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Relay-Like Exchange Mechanism through a Spin Radical between TbPc₂ Molecules and Graphene/Ni(111) Substrates

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Abstract

We investigate the electronic and magnetic properties of TbPc₂ single ion magnets adsorbed on a graphene/Ni(111) substrate, by density-functional theory (DFT), *ab-initio* complete active space self-consistent field calculations, and x-ray magnetic circular dichroism (XMCD) experiments. Despite the presence of the graphene decoupling layer a sizable antiferromagnetic coupling between Tb and Ni is observed in the XMCD experiments. The molecule-surface interaction is rationalized by the DFT analysis and is found to follow a relay-like communication pathway, where the radical spin on the organic Pc ligands medi-

ates the interaction between Tb ion and Ni substrate spins. A model Hamiltonian which explicitly takes into account the presence of the spin radical is then developed, and the different magnetic interactions at play being assessed by first-principle calculations and by comparing the calculated magnetization curves with XMCD data. The relay-like mechanism is at the heart of the process through which the spin information contained in the Tb ion is sensed and exploited in carbon-based molecular spintronics devices.

Keywords: molecular magnetism; graphene; spintronics; density functional theory; metal-organic interface

1 Single ion magnets belonging to the family of
2 bis(phthalocyaninato) lanthanide (Ln) double-
3 decker complexes (LnPc_2 , with Pc = phthalocyanine)
4 emerged recently as promising molec-
5 ular spin units, where both the electronic and
6 nuclear spin information can be addressed and,
7 under certain experimental conditions, manip-
8 ulated by external electric and magnetic stim-
9 uli, thus constituting a molecular brick for spin-
10 ionic devices.¹⁻³

11 Among them, TbPc_2 has been so far the most
12 studied molecule, starting from the pioneering
13 work of Ishikawa.^{4,5} In its neutral form, the
14 spin-orbital moment hosted by the f-electrons
15 is flanked by a radical spin $S=1/2$, which de-
16 localizes onto the two Pc ligands. It has been
17 shown that the f magnetic moment in this class
18 of molecules can couple to ferromagnetic and
19 antiferromagnetic surfaces.⁶ These are remark-
20 able findings, if one considers that the Tb ion
21 is shielded by the organic Pc ligands, in con-
22 trast to flat 3d-metal phthalocyanines or por-
23 phyrins,⁷⁻⁹ where the ion is drawn in direct con-
24 tact with the surface.

25 There is a general consensus in considering
26 the magnetic coupling between the f electrons
27 and a substrate/electrode as occurring not sim-
28 ply through space (dipolar). The orbitals of
29 the Pc rings act as a bridge between the f spins
30 and substrate magnetization, allowing for mag-
31 netic exchange. It has been suggested that in
32 order for the localized f-electrons to communi-
33 cate/hybridize with the outer world, here rep-
34 resented by the N and C sp electrons of the
35 Pc rings, an important role is played by the d-
36 electrons of the Ln ions.^{10,11} Early NMR exper-
37 iments¹² provided clear evidences of the pres-
38 ence of an $S=1/2$ radical in polycrystalline sam-
39 ples of YPc_2 , and the interaction between the
40 radical and the f magnetic moment has been
41 clearly demonstrated by comparing the results
42 of the neutral form of TbPc_2 with those of the
43 anionic form $[\text{TbPc}_2]^-[\text{TBA}]^+$ in spintronic
44 devices.³ An unresolved issue is if the radical spin
45 in the Pc rings endures upon deposition on a
46 substrate. Previous analyses have relied on
47 scanning-tunneling spectroscopy (STS) and mi-
48 croscopy (STM) experiments, where the inter-
49 action between the TbPc_2 molecules and non-

50 magnetic, Cu,¹³ Au,¹⁴ carbon nanotubes³ and
51 magnetic, *i.e.* Co,¹⁵ substrates has been stud-
52 ied. The evidence is that only on low interact-
53 ing Au or carbon nanotube surfaces spin polar-
54 ized states at the Pc rings are still present. Yet,
55 the dilemma whether the spin in the Pc rings
56 exists in the form of a self-standing radical or
57 is due to contact interaction with magnetized
58 substrates still remains unsettled. To address
59 this issue, one should ideally have a substrate,
60 which is scarcely reactive, so that the magnetic
properties of the TbPc_2 molecule are preserved,
and yet hosts a net magnetization, leading to a
measurable exchange coupling with the molec-
ular spins.

Here we present a combined theoretical
and experimental investigation of the inter-
action between TbPc_2 molecules and gra-
phene/Ni(111) substrates. By low-temperature
XMCD experiments, we give evidence for
an antiferromagnetic interaction between the
molecule and the substrate, *i.e.* between the Tb
and Ni magnetic moments. Density-functional
theory calculations are carried out for the whole
molecule-substrate system, in order to shed
light on the mechanism behind this interaction,
addressing the charge transfer at the interface.
We observe that, in virtue of the graphene de-
coupling layer, the electron transfer occurring
at the molecule-substrate is reduced, and, al-
though sizable, is such that the radical spin is
preserved. Placing the TbPc_2 molecule in direct
contact with the Ni substrate leads instead to
the destruction of radical, while spin polarized
states are induced at the lower Pc ring by con-
tact interaction. We can thus propose a model
Hamiltonian which takes into account explic-
itly the spin radical, describes the relay-like
spin communication between the 4f electrons
and the magnetized Ni substrate, and repro-
duces the magnetization curves extracted by
XMCD. Furthermore, the model considers the
multi-domain magnetic character of the Ni sin-
gle crystal used in our experiments. Finally, by
multi-configurational Complete Active Space
Self Consistent Field (CASSCF/RASSI-SO)
and DFT calculations we estimate the various
magnetic interactions at play, and discuss them
in light of the existent experimental evidences.

