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# Electrocatalytic Oxidation of Ascorbic Acid on Mesostructured SiO<sub>2</sub>-Conducting Polymer Composites

*Omar Rivero<sup>1,2</sup>, Francisco Huerta<sup>3</sup>, Francisco Montilla<sup>1</sup>, C. Sanchis<sup>1</sup>, Emilia Morallón<sup>1\*</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Dept. Química Física e Instituto Universitario de Materiales, Universidad de Alicante, Ap. 99, E-03080, Alicante, Spain

<sup>2</sup>Escuela Profesional de Química. Facultad de Ciencias. Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería, Av Tupac Amaru, 210 Rimac, Lima, Peru

<sup>3</sup>Dept. Ingeniería Textil y Papelera, Universitat Politècnica de Valencia, Plaza Ferrandiz y Carbonell, 1. E-03801, Alcoy, Spain

## Abstract

The conducting self-doping copolymer poly(aniline-*co*-ABA) preserves its redox activity at pH values as high as 7. This observation was the starting point to synthesize an organic-inorganic hybrid composite able to electrochemically oxidize ascorbic acid molecules at that pH. The inorganic part of the catalytic element was an ordered mesoporous electrodeposit of SiO<sub>2</sub>, which has been used as the template for the electrochemical insertion of the self-doping copolymer. The oxidation of ascorbate ions at a fixed potential on this composite was studied by means of the kinetic model proposed by Bartlett *et al.* (Phys. Chem. Chem. Phys., 3 (2001) 1491). It was observed that the effective kinetic constant  $K_{ME}$  increased significantly but, simultaneously,  $k'_{ME}$  remained almost constant when the composite was employed as the electrocatalytic substrate. These results were interpreted in the light of two combinations of kinetic constants, which strongly suggested that the increase in  $K_{ME}$  should be ascribed to the improvement in electronic conductivity of the copolymer induced by the highly ordered silica template.

\*Corresponding author: [morallon@ua.es](mailto:morallon@ua.es)

## 1. Introduction

Although the sol-gel synthesis of  $\text{SiO}_2$  is known from the 60's, mesostructured silica was reported only two decades ago in the form of surfactant templated particles [1]. These tailored materials were used soon as supports to immobilize catalytically active species, such as metals, peptides or enzymes [2,3,4]. More recently, the assembly of functional mesostructured materials based on silica, titania or zirconia has gained increasing interest from a wide range of both scientific and technologic fields [5,6]. Functionalization provides with interesting electrical, optical or catalytic properties which may be very different to those of the original constituents [7]. Specifically, the preparation of mesostructured materials as electrodes containing conducting polymers as functionalization agents has attracted attention because of its range of possibilities in optoelectronics or bioelectrochemistry, among others [8,9].

It is known that when organic molecules are inserted into host mesoporous inorganic materials, the physicochemical properties as well as the surface characteristics of the inorganic matrix such as hydrophobicity or surface charge result altered [10]. This behavior has been used to induce the adsorption or to immobilize large molecules, even proteins, on silica mesopores which significantly broadened the application of these materials [11,12]. In particular, we have shown in previous studies the electrochemical growth of polyaniline through the pores of unstructured  $\text{SiO}_2$  films deposited on glassy carbon electrodes [13]. The obtained composite materials were used recently as electrocatalysts towards some organic and inorganic redox probes [14].

In the present contribution, we will try to take advantage of the highly oriented  $\text{SiO}_2$  mesostructure to insert electrochemically a self-doping conducting copolymer obtained

from aniline and *o*-aminobenzoic acid (ABA) monomers. This composite material will be used as electrode to study the oxidation of ascorbic acid molecules at neutral pH. We have observed that the oxidation kinetics of ascorbate molecules on conducting poly(ani-*co*-ABA) films can be satisfactorily described by the kinetic model proposed by Bartlett et al. [15]. It is expected that the application of the same model to the oxidation of ascorbate on the mesostructured SiO<sub>2</sub>-poly(ani-*co*-ABA) composite electrode could clarify the role of the highly ordered silica matrix on the kinetics of the electrocatalytic oxidation.

