



Scanning and Analytical Transmission Electron Microscopy

Introduction to STEM

MSE-735

Fall 2025

Principles of STEM

STEM components

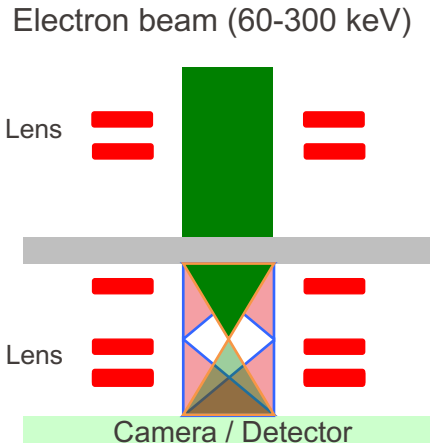
Imaging modes

Spectrum imaging

Summary

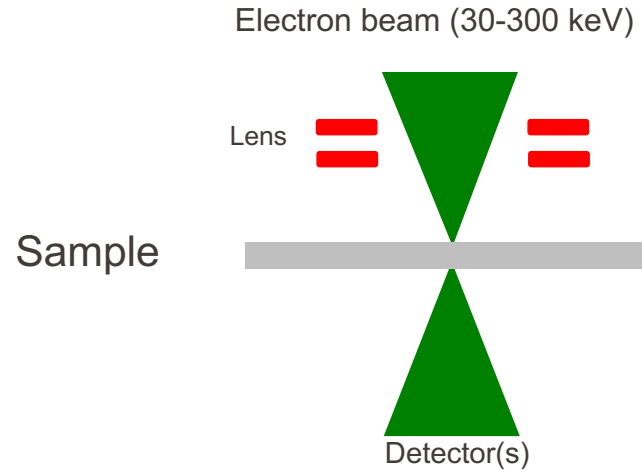
Types of transmission electron microscopes

Conventional mode (CTEM)

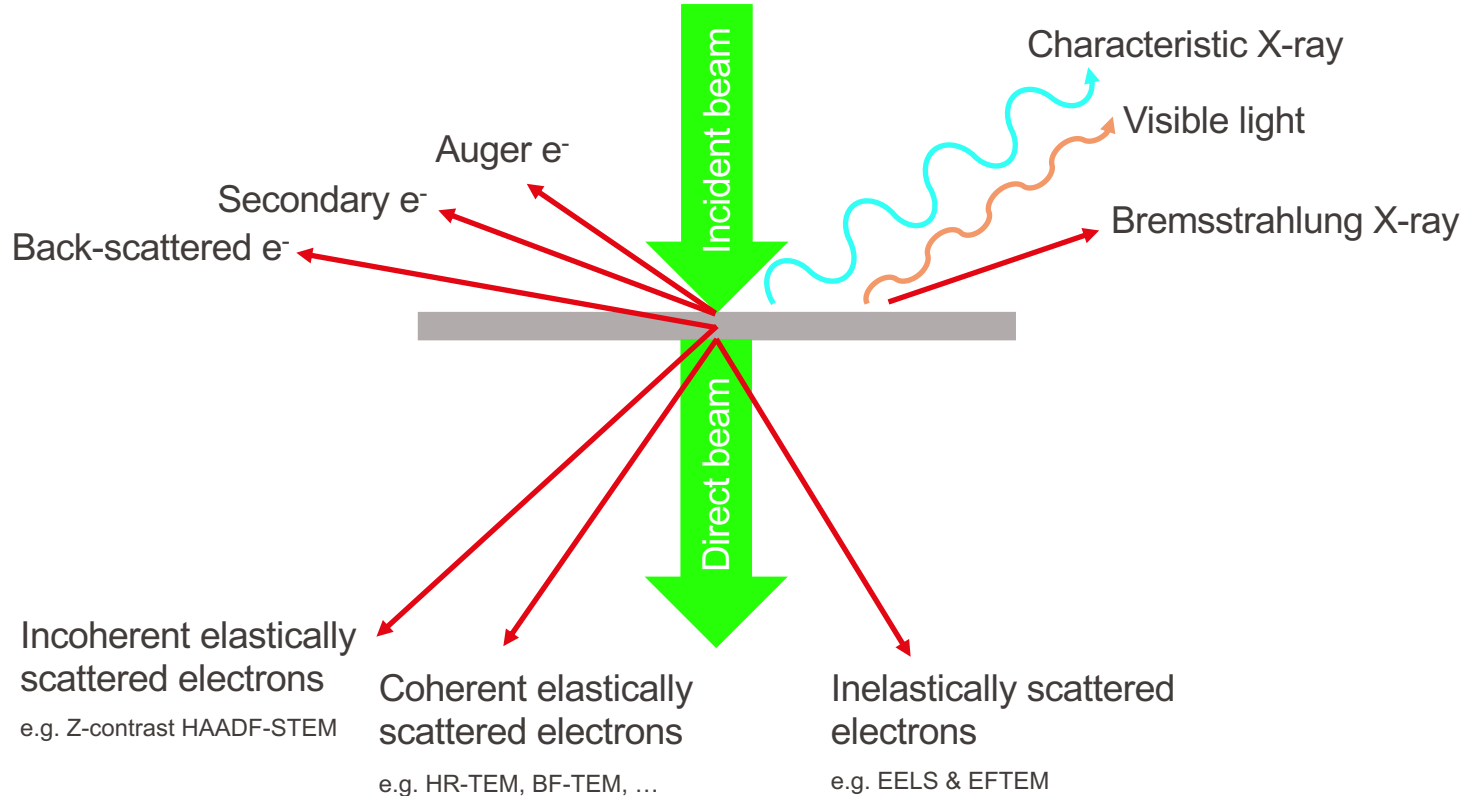


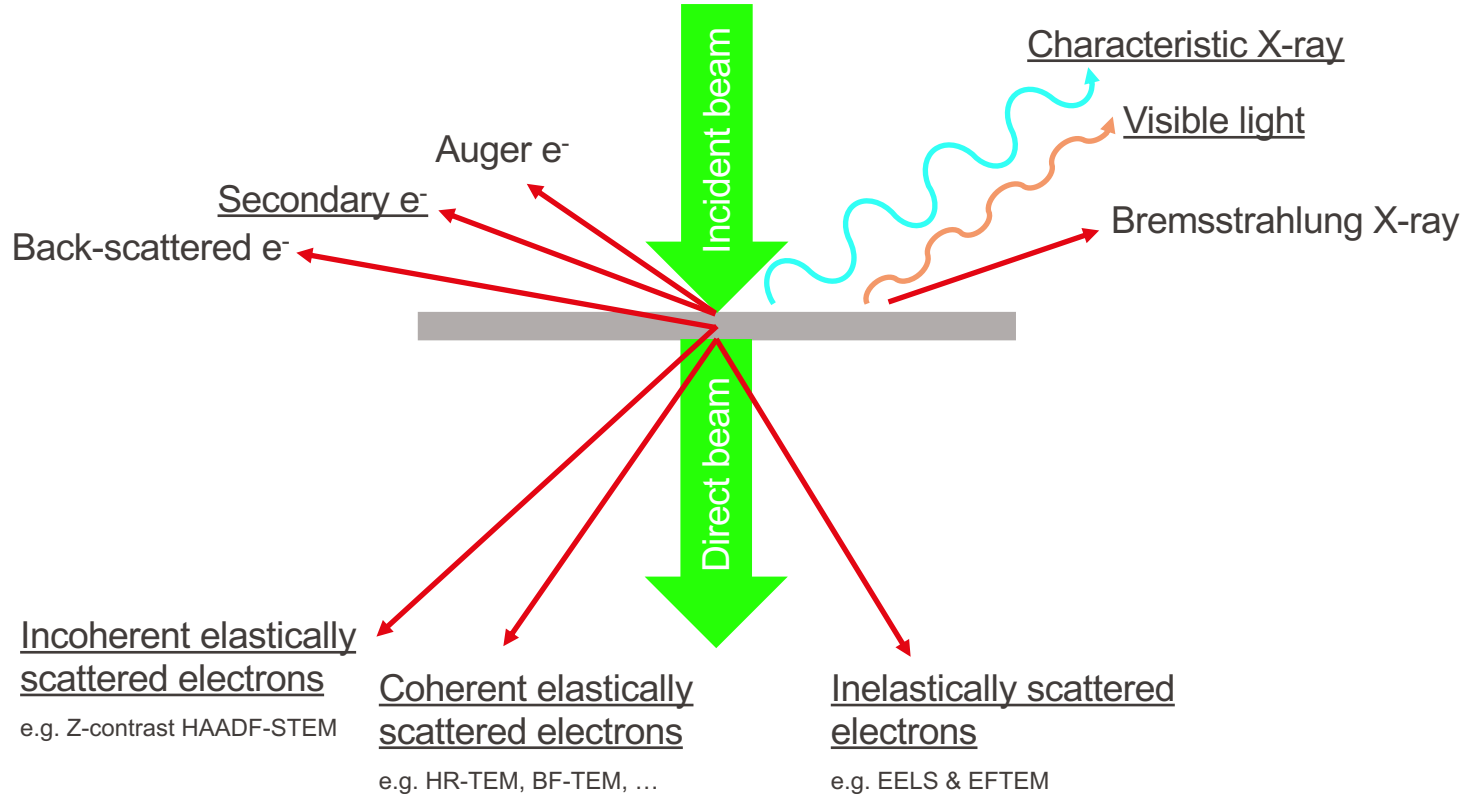
The most important lens:
Objective lens

Scanning mode (STEM)



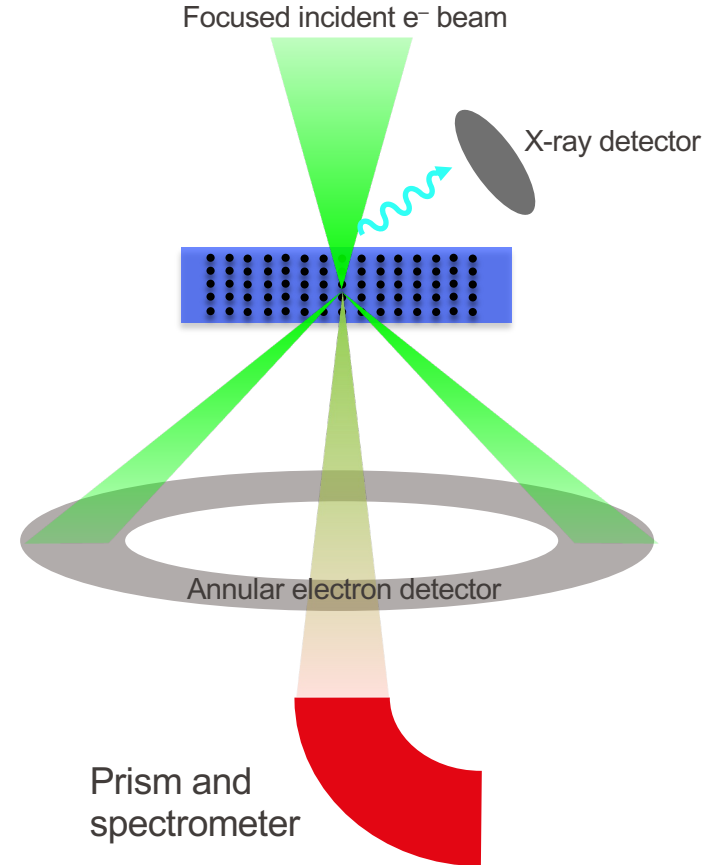
The most important lens:
Condenser lens





In STEM, the electron beam is focused to a fine spot (sub-Ångström in size for aberration-corrected STEMs), which is then scanned over the sample in a raster pattern. This is similar to the operation of scanning electron microscopy.

By rastering the beam across the sample, STEM is well suited for analytical spectrum imaging techniques such as EDX and EELS.



Electromagnetic lens (condenser system): Focuses electrons from the FEG onto the sample.

Beam deflectors: Scan the beam across the sample.

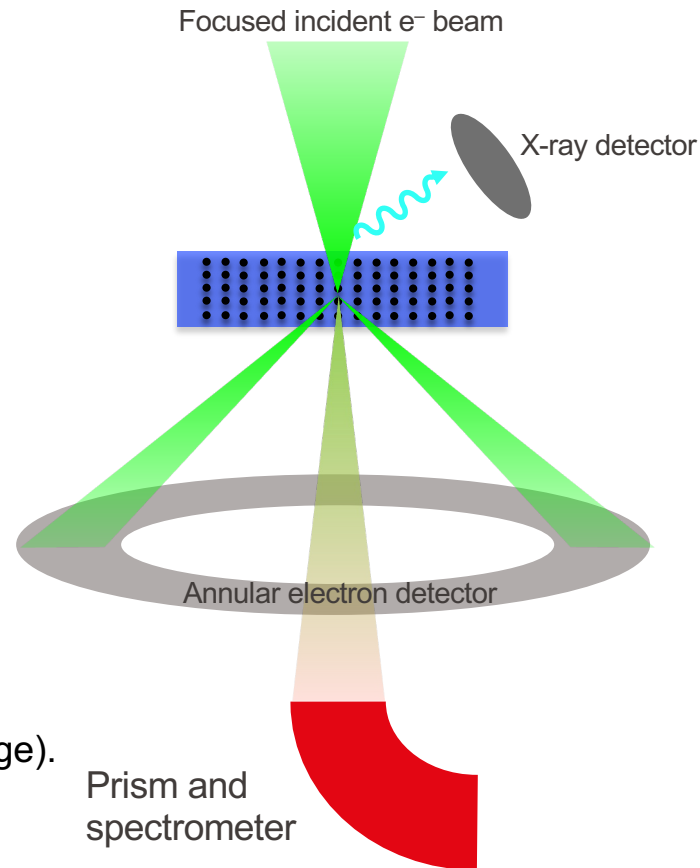
For each probe position (x, y):

- Detector:

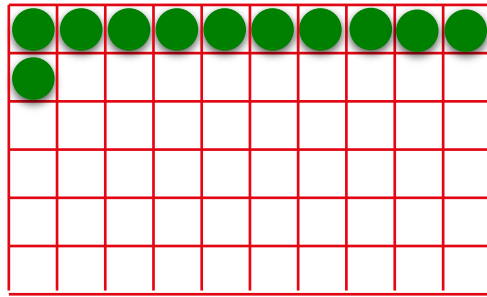
Records signal intensity $I(x,y)$ → forms an image.

- Spectrometer:

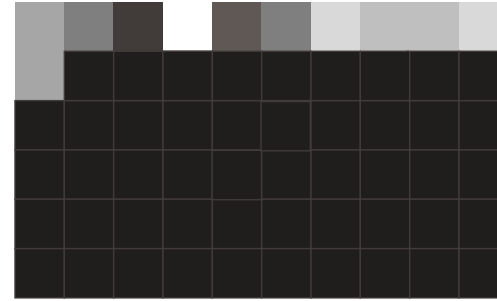
Records integrated signals from hyperspectral datasets
→ forms a 3D data cube (e.g., EELS or EDX spectrum image).



Principles of STEM | Magnification and scanning



Beam locations on the specimen



Area scanned on the screen

Information transfer $f(x,y,S)$

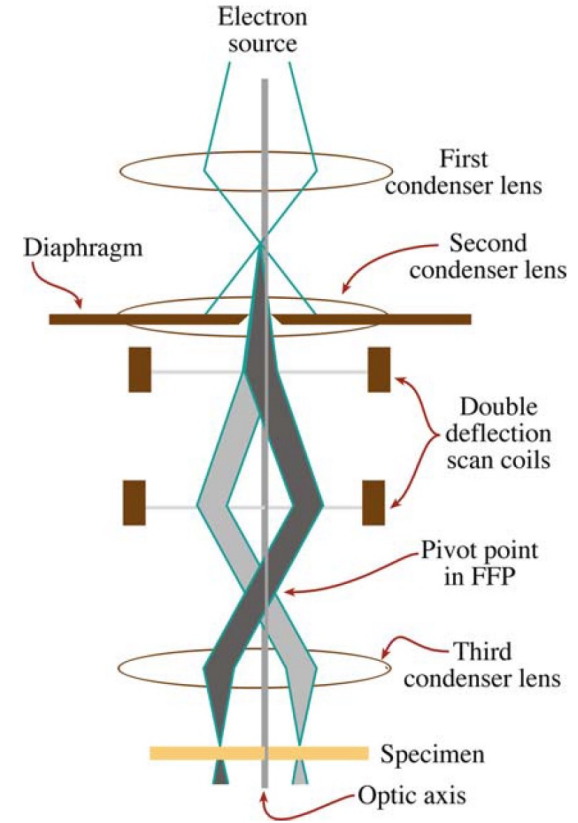
- Image formed by recording the time sequence of intensities for any particular small portion of diffraction pattern as the incident beam is scanned over the sample (using pair of deflector or scan coils)
- Monitor and scanning coils are synchronized
- Intensity of each pixel is proportional to signal collected by the detector
- When changing the magnification, we just change the raster size (no change in optics)

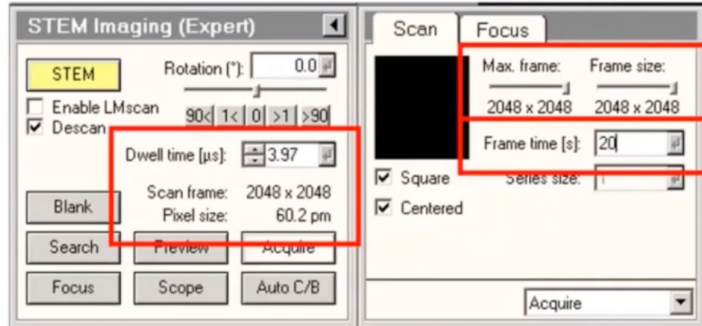
Magnification = Image size (e.g. display) / Raster size on the specimen

All the STEM images appear on the computer screen at a magnification that is controlled by the **scan dimensions** on the specimen, not the lenses of the microscope.

This is a fundamental difference between scanning and static image formation.

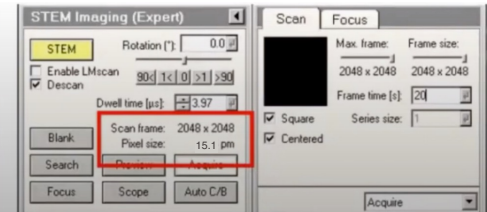
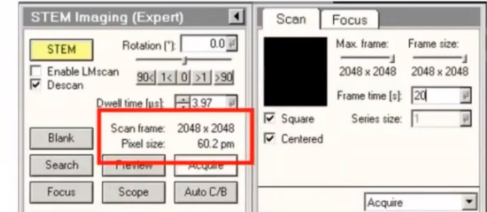
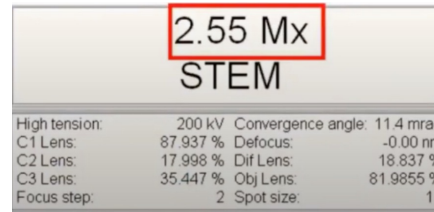
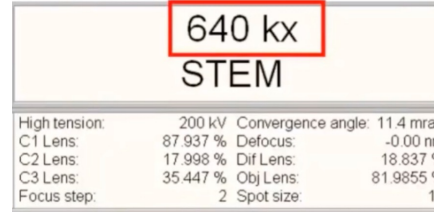
Magnification = Size of the screen / Raster size on the sample





Scan frame × Dwell time = Frame time

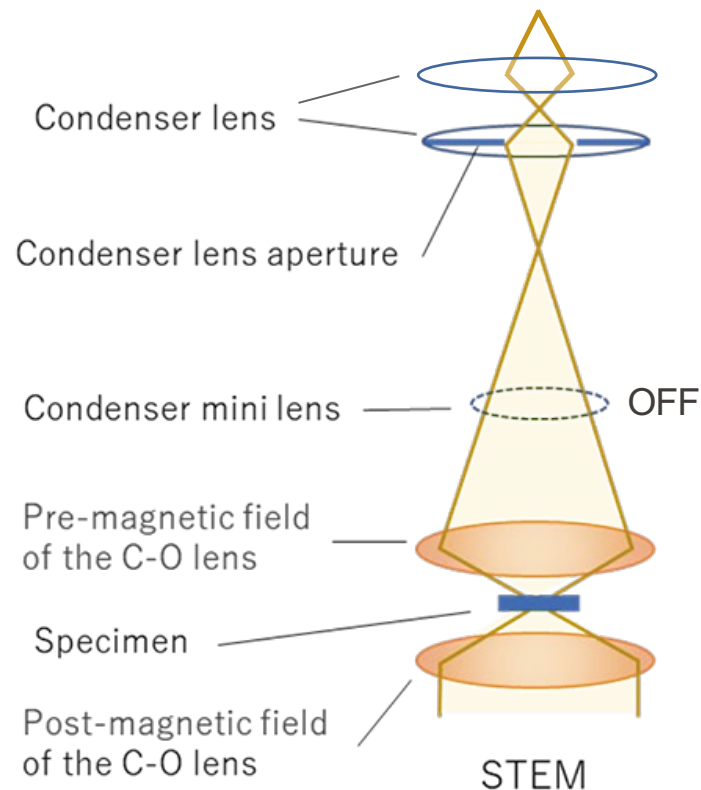
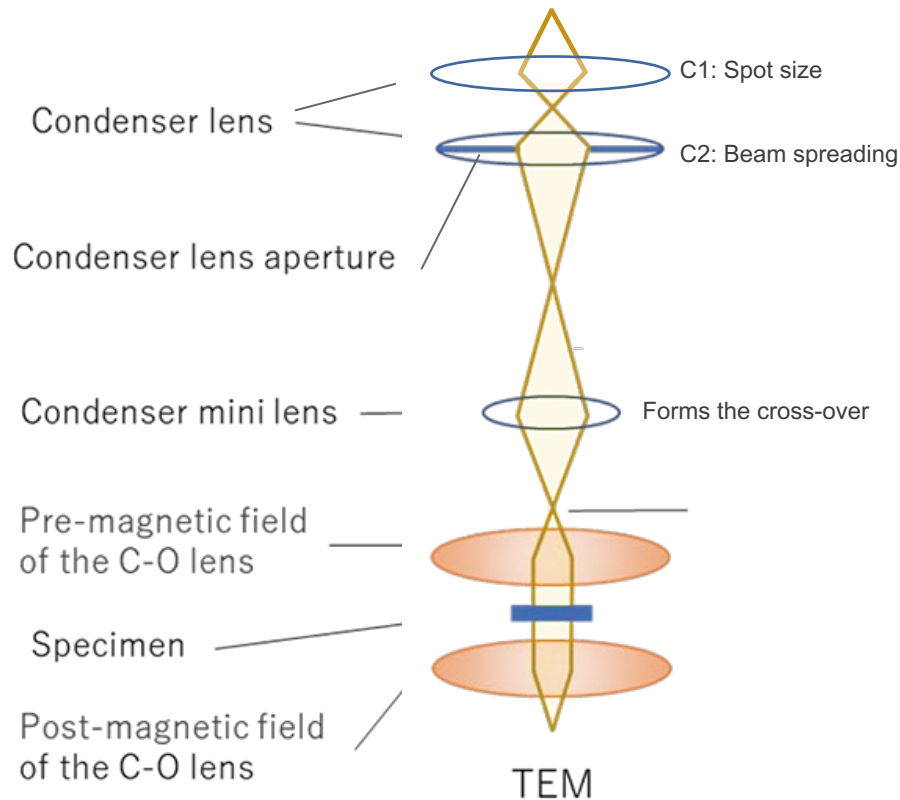
Example: 2048×2048 pixels \times $3.97 \mu\text{s}$ per pixel \approx **20 s**



If for Mag. = 640 kx, the Pixel size is 60.2 pm, for Mag. = 2.55 Mx calculate:

