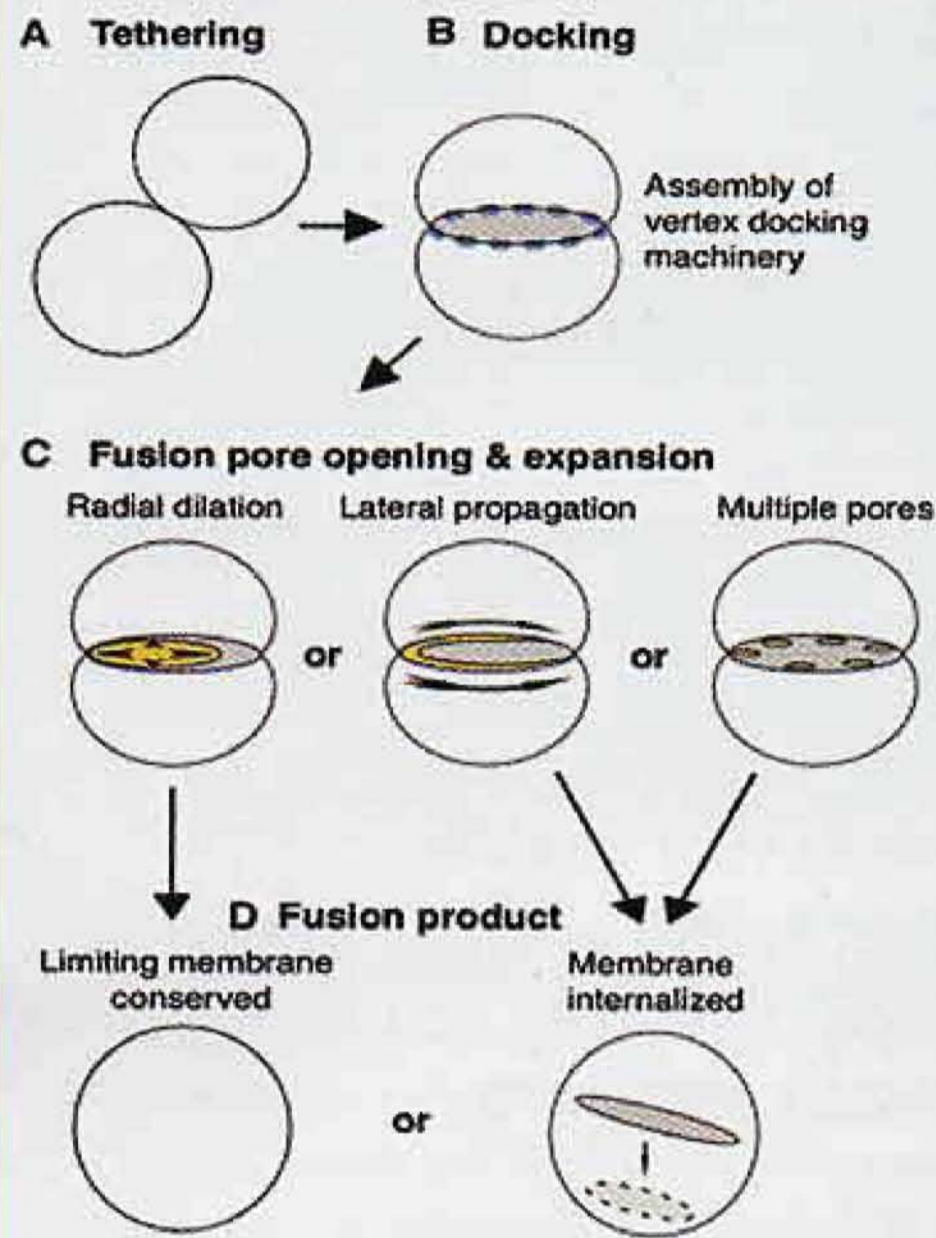


# Membrane Leftovers after Fusion of Vacuoles

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In a clever application of time-lapse fluorescence microscopy, Li Wang, Scott Seeley, William Wickner, and Alexey Merz looked to see if there was membrane left over after vacuoles fused within a cell.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, it is not known what happens when two vacuoles come together (this is referred to as “docking”) and join



together as one larger vacuole (“fusion”). For reference, the surfaces of the vacuoles where they have joined is the “boundary” membrane, the membranes on the outside are the “outside” membranes, and the circular junction of the boundary and outside membranes is the “vertex.” A popular theory has a fusion pore opening somewhere near the center of the boundary membrane, expanding radially to the vertices. When this process is complete,

there is one larger vacuole with no residual membrane; the boundary membrane has become incorporated into the outside membrane of the new vacuole. But, as pointed out by Wang *et al.*, there have been several observations over the years showing pieces of membranes floating within vacuoles. Could there be another mechanism that

would show that this extra membrane was a result of a different fusion process?

