Carbon Xerogel Nanostructures with Integrated Bi and Fe Components for Hydrogen Peroxide and Heavy Metal Detection

Carmen I. Fort 1,2, Mihai M. Rusu 2,3,4, Liviu C. Cotet 1,2, Adriana Vulpoi 4, Ileana Florea 5, Sandrine Tuseau-Nenez 6, Monica Baia 7, Mihaela Baibarac 8, and Lucian Baia 2,3,4,7,8*

1 Department of Chemical Engineering, Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, “Babes-Bolyai” University, Arany Janos 11, RO-400028 Cluj-Napoca, Romania; carmen.fort@ubbcluj.ro (C.I.F.); cosmin.cotet@ubbcluj.ro (L.C.C.)
2 Laboratory of Advanced Materials and Applied Technologies, Institute for Research-Development-Innovation in Applied Natural Sciences, “Babes-Bolyai” University, Făntănele 30, RO-400294 Cluj-Napoca, Romania; mihaimrusu@gmail.com
3 Department of Condensed Matter Physics and Advanced Technologies, Faculty of Physics, “Babes-Bolyai” University, M. Kogalniceanu 1, RO-400084 Cluj-Napoca, Romania
4 Nanostructured Materials and Bio-Nano-Interfaces Center, Institute of Interdisciplinary Research in Bio-Nano-Sciences, “Babes-Bolyai” University, T. Laurean 42, RO-400271 Cluj-Napoca, Romania; adriana.lazar@ubbcluj.ro
5 LPICM, CNRS, Ecole Polytechnique, IPParis, 91228 Palaiseau, France; lenuta-leana.florea@polytechnique.edu
6 Laboratoire de Physique de la Matière Condensée, Ecole Polytechnique, IPParis, 91228 Palaiseau, France; sandrine.tuseau-nenez@polytechnique.edu
7 Department of Biomolecular Physics, Faculty of Physics, “Babes-Bolyai” University, M. Kogalniceanu 1, RO-400084 Cluj-Napoca, Romania; monica.baia@ubbcluj.ro
8 Laboratory Optical Processes in Nanostructure Materials, National Institute of Materials Physics, Atomistilor str. 405 A, 77125 Bucharest, Romania
* Correspondence: barac@infim.ro (M.B.); lucian.baia@ubbcluj.ro (L.B.)
Tel.: +40-21-369-0170 (M.B.); +40-264-405-390 (L.B.)

Abstract: Multifunctional Bi- and Fe-modified carbon xerogel composites (CXBiFe), with different Fe concentrations, were obtained by a resorcinol–formaldehyde sol–gel method, followed by drying in ambient conditions and pyrolysis treatment. The morphological and structural characterization performed by X-ray diffraction (XRD), Raman spectroscopy, N2 adsorption/desorption porosimetry, scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and scanning/transmission electron microscopy (STEM) analyses, indicates the formation of carbon-based nanocomposites with integrated Bi and Fe oxide nanoparticles. At higher Fe concentrations, Bi-Fe-O interactions lead to the formation of hybrid nanostructures and off-stoichiometric Bi2Fe4O9 mullite-like structures together with an excess of iron oxide nanoparticles. To examine the effect of the Fe content on the electrochemical performance of the CXBiFe composites, the obtained powders were initially dispersed in a chitosan solution and applied on the surface of glassy carbon electrodes. Then, the multifunctional character of the CXBiFe systems is assessed by involving the obtained modified electrodes for the detection of different analytes, such as biomarkers (hydrogen peroxide) and heavy metal ions (i.e., Pb2+). The achieved results indicate a drop in the detection limit for H2O2 as Fe content increases. Even though the current results suggest that the surface modifications of the Bi phase with Fe and O impurities lower Pb2+ detection efficiencies, Pb2+ sensing well below the admitted concentrations for drinkable water is also noticed.

Keywords: carbon nanocomposites; bismuth; iron; hybrid structures; electrochemical sensors; lead; hydrogen peroxide

1. Introduction

The detection of water contaminants such as heavy metals represents a significant research focus for present concern due to their significant threat to human health, animal
health, and the environment [1]. Additionally, biomolecule detection such as hydrogen peroxide, dopamine, uric acid, etc. plays a crucial role in clinical diagnoses as well as in many industrial applications, such as food processing, pharmaceutical industries, paper bleaching, mineral processing, environmental analysis, and cleaning products [2].

Various analytical methods have been employed for detection of heavy metals or biomarkers including atomic fluorescence spectrometry [3], atomic absorbance spectrometry [4], chemiluminescence [5], chemiresistor [6], electrochemical [7–9], and colorimetric [10] sensors. Among most of the above-mentioned methods, which suffer from some technical downsides involving time-consumption, costs, or low sensitivity and selectivity, the electrochemical detection technique shows promising prospects due to its high sensitivity, high selectivity, simple instrumentation, fast response, miniaturization capabilities, portability and low cost [1].

For both biomarker [2] or heavy metal [11] detection, most of sensor preparation methods were based on the immobilization of different type of enzymes (such as horseradish peroxidase, cytochrome, myoglobin, glucose oxidase, acetylcholinesterase, etc.) on the electrodes surface previously functionalized, leading thus to a remarkable selectivity and high sensitivity [2,11]. Such enzyme-based sensors presents notable disadvantages due to the complex enzyme immobilization procedures, the strong influence of the experimental conditions (temperature, humidity, pH, light, etc.) on the sensor stability, and the particular nature of the enzymes, which also greatly influences the sensor stability [1,2,11].

