



# Class overview today - November 14, 2016

- Lecture: **Natural diffusion**
  - Introduction to the diffusion process
  - Mathematical description of diffusion
  - Hillslope diffusive processes
- Exercise 10: **Hillslope diffusion**



# **Introduction to Quantitative Geology**

## **Natural diffusion: Hillslope sediment transport**

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14.11.2016



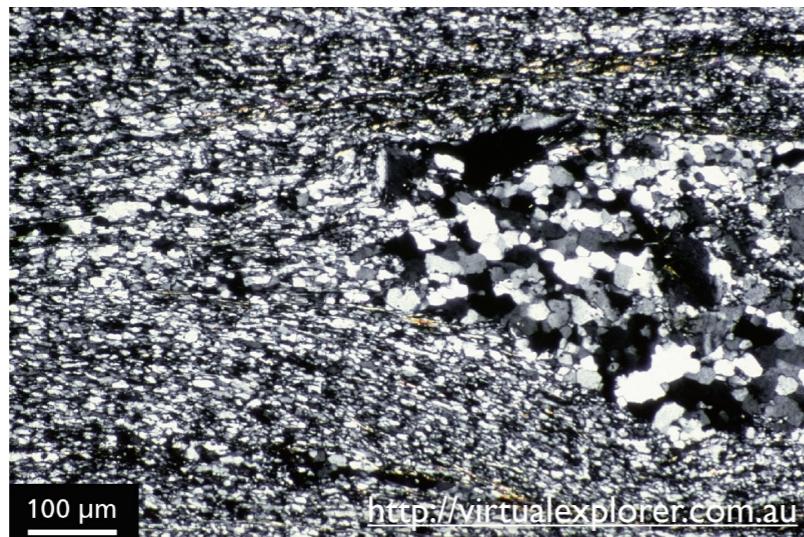
# Goals of this lecture

- Introduce the **diffusion process**
- Present some examples of **hillslope diffusive processes**  
(heave/creep, solifluction, rain splash)



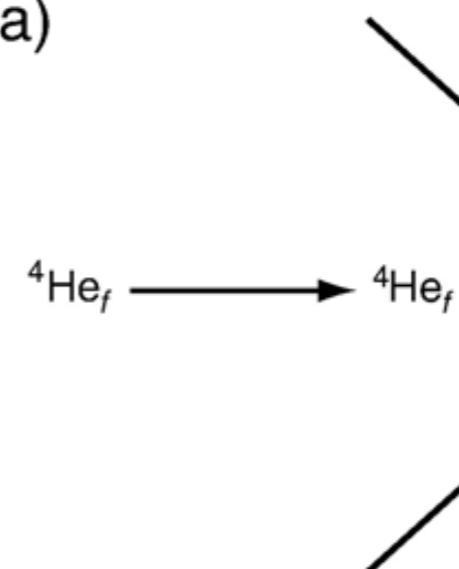
# Diffusion as a geological process

Grain boundary  
sliding



${}^4\text{He}$  diffusion in apatite

(a)

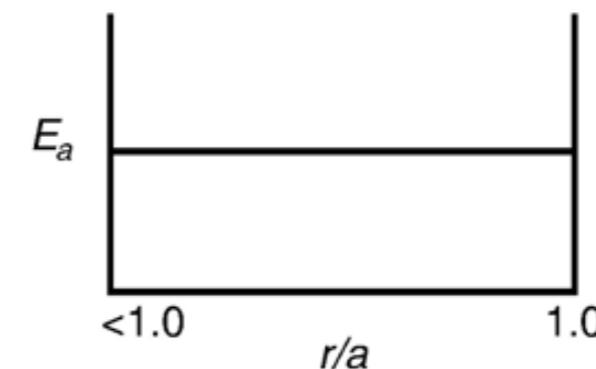


Shuster et al., 2006

Rain splash



Hillslope erosion



Thermochronology

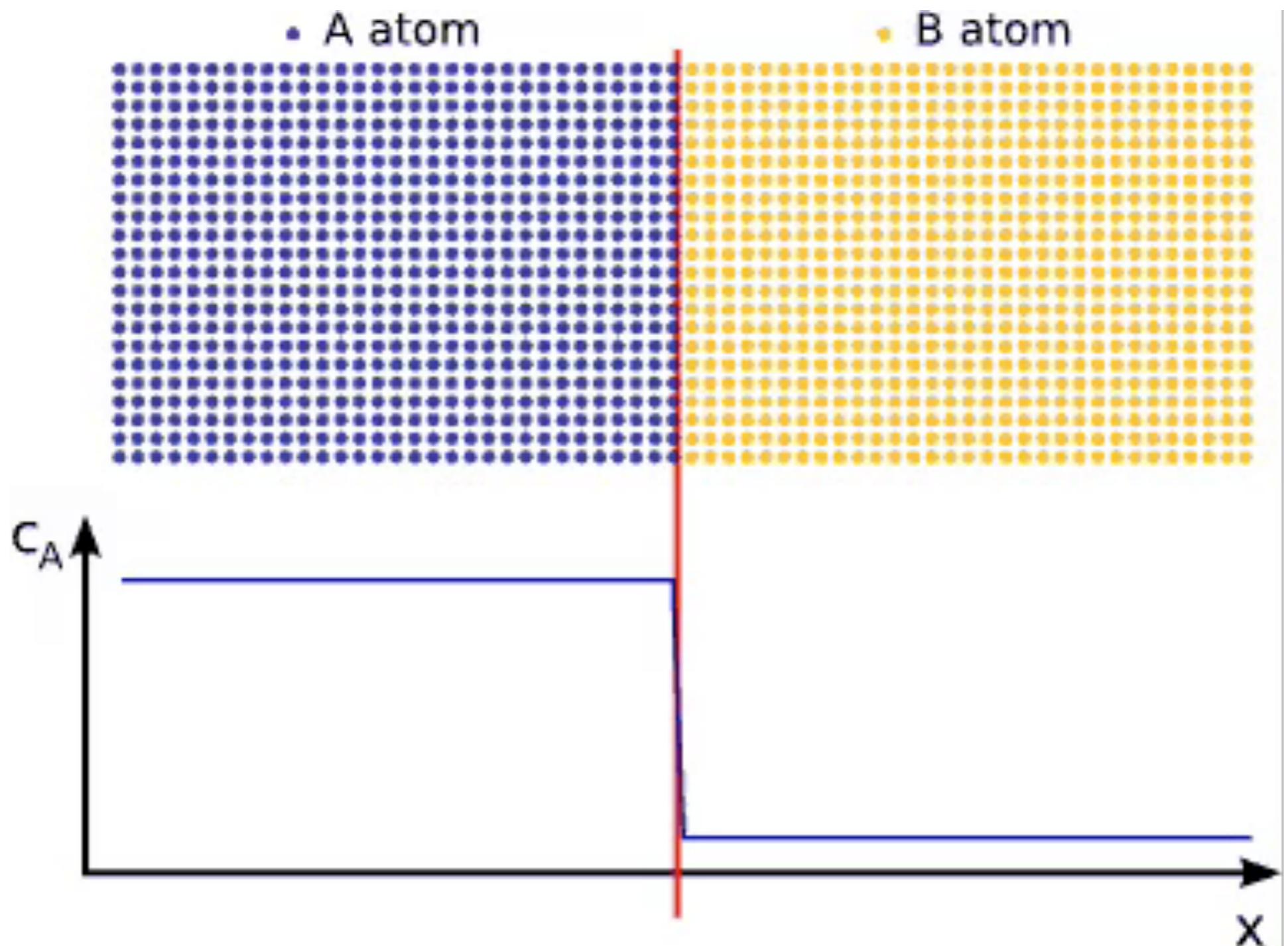


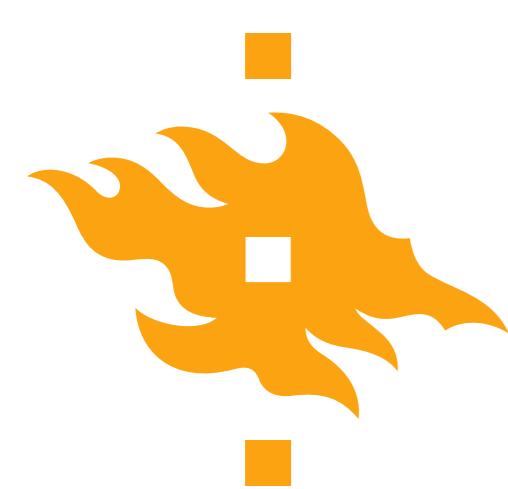
# General concepts of diffusion

- **Diffusion** is a process resulting in mass transport or mixing as a result of the random motion of diffusing particles

