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Near-enantiopure trimerization of 9-Ethynylphenanthrene on a chiral metal surface

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ABSTRACT: Enantioselectivity in heterogeneous catalysis strongly depends on the chirality transfer between catalyst surface and all reactants, intermediates, and the product along the reaction pathway. Here we report the first enantioselective on-surface synthesis of molecular structures from an initial racemic mixture and without the need of enantiopure modifier molecules. The reaction consists of a trimerization via an unidentified bonding motif of prochiral 9-ethynylphenanthrene (9-EP) upon annealing to 500 K on the chiral Pd₃-terminated PdGa{111} surfaces into essentially enantiopure, homochiral 9-EP propellers. The observed behavior strongly contrasts the reaction of 9-EP on the chiral Pd₁-terminated PdGa{111} surfaces, where 9-EP monomers that are in nearly enantiopure configuration, dimerize without enantiomeric excess. Our findings demonstrate strong chiral recognition and a significant ensemble effect in the PdGa system, hence highlighting the huge potential of chiral intermetallic compounds for enantioselective synthesis and underlining the importance to control the catalytically active sites at the atomic level.

The pronounced enantiospecific physiological effects of chiral molecules, requires asymmetric synthesis, e.g., in pharmaceutical or food industry. Homogeneous catalysis is most widely used to obtain enantioselective synthesis via chirality transfer directly from the catalyst's organic ligand(s) despite the fact that it involves tedious separation, elaborate recycling, and its restriction to a limited temperature range.^[1-3] Difficulties in separation and recycling can be alleviated by moving from homogeneous to heterogeneous catalysis.

Rational engineering of such catalysts requires fundamental understanding of the enantiospecific reactant-catalyst interaction, reaction mechanism, and kinetics. This can be achieved by investigating the interaction of molecules (educts and products) with the catalyst's surface on the atomic and molecular level and under idealized conditions, i.e., using single crystal surfaces in ultra-high vacuum (UHV).^[4,5] For this purpose, achiral surfaces are commonly rendered chiral by using molecular modifiers.^[6-13] This approach is marred by the need of enantiopure modifier molecules, low thermal stability, and increased complexity emerging from molecule-molecule interactions. The usage of chiral metal surfaces promises to considerably reduce complexity and increase thermal stability. Such surfaces were created by cutting achiral single crystals along low-symmetry, i.e., high Miller-index, directions.^[14,15] Although the resulting surfaces exhibit only low densities of chiral centers, enantioselective decomposition of, e.g., chiral tartaric and aspartic acid was reported on Cu(643)^{R/S}.^[16,17]

Low-index surfaces of intrinsically chiral metals offer the advantage of exhibiting orders of magnitude more chiral centers. However, today only surfaces of chiral PdGa have been suffi-

ciently well characterized to allow the investigation of enantiospecific molecule-surface interactions, resultant molecular structure, and their formation kinetics.^[18,19] Owing to its non-centrosymmetric nature,^[20] PdGa exists as two enantiomorphs, PdGa:A and PdGa:B, and all its bulk truncated surfaces are chiral.^[19] Here, we focus on the structurally dissimilar three-fold symmetric surfaces PdGa:A(111)/PdGa:B($\bar{1}\bar{1}\bar{1}$) and PdGa:A($\bar{1}\bar{1}\bar{1}$)/PdGa:B(111), of which the former are terminated by single, isolated Pd atoms, referred to as Pd₁, while the latter by isolated Pd trimers, accordingly denoted Pd₃ (Fig. 1a).^[21] Because of this difference in combination with similar electronic properties, identical symmetry group, and the same lattice parameters,^[21] PdGa{111} surfaces are ideal to disentangle the influence of geometric and electronic, i.e., ensemble and ligand, effects in enantioselective heterogeneous catalysis.^[22-24]

