Controllable Self-Assembly of Organic–Inorganic Amphiphiles Containing Dawson Polyoxometalate Clusters


Abstract: An organic–inorganic molecular hybrid containing the Dawson polyoxometalate, \( ((\text{C}_4\text{H}_9\text{N})_5\text{H})\text{[P}_2\text{V}_7\text{W}_{12}\text{O}_{49}(\text{OCH}_2)\text{CNHCO}_2\text{H}_3] \), was synthesized and its surfactant-like amphiphilic properties, represented by the formation of bilayer vesicles, were studied in polar solvents. The vesicle size decreases with both decreasing hybrid concentration and with increasing polarity of the solvent, independently. The self-assembly behavior of this hybrid can be controlled by introducing different counterions into the acetonitrile solutions. The addition of ZnCl\(_2\) and NaI can cause a gradual decrease and increase of vesicular sizes, respectively. Tetraalkylammonium bromide is found to disassemble the vesicle assemblies. Moreover, the original counterions of the hybrid can be replaced with protons, resulting in pH-dependent formation of vesicles in aqueous solutions. The hybrid surfactant can further form micro-needle structures in aqueous solutions upon addition of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions.

Introduction

Polyoxometalates (POMs) are a large group of anionic metal oxide clusters with varied topologies, sizes, and charge densities, composed of early-transition-metal ions in high oxidation states and oxo ligands.[1] POMs have been widely studied for their applications in the development of magnetic and photo-electronic materials, catalysts, and medicines.[1–2] POMs are also used in industry as catalysts and electrode materials.[3] In recent years, the self-assembly behavior of POMs has received continuous interest, because it helps to incorporate POMs into nano-devices with desired morphology and functionality, which consequently expands the applicability of POMs.[4]

Various methods are available to assemble POMs into nano- and micro-structures. As a well-developed protocol, supramolecular interaction-driven self-assembly, including coordination and hydrogen bonding, has been used to obtain oligomers of POMs,[5] POM-based nanocages,[6] nanorods,[7] and 3D-frameworks.[8] Due to the macroionic feature of POM anions, counterion-mediated self-assembly leads to the formation of hollow, spherical “blackberry” structures in solutions as well as monolayers of close-packed POM clusters on surfaces.[4a–c,9] Self-assembly of POMs based on solvophobic interactions has also been achieved by using surfactant-encapsulated POMs[10] and/or POM–organic hybrids.[11] In the latter approach, several types of POM hybrids with different molecular architectures (dumbbells, POMs functionalized with single or double alkyl chains, etc.) have been successfully explored for their amphiphilic properties in solution and at interfaces.[11–12] Therefore, these POM-based hybrids can be considered as unique types of surfactants with bulky polar head groups.

So far, hybrids containing several types of POM clusters have been explored. Anderson-type POMs functionalized with two long alkyl chains were found to form bilayer vesicle structures in acetonitrile/water mixed solvents, and reverse vesicle structures in acetonitrile/toluene mixed solvents.[13] The vesicle size can be tuned by solvent composition. Moreover, the vesicles of a Lindqvist hexavanadate-based hybrid surfactant were found to demonstrate interesting fluorescence properties associated with the self-assembly process.[10] The surfactants with Keggin-type POM as polar head groups were found by Polarz et al. to be able to self-as-

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semble into micelles and lyotropic phases.\textsuperscript{[11]} The surfactants were later observed to self-assemble into a hexagonal lattice at the air/water interface.\textsuperscript{[11]} However, the research in this area has only just started and is still far from achieving the aim of rationally controlling the self-assembly process of hybrids by designing their architectures to facilitate their applications. One important POM-type lacking detailed studies as a polar head group in single-cluster hybrid surfactants is the Dawson cluster. Earlier studies on single Dawson-based hybrids were carried out mainly on bulk samples and/or at interfaces, leaving their detailed solution behavior unexplored.\textsuperscript{[14]} Herein, we report the synthesis of a single Dawson-cluster-based organic-inorganic hybrid and its concentration-, polarity-, counterion-, and pH-dependent self-assembly behaviors in solution, determined by using laser light scattering (LLS), electron microscopy, and \textsuperscript{1}H NMR techniques.

