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Effect of the Al₂O₃ Deposition Method on Parylene C: Highlights on a Nanopillar-Shaped Surface

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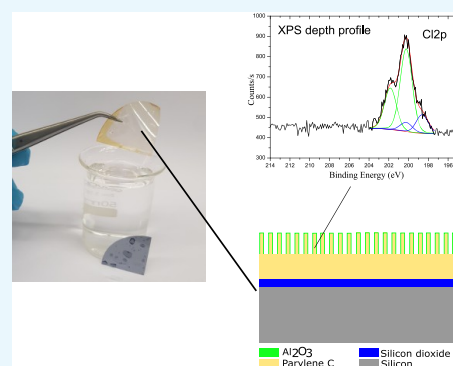


Article Recommendations



Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Parylene C (PC) has attracted tremendous attention throughout the past few years due to its extraordinary properties such as high mechanical strength and biocompatibility. When used as a flexible substrate and combined with high- κ dielectrics such as aluminum oxide (Al₂O₃), the Al₂O₃/PC stack becomes very compelling for various applications in fields such as biomedical microsystems and microelectronics. For the latter, the atomic layer deposition of oxides is particularly needed as it allows the deposition of high-quality and nanometer-scale oxide thicknesses. In this work, atomic layer deposition (ALD) and electron beam physical vapor deposition (EBPVD) of Al₂O₃ on a 15 μ m-thick PC layer are realized and their effects on the Al₂O₃/PC resulting stack are investigated via X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy combined with atomic force microscopy. An ALD-based Al₂O₃/PC stack is found to result in a nanopillar-shaped surface, while an EBPVD-based Al₂O₃/PC stack yields an expected smooth surface. In both cases, the Al₂O₃/PC stack can be easily peeled off from the reusable SiO₂ substrate, resulting in a flexible Al₂O₃/PC film. These fabrication processes are economic, high yielding, and suitable for mass production. Although ALD is particularly appreciated in the semiconducting industry, EBPVD is here found to be better for the realization of the Al₂O₃/PC flexible substrate for micro- and nanoelectronics.



1. INTRODUCTION

Poly(*p*-xylylene) (C₈H₈)_n also known as parylene is the name of a family of sustainable and green polymers. Among them, Parylene C (PC) (C₈H₇Cl)_n is the most popular for microelectronic and medical coating applications.^{1,2} Deposited via chemical vapor deposition (CVD), this polymer possesses many desirable properties that make it a very versatile material especially in the field of implantable medical devices and electronics.^{3,4} For instance, PC is widely used as an encapsulating coating film in a biological environment owing to its high conformability^{5,6} and class VI biocompatibility and is United States Food and Drug Administration-approved.⁷ As for electronics, PC is broadly employed not only as a dielectric^{8,9} but also as a flexible substrate^{10,11} in electronics and, in particular, in organic electronics where the deposition process is compatible with organic materials¹² and nanomaterial-based electronics such as carbon nanotubes,^{8,13,14} graphene,^{15–18} and transition metal dichalcogenides^{11,19} where the influence of water molecules is strongly diminished.^{20–22}

In order to obtain sub-100 nm electronic devices on top of flexible and biocompatible substrates, electron beam lithography (EBL) becomes mandatory with delicate requirements in terms of flatness of the substrate²³ as well as its resistance to basic solvents and chemicals. PC represents the perfect candidate due to its pinhole and stress-free nature arising

from the CVD process as well as its chemical and biological inertness, making it almost completely unaffected by solvents and some basic chemicals.²⁴ More interestingly, the CVD of PC on top of a rigid host substrate that can be detached *a posteriori* due to the fact that its delamination property in water is a very reliable method of fabricating flexible and EBL-compatible nanodevices.^{25,26}

The use of ALD^{27,28} of high- κ dielectrics is particularly needed in organic and nanoelectronics as it allows the deposition of high-quality and nanometer-scale oxide thicknesses such as Al₂O₃ for applications in low-power field-effect transistors^{29,30} or in devices with a high-aspect-ratio surface.³¹ The ALD technique has thus become the preferred technique in the semiconductor industry.³¹

One of PC's distinguished properties is its easy delamination from the underlying silicon dioxide (SiO₂) substrate by simple immersion in deionized (DI) water, as described in Figure 1a. Figure 1b presents the result of the delamination of a 15 μ m-thick PC deposited on a quarter of a 2 in. wafer used in this

