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Nanoscale Volcanoes: Accretion of Matter at Ion-Sculpted Nanopores

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We demonstrate the formation of nanoscale volcano-like structures induced by ion-beam irradiation of nanoscale pores in freestanding silicon nitride membranes. Accreted matter is delivered to the volcanoes from micrometer distances along the surface. Volcano formation accompanies nanopore shrinking and depends on geometrical factors and the presence of a conducting layer on the membrane's back surface. We argue that surface electric fields play an important role in accounting for the experimental observations.

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Single nanopores with diameters less than 2 nm have recently been fabricated in thin, insulating solid-state membranes using a method called ion-beam sculpting [1]. In aqueous solutions, these nanopores function as single molecule detectors that electronically measure the length and folding conformation of DNA molecules passing through the nanopore [2,3]. These nanopores may play a significant role in molecular electronics and rapid DNA sequencing strategies. Notwithstanding the large body of existing knowledge involving ion-beam-induced sputter erosion, atomic displacements, implantation, surface diffusion, and viscous flow [4–15], the mechanism responsible for the formation of these extremely small nanopores is still obscure. In this Letter, we present several unanticipated phenomena that provide new insight into the physical mechanisms involved.

In Ref. [1], ion-beam-induced pore closing was measured in situ by monitoring ions transmitted through the pore into a detector, as depicted in Figs. 1(a) and 1(b), and was confirmed by TEM imaging. A surface diffusion model was posited where the incident ion beam (3 keV Ar⁺/0.0135) creates mobile surface atoms that diffuse to and close the pore. A net flow of atoms to the pore was subsumed in a mathematical boundary condition of zero mobile surface atom concentration at the moving pore boundary, where the delivered atoms shrink the pore. Fitting the model to the observed pore closing rate implied that mobile surface atoms were delivered to the pore from as far as 50 nm away. Here we perform atomic force microscope (AFM) studies of the surface region near ion-sculpted nanopores, revealing that much more matter accumulates near the nanopore and from much further away than had previously been thought. Evidence is presented that electrical charging of the surface is important in the process.

Samples were fashioned from 0.25 μm thick, low stress Si₃N₄ grown on silicon substrates by chemical vapor deposition. The stoichiometry of the silicon nitride membrane was verified using Rutherford backscattering. A freestanding 30 μm square window of Si₃N₄ was fabricated by lithographically patterning and subsequently etching the silicon substrate below the membrane. A starting pore ~100 nm across was then drilled through the freestanding membrane window at its center with a scanned 50 keV, 10 nm diameter, gallium ion beam from an FEI 9500 focused ion-beam machine (FIB). AFM images show that the pore size at the membrane surface facing the FIB beam was always larger than the pore size on the opposite side, indicating that a truncated conical pore passes through the membrane with a full apex angle of ~10 degrees.

This FIB pore was then closed by exposure to a 300 μm diameter, 3 keV Ar⁺ ion beam in an ion-beam sculpting apparatus [16]. The beam was centered on the membrane window and programmed to irradiate with a duty cycle of 100 ms during each second [17]. The ions transmitted through the pore were monitored with a channeltron single-ion counting detector, as illustrated schematically in Fig. 1(a). The argon ion beam was incident on the sample such that the walls of the pore make an acute angle with the Ar⁺-irradiated surface.

Figure 1(b) shows the transmitted ion current with increasing beam exposure. The closing pore increasingly blocks the incident beam until finally no ions are trans-
mitted when the pore is completely closed. The flux was 
4.4 \text{Ar}^+ \text{ per nmm}^2/\text{sec} during the duty cycle “on time.”

Pore closing is confirmed by TEM observations.

At exposure times of 0, 4, 8, and 15 s on the closing
curve in Fig. 1(b), the sample was imaged \textit{ex situ} in a
Digital Instruments (Model 100) AFM equipped with a
high resolution “Stinger” silicon tip [18]. Figure 1(c) con-
tains AFM images of the nanopore region for each of the
above exposure times, each with a calibrated surface ele-
vation line scan passing across the pore. Clearly observable
are “volcanolike” ridge structures that keep growing until
the pore has closed. They extend \(\sim100–200 \text{ nm}\) from the
pore and have elevations up to 15–25 nm above the
sputter-eroded flat surface far from the pore. These obser-
vations indicate that significantly more material has aggre-
gated in the vicinity of the pore than has previously been
assumed or observed. The height of the tallest volcano
extends \(\sim10–20 \text{ nm}\) past the original presputtered surface
height. Volcanolike structures are not observed on the
unexposed back surface of the membrane.