- The pixel size,
- Scan area, and
- Size of the screen

Probe forming | 2-condensor lens system



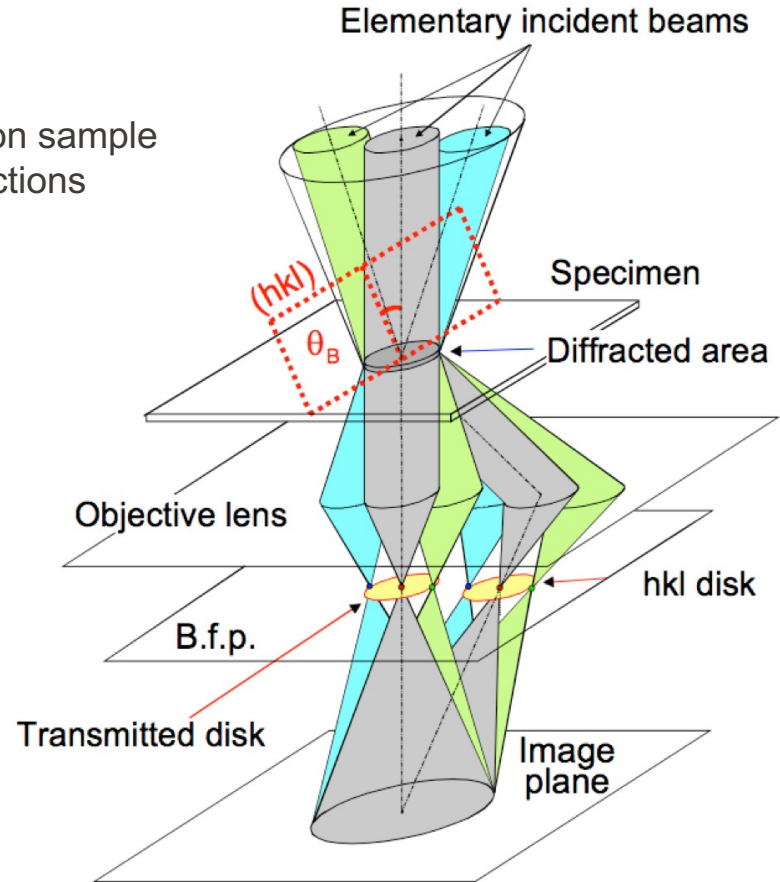
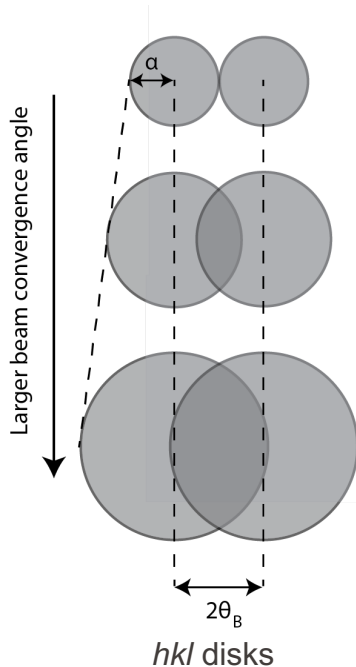
C-O lens: condenser-objective lens

Probe forming

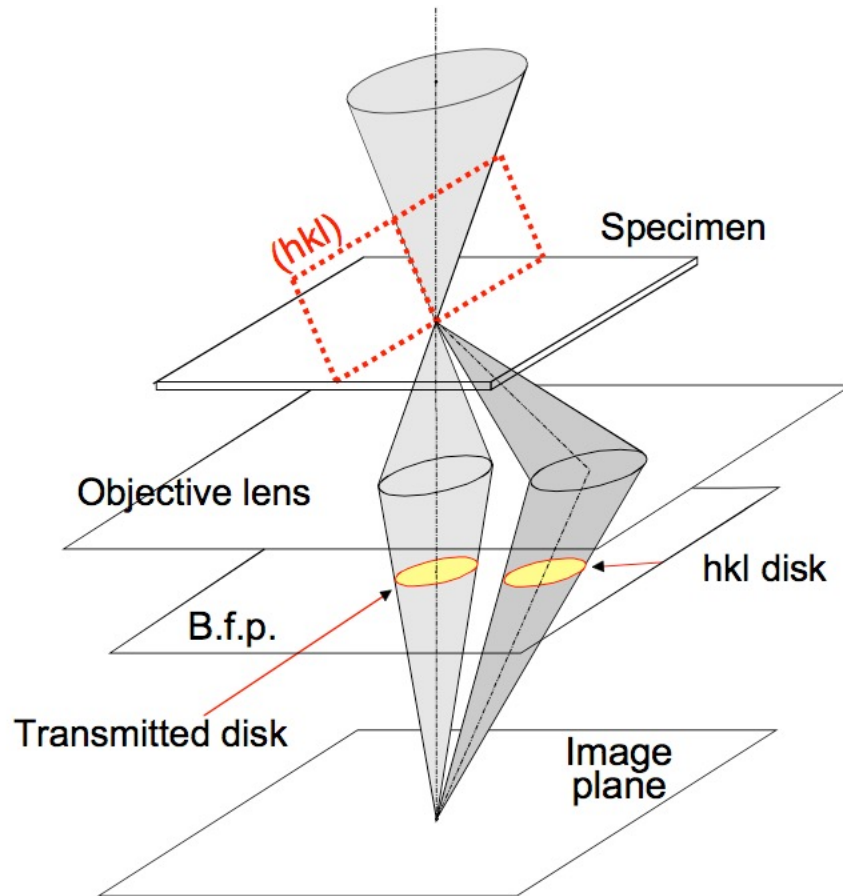
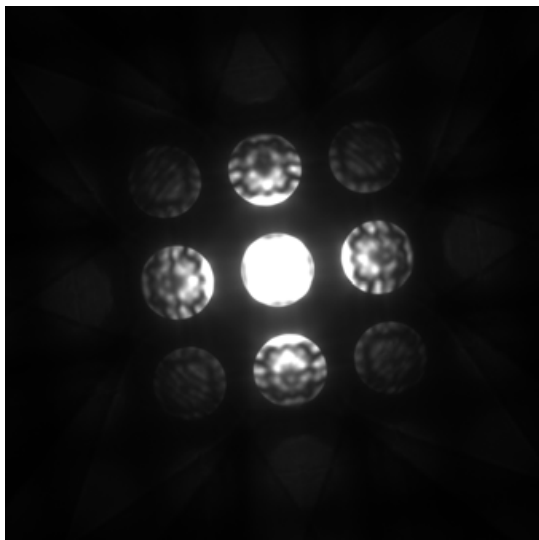
Consider exact 2-beam condition:

Imagine a convergent beam, not fully focused on sample

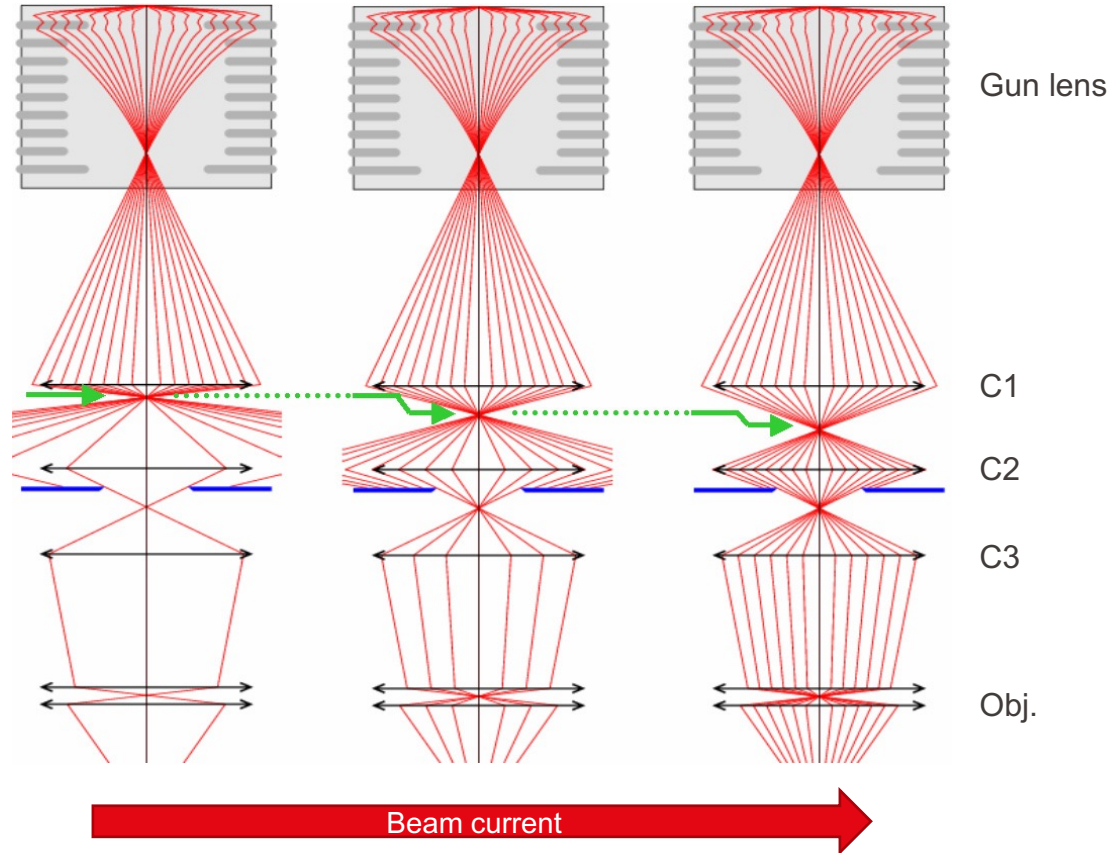
→ Decompose as parallel rays of different directions



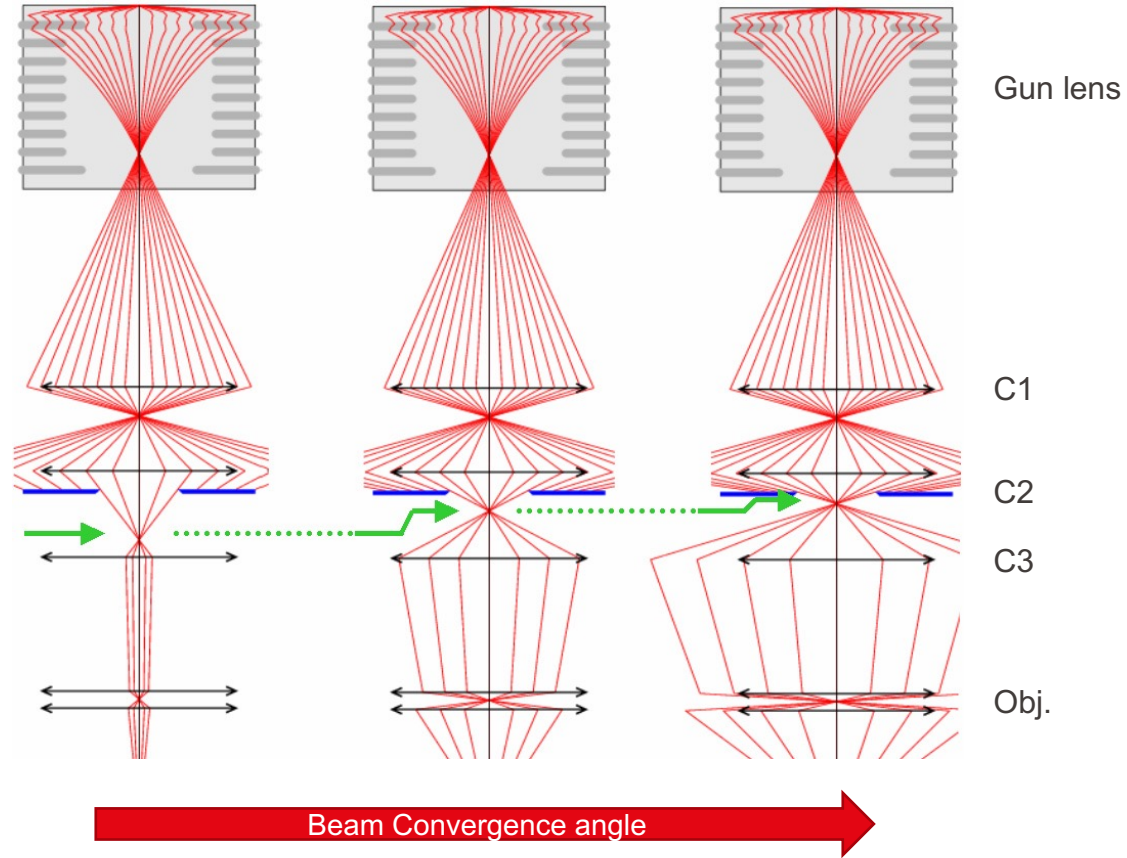
Probe forming



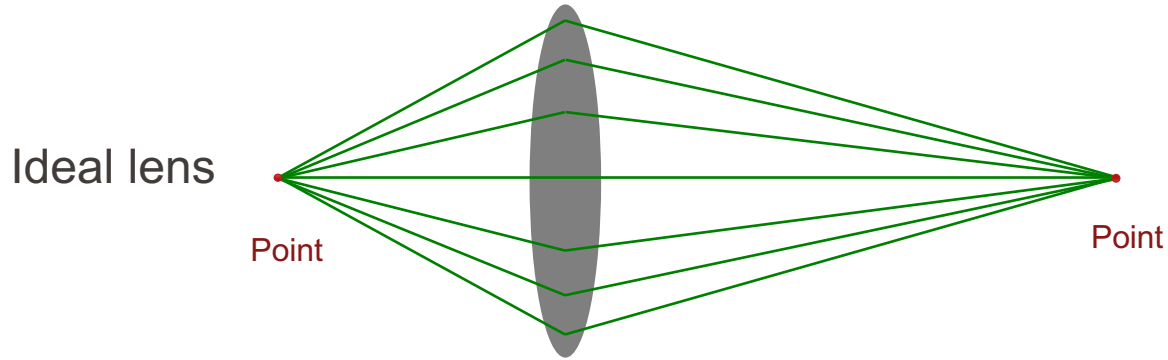
Probe forming | 3-condensor lens system



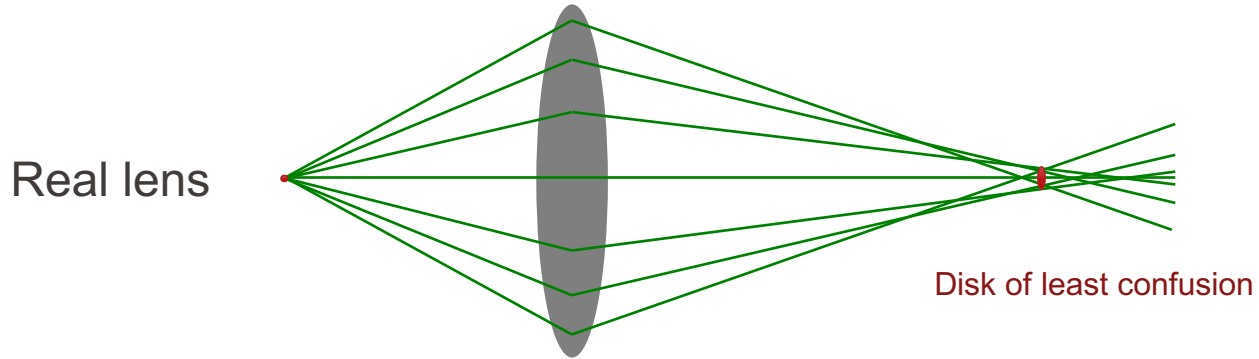
Probe forming | 3-condensor lens system



Aberrations



A point source is focused to a point



A point source is focused to a disk

Lens aberrations limit resolution!

■ Lens aberrations

- Chromatic aberration
- Spherical aberration
- Astigmatism

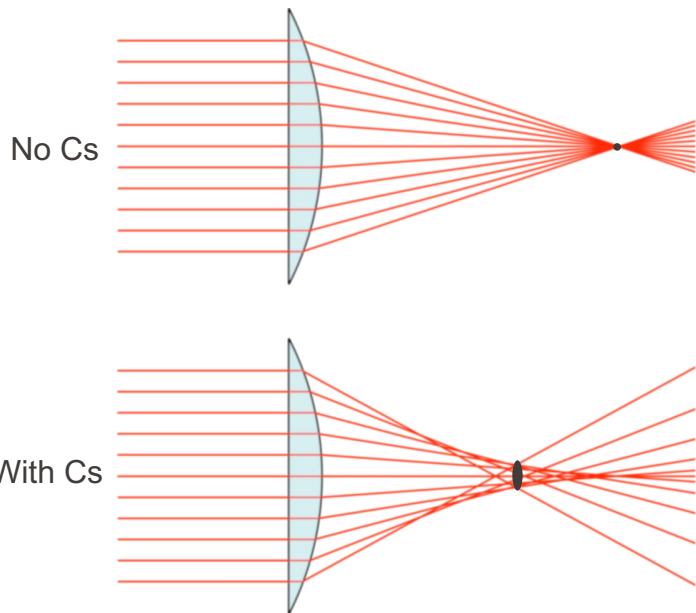
Diffraction effect (aperture limit)



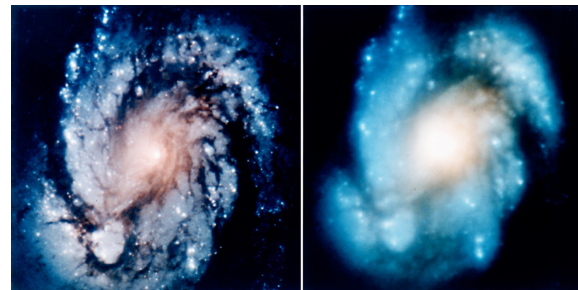
STEM resolution is determined by the size of the probe and stability of the instrument

Resolution in HR-S/TEM limited by aberrations, especially by Spherical aberration (C_s)

- Spherical aberration (Cs)

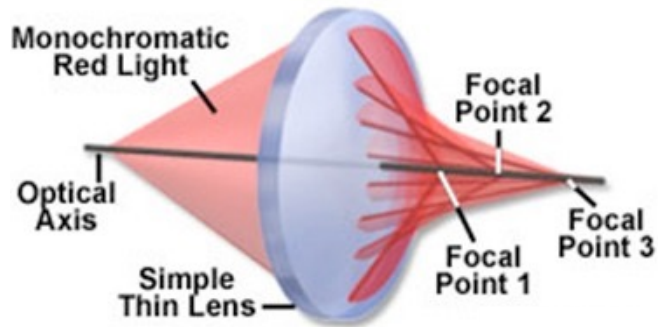


- Parallel rays that pass through the central region of the lens focus farther away than the rays that pass through the edges of the lens.
- Results in multiple focal points and thus a blurred image.
- Larger probe and lower resolution.



Core of the galaxy M100 ©NASA

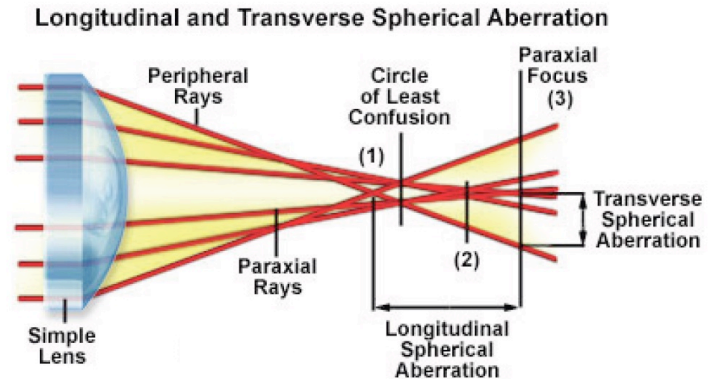
- Spherical aberration (C_s)

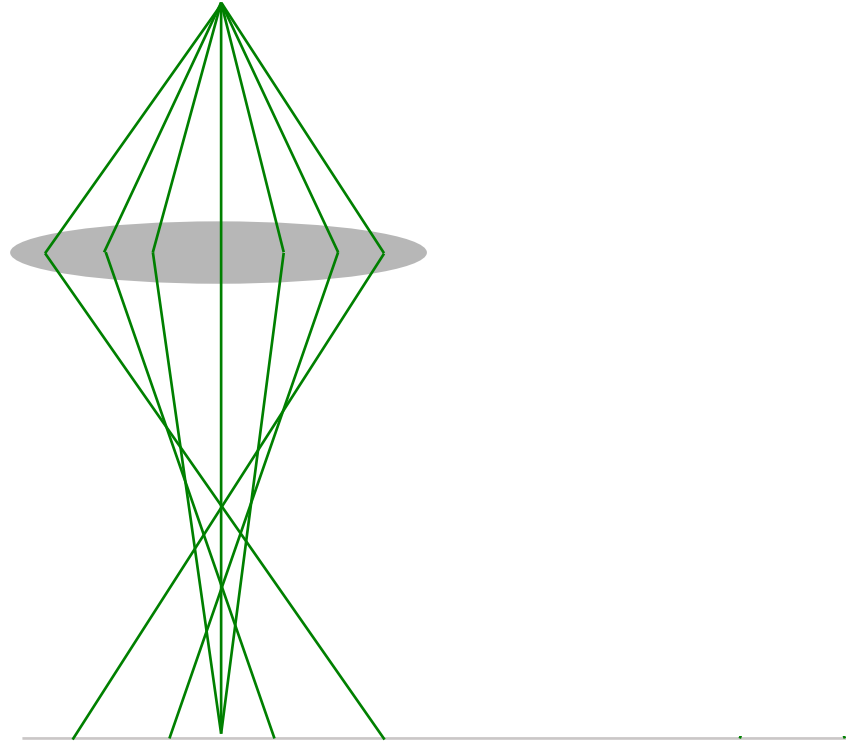


$$\alpha_{opt} = \left(\frac{4\lambda}{C_s} \right)^{\frac{1}{4}}$$

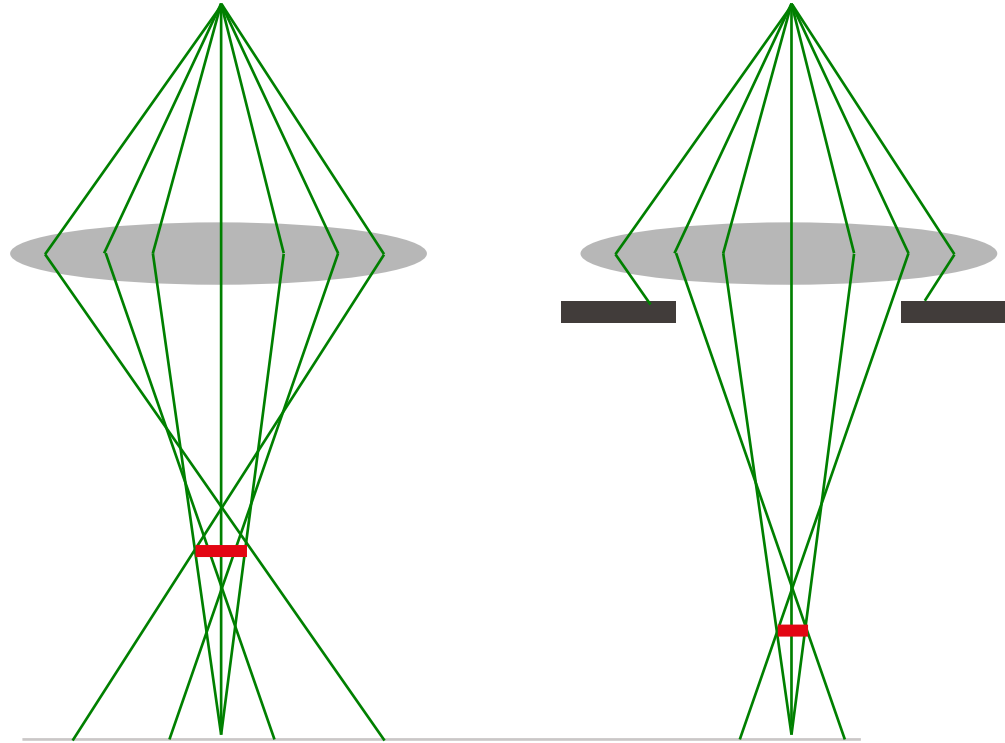
$$d_{opt} = 0.61 \frac{\lambda}{\alpha_{opt}} = 0.43 \lambda^{\frac{3}{4}} C_s^{\frac{1}{4}}$$

- Focal length depends on the distance from optical axis
- Image of the object is dispersed along the optical axis





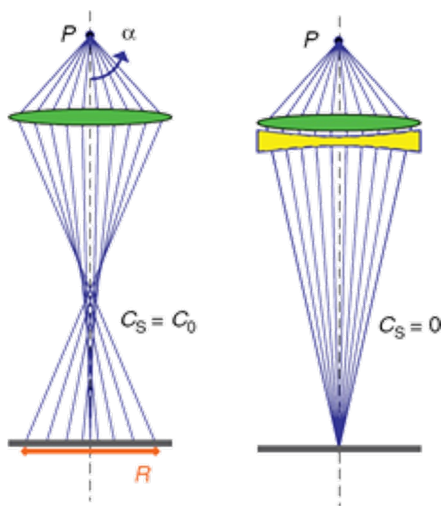
How to lower the effect of spherical aberration?



