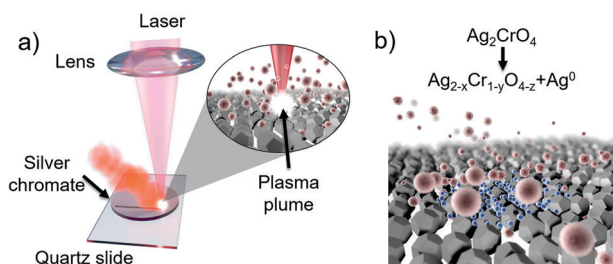


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Laser and electron beam-induced formation of Ag/Cr structures on Ag_2CrO_4

Lemos P. S., Silva G. S., Roca R. A., Assis M., Torres-Mendieta R., Beltrán-Mir H., Mínguez-Vega G., Cordoncillo E., Andrés J. and Longo E.*

The interactions of silver chromate (Ag_2CrO_4) with a femtosecond (fs) laser and electron beam irradiations were investigated.

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Laser and electron beam-induced formation of Ag/Cr structures on Ag₂CrO₄†

Lemos P. S.,^a Silva G. S.,^a Roca R. A.,^a Assis M.,^a Torres-Mendieta R.,^b Beltrán-Mir H.,^c Mínguez-Vega G.,^d Cordoncillo E.,^c Andrés J.^e and Longo E.*^f

Cite this: DOI: 10.1039/c8cp07263a

Received 26th November 2018,
Accepted 7th February 2019

DOI: 10.1039/c8cp07263a

rsc.li/pccp

The interactions of silver chromate (Ag₂CrO₄) with a femtosecond (fs) laser and electron beam irradiations were investigated. For the first time, the growth and coalescence of metallic Ag nanoparticles (NPs) on an Ag₂CrO₄ surface via fs laser irradiation can be reported. Furthermore, electron beam irradiation causes a segregation process of Ag NPs in which Ag nanofilaments are obtained. The Ag₂CrO₄ particles were characterized using X-ray diffraction (XRD), micro-Raman spectroscopy (Raman), field-emission scanning electron microscopy (FE-SEM), high-resolution electron microscopy, and energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS). According to the results, the fs/electron beam irradiations of Ag₂CrO₄ are environmentally friendly, fast, and effective methods to produce metallic Ag NPs. Both strategies have enormous potential for the synthesis and morphological control of Ag NPs on templates or biotemplates, core–shells, decorations, and composites based on Ag_{2–x}CrO₄:Ag materials, which are difficult to synthesize using conventional chemical and physical methods.

Introduction

Nanoscale-manipulations of atoms are possible through the ever-increasing advances of modern technologies, such as electron microscopy^{1,2} and ultra-short laser radiation,³ which open up a number of exciting possibilities for the nanoscale-controlled *in situ* fabrication of nanoparticles (NPs). When a material is subjected to external perturbation, *e.g.*, an electron beam or femtosecond (fs) pulse laser irradiation, a large amount of energy is interchanged through nonequilibrium processes, thereby altering the geometry, electronic structure, and morphology of the irradiated material.^{4–7} These changes cause unexpected effects on their physical and chemical properties, *e.g.*, photoluminescence emission,⁸ photodegradation,⁹ antimicrobial activity,¹⁰ and the growth of nanostructures.^{10,11} Excellent studies have been published on electron beam-induced syntheses^{12,13} and how different functional

nanomaterials and nanostructures have been successfully fabricated using fs laser treatment for several practical applications.^{3,14–19} Both techniques have gained enormous attention owing to their ability to investigate the structure–property relation of nanomaterials and their chemical interactions with solid surfaces.

Recently, fs laser and electron beam irradiation have been widely employed to grow metallic NPs of Ag,^{20–29} Au NPs,^{30–32} Bi NPs,^{33,34} Os NPs,³⁵ Cu NPs,^{36,37} Pt NPs,³⁸ Li NPs,³⁹ Na NPs,⁴⁰ Mg NPs,⁴¹ Ca NPs,⁴² and Ba NPs.⁴¹ Moreover, electron beam and fs laser irradiation do not require the addition of any solvent or chemistry component during the formation process of nanostructures. Thus, these techniques can be considered as environmentally friendly according to the principles of green chemistry⁴³ and the resulting nanomaterials could be applied to a wide range of technological applications.

Our research group investigates Ag-containing semiconductors that have attracted significant attention owing to their rich history in technical applications, *e.g.*, in catalysis,⁴⁴ photocatalysis,⁴⁵ for gas sensors,⁴⁶ and antimicrobial agents.⁴⁵ In this context, a variety of Ag-containing oxides such as Ag₂WO₄ in their different polymorph forms α -Ag₂WO₄,²⁰ β -Ag₂WO₄,^{21,47} and γ -Ag₂WO₄⁴⁸ have been studied. Various Ag-based compounds such as β -Ag₂MoO₄,⁴⁹ Ag₃PO₄,^{50,51} β -AgVO₃,⁵² and Ag₂CrO₄⁵³ have shown the ability to form Ag NPs under electron beam irradiation. The Ag NPs' growth on the semiconductor templates could enhance the surface plasmon resonance effect, which can dramatically amplify the absorption of visible light and improve the separation rate of the photogenerated holes and electrons, thereby enhancing the

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: 10.1039/c8cp07263a

1 photocatalytic activity.⁵⁴ In this context, recently, we have presented
the scale-up of the formation of Ag NPs on α -Ag₂WO₄ with
bactericidal properties *via* fs laser irradiation,⁵⁵ the laser-induced
formation of Bi NPs with different crystallographic structures,⁵⁶
5 and the formation of In NPs provoked by laser/electron beam
irradiation.⁵⁷