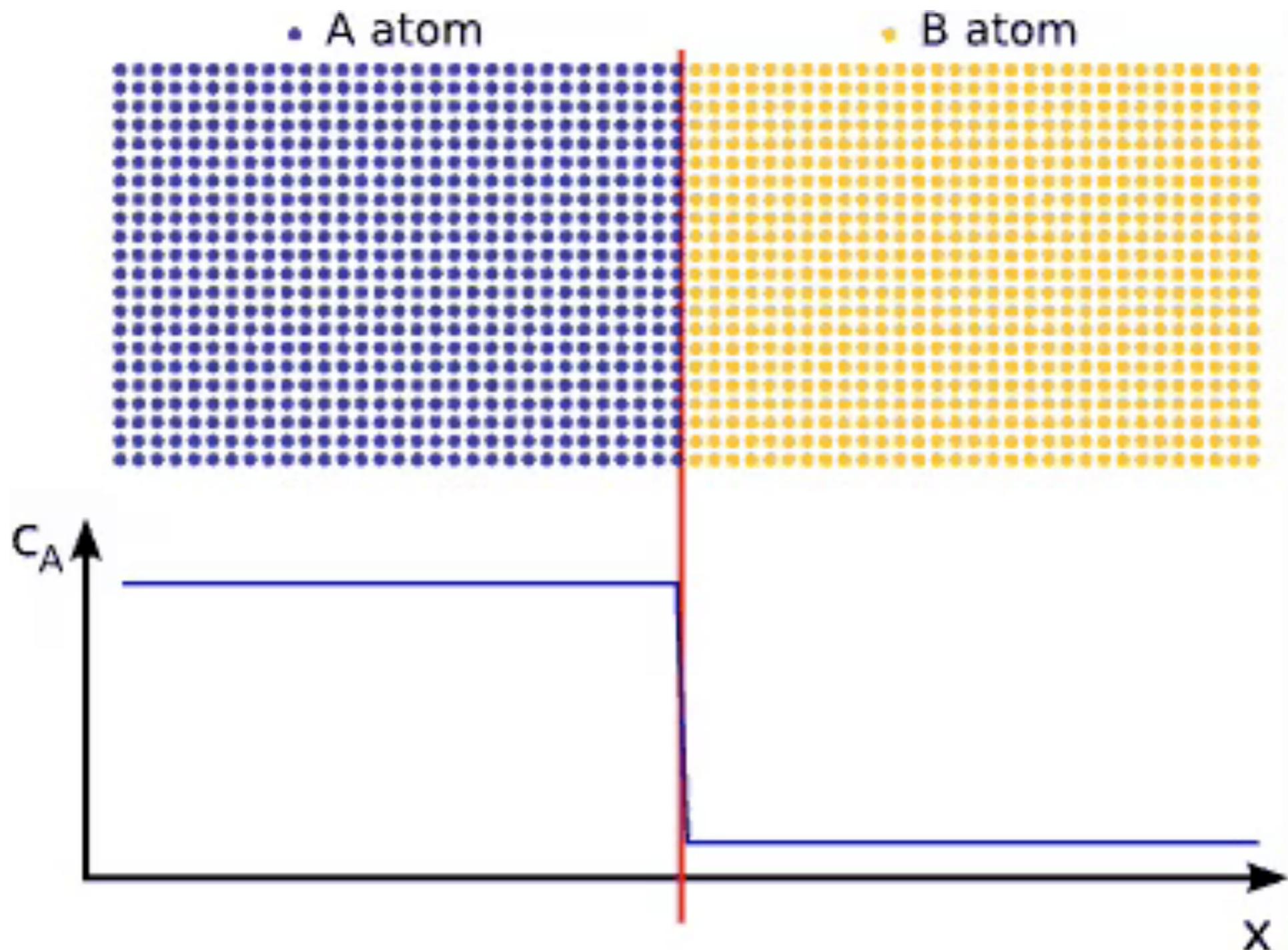


# The diffusion process



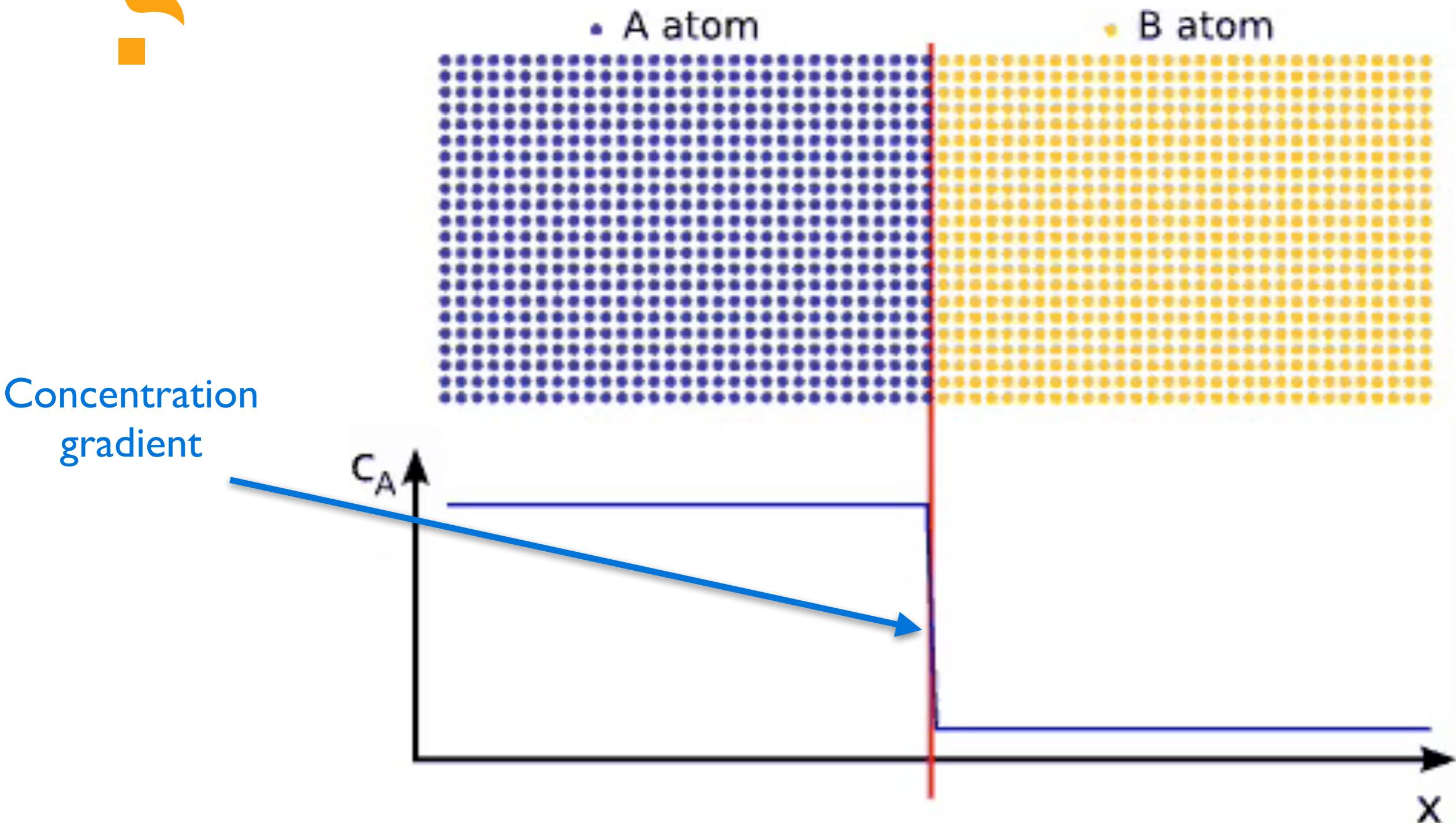


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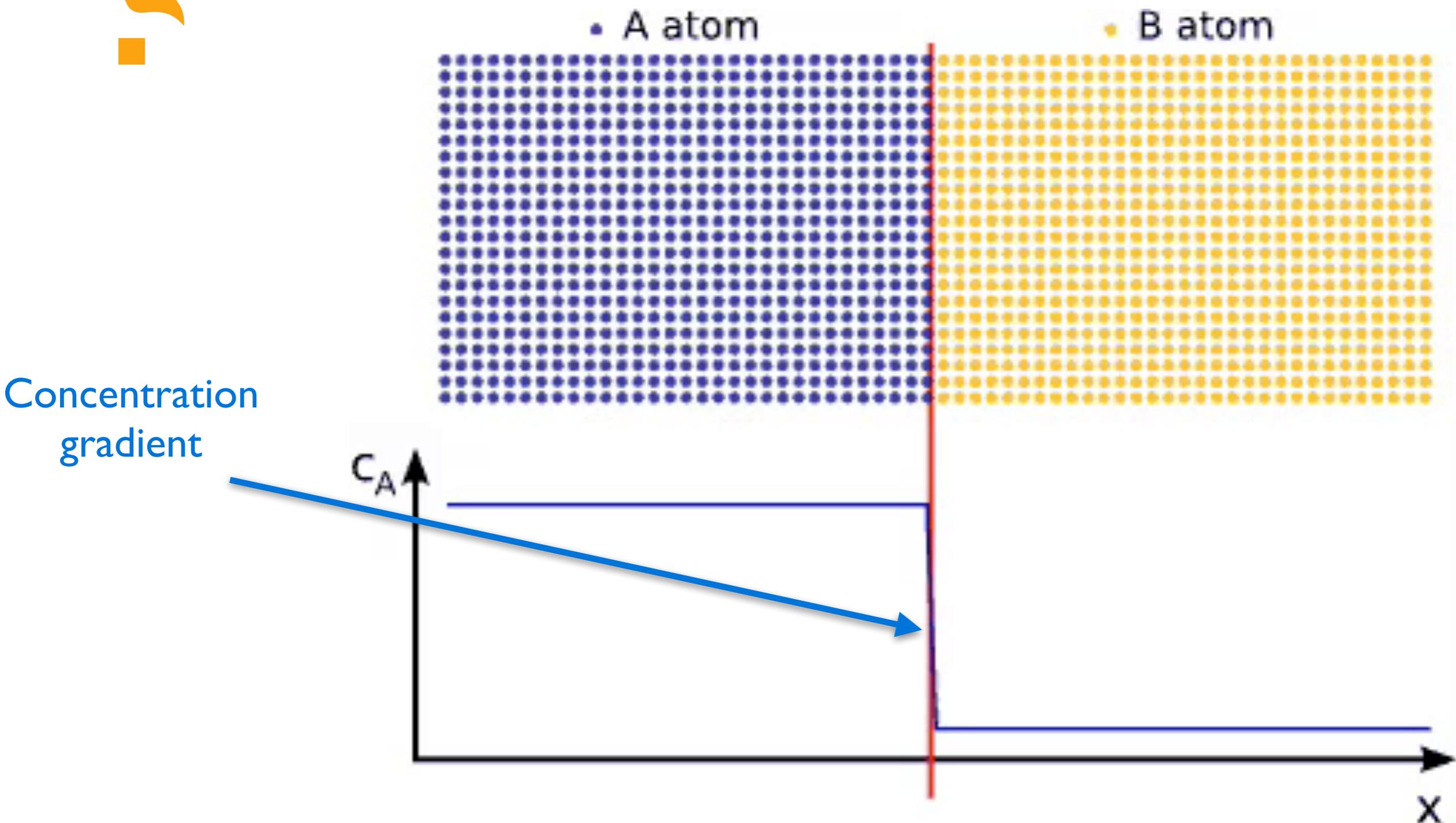


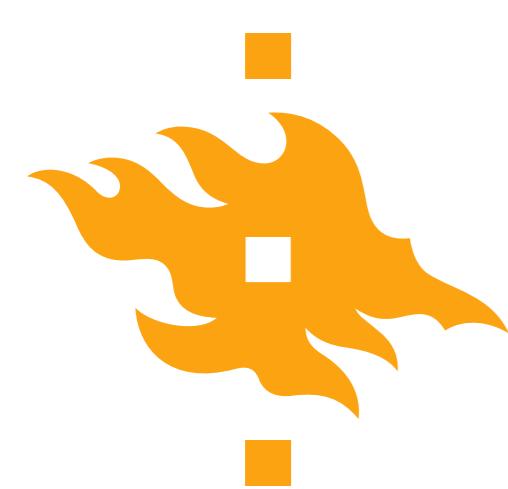
# The diffusion process





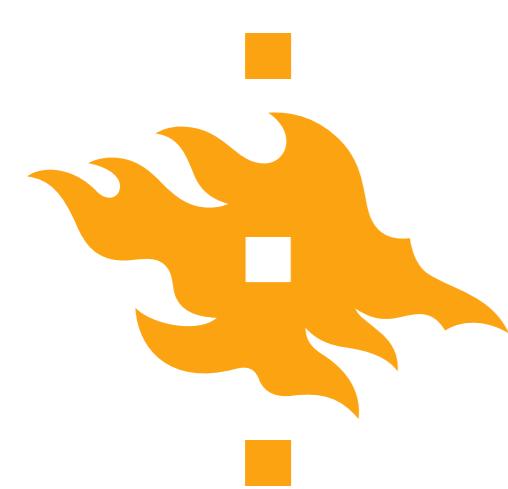
# The diffusion process





# General concepts of diffusion

- **Diffusion** is a process resulting in mass transport or mixing as a result of the random motion of diffusing particles
- Net motion of mass or transfer of energy is from regions of high concentration to regions of low concentration
- Diffusion reduces concentration gradients



# A more quantitative definition

- **Diffusion** occurs when a **conservative property** moves through space at a **rate proportional to a gradient**
- **Conservative property:** A quantity that must be conserved in the system (e.g., mass, energy, momentum)
- **Rate proportional to a gradient:** Movement occurs in direct relationship to the change in concentration
  - Consider a one hot piece of metal that is put in contact with a cold piece of metal. Along the interface the change in temperature will be most rapid when the temperature difference is largest



# A mathematical definition

- We can now translate the concept of diffusion into mathematical terms.
  - We've just seen “Diffusion occurs when a (1) **conservative property** moves through space at a (2) **rate proportional to a gradient**”
  - If we start with part 2, we can say in comfortable terms that **[transportation rate]** is proportional to **[change in concentration over some distance]**



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# A mathematical definition

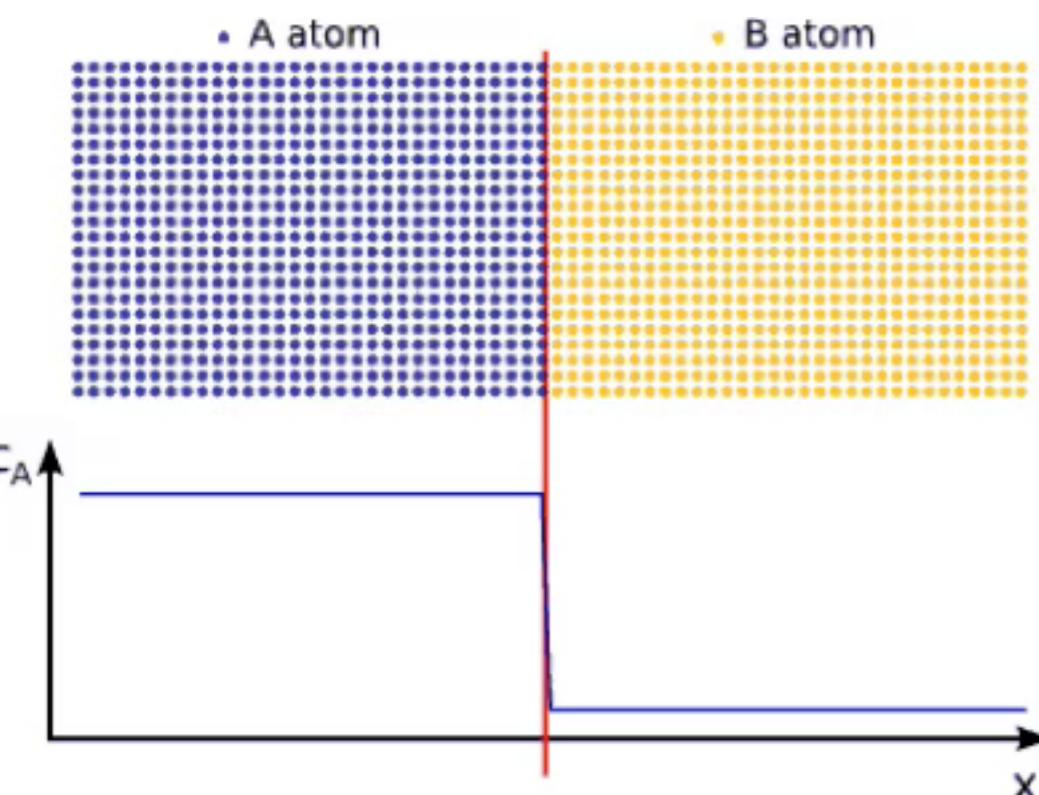
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- Finally, in symbols we can say

$$q \propto \frac{\Delta C}{\Delta x}$$

where  $q$  is the mass flux,  $\propto$  is the “proportional to” symbol,  $\Delta$  indicates a change in the symbol that follows,  $C$  is the concentration and  $x$  is distance



