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Nano-diffraction at individual SiGe/Si island clusters and InGaAs/GaAs quantum dot molecules

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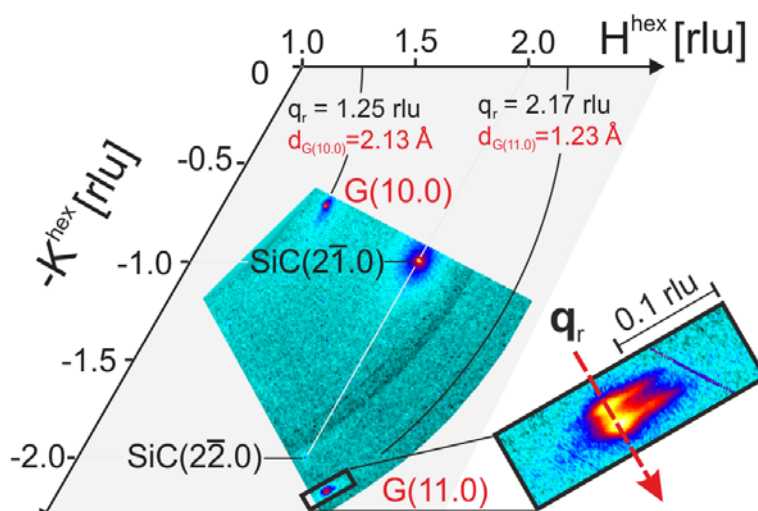
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# Report:

The two publications, Schumann et al. New J. Phys. **15**, 123034 (2013) and Schumann et al. PRB(R) 90, 041403 (2014), which result from the beamtime appears at the end of this document. Nevertheless we keep the original very preliminary report in its previous form.

From experiments performed last year at the ID10 beamline of the ESRF for graphene/SiC(0001) samples, we have learned that GID is indeed a powerful tool for investigating graphene. We have obtained precise information about lattice parameters as well as epitaxial alignment of monolayer graphene grown on SiC(0001) by surface thermal decomposition. It was also possible to study the so-called buffer layer (a C-rich  $(6\sqrt{3}\times 6\sqrt{3})R30^\circ$  reconstruction of the



the reflections related to the SiC substrate and to the graphene layer denoted by G(11.0) and G(10.0). The inset shows a higher resolution map around the graphene (11.0) reflection, revealing a splitting into a buffer layer and a graphene-related reflection.

(0001) surface of hexagonal SiC) that exists underneath the monolayer graphene. We observed that the layer, although expected to be isomorphic to graphene, has in fact an *in*-plane lattice constant different from that of monolayer graphene. Additionally, we have also measured a nanocrystalline graphene film ( $\sim 1.5$  monolayer thick) grown by MBE on a  $(6\sqrt{3} \times 6\sqrt{3})$  R30° reconstructed SiC(0001) surface. With GID the epitaxial alignment of the nanocrystals in respect to the substrate could be probed. Strikingly, the existence of aligned reflections for the film and substrate as well as the absence of diffraction rings shows that the graphene domains are in-plane aligned to the underlying template and have the same orientation (see Fig. 1). Therefore, despite its nanocrystalline nature, the MBE-graphene possesses an epitaxial relation to the substrate, on the contrary to what has been previously suggested. A publication which will report on these results is currently under preparation.

## Structural investigation of nanocrystalline graphene grown on $(6\sqrt{3} \times 6\sqrt{3})R30^\circ$ -reconstructed SiC surfaces by molecular beam epitaxy

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**Abstract.** Growth of nanocrystalline graphene films on  $(6\sqrt{3} \times 6\sqrt{3})R30^\circ$ -reconstructed SiC surfaces was achieved by molecular beam epitaxy, enabling the investigation of quasi-homoepitaxial growth. The structural quality of the graphene films, which is investigated by Raman spectroscopy, increases with growth time. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy proves that the SiC surface reconstruction persists throughout the growth process and that the synthesized films consist of  $sp^2$ -bonded carbon. Interestingly, grazing incidence x-ray diffraction measurements show that the graphene domains possess one single in-plane orientation, are aligned to the substrate, and offer a noticeably contracted lattice parameter of 2.450 Å. We correlate this contraction with theoretically calculated reference values (all-electron density functional calculations based

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on the van der Waals corrected Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof functional) for the lattice parameter contraction induced in ideal, free-standing graphene sheets by: substrate-induced buckling, the edges of limited-size flakes and typical point defects (monovacancies, divacancies, Stone–Wales defects).

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## 1. Introduction

Graphene is considered to be of great importance for future device applications due to its outstanding electronic properties [1]. Regarding its synthesis, several techniques have been used for the production of this material [2–9]. Among them, micro-mechanical cleavage of graphite [4], which allows for the preparation of flakes with different numbers of graphene layers and high structural quality, is certainly the most popular. However, in spite of being very useful for the preparation of graphene aiming at basic research, this method is unsuitable for industrial applications. On the other hand, techniques such as surface thermal decomposition of SiC [5, 6] and chemical vapor deposition (CVD) on metallic templates [7, 8] are promising due to their capability of achieving large-area synthesis. Despite this advantage, they also have inherent drawbacks. With Si depletion on SiC it is possible to produce graphene of high structural quality on both polar hexagonal faces of SiC. On the Si-polar face monolayer graphene films are thermodynamically stable [9] and can be realized on a wafer scale [6], but the synthesis of homogeneous bi- or few-layer graphene is still a challenge. For the C-polar face, a precise control of the number of grown layers is difficult to be achieved [10]. By employing CVD, monolayer graphene on metals can be routinely fabricated. However, the growth of continuous few-layer graphene has not been demonstrated so far. Besides, the required post-synthesis transfer to a (semi-)insulating substrate often introduces structural defects in the graphene layer, which may degrade the electronic properties of the material and might therefore limit its technological application.

Molecular beam epitaxy (MBE) is a technique that shows potential to overcome those drawbacks. It is widely used for the growth of high-quality semiconductor films as well as heterostructures on a large variety of templates at moderate temperatures ( $< 1000^\circ\text{C}$ ) [11]. One of its main advantages is the thickness control, which in the context of graphene might enable the precise growth of not only mono- but also few-layer graphene films on different technologically relevant substrates. Recently, results on the MBE growth of graphene on various substrates have been reported. The chosen templates include  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  [12–14],  $\text{SiO}_2$  [14, 15], h-BN [16], SiC [17, 18], epitaxial graphene [14, 19], Si [20] and mica [15, 21]. The synthesis of carbon materials with different structural quality and morphology, varying from highly disordered

sp<sup>2</sup> carbon [14, 15, 20] via nanocrystalline graphene films [12, 13, 16], to high-quality but isolated graphene islands [21], was observed. Despite the fact that the utilization of distinct growth conditions does not allow a direct comparison between the results, a general correlation between the surface structure of the substrate and the film structural quality seems to exist. As an example, only strongly disordered sp<sup>2</sup> carbon films could be prepared on amorphous SiO<sub>2</sub> [14, 15] and amorphous carbon [20] templates (both on Si substrates). In contrast, nanocrystalline films with domain sizes that can exceed a few tens of nanometers could be grown on substrates possessing a hexagonal surface structure, such as epitaxial graphene [14], h-BN [16] and Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>(0001) [13]. Although some authors point out that the MBE growth of graphene on such substrates is a type of van der Waals (vdW) epitaxy [12, 16, 21], and that the graphene domains are expected to be randomly aligned [12, 14, 15], only little attention has been given to the existence and direct measurement of the epitaxial relation between the MBE-grown graphene and the underlying substrate. Overall, despite the recent progress on this field, there are still many fundamental aspects in MBE growth of graphene that remain to be addressed.

We here investigate the MBE growth of graphene on the so-called buffer layer (BL) on SiC. This is a  $(6\sqrt{3} \times 6\sqrt{3})R30^\circ$ -reconstructed (0001) surface of hexagonal SiC, which is isomorphic to graphene (i.e. it possesses similar crystal structure and lattice constant [22]) but has about 30% of its atoms covalently bound to the SiC substrate [23]. Therefore, due to its similarity to a monolayer of graphene, we can employ the BL as a template to investigate the quasi-homoepitaxy of graphene by MBE. A considerable advantage of using it as a template instead of epitaxial monolayer graphene is that results (e.g. obtained by Raman spectroscopy) originating from the substrate and from the MBE-prepared graphene may be separated in an intuitive way. We demonstrate the synthesis of nanocrystalline graphene films whose properties were investigated by atomic force microscopy (AFM), Raman spectroscopy, x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) and synchrotron grazing incidence x-ray diffraction (GID). Most strikingly, with the latter technique it is observed that the graphene layers grow planar and, despite its nanocrystalline nature, possess an in-plane alignment to the BL/SiC(0001) substrate. In addition, the lattice parameter of the MBE-grown graphene is measurably contracted compared to what is expected for a graphene plane. For comparison, we include theoretical values (density-functional theory (DFT); for details see below) for the expected magnitude of a contraction of graphene due to a substrate induced buckling or the presence of zero- or one-dimensional defects.

