High aspect ratio nanotubes assembled from macrocyclic iminium salts

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Contributed by Monica Olvera de la Cruz, July 20, 2018 (sent for review May 31, 2018; reviewed by Jonathan L. Sessler and Gregory A. Voth)

One-dimensional nanostructures such as carbon nanotubes and actin filaments rely on strong and directional interactions to stabilize their high aspect ratio shapes. This requirement has precluded making isolated, long, thin organic nanotubes by stacking molecular macrocycles, as their noncovalent stacking interactions are generally too weak. Here we report high aspect ratio ($>10^3$), lyotropic nanotubes of stacked, macrocyclic, iminium salts, which are formed by protonation of the corresponding imine-linked macrocycles. Iminium ion formation establishes cohesive interactions that, in organic solvent (tetrahydrofuran), are two orders of magnitude stronger than the neutral macrocycles, as explained by physical arguments and demonstrated by molecular dynamics simulations. Nanotube formation stabilizes the iminium ions, which otherwise rapidly hydrolyze, and is reversed and restored upon addition of bases and acids. Acids generated by irradiating a photoacid generator or sonicating chlorinated solvents also induced nanotube assembly, allowing these nanostructures to be coupled to diverse stimuli, and, once assembled, they can be fixed permanently by cross-linking their pendant alkenes. As large macrocyclic chromonic liquid crystals, these iminium salts are easily accessible through a modular design and provide a means to rationally synthesize structures that mimic the morphology and rheology of carbon nanotubes and biological tubules.

stimuli-responsive materials | macrocycles | supramolecular chemistry | nanotubes | molecular dynamics

Nanotubes offer unique properties that emerge from their low dimensionality, tubular rigidity, and confined interior microenvironments (1). These features have been exploited for the directional or selective transport of charges (2, 3), energy (4), biomass (5), and water (6); for the mechanical reinforcement of living cells (5) and soft matter (7); and as containers for drugs and viral genetic information (8). Their few-nanometer thickness and high aspect ratios impart these functions and are key to their rheological properties and processability. Inspired by biological 1D nanostructures such as microtubules and helical virus capsids, abiotic self-assembled nanotubes have been explored based on cylindrical micelles (9) and columns using helical (3) or tapered (10) building blocks. These designs sometimes provide micrometer-long structures (9), but with thicknesses that are 10 times that of carbon nanotubes (CNTs). Aida and coworkers (9) noted that cylindrical micelles derived from amphiphile bilayers were approaching their ultimate thickness limits. Molecular macrocycles (MCs) are intuitive building blocks for thinner nanotubes because their composition, size, and porosity can be defined rationally through chemical synthesis (11). However, MC stacking is generally too weak to produce nanotubes with the high aspect ratios ($>10^3$) of CNTs and biological filaments. Stacked MCs instead almost always exhibit aspect ratios around 10 as short, individual assemblies or longer structures stabilized by bundling (12–14), limiting their utility as isolated nanostructures (15). Alternatively, when functionalized with many long alkyl or alkoxy side chains, they form bulk liquid crystalline phases

(16–19), with assembly sometimes driven by the presence of metal ions or organic guests (20). Shionoya and coworkers (21) recently observed that cyclometallated Pd–phenanthroline MCs formed micrometer-long nanotubes that were attributed to the square-planar geometry of the metal; the corresponding Zn complexes formed spherical aggregates. However, a general strategy has yet to emerge for making synthetic nanotubes that rival the morphologies of isolated CNTs.

Here we describe MCs that stack into lyotropic nanotubes with aspect ratios $>10^3$ upon protonation of their imine linkages, which turns on cohesive interactions of 10^2 to 10^3 kJ/mol as estimated by molecular dynamics simulations. Stacking stabilizes the MC's 12 iminium linkages, which are normally prone to hydrolysis, and is reversed and restored through the addition of bases and acids, respectively, including acids introduced by irradiating a photoacid generator or sonicating chlorinated solvents. Reactive alkene groups on the periphery of the MCs were cross-linked using thiol–ene reactions, thereby stabilizing the nanotubes as covalently bonded structures. These macrocyclic iminium salts feature a modular design via one-step synthesis from readily accessible amine and aldehyde components. As a diverse family of large ($>3,500$ daltons) and stimuli-responsive chromonic liquid crystals (20, 22), they provide a means to rationally access and manipulate high aspect ratio nanotubes with modular designs. Accessing high aspect ratio nanotubes based on

Significance

The distinct properties of one-dimensional nanomaterials, such as carbon nanotubes and actin filaments, emerge from their high aspect ratios. Stacking macrocycles into nanotubes represents a potentially powerful design strategy to access synthetic nanotubes, but such noncovalent assemblies are typically too weak to support individual, high aspect ratio structures. We report hexagonal macrocycles that exhibit strong electrostatic stacking upon protonation of their imine linkages. The resulting nanotubes form lyotropic phases and align in flow, a hallmark of high aspect ratio structures. The iminium-linked macrocycle assemblies form and disassemble reversibly in the presence of bases and acids, and are stabilized by covalent cross-linking.