## **2. Experimental part**

### ***2.1. Reagents and equipment***

Tetraethyl orthosilicate (TEOS, Sigma-Aldrich), Ascorbic acid (Sigma-Aldrich p.a.), cetyl trimethylammonium bromide (CTAB, Sigma-Aldrich) and sulfuric acid (Merck, p.a.) were used as received. All the solutions were prepared with 18.2 MΩ cm ultrapure water obtained from an Elga Labwater Purelab system. The carboxylate-containing polyaniline film was synthesized from the electrochemical copolymerization of *o*-aminobenzoic acid (99%, Aldrich) and aniline (Aldrich) in 0.5M sulfuric acid electrolyte with 50 mM concentration of each monomer.

The electrochemical experiments were performed in conventional electrochemical pyrex glass cells. The working electrode was a glassy carbon disk (GC, V-25 model, Carbone Lorraine). The GC electrode was carefully polished with fine emery paper and alumina suspensions (Buehler, 1μm and 0.25 μm) over cloth and then ultrasonically cleaned in distilled water. A platinum wire was employed as counter electrode, and a

reversible hydrogen electrode (RHE) immersed in the same electrolyte solution through a Luggin capillary was used as the reference electrode. All the results are presented in this potential scale.

## ***2.2. Preparation of SiO<sub>2</sub> layers on glassy carbon electrodes***

Either microporous or mesoporous silica layers were obtained from two silica precursor solutions:

Solution 1 for the microporous SiO<sub>2</sub>: 2 mL of TEOS is mixed with 2.75 mL ethanol and 2 mL of a 0.46 M KCl/0.01M HCl solution. The resulting solution was stirred in a closed vial for 15 min in an ultrasound bath.

Solution 2 for the mesoporous SiO<sub>2</sub>: 13.6 mmol TEOS and 20 mL ethanol were added to a vessel containing 20 mL 0.1M NaNO<sub>3</sub> in 10<sup>-3</sup> M HCl. This solution was stirred and then 4.35 mmol CTAB were added. The resulting mixture was stirred for 2.5 h.

The precursor solution (solution 1 or solution 2) was placed in an electrochemical cell in which the electrodeposition of the silica was performed. The SiO<sub>2</sub> layer is electrochemically deposited on glassy carbon electrode during the application of a very negative potential (-0.9V/RHE) for 10 s where the reduction of water is produced. This reaction decreases the concentration of protons in the vicinity of the electrode surface, inducing the collapse of colloids in the precursor solution and favouring the silica deposition [12,13,16]. If solution 1 is used, the obtained SiO<sub>2</sub> layer is microporous [16]. If the solution 2 is used, a mesoporous SiO<sub>2</sub> layer is obtained on the glassy carbon electrode because it has been demonstrated previously that CTAB induces the ordering

