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Hybrid organic-inorganic nanotubes effectively adsorb some organic pollutants in aqueous phase

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1	Hybrid organic-inorganic nanotubes effectively adsorb some organic pollutants in aqueous
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4	Roberto Nasi, <sup>1,§</sup> Filomena Sannino, <sup>2</sup> Pierre Picot, <sup>3,§</sup> Antoine Thill, <sup>3</sup> Olimpia Oliviero, <sup>4</sup> Serena
5	Esposito, <sup>1</sup> Marco Armandi, <sup>1</sup> Barbara Bonelli <sup>1,*</sup>
6	
7	<sup>1</sup> Department of Applied Science and Technology & INSTM Unit of Torino Politecnico - Politecnico
8	di Torino, 10129 Torino, Italy
9	<sup>2</sup> Department of Agricultural Sciences– Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, 80055 Portici-
10	Napoli, Italy
11	<sup>3</sup> LIONS, NIMBE, CEA, CNRS, Université Paris-Saclay, CEA-Saclay, Gif-sur-Yvette, 91191, France
12	
13	<sup>4</sup> Department of Neuroscience and Reproductive and Odontostomatologic Sciences, Università degli
14	Studi di Napoli Federico II, 80055 Portici- Napoli, Italy
15	
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17	Corresponding author: <u>*barbara.bonelli@polito.it</u>
18	<sup>§</sup> Both authors equally contributed to the paper.
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# 28 Abstract

Methylimogolite nanotubes (Me-IMO NTs, chemical composition (OH)<sub>3</sub>Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>SiCH<sub>3</sub>) are characterized by having an inner hydrophobic (fully-methylated) surface. Conversely, the outer surface is hydrophilic and positively charged below the point of zero charge (at pH = 8.6), due to the Al(OH)Al + H<sup>+</sup> = Al(OH)<sub>2</sub><sup>+</sup>Al equilibrium occurring at the outer surface of the NTs when they are dispersed in water.

In this work, adsorption of MCPA (2-methyl-4-chlorophenoxyacetic acid) and of dichloromethane (DCM) on Me-IMO NTs was studied by means of both adsorption/desorption measurements in batch conditions (at room temperature and at different pH value) and Small Angle X-rays Scattering (SAXS).

38 MCPA, which partially dissociates in water ( $pK_a = 2.90$ ), is mainly adsorbed at the outer 39 surface of the NTs, although measurements in batch conditions show that other types of interaction 40 occur (i.e. H-bond) at higher MCPA concentration. SAXS measurements confirm that MCPA has not 41 entered the NTs inner pores.

Interaction of the NTs with DCM, instead, is more complex: SAXS measurements show that
DCM molecules interact with the NTs inner surface, whereas batch experiments indicate that
additional interactions take place with the outer surface of the NTs.

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#### 54 Introduction

Hybrid organic-inorganic nanotubes (NTs) with chemical formula (OH)<sub>3</sub>Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>SiCH<sub>3</sub> (Me-IMO) can be synthesized in water by a template-free sol-gel procedure, starting from commercial precursors, i.e. an Al salt (or alkoxide) and triethoxymethylsilane (TEMS) (Bottero et al., 2011). Dual functionalization of the inner surface is also possible to a certain extent (Picot et al., 2019) and Geanalogues can be obtained, as well (Amara et al., 2015).

Me-IMO NTs have unique properties: they are mainly mesoporous with remarkably high accessible specific surface area (about 650 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>) and are thermally stable up to 300 °C (Mackenzie, 1989; Bottero et al., 2011). When dispersed in water, the NTs are positively charged at pH values below 9 (Bahadori et al., 2018). Such positive charge stems, in part, from the acid-base properties of external -OH groups (Gustafsson, 2001) as in eq. (1):

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66  $Al(OH)Al + H^{+} = Al(OH)_{2}^{+}Al$  (1)

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and, in part, from some curvature effects (Poli et al., 2015).

Proper (inorganic) imogolite (IMO) NTs (Cradwick et al., 1972), which can be obtained by sol-gel methods as well (Du et al., 2017), have different structure (Thill et al., 2017) and applications, depending on whether they occur as a powder or in aqueous suspension of freshly synthesized NTs. Aqueous dispersions of pristine IMO NTs, which have never been dried, do not show any bundles, since the NTs repeal each other, due to their positive surface charge. The NTs may form bundles upon addition of salt or upon increase of pH. In such a case, bundles formation is irreversible to a large extent (Karube, 1998).

Surprisingly, even in freshly synthesized dispersions, Me-IMO NTs are always observed to
form bundles (Scheme 1), where three types of pores A, B and C can be identified (Ackerman et al.,
1993). Noticeably, in Me-IMO the A pores have an average diameter of 2.0 nm and are extremely

hydrophobic, whereas in IMO they have an average diameter of 1.0 nm and are extremely hydrophilic
(Bonelli et al., 2009; Zanzottera et al., 2012b); the B pores are 0.45 nm wide in Me-IMO, allowing
adsorption of small probes in gas/solid systems (Zanzottera et al., 2012a; Bonelli et al., 2013a), being
instead smaller in IMO (*ca.* 0.30 nm) and, thus, less accessible to gas probes (Ackerman et al., 1993).
Finally, the C pores (Scheme 1) are larger slit-mesopores, accessible to large molecules (Garrone and
Bonelli, 2016; Shafia et al., 2016a) and characterized by amphoteric properties (Bonelli et al., 2009,
2013b) in both Me-IMO and IMO.



