Vacancy-Assisted Halogen Reactions on Si(100)-(2 × 1)

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Scanning tunneling microscopy studies of etching of Si(100)-(2 × 1) show that the rate of terrace pit formation goes through a maximum for surface coverages of θ(Cl) = 0.77 ± 0.05 monolayer, in contrast to predictions of conventional models. Using recently calculated energies for different possible surface configurations, we show that a key component in desorption is the formation of a single-atom vacancy adjacent to a volatile SiCl₂ unit. The demonstration of vacancy-assisted reaction establishes a self-limited reaction and the sequence of events leading to desorption.

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Etching refers to the removal of material from a surface by chemical means, and dry etching implies gas phase etchants and reactive products. Spontaneous dry etching is activated by thermal processes, and it can be assisted by photon, electron, or ion irradiation [1]. While etching is central to a wide range of technologies, including chip fabrication, the atomic sequences of events that occur are imprecisely known. Determining them challenges our ability to describe dynamic surface processes.

Descriptions of thermally activated etching have focused on what was naturally taken to be the central player, the desorbing molecule [2]. In the absence of a compelling reason to justify more complicated models, they treated the surface as a structurally stable backdrop that provided the heat reservoir needed for desorption. Here, we show that the Si(100) surface is not simply a structurally stable backdrop and that vacancy creation, in conjunction with SiCl₂ formation, is a key part of spontaneous etching with Cl. When single atom vacancies cannot be formed, because the surface is too rich in Cl, the etch rate drops precipitously. Thus, the etching agent itself reduces the reaction. Such self-limited inhibition is well known for heterogeneous catalysis where, assuming a Langmuir-Hinshelwood model, two reactants compete for active surface sites [3], but it was not expected for semiconductor etching reactions.

In this paper, we focus on thermally activated etching of Si(100)-(2 × 1) with Cl. With scanning tunneling microscopy (STM), we have determined the amount of Si removed as a function of the amount of Cl on the surface for a given set of processing conditions. For this surface, the terrace sites are initially equivalent, a single monovalent Cl atom reacts with each dangling bond of a dimer to form Si(100)-(2 × 1)-Cl, and temperature programmed desorption experiments [4–6] show there is only one important desorption product, SiCl₂. Conventional models would predict that the etch rate would increase monotonically with Cl concentration, θ(Cl). In contrast to expectations, we find a maximum when θ(Cl) = 77 ± 5% and a sharp decrease as the surface became saturated.

The evolution of single-layer-deep pits during thermal etching of Si(100)-(2 × 1) has been investigated by Chan-der et al. [7] using STM. They reported that terrace pitting was initiated by dimer vacancy creation and that pit growth occurred preferentially along the dimer row direction, with occasional branching to neighboring rows. Motivated by the STM results, de Wijs, De Vita, and Selloni (WVS) [8] recently carried out first principles local density functional calculations of the energies of different Si-Cl configurations. They proposed a nonconventional model in which thermal creation of a single-atom vacancy adjacent to a SiCl₂ precursor enables its desorption. This paper explores the ramifications of the calculations, predicts coverage-dependent desorption rates, and establishes the connection to reaction rate reduction.

The experiments were performed in ultrahigh vacuum (base pressure 5 × 10⁻¹¹ Torr) using an Omicron STM and RHK electronics. The preparation of clean Si(100)-(2 × 1) has been described elsewhere [7,9–11]. A solid-state electrochemical cell derived from AgCl doped with CdCl₂ was used to provide Cl₂ at a constant flux [7]. Procedurally, we dosed clean Si(100) to accumulate a given initial coverage, θ₁(Cl). To visualize the resulting adsorption structure and to directly quantify the concentration, we acquired dual bias STM images. In filled-state images, dimers with adsorbed Cl appeared darker than those that were Cl free because the density of states near E_F was decreased by Cl adsorption. The sample was then heated at a rate of ~2.8 K s⁻¹ to 800 K, held for 10 min, and quenched. This time-temperature regimen was chosen because it reduced the final Cl concentration, θ_f(Cl), to 50%–80% of θ₁(Cl). (Higher temperatures or extended annealing will ultimately desorb the Cl and allow the surface to recover from its etched state.) It was then imaged again to quantify θ_f(Cl) and the amount lost to desorption of SiCl₂. Finally, the amount of Si removed by etching could also be deduced by measuring the pit area in the images.

Figure 1 shows three STM images for samples having representative initial coverages. Each scanned area
initiated as single dimer vacancies grew along the dimer row direction, one dimer at a time, to produce vacancy lines, labeled DV_L. Vacancy diffusion in this regime was hindered by the high Cl concentration. Branching events expanded the pits, and some were two or three dimers in width [7]. Also apparent are bright chains that represent regrowth features, RG, built up from Si released from its terrace site when one Si atom of a dimer desorbs. These regrowth chains have formed against a Cl-rich surface. The results are similar to those observed after steady state etching with constant etchant flux [2,7,9,10]. Etching also roughened the steps and caused them to retreat.