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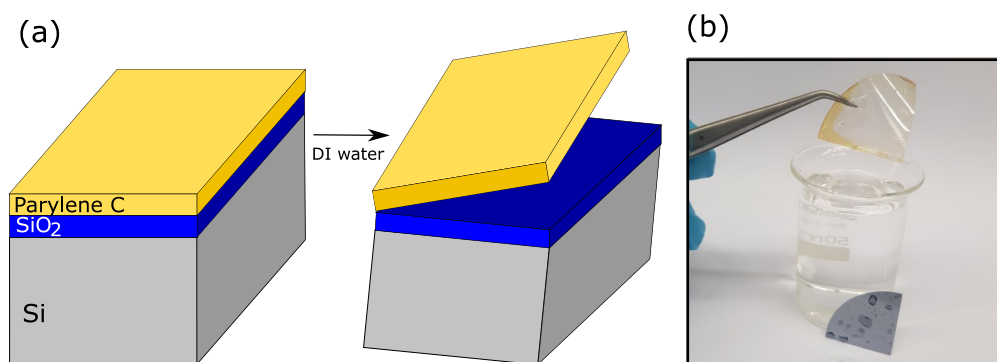


Figure 1. (a) Representation of the initial substrate composed of a parylene layer deposited on top of a SiO₂/Si substrate before and after delamination. (b) Photograph of the delamination procedure of a 15 μm -thick PC (yellowish) on a silicon substrate in DI water used in this work. Photograph courtesy of David Brunel. Copyright 2020.

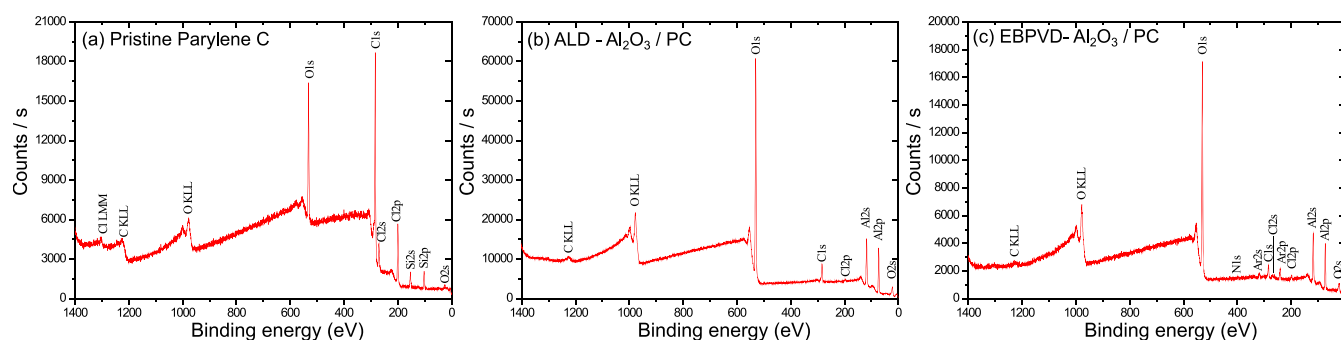


Figure 2. XPS spectra of the surface of (a) a pristine PC, (b) ALD-Al₂O₃ on PC, and (c) EBPVD-Al₂O₃ on PC.

work. The flexible polymer film here is continuous, highly flexible, and transparent. The production and characterization of an Al₂O₃-covered PC substrate for flexible micro- and nanoelectronics could lead the path to the realization of large-scale flexible nanoelectronics.