Inserting an aperture can lessen the effect of spherical aberration
But it comes with a cost → Lower current and more diffraction effect

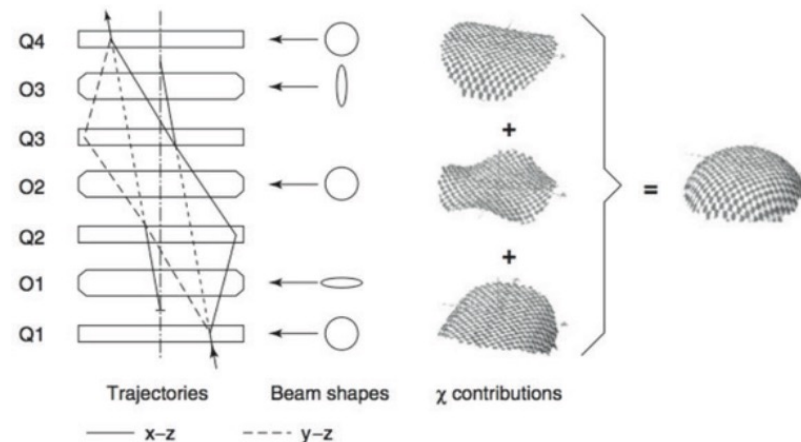
- Cs correction in light optics

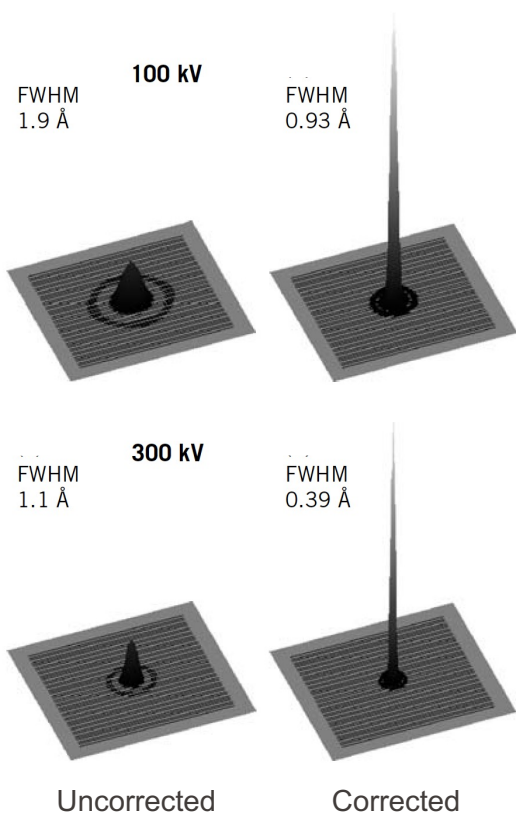
- Correction with combination of convex and concave lenses



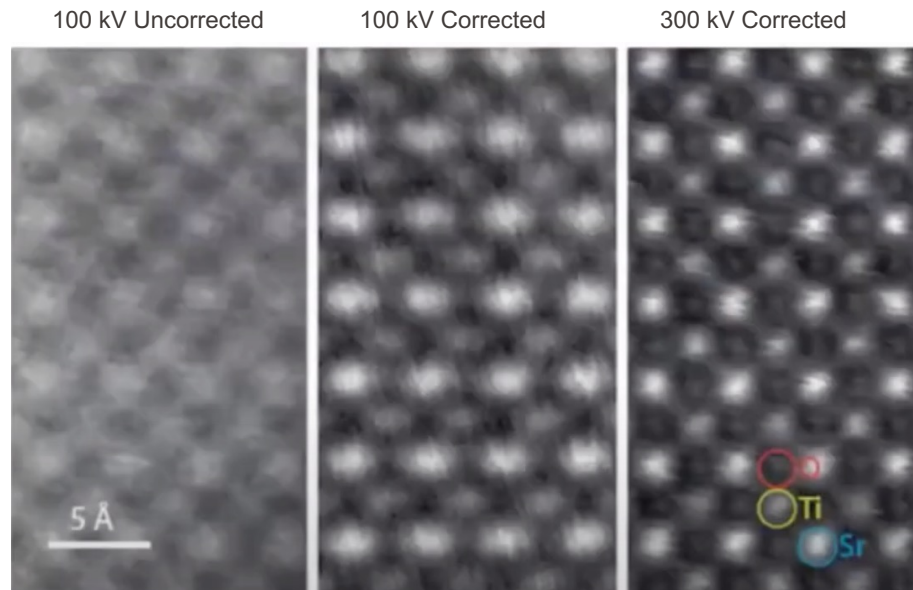
- Cs correction in electron optics

- Combination of standard radially-symmetric convergent lenses with multipole divergent lenses (e.g. tetrapoles, hexapoles) to tune C_s .
- Compensate C_s and other distortions with equivalent but opposite components to add together with aim of giving ideal spherical wavefront.



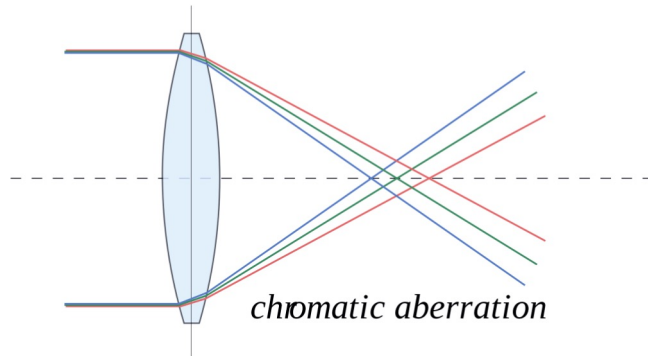


Z-contrast images



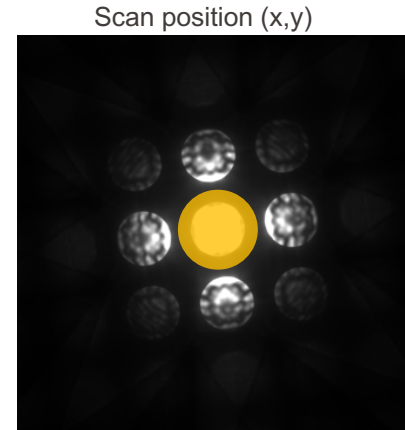
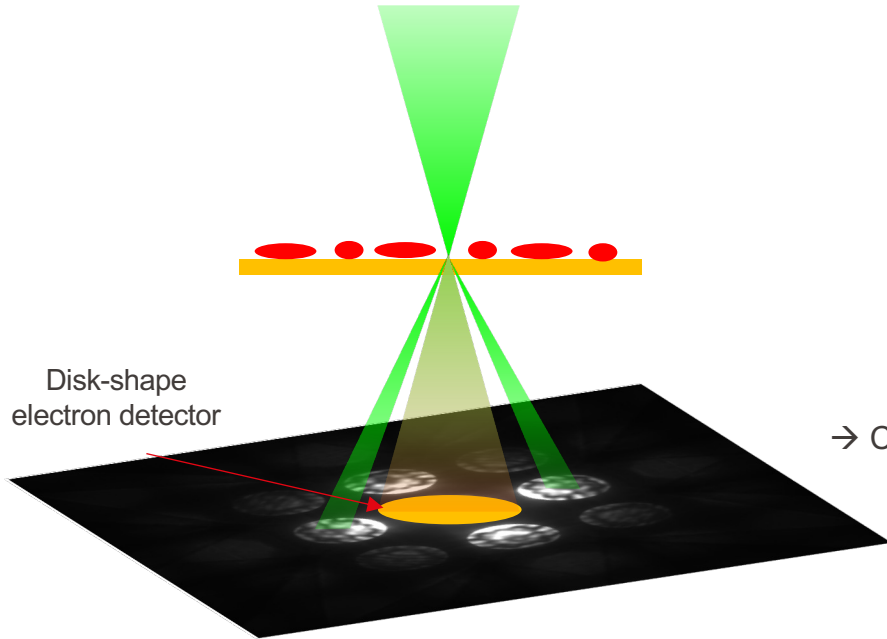


- Chromatic aberration (Cc)



- Lens cannot focus all energies to the same convergence point.
- Electrons of lower energy will be bent more strongly.
- Correcting the aberration is necessary, otherwise the resulting image would be blurry and delocalized, a form of aberration where periodic structures appear to extend beyond their physical boundaries.
- The effect of Cc increases with source energy spread.

Image formation



Defects, crystal tilts relative to incident or changes in thickness,
 → Change in diffraction condition and intensities

→ Change in integrated signal on detector → Signal change on the image

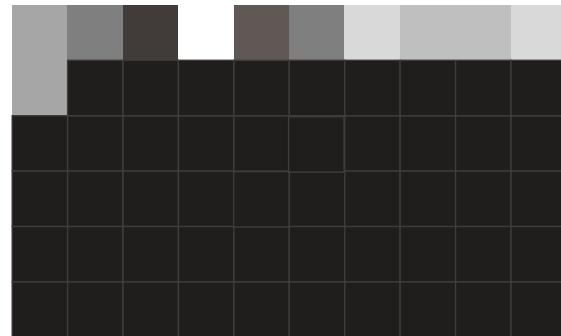
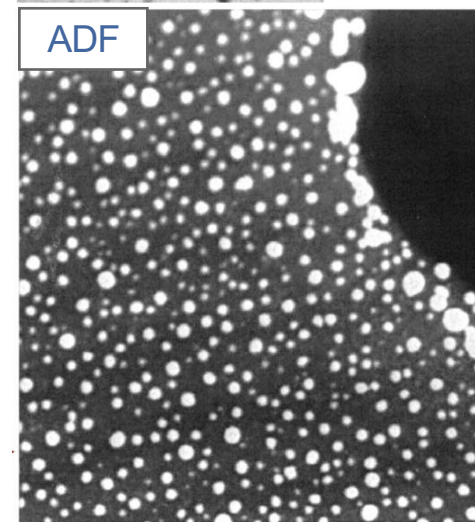
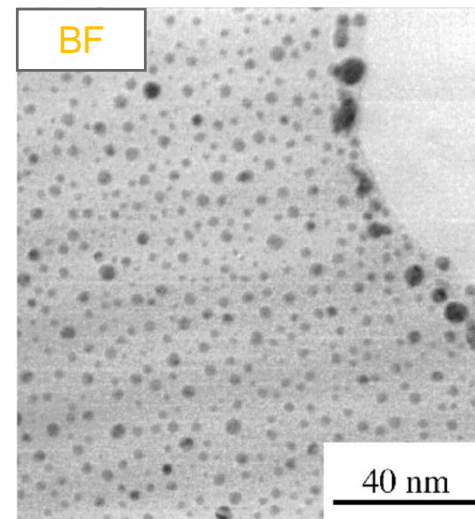
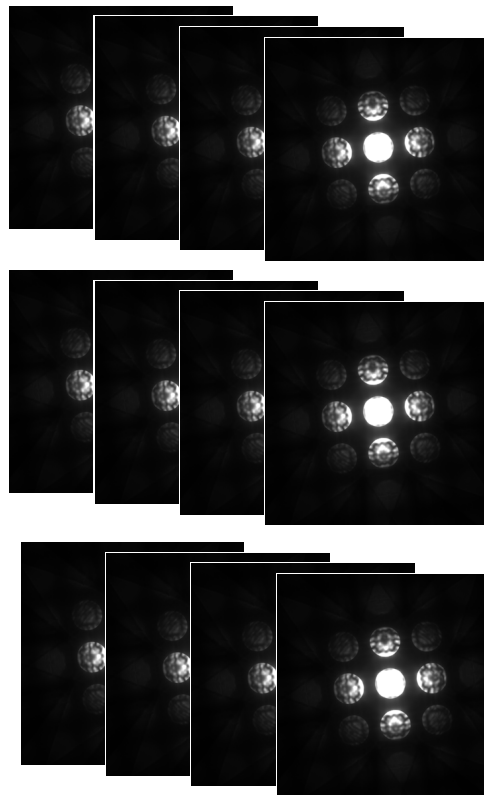
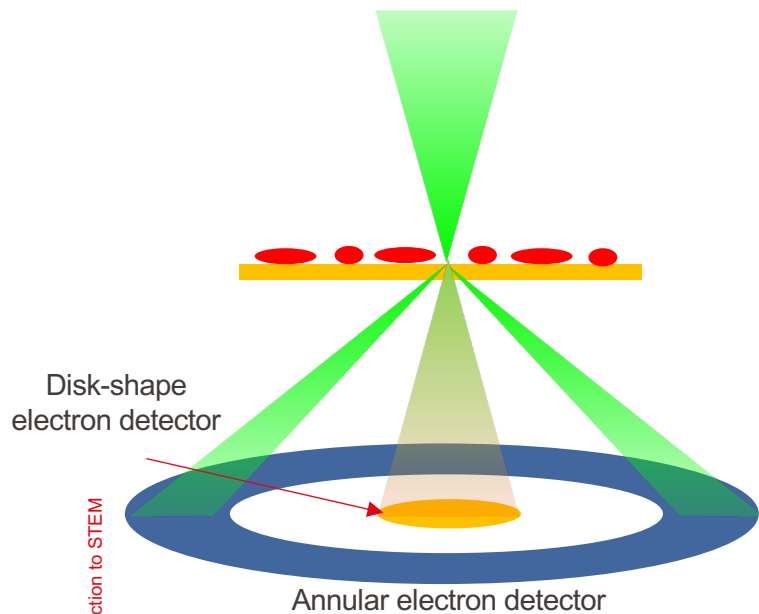
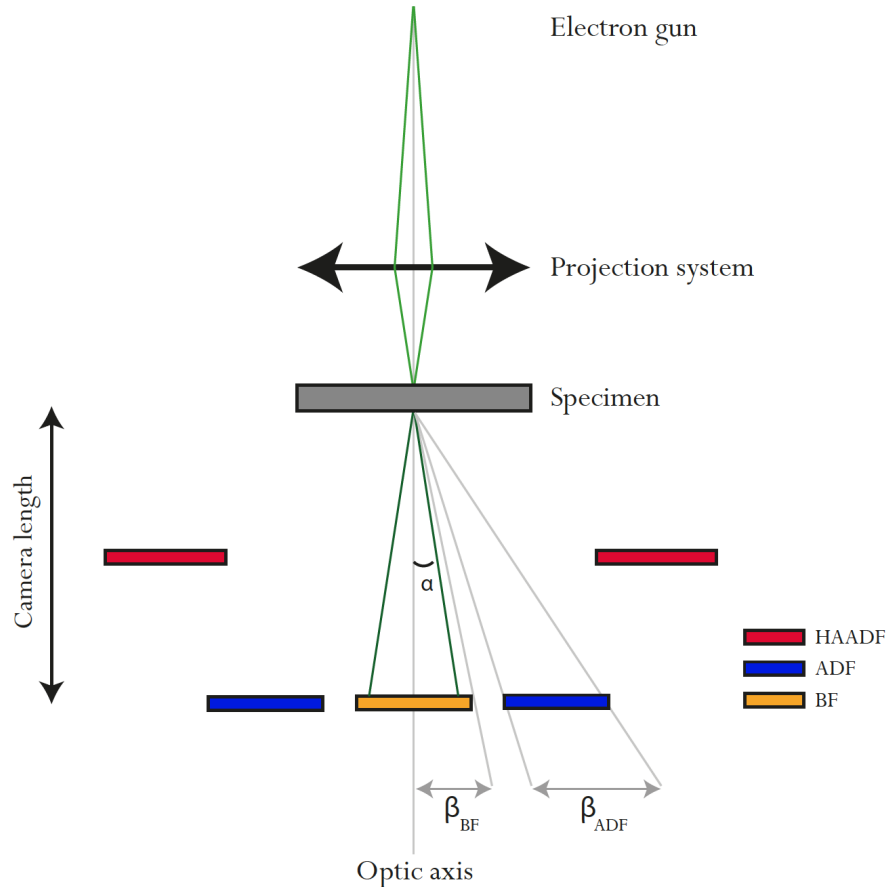


Image formation



BF: Bright-field
ADF: Annular dark-field



The focused probe is a convergent electron beam.

The BF and ADF detectors are radially symmetric. Therefore, they are characterised by the range of scattering angles they collect.

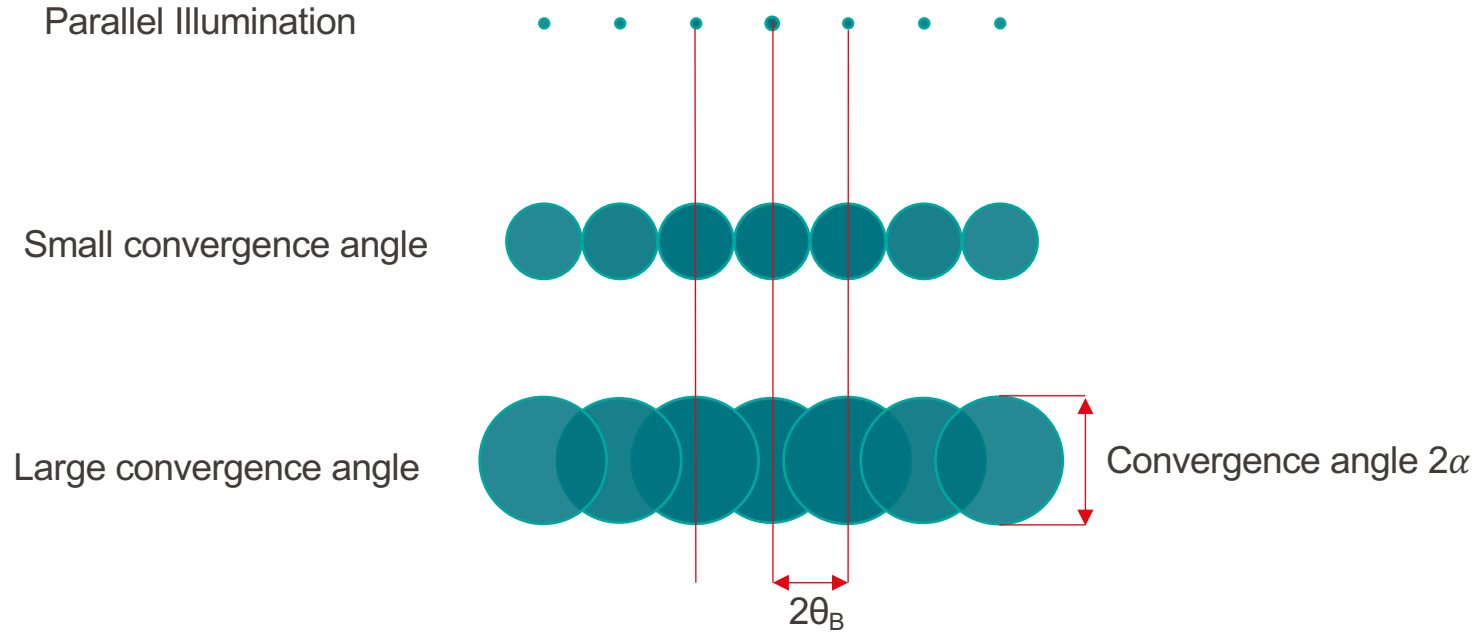
The convergence semi-angle of the probe is denoted by α .

A collection semi-angle of a detector is denoted by β , which may be defined by an inner and outer collection angle:

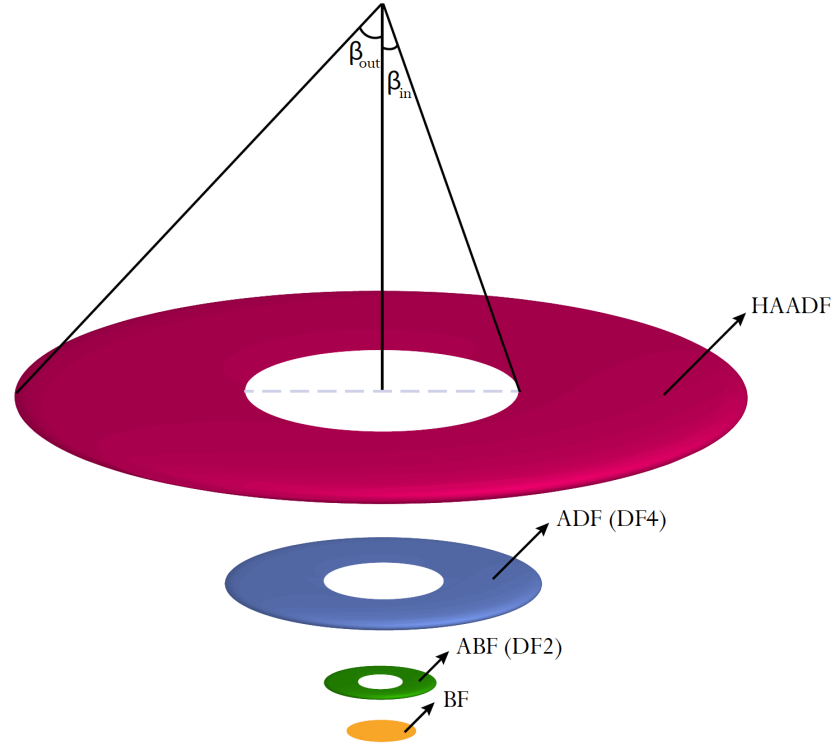
β_{inner} : the minimum scattering angle collected

β_{outer} : the maximum scattering angle collected

Knowledge of these angles is important for STEM imaging.

