Processing of porous structures of $\text{YBa}_2\text{Cu}_3\text{O}_{7-\delta}$
High-temperature superconductor

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Technological aspects of fabrication of the $\text{YBa}_2\text{Cu}_3\text{O}_{7-\delta}$ ceramics with preparation of open pores are presented. The highest porosity of the sample with open pores and suitable mechanical properties was performed using $\text{C}_12\text{H}_{22}\text{O}_{11}$ (sugar sucrose) as the supplementary phase.

Key words: $\text{YBa}_2\text{Cu}_3\text{O}_{7-\delta}$; open porous structure

1. Introduction

The search for applications of superconductive ceramics is mainly focused on two groups of materials: thin films and bulk ceramics. The main aim of this research to assure their proper use and to optimize parameters such as: critical current, critical magnetic field and critical temperature [1–4]. Superconductive ceramics can also be interesting material for other practical applications. Materials with porous structure can be used, for example, as gas filters [5] or as composites with superconductive matrices.

Despite many papers concerning the syntheses of $\text{YBa}_2\text{Cu}_3\text{O}_{7-\delta}$ [3, 4, 6–8], fabrication of open-pore superconductive ceramics is not well known yet [9, 10]. Therefore, various technological aspects of fabrication of $\text{YBa}_2\text{Cu}_3\text{O}_{7-\delta}$ open-pore ceramics have been studied. The basic problem is using an adequate supplementary filler in order to obtain a homogeneous localization of free spaces. Filling should not destroy the superconductive properties. It should also enable fabrication of samples with good mechanical properties. Various materials being used as supplementary phases, for example: wax, graphite or polyurethane foams, the best results were obtained using the crystalline sucrose as a filler.

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2. Experimental

2.1. Sintering granules of YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$

During the initial stage of this research, in order to obtain an open-pore structure, granules of YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$ were sintered so as to preserve pores that had been formed between not pressed granules. Superconductive YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$ material was prepared using the standard method of powders sintering. It was then ground and separated into three fractions: 0.2–0.4 mm; 0.4–0.63 mm and 0.63–0.8 mm. The sintering proceeded in the temperature range from 940 to 1100 ºC and the time of sintering changed from 10 min to 3 h. The best results were obtained after sintering at 940 ºC for 3 h (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Sample obtained by mixing YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$ granules of the size of 0.63–0.8 mm, not pressed and sintered at 950 ºC by 3h

Generally, the obtained samples were either mechanically weak or containing a molten matrix. Therefore, the method was not reproducible. In order to improve the mechanical properties of the samples, it was modified by filling free spaces between granules in the matrix with liquid wax. After solidification of the filler, the sample was pressed and sintered to obtain intergranular bindings. The wax filler made possible a tight pressing of the granules without losing empty spaces between them. This resulted in fluidisation of the wax under high pressure and its outflow from the matrix. Nevertheless, weak pressing of the granules allowed one to obtain samples with open pores (Fig. 2). Unfortunately, they were not mechanically stable.

Fig. 2. Sample obtained by sintering YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$ granules filled with wax and slightly pressed
2.2. Fabrication of the YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$–δ porous ceramics by using poly(pyrrole imide) foams

Another way to obtain porous structure of the YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$–δ ceramics was described in [9,10]. Poly(pyrrole imide) (PPI) foams were used as porous structure replicas. The authors presented two methods of preparing the porous structure. The first method consisted in a complete filling of the PPI foams, then they obtained negatives of the foams. The other method consisted in covering the structure of the PPI foams with YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$–δ, then they obtained replica of PPI foams. Both methods required mixing of very finely ground superconductive with a liquid in order to obtain a suspension of an optimum viscosity. The next stage for both methods is burning out PPI and sintering YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$–δ. In the present work, this stage (a slow heating) was carried out to ca. 400 ºC. It should inhibit burning of PPI foam. Then the sample was sintered at 935 ºC for 24 h. The difference between the methods described above consists in choosing a proper viscosity of the suspension and the method of filling with the foam. In the case of fabricating replica, a moderate viscosity of the suspension should be chosen in order to provide open pores in the soaked foam samples (Fig. 3). In the case of applying the foam as the supplementary filler, use of a thick suspension of YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$–δ was required to fill all free spaces within the foam.

Fig. 3. A porous sample obtained by burning out PPI foams covered with YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$–δ suspension

The critical point of such technique of fabrication of open-pore ceramics was the preparation of the YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$–δ suspension of appropriate viscosity and also depositing a small amount of the suspension on the foam by soaking it. In order to obtain the required viscosity, the following liquids were applied: methanol, water, glycerine or their mixtures. Despite many attempts, the obtained samples were neither reproducible enough nor mechanically resistant, mainly due to the lack of pressing the YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$–δ ceramic before sintering them. Therefore the obtained samples were not suitable for a further material research.

2.3. Mixture of the YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$–δ granules and crystalline sucrose

The basic disadvantage of the previously described methods of preparation of open-pore structures was insufficient pressing of the samples or not pressing them
before the sintering stage. Because of this, the samples exhibited poor mechanical properties. In order to avoid such problems, a method consisting in mixing granules of the filler with granules of YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$ was elaborated. Such material was produced by the first method and additionally very strongly pressed before sintering the samples. The best results were obtained when applying the crystalline sucrose as a filler.

In order to open pores, the filler was added in the amount necessary to obtain 50% and 60% volume fraction. Using such an amount of the filler assured the connection between granules of the filler and existence of open-pore system after sintering the mixture. The granules with the same size range were mixed. The mixtures were pressed up to 700 MPa, slowly heated to 400 ºC and sintered at 935 ºC for 36 h. The method turned out to be well reproducible and gave the samples of good quality (Fig. 4).

2.4. XRD and $R(T)$ measurements

X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns were recorded with an X'Pert MRD (Philips) diffractometer using CuKα radiation ($2\theta$ range of 20–65º). Finally, electrical characterization $R(T)$ were carried out using a standard four probe geometry (Ag paste to Ag electrodes deposited onto the samples).

3. Results and discussion

The best results were obtained with the method using mixed granules of YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$ and a filler. It allowed to press the mixture very tight and thereby to obtain suitable connections between granules of YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$. The crystalline sucrose turned out to be the best filler, which allowed us to obtain the material having good mechanical resistance, containing 60 vol. % of the pores. It, was characterized by the average density of about 2.76 g/cm$^3$ and the size of pores dependent on the size of the used granules. In order to analyse the quality of the samples, XRD and $R(T)$ measurements were performed.
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Fig. 5. XRD pattern for standard YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$

Fig. 6. XRD pattern for the YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$ after sintering with sugar

Fig. 7. R–T plot for a superconductive sample having open pores filled with iron and fixed with wax
Figures 5 and 6 present the XRD patterns for a reference sample and the sample after sintering with sucrose and oxidation at 475 ºC for 36 h. The X-ray analysis revealed absence of remaining sucrose filler: the samples were burned out completely. Moreover, the $R(T)$ dependence points to the metallic nature of the material above the transition temperature and a narrow (2–3 K) transition to superconductivity at 91 K (Fig. 7).

4. Conclusion

The method of producing the porous $\text{YBa}_2\text{Cu}_3\text{O}_{7-\delta}$ ceramics consisting in using granules of supplementary materials as fillers, gave the best results in the case of crystalline sucrose. The obtained materials have good superconductive and mechanical properties. Therefore such a technique is suitable for obtaining materials applicable in a material research.

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References


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