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# Facile and Reproducible Electrochemical Synthesis of The Giant Polyoxomolybdates

Marcus Tze-Kiat Ng, Nicola L. Bell, De-Liang Long and Leroy Cronin\*

School of Chemistry, University of Glasgow, University Avenue, Glasgow, G12 8QQ, UK.

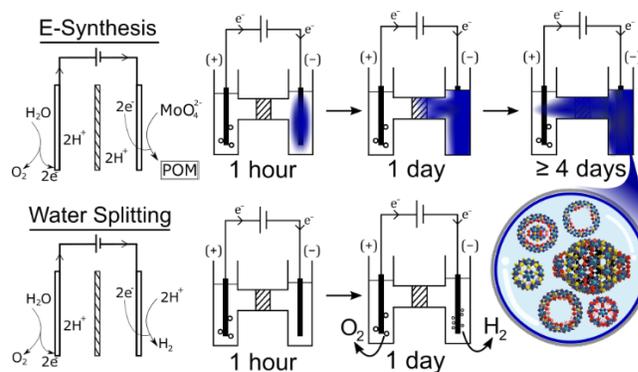
## Supporting Information Placeholder

**ABSTRACT:** Giant polyoxomolybdates are traditionally synthesized by chemical reduction of molybdate in aqueous solutions, generating complex nanostructures such as the highly symmetrical spherical  $\{\text{Mo}_{102}\}$  and  $\{\text{Mo}_{132}\}$ , ring-shaped  $\{\text{Mo}_{154}\}$  and  $\{\text{Mo}_{176}\}$ , and the gigantic protein sized  $\{\text{Mo}_{368}\}$  which combines both positive and negative curvature. These complex polyoxometalates are known to be highly sensitive to reaction conditions and often difficult to reproduce, especially  $\{\text{Mo}_{368}\}$  which is often produced in yields far below 1% meaning further investigation has always been limited. Whilst the electrochemical properties of these materials have been studied, their electrochemical synthesis has not been explored. Herein, we demonstrate an alternative reliable synthetic method with the means of electrochemistry. By using electrochemical synthesis, we have shown the synthesis of various reported polyoxomolybdates, along with some unreported structures with unique features that have yet to be reported by traditional synthetic methods. The six different giant polyoxomolybdates that were obtained via electrochemical synthesis range from the spherical  $\{\text{Mo}_{102-x}\text{Fe}_x\}$ ,  $\{\text{Mo}_{132}\}$ , to the ring-shaped  $\{\text{Mo}_{148}\}$  and  $\{\text{Mo}_{154-x}\}$ ; as well as the largest known polyoxometalate  $\{\text{Mo}_{368}\}$  with improved yield (up to 26.1 % for  $\{\text{Mo}_{368}\}$ ), increased reproducibility and shorter crystallization time compared to chemical reduction methods.

Polyoxometalates (POMs) are inorganic metal-oxide clusters, commonly comprised of molybdenum or tungsten,<sup>1</sup> self-assembled by condensation of  $\{\text{MO}_x\}_n$  building blocks in aqueous conditions at low pH.<sup>2</sup> As a family, their structural diversity and the tunability of the bulk electronic properties has proved of interest for fields such as analytical chemistry, energy storage materials, electronics and catalysis.<sup>3-5</sup> Despite the illusion of triviality in their synthesis, the self-assembly process for POMs can be influenced by subtle changes to a wide range of factors such as metal salts, heteroatoms, cations, reducing agents, temperature, pH, rate of addition, sequence of additions and more.<sup>6-8</sup> These factors often make POM synthesis highly irreproducible especially when it comes to larger and more complex structures. One of the most complex structures, and the largest POM known to date, is a giant polyoxomolybdate consisting of 368 Mo atoms  $\{\text{Mo}_{368}\}$ , which exhibits a lemon-shaped structure and was first reported in 2002.<sup>9</sup> A follow up report in 2004 demonstrated an improved procedure to shorten the period required to obtain the cluster to two days by increasing the con-

centration of electrolyte.<sup>10</sup> Curiously, there are no reports regarding the synthesis since then, as opposed to other small clusters such as Keggin and Wells-Dawson types.<sup>11</sup> Within our labs we have found the procedures for larger polyoxometalates and in particular  $\{\text{Mo}_{368}\}$  are challenging to reproduce.<sup>12</sup>

