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Mn²⁺ bispidine complex combining exceptional stability, inertness and MRI efficiency

Daouda Ndiaye,^{a)‡} Patrick Cieslik,^{b)‡} Hubert Wadehohl,^{b)} Agnès Pallier,^{a)} Sandra Mème,^{a)} Peter Comba,^{b,c)*} and Éva Tóth^{a)*}

- a) Centre de Biophysique Moléculaire, CNRS UPR 4301, Université d'Orléans, rue Charles Sadron, 45071 Orléans, France
- b) Universität Heidelberg, Anorganisch-Chemisches Institut, INF 270, D-69120 Heidelberg, Germany
- c) Universität Heidelberg, Interdisciplinary Center for Scientific Computing, INF 205, D-69120 Heidelberg, Germany

ABSTRACT. As an essential metal ion and an efficient relaxation agent, Mn²⁺ holds great promise to replace Gd³⁺ in MRI contrast agent applications, if its stable and inert complexation can be achieved. Towards this goal, four pyridine and one carboxylate pendants have been introduced in coordinating positions on the bispidine platform to yield ligand L³. Thanks to its rigid and preorganized structure and perfect size-match for Mn²⁺, L³ provides remarkably high thermodynamic stability ($\log K_{\text{MnL}} = 19.47$), selectivity over the major biological competitor Zn²⁺ ($K_{\text{MnL}}/K_{\text{ZnL}} = 4.4$), and kinetic inertness. Solid-state X-ray data show that [MnL³(MeOH)](OTf)₂ has an unusual eight-coordinate structure with a coordinated solvent molecule, in contrast to the six-coordinate structure of [ZnL³](OTf), underlining that the coordination cavity is perfectly adapted for Mn²⁺, while it is too large for Zn²⁺. In aqueous solution, ¹⁷O NMR data evidence one inner sphere water and dissociatively activated water exchange ($k_{\text{ex}}^{298} = 13.5 \times 10^7 \text{ s}^{-1}$) for MnL³. Its water proton relaxivity ($r_1 = 4.44 \text{ mM}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$ at 25 °C, 20 MHz) is about 30% higher than values for typical monohydrated Mn²⁺ complexes, which is related to its higher molecular size; its relaxation efficiency is similar to that of clinically used Gd³⁺-based agents. *In vivo* MRI experiments realized in control mice at 0.02 mmol/kg injected dose indicate good signal enhancement in the kidneys and fast renal clearance. Taken together, MnL³ is the first chelate that combines such excellent stability, selectivity, inertness and relaxation properties, all of primary importance for MRI use.

INTRODUCTION

For more than three decades, complexes of the paramagnetic Gd³⁺ ion have been extensively used as contrast agents and have largely contributed to the clinical success of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). Recently, safety concerns related to the use of Gd³⁺-based agents¹⁻² and the observation of small Gd-deposits in the brain and other tissues³⁻⁴ have promoted increasing efforts towards safer and biocompatible alternatives.⁵ Among these, complexes of Mn²⁺ are particularly promising.⁶⁻¹⁸ Manganese is an essential metal ion and in the divalent state is a strong relaxing agent, due to five unpaired electrons, slow electron spin relaxation and generally fast water exchange.¹⁹ Given the high concentrations needed for MRI contrast agents, the Mn²⁺ ion needs to be chelated with high stability and inertness of the complex in order to prevent free metal ion release even in a chemically challenging biological environment. In addition, the complex must contain at least one water molecule in the inner coordination sphere for good relaxation efficiency. In order to be considered as a viable replacement for current small molecular weight Gd³⁺ based agents, an Mn²⁺ probe should have comparable relaxivity at imaging fields, which is challenging given the lower spin ($S=5/2$) of Mn²⁺ with respect to Gd³⁺ ($S=7/2$). Finally, the contrast agent should easily distribute into the extravascular and extracellular space and have fast, mainly renal clearance.

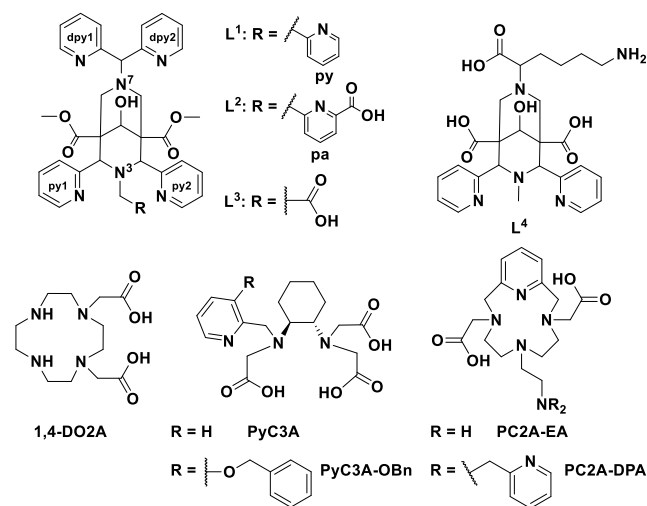
Among the major ligand classes investigated for Mn²⁺ complexation in the context of MRI contrast agent development, open-chain chelators based on the *trans*-1,2-cyclohexylene backbone

such as PyC3A and its derivatives,^{6,18} and ligands derived from the macrocyclic PC2A^{8,20-21} or *cis*-1,4-DO2A²²⁻²³ proved to be the most promising (Scheme 1). Several of these complexes have passed the first *in vivo* MRI evaluation steps in preclinical models and MnPyC3A has just entered clinical trials.²⁴

