

# **Fabrication and characterization of titanium-nickel-zirconia matrix composites prepared by spark plasma sintering**

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## **Abstract**

Ti–Ni–ZrO<sub>2</sub> composites were prepared by spark plasma sintering (SPS). The effect of ZrO<sub>2</sub> content on the densification, microstructure and microhardness properties of the composites were investigated. Samples were characterized by SEM, EDS and XRD analyses. Noticeably, SPS process under the sintering conditions was achieved at a sintering temperature of 950 °C, for 10 min holding time, at 100 °C/min of heating rate and at an applied pressure of 50 MPa. This resulted in maximum densification of the powder compact and the formation of a distinguishable spherical globules rich in Ni surrounding the retained Ti. Gradient composition distribution of ZrO<sub>2</sub> at the grain boundaries resulted into pinning effect of the grain growth. As the ZrO<sub>2</sub> content increased from 5 to 10 vol.%, it was accompanied by a significant increase in hardness values of the sintered composites from 480 to 713 HV.

**Keywords:** Spark plasma sintering; Zirconia; Titanium; Composites; Pinning effect

## **1. Introduction**

For many years, the development of new materials (alloys or composites) has been the driving force for technological advancement. From heavy to light industries, the need for new materials is growing especially light metals such as aluminium, magnesium and

titanium. In recent times, there has been an increase in the number of conferences/symposia focusing solely on light metals and light metals technology. This could be as a result of the critical technological challenges encountered on such materials, due to engineering components/parts being exposed to extremely harsh environmental conditions [1]. Titanium, as a light metal finds applications in mechanical, aerospace and biomedical industries owing to its high strength to weight ratio, good resistance to corrosion, biocompatibility and osseointegration properties [2, 3].

Powder metallurgy (P/M) technique which involves sintering has been used to produce new titanium alloys/composites because of the low cost, near net-shape fabrication, increase in material yield and variation of composition [4]. Some novel sintering techniques such as hot pressing (HP) [5], hot isostatic pressing (HIP) [2, 6], microwave sintering [4, 7] and spark plasma sintering (SPS) [8], have been reported for fabrication of engineering materials [9]. SPS has become a special technique for the consolidation of a different materials towards engineering advancement because it offers several advantages over other conventional sintering techniques such as fast heating rates, lower sintering temperatures, short sintering time, higher sintered densities, minimal material loss during sintering and limited grain growth.

Although the SPS technique has been established to be effective for the development of different engineering materials, there is still limited scientific knowledge on the consolidation of Ti alloys reinforced with nickel and zirconia. Therefore, it becomes very necessary that more attention be paid to the study of titanium-nickel-zirconia composites developed through spark plasma. The possibility of reinforcement in metal matrix composites can change the properties of the composites so that their applications can be

broadened [4]. The relationship between the sintering temperature, densification rate and microstructure of the SPS sintered Ti composites have been investigated.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Commercially available cp-Ti powder (99% purity, APS 88  $\mu\text{m}$ ), Ni powder (99% purity, APS 88  $\mu\text{m}$ ) and  $\text{ZrO}_2$  powder (99% purity, APS 44  $\mu\text{m}$ ) supplied by Alfa Aesar were used in this study. Fig. 1 shows the SEM morphology of the starting powders. The cp-Ti and Ni powders are spherical and non-porous [10] with very few satellites suggesting that the powders were produced through gas atomisation [11, 12] while  $\text{ZrO}_2$  particles are round with hollow doughnut-like morphology and with many satellites. Ti, Ni and  $\text{ZrO}_2$  powders were weighed and mixed according to the different volume ratios i.e. Ti–45Ni–5 $\text{ZrO}_2$  and Ti–40Ni–10 $\text{ZrO}_2$  as listed in Table 1. The weighed powders were placed in a 250 ml cylindrical plastic vessel with a powder fill level of 50 %, loaded axially, positioned in a Turbula shaker mixer and subjected to translational and rotational motions for 8 h at a speed of 49 rpm. The mixing was carried out in a dry environment. The ad-mixed powders were sintered in a vacuum environment using the SPS process (HHPD 5 manufactured by FCT Germany). The sintering parameters are presented in Table 1.

The density of the sintered samples was measured based on Archimedes' principle. Phase identification was performed using the PW1710 Philips X-ray diffractometer with  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  radiation at 40 kV and 40 mA to identify the constituent phases. Diffractograms were collected over a range of  $2\theta$  between 10 and 90°, with a step size of 0.02. A search-match routine was performed using X'Pert High Score Plus software for phase identification.

Samples for metallographic examinations were sectioned using a Buehler™ Isomet 4000 linear precision saw with a diamond blade, mechanically ground with silicon carbide paper

from 220 down to 1200 grade, polished from 9 to 1  $\mu\text{m}$  diamond finish, cleaned with distilled water and acetone and dried in air.