The term Molybdenum Blue (MB), applied to reduced polyoxomolybdates, derives from the deep-blue coloration of solutions consisting of various Mo species such as ball shaped Keplerate  $\{\text{Mo}_{102}\}$ ,<sup>13-14</sup> nano-wheel  $\{\text{Mo}_{154}\}$ ,<sup>15</sup> and nano-hedgehog  $\{\text{Mo}_{368}\}$ .<sup>9</sup> The characteristic hue is achieved by partial reduction of molybdate clusters in acidic media. Besides MBs, other giant polyoxomolybdates of more reduced molybdate clusters are known as molybdenum browns,<sup>16</sup> such as the highly reduced ball shaped Keplerate  $\{\text{Mo}_{132}\}$ .<sup>17</sup> One of the most important factors required to make large molybdenum anion clusters  $\{(\text{MoO}_x)_y\}$  (i.e. where  $y > 36$ ) is the choice of reducing agents, often sodium dithionite ( $\text{Na}_2\text{S}_2\text{O}_4$ ), hydrazine ( $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4 \cdot \text{HCl}$  or  $\text{N}_2\text{H}_4 \cdot \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ ) or other organic reductants.<sup>18</sup> The intrinsic properties and quantities of different reducing agents have found to be the trigger for the formation of different clusters.<sup>19</sup> In 2017, Sahin et al. observed the formation of a characteristic blue solution upon undertaking cyclic voltammetry (CV) experiments on molybdate salts suggesting the formation of MB species was possible,<sup>20</sup> but neither were crystals isolated nor was structural characterisation reported of the amorphous product formed on the electrode surface.



**Figure 1.** Schematic representation of the difference between electrochemical synthesis of POM and water splitting by addition of molybdate source in acidic media. Left chamber (anode) and right chamber (cathode). Top: Colourisation of the solution

indicating the MB species formation around the cathode surface during electrochemical synthesis (E-Synthesis). **Bottom:** Hydrogen evolution from cathode during water splitting.

Herein, we report the synthesis of a number of giant polyoxomolybdates in aqueous condition by using the electrochemical technique, chronopotentiometry (CP) to yield the following compounds:

- 1,  $[H_{16}Mo_{368}O_{1032}(H_2O)_{240}(SO_4)_{48}]^{48-}$
- 2,  $[Mo_{154}O_{462}H_{14}(H_2O)_{70}][Mo_{154}O_{462}H_{14}(H_2O)_{58}(SO_4)_6]^{40-}$
- 3,  $[Mo_{142}O_{432}(H_2O)_{58}H_{14}]^{26-}$
- 4,  $[Mo_{36}O_{112}(H_2O)_{16}][Mo_{150}O_{442}(OH)_{10}(H_2O)_{61}]^{22-}$
- 5,  $[Mo_{132}O_{372}(CH_3COO)_{30}(H_2O)_{72}]^{42-}$
- 6,  $[Mo_{102}O_{282}(H_2O)_{66}(SO_4)_{12}]^{12-}$
- 7,  $[Fe_{25}Mo_{77}O_{257}(H_2O)_{91}(SO_4)_{12}]^{12-}$

In the synthesis of **1**, an equimolar mixture of sodium molybdate dihydrate ( $Na_2MoO_4 \cdot 2H_2O$ , 0.75 M) and sulphuric acid ( $H_2SO_4$ , 0.75 M) in water solvent at pH 0.9 was placed in a H-cell separated by a glass frit was subjected to electrochemical reduction whereby the current was held at 100  $\mu A$  in a two-electrode set up. The low current ensures a slow and steady stream of charge passes through, reducing the metal ions with little to no parasitic reaction such as through the Hydrogen Evolution Reaction (HER) (Figure 1). Within minutes, formation of deep blue solution appeared around the cathode and its diffusion was observed, continuing up the cathodic chamber of the H-cell until it was dark. As the experiment proceeded, transit of the reduced ions across the channel to anodic chamber was observed (Figure 1 Top). After electrolysis, the elongated hexagonal shaped crystalline product was collected, and unit cell checks on several of these crystals confirmed them to comprise  $\{Mo_{368}\}$ . The  $\{Mo_{368}\}$  structure<sup>9</sup> was confirmed by multiple unit cell check using crystals prepared in several electrochemical synthesis repeats under the optimised conditions.

