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The Role of Hydrogen in Defining the n-Type Character of BiVO$_4$ Photoanodes

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ABSTRACT: The roles of hydrogen impurity and oxygen vacancy defects on defining the conductivity, and hence photoelectrochemical (PEC) performance characteristics, of monoclinic scheelite bismuth vanadate (BiVO$_4$) are investigated using a combination of experiment and theory. We find that elemental hydrogen is present as an impurity in as-synthesized BiVO$_4$, and that increasing its concentration by annealing in H$_2$ at temperatures up to 290 °C leads to near-complete elimination of majority carrier transport limitations, a beneficial shift in the photoanodic current onset potential, and improved fill factor. Magnetic resonance measurements reveal that hydrogen can be incorporated in at least two different chemical environments, which are assigned to interstitial and substitutional sites. Incorporation of hydrogen leads to a shift of the Fermi level towards the conduction band edge, indicating that n-type character is correlated with increased hydrogen content. This finding is in agreement with theory and reveals that hydrogen acts as a donor in BiVO$_4$. Sub-bandgap photoluminescence is observed from as-synthesized material and is consistent with deep electronic states associated with oxygen vacancies. Hydrogen treatment leads to reduced emission from these states. These findings support the conclusion that hydrogen, rather than oxygen vacancies, is dominant in determining the n-type conductivity of BiVO$_4$. These findings have important implications for controlling the electronic properties and functional characteristics of this promising photoanode material.

INTRODUCTION

Photoelectrochemical (PEC) water splitting is a promising route to capture and store solar energy as hydrogen in a single step. One advantage to this approach is the natural charge-separating ability of semiconductor-liquid junctions, which can provide large photovoltages, even over complex surface topography, without need for forming solid-state semiconductor junctions. Among photoelectrode materials, thin film transition metal oxide semiconductors have attracted considerable interest due to their potential for low cost, ease of fabrication, and improved stability relative to the semiconductors more commonly used in the photovoltaics industry. However, these oxide materials are often characterized by deviations from ideal stoichiometry and complex defect properties. Improved understanding and control of the mechanisms of charge separation, transport, and recombination, which are largely defined by crystal defects and impurities, is important for advancing progress within this class of materials.

Bismuth vanadate (BiVO$_4$) is one of the most actively investigated oxide semiconductors for PEC energy conversion due to its moderate indirect bandgap of 2.5 eV, favourable conduction band position, and relatively long photocarrier lifetimes. However, poor majority carrier transport, arising from formation of electron small polarons, has been identified as one of the primary limitations on its PEC performance. To overcome this issue, the best-performing BiVO$_4$ films incorporate n-type dopants, such as tungsten or molybdenum, to increase n-type conductivity, nanostructured architectures to decrease transport lengths while increasing semiconductor-electrolyte junction areas, or carrier selective contacts to reduce photocarrier recombination rates. While these advances have yielded impressive performance improvements, basic understanding and control of defect properties in this material remain lacking. This is exemplified by the discrepancy between calculations of intrinsic defect formation energies and experimentally obtained conductivities in synthesized thin films. In particular, density functional theory (DFT) calculations by Yin et al. predict that BiVO$_4$ should have p-type character when synthesized under O-rich conditions and n-type character when synthesized under O-poor/Bi-rich conditions. In contrast, experimentally synthesized films, which are typically annealed at high temperature for long times in oxygen or air (i.e. under O-rich conditions), consistently exhibit n-type conductivity. While this native n-type conductivity is typically attributed to the presence of oxygen vacancies (O$_{vac}$), which act as shallow donors in BiVO$_4$, these synthesis conditions should favour dominant formation of bismuth vacancies (Bi$_{vac}$), which are shallow acceptors. Equilibrium between these two lowest formation energy defects under O-rich conditions should result in a Fermi level that is pinned approximately 0.55 eV above the valence band maximum (VBM). The strik-
ing difference between theory and experiment provides a clue that unidentified and uncontrolled impurity defects may play a defining role in determining the conductivities, and thus functional characteristics, of BiVO₄ photoanodes.

Hydrogen is known to be ubiquitous in synthesis and processing environments, readily diffuses, and is difficult to detect experimentally. However, it has also been shown to play a significant role in affecting the electronic properties of a range of semiconductors. For example, the recognition that interstitial and oxygen site substitutional hydrogen (Hᵢ and Hₒ, respectively) act as shallow donors in ZnO²²⁻²⁵ was important for resolving many previously poorly understood and apparently contradictory experimental observations. For the case of BiVO₄ annealing in hydrogen has been shown to improve its PEC performance by increasing its n-type conductivity. However, the mechanisms by which H₂ annealing does this are not yet clear and the role of residual hydrogen during synthesis has not been addressed.

In the present work, we explore the role of hydrogen in defining the electronic properties of BiVO₄. We find that annealing of BiVO₄ films in H₂ at moderate temperatures increases PEC performance by increasing the n-type character of the material and reducing mid-gap electronic states. Application of the hydrogen treatment to advanced nanoporous BiVO₄ films reveals that majority carrier transport limitations can be almost entirely eliminated, thereby enabling front-illuminated configurations with this high performance material. Although it is often assumed that formation of oxygen vacancy defects, which act as electron donors, is the dominant effect of annealing metal oxide semiconductors in hydrogen, we find that hydrogen in BiVO₄ plays an active role in defining its n-type conductivity. In particular, magnetic resonance measurements confirm that hydrogen incorporates into BiVO₄ and photoluminescence spectroscopy, combined with first principles calculations, indicates reduced radiative recombination at deep electronic states, which are consistent with those introduced by oxygen vacancies. These findings, together with recent breakthroughs in understanding polaron transport in BiVO₄, point to important roles for interactions between polarons and lattice defects on defining majority carrier mobility. Finally, we also find that residual hydrogen in as-synthesized BiVO₄ films may have a direct impact on conductivity and electronic transport properties. Thus, consideration and control of the annealing atmosphere and precursors during synthesis, which are commonly overlooked in formation of metal oxide semiconductors, is important for defining functional PEC characteristics.

■ EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

BiVO₄ Thin Film Synthesis and Processing

Spin-coated bismuth vanadate thin films were prepared by adapting a literature procedure. In a typical deposition, 15 mL of a 0.2 M solution of bismuth (III) nitrate pentahydrate (Sigma Aldrich, ≥98%) in acetylacetone (Sigma Aldrich, ≥99%) and 100 mL of a 0.03 M solution of vanadium(IV)-oxy acetylacetonate in acetylacetone were prepared separately, and sonicated for 10 min. Next, the two solutions were mixed together and sonicated for an additional 5 min. Approximately 1-1.2 mL of this resulting solution – enough to homogeneously cover the substrate surface – was filtered with a 0.45 μm nylon filter (Thermo Scientific) and dispensed onto a 100 mm wafer of fused silica (4 W 55, Hoya Corporation USA, Milpitas, CA) for optical measurements or plates of fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) on glass for photoelectrochemical measurements (Sigma-Aldrich, 100 mm x 100 mm x 2 mm, TEC 15, ~13 Ω cm⁻²). Prior to deposition, substrates were thoroughly washed with isopropanol and with detergent and deionized water, dried with a nitrogen gun, and treated for 10 min in an ozone cleaner (Jeligt Model 42). The substrate, with precursor solution covering its surface, was then spun twice in a row at 1000 rpm for 6 s on a Laurell Technologies spin coater with an acceleration rate of 150 rpm/s. After this spin-coating cycle, the substrate was annealed for 10 min at 550 °C in a muffle furnace. This procedure (i.e. spin-coating followed by short annealing) was repeated nine times. After the final spin-coating cycle, the substrate was annealed for 2 h at 500 °C to achieve a final thickness of ~50 nm.

BiVO₄ Powder Synthesis

Monocrystalline scheelite BiVO₄ powder was synthesized by solid-solid reaction between Bi₂O₃ and V₂O₅. 7.193 g of Bi₂O₃ (99.99%, Sigma Aldrich) and 2.808 g of V₂O₅ were mixed, giving a 1:1 stoichiometric ratio of bismuth to vanadium. The powders were ground together with a mortar and pestle, dispersed in ethanol to increase the homogeneity of the mixture, dried overnight, pressed into a pellet, and heated in a furnace at 600 °C in air for 72 h. After cooling, the pellet was crushed into a bright yellow powder. XRD showed a small amount of unreacted V₂O₅, so the powder was again ground with a mortar and pestle, pressed into a pellet and placed in the furnace for an additional 1 h at 650 °C. After the second round of heating, XRD confirmed that the product powder consisted of pure monocrystalline scheelite BiVO₄ with unreacted V₂O₅ below the detection limit (Figure S3). Some of the powder was post-treated in H₂ as described for thin films.

Electrodeposited BiVO₄ Thin Film Synthesis and Processing

Electrodeposited BiVO₄ films were prepared on FTO glass substrates using a previously published protocol by Kim et al., with slight modifications. Briefly, 0.04 M Bi(NO₃)₃ - 5H₂O was dissolved in 500 ml of 1 M NaOH (pH 1.7, HNO₃). Separate, 0.23 M p-benzoinic acid was dissolved in 200 proof ethanol (ACS reagent grade, Sigma-Aldrich). Prior to deposition, 50 mL of the Bi(NO₃)₃ solution was mixed with 20 mL of the p-benzoinic acid. FTO/glass electrodes were cleaned with detergent and deionized water, cut into 1.5×1.5 cm² squares, cleaned by sonication for 15 min in 1:1 acetone/isopropanol alcohol, and dried under N₂. Contact was made with copper tape. The electrode area was 1×1 cm² using electrolytically grown Cu film 470 (3M) to shield the other areas of the electrode and the copper tape. BiOI was electrochemically deposited from the above mixture onto the FTO electrodes in a 3 electrode cell with Pt mesh counter electrode and 3 M Ag/AgCl reference electrode at a potential of -0.1 V vs. Ag/AgCl for 5 min. After rinsing and drying with N₂, 200 µL of 0.2 M VO(acac)₅ in DMF was deposited on the BiOI layer and annealed in a muffle furnace at 500 °C for 2 h at 450 °C. After annealing, the electrodes were immersed in 0.1 M NaOH to remove remaining V₂O₅. Scanning electron microscopy was used to compare the morphologies of spin coated and electrodeposited films, as shown in Fig. S1. As expected, the electrodeposited material was characterized by a nanoporous morphology. Subsequently, these samples were split in half, with one half treated by H₂ annealing and the other half retained as a control.

H₂ Annealing

Samples of BiVO₄ were annealed in a quartz glass tube furnace equipped with a vacuum pump and mass flow controllers for flowing N₂ and H₂ gases. The quartz tube was conditioned prior to annealing samples by a 550 °C air anneal for 2 h followed by a N₂ anneal at 200 °C for 1 h and, finally, a H₂ anneal at 350 °C for 1 h. Samples were annealed in 1 atm of H₂. The procedure for charging the quartz reactor included 3× evacuations to at least 200 mTorr, with a N₂ purge between each pump cycle, with a final pumping step to at least 100 mTorr. The tube was then filled with H₂. The flow rate of H₂ was kept constant at 150 scm for the duration of the annealing treatment. The heating rate was 1 °C/s and the annealing time was 15 min at the target temperature, after which the clam shell of the furnace was opened and allowed to cool to room temperature. Once cooled, the flow was switched from H₂ to N₂ and the tube was purged for ~5 min prior to removing the sample.

