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Rare-earth doped micro-emitters made by lift-off processing in pulsed laser deposited layers on Si substrate

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Abstract: Rare earth emitters are promising in integrated optics but require complex integration on silicon. In this work, we have fabricated an $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ micro-emitter on SiO_2 on Si substrate without etching. Since pulsed laser deposition produces a high quality layer at room temperature, material can be locally deposited on top of substrates by lift-off processing. After annealing, microstructures exhibit good crystallographic quality with controlled dimensions for light confinement and narrow emission. This works allows envisioning rare-earth doped micro-photonics structures directly integrated on silicon without etching, which opens the way to integration of new functional materials on silicon platform.

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1. Introduction

Rare earth emitters have been studied for a while in integrated optics as laser source [1] and waveguide amplifier with glasses [2,3] or polymer [4]. Recently, they have been integrated in Complementary Metal Oxide Semiconductor (CMOS) driven or compatible Si photonics chip as active devices like laser sources [5], amplifiers [6,7] as well as modulators [8,9]. Rare earth emitters offer thus many possibilities for developing new active functions in integrated optics initially focused on group IV [10] or III-V materials [11,12]. However, complex processing is needed for their efficient incorporation on silicon platform such as bonding [13], masked deposition [5,14], additional layer [15], or etching [16,17] which can be costly and detrimental for practical applications. This is especially the case for Y_2O_3 and Al_2O_3 matrix which require inductively coupled plasma optimized etching [18–20].

In this work, we propose an innovative design of rare-earth doped layer micro-emitters without etching using lift-off processing combined with Pulsed Laser Deposition (PLD). While the classical structuring via etching is performed with the partial erosion of a full-surface coating of the substrate through a mask (e. g. photoresist), in the lift-off procedure, the material is cleared away with the structured resist together with the material deposited thereon. Such method is easier than etching and avoids potential damage along the etched sidewall. Lift-off processing is conventional in microelectronics for thin layer patterning (e.g metal) or thicker layer with low temperature deposition like sputtering [21], atomic layer [22], or glass deposition [23]. Although very attractive, one of the main drawbacks of the lift-off procedure is the substrate temperature during deposition. Indeed, if the substrate temperature is higher than 200°C (i.e the hard bake temperature of the photoresist), lift-off processing cannot be successful. PLD allows overcoming such limitation. PLD is a high quality growth technique commonly used for many applications in

photonics [24] which can provide for instance low loss waveguide grown at room temperature [25]. One of the main advantages of PLD lies on the fact that the atoms/molecules reaching the surface during deposition have a kinetic energy which exceeds the thermal energy by several orders of magnitude [26]. Such phenomenon leads to the possibility to grow films on substrates in a range of temperatures much lower than otherwise required with other technics (Molecular Beam Epitaxy, Chemical Vapor Deposition. . .). Therefore, the possibility to merge both technologies (i.e lift-off and PLD) is of great interest for the direct integration of structures for photonics applications.

In this paper, we focus on the fabrication and the study of micro-structured $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ layers to demonstrate light confinement and emission without etching. We first have investigated planar $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ layers. X-Ray Diffraction (XRD) and Photoluminescence (PL) measurements were performed directly after room temperature deposition and compared with samples annealed at 650°C . We have then fabricated $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ microstructures on SiO_2 buffer layers deposited on Si substrate. As a function of the waveguide width, we have observed different confined modes compared with modeling. Finally, we have performed PL measurements showing a strong emission of the micro-emitters.