Author contributions: C.S., M.S., A.D.C., M.O.d.l.C., and W.R.D. designed research; C.S., M.S., A.D.C., A.M.E., X.L., N.C.F., and M.C.H. performed research; C.S., M.S., A.D.C., B.H., M.J.B., M.O.d.l.C., and W.R.D. analyzed data; and C.S., M.S., A.D.C., M.O.d.l.C., and W.R.D. wrote the paper.

Reviewers: J.L.S., University of Texas at Austin; and G.A.V., The University of Chicago.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1809383115/-DCSupplemental.

Published online August 21, 2018.

dialdehyde (*SI Appendix, Scheme S4*). Each of these MCs is dispersible up to 100 μM in THF with no evidence of assembly and precipitates as a microcrystalline powder from polar solvents (*SI Appendix, Fig. S17*) (32).

The **1-DMTP** MCs exhibit a counterintuitive stability as a function of acid concentration that reflects both their acid-labile imine linkages and protonation-induced assembly. THF solutions of **1-DMTP** (100 μM) containing 5 mM $\text{CF}_3\text{CO}_2\text{H}$ undergo rapid hydrolysis to MC fragments within minutes (Fig. 1*B*), as evidenced by a change in solution color (from yellow to colorless) and evolution of its UV-visible (UV-vis) spectrum over 30 min (Fig. 1*D*) (33). After this change, further addition of TFA up to 200 mM does not alter the UV-vis spectrum significantly (Fig. 1*D, Inset*). MALDI-MS of these degraded solutions exhibits peaks at m/z of 1,027 ($2 \cdot 1 + \text{DMTP}$), 1,204 ($2 \cdot 1 + 2 \cdot \text{DMTP}$), and 1,620 ($3 \cdot 1 + 2 \cdot \text{DMTP}$), all of which correspond to MC fragments (Fig. 1*G*). In contrast, an otherwise identical THF solution of **1-DMTP** containing more $\text{CF}_3\text{CO}_2\text{H}$ (200 mM) and tetrabutylammonium perchlorate (TBAP; 3 mM) immediately turns red-orange (Fig. 1*E, Inset*), corresponding to a red shift in absorption from 416 nm to 493 nm (Fig. 1*E*), which is characteristic of conjugated iminium ions (33). Infrared spectroscopy of **1-DMTP** was also consistent with iminium ion formation, as the characteristic $\text{C}=\text{N}$ stretches were blue-shifted and broadened (*SI Appendix, Fig. S23*) (34). MALDI-MS analysis of the solution provided a single prominent peak at $m/z = 3,556.8$, corresponding to $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$ of the intact MC. The presence of 3 mM TBAP into MC solutions at 5 mM TFA does not affect the UV-vis evolution in Fig. 1*D*, but was used to be consistent with imaging experiments described below. Together, these data indicate that **1-DMTP** is unusually stable in the presence of 200 mM $\text{CF}_3\text{CO}_2\text{H}$ yet unstable at 5 mM $\text{CF}_3\text{CO}_2\text{H}$.