Consequently, many efforts have been dedicated to the development of non-enzymatic electrochemical sensors for heavy metals [1,12] or biomarkers [2] detection. Development of innovative sensitive and cost-effective electrochemical sensors based on different carbonaceous nanocomposite materials, fabricated by different techniques, for the detection of biomolecules, or heavy metal ions has often been in the research focus. Carbonaceous-based nanomaterials such as graphite [13], carbon fibers [14], carbon aerogel [8,15,16], carbon xerogels [7,9], carbon nanotubes (single walled or multi-walled) [17], graphene [18], have been used as the conductive phase in different composite materials suitable for electrochemical detection of biomolecules [2], or heavy metals ions [12]. There is a variety of functional converters/additives such as metal nanoparticles (Au, Ag, Pd, Ir, Sb, Hg, and Bi), metal oxides (Bi$_2$O$_3$, Ce$_2$O$_4$, Fe$_3$O$_4$, SnO$_2$, NiO, SnO$_2$, Co$_3$O$_4$, MnFe$_2$O$_4$, MnCo$_2$O$_4$ NPs, SnFe$_2$O$_4$), non-metals (N), halogen (F), alloys (AuPt alloy microsphere) [19–21], etc., which can be physically, chemically, or electrochemically introduced into the carbon matrix.

Among this variety of carbonaceous nanocomposite materials, Bi supporting carbon aerogel nanomaterials (CXB) represent a good candidate for heavy metal detection [7,9], and so far, to the best of our knowledge, the properties of Bi-nanocomposite systems were not fully exploited. As major advantages to the functionality of the binary carbon-metal/oxide system, the CX is endowed with tunable morphological and structural properties and possesses a good electrical conductivity, high porosity and surface area [7,9]. Complementary, Bi adds to the nanocomposite system other important benefits such as (i) good electrochemical properties, i.e., large cathodic potential range and less sensitive to the dissolved oxygen [21]; (ii) its ability to form “fusible alloys” with heavy metals; (iii) good catalytic properties; (iv) low toxicity and environmental friendliness.

In our previous study we reported the use of high mesoporous Fe doped carbon aerogel for modified carbon paste electrodes preparation to catalyze the H$_2$O$_2$ electroreduction [8]. Based on these findings related to the applications of nanocomposite materials and their electrochemical applications [7,9,22,23], herein we combine the benefits of the presence of both Fe and Bi-based nanoparticles within the carbon xerogel matrix. Thus, this time the aim is to investigate the influence of Fe concentration on both the morphological and structural characteristics as well as the detection efficiency of both heavy metal ($\text{Pb}^{2+}$), due to the presence of Bi, and biomarker (H$_2$O$_2$), due to the presence of Fe.
2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Reagents

Unless otherwise indicated, reagents were purchased from Sigma Aldrich and were used without any further purification: resorcinol (m-C₆H₄(OH)₂, 99%), formaldehyde solution (37 wt.% in H₂O, stabilized with methanol, Chem-Lab), bismuth (III) nitrate pentahydrate [Bi(NO₃)₃·5H₂O, 98%, Alfa Aesar], acetic acid (CH₃COOH, 99.7%), anhydrous iron (II) acetate (Fe(OOCCH₃)₂, minimum Fe content 29.5%), acetic acid (CH₃COOH, 99%), ammonium hydroxide water solution (NH₄OH, 10 wt.%), glycerol formal (47–67% 5-hydroxy-1,3-dioxane, 33–53% 4-hydroxymethyl-1,3-dioxolane). All reagents were of analytical grade. Bidistilled water was used for the preparation of all solutions.

2.2. Synthesis of Bi/Fe/C Xerogel Ternary Composite

The composite synthesis started with the dissolution under stirring of 1.2 g Bi(NO₃)₃·5H₂O in glycerol formal respecting 0.12 g/mL. Then, 2 g resorcinol (R) followed by the formaldehyde (F) solution were added respecting a molar ratio R/F as 0.5. As pH adjustment, 4 mL 10% solution of NH₄OH was drop by drop added. When 12 mL of acetic acid was poured to the prepared mixture a clear solution was obtained. The iron as Fe(OOCCH₃)₂ was dissolved in the solution using different amounts of 0.01, 0.12 and 1.2 g. These are the precursor solution of the final CXBiFeₓ materials, where x is standing for the initial Fe precursor content added to the synthesis and is 0.01, 0.12 and 1.2 g, respectively. As blank, a solution without iron is also included (CXBiFe₀).

The obtained solutions were sealed in glass vessels and placed at 60 °C for 3 days. Wet gels with the geometry of the vessels were obtained. These were then rinsed two times with ethanol and held in acetic acid for one day for washing. After a second step of rinsing with ethanol, the gels were dried in ambient conditions for several days until constant mass. The obtained organic xerogels embedded with Bi and Fe ions were pyrolyzed at 750 °C for 1 h using a heat rate of 3 °C/min and argon atmosphere to yield the final carbon xerogel nanocomposites.

2.3. Characterization Methods

X-ray diffraction (XRD) measurements were performed on a powder diffractometer (X’Pert, PANalytical) in Bragg–Brentano geometry, using Cu Kα₁ radiation (graphite monochromator to avoid Fe fluorescence signal) equipped with a Miniprop punctual detector. The experimental setup was as follows: fixed divergence slit 0.5°, fixed anti-scattered slit 1°, fixed incident mask 10 mm, incident, and receiving Soller slits 0.02 rad. The data were collected from 12 to 80° 2θ, step size 0.03°, 20 sec/step. For the phase identification, the ICDD PDF2 (release 2004) was used.

Nitrogen adsorption–desorption analysis was performed with a Sorptomatic (Thermo Electron Corp.) equipment after degassing around 100 mg of the tested material for 20 h at 106 °C in vacuum (<1 mPa). The specific surface area was determined using the three-parameter BET (Brunauer–Emmet–Teller) method, while the pore size distribution and the cumulative pore volume were evaluated using the BJH (Barrett–Joyner–Halenda) model for the mesopore range and the H–K (Horvath–Kawazoe) model for the micropore range.

