PREPARATION AND PROPERTIES OF FLY ASH-BASED GEOPOLYMER FOAMS

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An extremely porous geopolymer material – an incombustible alumino-silicate foam – can be prepared by incorporating gas-forming agents into mixtures consisting of an alkaline activating agent (NaOH + sodium water glass) and fly ash. Aluminium powder or materials containing elemental Si (silica fume, FeSi or SiC) may be used as gas-forming agents. Macroscopic pores are given rise thanks to the release of gaseous hydrogen generated during the reaction of aluminium, respectively Si, in a strong alkaline environment. The formation of the foam becomes more intense if aluminium powder is used instead of silica fume. The effect of silica fume can only be observed at concentrations ranging from 5 to 10 percent by weight and at temperatures above 60°C because of a low content of elemental Si in silica fume. The foam formation takes place immediately after the addition of aluminium powder to the mixture but the foam collapsing must be prevented by incorporation of portland cement or lime. The Si reaction in the strong alkaline environment is boosted by the presence of an alumino-silicate material, ie the fly ash. Geopolymer foams prepared by addition of gas-forming aluminium powder or silica fume are characterized by similar pore sizes; the pore size is comparable with that observed in lime-silicate materials produced in autoclave. The volume weight of geopolymer foams is similar to that of other inorganic foams. The strength of geopolymer foams is dependent on their volume weight. Mechanical properties of geopolymer foams were stable over the investigated period of a year. Geopolymer foams are incombustible and can resist temperatures of up to 1000°C without any sign of decomposition. Their shape does not change after exposure to temperatures ranging from 400 to 800°C. In contrast to lime-silicate foams and cement-based foams the firing of geopolymer foams is not accompanied by the formation of any cracks or by any additional changes (rehydration).

INTRODUCTION

Porous materials have been applied extensively as purification membranes, high-efficiency adsorption materials, catalysts or building materials. Macro-porous materials (the materials with pores larger than 50 nm according to the IUPAC classification [1]) can be prepared on the basis [2] of organic polymers, metals or inorganic bodies (glass, ceramics, hydrate lime materials, hydraulic binders). Organic polymer foams are usually produced by expansion in vacuum, extrusion of molten polymer into a vacuum chamber, by blowing compressed gas into the molten polymer or by adding gas-forming agent to organic materials. Thanks to their low mass, low heat conductivity and good sound proofing properties the polymer foams are suitable for the manufacture of packaging components or insulating components used in civil engineering. The combustibility of such materials represents their main drawback which limits their applications to about 50 to 120 °C at the maximum. They start to burn at temperatures ranging from 350 to 500°C. Therefore, more resistant inorganic macro-porous materials (porous concrete) are to be used at higher temperatures. Porous concrete is prepared on the basis of lime or cement pastes into which a gas-forming agent (aluminium powder, H₂O₂, CaC₂, O₂) is incorporated. The gas released during the reaction gives rise to a macro-porous structure that is preserved even after the binder hardens. Porous concrete is produced currently by using mixture composed of silica/aluminous and lime-containing materials to which aluminium powder is added. Hydro-thermal conditions in the autoclave give rise to a strong structure composed of crystalline lime hydro-silicates. However, hydro-silicate dehydration and decomposition take place at high temperatures, which may be regarded as a drawback. There is also an alternative technology available: cement or lime pastes are mixed with an organic foam obtained by using agents suppressing the surface tension (surfactants).
It is also possible to use another type of inorganic binder for the preparation of macro-porous materials, ie alkali-activated alumino-silicates called geopolymers. The authors [3-8] investigated properties and possibilities of preparation of these macro-porous geopolymers by using meta-kaolin precursor. Silica fume, SiC and H₂O₂ were added as gas-forming agents. The present work deals with the preparation and properties of macro-porous materials on the basis of alkali-activated fly ashes – geopolymers.