However, strong Mn²⁺ complexation remains challenging since Mn²⁺ complexes are typically labile. Due to the spherical *d* electron distribution leading to the Irving-Williams order of thermodynamic stability constants (Mn²⁺ < Fe²⁺ < Co²⁺ < Ni²⁺ < Cu²⁺ > Zn²⁺), there generally is a lower stability for a Mn²⁺ complex than for its analogue formed with Zn²⁺, the major divalent competitor in biological systems. We have recently identified the very first ligands based on a bispidine platform that are capable of providing selectivity for Mn²⁺ vs Zn²⁺ (L¹ and L² in Scheme 1; $K_{\text{MnL}}/K_{\text{ZnL}}$ of 10⁸-10¹⁰).²⁵ These peculiar properties result from the remarkably rigid and large coordination cavity and the high denticity of these ligands that perfectly match the larger size of the Mn²⁺ ion (~10%), while they are less adapted to the smaller Zn²⁺, which cannot accommodate all ligand donor groups. The difference in coordination geometry was evidenced by solid state crystal structures of the Mn²⁺ and Zn²⁺ complexes, DFT calculations, as well as solution studies. Both bispidine ligands form six-coordinate Zn²⁺ and rather unusual eight-coordinate Mn²⁺ complexes.

The bispidine L⁴²⁶ with the same rigid cavity as L¹-L³ but a lower denticity (5 vs 7 or 8), as well as analogues of L⁴,²⁷ provide a significantly lower complex stability ($\log K$ approx. 12 vs >20) and no

Mn²⁺ selectivity ($K_{MnL}/K_{ZnL}=4\times 10^{-4}$). However, MnL⁴ is exceptionally inert, similarly to MnL¹. The lack of transmetallation is probably related to the rigidity of the bispidine backbone.²⁸⁻²⁹ We report here the new bispidine L³ and its [MnL³(H₂O)]⁺ complex with chemical design elements that help fulfil requirements for a safe and efficient MRI contrast agent, i.e. high complex stability, Mn²⁺/Zn²⁺ selectivity, resistance to dissociation together with excellent relaxation efficacy and water solubility. The four pyridine pendants on the bispidine backbone are expected to maintain a large coordination cavity, leading to high Mn²⁺ complex stability and good Mn²⁺/Zn²⁺ selectivity, while the introduction of a carboxylate function increases water solubility. The elevated molecular weight of the ligand and complex ($M_w = 676 \text{ g mol}^{-1}$) compared to typical Mn²⁺ based relaxation agents should result in increased relaxivity, comparable to that of clinically used Gd³⁺ agents, and thus ensuring good MRI contrast enhancement *in vivo*.



Scheme 1. Ligands discussed in the text.

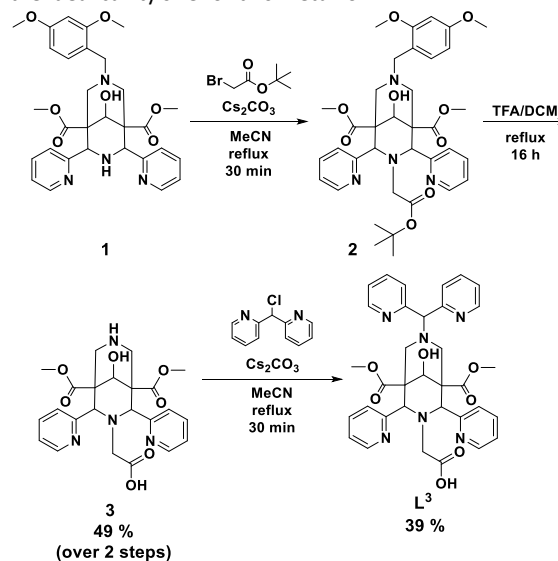
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Synthesis and structural properties of MnL³ and ZnL³

Ligand L³ was synthesized by a modified protocol starting from bispidine fragment 1 (Scheme 2; see Supporting Information for details). After alkylation with *tert*-butyl bromoacetate and subsequent deprotection, reaction with 2,2'-dipyridylmethylene chloride in the presence of Cs₂CO₃ formed L³ in moderate yields. The Mn²⁺ and Zn²⁺ complexes were prepared in stoichiometric reactions of the ligand with the respective triflate salts in methanol. Ether diffusion yielded crystals suitable for X-ray structure determination. Selected bond lengths and angles are listed in Table 1 alongside with the data for MnL¹ and MnL², and plots of the molecular cations are presented in Figure 1.

