

# Abbreviations

$\psi$	wavefunction
%N	percentage nitrogen by mass
<b>2-NDPA</b>	2-Nitrodiphenylamine
<b>a.u.</b>	atomic units
<b>B3LYP</b>	Becke, 3-parameter, Lee-Yang-Parr hybrid functional
<b>BCP</b>	bonding critical point
<b>CH<sub>3</sub>CH<sub>3</sub></b>	NC repeat unit with two methoxy capping groups
<b>CH<sub>3</sub>OH</b>	NC repeat unit with methoxy capping group on ring 1, hydroxy group on ring 2
<b>CCP</b>	cage critical point
<b>CP</b>	critical point
<b>DFT</b>	density functional theory
<b>DSC</b>	differential scanning calorimetry
<b>DOS</b>	degree of substitution
<b>DPA</b>	diphenylamine
<b>EM</b>	energetic materials
<b>ESP</b>	electrostatic potential
<b>G09</b>	Gaussian 09 revision D.01

<b>GM</b>	genetically modified
<b>GView</b>	Gauss View 5.0.8
<b>HF</b>	Hartree Fock theory
<b>IR</b>	infra-red spectroscopy
<b>MEP</b>	minimum energy path
<b>MM</b>	molecular mechanics
<b>MMFF94</b>	Merck molecular force field 94
<b>MW</b>	molecular weight
<b>NC</b>	nitrocellulose
<b>NCP</b>	nuclear critical point
<b>NG</b>	nitroglycerine
<b>NMR</b>	nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy
<b>OHCH<sub>3</sub></b>	NC repeat unit with hydroxy capping group on ring 1, methoxy group on ring 2
<b>PCM</b>	polarisable continuum model
<b>PES</b>	potential energy surface
<b>PETN</b>	pentaerythritol tetranitrate
<b>QM</b>	quantum mechanics
<b>QTAIM</b>	quantum theory of atoms in molecules
<b>RCP</b>	ring critical point
<b>SB59</b>	1,4-bis(ethylamino)-9,10-anthraquinone dye
<b>SEM</b>	scanning electron microscopy
<b>S<sub>N</sub>2</b>	bi-molecular nucleophilic substitution reaction

<b>TG</b>	thermogravimetric analysis
<b>TS</b>	transition state
<b>UFF</b>	universal force field
<b>UV</b>	ultraviolet
<b>UV-Vis</b>	ultraviolet–visible spectroscopy
<b><math>\omega</math>B97X-D</b>	$\omega$ B97X-D long-range corrected hybrid functional
<b>ZPE</b>	zero-point energy



