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Title

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Journal

Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, 374(1784)

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Publication Date

2019-10-28

DOI

10.1098/rstb.2019.0202

Peer reviewed

Research



Cite this article: Cohen N, Waite JH, McMeeking RM, Valentine MT. 2019 Force distribution and multiscale mechanics in the mussel byssus. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* **374**: 20190202.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2019.0202>

Accepted: 21 May 2019

One contribution of 15 to a theme issue 'Transdisciplinary approaches to the study of adhesion and adhesives in biological systems'.

Subject Areas:

biomaterials

Keywords:

mussel, mechanics, damage, multiscale

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Electronic supplementary material is available online at <https://dx.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.c.4588595>.

Force distribution and multiscale mechanics in the mussel byssus

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The byssi of sessile mussels have the extraordinary ability to adhere to various surfaces and withstand static and dynamic loadings arising from hostile environmental conditions. Many investigations aimed at understanding the unique properties of byssal thread–plaque structures have been conducted and have inspired the enhancement of fibre coatings and adhesives. However, a systems-level analysis of the mechanical performance of the composite materials is lacking. In this work, we discuss the anatomy of the byssus and the function of each of the three components (the proximal thread portion, the distal thread portion and the adhesive plaque) of its structures. We introduce a basic nonlinear system of springs that describes the contribution of each component to the overall mechanical response and use this model to approximate the elastic modulus of the distal thread portion as well as the plaque, the response of which cannot be isolated through experiment alone. We conclude with a discussion of unresolved questions, highlighting areas of opportunity where additional experimental and theoretical work is needed.

This article is part of the theme issue 'Transdisciplinary approaches to the study of adhesion and adhesives in biological systems'.

1. Motivation

Mussels effectively adhere to a variety of natural and man-made surfaces—including rocks, piers, ships and each other—in wet, salty and hostile environments [1–3]. The strong adhesions formed by the mussels allow them to fix their position, despite crashing waves, tidal currents and predators, which subject the mussels to a wide range of forces operating over many timescales [4,5]. Adhesion is achieved through the deposition of a series of acellular plaque-tipped threads that collectively are called the byssus (figure 1). Each mussel typically deposits hundreds of threads radially around its body to optimize load distribution, energy dissipation, strength and adhesion [6]. Should it become necessary, mussels can jettison their holdfast, which resides within the mussel shell, and hence remain able to select another habitat [7].

Although numerous studies have examined aspects of the mechanical properties of the byssus, these almost exclusively focus on isolated structural elements and their response to load [4,5,8–10], and fail to consider the systems-level response of the composite material. In this work, we take a different approach and examine the force distribution along one of the byssal thread–plaque structures at various length scales with the aim of understanding how the mechanical function of each component contributes to the system response. We pay special attention to the mechanics and the behaviour of the plaque, for which there have been limited experimental studies and no theoretical models that capture the observed trends. Our anticipation is that by considering the multiscale properties of the byssal system, we will not only