As expected from previous work, L³ perfectly wraps around the Mn²⁺ center, coordinating with all seven donor atoms. A methanol solvent molecule is also coordinated, ultimately leading to a rare example of an octacoordinate Mn²⁺ center.^{25,30-33} The coordinated ligand is protonated at the acetate appended to N3 – this follows from the stoichiometry ([MnL³(MeOH)](OTf)₂) and the bond distances of the coordinated acetate group (the coordinated carbonyl oxygen to carbon bond is shorter than the protonated carboxylate to carbon bond, see Supporting Information). The situation in aqueous solution at physiological pH obviously is different, see potentiometric titration data below. In comparison to the

complexes of L¹ and L², MnL³ is more symmetrical: the metal-donor distances range from 2.182 – 2.621 Å and the elongation of one of the Mn²⁺-pyridine bonds found in the structures with L¹ and L² is absent (see Table 1). This might be due to a combination of steric and electronic effects and is presumably also related to the protonated acetate arm, i.e. for the solution studies (see below) this is not relevant, at least at physiological pH. The coordination geometries of the three MnL¹⁻³ complexes are similar, as seen in the overlay plot in Figure 1c. It is of no surprise either that the reaction of L³ with Zn²⁺ yields a hexacoordinate structure, where one pyridine donor (Ndp2) is dangling (Figure 1b), and this also emerges from the potentiometric titrations (see below; note that various close to degenerate isomers with six-fold coordination of the seven- and eight-dentate bispidines L are possible²⁵ and the pH titrations suggest that a tertiary amine is protonated). To confirm the ideal fit of the Mn²⁺ ion in the bispidine cavity, hole-size calculations were conducted (see Supporting Information for details),³⁴⁻³⁶ and these show similar behavior to those with L¹ (Figure S1), with an energy minimum at an average metal-donor distance of 2.63 Å. Therefore, the complexation of Mn²⁺ by L³ induces a negligible amount of steric strain (approx. 3 kJ/mol), confirming the ideal cavity size for this metal ion.



Scheme 2. Synthesis of L³, starting from the known intermediate 1.³⁷

Table 1. Selected bond lengths (Å) and angles (°) of [MnL³(MeOH)](OTf)₂ in comparison to [MnL¹(OTf)](OTf) and [MnL²](OTf).

	[MnL ³ (MeOH)](OTf) ₂	[Mn(OTf)L ¹](OTf) ^a	[MnL ²](OTf) ^a
Bond [Å]			
M-N3	2.503(3)	2.4527(17)	2.3593(15)
M-N7	2.358(3)	2.4079(16)	2.5523(15)
M-Npy1	2.373(3)	3.037(2)	2.3635(18)
M-Npy2	2.353(4)	2.2937(19)	2.9098(22)
M-D(N3)	2.370(3)	2.2728(18)	2.2412(17)
M-Ndp1	2.620(3)	2.2520(18)	2.4233(17)
M-Ndp2	2.496(3)	2.5487(17)	2.3775(18)
M-O _x	2.182(3)	2.3804(16)	2.2018(14)
Angle [°]			
N3-M-N7	75.26(10)	72.42(5)	73.37(5)
Npy1-M-Npy2	131.52(11)	130.92(6)	129.37(5)