The chirality of Pd₁ manifests itself in enantioselective adsorption at 300 K with an enantiomeric excess $ee = 100\% \cdot \frac{|R-S|}{R+S} = 96\% \pm 2\%$ for prochiral 9-Ethynylphenanthrene (9-EP, Fig. 1b).^[25] However, no enantioselective reaction between molecules could be demonstrated on that surface.^[25]

Here, we study the near-enantiopure trimerization from an initial racemic mixture of 9-EP on the Pd₃-terminated PdGa{111} surface by scanning tunneling probe microscopy (STM), CO-sensitized non-contact atomic force microscopy (nc-AFM), and density functional theory (DFT) calculations.

Deposition of sub-monolayer coverages of 9-EP onto the PdGa:A($\bar{1}\bar{1}\bar{1}$)Pd₃ (A: Pd₃) surface kept at 300 K results in a homogeneous coverage of well isolated molecules when imaged at 5 K (Fig. 1c). Analysis of adsorption site and molecule orientation reveals that the vast majority of 9-EP are present in two

disparate configurations, each appearing in three symmetrically equivalent geometries. Combining high-resolution STM and nc-AFM images, the nature of these two distinct 9-EP configurations can be assigned to R and S surface enantiomorphs of the molecule (Fig. 1d). The STM signature of the S configuration is an elongated protrusion (green arrows in Fig. 1d) attributed to the alkyne group pointing towards the right of the phenanthrene backbone. Conversely, the adsorption configuration of the R surface-enantiomer leads to a dot like imaging of the alkyne group (blue arrows in Fig. 1d).

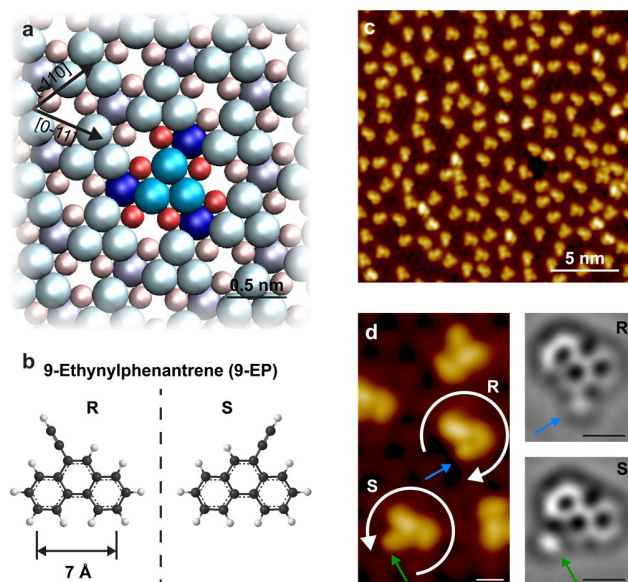


Figure 1 | (a) Surface structure of PdGa:A($\bar{1}\bar{1}\bar{1}$)Pd₃ with the chirality of the surface highlighted in saturated colors for one Pd trimer (top layer Pd₃ bright blue, $z=0$ nm) and its neighbors: second layer (Ga₃ red, $z=-85$ pm) and third layer (Pd₁ dark blue, $z=-161$ pm). (b) molecular structure of prochiral 9-Ethynylphenanthrene (9-EP), which appears in two distinguishable surface enantiomers R and S when restricted to a planar configuration. (c) STM image of 9-EP deposited at 300 K on PdGa:A($\bar{1}\bar{1}\bar{1}$)Pd₃ (bias voltage $V_B = 20$ mV, tunneling current $I_T = 1$ nA). (d) STM image (left; $V_B = 20$ mV, $I_T = 10$ nA) and Gaussian-Laplace filtered nc-AFM images (right) of R and S enantiomers.