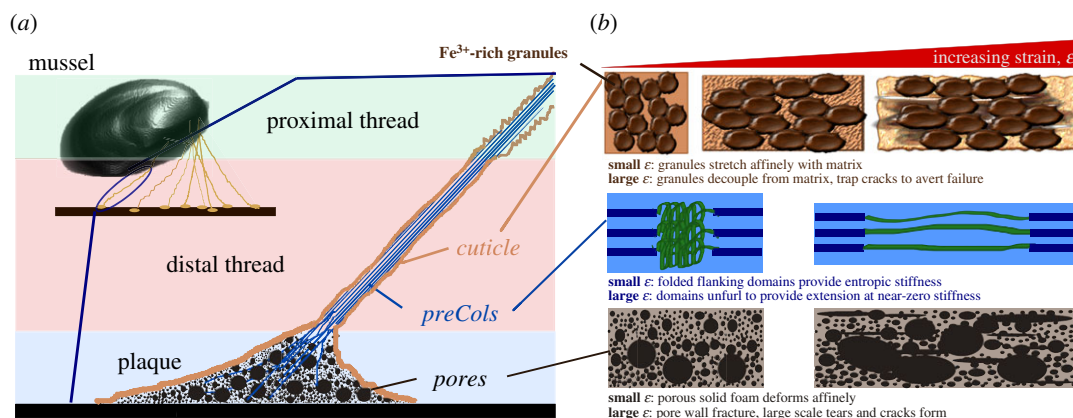


Figure 1. (a) A schematic of the anatomy and the structure of the byssus. (b) Under strain, multiscale damage mechanisms dissipate energy and prevent structural failure. (Online version in colour.)

gain new insight into the function and properties of natural mussel materials, but will also advance the translation of these concepts to mussel-inspired synthetic mimics.

2. The structure of the byssus

Each mussel attaches to its substrate via a network of plaque-tipped threads that are radially distributed around the mussel body. This arrangement allows for efficient load sharing among the threads in both shear and tension [11]. Within a single thread, there are three structural regions with distinct mechanical and structural features: the proximal portion, which is closest to the mussel body and typically resides within the shell; the distal portion, which extends from the shell to the surface; and the plaque, which forms a thin adhesive disc at the end of the thread (figure 1) [12].

The proximal and the distal portions of the thread both comprise aligned, linear arrays of collagen-like domains (the preCols), containing a highly ordered collagen core, an extensible flanking region, and terminal sequences enriched in histidine and Dopa content to enable the formation of metal-ion coordinated or other cross-links [13–19]. Importantly, the composition is graded from the soft and easily damaged mussel tissue to the hard external substrate to which the mussel is adhered [5]. The proximal portion contains mainly preCol-P, with flanking regions and enriched elastin-like structures, whereas the distal portion contains mainly preCol-D, with alanine-rich flanking regions that form β -sheets resembling the high-tensile-strength domains of spider dragline silk [14,20]. There is a uniform distribution of preCol-NG enriched in β -sheet-forming domains. These modular domains play a critical role in determining the extensibility of the collagen-rich thread. At low forces, they respond as soft entropic springs, while at large forces, the β -sheet-rich domains rapidly unfold. A series of beautiful studies have demonstrated that these ‘foldamer’ domains not only provide a molecular mechanism for toughening, but immediately refold when the force is removed, providing a means for rapid restoration of the materials properties under cyclic loading [14,15].

The plaque, which creates the adhesive contact with the substrate, is an elliptical spatulate disc, typically millimetres in diameter on the basal side and approximately 100 μm high with a tapered shape that joins the distal thread. Internally, the plaques of intertidal mussel species (e.g. *Mytilus*

californianus, *M. galloprovincialis*) are filled with a disordered open-cell foamy matrix formed from mussel foot proteins (mfps) that creates a mechanical interlayer connecting the substrate and the thread [2,21]. This matrix encompasses collagen fibres stretching from the thread. The fibre volume fraction in the plaque is significantly lower than in the thread and the fibres do not reach the underlying substrate. It is likely that under native conditions, the foamy matrix is filled with complex fluids secreted during plaque deposition, as well as seawater and liquid–liquid phase-separated fluids (coacervates) derived from initially soluble macromolecules [22].

The entire byssal thread and plaque are coated with a thin, hard shell called the cuticle, which is typically several micrometres thick and likely plays a major role in determining the plaque stiffness and geometry. Small, monodisperse granules (approximately tens of nanometres in diameter) enriched in iron-catechol bonds are randomly distributed throughout the cuticle of intertidal species of mussels [23]. These granules have long been thought to provide a means of toughening by blunting microscale cracks that form in the mfp1-rich matrix of the cuticle, thereby thwarting the coalescence of micro-cracks into large-scale defects that eventually cause the structure to fail under high loads [24].

