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# Chemically Selective Imaging of Individual Bonds Through Scanning Electron Energy-Loss Spectroscopy: Disulfide Bridges linking Gold Nanoclusters

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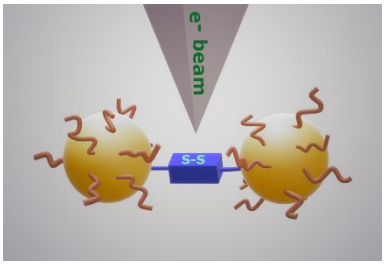
**As proof-of-principle of chemically selective, spatially resolved imaging of individual bonds, we carry out electron energy-loss spectroscopy (EELS) in a scanning transmission electron microscope (STEM) on atomically precise, thiolate-coated, gold nanoclusters linked with 5,5′-bis(mercaptomethyl)-2,2′-bipyridine dithiol ligands. The images allow the identification of bridging disulfide bonds (R-S-S-R) between clusters and X-ray photoelectron spectra (XPS) support the finding.**

## TOC GRAPHICS




**KEYWORDS** Gold nanoclusters, linking, Electron energy-loss spectroscopy, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy.

Rapid progress is being made toward chemically selective atomically resolved microscopy, what may be regarded as the chemists' ideal structural tool. An example is the recent demonstration of imaging vibrational local modes inside a molecule through tip-enhanced Raman spectromicroscopy.[1] This involves measurements in the atomistic near-field, suitable for planar molecules. In contrast, the combination of scanning transmission electron microscopy (STEM) and electron energy-loss (EELS) microscopy provides a far-field method for chemically selective

atom-resolved spectromicroscopy, which has been implemented primarily to image the chemical structure of hard materials.[2-5] Its implementation in soft, organic materials has been limited due to the damage induced by the high energy electrons. With increasing detection sensitivity and energy resolution of electron analyzers, STEM-EELS can be expected to find wider use in direct chemical structure determination, where other methods may fail. We demonstrate this in the present, by imaging the disulfide-bridging bond between atomically precise, thiolate-coated gold nanoclusters, which was anticipated but could not be definitely established by standard spectroscopic means.

Monolayer protected gold nanoclusters have attracted attention due to their physicochemical properties and applications such as surface chemical modification.[6-9] Of interest are gold nanoclusters with >200 gold atoms, which sustain localized surface plasmon resonances (LSPR) that can be tuned by modifying their immediate surroundings.[10,11] Modification of the nanocluster surface is necessary for assembly and implementations in biology, medicine or electronics.[6,7,12] Ligand-exchange reactions are commonly used for this purpose, and bifunctional ligands are used to interconnect nanoclusters into superstructures with tunable optical and electronic properties.[10,12-17] The precisely-defined structural units and their ease in self-assembly allow systematic studies of emergent LSPR properties in individual superstructures, with the recognition that the linkage plays an important role in defining all such properties.[18] A predicate for such studies is the detailed knowledge of the chemical structure.

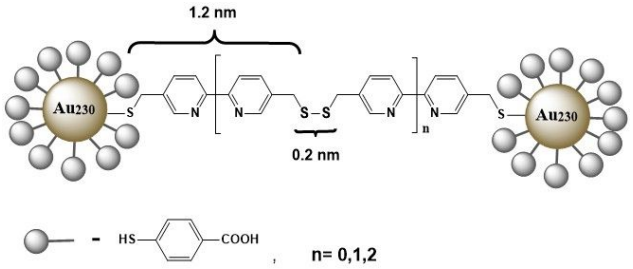


**Figure 1.** The suggested structure of two $Au_{230}$ nanoclusters linked by 5,5′-bis(mercaptomethyl)-2,2′-bipyridine (BMM-BPy) dithiols. Indicated are the lengths of the dithiol (1.2 nm), and the disulfide bond (0.2 nm).

