



Cite this: *Chem. Commun.*, 2018, 54, 13726

Received 29th September 2018,  
Accepted 13th November 2018

DOI: 10.1039/c8cc07725h

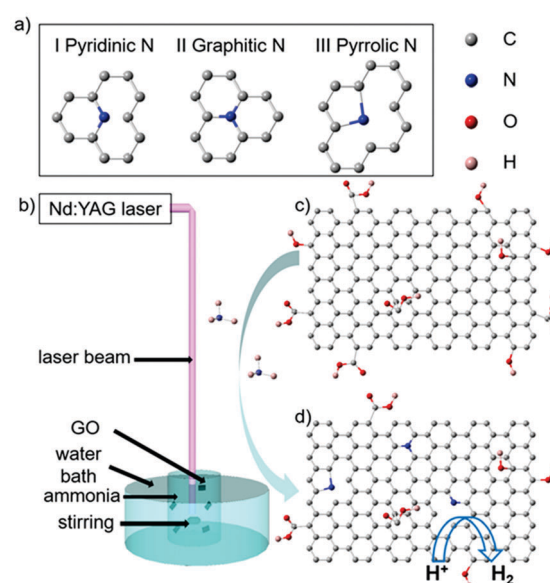
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# Selective nitrogen doping of graphene oxide by laser irradiation for enhanced hydrogen evolution activity†

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**Selective nitrogen-doping of graphene oxide with a high pyridinic N ratio (51%; L-GO) was achieved by laser irradiation of graphene oxide with ammonia. The resulting L-GO exhibited enhanced electrocatalytic properties; specifically, the overpotential of the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) was improved by over 400 mV at 10 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> compared to the pristine graphene oxide.**

Graphene and graphene oxide have attracted a lot of interest due to their unique physical and chemical properties, such as large surface area, excellent electrical conductivity, and ease of functionalization.<sup>1,2</sup> Doping of graphene (oxide) with heteroatoms, such as nitrogen (N), boron (B), phosphorus (P), fluorine (F), or sulphur (S), influences the charge distribution of the carbon atoms, which is an effective approach to tailor its electronic structure and electrochemical properties.<sup>3–5</sup> For example, in N-doped graphene, the spin density and charge distribution of carbon atoms are influenced by the neighbouring nitrogen dopants, which introduce “activation regions” on the graphene surface.<sup>6</sup> Many interesting properties arising from these “activation regions” have been found in N-doped graphene. It has been recognized that N-doped graphene is a potential candidate for various applications, such as electrocatalysts,<sup>3,7</sup> biosensors,<sup>8</sup> field effect transistors,<sup>9</sup> Li-batteries<sup>10,11</sup> and ultracapacitors.<sup>12</sup> Nitrogen doped graphene has also been used as the substrate material for electrocatalysts.<sup>13,14</sup> It was considered that N-doped graphene as the substrate contributes to the improved hydrogen evolution reaction (HER)



**Fig. 1** An illustration of the preparation of nitrogen doped graphene oxide by laser irradiating a solution containing graphene oxide and ammonia. (a) Three types of bonding configurations of N in graphene (oxide). (b) A schematic view of the experimental setup. (c) The structure model of graphene oxide (GO). (d) The structure model of nitrogen doped GO after laser irradiation (L-GO).

performance due to the interactions between the metal catalysts and the active sites on the substrate.<sup>13,14</sup>

Nitrogen atoms can be incorporated into the graphene carbon lattice in three predominant bonding configurations, namely, graphitic N, pyridinic N, and pyrrolic N (Fig. 1a).<sup>6,15</sup> It has been reported that both graphitic N and pyridinic N facilitate the oxygen reduction reaction (ORR) activities.<sup>15,16</sup> Theoretical calculations demonstrated that pyridinic N in N-doped graphene can increase the absorption of H<sup>+</sup>, thus improving the catalytic HER performance.<sup>17</sup> However, achieving selective pyridinic N is still challenging and most processes require multistep, high temperature or prolonged reaction times.

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: 10.1039/c8cc07725h

Here, we report a one-step facile synthesis of N-doped graphene oxide with abundant pyridinic N dopants. Laser irradiation is an effective approach to introduce foreign atoms and functional groups into the materials.<sup>18,19</sup> Previously, we employed laser irradiation to create dangling bonds in graphene oxide and introduced C–N bonds subsequently by a solvothermal reaction.<sup>20</sup> In this work, we prepared N-doped graphene oxides by laser irradiation of a solution containing ammonia and graphene oxide, and achieved a high pyridinic N ratio (51%). We show that such N-doped graphene oxide with a high pyridinic N ratio, for use as an electrode material for the HER, displays an improved HER performance. The overpotential at 10 mA cm<sup>−2</sup> was reduced by over 400 mV compared with the pristine graphene oxide (GO). Our studies support that the pyridinic N is the potential active site for the catalytic HER properties. The findings contribute to the fundamental understanding of N-doped graphene oxide as the catalytic material or as the substrate material for HER or other electrochemical activities.

