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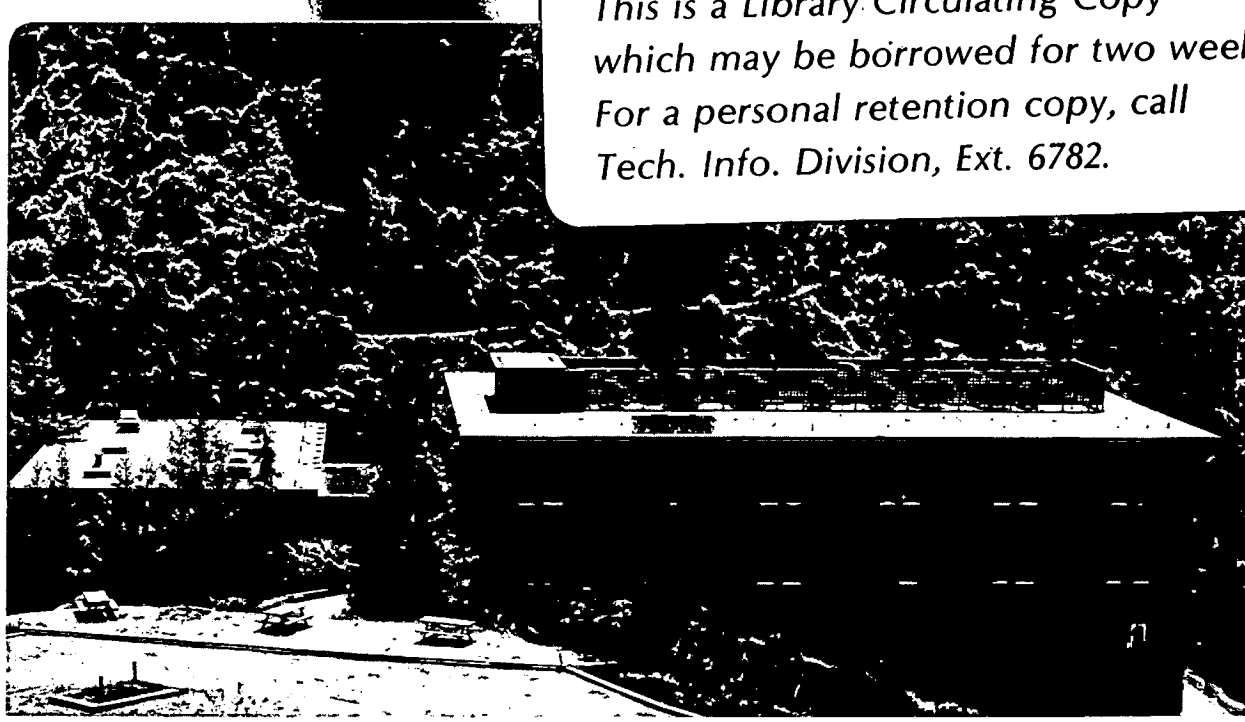

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The Preparation and Selected Properties of Mg-doped p-type Iron Oxide as a Photocathode for the Photoelectrolysis of Water Using Visible Light

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ABSTRACT

Stable Mg-doped iron oxides that exhibit p-type character have been synthesized. These have been utilized in the form of sintered polycrystalline discs for the photodissociation of water. We report the influence of sintering temperature, surface oxygen deficiency, Mg-doping level and solution chemistry on the photoactivity of the Mg-doped iron oxide photocathodes.

