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# **Ceria-coated Replicated Aluminium Sponges as Catalysts for the CO-Water Gas Shift Process**

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A study on the use of chemical conversion coating as a preparative technique for foam-based structured catalysts, in the water gas shift reaction, is presented. The results showed a significant correlation between the topological properties of the structure and the preparation technique, highlighting how chemical conversion coating is a suitable technique for highly porous structures. In the first part of the paper, the performance of two structured catalysts obtained by coating commercial aluminium foams, with different porosity, was compared. The activity tests suggested that diffusion phenomena occurred in the case of the uncompressed foams. These results were confirmed by evaluating the performance of a catalyst obtained by coating a compressed 5 PPI pore size commercial aluminium foam, which showed much higher activity, at the same contact time, with respect to the catalyst obtained with the corresponding non-compressed foam. Finally, the performance of a catalyst obtained

by coating an aluminium sponge, synthesized by the replication technique, was compared to that of a catalyst obtained by coating a compressed 40 PPI pore size aluminium foam. The higher activity of the sponge-based catalysts confirmed the dependence of the activity on the topological properties of the structure: X-ray computed tomography images highlighted the narrow distribution of the pore sizes and the presence of “bottleneck type” connections in the sponge structure, which are beneficial for the activity of the catalyst.

Keywords: Water gas shift; Chemical conversion coating; Aluminum foams: Structured catalyst

## **1. Introduction**

Hydrogen is the first and lightest element in the periodic table and, therefore, the most abundant in the universe; its existence, as well as its flammability, have been known since the second half of the eighteenth century. The high abundance of hydrogen, coupled with its high energy density, make it the first candidate to become the energy vector of the next energy transition [1]. Hydrogen can be produced from both fossil and renewable sources [2][3], but the majority is still derived from fossil reserves. The hydrogen first has to be extracted from the fossil source, then it can be used in a fuel cell to generate electrical power [4][5]. Furthermore, problems related to storage [6], transport and security of hydrogen remain partially unresolved. The large-scale centralized production of hydrogen [7], therefore, appears to be difficult, while distributed production is much more attractive [8], as distributed production would considerably limit the problems associated with storage and transport. Unfortunately,

most hydrogen is produced by reforming processes, which, though effective, generate a syngas rich in carbon monoxide; a poison for proton exchange membranes. Therefore, the syngas goes through a series of further transformations, such as two stages of water gas shift [9][10] and one of methanation [11][12], preferential oxidation [13] or a treatment with permselective membranes [14]. The overall process is effective, but inefficient and not suitable for distributed production; where small and smart plants are needed. In recent decades, the attention of many research groups has been focused on the intensification of the CO Water Gas Shift (WGS) process [15] which is clearly, among the process listed above, the most inefficient. The two-stage approach to water gas shift presents several disadvantages: the intermediate cooling phase requires the presence of an auxiliary unit, which adds considerable cost to the process; moreover, the two stages can be considered as two separate processes, further multiplying the costs. In addition, a two-stage process plant is not suitable for the small-scale applications used in distributed hydrogen production. Increasingly sophisticated catalytic formulations [16], proposed in recent years, can be considered competitive alternatives to those actually used in current catalytic systems. In particular, the noble metal-based catalysts supported on reducible oxides, due to the level of catalytic performance, are suitable for the design of single-stage WGS reaction processes [17]. However, these formulations do not solve the underlying problem; that the double-stage process is not efficient. The single-stage process is the only viable way to achieve a robust reduction in costs and plant sizes. A possible solution comes from the use of highly conductive structured carriers, coupled with highly active catalytic formulations [18], i.e. structured catalysts. In the last decades, structured catalysts have been extensively studied, as profitable alternatives to the traditional

powder and pellets catalysts, providing better performance in terms of pressure drops (thus decreasing the energy costs of operation and increasing the lifetime of the catalyst) [19] and heat and mass transfer [20]. In this regard, the development of highly efficient structured catalysts allow processes to be operated in a continuous mode, thus avoiding the barrier towards scaling up [21]. In addition, due to their standard shape and well-defined geometrical and flow properties, foams are highly suitable for easy scale up of the catalytic reactors [22].

One of the main issues related to the use of pellet-shaped catalysts is their inefficient heat conduction, which leads to a disadvantage both in endothermic and exothermic processes: in the first case, temperature gradients along the catalytic bed induce the formation of cold zones that reduce the reaction kinetic; in the latter case, the presence of hot-spots can cause damage to the catalyst and induce its early deactivation. To overcome the limitations of conventional catalysts, higher surface area for the thermal exchange is required, which is normally achieved by using multiple long reactor tubes and/or small diameter, with a negative impact in terms of pressure drops. On the other hand, the route of increasing the diameter of catalyst pellets has a detrimental impact in terms of radial heat transfer, decreased effectiveness factor and more catalyst volume required [23]. Therefore, the high thermal conductivity of the structured carriers plays a key role in the intensification of endothermic and exothermic reaction-based processes, allowing for effective management of the heat of the reaction [24]. In particular, highly conductive carriers may allow the achievement of a pseudo-isothermal profile along the catalytic bed, which is a necessary condition for the realization of a single stage WGS process [25]. Different types of structured carriers have been proposed, such as honeycomb monoliths, open-cell foams and wire meshes.

