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Destruction of *Deinococcus geothermalis* biofilm by photocatalytic ALD and sol-gel TiO₂ surfaces

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Abstract The aim of the present work was to explore possibilities of photocatalytic TiO₂ coating for reducing biofilms on non-living surfaces. The model organism, *Deinococcus geothermalis*, known to initiate growth of durable, colored biofilms on machine surfaces in the paper industry, was allowed to form biofilms on stainless steel, glass and TiO₂ film coated glass or titanium. Field emission electron microscopy revealed that the cells in the biofilm formed at 45°C under vigorous shaking were connected to the surface by means of numerous adhesion threads of 0.1–0.3 µm in length. Adjacent cells were connected to one another by threads of 0.5–1 µm in length. An ultrastructural analysis gave no indication for the involvement of amorphous extracellular materials (e.g., slime) in the biofilm. When biofilms on photocatalytic TiO₂ surfaces, submerged in water, were exposed to 20 W h m⁻² of 360 nm light, both kinds of adhesion threads were completely destroyed and the *D. geothermalis* cells were extensively removed (from >10⁷ down to below 10⁶ cells cm⁻²). TiO₂ films prepared by the sol-gel technique were slightly more effective than those prepared by the ALD technique. Doping of the TiO₂ with sulfur did not enhance its biofilm-destroying

capacity. The results show that photocatalytic TiO₂ surfaces have potential as a self-cleaning technology for warm water using industries.

Keywords *Deinococcus geothermalis* · Ultrastructure · Photocatalysis · Adhesion threads · Field emission scanning electron microscope (FESEM)

Introduction

Biofilms are a source of product contamination and defects in water using industries, causing energy transfer loss in heat exchangers, inducing failure of medical devices placed in humans, and causing equipment damage and end product contamination and defects [9]. In many cases the use of chemical cleaning agents or biocides have proven ineffective or their use is restricted by regulations, e.g., in the food industry and in products to be used in food contact [7, 31, 41]. Engineering surfaces to repel microbial adhesion, or using physical methods rather than chemical for antifouling is therefore of great interest. Semiconductors like TiO₂ and SnO₂ are known to generate microbicidal, reactive oxygen species upon illumination with UVA [3, 8, 17].

The aim of the present work was to explore possibilities of photocatalytic TiO₂ film coating for reducing biofilms in warm water using industrial processes like papermaking. We used as the model organism *Deinococcus geothermalis*, which is a primary biofilm former, capable of forming durable biofilms on abiotic surfaces in the paper industry [18, 19, 39]. We present results obtained by field emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM) on the details of *D. geothermalis* adhesion onto the surface, and on the impact of illumination at 360 nm on biofilms grown on various coated and non-coated surfaces. Data on biofilm density and its changes were obtained by scanning fluorometry. The results demonstrate a high potential of photocatalytic TiO₂ surfaces for controlling biofilms on metal surfaces.

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Materials and methods

The surfaces and substrata used are listed in Table 1. The model bacterium was *D. geothermalis* E50051 (HAMBI 2411) [39]. All coupons (Table 1, $\sim 1 \text{ cm}^2$) were cleaned with detergent (Nelli soap, Farnos, Turku, Finland), sonicated for 5 min in acetone and in 96% ethanol, disinfected (70% ethanol) and mounted in the wells of a polystyrene plate. The wells were filled with 3 ml of culture medium (oligotrophic medium R2 [2]) and inoculated with 5 vol-% of *D. geothermalis* -strain E50051 grown for 1 day with shaking in R2 broth at +45°C. The plate was covered with a lid and incubated with shaking (160 rpm) for 2 day at +45°C in the dark. The plates holding coupons with pre-grown biofilms, submerged in the R2 medium (3 mm liquid above the biofilm), were illuminated (Sylvania 18 W Blacklight Blue) or not illuminated (control) with 360 nm, 1 W/m^2 , for 20 h, with shaking at +45°C.