Results

The existence of an exchange coupling between the Tb spins and the Ni magnetization has been demonstrated by experimentally measuring the magnetic properties of TbPc₂ molecules evaporated on a graphene/Ni(111) substrate, which we present hereafter. After preparing the graphene/Ni(111) surface according to the same procedure we have already reported,⁹ we thermally evaporate 0.2-0.3 monolayer of TbPc₂ molecules. Experiments were carried out at the ID8 (now ID32) beamline of the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF) in Grenoble. A schematic view of the experimental conditions can be seen in the inset of Figure 1: the external magnetic field \mathbf{B} was applied parallel to the incident photon beam with an angle Θ with the sample surface ($\Theta = 0^\circ$ defines the normal incidence direction). X-ray Natural Linear Dichroism (XNLD) measurements on the Tb $M_{4,5}$ and N K edges (shown on the Supporting Information) indicate that the TbPc₂ molecules are isolated and flat on the substrate, with the Pc plane parallel to the surface, in agreement with previous works on TbPc₂.^{8,16-21} Figure 1 shows XAS absorption and XMCD spectra at the $M_{4,5}$ absorption edges of Tb taken at $T = 8$ K and $B = 5$ T. In agreement with previous works,^{8,16-21} spectra taken at an angle of $\Theta = 0^\circ$ (a) and $\Theta = 70^\circ$ (b), while displaying the same lineshapes, show a remarkable dependence of the XMCD intensity on the field direction, which is a direct consequence of the strong uniaxial anisotropy of the TbPc₂ molecules.

The magnetization cycles of the TbPc₂ molecules adsorbed on the graphene/Ni(111) surface, extracted measuring the XMCD signal as a function of the external magnetic field, are shown in Figure 2 for a magnetic field applied perpendicular ($\Theta = 0^\circ$) and at grazing ($\Theta = 70^\circ$) incidence. Interestingly, the curve taken at $\Theta = 70^\circ$ displays a kink (see inset in Fig. 2) which is the signature of the antiferromagnetic coupling with the underlying Ni substrate, consistent with what has been recently reported by Lodi Rizzini *et al.*¹⁶ and our group,⁹ when the molecule is directly adsorbed on Ni(111)

substrates. Here, however, the intensity of the coupling is much reduced due to the presence of the graphene interlayer.

In order to unravel the mechanisms behind the molecule-substrate magnetic interaction, we performed DFT calculations, using the Quantum Espresso code²² (computational details are given in the Methods section). In Fig. 3 we sketch the atomic structure of the molecule-substrate interaction region, and highlight the three magnetic units at play, *i.e.* Tb magnetic moment (yellow arrow), organic spin radical (green arrows), and Ni magnetization (blue arrows). The eight f electrons of the Tb ion, according to the Hund's rules, arrange into orbitals as to maximize both the total spin and angular momentum ($S=3$ and $L=3$), which are coupled and aligned parallel to each other due to spin-orbit interaction. The Tb ion acquires a 3+ valence, giving three electrons to the π -conjugate systems of the Pcs, which in turn tend to acquire a $-2e^-$ charge each. The unbalanced electron leads to a spin polarized radical equally distributed, in the gas-phase molecule, on the two Pc rings. The spin density of the gas-phase TbPc₂ molecule is plotted in Figure 4(a), in the case that the Tb and the radical spins are antiferromagnetically coupled to each other. It can be noticed that the spin density on the Pcs is mainly localized on the inner 16 C atoms (on average $0.05 \mu_B/\text{C}$ atom) nearest to the Tb ion, the remanent polarization being on the outer C atoms ($0.005 \mu_B/\text{C}$ atom), while a small negative polarization is observed on the N atoms (about $-0.01 \mu_B/\text{N}$ atom). Finally, the magnetization of the graphene/Ni(111) substrate has to be considered.

