

# Ab initio modeling of TiO<sub>2</sub> nanosheets

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**Abstract** We present density functional calculations on 1–6 monolayer (ML) thick TiO<sub>2</sub> films peeled off from the main low-index surfaces of anatase. The structure of the films is optimized both by constraining the lattice constants to those of bulk anatase, and by allowing them to relax. It is found that the stability order of the films does not follow that of the surfaces from which they are derived, and does not increase monotonously with film thickness. Furthermore, relaxing the lattice constants can induce large modifications in the film structure. In particular, two anomalously stable films are found. One derives from the 2 ML (001) film, and rearranges to a lepidocrocite-TiO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet. The other one derives from a 4 ML (101) film, and gives rise to a novel phase, where all the Ti ions are fivefold coordinated.

**Keywords** Titanium dioxide · Nanosheets · Density functional calculations

## 1 Introduction

Titania (TiO<sub>2</sub>) is one of the most versatile metal oxides, as it is widely adopted in heterogeneous catalysis, photocatalysis, and photovoltaics applications [1–3]. Because the most active polymorph, anatase, is not stable as a bulk phase [4], TiO<sub>2</sub> is commonly used under the form of nanosized particles since decades. Recently, the need of obtaining a better control in the size and the shape of metal oxide nanoparticles

has been boosted by the search for materials of improved performance. This has stimulated both work in the field of synthesis [5, 6] as well as investigations on model systems in UHV [7, 8]. Particular interest is being devoted to TiO<sub>2</sub> nanosheets, which are two-dimensional systems having a thickness of a few atomic layers. In spite of their low dimensionality, TiO<sub>2</sub> nanosheets can be remarkably stable. In particular, lepidocrocite structured nanosheets, where Ti ions are in a sixfold coordinated configuration, were computed to be only 0.18 eV/unit formula higher in energy with respect to bulk TiO<sub>2</sub> [9]. This has suggested the use of lepidocrocite TiO<sub>2</sub> as a building block for complex nanostructured materials, as multilayer and composite systems [10–13]. Furthermore, lepidocrocite nanosheets can be possibly wrapped up in nanotubes, even though this issue is still debated [14–28]. An interesting feature of lepidocrocite TiO<sub>2</sub> layers is their close structural relationship with anatase. In fact, recent density functional theory (DFT) investigations showed that a bilayer of (001)-oriented TiO<sub>2</sub>-anatase can be converted through a barrierless pathway into a lepidocrocite nanosheet, by allowing the upper half of the bilayer slide over the lower half [7]. A similar conclusion has been obtained by molecular dynamics (MD) investigations on 1D periodic models cut out from (001)-oriented TiO<sub>2</sub>-anatase slabs [29]. It is known that on decreasing the crystallite size, the favored titania phase turns out to be the thermodynamically unstable anatase one, because of its low surface energy [4, 30, 31]. However, the instability of thin anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> layers with respect to lepidocrocite nanosheets shows that on reducing one or more particle dimensions to subnanoscopic size, other structures may be stable. In this work we perform a systematic investigation of the energetics of structures obtained by peeling off ultrathin layers from low-index surfaces of anatase TiO<sub>2</sub>, with the aim of verifying whether stable TiO<sub>2</sub> nanolayers with structure other than lepidocrocite exist.

