Observation of Borirene from Crossed Beam Reaction of Boron Atoms with Ethylene

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Received April 26, 2000

The small-ring Hückel 2π aromatic compound borirene, (CH)2BH, has received considerable attention since Volpin et al. suggested that trivalent boron could replace a carbon atom of the isoelectronic cyclopropenyl cation C3H+ 3. Ab initio studies of borirene and its derivatives demonstrated the aromatic character of the molecule, which was found to have about 70% of the resonance energy of cyclopropenyl cation and was predicted to have about 70% of the aromatic character was confirmed) followed by ethynylborane (H2-CH=CH2). The second pulsed beam of ethylene was obtained by expanding 500 Torr of pure C2H4; peak velocity and speed ratio (0.2). The second pulsed beam of ethylene was obtained by generating a pulsed beam of boron atoms by laser ablation of a boron rod9 and undertaken a systematic investigation of B(P) reactions with simple unsaturated hydrocarbons of potential practical interest. The aim is also to gain an insight into the chemical behavior of this atomic species which is still unexplored.

We report the first account on the dynamics of a ground-state B(P) reaction, namely that with ethylene. By using the CMB technique with mass spectrometric detection and combining our results with electronic structure calculations, our study gives a clear evidence of formation of borirene as primary reaction products under collision free conditions.

Reactions of Boron Atoms with Ethylene

Reaction products were detected at m/e = 38, 37, 36, 35, and 34 corresponding to the ions C2H3B+, C2H2B+/C2H3B+, C2H3B+/C2H2B+, C2H2B+/C2H3B+, and C2H3B+, respectively. The laboratory distributions of the different ions were found to be superimposable, which unambiguously indicates that the only detected product is C2H3B+ and it partly fragments to daughter ions in the electron impact ionizer. No radiative association to C2H2B was detected because under single collision conditions, differently from the case of matrix experiments, the initially formed adduct fragments due to its high energy content. Because of the best signal-to-noise ratio, all the final measurements were carried out at m/e = 37; the product laboratory angular distribution is shown in Figure 1 (top). Quantitative information on the reaction dynamics is obtained by moving from the lab coordinate system to the CM one and analyzing the product angular, T(θ), and translational energy, P(E+) distributions into which the CM product flux can be factorized.7 The solid line superimposed on the experimental results in Figure 1 is the calculated curve when using the best-fit CM functions. A convenient way to summarize the dynamical features of the reactive event is to report the CM product flux contour map, where the intensity is given as a function of product CM velocity, v, and scattering angle, θ (Figure 2). The shape of our CM angular distribution is isotropic, that is with the same intensity in the whole angular range, as well visible of the elaborate experimental techniques devised in the field of reaction dynamics, although such techniques have been successfully used to investigate the reaction dynamics of light, second-row atoms (Li, C, N, O, and F).7 We recall that, among those techniques, the crossed molecular beam (CMB) method with mass spectrometric detection turned out to be particularly suitable for investigating reactions giving polyatomic products which are not a priori predictable and whose spectroscopic properties are unknown.7,8 The application of such a technique has one stringent prerequisite, that is it must be possible to produce a beam of the unstable (atomic or radical) species of sufficient intensity to carry out angular and velocity distribution measurements of the reaction products.9 In our laboratory, we have recently succeeded in generating a pulsed beam of boron atoms by laser ablation of a boron rod6 and undertaken a systematic investigation of B(P) reactions with simple unsaturated hydrocarbons of potential practical interest. The aim is also to gain an insight into the chemical behavior of this atomic species which is still unexplored.

In this contribution, we report the first account on the dynamics of a ground-state B(P) reaction, namely that with ethylene. By using the CMB technique with mass spectrometric detection and combining our results with electronic structure calculations, our study gives a clear evidence of formation of borirene as primary reaction products under collision free conditions.

We have performed a first scattering experiment at a collision energy, Ec, of 17.6 kJ mol−1 using the 35° universal CMB apparatus.10 Two well-collimated, supersonic beams of the reagents are crossed at 90° in a scattering chamber maintained in the 10−7 mbar range. The reaction products are detected by a rotatable electron impact quadrupole mass spectrometer, contained in an ultrahigh-vacuum (<8 × 10−12 mbar) chamber. Product velocity distributions are obtained using the time-of-flight (TOF) technique at different laboratory scattering angles and for different mass-to-charge-ratios (m/e) of the ionized products. Characterization on axis of the pulsed boron beam (obtained by seeding the ablated boron in neat helium) shows that no boron clusters were present. A chopper wheel located after the ablation zone and the skimmer of the primary source selected a slice of the boron beam with a peak velocity of 1611 ± 15 m s−1 and speed ratio of 8.7 ± 0.2. The second pulsed beam of ethylene was obtained by expanding 500 Torr of pure C2H4; peak velocity and speed ratio were 895 ± 5 m s−1 and 13.0 ± 0.5, respectively. Reaction products were detected at m/e = 38, 37, 36, 35, and 34 corresponding to the ions C2H3B+, C2H2B+/C2H3B+, C2H3B+/C2H2B+, C2H2B+/C2H3B+, and C2H3B+, respectively. The laboratory distributions of the different ions were found to be superimposable, which unambiguously indicates that the only detected product is C2H3B+ and it partly fragments to daughter ions in the electron impact ionizer. No radiative association to C2H2B was detected because under single collision conditions, differently from the case of matrix experiments, the initially formed adduct fragments due to its high energy content. Because of the best signal-to-noise ratio, all the final measurements were carried out at m/e = 37; the product laboratory angular distribution is shown in Figure 1 (top). Quantitative information on the reaction dynamics is obtained by moving from the lab coordinate system to the CM one and analyzing the product angular, T(θ), and translational energy, P(E+) distributions into which the CM product flux can be factorized.7 The solid line superimposed on the experimental results in Figure 1 is the calculated curve when using the best-fit CM functions. A convenient way to summarize the dynamical features of the reactive event is to report the CM product flux contour map, where the intensity is given as a function of product CM velocity, v, and scattering angle, θ (Figure 2). The shape of our CM angular distribution is isotropic, that is with the same intensity in the whole angular range, as well visible.
which is stabilized by 217 kJ mol−1 intermediates borirane radical, (CH2)2 B, and vinylborane radical, or insert into one of the C−H bonds leading to the bound borirane radical does not correlate with the ground state of the C2 H3 B isomer corresponding to the general formula C2H3B.