Deposition at 100 K and 300 K substrate temperature results in basically identical adsorption configurations, as evidenced in Figs. 2a-b. In both cases, the adsorbates are R and S enantiomers with equal abundance (100 K: $ee = 4\% \pm 5\%$; 300 K: $ee = 4\% \pm 4\%$). In some cases, S enantiomers seem to have some co-adsorbate, most likely CO, attached (labelled S_{co}). Upon annealing to 350 K an $ee = 19\% \pm 5\%$ in favor of R evolves (Fig. 2c). We therefore conclude that (i) the energy barrier for S to R interconversion can be overcome above 300 K, and (ii) R 9-EP is energetically preferred over S 9-EP on A:Pd₃. Concomitantly, the occurrence of S_{co} is reduced to virtually zero due to CO desorption,^[26] and a new species labelled R' (Fig. 3b), representing the same surface enantiomorph as R but being adsorbed on a different site, emerges in low numbers.

We attribute the moderate R enantiomeric excess on A:Pd₃ to dissimilar lattice sites of the R and S alkyne groups, resulting in slight adsorption energy differences. Whereas the alkyne group peripherally overlaps with one Pd atom of the substrate trimer for R, it completely covers the Pd trimer for S. The phenanthrene backbone exhibits in both cases an identical adsorption

configuration (Fig. 3a). This difference in adsorption geometry will become decisive in the formation of chiral 9-EP oligomers, as we will show in the following.

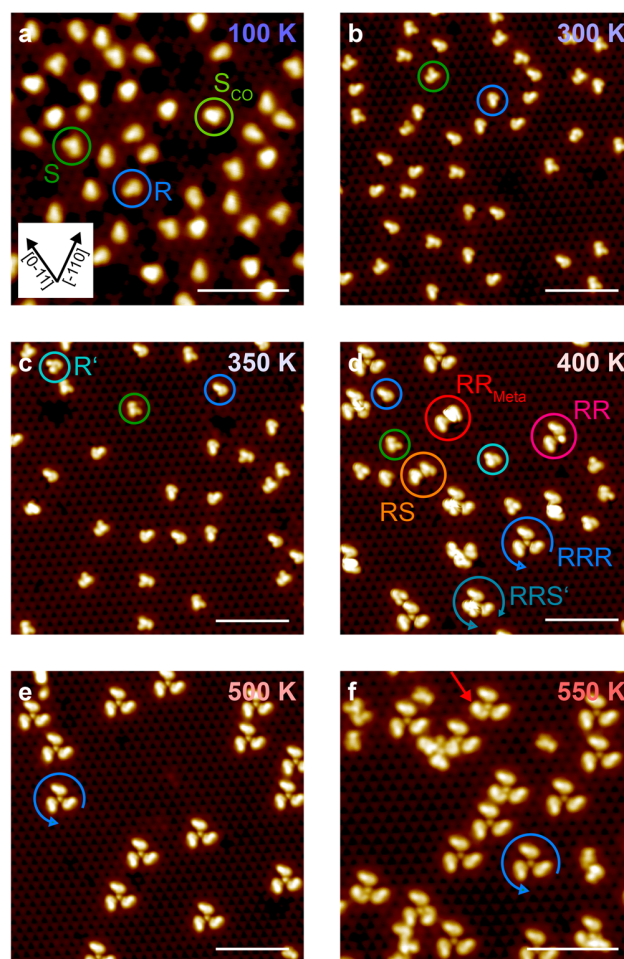


Figure 2 | STM images of 9-EP on PdGa:A($\bar{1}\bar{1}\bar{1}$)Pd₃. As deposited at (a) 100 K and (b) 300 K. Annealing series of 9-EP on PdGa:A($\bar{1}\bar{1}\bar{1}$)Pd₃ to (c) 350 K, (d) 400 K, (e) 500 K, and (f) 550 K. STM settings: (a) $V_B = 50$ mV, $I_T = 50$ pA; (b)-(f) $V_B = 20$ mV, $I_T = 1$ nA. 9-EP/PdGa:A($\bar{1}\bar{1}\bar{1}$)Pd₃ structures are labelled according to the nomenclature in the text. The red arrow in (f) indicates an exemplary 9-EP integrated in a trimer with disintegrated alkyne group. All scale bars correspond to 5 nm.

