

Exploiting Potential Inversion for Photoinduced Multielectron Transfer and Accumulation of Redox Equivalents in a Molecular Heptad

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Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Photoinduced multielectron transfer and reversible accumulation of redox equivalents is accomplished in a fully integrated molecular heptad composed of four donors, two photosensitizers, and one acceptor. The second reduction of the dibenzo[1,2]dithiin acceptor occurs more easily than the first by 1.3 V, and this potential inversion facilitates the light-driven formation of a two-electron reduced state with a lifetime of 66 ns in deaerated CH₃CN. The quantum yield for formation of this doubly charge-separated photoproduct is 0.5%. In acidic oxygen-free solution, the reduction product is a stable dithiol. Under steady-state photoirradiation, our heptad catalyzes the two-electron reduction of an aliphatic disulfide via thiolate-disulfide interchange. Exploitation of potential inversion for the reversible light-driven accumulation of redox equivalents in artificial systems is unprecedented and the use of such a charge-accumulated state for multielectron photoredox catalysis represents an important proof-of-concept.

N atural oxygenic photosynthesis relies on the temporary accumulation and storage of redox equivalents on plastoquinone and the oxygen-evolving complex before stable reduction and oxidation products are formed. Similar strategies could be interesting for artificial photosynthesis, and therefore significant attention is currently devoted to light-driven accumulation of redox equivalents in artificial systems.¹ With sacrificial electron donors or acceptors, the accumulation of multiple electrons or holes on a given molecular entity is readily achievable,² but use of such reagents does not permit sustainable solar energy conversion. Consequently, it is desirable to explore the basic concepts that allow for longlived (>10 ns) accumulation of redox equivalents without sacrificial reagents.

Photoinduced transfer of single electrons has been explored in many covalent donor-acceptor compounds,³ but the transfer of multiple electrons is yet a great challenge.⁴ Excitation with two or more photons can trigger a multitude of processes, many of which are either nonproductive or even counter-productive.^{1,5} Consequently, only a handful of prior studies achieved light-driven accumulation of redox equivalents in molecular systems without sacrificial reagents.^{1,5a,6}

In all these prior studies, the second redox process was thermodynamically more difficult to perform than the first, and this made the accumulation of redox equivalents all the more

challenging. We hypothesized that an acceptor exhibiting redox potential inversion, i.e., a compound in which the second reduction occurs more easily than the first,⁸ could facilitate the light-driven accumulation of reduction equivalents. There are a number of possible acceptor units,^{8,9} and we were inspired by prior electrochemical and computational studies of bipyridinium disulfides and dibenzo [1,2] dithiin (PhSSPh) compounds.¹⁰ We decided to incorporate the latter as a central acceptor unit between two $\operatorname{Ru}(\operatorname{bpy})_3^{2+}$ (bpy = 2,2'-bipyridine) photosensitizers equipped with peripheral triarylamine (TAA) donors (Scheme 1a). The plan was to excite both photo-





sensitizers, and to search for a charge-separated state in which the central PhSSPh unit is reduced twice while two peripheral TAA donors are each singly oxidized.

The molecular heptad was synthesized in 18 individual reaction steps as described in the Supporting Information (SI pages S3-S14). The spatial separation of PhSSPh acceptor and TAA donors on separate bpy ligands simplified the synthesis

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but leads to a mixture of diastereomers (SI page S38). However, all elementary electron transfer steps are expected to follow predominantly through-bond pathways,¹¹ and thus the analysis of electron transfer kinetics should remain relatively straightforward.

Cyclic voltammetry of the PhSSPh reference compound (Scheme 1b) shows the typical features of potential inversion as reported previously for this and closely related compounds (SI page S16).^{10,12} From cathodic scans, a peak potential of -1.6 V vs SCE is measurable, whereas on return scans the corresponding reoxidation wave is detected at -0.3 V vs SCE. The shift of 1.3 V between corresponding (two-electron) half-waves is a manifestation of the redox potential inversion.¹ Single reduction of PhSSPh generates a disulfide radical anion with considerable tension, which is only released after reduction with a second electron, leading to disulfide bond breaking and consequent rotation of the thiolate groups away from each other to minimize electrostatic repulsion. The peak potential at -1.6 V reflects the necessary potential for single reduction, whereas the potential for the second redox step is commonly associated with the peak potential of the return oxidation (-0.3)V). Thus, two-electron reduction of PhSSPh to its dithiolate form (PhS⁻PhS⁻) is thermodynamically easier by ca. 1.3 V than one-electron reduction to the dithiin monoanion (PhSSPh⁻). The potentials for TAA oxidation and all Ru(bpy)₃²⁺ related redox processes in the heptad are as expected (SI page S18).¹³

Transient absorption (TA) spectroscopy in conjunction with spectro-electrochemistry (Figure 1) provides direct evidence for the formation of the desired photoproduct comprised of two singly oxidized TAA units and the doubly reduced acceptor in deaerated CH₃CN at 22 °C. The Ru(bpy)₃²⁺ units are excited selectively at 532 nm, and this is known to lead to reductive ³MLCT excited state quenching by TAA with a time



