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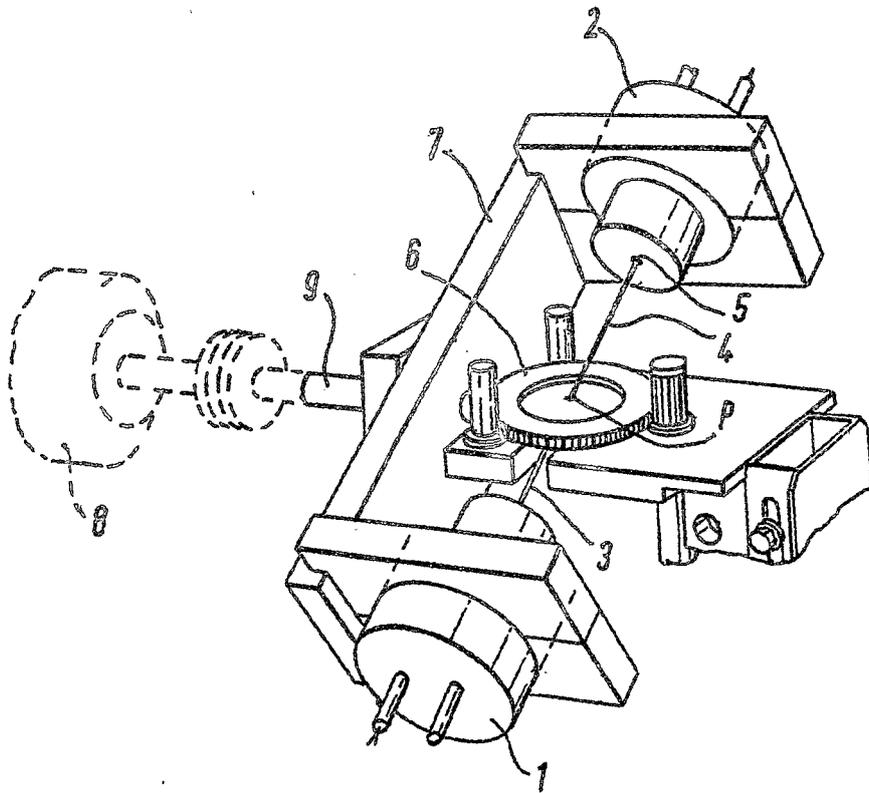
(54) **Thinning of specimens for examination under the electron microscope**

(57) Heretofore specimens have been thinned to penetration for examination by *electron microscopy* techniques, by ion erosion techniques. A more rapid technique is disclosed employing a beam or beams comprised solely of neutral particles. In tests carried out using this technique the *sputtering rate* from a sample specimen has been shown to be several percentages greater using a neutral source than from an ion source with the same flux density.

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SPECIFICATIONS

Thinning specimens for examination under the electron microscope

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The present invention relates to specimen thinning techniques for the preparation of materials for examination under the electron microscope.

10 The high resolution attainable with transmission electron microscopy makes this an outstanding technique for examining the microstructure of materials. The direct examination of materials by transmission electron microscopy requires that the specimen to be examined is transparent to electrons.

15 Consequently the thickness of the specimens must be restricted to 100 to 200nm. It has therefore been necessary to develop methods for preparing thin specimens of materials that have widely varying mechanical and chemical properties. Soft materials such as biological specimens, may be prepared by microtoming, although difficulty is sometimes encountered when hard particles are present.

20 For some metals, semiconductors, and other inorganic materials, chemical etching and electrolytic techniques are suitable. In one widely used method the material to be thinned is placed in a jet etching tank and the etching process observed through a lens with a light source behind the specimen.

25 The etching action of the jet is maintained until perforation of the specimen occurs. Since the etching action is stronger at the centre of the jet than its periphery, perforation starts at the centre and spreads towards the periphery. Thus the etching process is immediately arrested when perforation occurs by flushing the specimen with an inhibiting wash, leaving adjacent areas around the perforation which are usually sufficiently thin to allow micrographs to be taken during examination under the

30 electron microscope. For materials for which suitable chemical etchants do not exist, such as some glasses, ceramics, and geological specimens, various mechanical preparation techniques have been tried. The specimens may be crushed and fine slivers selected, or thin sections may be produced by very careful mechanical polishing. These operations require considerable skill and can generally not be applied to brittle granular materials with voids.

35 A large variety of materials which do not lend themselves to chemical treatment may be thinned by ion erosion.

40 In typical known thinning equipment ion beams of about 2mm diameter from two sources impinge centrally on either side of a specimen. A hole or perforation is allowed to form in the specimen by the ion beam, which acts in a similar way to the chemical jet during chemical etching, when the ion beam is immediately turned off to leave adjacent thin areas

45 around the perforation transparent to electrons. Ion erosion has proved an increasingly valuable tool to electron microscopists especially those engaged in examining classes of material such as ceramics, impurity-doped semiconductors and

50 alloys.

Difficulty however arises when dealing with ionic and covalent materials since bombardment with the charged particles of the ion beam may deleteriously affect the structure of the material.

70 It is an object of the invention to provide a method of thinning specimens by particle bombardment of the specimen, which method obviates the deficiencies of known ion erosion techniques when dealing with ionic and covalent materials.

75 According to the invention there is provided a method of preparing specimens suitable for examination by electron microscopy techniques comprising providing a source for producing a beam of energetic uncharged or neutral particles, and irradiating a specimen by the beam thereby to erode the specimen to penetration and produce an area surrounding the penetration of suitable thickness for transmission of electrons.

