

A silicon nitride reference material—A testing program of ESIS TC6

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Available online 24 May 2006

Abstract

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Keywords: Si_3N_4 ; Mechanical properties; Thermal properties; Wear resistance; Reference material

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A definitive version was subsequently published in
Journal of the European Ceramic Society 27 (2007) 1203-1209
doi:10.1016/j.jeurceramsoc.2006.04.020

A Silicon Nitride Reference Material – A Testing Program of ESIS TC6

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Abstract

Silicon nitrides with sufficient strength for structural applications have been developed twenty years ago. A break-through in the use of these ceramics for structural applications did not yet take place. Most probably, the reason for this is a significant lack of design relevant data.

TC 6 "Ceramics" of the European Structural Integrity Society (ESIS) has established a research program in order to determine a complete set of material properties and data indispensable for design for a commercially available silicon nitride ceramic. The material chosen as the ESIS Silicon Nitride Reference Material is a gas pressure sintered silicon nitride containing ~3 wt.-% Al₂O₃ and ~3 wt.-% Y₂O₃.

The results available to the present indicate that this specific material has a good mechanical performance at room temperature and up to ~ 800°C. Above this temperature the large amount of amorphous grain boundary phase causes a detrimental influence on the environmental assisted crack growth properties and the creep performance.

Keywords: Si₃N₄ (D), mechanical properties (C), thermal properties (C), wear resistance (C), reference material

1. Introduction

The performance of structural ceramics was impressively improved during the last decades. Many ceramics now reach more than twice the strength measured thirty years ago¹. Process technologies became less expensive and more reliable². Higher toughness and the existence of a R-curve lead to more defect tolerant materials. The understanding of the interaction between the properties of the raw materials, processing and the microstructure steadily grows, allowing materials to be tailored for specific applications³. The performance of several commercial silicon nitrides meets the requirements of the designers⁴.

Parallel to the material development, concepts for a reliable design of ceramic components were established⁵⁻⁷. Such tools now take into account various failure modes

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and are implemented in FEM-software⁸⁻¹⁰. Nevertheless, the idea of using a 'brittle and unreliable' material such as 'ceramic' for structural parts still seems to be a strange idea for most engineers. A lack of personal experience with such materials combined with the uncommon design methodology may be the reason for this. In practice, a majority of applications of ceramics is technically rather unobtrusive (cutting tools, wear resistant parts¹¹). Spectacular applications like the ceramic turbocharger rotor are rare¹².

Several simple design-studies exist, that use 'typical material properties' – especially for time or cycle dependent properties - to prove the principal suitability of ceramics¹³. These studies demonstrate the crucial influence of these properties on the long-term reliability of components. But data that characterise these properties are only very seldom included in manufacturers' material data sheets. Only some ceramics have been studied in detail with respect to all kind of properties, for example NC132¹⁴⁻¹⁶. But often these investigations were focused towards other goals and have to be considered unsystematic with regard to the use of these data for design purposes. A consequence of this lack of data is a lack of implemented examples for appropriate ceramic design¹⁷.

The aim of this paper is to introduce the 'Reference Material Testing Program' (RMTP) of ESIS TC6. In the following sections a description of the concept and of the working tasks is provided. The state of the program together with some selected preliminary results is reported.

2. The Reference Material Testing Program of ESIS TC6

In the Technical Committee 6 "Ceramics" (TC6) of the European Structural Integrity Society (ESIS), the idea was born to establish a database containing all property data of one structural ceramic that are relevant for a successful design of components. It is expected, that this program will result in a complete data base for mechanical design for that material. Such a database can be the basis for detailed design studies, give a baseline for further material development and will make a fair comparison between alternative materials possible. An enhanced use of ceramics in structural applications might result. The RMTP has now been a common task for ESIS TC6 for a considerable time period. It promoted collaboration between the partners and keeps attracting new potential participants. The high relevance of the RMTP activity is supported by the fact, that participation in the program is voluntary and not funded.

To produce a reasonable database, a material that performs reasonable in a large number of possible applications is preferred to ensure a fair comparison with alternative ceramics. A candidate structural ceramic for the RMTP should therefore be applicable at ambient temperature as well as above 1000°C and have a toughness around 5 MPa√m or more. It should be commercially made by a large European producer and the production should have reached a stable quality. The existence of the material should be assured for several more years.

