

Abbreviations

%N	percentage nitrogen by mass
2-NDPA	2-Nitrodiphenylamine
a.u.	atomic units
B3LYP	Becke, 3-parameter, Lee-Yang-Parr hybrid functional
BCP	bonding critical point
CH₃CH₃	NC repeat unit with two methoxy capping groups
CH₃OH	NC repeat unit with methoxy capping group on ring 1, hydroxy group on ring 2
CCP	cage critical point
CP	critical point
DFT	density functional theory
DSC	differential scanning calorimetry
DOS	degree of substitution
DPA	diphenylamine
EM	energetic materials
ESP	electrostatic potential
G09	Gaussian 09 revision D.01
GM	genetically modified

GView	Gauss View 5.0.8
HF	Hartree Fock theory
IR	infra-red spectroscopy
MEP	minimum energy path
MM	molecular mechanics
MMFF94	Merck molecular force field 94
MW	molecular weight
NC	nitrocellulose
NCP	nuclear critical point
NG	nitroglycerine
NMR	nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy
OHCH₃	NC repeat unit with hydroxy capping group on ring 1, methoxy group on ring 2
PCM	polarisable continuum model
PES	potential energy surface
PETN	pentaerythritol tetranitrate
QM	quantum mechanics
QTAIM	quantum theory of atoms in molecules
RCP	ring critical point
SB59	1,4-bis(ethylamino)-9,10-anthraquinone dye
SEM	scanning electron microscopy
S_N2	bi-molecular nucleophilic substitution reaction
TG	thermogravimetric analysis

TS	transition state
UFF	universal force field
UV	ultraviolet
UV-Vis	ultraviolet–visible spectroscopy
ωB97X-D	ω B97X-D long-range corrected hybrid functional

Chapter 4

Post-Denitration Reactions

4.1 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. Nitrous and nitric acids released directly from denitration, or via transformation of released 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[?, 2]. Samples exposed to higher ageing temperatures presented spectra dominated by consecutive products (figure 4.1). UV absorbances at 600 nm and 650 nm were characteristic of the 1,4-bis(ethylamino)-9,10-anthraquinone dye (SB59) dye used to indicate the presence of 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°C treated run, the final measurement (indicated by the royal-blue line in bold, figure 4.1d) 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 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 4.1.

