

# Electron Rearrangement Dynamics in Dissociating $I_2^{n+}$ Molecules Accessed by XUV Pump-Probe Experiments

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The charge rearrangement in dissociating  $I_2^{n+}$  molecules is measured as a function of the internuclear distance  $R$  using XUV pulses delivered by the free-electron laser (FEL) in Hamburg. Within an XUV pump-probe scheme the first pulse initiates dissociation by multiply ionizing  $I_2$ , and the delayed probe pulse further ionizes one of the two fragments at a given time, thus triggering charge rearrangement at a well-defined  $R$ . The electron transfer between the fragments is monitored by analyzing the delay-dependent ion kinetic energies and charge states. The experimental results are in very good agreement with predictions of the classical over-the-barrier model demonstrating its validity in a thus far unexplored quasimolecular regime relevant for FEL, plasma and chemistry applications.

The dynamics of charge relaxation, rearrangement and equilibration at the transition between chemically bound and unbound systems is essential for understanding many chemical [1, 2] and plasma reactions [3, 4]. It is also crucial for the imaging of biomolecules with atomic resolution, a key application of Free-Electron Lasers (FELs). Here, the idea is to take a snapshot of the molecule by irradiating the system with intense ultra-short ( $< 100$ fs) X-ray pulses before it is damaged [5]. Recent experiments on nano-crystallized lysozyme, however, have shown that the photon-induced damage leads to a scattering pattern that is different from what is expected for the intact molecule even for X-ray pulses as short as 70fs [6]. Photon absorption is strongly localized at constituents with high atomic numbers, often having more than an order of magnitude larger cross sections as compared to H or even C atoms [7]. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the underlying ultrafast electronic and nuclear rearrangement dynamics in order to develop improved damage models that take into account the spatio-temporal spread of the locally induced charge.

Localized photon absorption efficiently triggers atomic movement and electron rearrangement across the entire molecular ion, mainly leading to its fragmentation. In a recent study methylselenol [8] and ethylselenol [9] molecules, containing one heavy selenium atom as photoabsorption center, were irradiated with single intense 5fs X-ray pulses. From the observed charge-state distributions and the fragments' kinetic energies it could be concluded that even for such short pulses ultrafast charge rearrangement takes place, accompanied by considerable atomic displacements which is relevant for imaging with atomic resolution. However, the central question concerning the underlying time and length scales remained open.

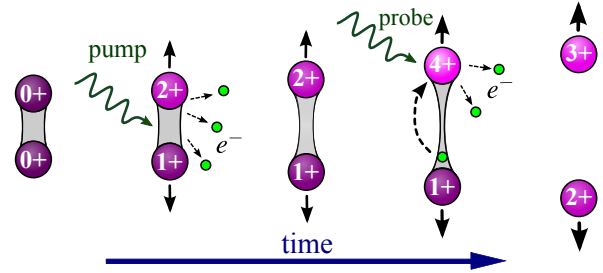


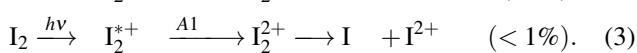
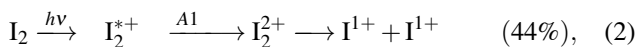
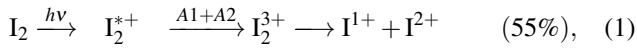
FIG. 1. Illustration of the XUV-pump-XUV-probe scheme. The pump pulse triggers the dissociation into  $I^{1+} + I^{2+}$  by multiple ionization. The delayed probe pulse creates a  $I^{4+}$  ion that in turn attracts electrons from the other side of the molecule resulting in the more symmetric break-up into  $I^{2+} + I^{3+}$ . Charge transfer is only possible up to a critical internuclear separation, beyond that the fragments behave as individual ions.

In this work we present experimental results on the electron transfer between two iodine ions at freely chosen internuclear distances  $R$ . A dissociation of the  $I_2$  molecule is triggered by multiple ionization with a femtosecond pump pulse [10]. The evolving system is then further ionized by the delayed probe pulse. Depending on the time delay, or the corresponding internuclear distance, and the charge states created by the pump pulse an electron can be transferred from one constituent to the other, as illustrated in Fig. 1. We explicitly address the question of how fast and up to which critical distance  $R_{crit}$  charge can be rearranged. Our results are in excellent agreement with the predictions of the classical over-the-barrier (COB) model [11, 12] that has been developed to describe charge transfer in ion-atom collisions.

