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# Pressure assisted flash sintering of Mn-Co based spinel coatings for solid oxide electrolysis cells (SOECs)

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## Abstract

Pressure assisted flash sintering was used to process Mn-Co-Cu based spinel coatings, electrophoretically deposited on a Crofer22APU interconnect. This method resulted in highly dense coatings, heat-treated for only a short duration (<10 minutes) at temperatures lower than conventional sintering temperatures. The electrophoretically deposited coatings showed no delamination or cracks after flash sintering at high heating rates (>200 °C/min). The high heating rate promoted Cu modified Mn-Co spinel and limited the formation of a Cr-oxide scale on the

1 Crofer22APU substrate. Flash sintering was found to be a promising and time efficient sintering  
2 technique to overcome some of the issues related to low coating density and oxide scale formation  
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4 in solid oxide electrolysis cell conditions.  
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9 **Key words:** Flash sintering, protective coatings, EPD, SOEC, SOFC  
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## 14 **1. Introduction**

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17 Cr-based steel interconnects such as Crofer22APU and Crofer22H are most commonly used in solid  
18 oxide electrolysis cells (SOECs) thanks to their high electrical conductivity, mechanical stability  
19 and coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) matching with other cell components [1,2]. SOECs  
20 generally operate at 700-900 °C, which enhances the possibility of Cr evaporation from the  
21 interconnect, which can contaminate neighboring electrodes. Deposition of protective coatings on  
22 metallic interconnects is considered the most effective way to hinder the Cr evaporation. In this  
23 context, Mn-Co based spinel coatings, due to their high electrical conductivity, high Cr retention  
24 capability and CTE closely matching with interconnect, are likely to be the materials of choice [3].  
25 Doping and or modification of Mn-Co spinel with transition metal elements (Fe and Cu) is an  
26 attractive way to further improve their performance [4–7]. For instance, many researchers have  
27 studied Cu doped Mn-Co spinel and found that Cu addition stabilizes the cubic phase ( $\text{MnCo}_2\text{O}_4$ )  
28 and improves the density of the coatings [8–10].  
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37 In general, conventional sintering usually produces coatings with a certain grade of porosity, which  
38 might affect the Cr blocking capability of the protective layer. In order to produce dense coatings,  
39 conventional sintering should be carried out above 900 °C or for a long dwell time (a matter of  
40 hours). In both cases, there is a high possibility of formation of a non-conductive Cr-based oxide  
41 scale at the interconnect surface, thus increasing the overall area specific resistance of the  
42 interconnect [11].  
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1 Pressure assisted flash sintering is a promising technology that can produce dense coatings in just a  
2 few minutes by combining simultaneously high pressure and electric current [12]. A limited number  
3 of studies has been carried out on flash sintering of Mn-Co based spinel in order to understand its  
4 phase stability and densification [11,13,14]. However, up to now, much of the research related to  
5 flash sintering of ceramics was mainly carried out on compact of powders. To the best of the  
6 author's knowledge, no studies have been conducted to observe the (pressure assisted) flash  
7 sintering effect on as-deposited Mn-Co based coatings. Due to high heating and cooling rates, there  
8 is a high possibility of stress generation at the coating/substrate interface subjected to flash  
9 sintering. The high stress can subsequently lead to delamination at the coating/substrate interface or  
10 can even generate cracks within the coatings. Therefore, it is important not only investigate the  
11 density of coatings but also the coating/substrate interface.  
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26 In our previous studies,  $Mn_{1.5}Co_{1.5}O_4$  (MCO) coatings doped with 0-10wt% of Cu were  
27 successfully produced using the electrophoretic deposition (EPD) technique [10,15]. MCO and CuO  
28 particles were electrophoretically co-deposited to obtain homogenous thick coatings of  $\sim 15\mu m$ .  
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34 Two steps sintering of MCO coatings has been repeatedly reported in literature, where first step is  
35 carried out in reducing atmosphere with an aim to decompose the spinel and second step in  
36 oxidizing atmosphere for reformation of spinel [10,15,16]. In present work, pressure assisted flash  
37 sintering is used in addition to conventional sintering to analyze the impact of a different heat  
38 treatment process on the density of Cu doped MCO spinel coatings and on the formation of the  
39 oxide scale.  
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## 51 **2. Experimental**