In the current work, the semiconductor under study is
Ag₂CrO₄, which is a promising inorganic material because of
its unique electronic and crystal structure that enables it to be a
10 good photocatalyst.^{58–65} Our group performed the synthesis,
characterization, and determination of the photoluminescence
properties of Ag₂CrO₄ microcrystals.⁶⁶ In addition, the forma-
tion and growth of Ag NPs on Ag₂CrO₄ induced by electron
irradiation on an electron microscope was investigated.⁵³ It is
15 well known that the photo- and electrochemical properties of
semiconductor films used in photovoltaics, photocatalysis, and
photoelectrolysis are greatly enhanced by the deposition of Ag NPs
onto their surfaces. The Ag NPs are employed as a high visible-light-
driven photocatalyst and microbial agent^{10,49,50,52,67} to enhance the
20 performance. The improved properties appear owing to the surface
plasmon resonance (SPR) effect and extended visible-light absorp-
tion that is present in metallic Ag NPs. Hence, a plasmon band is
created, the charge recombination reduced, and their response
improved.^{68,69} This study is intended to complement our previous
25 studies. The goal is two-fold: (i) to demonstrate, for the first time,
that fs laser irradiation can be used for the formation of Ag NPs on
Ag₂CrO₄ surfaces, and (ii) to study the evolution behavior and
growth mechanisms of Ag NPs induced by electron beam and fs
laser irradiation.

Experimental

Synthesis of Ag₂CrO₄ microparticles

35 Two Ag₂CrO₄ samples were synthesized using the precipitation
method without any surfactants. The chromate precursor
solution was prepared in 50 mL of distilled water, to which
 1.0×10^{-3} mol of K₂CrO₄ was added (99.5% purity; Química
Especializada Erich Ltda–QEEL). The solution was magnetically
40 stirred until it turned homogeneous and yellow. The silver
precursor solution was prepared with 2.0×10^{-3} mol of AgNO₃
(99.8% purity; Alfa Aesar) in 50 mL distilled water. The solution
was magnetically stirred until it turned homogeneous and
transparent. The addition of the silver precursor solution to
45 the chromate precursor solution was carried out with dropwise
additions with a rate of 10 mL min⁻¹. The resultant solution
was magnetically stirred for 20 minutes. The precipitate was
washed four times with water and once with acetone and
afterward dried in a stove at 60 °C for 4 hours.

Structural characterization of Ag₂CrO₄ microparticles

50 The Ag₂CrO₄ was structurally characterized by X-ray diffraction
(XRD) using a D/MAX-2500 PC diffractometer (Rigaku) with Cu
K α radiation ($\lambda = 1.5406$ Å). The data were recorded in the
normal routine for 2θ values ranging from 15° to 60° with a
55 scanning velocity of 2° min⁻¹. Micro-Raman measurements

were conducted using an iHR550 spectrometer (Horiba Jobin
1 Yvon, Japan) coupled to a CCD detector and an Ag ion laser
(MellesGriot, USA) operating at 514.5 nm with a maximum
power of 200 mW and a fiber microscope. The measurements
5 were performed in the range of 30–1000 cm⁻¹.

Fs laser irradiation

To perform the fs laser irradiation, the sample had to be
compressed into a pellet form. The resulting Ag₂CrO₄ pellets
were irradiated with a Ti:sapphire laser (Femtopower Compact
10 Pro, Femtolasers), which delivers 30 fs full-width at half-
maximum (FWHM) pulses at a central wavelength of 800 nm
and a repetition rate of 1 kHz. In addition, a programmable
acousto-optic filter (Dazzler, Fastlite) was used to ensure a
precise pulse compression at the sample. A laser beam with a
15 mean power of 200 mW was focused onto the surface of the
pellet target with a 75 mm lens to obtain a focal spot with a
diameter of 20.6 μ m FWHM. The silver chromate sample was
placed at the top of a quartz slide attached to a two-
dimensional motion-controlled stage moving at a constant
20 speed of 0.45 mm s⁻¹ in the focus plane perpendicular to the
laser beam. Fig. 1a and b present a scheme of the experimental
procedure and obtained results, where the interaction between
the fs laser radiation and Ag₂CrO₄ promotes the creation of a
plasma plume that leads to the segregation of Ag nanoparticles.
25 The selected parameters of the laser irradiation are similar to
those previously reported for the most efficient segregation of
metal NPs from semiconductor networks.^{55–57} In addition,
when we are dealing with pulsed laser sources that interact
with a moving target, as the light is not delivered in a contin-
30 uous way, it is more common to talk about the overlapping
between the pulses on the sample. In this way, a large overlap
means more investment of energy delivered to a single area in a
long period of time, and a minimal overlap means a minor
investment of energy delivered to a single area but in a short
35 period of time. For the current experiment, the irradiation time
is controlled by the size of the beam and the speed of the
platform. The size of the focal spot on the sample surface was
about 20.7 microns. The laser has a 1 KHz repetition rate and
the motion velocity of the platform was 0.45 mm s⁻¹. These
40 parameters indicate that there is an overlapping of the spot size
of around 95% between consecutive pulses. Considering the
large overlapping used in the current experiment, in compar-
ison with electron beam excitation, while using fs laser irradia-
45 tion there is still plenty of room towards crossing the line
between basic research and the final industrialization of the
process.