Various theoretical and experimental research groups have investigated the structure and magnetic properties of graphene deposited on a surface of Ni(111) and identify, as the more frequent, two possible stacking configurations²³⁻²⁵ labeled as top-fcc (the graphene C atoms alternately place themselves over the atoms of the first and third layer of Ni) and top-bridge (the graphene C atoms lie in a bridge positions between the atoms of the first layer of Ni). In both of them, the bonding between graphene and the Ni(111) surface is primarily due to extended

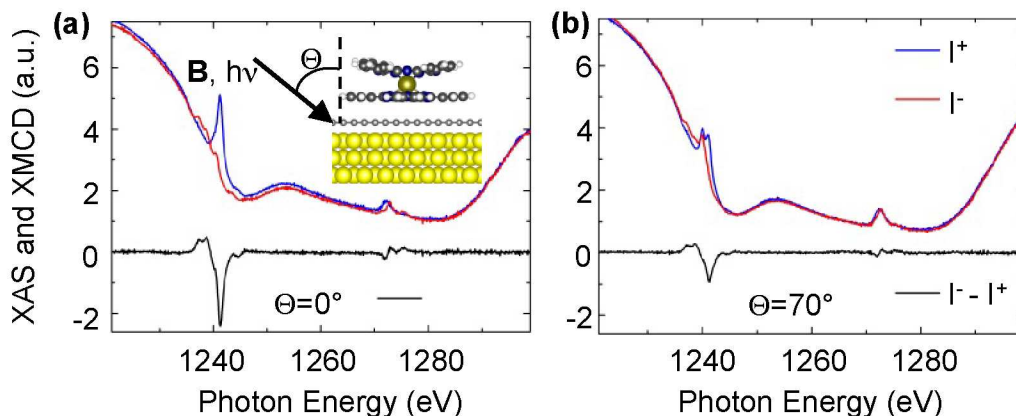


Figure 1: XAS (red and blue, for the two different light polarizations) and XMCD spectra (black) for Tb $M_{4,5}$ edge in TbPc₂/graphene/Ni(111) at $\Theta = 0^\circ$ (a) and $\Theta = 70^\circ$ (b) incidence angles, measured with an applied external field of 5 T.

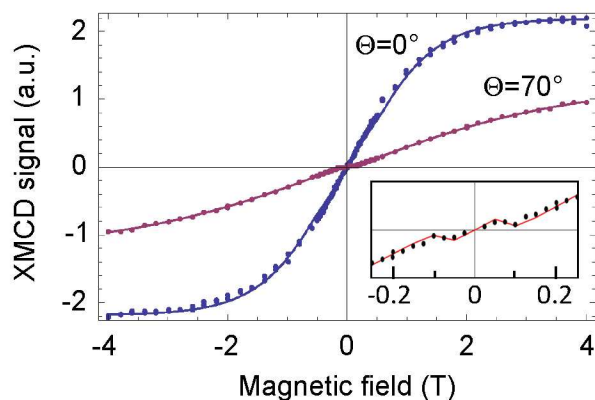


Figure 2: XMCD magnetization of TbPc₂ on the graphene/Ni(111) substrate, for $\Theta = 0^\circ$ (blue dots) and $\Theta = 70^\circ$ (red dots). The lines are the simulated Tb magnetizations using Hamiltonian (1) (see later in the text)). In the inset a zoom-up of the low-field region for the $\Theta = 70^\circ$ case is displayed.

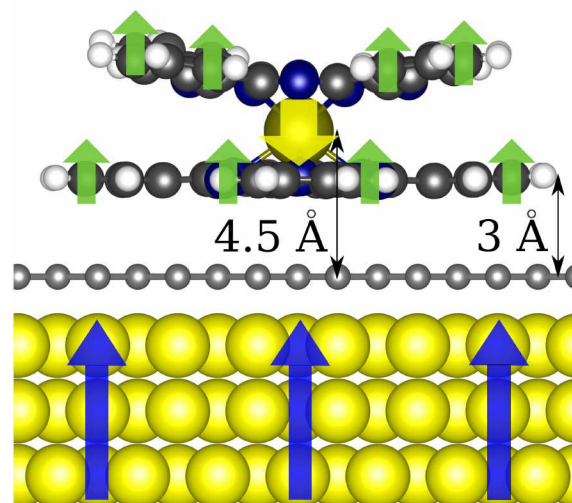


Figure 3: Adsorption geometry of the TbPc₂ on graphene/Ni(111). The C, N, H, are colored dark gray, dark blue and white, respectively, while the Tb ion is in green. The arrows represent the three different spins: the Tb, the radical on the Pcs and the Ni slab, colored yellow, green and blue, respectively. The orientation of the spins is the one attained in the ground state, as calculated by DFT.

1 van der Waals (vdW) interactions, with a binding
 2 distance of ≈ 2.1 Å. In the top-fcc stack-
 3 ing, a small spin polarization (around 0.02-0.03
 4 Bohr magneton in modulus) is induced by the
 5 Ni spins on the graphene layer, with opposite
 6 sign on the two inequivalent C atoms, while in
 7 the top-bridge stacking the spin polarization is
 8 one order of magnitude smaller and of the same
 9 sign on the two C atoms.^{9,26} In the following we
 10 discuss in detail the top-fcc stacking (the most
 11 abundant, *i.e.* $\simeq 65\%$), while results for the
 12 top-bridge stacking are shown in the Support-
 13 ing Information.