Among all of the possible geometries, foams appear to be the most promising: comparative studies have shown that open-cell foams provide optimal geometry in many catalytic processes, where tortuosity ensures better axial and radial heat dispersion and mass transfer [26]. In fact, the tortuosity of the structure induces a turbulence in the gas flow which promotes transport phenomena, while other systems such as honeycomb monoliths have ordered channels that split the total flow, thus reaching conditions for laminar flow in each of them. In addition, compared to commercial pelletized catalysts, higher geometrical surface areas are possible, which enhance the activity per unit reactor volume and the external mass transfer rates [27]. Foams can be easily coated with high surface area materials and various well-established technologies are available to do this [28]. Among these, the washcoating technique is the most conventional preparation method; it allows very high active metal loading of the pellets, and thus every pellet catalyst formulation can be replicated with the structured catalyst. In previous studies, the effective thermal conductivity of aluminium foam-based catalysts has been related to the performance, in terms of CO conversion, for the water gas shift reaction [29]. Heat exchange in porous structures is a relatively complex phenomenon, because it takes place in two phases: in the solid network and in the fluid [30]. Many investigations have focused on the correlation between the effective thermal conductivity and the porosity; for high porosity commercial metal foams, it has been suggested that the effective thermal conductivity strongly depends on the cross-sections of the fibre and intersections. However, no systematic dependence has been found on pore density [31]. On the other hand, the effective thermal conductivity of open cell replicated aluminium metal sponges [32], with a porosity (expressed as a fraction of the whole volume) from 0.57 to 0.77 and

pore size between 0.7 mm and 2.4 mm, decreases with increasing porosity, while no pore size influence was found [33]. Another critical issue related to the preparation of structured catalysts is the loading of the active species on the structured carrier. Currently, the most common method to prepare structured catalysts is washcoating: this method consists of loading the carrier with a primer through a colloidal suspension of alumina [34] or silica [35] as a binder. This method involves exploiting the adhesion capacity of these species with the carrier, while the active species can be loaded by mixing with the primer or by subsequent impregnation. This method has been extensively studied over recent decades [36], with the aim of optimizing the procedure. Alternative binders have been proposed, allowing the wide use of structured catalysts, in important industrial processes [37]. Despite its wide use in structured catalysts preparation, washcoating has some disadvantages that affect its use in some cases: it is not suitable for small pore size foams [38] and the resistance to mechanical stresses of the coating depends on the type of binder [39]. Additionally, the primer may not be inert towards the process, and may be detrimental in some cases [40]. Moreover, high specific surface areas can be reached only by loading a large amount of primer and thus, through the formation of too thick a coating. A possible alternative to washcoating is chemical conversion coating, which allows a thin coating of ceria [41], zirconia or titania [42] to be created on aluminium surfaces. This technique has been successfully used in protecting aluminium alloys from corrosion. Moreover it is easy to perform and the resulting coating is highly resistant to mechanical stresses [43] [44]. Conversely, the maximum loading of the protecting species is related to the surface area per unit volume. In previous work, the possibility of using this technique to prepare a ceria-based structured catalyst for the WGS reaction was demonstrated [45].

Ceria is considered an excellent support, thanks to its high oxygen storage capacity [46], in fact it is actively involved in redox behavior and the catalytic activity of the supported catalysts. This leads to improved reaction rates, not only in WGS but also in reforming reactions [47]. It is widely recognized that ceria has the ability to enhance the CO conversion in the WGS reaction because it has a higher redox couple capability than other oxides, due to the high oxygen mobility in the lattice [48]. This mobility, which is related to the oxygen storage capacity, is also responsible for the higher strong metal to support interaction (SMSI) of ceria compared to non-reducible supports [49] [50]. Moreover, CeO<sub>2</sub> has also basic properties, which can inhibit coke formation, resulting in more stable catalysts [51].

Herein, we report a comparative study on some structured catalysts, highlighting the high correlation between the topological properties of the carriers and the activity of the corresponding structured catalysts obtained by chemical conversion coating, with a ceria precursor, followed by impregnation with a platinum precursor, in the CO WGS reaction. Discussion of the activity tests is divided in two parts: in the first part, we discuss the effect of porosity and the relative density of commercial aluminium foams on the activity of the corresponding catalysts in the WGS reaction. In the second part, we compare the activity of a catalyst obtained by coating an opportunely-shaped commercial foam with a catalyst obtained by coating a replicated aluminium sponge.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### ***2.1 Replicated aluminium sponge preparation***

Samples were made by the replication process [52]. Bread flour (Shipton Mill) and NaCl (Fisher Scientific) were blended and mixed with water (in the ratio 70% NaCl, 15% flour and 15% water by mass) to form a dough-like paste. These were then

shaped into spheres of diameter 2.36 mm to 2.80 mm (checked by sieving the spheres to separate those outside this range), and gradually heated up to 973 K in air (held at the maximum temperature for 1 hour) to harden.

The preforms were then placed into a vacuum chamber with a block of 99.85% pure aluminium on top (supplied by William Rowland Ltd, Sheffield, UK). The temperature was raised at 293 K per minute to 1013 K and held at that level for 105 minutes. Argon gas was then let into the chamber up to a pressure of 2.5 bar to cause the aluminium to infiltrate the spaces between the spheres in the preform, and the chamber was cooled under pressure. After solidification, a dissolution treatment in water was used to remove the NaCl, and samples were cut by electro-discharge machining (EDM) into cylinders of length 32 mm, diameter 19 mm and mass 6.9 g.