Morphological characterization of the samples

50 The morphology of fs laser-irradiated and non-irradiated sam-
ples was observed using a field-emission scanning electron
microscope (FE-SEM) (Inspect F50 model; FEI Company, USA)
working at 5 kV. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM)
images are obtained using a high-resolution (HR) JEM-2100
55 LaB6 (Jeol) microscope with an acceleration voltage of 200 kV
coupled with INCA Energy TEM 200 (Oxford Instruments) to

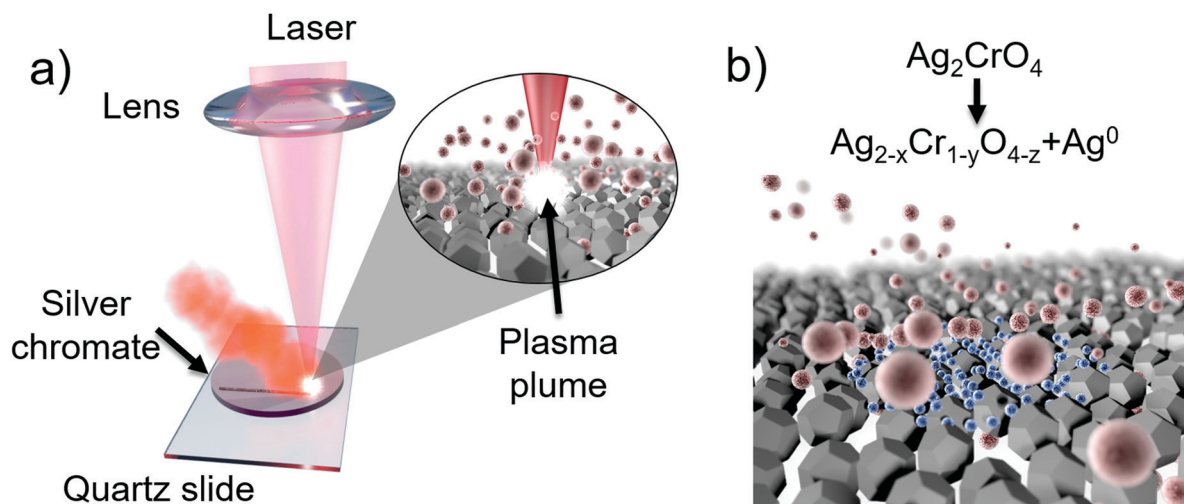


Fig. 1 Representation of the procedure employed to irradiate Ag_2CrO_4 , where the generation of the plasma plume takes place (left), with formation of $\text{Ag}_{2-x}\text{Cr}_{1-y}\text{O}_{4-z}:\text{Ag}$ (right). (a) Experimental procedure and (b) schematic representation of the obtained results.

perform energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS). For both the non-laser irradiated powder and the laser irradiated powder, in the case of FE-SEM, the samples were prepared by depositing a small amount of powder directly onto the FE-SEM sample holder, and for the TEM the powder was suspended in water and a droplet of the mixture was deposited onto the carbon-coated Cu grid (TEM grid). After the evaporation of water, it was submitted to high vacuum and analyzed via TEM.

Results and discussion

XRD patterns

Fig. 2 presents the XRD patterns of the Ag_2CrO_4 microparticles prepared using the aforementioned methodology. All diffraction peaks can be perfectly indexed to an orthorhombic

structure with space group $Pnma$ and without any deleterious phases within the detection limits of the diffractometer. The well-defined peaks indicate long-range structural order and crystallinity. The XRD patterns are in good agreement with the *Inorganic Crystal Structure Database* (ICSD) Card no. 16298 and literature.^{53,70}

Fig. 3 illustrates the orthorhombic structure of the Ag_2CrO_4 microparticles. The figure is produced using the *Visualization for Electronic and Structural Analysis* (VESTA) program, version 3.3.2., using lattice parameters and atomic positions obtained from the crystallographic information file (CIF) no. 16298.

According to Silva *et al.*,⁶⁶ the Ag_2CrO_4 structure is composed of elongated octahedral $[\text{AgO}_6]$ clusters and distorted off-centered $[\text{AgO}_4]$ tetrahedra and $[\text{CrO}_4]$ clusters. The tetrahedral clusters interact with the octahedral $[\text{AgO}_6]$ ones, generating polarization at the short and medium distance, which is reflected throughout the crystalline lattice. These structural

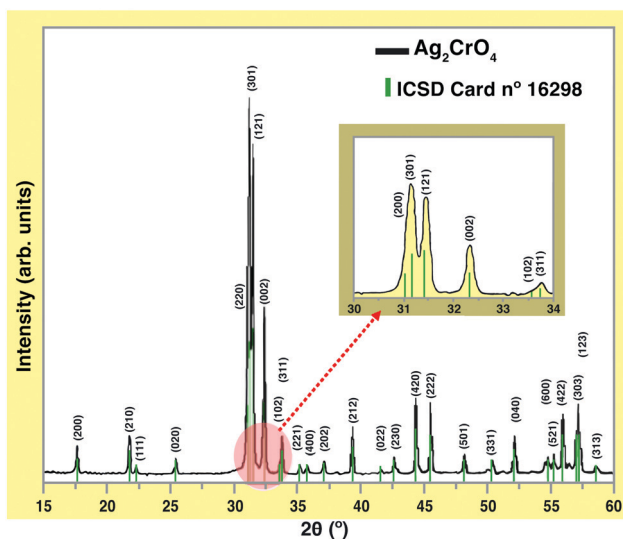


Fig. 2 XRD pattern of the non-irradiated Ag_2CrO_4 microcrystals.