We recently presented a versatile approach to covalently link $Au_{210\text{-}230}(p\text{-MBA})_{70\text{-}80}$ nanoclusters ($Au_{230}$) into covalently linked dimers, trimers, and multimers.[17] Based on the analysis of reaction yields and Monte Carlo kinetic models, we speculated on reaction routes involving different linkages:[19] a single dithiol, or two to three dithiols fused by (-S-S-) disulfide bonds, as illustrated in Figure 1. This was indirectly supported by the observation of inter-cluster separations of 1 - 2.85 times the length of a dithiol molecule.[19] However, conclusive spectroscopic proof could not be obtained through methods such as single-particle Raman, because of the spectral congestion by the thiolate-stapled gold clusters. To characterize the individual structures, it is necessary to combine high-resolution microscopy and high-sensitivity spectroscopy.[2,3,20] Electron microscopy has the capability to measure individual nanostructures.[3,4,21,22] STEM has previously been used to characterize the organic/inorganic, thiolate-protected gold nanoclusters on the sub-nanometer scale.[4,22,23] Here, to visualize the linkage, we employ EELS during STEM imaging, as previously implemented to study 2D materials and larger nanoparticles.[3-5] In addition, we exploit X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) to provide complementary support.[20] The combination of these analytical tools allows the simultaneous structural and spectral analysis of individual nanostructures.

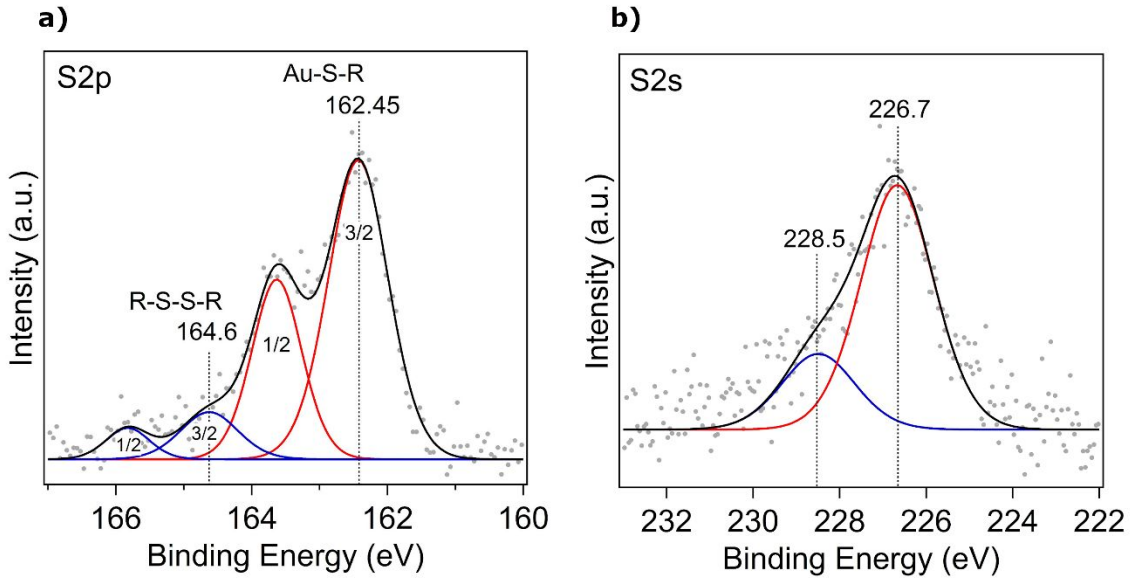



**Figure 2.** XPS of sulfur (a) 2*p* and (b) 2*s* spectra on $Au_{230}$ linked oligomers. The 2*p* signal is fitted to two spin-orbit split doublets $2p_{1/2}$ and $2p_{3/2}$, and consistent with that, the 2*s* spectrum is fitted to two peaks of the same relative intensity. The red peaks are assigned to S-Au and the blue peaks are assigned to S-S bound sulfur, respectively.