Figure 1(b) was obtained for a surface with intermediate Cl concentration, \( \theta_i(\text{Cl}) = 0.77 \text{ ML} \) and \( \theta_f(\text{Cl}) = 0.41 \text{ ML} \). It shows large, single-layer-deep etch pits, regrowth features up to 7 rows in width, and a rougher \( S_B \) step profile. Differences compared to Fig. 1(a) demonstrate that dimer vacancies became more mobile as \( \theta(\text{Cl}) \) decreased. Hence, pits could grow by accretion as vacancies coalesced or were captured. Etching at the perimeters of larger pits became more like step etching as they extended over many dimer chains. The step roughness was enhanced by the breakthrough of pits in the upper terrace and diffusion of vacancies to the step. Etching in this intermediate coverage regime gave surfaces with the greatest areal pit density.

Figure 1(c) shows the result of etching at low concentration, \( \theta_i(\text{Cl}) = 0.20 \text{ ML} \) and \( \theta_f(\text{Cl}) = 0.13 \text{ ML} \). Because there was less Cl, the etch rate was considerably reduced and, when a vacancy was produced, it could diffuse easily. The extended dark areas correspond to pits that have grown by both accretion and etching. (In this image, the tip conditions were especially good and residual Cl could be identified as intermediate-gray dots. Chlorine concentrations were deduced from the images where atomic features could be resolved.) As for intermediate coverages, the regrowth islands are large. Step profiles were more regular because atom rearrangement at the step was not impeded by Cl, the etch rate was slower, and there was little breakthrough with terrace pits.

To determine the amount of material removed as a function of the \( \theta_i(\text{Cl}) \), we concentrated on large terraces with widths of \(~500\ \text{Å}\) This minimized the possibility that Si atoms and vacancies could reach steps and be accommodated. The etch rate was the pit area divided by the time, 10 min. As summarized in Fig. 1(d), the overall etch rate increases with coverage until \( \theta_i(\text{Cl}) = 0.77 \pm 0.05 \text{ ML} \). Thereafter, it decreases sharply. Indeed, the etch rate for a surface that was initially saturated was equal to that for \( \theta_i(\text{Cl}) = 0.20 \text{ ML} \), namely, \( 5.8 \times 10^{-5} \text{ ML/s} \).

To understand the downturn in Fig. 1(d), we must consider the possible reaction pathways and the energetics involved. To determine the relationship between the etch rate, \( dc/dt \), and concentration \( \theta(\text{Cl}) \), we assume that one step in the overall reaction is rate controlling and, from the activation energies [8], this must be the rate of
desorption of SiCl$_2$. All other steps are in equilibrium. Improvements to this model are indicated by the STM results, as discussed below.

The conventional etching pathway is depicted in Fig. 2(a). For any coverage, it starts with two monochlorinated Si atoms that constitute a surface dimer, 2SiCl$_2(a)$. Isomerization produces a precursor molecule bound to the surface, SiCl$_2(b)$, as well as a Si atom having two dangling bonds, Si(a). Si(a) has generally been taken to be a “bystander” since it surrenders its Cl and remains on the surface when its more active partner desorbs. Thus, 2SiCl$_2(a) \rightarrow$ SiCl$_2(b) +$ Si(a) – $E_1$, where $E_1$ is the energy of isomerization. Thermal desorption converts SiCl$_2(a)$ to gas phase SiCl$_2(g)$, and the no-longer-stabilized bystander moves onto the terrace to create a dimer vacancy, Fig. 2(a). Hence, SiCl$_2(a)$ + Si(a) $\rightarrow$ SiCl$_2(g)$ + Si(a) – $E_2$, where $E_2$ is the activation energy of desorption. For this pathway, $dc/dt$ should increase continuously with $\theta$(Cl). From Fig. 1(d), this model fails to describe Si(100) etching.

WVS determined the energy barriers of Fig. 2(a), finding $E_1 = 1.4$ eV and $E_2 \sim 3.2$ eV at low coverage. From the reverse barrier, 0.7 eV, they concluded that SiCl$_2(a)$ would decay to 2SiCl$_2(a)$ within ~50 ns of its creation at 850 K. The calculated barrier, ~4.6 eV, was much higher than experiment, 3–3.6 eV (Refs. [6] and [12]) and the etch rate would be negligible. Accordingly, they investigated alternate pathways and proposed the one shown in Fig. 2(b). The initial step was again the formation of SiCl$_2(a)$, but now the bystander was seen to escape onto the terrace before the reverse reaction could occur. The diffusion barrier of 0.6–1 eV can be easily overcome at 800 K [13]. Escape created a single vacancy next to SiCl$_2(a)$ at a cost of $E_3 = 0.03$ eV and eliminated the normal deexcitation pathway. Since the bystander would be unlikely for entropic reasons to return to the vacancy site, SiCl$_2(a)$ would have a much greater chance to desorb. WVS also considered that the new intermediate state could decay by transferring 2 Cl atoms to a dimer far away from the single vacancy, but the gain in doing so was only $E_4 = 0.05$ eV when the concentration was low.

