Safe immobilization of Cr(III) in heat-treated zeolite tuff compacts

Barbara Liguori, Antonio Cassese, Carmine Colella *

Dipartimento di Ingegneria dei Materiali e della Produzione, Università Federico II, Piazzale V. Tecchio 80, 80125 Napoli, Italy

Abstract

The possibility to remove chromium ions from a simulated electroplating wastewater by a discontinuous ion-exchange process based on phillipsite-rich Neapolitan yellow tuff (NYT) has been investigated. The immobilization of the pollutant cation in the resulting sludge through a heat-treatment has been realized, demonstrating that compacts made of Cr-loaded NYT powder, fired at temperatures of 1000 °C or over, are safe materials with negligible Cr^{3+} leaching. The set up overall process allows, in addition, a volume reduction of the waste with associated lower disposal costs or, better, the obtainment of a ceramic material, whose physical and mechanical properties are comparable to those of similar ordinary ceramics, such as bricks. In summary, the proposed strategy looks at the polluted sludge as a resource to be exploited, instead of a dangerous material to safely dispose of.
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1. Introduction

Hexavalent chromium is a powerful carcinogenic agent, because of its ability to modify the DNA transcription process causing important chromosomal aberrations [1]. However, the presence of chromium in environment, whatever its oxidation state and the possibility of variations by redox reactions, is a source of serious problems and harmful health effects [2].

Chromium removal from water is part of the wider problem of heavy metals abatement. Various procedures have been set up to remove heavy metals from water, based on chemical precipitation, membrane filtration, carbon adsorption and ion-exchange [3]. Ion-exchange, in particular, has proven to be one of the most useful techniques to remove polluting cations from water, since it allows: (1) good performances, (2) reasonable costs and, in favourable cases, (3) metal recovery [4]. As regards chromium, various exchangers have been tested, e.g., ion-exchange resins [5], natural hydrothermal zeolites [6], natural sedimentary zeolites [7] and synthetic zeolites [8].

Ion-exchange is usually operated by continuous processes in fixed bed plants. This procedure involves, however, good cation exchange selectivity for the noxious species to overcome the negative effects of interfering cations on the overall process performance. An alternative way to operate is to opt for a discontinuous process, i.e., the direct addition of a low cost natural zeolite to wastewater. Selecting a proper water–zeolite ratio allows to exhaustively remove the toxic cation from water in times of practical significance, transferring the polluting cation from water to a zeolitic sludge. Stabilization–inertization of the sludge in a cement matrix is usually a successful procedure to safely and irreversibly entrap the cation. This technique has proven to be suitable to remove and safely dispose chromium either using natural [9] or synthetic zeolites [10].

Previous research pointed out that ceramization of zeolitic sludges entrapping polluting cations may be a possible alternative procedure to safely dispose harmful species. In particular, it has been proven that pre-formed compacts of zeolitic sludge can be transformed by firing into stable alumino-silicate structures, which are highly resistant to leaching and possibly also of interest as ceramic materials [11].

On the basis of previous results pointing out the reasonable selectivity of phillipsite for chromium [9], this work aims to evaluate the ability of a phillipsite-rich tuff to steadily entrap chromium through a two stage process: (a) cation removal from water by ion-exchange and (b) stabilization of the resulting Cr-bearing sludge by thermal conversion of pre-formed compacts into ceramic materials.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39 0817682390; fax: +39 0817682394.
E-mail address: carmine.colella@unina.it (C. Colella).

2. Experimental

2.1. Tuff sample

A phillipsite-rich tuff powder sample from Marano (Naples, Italy), belonging to the huge formation of *Neapolitan yellow tuff* (NYT), marketed by IZ, Italiana Zeoliti, Pigneto (MO, Italy) as PHIL-75, whose chemical composition has been reported previously [12], was selected as the natural exchanger. Its mineral composition was as follows: phillipsite 46%, chabazite 5%, analcime 9%, smectite 10% plus 30% of non-exchanging phases, including feldspar, pyroxene, biotite and amorphous compounds [12]. The cation exchange capacity (CEC), measured through the cross-exchange procedure [13], turned out to be $2.03\ meq\ g^{-1}$. Table 1 reports the results of the screen analysis of the tuff sample.

