NH4+ in zeolites: coordination and solvation effects

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Proton transfer from a zeolitic cluster to NH$_3$ and subsequent coordination of the ammonium cation onto the zeolitic cluster are studied by using ab initio quantum chemical cluster calculations. Proton transfer from the zeolite cluster to NH$_3$ is favorable if, after proton transfer, the resulting NH$_4^+$ cation is coordinated to the zeolitic cluster with two or three hydrogen bonds. These structures are referred to as 2H and 3H, respectively. Their adsorption energies the energy needed for the process of proton transfer followed by the binding of the NH$_4^+$ cation, are calculated to be $-114$ and $-113 \text{ kJ/mol}$, respectively. The geometries were optimized at the SCF level and the adsorption energies were calculated at the second-order Möller–Plesset perturbation theory level (MP2), using the counterpoise correction (CPC) to avoid the basis set superposition error (BSSE). The basis set is the 6-31+G(d,p)/STO-3G one, which has previously been shown to give proper binding and proton transfer energies. The calculated heats of adsorption compare well with experimental heats of desorption. Proton transfer also occurs when another NH$_3$ molecule is coadsorbed. However, the process of coadsorption is energetically less favorable than the 2H and 3H structures: the adsorption energy per NH$_3$ molecule is only $-30 \text{ kJ/mol}$. For the clusters the N–H stretching frequencies have been calculated at the SCF level in the harmonic approach. They have been compared with experimental spectra of the NH$_4^+$ forms of some zeolites. The N–H stretching region of these spectra can be explained as a superposition of the spectra of the 2H and 3H structures. By comparison of the adsorption energy on a geometry optimized cluster and on a fixed geometry cluster, it was found that the choice of the geometry is important. On enlarging the fixed geometry cluster the adsorption energy remained constant.

### Introduction

Proton transfer from acidic zeolites to NH$_3$ and the interaction of the NH$_4^+$ cation with the zeolite lattice are widely studied subjects, both by experimentalists and theoreticians. In this paper we present a study in which these processes are studied by ab initio quantum chemical calculations on small zeolitic clusters. The calculated results will be compared with experimental heats of adsorption and infrared spectra.

In our earlier study we found that proton transfer is not favorable if after protonation the NH$_4^+$ ion is bonded to the zeolite with a single hydrogen bond. [The term hydrogen bond, through perhaps not appropriate for a fully ionic system, is used to characterize the geometrical arrangements studied.] However preliminary calculations indicated that multiple hydrogen bonding with the zeolite substrate might stabilize the NH$_4^+$ to such an extent that proton transfer becomes favorable. The present paper reports a detailed analysis of the stabilization by double and triple hydrogen bonding to the zeolitic lattice and by coadsorption of a second NH$_3$ molecule. Vibrational analyses at the equilibrium geometries of the clusters will be represented as well.

In this study minimal size clusters will be used. Although it is not certain that these clusters represent the zeolite acidic site in the best way this choice is made because with these small clusters it is possible to use a basis set that adequately describes the proton-transfer process.

### Survey of Experimental Data

NH$_4^+$ adsorbed in zeolites has been studied by spectroscopic techniques such as IR and $^1$H NMR spectroscopies. Also the energy effects of the NH$_3$ adsorption have been measured by temperature-programmed desorption (TPD) and microcalorimetry (MC). MC gives a direct measurement of the heat of adsorption. TPD gives the heat of activation for desorption, but this quantity is often interpreted as the heat of desorption.

In the infrared spectra of ammonium loaded zeolites the N–H stretching regions (2700–3400 cm$^{-1}$) are very similar (see refs 15 and 16 and the Results section of this paper). The same pattern can be found in all cases: broad intense bands around 2800, 3000, and 3200 cm$^{-1}$ and a less intense peak or shoulder around 3400 cm$^{-1}$. Only in less well resolved spectra these features are hard to find.

