hydrogen bond donors for anion recognition.

The increased aromatic character of the squaramide ring upon either hydrogen bonding or deprotonation is reflected in the high Brønsted acidity of the parent squaric acid ($pK_{a1} = 0.55$).¹¹ The cyclic oxocarbon family also contains the three-carbon deltic acid and five-carbon croconic acid, which have similar properties to squaric acid but differ in their acidity ($pK_{a1} = 2.57$ and 0.68, respectively).¹¹ Whereas deltic acid (and the corresponding dianion) are reported to be more strongly aromatic than squaric acid, it has been suggested that croconic acid and its dianion are not aromatic.¹² We envisaged that these differences might impact upon both the hydrogen bond donicity and Brønsted acidity of the analogous amides: the deltamides and croconamides (Figure 1), and impact their anion binding abilities. While anion recognition by ureas and squaramides (including most of the compounds UR1-6 and SQ1-6, Chart 1) has been extensively investigated, ^{3,7,9,13,14} there is only a single recent report of anion



Chart 1. Structures of the ureas, deltamides, squaramides and croconamides

binding by the croconamides¹⁵ and the analogous N,N'disubstituted deltamides have not previously been reported. In order to compare the binding properties for monovalent anions of ureas, deltamides, squaramides, and croconamides we synthesized a systematic library of symmetrical croconamides CR1-CR6 and deltamides DT1-DT6, bearing both alkyl and aryl substituents (Chart 1). The aryl substituents were chosen to include *p-tert*-butylphenyl derivatives for increased solubility in organic solvents and *p*-nitrophenyl and *p*-trifluoromethylphenyl groups, as these are commonly used to enhance anion binding affinities for both urea and squaramide derivatives. The pnitrophenyl derivatives also allow the use of UV-visible spectroscopy to monitor anion binding.9 For comparison, we also synthesized and evaluated the known squaramide derivatives SQ1,¹⁶ SQ2¹⁷ and SQ4,¹⁸ for which little anion binding data has been previously reported.

Results and Discussion

Synthesis.

Squaramides SQ1, SQ2, and SQ4 were synthesized via condensation of diethyl squarate with two equivalents of butylamine, benzylamine, and *p-tert*-butylaniline, respectively, as reported previously.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ The aryl-substituted croconamides CR3-CR6 were similarly prepared from dimethyl croconate,19 upon condensation with aniline, *p-tert*-butylaniline, ptrifluoromethylaniline, and *p*-nitroaniline, respectively. Condensations with aniline and *p-tert*-butylaniline proceeded within 24 hours and at room temperature whereas longer reaction times (up to 48 hours) and elevated temperatures (up to 90°C) were required for condensation of the electron deficient ptrifluoromethylaniline and p-nitroaniline. In contrast, attempts to synthesise the butyl-substituted croconamide CR1 from dimethylcroconate and two equivalents of *n*-butylamine initially gave a mixture of mono-, di-, and tri-functionalised derivatives of croconic acid dimethyl ester (see ESI, Figure S2).20 This was

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attributed to the increased nucleophilicity of the primary amine as compared to aniline. Reduction of the reaction temperature to 5°C and shortening of the reaction time to 30 minutes resulted in the formation of the desired disubstituted croconamide CR1. The synthesis of the benzyl substituted croconamide CR2 from dimethylcroconate and two equivalents of benzylamine proceeded within two hours and at room temperature. Crystals of CR4 suitable for X-ray crystallography were obtained upon slow evaporation of an acetonitrile solution. In the solid state, CR4 adopts a syn/syn conformation (see ESI Figure S89), similar to that recently observed for the N,N'-[3,5bis(trifluoromethyl)phenyl]-croconamide.15



Scheme 1. Synthesis of deltamides DT1-DT6.

The deltamides were synthesised via an alternative approach, using a modification of the method recently reported by Lambert et al. for the synthesis of the deltic guanidinium macrostere.²¹ Deltamides DT1-DT6 were prepared starting from commercially available tetrachlorocyclopropene 1 (Scheme 1). For DT1-DT5, threefold nucleophilic substitution of 1 with the appropriate 2,4dimethoxybenzyl (DMB) protected anilines or aliphatic amines in the presence of potassium carbonate afforded the corresponding cyclopropenium chloride salts 2-6. Subsequent hydrolysis of the trisubstituted species in the presence of excess sodium acetate and sodium carbonate gave the corresponding cyclopropenones 7-11 which were then treated with trifluoroacetic acid (TFA) to remove the DMB-protecting groups, affording deltamides DT1-DT5 in moderate overall yields. Reaction of 1 with DMB-protected p-nitroaniline under these conditions did not proceed even at elevated temperatures. However, when the reaction was performed at elevated temperatures and in the presence of

excess sodium acetate and sodium carbonate, a low yield (5%) of the corresponding cyclopropenone **12** could be isolated. Removal of the DMB protecting groups with TFA proceeded smoothly to give the bis(*p*-nitrophenyl)deltamide **DT6**.

