

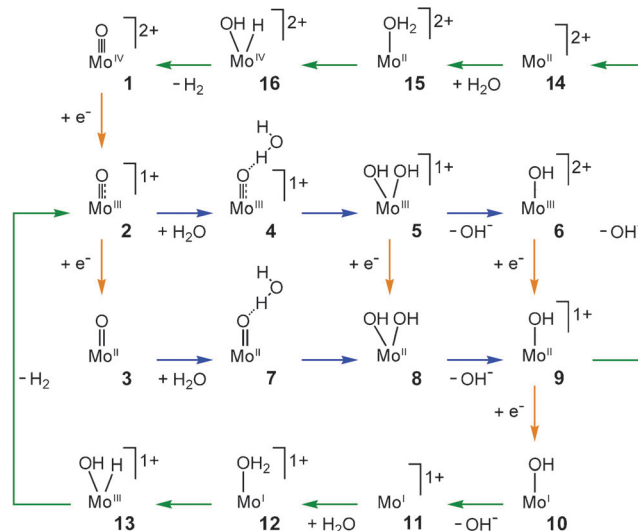
Computational Evidence for Hydrogen Generation by Reductive Cleavage of Water and α -H Abstraction on a Molybdenum Complex**

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Owing to the increasing global energy demand and declining oil resources, hydrogen has attracted extensive attention as a good candidate for a clean, sustainable fuel.^[1] Besides heterogeneous catalysts, some homogenous systems have also been developed, with inspiration from hydrogenase enzymes, for catalytic generation of H_2 from water.^[2] In 2010, Karunadasa, Chang, and Long reported a novel and interesting electrocatalytic cycle for reduction of water to form H_2 .^[3] They achieved H_2 evolution from the reaction of $[(PY5Me_2)MoO](PF_6)_2$ ($PY5Me_2$ = 2,6-bis[1,1-bis(2-pyridyl)ethyl]pyridine) with water in electrolysis experiments. Their discovery established a distinct paradigm for producing H_2 from water. Elucidation of the mechanism and energetics of this reaction is important for further development of active complexes for water reduction and a better understanding of the processes occurring on hydrogenase enzymes.

On the basis of detailed DFT calculations, we propose possible electrocatalytic cycles for H_2 generation from water starting with $[(PY5Me_2)MoO]^{2+}$, as schematically illustrated in Scheme 1. All calculations were carried out with the Gaussian09 program suite.^[4] The unrestricted PBE1PBE hybrid functional^[5] was adopted after careful selection. The geometry of each species was optimized in aqueous phase by incorporating solvent effects with the polarizable continuum model (PCM).^[6] Two possible spin states were examined for most species, and for a few stationary points three spin states were checked. Other computational details are described in the Supporting Information.

The Mo^{IV} oxo complex $[(PY5Me_2)MoO]^{2+}$ (**1**) was identified in the singlet state. As shown in Figure 1, the Mo–O bond length in **1** is calculated to be 1.685 Å, identical to the experimentally measured value.^[3] One- and two-electron reductions of **1** give birth to $[(PY5Me_2)MoO]^+$ (**2**) and $[(PY5Me_2)MoO]$ (**3**), respectively. Complex **2** adopts the doublet state, and **3** the triplet state; the triplet–singlet energy



Scheme 1. Possible catalytic cycles for H_2 generation from water starting with $[(PY5Me_2)Mo^{IV}O]^{2+}$. The $PY5Me_2$ ligand is omitted.

gap of **3** is only 1.3 kcal mol^{−1}. Computed redox potentials for $[(PY5Me_2)MoO]^{2+/+}$ and $[(PY5Me_2)MoO]^{+/0}$ couples are −0.69 and −1.45 V versus standard hydrogen electrode (SHE), respectively. The calculated Mo–O bond lengths in **2** and **3** of 1.756 and 1.813 Å, respectively, indicate that the Mo–O bond is weakened step by step during the reduction. The reaction of **1** with H_2O is energetically unfavorable, being endergonic by 24.7 kcal mol^{−1} with an activation energy of 38.0 kcal mol^{−1}. Detailed results are given in the Supporting Information. In the following, we discuss the reactions of **2** with H_2O and **3** with H_2O . Gibbs free-energy profiles for these two reactions are presented in Figures 2 and 3, respectively. Optimized geometries of the species involved in the reaction of **2** with H_2O are shown in Figure 1, and other optimized geometries are provided in the Supporting Information (Figure S4).