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## 2 Computational details

We considered anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> thin films of thickness ranging from 1 to 6 monolayers (ML), which were modeled with slabs repeated along the *z* direction. We considered the main low-index surfaces of anatase (Fig. 1). We adopted a plane-wave basis set, Vanderbilt ultrasoft pseudopotentials [32] and the Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof [33] exchange–correlation functional. Valence states include 2s and 2p shells for O (six electrons), and 3s, 3p, 3d, and 4s states for Ti (12 valence electrons). Consecutive slabs were separated by a vacuum region of at least 10 Å. Both the internal and the lattice constants of the slab models were optimized. The configuration space was first explored by computing total energies over coarse grids where the film constants were elongated/contracted up to ±25% wrt the bulk values. Minima structures were refined by variable-cell runs using a Wentzovitch damped dynamics [34]. Test carried out on bulk TiO<sub>2</sub> showed that results of converged fixed-cutoff calculations are reproduced by variable-cell calculations with a kinetic-energy cutoff of 50 Ry for the wavefunctions, and of 400 Ry for the augmentation charge. We emphasize that, though we optimized the film structures thoroughly (no symmetry was considered during the optimization runs) the aim of our work was not that of obtaining the global minimum starting from a given distributions of cations and anions, but rather that of exploring the architectures of possible TiO<sub>2</sub> nanolayers whose structure is connected to that of anatase. To compare the energy of different films, we define a formation energy per TiO<sub>2</sub> unit ( $E_{\text{film}}$ ) as follows:

$$E_{\text{film}} = E_{\text{tot}}(\text{slab})/n - E_{\text{tot}}(\text{TiO}_2) \quad (1)$$

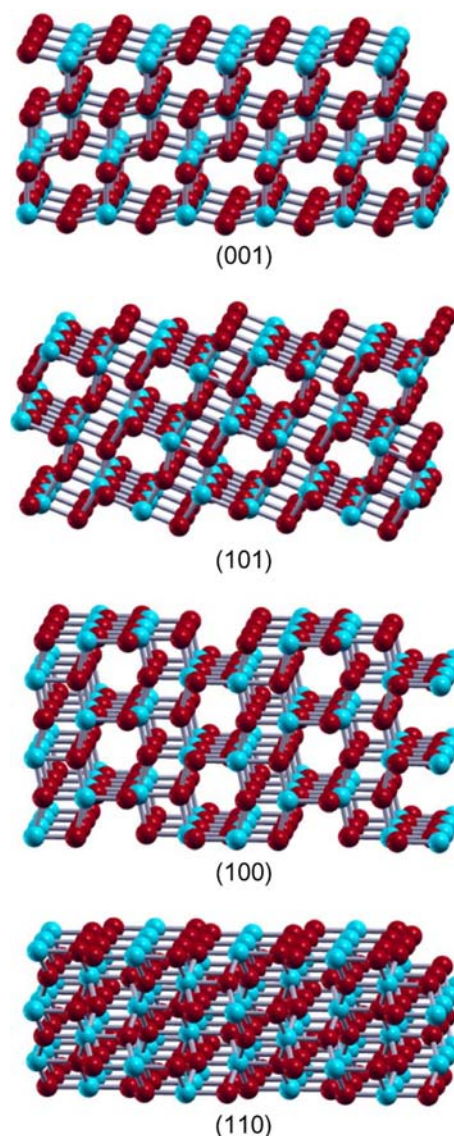
where  $E_{\text{tot}}(\text{slab})$  is the total energy of the slab model,  $E_{\text{tot}}(\text{TiO}_2)$  is the total energy of bulk anatase per unit formula, and  $n$  is the number stoichiometric TiO<sub>2</sub> units forming the slab unit cell. We indicate as  $E_{\text{film}}$  and  $E'_{\text{film}}$  values computed *before* and *after* allowing the slab constants to relax, respectively (ion positions were fully relaxed in both cases). For films whose lateral size was constrained to the bulk lattice constants, we can also define a surface energy which can be compared to that of the surface from which they were peeled off. This energy ( $E_{\text{surf}}$ ) is also reported, and was computed as:

$$E_{\text{surf}} = [E_{\text{tot}}(\text{slab}) - n \times E_{\text{tot}}(\text{TiO}_2)]/2A \quad (2)$$

where  $A$  is the area of the film surface.