With the exception of **DT1**, all of the prepared deltamides were found to be stable when either stored under vacuum, at -20°C under argon, or as DMSO solutions. **DT1** was successfully synthesized and characterized by ¹H NMR, ¹³C NMR, and high resolution mass spectrometry (HRMS) and its purity was confirmed by liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LCMS). However, DMSO and chloroform solutions of **DT1** decompose within few hours to give complex mixtures of ring-opened products (Figure S1).²²

Crystals of **DT3** and **DT4** suitable for single crystal X-Ray analysis were obtained by slow evaporation of their respective dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) solutions. (For full structure determination details see the ESI.) In both cases, the deltamides adopt the *anti/anti-*conformation required for dual H-bond donation to anions. While the crystal structure of **DT3** is solvent free (Figure 2, top), the **DT4** structure incorporates a DMSO molecule. Interestingly, the DMSO forms a hydrogen bond with only one of the two available amide protons (N···O distance of 2.837(2) Å) (Figure 2, bottom). This observation is in contrast to the solid-state structures of a range of symmetrically substituted squaramides such as **SQ3**, **SQ5** or a 3,5-bis(*tert*-butyl) substituted squaramide, all of which were found to bind to the DMSO oxygen in the solid state through both amide hydrogen atoms.^{5,8}



Figure 2. Single crystal X-ray diffraction determined depictions of DT3 (top) and DT4·DMSO (bottom) with displacement ellipsoids shown at the 50% probability level. C=grey, O=red, N=blue, S=yellow, H=white, Hydrogen bonds=dashed lines. The N···O distance is 2.837(2) Å..

Anion Binding Studies.

With the deltamides and croconamides in hand, we proceeded to evaluate their anion binding abilities in d_6 -DMSO and d_3 -MeCN, to allow comparison to previously reported data for the squaramide and urea derivatives. Initial screening for anion

binding was performed by adding ten equivalents of the tetrabutylammonium salts of a range of halide (Cl⁻, Br⁻, l⁻) and monovalent oxoanions (HSO4, H2PO4, NO3, ReO4, CIO4, TsO, BzO⁻, AcO⁻) to d₆-DMSO solutions of receptors CR1-CR5 and DT2-DT5, respectively. For CR1-CR5, only the addition of chloride gave rise to significant downfield shifts of the croconamide NH protons indicating the formation of hydrogen bonds between the receptors and chloride. Addition of H₂PO₄, BzO', and AcO' led to the disappearance of the NH signals and a distinct color change from yellow to red, suggesting that these anions deprotonate CR1-CR5. This was confirmed by UV-visible spectroscopy, where upon addition of 10 equiv. of H₂PO₄ to CR5 the absorbance at 420 nm increased, together with the disappearance of the two absorption bands at 383 and 470 nm. Almost identical spectra were obtained upon addition of 10 equiv. of hydroxide, confirming the deprotonation event (Figure 3).

For **CR6**, binding to anions was not observed in either d₆-DMSO or d₃-MeCN. Signals attributable to the croconamide NH protons were not observed in the NMR spectra in either solvent, and the UV-vis spectra indicated that this compound exists in its deprotonated form in both DMSO and MeCN solution (Figure S5). Similar behavior has previously been observed for the analogous *p*-nitrophenyl squaramide **SQ6**.¹⁸



Figure 3. Representative UV-Vis spectra recorded over the course of a titration of CR5 (20μ M) with TBAOH (0 to 10 equiv.) in MeCN/water (9:1, v/v) at 298 K. [OH]=0, 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100, 110, 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 180, 200 μ M.

Subsequent titrations of **CR1-CR5** with TBACI were performed and the data analyzed using bindfit (v0.5)²³ and HypNMR.²⁴ In all cases, the best fit with the highest reproducibility was to a 1:1 binding model (Figure S29-S33) to give the association constants in Table 1. Unexpectedly, alkyl derivatives **CR1** and **CR2** were found to have higher affinities for chloride than the aryl derivatives **CR3-CR5**, and for the aryl derivatives, the addition of the electron withdrawing *p*-CF₃ group to **CR5** resulted in a decrease in affinity in comparison to that observed for phenyl derivative **CR3**. This trend is opposite that normally observed for urea and squaramide derivatives, where it is well-established that addition of aryl substituents bearing electron withdrawing groups increases affinity for a range of anions. $^{\rm 3.8}$

Table 1. Appar	ent Association	Constants ($K_{\rm a}, {\rm M}^{-1}$)	of	Deltamides	and
Croconamides for	or Anions in d ₆ -D	MSO ^a				

	Cľ	H ₂ PO ₄ ⁻	AcO ⁻	BzO
CR1	230	_c	_c	_c
CR2	110	_ ^c	_ ^c	_c
CR3	42	_ ^c	_c	_c
CR4	20	_c	_c	_c
CR5	19	_c	_c	_c
CR6	_c	_c	_c	_c
DT2	<5	110	11	6
DT3	9	>10 ⁴	2300	730
DT4	6	8700	1200	500
DT5	12	>10 ⁴	6500	4300
DT6 ^b	<100 ^d	_c	_c	_c

^{*a*} Determined by ¹H NMR spectroscopy in DMSO-*d*₆ (0.5% water) at 300 K unless otherwise noted. Anions were added as their tetrabutylammonium (TBA) salts. Values rounded to a maximum of two significant figures. Estimated errors in *K*_a <15%. ^{*b*} Binding studies performed by UV-vis spectroscopy in DMSO (0.5% water) at 298 K. ^{*c*} Addition of the anion caused the receptor to deprotonate. ^{*d*} Changes in spectra too small to fit to a binding model.

