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► To cite this version:

Christian Beauger, Laetitia Testut, Guillaume Ozouf, Sandrine Berthon-Fabry, Arnaud Rigacci. TiO₂:Nb aerogels, how sol-gel parameters can direct the synthesis route towards an optimization of catalyst support for PEMFC. 3rd International Seminar on Aerogels 2016: “Properties-Manufacture-Applications”, Sep 2016, Sophia Antipolis, France. 2016. hal-01427037

HAL Id: hal-01427037

<https://minesparis-psl.hal.science/hal-01427037>

Submitted on 5 Jan 2017

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TiO₂:Nb aerogels: how sol-gel parameters can direct the synthesis route towards an optimization of catalyst support for PEMFC

C. Beauger*, L. Testut, G. Ozouf , S. Berthon-Fabry and A. Rigacci

MINES ParisTech, PSL Research University PERSEE - Centre procédés, énergies renouvelables et systèmes énergétiques, CS 10207 rue Claude Daunesse
06904 Sophia-Antipolis Cedex, France

* corresponding author

Christian.beauger@mines-paristech.fr

Many energetic applications could benefit from the peculiar morphology of aerogel materials. Their large specific surface area combined with a tunable pore size distribution make them particularly appropriate for most catalytic processes. TiO₂ aerogels have thus advantageously been developed in our group respectively for hydrogen production by water splitting [1] and hydrogen conversion in fuel cells [2].

Proton exchange membrane fuel cells (PEMFC) still suffer from low durability resulting from carbon corrosion at the cathode side. Doped TiO₂ and SnO₂ have recently been proposed as alternatives to carbon blacks catalyst support. Stable in PEMFC operating conditions and electronic conductive after doping, their morphology have to be optimized to allow good platinum dispersion and utilization ratio as well as proper fluid management within the electrode (air admission and water elimination). Aerogels have proven here to be promising candidates [3, 4].

In order to optimize the morphology of Nb-doped TiO₂ aerogels developed in a previous study [1], sol-gel parameters were varied and their influence on both the specific surface area and the pore size distribution was analysed. Playing on the respective amounts of catalyst, water and solvent allowed modifying significantly the aerogel morphology (Figure 1).

Most significant results obtained in our group will be presented.

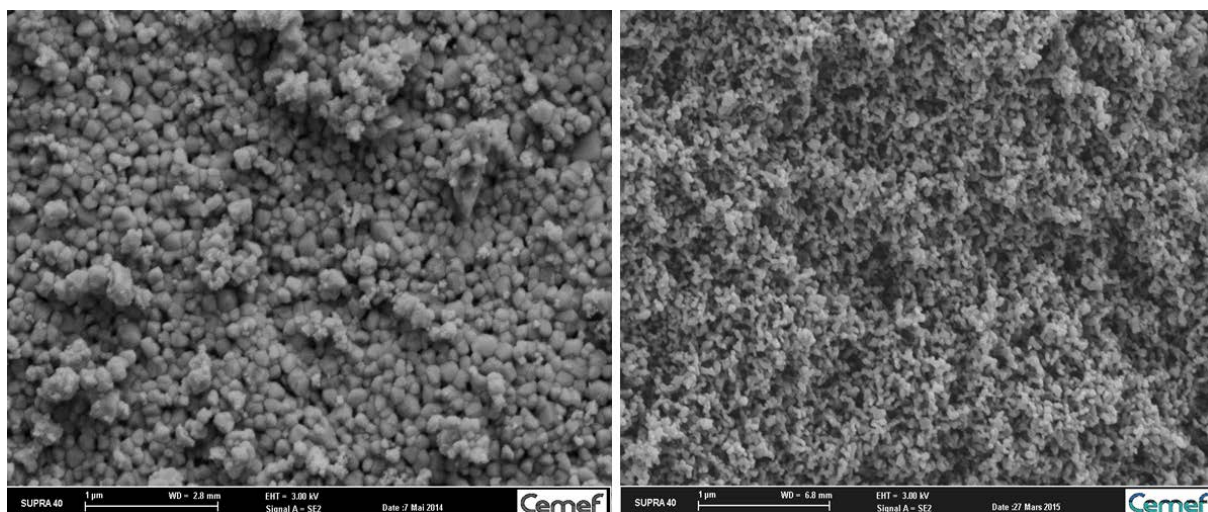


Fig.1 : SEM images of TiO₂ aerogels for different sol-gel parameters

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