$^1$H NMR spectroscopy provides detailed information about the siting and coordination of the NH$_4^+$ tetrahedron around the acidic site. At relatively low temperatures the NH$_4^+$ tetrahedron is localized at the AlO$_4$ tetrahedrons. At these low temperatures (from 77 K to about 120 K) the NH$_4^+$ is still rotating and tumbling around its own symmetry axes or jumping from one orientation to another. However, it remains located at a given AlO$_4$ tetrahedron, and there is very little translational motion away from it. At very low NH$_4^+$ loading Earl et al. report two peaks. These are assigned to two different sites. At higher loadings more peaks appear in the spectrum. The authors suggest these peaks stem from hydrogen-bonded forms of NH$_4^+$ and NH$_3$. The zeolite lattice appears to be a highly flexible structure: inelastic neutron scattering and infrared studies show that on deprotonation of the zeolite, i.e., on forming NH$_4^+$, the zeolite lattice is distorted. The zeolite lattice has the ability to adjust its bond lengths and angles to the deprotonation.

The adsorption energy of NH$_3$ on a zeolite acidic site is not known with certainty. The values show a large range depending on the technique and the type of zeolite, but even the results of applying the same technique to the same system may differ significantly. If the adsorption energy is determined with MC,
there is some ambiguity in the choice of which part of the plot of the heat of adsorption against the amount adsorbed is due to adsorption at the zeolite acidic site. From various MC measurements an average adsorption energy of 146 ± 23 kJ/mol on different types of H and H/Na forms of zeolites is found.\(^6\)\(^{21}\)\(^{26}\)\(^{29}\)\(^{34}\) If the activation energy for desorption is interpreted as the heat of adsorption there is an ambiguity in the choice of the method to calculate the \(\Delta E^{\text{ads}}\) from the TPD spectrum. Different methods can give results that are quite different. From the TPD measurements activation energies for desorption in the range 112 ± 33 kJ/mol were found.\(^5\)\(^{11}\)\(^{12}\)\(^{24}\)\(^{25}\)\(^{27}\)\(^{32}\)

Methods

In this paper we will model the interaction between \(\text{NH}_4^+\) and the zeolite wall using small molecular clusters. The zeolite wall is represented by an \(\text{Al(OH)}_2\text{H}^+\) fragment, because at low temperatures the \(\text{NH}_4^+\) binds at the aluminum sites. The way the cluster is chosen depends on the coordination of the \(\text{NH}_4^+\). If the \(\text{NH}_4^+\) is bonded to the zeolite wall with two hydrogen bonds, a \(\text{Al(OH)}_2\text{H}^-\) (Figure 1a) cluster will be used; this is the 2H structure. When \(\text{NH}_4^+\) is bonded to the zeolite wall with three hydrogen bonds, the zeolite wall is modelled by an \(\text{Al(OH)}_3\text{H}^-\) (Figure 1b) cluster; this is the 3H structure. Some additional calculations on \(\text{NH}_4^+\) bonded singly or doubly to the latter cluster have been performed as well. Finally, when dealing with the coadsorption of two \(\text{NH}_3\) molecules on a single acidic site the \(\text{H}_3\text{SiOHA}1\text{H}_3\) cluster was adopted (Figure 1c).

All the calculations are performed with the 6-311+G(d,p)/STO-3G basis set, used in our earlier paper.\(^1\) This notation means that the hydrogens that saturate the dangling bonds are described with a STO-3G basis set,\(^40\) the silicon and aluminum atoms with a 6-311G(d) basis set,\(^41\) the nitrogen with a 6-311G(d) basis set,\(^42\) the hydrogens which are attached to the nitrogen with a 31G(p) basis set,\(^43\) and the oxygen atoms with a 6-311+G(d) basis set.\(^44\)

The cluster size is limited by the use of this basis set: in our earlier paper we have shown that a smaller basis set does not give reliable results. The equilibrium geometries were found by geometry optimization of the clusters at the SCF level, using gradient techniques. No counterpoise correction (CPC) was applied in this step. These optimizations were repeated with Al–N distances 0.1 Å shorter and longer than that found for the full geometry optimization. For each of these structures a calculation is performed in which electron correlation is included through second-order Møller–Plesset theory,\(^35\) keeping the cores frozen. These data were used to obtain the final SCF and SCF/MP2 equilibrium Al–N distances and equilibrium interaction energies, both with and without CPC.