Here, after the CVD of a 15 μm -thick PC on top of a 285 nm-thick SiO₂ substrate (described in the [Experimental Section](#)), Al₂O₃ is deposited via ALD and EBPVD. The resulting oxide surfaces are analyzed with atomic force microscopy (AFM), and X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) is used for a complete analysis of the resulting Al₂O₃/PC substrate.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Surface Characterization. In this work, a 30 nm-thick Al₂O₃ layer is realized with ALD and a 15 nm-thick Al₂O₃ with EBPVD on top of PC. The resulted Al₂O₃ nanolayers on PC are characterized with XPS (both top surface and depth profiles) combined with AFM. In the literature, investigations of oxide/polymer stacks such as Al₂O₃/polypropylene probed with infrared transmission have been realized^{32–34} but, to our knowledge, the study of oxide/polymer stack probed by XPS depth profiles is presented for the first time. [Figure 2a–c](#) shows the XPS spectra of the surface of (a) a pristine PC, (b) ALD-Al₂O₃ on PC, and (c) EBPVD-Al₂O₃ on PC. The atomic concentrations of the elements detected on the film surface in each spectrum are collected in [Table 1](#). For a more accurate characterization of the pristine PC away from surface contamination such as adventitious carbon, XPS measurements were carried out on an intentionally but gently scratched area and are presented in [Figure 2a](#). Carbon (C), chlorine (Cl), oxygen (O), and silicon (Si) species are observed on the

Table 1. Atomic Concentration of the Elements Detected on the Surface of (a) PC, (b) ALD-Al₂O₃/PC, and (c) EBPVD-Al₂O₃/PC

surface elements	PC	ALD-Al ₂ O ₃ /PC	EBPVD-Al ₂ O ₃ /PC
O	20.3%	60.2%	56.8%
C	68.8%	12.5%	11.9%
Cl	6.0%	0.5%	0.8%
Si	3.9%	0%	0%
Al	0%	26.8%	25.6%
Ar	0%	0%	1.7%
N	0%	0%	1.4%

surface of the pristine PC. The Cl and C atomic concentrations of 6% and 68.8%, respectively, are close to the ones of PC, as one Cl atom is bonded to eight C atoms in a PC monomer. Moreover, the excess of carbon is due to the atmospheric contamination, confirmed by the presence of carbon bonded with hydroxyl groups (C–OH), carbonyl groups (C=O), and carboxyl groups (OH–C=O) in the C 1s spectrum. The detection of silicon with a binding energy at around 103.5 eV for Si 2p, corresponding to SiO₂, is certainly due to a previous scratch that has pierced the soft polymer. The remaining 10% oxygen species belong to the standard atmospheric contamination. XPS results of ALD-Al₂O₃ on PC are presented in [Figure 2b](#). The presence of Al and O species, with binding energies at 531.2 and 119.3 eV for O 1s and Al 2s, respectively, confirms the conformal deposition of Al₂O₃. However, C atoms are also detected on the surface, showing once again the standard carbon–oxygen contamination. XPS measurements were repeated at several regions of the sample, and the

resulting atomic concentrations confirm a homogeneous deposition of Al_2O_3 .

Figure 2c shows the XPS spectrum of EBPVD- Al_2O_3 on PC. Both Al and O are detected on the surface, with binding energies at 531.2 and 119.3 eV for O 1s and Al 2s, respectively, confirming the presence of Al_2O_3 . In comparison to ALD-deposited Al_2O_3 , the EBPVD- Al_2O_3 contains traces of N on the surface, which are due to the EBPVD process itself, where a nitrogen flux is injected at the end of the deposition process before restoring the atmospheric pressure.

As the flatness of the resulting surface after oxide deposition is crucial in micro- and nanoelectronics, especially when working with a flexible substrate, EBPVD- Al_2O_3 /PC and ALD- Al_2O_3 /PC are analyzed via AFM. Figure 3a presents the AFM

