

Electrocatalytic carboxylation of benzyl chlorides at silver cathodes in acetonitrile

Abdirisak A. Isse and Armando Gennaro*

Dipartimento di Chimica Fisica, Università di Padova, via Loredan 2, 35131 Padova, Italy.

E-mail: A.Gennaro@chfi.unipd.it; Fax: +39 049 8275135; Tel: +39 049 8275132

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Silver exhibits powerful electrocatalytic activities towards the reductive carboxylation of benzyl chlorides (RCl) in CO₂-saturated CH₃CN, reduction of RCl occurs at potentials that are about 0.6 V more positive than those of the same process at Hg or carbon electrodes and gives carboxylic acids in good to excellent yields.

The electrochemical reduction of benzyl chlorides in CO₂-saturated solvents has been extensively investigated as a synthetic route to carboxylic acids.¹ In fact, this method of synthesis may provide a valuable alternative route to the manufacture of 2-arylpropanoic acids, which are of great interest in the pharmaceutical industry.² A drawback to the use of benzyl chlorides as starting material is, however, that their reduction at the most commonly used cathodes occurs at very negative potentials, where concomitant reduction of CO₂ may take place, resulting in undesired products and a decrease of current efficiency. This has prompted the search for suitable catalytic systems capable of mediating the electrocarboxylation process.

Several nickel and palladium complexes with phosphine ligands,³ as well as some square-planar cobalt⁴ and nickel⁵ complexes, have been used as homogeneous catalysts for the electrochemical carboxylation of various benzyl chlorides. Electrogenerated organic radical anions, acting as outer sphere electron transfer agents, have also been used.^{5,6} Although good current efficiencies were obtained with many of these catalytic systems, only moderate to low turnover numbers were achieved. A high turnover number has been reported only in one case where a zeolite-encapsulated cobalt complex was used.^{4c}

A very interesting type of catalysis in electrochemistry is one in which the electrode, besides being a source or a sink for electrons, behaves as a catalyst for the redox reaction. Several electrode materials, e.g., Pt, Ni, Au, stainless steel and graphite, have been used for the electrocarboxylation of benzyl chlorides. Although the role of the cathode was not investigated in depth, it seems that none of the electrodes so far tested has a particular electrocatalytic effect towards the reductive carboxylation of the halides. Very recently, a series of papers dealing with the reduction of organic halides at silver cathodes has appeared.⁷ The most important result emerging from such studies is that silver exhibits extraordinary electrocatalytic activities towards the reduction process, especially in the case of bromides and iodides. With the exception of a study on the carboxylation of some aromatic halides, which gave only poor to moderate yields,⁸ the possibility of exploiting the electrocatalytic nature of silver in electrocarboxylations has not been explored yet.

Here we report the results of an investigation on the potentialities of silver as an electrocatalyst in the carboxylation of benzyl chlorides. The process was studied in CH₃CN + 0.1 M Et₄NClO₄ at Ag, Hg and carbon cathodes at 25 °C.⁹ Two types of silver electrode were used: one made from the bulk metal and the other (denoted Ag/Pt) prepared by electrodeposition of Ag on Pt. On all three electrodes, a single irreversible peak is observed in cyclic voltammetry. Fig. 1 shows cyclic voltammograms recorded at Ag for the reduction of PhCH₂Cl in the absence and presence of CO₂, as well as for the reduction of CO₂ alone. It is noteworthy that *E*_p of PhCH₂Cl is about 0.5 V

more positive than that of CO₂ and becomes even more positive when the solution is saturated with CO₂. Voltammograms similar to those shown in Fig. 1 were obtained for all benzyl chlorides (RCl). The position of the peak, however, depends strongly on the electrode material. The data obtained at Ag, Hg and glassy carbon (GC) electrodes are collected in Table 1. The data obtained on Ag/Pt (not shown in the Table) were the same, within experimental error, as those reported for Ag. Whereas the presence of CO₂ had no effect on the peak potential (*E*_p) of RCl at GC or Hg, significant positive shifts were observed at the silver electrodes. The last column shows *E*_p values obtained at Ag in CO₂-saturated CH₃CN.