Raman spectra were recorded with a Renishaw in Via Reflex Raman Microscope equipped with a Ren Cam charge-coupled device (CCD) detector. The 532 nm laser line was used for excitation, and the spectra were collected with a 0.85 NA objective of 100× magnification. Typical integration times were of 30 s, and the laser power was 1 mW. The Raman spectra were recorded with a spectral resolution of 4 cm⁻¹.

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) studies were performed using SEM Quanta 3D FEG dual beam microscope (FEI, Hillsboro, OR, USA), working in high vacuum mode using ETD (Everhart Thornley Detector). Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM) analyses have been performed on two different transmission electron microscopes (JEOL 2010, JEOL Ltd., Tokyo, Japan and FEI Titan–Themis, FEI, Hillsboro, OR, USA) both operating at 200 kV accelerating voltage. For the chemical analyses we used a Titan–Themis operating
at 200 KV equipped with a Cs probe corrector and a SuperX detector that allows chemical analyses of light and heavy elements through energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) with a spatial resolution within picometer range.

2.4. Preparation of the Glassy Carbon/Chitosan (GC/Chi)–CXBiFe\textsubscript{x} Electrodes

Glassy carbon electrode (GCE) surface (with the geometrical area of 0.07 cm\textsuperscript{2}) was carefully polished on alumina slurry (1 \(\mu\)m, and then 0.1 \(\mu\)m Stuers, Copenhagen, Denmark). Then, GCE surface was washed with bidistilled water. By sonication for 5 minutes in acetone the alumina particles were removed, concomitantly with other possible contaminants. All CXBiFe\textsubscript{x} nanocomposites were immobilized onto GCE surface by using a solution of 10 mg chitosan (Chi) polymer in 10 mL of 0.1 M acetic acid. By adding 1 g/L CXBiFe\textsubscript{x} and sonicated for 2 h, 5 \(\mu\)L of the resulted mixture were placed onto the clean GCE surfaces. Then, by keeping for drying under a beaker for 2 h at room temperature the GC/Chi–CXBiFe\textsubscript{x} electrodes were obtained.

2.5. Electrochemical Measurements

For electrochemical measurements, a PC controlled electrochemical analyzer (AUTOLAB PGSTAT302N EcoChemie, Utrecht, Netherlands) was used. A conventional three-electrode cell, equipped with GC/Chi–CXBiFe\textsubscript{x} as working electrode, an Ag/AgCl, KCl sat. as reference electrode, and a Pt wire, as counter electrode was used. The electrochemical impedance spectroscopy investigations were carried out at room temperature, by immersing the working electrodes (GC and GC/Chi–CXBiFe\textsubscript{x}), in 0.1 M acetate buffer containing 5 mM [Fe(CN)\textsubscript{6}]\textsuperscript{3−/4−}, in a frequency range from 10\textsuperscript{4} Hz to 10\textsuperscript{−1} Hz. The electrochemical experiments were performed by cyclic voltammetry (CV) and square wave anodic stripping voltammetry techniques (SWASV). The electroanalytical detection of heavy metal (i.e., Pb\textsuperscript{2+}) was carried out in 0.1 M acetate buffer (pH 4.5), after potentiostatic polarization at −1.4 V vs. Ag/AgCl, KCl sat. for 180 s, under constant stirring at 400 rpm. Then, after 10 s of equilibration from the stirring stopping the anodic voltametric scan was achieved. For hydrogen peroxide detection, the SWV investigations were carried out in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7). The electrochemical behavior of GC/Chi–CXBiFe\textsubscript{x} was exploited for 1–10 pM Pb\textsuperscript{2+} detection, and 3–30 \(\mu\)M for hydrogen peroxide, respectively. All experiments were carried out at the ambient temperature.

3. Results and Discussions

Since a major objective of the present research was to extend the material’s functionality, the synthesis method involved was a sol–gel process based on the polycondensation reaction of resorcinol with formaldehyde that led to the obtaining of ternary composite materials made up from carbon, bismuth and iron components [24]. By adding in the well-adjusted pH reaction medium bismuth and iron salts as metal precursors (i.e., co-synthesis pathway [22]), organic–inorganic wet gels were first achieved. By drying in ambient condition and pyrolysis in inert atmosphere and high temperature (i.e., 750 °C/1 h) ternary xerogels were finally obtained. These are composed of a carbon nanoporous framework embedded with metal/oxide nanoparticles that resulted during the pyrolytic reduction process [22–24]. Insights about the structural characteristics that are reflected in their applicability in sensing field are further revealed.

3.1. Morphological and Structural Analysis

Due to their wide area of sample analysis and large penetration depth, XRD investigations are initially performed to access the structural information characteristic to the investigated CXBiFe\textsubscript{x} systems. The acquired diffractograms are presented in Figure 1I. The broad signals centered at 2θ\textsubscript{Cu} = 25° and 2θ\textsubscript{Cu} = 44° represent the reflections found in defect rich turbostratic carbon, while the broad signal at about 2θ\textsubscript{Cu} = 30° can be ascribed to bismuth oxide prior to crystallization. As observed, the crystalline reflections from the tetragonal Bi\textsubscript{2}O\textsubscript{3} phase (JCPDS file 01-074-1374) are dominant for the CXBiFe\textsubscript{x} composites.
with low Fe amounts. With the increase of the Fe concentration, the crystallinity of Bi$_2$O$_3$ phase is seen to drop, while iron oxide is identified as magnetite Fe$_3$O$_4$ (JCPDS file 01-075-0449) or maghemite γ-Fe$_2$O$_3$ (JCPDS file 00-024-0081). Indeed, by XRD, it is difficult to distinguish these two phases as they produce very similar peaks, which can contribute to the broadness of the peaks found at 2θ$_{Cu}$= 35.8°, 57.4° and 63.2° together with the nano-size effects. For the CXBiFe$_{1.2}$ sample, new intense reflections are observed at 2θ$_{Cu}$ = 28.2° and 29.0° corresponding to the mullite phase (Bi$_2$Fe$_4$O$_9$, JCPDS file 00-020-0836).