Microstructures of the powders and sintered samples were carried out in a field emission scanning electron microscopy (JEOL FE-SEM JSM-7600F) equipped with energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscope for compositional analysis. Microhardness test (Vickers) was carried out using a Future-Tech FM 700 Microhardness tester at an indent load of 100 gf ( $\text{HV}_{0.1}$ ) and a dwelling time of 10 s. Ten indentations were taken at intervals and the average value recorded.

### 3. Results and discussion

Fig. 2 shows the relative densities of cp-Ti and Ti–Ni–ZrO<sub>2</sub> composites sintered between 850-950 °C at sintering pressure of 50 MPa. Sintered relative density of cp-Ti without Ni and ZrO<sub>2</sub> addition reaches 98.48% densification at a temperature of 850 °C, which is in agreement with Balaji and Kumaran [13]. On one hand, it was observed that there was a significant decrease in the relative density of Ti–45Ni–5ZrO<sub>2</sub> (850 °C) to 84.99% due to the presence of pores (see Fig. 3b). It must be noted that sintering titanium with addition of Ni and ZrO<sub>2</sub> at low temperature could result in high porosity and thus result in low sintered density. On the other hand, it was noticed that the sintered relative densities increased with an increment in sintering temperature from 850 to 950 °C (for both 5 and 10 vol.% ZrO<sub>2</sub>). This can be attributed to the rearrangement and increasing contact points between particles which were intensified with the increasing temperature. The sintered relative density of the composites as presented in Table 1 increases with increasing ZrO<sub>2</sub> content and temperature from 84.99% (Ti–45Ni–5ZrO<sub>2</sub>(850 °C)) to 100% (Ti–40Ni–10ZrO<sub>2</sub>(900 °C)). In other words, the addition of more ZrO<sub>2</sub> content could promote full densification achieved at 900 °C [14]. Furthermore, the sintering densification process progresses at an even lower temperature range and addition of more ZrO<sub>2</sub> makes more significant effect. Generally, as

expected the density of the sintered compacts increased with increasing sintering temperature.

Fig. 3 shows the SEM micrographs of the cp-Ti and Ti-wNi-xZrO<sub>2</sub> (w = 40 and 45 vol.%; x= 5 and 10 vol.%) composites at different sintering temperature. Fig. 3(a) represents a typical SEM image of the as-sintered cp-Ti consisting of round pores and mostly  $\alpha$ -phase. From Fig. 3(b)-(g), there is a clear indication in formation of in-situ reinforcements in the cp-Ti matrix during sintering. These formations are promoted by the presence of Ni and its high affinity with Ti, thus forming TiNi and Ni-rich spherical globules dispersed and well distributed in the Ti matrix. The white spot present in Fig. 3(b) are aggregated particles of undiffused ZrO<sub>2</sub>.

The presence of pores around Ni-islands (spherical globules) as shown in Fig. 4(a) indicate poor sinterability of the composite at sintering temperature of 850 °C. In other words, high content of Ni at low sintering temperature could influence the full densification of Ti. This could be responsible for the decrease in sintered relative density (84.99%) observed in Fig. 2. As sintering temperature was increased from 850 °C to 950 °C, and Ni content decreased from 45 vol.% to 40 vol.%, a non-porous microstructure was formed. This clearly shows that by increasing temperature, densification is promoted, also, by decreasing Ni content, the sintered relative density could increase. It is evident (in Fig. 2), that Ti-40Ni-10ZrO<sub>2</sub> composite sintered at 850 °C recorded a relative density of 97% when compared with Ti-45Ni-5ZrO<sub>2</sub>, at the same sintering temperature gave a density of 84.99%. The presence of ZrO<sub>2</sub> along the grain boundary as shown in Fig. 4(b) has demonstrated its binding effect.

Fig. 4(b) shows the SEM image alongside the EDS pattern with elements present in the phases. The results of the EDS analysis reveal that the light (region 1; spherical globules), grey (region 2; around the globules) and dark (region 3) phases are rich in Ni, Ti-Ni and Ti

respectively with ZrO<sub>2</sub> particles present at the grain boundaries which could hinder grain boundary movement as a result of pinning effect exerted by the ZrO<sub>2</sub> particles [14].

From Fig. 4(c), SEM investigation of neck growth showed the presence of small dispersoids comprising mostly ZrO<sub>2</sub> which could significantly influence sintering mechanism and grain growth during sintering. German [15] stated that small dispersoids with a close spacing are very effective in slowing grain growth as well as sintering. Also, dispersoids could provide a pinning effect on the grain boundary and cause the boundary to curve since typically the dispersoid is slow moving compared to the boundary. If the dispersoid is pulled by the boundary, then coarsening of the dispersoid occurs during sintering [16].

