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Combined 1,4-butanediol lactonization and transfer hydrogenation/hydrogenolysis of furfural-derivatives under continuous flow conditions†

Christof Aellig, Florian Jenny, David Scholz, Patrick Wolf,‡ Isabella Giovinazzo, Fabian Kollhoff and Ive Hermans^{*}

The oxygen-free lactonization of 1,4-butanediol to γ -butyrolactone coupled with a sequential reductive upgrading of furfural derivatives following a transfer hydrogenation/hydrogenolysis mechanism was studied over AlO_x-supported copper catalysts. The Cu–Al hydrotalcite-like catalyst-precursor was first reduced with H₂, forming dispersed Cu nanoparticles. The catalyst was characterized and tested for the dehydrogenation of various primary and secondary alcohols, optimizing the activation procedure and reaction conditions. Subsequently, the combined transfer hydrogenation/hydrogenolysis to furfural derivatives was investigated. All reactions were performed under continuous flow conditions to increase the space-time yield and the selectivity towards the desired products, as well as to study the catalyst stability.

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Introduction

A key challenge for the chemical industry is the replacement of the current oil-derived feedstocks with readily available and preferably renewable raw materials. Furfural and 5-(hydroxymethyl)furfural (HMF), available from the dehydration of biomass-derived sugars,¹ as shown in Scheme 1, are potential key platform molecules in the manufacturing of value-added chemicals. 2,5-Bis(hydroxymethyl)furan (BHMF), obtained by hydrogenation of HMF, is, for instance, used as an intermediate in the production of polyurethane foams and polyesters.² Furfuryl alcohol (FA), the hydrogenation product of furfural, is widely used in the production of resins and as an intermediate for various compounds such as vitamin C or lysine.³ Further hydrogenolysis of FA and BHMF to methylfuran (MeF) and 2,5-dimethylfuran (DMeF) provides potential fuel substitutes which have more desirable properties than other bio-fuels such as ethanol.⁴ Hydrogenation and hydrogenolysis of furfural have been extensively investigated with a variety of catalysts, including not only Ru,^{5a,b} Pd^{5c,e,7} and Ir^{5d} but also promising noble metal-free and bimetallic catalysts^{5e-i} based on Cu and Ni were reported.

For the reductive upgrading of HMF, similar noble-metal catalysts have been used, including Au and Pt catalysts.^{5d,6}

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Usually hydrogenation and hydrogenolysis reactions are performed under hydrogen pressure. In order to circumvent the inherent problems associated with H_2 (such as storage, safety and eco-efficiency), other hydrogen sources like 2-propanol,^{5b,j,6b,8} formic acid^{5d} or other alcohols^{5k,l} have recently gained a lot of attention. In case of alcohols, low-cost carbonyl compounds (*e.g.* acetone) are formed that have to be



Scheme 1 Reductive upgrading of furfural and 5-(hydroxymethyl)furfural (HMF) to furfuryl alcohol (FA), 2,5-bis(hydroxymethyl)furan (BHMF), 2-methylfuran (MeF) and 2,5-dimethylfuran (DMeF) via transfer hydrogenation/hydrogenolysis with parallel oxygen-free lactonization of 1,4-butanediol (BDO) to γ -butyrolactone (GBL).

ETH Zurich, Institute for Chemical and Bioengineering, Wolfgang-Pauli-Strasse 10, 8093 Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: hermans@chem.wisc.edu

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Current address: University of Wisconsin – Madison, Department of Chemistry & Department of Chemical and Biological Engineering, 1101 University Ave, Madison WI 53706 USA.

