PhD Thesis

Nanostructure Research by Small-Angle X-Ray Scattering: From Instrument Design to New Insights into Materials Sciences

András Ferenc Wacha

Supervisor: Dr. Attila Bóta

Budapest University of Technology and Economics and Research Centre for Natural Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

2016.
1 Introduction

Small-angle X-ray scattering (SAXS) is a versatile measurement method for characterizing the structure of matter on the nanometer scale. It has found applications in many different areas of scientific research, ranging from materials to life sciences. Typical use cases are the determination of nanoparticle size-distribution, fractality, supramolecular self-assembling properties, intra- and interchain properties of polymers and polyelectrolytes, low-resolution structure of biological macromolecules, as well as the interactions between them. SAXS is an indirect method inasmuch as the results are not intuitively understandable pictures of the system, thus a priori knowledge is frequently indispensable for their interpretation. On the other hand, the results obtainable by this technique are highly accurate and reproducible, because scattering techniques are ensemble methods yielding average quantities on a large number of objects. Furthermore, SAXS experiments are generally non-invasive: samples can be investigated in their native state, usually without special preparation procedures.

While today’s high-flux synchrotron lightsources provide ideal grounds for SAXS instruments, a large number of facilities based on laboratory X-ray generators exist worldwide. Although several commercial vendors sell complete, turn-key instruments, unique SAXS cameras have been traditionally constructed in-house, tailored to the needs of the local research group. The largest advantages of local instrumentation, offsetting even the low X-ray flux, are their availability at short notice and their flexibility. Many questions can be answered even with these apparatuses, and in the case of problems not tractable by the local facility, the preliminary SAXS results are still extremely valuable in the planning and successful execution of subsequent synchrotron measurements. Furthermore, in situ and in operando studies of slow processes can need very long experiment times and frequent or prolonged access to the instrument, which is also an argument
for in-house infrastructure.

SAXS was an important experimental tool in the research group of Dr. Attila Bóta, where I did my research work presented here. The families of materials investigated by this group (activated carbons, phospholipid vesicles, self-assembling nanosystems, etc.) were well-suited for SAXS measurements, and the appropriate experimental apparatus was also available. However, with the fast improvement of instrumentation worldwide, the expected publication standards of SAXS results quickly surpassed its capabilities. Pushing the limits of the instrument eased the situation temporarily.

At the same time the research group has regularly (2-3 weeks on average in each year from 1999 until its decommissioning in 2012) obtained beamtime at the synchrotron instrument B1 (formerly JUSIFA) at the Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron (Hamburg, Germany). Since 2006 we were also regular guests at beamline 7T-MPW-SAXS at BESSYII (Berlin, Germany), a possibility continuing to the present day. In 2011 we were awarded measurement time at the beamline ID02 of the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (Grenoble, France), considered to be the top among SAXS instruments worldwide.

In 2012, funding became available for the group in the form of a joint effort between the Research Centre for Natural Sciences and Gedeon Richter Plc, a prominent pharmaceutical company in Hungary and Europe, for constructing a new in-house SAXS apparatus, based on our experience at the above mentioned large-scale instruments. In designing and realizing the instrument and the corresponding computing infrastructure I assumed the leading role.

2 Objectives

The main goals of my research work were concerned with establishing an up-to-date, state-of-the-art small-angle X-ray scatter-
ing facility in Hungary, which should be able to provide near-synchrotron quality results. This task was two-fold. Firstly, the experimental apparatus had to be designed and built, with the aim to keep its structure simple and highly variable, and to achieve a very high flux and low instrumental background, thus ensuring a flexibility and signal-to-noise ratio uncommon among other laboratory instruments. Secondly, the computing infrastructure had to be installed and developed, for controlling the instrument, acquiring, handling and archiving experimental data. A good experimental practice of SAXS measurement also needed to be implemented at the new facility. In all of these aspects, my previous experience at the above mentioned synchrotron beamlines turned out to be indispensable. The high intensity, low background, and extreme flexibility of both hardware and software of the resulting instrument is unparalleled in conventional laboratory instruments. The new apparatus has been christened CREDO (standing for Creative Research Equipment for Diffraction).

After finishing most of the construction and programming tasks, the instrument had to be calibrated. In the beginning, I have used already calibrated samples obtained from external sources. Later on, I have done the independent calibration of these samples on CREDO, based on first principles methods.

Validation of the instrument was also important, partly because the interests from the industrial sphere. To achieve this, we took part in an interlaboratory comparison study organized by the Institute for Reference Materials and Measurements of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (IRMM-JRC, Geel, Belgium). The aim of this study was to determine the size distribution of SiO$_2$ nanoparticles using SAXS measured at several independent (synchrotron and laboratory) facilities. One of the most important results of this study was that CREDO has obtained a certificate from IRMM-JRC.