It is to be observed, that the choice of using a marketed product, costing US$ 0.08–0.10 per kg, is convenient, but not limitative, as more specific products, with higher zeolite content, may be easily found in the numerous tuff quarries operating in the same area [14]. Products richer in zeolite could also be obtained from the parent rock, by mineral enrichment processes, based on simple grinding and screening [15].

2.2. Preliminary Cr^{3+} exchange tests

Ion-exchange kinetic runs were carried out by putting 5–25 g of NYT powder into contact at room temperature, under continuous stirring in a batch reactor system, with a Cr^{3+} solution, simulating an electroplating wastewater, having the following cation composition: $[Cr^{3+}] = 45\ mg\ l^{-1}$, $[Na^+] = 20.3\ mg\ l^{-1}$, $[K^+] = 9.2\ mg\ l^{-1}$, $[Ca^{2+}] = 150\ mg\ l^{-1}$, $[Mg^{2+}] = 21\ mg\ l^{-1}$. The simulated solution was obtained dissolving, in bidistilled water, chromium and magnesium nitrates, provided by Baker Analyzed, and sodium, calcium and potassium nitrates, provided by Carlo Erba Analyticals. Cr^{3+} uptake by the NYT sample was monitored by drawing small solution samples at fixed times and measuring, after filtration, Cr^{3+} concentration by atomic absorption spectrophotometry (AAS, AA2100 Perkin-Elmer apparatus). pH was occasionally measured by a Radiometer mod. PHM220 pH meter, to be sure of the absence of any precipitate (pH ≤ 6).

2.3. Preparation and firing of the Cr^{3+}-loaded tuff sample

A model tuff sludge, whose chromium amount was fixed on the basis of the results of above mentioned kinetic tests,

was obtained by contacting, under continuous stirring, at room temperature, for 24 h 100 g of NYT sample with a $178\ mg\ l^{-1}$ Cr^{3+} solution. Chromium content in the experimental Cr^{3+}-loaded tuff sample, estimated by AAS, after a suitable dissolution with a hydrofluoric–perchloric acid mixture, was $1.67\ mg\ g^{-1}$.

Cr^{3+}-bearing NYT samples were dry-formed into cylindrical compacts (i.d. = 10 mm; height = 3 mm), using a suitable steel mould and a Carver Lab press. Compaction pressure was fixed at 120 MPa. Firing of the compacts was carried out in an electric furnace. Green compacts were brought at temperatures ranging from 800 to 1100 °C (heating rate, $10\ °C\ min^{-1}$), kept at the selected temperature for 1 h, and finally slowly cooled down to room temperature inside the furnace.

Reference heat-treatments of Cr^{3+}-loaded powder tuff samples were also performed in a wide range of temperatures to investigate the thermal evolution of the zeolite (phillipsite) structure.

2.4. Characterization of Cr^{3+}-loaded tuff samples after firing

Changes in mineral composition of the samples after thermal treatments were investigated by X-ray diffraction (XRD, Philips PW 1730 apparatus, rad. Cu $K\alpha_1$).

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM, Oxford-Cambridge S440) was used to analyze the ceramic microstructure of the fired compacts.

Thermodilatometric analyses (Netzsch 402 E/7) were carried out in air on cylindrical Cr^{3+}-loaded tuff compacts (i.d. = 10 mm; height = 10 mm), obtained using a isostatic press (150 MPa). Heating rate was fixed at 10 °C/min; Al_2O_3 was used as reference material.

Physical properties of the fired compacts, such as open porosity and bulk density, were estimated using a mercury porosimeter (Micromeritics Autopore 9400). Linear shrinkage was determined, estimating with a gauge the variation of the compacts diameter after firing. Compressive strength measurements were performed using an Instrom 4204 instrument. All the physical measurements were carried out in triplicate and the results averaged.

