

# Morphology Control of Fluorescent Nanoaggregates by Co-Self-Assembly of Wedge- and Dumbbell-Shaped Amphiphilic Perylene Bisimides

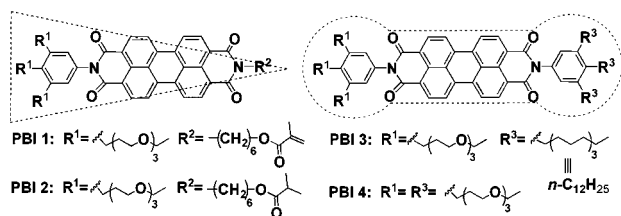
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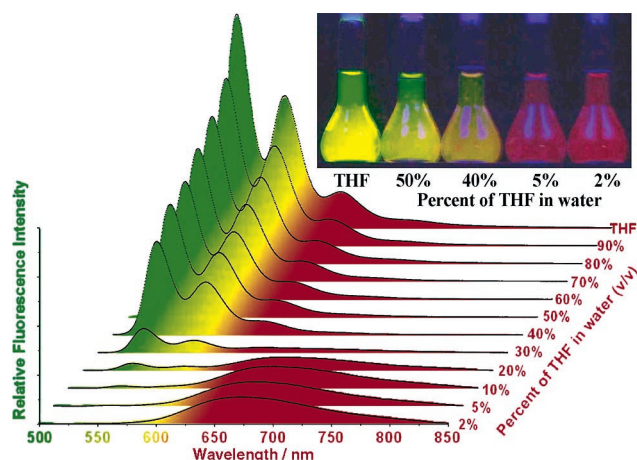
Perylene bisimides (PBIs) have been extensively studied as building blocks for functional supramolecular architectures in nonpolar solvents through hydrogen bonding, metal ion coordination, and  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking interaction.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, little attention was paid to the self-assembly behavior of PBIs in aqueous solution.<sup>2</sup> Amphiphilic molecules, consisting of hydrophobic and hydrophilic moieties, self-assemble into highly organized aggregates with various morphologies such as spherical micelles, wormlike micelles, spherical and hollow vesicles, planar bilayers, nanotubes, and others.<sup>3</sup> The formation of these morphologies depends on solvent environments, molecular structures and shapes, as well as the relative fraction of hydrophilic and hydrophobic parts.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the stabilization of self-assembled superstructures through covalent linkage, for example, by polymerization, is of great interest for the practical application of supramolecular chemistry.<sup>5</sup> By covalent stabilization, the aggregate dimension and shape can be captured, and aggregate strength can be increased.<sup>6</sup> Here, we report for the first time that the nanoaggregates of perylene bisimides with particular morphology can be obtained by self-assembly of differently shaped amphiphilic PBIs in aqueous solution.

Chart 1



In this work, the wedge- and dumbbell-shaped amphiphilic perylene bisimides PBI 1–4 (Chart 1) were synthesized and fully characterized (see details in Supporting Information). The absorption and fluorescence spectra of molecularly dissolved PBI 1–4 display a mirror-image relationship with a small Stokes' shift (5–6 nm) in “good” solvents such as  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$  and THF (Figure S-15 in Supporting Information). Upon addition of the “bad” solvent water into the THF solution, a gradual decrease in fluorescence intensity at 500–600 nm was observed as exemplified for PBI 1 (Figure 1), and a new broad and structureless fluorescence band appears at 600–800 nm owing to excimer formation.<sup>7</sup> These observations imply that monomeric PBI 1 self-assembles into fluorescent multimolecular aggregates in aqueous solution.

For the wedge-shaped PBI 1, Israelachvili's critical packing parameter ( $P_c$ )<sup>8</sup> was calculated to be 0.252, implying that spherical micelles should be favorably formed in polar solvents ( $P_c < 1/3$  for micelle formation).<sup>8a</sup> The theoretical prediction was confirmed by transmission electron microscopic (TEM) studies. A large number of spherical micelles with the diameter of 4–6 nm were observed for PBI 1 in THF-containing water (2%, v/v) as shown in Figure 2a. The micelles were formed with a narrow polydispersity and a