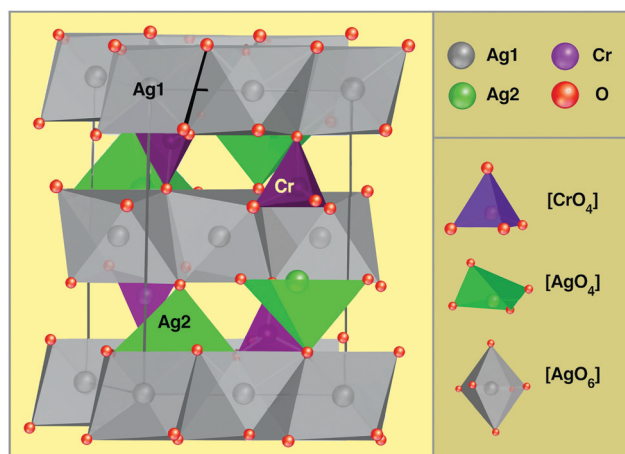


Fig. 3 A schematic representation of the orthorhombic structure of Ag_2CrO_4 microparticles. The $[\text{CrO}_4]$, $[\text{AgO}_4]$ and $[\text{AgO}_6]$ clusters, as building blocks of Ag_2CrO_4 , are depicted.

and electronic displacements promote the formation of induced and permanent dipoles between the different clusters, enhancing domains of different electron density distributions (low and high) in the crystalline network.⁷¹

Raman spectra

Furthermore, a micro-Raman analysis was performed to investigate the degree of structural order–disorder in the short-range (Fig. 4). The micro-Raman spectrum presents three peaks in the high-frequency region at 781, 812, and 855 cm^{-1} . These peaks are related to the symmetric stretching vibrations of Cr–O bonds in the $[\text{CrO}_4]$ clusters and their positions are in good agreement with the literature.⁷² The orthorhombic structure of Ag_2CrO_4 has 36 Raman-active modes with mechanical representation $\Gamma = 11A_g + 7B_{1g} + 11B_{2g} + 7B_{3g}$, of which 18 are internal modes [$2\nu_1, 4\nu_2, 6\nu_3, 6\nu_4$] and 18 are external modes [6 rotational (R) and 12 translational (T) modes].⁵³ Not all Raman-active modes were experimentally observed owing to weak intensity and/or merging of modes with close wavenumbers.

FE-SEM images

To investigate the morphological alterations resulting from the fs laser irradiation, FE-SEM micrographs were analyzed. The non-irradiated particles present a high agglomeration rate when observed under low magnification (Fig. 5a). However, when these particles are analyzed at medium and high magnifications (Fig. 5b and c), they appear faceted and formed mainly by irregular polyhedrons. The particles of the fs laser-irradiated sample (Fig. 5d–f) are faceted and present irregular polyhedra (slightly different from those observed in the non-irradiated sample).

To analyze the effects of fs laser irradiation on the morphology and the particle size distribution more deeply, a count of 200 particles of each sample was taken, and the results are presented in Fig. 6. The distribution curve in each histogram,

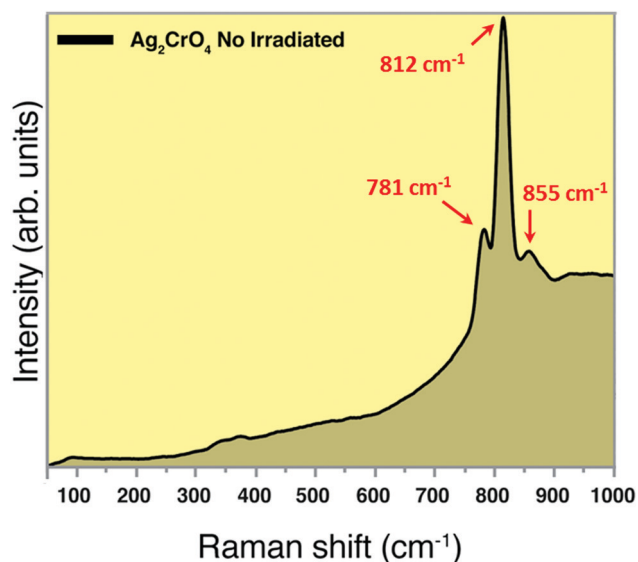


Fig. 4 Raman scattering spectrum of the non-irradiated Ag_2CrO_4 sample.

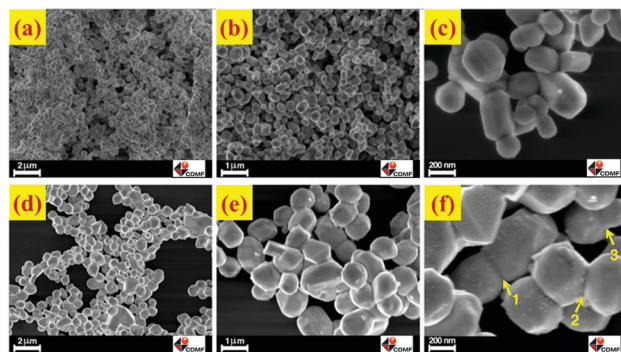


Fig. 5 (a) Low-, (b) medium-, and (c) high-magnification FE-SEM images of the non-irradiated Ag_2CrO_4 sample. (d) Low-, (e) medium-, and (f) high-magnification FE-SEM images of the fs laser-irradiated Ag_2CrO_4 sample. *Numbers 1, 2 and 3 in (f) indicate the initial stage of the sintering process.

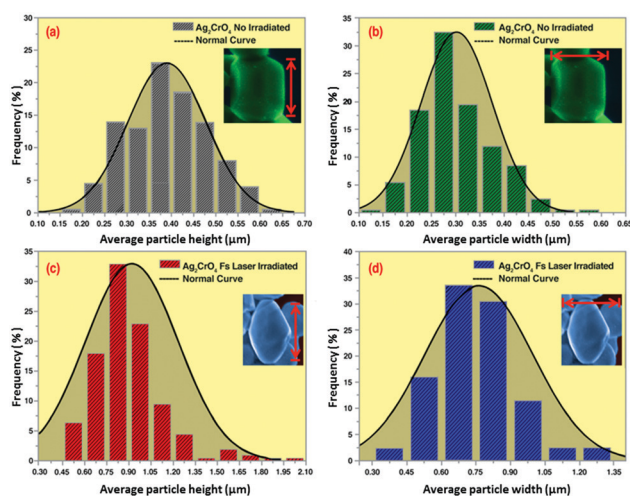


Fig. 6 Average height and width distribution of Ag_2CrO_4 microparticles non-irradiated (a and b) and fs laser-irradiated (c and d).

the mean height, and the width of the particles were calculated using a log-normal distribution curve. The non-irradiated sample (Fig. 6a and b) showed a very narrow particle size distribution.

