

Unconventional nucleation and growth kinetics: *in situ* variable-temperature scanning tunneling microscopy studies of chemical vapor deposition of inorganic monolayers on metallic substrates

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The growth of thin films from atoms and/or molecules deposited from the gas phase onto solid substrates is a non-equilibrium phenomenon where the structure, composition, and crystallinity of the films are determined by kinetic and thermodynamic processes. Over the past few decades, vast and fruitful efforts have been devoted to understanding the kinetics of thin film growth. As a result, conventions of the kinetic factors have been developed to predict the growth mechanism and, hence, microstructure of the as-grown films: for example, nucleation at terraces (steps) is expected to occur when surface diffusion of adsorbed species is significantly lower (higher) compared to the deposition flux and is observed at higher (lower) fluxes and lower (higher) substrate temperatures. Here, we report an unconventional growth mode of inorganic monolayers on metallic substrates.

Using *in situ* ultra-high vacuum scanning tunneling microscopy (UHV STM), we investigated the chemical vapor deposition (CVD) kinetics of hexagonal boron nitride (hBN) monolayers on Pd(111). In each experiment, STM images are acquired while exposing Pd(111) to borazine (10^{-7} – 10^{-6} Torr) at temperatures 573 K and 673 K and for times up to 2500 s. The STM images reveal the nucleation and growth of two-dimensional islands on the Pd surfaces. From the images, we measure the areal coverage, island sizes, and island density as a function of time, temperature, and borazine flux. We find that the rates of areal coverage and island density increase ten-fold with increasing borazine pressure from 10^{-7} to 10^{-6} Torr at 573 K and three-fold with increasing temperature from 573 K to 673 K and borazine pressure of 10^{-7} Torr. Our STM images reveal an unusual nucleation and growth mode: at lower deposition flux and higher temperature, islands form on terraces; increasing the flux and/or lowering the temperature result in preferential nucleation and growth at the step edges. Interestingly, the step-edge growth of borazine islands is observed on *both* up and down steps. We attribute this phenomenon to the structure and the highly anisotropic bonding of borazine on Pd(111). Our results provide new insights into the growth dynamics of two-dimensional layered materials.