2.5. Leaching tests

To test the safety of chromium immobilization, two procedures were used:

(a) Hundred milligram samples of unfired Cr^{3+}-loaded powder tuff were contacted, under continuous stirring, for 3 days with 50 ml of a 1 M NaCl solution, to evaluate the amount of back exchangeable Cr^{3+}.

(b) Samples of Cr^{3+}-loaded powder tuff, both fired and unfired (reference sample), were subjected to the so-called "availability test", which is a measure of the extent of a given species (e.g., a cation) that is not tied up in poorly soluble mineral phases and can potentially be released into environment [16]. Accordingly, leached Cr^{3+} was estimated

Table 1
Screen analysis of the tuff sample utilized

Screen size (μm)	Cumulative passing (wt%)
180	100.0
125	98.5
90	94.5
63	82.0
38	57.2

by contacting powdered tuff compacts with distilled water (solid-to-liquid ratio equal to 1/50 by weight). In a first step, lasted 3 h, the pH of the contact solution was kept constantly at 7.0 by adding suitable amounts of a 1 M HNO_3 solution. The treatment was then renewed on the residual filtered solid in the same conditions as above, except pH which was fixed at 4.0. The ultimate contact solution was finally analyzed for Cr^{3+} by AAS.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Kinetics of chromium uptake by ion-exchange

The ion-exchange kinetic curves of Fig. 1 allow to evaluate the minimum tuff amount necessary to bring, in times of practical significance (30 min or less), Cr^{3+} concentration in the model wastewater (see Section 2) under the law's limit (2 mg l^{-1}) [17]. It is evident that values of tuff/solution ratios <25 g l^{-1} do not meet the above requirements. This means that only a very limited fraction of the CEC of the material is utilized and therefore that the process is poorly effective. Actually, this is a common outcome in discontinuous processes, in which the reaction tends rapidly to equilibrium and the overall performance greatly suffers of the presence of interfering cations. However, this fact is mostly overcome by the low cost of the rough material and, in addition, it is balanced by the advantage that the ingoing Cr^{3+} remains entrapped in the solid, due to a partial and/or gradual breakdown of the zeolitic structures, especially phillipsite, which makes the exchange practically irreversible [7]. A qualitative confirmation of this is evident in the XRD patterns of Fig. 2, where a reduction in the peaks intensity of phillipsite (P) after exchange with Cr^{3+} was observed (analcime, A, peaks remain practically unchanged, demonstrating that this phase, characterized by a higher framework density [18], does not exchange chromium). On its turn, the irreversibility of chromium-exchange is demonstrated by the results of the back-exchange with a 1 M NaCl solution, which gave a Cr^{3+} release <0.001 mg l^{-1}. This occurrence, however, cannot be considered

Fig. 2. Comparison of the XRD patterns of NYT: (a) before and (b) after the Cr^{3+} exchange process. A, analcime; C, chabazite; F, feldspar; P, phillipsite (only the most intense peaks of each phase are indicated).

satisfactory for a safe chromium immobilization: Cr^{3+} leaching could, in fact, take place as a result of an accidental contact with acid solutions, seeing that the intermediate silica zeolites, i.e., phillipsite and chabazite, are poorly acid-resistant [15,19].

3.2. Thermal treatment of the Cr^{3+}-loaded sludge

Fig. 3 summarizes the evolution of the ceramic system (Cr^{3+}-loaded powder tuff samples, see Section 2) monitored by XRD analysis as a function of the treatment temperature. Inspecting the XRD patterns in Fig. 3, makes evident that the thermal behavior of the Cr^{3+}-bearing NYT, maybe due to the exiguity of Cr^{3+} contained in the tuff (1.67 mg g^{-1}), is similar to that of the parent previously investigated NYT [20], i.e., (a) chabazite (C) and phillipsite (P) structures collapse within about 600 °C; (b) crystallization of alkali feldspar (F) is observed at about 800 °C, with some residual analcime and an amorphous phase still present; (c) the sample appears nearly amorphous, apart a very limited presence of feldspars at 1100 °C.