For each cluster, the adsorption energy of \(\text{NH}_4^+\) is calculated by connecting a two-step process. The first one is the proton transfer at infinity. The second is the adsorption of \(\text{NH}_4^+\) onto the anionic zeolite fragment. The proton-transfer energy at infinity is calculated, as the difference in proton affinity (PA) between the zeolitic anionic fragment and \(\text{NH}_3\):

\[
\Delta E^{\text{PT}} = \text{PA}_{Z^-} - \text{PA}_{\text{NH}_3} \tag{1}
\]

The required proton affinities are obtained as the difference in energy between the isolated and fully optimized \(\text{NH}_3\) and \(\text{OSiAlH}_6^-\) molecules and the fully optimized and isolated \(\text{NH}_4^+\) and \(\text{OSiAlH}_6^-\) ions, respectively.

In the second step the interaction energy between two fragments A and B is calculated from

\[
\Delta E^{\text{int}} = E^{\text{AB}} - E^A - E^B \tag{2}
\]

In (2) \(E^{\text{AB}}\) is the energy of the complex obtained by interpolating on the three Al–N distances considered, and \(E^A\) and \(E^B\) are the energies of the free optimized fragments (for example the optimized ions \(\text{NH}_4^+\) and \(\text{OSiAlH}_6^-\)). However this interaction

\[\text{Figure 1. Geometries of the complex considered: (a) NH}_4^+\text{ doubly bonded to an Al(OH)}_2\text{H}^-\text{ cluster (2H structure); (b) NH}_4^+\text{ triply bonded to an Al(OH)}_3\text{H}^-\text{ cluster (3H structure); (c) NH}_3\text{–NH}_4^+\text{ coadsorbed on a SiH}_3\text{OSiAlH}_3\text{ cluster.}\]
The validity of the cluster choice and the importance of geometry optimization were tested by adopting the cluster in Figure 2. It has the same geometrical parameters as the rigid-geometry SiH₃OAlH₇⁺ cluster discussed in ref 1 (partly taken from a force field calculation for a 1:1 Si/Al Na-faujasite, but two hydrogens on aluminum were replaced by OH groups (using the faujasite geometry) to allow triple bonding by NH₄⁺). For the NH₄⁺ ion an experimental geometry was taken. The binding energy for this cluster was calculated at the SCF level. In these calculations were performed at the SCF-optimized geometry only. The results confirm our earlier preliminary findings that these proton-transferred structures are much favored over the singly-H-bonded structure studied in ref 1.

In our earlier paper,¹ we found that the proton was not transferred to the NH₃ to the zeolite if the NH₄⁺ was kept singly coordinated to the zeolitic cluster. However, if a second NH₃ is adsorbed to the cluster, the result of the geometry optimization is that the ionic state is stabilized to such an extent that NH₄⁺ is formed. For this coadsorbed structure the SCF/MP2/CPC calculations were performed at the SCF-optimized geometry only. Some of the geometrical parameters are given in Figure 5a.

In Table III the binding energies for the coadsorbed structure system are tabulated. The adsorption energy at the SCF-level is 59.8 kJ/mol per two adsorbed NH₃ molecules; i.e., only 30 kJ/mol per NH₃ molecule. Energetically this coadsorbed state is unfavorable compared to the 2H and 3H structures and also to the state where the proton is not transferred and a single NH₃ molecule is hydrogen bonded on a single site. From Table III it can be seen that the MP2 calculation overestimates both the adsorption and the binding energy. The SCF calculation gives almost the same value as the SCF/MP2/CPC calculation. In Table III also the interaction energies between all the individual pairs are tabulated, these are calculated in the absence of the third molecule. From the last column in Table III it can be seen that they are not additive. The three-body term, defined as the difference between the sum of the three binding energies between NH₃, NH₄⁺, and OSiAlH₇, is repulsive. The structure with the proton transferred may be a local minimum; this structure is given in Figure 5a. Also the structure in which the proton is not transferred and two NH₃ molecules are binding sequentially to the same OH group is also a minimum. In this case the O–N distance is 2.73 Å, the N–N distance 3.29 Å. The structure in which the proton is attached to the zeolite while hydrogen bonding to two NH₃ molecules is 15 kJ/mol lower at the SCF level. Since the anion is stabilized at the electron-correlated level, this difference will be smaller at the MP2 level. Thus in this structure there appears to be a very subtle balance between proton-transfer energies and differences in binding energies.