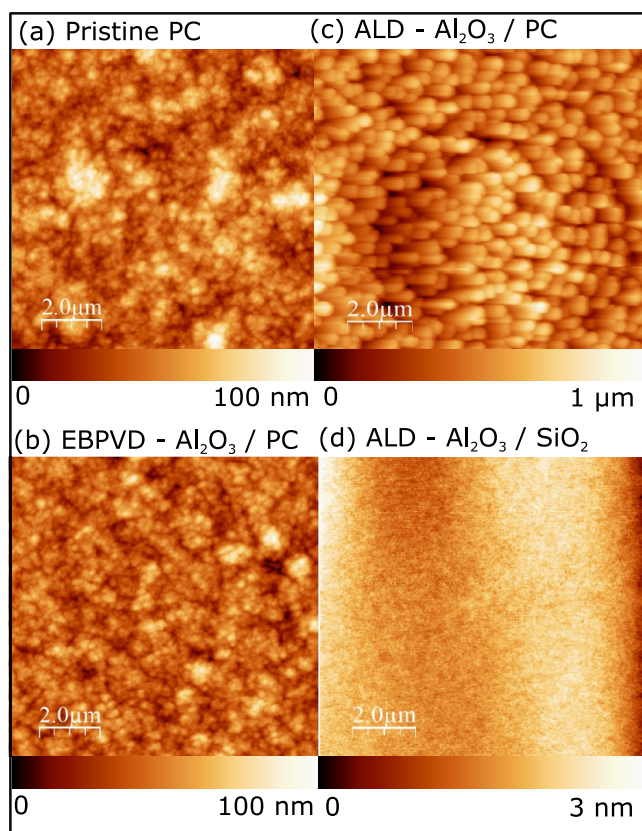


Figure 3. AFM images of (a) a 15 μm -thick pristine PC, (b) EBPVD- Al_2O_3 deposited on the pristine PC, (c) ALD- Al_2O_3 deposited on the pristine PC, and (d) ALD- Al_2O_3 deposited on a 285 nm-thick SiO_2 layer.

image of a pristine 15 μm -thick PC, and the average roughness was measured at ~ 10 nm with a standard margin error of 15% (see the [Experimental Section](#)). Then, EBPVD- Al_2O_3 /PC is imaged and presented in Figure 3b, where the average roughness is measured at around 10 nm. Hence, the EBPVD process has no effect on the surface roughness of the resulting surface. However, the situation is very different when it comes to ALD- Al_2O_3 -covered PC, as can be seen in Figure 3c, where a nanopillar-shaped surface is observed with an average and root-mean-square (rms) roughness of 140 and 170 nm, respectively (see the [Supporting Information](#)). This observation implies that the ALD of Al_2O_3 has strongly impacted the surface of the PC. The ALD technique itself is not responsible for the nanopillar formation, as demonstrated by the

deposition of Al_2O_3 on a SiO_2 substrate and imaged in Figure 3d where a very smooth surface of 0.3 nm rms roughness is measured. The water precursor used to deposit the oxide has perturbed the highly hydrophobic nature of PC and then implied the nanopillar-shaped surface formation.

2.2. XPS Depth Profiles. In order to describe the nature of these nanopillars, the XPS depth profile method is used here for an exhaustive characterization of the nanostructured surfaces. First, XPS measurements are calibrated with a known thickness of Al_2O_3 deposited with ALD on top of a gold surface (see Figure S1 in the Supporting Information). The quality of this calibration is then confirmed by the EBPVD- Al_2O_3 presented in Figure 4a, which depicts the XPS depth profile where the stoichiometry of Al_2O_3 is confirmed with expected thickness. Indeed, after the quick disappearance (around 30 s) of the adventitious carbon due to the first sputtering, the oxide is detected for a total sputter time of 10.5 min, corresponding to an oxide thickness of 17 nm, which is in good agreement with a target thickness of 15 nm. The resulting surface can then be simply presented by Figure 4b. Nevertheless, Cl elements, originating from the PC substrate, appear at a sputtering time of 8 min, thus before the disappearance of the Al_2O_3 , with an inflection point measured at 10.5 min. This implies a reaction between Al_2O_3 and the underlying PC, which will be discussed in Figure 5. Concerning the nanopillars, Figure 4c shows the XPS depth profile of the ALD- Al_2O_3 on PC. Similar to the EBPVD- Al_2O_3 , Al and O concentrations verify the redox equation. Nonetheless, the oxide remains detectable for a very long time (~ 71.8 min), resulting in a thickness of ~ 144 nm, which is far beyond the theoretical deposited thickness (30 nm) but in the same order of the average roughness measured. It is important to note that ALD- Al_2O_3 precursors have been found in the literature to react with the underlying substrate to depths of 100 nm such as with polyamide-6 at 90 $^\circ\text{C}$.³² Interestingly, Cl species that normally belong to the PC substrate appear after ~ 15.5 min of sputtering, which corresponds to a thickness of ~ 31 nm. In addition, the C concentration does not stabilize until the complete disappearance of the oxide (at around 110 min of sputtering). During the oxide deposition, while precursors reacted with PC, a nanopillar-shaped PC surface is formed, and the average height of these nanopillars determined by XPS is consistent with the average roughness measured by AFM. Then, an Al_2O_3 layer is covering these nanopillars with a target thickness of 30 nm. The final structure of this nanopillar-shaped surface is presented in Figure 4d.