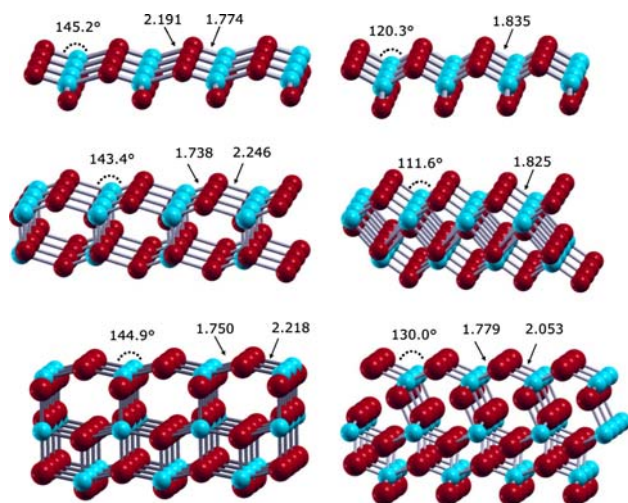
## 3 Results and discussion

*(001)-oriented films.* The (001) surface has a square unit cell, and is characterized by the presence of rows of two-fold coordinated anions (O<sub>2c</sub>). Each O<sub>2c</sub> ion in the unrelaxed structure is symmetrically connected to two fivefold



**Fig. 1** Ball-and-sticks models of most stable low-index anatase surfaces

coordinated cations (Ti<sub>5c</sub>), which yields –Ti<sub>5c</sub>–O<sub>2c</sub>– chains running perpendicular to the O<sub>2c</sub> rows. Relaxation schemes of metal oxide surfaces usually involve the shortening of the bonds between undercoordinated ions, while cations and anions move inward and outward, respectively. However, in the case of the anatase (001) surface these stabilization criteria are conflicting. This drives a symmetry breaking of the surface chains, which are converted in a sequence of alternating short (double) and long (dative) Ti<sub>5c</sub>–O<sub>2c</sub> bonds [30,31]. Even when relaxed, the surface is however under tensile stress, which can be put in relation with the unnatural bond angle at the O<sub>2c</sub> ions (~150°). This explains why on annealed samples the (001) surface is (1 × 4)-reconstructed. Theoretical calculations by Lazzeri and Selloni [35] indicate that this corresponds to a structure where one out of four



**Fig. 2** From top to bottom: relaxed structures of 1 ML, 2 ML, and 3 ML (001)-oriented films. Structures on the left (right) are those obtained with bulk (optimized) constants. Displayed bond lengths are in Å

$O_{2c}$  rows are replaced by a “polymer” of  $TiO_3$  stoichiometry which are characterized by a tetrahedral coordination at the Ti ions. Given the larger section of the  $TiO_3$  polymer when compared to that of O-bridges, the remaining parts of the surface chains can shrink: this lowers the  $Ti_{5c}-O_{2c}-Ti_{5c}$  angles to  $\sim 120^\circ$ , which is stereochemically more appropriate for twofold coordinated O ions.

Now, we start to study the energetics of thin  $TiO_2$  films peeled off from the surface. The thinnest possible film is made of only one  $TiO_2$  unit for each surface cell, i.e., it is a  $TiO_2$  monolayer. Still, it has the main features of the (001) surface, because it exposes  $O_{2c}$  ions connected to Ti ions, even though the latter are now fourfold, instead of fivefold coordinated. The upper and the lower sides of the film are equivalent but rotated by  $90^\circ$ , as a consequence of the pseudo-tetrahedral coordination of the cation. Because the film is no more connected to an underlying bulk phase, its lattice constants can freely relax. As we should expect on the basis of above discussion, the film undergoes a symmetric shrinking (see Fig. 2). This yields a substantial contraction both for the lattice constant (from 3.786 to 3.185 Å), and for the Ti–O–Ti angle (from  $150^\circ$  to  $120^\circ$ ), similarly to the  $(1 \times 4)$ -reconstructed surface.

These structure changes allow a strong stabilization of the film energy, which passes from 2.09 to 0.65 eV/ $TiO_2$  stoichiometric unit above the bulk phase.