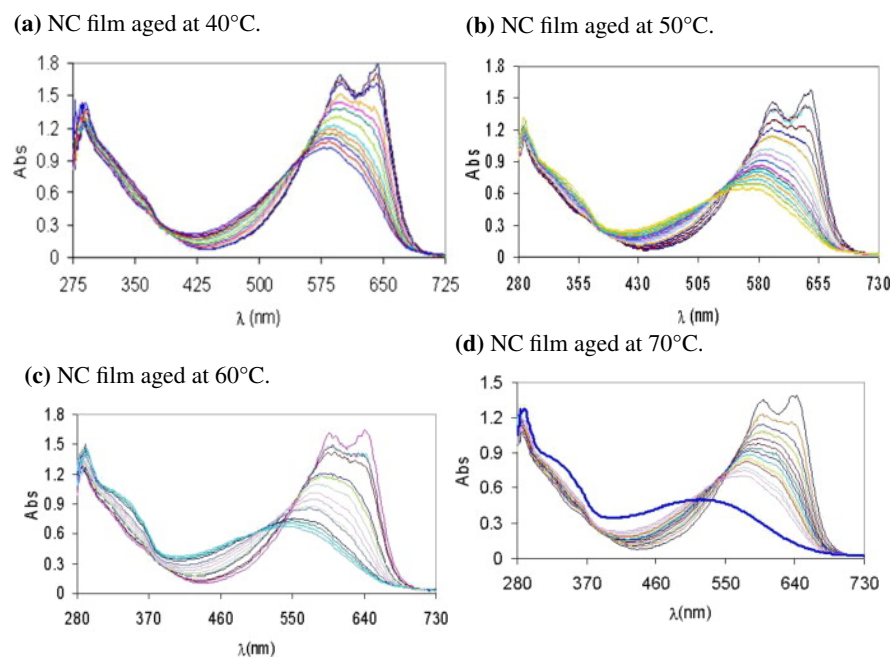
## Chapter 1

# Post-Denitration Reactions

### 1.1 Introduction

Products of the preliminary denitration step of nitrocellulose (NC) can be evolved as gases or remain trapped in the polymer matrix. Reactive nitrous oxide radicals generated from homolysis of the O-N bond are likely to migrate within the bulk and attack other sites on the polysaccharide. Reacting radicals could generate branching radical chain reactions, leading to deeper decomposition of the polymer; chain scission and eventually complete disintegration of the molecules could be achieved by a radical chain reaction assisted by products released by ongoing acid hydrolysis. Nitrous and nitric acids released directly from denitration, or via transformation of released  $\text{NO}_x$  species, contribute to the acidity of the overall system, lowering the pH and stimulating further hydrolysis processes [1].

When studying the ageing of NC using UV-Vis spectroscopy, Moniruzzaman *et al.* observed increasing concentrations of secondary reaction products following heat treatment over extended timescales[3, 2]. Samples exposed to higher ageing temperatures presented spectra dominated by consecutive products (figure 1.1). UV absorbances at 600 nm and 650 nm were characteristic of the SB59 dye used to indicate the presence of  $\text{NO}_x$ , released by the denitration of NC. The isosbestic point identified at 552 nm showed that as the concentration of SB59 decreased, the concentration of the [SB59 + NC] product increased. For sample aged at temperatures  $>40^\circ\text{C}$ , the isosbestic point demonstrated a downwards shift. In the case of the  $70^\circ\text{C}$  treated run, the final measurement (indicated by the royal-blue line in bold, figure 1.1d) deviated from the isosbestic point entirely, and showed more than 81% consumption of the original dye concentration. The drift from the isosbestic point, in addition to the appearance of new absorbance peaks below 400 nm, alludes to the presence of new species in the reaction mixture not generated by the primary reaction of SB59 and



**Figure 1.1:** UV-Vis spectra of aged NC-based film, from the work of Moniruzzaman *et al.*[2]. The peaks at 600 nm and 650 nm are attributed to the  $\pi - \pi^*$  transitions in the anthraquinone dye (1,4-bis(ethylamino)-9,10-anthraquinone dye (SB59)). Spectral lines with highest absorbance peaks in this region correspond to the sample prior to heat treatment. Peaks below 400 nm indicate the formation of SB59 derivatives due to secondary reactions.

NC. It is likely that these arise from the continued reaction of SB59 derivatives with NC degradation products, or further derivatives thereof, as suggested in scheme 1.1.

Following cleavage of the nitrate ester via homolytic fission, elimination of nitrous acid, or hydrolysis, the resulting residues are available for further reaction with the polymer or other free molecules in the system. Chin *et al.* proposed schemes for the propagation of such reactions initiated by both the thermolysis and hydrolysis of nitrate esters [4]:

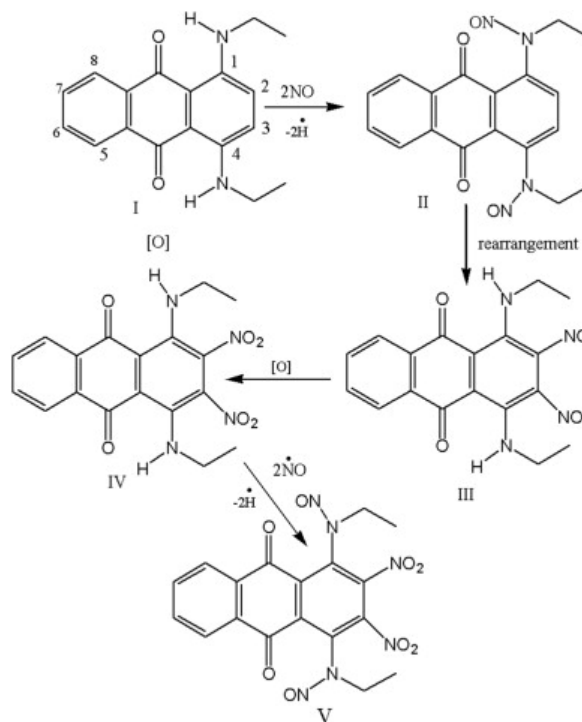
Termination reactions were not emphasised in the schemes for either of these cases. The hydrolysis scheme was adapted from an earlier work by Camera *et al.* involving the nitrate ester decomposition and subsequent reactions of ethyl nitrate (where  $R = CH_3CH_2$  for the scheme above) [5]. The original study included an expansion of the hydrolysis step (equation  $PhCH_2ONO_2$ , ), where the involvement of  $NO_2^+$  was illustrated (scheme ?? in section ??) It was highlighted by Camera, that the oxidation of alcohol by nitric acid (equation 1.6) is slow and thus rate-limiting. The mechanism is likely to occur *via* a series of intermediate reactions of which the details are not known. Following the generation of nitrous acid, subsequent oxidations occur rapidly. According to Rigas *et al.*, alcohols are

more susceptible to wet oxidation than esters [?]. A higher concentration of unsubstituted hydroxyl groups in the system, and therefore a fewer nitrate ester groups (or a lower degree of substitution (DOS) value), decreases overall stability.

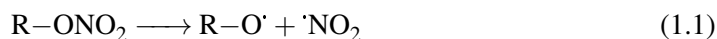
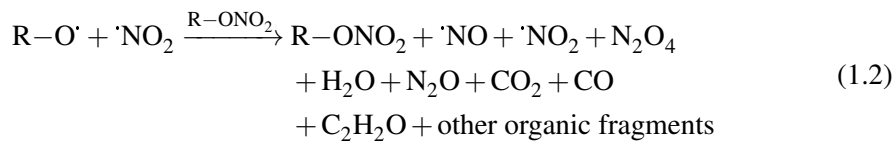
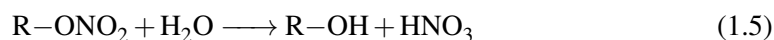
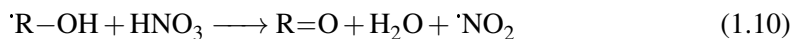
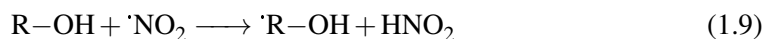
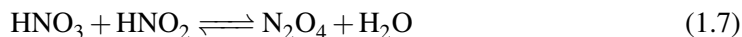
Equations 1.7 - 1.10 describe a possible branched radical chain mechanism, fed by the nitrous and nitric acids produced during the hydrolysis and alcohol oxidation reactions during the initiation stage. By contrast, the propagation reactions in the branched radical chain mechanism for thermolysis are poorly characterised (equation 1.2), defined only by the observable products. This is likely due to their rapid and varied nature, rendering it difficult to follow spectroscopically.

Aellig *et al.* presented an alternative scheme for the decomposition of benzyl nitrate ( $R = PhCH_2$ ), involving more interaction with the solvent [6]:

Both the Camera/Chin and Aellig schemes above produce final end products observed in the decomposition of NC. In particular, Aellig's scheme accounts for the production of  $N_2O$ , which forms a significant part of the decomposition eluent [7]. Whilst the schemes do not propose an exhaustive description of the full spectrum of reactions that take place in



**Scheme 1.1:** Proposed pathway for the reaction of SB59 dye with  $\cdot NO$  released as a result of denitration of NC [2].

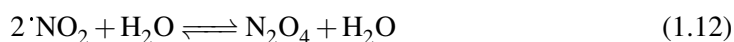
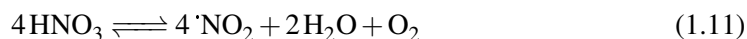
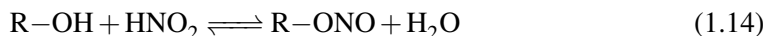
**Thermolytic initiation****Propagation****Hydrolytic initiation****Propagation**

the NC matrix during its slow ageing, the early stage reactions of the key species responsible for decomposition are encapsulated.