Upon annealing at 400 K, 9-EP dimers and trimers are forming (Fig. 2d), of which 92% exhibit well defined configurations that can be classified into the 5 species shown in Figs. 3c-g. We will refer to 9-EP trimers as propellers based on their appearance. A common feature of all 9-EP oligomers is that they are linked with their alkyne group positioned on the same Pd trimer, facing each other. Additionally, several peculiarities related to the participation of R and S enantiomers in the oligomers are recognized. First, the R enantiomers in all coupled structures are on identical adsorption sites as the isolated R (except for one 9-EP contained in the RR_{Meta} dimer in Fig. 3d). Second, S' in a propeller exhibits a different positional and orientational configuration as the isolated S. Third, the entire absence of homochiral S or S' dimers and propellers. Without enantioselectivity, one expects a statistical propeller occurrence of

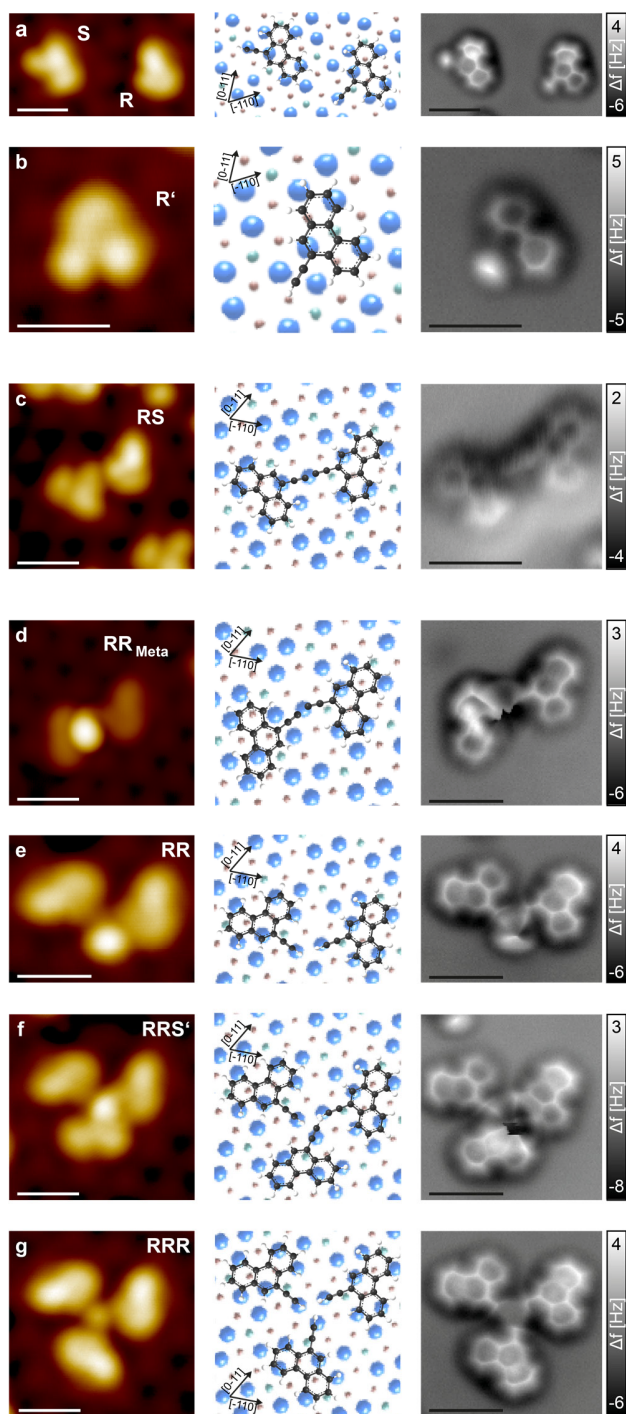


Figure 3 | STM image (left) with the adsorption configuration determined by overlaying the STM images with the atomic surface structure (center) and the corresponding nc-AFM images (right) for (a) R, S and (b) R' monomer, the (c) RS, (d) RR_{Meta} and (e) RR dimer, and the (f) RRS' and (g) RRR trimers. STM settings (a)-(b), (d)-(g): $V_B = 50$ mV, $I_T = 10$ pA; (c) $V_B = 20$ mV, $I_T = 2$ nA. All scale bars represent 1 nm.

$RRR:RRS':RS'S':S'S'S' = 1/8:3/8:3/8:1/8$. Instead, we observe relative abundances of $6/8:2/8:1/100:0$ (459 monomer

units analyzed). This implies a strong bias towards the incorporation of R 9-EP in propellers, the probability amounts to roughly 90%, and yields an RRR enantiomeric excess of $ee_{RRR} = 100\% * \frac{\#RRR - \#RRS' - \#RS'S' - \#S'S'S'}{\#RRR + \#RRS' + \#RS'S' + \#S'S'S'} = 49\% \pm 4\%$ at 400 K.

Increasing the annealing temperature to 500 K (Fig. 2e) raises the yield of propellers from around 50% to more than 86% with a corresponding decrease of dimers and monomers. The full temperature dependent development of 9-EP structures and their relative coverage, i.e., the species' coverages normalized to the overall number of 9-EP units, is summarized in Fig. 4. Besides propellers becoming the most abundant species at 500 K, they also evolve into homochiral, enantiopure RRR propellers (Fig. 4b) with ee_{RRR} rising to staggering $97\% \pm 2\%$, which corresponds to a 99.5% probability of a 9-EP in the propeller being in form R. Moreover, RR and RR_{Meta} vanish at 500 K and only RS along with various other unidentified dimer structures with a collective yield of 6% remain.