Electron transfer to organic halides, RX, involves rupture of the carbon–halogen bond.¹⁰ The electrode may get involved in interactions with RX or its reduction intermediates and products. Because of its inertness to the species involved in the reaction, GC has been suggested as the best electrode material for the investigation of the reduction mechanism of organic halides. We may, therefore, use this electrode as a reference material to examine the electrocatalytic properties of the electrodes towards the reduction of RCl. The data reported in Table 1 show that similar *E*_p values were obtained at GC and Hg, suggesting that, for both electrodes, surface processes do not play an important role in the reaction.¹¹ Instead, the *E*_p values obtained at Ag are considerably more positive than those measured at GC. Such a great difference of *E*_p between the two

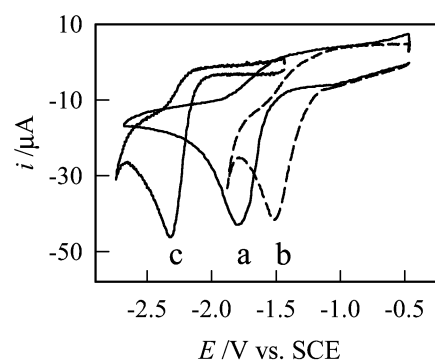


Fig. 1 Cyclic voltammograms recorded at 0.2 V s⁻¹ in CH₃CN + 0.1 M Et₄NClO₄ at a Ag electrode. (a) 3 mM PhCH₂Cl, (b) as (a) + 0.28 M CO₂, (c) 4 mM CO₂.

Table 1 Voltammetric data for the reduction of benzyl chlorides (3 mM) and CO₂ (4 mM) in CH₃CN + 0.1 M Et₄NClO₄ at *v* = 0.2 V s⁻¹

Compound	GC	Hg	Ag	
	<i>E</i> _p /V vs. SCE	<i>E</i> _p /V vs. SCE	<i>E</i> _p /V vs. SCE	<i>E</i> _p (CO ₂) ^a /V vs. SCE
CO ₂	-2.41	-2.46	-2.34	
PhCH ₂ Cl	-2.25	-2.27	-1.79	-1.52
4-CF ₃ C ₆ H ₄ CH ₂ Cl	-1.99	-1.97	-1.67	-1.48
4-CH ₃ OC ₆ H ₄ CH ₂ Cl	-2.26	-2.31	-1.82	-1.52
PhCH(CH ₃)Cl	-2.23	-2.29	-1.81	-1.53

^a In the presence of 0.28 M CO₂.

electrodes points to a significant electrocatalytic effect of the silver electrode towards the reduction of RCl.

The extraordinary electrocatalytic effect of Ag is probably related to the high affinity of the metal for halide ions, which is well documented in the literature.¹² As reported earlier for various alkyl halides,^{7b,d} it is very likely that reduction of RCl at Ag involves interaction of both RCl and its reduction intermediates and products with the electrode. Such interactions can affect both the thermodynamics and kinetics of the process. Although adsorption of the products has a thermodynamic advantage resulting in a positive shift of the reduction potential, kinetic effects probably play a major role in the electrocatalytic process. In fact, interaction of RCl with Ag with the formation of an activated complex of the form R...Cl...Ag may decrease significantly the great overpotential associated with the dissociative reduction of the carbon-halogen bond.

The most relevant outcome of the voltammetric investigation is that, at Ag cathodes, reduction of RCl occurs at potentials considerably more positive than E_p of CO₂. In the least favourable case, the difference between E_p of CO₂ and that measured for RCl in the presence of CO₂ is 0.51 V (Table 1). This provides a potential window save enough for electrocarboxylation of RCl to be performed without any interference from reduction of CO₂. Controlled-potential electrolyses were carried out in CO₂-saturated solutions containing ca. 50 mM RCl (1 mmol) in an undivided cell with an Al sacrificial anode. Both Ag and Ag/Pt electrodes were used. Also some experiments were performed at Hg and graphite electrodes for comparison. In each case, the electrolysis was carried out at a potential just beyond E_p of RCl and was stopped after total conversion of the halide was achieved. At the end of the electrolysis, identification and quantification of the products was done by HPLC. The results are reported in Table 2. The principal product was always the corresponding carboxylic acid (RCO₂H) although its yield depends, to some extent, on the experimental conditions. At silver electrodes, whether bulk or coated on Pt, excellent results both in terms of chemical yields and current efficiencies were obtained.¹³ Substituents on the phenyl ring do not strongly modify the product distribution, although, as a general trend, the yield of RH increases with the electron-donating power of the substituent. At graphite and Hg electrodes (entries 4, 5 and 10), poor current efficiencies (< 50%) were obtained. Owing to the very negative potentials required for the reduction of RCl at these electrodes, concomitant reduction of CO₂ to give oxalate, CO and carbonate, as previously reported,¹⁴ probably takes place resulting in a high consumption of charge.

