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<td><strong>Authors(s)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Publication date</strong></td>
<td>2012-06-04</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Publication information</strong></td>
<td>Faraday discussions, 161 : 151-166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>Royal Society of Chemistry</td>
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<td><strong>Item record/more information</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/4573">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/4573</a></td>
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<td><strong>Publisher's version (DOI)</strong></td>
<td>10.1039/C2FD20079A</td>
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Lipid phase behaviour under steady state conditions

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Received (in XXX, XXX) Xth XXXXXXXXX 20XX, Accepted Xth XXXXXXXXX 20XX
DOI: 10.1039/b000000x

At the interface between two regions, for example the air-liquid interface of a lipid solution, there can arise non-equilibrium situations. The water chemical potential corresponding to the ambient RH will, in general, not match the water chemical potential of the solution, and the gradients in chemical potential cause diffusional flows. If the bulk water chemical potential is close to a phase transition, there is the possibility of forming an interfacial phase with structures qualitatively different from those found in the bulk. Based on a previous analysis of this phenomenon in a two component systems (C. Åberg, E. Sparr, K. Edler and H. Wennerström, Langmuir 2009, 25, 12177), we here analyse the phenomenon for three-component systems. The relevant transport equations are derived, and explicit results are given for some limiting cases. Then the formalism is applied conceptually to four different aqueous lipid systems, which in addition to water and a phospholipid contain i) octyl glucoside, ii) urea, iii) heavy water, iv) sodium cholate as the third component. These four cases are chosen to illustrate i) a method to use a micelle former to transport lipid to the interface where a multi-lamellar structure can form; ii) to use a co-solvent to inhibit the formation of a gel phase at the interface; iii) a method to form pure phospholipid multi-lamellar structures at the interface; iv) a method to form a sequence of phases in the interfacial region. These four cases all have the character of theoretically based conjectures and it remains to investigate experimentally whether or not the conditions can be realized in practice.

1. Introduction

The living system is highly dynamic. It is an old debate whether or not the study of equilibrium properties can shed light on what is going on in the living cell. The huge success of molecular biology during the last sixty years has to a substantial degree been based on studies of equilibrium systems, clearly demonstrating that such investigations are relevant. However, it is equally obvious that in order to get a more complete understanding it is necessary to go beyond the equilibrium picture and analyse also dynamics and transport processes. The primary aspects of the dynamics are the chemical transformation of metabolites from their initial form to end products, and the regulation of the complex machineries that accomplish such transformations. Currently, studies of such intricate couplings are characterized by the term systems biology. In the present paper we address another aspect of the dynamics. The general question we pose is: Does the fact that one has non-equilibrium transport processes in the system affect structural properties and, in particular, to what extent does it affect lipid phase behaviour?

One major role of lipid structures in the living cell is to separate regions with different properties, as, for example, the intra- and extracellular regions. It is clear that the thermodynamic conditions can be different on the two sides of the barrier membrane. Since lipids can adopt a range of structures one can have the situation that for values of the thermodynamic parameters on one side of the lipid barrier, the lipids prefer one structural arrangement, while for the conditions on the other side, another structure is the preferred one. Such a scenario is an obvious possibility across the (human) skin and across the membrane system in the alveoli of the lung, but there are potentially many more situations where one could consider the possibility of such complications.

In laboratory studies of lipid systems, one also needs to be aware of the possibility of non-equilibrium effects. In a typical Langmuir trough laboratory setup there is not full control of the thermodynamic conditions of the gas phase. It is the rule rather than the exception that the relative humidity (RH) of the gas phase does not match the chemical potential of the water (\(\mu(H_2O)\)) in the liquid phase. This generates non-equilibrium transport processes across the air-water interface, which could in turn give rise to unexpected structural changes. Similar conditions exist also in the lipid tear film formed on our eyes, which indeed should act to prevent evaporation and dry eyes.

In a recent publication we analysed possibilities of forming lamellar structures triggered by transport processes at the air-water interface. We analysed the general two component water– amphiphile case and applied it the specific AOT (bis(2-ethylhexyl)sulfo succinate) – water system. In this case we could base the quantitative analysis on previous thorough equilibrium characterization of the bulk system. We showed that a multilamellar structure could form at the interface, and that the extent of the phenomenon depended strongly on an interplay...
2. Three components. General considerations.