It is widely agreed that first-stage decomposition follows a first-order process (or pseudo-first order, with respect to hydrolysis reactions). A number of studies observe catalytic rate of decay for the longer-term aging processes. Dauerman [8] observed that when NC was treated with  $\text{NO}_2$  gas before heating, the time required for sample ignition halved. He suggested that the  $\text{NO}_2$  adsorbed onto the surface acted as a catalysing agent.

Neutral and alkaline hydrolysis reactions follow a pseudo-first order process, however it has been suggested that the presence of acid facilitates a catalytic rate of degradation after an initial incubation period. Multiple studies have addressed the decomposition reactions of nitrate esters following the initial scission of the nitrate group [9, 5, 10, 11, 1] In their work looking into the atmospheric reactions methyl nitrate methylperoxy nitrate Arenas (2007) suggested it was possible for the homolytic denitration reaction of methyl nitrate to share a common peroxy intermediate with the peroxide. This could account for some of the different/lower order  $\text{NO}_x$  generated (just  $\text{'NO}$ , tbh, or maybe perhaps how  $\text{NO}_3$  may get



**HNO<sub>3</sub> decomposition initiated***Propagation**Termination*

generated?).

In this section, secondary and extended reaction schemes for the low temperature ageing of NC are explored. Decomposition pathways defined by Chin, Camera and Aellig *et al.* are probed to determine the reactions responsible for the experimentally observed degradation products. The reactions found to be energetically feasible from the proposed routes will be scrutinised to determine whether an autocatalytic pathway can be formed from the thermodynamically validated reaction schemes.

## 1.2 Methodology

The reactions proposed by Chin, Camera and Aellig *et al.* were used to construct possible degradation routes for NC. The products of homolytic fission, elimination of HNO<sub>2</sub> and acid hydrolysis of NC were used as the starting point. Schemes were constructed based on the propagation of the given reactions in a step-wise fashion; subsequent reactions were dependent on the products generated in prior stages, in addition to the assumed availability of other reactants in the system. An abundance of water and oxygen were assumed present in the system, attributed to air exposure or the wetted storage conditions of NC. Unsubstituted alcohol moieties (R-OH) were also presumed available, due to incomplete nitration during the synthesis of NC [12], or re-generation following denitration *via* hydrolysis. The schemes were modelled with both ethyl nitrate and the NC monomer. Free energies of reaction ( $\Delta G$ ) were used to determine the feasibility of a reaction.

### 1.2.1 Computational details

All geometry optimisations were conducted in Gaussian 09 revision D.01 (G09), using the  $\omega$ B97X-D and B3LYP functionals. Optimisations and thermochemistry calculations were performed to the level of 6-31+G(2df,p) with tight convergence criteria (table ??). Calculations were performed in both vacuum and with polarisable continuum model (PCM) to introduce implicit solvent effects. Chemical species were constructed using Gauss View 5.0.8 (GView) and for molecules of more than 3 atoms, the “Clean” function was used to re-order atoms to a preliminary starting geometry. Energies of optimised structures were checked against values listed on NIST Computational Chemistry Comparison and Benchmark Database [13] if analogous molecules to a similar level of theory were available.