2. Pulsed laser deposited $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ planar layers

$\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ is a material of choice for integrated optics. The Eu^{3+} ion is well known for its intense red emission under UV excitation and for its quantum yield close to 100% [27] which could be very interesting for visible integrated optic [28]. Moreover, Y_2O_3 host presents many advantages. Yttrium Oxide has a large band gap which ensures optical transparency for a wide range of wavelengths and it is chemically stable. Furthermore the atomic radius of Yttrium and Europium are in the same range which allows an efficient rare earth incorporation [29]. $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ 300 nm planar layers were first deposited on SiO_2 (2 μm)/Si substrate. A KrF excimer laser ($\lambda=248$ nm, $t=17$ ns, Coherent Compex Pro) operating at 5 Hz was used for the ablation of the target under 73 mJ, focused over 2mm^2 . Substrate rotation was used to obtain homogeneous layer thickness at the growth speed of 3.5 nm/min, at room temperature in an oxygen-gas atmosphere (10^{-3} mbar). The distance between the sample and the $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ target was set to 6 cm. After the growth, samples were annealed 24 hours at 650°C with a $0.5^\circ\text{C}/\text{min}$ ramp under ambient air. Figure 1 presents XRD and PL measurements before and after annealing. X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns were collected using a D2-phasex Bruker instrument with Cu- $\text{K}\alpha$ radiation ($\lambda = 0.1540598$ nm)

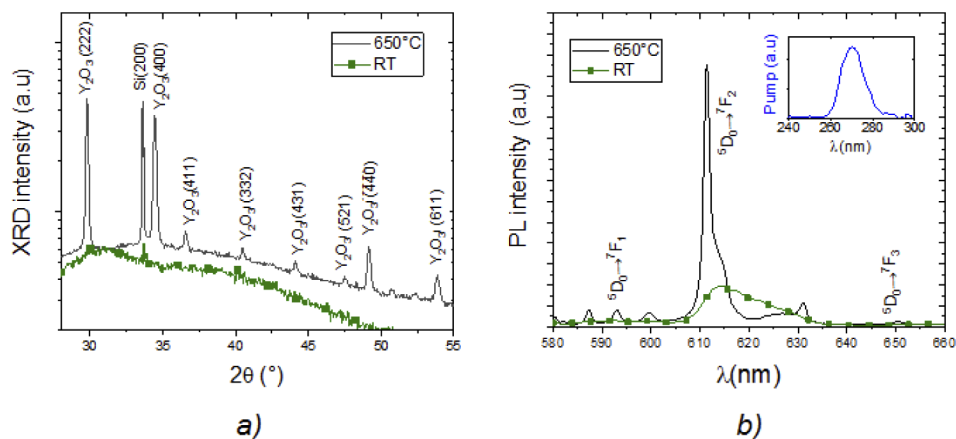


Fig. 1. $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ layer before and after annealing compared by a) X-ray diffraction and a) photoluminescence measurement with the excitation spectra presented in the inset

using a graphite monochromator in the 2θ range from 25 to 55° [Fig. 1(a)]. Before annealing, no peaks are detected which evidence the amorphous character of the Y_2O_3 thin film. After annealing, the XRD pattern shows that all diffraction peaks can be indexed to the Y_2O_3 cubic phase (JCPDS 00-041-1105) and no signal from another phase (Y_2O_3 monoclinic) or impurities is observed, indicating that the product is single-phase [30,31]. PL measurements were performed with an Oriel Cornerstone CS260 monochromator and a Hamamatsu R1477 visible photo-multiplier. Roithner LED UVR270SC3P pump source was focused over few mm^2 with a centered wavelength around 270 nm. The excitation spectrum is highlighted on the inset of Fig. 1(b). This excitation wavelength corresponds to the excitation of the Eu-O charge band [32,33]. Light emission is then collected from $\sim mm^2$ surface aligned with the pumped region. Without annealing, $Y_2O_3:Eu^{3+}$ emission spectrum is broad with low intensity, due to the amorphous Y_2O_3 matrix [34]. Note that rare earth emission is nevertheless detected with such low temperature deposition which could be interesting for CMOS compatible applications. After annealing, we clearly see that narrow and higher intensity emission bands are detected, corresponding to the well-known Eu^{3+} energy level in a crystalline Y_2O_3 host [32,35]. Therefore, our growth conditions allow depositing $Y_2O_3:Eu^{3+}$ layers with enhanced emission properties after annealing, as expected [34].