The X-ray diffraction spectra as a function of w/x for the Ti-wNi-xZrO<sub>2</sub> (w = 40 and 45; x= 5 and 10 vol.%) sintered compacts are presented in Fig. 5 and compared with the XRD spectra of commercially pure Ti (cp-Ti). The patterns of cp-Ti corresponds to hexagonal close-packed (hcp)  $\alpha$ -Ti type structure which were generally detected without the presence of TiO<sub>2</sub> which indicate a complete inert environment during sintering. This result was consistent with refs [17, 18]. Diffraction peak for  $\alpha$ -Ti (102) at a peak position  $2\theta=52.684^\circ$  gradually becomes narrower and forms a peak overlap at  $2\theta=51.818^\circ$ . At sintering temperature of 950 °C/Ti-40Ni-10ZrO<sub>2</sub>, the overlap peak disappears. This phenomenon was observed at  $\alpha$ -Ti (100) located at  $2\theta=35.015^\circ$  where the peak is significantly overlapping and eventually disappeared from the patterns. This could be due to microstructure inhomogeneity promoted by the presence of Ni and ZrO<sub>2</sub> in the matrix of cp-Ti. For all the sintered compacts, there is a minor shift in peak positions from the exact  $2\theta$  position when sintering temperature increased from 850 to 950 °C. This may possibly be due to high micro-strain in the sintered compacts caused by the rapid heating (sintering rate of 100 °C/min) and fast cooling during spark plasma sintering process.

Secondary phase such as Ti–Ni was detected in the patterns as a result of fast diffusion of Ni in Ti which is about two orders of magnitude [19, 20], although Ni is a preferred alloying element to cp-Ti and Ti alloys for solid state sintering [20]. Peaks of ZrO<sub>2</sub> were also detected as major phases in the sintered compacts suggesting that ZrO<sub>2</sub> is stable and unreactive [1].

The variation of microhardness measured on the polished sections of SPS-processed cp-Ti without and with addition of Ni/ZrO<sub>2</sub> at varying sintering temperature is shown in Fig. 6. The microhardness values of sintered composite treated at low sintering temperature of 850 °C with 5 vol.% ZrO<sub>2</sub> addition was relatively the lowest compared to compacts prepared at higher sintering temperature and more ZrO<sub>2</sub> content. The low microhardness value could be as a result of the fact that the sintered relative density of the sample was reduced to 84.99%. Generally, the corresponding microhardness values at 5 vol.% ZrO<sub>2</sub> addition were considerably lower than those obtained at 10 vol.% ZrO<sub>2</sub>. Nevertheless, the SPS-processed Ti–Ni–ZrO<sub>2</sub> compacts, for all the given sintering temperatures (850–950 °C) showed superior hardness property compared to SPS-processed cp-Ti with a microhardness value of 480 HV. As it can be seen, microhardness increased from sintering temperature of 850 to 950 °C irrespective of the Ni/ZrO<sub>2</sub> contents in the compacts. This enhancement of hardness could be attributed to the improvement of densification, presence of Ti–Ni and ZrO<sub>2</sub> phases in the cp-Ti matrix and grain refinement [10].

#### **4. Conclusions**

Ti-based (Ti–Ni–ZrO<sub>2</sub>) composites could be fully consolidated by spark plasma sintering at a heating rate of 100 °C/min, at 950 °C under a pressure of 50 MPa, although the sintered relative density decreases with the addition of 45vol.%Ni–5vol.%ZrO<sub>2</sub>. XRD analysis and EDS confirmed the formation of in-situ reinforced Ni, TiNi and ZrO<sub>2</sub> phases during spark plasma

sintering. Varying ZrO<sub>2</sub> content can significantly influence the microstructure and microhardness values of the composites by providing pinning effect in forms of dispersoids within the neck region, slowing down grain growth and grain boundary movement. An excellent microstructure without pores and cracks was obtained with uniform distribution of Ni-rich spherical globules. Vickers hardness increases as ZrO<sub>2</sub> content increased from 5 to 10 vol.%.

### **Acknowledgements**

Dr B.A. Obadele would like to thank The Claude Leon Foundation and The University of Johannesburg for their financial support. The authors would like to thank The Institute for NanoEngineering Research, Tshwane University of Technology for the use of the needful facilities to conduct the experiments.

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## Table Caption

Table 1 The sample designation, sintering parameters and sintered relative density.

## Figure Caption

- Fig. 1. SEM morphology of the as-received powders (a) cp-Ti (b) Ni and (c) ZrO<sub>2</sub>(8YSZ).
- Fig. 2. Variation in the sintered relative density of the cp-Ti and Ti-Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub> samples.
- Fig. 3. Scanning electron micrographs of (a) cp-Ti, (b,c,d) Ti-45Ni-5ZrO<sub>2</sub> and (e,f,g) Ti-40Ni-10ZrO<sub>2</sub> composites at different sintering temperatures. (a,b,e) 850 °C, (c,f) 900 °C and (d,g) 950 °C.
- Fig. 4. SEM images and EDS profile of spark plasma sintered Ti-Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub> composites showing the distribution of phases.
- Fig. 5. XRD patterns of sintered cp-Ti and Ti-Ni-ZrO<sub>2</sub> samples.
- Fig. 6. The average microhardness values of the sintered samples.