## ***2.2 Shaping of commercial aluminium foam***

The commercial aluminium foam samples studied were prepared by machining from larger blocks of the commercial product (5 PPI, 40 PPI open cell, 10% relative density). The first set of aluminium carriers (designated as  $F_n$ , where  $n = 5, 40$  corresponds to the P.P.I. of the foam) was obtained by machining to realize a cylinder with a diameter of 13 mm and a length of 103 mm. Moreover, a 5 PPI foam (size  $(30 \times 13 \times 103)$  mm) was compressed and shaped (designated as  $F_n$ , where  $n = 5\_C$ ,  $n$  is the porosity of the parent foam and C identifies that it has been compressed) to make a cylinder with the same size, but with increased relative density. The second set was composed of a replicated aluminium sponge, processed as discussed above, and a foam obtained by compressing and shaping a 40 PPI foam ( $F_n$  where  $n = 40\_C$ ) (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Textural properties of the structured carriers**

<b>Carrier</b>	<b>Length (mm)</b>	<b>Diameter (mm)</b>	<b>Pore size (PPI)</b>	<b>Relative density (%)</b>
F5	103	13	5	10
F40	103	13	40	10
F5_C	103	13	-	29
F40_C	32	19	-	28
R_Sponge	32	19	-	28

### ***2.3 Ceria coating process and catalyst preparation***

The aluminium carriers were initially degreased with acetone, then etched with sodium hydroxide solution (1.5 M) for 1 minute and finally treated with nitric acid solution (35 wt%) for 30 s. After each treatment, the carriers were thoroughly washed with distilled water. Immediately after pre-treatment, the carriers were immersed in the bath for coating deposition at a temperature of 323 K for the first set of foams, and at a temperature of 313 K for the latter set. The bath was made by dissolving  $\text{CeCl}_3 \cdot 7\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  35 wt% in distilled water, in a mass ratio 1/3/75, acidified with HCl until a pH of 3 was reached. The chemical treatment was repeated four times for 2 hours; after each treatment the resulting coated carriers were washed with distilled water, the excess of water was removed with compressed air and dried at 393 K for 2 hours. The active metal was then loaded by impregnation of the coated carriers with a solution of tetrammineplatinum (II) nitrate, dried at 393 K for 2 hours and calcined at 723 K for 3 hours.

### ***2.4 Characterization techniques***

The coating coverage and active species loading were evaluated by means of energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence (ED-XRF) using an ARL QUANT'X ED-XRF spectrometer (Thermo Scientific). The resistance of the coating to mechanical stress was evaluated using an ultrasound adherence test with an ultrasonic bath CP104 (EIA

S.p.A.). The coated carriers were dipped in ethanol at 298 K and submitted to ultrasound, at 60% of the rated power of the equipment (200 W; 39 kHz), for six cycles of 5 minutes. The XRD diffractograms were obtained with a Bruker D8 Advance, with a Cu K $\alpha$  radiation source (35 kV; 40 mA) in the 2 $\theta$  range (20 to 80)  $^{\circ}$ , (Stp = 737; Stp size = 0.0814; t/Stp = 0.5 s). Crystallite dimensions were calculated from the diffractograms by applying the Scherrer equation. The structural changes were evaluated using an inVia Raman microscope (Renishaw), equipped with a 514 nm Ar ion laser operating at 25 mW. Sample morphology was observed by a field emission scanning electron microscope (FE-SEM, mod. LEO 1525, Carl Zeiss SMT AG, Oberkochen, Germany). The H<sub>2</sub>-TPR experiments were carried out before the activity tests, with a reducing stream of 500 Ncc/min containing 5 vol% of H<sub>2</sub> in N<sub>2</sub>, in the temperature range of 298 K to 723 K, with a heating rate of 10 K/min.

X-ray computed tomography (XCT) measurements were made using a Nikon MCT 225 system with two different scan setups, optimised for each scanned sample. Two samples were obtained by cutting the PtCeR\_Sponge and PtCeF40\_C exhausted catalysts and these were analyzed by XCT. The scan of the PtCeR\_Sponge sample was performed at a geometric magnification of 14 $\times$ , providing a voxel size of 14.3  $\mu\text{m}$ . The following parameters were used: 3142 X-ray projections formed by averaging two frames per projection, each lasting 2000 ms, a detector gain 24 dB; X-ray tube voltage 115 kV and current 124  $\mu\text{A}$ . The scan of the PtCeF40\_C sample was performed at a geometric magnification of 9 $\times$ , providing a voxel size of 22.2  $\mu\text{m}$ . The following parameters were used: 3142 X-ray projections formed by averaging two frames per projection, each lasting 1425 ms, a detector gain 24 dB; X-ray tube voltage 115 kV and current 191  $\mu\text{A}$ . For both XCT scans, a 0.5 mm copper X-ray pre-filter was used

and a warmup scan of approximately one hour was performed prior to the scan. A detector shading correction was applied by averaging 256 reference frames (128 bright and 128 dark), and flux normalisation was applied during the scan.

XCT data were acquired using Nikon's proprietary acquisition software (X-Inspect) and reconstructed using Nikon's proprietary reconstruction software (CT-Pro). Surface determination was performed on the reconstructed XCT volume in VGStudioMAX 3.2 using the iterative maximum gradient method with the ISO-50 isosurface as a starting point [53], over an initial search distance of 4 voxels. Data were then triangulated and exported from VGStudio using no mesh simplification and imported into MeshLab 2016 for visualisation.

### ***2.5 Catalytic activity tests***

The activity tests were performed at atmospheric pressure, in the temperature range of 553 to 673 K, decreasing the temperature in steps, and then by evaluating the products composition when steady state temperature conditions were obtained. The reactor was fed with a reaction mixture of 8 % CO, 30 % H<sub>2</sub>O and 62 % N<sub>2</sub>, in a stainless steel tubular reactor with an internal diameter of 22 mm and 400 mm length, at a contact time ( $\tau$ ) between 24 ms and 99 ms (GHSV = 36364 - 150000 h<sup>-1</sup>). The reaction product composition was evaluated, on dry basis, by means of an ABB system equipped with the non-dispersive infrared analyser Uras 14 for CO, CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> and a thermal conductivity detector Caldos 17 for H<sub>2</sub>.