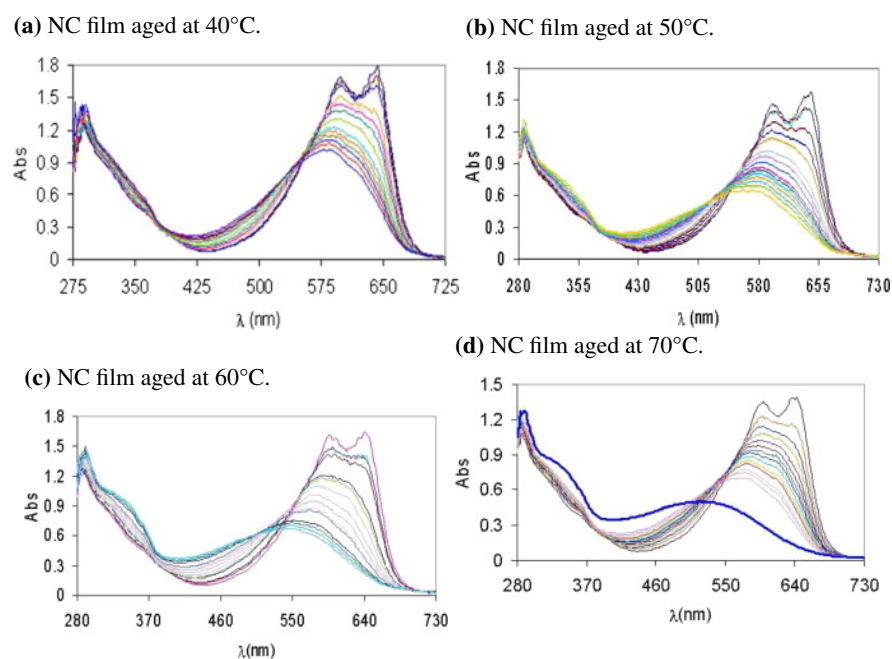
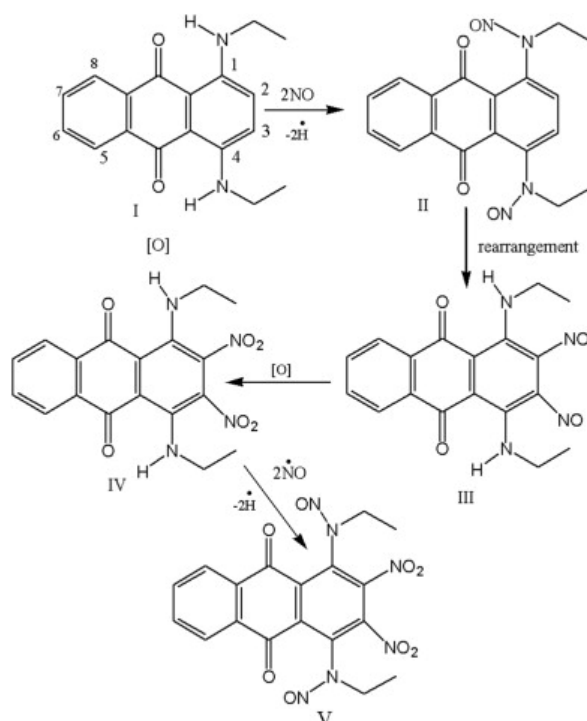


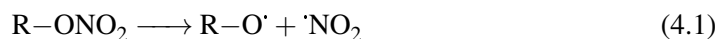
Figure 4.1: UV-Vis spectra of aged NC-based film, from the work of Moniruzzaman *et al.*[2]. The peaks at 600 nm and 650 nm are attributed to the $\pi - \pi^*$ transitions in the anthraquinone dye (SB59). Spectral lines with highest absorbance peaks in this region correspond to the [NC + SB59] sample prior to heat treatment. Peaks below 400 nm indicate the formation of SB59 derivatives due to secondary reactions.



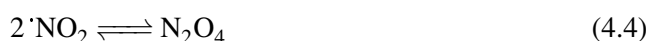
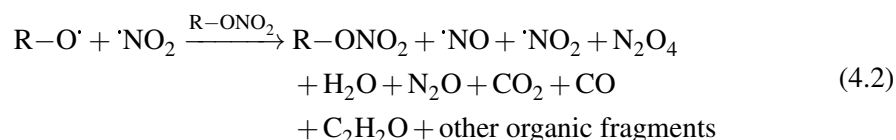
Scheme 4.1: Proposed pathway for the reaction of SB59 dye with $\cdot\text{NO}$ released as a result of denitration of NC [2].

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 [3] :

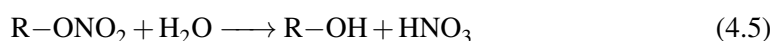
Thermolytic initiation



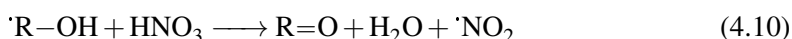
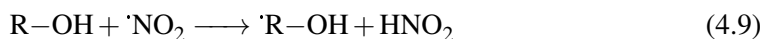
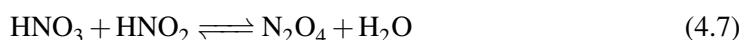
Propagation



Hydrolytic initiation

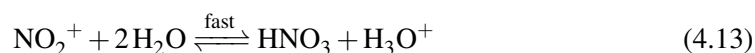


Propagation



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 $\text{R} = \text{CH}_3\text{CH}_2$ for the scheme above) [?]. The original study included an expansion of the hydrolysis step (equation $\text{PhCH}_2\text{ONO}_2$,), where the involvement of NO_2^+ is illustrated:

Hydrolysis scheme for ethyl nitrate

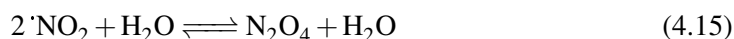
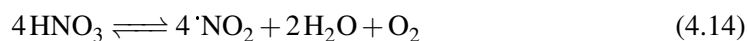


It was highlighted by Camera, that the oxidation of alcohol by nitric acid (equation 4.6) is slow and thus rate-limiting. The mechanism is likely to occur *via* a series of intermediate reactions of which the details are not known. Following the generation of nitrous acid, subsequent oxidations occur 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.

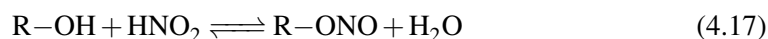
Equations 4.7 - 4.10 describe a possible branched radical chain mechanism, fed by the nitrous and nitric acids produced during the hydrolysis and alcohol oxidation reactions during the initiation stage. By contrast, the propagation reactions in the branched radical chain mechanism for thermolysis are poorly characterised (equation 4.2), 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 [?]:

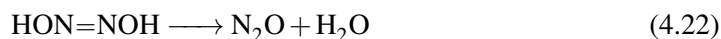
HNO₃ decomposition initiated



Propagation



Termination



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 N₂O, which forms a XXXX part of the decomposition eluent.

Whilst the schemes do not propose an exhaustive description of the full spectrum of reactions that take place in 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 [4] observed that when NC was treated with NO_2 gas before heating, the time required for sample ignition halved. He suggested that the 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 [?, 5, ?, 6, ?, 1]

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.

4.2 Methodology

The reactions proposed by Chin, Camera and Aellig *et al.* were used to construct degradation routes for NC. Proceeding on from the initial denitration step, the products of homolytic fission, elimination of HNO_2 and acid hydrolysis of NC were used as starting points. Schemes 4.2 - 4.4 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 steps 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 the 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 [?], or re-generation following denitration *via* hydrolysis. The schemes were modelled with both ethyl nitrate and the NC monomer. Free energies of reaction (ΔG) were used to determine the feasibility of a reaction.

4.2.1 Computational details

All geometry optimisations were performed in Gaussian 09 revision D.01 (G09), using the ω B97X-D long-range corrected hybrid functional (ω B97X-D) and Becke, 3-parameter, Lee-Yang-Parr hybrid functional (B3LYP) functionals. Optimisations were to the level of 6-31+G(2df,p) with tight convergence criteria (table ??). 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 reasonable geometry. Optimisations were performed in both vacuum and with polarisable continuum model (PCM) to introduce implicit solvent effects. Energies of optimised structures were checked against values listed on NIST Computational Chemistry Comparison and Benchmark Database [7] where available.

4.3 Results and Discussion

The schemes based on the reactions described in section

Table 4.1: Free energies of protonation for each oxygen site on ethyl nitrate.

Protonated site		ΔG_r /kcal mol ⁻¹			
		ω B97X-D	PCM	B3LYP	PCM
Terminal (upper)	CH ₃ CH ₃ ONO ₂ H ⁺	-12.2768	8.8219	-13.7825	5.6253
Terminal (lower)	CH ₃ CH ₃ ONO ₂ H ⁺	-9.4752	9.4595	-11.1321	5.6461
Bridging	CH ₃ CH ₃ O(H ⁺)NO ₂	-9.3227	9.0581	-15.3096	6.6736