Raman investigations were performed to detect if the presence of Fe in different concentration induces changes in the graphitization degree of the porous carbon matrix via the catalytic graphitization mechanism observed in previous studies [8]. From the Raman spectra presented in Figure 1, the D and G signals characteristic to carbon structures are observed for all investigated systems. The first signal around 1348 cm$^{-1}$ is characteristic to the D and G carbon specific vibrational region, and (II) the D and G bands (FWHM$_D$ and FWHM$_G$) decrease with the increase of the Fe concentration.

Raman investigations were performed to detect if the presence of Fe in different concentration induces changes in the graphitization degree of the porous carbon matrix via the catalytic graphitization mechanism observed in previous studies [8]. From the Raman spectra presented in Figure III, the D and G signals characteristic to carbon structures are observed for all investigated systems. The first signal around 1348 cm$^{-1}$ is characteristic to the D and G carbon specific vibrational region, and (II) the D and G bands (FWHM$_D$ and FWHM$_G$) decrease with the increase of the Fe concentration.
concentration (see Table 2). As confirmed by XRD measurements, Fe is essentially found in oxidized state. For this reason, the data suggests that carbothermal reduction reactions and graphitization mechanisms [26] may be active under the given conditions, but only found in an incipient stage.

Table 1. Summary of morphological and structural parameters obtained for the synthesized samples and other similar materials.

| Material                | Preparation Method | $I_D/I_G$ | $S_{\text{BET}}$ (m$^2$/g) | $V_{\text{mpores}}$ (cm$^3$/g) | $V_{\text{spore}}$ (cm$^3$/g) | $<D>$ (nm) | C:O:Fe:Bi (at%) | Ref. |
|------------------------|--------------------|----------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|------------------|------|
| C-Bi xerogels          | impregnation       | -        | 80                          | 0.041                          | -                             | 56         | 1% (Bi)          | [9]  |
|                        | co-synthesis       | -        | 200                         | -                              | -                             | -          | 7% (Bi)          | [22] |
| C-Bi aerogels          | co-synthesis       | -        | -                           | 85/155                         | 16.4% (Bi)                    | -          | -                | [7]  |
| CXFe                   | co-synthesis       | 0.89     | 570                         | 1.012                          | 60/120                        | 96.8:2.7:0:0.5 |                |      |
| CXBiFe$_{0.01}$        | co-synthesis       | 0.84     | 185                         | 0.250                          | 0.050                         | 8          | 94.2:2.1:0:0.2   | [23] |
| CXBiFe$_{0.12}$        | co-synthesis       | 0.82     | 79                          | 0.161                          | 0.026                         | 7          | 96.6:3.0:0.2:0.1 |      |
| CXBiFe$_{1.2}$         | co-synthesis       | 0.82     | 162                         | 0.038                          | 0.071                         | 10/33      | 96.4:2.9:0:60.03 |      |

Table 2. Results obtained after a four peaks deconvolution of the D–G region of the Raman spectra.

| Sample       | Peak Index | Position (cm$^{-1}$) | FWHM (cm$^{-1}$) | Peak Area (%) |
|--------------|------------|----------------------|------------------|---------------|
| CXBiFe$_0$   | D$_4$      | 1244.85              | 232.98           | 24.37         |
|              | D$_1$      | 1348.35              | 142.76           | 29.00         |
|              | D$_3$      | 1530.94              | 194.04           | 33.63         |
|              | G          | 1595.87              | 63.46            | 13.00         |
| CXBiFe$_{0.01}$ | D$_4$    | 1241.63              | 231.16           | 22.64         |
|               | D$_1$      | 1347.84              | 145.10           | 31.41         |
|               | D$_3$      | 1533.29              | 189.65           | 32.91         |
|               | G          | 1597.13              | 62.57            | 13.03         |
| CXBiFe$_{0.12}$ | D$_4$    | 1249.00              | 244.48           | 25.63         |
|                 | D$_1$      | 1346.06              | 139.15           | 28.47         |
|                 | D$_3$      | 1534.51              | 196.54           | 32.26         |
|                 | G          | 1594.07              | 59.55            | 12.63         |
| CXBiFe$_{1.2}$ | D$_4$     | 1249.00              | 253.17           | 25.28         |
|                 | D$_1$      | 1344.53              | 137.20           | 29.13         |
|                 | D$_3$      | 1536.29              | 199.32           | 32.70         |
|                 | G          | 1593.01              | 58.03            | 12.88         |

The effects induced by the variation of Fe concentration over the microporous and mesoporous features of the investigated nanocomposites will affect the associated N$_2$ adsorption/desorption isotherms as presented in Figure 1III. The samples with no or intermediate Fe concentrations show type III adsorption isotherms characterized by a convex shaped isotherm with respect to the P/P$_0$ axis and no inflexion point at small relative pressure values. This feature is specific to systems with weak adsorbate-adsorbent interactions according to the IUPAC (International Union of Pure and Applied Chem-
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It can be observed that the CXBiFe₁.₂ sample with the highest Fe concentration exhibits a type I isotherm with high N₂ adsorption amounts and a convex shaped isotherm for P/P₀ < 0.35 followed by an inflexion point and steady increase until saturation.