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Scheme 1.

Three types of pores occurring in Me-IMO NTs in the powder form.

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Although also gels may be obtained, usually powders of Me-IMO NTs are obtained (Bottero et al., 2011). In water, the positively charged outer surface (eq. 1) favours both NTs re-dispersion, and interaction with negatively charged species (Bonelli, 2016) and/or polar molecules (Boyer et al., 2014). Nonetheless, some of us showed that in oil-in-water emulsion, Me-IMO NTs adsorb at the oil/water interface, stabilizing the emulsion by inducing slow oil-triggered modifications of the viscosity of the continuous phase and, possibly, favouring transport of small molecules within the NTs (Picot et al., 2016). With Me-IMO NTs, the simultaneous occurrence of an inner hydrophobic surface and an outer
hydrophilic (and positively charged surface) may be of interest in applications implying selective
adsorption, like gas membranes, adsorption of complex mixtures and removal of water pollutants, as
well. Indeed, IMO has been proposed as an optimal adsorbent of anions and, in particular, for
phosphate fixation at the outer surface of the NTs (Mizota, 1977; Parfitt, 2009; Rojas-Mancilla et al.,
2019).

There is currently a great interest into the development of new nanomaterials able to 103 efficiently remove from water several organic pollutants, besides inorganic ones, like agrochemicals, 104 dyes, halogenated compounds, pharmaceutical and personal care products, etc. (Freyria et al., 2018). 105 Some of us studied the adsorption and degradation of the azo-dye Acid Orange 7 (AO7, 106  $C_{16}H_{11}N_2SO_4Na$ ) in the presence of aqueous suspensions of IMO, Me-IMO or Fe<sup>3+</sup>-doped NTs 107 (Shafia et al., 2016a; Bahadori et al., 2018). Some interesting insights were obtained, like the 108 109 preferential interaction of AO7 moieties (negatively charged in water) with the outer surface of NTs, although some of the inner Si-OH groups of IMO NTs (likely those at the mouth of A pores) were 110 able to interact with the pollutant by H-boding. In the presence of Fe<sup>3+</sup>species, instead, a ligand 111 displacement phenomenon was observed, where  $Fe^{3+}$  ions were able to coordinate the dye through its 112 N atoms. (Shafia et al., 2016a). This work focuses, instead, on the interaction of Me-IMO NTs with 113 114 two organic molecules (Table 1) in water suspension, namely 4-chloro-2-methylphenoxyacetic acid (MCPA) and dichloromethane (DCM). 115

116

### 117 **Table 1**

118 Some properties of MCPA and DCM.

Pollutant	Molecule	Dipole	рКа	Solubility in	Bulk Electron
	dimension(s) (nm)	Moment (D)		water (g/L)	density (e <sup>-</sup> /Å <sup>3</sup> )
MCPA	~ 0.8 x 0.7		2.90	0.825 at 23 °C <sup>b</sup>	0.480
DCM	0.33 <sup>a</sup>	1.470	-	17.5 at 25 °C	0.396

<sup>a</sup>Kinetic diameter

120  $^{b}$  (Gimeno et al., 2003)

MCPA is a phenoxy herbicide extensively used in agriculture to control annual and perennial weeds in cereals, grasslands, trees and turf: being highly soluble in water and very mobile, it can leach from soil and can be found in groundwater wells, thus posing serious environmental problems. For this reason, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) classifies MCPA as a potential groundwater contaminant (Addorisio et al., 2010).

DCM is a chlorinated volatile organic compound (VOC), which is soluble in water due to its dipole moment ( $\mu_{DCM}$  = 1.470 D): it is manly used as solvent and reagent, being also employed in the manufacture of aerosols, adhesives, and for dry cleaning (Huang et al., 2014). In addition to its high toxicity and carcinogenic character, DCM contributes to global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, and photochemical smog: the U.S. EPA has included it among the 17 highly dangerous chemicals that should be targeted for emissions reduction.

In this work, a sample of Me-IMO NTs was characterized by powder X-ray Diffraction (XRD), N<sub>2</sub> isotherms at -196 °C,  $\zeta$ -potential measurements and SAXS and was tested as adsorbent of either MCPA or DCM by means of adsorption/desorption experiments in batch conditions and by SAXS.

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#### 138 2. Materials and Methods

139 *2.1 Me-IMO synthesis* 

A sample of Me-IMO was synthesized according to a procedure reported elsewhere (Bottero et al., 2011). In acidic medium due to HClO<sub>4</sub>, Al-*sec*-butoxide (ASB) and triethoxymethylsilane (TEMS) were used as the Al and Si source, respectively, with molar ratio Al : Si = 2 : 1.15. The slight excess of TEMS was used to prevent formation of by-products (i.e. Al hydroxide) due to fast hydrolysis of ASB, which is a crucial issue in the synthesis. For the same reason, the sample was synthesised in a dry room (i.e. a moisture-free environment) (Shafia et al., 2016b).

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### 147 2.2. Me-IMO characterization

148 X-ray powder diffraction (XRD) were measured in the 2.5–20° 2 $\theta$  range on an 'Xpert 149 Diffractometer (Cu K<sub>\alpha</sub> radiation; l=1.5414 Å, step width = 0.02 2 $\theta$ ).

