

Using thin-crystal engineered kaolins to enhance mechanical properties of coatings.

J.C.Husband, L.F.Gate, N.Norouzi[†] and D.Blair[†].

Pigments for Paper Group, Imerys Minerals Ltd., Par Moor Centre, Par, United Kingdom PL24 2SQ,

[†]Dept of Chemistry, University of Edinburgh, King's Building, West Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JJ,

ABSTRACT

Structures in nature display hierarchical features which span nano to macroscopic length scales. In paper coatings, the mineral pigment particles themselves form the building blocks, and together with the binder are the limiting factor in determining the structural properties of the coating. The mechanical properties of paper coating layers are very important in converting and printing operations. These include stiffness, resistance to fold cracking, dusting and pick resistance. In this work, we show the potential gains in mechanical properties (such as elastic modulus, tensile strength and stiffness) which can be realised by reducing the z-direction size of the building blocks to nanoscale dimensions. This can be done using kaolins having thinner crystals than have been mined hitherto. For a given coat weight, compared to conventional clays or carbonates, these thin particles give greater energy transfer under tensile deformation and so increase the elastic modulus of the coating layer. This leads to gains in sheet stiffness which allow savings in raw material and energy costs. A coating layer containing thin crystal clay has an elastic modulus 7-8 times higher than one containing only ground calcium carbonate. Future developments in binder design need to be pursued to further improve the modulus of the coating and accelerate dematerialisation of the sheet.

INTRODUCTION

Current research into novel material structures frequently takes its inspiration from nature. For example, aligned platelet structures which mimic nacre have recently been made in the laboratory. Initial success was achieved using PVA-montmorillonite films prepared by layer by layer deposition (LbL) techniques [1]. Subsequent cross-linking achieved tensile strength values in the region of 400 MPa. LbL techniques are not practical industrially, but a more practical approach was taken by Walther et al. [2] who prepared montmorillonite – PVA layers using blade coating. The PVA is first chemisorbed onto the clay surface, the excess removed by centrifugation, and the resulting suspension blade coated onto paper. Sufficient shear induced ordering of the platelets took place, and films having a modulus of 25 – 40 GPa were produced depending on cross-linking.

In paper coating, this kind of approach has potential applicability in the growing area of recyclable barrier coatings. Among traditional coated paper grades, stiffness is a critical property since it limits the amount of dematerialisation that can be achieved for a given grade of paper. It is interesting that reduction of basis weight from 30 to 28 lb ream⁻¹ for a major US title was unsuccessful because the magazine had an “insubstantial feel” [3]. Applying a coating layer of high modulus offers a way of increasing coated paper stiffness and enabling the amount of fibre to be reduced. This is desirable for cost and environmental reasons. However, montmorillonite is not a suitable coating pigment in these applications for reasons which include optical properties, such as poor colour and low light scattering, very low coating solids, and the requirement for a porous coating layer to give controlled ink setting.

Kaolin is a widely used coating pigment in the graphic sector, generating good light scatter and porosity, especially in combination with calcium carbonate. Traditionally, coating kaolins have been selected for fluidity, so that coating solids can be high. Inevitably, this means that the kaolin particles have a low aspect ratio. Recently, a new generation of high aspect ratio coating kaolins has been produced from secondary deposits in North America. These particles have large plate diameters but very low plate thicknesses (Figure 1). In the case of the highest aspect ratio fine clays, the crystals approach nanoscale dimensions, <50 nm, Figure 2, values calculated from equations published by Jennings and Parslow [4]. These approach the length scale at which unusual strength properties become apparent due to the avoidance of crack propagation [5]. The micrograph in Figure 3 shows an example of a thin crystal kaolin in a paper coating.

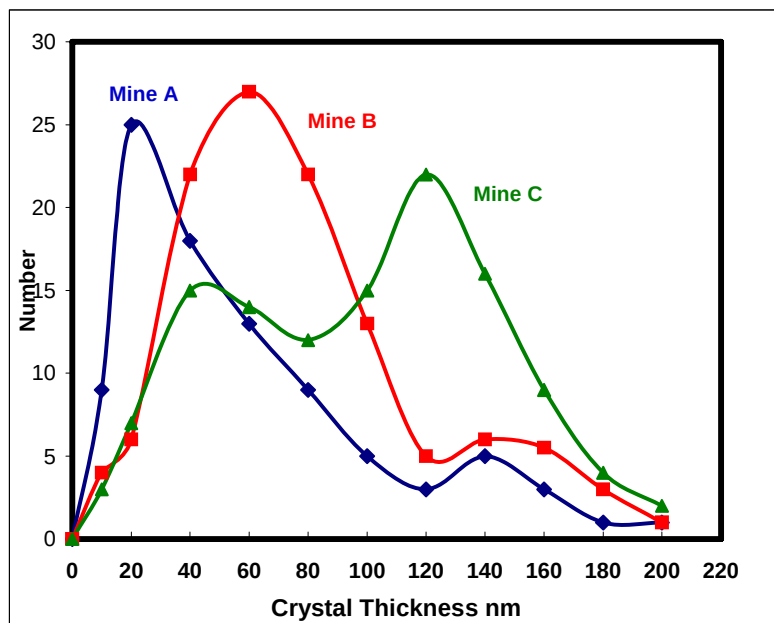


Figure 1. Thickness distribution of kaolin crystals from different mines in Georgia, measured by electron transmission. Source : R.Pruett.

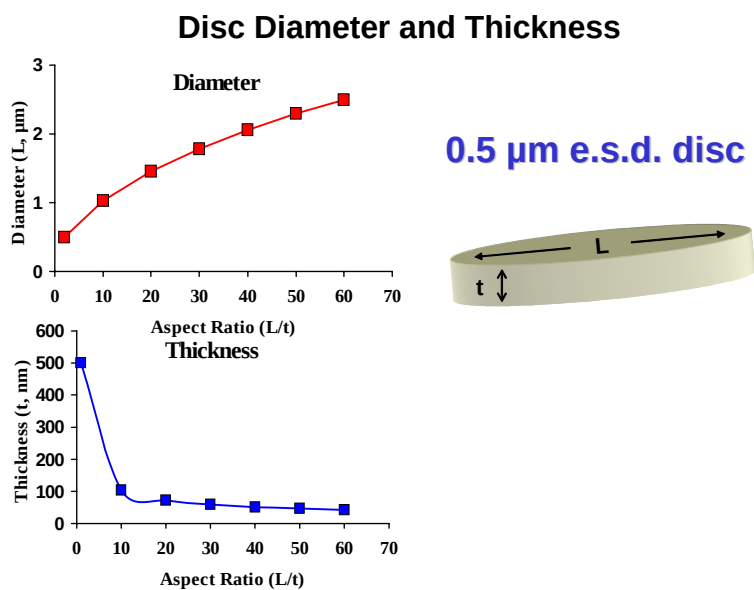


Figure 2. Disc diameter and thickness values as a function of aspect ratio. Calculated for particles of 0.5 μm esd using the Jennings and Parslow equation [4].

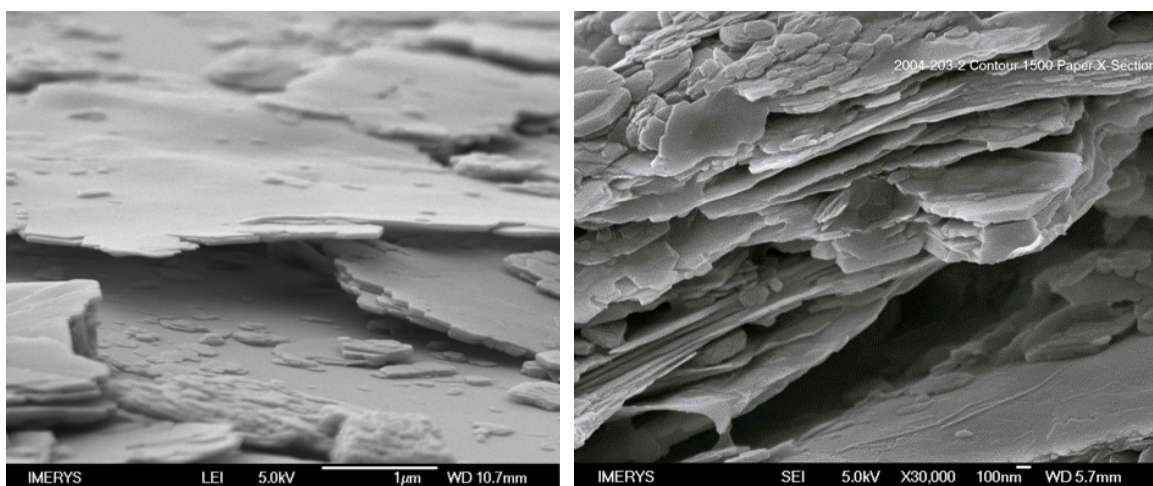


Figure 3. SEM showing thin kaolin plates (left), and in a paper coating (right).

Parpillon *et al.* [6] measured the tensile strength of coating layers based on kaolin and calcium carbonate (GCC). They found that, at the same latex level, kaolin gave coating layers with about twice the tensile strength of GCC. Kaolin also gave greater stiffness. Subsequently, Lepoutre and Rigdahl [7] examined a wider range of pigments of different shape and related the in-plane elastic modulus of coating layers to the presence of voids. Further studies of the z-directional strength of kaolin and GCC layers were reported by Inoue and Lepoutre [8]. They concluded that coating layers based on plate-shaped clay particles were more resistant to in-plane stresses than isometric GCC.

Recently, some work has been published on z-directional coating strength of paper using a micro-indentor [9]. Although applied to coated paper the technique is in an early stage of development; the z-direction elastic stiffness estimated from the indentor showed order of magnitude agreement with that calculated from in-plane tensile measurements for coating layers containing calcium carbonate. For clay, the z-direction result was lower than the in-plane, which the authors suggested might arise as a result of the aspect ratio of kaolin particles.

Engineering the particle shape, or aspect ratio, has made kaolin a very versatile coating pigment which confers additional functionality to coating formulations [10,11]. Our previous studies have investigated the effect of kaolin particle shape on the in-plane and z-direction tensile strength of coating layers [12,13] and the printing strength of papers coated with the same pigments [14]. The present study highlights the role of kaolin particle shape in determining the mechanical properties of coating layers, particularly the in-plane mechanical properties which have been shown to influence the bending stiffness and folding resistance of coated paper [15-17].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

A series of four coating kaolins were used having approximately similar particle size distributions as determined by sedimentation. These were chosen to cover a range of particle aspect ratio values, from blocky to very platy. The mean (D50) particle size was 0.40 µm esd. Additionally, two ultrafine kaolins were included of blocky and platy morphology. These had a mean size of 0.20µm. A GCC of 95wt% < 2µm (Carbital 95™, D50 = 0.50µm) was also used in some experiments. The properties of the kaolins are summarised in Table 1. The mean aspect ratio (defined as the average plate diameter / thickness) was measured by stopped flow conductivity using a patented technique [18]. The shape trends are generally mirrored by the difference between the average size (D50) as measured by sedimentation using a Micromeritics Sedigraph™ and light scattering using a Malvern Mastersizer™ S. The latex binder used was a carboxylated styrene butadiene acrylonitrile copolymer of Tg = 10°C (DL920, Dow).

The kaolins were slurried at the optimum solids using 0.3wt% of a sodium polyacrylate dispersant (CED3546, Ondeo Nalco). The latex was added at levels between 3 and 17 pph based on clay. 0.3 pph of sodium carboxymethyl cellulose (Finnfix 10™, CP Kelco) was also added as a thickener. After pH adjustment to 8.0,

the colours were screened through 53 μ m. In order to remove air bubbles, the colours were centrifuged at 4000 min⁻¹ for 10 minutes. In some experiments a hydroxyethyl derivative of corn starch (Penford Gum 280, Penford Products, USA) was used in combination with latex. The starch was cooked at 20% solids at 95° - 100°C for 20 minutes.

Table I. Physical properties of kaolins

Kaolin type	Grade	Particle size distribution by Sedigraph, wt% below					D50 by light scattering (Malvern) μ m	Shape factor	BET surface area, m ² g ⁻¹
		2 μ m	1 μ m	0.5 μ m	0.25 μ m	D50 μ m			
FB (Fine Blocky)	Blend of Capim DG / Premier	93	81	63	34	0.37	1.46	16	14
FUP (Fine Ultra Platy)	E ¹⁰⁰	90	77	60	34	0.40	3.1	56	16
UFB (Ultra Fine Blocky)	Astrasheen	100	99	94	68	0.19	0.32	10	27
UFP (Ultra Fine Platy)	Contour Xtreme	97	90	79	53	0.23	1.43	40	24

Experimental Methods

Coating films were prepared by drawdown using wire wound bars. The substrate chosen was a polyethylene terephthalate film of caliper 13 μ m (Look! Roasting Film, Terinex Ltd.). This was found by Prall [19] to give the easiest separation of the coatings from the substrate. Coatings acceptable for tensile testing were found by experience to require a thickness of at least 50 μ m. This was achieved by using a nominally 150 μ m wet film thickness wirewound bar (Sheen Instruments, Kingston, UK). Typically, 100 μ m thick films were produced. Following drawdown and drying with a hot air stream, we found that the majority of pigment binder combinations could be easily separated from the substrate and were sufficiently self-supporting to handle. The exceptions were using 100 % GCC, which gave very fragile films.

For measurement of tensile strength in the plane of the coating, the films were cut into a barbell shape using a template designed for rubber testing. The length of the barbell was 50mm, and the width of the central bar was 4mm. The thickness of the film was measured using a caliper gauge (Messmer) accurate to ± 2 μ m. The ends were attached via rubber-faced clamps to a tensile tester (Testometric 350, Rochdale). An extension rate of 10 mm min⁻¹ was used for the tensile testing. Experiments were carried out at 23°C and 50% RH. Load and elongation at break were recorded for each sample, and an example of the output is shown in Figure 1. The strength was calculated by dividing the load (N) at break by the cross-sectional area of the sample across which the load is applied to give the tensile strength in force per unit area (MPa). 10 measurements were made on each sample, and the mean value calculated. In the following figures error bars signify the standard deviation. The elastic modulus of the layers was derived from the same data by taking the slope of the initial linear portion of the tensile strength / elongation plot as shown in Figure 1.

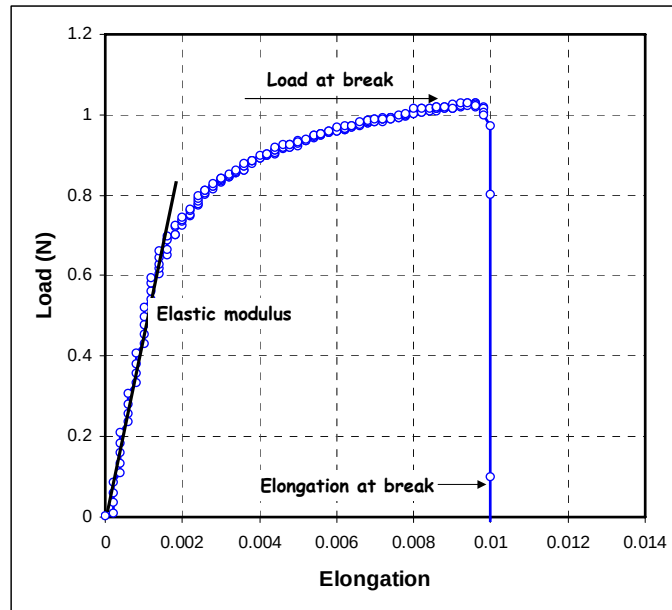


Figure 4. Example of a load / elongation curve for coating (Clay FB / 5pph latex) in the in-plane direction.