It is therefore clear from these results that introduction of the molybdate species during electrolysis suppresses the HER. The electrons produced in the oxygen evolution reaction (OER) are then utilised in the reduction of molybdate species in solution. The notion is similar to that of the electron-coupled-proton-buffer (ECPB),<sup>21-22</sup> with one major difference. Instead of utilising POM as an electron sponge, the electrons are used as the reducing agent that triggers the self-assembly of the POM. An overall water splitting process in acidic media can be split into two half-reactions.

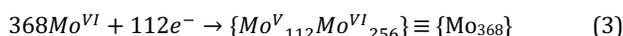
Hydrogen Evolution Reaction (HER):



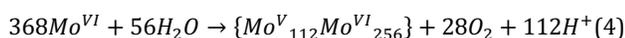
Oxygen Evolution Reaction (OER):



The half reaction for reduction of Mo(VI) to  $\{Mo_{368}\}$  is thought to be as follows:



When coupled with OER, the overall process can be denoted:

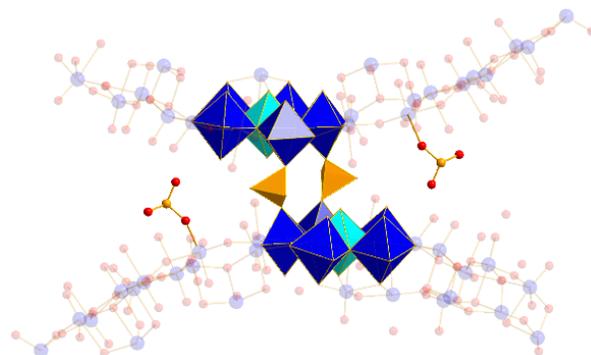


Based on equation (4), excess protons yielded in the equation would result in a pH drop in the system as the reaction proceed.

Indeed, the pH of the solution decreased over the course of the reaction from,  $pH_{initial} = 0.90$  to  $pH_{final} = 0.71$  while in the course of the experiment, evolution of a gas was observed in the anodic chamber. Thus equation 4 can be considered a simplified model of the processes at play (See SI Section 7 for a more detailed version of eq. (4).)

The electrodes used in the electrochemical synthesis were platinum (Pt). When carbon-based electrodes were utilized instead under the same experimental conditions, no crystals were obtained. The leaching of Pt into the electrolyte that may catalyse the formation of  $\{Mo_{368}\}$  in solution phase was ruled to be unlikely by ICP as these experiments indicated that no Pt traces were present in the solution after the experiment. The absence of crystals when the reaction was performed on carbon-based electrodes is not clear yet. One theory is that the superior ability of Pt for water-splitting, due to low Volmer and Tafel barrier,<sup>23</sup> has a similar effect on the electrochemical synthesis of POM.<sup>24-25</sup>

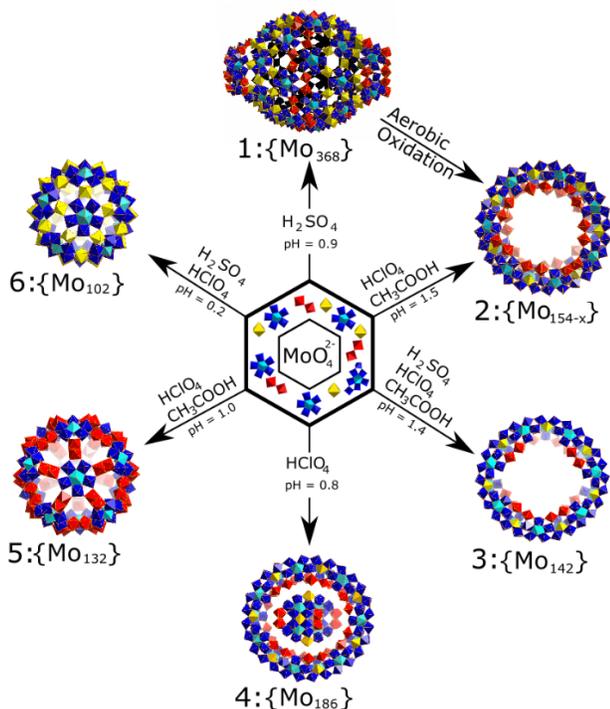
Upon exposure of the mother liquor of **1** to aerobic conditions for two weeks, cuboid-shaped crystals **2**,  $\{Mo_{154}\}$  (see Table S2). These were shown to consist of a  $\{Mo_{154}\}$ -type MB which forms a 1D chain linked by Mo-O-Mo bonds between wheels (Figure S7b). The chains are further bridged by sulphate groups on the outer rim of the wheel (Figure 2) to form 2D sheet. This is the first observation where sulphate coordination and bridges present on this nano-wheel  $\{Mo_{154}\}$ .