To conclusively address the questions: which is the dominant reaction pathway?, we can combine our experimental findings with previous2 and new electronic structure calculations of the BC2H4 potential energy surface; the possible reaction channel together with the computed relevant minima and transition states along the pathway leading to borirene is shown in Figure 3. In principle, B(2P) can either add to the π bond of the C2H4 molecule or insert into one of the C−H bonds leading to the bound intermediates borirane radical, (CH2)2 B, and vinylborane radical, CH2CBBH, respectively. Our electronic structure calculations unveil that B(2P) adds indeed without entrance barrier to the ethylene molecule, thus forming the borirane radical, (CH2)2 B, which is stabilized by 217 kJ mol−1 with respect to the reactants (B3LYP/cc-pVDZ level; zero-point energy corrected). The borirane radical does not correlate with the ground state of the reactants. However, there is a π-complex correlating with the reactants. In C2 symmetry, this will give a A′ state which would has an avoided crossing with the borirane radical. This radical undergoes then a H atom shift to form the rearranged borirane radical, CH(BH)CH2. Our result correlates strongly with Andrews studies as borirane is the major radical observed in the matrix experiment as well.5 A hydrogen atom elimination from the gas-phase CH(BH)CH2 complex leads finally to borirene formation.

The extent of the translational energy release, determined by the shape of P(E′), gives us a useful criterion through the energy conservation rule7,8 to support our conclusions. The value of the heat of reaction, ΔHr, indeed, can be derived from the falloff of the P(E′). The best-fit of the experimental data is achieved when using the function reported in Figure 1 where the tail extends up to 158 kJ mol−1. This range of energy is consistent with the formation of the borirene molecule. Moreover, the total angular momentum is conserved during the reactive collisions and therefore, since the departing H atom is light compared to the borirene molecule, about 70−85% of the initial angular momentum has to be channeled into rotational excitation of products, implying that part of the available energy is converted into internal excitation of the molecular moiety. This is well documented by the isotropic angular part of the flux contour map since a peak at the poles at 0° and 180° is clearly not observed.

Based solely on the energetics as calculated at the CCSD(T) level9 also the singlet closed shell molecules H2BCCH and HBCCH2 could be formed as minor reaction products. However, the only route to form these species is via H atom elimination from the allene-like intermediate HBCCCH2, which in turn can be derived from the vinylborane radical, CH2CBBH, through H migration. However, our ab initio calculations do not locate a transition state for an insertion of B(2P) into an ethylenic C=H bond.14

It is also instructive to compare our findings to those for similar systems X + C2H4. Interestingly, in all cases the interaction of open-shell electrophilic atomic species with the π electrons of ethylene was found to be the dominant approach. A survey of these systems reveals that the most similar case to the title reaction is that of N(2D) + C2H4, also recently studied in crossed beam experiments.11 The electronically excited nitrogen atoms can, indeed, add to the π bond of ethylene (forming a cyclic intermediate analogous to the borirane radical) or insert into one of the C−H bonds; the addition pathway was found to be the only active for energies lower than 50 kJ mol−1 because of a high energy barrier for direct insertion of N(2D) into the C−H bond. Interestingly, RRKM simulations show that the formation of cyclic product 2H azirine following an H emission from the initial addition intermediate is by far the main reaction pathway.

In conclusion, our study gives a first insight into the mechanism of a reaction of atomic boron with a simple hydrocarbon ethylene to form a neutral heterocyclic 2π aromatic system in the gas phase, that is, the elusive borirene molecule. This is the first time borirene has been detected in the gas phase under well-defined experimental conditions.

Acknowledgment. R.I.K. is indebted the Deutsche Forshungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for a Habilitation fellowship (II1-K10181/3-1). The work was further supported by Academia Sinica and the Taiwanese Petrol Organization. Y.H. thanks IDRIS (CNRS) for providing computer time (Project No. 337). This work was performed within the International Astrophysics Network (http://po.iams.sinica.edu.tw/~kaiser/network.html).