### ***2.6 Kinetic evaluations***

In order to develop a kinetic model able to predict the catalytic behaviour of Al-foams during the WGS reaction, the mass balance equations were written for every component and derived by assuming a steady state and a piston flow of the gas. A

finite increment of  $5 \times 10^{-5}$  g was selected for the catalytic mass in order to ensure that the numerical integration remained stable; the Euler numerical method was used to solve the differential equations and to integrate the system. After the solution of the mass balance, the results of the model were compared with the experimental values, through an objective function which involves the minimization of the differences between the above values through a least-squares method, using the kinetic constants as the variable terms. The model was implemented in the software Microsoft Office Excel 2016.

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### ***3.1 Characterization results***

The chemical composition of the catalysts was also measured by means of ED-XRF, to evaluate the loading of ceria and platinum (Table 2). The results showed that by increasing the pore density of the foam (5, 40 PPI) an increase of the ceria loading is obtained. This result may be explained by considering that a higher foam surface area per unit volume is available at higher values of PPI (which correspond to smaller pores) [54]. As a consequence of the higher ceria loading, the samples with higher PPI values also showed higher Pt loading. Apart from this effect, the difference in the ceria loading between the compressed and uncompressed F40 foam was attributed to the different coating reaction temperature. The chemical conversion coating is the result of an oxidation reaction between the metallic surface and the salt precursor of the protecting oxide (in our case cerium (III) chloride), so under the same overall reaction conditions, the extent of the coating available for reaction depends on the metallic surface area. The reaction mechanism for the ceria conversion coating provides a series of redox reactions in which the surface aluminium is oxidized in acidic media with the

formation of hydroxyl ions [55]. At the same time, cerium (III) chloride is itself oxidized to give a cerium (IV) hydroxide or peroxide on the aluminium surface and the transformation to cerium (IV) oxide is subsequently obtained by calcining. This technique exploits limited and controlled corrosion to arrive at a material condition which protects against further, unwanted corrosion and, therefore, as the reaction proceeds, the surface is increasingly covered and less and less remaining aluminium can be oxidized. At the same time, the loading is strongly dependent on the reaction temperature, with a higher temperature corresponding to a higher loading. Platinum loading was carried out by impregnation of the coated foams before calcining, in a hot solution of tetramine platinum nitrate. The XRF results showed that the ratio between platinum and ceria was similar for all the catalysts.

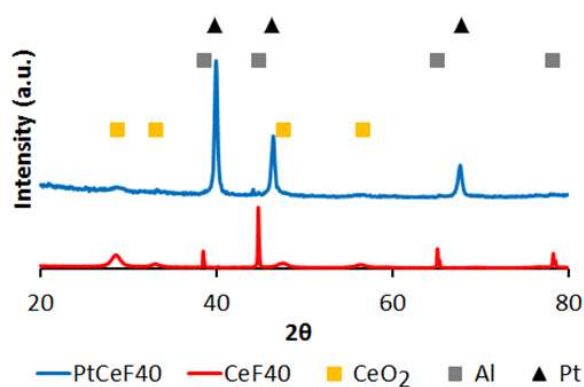
**Table 2. Catalysts characterization results**

Catalyst	Chemical composition (wt%)			Crystallite size (111) (nm)		BET surface area (m <sup>2</sup> /g)
	Al	CeO <sub>2</sub>	Pt	CeO <sub>2</sub>	Pt	
PtCeF5	96.0	3.2	0.4	7.4	35	2.1
PtCeF40	89.0	9.9	1.1	7.8	33	8.1
PtCeF5_C	95.8	3.8	0.4	7.7	32	1.9
PtCeR_Sponge	95.9	3.7	0.4	7.3	22	2.0
PtCeF40_C	90.4	8.7	0.9	7.4	22	7.1

BET surface area measurements showed a progressive increase in the surface area of the structured catalysts with increasing active component loading. From the obtained data, we hypothesized that the surface area of the coating created was about 70 m<sup>2</sup>/g. In order to evaluate the resistance of the coating to mechanical stress, the coated carriers were subjected to an ultrasound adherence test, as indicated above. No mass

loss was detected, suggesting the formation of a strongly bonded coating.

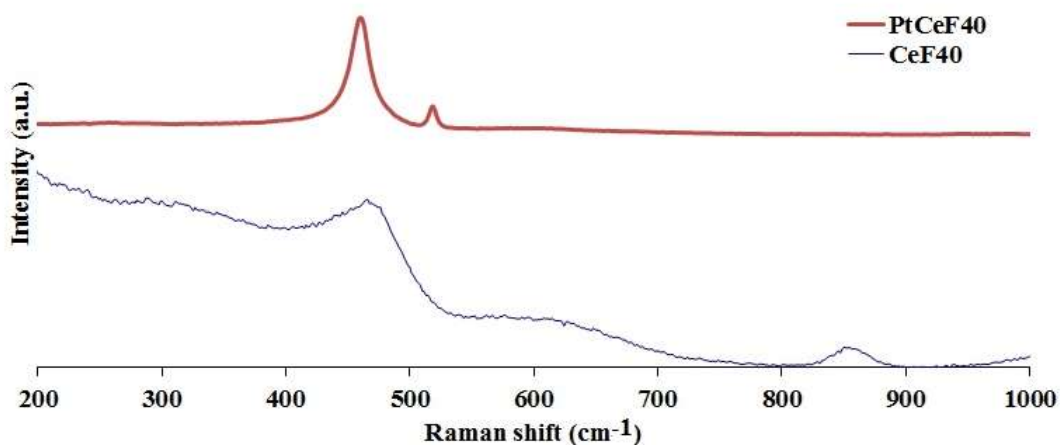
XRD diffractograms of the samples showed characteristic peaks for the aluminium carriers (Figure 1), of the cubic ceria fluorite type coated to the aluminium surface. The three peaks at  $2\theta = 39.9, 46.4$  and  $67.7$  were attributed to platinum. The crystallite size of platinum was also calculated by means of the Scherrer equation (Table 2), highlighting similar sizes for all the catalysts.



