Hot atom chemistry: Oxygen at stepped platinum surfaces

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ABSTRACT

It is a paradigm in chemistry that chemical reactions are mainly governed by thermodynamics. Within this assumption, reaction rates can be derived from transition state theory which requires a quasi-equilibrium between reactants and activated transition state complexes that is achieved through friction. However, to reach thermal equilibrium through friction takes some time. Here we show, based on ab initio molecular dynamics simulations of the interaction of molecular oxygen with stepped Pt surfaces, that chemical reactions in heterogeneous catalysis can occur in a non-equilibrium fashion when the excess kinetic energy upon entering the potential well of a reaction intermediate is large enough.

1. Introduction

Our basic understanding of chemical reactions in the presence of a catalyst is based on thermodynamic concepts. Complex reactions can consist of several elementary reaction steps which are each characterized by a reactant and a product state that are typically separated by an activation barrier. Usually it is assumed that the redistribution of excess kinetic energy is much faster than the propagation from one reaction intermediate to the next [1]. Then chemical reactions occur at a characteristic reaction rate at a given temperature and chemical concentration that can be determined using transition state theory (TST) [2–5]. Its application demands a quasi-equilibrium between reactants and activated transition state complexes.

Reaching equilibrium has to be achieved through friction [4], i.e., through a strong coupling with the corresponding heat bath. This represents a crucial assumption underlying transition state theory. If there is only low-to-moderate coupling, transition state theory cannot be applied without refinement, as has already been discussed in the seminal work of Kramers [6]. Deviations from TST behavior have already been discussed for organic reaction intermediates [1]. Furthermore, so-called “hot atoms” dynamics have been invoked to explain experimental observations in the spatial distribution of dissociation products on surfaces [7,8]. On Al(111), according to scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) experiments, a small dosage of molecular oxygen exclusively leads to single oxygen atoms separated by an average distance of more than 80 Å [7]. Various mechanisms have been proposed to explain this surprising result. For example, subsurface migration of single oxygen atoms has been invoked [9]. However, also a hot atom-like mechanism based on a cannonball abstraction process [10,11] has been proposed. First-principles based molecular dynamics simulations including spin selection rules [12,13] have been able to reproduce and explain the experimentally observed small sticking probability at low kinetic energies [14,15], but have not found any indications for the cannonball mechanism. On Pt(111), molecular chemisorbed O2 molecules dissociate at higher temperatures with the oxygen atoms being preferentially two lattice sites apart from each other [8] which has also been explained by a hot atom mechanism and confirmed in kinetic Monte Carlo simulations [16]. A non-thermal, hot-molecule mechanism has also been proposed based on a combination of experiment and molecular dynamics simulations for the dissociative adsorption of methane on Ir (111) [17,18]. At low incident kinetic energy, methane molecules become trapped on Ir(111) in a physisorption well. However, according to molecular dynamics simulations, vibrationally pre-excited methane molecules can further react and adsorb dissociatively on Ir(111) before their vibrational and kinetic energy becomes accommodated [18]. Interestingly enough, in another computational study it was shown that most of the adsorptive behavior at low energies can also be explained based on thermal rate constants which assumes accommodation prior to any further reaction [19]. Still, in the kinetic simulations, vibrationally pre-excitation has not been considered, but it has been argued that vibrational excitation of physisorbed molecules should not change the rate constants too dramatically.

This indicates that the unequivocal direct identification of hot atom dynamics in reactions on surfaces by a combination of experiment and
theory is not easy to achieve. From an experimental point of view this is
due to the fact that the lifetime of dynamical hot atom events is typically
so short that these events can not be directly detected. As far as simu-
lations are concerned, in recent years significant progress has been made
by performing dynamical simulations that include the coupling either to a
phonon bath [15,20–24] or to electron-hole pairs [25–30]. Such simu-
lations have provided very valuable insights into hot atom dy-
namics in reactions at surfaces. Still it is fair to say that there is not yet a
general understanding about the factors promoting hot atom reactions at
surfaces.