Some samples of the coatings were supercalendered using a Perkins laboratory calender. The coatings were placed between sheets of thin lens tissue to avoid the coatings sticking to the rolls. The calender was unheated and the linear load was 78 kg cm^{-1} .

Coated papers were produced on a pilot coater running at 600 m min^{-1} . A 58 gm^{-2} woodfree basepaper was used, and a coatweight of 12 gm^{-2} per side applied using a roll applicator with blade metering. 50% blends of each kaolin were made with a fine GCC (Carbital 95™). 9.5 pph of styrene butadiene acrylonitrile latex (DL920, Dow) and 1 pph CMC (Finnfix 5, CP Kelco) was added throughout. After coating, all of the coated reels were supercalendered under the same conditions using 11 nips with a surface temperature of 100°C and a linear load of 200 kN m^{-1} at 600 m min^{-1} . The moisture of the coated papers was controlled to $5.5 \pm 0.3 \text{ wt}\%$. Coating and calendering were carried out at the pilot plant at Oy Keskuslaboratorio Centrallaboratorium AB (KCL), Helsinki, Finland.

The bending resistance of the coated papers was measured using a Stiffness Tester (Lorentzen & Wettre), following a SCAN-P test method [20]. 10 measurements of each sample were made, in the machine and cross-machine directions respectively. The results for the two directions were then averaged to give a geometric mean bending resistance.

RESULTS

The effect of particle shape on in-plane properties

Figure 5 shows results for in-plane tensile strength properties of coatings made from all the clays at a range of latex levels. We found that the high aspect ratio clays gave higher in-plane tensile strength than the low aspect ratio clays. The GCC coatings had the lowest in-plane tensile strength, 6-7 times lower than the strongest kaolin, the ultra high shape fine clay.

Figure 6 plots the elastic modulus of the same coatings as a function of latex level. The ranking of modulus values follows that of the tensile strength trends in Figure 5, with the high aspect ratio clays giving the highest modulus values. These high shape clays give a modulus between 5 and 8 times higher than the GCC alone.

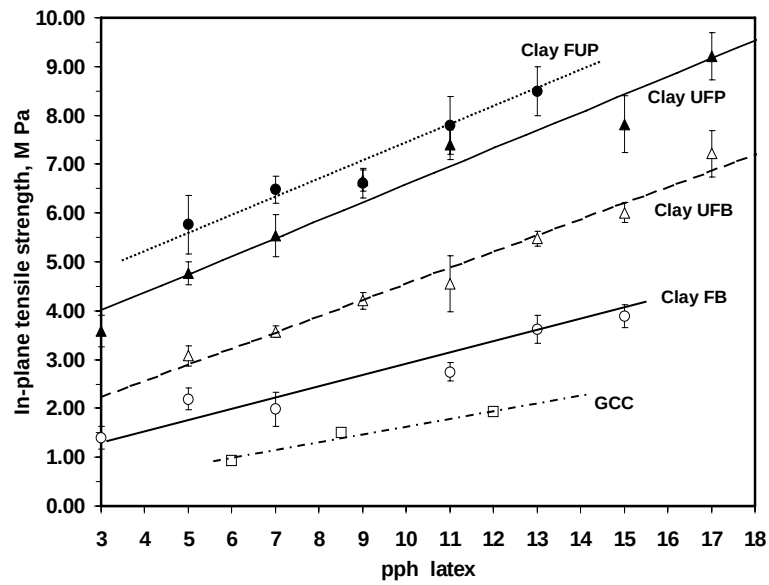


Figure 5. In-plane tensile strength of coating layers as a function of latex level.

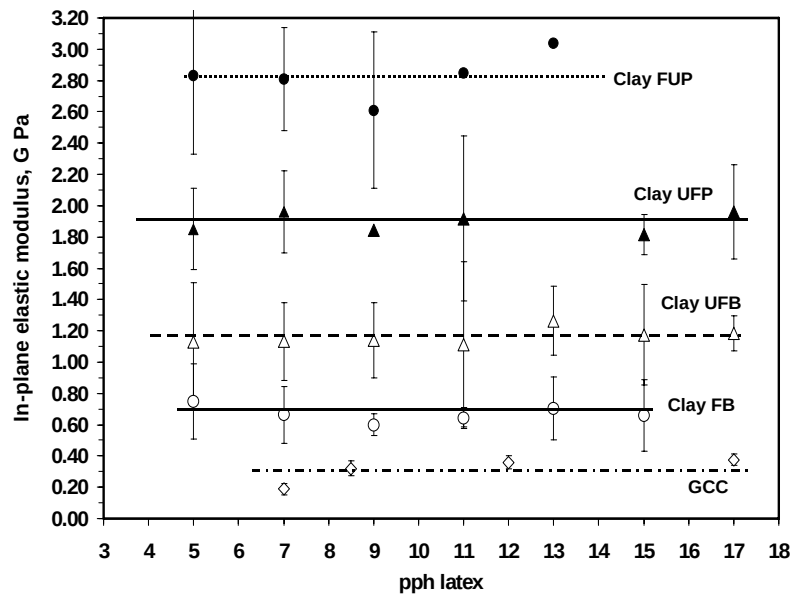


Figure 6. In-plane elastic modulus of coating layers as a function of latex level.

Calendering the coatings based on the ultrafine clays (Figure 7) showed that the in-plane strength and the modulus increased as the coating became denser. After 6 nips the coating layers reduced in caliper by 5-6 %. The platy clay still held the advantage over the blocky counterpart. Also plotted in Figure 4 is the modulus of the basepaper, showing that it is unaffected by calendering. Note that the final modulus values for the calendered coating layer and basepaper are both of the same order of magnitude.

It is also clear from Figures 2 and 3 that the latex contributes to the tensile strength but not the elastic modulus of the coatings. This is in contrast to starch (Figure 8) where we found that substitution for latex leads to an increase in modulus while lowering tensile strength slightly. These trends reflect the known influences of latex and starch on coated paper stiffness, although high modulus latex can be used to build stiffness [21,22,26].

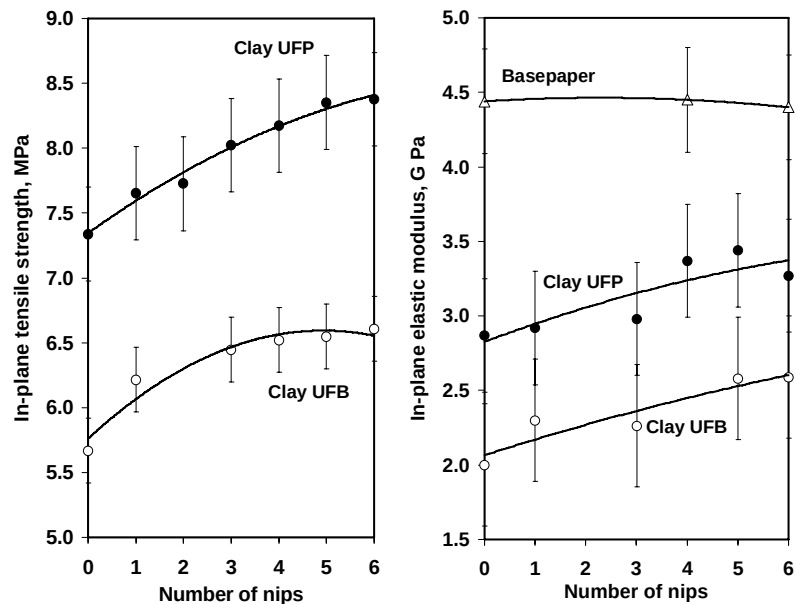


Figure 7. Effect of laboratory calendering of unsupported coating layers and basepaper on in-plane mechanical properties.

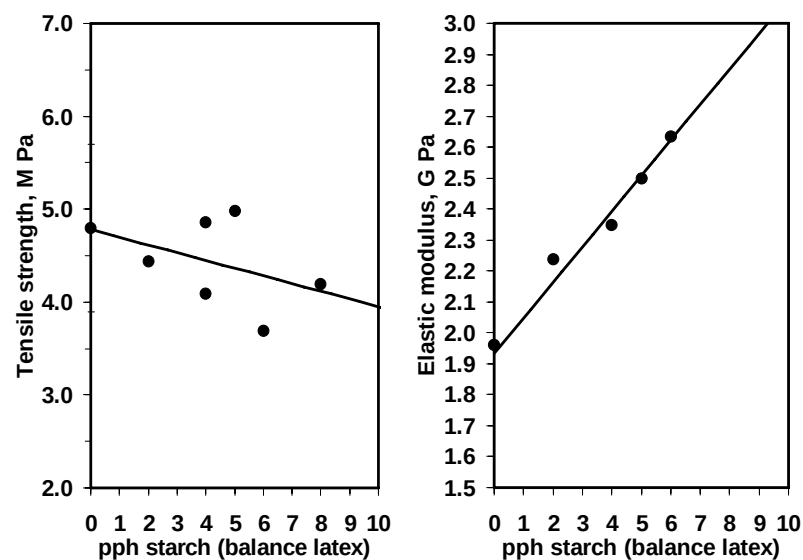


Figure 8. In-plane mechanical properties of coating layers based on UFP kaolin with a latex – starch binder system (total 10 pph).

Blends of kaolin UFP were made with a fine gcc, and the modulus values are plotted in Figure 9. The modulus increases with kaolin addition, but the trend is not linear. These results show that platy clay can have a significant influence on the modulus even at levels of addition below 50 wt%. This is important given that in today's formulations, high carbonate levels are required for good optical properties.

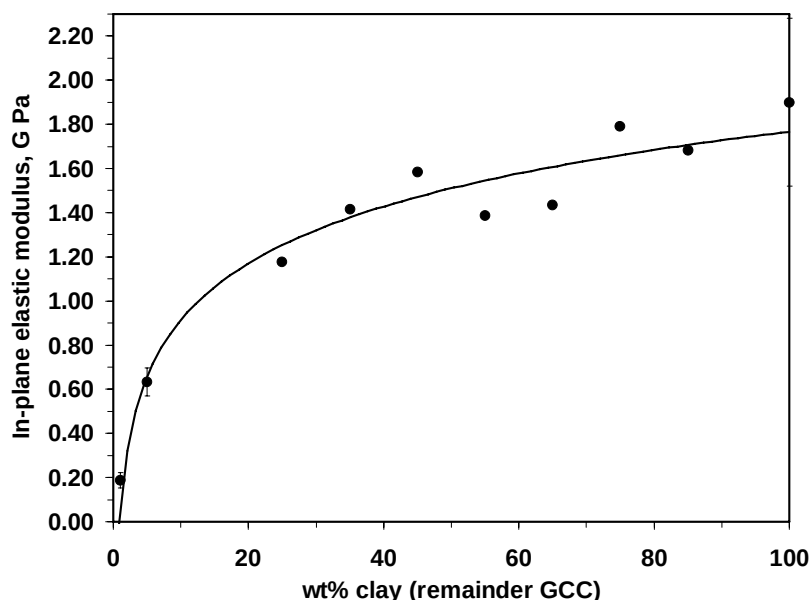


Figure 9. In-plane elastic modulus of coating layers containing kaolin and gcc of different ratios. Latex level 5 pph.

The geometric mean bending resistance values for calendered papers coated with 50 wt% blends of kaolin and GCC from the pilot coating trial are shown in Figure 10. The trends agree with the elastic modulus values plotted in Figure 3, with the fine ultra-platy kaolin giving the greatest contribution to stiffness. We found that there was an excellent correlation between the bending resistance of coated papers containing 50% clay and the elastic modulus values for the coating layers containing 100% of the kaolin component (Figure 11).

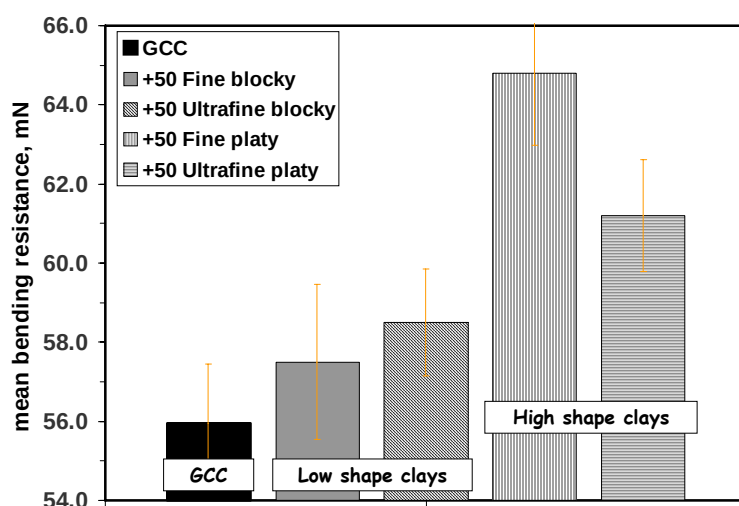


Figure 10. Geometric mean bending resistance of coated and supercalendered papers (9.5 pph latex, 12 gm⁻² per side).

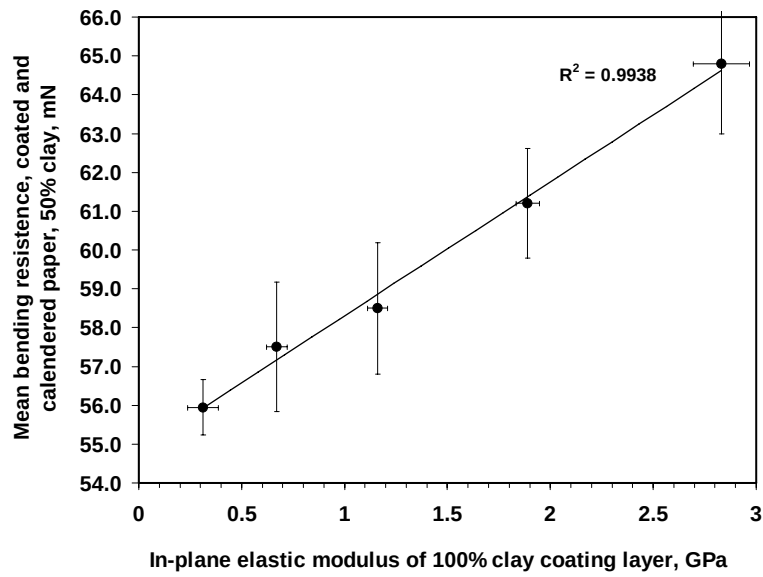


Figure 11. Correlation between geometric mean bending resistance of coated papers and elastic modulus of coating layers.

In turn, there was also a strong linear relation between the mean bending resistance and the shape factor of the kaolin as measured by the method described in [18] (Figure 12).

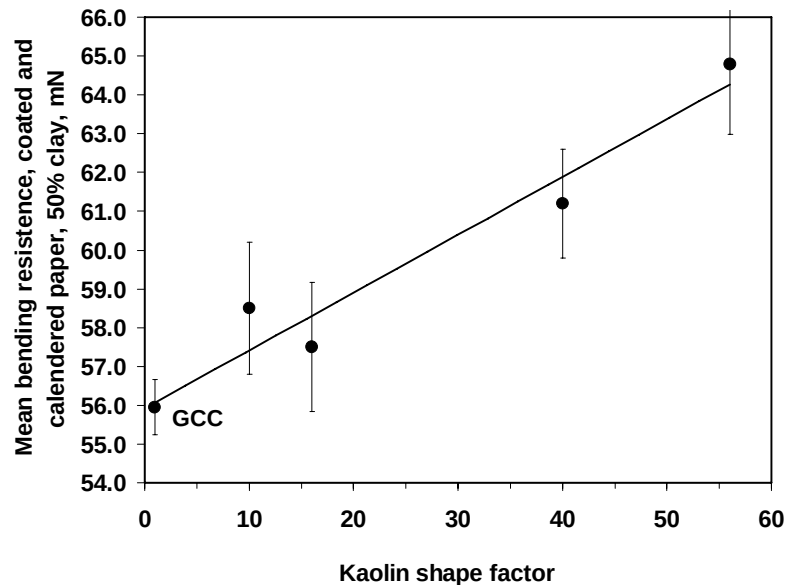


Figure 12. Correlation between geometric mean bending resistance of coated papers and shape factor of kaolin component.

