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Can Microdroplets Make Soil?



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International Centre for Clean Water



Science

RESEARCH

NANOPARTICLES

Spontaneous weathering of natural minerals in charged water microdroplets forms nanomaterials

B. K. Spoorthi¹, Kavyashila Debnath², Palash Basu¹, Anil Nagai¹, Umesh V. Vaghmare¹, Thalapatt Pradeep^{1,3*}

In this work, we show that particles of common minerals break down spontaneously to form nanoparticles in charged water microdroplets within milliseconds. We transformed micron-sized natural minerals (like quartz and rutile) into 5- to 10-nanometer particles when integrated into aqueous microdroplets generated via electrospray. We deposited the droplets on a substrate, which allowed nanoparticle characterization. We determined through simulations that quartz undergoes proton-induced etch, especially when reduced in size and exposed to an electric field. This leads to particle etching and the formation of silicate fragments, which we confirmed with mass spectrometry. This rapid weathering process may be important for soil formation, given the prevalence of charged aerosols in the atmosphere.

Nanoparticles of minerals exist naturally in soil, and some of them are essential for life (1). Microscale studies have been a of interest over the past decade, because the confined environment within them is known to cover chemical synthesis at an accelerated rate, as well as other processes such as the formation of nanoparticles (2). We decided to explore whether natural minerals could disintegrate in microdroplets, through a process opposite to chemical synthesis.

For our experiments, we prepared microscale particles of natural quartz (SiO₂) and rutile (TiO₂-substituted Al₂O₃) for use in an electrospray setup (Fig. 1, A and B). We ground commercial millimeter-sized quartz particles well using a

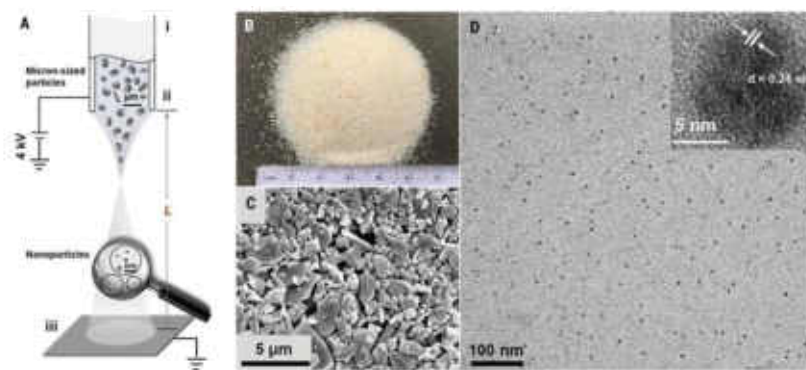
mortar and pestle and used centrifugation to separate the differently sized particles that formed. We carefully excluded all the particles smaller than 1 μm in size and used particles of 5 to 10 μm that were suspended in water for the experiment (Fig. 1C). Even after ultra-sonication to detach any adhered particles, we found some smaller particles attached to a few large ones (Fig. 1C). These adhering particles had dimensions greater than 100 nm (Fig. 1D). We took an optical image of the ground quartz powder and an optical microscopic image of the separated particles that we used for electrospray (Fig. 1E). We electrosprayed a suspension of about 6 mg/ml of the separated quartz particles through a capillary

tube that had an inner diameter of 50 μm, flow rate of 0.5 ml/hour and observed the exiting plume (Fig. 1F). We collected the product of electrospray 15 cm away from the spray tip, which resulted in a flight time on the order of 10 ms, consistent with similar experiments (3, 4). The product that was deposited on a transmission electron microscopy (TEM) grid had only 5- to 10-nm-diameter particles (Fig. 1G) throughout the grid. Under higher magnification, particles of different morphologies were observed. The particles showed the (110) plane of quartz (inset of Fig. 1G). Sonication had no effect on the breaking of silica particles. Experimental methods are presented in the supplementary materials, including a video of the electrospray process (movie S1).

To ensure that our initial observations were truly representative of the process, we performed measurements on larger quantities of samples. We built a multinozzle electrospray unit composed of six nozzles. We electrosprayed 1 liter of the suspension that contained 100 mg of the crushed micron-sized particles discontinuously over a month at the optimized conditions (spray voltage and distance) and a 0.5 ml/hour flow rate, and a deposit

Department of Chemistry, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai 600 025, India. ²Theoretical Sciences Unit, Jawahar Institute of Physics, Advanced Scientific Research, Bangalore 560 019, India. ³International Centre for Space Studies, 137 Satellite Road, Singapore 487 115, India. *Corresponding author: Email: pradeep@iitm.ac.in

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A scale of 1000

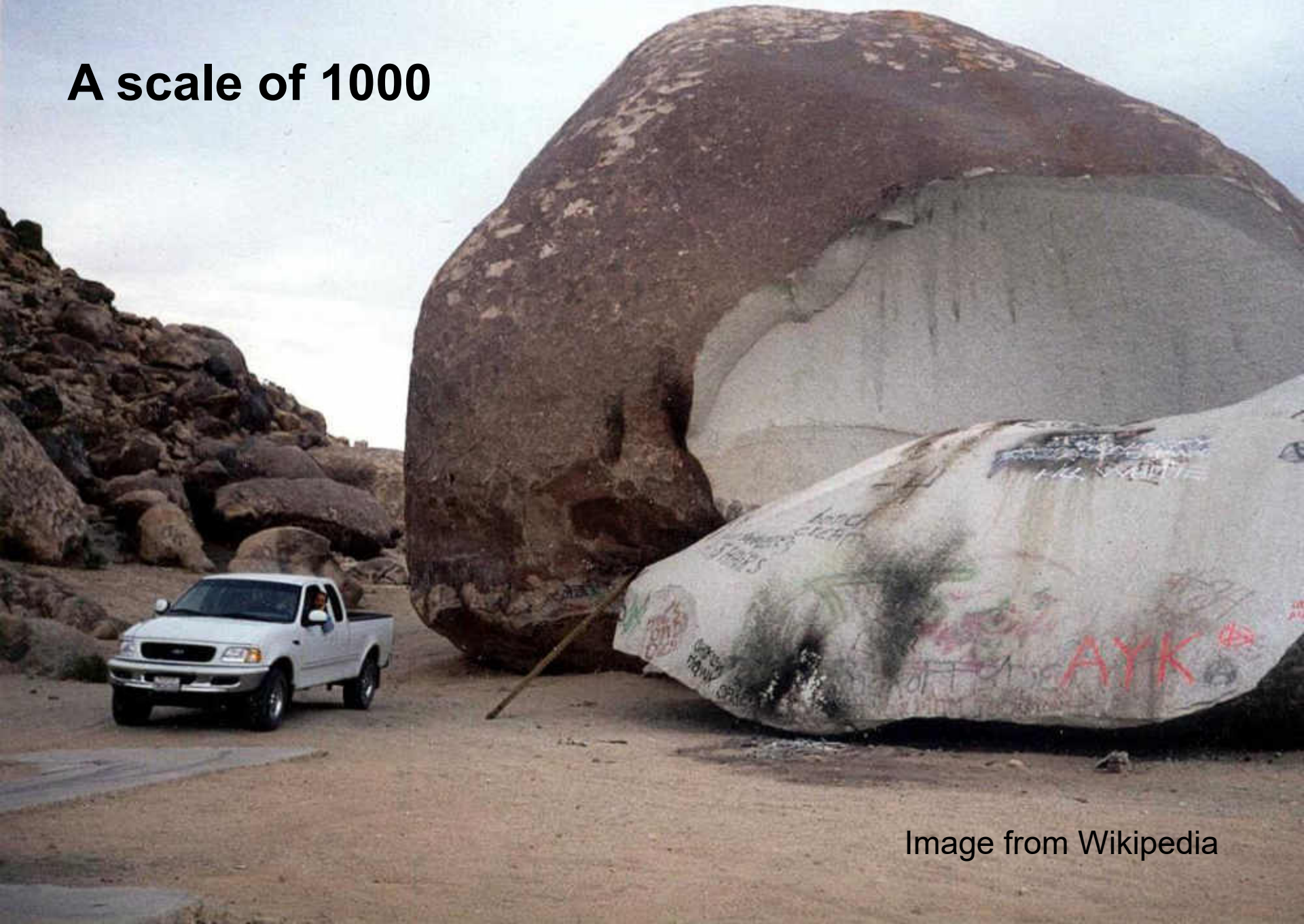
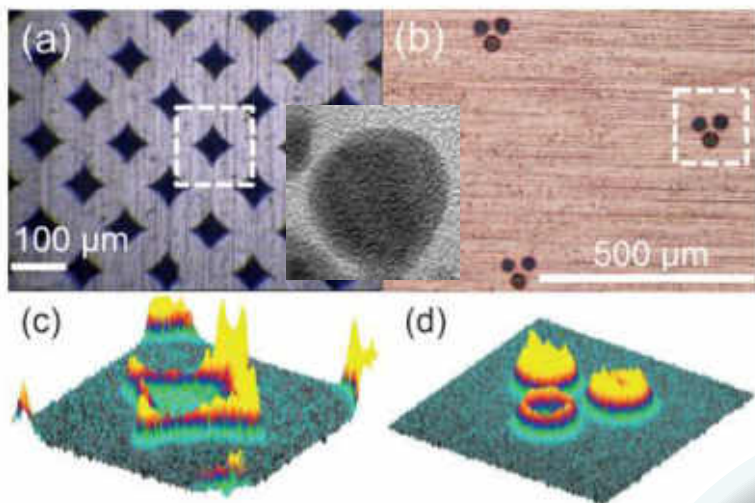
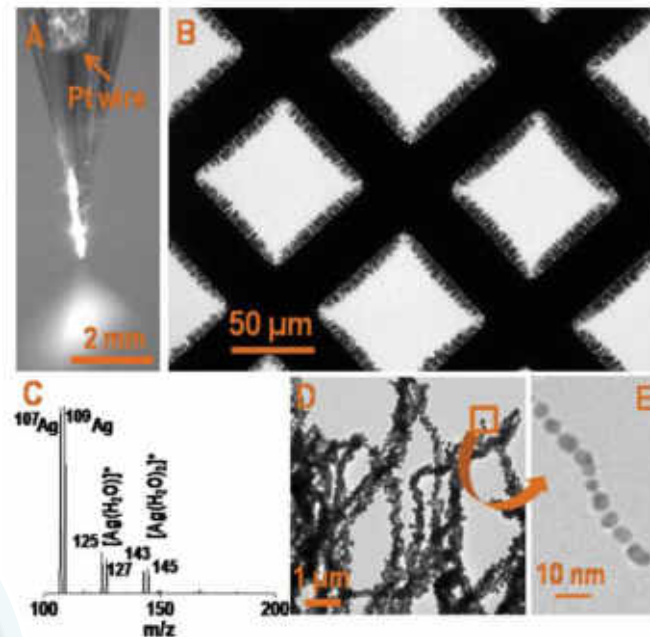
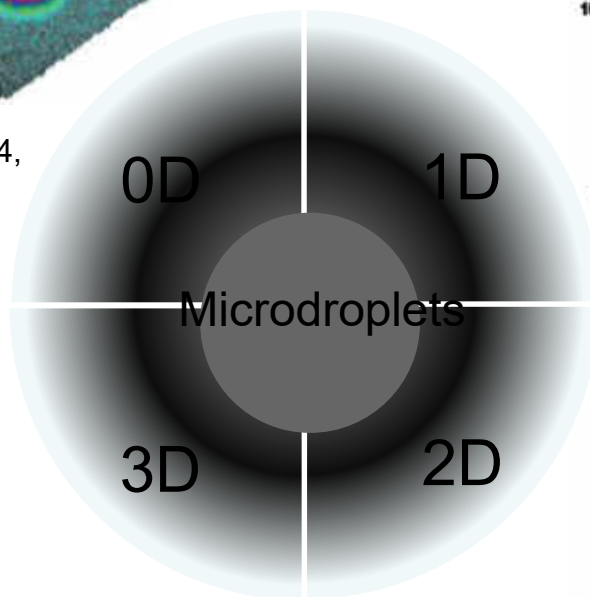


Image from Wikipedia

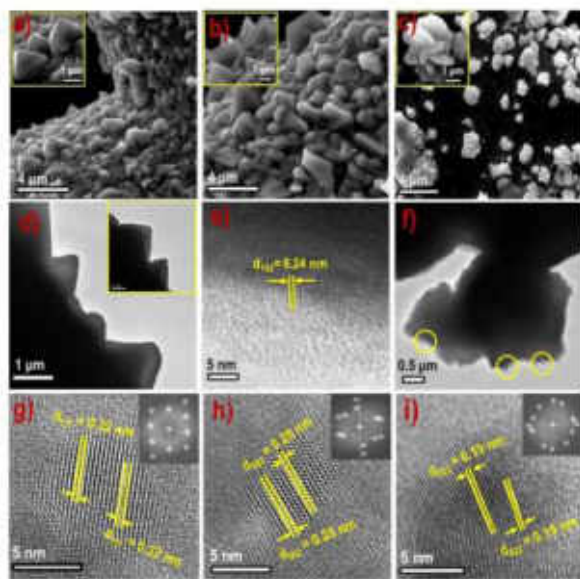
Functional Nanomaterials



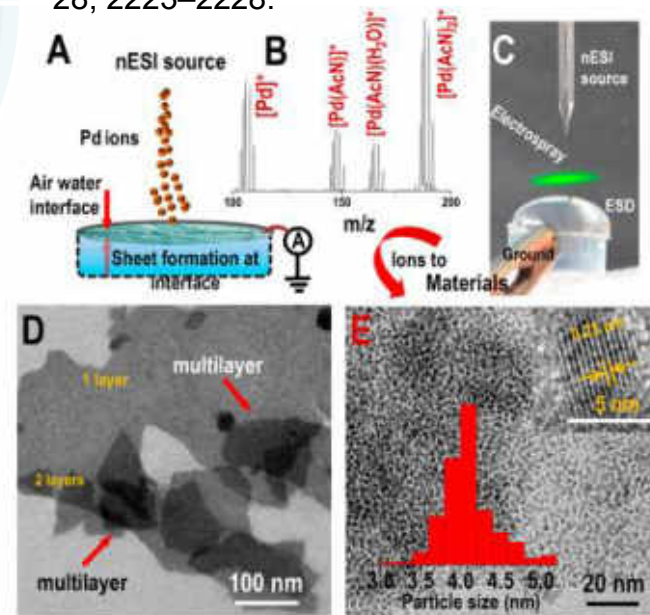
Anyin Li, et. al., *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed.* 2014, 53, 12528–12531.



