On the incompatibility of lithium–O_2 battery technology with CO_2\(^\dagger\)

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When solubilized in a hexacarboxamide cryptand anion receptor, the peroxide dianion reacts rapidly with CO_2 in polar aprotic organic media to produce hydroperoxycarbonate (HOOCO\(_2\)\(^-\)) and peroxydicarbonate (\(\text{O}_2\text{COOCO}_2\)\(^-\)). Peroxydicarbonate is subject to thermal fragmentation into two equivalents of the highly reactive carbonate radical anion, which promotes hydrogen atom abstraction reactions responsible for the oxidative degradation of organic solvents. The activation and conversion of the peroxide dianion by CO_2 is general. Exposure of solid lithium peroxide (Li\(_2\)O\(_2\)) to CO_2 in polar aprotic organic media results in aggressive oxidation. These findings indicate that CO\(_2\) must not be introduced in conditions relevant to typical lithium–O\(_2\) cell configurations, as production of HOOCO\(_2\)\(^-\) and \(\text{O}_2\text{COOCO}_2\)\(^-\) during lithium–O\(_2\) cell cycling will lead to cell degradation via oxidation of organic electrolytes and other vulnerable cell components.

Introduction

The two-electron reduction of molecular oxygen to the peroxide dianion is an attractive cathode redox couple for developing rechargeable lithium–O\(_2\) batteries.\(^1\) Lithium carbonate (Li\(_2\)CO\(_3\)) formation is deleterious to battery performance because it passivates electrodes and causes a drastic reduction in the round trip efficiency of discharge–charge cycles.\(^2,3\) Carbonate formation is typically ascribed to oxidative degradation of organic electrolytes\(^4,5\) and carbon electrodes\(^6\) by superoxide\(^6-9\) and singlet oxygen.\(^10\) Although peroxide is often considered to be a strong oxidant in aqueous media, salts of its dianion (O\(_2\)\(^2-\)) are poor oxidizers in organic media due to their extremely low solubility and so, for this reason, the possible role of peroxide in furnishing carbonate is underappreciated.\(^11\) The presence of carbonate-derived CO\(_2\) during the recharge cycle of lithium–O\(_2\) batteries\(^1\) prompted us to consider the possibility that carbonate formation may be a consequence of peroxide combination with carbon dioxide; this would likely confer increased solubility and yield powerful oxidizers. To address this topic, we utilized an anion-receptor solubilized form of the peroxide dianion\(^12\) to elucidate the molecular level details of its reaction with carbon dioxide. As reported herein, we observed the formation of strongly oxidizing peroxy(di)-carbonate intermediates and studied their reaction with organic solvents to produce carbonate. In a complementary line of investigation, we showed that carbon dioxide activation of insoluble Li\(_2\)O\(_2\) similarly engenders solvent oxidation with the concomitant production of carbonate. Our findings shed light on the identity and behavior of the hot oxidants generated upon the facile and quantitative combination of O\(_2\)\(^2-\) with CO\(_2\) via direct spectroscopic detection and exploratory reaction chemistry.

Results and discussion

Reaction of O\(_2\)\(^2-\) with CO\(_2\) using an anion receptor

Despite the drastic and deleterious effect that CO\(_2\) has upon the performance of a cycling lithium–oxygen battery, our understanding of the chemical entities responsible for this effect is poor and based primarily upon computational studies or observation of terminal reaction products.\(^7,8\) To examine the effect of CO\(_2\) on the oxidative power of peroxide, an anion receptor complex\(^9\) of the peroxide dianion, [O\(_2\)⊂mBDCA-5t-H\(_4\)]\(^\circ\) (1, Fig. 1)\(^12\) was employed as a soluble source of peroxide dianion. The anion receptor mBDCA-5t-H\(_4\) encapsulates the peroxide dianion via six N–H···O hydrogen bonds. Since its
discovery, this cryptate has enabled exploration of the reactivity of the peroxide dianion with small molecules in polar organic media without the complicating influence of acidic protons.\textsuperscript{12,14} Despite being a simple molecule, the peroxide dianion has yielded rich and previously unknown chemistry, including metal-free oxidation of carbon monoxide (CO) generating carbonate, which is encapsulated by the anion receptor as \([CO_3<sup>m</sup>BDCAl-5t-\text{H}_6]^{2-}\) (2, Fig. 1).\textsuperscript{14}