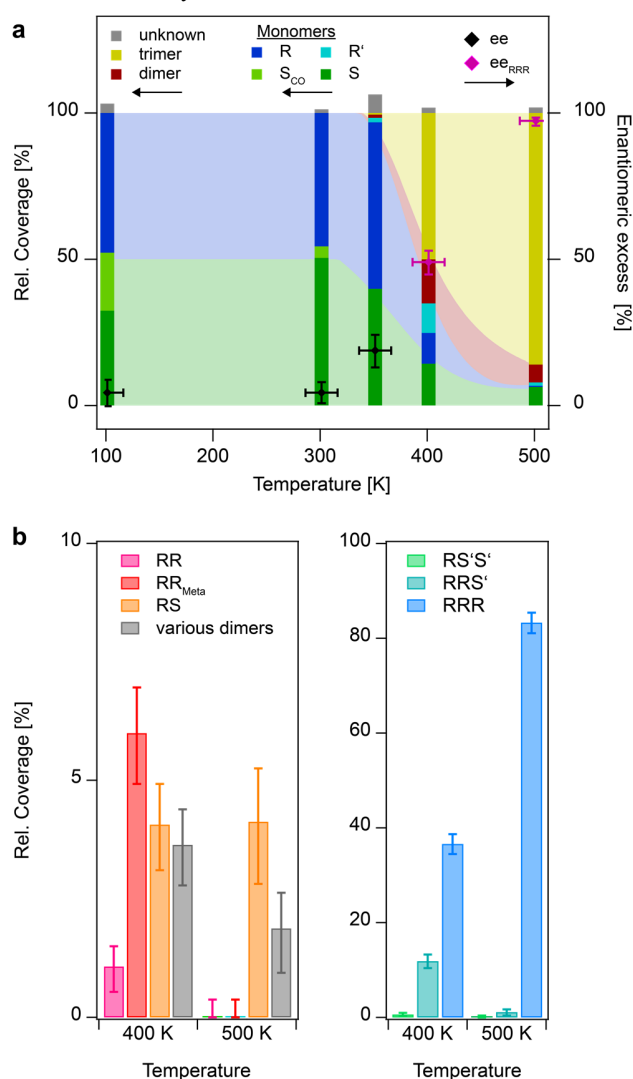


Figure 4 | (a) Color map of the relative coverage of 9-EP monomers, dimers, and trimers together with the enantiomeric excess as function of adsorption/annealing temperature on $PdGa:A(\bar{1}\bar{1}\bar{1})Pd_3$. (b) Relative coverage of various 9-EP dimers and trimers at annealing temperatures 400 K and 500 K.

Annealing to 550 K initiates decomposition of 9-EP, presumably at the alkyl group, as evident from the emergence of propellers with one 9-EP unit closer to the connecting center (Fig. 2f). Therefore, temperatures beyond 500 K have not been considered in our analysis.

Among all 9-EP oligomers, the structural identification of RS dimers presented in Fig. 3c is most straightforward. Their R and S elements must be dehydrogenatively covalently coupled because pristine R and S enantiomers cannot be present in such close proximity due to steric hindrance of their alkyne groups. Our interpretation is supported by the bond distances inferred from nc-AFM and their persistence upon annealing to 500 K (Fig. 4b). This stability contrasts to that of the RR and RR_{Meta} dimers (Figs. 3d-e), which are present at 400 K but vanish upon annealing to 500 K (Fig. 4b). The depletion of RR and RR_{Meta} dimers suggests them to be precursors for 9-EP propellers (Fig. S5). Both dimers are characterized by an apparent connection at the alkyne groups. This connection site shows up as bright protrusion in the STM images (bias dependent), indicating an extended connecting moiety, which, however, cannot be resolved by nc-AFM.

While RRS' exhibits a similarly strong protrusion in STM images as RR and RR_{Meta} dimers, the protrusion of RRR propellers is a less-pronounced, well-defined central dot (Fig. 3f-g; for detailed STM characterization of RRR propellers, see Fig. S3-S4). The corresponding nc-AFM image of RRR (Fig. 3g) is featureless in the center, but displays its R elements like individual R monomers (Fig. 3a). The near-complete absence of RRS' at 500 K implies that this species, alike RR and RR_{Meta} dimers, is a metastable precursor of RRR propellers. The conversion of RRS' into RRR requires the wrong-handed S' incorporated into a propeller to convert into the R configuration.