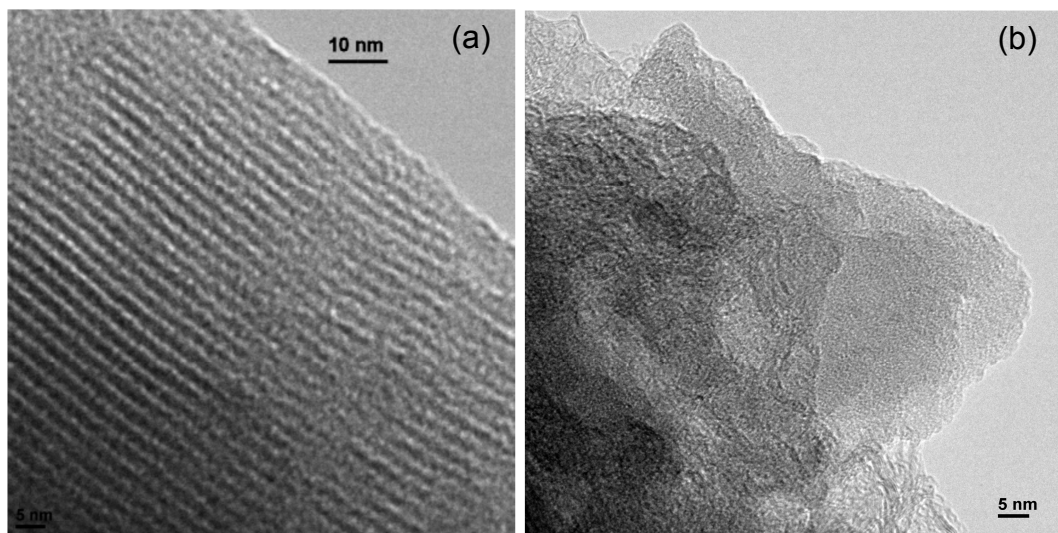
of the SiO<sub>2</sub> layers [12]. The CTAB is removed from the electrode by treating the mesoporous film electrode in an ethanol solution containing 0.1M HCl under stirring for 5 min [12]. The counter electrode was a platinum wire and a silver wire was used as a pseudo-reference electrode but the reported potentials are referred to the RHE scale.

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

#### ***3.1. Synthesis and characterization of mesostructured SiO<sub>2</sub>-conducting polymer composites***

Two identical glassy carbon electrodes were used as the support for the electrochemically assisted deposition of SiO<sub>2</sub> layers. The experimental procedure is explained comprehensively in the previous section and it has been also described elsewhere [12]. One of these electrodes was submitted to the deposition of an ordered mesoporous silica film through the template route whereas the other was used for the deposition of microporous SiO<sub>2</sub>. Structural differences between both silica layers can be observed clearly in the TEM micrographs presented in Fig. 1. The addition of CTAB to the synthesis medium leads to the well-arranged growth of silica mesostructures showing parallel channels of about 2-3 nm width perpendicular to the electrode surface [12]. On the contrary, a microporous silica deposit is obtained for the glassy carbon electrode immersed in the CTAB-free precursor solution. The potentiostatic growth of a conducting polymer such as polyaniline through the pores of the microporous, electrochemically synthesized SiO<sub>2</sub> film has been reported previously [13]. It was shown there that the polymerization reaction takes place initially inside the pores of the

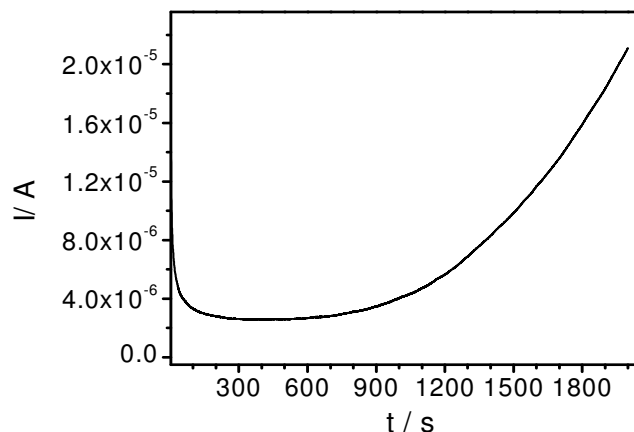
SiO<sub>2</sub> structure. These pores fill up slowly with polyaniline and, finally, the polymer chains reach the outer layer of the silica and spread out on its surface. In that stage, a quicker polyaniline autocatalytic growth is observed.



**Fig. 1.** TEM micrographs acquired at the same magnification after the electroassisted deposition of either a SiO<sub>2</sub> film with highly oriented mesostructure (a) or a microporous SiO<sub>2</sub> film (b) on glassy carbon substrates.