EXPERIMENTAL

Fly ash rejected in the Opatovice power plant (Czech Republic) fired by brown coal was used for the preparation of geopolymer foams. The fly ash composition is given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SiO₂</th>
<th>Al₂O₃</th>
<th>CaO</th>
<th>Fe₂O₃</th>
<th>Na₂O</th>
<th>K₂O</th>
<th>TiO₂</th>
<th>MgO</th>
<th>P₂O₅</th>
<th>SO₃</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>53.68</td>
<td>31.34</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Geopolymer foams were prepared by mixing the fly ash with the alkaline activating agent and the gas-forming ingredient. The water coefficient (water-to-fly ash ratio) in the mixture amounted to 0.26. The SiO₂/Na₂O modulus was equal to 1.06 and the Na₂O content (related to the fly ash weight) corresponded to 6 percent. Aluminium powder, silica fume, SiC and FeSi powder were added as gas-forming agents. Geopolymer foams were kept at a temperature of 80°C for 12 hours. Finished foams were maintained subsequently in air at a relative humidity ranging from 40 to 50 percent. The preparation diagram is shown in Figure 1.

Aluminium powder (Aquapor 4207 and 4213, added in the manufacture of porous concrete) was used in the present work. The composition of aluminium applied as additive is given in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aquapor 4207</th>
<th>Aquapor 4213</th>
<th>Aluminium powder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of solid matter</td>
<td>68-72 %</td>
<td>68-72 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D50</td>
<td>40-65 μm</td>
<td>15-22 μm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al content</td>
<td>99 %</td>
<td>99 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Silica fume (Elkem) contained 95 % SiO₂ and its specific surface area was 2.500 m²/kg (BET). SiC powder contained 92 % SiC and its average grain size was 1.1 mm. FeSi powder contained 15 % Si and 92 % of particles were below 45 μm.
Geopolymer foam samples prepared in molds with the dimensions of 100×100×100 mm and 40×40×160 mm were subjected to tests aimed at assessing their compressive strength over periods of time ranging from 7 to 180 days. Prior to the strength tests the samples of geopolymer foams were kept in air at a relative humidity of 45 to 50 %. The volume weight was also determined. Porous geopolymer foams were investigated with the aid of light microscopy and the digital image analysis (NIS Elements [9]) was applied to the determination of pore characteristics. The pores in the geopolymer foam were highlighted by filling them with a color paste. The values of heat conductivity characterizing the foams were determined, too. The foams subjected subsequently to firing at temperatures ranging from 200 to 1000°C were used for both the determination of their mechanical strength and the changes in sample dimensions caused by the firing process. Foam samples available after their destruction tests were subjected to the x-ray diffraction analysis and the morphology of fracture surfaces was investigated with the aid of the SEM technique completed by means of the point and area analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Preparation of geopolymer foams

The action of gas-forming aluminium agents and silicate materials in alkaline environment is different. Aluminium powder reacts in a strong aqueous alkaline environment by giving rise to gaseous hydrogen:

$$2\text{Al} + 2\text{NaOH} + 6\text{H}_2\text{O} \xrightarrow{20-30^\circ\text{C}} 2\text{Na}[\text{Al(OH)}_4] + 3\text{H}_2$$

The foam is formed at current temperatures (20-30°C) if aluminium powder is used as a gas-forming agent. A body characterized by a low strength is produced at such temperatures when the geopolymer structure is not formed to the full. The body may remind the so-called “false set” of portland cement. The character of the foam body changes during its heating until a stage is reached when it becomes very plastic and the foam starts caving in (see Figure 3). Other stabilizing additives (portland cement, lime) are used with the aim to avoid the uncalled-for foam destruction.

Table 3. Volume density of foam samples (kg m⁻³) of various volumes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foam Type</th>
<th>10×10×10 cm</th>
<th>4×4×16 cm</th>
<th>4×4×4 cm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aquapor 4207</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquapor 4213</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aluminium powder</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. The subsidence of a geopolymer foam at a water coefficient of 0.35 (a) and a well-prepared foam at a water coefficient of 0.26 (b).

Figure 4. Defects observed in the foam. Irregular pores. A high water coefficient.

Figure 5. Defects observed in the foam. Residues of unreacted aluminium powder in the foam. Low water coefficient.
The properties of geopolymer foams are influenced by the grain size of aluminium powder as well as by the water coefficient (Figures 4 and 5, Table 3). The appearance of optimally stabilized geopolymer foam exhibiting a uniform pore distribution is evident from Figure 6.

The gas-generation mechanism in Si-containing additives is different. Elemental Si is present in silica fume recommended as a gas-forming agent for use in the preparation of geopolymer foams on the basis of meta-kaolin [4] as this is evident from Figure 7.