The particles have a size distribution range between 0.10 μm and 0.60 μm . In addition, the non-irradiated particles exhibit a mean height and a width of $(0.39 \pm 0.09) \mu\text{m}$ and $(0.30 \pm 0.07) \mu\text{m}$, respectively. On the other hand, the fs laser-irradiated sample (Fig. 6c and d) presented a particle size distribution ranging from 0.45 μm to more than 2.0 μm , and a mean height and a width of $(0.92 \pm 0.31) \mu\text{m}$ and $(0.76 \pm 0.24) \mu\text{m}$, respectively. These values show that a significant increase in the particle size distribution of the fs laser-irradiated sample relative to the non-irradiated sample has occurred. The results reveal that the coalescence process has taken place and that the particles' growth has been stimulated by fs laser-irradiation.

By plotting the height of each particle with its own width (Fig. 7), a considerable increase in the dispersion of particles from the non-irradiated to fs laser-irradiated samples can be observed. In addition, the width/height ratios of the particles are similar (0.77 for the non-irradiated particles and 0.83 for

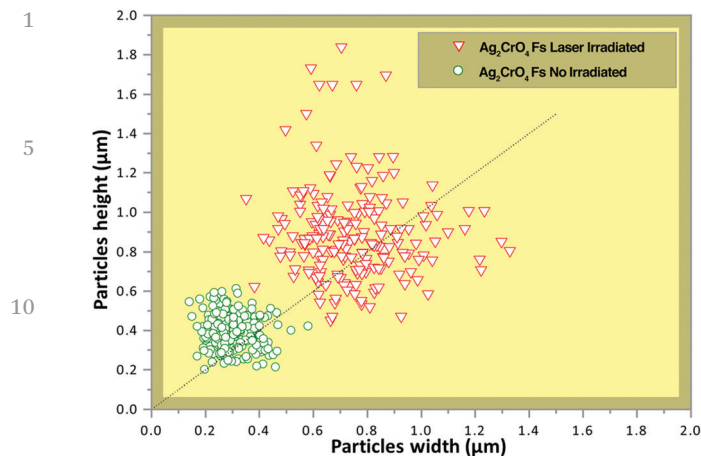


Fig. 7 Height versus width of non-irradiated Ag_2CrO_4 particles (green circles) and height versus width of fs laser-irradiated Ag_2CrO_4 particles (red triangles).

the irradiated particles), which suggests that the coalescence process did not occur along a preferable unidirectional orientation or oriented attachment.⁷³

The coalescence process could be observed using microscopes. In Fig. 5f, the numbers 1, 2, and 3 present the neck growth between contacting particles, which indicate an early stage of the sintering process.⁷⁴ As other groups have previously reported, the interaction between high intensity fs laser radiation and a semiconductor powder may promote a microsintering process.⁷⁵ The whole interaction can be thought to occur in three stages: In the first stage, the laser irradiation promotes

the detachment of electrons, ions and another bigger species out of the surface of the microparticles that interact with the laser radiation, leading to the creation of a plasma plume. In the second stage, there is no more interaction with the laser because the temporal width of the pulses used in the current article is 30 fs, but in the counterpart, the plasma plume still exists (lifetime in the region of ns), which interacts with the remaining powder bed. The plasma plume can reach extremely high temperature and pressure values, 1000 K and 10^{10} Pa, respectively.⁷⁶ As the melting temperature of Ag_2CrO_4 is around 938 K,⁷⁷ such conditions can promote the melting of the microparticles in the powder bed that interact with the plasma.

In the third stage, the plasma plume gets extinguished and the species that formed the plasma plume cool down and form nanostructures, and the melted microparticles belonging to the powder bed also cool down and solidify forming bigger microparticles. A graphical representation of these stages can be found in the ESI.†

HR-TEM images

In order to investigate the effects of fs laser irradiation on the nanostructure growth and stoichiometric modifications of the original material, HR-TEM images were analyzed. Fig. 8 depicts a representative micrograph of the laser-treated samples. Four different regions are highlighted. Region (b) shows a zoomed-in particle near the stems. Through the zoom, it was possible to examine the lattice planes, which show that the reciprocal distances corresponding to the strongest reflections have the diffraction index (111). This matches with Ag according to the