While the conversion of 1 to 2 under CO (1 atm, 40 °C) takes two hours to go to completion, exposing a dimethylformamide-peroxide cryptate in the presence of oxygen atom acceptors. While 1 on its own is unreactive towards PPh<sub>3</sub> and methoxythioanisole at 25 °C, it was next performed in the presence of oxygen atom acceptors. While 1 on its own is unreactive towards PPh<sub>3</sub> and methoxythioanisole at 25 °C, exposing a mixture of 1 and an organic oxygen-atom acceptor to CO<sub>2</sub> (1 atm, 25 °C) resulted in the rapid formation of triphosphine oxide (90%, Fig. 2) or 1-methylthiolyl-4-methoxybenzene (61%, Fig. 2), respectively.

Aiming to establish the chemical identity of the oxidant(s) generated upon exposure of peroxide cryptate 1 to CO<sub>2</sub>, we followed the reaction by variable temperature \(^{13}\text{C}\) NMR spectroscopy. A strong new signal at \(\delta = 156.9\) ppm, together with one minor species resonating at \(\delta = 157.4\) ppm, was observed at \(-50 \text{ °C}\) (Fig. 3). We first considered peroxycarbonate (\(\text{OOCO}_2\)\(^{-}\), Fig. 3) and hydroperoxycarbonate (HOOCO\(_2\)\(^{-}\), Fig. 3) as candidates to correspond to the observed \(^{13}\text{C}\) NMR signals, since hydroperoxycarbonate is known to be active for sulfide oxidation.\textsuperscript{16,17} The salt [PPN][HO\(_{13}\)CO\(_2\)] (PPN = bis(triphenylphosphine)iminium), which was generated \textit{in situ} from H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> and bicarbonate [PPN][H\(_{14}\)CO\(_3\)] (\(\delta = 160.0\) ppm),\textsuperscript{18–20} showed a single \(^{13}\text{C}\) resonance at \(\delta = 157.5\) ppm, confirming the identity of the minor intermediate as HOOCO\(_2\)\(^{-}\).

Moreover, \(^{13}\text{C}\) Gauge-Independent Atomic Orbital (GIAO) NMR calculations of the chemical shifts of potential candidates were performed.\textsuperscript{15} From a range of potential chemical species (Fig. 4), symmetric peroxydicarbonate (\(\text{O}_2\text{COOCO}_2\)\(^{-}\)) emerged as the most plausible assignment for the major product at \(\delta = 156.9\) ppm, having the best match between the observed and calculated \(^{13}\text{C}\) NMR chemical shift.\textsuperscript{15} In an effort to independently generate \(\text{O}_2\text{COOCO}_2\)\(^{-}\), an experiment was carried out in which excess \(^{13}\text{C}\)O<sub>2</sub> was added to a frozen mixture of potassium tert-butoxide and bis(trimethylsilyl) peroxide giving rise to a single new \(^{13}\text{C}\) NMR resonance at \(\delta = 155.5\) ppm (\(-40 \text{ °C}\)), tentatively supporting our identification of the major 1 + CO\(_2\) product as symmetric peroxydicarbonate. Differences in the medium and reaction conditions may account for the observed chemical shift difference (155.5 ppm \textit{here} versus 156.9 ppm, above). Similarly, superoxide (O\(_2\)\(^{-}\)) has been documented to absorb two equivalents of CO\(_2\), generating unsymmetrical peroxydicarbonate (Fig. 4) as a precipitate.\textsuperscript{21} In our hands, the low

![Fig. 1](image1.png)  
**Fig. 1** The reaction scheme of peroxide cryptate 1 with CO<sub>2</sub> and a line drawing of [O\(_2\)\(\text{mBDCAl-5t-\text{H}_6}\)]\(^2\)\(^{-}\) and [CO\(_3\)\(\text{mBDCAl-5t-\text{H}_6}\)]\(^2\)\(^{-}\).

![Fig. 2](image2.png)  
**Fig. 2** Addition of CO<sub>2</sub> to 1 in the presence of an oxygen-atom acceptor.