**Figure 1. Diffractograms of PtCeF40 and CeF40.**

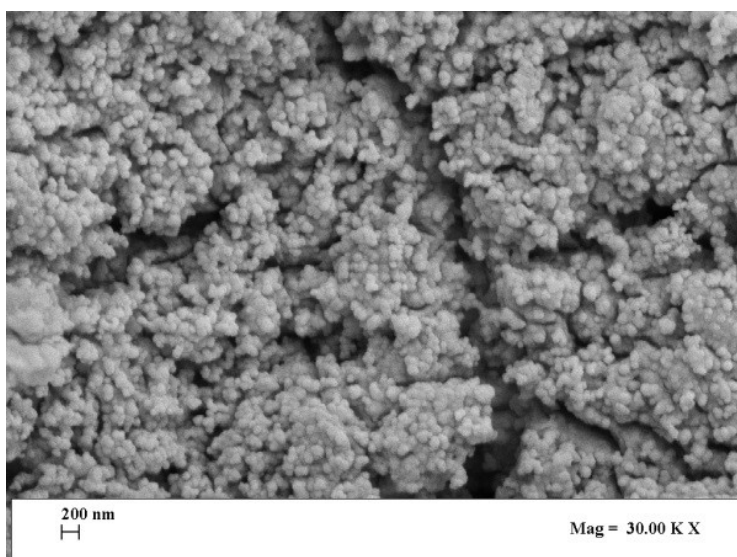
Raman analysis showed that the coated surface of the foams contains a highly defective ceria, while the calcined catalyst clearly shows the formation of the typical cubic fluorite structure (Figure 2). The CeF40 spectrum showed a large peak at about  $469\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , which was attributed to the  $F_{2g}$  mode typical of a fluorite-type cubic structure. This peak corresponds to the symmetrical stretching of oxygen around  $\text{Ce}^{4+}$ . The two bands at approximately  $270\text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $600\text{ cm}^{-1}$  were attributed respectively to the second-order transverse acoustic mode (2TA) and the defect induced mode (D) of ceria. It has been observed that these defects promote the catalytic activity of ceria, as they regulate the oxygen storage capacity of the support, through the redox cycles between the species  $\text{Ce}^{4+}$  and  $\text{Ce}^{3+}$  [56][57]. The peak at  $842\text{ cm}^{-1}$  has been attributed to the stretching of the O-O bonds of the peroxide species [58]. This identification supports the reaction mechanism previously proposed, according to which ceria is

formed in the presence of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  and there is subsequent decomposition of  $\text{Ce}(\text{O}_2)(\text{OH})_2$  at high temperature. The PtCeF40 spectrum showed two peaks at  $461\text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $516\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . The  $461\text{ cm}^{-1}$  peak was ascribed once again to  $\text{F}_{2g}$  mode, while the peak at  $516\text{ cm}^{-1}$  was attributed to the interaction with platinum [59].



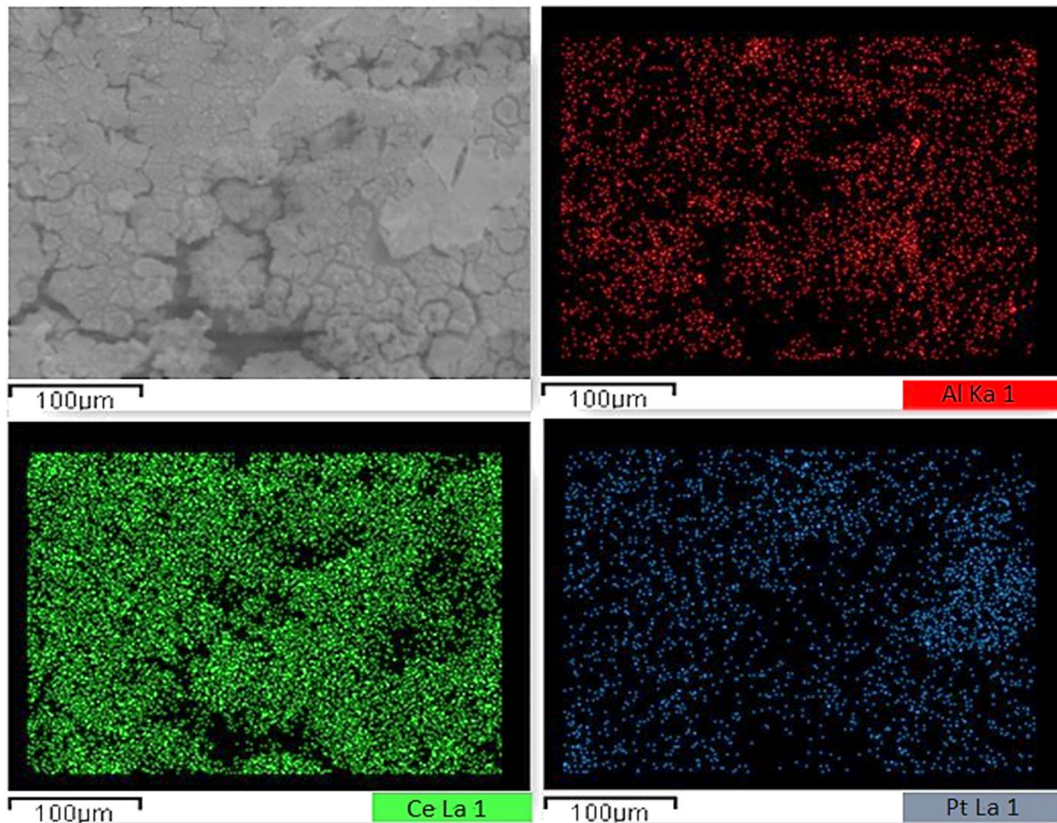
**Figure 2. Raman spectra of PtCeF40 and CeF40**

The SEM image of the coated foams highlighted the nanometric morphology of the coating. Moreover, canal-like or fracture-like cavities are present, which could be beneficial structures to increase the catalytic activity (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. SEM image of CeF40**

Good coverage of the surface with ceria and the good dispersion of metallic platinum were indicated by the EDS imaging. The distribution of aluminium on the surface shows that the majority of the surface is covered by ceria and that there are no cerium-free islands.