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57 The co-deposition of  $Mn_{1.5}Co_{1.5}O_4$  (MCO) and CuO particles was carried out on disc shaped  
58 (diameter:  $15 \pm 0.1$  mm, thickness:  $2 \pm 0.1$  mm) Crofer22APU substrates by EPD. A previous study  
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1 showed that a MCO coating doped with 10 wt% of CuO exhibited higher density as compared with  
2 pure MCO and MCO doped with 5 wt% of CuO [10]. Therefore, for this study, a suspension of  
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4 MCO and CuO (90:10 wt%) was prepared in a solvent composed of ethanol and water in 60:40  
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6 vol%, where 37.5g of solid content was added per liter of the solvent. Further details about the EPD  
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8 deposition parameters can be found elsewhere [15,17]. After the deposition, the samples were dried  
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10 in air for 24 hours and subsequently sintered.  
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13 The EPD coated samples were sintered according to three different heat treatments, referred as S1,  
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15 S2 and S3. S1 was a single step treatment where the coatings were sintered by flash sintering. Flash  
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17 sintering was done in vacuum (1 m.bar) using a load of 5 kN. The disc shaped coated samples were  
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19 introduced into a graphite die and two cylindrical graphite punches were used to hold the sample in  
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21 the die. Boron nitride (BN) was sprayed on the graphite punches to avoid direct contact with the  
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23 coated Crofer22APU samples. The samples were heated up to 700°C at a heating rate of 200  
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25 °C/min followed by a dwell of 1 min. Afterward, a power pulse of 6.8 V was applied for three  
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27 seconds to obtain a temperature of approximately 830±30 °C. Subsequently, the samples were  
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29 cooled down to room temperature at an initial cooling rate of 200 °C/min.  
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36 The heat treatment referred to as S2 involved a two steps process; first step sintering in reducing  
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38 atmosphere (Ar-3% H<sub>2</sub>) at 900°C for 2 hours at a heating/cooling rate of 10°C/min, followed by a  
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40 second sintering step using flash sintering. The S3 treatment involved three steps; first two steps  
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42 were similar to S2 (first in reducing atmosphere and second by flash sintering), while a third  
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44 additional step was done in static air at 900°C for 2 hours at a heating/cooling rate of 10°C/min.  
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47 Flash sintering during S2 and S3 treatment was done under same conditions mentioned for S1.  
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51 The microstructure and compatibility of the coatings with the Crofer22APU interconnect was  
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53 examined by SEM (Merlin ZEISS). For that purpose, the cross sections of Crofer22APU/MnCoCu  
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55 coated samples were metallographically polished down to 1 µm using diamond paste. The  
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57 crystalline phase analysis of the deposited and heat-treated coatings was carried out using a  
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59 PanAlytical X'Pert Pro PW 3040/60 Philips (the Netherlands), with Cu K $\alpha$  and the X'Pert software.  
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1 The XRD analysis were carried out in the range of 2 theta 10°-70°, with a step size of 0.02626° and  
2 time per step of 10.20 seconds. Prior to the XRD and SEM analysis, the coated Crofer22APU  
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4 samples were sonicated for 5 min, in order to remove the BN layer.  
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### 9 **3. Results and Discussion**