3. The mechanics of the byssus

The proximal portion, the distal portion and the plaque of each byssal thread form a coupled mechanical system which must be considered in its entirety in order to understand its mechanical response to load. Experiments have shown that the proximal portion of the thread is significantly softer than the distal portion or plaque, and thus experiences the greatest deformation under load [5,8]. The compliance of the proximal portion assists in the dynamic response by dissipating energy as the mussel is subjected to impact forces [11]. This allows the mussel to maintain adhesive contact and prevents irreparable damage in the soft tissue.

The mechanical response of the distal portion has been extensively studied [5,8,10,13,14]. Subjected to strains of less than approximately 30%, the distal thread exhibits a linear mechanical response with stiffness arising from both the cuticle and collagen domains in the thread interior, as illustrated on the right-hand side of figure 2 [14,15,24]. In this regime, the cuticle matrix and granules deform together, suggesting good load transfer at the granule : matrix interface

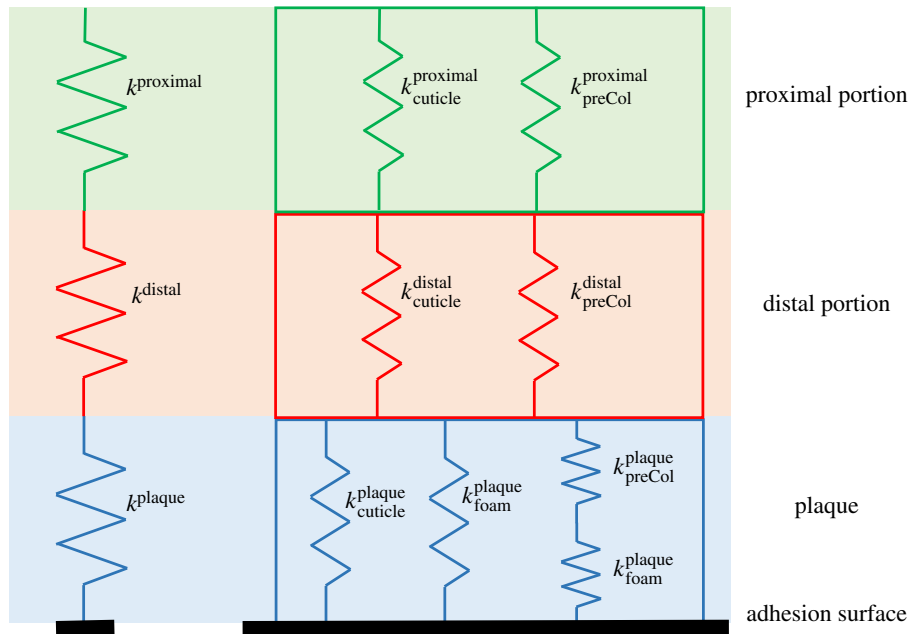


Figure 2. A representation of the mechanics of the byssus using a simple nonlinear spring system. (Online version in colour.)

[24]. At higher strains (greater than or equal to 30%), the distal portion experiences micro-structural changes that result in a nonlinear mechanical response and promote toughening mechanisms which operate synergistically to avert structural failure. Specifically, within the thread, the flanking domains of the preCols unfold, providing a rapid extension increase at near zero stiffness [14,15,17]. Once the flanking domains are extended, the preCol-D domains, which at low loads are slightly kinked, also extend and straighten [16]. The release of this hidden length within the preCol domains is highly effective in providing resilience, similar to mechanisms found in other tough load-bearing materials [25,26].