Calculated IR Spectra. In Figure 6 the N–H stretching region of the infrared spectrum of two NH₄⁺ containing zeolites is reported. In Figure 6a this region is shown for a NH₄⁺–Y zeolite, whereas Figure 6b refers to the NH₄⁺ form of mordenite. These NH₄⁺ forms of zeolites were obtained by ion exchange of the sodium forms. The IR spectra were measured after evacuating the sample for 1 h at 500 °C followed by adsorption of NH₃. The features of these spectra have already been discussed.

For all the geometry-optimized clusters normal-mode analyses were carried out. From these analyses the N–H and O–H stretching frequencies were selected. This selection was simple because the N–H stretching frequencies were isolated from the other normal modes. In Table IV the results of these vibrational analysis is given.

Rigid-Geometry Calculations. To study the effect of both the cluster choice and the role of the geometry optimization, some rigid-geometry calculations were performed. The composition of the cluster was changed in order to study the effect of the cluster choice, and the effect of geometry optimization was studied by comparing the results of the rigid geometry calculations with the results for the 3H cluster, both having the same stoichiometry. We took the SiH₃OAl(OH)₃H, triply bonded to NH₄⁺ shown in Figure 2. The SiH₃OAl part was the same as used in our earlier paper on the subject.¹ The Al atom is located along one of the C₃ axes of the NH₄⁺ ion. Because the aluminum cluster did not have a 3-fold axis, the angle of rotation of the NH₄⁺ tetrahedron around the Al–N axis was optimized at the SCF level, using a deformation matrix method.
Figure 3. Optimized geometries of the clusters modelling the zeolite wall. Protonated forms (a, c, e) optimized in C₅ symmetry. Anionic forms (b, d, f) optimized in Cₛ, Cᵥ, and C₅, respectively.

TABLE I: Deprotonation Energies (kJ/mol) of the Clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>SCF</th>
<th>MP2</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al(OH)₂H₂</td>
<td>1379</td>
<td>1377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al(OH)₃H₂</td>
<td>1384</td>
<td>1356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H₂SiOAlH₇</td>
<td>1359</td>
<td>1358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH₄⁺</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>905</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The deprotonation energies are defined as the difference in energy between the optimized ZH and Z⁻ forms of the clusters. They are given at the SCF and at the correlated level (deprotonation energy = -ΔPA).

3-21G basis set. It was found that the minimum energy was reached if the Al-O=H-N dihedral angle had a mean value of 6°. Using a ΔEP in the rigid geometry at infinity of 444 kJ/mol the adsorption energy is -18.4 and -10.6 kJ/mol at the SCF and SCF/CP levels, respectively. The Al-N distances at these levels were 2.78 and 2.81 Å, respectively.

The calculations for this cluster were repeated with a reduced cluster size, replacing the OSiH₃ group by a OH group. The results do not differ much: the adsorption energies are -16.0 and -9.6 kJ/mol at the SCF and SCF/CP levels, respectively. The Al-N distances at these levels were 2.78 and 2.81 Å, respectively. These results differ considerably from the results found for the corresponding geometry optimized cluster, the 3H structure.

Discussion

It is not surprising that if a second NH₃ is adsorbed on the acidic site the NH₄⁺ is stabilized in the single-bonded form. From our earlier paper it was seen that the ionic state is 52 kJ/mol higher in energy than the hydrogen bonded form. The calculated binding energy between NH₃ and NH₄⁺ is -99 kJ/mol, whereas for the NH₃ dimer they are -19, -14, and -18 kJ/mol. From the differences one could expect the charged form of the structure to become favorable over the true hydrogen-bonded one when another NH₃ is coadsorbed. The fact that the ionic state is stabilized by a single extra NH₃ is an indication of the strong acidity of this acidic site in the zeolite. It has been shown experimentally that gas-phase α-naphthol* (pKₐ ~ 0.5) requires three additional NH₃ molecules to accomplish proton transfer to NH₃. This suggests that the acidic site of a zeolite is more acidic than strong mineral acids such as HI for which a pKₐ of 0.77 has been reported.

