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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1878660> since 2022-11-05T09:50:31Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1016/j.mtchem.2022.101011

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(Article begins on next page)

This is the author's final version of the contribution published as:

Synthesis of Ni-doped ceria nanoparticles and their unusual surface reduction in hydrogen

DOI: 10.1016/j.mtchem.2022.101011

The publisher's version is available at:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2468519422002403?via%3Dihub>

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Synthesis of Ni-doped ceria nanoparticles and their unusual surface reduction in hydrogen

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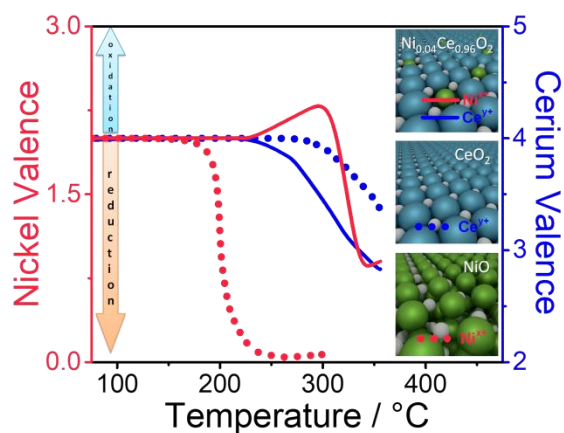
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ABSTRACT

This work presents an original approach to prepare pure and Ni-doped CeO₂ nanoparticles (NPs) that can be directly drop-casted on a substrate or calcined to form powders. The reduction of the NPs in H₂ is very different than the one usually anticipated for supported Ni-CeO₂ catalysts. In situ soft X-ray absorption and infrared spectroscopies revealed that the reduction of Ce⁴⁺ into Ce³⁺ in H₂ proceeds via a simultaneous oxidation of Ni²⁺ ions into Ni^{δ+} (2<δ<3). Comparison with reference samples indicates that Ce⁴⁺ ions reduction is promoted over Ni-doped CeO₂ NPs, whereas that of Ni²⁺ is hindered. Theoretical simulation of Ni L-edge spectra suggested that Ni dopant into ceria is in square planar four-coordinate environment, in contrast to the familiar octahedral symmetry of bulk nickel oxides. Our results reveal that the surface chemistry of Ni-doped CeO₂ is quite distinct as compared to that of the individual bulk oxides, which potentially can lead to different performance of this material, notably in catalytic applications.

TOC GRAPHICS



KEYWORDS X-ray absorption spectroscopy, operando analysis, in situ DRIFT, square-planar symmetry, NEXAFS

1. Introduction

Ceria (CeO_2) is a material commonly employed in various catalytic processes including three-way-catalysis [1,2], NO_x reduction [3], solid oxide cells [4], CO oxidation [5], water-gas-shift reaction [6], CO_2 valorization [7,8] and many more [9]. A key characteristic of CeO_2 is the ease to exchange between Ce^{4+} and Ce^{3+} oxidation states, while keeping a rather stable cubic fluorite crystal structure [10]. This property facilitates the creation of oxygen vacancies [11], which can serve both, as reservoir of mobile oxygen in the bulk, and as adsorption sites for reactants on the surface [12]. There are two main strategies to facilitate reduction of ceria and consequently the creation of vacant sites. The first is to manipulate the size and the surface planes of pure CeO_2 [13,14] and the second to introduce dopant atoms in the crystal structure [15,16]. For this latter several elements have been studied, including rare-earth (La, Zr, Gd), platinum group (Ru, Pt) and transition metals (Fe, Ni, Cu denoted as TM) [6,17,18]. The properties of doped-ceria depend on the size, the valence and the concentration of the dopant atom. Therefore, the choice of the dopant controls the oxygen storage capacity [19] and the redox behavior of ceria [18].

The synthesis of metal-doped ceria particles is challenging, especially when TM are used as dopants. The use of conventional synthesis methods, such as co-precipitation, sol-gel or hydrothermal often leads to a mixture of doped particles and segregated metallic particles [1,20–22]. Among the recent strategies devoted to the synthesis of TM-doped particles [1], the use of organic soft templates has been proven to be effective in obtaining pure-phase particles with small size and size distributions. Briefly, this type of synthesis consists in the self-assembly of isolated cerium and TM in an organic matrix, followed by its removal upon heat treatment. This technique has several advantages: (i) it efficiently impedes the phase separation in single oxides leading to atomic dispersion of the dopant and potentially to single-atom catalysts [23], (ii) the size of the resulting material is controlled and uniform; (iii) the removal of the organic template can provide high nano-porosity to the finite structure resulting in high-surface area

materials. Particularly, the use of coordination polymers [24] or metal-organic frameworks [15,25,26] turned out to be an efficient strategy to conceive highly uniform and porous nanostructures. Among the methods proposed, Elias and coworkers prepared monodispersed $M_{0.1}Ce_{0.9}O_{2-x}$ particles (with $M = Mn, Fe, Co, Ni, Cu$) *via* pyrolysis of metallic Schiff-bases complexes in oleylamine medium [15]. Although this synthesis method ensures remarkable production of a wide range of TM-doped ceria catalysts, it suffers from its complexity and low production yields. Recently we reported on the preparation of Ni-doped CeO_2 NPs from Schiff base complexes [25] using an approach with less synthesis steps than preceding reports [15], however the production yield was still relatively low. Herein, we simplify the synthesis method to produce pure CeO_2 and Ni-doped CeO_2 with small and uniform particles sizes, while increasing its yield by a factor of 10. Furthermore, *in situ* surface spectroscopy is employed to examine the reduction of the nanoparticles in 1 bar H_2 . It is demonstrated that the reduction of Ni^{2+} in H_2 is hindered and that of Ce^{4+} is promoted on doped NPs as compared to pure reference samples. Contrary to the generally accepted notion that Ni^{2+} reduction precedes that of Ce^{4+} , we found that Ni^{2+} not only resists to reduction, but is oxidized further, likely due to electronic interaction with Ce ions. This is a radically different reactivity path than that reported on CeO_2 -supported Ni particles [27].

2. Experimental Section

2.1 Synthesis of CeO_2 and $Ni_{0.1}CeO_x$ NPs

Ni-doped CeO_2 nanoparticles (hereafter named as $Ni_xCe_{1-x}O_2$) were prepared from a method recently developed in our group involving the use of Schiff-base metal complexes to produce pure-phase TM-doped ceria nanoparticles [25]. In this four-step method, one step is devoted to the preparation of the Ce^{III} -L while a two-steps reaction is dedicated to the preparation of the heterometallic Ce^{III} - Ni^{II} -L (where L = N,N'-bis(3-methoxysalicylidene)-propylene-1,3-diamine). Finally, a last step consists in mixing the metallic complexes in oleylamine media and followed by pyrolysis at 180 °C under inert atmosphere [25].