14 We consider TbPc₂ molecule aligning with
 15 the Pc parallel to the surface, as indicated by
 16 XLND experiments, and the case where the Tb
 17 spin is coupled antiferromagnetically to the Pc
 18 radical, which in turn is parallel to the Ni mag-
 19 netization direction, as depicted in Fig. 3. The
 20 structural optimization of the system teaches
 21 us that, upon adsorption, the TbPc₂ undergoes
 22 a series of structural changes (compare panels
 23 (a) and (c) in Fig. 4). In particular, it can be
 24 noticed a flattening of the curvature of the Pc
 25 in contact with the graphene, while the upper
 26 Pc bends outward from the surface. The flat-
 27 tening of the lower Pc is due to van der Waals
 28 interactions between the instantaneous induced
 29 multipoles in the π -conjugate systems of the Pc
 30 and the graphene/Ni substrate, leading to an
 31 average Pc-graphene distance of around 3 Å,
 32 while the bending of the upper Pc is due to
 33 charge repulsion between the two Pc's. The Tb
 34 ion stands at 4.5 Å from the graphene layer,
 35 leading to an overall Tb-Ni distance of more
 36 than 6.6 Å. Upon deposition, charge transfer
 37 of $0.75 e^-$ from the molecule to the surface
 38 takes place, and a partial quenching of the Pc
 39 spin radical is observed, its moment dropping
 40 to around $0.2 \mu_B$. No visible alteration is ob-
 41 served for the spin moment of Tb. In panels (b)
 42 and (c) of Fig. 4 top and side views of the spin
 43 density isosurface are presented. Together with
 44 the known alternating spin polarization at the
 45 graphene layer, a sizable quenching of the spin
 46 polarization can be observed in the upper Pc
 47 plane, together with a reduction of the polar-
 48 ization in the Pc plane close to the substrate.
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50 More insight can be gained analyzing the
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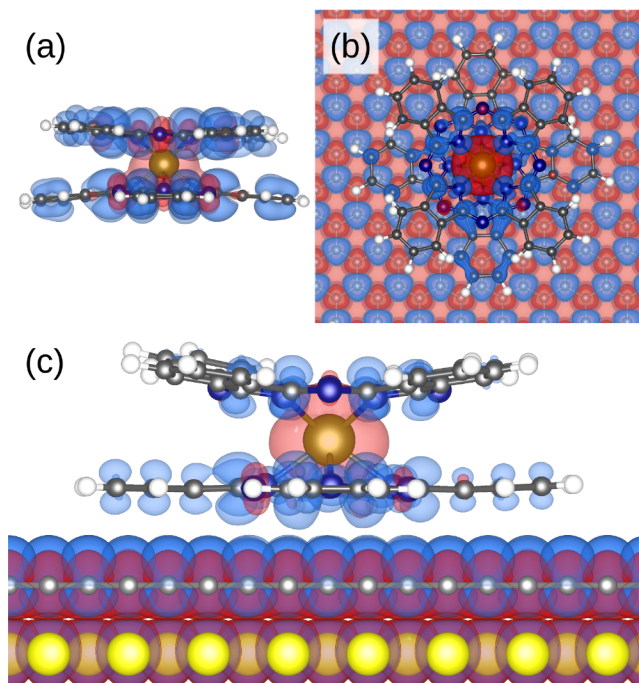


Figure 4: Spin density plot for TbPc₂ in the gas phase (a) and after the adsorption on graphene/Ni(111) for the top-fcc stacking, the top view (b) and side view (c), for the spin configuration depicted in Fig. 3. The spin up and down excesses are depicted in blue and red for isovalues of 0.0003 electrons/a.u.³. Ni has an inner (blue) core of spin up excess electrons, which is surrounded by spin down electrons, the superposition of which giving a violet coloration in the figure.

1 projected local density of states (LDOS) of
2 the TbPc₂, in the gas phase and absorbed on
3 graphene/Ni, as shown in Figure 5, where we
4 plot the states with *f* and *d* orbital charac-
5 ter of the Tb ion, as well as the *p*-states of
6 the N and C ions in the Pc closer to the Tb
7 ion, together with the LDOS of the substrate,
8 *i.e.* *p*_z-states at the graphene and *d*_{z²}-states of
9 the topmost Ni layer. Focusing on the space
10 distribution of spin-polarized LDOS of the gas-
11 phase TbPc₂ molecule we notice that the ma-
12 jority spin highest-occupied molecular orbital
13 (HOMO) is localized mainly on the first circle of
14 C and N atoms around the Tb (enlarged atoms
15 in the sketch of Figure 5). The HOMO is shown
16 as a light grey peak close to Fermi level (E_F)
17 in Figure 5(b). Comparing the LDOS of the
18 Pcs before (Fig. 5(b)) and after (Fig. 5(d)) the
19 adsorption on graphene/Ni(111), we can see a
20 rearrangement of the states closer to E_F due to
21 the hybridization between the 2*p* states of Pcs
22 and the 2*p*_z states of graphene, accompanied by
23 a small shift to lower energies of the molecular
24 C and N (2*p*) and Tb (3*d*) orbitals. On the one
25 hand, being these spin polarized orbitals of the
26 Pc the ones associated with the spin radical,
27 it is clear that their hybridization with the sub-
28 strate is detrimental for the radical's survival. On
29 the other hand, it is interesting to note that in
30 case of semiconducting or insulating decoupling
31 layers a complete loss of hybridization would
32 eventually take place, with disruptive effects on
33 the magnetic coupling. We can thus conclude
34 that a small amount of hybridization is optimal
35 for preserving the spin radical, and, at the same
36 time, enabling its magnetic coupling with the
37 substrate. The partial metallicity assumed by
38 graphene through the interaction with the Ni
39 substrate seems to supply the correct amount
40 of hybridization. Not much could be said on
41 the Tb *f* orbitals, since they are only poorly
42 altered upon adsorption, due to their localized
43 character. The survival of the spin radical upon
44 adsorption, which we observe here, is a non ob-
45 vious finding and is directly related to the pres-
46 ence of the graphene decoupling layer.