In this study, I will demonstrate that hot atom dynamics plays a
critical role in the interaction of O\textsubscript{2} molecules with stepped Pt surfaces.
The adsorption and dissociation of oxygen on platinum surfaces are of
significant technological importance, as they not only constitute crucial
reaction steps in the car exhaust catalyst [31], but they are also relevant
for the oxygen reduction reaction in fuel cells in aqueous environments
[32–36]. Molecular oxygen can adsorb both molecularly and dis-
sociatively on Pt(111) [8,37]. At low surface temperatures, however,
oxygen does not directly dissociate on Pt(111), even if impinging with
high kinetic energies [8,38,39]. Rather, it initially absorbs molecularly due
to steric hindrance caused by the shape of the underlying potential en-
ergy surface, and only in a second step dissociates caused by thermal
fluctuations, as demonstrated in tight-binding molecular dynamics
studies [40,41].

Stepped surface are known to exhibit an enhanced catalytic activity
[42–45] due to the presence of low-coordinated sites which typically
interact strongly with adsorbates. In this context, also the interaction of
oxygen with stepped surface has raised a lot of interest [46–52]. A joint
experimental and theoretical study revealed that O\textsubscript{2} dissociation is
strongly favored at the step sites [48]. DFT calculations found that the
adsorption energies of oxygen atoms and molecules at Pt step sites are
significantly enhanced compared to terrace sites [48,53,54]. However,
interestingly enough the DFT calculations also showed that the
enhanced O\textsubscript{2} dissociation is not caused by a lowering of the local
dissociation barrier [48,53]. The exact O\textsubscript{2} dissociation mechanism at the
step sites could not be revealed in these studies, but it was speculated
that it still proceeds as a thermal equilibrium process rather than
through a hot precursor [48]. Here I will provide evidence based on \textit{ab initio}
molecular dynamics simulations (AIMD) of O\textsubscript{2} adsorption on
stepped Pt surfaces that it is indeed a hot atom or rather a hot precursor
mechanism that contributes to the preferential O\textsubscript{2} dissociation on
stepped Pt surfaces.

2. Computational details

In this work, the dynamics of oxygen adsorption on flat and stepped
Pt surfaces has been addressed by performing \textit{ab initio} molecular dy-
namics simulations on the basis of density functional theory (DFT). The
whole adsorption process including dissociation events and the accom-
modation of the hot atoms has been treated in a fully consistent manner.
The periodic DFT calculations have been performed using the Vienna \textit{ab initio}
simulation package (VASP) [55] in a spin-polarized fashion. The exchange-correlation effects have been described within the generalized
gradient approximation (GGA) using the RPBE functional [56], as this
functional yielded sticking probabilities of O\textsubscript{2}/Pt(111) [57] in better
agreement with the experiment than the PBE functional [58].

The one-electron valence states were expanded in plane waves with kinetic
energies up to the cutoff energy of 400 eV, and the ionic cores were
represented by projector augmented wave (PAW) potentials [59] as
constructed by Kresse and Joubert [60]. The Pt(111) surface was
modeled by a slab of five layers within a 3 × 3 geometry with the up-
permost two layers free to move while the three bottom layers were kept
fixed at the bulk geometry. For Pt(211) and Pt(533), 15-layer and
20-layer slabs, respectively, within a 1 × 3 geometry were used with the
 corresponding numbers of layers free to move. For all considered
surfaces, the integration over the first Brillouin zone was replaced by the
summation over 3 × 3 × 1 special k-points. The (211) surface consists of
(111) terraces that are three atom rows wide separated by (100)-like
steps. (533) surfaces are rather similar, the (111) terraces are just four
atoms wide. Note that it nowadays correspond to the state of the art to
include dispersion effects in the DFT calculation of molecule-surface
interactions [61,62]. However, it has recently been shown that disper-
sion corrections modify the surface reaction energy of O\textsubscript{2} dissociation
from the molecular precursor state on Pt(111) only by about 0.1 eV [63].
Therefore dispersion corrections have not been considered in this study
so that the computational setup is comparable to the one used in the
previous DFT studies addressing O\textsubscript{2} adsorption on stepped Pt surfaces
[48,53].

The AIMD simulations were performed using the Verlet algorithm
with a time step of 1 fs. The trajectories were started 5 Å above the
surface with random lateral position and orientation of the O\textsubscript{2} molecules
without considering any zero-point vibrational energy in the initial
conditions. This is motivated by the fact that the sum of all zero-point
energies typically stays approximately constant along the reaction
path for adsorption [64]. If not otherwise stated, the simulations were
performed within the microcanonical ensemble. However, additional
simulations were performed with the second Pt layer coupled to an
Anderson thermostat [57,65,66] with a collision rate of 0.02 fs\textsuperscript{−1}.