In the present paper this method has been simplified in several ways: (i) the number of steps have been lowered to three using only monometallic complexes for the synthesis ($\text{Ce}^{\text{III}}\text{-L}$ and $\text{Ni}^{\text{II}}\text{-L}$). In other terms, the bimetallic complex preparation has been discarded since we observed that it is not a prerequisite for the preparation of monodisperse Ni-doped CeO_2 nanoparticles; (ii) the synthesis yield was improved by a factor of 10 while lowering the solvent/reactant ratio, allowing to produce more catalyst (from 50-100 mg to around 1 g with the new method) without using excessive amounts of solvent; (iii) after pyrolysis of the metallic Schiff-base complexes under oleylamine medium, the NPs were extracted using methanol instead of ethanol which has been found to be more efficient to precipitate the NPs.

2.1.1 Preparation of Ce(III)-L:

In a solution of 200 ml of methanol were added 3 g of 2-hydroxy-3-methoxybenzaldehyde (20 mmol), 0.7 g of 1,3-diaminopropane (10 mmol) and 4.06 g of $\text{Ce}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (10 mmol), giving an yellow precipitate immediately. The yellow suspension was stirred at reflux for 3h before cooling down to room temperature. The crude product was filtered through a frit, washed several times with cold EtOH and dried under vacuum to give Ce(III)-L as a yellow powder.

2.1.2 Preparation of Ni (II)-L:

In a three-necked flask were mixed 8 g of 2-hydroxy-3-methoxybenzaldehyde (52.6 mmol), 2.1 g of 1,3-diaminopropane (30 mmol) and 6.66 g $\text{Ni}(\text{OCOCH}_3)_2 \cdot 4\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (27 mmol) in a solution of 100 ml of methanol. The green solution was refluxed at 80 °C for 4 h before cooling down to room temperature. The green crystals obtained after reducing the volume of the solution to 20 ml were then filtered and washed several times with methanol.

2.1.3 Preparation of $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ nanoparticles:

The $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ nanoparticles were prepared by mixing 5.1 of Ce (III)-L and 1.5 g of Ni (II)-L in 200 ml of oleylamine. The mixture was refluxed at 180 °C under argon for 4 hours, and the remaining dark brown

product was isolated by centrifugation. Around 450 ml of methanol were added to the solution leading to the precipitation of the nanoparticles. Consequently the brown flocculent was isolated by centrifugation. After recuperation of the NPs by centrifugation (4400 rpm for 10 min) the NPs were calcined under air at 450 °C for 1 h, leading to approximately 1 g of powder. A similar protocol was used for the preparation of undoped CeO₂ particles, by pyrolysis of only Ce^{III}-L in oleylamine.

2.2. Characterization techniques

2.2.1 Standard characterization

Ex situ X-Ray Diffraction (XRD) patterns of the calcined samples were recorded on a Bruker D8 advance diffractometer operating at 40 kV and 40 mA using Cu K α radiation ($\lambda = 1.5418 \text{ \AA}$). XRD patterns were recorded from 20 to 80° at a scan rate of 0.032° s⁻¹. The resulting patterns were processed using DIFFRAC.EVA for the crystallite size calculation according to the line broadening of the most intense reflection (i.e. the (111) plan for the fluorite-type CeO₂ phase) using the Scherrer equation while FullProf software [28] was used for the Rietveld refinement and the determination of the lattice parameters. Raman spectra were measured using a micro-Raman spectrometer (Horiba LabRam Aramis). A 10x objective was used to focus the excitation laser with an excitation wavelength of 532 nm, giving approximately a 2.6 μm wide spot with a laser power of less than 1 mW in order to avoid damaging of the sample. Temperature-Programmed Reduction of the catalysts by hydrogen (H₂-TPR) was carried out in an AutoChem II apparatus (Micromeritics) incorporating a thermal conductivity detector (TCD). The profiles were obtained after loading 50 mg of sample in a U-shaped fixed bed reactor and heating at 950 °C under 20 ml min⁻¹ of 10% H₂/Ar with a 10 °C min⁻¹ heating rate. Elemental analysis of the Ni-doped CeO₂ material was carried out by Inductively Coupled Plasma Optical Emission Spectroscopy (ICP-OES, Varian 720ES) after dissolution of the powdered sample in acidic medium (HNO₃) followed by filtration of residual particles.

The TEM investigations were carried out using a FEI Talos F200X microscope operating at 200 kV. Observations were performed in scanning transmission electron microscopy (STEM) mode using a high-angle annular dark-field (HAADF) imaging. Energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) using a Super-X system with four silicon drift detectors (SDDs) was applied to the detection of differences in local chemical composition.

2.2.2 *In situ infrared experiments*

In situ Diffuse Reflectance Infrared Fourier Transform Spectroscopy (DRIFTS) was used to investigate the behavior of different functional groups characterizing the samples under air or H₂ while heating. The experiments were performed on a Bruker Vertex 70 FTIR spectrometer equipped with a Praying Mantis diffuse reflectance accessory and a tailor-made reaction cell with ZnSe windows. A cold trap was placed at the inlet of the reaction cell in order to remove water traces from the gas feed. Prior to the tests, the powder samples were grounded with a mortar and diluted with KBr in order to avoid signal saturation (10 wt.% in KBr). A background (64 scans, 4 cm⁻¹) was acquired by placing pure KBr in the reaction cell. Then, around 120 mg of diluted sample were loaded in the cup deposited in the center of the reaction cell for the analysis. The sample was firstly subjected to an oxidative treatment under 10 ml min⁻¹ of synthetic air to 400 °C with a 10 °C min⁻¹ heating rate for 30 min. After cooling down to 120 °C a reducing treatment was subsequently realized under 10 ml min⁻¹ of H₂ at 400 °C for 30 min. Spectra were recorded continuously during the treatments *via* the execution of a macro with an accumulation of 32 scans at a resolution of 4 cm⁻¹.