At such high strains, the cuticle matrix and the granules become mechanically decoupled, with cracking and significant deformation in the matrix that is absent in the granules [24]. Prior analysis suggested that this delamination occurs due to the stiffness mismatch between the granules, which were assumed to be stiffer, and the matrix, which was assumed to be more compliant [24,27]. Recent atomic force microscope analysis supports the rejection of this hypothesis, revealing that the granules of the cuticle covering the distal thread retain water, allowing them to maintain their stiffness regardless of whether the rest of the thread is hydrated or dry [23]. By contrast, the cuticle matrix becomes significantly stiffer when dried. Thus, hydrated samples are uniform in stiffness while dry samples comprise softer granules, and thus, the origin of the delamination and toughening is not yet clear [23]. It is possible that although the linear Young's modulus of the two phases is similar, the nonlinear constitutive behaviour is not, and the matrix is strain-softening in a manner that leads to the observed delamination. At this point, such ideas are conjecture and further analysis is required. Whatever the mechanical origin, the delamination events enable non-uniform extension of the cuticle and allow the granules to blunt or trap micro-cracks that form in the matrix, thereby suppressing the formation of large-scale defects that would otherwise critically compromise the structure.

In contrast with the substantial prior work on the distal thread, there are few experimental studies and theoretical

models of the mechanical properties of the geometrically complex plaque, which is stiffer than the distal thread [8,10]. At low tensile strains, the plaque responds linearly to applied load, while at high strains, the internal foamy region experiences damage in the form of rupture of pore walls, fibre: matrix delamination and collagen fibre scission [10]. While the modulus of the pore walls within the plaque interior is not known, it is reasonable to assume that the modulus of a monolith of pore material would be similar to that measured for other mfp-rich materials, of order hundreds of MPa [23,28]. However, the volume fraction of the fluid-filled voids in the foamy matrix is large, which limits the contributions of the foamy region to the overall stiffness.

Although some damage may arise from direct tensile loading, we believe that the fluid permeating the pores may also play an important role. As the plaque deforms, the internal fluid, characterized by a high bulk modulus and a low stiffness, experiences hydrostatic stress which can lead to diffusion or convection out of the matrix through the cuticle. Microscopically, the hydrostatic stress in the pores could induce substantial local shear stress on the matrix walls, inevitably leading to rupture and percolation in the form of large-scale fluid-filled pores, which have been experimentally observed within the plaque [10]. A similar effect has been observed in the percolation of liquid metal inclusions in compressed liquid metal embedded elastomers [29,30].

The cuticle covering the plaque also contains iron-rich granules similar to those in the distal thread albeit at much lower density. Although these have not been studied in detail, it is possible that they also provide some level of toughening and nonlinear response under moderate to severe tensile loads.

In cases where the force is removed prior to structural failure, several elements of the byssal thread show remarkable recovery [15]. The unravelled foldamer domains in the preCols rapidly (approximately milliseconds) refold to their original lengths, restoring the highly ordered collagen bundles almost immediately [17,24]. This appears to partially restore the low-strain stiffness of the distal thread. A slower

recovery is also observed, and is assigned to the reformation of a sacrificial bonding network of metal–Dopa and/or metal–His bonds. This rebonding is seen within minutes and eventually leads to the full restoration of mechanical properties (approx. 24 h) [4]. For cyclically loaded thread : plaque structures, an immediate stiffness recovery is also observed, but no slow recovery is seen on timescales of at least several hours [10], and there is little dependence of the detachment force on pulling speed [8]. This suggests that the metal–ion coordination bonds that help restore the preCol mechanics are either not present in the plaque region or are insufficient to improve the mechanical response. Given the low density and mechanical isolation of the collagen threads, the latter is perhaps more likely. By the same reasoning, it is unlikely that the preCol foldamer domains are providing the immediate stiffness recovery. Rather, there may be foldamer domains present in the plaque body or cuticle that have not been identified, or there may be geometric changes within the plaque body (i.e. collapse of pore walls due to outflux of fluid) that are immediately restored. Additional experiments are required to discern these possibilities.

4. Multiscale phenomenological model of the plaque–thread

Using this understanding of the structural and mechanical features of the thread–plaque system, we construct a multi-scale, phenomenological model by considering mechanical contributions operating over three length scales, as illustrated in figure 2. At the smallest scale, we consider the elastic contributions arising from the cuticle, the preCols and the foamy region within the plaque. We do not attempt to model the protein-level nanoscopic domains directly, rather we use a coarse-grained approach to model the average time-independent elastic properties of these microstructures. At a slightly larger length scale, these micro-structural components are organized into three zones: the plaque, the distal thread portion and the proximal thread portion. The three springs with stiffnesses k^{plaque} , k^{distal} and k^{proximal} representing these zones are connected in series to represent at the largest length scale a single byssal thread–plaque structure to which forces are applied (figure 2, right). This simplified picture thus enables us to examine each individual component and approximate its contribution to the overall mechanical response.

