

1 **Hyporheic flow under periodic bedforms influenced by**
2 **low-density gradients**

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19 **Abstract**

20 Small density variations across streambeds due to low solute concentrations in
21 stream water exist commonly in streams and rivers. Using laboratory experiments and
22 numerical modeling, we demonstrated that even small density variations can influence
23 hyporheic flow in streambeds with periodic bedforms. The circulating pore water flow
24 patterns in the bed were modified constantly as the solute front moved downward.
25 Density-induced head gradients eventually overwhelmed the regional hydraulic gradient
26 and drove the circulating flow below a hydraulic divide that would have existed without
27 the density influence. The density-modified hyporheic flow provided a relatively fast
28 solute transport mechanism and enhanced the overall mass exchange between the stream
29 and bed. These results highlight the important role of weak, upward density gradients in
30 modulating hyporheic flow.

31 **Keywords:** Water quality; solute transport; advection; hyporheic zone; mass flux

32 **1. Introduction**

33 Hyporheic flow induces significant solute exchange across streambeds, affecting
34 water quality in both the stream and bed (Figure S1a) [Hill *et al.*, 1998; Pretty *et al.*, 2006].
35 Numerous investigations have been carried out to examine hyporheic flow and associated
36 solute transport processes under the influences of stream water flow, stream network
37 morphology and bedforms, sediment properties, and regional hydraulic gradients in the
38 shallow aquifer [Bencala *et al.*, 1984; Cardenas *et al.*, 2004; Salehin *et al.*, 2004; Boano
39 *et al.*, 2006; Packman *et al.*, 2006; Cardenas, 2008; Revelli *et al.*, 2008]. Many studies
40 focused on hyporheic flow driven by hydraulic head gradients due to stream flow and
41 bedform interactions (Figure S1b) [Elliott and Brooks, 1997; Cardenas and Wilson, 2007;
42 Jin *et al.*, 2010].

43 Laboratory experiments have been conducted to quantify the hyporheic exchange
44 using salt or other solutes as the tracer [Marion *et al.*, 2003; Salehin *et al.*, 2004; Jin *et al.*,
45 2010]. The solutes in these experiments were typically released at low concentrations, a
46 common condition that also exists in natural streams and rivers [Boano *et al.*, 2009]. The
47 low solute concentrations led to only small density variations between the stream water
48 and underlying pore water in the bed [Boano *et al.*, 2009]. Such small density variations
49 have been assumed to have little effect on the hyporheic flow and solute transport, and
50 hence have been largely neglected [Marion *et al.*, 2003; Salehin *et al.*, 2004; Jin *et al.*,
51 2010]. However, Boano *et al.* [2009] demonstrated that the weak density gradient due to
52 low solute concentrations in the stream water was capable of driving significant hyporheic

53 exchange between a model stream and its flat streambed in a flume experiment. The flow
54 driven by the density gradient provided an advective solute transport mechanism,
55 overwhelming the diffusive transport.

56 The purpose of this study was to examine effects of low-density gradients on
57 hyporheic flow and solute transport processes in a streambed with periodic bedforms. In
58 contrast to a flat bed, a streambed with periodic bedforms is subjected to the influence of
59 relatively strong hydraulic head gradients generated by stream flow and bedform
60 interactions (Figure S1). The flow and associated solute transport driven by such gradients
61 dominate the hyporheic exchange processes and have been the focus of many previous
62 studies [*Elliott and Brooks*, 1997; *Salehin et al.*, 2004; *Jin et al.*, 2010]. The question
63 addressed here is whether the relatively weak density gradients impose modulating effects
64 on the hyporheic flow. We are particularly interested in how flow and solute transport
65 behave under the influence of density gradients in the deep area of the hyporheic zone
66 where a hydraulic divide would exist without the density effects due to the presence of an
67 underflow (Figure S1c). Previous studies have shown that, constrained by this hydraulic
68 divide, solute transport to the deeper area occurs slowly through diffusion/dispersion
69 [*Bottacin-Busolin and Marion*, 2010; *Jin et al.*, 2010]. Here we address the question of
70 whether density gradients induce flow and advective transport that enhances solute
71 transfer to the deeper area (Figure S1d).