XPS allows elemental analysis of oligomers but lacks the sensitivity to pinpoint individual bonds (See SI experimental methods). The presence of gold, carbon, and a trace amount of oxygen is established through measurements of the core-level spectra of Au 4*f*, C 1*s,* and O 1*s* (Fig. S1). The XPS core-level band around 84 eV is similar to bulk gold, with a linewidth (see Table S1) consistent with nanoclusters of approximately 4 nm in diameter.[20] In Fig. 2, we show the photoemission spectra of the S 2*p* and S 2*s* core-levels. The 2*p* transition consists of spin-orbit split doublets and the spectrum in Fig. 2(a) shows two doublets. The red doublet with the $2p_{3/2}$ component at 162.45 eV is assigned to the sulfur atoms chemically-bonded to gold atoms (S-Au). Similar binding energies at 162.6 eV,[24] 162.8 eV,[25] and 162.9 eV[26] have been observed before in

the thiolate-protected gold nanoclusters. The blue doublet, with $2p_{3/2}$ component at 164.6 eV, is admittedly weak. Confidence in this spectral decomposition is established by its consistency with the S 2*s* spectral profile shown in Fig. 2(b), which is best fitted to two peaks at 226.7 eV and 228.5 eV, with similar relative peak intensities as in the S 2*p* doublet pair. The measured energy of the blue doublet is in excellent agreement with the earlier work of Siegbahn and Verbist, where the same signal at 164.6 eV was assigned to the disulfide group (R-S-S-R) that bridges dithiol molecules.[27] As such, we assign the components at 162.5 eV and 164.6 eV in the S 2*p* band, and 226.7 eV and 228.5 eV in the S 2*s* band to S-Au and S-S bonded sulfur atoms, respectively. The assignment establishes the presence of disulfide bonds but lacks the sensitivity to observe them in individual covalently-linked clusters.

Aberration-corrected STEM images of a monomer, dimer, and trimer of $Au_{230}$ clusters mounted on a graphene-coated grid are shown in Fig. 3(a). The images are obtained at 80 kV, with current and exposure time reduced to minimize e-beam damage, while retaining sufficient imaging contrast. Close-ups of individual $Au_{230}$ clusters are provided in Fig S2, where lattice fringes of