Depanjan Sarkar et. al., *Adv. Mater.* 2016, 28, 2223–2228.



Arijit Jana et. al., *J. Mater. Chem. A*, 2019, 7, 6387–6394.



Depanjan Sarkar, et. al., *J. Phys. Chem. C* 2018, 122, 17777–17783.

Chemical Science

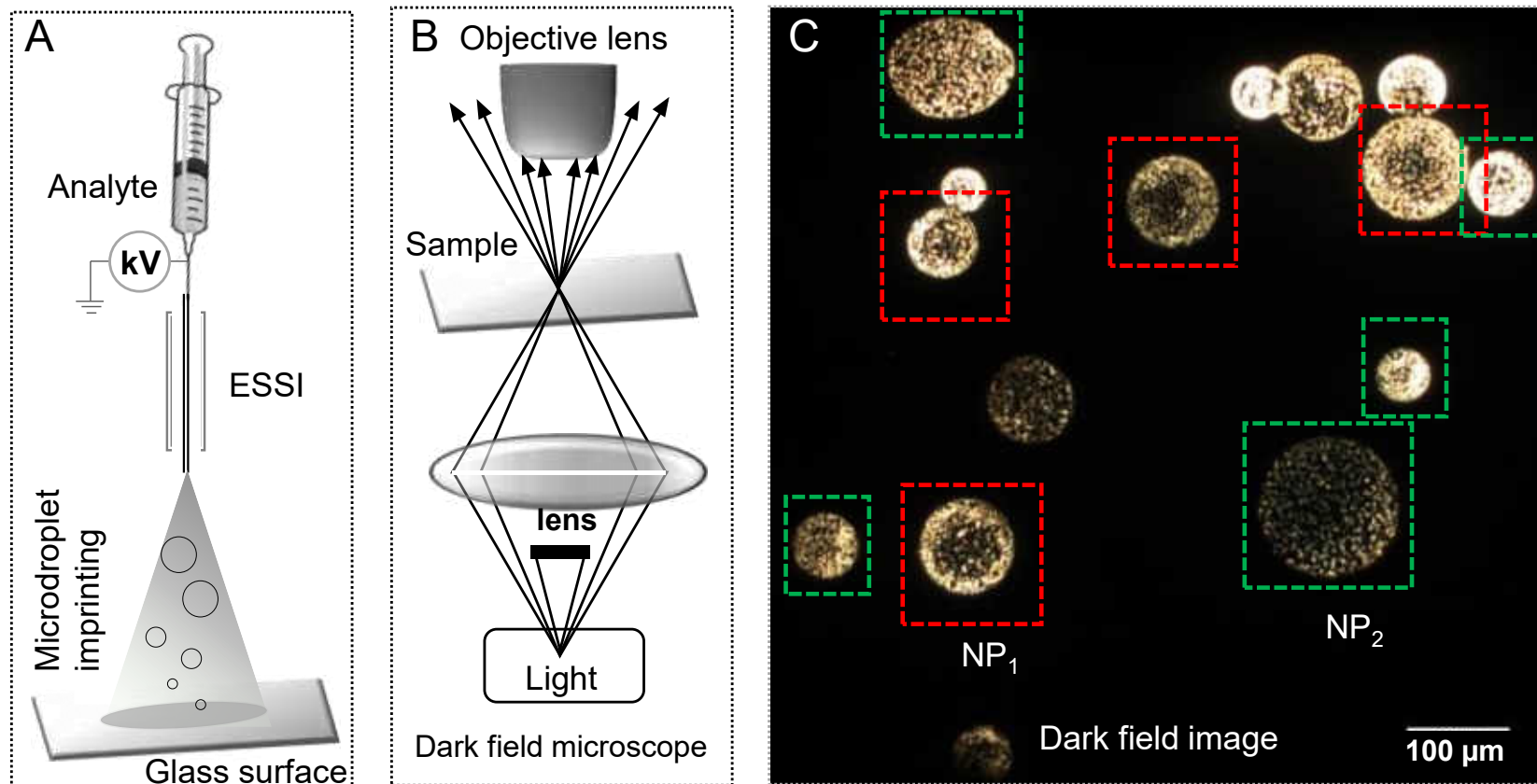
Volume 13
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Pages 13251–13634

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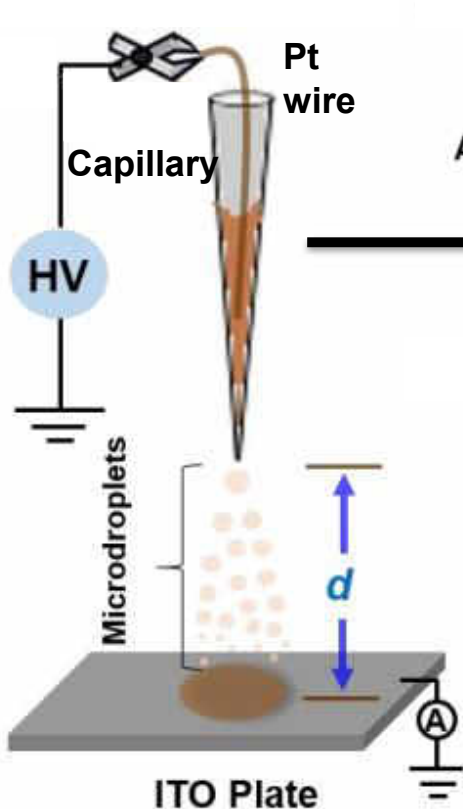
Understanding Microdroplets



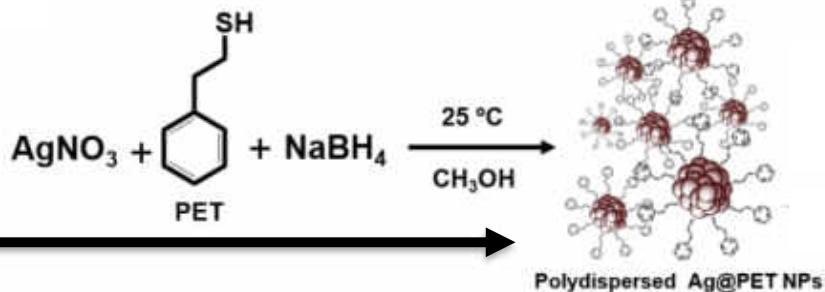
Transformation of Materials in Microdroplets

Ambient Microdroplet Annealing of Nanoparticles

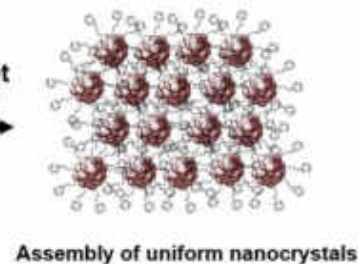
Experimental set-up



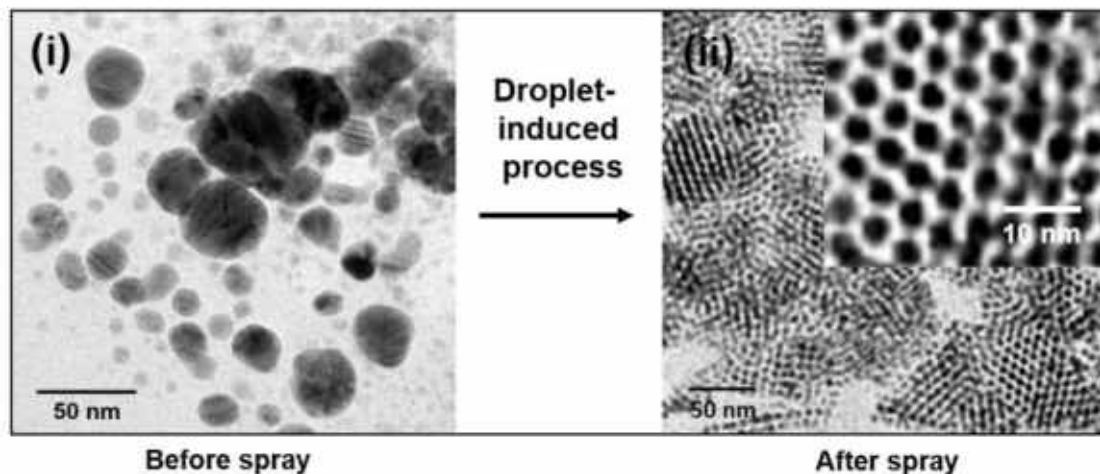
Synthesis of polydisperse NPs



Ambient
microdroplet
annealing



Transformation process





Thanks to ChatGPT

Weathering in Nature

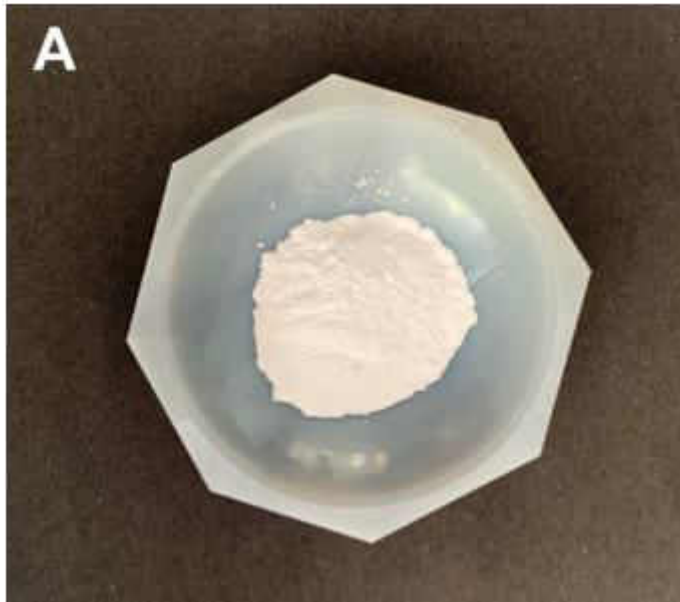


Sand, the Ubiquitous Material

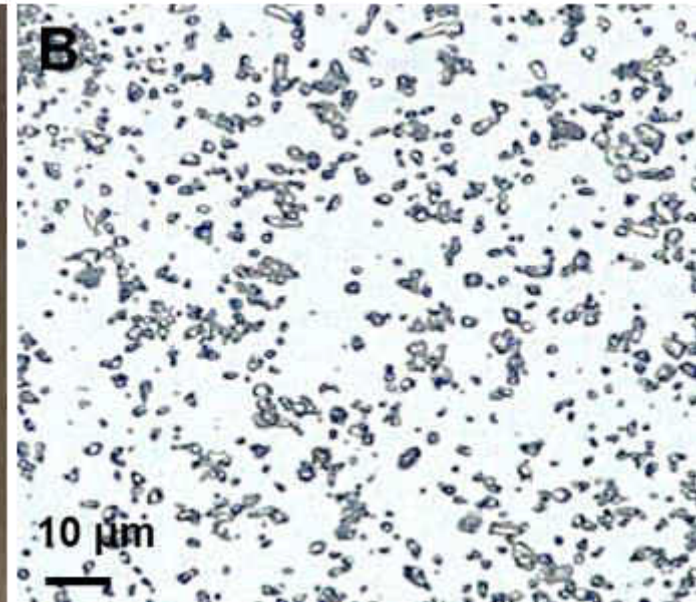


Images from Wikipedia



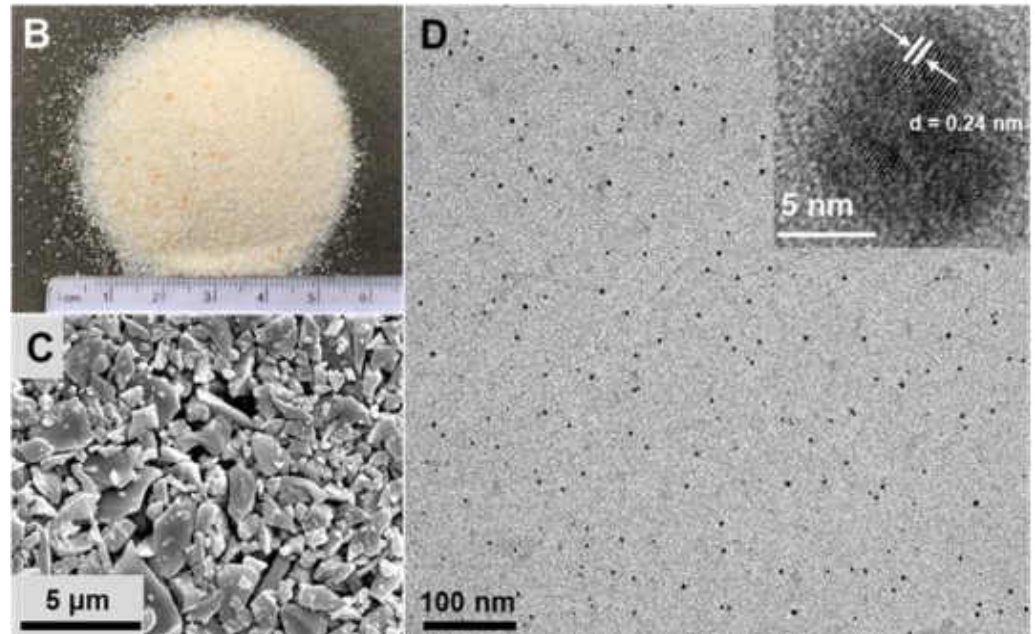
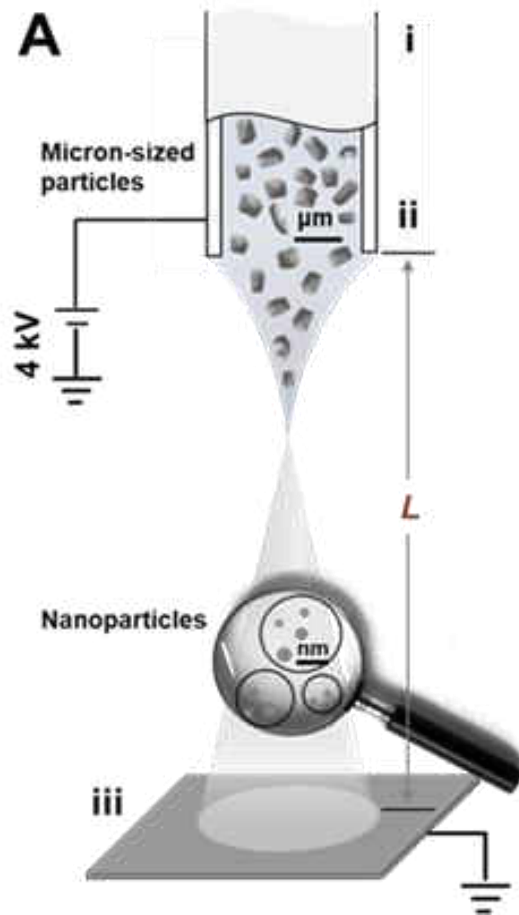