# A mathematical definition



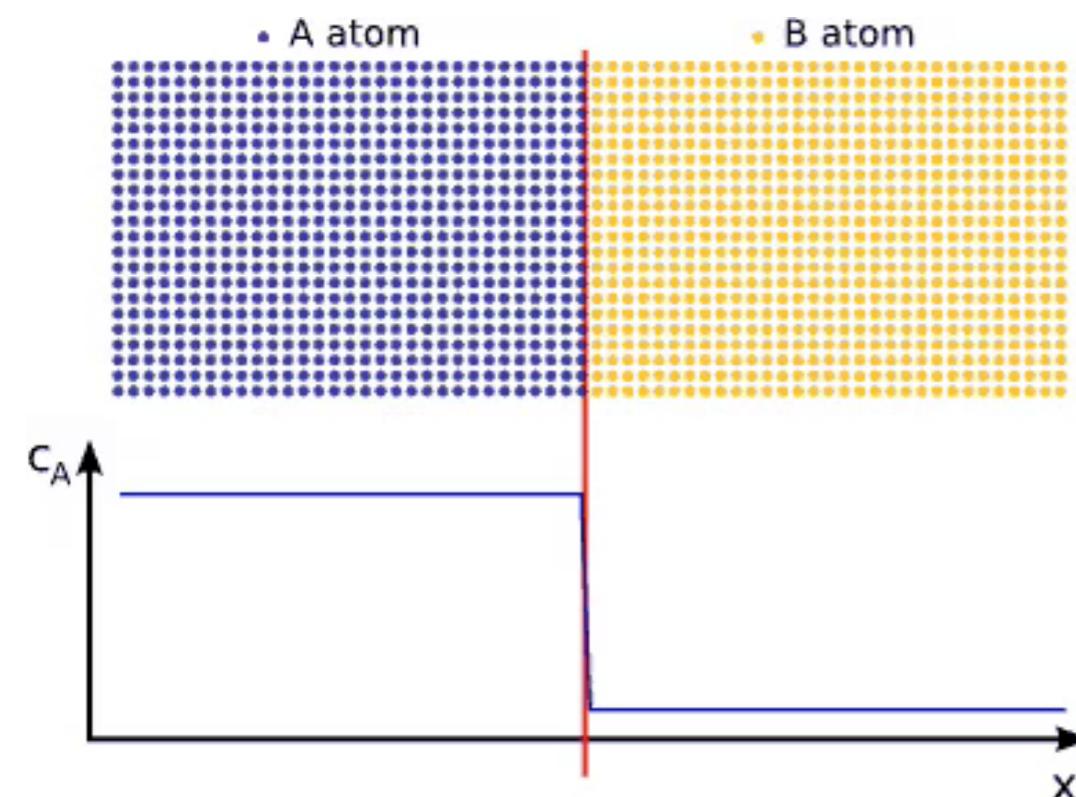
- If transport is directly proportional to the gradient, we can replace the proportional to symbol with a constant
- We can also replace the finite changes  $\Delta$  with infinitesimal changes  $\partial$
- Keeping the same colour scheme, we see

$$q \propto \frac{\Delta C}{\Delta x} \longrightarrow q = -D \frac{\partial C}{\partial x}$$

where  $D$  is a constant called the **diffusion coefficient** or **diffusivity**



# A mathematical definition



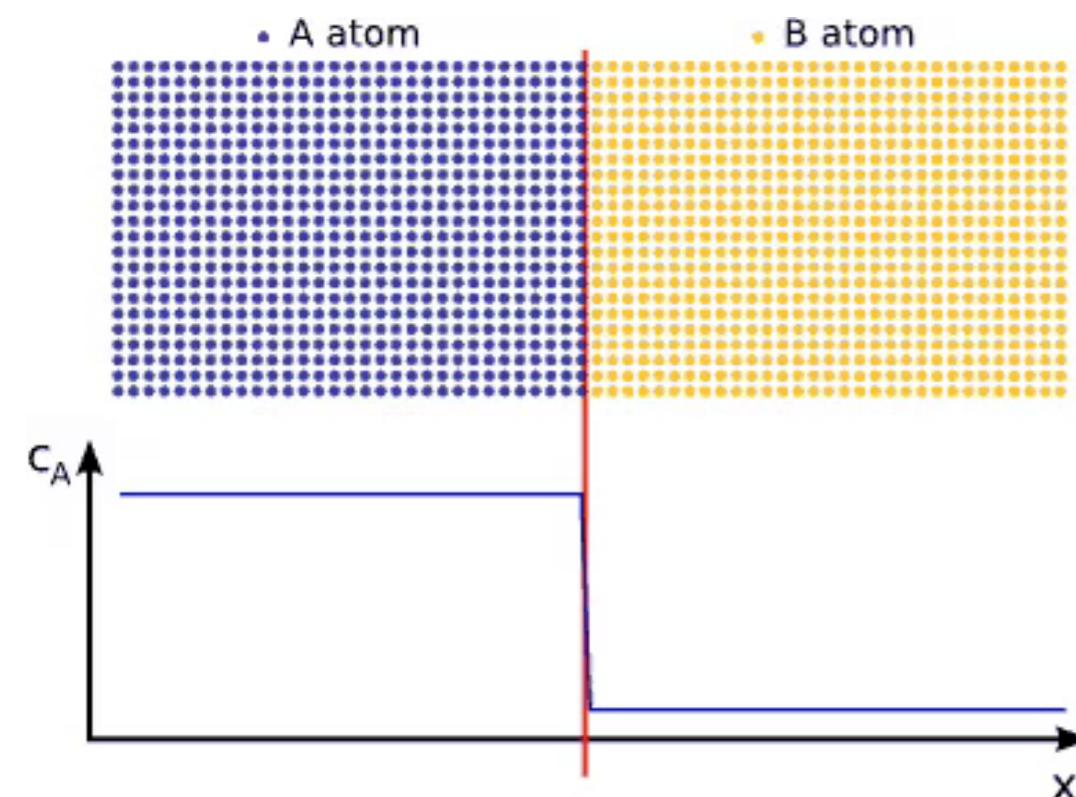
- Consider the example to the left of the concentration of some atoms A and B
- Here, we can formulate the diffusion of atoms of A across the red line with time as

$$q = -D \frac{\partial C_A}{\partial x}$$

where  $C_A$  is the **concentration** of atoms of A



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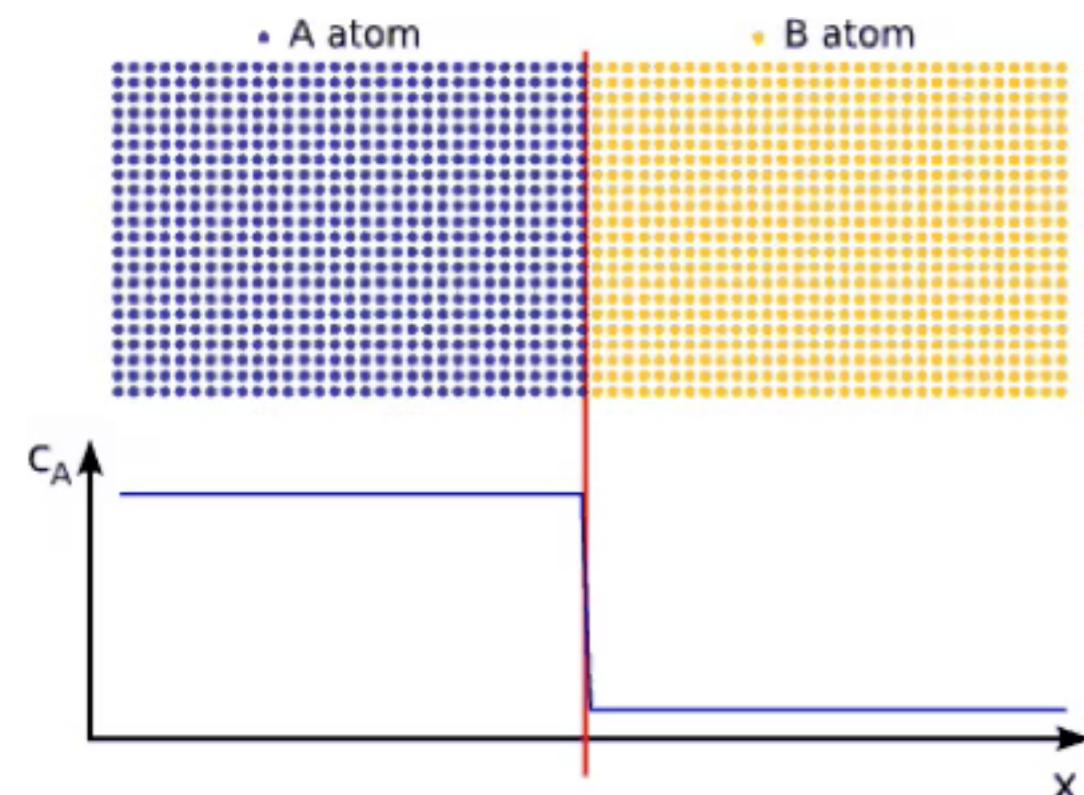
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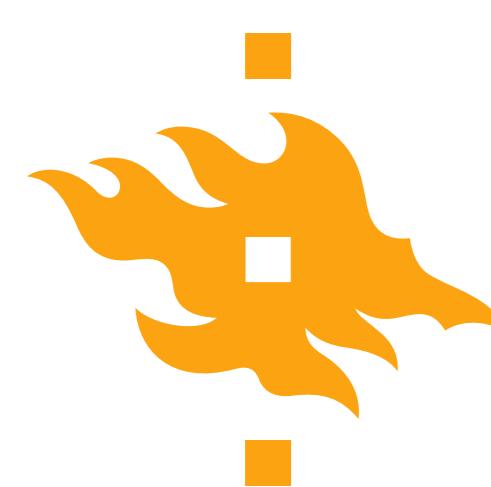


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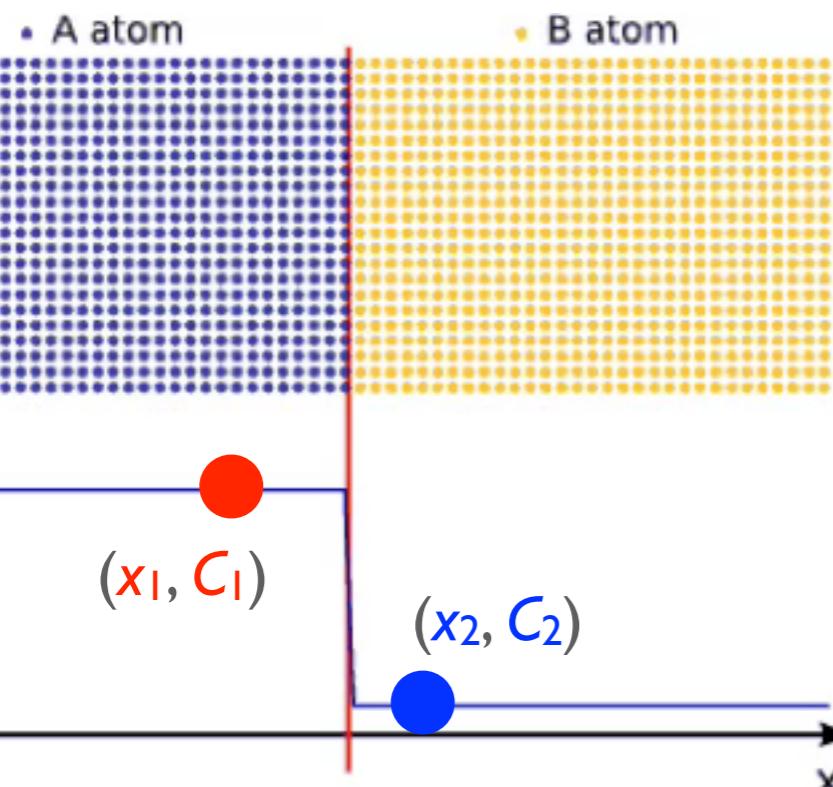
- OK, but **why is there a minus sign?**

$$q = -D \frac{\partial C_A}{\partial x}$$





# A mathematical definition



- OK, but **why is there a minus sign?**

$$q = -D \frac{\partial C_A}{\partial x}$$

- We can consider a simple case for finite changes at two points:  $(x_1, C_1)$  and  $(x_2, C_2)$
- At those points, we could say