Pores formed with the \text{Ar}^+ ion beam incident on the
same side as the FIB drilling beam, where the walls of the
pore form an obtuse angle with the argon-exposed surface,
also close but show no volcanolike structure above the flat
nitride surface facing the \text{Ar}^+ beam. These pores, however,
do show an accumulation of matter within the pore (be-
tween the front and back surfaces) near its back surface
when interrogated with the AFM.

Figure 2 further demonstrates this angular effect. The
sample in the FIB was tilted so the axis of the initial pore
made a 20\(^\circ\) angle to the membrane surface normal, as in
Fig. 2(a). Under these conditions, part of the pore makes an
acute angle with the flat surface and part makes an obtuse
angle with it. As seen in Fig. 2(b), only the side of the pore
with an acute angle to the surface develops the volcanolike
ridge.

Experiments were also performed with a 5 \times 5 square
array of 100 nm pores centered in the membrane window,
spaced 1 \text{ \mu m} apart, as shown in Fig. 3(a). The single AFM
line scan height plot extends along a diagonal connecting
opposite corner pores. Argon beam exposure initially re-
sulted in the corner pores developing the highest volcano
structures, the side pores slightly lower structures, and
those on the inside increasingly smaller ones as the center
pore of the array is approached, as shown in Fig. 3(b). For
this image, the sample was exposed to a flux of 4.4 \text{Ar}^+ \text{ per nmm}^2/\text{sec} for 30 seconds. Figure 4 shows TEM images of
this sample. The pores have closed commensurately with
the size of the volcanoes formed, with the center pore
virtually unclosed, and with the corner pores completely
closed [19]. The pores appear to compete for mobile matter
over micron distances; the corner pores have the greatest
access to the mobile matter and the center pore the least
access.

This surprising notion is reinforced by observing the
evolution of the nanopore array structure after the outer-
most pores have completely closed. Figure 3(c) shows

FIG. 2 (color). (a) A pore making a 20\(^\circ\) angle to surface. (b) A
volcano forms on the acute angle side of the pore.

FIG. 3 (color). (a)–(d) Array of pores after successive equal
exposures to an \text{Ar}^+ ion beam. The original, presputtered level is
at \(-5 \text{ nm}\), as calculated from the known sputter yield of \text{Ar}^+ on
silicon nitride. (e) Volcanoes on a gold backed membrane.
diminution of the corner pore volcano, while the inner diagonal pores nearly attain their full height, the side pores begin to shrink, and the innermost pore begins to close. The data in Figs. 3(a)–3(d) indicate that the volcanoes develop to a maximum size coincidentally with the closing of the pore, after which they begin to diminish. When they are growing, the volcanoes compete for available matter; the inner pores are almost completely screened from it until the outer pores close.

Figure 3(e) shows the effect of grounding an evaporated conducting layer (50 nm Au on 5 nm Cr) on the backside of the membrane (deposited prior to FIB drilling of the starting pores) during the Ar$^+$ surface irradiation. The insulating top side of the membrane was exposed to 4.4 Ar$^+$ per nm$^2$ sec for 60 s, and it developed a very uniform array of volcanoes. The volcanoes are somewhat higher and broader than those obtained without the conducting back layer. It appears that all pores now have equal access to the supply of mobile matter and that the screening effect has nearly disappeared.

We postulate that surface electric fields on the ion-beam exposed surface play an important role in volcano formation. Consider the radial in-plane electric field $E_T$ in the surface of a two-dimensional uniform layer of charge of outer radius $r_{\text{max}}$ and inner radius $r_0$. Let there also be a ring of compensating charge at $r_{\text{max}}$ that makes the whole structure charge neutral. One then finds $E_T$ as a function of the distance from the pore center, $r$, to be

$$E_T(r) = -\frac{\sigma}{2\varepsilon} \sum_{m=0}^{\infty} \left( \frac{2m+1}{(m+2)(m-1)} + \frac{1}{m+2} \right) \frac{1}{r^{m+2}}$$

for $r_0 < r < r_{\text{max}}$. Here $\sigma$ is the surface charge density and the $P_m(x)$ are $m$th order Legendre polynomials. This result is plotted in units of $\sigma/\varepsilon$ and $r/r_0$ in Fig. 5 for a value of $r_{\text{max}}/r_0 = 300$, which approximates our geometry for a 30 $\mu$m window, where the nanopore corresponds to the charge-free center disk and the grounded silicon substrate at the edges of the window corresponds to the outer ring of compensating charge. A negative in-plane radial electric field exists for positive $\sigma$ that attracts positively charged matter towards the pore periphery. It extends over 5.8 $r/r_0$, the region over which the volcanolike structures grow around the nanopore. For $r/r_0$ beyond this region, the electric field changes sign and positively charged matter is weakly repelled from the pore. The boundary between these regions increases slowly with $r_{\text{max}}/r_0$.