2.1 Organisation of the RMTP

The aspired goal of providing a complete set of design data involves a large experimental effort comprising state of the art standard tests as well a highly sophisticated experiments. Five working areas comprising the relevant properties were defined and co-ordinators were found for each topic. An overview of the structure of the program is given in Table I. The working program for each topic was established in a bottom-up procedure. The experimental work should be shared within the group and only some experiments should be reproduced and verified by one or more participants. The co-ordinators take over the organisation of the work within their topic. They collect the results and review them. As specialists in the fields of their topic they are qualified to interpret measurements and identify contradicting data and missing information.

Table I: Topics in the ESIS Reference Material Testing Program

topic A	project coordination, production of specimens, physical and thermal properties as functions of temperature from ambient temperature to 1200°C.
topic B	contact loading, hardness, indentation damage, friction and wear, the influence of machining on strength, chipping and related topics.
topic C	strength at room to high temperatures, biaxial strength, strength distribution and volume effect, fracture toughness and R-curve.
topic D	sub-critical crack growth at ambient to high temperatures, fatigue up to 10^6 cycles at different R-values.
topic E	creep in bending and tension, oxidation and corrosion characteristics, thermal shock.

To avoid an influence of specimen preparation samples are to be produced by one machine shop so far as possible. Tests are to be made according to standard or pre-standard methods if such are available and reasonable. Additional tests employing other methods will complete the database. Minimal results are specified by the RMTP, but each participant is free to perform more in-depth investigations beyond the agreed test extend.

In the starting phase a focus is put on room temperature properties and only screening tests are performed in the range up to 800°C. Later a limited test program will be carried out at temperatures from 800°C up 1300°C. Until now 17 research teams from 10 European countries participate in the RMTP. They are listed in Table II as well as the main topics in which they are involved and possible duties as topic co-ordinators.

2.2 Investigated Material

The material chosen as the ESIS Silicon Nitride Reference Material is produced by CeramTec (Plochingen, Germany) under the name SL200 B. It is a gas pressure

Table II: Participants in the ESIS TC6 Reference Material Testing Program

Participants name, Organisation, Country	Main working areas co-ordination duty (c:)
R. Danzer, T. Lube, Institut für Struktur- und Funktionskeramik, Montanuniversität Leoben, A	organisation, specimens, strength, crack growth, c: topics A & C
J.-P. Erauw, Belgian Ceramic Research Centre, Mol, B	wear, strength
G. Roebben*, Department of Metallurgy and Materials Engineering, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, B	basic properties
A.-P. Nikkilä, Institute of Materials Science, Tampere University of Technology, SF	fatigue
O. Rosenfelder, K.Friederich, CeramTec AG, Plochingen, BRD	material
M. Bartsch, Institut für Werkstoff-Forschung, DLR, Köln, BRD	toughness
R. Steinbrech, Institut für Werkstoffe und Verfahren der Energietechnik II, Forschungszentrum Jülich GmbH, BRD	toughness
H. Klemm, Institut für keramische Technologien und Sinterwerkstoffe, Dresden, BRD	crack growth
R. Westerheide, Fraunhofer Institut für Werkstoffmechanik, Freiburg, BRD	wear, toughness, c: topic B
G. De Portu, Instituto di Ricerche Tecnologiche per la Ceramica, Faenza, I	wear
V. Sglavo, Dipartimento di Ingegneria dei Materiali, Università di Trento, I	strength, toughness
J. Dusza, Institute of Materials Research, Slovak Academy of Science, Košice, SK	strength, creep, crack growth, c: topic E
M. Anglada, J. Alcala, Departament de ciencia dels Materials i Enginyeria Metal.lurgica, Universidad Politénica de Catalunya, Barcelona, E	fatigue, c: topic D
J. Kübler, Eidgenössische Materialprüf.- und Forschungsanstalt, Dübendorf, CH	crack growth, creep, c: topic D
R. Morrell, National Physical Laboratory, Teddington, UK	wear, basic properties, c: topic B
M. Reece, Department of Materials, Queen Mary and Westfield College, London, UK	electrical properties
Z. Chlup, Institute of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Institute of Physics of Materials, Brno, CZ	toughness