72 To address this question, laboratory flume experiments similar to those of *Jin et al.*
73 [2010] were conducted with continuous measurements of solute concentrations in the

74 stream and pore water samples collected from two vertical arrays of sampling ports at
75 different depths (100- μ l solution taken for each sample), located at the stoss and lee slopes
76 of a bedform (Figure S1c). These measurements allowed assessment of density effects on
77 the downward movement of the solute front. In simulating the experiments, we employed
78 both constant-density and variable-density models. Comparison between predictions of
79 these two models and the experimental data enabled the discernment of density effects on
80 the hyporheic flow and solute transport processes.

81 **2. Laboratory experiments and numerical simulations**

82 The experimental set-up follows that of *Jin et al.* [2010] based on a circulating
83 flume system. To avoid possible initial contamination of the pore water by residual
84 materials in the sediment prior to the experiment, artificial sand supplied by Nanjing
85 Ninglei Sand and Stone Factory (China) was used for the streambed. Our previous
86 experiments conducted with river sand did not reveal properly the density effect [*Jin et al.*,
87 2010]; we suspect that residual materials in the river sand used might have raised the
88 initial density of pore water, reducing the density contrast between the stream water and
89 pore water to a minor level in the experiment. The artificial sand used for the present
90 experiment was sieved between 30 mesh ($D_1 = 0.60$ mm) and 60 mesh sieves ($D_2 = 0.25$
91 mm), and made of 99% pure silicon dioxide. The bulk porosity was measured to be 0.46
92 using the water evaporation method. The saturated hydraulic conductivity, measured using
93 the constant-head method [*Chinese National Standard*, 1999], was found to be around

94 $4.35 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m s}^{-1}$. The sand was thoroughly cleaned before all experiments following the
 95 method described by *Jin et al.* [2010]. The average flow velocity, water depth and pH in
 96 the stream water were 12.26 cm s^{-1} , 10.21 cm and ~ 6.8 , respectively. The experiment
 97 started with freshwater in the streambed and a relatively low initial solute concentration
 98 (1.73 kg m^{-3}) in the stream water. As the exchange between the stream and bed took place,
 99 the solute concentration in the stream water decreased but remained spatially uniform due
 100 to mixing through the flume circulation system [*Jin et al.*, 2010].

101 A one-way sequential coupling method was used to simulate the stream water flow,
 102 and pore water flow and solute transport in the streambed. First, the stream water flow
 103 was computed using the CFD package FLUENT based on the Reynolds-averaged
 104 Navier-Stokes equations together with the $k-\omega$ turbulence closure scheme [*Jin et al.*,
 105 2010]. The predicted pressure at the sediment-water interface was then input into a
 106 COMSOL-based model as boundary conditions to drive coupled pore water flow and
 107 solute transport in the streambed [*Jin et al.*, 2010].

108 Density-dependent fluid flow in the bed is governed by [*COMSOL*, 2006]:

$$109 \quad \rho S \frac{\partial h_f}{\partial t} + \theta \frac{\partial \rho}{\partial C} \frac{\partial C}{\partial t} + \nabla \cdot \left[-\rho K \left(\nabla h_f + \frac{\rho - \rho_f}{\rho_f} \nabla D_v \right) \right] = 0, \quad (1)$$

110 where h_f (m), the equivalent freshwater hydraulic head, is given by $p/\rho g + D_v$ with p (Pa)
 111 being the pore water pressure and D_v (m) the vertical coordinate directing upward; C (kg
 112 m^{-3}) is the solute concentration; ρ (kg m^{-3}) is the fluid density; ρ_f (1000 kg m^{-3}) is the
 113 freshwater density; S (m^{-1}) is the equivalent freshwater specific storativity, representing

114 storage due to compressibility of the fluid and porous medium [Bear, 1972]; t (s) is the
115 time; θ is the porosity; and K (m s^{-1}) is the equivalent freshwater hydraulic conductivity.
116 The density of the fluid as a function of concentration is given by:

$$117 \quad \rho = \rho_f + \frac{\partial \rho}{\partial C} C = \rho_f + \gamma C, \quad (2)$$

118 where γ is 0.7143 for the salt solution applied in the experiments [Langevin *et al.*, 2003].

119 The second term on the left hand side of equation (1) represents change in storage
120 due to concentration variations and is likely to dominate the compressible storage term
121 due to the relatively small compressibility of the artificial sand used in the study [Bear,
122 1972]. Coupled with the pore water flow, the salt solute transport in the porous bed is
123 governed by the conservative transport equation (e.g., Jin *et al.*, 2010).