For illustration purposes, consider the specific case of a bulk liquid with three components, including water, component A and lipid B. Here, A can be either a co-solvent, like urea or glycerol, a co-lipid, like cholesterol, or a surfactant. The liquid system has an interface to air with a given RH (defined as rH2O) at the air-liquid interface (represented by a double dotted line, \( \Phi(l \rightarrow g) \)). The latter boundary condition is fulfilled for different ratios A/B, and the position of the endpoint (filled circles) depends on the diffusion coefficients of components A and B. In the figure, \( x_{\text{tot}} \) corresponds to the situation where \( D_\alpha > D_\beta \), and \( x_{\text{tot}} \) corresponds to the situation of ideal mixing and \( D_\alpha = D_\beta \) between the equilibrium conditions and the diffusion rates in the system. In the present study, we extend this first analysis to also consider general three-component systems, and we then apply the arguments to qualitatively discuss some specific cases in lipid systems.

3. Diffusion in a three-component system

3.1 Solvent evaporation and mass transport

In our earlier work, we presented a hydrodynamic model for mass transport in a two-component system with water evaporation. The final result is that, at steady state, a non-volatile component fulfills the equation
This journal necessarily vanishes at the bottom of the container, it follows that the fraction is unity, the centre of mass velocity because using the fact that the total mass and flux is completely diffusive, \( J_i = v_i X_i \), and the problem simplifies considerably.

The evaporation of water causes the location of the air-liquid interface to move downwards. Consequently, steady-state conditions can be appropriately defined by using a coordinate system centered on the air-liquid interface, rather than on the container. We therefore switch to the coordinate system defined by

\[ z = z' - s(t) \]

where \( s(t) \) denotes the position of the air-liquid interface (see Figure 2). At steady state, the interface moves with constant velocity, \( s \), and the mass fractions, \( X_i \) (as a function of \( z \)) are independent of time. In principle, the steady-state will only occur for an infinitely large (in the \( z \) direction) container; in practice, an approximate steady-state occurs for a large enough container. The continuity equation, Eq. (2) then reads

\[ \frac{\partial}{\partial z} (X_i (v_i - s)) = 0. \]  (5)

While a volatile component can escape through evaporation, the molecules of a non-volatile component at the interface are forced to move at the same velocity as the interface itself. For a non-volatile component we therefore find \( v_n (z = 0) = s \) for all \( t \). Using this condition in an integration of Eq. (5) and using the fact that the flux is completely diffusive, \( J_v = v_n X_v \), then yields Eq. (1).

3.2 Multi-component diffusion with evaporation

Eq. (1) is the governing equation for the concentration of a non-volatile solute. To go further, one must relate the diffusional fluxes to the local mass fractions. For a two-component system, Fick’s first law, \( J_i = -D_i \frac{\partial X_i}{\partial z} \), provides such a link. However, across a phase boundary there is often a gradient in concentration even at equilibrium, while no diffusional transport occurs under these conditions. In multi-phase systems, or inhomogeneous systems in general, Fick’s first law therefore has to be used with care. Alternatively, one may utilise a generalised form of Fick’s law

\[ J_i = -D_i \frac{\partial X_i}{\partial z} \]  (6)

wherein it is recognised that the driving force for the diffusional transport is the gradient in chemical potential, \( \mu_i \), rather than the gradient in concentration. The chemical potential varies smoothly over a phase boundary, and using this form of Fick’s first law therefore does not predict any diffusional transport across an interface at equilibrium.

Insertion of Eq. (6) into Eq. (1) yields the equation

\[ \frac{d\mu_{nv}}{dz} = -s \frac{RT}{D_{nv}} \]  (7)

The simplicity of Eq. (7) is, however, somewhat deceptive; if the diffusion coefficient, \( D_{nv} \), is concentration dependent, then complications arise. Nevertheless, it is useful as a basis for qualitative discussions, as we demonstrate below.