Quantifying density of the biofilms

The method for quantifying the density of biofilms was modified from that described by Mattila et al. [28] by replacing ATP content for calibration by microscopic counting. Briefly, the coupons were rinsed with municipal tap water and stained with SYTO9 (Molecular Probes, Leiden, The Netherlands) nucleic acid stain ($3.34 \mu\text{mol l}^{-1}$) for 5 min. The coupons were rinsed with water and the emitted fluorescence from an area of 245–315 mm^2 was measured using a scanning fluorometer (Fluoroskan Ascent, Labsystems, Helsinki, Finland) at excitation wavelength of 478–492 (± 2) nm and emission wavelength of 525–551 (± 2) nm. Fluorescence intensity was translated into cell number using a calibration curve prepared by microscopic counting. The fluorescence intensity was proportional to cell number up to a biofilm density of $5 \times 10^8 \text{ cm}^{-2}$. Stained biofilms were viewed with an epifluorescent microscope (Nikon Eclipse E800, Tokyo, Japan)

Preparation of samples for FESEM

Coupons with biofilms were rinsed with water, fixed in phosphate (0.1 M, pH 7.2) buffered 2.5% glutaraldehyde

for 3 h, and rinsed with phosphate buffer three times. Dehydration was carried out with an ethanol series from 50% to 75% to 96% and absolute, followed by hexamethyldisilazane (Fluka, Buchs, Switzerland). Biofilms were coated with chromium (5 nm, 208 HR High Resolution Sputter Coater, Cressington Scientific Instruments Inc, Cranberry, PA, USA) and microscoped with FESEM of JEOL JSM-6330F (Tokyo, Japan), operated at 15 kV (Fig. 3) or Hitachi S-4800 (Tokyo, Japan) operated at 1 kV (Figs 1, 2, 4, 5).

Preparation of TiO_2 coated surfaces

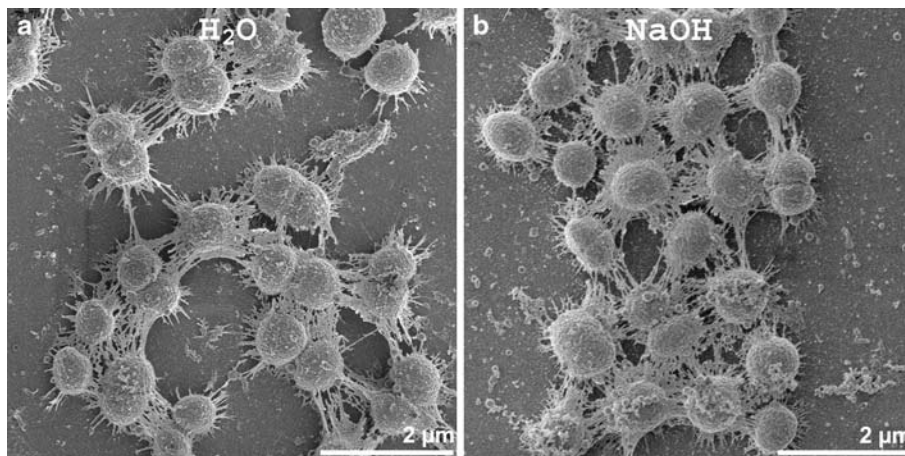
Films ALD_1 and ALD_2 were grown by atomic layer deposition (ALD) on a borosilicate glass substrate. ALD is a gas phase deposition method, which produces uniform and high quality thin films [21, 35]. Film ALD_1 was prepared at 350°C using $\text{Ti}(\text{OCH}_3)_4$ and water as precursors. This process has been shown to produce anatase thin films with good photocatalytic activities [32]. Film ALD_2 was prepared at 500°C using TiCl_4 , water and H_2S as precursors. The role of H_2S was to enhance the formation of a rutile phase and to introduce sulfur doping. Both films were approximately 100 nm in thickness.

The titanium dioxide coating on titanium substrates was prepared by the sol-gel technique according to [14, 15]. Commercially available tetraisopropyl orthotitanate, $\text{Ti}((\text{CH}_3)_2\text{CHO})_4$ (Merck, Whitehouse Station, NJ, USA) was dissolved in half of the prescribed amount of absolute ethanol (solution I). Deionised water, and nitric acid (HNO_3 , 65%) were mixed with the other half of the prescribed amount of absolute ethanol (solution II). Solution II was then slowly added to solution I under constant stirring at 0°C. Poly(ethylene glycol) (PEG; average molecular weight of 2,000) was used as the macropore forming agent. The temperature of the sols was then raised in order to dissolve the added organic templates. The sols were aged for at least 2 weeks before dip-coating. The coatings were prepared on titanium substrates by dip-coating at a withdrawal speed of 0.48 mm/s. The coated Sol-gel_1 was heat-treated at a heating ramp of 1°C/min until temperature reached 500°C, maintained at 500°C for 1 h and allowed to cool in the oven. The coated Sol-gel_2 was heat-treated at 500°C for 1 h and cooled at room temperature. The prepared films approx. 250 nm in thickness (as observed