Photoelectrochemical Characterization

Photoelectrochemical (PEC) testing was performed with a Biologic SP-300 potentiostat using a three electrode configuration with a Pt counter electrode and 3M Ag/AgCl reference electrode at a scan rate of 50 mV s⁻¹. All PEC measurements presented here were performed in the presence of sodium sulfite as a sacrificial hole acceptor. The use of sulfite, which is characterized by facile oxidation kinetics, allows for evaluation of differences in PEC performance due to photon absorption and photocarrier transport within the semiconductor, without influence from changes of the.
native catalytic activity of the surface. For spin-coated films, the electrolyte was 1 M phosphate buffer (1:1 K2HPO4 and KH2PO4) at pH 6.8 with 0.1 M Na2SO4 as a sacrificial hole acceptor. For nanoporous BiVO4 films, the electrolyte was 0.5 M phosphate buffer (1:1 K2HPO4 and KH2PO4) with 1 M Na2SO4 as a sacrificial hole acceptor at pH 7.16. In this case, the higher concentration of hole acceptor was used for comparison with literature results. 

According to common practice, we use as a figure of merit the photocurrent density at 1.23 V vs. RHE, which is arbitrary with respect to sulfite oxidation but provides a useful indication of the saturation current density (Jsc) before the onset of dark current. We note that Mott-Schottky analysis for determination of donor densities and flatband potentials yielded non-idealities that precluded quantification. Therefore, as a second figure of merit, we use the onset potential (Eonset), herein defined as the potential at which the anodic photocurrent reaches 1 µA cm−2 in the anodic sweep of the second cycle of a cyclic voltammogram.

Materials Characterization

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was performed using a monochromatized Al Kα source (hv = 1486.6 eV), operated at 150 W, on a Kratos Axis Ultra DLD system at a take-off angle of 0° relative to the surface normal, and pass energy for narrow scan core level and valence band spectra of 20 eV. Spectral fitting was performed using Casa XPS analysis software. Spectral positions were corrected using adventitious carbon by shifting the C 1s core level position to 284.8 eV and curves were fit with quasi-Voigt lines following Shirley background subtraction.

The 1H magic angle spinning (MAS) solid-state nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy measurements were performed on a Bruker Avance I 500 MHz NMR spectrometer equipped with a 4 mm H/X magic angle spinning probe with a resonance frequency of 500.23 MHz. The 1H spectra were acquired with a 90° pulse of 5.25 μs duration, relaxation delay of 1 s, and 13 kHz spinning speed.

Raman spectroscopy was performed with a Horiba Jobin Yvon LabRAM HR confocal Raman microscope with 633 nm excitation.

Photoluminescence measurements were performed on a custom-built instrument. Temperature control was achieved using a 10 K closed cycle He cryostat (Janus Research Company, Wilmington, MA, USA) equipped with a temperature controller (Model 335, Lake Shore Cryotronics, Inc., Westerville, OH, USA). The sample was excited with a 405 nm continuous wave laser (100 mW Excelsior, Spectra-Physics, Santa Clara, CA, USA) after passing the beam through a 405 nm notch filter and attenuating to 3 mW with a spot size of 2 mm. The photoluminescence from the sample was collected through a 407 nm long pass filter and focused onto the inlet slit of an Andor Shamrock spectrometer equipped with a 600 lines/mm grating blazed at 500 nm (Andor Technology Ltd., Belfast, UK). The spectra were recorded with an Andor iDus 410 CCD detector operated at -90 °C. Wavelength calibration was performed with a Hg calibration lamp and correction for the spectral response of the setup was achieved using a 45 W NIST-traceable quartz tungsten halogen light source with known colour temperature.

Room temperature absorption was measured by transverse photothermal deflection spectroscopy (PDS) according to Ref. [28] and references therein. The sample was located in a quartz cuvette filled with C2F6 as a Xenon arc lamp with monochromator (resolution: 10 meV), second order filters and a 10 Hz were used for excitation, and a red laser diode was used for the probe beam, whose deflection was measured by a position-sensitive quadrant photodiode via lock-in technique.

Density Functional Theory

Density functional theory (DFT) calculations were performed using the PBE functional and ultrasoft pseudo-potentials as implemented in the Quantum ESPRESSO software package. All calculations were performed with kinetic energy and charge density cut-offs of 816 and 8,163 eV, respectively, with tetrahedral occupations. Initially, an optimized 24 atom super cell was prepared using an 8×8×8 k-point mesh. From this, a 3×2×3 cell was created containing 432 atoms. All subsequent calculations were carried out with a 2×2×2 k-point mesh. SCF and NSCF calculations were performed on optimized structures for defects including: hydrogen interstitial (H_int), oxygen vacancy (O_vac), bismuth vacancy (Bi_vac), and substitutional hydrogen for oxygen (H_e). Integrated local density of states were calculated using pp.x and visualized in VESTA.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Impact of Hydrogen Annealing on Photoelectrochemical Characteristics

