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The All-Seeing Eye of Resonant Auger Electron Spectroscopy: A Study on Aqueous Solution Using Tender X-Rays

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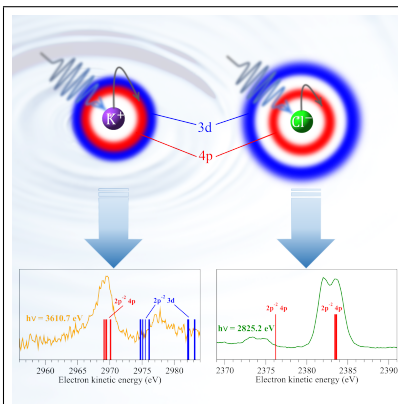
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Abstract

X-ray absorption and Auger electron spectroscopies are demonstrated to be powerful tools to unravel the electronic structure of solvated ions. In this work for the first time we use a combination of these methods in the tender x-ray regime. This allowed us to address electronic transitions from deep core levels, to probe environmental effects, specifically in the bulk of the solution since the created energetic Auger electrons possess large mean free paths, and moreover, to obtain dynamical information about the ultrafast delocalization of the core-excited electron. In the considered exemplary aqueous KCl solution the solvated isoelectronic K^+ and Cl^- ions exhibit notably different Auger electron spectra as a function of the photon energy. The differences appear due to dipole-forbidden transitions in aqueous K^+ whose occurrence, according to the performed *ab initio* calculations, becomes possible only in the presence of solvent water molecules.

Graphical TOC Entry



Keywords

Solvated ions, Auger electron spectroscopy, x-ray absorption spectroscopy

Understanding how atoms or molecules respond to irradiation with x-rays gives insight into the structure of solutions (Ref.¹ and references therein), and the mechanisms of radiation damage²⁻⁴. Depending on the photon energy, the absorption of an x-ray photon results in the population of core-excited or core-ionized states. The relaxation of these highly energetic states involves an ultrafast cascade of intraatomic processes, such as radiative and Auger decays, and it depends on the character of the initially populated states⁵⁻¹². Furthermore, if the initially excited or ionized species is embedded in an environment, interatomic processes are possible^{4,13-16}.

X-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS) in the soft x-ray regime is a powerful tool to describe core-excited states of a specific atom and thus to probe the local environment surrounding the target atom by measuring its influence on the electronic structure of the atom. In the tender and hard x-ray regimes, these core-excited states overlap significantly due to the lifetime broadening, rendering studies on the influence of the environment difficult. This challenge can be overcome by detecting the electrons originating from the subsequent resonant Auger decay, which allows one to separate the overlapping states^{17,18}. With our recently commissioned microjet setup dedicated to the study of liquids by electron spectroscopy techniques using tender x-rays^{19,20}, we can now probe much deeper core levels and corresponding fast Auger electrons. This allows us to focus our investigations on the liquid bulk by strongly reducing the specific interface contributions, and also to access ultrafast dynamical processes owing to the very short lifetimes of the corresponding core-excited states.

In this work we combine Auger electron spectroscopy (AES) together with XAS in the tender x-ray regime to study the electronic decay processes following x-ray absorption of aqueous potassium chloride at the K-edges of both K^+ and Cl^- (schematically presented in Fig. 1). In particular, we demonstrate experimentally that at photon energies below the K-edges of the two ions, core-excited states are populated. These states undergo resonant Auger decay within less than 1 fs¹⁶. In both ions, there is a competition between resonant Auger decay and delocalization of the excited electron. Using the core-hole clock method

we show that in Cl^- the delocalization time for the $1s^{-1}4p$ resonance is of the same order as that of the resonant Auger process, whereas in K^+ the delocalization is expected to be slower. Although the K^+ and Cl^- ions are isoelectronic, they have different fingerprints in the resonant Auger spectra. Our analysis reveals that these differences result to a large extent from different electronic structures of the two ions, thus confirming that the combination of XAS and AES techniques is a sensitive probe of the electronic structure of solutions.