Note that we do not take into account the possible electron transfer
to electron-hole pairs. Its inclusion would lead to an additional energy
dissipation channel and thus further energy losses. The importance of
such electronically non-adiabatic effects on processes is not
fully clarified yet. However, according to a recent review [29] and
explicit studies employing so-called electron friction approaches [25,26,
67], non-adiabatic energy dissipation channels appear to have only
small effects on calculated sticking probabilities. Experimentally, such
non-adiabatic effects can be determined by measuring the so-called
chemisorrent [68] whose magnitude scales with the interaction
strength between adsorbate and surface [69]. The adsorption energy of
the O\textsubscript{2} molecular precursor state at the step sites of Pt surfaces of about
0.9 eV according to previous calculations [48] and our own results (see
Fig. 1) does not correspond to a particularly strong chemisorption.
Therefore we did not take into account any energy losses due to elec-
tronically non-adiabatic processes in this particular computational
study.

3. Results and discussion

In order to get a first impression of the interaction of O\textsubscript{2} with stepped
platinum surfaces, we probe the potential energy surface of O\textsubscript{2}/Pt(211)
by determining so-called elbow plots [70] and comparing them to pre-
vious results for the O\textsubscript{2}/Pt(111) system [57] (see Fig. 1). Such elbow
plots correspond to two-dimensional cuts through the six-dimensional
potential energy surfaces (PESs) as a function of the O\textsubscript{2} center of mass
distance from the surface and the O-O distance with the remaining de-
grees of freedom kept fixed. In Fig. 1, so-called t-b-t geometries have
been considered with the O\textsubscript{2} center of mass above a bridge site and the
oxygen atoms oriented towards the adjacent top positions in a flat ge-
ometry, as illustrated in the insets of Fig. 1. On Pt(211), the O\textsubscript{2} center of
mass is directly above the atoms at the upper side of the steps with the
molecular axis being parallel to the steps.

The pronounced minima 2 Å above the surface in the O\textsubscript{2} t-b-t geo-
metry with a slightly increased O-O bond length of about 1.8 Å
respond to chemisorbed superoxo-like (O\textsubscript{2}•) molecular states, as
derived from their magnetic moment in previous computational studies
[71,72]. Note that the shape of the two PESs is rather similar, however,
the depth of the molecular adsorption well differs significantly. Above
the step sites, molecular adsorption is about 0.7 eV stronger, confirming
the results of previous DFT studies [48,53]. The dissociation channel
towards larger O-O distance visible in Fig. 1 does not correspond to the
minimum energy path towards dissociation as in the determination of
this two-dimensional cut through the multi-dimensional potential energy surface only the O₂ center of mass distance from the surface and the O-O distance were varied whereas in a true determination of the energy minimum path all relevant degrees of freedom need to be relaxed. Still, the configuration of the transition state towards dissociation on Pt(211), as illustrated in Ref. [53], is rather close to the t-b-t geometry used in the determination of the elbow plots. Hence, the calculated results presented in Fig. 1 confirm the previous findings that the barriers for O₂ dissociation taken as the difference between the energy of the transition state towards dissociative adsorption and the bottom of the molecular adsorption well are almost the same on the flat and the stepped Pt surface [48, 53].

We now turn to the results of the AIMD simulations of O₂ molecules impinging on Pt(211) and Pt(533). For both surfaces, we have run more than 250 trajectories for each of the two initial kinetic energies $E_{\text{kin}} = 0.1$ eV and 0.8 eV with the Pt surface atoms initially at rest which corresponds to an initial surface temperature of $T_s = 0$ K in the microcanonical ensemble. This means that upon impinging on the surface, the impact of the O₂ molecule on the surface will lead to an energy transfer and a heating up of the surface. Assuming a full transfer of the initial kinetic energy plus the gain from the adsorption energy of about 0.8 eV in the precursor state to the surface and considering the fact that there are 18 moving Pt atoms per surface unit cell of the (211) surface, a maximum temperature rise of about 350 K could be possible. However, as we will see below, within the first 2.5 ps of the AIMD runs, the Pt atoms gained a total kinetic energy of about 0.3 eV corresponding to a temperature rise of about 130 K for the (211) surface. For Pt(211), we have additionally run simulations with an initial surface temperature of $T_s = 140$ K in the microcanonical ensemble, i.e., without invoking any thermostat, and with the Anderson thermostat coupled to the second-layer Pt atoms. This temperature has been chosen as the STM experiments [48] were performed at this temperature. In the calculations within the microcanonical ensemble, there will again be a net energy transfer to the surface upon the O₂ adsorption whereas in the calculations with the Anderson thermostat, the hot spot created upon O₂ adsorption will successively be cooled down. Only the second layer had

