Atomic force microscopy reconstruction of G-wire DNA

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I. INTRODUCTION

Evidence of artificial broadening of biomolecular shape due to finite apical tip geometry has been observed since the first atomic force microscope (AFM) images of plasmid DNA were made.1–8 Numerous algorithms have been developed to compensate for tip broadening.9–15 In this article we apply the procedure of Miller and co-workers11 to the reconstruction of images of a novel form of quadruplex DNA (the “G wire”) was coadsorbed with 7.6-nm-diam colloidal gold probe calibration standards and examined by AFM. After the probe apices were reconstructed from AFM images of the standards, the artificial broadening of the coadsorbed G-wire DNA was removed, resulting in more reliable image interpretation. Using simple geometric models, a favorable comparison between observed and modeled G-wire cross sections suggests that reconstructions removed about 25% of the tip-broadened AFM image in these studies. © 1996 American Vacuum Society.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

G₄T₂G₄ oligonucleotide (Midland Certified), or “oligo,” was purified on a 12% polyacrylamide gel. The oligo was cut from the gel, diced, eluted into 10 mM Tris-EDTA (pH 7.5), and the gel fragments centrifuged out. The supernatant was then purified on a C18 column to remove excess salt. The oligo was eluted in 50/50 methanol/water and dried down. The dried sample was resuspended in water, incubated at 95 °C to fully denature the molecule, and diluted (0.25 μg/ml) into self-assembly buffer (10 mM Tris pH 7.5, 5 mM MgCl₂, and 50 mM NaCl or KCl) and incubated for 24 h at 37 °C. G wires that form in this time can be diluted 1:100 into an AFM buffer (10 mM Tris, 1 mM MgCl₂, pH 7.5) with 1:10 stock dilution of gold particles (Ted Pella, Inc.) and directly deposited onto freshly cleaved mica. After incubating 5 min, excess sample was rinsed off the mica with 1 ml distilled water, vigorously blown dry with nitrogen, and imaged with a Nanoscope III AFM (Digital Instruments). Images were taken in Tapping Mode™ in dry air (relative humidity <10%) with single crystal silicon 125-μm-long tapping tips (Nanoprobes). The images were flattened to make the background have the same height (gray scale) and were then reconstructed with an algorithm developed by Miller and co-workers.11

Volume measurements were made using macros developed for NIH Image, version 1.57. The volume measurements are taken by defining the substrate’s background out of 256 gray levels and summing up the area under each pixel of the sample above the background, calibrated to the known vertical height scale. Consequently, the largest source of error comes from defining the substrate plane (a minimum of 10% in these volume measurements). The lateral and vertical height calibrations have less than 5% error and are ignored in

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A fundamental problem in atomic force microscopy (AFM) image interpretation is distinguishing features arising from tip geometry from true molecular detail. In this study, a novel 4-stranded form of DNA (the “G wire”) was coadsorbed with 7.6-nm-diam colloidal gold probe calibration standards and examined by AFM. After the probe apices were reconstructed from AFM images of the standards, the artificial broadening of the coadsorbed G-wire DNA was removed, resulting in more reliable image interpretation. Using simple geometric models, a favorable comparison between observed and modeled G-wire cross sections suggests that reconstructions removed about 25% of the tip-broadened AFM image in these studies. © 1996 American Vacuum Society.
The black scale bar is 100 nm for all six panels.

The gold particle’s height is in contact with the tip. In our system, the G wire averaged 2.0 ± 0.5 nm and the gold particles were 7.6 ± 0.9 nm.

The measurement of the G wire and gold particles are subtracted from the total volume. The resulting number is then divided by the total linear length of G wire in the image field to obtain the raw and reconstructed volume/unit length (cross section) of G-wire DNA.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A typical image of G-wire DNA coadsorbed with 7.6 ± 0.9 nm colloidal gold particles is shown in Fig. 1(a). Figures 1(b) and 1(c) are typical reconstructed images of Fig. 1(a) employing particles b and e. The streaks adjacent to two of the larger particles are artifacts due to the reconstruction process. The reconstruction procedure is a two step process:

1. Reconstruct the tip from a characteristic gold particle (the chosen gold particle should have symmetry similar to other gold particles in the field to ensure reasonable reconstructions). The gold particles must be at least three times the average height of the sample, since only about a third of the gold particle’s height is in contact with the tip. In our system, the G wire averaged 2.0 ± 0.5 nm and the gold particles were 7.6 ± 0.9 nm.

2. Reconstruct the image based on the known tip shape. The reconstruction starts from the tallest feature on the field and moves in a single pass parallel to the slow scan axis followed by reconstruction of each fast scan line. The assumption is that the gold particle from which the tip is reconstructed is the tallest structure. Consequently, other tall structures, if not nearby, can give rise to reconstruction artifacts (streaks).

