

# Computational study of the glycolytic degradation of poly(ethylene terephthalate) catalyzed by $N^1, N^2$ -bis(2-aminobenzyl)-1,2-diaminoethane zinc(II)

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## Abstract

1 A possible reaction mechanism of the glycolytic degradation of poly(ethylene tereph-  
2 thalate) (PET) catalyzed with  $N^1, N^2$ -bis(2-aminobenzyl)-1,2-diaminoethane zinc(II)-  
3 (ABEN) was determined using KS-DFT using the meta-NGA global-hybrid functional,  
4 MN15<sup>1</sup> up to def2-SVP/def2-TZVP level of theory making use of an energy-weighted  
5 climbing image nudged elastic band (EW-CI-NEB) algorithm<sup>2</sup> to determine the min-  
6 imum energy path (MEP) and then optimizing the converged climbing image (CI)

7 using eigenvector-following partitioned rational function optimization (EF P-RFO) to  
8 obtain the transition state (TS). The non-covalent interactions were obtained using  
9 and averaged independent gradient model (aIGM) algorithm<sup>3</sup>

## 10 Introduction

11 By 2015, the annual global production of plastics surpassed 367 million tonnes; 55 %  
12 of all plastic waste was discarded, 25.5 % incinerated and just 19.5 % was recycled.<sup>4</sup>  
13 Poly(ethylene terephthalate) (PET) is one of the most widely traded polymer there  
14 is on the market. It's mainly used in the fabrication of bottles, packages and fibers.  
15 The widespread usage of this plastic is due to its properties, like an excellent tensile  
16 strength, chemical resistance, clarity, processability and a reasonable thermal stability,  
17 It is also very cheap to produce.<sup>5,6</sup> Albeit all its properties, PET is also becoming a  
18 global problem, since a lot of it is not recycled at all. It is becoming a waste problem.  
19 Even though PET by itself is not harmful to humans and by itself does not impose  
20 an environmental damage, because of its substantial presence in bodies of water and  
21 its high resistance to biological and atmospheric agents, PET is classified as a noxious  
22 material<sup>7</sup> Chemical recycling of PET has become an important topic since this is the  
23 most sustainable way of recycling plastic, and produces *de novo* the starting materi-  
24 als of the synthesis of PET. There is an extensive amount of literature on the topic of  
25 chemical degradation of PET, processes such as methanolysis, hydrolysis and glycol-  
26 ysis have been thoroughly studied.<sup>8-10</sup> The most sustainable reaction of degradation  
27 of PET is the glycolysis since this reaction produces Bis(2-hydroxyethyl) terephthalate  
28 (BHET), one of the precursors of PET itself. PET glycolysis, nevertheless is not a  
29 very effective process if no catalyst is used. Plenty of studies have been made on the  
30 reaction of the degradation of PET via catalyzed glycolysis. Some transition metals  
31 such as zinc lead to a good yield in this type of reactions with the benefit that zinc  
32 is not a very toxic metal. For the chemical recycling of PET, numerous protocols  
33 involving hydrolysis, methanolysis and glycolysis among many others<sup>8-10</sup> have been

reported. The uncatalyzed glycolysis of PET is not an effective process; transition metal (TM) salts have been determined to aid in this reaction. The oldest report of the catalyzed glycolytic degradation of PET was reported by Vaidya and Nadkarni in 1988<sup>11</sup> in which they carried the reaction using different metal acetates as catalysts. Then it was determined that  $\text{Zn}^{\text{II}}$  has a great in comparison to other TM ( $\text{Mn}^{\text{II}}$ ,  $\text{Co}^{\text{II}}$  and  $\text{Pb}^{\text{II}}$ ) activity as a catalyst in the glycolysis of PET.<sup>12</sup> Alongside the numerous zinc catalysts studied to date, a novel zinc complex made with a polyaza macroligand,  $N^1,N^2$ -bis(2-aminobenzyl)-1,2-diaminoethane zinc(II) (ABEN)<sup>13</sup> has shown to have a great catalytic activity in the glycolytic degradation of PET yielding around 78 % of BHET.<sup>14</sup> The main purpose of this article is to evaluate the possible reaction mechanism involved in this catalyzed glycolytic depolymerization of PET with ABEN and determine the covalent or non-covalent interactions involved. Abdelaal2008, Nikje2006

## Methods

The starting configurations for EG and ABEN were proposed and optimized using XTB<sup>15</sup> with the force field GFN2-xTB.<sup>16</sup> The starting configuration for DBHET was proposed using crystallographic data.<sup>17</sup>

The software ORCA (5.0.1)<sup>18</sup> was used to perform the geometrical optimization of the species involved in the depolymerization; DBHET, ABEN and EG in KS-DFT using a meta-NGA functional, MN15<sup>1</sup> using the def2-TZVP basis set (BS)

The optimized structures were then merged onto the same Cartesian coordinates and then re-optimized in MN15/def2-TZVP. Then, a multidimensional relaxed surface scan was performed keeping constrained, and varying the bond distances in 5 steps to obtain the products of this reaction. The optimized product and the starting geometry of the relaxed surface scan were the input for an Energy-Weighted Climbing image Nudged Elastic Band (EW-CI-NEB)<sup>2</sup> algorithm to find the path of minimum energy connecting both ends, followed by a P-RFO optimization to find a TS performed onto the climbing image (CI).

In order to determine covalent and non-covalent interactions regions between the molecules, an analysis based on Hirshfeld partition of molecular density (IGMH) algorithm within multiwfn was performed<sup>19</sup> onto the optimized reactant. To minimize computation time, aIGM was performed with the MEP obtained by NEB-TS.

With JANPA,<sup>20</sup> CLPOs and bond orders for the reactants, products and transition states were obtained.

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