To reveal the dependence of $dc/dt$ on $\theta$(Cl) for this model, we must consider the possible surface configurations, the relative energies that dictate the partitioning of Cl, and the desorption barriers for the precursor states. The seven relevant configurations depicted in Fig. 2(c) are [1] = a Si dimer, Si$_2(a)$; [2] = a dimer with one Cl, Si$_2$Cl(a); [3] = a dimer with two Cl atoms, 2SiCl(a); [4] = a dimer with two Cl atoms and one bystander, SiCl$_2(a)$ + Si(a); [5] = same as [4] after the bystander escaped to create a single vacancy, SiCl$_2(a)$ + SV; [6] = terrace dimer with the bystander that escaped, Si$_3(a)$ + Si(a); and [7] = unpaired Si atom of a dimer, Si(a) + SV.

Etching occurs from [4], though at a negligible rate, and from [5], the new intermediate state. The bystander can escape onto the terrace at a cost of $E_3 = 0.03$ eV,
for coverage-dependent return by considering diffusion against a dynamic background of Cl, and it would include capture of bystanders to form regrowth structures, Figs. 1(a)–1(c).

In dynamic equilibrium, the concentrations of configurations differing by energies $E_1$, $E_3$, and $E_4$ are related to the energy gained in transferring two Cl atoms from SiCl$_2$ far from the vacancy site, but there would be reaction inhibition and a downturn, independent of $E_4$. To derive Eq. (1), we assumed that [1] and [3] are the dominant species, as shown by experiment [2,4–7,11].

In this Letter, we showed that STM results make it possible to assess the validity of reaction pathways [13]. They also point to improvements that would focus on the surface evolution during etching. While the calculations do not take into account the evolving surface structure, we see that the diffusivity of adatoms and vacancies, and therefore the surface structure, depends on coverage. As an isolated vacancy grows, as a dimer vacancy line evolves into an extended monolayer-deep pit, and as the regrowth islands change in shape, there must be corresponding changes in the population of the different desorption sites. We attribute any deviation from the simple form of Eq. (1) to these differences, and they are most profound near the peak etch rate, 0.77 ML. Second, Figs. 1(a) and 1(b) show that regrowth structures formed at high concentration are single dimers in width, but they are more extended at lower concentration. To properly describe the etching of regrowth features, it will be necessary to quantify Si atom diffusion against a background of Cl and to determine the desorption barriers and the Cl concentrations on regrowth features as a function of their size.

There are important implications that follow from these observations. First, increasing the flux in steady state etching can reduce rather than increase the etch rate. Second, etching at low temperature will be suppressed because of the high Cl concentration, an effect not considered before. Third, an increase in halogen concentration can inhibit the dominant pathway and increase the relative importance of pathways that are accessible only at high coverage. This last point can be seen from studies of Br-Si(100) where high coverage causes a unique $3 \times 1$ phase transformation and etching of atom rows rather than dimer rows [11].

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2. For a detailed review, see J. H. Weaver and C. M. Aldao, “Spontaneous Halogen Etching of Si,” in Morphological Organizations During Epitaxial Growth and Removal, edited by Z. Y. Zhang and M. G. Lagally (World Scientific, Singapore, to be published).
13. H. Feil, Phys. Rev. Lett. 74, 1879 (1995). The energies used in Eq. (1) were obtained in 0 K calculations. Feil used molecular dynamics to examine the temperature dependence of the free energy barrier for desorption. He used the Stillinger-Weber potential and a model system derived from a 6 layer crystallite of Si with an adatom of Si placed on the $2 \times 1$ surface prior to saturation with Cl. The resulting surface moiety was taken to resemble SiCl$_3$ and the barrier for desorption was seen to decrease because of the number of configurations for SiCl$_3$ in the transition state. Equivalent calculations have not been reported for Si(100)-(2 $\times$ 1) where desorption involves the measured quantity, SiCl$_2$.  

$dc/dt = b(\exp[-(E_1 + E_3)/k_B T]\theta(Cl)[1 - \theta(Cl)]/[1 + \exp(E_4/k_B T)[1 - \theta(Cl)]/\theta(Cl)])^{1/2},$ (1)