Since we are interested in the effect of silica mesostructure on the electrocatalytic properties of poly(ani-co-ABA), a glassy carbon electrode was modified with an oriented SiO<sub>2</sub> layer obtained as in Fig. 1a and that material was then used as a template for the growth of the conducting copolymer. The template electrode was immersed at controlled potential in an acidic polymerization solution containing 50 mM aniline and 50 mM *ortho*-aminobenzoic acid. The potential was then stepped up to 1.05V/RHE and the chronoamperogram shown in Fig. 2a was recorded. According to the profile of this curve, it can be deduced that the polymerization is restricted to the inner mesostructure of the silica layer below, roughly, 1200 s [13]. The exponential shape of the chronoamperogram recorded beyond that point reveals that poly(ani-co-ABA) grows out of the silica pores. Accordingly, in the present study we have limited the

polymerization time to 1200 s in order to fill up all the mesopores of the silica structure and to minimize the amount of polymer sticking out of the pores.



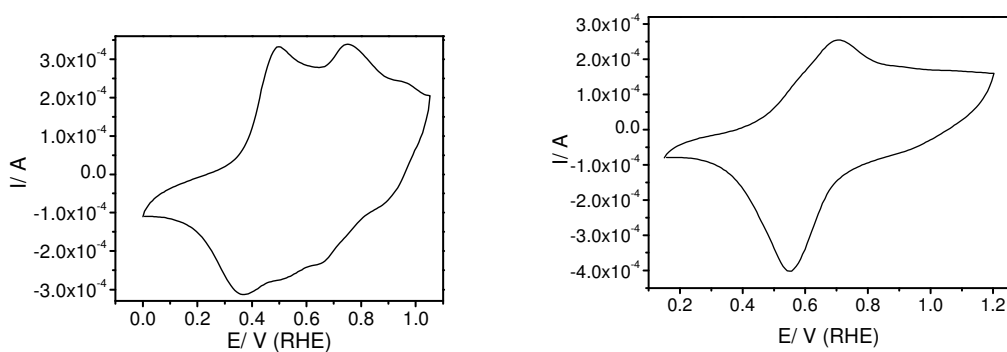
**Fig. 2.** Chronoamperometric curve showing the potentiostatic growth of poly(ani-co-ABA) through an oriented silica mesostructure. Initial potential: 0.05V/RHE; Final potential: 1.05 V/RHE; [ani]= 0.05M [ABA]= 0.05M . Supporting electrolyte: 0.5M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>.

Once synthesized, the composite electrode obtained as in Fig. 2 but during 1200 s has been tested in both sulfuric acid and pH 7 phosphate buffer solutions and the results presented in Fig. 3. The materials were submitted to repeated oxidation-reduction cycles till the voltammetric curves show a steady profile and it was checked that the structure of the SiO<sub>2</sub> film remained after cycling. The characteristic shape recorded in H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> electrolyte shows, as the main features, the redox transition of the copolymer from leucoemeraldine to emeraldine redox state at around 0.5V and a pair of peaks of uncertain nature in the vicinity of 0.75V. This curve is similar to that obtained during the copolymerization of aniline and ABA monomers on a bare glassy carbon electrode [17]. Obviously, this voltammetric profile changes significantly when the composite electrode is cycled in neutral medium, as it is observed in Fig. 3b. There, only a pair of redox peaks appears in the voltammetric curve at around 0.6V. Nevertheless, the



presence of aminobenzoic units in the copolymer chains provides this material with self-doping properties and preserves its redox activity in pH 7 medium. Such behavior makes the poly(ani-co-ABA)/SiO<sub>2</sub> composite electrode an interesting material to study the catalytic oxidation of ascorbic acid molecules in phosphate electrolyte and to establish whether or not the mesostructured silica improves the kinetics of the electrocatalytic oxidation.