For these reasons, one could envision improving reductive upgrading by selecting an appropriate renewable hydrogen source which would yield a valuable side product. The oxygen-free 1,4-butanediol (BDO) lactonization to γ -butyrolactone (GBL), a useful intermediate in the synthesis of fine chemicals,^{9b} produces two equivalents of molecular hydrogen. This makes BDO an excellent hydrogen source, readily available from fermentation of biomass.⁷ In the past, lactonization has been performed with various oxidants and catalysts,⁹ including some Cu catalysts.¹⁰ In addition, Mizugaki et al.¹¹ reported that copper nanoparticles on AlO_x (Cu/AlO_x) derived from Cu-Al hydrotalcite (Cu-Al-HT) show an excellent performance in the hydrogenolysis of glycerol to 1,2-propanediol. Prompted by these literature observations, we decided to investigate transfer hydrogenation/hydrogenolysis using BDO as the hydrogen donor in the reductive upgrading of furfural and HMF with a Cu/AlOx catalyst under continuous flow conditions.

Results and discussion

Catalyst synthesis and activity

Various copper-containing materials were synthesized following a co-precipitation method as described in the experimental section. The catalyst composition was initially optimized in terms of activity and selectivity for the conversion of the BDO-furfural mixture by screening different supports (Al₂O₃, SiO₂ and Fe₂O₃) and Cu loadings (see Tables S1 and S2 in the ESI†). The XRD pattern of the most promising Cu–Al-HT catalyst precursor is characteristic for hydrotalcite-like materials (Fig. 1 and S1†). The layered structure of the precursor can also be observed in an electron micrograph (Fig. S2†). Reduction of the material under a H₂ flow ($T \ge 200 \text{ °C}$) yielded copper nanoparticles on AlO_x, as evidenced by using the HAADF-STEM (Fig. S3 and S5†). The XRD pattern shows the formation of both Cu and Cu₂O phases (Fig. 1 and S1†).



Fig. 1 XRD patterns of Cu–Al-HT as prepared, the reduced catalyst (25 mL min⁻¹ H₂ flow, 45 min, 250 °C) and the catalyst exposed to the reaction solution (c_{BDO} : 0.2 mol L⁻¹, $c_{furfural}$: 0.2 mol L⁻¹, p: 16 bar, *T*: 220 °C) for 6 hours.

The XRD pattern of a catalyst exposed to H_2 (25 mL min⁻¹) at 250 °C for 4 hours does not show significant differences to the XRD pattern of a catalyst reduced for only 45 minutes (Fig. S7†). This indicates that the crystalline phases of the catalyst did not significantly change after 45 minutes of activation.

Catalytic activity studies were performed in a continuous flow reactor (Scheme S1[†]), offering several advantages over batch reactors, such as improved control of reaction parameters, enhanced heat- and mass-transfer, better mixing of the reactants, shorter reaction times and smaller reactor volumes.¹² Initial catalytic experiments focused on the oxygen-free dehydrogenation of alcohols. Although the reaction was performed at 16 bar over-pressure, H₂ gas bubbles were observed at the exit of the reactor. Therefore, the liquid holdups were calculated using the correlation of Larachi *et al.*¹³ for trickle bed reactors (see ESI[†]) in order to accurately determine contact times.

A significantly higher activity was observed when the catalyst was reduced at 250 instead of 200 °C (Fig. S8†). Temperature Programmed Reduction (TPR) (Fig. S9[†]) reveals that the Cu²⁺-to-Cu⁰ reduction only starts at around 200 °C, and this observation corroborates the working hypothesis that the active phase of the catalyst consists of dispersed copper nanoparticles. The dehydrogenation of various primary and secondary alcohols was investigated and the results are summarized in Table 1. In the case of benzyl alcohol and 2-heptanol, the catalyst did not only show activity in the dehydrogenation but also in the hydrogenolysis reaction, forming toluene and heptane, respectively. In the case of the conversion of BDO to GBL, the catalyst showed high activity and selectivity towards the desired lactone product (Fig. 2). Small quantities of 3-hydroxytetrahydrofuran were detected by GC-MS, supporting the proposed reaction mechanism in Scheme 2.

We emphasize that no activity could be observed in blank experiments where the reactor was only filled with quartz particles or an HT support (after thermal activation).