From experiments, we know that $k^{\text{proximal}} < k^{\text{distal}} < k^{\text{plaque}}$ [5,8]. Both the proximal and the distal portions of the thread contain cuticle and preCol components that are modelled using two springs connected in parallel, as seen on the right-hand side of figure 2. Within the plaque region, the cuticle and the fluid-filled foam are continuous from the distal thread to the adhered surface and are thus modelled as two springs connected in parallel. The preCol bundles terminate within the foamy region [21], and these are modelled using two springs connected in series. Given the low polymer volume fraction within the foam, we assume it to be soft as compared to the other components, i.e. $k_{\text{foam}}^{\text{plaque}} < k_{\text{cuticle}}^{\text{plaque}}, k_{\text{preCol}}^{\text{plaque}}$. This leads to two conclusions: (i) the stiffness of the in-series mechanism of the preCols and the foam is determined by the compliant foam, and (ii) the foamy region is connected in parallel to the cuticle and has a negligible contribution to the plaque stiffness.

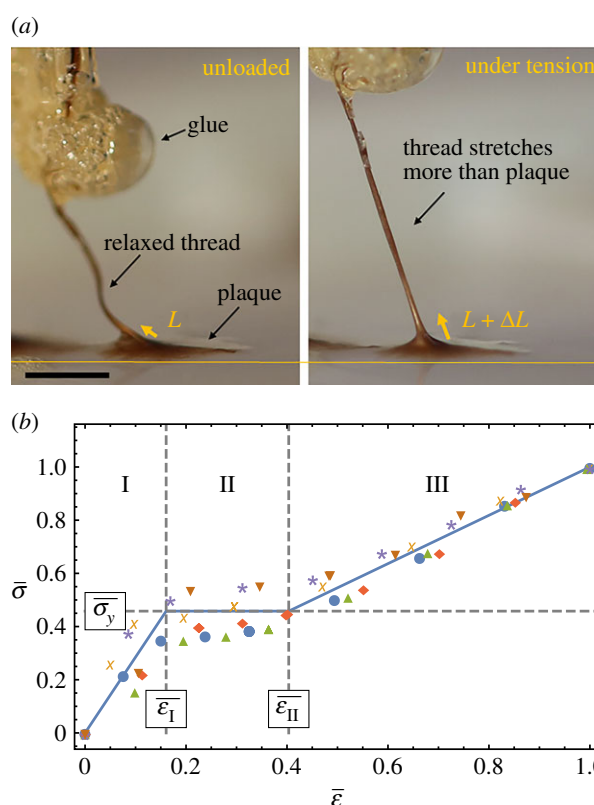


Figure 3. (a) A relaxed and a stretched thread–plaque configuration (scale bar is 2.5 mm). (b) The three linear regions in the stress–strain curve characterizing the behaviour of the plaque. The continuous curve and the different marks correspond to the proposed model using the average values of parameters (table 1) and six experimental data sets from Wilhelm *et al.* [10], respectively. (Online version in colour.)

Therefore, we assert that the stiffness of the plaque is governed by the stiffness of the cuticle.