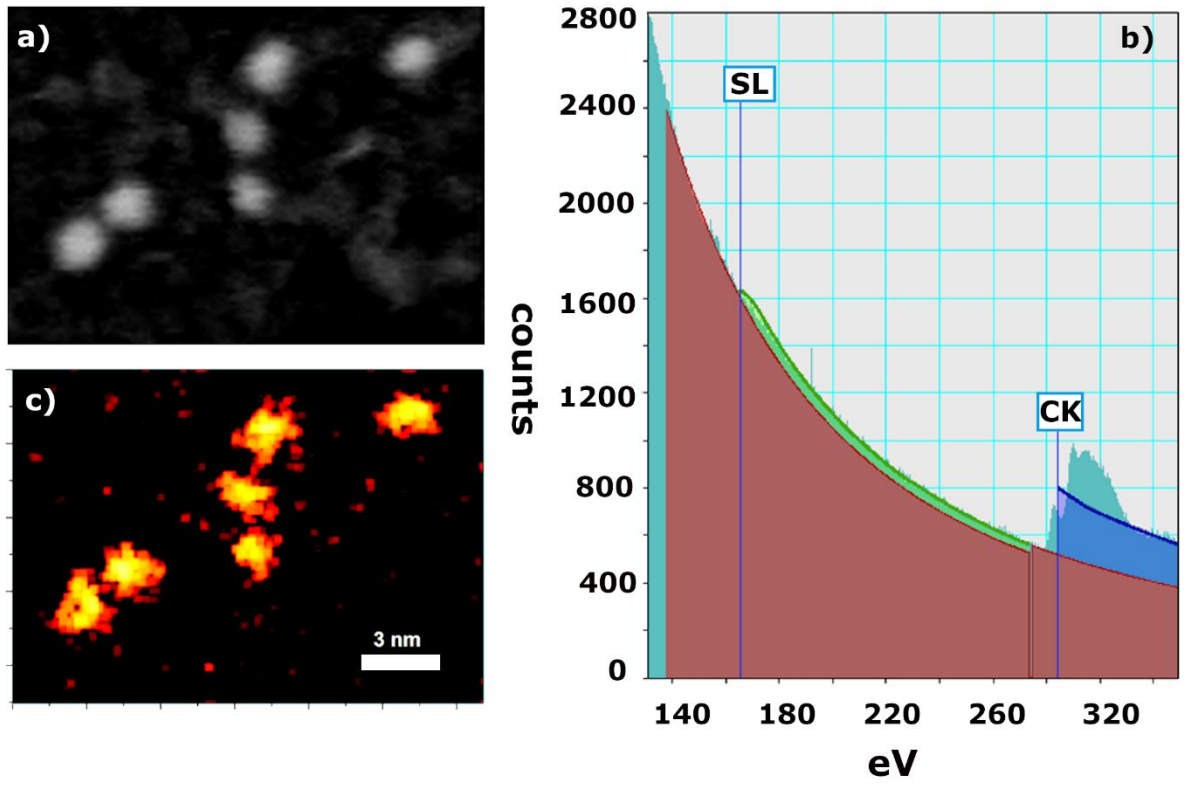



**Figure 3**. Atomic-level EELS mapping of covalently-linked gold oligomers: (a) STEM image, (b) EELS spectrum showing the opening of scattering channels at S L-edge and C K-edge, (c) Logarithmic intensity plot of the sulfur elemental map.

the face-centered-cubic arrangement can be seen, and the cluster diameter can be established as ~1.8 nm, in agreement with our prior estimate of 1.7±0.1 nm.[28] The sample was prepared by dispersing a trimer solution purified by polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (PAGE), however an overview of the dry-mounted clusters shows a wide distribution of superstructures (see Fig. S3). As earlier described,[19] dithiol-linked gold structures are dynamic in nature: they undergo continuous breaking and forming of superstructures. The EELS spectrum recorded under the same STEM imaging conditions is shown in Figure 3(b). In the core loss region >100 eV, the spectrum shows the characteristic edges of sulfur (165 eV), carbon (284 eV) dominated by the graphene

grid, and trace amounts of nitrogen (401 eV) and oxygen (532 eV). The complete EELS spectrum is provided in Figure S4. The integrated S loss channel (highlighted in green in Fig. 3b) is mapped in Fig. 3(c) and Figure S5. The maps image the 70-80 sulfur atoms distributed on each $Au_{210-230}$(*p*-MBA)$_{70-80}$ cluster (close-ups provided in Fig. S6).

Line profiles of the elemental sulfur images in Figure 4 explore the inter-cluster bridges. The four images contain the variations seen (for close-ups, see Figs. S6 and S7). In Figs. 4(a) and (b), we see a clear intensity peak between the linked dimers, suggestive of a disulfide bond. Note, the pixel resolution is 0.16 nm, as such the two S atoms of the 0.2 nm-long S–S bond cannot be expected to be resolved. The intensity profile along the orange line in Fig. 4(c) is informative. It shows a peak between the first two clusters, similar to those in 4(a), (b). No such peak is found between the subsequent pairs. Indeed, the inter-cluster separation between clusters 2-3 and 3-4 of ~ 1 nm could only accommodate a single dithiol linker, and therefore a disulfide bond is not expected. The image of an isolated dimer bound by a single 1.2 nm dithiol, absent bridging sulfur, is provided in Fig. S8. In Fig. 4(d), we show the sulfur intensity profiles along with two-line cuts of a trimer. The orange line cuts across two nanoclusters, while the vertical cyan line passes through all three. The profile along the orange line is similar to those in Fig. 4(a) and (b), consistent with a disulfide linkage. The profile along the cyan line shows additional weak peaks ~0.5 nm apart between nanoclusters separated by ~1.5 nm, consistent with two disulfide bridges, therefore three dithiol molecules linking the two nanoclusters. In all cases, the intercluster separations are consistent with the expected number of dithiol linkers, and the visualized disulfide bonds, in full agreement with our prior hypothesis and finding on distances between nanoclusters (1- 2.85 times the length of BMM-BPy.