XRD analysis of the spent catalyst (6 hours on stream) reveals that the Cu_2O phase completely disappeared and only elemental copper was left. Two additional peaks appeared (Fig. 1 and S1†), indicating the formation of crystalline

 Table 1
 Oxygen-free dehydrogenation of different alcohols to their corresponding carbonyl compounds and lactonization of BDO to GBL

Substrate	Product	Conversion ^a /%	Yield ^a /%
ОН	0	51	31 ^b
он	\sim	22	19
ОН		86	80 ^c
ноон	[°}=0	100	98

^{*a*} Solvent: 1,4-dioxane, c_{alcohol} : 0.2 mol L⁻¹ *p*: 16 bar, *T*: 220 °C, residence time: 2.7 min, activation *T*: 250 °C (25 mL min H₂ flow, 45 min). ^{*b*} Yield of toluene: 18%. ^{*c*} Yield of heptane: 3%.



Fig. 2 BDO conversion (X) and GBL yield (Y) against contact time (activation T: 250 °C (25 mL min⁻¹ H₂ flow, 45 min), c_{BDO} : 0.2 mol L⁻¹, p: 16 bar, T: 220 °C).



Scheme 2 Proposed mechanism of the oxygen-free lactonization of BDO to GBL.

phases of alumina during the reaction.¹⁴ Although there is a clear difference in activity (Fig. S8†), no significant difference in the diffractograms of the catalysts activated at 200 °C and 250 °C can be observed (Fig. 1 and S1†). However, there is a difference in the HAADF-STEM images after reaction. The catalyst that was activated at 250 °C showed clearly segregated Cu nanoparticles with an average particle size of 20–40 nm (Fig. S6†), whereas the catalyst that was activated at 200 °C showed a more disperse distribution with large particles up to 60 nm (Fig. S4†). This difference in the structure of the catalyst probably explains the difference in reactivity (Fig. S8†). Further increase of the reduction temperature, however, leads to the formation of larger and less active particles.

Temperature dependence and mass transfer

The Arrhenius plots obtained in the temperature range 170 to 220 °C, based on BDO consumption without acceptor or



Fig. 3 Arrhenius plots based on BDO consumption of pure BDO, BDObenzaldehyde, BDO-HMF and BDO-furfural transfer hydrogenation systems (activation *T*: 250 °C (25 mL min⁻¹ H₂ flow, 45 min), c_{BDO} : 0.2 mol L⁻¹, $c_{acceptor}$: 0.2 mol L⁻¹, *p*: 16 bar, *T*: 170-220 °C).

with benzaldehyde used as H-acceptor, show clear curvatures (Fig. 3). This observation can point towards (i) mass-transfer limitations at higher temperatures, (ii) a change in the rate-determining step, or (iii) a rate-determining elementary reaction step which cannot be expressed by a simple powerlaw type model. In contrast, the Arrhenius plots of HMF and furfural as H-acceptors are perfectly linear (Fig. 3), both giving an activation energy of 35 ± 1 kcal mol⁻¹, suggesting that the dehydrogenation of BDO to 4-hydroxy-n-butanal is the rate-determining step (RDS) (Scheme 2). This is confirmed by the fact that the reaction rate of both BDO and furfural consumption is first order in BDO (Fig. S10[†]). At reaction temperatures below 190 °C, the slopes associated with pure BDO and the BDO/benzaldehyde transfer-hydrogenation system are linear, yielding the same activation energy of $35 \pm 1 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ as the BDO/furfural and BDO/HMF systems. This leads to the assumption that in the 170-190 °C temperature range, the RDS is the same for all of these systems.

Interestingly, at low reaction temperatures, the overall reaction rate is significantly lower for the BDO/furfural and BDO/HMF systems than for the BDO and BDO/benzaldehyde systems, despite our hypothesis of BDO dehydrogenation being the rate-determining step. One plausible explanation for this observation could be the strong adsorption of HMF and furfural to the catalyst, reducing the number of BDOdehydrogenation sites, lowering the pre-exponential factor.