$$q = -D \frac{\Delta C}{\Delta x}$$

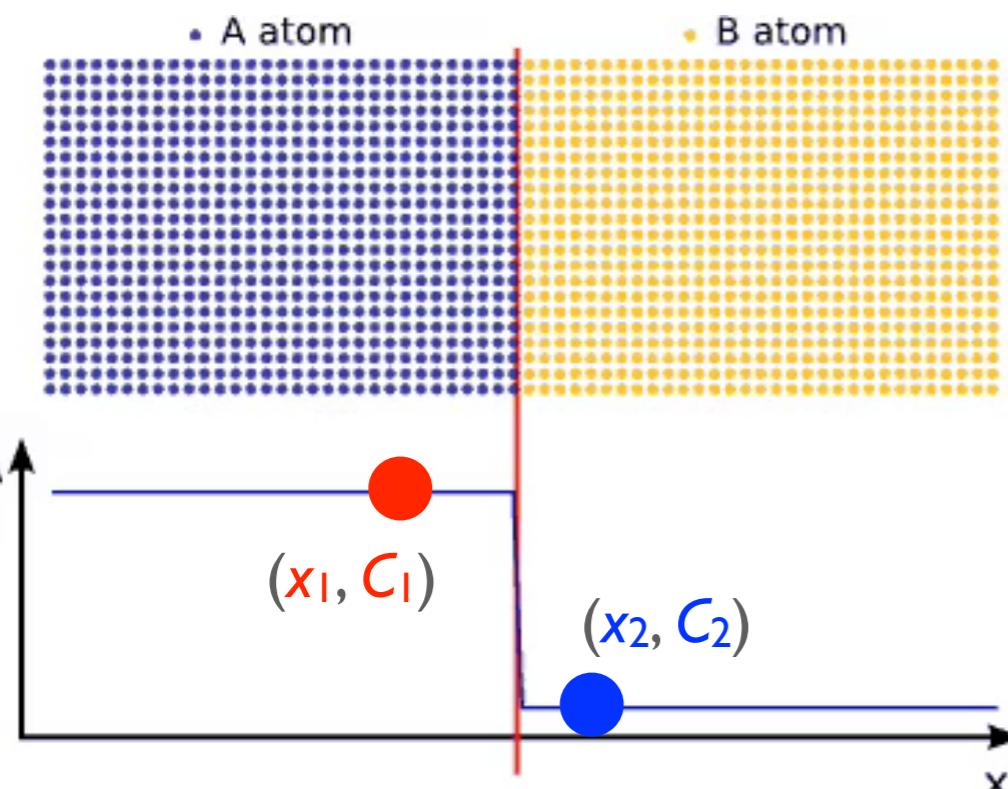
$$q = -D \frac{C_2 - C_1}{x_2 - x_1}$$

- As you can see,  $\Delta C$  will be negative while  $\Delta x$  is positive, resulting in a negative gradient



# A mathematical definition

Positive flux of A



- OK, but **why is there a minus sign?**

$$q = -D \frac{\partial C_A}{\partial x}$$

- Multiplying the negative gradient by  $-D$  yields a positive flux  $q$  along the  $x$  axis, which is what we expect

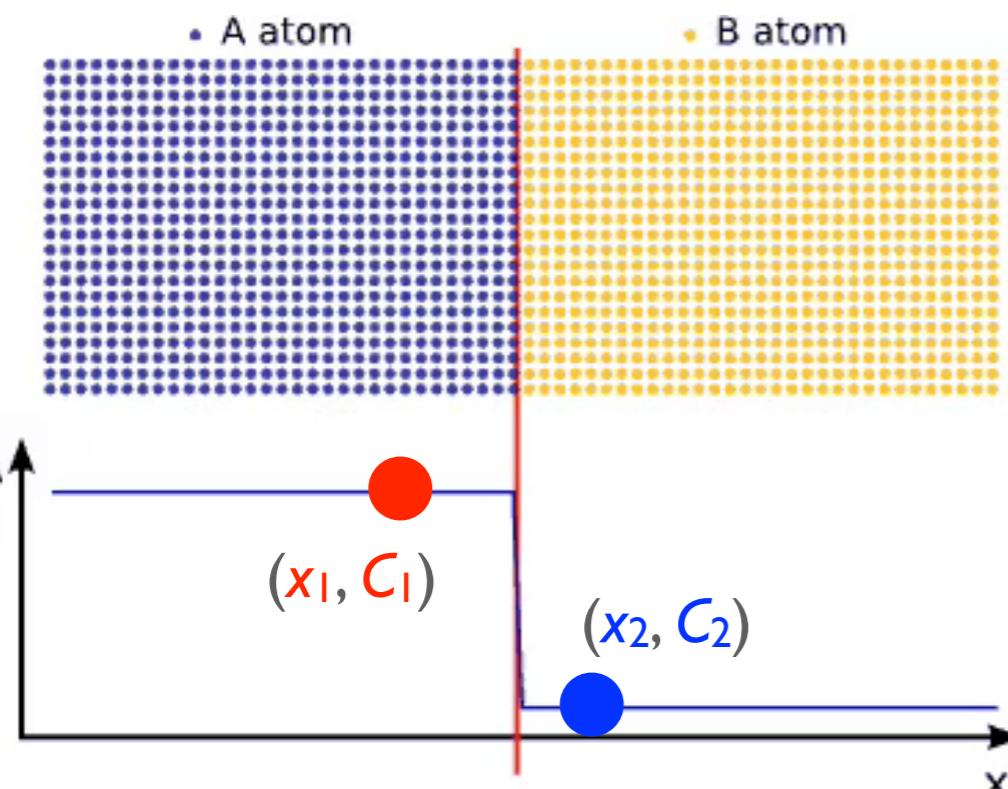
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$$\frac{\Delta C}{\Delta t} = - \frac{\Delta q}{\Delta x}$$

where **t** is time



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$$\frac{\Delta C}{\Delta t} = - \frac{\Delta q}{\Delta x} \quad \text{← Conservation of mass/energy}$$

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# A mathematical definition

$$\frac{\Delta C}{\Delta t} = - \frac{\Delta q}{\Delta x}$$

- So, how is this a conservation of mass/energy equation?



# A mathematical definition

$$\frac{\Delta C}{\Delta t} = - \frac{\Delta q}{\Delta x}$$

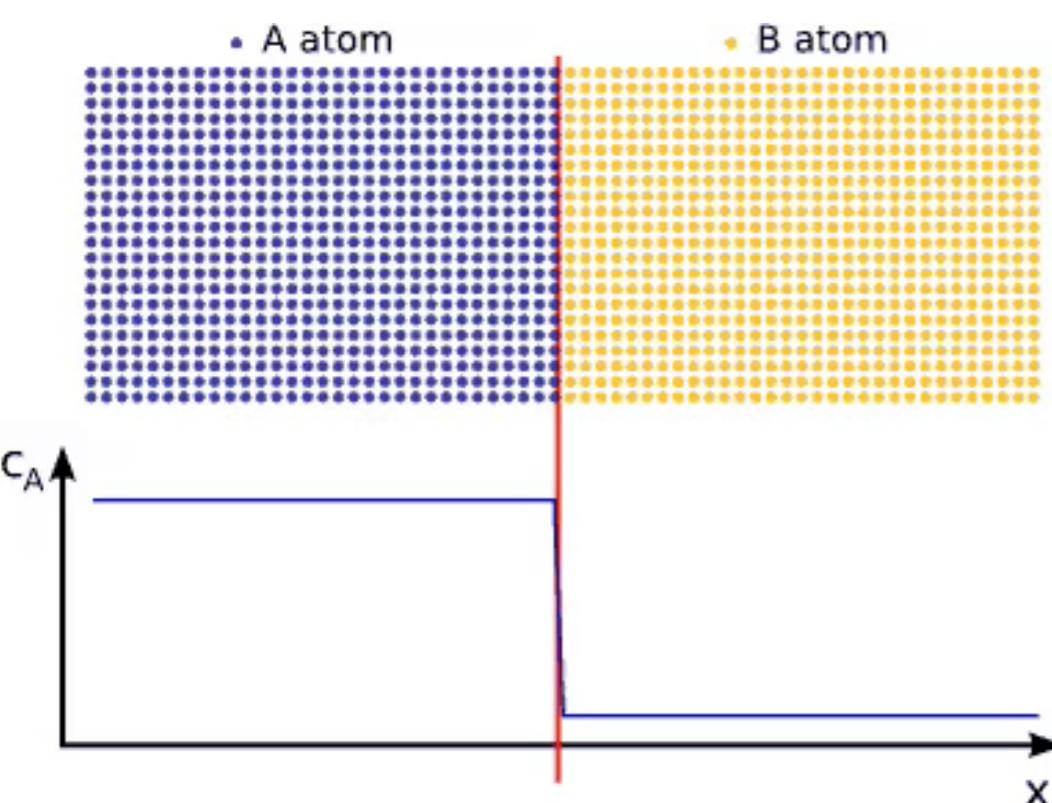
- So, how is this a conservation of mass/energy equation?

$$\frac{\Delta C}{\Delta t} = - \frac{q_2 - q_1}{x_2 - x_1}$$

- Consider the fluxes  $q_1$  and  $q_2$  at two points,  $x_1$  and  $x_2$
- What happens when the flux of mass  $q_2$  at  $x_2$  is larger than the flux  $q_1$  at  $x_1$ ?



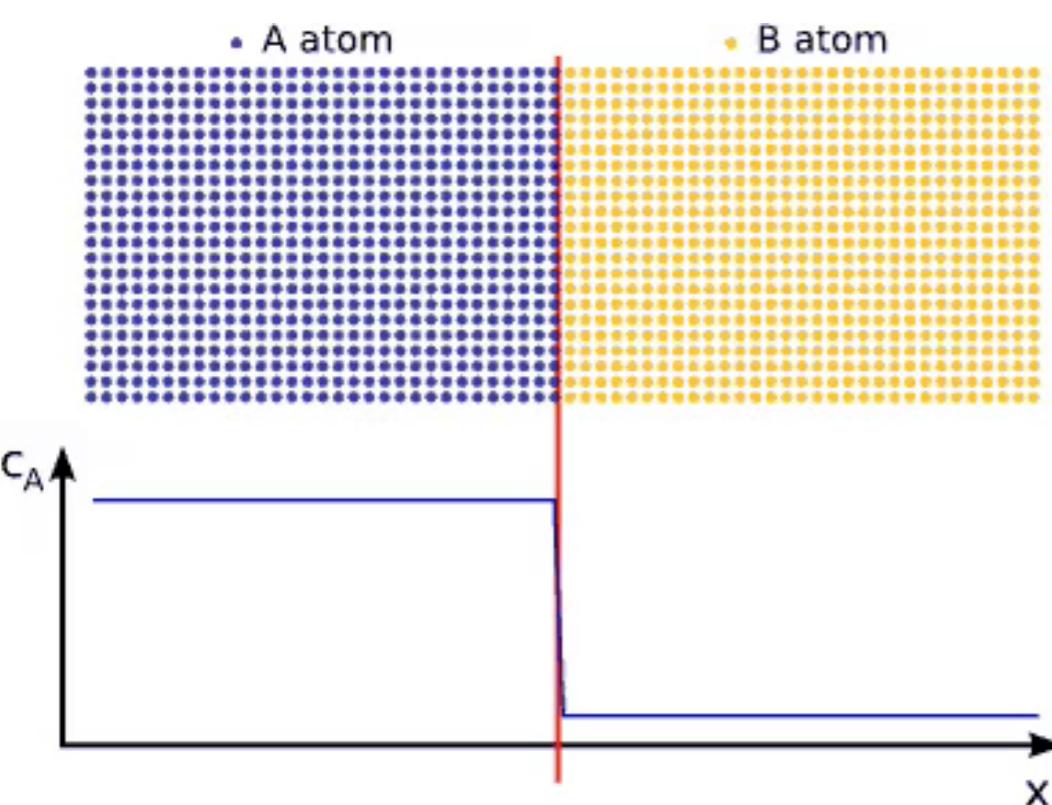
# A mathematical definition



- If we again replace the finite changes  $\Delta$  with infinitesimal changes  $\partial$ , we can describe our example on the left
- Essentially, all this says is that the concentration of A will change based on the flux across a reference face at position  $x$  minus the flux across a reference face at position  $x + dx$



