

INTERFACIAL TRANSITION ZONE BETWEEN AGGREGATE AND ALKALI-ACTIVATED BLAST FURNACE SLAG – A SCANNING ELECTRON MICROSCOPY

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ABSTRACT

Alkali-activated binders are currently a widely-researched material. Thanks to the use of secondary raw materials such as slag from metallurgical production and ash from combustion, it appears to be a more promising and more environmentally friendly material than conventional cement concrete. Considerable attention is paid to the bonding phase itself, but only a few works deal with the binder-aggregate interaction. With cement concrete, much more attention is paid to this issue. This paper deals with the possibility of observation using electron microscopy and the information that can be obtained by this method. The problems of sample preparation and difficulties in the course of our own observation are monitored.

Keywords: Alkali-activated binders, Cement concrete, Scanning electron microscopy

1 INTRODUCTION

Alkali activated materials are well known more than sixty years the attention of researches was intensified in last two decades. It is especially, because the production of ordinary Portland cement is very environmentally inefficient and many researchers try to find out the alternative binder. Many research works were done on study of alkali activated binders, mortars and concretes [1, 2, 7, 8]. The main focus is nowadays taken on chemistry and microstructure of various type of AAM [2]. The interaction of binder matrix and aggregate was very intensively studied in ordinary Portland cement materials [3, 4, 5]. However, in alkali-activated binders this area is not well explored [6]. Because of the interaction of alkali-activated materials and aggregate is not the same as in Portland cement the intensive study is necessary.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The alkali-activated materials were prepared in the same way as cement mortar for strength testing. Because there is not standard for testing of alkali-activated materials the standard for cement testing was used [9]. Standard samples of dimensions 160x40x40mm were prepared from alkali-activated binder and aggregate prepared from various types of rock. The granulometry of aggregate was prepared according to standard for cement testing. These samples were cut to smaller size. These small samples were used for electron microscopy observation. In previous research the broken samples after strength were used for microscopy observation. Due to its mechanical destruction, the results were not satisfactory.

Alkali-activated blast furnace slag

The fine milled blast furnace slag (BFS) was used for preparation of alkali-activated binder. The chemical composition of BFS is in Table 1. Activator was prepared from sodium water glass with modified silicate modulus to $M = 2.0$. Modification of modulus was done by addition of 50% sodium hydroxide solution. Chemical composition of used water glass is in Table 2. The amount of added hydroxide solution was 11,9 ml to 100 ml of water glass.

Table 1. Chemical composition of blast furnace slag

Chemical element	[%]
Ca	30,054
Si	20,293
Fe	0,259
Al	6,109
Mg	1,832
S	0,653

Table 2. Chemical composition of water glass

Oxid	[%]	M (SiO ₂ / Na ₂ O)
Na ₂ O	7,53	3,42
SiO ₂	24,94	

Rock types and aggregate preparation

Used rocks for preparation of aggregate were chosen due to industrial usage in concrete preparation in Czech Republic. Four types of rock were used. The rock type and mineralogical composition is in Table 3. Aggregate prepared from rock was crushed and sieved to the same size as standard sand for preparation of samples for cement strength testing.

Table 2. Mineralogical composition of used rocks

Amphibolite		Limestone		Travertine		Granite	
Mineral type	%	Mineral type	%	Mineral type	%	Mineral type	%
Calcite	4.7	Calcite	93.2	Calcite	98.2	Calcite	4.3
Biotite	2.1	Quartz	6.8	Quartz	1.8	Quartz	31.5
Chlorite	6.5					Microcline	17.0
Actinolite	33.1					Biotite	5.2
Andesine	53.7					Chlorite	5.3
						Oligoclase	46.7

Electron microscopy observation and sample preparation

Scanning electron microscopy was used for monitoring surface of samples, their composition and structure. Due to selected methodic, it was necessary to prepare smaller samples than the original beams prepared according to standard for cement testing. Samples were cut from the original 160x40x40mm to a size of 10 x 10 mm and then was prepared polished surface on one side of sample. Grinding was performed on grain papers of grain size 220 and 1000. After the cut was made, the sample was polished with Al₂O₃. The residues of oxide were washed with water and the samples were dried, because electron microscopy didn't allow analyzing wet samples. The drying process is not very appropriate for hydrated binder materials. It is because the thermal destruction of hydrated phases of binder. Solution of this problematic will be taken in to account in next research.

Despite this preparation of the samples, it was not possible to achieve a sufficient vacuum in the vacuum chamber as they were porous materials. Further surface treatment of the specimen was the staining of the sample surface with a thin layer of chromium approximately 30 µm. This ensures the filling of the pores on the surface of the samples, but also the discharge of the electrical charge.