124 The initial and boundary conditions for both the stream flow model, and pore water
125 flow and solute transport model were essentially the same as those used by Jin *et al.*
126 [2010], simulating the conditions in the laboratory experiment. The predicted hydraulic
127 heads at the sediment-water interface from the stream flow simulation were converted to
128 the equivalent freshwater head based on the density of the stream water before its
129 application to define the boundary condition at the top of the bed for the pore water flow
130 simulation. Since the solute concentration and hence the density of the stream water
131 change with time as a result of solute exchange across the sediment-water interface, the
132 converted equivalent freshwater head prescribed at the interface varied temporally.
133 Periodic boundary conditions were applied to the lateral (vertical) boundaries for velocity,

134 pressure, concentration and solute flux. A no flow condition was applied at the bottom
135 boundary [Jin *et al.*, 2010]. The initial solute concentration in the pore water of the bed
136 was zero and a relatively low initial solute concentration ($C_0= 1.73 \text{ kg m}^{-3}$) set for the
137 stream water.

138 **3 Results and discussion**

139 **3.1 Simulation cases**

140 A large number of simulations were conducted to examine the density effects on the
141 hyporheic flow and solute transport, in comparison with the experimental results. These
142 simulations covered cases (Table S1) with and without density effects, and with measured
143 and adjusted values of key model parameters (θ , K). The aim of the simulations was to
144 ascertain the effect of density gradients on hyporheic flow and solute transport, i.e.,
145 whether the density effects are essential for the model to predict the experimental results
146 or whether adjustment of the θ and K values is sufficient. Details of the results and
147 discussions for all the cases can be found in the supplementary materials. Here the focus
148 is on the first four cases:

149 Case 1: Neglecting density variations and using the measured hydraulic conductivity (K
150 $= 4.35 \times 10^{-3}$);

151 Case 2: Neglecting density variations and using an adjusted K ($= 21.8 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m s}^{-1}$);

152 Case 3: Including density variations and using the measured K ; and

153 Case 4: Including density variations and using an adjusted K ($= 2.5 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m s}^{-1}$).

154 These cases took into account uncertainty in the measurements of the sediment properties,
155 in particular, hydraulic conductivity, and hence allowed more rigorous assessment of
156 density effects. The results are plotted in Figures 1-3 and S2 where comparison between
157 the data and model predictions for the different cases can be made with regard to solute
158 concentration in the stream water, and flow and solute transport in the bed.

159 **3.2 Density effects on hyporheic flow dynamics, solute transport and exchange** 160 **across the interface**

161 A distinctive feature of the simulated density-dependent hyporheic flow is the
162 temporal variations of the flow, which are linked to the downward movement of the solute
163 front (case 4, Figure 3; and case 3, Figure S2). This is in contrast to the steady state
164 condition of the simulated constant-density flow (i.e., without the density influence), in
165 particular, the existence of a hydraulic divide separating the upper and lower flow zones
166 throughout the simulation (case 1, Figure 3; and case 2, Figure S2). This hydraulic divide
167 is due to an underflow caused by a pressure/head drop along the flume, as explained in
168 previous studies [*Cardenas and Wilson, 2007; Jin et al., 2010*]. The fundamental
169 difference between the variable- and constant-density flows has ramifications for solute
170 transport in the streambed and exchange across the sediment-water interface.

171 As shown in Figure 1, the solute concentration in the overlying stream water
172 decreased with time as the solute was transported into the bed. The concentration
173 reduction at the beginning of the flume experiment and simulations (0-100 min) was rapid,

174 corresponding to the initial fast transfer of solute from the overlying water to the shallow
175 streambed area, where the pore water flow velocity was relatively large mainly under the
176 influence of hydraulic head gradients at the sediment-water interface. The flow in the
177 shallow area was less affected by the density/concentration variations (26 and 180 min,
178 Figure 3). Thus, all models with and without the density effect predicted similarly well the
179 initial decrease of the solute concentration in the stream water (Figure 1).