The Ne-O length in the coadsorbed system is 2.55 Å. This is very close to the value for the NH₄⁺-OSiAlH₇ system. The N=O distance however is longer than in the NH₄⁺-NH₃ complex, which is 2.85 Å, presumably because of repulsion between the anionic zeolite cluster and the NH₃ dipole.

The binding energy for the complex involving the NH₃, NH₄⁺, and OSiAlH₇ molecules is not equal to the sum of the binding energies for the separate pairs. The difference between this sum and the total binding energy, the three body term, is 29 kJ/mol at the CPC-corrected SCF level (of Table III). Electron correlation adds 2 kJ/mol to this three-body term. These numbers...
For the water trimer this term was in the range of -3 kJ/mol at the SCF level this term is -17 kJ/mol for the NH3-.HF.-HF system found for sequentially hydrogen bonding systems. For example, the interaction energies and CPC are calculated with the formulas (2) and (3). 

\[ \Delta E_{\text{ABC}} = \Delta E_{\text{AB}} + \Delta E_{\text{AC}} - \Delta E_{\text{BC}} \]

is the three body term. The total of the interaction energies and the interaction energies between the pairs of molecules. The interaction energies and CPC are calculated with the formulas (2) and (3). 

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is the three body term.

\[ \Delta E_{\text{ABC}} = \Delta E_{\text{AB}} + \Delta E_{\text{AC}} - \Delta E_{\text{BC}} \]

The three-body energy is caused by polarization energy, it is to be expected that, in this system with two ions the three-body term is less than under the influence of these ions (4) for the complete system of the three interacting particles. 

\[ \Delta E_{\text{ABC}} = \Delta E_{\text{AB}} + \Delta E_{\text{AC}} - \Delta E_{\text{BC}} \]

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0.1° from linearity. From the small difference in binding or adsorption energy between the 2H and 3H state, it can be seen that the binding energy is not proportional to the number of hydrogen bonds. Although the N−Al distance is much shorter in the 3H structure than in the 2H structure, the O−N distance in the hydrogen bonds are larger. This might be due to the somewhat more flattened geometry: In the 3H structure the O−Al−O angle is 101°; in the 2H structure it is 101°. Apparently in the case of an ion−ion interaction the exact alignment of the hydrogen bond does not seem to be very important, the factor determining the stability seems to be the short distance and the high coordination between the cation and the anion.

From the Si−O stretching frequency in the experimental spectrum, it is clear that the proton is transferred to the NH3. The interpretation of the experimental spectra from the calculated vibrational analyses is not completely straightforward. In this paper four geometry-optimized structures are discussed, features from all of them might appear in the experimental spectrum. The spectrum of the hydrogen bonded structure, i.e., the structure in which the proton is still attached to the zeolite is dominated by one single peak. The OH stretching frequency is shifted into the N−H stretching region. The spectrum of the coadsorbed structure is also dominated by a single peak at 3142 cm−1 (coming from the proton hydrogen bonding to the coadsorbed NH3). These peaks are not likely to appear in an experimental spectrum since the 2H and 3H structures are energetically more favorable. At higher loadings peaks stemming from coadsorbed structures may appear.

The two structures that are most likely to dominate the experimental spectrum are the 2H and 3H structures. From their almost equal adsorption energies it might be expected that the spectrum is a sum of the spectra of these two structures. However it should be remembered that the features of the infrared spectrum of the adsorbed NH4+ are influenced by the specific type of zeolite and that different sites may give different contributions to the spectrum. Still it is useful to compare the calculated and experimental frequencies. The spectrum of the 2H structure is dominated by two large peaks at 2623 and 2740 cm−1. They might correspond with the two bands that are present in the experimental spectrum at 2780 and 2930 (mordenite), 2800 and 3040 (faujasite), 2970 (beta) and 2840 and 3068 cm−1 for the erionite. However, the values are downshifted by about 250 cm−1. The spectrum of the 3H structure has two large peaks relatively close together (3103 and 3141 cm−1) which in an experimental spectrum will appear as one peak. It also has a less intense peak at 3478 cm−1. The composite peak around 3120 may correspond to the band in the experimental spectrum at 3180 (mordenite), 3270 (faujasite), 3200 (beta) and 3260 (erionite). The less intense peak at 3478 may correspond to the less intense peak or shoulder appearing in the experimental spectra at 3400, 3360, 3460, and 3384 cm−1 for the zeolites mordenite, faujasite, beta, and erionite, respectively. If this interpretation is right, the numerical value of the first band is shifted by 100 cm−1. The numerical value of the 3478 cm−1 peak seems to be right. In the cluster this frequency corresponds to the stretch of the proton pointing away from the zeolitic cluster. Since it is not hydrogen bonding, the harmonic approach might be sufficient.