**Results and Discussion**

Due to the existence of symmetrical functional positions on the surfaces of Anderson, Lindqvist and Keggin clusters, the hybrid surfactants containing such polar head groups usually have two alkyl tails.\textsuperscript{[11–13]} However, the two caps of the substituted Dawson cluster, [P\textsubscript{2}V\textsubscript{3}W\textsubscript{15}O\textsubscript{62}]\textsuperscript{9–}, are asymmetrical, with the vanadate cap comparatively more reactive than the tungstate one. Therefore, it is possible to synthesize single-tailed hybrids based on this cluster. Similar to the synthesis of Dawson-based dumbbell molecules,\textsuperscript{[15]} the organic ligand L\textsuperscript{1} with a 15-carbon alkyl chain and tris(hydroxymethyl)amidomethane moiety was initially synthesized and then reacted with [P\textsubscript{2}V\textsubscript{3}W\textsubscript{15}O\textsubscript{62}]\textsuperscript{9–} to obtain the target molecule ((C\textsubscript{4}H\textsubscript{9})\textsubscript{4}N)\textsubscript{5}H[\text{H}\text{P}\text{W}\text{O}\text{R}]\cdot\text{Ds} with a 15-carbon alkyl chain and tris(hydroxymethyl)amidomethane moiety was initially synthesized and then reacted with [P\textsubscript{2}V\textsubscript{3}W\textsubscript{15}O\textsubscript{62}]\textsuperscript{9–} to obtain the target molecule ((C\textsubscript{4}H\textsubscript{9})\textsubscript{4}N)\textsubscript{5}H[\text{H}\text{P}\text{W}\text{O}\text{R}]\cdot\text{Ds}·\text{TBA}·\text{Ds} acetone solution at 30°C. Dynamic-light scattering (DLS) and SLS were applied to determine the hydrodynamic radius of the vesicle structure from the 0.5 mg mL\textsuperscript{−1} acetone solution depending on the concentration. c) DLS results of 0.5 (●) and 0.03 (○) mg mL\textsuperscript{−1} TBA-Ds acetone solution at 30°C scattering angle. d) TEM images of the vesicle structure from the 0.5 mg mL\textsuperscript{−1} TBA-Ds in acetone solution.

![Figure 2](image-url)

**Figure 2.** a) Scattered intensities at 90° scattering angle of the TBA-Ds in acetone at different concentrations. b) Hydrodynamic radius of the formed vesicle structures in the TBA-Ds acetone solution depending on the concentration. c) DLS results of 0.5 (●) and 0.03 (○) mg mL\textsuperscript{−1} TBA-Ds acetone solution at 30°C scattering angle. d) TEM images of the vesicle structure from the 0.5 mg mL\textsuperscript{−1} TBA-Ds in acetone solution.

Figure 1. The synthesis of the surfactant with Dawson-type POMs as polar head group. Polyhedron color code: W = grey; P = black; V = white.
concentration is raised from 0.02 to 0.5 mg mL$^{-1}$ (Figure 2b).

**Effect of solvent polarity**: For solutions with a given POM-hybrid concentration, the vesicle size can be tuned by adjusting the solvent polarity. Solutions of 0.02 mg mL$^{-1}$ TBA-Ds in pure acetone, pure acetonitrile, and acetone/water mixed solvents containing 95:5, 85:15, 65:35, and 50:50 vol% of acetone/water, respectively, were prepared. The vesicle sizes measured by DLS and TEM (Figure 3) showed a linear relationship with the inverse of the dielectric constant of the solvent. Data of Dawson-based surfactant are represented by $\bullet$, whereas $\blacksquare$ represents that of hexavanadate-based surfactant (V$_6$ surfactant). b) TEM images of the vesicle structure formed by TBA-Ds in the mixture of water/acetone (1:1) with a proposed model for the bilayer structure.

The vesicle size of [V$_6$] surfactant showed similar dependence on the solvent polarity, but with a much more negative slope than that of TBA-Ds (Figure 3a), which could be related to the less negative charge of [V$_6$]~$^-$~ (−2) compared with the TBA-Ds (−6). The counterion dissociation is controlled by factors, such as static charge interaction, solvent polarity, and solvation of ions. Static-charge force is proportional to the number of charges of the ions and thus, TBA could be easier to diffuse away from the surface of the [V$_6$] polar head groups of the surfactant than from Dawson clusters (TBA-Ds). Therefore, the effective charge on the [V$_6$] surfactant increases more significantly when the solvent polarity increases, which finally results in a more negative slope in Figure 3a. For the [V$_6$] surfactant, vesicles could only be observed when 20–35 vol% of water was added to its acetone solution. However, due to the high negative charge (~6) and much larger polar head group, TBA-Ds can form vesicle structures in less polar solvents, such as pure acetone.