Fig. 1a-b shows PEC current density vs. applied electrochemical potential (J-E) curves obtained from undoped, planar BiVO$_4$ photoanodes formed via spin coating. Measurements were performed under simulated AM1.5G illumination at 100 mW/cm$^2$ in 1 M potassium phosphate (KP$_i$) buffer at pH 6.8 containing 0.1 M SO$_3$$^-$ as a sacrificial reagent. A summary of quantitative performance metrics for saturation current density ($J_{sat}$) and onset potential for photocurrent generation ($E_{on}$) is provided in Table 1. Significantly higher photocurrent and more negative (i.e. cathodic) onset potential are observed for the as-grown samples when illuminated from the backside (Fig. 1b) compared to the frontside (Fig. 1a). A direct comparison of these two lighting conditions is provided in Fig. S2. This difference between frontside and backside illumination has been observed previously for BiVO$_4$ photoanodes and indicates that charge carrier transport limitations in the material are associated with majority electrons rather than minority holes. For the case of backside illumination, charge carriers are generated, on average, closer to the back contact and electrons have a shorter distance to travel, whereas the opposite is true for frontside illumination. The finding that electron transport limits frontside illumination performance is consistent with recent reports that electron small polarons form within the material, leading to extremely small mobilities relative to those that would be expected for band transport.

As summarized in Table 1 and shown in Fig. 1, after annealing in hydrogen at 265 °C for 15 min, the PEC performance characteristics of spin-coated BiVO$_4$ improve significantly for frontside illumination and slightly for backside illumination. Importantly, the J-E characteristics for the two illumination configurations (co-plotted in Fig. S2) are nearly identical following hydrogen treatment. These results indicate that majority carrier transport limitations are largely eliminated by exposure of BiVO$_4$ to hydrogen at elevated temperature. Furthermore, J-E current hysteresis, which is a common feature of defect state charging, is significantly reduced with H$_2$ annealing, suggesting passivation of electronically active trap states. This is highlighted by comparing the difference between the integrated forward and reverse sweeps, Table 1.

![Figure 1](https://example.com/fig1.png) (a-c) Photoelectrochemical (PEC) J-E characteristics of spin-coated BiVO$_4$ films deposited on FTO/glass substrates and measured under AM 1.5G 1 Sun illumination in 1 M phosphate buffer (pH 6.8) with 0.1 M Na$_2$SO$_3$ as sacrificial hole acceptor. In all cases, the second cycle, scanned at 50 mV s$^{-1}$ from the open-circuit potential to 1.4 V vs. RHE, is shown. As-deposited films are compared to films annealed in hydrogen at 265 °C under (a) frontside and (b) backside illumination. The onset potentials ($E_{on}$), defined as the potential at which the current density is equal to 0.001 mA cm$^{-2}$, are indicated with color-coded vertical dashed lines. Figure S2 compares front and backside illumination together. With no illumination, negligible currents are observed for all samples, except those annealed in H$_2$ at 320 °C, as described in the text. (c) Films annealed in H$_2$ at different temperatures are compared and $E_{on}$ is shown for the maximum shift from the sample treated in H$_2$ at 290 °C compared to the as-grown material with frontside illumination. (d) PEC testing of nano-BiVO$_4$ samples in 0.5 M phosphate buffer with 1 M Na$_2$SO$_3$ (pH 7.16), deposited on FTO/glass substrates, showing the forward sweep of the second cycle from open-circuit voltage to 1.4 V vs. RHE. The $E_{on}$ is shown for the H$_2$ annealed sample, which yielded the lowest value of 167 mV.

Table 1. Photoelectrochemical (PEC) performance metrics from data shown in Fig. 1 including using both front and backside illumination: onset potential ($E_{on}$), current density at 1.23 V vs. RHE ($J_{sc}$), and the integrated charge density of the forward sweep minus the reverse sweep.

<table>
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<th>Spin Coated</th>
<th>$E_{on}$ vs. RHE (V)</th>
<th>$J_{sc}$ (mA cm$^{-2}$)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Front</td>
<td>Back</td>
<td>Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as-grown</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>H$_2$ 245°C</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>1.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>H$_2$ 265°C</td>
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<tr>
<td>H$_2$ 275°C</td>
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<td>0.23</td>
<td>1.43</td>
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<tr>
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<td>as-grown</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>H$_2$ 265°C</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>2.53</td>
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The impact of the H$_2$ annealing temperature on PEC performance was examined by treating samples at 245, 265, 290, and 320 °C under pure H$_2$ at 1 atm for 15 min each. X-ray diffraction (XRD) and Raman spectroscopy confirmed that the material remained monoclinic scheelite phase BiVO$_4$ through H$_2$ annealing temperatures to 290 °C (see Figs. S3 & S4). Fig. 1c shows that $J_{sc}$ increased as the H$_2$ annealing temperature was increased from 245 °C to 290 °C. However, at the next annealing temperature of 320 °C the sample turned visibly black and exhibited very low photocurrent. Measurement of the $J$-$E$ curve from this sample in the dark revealed a large anodic current in the first sweep due to oxidation of metallic species that were generated by H$_2$-induced reduction of BiVO$_4$ (Fig. S5a), whereas H$_2$ treatments at lower temperature did not yield this feature. Therefore, the threshold for destructive reduction of BiVO$_4$ in 1 atm H$_2$ is between 290 and 320 °C, as confirmed by XRD and XPS (Figs. S3 & S5, respectively).