We consider next a 2 ML film, where the surface chains of the top and bottom surfaces run in the same direction. As we already showed in Ref. [7], this film spontaneously undergoes a spectacular transformation, which consists in a gliding of the upper part of the film over the lower part along the direction of the surface chains, and by a simultaneous contraction of the lattice constant along the same direction (see Fig. 2,

**Table 1** Structural and energy parameters of  $TiO_2$  films derived from the (001) anatase surface, and consisting of a number layers  $1 \leq N_{lay} \leq 6$

$N_{lay}$	$E_{film}$	$E_{surf}$	$a'$	$b'$	$E'_{film}$
1	2.09	1.17	3.185	3.185	0.65
2	0.78	0.87	3.730	3.020	0.16
3	0.53	0.90	3.575	3.475	0.44
4	0.41	0.91	3.863	3.407	0.24
5	0.32	0.91	3.716	3.716	0.31
6	0.27	0.90	3.862	3.520	0.21

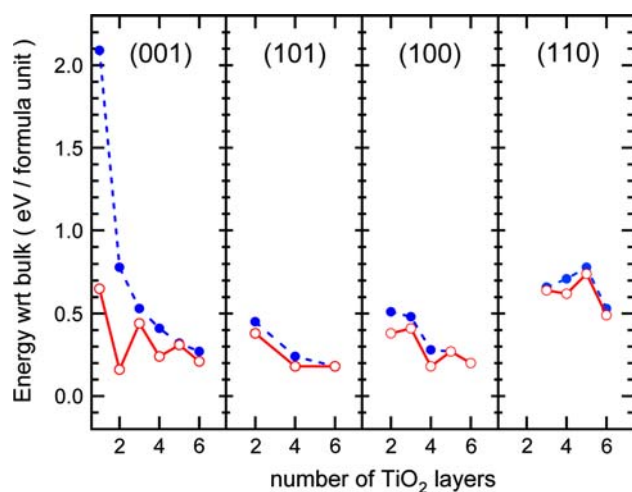
$E_{film}$  (in eV/ $TiO_2$ ) is the film energy wrt bulk anatase, while  $E_{surf}$  (in  $J/m^2$ ) is the surface energy. Both values are computed by constraining the film constants to those of bulk anatase ( $a = 3.786$  Å,  $b = 3.786$  Å).  $E'_{film}$  is the film energy computed for the  $a'$  and  $b'$  optimized constants

middle). The final structure is that of lepidocrocite  $TiO_2$ , and it is characterized by fully (viz. sixfold) coordinated cations, and by a remarkable stability: only 0.16 eV/ $TiO_2$  above bulk anatase, to be compared with the 0.78 eV of the starting film.

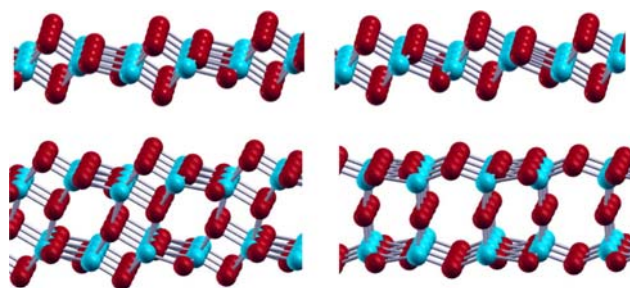
Because the direction of the  $-Ti_{5c}-O_{2c}-$  chains rotates by  $90^\circ$  on adding one  $TiO_2$  monolayer, for a 3 ML-film chains at the top and at the bottom surface run in perpendicular directions, as in the 1 ML case. This hampers a anisotropic shrinking of the unit cell, and consequently the attainment of sixfold coordination for Ti cations. Interestingly, however, both the film surfaces assume a canted geometry, which can be interpreted as a (frustrated) attempt to assume a lepidocrocite structure (see Fig. 2, bottom). The converged cell is  $3.475 \times 3.475$  Å, while cell relaxation lowers the film energy from 0.53 to 0.44 eV/ $TiO_2$ .