## 2. Experimental details

The substrates were prepared in an inductively heated furnace system. First, n-type 6H-SiC(0001) substrates with a size of  $1 \times 1 \text{ cm}^2$  were chemically cleaned in n-butylacetate, acetone and methanol under ultrasonication. Afterward, they were loaded into the furnace and etched at 1400 °C for 15 min in an Ar/H<sub>2</sub> (95/5 vol%) atmosphere of 900 mbar and a flux of 500 standard cubic centimeter per minute (sccm). The etching was performed in order to obtain a stepped SiC surface and removes scratches and irregularities. The  $(6\sqrt{3} \times 6\sqrt{3})R30^\circ$  BL was formed on the SiC(0001) surface by thermally treating the samples in the same system at a temperature of 1450 °C for 15 min in an Ar atmosphere of 900 mbar and a flux of 100 sccm, similar to what has been proposed by Ostler *et al* [24]. Note that at these conditions the formation of monolayer graphene inclusions close to surface step edges [25] could be strongly suppressed

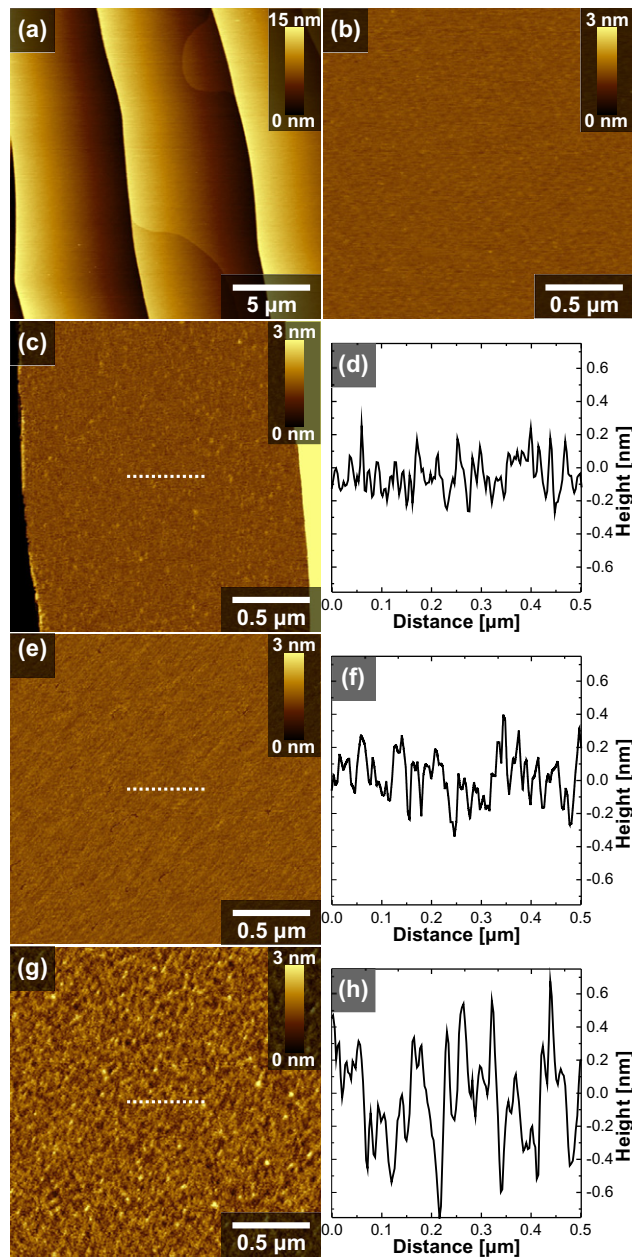
(as verified by Raman spectroscopy). For the MBE experiments, the backside of the substrates was covered with 1  $\mu\text{m}$  thick Ti in order to enable contact-free radiative heating in vacuum. Subsequently, the substrates were loaded into a preparation chamber and degassed in ultra-high-vacuum (UHV) at 350 °C for 30 min prior to the transfer to the growth chamber by means of a load-lock system. The graphene synthesis was carried out in a MBE system in UHV with a base pressure of  $\sim 3 \times 10^{-10}$  mbar. Atomic carbon was used as a precursor, which is provided by a current-heated filament made of highly oriented pyrolytic graphite (HOPG) (*MBE Komponenten GmbH*). The growth was performed at a substrate temperature  $T_s$  of 950 °C (calibrated with a pyrometer) with growth times ( $\Delta t$ ) varying between 30 and 240 min. The MBE-prepared samples, as well as pristine substrates (i.e. BL on SiC(0001)), were investigated by non-contact tapping-mode AFM, Raman spectroscopy with a spatial resolution of 1  $\mu\text{m}$  and an excitation wavelength of 482.5 nm, and XPS using a monochromated Al  $K\alpha$  x-ray source. For the latter analysis, prior to the measurements the samples were annealed at 350 °C for 20 min in UHV in order to remove surface contaminants. Additionally, GID measurements were performed at the ID10 beamline of the *European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF)* with a photon energy of 10 keV ( $\Delta E/E = 10^{-4}$ ). The primary intensity was amounted to  $10^{14}$  counts per second (cps) at a beam size of 100  $\mu\text{m}$  (horizontal) times 1 mm (vertical) with a vertically mounted sample and an angle of incidence of 0.15°.

### 3. Results and discussion

AFM images of the substrate and the MBE-grown samples are presented in figure 1. Figure 1(a) shows the topology of a  $(6\sqrt{3} \times 6\sqrt{3})R30^\circ$ -reconstructed SiC surface. The initial BL-covered substrate surface consists of atomically smooth terraces (5–10  $\mu\text{m}$  wide) with steps between them whose heights are 5–10 nm. This overall morphology persists throughout the MBE growth. No further step bunching or surface graphitization due to surface thermal decomposition occurs (as confirmed by Raman spectroscopy). The root mean square (rms) roughness measured on a single terrace (see figure 1(b)) is  $\sim 0.8$  Å. Figures 1(c), (e) and (g) show the surface of samples after MBE growth, primarily taken on a single terrace. In each case, the substrate temperature was 950 °C with growth times of (c) 60 min, (e) 120 min and (g) 240 min. The respective section analysis are depicted in figures 1(d), (f) and (h). While MBE growth for 60 min does not significantly alter the surface roughness in comparison to what is measured for the bare BL-covered surface, longer growth times lead to surface roughening, with rms values of  $\sim 1.3$  Å for  $\Delta t = 120$  min, and  $\sim 3.4$  Å for  $\Delta t = 240$  min (these values are representative for measurements performed on several single terraces). Nevertheless, no surface segregation or island formation is observed after MBE growth. This indicates that, despite the increased roughness, the MBE-prepared graphene layers grow essentially planar on top of the BL. In addition, note that AFM measurements performed on several surface terraces of different samples reveal that no extended wrinkles or nanofins exist on the surface, which is opposite to what has been reported by Maeda and Hibino [26] for graphene grown by MBE directly on epitaxial graphene (prepared on SiC by surface graphitization) using cracked ethanol as a precursor. In that case, wrinkles/nanofins structures at the surface which can be as high as 5 nm and extended laterally over hundreds of nanometers were observed.