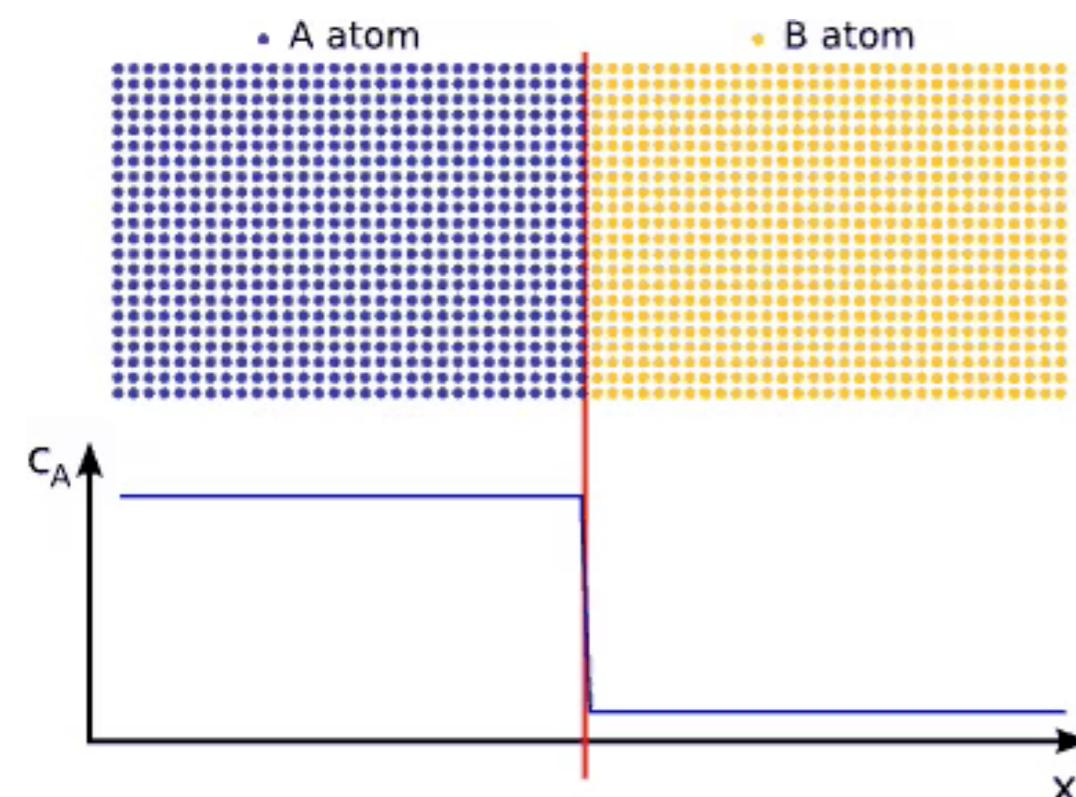
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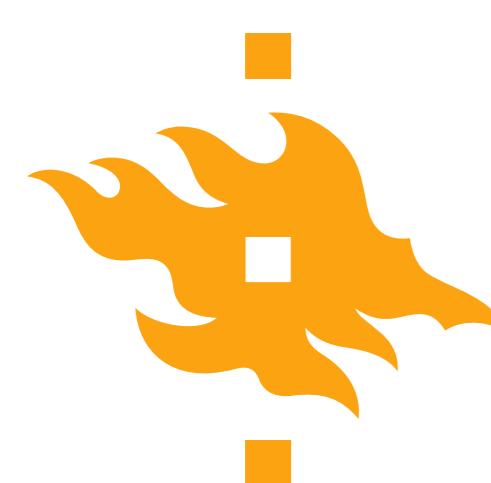
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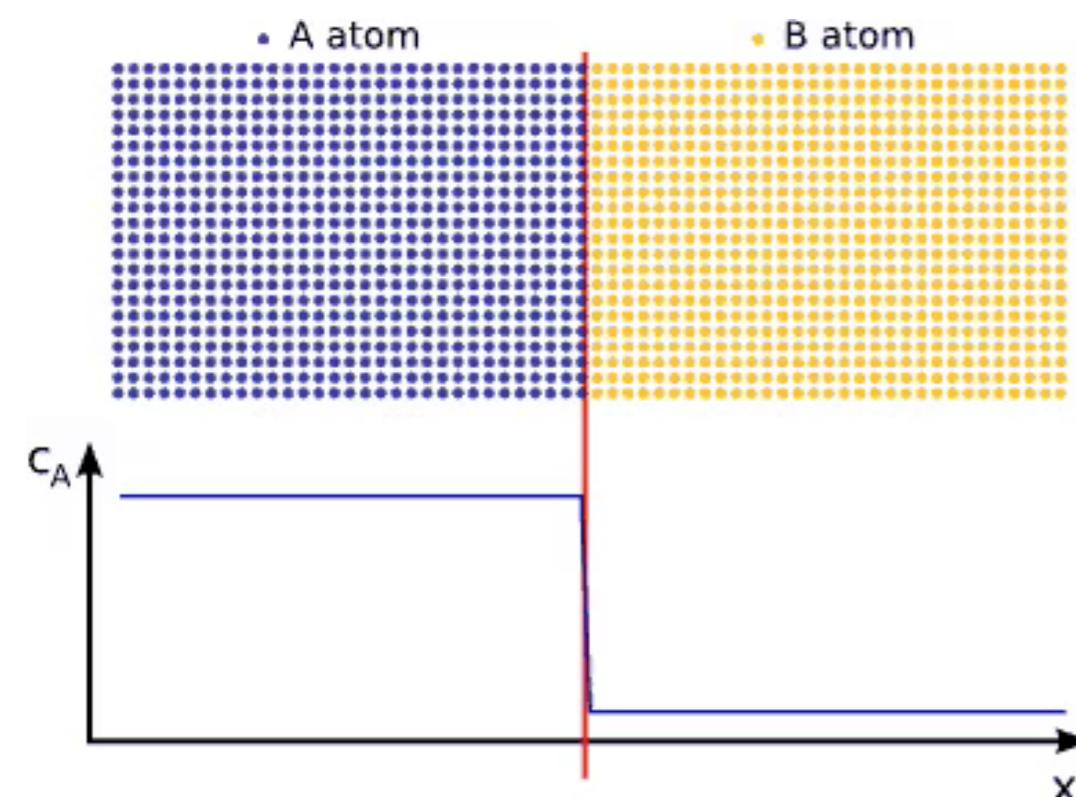
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- On the GitHub site for this week's lesson you can find notes on how to mathematically combine the two equations we've just seen into the diffusion equation, and how the diffusion equation can be solved
- Notes on solving the diffusion equation



# A mathematical definition

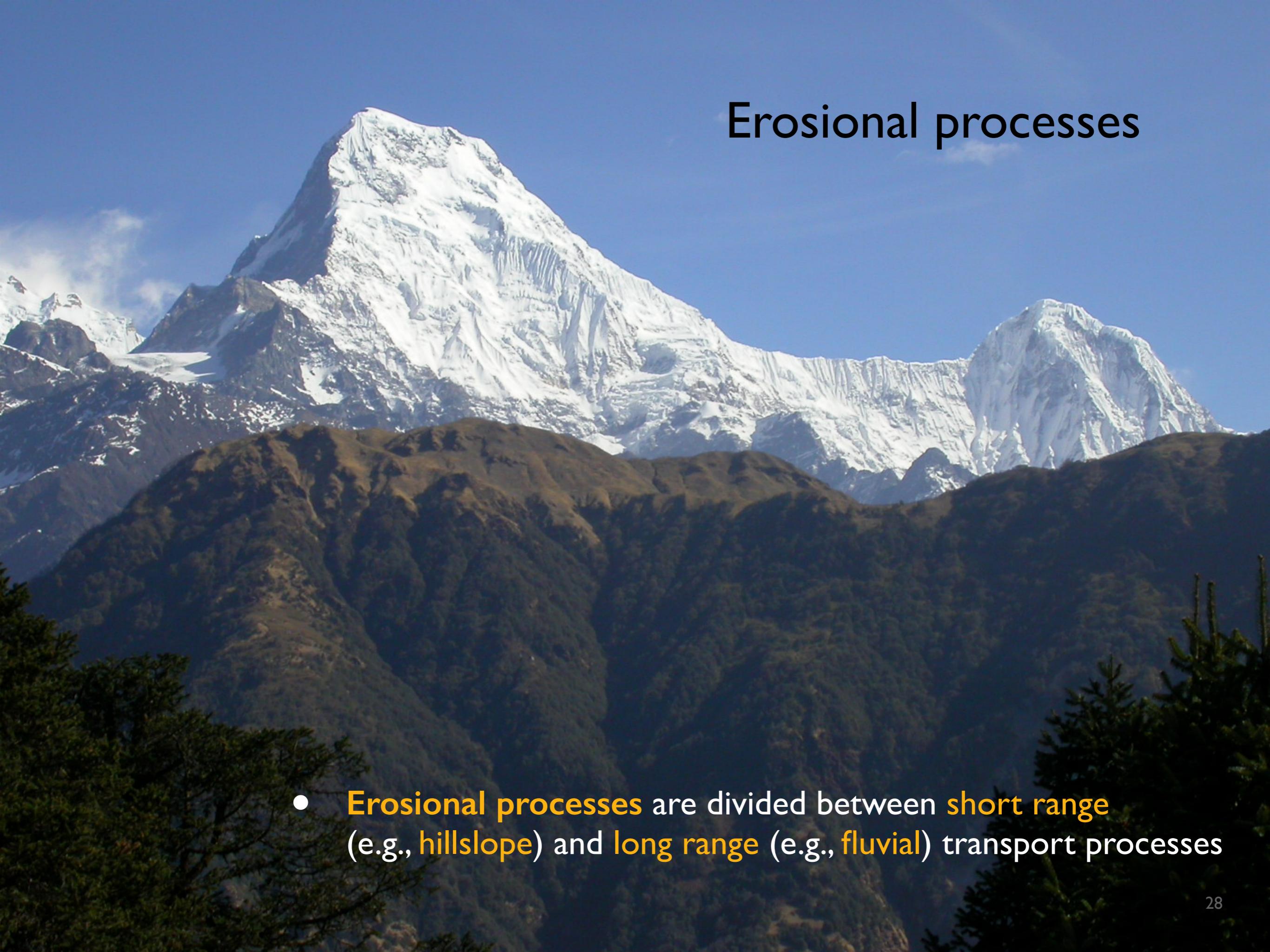


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# General concepts of diffusion

- So our definitions of diffusion to this point are OK for true diffusion processes, but there are also numerous geological processes that are not themselves diffusion processes, but result in diffusion-like behaviour
- **Hillslope diffusion** is a name given to the overall behaviour of various surface processes that transfer mass on hillslopes in a diffusion-like manner

A wide-angle photograph of a mountain range. In the foreground, dark green hills are visible. Behind them, majestic mountains rise, their peaks and ridges heavily covered in white snow. The sky above is a clear, vibrant blue with a few wispy white clouds.

# Erosional processes

- **Erosional processes** are divided between **short range** (e.g., **hillslope**) and **long range** (e.g., **fluvial**) transport processes



# Hillslope processes

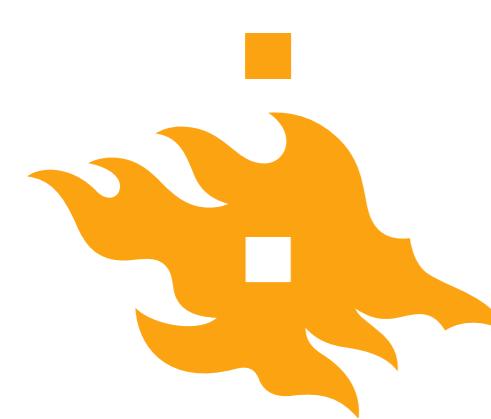
- **Hillslope processes** comprise the different types of mass movements that occur on hillslopes
- **Slides** refer to cohesive blocks of material moving on a well-defined surface of sliding
- **Flows** move entirely by differential shearing within the transported mass with no clear plane at the base of the flow
- **Heave** results from disrupting forces acting perpendicular to the ground surface by expansion of the material