^a ref.²⁵

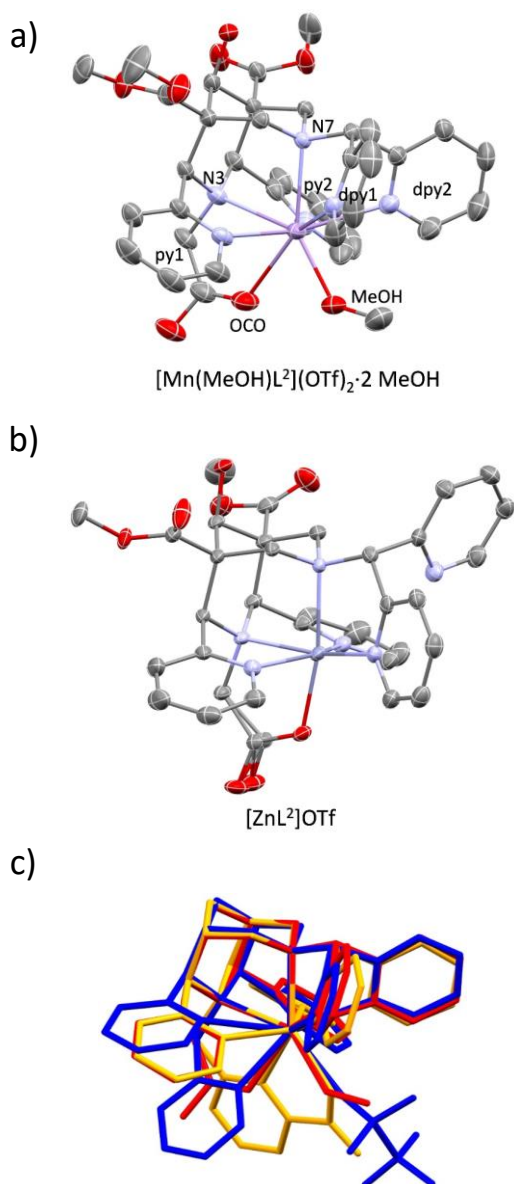


Figure 1. Plots of the solid state structures of a) $[\text{MnL}^3(\text{MeOH})](\text{OTf})_2$ and b) $[\text{ZnL}^3](\text{OTf})$. Atoms shown at 50% probability, hydrogen atoms, solvent molecules and anions have been omitted for clarity; c) overlay plot of the structures of the Mn^{II} complex cations with ligands L^1 (blue), L^2 (yellow), and L^3 (red); substituents to the bispidine backbone have been omitted.

Stability and kinetic inertness

In aqueous solution, pH-potentiometry was used to determine the protonation constants of L^3 and the thermodynamic stability constant and protonation constants of ZnL^3 (Figure S2, Table 2). In the Zn^{2+} - L^3 system, the species distribution curves corroborate the pH-dependent ^1H NMR data recorded in aqueous solution (Figure S3). Changes in the ^1H NMR spectra (in particular the chemical shift of the proton on the carbon bearing the two pyridines) correspond to pH regions where formation of the protonated (pH 0-3) or deprotonated complexes (pH 8-11) occur. The stability of the MnL^3 complex is too high to be assessed by potentiometry (the complex is fully formed at pH 2). Therefore, a relaxometric titration was done as previously described in batch samples between 0.8 M acid

concentration and pH 10 to determine $\log K_{\text{MnL}}$ and $\log K_{\text{MnHL}}$ (Figure 2).²⁵ We note that the relaxivity of the complex remains stable even in basic pH (for >50 hours at pH 9) excluding hydrolysis of the ester groups. MnL^3 has a remarkably high stability constant, and the ligand retains good selectivity for Mn^{2+} , although the $K_{\text{MnL}}/K_{\text{ZnL}}$ ratio is slightly lower than for L^1 and L^2 . For ZnL^3 , the high value of the first protonation constant ($\log K_{\text{ZnHL}} = 9.73$) shows that one tertiary amine remains protonated until basic pH, implying that this donor group is not coordinated to the metal ion, and this is also responsible for the reduced stability in comparison to the Mn^{2+} analogue. The $\text{pMn}=9.82$ value ($\text{pM} = -\log[\text{Mn}]_{\text{free}}$, calculated for $c_{\text{Mn}}=c_{\text{L}}=10^{-5}$ M, pH 7.4) of MnL^3 is remarkably high and, apart from that for MnL^1 , it is the highest ever reported for an Mn^{2+} complex with a coordinated H_2O molecule.

Because in ZnL^3 not all ligand donor groups are involved in the complexation, the formation of a dinuclear Zn_2L^3 complex might occur. Potentiometric titration of the ligand in presence of two equivalents of Zn^{2+} allowed to estimate the stability constant for Zn_2L^3 ($\log \beta_{\text{Zn}_2\text{L}^3} = 19.8(3)$; $\log \beta_{\text{Zn}_2\text{HL}^3} = 27.3(4)$). In contrast, no dinuclear complex is formed in the Mn^{2+} - L^3 system (see Supporting Information), and this was expected since Mn^{2+} coordinates to all donor groups of the ligand.

Table 2. Ligand protonation constants, Mn^{2+} and Zn^{2+} stabilities and pM values for the bispidine and reference ligands; errors in parenthesis are one standard deviation; $I = 0.15$ M NaCl, 298 K.

	L^1 ^a	L^2 ^a	L^3	L^4 ^b	PyC3A ^c	PC2A-EA ^d
$\log K_{\text{H}1}$	>11.05	11.90	12.26(3)	11.44	10.16	11.34
$\log K_{\text{H}2}$	6.73	5.44	6.52(2)	10.31	6.39	8.93
$\log K_{\text{H}3}$	5.62	5.28	4.41(2)	4.71	3.13	6.91
$\log K_{\text{H}4}$	5.27	1.36	2.83(3)	2.76	-	1.97
$\log K_{\text{H}5}$	2.30	-	-	2.22	-	-
$\log K_{\text{MnL}}$	24.2 ^a	24.7 ^e	19.47(2) ^e	12.21	14.14	19.01
$\log K_{\text{MnHL}}$	3.0	-	4.4(1) ^{e, f}	10.42	2.43	6.88
$\log K_{\text{MnH}_2\text{L}}$	-	-	-	3.87	-	2.50
$\log K_{\text{ZnL}}$	14.30	14.70	15.04(6)	15.59	-	-
$\log K_{\text{ZnHL}}$	8.88	9.36	9.73(5)	10.33	-	-
$\log K_{\text{ZnH}_2\text{L}}$	5.44	-	2.91(6)	3.28	-	-
pMn ^b	12.71	12.59	9.82	6.65	8.17	9.27
pZn ^b	9.50	8.58	8.73	8.40	-	-

^a ref. 25; ^b ref. 26; ^c ref. 6; ^d ref. 8; ^e from relaxometric data. ^f $\log K_{\text{MnHL}} = 3.47(2)$ is obtained from titration of fully formed MnL^3 with HCl.

