

Unraveling the ground state and excited state structures and dynamics of hydrated Ce^{3+} ions by experiment and theory.

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The 4f-5d transition of Ce^{3+} provides favorable optical spectroscopic properties such as high sensitivity and quantum yield, making it a most important dopant for lanthanide-activated phosphors. A key for the design of these materials with fine-tuned color emission is a fundamental understanding of the Ce^{3+} ground state and excited state structures and the dynamics of energy transfer. Such data is also crucial for deriving coordination chemistry information on Ce^{3+} ions in different chemical environments directly from their optical spectra. Here, by combining 4f-5d absorption and luminescence spectroscopy and highly accurate quantum chemical electronic structure calculations, we study the interplay between the local structure of Ce^{3+} in aqueous solutions and in crystalline hydrates, the strengths of Ce–O/Cl interactions with aqua and chloride ligands, and the resulting absorption and luminescence spectra. Experimental and theoretical absorption spectra of $[\text{Ce}(\text{H}_2\text{O})_9]^{3+}$ and $[\text{Ce}(\text{H}_2\text{O})_8]^{3+}$ with defined geometries provide a means for analyzing the equilibrium between these species in aqueous solution as a function of temperature ($K(298) = 0.20 \pm 0.03$), while analyses of spectra of different aqua-chloro complexes reveal that eight-coordinate aqua-chloro complexes are present in solution at high chloride concentration. An intriguing feature in these systems concerns the large observed Stokes shifts, 5500–10100 cm^{-1} . By exploring the excited state potential energy surfaces with relativistic multireference calculations, we show that these shifts result from significant geometrical relaxation processes in the lowest $5d^1$ excited state. For $[\text{*Ce}(\text{H}_2\text{O})_8]^{3+}$ the relaxation gives shorter Ce–O bonds and a Stokes shift of $\sim 5500 \text{ cm}^{-1}$, while for $[\text{*Ce}(\text{H}_2\text{O})_9]^{3+}$ the lowest $5d^1$ state results in a spontaneous dissociation of a water molecule and a Stokes shift of $\sim 10100 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. These findings are important for the understanding and optimization of luminescence properties of cerium complexes.

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