Given the propensity for the croconamides to deprotonate upon addition of basic anions in DMSO, we also evaluated their binding behavior in MeCN, since deprotonation of hydrogen bond donors by anions is less likely in this solvent.²⁵ In d₃-MeCN, downfield shifts of the signals attributable to the NH protons were observed upon addition of all halide anions (Cl, Br, and I) as well as NO₃, TsO⁻, and HSO₄⁻ and the titration data were fitted to 1:1 binding models (as above) to provide association constants for these anions (Table 2). However, the addition of H₂PO₄, BzO, and AcO again led to the deprotonation of receptors CR1-CR5 (as observed for these anions in DMSO). In d₃-MeCN, CR1-CR5 were observed to bind halides with complex stability decreasing across the series Cl > Br > l, reflecting a correlation between binding affinity and higher charge density of the anion. For the oxoanions, complex stability decreases along the series TsO > HSO₄ > NO₃, reflecting the intrinsic basicity of these oxoanions. For both halides and oxoanions these trends parallel those previously observed for both ureas and squaramides.9 However, in contrast to both ureas and squaramides, the alkyl croconamides have higher binding affinities for a given anion than the aryl derivatives, as was observed in d₆-DMSO.

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Table 2. Apparent Association Constants (K _a , M ⁻¹) of Deltamides and Croconamides for Anions in MeCN ^a										
Receptor		Associat	Association Constant $K_a(M^{-1})$							
		Cl	Br⁻	Г	H ₂ PO ₄ ⁻	BzO	AcO	NO ₃ ⁻	TsO ⁻	HSO₄ ⁻
Deltamides	DT4	630	120	27	>104	>10 ⁴	6500	48	900	590
	DT6 [♭]	2100	970	280	2.8×10 ⁷	2.4×10 ⁵	2.5×10 ⁶	_ c	3900	5.0×10 ⁴
Croconamides	CR1	>104	5300	230	d	d	d	300	1500	390
	CR2	>10 ⁴	5700	e	d	d	d	560	1900	680
	CR3	>10 ⁴	550	e	d	d	d	e	_ e	60
	CR4	1400	140	6	d	^d	d	13	32	21
	CR5	2100	280	22	d	d	d	31	110	43
		^f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f

^a Apparent association constants (K_a/M⁻¹) determined by ¹H NMR spectroscopy in MeCN-d₃ (0.5% water) at 300 K unless otherwise noted. Anions were added as their tetrabutylammonium (TBA) salts. Values rounded to a maximum of two significant figures. Estimated errors in Ka <15%. ^b Binding studies performed by UV-vis spectroscopy in MeCN (0.5% water) at 298 K. ^c Changes in UV-vis absorbance too small to obtain the association constant. ^d Addition of the anion resulted in deprotonation of the receptor, "K₂ could not be determined due to broadening of the NH proton signal." Receptor exists in its deprotonated form at neutral pH in MeCN.



Figure 4. ¹H NMR spectroscopic binding studies of DT3. (Top) Representative stack plot of the ¹H NMR spectrum of receptor DT3 (2.5 mM) upon titration with TBA benzoate in DMSO-d₆ (0.5% water) at 300 K. (Bottom) Fitting curves for the titration data of DT3 with chloride, benzoate, and acetate. The titration data was fitted to a 1:1 binding model.

For the deltamides DT2-DT5, an anion screen in d₆-DMSO (as described above) showed negligible shifts of the signals attributable to the NH protons upon addition of Br, I, HSO4, NO3, ReO₄, or CIO₄, with very small downfield shifts observed upon addition of Cl, and significant downfield shifts observed upon the addition of H₂PO₄, BzO, and AcO, indicating the formation of hydrogen bonds to these anions. Subsequent titrations with Cl⁻, H₂PO₄, BzO⁻, and AcO⁻ were performed and in all cases the binding data was best fit to a 1:1 binding model (Table 1 and Figure 4).^{26,27} For **DT2-DT5**, binding to Cl⁻ was found to be very weak ($K_a < 12 \text{ M}^{-1}$ in all cases), but stronger binding was observed to the oxoanions with binding affinities decreasing across the series $H_2PO_4^- > AcO^- > BzO^-$. This trend does not correlate with the basicity of the anions, in direct contrast to previous observations for the urea and squaramide compound series,^{9,28} nor does it correlate with the recently reported hydrogen bond acceptor parameter series, in which carboxylates are shown to be stronger hydrogen bond acceptors than ⁻O₂P(OR)₂.²⁹

In general, the series DT2-DT5 follows the expected trend of aryl substituents on the deltamide nitrogen atoms resulting in increased binding affinity for all anions in comparison to alkyl substituents and the introduction of electron withdrawing groups onto the deltamide substituents results in increased anion affinity, as has been previously observed for ureas and squaramides.⁸