**Effect of counterions**: Counterions play a critical role in colloidal systems and biological systems, such as the folding of RNA molecules, the formation of virus capsid structures, and in the stabilization of biological macromolecules. Due to their high charge density and hydrophilic nature, POMs exhibit strong counterion-dependent self-assembly, catalytic behavior, and stability. In particular, counterion distribution around hydrophilic macromolecules and selective monovalent cation association and exchange around Keplerate POM macromolecules in dilute aqueous solutions are unique and directly related to their self-assembly processes. On the other hand, counterions can also affect the behavior of common surfactants in aqueous solution at air/solution interfaces or at solid/solution interfaces and in the micelle-to-vesicle transition processes. Therefore, the effect of counterions on the self-assembly of POM-containing hybrids is an interesting avenue, worth further investigation.

TBA-Ds is not soluble in water, but soluble in polar organic solvents, such as acetone and acetonitrile. Different salts, ZnCl$_2$, CuCl$_2$, NaI, tetrabutylammonium iodide (TBA-I), and dodecyltrimethylammonium bromide (DTMA-Br), which are soluble in acetonitrile, were added to acetonitrile solutions of TBA-Ds, respectively, to study the role of the counterions on the vesicle formation and vesicular sizes. The vesicle size decreased gradually with increasing concentration of ZnCl$_2$. Interestingly, the vesicle size remains unchanged at first upon addition of NaI, but gradually increases when the NaI concentration exceeds 0.03 mg mL$^{-1}$ (Figure 5a). DOSY measurements indicated that the addition of NaI increased the diffusion coefficient (D) of TBA cations (without NaI, D = 1.386 × 10$^{-9}$ m$^2$s$^{-1}$; with 0.1 mg mL$^{-1}$ NaI, D = 2.019 × 10$^{-9}$ m$^2$s$^{-1}$), suggesting that the additional counterions replace the original TBA counterions around the Dawson clusters and subsequently release TBA cations into the solution. ZnCl$_2$, which is quite solvated in acetonitrile, prefers coordinating to the terminal.
or bridging oxo ligands on the surface of the Dawson clusters, forcing the polar domains to be exposed to the solvent environment, which in turn increases the curvature of the vesicle, that is, the vesicle size becomes smaller. Upon the addition of NaI, on the other hand, the sodium ions contribute to shielding the high negative charges of the polar head groups from each other, and thus reduce the repulsion between the polar heads on the surface of the vesicle. The curvature of the vesicle decreases, and as a result, the vesicle size increases. The same argument can be used to explain the formation of larger vesicles from H-Ds ($R_h = 110 \text{ nm}$), compared with vesicles obtained from TBA-Ds ($R_h = 75 \text{ nm}$), both in acetonitrile.

The additions of CuCl$_2$, TBA-I, or DTMA-Br show no obvious effect on the vesicle size as those cations are not able to replace the TBA cations that surround the polar Dawson clusters. However, TBA-I and DTMA-Br were observed to cause the disassembly of the vesicles, and this is confirmed by the fact that the scattered intensities from corresponding solutions drop increasingly, when more of these salts were added (Figure 5b). Further, addition of TBA-I and DTMA-Br does not liberate the original TBA counterions, but results in a gradual accumulation of the hydrophobic cations around the hydrophilic Dawson clusters, causing a decrease in the hybrid molecule’s amphiphilic nature. The TBA counterions dissociate the vesicle structures faster than DTMA, possibly due to the comparatively smaller volume of the TBA cations, which allows a larger amount of TBA cations to move closer to the POM, compared with the larger DTMA cations.

**Effect of pH:** pH-sensitive vesicle structures are important for applications in sensing, imaging, and drug-delivery systems. [21] [Mo$_7$Fe$_3$], a POM macromolecule, showed pH-controlled deprotonation in aqueous environment (like a weak acid) and resulted in pH-dependent assembled “blackberry” sizes. [22] H-Ds is water soluble, and its Dawson cluster polar-head group behaves like a nanoacid, negative charges of which can be tuned by changing the pH of the solution.