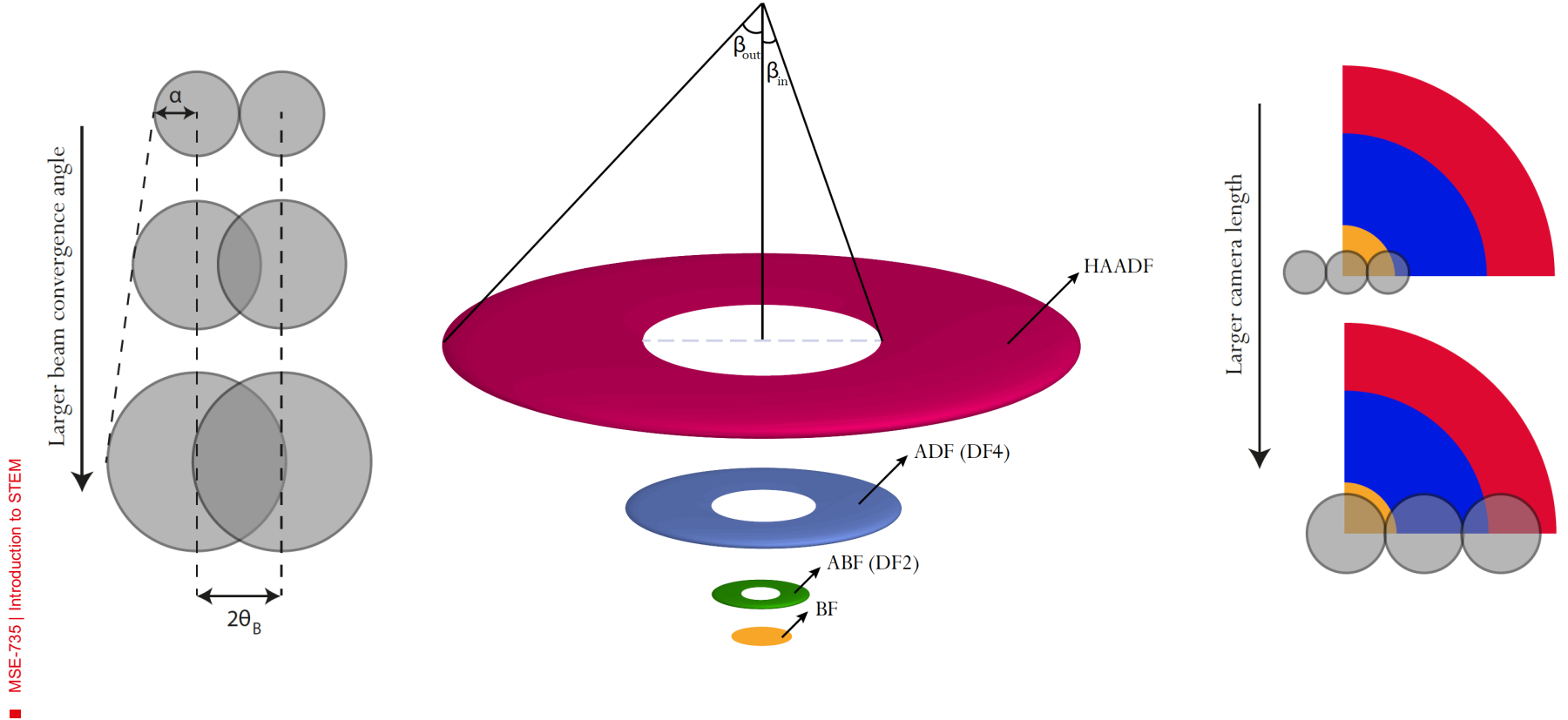


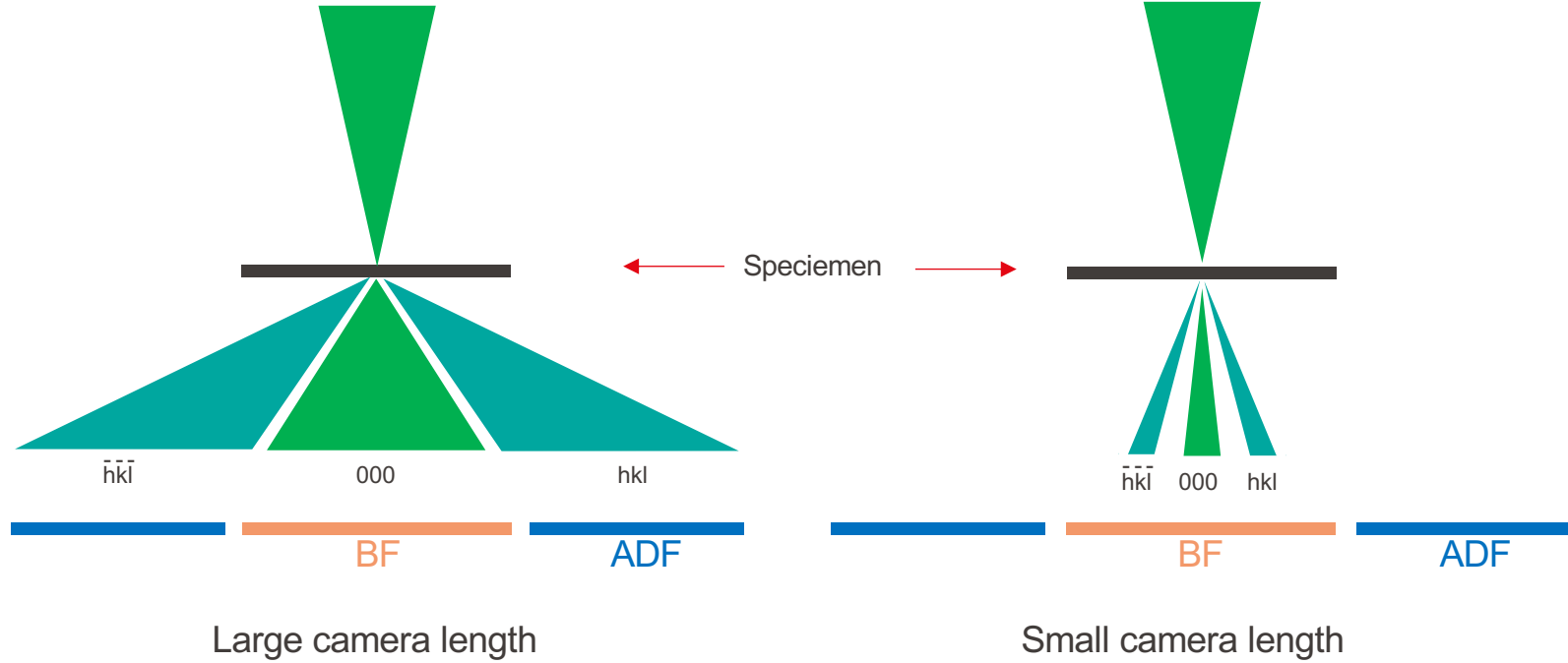
Disks overlap if $\theta_B < \alpha$

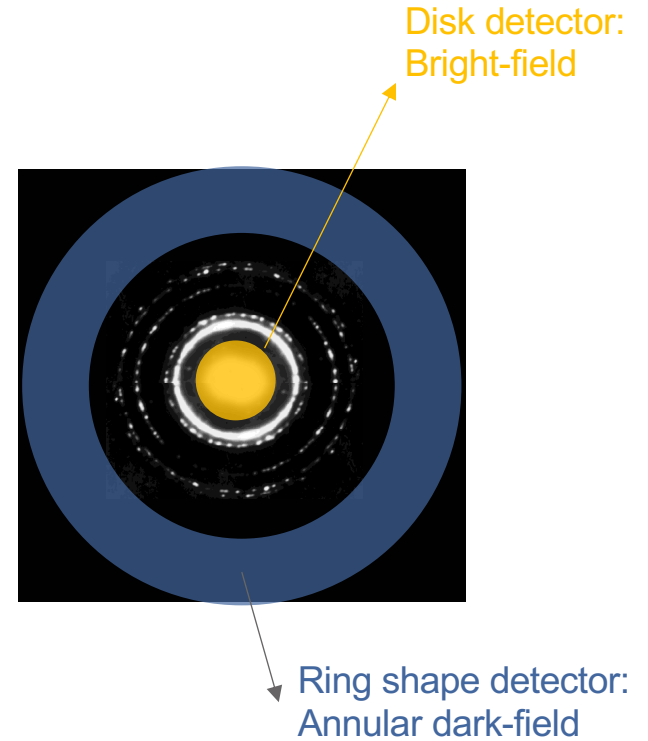
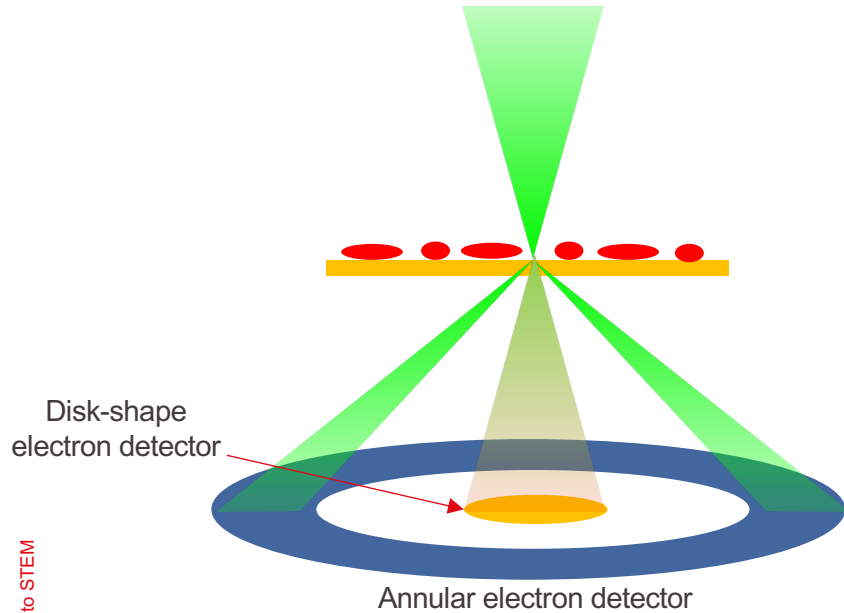


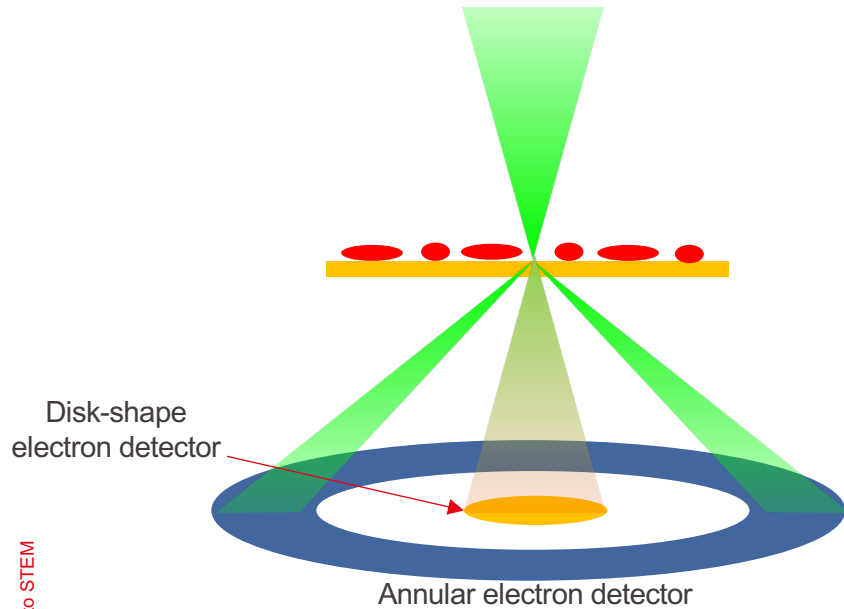
Schematic showing the configuration of the STEM detectors in the Osiris, Themis, and Spectra installed at CIME.

Principles of STEM | Knowledge of angles

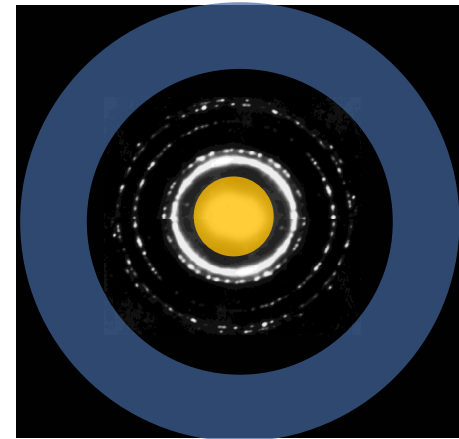


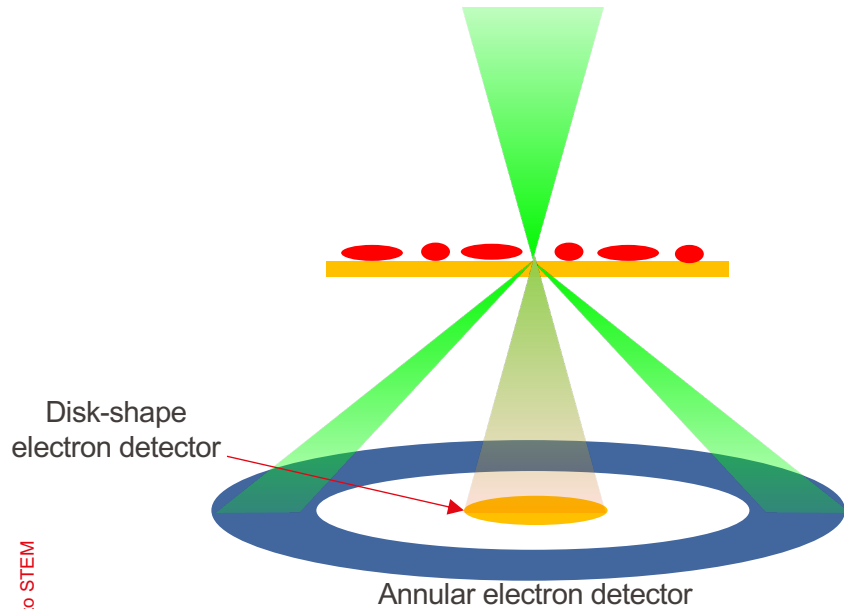




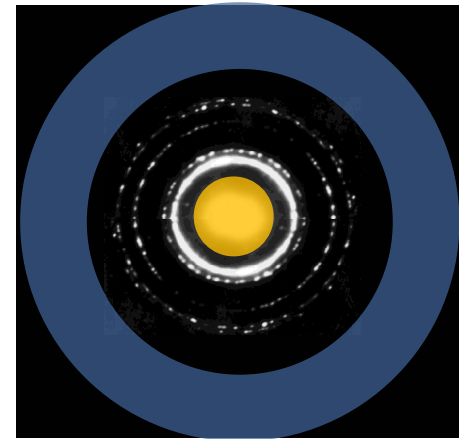


The BF detector is a solid disc that collects the direct (unscattered or low-angle scattered) beam, whose intensity varies depending on the specific point on the specimen illuminated by the probe at that moment.





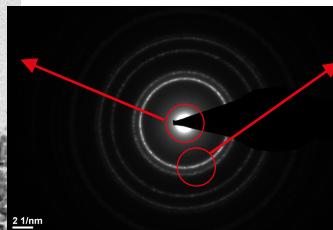
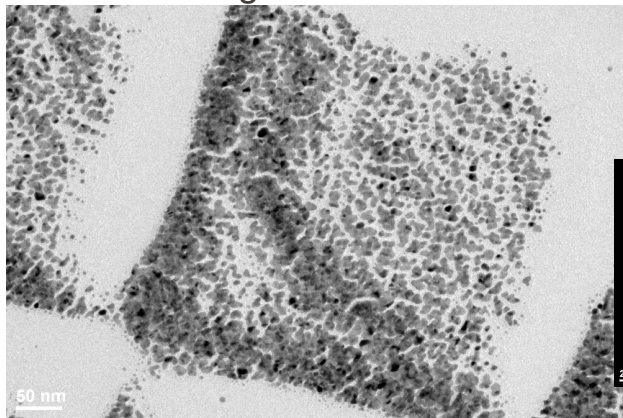
For dark-field imaging, an annular detector with inner and outer collection semi-angles defined by the camera length is used. It surrounds the BF detector and collects the electrons scattered into those angles.



- Proposed by Crewe and co-workers during the early development of the modern STEM.
- The detector consists of an annular sensitive region that collects electrons scattered over a defined angular range. The radii can vary over a wide interval, but typically the inner radius is in the range of 30–100 mrad and the outer radius in the range of 100–200 mrad.
- At high scattering angles ($> \sim 100$ mrad), the compositional contrast is enhanced, and the coherent effects of elastic scattering can be neglected because the scattering is predominantly thermally diffuse. This results in **incoherent imaging**.

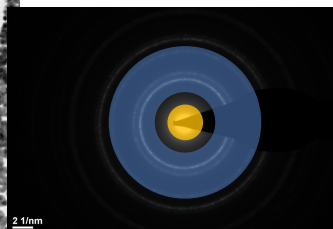
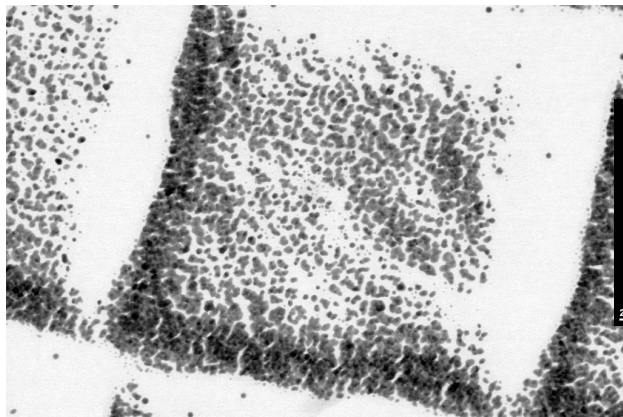
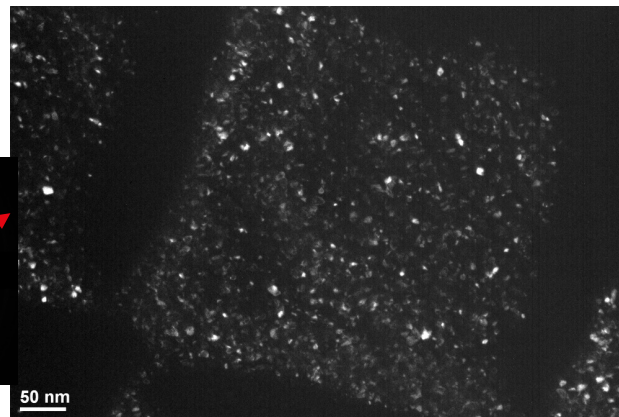
Imaging modes

Bright-field TEM

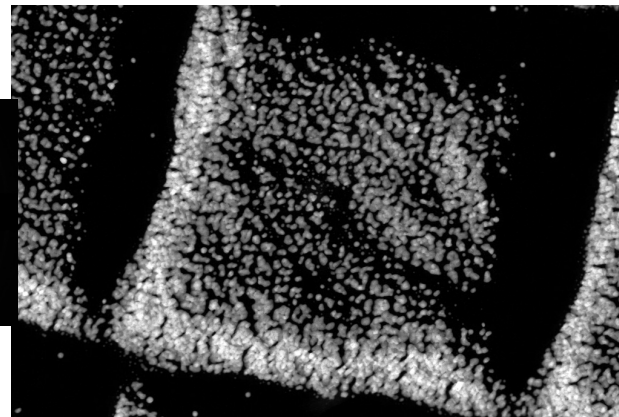


Aperture

Dark-field TEM



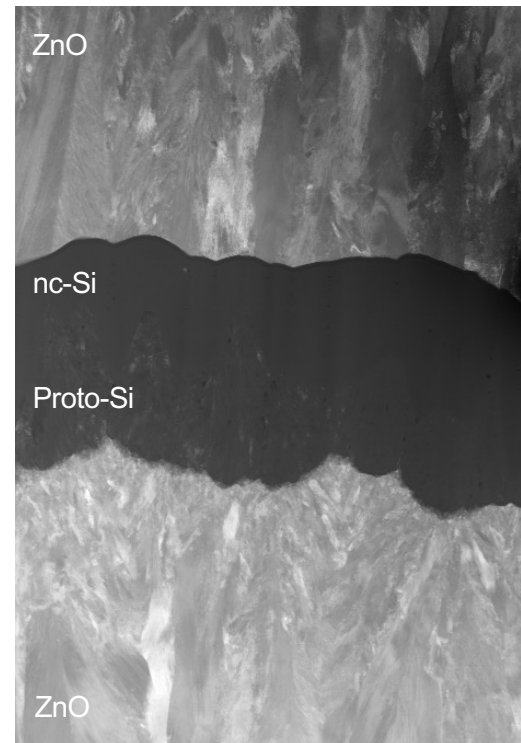
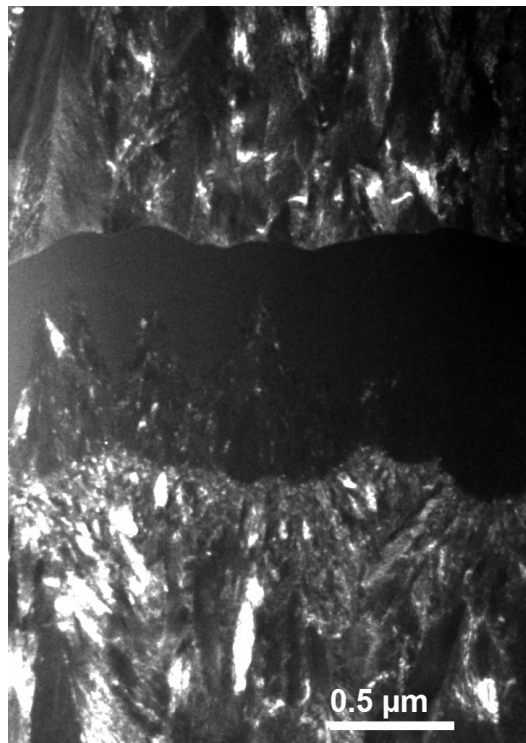
Detector



Annular dark-field STEM

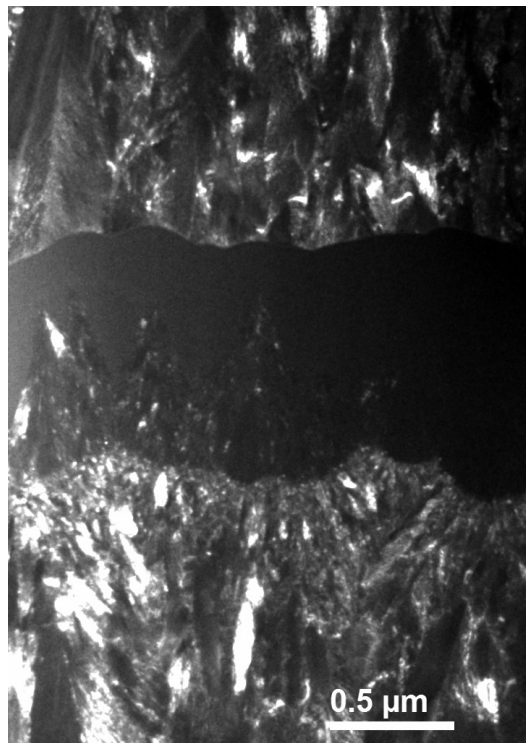
Imaging modes

ADF-STEM and DF-TEM images of a photovoltaic stack
Visible: Protocrystalline/crystalline Si interface, B-doped layer in proto-Si, voids

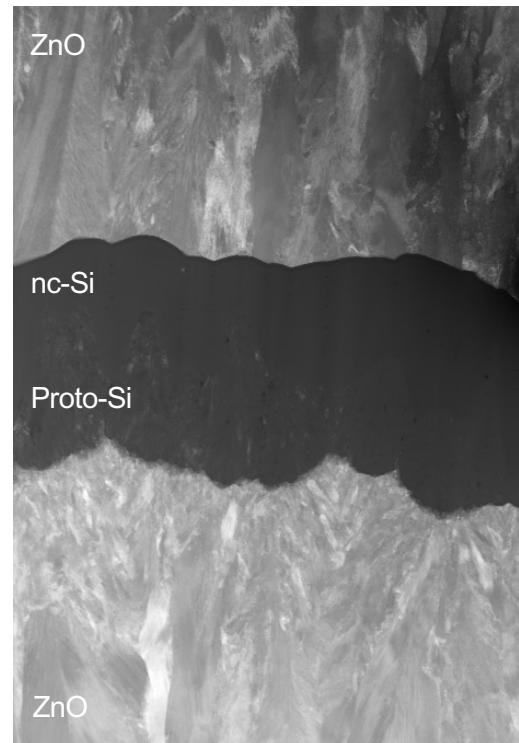


Which one is the annular dark-field STEM image?

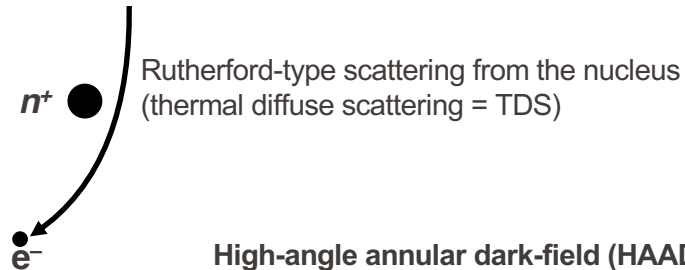
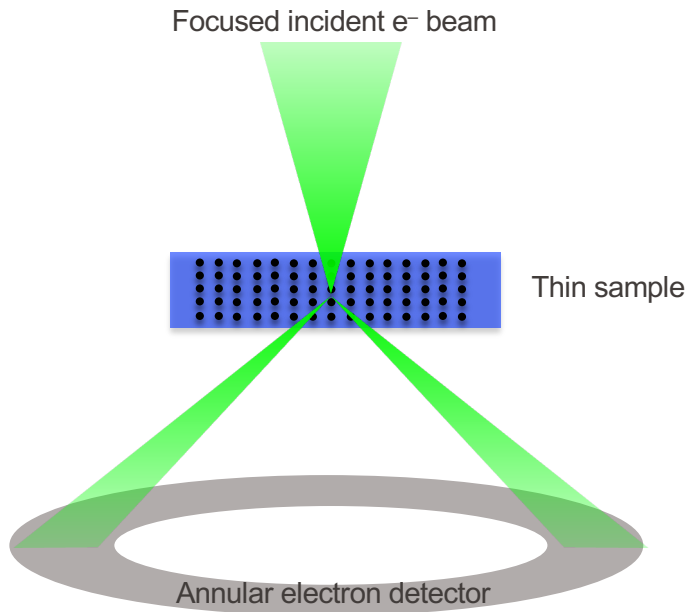
ADF-STEM and DF-TEM images of a photovoltaic stack
Visible: Protocrystalline/crystalline Si interface, B-doped layer in proto-Si, voids



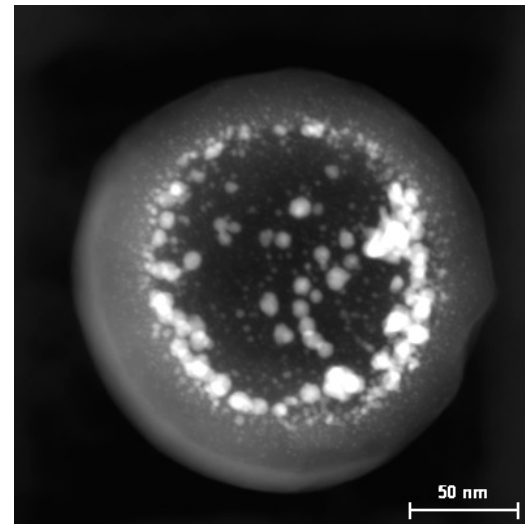
Few grains have intensity
strong contrast



More grains have intensity
More grain visibility & less contrast



High-angle annular dark-field (HAADF) image



Ni-Rh catalytic nanoparticles in carbon shell

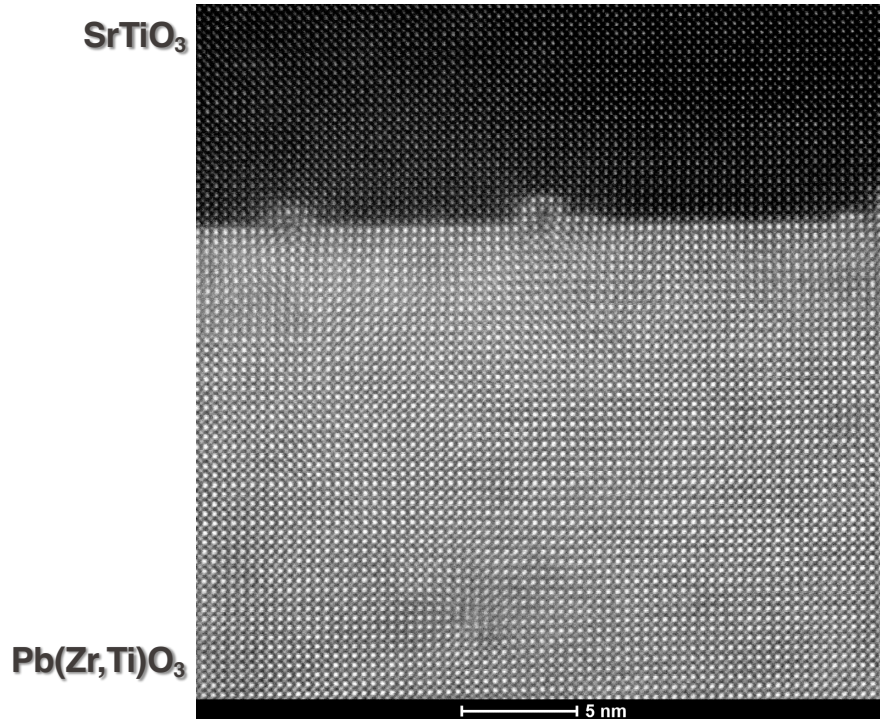
Mass/thickness contrast image

- Incoherent Rutherford-type scattering deflects transmitted e^- to high scattering angles
- A larger nucleus or a thicker specimen results in more scattering.
- The image maps intensity as a function of probe position (x,y) :

$$I(x, y) \propto t \cdot Z^{1.6-2}$$
, where t is the local thickness and Z is the atomic number.