![Fig. 3](image3.png)  
**Fig. 3** Variable temperature \(^{13}\text{C}\) NMR (left) and \(^{17}\text{O}\) NMR (right) analysis of the reaction between \(^{13}\text{CO}_2\) and 1.

![Fig. 4](image4.png)  
**Fig. 4** Possible intermediates during the conversion of 1 and CO<sub>2</sub> to 2 (top) and formation of symmetric and unsymmetric peroxydicarbonate (bottom).
solubility of this unsymmetrical peroxycarbonic material precluded its characterization by solution $^{13}$C NMR studies under conditions we employed successfully for in situ characterization of $^{17}$OOCOO$^-$ and HOOCO$^-$2. This establishes that these oxidants are generated upon addition of CO$_2$ to superoxide as compared with the peroxide dianion (Fig. 4).

Further support for the formation of HOOCO$^-$ and O$_2$COOCO$^-$ upon interaction of CO$_2$ with peroxide sources was provided by variable temperature $^{17}$O NMR spectroscopy. Due to the fast relaxation times of $^{17}$O nuclei, observation of the $^{17}$O resonance for mid-size molecules such as 1-17O$_2$ and 2-17O$_2$ was expected to be challenging in solution.22 Indeed, $^{17}$O NMR measurements of independently prepared peroxide cryptate 1-17O$_2$ and carbonate cryptate 2-17O$_2$ (70%, $^{17}$O-enriched) showed no resonances between $\delta = -1100$ and +1800 ppm (H$_2$O used as a reference, $\delta = 0$ ppm) in DMF. However, solid-state $^{17}$O NMR measurements for 1-17O$_2$ and 2-17O$_2$ were successful, as reported previously in the case of 2-CO$_2$O$_2^{14}$ and in the present work for 1-17O$_2$, providing the benchmark $^{17}$O NMR chemical shifts ($\delta = 260$ ppm for 1-17O$_2$ and 170 ppm for 2-CO$_2$O$_2$) (Fig. 5, Table 1). As seen in Fig. 3, 70% $^{17}$O-enriched samples of HOOCO$^-$ and O$_2$COOCO$^-$ generated in DMF solution at $-78$ °C from the reaction of 1-17O$_2$ and 13CO$_2$ resulted in a broad $^{17}$O NMR resonance at $\delta = 275.3$ ppm, assigned as overlapping signals of HOOCO$^-$ and O$_2$COOCO$^-$. Upon gradual warming of the sample to $-10$ °C, the intensity of the signal decayed; the signal ultimately resolved into two peaks with equal intensities at $\delta = 278.7$ and 264.0 ppm, distinct from those observed for 1-17O$_2$ and 2-CO$_2$O$_2$. The two peaks observed are attributed to HOOCO$^-$ which contains two chemically inequivalent $^{17}$O atoms ($\delta = 278.7$ ppm for HOOCO$^-$ and 264.0 ppm for HOOCO$^-$), in contrast to the situation for O$_2$COOCO$^-$ in which the peroxy oxygen atoms are related by symmetry. The appearance of the relatively sharp $^{17}$O NMR signals assigned to HOOCO$^-$ coupled with the concurrent observation of monodeprotonated cryptand [mBDCA-5t-H$_5^-$] by $^1$H NMR spectroscopy strongly suggests that HOOCO$^-$ is not strongly sequestered inside the anion receptor. The observed $^{17}$O NMR chemical shifts are in accordance with expectations arising from $^{17}$O NMR absolute shielding calculations and compare well with data for benchmark organic compounds containing the peroxo functional group.23