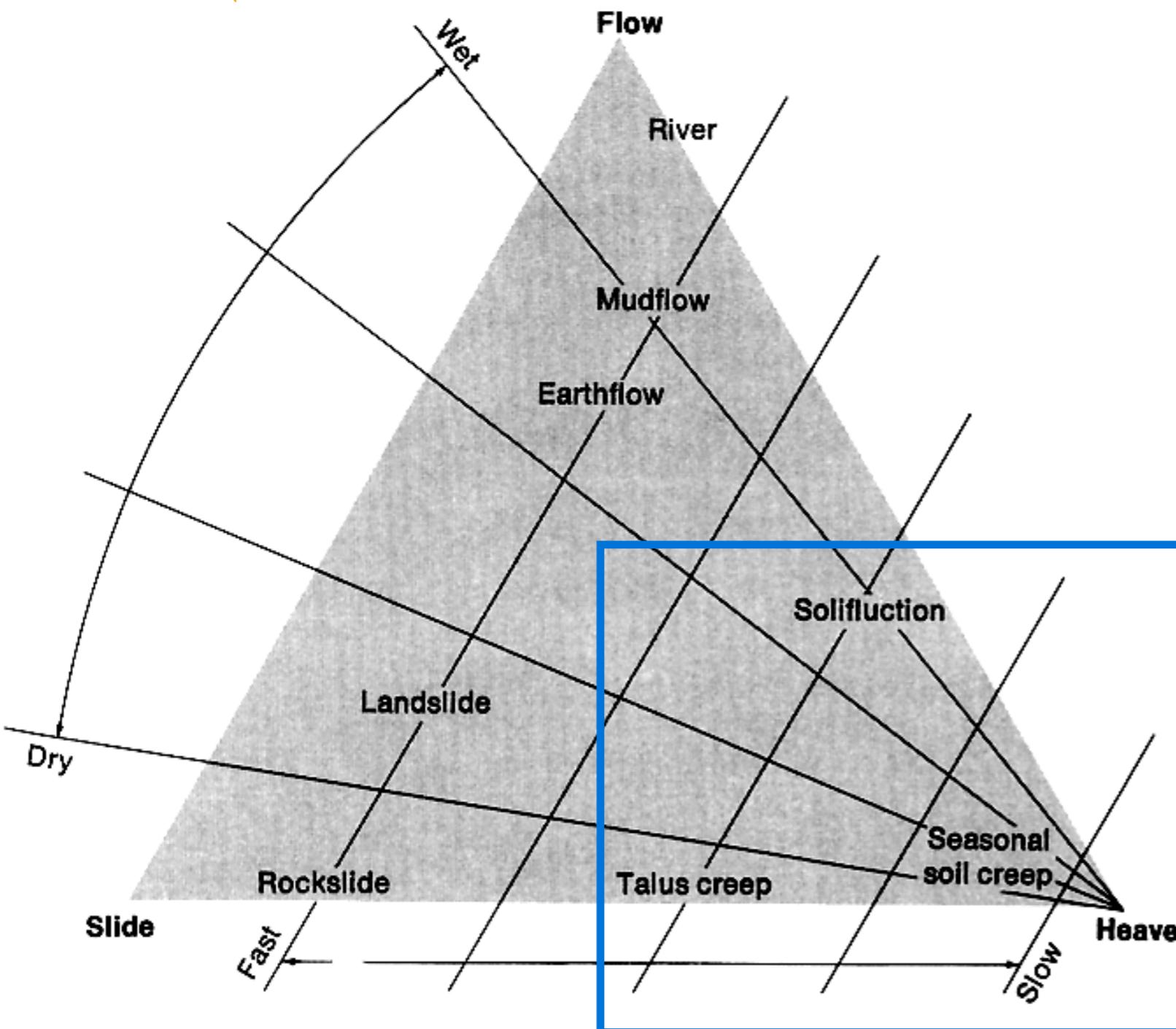
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## Our focus



# Mass movement processes



- Creep is almost too slow to monitor



# Heave and creep

- **Creep:** The extremely slow movement of material in response to gravity
- **Heave:** The vertical movement of unconsolidated particles in response to expansion and contraction, resulting in a net downslope movement on even the slightest slopes
- **Seasonal creep or soil creep** is periodically aided by heaving



# Heave and creep

Nearly vertical  
Romney shale  
displaced by  
seasonal creep

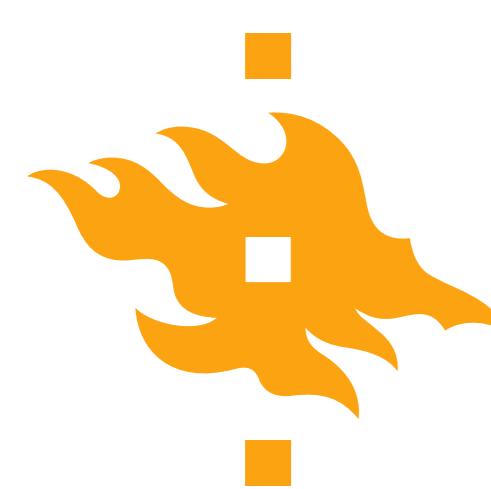




# Heave and creep



Fig. 4.29, Ritter et al., 2002



# How does heaving work?

- Near-surface material moves perpendicular to the surface during **expansion (E)**
- Expansion can result from swelling or freezing
- In theory, particles settle vertically downward during **contraction (C)**
- In reality, particle settling is not vertical, but follows a path closer to **D**

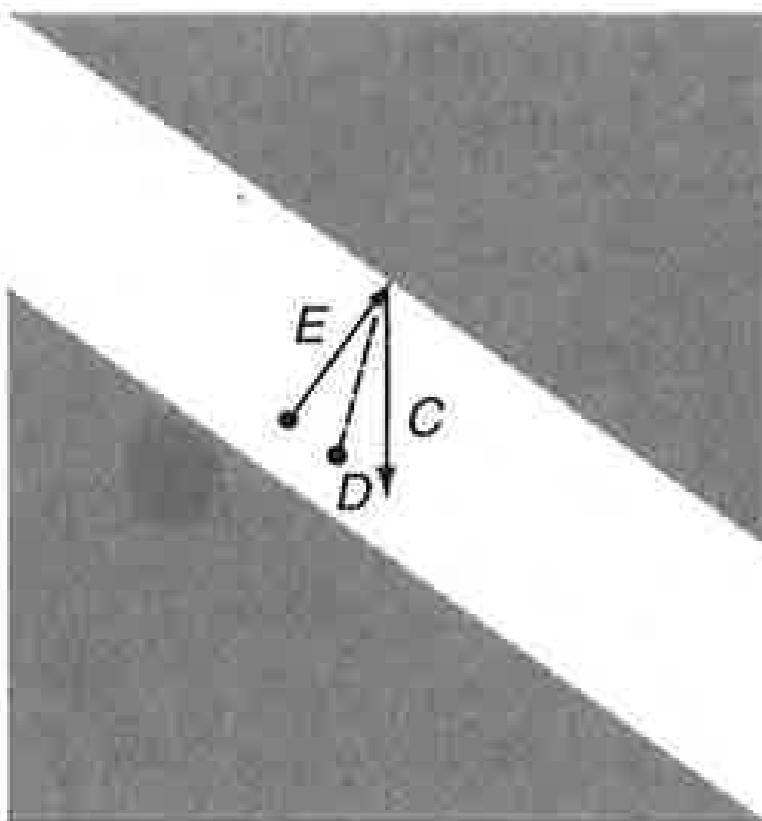


Fig. 4.30, Ritter et al., 2002



# How does heaving work?

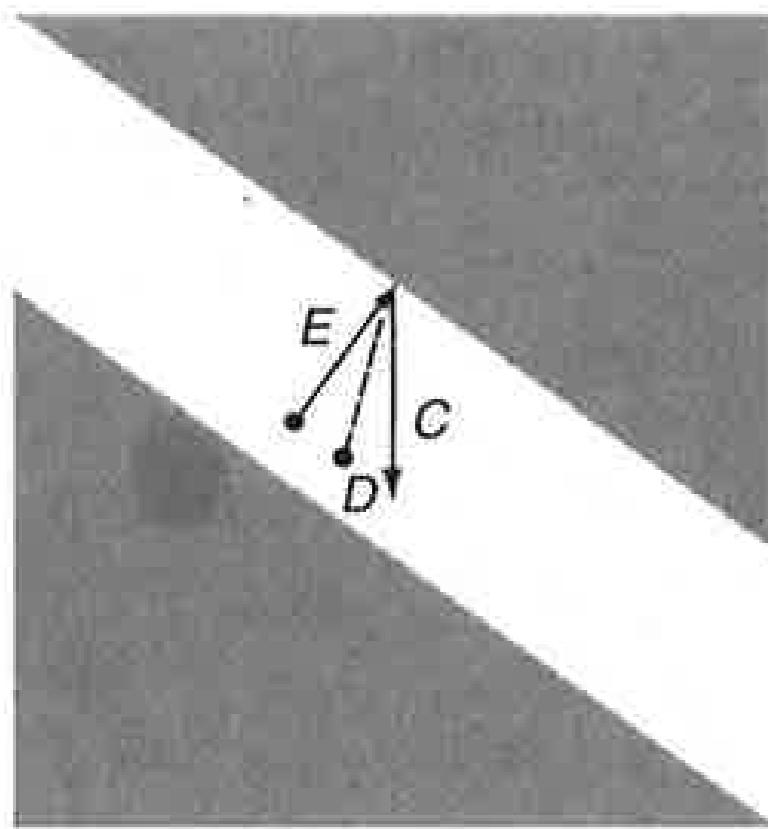


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- **Based on this concept, what do you think will influence the rates of creep?**



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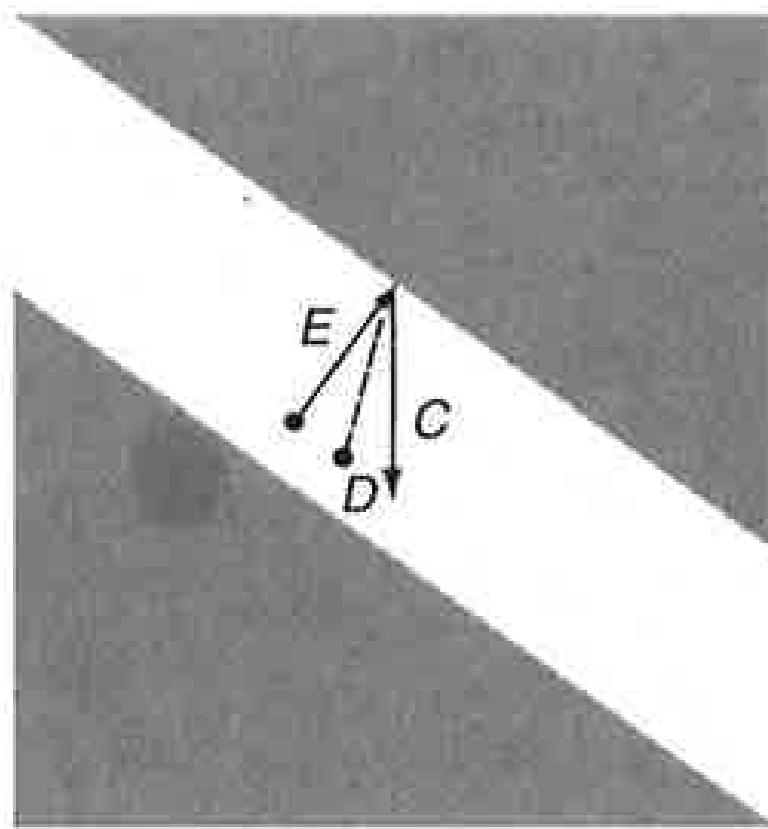


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- In reality, particle settling is not vertical, but follows a path closer to **D**
- Based on this concept, what do you think will influence the rates of creep?  
**Slope angle, soil/regolith moisture, particle size/composition**



# Common features of hillslope diffusion

- The rate of transport is strongly dependent on the hillslope angle
  - Steeper slopes result in faster downslope transport
  - In other words, the flux of mass is proportional to the topographic gradient
- This suggests these erosional processes can be modelled as **diffusive**



# Recap

- **What are the two components of diffusion processes?**
- **How does soil creep result in diffusion of soil or regolith?**
- **What are the main factors controlling the rate of hillslope diffusion?**



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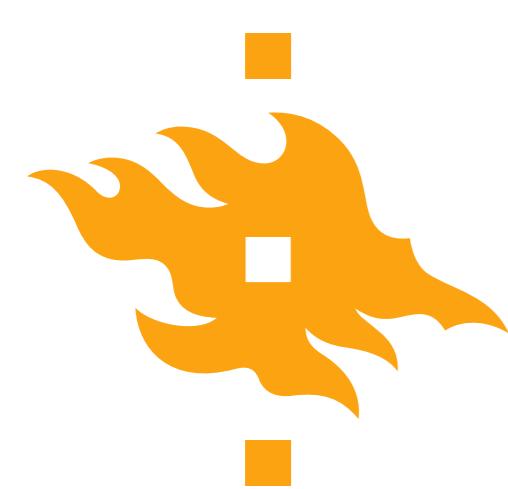
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- How does soil creep result in diffusion of soil or regolith?
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# Additional examples of hillslope diffusion