180 The further reduction of the stream water solute concentration in the second phase
181 (100-1100 min, Figure 1) was more gradual. During this stage, solute transport continued
182 downward towards the deep area of the bed. The density gradient due to the concentration
183 variation started to affect the flow as simulated in case 4 (Figure 3). This resulted in a
184 considerable increase of the flow rate and significant changes in the flow pattern. After an
185 elapsed time of 400 min, the circulation initiated from the sediment-water interface
186 extended to the bottom boundary of the bed. This is in contrast with the separation of the
187 upper and lower flow zones in the constant-density flow simulations (case 1, Figure 3; and
188 case 2, Figure S2). The density effects on the flow led to a more rapid solute transfer to
189 the deep area, particularly in the area close to the bottom boundary of the bed. Again, this
190 bottom area would be separated from the upper circulating zones if the density effect was
191 not considered as in cases 1 and 2 where the solute transfer across the hydraulic divide to
192 the bottom area was due to solute diffusion – a very slow process. These manifestations of
193 the effects of density on hyporheic flow are evident in the experimental results.

194 The density effects enhanced solute exchange across the sediment-water interface,

195 which led to a relatively rapid decrease of solute concentration in the stream water.
196 Without such effects taken into account, the constant-density flow and solute transport
197 model failed to reproduce the rapid solute concentration change observed in the laboratory
198 experiment (case 1 in Figure 1). More importantly, the constant-density model, unable to
199 provide a relatively fast, advective transport mechanism for the bottom area of the bed,
200 would not predict an asymptotic concentration, which was evident in the experiment over
201 a relatively short period. This asymptotic concentration represents a steady state condition
202 with no net exchange between the overlying stream water and pore water in the bed. In
203 this condition, the solute concentrations in both waters become the same, equal to
204 $C_0 V_s / (V_s + V_p)$ [Jin *et al.*, 2010], where V_s is total volume of water in the flume system
205 excluding pore water and V_p is the total volume of the pore water in the streambed. The
206 experimental results show that the concentration in the stream water reached a relatively
207 steady level after an elapsed time of 1300 min. Even with a five-fold increased hydraulic
208 conductivity, the model without the density effects included still failed to predict the
209 approach of the asymptotic state despite over-prediction of the earlier decrease of the
210 solute concentration (case 2 in Figure 1).

211 With the density effects included, the variable-density model was able to replicate the
212 observations from the experiment. Although adjustment of the hydraulic conductivity
213 from the measured value ($4.35 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m s}^{-1}$) to $2.5 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m s}^{-1}$ was necessary for the
214 model predictions to match the experimental results (case 4, Figure 1), the prediction of
215 the asymptotic condition (including case 3) indicated the important role played by the

216 density-driven flow in hyporheic exchange. The adjustment by a factor less than 2 is
217 likely to be within the range of uncertainty with the hydraulic conductivity measurement.

218 Further evidence of the density effects on the hyporheic flow and solute transport is
219 provided by the measurements of the pore water solute concentrations at the two arrays of
220 sampling points (Figure 2). Again, without the density effect included, the
221 constant-density model was unable to predict the downward movement of the solute front
222 as shown by the measured concentration profiles. With no adjustment of the hydraulic
223 conductivity, the model under-predicted the solute front movement except for the early
224 time when the front was near the sediment-water face and the density effect was relatively
225 insignificant. The model failed to predict the movement of the solute through into the
226 bottom area of the bed (> 575 min in Figure 2) even with a five-fold increased hydraulic
227 conductivity and at the cost of over-predictions for early times. As discussed above, this
228 failure is due to the confinement of the upper circulations by the hydraulic divide, which
229 persists in the constant-density flow simulation. In contrast, the variable-density model,
230 with density effects accounted for, simulated the behavior of the solute front as observed
231 in the experiment, especially in the area near the bottom of the bed.

232 **4. Concluding remarks**

233 Small density variations between the stream water and pore water in the streambed
234 exist commonly in natural streams. Such variations also occur in laboratory experiments
235 on hyporheic exchange, which typically release solutes to the stream water at low

236 concentrations as tracers for studying the hyporheic exchange processes. The effects of
237 small density variations on hyporheic flow and solute transport have been assumed to be
238 of little importance compared with other forcing factors such as hydraulic gradient due to
239 stream flow and bedform interactions. Using well-controlled laboratory experiments and
240 numerical simulations, we have demonstrated that even small density variations can
241 influence the hyporheic flow and solute transport in the streambed with the presence of
242 periodic bedforms.