Ground silica

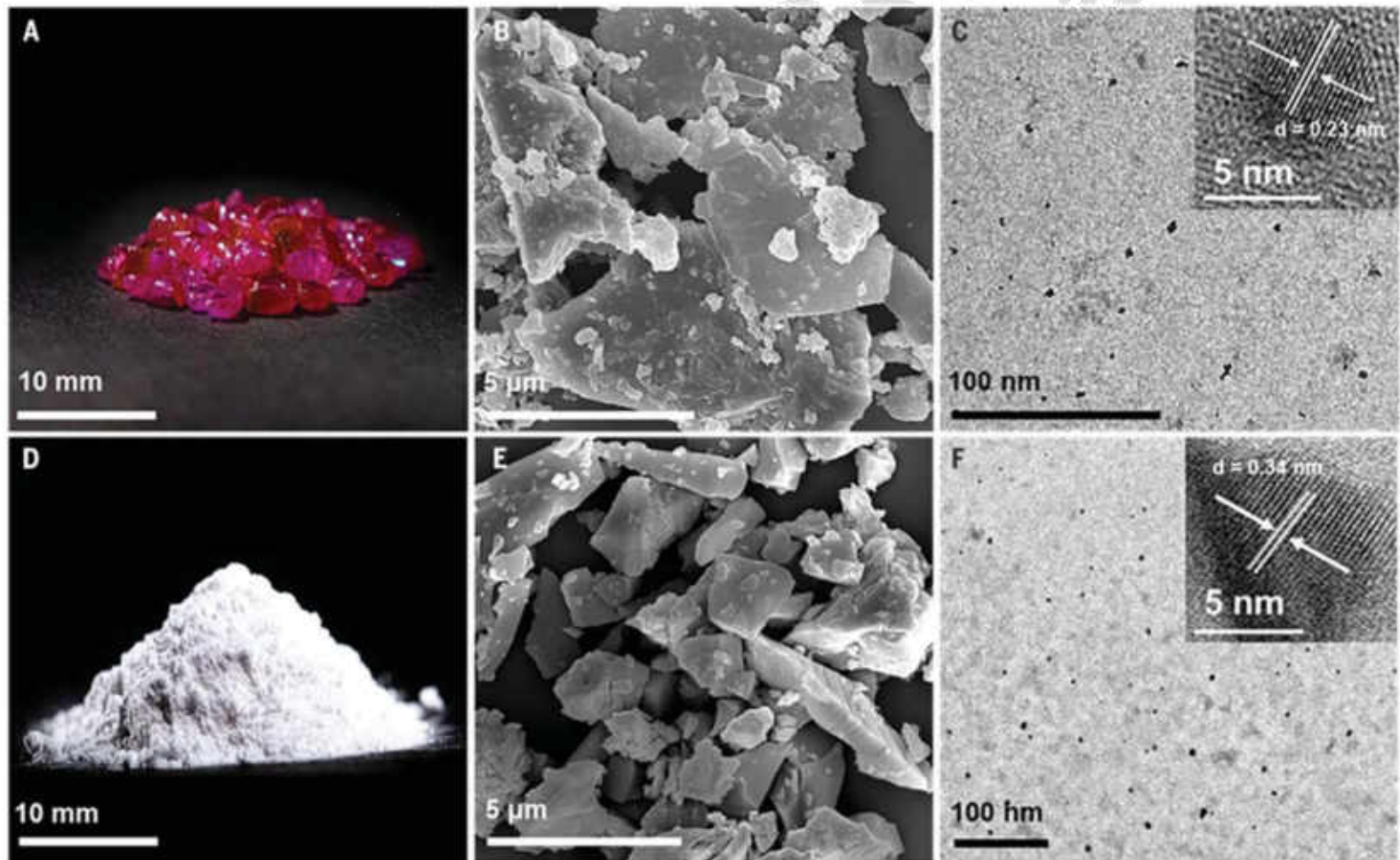


Optical image of silica

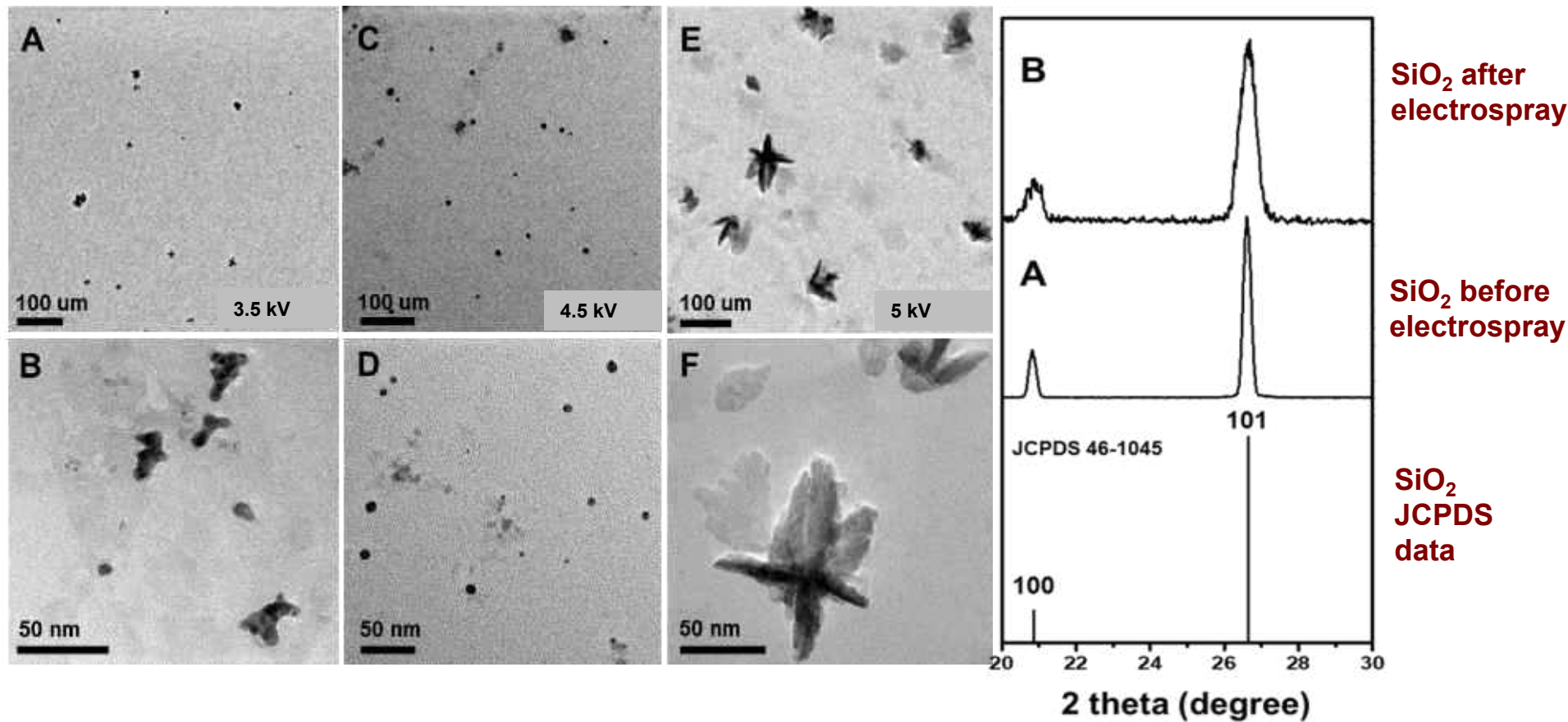
Weathering of Minerals in Microdroplets



Ruby, Fused Alumina

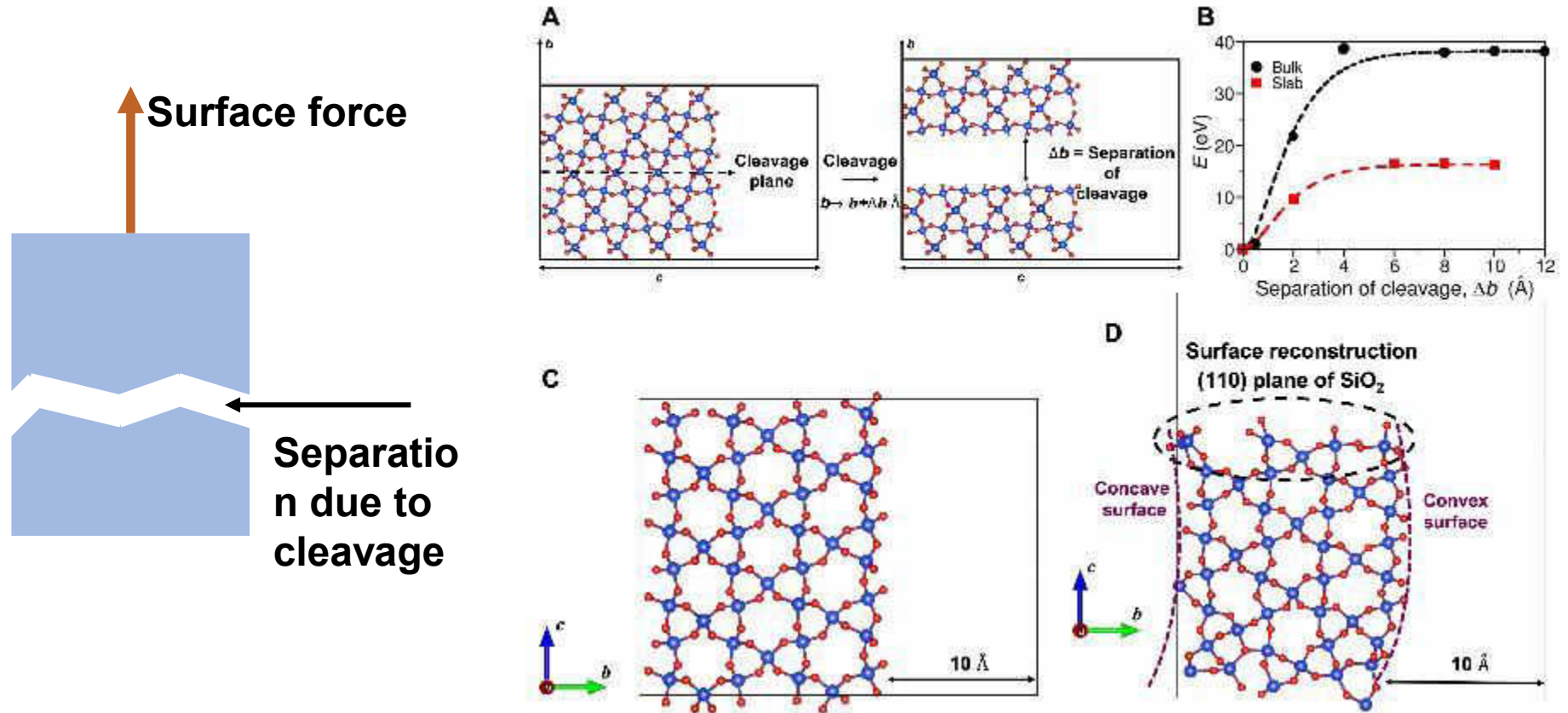


Fragmentation of Silica – Varying Conditions

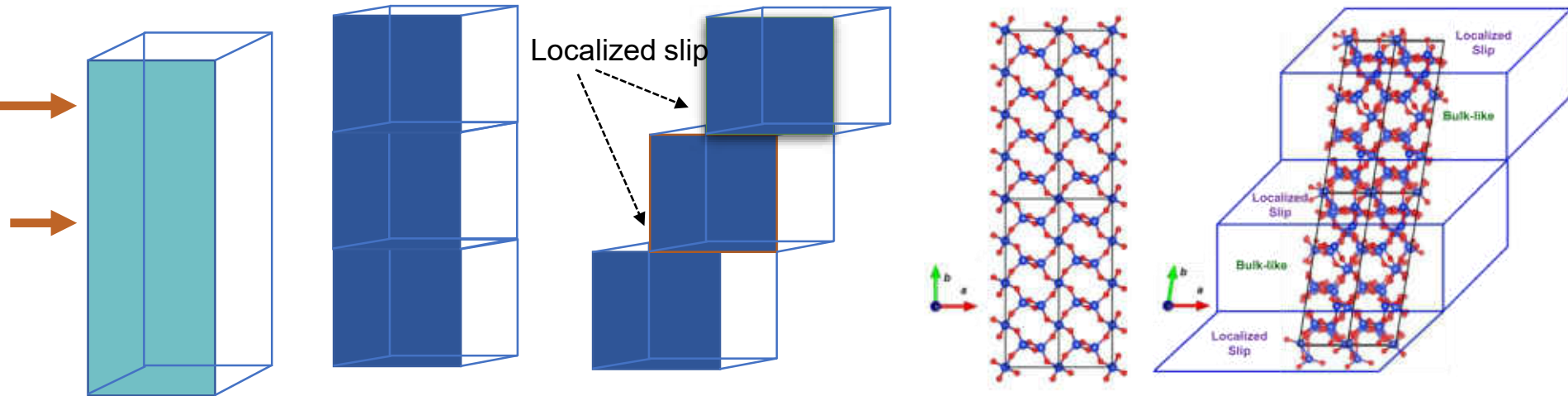


Mechanism: Cleavage

The process of cleavage and surface reconstruction visualized with first-principles simulations