- **Solifluction**
- **Rain splash**
- **Tree throw**
- **Gopher holes**



# Frost creep and solifluction

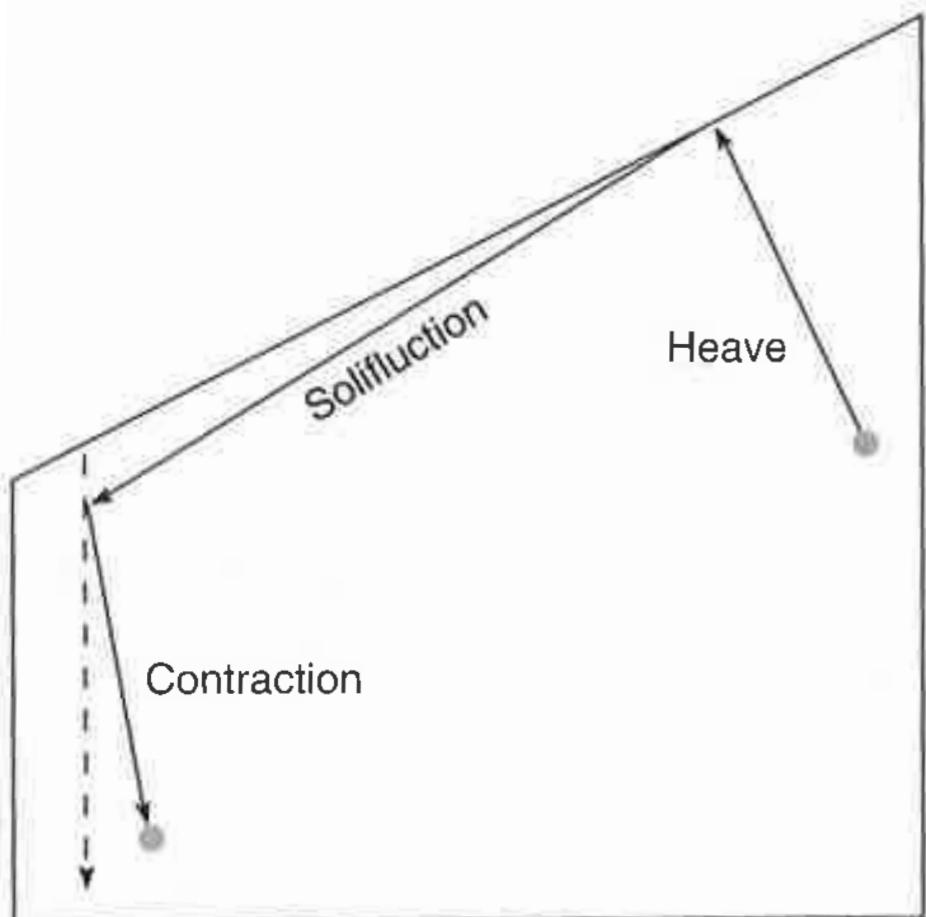
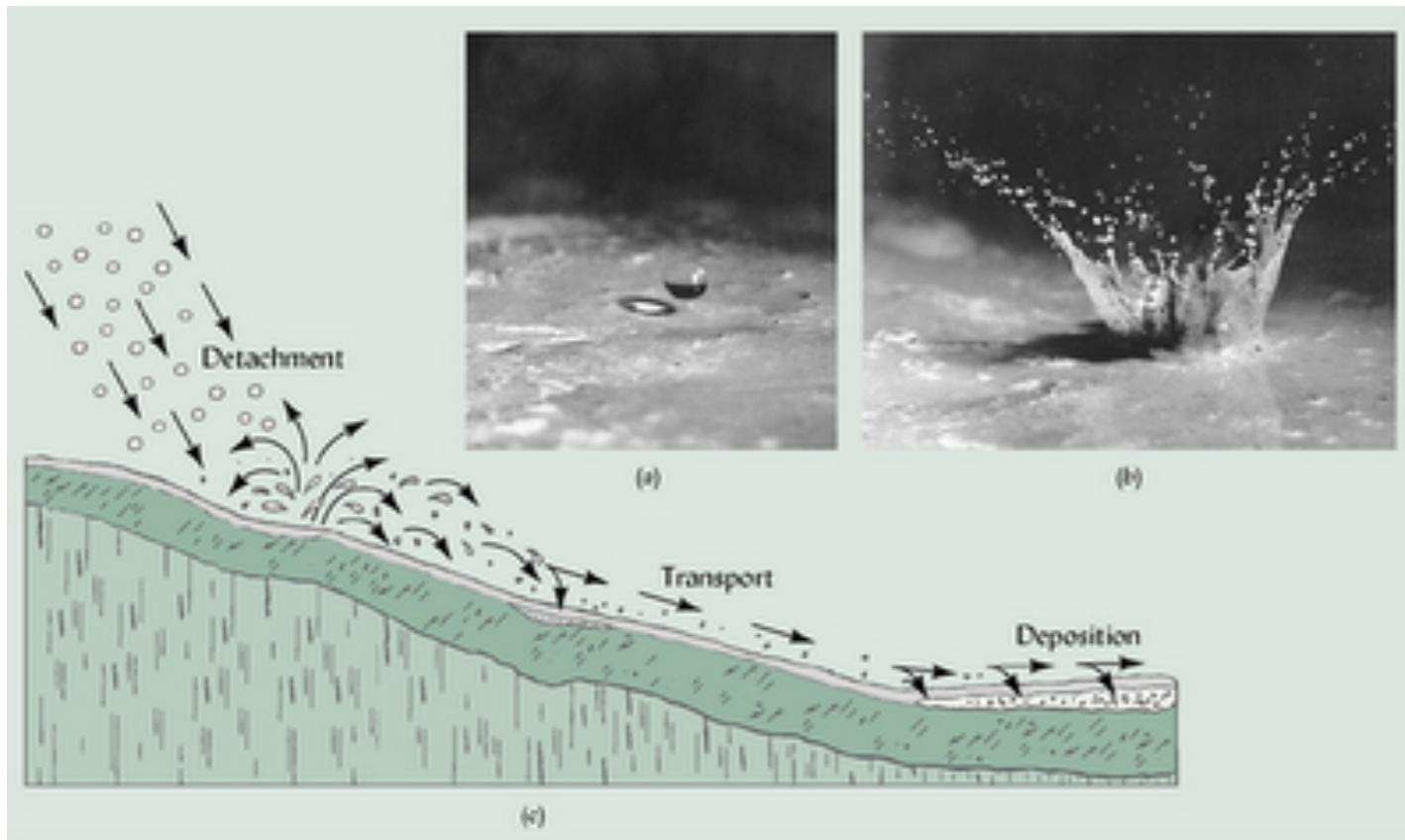


Fig. 11.14b, Ritter et al., 2002

- **Solifluction** occurs in saturated soils, often in periglacial regions
  - In periglacial settings, **frost heave** leads to expansion of the near-surface material
  - During warm periods, saturated material at the surface flows downslope above the impermeable permafrost beneath

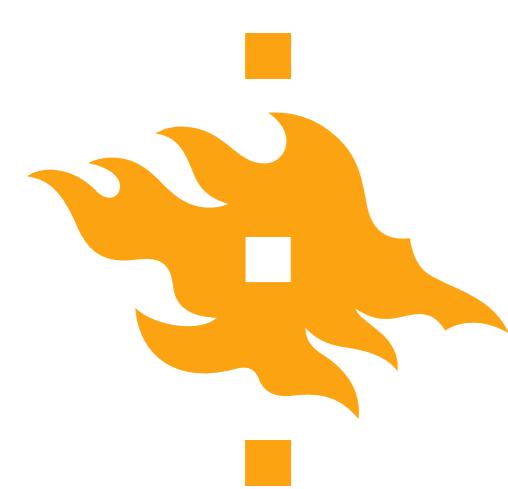


# Rain splash

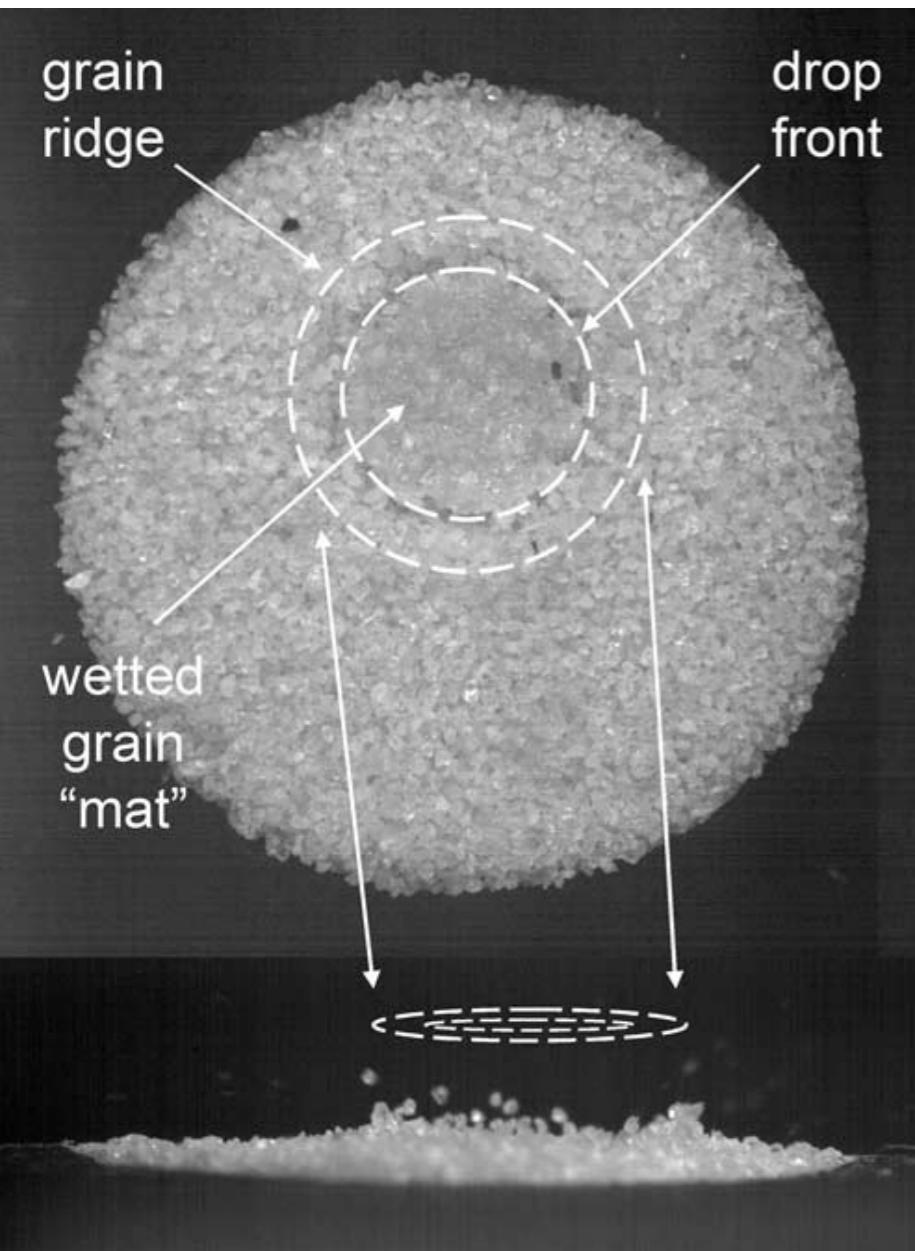


<http://geofaculty.uwyo.edu/neil/>

- **Rain splash transport** refers to the downslope drift of grains on a sloped surface as a result of displacement by raindrop impacts
- Although this process can produce significant downslope mass transport, it is generally less significant than heave