243 The density effect leads to alteration of the flow rate and patterns as the solute front
244 moves downward. The main difference is that the density-induced head gradients drive the
245 circulating flow below a hydraulic divide that would exist without the density influence.
246 The modified hyporheic flows provide a relatively fast solute transport mechanism and
247 enhanced the overall mass exchange between the stream and bed. These findings will have
248 important implications for studies of river ecosystems including hyporheic zones.

249 The experimental set-up used here is one that has been adopted in many previous
250 studies [*Elliott and Brooks, 1997; Marion et al., 2003; Boano et al., 2009; Jin et al., 2010*].
251 While the findings highlight the importance of small density variations as a driving factor
252 of hyporheic exchange processes, further investigation should be conducted to examine
253 the density effects on hyporheic flow and solute transport under different conditions such
254 as a pulse input of solute to the stream, large solute concentrations in the stream water and
255 downward density gradients (solute initiated from the bed).

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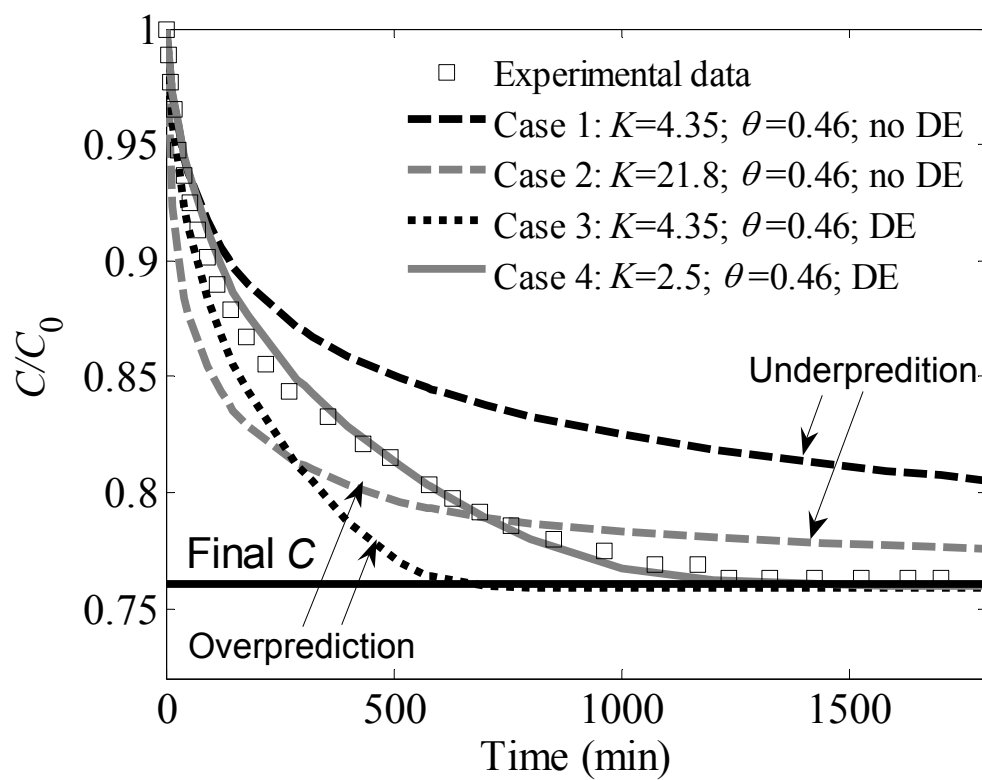
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321 **List of figures**

322 Figure 1. Comparison of experimental data and modeled solute concentrations in the
323 stream water. The solid horizontal line indicates the calculated steady state
324 concentration, $C_0 V_s / (V_s + V_p)$. Hydraulic conductivity K ($\times 10^{-3} \text{ m s}^{-1}$) and
325 density effect (DE) in all figures below are the same as this figure.

326 Figure 2. Comparison between measured and predicted solute concentrations varying
327 with depth. The solid horizontal line indicates the location of the hydraulic
328 divide at sampling array N1 or N2 (locations of the sampling points are shown
329 in Figure S1c).