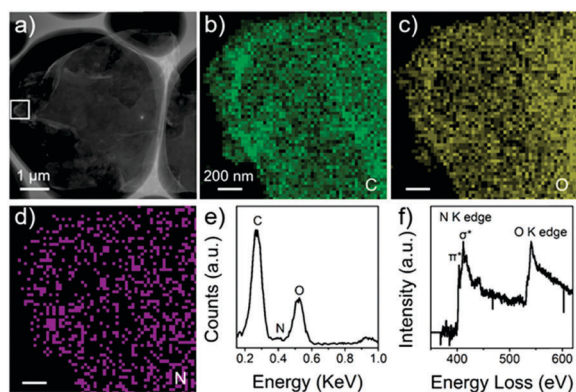
As illustrated in Fig. 1b, a pulsed Q-switch Nd:YAG nano-second laser (energy per pulse = 225 mJ, wavelength = 1064 nm, pulse duration = 7 ns) was used to irradiate ammonia solution that contained graphene oxide at the following concentrations: graphene oxide – 0.2 mg mL<sup>−1</sup> and ammonia – ~15.9 mol L<sup>−1</sup>. The solution in a quartz tube was immersed in an ice water mixture with vigorous stirring. The graphene oxide (Fig. 1c) reacted with ammonia (between Fig. 1c and d), producing the nitrogen doped material (Fig. 1d). The laser parameters were varied to optimize the N-doping and catalytic properties (see details in the ESI†).

A scanning transmission electron microscope (STEM) image of the laser treated graphene oxide (L-GO) and the corresponding electron energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) mappings show the uniform distribution of carbon, oxide and nitrogen within the 2D nanosheets (Fig. 2). The EDS quantification gives the atomic percentage of 60.7%, 36.02% and 3.28% corresponding to carbon, oxygen and nitrogen, respectively. Electron energy loss spectroscopy (EELS) provides more detailed information about the doped nitrogen (Fig. 2f). The pre-peak near 401 eV is associated with  $\pi^*$  bonding and the feature over 410 eV corresponds to  $\sigma^*$  bonding of N.<sup>21,22</sup> From these measurements, we

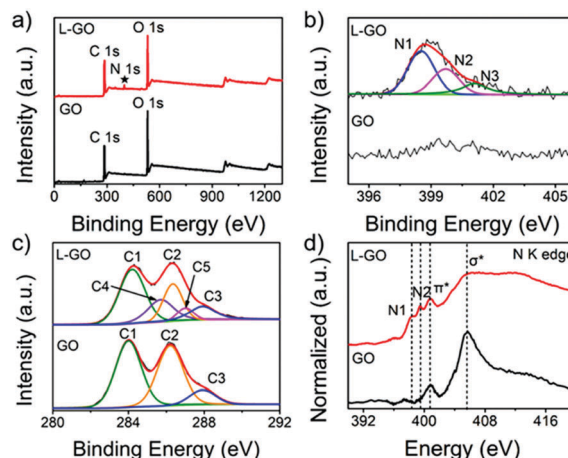
conclude that nitrogen has been introduced into the graphene oxide through laser irradiation of the solution of graphene oxide and ammonia.

The X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) and X-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS) measurements were further performed to elucidate the bonding states of carbon and nitrogen in L-GO. The XPS survey spectrum clearly shows the existence of doped-N in L-GO. The total N doping level in L-GO is about 3.57 at% (Table S1, ESI†), which is consistent with the estimated value from EDS. High resolution XPS spectra of N 1s and C 1s are further obtained to gain more insights into the atomic sites and bonding types of N in L-GO (Fig. 3b and c). Based on the characteristics of the N peak, the doped-N sites in L-GO marked as N1, N2, and N3 are composed of pyridinic N, pyrrolic–nitrilic N and graphitic N with the peaks located at 398.5 eV, 399.7 eV and 401.2 eV, respectively.<sup>23</sup> The calculated ratio of each of these nitrogens is 51% for pyridinic N, 30% for pyrrolic–nitrilic commixture N and 19% for graphitic N (see Table 1). The pyridinic N ratio (51%) in L-GO is considerably high. The C 1s XPS spectra of L-GO and pristine GO ranging from 280 to 290 eV are recorded, as shown in Fig. 3c. The peaks marked with C1, C2 and C3 are related to C–C, C–OH and COOH, respectively. After nitrogen doping, the C2 (C–OH) peak was dramatically weakened, whereas two new peaks at 285.7 and 287.0 eV appeared, which correspond respectively to the N–sp<sup>2</sup> C and N–C=O.<sup>16</sup>

Fig. 3d shows XAS spectra measured in the total electron yield (TEY) mode at the nitrogen K edge for GO and L-GO. The N K edge XAS spectrum of L-GO shows sharp peaks around 400 eV, which are marked as N1, N2 and  $\pi^*$  corresponding to the pyridinic N, pyrrolic–nitrilic N and graphitic N. They are in good agreement with the results obtained from XPS. In the XAS spectrum of pristine GO, there is no distinct N 1s peak as expected. The peaks in the C K edge XAS spectrum of the pristine GO and L-GO (Fig. S2, ESI†) are similar, which is consistent with the low concentration of nitrogen doping in graphene oxide.<sup>24</sup> There is an increase in the intensity of the  $\pi^*$



**Fig. 2** TEM characterizations of the N-doped graphene oxide by laser irradiation (L-GO). (a) STEM image, and the corresponding EDS maps of (b) C, (c) O and (d) N for the selected area in (a), (e) EDS spectrum, and (f) EELS spectrum.