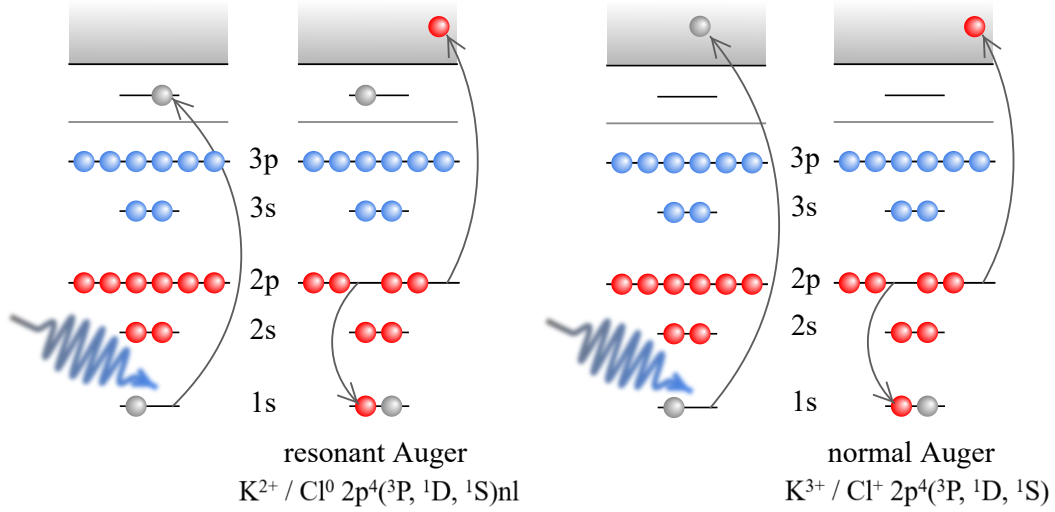


Figure 1: Schematic representation of the resonant (left) and normal (right) Auger processes of the isoelectronic K^+ and Cl^- ions.

The photon-energy dependent resonant and normal Auger spectra of K_{aq}^+ and Cl_{aq}^- are shown in Figs. 2 and 3 as 2D maps where the Auger intensities are illustrated by a color code. These spectra were measured using a newly operational microjet setup designed for the HAXPES end station of the GALAXIES beamline at the synchrotron radiation facility SOLEIL in France^{19,20}; for details, see Supplementary Information (SI). The $\text{KL}_{2,3}\text{L}_{2,3}$ normal Auger decay leads to the population of the $2p^{-2}(^3\text{P}, ^1\text{D}, ^1\text{S})$ final states. For both K^+ and Cl^- , the experimentally observed transitions are to the $2p^{-2}(^1\text{D}, ^1\text{S})$ final states, whereas the transitions to ^3P final states are weak since they are forbidden in LS coupling (see Figs. 2(a) and 3(a)). In addition, the $2p^{-2}(^1\text{D})$ main line of K^+ exhibits a low-energy shoulder labeled A whose origin will be discussed below. Close to threshold the $\text{KL}_{2,3}\text{L}_{2,3}$ normal Auger

lines are asymmetric (see Figs. 2(c) and 3(c)) and also shifted to higher kinetic energies as compared to the spectra reported in¹⁶. This is due to post-collision interaction^{21,22} discussed in more detail in the SI.