Experimental phase diagrams are most often determined in terms of composition (as in Figure 1), rather than chemical potentials. Consequently, we convert the general form of Fick’s first law, Eq. (6), into compositions

\[ \frac{d\mu_{nv}}{dz} = -s \frac{RT}{D_{nv}} \]  (7)
described by Eq. (11). Two different schematic solutions are

\[ \frac{dX_A}{dz} = \frac{D_{AA}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_A - \frac{D_{AB}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_B \]

from which we can find explicit expressions for the diffusion coefficient matrix; for our three-component system

\[ J_A = \frac{D_{AA}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_A - \frac{D_{AB}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_B \]

\[ J_B = \frac{D_{BB}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_B - \frac{D_{AB}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_A \]

where we have suppressed the concentration-dependence of the diffusion coefficients, \( D_{ij} \). Insertion into Eq. (1) now yields

\[ \frac{dX_A}{dz} = - \frac{D_{AA}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_A - \frac{D_{AB}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_B = sX_A \\
\frac{dX_B}{dz} = - \frac{D_{BB}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_B - \frac{D_{AB}}{RT} \nabla \Phi_A = sX_B. \]

These are, supplemented by appropriate boundary conditions, the final governing equations of the problem.

### 3.3 Interfacial phase formation

In order to assess the potential formation of different phases at the air-liquid interface and their eventual compositions, we must relate the transport picture [Eq. (9)] to the equilibrium phase behaviour (Figure 1). This link is provided by the appropriate boundary conditions. As in our previous analysis of the two-component case, we will analyse the situation in terms of an “unstirred layer” picture. The reason for this is the recognition that in practice it is difficult to arrange an experimental setup wherein bulk flow is completely absent (for reasonable sample sizes). Within the “unstirred layer” picture, we therefore assume that in the bulk of the solution mixing is efficient and the concentration uniform. Only in a thin layer of thickness \( L \) close to the air-liquid interface do the concentrations vary (see Figure 2b).

Consequently, the concentration at \( z = L \) is uniquely determined by the bulk concentrations,

\[ X_i(L) = X_i(\text{bulk}). \]

A second boundary condition is provided by the \( \mu(\text{H}_2\text{O}) \) in the gas phase. Writing the line of constant \( \mu(\text{H}_2\text{O}) \) (Equation (1)) in terms of component \( A \), we express this boundary condition as

\[ X_A(0) = \Phi(0 \rightarrow g) (X_A(0)). \]

The final link to the equilibrium phase behaviour is accomplished by considering the path in the phase diagram, i.e. by considering, say, \( X_B \) as a function of \( X_A \). To this end, we solve for the gradients, \( \frac{dX_A}{dz} \) in Eq. (9) and divide one of the gradients with the other. We then find

\[ \frac{dX_B}{dX_A} = \frac{D_{AA}X_B - D_{AB}X_A}{D_{BB}X_A - D_{AB}X_B} \]

which describes the path in the phase diagram, neglecting the spatial dependence. The path begins at the point \( X_A = X_A(\text{bulk}); \)

\[ X_B = X_B(\text{bulk}) \]

[Eq. (10)] and ends somewhere on the line described by Eq. (11). Two different schematic solutions are illustrated in Figure 1. We again remind the reader that the diffusion coefficients, \( D_{ij} \), are in general concentration dependent. However, Eq. (12), contains no explicit spatial dependence.

In terms of chemical potentials, the corresponding procedure based upon Eq. (7), rather than Eq. (9), yields

\[ \frac{d\mu_A}{dz} = D_{AA} \lambda_A - D_{AB} \lambda_B \]

\[ \frac{d\mu_B}{dz} = D_{AB} \lambda_A - D_{BB} \lambda_B \]

Regardless, how to find the path in the phase diagram is now, at least in principle, clear: Integrate Eq. (12) progressively (possibly numerically), and take note of whether any phase boundaries presents themselves along the path or not. If the path does not cross any phase boundary before reaching the line described by Eq. (11), then the system is composed of a single phase. If, on the other hand, the path crosses a phase boundary, then it follows the tie line to the next phase, and the integration of Eq. (12) continues from there. In principle one can, depending on the phase diagram, have the formation of several phases stacked on top of each other.

We stress that, in general, the diffusion coefficients may be decisively different in the two phases, and the solution consequently depends on the diffusion coefficients in a rather intricate way.