## 1.3 Results and Discussion

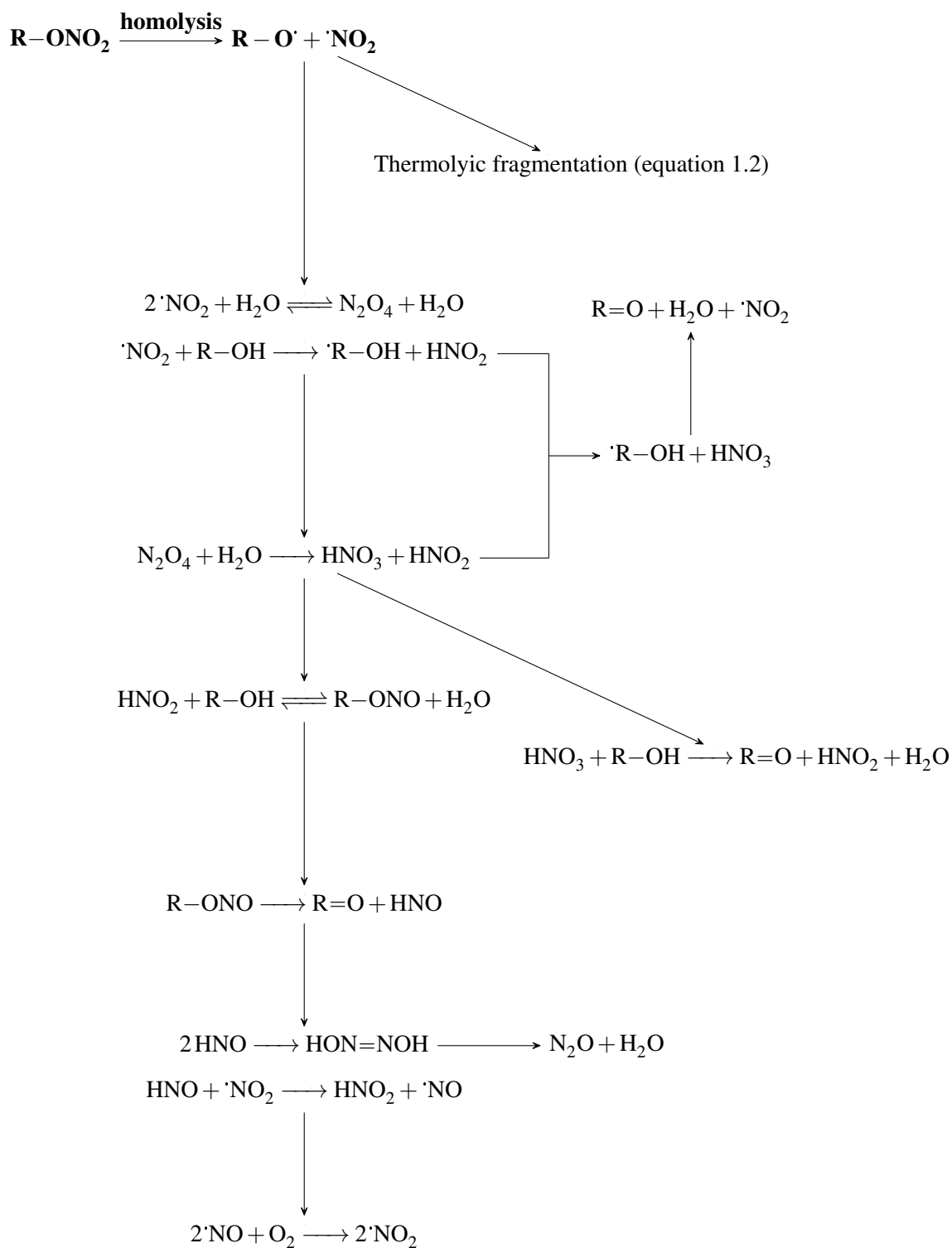
Simplified schemes for the ageing reactions of NC beginning from homolytic fission, elimination of  $\text{HNO}_2$  or acid hydrolysis are illustrated in schemes 1.2 - 1.4. When starting from the products of homolytic fission, the propagation reactions are dominated by radical interactions.  $\cdot\text{NO}_2$  and  $\text{HNO}_2$  were consumed and regenerated, supporting the theory that these may be species contributing to the observed autocatalytic rate of decomposition, following a first-order rate induction period [14, 15, 16]. For all schemes,  $\text{R}=\text{O}$  and  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  were terminating species, which may go on to participate in wider reactions outside the scope of the proposed reactions. Table ?? shows the energies for the reactions in all schemes, for both ethyl nitrate and the NC monomer.

Still to mention:

- Describe the other two schemes
- Describe the energies in the table
- Discuss why some of the values may be positive.
- Include enthalpies of reaction, zero point energies, and any experimental proxies I can find for the reaction enthalpies too.

NOTE: ZPE energy correction means that you REMOVE the ZPE, so that you only compare the actual energy available for the reaction. - ?