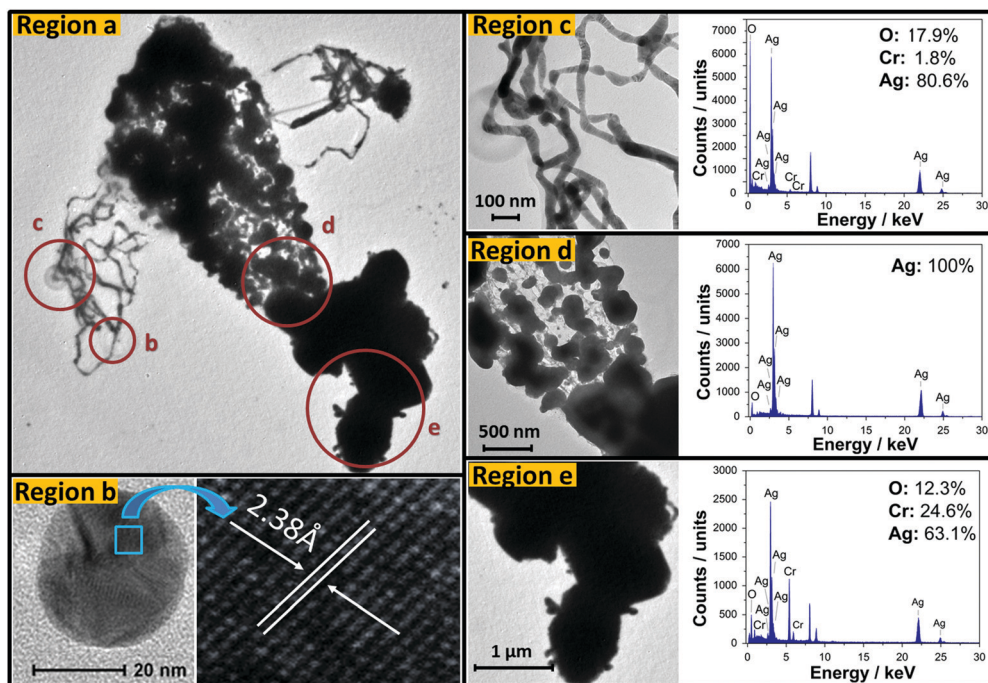
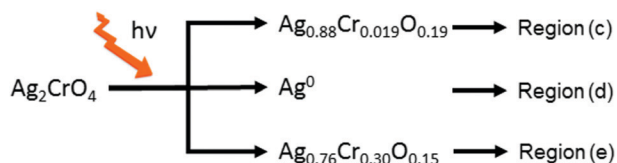


Fig. 8 (Region a) TEM images of the Ag_2CrO_4 microparticles irradiated with fs laser, (Region b) high resolution of the structure formed by fs laser radiation, (Region c) EDS characterization of the stems, (Region d) EDS characterization between the stems and the Ag_2CrO_4 microparticle and (Region e) EDS characterization of the Ag_2CrO_4 microparticle.

1 *Joint Committee on Powder Diffraction Standards (JCPDS) No. 65-*
 2871. Region (c) corresponds to the stems formed *via* fs laser
 irradiation. The EDS spectra indicate that this region exhibits
 80.6% of Ag, 1.8% of Cr and 17.6% of O in its atomic
 5 composition. By contrast, region (d) exhibits only the presence
 of Ag (100%). Region (e) shows the lowest concentration of Ag
 (63.1%) and the highest concentration of Cr (24.6%). After a
 conversion of the elementary percentages into molar fractions
 to estimate the stoichiometry of the material, we noticed that in
 10 all regions, the stoichiometric coefficients do not match the
 Ag_2CrO_4 coefficients. These results suggest that in addition to
 metallic silver, fs laser-irradiation may form other products,
 such as simple metal oxides of silver (Ag_wO_x) and chromium
 (Cr_yO_z).



The morphology of the sample irradiated by the fs laser
 remained unchanged during the observation *via* TEM. This
 indicates that the stem growth is a consequence of the inter-
 actions between the sample and the fs laser irradiation. Since
 25 the fs laser-irradiated sample remained unchanged during the
 presence of the electron beam of the TEM, it can be assumed
 that the stems are thermodynamically stable because the
 sample received inside the TEM high-vacuum chamber energy
 doses of the order of $1.2 \times 10^8 \text{ kJ m}^{-2}$, which would be more
 30 than sufficient to alter the sample previously irradiated with the
 fs laser.

According to the EDS measurements (Fig. 8) the fs laser
 irradiation provokes the formation of $\text{Ag}_{2-x}\text{Cr}_{1-y}\text{O}_{4-z}$ and
 35 metallic Ag NPs. Therefore, aside from the sintering process
 the interplay between the species forming the above mentioned
 plasma plume might also lead to the formation of metallic Ag
 NPs and simpler metallic oxides.⁵⁵ Moreover, the presence of
 different Ag nanostructure morphologies could be attributed to
 40 a welding phenomenon that is a consequence of the interaction
 between newly created Ag NPs with further incoming fs laser
 pulses. As it has been extensively reported, when the distance
 between two or more metal NPs is sufficiently short, hybridized
 plasmon modes appear producing an enhancement of the near
 45 field in the interparticle gaps, reaching enough energy to melt
 them, which leads to the union of the nanostructures.^{78,79} In
 addition, the non-irradiated sample was also exposed to the
 electron beam irradiation of the TEM and the corresponding
 results are presented in Fig. 9. Here, the interaction of the
 50 sample with the electron beam irradiation was completely
 different to that of the fs laser-irradiated sample. As soon as
 the electron beam interacted with Ag_2CrO_4 (Fig. 9a), the
 sample decomposed rapidly, forming products that adhered to the
 Cu-C grid of the TEM, where the sample was placed onto (Fig. 9b).

In order to understand the influence of the electron beam
 irradiation, a quantitative analysis was performed, as shown in

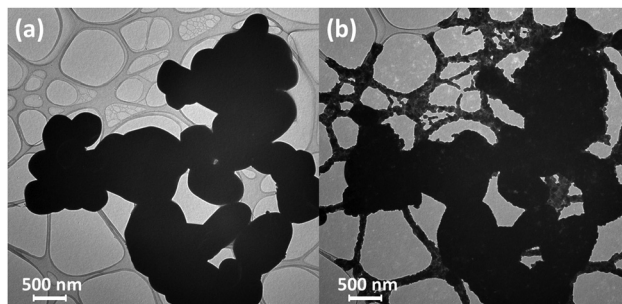


Fig. 9 TEM images of the non-irradiated Ag_2CrO_4 sample (a) before
 electron beam irradiation and (b) after electron beam irradiation.

Fig. 10. Fig. 10a and b display the Ag_2CrO_4 sample before and
 after electron beam irradiation, respectively.