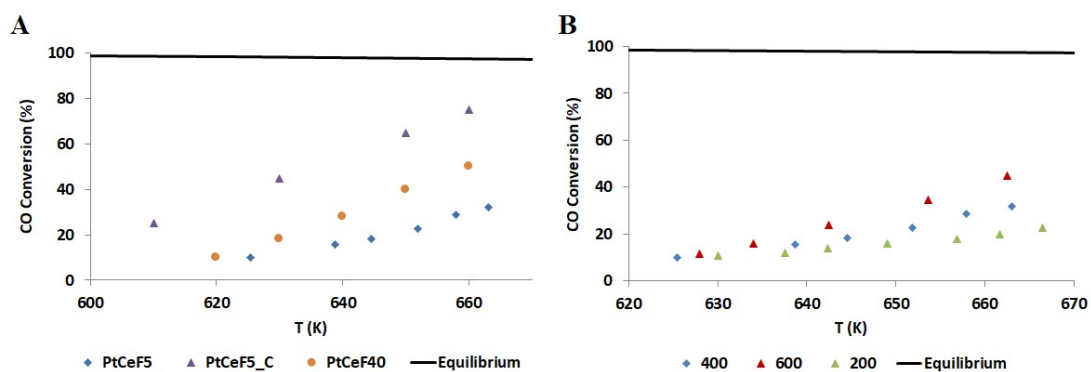
**Figure 4. EDS of PtCeF40**

While the platinum distribution is satisfactory, the ratio between platinum and cerium is not constant throughout the image. This factor implies an imperfect dispersion, attributed to the method used in the platinum impregnation (see Figure 4).

### ***3.2 Activity tests results***

In a preliminary comparison, the activity of the two structured catalysts PtCeFn with  $n = 5, 40$  was evaluated by performing the tests at the same contact time ( $\tau = 30$  ms).

For all the catalysts, the results showed a progressive reduction of the CO conversion with increasing temperature (see Figure 5 A).



**Figure 5. CO conversion as function of temperature at  $\tau = 30$  ms, feeding conditions: 8% CO, 30% H<sub>2</sub>O, 62% N<sub>2</sub>, P=1 atm. Comparison among the PtCeFn catalysts with n=5, 40, 5\_C (A) and PtCeF5 catalyst at three different flow rate: 200, 400 and 600 Ncc/min (B).**

By comparing the performances of the two uncompressed catalysts, the foam having a smaller pore diameter (PtCeF40) displayed slightly increased CO conversion. These results suggest a correlation between the porosity of the foam and the catalytic activity. In fact, two main phenomena were relevant; the reaction and the mass transport within the foam. The latter phenomenon was dominant in the case of the PtCeF5, whose lower CO conversion showed that the chemical reaction is not controlling the process in this case. This problem may be due instead to an insufficient diffusion of the reactant within the catalytic bed. This hypothesis is suggested by the fact that, in the case of PtCeF40, an enhanced CO conversion was obtained by increasing the temperature; this foam, in fact, has a smaller pore dimension, which forces the gas distribution into the structure and increases the local gas velocity. As such, a higher turbulence in the flow (and, therefore, better diffusion) is achieved. To experimentally verify the eventual external diffusion limitation, the PtCeF5 sample was prepared at three

different catalytic masses and tested under three flow-rates: 200, 400 and 600 Ncc/min, by maintaining the same hourly gas space velocity, as well as contact time. The results, shown in Figure 5 (B), demonstrate that, at temperatures lower than 640 K, when the gas velocity though the catalytic bed is changed, the CO conversion remains the same. On the other hand, at higher temperatures, the contribution of diffusion is more pronounced compared to that of the chemical reaction. These results also explain the similar trend of the curves for PtCeF5 and PtCeF40 observed below 640 K in Figure 5 (A). To better explore this phenomenon, as mentioned above, an aluminium foam of size (30 × 13 × 103) mm and porosity 5 PPI, was compressed with a bench vice in the radial direction, to obtain a cylindrical structure with 13 mm diameter and 103 mm length. The pressed structure was coated, and the performance of the resulting catalyst compared to the corresponding PtCeFn catalyst (Figure 5 (A)). The CO conversion exceeded 75% at 673 K and reached 25% at 610 K. The compression of the carrier increased the relative density of the foam, deforming the pores and generating something similar to a dense wire mesh. Thus, a great increase of the tortuosity was achieved and the huge turbulence created in the reduced size pores gave a boost to the reaction.