In conclusion, we have shown that electrocarboxylation of benzyl chlorides can be successfully achieved without resorting to the use of homogeneous catalysts. The process at Ag cathodes occurs at potentials similar to, or even more positive than, those of the most efficient catalysts so far reported³⁻⁵ and gives

carboxylic acids in very high yields without passivation of the electrode. Silver has shown good catalytic properties in the electroreduction of a variety of organic halides and it is fairly likely to be a good cathode material for their electrocarboxylation. The excellent results reported here for the benzyl chlorides recommend a broad research in that direction.

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- For voltammetric investigations a silver disk of ~0.5 mm diameter, a Pt sphere coated with silver, a glassy carbon disk of ~3 mm diameter and a Hg sphere were used. Before use, the Ag and GC disks were polished with a 0.25 μm diamond paste and ultrasonically rinsed in CH₃CN and ethanol, respectively. For macro-scale electrolyses a Ag foil (12 cm²), a Hg pool (8 cm²), a compact graphite rod (6 cm²) and a Ag-coated Pt plate (2.2 cm²) were used; the thickness of the Ag film on the latter was ~30 μm. The preparation of the Hg microelectrode and the Ag-coated Pt electrodes was based on electrodeposition of Ag on Pt from aqueous KAg(CN)₂ solutions, as previously described.^{9a} (a) A. A. Isse, A. Gennaro and E. Vianello, *J. Electroanal. Chem.*, 1998, **444**, 241.
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- The reduction of many organic halides, especially bromides and iodides, at Hg involves organomercury compounds arising from adsorption of the intermediate radicals on the electrode, see: D. G. Peters, in *Organic Electrochemistry*, eds. H. Lund and M. M. Baizer, Dekker, New York, 1991, p. 361.
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- An exception is when the experiment was conducted in a divided cell (entry 2). In that case, only a moderate yield of phenylacetic acid was obtained together with PhCH₂CO₂CH₂Ph arising from esterification of the carboxylate with PhCH₂Cl. Owing to the stabilisation of the carboxylate ions by the Al³⁺ cations arising from the dissolving anode, the undesirable esterification reaction is avoided when an undivided cell is used.
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Table 2 Electrocarboxylation of RCl in CH₃CN + 0.1 M Et₄NClO₄

Entry	RCl	Cathode	E_{app}^a	n^b	Product yields ^c (%)	
					RH	RCO ₂ H
1	PhCH ₂ Cl	Ag	-1.65	2.11	6	94
2 ^d	PhCH ₂ Cl	Ag	-1.65	2.00	18	53
3	PhCH ₂ Cl	Ag/Pt	-1.65	2.01	5	90
4	PhCH ₂ Cl	C	-2.30	4.49	16	81
5	PhCH ₂ Cl	Hg	-2.24	3.70	4	90
6	4-CF ₃ C ₆ H ₄ CH ₂ Cl	Ag	-1.55	2.32	2	95
7	4-CH ₃ OC ₆ H ₄ CH ₂ Cl	Ag	-1.70	2.26	16	79
8	PhCH(CH ₃)Cl	Ag	-1.68	2.01	15	80
9	PhCH(CH ₃)Cl	Ag/Pt	-1.68	2.00	6	81
10	PhCH(CH ₃)Cl	C	-2.29	5.59	14	82

^a Applied potential (V vs. SCE). ^b e⁻ per molecule of RCl. ^c Yield = 100 × (moles of product/moles of RCl). ^d A two-compartment cell was used; 10% benzyl phenylacetate, which accounts for 20% of the starting RCl, was also obtained.