**Fig. 3** XPS and XAS measurements of pristine GO and N-doped graphene oxide by laser irradiation (L-GO). (a) XPS survey spectra. (b) XPS spectra showing N 1s features. (c) XPS spectra showing C 1s features. (d) XAS spectra showing the N K peaks.

**Table 1** The ratios (%) of different types of doped nitrogen in L-GO and H-GO from the XPS measurements

Sample	Pyridinic N	Pyrrolic-nitrilic N	Graphitic N
L-GO	51	30	19
H-GO	28	51	21

peak and a decrease in the intensity of the  $\sigma$  peak for L-GO compared with the pristine GO, indicating that the  $\pi$  network is dominant.<sup>25</sup>

In order to identify the role of pyridinic N in the electrocatalytic hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) performance, we compare the HER properties of L-GO with N-doped graphene oxide by using the hydrothermal reaction method (H-GO). The solution of graphene oxide and ammonia was heated at 150 °C using a stainless-steel autoclave. It is noted that it takes 12 h to achieve the N-doped graphene oxide in contrast to 20 min using the laser irradiation method. The total N-doping level in H-GO is about 5.31 at% (Fig. S4 and Table S1, ESI<sup>†</sup>), however, the ratio of pyridinic N is much lower (28%) compared to L-GO (Table 1 and Fig. S5, ESI<sup>†</sup>). The electrochemical measurements were performed using a three-electrode system. The working electrode is glassy carbon (GC), and the geometric area of the GC is about 7.065 mm<sup>2</sup>. 0.015 mg catalyst was fully covered on the GC. The details are included in the ESI<sup>†</sup>. The electrochemical HER performances of N-doped L-GO, N-doped H-GO and the pristine GO are shown in Fig. 4. Remarkably, there is a significant improvement in the electrochemical property for L-GO prepared under the laser energy of 225 mJ per pulse; the overpotential at the current density of 10 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> is more than 400 mV and 80 mV lower than those of the pristine GO and H-GO, respectively. We also find that H-GO has a slightly lower Tafel slope than the L-GO (100.56 mV dec<sup>-1</sup> vs. 133.81 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>), which may result from the lower oxygen content and higher electron transfer in H-GO.

It is interesting that H-GO has a higher nitrogen doping level than L-GO, but L-GO has better electrochemical HER performance in terms of the overpotential. We consider that the improved HER properties of L-GO arise from the higher pyridinic N ratio. Other factors, such as defects may also play a role, on which further quantification is needed to draw any conclusion.

Lastly, we have also done a systematic study using different laser energy and with different kinds of nitrogen sources (Fig. S1 and S6, ESI<sup>†</sup>). The electrochemical performances of

these samples obtained from different experimental conditions suggest good controllability and reproducibility of the laser N doping methods.

In summary, nitrogen has been successfully doped into graphene oxide by laser irradiation of the solution of graphene oxide and ammonia under optimized laser conditions. The N-doped graphene oxide obtained by the laser irradiation method shows a higher pyridinic N ratio than that prepared by the hydrothermal method. Compared to the hydrothermal method, the laser irradiation is a simple and fast approach to prepare N-doped graphene oxide. The N-doped graphene oxide shows an improved electrochemical HER performance, which can be attributed to the high pyridinic N ratio.

#### Acknowledgements

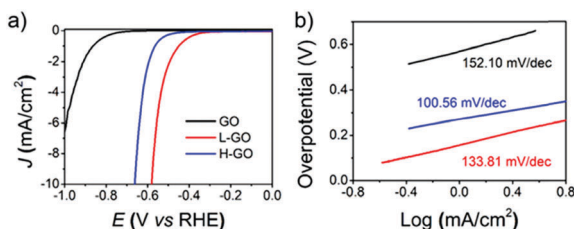
This work was funded by the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Science, Office of Basic Energy Sciences, Materials Sciences and Engineering Division under Contract No. DE-AC02-05-CH11231 within the KC22ZH program. Work at the Molecular Foundry was supported by DOE BES under Contract No. DE-AC02-05CH11231. The X-ray measurements were conducted at Stanford SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory, which was supported by the DOE BES under contract #DE-AC02-76SF00515. W. Z. acknowledges the support from Tianjin University Graduate School International Academic Exchange Fund.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict interests.

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**Fig. 4** HER measurements. (a) The linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) of the pristine GO, N-doped graphene oxide by laser irradiation (L-GO) and N-doped graphene oxide by the hydrothermal method (H-GO) measured in N<sub>2</sub>-saturated 0.5 M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>. (b) Tafel slopes of the pristine GO, L-GO and H-GO with the plot colour corresponding to those in (a).

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