Table 1 The studied surfaces

| | Surface code | | | | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| | ALD_1 | ALD_2 | Sol-gel_1 | Sol-gel_2 | Noncoated | |
| Preparing method | ALD | ALD | Sol-gel | Sol-gel | – | As delivered |
| Active substance | TiO_2 , Anatase | $\text{TiO}_2\text{:S}$, Rutile | TiO_2 , Anatase macropores | TiO_2 , Anatase | – | – |
| Substratum | Borosilicate glass | Borosilicate glass | Titanium | Titanium | Borosilicate glass | Stainless steel AISI316 |

Fig. 1 Resistance of *Deinococcus geothermalis* biofilm towards washing with alkali. *D. geothermalis* E50051 was grown on glass surface in R2 medium at 45°C for 2 day under shaking at 160 rpm. The field emission scanning electron micrographs were taken after the biofilms were washed for 1 h at 45°C with drinking water (a) or with 0.1% (w/v) aqueous sodium hydroxide (b). Biofilm subjected to no washing (not included in the Figure) appeared identical to panel a



by cross-sectional high-resolution scanning electron microscope) were of anatase crystal structure (as observed by Thin-Film X-ray Diffraction).

Results

Field emission scanning electron microscope was used to establish whether adhesion of *D. geothermalis* to non-living surfaces is mediated by slime, by specific adhesion organelles like fimbria or by the sticky surface of the cell

body, and how the adhesion organelles respond to alkaline washing used in industrial cleaning. *D. geothermalis* strain E50051 was allowed to form biofilm on glass coupons. The biofilms persisting after subsequent washing were then investigated by FESEM (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 reveals the dense network of thread-like organelles of *D. geothermalis* E50051, connecting the cells to the glass surface as well as the adjacent cells to one another. Each cell was connected to the glass by 20–50 threads of 0.3–0.6 μm in length. Adjacent cells were linked to one another by two to ten threads of up to

Fig. 2 Photocatalytically induced change in morphology of *Deinococcus geothermalis* growing on TiO₂ coated glass substratum prepared by the ALD method (surface ALD_1 in Table 1). Field emission scanning electron micrographs show 2 day old biofilms of the strain E50051 not illuminated (a, b) or illuminated (c, d) for 20 h at 360 nm