So far, only the dehydrogenative covalent coupling of RS dimers could be unambiguously deduced. Identification of the RR, RR_{Meta} and RRS' coupling is hampered by their presumably non-planar motif observed in nc-AFM (Figs. 3d-f). For RRR, the central link exhibits a surprisingly featureless nc-AFM signature (Fig. 3g), preventing elucidation of its atomic structure.

As 9-EP on A:Pd₃ is mobile at 300 K (Fig. S6), the oligomers cannot be unspecifically bonded entities held together by weak interactions (e.g., electrostatic), which is corroborated by the low energy gain derived from DFT (Table S1). We rather postulate an activated oligomerization via strong bond formation which is supported by the fact that the trimers are impossible to separate by STM-tip induced manipulation. The likeliest mechanisms are either a [2+2+2] cyclization of alkynes, which has been reported for different molecules on Au(111)^[27-29] and Cu(111)^[30], or a coordination to individual Pd or Ga surface adatoms or to carbon-based fragments. The [2+2+2] cyclization as formation mechanism of the 9-EP propellers can be excluded due to the excessively large spatial separation of the phenanthrene moieties (Fig. S7). Also the coordination of 9-EP molecules to Pd or Ga adatoms has to be discarded as direct evaporation of the respective metals does not aid the expected oligomer formation (Figs. S8-S9). Neither does co-adsorption of benzene stabilize the oligomers as they desorb below 350 K, just like other small carbon-based molecules such as acetylene, ethylene, and CO,^[26,31] nor deliver simulated nc-AFM images of 9-EP coupled via additional central carbon species signatures comparable to the experimental ones (Fig. S10). Therefore, the bonding motif of the 9-EP molecules building homochiral and highly enantioselective 9-EP propellers remains unresolved and

thus limits our discussion of their synthesis to experimental observations.