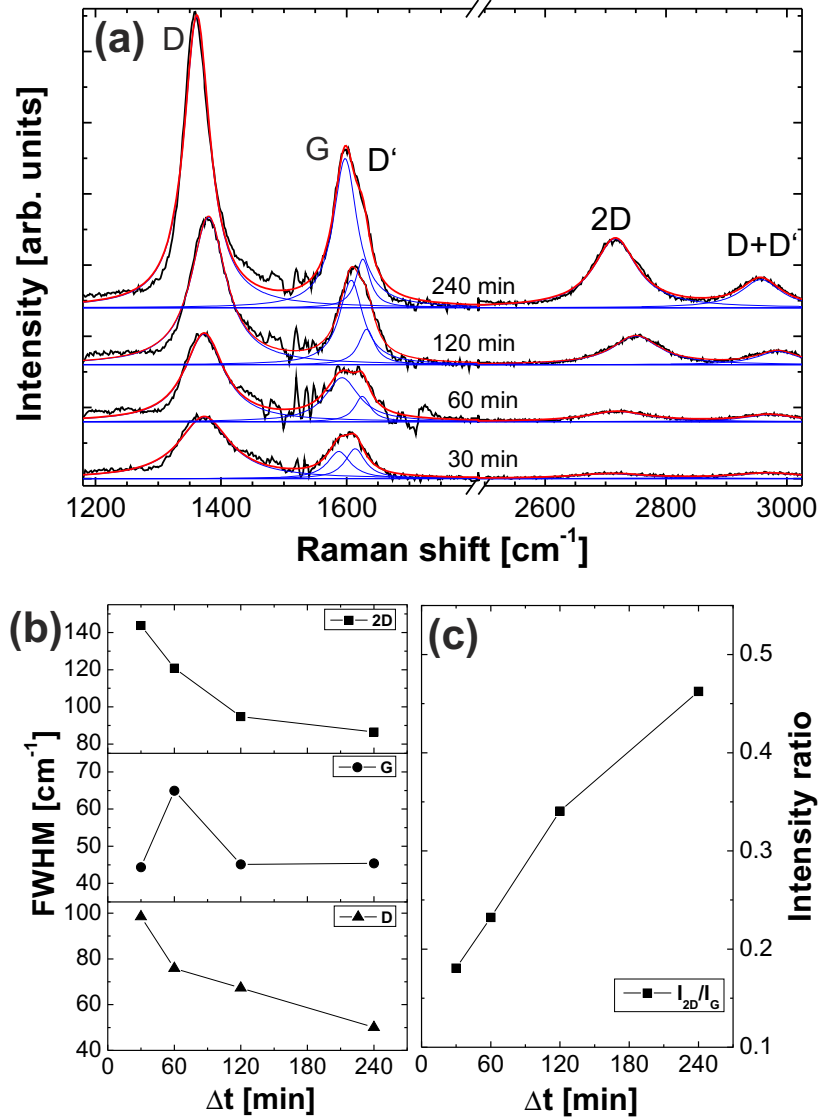
Raman measurements performed on the center of the surface terraces, for samples grown at a temperature of 950 °C and  $\Delta t$  between 30 and 240 min, are displayed in figure 2(a). The displayed spectra correspond to what is obtained after subtracting the SiC- and BL-related





**Figure 1.** AFM surface images of (a), (b) a BL-covered SiC(0001), and MBE-grown graphene films prepared at a substrate temperature of 950 °C for growth times of (c) 60 min, (e) 120 min and (g) 240 min. The respective line section analysis corresponding to the white dashed lines are shown in (d), (f) and (h).

background signals from the raw data. They show the typical graphene-related Raman features, namely the defect-induced D- and D'- lines at  $\sim 1380$  and  $\sim 1610$   $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , the normal  $E_{2g}$  mode (aka G-line) at  $\sim 1590$   $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , the double-resonant two-dimensional (2D)-line at  $\sim 2720$   $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , and the second order line D+D' at  $\sim 2970$   $\text{cm}^{-1}$  [27]. Note that measurements performed at several surface terraces yielded very similar results, which show that the MBE-grown layers cover the whole substrate surface and not only isolated areas.



**Figure 2.** (a) Raman spectra and best fitting curves (the blue ones are single Lorentzians; the red ones are the sum of them) of samples prepared at  $T_S = 950^\circ\text{C}$  with growth times as indicated in the plot. The spectra background originated from SiC, as well as that from the BL were removed. The spectra are shifted along the vertical axis for better visibility. (b) FWHM of the D-, G- and 2D lines as a function of growth time. (c) Ratio between the intensities of the 2D- and G-lines as a function of growth time.

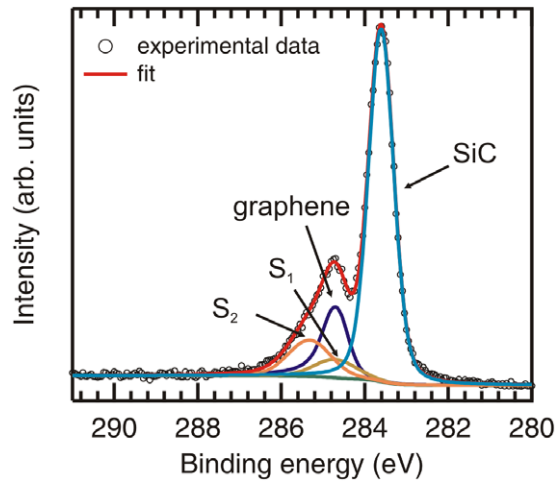
It is observed that, by increasing growth time, the intensity of the graphene signal increases while the peak widths decrease. Especially the double resonant 2D-peak becomes clearly visible for growth times over 120 min. The full widths at half maximum (FWHM) obtained from the fittings of the D, G and 2D peaks, are presented, figure 2(b). Overall, the widths decrease monotonically with growth time, corresponding to an increase in structural order of the grown graphene [28]. Only the G-line FWHM of the layer grown for 30 min, appears as an exception.



This might be due to the fact that the surface coverage for this film is very low (less than 0.4 monolayers (ML)—see XPS results below). Consequently, the Raman signal intensity is also very low, which may result in a non-ideal subtraction of the SiC- and BL-related backgrounds. In figure 2(c), the intensity ratio ( $I_{2D}/I_G$ ) between the 2D- and the G-line versus growth time is displayed. It increases monotonically, confirming that the fraction of  $sp^2$ -bonded carbon atoms arranged in the graphene honeycomb lattice increases with growth time [28].

Nevertheless, in spite of the observed improvement, the general features of the Raman spectra, in particular the appearance of an intense D peak, reveal that the MBE-grown graphene possesses a nanocrystalline and partially defective structure. Additionally, the existence point-like defects (see discussion regarding DFT calculations), such as mono- and divacancies, is a source of the high intensity of the D peak. This structural nature hinders the possibility of observing subtle changes in the Raman peaks, such as the expected broadening of the 2D peak as the graphene layer thickens with growth time (see XPS results next). For instance, the FWHM of the 2D peaks (the best value is  $\sim 85\text{ cm}^{-1}$ —see figure 2(b)) is still much larger than the typical values observed for mono- and bi-layer graphene on SiC(0001) prepared by surface graphitization ( $\sim 35$  and  $\sim 55\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , respectively) [31]. Moreover, the nanocrystallinity of the films is probably the main reason associated with the increased surface roughness after MBE growth (see figure 1). It is plausible to assume that defective regions between the graphene domains (i.e. the grain boundaries) will be responsible for an increase of the rms roughness. Besides, neighboring graphene domains might be slightly tilted in respect to each other, which would generate additional surface corrugation and thus increase the final rms roughness. Finally, we have calculated the average lateral size ( $L_a$ ) of the graphene domains by taking into account the width of the Raman peaks [29]. For the present case,  $L_a$  increases from  $\sim 5\text{--}7\text{ nm}$  for  $\Delta t = 30\text{ min}$  to  $\sim 15\text{--}20\text{ nm}$  for  $\Delta t = 240\text{ min}$ . These values can be taken as a lower limit for the actual crystallite sizes, since the model provided by *Cançado et al* [29] consider as defects only domain boundaries and not point-like defects (such as vacancies) located within the graphene domains. For a more detailed discussion see [13, 30].

XPS measurements were performed in order to determine the number of graphene layers grown by MBE as well as their bonding features. A representative measurement of the C1 s core level spectrum is presented in figure 3 for the graphene film grown on the BL/SiC(0001) template for 60 min. Two components of the spectrum are related to the BL ( $S_1$  at  $\sim 284.70\text{ eV}$  and  $S_2$  at  $\sim 285.35\text{ eV}$ ). The lower energy component  $S_1$  is due to the covalent bonding between the BL and the SiC, while  $S_2$  arises due to the  $sp^2$ -bonded carbon within the BL [23]. This shows that the BL remains unaltered during MBE growth even for the longest employed growth time, as also observed by Raman spectroscopy (not shown). It also reveals the absence of strong interaction (i.e. via covalent bonding) between the BL and the uppermost MBE-grown graphene. The component corresponding to the SiC bulk is seen at  $\sim 283.61\text{ eV}$ , while the one at  $\sim 284.61\text{ eV}$  is due to carbon in the  $sp^2$  bonding configuration forming the MBE-graphene. From the intensity ratio between the SiC and graphene components (taking into account the existence of the BL as well), the thickness of the MBE films could be deduced. It monotonically increases from  $\sim 0.4\text{ ML}$  for  $\Delta t = 60\text{ min}$  to  $1.5\text{ ML}$  for  $\Delta t = 240\text{ min}$ . Hence, more than 120 min are needed to form one complete ML. The increase in thickness to  $1.5\text{ ML}$  is likely an additional reason, besides nanocrystallinity, for the relatively large rms roughness of the layer grown for  $\Delta t = 240\text{ min}$  (see figure 1). Since this value corresponds to an average obtained for a large surface area, it is very likely that the AFM tip probes regions which locally contain a different number of graphene layers. This idea is corroborated by the fact that lower rms roughnesses