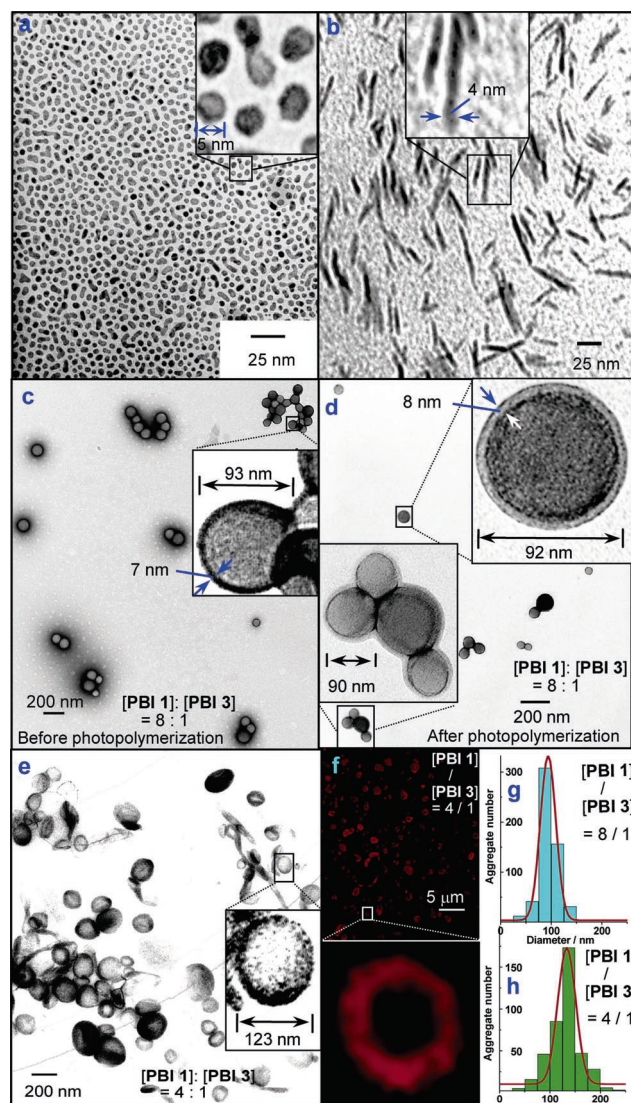


**Figure 1.** Fluorescence spectra of PBI 1 in THF and THF-containing water,  $\lambda_{\text{ex}} = 490$  nm,  $[\text{PBI } 1] = 2 \times 10^{-6}$  M. The inset shows a photograph of PBI 1 in THF and THF-containing water under UV-light irradiation.

high degree of curvature due to the conical structure. The same aggregation behavior was also observed for PBI 2. In contrast, dumbbell-shaped PBI 4 self-assembled into rod aggregates with a diameter of 4 nm (Figure 2b). The formation of well-defined aggregates of these PBIs may be attributed to the  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking interaction between the perylene cores along one-dimensional long axis without curvature, and stabilized by surrounding hydrophilic chains as shown in Scheme 1(bottom).

More interestingly, hollow vesicles were observed for the co-self-assembled system of PBI 1 and PBI 3 ( $[\text{PBI } 1]/[\text{PBI } 3] = 8/1$  in molar ratio) in THF-containing water (2%, v/v) as shown in Figure 2c. Spherical vesicles were formed with the average diameter of 94 nm and the wall thickness of 7–8 nm, which is approximately twice the length of a single optimized molecule PBI 1 (3.3 nm) or PBI 3 (4.0 nm) in water. The aggregation number for the inner and outer layers were calculated to be approximate  $2.9 \times 10^5$  and  $3.2 \times 10^5$ , respectively, from the bilayer volume divided by the volume of the single molecule. For the co-self-assembled system with higher PBI 3 content ( $[\text{PBI } 1]/[\text{PBI } 3] = 4/1$ ), bilayer vesicles were observed with a larger average diameter of 133 nm in THF-containing water (2%, v/v) as shown in Figure 2e. The size distribution of these co-aggregates also became broader at higher PBI 3 content as measured from TEM (Figure 2g,h) and dynamic light scattering (DLS) (Figure S-24), and these large vesicles emit red fluorescence (Figure 2f).