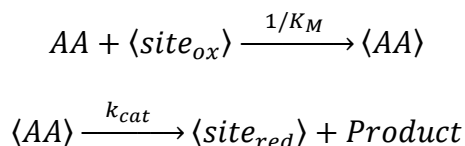
It is worth mentioning that ascorbic acid is not oxidized on a microporous SiO<sub>2</sub>-poly(ani-co-ABA) composite. This result is similar to that reported previously by Walcarius et al. [18] for zeolite modified electrodes, which was associated to a molecular sieving effect. For this reason, in the following sections only mesostructured silica modified electrodes have been studied.



**Fig. 3.** Stabilized cyclic voltammograms recorded in (a) 0.5M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> and (b) pH 7 phosphate buffer solutions for a composite electrode obtained as in Fig. 2 but during 1200 s. Scan rate 50 mV s<sup>-1</sup>.

### ***3.2. Electrocatalytic oxidation of ascorbic acid on mesostructured SiO<sub>2</sub>-poly(ani-co-ABA) composite electrodes***

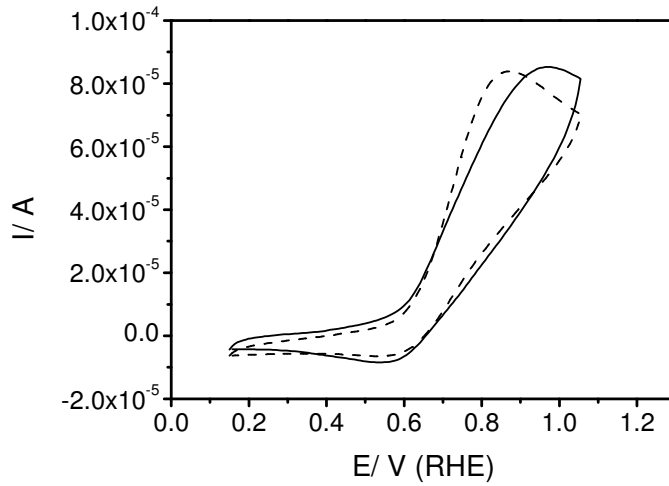
The oxidation of ascorbic acid (AA) as a model molecule has been the subject of numerous studies owing to its significance in biological processes. It has been reported that the electrocatalytic oxidation of AA can be favored on conducting polymers as opposed to carbon or metal electrodes because no strongly adsorbed residues are formed in the organic polymer substrates [19]. Consequently, lower overpotentials and better reproducibility are usually found for the former electrodes [17]. In a recent contribution we have shown that ascorbic acid molecules can be readily oxidized on poly(ani-co-ABA) films [17]. Besides, it was stated that the surface active sites for the oxidation of ascorbic acid were, specifically, the rings showing full quinoid character in the copolymer backbone. The existence of electrostatic repulsions between the attached carboxylate self-doping anions and AA was also demonstrated at pH values above the pK<sub>a</sub> of ascorbic acid, which is 4.25. The accepted mechanism for the electrochemical oxidation of AA on polyaniline derivatives has been previously described [15,17,20] and it involves a Michaelis–Menten kinetics for which the overall reaction can be divided in the following two stages:



Firstly, the formation of the reaction adduct  $\langle AA \rangle$  between the Ascorbic Acid molecule and the catalytic site in its oxidized form, whose kinetic constant parallels the reciprocal of the Michaelis constant,  $K_M$ . In the second step, charge transfer takes place

from the molecule to the site which is then reduced. This second step is governed by the rate constant for the catalytic reaction,  $k_{cat}$ .