So far, we have found that (001)-oriented films with an odd number of  $TiO_2$  layers have square unit cells, whereas films with an even number of  $TiO_2$  layers have a rectangular unit cell, and are characterized by a higher lattice relaxation energy. This trend is maintained at least until  $N_{lay} = 6$ , as it appears from Table 1 and Fig. 3, where the total energy curves corresponding to films with bulk and relaxed lattice constants are compared. In fact, the solid red curve shows a zig-zag profile, with maxima and minima corresponding to odd and even  $N_{lay}$  values, respectively.

For the thickness range here considered, the minimum corresponds to  $N_{lay} = 2$ , i.e., for the lepidocrocite structure. Thus, optimized structures obtained for  $N_{lay} = 4$  and  $N_{lay} = 6$  are not global minima, since their conversion into two (three) lepidocrocite nanosheets is energetically favored. Another interesting feature of the Fig. 3 graph is that, in contrast to the solid curve, the broken blue curve, which refers to the total energy of the films with bulk lattice constants, displays a monotonously decreasing trend. Thus, the sawtooth profile of the red curve has a completely different nature with respect to that observed, e.g., for the rutile (110) surface, where a different stability of films made of even/odd



**Fig. 3** Total energies of relaxed anatase thin films of 1–6 ML thickness. *Dots* represent calculations where the film constants were constrained to the bulk values, whereas *open circles* refer to totally unconstrained optimizations



**Fig. 4** Relaxed structures of 1 ML (*top*) and 2 ML (*bottom*) (101)-oriented films. Structures on the *left* (*right*) are those obtained with bulk (optimized) constants

number of layers is found even without relaxing the film lattice constants [36].

**(101)-oriented films.** The (101) surface has a centered rectangular cell, and it can be viewed as a stack of double layers of  $\text{TiO}_2$ , separated by regions of relatively low density. The (101) surface exposes fivefold and sixfold coordinated cations, as well as twofold and threefold coordinated anions. At variance to the (001) case, the  $\text{O}_{2c}$  ions connect  $\text{Ti}_{6c}$  and  $\text{Ti}_{5c}$  cations, which allows a more efficient ion relaxation. As a result, the (101) surface is much more stable than the (001) one. Because the film is organized in double layers, it makes sense to consider only films made of an even number of  $\text{TiO}_2$  layers. Thus, we start by considering the 2 ML case. In tune with the low energy and chemical inertness of the (101) surface [30,31,37–41], this film is rather stable even when adopting the bulk lattice constants ( $0.45 \text{ eV/TiO}_2$ ), while cell optimization has a very limited impact both for structure (Table 2 and Fig. 4) and for energy ( $0.38 \text{ eV/TiO}_2$ ). The equilibrium cell size is  $3.545 \times 10.495 \text{ \AA}$  to be compared with the  $3.786 \times 10.447 \text{ \AA}$  bulk one.

**Table 2** Structural and energy parameters of  $\text{TiO}_2$  films derived from the (101) anatase surface, and consisting of an even number layers  $2 \leq N_{\text{lay}} \leq 6$

$N_{\text{lay}}$	$E_{\text{film}}$	$E_{\text{surf}}$	$a'$	$b'$	$E'_{\text{film}}$
2	0.45	0.36	3.545	10.495	0.38
4	0.24	0.40	3.677	11.887	0.18
6	0.18	0.44	3.741	10.423	0.18

$E_{\text{film}}$  (in  $\text{eV/TiO}_2$ ) is the film energy wrt. bulk anatase, while  $E_{\text{surf}}$  is the surface energy (in  $\text{J/m}^2$ ). Both values are computed by constraining the film constants to those of bulk anatase ( $a = 3.786 \text{ \AA}$ ,  $b = 10.447 \text{ \AA}$ ).  $E'_{\text{film}}$  is the film energy computed for the  $a'$  and  $b'$  optimized constants