Mechanism: Slip

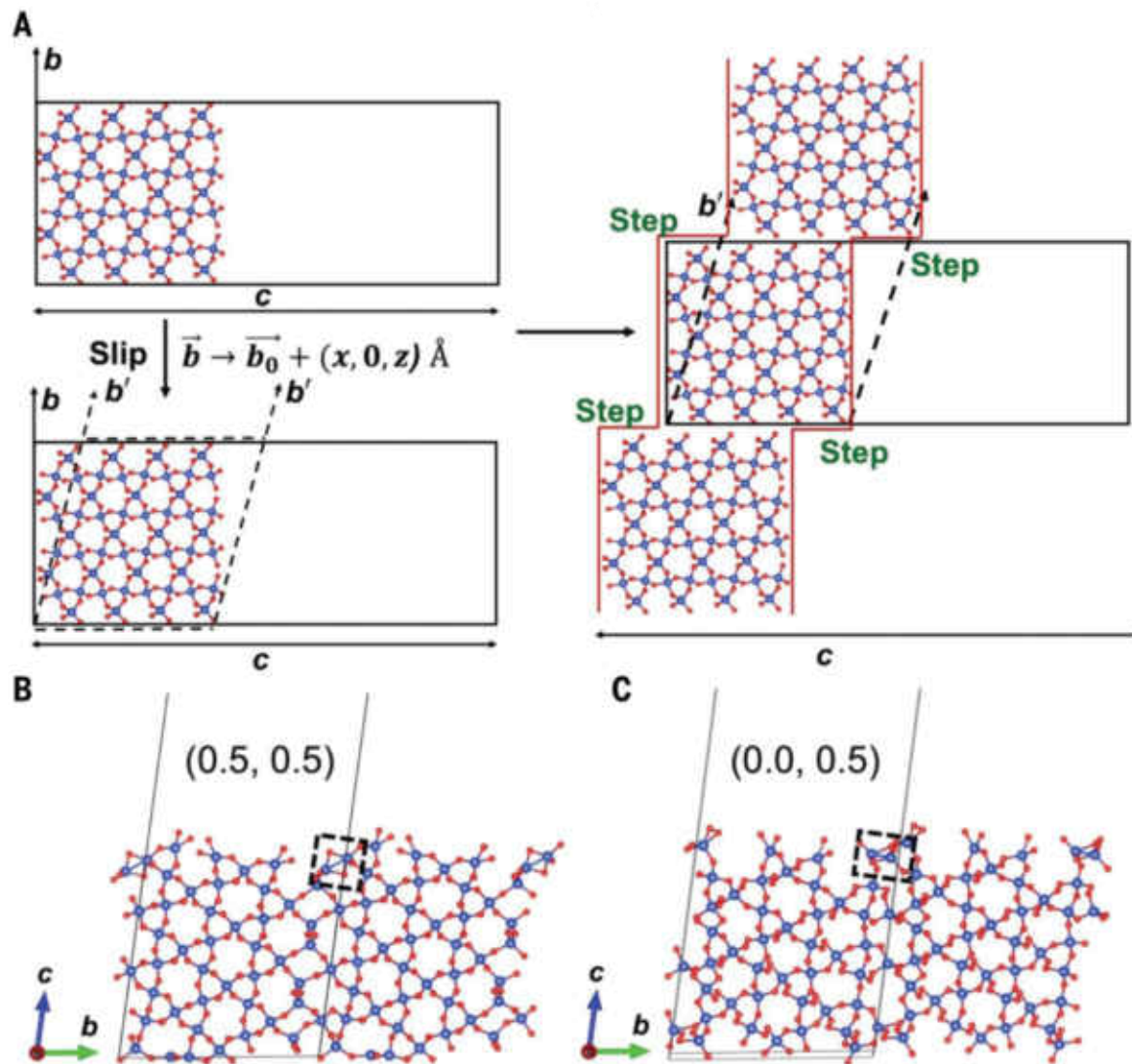


This instability leads to the formation of a stacking fault on the (010) plane, achieved with slip localized at (010) plane

Stacking fault

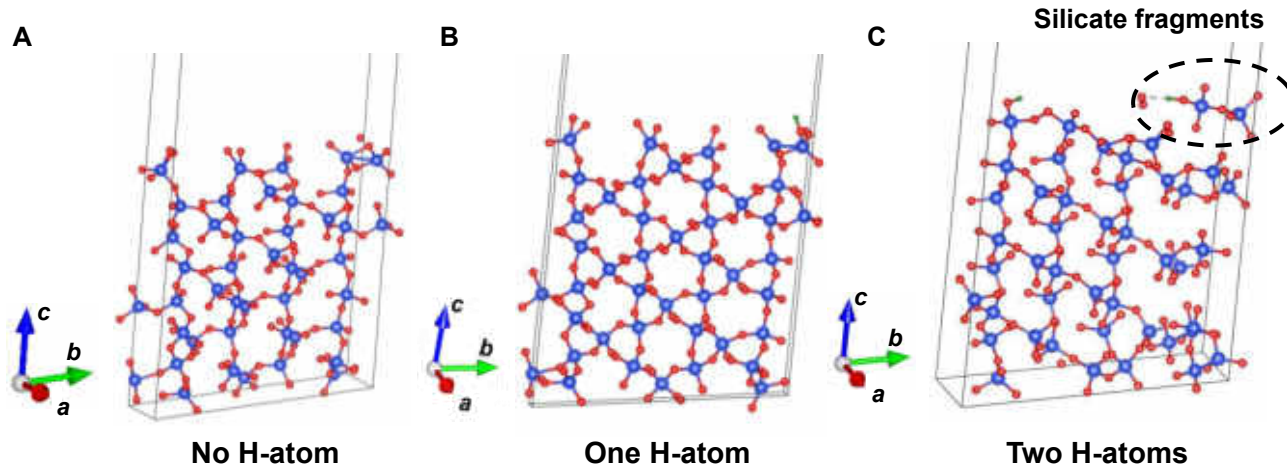
$$\vec{b} \rightarrow \vec{b}_0 + (x, 0, z).$$

$(x, z \in [0, 1])$ - fractional coordinates

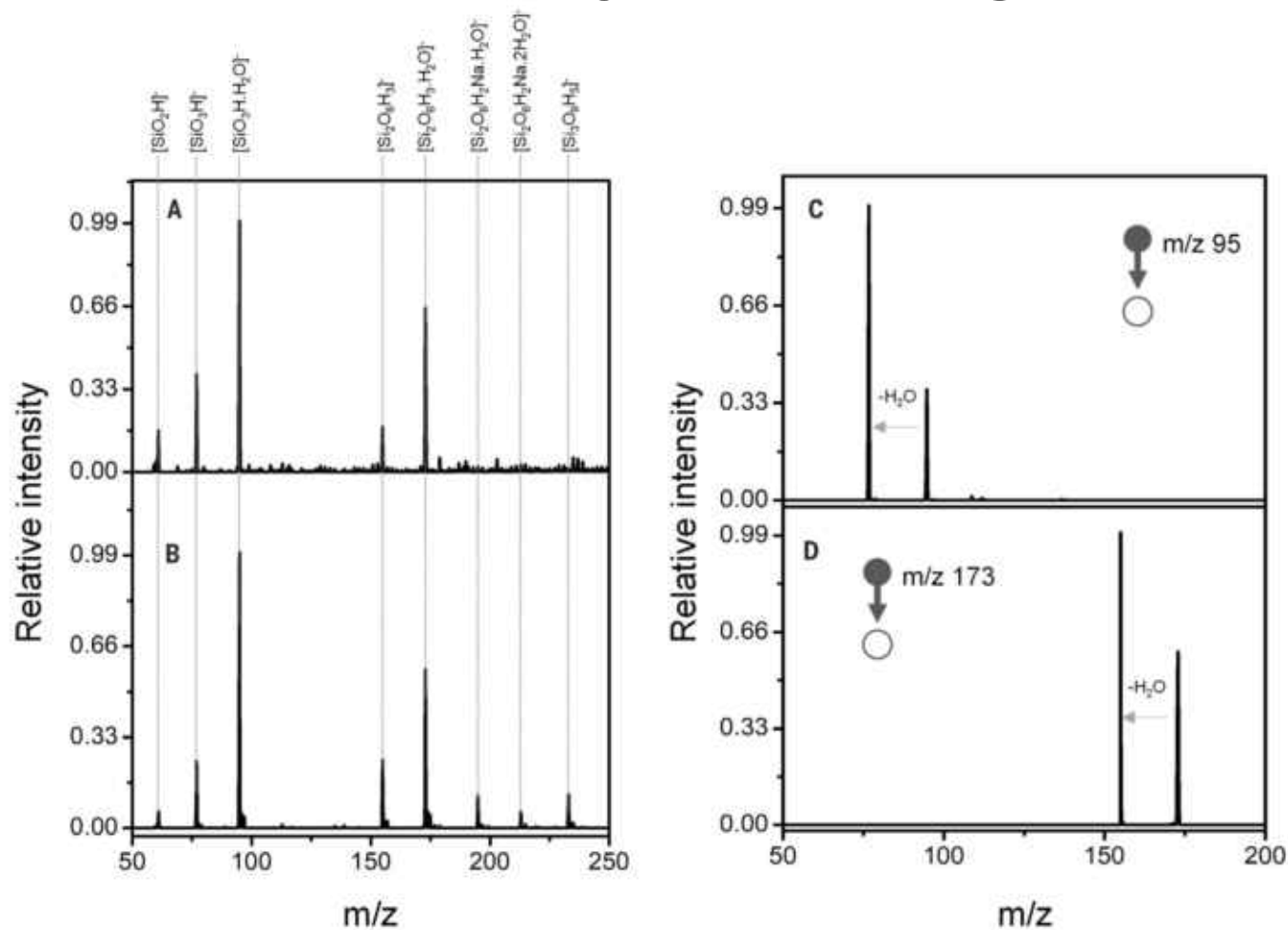


SFEs of (010) direction with (0, 0), (0, 0.5), (0.5, 0) and (0.5, 0.5) slip configurations on the (110) plane of SiO₂

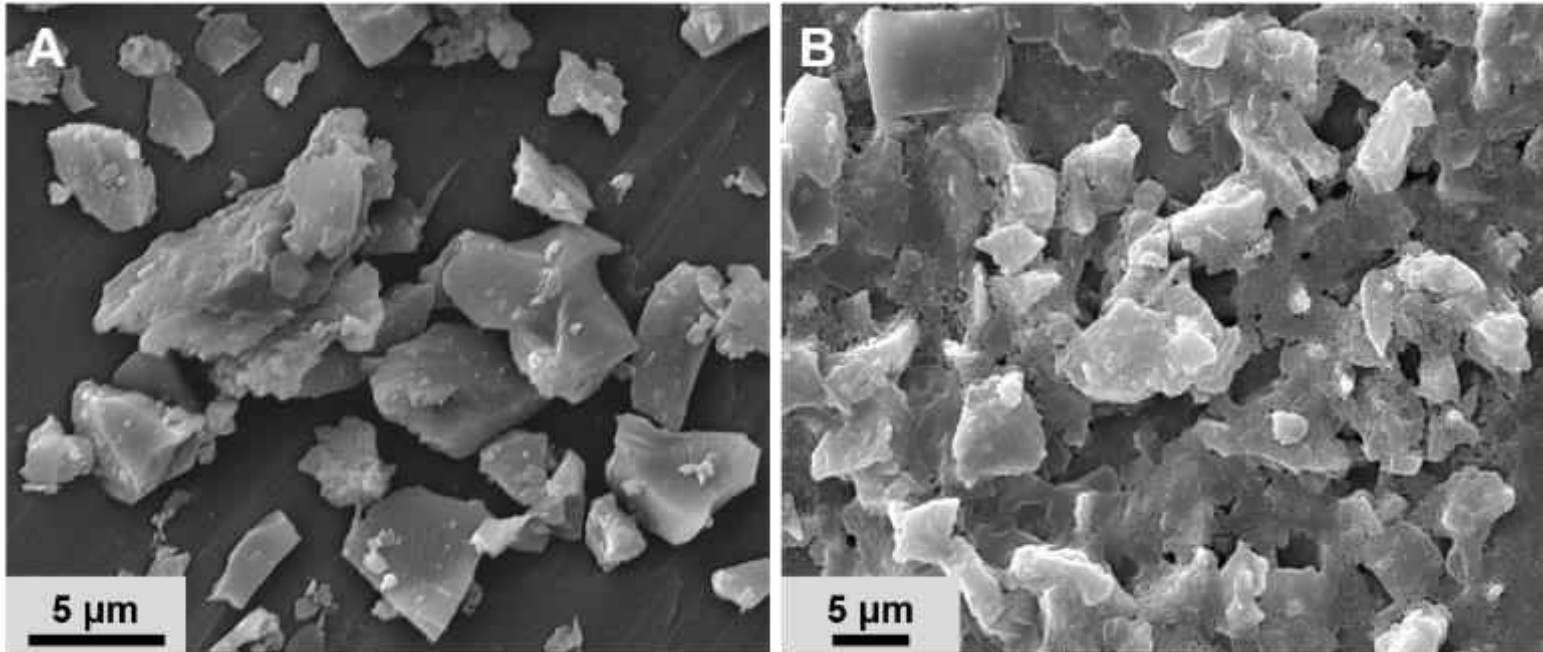
SFE (J/m^2)	Slab					
	x	z	w/o H-atom	1 H-atom	2 H-atoms	E
	0.0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	0.5	0.5	-1.21	-0.93	-0.88	-1.20
	0.5	0.0	1.20	1.18	0.90	1.12
	0.0	0.5	-0.07	0.89	-0.83	-0.09