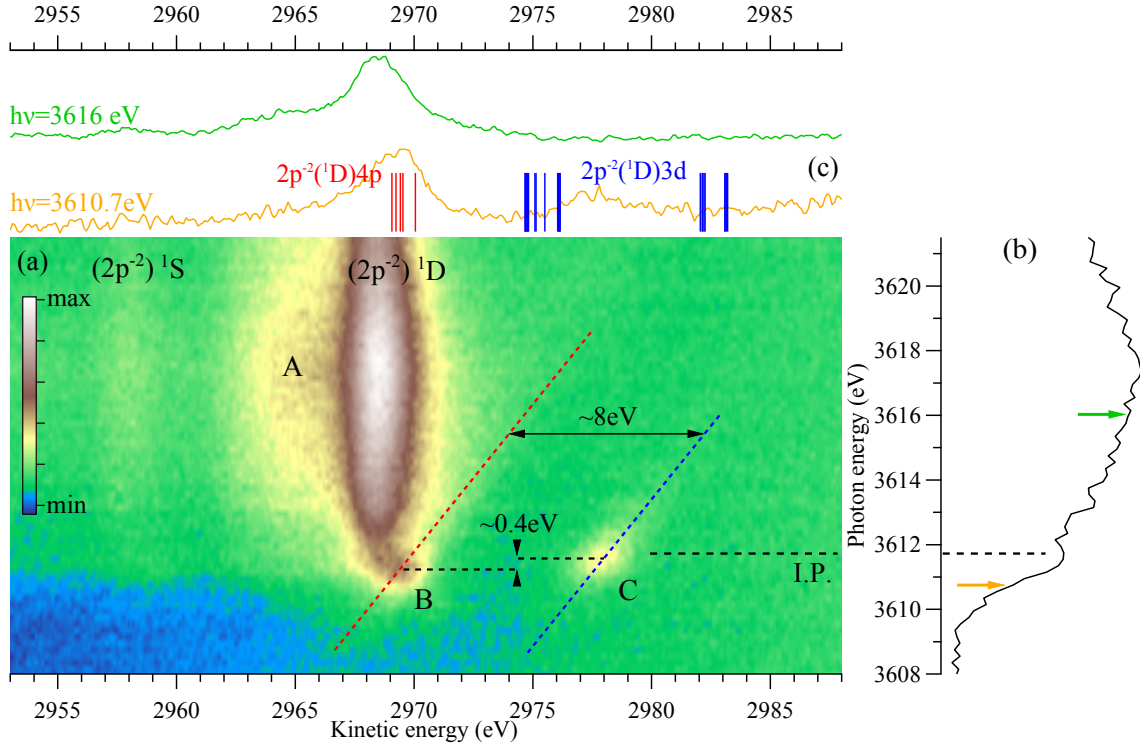


Figure 2: (a) 2D map showing the kinetic energy of the electrons emitted in KL_{2,3}L_{2,3} Auger decay vs the photon energy in the vicinity of the K-edge of aqueous K⁺. The features A, B and C are discussed in the text. (b) Experimental partial electron yield spectrum of K⁺ obtained after integrating over the kinetic energies of the Auger electrons. (c) Auger spectra at photon energies 3610.7 eV and 3616 eV. The vertical bars in the resonant Auger spectrum measured at 3610.7 eV indicate the spectator Auger energies of the calculated doublet 2p⁻² 3d (blue) and 2p⁻² 4p (red) states of K⁺(H₂O)₆.

In the pre-edge regions of the XA spectra of K⁺ and Cl⁻ displayed on Figs. 2(b) and 3(b), no core-excited states are visible due to their lifetime broadening and energetic proximity to the ionization threshold. These states can, however, be identified by their resonant Auger features, which disperse with photon energy. These features are indicated by diagonal dashed lines in Figs. 2(a) and 3(a). To assign these features, we calculated the XA spectra, representing the initial states, and the final states of the Auger process.

The XA spectra in the region of the lowest core-excited states of isolated K⁺ and Cl⁻ and