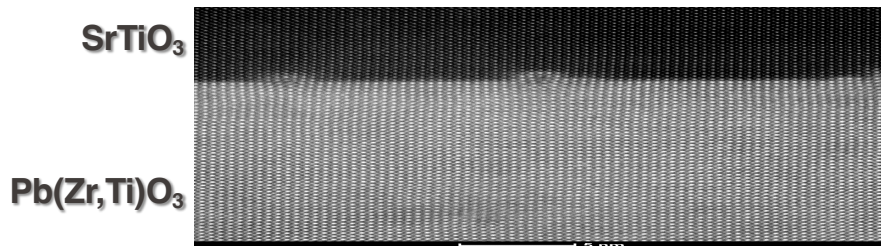
Imaging modes | High-angle annular dark-field

Cs-corrected atomic resolution HAADF-STEM of perovskite interface (300 kV)

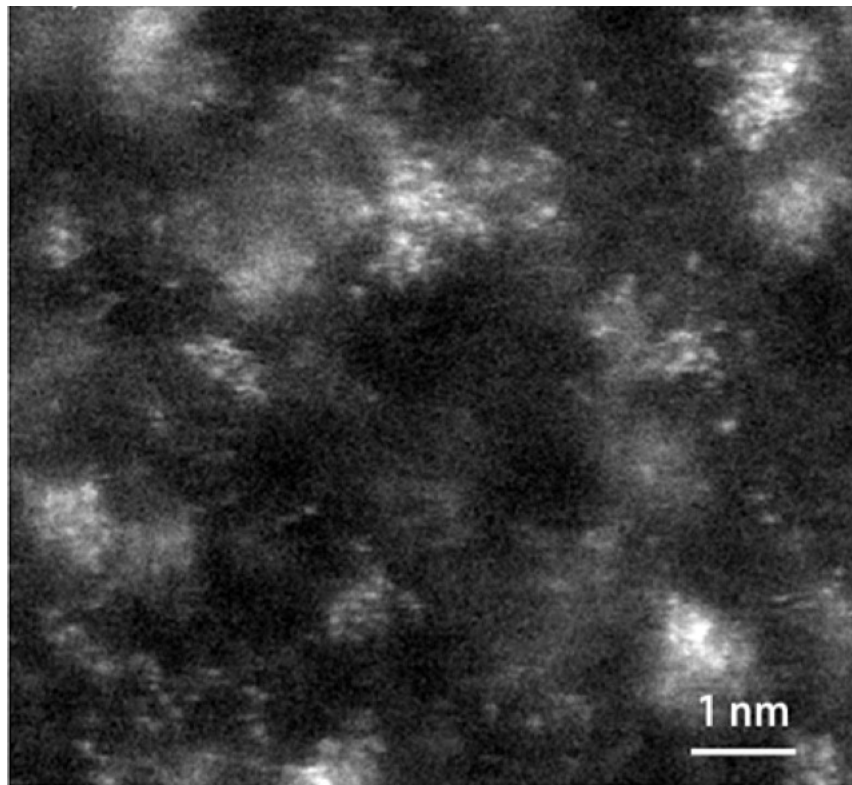


Imaging modes | High-angle annular dark-field

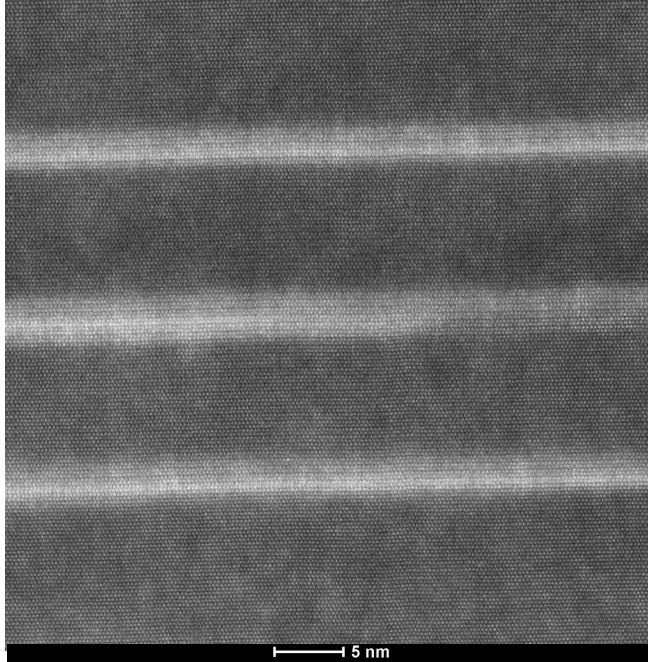
Cs-corrected atomic resolution HAADF-STEM of perovskite interface (300 kV)



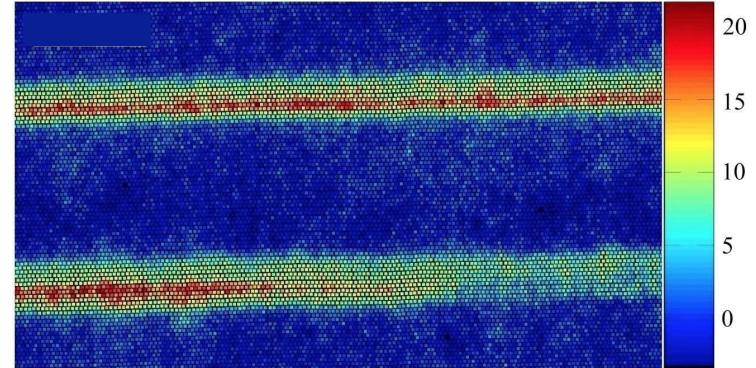
Individual Pt atoms in a metallosupramolecular polymer



In / Ga multilayer



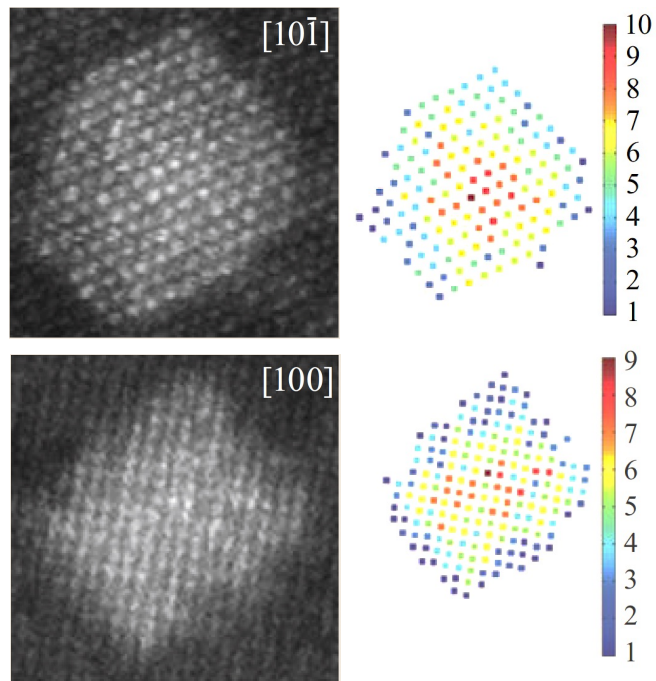
Evaluated map of the In concentration



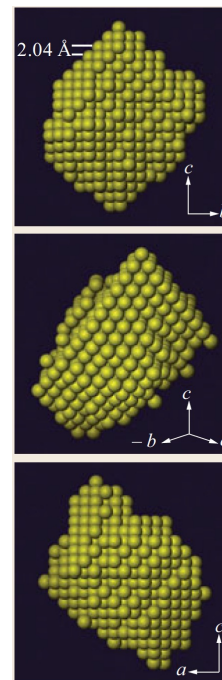
Quantitative STEM allows measurement of composition

Requires detector calibration

Ag cluster embedded in an Al matrix together with the number of Ag atoms per column

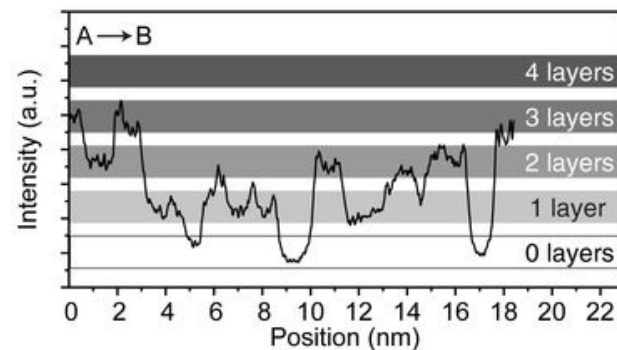
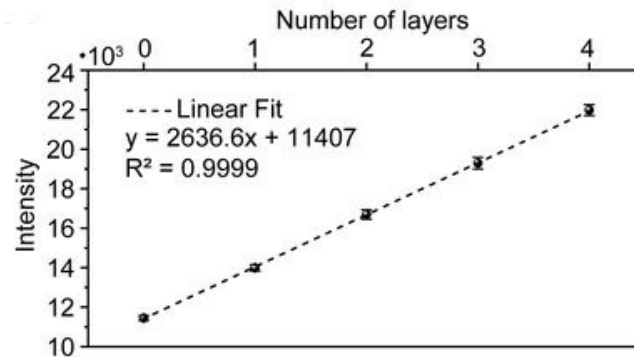
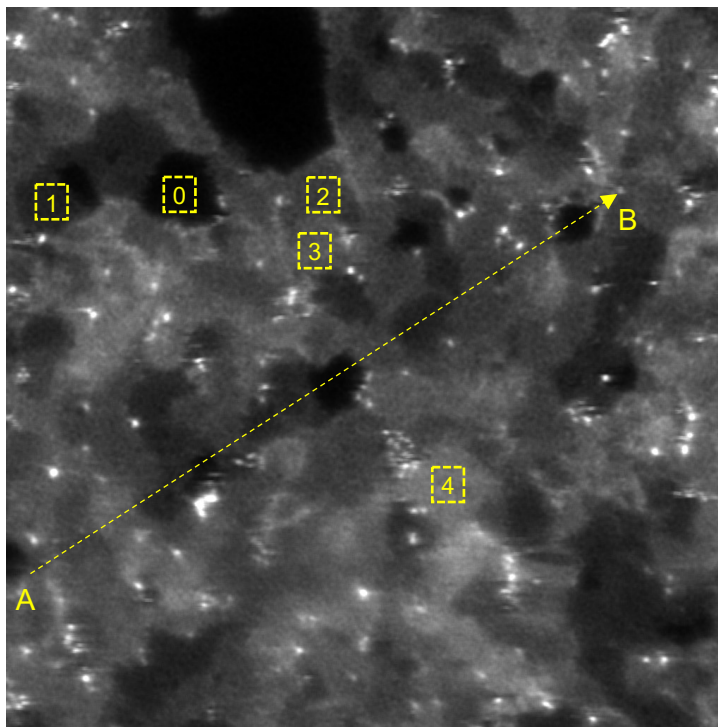


Computed 3-D reconstruction of the cluster viewed along three different directions



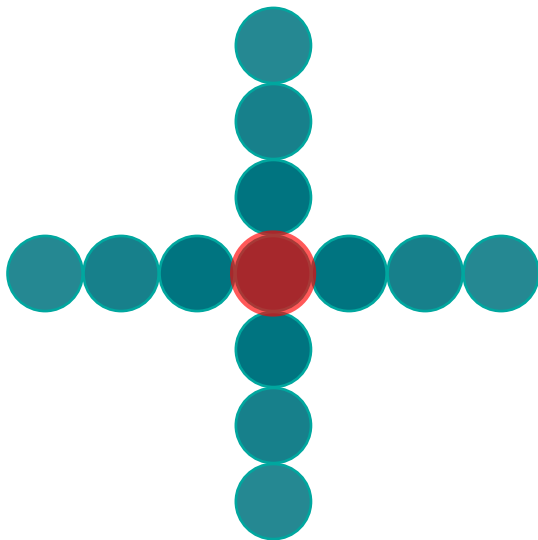
Atom counting implies precise detector calibration and assumptions about the sample

Example : Variation of the intensity according to the number of graphene layers



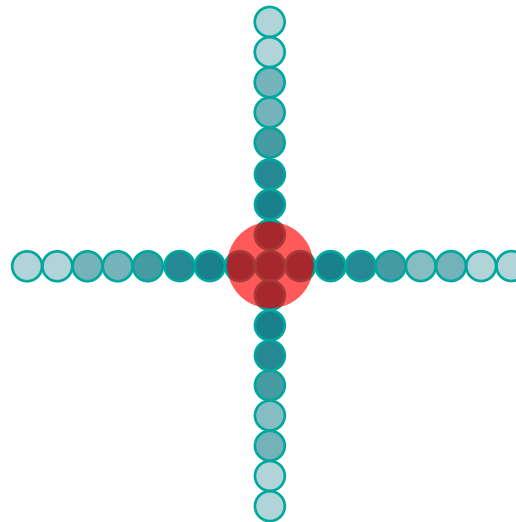
Imaging modes | Effect of camera length

High camera length



Directly transmitted disk on the solid disk detector
→ BF-STEM image

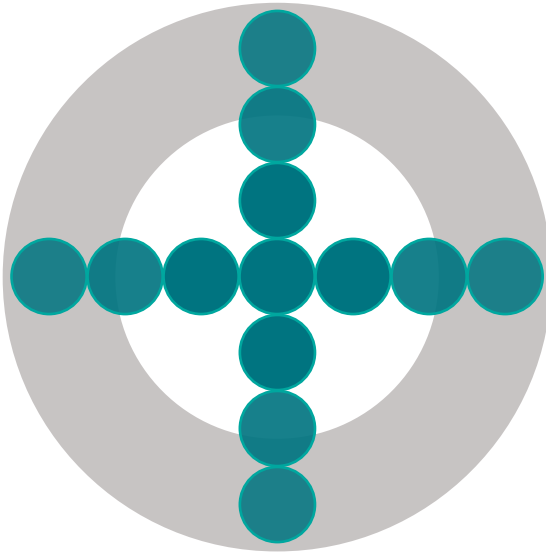
Low camera length



Both direct and diffracted disks
on the the solid disk detector

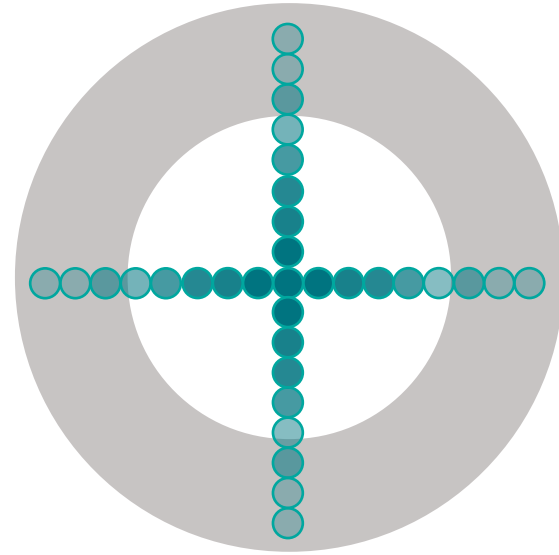
Imaging modes | Effect of camera length

High camera length



Dominant diffraction contrast

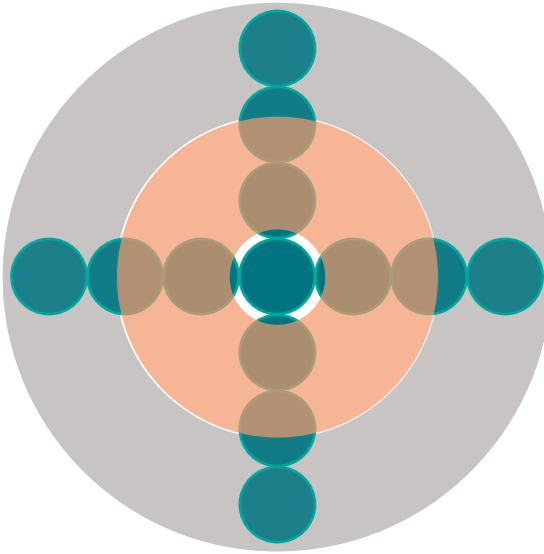
Low camera length



Dominant Z-contrast (TDS)

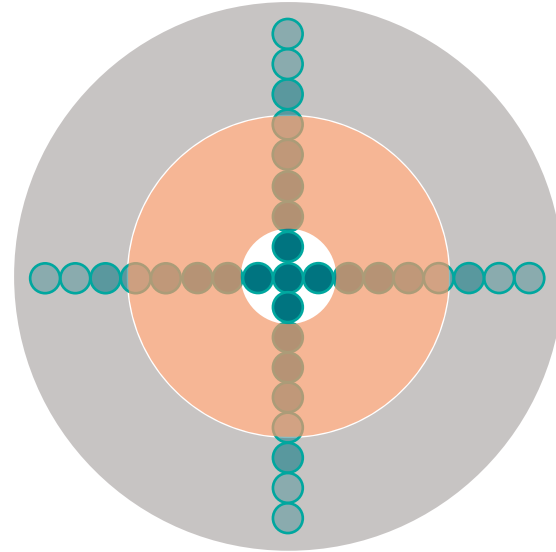
Imaging modes | Effect of camera length

High camera length



Mixed diffraction and Z-contrast → MAADF
Pure diffraction contrast → LAADF

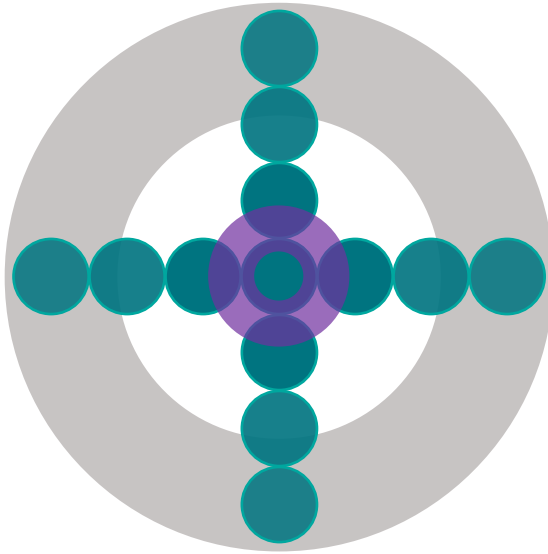
Low camera length



Z-contrast image → HAADF
Mixed diffraction and Z-contrast → MAADF

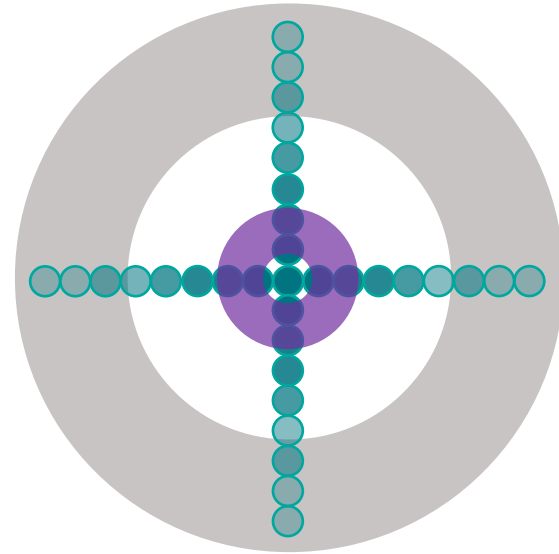
Imaging modes | Effect of camera length

High camera length



Mixed diffraction and Z-contrast \rightarrow MAADF
Annular bright-field (ABF) image

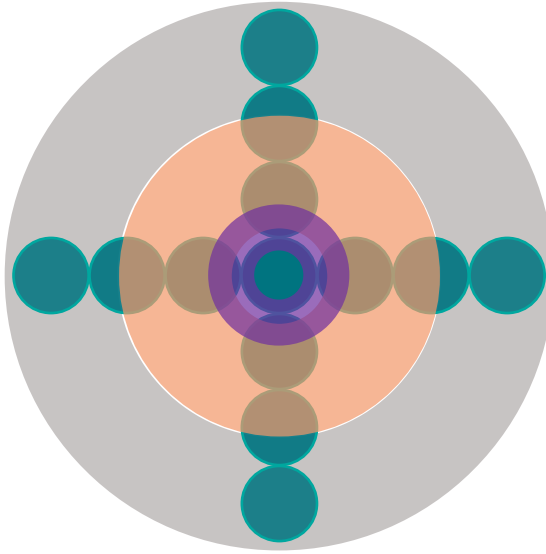
Low camera length



Z-contrast image \rightarrow HAADF
Pure diffraction contrast \rightarrow LAADF

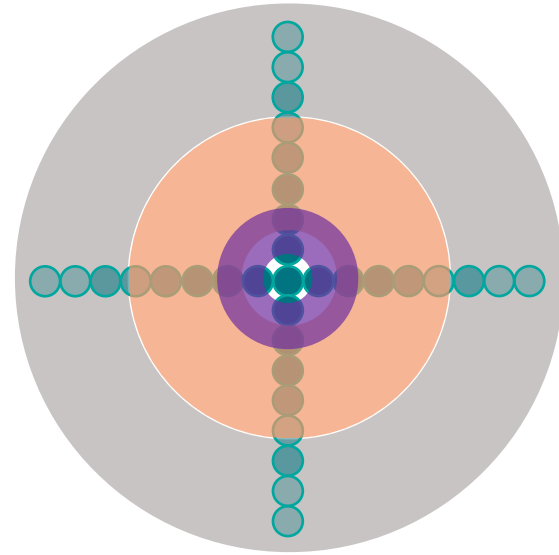
Imaging modes | Effect of camera length

High camera length



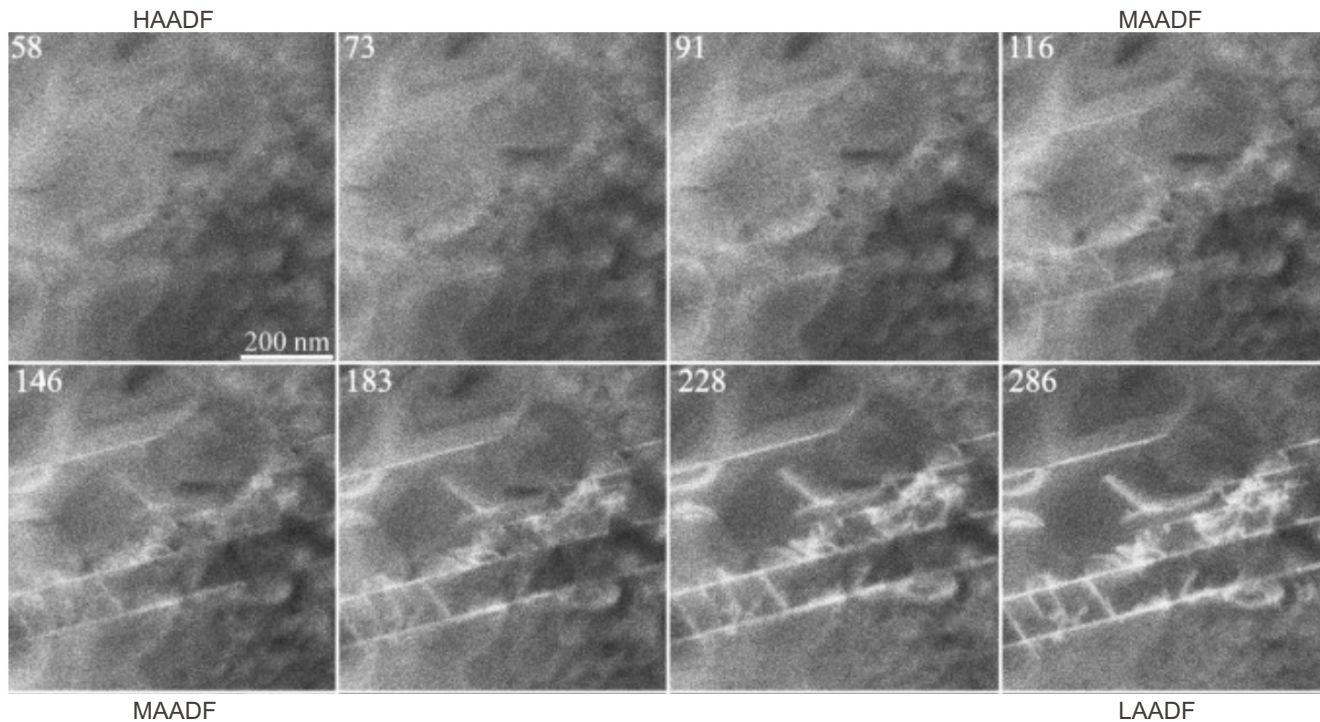
Mixed diffraction and Z-contrast → MAADF
 Pure diffraction contrast → LAADF
 Annular bright-field (ABF) image