47 To confirm this, we performed calculations
48 for a TbPc₂ molecule directly adsorbed on a
49 Ni(111) slab. The interaction with the sub-

strate leads, similarly to what has been found
in the presence of the graphene layer, to a gen-
eral flattening of the lower Pc ring, while the
H atoms are pushed away from the surface due
to steric repulsions. The distance between the
Pc and the upper Ni atoms is around 1.97 Å,
being the interaction much stronger, as com-
pared to the 3 Å distance between the Pc and
graphene. This reflects in a larger charge trans-
fer from the molecule to the surface and the
complete quenching of the radical spin. The
interaction with the reactive Ni surface leads
instead to a robust polarization of the lower
Pc plane induced by contact interaction with
the Ni substrate (see Fig. 6). The spin polar-
ization changes sign across the lower Pc ring,
and arises from contact interaction with the
spin-polarized Ni surface. On the other hand,
in the case of the graphene/Ni substrate dis-
cussed above, the spin radical could be stabi-
lized in two metastable spin solutions, *e.g.* ei-
ther parallel (which is the state of lowest en-
ergy, as it will be discussed later) or antiparal-
lel with respect to the Ni magnetization. We
also note that if the twist angle between the
upper and lower Pc planes is around 41-42°
in the molecular crystal,²⁷ and it is close to
45° in our gas-phase calculations, it is reduced
to 41° when the molecule is deposited on the
graphene/Ni surface, while is sensibly smaller
when the molecule interacts directly with the
Ni surface, *i.e.* $\simeq 36^\circ$. Thus, the increase of
the molecule-surface charge transfer is associ-
ated with a reduction of the twist angle between
the Pc planes, which comes hand in hand with
the quenching of the spin radical, as suggested
by Komeda *et al.*¹⁴

The above analysis entails in a natural way
the idea that the interaction mechanism which
takes place between Tb and Ni could differ, de-
pending on whether the spin radical in the Pc is
suppressed or not. Experiments on rare-earth
double deckers directly adsorbed on Ni(111)
presented earlier¹⁶ and recently confirmed by
us¹¹ have adopted a simple model Hamiltonian,
considering a direct coupling between the Ter-
bium spin and the Nickel magnetization. The
present DFT results of the quenching of the spin
radical upon direct contact with Ni substrate