Mass Spectrometry of the Fragments

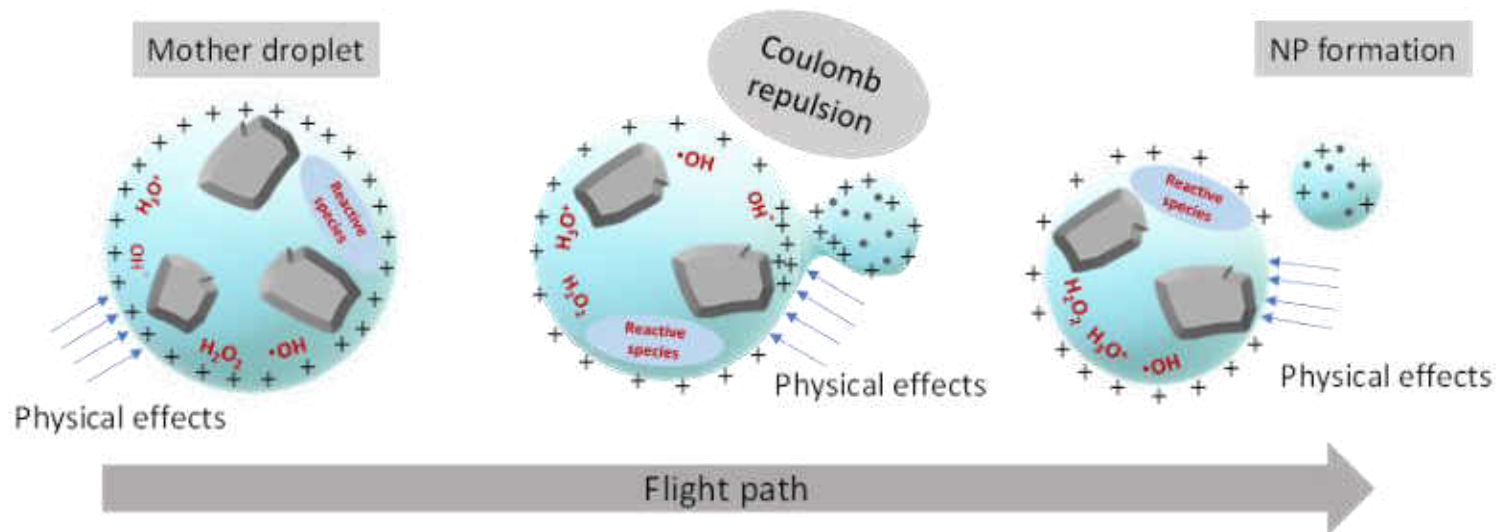


Effect of charged microdroplets on quartz



Increased surface roughness after the spray

Mechanism of nanoparticle formation



Rayleigh, On the
equilibrium of liquid
conducting masses
charged with electricity,
Philosophical Magazine,
1882

$$Q = 8\pi (\epsilon_0 \gamma R^3)^{1/2}$$

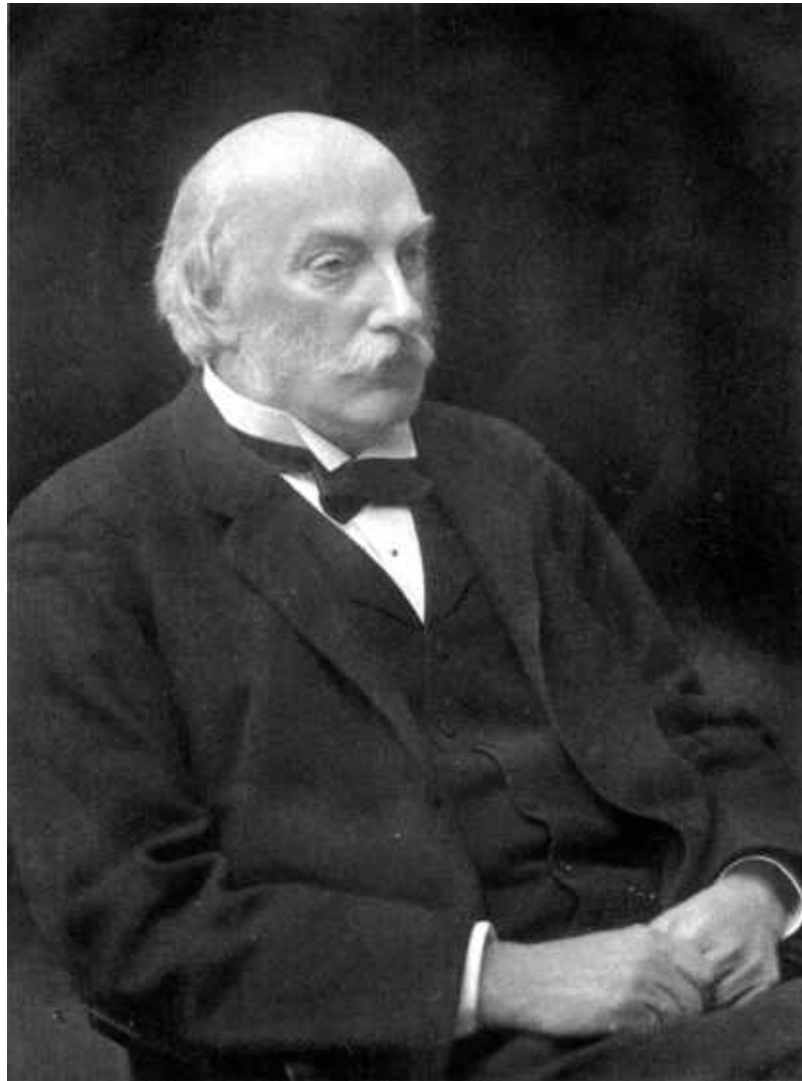
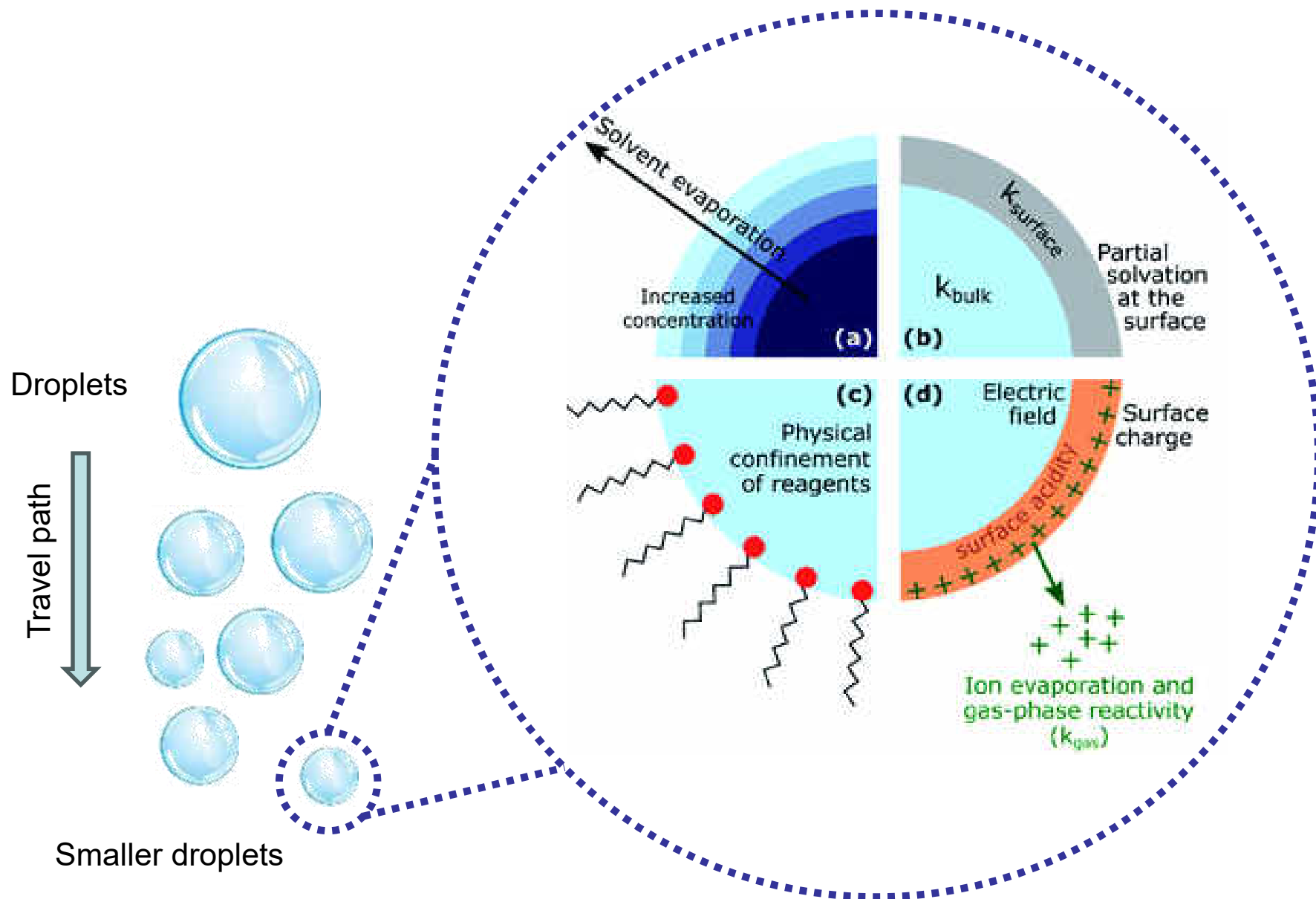


Image from Wikipedia

Understanding Microdroplets



PERSPECTIVES

CHEMISTRY

Breaking down microdroplet chemistry

Charged microdroplets accelerate mineral disintegration

By R. Graham Cooks and Dylan T. Holden

Charged microdroplets are commonly observed in clouds, sea spray, and other natural aerosols. The chemistry that occurs at the air-water interface of these droplets is often distinct from what is observed in bulk solution, which is of considerable interest because chemical reactions can be accelerated at this boundary (1, 2). This may have implications for environmental processes such as the weathering of rocks, which contributes to soil formation. On page 102 of this issue, Spoorthi *et al.* (3) report that micrometer-scale mineral particles can rapidly break down into nanoparticles when in charged aqueous microdroplets (see the figure). This points to a potential role for atmospheric water droplets in the natural disintegration of minerals.

To examine material degradation, Spoorthi *et al.* borrowed methodology used to accelerate bond-forming chemical reactions. By spraying an aqueous suspension of microparticles of natural minerals, the authors produced nanoparticles of minerals in high yield. Specifically, Spoorthi *et al.* used an electrospray device to emit a jet of liquid droplets (by applying high voltage) containing mineral particles of natural quartz, ruby, or synthetic alumina that ranged in size from 1 to 5 μm in diameter. The authors observed the production of nanoparticles that were 5 to 10 nm in diameter. Moreover, the fragmentation occurred in approximately 10 ms.

Such material degradation and chemical synthesis experiments are united by the extremes of chemical reactivity that occur at the air-water interface, where reagents are partially solvated (4). Whether formed through nebulization, splashing from a surface, or other means, microdroplet populations will include droplets with nonzero net charges. The small radius of curvature in a microdroplet produces a very strong electric field (5) that can support a double layer of electric charge at the air-water interface. The change in geometry (radius of curvature)

converts a two-dimensional air-water interface with limited electric field into a sphere with an electric field of a strength approaching the order of chemical bond energies (3 to 4.5 eV/Å). Coulombic fission (the splitting of charged microdroplets due to excess charge overcoming the surface tension) and evaporative processes further increase the surface area, reduce the radius of curvature, and augment the surface electric field of the droplet.

The unusual chemical nature of the air-water interface results in much remarkable chemistry. For example, amino acids in water undergo dehydration to form peptides in this environment (6), whereas bulk water simply solvates amino acids. The superacidic interface activates amino acids and removes water to yield peptides. In addition to such acid-base reactions, redox chemistry results from the formation of strong oxidants and reductants from water at the interface. For example, a high hydronium ion (H_3O^+) concentration at the interface derived from fleetingly charged surface water molecules ($\text{H}_2\text{O}^+/\text{H}_2\text{O}^-$) coexists with oxidative species such as hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2) and $\text{OH}^\bullet$. These redox species enable a variety of spontaneous chemical trans-

formations, including carbon-oxygen (O) bond cleavage in phosphonates, which yields the corresponding phosphonic acid (7), and in the Baeyer-Villiger oxidation of aryl ketones to give esters (8). These considerations thereby enable simultaneous acid-base and oxidation-reduction chemistry in a single population of droplets (7).

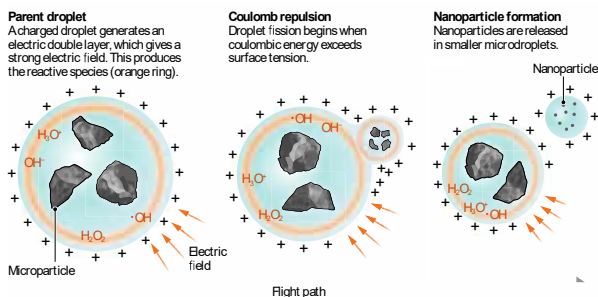
Through their study, Spoorthi *et al.* have added natural weathering to a list of processes in which accelerated interfacial microdroplet reactions play an important role. Other processes include those in the atmosphere, both natural and anthropogenic, the latter typified by pollution that involves nitrate photochemistry (9). A substantial number of accelerated catalyst-free microdroplet reactions form the basis for chemical syntheses that generate a variety of small molecules (10), including the facile and high-throughput functionalization of drugs. This latter approach can be scaled up so that microdroplet reactions produce substantial small-molecule products. Prebiotic chemistry, including peptide and nucleotide formation, is another process that is accelerated at the microdroplet air-water interface (11).

The millisecond timescale of quartz degradation reported by Spoorthi *et al.* matches the known microsecond-to-millisecond timescale for accelerated bond-formation and bond-cleavage chemical reactions in microdroplets (7). This reinforces the conclusion that the chemical basis for accelerated weathering lies in the powerful acidic and hydrolytic nature of the air-water interface. The authors further suggest a role for the superacid interface in inducing slippage at crystal plane boundaries in quartz and ruby fragmentation. Their simulations show that individual protons inserted into the slip configuration mineral

Micro-to-nano transitions in minerals at the air-water interface

Reactions that promote mineral disintegration are accelerated at the air-water interface of microdroplets.

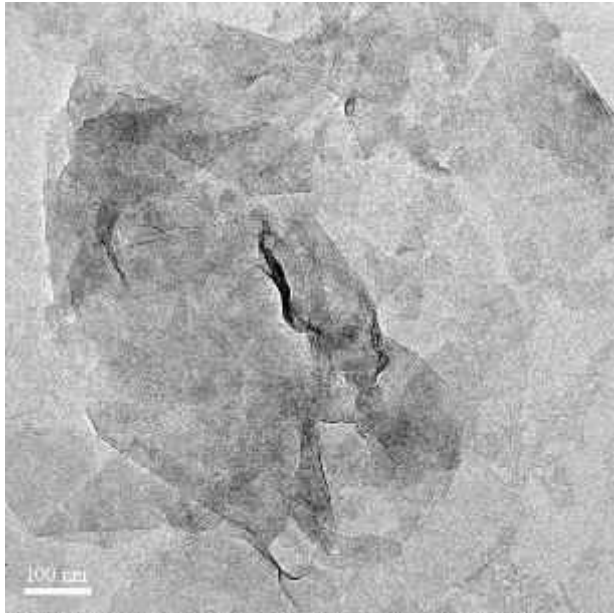
Key reactive species are the result of the effects of a high electric field at the surface of the water droplets.