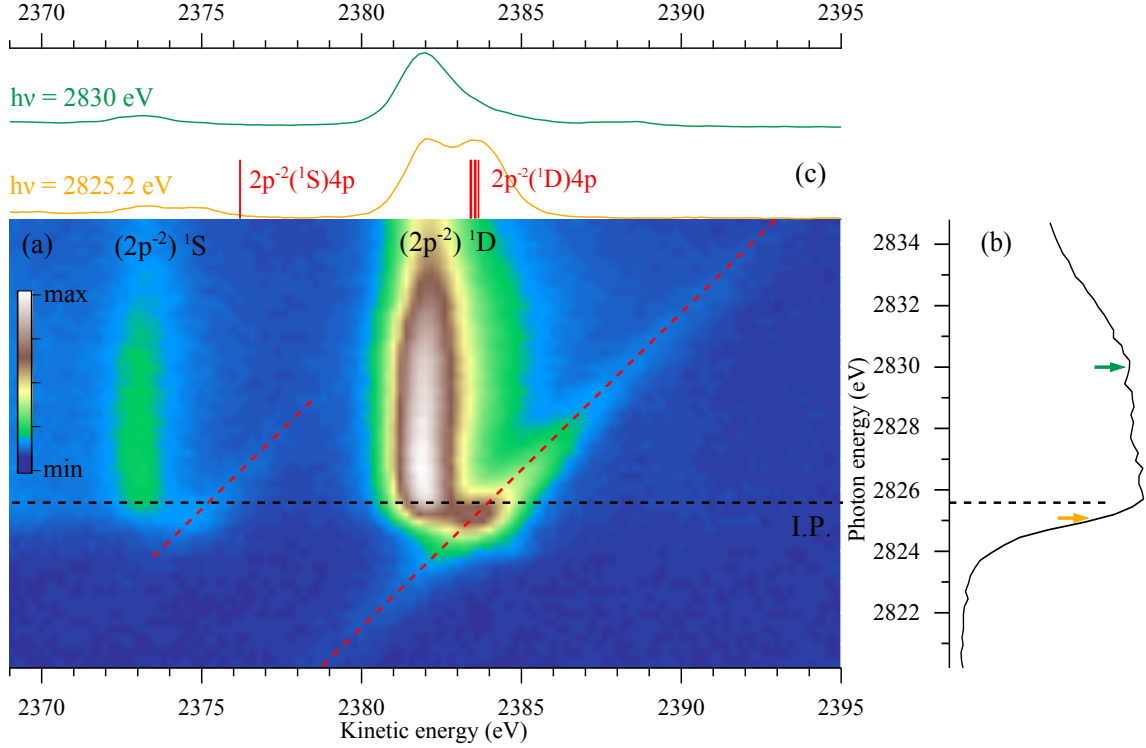


Figure 3: (a) 2D map showing the kinetic energy of the electrons emitted in KL_{2,3}L_{2,3} Auger decay vs the photon energy in the vicinity of the K-edge of aqueous Cl⁻. (b) Experimental partial electron yield spectrum of Cl⁻ obtained after integrating over the kinetic energies of the Auger electrons. (c) Auger spectra at photon energies 2825.2 eV and 2830.0 eV. The vertical bars in the resonant Auger spectrum at 2825.2 eV indicate the the spectator Auger energies of the calculated doublet 2p⁻²4p states of Cl⁻(H₂O)₆.

their hexa-coordinated clusters representing K_{aq}⁺ and Cl_{aq}⁻ were calculated with the algebraic diagrammatic construction method for the polarization propagator²³ within the core-valence separation approximation²⁴⁻²⁶ (CVS-ADC(2)x) as implemented in the Q-Chem package²⁷⁻³⁰ (see SI for details). The theoretical XA spectra of the isolated ions (Fig. 4(a),(b)) show the two dipole-allowed states, 1s⁻¹4p and 1s⁻¹5p, which are split by 4.3 eV and 10.8 eV in K⁺ and Cl⁻, respectively. The excitation energies of the dipole-forbidden 1s⁻¹3d states are marked with blue crosses. Their positions relative to the 1s⁻¹4p states in K⁺ and Cl⁻ is different and as discussed below, this is important for understanding the resonant Auger features of K⁺. Upon addition of water molecules, the degeneracy of the states is lifted and they interact with other states of the ion or the neighboring water molecules. Thus,

dipole-forbidden states acquire intensity in the cluster. A similar effect was observed in the XA spectra of microsolvated clusters of Na^+ and Mg^{2+31} . The resulting spectra with the lowest resonances shifted to the experimental value are shown in Fig. 4(c),(d), together with the experimentally obtained ionization energies. In particular, the lowest peak in the XA spectrum of the 6-coordinated K^+ cluster contains three states (Fig. 4(c)). The lowest- and highest-lying states are split by approximately 0.5 eV and they have a mixed 4p and 5p character while the low-intensity state in between has a predominantly $1s^{-1}3d$ character. In the hexa-coordinated cluster of Cl^- , the solvent molecules have little influence on the position and character of the first state – it has mainly $\text{Cl}^- 1s^{-1}4p$ character with some admixture of states of the nearest water molecules (Fig. 4(d)).

