LETTERS

A Combined Crossed Molecular Beam and ab Initio Study of the Reactions \( \text{C}_2(X^1\Sigma_g^+, \text{a}^3\Pi_u) + \text{C}_2\text{H}_4 \rightarrow n\cdot\text{C}_4\text{H}_3(X^2\text{A}^\prime) + \text{H}(^2\text{S}_{1/2}) \)

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Received: May 31, 2001; In Final Form: August 29, 2001

The reactions of the dicarbon cluster \( \text{C}_2 \) in the \( \Sigma_g^+ \) singlet ground state and \( \text{a}^3\Pi_u \) triplet state with the simplest alkene ethylene, \( \text{C}_2\text{H}_4 \), were unraveled under single collision conditions using the crossed molecular beam method with mass spectrometric detection. Our experimental data revealed the presence of a \( \text{C}_2 \) versus H substitution pathway leading to \( n\cdot\text{C}_4\text{H}_3 \) isomer(s) via bound \( \text{C}_4\text{H}_4 \) intermediates. The crossed beam results were combined with ab initio electronic structure calculations of the relevant stationary points which disclose that the formation of the \( n\cdot\text{C}_4\text{H}_3(X^2\text{A}^\prime) \) product can take place through different reaction pathways via three- and four-membered ring structures. Based on electronic structure and RRKM calculations, the cyclobutynyl molecule in its triplet electronic state should be a key intermediate in the \( \text{C}_2(a^3\Pi_u) \) reaction.

Introduction

Diatomic carbon molecules have been identified in a variety of terrestrial and astrophysical environments from the high temperature flames\(^1\) to the low temperature conditions of the interstellar clouds.\(^2\) As a consequence, detailed laboratory studies on the reactions of \( \text{C}_2 \) with molecules relevant in those environments, such as hydrocarbons, are useful for modeling combustion chemistry and astrophysical processes. The kinetics of some reactions involving the singlet ground state and the electronically excited triplet state have been investigated.\(^1\)\(^-\)\(^5\) In these studies, the disappearance of \( \text{C}_2 \) in the \( \Sigma_g^+ \) singlet ground state and \( \text{a}^3\Pi_u \) triplet state with the simplest alkene ethylene, \( \text{C}_2\text{H}_4 \), were unraveled under single collision conditions using the crossed molecular beam method with mass spectrometric detection. Our experimental data revealed the presence of a \( \text{C}_2 \) versus H substitution pathway leading to \( \text{C}_4\text{H}_3 \) isomer(s) via bound \( \text{C}_4\text{H}_4 \) intermediates. The crossed beam results were combined with ab initio electronic structure calculations of the relevant stationary points which disclose that the formation of the \( n\cdot\text{C}_4\text{H}_3(X^2\text{A}^\prime) \) product can take place through different reaction pathways via three- and four-membered ring structures. Based on electronic structure and RRKM calculations, the cyclobutynyl molecule in its triplet electronic state should be a key intermediate in the \( \text{C}_2(a^3\Pi_u) \) reaction.

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above the ground state), giving us the unique opportunity to investigate the effect of electronic structure on the reactive behavior without the usual complication of a strongly increased exothermicity. The crossed molecular beam technique with mass spectrometric detection has been established as a powerful technique to observe hydrogen deficient hydrocarbon radical formation under well-characterized experimental conditions in the gas phase. Since investigations are performed at the molecular microscopic level in a collision free environment, it is possible to observe the consequences of a single reactive event, this approach provides a direct insight into the reaction mechanism and makes it possible to infer the nature of the primary reaction products. When the products are polyatomic molecules, the crossed beam technique with mass spectrometric detection has proved to be unique in identifying the relevant reaction pathways. In this paper, we report on the first reactive scattering experiment on C2 reactions performed with this powerful technique. The reaction presented here is the one with ethylene. Our study gave evidence that the reactive channel leading to n-C4H3(X2A′) is important for both the reactions of C2(X1Σg+) and C2(a1Πu). Therefore, the title reaction can well be considered as an effective route to produce carbon chains in different environments.