The main data derived from the N₂ isotherms together with the structural parameters achieved from Raman spectroscopy and TEM/SEM/EDX investigations are presented in Table 1 alongside other results already reported for similar C-Bi-based samples. The specific surface area follows a non-monotonous trend: the CXBiFe₀ sample has the highest value of S_{BET} = 181 m²/g and is followed by an abrupt decrease to S_{BET} = 65 m²/g for CXBiFe₀.₀₁, and a further increase until S_{BET} = 162 m²/g for CXBiFe₁.₂ sample. Although the cumulative mesopore volume decreases with the increase of the Fe concentration, the micropore volumes follow an inverted trend. This could be because in some situations, Fe reinforces mesopore walls of the carbon structure. In other cases, by filling of mesopores with Fe nanoparticles micropores could be generated. An optimum ratio between precursors (i.e., C and Bi) permitted to have the highest specific surface area of CXBiFe₀. The presence of Fe seems to decrease the specific surface area. Also, the higher Fe concentration could increase the loss of Bi content/component during pyrolytic treatment by local increase in temperature. The adsorption data suggest that the synthesis procedure that yielded the highest Fe concentration also tuned the pore formation mechanism towards the micropore range.

Electron microscopy investigations were further required to evaluate the changes in the nanocomposite morphology and structure when the Fe content is increased. As shown in Figure 2, the trapped amounts of Bi and Fe precursors form spheroidal nanoparticle systems imbedded in the pores of the carbon xerogel. Then, as suggested by the topological contrast specific to the SEM micrographs, the nanoparticles are exposed to the surrounding environment during the grinding of the pyrolyzed xerogel monoliths. As presented in Table 1, the elemental composition of the investigated nanocomposites indicates a steady increase of Fe concentration (in at. %) relative to the Bi content, which is kept constant throughout the synthesis step. As seen in the SEM and TEM micrographs and the measured particle size distributions, the average nanoparticle size is between 6-8 nm. At higher concentrations of Fe, the average size of the nanoparticles shifts towards larger values (10 nm), also emphasizing the appearance of secondary mode for nanoparticles with an average diameter of 30 nm for the CXBiFe₁.₂ sample.

Most notably, the high-angle annular dark-field scanning transmission electron microscopy (HAADF)-STEM-EDS analyses demonstrated the nanoparticles found in CXBiFe₁.₂ sample as being hybrid structures, as presented in Figure 3. In the HAADF images, due to the enhanced Z-contrast between Bi and Fe, the free-standing nanoparticles and the regions of the hybrid structures with weaker contrast are associated with Fe-rich phases such as Fe₃O₄ or Bi₂Fe₄O₉, while the brighter region are associated with Bi-rich phases such as Bi₂O₃. This is well represented in the EDX maps that further confirmed the heterogeneous distribution of Bi, Fe, and O elements within the nanoparticle structure. During pyrolysis at 750 °C, clusters with compositions such as Bi and/or Bi₂O₃ and Fe₃O₄ are already formed and start to diffuse through the porous xerogel mass.

Having in mind that Bi and Bi₂O₃ have smaller bulk melting temperatures (T_{Bi} = 271 °C and T_{Bi₂O₃} = 817 °C) than Fe and iron oxides (T_{Fe} = 1538 °C and T_{Fe₂O₃-Fe₃O₄} ≈ 1567–1597 °C), it is considered that the mobile Bi/Bi₂O₃ will migrate more efficiently onto the carbon surface and coalesce with the surrounding clusters. This suggests that the Fe₃O₄ clusters will modify the Bi₂O₃ nanoparticle growth serving as nucleation and/or anchoring sites. The variations of the morphological and structural features of the nanoparticles strongly depend on the local conditions such as number and size of interacting clusters, local concentration of Bi, Fe and O, and temperature variation with time [28].

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As suggested by the electron microscopy and XRD results, at the interface of two or several interacting nanoparticles, new hybrid structures and structural phases such as off-stoichiometric Bi$_2$Fe$_4$O$_9$ could form and to act as anchoring sites for the Bi fraction. This mechanism can also explain the size increase observed at higher Fe concentrations. Thus, as opposed to the more ideal case demonstrated for the CXBiFe$_0$ sample, the Bi-based nanoparticles will exhibit a modified surface composition in Fe-integrated systems that may alter their electrochemical response.
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Figure 3. (a) BF-STEM and HAADF-STEM images on a large area of the sample containing the hybrid nanoparticles; (b) STEM-EDS elemental map and its corresponding HAADF image on a single hybrid nanoparticle showing its chemical composition with bismuth in dark blue, iron in orange, and oxygen in green demonstrated in sample CXBiFe1.2.

3.2. Electrochemical Performance

3.2.1. Electrochemical Characterization of GC/Chi–CXBiFeₓ Electrodes

For characterizing the interfacial properties of GCE/CXBiFeₓ modified electrodes, the electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS), was used to comparatively investigate the GC/Chi–CXBiFeₓ, and GC electrodes, using [Fe(CN)₆]³⁻/⁴⁻ as electrochemical probe (Figure 4). The EIS data were fitted to a modified Randles equivalent circuit [7,9], involving an uncompensated electrolyte solution resistance (Rel) coupled in series with a parallel combination of the interface capacitance (Q) and faradaic impedance. The former symbolizes a mixed capacitance including a constant phase element (CPE) and the double layer capacitance (C), while the faradaic impedance is modelled as a charge transfer resistance (R_{ct}) coupled with a mass transfer resistance (W), respectively. By using the ZSimpWin 3.21 software, the values of all above-mentioned parameters were estimated, as can be seen from Table 3.