Due to the availability of oxygen sites on the ethyl nitrate molecule, the optimal site for protonation was determined for inclusion in the reaction scheme for the first stage of hydrolysis. Table 1.2 shows the protonation energies for the three different oxygen sites on ethyl nitrate. Despite the upper terminal oxygen possessing the most thermodynami-



**Scheme 1.2:** Proposed degradation pathway starting from the homolysis products of a nitrate ester, derived from the schemes presented by Camera [5] and Aellig[6].

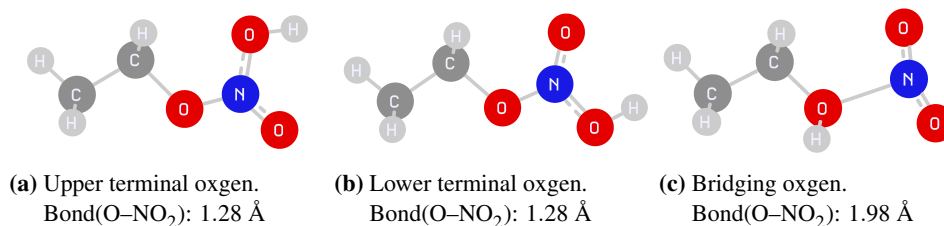
**Table 1.1:** Energies of nitrate ester decomposition reactions proposed by Camera [5], Chin [4] and Aellig [6]. R = CH<sub>3</sub>CH<sub>2</sub> for ethyl nitrate, and R = (H<sub>3</sub>CO)<sub>2</sub>C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>9</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (bi-methoxy capped glucopyranose monomer unit).

Reaction	$\Delta G_r$ /kcal mol <sup>-1</sup>			
	$\omega$ B97X-D	PCM	B3LYP	PCM
$\text{NO}_2^+ + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightleftharpoons \text{HNO}_3 + \text{H}_3\text{O}^+$	-0.90	-1.34	1.77	2.46
$2\text{'NO}_2 \rightleftharpoons \text{N}_2\text{O}_4$	-0.12	-1.31	0.54	0.16
$\text{N}_2\text{O}_4 \rightleftharpoons 2\text{'NO}_2$	0.12	1.46	-0.54	-0.16
$2\text{'NO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \rightleftharpoons \text{N}_2\text{O}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-0.12	-1.46	0.54	0.16
$\text{'NO}_2 + \text{HNO} \longrightarrow \text{HNO}_2 + \text{'NO}$	-28.22	-28.67	-27.33	-27.63
$2\text{'NO} + \text{O}_2 \longrightarrow 2\text{'NO}_2$	-20.77	-21.97	-21.16	-22.16
$2\text{'NO} + \text{O}_2 \longrightarrow 2\text{'NO}_2$	-59.89	-60.47	-60.47	-61.00
$\text{HNO}_3 + \text{HNO}_2 \rightleftharpoons \text{N}_2\text{O}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-2.25	-1.85	-5.13	-4.18
$\text{N}_2\text{O}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \longrightarrow \text{HNO}_3 + \text{HNO}_2$	2.25	1.85	5.13	4.18
$4\text{HNO}_3 \rightleftharpoons 4\text{NO}_2 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{O}_2$	53.35	58.36	42.61	46.94
$2\text{HNO} \longrightarrow \text{HON}=\text{NOH}$	-38.97	-39.72	-36.63	-37.41
$\text{HON}=\text{NOH} \longrightarrow \text{N}_2\text{O} + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-48.08	-48.18	-50.55	-50.75
Ethyl nitrate ( R = CH <sub>3</sub> CH <sub>2</sub> )				
$\text{R-ONO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \longrightarrow \text{R-OH} + \text{HNO}_3$	4.56	5.24	4.00	4.86
$\text{R-OH} + \text{HNO}_3 \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{HNO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-34.06	-38.43	-37.59	-41.77
$\text{R-OH} + \text{'NO}_2 \longrightarrow \text{'R-OH} + \text{HNO}_2$	16.38	13.92	15.89	13.70
$\text{'R-OH} + \text{HNO}_3 \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{'NO}_2$	-50.44	-52.35	-53.48	-55.47
$\text{R-OH} + \text{HNO}_2 \rightleftharpoons \text{R-ONO} + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-3.21	-3.28	-2.64	-2.95
$\text{R-ONO} \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{HNO}$	-1.50	-5.82	-4.37	-8.50
NC monomer ( R = (H <sub>3</sub> CO) <sub>2</sub> C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>9</sub> O <sub>3</sub> )				
$\text{R-ONO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \longrightarrow \text{R-OH} + \text{HNO}_3$	0.68	5.63	0.61	-0.70
$\text{R-OH} + \text{'NO}_2 \longrightarrow \text{'R-OH} + \text{HNO}_2$	14.71	11.15	13.03	23.21
$\text{'R-OH} + \text{HNO}_3 \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{'NO}_2$	-51.44	-49.49	-54.75	-56.37
$\text{R-OH} + \text{HNO}_2 \rightleftharpoons \text{R-ONO} + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-4.43	-7.30	-4.31	-0.18
$\text{R-ONO} \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{HNO}$	-2.93	-1.71	-6.82	-11.21