Experimental Section

The scattering experiments were performed at two different collision energies, Ec, of 3.5 and 6.9 kcal mol−1 by using the 35 in. universal crossed molecular beam apparatus described in ref 11. A dicarbon beam of C2(X1Σg+)/a1Πu was prepared via laser ablation of graphite and seeded the ablated species in helium carrier gas. At higher velocities, the beam contains both ground state and electronically excited dicarbon. However, a quenching of the a1Πu state at lower velocities yields only C2(X1Σg+) molecules. This is fully consistent with previous characterizations of the laser ablation source employed here as vibrationally excited Cn(X1Σg) radicals, and electronically excited carbon atoms in the 1D state was found to be present only in the fast part of the pulsed beam. A catcher wheel located after the ablation zone and the skimmer selected slices of the pulsed beam with peak velocities of 1200 ± 8 m s−1 and 1940 ± 15 m s−1 and speed ratios of 9.0 ± 0.3 and 6.2 ± 0.2. The pulsed dicarbon beam crossed the hydrocarbon beam at 90° in a scattering chamber held at 1 − 2 × 10−7 mbar. Reaction products were detected via a rotating quadrupole mass spectrometer, preceded by an electron impact ionizer; the whole detector unit was placed in a rotatable ultrahigh vacuum (8 × 10−13 mbar) chamber. By employing the time-of-flight (TOF) technique, the product velocity distributions were measured at different laboratory scattering angles and for distinct mass-to-charge ratios (m/e).

Reactive scattering signal was indeed observed at m/e = 51 (C3H1) and 50 (C2H2), but, since the TOF spectra recorded at the two mass-to-charge ratios are superimposable, we can conclude that under our experimental conditions the only product formed in this range of masses is C3H4 and that the ion C3H3+ is actually formed by dissociative ionization in the ionizer. We would like to stress that due to the inherent background of the ethylene reactant at m/e = 28 - 24 we were unable to investigate the previously postulated channels leading to C3H (m/e = 25) + C2H3 (m/e = 27) and C2H2 (m/e = 26) + C2H2 (m/e = 26). Figure 1 displays the laboratory angular distribution and selected TOF spectra at a collision energy of 6.9 kcal mol−1. To extract quantitative information on the reaction dynamics, a transformation of coordinates from the laboratory system to the center-of-mass (CM) reference frame is needed. This was actually achieved by a forward convolution of trial CM functions (the product angular, T(θ), and translational energy, P(E′T), flux distributions) until the best fit of the laboratory distributions is obtained. The solid lines superimposed on the data are the calculated curve when using the best fit CM functions; Figure 2b reports the best fit P(E′T) functions. The corresponding product CM angular distributions are isotropic and symmetric with respect to θ = 90° for both collision energies (Figure 2a); this suggests that the reaction involves bound C4H3 intermediate(s) which have a lifetime longer than its{their} rotational period. Interestingly, if we examine the product translational energy distributions, we can see how at the lower Ec, the P(E′T) peaks very close to zero translational energy, suggesting that the C4H3 complex dissociates to C4H2 + H without exit barrier; on the contrary, at the higher Ec, a broad plateau from 0 to 10.8 kcal mol−1 is clearly visible. The dramatic change in shape likely implies the onset of a second reaction channel with the increase of the collision energy. The tails of both distributions extend up to 38−48 kcal mol−1 and 36−50 kcal mol−1, respectively.

The Computational Approach. All ab initio calculations on the singlet and triplet C4H4 PESs were carried out using the G2M(RCC,MPI2) method, which gives an approximation to the RCCSD(T)/6-311G** level. The geometries of the reactants, reaction intermediates, transition states, and products were optimized at the density functional B3LYP/6-311G** level. Vibrational frequencies calculated at this level were used for characterization of stationary points as minima and transition states, for zero-point energy (ZPE) corrections, and for RRKM calculations of reaction rate constants. The GAUSSIAN 94,19 MOLPRO 98,20 ACES-II,21 and DALTON22 ab initio program packages were employed.