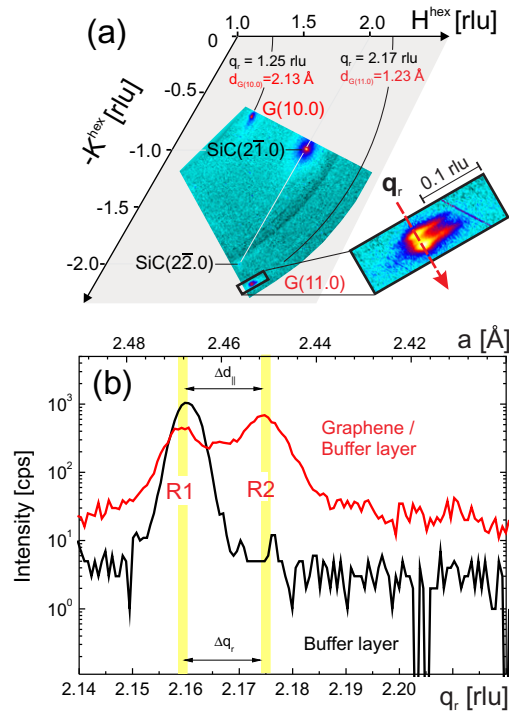


**Figure 3.** C1s core level spectrum of a MBE grown graphene film on a BL/SiC(0001) template.  $\Delta t$  is 60 min in this case. There are two contributions related to the BL ( $S_1$  and  $S_2$ ), a third one related to the SiC bulk, and a fourth one related to the MBE-grown graphene layer.

were measured for thinner films, i.e. prepared with shorter growth times. Finally, it is observed that the graphene peak in the C1s spectrum is shifted to higher binding energies with respect to the neutral position (284.45 eV). This means that the layer is n-type doped, similar to what is measured for monolayer graphene produced by surface graphitization on SiC(0001) [31]. However, the shift of  $\sim 0.15$  eV observed in the present case is smaller than the values observed for those samples ( $\sim 0.3$  eV), indicating a reduced amount of intrinsic doping in the MBE-grown graphene.

GID measurements were performed in order to obtain information about the structure as well as epitaxial orientation of the MBE-grown layers. The GID measurements were performed for the clean ‘BL’ substrate phase as well as for the sample after  $\Delta t = 240$  min, where it is certain (as determined by XPS) that at least one full graphene monolayer has formed. Using this technique, the angle of x-ray incidence ( $0.15^\circ$ ) is slightly smaller than the critical angle of total reflection ( $0.21^\circ$ ). In that case GID may serve as an extremely surface sensitive tool, since the x-ray wave-field decays exponentially within the sample [32]. This enables investigations on mono- and few-layer graphene films. With GID, the lattice planes orthogonal to the sample surface are analyzed by diffraction and information about in-plane lattice parameters and the in-plane orientation can be obtained. By rotating the sample with respect to the incident beam, a so-called angular scan is performed. This scan provides a curved line  $\mathbf{q}_a$  in reciprocal space where every point on the curve has the same distance to the origin (00.0). By varying the azimuthal angle of detection and rotating the sample in a 2:1 ratio, we obtain a radial scan along  $\mathbf{q}_r$ , which corresponds to the length of the scattering vector (see figure 4(b)). In our experiment we measured reciprocal space maps (RSM) by a combination of angular and radial scans.

This is presented in figure 4(a). The axes are scaled to the reciprocal lattice units of the SiC substrate. The reflections associated with SiC, BL and graphene appear at the same angular positions, revealing that the graphene film and the BL are in-plane aligned with the substrate. In addition, the domains possess the same orientation, since a distribution of many randomly



**Figure 4.** (a) Reciprocal space map of MBE-grown nanocrystalline graphene on a BL/SiC(0001) template. The inset shows a higher resolution map around the graphene (11.0) reflection, revealing a splitting into a BL and a graphene reflection. (b) Radial scan along the graphene (11.0) direction. The red curve shows a measurement on MBE grown graphene, the black curve presents an according scan on a bare BL sample. The peak positions of the BL (R1) and graphene (R2) reflections are indicated by the shaded area. The slightly lower peak intensity and enhanced background level of the curve measured for the MBE-grown graphene can both be attributed to its larger surface roughness in comparison to that of the pristine BL/SiC(0001) sample.

oriented domains would lead to a diffraction ring at the same radial position in reciprocal space. This result is the opposite of what has been measured for nanocrystalline graphene grown by MBE (using cracked ethanol as a C precursor) on epitaxial graphene on SiC [14]. In that work, samples analyzed by reflection high energy electron diffraction appeared to indicate that the graphene domains formed after MBE growth are not aligned to the underlying epitaxial graphene and SiC substrate. The present GID result also contradicts the notion that graphene synthesized by MBE should generally be composed of nanocrystals that are randomly aligned compared to the substrate [12, 15]. Apart from the different experimental procedures (e.g. solid-source versus gas-source MBE), one can speculate about the fundamental difference observed between the present results and the ones from [14] by simply considering the fact that the BL/SiC(0001) and the epitaxial graphene/BL/SiC(0001) are in fact very different substrates. An enhanced reactivity of the BL in comparison with epitaxial graphene will surely influence the C surface diffusion as well as the initial nucleation and growth of the graphene islands, even if the epitaxial process undergoes via vdW forces. In that respect, epitaxial graphene may act as

a screening layer, suppressing effects associated with the underlying SiC. More investigations aiming at a complete understanding of the fundamental growth aspects are in progress.

Additionally, the GID measurements provided information about the lateral size of the graphene domains. By fitting the graphene-related R2 peak (see figure 4(b)) with a Gaussian function, a lower limit for the domain size could be estimated via the application of the determined fitting values into the Scherrer equation. The value is 35 nm, which agrees well with that derived from the Raman data. In order to examine a larger angular range we performed line scans with an azimuthal sample rotation of  $130^\circ$  (not shown here). Therein, only graphene (and BL) peaks with a separation of  $60^\circ$  emerge with an intensity that is two orders of magnitude higher than the background signal. The fact that the graphene films possess only one crystallographic orientation raises questions about the limited size of the domains (limited to a few tens of nm). In fact, the scan in angular direction over the graphene peak reveals a FWHM of  $\sim 0.5^\circ$ , revealing hence a narrow distribution in the rotational alignment. This might already be enough to hinder coalescence of neighbor islands. Furthermore, due to the relatively low growth temperatures ( $950^\circ\text{C}$ ), an ineffective healing of defects in the grain boundary regions, which possibly contain even localized amorphous structures, may also be a factor impeding coalescence.

The inset in figure 4(a) shows the RSM with higher resolution around the graphene (11.0) reflection. A splitting in two components can be observed. One of the two reflections corresponds to graphene and one to the BL. In figure 4(b) a line scan in radial direction over the split peak is shown. For comparative purposes a scan of a bare BL/SiC sample is also added therein. By comparing these two scans the R1 peak can unambiguously be attributed to the underlying BL. The graphene reflection (labeled R2 in figure 4(b)) is clearly shifted toward higher  $q_r$  in comparison to the BL reflection, which stands for a smaller lattice parameter in the analyzed in-plane direction. The lattice parameters derived from figure 4(b) are 2.450 and 2.468 Å for the MBE-grown graphene and the BL, respectively. This yields a relative mismatch of  $\sim 0.7\%$ . Interestingly, the lattice parameter of the MBE-grown graphene is about 0.45% smaller in comparison to the standard lattice parameter of graphite (2.461 Å) [33].

There are several potential reasons that could cause such a contraction, among them: (i) the contraction could be related to the different linear thermal expansion coefficients of graphene and SiC [34, 35]. Based on this difference, Ferralis *et al* [34] estimated that a compressive strain in graphene of up to  $\sim 0.8\%$  can arise upon sample cooling down to room temperature, since SiC contracts during cooling while graphene expands. (ii) The strong corrugation of the BL, product of its partial covalent bonding to the SiC [22], could contribute to the apparent contraction of the (2D projected) lattice parameter of the uppermost nanocrystalline graphene, despite the existent epitaxial relation between them. Indeed, recent first-principles calculations [9] quantify this corrugation of epitaxial monolayer graphene films on the BL to be approximately 0.4 Å (top to bottom atom in a graphene plane commensurate with a  $(6\sqrt{3} \times 6\sqrt{3})R30^\circ$  mesh of the SiC substrate below). (iii) A lateral contraction of graphene could also occur due to the intrinsic presence of defects and domain boundaries in the nanocrystalline film. In fact, the strong D peak in the Raman signal for  $\Delta t = 240$  min as well as the small-scale structures seen in the AFM image (see figure 1(d)) would all allow for the presence of zero- or one-dimensional defects in the films. We estimate the graphene film contraction that would result from specific defect types and densities by DFT below.