When **2** reacts with H_2O , precursor complex **4** is firstly formed, in which H_2O is bonded to the oxo ligand through a hydrogen bond. This step is endergonic by 6.6 kcal mol^{−1}. Next, the bound H_2O is deprotonated through nucleophilic attack by the oxo ligand, and dihydroxo complex $[(PY5Me_2)Mo(OH)_2]^+$ (**5**) is formed. Complex **4** is in the doublet state, but **5** adopts the quartet state; the transformation of **4** into **5** goes through a doublet transition state (**TS4/5**). This step is slightly endergonic by 1.4 kcal mol^{−1} and has a moderate activation energy of 20.7 kcal mol^{−1}. Subsequently, an OH^- anion can be eliminated from **5**, and monohydroxo complex $[(PY5Me_2)Mo(OH)]^{2+}$ (**6**) is pro-

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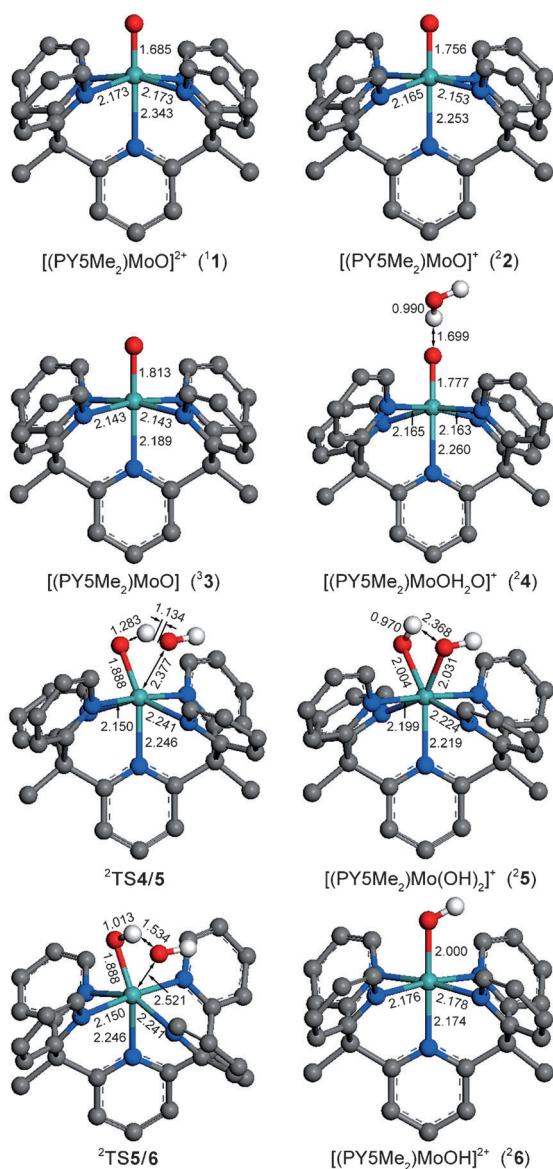


Figure 1. Optimized geometries of Mo oxo complexes **1–3**, and the species involved in the reaction of **2** with H₂O and the elimination of OH[−]. Mo, O, N, C, and H atoms are represented by green, red, blue, gray, and white, respectively. H atoms on the PY5Me₂ ligand are omitted for clarity. Selected distances are given in Å. The superscript indicates the spin multiplicity of each species (1, 2, 3, and 4 for the singlet, doublet, triplet, and quartet state, respectively).

duced. Note that **5** and **6** are both in the quartet states, but the transition state in this step (**TS5/6**) is in the doublet state. This step is exergonic by 12.4 kcal mol^{−1} and the activation energy is 19.6 kcal mol^{−1}. The further elimination of OH[−] from **6** is thermodynamically unfeasible, because it is endergonic by 29.6 kcal mol^{−1}.