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sintered ceramic containing ~3 wt.-% Al₂O₃ and ~3 wt.-% Y₂O₃. The material is provided in the form of plates (47 × 11 × 102 mm). These plates have a light skin layer (~1,5 mm thick) and a darker bulk. Since it is not known if this colour difference is also responsible for any difference in mechanical properties, the position of the outer layer is

recorded for all experiments. To avoid an influence of the specimen production, all specimens are produced at the same partner. Care was taken that for each individual specimen the plate from which it comes as well as the position within the plate is recorded during all production steps. Sample sets were put together randomly from a large number of specimens. About 1200 bend bars for strength tests were produced and distributed, as well as different pieces for wear tests and other investigations, approx. 80 plates have been used to produce these specimens.

3. Properties of the ESIS Reference Silicon Nitride

3.1 Physical and Thermal properties

The microstructure of the material consists of β -Si₃N₄ grains with an aspect ratio of ~3 - 5 and an intergranular glassy phase. It could be shown^{18,19} that also a small amount (0,03 ÷ 0,16 wt.%, depending on the position in the plate, see 2.2) of α -Fe remaining from the original powder is present. The volume fraction of glassy phase as determined by various techniques²⁰ is around 12%. The glass transition temperature of the amorphous silicate phase was estimated¹⁹ by differential scanning calorimetry to be at 950°C. No crystallisation takes place during heating up to 1400°C in N₂. Young's modulus and Poisson's ratio were determined¹⁹ using the IET-technique, see Table III. The coefficient of linear thermal expansion α_{lin} and the specific heat c_p were measured in argon. Thermal diffusivity a was determined by the laser flash method.. These data were used to calculate thermal conductivity λ according to $\lambda = a \rho c_p$. The change of the density ρ with temperature was estimated using the approximation²¹ that the volumetric expansion α_v equals three times the linear expansion α_{lin} , $\alpha_v = 3 \cdot \alpha_{lin}$. The results are shown in Fig. 1 and in Table III together with the data from the manufacturers data sheet.

3.2 Hardness, Wear and Machining

Hardness tests using different indenters and different kinds of wear tests were conducted²² on both type of surfaces, the light skin and the dark bulk. Results of the hardness measurements are included in Table III. Erosion tests were conducted at 75 m s⁻¹ air speed and 10,7 g s⁻¹ feed rate of a 220 μ m sand. Ball-on-disc wear tests were performed. The ball for these tests was substituted by pins made from the same silicon nitride with a tip curvature radius of 5,74 mm. The total sliding distance was 5 km, at a wear track diameter of 25 mm. Sliding speed was varied from 0,01 m s⁻¹ to 0,1 m s⁻¹ with applied load of 5 N or 10 N. The material proved to be very resistant to erosion, with the dark bulk showing an even lower mass loss at a given total mass of sand than the skin. Almost no specific wear was measured in ball-on-disc wear tests and no transition from mild to severe wear could be identified.

Table III: Properties of the Reference Material – Manufacturers data and results from the RMTP (values in brackets correspond to 95 % confidence limits).

Property	Unit	Manufacturer	ESIS Testing Program
Density	kg/m ³	3210	3190 ± 9
4-point bending strength	MPa	750	867 (852 - 881)
Weibull modulus	-	12	14 (11 - 16)
3-point bending strength	MPa	n.a.	985 (965 - 1006)
Weibull modulus	-	n.a.	16 (12 - 20)
Fracture toughness	MPa√m	7 (IF)	4,9 ± 0,1 (SEVNB), 7,9 ± 1,2 (IF)
Young's modulus	GPa	305	303 ± 1.3 (bulk) 307 ± 2 (skin)
Hardness HV10	GPa	16,2	14,3
Thermal conductivity	W/mK	21 (20 - 100°C)	26 (20 - 100°C)
Thermal expansion	10 ⁻⁶ K ⁻¹	3,2 (20 - 400°C)	2,6 (20 - 400°C)
Specific heat	kJ/kgK	0,7 (20 - 100°C)	0,76 (20 - 100°C)