The values of BET SSA (Brunauer Emmett Teller Specific Surface Area), total pore volume and *t-plot* microporous volume reported in Table 2 were calculated from the N<sub>2</sub> adsorption/desorption isotherm measured at -196 °C on the powder outgassed at 275 °C in order to remove residual water and atmospheric contaminants. The Non Local-Density Function Theory Pore Size Distribution (NL-DFT PSD) and the corresponding cumulative pore volume curve were obtained by applying a N<sub>2</sub>– silica kernel (for cylindrical pores) to the isotherm adsorption branch.

- The Al/Si ratio was measured by means of Energy Dispersive X-ray analysis (EDX, AZTec, Oxford Instruments) on three different spots (ca. 0.1 mm<sup>2</sup> area each): the so-obtained average value Al/Si = 0.49 was in fair agreement with the theoretical one Al/Si = 0.50.
- Electrophoretic mobility as a function of pH was measured at 25°C by means of light 159 160 scattering technique on a Zetasizer Nano-ZS instrument (Malvern Instruments, Worcestershire, UK). The corresponding ζ-potential curve was calculated according to the Henry's equation UE= 161  $2\epsilon\zeta f(Ka)/3\eta$ , where UE is the electrophoretic mobility,  $\epsilon$  is the dielectric constant,  $\zeta$  is the zeta 162 potential, f(Ka) is the Henry's function, and  $\eta$  is the viscosity. The adopted value of f(Ka) was 1.5, in 163 agreement with the Smoluchowski approximation, usually applied to aqueous solutions of moderate 164 electrolyte concentration, as in the present case. Water suspensions were obtained after 2 min 165 sonication with an ultrasonic probe (100 W,20 kHz, Sonoplus; Bandelin, Berlin, Germany); the pH 166 of the suspension was then adjusted by adding either 0.10 M HCl or 0.10 MNaOH. 167
- 168 SAXS (Small Angle X-ray Scattering) data were acquired on a Xeuss 2.0 HR SAXS/WAXS 169 instrument (Xenocs) equipped with a microfocus Copper sealed tube (30 W/30  $\mu$ m); single reflection 170 multilayer optic with 2D collimation for Cu K $\alpha$  ( $\lambda$ =1.5414 Å) and 2 motorized scatter-less slits 2.0 171 with variable aperture enable the definition of the beam energy (Cu K $\alpha$  with spectral purity > 97 %) 172 and size while minimizing the scattering background. The divergence of the beam is < 0.4 mrad in

both planes perpendicular to beam axis. The sample were measure in the high resolution beam configuration with a max flux at the sample position of  $1 \times 10^8$  (ph/s).

Me-IMO NTs were studied both as powder and in water suspension: in the former case, the powder was fixed between two Kapton films and placed in aluminium frame (Fig. 6), whilst glass capillaries containing dispersion and contaminants were vacuum tight sealed and placed in a different aluminium sample holder that can accommodate up to 20 capillaries.

MCPA adsorption on MeIMO has been evaluated by SAXS, as follows: a stock dispersion of
5g/L of MeIMO in 100µM of herbicide water (MilliQ) solution was prepared (natural pH 4.45). From
the stock MeIMO dispersion three samples were also prepared at different pH (3, 4.45, 9.65, 10.46)
by means of HCl or NH<sub>3</sub> addition.

- 183 DCM adsorption on Me-IMO has been evaluated by SAXS at natural pH.
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### 185 *2.3 Adsorption/desorption experiment in batch-conditions*

4-chloro-2-methylphenoxyacetic acid (MCPA) and Dichloromethane (DCM) were purchased
from Sigma-Aldrich Chemical Co. (Poole, Dorset, U.K.; 99.0% purity). HPLC grade solvents (Carlo
Erba, Milan, Italy) were used without further purification. All the other chemicals were from SigmaAldrich, unless otherwise specified.

For MCPA experiments, a stock solution of the herbicide was prepared by dissolving 200 mg
 MCPA in 1000 mL of ultrapure water (final concentration 1000 µmol L<sup>-1</sup>) and, then, kept refrigerated.
 For DCM experiments, a stock solution of the organic pollutant was prepared by diluting
 DCM with ultrapure water (final concentration 0.15 mol L<sup>-1</sup>).

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## 195 *2.3.1 Analytical determination of the organic contaminants*

The concentration of MCPA was measured on an Agilent 1200 Series HPLC apparatus
(Wilmington, DE), equipped with a DAD array and a ChemStation Agilent Software. A MachareyNagel Nucleosil 100-5 C18 column (stainless steel 250 4 mm) was used.

For MCPA determination, the mobile phase, comprising a binary system of 50:50 acetonitrile:
phosphate buffer (0.1%, pH 2.5), was pumped at 1 mL min<sup>-1</sup> flow in isocratic mode. The UV detector
was set at 225 nm. The quantitative determination of MCPA was performed by elaborating its
corresponding calibration curve in the 0.25 - 1000 µmol L<sup>-1</sup> range.