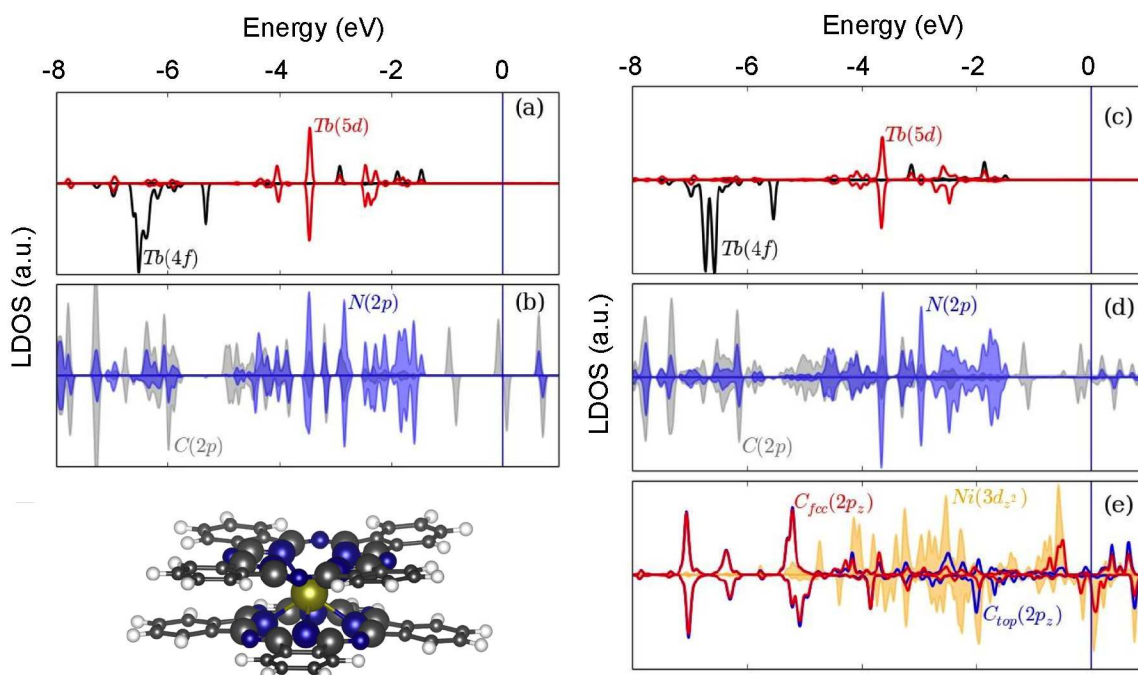


Figure 5: Spin-polarized LDOS of TbPc₂ in gas phase (a)–(b) and TbPc₂ on graphene/Ni(111) in the top-fcc stacking (c)–(e). (a)–(c) 4*f* and 5*d* states of Tb of TbPc₂; (b)–(d) the projections on the 2*p* orbitals of the nearest-neighbours to the Tb ion, N and C atoms (enlarged atoms in the molecule sketch); (e) 3*d*_{z²} states of the first layer of Ni and 2*p*_z states of C_{top} and C_{fcc}. The *d* states of the Ni layer are plotted in orange, while graphene C *p* states are in blue and red. *d*-character in panels (a)–(c) has been enhanced for better comparison. In each panel, the upper (lower) side is relative to the majority (minority) spin channel (with respect to Ni), for the spin configuration depicted in Fig. 3.

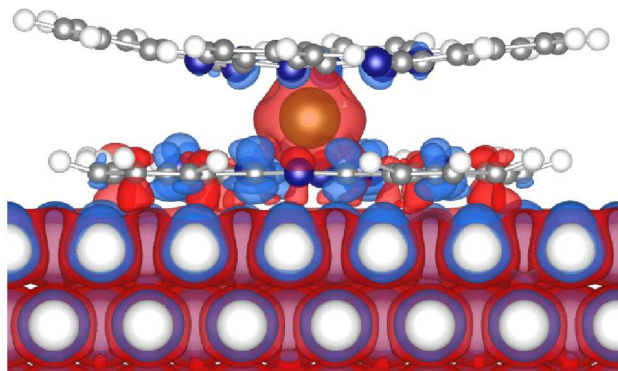


Figure 6: Side view of the spin-polarized charge density isosurfaces of TbPc₂ molecule adsorbed on Ni(111); blue (red) color stands for spin up (down) spin-polarization, relative to the positive (up) Ni magnetization (AFM coupling between Tb and Ni has been considered in the plot).

are in favor of this assumption. Thus, following the indications given by our DFT analysis, we propose for the Tbpc₂/graphene/Ni(111) system a spin model Hamiltonian where the spin radical is explicitly considered and has an active role in mediating the Tb-Ni coupling. The radical is portrayed as a spin-1/2, on the Pc₂ ligands, isotropically coupled to the spin of Terbium, to the magnetization of the Ni as well as to the external magnetic field. All the interactions described above are of electronic origin (*e.g.* superexchange), as we assume that dipolar interactions are much smaller, and in comparison, negligible.¹⁶

The model Hamiltonian describing the low-energy physics of the TbPc₂-graphene-Ni(111) system in an applied field \mathbf{B} reads:

$$H_{\text{up}} = H_{\text{CF}} + \mu_B(\hat{\mathbf{L}} + 2\hat{\mathbf{S}} + 2\hat{\mathbf{s}}) \cdot \mathbf{B} + J_{\text{exch}}\hat{\mathbf{S}} \cdot \hat{\mathbf{s}} + K\mathbf{M}_{\text{Ni}} \cdot \hat{\mathbf{s}}, \quad (1)$$

In the above equation, H_{CF} is the crystal field Hamiltonian, $\hat{\mathbf{L}}$ and $\hat{\mathbf{S}}$ are the orbital and spin total angular momenta of the 4f-electrons in Tb³⁺, $\hat{\mathbf{s}}$ the spin of the Pc radical, and \mathbf{M}_{Ni} the Ni magnetization. (The model Hamiltonian 1 is solved in the case of a Ni single crystal multi-domain magnetic structure, as discussed in the

Supporting Information). J_{exch} and K are parameters describing the magnetic exchange couplings between the Tb and Pc radical, and the Pc radical and the Ni magnetization, respectively.

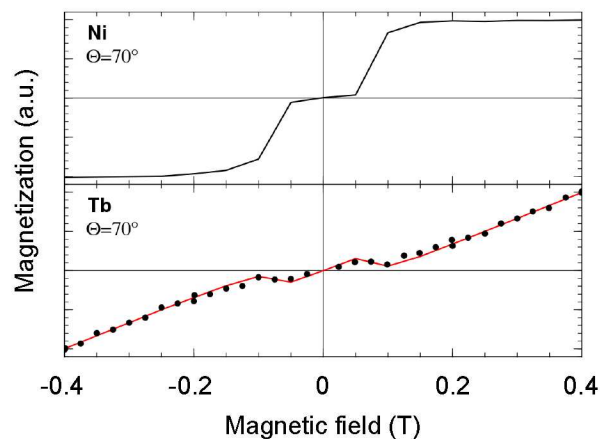


Figure 7: Zoom in on the low-field region of the XMCD magnetization of TbPc₂ on graphene/Ni(111) substrate, for $\Theta = 70^\circ$ (dots). In the upper (lower) panels the Ni (Tb) magnetizations are displayed. The colored (red) line is the simulated Tb magnetization using Hamiltonian (1), with $J_{\text{exch}} = -2.0 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ and $K = +1.8 \text{ cm}^{-1}$.