The observed variation of the aggregates' shape and size can be rationalized by considering spontaneous curvature. When dumbbell-shaped PBI 3 is co-self-assembled with wedge-shaped PBI 1, the average hydrophobic part increases, and the interface between the hydrophilic and hydrophobic parts changes from a curved interface to a more flat one. The resulting decrease in spontaneous curvature releases the strain in the initially formed micelles with a high curvature, leading to micelle growth and a transition to vesicles as

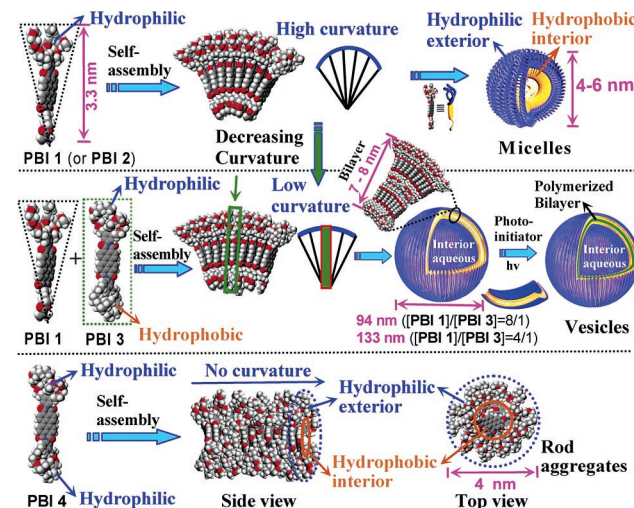


**Figure 2.** TEM images of self-assembled PBI 1 (a), PBI 4 (b), and before (c) and after (d) photopolymerization of co-aggregates of PBI 1 and PBI 3 in a 8:1 molar ratio; TEM (e) and confocal fluorescence images (f) of co-aggregates of PBI 1 and PBI 3 in a 4:1 molar ratio in THF-containing water (2%, v/v); and size distribution obtained from 548 co-aggregates ([PBI 1]/[PBI 3] = 8/1) (g), and from 402 co-aggregates ([PBI 1]/[PBI 3] = 4/1) (h). [PBI 1] = 0.5 mg/mL ( $4.32 \times 10^{-4}$  M); [PBI 4] = 0.5 mg/mL.

illustrated in Scheme 1 (top and middle). It is interesting to note that such mechanism for the control of self-assembly by spontaneous curvature is present in biology. A typical example is the deformation of flat lipid membranes by protein coating into transport spherical vesicles.<sup>9</sup>

To stabilize these nanoaggregates, the in situ photopolymerization was performed in an organized state using 2,2-dimethoxy-2-phenylacetophenone as photoinitiator under UV irradiation at 350 nm. This wavelength was chosen because the photoinitiator has a maximum absorption at 350 nm, where perylene chromophores have a very weak absorption.<sup>1</sup> After photopolymerization, the vesicles from co-self-assembly retained their original shapes as shown in Figure 2d. The photopolymerization was confirmed by infrared (IR) studies. The vibration band at  $968.1\text{ cm}^{-1}$  (characteristic vibration of  $\delta(\text{=CH}_2)$  wagging mode) disappears after photopolymerization (Figure S-23). These vesicles do not change their morphology after the addition of PBI 3, confirming that the vesicle structures are locked by photopolymerization.

**Scheme 1.** Schematic Illustration for the Formation of Micelles from Wedge-Shaped PBI 1 (top), Bilayer Vesicles from the Co-self-assembly of PBI 1 and Dumbbell-Shaped PBI 3 (middle), and Rod Aggregates from Dumbbell-Shaped PBI 4 (bottom).



In summary, the aggregate morphologies of amphiphilic PBIs are dependent on their molecular shapes. The co-self-assembly of wedge-shaped PBI 1 and dumbbell-shaped PBI 3 generated hollow vesicles owing to the changes in spontaneous curvature. The bilayer structures of the vesicles could be stabilized by in situ photopolymerization. The morphology changes by co-self-assembly of different molecular architectures provide a guideline for the rational design of particular morphology such as vesicles.

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**Supporting Information Available:** Synthetic details, spectroscopic characterization, UV-vis absorption, fluorescence and 2D NMR spectra of amphiphilic perylene bisimides, TEM images, and DLS data of aggregates. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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