**Table 1.2:** Free energies of protonation for each oxygen site on ethyl nitrate.

Protonated site		$\Delta G_r$ /kCal mol <sup>-1</sup>			
		$\omega$ B97X-D	PCM	B3LYP	PCM
Terminal (upper)	CH <sub>3</sub> CH <sub>3</sub> ONO <sub>2</sub> H <sup>+</sup>	-12.28	8.82	-13.78	5.63
Terminal (lower)	CH <sub>3</sub> CH <sub>3</sub> ONO <sub>2</sub> H <sup>+</sup>	-9.48	9.46	-11.13	5.65
Bridging	CH <sub>3</sub> CH <sub>3</sub> O(H <sup>+</sup> )NO <sub>2</sub>	-9.32	9.06	-15.31	6.67

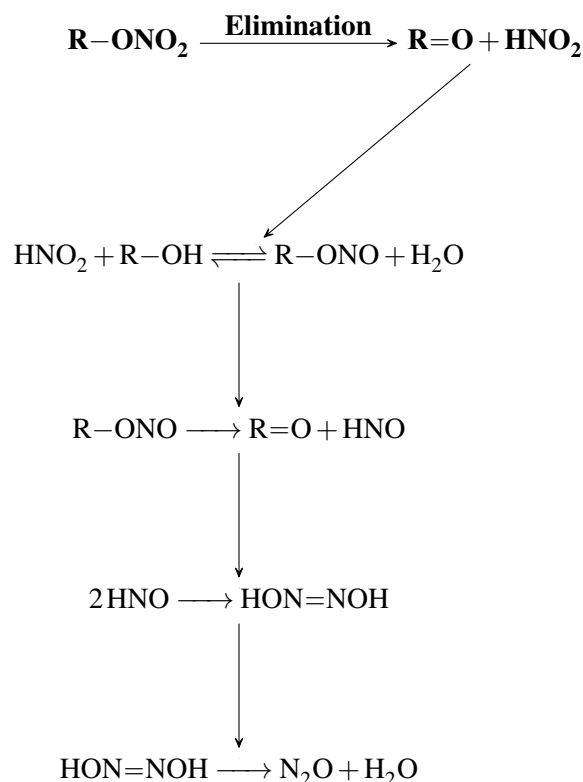
cally favourable energy of protonation, inspection of the reaction geometries shows that the bridging structure most resembles that expected for the liberation of the NO<sub>2</sub><sup>+</sup> group at the next step. Though appearing less thermodynamically favourable when compared to proto-