We also computed the lowest doublet states of the type $\text{K}^{2+}[2p^{-2}\text{nl}](\text{H}_2\text{O})_6$ and $\text{Cl}^0[2p^{-2}\text{nl}](\text{H}_2\text{O})_6$. They represent the final states of the spectator Auger decay, which is the predominant decay process for the low-lying core-excited states in isoelectronic argon³². The calculations were performed at the Configuration Interaction Singles (CIS) level using the GAMESS-US package^{33–35} (see SI for details). The energy positions of the states (see bars on Figs. 2(c) and 3(c)) are adjusted to the kinetic-energy scale of the Auger spectra of both ions such that the lowest $2p^{-2}(^1\text{D})4p$ states coincide with the maxima of the dispersive features close to the ^1D main line.

In the following we assign the dispersive features on Figs. 2(a) and 3(a). In the 2D map of Cl^- two dispersive resonant Auger features are visible. Both of them exhibit a maximum at $h\nu = 2825.2 \text{ eV}$, i.e. $\cong 200 \text{ meV}$ below the ionization threshold. The former value agrees well with the position of the $1s^{-1}4p$ excitation determined from Cl K-edge XAS experiments on hydrated Mg and Sr chlorides³⁶ and metalchloride complexes³⁷. Moreover, the maxima in the kinetic energies of these dispersive features are split by $\cong 8.5 \text{ eV}$, which is in line with the calculated value of $\cong 7 \text{ eV}$ for the splitting between the $2p^{-2}(^1\text{S})4p$ and $2p^{-2}(^1\text{D})4p$ final states. Consequently, we assign these features as originating from the resonant Auger decay of the $1s^{-1}4p$ excitation to the $2p^{-2}(^1\text{S}, ^1\text{D})4p$ final states.

The 2D map of K^+ shown in Fig. 2(a) also displays two dispersive features. The line denoted as B exhibits a maximum at $h\nu = 3611.2$ eV and $E_{\text{kin}} = 2969.2$ eV, while the line labeled C exhibits a maximum at $h\nu = 3611.6$ eV and $E_{\text{kin}} = 2978.1$ eV. The observed energy positions relative to the $K^+ 1s^{-1}$ threshold in combination with the relative energy position of the $2p^{-2}nl$ states suggest that feature B is a result of resonant Auger decay of the $1s^{-1}4p$ excitation to the $2p^{-2}(^1D)4p$ final state, whereas feature C originates from the $1s^{-1}3d \rightarrow 2p^{-2}(^1D)3d$ resonant Auger transition. The latter is dipole-forbidden in the isolated ion, which explains the low intensity of feature C. Another argument in favor of this assignment is the energy difference between the spectral features A and C, which matches well the lowest ionization potential of liquid water $I_{\text{aq}} \cong 11.16$ eV.³⁸ Feature A is assigned to a charge transfer from a water molecule W to the 3d orbital of K^+ during the Auger decay, i.e. $K^{2+}(1s^{-1}) \rightarrow K^{2+}(2p^{-2}3d)W^{+16}$, so that its energy position should be lower by I_{aq} if we take into account the small energy separation of the $1s^{-1}3d$ excitation from threshold. No dispersive features related to the $2p^{-2}(^1S)$ parent state are observed in the 2D map due to the high intensity and broadening of shoulder A.

We note that the resonances of K_{aq}^+ and Cl_{aq}^- calculated to be above the corresponding ionization threshold (Fig. 4(c,d)) are not experimentally observed. This might be due to the fact that the corresponding resonant Auger spectra cannot be separated energetically from the more intense normal Auger main lines.