On the basis of the preceding discussion, we could expect a smooth convergence towards a bulk-like situation when increasing the film thickness. Surprisingly, however, we find that for 4-ML film the energy gain obtained by relaxing the cell is larger than that of the 2-ML film (from  $0.28$  to  $0.18 \text{ eV/TiO}_2$ ). This is due to an unexpected rearrangement of the film, which gives rise to the peculiar structure shown in Fig. 4, that we call “pentacoordinated nanosheet” because all the cations are fivefold coordinated, while the central O ions are converted from threefold to twofold coordinated. We speculate that the driving force of the transformation is the lowering of the O coordination number, since in coordination chemistry the threefold coordination is rather unfavored for oxygen. Remarkably, this nanosheet is *stretched*, rather than *shrunked*, as the lepidocrocite nanosheet: the cell size, in fact, passes from  $3.786 \times 10.447 \text{ \AA}$  to  $3.677 \times 11.887 \text{ \AA}$ . No major restructuring occurs for a 6 ML film (Table 3). The energy of the film with the bulk constants ( $+0.18 \text{ eV/TiO}_2$ ) is not appreciably changed by optimizing the lattice constants, and it is equal to that computed for the optimized 4-ML film.

**(100)-oriented films.** The (100) surface is only slightly less stable than the (101) one. In fact, it contains the same structural elements, but they are differently arranged. As a consequence, films can be built with both an even and an odd number of ML, except for the 1 ML film, which is not complete. The similarity of the (101) and (100) surfaces, coupled to the assumption of no symmetry in the lattice optimization procedure, has the interesting consequence that a 2-ML film is transformed into a 2-ML (101) film, whereas a 4-ML film is converted into the “pentacoordinated” nanosheet which was obtained by optimizing the constants of the 4-ML (101) film.

Because 3-ML (101) films are not possible, the 3-ML (100) film does not undergo a major restructuring, and it turns out to be less stable of both the 2-ML and the 4-ML films.

Notably, this instability of the 3-ML film is not only due to the fact that it cannot be converted into more stable (101)-derived structures, but it seems to be also intrinsic in (100) films made of an odd number of monolayers, as it can be deduced from the total energy curve of the bulk-dimensioned

**Table 3** Structural and energy parameters of TiO<sub>2</sub> films derived from the (100) anatase surface, and consisting of a number layers  $2 \leq N_{\text{lay}} \leq 6$ 

$N_{\text{lay}}$	$E_{\text{film}}$	$E_{\text{surf}}$	$a'$	$b'$	$E'_{\text{film}}$
2	0.51	0.45	3.545	10.495	0.38
3	0.48	0.63	3.639	10.304	0.44
4	0.28	0.49	3.677	11.887	0.18
5	0.27	0.60	3.734	9.582	0.27
6	0.20	0.53	3.753	9.682	0.20

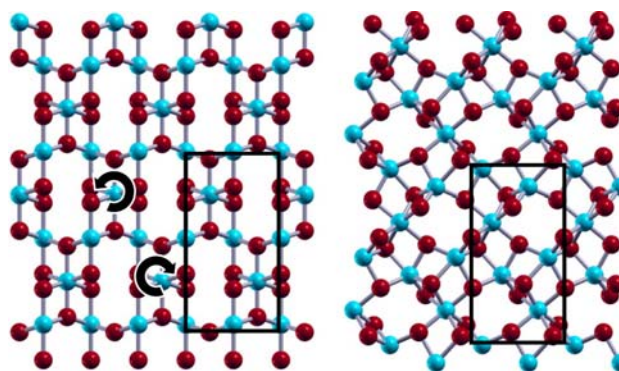
$E_{\text{film}}$  (in eV/TiO<sub>2</sub>) is the film energy wrt bulk anatase, while  $E_{\text{surf}}$  is the surface energy (in J/m<sup>2</sup>). Both values are computed by constraining the film constants to those of bulk anatase ( $a = 3.786 \text{ \AA}$ ,  $b = 9.737 \text{ \AA}$ ).  $E'_{\text{film}}$  is the film energy computed for the  $a'$  and  $b'$  optimized constants

(100) films reported in Fig. 3. In any case, similar to the (101) case, relaxing the film lattice constants for 5- and 6-ML films has practically no effect on the energy.