Wang *et al.* looked for fusion pores by loading isolated vacuoles with a fluorescent dye and fusing them with unloaded vacuoles. By using specific inhibitors to block all steps after tethering, no fluorescent dye was transferred between vacuoles, and their size did not change, as you might expect if fusion was not allowed to occur. When inhibitors of fusion downstream from docking were used, no exchange of the dye was seen either. This led to the conclusion that although small or transient fusion pores may form during docking, they do not lead to the final fusion event.

Many proteins are known to mediate the docking and fusion events. Wang *et al.* labeled several of these proteins, and certain lipids within the membranes, and demonstrated that the molecules they labeled were functionally intact. They then looked at the ratio of the fluorescent signals to elucidate the relationship between proteins and lipids in the membranes at the site of fusion. After establishing the utility of this assay, they demonstrated that the accumulation of the fusion proteins at the junction vertices is a regulated and selective process. This accumulation was shown to lie on the authentic fusion pathway.

Most interestingly, Wang *et al.* demonstrated that the boundary membrane is released from the vertices, apparently to become incorporated into the resultant vacuole. It is not known what happens to this internalized membrane, but it clearly demonstrates that fusion of these cytoplasmic compartments is the result of events that occur at the vertex of docked vacuoles, rather than a fusion pore event. It will be interesting to see if this fusion mechanism occurs wherever compartments fuse within the cell.

## References

1. The authors thank Professor William Wickner for reviewing this article.
2. Wang, L., E.S. Seeley, W. Wickner, and A.J. Merz, Vacuole fusion at a ring of vertex docking sites leaves membrane fragments within the organelle, *Cell* **108**:357-369, 2002.

## INDEX OF ARTICLES

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Membrane Leftovers after Fusion of Vacuoles</b> .....  | 3  |
| <i>Stephen W. Carmichael, Mayo Clinic</i>   |    |
| <b>Inspecting Surfaces With a Sharp Stick: Scanning Probe Microscopy – Past, Present, and Future</b> .....  | 5  |
| <i>Paul West, Pacific Nanotechnology, Inc.</i>  |    |
| <b>The Life and Death of a Tungsten Hairpin Filament</b> .....  | 10 |
| <i>Steve Chapman, Protrain</i>  |    |
| <b>Photoshop Tutorials: Selecting ROIs from Brightfield Images</b> ..                                       | 16 |
| <i>Jerry Sedgewick, University of Minnesota</i>   |    |
| <b>TEM Sample Preparation Using Focused Ion Beam – Capabilities And Limits</b> .....                        | 22 |
| <i>H.J. Engelmann, B. Volkmann, Y. Ritz, H. Saage, H. Stegmann, Q. de Robillard, E. Zschech; AMD Saxony</i> |    |
| <b>Beyond the Hype – Is 2-Photon Microscopy Right for You?</b> .....  | 26 |
| <i>Jason Kirk, University of Connecticut</i>  |    |
| <b>Creating Multimedia Teaching and Training Tools</b> .....  | 30 |
| <i>Steven B. Barlow, San Diego State University</i>   |    |
| <b>Another Way to Implement Diffraction Contrast in SEM</b> .....   | 36 |
| <i>Xiaodong Tao and Alwyn Eades, Lehigh University</i>  |    |
| <b>Tardigrades and Microscopes</b> .....  | 39 |
| <i>William R. Miller, Chestnut Hill College</i>   |    |
| <b>Choosing a Cantilever for In Situ Atomic Force Microscopy</b> .....                                      | 42 |
| <i>John T. Woodward, National Institute of Standards and Technology</i>                                     |    |
| <b>Industry News</b> .....  | 44 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Petrographic Slides Projected in a 35mm Slide Projector</b> .....  | 46 |
| <i>Roy Beavers, Southern Methodist University</i>                     |    |
| <b>Embedding Media Health Hazards And Medical Documentation</b> ..... | 46 |
| <i>E. Ann Ellis, Texas A &amp; M University</i>                       |    |
| <b>How to Produce Posters Using PowerPoint</b> .....                  | 48 |
| <i>John J. Bozzola, Southern Illinois University</i>                  |    |
| <b>NetNotes</b> .....   | 49 |
| <b>Index of Advertisers</b> .....                                     | 54 |