Regarding point (i), strain up to 0.4% has been inferred by Raman spectroscopy for epitaxial monolayer graphene grown by surface thermal decomposition on SiC(0001) [36].

A similar contraction was directly linked to substrate thermal contraction in a recent study of near-perfect CVD-grown graphene on Ir(111) [33]. However, the contraction observed by us extends to a smaller lattice parameter than that found in [33, 36]. In a perfect graphene plane, we would expect the contraction observed by us to induce the formation of wrinkles/nanofins for strain relief, but we observe no such wrinkles in our graphene films, according to AFM analysis.

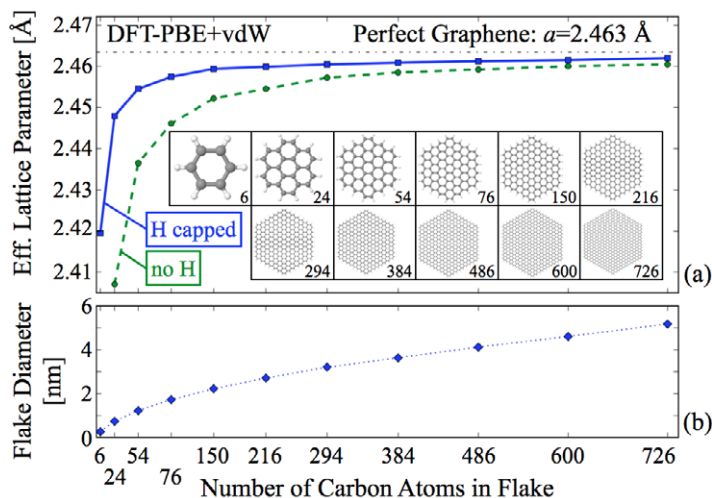
To estimate the possible contributions of (ii) and (iii), we performed DFT calculations of isolated graphene sheets. The calculations were performed using the all-electron, localized basis set code FHI-aims ('tight' settings) [37] and the Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) functional [38] with a correction for vdW effects, PBE+vdW [39]. At this level of theory, the lattice parameter of a perfect, infinite periodic flat graphene sheet is  $a = 2.463 \text{ \AA}$ . The calculated value for monolayer graphene on SiC is practically the same (within 0.1%). We note that, while we include the vdW correction for consistency with earlier work [9], it has no strong effect on the in-plane lattice parameters of interest here. Even when just using only the PBE functional,  $a = 2.467 \text{ \AA}$  for a perfect graphene sheet. Beyond the original vdW correction of Tkatchenko and Scheffler [39], the strength of effective interatomic  $C_6$  coefficients that describe the vdW interaction in carbon-based nanostructures may vary considerably with the structure [40] and could significantly change out-of plane interactions with a graphene sheet. However, their effect will still be small on the energy scale of interest for the in-plane lattice parameter, which is dominated by the covalent interactions that are described by the PBE functional itself.

To estimate the influence of the possible substrate-induced corrugation (point (ii) above), we proceed as follows. We take the fully relaxed structure of a graphene sheet with a  $(13 \times 13)$  supercell situated on top of the 'BL', as determined in [9]; its calculated maximal corrugation perpendicular to the surface (top to bottom atom) amounts to  $0.41 \text{ \AA}$ . The MBE-grown graphene on the BL should show the same approximate corrugation. If this corrugation led to significant stress in the plane, a perfect graphene sheet with the same (fixed)  $z$  corrugation should experience the same stress and should thus contract. In fact, however, relaxing all in-plane coordinates and lattice parameters of such a graphene plane with fixed  $z$  corrugation leads to a surface area that corresponds to an effective graphene lattice parameter of  $a = 2.462 \text{ \AA}$ , i.e. the calculated contraction is less than 0.05%.

Finally, we address the potential impact of different types of defects on the in-plane lattice parameter. Coming to one dimensional defect types (domain boundaries) first, figure 5 shows the development of the effective lattice parameter of finite-size graphene flakes as a function of flake size. The effective lattice parameter is calculated by fully relaxing the flat graphene flakes, then taking the average of all C–C nearest-neighbor bond distances in the flake and converting this value to the equivalent lattice parameter of a perfect honeycomb mesh. Two different types of flakes are considered, i.e. those with a H-saturated boundary and those with no capping atoms at the boundary. A significant contraction of the effective lattice parameter results in either case. To approach the GID-observed lattice parameter of  $2.450 \text{ \AA}$  (figure 4) by this effect alone, the equivalent saturated flakes would have to be extremely small (less than  $0.8 \text{ nm}$  in diameter). The equivalent unsaturated flakes, however, could be significantly larger: about  $2 \text{ nm}$  even if they were perfect otherwise. With increasing flake size, the net contraction decreases rapidly for larger sizes.

Localized zero-dimensional (point-like) defects can also lead to strain and corrugation in graphene sheets [41, 42]. Figure 6 gives quantitative predictions for the strain, corrugation and net area change of a periodic graphene sheet (all calculations: DFT-PBE+vdW, reciprocal sampling equivalent to  $20 \times 20$  or denser with respect to the primitive unit cell, residual forces





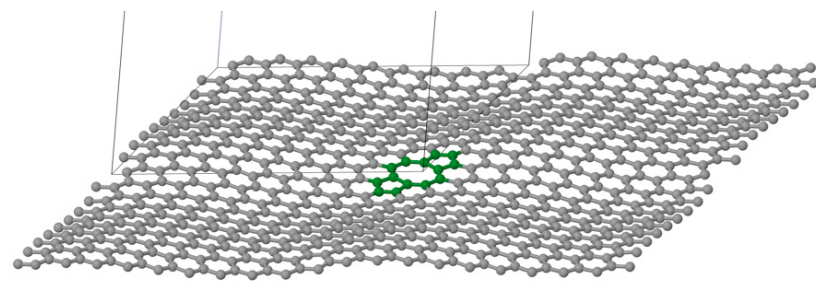
**Figure 5.** (a) Calculated (DFT-PBE+vdW) effective lattice parameter (average C–C bond length) in a series of fully relaxed graphene flakes of finite size with (squares) and without (circles) hydrogen termination at the edges. The hydrogen-terminated flakes are shown in the inset. The lattice parameter of a flat, strain-free, periodic graphene sheet calculated in DFT-PBE+vdW is indicated by a dashed line. (b) Diameter (maximum C–C distance) of the flakes used in (a).

and stresses below  $0.001 \text{ eV } \text{\AA}^{-1}$  after complete, stress-tensor based relaxation of 2D unit cells, and  $50 \text{ \AA}$  vacuum thickness between graphene sheets in  $z$  direction) with well-defined arrays of specific common defect types: monovacancies, divacancies and the Stone–Wales defect (for a recent review, consider, e.g. [41]).

Monovacancies are perhaps the most studied point defect type in graphene (e.g. [42–44] and many references therein). In particular, the relation between theoretically imposed isotropic strain and monovacancy properties such as corrugation and spin polarization has been the subject of a recent, exhaustive study [42]. We here consider only the fully relaxed, stress-free local optimum structures as calculated by DFT-PBE + vdW. Figure 6 shows that monovacancies would be associated with significant strain and corrugations of perfect graphene sheets if no spin polarization were included. However, monovacancies are in fact paramagnetic defects that carry a significant local moment in DFT-PBE+vdW. This leads to a slight reduction of the compressive strain compared to a perfect graphene sheet, and thus also to a reduction of the overall distortion (buckling of the monovacancy and corrugation of the sheet). Even with 2% monovacancies (modeled by a  $(5 \times 5)$  periodicity in figure 6), monovacancies alone would not yet lead to the full strain seen in the GID experiments above.

Among the other possible point defect types in graphene, divacancies are in fact thermodynamically more stable than monovacancies [41, 45], a tendency that is even enhanced by compressive strain [46]. The calculated results for divacancies with corrugation shown in figure 6 were obtained by starting from the fully relaxed, non-spinpolarized monovacancy geometries and removing the most strongly buckled atom (in  $z$  direction) in the monovacancy. As can be seen in the table and the structure of the  $(10 \times 10)$  divacancy defect in figure 6, this procedure leads to very significant strains and buckling in a free-standing graphene sheet. The sheet curvatures seen at the defect locations follow the trend described in the literature [41].