The unexpectedly high stability of **1-DMTP** to high (but not low) concentrations of $\text{CF}_3\text{CO}_2\text{H}$ is associated with MC assembly. Atomic force microscopy (AFM) of solutions of **1-DMTP** containing 200 mM $\text{CF}_3\text{CO}_2\text{H}$ drop cast on highly ordered pyrolytic graphite (HOPG) indicated 1D assemblies with uniform widths and 4-nm thicknesses (Fig. 1*H* and *SI Appendix, Fig. S19*). No features were observed in micrographs of drop cast solutions of **1-DMTP** containing 5 mM $\text{CF}_3\text{CO}_2\text{H}$ (Fig. 1*F*). The role of MC stacking in stabilizing iminium linkages at high acidity is further supported by a model compound containing two imine linkages (*SI Appendix, Scheme S8* and Fig. S24), which hydrolyzes in the presence of 200 mM $\text{CF}_3\text{CO}_2\text{H}$. All of the imine-linked MCs described above assemble similarly under high $\text{CF}_3\text{CO}_2\text{H}$ concentrations (*SI Appendix, Schemes S2–S4* and Fig. S19). The **1-DMTP** MC is studied in greatest detail below because it is capable of covalent cross-linking, but these findings indicate a general design for nanotubes that is based on directional bonding approaches and relatively simple monomers. The MC assemblies continue to evolve over 12 h, after which flocculation of red fibrous solid leaves a nearly colorless solution (*SI Appendix, Fig. S18*), indicating the depletion of dissolved MCs. AFM further reveals that the red solutions containing short tubular assemblies (Fig. 1*H*) ripen into micrometer-long nanotubes with aspect ratios exceeding 1,000, which entangle into meshes (Fig. 2*A*). Even in these relatively dense meshes, bundles of nanotubes are rare (Fig. 2*A*). We attribute the formation of individual nanostructures, in part, to the TBAP electrolyte, whose ions screen side-by-side interactions between adjacent nanotubes (Fig. 2*B*). Micrographs obtained of nanotubes in the presence of smaller cations or anions [LiClO_4 , NBu_4Br , $\text{N}(\text{CH}_3)_4\text{ClO}_4$] showed more prevalent bundled structures, whereas another large, noncoordinating electrolyte pair (NBu_4PF_6) also provided mostly separated nanotubes (*SI Appendix, Fig. S20*). Overall, the few-nanometer diameter and thickness of nanotubes under AFM are consistent with the size of MCs (3.4-nm inner diameter). The nanotubes extend for several microns with 5-nm diameters in solution, as characterized using transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and polarized light imaging (Fig. 2*C* and *D*). The transmission electron micrographs indicate a uniform tube

Fig. 2. Morphology and LC behavior of the nanotubes. (A) AFM of a mesh of nanotubes from 100 μM **1-DMTP** solution containing 200 mM TFA and 3 mM TBAP drop cast on HOPG. (B) AFM of a rare bundle of nanotubes arranged on HOPG indicates an approximate 5-nm width of individual nanotubes (*Inset*). (C) TEM of dense, nonbundled nanotubes with uniform, 5-nm widths and micrometer-scale lengths. (D) The lyotropic nanotubes shown align in the circular flow generated by stirring the suspension. (Top) True colors of the LC phases photographed through cross-polarizers at various stirring rates. (Bottom) False-colored photographs in which the color gradient represents the orientation of the LC phases.

diameter consistent with the sizes of individual **1-DMTP** MCs. The nanotubes appear rigid with micrometer-long persistent lengths and morphologies comparable to multiwalled CNTs. Tube ends are rarely observed, suggesting high end-cap energies. Although we observe weak electron diffraction spots from the nanotubes dispersed onto a TEM grid, the nanotubes do not appear to be 1D crystals (*SI Appendix, Fig. S21*).

Grazing incidence wide-angle X-ray scattering of a drop-cast film indicated a stacking distance of 4.6 Å between MCs with a preferential orientation normal to the HOPG substrate (*SI Appendix, Fig. S22 A and B*). A polarized light micrograph reveals the spontaneously ordered domains (*SI Appendix, Fig. S22E*). Concentrated nanotube suspensions exhibit a packing distance of 56.9 Å (*SI Appendix, Fig. S22 C–F*) via transmission X-ray diffraction, characteristic of the M phases in chromonic liquid crystals (22); this signal is absent in dilute nanotube suspensions. Because of their high aspect ratios (35), these nanotubes exhibit liquid crystalline (LC) behavior in solution at concentrations as low as 0.04 wt % of the MC (Fig. 2*D*). Similar behavior has been reported for dispersions of multiwalled CNTs (30). The LC phases respond to flow generated by stirring in a glass vial (Fig. 2*D*). Increasing flow rate induces greater nanotube alignment, as indicated by increasingly homogeneous red-colored phases (Fig. 2*D, Top*) and less segregated phase orientations (Fig. 2*D, Bottom*; see also *Movie S1*). Both of these image sets show increased continuity at higher stirring rate, demonstrating excellent shear alignment properties of nanotubes with circular flow. These results indicate that intriguing rheological behaviors emerge with low concentrations of high aspect ratio nanotubes assembled from macrocyclic iminium salts for nanotube alignment and processing.