DISCUSSION

This work has shown how the aspect ratio of kaolin particles can be used to influence the mechanical properties of the coating layer. Compared to widely used low aspect ratio glossing clays, high aspect ratio kaolins gave both increased in-plane tensile strength and increased elastic modulus. This advantage of platy clays is also known from polymer science, where platy fillers give enhanced flexural modulus [23,24]. As a result of the increased modulus, we have found that high shape clays are useful in increasing the stiffness of coated papers. Recent studies by Rioux [25] have confirmed these results.

The elastic modulus and the caliper of the paper effectively determine the stiffness of the sheet [27]. The caliper of the paper or the coating layer is critical since it has a third power influence on stiffness. When calendering a

coated paper, the stiffness is usually reduced because of the caliper reduction [27]. Our work shows that, after calendering, coating layers increased in tensile strength and modulus, perhaps because the benefits in structure consolidation outweigh the limited reduction in thickness compared to basepapers. High aspect ratio clays still showed a modulus advantage over blocky clays after calendering. Further work should focus on the potential for fold cracking in high modulus coatings, and ways of overcoming this [26].

CONCLUSIONS

The demands for high brightness means that calcium carbonate pigments (ground or precipitated) are an essential component of coated printing papers today. However the isometric particle shape of these mineral particles means that the stiffness contribution from the coating is quite low. We have shown that blending high shape kaolins with GCCs can give useful increases in the stiffness of coated papers. An ultraplasy clay was found to give the largest improvements in stiffness. Blended 50 : 50 with GCC, the bending resistance after calendering was increased by 11 % compared with a blocky glossing clay of similar particle size. Calculations based on published models for multilayer stiffness [27] suggest that this may allow a reduction in basepaper thickness, and thus fibre savings, of around 4 %.

The role of the binder in building the elastic modulus of the coating was also investigated. Increasing the level of a standard SBR latex increased the tensile strength but had no influence on the modulus of the coating layer. Starch was found to increase the modulus of the coating. This is in agreement with the known influences of different binder systems on stiffness of coated paper. It should be noted that high modulus latexes which contribute to stiffness can also be used. Hence a combination of thin crystal kaolin and higher modulus binders, perhaps not yet invented, can build the stiffness of the coated paper and enable further cost savings through reductions in the amount of fibre.

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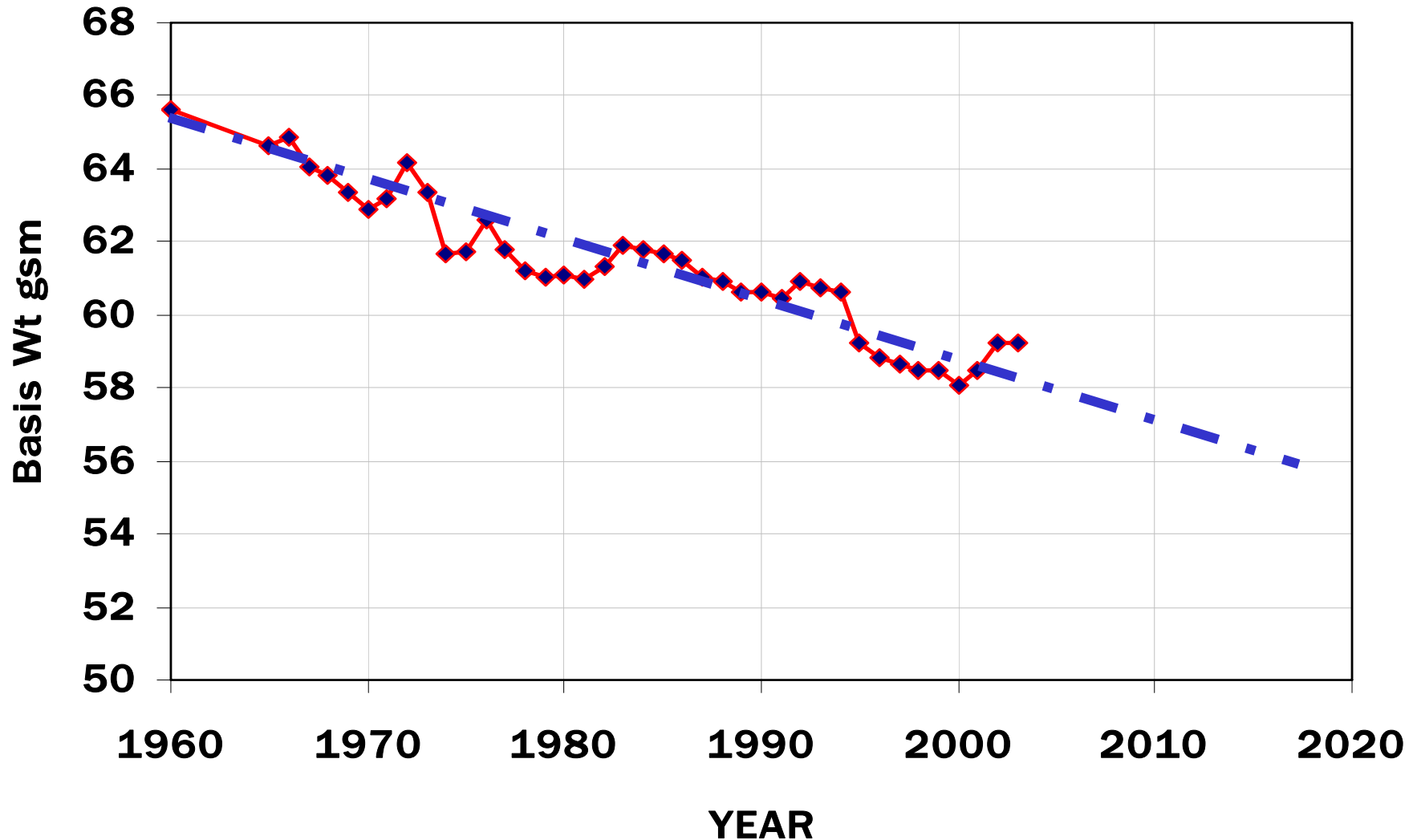


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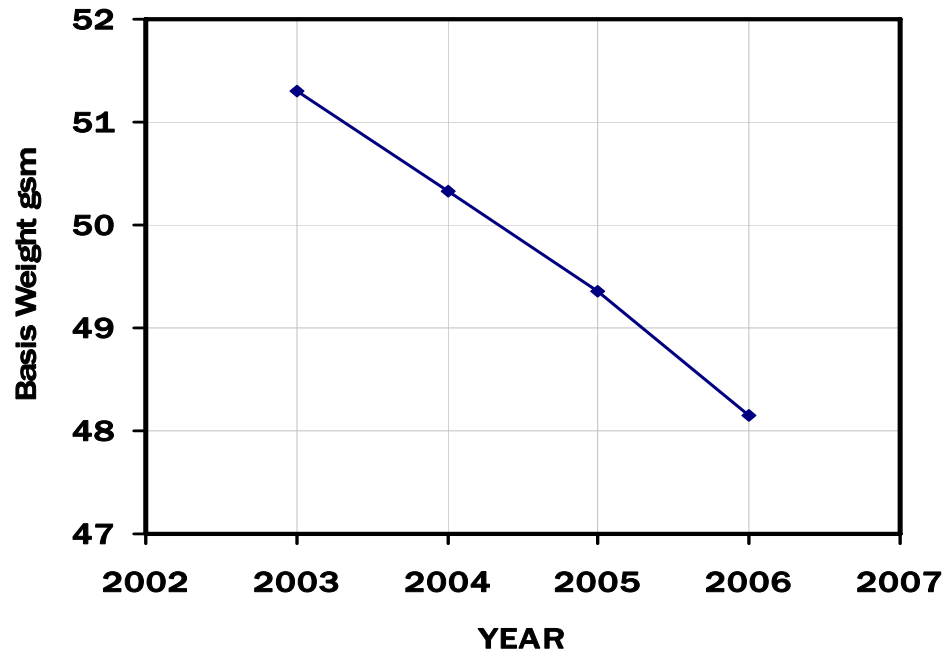
The trend to reduce basis weight of graphic papers requires improved strength / weight performance

US #5 coated paper grades



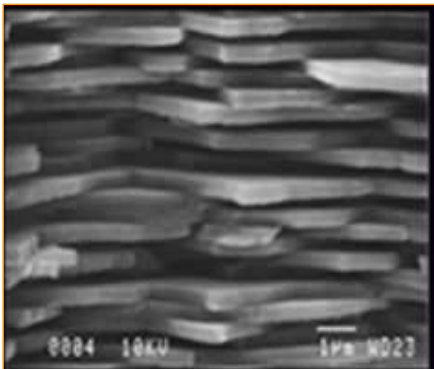
Time International needs

- Lightweight papers with greater thickness, better stiffness / feel
 - “Our Weekly titles did not feel “substantial enough” on 28# paper and were moved back to 30# ”
- Whiter No. 5 grade
 - “Increased whiteness is the paper improvement most frequently requested by our titles
 - All other coated paper categories have moved up several points in brightness within the past 5 years”



Natural structures are multilayered with high aspect ratio nanoscale elements for strength

Nacre



Source: Gao et al., 2003.

Bone

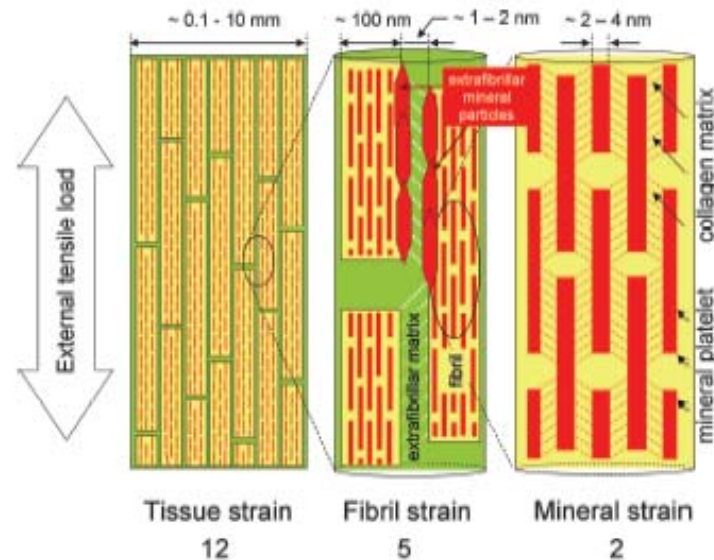


Fig. 4. Schematic model for bone deformation in response to external tensile load at three levels in the structural hierarchy: at the tissue level (Left), fibril array level (Center), and mineralized collagen fibrils (Right). (Center) The stiff mineralized fibrils deform in tension and transfer the stress between adjacent fibrils by shearing in the thin layers of extrafibrillar matrix (white dotted lines show direction of shear in the extrafibrillar matrix). The fibrils are covered with extrafibrillar mineral particles, shown only over a selected part of the fibrils (red hexagons) so as not to obscure the internal structure of the mineralized fibril. (Right) Within each mineralized fibril, the stiff mineral platelets deform in tension and transfer the stress between adjacent platelets by shearing in the interparticle collagen matrix (red dashed lines indicate shearing qualitatively and do not imply homogeneous deformation).

Source: Gupta et al 2006

Structures with nanoscale elements have unusual properties

Materials become insensitive to flaws at nanoscale: Lessons from nature

Huajian Gao^{1*}, Baohua Ji¹, Ingomar L. Jäger², Eduard Arzt¹, and Peter Fratzl²

¹Max Planck Institute for Metals Research, Heisenbergstrasse 3, D-70569 Stuttgart, Germany; and ²Erich Schmid Institute of Material Science, Austrian Academy of Sciences and Metal Physics Institute, University of Leoben, Jahnstrasse 12, A-8700, Leoben, Austria

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Natural materials such as bone, tooth, and nacre are nanocomposites of proteins and minerals with superior strength. Why is the nanometer scale so important to such materials? Can we learn from this to produce superior nanomaterials in the laboratory? These questions motivate the present study where we show that the nanocomposites in nature exhibit a generic mechanical structure in which the nanometer size of mineral particles is selected to ensure optimum strength and maximum tolerance of flaws (robustness). We further show that the widely used engineering concept of stress concentration at flaws is no longer valid for nanomaterial design.

Natural materials, such as shells (1–7), tooth (8, 9), or bone (10–12), exhibit many levels of hierarchical structures from macroscopic to microscopic length scales. Despite these complicated hierarchical structures, we find it most interesting to observe that the smallest building blocks in such materials are generally on the nanometer length scale. Fig. 1 *a* and *d* shows that enamel of tooth is made of long, more or less needle-like crystals $\approx 15\text{--}20\text{ nm}$ thick embedded in soft matrix (8, 13). Fig. 1 *b* and *e* shows that the nanostructure of bone consists of mineral crystal platelets with thickness around a few nanometers embedded in a collagen matrix (12, 14, 15). Fig. 1 *c* and *f* shows the “brick and mortar” structure of nacre where the thickness of the aragonite bricks is around a few hundred nanometers (1, 3, 5). Although it is quite clear that the composite character of these materials plays an important role, one important question remains: Why is the nanometer scale so important? Although the stiffness of biocomposites is similar to that of the mineral constituent, their fracture energy can be several orders of magnitude higher than that of the mineral. Monolithic CaCO_3 shows a work of fracture that is $\approx 3,000$ times less than that of the composite shell (nacre) (5). Generally, there is a well defined organization of the components in the composite in the form of interlaced bricks separated by soft layers. Mineral lamellae are separated by glue (protein), which results in high toughness by stress-redistribution and crack-stopping mechanisms (16). Previous researchers have tried to address the mechanism of high toughness of these

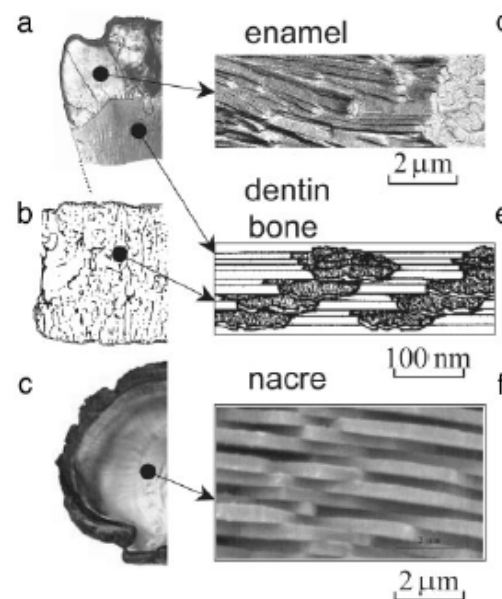


Fig. 1. Many hard biological tissues, such as tooth (*a*), vertebral bone (*b*), or shells (*c*) are made of nanocomposites with hard mineral platelets in a soft (protein) matrix. Enamel (*d*) is made of long, more or less needle-like crystals $\approx 15\text{--}20\text{ nm}$ thick and $1,000\text{ nm}$ long, with a relatively small volume fraction of a soft protein matrix (8, 13). Dentin and bone (*e*) are made up of plate-like crystals ($2\text{--}4\text{ nm}$ thick, up to 100 nm long) embedded in a (collagen-rich) protein matrix (12, 14, 15). The volume ratio of mineral to matrix is on the order of 1:2. Nacre (*f*) is made of plate-like crystals ($200\text{--}500\text{ nm}$ thick and a few micrometers long) with a very small amount of soft matrix in between (3). All of the composites share the structural feature of hard platelets with a very large aspect ratio, arranged parallel in a brick-and-mortar-like fashion. An unsolved problem is the question of why these crystals are in the nanometer range.