330 Figure 3. Comparison of modeled solute concentration distribution, flow velocity (white
331 arrows) and streamline (grey line) at different elapsed times for different cases
332 with and without density effects. The color scale represents solute
333 concentration (C) in the streambed, with warm colors for high concentration
334 and cool for low concentration. The thick grey line shows the hydraulic divide
335 predicted by the constant-density flow model. This divide is also shown in the
336 results of the variable-density model for comparison. The results from case 3
337 (shown in Figure S2) exhibit similar trends to those from case 4 except for
338 over-predictions of hyporheic flow and downward solute transfer.

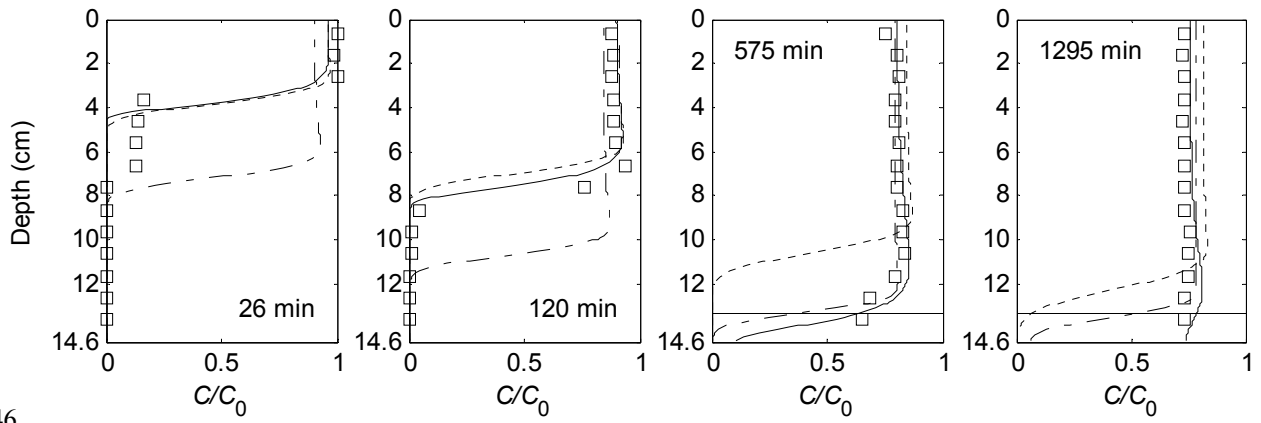


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Figure 1

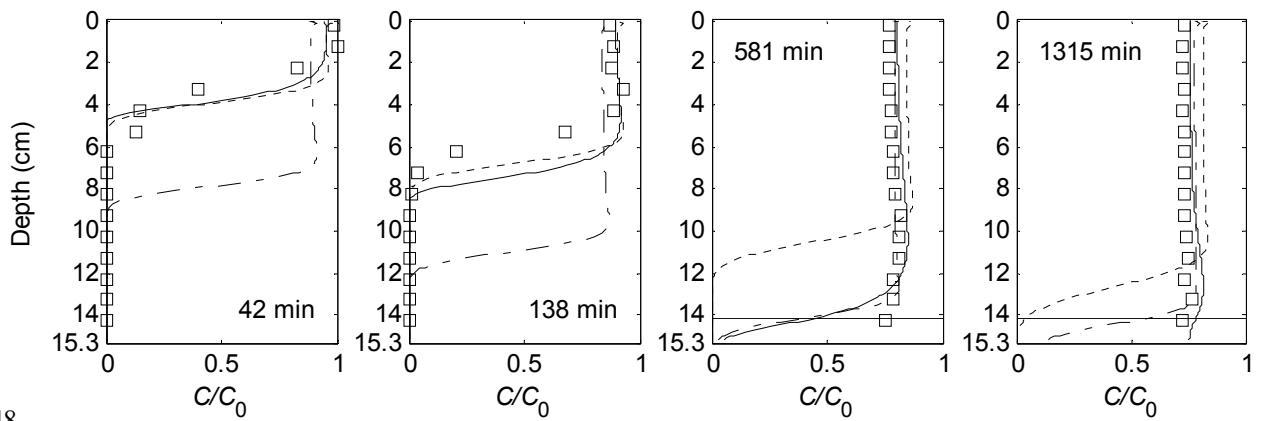
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346