Conditions of measuring:

Scanning Electron Microscope FEI Quanta 650 FEG

Acceleration voltage: 20 kV

Current: 8 - 10 nA

Pressure in vacuum chamber: 50 Pa

Electron beam diameter: 6 µm

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

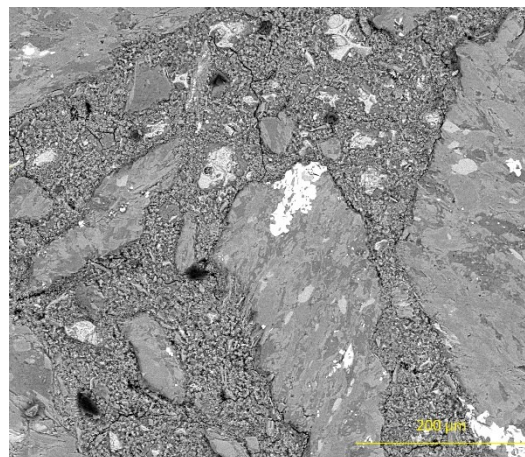
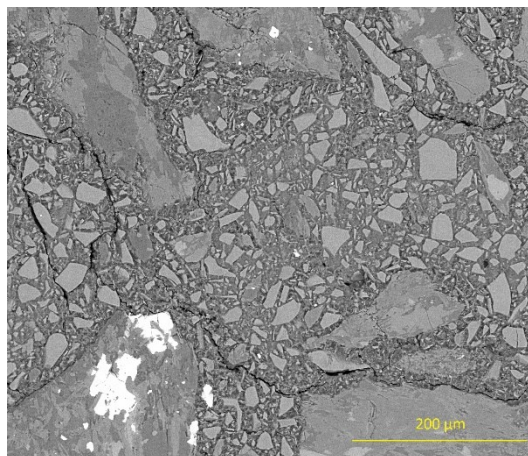


Figure 1 Amphibolite with alkali activated grounded blast furnace slag (left) and with Portland cement (right)

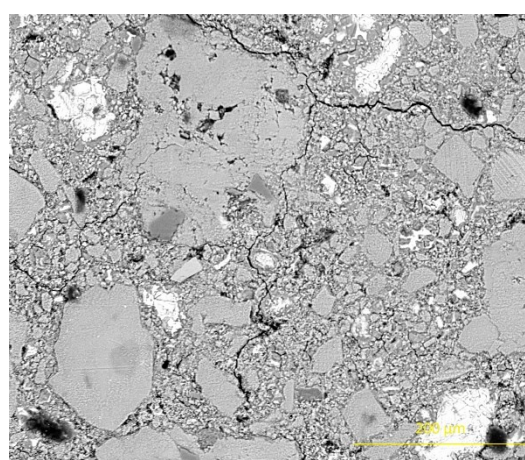
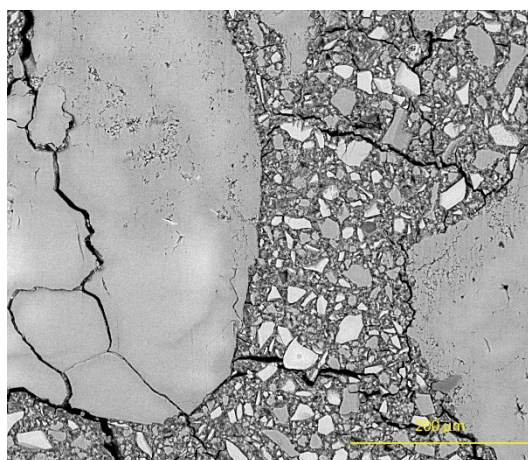


Figure 2 Travertine with alkali activated grounded blast furnace slag (left) and with Portland cement (right)