Progress towards making strong multi-layered materials based on montmorillonite cross-linked with PVA by LbL assembly

Ultrastrong and Stiff Layered Polymer Nanocomposites

Paul Podsiadlo,¹ Amit K. Kaushik,² Ellen M. Arruda,^{2,3} Anthony M. Waas,^{2,4} Bong Sup Shim,¹ Jiadi Xu,⁵ Himabindu Nandivada,¹ Benjamin G. Pumplin,² Joerg Lahann,^{1,3,6} Ayyalusamy Ramamoorthy,⁵ Nicholas A. Kotov^{1,6,7*}

Nanoscale building blocks are individually exceptionally strong because they are close to ideal, defect-free materials. It is, however, difficult to retain the ideal properties in macroscale composites. Bottom-up assembly of a clay/polymer nanocomposite allowed for the preparation of a homogeneous, optically transparent material with planar orientation of the aluminosilicate nanosheets. The stiffness and tensile strength of these multilayer composites are one order of magnitude greater than those of analogous nanocomposites at a processing temperature that is much lower than those of ceramic or polymer materials with similar characteristics. A high level of ordering of the nanoscale building blocks, combined with dense covalent and hydrogen bonding and stiffening of the polymer chains, leads to highly effective load transfer between nanosheets and the polymer.

A critical challenge in nanocomposite fabrication is the ability to realize materials that allow the transfer of the exceptional mechanical properties (i.e., tensile strength, σ_{UTS} , and Young's modulus, E) of the nanoscale materials to the macroscale properties of the bulk

materials. Nanoparticle-filled polymer composites based on these structural elements have mechanical properties that fall far below the expected theoretical and experimentally determined values of the individual building blocks, except at low volume fractions of the reinforcement ($1-9$). The deficiency in the properties of the composite is largely related to the difficulty of obtaining well-dispersed large volume fractions of the reinforcing nanomaterials and a lack of structural control. The difficulty is also associated with realizing an effective load transfer from the polymeric matrix to the nanoscale components and the insufficiently understood mechanical interactions of the two constituents at the nanoscale. We demonstrate that it is possible to produce composites with properties that approach the theoretical maxima using spatial and orientational control of clay platelets in a polymer matrix at the nanoscale and retaining this order at the macroscale.

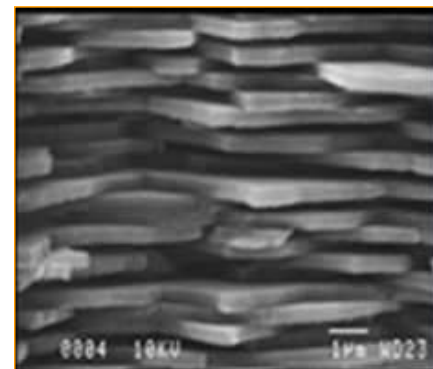
¹Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2136, USA. ²Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2125, USA. ³Program in Macromolecular Science and Engineering, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2140, USA. ⁴Department of Aerospace Engineering, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2140, USA. ⁵Biophysics Research Division and Department of Chemistry, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1055, USA. ⁶Department of Biomedical Engineering, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2099, USA. ⁷Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2136, USA.

*To whom correspondence should be addressed. E-mail: kotov@umich.edu

Hybrid organic-inorganic nanocomposites of polymer and clay nanoplatelets have received special attention because of the very low cost of the inorganic component, relatively simple preparation, and fairly predictable stiffening behavior when introduced into polymers ($9, 10$). Montmorillonite (MTM) clay (~ 1 -nm-thick-by-100- to 1000-nm-diameter sheets) has been extensively used for this purpose because it is readily available and has exceptional mechanical properties. The in-plane modulus of elasticity has been estimated by Monte Carlo simulations to be ~ 270 GPa (6). Although composites incorporating 50 volume % of MTM should theoretically have stiffness values on the order of 100 GPa, values achieved to date with MTM platelets are at least one order of magnitude lower. This is because, in general, less than ~ 10 weight % (wt %) of the clay can be incorporated homogeneously as completely dispersed silicates rather than intercalated structures into the polymer because of the strong tendency of the clay to aggregate and phase separate. Further increases in the volume of the clay content have either marginally increased or even reduced both the strength and stiffness ($9, 11$).

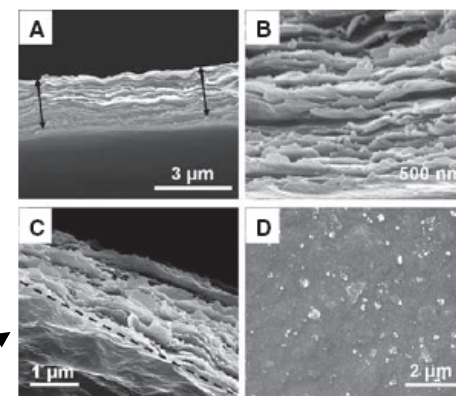
We approached preparation of the clay nanocomposite by using a bottom-up assembly process called layer-by-layer (LbL) assembly (12). The LbL process is based on sequential adsorption of nanometer-thick monolayers of oppositely charged compounds (such as polyelectrolytes, charged nanoparticles, and biological macromolecules) to form a multilayered structure with nanometer-level control over the architecture. In the past, we have used the LbL technique to prepare nanocomposites from carbon nanotubes (CNTs) that have $\sigma_{UTS} \sim 220$ MPa (13) and have also shown that the organized composites have many analogies with

Nacre



Source: Gao et al., 2003.

Fig. 2. Scanning electron microscopy characterization of a 300-bilayer, free-standing PVA/MTM nanocomposite. (A) Cross section of the film. Arrows indicate the span of the cross section. (B) Close-up of the cross section showing the separation of layers. (C) Top-down view of a fracture edge of the composite after tensile testing. Dashed line indicates edge of the sample. (D) Top-down view of the composite's surface. The slight separation of the layers seen in (A) and (B) is due to a shearing force resulting from cutting the sample with a razor blade during scanning electron microscopy sample preparation.



**Tensile strength = 400 MPa
 $E' = 106$ GPa**

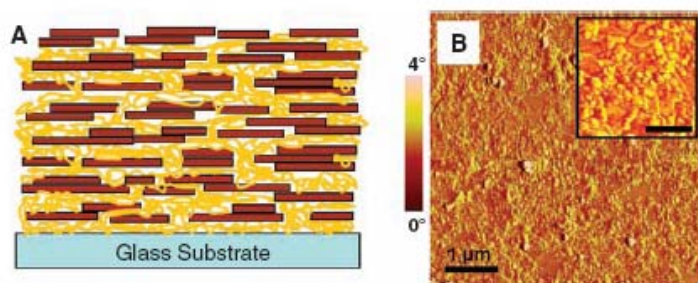


Fig. 1. Preparation of PVA/MTM nanocomposites. (A) Schematic representation of the internal architecture of the PVA/MTM nanocomposite (picture shows 8 bilayers). (B) ATM phase image of a single PVA/MTM bilayer adsorbed on top of a silicon wafer. (Inset) Close up of the main image showing individual MTM platelets more clearly. Scale bar in inset, 400 nm. (C) Top-down view of the composite's surface. The slight separation of the layers seen in (A) and (B) is due to a shearing force resulting from cutting the sample with a razor blade during scanning electron microscopy sample preparation.

Progress towards making multi-layered materials based on montmorillonite cross-linked with PVA by doctor blading

NANO LETTERS

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Large-Area, Lightweight and Thick Biomimetic Composites with Superior Material Properties via Fast, Economic, and Green Pathways

Andreas Walther,^{*,†} Ingela Bjurhager,[†] Jani-Markus Malho,[†] Jaakko Pere,[‡] Janne Ruokolainen,[†] Lars A. Berglund,[†] and Olli Ikkala^{*,†}

[†]Molecular Materials, Department of Applied Physics, Helsinki University of Technology/Aalto University, FIN-00076 Finland, [‡]Fibre and Polymer Technology, Division of Biocomposites, Department of Materials Science and Engineering, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, SE-100 44 Sweden, and [§]VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, Biotechnology, FIN-02044 VTT, Finland

ABSTRACT Although remarkable success has been achieved to mimic the mechanically excellent structure of nacre in laboratory-scale models, it remains difficult to foresee mainstream applications due to time-consuming sequential depositions or energy-intensive processes. Here, we introduce a surprisingly simple and rapid methodology for large-area, lightweight, and thick nacre-mimetic films and laminates with superior material properties. Nanoclay sheets with soft polymer coatings are used as ideal building blocks with intrinsic hard/soft character. They are forced to rapidly self-assemble into aligned nacre-mimetic films via paper-making, doctor-blading or simple painting, giving rise to strong and thick films with tensile modulus of 45 GPa and strength of 250 MPa, that is, partly exceeding nacre. The concepts are environmentally friendly, energy-efficient, and economic and are ready for scale-up via continuous roll-to-roll processes. Excellent gas barrier properties, optical transparency, and extraordinary shape-persistent fire-resistance are demonstrated. We foresee advanced large-scale biomimetic materials, relevant for lightweight sustainable construction and energy-efficient transportation.

KEYWORDS Biomimetic materials, nacre, self-assembly, layered composite, mechanical properties

Natural composites provide prime examples of lightweight, strong, stiff, and tough materials. Transferring these properties into future materials will undoubtedly benefit a wide area of fields, such as advanced constructions, in transportation, biomedical implant technology or for the defense sector. If suitable and simple pathways to biomimetic materials can be developed, synthetic lightweight high-performance materials will essentially promote sustainability and energy-efficiency, which is increasingly relevant for future societies. In natural composites some of the unraveled mysteries are the combination of hard and soft building blocks, the presence of a majority of inorganics and their highly ordered arrangement. The combination of a majority phase of reinforcing material with a minority of soft, energy-dissipating, and crack-deflecting

only a low fraction of the reinforcement and highly synergistic mechanical properties have remained a challenge.*

One remarkable biological composite that has gained tremendous interest as model system for materials science is nacre. Its hierarchical architecture is constituted of highly aligned inorganic aragonite platelets surrounded by a protein matrix, serving as glue between the platelets. The structure exhibits a cooperative behavior under mechanical stresses and is considered as a near perfect marriage of hard and soft materials.⁶ The structure of nacre has been mimicked by several sequential approaches, such as layer-by-layer (LbL)^{6–9} and other multilayer deposition strategies,¹⁰ ice-templating and sintering of ceramics,^{11,12} uncontrolled co-casting of polymer/clay mixtures^{13–18} or processes at

**Tensile strength = 141 MPa
E' = 34 GPa**

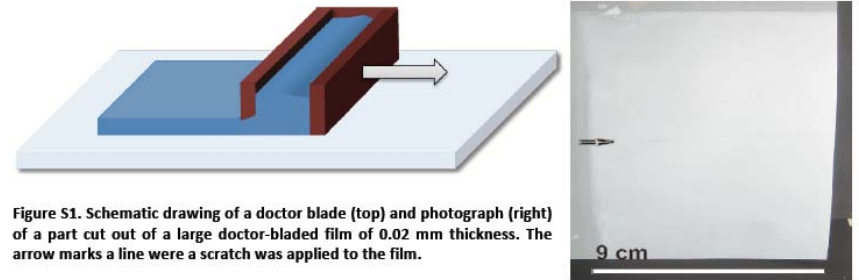


Figure S1. Schematic drawing of a doctor blade (top) and photograph (right) of a part cut out of a large doctor-bladed film of 0.02 mm thickness. The arrow marks a line where a scratch was applied to the film.

C The present PVA/MTM mimics for nacre

Each MTM colloidal object pre-coated by PVA separately
Assembly made in one step
PVA mediates interactions between the MTM platelets
(hydrogen bonding and optional crosslinking)

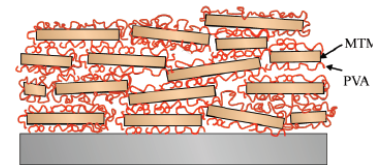


Figure S6. Simplified schematics for A) nacre, B) LbL-concept for nacre using cationic polyelectrolytes and MTM (Tang, Nature Materials 2004)(4), and C) the present one-step concept.

Additional HR-TEM of the layered structure within PVA/MTM composites

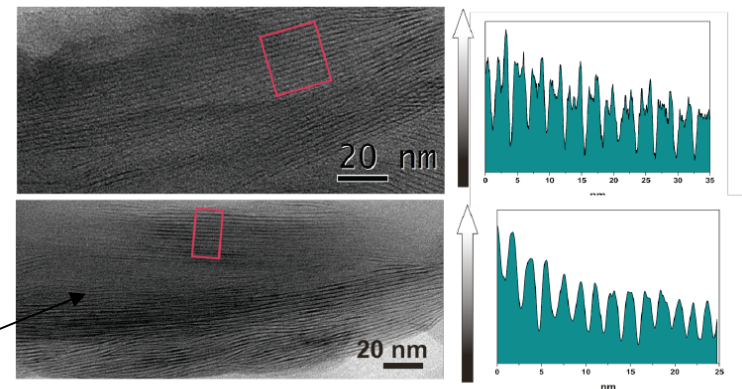
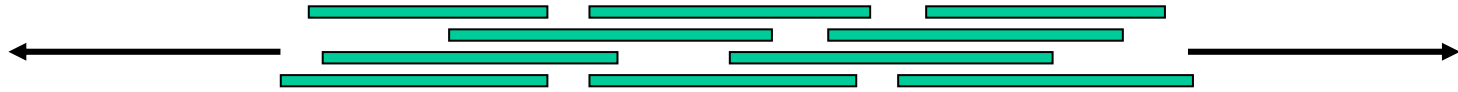
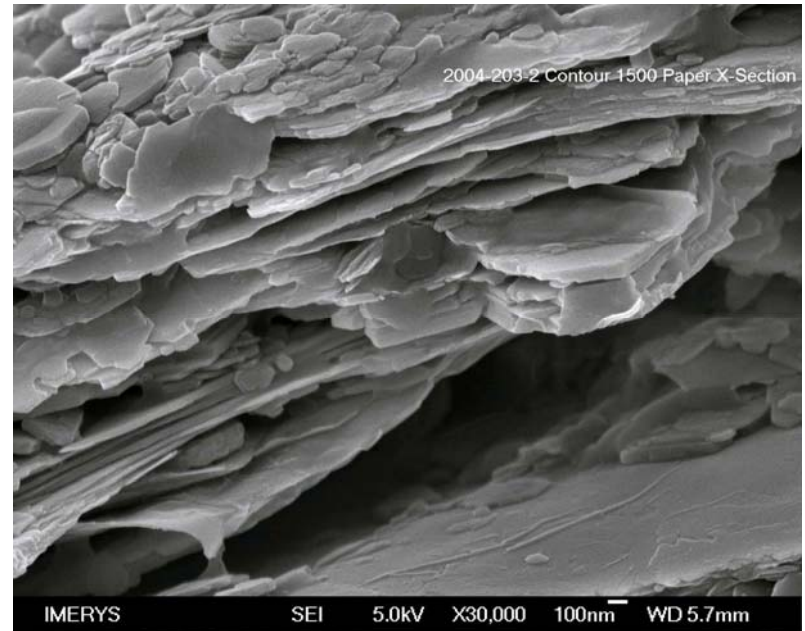
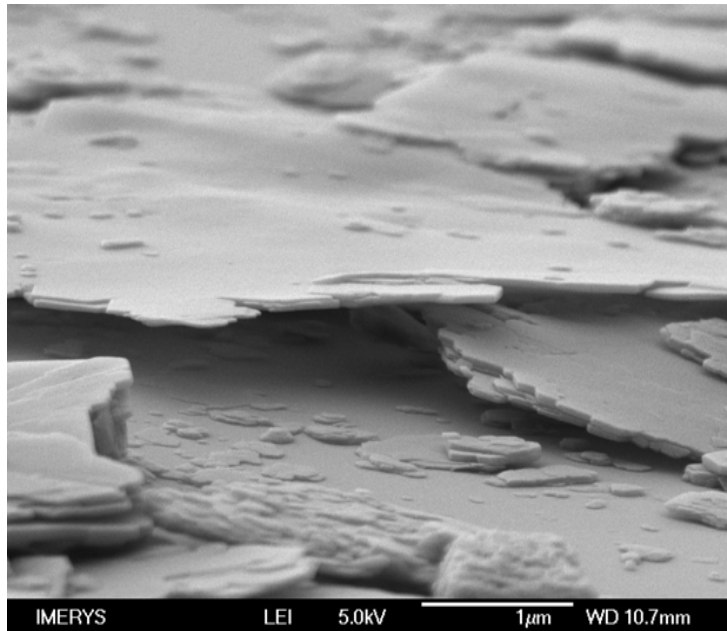


Figure S7. Further HR-TEM images of cross sections of layered composites of PVA-coated nanoclay particles. The grey scale analysis on the right correspond the cross sections shown in the respective images. Typical spacings are in the range of 1.8 – 2.2 nm. The upper image shows an overlay of at least two layered patterns, one being dominant.