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N1



348

349

N2

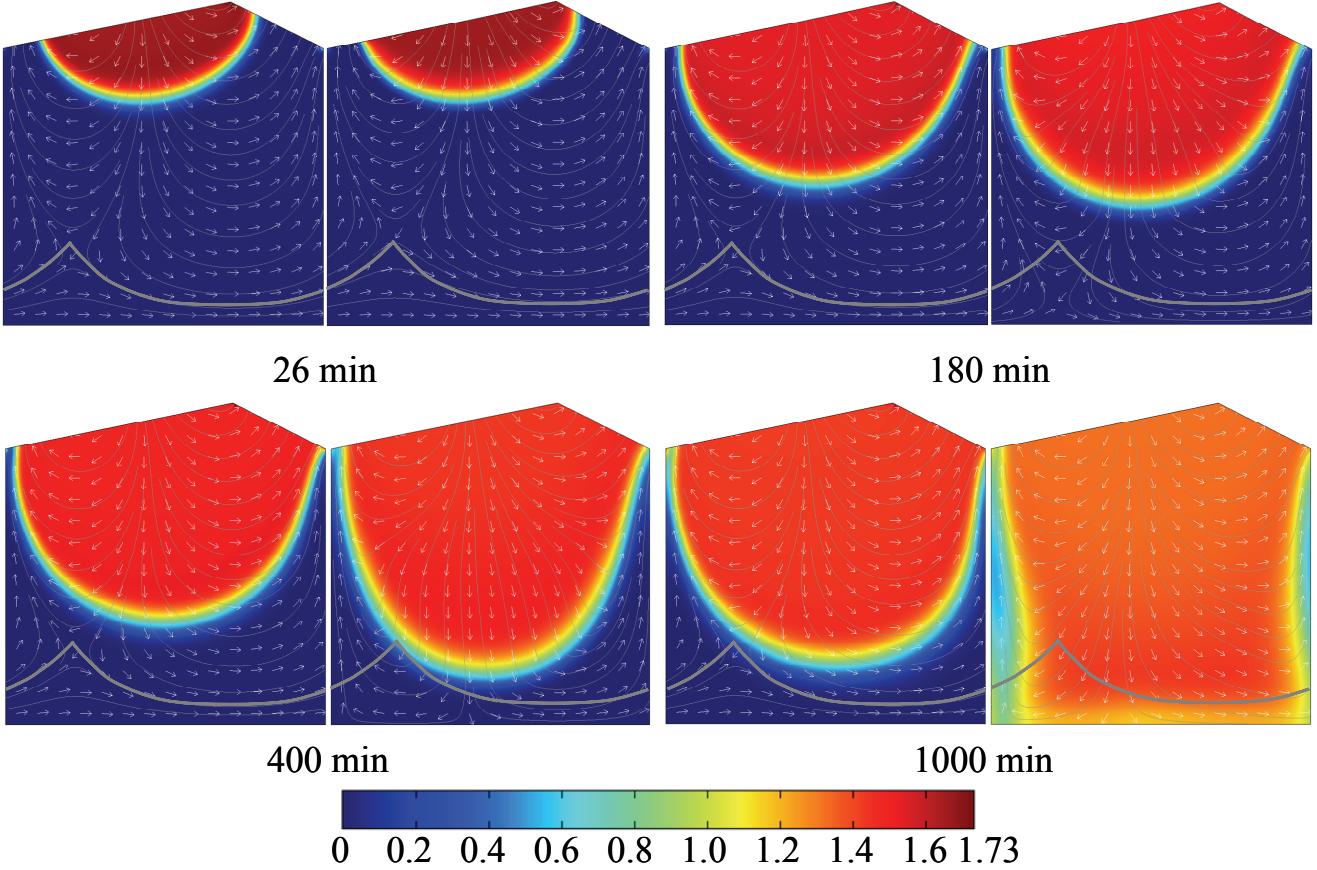
- Experimental data
- Case 1: $K=4.35$; $\theta=0.46$; no DE
- · - · - Case 2: $K=21.8$; $\theta=0.46$; no DE
- Case 4: $K=2.5$; $\theta=0.46$; DE

350

351

Figure 2

Case 1: $K=4.35$; $\theta=0.46$; no DE Case 4: $K=2.5$; $\theta=0.46$; DE Case 1: $K=4.35$; $\theta=0.46$; no DE Case 4: $K=2.5$; $\theta=0.46$; DE



352

353

Figure 3