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15 Figure 1 shows XRD analyses carried out on Cu doped MCO coated Crofer22APU substrates after  
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17 S1, S2 and S3 sintering treatments. The XRD pattern after the S1 treatment (Figure 1(a)) shows the  
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19 presence of the (Mn, Co)<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> phase (PDF # 018-0408) with an intermediate tetragonal spinel  
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21 structure. The S1 treatment also resulted in the partial reduction of CuO into Cu<sub>2</sub>O after flash  
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23 sintering. The high heating/cooling rates and short dwell time during flash sintering resulted in only  
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25 partial reduction of the CuO. The presence of BN phase is also visible after the S1 treatment, which  
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27 is due to presence of residuals of the BN layer. On the other hand, the XRD analysis after the S2  
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29 treatment (two steps sintering) shows the decomposition of the MCO spinel into MnO and metallic  
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31 Co. In contrast to the S1 treatment, the sintering performed during the first step of the S2 treatment  
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33 in a reducing atmosphere for 2 hours at 900 °C, ensured the complete reduction of the MCO spinel  
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35 into MnO and metallic Co. These results are in agreement with results found in previous studies for  
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37 MCO spinel sintered in reducing atmospheres [3,15]. The S2 treatment also resulted in the  
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39 reduction of the CuO into metallic Cu. XRD analysis after the S3 treatment (figure 1 (c)) carried out  
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41 in air shows the reforming of the MnCo<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> cubic phase spinel (PDF# 023-1237), with the Cu  
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43 incorporated into the spinel as no distinct peak for a Cu based phase was observed. These results are  
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45 also coherent with previous studies, where Cu doping was found to stabilize the cubic phase  
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47 [6,10,15,18] of MCO by partial replacement of Mn [5,19]. The stabilization of the cubic phase is  
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49 beneficial to minimize the tetragonal-cubic phase transformation that occurs in MCO at around 400  
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51 °C during heating/cooling cycling, consequently limiting the thermal stresses due to difference in  
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1 volume and coefficient of thermal expansion of both phases. The XRD pattern of the cubic  
2  $\text{MnCo}_2\text{O}_4$  (PDF# 023-1237) is also shown in figure 1d, for better understanding and comparison. A  
3  
4 slight shift can be seen between the XRD patterns of the S3 treated sample and that of  $\text{MnCo}_2\text{O}_4$   
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7 ( $\text{PDF# 023-1237}$ ), which is most likely due to lattice distortion of Mn-Co spinel as a result of Cu  
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9 inclusion into the spinel.  
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14 **Figure 1. XRD characterization of sintered coatings after (a) S1, (b) S2, (c) S3 treatments and (d) XRD simulated pattern of**  
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16  **$\text{Co}_2\text{MnO}_4$  phase**  
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21 Figure 2 shows the cross sections of EPD deposited Mn-Co-Cu spinel coatings on Crofer22APU,  
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23 sintered in three different ways, as previously described. The sintered coatings were uniform, with a  
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25 thickness of  $\sim 15 \mu\text{m}$ . By the introduction of pressure-assisted flash sintering, coatings with  
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27 negligible porosity were obtained at temperatures lower than conventional sintering temperature  
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29 (approx.  $950 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ) of Mn-Co based spinel coatings. Despite of fast heating and cooling rates ( $>200$   
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31  $^\circ\text{C}/\text{min}$ ) during the flash sintering, no cracks or delamination effects between the Crofer22APU  
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33 substrate the Mn-Co-Cu spinel coatings were observed.  
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43 **Figure 2. EPD deposited Mn-Co-Cu coating on the Crofer22APU substrates. Sintering was performed according to (a,b) S1, (c,d)**  
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45 **S2 and (e,f) S3 treatment**  
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49 Figure 3 shows the EDS mapping carried out on Crofer22APU/Mn-Co-Cu coatings, sintered by the  
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51 three different heat treatments. After the S1 and S2 treatments, different phases are clearly visible in  
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53 the Mn-Co-Cu coating, while after the S3 treatment, the coating becomes homogenous with no  
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55 distinct phases. In particular, the EDS mapping shows Cu rich zones after the S1 and S2 treatments,  
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57 while after the third step sintering (S3), no Cu rich areas were observed. These EDS analyses are in  
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1 agreement with the XRD investigation and previous studies, where sintering of MnCoCu spinel  
2 coatings in a reducing atmosphere results in decomposition of the spinel, and reforming of the  
3 MnCo spinel after sintering in air. It is also worth pointing out that flash sintering (S1) did not  
4 resulted in the formation of a Cr oxide scale on the Crofer22APU substrate. Nevertheless, a Cr rich  
5 scale of ~1 μm was formed after the S3 treatment, as clearly visible from the corresponding EDS  
6 mapping (Figure ). The formation of the oxide scale is due to third step sintering carried out in air at  
7 900 °C. The oxidizing sintering step in S3 could be potentially carried out during the  
8 consolidation/sealing procedure of a real SOCs stack.  
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24 **Figure 3. EDS mapping carried out at Mn-Co-Cu coated Crofer22APU substrates sintered by S1, S2 and S3 treatments**

## 28 **4. Conclusions**

31 Flash sintering was employed to rapidly sinter of Cu doped MnCo spinel (MCO) coatings  
32 electrophoretically deposited on a Crofer22APU interconnect.  
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36 The findings in this study provide the following insights for future research:

- 37 - The proposed approach, EPD co-deposition and flash sintering can be further expanded to study  
38 the in-situ formation of new spinel structures (i. e. avoid Co), by a proper selection of precursors.
- 39 - The one-step sintering treatment (S1) could be directly converted in Cu doped MCO, by a stack  
40 consolidation treatment in air.
- 41 - A natural progression of this work is to analyse the effect of the pressure-assisted flash sintering  
42 on the electrical properties of the coated samples