In the second part of this work, the activity of a catalyst obtained by coating a compressed 40 PPI aluminium foam (PtCeF40\_C) was compared with a catalyst obtained by coating a replicated aluminium sponge (PtCeR\_Sponge), with the same relative density, as described in section 2.1; the activity test results were compared in terms of the reaction rate. For both the catalysts investigated in this work, the kinetic constant  $k$  of the WGS reaction was calculated on the base of the Arrhenius equation by optimizing the pre-exponential factor and the activation energy values following

the rate expression used in previous work [21], under the hypothesis of first-order dependency on the CO and H<sub>2</sub>O reactants. (Eq.1, where  $K_{eq}$  is the equilibrium constant calculated through the GasEQ tools and  $P_i$  refers to the partial pressure of the various components). This assumption, which is coherent with the experimental data, was also used by other authors for CeO<sub>2</sub>-based catalysts [60].

$$r = k \left( P_{CO} P_{H_2O} - \frac{1}{K_{eq}} P_{CO_2} P_{H_2} \right). \quad \text{Eq. 1}$$

From the slope and the intercept of the fitting line, it was possible to evaluate the kinetic expression (activation energy and pre-exponential value, respectively) and the values found for the two samples are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Kinetic parameters**

Sample	Activation Energy (kJ·mol <sup>-1</sup> )	Pre-exponential factor (kmol·s <sup>-1</sup> ·atm <sup>-2</sup> )
PtCeR_Sponge	100	1758
PtCeF40_C	104	1195

Very close activation energies were calculated for the two catalysts, implying that the difference is coherent with the experimental error. Moreover, the activation energy found for the Pt-based catalyst of the present report is coherent with the values reported for similar catalytic systems in the recent literature [61]. The CO reaction rate ( $r_{CO}$ , mol<sub>CO</sub>·g<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup>·s<sup>-1</sup>) was calculated according to previously reported expressions [62]. A comparison between the two catalysts at different contact times was undertaken, and in

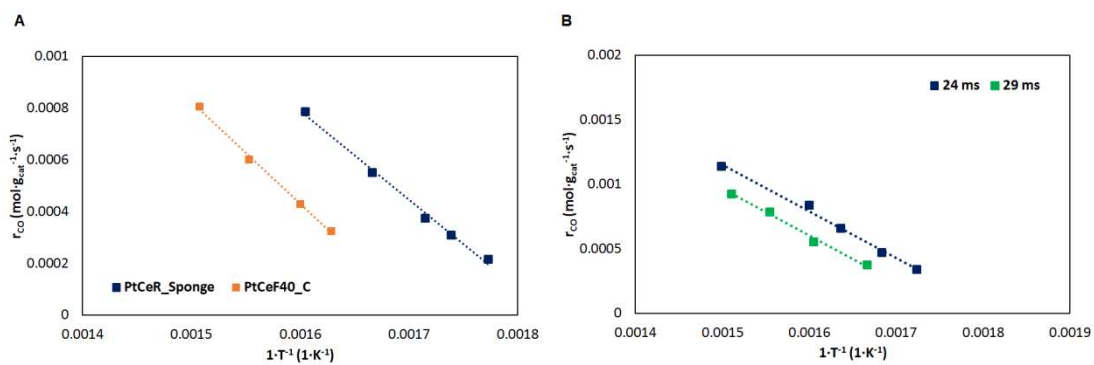
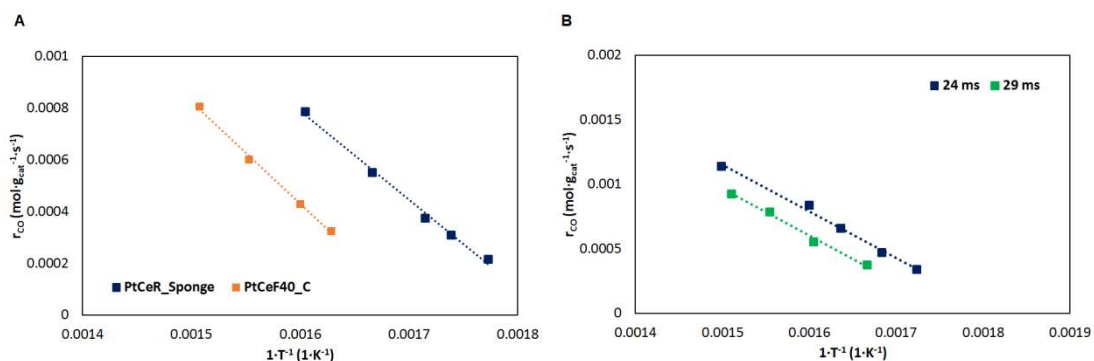
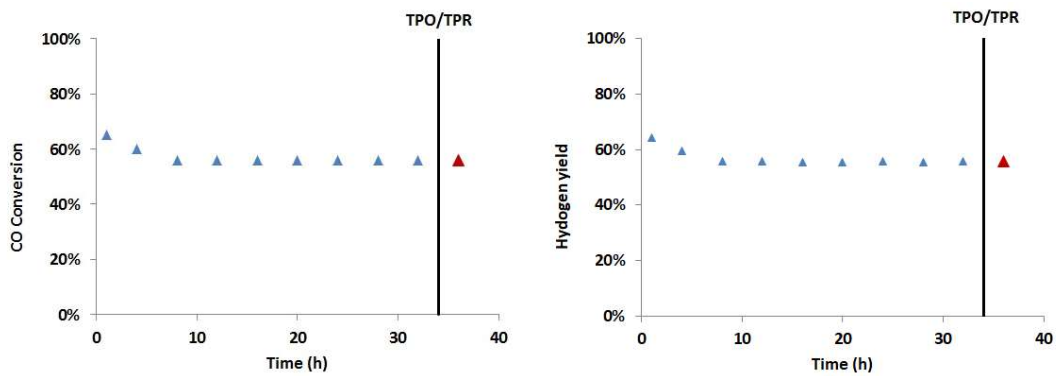


Figure 6, the result at 29 ms is reported. From the obtained data, it is clear that the prediction of the first-order expression is in agreement with the experimental values; moreover, for all the investigated contact times, the CO reaction rate measured for the PtCeR\_Sponge was higher than that observed over the PtCeF40\_C catalyst. The time on stream experiment carried out on the PtCeR\_Sponge catalyst (see Figure 7), showed a high stability of this catalyst: less than 10% of CO conversion was lost during the first 8 hours of reaction, while in the following hours the conversion remained stable.