Layer thickness and refractive index were measured before and after annealing using a Dektak profilometer and a J.A Woollan Ellipsometer. A good correlation was found between both measurements. Before annealing, the layer thickness was estimated to be $0.30 \mu m$ and $0.28 \mu m$ after annealing. Furthermore, the refractive index increases from 1.80 to 1.87 at 610 nm wavelength (see *Supplement 1*). Such measurements indicate that the layer density increases during the annealing step, as previously reported in the literature [36–38].

3. Processing for micro-structuration

Figure 2(a) reports the process flow for the $Y_2O_3:Eu^{3+}$ micro-structuration. AZ5214 negative photoresist [PR in the Fig. 2(a)] was used on top of a $2 \mu m$ thermal SiO_2 buffer on Si substrate. UV lithography was achieved with a standard EVG mask aligner and standard Cr lithography photomask. $1.8 \mu m$ height photoresist strip with 2 , 4 and $8 \mu m$ width were defined along the $\langle 110 \rangle$ Si crystalline axis. Afterward, samples were directly placed under vacuum to prevent

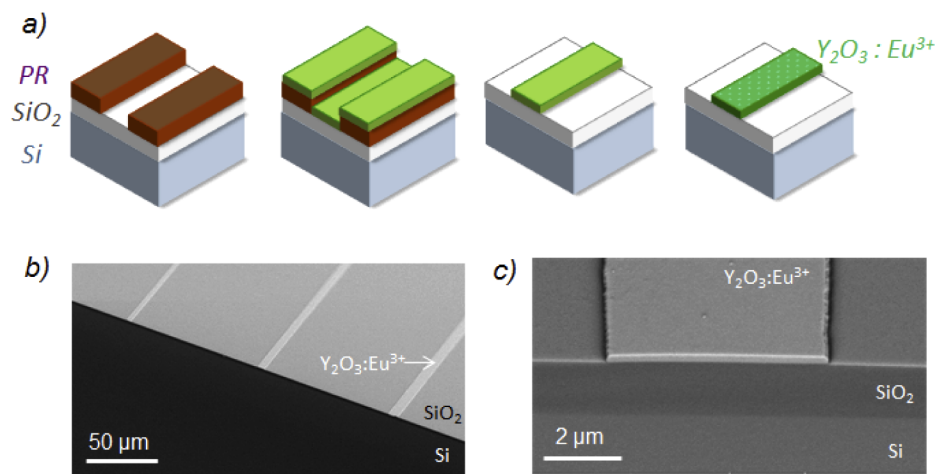


Fig. 2. a) Process flow for the rare-earth based micro-emitters starting by UV lithography, followed by Y_2O_3 deposition, lift-off and $650^\circ C$ annealing; b) Tilted SEM imaging of micro-structured Eu^{3+} doped Y_2O_3 layers showing different waveguide width and c) zoom in the cross-section

photoresist drying. PLD was then carried out under the same experimental conditions as described in the previous section for 0.3 and 0.6 μm layer thicknesses. Subsequently, samples were immersed in acetone and placed into an ultrasonic bath. During this process step, since the material is only deposited on the SiO_2 surface at specific locations which are not protected by a resist mask, the subsequent lift-off clears away the resist structures together with the material deposited thereon, while the material directly deposited on the substrate through the openings of the resist mask remains there, as desired. Finally, samples were annealed in air for 24 hours at 650°C with a 0.5°/min ramp. Figures 2(b) and 2(c) present Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) images of samples cleaved along the $\langle -110 \rangle$ Si crystalline axis and tilted at 45°. For these observations, samples were metalized with 5 nm thick Pt/Pd layer to circumvent charging effects. In Fig. 2(b), the black region corresponds to the Si substrate, the grey to SiO_2 , and the white strips to the $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$. In Fig. 2(c), the darker grey region corresponds to the SiO_2 buffer and the brighter region is the $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$, as indicated in the Figures. We clearly see that the waveguide width can be controlled by the lithography step [Fig. 2(b)] with a nice cross-section after annealing [Fig. 2(c)]. Note that, sidewall roughness could be improved by optimizing the lithography and deposition steps.

