High-aspect-ratio germanium zone plates fabricated by reactive ion etching in chlorine

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This article describes the fabrication of soft x-ray germanium zone plates with a process based on reactive ion etching (RIE) in Cl₂. A high degree of anisotropy is achieved by sidewall passivation through cyclic exposure to air. This enables structuring of higher aspect ratios than with earlier reported fabrication processes for germanium zone plates. The results include a zone plate with a 30 nm outermost zone width and a germanium thickness of 310 nm having a first-order diffraction efficiency of 70% of the theoretical value. 25 nm half-pitch gratings were also etched into 310 nm of germanium. Compared to the electroplating process for the commonly used nickel zone plates, the RIE process with Cl₂ for germanium is a major improvement in terms of process reproducibility. © 2009 American Vacuum Society. [DOI: 10.1116/1.3089371]

I. INTRODUCTION

Zone plates are diffractive lenses widely used in the x-ray spectral range for high-resolution focusing and imaging. For the soft x-ray range, electroplated nickel zone plates presently dominate due to their high diffraction efficiency. In the present article we report on a new fabrication process for germanium zone plates based on reactive ion etching (RIE) with Cl₂. The relative simplicity of this fabrication process makes germanium zone plates an attractive alternative to nickel zone plates.

In order to obtain a high diffraction efficiency, the optical material of a zone plate should be strongly phase shifting and weakly absorbing. For soft x-rays, nickel and germanium have long been identified as suitable materials in this respect. In Fig. 1 their theoretical diffraction efficiencies at λ=2.88 nm are graphed as a function of the material thickness. Nickel, which is a common material for soft x-ray zone plates, can provide a higher efficiency than germanium. Unfortunately, there is no applicable dry-etch process for nickel. Unfortunately, there is no applicable dry-etch process for nickel, and the fabrication therefore relies on electroplating into a structured mold. The electroplating is difficult to control in comparison to the other process steps and some of the problems concern control of the mass distribution and the deposition rate, and adhesion of the plating mold. Germanium, on the other hand, can be structured to high aspect ratios by plasma etching. It used to be a common zone-plate material and there are several reports in literature from the period 1987–2000. The fabrication during that time was based on RIE of germanium with CBrF₃, which is an ozone-depleting gas that has been taken off the market. Chlorine, however, is available and, in the present article, we show that the RIE of germanium with Cl₂ can be highly anisotropic and it is therefore well suited for zone-plate fabrication.

II. FABRICATION PROCESS

The fabrication is based on a trilayer process, as illustrated in Fig. 2. It comprises an electron-beam-lithography step for patterning and two steps of RIE for the subsequent pattern transfer into the germanium film. For the fabrication of the zone plates and the grating lines presented in this work, 50 nm thick silicon nitride membranes were used as substrates. These were coated with a 10 nm titanium etch stop. The trilayer itself consisted of 310 nm of germanium, a 10 nm titanium hard mask, and 50 nm of e-beam resist (ZEP7000, Nippon Zeon Co.). The e-beam resist was spun cast and then baked for 30 min at 170 °C. The titanium and the germanium layers were deposited by e-beam evaporation in an Auto 306 system (Edwards Ltd.) under high-vacuum conditions (base pressure of 2×10⁻⁶ mbar) and without temperature control of the substrate. The deposition rates were approximately 1 and 0.3–0.4 Å/s for titanium and germanium respectively.

The samples were patterned by e-beam lithography at 25 keV (Raith 150 system) and developed in hexyl acetate for 30 s. The pattern transfer to the titanium hard mask was done by RIE with BCl₃ (Oxford Plasmalab 80+) under the following conditions: 80 W sample rf power (0.33 W/cm²), 15 mTorr pressure, and 10 sccm BCl₃ flow. The etch time was 110 s. The final step, the pattern transfer into the germanium layer, was performed by RIE with Cl₂ (Oxford Plasmalab 100). A helium back side pressure of 5 Torr was applied and the working electrode was kept at 20 °C. The membranes were placed on a silicon carrier wafer but were not thermally connected to it. The etching was done using 25 W (0.1 W/cm²) of sample rf power, 2 mTorr pressure, and 10 sccm gas flow. The total etch time was 3 min but it was divided into four steps: 30, 30, 60, and 60 s. The sample was unloaded between each etch step for sidewall passivation.