Department of Chemistry, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA. Email: cooks@purdue.edu



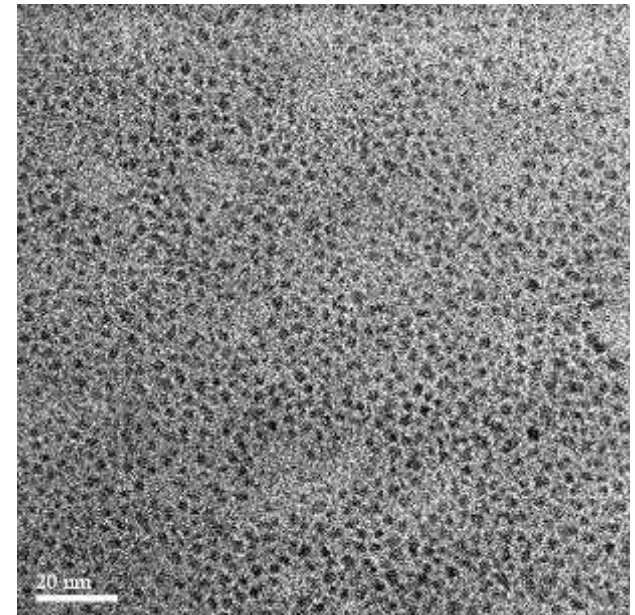
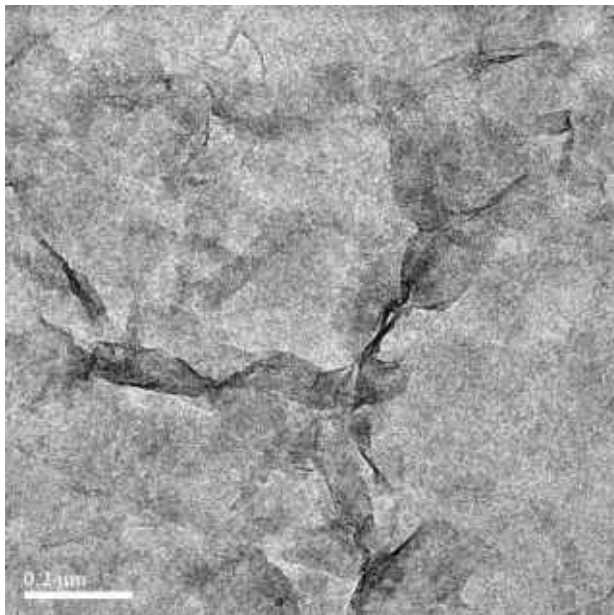
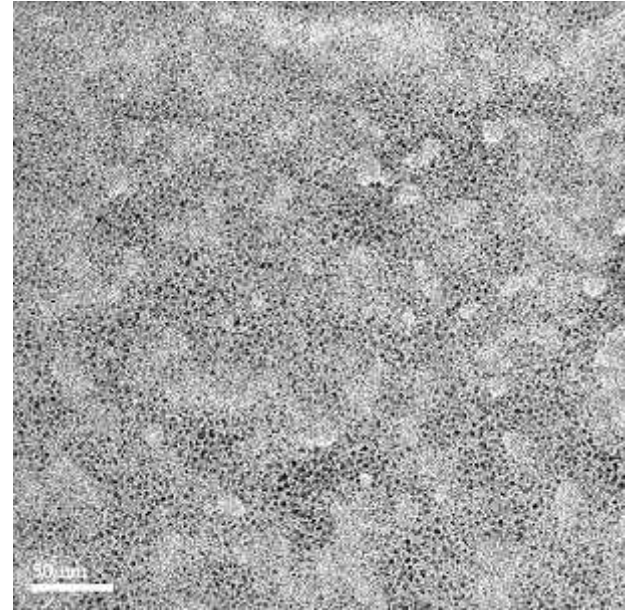
MoS₂ Nanosheets



Ambient electrospray



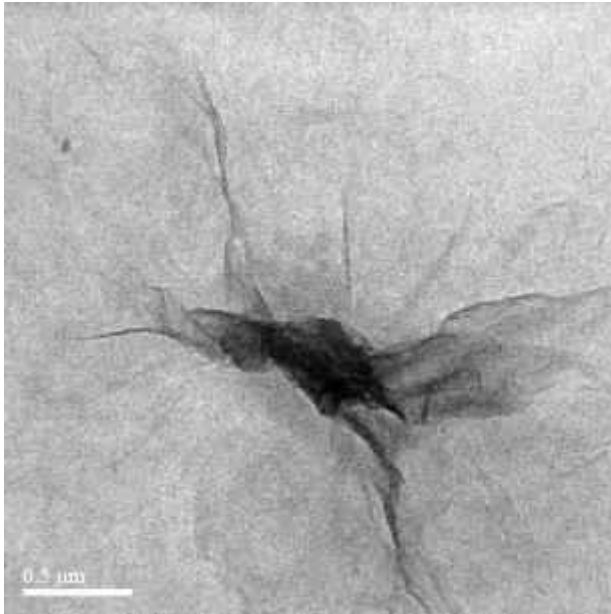
Solvent: Water
Potential: 3.0 kV



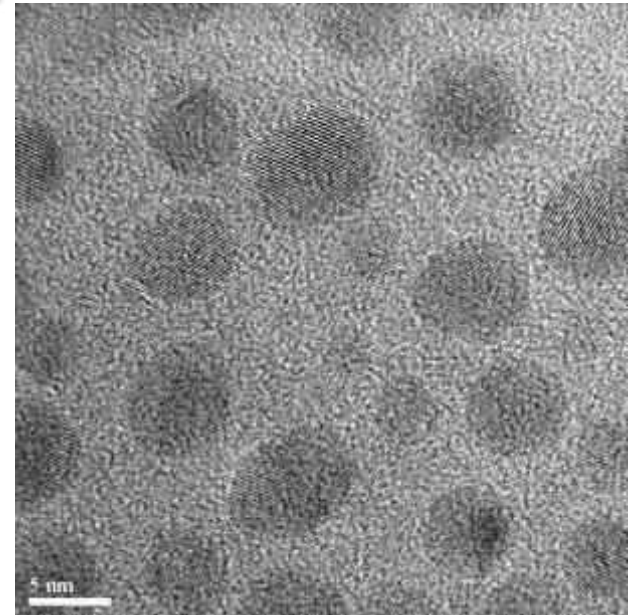
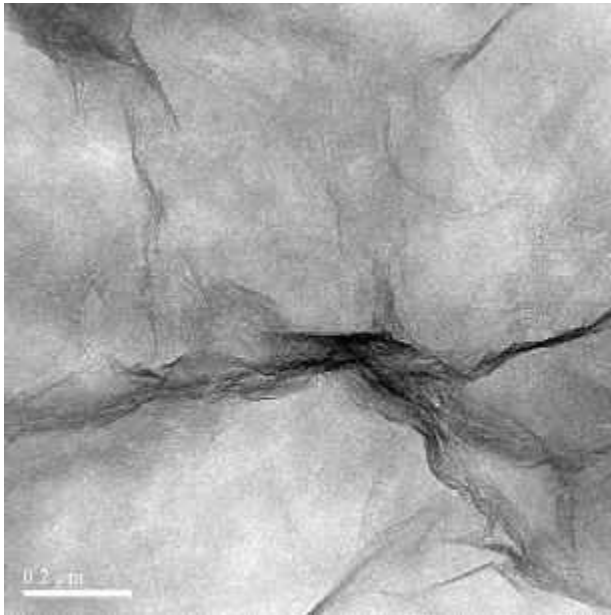
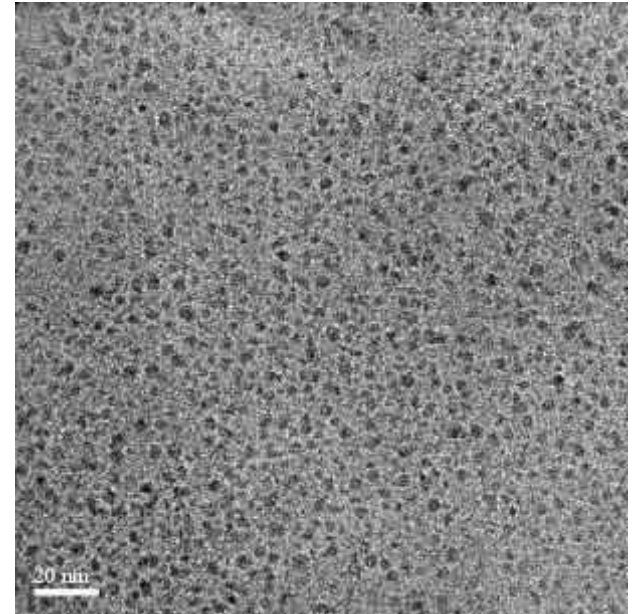
MoS₂ Nanosheet

MoS₂ Nanoparticles

Graphene Oxide



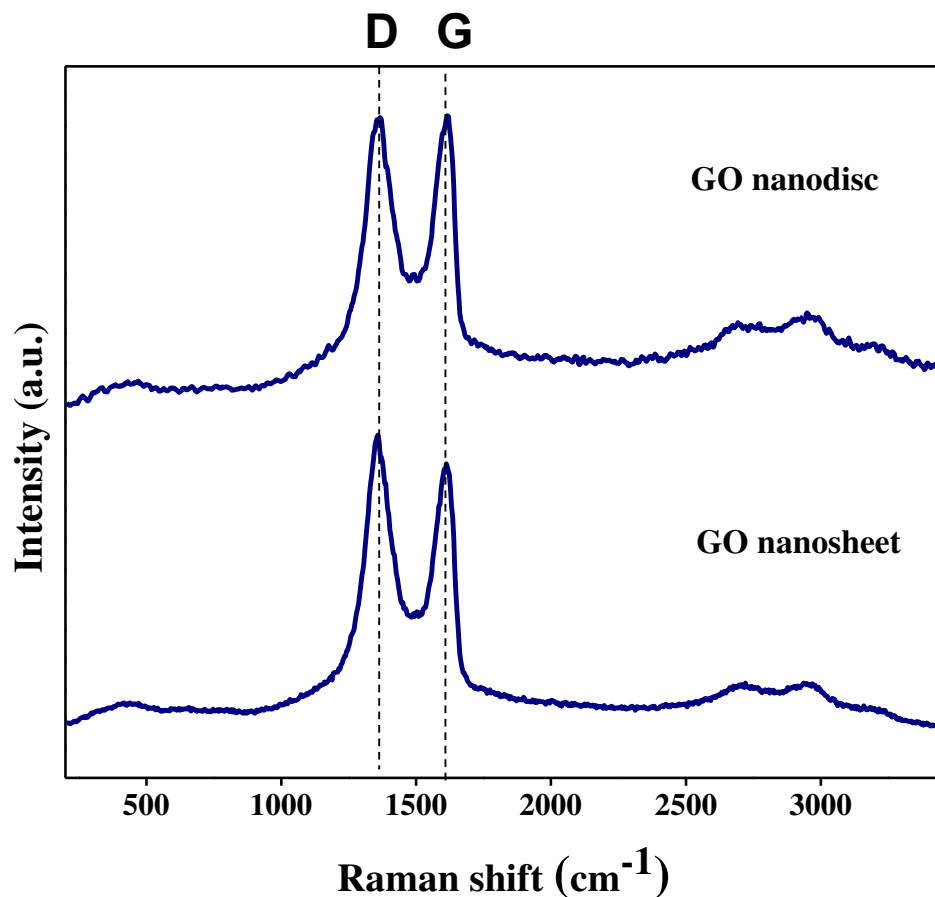
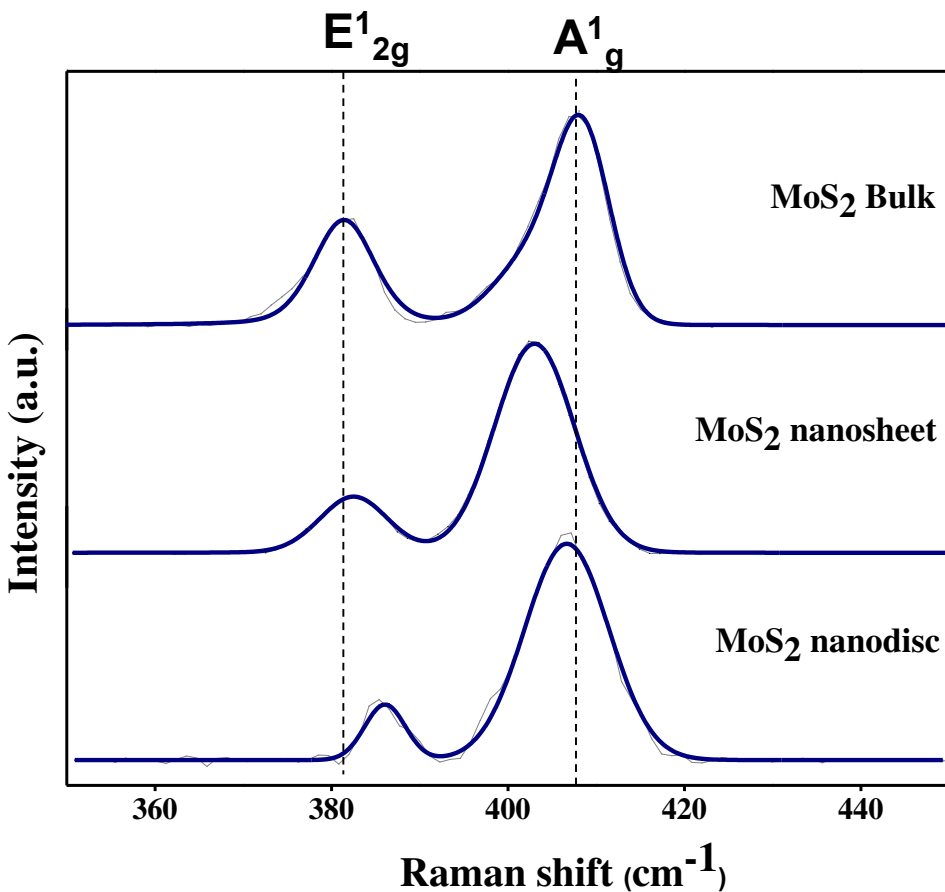
**Ambient
electrospray**