With the path in the phase diagram known, the spatial dependence can be found by integration of Eq. (9). We sketch the procedure for a system where just one phase, \( \beta \), forms at the liquid-gas interface on top of a bulk phase \( \alpha \) (Figure 2b). From the path in the phase diagram, \( X_A(X) \) is known in both phases. In particular, the concentrations on either side of the two phase region are known, and we denote these by \( X_A(\alpha \rightarrow \beta); X_A(\beta \rightarrow \alpha) \) and \( X_B(\alpha + \beta); X_B(\alpha \rightarrow \beta) \), respectively (Figure 2b). Furthermore, the concentrations at the gas-liquid interface, \( X_A(0); X_B(0) \), are also known. Solving for \( dX_A/dz \) in Eq. (9) and integrating then yields

\[ \int \frac{D_{AA}D_{BB} - D_{AB}D_{BA}}{D_{BB}X_A} dX_A = s \int dz. \]

\( X_A \) is a known function of \( X_A \), so the integral of the right-hand side is known. In either phase, Eq. (14) can be used to find \( z \) as a function of \( X_A \); inversion gives \( X_A(z) \), and, since \( X_B(X_A) \) is known, also \( X_B(z) \).

In particular, the thickness, \( z_\beta \), of the film formed by \( \beta \) phase can be found from Eq. (14) by integrating over both phases to yield

\[ \int_{X_A(0)}^{X_B(\alpha + \beta)} \frac{D_{AA}D_{BB} - D_{AB}D_{BA}}{D_{BB}X_A} dX_A = l_\beta \]

and solving for \( z_\beta \)

\[ \frac{z_\beta}{L} = \frac{l_\beta}{l_\alpha + l_\beta}. \]

Eq. (15) can be used to predict the existence, or not, of an interfacial phase, \( \beta \), at the air-liquid interface for a system where the path in the phase diagram traverses one two-phase region. In order for the \( \beta \) phase to form, its thickness, \( z_\beta \), must be larger than a typical microscopical distance of the \( \beta \) phase. There is also a
contribution due to surface free energy,\textsuperscript{10} that we have neglected. The situation necessarily becomes more involved when the path in the phase diagram traverses several two-phase (or even three-phase) regions, though the basic formalism outlined here will provide a basis for extensions to such cases.

4. Two limiting cases

The formal analysis presented in the previous section can be used to quantitatively describe specific systems provided enough information on bulk properties is available. We performed such an analysis for a two-component system.\textsuperscript{10} For three components the description easily becomes involved to the extent that one loses the overview. As a basis for further more qualitative discussions we consider two limiting cases of the general three-component situation. For the case where component A is a co-solvent it is a reasonable assumption that $D_A$ $>>$ $D_B$. This implies that the concentration gradient is sustained through the slow diffusion of the lipid B and that there is a negligible gradient in the chemical potential of co-solvent A, $\mu(A)$. This follows immediately by an integration of Eq. (13) for constant diffusion coefficients. In relation to the phase diagram of Figure 1 the profile follows a path of constant $\mu(A)$. To locate such a path in the diagram one needs either a good thermodynamic model or a detailed experimental characterization of the system. The path from $X_{bulk}$ to $X_{surf}$ in Figure 1 shows a possible illustration of this case.

Another simple limiting case could be illustrated by the situation when component A is a lipid of similar character as component B. If one makes the (unrealistic) assumption that $D_A$ $=$ $D_B$ and that the two lipids mix ideally, this corresponds to the two-component case analysed before by us.\textsuperscript{10} Since there is nothing in the transport model that makes a distinction between the two lipids, the path within the one-phase regions in the phase diagram should be along straight lines of constant lipid ratio, as illustrated by the path from $X_{bulk}$ to $X_{surf}$ in Figure 1. The analysis above confirms this; for ideal mixing, the cross diffusion coefficients in Eq (8) vanish and Eq (12) reads $dX_A/dX_B = X_A/X_B$ for equal diffusion coefficients, showing that the ratio remains constant.

Below we will discuss some illustrative cases where one could expect the formation of a transport-induced phase at the air-liquid interface. We will make use of the limiting cases as a basis for qualitative arguments. We will not apply the formalism of section 3 quantitatively, but rather use it as a conceptual basis for the discussions. The aim is more to inspire thinking about these non-equilibrium effects rather than to provide explanations of already existing experimental results. It is our hope that this approach is in line with the traditional spirit of the Faraday Discussions.