Sidewall passivation was needed for linewidths in the range of 30 nm for which the aspect ratio was about 10:1. Since oxides normally etch slowly in Cl₂ plasmas, isotropic etching can be inhibited by oxidation of the germanium sur-

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face. The oxide layer at the bottom of the trenches is then cleared by the ion bombardment so that the etching can proceed vertically, while the sidewalls remain protected. The most successful passivation method was to simply unload the sample and expose it to air between the etch steps. No lateral etch rate could be detected using this method and the degree of anisotropy was determined by the length of the etch interval. However, grass formation was observed for etch intervals shorter than 30 s and occasionally when only 30 s intervals were used. This problem was avoided by combining 30 and 60 s intervals as described above. In Fig. 3, which shows a grating etched for \(30 + 30 + 60 + 60\) s, it is possible to see the effect of the increased length of the later etch intervals. The upper part of the lines is thicker and the sidewalls are more vertical than for the lower part where the etch process has been more isotropic.

Other schemes to inhibit sidewall etching were also investigated. Oxidation with O\(_2\) plasma and addition of 5% oxygen to the feed gas (1 sccm O\(_2\) and 19 sccm Cl\(_2\) flow rate) both prevented sidewall etching but they also resulted in excessive grass formation. A third method was attempted in which a flow of oxygen (50 sccm at a chamber pressure of 90 mTorr) was applied for up to 10 min between the Cl\(_2\) etch intervals. This did not have a noticeable passivating effect.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With the process described in the previous section, a zone plate with 30 nm outermost zone width and a germanium thickness of 310 nm was fabricated (cf. Fig. 4). The zone-plate diameter was 56 \(\mu\)m. The first-order diffraction efficiency was measured in a laboratory laser-plasma based arrangement operating at \(\lambda = 2.88\) nm. At this wavelength, the average efficiency for the entire zone plate area, including substrate absorption, was 8.1%. Taking into account the transmission of the substrate, consisting of 50 nm of Si\(_3\)N\(_4\) and 10 nm of Ti, an average groove efficiency of 11.5% was obtained. For a germanium thickness of 310 nm and \(\lambda = 2.88\) nm, this corresponds to approximately 70% of the theoretical efficiency as calculated with the formula given by Kirz. The radial variation in the diffraction efficiency is displayed in Fig. 5. As expected, due to increasing fabrication difficulties, the efficiency decreases with the radially shrinking zone width. The abrupt decrease in efficiency over the last micrometer does not, however, reflect a reduction in the pattern quality. This is a blurring effect in the measurement, which causes the data to extend further than the zone-plate radius. It should also be noted that the innermost part of the graph in Fig. 5 originally contained the
The anisotropy of the germanium etch is very high due to the presence of native oxide on the film. The etch resistance of a hard mask of pure titanium would be reliant on the composition of the films since the characteristic metallic appearance that Ti films deposited at ultrahigh-vacuum conditions have. In addition, the etch rate of the hard mask was not measured, it was clear that it was not pure titanium since the films lacked the characteristic metallic appearance. Pure titanium is etched by RIE with Cl₂ for the fabrication of germanium zone plates. The aspect ratio of the lines is 12.4:1, which is higher than the total area of the zone plate.

In summary, we have demonstrated a process based on RIE with Cl₂ for the fabrication of germanium zone plates. The anisotropy of the germanium etch is very high due to the application of sidewall passivation. The presented process therefore enables the fabrication of zone plates with high diffraction efficiency for soft x-rays without the need for electroplating as for the commonly used nickel zone plates.

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