Figure 1. (a) TA spectrum of 5.0 μ M heptad in CH₃CN, measured in a time window of 100 ns immediately following excitation at 532 nm. (b) Difference spectrum after oxidation of TAA to TAA⁺ using Cu(ClO₄)₂ and the heptad. (c) Difference spectrum after reduction of TAA-Ru in CH₃CN containing 0.1 M TBAPF₆ at -1.6 V vs SCE. (d) Difference spectrum after (2-fold) reduction of bpy-xy-PhSSPh-xy-bpy (99 μ M) in CH₂Cl₂ at -2.0 V vs SCE. (e) Spectrum obtained after subtracting the green trace in panel b from the black trace in panel a (green trace scaled to match the intensity of the black trace at 775 nm prior to subtraction).

constant of ca. 10-65 ps.^{7g,h,13} Consequently, the characteristic absorption bands of ${\rm TAA^{+}}$ at 375 and 775 nm are readily detectable in the transient absorption spectrum recorded in neat CH₃CN (Figure 1a), in line with the difference spectrum obtained by chemical oxidation of the heptad with $Cu(ClO_4)_2$ (Figure 1b). The TA spectrum further exhibits a prominent absorption at 520 nm attributable to the reduced photosensitizer $(Ru(bpy)_3^+)$, as confirmed by comparison to the spectro-electrochemical data obtained from the TAA-Ru reference compound (Scheme 1c, Figure 1c). The most interesting spectral region is around 320 nm where the electrochemical reduction of the PhSSPh subunit to PhS-PhSleads to a diagnostic bleach (Figure 1d) due to a significant change in π -conjugation associated with this two-electron reduction. A negative signal is indeed observed in the transient absorption spectrum (Figure 1a) at 320 nm (blue dashed line). When subtracting the contribution of the oxidation product TAA⁺ (green trace in Figure 1b) from the TA spectrum (black trace in Figure 1a), the bleach at 320 nm is seen more clearly (Figure 1e). This derived spectrum indicates the formation of two different reduction products, namely PhS⁻PhS⁻ (bleach at 320 nm) and reduced photosensitizer (bands at 375 and 520 nm, bleach at 455 nm). We note that the latter exhibits significant absorption at 320 nm (Figure 1c), weakening the bleach caused by two-electron reduction of PhSSPh to PhS⁻PhS⁻ at that wavelength.

The observation of reduced photosensitizers is due to the formation of TAA⁺/Ru(bpy)₃⁺ pairs, which can be considered as intermediates on the reaction pathway to the final desired photoproduct composed of doubly reduced disulfide and two TAA⁺ moieties, as discussed below. The key photoproduct composed of 2 TAA⁺ units and doubly reduced disulfide (PhS⁻PhS⁻) can only be reached as a result of the absorption of two visible photons (SI page S21), hence a quadratic power dependence of the 320 nm bleach would be expected.^{7g} Unfortunately, this signal is too weak for excitation power-dependent measurements (SI page S22), especially in the low-power regime for which such quadratic power dependence could be expected.^{7g,14}

When monitoring the TA signal at 775 nm after excitation at 532 nm with laser pulses of ca. 10 ns duration in CH₃CN, one observes a triexponential decay with time components of ≤ 10 , 66, and 645 ns in relative importance of 80%:5%:15%, analogous decay behavior is detectable at other wavelengths (SI page S25). Thus, all photoproducts form within the duration of the laser pulses and start to decay immediately. The shortest, instrumentally limited decay component (<10 ns) is attributed to a proximal $TAA^+/Ru(bpy)_3^+$ pair. Charge recombination from this state is known to be rapid from closely related molecules.¹³ In time-gated measurements the 320 nm bleach is no longer detectable after a delay of 500 ns (SI page S26), and consequently the time constant of 66 ns is attributed to the key photoproduct (TAA+-Ru(bpy)32+- $PhS^{-}PhS^{-}-Ru(bpy)_{3}^{2+}-TAA^{+})$. However, the spectral signatures of TAA⁺ and $Ru(bpy)_3^+$ remain observable even after 500 ns hence the lifetime of 645 ns must be caused by TAA+/ $Ru(bpy)_{3}^{+}$ pairs undergoing slow reverse electron transfer. It seems possible that this occurs in a photoproduct of the type TAA^+ -Ru(bpy)₃²⁺-PhSSPh-Ru(bpy)₃⁺-TAA, in which the oxidizing and reducing equivalents are on distant TAA and photosensitizer units (SI page S25). For an excitation pulse energy of ~34 mJ using a laser beam irradiating the entire detection window in the cuvette, we determined an absolute