With this spring system, we can analyse the mechanical response of a thread–plaque structure to loading. We consider a single structure clamped by the distal thread and attached to a motor that displaces the thread end at constant speed at a pulling angle of 45° . At the other end, the plaque is attached to a flat substrate (following the experiments described in [10]). The distal thread has an approximate length $L^{\text{distal}} = 2$ mm and a cross-sectional area $A^{\text{distal}} \approx 0.79 \times 10^{-2}$ mm² (based on an approximate diameter of 0.1 mm). The plaque has a complex geometry (figure 3a) which is hereby idealized as a truncated cone of height $L^{\text{plaque}} = 0.1$ mm and end diameters 0.1 and 1 mm. The adhesion area of the plaque with the surface is $A \approx 0.79$ mm². The thread–plaque structures containing the proximal thread portion are not easily harvested from living mussels, so the proximal thread portion is not considered here. We note that experiments have shown that varying the pulling angle has a strong effect on the failure mode with significant shear loading for shallow angles and the development of bending stresses within the plaque for obtuse-angle loading, which both bias cohesive failure [8]. In this work, we limit our analysis to the adhesive failure regime, and consider pulling angles of 45° only.

A force F is applied to the free end of the distal portion and leads to a displacement d (figure 3a). We define the nominal stress that develops along the adhesion surface by $\sigma = F/A$ and the strain of the system by $\varepsilon = d/L$. The plaque

Table 1. Normalized values of model parameters.

$$\bar{\varepsilon}_I = 0.16 \pm 0.06 \quad \bar{\varepsilon}_{II} = 0.4 \pm 0.1 \quad \bar{\sigma}_y = 0.46 \pm 0.13 \quad \bar{E}_I = 2.8 \pm 2 \quad \bar{E}_{III} = 0.9 \pm 0.18$$

Table 2. The model parameters and their significance.

parameter	significance
d_{\max}, F_{\max}	the maximum displacement and the maximum force at failure
$L^{\text{plaque}}, A^{\text{plaque}}, E^{\text{plaque}}$	the length, the effective area and the effective Young's modulus of the plaque
$L^{\text{distal}}, A^{\text{distal}}, E^{\text{distal}}$	the length, the effective area and the effective Young's modulus of the distal thread portion
$k^{\text{eff}} = \bar{E} F_{\max}/d_{\max}$	the effective spring constant for the thread–plaque system
$k^{\text{plaque}} = A^{\text{plaque}} E^{\text{plaque}}/L^{\text{plaque}}$	the spring constant of the plaque
$k^{\text{distal}} = A^{\text{distal}} E^{\text{distal}}/L^{\text{distal}}$	the spring constant of the distal portion

detaches from the surface at a force F_{\max} and a corresponding displacement d_{\max} at the end of the distal segment where the force is applied. Equivalently, the maximum stress and the maximum strain are denoted σ_{\max} and ε_{\max} , respectively. Generally, mussel samples differ in geometry and thus, we define the normalized quantities $\bar{\sigma} = F/F_{\max} = \sigma/\sigma_{\max}$ and $\bar{\varepsilon} = d/d_{\max} = \varepsilon/\varepsilon_{\max}$, such that $0 \leq \bar{\sigma} \leq 1$ and $0 \leq \bar{\varepsilon} \leq 1$.

Experiments reveal three distinct mechanical regimes, as shown in figure 3b. We propose the following piece-wise function to characterize the stress–strain response of the thread–plaque system

$$\bar{\sigma}_m(\bar{\varepsilon}) = \begin{cases} \bar{E}_I \bar{\varepsilon} & 0 < \bar{\varepsilon} < \bar{\varepsilon}_I \\ \bar{\sigma}_y & \bar{\varepsilon}_I < \bar{\varepsilon} < \bar{\varepsilon}_{II} \\ \bar{\sigma}_y + \bar{E}_{III}(\bar{\varepsilon} - \bar{\varepsilon}_{II}) & \bar{\varepsilon}_{II} < \bar{\varepsilon} < 1 \end{cases}, \quad (4.1)$$

where $\bar{E}_I = \bar{\sigma}_y/\bar{\varepsilon}_I$ and $\bar{E}_{III} = (1 - \bar{\sigma}_y)/(1 - \bar{\varepsilon}_{II})$ describe the stiffness of the plaque in the first and the third regimes, respectively, $\bar{\varepsilon}_I$ and $\bar{\varepsilon}_{II}$ are the normalized strains at which the behaviour changes, and $\bar{\sigma}_y$ is the yield stress. We emphasize that within the context of this work, the yield stress marks the initiation of damage in the mussel plaque. Henceforth, the normalized stress $\bar{\sigma}_m(\bar{\varepsilon})$ in equation (4.1) will denote the main stress–strain curve.