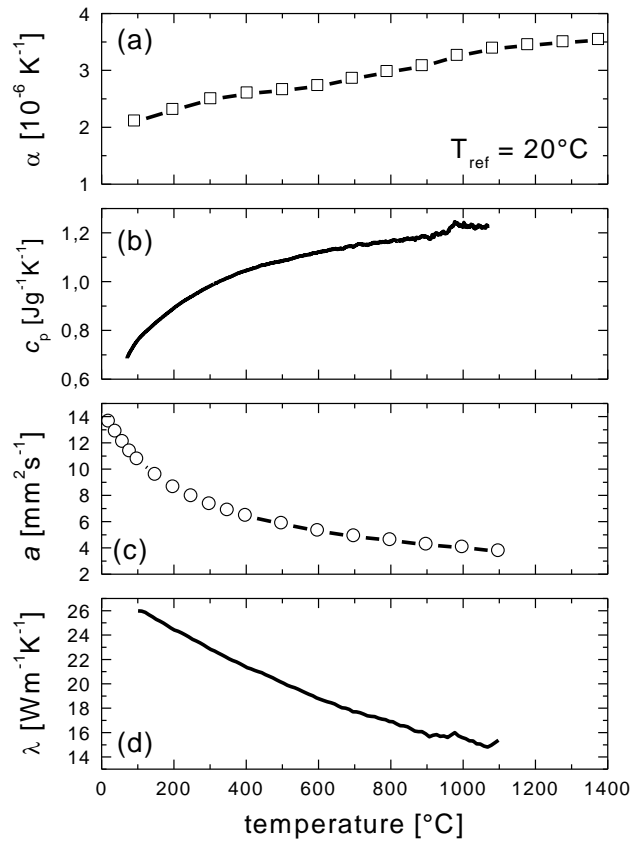


Fig. 1: Thermal properties. (a) coefficient of linear thermal expansion for a reference temperature of 20°C, (b) specific heat, (c) thermal diffusivity and (d) thermal conductivity.

3.3 Strength, Strength Statistics and Fracture Toughness

At ambient temperature strength tests were performed according to EN 843 1²³ in 3- and 4-point loading with a 40 mm (40/20 mm) span and the tensile face close to the skin as well as in the bulk²⁴. Additionally, biaxial strength was investigated using the ball-on-three-balls test²⁵. Two specimen sets were tested: a) diameter 43,4 mm and thickness 3,7 mm on a support with diameter 34,6 mm and b) $10 \times 8,4 \times 2$ mm on a support with diameter 7,1 mm. The tensile surface of all strength specimens was ground with a D15 diamond disc. A more detailed description of these tests can be found elsewhere^{24,26}. The parameters of the Weibull distributions were determined for each set following the ENV 843-5²⁷. The same type of defects (agglomerates of amorphous intergranular phase, regions with microporosity and iron inclusions) was detected as failure origins for all types of specimens. These defects can also be found on polished sections as shown in an example in Fig. 2. The results of the strength tests are summarised in Table III and in Fig. 3. In order to compare the biaxial data with the uniaxial data, the PIA criterion²⁸ was used to calculate an equivalent stress for the biaxial tests. From Fig. 3 it is obvious, that the biaxial strength follows the same volume dependence as the uniaxial strength.

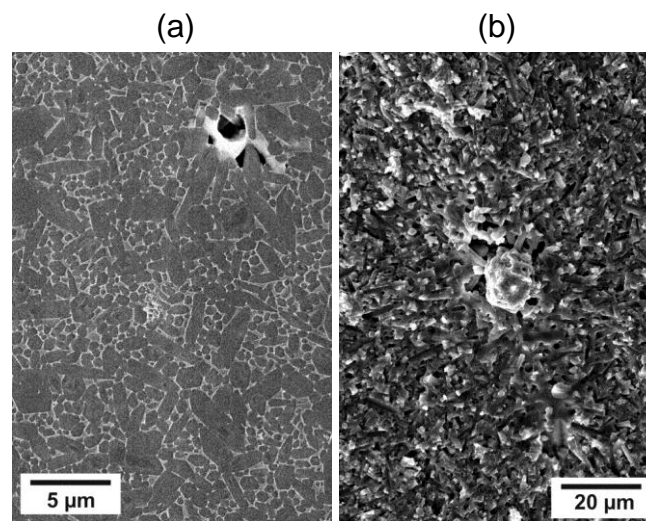


Fig. 2: Microstructure and typical defect (iron inclusion and agglomerate of glassy phase) on (a) a polished section and (b) a fracture surface of a bending specimen.