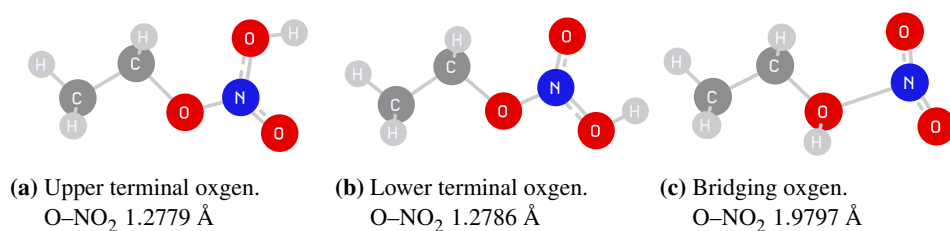
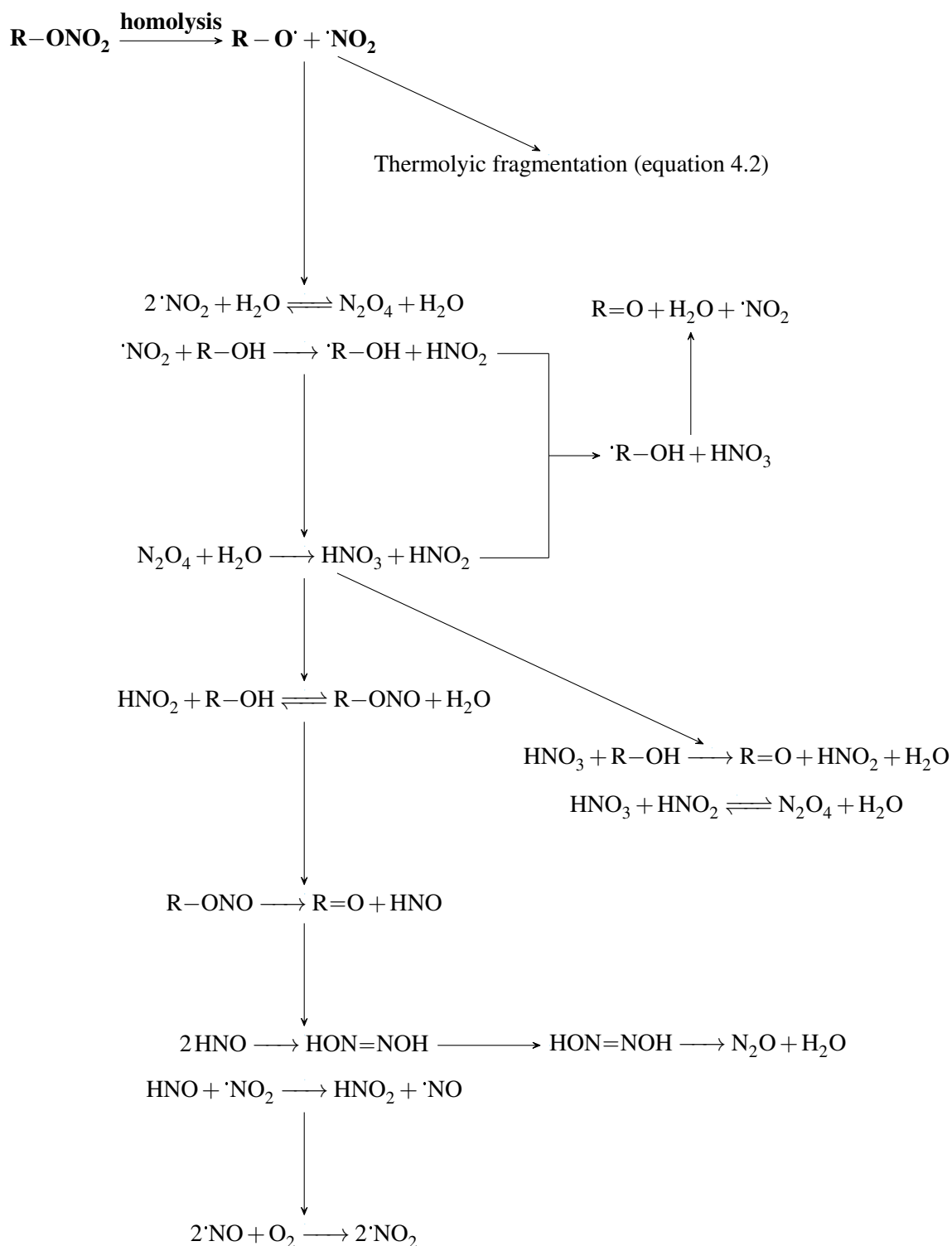