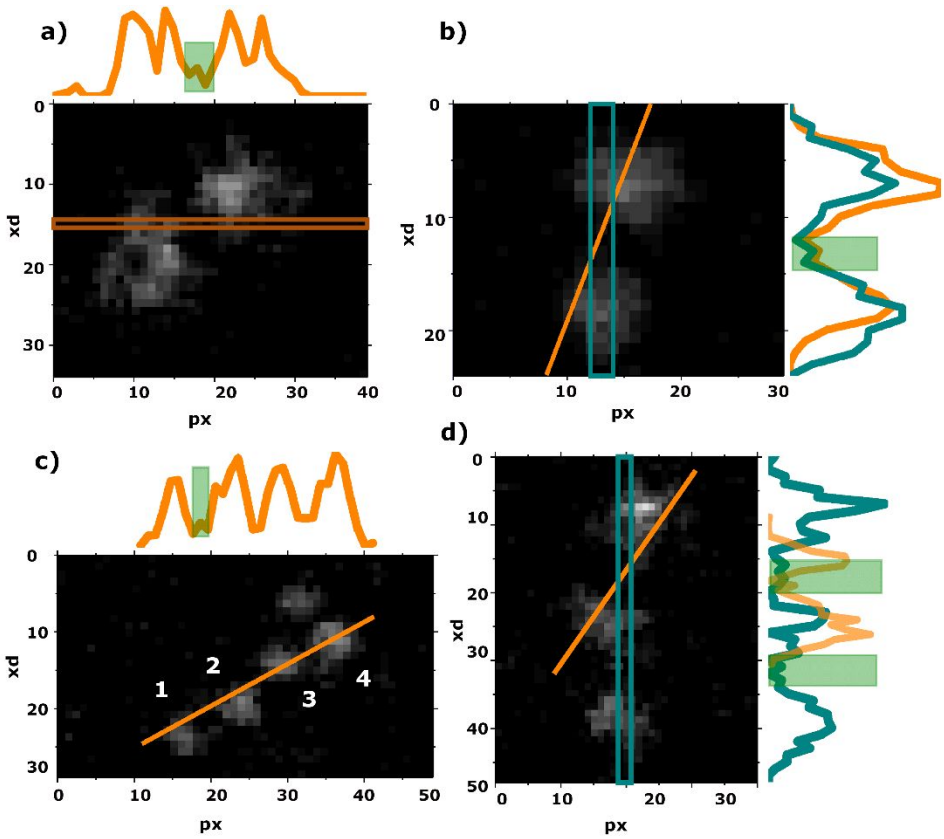



**Figure 4.** (a)—(d) The cross-section profiles of sulfur intensities taken along the lines indicated in the inset images. The inset images 4(a)—(d) are the same as the enlarged yellow-coded images shown in S5(a)—(d), respectively.

We have demonstrated that the combination of STEM and EELS already allows the visualization of chemical bonds and structure in real space. In the present implementation, we determined the disulfide linkages between dithiol-bound $Au_{230}$ clusters, which to date was the subject of speculation. The nature and composition of the molecular bridges were also confirmed through XPS measurements. The combination of the three techniques provides comprehensive chemical analysis, which can be expected to have broader use as the resolution and sensitivity electron microscopies advance. The particular finding here, namely the bonding motif between

nanoclusters is important to advance our understanding of the optical and electronic response of superstructures with emergent plasmonic response.

## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

**Supporting Information**. The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI:

Description of the experimental methods and measurements; Au 4*f*, C 1*s,* and O 1*s* photoemission spectra along with the FWHM values; STEM micrographs of gold nanoclusters; EELS spectrum of covalently-linked nanoclusters; intensity plot of sulfur elemental map derived from EELS spectrum; cross-section profiles of sulfur intensities.

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**Notes**

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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