5. Water – octyl glucoside – phospholipid

Single-chain micelle-forming surfactants can be used to solubilize bilayer-forming lipids. The double chain lipids are taken up in the micelles, so they are present in an isotropic solution where they diffuse with the micellar aggregates. Conversely, the single chain surfactants enter, to some extent, the lipid bilayers, affecting their properties. Octyl glucoside (OG) is often used for solubilizing membrane lipids and membrane proteins. The phase equilibria in systems of OG and DMPC (dimyristoyl phosphatidyl choline) have been determined by Keller et al., using calorimetric methods.\textsuperscript{18} In Figure 3 we show a schematic phase diagram based on their results together with character of the binary OG-water and DMPC-water systems.\textsuperscript{19-21} This can be used to illustrate the simplest scenario: There is an isotropic phase containing micelles above the CMC of the surfactant and these micelles can incorporate lipids. Outside the isotropic phase there is a large two-phase area, which on the far side ends in a one-phase area of a lamellar liquid crystalline L_{α} phase. At low water and low OG concentrations (in the lipid rich corner) there appears a L_{β} gel phase.

In the ternary isotropic one-phase solution, the $\mu$(H_{2}O) is close to that of pure water, which correspond to RH $>$ 99%. When such a solution is exposed to a humid gas phase, a gradient in $\mu$(H_{2}O) develops across the interface. Reasonable RH values in the gas phase are RH $<$ 80%, and this corresponds to $\mu$(H_{2}O) values way into the lamellar L_{α} phase or even into the L_{β} gel phase. If the composition of the bulk solution is close to the border to two-phase L_{α}–L_{β} solution one can, in principle; expect that a stack of bilayer should develop in the interfacial region for all concentrations of the surfactant under steady-state conditions. However, for surfactant concentrations below CMC, the lipid concentration in the solution is minute and, in practice, it takes a very long time for the lipids to reach the surface. For surfactant concentrations above CMC, one the other hand, there is a pool of lipids in micellar aggregates, and the diffusion coefficient of the lipids is close to that of the surfactants in micelles. Thus, there exists a transport mechanism by which lipids can reach the interfacial region within reasonable time so that steady-state conditions can be established. In this limit one can consider the micelles as a pseudo-component. According to section 3, and also in line with the results in our previous studies of diffusion and
interfacial phase behaviour in evaporating solutions,\textsuperscript{10, 16} the

\textsuperscript{10} Figure 4: Schematic phase diagram for the ternary system water-urea-
\textsuperscript{11} DMPC (27°C) based on combined data from previous studies.\textsuperscript{27-28} The L
\textsuperscript{12} and L\textsubscript{\+} gel phases are formed both in pure water and in an aqueous
\textsuperscript{13} phase that also contain urea. The double dashed line represent the conditions
\textsuperscript{14} with constant $\mu$(H\textsubscript{2}O), in this case corresponding to around 70 % RH at
\textsuperscript{15} the air-liquid interface. At low urea contents, this $\mu$(H\textsubscript{2}O) corresponds to
\textsuperscript{16} an L\textsubscript{+} gel phase, while at higher urea contents, L is the stable phase at the
\textsuperscript{17} same $\mu$(H\textsubscript{2}O). Two different scenarios are shown (dotted lines with
\textsuperscript{18} arrows), in both cases the bulk phase is an isotropic micellar solution. In
\textsuperscript{19} the binary DMPC-water system, the concentration profile goes from an
\textsuperscript{20} isotropic L\textsubscript{1} solution in bulk to an interfacial film that contain a lamellar
\textsuperscript{21} L\textsubscript{2} phase in the layer of the film that faces the bulk solution, and a L\textsubscript{+} gel
\textsuperscript{22} phase in the part of the film that is exposed to air with the given RH. In the
\textsuperscript{23} presence of urea, the L\textsubscript{+} phase is stable at all RH, and the interfacial
\textsuperscript{24} film is a L\textsubscript{1} phase.
\textsuperscript{25}
\textsuperscript{26}
\textsuperscript{26} Such an effect could be of relevance for the liquid film in the
\textsuperscript{27} eyes.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{9} 7. Phospholipid vesicles in a mixed D\textsubscript{2}O-H\textsubscript{2}O system