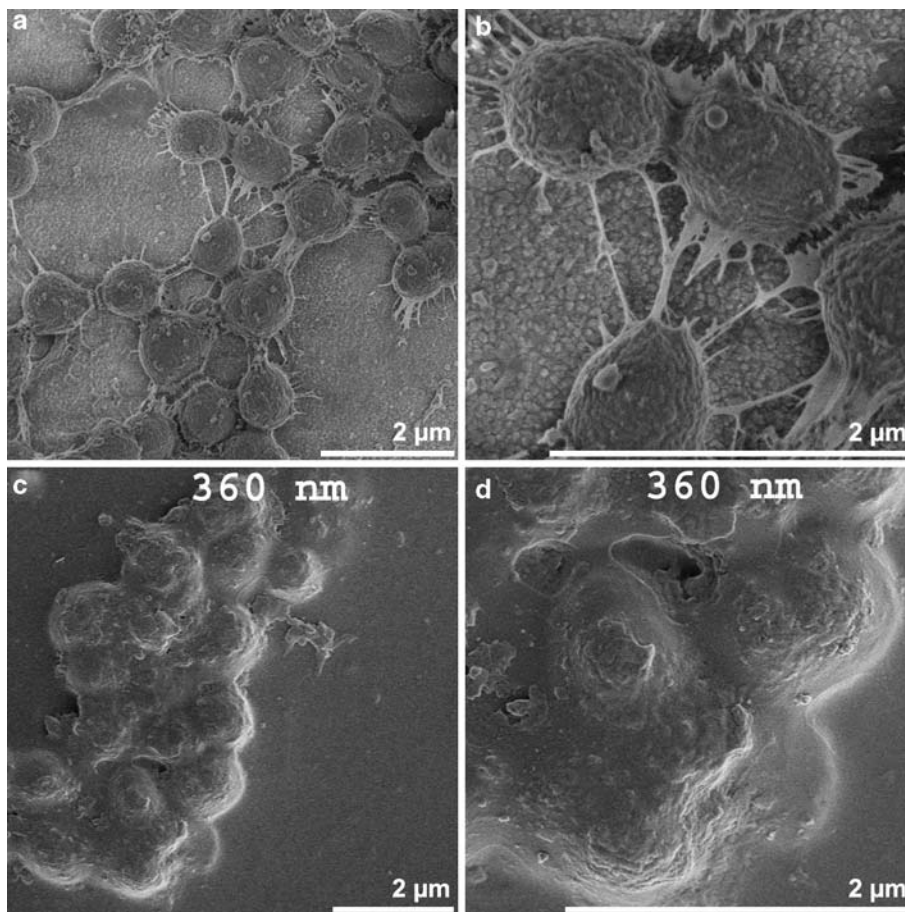
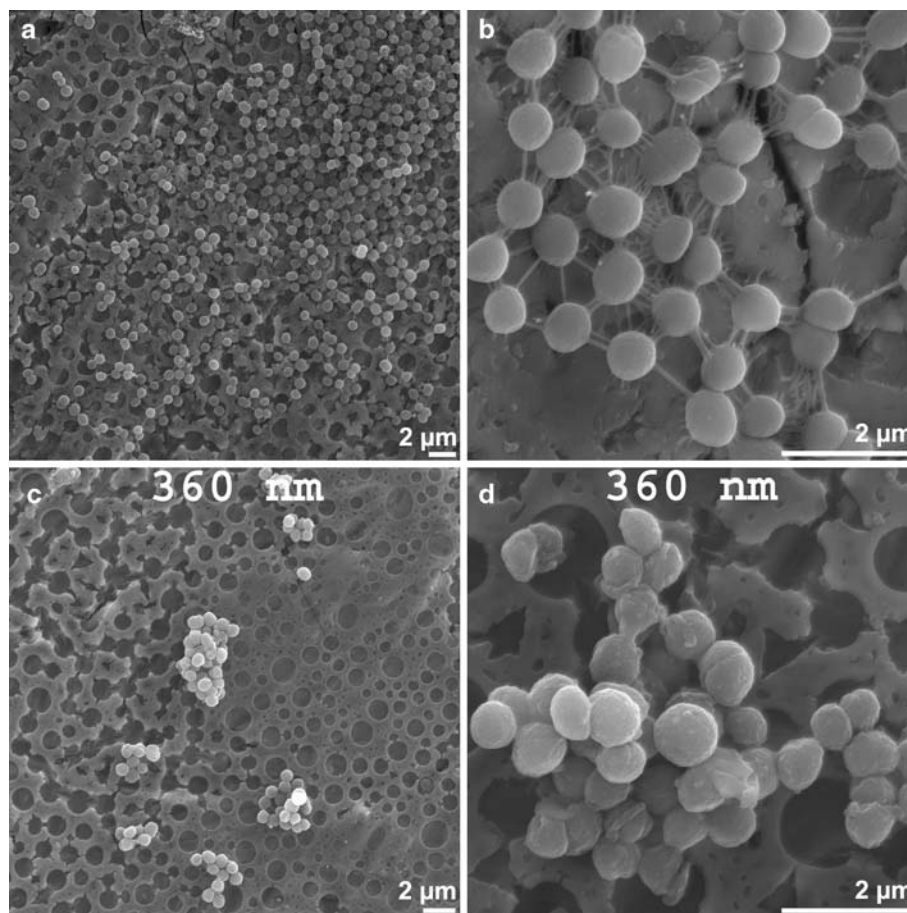


Fig. 3 Photocatalytically induced morphological change in *Deinococcus geothermalis* growing on titanium substrate coated with TiO₂ by the sol-gel method (surface Sol-gel_1 in Table 1). Field emission scanning electron micrographs show 2 day old biofilms of the strain E50051 not illuminated (**a, b**) or illuminated (**c, d**) for 20 h at 360 nm



1 μm in length. The morphology of the cells and their adhesion organelles seemed unaffected by washing with strong alkali under agitation ($\text{pH} > 12$, 45°C , Fig. 1b). The amount of adhered cells remained 10^7 cm^{-2} (within one log unit), irrespective of the washing.

The impact of photocatalysis on the adhesion apparatus of *D. geothermalis* was investigated using glass coupons coated with TiO₂ by the ALD method. *D. geothermalis* biofilm was grown on the surface and then illuminated or not illuminated at 360 nm (Fig. 2).