The rapid and robust assembly of cationic iminium-linked MCs is superficially unexpected, considering the apparent presence of charge repulsion. However, in low-dielectric constant media such as THF, small amounts of salts can significantly alter phase behavior (36) because correlations among charges are very strong (37, 38). We theorize that, upon protonation, cationic MCs attract CF_3CO_2^- counterions and aggregate into nanotubes containing alternating structures of cationic MCs and CF_3CO_2^- anions via electrostatic interactions. Acids with different counterions such as HCl also induce MC stacking (see below). The assembly process and the role of the counterions were investigated using molecular dynamics simulations by explicitly including the unprotonated and cationic **1-DMTP** MCs, the THF solvent molecules, and CF_3CO_2^- counterions. Two unprotonated MCs placed 20 Å apart (Fig. 3*A*, *Inset*) remain separated during a 30-ns simulation (Fig. 3*A* and *Movie S2*), while protonated MCs initially separated by 20 Å (Fig. 3*B*, *Inset*) aggregate within 1 ns of the simulation with four pairs of protonated sites bound together with counterions for the entire 50-ns simulation (Fig. 3*B* and *Movie S2*). Furthermore, two preassembled nonprotonated

Fig. 3. Molecular dynamics simulations of acid-mediated stacking. (*A* and *B*) Representative depictions of (*A*) two neutral and (*B*) two protonated **1-DMTP** MCs that were initially separated during the simulations (*Insets*). The spheres represent the imine and iminium N atoms in *A* and *B*, respectively. Red structures in *B* represent CF_3CO_2^- counterions. The THF solvent molecules included in the simulations are excluded for clarity. Arrows P1 to P4 in *B* point to four protonated N–N pairs that are bound across the two MCs through counterions. (*C*) The number of bound N–N pairs between the two preassembled protonated MCs. (*Inset*) A snapshot of the simulation. (*D*) The PMF from umbrella sampling along the collective variable of the distance between the center of mass of Ns of two preassembled protonated MCs. The error bars of the PMF, estimated by Monte Carlo bootstrap error analysis, are within 1 $\text{kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$. (*Inset*) The snapshots for the first (assembled) and the last (disassembled) umbrella sampling windows. (*E* and *F*) Representative snapshots of 10 (*E*) preassembled MCs and (*F*) fully protonated MCs during 36-ns simulation. (*Insets*) The prearranged 10-ring stacks at the beginning of the simulation.

MCs become fully separated after 24 ns (*Movie S3*), with insignificant cohesive energy that is reproduced in the case of 10 preassembled MCs (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S28*A*), while protonated MCs stay assembled (Fig. 3*C*, *Inset* and *Movie S3*). The number of bound N–N pairs between the two protonated MCs remains ~ 12 (Fig. 3*C*).

Simulations reveal a strong cohesive energy between protonated MCs. In a direct calculation without biases, the trajectories of 10 preassembled protonated MCs show strong cohesive energy per MC ($\sim -1,310 \text{ kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$, i.e., $\sim 530 k_B T$, where $k_B T$ is the thermal energy), with the electrostatic energy being the major contribution (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S28*A*). *SI Appendix*, Fig. S28*B* shows that the magnitude of ΔE_{vdw} , the difference of the van der Waals interaction energy per macrocycle between the assembled and the disassembled states, for both the protonated and the deprotonated MCs is more than 10 times smaller than the electrostatic interaction for the protonated MCs, which corroborates that the self-assembly of protonated MCs is driven by the electrostatic attraction. The potential of mean force (PMF) using umbrella sampling (39) also indicates a strong attraction of $\sim 350 \text{ kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$, i.e., $\sim 140 k_B T$, between the two protonated MCs (Fig. 3*D*; see also *Movie S4*). The PMF difference from umbrella sampling is much smaller than that from direct interaction energy calculation for two reasons: First, the PMF includes both entropic and enthalpic contributions, which counteract each other. Second, the direct energy estimate is for at least 10 MCs, while the umbrella sampling is performed for two MCs, which neglects longer-range effects. We note that sampling for the self-assembly of the MCs is challenging due to many degrees of freedom, including the distance, the tilting angle, the ring conformation, and the counterion coordination. An accurate analysis would require advanced methods for finding the true reaction pathway (40, 41). Nevertheless, the PMF difference from umbrella sampling here has the same sign and is in the same order of magnitude as the direct interaction energy calculation, indicating that electrostatic interaction dominates the self-assembly process.