The experiment was conducted at the beamline BL2 at FLASH, which is equipped with an autocorrelator that splits the incoming FEL beam geometrically into two equal parts and introduces an adjustable time delay between them to allow for XUV pump-probe experiments [13]. The two beams are spatially overlapped and focused down to a diameter of approximately 35  $\mu\text{m}$ . We used 87 eV pulses at a repetition rate of 300 pulses/s with a duration of approximately 60 fs (FWHM) and an intensity of roughly  $10^{14} \text{ W/cm}^2$ . The FEL beam was focused into a supersonic gas jet containing iodine molecules. In order to produce a gaseous iodine target solid iodine was heated to 400 K inside a reservoir containing helium gas at a stagnation pressure of 1 bar resulting in a He : I<sub>2</sub> ratio of approximately 50 : 1. The gas mixture was expanded through a heated 30  $\mu\text{m}$  diameter nozzle to create a supersonic jet.

By means of a reaction microscope [14] we detected all coincident ionic fragments created upon ionization. The ions were accelerated by a homogeneous electric field of 35 V/cm onto a time- and position-sensitive detector which allowed to reconstruct the initial three dimensional momenta and the charge states. During the measurement, the pump-probe delay time was continuously scanned between -2 ps and +2 ps, meaning that one of the pulses precedes the other for negative delays and succeeds it for positive delays.

We first consider the ionization with a single photon of 87 eV. This energy is close to the maximum of the  $4d^{-1}$  giant shape resonance in I<sub>2</sub> [15] which amounts to more than 80% of the total cross section [16]. Thus, absorption of one photon mostly leads to the creation of a  $4d$ -type vacancy that undergoes either a single Auger decay (A1) leading to I<sub>2</sub><sup>2+</sup> or a cascade of two Auger processes (A1+A2) resulting in I<sub>2</sub><sup>3+</sup> [10]. A1 has a lifetime of only a few femtoseconds [17], while the decay time of A2 was determined recently to be 23 fs [18]. Two singly charged iodine ions that repel each other by the Coulomb force expand within 150 fs to twice their equilibrium internuclear distance. Thus, A1 and A2 can be considered fast compared to both the FEL pulse duration and the dissociation time. In a low-intensity measurement at FLASH we detected only a small fraction of bound I<sub>2</sub><sup>2+</sup> (< 10%) and I<sub>2</sub><sup>3+</sup> (< 1%) as the majority of molecular ions dissociate. Hence, the absorption of a single 87 eV photon mainly leads to the creation of dissociating I<sub>2</sub><sup>2+</sup> or I<sub>2</sub><sup>3+</sup> molecular ions that fragment into:



At the higher intensity of  $10^{14} \text{ W/cm}^2$  multiple photons are absorbed within one pulse: Using Xe gas as a target which also features a  $4d$  shape resonance [19], analog to the one in I<sub>2</sub>, we observed charge states up to Xe<sup>6+</sup>, the highest one that can be produced by a sequence of at least four single-photon ionization events. With identical beam parameters I<sub>2</sub><sup>12+</sup> was reached allowing to draw the same conclusion that mostly se-