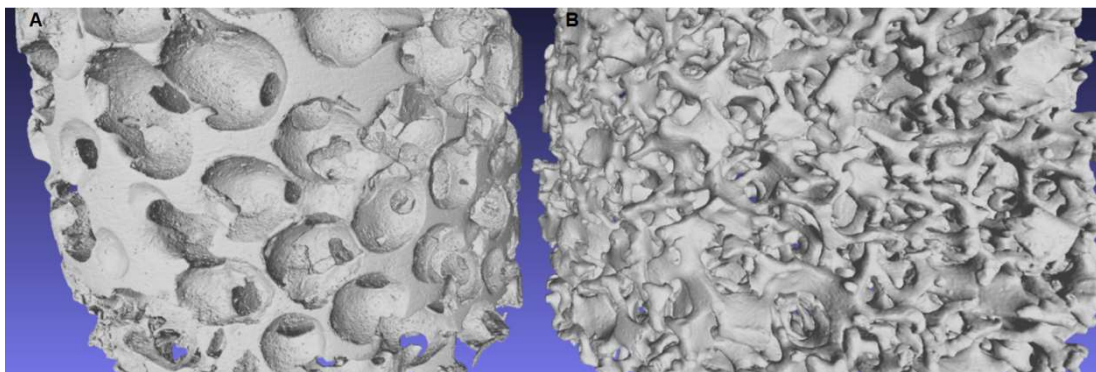
**Figure 6. Arrhenius plots of kinetic reaction rates; feeding conditions: 8%CO, 30% H<sub>2</sub>O, 62% N<sub>2</sub>, P=1 atm. (A) Comparison between PtCeR\_Sponge and PtCeF40\_C at a contact time of 29 ms. (B) Comparison between two contact times (24 ms and 29 ms) for PtCeR\_Sponge.**

After 35 hours, a cycle of oxidation (TPO) and reduction (H<sub>2</sub>-TPR) was performed without affecting the CO conversion in the following experiment.



**Figure 7. Time on stream on PtCeR\_Sponge catalyst. Feeding conditions: 8% CO, 30% H<sub>2</sub>O, 62% N<sub>2</sub>, P=1 atm, T= 593 K,  $\tau$ = 38 ms**

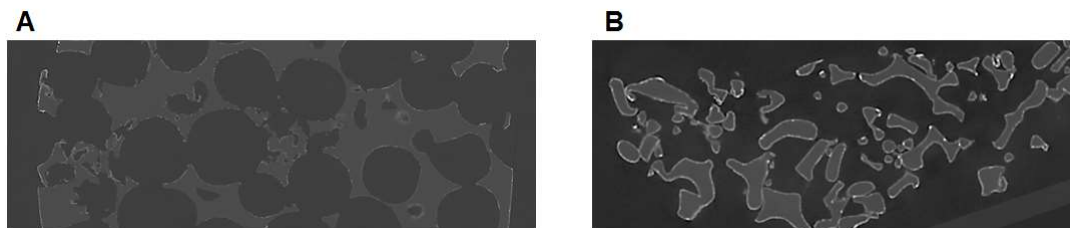
In all tests, no methanation occurred, such that high selectivity to hydrogen was achieved. The activity tests results confirmed that the textural characteristics of the structure can affect the performance of the catalysts. In Figure 8, images of the XCT data of the two catalysts are reported. These images highlight the physical differences between the two structures: the pores of the sponge had a spherical form, and small openings between the pores, while in the compressed foam it was impossible to define the individual pores.



**Figure 8. 3D XCT images of PtCeR\_Sponge (A) and PtCeF40\_C (B). Lateral view.**

However, pseudo-elliptical cavities can be identified in the compressed foam structures, formed from the initial porous structure as the result of the compression. Moreover, the compression process seems to have distorted the structure in an uneven manner. Nevertheless, as can be seen in the XCT data, the pores of the sponge are

interconnected with smaller channels through which the gas is forced to flow. The top view of a segment of the two structures highlights the difference between the void distribution in the two cases (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** “D XCT slice data of PtCeR\_Sponge (A) and PtCeF40\_C (B). View from the top.

The pores in the sponge have a limited number of small connections with the adjacent pores, giving rise to “bottleneck”-type structures (see Figure 9A) [63], which could be beneficial in catalytic systems. By contrast, the structure of the compressed foam is more open and the distribution of the void spaces through the entire volume is disordered, generating preferential directions for flow (Figure 9B), that are detrimental for catalysis applications.

## **Conclusions**

In the first part of this paper, we compared the activity of structured catalysts prepared by chemical conversion coating of commercial open cell aluminium foams with different porosities in the WGS reaction. The activity tests showed that diffusion phenomena occurred in the case of the uncompressed foams. In the second part of this work, we compared the activity of two structured catalysts obtained by coating two different structures. In one case, the structure was obtained by compressing a commercial open cell aluminium foam; in the other case the structure was obtained by producing a different open cell foam through a replication process. The results showed better performance for the catalysts obtained using the replicated sponge. XCT

analysis highlighted a different distribution of the pores in the structures: the sponge was characterized by a regular distribution of spheroidal pores with limited interconnection, while the compressed foam was characterized by an irregular structure in which the compression was not able to completely eliminate the preferential directions. On the basis of these results, we can conclude that:

1. The chemical conversion coating is not an alternative technique to washcoating; rather, it is a technique that can be used in highly porous systems, where washcoating would not be feasible. On the other hand, the choice of the coating technique is intimately related to the textural characteristics of the structure.
2. The replication process can be considered to be a highly suitable technique for sponge preparation as it allows design and creation of porous structures under controlled conditions. The narrow distribution of porosities and “bottleneck”-type connections can prevent the formation of preferential directions, obtaining benefits in the field of catalysis. Conversely, the simple compression of commercial structure does not guarantee the elimination of bypass phenomena.

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