By comparing the R_{ct} value obtained for bare GC electrode, and the value obtained for all modified electrode, one can conclude that the presence of the high conductive CXBiFeₓ nanocomposite matrix on the GCE surface led to a significant diminish of the charge transfer resistance (R_{ct}). On the other hand, the R_{ct} value increases with the Fe concentration in the CXBiFeₓ nanocomposite matrix. As previously observed, the nanoparticles are primarily found in oxidized states, also with lower crystallinity and poor conductivity [29]. Such inclusions may also alter the connectivity of the electron conducting matrix, increasing the capacitive response of the system. Moreover, the variation of specific surface area and the micro-porosity values for CXBiFeₓ nanocomposite matrix, strongly influences the
double layer capacitance (C), reflected by following sequence: GC ≪ GC/Chi-CXBiFe_0 < GC/Chi-CXBiFe_0.01 < GC/Chi-CXBiFe_0.1 < GC/Chi-CXBiFe_1.2.

![EIS spectra of GCE and GCE/Chi–CXBiFex.](image)

**Figure 4.** EIS spectra of GCE and GCE/Chi–CXBiFex. Experimental conditions: supporting electrolyte, 0.1 M acetate buffer (pH 4.5) containing 1 mM [Fe(CN)_6]^{3-/4-}; applied potential, 0.2 V vs. Ag/AgCl, KCl sat, frequency interval, 0.1–10^4 Hz.

**Table 3.** The parameters of the equivalent circuit.

| Electrode            | R_d (Ω/cm^2) | CPE_d (μS·s^n/cm^2) | n | R_1 (Ω/cm^2) | W (mS·s^1/2/cm^2) | C (μF/cm^2) | χ² |
|----------------------|--------------|---------------------|---|--------------|-------------------|------------|----|
| GC                   | 22.23 ± 2.30 | 0.60 ± 3.70         | 0.78 ± 0.83 | 3904 ± 3.75  | 0.66 ± 5.68     | 0.10       | 0.003552 |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe_0      | 48.19 ± 0.56 | 65.1 ± 1.58         | 0.57 ± 1.35 | 1247 ± 1.43  | 0.49 ± 1.70     | 9.79       | 0.0003785 |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe_0.01   | 23.72 ± 5.28 | 77.4 ± 3.93         | 0.65 ± 0.83 | 1801 ± 3.75  | 0.57 ± 3.22     | 27.13      | 0.00140 |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe_0.1    | 23.32 ± 5.07 | 70.88 ± 1.13        | 0.68 ± 2.58 | 2187 ± 6.20  | 0.54 ± 1.00     | 29.48      | 0.00286 |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe_1.2    | 3654 ± 5.04  | 381 ± 14.12         | 0.72 ± 3.98 | 381 ± 14.12  | 0.60 ± 3.99     | 433.30     | 0.00514 |

n is the roughness factor; (±) represents the relative standard deviation (%).

Interestingly, the following sequence W_{CXBiFe0} ≈ W_{CXBiFe0.01} ≈ W_{CXBiFe0.1} ≈ W_{CXBiFe1.2}, showing similar behavior of CXBiFe_x, was obtained in the region corresponding to lower frequencies, which is the domain attributed to the diffusion limited processes (Figure 4).

3.2.2. Amperometric H₂O₂ Detection

The cyclic voltammograms, recorded at GC/Chi–CXBiFe_1.2 nanocomposite modified electrode (Figure 5), in the absence and in the presence of 1 mM H₂O₂, showed an electrocatalytic activity toward the H₂O₂ reduction at GC/Chi–CXBiFe_1.2. The presence of 1 mM H₂O₂ in the electrolyte solution, in the potential domain, which corresponds to the voltametric peak due to the existence of Fe oxides in CXBiFe1.2 matrix, lead to a significant increase of the reduction peak current, thus demonstrating an electrocatalytic process. Therefore, two consecutive steps are involved: (i) the first one, occurring according to a Fenton-type mechanism [30], is the catalytic oxidation of reduced iron states ions by H₂O₂; (ii) the second one, assuring the regeneration of the catalyst, is the electrochemical reduction of the chemically generated Fe³⁺ ions.
The electroanalytical parameters for H$_2$O$_2$ reduction were estimated from the amperometric calibration curves, recorded at the GC/Chi–CXBiFe$_x$ (Figure 6). After successive injections of 3 µM H$_2$O$_2$ typical current time response curves were obtained for all four investigated electrodes (Figure 6A). The amperometric response provided by the GC/Chi–CXBiFe$_x$ becomes stable in less than 6 s, making these electrodes competitive with other similar sensors [8]. The average results, obtained by using three different GC/Chi–CXBiFe$_x$ modified electrodes and electrolyte solutions containing H$_2$O$_2$ (1–30 µM) were used to draw the calibration curves described in Figure 6B. The corresponding linear regressions parameters illustrated in Table 4 enable the calculation of the electroanalytical parameters that are further compared with previously reported results for H$_2$O$_2$ detection (Table 5).

**Figure 5.** Cyclic voltammograms recorded in the absence and the presence of 1 mM H$_2$O$_2$ at GC/Chi-CXBiFe$_{1.2}$. Experimental conditions: scan rate, 20 mV s$^{-1}$; supporting electrolyte, 0.2 M phosphate buffer (pH 7); starting potential, −0.8 V vs. Ag/AgCl, KCl sat.

