Imaging the three-dimensional shapes and light induced dynamics of rotating helium nanodroplets

Bruno Langbehn, Yevheniy Ovcharenko, Daniela Rupp, Katharina Sander, Andrew Clark, Marcello Coreno, Riccardo Cucini, Paola Finetti, Michele Di Fraia, Cesare Grazio, Denys Iablonsky, Aaron C. LaForge, Verónica Oliver Álvarez de Lara, Oksana Plekan, Paolo Piseri, Toshiyuki Nishiyama, Carlo Callegari, Kevin C. Prince, Kyoshi Ueda, Frank Stienkemeier, Thomas Fennel, and Thomas Möller

* Institut für Optik und Atomare Physik, Technische Universität Berlin, 10623 Berlin, Germany
† European XFEL GmbH, 22869 Schenefeld, Germany
‡ Institut für Physik, Universität Rostock, 18059 Rostock, Germany
§ Laboratoire Chimie Physique Moléculaire, EPFL, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland
¶ Elettra - Sincrotrone Trieste, 34149 Trieste, Italy
∗∗ Institute of Multidisciplinary Research for Advanced Materials, Tohoku University, Sendai 980-8577, Japan
†† Physikalisches Institut, Universität Freiburg, 79104 Freiburg, Germany
‡‡ CIMAINA and Dipartimento di Fisica, Università degli Studi di Milano, 20133 Milano, Italy
§§ Department of Physics, Graduate School of Science, Kyoto University, Kyoto 606-8502, Japan
††† IOM-CNR TASC Laboratory, Basovizza, 34149 Trieste, Italy
∗∗∗ Max-Born-Institut für Nichtlineare Optik und Kurzzeitspektroskopie, 12489 Berlin, Germany

Synopsis

Intense short-wavelength femtosecond light pulses delivered by free-electron laser (FEL) facilities allow to investigate the structure and dynamics of nanometer-sized objects via coherent diffractive imaging (CDI). We studied single helium nanodroplets using extreme ultraviolet (XUV) femtosecond light pulses delivered by the FERMI-FEL and could uniquely determine the three-dimensional shapes of the droplets. Further, when irradiated by a strong optical laser pulse before being imaged with the XUV pulse, ultrafast dynamics inside the droplets can be observed in the diffraction patterns, thus enabling the investigation of plasma formation on a scale of nanometers and femtoseconds.

With the advent of free-electron lasers (FEL) delivering femtosecond short-wavelength pulses, coherent diffractive imaging methods have been developed to gain insight into the structure of unsupported nanoparticles such as viruses or clusters. While experiments using light pulses in the X-ray regime ultimately aim at atomic resolution [1], full three-dimensional information on the particle shape and orientation from a single diffraction pattern requires access to wide-angle scattering signal, especially available at longer wavelengths [2].

In our experiment, XUV diffraction patterns of single helium nanodroplets were recorded at the FERMI FEL’s LDM endstation [3]. While the majority of the bright scattering images exhibit rings in concentric circles, thus indicating spherical droplet shapes [cf. Fig. 1(a)], about 10% of the images show diffraction patterns of non-spherical particles. In particular, a tilt of a deformed droplet out of the scattering plane produces non-centrosymmetric features in the wide-angle diffraction pattern [cf. Fig. 1(b),(c)] that allow a unique determination of its three-dimensional shape. In a second set of measurements the droplets were doped with xenon atoms and a plasma was ignited with a high power infrared (IR) laser pulse. The nanoplasma propagation and destruction of the droplets was traced via single-particle imaging from femtoseconds up to hundreds of picoseconds after IR excitation [cf. Fig. 1(d)-(f)]. The reduced symmetry of the exploding particles complicates the interpretation of the diffraction patterns, demonstrating the need for 3D reconstruction algorithms.

Figure 1. Top: Wide-angle scattering images of helium nanodroplets and corresponding model droplet shapes. Bottom: Droplet disintegration after IR excitation.

References