2.2.3 *In situ sXAS experiments*

The sXAS experiments were performed at the APE-HE beamline of the Elettra synchrotron radiation facility (Trieste, Italy), exploiting a dedicated setup based on a reaction cell with Si₃N₄ membranes, as described in detail elsewhere [29]. The sXAS signal was detected in TEY mode by probing the drain

current from the sample with a picoammeter. The catalyst powder was loaded in the in situ cell, installed in the APE-HE instrument, and interfaced with gas delivery and temperature control systems. Gas flows were monitored by calibrated mass flow controllers. All reported experiments were performed at a gas pressure of 1 bar. The sample was initially pretreated in 10% O₂/He mixture at 340 °C for about 30 min and then cooled to room temperature under He gas flow. Then the gas atmosphere was switched to 10% H₂/He mixture and the temperature was raised with a rate of 2.5 °C/min up to 360 °C, while *in situ* sXAS Ni L- and Ce M-edges spectra were recorded at selected temperatures. Finally, the sample remained for about 30 min at the maximum annealing temperature, before cooling down in H₂/He. Spectra analysis was performed using the CasaXPS vs 2.3.23 software. The background subtraction was done using a spline-linear function.

The shape of Ce M_{5,4} edge is distinguishably different between the Ce³⁺ and Ce⁴⁺ oxidation states, therefore the differences in the oxidation state can be easily detected based on the overall peak shape. In particular, the Ce M₅-edge spectra were fitted by a linear combination of standard reference curves of Ce⁴⁺ and Ce³⁺ species recorded at the same spectrometer over a 10%Ni-CeO₂ sample prepared by impregnation method. The Ce M₅-edge corresponding to Ce⁴⁺ was recorded after O₂ treatment at 360 °C, while the Ce³⁺ one after long-time reduction in H₂ at 350 °C. Fitting was performed after linear background subtraction, while the full width at the half maximum and the energy difference among the two reference peaks were fixed. The reference peaks were allowed to vary until the difference between their sum and the experimental spectra (residual standard deviation, STD) was minimized (typical STD between 0.005 and 0.010).

In case of Ni L_{3,2} edge, the modifications between the various nickel oxidation states are less evident in the peak shape and therefore it is important to define the position of the peak. In order to be able to exclude artifacts in the peak position between different samples and conditions, we used the position of the most prominent feature of Ce M₅-edge as an internal reference for all the samples and conditions.

The position of this peak was fixed at 884 eV and the position of the Ni L-edge was calculated according to this value. All the sXAS spectra shown in this paper have been calibrated using this method. The position of the reference Ni (metallic) and NiO peaks were collected in situ over a reference sample composed of 10%Ni on CeO₂, after reducing and oxidizing treatments.

2.2.4 Charge-transfer multiplet calculations

The Ni L_{3,2}-edge was simulated using the charge-transfer multiplet (CTM) approach using the CTM4XAS5.23 program [30]. We attempted to fit the experimental Ni L_{3,2}-edge spectra with both octahedral and tetrahedral symmetries, however only the latter symmetry gave theoretical curves in resemblance with the experimental ones. The crystal field value (10Dq) and the charge transfer energy value (Δ) were the main parameters adjusted in the simulation to obtain the best accordance with the experimental spectra. Other simulation parameters were as follows: (i) for Ni²⁺ Slater integrals (F_{dd} , F_{pd} , G_{pd}) = 1, spin-orbit splitting parameter $SO = 0.99$, optical parameters $Dt = 0.1$, $Ds = 0.05\text{eV}$, core hole potential U_{pd} and the 3d-3d repulsion energy $U_{dd}=0$, $U_{pd} = -1.8$, and the hopping parameters $e_g = 2\text{ eV}$ and $t_{2g} = 1\text{ eV}$, Temperature 600K; (ii) for Ni ^{δ^+} , (F_{dd} , F_{pd} , G_{pd}) = 1, $SO = 0.97$, $Dt = 0.13$, $Ds = 0.05\text{eV}$, $U_{dd}=0$, $U_{pd} = -0.1$, $e_g = 1\text{ eV}$ and $t_{2g} = 1.5\text{ eV}$, Temperature 600K.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Synthesis and ex-situ characterization

Ni-doped CeO₂ NPs (hereafter abbreviated as Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ with $x = 0.036$, determined by ICP-OES) were prepared from Schiff bases metal complexes as detailed in the experimental part. Briefly, the method involves the preparation of the monometallic Ce^{III}-L and Ni^{II}-L complexes followed by their pyrolysis at 180 °C in inert atmosphere under oleylamine media. After cooling down to room temperature, the resulting nanoparticles are obtained by extraction with methanol and finally dispersed in hexane solution or calcined at 450 °C to form a powder (Fig. 1). A similar protocol was used for the preparation of undoped

CeO₂ particles (hereafter abbreviated as CeO₂). The production yield was around 1g of NPs, which is around 10 higher than that of previous reports (50-100 mg) [25].

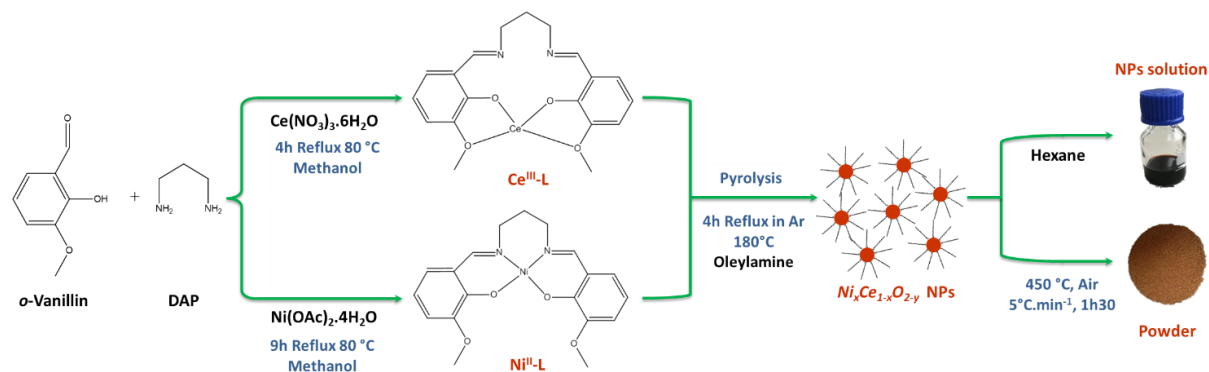


Figure 1. Illustration of the Ni_{0.1}CeO_x NPs preparation method. For the CeO₂ NPs synthesis a similar protocol was used, with only Ce^{III}-L Schiff base complexes.