The cells adhering to TiO₂ possessed threads of 0.5–1 μm in length and $\sim 50 \text{ nm}$ in diameter connecting adjacent cells. The short appendices, 0.1–0.3 μm in length connecting the bacterial cell body to the TiO₂ surface, were fewer in number (5–20 cell^{-1}) than those connecting the same strain onto plain glass (Fig. 1).

Illumination at 360 nm of the biofilm on the TiO₂ (ALD) coated glass surface resulted in massive detachment ($89 \pm 5\%$) of cells. The cells remaining on the surface appeared collapsed and the adhesion threads destroyed (Fig. 2c, d). Parallel coupons of TiO₂ coated surface incubated for the same period (20 h) in the dark, showed no deterioration of the *D. geothermalis* biofilm.

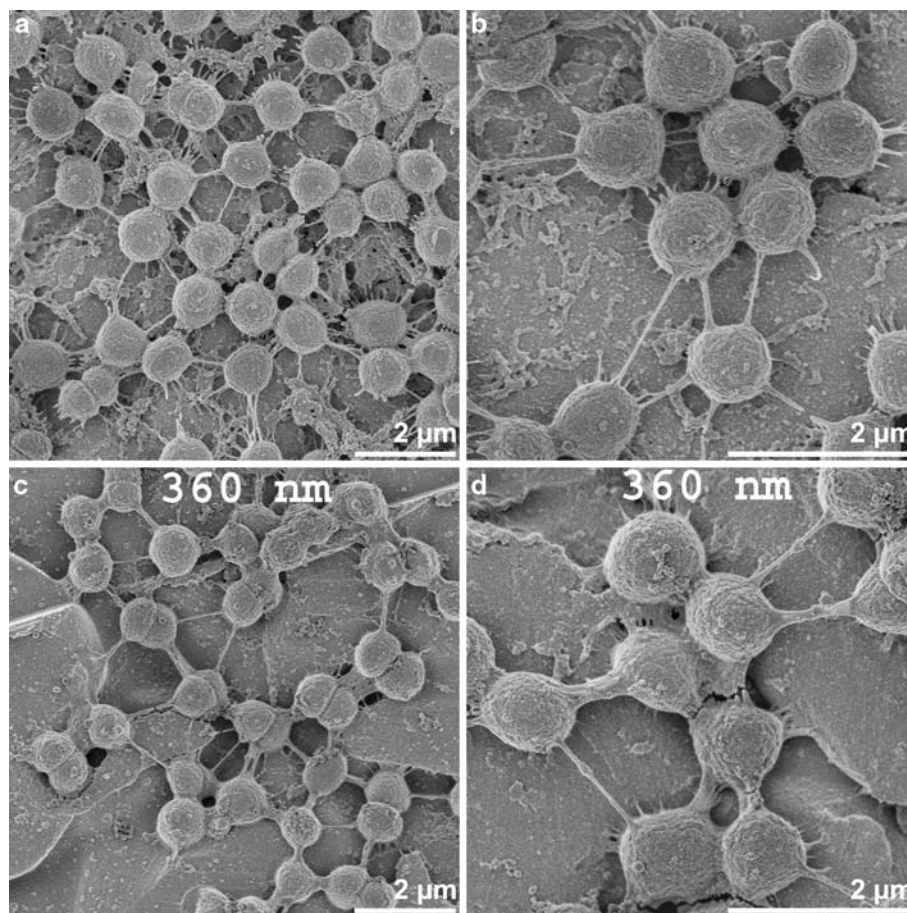
To answer the question of whether the massive collapse of the biofilm on TiO₂ (ALD) surface in response to 360 nm irradiation was linked to the photochemistry of the TiO₂ film or to other properties of the substratum, TiO₂ coatings were prepared on

titanium substrate using a different technology; sol-gel was used. *D. geothermalis* biofilm was grown and the illumination executed as for Fig. 2. It was found (Fig. 3) that the *D. geothermalis* biofilm was removed by photocatalysis from the sol-gel TiO₂ coated titanium surface at least as effectively ($> 95\%$) as from the ALD TiO₂ surface on glass. Figure 3 shows that the cells remaining on the surface had lost all adhesion threads, even if some of the cells looked otherwise intact. Many of the cells looked lysed (Fig. 3c, d).