(5×5)			(7×7)			(10×10)		
$a_{\text{eff}}$	$\Delta z_{\text{top-bottom}}$	$\Delta A_{\text{defect}}$	$a_{\text{eff}}$	$\Delta z_{\text{top-bottom}}$	$\Delta A_{\text{defect}}$	$a_{\text{eff}}$	$\Delta z_{\text{top-bottom}}$	$\Delta A_{\text{defect}}$
Monovacancy, non-spinpolarized								
2.447	0.741	-1.72	2.455	0.800	-1.78	2.459	0.865	-1.88
Monovacancy, spin-polarized (ferro- or paramagnetic)								
2.453	<0.01	-1.06	2.458	0.197	-1.11	2.461	0.055	-0.98
Divacancy, non-spinpolarized, corrugated								
2.417	1.023	-4.94	2.431	1.566	-6.82	2.443	1.888	-8.46
Divacancy, non-spinpolarized, flat (metastable)								
			2.447	$\leq 0.02$	-3.42			
Stone-Wales defect, non-spinpolarized								
			2.469	0.00	+0.54			

**Figure 6.** Top: calculated fully relaxed (atomic positions and unit cell) structure of a graphene sheet with a  $(10 \times 10)$  periodic arrangement of 5-8-5 divacancy defects (atoms highlighted in green). The in-plane supercell and surface normal are indicated by thin lines. Bottom: DFT-PBE+vdW calculated effective lateral lattice parameter  $a_{\text{eff}}$  (in Å), the top-to-bottom corrugation  $\Delta z_{\text{top-bottom}}$  (in Å) and effective area lost (gained) per defect,  $\Delta A_{\text{defect}}$  (in Å<sup>2</sup>) of different defect types and periodicities in an ideal, free-standing graphene sheet.

It is also obvious that such defects could easily explain the GID-observed lateral lattice parameter reduction even for relatively low defect concentrations ( $(10 \times 10)$  case). In fact, significant corrugations of this kind are seen in atomically resolved STM images of defects generated in HOPG by ion implantation (e.g. figure 1 in [47]). However, even if a divacancy were completely flat, the associated strain would still be significant. For comparison, figure 6 also includes the case of a flat,  $(7 \times 7)$  periodic divacancy, which is a local structure optimum about 0.1 eV higher in energy than the corrugated divacancy arrangement. Even at this defect density, divacancies would be sufficient to explain the observed strain. Finally, we also include the case of the Stone–Wales defect, which results from the rotation of a single C–C bond, but the number of C atoms remains unchanged. Here, a slight expansion, not compression, of the overall lattice parameter would result.

Idealized theoretical defects and boundaries are certainly just approximations to the experimental reality of MBE-grown nanocrystalline graphene films such as those seen in the AFM image of figure 1(d). If defects left over from the growth process really do play a role, the morphology of such films would likely be characterized by a combination of the defect types considered here, as well as others. It thus seems qualitatively plausible that the strain induced by defects may indeed significantly contribute to the overall lattice parameter contraction that we observe in GID. Eliminating the potential for metastable defects will be important to achieve large-scale homogeneous electronic properties of epitaxially MBE-grown sheets.

On the other hand, controlling the nature and concentration of defects in a graphene sheet during growth may be a promising path toward strain-engineered graphene films.

#### 4. Conclusions

Nanocrystalline graphene layers synthesized by MBE on  $(6\sqrt{3} \times 6\sqrt{3})R30^\circ$ -reconstructed SiC surfaces were investigated. Raman spectroscopy measurements indicate an improvement in the structural quality with increasing growth time. The average size of the graphene domains exceeds 15 nm for layers grown for 240 min. The  $(6\sqrt{3} \times 6\sqrt{3})R30^\circ$  BL persists throughout the growth process as confirmed by XPS measurements, which also reveals that the uppermost MBE-grown graphene layers consist of  $sp^2$ -bonded carbon and thus seems to weakly interact with the underlying BL-covered substrate. Strikingly, GID measurements reveal that the graphene domains are in-plane aligned to the underlying template and have the same orientation. Therefore, despite its nanocrystalline nature, the layer possesses an epitaxial relation to the substrate. In addition, GID also shows that the lattice parameter is strongly contracted. By a first-principles approach for isolated graphene sheets, we derive reference values for the lattice parameter contraction expected from (i) a possible substrate-induced buckling, (ii) the edges associated with finite carbon flakes (hydrogen-saturated or unsaturated) and (iii) monovacancies, divacancies and Stone–Wales defects in periodic supercell arrangements in hypothetical, infinite-periodic graphene sheets. The calculations demonstrate that a lattice parameter contraction will arise from all defects except for the Stone–Wales defect. The largest contraction is associated with the divacancy, which also induces a significant buckling in free-standing graphene sheets. A low concentration of defects is thus one possible explanation for the observed contraction.

Finally, the present results also demonstrate the feasibility of using MBE as an alternative method for the controlled synthesis of graphene layers directly on an insulating substrate. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the growth conditions (e.g. substrate temperature) have to be optimized in order to allow the preparation of layers with higher structural quality, i.e. domains exceeding hundreds of nanometers in size and lower defect concentration.

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# Effect of buffer layer coupling on the lattice parameter of epitaxial graphene on SiC(0001)

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Grazing-incidence x-ray diffraction (GID) was employed to probe the structure of atomically thin carbon layers on SiC(0001): a so-called buffer layer (BL) with a  $6(\sqrt{3} \times \sqrt{3})R30^\circ$  periodicity, a monolayer graphene (MLG) on top of the BL, and a bilayer graphene (BLG). The GID analysis was complemented by Raman spectroscopy. The lattice parameter of each layer was measured with high precision by GID. The BL possesses a different lattice parameter and corrugation when it is uncovered or beneath MLG. Our results demonstrate that the interfacial BL is mainly responsible for the strain in MLG. By promoting its decoupling from the substrate via intercalation, it turns into graphene, leading to a simultaneous relaxation of the MLG and formation of a quasi-free-standing BLG.

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Graphene, with its broad range of superlative properties, is promising for several applications, and is thus anticipated to play a major role in future technologies [1]. The practical utilization of this material will require the development of scalable processes aiming at its precise synthesis [1,2]. As an example, for the production of graphene-based electronic devices, large-area growth of layers offering high structural and electronic quality directly on (semi-)insulating substrates is of great advantage as it will avoid transfer processes that may otherwise degrade their properties. This has currently been pursued by different groups which employed synthesis methods such as chemical vapor deposition [3,4], molecular beam epitaxy [5,6], as well as graphitization of SiC surfaces [7–12]. The latter technique makes use of high temperature annealing (usually above 1400 °C) to sublimate Si atoms and create a C-rich SiC surface where graphene is formed.

Epitaxial graphene can be prepared on polar [(0001) and (000 $\bar{1}$ )] [7–10] and nonpolar [(1120) and (1 $\bar{1}$ 00)] [11] faces of hexagonal SiC, as well as on the (111) surface of cubic SiC [12]. Growth on the Si-terminated (0001) face is certainly the most investigated case as it has an important aspect: It allows for the preparation of high-quality monolayer graphene (MLG) which continuously covers surface terraces and steps in a carpetlike manner, with only small fractions of bilayer or few-layer graphene existing close to the step edges [8,10,13]. The interfacial layer between graphene and SiC is also one atom thick and is often referred to as the buffer layer (BL). Although there has been an intense debate about its atomic structure [14–18], it is currently almost a consensus that the BL is a  $6(\sqrt{3} \times \sqrt{3})R30^\circ$  surface reconstruction of SiC exhibiting a graphenelike honeycomb lattice with partial  $sp^3$  hybridization [17,18]. It is also well accepted that the structural (and electronic) properties of the MLG are influenced by the existence of the BL [19,20]. Nevertheless, it is not completely understood how the structure and morphology of the BL changes during the growth of epitaxial graphene and/or due to postgrowth processes (e.g., decoupling from the substrate by intercalation) [21,22] and, most importantly,

how such modifications will finally affect the uppermost MLG. In order to shine further light on this issue, we have studied different types of carbon coverages on SiC(0001) samples using Raman scattering spectroscopy and grazing-incidence x-ray diffraction (GID). The use of the latter for the characterization of multilayer graphene films on SiC has been demonstrated [23]. However, no emphasis was placed on the BL, or on high-precision measurements of a single graphene layer. GID allowed us to measure the in-plane lattice parameters of graphene (monolayer and bilayer) and BL on SiC(0001) with very high precision. Based on this, information about the average strain level in each atomic layer could be gained, which agrees with Raman results. It is observed that the BL possesses different lattice parameters and corrugation for the cases when it is uncovered or covered by a MLG. It is also revealed that the interfacial BL is indeed the main agent responsible for the strain normally measured in MLG on SiC(0001). The present results are of general relevance as they show that GID is a powerful tool for precise structural studies of purely two-dimensional (2D) atomic crystals.