The concentration of DCM was determined by Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry 203 (GC-MS). The samples were analysed on a Perkin-Elmer AutoSystemTMXL GC, equipped with a 204 Programmed-Temperature Split/Splitless injector with programmable pneumatic control kept at a 205 constant temperature of 250 °C; a Restek Rtx-5MS capillary column (5% diphenyl-95% 206 dimethylpolysiloxane, 30 m x 0.25 mm, 0.25 µm) and a Perkin-Elmer Turbo Mass Goldmass-207 spectrometer. The oven temperature was programmed to run at 60 °C for 5 min and then to increase 208 by 15 °C min<sup>-1</sup> to a final temperature of 280 °C. A NIST mass spectral library version 1.7 was used 209 for peak identification. The quantitative determination of DCM was performed elaborating its 210 corresponding calibration curve in the 0.0125 and 0.15 mol L<sup>-1</sup> range. 211

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# 213 2.3.2 Study of the effect of pH, time and concentration of MCPA

To evaluate the effect of pH, MCPA sorption experiments were carried out at solid/liquid ratio 214 of 0.5 g L<sup>-1</sup> obtained by adding 5 mg of NTs to a final volume of 10 mL, using a fixed pesticide 215 concentration of 10 µmol L<sup>-1</sup>, obtained by diluting 1000 µmol L<sup>-1</sup> stock solution, varying the pH from 216 3.0 to 9.5 and for an incubation time of 24 h. The pH was controlled by addition of 0.01 mmol L<sup>-1</sup> 217 HCl or NaOH to the solution. After incubation in a rotatory shaker at 20 °C, the samples were 218 centrifuged at 7000 rpm for 20 min. The amount of adsorbed MCPA was calculated as the difference 219 between the MCPA quantity initially added and that present in the liquid at equilibrium. Blanks of 220 MCPA in ultrapure water were analyzed in order to check for pesticide stability and/or sorption on 221 the vials. 222

To evaluate the effect of time on MCPA adsorption, experiments were performed at solid/liquid ratio of 0.5 g  $L^{-1}$  using 7.0 µmol  $L^{-1}$  of MCPA at pH 3.5. The suspensions were stirred

for 2.0, 5.0, 10, 20, 40, 60, 90, 120, 300, 1080, 1440, 1680 and 2880 min. Different volumes of a stock solution of herbicide (1000  $\mu$ mol L<sup>-1</sup>) were added to the NTs containing liquid to have initial MCPA concentration in the 0.05 - 260  $\mu$ mol L<sup>-1</sup> range. The pH was kept constant at 3.5 by addition of 0.10 or 0.01 mol L<sup>-1</sup> HCl or NaOH. The samples were incubated for 1440 min and, then, after centrifugation, the supernatants were analyzed as described above.

During desorption experiments, immediately after adsorption of 255 and 170  $\mu$ mol L<sup>-1</sup> initial MCPA concentration, the samples were put in contact with different volumes of ultrapure water, so to determine the amount of released herbicide. In particular, 10 mL of supernatant was removed and replaced with 10 mL of ultrapure water. After shaking at 25 °C for 24 h, the suspensions were centrifuged and the concentration of released herbicide in the supernatant was determined. The same procedure was repeated by replacing 3.0, 4.0, and 6.0 mL of supernatant with the same volume of ultrapure water.

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# 2.3.3 Study of the effect of pH, time and concentration of DCM

In order to study the effect of pH, sorption experiments were made at a solid/liquid ratio of 239 0.5 g L<sup>-1</sup> obtained by adding 5 mg solid to a final volume of 10 mL, using a constant DCM 240 concentration of 0.15 mol L<sup>-1</sup>, varying the pH from 3.5 to 7.0 and with an incubation time of 24 h. 241 pH was controlled by addition of 0.01 mmol  $L^{-1}$  HCl or NaOH. After incubation in a rotatory shaker 242 at 20 °C, the samples were centrifuged at 7000 rpm for 20 min. The amount of adsorbed DCM was 243 calculated as the difference between the initially added quantity of DCM and the quantity present at 244 equilibrium in the liquid. Blanks of DCM in ultrapure water were analysed in order to check for 245 pollutant stability and sorption on the vials. 246

In order to study the effect of time, experiments were performed at a solid/liquid ratio of 0.5 g  $L^{-1}$  by using 0.15 mol  $L^{-1}$  of DCM at pH 5.5. The suspensions were stirred for 2.0, 5.0, 10, 20, 40, 60, 90, 120, 300, 1080, 1440, 1680 and 2880 min. The adsorption isotherm was obtained as follows: different volumes of a stock solution of DCM (0.15 mol  $L^{-1}$ ) were added to the Me-IMO NTs containing liquid in such a way to have an initial DCM concentration in the 0.0125 - 0.15 mol  $L^{-1}$  range. The pH of each suspension was kept constant at 5.5 by adding 0.10 or 0.01 mol  $L^{-1}$  HCl or NaOH. The samples were incubated for 300 min and, then, after centrifugation, the supernatants were analysed as described above.

During desorption experiments, the sample obtained immediately after adsorption from 0.15 mol  $L^{-1}$  DCM initial concentration, was put in contact with different volumes of ultrapure water at standard pH value, so to determine the amount of released DCM. In particular, 10 mL of supernatant was removed and replaced by 10 mL of ultrapure water. After shaking at 25 °C for 5 h, the suspension was centrifuged and the concentration of released DCM was determined. The same procedure was made by replacing 3.0, 4.0, and 6 mL of supernatant with the same volume of ultrapure water.