As seen from this interpretation there is not a simple correspondence between the calculated harmonic frequencies and intensities and the experimental spectra. However, for some features a satisfactory explanation can be found, this explanation supports the suggestion that the 2H and 3H structures may both appear at the same time.

The calculated heats of adsorption for the fixed geometry and optimized geometry Al(OH)3H2 clusters different about 100 kJ/mol, the latter more being favorable. From formula 4 it is seen that this difference may be caused by a difference in ΔEpr or ΔEcm. There is only a small difference in ΔEpr: 444 kJ/mol for the fixed geometry cluster and 452 kJ/mol for the optimized geometry cluster. Apparently the difference in adsorption energy is caused by the difference in interaction energy. The interaction energies for the fixed-geometry cluster are −460 and −453 at the
The adsorption energy calculated within the fixed geometry does not have a heat of adsorption that agrees with an experimental one. This is consistent with the proposed flexibility of the zeolite lattice. This flexibility is shown experimentally by infrared and inelastic neutron-scattering spectra. Thus adsorption energies should be calculated by optimizing the geometries. As we see from our calculations, the extra binding energy compensates for the deformation energy. If the lattice should be less flexible than the clusters used, the adsorption energy is dependent on the geometry of the lattice. For example, if the AlO₆-tetrahedrons in the lattice would have the shape they have in the optimized 3H structure, the adsorption energy will increase by ~33 kJ/mol because the deformation energy is absent. If, on the other hand, the lattice would have the shape of the isolated Al(OH)₃H⁺ ion the adsorption energy will be a bit less than the ~112 found for this cluster. In the fixed-geometry cluster the difference in adsorption energy between the Al(OH)₃H⁺ cluster and the Al(OH)₃H⁺OSiH₃ cluster is minimal. In this case the adsorption energy seems to be determined to a large extent by the atoms that are directly interacting with ammonia cation.

Conclusions

The proton transfer from a zeolite to NH₃ and the binding of NH₄⁺ is studied by quantum chemical cluster calculations. The geometries of the cluster were optimized at the SCF level. The adsorption energies are calculated at the SCF/MP2/CPC level i.e. electron correlation was included through second-order Möller-Plesset perturbation theory, and the counterpoise correction was applied to avoid the basis set superposition error. Four different structures have been studied. In one the proton was not transferred and NH₃ is forming a hydrogen bond with the zeolitic OH group. In two other structures the NH₄⁺ are forming two or three hydrogen bonds with the zeolitic cluster.

Finally a structure was studied in which two NH₃ molecules are adsorbed on a single zeolitic OH group. The heats of adsorption calculated for these structures are ~60, ~110, ~112, and ~30 kJ/mol, respectively. Experimentally the heat of adsorption for different types of zeolites is in the range from ~110 to ~150 kJ/mol.

The two structures in which the NH₄⁺ is forming two or three hydrogen bonds with the zeolitic cluster are favorable because the ammonium cation has a high coordination with the cluster. If the geometry of these structures was not optimized a part of this high coordination is lost and the heat of adsorption is only ~10 kJ/mol. In the rigid-geometry cluster one of the dangling bond hydrogens is substituted by a SiH₂ group, the adsorption energy is not affected.

The vibrational frequencies of the clusters were calculated at the SCF level in the harmonic approach. They have been compared with experimental spectra of NH₄⁺ forms of zeolites. The features of the experimental spectrum can be explained from the calculated spectra.

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