The kinetic inertness of Mn^{2+} complexes is typically assessed in trans-metalation experiments. Despite the four orders of magnitude difference between K_{MnL} and K_{ZnL} , due to the formation of the dinuclear complex Zn_2L^3 , trans-metalation is shown to occur in presence of a sufficient excess of Zn^{2+} . This allows to directly compare MnL^3 with previously reported Mn^{2+} complexes using the same standard protocol. A similar situation occurs with GdDTPA ($\log K_{\text{GdDTPA}} = 22.46$, $\log K_{\text{ZnDTPA}} = 18.29$ and $\log \beta_{\text{Zn}_2\text{DTPA}} = 22.77$).³⁸ First, we followed trans-metalation in presence of 25 equivalents of Zn^{2+} (pseudo-first order conditions) at pH 6 and 37 °C (Figure 3a). Under these conditions, the calculated dissociation half-life is 14.3 days, considerably longer than $t_{1/2} = 54.4$ h or 64.5 h, reported for the most inert non-bispidine monohydrated complexes MnPC2A-EA⁸ and MnPC2A-DPA.²⁰

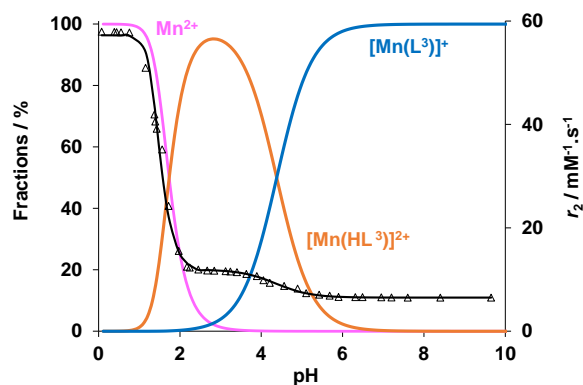


Figure 2. Species distribution curves calculated for MnL^3 (1 mM), and pH-dependent relaxivities (Δ) measured at 25 °C, 60 MHz. The black line represents the fit to yield stability constants.

In order to gain more insight into the mechanism of the slow dissociation, we have followed the reaction at varying concentrations of Zn^{2+} (10-50 equivalents) and varying pH (3.0-6.0). The pseudo-first order rate constants show a linear dependence on the Zn^{2+} concentration, while they are strictly independent of pH (Figure 3b). This unusual behavior implies that proton-assisted dissociation is negligible in this pH range, in sharp contrast to typical poly(amino carboxylate) metal complexes, for which it constitutes a major dissociation pathway. H^+ -assisted demetalation is also observed for the Mn^{2+} complex of the pentadentate bispidine L^4 .²⁶ The fit of the data in Figure 3b to $k_{\text{obs}} = k_0 + k_{\text{Zn}} [\text{Zn}]$ yields $k_{\text{Zn}} = (1.71 \pm 0.03) \times 10^{-5} \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ for the rate constant of the metal-assisted dissociation. k_0 , characteristic for the spontaneous dissociation could not be determined and had to be fixed to zero, otherwise a negative value was obtained with a large error, $k_0 = (-1 \pm 4) \times 10^{-8} \text{ s}^{-1}$. Similar pH-invariance has been observed for MnL^1 dissociation in presence of excess Cu^{2+} ,²⁵ indicating that this peculiar behavior is characteristic for this family of octa-coordinate bispidine Mn^{2+} complexes. By considering solely the Zn^{2+} -assisted dissociation pathway, one can estimate a dissociation half-life of 4.7×10^4 days for physiological Zn^{2+} concentration (10 μM in the blood).³⁹ Although it is likely that under physiological conditions spontaneous dissociation has a more important role – it might even become the major contributor to dissociation – the estimated highest limit for k_0 in the order of 10^{-8} s^{-1} would correspond to a dissociation half-life of 82 days; hence one can conclude that MnL^3 has extremely high kinetic inertness.