**Figure 2.** Highlighted sulphate bridges that link the  $\{Mo_{154}\}$  wheel on one of the axes of the 2D plane, (Orange: Sulphate and Blue: Molybdate).

One of the possible explanations for the formation of this new  $\{Mo_{154}\}$  derivative is that the decomposition of  $\{Mo_{368}\}$  to smaller building blocks (e.g.  $Mo_1$ ,  $Mo_2$  and  $Mo_5$ ) occurs first. The building blocks then undergo spontaneous self-assembly to  $\{Mo_{154}\}$ .<sup>26</sup> The second possible explanation is that the  $\{Mo_{154}\}$  could be present in the reduced solution when the experiment is first completed and this species crystallizes overtime whilst the  $\{Mo_{368}\}$  is deconstructed to smaller Mo-species and redissolved the aqueous phase. Following the isolation of **2**, a derivative of  $\{Mo_{154}\}$  known as  $\{Mo_{152}\}$ <sup>27</sup> was synthesised directly via electrochemical synthesis and does not possess the described sulphate groups.

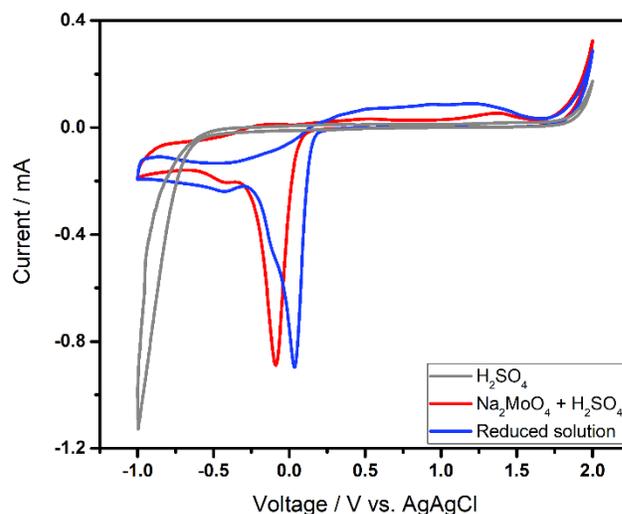
To develop the electrochemical synthesis methodology further, pH as well as the type of acid used were varied (Figure 3). By mixing  $H_2SO_4$ ,  $HClO_4$ ,  $CH_3COOH$  with sodium molybdate, defected nano-wheel, **3**,  $\{Mo_{142}\}$ <sup>28</sup> was synthesised via electrolysis. When  $H_2SO_4$  was replaced with  $HClO_4$ , **4**,  $\{Mo_{186}\}$  was formed.<sup>29</sup> Upon mixing  $H_2SO_4$  and  $HClO_4$  with  $Na_2MoO_4$ , formation of **6**,  $\{Mo_{102}\}$  cluster was observed (see Table S2).



**Figure 3.** Schematic representation of the six giant polyoxomolybdates produced by the electrochemical synthesis reported in this study under different conditions.