The reaction of **3** with H₂O is somewhat like the reaction of **2** with H₂O, but the former proceeds on the triplet surface, although the triplet–singlet energy gaps of some stationary points are small. The overall reaction is exergonic by 22.0 kcal mol^{−1} and the highest barrier on the whole potential energy surface is 30.7 kcal mol^{−1}. The activation energy

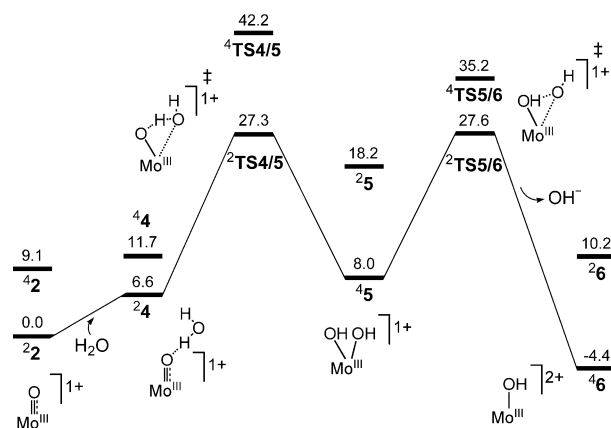


Figure 2. Free-energy (298.15 K, in kcal mol^{−1}) profile for the reaction of **2** with H₂O and the elimination of an OH[−] anion.

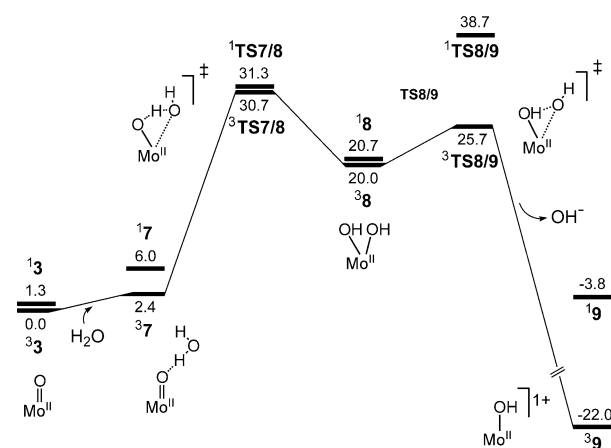


Figure 3. Free-energy (298.15 K, in kcal mol^{−1}) profile for the reaction of **3** with H₂O and the elimination of an OH[−] anion.

(28.3 kcal mol^{−1}) for deprotonation of H₂O in **7** is higher than that for the deprotonation of H₂O in **4**, because **TS7/8** and **TS4/5** are both post-transition states, and the energy of **8** relative to **7** is much higher than that of **5** relative to **4**. Hence, the stronger nucleophilicity of Mo^{II}(oxo) in **3** does not play a major role. Elimination of an OH[−] anion from **8** is facile; it is strongly exergonic by 42.0 kcal mol^{−1} with a low activation energy of 5.7 kcal mol^{−1}. Elimination of the second OH[−] anion is not so energetically favorable, because it is endergonic by 16.5 kcal mol^{−1}.

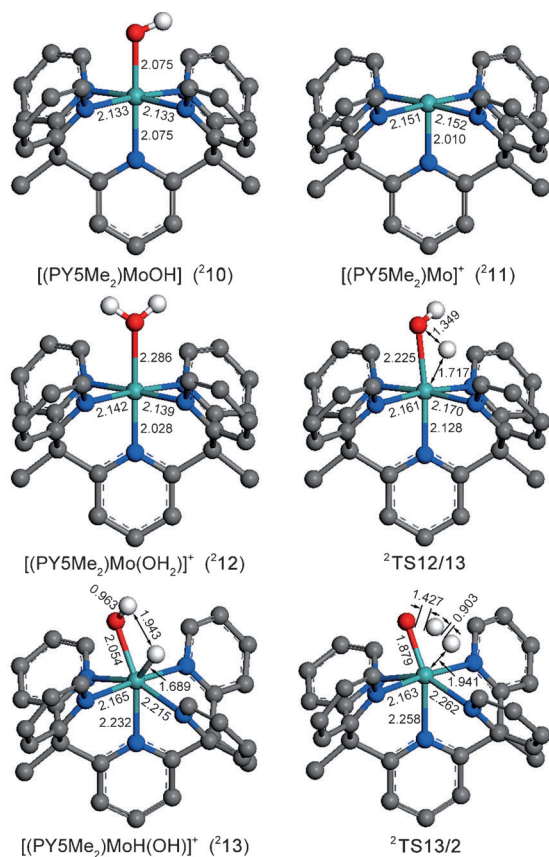
One-electron reduction of **5** yields **8**, and reduction of **6** yields **9**. In addition, **9** can be reduced to Mo^I monohydroxo complex [(PY5Me₂)MoOH] (**10**). We mentioned above that one- and two-electron reductions of **1** lead to **2** and **3**, respectively. All computed redox potentials for the possible couples involved in this electrochemical system are collected in Table 1.^[7] Karunadasa, Chang, and Long observed two half-wave potentials of this reaction system in aqueous KCl solution at *E*_{1/2} = −0.58 and −1.06 V versus SHE,^[3] and assigned them to [(PY5Me₂)MoO]^{2+/+} and [(PY5Me₂)MoO]⁺⁰ couples. Computed redox potentials for [(PY5Me₂)MoO]^{2+/+} and [(PY5Me₂)MoO]⁺⁰ couples are