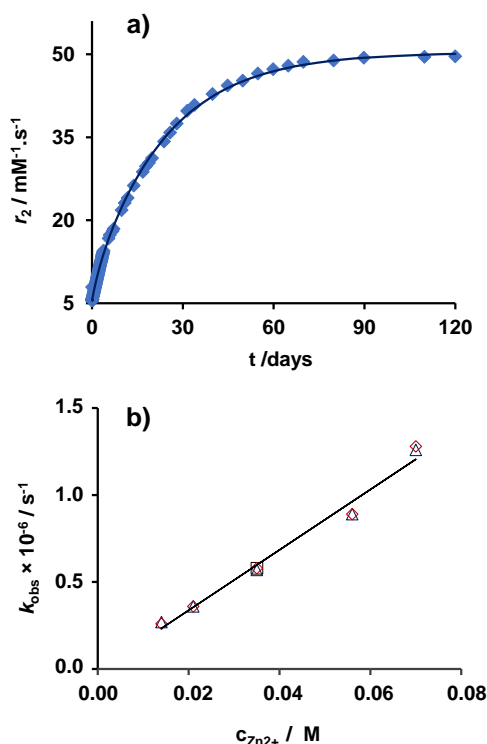


Figure 3. a) Time-dependent variation of the transverse ^1H relaxation rates in 1.4 mM MnL^3 , 37 °C, 60 MHz, 0.1 M NaCl, in the presence of 25 equivalents of Zn^{2+} . The curve represents the fit of the experimental data to yield the rate constant, k_{obs} . b) Variation of k_{obs} in Zn^{2+} trans-metalation experiments as a function of Zn^{2+} concentration. \square : pH 6.0 ; \diamond : pH 4.9 ; Δ : pH 3.1. $c_{\text{MnL}} = 1.4 \text{ mM}$, 37 °C.

Complexation of L^3 with Mn^{2+} is relatively slow, but orders of magnitude faster than decomplexation. This indicates that there is no microscopic reversibility, i.e. complex formation and metal ion release follow different pathways. Especially for bispidine complexes, this is a common observation.^{37, 40} Non-reversibility has also been observed when we have carried out a titration of fully formed MnL^3 (pH 7) with HCl (Fig. S3). The analysis of this curve yields a protonation constant of $\log K_{\text{HMnL}} = 3.47(2)$, around one logK unit below that determined from the relaxometric stability study (Table 2). Our interpretation of this important property for imaging applications, consistent with all observations, is based on two features of multidentate bispidine ligands: the rigidity of the chair-chair conformation of the bispidine backbone with the lone pairs of the two tertiary amines pointing to the center of the cavity, and the efficient encapsulation of the metal center. Due to the orientation of the lone pairs of the tertiary amines and the rigidity of the adamantane-derived backbone, bispidines are proton sponges,²⁸ and this also emerges from the high values of the first protonation constants (see Table 2). This is a reason for relatively slow complexation, depending on the metal ion, specific ligand and reaction conditions: the most demanding step is the deprotonation of the second tertiary amine, and in a number of examples, this has led to fast formation of relatively stable intermediates⁴¹ in which the metal has not yet fully entered the bispidine cavity. Such a pre-complex has also been identified in the formation of MnL^1 and its stability constant could be determined.²⁵ Once the

complex is formed, there is no possibility of competing protonation – the metal ion is completely locked in the bispidine cavity – in this sense, one might think of bispidines as “metal ion sponges”. The fact that the pendant donor groups are well oriented and resistant to H⁺-assisted decomplexation is also illustrated by the structure of MnL³, where protonation of the acetate group does not lead to partial decomplexation (see above). The attack of OH⁻ is another potential decomplexation pathway, a process that may become increasingly prevalent at higher pH and when the complex concentration is very low with respect to the OH⁻ concentration (e.g. in the case of radiotracer imaging, typically used at subnanomolar concentrations). In our case, the complex remains intact even at pH 10 for several days, as followed by relaxometric measurements. Therefore, we conclude that very efficient encapsulation by the heptacoordinate ligand L³ completely shields the metal ion from attack by OH⁻. Finally, we also note that the slow formation of such Mn²⁺ bispidine complexes is not expected to constitute an obstacle for their potential large-scale production.

Relaxation properties

The solid-state structure of MnL³ shows the coordination of one solvent methanol in the inner sphere of Mn²⁺, which is certainly replaced by a water molecule in aqueous solution. This was indeed confirmed by measuring the temperature-dependent ¹⁷O transverse relaxation rates (1/T₂) and using the method of Gale to estimate the hydration number,⁴² which gave $q = 1.0$ (Fig. S7).

The relaxivity of MnL³ amounts to $r_1 = 4.44 \text{ mM}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$ (25 °C, 20 MHz), very close to that of commercial agents based on Gd³⁺ ($r_1 = 4.74 \text{ mM}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$ for GdDOTA).⁴³ The relaxivity is slightly higher than that of MnHL⁴ ($r_1 = 4.28 \text{ mM}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$) and ~30 % higher than for typical monohydrated Mn²⁺ complexes formed with non-bispidine chelators⁴⁴ (e.g. MnPyC3A: $3.3 \text{ mM}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$, MnPC2A-EA: $3.52 \text{ mM}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$; Mn(1,4-DO2A): $2.1 \text{ mM}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$). In the presence of human serum albumin, the relaxivity of MnL³ increases (by ~40 % at 20 MHz, 25 °C), indicating some non-specific protein binding, which is likely induced by the presence of the pyridine pendants (Figure 4a).