To estimate the in-plane electric field near the nanopore, we have evaporated gold electrodes on the surface of our samples and observed them to charge up to $\sim 200$ volts during ion-beam exposure. This is consistent with the dielectric breakdown voltage of the 0.5 $\mu$m silicon nitride dielectric ($\sim 10^7$ V/cm) [20]. Near the pore, Eq. (1) gives $E_T \sim \sigma/\varepsilon = 4 \times 10^6$ V/cm. We posit that such a large field is effective in facilitating both trapping and transport of charged matter along the surface to the pore over distances of several pore radii.

The lack of a noticeable depletion region just outside the volcanoes suggests that surface atoms (not necessarily charged) are constantly being delivered to the pore regions from much further away by ion-beam-induced surface diffusion, where they are captured near the pore by the electric field there. The screening effects observed in Figs. 3(b)–3(d) suggest that this matter, when charged and near the pore, is trapped by the open outer pores in the array before it finds its way to the inner pores. Once a pore closes, it no longer generates an attractive field and stops acting as a trap, allowing inner pores to close.

**FIG. 4 (color).** Individual nanopore TEM images overlaid on the AFM image of the Fig. 3(b) nanopore array.

**FIG. 5 (color).** Plot of in-plane electric field $E_T$ near a nanopore in units of $\sigma/\varepsilon$. Pore radius is at $r/r_0 = 1$. 
data in Fig. 3(b) clearly indicate that the accreted matter arrives from distances greater than 1 μm, which greatly exceeds the 50 nm suggested in Ref. [1].

The fact that pore arrays in membranes backed by a conducting gold layer close more efficiently and more uniformly is consistent with the notion that the mobile surface charge density near the pore is higher on these samples than on a membrane without a conducting backing. The beam-excited surface charged matter likely has a higher sputtering rate due to its repulsion from other positive surface charges. The conducting backing provides an attractive countercharge, which tends to cancel this field-enhanced sputtering effect, enhancing the available charged matter for pore closing. Pore-pore screening effects are thereby mitigated and pore closure rates enhanced. Additional compressive surface normal forces on the ion-beam charged top surface induced by the countercharge in the back electrode may generate local tensile surface forces that further contribute to the accretion of matter near the boundary of the pore.

The observation that volcanolike ridge structures form only on the region of a pore whose wall forms an initially oblique angle with the Ar+-bombarded surface is compatible with the overall picture presented here. High surface field pointing towards, and terminating at, the top surface pore boundary will be obtained only where the inner pore wall is geometrically blocked from the beam. When the pore’s inner wall can be bombarded and charged by the beam, we expect matter to be accreted at the beam boundary inside the pore near the back surface where the electric fields are high, not on the top surface. Indeed, in TEM pictures of ion-sculpted nanopores closed with poorly controlled geometries, we have observed pores to close from different depths and to form overlapping closures from the top and back surfaces.

We conclude by noting that the large mass transport effects reported here with nanopores may be expected whenever preexisting insulating nanostructures are exposed to broad ion beams or when highly focused ion beams are used to form such structures in the first place. Understanding them can result in reliable fabrication of important nanoscale structures. From a more fundamental perspective, it seems clear that modeling studies of ion-induced irradiated nanopore structural transformations can form the basis of a quantitative understanding of surface atom driving forces, transport and accretion. There may also be circumstances in which instabilities such as nanoscale ion-beam-induced surface rippling on insulators [10–14] may be influenced by the surface charging effects and electric fields discussed above. We note that the motion of highly charged matter along a surface may involve collective fluidlike notions as well as those of independent particle diffusion and drift. It will be interesting to see if comprehensive attempts to quantitatively model the transport phenomena and detailed morphological surface evolution presented here can clarify the relative importance of these different approaches to understanding the matter transport involved. Further insight may follow from experimentally determining the elemental content of the accreted matter for different materials. Such measurements on nanometer-sized volcanoes are definitely a challenging experimental problem.

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[18] Tip curvature radius: ~5 nm; aspect ratio >4/1. Manufacturer: MikroMasch (Portland, OR, USA).
[19] Excessive TEM e-beam exposure opens ion-sculpted nanopores. The pore in the upper right of Fig. 4 opened while adjusting the microscope for optimal image quality.