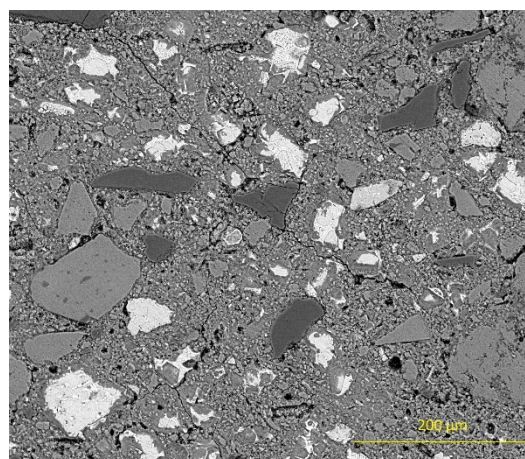
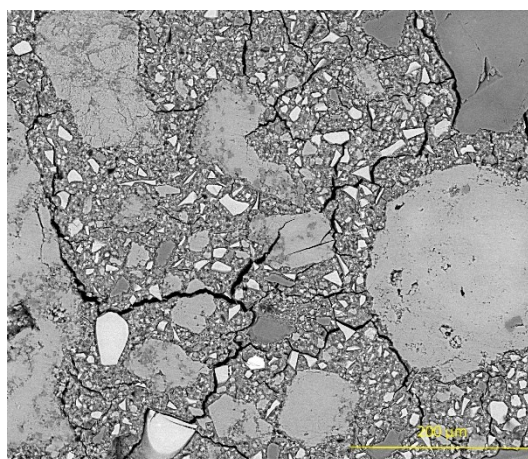


Figure 3 Limestone with alkali activated grounded blast furnace slag (left) and with Portland cement (right)

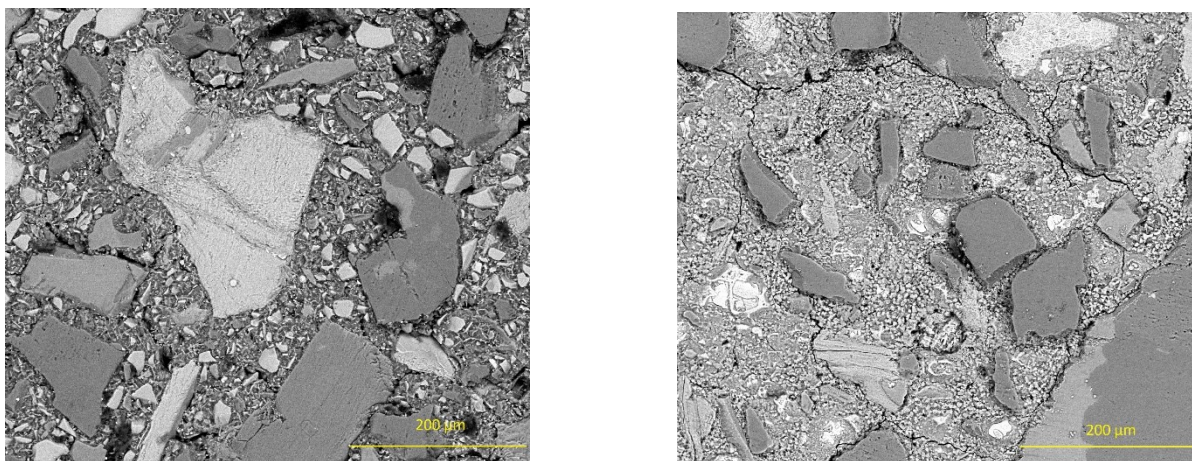


Figure 4 Granite with alkali activated grounded blast furnace slag (left) and with Portland cement (right)

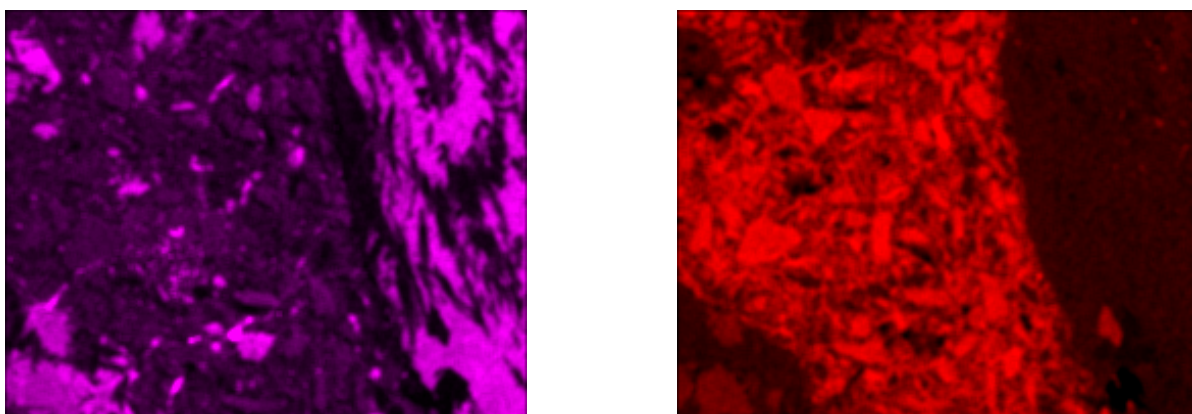


Figure 5 Energy-dispersive X-ray mapping the distribution of elements: Al (left) and Ca (right) on the surface of the amphibolite with alkali activated grounded blast furnace slag