The X-Ray Diffraction (XRD) patterns of calcined nanoparticles (Fig. S1a) are characteristic of the cubic fluorite phase (JCPDS 34-0394). The absence of any Ni-containing crystal phases discard the presence of segregated Ni particles and confirms the high dispersion of Ni at Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂. The analysis of the XRD results, presented in Table 1, shows similar crystallite sizes of the two NPs types (ca. 6.7 nm). The lattice parameters of both samples are lower than the theoretical value of bulk ceria (5.411 Å) which can be attributed to reduced surface relaxation in small nanoparticles [22]. A slight increase (0.13±0.01%) of the Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ lattice parameter as compared to CeO₂ (Table 1) can be indicative of the Ni occupation sites in ceria lattice. In particular, Ni ions may substitute lattice Ce⁴⁺ (substitutional sites) or alternatively, occupy interstitial lattice positions (interstitial sites), while may easily exchange between the two sites depending the conditions (e.g. temperature) [31,32]. Although in both cases nickel is stabilized as Ni²⁺ [31], the ceria lattice parameters are distinct. Substitution of Ce⁴⁺ with the smaller Ni²⁺ cations (83 pm for Ni²⁺ vs 101 pm for Ce⁴⁺) would lead to lattice contraction, while lattice expansion is expected for Ni impurities at

interstitial ceria sites [32]. The increase of the lattice parameter in Table 1 not only confirms the successful doping of Ni atoms, but is also compatible with Ni²⁺ at interstitial ceria sites [32].

According to the theoretical study of Z. Chafi et al. [33], when a nickel atom is located at interstitial sites of the cubic fluorite ceria lattice, an increase of the ceria lattice parameter is expected. This is due to the large repulsion between Ce atoms around the Ni-dopant causing expansion of the CeO₂ lattice. As Ni concentration is increasing, the insertion becomes more exothermic allowing easier insertion of Ni atoms [33]. Of course one should also mention here that the enhanced reducibility of Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ can be an additional cause of lattice expansion. Since the size of Ce³⁺ is larger than that of Ce⁴⁺ ($r_{\text{Ce}^{3+}} = 1.143 \text{ \AA}$, $r_{\text{Ce}^{4+}} = 0.970 \text{ \AA}$; both ions are 8-fold coordinated), reduction of ceria would also induce lattice expansion in order to retrieve the strain induced by the Ce³⁺ ions [34]. Although we cannot totally exclude the enhanced reducibility of Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ as the cause of the observed lattice expansion, we assume that this mechanism is quite unlikely since the XRD measurements were performed over calcined samples.

The Raman spectrum of ceria is dominated by a sharp peak attributed to the triply degenerate oxygen breathing mode of F_{2g} symmetry, characteristic for cubic fluorite structure. As shown in Fig. S1b in case CeO₂ the F_{2g} peak is located at 464 cm⁻¹, while for Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ it shifts at 460 cm⁻¹ and becomes broader. The shift of the F_{2g} Raman peak to lower wavenumbers indicates an expansion of the average fluorine lattice parameter of ceria due to Ni doping, in fully agreement with the XRD results [10,35,36]. In addition, new bands appear at 228, 558 and 625 cm⁻¹ for Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ sample. These peaks are attributed to the D band defects and the creation of O vacancies due to nickel solubility [37,38].

Table 1. Structural and textural parameters of calcined samples

Catalyst	Crystallite size ^a (nm)	Lattice parameter ^b (± 0.0005 Å)	Volume cell ^b (± 0.03 Å ³)
CeO ₂	6.8	5.4082	158.18
Ni _x Ce _{1-x} O ₂	6.6	5.4153	158.81

a. Crystallite size estimated from the Scherrer's equation applied to the most intense (111) diffraction peak

b. Data obtained from Rietveld refinement using FullProf software

Fig. 2a and b shows representative TEM and HR-TEM images combined with selected area electron diffraction (SAED) patterns. The TEM images of the calcined sample show aggregation of small and uniform nanoparticles. The particle size distribution histogram inserted in Fig. 2a, indicates a mean CeO₂ particle size around 7.7 nm, in fair agreement with the crystalline sizes found by XRD (6.8 nm, see Table 1). The HR-TEM image combined with the SAED pattern in Fig. 2a shows distinct diffraction spots and lattice fringes spacing corresponding to the planes of CeO₂ NPs. The microscopy analysis of Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ (Fig. 2b) shows similar particle morphology with the CeO₂, but the mean particle size is somewhat smaller (5.5 nm). The diffraction patterns correspond to that of ceria, however in the EDX mapping (Fig. 2d and Fig. S2) the presence of nickel is evident and is quantified to 3.5 % Ni atomic ratio, corroborating the Ni_{0.036}Ce_{0.964}O₂ stoichiometry determined separately by inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectroscopy (ICP-OES). The Ni and Ce mapping indicates a rather homogenous mixture of the two elements, even though some areas are richer in Ni are visible (see also Fig. S2 showing higher EDX analysis area). Interesting structural information comes from the comparison of the high resolution images and diffraction patterns between areas with high and lower nickel signal (Fig. 2c). From this is shown that Ni

significantly increases the lattice planes of ceria crystalline phase, corroborating the lattice parameter difference observed in XRD and confirming the integration of nickel in the ceria lattice. Consequently, diffraction and microscopy results of $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ NPs confirm Ni incorporation into CeO_2 lattice.[39]