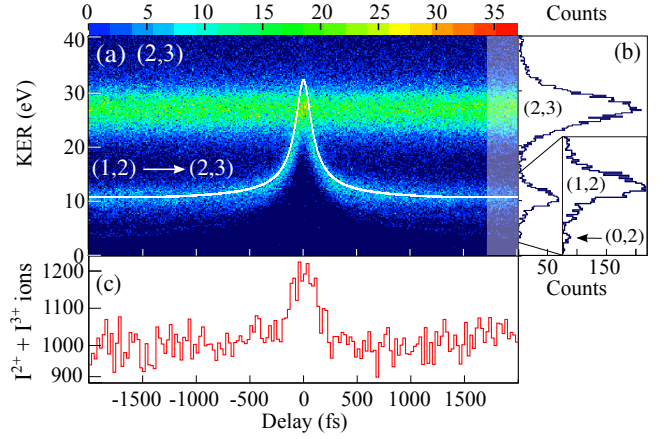


FIG. 2. (a) KER for all coincident (2, 3) ion pairs plotted as a function of the time delay. The classical simulation via the pathway (1, 2) → (2, 3) is superimposed in white. (b) Projection of KERs at large delays (shaded area) onto the KER axis with the inset showing a magnified view of the low-energy region. The charge states belonging to the observed asymptotic KERs are indicated in brackets. (c) Projection of all KERs onto the delay axis.

quential single-photon absorption took place. Thus, the first photon produces I<sub>2</sub><sup>2+</sup> or I<sub>2</sub><sup>3+</sup>, the second one creates another  $4d$ -type vacancy with a subsequent Auger decay resulting in I<sub>2</sub><sup>4+</sup> or I<sub>2</sub><sup>5+</sup>, respectively [20], and the third one photoionizes the aforementioned molecular ions.

With this knowledge we now discuss the results obtained with two consecutive intense XUV pulses. The delay-dependent kinetic energy release (KER) for the fragmentation channel I<sub>2</sub><sup>2+</sup> + I<sub>2</sub><sup>3+</sup> is shown in Fig. 2(a). In the following, coincident ions will be denoted as ( $P, Q$ ) instead of I <sup>$P$ +</sup> + I <sup>$Q$ +</sup>. Figure 2(a) shows two distinct features, a constant one around 27 eV and a delay-dependent trace converging to 11 eV (Fig. 2(a) and (b)). The constant feature emerges from two-photon absorption within one pulse, as can be shown by evaluating the KER. Assuming purely Coulombic potential energy curves the KER can be estimated via  $\text{KER} \approx E_{\text{Coul}} = (P \cdot Q)/R$  (atomic units, a.u., are used throughout). Thus, for the instantaneous ionization I<sub>2</sub> → (2, 3) at equilibrium internuclear distance  $R_{\text{eq}} = 5 \text{ a.u.}$ , the expected KER amounts to 32 eV. The disagreement with the measured value of 27 eV hints towards an ultrafast increase of the distance  $R$  between the constituents: In order to produce I<sub>2</sub><sup>5+</sup>, that eventually breaks into (2, 3), two photons are required. Since these photons will be absorbed sequentially within the same pulse, the first photon triggers the dissociation leading to an increased  $R$  by the time the second photon creates an ion pair with charges (2, 3).

The time-dependent KER traces overlap for small delays with the single pulse case (Fig. 2(a)), because the pump and probe pulses can be considered as one pulse within their temporal overlap. With increasing delay the KER gets smaller, finally converging to an asymptotic value of 11 eV (Fig. 2(b)). This is due to the creation of intermediate charge states ( $P_i, Q_i$ )

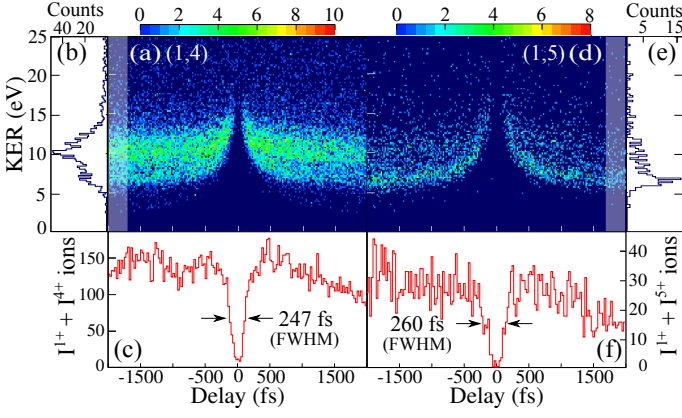


FIG. 3. (a),(d) Delay-dependent KER spectra of all coincident (1,4)(a) and (1,5)(d) ion pairs. (b),(e) Projection of KERs at large delays (shaded area) onto the KER axis. (c),(f) Projection of all KERs onto the delay axis. For delays below  $(124 \pm 3)$  fs (HWHM) no coincident (1,4) ions are detected while for (1,5) the corresponding range of delays is  $(130 \pm 5)$  fs (HWHM).