Figure 1 compares a raw and reconstructed field of G-wire DNA and gold. Note the marginal slimming of the G-wire DNA that can be seen in the top view images of Figs. 1(b) and 1(c). The vertical gray scale (0–5 nm) in all six images is set to enhance the height of the DNA, making the gold particles appear to be bleached out. The black scale bar is 100 nm for all six panels.
TABLE I. The top three rows contain representative contact heights, theoretical raw, and reconstructed G-wire DNA volume/unit lengths (cross sections), difference between the two areas, and estimated unreconstructed volume of an average gold particle. The bottom rows are experimental results and error with details explained by the alphabetical superscripts. Calculations based on $2.0 \pm 0.5$ nm G wires and $7.6 \pm 0.9$ nm average height of gold.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$R_i$(nm)</th>
<th>$h$(nm)</th>
<th>$A_i$(nm$^2$)</th>
<th>$A_r$(nm$^2$)</th>
<th>$\Delta A$(nm$^2$)</th>
<th>$V_r$(nm$^3$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20.000</td>
<td>19.048</td>
<td>19.070</td>
<td>13.847</td>
<td>5.223</td>
<td>3169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.000</td>
<td>18.182</td>
<td>13.255</td>
<td>10.876</td>
<td>2.379</td>
<td>1354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.0000</td>
<td>16.667</td>
<td>9.0267</td>
<td>8.7875</td>
<td>0.0239</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5±1.1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>12.4±1.6</td>
<td>9.4±1.3</td>
<td>3.0±0.6</td>
<td>1100±140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[a\]Calculated by subtracting reconstructed from raw data cross sections.

\[b\]Directly measured from second difference images [Fig. 2(d) or 2(c)].

\[c\]Directly measured from second difference images [Figs. 2(b)−2(c)−2(d)−2(c)=2(f)].

ing tip geometry or nonuniformity of the gold particles. It is difficult to determine the predominating factor. Though it is well known that the geometric characteristics of colloidal gold particles are batch dependent, our batch was rigorously characterized by transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and had a standard deviation of less than 10% both in size and ellipticity. Future efforts will be focused on employing other types of uniformly round standards. Colloidal gold has been used here because it is inexpensive, easy to coadsorb with a sample, and tends not to bind to the sample. Greater improvements in maintaining a standard spherical character of the tip, is that although the two reconstructions appear to have very consistent with other tip reconstructions from Fig. 2~ and 3~ shown are in excellent agreement.

Figure 3 compares reconstructed tip cross sections from two gold particles [Figs. 2(b) and 2(e)]. The notable feature is that although the two reconstructions appear to have very different surface topographies on the nanometer scale, their multiananometer scale features (radius of curvatures as a function of cross section viewpoint) are in excellent agreement. Each reconstruction is viewed from two orthogonal directions (indicated by the arrows). The radius of curvature from Figs. 3(b) and 3(e) both are about $8.5 \pm 1.0$ nm, whereas Figs. 3(c) and 3(f) are $5.0 \pm 1.0$ nm. Even at the extremes of the error limits, the two radii of curvature are distinct, and consistent with other tip reconstructions from Fig. 2 (data not shown), providing strong evidence for subtle asymmetry of the tip shape that is not immediately apparent from direct observation of the colloidal gold particles in the raw AFM image. In an effort to further determine the efficacy of the image reconstruction algorithm a simple geometric model, based on easily measured features of the G wires and tip, was employed to compare the reduction in the volume/unit length (cross section) of G wire due to the reconstruction process. The model was then compared with experimental data and found to be in good agreement.

IV. IMAGE RECONSTRUCTION MODEL

Figure 4(a) is a model of the key components for comparing with the area under reconstructed volume/unit length (cross section). $\mathcal{A}$ is the half-angle between the substrate normal and the line intersecting the tip’s hemispherical origin and the center of the G-wire DNA (modeled as a cylindrical rod lying flat on its side). $R_c$ is the radius of curvature of the tip, $H$ is the height of the DNA above the mica substrate, and $h$ is the height of the contact point between the tip and the center of the G-wire DNA.

![Figure 4](image-url)
on the DNA. Figure 4(b) is the unreconstructed cross section $A_u$ due to the tip’s apex mapping out the AFM image above the smaller G-wire DNA (black silhouette). Figure 4(c) is the reconstructed cross section $A_r$ of the AFM image when the shape of the tip is removed from Fig. 3(b). The black silhouette in the middle of Figs. 4(b) and 4(c) is the cross sectional shadow of the G-wire DNA expected for an ideal (delta function) tip normally incident upon the substrate. Notice that even after reconstruction, the majority of cross sectional area is largely represented by a region of lost information, where the apex of the tip is not in contact with sample.