The pH of the 1.0 mgmL$^{-1}$ aqueous solution of H-Ds is 2.99, corresponding to the release of approximately four protons per Dawson cluster. Vesicle structures with $R_h$ of about 67 nm were observed from this solution by light-scattering experiments. Interestingly, the $R_h$ of the vesicle structures gradually decreased to 64 nm at pH 5, whereas the $R_h$ increased to 81 nm at pH 1.5. A plateau area appeared from pH 5 to 9 with $R_h$ of about 64 nm. However, $R_h$ value decreased sharply to 38 nm, when pH was changed from 9 to 12 (Figure 6b). Further experiments indicated that the pH-dependent self-assembly process can be done reversibly.

The increase of the pH value leads to further deprotonation of the polar head groups, which consequently increases their net charge. Therefore, the repulsion between the polar heads of the hybrids in the aggregates becomes stronger, resulting in significantly larger curvature of the vesicles, that is, smaller size. The vesicles from the H-Ds hybrids and the “blackberry” structures formed by POM macroions showed the same pH-dependent self-assembly behavior. [22] However, the driving forces for the two aggregates are different. It is the solvophobic interaction that controls the assembly of the H-Ds hybrid surfactant, whilst the counterion-mediated attractive forces and the hydrogen-bonding interactions are the major factors for the “blackberry” formation.

The addition of divalent counterions to an aqueous solution of the H-Ds hybrid caused a decrease in the stability of the self-assembled structures. When 20 μL of 0.02 mgmL$^{-1}$ CaCl$_2$ aqueous solution was added into a 5 mL aqueous solution of the H-Ds hybrid ($\approx 0.2 \text{ mgmL}^{-1}$), the solution became cloudy, and the formation of a large amount of uniform microneedle-like structures was observed. SEM results indicated that the length of the needles is approximately 320 μm, and the diameter of the cross section is approximately 2.7 μm, which is quite similar to the assemblies observed for Anderson-based surfactant on silicon substrate [23] (Figure 7). The microneedle structures showed high contrast.

**Figure 5.** a) The plot of hydrodynamic radius versus the concentration of added salt. Circle = NaI; square = ZnCl$_2$. b) The plot of the reduced scattered intensity at 90° scattering angle versus the concentration of added salt. • = TBA-I; ● = TMDA-Br.

**Figure 6.** a) DLS results of H-Ds aqueous solution at pH 1.5 (●) and pH 12 (●) at 90° scattering angle; b) The plot of hydrodynamic radii of vesicles versus pH of the hybrid aqueous solution.

**Figure 7.** a) SEM image of the microneedle structures. b) Zoom-in image of one needle.
from the iron substrate under SEM mode, suggesting that the polar head groups should be on the surface of the microstructures. Known as the “salting out effect”, the addition of Ca$^{2+}$ ions led to stronger interaction among the individual hybrids and their assemblies, which eventually destroyed the vesicles and rearranged the hybrids into highly ordered solid structures with specific orientation.

**Conclusion**

An organic–inorganic hybrid surfactant with the Dawson-type POM cluster acting as the polar head group has been synthesized; it is able to self-assemble into vesicle structures in polar solvents. The size of the vesicles can be adjusted by hybrid concentration and the solvent polarity. In organic polar solvent, the vesicle formation and their corresponding characteristic linewidth, $G(t)$, so obtained, can be used to determine an average apparent translational diffusion coefficient, $D_{app} = kT/\eta d^2$. The hydrodynamic radius $R_h$ is related to $D$ by the Stokes–Einstein equation: $R_h = kT/(6\eta D)$, in which $k$ is the Boltzmann constant, and $\eta$ is the viscosity of the solvent at temperature $T$. From DLS measurements, we can obtain the particle-size distribution in solution from a plot of $G(t)$ versus $R_h$. The $R_h$ of the particles is obtained by extrapolating $R_h$ to zero scattering angle. The normalized distribution function of the characteristic linewidth, $G(t)$, so obtained, can be used to determine an average apparent translational diffusion coefficient, $D_{app} = G(t)/q^2$. The hydrodynamic radius $R_h$ is related to $D$ by the Stokes–Einstein equation: $R_h = kT/(6\eta D)$, in which $k$ is the Boltzmann constant, and $\eta$ is the viscosity of the solvent at temperature $T$. From DLS measurements, we can obtain the particle-size distribution in solution from a plot of $G(t)$ versus $R_h$. The $R_h$ of the particles is obtained by extrapolating $R_h$ to zero scattering angle.