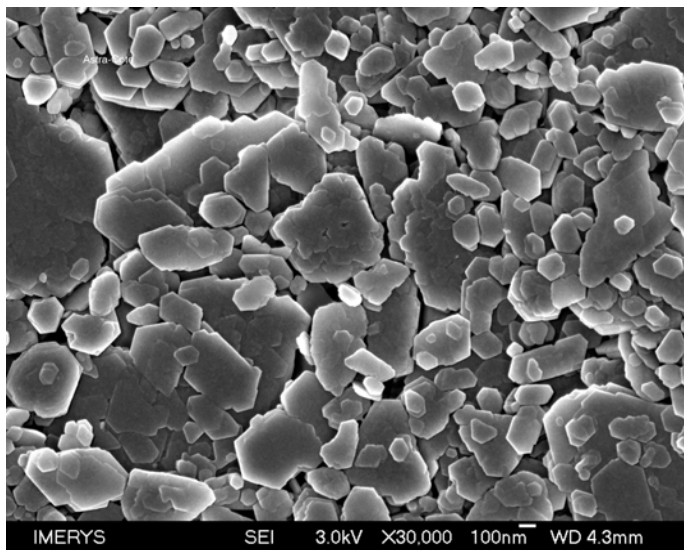
Coating layers for graphic papers



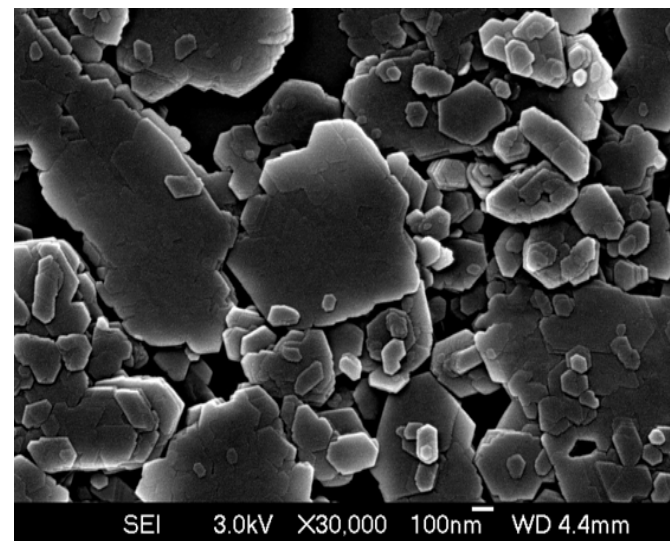
Montmorillonite-based films may be good for barrier properties but cannot be used for printing papers due to low porosity, solids / coverage and poor optical performance. Kaolin is a versatile particle and can be produced with very high aspect ratio or thin particles.



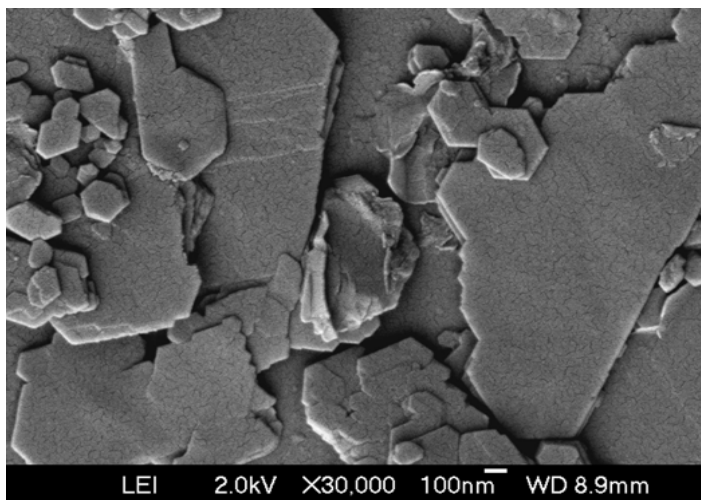
Examples of kaolin types that can be made from Georgia crudes



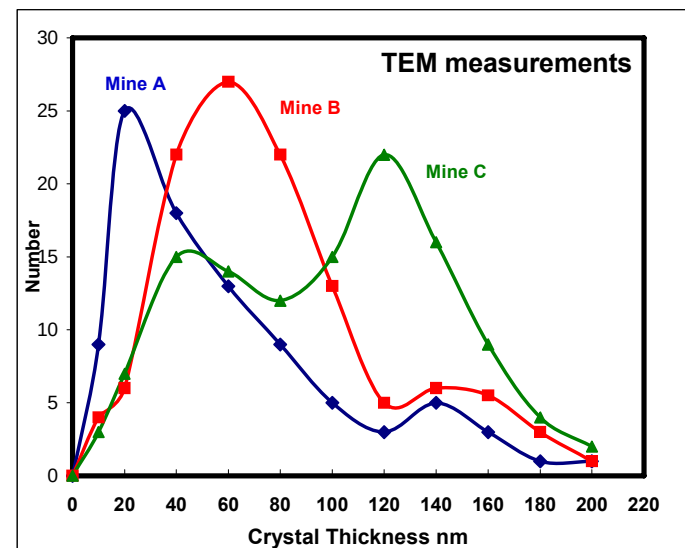
Fine glossing clay (blocky)
Astrasheen™



Fine shape engineered clay (platy)
(Thin crystal clay)
Contour Xtreme™

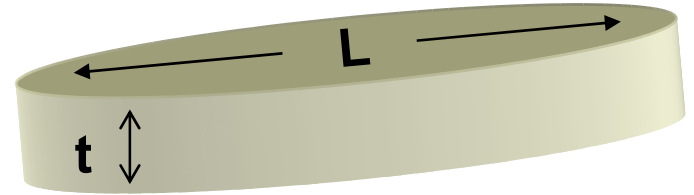
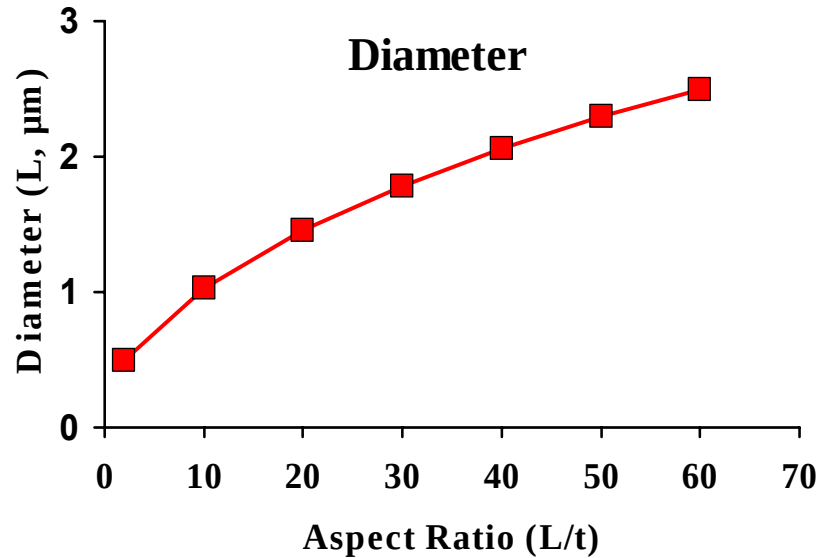


Shape engineered clay (platy)
(Thin crystal clay) E¹⁰⁰™

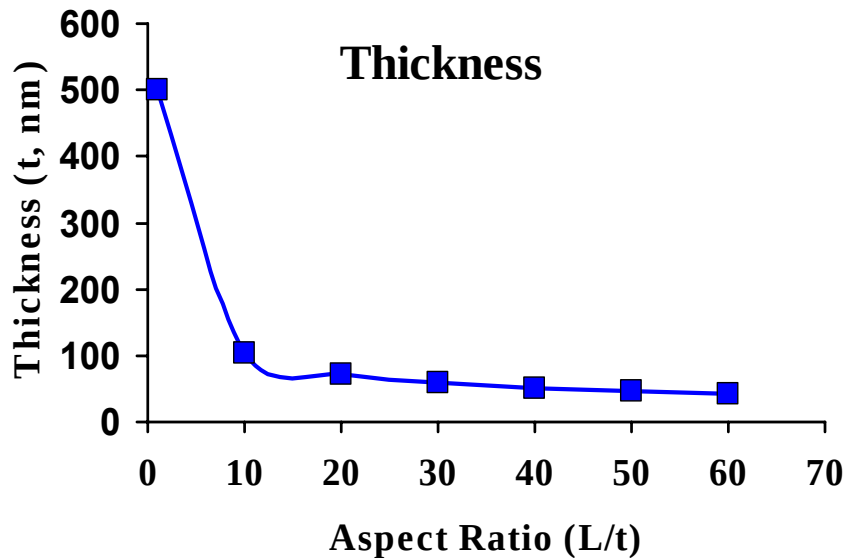


Disc Diameter and Thickness

0.5 μm e.s.d. disc :

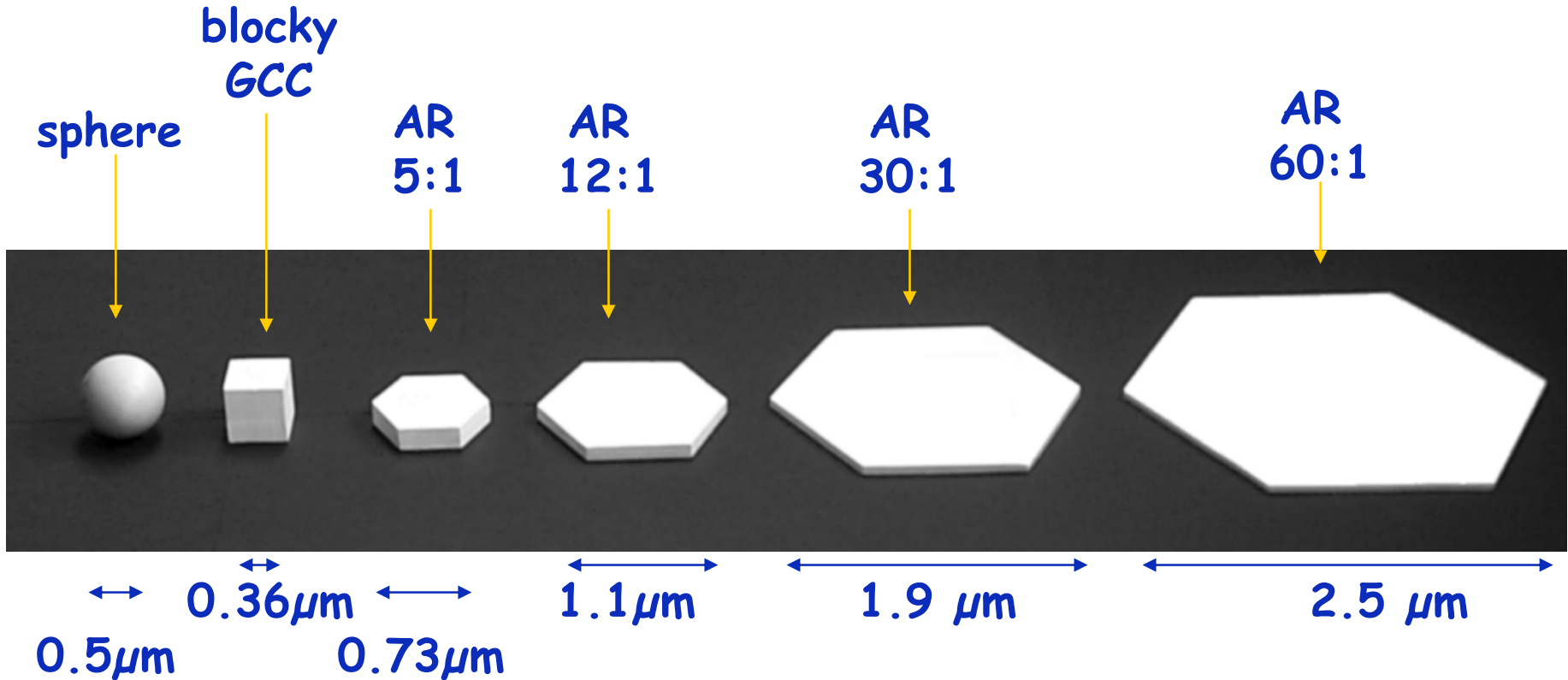


Aspect ratio = d/t



This can vary between
10:1 (blocky) to >60:1
(hyperplaty)

Kaolin disc diameter can be much larger than the esd



All the above particles have the same esd (0.5 μm), so the crystal thickness decreases as the diameter increases.