In order to reduce the number of parameters in the model, we have evaluated the intramolecular interaction J_{exch} by CASSCF calculations, followed by spin-orbit (SO) diagonalization to account for the important effect of SO coupling on the Tb³⁺ centre (more details are given in the Method section). The calculations predict a ferromagnetic intramolecular Tb-radical exchange constant $J_{\text{exch}} = -2.0 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. If we assume the above value for J_{exch} , it is possible to fit the experimental magnetization curve, as shown in Fig. 7, choosing a value of the radical-Ni coupling K of the same order of magnitude of J_{exch} , but reversed in sign, *i.e.* $K = +1.8 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. We note that, with the same choice of parameters, the model is able to fit also the Tb magnetization curve obtained at normal incidence, *i.e.* $\Theta = 0^\circ$ (see blue dots and line in Fig. 2). In this case, the absence of a visible kink in the experimental and theoretical Tb magnetization is a direct consequence of the different magnetic behavior of the Ni substrate, for which the

magnetization saturates only for fields greater than 0.5 T (see the Supporting Information), as compared to the $\Theta = 70^\circ$ case, where the onset of Ni saturation is at fields around ~ 0.2 T (see the upper panel in Fig. 7). Being the size of the magnetic coupling proportional to the Ni magnetization (see Eq. 1), and considering the reduced coupling induced by the presence of graphene, the signature of the magnetic coupling in the magnetization curves almost disappears for $\Theta = 0^\circ$. The spin model described in the Hamiltonian of Eq. 1 encodes thus a relay-like Tb-spin radical-Ni exchange mechanism, which is able to reproduce, with realistic values of the coupling parameters, the magnetization cycles extracted by XMCD experiments.

Discussion

We discuss here in more detail the possible theoretical and experimental estimates of the exchange parameters K and J_{exch} in the Hamiltonian 1. If both the parameters are freely varied, the Tb magnetization curve could be fitted for a broad range of $[K, J]$ values, the system being somehow under-determined. This happens also in virtue of the very small coupling evidenced by the XMCD experiments which lead to a smooth behavior of the Tb magnetization signal, with only a small kink emerging wearily from the almost linear behavior shown at low applied field. An alternative approach, to the one discussed in the previous section, is to supply an estimate for K and find the J_{exch} which best fits the experiments. We have thus characterized by DFT, states with different spin alignments, with the radical coupled either ferromagnetically or antiferromagnetically with the Ni substrate, and calculated the difference in the total energies of these states. We find that the residual spin polarization in the Pc planes couples ferromagnetically to the Ni magnetization, *i.e.* $K = -365 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. We note that the magnitude of this coupling is rather significant considering that only $\pi - \pi$ interactions are present between the Pc and graphene planes, *i.e.* no direct chemical bonds form at the Pc-graphene interface, and that the distance between Pc and

Ni is around 5.1 \AA . If we assume for K the DFT value, *i.e.* $K = -365 \text{ cm}^{-1}$, the model is still able to fit the experimental data, and the best fit is found for $J_{\text{exch}} = +0.26 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. Clearly, since the experimental findings prove an overall *indirect* antiferromagnetic coupling between Ni and Tb, the Tb-radical and radical-Ni couplings cannot be simultaneously ferromagnetic, so that the above first principle estimates of K and J_{exch} , done by DFT and CASSCF respectively, could not be valid at the same time. From the theoretical point of view, a more precise and trustful numerical evaluation of the above couplings would require the employment of more advanced approaches, and their application to systems both complex and large as the ones considered in this work is not feasible at the current stage. Whereas there is no direct experimental evaluation of the radical-Ni coupling to compare with, the intramolecular Tb-radical coupling has been estimated, in indirect ways, by transport experiments in molecular spin-transistor^{28,29} and spin-valve³ geometries, or by combination of NMR experiments and DFT calculations.³⁰ The order of magnitude extracted from the experiments is in good agreement with the one coming from our fits. However, in the above experiments both ferro-^{3,28,30} and antiferro-magnetic²⁹ coupling has been extracted, suggesting that the sign of the Tb-radical intramolecular coupling can be influenced by the experimental geometry and by the distortions that the molecules suffer when interacting with the substrate leads.

Conclusions

To summarize, we have presented a combined theoretical and experimental study of the magnetic interactions in TbPc₂ molecules adsorbed on graphene-decorated Ni substrates. Detailed DFT calculations, performed both in absence and presence of the graphene layer, give a rather strong indication that in the latter case, the spin radical on the Pc ring survives the interaction, the driving mechanism being the active role of graphene in electronically decoupling the molecule from the reactive Ni surface. We have

found instead a complete quenching of the radical when the molecule is directly in contact with the Ni. Following these indications, in the case of the TbPc₂/graphene/Ni(111) system, we propose a spin model Hamiltonian where the radical spin on the organic Pc ligands has an active role in mediating the antiferromagnetic interaction between Tb magnetic moment and the Ni magnetization. Such model accounts for the magnetization cycles measured in XMCD experiments. We have presented also theoretical estimates by DFT and CASSCF calculations of the different exchange interactions at play in the system, although the relative signs of the Tb-radical and radical-Ni couplings could not be univocally determined in the presented work.