2.3. EBPVD- Al_2O_3 /PC Chemical Structure. In order to prove the interaction between Al_2O_3 and the underlying PC substrate, the Cl 2p, Al 2s, and C 1s peaks were plotted and are shown in Figure 5a–d for EBPVD- Al_2O_3 and in Figure 5e–h for ALD- Al_2O_3 . Concerning the EBPVD- Al_2O_3 , analyses are focused on sputter times of 10.5 and 19 min marked with a green star and a yellow circle in Figure 4a, whereas for ALD- Al_2O_3 , analyses are focused on sputter times of 22.5 and 110 min marked with a red square and a blue triangle in Figure 4c, respectively.

The first analysis concerns the yellow circle point that can be considered as the bulk parylene under the EBPVD- Al_2O_3 . In Figure 5a, the Cl 2p peak is detected after the disappearance of Al_2O_3 , at 19 min of sputter time. In this case, this peak can be fitted into a single doublet, with two components with binding energies at 200.1 and 201.7 eV, close to values corresponding to chlorine bound to aromatic carbon.³⁵ Figure 5b presents the

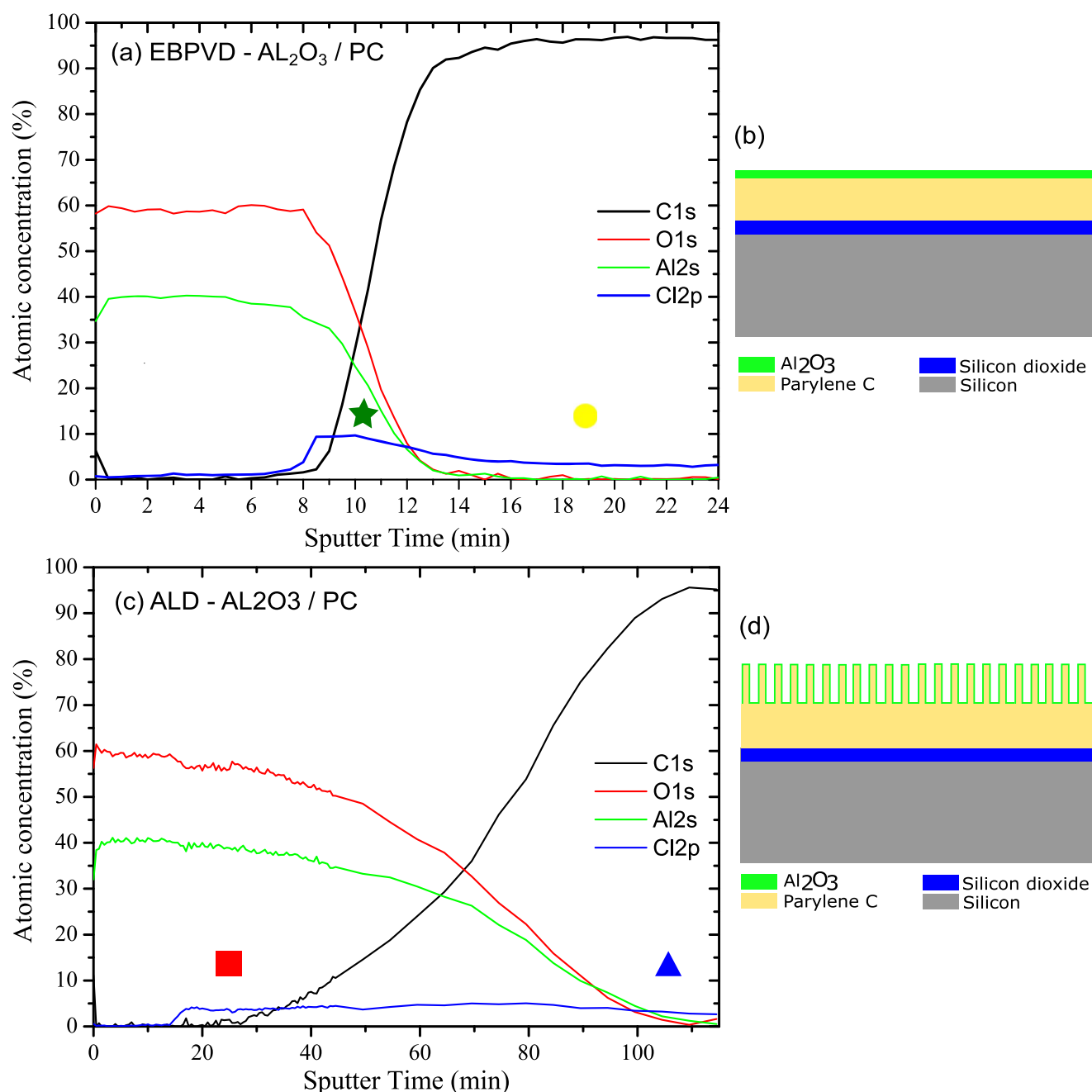


Figure 4. (a) XPS depth profile of the EBPVD- Al_2O_3 over a 15 μm -thick PC. (b) Structure of the EBPVD- Al_2O_3 /PC stack. (c) XPS depth profile of the ALD- Al_2O_3 over a 15 μm -thick PC. (d) Structure of the ALD- Al_2O_3 /PC stack.

C 1s peak acquired at the same time during the depth profile. This peak can be fitted into two components with binding energies at 284.7 and 286.1 eV, corresponding to aromatic carbon and carbon bound to chlorine, respectively. This first two spectra confirm that the parylene bulk is correctly detected.