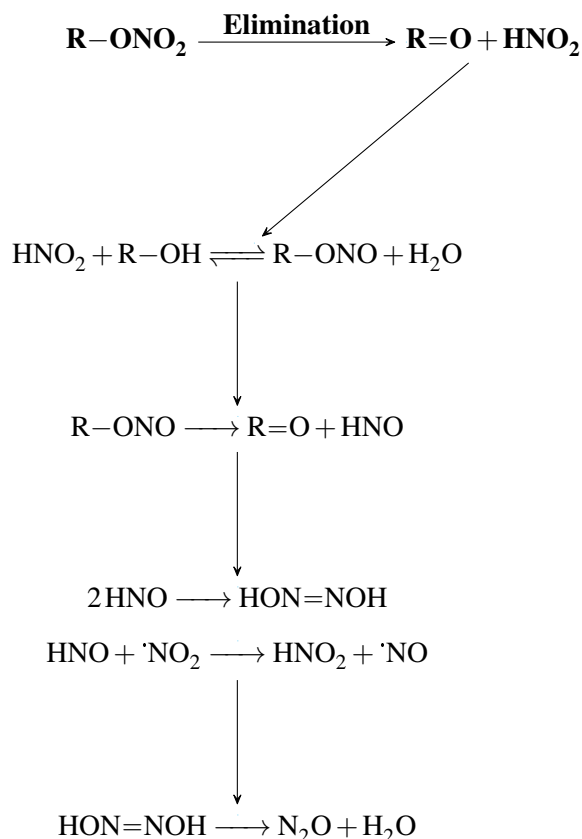