The average size of silica fume particles is 100 nm [10]. Si particles present in silica fume are evidently of a similar size. Elemental Si present in silica fume reactions in the alkaline environment by giving rise of gaseous H₂:

\[
\text{Si} + 4\text{H}_2\text{O} \xrightarrow{\Delta 60^\circ C} \text{Si(OH)}_4 + 2\text{H}_2
\]

The above reaction takes place only at temperatures above 60-80°C and a strong geopolymer structure is formed at the same time. Some workers [11, 12] maintain that elemental Si gives rise to Si–H bonds in the strong alkaline environment; however, the bonds are not stable, Si–OH groups and gaseous H₂ are formed. In contrast to Al, the foam formation obtained by using SiO₂ fume is accompanied by the simultaneous formation of the geopolymer structure. H₂ generation is further boosted by the presence of a alumino-silicate material (for instance, fly ash) as this is evident from Table 4.

A visible foaming effect (Figure 8) becomes only obvious at larger additions of SiO₂ fume because of a low concentration of elemental Si in this additive.

Other Si-containing agents (SiC and SiFe powders) were also incorporated with the aim to generate gas in the geopolymer body. However, such additives exhibited little efficiency as demonstrated by Figure 9.

![Figure 6. Stabilized geopolymer foam characterized by a uniform pore distribution, an optimum water coefficient and an optimum concentration of aluminium powder.](image1)

![Figure 7. X-ray diffraction spectrum of silica fume.](image2)

![Figure 8. Geopolymer foam. SiO₂ fume.](image3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Gas evolution behaviour of mixtures.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NaOH solution + sodium water glass + silica fume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NaOH solution + sodium water glass + silica fume + fly ash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NaOH solution + sodium water glass + silica fume + fly ash</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Character of foam porosity

The microstructure of fracture surfaces of geopolymer foams prepared by additions of aluminium powder and SiO₂ fume are shown in Figures 10-13.

The pore size in geopolymer foams (Figure 14) prepared by adding aluminium and silica fume gas-forming agents is practically the same; it is comparable to that observed in reference materials on the basis of lime-silicate materials (Ytong) exposed to autoclave treatment. Nevertheless, the pores in lime-silicate materials...
are more symmetrical than those found in geopolymer materials where the pore roundness is slightly worse (Figure 15).

Mechanical properties of foams

The dependence of the compressive strength on volume weight (Figure 16) shows – analogously to other macro-porous materials – a decrease in the material strength with the decreasing volume weight. The strength of geopolymer foams does not vary significantly in dependence on time (Figure 17); this behavior is in agreement with results obtained by a long-term monitoring of geopolymer strength over periods ranging from 3 to 7 years [13].

Thermal properties of geopolymer foams

Measured values of the heat conductivity of geopolymer foams and reference materials are obvious from Figure 18. The thermal properties of geopolymer foams are comparable with those characterizing other materials.
High-temperature properties of geopolymers

The heating of geopolymers to a temperature below 1000°C is not accompanied by any destruction or disintegration phenomena. The heat treatment brings about changes in the color of geopolymers from grey to dark brown (800-1000°C), see Figure 20.

The strength values of fired geopolymers (Figure 21) remain practically constant, only the strength of the material fired at a temperature of 1000°C grows because of its sintering. The volume of samples fired above 800°C changes (owing to the sintering), see Figure 22.

In contrast to the reference materials (cement foams or lime-silicate materials treated in autoclave) the firing of geopolymers results in a small loss of their mass, which happens at all temperatures up to 1000°C, see Figure 23.

The mechanical strength of geopolymers is related to the behavior of the geopolymer during their heating which is accompanied by a continuous loss of mass (water loss) at temperatures of up to 400-600°C (Figure 24). The water is probably present in the geopolymer as “free” water in micro-pores as well as in gel pores and, finally, as OH groups at the end of Si–O–Si chains. Water in gel pores is bonded as Na(H₂O)⁺. The heating at temperatures below 200°C is accompanied by a loss of more than 60 % of H₂O. The residual water gets lost or, respectively, the OH groups are eliminated only when the materials are heated to temperatures above 400-600°C.
with minor representation of the Al\textsuperscript{13} coordination formed of mullite residues from the original fly ash. However, the firing temperature affects the character of \textsuperscript{23}Na NMR MAS spectra. It is evident from \textsuperscript{29}Na NMR MAS spectra at temperatures below 400°C that Na is present in the structure in the form of Na(H\textsubscript{2}O\textsubscript{n}) where n = 2 to 8 [see [14]]. A shift towards the Na(H\textsubscript{2}O\textsubscript{3}) structure occurs at higher temperatures. There is a large number of peaks at 600°C which are in relation with the overall structural re-arrangement. A structure corresponding to sodium-silicate glass [16, 17] can be deduced from the spectrum at 800°C.