Graphene oxide nanosheet

Graphene oxide nanodiscs

Raman Spectra of MoS₂ and Graphene Oxide Nanosheets

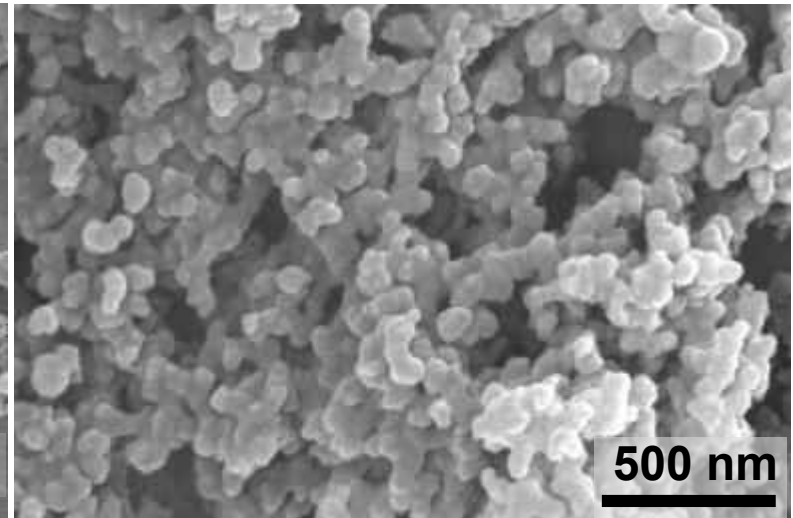
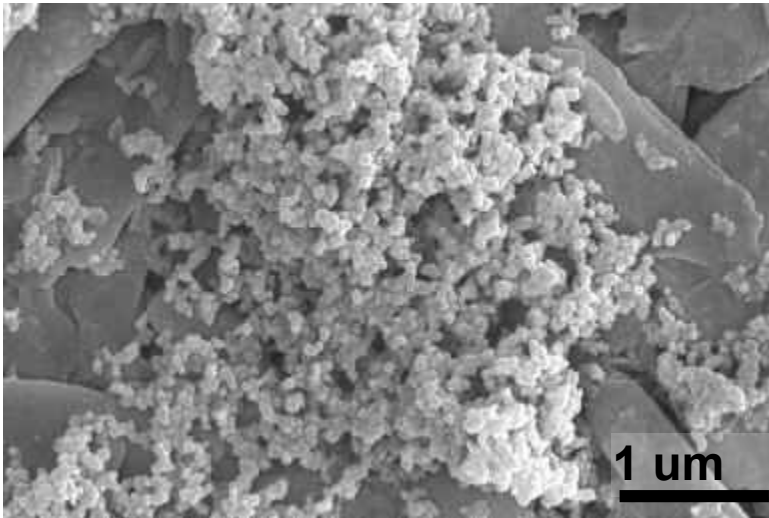
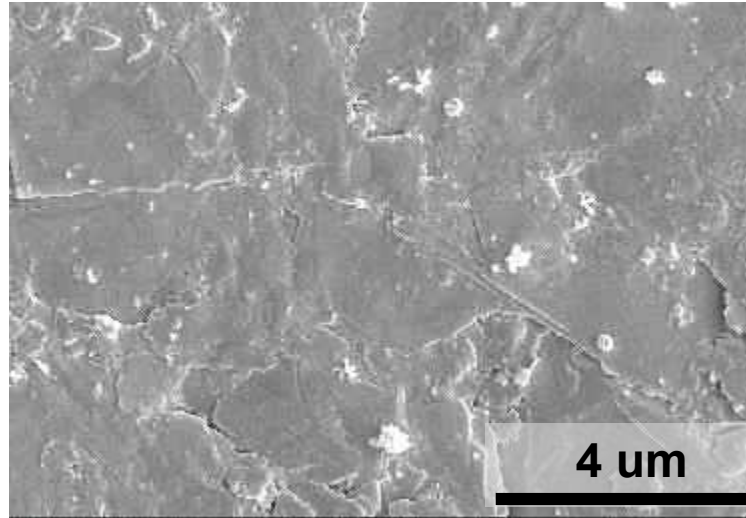


Relative peak intensity

	E^1_{2g} (cm ⁻¹)	A^1_g (cm ⁻¹)
Bulk	381.34	407.67
NS	382.88	402.95
ND	386.01	406.67

Charged Droplets on MoS₂ Bulk

Bulk MoS₂ surface
before the spray



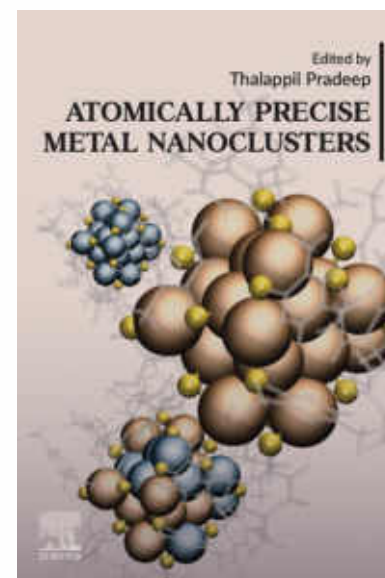
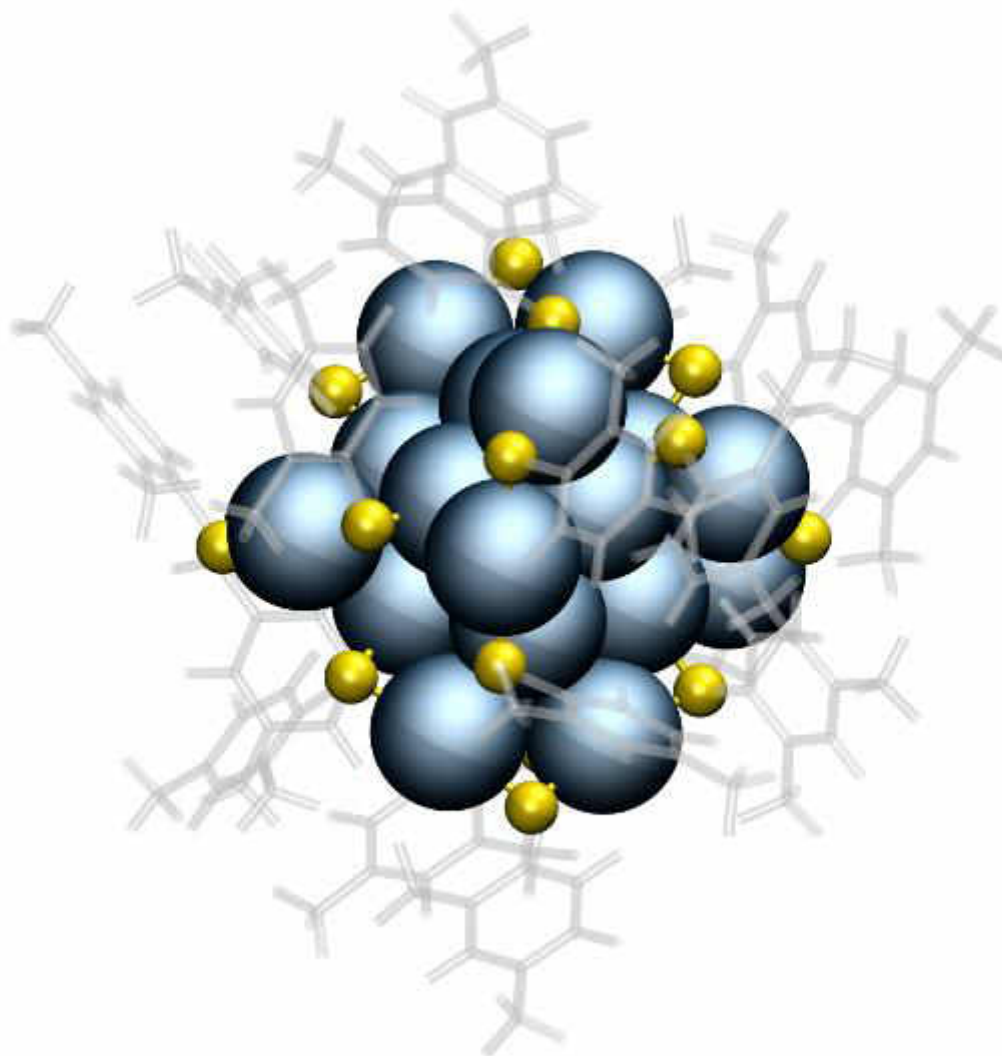
Appearance of microspheres after the water spray on MoS₂

Marcasite, FeS_2



Image from Wikipedia

New molecules



Au_{25} , Ag_{25} , Ag_{29}

Biopolymer-reinforced synthetic granular nanocomposites for affordable point-of-use water purification

Mohan Udhaya Sankar¹, Sahaja Aigal¹, Shihabudheen M. Maliyekkal¹, Amrita Chaudhary, Anshup, Avula Anil Kumar, Kamalesh Chaudhari, and Thalappil Pradeep²

¹Unit of Nanoscience and Thematic Unit of Ex

Edited by Eric Hoek, University of California,

Creation of affordable materials for cons water is one of the most promising way drinking water for all. Combining the composites to scavenge toxic species other contaminants along with the ab affordable, all-inclusive drinking water without electricity. The critical proble synthesis of stable materials that can uously in the presence of complex s drinking water that deposit and caus surfaces. Here we show that such can be synthesized in a simple and effective out the use of electrical power. The na sand-like properties, such as higher shea forms. These materials have been used water purifier to deliver clean drinking ily. The ability to prepare nanostructu ambient temperature has wide releva water purification.

hybrid | green | appropriate technology | frugal science | developing world

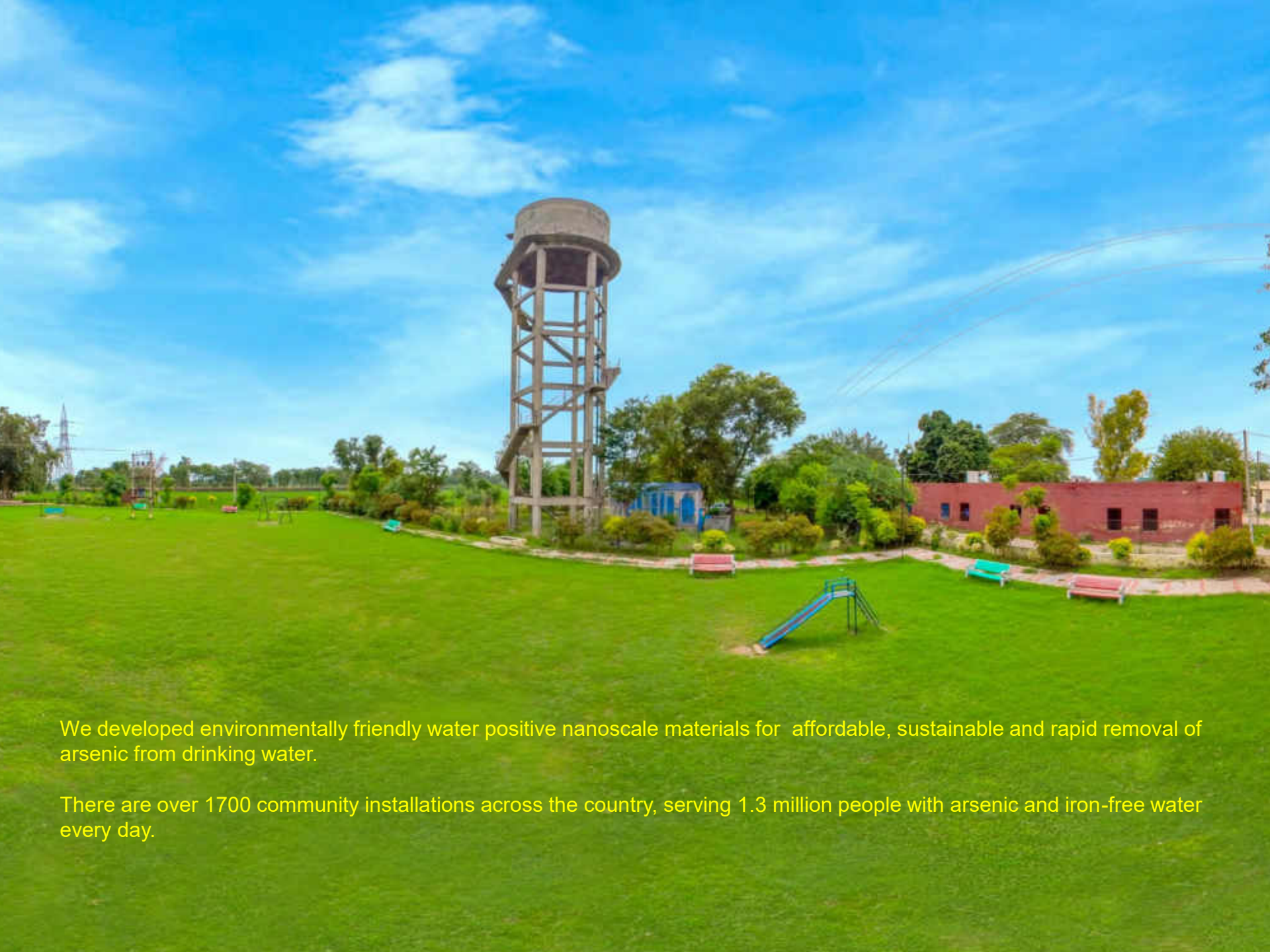


Madras, Chennai 600 036, India

(received for review November 21, 2012)