In terms of physical units, the maximum force and displacement that were measured in experiments for a distal plaque system harvested from *M. californianus* mussels were roughly $F_{\max} = 1.5$ N and $d_{\max} = 2$ mm, respectively [10]. From this, we can estimate the maximum strain $\varepsilon_{\max} = d_{\max}/(L^{\text{plaque}} + L^{\text{distal}}) \approx 95\%$. The maximum stress at the adhesion surface $\sigma_{\max} \approx 1.9$ MPa and the maximum stress at the distal–plaque interface $\sigma_{\max}^{\text{distal}} \approx 191$ MPa.

The model parameters were obtained by fitting each of six normalized stress–strain datasets obtained from experimental pull-to-failure tests to equation (4.1) using a least-squares fitting method (figure 3b and table 1). We find that the first linear regime ends at a strain of approximately 15% and the third linear regime begins at a strain of approximately 38%. We note that the normalized data values do not take into account the true geometry of the plaque–thread system, so the values of the yield stress and the elastic moduli are not representative of the true properties of the plaque. For most of the model parameters, the sample-to-sample variation as estimated from the standard deviation of the measured

values is relatively small, less than 40%, with the exception of \bar{E}_I , which varies from 1.7 to 4.8 in normalized units. We note that the variation in \bar{E}_{III} is significantly smaller, perhaps indicating more regularity in the structural features that dominate this response.

Recall that the experiments are conducted on a system comprising a 2 mm distal thread portion and adherent plaque (without proximal thread portion). Since a short distal segment is required to enable pulling, it is difficult to experimentally measure the properties of the plaque alone; however, the proposed spring system enables us to isolate the properties of the plaque and estimate its stiffness. To illustrate this, we approximate the initial stiffness values of the distal thread segment and the plaque. Following figure 2, we model these as a simple mechanical system with two springs that are connected in series. The effective spring k^{eff} constant is related to k^{plaque} and k^{distal} via

$$k^{\text{eff}} = \frac{k^{\text{plaque}} k^{\text{distal}}}{k^{\text{plaque}} + k^{\text{distal}}}. \quad (4.2)$$

The definition and the significance of the model parameters are listed in table 2. From the average value of \bar{E}_I , and estimates of F_{\max} and d_{\max} , we calculate the effective spring constant of the first linear regime $k^{\text{eff}} = 2.1$ N mm^{−1}. Because of the series connections of the two springs $k^{\text{eff}} \leq k^{\text{plaque}}$, k^{distal} , and therefore $k^{\text{distal}} \geq 2.1$ N mm^{−1}. Using reasonable estimates for the length and cross-sectional area of the distal thread E_I^{distal} portion, we obtain greater than or equal to 545 MPa. This value agrees well with the range of measured values of $E_I^{\text{distal}} = 500$ –770 MPa [5,23], and provides confidence that our simple model can provide physically reasonable results.

We next aim to estimate the stiffness of the plaque, which is not directly accessible experimentally, as it is impossible to physically separate the plaque and distal thread portions. By setting $E_I^{\text{distal}} = 545$ MPa, we determine $k^{\text{plaque}} = 2571$ N mm^{−1} from equation (4.2). The plaque has a complex geometry that leads to heterogeneous strain and stress fields and makes it difficult to compute the effective Young's modulus. We assume that the effective area can be computed based on the average diameter $(0.1 + 1)/2 = 0.55$ mm, resulting in $A^{\text{plaque}} \approx 0.24$ mm². This leads to the Young's modulus approximation $E_I^{\text{plaque}} = 1.1$ GPa, which qualitatively agrees with the experimental trends that illustrate that the plaque

is stiffer than the thread. Recall that since the porous region of the plaque is expected to be compliant, the computed stiffness approximates the modulus of the plaque cuticle, which to our knowledge has not been directly measured. The measured distal thread cuticle values depend sensitively on hydration and range from 0.5 to 2.2 GPa [23]. We note that at least some regions of the plaque cuticle experience bending in addition to tensile loading [8], an effect which is not directly accounted for in the current analysis but could be incorporated into future models.