Discussion

The Singlet Surface. The ab initio calculations show that C2(X1Σg+) attacks the π bond of ethylene without an entrance barrier on a singlet PES (Figure 3a), forming a three-member ring intermediate s-i1, which is bound by 85.5 kcal mol−1 with respect to the reactants. The geometry of s-i1 is characterized by three single C−C bonds in the cycle (1.46−1.59 Å) and an outer double C=C bond (1.27 Å). Interestingly, the outer C=C bond is tilted toward one of the CH2 carbons and the symmetry of s-i1 is only C2v, s-i1 can lose a hydrogen atom or isomerize to butatriene s-i2. The s-i1 → s-i2 isomerization exhibits a relatively low barrier of 14.2 kcal mol−1 and is exothermic by 47.0 kcal mol−1, so that the butatriene lies 132.5 kcal mol−1 lower in energy than the reactants. This rearrangement proceeds by formation of a new C−C bond between the out-of-cycle C and one of the CH2 carbons accompanied with a rupture of two bonds in the cycle. Intrinsic reaction coordinates (IRC) calculations at the B3LYP/6-311G** level confirmed that the transition state actually connects s-i1 and s-i2. Butatriene can eliminate a H atom to form the major reaction products, the n-C4H3 radical (p1) + H, without an exit barrier. The total reaction exothermicity is calculated to be 37.3 kcal mol−1.

This picture gains strong support from our experimental data. As visible in Figure 2b, the P(E′T) of our low collision energy experiment, which contains only ground-state C2(X1Σg+) in the beam, peaks close to zero mirroring the absence of any exit barrier as predicted by the present calculations. Also, if we subtract the collision energy from the energy maximum of the P(E′T), we can derive a value of exothermicity of 33−43 kcal
mol−l, which conforms with the ab initio value derived for the present reaction channel. In addition to that, the decomposing butatriene complex resides in a deep potential energy well, which can account for the observation of a backward-forward symmetric CM angular distribution. It is quite interesting to consider whether the elusive singlet cyclobutyne intermediate can be formed or not in the C2 (X 1∑g+)+C2H4 reaction. At the B3LYP/6-311G** level, singlet cyclobutyne is a stationary point, but it has one imaginary frequency, 580i cm−1. If the C2v symmetry is relaxed, cyclobutyne collapses to the three-member ring isomer s-i1. Thus, singlet cyclobutyne corresponds to a transition state for the degenerate isomerization of s-i1 with a barrier of 26.9 kcal mol−1 at B3LYP/6-311G**. A previous calculation on singlet cyclobutyne at the two-configurational SCF (TCSCF) level with the DZP basis set showed that this structure is a local minimum separated from linear butatriene by a barrier of 25 kcal mol−1. More recently, Johnson and Daoust found that singlet cyclobutyne, if it exists, should easily rearrange to cyclopropylidene (s-i1). In their calculations, including TCSCF/3-21G, MCSCF(4,4) with basis sets up to 6-31G*, and MP2/6-31G*, cyclobutyne is still a local minimum, but the barrier separating it from cyclopropyldenemethylene is very low, 0.52 kcal mol−1, at their best MP4/6-311G**//MP2/6-31G* level. We carried out more sophisticated calculations of singlet cyclobutyne using the 6-311G** basis set in conjunction with the coupled cluster CCSD(T) method and multireference CASSCF with large active space including twelve electrons distributed on twelve orbitals. The results obtained both in the coupled cluster and multireference calculations are similar to that from the density functional B3LYP calculation. Singlet cyclobutyne is not a local minimum but rather a transition state with an imaginary frequency ranging between 387i and 580i cm−1. We can finally conclude here that

Figure 1. (a) C4H4 product laboratory angular distribution (detected at m/e = 50) from the reaction C2 + C2H6(X'Ag) at a relative collision energy Ec = 6.9 kcal mol−1. The solid line represents the angular distribution obtained from the best-fit CM angular and translational energy distributions. (b) Time-of-flight spectra at selected laboratory angles.