by the pump pulse leading to dissociation until the probe pulse promotes the system onto a steeper potential energy curve belonging to the final charge states  $(P_f, Q_f)$ . The longer the delay, the smaller the energy gain gets on the steeper curve. For very large delays the measured KER is equal to that of the precursor state  $(P_i, Q_i)$ . This allows us to reconstruct the reaction pathway leading to the final coincidence channel  $(P_f, Q_f)$ . Therefore, an asymptotic KER of 11 eV in Fig. 2(b) – corresponding to the Coulomb energy of a  $I^+$  and a  $I^{2+}$  ion at  $R_{eq}$  – suggests the pathway:  $I_2 \xrightarrow{\text{pump}} (1,2) \xrightarrow{\text{probe}} (2,3)$ .

To substantiate this interpretation, we use a Coulomb-explosion model in which we treat the ions classically as moving point-like charges: The equation of motion is solved for a particle with the reduced mass  $\mu = m_{\text{iodine}}/2$  in a potential  $(P \cdot Q)/R$ . The dissociation initiated by the pump pulse is modeled by placing the system onto the intermediate potential  $(P_i \cdot Q_i)/R$  at  $R_{eq}$  with zero initial velocity, and following the motion for all internuclear distances  $R$ . The ionization by the probe pulse is assumed to be instantaneous, promoting the molecular ion onto the steeper  $(P_f \cdot Q_f)/R$  potential. The propagation is continued until an asymptotic KER-value is reached. The result of the simulation for the channel (2,3) via the precursor (1,2) is shown in Fig. 2(a) in white. Very good agreement with the experiment is obtained supporting the proposed pathway and the use of purely Coulombic potentials.

The coincidence channel (1,4) with two overlapping traces of precursor states is shown in Fig. 3(a). The dominant trace converging to roughly 11 eV (Fig. 3(b)) can be identified as emerging from the precursor charge state (1,2):  $I_2 \xrightarrow{\text{pump}} (1,2) \xrightarrow{\text{probe}} (1,4)$ . The weak trace converging to approximately 6 eV stems from single-photon absorption within the pump pulse initiating the dissociation via the precursor (1,1), which is further ionized by two photons from the probe

pulse leading to (1,4):  $I_2 \xrightarrow{\text{pump}} (1,1) \xrightarrow{\text{probe}} (1,4)$ . As the latter pathway requires two-photon absorption within one pulse, it is considerably weaker than the single-photon pathway.

Striking differences between the equally charged channels (1,4) and (2,3) are found for small delays (Fig. 3(c) and Fig. 2(c), respectively). The yield of the (1,4) channel vanishes almost completely for overlapping pulses and no time-independent trace appears, meaning that these charge states are not created within a single pulse. Another asymmetric channel (1,5) (Fig. 3(d)), mainly produced via the precursor (1,1), shows similar features, in particular the depleted ion yield at small delays (Fig. 3(f)).

According to their characteristic time dependences all observed coincidence channels can be grouped into two classes. Asymmetrically charged fragments with  $|P - Q| > 1$  exhibit a pronounced yield minimum at small delays while symmetric ones do not. In particular, many of the symmetric channels even show a maximum of the count rate at small delays (Fig. 2(c)). This is expected because a more positive charge at one of the ions will attract electrons throughout the molecule, and due to the very fast electronic motion the rearrangement of charges will favor a symmetric break-up. Thus, any charge asymmetry induced by the probe pulse is effectively equalized. This is valid for small delays corresponding to small internuclear distances. Beyond a critical value  $R_{crit}$  the two individual ionic fragments respond as if they were isolated instead of belonging to a molecular system, i.e. all charges will remain localized at the nuclei. Thus, by varying the time delay between the two pulses and by monitoring the charge states of the ionic fragments the critical times and the corresponding  $R_{crit}$  up to which charge transfer occurs can be determined.