The formation of **4** was confirmed by a unit-cell measurement which is consistent with the unit cell previously reported by Cronin et al.<sup>29</sup> In that work we hypothesised that the  $\{\text{Mo}_{186}\}$  cluster could only be synthesised in a flow-reactor system due to the fact that the synthesis occurred in a non-equilibrium reaction system with controlled input of reducing agent and acid. The advantage of an electrochemical synthesis is the presence of an electrochemical gradient intrinsic to an electrochemical set-up. Ball-shaped Keplerates from molybdenum blue  $\{\text{Mo}_{102}\}$  and brown  $\{\text{Mo}_{132}\}$  families have also been obtained by our method. The  $\{\text{Mo}_{102}\}$  that was synthesised via electrochemical synthesis possesses different unit cell than reported in the literatures (see Table S2). When  $\text{FeSO}_4$  and acetic acid were added to the perchloric acid and the pH raised to 1.4, a new cluster  $\{\text{Mo}_{77}\text{Fe}_{25}\}$  **7** was formed, which has a structure similar to  $\{\text{Mo}_{102}\}$  and  $\{\text{Mo}_{72}\text{Fe}_{30}\}$  (See structure description in SI Section 6). By adding  $\text{CH}_3\text{COOH}$  and  $\text{HClO}_4$  with  $\text{Na}_2\text{MoO}_4$  and reducing the solution for 10 days, **5**,  $\{\text{Mo}_{132}\}$ <sup>17</sup> was obtained and confirmed by unit-cell check.

Next, electrochemical characterisation of a solution from the electrochemical synthesis of **1** was undertaken. A three-electrode set-up was employed with a glassy carbon electrode (GCE) as the working electrode, Pt as the counter electrode and Ag/AgCl (3.0 M KCl) as the reference electrode. When cyclic voltammetry (CV) was carried out in  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  solution (Figure 4, grey), a reduction wave originating from HER was observed at  $-0.8$  V vs. Ag/AgCl. The HER peak was not present in the case of both of  $\text{Na}_2\text{MoO}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  (Figure 4, red) and the solution from the electrochemical synthesis of **1** (Figure 4, blue).



**Figure 4.** Cyclic voltammetry of the different solutions, scan rate:  $10 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$ . Gray: Blank solution of just  $0.75 \text{ M H}_2\text{SO}_4$ , Red:  $0.75 \text{ M Na}_2\text{MoO}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ , Blue: Reduced solution after electrochemical synthesis of **1**, containing higher nuclearity MB species.

Additional experiments were performed by increasing the pH under which the electrochemical synthesis was done. When the pH was raised to 3, the solution did not turn deep blue as observed at lower pH. Instead, a light blue solution was observed, and an aggregate of a molybdenum oxide polymer was formed as white solid at the bottom of the cathodic chamber. It was noted that all the experiments with  $\text{CH}_3\text{COOH}$  yielded white ppt in the cell. In another case, when  $\text{H}_3\text{PO}_4$  was added to the solution of  $\text{Na}_2\text{MoO}_4$  yielding a blue solution through electrolysis with no solid present. When this blue solution was placed on glass slide, immediate crystallization was observed and a polyoxomolybdenum(V) phosphate framework<sup>30</sup> was observed. (See Table S1 for detailed conditions and yield for all the compounds synthesised).

In conclusion, we have shown that electrochemical synthesis is a valuable addition to the synthetic chemists' toolkit in the field of polyoxometalate chemistry. We have demonstrated that electrochemical synthesis can produce giant polyoxometalates which are challenging to synthesise or unknown by other routes with higher yield on average. By allowing selective redox transformation in the absence of chemical redox agents, which could contaminate the synthesis, electrochemical synthesis improves the reproducibility of POM synthesis and can potentially allow access to novel materials as demonstrated here. This facile electrochemical synthesis method opens the gate for all scientist to easily prepare giant polyoxomolybdates facilitating their application to other fields. Electrochemical synthesis is shown to have significant potential for the reproducible synthesis of known compounds, specifically  $\{\text{Mo}_{368}\}$  and its homologues, as well as a means to form new self-assembled metal oxide nanostructures, unknown by chemical reduction methods. Future work, by varying transition metals, exploring the role of electrode materials, cations, concentrations, solvents, organic linkers, electrode materials, and attempting chronoamperometry (CA) with various fixed potential offers great opportunities to unveil the versatility and tunability of the electrochemical synthesis of POMs.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

## Supporting Information

Experimental protocols, additional characterization. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

### Corresponding Authors

\*lee.cronin@glasgow.ac.uk

### ORCID

Marcus Tze-Kiat Ng: 0000-0002-6461-2132

Nicola Bell: 0000-0002-7497-9667

De-Liang Long: 0000-0003-3241-2379

Leroy Cronin: 0000-0001-8035-5757

### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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