3.3. Physical and mechanical properties of the heat-treated compacts

Table 2 summarizes the physical and mechanical properties of the heat-treated Cr^{3+}-bearing tuff compacts. Bulk density
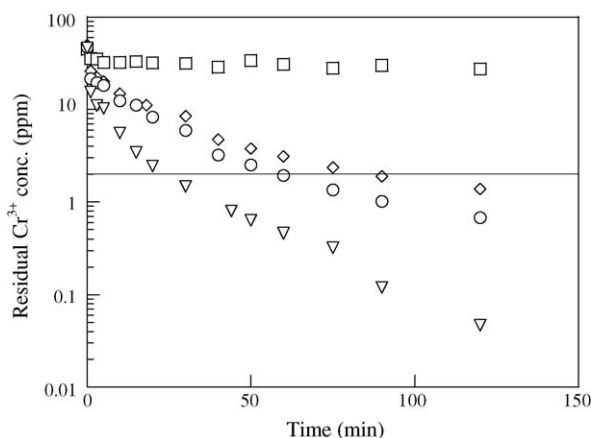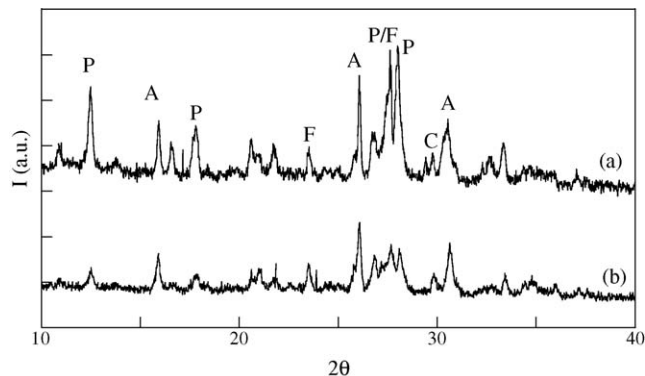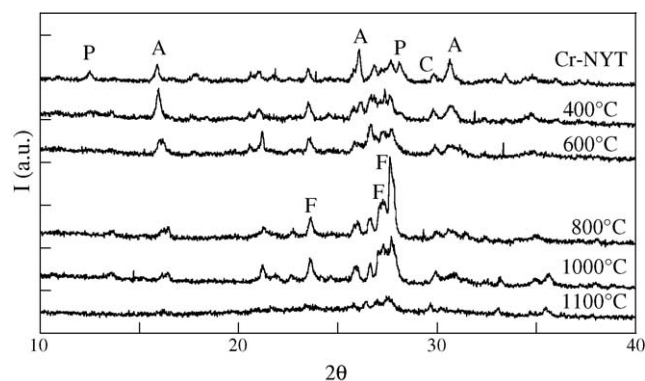

Fig. 1. Cr uptake curves by 5 g (square), 17 g (rhomb), 20 g (circle) and 25 g (upside down triangle) of NYT sample from 1 l of 45 mg l^{-1} Cr^{3+} solution in the presence of an interfering cationic matrix (see Section 2). Horizontal line: law's limit at discharge.

Fig. 3. Comparison of the XRD patterns of Cr^{3+}-loaded NYT powder, fired at different temperatures for 1 h (symbols as in Fig. 2). Top diffractograms: unfired sample.

Table 2
Physical and mechanical properties of heat-treated Cr^{3+}-loading zeolite tuff compacts

Firing temperature (°C)	Bulk density (g cm^{-3})	Porosity (%)	Linear shrinkage (%)	Compressive strength (MPa)
800	1.40	35.0	1.5	31
900	1.41	29.1	2.4	29
1000	1.45	28.5	2.9	31
1100	2.06	2.9	14.3	79