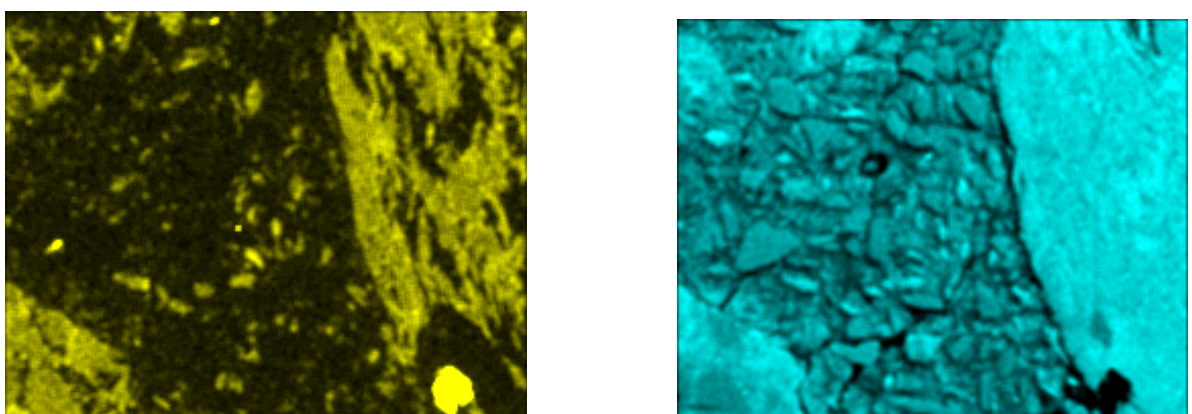


Figure 6 Energy-dispersive X-ray mapping the distribution of elements: Fe (left) and Si (right) on the surface of the amphibolite with alkali activated grounded blast furnace slag

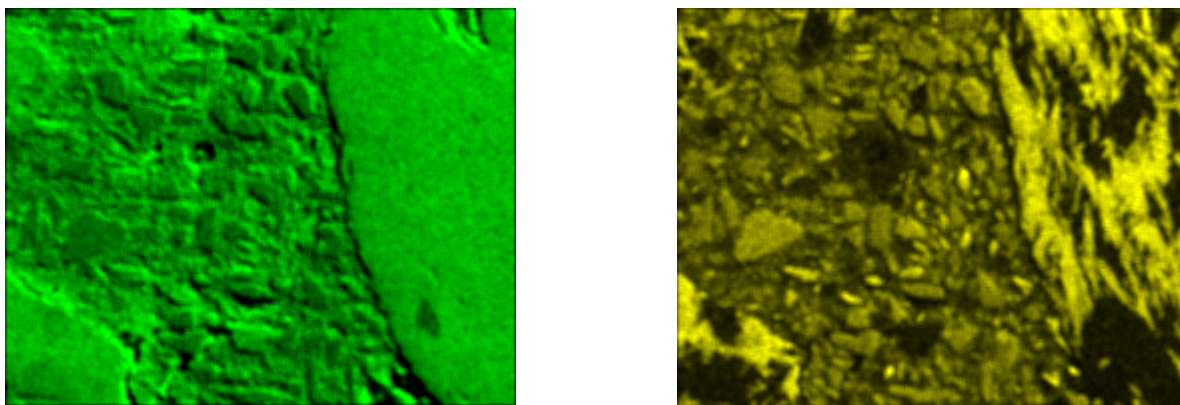


Figure 7 Energy-dispersive X-ray mapping the distribution of elements: Mg (left) and O (right) on the surface of the amphibolite with alkali activated grounded blast furnace slag

As can be seen from Figures 1 - 4, in spite of the demanding preparation of samples for microscopic observation, cracks and small fragments appear on the surface of specimens and it hinders clear visibility of the grain boundaries. Cracks spread not only by the binder but also through the aggregate, especially in brittle materials such as limestone and travertine (Figure 2 and 3 left). Alkali activated grounded blast furnace slag as a binder contains larger particles, while the Portland cement has a finer character, which can result in better strength properties, and there is no such scaling of the surface when treated. For this reason, it is difficult to determine the dependence of the elements on the distance from the aggregate grain in the samples, Energy-dispersive X-ray mapping the distribution of elements Figures 5 – 7 provides evidence that investigated material is inhomogeneous.

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