In order to test for external mass-transfer limitations (film diffusion), different reactor lengths were tested, adjusting the flow rate in a way that the residence time remains constant. According to film theory, the liquid film around the catalyst particle gets thinner with increasing flow rate. As a consequence, mass transfer would be enhanced, resulting in an increase in conversion if this transfer were to be the controlling step. Changing the flow rate did however not significantly affect the conversion of both BDO and benzaldehyde (Fig. 4). Therefore, external mass-transfer limitations can be excluded. On the other hand, the activation energy above 210 °C clearly decreased to below 10 kcal mol⁻¹. Since diffusion



Fig. 4 Conversion of BDO and benzaldehyde for different column lengths (6 cm, 10 cm and 15 cm) adjusting the flow rate to keep the residence time at 0.26 min (activation *T*: 250 °C (25 mL min⁻¹ H₂ flow, 45 min), c_{BDO} : 0.2 mol L⁻¹, $c_{benzaldehyde}$: 0.2 mol L⁻¹, p: 16 bar, *T*: 220 °C).

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limitations could be excluded, the reaction mechanism is apparently more complex and cannot be expressed by a simple power-law type model at higher temperatures. Further kinetic modeling is required to rationalize these observations.

The same test for external diffusion limitations was also performed with the BDO-furfural mixture at 220 $^{\circ}$ C (Fig. S11†) showing, as expected, no dependence of the conversion on the flow rate.

Catalyst stability

In order to test the long-term stability of the catalyst, a reaction with the BDO-benzaldehyde mixture was performed at 220 °C over 24 h. Over the first 12 hours, a slight deactivation could be observed (viz., a decrease of 5% in the BDO conversion and 10% for benzaldehyde; in agreement with the reaction stoichiometry) as shown in Fig. S14.† After 12 hours, the catalytic performance remained constant and no further deactivation could be observed. Although several trends could explain the decrease in conversion over the first 12 hours, no evidence for significant copper leaching could be obtained from ICP-OES analysis after digestion of the catalyst. HAADF-STEM analysis reveals an increase in the particle size (from around 20 nm to 40 nm) of the freshly activated catalyst at 250 °C and after 6 hours of reaction with the BDO-furfural mixture (Fig. S5 and S6⁺). EDXS analysis (Fig. S12 and S13[†]) clearly shows that the carbon content on the support is significantly higher after reaction. Based on these observations, we propose that the main reason for the slight loss in activity is sintering and coking of the catalyst. A 5% increase in activity could be observed after air calcination of the used catalyst (after 24 h on stream) at 450 °C, followed by reactivation under H₂, indicating that coking is indeed (partially) contributing to deactivation. Although no significant Cu leaching could be observed in the present system, we emphasize that real biomass streams may contain residual water from previous processing, and that leaching of Cu could become an issue.15

Transfer hydrogenation/hydrogenolysis of furfural and HMF

The hydrogenation of furfural with BDO yielded 99% FA and 57% GBL at a residence time of 0.65 minutes under continuous flow conditions (Fig. 5). One can clearly see that FA is decreasing at residence times higher than 0.5 min due to hydrogenolysis to MeF and other side reactions like decarbonylation and ring hydrogenation. The by-products furan, THF and 2-methyltetrahydrofuran were detected by GC-MS. Because of the low selectivity towards the desired MeF product, more focus was put on the selective conversion of furfural to FA and of BDO to GBL (Fig. 5). When stoichiometric amounts of BDO (0.1 mol L⁻¹ instead of 0.2 mol L⁻¹) were used in combination with furfural (0.2 mol L⁻¹), only an 81% yield of FA could be obtained at 100% BDO conversion.

The transfer hydrogenation/hydrogenolysis of HMF proceeds mainly *via* BHMF, which, subsequently, undergoes hydrogenolysis *via* 2-methylfurfuryl alcohol (MFA) to DMeF.