The relaxation efficiency of MnL³ has been further characterized by recording Nuclear Magnetic Relaxation Dispersion (¹H NMRD) profiles at 25°C and 37°C, from 0.01 to 80 MHz (Figure 4a). The shape and temperature dependence of these profiles are characteristic for small molecular weight complexes and indicate that the relaxivity is limited by fast motional dynamics. Direct information on the water exchange has been obtained from the analysis of the variable temperature ¹⁷O relaxation rates (Figure 4b). These were fitted together with the NMRD profiles to yield parameters characterizing the water exchange and rotational dynamics of MnL³, as shown in Table 3 (see Supporting Information for full details). The water exchange rate constant for MnL³, k_{ex}^{298} , is about twice as high as for MnHL⁴. While this increase has no impact on the relaxivity, it is interesting to note that it is accompanied by a change of the exchange mechanism, associative for the six-coordinate MnHL⁴ and dissociative for the eight-coordinate MnL³: the activation entropy (ΔS^\ddagger) is positive for MnL³ and negative for MnHL⁴. This also supports the hypothesis discussed above that in MnL³ the metal center is completely shielded from attack of other ligands (especially OH₂ and OH⁻), while for systems with lower coordination numbers this is not the case.

The slight relaxivity increase for MnL³ as compared to MnHL⁴ can be attributed to its slightly higher molecular weight (17%), thus slower rotational motion, as reflected by the rotational correlation time determined in the fit (Table 3). This compensates the lack of the second-sphere relaxation mechanism, which is operating for

MnHL⁴, thanks to the presence of the charged non-coordinating carboxylate groups but missing for the ester-bearing MnL³.

In vivo and ex vivo studies

Given the excellent Mn²⁺/Zn²⁺ selectivity and kinetic inertness of MnL³ combined with relaxivities that clearly outstrip those typically reported for small Mn²⁺ complexes, we carried out a standard *in vivo* MRI study (7 T) in wild type mice. Mice were injected intravenously with a solution of MnL³ at a 0.02 mmol/kg dose, 80 % lower than that used in the clinic. The MR images obtained show very good contrast at the level of the kidneys 2 min after injection. No significant liver uptake is noted. Overall, these images illustrate the high relaxation efficiency of MnL³, which is retained *in vivo*. The normalized signal intensities followed for one-hour post-injection in the kidney, the liver and the aorta are shown in Figure 5. The highest signal intensity was reached at ~5 mins after injection. These kinetic data point to a rapid and primarily renal elimination of the compound. The biodistribution half-life of MnL³ in the kidney was estimated to 25 min, a value similar to that of clinically used small contrast agents.

Complete elimination of the probe from the mice was confirmed by an *ex vivo* biodistribution study. Mice were sacrificed at 24 h post injection (0.02 mmol/kg dose MnL³) and the organs harvested. The manganese content was determined by ICP-MS in different organs following acid digestion. The results obtained (Table 4) are compared with baseline values from the literature⁴⁵ or determined by us, and with those reported for a PyC3A-derivative-based Mn²⁺ complex¹⁸ developed for liver imaging (Table 4). 24 h after injection, MnL³ is completely excreted from the body.

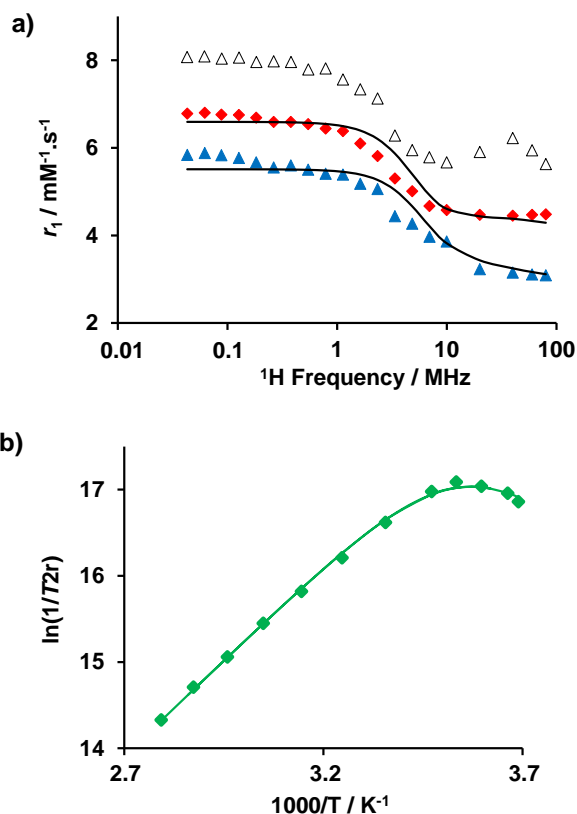


Figure 4. a) Proton relaxivities of MnL^3 measured in water at 25 °C (\blacklozenge) and 37 °C (\blacktriangle) and in human serum at 37 °C (\triangle), and b) reduced transverse ^{17}O relaxation rates (\blacklozenge ; 9.4 T). The lines represent the simultaneous fit of the experimental points using the Solomon-Bloembergen-Morgan theory of paramagnetic relaxation.

Table 3. Parameters characterizing water exchange and rotational dynamics obtained from the analysis of ^1H NMRD and ^{17}O NMR data.