In order to estimate the area under unreconstructed (raw) and reconstructed cross sections, the contact height and contact angle must be calculated in terms of $H$ and $R_c$:

$$h = \frac{2Rh}{2R_c + H}$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

$$\theta = 2 \cos^{-1}\left(\frac{R_c - h}{R_c}\right).$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

The unreconstructed cross sectional area from analytical geometry is [Fig. 4(b)]

$$A_u(\text{nm}^2) = \frac{R_c^2 \theta}{2} - (R - H) \sqrt{2Rh - H^2},$$  \hspace{1cm} (3)

where $\theta$ is in radians. The reconstructed area [Fig. 4(c)] is given by

$$A_r(\text{nm}^2) = (R + h) \sqrt{2Rh - h^2} - \frac{R_c^2 \theta}{2} + 2hH \sin\left(\frac{\theta}{2}\right).$$  \hspace{1cm} (4)

The unreconstructed volume surrounding a gold particle is the three dimensional analog of Eq. (3) and is given by

$$V_u = \frac{\pi}{3} H^2 (3R_c - H).$$  \hspace{1cm} (5)

The mailbox-shaped cross section under the G-wire DNA is estimated by a 2-nm-diam semicircular cap, $0.5\pi r^2$, with a rectangular base $2r^2 = 0.5\pi (1\text{ nm})^2 + 2\text{ nm}^2 = 3.6\text{ nm}^2$.

Table I summarizes the theoretical and experimental measurements of G-wire cross sections and colloidal gold unreconstructed volumes. No comparison of reconstructed particle volumes is made with theory because the reconstructed gold particles are made from extrapolated, rather than genuine, tip features. The basic observations are as follows:

(1) An estimate of the tip radius of curvature from the averaged unreconstructed reduction of colloidal gold volumes through Eq. (5) is $8.5 \pm 1.1$ nm and is in good agreement with the tip reconstructions of Figs. 3(b) and 3(e).

(2) For comparison purposes, three different estimates of raw and reconstructed cross sections are included based on tips with radius of curvature of 20, 10, and 5 nm (top three lines of Table I). The summarized experimental data are included in the last row and are within experimental error of the modeled cross sections.

The experimental data for raw and reconstructed cross sections fall between the theoretical estimates for 2-nm-diam (tall) G-wire DNA and tips with radius of curvature of 5 and 10 nm. The difference between raw and reconstructed cross sections ($3.0 \pm 1.0$ nm) falls between the 10 and 20 nm radius of curvature limit, though we would expect it to be lower based on the sharper tip geometries seen in Figs. 3(c) and 3(f). The smaller $2.5 \pm 1.0$ nm difference is an actual measure of the difference volume from Figs. 1(d) or 1(e). The large error overlaps the directly calculated difference. The cross section area difference of $0.2 \pm 0.4$ nm reflects a height comparison between Figs. 1(b) and 1(c) or 1(d) and 1(e). The error being larger than the volume measurement suggests that reconstructions from different particles give similar results.

Image reconstruction provides a small improvement (25%) of the reduction in volume due to tip geometry for G-wire DNA. The area of the region of indeterminacy [Fig. 3(c)] is larger ($5.8\text{ nm}^2$ for our system) than the area under the actual sample (about $3.6\text{ nm}^2$) and would continue to deteriorate with increasing sample height. Identification of this region of indeterminacy remains an area of current research in our laboratory. An indication of how little of the sample is imaged by the tip can be seen in Table I under column labeled $h$, the height of the sample where the tip makes contact. Even for a very sharp tip (5 nm), only the top sixth of a 2 nm tall sample is imaged. The solution to high resolution AFM imaging of larger biomolecules still awaits improvements in tip manufacturing and sharpening processes. The reconstruction algorithm used here may have some advantage in an area of experimentation where subtle changes in tip shape, perhaps due to adsorption/desorption processes, need to be detected. Further improvements in calibration standards will be needed for more reliable tip and image reconstruction.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Image reconstructions of G-wire DNA were made using colloidal gold standards to reconstruct the tip shape. The uniformity of the reconstructions could be seen through comparisons of the tip geometry and differences between volume/unit lengths of G wire reconstructed from different gold particles. A 25% reduction in volume in the reconstructed images were obtained. For the tips used in this study, the region of indeterminacy, i.e., the region of sample not contacted by the tip’s apex, was larger than the volume of the modeled sample.

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