**Figure 6.** I vs. time dependence recorded at GC/Chi–CXBiFe$_x$, for successive addition of 3 µM H$_2$O$_2$, and 1 mM H$_2$O$_2$, respectively (A), and the corresponding amperometric calibration curve (B). Experimental conditions: rotating speed 400 rpm; supporting electrolyte, 0.2 phosphate buffer M (pH 7); applied potential, −0.3 V vs. Ag/AgCl, KCl sat.
Table 4. Linear regression parameters for amperometric detection of \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) at GC/Chi–CXBiFe\(_x\).

| Electrode Type     | Intercept (\( \mu A \)) | Slope (\( \mu A/\mu M \)) | \( R^2 \)    | \( N \) |
|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|--------|
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe\(_{1.2}\) | –4.586 ± 0.185           | –2.354 ± 0.028             | 0.99864      | 10     |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe\(_{0.12}\) | –3.353 ± 0.235           | –1.655 ± 0.053             | 0.99074      | 10     |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe\(_{0.01}\) | 1.365 ± 0.327            | –1.155 ± 0.021             | 0.99679      | 10     |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe\(_0\)   | –0.116 ± 0.001           | –1.879 × 10\(^{-5}\) ± 0.028 × 10\(^{-5}\) | 0.99796      | 10     |

Table 5. Analytical parameters of the sensors based on carbonaceous materials used for amperometric detection of \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \).

| Electrode Type     | Applied Potential V vs. Ag/AgCl, KCl\(_{\text{sat}}\) | Linear Range | Detection Limit (\( \mu M \)) | Ref.     |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| (Fe-CA)-CPE        | –0.3                                                 | 1–50 mM      | 500                            | [8]      |
| GC/Chi-BiFeCX      | –0.3                                                 | 5–50 \( \mu M \) | 4.77                           | [23]     |
| GC/Chi-BiFeCX-TiO\(_2\) | –0.3                                             | 5–80 mM      | 3110                           | [23]     |
| GCE/RGO/Au/Fe\(_3\)O\(_4\)/Ag | 0.55                                           | 2 \( \mu M\)–1.2 mM | 1.43                           | [31]     |
| PFECS/rGO/GCE      | 0.44                                                 | 10–190 \( \mu M \) | 1.25                           | [32]     |
| CoFe/NGR           | –0.25                                                | 1–8654       | 0.28                           | [33]     |
| AP-Ni-MOF/CPE      | –0.25                                                | 4 \( \mu M\)–60 mM | 0.9                            | [34]     |
| MnO\(_2\)nanosheets/GCE | –0.6                                            | 25 nM–2 \( \mu M \) and 10–454 \( \mu M \) | 5 nM               | [35]     |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe\(_0\) | –0.3                                                 | 1–10 mM      | 842.24                         |         |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe\(_{0.01}\) | –0.3                                              | 3–30 \( \mu M \) | 0.85                           |         |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe\(_{0.12}\) | –0.3                                              | 3–30 \( \mu M \) | 0.43                           |         |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe\(_{1.2}\) | –0.3                                              | 3–30 \( \mu M \) | 0.24                           |         |

The increase in sensitivity values, and the decrease in detection limit values (estimated for a signal to noise ratio of 3) for \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) at GC/Chi–CXBiFe\(_x\) modified electrodes, with the Fe concentration increasing in CXBiFe\(_x\) nanocomposite (from 0 to 1.2) was observed (Table 5). As expected, the presence of nanostructured iron oxides in the CXBiFe\(_x\) nanocomposite matrix, successfully led to improved electroanalytical parameters values with the increase in the amount of iron precursor. The obtained electroanalytical parameters, recommend the GC/Chi–CXBiFe\(_x\) modified electrodes as competitive for \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) detection, with better or comparable results with others already published (Table 5).

GC, glassy carbon; Chi, chitosan; CX, carbon xerogel; CA, carbon aerogel; AP-Ni-MOF, Ni\(^{2+}\) metal organic framework based on adipic acid piperazine; CoFe/NGR, CoFe nanoparticles on the nitrogen-doped graphene; PFECS, polymer (poly(2,5-bis((2-ferrocenyylethyl)oxy carbonyl)styrene).

3.2.3. SWASV for Pb\(^{2+}\) Detection

The recorded voltammograms for GC/Chi–CXBiFe\(_x\) modified electrodes show well-shaped anodic peaks, corresponding to the dissolution of Pb previously deposited on the electrodes surface during the preconcentration step (Figure 7A,C).

By using three different GC/Chi–CXBiFe\(_x\) modified electrodes, for each Fe concentration, and electrolyte solutions containing very low Pb\(^{2+}\) concentrations (1–10 pM) the SWASV were recorded. Thus, the average results were used to draw the calibration curves for each type of electrode (Figure 7B,D). The obtained linear regression parameters (Table 6) permit the calculation of the electroanalytical parameters for Pb\(^{2+}\) detection (Table 7).
Figure 7. SWASVs recorded at GC/Chi-CXBiFe₀ (A) and GC/Chi-CXBiFe₁₂ (B) electrodes in the presence and absence of Pb²⁺, and the corresponding calibration curve (C,D), respectively. Experimental conditions: supporting electrolyte, 0.1 M acetate buffer (pH 4.5); deposition potential, −1.4 V vs. Ag/AgCl, KCl sat; deposition time, 180 s; frequency, 10 Hz; amplitude, 25 mV; starting dissolution potential, −1.2 V vs. Ag/AgCl, KCl sat.