An important aspect of the study of core-excited states in aqueous solutions is the effect of ultrafast delocalization of the excited electron which competes with the resonant Auger decay^{40,41}. The photon-energy dependent Auger spectra also contain information about the delocalization time thus providing a convenient alternative to the more challenging time-domain experiments in the 1 fs regime. To estimate the photon-energy dependent delocalization time of the core-excited electron, $\tau_{\text{CT}}(h\nu)$, we used the core-hole clock method.^{17,42–45} Within this method, $\tau_{\text{CT}}(h\nu)$ can be determined from the lifetime of the core hole τ_c and the ratio of the intensities of the normal (d) and resonant (l) Auger peaks according to

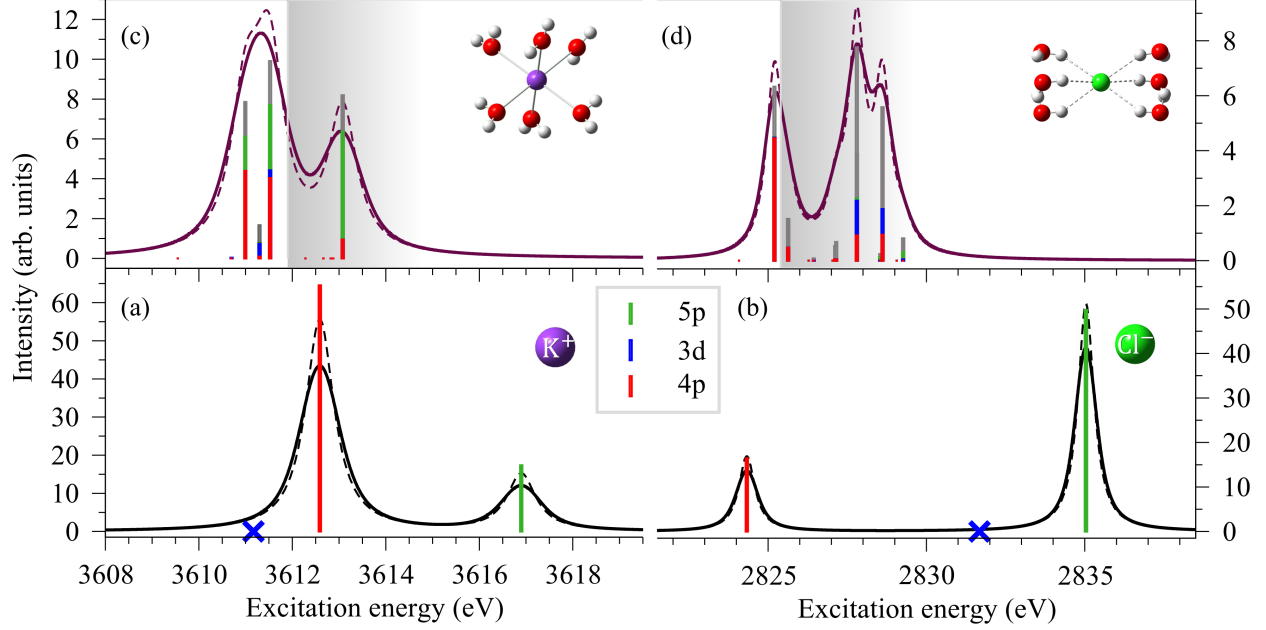


Figure 4: XA spectra of the lowest K-shell resonant transitions in the isolated K^+ (a) and Cl^- (b) ions and their 6-coordinated clusters, (c) and (d). For comparison with the experiment, the theoretical stick spectra are convolved with a Lorentzian of FWHM 0.74 eV and 0.62 eV representing the lifetime broadening of K^+ and Cl^- ³⁹ (dashed lines) and a Voigt profile (solid line) to account for both the lifetime and the experimental broadening (see text). The colors in the stick spectrum represent the projections of the singly-occupied natural orbitals (SONOs) of the core-excited 6-coordinated clusters on the basis of SONOs belonging to the $1s^{-1}3d$, $1s^{-1}4p$, and $1s^{-1}5p$ states of the isolated ions. The remaining contributions from higher-lying atomic core excitations or from excitations to the solvent molecules are depicted as grey sticks. The theoretical XA spectra of both K^+ and Cl^- were shifted to higher photon energies such that the energies of the lowest core-excited states correspond to the experimentally determined ones. The darker edge of the grey boxes indicates the ionization threshold as obtained in the experiment.