To obtain a more quantitative picture of the charge rearrangement dynamics or a measure for the critical internuclear distance  $R_{crit}$ , we use the classical over-the-barrier model (COB) to describe the electron transfer from one ion to the other. We consider two ions  $I^{P_f}$  and  $I^{Q_f}$  with  $P_f \leq Q_f$  that are separated by  $R$ . A purely one-dimensional model is used where the connection line between the two nuclei forms the coordinate axis. The binding energy  $E_{P_f} < 0$  of the least bound electron of  $I^{P_f}$  is increased by the presence of the charge  $Q_f$  to  $E'_{P_f} = E_{P_f} - Q_f/R$ . The outermost electron of  $I^{P_f}$ , located at  $r$ , experiences a potential  $V_e(r, R)$  that results from the superposition of the Coulomb potential of its own nucleus with effective charge  $P_f + 1$  and that of the neighboring ion with  $Q_f$ :

$$V_e(r, R) = -\frac{P_f + 1}{R - r} - \frac{Q_f}{r}. \quad (4)$$

The electron can classically cross over to  $I^{Q_f}$  as long as its binding energy  $E'_{P_f}$  lies above the potential barrier as indicated in Fig. 4 for  $(P_f, Q_f) = (1, 4)$ . Charge transfer is not possible for internuclear distances larger than

$$R_{crit} = \frac{P_f + 1 + 2\sqrt{(P_f + 1)Q_f}}{|E_{P_f}|}. \quad (5)$$

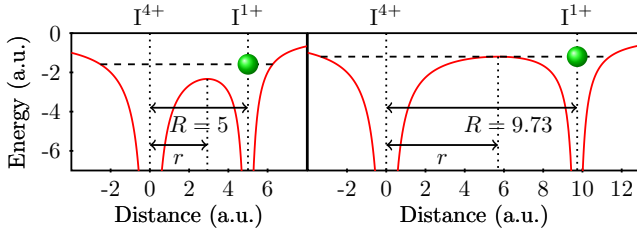


FIG. 4. Illustration of the COB model for the coincidence channel (1,4). At  $R_{eq} = 5$  a.u. the most loosely bound electron ( $E_{P_f} = -19.2$  eV [21]) can easily overcome the potential barrier towards  $I^{4+}$  while electron transfer is blocked beyond  $R_{crit} = 9.73$  a.u..

$R_{crit}$  can be predicted for all asymmetric charges via Eq. 5. However, in the experiment a critical time delay  $t_{crit}$  is measured, which is determined by the half width at half minimum (HWHM) of the dip observed in KER-traces (compare Fig. 3 (c),(f)).  $t_{crit}$  can be translated into  $R_{crit}$  by calculating the nuclear dynamics of the molecule between the two pulses. This is done using our classical pump-probe simulation which assumes a purely Coulombic potential defined by the intermediate charge states  $P_i$  and  $Q_i$ . However, in the experiment  $t_{crit}$  cannot be attributed to a specific precursor state due to resolution and statistical limitations. Since all considered coincidence channels contain at least one of the main precursors (1,1) and (1,2), we calculate  $R_{crit}^{exp}$  for (1,1) (Fig. 5(a) blue upwards triangles) and for (1,2) (Fig. 5(a) green downwards triangles).

All  $R_{crit}^{COB}$  values predicted by the COB model (Fig. 5(a) black circles) lie between the corresponding experimental data points  $R_{crit}^{exp}$  via the precursor states (1,1) and (1,2). Notably, for the (1,4) channel  $R_{crit}^{COB}$  shows a tendency towards  $R_{crit}^{exp}$  via (1,2), which is also the main precursor observed in the experiment. As another example, the (1,5) channel evolves mostly from (1,1). Also here the corresponding critical distance from the COB model tends towards  $R_{crit}^{exp}$  via (1,1). These trends encourage us to calculate average experimental values  $\bar{R}_{crit}^{exp}$  where we weight  $R_{crit}^{exp}$  via (1,1) and (1,2) according to the number of counts contained in the respective precursor trace. The resulting values (Fig. 5(a) red diamonds) are in very good agreement with the prediction of the COB model.