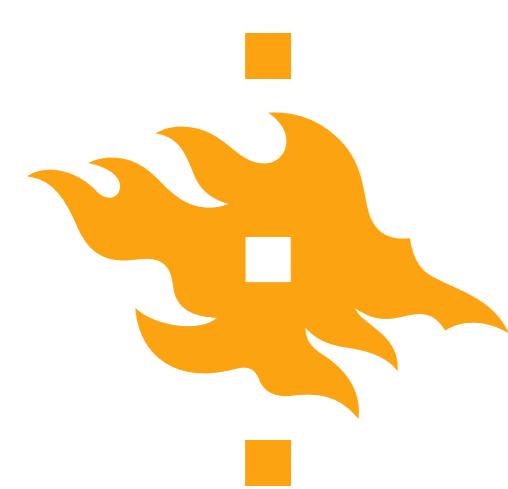


# Studying rain splash

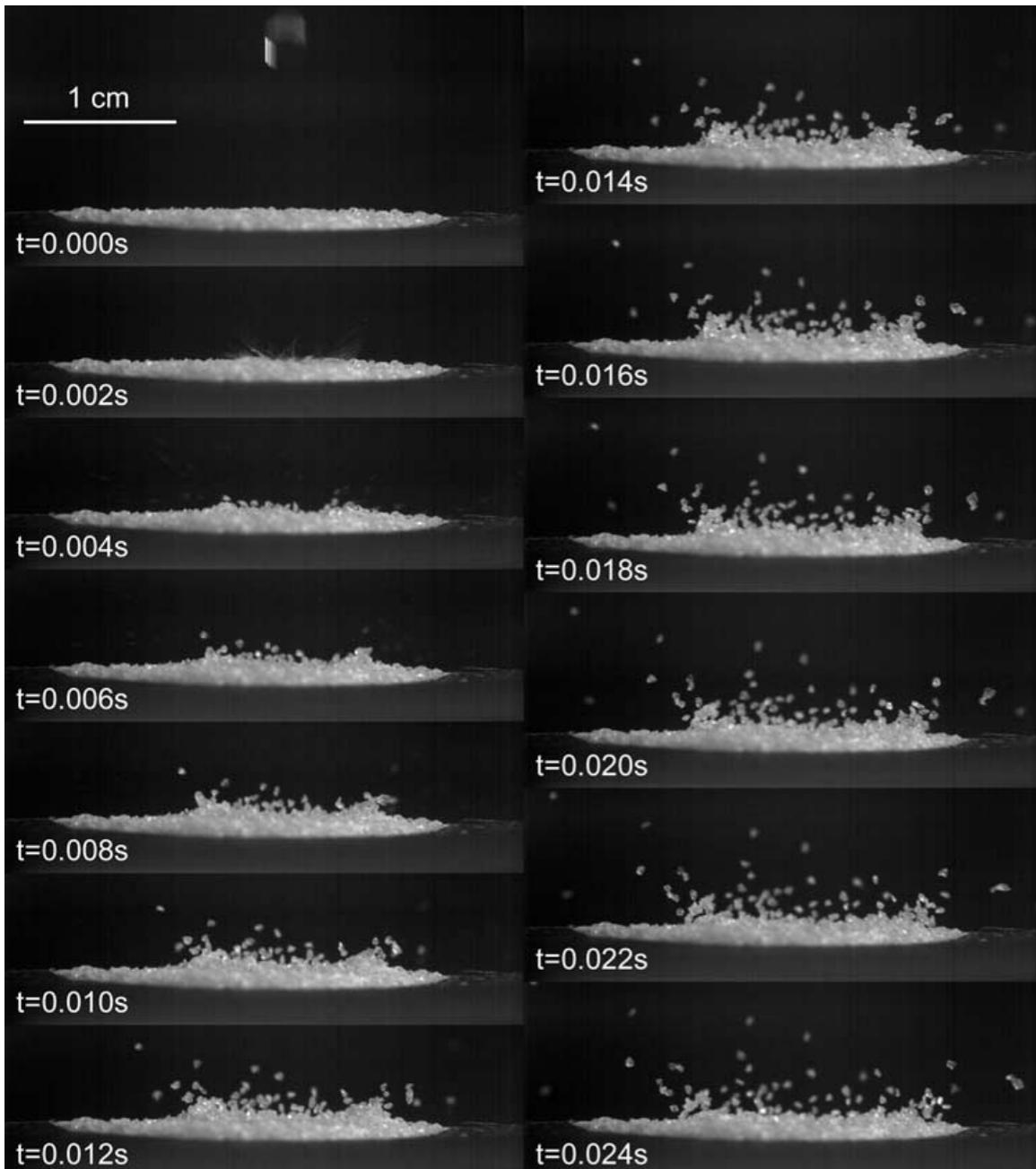


- Experimental setup:
  - “Rain drops” released from a syringe ~5 m above a dry sand target
  - Drops travel down a pipe to avoid interference by wind
  - Various drop sizes (2-4 mm), sand grain sizes (0.18 - 0.84 mm) and hillslope angles
  - High-speed camera used to capture raindrop impact and sand grain motion

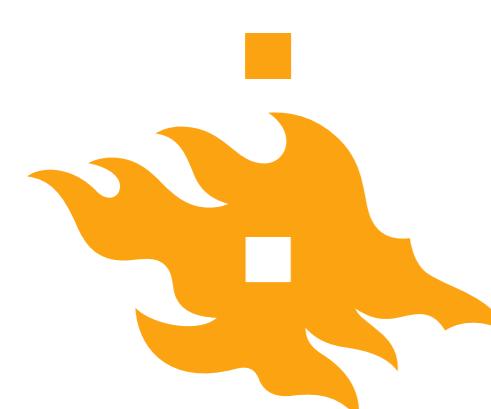
Furbish et al., 2007



# Studying rain splash

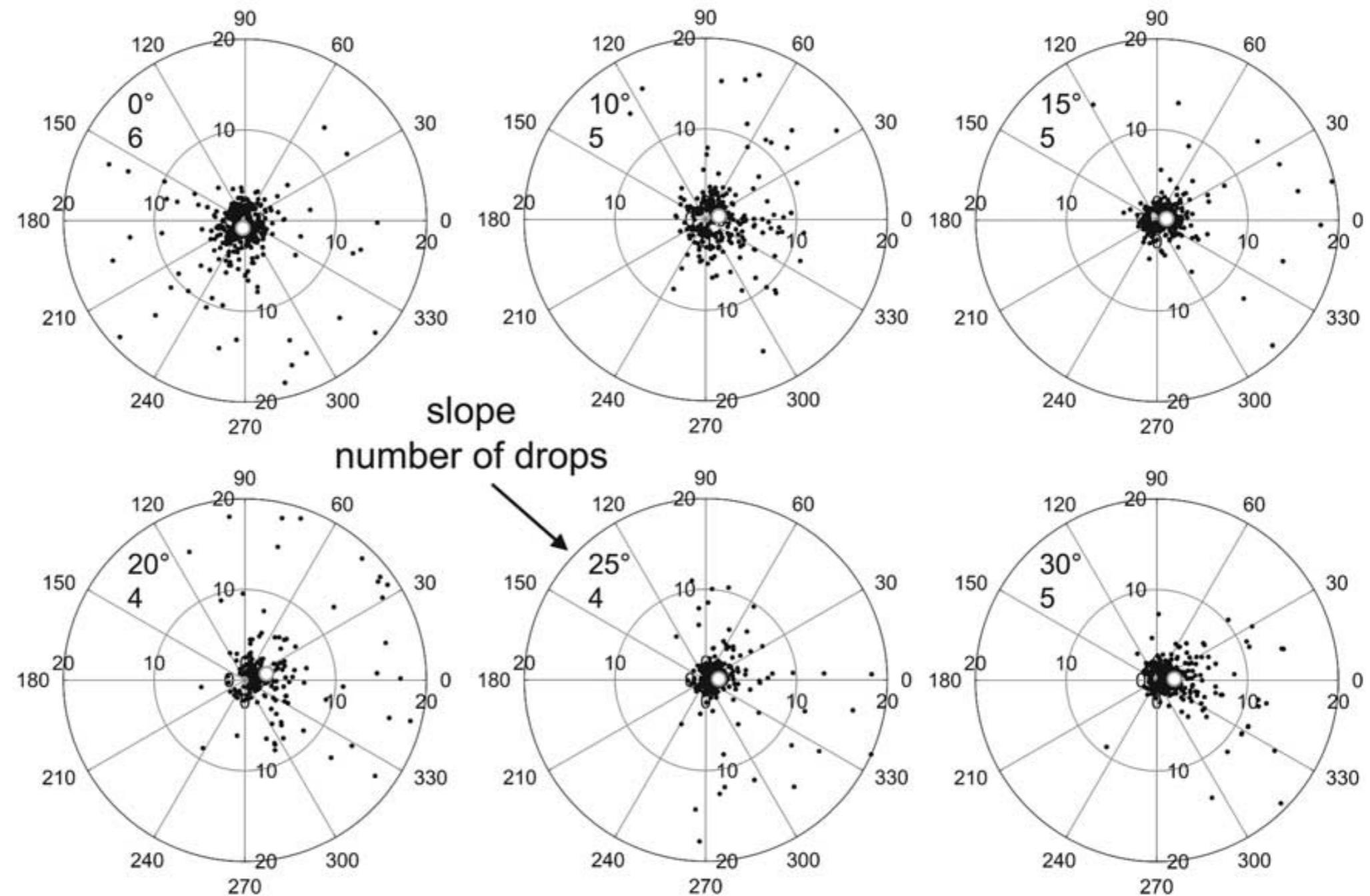


- Dry sand grains are displaced following raindrop impact
- Miniature bolide impacts (?)

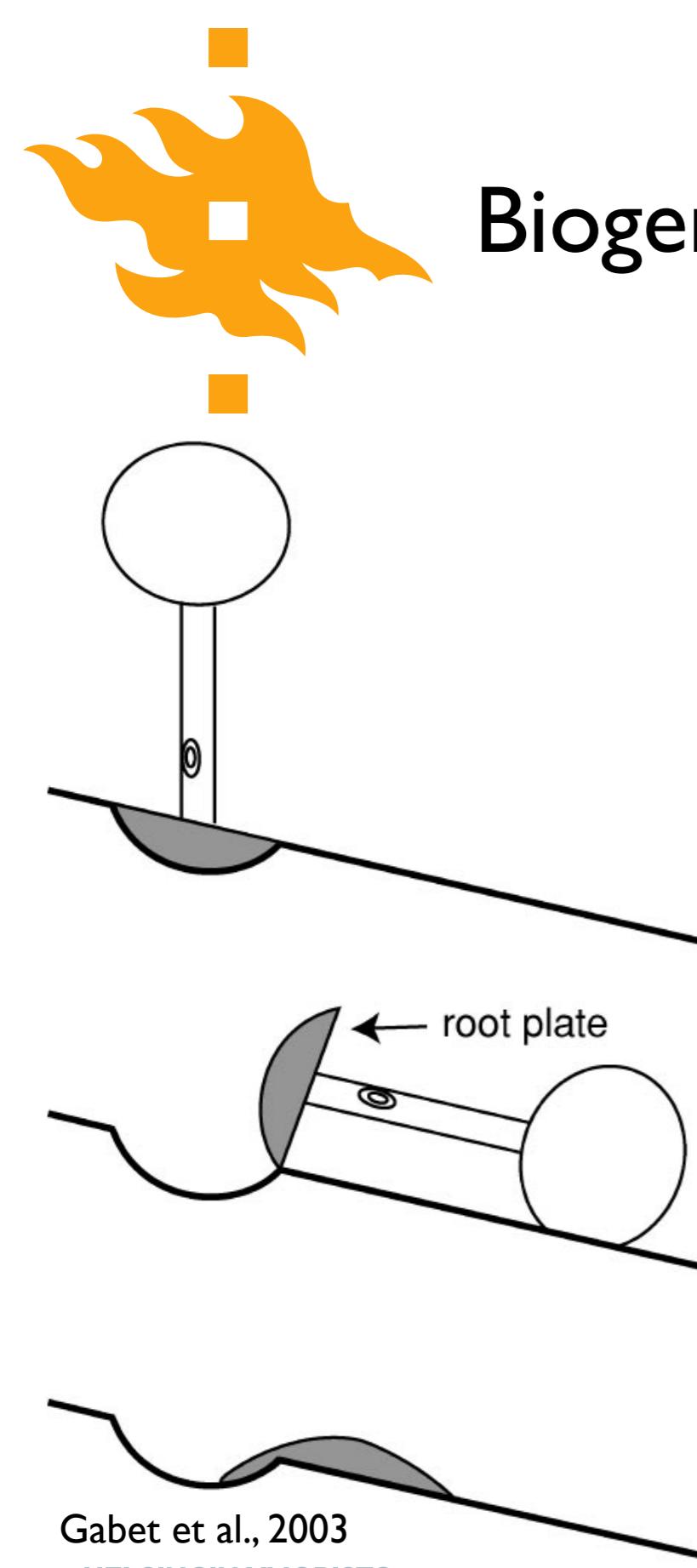


# Studying rain splash

More particles drift downslope as slope angle increase



Furbish et al., 2007



# Biogenic transport: Tree throw

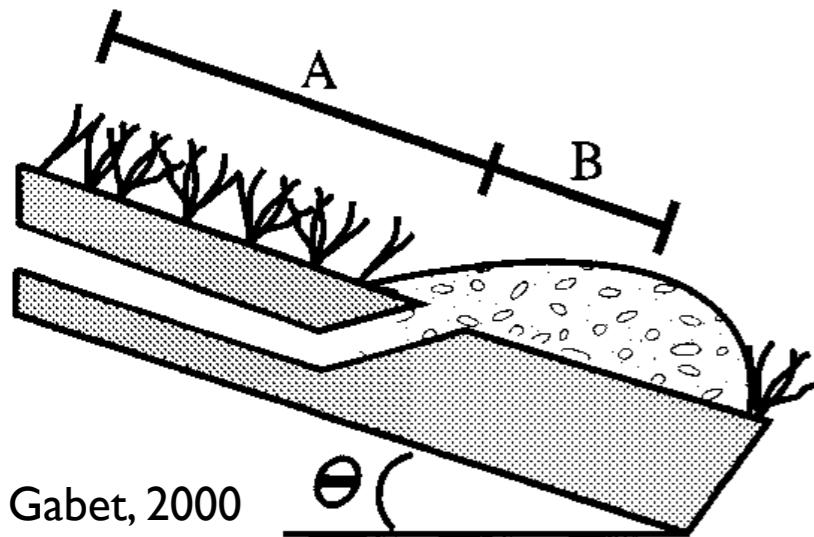
- Falling trees also displace sediment/soil and can produce downslope motion
- When trees fall, its root mass rotates soil and rock upward
- Gradually, this soil/rock falls down beneath the root mass as it decays

Gabet et al., 2003

HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO  
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UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI



# Biogenic transport: Gopher holes



Gabet, 2000

- Gophers dig underground tunnels parallel to the surface and displace sediment both under and above ground
- On slopes, this sediment is displaced downslope, resulting in mass movement
- Locally, this process can be the dominant mechanism for sediment transport



# References

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