Table 6. Linear regression parameters for SWASV detection of Pb²⁺ at CXBiFeₓ nanocomposites modified glassy carbon electrodes.

| Electrode Type       | Intercept (µA) | Slope (µA/pM) | R²     | N   |
|----------------------|----------------|---------------|--------|-----|
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe₀       | 2.69 ± 0.14    | 1.17·10⁶ ± 0.02·10⁶ | 0.99747 | 10  |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe₀₀₁     | 2.98 ± 0.18    | 1.01·10⁶ ± 0.02·10⁶ | 0.99366 | 10  |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe₀₁₂     | 1.20 ± 0.09    | 3.77·10⁵ ± 0.16·10⁵ | 0.99001 | 7   |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe₁₂      | 2.76 ± 0.26    | 6.39·10⁵ ± 0.37·10⁵ | 0.97323 | 10  |

Table 7. Analytical parameters of the sensors based on carbonaceous materials used for SWASV detection of Pb²⁺.

| Electrode Type       | Peak Potential | Linear Range | Sensitivity (µA/µM) | Detection Limit (pM) | Ref.     |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------|
| GC/Chi-(Bi-CX)       | −0.55          | 1–10 pM      | 1.15·10⁶            | 0.36                 | [9]      |
| GC/Chi-(Bi-CX)       | −0.56          | 1–10 pM      | 1.37·10⁶            | 0.28                 | [7]      |
| GC/Chi-(Bi-CA)       | −0.44          | 1–10 pM      | 2.3·10⁵             | 0.48                 | [7]      |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe₀       | −0.53          | 1–10 pM      | 1.17·10⁶            | 0.36                 |          |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe₀₀₁     | −0.58          | 1–10 pM      | 1.01·10⁶            | 0.54                 |          |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe₀₁₂     | −0.56          | 1–10 pM      | 3.77·10⁵            | 0.77                 |          |
| GC/Chi-CXBiFe₁₂      | −0.51          | 1–10 pM      | 6.39·10⁵            | 1.24                 | This work|

GC, glassy carbon; Chi, chitosan; CX, carbon xerogel; CA, carbon aerogel.
The anodic peak potential values for Pb$^{2+}$ detection at the prepared GC/Chi–CXBiFe$_x$ modified electrodes present small differences (Table 6) that can be associated with the material surface hydrophobicity [7].

Moreover, by the increasing of the Fe concentration in CXBiFe$_x$ nanocomposite from 0 to 1.2%, the decreasing of the sensitivity from $1.17 \cdot 10^6 \mu A/\mu M$ to $6.39 \cdot 10^5 \mu A/\mu M$ and the increasing of the detection limit values from 0.36 pM to 1.24 pM (estimated for a signal to noise ratio of 3) was observed (Table 6). A possible explanation for the variation of the obtained electroanalytical parameters can arise from the corroborated effect of the (i) partial coverage of the Pb$^{2+}$ sensing Bi centers due to Bi-O-Fe interactions and the formation of hybrid nanostructures (ii) individual or cumulative effects of the size and spatial distribution of the Bi/Fe nanoparticles, and (iii) charge transport properties affected by matrix graphitization yields, the chemical state of the nano-inclusions and the porosity (Table 1). Still, excellent electroanalytical performance (sensitivity, detection limit and linear range) was obtained at the GC/Chi–CXBiFe$_x$, which can detect Pb$^{2+}$ concentrations starting from much lower values than the ones reported by official safety and recommendation standards for drinkable water [36,37]. This is mainly due to the irregular microstructure of CXBiFe$_x$ nanocomposite, where the Bi/Fe nanoparticles, randomly dispersed in the carbon xerogel, offer an easy access to the heavy metal ions. The obtained analytical parameters, sensitivity, and detection limit, recommend the GC/Chi–CXBiFe$_x$ modified electrode as competitive for Pb$^{2+}$ detection, with comparable results with the best already published (Table 7).

By comparing four different compositions of Fe-modified carbonaceous nanocomposite materials, CXBiFe$_x$, the good electroanalytical properties, for both heavy metals (Pb$^{2+}$), and biomarkers (H$_2$O$_2$) detection, proved that the synthetized electrode materials are well-matched with the two different applications. Due to Bi-O-Fe interactions, the H$_2$O$_2$ and Pb$^{2+}$ sensing performances do not evolve in tandem: as Fe is seen to hinder the sensing capabilities of Bi while improving the H$_2$O$_2$ detection through its inherent Fenton mechanisms. The present study proved that CXBiFe$_x$ composite material open new opportunities for sensors development, offering the advantages of using a very low amount of nanomaterial (CXBiFe$_x$) for the electrode preparation, and bifunctionalities.

4. Conclusions

Xerogel nanocomposites were obtained by tailoring the initial resorcinol– formaldehyde synthesis with Bi and Fe precursors. During this study, the variation of Fe concentration is investigated, while keeping constant the other synthesis parameters, including the Bi concentration. The increased Fe content, combined with the pyrolysis effect induced significant changes at the nanoscale. First, the growth of $\beta$-Bi$_2$O$_3$ and amorphous Bi$_2$O$_3$ was altered due to Bi-O-Fe interactions, which ultimately led to hybrid nanoparticles with increased size and structural features resembling that of a defected Bi$_2$Fe$_4$O$_9$ structure. Secondly, the excess Fe amounts will be introduced as Fe$_3$O$_4$ nanoparticles as observed in XRD and TEM results. Finally, considering the changes in features of the carbon support, higher graphitization yields were not detected with the increase in Fe content, as pure metal/carbide catalytic states were not reached during present thermal conditions. Nevertheless, changes of the porous features for the carbon support were induced as the specific surface area and micropore volumes increased with Fe concentration. The electroanalytical parameters values indicate that the presence of Fe in the CXBiFe$_x$ nanocomposite decrease the Pb$^{2+}$ detection efficiency, most probably due to modification of Bi nanoparticle surface with Fe phase. Nevertheless, the obtained composites where still operational for sensing Pb$^{2+}$ concentrations well below the standard detection limits. Further on, the nanocomposites revealed improved performance for H$_2$O$_2$ detection with the increase of Fe content. This clearly indicates that such materials are compatible with the two different applications and may represent a starting point for contexts where heavy metal ions and biological environments interact.
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