The low solubility of the deltamides in MeCN prevented a detailed evaluation of the binding affinities of DT2, DT3 or DT5 in this solvent, but DT4 was sufficiently soluble to allow NMR titrations to be performed in d₃-MeCN with a wide range of anions, with subsequent determination of association constants by fitting to a 1:1 binding model (Table 2). In this solvent, the binding trend for the halide ions shows complex stability decreasing across the series Cl⁻ > Br⁻ > l⁻, while for the oxoanions, complex stability decreases along the series $H_2PO_4^- > AcO^- \approx BzO^- > TsO^- \approx$ $HSO_4^{-} >> NO_3^{-}$, with Cl having a similar affinity to HSO_4^{-} . For **DT6**, anion binding affinity was determined in more dilute solution using

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UV-vis spectroscopic titrations.³⁰ Addition of anions resulted in a red-shift of the absorbance band at 385 nm, with a clear isosbestic point indicating the presence of only two species in solution, consistent with the formation of 1:1 complexes (Figure 5, top). A similar trend in anion binding affinities was observed for DT6 under these conditions to that observed above for DT4 by NMR titration (Table 2). Notably, no deprotonation of this receptor was observed in MeCN. However, in DMSO, addition of H₂PO₄, AcO⁻ and BzO⁻ led to deprotonation of this receptor, as evidenced by a decrease in the absorbance band at 406 nm and concomitant increase in absorbance at 538 nm (Figure 5, bottom), which was accompanied by a colour change of the receptor solution from yellow to red. The addition of OH⁻ led to similar changes in the spectra, confirming that these were a result of deprotonation (Figure S70). This is comparable to the behavior of the corresponding *p*-nitrophenyl urea derivative, previously reported by Fabbrizzi and coworkers.³¹



Figure 5. UV-Vis Spectroscopic Binding Studies of **DT6**. (Top) Representative UV-Vis spectra recorded over the course of a titration of **DT6** (20 μ M) with TBA acetate in MeCN (0.5% water) at 298 K. [AcO] = 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 30, 34, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 100 μ M. Inset: Fitting curve for the titration data 414 nm to a 1:1 binding model. (Bottom) Representative UV-Vis spectra recorded over the course of a titration of **DT6** (20 μ M) with TBA acetate in DMSO (0.5% water) at 298 K. [AcO] = 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 24, 30, 40, 50, 60, 80, 100 μ M.

Crystals of the DT4 and DT5 complexes with benzoate suitable for single crystal X-Ray analysis were obtained by slow evaporation of DMSO solutions of DT4 and DT5, respectively in the presence of tetrabutylammonium benzoate (TBABzO). As shown in Figure 6, in the DT5-benzoate structure a DT5 molecule forms a 1:1 complex with a benzoate anion through two hydrogen bonds. The asymmetric interaction between the two at least in part reflects the difference between the 2.238(3) Å carboxylate oxygen-oxygen separation and the 3.582(2) Å amine nitrogennitrogen separation. In contrast, as Fig. 7 indicates, in the DT4benzoate crystal structure the benzoate bridges two (of three; see ESI material) crystallographically independent deltamide molecules, with one carboxylate oxygen participating in a hydrogen bond interaction with the amide proton of one deltamide and the other carboxylate oxygen likewise linked to the amide of the second deltamide. A water molecule provides a second hydrogen bond bridge between the two deltamides.



Figure 6. Single crystal X-ray diffraction determined depictions of the **DT5**-benzoate complex, with displacement ellipsoids shown at the 50% probability level. The tetrabutylammonium counterion and rotational disorder of the *p*-CF3 groups (see the ESI material) are omitted for clarity. C=grey, O=red, N=blue, F=bright green, H=white, Hydrogen bonds=dashed lines. The N···O distances are 2.715(2) and 2.736(2) Å.

The structures of the **DT4** and **DT5** complexes demonstrate binding mode flexibility that reflects both packing interactions and the difference in separation between the carboxylate oxygens and amine nitrogens. The DFT-optimized structures of **DT5** and the 1:1 **DT5** complexes with OAc⁻ and $H_2PO_4^-$ indicate that the $H_2PO_4^-$ ion is a better geometric match for the deltamide unit (Figure 8), requiring less alteration of the free **DT5** structure upon binding. This provides a possible explanation for the unusual binding trends observed for the deltamides with respect to these oxoanions, since any change to the structure required for binding to an anion would incur a 'reorganisation' energy penalty.