The EDS characterization was performed for the two regions
 of Fig. 10b: region (1) already existed and region (2) formed as a
 consequence of the electron beam irradiation on the sample. As
 soon as the electron beam irradiation reached the sample, the
 formed product spread instantly along the entire Cu-C grid of
 the TEM. The grid worked as a template and the formed product
 covered the grid over a few micrometers. The EDS characteriza-
 20 tion (Fig. 10c) shows different atomic proportions of Ag (66.1% and
 39.1%), Cr (30.7% and 23.0%) and O (3.2% and 37.9%) in regions
 1 and 2, respectively. When we converted the elementary percent-
 ages into molar fractions to determine the stoichiometry of the
 25 products (Fig. 10e), we noticed that in both regions, the
 stoichiometric coefficients do not match the Ag_2CrO_4 coefficients.
 These results indicate that there may be other products formed
 by the electron beam, in addition to metallic silver, already
 30 observed.

The HR-TEM analysis displayed in Fig. 10d illustrates that
 the interplanar distances found in the formed product (2.58 Å
 and 2.59 Å) are related to the (0 4 0) plane of the orthorhombic
 structure of Ag_2O_3 , according to the JCPDS No. 40909. Further-
 35 more, additional values of interplanar distances were found
 that could not be identified as metallic Ag, Ag_2CrO_4 , or simple
 oxides such as Ag_2O or CrO_3 . This confirms our hypothesis
 that there are other products of unknown composition being
 40 formed simultaneously to the metallic Ag. Hence, it was neither
 possible to detect a proper stoichiometry for $\text{Ag}_{2-x}\text{Cr}_{1-y}\text{O}_{4-z}$
 nor an estimated ratio between formed oxides and metallic Ag.
 This is because the amounts of Ag, Cr, and O with respect to
 each formed compound cannot be determined and it is not
 45 possible to distinguish the amount of metallic Ag from the total
 Ag amount found in the sample by using only an EDS analysis.

The Ag NP growth process and spreading through the TEM
 grid can be understood as a mass transport phenomenon
 induced by the electron beam. The atom and particle migration
 along the grid occurs *via* diffusion and/or convection owing to
 the electrical potential generated by the electron beam. When
 the electron beam interacts with the sample, the electrons
 decelerate and part of the energy dissipates *via* repeated ran-
 50 dom scattering and absorption within an interaction volume of
 the specimen. This energy loss, due to inelastic collisions, is

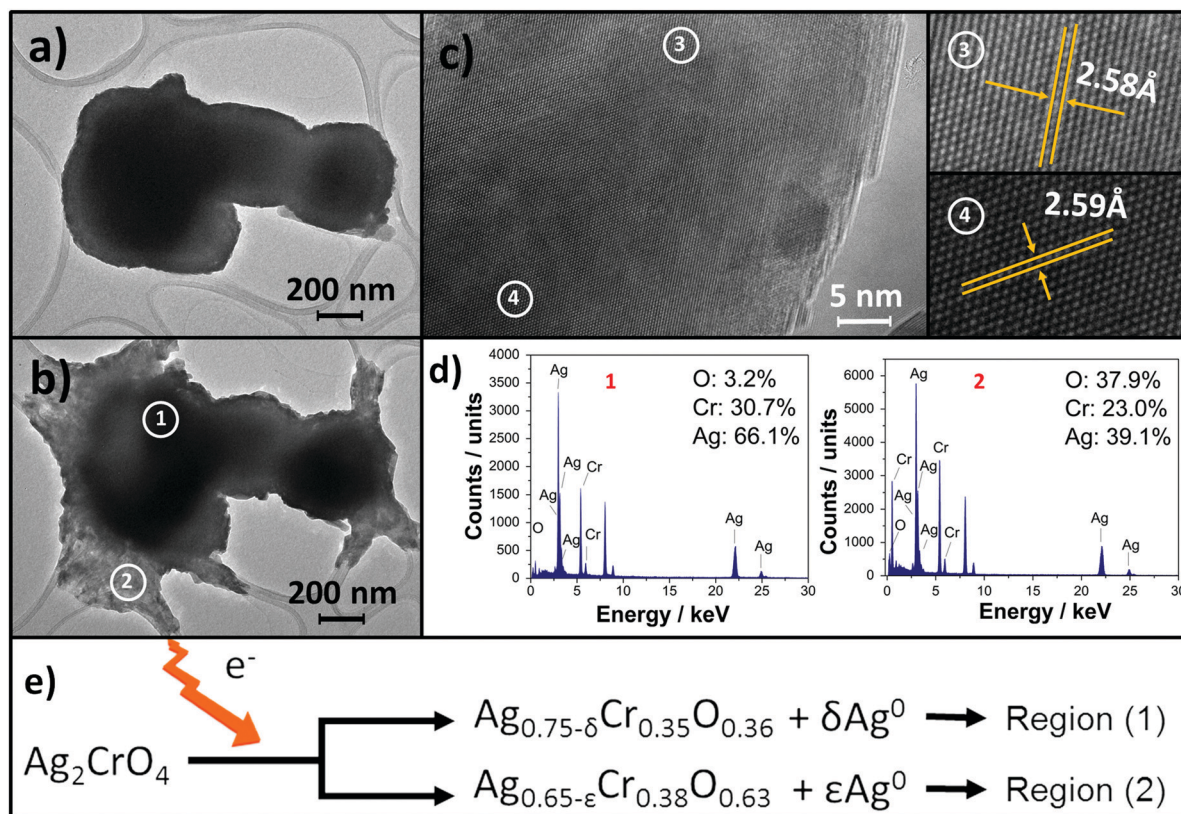


Fig. 10 TEM images (a) before electron beam irradiation and (b) after electron beam irradiation. (c) EDS characterization of the central (1) and peripheral (2) regions of the Ag_2CrO_4 microparticle and (d) high resolution TEM of an Ag_2CrO_4 microparticle.

mostly used in the generation of electron-hole pairs. The generated free carriers move and redistribute around the electron-irradiated region, forming relatively stable defects, also known as self-trapped excitons (STEs). The STE formation is followed by strain and bond-breaking processes that accelerate and induce anatomic diffusion in comparison with the environmental thermal diffusion, without electron beam irradiation.⁸⁰ The thermal energy inside the high-vacuum chamber is 7.73 million times higher than the environmental thermal energy. This condition enables a mass transport along the TEM grid.