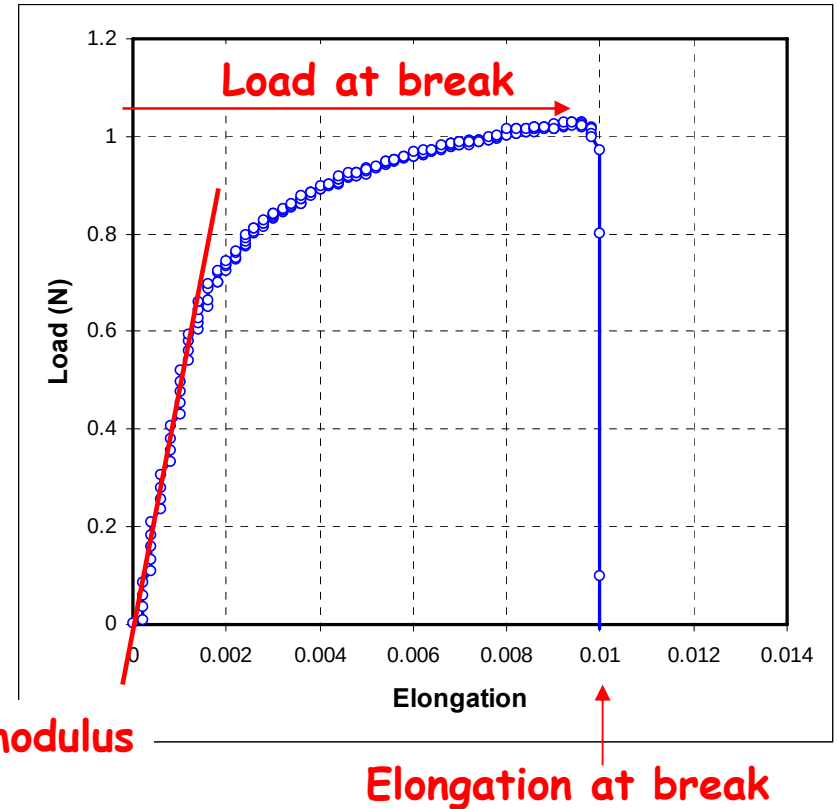
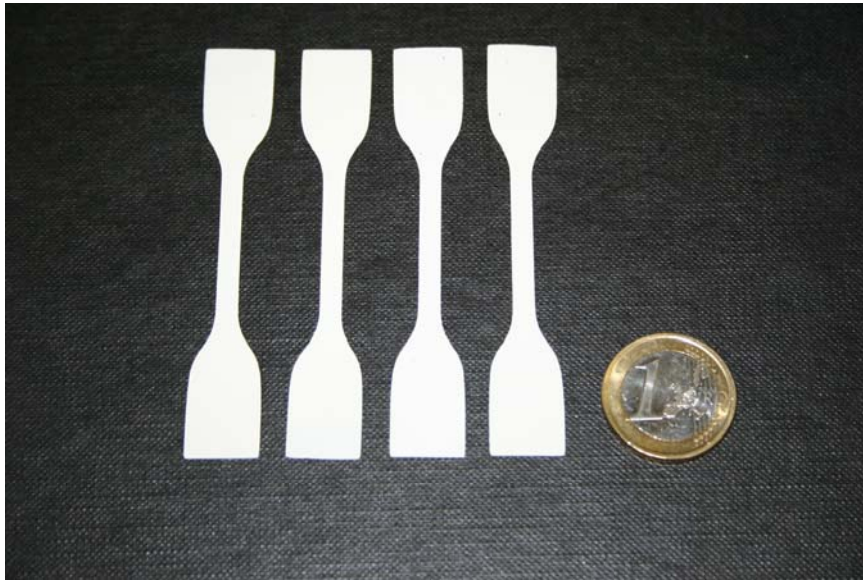
The mechanical properties of coatings will be very different

Kaolins used

Clay	D50 (μm)	Shape factor	Surface area m^2g^{-1}
A Fine blocky	0.37	16	14.2
B Fine ultraplaty	0.40	56	16
C Ultrafine blocky	0.19	12	27
D Ultrafine platey	0.23	40	24

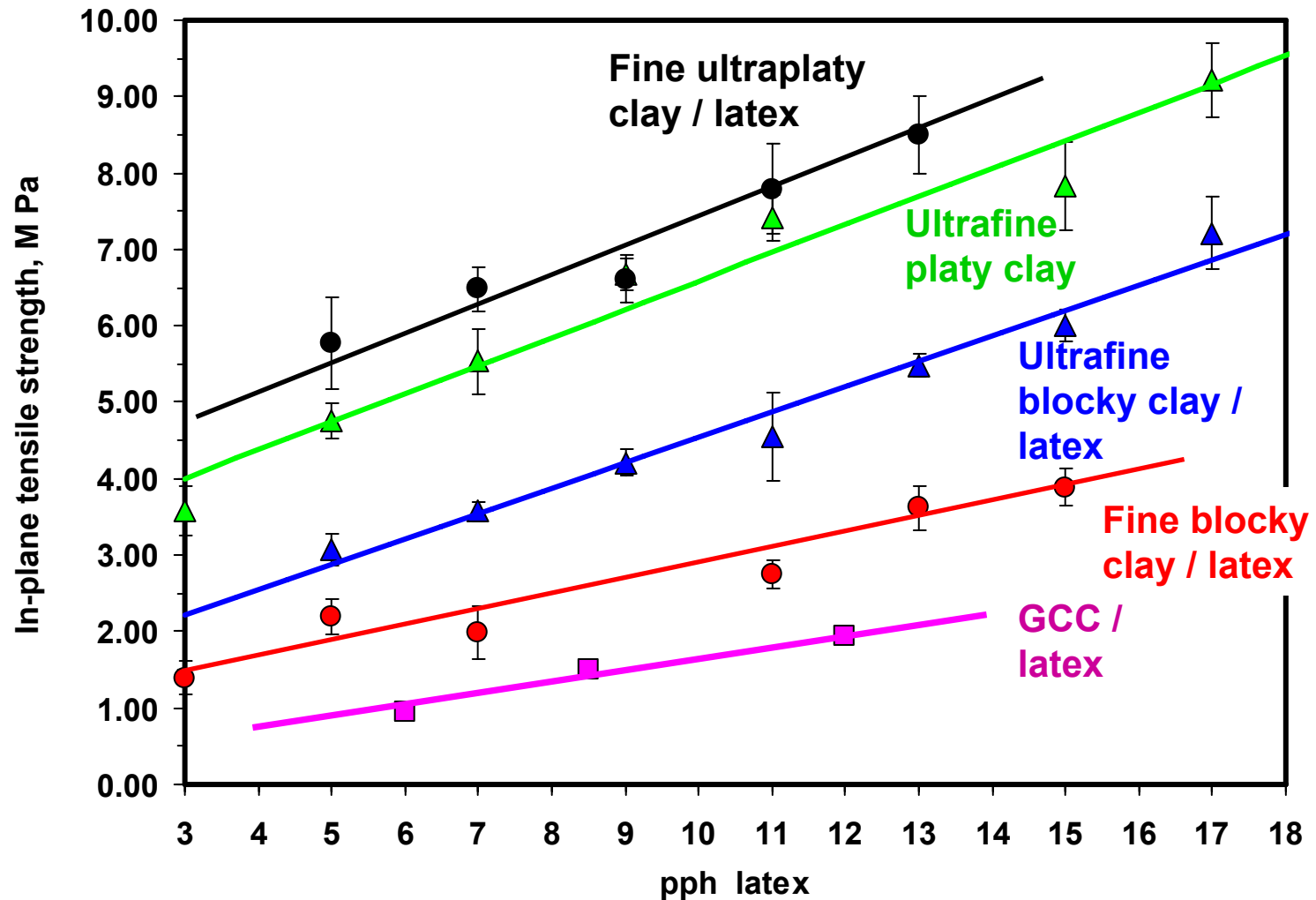
- Add SBN latex ($T_g = 10^\circ\text{C}$) at 3 - 18 pph on kaolin
- CMC at 0.3 pph
- Centrifuge to remove air bubbles
- Prepare coating layers ($\sim 100\mu\text{m}$ thickness) on PET film
- Peel off to give unsupported coatings

Measuring in-plane tensile strength of unsupported coating layers



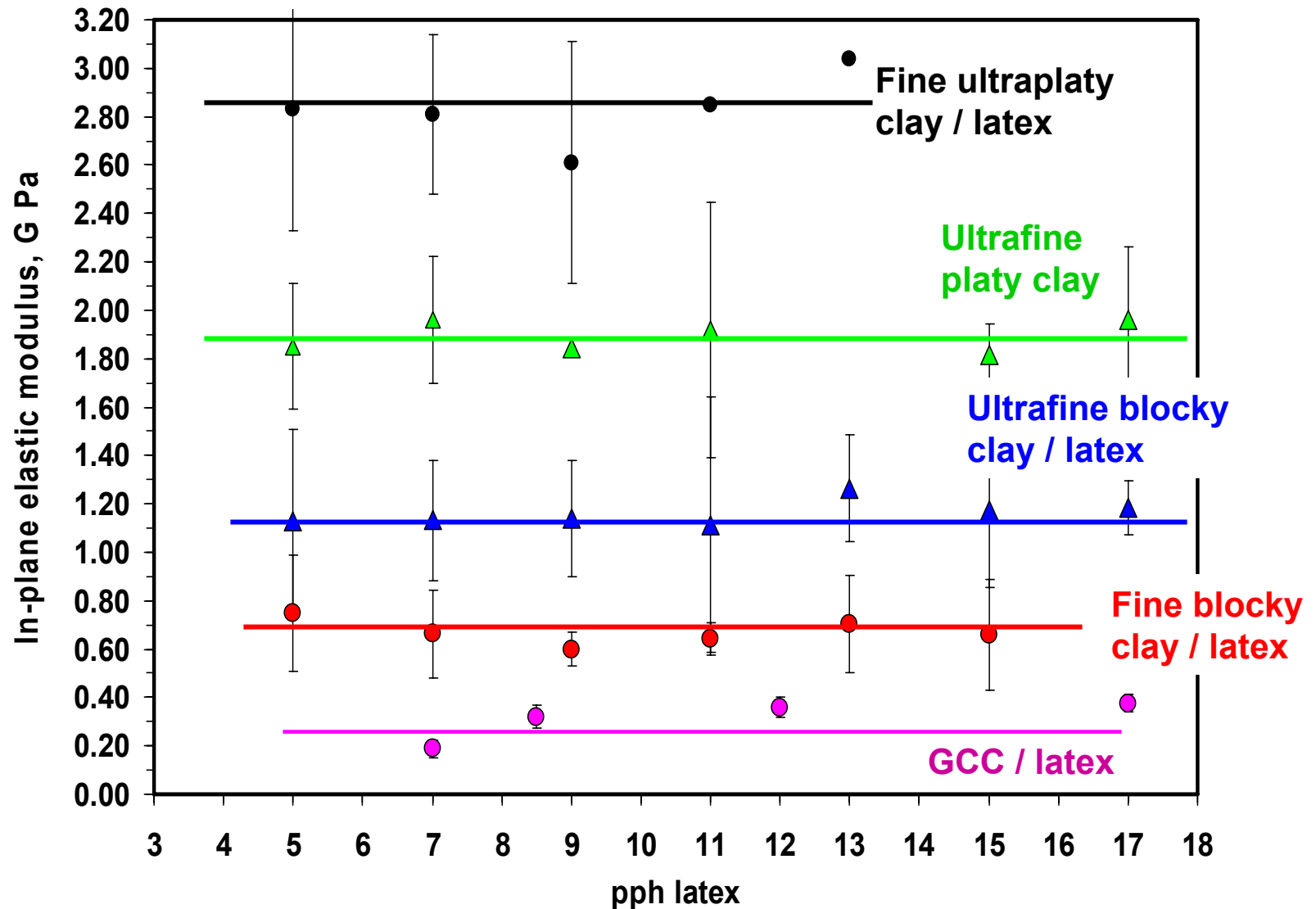
- Tensile strength = Load at break / cross-sectional area
- Elastic modulus = slope of initial linear portion of stress - strain curve

In-plane tensile strength of unsupported coatings



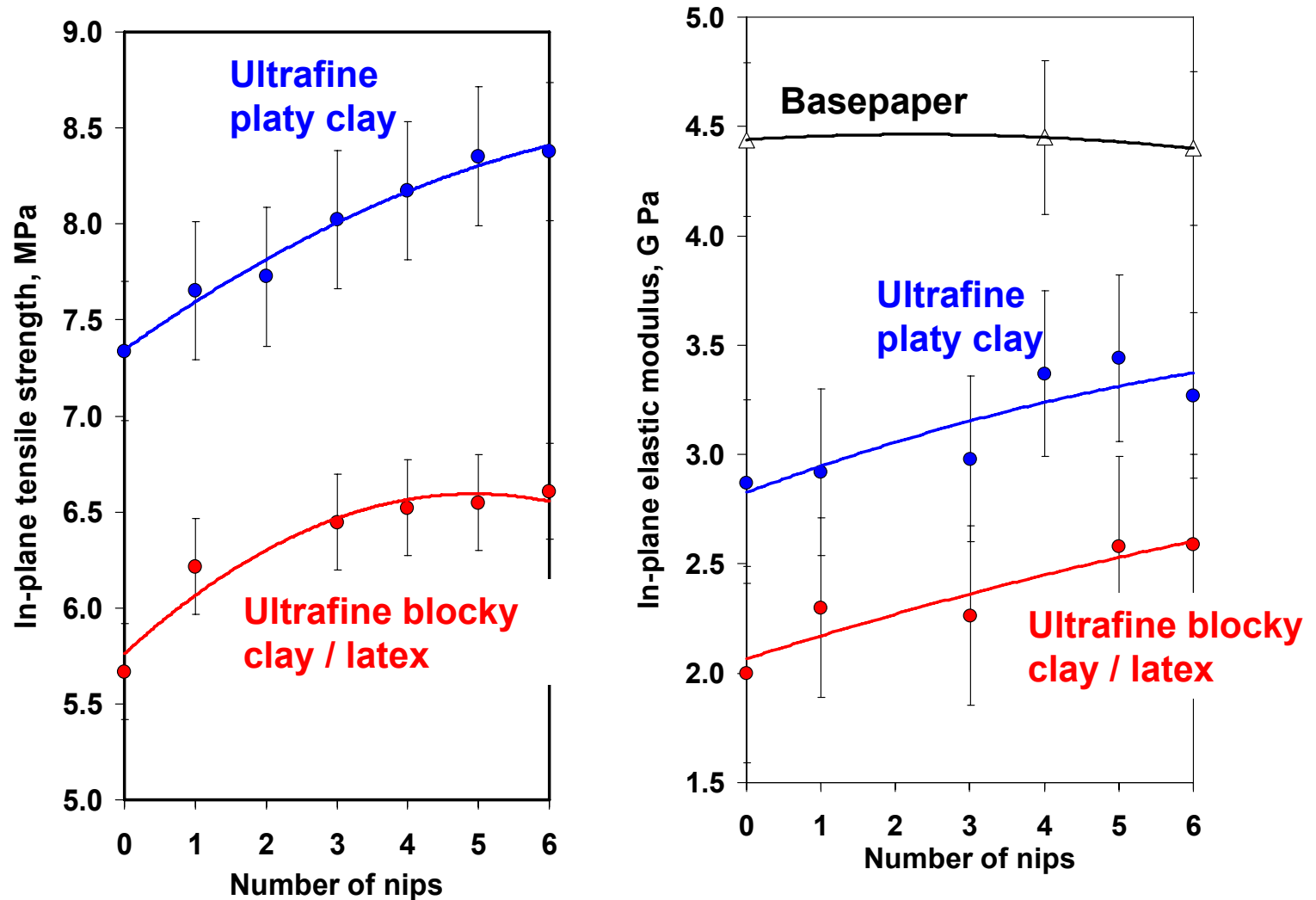
- *Tensile strength increases with latex level and kaolin aspect ratio*