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Figure 7. Single crystal X-ray diffraction determined depiction of the solid state **DT4**-benzoate complex, with displacement ellipsoids at the 50% probability level. Two crystallographically independent **DT4** molecules are bridged by hydrogen bond interactions with a benzoate anion and a water molecule. A hydrogen bond interaction between the bridging water molecule and the benzoate anion is expected, however the water hydrogen sites were not located. A third crystallographically independent **DT4** molecule which does not participate in a hydrogen bonding interaction with the benzoate anion (see ESI material) and the tetrabutylammonium counterion are omitted for clarity. Disorder of the benzoate anion and the water molecule is also not shown (see ESI material). C=grey, O=red, N=blue, H=white, Hydrogen bonds=dashed lines.

pK_a determination. To gain further insight into the anion binding behavior of the croconamides and deltamides and place this in context with regards to that of the ureas and squaramides, we evaluated the Brønsted acidity of all four compound classes, either through direct measurement of experimental pK_a values or via computation (Table 3). Where possible, experimental pK_a values were determined by pH-spectrophotometric titrations in a mixture of acetonitrile-water (9/1, v/v) and in the presence of TBAPF₆ (0.1 M) as described previously for squaramide (SQ3 and SQ5, among others), thiosquaramide, urea (UR5), and sulfonamide based anion receptors.^{5,7} Additionally, and in cases where experimental values could not be obtained, theoretical pK_a values in MeCN were calculated using density functional theory (DFT) at the G3(MP2,CC)-(+)³² level in conjunction with the SMD implicit solvation model³³ (see ESI for full details).³⁴ In general, the experimentally and computationally determined pK_a values are in reasonable agreement (within 1.3 pK_a units) and allow for a comparison of the acidity of the four different receptor classes as well as for a comparison within one class.

For deltamides **DT1-DT5**, no deprotonation was observed in the pH-spectrophotometric titrations. This behavior is similar to that reported previously for **UR5**⁷ indicating that the pK_a values of deltamide based receptors **DT1-DT5** as well as the value for **UR5** lie outside the range covered by the described pH-spectrophotometric method, which is limited to compounds with

 $pK_a < 14.^7$ This is consistent with the pK_a values of **DT1-DT5** obtained computationally, which range from 13.9 to 22.4. In contrast, the pK_a for **DT6** was established experimentally as 12.0, indicating the increased acidity of the deltamide protons when the strongly electron withdrawing *p*-nitrophenyl substituent is appended to the nitrogen atom.



Figure 8. M06-2X/6-31+G(d) optimized molecular structure of **DT5**, **DT5**-benzoate, and **DT5**-dihydrogenphosphate complex in DMSO. H-H and O-O bond distances (Å) and C-C-N bond angles (°) are indicated. C=cyan, O=red, N=blue, F=pink, P=bronze, H=white.

Deprotonation of the croconamides was more readily observed experimentally. In the course of the pH-spectrophotometric titrations, **CR1** and **CR2** were found to undergo a single deprotonation event characterized by a decrease in absorbance at ~397 nm with an increase at approx. 430 nm (Figure 9). An absorbance peak at approx. 360 nm did not change significantly

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 $\label{eq:table_$

	p <i>K</i> a			p <i>K</i> a	
	Exp. ^a	Calc. ^b		Exp. ^a	Calc. ^b
UR1	n.d. ^c	26.3	SQ1	^h	16.7
UR2	n.d. ^c	24.3	SQ2	n.d. ^c	14.6
UR3	18.7 ^d , 19.5 ^e	18.3	SQ3	11.7 ⁱ , 12.5 ⁱ	^k
UR4	n.d. ^c	18.7	SQ4	n.d. ^c	12.9
UR5	f	15.3	SQ5	9.8 ⁱ	10.4
UR6	n.d. ^c	14.8	SQ6	n.d. ^c	10.0
DT1	g	22.4	CR1	10.2	11.2
DT2	h	20.8	CR2	9.3	10.4
DT3	h	15.8	CR3	8.4	7.1
DT4	h	16.3	CR4	8.6	7.8
DT5	h	13.9	CR5	7.3	6.8
DT6	12.0	12.9	CR6	/	5.9

^aExperimental values determined using the pH-spectrophotometric method described above in MeCN/water mixture (9/1, v/v; in the presence of 0.1 M TBAPF₆ unless otherwise stated. Errors estimated as ±0.5 pK_a units. ^bCalculated values determined in pure MeCN. Errors in calculated pK_a values (±1 pKa unit).³⁴ ^cThe pK_a value has not been determined or reported in the literature. ^dData from reference 37. Measured in dry DMSO at 25°C using the Bordwell overlapping indicator method;³⁶ error ±0.1 pK_a units. ^bData taken from reference 38. Measured in DMSO at 25°C using the Bordwell overlapping indicator method;³⁶ error ±0.1 pK_a units. ^cData taken from reference 38. Measured in DMSO at 25°C using the Bordwell overlapping indicator method;³⁶ error not reported. [']No deprotonation observed using the pH-spectrophotometric method described above as reported in reference 7. ^gReceptor not stable (see above). ^hPresent work. No deprotonation observed using the pH-spectrophotometric method,³⁶ error ±0.1 pK_a units. ^kReference *f*_a (alues a bordwell overlapping indicator method;³⁶ error ±0.1 pK_a units. ^bReference *f*_a (alues a bordwell overlapping indicator method;³⁶ error ±0.1 pK_a units. ^bReference *f*_a (aculations performed in this work. [']Not determined due to instability of receptor under acidic conditions.