\textsuperscript{28} Consider a system where unilamellar phospholipid vesicles have
\textsuperscript{29} been prepared in pure H\textsubscript{2}O. Assume that the lipid bilayer has a
\textsuperscript{30} density slightly above 1.0x10\textsuperscript{3} kg/m\textsuperscript{3}. In a quiescent liquid
\textsuperscript{31} the vesicles will settle to the bottom of the container. However, this
\textsuperscript{32} is a slow process and, in practice, there is always some
\textsuperscript{33} convection that keeps the vesicle concentration rather
\textsuperscript{34} homogeneous in the system. Now, the liquid sample with an open
\textsuperscript{35} air-water surface is placed in a big container where the RH is
\textsuperscript{36} substantially less than 100%. For the case when the water vapour
\textsuperscript{37} is made from D\textsubscript{2}O we expect some special effects since a mass
\textsuperscript{38} density gradient develops across the interface. What structures
\textsuperscript{39} can form at the surface at steady state? Irrespective of the detailed
\textsuperscript{40} conditions, a lipid monolayer is present at the surface. When the
\textsuperscript{41} liquid sample is exposed to the D\textsubscript{2}O atmosphere, there will be a
\textsuperscript{42} condensation and diffusion transport of heavy water into the liquid,
\textsuperscript{43} and a somewhat larger evaporation and diffusion transport of ordinary
\textsuperscript{44} H\textsubscript{2}O into the gas phase. Hence, in the aqueous system the interfacial region will have a mixed
\textsuperscript{45} composition, resulting in a density gradient. Vesicles in the liquid
\textsuperscript{46} can slowly float towards the monolayer at the surface. Is there a
\textsuperscript{47} possibility that vesicle fusion can occur in this environment?
\textsuperscript{48} There is a gradient in water (D\textsubscript{2}O=H\textsubscript{2}O) chemical potential
\textsuperscript{49} across the interface. The thickness of this region is determined by the
\textsuperscript{50} competition of different diffusion processes. It is important to
\textsuperscript{51} realize that a RH of 60% corresponds to a large osmotic pressure
\textsuperscript{52} of 70 MPa at 25 °C. Thus, surface vesicles are pushed towards
\textsuperscript{53} the monolayer with substantial force, and the tendency for fusion
\textsuperscript{54} will be strongly increased. We are not in the position to claim that
\textsuperscript{55} fusion will occur, but it is certainly a possibility. Assuming that the
\textsuperscript{56} vesicles are labile enough for fusion to occur, a lamellar
\textsuperscript{57} system will gradually develop at the interface. With an unstirred
\textsuperscript{58} layer, there is no convection, and close to the surface a steady
\textsuperscript{59} state will develop as previously described.\textsuperscript{10} The interfacial phase
\textsuperscript{60} will here consist of a number of bilayers separated by a water
\textsuperscript{61} layer with varying D\textsubscript{2}O-H\textsubscript{2}O ratio and varying thickness. The
\textsuperscript{62} envisaged formation process is shown in Figure 5.

In higher animals the digestion of lipids proceeds through a solubilisation process involving bile. The main components of bile are bile salts, phospholipids and cholesterol. The aggregation properties of the components of bile have been extensively studied, and in particular, there are many studies of ternary systems composed of water – bile salt – phospholipid.29-32 The emphasis of these investigations has been the relation between lamellar aggregates, micelles of different shapes and the formation of hexagonal and cubic liquid crystalline phases. Figure 6 shows the phase diagram of the system water – sodium cholate - lecithin. In addition to the micellar solution there are three different liquid crystalline phases, including a lamellar phase (L), a normal hexagonal phase (H1) and a bicontinuous cubic phase (C3).

If an isotropic micellar solution is exposed to an interface with air of RH≈60%, we can expect a more complex pattern of structures than discussed in the previous cases. In the isotropic solution, both phospholipids and cholate diffuse with the micelles and these two components have effective diffusion constants of the same order of magnitude. Due to the solubilisation in micelles, the transport is fast enough so that steady-state conditions can be reached within reasonable times. Due to the presence of the charged cholate molecules, there is a long-range double layer repulsion between aggregates. Thus, a gradient in the µ(H2O) can develop gradually as the concentration of the other components increase on approaching the surface. This effect will tend to make the interfacial layer thicker than for the non-charged systems.