CREDO is a large-scale instrument, capable of more than just to serve the needs of a single research group or institute.
Joining efforts with the small-angle neutron scattering (SANS) instruments of the Budapest Neutron Centre, we have established the Hungarian Small-Angle Scattering Network (HUNSAS) to facilitate access to these experimental apparatuses for guest researchers both from Hungary and abroad, and to ensure a better utilization of the infrastructure. The consortium operates a beamtime proposal system similar to that of synchrotron and neutron facilities. Through this, external researchers can obtain measurement possibilities on CREDO and/or the SANS beamlines simultaneously.

An in-house developed laboratory instrument can never be deemed finished or complete. In order to make the most of the conditions, various aspects of the instrument had to be improved. This included a new method for optimizing the collimating system (with more general results applicable on other small-angle scattering apparatuses), several new sample environments, a complete refurbishment of the instrument control software, and frequent revision of the standard experimental procedures and data assessment/interpretation routines.

Finally, I have illustrated the capabilities of CREDO and SAXS in general by focusing to the following problems:

- characterizing the anisotropic pore structure of activated carbon during the preparation process,

- following the self-assembly of a photoluminescent gold-cysteine nanocomplex *in situ* by time-resolved small-angle X-ray scattering experiments,

- determining the low-resolution structure and folding state of two proteins: hen egg-white lysozyme and human calmodulin.
3 New Scientific Results

I have summarized the results of my doctoral research in the following statements:

1. I have designed and constructed CREDO, a versatile laboratory instrument for small-angle X-ray scattering, capable of providing scattering data with nearly the same quality as obtainable at synchrotron beamlines. A continuous range of the scattering variable \( q = 4\pi \sin \theta / \lambda \) from 0.014 to 29.9 nm\(^{-1}\) is accessible, corresponding to > 400 to 0.2 nm periodic distances. I have also developed a flexible and reliable control software and the accompanying browser-based data processing framework, which covers the tasks of data evaluation, plotting and interpretation, which is rarely found even at large-scale instruments. I have validated the apparatus by accurately deriving the size distribution of SiO\(_2\) nanoparticles, thereby obtaining certification from the Institute of Reference Materials and Measurements of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. I have demonstrated the high signal-to-noise ratio and low instrumental background of the instrument by determining the size and shape of two proteins (hen egg-white lysozyme and human calmodulin) from solution SAXS measurements on CREDO, a highly challenging task for traditional laboratory instruments, due to the low scattering power of these samples. I have reported the novel design of this instrument and its other characteristics in [S1]. The homepage of the facility can be found at http://credo.ttk.mta.hu. [S1, S2]

2. I have developed a new optimization method for the 3-pinhole collimation scheme, based on algebraically derived results. Defining constraints on the sample and beam-stop size, the set-up yielding the highest radiation intensity at the sample position with negligible instrumen-
tal background can be determined with this method. I have also implemented the results using the Python programming language. The resulting proof-of-concept script, SASCollOpt.py features a graphical user interface which facilitates its routine usage in the alignment of CREDO, as well as other instruments following the same collimation scheme. \[S3\]

3. I have executed \textit{in situ} measurements in order to follow the self-assembly of a gold-cysteine nanocomplex using time-resolved small-angle X-ray scattering, and developed automatic model fitting procedures to treat the high amount of experimental data. I have predicted and quantified the evolution of lamellar structures, the existence of which were also proven by transmission electron microscopy. I have found that these lamellae of several nanometer thickness consist of a periodically repeating ensemble of thin layers. I have also characterized the periodic repeat distance and the average number of layers composing the lamellae, as well as the dependence of the speed of self-assembly on the incubation temperature by analyzing the changes in the fitted quantities over the time of incubation. \[S4\]

4. I studied the changes in the anisotropy of activated carbons introduced by the choice of precursor material and the activation process, based on small-angle X-ray scattering experiments carried out at two different synchrotron beamlines. I have quantified the extent of anisotropy in time (during the activation process), and over the hierarchical structure of the carbon skeleton using azimuthal scattering curves. I have also described pore formation and characterized the typical pore sizes by fitting semi-empirical mathematical models to experimental data. I have also constructed a simple computer model to aid the better understanding of the changes in anisotropy and pore formation observed during
the activation procedure. [S5, S6]

4 Related Publications


5 Other Publications

5.1 Journal Articles


5.2 Hungarian-language Articles


[O2] Ákos Szabó, Péter Mezey, Csaba Fodor, Attila Domján, Gergely Kali, Tímea Stumphäuser, Gábor Erdődi, Ralf Thomann, Péter Németh, István Szanka, Gergely Illés,
6 Acknowledgements

I hereby wish to express my gratitude to the following people:

- Dr. Attila Bóta, dr. Zoltán Varga and all members of the Research Group for Biological Nanochemistry,


- dr. Ádám Demeter, dr. György Thaler, dr. Zsolt Szombat-helyi (Gedeon Richter Plc.)

- Ferenc Laufer

- dr. András Halbritter


- My family: dr. Luca Hirka, János Wacha, Zsófia Wacha

The construction of the instrument was co-funded by Gedeon Richter Plc, the Hungarian National Scientific Research Fund (CNK 810520) and the Central Hungarian Operative Program (KMOP-1.1.2-07/1-2008-0002).