Table 1: Computed redox potentials [V vs. SHE] for the possible couples in this investigated electrochemical system.

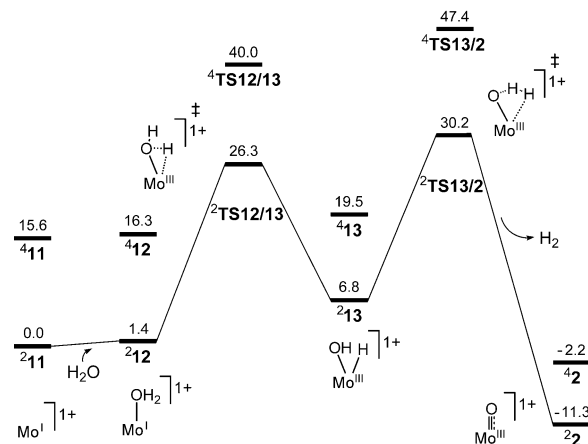
Redox couple	$[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{MoO}]^{2+/+}$	$[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{MoO}]^{+/0}$	$[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{Mo}(\text{OH})_2]^{+/0}$	$[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{MoOH}]^{2+/+}$	$[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{MoOH}]^{+/0}$
redox potential	−0.69	−1.45	−1.94	−0.68	−1.40

close to those for $[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{MoOH}]^{2+/+}$ and $[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{MoOH}]^{+/0}$ couples, respectively. If reduction of **1** to **2** and **3** occurs, then reduction of **6** to **9** and **10** can take place as well.

Once **10** is formed, elimination of OH^- releases the Mo^{I} site ($[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{Mo}]^+$ (**11**)). This step is endergonic by $5.1 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$. The Mo^{I} site is active enough to generate H_2 by reductive cleavage of water and subsequent $\alpha\text{-H}$ abstraction. Optimized geometries of all species involved in this process are presented in Figure 4, and the Gibbs free-energy

**Figure 4.** Optimized geometries of the species involved in water reduction to form H_2 on Mo^{I} . Selected distances are given in Å.

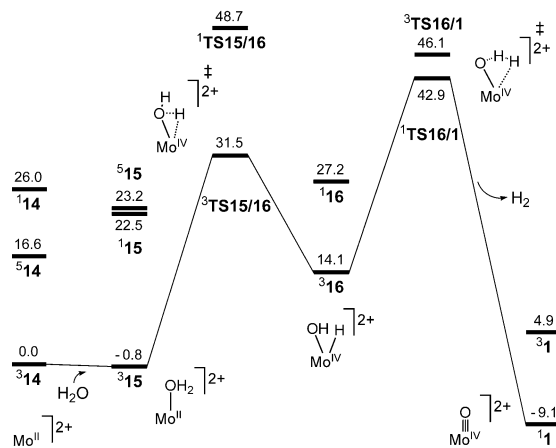
profile for this process is shown in Figure 5. Coordination of H_2O at this Mo^{I} site leads to formation of aquo complex $[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{Mo}(\text{OH}_2)]^+$ (**12**), which is endergonic by $1.4 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$. Oxidative addition of H_2O to Mo^{I} forms hydrido hydroxo complex $[(\text{PY5Me}_2)\text{MoH}(\text{OH})]^+$ (**13**). Cleavage of H_2O into hydride and hydroxide is endergonic by $5.4 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ with a moderate activation energy of $24.9 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$. Finally, the hydride will capture the proton of the hydroxide ligand to generate H_2 . At the same time, Mo^{III} oxo complex **2**