The influence of test temperature on the strength can be obtained from Fig. 4. At increasing temperature, strength remains almost constant at a value of ~ 870 MPa up to 800°C . Above this temperature a drop can be observed. This behaviour can be explained by the softening of the amorphous phase, which takes place above 950°C ¹⁹. At high temperatures, an influence of loading speed on the strength was also observed^{24,29,30} as indicated by the difference between tests with high and low loading rates.

Fracture toughness of the bulk determined with the SEVNB³¹ method is $K_{Ic,SEVNB} = 4,9 \pm 0,1 \text{ MPa}\sqrt{\text{m}}$. Fracture toughness by the Chevron-notch (CNB) method³² is $K_{Ic,CNB} = 5,2 \pm 0,1 \text{ MPa}\sqrt{\text{m}}$. No significant difference in fracture toughness between skin and bulk was found²⁴ using the IF-method³³. A slightly rising R-curve was reported²⁴ from stable crack growth experiments and fracture toughness tests using long cracks. This R-curve can explain the higher values of $K_{Ic,CNB}$ compared to $K_{Ic,SEVNB}$. During CNB tests stable crack growth takes place prior to fracture thus leading to a toughness result on the intermediate or upper part of an R-curve³⁴.

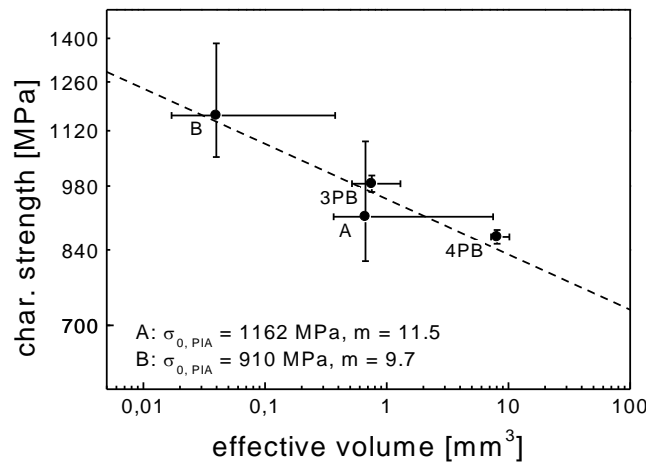


Fig. 3: Dependence of the characteristic strength of uniaxially and biaxially loaded specimens on the effective volume. The scatter bars refer to the 95% confidence intervals for characteristic strength and effective volume respectively. The dashed line indicates the behaviour predicted according to the Weibull theory.

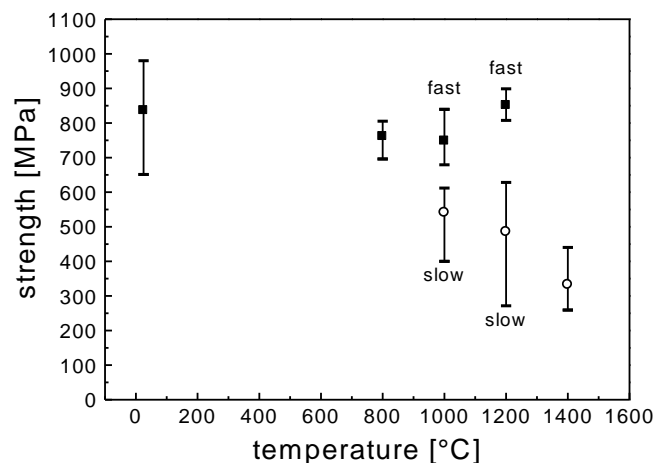


Fig. 4: The influence of test temperature on the strength. Bars indicate the scatter of the data (minimal and maximal value).