We conclude that *D. geothermalis* E50051 biofilms grown on TiO₂ coated surfaces were destroyed and removed by photocatalytic activity independent of the method of preparation (ALD or sol-gel) or the substratum (glass or titanium).

To distinguish between the roles of 360 nm illumination as such and of TiO₂ mediated photocatalytic activity, the effects of light exposure were inspected with non-photocatalytic stainless steel. To do this, *D. geothermalis* was allowed to grow on coupons of unpolished stainless steel and then illuminated or not illuminated. It is seen from Fig. 4a, b that *D. geothermalis* growing on stainless steel possessed attachment structures similar in morphology and number to those connecting *D. geothermalis* onto TiO₂ coated surface on glass or on titanium (Figs 2 b, 3 b). The attachment structures differed from those on uncoated glass surface (Fig. 1a) by their lower density.

Fig. 4 Effect of 360 nm illumination on *Deinococcus geothermalis* growing on stainless steel, investigated with field emission scanning electron microscope. The micrographs show *D. geothermalis* E50051 grown for 2 day on stainless steel not illuminated (a, b), or illuminated (c, d) for 20 h at 360 nm



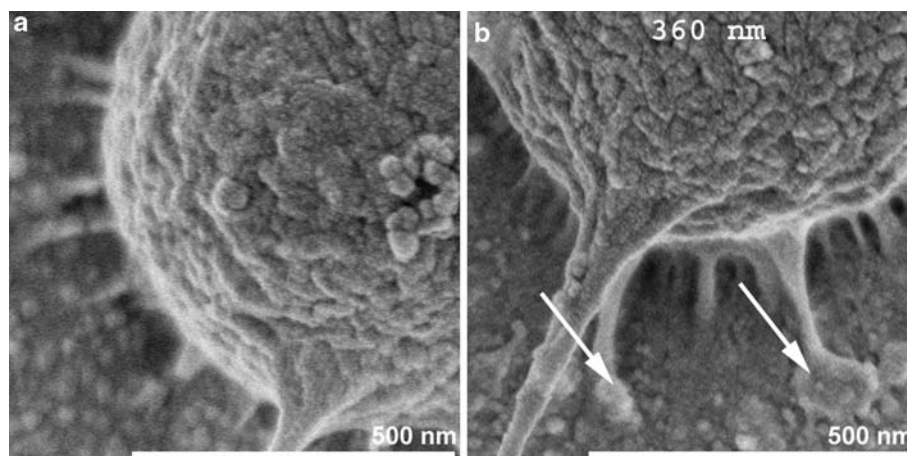
When *D. geothermalis* E50051 grown on stainless steel was illuminated at 360 nm, no ($< < 1$ log) reduction was observed in cell density, and the adhesion threads looked similar in density and dimensions independent of the exposure to illumination (Fig. 4a–d). Therefore, the effects displayed in Figs. 2c, d and 3c, d must have been due to TiO_2 induced photocatalysis.

Ultrastructural details of the cell surface and adhesion organelles of *D. geothermalis* are shown in high magnification ($\times 100,000$) FESEM micrographs in Fig. 5.

It shows that the cell surface (Fig. 5a) of *D. geothermalis* is not smooth but is composed of many differently shaped structures. The adhesion threads are non-uniform in shape, thickness and length (Fig. 5b). Several threads expand to a foot-like form at the site where the thread touches the steel surface (arrows in Fig. 5b).

To collect quantitative data on the effects of the substratum and the treatments on biofilm density, a method is needed for counting of cells independent of the possible presence of extracellular materials like

Fig. 5 Ultrastructural details of *Deinococcus geothermalis* cells attached on stainless steel coupons. The images were taken with field emission scanning electron microscope applying $\times 100,000$ magnification. *D. geothermalis* was grown and illuminated as in Fig. 4. Not illuminated (a), or illuminated (b) for 20 h at 360 nm



slime. We developed a method based on optical fluorescence reading to quantitate biofilms. The fluorescence emitted by bacterial biomass stained with a nucleic acid specific dye, SYTO9, is quantified using a scanning fluorometer. Figure 6 shows examples of microscopic views of steel coupons prepared for fluorescent readout. It shows surface attached deinococcal cells of diameter of 1 μm occurring singly, in pairs, in small microcolonies where individual cells (3–10) can be distinguished and as larger intensively fluorescing microcolonies where the individual cells can no longer be distinguished. All cell aggregate sizes were approximately equally distributed on the un-coated steel surface whether illuminated (Fig. 6b) or not illuminated (Fig. 6a).