43 Flash sintering was found to be a promising sintering method that involves short sintering times  
44 (<10 min) to obtain high densification with respect to conventional sintering. The high heating and  
45 cooling rates during flash sintering did not produce any cracks within the coatings as well as no  
46 delamination at the Crofer22APU/coating interface. Moreover, the use of a reducing atmosphere  
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1 during flash sintering did not promote the formation of a Cr-rich oxide scale at the Crofer22APU  
2 substrate. These results confirm that flash sintering could be an attractive way to minimize the  
3 current issues /challenges related to coatings degradation under SOEC conditions at 850°C.  
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## 9 **5. Acknowledgment**

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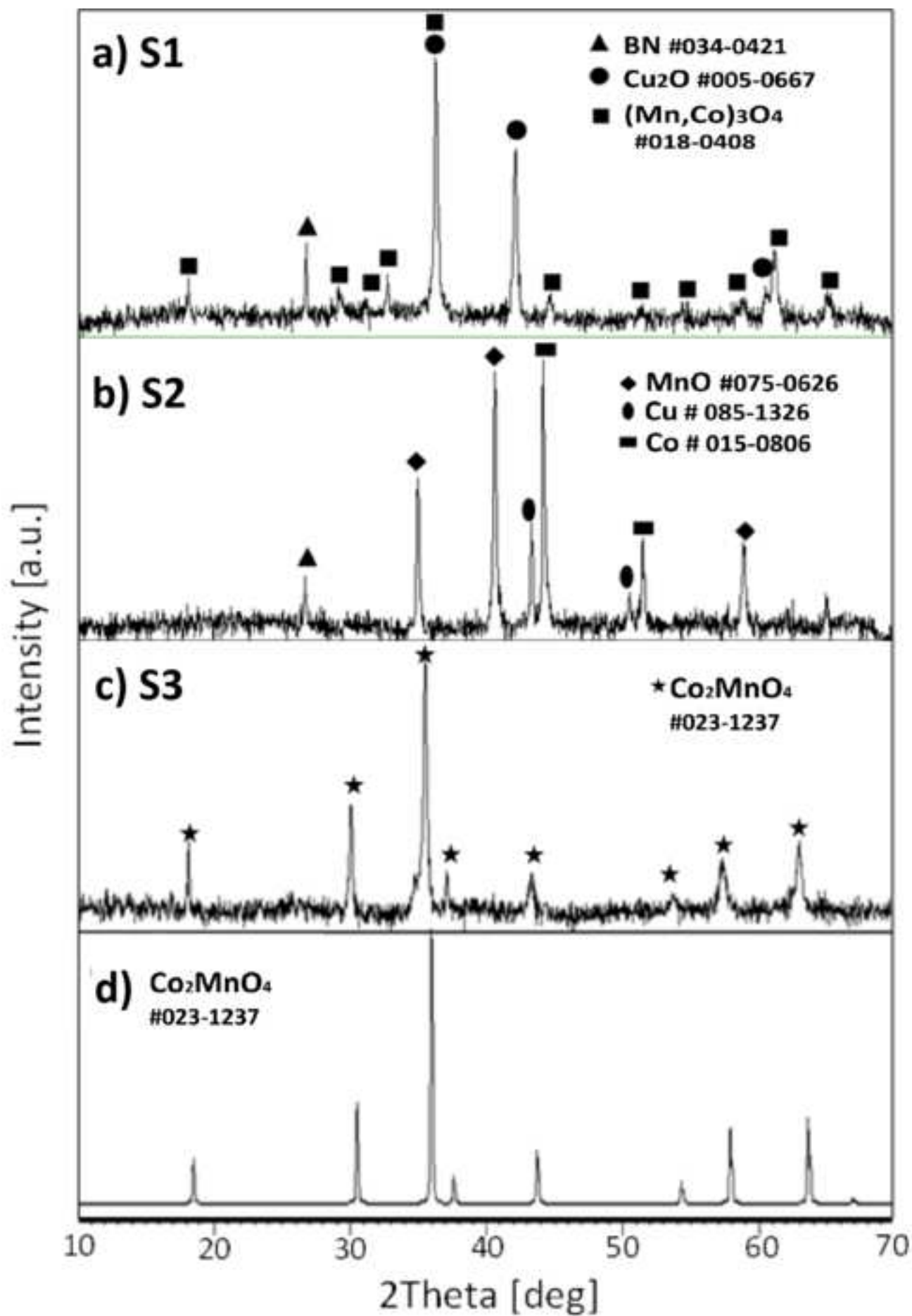
**List of Figures**

**Figure 1.** XRD characterization of sintered coatings after (a) S1, (b) S2, (c) S3 treatments and (d) XRD simulated pattern of  $\text{Co}_2\text{MnO}_4$  phase