In-plane elastic modulus of unsupported coatings



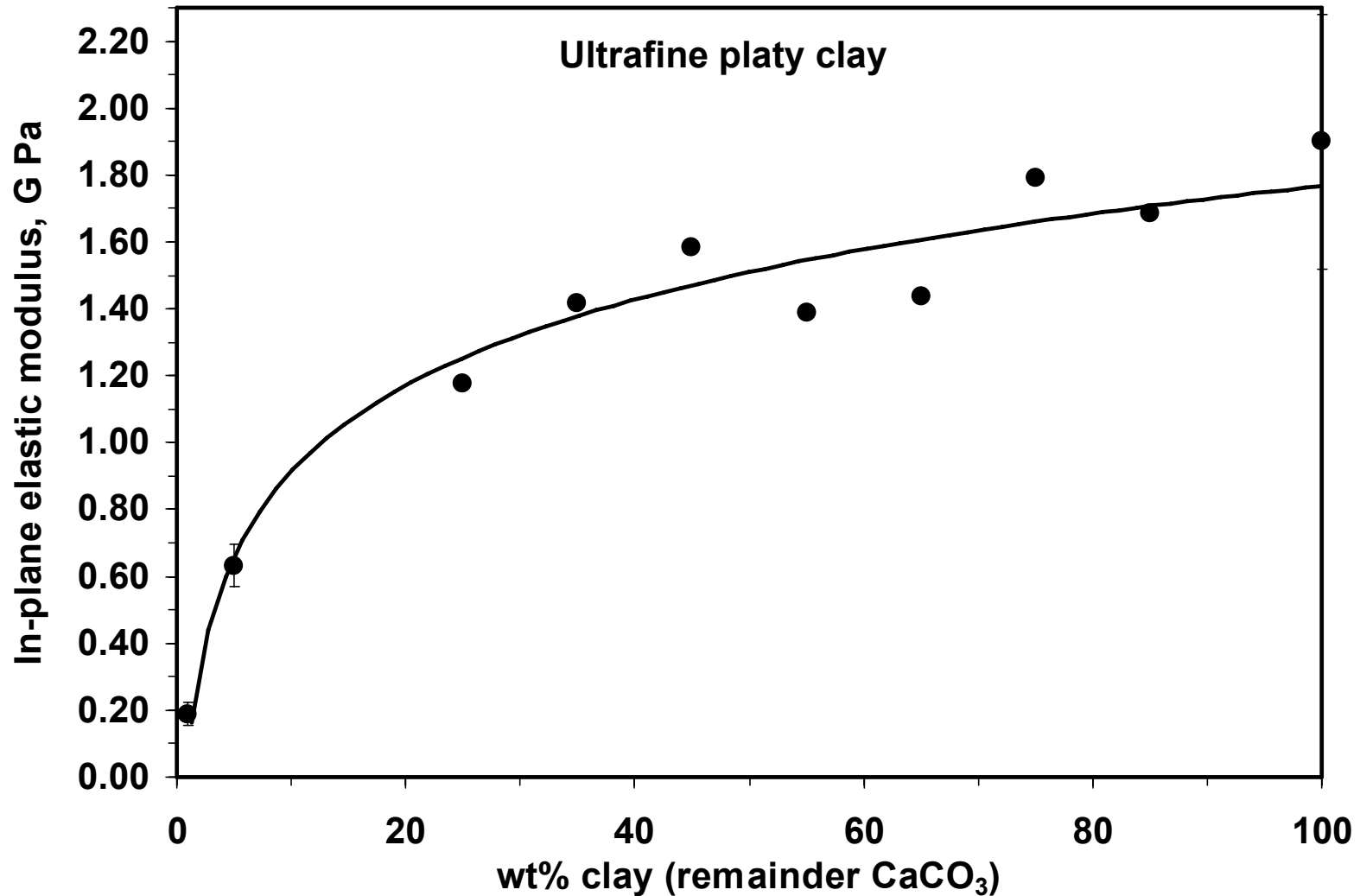
- *Modulus unaffected by latex level – dominated by pigment shape*

Effect of lab calendering on in-plane tensile properties of unsupported coatings



*Strength properties increase with calendering,
Coating layers can have a modulus which is close to that of basepaper.*

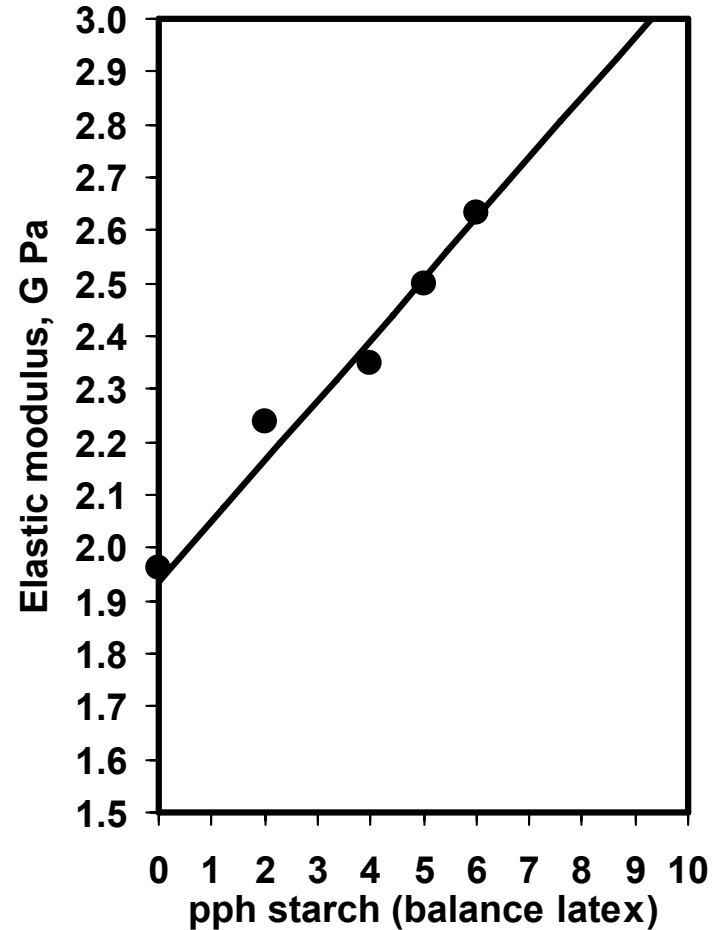
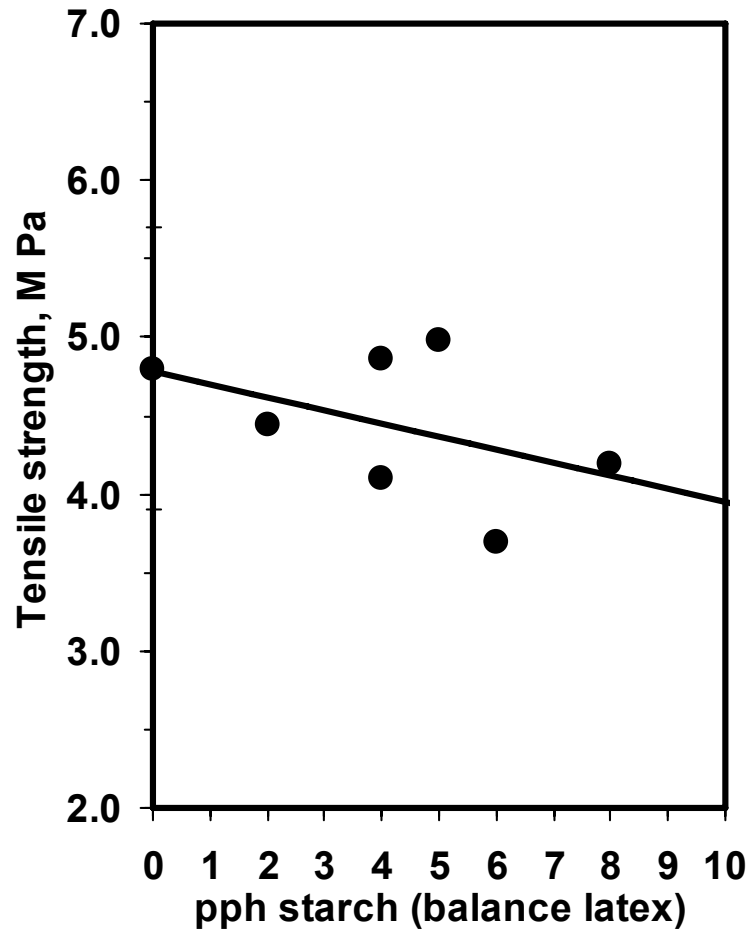
Elastic modulus of kaolin - carbonate blends



***Benefits of high aspect ratio clay still present in blends with carbonate
Biggest gains with low levels of kaolin substitution (<50 parts) so optical
properties of GCC can be maintained***

Effect of binder type (starch) on in-plane tensile properties of unsupported coatings

Kaolin UFP, 10 pph binder total

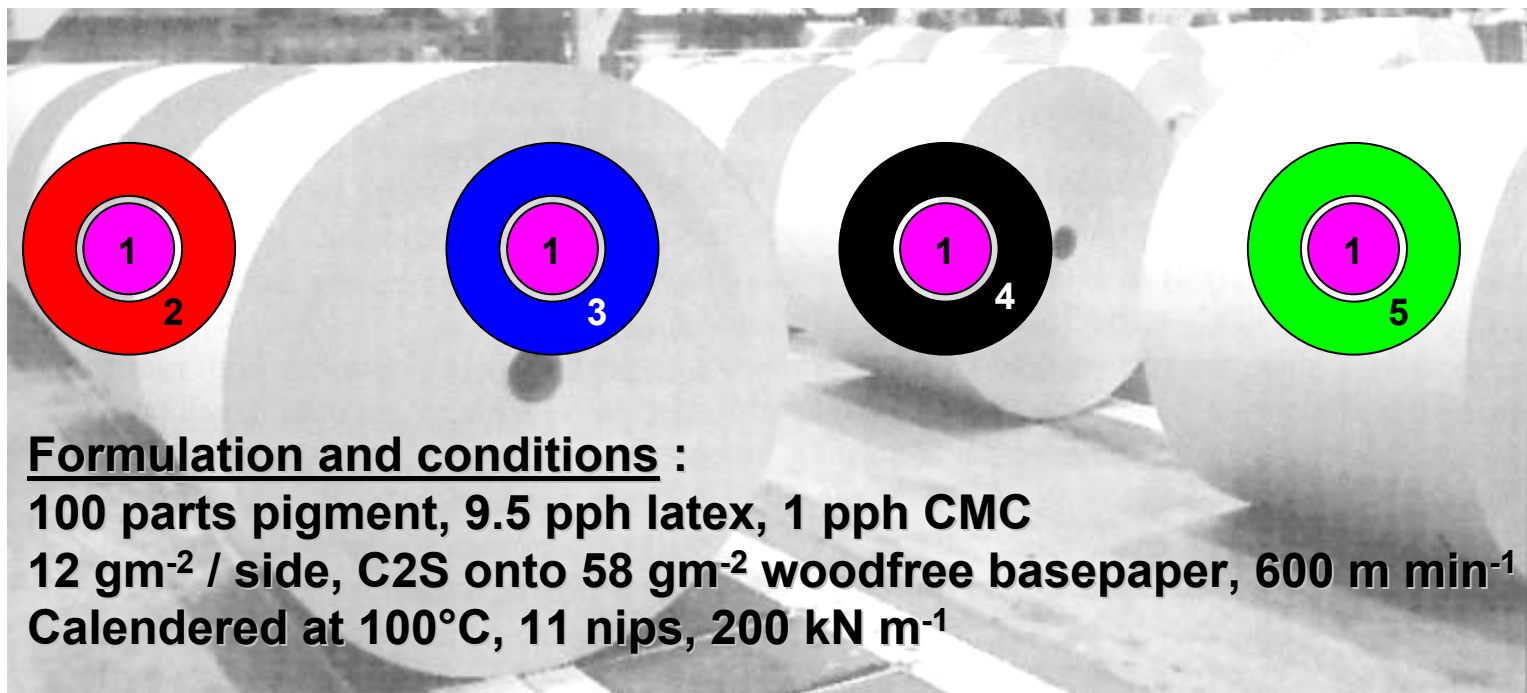


Starch can help increase the elastic modulus further.

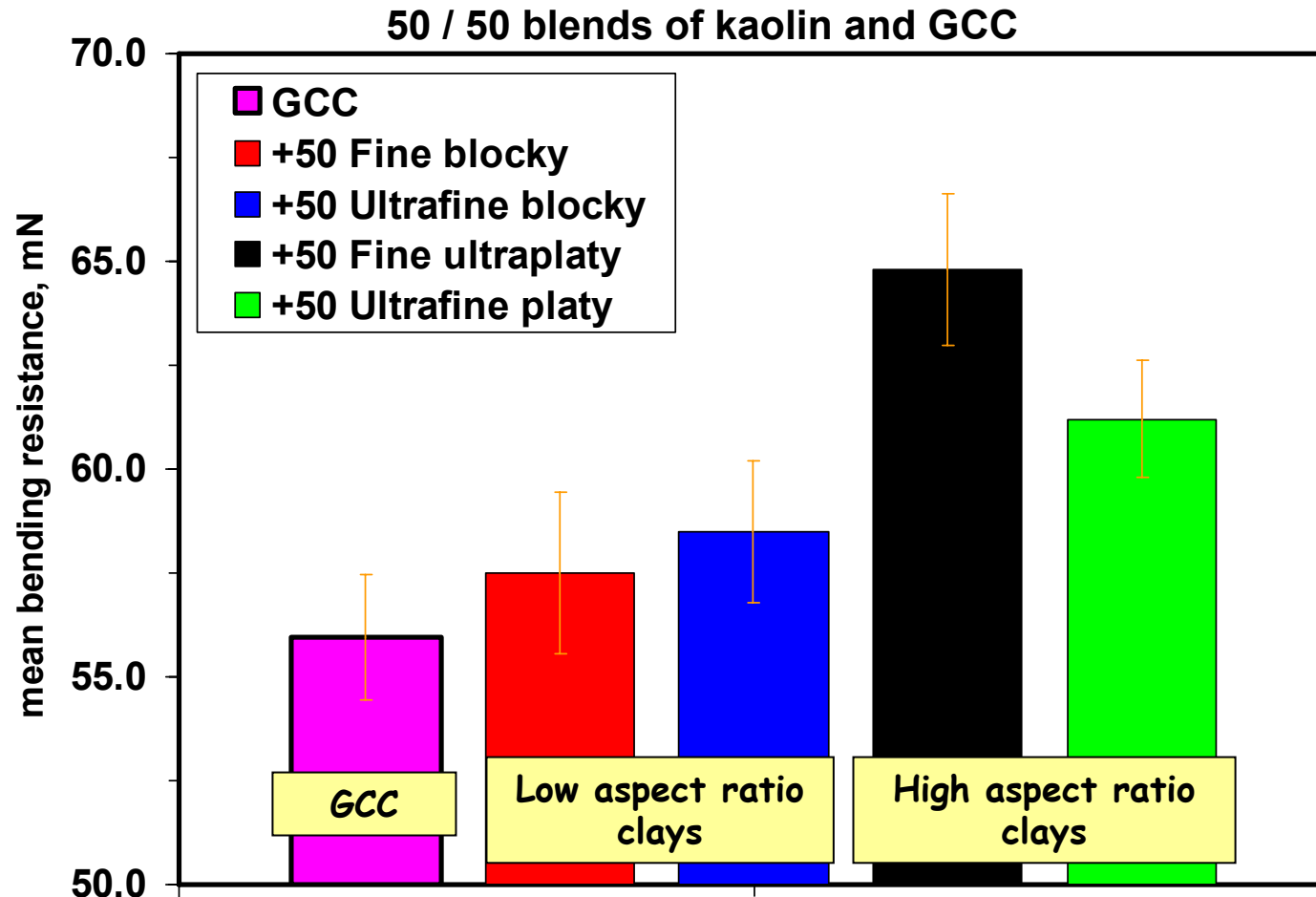
Pilot coater trial

Fomulation	GCC control	Fine blocky	Ultrafine blocky	Ultra fine platy	Fine ultraplaty
1	100				
2	50	50			
3	50		50		
4	50			50	
5	50				50

4 reels coated, first half of each reel was GCC control, then clay / GCC :