Figure 7 shows data obtained by the fluorescent reading technique of *D. geothermalis* biofilms on different substrates and their responses to photocatalytic activity. It shows that *D. geothermalis* E50051 adhered approximately 1 log more effectively to steel and to TiO₂ coated surfaces than to glass. Photocatalytic TiO₂ ALD surfaces were effective in destroying the adhered biofilms in response to irradiation, reducing the biofilm quantity by 1 log value and those prepared by the sol-gel method, by 2 log values. Doping of ALD-TiO₂ with sulfur (ALD_2, Fig. 7) did not enhance its biofilm destroying activity.

Discussion

This paper describes the biofilm behavior of paper machine pink slime former *D. geothermalis* on abiotic surfaces and reversal of the adhesion by illuminated photocatalytic films. *D. geothermalis* adhered onto glass, steel and TiO₂ coated materials by an extensive network of adhesion threads. The FESEM images gave no indication of any significant contribution of extracellular materials in the biofilm. The adhesion threads in *D. geothermalis* were first observed by Kolari et al. [19]. These threads connect the cells to an abiotic substratum, leading to formation of an enduring biofilm that cannot be removed by vigorous shaking in water or by chemi-

cally aggressive cleaning formulations such as sodium dodecyl sulphate [19] or sodium hydroxide [this paper; 19] at an elevated temperature. The inertness towards chemical cleaning and shearing forces distinguishes the deinococcal adhesion apparatus from that described for other taxons like *Burkholderia cepacia* and *Staphylococcus epidermidis* [19] and *Acinetobacter* sp. [12].

It has been shown in many studies that bacteria growing as biofilms are more resistant to antimicrobial agents than the same bacteria in planktonic form [4–6, 20, 22, 36]. Kolari et al. [20] reported that in the presence of biocides, many biofilm bacteria, including *D. geothermalis*, produced even more biofilm than in the absence of biocides.

In this study, we show that biofilms of *D. geothermalis* on TiO₂ coated surfaces were effectively removed (1–2 log units) by titanium dioxide generated photocatalytic action in response to irradiation at 360 nm. This wavelength is emitted by daylight sources (fluorescent tubes) commonly used in offices and workspaces.

FESEM analysis of *D. geothermalis* biofilms after exposure to TiO₂-generated photocatalysis upon illumination at 360 nm showed that adhesion threads connecting the *D. geothermalis* cells to each other and to the abiotic surface were completely destroyed. Photocatalytic activity by TiO₂ is known to have disinfecting action [1, 11, 13, 24, 26, 37, 40]. Its effectiveness in killing water suspended microorganisms is well documented and also has practical applications.

The potential of photocatalytic TiO₂ as a tool against a biofilm mode of growth has received little attention so far. Li and Logan [23] studied the response of low density (10^5 cells cm^{-2}) adhered *Escherichia coli* (strains JM109, D21 and D21f2), *B. cepacia* (strains G4 and Env435) and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (strains PA01 and PDO300) on TiO₂ coated glass upon illumination at 254 (UVC) and 340 nm (UVA). They achieved up to 50% removal at 340 nm and 30–70% removal at 254 nm using irradiation doses of 28–46 W h m^{-2} . In our study, from 90% to close to 100% removal of *D. geothermalis* was observed at 360 nm irradiation upon exposure to 20 W h m^{-2} . Li and Logan [23] used a 20 nm thick

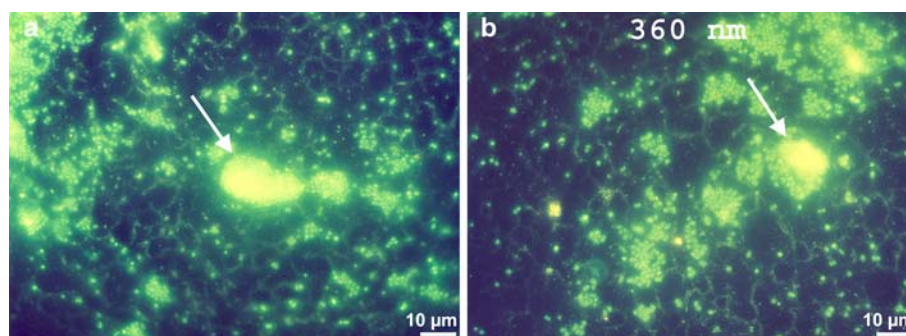


Fig. 6 Epifluorescence micrographs of SYTO9 stained 2 day grown *Deinococcus geothermalis* E50051 biofilm on steel before (a) and after (b) illumination at 360 nm (Nikon Eclipse E800; Excitation- λ 478–492 (± 2) nm, emission- λ 525–551 (± 2) nm).