- 261
- 262 **3. Results and discussion**

3.1. Relevant physico-chemical features of the Me-IMO NTs in powder and water suspension.
Figure 1 reports the powder XRD pattern (a), the N<sub>2</sub> adsorption/desorption isotherm at -196

°C (b), the PSD and cumulative volume (c) and the  $\zeta$ -potential curve (d) of the Me-IMO NTs. In Fig. 1a, the main reflection at 3.32 20 and the halo at 8.84 20 degrees are characteristic of NTs organized into a pseudo-hexagonal arrangement (Bursill et al., 2000; Bottero et al., 2011). The value of the cell parameter (Table 2) was a = 3.02 nm, as calculated by applying the equation  $a = \frac{2}{\sqrt{3}} d_{100}$ : the cell parameter is larger than that of IMO NTs (Cradwick et al., 1972), due to larger A pores (*vide infra*).

Fig. 1b shows a type IV  $N_2$  isotherm, with a limited (type H4) hysteresis loop. The steep increase of the adsorbed volume at low P/P<sup>0</sup> values indicates occurrence of some micropores, whereas the rounded knee below 0.1 P/P<sup>0</sup> is due to the presence of very narrow mesopores. The corresponding values of BET SSA and pore volume (Table 2) are typical of Me-IMO NTs (Bottero et al., 2011). Accordingly, the PSD curve (circles in Fig. 1c) shows the occurrence of (mainly) narrow mesopores with an average diameter of *ca*. 2.0 nm (A pores). The value of micropore volume that can be extrapolated from the cumulative pore volume curve (squares in Fig. 1c) is close to that reported in Table 2, which is obtained by the *t*-plot method (0.085 cm<sup>3</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>).

The  $\zeta$ -potential curve (Fig. 1d) shows that the NTs are positively charged in a broad pH range, and have a point of zero charge equal to 8.6. Nonetheless, the lines at  $\zeta = \pm 37$  mV show range of  $\zeta$ potential reported in the literature for stable suspensions (Honary and Zahir, 2013), indicating that above pH = 5 some NTs aggregation may occur. Such a phenomenon could affect the adsorption/desorption experiments (*vide infra*).





Figure 1. Section a: low angle XRD pattern of Me-IMO powder; section b: N<sub>2</sub> isotherm at 196 °C (black symbols: adsorption branch; white symbols: desorption branch); section c: NL-DFT

PSD (circles) and cumulative pore volume (squares) as obtained by applying a  $N_2$  - silica kernel to the isotherm adsorption branch; section d:  $\zeta$ -potential curve of Me-IMO NTs as a function of pH.

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Table 2. Some textural properties of Me-IMO NTs as obtained by N<sub>2</sub> isotherms at -196 °C,
 X-ray powder diffraction and SAXS experiments with either the dry powder or the water dispersed
 one.

Sample	BET SSA (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	Total Pore Volume (cm <sup>3</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	<i>t</i> -plot Micropore Volume (cm <sup>3</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	Cell parameter <i>a</i> (nm) XRD	Inner radius (nm) (SAXS)	Wall thickness (nm) SAXS
Me-IMO	615	0.35	0.085	3.02	0.91 (0.92 <sup>a</sup> )	0.55 (0.56 <sup>a</sup> )

- <sup>a</sup> Value for Me-IMO NTs re-suspended in water.
- 294

Figure 2a compares the SAXS spectra of the Me-IMO NTs powder under vacuum and of the same re-dispersed in water (NTs concentration = 5 g  $L^{-1}$ ): the two patterns are very close, indicating that re-dispersion in water does not induce significant changes in the NTs shape. Only small variations at small angles indicate that the NTs bundling may be slightly affected by re-dispersion in water, with a consequent decrease of the average bundle size. The internal contrast is also modified.

Fig. 2b compares the experimental SAXS pattern of Me-IMO NTs powder dispersed in water 300 (NTs concentration = 5 g  $L^{-1}$ ) with the calculated patterns for isolated NTs and for NTs in small 301 bundles. In agreement with the powder XRD pattern, comparison of the SAXS curves clearly 302 303 indicates the presence of bundles when the powder is re-dispersed in water. The NTs inner radius, as obtained by SAXS, is  $r_i = 0.91$  nm and the wall thickness is  $t_w = 0.55$  nm. The experimental peak 304 position in SAXS at  $q = 0.238 A^{-1}$  cannot be directly associated to the hexagonal lattice parameter 305 306 due to the peak shift induced by the NTs form factor. The lattice parameter that is obtained by the computed SAXS pattern is 3.05 nm, i.e. a value that well corresponds to the NTs external diameter, 307 with a small additional separation of 0.15 nm. 308

The geometric values obtained from XRD and SAXS are in very good agreement with the pores diameter as measured by  $N_2$  isotherm. Indeed, according to the determined sizes, the micropore volume is 0.095 cm<sup>3</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>, in fair agreement with the value as determined by the *t*-plot method (0.085 cm<sup>3</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>). The small difference may be due to tiny amounts of water or anions trapped within the B pores, which occupy a small part of the volume, finally explaining the 0.15 nm additional distance in the bundle lattice parameter.



Figure 2. Section a: SAXS patterns of Me-IMO NTs as dry powder (blue curve) and redispersed in water (5 g L<sup>-1</sup>, red curve). Section b: SAXS pattern of NTs in water (blue curve) compared to a scattering model of dispersed hollow NTs (with  $r_i = 0.91$  nm, wall thickness = 0.55 nm, internal electronic density = 0.05 e<sup>-</sup>/Å<sup>3</sup>, black curve) and to a scattering model considering bundles (red curve).