**(110)-oriented films.** The (110) surface has a centered rectangular cell, and it is characterized by the presence of Ti<sub>4c</sub> ions. It should be noted, however, that the coordination of these species strongly deviates from the tetrahedral one, which best suits a moderately ionic compound as TiO<sub>2</sub>, and it can be rather described as cis-divacant octahedral. Thus, the (110) surface is the most unstable of those considered so far. To obtain a 2D-film without interruptions we must take at least three monolayers, i.e., one layer of Ti<sub>6c</sub> ions at the film center and one layer of Ti<sub>4c</sub> at each surface (see Fig. 5, left). The film relaxation is driven by the necessity of yielding a more stable environment to the Ti<sub>4c</sub> ions. The resulting structural rearrangement is best described as a rotation in opposite direction of the two Ti<sub>6c</sub> present in each cell see Fig. 5, right). In this way, the Ti<sub>4c</sub> ions are converted to Ti<sub>5c</sub> ions, while half of the O<sub>2c</sub> ions initially present are converted to O<sub>3c</sub>. Though the increase of the coordination number of surface oxygens is not usually energetically convenient, this is largely compensated by the modification of the coordination of the Ti ions. Thicker films do not undergo major rearrangements. It is however interesting to note that whereas films composed by an odd number of layers do maintain a rectangular cell, those composed by an even number of layers is slightly distorted to monoclinic symmetry (Table 4).

## 4 Conclusion

In conclusion, structural properties of ultrathin anatase layers depend on thickness in a way which is sensitive to the layer orientation. In particular, we find that: (1) the stability sequence of thinner films does not follow that of related surfaces, (2) notably, (001)-oriented films can compete in stability with (101) and (100) ones of comparable thickness even for 6 ML-thick films, (3) thinner films may exhibit phase

**Fig. 5** Left top view of a 3-ML (110)-oriented film with the bulk constant. To better show its nature, the *unrelaxed* ionic structure is shown. Curved arrows show the rotations undergone by the Ti<sub>6c</sub> ions upon relaxation. Right equilibrium structure of the relaxed film with the optimized constants**Table 4** Structural and energy parameters of TiO<sub>2</sub> films derived from the (110) anatase surface, and consisting of a number layers  $3 \leq N_{\text{lay}} \leq 6$ 

$N_{\text{lay}}$	$E_{\text{film}}$	$E_{\text{surf}}$	$a'$	$b'$	$\beta'$	$E'_{\text{film}}$
3	0.66	1.36	5.195	9.893	90.	0.64
4	0.71	0.85	5.882	9.268	89.27	0.62
5	0.78	1.16	5.473	9.193	90.	0.74
6	0.53	0.95	5.655	9.322	88.65	0.49

$E_{\text{film}}$  (in eV/TiO<sub>2</sub>) is the film energy wrt bulk anatase, while  $E_{\text{surf}}$  is the surface energy (in J/m<sup>2</sup>). Both values are computed by constraining the film constants to those of bulk anatase ( $a = 5.354 \text{ \AA}$ ,  $b = 9.737 \text{ \AA}$ ,  $\beta = 90^\circ$ ).  $E'_{\text{film}}$  is the film energy computed for the  $a'$ ,  $b'$ , and  $\beta'$  optimized constants

transitions, in some cases giving rise to unprecedented structures; (4) stability oscillations are observed when increasing the thickness of films with a given orientation. These oscillations can be already present when the film constants are frozen to the bulk values, or can be induced by the relaxing the constants.

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