80 The method of thinning specimens as afforded by the present invention with a neutral beam is particularly advantageous when dealing with ionic and covalent materials since the absence of surface charge reduces migration of any mobile charge constituent of the material being thinned.

85 Thinning of the specimen using a neutral beam source may be carried out by using two neutral beams on either side of the specimen and thinning to penetration. A more rapid technique may be employed by using one source with the specimen position close to the beam aperture of the source where the intensity and hence the eroding power of the neutral particle beam is the greater.

90 Any source which is capable of producing a beam of charged particles which can then be neutralised before impinging on the specimen would be suitable, such sources being well known to those skilled in the art.

95 For example, ions may be passed through a resonance charge exchange tube and the resulting neutral beam allowed to impinge on the specimen. A preferred technique is to use a saddle field source with a neutral output which eliminates the cumbersome charge exchange tube.

100 Other features and advantages of the present invention will become apparent from the description that follows.

105 An embodiment of the invention will be described by way of example with reference to the sole accompanying drawing which shows a perspective view of the principal parts of a thinning unit for emitting a beam of neutral particles.

110 As mentioned earlier the technique for thinning specimens for use in electron microscopy by ion erosion is known, and the saddle field ion source is suitable for providing the neutral beam required to perform the present invention.

115 A thinning unit for thinning specimens with a neutral beam is shown in Figure 1. It comprises two fine beam neutral saddle field sources 1 and 2 which produce neutral beams 3 and 4 of about 1½ mm diameter from the cathode apertures 5.

120 The neutral beams are directed to pass through the centre of a rotatable specimen platform 6 the centre P of which is located on the axis of the pivot of an arm 7 which supports the two sources 1 and 2.

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The arm 7 is driven by a servo motor 8 through a rotary shaft 9. The rotatable arm 7 may be set at an angle relative to the plane of the specimen platform 6 from 0° (glancing incidence) through 90° (normal) to 180° and may be rocked at any amplitude between these limits.

During a thinning process material is controllably removed from either side of the specimen by exposure to the neutral beams from the two diametrically opposed sources 1 and 2.

The specimen is illuminated and may be observed during processing through a binocular microscope (not shown) mounted above the unit.

Although thinning of the specimen using the unit as described with a neutral beam may be carried out by using two neutral beam sources on either side of the specimen with the specimen held normally at 2 cm. from the aperture of the source, a more rapid technique may be employed by using only one source with the specimen positioned as close as possible to the beam aperture (commensurate with the possibility of insertion and removal of the specimen between the source and the specimen platform 6) where the intensity and hence the eroding power of the neutral particle beam, is the greater. In practice the preferred beam power of the source is within the range 4 to 8 kV at a plasma current of up to ½ mA.

Thinning insulating specimens using a beam comprised solely of neutral particles is more rapid than with an ion beam or a beam comprised of a mixture of ions and neutrals of the same energy and flux density.

To compare the effects of ion and neutral bombardment on stoichiometry, thin specimens of magnesium oxide were bombarded from one side of a specimen separately with ions and neutrals. With 6 kV applied to a saddle field source, X-ray analysis showed that cation concentration at the unthinned surface under ion bombardment increased by 80%, while under neutral bombardment the increase was 20%. In addition the sputtering rate of the oxide was 15% greater from a neutral source than from an ion source with the same flux density.

To explain this effect it is proposed that the positively charged ions in an ion beam exert electrostatic forces on ions in the sample. The attractive force on the anions will produce an increase in the preferential sputtering of the oxygen ions with an associated creation of a positively charged surface region. The electrostatic repulsive forces from both the beam and the surface will therefore produce a driving force for cations away from the thinned surface.

With a neutral beam these driving forces will be reduced. Some positive surface charge may still remain however because of secondary electron emission.

CLAIMS

1. A method of preparing specimens suitable for examination by electron microscopy techniques comprising providing a source for producing a beam of energetic uncharged or neutral particles, and irradiating a specimen by the beam thereby to erode the specimen to penetration and produce an area surrounding the penetration of suitable thickness for

transmission electrons.

2. A method as claimed in Claim 1 wherein the specimen is held as close as possible to the aperture of the source where the intensity and hence eroding power of the neutral beam is the greater thereby to rapidly thin the specimen to penetration.

3. A method as claimed in Claim 1 wherein a pair of said neutral beam sources are employed to act on either side of the specimen respectively to thin the specimen to penetration.

4. A method as claimed in Claim 1 wherein the source is a saddle field source.

5. A method as claimed in Claim 1 wherein the source comprises an ion source and a resonance charge exchange tube.

6. Apparatus for preparing specimens suitable for examination by electron microscopy techniques comprising a platform for supporting a specimen, and a source for producing a beam of neutral particles arranged with respect to the specimen such that in use, the beam produced by the source is directed onto the specimen to thereby thin the specimen to penetration.

7. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 6 wherein a said source is positioned on either side of the specimen so that the beams thereof are directable onto the specimen to thin one part thereof to penetration.

8. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 6 wherein the source is a saddle field ion source modified to produce a beam of neutral particles.

9. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 6 wherein the source is an ion source and a resonance charge exchange tube acting therewith to produce the neutral beam.

10. A method of preparing specimens suitable for examination by electron microscopy techniques substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to and as illustrated in the accompanying drawing.

11. Apparatus for preparing specimens suitable for examination by electron microscopy techniques substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to and as illustrated in the accompanying drawing.

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