**Figure 1.2:** Optimised geometries of the possible protonation sites on ethyl nitrate.

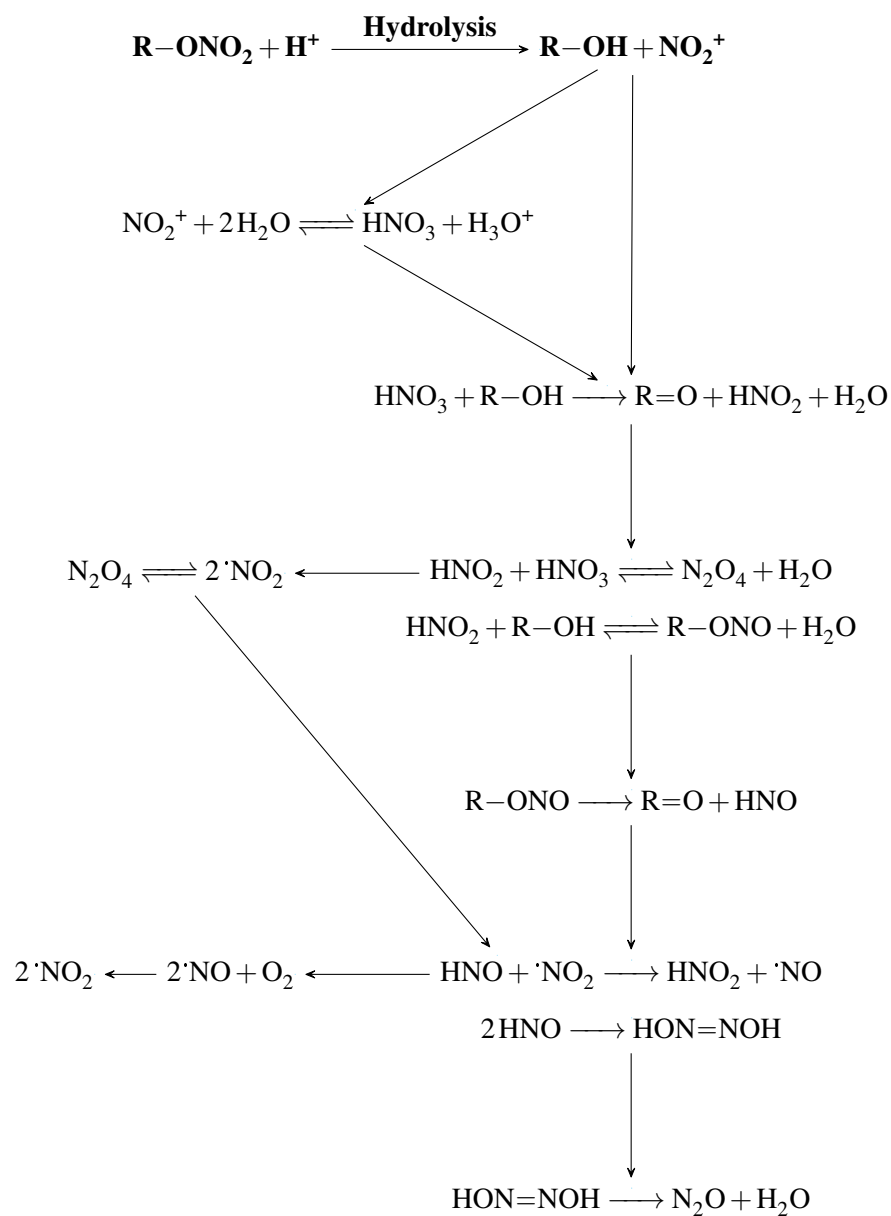
nation at the terminal upper oxygen site, the higher energy of reaction likely arises from the instability of the protonated complex. The elongation of the O-NO<sub>2</sub> bond allows to stabilisation of the proton at the bridging site, such that the departure of NO<sub>2</sub><sup>+</sup> is easily facilitated. Subsequent calculation involving the energy of the protonated ethyl nitrate will employ the values associated with the protonated bridging site.

For the decomposition of HNO<sub>3</sub> to .NO<sub>2</sub>, 2H<sub>2</sub>O and O<sub>2</sub>, Aellig prescribes the use of an amberlyst catalyst (amberlyst-15).



**Scheme 1.3:** Proposed degradation pathway starting from the elimination of HNO<sub>2</sub> from a nitrate ester, derived from the schemes presented by Camera [5] and Aellig[6].

## 1.4 Summary



**Scheme 1.4:** Proposed degradation pathway starting from the acid hydrolysis of a nitrate ester, derived from the schemes presented by Camera [5] and Aellig[6].

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