Fig. 1. Two-dimensional cuts through the six-dimensional potential energy surfaces of O₂/Pt (111) and O₂/Pt(211) as a function of the O-O distance and the O₂ center of mass distance from the surface in a t-b-t geometry (see text). The lateral position of the center of mass of the O₂ molecule and its orientation together with the surface unit cell are illustrated in the inserts. On Pt(211), the O₂ center of mass is directly above the atoms at the upper side of the steps with the molecular axis being parallel to the steps. The contour spacing is 0.1 eV.

Fig. 2. Trapping probability of O₂ impinging on Pt(111) [57], Pt(211) and Pt(533) as a function of the kinetic energy for normal incidence. Computational results derived from AIMD simulations for the surface initially at rest ($T_s = 0$ K), at initial surface temperatures of $T_s = 200$ K and $T_s = 140$ K, respectively, within the microcanonical ensemble and invoking an Anderson thermostat for the second layer Pt atoms.
been coupled to the thermostat in order to avoid any direct influence of velocity changes due to the thermostat on the adsorption dynamics. The resulting trapping probabilities are plotted in Fig. 2 where we also include the results of AIMD simulations for O$_2$/Pt(111) [57]. For Pt (111), the simulations at finite temperatures were performed at $T_s = 200$ K as corresponding molecular beam experiments were performed at this temperature [73]. The O$_2$ molecules were considered to be trapped when after at least 2.5 ps run time of the trajectories they had transferred their initial kinetic energy to their internal and the surface degrees of freedom.

First of all note that the calculated trapping probabilities with and without invoking the thermostat hardly differ. This suggests that the size of the surface unit cells, together with the relatively short run time of the AIMD simulations of less than 3 ps, is obviously sufficient to properly account for the energy dissipation in the surface slabs along the AIMD runs. The trapping probabilities at the stepped Pt surfaces are larger than on the flat Pt(111) surface which is in qualitative agreement with experimentally measured trapping probabilities for O$_2$ on Pt(533) [47] and Pt(553) [50], confirming the enhanced reactivity of the stepped Pt surfaces compared to Pt(111). Quantitatively, the AIMD results for Pt (533) are lower by almost a factor of two compared to the experiment. This might be a consequence of the fact that the RPBE functional is known to underestimate the interaction of molecules with surfaces, in particular when dispersion effects might play a role [63,74]. Note furthermore that apparently surface temperature effects play only a minor role, as far as the adsorption of O$_2$ on stepped Pt surfaces is concerned.

In order to better understand the energy dissipation of the O$_2$ molecule to the Pt substrate, in Fig. 3 the mean kinetic energies of the impinging O$_2$ molecule with an initial kinetic energy of 0.8 eV and the Pt substrate atoms of Pt(111), Pt(211) and Pt(533), respectively, are plotted along the run time averaged over all corresponding trapping events. The surface atoms were initially at rest corresponding to a surface temperatures of $T_s = 0$ K. Note that these simulations were performed on purpose in the absence of any thermostat because otherwise no reliable determination of the local energy redistribution upon the O$_2$ adsorption on the considered Pt surfaces would have been possible. The larger O$_2$ adsorption energies on Pt(211) and Pt(533) compared to Pt (111) are reflected in the fact that there is a larger energy transfer to the Pt atoms. Due to the stronger interaction, the O$_2$ molecules become more accelerated when impinging on the stepped surfaces and therefore also transfer more energy to the substrate. The energy distributions for Pt (211) and Pt(533) are rather similar. After about 1.5 ps, the mean kinetic energy of the surface atoms levels off at a value of about 0.3 eV. Considering the equipartition theorem which says that the mean kinetic energy and the mean potential energy should be the same, one can assume that the O$_2$ molecules have transferred about 0.6 eV to the stepped Pt surfaces. Still, their mean kinetic energy including vibrational and rotational energy and the motion parallel to the surface is about twice as large as on Pt(111), indicating that still a substantial amount of internal energy is associated with the trapped molecules.