**Figure 5.** Free-energy (298.15 K, in kcal mol^{-1}) profile for the reduction of water to form H_2 on Mo^{I} .

is regenerated. This step is exergonic by $18.1 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ and the activation energy is moderate ($23.4 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$). All of these steps occur on the doublet surface. The whole process of water reduction on Mo^{I} to form H_2 and **2** is exergonic by $11.3 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ and has an overall barrier of $30.2 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$.

We also considered the possibility of water reduction to H_2 on Mo^{II} . The Gibbs free-energy profile for H_2 generation on Mo^{II} is depicted in Figure 6, and optimized geometries of the species involved in this process are given in the Supporting Information (Figure S5). The whole process is exergonic by $9.1 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$ and has an overall barrier of $42.9 \text{ kcal mol}^{-1}$. This barrier is higher than that for reduction of water on Mo^{I} , that is, Mo^{II} is less active.

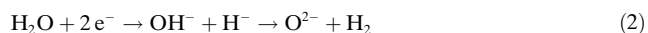
All possible reaction steps depicted in Scheme 1 have been already explored. On the basis of the calculations described above, we suggest that the most likely cycle for the

**Figure 6.** Free-energy (298.15 K, in kcal mol^{-1}) profile for the reduction of water to form H_2 on Mo^{II} .

generation of H₂ from water in this electrochemical system is **2**→**4**→**5**→**6**→**9**→**10**→**11**→**12**→**13**→**2**. In this cycle **10**→**11**→**12**→**13**→**2**→**4**→**5**→**6** is a thermochemical process and **6**→**9**→**10** is an electrochemical process. Overall, this catalytic cycle can be represented by Equation (1).



This process is distinct from the mechanisms previously proposed for H₂ evolution on hydrogenases^[8] and some molecular catalysts,^[9] in which H₂ is generated by proton reduction. Interestingly, in this process the two H atoms of the formed H₂ come from an H₂O molecule [Eq. (2)].



We additionally studied the reaction of H₂O with MoO⁺ species (without the PY5Me₂ ligand) and reduction of H₂O on bare Mo⁺ ion. Detailed results are provided in the Supporting Information. The reaction of H₂O with MoO⁺ to form Mo(OH)₂⁺ is very facile, being exergonic by 10.7 kcal mol⁻¹ with a barrier of 11.9 kcal mol⁻¹, but the elimination of OH⁻ is thermodynamically unfavorable, since even the first step is endergonic by 35.3 kcal mol⁻¹. The production of H₂ by H₂O reduction on bare Mo⁺ ion is exergonic by 19.7 kcal mol⁻¹ and involves an overall barrier of 16.9 kcal mol⁻¹. Accordingly, when a suitable ligand is chosen, H₂ can be generated from H₂O on Mo^I. The major obstacle to accomplishing a catalytic cycle is elimination of OH⁻ anions.

Karunadasa, Chang, and Long also reported production of H₂ from the reactions of [(PY5Me₂)Mo(CF₃SO₃)]⁺ with H₂O and [(PY5Me₂)MoI]²⁺ with H₂O.^[3] These two reactions can take place because the active Mo^{II} site is formed during the reaction. Detailed results are presented in the Supporting Information.

It is interesting that generation of H₂ on all three active complexes occurs through reductive cleavage of H₂O and subsequent α-H abstraction. This has long been considered as a possible mechanism for reduction of water to H₂, but a clear example was not established.^[10] Now our computational results, based on the experimental facts, reveal that H₂ production by reductive cleavage of H₂O and subsequent α-H abstraction on [(PY5Me₂)Mo]⁺ is energetically favorable. H₂ formation by a similar mechanism occurring on [(PY5Me₂)Mo]²⁺ is also possible, although less favorable. These findings broaden the understanding of mechanisms for

water reduction and may be helpful for developing more active or applicable catalysts for H₂ generation from H₂O.

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