The mechanism of CO$_2$/peroxide driven oxidation

Having thereby established the identity of the active oxidants generated from the combination of O$_2$ and CO$_2$ as HOOCO$^-$ and O$_2$COOCO$^-$, we next turned our attention to the mechanism of CO$_2$/peroxide driven oxidation. The reaction of $^{18}$O-labeled 1 and CO$_2$ was performed in the presence of an oxidizable substrate. Exposure of a mixture of 1-18O$_2$ and PPh$_3$ to CO$_2$ furnished 18OPPh$_3$ as the oxidized product based on GCMS analysis.15 The obtained $^{18}$O isotope labeling data precluded the possibility of O–O bond cleavage prior to the oxygen atom transfer (OAT) reaction, as such a process would yield isotopic scrambling and result in a mixture of 16OPPh$_3$ and 18OPPh$_3$. Therefore, $^{18}$O$_2$CO$_2$ – with its peroxy unit intact as it was derived from the peroxide dianion – is implicated as the active species for the OAT conversion of PPh$_3$ to OPPh$_3$ (Fig. 6, OAT pathway). In contrast, addition of CO$_2$ to a solution of 1-18O$_2$ in the presence of the hydrogen atom donor 9,10-dihydropyrene (DHA) led to a statistical mixture of anthraquinone products with $^{16}$O and $^{18}$O incorporation.15 The observed isotope scrambling was likely due to a sequence of H-atom abstraction/radical recombination reactions. By analogy to the behavior of organic peroxycarbonates,26 symmetrical peroxycarbonate would be expected to undergo O–O bond homolysis generating two equivalents of the reactive carbonate radical CO$_3^-$(Fig. 6, hydrogen atom transfer (HAT) pathway).27

Quantum chemical calculations indicate that homolytic cleavage of the O–O bond in O$_2$COOCO$_2^-$ is only mildly endergonic (reaction free energy +14 kcal mol$^{-1}$). This species thus has an unusually weak O–O bond.

Homolytic cleavage of the O–O bond and generation of CO$_3^-$(Fig. 6) appears to be favorable for two reasons: (i) repulsion of the negative charge due to poor solvation in organic solvents resulting in coulombic explosion28 and (ii) resonance stabilization of the unpaired electron of the carbonate radical anion over the carbonate $\pi$ system. Carbonate radicals have been generated previously via laser photolysis of aqueous persulfate in the presence of bicarbonate.29 Carbonate radicals have been implicated in guanine oxidation27 and are also believed to be formed upon treatment of peroxynitrite (ONOO$^-$) with CO$_2$ and in that case generate nitrogen dioxide as a byproduct.27,30,31 Furthermore, in the manganese-catalyzed oxidation of amino acids by H$_2$O$_2$, the formation of reactive oxygen species only
Li₂O₂ treated with CO₂ in the presence of the spin trap 5-H₆, and related compounds to occur CO₃²⁻ signals for the hydroxyl adduct [BMPO–OH]⁺ together with small quantities (ca. 5%) of an unidentified decomposition product.

Table 1. Experimental solid-state ¹⁷O NMR and ADF computational results on [K₂(DMF)]₂[¹⁷O₂⊂mBDCA-5t-H₆], [K₂(DMF)]₂[¹⁷O₂⊂mBDCA-5t-H₆], and related compounds

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 swath uncertainties in the experimental data: δ₁₂³ ± 2 ppm; δ₁₃₄ ± 10 ppm; C_q ± 0.2 MHz; η₀ ± 0.1. cm ref. 24. d cm ref. 25.

Activation of solid Li₂O₂ with CO₂ in aprotic organic media

To examine the effect of CO₂ on the oxidative power of Li₂O₂ under conditions relevant to the charging of lithium–air cells, commercially available solid Li₂O₂ was exposed to CO₂ (1 atm, 25 °C, 48 h) in 1,2-dimethoxyethane (DME). In contrast to the results from the control experiments carried out similarly but in the absence of CO₂, substantial amounts of methyl methoxyacetate were identified among the products of DME oxidation (Fig. 8). Approximately 51% of the Li₂O₂ was consumed, and quantitative conversion of the consumed Li₂O₂ to Li₂CO₃ (based upon lithium) was observed by [C] NMR spectroscopy and total inorganic carbonate (TIC) analysis. The consumed peroxide must generate an oxidizing equivalent; 74% was identified as radicals. On longer timescales, [BMPO–OH]⁺ was further oxidized to [BMPO–O]⁺ and other unidentified decomposition products.

occurred when HCO₃⁻ buffer was used. Carbonate radicals generated in lithium–oxygen batteries can then engage in HAT reactions with solvents containing weak C–H bonds, driven by the high O–H bond strength (BDE = 107 kcal mol⁻¹) of the bicarbonate that is formed. Accordingly, we suggest that for stability under lithium–O₂ cell cycling conditions, an organic solvent/electrolyte should have no C–H bonds of BDE = 107 kcal mol⁻¹ or less.