Figure 2. (a) Center-of-mass angular energy distributions at 3.5 kcal mol−1 (solid line) and 6.9 kcal mol−1 (dashed line) of the reaction C2−(X′Σg+/a′Πg) with ethylene to C4H3 and atomic hydrogen. (b) Center-of-mass translational energy distributions at 3.5 kcal mol−1 (solid line) and 6.9 kcal mol−1 (dashed line) of the reaction C2(X′Σg+/a′Πg) with ethylene to C4H3 and atomic hydrogen.
elusive cyclobutylene does not exist in the singlet electronic state, and the reaction of \( \text{C}_2(X^1\Sigma^+ \pi) \) with \( \text{C}_3 \text{H}_4 \) proceeds via \( s-i1 \) and \( s-i2 \), which loses a H atom to form the \( n-\text{C}_4 \text{H}_3 \) isomer.

**The Triplet Surface.** The initial addition of \( \text{C}_2(\Sigma^+ \pi) \) to the \( \pi \)-system of ethylene on the triplet surface (Figure 3b) involves a barrier of 3.7 kcal mol\(^{-1}\) (the theoretical value is probably overestimated since an activation barrier \(< 1 \) kcal mol\(^{-1}\) has been derived from singlet measurements\(^{30}\)). This result is in contrast with earlier lower level HF/3-21G calculations\(^{31}\) which showed that the addition of \( \text{C}_2(\Sigma^+ \pi) \) to ethylene occurs without barrier, also, our geometry optimization of the \( \text{C}_2(\Sigma^+ \pi) + \text{C}_3 \text{H}_4 \) addition transition state at the B3LYP/6-311G\(^{*}\) and QCISD/6-311G\(^{*}\) levels do not give any barrier. Higher level calculations, not feasible at present, are therefore required, and the G2M(RCC,MP2)/MP2/6-311G\(^{*}\) result can be considered as an upper estimate of the barrier height. This addition forms a chain intermediate \( t-i1 \) bound by 30.2 kcal mol\(^{-1}\) with respect to the reactants. This intermediate can undergo to ring closure forming a three-member ring intermediate \( t-i2 \), which in turn would rearrange to a branch isomer \( t-i4 \), then to another three-member cyclic intermediate \( t-i5 \), which ring-opens to linear triplet butatriene \( t-i6 \) (93.2 kcal mol\(^{-1}\) below the reactants). \( t-i6 \) loses a hydrogen atom to produce \( n-\text{C}_4 \text{H}_3 \) \( p1 \) with overall exothermicity of 39.5 kcal mol\(^{-1}\). The highest barrier on this pathway is located between \( t-i2 \) and \( t-i4 \) at 22.5 kcal mol\(^{-1}\) above \( t-i2 \) and 7.9 kcal mol\(^{-1}\) below the reactants. A second route from \( t-i1 \) to \( t-i6 \) involves the four-member ring isomer \( t-i3 \), triplet cyclobutylene. The ring closure from \( t-i1 \) to \( t-i3 \) is characterized by a barrier of 15.0 kcal mol\(^{-1}\) and the corresponding transition state is 15.2 kcal mol\(^{-1}\) lower in energy than the reactants. Then, \( t-i3 \) undergoes ring opening along the CH\(_2\)-CH\(_2\) bond to yield \( t-i6 \) with a barrier of 20.3 kcal mol\(^{-1}\). An interesting aspect is that the triplet cyclobutylene corresponds to a well-defined local minimum at 46.2 kcal mol\(^{-1}\) below the reactants and is stabilized by a barrier of \(< 20 \) kcal mol\(^{-1}\) with respect to the ring opening. The ground state of cyclobutylene along the triplet PES is \( ^3\text{B}_2 \); the molecule can be described in terms of three single C–C bonds and one C=C double bond in the four-membered ring. The two unpaired electrons are localized on carbon atoms that do not have bonds with hydrogen. Both pathways leading from \( t-i1 \) to \( t-i6 \) are expected to compete. From the PES shown in Figure 3b, we can conclude that for the \( \text{C}_2(\Pi \pi) + \text{C}_3 \text{H}_4 \) reaction, similar to \( \text{C}_2(X^1\Sigma^+ \pi) + \text{C}_2 \text{H}_4 \), \( 1-\text{C}_4 \text{H}_3 (p1) \) is the major \( \text{C}_4 \text{H}_3 \) product, formed via a decomposing triplet butatriene complex through an exit barrier of 2.2 kcal mol\(^{-1}\). Both suggestions gain full support from our crossed beam data. First, the experimentally determined reaction exothermicity falls in the range 29–43 kcal mol\(^{-1}\). Second, the distribution maximum of the \( P(E_T) \) at the higher collision energy extends to 11 kcal mol\(^{-1}\), while in the case of the low energy experiment it peaked closed to 0 kcal mol\(^{-1}\); this dramatic change of the shape with the collision energy can be rationalized if at the higher collision energy a second channel opens, i.e., the reaction of dicarbon in the triplet state which is not present in the beam at lower velocities. The onset of the reaction of \( \text{C}_2(\Pi \pi) \) on the triplet surface could account for this nonzero peak in the translational energy distribution.