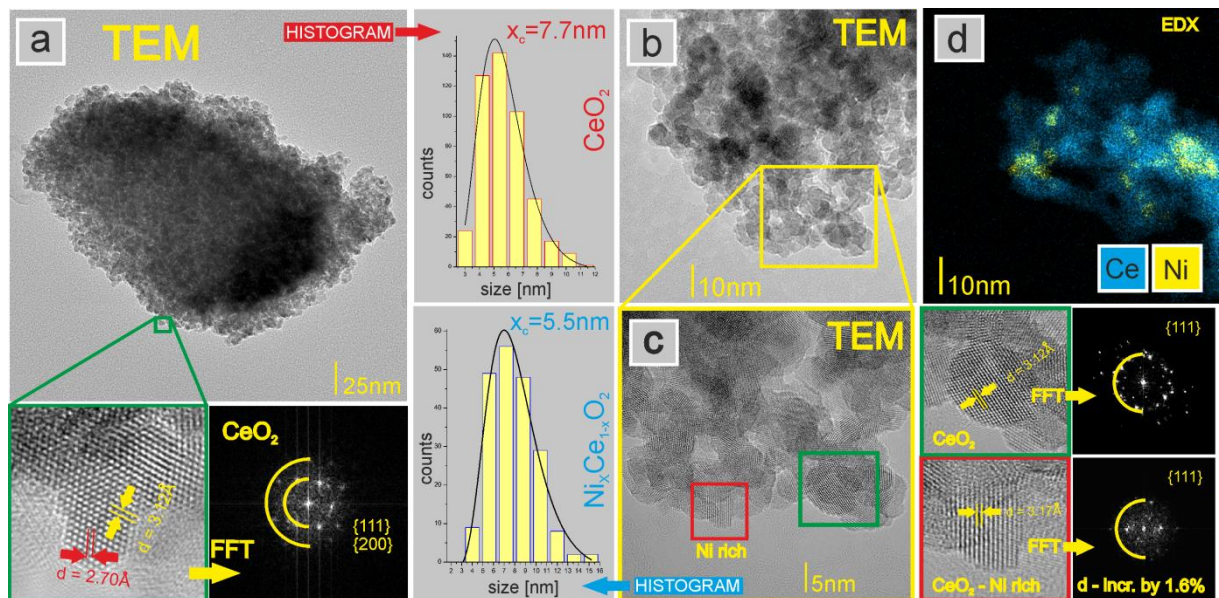


Figure 2. HAADF-STEM images of calcined a) CeO_2 and b,c) $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ NPs samples. The particle size distribution histogram, HR-images and selected SAED patterns are inserted in the two figures. d) EDX mapping of $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ sample indicating mixing of Ni and Ce elements.

The reducibility in H_2 was initially investigated by H_2 -TPR (Fig. S3). The H_2 -TPR profile of CeO_2 exhibits two broad peaks with maximum around 500 °C and 850 °C, typically assigned to the reduction of the surface and bulk Ce^{4+} ions, respectively [40,41]. In case of $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ an additional peak at 310 °C is evident, which was previously linked to NiO reduction [42]. However, the high H_2 uptake in our case (estimated to $644 \mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{g}^{-1}$), is incompatible with the low nickel amount of $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ NPs ($x=0.036$) which would theoretically lead to three times lower H_2 consumption than the one observed (see Fig. S3). The origin of this peak is probably due to Ce^{4+} reduction as will be explained below on the basis of in situ soft X-ray absorption spectroscopy (sXAS).

3.2. *In situ* DRIFTS analysis

The reduction of pre-oxidized CeO_2 and $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ samples was followed by *in situ* DRIFTS. Fig. 3 displays 2D maps recorded during heating in pure H_2 , while DRIFT spectra are shown in Fig. S4. The stretching vibrations of OH groups can be followed in the $3900\text{-}3550\text{ cm}^{-1}$ region, while the $2250\text{-}1950\text{ cm}^{-1}$ region gives information about cerium oxidation state. The H_2 treatment induces progressive dehydroxylation, characterized by several negative peaks in the $3900\text{-}3550\text{ cm}^{-1}$ region. An intense band is observed for both samples at 3658 cm^{-1} together with features in the $1800\text{-}1100\text{ cm}^{-1}$ region (not shown), assigned to desorption of bicarbonate compounds, probably remaining on the sample surface after calcination. Starting from $200\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ two additional peaks at 3709 cm^{-1} (terminal OH groups-Type I) and 3685 (bridging OH groups-Type II) [43–45], are observed on $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$. Therefore, $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ is differentiated from CeO_2 by desorption of polycordinated OH groups during heating in H_2 . According to literature [46], type I OH groups have a higher propensity to dissociate as OH^- anions, causing creation of charge deficiency on the coordinated cerium atom upon their removal. Interestingly, at $300\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ a broad band at 2117 cm^{-1} appeared on $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$, the intensity of which increases with temperature. This band has been attributed to forbidden ${}^2\text{F}_{5/2} \rightarrow {}^2\text{F}_{7/2}$ electronic transition of Ce^{3+} [47]. This peak is much less evident for CeO_2 and appears only at the maximum annealing temperature ($400\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$). According to these results, the reduction of Ce^{4+} to Ce^{3+} over $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ take place between 300 and $400\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ simultaneously with surface dehydroxylation.

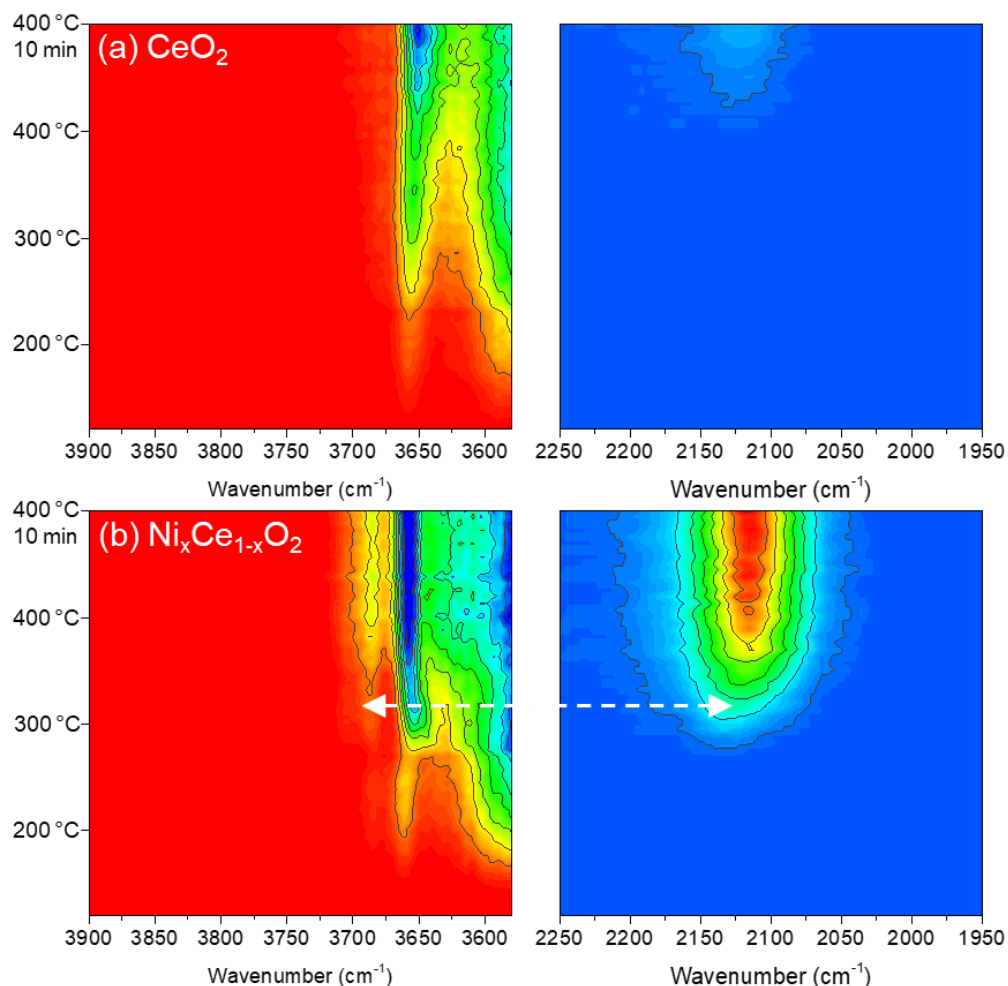


Figure 3. 2D mapping of the DRIFTS spectra recorded in 1 bar H_2 during heat treatment up to 400 °C after background subtraction and applying Kubelka-Munk equation, a) CeO_2 and b) $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$. In the 3900-3580 cm^{-1} range (left panels), the color scale goes from $f(r_\infty) = 0$ (red) to negative values (blue). In the 2250-1950 cm^{-1} range (right panels), the color scale goes from $f(r_\infty) = 0$ (blue) to positive values (red).