To experimentally confirm the generation of CO₃²⁻, 1 was treated with CO₂ in the presence of the spin trap 5-tert-butoxycarbonyl-5-methyl-1-pyrroline-N-oxide (BMPO), and the reaction was monitored by EPR spectroscopy. Upon addition of the CO₂, signals for the hydroxyl adduct [BMPO–OH]⁺ together with small quantities (ca. 5%) of an unidentified spin–trap adduct suspected to be [BMPO–O₃CO₂]⁻ were observed within seconds (Fig. 7). Formation of [BMPO–OH]⁺ is proposed to occur via a rapid reaction between the chemically generated CO₃²⁻ and BMPO, initially yielding [BMPO–O₃CO₂]⁻, followed by decahydroxylation and protonation. The proton source under these conditions could be the anion receptor mBDCA-5t-H₆ (Fig. 7C). This sequence is directly along the lines proposed for the related spin trap DMPO under exposure to carbonate radicals. On longer timescales, [BMPO–OH]⁺ was further oxidized to [BMPO–O]⁺ and other unidentified decomposition products.

![Fig. 6 Proposed mechanistic pathways for CO₂-mediated solvent decomposition in lithium–O₂ batteries. OER is an “oxygen evolving reaction”, HAT is a “hydrogen atom transfer” oxidative process involving hydrogen atom abstraction by carbonate radical anion, and OAT is “oxygen atom transfer” to a substrate, S.](image)

![Fig. 7 (a) X-Band EPR spectra of: pristine BMPO in DMF (red), BMPO + 1 without adding CO₂ in DMF (purple), and exposure of BMPO + 1 to CO₂ in DMF (black). (b) Simulation of the EPR spectra of BMPO + 1 + CO₂ in DMF by linear combination of the contribution from: [BMPO–O₃CO₂]⁻ (green), [BMPO–OH]⁺ (red), and [BMPO–O]⁺ (yellow). (c) Formation of [BMPO–O]⁺ from [BMPO–OH]⁺ and an oxidant "[O]^·".](image)
in the formation of 4-oxo-TEMPO. Of the oxidizing equivalents generated during the transformation of Li2O2 to Li2CO3, ca. 15% were incorporated into the 4-oxo-TEMPO reaction product based on EPR spin quantification. These experiments suggest that the oxidation of 4-oxo-TEMP is most likely due to CO2/ peroxide-derived oxidants as opposed to singlet oxygen formation or at the very least that 4-oxo-TEMP is not a selective probe for singlet oxygen in Li-O2 cells under conditions of CO2 availability.

Conclusions

While previous studies on lithium–O2 batteries have attributed the low cycling number and capacity fading to singlet oxygen and superoxide, it is now clear that CO2/peroxide-derived oxidants are responsible for carbonate formation by way of the active oxidants HOOCO2− and CO3− via −O2COOCO2−. Since prototypical lithium–air cells (ether electrolyte, carbon cathode) lose 5–7% of their capacity to parasitic CO2 formation per complete cycle and have a typical cycling number of ca. 50, the resulting CO2/peroxide dianion-derived oxidants were expected to cause organic electrolyte degradation. This oxidative degradation may occur both during discharge through reaction of the peroxide dianion with CO2 and during recharge through electrochemical oxidation of carbonate initially generating the carbonate radical (CO2•−). It has been established that recharging a lithium–O2 battery regenerates CO2 from Li2CO3, however identification of the mechanism and product(s) of electrochemical Li2CO3 degradation have been unclear. Our studies provide evidence for a mechanistic pathway by which carbonate radical anions, when generated, engage in C–H abstraction from the solvent (C–H bond \( \equiv 107 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1} \), or less) and lead to solvent degradation and reformation of CO2 (Fig. 6). The regenerated CO2 sets in motion a decomposition cycle, therefore if even a small percentage of the total Li2O2 is converted to CO2, extensive oxidative degradation of the electrolyte in a cell will occur over the course of many cycles. If CO2 cannot be excluded from these systems then it is critical that the electrolyte and other cell components are invulnerable to reactive CO2/peroxide-derived oxidants if the full potential of rechargeable lithium–O2 battery systems is to be realized.

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References

See ESI.