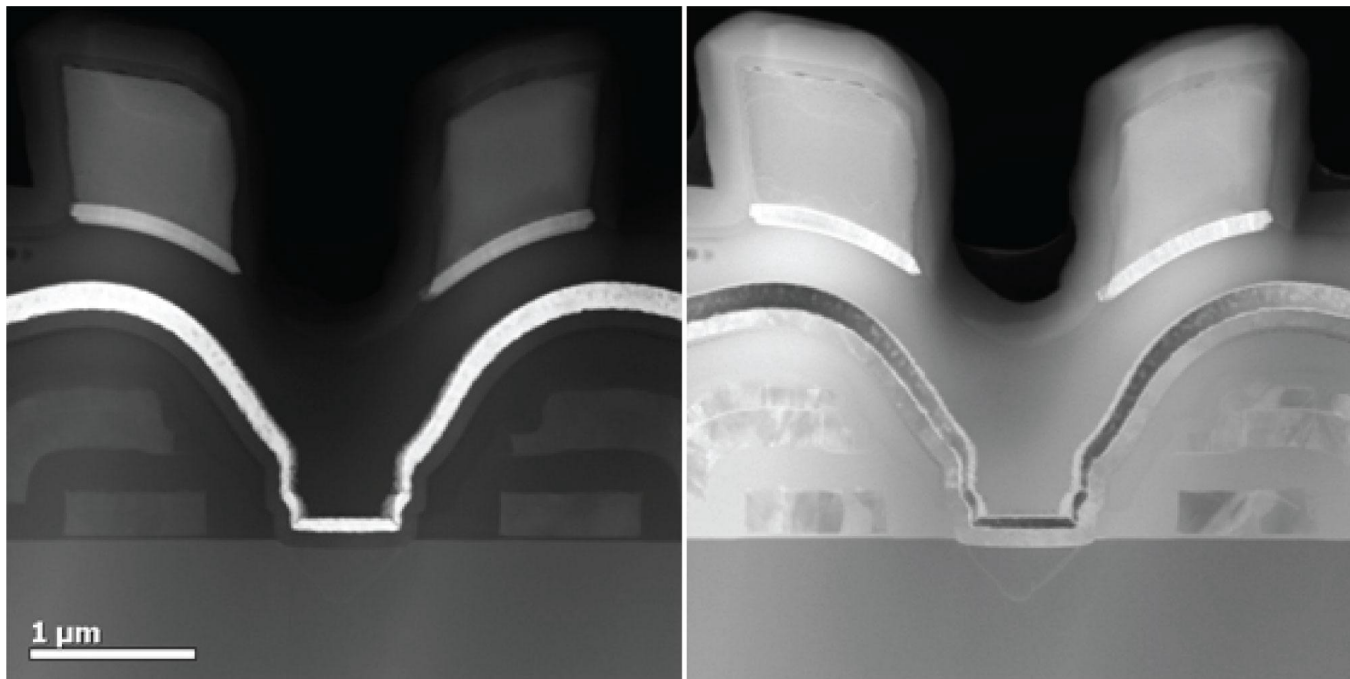
Low camera length



Z-contrast image → HAADF
 Mixed diffraction and Z-contrast → MAADF
 Pure diffraction contrast → LAADF

Example: Variation of defect contrast with camera length in γ / γ' region of Ni-superalloy



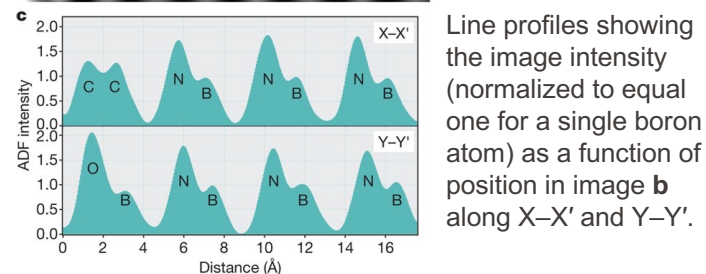
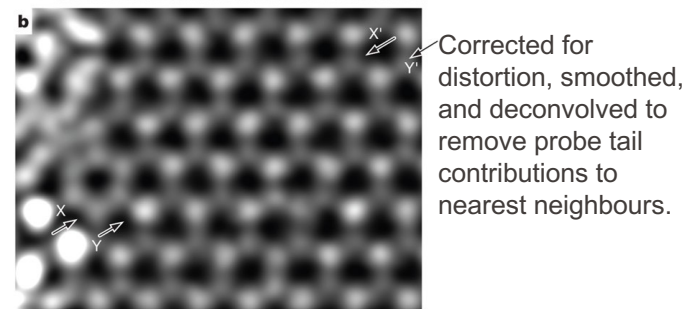
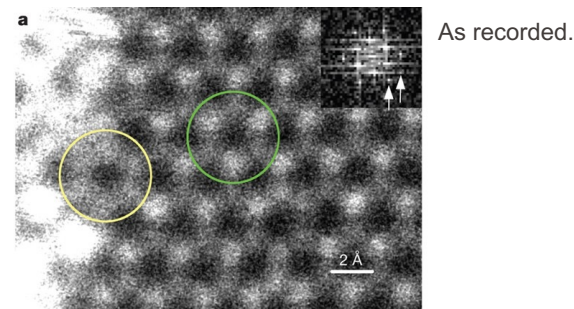
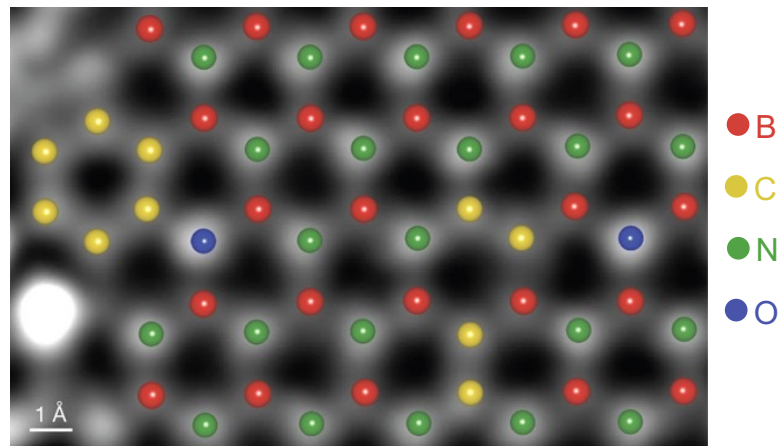


Jointly acquired HAADF and MAADF signals

The HAADF signal (left) provides contrast that can be easily interpreted in terms of the mass-thickness of the material, while the diffraction-contrast MAADF signal (right) reveals fine structural details. This is made possible by the optimized detector geometry.

EPFL Imaging modes | Medium-angle annular dark-field

Example: Doped graphene, BN monolayer – C_s STEM



Low kV is essential to prevent knock-on damage; here 60 kV used.

As λ increases aberration correction is even more important for obtaining atomic resolution.

Medium-angle ADF gives intensity $I \propto Z^{1.7}$ but with increased signal intensity for low-Z elements compared to true HAADF image. This intensity is needed for imaging single atoms (here $\beta = 58\text{--}200$ mrad)

- **Coherent:** Phase-sensitive, diffraction-dependent

Characteristics:

- ✓ Coherent artifacts (fringes, contrast reversals) can appear
- ✓ Interference produces contrast;
- ✓ Sensitive to diffraction and lattice structure
- ✓ Contrast depends on thickness, orientation, and defocus
- ✓ Possible contrast reversal with focus and thickness

Examples:

Bright-field, Phase-contrast TEM, LAADF-STEM

- **Incoherent:** Phase-insensitive, intensity directly reflects scattering cross-section

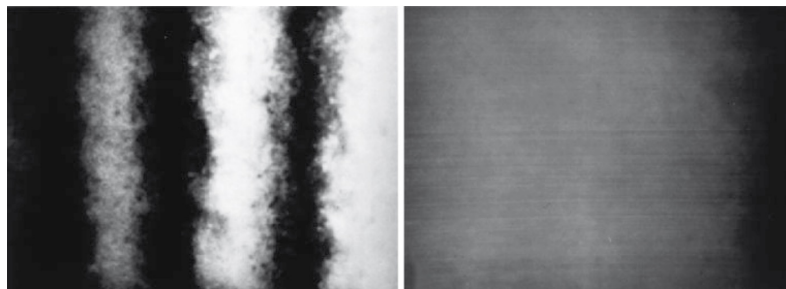
Characteristics:

- ✓ **Camera-like characteristic:**
Atoms in the image appear sharp when focused and blur when defocused.
- ✓ **Less sensitive to diffraction**
- ✓ **Image intensity directly related to mass-thickness**
- ✓ **Directly interpretable contrast**
- ✓ **No contrast reversal with focus**

Examples:

MAADF- and HAADF-STEM

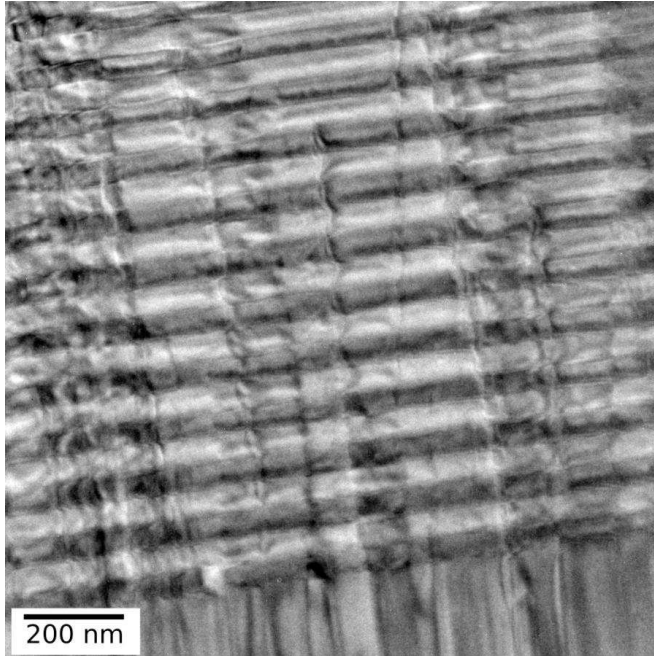
Example: Si <110>



BF-STEM: Thickness fringes visible
→ Coherent

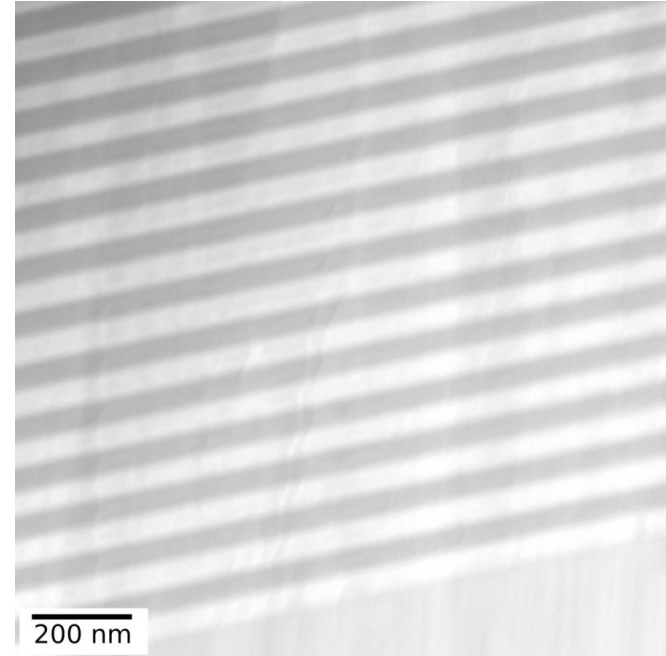
Z-contrast image
→ Incoherent

BF-TEM



Contrast due to strain and diffraction effects

HAADF-STEM



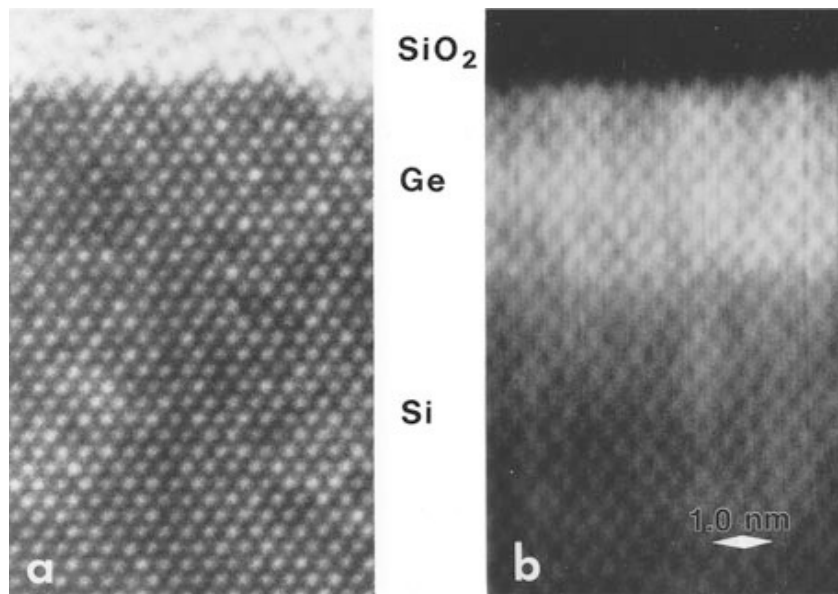
Contrast determined by atomic number

$\text{Al}_{0.45}\text{Ga}_{0.55}\text{N}$

GaN

$\text{Al}_{0.25}\text{Ga}_{0.75}\text{N}$

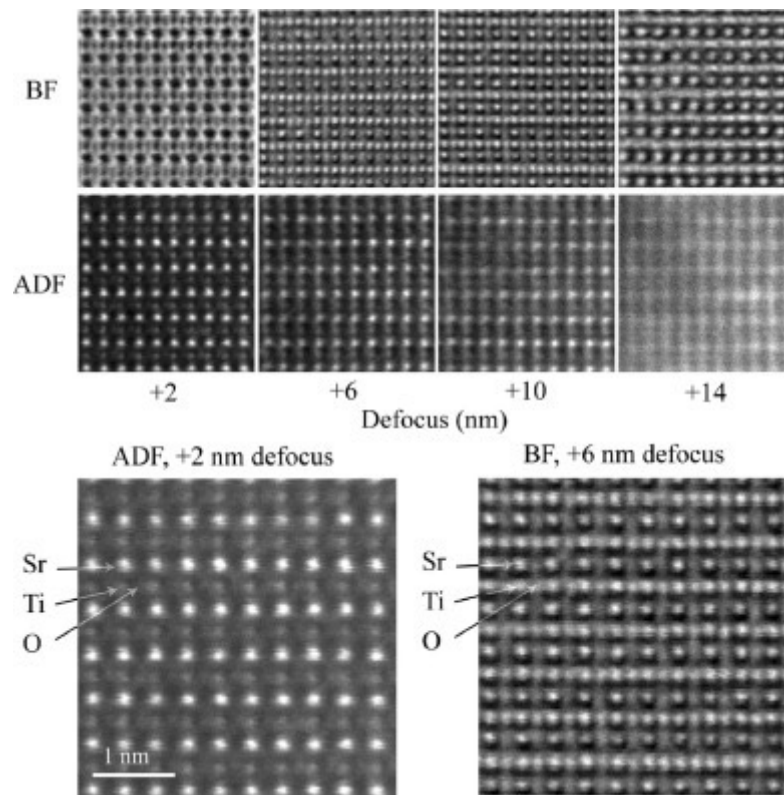
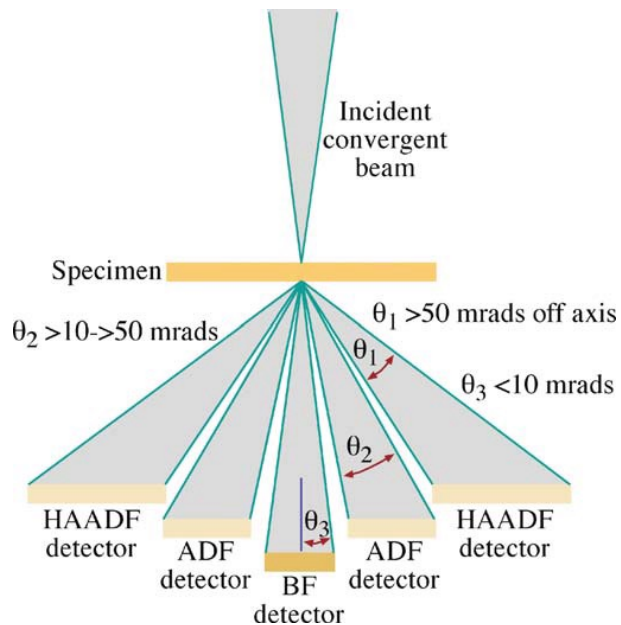
Example: Images of a Ge film grown epitaxially on Si



Conventional TEM image

Z-contrast image clearly delineating the Ge layer

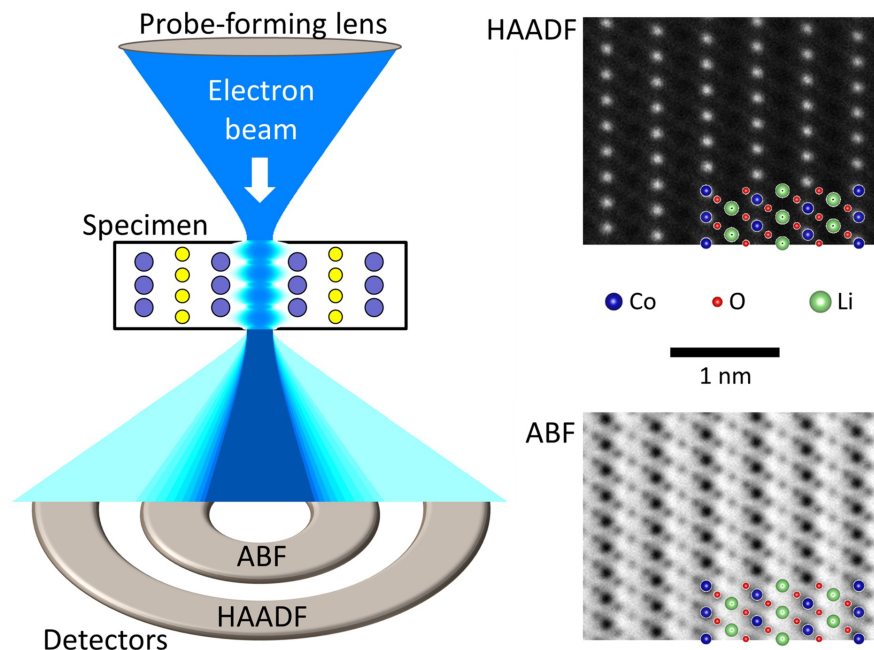
Imaging modes | Coherent vs incoherent image



BF | On-axis \rightarrow Coherent : Contrast reversal with focus/thickness

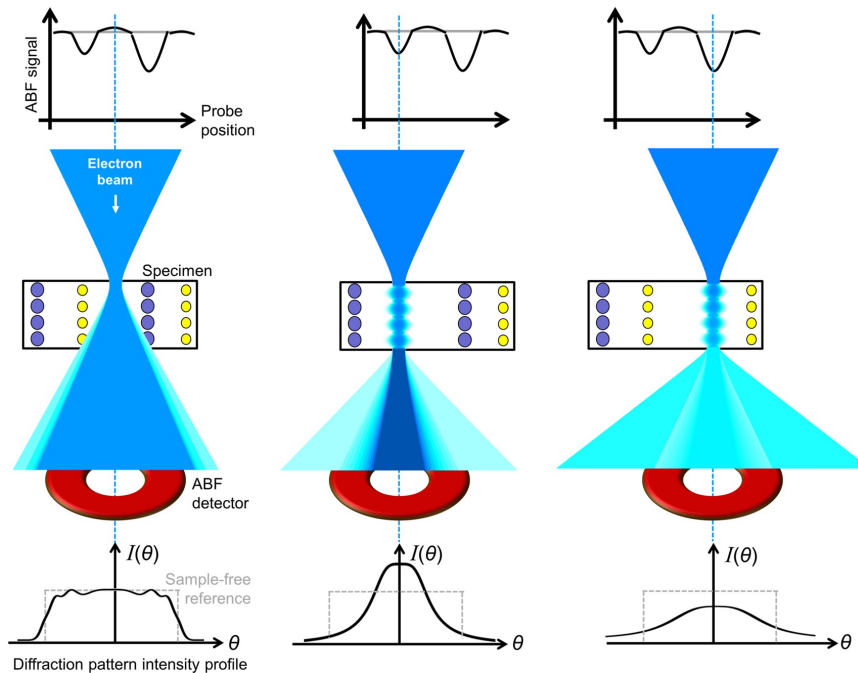
ADF | Off-axis \rightarrow Incoherent (no phase relation with the incident beam) : No Contrast reversal with focus/thickness

- HAADF not useful for imaging light atoms in a sample with heavy atoms because the contrast depends strongly on atomic number.
- BF imaging has some disadvantages for imaging light atom columns, similar to phase-contrast HR-TEM imaging.
- Harald Rose's annular bright-field (ABF) imaging (with aberration correction), where central part of BF detector is obscured, solves these problems.
- ABF produces a phase-contrast image; however, because it effectively sums signals from many point detectors—each with a different CTF—the resulting contrast is **largely incoherent over a wide range of thicknesses and defocus values**.
- Typically, the collection angle extends from half the probe convergence angle to the full probe angle. For instance, for $\alpha = 22$ mrad, one would use $\beta = 11$ – 22 mrad

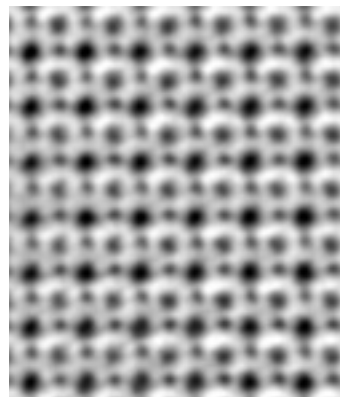


Low-Z and high-Z atoms can be seen clearly in the same image.