Fig. 5 Conversion of BDO to GBL and furfural to FA (activation T: 240 °C (25 mL min⁻¹ H₂ flow, 45 min), $c_{\text{BDO}}: 0.2 \text{ mol } \text{L}^{-1}$, $c_{\text{furfural}}: 0.2 \text{ mol } \text{L}^{-1}$, p: 16 bar, T: 220 °C).

Traces of 2-methylfurfural (MeFF) could be observed at low residence times using the GC-MS. At higher residence times, traces of 2,5-dimethyltetrahydrofuran could be detected (Scheme 3).

At a residence time of 0.6 minutes the hydrogenation of HMF yields 93% BHMF and 28% GBL at conversions of 94% and 29% for HMF and BDO, respectively. HMF deoxygenation results in a 72% yield of DMF at 100% HMF and BDO conversions and a 99% GBL yield after 29 minutes (Fig. 6).

Conclusions

The high oxygen content of biomass-derived platform molecules asks for efficient methods for the reductive upgrading to chemicals and fuels. After activation of a Cu–Al HT-like precursor under H_2 at temperatures above 200 °C, Cu nanoparticles dispersed on AlO_x are formed. The present catalyst is active not only in the oxygen-free dehydrogenation of alcohols to their corresponding carbonyl compounds, but also for the oxygen-free lactonization of BDO to GBL with parallel hydrogenation/hydrogenolysis of furfural or HMF. The use of 1,4-butanediol as the hydrogen donor has several advantages: (i) it can be obtained by fermentation, (ii) it releases two equivalents of H_2 , and (iii) the product GBL has many applications and can be further used in the chemical value-chain. Depending on residence time, FA can be obtained with a yield of 99%. At longer residence times, MeF and other



Scheme 3 Reaction network of the transfer hydrogenation/ hydrogenolysis of HMF to BHMF and DMeF.



Fig. 6 Conversion of BDO to GBL and HMF to BHMF and DMF (activation *T*: 250 °C (25 mL min⁻¹ H₂ flow, 45 min), c_{BDO} : 0.6 mol L⁻¹, c_{HMF} : 0.2 mol L⁻¹, *p*: 16 bar, *T*: 220 °C).

ring-hydrogenation and decarbonylation products are formed. In the case of HMF, BHMF can be obtained with a 93% yield at a residence time of 0.6 min. The subsequent hydrogenolysis of BHMF yields 72% DMeF after 29 minutes contact time.

The stability of the catalyst is tested over 24 hours showing that the conversion of both BDO and benzaldehyde slightly decreases over the first 12 hours, thereafter remaining stable. The reason for the deactivation can at least partially be attributed to sintering and coking.

Experimental section

Quantification of furfural (Sigma-Aldrich, 99%), FA (Aldrich, 98%), HMF (Aldrich, \geq 99%), BHMF, DMeF (TCI, >98%), BDO (ABCR, 99%) and GBL (Acros, 99%) was done with dodecane (Acros, 99%) as the internal standard and benzal-dehyde (Acros, >98%), benzyl alcohol (Acros, 99%), heptanal (ABCR, 97%), 1-heptanol (ABCR, 99%), 2-heptanone (ABCR, 99%) and 2-heptanol (Acros, >99%) with biphenyl (Acros, 99%) as the internal standard using a GC-FID equipped with an HP-FFAP column. 1,4-dioxane (Fluka, \geq 99.5%) was used as the solvent in all experiments.

Synthesis of BHMF

In a solution of HMF (Aldrich-Fine Chemicals, 99%; 2.02 g, 16 mmol) in dry methanol (ABCR-Chemicals, 99.9; 16 mL), NaBH₄ (1.21 g, 32 mmol) was slowly added at 273 K under constant stirring. After addition of the reductant, the ice bath was removed and the solution was stirred at room temperature for an additional 15 min. The reaction was quenched with 4 mL deionized water and 5 mL HCl (2 M). The product was extracted 7 times with 10 mL ethyl acetate and subsequently dried over MgSO₄. After filtration the solvent was removed under reduced pressure yielding solid BHMF (0.65 g, 55%).