As displayed in Fig. 3, Ag_2CrO_4 is composed of three different clusters; two of them with a predominant ionic character that act as network modifiers: $[\text{AgO}_4]$ and $[\text{AgO}_6]$; and one with a predominantly covalent character, which acts as a network former: $[\text{CrO}_4]$. We believe that the interaction between Ag_2CrO_4 and the different radiation forms, electronic or photonic, promotes the transitions of electrons from the occupied state (below the Fermi level) to the unoccupied state (usually above the Fermi level) in the oxygen atoms of the clusters. This causes an electron redistribution. Hence, stabilization of the crystal occurs, causing oxidation/reduction reactions. In this case, the clusters of Ag ($[\text{AgO}_x]$, $x = 4$ and 6), as constituent building blocks of Ag_2CrO_4 absorb this electronic excess, thereby reducing Ag^+ to Ag^0 and obtaining a non-stoichiometric oxide. As Ag_2CrO_4 is an n-type semiconductor,

it becomes an n/p-type semiconductor at the sites where the formation of Ag^0 occurs owing to the formation of internal defects which is due to the occurrence of Ag vacancies.

The control over the growth process during fs laser or electron beam irradiation is still limited. Nevertheless, an increment in the photon/electron current typically initiates or enhances the Ag growth process, which is still localized on particular nucleation sites, where Ag is drawn from distant regions of the particles. However, the fs laser and electron beam irradiation-driven processes induce the formation of non-stoichiometric compounds and/or compounds with an unknown stoichiometry. This fact has not been observed in previous studies on similar complex semiconductor Ag_2WO_4 networks.^{21,26,48,81-83}

Both products, $\text{Ag}_{2-x}\text{Cr}_{1-y}\text{O}_{4-z}$ and metallic Ag, induced by the fs laser and electron beam irradiation, are stable compounds. Their formation processes are extremely fast and deserve more profound investigations. In the future, we will investigate the effect of electron beam irradiation at cryogenic temperatures. Thus, it will be possible to determine if the mass transport occurs *via* convection or diffusion of atoms and to estimate the diffusion coefficients, which will help to understand the mass transport kinetics. Overall, these studies can provide a straightforward route for the design, iteration, and production of Ag and/or other metal NPs in semiconductor frameworks to develop promising applications.

1 Conclusions

The fs laser and electron beam irradiation of materials is a well-developed green process for the synthesis of metal NPs. In this study, we observed for the first time the growth of Ag NPs in Ag_2CrO_4 induced by fs laser irradiation. In addition, we investigated the already known growth of metallic Ag in Ag_2CrO_4 induced by electron beam irradiation. The Ag_2CrO_4 sample was obtained using the precipitation method. The sample was divided into two parts; one part was irradiated with an fs laser. The XRD and micro-Raman analyses revealed that the Ag_2CrO_4 sample has an orthorhombic structure. The FE-SEM measurements showed that the non-irradiated particles present narrow size distributions (between 0.15 μm and 0.60 μm). However, the irradiated sample exhibits an expressive increase in the particle size distribution (between 0.45 μm and 2.0 μm). This result evidences the initial process of particle coalescence activated by fs laser irradiation. In addition, the TEM images reveal the presence of several micro-stems along some fs laser-irradiated particles. These micro-stems are stable and were formed during the fs laser irradiation. The non-irradiated sample reacted readily when subjected to the electron beam of the TEM. The TEM grid worked as a template and recoating took place. The EDX analysis confirms that in both irradiations, the products are formed by Ag NPs and species with unknown stoichiometry ($\text{Ag}_{2-x}\text{Cr}_{1-y}\text{O}_{4-z}$). To the best of our knowledge, the formation of Ag micro-stems induced by fs laser irradiation and the coating of a TEM grid while studying Ag_2CrO_4 are reported for the first time. These results show enormous potential for the synthesis and morphological control of Ag NPs with fs laser and electron beam irradiation. Moreover, fs laser irradiation proved to be promising for sintering studies. The electron beam irradiation results enable investigations of the growth of Ag NPs on, e.g., templates or biotemplates, core-shells, or decorations.

35 Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

40 Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the financial support of agencies: CAPES (PNPD-1268069), FAPESP (2013/07296-2, 2013/26671-9), CNPq (304531/2013-8), Generalitat Valenciana for PrometeoII/2014/022, Prometeo/2016/079, ACOMP/2014/270, ACOMP/2015/1202, Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad, project CTQ2015-65207-P, MAT2016-80410-P and FIS2016-75618-R, the Ministry of Education Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic under Project No. LM2015073, the European Union for the funds Hybrid Materials for Hierarchical Structures (HyHi, Reg. No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000843), to the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad, “Salvador Madariaga” program, PRX15/00261, and finally to “Universitat Jaume I”-projects No. UJI-B2016-25, No. P11B2013-65 and UJIB-2016-38 for the financial support. The authors are also very grateful to the Serveis Centrals d’Instrumentació Científica (SCIC) of the

Universitat Jaume I for the use of the femtosecond laser and microscopy facilities.

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