3.4 Time dependent Failure

The influence of time on strength at room temperature was investigated²⁴ by measuring the time to failure in static bend loading (static bend tests) and by determination of the influence of loading rate on strength (dynamic bend tests). At 800°C, 1000°C and 1200°C the time to failure in static bending was determined. Tests at ambient temperature were conducted in deionized water, at high temperatures in air. The data were evaluated assuming a power-law relation for the dependence of the crack growth velocity v on the applied stress intensity K_I : $v \propto K_I^n$. Corresponding plots are shown in Fig. 5. At room temperature and 800°C the exponent $n_{RT} \approx 42$, at 1000°C $n_{1000} \approx 22$ and at 1200°C $n_{1200} \approx 6$. The low value of n_{1200} is an indication that the creep may play an important role in failure at this temperature. It was shown³⁰, that at 1200°C the lifetime is controlled by sub-critical growth of a single crack at high (200 – 300 MPa) applied stresses. At low applied stresses (~ 150 MPa) failure is caused by non localized creep damage and multiple crack growth.

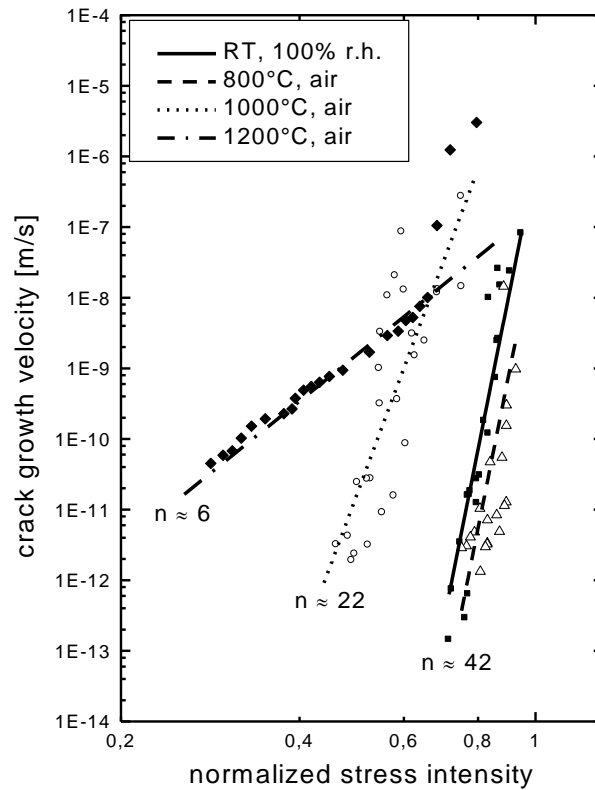


Fig. 5: Dependence of crack growth velocity on applied stress intensity (v - K curves) at different temperatures.

Cyclic loading experiments were conducted in an ambient air environment (25°C, rel. humidity 50%) with a sinusoidal load wave of frequency 117 ± 4 Hz and loading ratio ($R = P_{\min}/P_{\max}$) of 0.1³⁵. Three different stress levels in 4-point bending

(40 mm outer and 20 mm inner spans) were used. The time to failure at a given stress level exhibits a variation of about three orders of magnitude. Such difference in lifetime might even increase if the tests were not suspended after 10^7 cycles (equivalent to 10^5 s). By comparison with the static lifetime data it can be argued that the cyclic lifetimes are fundamentally governed by underlying environmentally-assisted (static fatigue) effects. Simple calculations using the frequency and load ratio, R , indicate that, in the absence of true mechanical damage under cyclic loads, cyclic lifetimes shall be an order of magnitude longer than static lifetimes. Overall, the results are similar to those obtained by Ohya et al.³⁶ and Jacobs et al.³⁷ where environmental effects are found to play a significant role in the cyclic behaviour. It seems sensible to propose that, for structural applications of the ESIS Si₃N₄ reference material, cyclic lifetimes could be estimated on the basis of static results. A different behaviour can however be expected for other loading ratios, especially for $R = -1$.