throughout the titrations. However, for the aryl-substituted croconamides CR3, CR4 and CR5, a more complex titration profile was observed. This is most obvious for the ptrifluoromethylphenyl derivative CR5, although all compounds follow the same trend. At low pH, CR5 has a broad absorbance band (λ_{max} 416 nm) with a shoulder evident at approx. 374 nm. An absorbance of much lower intensity is also evident at 500 nm. As the pH is increased, the shoulder at 374 nm grows in intensity and an absorbance band grows at 454 nm, with a concomitant decrease in absorbance at 416 nm. As the pH is increased further (pH >9) the absorbance at 374 nm decreases in intensity while the absorbance band at 454 nm is blue-shifted to 422 nm. However, for this second transition, clear isosbestic points were not obtained, suggesting the presence of multiple species in solution. We postulate that the second transition may be the second deprotonation event for the aryl-substituted croconamides (CR3-CR5), which appear to be highly acidic, as indicated by their ready deprotonation by weakly basic anions such as H₂PO₄. This is consistent with the highly acidic nature of the parent croconic acid, for which the reported values of pK_{a1} and pK_{a2} are 0.80 and 2.24, respectively.¹¹ However, this could also reflect hydration or decomposition of the croconamide core under these conditions.³⁵ The experimentally obtained pK_a values of **CR1-CR5** corresponding to the first deprotonation event range from 7.3 to 10.2 and are summarized in Table 3. These values are in good agreement with the calculated values also shown in Table 3. In the case of **CR6**, the pK_a could not be determined experimentally, as the receptor was unstable in acidic conditions (pH < 5.5) as determined by changes in both the UV-vis spectrum and NMR spectra (Figure S88).



Figure 9. Absorption spectra taken over the course of a pH-spectrophotometric titration of **CR1** in acetonitrile/water solvent mixture (9:1, v/v; in the presence of 0.1 M TBAPF₆). (Inset): Four parameter sigmoid curve fit with the point of inflexion corresponding to the pK_a value of **CR1**.

While a direct comparison is not possible as a result of the different solvent systems used, both the experimental and computational pK_{a1} values determined for **CR5** (7.3 and 6.8) in this work are inconsistent with the previously reported pK_a for this compound in DMSO (10.8).¹⁵ Our titration data, which shows two clear transitions between pH 4 and 12, suggests that the previously reported value is in fact that of the second deprotonation event (p K_{a2}) for this molecule. Our lower p K_{a1} value is more consistent with the observation that CR5 is readily deprotonated upon addition of the relative weak base, H₂PO₄. The ease with which the croconamides are deprotonated is further demonstrated by the isolation of the tetrabutylammonium salt of the bis(o-chlorophenyl) croconamide CR7 upon slow evaporation of a MeCN solution of CR7 in the presence of five equivalents of tetrabutylammonium sulfate (TBA₂SO₄). This resulted in the formation of single crystals suitable for X-ray diffraction analysis. The so obtained X-ray crystal structure shows a singly deprotonated CR7 anion with a tetrabutylammonium counterion (TBA[CR7-H⁺]) (see Fig. 10 and the ESI material); the structure does not contain sulfate. The C-N bond length between the fivemembered ring carbon and the deprotonated nitrogen atom is 1.285(2) Å, while that of the opposite C-N bond is 1.349(2) Å. The C-O bond on the opposite side of the deprotonated nitrogen is slightly but significantly elongated with respect to the adjacent and the central C-O bond in the five-membered ring (1.239(2) Å c.f. 1.2262(19) Å and 1.2294(19) Å respectively). These observations

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are in agreement with the two resonance structures of [**CR7**-H⁺]⁻ (Fig. 10). The deprotonated croconamide crystal structure affirms the conclusions drawn from the ¹H NMR binding studies and pH titrations. Croconamides appear to be prone to deprotonation even in the presence of only slightly basic anions such as sulfate.



Figure 10. (Top) Single crystal X-ray diffraction determined depiction of [**CR7**-H⁺]⁻ and it's with TBA counterion. Displacement ellipsoids are shown at the 50% probability level; disorder found for 2-chlorophenyl residue has been omitted for clarity. C=grey, O=red, N=blue, CI=purple, H=white. (Bottom) Mesomeric structures of [**CR7**-H⁺]⁻.

Comparison of dual H-bond motifs. Table 4 summarizes the apparent association constants K_a obtained as part of this work for deltamides DT1-DT6, squaramides SQ1, SQ2, and SQ4, and croconamides CR1-CR6, with chloride and acetate in DMSO (0.5% water, unless otherwise noted). Where possible, literature values are also given for ureas UR1-UR6 and squaramides SQ3, SQ5, and SQ6. A number of differences are apparent between these dual H-bond motifs, with regards to anion binding affinities and selectivity. Some of these are partly explained by the differences in pK_a between the compound classes. For compounds bearing the same substituents, the trend for pK_a values is ureas > deltamides > squaramides > croconamides with the croconamides being $10 - 15 \text{ pK}_a$ units more acidic than the corresponding ureas. Within each compound class the diaryl derivatives are 4 - 8 pKa units more acidic than the dialkyl derivatives, with the addition of *p*-nitro or *p*-trifluoromethyl groups leading to decreased pK_a values compared to the unsubstituted phenyl derivatives.