To quantify the role of the two pathways leading from \( t-i2 \) to the triplet butatriene, we carried out RKR calculations of the triplet reaction rate constants using the technique described elsewhere.\(^{23}\) The rates for individual steps computed for the collision energy of 6.9 kcal mol\(^{-1}\), presented in Table 1, were then employed to solve the kinetic equation for the steady-state regime and to calculate the branching ratio of the \( t-i1 \rightarrow t-i2 \rightarrow t-i6 \) pathway vs \( t-i1 \rightarrow t-i2 \rightarrow t-i4 \rightarrow t-i5 \rightarrow t-i6 \) pathway. The results show that about 90% of triplet butatriene are formed via the path involving the triplet cyclobutylene intermediate \( t-i3 \), and only 10% are produced by the multistep mechanism via the three-member ring intermediates. The branching ratios were found to be not sensitive to the collision energy; for instance, at zero collision energy they change by less than 1%. Thus, the elusive cyclobutylene in the triplet electronic state is a key intermediate of the \( \text{C}_2(\Pi \pi) + \text{C}_3 \text{H}_4 \) reaction. From the rate constants, we can estimate that the lifetime of triplet cyclobutylene under single collision conditions is about 3 ps, while that of triplet butatriene \( t-i6 \) is about 4 ps, hence both intermediates are expected to be observable spectroscopically. The long lifetime of \( t-i6 \) well accounts for the symmetric CM angular distribution experimentally observed.