Changes in the geopolymer morphology occur at firing temperatures above 600-800°C and a gradual sintering can be observed (Figures 26, 27).

The determination of the geopolymer refractoriness under load shows that the T\textsubscript{Q.S} temperature ranges from 630 to 700°C as found in [14]. An analogous character can also be assumed for geopolymer foams as demonstrated by the dependence of the volume of geopolymer foams on firing temperatures.

As regards the high-temperature behavior, there is a substantial difference between the geopolymer and other inorganic foams. Lime-silicate materials treated...
in autoclave lose their mass continuously and first cracks start occurring at a temperature of 800 to 1000°C (Figure 28). The values characterizing the mass loss at temperatures below 1000°C are similar to those observed for alumino-silicate foams. Lime-silicate materials lose their mass at firing temperatures above 800°C. The lime-silicate body becomes friable, which is caused by the disintegration of the phases present in the material (the xonotlite – stable up to 850°C, the tobermorite – stable up to 650°C).

Cement foams (on the basis of portland cement) exhibit pronounced fluctuations in their mass starting from 200°C when free-bound water begins to escape. An ulterior mass loss due to the decomposition of the CSH phase and to the beginning of the portlandite decomposition occurs above 600°C. The cracks become more pronounced and samples start disintegrating during their handling. A melt that strengthens partially the samples starts forming at temperatures of about 1000°C. A spontaneous disintegration of the cement foam exposed to temperatures above 800°C takes place after one-week storing of samples in air; this phenomenon is due to the rehydration of the products originated during the firing (CaO), see Figures 29 and 30.

CONCLUSION

A high-porosity geopolymer material – an incombustible alumino-silica foam – can be prepared by introducing a gas-forming agent (Al, SiO₂ fume) into the mixture composed of the alkaline activator (NaOH + sodium water glass) and fly ash. Aluminium powder or materials containing elemental Si as silica fume, FeSi or SiC can be used as gas-forming agents. The macro-pores are developed thanks to the release of gaseous H₂ in result of the Al (or, respectively, Si) reaction in the strong alkaline environment. The foam formation is more intense if aluminium powder is used as compared with the addition of silica fume. The effect of silica fume becomes apparent at its concentrations ranging from 5 to 10 wt.% because of the low content of elemental Si in this material. The use of FeSi or SiC for the preparation of geopolymer foams is less effective. The formation of the foam starts immediately after the incorporation of the aluminium powder into the mixture but the foam collapse must be prevented by further addition of portland cement or lime. The amount of aluminium powder or, respectively, its grain size exerts a paramount effect on final properties of the geopolymer foam. If silica fume is incorporated, its effect (foam formation) can only be observed after heating to a temperature above 60°C. The Si reaction in the strong alkaline environment is accelerated by the presence of an alumino-silicate material (fly ash). The process of foam formation in the geopolymer slurry is also influenced by the water coefficient that affects the rheological properties of the mixture. The pore size in geopolymer foams prepared by additions of Al and silica fume gas-forming agents is practically the same and it is comparable to that found in lime-silicate materials treated in autoclave. The pores observed in lime-silicate materials are more symmetrical than those present in geopolymer materials where their roundness is poorer. The strength values of geopolymer foams are dependent on their volume weight. The volume weight of geopolymer foams is comparable with that of other inorganic foams. Mechanical properties of geopolymer foams are stable within the investigated period of a year. Geopolymer foams are incombustible and they resist temperatures of up to 1000°C without decomposition. Furthermore, the shape of such materials does not suffer any dimensional changes in the temperature range of 400 – 800°C. In contrast to the lime-silicate and cement foams, the firing of geopolymer foams is not accompanied by any formation of cracks or by additional changes following the firing (rehydration).
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REFERENCES