Three types of samples were investigated in this Rapid Communication, as illustrated in Fig. 1: a bare BL [Fig. 1(a)], MLG [on top of the BL, Fig. 1(b)], as well as bilayer graphene (BLG) [Fig. 1(c)], which were all prepared on *n*-type 6H-SiC(0001). The substrates were chemically cleaned and hydrogen etched using a standard procedure [10]. The bare BL sample [Fig. 1(a)] was grown at a temperature of 1400 °C for 15 min in an Ar atmosphere of 900 mbar and a flow rate of 100 sccm (sccm denotes cubic centimeter per minute at STP). The MLG sample [Fig. 1(b)] was prepared at a temperature of 1600 °C for 15 min in an Ar atmosphere of 900 mbar and a flow rate of 500 sccm. Note that due to the layer-by-layer growth (from below) of graphene on SiC(0001) [24], the first carbon layer formed during the graphitization process is in fact a bare BL. It will turn into a purely  $sp^2$ -hybridized layer (i.e., graphene) only when a second BL is formed underneath it. This is because such a process eliminates the  $sp^3$  bonds and thus promotes its detachment from the SiC. Hence, the underlying layer becomes the new BL, while the former (bare BL) converts into a graphene monolayer. The BLG sample [Fig. 1(c)] was synthesized in two steps: (i) MLG was prepared as for the sample illustrated in Fig. 1(b); and (ii) bilayer formation was achieved by oxygen intercalation upon annealing in air for 40 min at 600 °C. During this process, oxygen-containing

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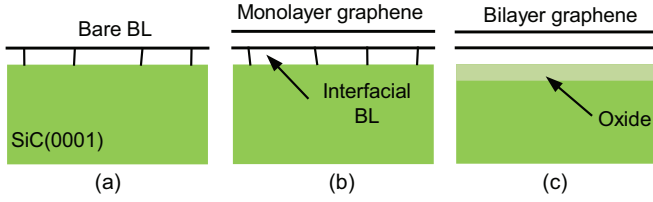


FIG. 1. (Color online) Schematic structures (side view) of the samples investigated in the present study: (a) bare BL; (b) monolayer graphene on top of the BL; (c) bilayer graphene on top of an oxidized SiC surface (obtained by oxygen intercalation).

species intercalate underneath the MLG/BL and oxidize the SiC surface. The BLG is created as this process decouples the BL from the substrate, and turns into a graphene layer. More details about the  $O_2$  intercalation process upon air annealing are reported elsewhere [22].

Raman spectra of the three different samples are shown in Fig. 2. They were recorded using an excitation wavelength of 482.5 nm with a spatial resolution of  $1\ \mu\text{m}$ . The measurements were performed exclusively on surface terraces to avoid contributions from few-layer graphene at the step edge regions [8,10]. The spectrum recorded for the bare BL [see Fig. 2(a)] exhibits two intense and broad bands in the spectral region of  $1200\text{--}1660\ \text{cm}^{-1}$  and a low-intensity modulated bump between  $2540$  and  $3000\ \text{cm}^{-1}$ . Well-defined  $G$  and  $2D$  peaks, which are usually measured for graphene [25], are not seen in the spectrum. This is because the BL possesses a phonon dispersion which is substantially different from the one of graphene [26]. For the MLG/BL system, a Raman spectrum showing intense  $G$  and  $2D$  peaks is measured [see Fig. 2(b)]. The  $2D$  peak can be well fitted by a single Lorentzian, as expected for a single layer. The  $G$  and  $2D$  peaks are positioned at  $1581(\pm 5)$  and  $2724(\pm 10)\ \text{cm}^{-1}$ , respectively.

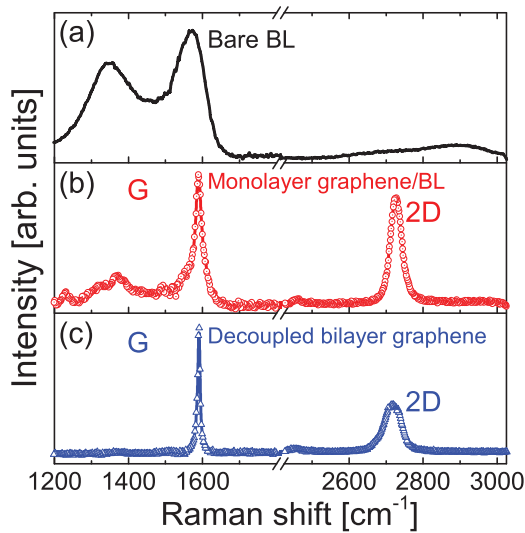


FIG. 2. (Color online) Raman spectra of the three samples investigated in the present study: (a) bare BL; (b) monolayer graphene on top of the BL; (c) bilayer graphene on top of an oxidized SiC surface (obtained by oxygen intercalation upon air annealing).

Based on the position of the Raman peaks [27], an average (compressive) strain of  $\sim 0.2\%$  was estimated for the MLG. The position of the  $2D$  peak was utilized for this purpose, since it is only marginally affected by the doping, present in the investigated samples [28,29]. The broad spectral features existing from  $1200\ \text{cm}^{-1}$  close to the  $G$  peak's left shoulder originate from the underlying BL [26]. The Raman spectrum collected after air annealing [see Fig. 2(c)] shows features of quasi-free-standing BLG. The  $2D$  peak can be fitted by four Lorentzians positioned at  $2673$ ,  $2688$ ,  $2706$ , and  $2738\ \text{cm}^{-1}$  (fittings not shown). This coincides well with the values obtained by Malard *et al.* [30] for exfoliated BLG on  $\text{SiO}_2$  (taking the employed excitation energy into account), which shows that the original compressive strain present in the MLG is released after BL decoupling. This in turn suggests that the existence of the BL at the interface is certainly one of the main factors contributing to the compressive strain observed in the graphene layer [10,19]. Another evidence for the formation of BLG is that the BL-related Raman features are absent in the spectrum. Note that, as previously reported [22], the absence of a  $D$  peak proves that the air annealing process does not lead to defect formation in the graphene structure.

The structure of the samples was further investigated by GID. The measurements were performed at the beamline ID10 of the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF) in Grenoble. The primary beam energy was  $10\ \text{keV}$  with an intensity of  $10^{14}$  counts per second (cps) and a spot size on the sample of  $100\ \mu\text{m} \times 1\ \text{mm}$ . The angle of incidence was set to  $0.15^\circ$ , which is below the angle of total external reflectance ( $0.21^\circ$  for SiC and  $10\ \text{keV}$ ), to minimize the intensity obtained from the substrate. Using this technique, the lattice planes orthogonal to the sample surface normal are analyzed by diffraction, and information about the in-plane lattice parameter and orientation can be acquired. Figure 3 illustrates a reciprocal space map (RSM) obtained by combining

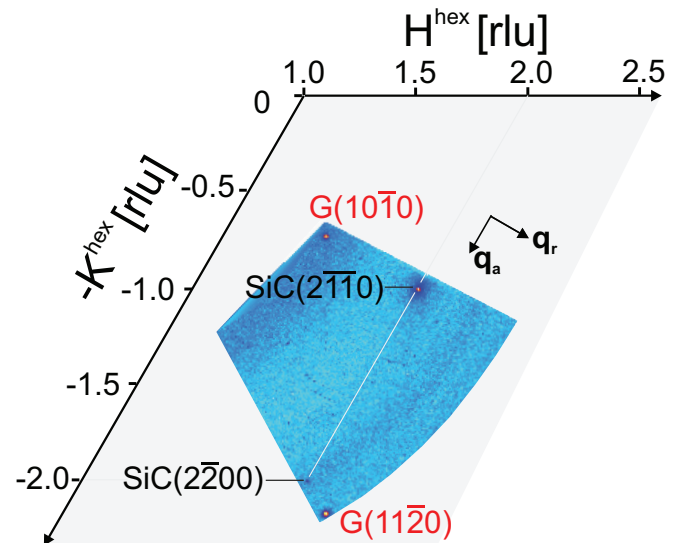


FIG. 3. (Color online) Reciprocal space map of monolayer graphene/BL on SiC(0001). The axes are scaled with the reciprocal lattice units (rlu) of SiC;  $q_a$  and  $q_r$  mark the radial and angular directions in the RSM.