Next, we consider the spatial distribution of the trapped O$_2$ molecules on Pt(211) and on Pt(533) at the end of the trajectories after at least 3 ps which is illustrated for Pt(211) in Fig. 4a for an initial O$_2$ kinetic energy of 0.1 eV and in Fig. 4b for an initial O$_2$ kinetic energy of 0.8 eV and for Pt(533) in Fig. 4c for an initial O$_2$ kinetic energy of 0.8 eV. On Pt(211), independent of their initial kinetic energy, all trapped molecules end up at the step sites. This illustrates that the dissociation to the substrate phonons is slow enough that the impinging molecules can still probe the three-atom wide terraces of Pt(211) and find the energetically most favorable adsorption sites, which is in agreement with experimental observations [48]. Note, however, that on Pt(533) with its four-atom wide terraces, after 3 ps there are still some trapped molecules located in the middle of the terraces, as is illustrated in Fig. 4c. Apparently, these terraces are already too wide to allow all impinging O$_2$ molecules to directly access the most favorable adsorption sites.

Interestingly enough, about three percent of all O$_2$ molecules impinging on Pt(211) and Pt(533) at both considered initial kinetic energies lead to dissociative adsorption. In contrast, on Pt(111) no such dissociative O$_2$ adsorption was found in AIMD simulations [57], in agreement with the experiment [38,39]. Figure 5a illustrates a dissociative adsorption event of an O$_2$ molecule impinging on Pt(211) with an

![Figure 3](image-url)  
Fig. 3. Kinetic energy redistribution of the O$_2$ molecule and the Pt substrate atoms of Pt(111), Pt(211) and Pt(533) for an initial O$_2$ kinetic energy of 800 meV averaged over all adsorption events within the microcanonical ensemble for the Pt surface atoms initially at rest corresponding to a surface temperatures of $T_s = 0$ K.
Fig. 4. Spatial distribution of O$_2$ adsorbed on a,b) Pt(211) and c) Pt(533) after impinging with random impact points within the surface unit cell with initial kinetic energies of the O$_2$ molecules of a) 100 meV and b,c) 800 meV. Note that the periodic images of the oxygen atoms are not plotted for the sake of clarity.
initial kinetic energy of 0.8 eV, in particular the dynamical nature of the $O_2$ molecule impinging on Pt(211) with an initial kinetic energy of 0.8 eV. The periodic images of the oxygen atoms are not plotted for the sake of clarity.

Fig. 5.

**Fig. 5.** Dissociative adsorption of $O_2$ on stepped Pt surfaces. a) Traces of an ab initio molecular dynamics trajectory of an $O_2$ molecule impinging on Pt(211) with an initial kinetic energy of 0.8 eV. The periodic images of the oxygen atoms are not plotted for the sake of clarity. b) Schematic drawing of the $O_2$/Pt potential energy curves illustrating the hot atom mechanism.

b) Schematic drawing of the $O_2$/Pt potential energy curves illustrating the hot atom mechanism.

4. Conclusions

In this work, I have presented ab initio molecular dynamics simulations of the interaction of $O_2$ molecules with stepped Pt surfaces. The Pt step sites correspond to active sites due to their lower coordination and adsorb the $O_2$ molecules upon impinging on the surface, as found both in experiments and in the AIMD simulations presented here. Interestingly enough, according to density functional theory calculations, the nominal dissociation barriers on Pt surfaces determined as the difference between the transition state towards dissociative adsorption and the bottom of the molecular adsorption well are rather similar on flat and stepped Pt surfaces. Still, in the AIMD simulations some direct $O_2$ dissociation events are found at the stepped Pt surfaces, whereas on Pt(111) no such event is found, even at kinetic energies that are higher than the barrier for dissociative adsorption of $O_2$. The direct dissociative adsorption is caused by the overall more attractive $O_2$ potential energy surface at the stepped surfaces which can lead to an incomplete equilibration of the $O_2$ molecule upon entering the molecular precursor state so that the hot precursor molecule is still able to overcome the activation barrier for dissociative adsorption. The presence of this hot atom chemistry does, however, not preclude that there are also thermally activated $O_2$ dissociation events at the stepped surfaces.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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