3.5 Creep and High Temperature Behaviour

Creep tests were conducted in 4-point bending (40/20 mm spans) in air at temperatures of 1150°C, 1175°C and 1200°C with applied stresses from 50 MPa to 175 MPa. The creep curves exhibit all three stages of creep up to 125 MPa at 1175°C. Examples are given in Fig. 6. The stress exponent for stationary power-law creep was determined to be $n_{\text{creep}, s} = 2.3 - 4.2$, for low and high temperatures respectively, see Fig. 7. The activation energy was found to be ~ 820 kJ/mol. These results indicate that the material has a rather poor creep performance (as compared to modern commercial silicon nitrides optimized for high temperature applications³⁸) which can most probably be attributed to the large amount of amorphous grain boundary phase and the iron inclusions.

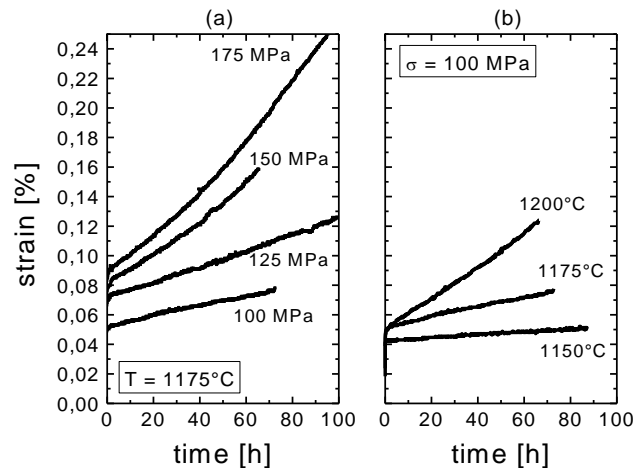


Fig. 6: (a) creep curves at 1175°C, (b) comparison of creep strain for an applied stress of $\sigma = 100$ MPa for different temperatures.

The material was subjected to oxidation between 1000°C to 1300°C during 250h. The effect of oxidation was characterised by the specific weight gain and the retained room-temperature strength. While the specific weight gain increases with increasing oxidation temperature, the retained strength is lowest after exposure at 1100°C (63% of the original strength) and rises to 70% of the original strength at 1300°C.

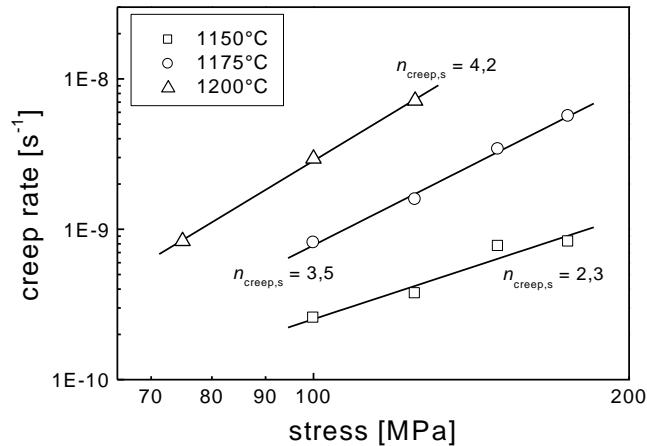


Fig. 7: Stationary creep rates as functions of elastically calculated outer fibre stress for different temperatures.

4. Summary and Outlook

An ESIS Reference Material Testing Program has been established with the aim to measure the basic data relevant for design of a commercial silicon nitride (SL 200B, CeramTec, Plochingen BRD). The project is carried out by TC6 "Ceramics" of the European Structural Integrity Society. Participation is voluntary and not funded. At the present time a majority of the specimens has been manufactured and distributed. A considerable part of the experiments is finished by now.

At room temperature the material has a 4-point bend strength of 867 MPa, a Weibull modulus of 15 and a fracture toughness around 5 MPa√m. The exponent of the power law for sub-critical crack growth is approx. 42. Mechanical performance deteriorates at temperatures above ~ 800°C. At high temperatures the large amount of amorphous grain boundary phase exerts a detrimental influence on the environmental assisted crack growth properties and the creep properties. First wear test results indicate that the wear behaviour at room temperature is excellent.

Detailed results of individual tests are published separately. A complete collection of data will be available in soon

5. Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the efforts of all participants who contributed to the present state of the program. They thank W. Preis of Lehrstuhl für Physikalische Chemie, MU Leoben, Austria for c_p determination.

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