Figure 4.2: Optimised geometries of the possible protonation sites on ethyl nitrate.

Table 4.2 shows the protonation energies for the three different oxygen sites on ethyl nitrate, for the first stage of hydrolysis. Despite the upper terminal oxygen possessing the most thermodynamically favourable energy of protonation, inspection of the reaction geometries shows that the bridging structure most resembles that expected for the liberation of the NO₂⁺ group at the next step. Though appearing less thermodynamically favourable when compared to protonation 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-NO₂



Scheme 4.2: Proposed degradation pathway starting from the homolysis products of a nitrate ester, derived from the schemes presented by Camera [?] and Aellig[?].



Scheme 4.3: Proposed degradation pathway starting from the elimination of HNO_2 from a nitrate ester, derived from the schemes presented by Camera [?] and Aellig[?].

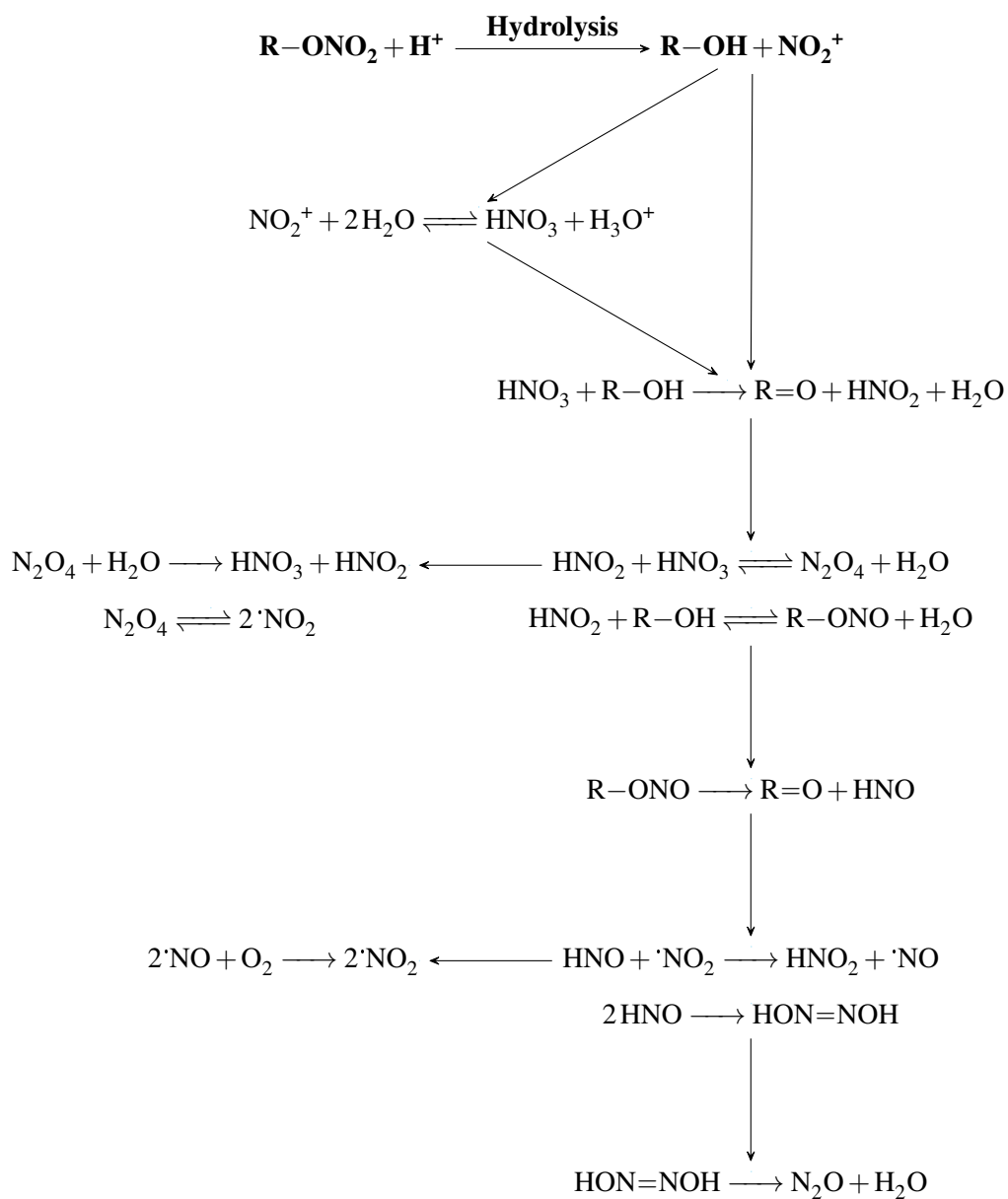
bond allows to stabilisation of the proton at the bridging site, such that the deapture of NO_2^+ is easily facilitated.

For the decomposition of HNO_3 to $\cdot\text{NO}_2$, $2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ and O_2 , Aellig prescribes the use of an amberlyst catalyst (amberlyst-15), [?, 8] The propagation reactions are acid catalysed by HNO_2 .

Insights into the reaction energies “HNO cannot be stored or concentrated and is typically studied using donor species that release HNO as a decomposition product.” (paper since retracted)

4.4 Summary

A disadvantage is that N_2O is a significant greenhouse gas, and cannot be re-converted back to HNO_3 , so much be considered win experimental design when observing industrial and environmental impact.



Scheme 4.4: Proposed degradation pathway starting from the acid hydrolysis of a nitrate ester, derived from the schemes presented by Camera [?] and Aellig[?].