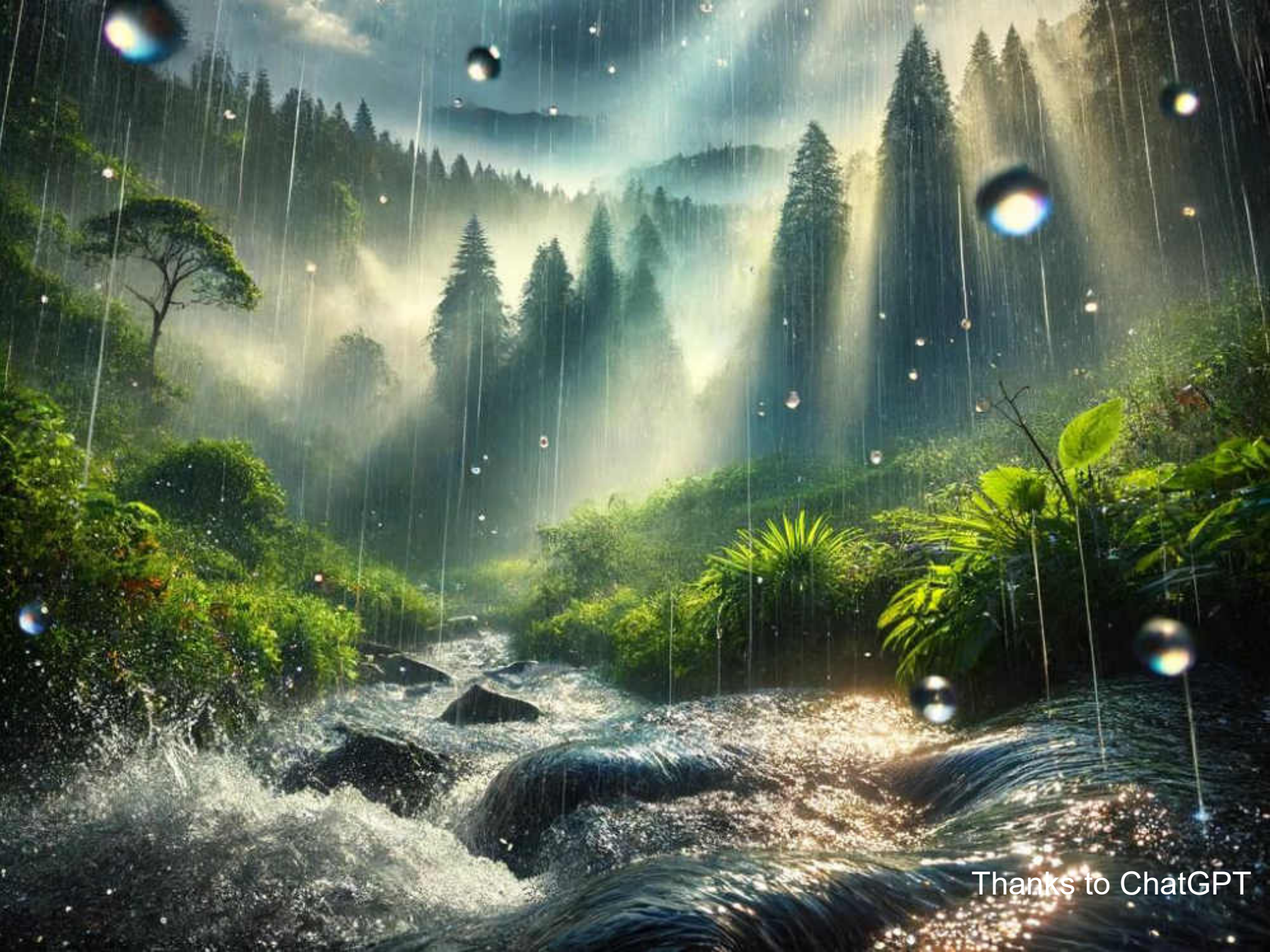
available; and (c) continued retention matrix is difficult. ate a unique family of nanocrystalline n granular composite materials pre- ature through an aqueous route. The mposition is attributed to abundant -O on chitosan, which help in the crys- oxide and also ensure strong covalent : surface to the matrix. X-ray photo-) confirms that the composition is rich ps. Using hyperspectral imaging, the aching in the water was confirmed. to reactivate the silver nanoparticle ial antimicrobial activity in drinking osites have been developed that can its in water. We demonstrate an af- device based on such composites de- und undergoing field trials in India, as :spread eradication of the waterborne

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



We developed environmentally friendly water positive nanoscale materials for affordable, sustainable and rapid removal of arsenic from drinking water.

There are over 1700 community installations across the country, serving 1.3 million people with arsenic and iron-free water every day.



Thanks to ChatGPT

Vision

Make soil using
processed wastewater
and make deserts
bloom.



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Conclusions

Natural minerals break spontaneously in charged water microdroplets

It occurs only in water... so far

Studies on a variety of materials

Facile due to proton-induced slip

Detailed investigations are essential to know more

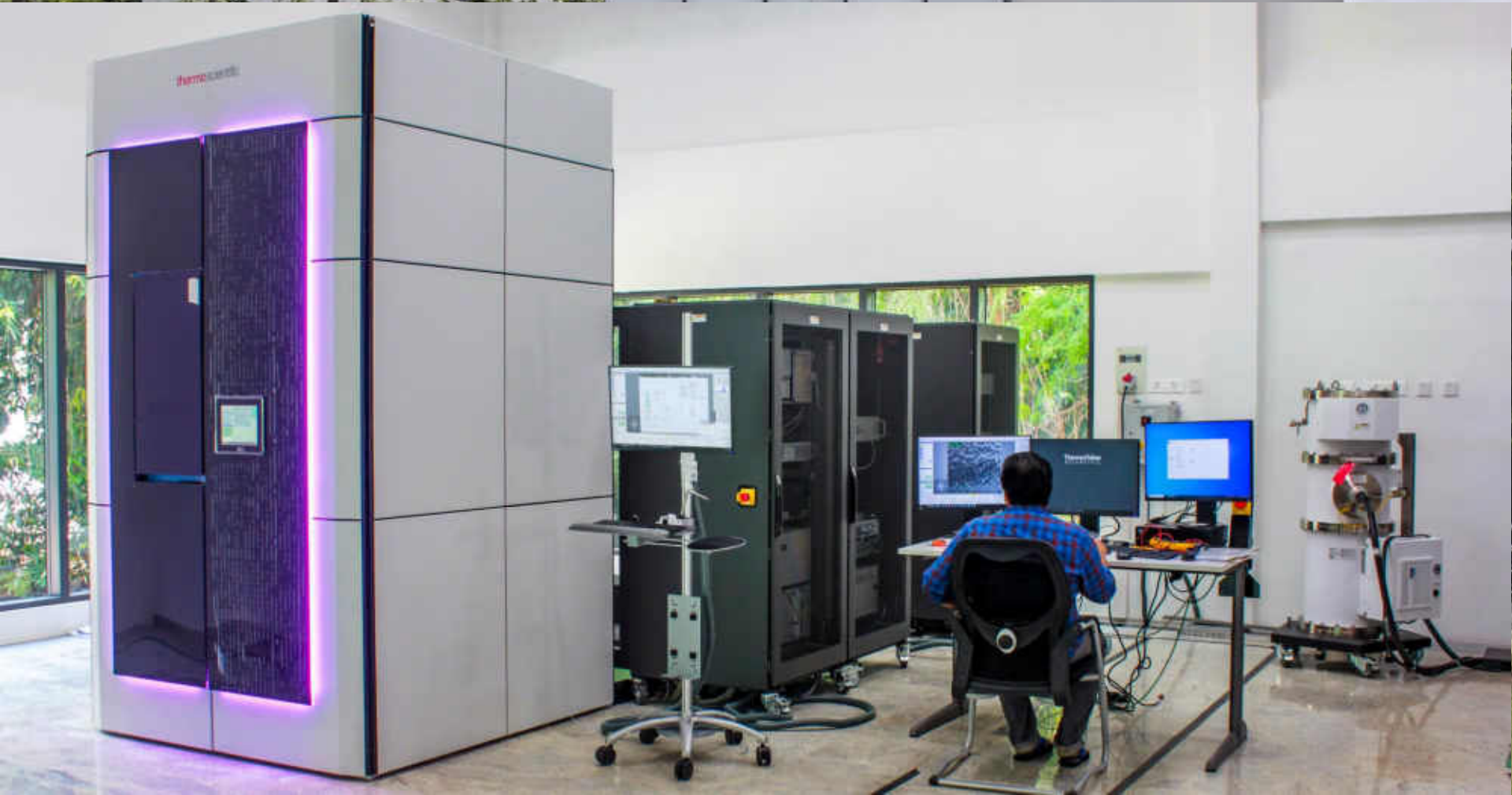
Implications to the production of specific nanomaterials and soil in general



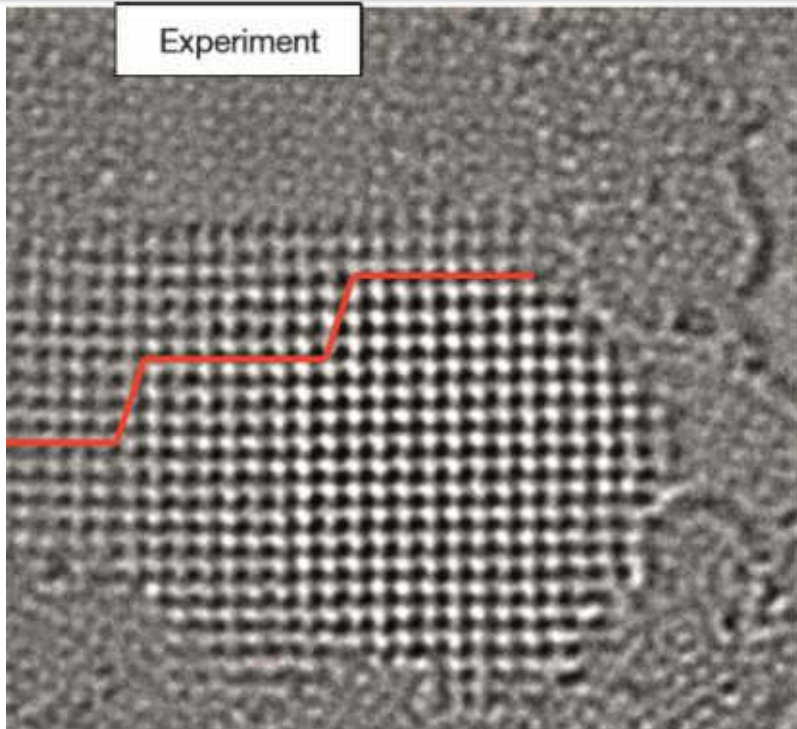
International Centre for Clean Water



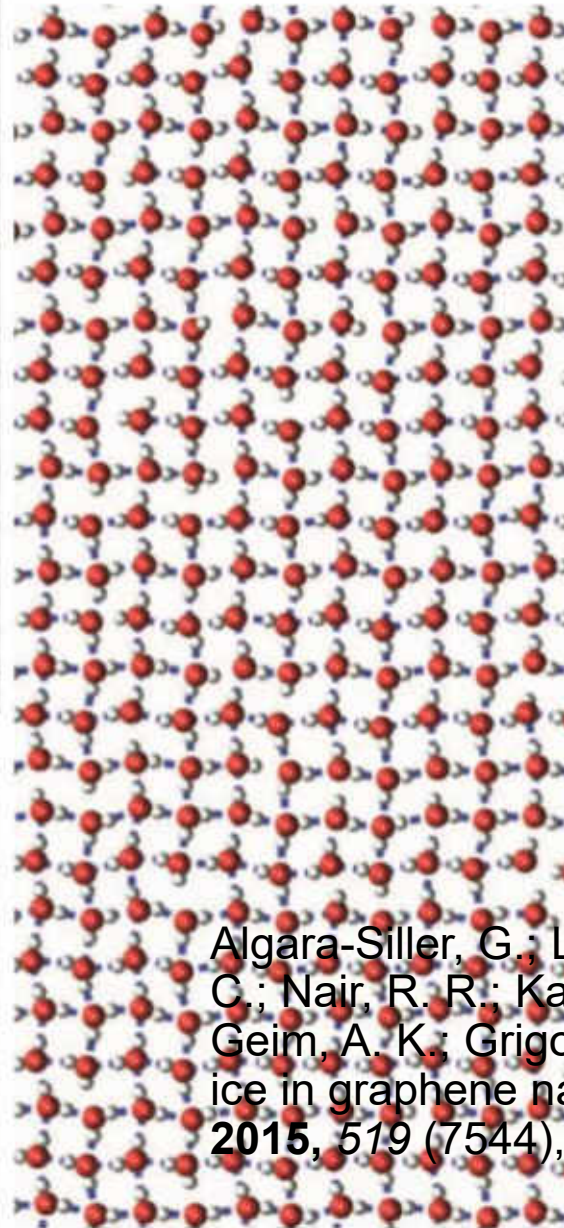
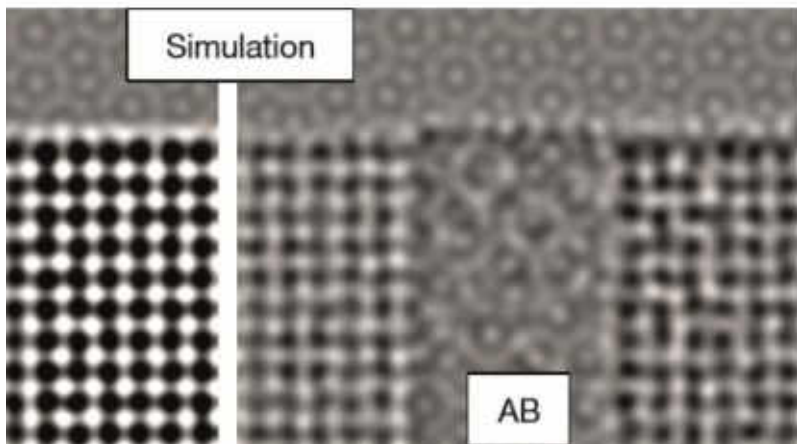
IIT Madras Research Park



Observing water



c



Algara-Siller, G.; Lehtinen, O.; Wang, F. C.; Nair, R. R.; Kaiser, U.; Wu, H. A.; Geim, A. K.; Grigorieva, I. V., Square ice in graphene nanocapillaries. *Nature* **2015**, 519 (7544), 443-445.





Department of Science and Technology

Institute of Eminence

Thank you all