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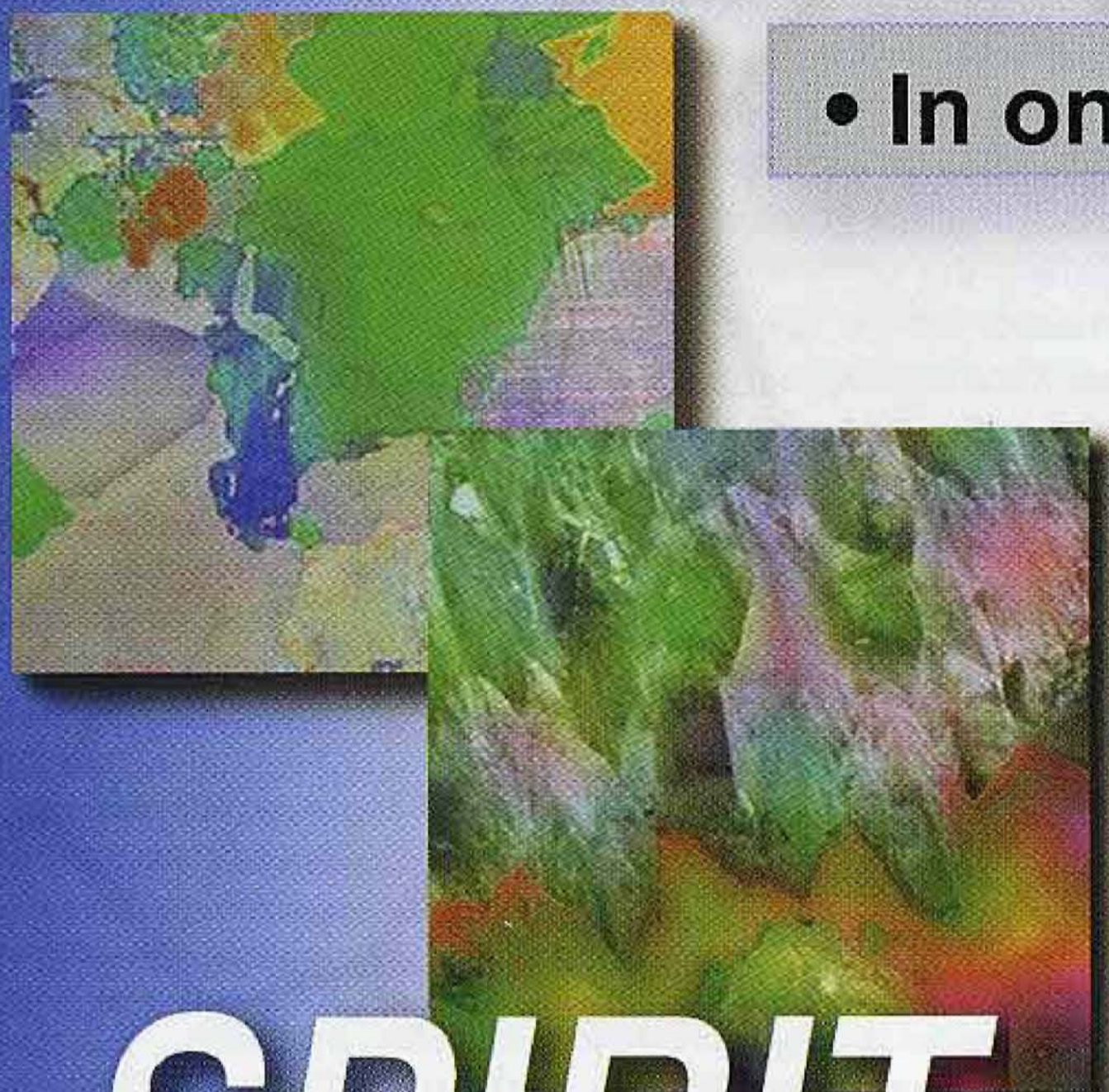
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