Table 4.2: Energies of nitrate ester decomposition reactions proposed by Camera [?], Chin [3] and Aellig [?]. R = CH₃CH₂ for ethyl nitrate, and R = (H₃CO)₂C₆H₉O₃ (bi-methoxy capped glucopyranose monomer unit).

Reaction	ΔG_r /kcal mol ⁻¹			
	ω B97X-D	PCM	B3LYP	PCM
$\text{NO}_2^+ + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightleftharpoons \text{HNO}_3 + \text{H}_3\text{O}^+$	-0.8965	-1.3388	1.7703	2.4646
$2\text{'NO} + \text{O}_2 \longrightarrow 2\text{'NO}_2$	-20.7705	-21.9731	-21.1604	-22.1590
$2\text{'NO}_2 \rightleftharpoons \text{N}_2\text{O}_4$	-0.1222	-1.3104	0.5418	0.1556
$\text{HNO}_3 + \text{HNO}_2 \rightleftharpoons \text{N}_2\text{O}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-2.2516	-1.8541	-5.1314	-4.1801
$\text{N}_2\text{O}_4 \rightleftharpoons 2\text{'NO}_2$	0.1235	1.4616	-0.5393	-0.1556
$4\text{HNO}_3 \rightleftharpoons 4\text{NO}_2 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{O}_2$	53.3503	58.3645	42.6094	46.9356
$2\text{'NO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \rightleftharpoons \text{N}_2\text{O}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-0.1222	-1.4616	0.5393	0.1556
$\text{N}_2\text{O}_4 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \longrightarrow \text{HNO}_3 + \text{HNO}_2$	2.2516	1.8541	5.1314	4.1801
$\text{'NO}_2 + \text{HNO} \longrightarrow \text{HNO}_2 + \text{'NO}$	-28.2164	-28.6682	-27.3269	-27.6255
$2\text{'NO} + \text{O}_2 \longrightarrow 2\text{'NO}_2$	-59.8947	-60.4724	-60.4687	-60.9960
$2\text{HNO} \longrightarrow \text{HON}=\text{NOH}$	-38.9693	-39.7158	-36.6276	-37.4081
$\text{HON}=\text{NOH} \longrightarrow \text{N}_2\text{O} + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-48.0829	-48.1843	-50.5531	-50.7490
Ethyl nitrate (R = CH ₃ CH ₂)				
$\text{R-OH} + \text{HNO}_3 \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{HNO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-34.0622	-38.4275	-37.5940	-41.7703
$\text{R-OH} + \text{'NO}_2 \longrightarrow \text{'R-OH} + \text{HNO}_2$	16.3762	13.9230	15.8873	13.6994
$\text{'R-OH} + \text{HNO}_3 \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{'NO}_2$	-50.4384	-52.3505	-53.4813	-55.4715
$\text{R-OH} + \text{HNO}_2 \rightleftharpoons \text{R-ONO} + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-3.2054	-3.2760	-2.6410	-2.9490
$\text{R-ONO} \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{HNO}$	-1.4963	-5.8218	-4.3672	-8.5012
NC monomer (R = (H ₃ CO) ₂ C ₆ H ₉ O ₃)				
$\text{R-ONO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O} \longrightarrow \text{R-OH} + \text{HNO}_3$	0.6754	5.6309	0.6124	-0.7012
$\text{R-OH} + \text{'NO}_2 \longrightarrow \text{'R-OH} + \text{HNO}_2$	14.7130	11.1516	13.0341	23.2098
$\text{'R-OH} + \text{HNO}_3 \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{'NO}_2$	-51.4382	-49.4947	-54.7483	-56.3693
$\text{R-OH} + \text{HNO}_2 \rightleftharpoons \text{R-ONO} + \text{H}_2\text{O}$	-4.4314	-7.3023	-4.3061	-0.1783
$\text{R-ONO} \longrightarrow \text{R=O} + \text{HNO}$	-2.9333	-1.7111	-6.8223	-11.2058

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