	MnL^3	MnPyC3A^a	MnPC2A-EA^b	Mn(1,4-DO2A)^c
q	1	1	1	0.9
r_1 ($\text{mM}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$)	3.17 ^d /4.44 ^e	2.1 ^d	3.5 ^f	1.7 ^d
k_{ex}^{298} (10^7 s^{-1})	13.5(5) ^g	5.4	4.0	113.4
ΔH^\ddagger (kJmol^{-1})	34.0(6)	37.2	-	29.4
ΔS^\ddagger ($\text{Jmol}^{-1}\text{K}^{-1}$)	+25(12)	-	-	-
E_{rH} (kJ.mol^{-1})	22(3)	-	-	19.1
τ_{rH}^{298} (ps)	110(4)	-	-	46

a. ref.⁶ b. ref.⁸ c. ref.²³ d. 37 °C, 60 MHz. e. 25 °C, 20 MHz. f. 25 °C, pH 6, 20 MHz. g. The scalar coupling constant calculated from the fit of ^{17}O NMR data is $A_0/\hbar = 30.3(5)\times 10^6 \text{ rad.s}^{-2}$

Table 4. Mn tissue content determined by ICP-MS in wild type 8-weeks-old C57BL/6JRj mice, 24 h post injection of 0.02 mmol/kg of MnL^3 . Data are presented as nmol/g \pm SD (n = 3).

	MnL^3	$\text{Mn(PyC3A-OBn)}^{18a}$	baseline (no injection)	baseline ⁴⁵
lungs	3.3 \pm 0.3	4.87	3.5 \pm 0.2	1.8
liver	20.4 \pm 4.0	23.3	14.1 \pm 1.2	16.5
spleen	2.2 \pm 0.9	9.03	1.8 \pm 0.6	2.2
kidneys	19.6 \pm 3.4	31.6	26.2 \pm 0.6	18.9

^a in balb/C mice; 0.1 mmol/ kg injected dose

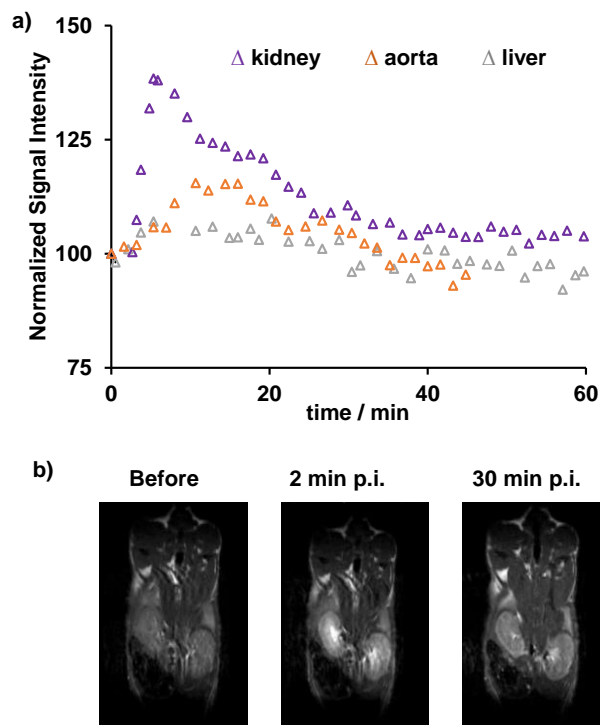


Figure 5. a) Normalized signal intensity in the kidney, liver and aorta plotted as a function of time. Measurements were performed for 3 mice. Standard deviations are not presented for better readability. b) Coronal T1-weighted MR images prior to injection and at 2 and 30 min post intravenous injection of 0.02 mmol/kg of MnL^3 .

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, rational chemical design has provided a small molecular weight Mn^{2+} complex combining unique features highly relevant for the development of more biocompatible alternatives to Gd^{3+} -based MRI agents. The remarkably high thermodynamic stability, $\text{Mn}^{2+}/\text{Zn}^{2+}$ selectivity and resistance to dissociation, all related to the rigidity, size-match and full encapsulation of MnL^3 , are decisive to avoid *in vivo* free metal ion release. Despite the seven ligand donor atoms, the large coordination cavity also affords for an inner sphere coordinated water in the complex, which, together with the slightly elevated molecular size, leads to proton relaxivities $\sim 30\%$ higher than those of typical Mn^{2+} complexes. *In vivo* in mice, MnL^3 retains this good relaxation efficiency, and undergoes rapid clearance mainly *via* the kidneys. Further improvement of the pharmacokinetic profile and the relaxivity can likely be achieved by substitution of the bispidine backbone, e.g. with carboxylates, phosphates or sulfonates, and simple synthetic protocols for such derivatives are available.^{40, 46-47}

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information. Details of synthesis, experimental procedures, X-ray crystal structure determinations and hole-size calculations, potentiometric titration curves, kinetic and NMR data, description of the analysis of ^{17}O NMR and NMRD data. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Author

* peter.comba@aci.uni-heidelberg.de; eva.jakabtoth@cncrs.fr

Author Contributions

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Notes

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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