**Figure 2.** EPD deposited Mn-Co-Cu coating on the Crofer22APU substrates. Sintering was performed according to (a,b) S1, (c,d) S2 and (e,f) S3 treatment

**Figure 3.** EDS mapping carried out at Mn-Co-Cu coated Crofer22APU substrates sintered by S1, S2 and S3 treatments

Figure 1: XRD characterization of sintered coatings after (a) S1, (b) S2, (c) S3 treatments and (d) XRD simulated pattern of



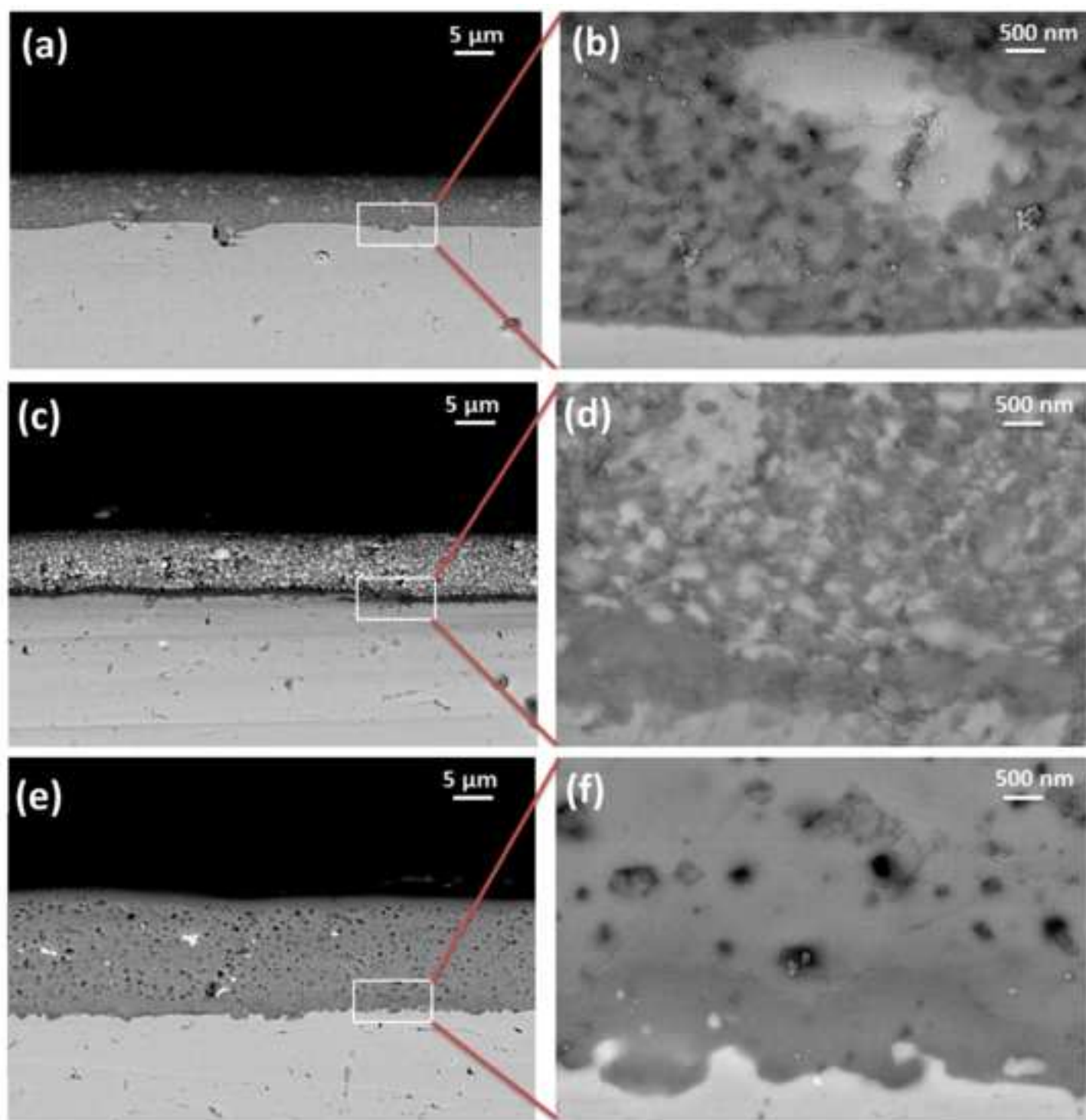


Figure 3: EDS mapping carried out at Mn-Co-Cu coated Crofer22APU substrates sintered by S1, S2 and S3 treatments

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