The SAXS analysis also allowed obtaining the inner and outer electron density ( $\rho_i$  and  $\rho_e$ ) of the NTs in both the dry powder and after re-dispersion in water. Interestingly,  $\rho_i$  is equal to 0.05 e<sup>-</sup> /Å<sup>3</sup> in both samples. As compared to the electron density of bulk water ( $\rho_{H2O} = 0.334 \text{ e}^{-}/Å^{3}$ ), such a low inner density means that in the powder (which was treated under vacuum at r.t. and not outgassed at high temperature) only few H<sub>2</sub>O molecules occur within the NTs and that the powder is extremely hydrophobic, as  $\rho_i$  did not increase upon contact with water.

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### 330 *3.2.* Adsorption of MCPA as studied in batch conditions and by SAXS

Fig. 3a shows the adsorbed amount of MCPA ( $\mu$ mol kg<sup>-1</sup>) as a function of pH (each point having being acquired after 24 h incubation): as a whole, the overall amount of adsorbed MPCA is maximum below pH 4, decreasing as pH increases. Such a behaviour may be interpreted by considering the  $\zeta$ -potential curve in Fig. 1d, where the net positive charge of the NTs progressively decreases as pH increases, until the PZC is reached (pH 8.6). In agreement with SAXS data in Fig. 5 (*vide infra*), the curve in Fig. 3a seems to point out the fact that the herbicide mainly interacts with the NTs outer surface.

338 Fig. 3b shows the adsorbed amount of MCPA as a function of time at a constant pH of 3.5, i.e. a pH value at which simultaneously the adsorbed amount is very high (Fig. 3a) and the NTs  $\zeta$ 339 340 potential is ca.+ 37 mV, a condition proper of a stable suspension (Honary and Zahir, 2013). In such 341 condition, aggregation of NTs into bundles should be limited, finally maximizing the available 342 external surface and, thus, MCPA adsorption. The curve in Fig. 3b shows indeed a steep increase in the adsorbed MCPA during the first minutes (inset), reaching complete adsorption after 1440 min. In 343 344 the adopted experimental conditions (i.e. pH = 3.5 and initial concentration of MCPA =  $1.0*10^{-5}$  M), such a phenomenon can be readily assigned to the occurrence of electrostatic interactions. The best 345

model describing the sorption kinetics in Fig. 3b was the pseudo second-order model, which can be
expressed in a linear form according to eq. (2) (Ozacar and Sengyl, 2006):

348 
$$\frac{t}{q} = \frac{1}{k_2 * q_e^2} - \frac{t}{q_e}$$
(2)

where  $q_e$  and q are the amount of organic pollutant adsorbed (µmol kg<sup>-1</sup> MCPA) at equilibrium and at time *t*, respectively, k<sub>2</sub> is the rate constant of adsorption (kg/µmol h) and *t* is the time (h). For MCPA, the following values where calculated  $q_e = 19821.99$  µmol kg<sup>-1</sup> and k<sub>2</sub> = 1.558 x 10<sup>-3</sup> kg/µmol h, with an r<sup>2</sup> = 1 confirming that the curve-fit procedure was appropriate.



Figure 3. Section a: MCPA adsorbed amount as a function of pH (incubation time = 24 h; initial MCPA concentration =  $1.0*10^{-5}$  M). Section b: MCPA adsorbed amount as a function of time

at pH = 3.5 (initial MCPA concentration =  $1.0*10^{-5}$  M). Inset to section b: magnification of the 0-1000 min range.

Figure 4 reports MCPA adsorption/desorption equilibrium isotherms at pH = 3.5. The 359 adsorption isotherm (black symbols) has a complex shape, which can be due to multiple phenomena 360 occurring at the NTs outer surface at increasing MCPA concentration. Being the pKa of MCPA in 361 water equal to 2.90 (Addorisio et al., 2010), at pH = 3.5 its dissociation degree ( $\alpha$ ) is ca. 0.5 and, thus, 362 363 besides electrostatic interaction, other types of interactions may occur with the outer surface of NTs, like H-bonding, as previously shown by some of us for MCPA adsorption on (mesoporous) Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> 364 365 and Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>. (Addorisio et al., 2010) Interestingly, at higher MCPA equilibrium concentration, the adsorption isotherm becomes convex, indicating that the adsorbing species has a lower affinity for 366 the adsorbent: multi-layer adsorption could, indeed, occur, as in MCPA crystals, where multiple inter-367 molecular bonds form (Kobyłecka et al., 2015). 368

So far, different adsorbents have been investigated for the removal of phenoxy herbicides, 369 including layered double hydroxides (Bruna et al., 2009; Ahmad et al., 2010; Kamaraj et al., 2014), 370 mesoporous metal oxides (Addorisio et al., 2010), resins (Ding et al., 2012) and carbon materials 371 (Kim et al., 2008). In particular, MCPA adsorption was studied on an Argentine montmorillonite 372 (MMT) and its organo-hybrid (OMMT) (Santiago et al., 2016): although adsorption on OMMT (0.05 373 mol/kg) increased with respect to MMT (ca. 0.01 mol/kg), the MCPA adsorbed amounts were 374 significantly lower with respect to that obtained in the adopted experimental conditions with Me-IMO 375 NTs, i.e. ca. 0.2 mol/kg. Such a value is particularly sound if compared to the amount of MCPA 376 adsorbed at pH = 4.0 on a mesoporous alumina with SSA =  $195 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$  (0.01 mol/kg), i.e. an adsorbent 377 378 with similar chemical composition, where diffusion limits occurred (Addorisio et al., 2010).