Fluorescent readout (Fig. 7) makes it possible to estimate cell numbers in larger, multi-layered, microcolonies, where microscopic counting is not possible (arrows)

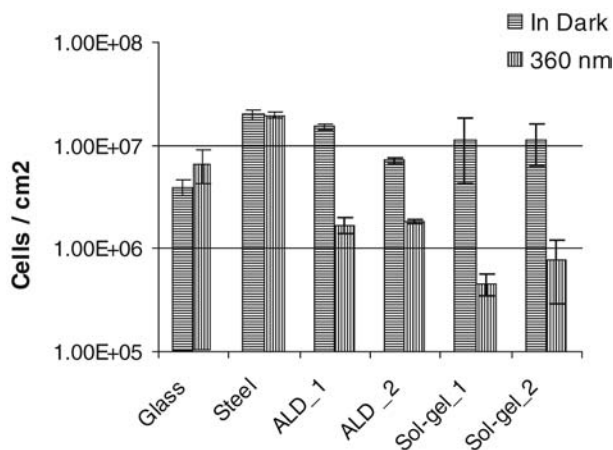


Fig. 7 Densities of *Deinococcus geothermalis* E50051 biofilms on abiotic surfaces and the effects of illumination at 360 nm. Biofilms were grown and then irradiated as described in the legend for Fig. 1. The coupons were stained with SYTO9 and intensity of the emitted fluorescence quantitated with a scanning fluorometer. Fluorescence values were translated in to cell numbers by using standard curve based on microscopic counting. Error bars indicate standard deviations

anatase TiO₂ film. Photocatalytic coatings used in our work were prepared by ALD [21] and sol-gel [14, 15] techniques to a thickness of 100 nm, possibly explaining the higher efficacy of biofilm removal achieved.

The adhesion threads connecting *D. geothermalis* to the substratum were shown to be non-uniform in thickness and length, and attachment to an abiotic surface appeared to involve a foot-like structure at the contact site. No similar structure has been reported in any other bacteria until now. *D. geothermalis* is a non-motile organism, possessing the ability to glide on a surface when exposed to external pressure [19]. Active gliding motility designated as “social gliding motility” or “twitching motility” has been shown in wide range of bacteria, e.g., *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* and *Myxococcus xanthus* [10, 27, 29] Such motility has been shown to depend on a type IV pilus. Type IV pili are known to be involved also in adhesion of *Shewanella oneidensis* onto glass [38], of *Ralstonia solanacearum* to polyvinylchloride (PVC) plastic [16] and microcolony formation of *P. aeruginosa* on polyvinylchloride plastic [30]. Interestingly, it was shown recently that the type IV pili occurring in iron reducing *Geobacter* species are electrically conductive nanowires connecting the bacteria to an inorganic surface [33].

The complete chromosomal sequence of one deinococcal species, *D. radiodurans*, is known [25]. It contains the full set of genes needed for the type IV pilus production machinery. A preliminary sequence involving type IV pilus genes has also been reported in *D. geothermalis* DSM11300 (accession number: NZ_AAHE00000000, [34]). However, the structures of *D. geothermalis* shown in this paper by FESEM and earlier by atomic force microscopy (AFM) [19] neither resemble morphologically the type IV pili such as published by Kang et al. [16] in

R. solanacearum nor the anchor-like adhesion organelles of *Acinetobacter* sp. [12]. In addition to the adhesion threads (Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 in this paper) *D. geothermalis* possesses a patchy cell surface responding heterogeneously to adhesion forces measured by AFM [19]. The patchy surface observed by FESEM in this study (Fig. 5) and by AFM by Kolari et al. [19] may thus have local and heterogeneous adhesiveness, possibly explaining why some of the *D. geothermalis* cells persistently adhered to TiO₂ film post irradiation in spite of the complete loss of adhesion threads.

The high efficacy of photocatalytic TiO₂ films in destroying the adhesion apparatus of the tenacious biofilm former *D. geothermalis* indicates that this technology could be used as a tool towards a biocide free process in warm water industries such as paper mills.

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