Synthesis of Cu-Al-HT

Solutions of $Cu(NO_3)_2$ ·3H₂O (Aldrich-Fine Chemicals, 99%; 6.04 g, 25 mmol) and Al(NO₃)₃·9H₂O (Aldrich-Fine Chemicals,

99%; 4.96 g, 13.2 mmol) in deionized water (35 mL) and Na_2CO_3 (Acros Organics, 99.6; 2.98 g, 28 mmol) in deionized water (30 mL) were added dropwise simultaneously to 50 mL of deionized water in a beaker under vigorous stirring and the pH was kept constant at 8–9 by adding NaOH (12 g, 0.3 mol) in deionized water (100 mL). The resulting pale blue slurry was transferred into a round-bottom flask and aged at 65 °C for two hours. The product was filtrated and washed thoroughly with deionized water and dried at 65 °C in a vacuum oven for 16 hours. Reduced Cu-loadings were achieved by reducing the amount of $Cu(NO_3)_2$ ·3H₂O to 0.5 and 0.25 of the initial amount.

Synthesis of Cu/Fe₂O₃

Cu/Fe₂O₃ was prepared according to the above mentioned procedure by replacing Al(NO₃)₃·9H₂O with the corresponding amount of Fe(NO₃)₃·9H₂O (Merck, \geq 98%).

Synthesis of Cu/SiO₂

Cu/SiO₂ was prepared according to a literature procedure.¹⁶ An aqueous solution of NaOH (4 M) was added dropwise to a solution of Cu(NO₃)₂·3H₂O (11.66 g, 48.3 mmol) under vigorous stirring. In the resulting slurry 5.29 g of colloidal silica solution (30% SiO₂ in water, Aldrich) was added. The gel was aged at 65 °C for two hours. After filtration the product was washed thoroughly with deionized water and dried in a vacuum oven at 65 °C for 16 hours.

Continuous flow experiments

A tubular reactor (\emptyset 4.6 mm, Scheme S1[†]) was packed with a mixture (void fraction 0.35) of Cu–Al-HT (1.5 g) diluted with quartz (0.9 g; \emptyset 0.1–0.2 mm) and attached to a pre-column (\emptyset 4.6 mm, length: 10 cm) filled with glass spheres (\emptyset 0.8 mm). The inlet of the reactor was connected to an HPLC pump; the outlet to a back-pressure regulator. The catalyst was pretreated at 250 °C or 200 °C, under ambient pressure and a constant H₂ flow (25 ml min⁻¹) for 45 min. Prior to pumping the reaction solvent over the catalyst bed the pressure was increased to 16 bar H₂ pressure with the use of the back-pressure regulator. Before starting the reaction, the H₂-line was closed and the pressure was kept at 16 bar to prevent evaporation of the solvent.

Catalyst characterization

The copper contents of the untreated, reduced and used catalysts were determined by using an ICP-OES (HORIBA Ultra 2). The reduced catalyst was prepared according to the pretreatment procedure described above. For ICP-OES measurements all samples were calcined in air at 600 °C for 5 hours and dissolved in *aqua regia* (37% HCl:65% HNO₃, 3:1). The copper contents were determined to be 65.6 wt% (untreated), 62.6 wt% (reduced at 200 °C), 55.3 wt% (reduced at 250 °C). Powder X-ray diffraction measurements were conducted using a PANalytical X'Pert Pro-MPD (CuK α radiation,

X'Celerator linear detector system, $2\theta = 10-70^{\circ}$, step size of 0.033°, ambient conditions). TEM images of untreated and STEM images of reduced and used catalysts were recorded using a Hitachi HD2700CS STEM (aberration-corrected dedicated STEM, cold field-emission source, 200 kV). H₂-TPR of untreated Cu–Al-HT was performed using a Thermo TPDRO 1100.

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