Here, MCPA adsorption likely occurs at the outer surface of the NTs, thus overcoming the aforementioned diffusion limitations during adsorption. However, the two desorption curves (white symbols, Fig. 4) showed that, in the adopted experimental conditions, MCPA adsorption is only partially irreversible, in that the desorbed amount of MCPA was ca. the 35 % and the 44% of the total amount of adsorbed MCPA (when starting from 129820 µmol/kg and 84790 µmol/kg. respectively).
It should be noticed that MCPA adsorption at the outer surface of the NTs is surely perturbing their
actual surface charge, which very likely decreases and, thus, the dispersion could become less stable,
with consequent NTs agglomeration, finally hampering effective desorption of MCPA.



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Figure 4. Adsorption (black circles) isotherm and desorption (white symbols) isotherms of MCPA on Me-IMO-NTs as obtained at pH = 3.5 in the 0 -160 µmol L<sup>-1</sup> equilibrium concentration range.

390

In order to confirm the preferential interaction with the outer surface of NTs, Figure 5a reports the SAXS spectra taken after contacting the Me-IMO NTs with MCPA  $1.0*10^{-4}$  M in water at pH 3.7, 4.5, 9.6 and 10.4. The bulk electron density of MCPA is  $\rho_{MCPA} = 0.48 \text{ e}^{-}/\text{Å}^{3}$ . In principle, the molecular size of MCPA (Table 1) allows adsorption within A pores: if so, a corresponding increase of the NTs inner electronic density should be measured by SAXS (Fig. 5), since the position of the first minimum of the scattered intensity is very sensitive to changes of the internal scattering length density. In order to better illustrate this, the scattered intensities of model NTs with internal electronic density varying from 0.05 to 0.2  $e/A^3$  are plotted in Fig. 5. Interestingly, the position of the first minimum of the experimental scattered intensity does not shift with pH. Such a constant inner NTs electronic density allows excluding any interaction of MCPA with the NTs inner surface.



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Figure 5. Experimental SAXS patterns of Me-IMO NTs in MCPA water suspensions at pH = 3.7, 4.5, 9.6 and 10.4 and calculated SAXS patterns (red curves), showing a shift of the scattering model of hollow cylinder at increasing internal electronic density (from 0.05 to 0.2 e<sup>-</sup>/Å<sup>3</sup>).

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# 406 *3.3.* Adsorption of DCM as studied in batch conditions and by SAXS.

Figure 6a reports the pH dependence of DCM adsorbed on Me-IMO NTs: the curve shape is very different with respect to that concerning MCPA (Fig. 3a), where the adsorbed amount decreases with pH because, simultaneously, the NTs outer surface becomes less positively charged. With DCM, adsorption is maximum at pH = 5.5 and, then, decreases. 411 DCM has a non-negligible dipole moment ( $\mu = 1.470$  D) and can be polarized by the polar outer NTs walls, leading to dipolar interactions. Simultaneously, its kinetic diameter (0.33 nm) allows 412 413 DCM diffusion within A pores, but also within B pores having a diameter of 0.45 nm, (Bottero et al., 2011; Bonelli et al., 2013b) and which are able to strongly polarize CO<sub>2(g)</sub> molecules in gas-solid 414 systems (Zanzottera et al., 2012a; Bonelli et al., 2013b). Although different phenomena affect 415 416 adsorption in liquid/solid systems, it is interesting to notice that DCM adsorption is maximum at pH 417 5.5, at which the  $\zeta$ -potential of the Me-IMO NTs is ca. + 30 mV, likely implying some NTs agglomeration with formation of (more) B pores, where the DCM molecules may diffuse and be 418 419 polarized, like CO<sub>2(g)</sub> molecules (Zanzottera et al., 2012a). Accordingly, the kinetic curve in Fig. 6b has a smooth knee (inset) before reaching a plateau, indicating that more than one type of interaction 420 likely occurs. Application of eq. (2) to model the DCM sorption kinetics in Fig. 6b (Ozacar and 421 Sengyl, 2006) allowed calculating the following parameters:  $q_e = 209.04 \text{ mol } \text{kg}^{-1}$  and  $k_2 = 0.0305$ 422 kg/mol h,  $r^2 = 0.99$ . The extremely high amount of adsorbed DCM could be explained by considering 423 424 that in oil/water emulsions, such hybrid NTs adsorb at the oil/water interface, stabilizing Pickering emulsions (Picot et al., 2016), modifying the viscosity and, possibly, favouring transport of small 425 molecules within the NTs. 426