3.3. *In situ* sXAS analysis

It is important to note that the DRIFTS bands associated to Ce^{3+} ions come from a sampling depth of few μm . The nickel and cerium oxidation states at the outer 5 nm [48] of the NPs are examined by *in situ* sXAS in 1 bar 10% H_2/He . Characteristic Ni $L_{3,2}$ -edge spectra of $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ upon annealing in H_2 are shown in Fig. 4a. The position of the Ni $L_{3,2}$ -edge (centroid of the peak) and its shape (multiplet structure) are

sensitive to the nickel chemical environment (i.e. oxidation state, coordination symmetry and interaction with ligand ions). In general, the Ni L₃-edge centroid shifts to higher energy for higher nickel oxidation [49,50] while the peak features around 855 and 872 eV are sensitive to Ni interaction with the ligand ion (O²⁻) (e.g. transformation of nickel oxide to hydroxide) [51]. The Ni L_{3,2}-edge of calcined Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ (50 °C in Fig. 4a) has the same centroid position with reference bulk NiO (852.8 eV), but quite different edge shape. This indicates bivalent nickel ions (Ni²⁺) but in different chemical environment as compared to the standard octahedral NiO. The Ni L_{3,2}-edge is stable up to 230 °C, but above this temperature the peak becomes broader and two distinct Ni L₃ features appear at 852.6 and 853.4 eV. The Ni L_{3,2}-edge measured above 230 °C, does not resemble to any of the standard nickel oxide or hydroxide spectra [51], while its complex peak shape suggests possible overlapping of two, or more, nickel chemical states. Attempts to simulate the Ni L_{3,2}-edge by linear combination of Ni, NiO and oxidized Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ reference peaks were unsuccessful. The accuracy of the fitting was improved when one of the reference peaks (Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂, up to 310 °C, and metallic Ni⁰, from 325 to 360 °C) is combined with a spectrum composed by 4 Gaussian/Lorentzian peaks (Fig. 4a and Fig. S5, S6) and shifted to higher energy than Ni²⁺ by 0.6 eV. Since the multiplet structure of this spectrum does not resemble the trivalent Ni³⁺ ions [51,52], we attribute it to a nickel oxidation state between 2 and 3, denoted as δ (Ni ^{δ} with 2 < δ < 3). The appearance of Ni ^{δ} is a remarkable observation which, contrary to the common consensus, indicates oxidation of Ni ions in 1 bar H₂. Notably when the sample is cooled down in H₂ the Ni L_{3,2}-edge is modified and Ni²⁺ reappears (Fig. S6), suggesting that the reported behavior can be observed only in situ and it is elusive to post-treatment analysis.

The Ce M₅-edge of the oxidized Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ corresponds to the Ce⁴⁺ state (Fig. 4b), while starting from 265 °C the absorption edge is modified, due to the formation of Ce³⁺ as indicated by the linear peak fitting analysis of Ce M₅-edge depicted in Fig. S7. Partial reduction of ceria is of course expected upon annealing in H₂, however the ease of ceria reduction (e.g. the amount of Ce³⁺ species and the temperature they

appear) in Ni-doped samples as compared to standard nanosized ceria with similar physico-structural properties is of major interest for the applications, and will be analyzed below.

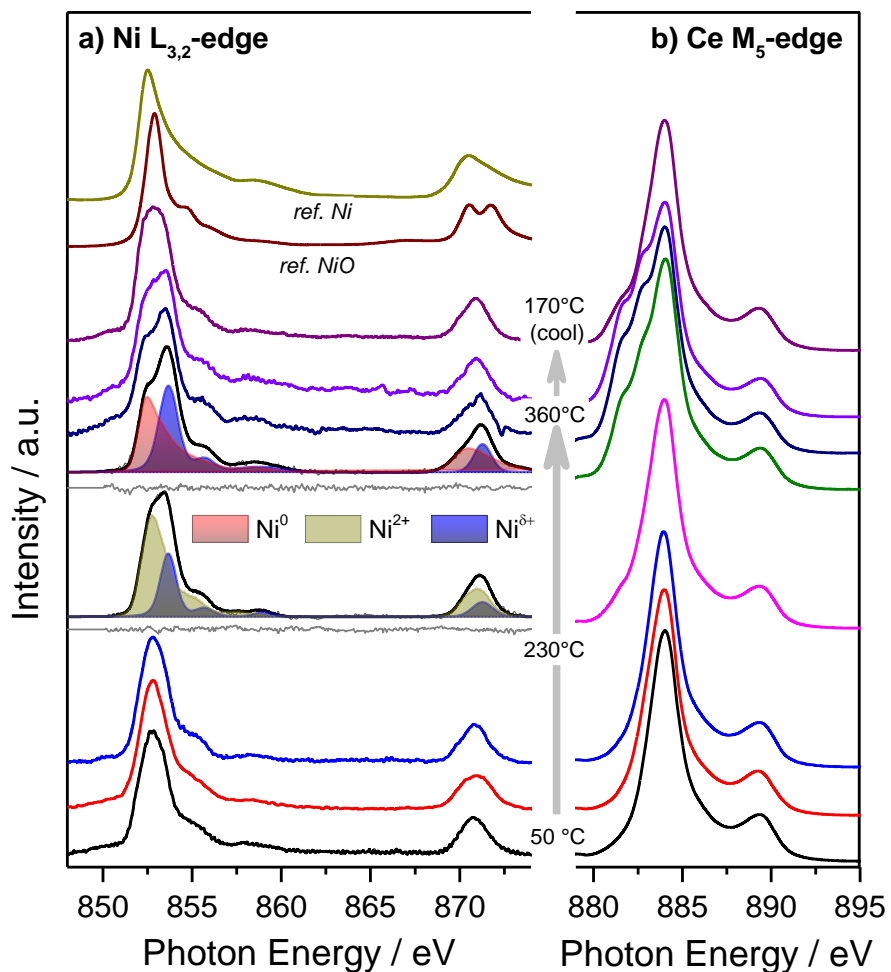


Figure 4. a) Ni L_{3,2}-edge sXAS spectra of pre-oxidized Ni_xCe_{1-x}O₂ NPs upon annealing in 1 bar 10% H₂/He mixture. Two characteristic cases of Ni L_{3,2}-edge fitting as well as peaks of metallic and NiO reference samples are included. b) Ce M₅-edge sXAS recorded at the same conditions as described in (a)