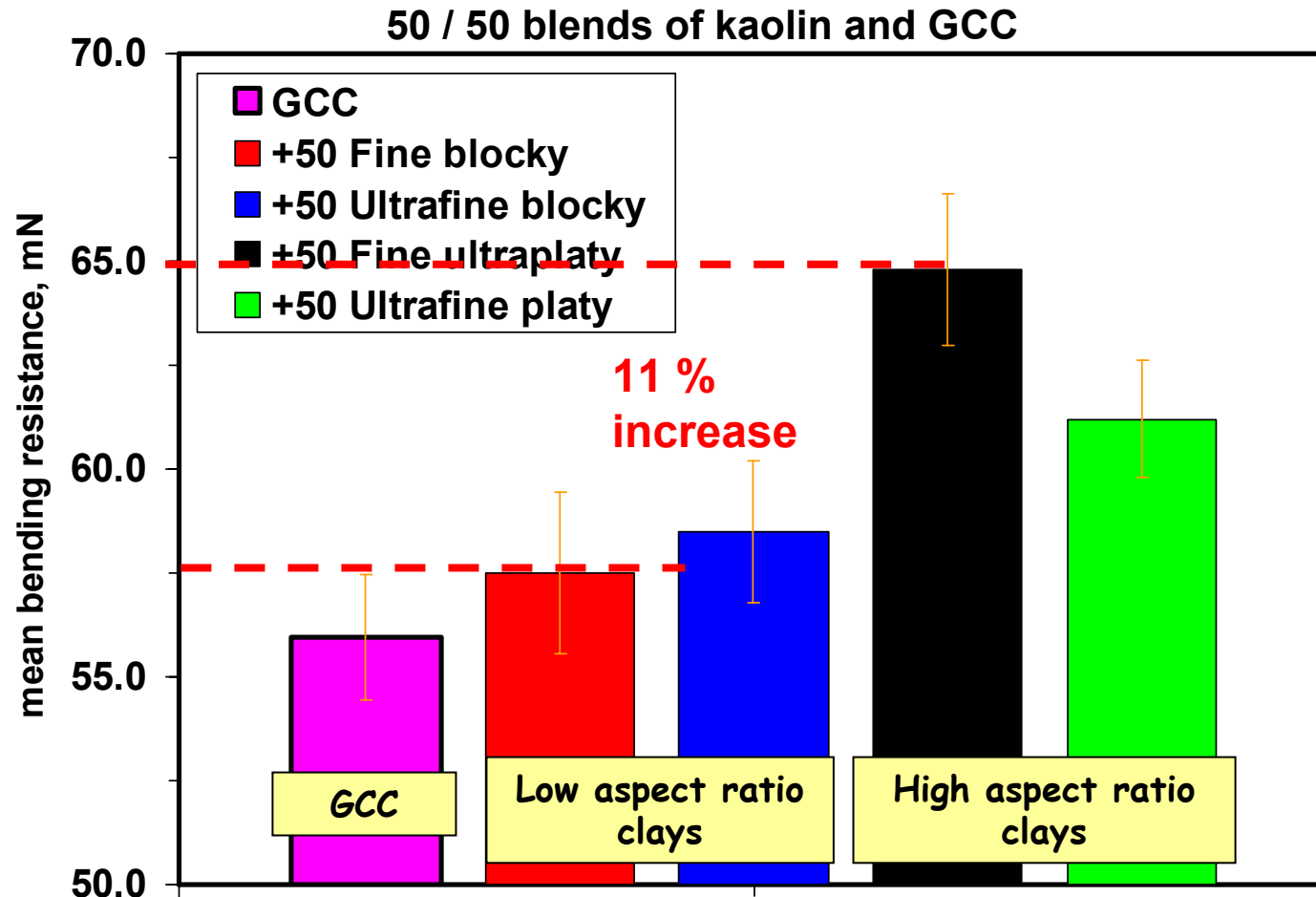


Pilot coating : Bending resistance of C2S coated papers 12 gm⁻² / side, calendered



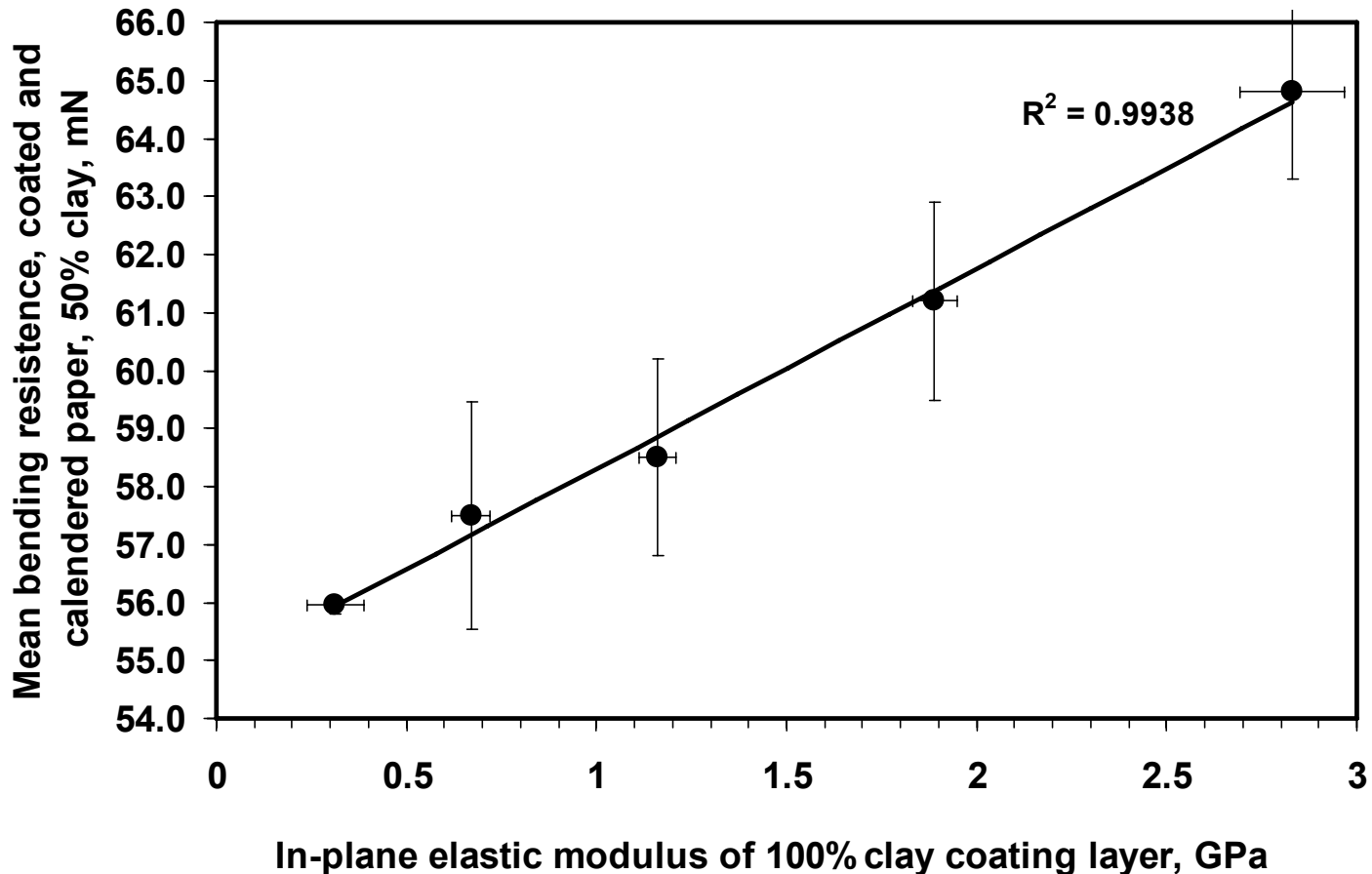
High aspect ratio clay gives improvements in bending resistance compared to blocky clays of up to 11%

Pilot coating : Bending resistance of C2S coated papers 12 gm⁻² / side, calendered



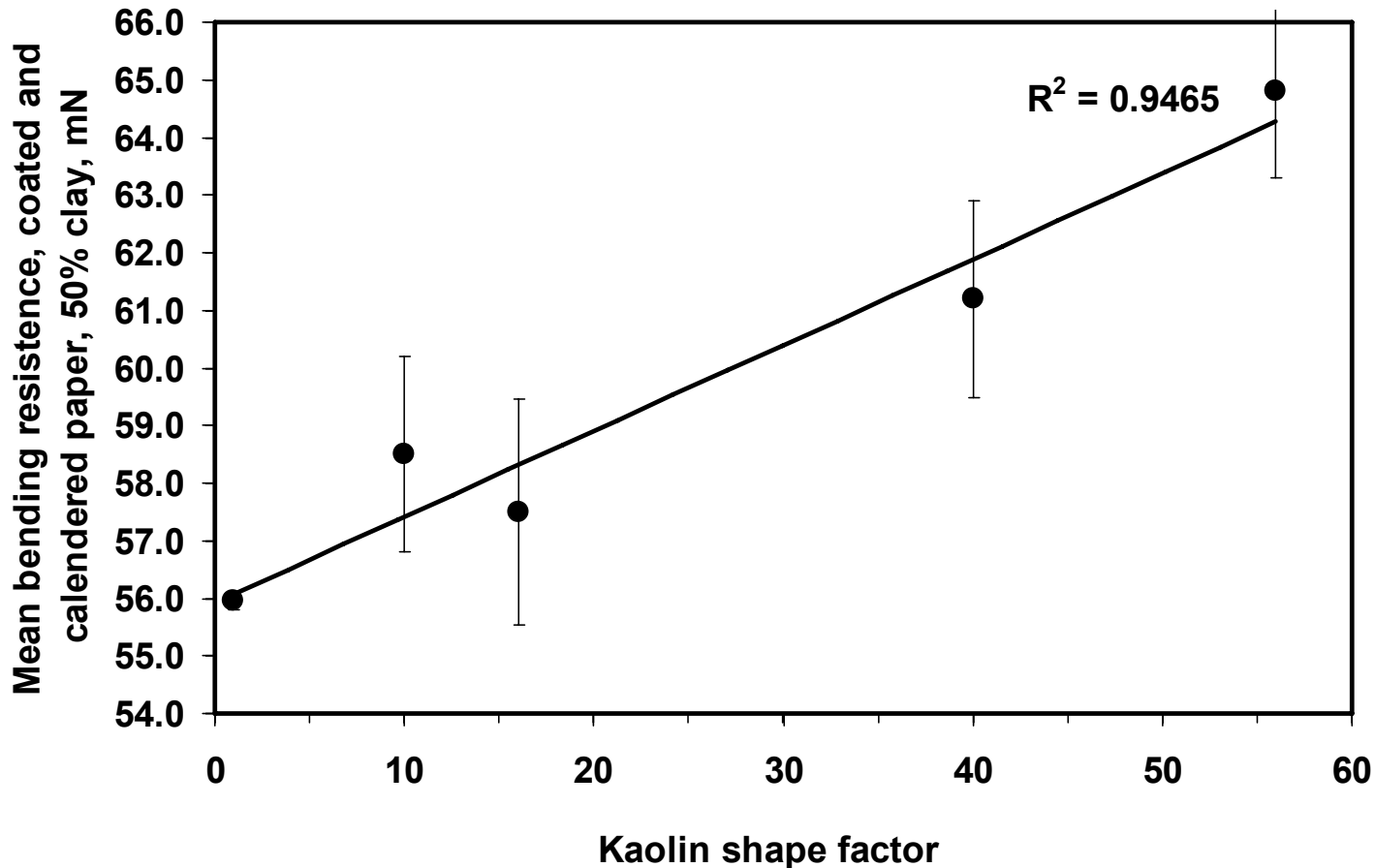
High aspect ratio clay gives improvements in bending resistance compared to blocky clays of up to 11%

Correlation between bending resistance of coated paper and elastic modulus of coating layer



Good correlation suggests stiffness is controlled by kaolin

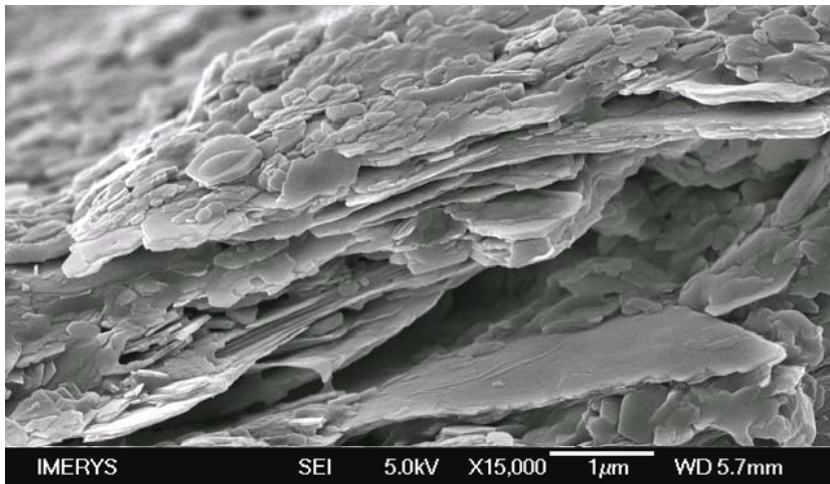
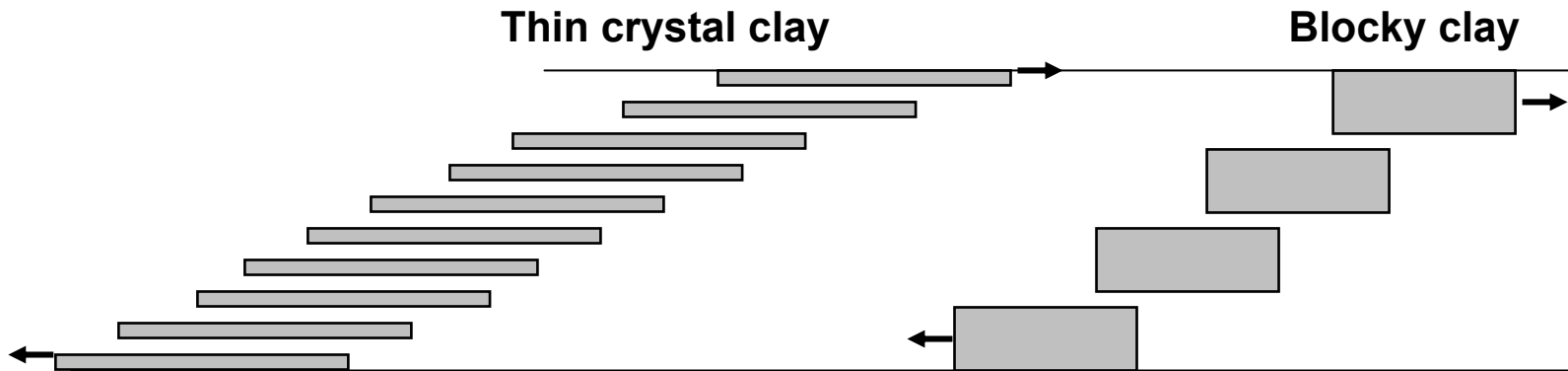
Correlation between bending resistance of coated paper and shape factor of kaolin



The shape of the kaolin in the coating can be used as a tool to control the elastic modulus and hence the stiffness of the coated paper.

Why do platy clays have this effect ?

Thin plates provide more face surface for load transfer



Summary

- The coating layer influences the strength and stiffness of the sheet,
- Kaolin shape factor is a useful control tool to improve coating layer stiffness,
- High aspect ratio thin crystal clays give more stiffness than conventional fine glossing clays or carbonates (eg. an 11% increase would allow reduction of 4% in fibre),
- The challenge is to combine these benefits with binder development and fibre engineering to reduce the amount of fibre while maintaining other sheet properties such as fold cracking, optics and bulk,
- This technology should be applicable to a range of coated grades.

Thank you for your attention

john.husband@imerys.com