We have presented a detailed study of the first asymmetric heterogeneous coupling reaction on an intrinsically chiral metal surface, which requires no enantiopure precursor or modifier molecules. Specifically, we investigated the oligomerization of 9-EP on PdGa:A(111)Pd₃. The adsorption of 9-EP monomers as R and S enantiomorphs is governed by the identical configuration of the phenanthrene moiety and the energetic difference only resides in the interaction of the alkyne group with the substrate. This minor difference in the 9-EP adsorption configuration between R and S seems to be the origin of the enantioselective formation of homochiral 9-EP trimers at 500 K with an enantiomeric excess of 97% because the adsorption configuration of each 9-EP unit in the RRR trimer remains exactly the same as for an isolated R monomer.

Owing to the ensemble effect, the temperature evolution of the enantiomeric excess of 9-EP structures and reaction products on PdGa{111}Pd₃ are in stark contrast to those on PdGa{111}Pd₁.^[25] Specifically, whereas on PdGa{111}Pd₃, 9-EP monomers occur in a racemic mixture at 300 K, they appear with an enantiomeric excess of 96% on PdGa{111}Pd₁ due to a lower energy barrier for the conversion between R and S monomers and the enantiospecific van der Waals interaction with the substrate's second layer Ga trimer.^[32] At elevated temperatures, however, all 9-EP molecules form stable dimers on PdGa{111}Pd₁ without enantioselectivity, whereas dimers on PdGa{111}Pd₃ are metastable and primarily intermediates for the homochiral and virtually enantiopure trimerization.

The obvious disparities in reaction pathway, kinetics, and enantioselectivity for the two structurally different PdGa{111} surfaces underline the significance of the ensemble effect and the need for an understanding of molecule-substrate interaction at atomic scales. Moreover, the reported creation of near-enantiopure molecular structures from a racemic mixture of precursor constitutes a significant advancement towards enantioselective heterogeneous catalysis on chiral metallic surfaces.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information.

Detailed description of experimental and calculation methods, and additional STM and DFT simulations (Figures S1-S10, Table S1). This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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Author Contributions

R.W. conceived and initiated the project in collaboration with H.B. and O.G.. S.S. and J.P. performed the measurements under supervision of R.W. and T.D.. S.S. analyzed the experimental

data. A.V.Y. and C.A.P. performed and analyzed DFT simulations. S.S. wrote the manuscript with input from all co-authors.

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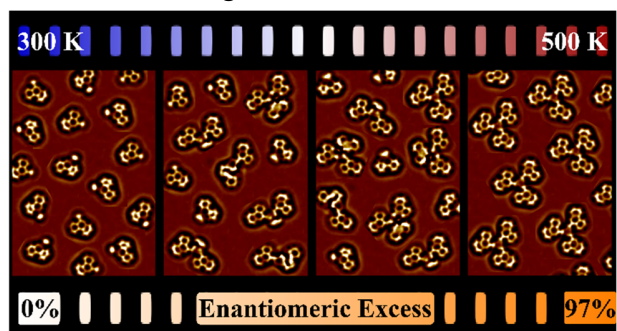
Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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Table of Content Figure

**One surface to rule them all**

Near-enantiopure trimerization of an initial racemic mixture of prochiral molecules proceeds on an intrinsically chiral inter-metallic PdGa{111} surface, which evidences the immense potential of PdGa for asymmetric heterogeneous catalysis.