Methods

XMCD experiments

TbPc₂ molecule evaporation is performed after degassing of the powders, keeping the evaporator temperature at 420°C and monitoring the thickness with an *in situ* quartz microbalance. XMCD measurements at the at the L_{2,3} absorption edges of Ni and M_{4,5} absorption edges of Tb were performed in total electron yield mode at a base pressure of 1.0 x 10⁻¹⁰ mbar. The dichroic spectrum is the difference between the XAS spectra taken with the helicity of the incident photon antiparallel (I-) and parallel (I+) to the external field, normalized by the height of the XAS edge. Since the XAS and XMCD line-shapes do not change with the field, to record the magnetization curve we measured only the intensities of the L₃(M₅) edge (E) at 853(1243) eV and pre-edge (P) at 845(1232) eV for the two polarizations; the resulting magnetization value is defined as: (E-/P- - E+/P+) / $\frac{1}{2}$ (E-/P- + E+/P+). For the magnetization measurements at $\Theta = 70^\circ$ at the Tb M₅ edge, in order to highlight the tiny magnetic coupling, each point is obtained as the average between the curve recorded sweeping the field up and the curve recorded sweeping the field down, also averaging the absolute values of the points recorded

with negative and positive fields.

Density-functional calculations

The DFT calculations have been performed by means of the Quantum Espresso (QE) computational package,²² with the Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof (PBE)³¹ exchange correlation functional. We used the projector augmented wave method (PAW)³² as recently implemented in the pseudopotentials made by Andrea Dal Corso,³³ with kinetic and charge density cutoffs of 1650 eV and 8440 eV, respectively. Simulating rare earths within DFT is very tricky, due to the strong electronic correlation effects in 4*f*-electrons. In order to overcome this deficiency, DFT+U^{34,35} or hybrid functionals³⁶⁻³⁹ approaches are commonly employed. Since in our supercell calculation the molecule and the metal substrate must be treated on the same footing, for computational reasons, we have chosen the DFT+U method, using a value of U = 6 eV (obtained using the linear response approach of Cococcioni *et al.*⁴⁰). No spin-orbit coupling is included in the calculations. Dispersion interactions have been included according to the DFT-D2 approach.⁴¹ The convergence towards states with different spin distributions is achieved employing removable local and global magnetization constraints during electronic self-consistency cycles, as implemented in QE. The Ni slab is composed of five Ni monolayers, in the absence of graphene, while three Ni monolayers have been employed for the Gr/Ni(111) substrate. Relaxation of the atomic coordinates at the molecule/substrate interface has been considered (molecule + upper surface layer), till remnant forces on the atoms were of the order of 5 meV/Å.

CASSCF calculations

The *ab-initio* calculations were done on [TbPc₂]⁰ in vacuum, using the DFT-optimized structure for that molecule adsorped on the graphene/Ni surface. We used ANO-RCC basis sets from the Molcas library, contracted to VDZP on Tb and VDZ on C, N, and H. The active space in the CASSCF calculation con-

sists of nine electrons in eight orbitals: eight electrons and seven 4f orbitals from Tb^{3+} plus one electron and the highest occupied π -orbital from Pc_2 . In a SO-free picture, the spin-1/2 of the Pc electron couples with the spin-3 of the ^7F Hund ground state of Tb^{3+} into two total-spin states, $S = 5/2$ and $S = 7/2$. For each of these we performed a state-averaged CASSCF calculation over the seven lowest states, formally corresponding to the sevenfold orbital degeneracy of ^7F , but now split by the crystal field of the ligand. We obtain the exchange splitting by taking the difference between the total ground-state energies of $S = 7/2$ and $S = 5/2$. This resulted in a calculated ferromagnetic stabilization of $S = 7/2$ over $S = 5/2$ by 7 cm^{-1} . Next we introduce SO coupling in the basis of the CASSCF wavefunctions using an atomic mean-field approximation of the SO operator, which is implemented in Molcas's RASSI module. This results in states that can be identified as coming from the $J = 6$ ground multiplet of Tb^{3+} , split by the crystal field, and weakly coupled to the radical spin. Analysis of the calculated wavefunctions reveals that the radical is coupled ferromagnetically to the Ising doublet $|M_J = \pm 6\rangle$, with an exchange gap of 6 cm^{-1} . The first excited crystal field state is calculated at 313 cm^{-1} , well above the ground state.

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Supporting Information Available: DFT calculation of TbPc_2 on top-bridge

stacked graphene/ $\text{Ni}(111)$ substrates; Implementation the spin-model Hamiltonian for the multi-domain magnetic structure of Ni single crystal; approximated spin-model Hamiltonian following CASSCF calculations; XPS and XLND characterization of the TbPc_2 film; XAS and XMCD spectra and magnetization cycle of Ni single crystal. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org/>.

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Graphical TOC Entry