The results described above were obtained from undoped thin films of BiVO$_4$ deposited by spin coating. This material was selected in this study due to its excellent homogeneity, which allows reliable comparison of differently treated samples. Moreover, its low diffuse reflectance facilitates optical characterization. While the PEC performance characteristics of this material are remarkable considering that it is an undoped 50 nm thick planar film that is not optimized for light absorption (the optical absorption depth is >100 nm above the band edge), we sought to investigate the effectiveness of H$_2$ annealing on higher performance material. For this purpose, nanoporous BiVO$_4$ samples were prepared by the method described by Kim et al. on FTO-coated glass substrates. The growth involves a thermally-driven reaction between aqueous electrodeposited BiO and dropcast VO(acac)$_2$ at 450 °C for 2 h in air. Half of an individual sample (measuring 1×1 cm$^2$ prior to halving) was annealed in H$_2$ at 275 °C for 15 min. PEC measurements were performed using the same electrolyte conditions as reported by Kim et al. (0.5 M phosphate at pH 7.16, with 1M Na$_2$SO$_3$) but larger active areas of at least 0.4 cm$^2$. As shown in Fig. 1d, as-grown material displayed a $J_{sc}$ of 2.56 mA cm$^{-2}$ with backside illumination but a significantly lower $J_{sc}$ of 1.63 mA cm$^{-2}$ with frontside illumination. While the H$_2$-annealed sample displayed similar back-illuminated performance ($J_{sc} = 2.64$ mA cm$^{-2}$), a dramatic increase of the photocurrent density was observed for frontside illumination ($J_{sc} = 2.53$ mA cm$^{-2}$). These results present an important advance for optimizing tandem cell designs in which, for example, nanoporous BiVO$_4$ would be illuminated from the frontside and monolithically integrated with a bottom cell. However, a better understanding of the underlying physical mechanisms contributing to improved PEC performance is necessary to realize its full potential and provide insight on improving the performance of next generation PEC materials.

**Hydrogen Incorporation in BiVO$_4$**

To determine the existence and structure of hydrogen in H$_2$-treated BiVO$_4$, we performed room temperature solid-state $^1$H magic angle spinning (MAS) nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy on as-grown and 270 °C H$_2$-annealed BiVO$_4$ samples. Because thin films could not be analysed using the instrumentation available, powder samples that were treated under identical conditions as thin films were used. Generally speaking, the integrated peak areas are proportional to population density and the line width is affected by the mobility, where less mobile protons have sharper line shapes. As shown in Fig. 2, a strong signal, centered at 0.2 ppm is observed from the H$_2$-annealed powder. A similarly-located peak was also observed in the as-grown material, but with an amplitude that was approximately 400× lower (Fig. 2). The H$_2$-annealed powder exhibits additional resonances in the range of 7-9 ppm, which are not present in the as-grown material. We note that no evidence for liquid water at 4.7-4.8 ppm$^{31,32}$ was observed.

These results indicate that: (i) hydrogen is incorporated into BiVO$_4$ after annealing in H$_2$, (ii) at least two different chemical environments exist for the incorporated hydrogen, and (iii) hydrogen is present in the as-synthesized BiVO$_4$ in one of these chemical states. Wang and co-workers have previously calculated formation energies for hydrogen interstitials (H$_{int}$) and substitutional hydrogen on oxygen lattice sites (H$_o$), as well as for native defects, in BiVO$_4$. They found that the formation energy for H$_{int}$ is lower than for all other defects under nearly all conditions. In addition, the formation energy of H$_o$ is low compared to native defects under the O-poor conditions encountered during H$_2$ annealing. Therefore, these experimental results are consistent with theoretical predictions that both hydrogen defect types are present in the material.

Based on bond and interaction distances, it is possible to predict solid-state NMR chemical shifts of different hydrogen defects in BiVO$_4$. Hyashi et al. examined the $^1$H chemical shifts arising from hydride (H) and hydroxide (OH) incorporated in a number of host metal oxide materials. The authors discovered a linear relationship of the chemical shift with the metal-hydrogen bond distance in the hydride bond, as well as with the distance between neighbouring oxygen atoms and the hydroxide associated with interstitial hydrogen (OH···O). Herein, density functional theory (DFT) was used to understand the structure of both hydrogen defect types and aid the assignment of the solid-state NMR resonances. For the case of H$_o$, geometry optimization of a hydrogen atom introduced to an oxygen vacancy reveals that the hydrogen atom becomes associated with the vanadium atom to form a HVO$_3$ unit with a V-H bond distance of 168 pm, which places the expected chemical shift near 0 ppm. Therefore, we conclude that the resonance observed near 0 ppm for both as-synthesized and H$_2$-annealed BiVO$_4$ is associated with H$_o$. Additionally, the sharp line shape in the H$_2$-annealed sample is consistent with a more localized and less mobile H associated with the defect.

![Figure 2](https://example.com/figure2.png) **Figure 2.** $^1$H NMR of BiVO$_4$ powder as-grown (grey) and H$_2$ annealed at 270°C (blue). The signal from the as-grown sample is magnified 200× for ease of comparison. The signal at -7.10 ppm is consistent with interstitial hydrogen and the signal at 0 ppm is assigned to substitutional hydrogen.
We note that a similar resonance has been observed in ZnO and was recently assigned to H₂ in that material. For the case H₂, the hydrogen atom bonds to lattice oxygen to form hydroxide. A variety of structural configurations for H₂, within BiVO₄ are possible and we consider one of these, as shown in (Fig. S7b and associated discussion). For this particular configuration, we find an OH⋯O distance of 265 pm, for which the expected chemical shift is 11-12 ppm. While this chemical shift is larger than any of those observed experimentally, our calculation is for just one of many possible interstitial hydrogen positions in BiVO₄. The observed ¹H NMR resonance at 9 ppm is in a range that is consistent with H₂, and suggests that their most likely positions are in locations with OH⋯O distances of 275-280 pm.