Strikingly, the pK_a of the aryl croconamides is 6-8, indicating that they are partially deprotonated at neutral pH and explaining both

the low observed binding affinities for chloride ions and their deprotonation by acetate. A similar trend in both binding affinity and proton acidity has previously been observed for the thiosquaramides.⁵ However, the $pK_{a}s$ of the alkyl-substituted croconamides **CR1** and **CR2**, are similar to that of *N*,*N*⁻ diphenylsquaramide **SQ3** and this is reflected in the similar (and relatively high) binding affinities observed for chloride ions by **CR1** ($K_a = 230 \text{ M}^{-1}$) and **SQ3** ($K_a = 260 \text{ M}^{-1}$) in d₆-DMSO. Both the alkyl croconamides (**CR1**, **CR2**) and the arylsquaramides (**SQ3-SQ6**)

are deprotonated in DMSO solution upon addition of acetate. One additional factor that may contribute to the different trend observed for the croconamide series in comparison to the ureas and squaramides is the energy penalty required for the molecules to adopt the conformation required for anion binding. In DMSO solution, the anti/anti- conformation required for anion binding is favoured as a result of hydrogen bonding to DMSO solvent molecules. In this conformation there is a tendency towards planarization for all compounds upon chloride binding, increasing the sp₂ character on the nitrogen atom and providing more favourable electrostatic interactions with the anion.³⁴ The cost of this 'reorganisation' energy penalty is higher for aryl croconamides than for alkyl croconamides (Table S2) as a result of increased steric interaction between the phenyl rings and the carbonyl groups and this may contribute to the lower binding affinities observed for the aryl croconamides.

In contrast, both urea and deltamide series of compounds bind chloride only weakly ($K_a < 75 \text{ M}^{-1}$) in d₆-DMSO and binding affinities follow the trend aryl > alkyl with the introduction of electron withdrawing groups onto the aromatic substituents providing a significant boost in binding affinity for the urea series, but not for the deltamides. Since the deltamides are more acidic than the corresponding ureas, this difference can not be explained by differences in pK_a and is more likely a result of geometric factors, with the dual H-bond donors in the deltamides spaced further apart than they are in the corresponding ureas. Indeed, computational calculations suggest that complexation to chloride incurs a significantly higher energy penalty in deltamides.³⁴ Similarly, binding affinities for acetate are similar for both UR3 and **DT3**, but **DT3** is approx. 2.5 pK_a units more acidic than **UR3**, so would be expected to bind acetate more strongly if acidity of the NH donor was the primary consideration.

The binding affinities for the *p*-nitrophenyl derivatives **UR6**, **DT6**, and SQ6 in MeCN are provided in Table 5. No binding was observed for CR6 under these conditions, as the receptor exists predominantly in its deprotonated form. However, the differences in binding affinities between the other dual H-bond donors are readily observed in this less polar solvent. While all three receptors display similar binding affinities for acetate (log K_a = 6.4-6.6), chloride binding affinities vary by three orders of magnitude, with SQ6 > UR6 > DT6. DT6 is therefore better able to discriminate acetate from chloride than either SQ6 or UR6. DT6 also displays significantly higher affinity for H₂PO₄⁻ than either SQ6 or UR6, binding to this anion with a higher affinity than it displays for acetate (DT6: log K_a 7.45 for H₂PO₄, log K_a 6.40 for AcO⁻); this trend is opposite to that displayed by either UR6 or SQ6 and does not correlate with anion basicity. Thus, both deltamides and ureas favor binding to oxoanions whereas the

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squaramides display similar affinities to both carboxylates and chloride. In addition, the deltamides have a subtly different selectivity profile to the ureas as a result of the greater distance between the hydrogen bond donor atoms.

Table 4. Apparent Association Constants for Ureas UR1-UR6, Deltamides DT1-DT6, Squaramides SQ1-SQ6, and Croconamides CR1-CR6 with chloride and acetate in DMSO^a

	K _a (M ⁻¹)			<i>K</i> _a (M ⁻¹)	
	Cl	AcO		Cl	AcO
UR1	< 10 ^b	c	SQ1	56	2200
UR2	c	c	SQ2	57	2000 ^k
UR3	31 ^d	2100 ^e	SQ3	260 ^d	c
UR4	c	c	SQ4	300	
UR5	75 ^d	c	SQ5	460 ^d	c
UR6	120 ^f	>10 ⁴ ^g	SQ6	m,i	_′
DT1	h	h	CR1	230	_/
DT2	< 5	11	CR2	110	_/
DT3	9	2300	CR3	42	
DT4	6	6500	CR4	20	
DT5	12	1200	CR5	19, 10 ^m	
DT6	<100 ⁱ	/	CR6		_/