The key advantage of our approach is the ability to isolate the mechanical response of individual components, in this case, by determining the stress and the strain within the distal thread and the plaque. We have extended this method to model the hysteresis effects observed under cyclic loading using a phenomenological and strain-dependent damage model. Our preliminary analysis and fits to experimental data are included in the electronic supplementary materials.

5. Future outlook

Mussels have fascinated sailors and scientists for decades, both for their pure ingenuity and for possible applications of their byssal materials to engineering applications, including protective coatings and synthetic adhesives. Despite this, many open questions remain. As we conclude, we highlight phenomena that are not fully understood from biological and mechanical viewpoints to further spur experimental and theoretical investigations of mussel-derived materials.

First, experiments indicate that the proximal and the distal thread portions are characterized by a material gradient, which has likely evolved to enhance adhesion and minimize soft tissue damage under loading. However, the importance of the micro-structural details is not clear. For example, while the anisotropic preCol fibres are aligned along the tension axis and are highly organized, the granular domains are spherical and randomly dispersed throughout the cuticle. A more rigorous investigation into the distribution of microstructures along the thread could lead to the design of architected materials with enhanced microstructures that more effectively carry load. Such features could then be incorporated into improved models that more accurately represent the micro- and nano-scale properties of the material.

A second relatively unexplored area is the bio-mechanics of the plaque, whose complex geometric features we only

partially considered here. The purpose of the liquid-filled porous structure is particularly intriguing, offering potential for the design of new classes of bioinspired materials. A recent report describing a very simple model of a plaque-inspired material suggests that porosity increases the effective ductility and enhances toughness by reducing the driving force for crack growth and trapping cracks [31]. While intriguing, this work considered a simple periodic two-dimensional structure with mono-dispersed voids (not liquid inclusions) and did not represent the full three-dimensional complexities associated with the interior structure of the plaque. Further studies are needed to fully understand these effects in both natural and engineered materials. For example, in future models, we anticipate incorporating rate-dependent phenomena to account for poroelasticity, viscoelasticity or interfacial sliding, as well as treatment of material failure.

In addition to a possible role in toughening, it is reasonable to conjecture that the compliance of the foamy region enables the mussel to adhere to rough and/or curved surfaces by adopting the topology of the foam to that of the substrate at a low energetic cost. The conformation of the fluid-filled region leads to a maximum contact area, and therefore a maximum adhesion strength, between the plaque and the surface. A better understanding of the function of the foamy region could be gained by more robust experimental and theoretical investigations, particularly by modelling the three-dimensional structures comprising stochastic polydisperse liquid-filled pores.

Data accessibility. All experimental data have already been published and are referenced within the article. The modelling results can be fully derived from the equations and methods described in the text.

Authors' contributions. N.C., R.M.M. and M.T.V. devised the study. M.T.V. provided experimental data and N.C. performed the modelling. All authors interpreted the results. N.C. and M.T.V. wrote and all authors critically revised the manuscript.

Competing interests. J.H.W. is a guest editor of this issue. There are no other competing interests.

Funding. This work was supported by the MRSEC Program of the National Science Foundation under Award no. DMR 1720256 (IRG-3).

Acknowledgements. Authors acknowledge Menaka Wilhelm for collecting the experimental data shown in figure 3*b* and the electronic supplementary material (previously reported in [10]), Emmanouela Filippidi for helpful discussions, and Younghoon Kwon and Justin Bernstein for assistance with imaging the structures shown in figure 3*a*.

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