3.4. Charge-transfer multiplet calculations of Ni L_{3,2}-edge

Formation of Ni²⁺ ions in Ni-doped ceria is supported by previous experimental findings [31,32], and first principle calculations [53,54]. To get more insights on the local electronic structure and the chemical

bonding of Ni ions in $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ NPs, we perform charge-transfer multiplet (CTM) calculations of the Ni $L_{3,2}$ -edge using the CTM4XAS5.23 software [30,55]. Calculated and experimental Ni $L_{3,2}$ -edges of Ni^{2+} and $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}$ states are shown in Fig. 5. Please note that CTM calculations describe quite well the experimental atomic multiple splitting and therefore the Ni L-edge shape, however cannot reproduce with accuracy the position of the Ni L-edge [56]. Therefore in Fig. 5 the centroid position of the theoretically simulated Ni L-edge is aligned to the centroid of the experimental peak. As shown in Fig. 5 the experimental spectra are accurately simulated assuming Ni^{2+} ions in square planar D_{4h} coordination symmetry (for brevity $\text{Ni}^{2+}[\text{D}_{4h}]$). Attempts to reproduce them by octahedrally (O_h) coordinated Ni^{2+} ions failed, since $\text{Ni}^{2+}[\text{O}_h]$ ions have a characteristic double-peak L_2 -edge [57,58], very different from the spectra in Fig. 4a.

The $\text{Ni}^{2+}[\text{D}_{4h}]$ geometry has been verified for Ni-S compounds [49,59] and salen complexes [60] by sXAS. However, as far as we are aware, this is the first time that $\text{Ni}^{2+}[\text{D}_{4h}]$ sites are observed in case of doped oxide particles. This structure is in sharp contrast with Ni ions coordinated in the bulk NiO, which is known to crystallize in the O_h symmetry. Our experiments confirm earlier theoretical studies predicting that when Ni substitute lattice Ce atoms, instead of the conventional octahedral coordination, it is coordinated by four O atoms in a square-planar environment [32,54,61]. For example in the case of $\text{CeO}_2(111)$ surface, two lattice oxygen atoms that were initially three-fold coordinated with Ce ions, become two-fold coordinated Ni [61]. Similar predictions regarding four-fold coordinated Ni were also reported for Ni ions occupying interstitial lattice positions, at least for low Ni dopant concentrations [33]. In this case, Ni atoms are located at the center of the cube formed by the eight oxygen atoms in the fluorite unit cell [33].

Apart from the local geometry, the analysis of the $10Dq$ and Δ parameters, defined in the CTM calculations, provides information about the nickel-ligand (Ni-O) interactions. In particular, the $10Dq$ term increases when the Ni and O ions come closer, while an increased Δ parameter denotes weaker Ni-O

interactions [62]. The simulation of the $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}$ spectrum needs higher $10Dq$ and lower Δ values ($10Dq=0.9$ and $\Delta=3$) as compared to the Ni^{2+} ($10Dq=0.5$ and $\Delta=5$) as shown in Fig. 5 and specified in experimental part. These differences indicate smaller square size, and larger attractive interactions, between $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}$ and O^{2-} ions as compared to the Ni^{2+} of the fully oxidized sample. This means an increasing covalent character of the $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}-\text{O}^{2-}$ which can explain the stability of these species at severe reducing conditions.

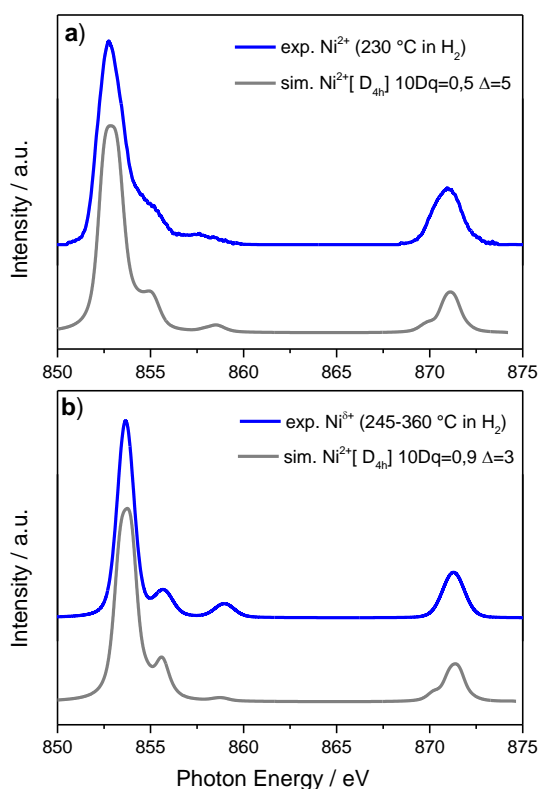


Figure 5. In situ Ni $L_{3,2}$ -edge sXAS spectra (blue lines) of **a)** the Ni^{2+} state recorded at 230 °C and **b)** the $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}$ state composed of 4 G/L peaks and used to fit the experimental spectra between 245 and 360 °C in 1 bar 10% H_2/He . The theoretically simulated Ni $L_{3,2}$ -edge (gray lines) for square-planar (D_{4h}) coordinated Ni^{2+} ions and the corresponding $10Dq$ and Δ values used in the simulations are included in the figure.

3.5. The evolution of nickel and ceria oxidation states as compared to reference samples

The evolution of Ni^0 and $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}$ states as a function of temperature, as derived from the Ni- $L_{3,2}$ edge deconvolution, is shown in Fig. 6a. The results collected over NiO powder sample are included for

comparison. The amount of $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}$ enhances continuously to the expense of Ni^{2+} , up to the maximum annealing temperature. Metallic Ni^0 appears rather abruptly around 330 °C, which is 130 °C higher than the NiO reference. One should note here that the distributions of nickel and cerium states shown in Fig. 6 represent their contribution in the sXAS spectrum as this is given by the peak fitting analysis. Eventual differences in the photoabsorption cross section (PCS) between different oxidation states are not considered since these values are practically unknown. However metallic nickel is expected to have lower PCS than the oxidized one due to the lower number of empty 3d band states. Therefore, the Ni^0 concentration shown in Fig. 6a is most probably underestimated.