From these results, it can be concluded that hydrogen incorporates into BiVO₄ as both H₂ and H₂, upon H₂ annealing. Importantly, our results also indicate that hydrogen is present at lower concentrations in as-grown material in the form of H₂. Although the previous prediction of defect formation energies found that H₂ is energetically favoured, it has been pointed out that H₂ is typically highly mobile. As such, its concentration can depend strongly on processing parameters, particularly for the case of thermal treatments. Both hydrogen defect types act as donors in BiVO₄ and can contribute to the n-type conductivity of the material. This is particularly important for synthesis of BiVO₄. As described above, native defect theory would predict that material synthesized under O-rich conditions, which is the typical environment used for formation of BiVO₄, should exhibit p-type character. Our finding that hydrogen defects are present in as-synthesized BiVO₄ can explain the experimental observation that as-grown BiVO₄ is nearly always n-type. The source of this hydrogen could be from decomposition of metal-organic precursors during formation and/or from water in the annealing environment, which is often laboratory air. These findings highlight that careful consideration and control over synthesis conditions is essential for achieving photoanodes with desired conductivity.

Optical and Electronic Properties of Hydrogen-Treated BiVO₄

The impact of H₂ annealing on band-edge and sub-bandgap optical absorption was studied by photothermal deflection spectroscopy (PDS), which enables quantification of the absorption coefficient with exceptional sensitivity and eliminates the influence of scattering. Fig. 3 shows a plot of the absorption coefficient (a) as a function of photon energy obtained from as-grown BiVO₄ on a quartz glass substrate compared to samples treated in H₂ at 265 °C and 280 °C, also on quartz. After H₂ annealing, a broad increase in the sub-bandgap absorption is observed. The inset of Fig. 3 shows Tauc plots derived from these data, which indicate an indirect bandgap of 2.5 eV for the as-grown sample, consistent with our previous report. No evidence for a change of the bandgap with H₂ treatment is observed. Therefore, we can conclude that the increased photocurrent densities observed from H₂-annealed samples do not arise from increased light harvesting associated with a reduction of the bandgap.

Although broad-spectrum sub-bandgap absorption could originate from formation of metallic clusters, neither XPS nor PEC measurements indicated their presence at H₂ annealing temperatures below 320 °C. Therefore, we consider the possibility that this absorption increase is due to d-d transitions of V⁵⁺ (3d⁰), which should have transition energies in the range of 1–2 eV. It is now well established that electron small polarons in BiVO₄ are energetically favoured over delocalized electrons in the conduction band. Such electron small polarons localize at V sites, leading to a change of formal oxidation state from V⁵⁺ (3d⁰) to V⁴⁺ (3d¹), the concentration of which will increase with increasing electron polaron concentration. Given that H₂ and H₂O are both predicted to be donors in BiVO₄, the concentration of V⁴⁺ is expected to increase with increasing hydrogen impurity concentration. Quantitative comparison of solid-state NMR performed on powders with PDS data obtained from thin films cannot be established with high accuracy. However, we note that the increase of hydrogen content in BiVO₄ by two orders of magnitude correlates well with the approximately two order of magnitude increase of the sub-gap optical absorption coefficient after H₂ annealing. A subgap absorption level of 100 cm⁻¹ roughly corresponds to 10¹⁸ cm⁻³ absorbing localized states. Considering this concentration is in good agreement with expected carrier concentrations based on previous works, this suggest that optical probes, such as is presented herein, may be useful for approximating majority carrier concentrations in BiVO₄ due to the small polaron localization about V.

In order to detect the presence of V⁴⁺ states in BiVO₄, as shown in Fig. 4, we used electron paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy (EPR) to observe the EPR signal from the H₂ annealed sample. The EPR signal from the H₂ annealed sample is assigned to the presence of V⁴⁺ within the material but the lack of a well-resolved hyperfine structure indicates the simultaneous presence of multiple local environments and strong spin-spin interactions between the V⁴⁺ ions.
interacting with a single $^{51}$V nucleus, eight hyperfine lines as observed. Thus, for an isolated electron interacting with a single $^{51}$V nucleus, eight hyperfine lines should be observed. As shown in Fig. 4, we observe a broad resonance at $g = 1.945$, which is characteristic of $V^{4+}$ in BiVO$_4$. The lack of a well-defined hyperfine structure indicates strong spin-spin couplings between the $V^{4+}$ ions within the material and the simultaneous presence of structurally different $V^{4+}$ sites arising from, for example, free polarons and defect-bound polarons associated with $H_{\text{int}}$ and $H_0$, as well as $H_{\text{Ovac}}$. We also detect a small background EPR signal in the as-synthesized BiVO$_4$ powder samples. These results confirm that $H_2$-annealing, which increases the content of hydrogen incorporated in the material, also increases the concentration of $V^{4+}$ sites. Previously, it was reported that increased $V^{4+}$ content is associated with higher conductivity of BiVO$_4$ nanoparticles. Taken together with PEC characteristics, these observations suggest that $H_2$-annealing yields an increase of the majority carrier concentration in the form of electron small polarons, as will be discussed below.

To probe the impact of $H_2$-annealing on the Fermi level within BiVO$_4$ thin films, we performed valence band photoemission spectroscopy. Given that the binding energy is referenced to the Fermi energy ($E_F$), and considering the known 2.5 eV bandgap of BiVO$_4$, linear fitting of the valence band edge was used to determine the Fermi level relative to the conduction band edge ($E_{\text{CB}} - E_F$) as a function of annealing condition. From this analysis, we find that $E_F$ is located 0.61 eV below $E_{\text{CB}}$ in the as-grown material. As shown in Fig. 5, $H_2$-annealing leads to a progressive shift of the Fermi energy towards the conduction band edge; as the annealing temperature is increased from 245 °C to 290 °C, $E_F$ shifts from 0.49 eV to 0.44 eV below $E_{\text{CB}}$.