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quantum yield of 0.5% for formation of the desired twoelectron reduction product (SI page S27). The formation of PhS⁻PhS⁻ via bimolecular disproportionation is not possible on a time scale of 10 ns at a sample concentration of 5 μ M.¹⁵ On a given photosensitizer unit, the presence of both a TAA⁺ and a TAA unit leads to an organic mixed valence situation.¹⁶

Under acidic conditions, protonation of the dithiolate photoproduct is expected, and consequently we anticipated the formation of an even longer-lived dithiol product. Indeed, in deaerated CH₃CN with 0.1 M monochloroacetic acid at 22 °C, significantly slower transient absorption decays are observed (SI page S29). In the presence of 0.2 M *p*toluenesulfonic acid (TsOH), the dithiol photoproduct accumulates under steady-state irradiation with a 455 nm (3.5 W) LED (Figure 2). The UV–vis difference spectra recorded as



Figure 2. (a) UV–vis difference spectra after different irradiation times (λ_{exc} = 455 nm) from a 5.3 μ M solution of the heptad in CH₃CN with 0.2 M TsOH. (b) Difference spectrum obtained by chemical oxidation of the heptad with Cu(ClO₄)₂. (c) Difference spectrum obtained after reduction of bpy-xy-PhSSPh-xy-bpy (99 μ M) in CH₂Cl₂ at -2.0 V vs SCE.

a function of irradiation time (Figure 2a) show both the characteristic changes expected for oxidation of TAA to TAA⁺ (Figure 2b) and those anticipated for the 2-fold reduction of the PhSSPh subunit (Figure 2c). In this case, the possibility of bimolecular reactions between individual heptads can of course not be excluded.¹⁷

Next, we explored whether the heptad can function as a multielectron donating photocatalyst. With its photogenerated aromatic dithiolate or dithiol entity, the heptad was anticipated to undergo thiolate-disulfide interchange with aliphatic disulfides such as trans-4,5-dihydroxy-1,2-dithiane (DTT^{ox}) as illustrated in Scheme 2.¹⁸ We hypothesized that after formation of the PhS⁻PhS⁻ photoproduct shown in Figure 1a,e, the TAA⁺ moieties can be reduced back to neutral TAA with a sacrificial electron donor. Nucleophilic attack of the PhS⁻PhS⁻ dithiolate at the DTT^{ox} disulfide can then form the aliphatic dithiolate DTT^{red} in two steps, coupled to oxidation of PhS⁻PhS⁻ to the aromatic PhSSPh disulfide, thereby closing the catalytic cycle. Using 0.1 M triethylamine (TEA) as a sacrificial donor, 22 mM DTT^{ox} substrate, and 20 μ M heptad in dry, deaerated CH₃CN at 22 °C, photoirradiation at 455 nm with an LED (3.5 W) for 20 h led to the desired DTT^{red} product, and a turnover number (TON) of 41 was determined for the heptad catalyst (SI page S32). When using either 40 μ M Ru(bpy)₃²⁺ or TAA-Ru reference compound, TONs of only 9 were determined.

Scheme 2. Proposed Mechanism for the Catalytic Reduction of an Aliphatic Disulfide (DTT^{ox})



Absolute product yields are low (3.6% in the case of the heptad), because the equilibrium of the reaction PhS⁻PhS⁻ + $DTT^{ox} \Leftrightarrow PhSSPh + DTT^{red}$ strongly disfavors product formation hence this is not a shortcoming of the heptad catalyst (SI page S33). The observation that the heptad catalyzes the reaction ca. 4.5 times better than the reference compounds is consistent with a significant contribution of the thiolate-disulfide interchange mechanism in Scheme 2 and represents an important proof-of-concept. The reference compounds instead are likely to lead to $\ensuremath{\bar{D}TT^{red}}\xspace$ via a single electron transfer route.¹⁹ The use of TEA favors this pathway, because its primary oxidation and deprotonation leads to a highly reducing α -aminoalkyl radical that can provide a second electron in a subsequent dark reaction after an initial lightinduced reaction step.²⁰ Expectedly, control experiments performed in the dark or in absence of TEA led to no product (SI page S32).

In summary, potential inversion can be exploited for the light-driven accumulation of redox equivalents without sacrificial reagents. In neat CH₃CN, the aromatic disulfide acceptor is converted to its dithiolate form after excitation of two Ru(bpy)₃²⁺ sensitizers with visible light, and this photoproduct lives for ca. 66 ns before reverse electron transfer with the covalently attached TAA⁺ occurs. The quantum yield for formation of this photoproduct was 0.5%. In the presence of strong acid, proton-coupled electron transfer leads to a stable dithiol. When using excess external reductant, the heptad catalyzes thiolate–disulfide interchange with an aliphatic substrate, thereby providing the important proof-of-principle that charge-accumulated states of donor–sensitizer–acceptor compounds are useful for light-driven multielectron catalysis.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/jacs.8b02443.

Detailed synthetic protocols and characterization data, description of equipment and methods, supplementary

electrochemical and spectroscopic data, and detailed thermochemical discussion (PDF)

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Notes

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