The results of linear peak fit analysis of the Ce M_5 -edges shown in Fig. 6b reveal a sharp increase of Ce^{3+} contribution above 270 °C. When the CeO_2 NPs are exposed at the same conditions (the Ce M_5 -edges are shown in Fig. S8), they are less reduced (Fig. 4b). This result can be used to associate the lower temperature peaks of the $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ NPs found in the TPR analysis (Fig. S3), with the ease of ceria reduction on this sample. Since Ni-doped and pure ceria nanoparticles have very similar size distribution (Fig. 2) one can exclude that their reducibility is affected by differences in their size. Therefore, the promotion effect of Ni-dopant remains the most plausible explanation of the improved ceria reducibility by H_2 .

Very interesting findings regarding the mechanism of $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ reduction emerge by comparison of Fig. 6a and 6b. The first remarkable observation is that Ce^{4+} reduction is not preceded by reduction of Ni^{2+} , as commonly assumed for supported nickel particles. On the contrary, Ni^{2+} is oxidized further to $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}$. Metallic Ni^0 is observed 70 °C higher than in Ce^{3+} , yet it coexists with a significant amount of $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}$ species. In previous studies of the nickel-ceria system [63,64] it was proposed that electrons can transfer from Ce^{4+} towards nickel, generating Ni^{2+} and Ce^{3+} . Although in our case the geometry of the system is different (diluted, instead of supported, nickel ions), one can propose that a similar mechanism takes also place for

$\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$, where Ce^{4+} is transformed to Ce^{3+} by transferring electrons towards Ni^{2+} to form Ni^{0} . The charge exchange between $\text{Ni}^{6+}/\text{Ni}^{2+}$ and $\text{Ce}^{4+}/\text{Ce}^{3+}$ redox couple can be the reason of the enhanced Ce^{4+} reducibility on $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ as compared to CeO_2 sample, at least at the initial stage of reduction. When metallic Ni^0 is formed, Ce^{4+} reduction can take place via the classical reduction mechanism related to adsorption and dissociation of H_2 on Ni^0 [8]. The infrared characterization showed that Ce^{3+} formation may also be linked with the loss of monocoordinated hydroxyls from the surface, probably desorbed as H_2O . The ease of ceria reduction observed for $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ is consistent with several previous ab initio studies which show that the oxygen vacancy formation energy is reduced in case of doped-ceria as compared to the undoped one, for both substitutional [53,54,61] and interstitial [65] Ni sites.

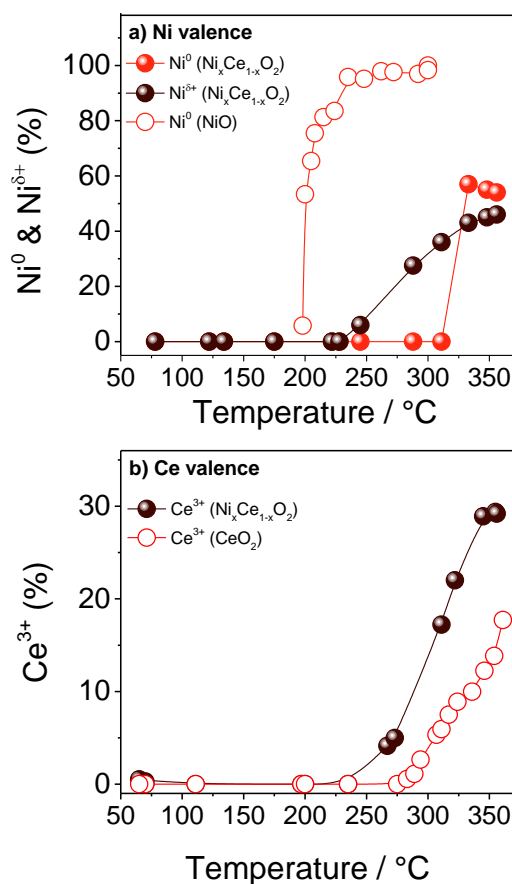


Figure 6. a) Evolution of Ni^0 and $\text{Ni}^{\delta+}$ valence states, as a function of annealing temperature in H_2 . The full circles symbols correspond to $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ NPs sample, while the empty circles are from reference NiO powder sample treated under identical conditions. b) Evolution of Ce^{3+} valence state as a function of annealing temperature in H_2 . The full circles symbols correspond to $\text{Ni}_x\text{Ce}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$ NPs sample, while the empty circles are from undoped CeO_2 NPs treated under identical conditions. The amount of nickel and cerium species is derived from the deconvolution of Ni $L_{3,2}$ and Ce M_5 -edge sXAS spectra, respectively and do not take into account eventual differences in the photoabsorption cross section between various oxidation states.

4. Conclusions

In summary, a relatively simple and efficient approach to synthesize undoped and Ni-doped CeO_2 nanoparticles with small particle size and size distribution is proposed. *In situ* sXAS and DRIFT spectroscopies were used to investigate in detail the adsorbed species and the reducibility of the NPs under H_2 , an important process involved in several applications of doped ceria. Ni insertion into ceria lattice enhances the Ce^{4+} reducibility, kinetically slow over pure CeO_2 , via a proposed mechanism based on electronic interaction between cerium and nickel ions at early stage of the reduction process. The findings in this work suggest that ionic nickel is stabilized in quite harsh reducing conditions, which is an intriguing discovery calling for further investigation of their reactivity, notably in hydrogenation reactions.

Supporting Information. XRD and Raman spectra, H_2 -TPR, DRIFT spectra, Peak fitting analysis of the Ni L-edge, Example of Ce M_5 -edge analysis, Ce M_5 -edge sXAS of CeO_2 sample upon annealing in H_2

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

M.B. acknowledges financial support from Strasbourg University via the IdEX-018 (Post-doctorate) project. J.Z. would like to thank the China Scholarship Council (CSC) for supporting his stay at ICPEES. D.S. and E.B. acknowledge the support from project n. 2017KKP5Z PRIN-2017 MOSCATo (Cutting-edge X-ray methods and models for the understanding of surface site reactivity in heterogeneous catalysts and

sensors). We thank Dr D. Tescher for the useful and constructive discussions and S. Sall for the support with DRIFTS. We acknowledge Elettra for the allocation of synchrotron radiation beamtime and the APE-HE beamline staff for the collaboration during the experiments. This work was partially performed in the framework of the Nanoscience Foundry and Fine Analysis (NFFA-MIUR Italy Progetti Internazionali) facility. Finally D.C. and S.Z. acknowledge the support of the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR), under contract No 236294 (project DuCaCO₂).

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