The question now is to find whether or not an electrically insulating material, as the mesostructured silica, can modify the electrocatalytic response of poly(ani-co-ABA) against ascorbic acid. Fig. 4 shows cyclic voltammograms recorded at pH 7 during the oxidation of 10 mM ascorbate at either the mesostructured SiO<sub>2</sub>-poly(ani-co-ABA) composite (dashed line) or at the deposit of poly(ani-co-ABA) (solid line). The oxidation of AA shows a shift of about 100 mV to lower potentials using the composite material as electrode. Furthermore, it can be observed that the difference between the anodic peak and the half-wave potential ( $E_p - E_{p/2}$ ) decreases from 0.24 V, measured for poly(ani-co-ABA), to 0.16 V when the oxidation is performed at the mesostructured SiO<sub>2</sub>-poly(ani-co-ABA) composite. These observations can be clearly related with an improvement in the kinetics of the oxidation reaction induced by the presence of the silica ordered template. So, a kinetic study on the oxidation of ascorbic acid at both electrocatalytic materials is required in order to gain more insight on the reasons for the observed kinetic improvement. In the next section, we will use the kinetic model originally developed by Bartlett [15], which has been successfully applied to the catalytic oxidation of ascorbic acid molecules at different conducting polymer coated electrodes [15,17,20].



**Fig. 4.** Rotating-disc electrode voltammetric curves showing the electrochemical oxidation of 10 mM ascorbic acid in pH 7 phosphate buffer solutions at glassy carbon substrates covered with either a mesostructured SiO<sub>2</sub>-poly(ani-co-ABA) composite (dashed line) or just a deposit of the poly(ani-co-ABA) copolymer (solid line). In both cases: 540 rpm rotation speed and 50 mV s<sup>-1</sup> scan rate.

### 3.3. Kinetic study of the ascorbic acid oxidation

Fig. 5 shows the catalytic oxidation currents recorded at a fixed potential of 0.95V with a rotating-disc electrode for increasing ascorbic acid concentrations. The recorded current points can be well fitted with the mathematical function expressed in Eq. 1, which is derived from Bartlett's kinetic model based on a Michaelis-Menten reaction mechanism [15].

$$i = nFA \left[ \frac{k'_D}{2} \left\{ (K_{ME} + [AA]) - \sqrt{(K_{ME} + [AA])^2 - \left( \frac{4K_{ME}k'_{ME}[AA]}{k'_D} \right)} \right\} \right] \quad (\text{Eq. 1})$$

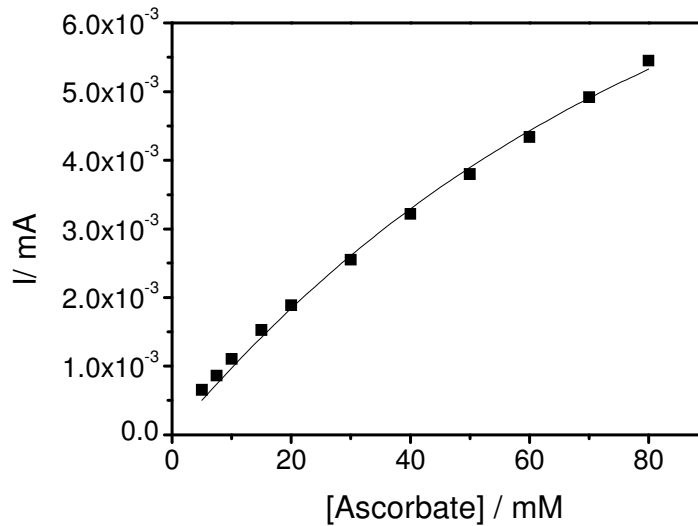
There are four fixed factors in this expression that can be easily obtained:  $n$ , the number of electrons involved in the oxidation reaction;  $F$ , the Faraday constant;  $A$ , the surface area of the electrode and  $k'_D$ , the mass transfer rate constant of ascorbate molecules, that

can be calculated from the Levich equation assuming a diffusion coefficient for AA of  $6.6 \times 10^{-6} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$ . According to the kinetic model, the *effective kinetic constants*  $K_{ME}$  and  $k'_{ME}$  depend on additional parameters such as the concentration of active sites,  $\Gamma_{site}$ , the electronic regeneration coefficient,  $k'_E$ , and the catalytic reaction coefficient,  $k_{cat}$  as follows [15]:

$$K_{ME} = \left( \frac{K_M}{k_{cat}} + \frac{\Gamma_{site}}{k'_D} \right) \left( \frac{1}{k'_E} + \frac{1}{k_{cat}} \right)^{-1} \quad (\text{Eq. 2})$$

$$k'_{ME} = \left( \frac{K_M}{k_{cat} \Gamma_{site}} + \frac{1}{k'_D} \right)^{-1} \quad (\text{Eq. 3})$$

The acceptable nonlinear fitting of the experimental points shown in Fig. 5 assures the applicability of the kinetic model to this system, under the conditions of the experiment, and allows  $K_{ME}$  and  $k'_{ME}$  to be obtained from Eq.1 according to the procedure described in [17].



**Fig. 5.** Validation of the applied kinetic model: (■) experimental currents recorded at 0.95V during the oxidation of increasing concentrations of ascorbate molecules on mesostructured  $\text{SiO}_2$ -poly(ani-co-ABA) composite electrodes. (—) Fitting curve obtained from Eq.1. Supporting electrolyte: pH 7 phosphate buffer.

The values obtained for these two constants are summarized in Table 1, where it has been also included the results obtained for the electrochemical oxidation of ascorbic acid directly at poly(ani-*co*-ABA), i.e., at the copolymer deposited on the bare glassy carbon substrate in the absence of mesostructured SiO<sub>2</sub> template. As it can be observed from the two first columns in the table, the  $K_{ME}$  value obtained for ascorbic acid oxidation at poly(ani-*co*-ABA),  $6.3 \times 10^{-5} \text{ mol cm}^{-3}$ , increases by 60% when the polymer is grown within the mesostructured silica. On the contrary, the value of the other kinetic constant,  $k'_{ME}$ , seems not to be significantly affected by the presence of the ordered silica matrix.

**Table 1.** Effective kinetic constants calculated for the oxidation of ascorbic acid at 0.95 V on glassy carbon rotating disk electrodes covered with either a mesostructured SiO<sub>2</sub>-poly(ani-*co*-ABA) composite or a poly(ani-*co*-ABA) film. Electrolyte solution: pH 7 phosphate buffer containing 10 mM AA.  $\omega = 540 \text{ rpm}$ .

Modified electrode	$K_{ME} / \text{mol cm}^{-3}$	$k'_{ME} / \text{cm s}^{-1}$	$K_1 (\alpha \Gamma_{site})$	$K_2 (\alpha k'_E)$
SiO <sub>2</sub> -Poly(ani- <i>co</i> -ABA)	$10.3 \times 10^{-5}$	$1.69 \times 10^{-3}$	$3.35 \times 10^{-3}$	$5.27 \times 10^{-5}$
Poly(ani- <i>co</i> -ABA)	$6.3 \times 10^{-5}$	$1.71 \times 10^{-3}$	$3.28 \times 10^{-3}$	$3.26 \times 10^{-5}$

In order to simplify the discussion on the effect of the silica matrix in the catalysis, some reasonable assumptions can be made. Among the parameters appearing in Eqs. 2 and 3, the mass transport rate,  $k'_D$ , has already been taken as a constant in the calculations of the values presented in Table 1, as diffusion within the mesoporosity is considered to be essentially conditioned by the electrolyte, without any effect of confinement. On the other hand, the catalytic reaction rate,  $k_{cat}$ , is expected to be a function of the nature of the reaction intermediate which is deemed to be unaffected by

the presence of the inorganic matrix. Finally, it should be mentioned that the analysis of the experimental variables affecting the Michaelis constant,  $K_M$ , was undertaken in a previous work [17]. There, it was shown that the main changes in  $K_M$  are due to the neutral/anionic state of both the ascorbic acid and the polymer. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider that  $K_M$  is mainly a function of pH and remains constant in the present study because all the experiments are conducted at a fixed pH 7 value.