and linear shrinkage show an increasing trend with firing temperature. Accordingly, porosity decreases. In particular, in the thermal range 1000–1100 °C, these physical properties show a sharp variation, reaching values of 2.06 g cm^{-3}, 2.9 and 14.3%, for bulk density, porosity and linear shrinkage, respectively, due to evident melting phenomena. Such belief is confirmed by the SEM micrographs of the fracture surfaces for Cr^{3+}-loaded tuff compacts, heat-treated at 1000 and 1100 °C, respectively (Fig. 4). The sample heated at 1100 °C presents, in fact, a fracture surface characterized by a glassy, continuous phase. The variation of the compressive strength of the compacts treated at increasing temperatures (last column of Table 1) confirms once
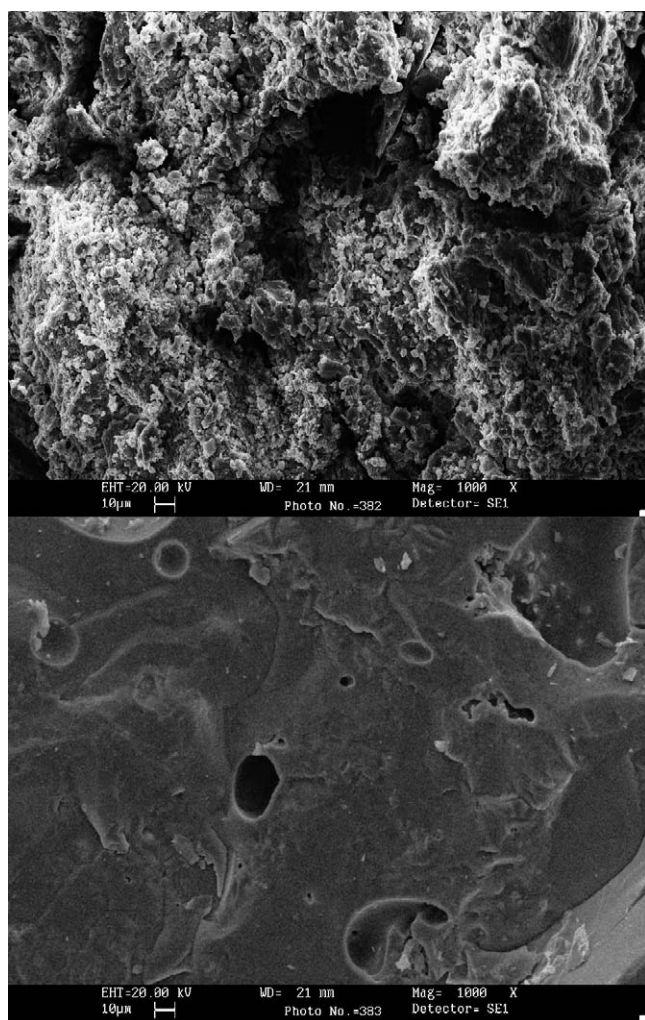
again the sharp change of microstructure in the thermal range 1000–1100 °C.

The mechanical properties of the fired compacts are good enough compared to those of analogous ceramic products (compressive strength for bricks are generally ≥15 MPa). These values are, moreover, much higher than the minimum value suggested by the international standards for handling and landfilling the solidified wastes, i.e., 0.44 MPa [21].

Fig. 5, reporting the thermodilatometric curve of the Cr^{3+}-loaded NYT sample, evidences a continuous contraction of the sample throughout the thermal range examined (room temperature → 900 °C). Linear shrinkage up to about 300 °C is due to removal of zeolitic water; the following smoother shrinkage must be assigned both to the breakdown of zeolitic structures and the joint formation of feldspars (more compact phases). Above 800 °C, it is evident the beginning of a sharp contraction, likely due to incipient sintering phenomena.