^aApparent association constants (K_a/M⁻¹) determined by ¹H NMR spectroscopy in DMSO-d₆ (0.5% water) at 300 K unless otherwise noted. Anions were added as their tetrabutylammonium (TBA) salts unless otherwise noted. Values rounded to a maximum of two significant figures. Estimated errors in K_a <15% unless otherwise noted. ^bValue reported in reference 40 for the UR1 analogue 1-butyl-3-isopentylurea as determined by ¹H NMR spectroscopy in DMSO-d₆ (0.5% water) at 298 K (estimated error <15%). ^cK_a not reported in the literature. Value from reference 8. K_a in DMSO-d₆ (0.5% water) at 298 K (estimated error in $K_a < 15\%$). Value from reference 41. K_a in DMSO- d_6 (0.5% water) at 298 K (error in $K_a \pm 18\%$). ^f Value from reference 42. K_a in DMSO- d_6 (0.5% water) at 298 K (error in K_a ±2%). ⁹Value from reference 42. K_a in DMSO-d₆ (0.5% water) at 298 K. Acetate was added as its tetramethylammonium salt. hReceptor not stable. The absorbance changes observed during UV-vis spectroscopic titrations of DT6 with chloride in DMSO-d₆ (0.5% water) at 298 K were too small to obtain an accurate value for K_a. ^JAddition of the anion caused the receptor to deprotonate. ^kValue from reference 17. K_a in DMSO-d₆ at 295 K (error in K_a <5%). Acetate was added as its tetramethylammonium salt. ¹The receptor exists in its deprotonated form in DMSO. "Value from reference 15. K_a in dry DMSO d_6 at 295 K (error in $K_a < 1\%$)

Table 5. Apparent Association Constants (log K_a) for *p*-nitrophenyl Derivativesin MeCN at 25 °C, Determined by UV-vis Titration.

Anion	UR6ª	DT6	SQ6 ª	CR6
CI	4.55	3.32	6.05	Deprot.
Br⁻	3.22	2.99	4.70	Deprot.
Г	<2	2.44	3.51	Deprot.
NO ₃ ⁻	3.65	<2	3.68	Deprot.
HSO4 ⁻	4.26	4.70	4.02	Deprot.
TsO ⁻	n.d.	3.59	n.d.	Deprot.
H ₂ PO ₄ ⁻	5.37	7.45	5.42	Deprot.
AcO	6.61	6.40	6.5	Deprot.
BzO		5.38		Deprot.

^a Values from reference 9.

Conclusions

A library of compounds incorporating dual H-bond motifs in the form of croconamides and the hitherto unreported deltamides has been prepared and their anion binding behavior and Brønsted acidity has been evaluated and compared to that of the known dual H-bond motifs, the ureas and squaramides. The croconamides were found to be considerably more acidic than the corresponding squaramides, and displayed an unusual trend in chloride binding affinities, with the N,N'-dialkylcroconamides having higher affinities than the N,N'-diaryl derivatives. This was attributed to a combination of the N,N'-diaryl derivatives existing partially in deprotonated form at neutral pH, therefore reducing their ability to bind to anions, and the higher 'reorganisation energy' penalty for aryl- vs alkyl-croconamides . In contrast, the deltamides are less acidic than the squaramides, but more acidic than the ureas. Within the deltamide series, the anion affinity trend is analogous to that observed previously for both ureas and squaramides, with the N,N'-diaryl derivatives displaying higher affinity than the N,N'-dialkyl derivatives, and the introduction of electron withdrawing groups to the aryl substituents resulting in increased anion affinity. Hence binding affinity within a series reflects the inherent acidity of the amide protons.

Some interesting differences in anion binding selectivities emerge when different dual H-bond cores with the same substituents are compared. The deltamides display lower anion binding affinities for chloride than the corresponding ureas and squaramides, whereas the affinity of all three dual H-bond cores for acetate ions is similar. In contrast to the ureas and squaramides, where anion binding affinity correlates with anion basicity, the deltamides also display higher affinity for $H_2PO_4^-$ than for carboxylates and other oxoanions. This can be attributed to the differences in structure between these three cores, which position the amide protons at different distances and different angles with respect to one another. Hence the geometric match between the receptor and anion appears to be a significant factor in determining anion selectivity.

These differences in binding selectivity for the different dual Hbond donor cores could be exploited through their incorporation into more complex molecular scaffolds containing multiple dual hydrogen bond donors, where, in addition to matching anion geometry through scaffold design, the inherent selectivity of the dual H-bond donor motifs can now be tuned to match the anion of interest, while the strength of the interaction for a given core can be tuned through appropriate substitution of the amide nitrogen atoms. This will assist in the design of future anion receptors that bind to their targets using hydrogen-bonding.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Australian Research Council for financial support (DP170100118 and DP140100227). We thank the University of Sydney for an International Postgraduate Research Scholarship (V.E.Z.) and the School of Chemistry (USyd) for John A. Lamberton Scholarships (V.E.Z. and L.Q.). Data collection assistance from the EPSRC funded UK National Crystallography Service at the University of Southampton is gratefully acknowledged.

Keywords: anion recognition • hydrogen bonding • deltamide • croconamide • squaramide

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Bite-angle and Brønsted acidity control anion binding affinity and selectivity by amides from the oxocarbon family.



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Deltamides and croconamides: expanding the range of dual H-bond donors for selective anion recognition