Consequently, the discussion must be focused on the influence of the concentration of active sites,  $\Gamma_{\text{site}}$ , and the electronic regeneration coefficient,  $k'_E$ , which is a measure of the kinetics of restoration of the active site oxidation ability. Since  $k'_{ME}$  depends only on the former parameter (Eq. 3), it is derived that the concentration of sites should remain almost unchanged whether the polymer grows dimensionally unrestricted or within the template. An unvaried concentration of active sites, which were identified as oxidized rings with a pure quinoid character [17], is consistent as the same oxidation potential (i.e. same degree of emeraldine to pernigraniline conversion) is used in both cases. From the model, we have found a combination of constants, expressed as  $K_I$  in Table 1, that allow the contribution of the active sites concentration,  $\Gamma_{\text{site}}$ , to be isolated. The fact that both materials show almost identical  $K_I$  values (and hence, the same concentration of active sites) strongly suggests that the 60% increase observed in the  $K_{ME}$  value for the template-grown polymer must be explained in terms of an enhancement in the electronic regeneration coefficient,  $k'_E$ , which is proportional to the combined  $K_2$  constant shown in Table 1.

The regeneration rate of the quinoid centers is essentially governed by the kinetics of electron transfer between the underlying electrode and the polymer-solution interface

sites. Accordingly, it is a function of the polymer conductivity [17]. The reason for the observed increase in the regeneration rate is somehow obscure, since the silica matrix is an insulator and does not provide new paths for the electron transfer. Nevertheless, the matrix can affect the growth of the polymer modifying some of its properties. An increase in the amount/size of the crystalline domains inside the polymer and the preferential orientation of the polymer chains perpendicular to the surface are some features that can be stimulated by the inert template. The former provides the intimate packing of the chains necessary for an efficient electron transfer. In addition, a perpendicular growth of the chain bundles guarantees that the electron path from the active sites towards the electrode have a larger contribution of intra-chain electron transfer (delocalization) and a lower amount of the less favored inter-chain electron hopping. These combined effects could be at the origin of the observed increase in  $K_2$  for the polymer confined inside the ordered silica template and, consequently, could explain the improvement in  $K_{ME}$  with no apparent effect in  $k'_{ME}$ . This interpretation is also supported by the results of Santos Pedroso *et al.* [21], who pointed out that the particular morphology of polyaniline grown on ordered mesoporous silica could be at the origin of the improved electrical conductivity found for this material.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Highly ordered, mesoporous, electrically insulating  $\text{SiO}_2$  layers were deposited on glassy carbon electrodes by an electrochemically assisted deposition method. The obtained material was used as the template for the electrochemical insertion of self-doping poly(aniline-*co*-ABA).



The copolymer grown within the silica mesoporosity preserves its electrochemical redox activity even at pH 7. Besides, this conducting material is able to oxidize ascorbate anions with improved kinetic performance when compared with poly(aniline-*co*-ABA) deposited straight on bare glassy carbon substrates.

The kinetic study for the oxidation of ascorbate ions at a fixed potential revealed that the effective kinetic constant  $K_{ME}$  increases significantly and, simultaneously,  $k'_{ME}$  does not change when the catalytic reaction takes place at the SiO<sub>2</sub>-polymer composite. The observation that the surface concentration of active sites  $\Gamma_{site}$  is almost the same for both poly(aniline-*co*-ABA) and SiO<sub>2</sub>-poly(aniline-*co*-ABA) strongly suggested that the increase in  $K_{ME}$  should be ascribed to an improvement in electronic conductivity of the copolymer induced by the silica template. This hypothesis seems supported by the fact that  $K_2$ , the combination of kinetic constants proportional to  $k'_E$ , is higher for the polymer grown inside the silica template.

### **Acknowledgements**

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