From the measured change of the Fermi level following $H_2$ annealing, it is possible to approximate the proportional increase of electron small polarons in the material. The Fermi-Dirac statistical analysis of Rettie et al. provides the following expression for the carrier concentration, $n(T)$, in a system in which donors supply electrons to small polaron states at higher energies:

$$n(T) \approx N(T)\exp\left(-\frac{E_F - E_F}{k_B T}\right)$$

where $N(T)$ is the number of thermally accessible small polaron states near the energy minimum, $E_{\text{m}}$, of the small polaron band and $E_F$ is the Fermi energy. For samples annealed in the range of 245 – 265 °C, the Fermi energy shifts by approximately 130 meV towards the conduction band edge, which corresponds to an increase of the electron small polaron concentration by a factor of approximately 150. We note that this increase of polaron concentration, derived from the change of the Fermi level position measured by photoemission spectroscopy, is in good agreement with the increased value of the sub-gap optical absorption coefficient measured by PDS of thin films.

Together, these results provide strong support for the hypothesis that hydrogen defects, in both as-grown and $H_2$-annealed samples, act as donors that affect n-type conductivity of BiVO$_4$. This conclusion is consistent with DFT calculations by Wang et al., who predicted that both $H_{\text{int}}$ and $H_0$ should be donors in this material. Furthermore, these findings are consistent with the model of Van de Walle, in which the character of the $H_{\text{int}}$ defect is defined by the position of the Fermi level with respect to the universal hydrogen level, which is at the same energy as an electron in the standard hydrogen electrode (SHE). In the case of BiVO$_4$, for which the CBM energy is 0.1 – 0.3 eV below SHE, interstitial hydrogen should act as a donor, as observed in our experiments. The higher carrier concentration created by $H_2$ annealing can also explain the improved PEC performance presented in Fig. 1, where increased film conductivity leads to reduced majority carrier transport limitations, as evidenced by the elimination of differences between frontside and backside illumination. Thus, increased hydrogen content plays a direct role in improving PEC characteristics.

**Oxygen Vacancies in BiVO$_4$**

The results presented above reveal correlations between the hydrogen content, Fermi level, sub-gap optical absorption, and PEC performance characteristics. However, it is important to recognize that $H_2$ annealing provides a reducing environment that, along with hydrogen impurity defects, could introduce oxygen vacancies into the lattice. In addition, $O_{\text{vac}}$ defects are often considered to be responsible for contributing free electron concentration and, thus, increasing the native n-type conductivity of BiVO$_4$.

While theoretical studies predict that oxygen vacancies are shallow donor defects in BiVO$_4$, there are, to the best of our knowledge, no experimental measurements verifying this or indicating that such states are primarily responsible for the n-type conductivity of this material. Furthermore, as discussed above, the same theory predicts that BiVO$_4$ should be p-type under the oxygen-rich synthesis conditions used for formation of thin films. While the work of Vinke and co-workers has been cited as indicating that $O_{\text{vac}}$ defects are responsible for the n-type conductivity of BiVO$_4$, this work investigated the mixed ionic and electronic character of conductivity in BiVO$_4$ at high temperature, from 800 to 1000 K, and in the absence of illumination. This important work showed that the activation energy for electronic conduction is large relative to that of oxygen vacancy ionic conduction. Thus, they found that electronic conductivity dominates at high temperature and ionic...
conductivity dominates at low temperature. While this study verified the n-type character of BiVO₄, there was no claim or experimental evidence that Ovac defects are responsible for electronic conduction.³⁰

In order to understand the potential influence of Ovac on the electronic properties of as-grown and H₂ annealed material, we used DFT to calculate the densities of states (DOS) associated with this defect. Using a supercell containing 432 atoms to ensure isolation of the defects, the DOS of a single Ovac was calculated using PBE on the relaxed defect structures. The resulting DOS is shown in Fig. 6 and compared to the unperturbed supercell.

The bandgap of BiVO₄, calculated with PBE, was found to be 2.10 eV, which compares reasonably well with the experimental bandgap of 2.5 eV, considering that PBE is known to underestimate bandgaps. The DOS related to Ovac are found deep in the gap, at 1.44 eV above the VBM. By scaling for the discrepancy in the bandgap using the scissor operator, the narrow DOS introduced by Ovac are predicted to lie approximately 1.7 eV above the VBM. This finding presents an apparent discrepancy with previous reports that Ovac defects act as shallow donors in BiVO₄. This was recently addressed by Kim et al., whose DFT PBE+U calculations also indicated the presence of deep level states associated with Ovac defects in BiVO₄.⁴⁹ In that work, they found that the negative ionization energy of Ovac centers leads to spontaneous ionization to a 2⁺ charge state. However, it was determined that it is energetically favourable for these donated electrons to form small electron polarons via self-trapping at vanadium sites. This results in occupied electronic states deep within the BiVO₄ bandgap, with a binding energy of approximately 0.5 eV. Thus, while Ovac defects do act as donors in BiVO₄, they yield localized electronic states. It is important to note that interactions between negatively charged electron small polarons and positively charged oxygen vacancies could lead to bound polarons with significantly lower mobilities than unbound polarons created by self-trapping of photogenerated charge carriers. Similar interactions between charged hydrogen defects and electron small polarons may also be present and polaron binding energies would be expected to be different for various defects. For example, it has been shown that small electron polaron binding energies to Ovac are considerably larger, by >400 meV, than to Hi in BaCeO₃.⁵² In such a case, controlling conductivity of the material by introducing defects having low electron small polaron binding energies would be more effective for tuning conductivity of the semiconductor. To the best of our knowledge, polaron binding energies with different defects have not yet been studied in BiVO₄. However, reliable computation of such interactions, including for hydrogen defects, would be extremely valuable for advancing approaches to improving charge transport in this actively investigated photoanode material.