Finally, we would like to discuss alternative reaction pathways in addition to the dicarbon versus hydrogen exchange as manifested in the present study. Table 2 compiles the reaction
enthalpies of all theoretically feasible reaction channels, excluding three-body dissociations. First, a molecular hydrogen elimination could yield the diacetylene products (HCCCCH) in a strongly exothermic reaction (−101.7 kcal mol⁻¹). Since, however, s-12 was identified as the central reaction intermediate, a H₂ elimination from the latter should yield exclusively the CCCCCCH(X 1 A 1 ) isomer. This carbene structure is less stable by 41.7 kcal mol⁻¹, which in turn gives a reaction enthalpy of −59.9 kcal mol⁻¹. Based on these thermodynamics, this channel might compete with the atomic hydrogen loss. However, the H₂ loss is expected to involve a significant exit barrier, which might make this channel less likely compared to the formation of the n-C₄H₃ isomer. More experimental studies are clearly necessary to exclude minor contributions of this molecular hydrogen loss. Second, we investigate possible carbon–carbon bond ruptures. Both pathways 3 and 4 are slightly endothermic by 2.8 (methylacetylene product; pathway 3a) and 4.2 kcal mol⁻¹ (allene product; pathway 3b) and 10.2 kcal mol⁻¹ (pathway 4). Since the highest collision energy in our experiments was 6.9 kcal mol⁻¹, pathway 4 is certainly closed. Based on the PESs involved, the intermediates do not carry a methyl group, and hence formation of the methylacetylene product (pathway 3a) is unlikely as well. However, the t-i5 structure could lose ground state atomic carbon on the triplet surface. Since the overall reaction, however, is endothermic by about 4.2 kcal mol⁻¹, this pathway might represent only a minor contribution, if any. Considering the singlet surface, any atomic carbon must be formed in the (C/D) state, which makes this pathway energetically not accessible. Likewise, the carbon–carbon bond rupture in s-12 to form triplet vinylidene carbene plus triplet carbene (pathway 5) is strongly endothermic by 43.3 kcal mol⁻¹ and hence closed in our experiment. Although the formation of tricarbon and methane (pathway 6) is strongly exothermic, the singlet PES shows no intermediate which can decompose to these products. Therefore, pathway 6 likely can be disregarded. The same argument holds for channel 7, as no singlet/triplet intermediate involved depicts any methyl group. Last, but not least, we like to discuss the exothermic reaction channels C₂H + C₂H₂ (pathway 9; −18 kcal mol⁻¹) and C₂H₂ + C₂H₂ (pathway 8; −104 kcal mol⁻¹). Note that prior to our crossed beam investigation, both pathways were suggested to be the most important reaction channels based on previous kinetic data. A closer look at the potential energy surfaces involved shows that two acetylene molecules cannot be formed. The butatriene molecule s-12 can only decompose to two vinylidene species; the overall reaction enthalpy is calculated to be slightly exothermic by 18.1 kcal mol⁻¹ and hence could be only a minor pathway compared to the atomic hydrogen loss. Pathway 9 is not open via indirect scattering dynamics as no intermediate can fragment to the ethynyl plus vinyl radicals; likewise, a direct reaction via hydrogen abstraction on the singlet surface involves a significant barrier of 26 kcal mol⁻¹ and hence is closed in our experiments.

Conclusion

Our combined experimental and theoretical investigations showed that the C₂H₃+H formation channel is a relevant one for the reactions of C₂(X 1 a 3) + C₂H₂ at any collision energy. To a minor amount, the triplet surface might lead to the formation of atomic carbon plus allene, whereas (a) a molecular hydrogen elimination and (b) the formation of two vinylidene molecules on the singlet surface could contribute slightly. The branching ratios of these 12 pathways are subject to further studies. Remarkably, our study permitted us to elucidate for the first time a C₂ reaction mechanism and suggested the existence of the triplet cyclobutane as a transient species. This last result deserves special attention. The chemical and physical properties of small cycloalkyne molecules have been a subject of ongoing interest for the past 50 years. Due to their ring strength, small cyclic molecules are thermally labile and air sensitive; these properties restrict their existence either to low temperature matrices or as π donors/acceptors bound in metal complexes. Both approaches have been applied successfully to isolate cyclohexyne, c-C₄H₄.⁶,²⁵ Also, cyclopropyne, c-C₃H₂, was assigned tentatively in a low-temperature matrix study and, very recently, compelling evidence was presented on the existence of reactive cyclopropyne intermediates in solution as well.²⁶ Transition metal complexes of the even smaller species cyclobutane have been synthesized elegantly,²⁷ but matrix isolated or free gas-phase cyclobutane has never been observed so far. According to the present and previous electronic structure calculations, however, this species should be metastable,²⁸ and hence observable if it could be "prepared" experimentally. Since triplet dicarbon is ubiquitous in hydrocarbon flames, our results suggest that a laser-based detection of the cyclobutane intermediate in these ethylene flame could be feasible.

Acknowledgment. R.I.K. is indebted the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for a Habilitation fellowship (IIC1-Ka1081/3-1). The experiments were supported further by Academia Sinica (January—March 2000). Further support for the computations came from Petroleum Research Fund of Taiwan, Academia Sinica, and the National Science Council (NSC8902113-M-001-034). From September 2001, subsistence from The University of York is acknowledged. This work was performed within the International Astrophysics Network.

References and Notes


(15) The tricarbon molecule C3 is present in the beam as well, but at the present collision energies no reaction with ethylene takes place.