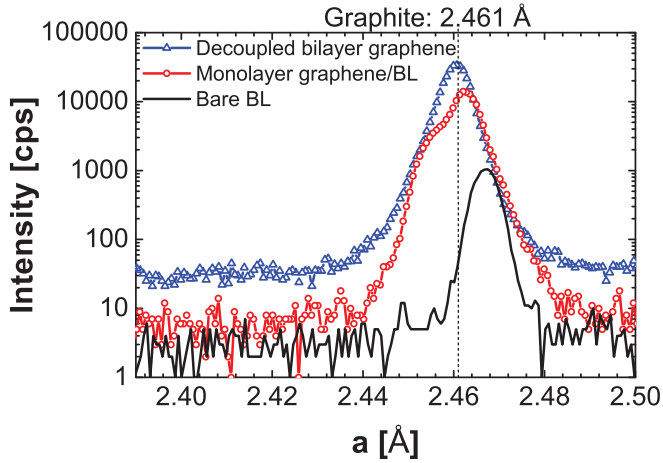


FIG. 4. (Color online) Line scans through the  $G(11\bar{2}0)$  reflection along  $q_r$ , transformed to real space, performed for the bare BL, monolayer graphene/BL, and bilayer graphene samples. The dotted line indicates the value for the lattice parameter of graphite [31]. The  $x$  axis is scaled to the lattice parameter of graphene.

angular and radial scans of GID measurements performed for the MLG/BL on SiC(0001). Two SiC-related reflections are present, the SiC( $2\bar{1}10$ ) and the (quasi)forbidden SiC( $2\bar{2}00$ ). Two graphene-related reflections are also observed, assigned as  $G(10\bar{1}0)$  and  $G(11\bar{2}0)$ . The appearance of these isolated reflections reveals that the layer possesses a single orientation with respect to the substrate. The graphene lattice is rotated by  $30^\circ$  with respect to the SiC, since the equivalent SiC( $2\bar{1}10$ ) and graphene( $11\bar{2}0$ ) reflections are rotated by this angle relative to each other. Very similar maps (not shown) were obtained for the other two samples investigated here.

In order to measure possible modifications in the lattice parameters of the three samples, line scans over the  $G(11\bar{2}0)$  reflection were performed with higher resolution along the radial direction  $q_r$ , as shown in Fig. 4. The central position of the peaks was determined by fitting Gaussians to the curves. The measurements reveal clear differences between the samples. The bare BL shows a lattice parameter of  $a = 2.467$  Å. The  $G(11\bar{2}0)$  reflection of the MLG/BL sample shows splitting, and can be well fitted with two Gaussian peaks, centered at 2.456 and 2.463 Å. The reflection obtained from the BLG consists of a single Gaussian, resulting in a lattice parameter of  $a = 2.460$  Å. Note that the upper limit for error is estimated to be  $\sim 0.001$  Å, based on the fitting error, the energy resolution of the primary beam, the accuracy of the motors which move the sample and the detector, and the alignment of the substrate-related peaks to literature values. Table I summarizes the lattice parameter measured for each sample.

TABLE I. Lattice parameter  $a$  obtained by GID for the samples investigated here.

Sample	$a$ (Å)
Bare BL	2.467
Monolayer graphene/BL	2.456/2.463
Decoupled bilayer graphene	2.460

The lattice parameter for the bare BL is  $\sim 0.24\%$  larger in comparison to that of graphite ( $a = 2.461$  Å) [31]. The larger lattice parameter of the BL is a result of its strong bonding to the substrate due to the  $sp^3$  hybridization of  $\sim 1/3$  of the C atoms [18]. These  $sp^3$  bonds will likely affect the interatomic distances in the BL lattice and consequently the average in-plane lattice parameter. In fact, it has been shown that the bond length between  $sp^3$ - and  $sp^2$ -hybridized carbon atoms are approximately 3% longer than that between two  $sp^2$ -hybridized atoms [32]. Furthermore, the partial  $sp^3$  bonding to the substrate leads to a  $(6 \times 6)$  long-range corrugation in the BL [as imaged by scanning tunneling microscopy (STM)] [17]. We could roughly estimate the out-of-plane height for this corrugation (see the Supplemental Material) [33]. Assuming that an ideally flat BL on SiC would adapt graphene's lattice parameter of 2.461 Å, an average corrugation angle of  $\sim 4^\circ$  to the surface is required to obtain the measured lattice parameter of the BL. Based on it and on STM literature data which show that the buckled region is extended over the side of the  $(6 \times 6)$  cell, a corrugation of  $\sim 0.52$  Å was obtained. This value is similar to what was measured by STM [17]. It is important to mention that the enlarged lattice parameter measured by GID evidences that the uncovered BL possesses a graphenelike hexagonal arrangement. The existence of pentagons, heptagons, and even octagons (due to either inclusion of extra carbon atoms or the formation of vacancies) is expected to lower the average bond length and thus lattice parameter [34,35].

The doublet shape of the  $G(11\bar{2}0)$  reflection obtained from the MLG/BL sample is likely related to the different bonding characteristics of the two layers. While the uppermost MLG is purely  $sp^2$  hybridized, the interfacial BL is expected to have the same density of  $sp^3$  bonds as for the case when it is uncovered [18]. Therefore, the fact that they exhibit different in-plane lattice parameters (2.456 and 2.463 Å for the MLG and the BL, respectively) is not totally unexpected. GID reveals two other interesting aspects. The first one is related to the MLG. Its lattice parameter is  $\sim 0.22\%$  smaller in comparison to graphite. The magnitude and type of strain is in agreement with what was estimated by Raman spectroscopy ( $\epsilon \approx 0.2\%$ ). It has been proposed that the compressive strain may arise upon sample cooling due to the different coefficients of thermal expansion for graphene and SiC [36]. While graphene's coefficient is negative, the one for SiC is positive [37]. Hence, for the contraction of the graphene lattice to be caused by this phenomenon, the MLG must be strongly pinned to the underlying BL/SiC substrate. The origin of the pinning remains unknown. In principle, one cannot exclude the possibility that covalent bonds are formed between the graphene and the BL, especially at grain boundaries. However, experimental evidences supporting this hypothesis have yet to be reported. Another tentative explanation has been given by Ferralis *et al.* [38]. They suggest that the highly corrugated potential in the substrate surface (which is indeed expected as the BL exhibits a semiconducting nature) [18] will promote a lateral pinning of the MLG, which will hinder tangential displacements for strain relaxation.

The second interesting aspect relates to the interfacial BL, which has a larger lattice parameter than that of graphite, similar to what was measured for the bare BL. However,

the increase is smaller than in that case and amounts to only  $\sim 0.08\%$ . The reason for the difference in the lattice parameters of the interfacial and the bare BL is not yet known, although one can speculate that it is associated with the different growth environments faced by the two layers. The bare BL grows at a SiC-Ar interface, while the interfacial BL grows underneath the former one [24]. Also the existence of a graphene layer on top during sample cooling might be the reason for the smaller lattice parameter of the interfacial BL, e.g., due to a decrease in its long-range corrugation. Lauffer *et al.* [39] have observed (by STM) that the surface roughness of MLG/BL is lower than of the bare BL. Such reduction might be associated (at least to a certain extent) to the smoothing of the interfacial BL [40]. The corrugation that we obtain based on the GID results is  $\sim 0.29$  Å, thus smaller than the value found for the bare BL ( $\sim 0.52$  Å). Finally, the fact that the bare and interfacial BL exhibit similar lattice parameters corroborates the mostly common interpretation in terms of structure, i.e., that both of them possess a periodic hexagonal structure as graphene. Should the  $6(\sqrt{3} \times \sqrt{3})R30^\circ$  graphenelike structure not persist at the interface (as proposed, for instance, in Ref. [15]), the splitting of the  $G(11\bar{2}0)$  reflection for the MLG/BL structure would certainly not be observed.

The line scan over the  $G(11\bar{2}0)$  reflection for quasi-free-standing BLG contains a single peak centered at  $2.460$  Å. The difference relative to the value for graphite is  $\sim 0.04\%$ . This very small compressive strain might also be caused by a pinning to the underlying  $\text{SiO}_2$  due to effects related to surface potential [38], as previously discussed. This result is in agreement with the Raman findings (note that in that case we considered, as a reference for strain-free material, Raman data obtained for BLG flakes on  $\text{SiO}_2$  [30]). The

single lattice parameter measured for both layers shows that, as a product of the oxygen intercalation, the interfacial BL decouples and slightly contracts, while (and as a consequence of it) the uppermost graphene expands. This unequivocally demonstrates that the interfacial BL, with its strong bonding to the SiC, is indeed responsible for the compressive strain generally measured in MLG on SiC(0001).

In summary, we have used GID to investigate the structure of three atomically thin carbon films (bare BL, MLG/BL, and decoupled BLG) on SiC(0001). The GID analyses were complemented by Raman measurements. The in-plane lattice parameter of each atomic layer could be determined with high precision using GID. This permitted us to gain information about their strain level. The results reveal that the BL possesses a lattice parameter that is larger than that of graphite. Interestingly, this value slightly decreases when the BL is located beneath a MLG, likely due to a lowering of the out-of-plane corrugation. Furthermore, our findings corroborate the mostly accepted interpretation for the structure of the BL, i.e., that it exhibits a graphenelike hexagonal lattice with part of the C atoms connected to the SiC substrate through  $sp^3$  bonds. It also shows that the BL (as a semiconducting interfacial layer) is directly responsible for the strained nature of MLG. If decoupled from the substrate by oxygen intercalation, the BL turns into an almost strain-free graphene layer, allowing the MLG on top to move laterally and relax, ultimately forming a quasi-free-standing BLG structure.

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