Although the polaron states described above should be paramagnetic, the hyperfine structure of V⁺⁺⁺⁺ measured by EPR was not well resolved and hence, it was not possible to directly establish the specific structure of the associated defect centers. Therefore, we used temperature-dependent photoluminescence (PL) spectroscopy to probe radiative recombination at deep states in BiVO₄. Measurements were performed on spin-coated as-grown and H₂-annealed samples on quartz substrates. Consistent with our prior identification of the material as an indirect bandgap semiconductor, we find no evidence for band edge PL.⁵ However, very weak sub-bandgap PL was observed at room temperature, indicating that recombination is dominated by non-radiative processes. At low temperature, a much stronger broad emission, centred at approximately 1.85 eV, was observed from both types of samples, as shown in Fig. 7. Gaussian spectral fitting indicates the presence of two components, a primary one centered at 1.86 eV and a weaker one centered between 1.60 – 1.63 eV, Fig. S8.

The temperature dependence of the PL intensity is well described by an Arrhenius behaviour with the inclusion of the T² temperature dependent capture cross section proposed by Krustok et al. and discussed in additional detail in the SI.⁵³ Fits generated with this model, as well as those using a double Arrhenius model, are presented in Fig. S9, with fit parameters summarized in Tables S1 & S2. The Arrhenius plot is presented in Fig. S10. Thermal quenching of the PL intensity for the as grown BiVO₄ film was governed by a 41 ± 2 meV activation energy. The exact origin of the thermal quenching is not yet known, but may arise from an activated competitive non-radiative recombination channel or from thermally activated delocalization of charge carriers from the defect site. We also note that the PL peak positions do not change with temperature. By comparison, the temperature dependence of the absorption spectrum is shown in Fig. S11, where the band gap of BiVO₄ increases with decreasing temperature. This can be modelled using phonon broadening by Eq. S4,⁴⁴ from \( E_0 = 2.59 \text{ eV} \) to 2.48 eV at 350 K.

Importantly, the PL intensity is significantly reduced after H₂ annealing, by a factor of 2.6, 3.3, and 3.3 at 245 °C, 265 °C, and 290 °C, respectively. Thermal quenching of the PL intensity is also observed for H₂-treated samples, with measured activation energies in the same range, with values of 35 ± 2, 34 ± 3, and 32 ± 2 meV for the 245, 265, and 290 °C H₂-annealed samples, respectively.

![Figure 6](image-url)
1.63 eV. The e-e-... 

As described above, solid-state NMR indicates a significant increase in the concentration of substitutional H₂ following H₂ annealing. Therefore, we also apply DFT to determine the effect of incorporating a hydrogen atom onto an oxygen vacancy center. As shown in Fig. 6a, the DOS arising from O_vac, which is located deep within the bandgap, is eliminated by hydrogen. This finding is consistent with the observed reduction of PL intensity from BiVO₄ upon H₂ annealing.

The magnitude of PL reduction is not commensurate with the observed increase of hydrogen content in the films, the carrier concentration needed for the measured change in the Fermi level, or the increase in sub-gap optical absorption. This suggests that substitutional hydrogen is not solely incorporated at oxygen vacancy sites that were already present in as-grown material. Rather, these results are consistent with the conclusion that H₂ annealing does result in a decrease of the total oxygen content within the bulk of the material but, at the same time, hydrogen is substitutionally incorporated at these sites, leading to preferential formation of H₂O rather than O_vac.

**CONCLUSION**

Post-synthetic processing of BiVO₄ photoanodes by H₂ annealing was found to enhance its PEC performance characteristics under AM 1.5G simulated solar illumination, yielding improved onset potential for photoanodic current, increased fill factor of J-E curves, and near-complete elimination of majority carrier charge transport limitations. To understand the role of hydrogen annealing on the functional characteristics of BiVO₄, we employed a variety of spectroscopic methods that, together, revealed that hydrogen is incorporated in the material at both interstitial (H_int) and substitutional (H₂O) sites. The result was a shift of the Fermi level towards the conduction band that, considered alongside recent transport measurements in BiVO₄, indicated a higher concentration of electron small polarons. Temperature-dependent photoluminescence measurements showed that H₂ annealing reduced radiative recombination at deep trap states associated with oxygen vacancy (O_vac) defects in the as-grown material. Thus, while annealing of BiVO₄ in hydrogen can reduce the oxygen content in the material, the primary effect is not due to introduction of oxygen vacancies but, rather, incorporation of hydrogen donors into the material. As a consequence, the photoelectrochemical performance characteristics are significantly improved under frontside illumination conditions due to reduced majority carrier transport limitations.

The results presented here indicate that hydrogen acts as a donor in BiVO₄ and its presence in as-grown material provides a resolution to the discrepancy between experiment and theory on the native conductivity of material synthesized under oxygen rich conditions; electronically active hydrogen defects incorporated during synthesis can play a defining role in the n-type character of this promising photoanode material. This work highlights that addressing the role of native and impurity defects, methods of passivating deep level states, and the active role of hydrogen in BiVO₄ and other metal oxide semiconductor systems is critical for understanding and controlling functional performance. Furthermore, these findings have important implications on electron small polaron transport in...
Monoclinic BiVO₄ has recently been discovered to dominate over band transport. Small electron polaron binding energies at different impurity and defect sites are expected to have a significant impact on the ability to affect conductivity of the material. Our measurements, which indicate that hydrogen impurities act as effective donors in BiVO₄, and play a defining role in the achieved conductivity of as-grown material, suggest a pressing need for detailed theoretical assessment of polaron-defect interactions in BiVO₄.

**ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

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

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**Notes**
The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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