the relation $\tau_{\text{CT}} = \tau_c l(h\nu)/d(h\nu)$ ^{17,42–45}. In the case of Cl^- , we performed the same data treatment as in Ref.³² to extract the intensities $l(h\nu)$ and $d(h\nu)$ (see Fig. 2 in the SI). At the specific photon energy of $h\nu = 2825.2$ eV, i.e. at the maximum of the lowest core excitation $1s^{-1}4p$, τ_{CT} is of the same order as the Auger lifetime, $\cong 1$ fs. This is manifested as a double-peak structure in the Auger spectrum in the interval $E_{\text{kin}} = 2380 - 2385$ eV (Fig. 3(c)). The position of the first peak coincides with the ^1D main line resulting from normal Auger decay, whereas the second peak at 2383.5 eV corresponds to resonant Auger decay to the $2p^{-2}(^1\text{D})4p$ states. The fast delocalization in this case is a result of the fact that the

energy splitting between the Cl^- ($1s^{-1}4p$) resonance and the ionization threshold is 0.2 eV, and thus, smaller than the lifetime broadening of 0.62 eV¹⁶.

For potassium, a comparable data treatment is more complicated due to the smaller splitting between the $1s^{-1} \rightarrow 2p^{-2}(^1D)$ normal Auger and $1s^{-1}4p \rightarrow 2p^{-2}(^1D)4p$ resonant Auger lines as well as the presence of contributions caused by charge transfer from the solvent. This hinders the extraction of reliable intensities for the different contributions visible in the 2D map (Fig. 2(a)), especially close to threshold in the kinetic energy region 2965 – 2970 eV. However, one can expect much less efficient delocalization in K^+ compared to Cl^- because the lowest core-excited state appears 0.7 eV below the ionization threshold compared to 0.2 eV for chloride and, moreover, because the lifetime of the K1s core hole is shorter than that of chloride (0.9 vs. 1 fs).

In summary, we studied the electronic structure of aqueous solution of KCl at the K-edges of both K_{aq}^+ and Cl_{aq}^- by combining XAS and AES in the tender x-ray regime, and *ab initio* calculations. The Auger electron spectra of both ions exhibit features of normal and resonant Auger processes. The spectator resonant Auger decay following the $1s^{-1}4p$ excitation proceeds similarly for both aqueous K^+ and Cl^- resulting in dispersive lines with maxima close to the normal Auger features. However, there is a clear difference between the two ions due to the non-negligible excitation of the dipole-forbidden $1s^{-1}3d$ state of K^+ in solution. The spectator Auger decay of this state produces an additional feature which is well separated from the remaining Auger features. Another substantial difference between the two ions is the time of delocalization of the core-excited electron at the pre-edge region. Using the core-hole clock method, we extracted information about the delocalization dynamics from the photon-energy dependent Auger spectra. In the case of Cl^- , the resonant Auger decay and the delocalization of the excited electron occur on a comparable timescale, whereas in K^+ , a much less efficient delocalization is expected. These results are an important first step in the study of relaxation cascades triggered by x-ray photoabsorption in liquids. The Auger processes considered here are inevitably followed by multiple intra- and interatomic electronic

decays, such as interatomic Coulombic decay (ICD) and electron-transfer mediated decay (ETMD)^{4,15}. As a result of the latter processes, genotoxic free radicals and slow electrons are formed in the vicinity of the metal center. The magnitude of the damage inflicted upon the environment and the energies of the emitted electrons depend on the initial Auger step, and can therefore be controlled by tuning the energy of the radiation. Consequently, the results of this work can have implications in understanding radiation chemistry and radiation damage in biologically relevant systems in which metallic centers are ubiquitous.

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Supporting Information Available

- `suppinfo.pdf`: contains 1) a detailed description of the experiment, as well as the *ab initio* calculations; 2) an explanation of the post-collision interaction shift observed in the experimental Auger spectra; 3) the radial density distributions of the core excited states of the bare ions; 4) the partial cross sections and charge transfer time extracted from the experimental 2D map near the Cl1s edge.

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