3.4. Leaching performance of the heat-treated Cr^{3+}-loaded NYT samples

Fig. 6 summarizes the results of the "availability test" carried out on the fired Cr^{3+}-loaded NYT samples. Inspecting this figure, allows the following observations to be made:

(a) Increasing temperature up to 400 °C causes a remarkable increase of released Cr^{3+} well beyond the law's limits, evi-

Fig. 4. SEM micrographs of the fracture surfaces of Cr^{3+}-loaded tuff compacts, heat-treated at 1000 °C (above) and 1100 °C (below).
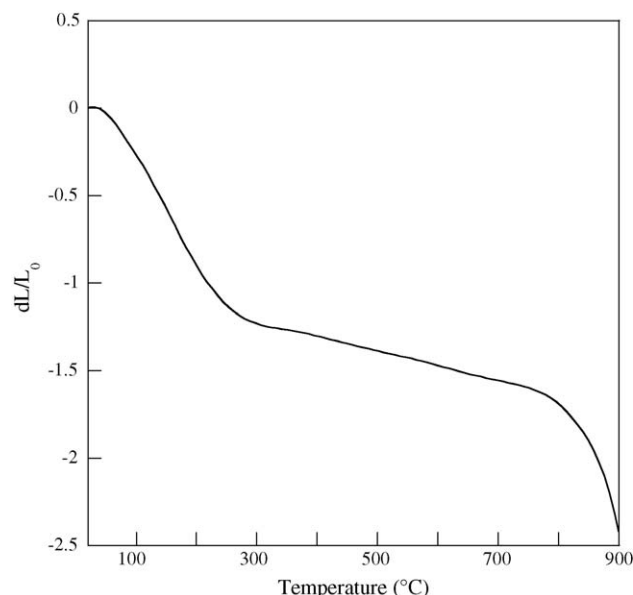

Fig. 5. Thermodilatometric profile of a green compact of Cr^{3+}-loaded tuff.
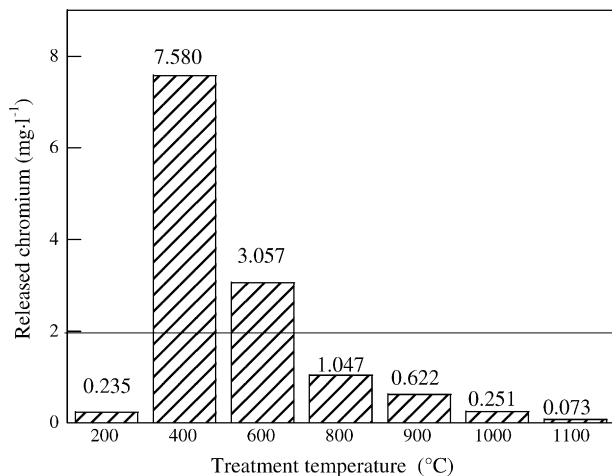
Fig. 6. Comparison of the amounts of released chromium by the fired Cr^{3+}-loaded tuff compacts in the "availability test" (see Section 2). Horizontal line: law's limit at discharge.

dently due to zeolite structure breakdown, which sets free chromium ions.

(b) The amount of released Cr presents a decreasing trend at further increasing temperatures, as a consequence of chromium trapping in the increasingly tight ceramic microstructure. The final values at or above $1000\,^{\circ}C$ are comparable to or better than the initial values ($200\,^{\circ}C$), with the substantial difference that now Cr^{3+} is safely and definitely immobilized in the ceramic matrix even in the unfavorable event of a contact with an acid solution.

4. Conclusions

The present study confirms that the recourse to a discontinuous process to remove cationic pollutants via ion-exchange is a feasible choice, provided that:

- a suitable low-cost cation-selective exchanger is available and
- it is possible to convert the resulting sludge by ceramization into a not leaching material.

It has been proven, in fact, that phillipsite-rich Neapolitan yellow tuff, a low-cost material, presenting a reasonable selectivity for Cr^{3+}, is effective in removing this cation from simulated electroplating wastewaters and that tuff sludge ceramization is an useful way for its definitive immobilization.

The described process, characterized by a simple technological approach, presents the advantages: (a) to confine the polluting cation in an acid-resistant matrix, provided that the firing temperature of the original Cr^{3+}-bearing sludge is not lower than $1000\,^{\circ}C$, (b) to obtain a remarkable reduction of sludge volume with associated cost lowering for handling and landfilling the solidified waste and (c) to set up a procedure to convert a potentially toxic waste in a ceramic material, which, on account of the satisfactory physical and mechanical properties, may be considered competitive with the ordinary ceramics.

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