As a next step we extend our Coulomb-explosion simulation by introducing a finite pulse duration and by combining it with the COB model to reproduce the time-dependent KER spectra. The FEL pulse duration is estimated from the width of the time-dependent trace in Fig. 2(a): As the width is mostly dependent on the pulse duration and the populated ground-state vibrational levels – the latter being small and identical for all pulse parameters – the pulse duration is the critical parameter influencing the width of the trace at small delays. By projecting a thin slice of KERs around 19 eV from Fig. 2(a) onto the delay axis and assuming that pump and probe pulse have the same duration an upper limit of 57 fs (FWHM) for the pulse duration is extracted. Figure 5 shows

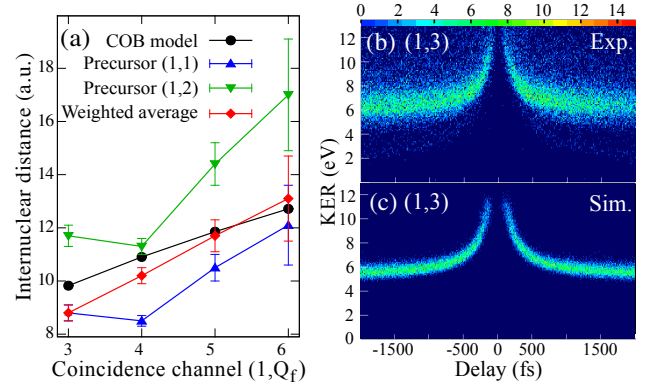


FIG. 5. (a)  $R_{crit}$  as a function of the asymmetric coincidence channel  $(1, Q_f)$  with  $Q_f \in \{3, 4, 5, 6\}$ . The black circles show the predictions from the COB model  $R_{crit}^{COB}$  with  $E_{P_f} = -19.2$  eV [21], while the experimental data  $R_{crit}^{exp}$  for the precursor (1,1) are drawn as blue upwards triangles, those for (1,2) as green downwards triangles and the weighted average as red diamonds. (b) Delay-dependent KER for (1,3). (c) Simulation of the delay-dependent KER for (1,3) with a finite pulse length of 57 fs (FWHM) and a width for the spatial ground state distribution of 0.5 a.u. (FWHM).

the comparison of experimental data for the channel (1,3) (Fig. 5(b)) with the result of the simulation via the precursor (1,1) and Gaussian pulses of 57 fs (Fig. 5 (c)). The excellent agreement demonstrates that classical models are suitable to describe both, the dissociation dynamics and charge rearrangement in highly-charged molecules.

It should be noted that the COB model used here is analog to those applied for field-ionization in strong laser fields (e.g., [22, 23]) and slow ion-atom collisions [11, 12]. Our experimental situation is similar to a collision, with the difference that now the reaction partners start from their closest distance. This way the ionic fragments are always emitted back-to-back and the motion is limited to one dimension as assumed in the COB model [24]. In addition, the classical treatment is only justified for small projectile velocities such that the electronic states can adjust adiabatically to the changing potentials. For dissociating  $I_2^{n+}$ , with ion kinetic energies below 0.1 eV per nucleon, this condition is very well fulfilled. Our experiment thus represents the ideal testing ground of the COB model at very low energies typical for chemical reactions.

In summary, the electron transfer dynamics between two iodine ions emerging from the break-up of  $I_2^{n+}$  is studied as a function of their separation. This is experimentally realized by inducing dissociation of an  $I_2$  molecule by means of an XUV pump pulse and creating a charge asymmetry by an XUV probe pulse. By mapping the delay-dependent kinetic energies of the ions along with their final charge states the complete fragmentation pathway including the intermediate degree of ionization after the pump pulse becomes accessible. This allows us to determine the critical internuclear distance up to which electron transfer occurs. The experimental data are in excellent agreement with the classical over-the-barrier model for electron exchange. The results demonstrate



that electron rearrangement may proceed over large distances of 10 a.u. or more, and that charges created locally within a molecule by e.g. absorption of X-rays at a heavy atomic constituent are very effectively distributed over the whole system within a time that is much shorter than the dissociation time. It leads to an overall acceleration of molecular damage, a critical quantity in FEL scattering experiments.

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