Now, we turn to the green star point: the Cl 2p peak is plotted in Figure 5c before the disappearance of the oxide. This Cl 2p peak can be fitted also into a single doublet, with two components observed with binding energies at 198.4 eV ($\text{Cl } 2p_{3/2}$) and 200.0 eV ($\text{Cl } 2p_{1/2}$). When these results are compared with the bulk parylene, this shift in Cl 2p binding energies and the change in peak shape due to different full width at half-maxima of the Cl 2p peak before the

disappearance of Al_2O_3 indicate a reaction between PC and the EBPVD- Al_2O_3 layer. The binding energy of this Cl 2p could correspond to AlCl_3 .³⁶ To verify this reaction, the Al 2s peak is also plotted in Figure 5d. This peak can be fitted into two components with binding energies at 119.2 and 120.1 eV. The major component, at 119.2 eV, is assigned to Al_2O_3 .³⁷ The minor component, at 120.1 eV, could correspond to AlCl_3 .³⁸ Thus, when Al_2O_3 is deposited with EBPVD on PC, Al atoms react with the PC during the deposition process.

2.4. ALD- Al_2O_3 /PC Chemical Structure. In the following part of this study, we turn to the blue triangle point of ALD- Al_2O_3 corresponding to the bulk parylene. Two doublets have been found on the Cl 2p spectrum in Figure 5e (blue triangle), the major doublet with the Cl $2p_{3/2}$ peak at 200.3 eV could