4. Optical characterizations

In order to measure light confinement in such waveguide, mode profile intensity was measured for different waveguide widths. For that purpose, a 635 nm wavelength fiber-coupled laser light (Roithner Laser Technik) is coupled/decoupled to the film waveguide with x20 microscope objectives (numerical aperture 0.4). Since Y_2O_3 is cubic polycrystalline, high losses ($> \text{dB/mm}$) were detected in the structured waveguides as well as in planar layers (i.e unstructured layers). Therefore, 2 mm length waveguides were studied to have enough intensity to measure the mode profile at the output with a CCD camera (Stingray F201B). Note that such materials losses could be improved by optimizing Y_2O_3 temperature growth [39] or by using Al_2O_3 host [40,41]. Figure 3(a) presents examples of 3 modes profile captured for a 0.6 μm -thick waveguide with 2, 4 or 8 μm widths. We clearly see that different propagated modes can be observed as a function of the waveguide width. In this measurement, we have chosen to evidence the multimode behavior in the largest waveguide by adjusting the input light at the waveguide entrance. For comparison, modeling by SIIO mode solver [42] was computed with a refractive index of 1.45 for SiO_2 [43] and 1.87 for Y_2O_3 according to ellipsometric measurement (*see Supplement 1*). According to

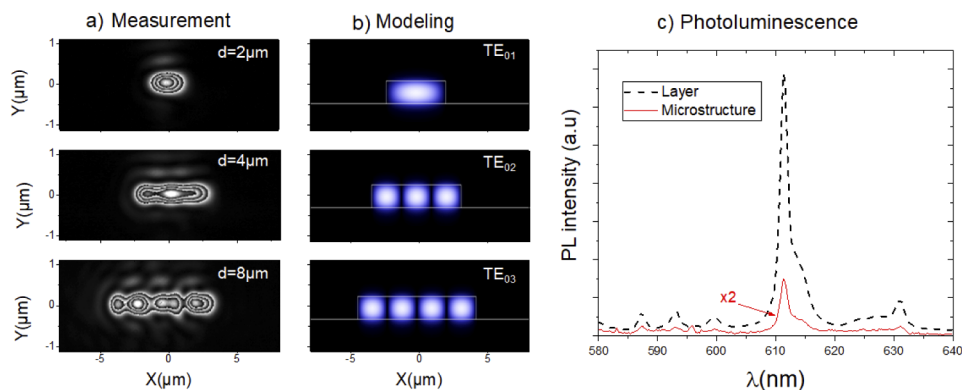


Fig. 3. Optical characterization of a 0.6 μm -thick micro-structured $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ layer for mode profile at 610 nm wavelength: a) measured and b) simulated intensity. c) Photoluminescence of micro-structured $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ layer compared to planar layers

modeling, multimode propagation is confirmed [Fig. 3(b)]. Therefore, we highlight here that the electromagnetic field is well confined in the microstructure alloying to control light propagation.

Finally, PL measurements were performed on micro-structured samples compared to unstructured layers with the same measurement setup presented previously. Figure 3(c) presents the emission spectra. We find a PL intensity reduction factor of around 10, which is close to the $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ surface ratio between the structured and the unstructured samples. Furthermore, the PL spectra shape is similar between single layers and which confirms that the micro-structuration does not affect significantly the layer quality.

5. Conclusion

In this work, we have demonstrated the possibility to fabricate $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ micro-emitters without etching allowing light emission and confinement. We have first studied the photoluminescence of $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ planar layers showing good crystalline quality and strong emission after annealing. We have then fabricated micro-structured $\text{Y}_2\text{O}_3:\text{Eu}^{3+}$ strip on SiO_2 layers on Si showing multimode light confinement. Finally, we have performed photoluminescence measurements which exhibit intense emission of the micro-structured layers. This work opens a way to the fast integration of rare-earth micro-emitters directly in photonics chip without etching processing, and thus for the integration of new functional materials on silicon platforms.

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Disclosures. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Supplemental document. See [Supplement 1](#) for supporting content.

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