In Figure 6 we have marked three tentative concentration profiles of the interfacial region, and the interfacial films that could form in these systems are schematically illustrated in Figure 7. For case (i), the bulk solution in bulk to an interfacial lamellar Lα phase. (ii) At intermediate cholate/lecithin ratio, one goes from Lα solution in bulk to an interfacial phase that form an H1 structure in the lower layers, and a lamellar Lα phase in the part of the film that is exposed to air with the given RH. (iii) At higher cholate/lecithin ratio, one goes from Lα solution in bulk to an interfacial phase that forms an H1 structure in the lower layers, followed by a bicontinuous cubic phase, C3 and finally a lamellar Lα phase in the part of the film that is exposed to air.
Figure 7: Schematic illustrations of possible sequences of structure in interfacial films that may form in ternary systems composed of Na Cholate-lecithin-water. Three different scenarios that correspond to the cases in Figure 6 are shown: (i) For low cholate/lecithin ratio, the interfacial film consists of a lamellar phase. The interlamellar distance varies with the position within the film due to the gradient in $\mu$(H$_2$O), and the most swollen structure is found in the lower layers of the film. (ii) At intermediate cholate/lecithin ratio, a transition from an H$_2$ phase to a lamellar L$_4$ phase takes place within the film as $\mu$(H$_2$O) decreases when approaching the surface. (iii) At higher cholate/lecithin ratio, a transition from an H$_2$ phase to a bicontinuous cubic phase, C1, and then to an L$_4$ phase can occur in the $\mu$(H$_2$O) gradient.

When the $\mu$(H$_2$O) decreases further, a bicontinuous cubic phase can form, and this, in turn, is followed by a lamellar phase at even $\mu$(H$_2$O) (water contents).

9. Discussion

An interface between an aqueous solution and air of ambient RH is a non-equilibrium system, where there is an evaporation of water. As a consequence of this, concentration gradients will evolve in the interfacial region. Above we have analysed the case where there are two components in the solution in addition to the water. In section 3 the formal transport equations were established. In the following sections, the same problem has been analysed in more qualitative terms when applied to some specific systems. The analysis is built on combining the descriptions of diffusional processes and equilibrium phase behaviour, and it illustrates a useful application of existing phase diagrams. The most important conclusion from the analysis is that, having non-equilibrium conditions in a system with self-assembly aggregation, gives rise to a potentially rich behaviour in the interfacial region. There are experimental observations of such phenomena, but very few systematic investigations have so far been performed. Apart from the fundamental aspects we see several applications of the concept for lipid systems. Our starting point has been efforts to understand how (human) skin responds to changes in the RH of the air. We have demonstrated both that the transport properties of the skin depend strongly on RH, and also demonstrated that this is correlated with structural changes on the molecular level. Another physiological case where these effects can be relevant is for the liquid film of the cornea.

In section 5 and 7, we discussed two different possibilities for formation of oriented multilamellar structures at the air-water interface, either by the use of micelles as transporters of insoluble lipids, or due to the interfacial density gradient that can occur if the lipid solution is exposed to an atmosphere with D$_2$O. One area of application of this is the preparation of thin ordered lamellar structures, where also other components can be incorporated. It should be possible to form a thin film at an interface and then transfer it to a solid substrate. By using a polymerisable lipid, we might also be able produce a film that is robust enough to be removed without solid substrate. Such thin films could offer interesting material properties, and could also provide new model membrane systems. The formation of oriented interfacial structures can be compared with established methods for depositing bilayers at solid surfaces, which rely on vesicle fusion near the interface or deposition from mixed micelles. These methods rely on different mechanisms than discussed in this paper, although slightly related.

In Figure 7, the positions that denote the interfaces between different liquid crystalline parts are marked with question marks. This signifies another interesting and open question that is related to how the interface between two liquid crystalline phases looks like. One application of interfacial films in systems with complex phase behaviour would be to create model systems for interfaces between different structures, in accordance with the discussion in section 8. This can also have direct applications in, e.g., biomembrane systems. The occurrence of continuous foldings and unfoldings between cubic and lamellar structures has been demonstrated in some biological membranes. Such cycles have also been suggested as a possible mechanism for the transition from the lamellar bodies of stratum granulosum to the planar bilayers of the extracellular lipids of stratum corneum.

We are currently pursuing some of the possible applications of interfacial films.

Acknowledgements

Karen Edler and Tahereh Mokhtari are acknowledged for fruitful discussions. The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) both through regular grants and a Linneaus programme. E.S. acknowledges The Swedish Foundation for Strategic Research (Stiftelsen för Strategisk Forskning) for financial support. C.Å acknowledges financial support from Science Foundation Ireland under Grant No. [09/RFP/MTR2425] and the European Union Seventh Framework Programme project NanoTransKinetics under grant agreement no. 266737.

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