We also estimate, from a simple electrostatic calculation, the cohesive energy (E) of an electroneutral unit in the nanotube aggregate (where the 12 charges per MC are neutralized by counterions) that considers only the first nearest neighbors of the protonated sites and the counterions: $E/k_B T = 12(-l_B/r_{\text{HN-CI}})$ where $l_B = 7.3 \text{ nm}$ is the Bjerrum length in THF ($l_B = e^2/4\pi\epsilon_0\epsilon_r k_B T$, where ϵ_r is the relative permittivity and e is the unit charge) and $r_{\text{HN-CI}} = 0.295 \text{ nm}$ is the peak distance of the HN–CI radial distribution, where HN denotes the proton attached to N and CI denotes the counterions. The interaction energy, E ($-297 k_B T$, i.e., $-740 \text{ kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}$), is on the same order of magnitude as the interaction calculated from the direct interaction energy calculation. This calculation underestimates E because it excludes higher-order contributions of alternating sign from the positive and negative charges located at longer distances, which, in periodic systems, can be resumed to add a multiplicative factor of order one (the Madelung constant) to E and, in disordered systems, also gives minor corrections (42). Furthermore, the 10-ring assembly of neutral MCs (Fig. 3*F*, *Inset*) falls apart quickly during the 36-ns simulations (Fig. 3*E* and *Movie S5*), while that of protonated MCs (Fig. 3*E*, *Inset*) remains aggregated throughout (Fig. 3*F* and *Movie S6*). The simulated stacking distance between MCs (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S29) is consistent with the experimental value measured by X-ray diffraction (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S22*A*). The simulations also suggest that the interior of the nanotube accommodates ~ 300 disordered THF molecules for every 10 stacked rings.

Similar to actin filaments and CNTs, which sustain their high aspect ratios from fracture with strong, directional protein interfaces and covalent bonds (10^2 kJ/mol) (43), we note that electrostatic cohesion is comparably strong. In low-dielectric constant media, excess charge is strongly penalized and ionic correlations, which are neglected in Poisson–Boltzmann approaches (44), are strong, resulting in the formation of neutral ion pairs (or cluster when geometrically possible) that strongly decreases the free energy of the systems (45–47); for comparison, the energy to pull

centrifugation and subsequently rinsed with Et₂O (15 mL × 3). The solid was dried under vacuum at room temperature before being analyzed using GPC and MALDI-MS. See *SI Appendix* for more details of individual MCs.

Nanotube Sample Preparation for UV-Vis, AFM, TEM, X-Ray Diffractions, Cross-Polarized Light Photography, and IR. An MC 1-DMTP solution was prepared in THF with 3 mM TBAP. The solution was then subjected to 200 mM CF₃CO₂H for nanotube assembly. The nanotube solutions were used for UV-vis and cross-polarized light photography at appropriate concentrations. The drop-cast samples of the solution were then used for AFM, TEM, and X-ray diffraction. The precipitates of the solution by centrifugation were used for IR. See *SI Appendix* for the details of individual characterizations.

Molecular Dynamics Simulations. MD simulations were performed using the package Nanoscale Molecular Dynamics (NAMD). See *SI Appendix* for details.

Stimuli-Responsive Studies of Nanotube Formation. For a demonstration of stacking reversibility (*Movie S7*) and light-induced nanotube formation (*Movie S8*), see *SI Appendix*.

Thiol–Ene Cross-Linking of Nanotubes and XPS Analyses. Photo-cross-linking of nanotubes deposited on HOPG and in solution was conducted using a setup illustrated in *SI Appendix*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. We thank Yimo Han and Dr. Reiner Bleher for advice on electron microscopy; Leilei Xiao for assistance in mass spectrometry; Dr. Sumit Kewalramani, Dr. Michio Matsumoto, Dr. Amanda Corcos for assistance in X-ray diffraction analyses; and Chong Luo and Prof. Jiaying Huang for assistance with photography using cross-polarizers. C.S. acknowledges the support of the Cornell Materials Research Science and Engineering Center (MRSEC) program (NSF DMR-1719875). W.R.D. and A.D.C. acknowledge the US Army Research Office for Grant W911NF-15-1-0447. A.M.E. is supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship (DGE-1324585) and the Ryan Fellowship from the Northwestern University. N.C.F. was supported by the US Department of Energy (DOE), through Contract DE-AC02-06CH11357. M.S., B.H., M.O.d.I.C., and M.J.B. are supported by US DOE Grant DE-FG02-08ER46539. M.O.d.I.C. thanks The Sherman Fairchild Foundation for computational support. X.L. and M.C.H. acknowledge the Northwestern University MRSEC (NSF DMR-1720139) for support of the AFM characterization. A.D.C. was supported through a National Defense Science and Engineering Graduate Fellowship. Finally, we acknowledge the Biomedical Image Group at École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), Switzerland for use of Orientation.

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