**Experimental Section**

**Sample preparation:** Complex TBA$_3$H$_2$P$_2$V$_3$W$_{15}$O$_62$ was synthesized according to the previous literature. The details of the synthesis and characterization of organic ligand L$^3$ are listed in the Supporting Information. TBA$_3$H$_2$P$_2$V$_3$W$_{15}$O$_62$ (1.0 g, 0.19 mmol) was dissolved in MeCN (30 mL), then L$^3$ (0.107 g, 0.3 mmol) was added to the solution. The reaction mixture was heated at reflux for 6 days in the dark. The resulting yellow solution was filtered and dried overnight under vacuum, and recrystallized from acetonitrile by ether diffusion. Yield: 0.90 g (0.16 mmol, 81.4 %, based on the theoretical amount of POM). FTIR (KBr): 3444 (w), 2960 (m), 2929 (m), 2873 (m), 1483 (m), 1465 (w), 1379, 1083 (s), 1064, 946 (s), 906 (s), 887 (s), 788 (s), 786 (w), 719 cm$^{-1}$ (s). MS (ESI; CH$_2$CN): m/z: 2621.7 [TBA$_4$DS]$^-$, 1666.7 [TBA$_3$DS]$^-$, 1586.5 [TBA$_2$HDS]$^-$; elemental analysis calculated (%) for C$_{139}$H$_{290}$N$_{20}$O$_{32}$P$_2$V$_3$W$_{15}$O$_{62}$: C, 72.42; H, 4.47, N 1.71; found: C, 72.50, H, 4.65, N 1.80.

**Static light scattering:** A commercial Brookhaven Instrument LLS spectrometer equipped with a solid-state laser operating at $\lambda = 532$ nm was used for measurement of both SLS and DLS. SLS experiments were performed at scattering angles ($\theta$) between 20 and 100$^\circ$ at 2$^\circ$ intervals. However, due to the large fluctuations in scattered intensities at low scattering angles, we removed the data from 20–40$^\circ$ in the final analysis. Derived from Rayleigh–Gans–Debye equation [25], partial Zimm plot was used to analyze the SLS data to obtain the radius of gyration ($\overline{R}_g$). The partial Zimm plot stems from the following approximate formula: $1/\beta = C(1+R_0/q^2\beta^2)$, in which $R_0$ is determined from the slope and the intercept of a plot of $1/\beta$ versus $q^2$.

**Dynamic light scattering:** DLS measures the intensity–intensity time correlation function by means of a BI-9800AT multichannel digital correlator. The field correlation function $g(t)$ was analyzed by the constrained regularized CONTIN method [26] to obtain information on the distribution of the characteristic line width $\Gamma$. The normalized distribution function of the characteristic linewidth, $G(t)$, so obtained, can be used to determine an average apparent translational diffusion coefficient, $D_{app} = kT/\eta d^2$. The hydrodynamic radius $R_h$ is related to $D$ by the Stokes–Einstein equation: $R_h = kT/(6\eta D)$, in which $k$ is the Boltzmann constant, and $\eta$ is the viscosity of the solvent at temperature $T$. From DLS measurements, we can obtain the particle-size distribution in solution from a plot of $G(t)$ versus $R_h$. The $R_h$ of the particles is obtained by extrapolating $R_h$ to zero scattering angle. The normalized distribution function of the characteristic linewidth, $G(t)$, so obtained, can be used to determine an average apparent translational diffusion coefficient, $D_{app} = G(t)/q^2$. The hydrodynamic radius $R_h$ is related to $D$ by the Stokes–Einstein equation: $R_h = kT/(6\eta D)$, in which $k$ is the Boltzmann constant, and $\eta$ is the viscosity of the solvent at temperature $T$. From DLS measurements, we can obtain the particle-size distribution in solution from a plot of $G(t)$ versus $R_h$. The $R_h$ of the particles is obtained by extrapolating $R_h$ to zero scattering angle.

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