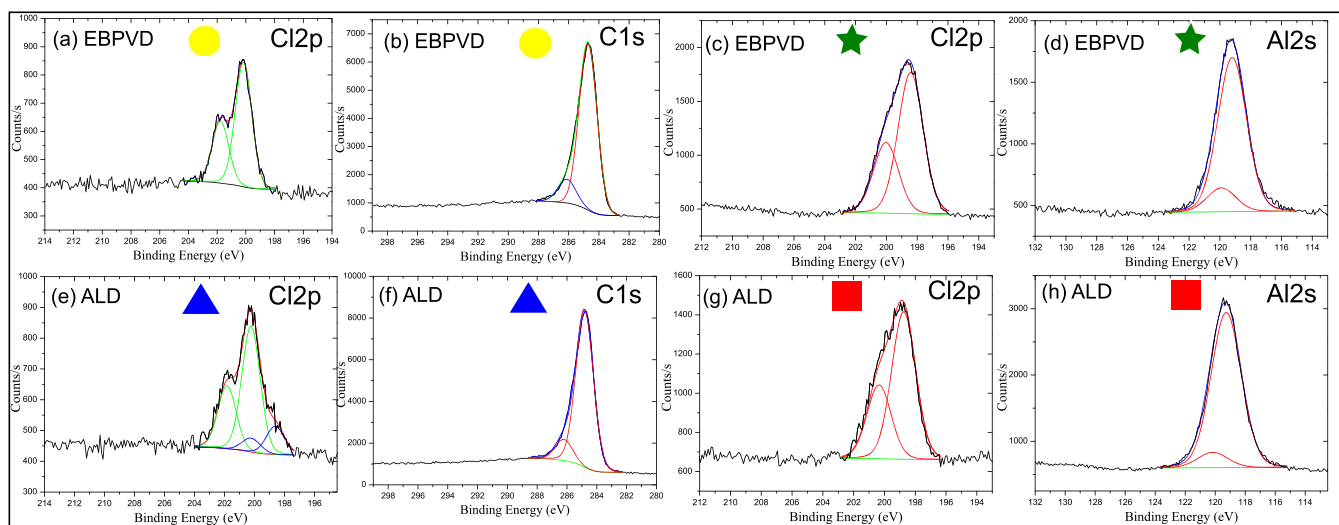


Figure 5. (a–d) XPS spectra of EBPVD- $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3/\text{PC}$ at different sputter times marked by colored geometrical forms in Figure 4a: (a) Cl 2p at the yellow circle point, (b) C 1s at the yellow circle point, (c) Cl 2p at the green star point, and (d) Al 2s at the green star point. (e–h) XPS spectra of ALD- $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3/\text{PC}$ at different sputter times marked by colored geometrical forms in Figure 4b: (e) Cl 2p at the blue triangle point, (f) C 1s at the blue triangle point, (g) Cl 2p at the red square point, and (h) Al 2s at the red square point.

correspond to the PC and the minor doublet with the Cl $2p_{3/2}$ peak at 198.7 eV, similar to the one measured on EBPVD- Al_2O_3 before the disappearance of the oxide, could also be assigned to AlCl_3 . This minor doublet is still present certainly because the spectrum has been acquired just after the disappearance of Al_2O_3 and thus not completely in the bulk of parylene. However, the C 1s peak was acquired at the same time during the depth profile and is shown in Figure 5f. This peak can be fitted into two components with binding energies at 284.7 and 286.1 eV, corresponding to aromatic carbon and carbon bound to chlorine, respectively, confirming that the major doublet of the Cl $2p_{3/2}$ peak at 200.3 eV corresponds to PC, exactly as seen in Figure 5b.

Finally, the Cl 2p peak in Figure 5g while the oxide is still present is considered and it can be deconvoluted into a single doublet, with two components with binding energies measured at 198.7 eV (Cl $2p_{3/2}$) and 200.3 eV (Cl $2p_{1/2}$). These peaks indicate that ALD- Al_2O_3 had also reacted with the underlying PC during the deposition process in the same manner as EBPVD- Al_2O_3 . Indeed, to prove this assertion, the Al 2s peak is once again plotted in Figure 5h and can be fitted into two components with binding energies of 119.3 and 120.2 eV assigned to Al_2O_3 and AlCl_3 , respectively, exactly as in Figure 5d.

3. CONCLUSIONS

EBPVD and ALD of Al_2O_3 have been successfully realized on a detachable and flexible PC substrate. Surface characterization was performed via atomic force microscopy, which demonstrated a smooth surface after EBPVD while an unexpected nanopillar-shaped surface was observed after ALD. Extensive investigations have been realized with X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy, and both surface analyses and depth profiles have been studied. Cl 2p, Al 2s, and C 1s peaks have been plotted at key sputter times. The emanating fitting curves indicated for both techniques that PC reacted with the oxide in a similar way. With the ALD technique, the water precursor responsible for the donation of oxygen was found responsible for the strong modification of the substrate roughness since PC

is extremely hydrophobic. Combining AFM observations with XPS allowed a complete description of the nanopillar-shaped surface that is indeed high-aspect-ratio nanopillars of PC fully covered with the desired Al_2O_3 thickness. These findings are of high value for applications that need flexible and biocompatible substrates such as PC. EBPVD is preferred for realization of micro- and nanodevices based on the $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3/\text{PC}$ substrate, while a nanopillar-shaped surface of $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3/\text{PC}$ is a very interesting substrate for 2D materials such as graphene or MoS_2 so as to investigate nanomechanical properties or to increase the carriers' velocity by inhibiting or decreasing the interface interactions with the substrate.

4. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

4.1. Parylene Deposition. Silicon substrates ($1.5 \times 1.5 \text{ cm}^2$) with a 285 nm-thick thermal SiO_2 were coated with 15 μm -thick PC in a homemade PC coating system. As a reliable deposition process is only obtained for a maximum thickness of 5 μm , the following process has been repeated three times in order to obtain the needed PC thickness. For every deposition process, the cooling system was started and the pyrolysis chamber was preheated to 690 $^\circ\text{C}$. A total of 8.25 g of PC dimer (1.65 g/ μm according to manufacturer's guide and thickness measurements probed by a stylus profilometer) was transferred to the loading chamber. The deposition process starts when the system pressure is under a critical value of 10 mTorr. At the beginning of the deposition, PC dimers were heated in the loading chamber ($\sim 160 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$) and sublimed. The dimer vapor then enters the pyrolysis chamber and is pyrolyzed into monomers. The active monomers polymerize uniformly on any surface they meet in the deposition chamber to form PC. The deposition process stops when all PC dimers are exhausted.

4.2. Atomic Layer Deposition (ALD) and EBPVD of Al_2O_3 . For ALD of Al_2O_3 , 30 nm-thick Al_2O_3 was deposited on PC substrates using a Fiji F200 at 100 $^\circ\text{C}$ and under 100 mTorr. This very popular method uses trimethylaluminum (TMA , $\text{Al}_2(\text{CH}_3)_6$) and water as precursors in the ALD process.³⁹ Calibration between this deposition method and

XPS measurements was realized using a 26 nm Al_2O_3 layer deposited on Au and is described in paragraph 1 of the [Supporting information](#). Here, after a 20 min thermalization required before any deposition, a 1 Å/cycle was realized as follows: Every cycle lasts 60.12 s and is composed of one pulse of TMA of 60 ms followed by 30 s of purging and then 60 ms of H_2O followed by another 30 s of purging. During the purging, an argon flux was pumped into the chamber to eliminate any byproducts or unreacted gases. The deposition time is thus 5 h. The thickness rate was controlled using a quartz microbalance.

For EBPVD of Al_2O_3 , the RF sputter of Al_2O_3 deposition was realized in a Plassys MEB800 IAD (ion-assisted deposition) under a mixture of high-purity argon and oxygen gases with an applied RF power of 300 W. The deposition rate was set at 0.2 nm/s.

4.3. Surface and Material Characterizations. Surface topographies were realized using a Bruker EnviroScope atomic force microscopy (AFM). Pixel images (512×512) at 0.7 Hz were recorded using tapping mode BudgetSensors AFM probes. Image treatments were realized using WSxM 5.0 Develop 9.1 software from Nanotec Electronica.⁴⁰ Average and rms roughness were measured using both WSxM and Nanoscope V softwares.

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) were realized using a PHI 5000 Versaprobe spectrometer (Physical Electronics) operating at a base pressure of 10^{-7} Pa. A focused monochromatized Al K_{α} X-ray source ($h\nu = 1486.6$ eV) was used at 15 kV. The analyzed area of the sample was 200 μm in diameter. A dual beam charge neutralization system involving low-energy Ar ions and electrons was used to compensate the charge-up effect. For charge correction, binding energies were calibrated using the C 1s peak from adventitious carbon with a fixed value at 284.8 eV. High-resolution core level spectra were acquired with a 23.5 eV pass energy, an energy step of 0.1 eV, and a 50 ms dwell time. The spectrometer was regularly calibrated with Cu $2p_{3/2}$ and Cu LMM of clean copper at 932.7 and 918.7 eV, respectively. Spectroscopic data were processed by the PHI Multipak software using a peak fitting routine with symmetrical Gaussian–Lorentzian functions. The Shirley background was subtracted from the spectra. The Ar-ion beam conditions for depth profiling were as follows: the ion source was operated at 1 kV, and the raster area was 2×2 mm². Each sputter cycle was set to 30 s, which corresponds to a sputter depth between 0.8 and 1.0 nm in Al_2O_3 .

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsomega.0c00735>.

Calibration of ALD-based Al_2O_3 deposition, effect of the TMA/water precursors on the nanopillar-shaped surface, and AFM characterization of the nanopillar-shaped surface after ALD- Al_2O_3 reaction with parylene C (PDF)

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Author Contributions

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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