427 Accordingly, the adsorption isotherm in Fig. 7 (black symbols) has an S-shape, indicating that at least two types of adsorption phenomena occur: at low concentration, DCM molecules should 428 interact with stronger adsorbing sites, since their sizeable dipole moment allows interaction with 429 polarizing sites, like B pores, stemming from partial NTs agglomeration into small bundles, and able 430 to polarize DCM molecules (kinetic diameter = 0.33 nm). At increasing pH value, the outer surface 431 432 of NTs (C surface) becomes less positively charged, thus lowering the adsorption capacity of the outer surface of the NTs towards DCM molecules. Unfortunately, the electronic density of DCM 433 (Table 1) is very close to that of water ( $\rho_{H2O} = 0.334 \text{ e}^{-}/\text{Å}^{3}$ ) and, thus, if such a phenomenon should 434 happen, it would be hardly discernible by SAXS, which instead could readily show DCM diffusion 435 within the NTs (A pores, vide infra). The latter phenomenon is likely responsible of the largest 436

adsorbed amount of DCM above 0.02 mol/L equilibrium concentration, although in those conditions
an oil-in-water Pickering emulsion could form (Picot et al., 2016).

As a whole, the thorough understanding of the interaction of DCM with Me-IMO NTs is
complicated both by the nature of the pollutant and by formation of Pickering emulsions (Picot et al.,
2016).

442 Concerning DCM removal from polluted water, adsorption is considered by the literature as one 443 the most applicable techniques (Lemus et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2014, 2017), but it requires porous 444 materials with sound adsorbing capacity and high stability. The DCM adsorption capacity of Zr-based 445 metal-organic framework (UiO-66) was enhanced in the presence of UiO-66 crystals with various 446 morphologies and optimized porous structure as obtained by adjusting the synthesis procedure.(Zhou 447 et al., 2017): however, in the adopted experimental conditions, the maximum adsorption capacity was 448 lower than here (ca. 6 mmol/kg).

As for MCPA, in the adopted experimental conditions DCM desorption was not fully reversible (white symbols in Fig. 7) indicating the likely occurrence of mass transfer phenomena, related to some NTs aggregation, which hampers DCM molecules diffusion of DCM from the interior of the NTs/bundles to the exterior. However, such diffusion limitations, occurring especially during desorption, could be overcome by changing operative conditions, e.g. liquid/solid ratio, and require dedicated studies.



457 Figure 6. Section a: DCM adsorbed amount as a function of pH. Incubation time: 24 h. Initial
458 DCM concentration: 0.15 M. Section b: DCM adsorbed amount as a function of time. pH = 5.5; initial

459 DCM concentration: 0.15 M. Inset to section b: magnification of the 0-600 min range, where the 460 maximum amount of adsorbed DCM is reached after 300 min.



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Figure 7. Adsorption (black symbols) isotherm and desorption isotherm (white symbols) of DCM on Me-IMO-NTs at pH = 5.5 in the 0 -0.06 mol L<sup>-1</sup> equilibrium concentration range.



Figure 8. SAXS patterns of Me-IMO NTs in the DCM suspension at natural pH. The scattering model for a hollow cylinder show the variation of internal electronic density from 0.05 to 0.29 e<sup>-</sup>/Å<sup>3</sup>.

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Fig. 8 reports the SAXS patterns observed when the NTs are contacted with DCM suspension. 471 The position of the first minimum shifts towards higher q values, indicating an increase of the inner 472 electronic density. The applied model yields a value of  $\rho_i$  equal to 0.29 e/Å<sup>3</sup> for the inner electron 473 density of Me-IMO NTs, proving that DCM (bulk DCM has  $\rho = 0.4 \text{ e/Å}^3$ , Table 1) has indeed entered 474 the NTs. The high adsorbed amounts measured by batch experiments indicate that the DCM 475 molecules adsorb also at the outer surface of NTs and not only within them, but since the SAXS 476 measurement is based on a change on the internal electron density, it may be unable to detected the 477 478 change in the outer electron density, since the NTs are suspended in water, which has a high electron density. 479

480

## 481 Conclusions

482 Methylimogolite NTs have two types of surface, namely an inner one, which is extremely 483 hydrophobic, and an outer one, which is hydrophilic, polar and positively charged below pH 8.6. The external positive charge affects the NTs behaviour in water: for instance, by varying pH, NTs
arrangement changes, likely leading to some aggregation phenomena that, in turn, affect both
adsorption and desorption processes in water.

Adsorption of two organic pollutants (namely MCPA, 2-methyl-4-chlorophenoxyacetic acid,
and DCM, dichloromethane) on methylimogolite occurs through complex interactions, which can be
only partially explained by the joint use of batch experiments and SAXS measurements.

On the one hand, the reported results show that MCPA adsorption occurs at the outer surface
of the NTs by means of both electrostatic interactions and intermolecular forces, with sound overall
adsorbed amounts as compared to another mesoporous adsorbent (i.e. Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>) with a chemical
composition similar to that of the NTs outer surface.

On the other hand, unravelling the type of interaction of DCM with methylimogolite is not straightforward. SAXS measurements clearly showed diffusion of DCM molecules within A pores and batch experiments showed high adsorbed amounts. However, the latter type of measurements seem to point out the interaction with another type of surface, most likely B pores forming among three aligned NTs in a bundle: unfortunately, this type of interaction that cannot be clearly assessed by SAXS. Moreover, on the basis of previous studies, stabilization of an emulsion induced by the same NTs could not be excluded.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first work assessing the adsorption/desorption of organic molecules of environmental concern with this type of nanomaterial and could open new perspectives for its practical application, undoubtedly after optimization of the desorption process, which requires dedicated studies.

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