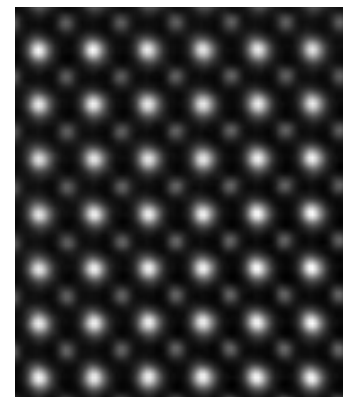
Simple theory: Channelled electrons scattered mostly into centre of BF detector by light columns giving some dark ABF contrast.



Example: $(\text{Ba}_x\text{Sr}_{1-x})\text{TiO}_3$



ABF

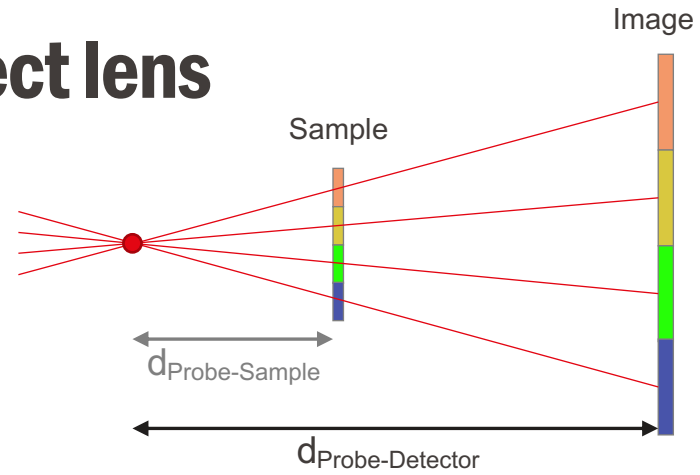


HAADF

Scattered more strongly to diffracted beams by heavy columns giving darker ABF contrast. Off column little scattering, so brighter ABF contrast.

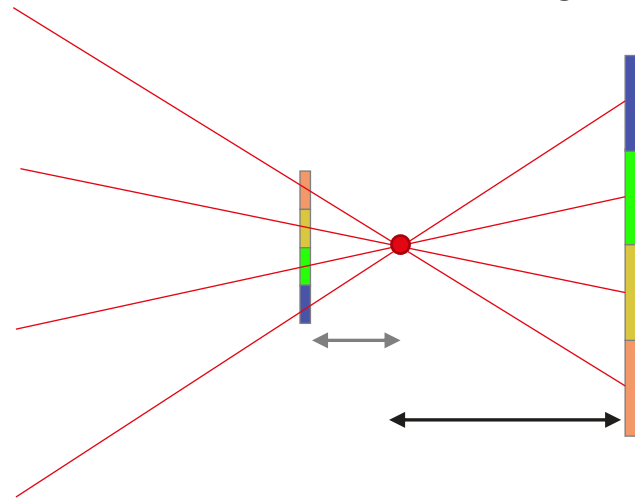
Shadow image | Perfect lens

Assuming perfect optics, overfocus condition

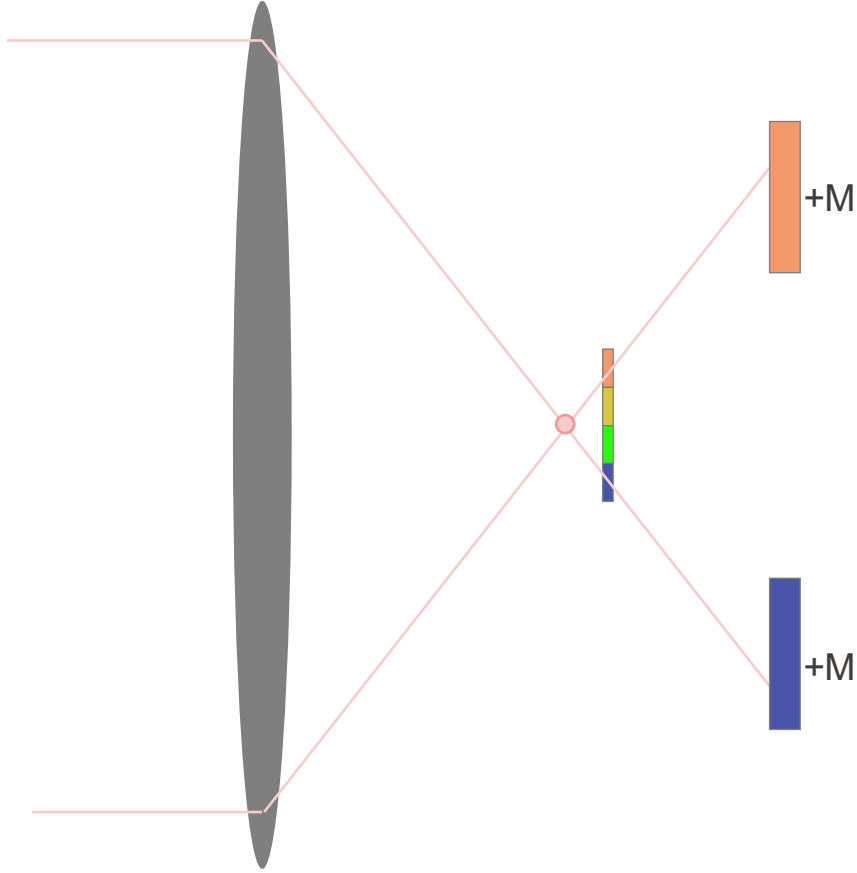


$$\text{Magnification} = \frac{d_{\text{Probe-Detector}}}{d_{\text{Probe-Sample}}}$$

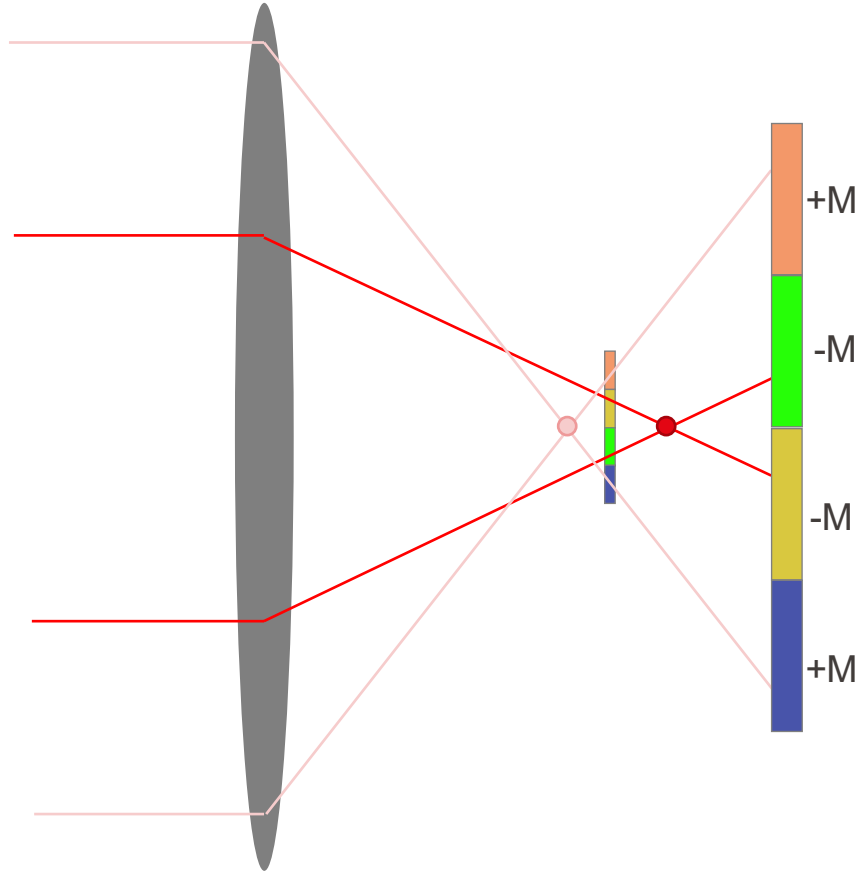
At underfocus the image will magnify, but inverted



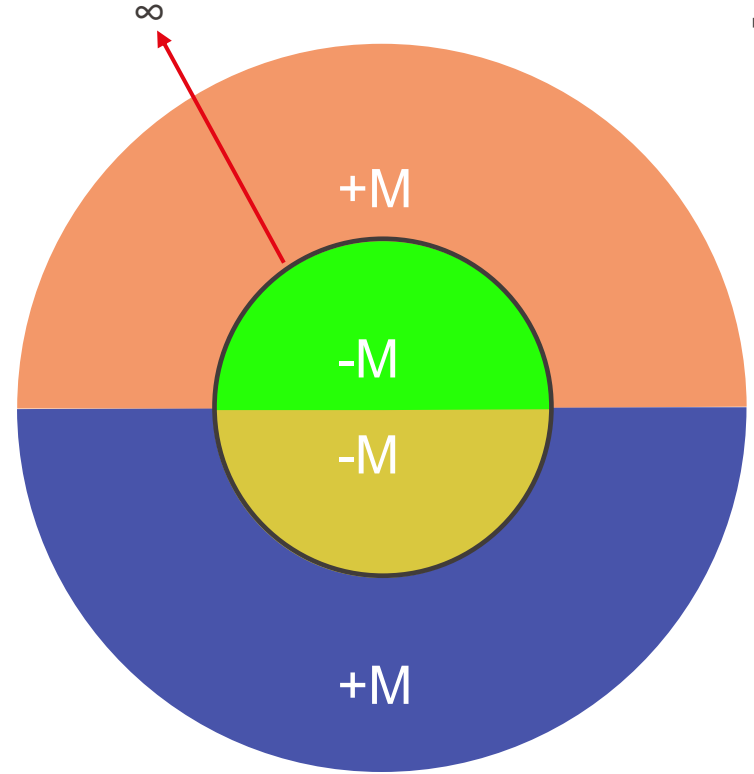
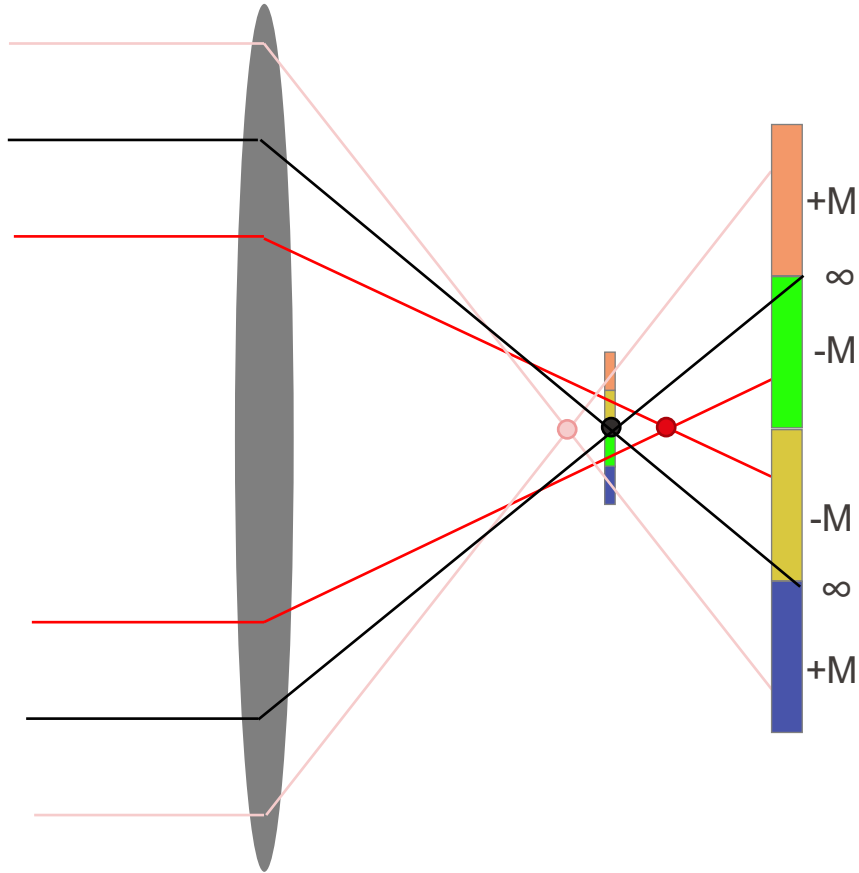
Shadow image | Real lens



Shadow image | Real lens



Shadow image | Real lens



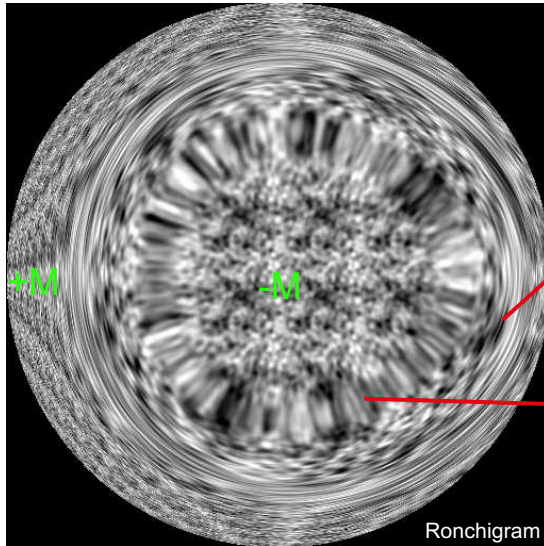
Shadow image | Real lens

In the presence of spherical aberration, for defocus Δ and wavevektor \mathbf{k} , magnification M' is:

$$M' = \frac{M}{1 + C_s \lambda^2 |k|^2 / \Delta}$$

In 1-D infinite magnification occurs at defocus $\Delta = -\lambda^2 C_s |k|^2$ or $|k|^2 = \frac{-\Delta}{\lambda^2 C_s}$

In 2-D there are two critical angles for which radial and circumferential magnifications are equal to infinity:



Azimuths

Radii

$$|k|^2 = \frac{-\Delta}{\lambda^2 C_s}$$

Circumferential

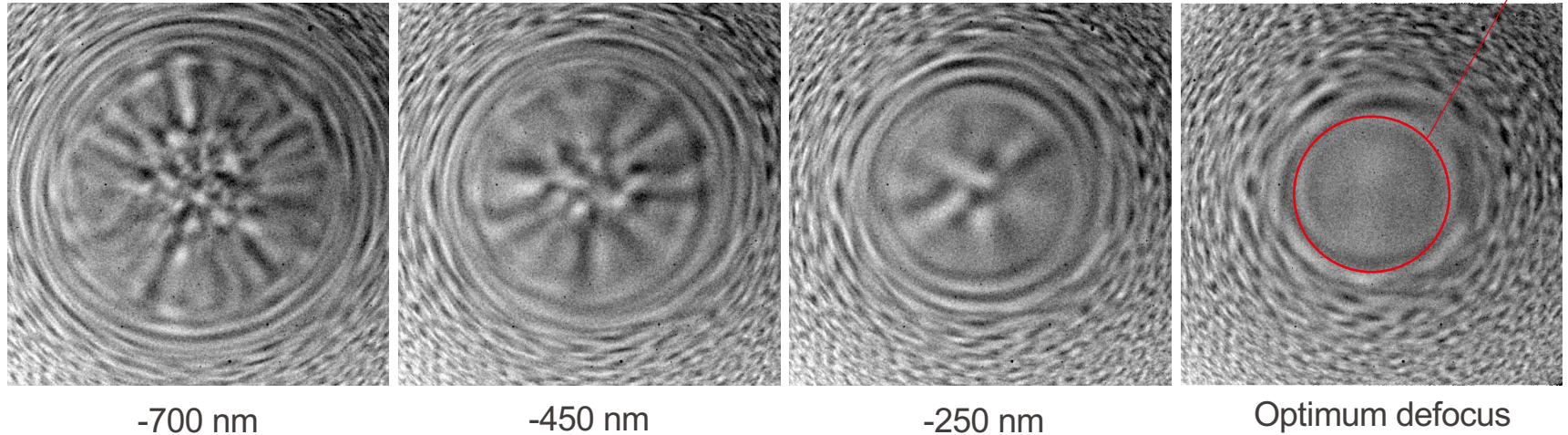
$$|k|^2 = \frac{-\Delta}{3\lambda^2 C_s}$$

Radial

Different Δ if there is astigmatism

The more defocus, the bigger the region in the centre which is inverted

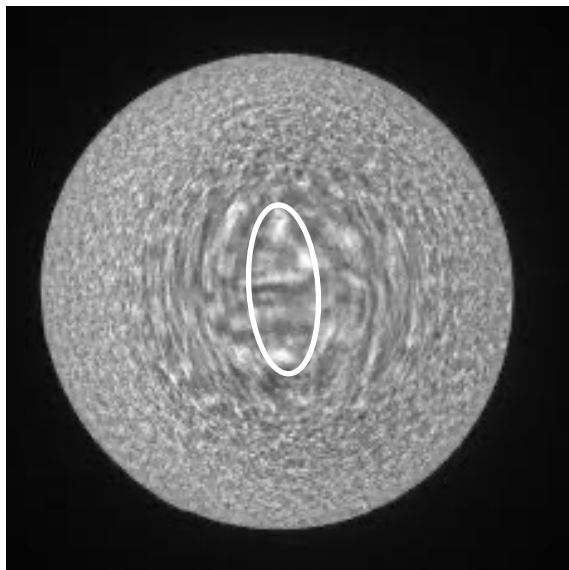
The more defocus, the bigger the region in the centre which is inverted



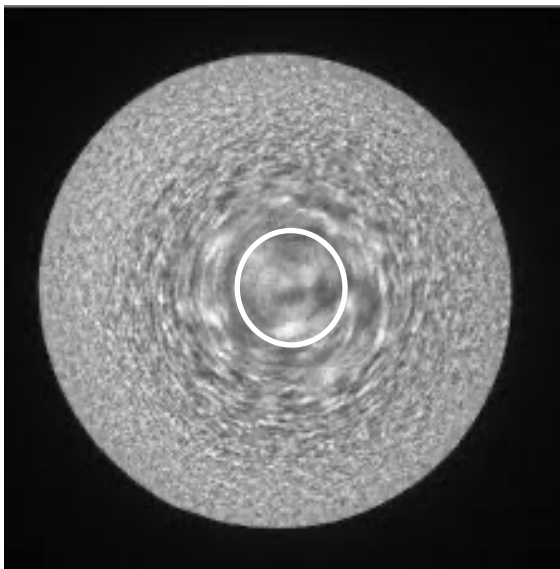
In practice:

- Reduce under-focus until infinite-magnification rings are of minimum diameter
→ Optimum defocus (c.f. Scherzer defocus in HR-TEM) ▶
- Fit probe-forming aperture to the “sweet spot” region of constant phase within this

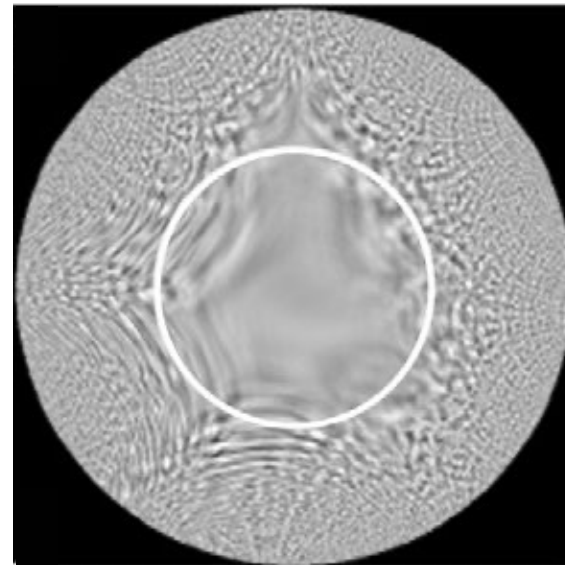
Different Δ if there is astigmatism \rightarrow Elliptical Roncigram instead of round



With astigmatims



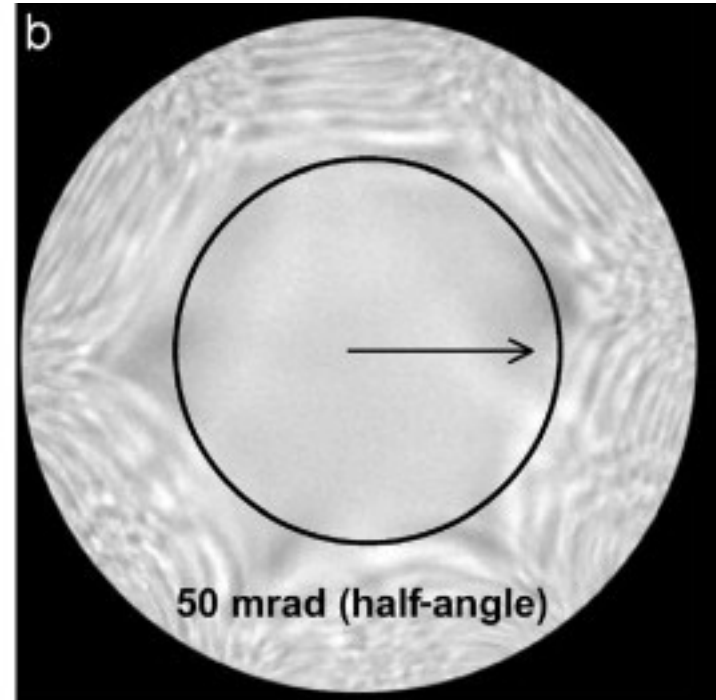
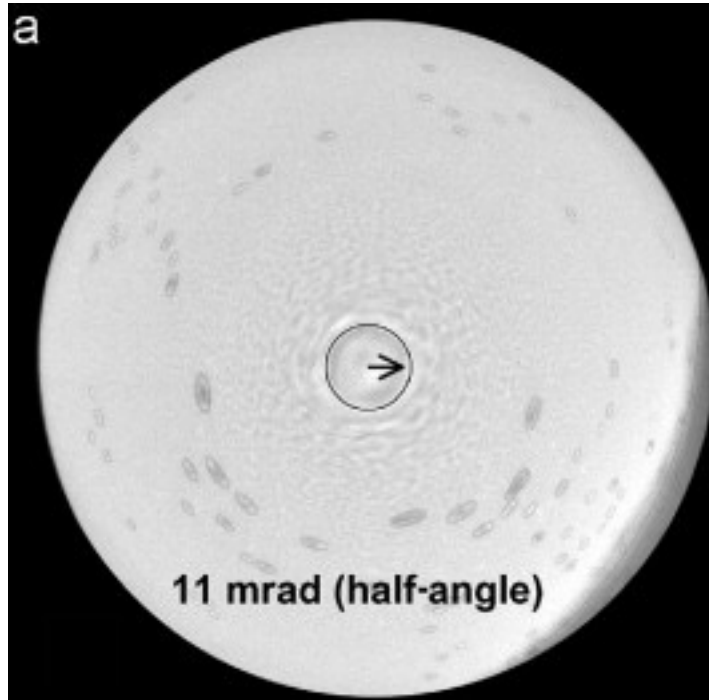
Astigmatims corrected



Cs corrected

Shadow image | Cs-Corrected

Cs correction increases the size of the sweet spot

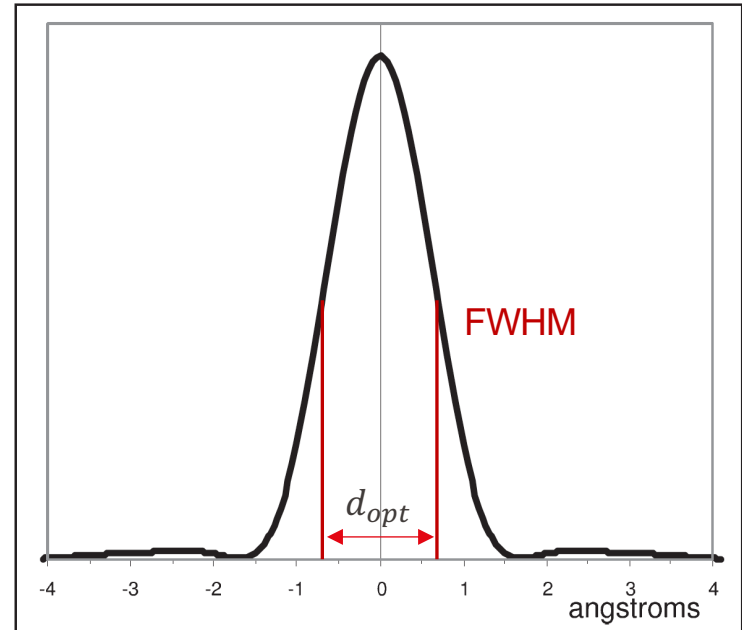


STEM resolution is determined by the size of the probe and stability of the instrument

$$\alpha_{opt} = \left(\frac{4\lambda}{C_s} \right)^{\frac{1}{4}}$$

At optimum defocus and with the correct aperture size, the probe FWHM is given by:

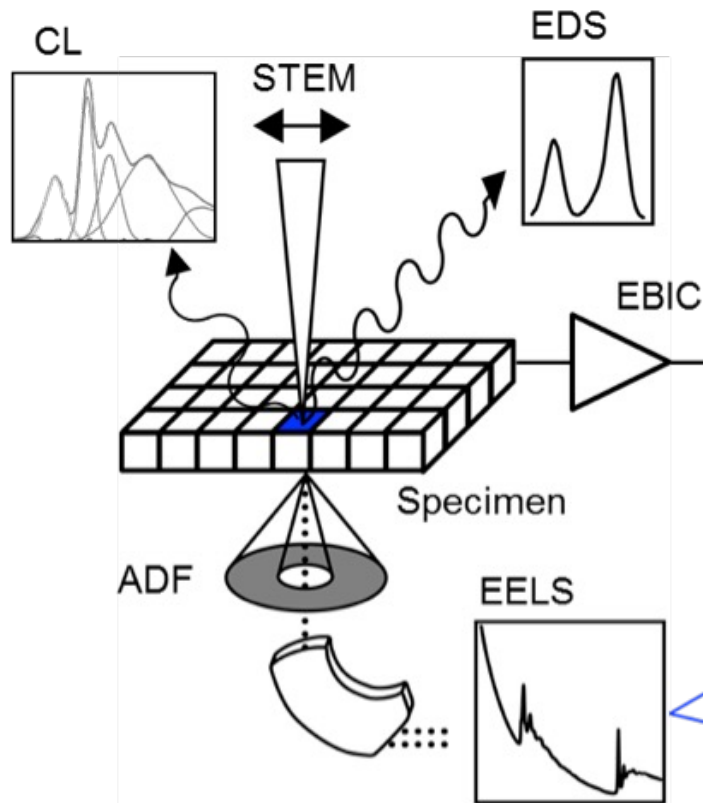
$$d_{opt} = 0.61 \frac{\lambda}{\alpha_{opt}} = 0.43 \lambda^{\frac{3}{4}} C_s^{\frac{1}{4}}$$



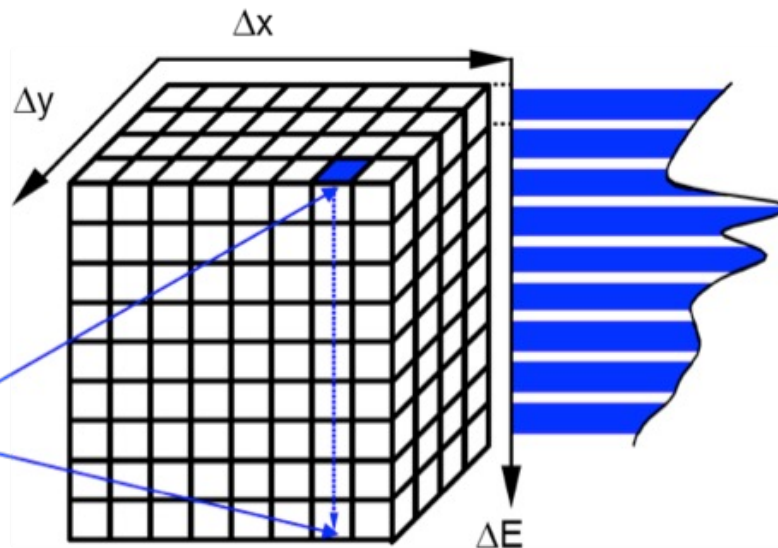
The intensity of a diffraction-limited STEM probe for the illumination conditions:

Cs 1mm, and defocus 35.5 nm, @200kV.

Spectrum imaging



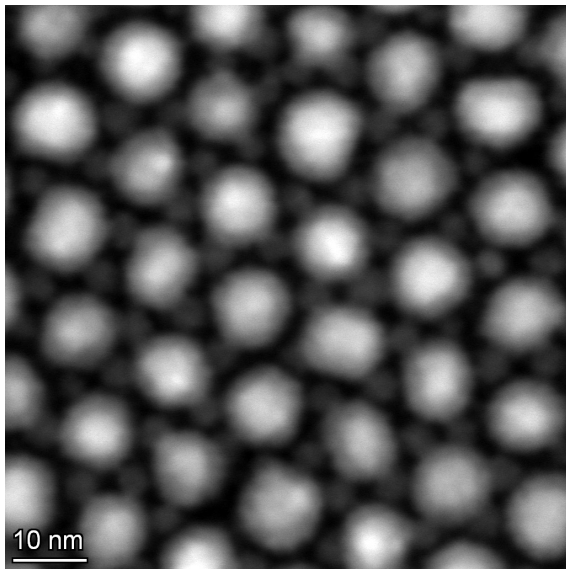
Record spectrum as function of probe position (x, y)



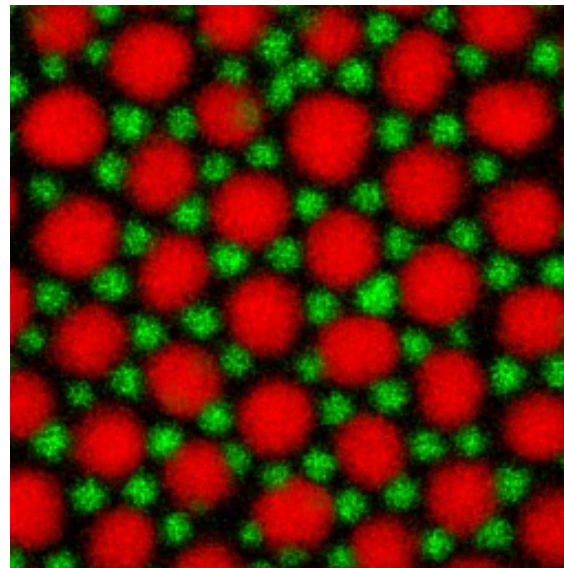
Energy-dispersive X-ray (EDX) STEM mapping

With fast mapping STEM-EDX has become a regular feedback tool for materials synthesis.
Sample characterized in a couple of minutes.

Example : Assembly of Fe_3O_4 and Cu particles



HAADF image



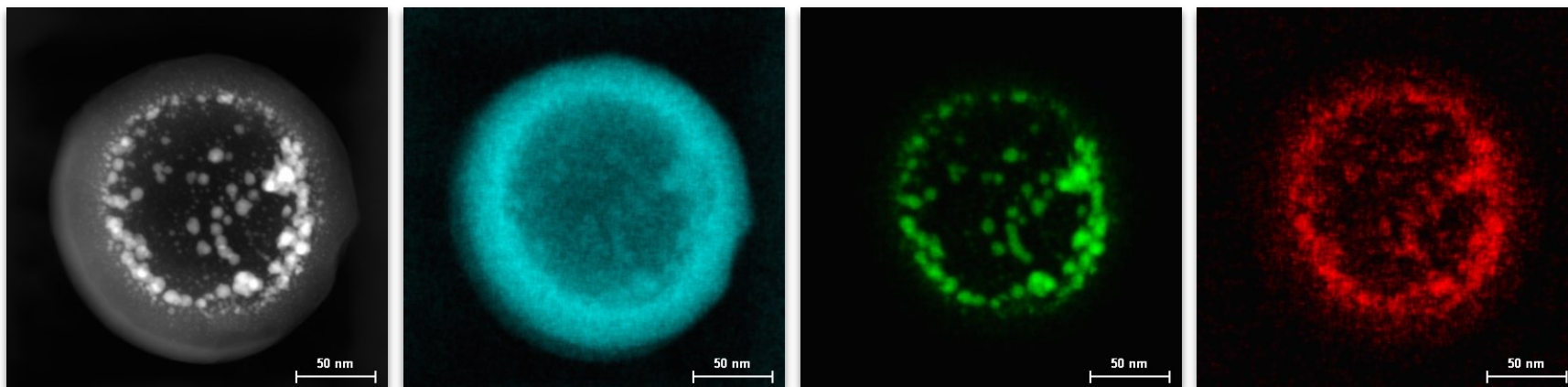
Map of Cu and Fe

Energy-dispersive X-ray (EDX) STEM mapping

With fast mapping STEM-EDX has become a regular feedback tool for materials synthesis.

Sample characterized in a couple of minutes.

Example : Ni-Rh catalytic nanoparticles in carbon shell



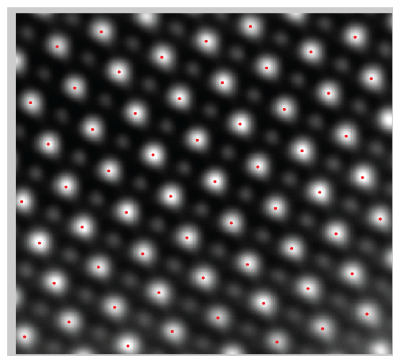
HAADF image

EDX maps of C, Rh and Ni

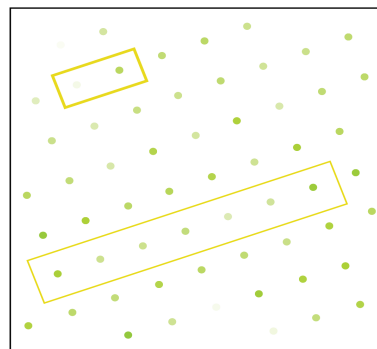
Energy-dispersive X-ray (EDX) STEM mapping

With aberration-corrected STEM, atomic resolution EDX became possible

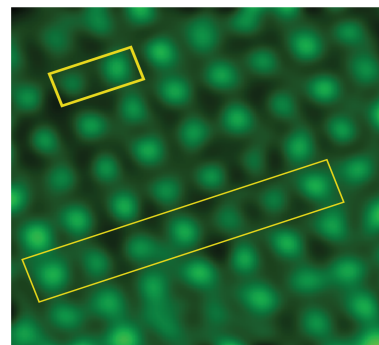
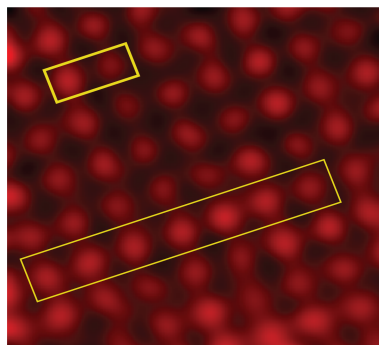
Example: $(\text{Ba}_x\text{Sr}_{1-x})\text{TiO}_3$



HAADF image

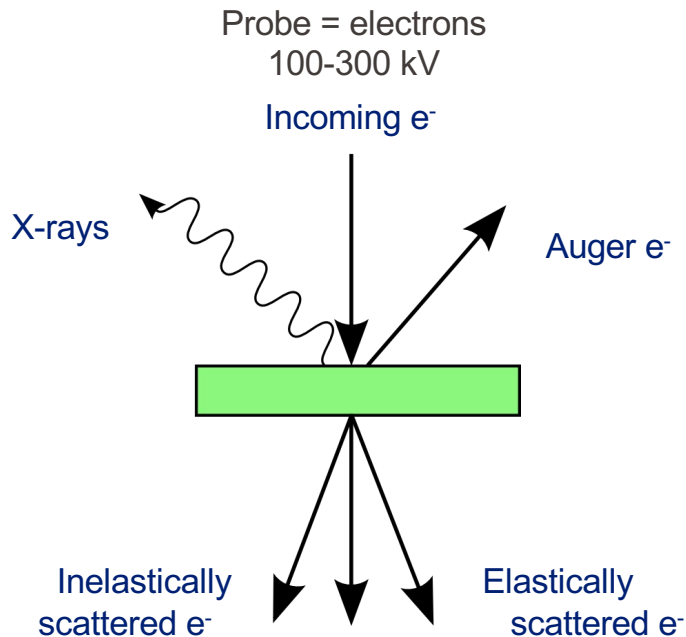


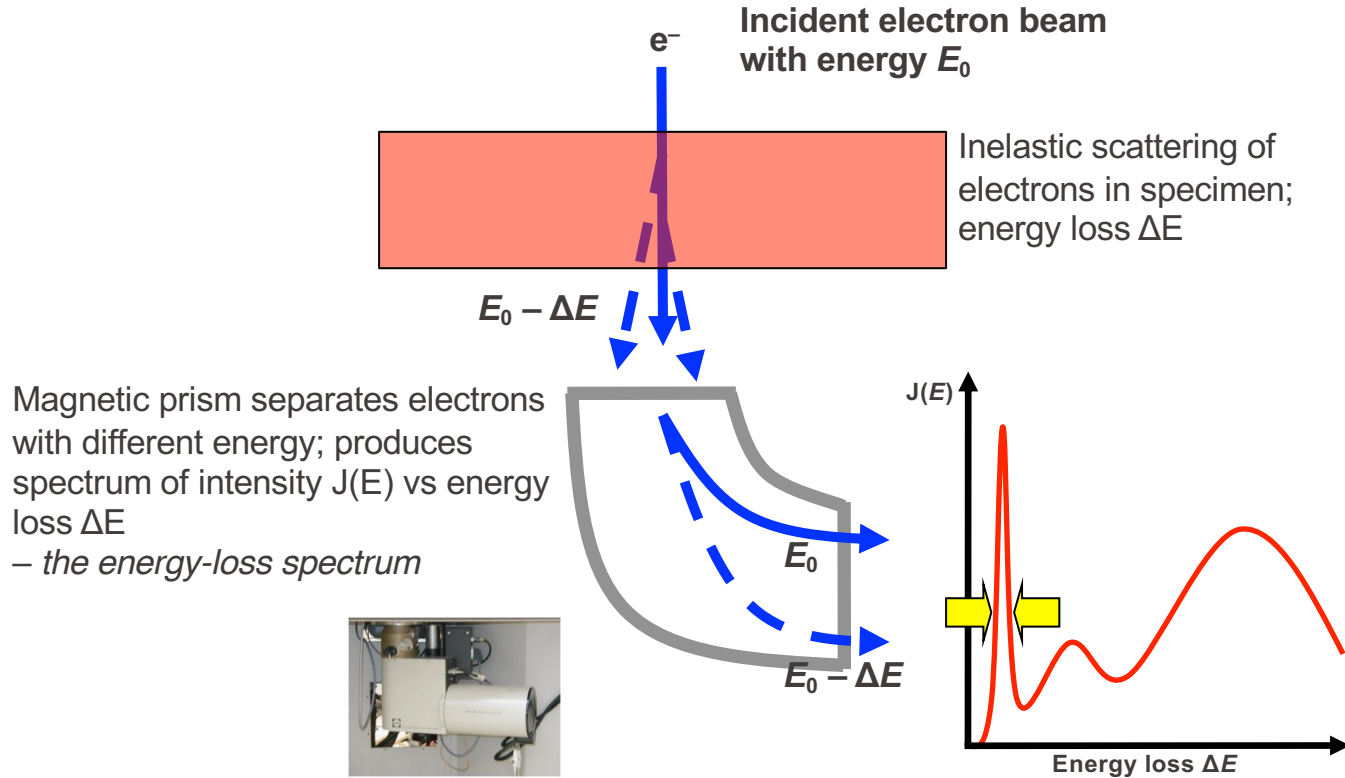
Intensity map



EDX maps of Sr and Ba

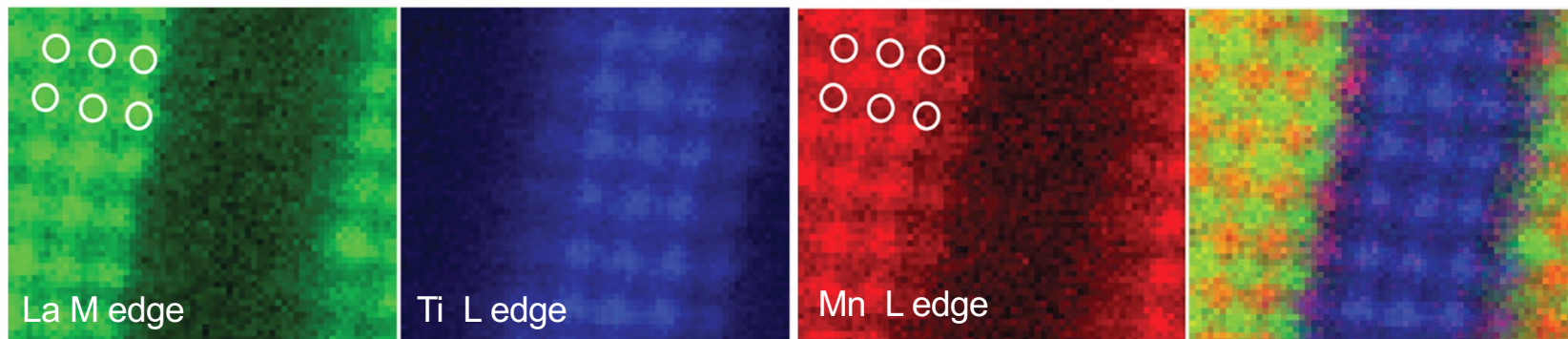
The S/TEM specific microanalysis technique!



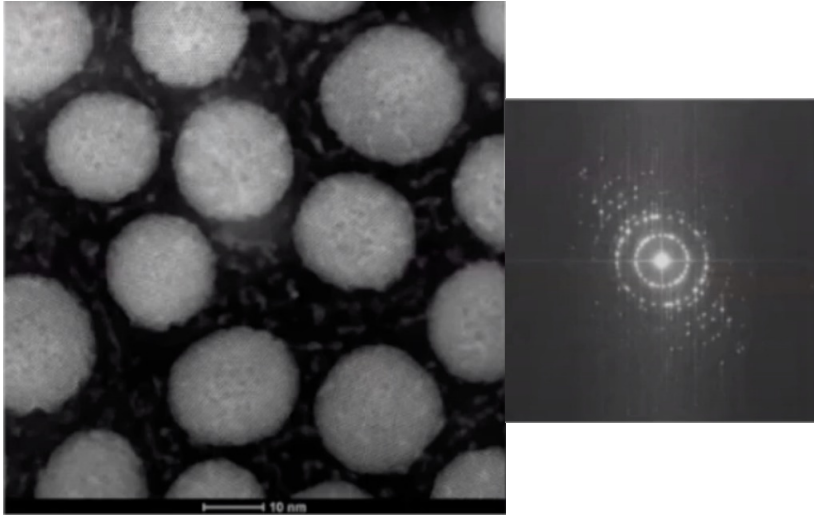


e.g. Gatan Enfina

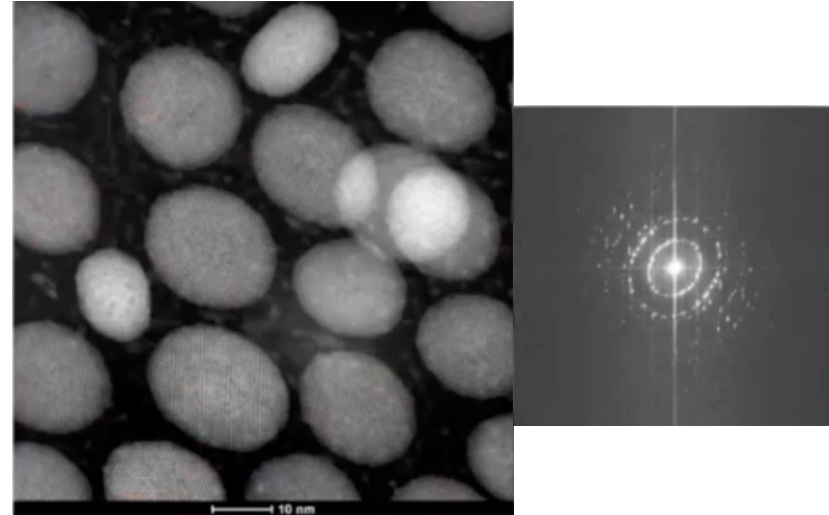
Example: Atomic resolution spectroscopic imaging of a $\text{La}_{0.7}\text{Sr}_{0.3}\text{MnO}_3 / \text{SrTiO}_3$ multilayer, showing the different chemical sublattices in a 64×64 pixel spectrum image extracted from 650 eV-wide electron energy-loss spectra recorded at each pixel.



Sample quality and imaging concerns

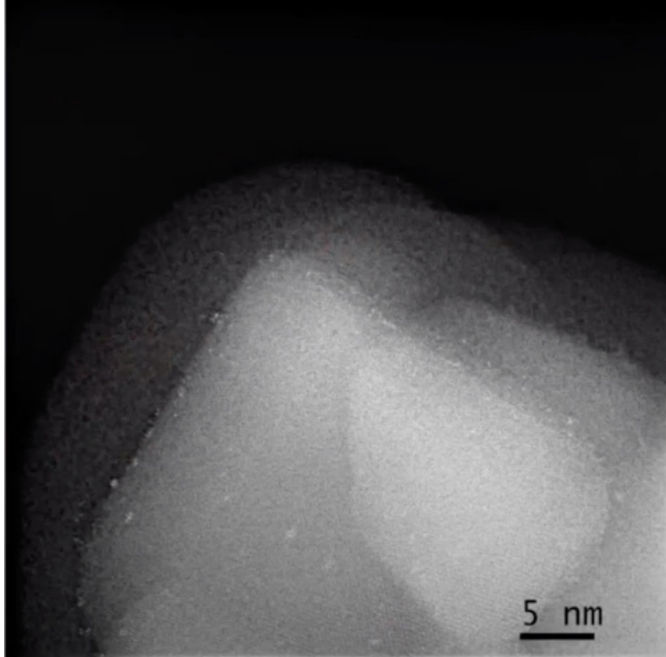


Without sample drift

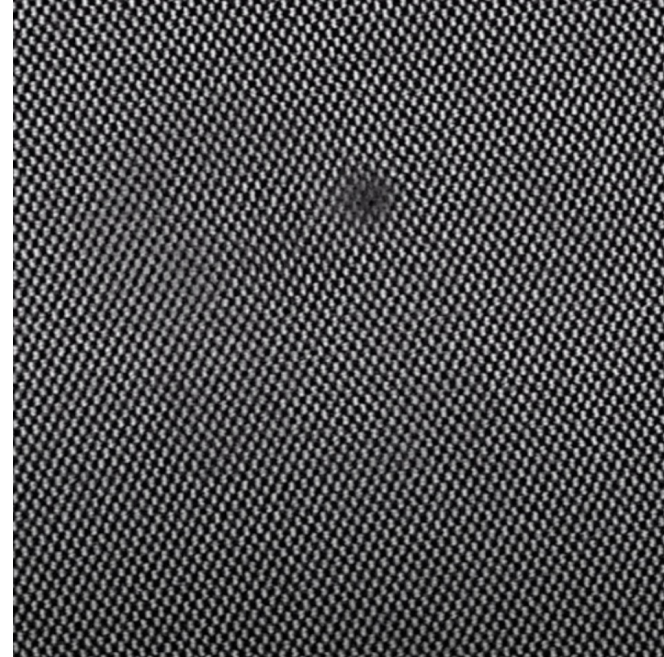


With sample drift

Sample quality and imaging concerns



Beam induced contamination



Beam induced damage (hole)

Sample quality and imaging concerns

Representative of sample

Thin

Stable under vacuum and probe current

Free of contamination

Uniform thickness for quantitative measurements

Conductive

- Aberration-correction and improved instrument stability give sub-Å resolution in STEM.
- With lower beam voltages, lighter elements can be analyzed without beam damage.
- Faster, more sensitive spectrometers give unprecedented access to composition, chemistry and physics of materials.
- Computer interfaces and software allow acquisition and processing of large datasets.
- STEM is now not one technique that can be easily summarized, but is split into many specialisms.
- Many other possible uses (e.g. imaging of magnetic domains, optical plasmon mapping, *in situ* studies) exist. The new equipment at CIME cover the majority of these possibilities, creating a state-of-the-art facility at EPFL.
- With the latest instrumentation, the sample and specimen preparation are often the limiting factor!

Some useful literature

- ✓ Scanning Transmission Electron Microscopy by S.J. Pennycook and P.D. Nellist (eds) (Springer)
- ✓ Aberration-corrected imaging in transmission electron microscopy: an introduction by R. Erni
- ✓ Transmission Electron Microscopy by D.B. Williams and C.B. Carter (Springer)
- ✓ Large Angle Convergent Beam Electron Diffraction by J.-P. Morniroli
- ✓ Transmission Electron Microscopy and Diffractometry of Materials, Fultz and Howe
- ✓ Science of Microscopy by C.W. Hawkes and J.C.H. Spence (eds) (Springer)