INTRODUCTION

α-Fe_2O_3 is one of the widely investigated semiconductors for the photoinduced dissociation of water. This compound has a relatively small band gap, 2.2 eV[1] that permits the use of about 40 percent of the solar photon flux incident on the earth's surface. It is abundant and therefore inexpensive and it is stable in various aqueous solutions over a broad pH range. However, when using pure α-Fe_2O_3, an external potential is needed, in addition to illumination, to produce hydrogen and oxygen from water. Various ways to eliminate the need for using an external potential have been explored.[2-5] Recently, we reported that a p/n iron oxide diode assembly composed of magnesium and silicon doped polycrystalline discs produces hydrogen from water with visible light and without any external potential.[6]

One would expect that introducing Ca^{2+} or Mg^{2+} ions into the α-Fe_2O_3 lattice to substitute for Fe^{3+} ions would increase the concentration of electron vacancies in this electronic semiconductor and would result in p-type behavior. In other laboratories, both CaO and MgO have been used to dope α-Fe_2O_3 but no p-type photocurrents were observed.[7] We have succeeded in preparing p-type α-Fe_2O_3 by doping with MgO and changing the conditions for its preparation. We then studied the photodissociation of water by these p-type iron oxide polycrystalline discs. In this paper the preparation of the MgO doped α-Fe_2O_3 is described and evidence is presented which shows that the photoactivity of the p-type iron oxide is markedly influenced by various experimental parameters. These include sintering temperature, iron oxide surface conditions and electrolyte composition.

Synthesis and Characterization of MgO doped p-type α-Fe_2O_3

Samples were prepared by mixing powders of α-Fe_2O_3 (MCB Manufacturing Chemists, reagent grade) and MgO (Mallinckrodt, analytical reagent grade). Four concentration levels of MgO were used such that the atomic percent of magnesium (Mg/(Mg+Fe)) was 1, 5, 10, or 20. The mixed powders were pressed (7000 Kg/cm^2) to form pellets 10 mm in diameter and subsequently sintered in air at 1350°C, 1425°C, or 1480°C for 20 hours. The discs were then rapidly cooled to room temperature when removed from the oven and had dark resistivities ranging from 10^1 to 10^3 Ωcm (Table 1).

Sample characterization by means of x-ray diffraction, scanning electron microscopy, and scanning auger electron microscopy all showed that the magnesium iron oxides consist mainly of a Mg-doped Fe_2O_3 matrix (Table 1). At 1350°C all peaks in the x-ray spectrum corresponded to an α-Fe_2O_3 phase whereas at 1480°C several of the α-Fe_2O_3 peaks were missing and peaks appeared which indicated the presence of $MgFe_2O_4$ and other substances which could not be identified.

Scanning electron microscopy pictures shown in Figure 1 depict the changes in surface topography with varied sintering temperature. At 1350°C the grains range in size from 10-20 μm in diameter and appear to be somewhat faceted, while at 1480°C the grains are larger, 20-50μm with much smoother surfaces. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (ESCA) measurements of the O(1s) peaks in the Mg-doped iron oxides are shown in Figure 2. The lower binding energy peak is due to the lattice

oxygen ions O^{2-} (529.2 eV) and the higher binding energy peak corresponds to both adsorbed oxygen and hydroxyl groups (532.0 eV).[19]

The photoelectrochemical experiments were conducted in a standard three electrode electrochemical cell with a Mercuric Oxide Luggin Capillary reference electrode, a p-type iron oxide disc connected to a metal wire with silver epoxy as the cathode, and a Pt counter electrode. Inlet and outlet valves were attached to permit oxygen gas to be purged through the solution below the level of the liquid, pass over the sample, and be forced out of the cell from above the solution.

Illumination of the sample was accomplished using a 500W Tungsten halogen lamp. The light was focussed with quartz optics and filtered first through a 5 cm water cell to absorb most of the IR radiation to avoid heating effects, then through a Corning 3-72 visible pass filter to screen the UV radiation with photons of $h\nu \geq 2.7$ eV. After measuring the irradiance with a thermopile detector and taking into account the absorption of light by the electrolyte solution and the filters, the incoming power of visible light was 37 ± 1 mW. All results presented in this work were accumulated under potentiostatic steady state conditons with the use of a Pine RDE 3 potentiostat. Voltage readings are presented versus the reversible hydrogen electrode (RHE).

The electrolyte solutions used in the electrochemical cell were sodium hydroxide and sodium sulfate. The sodium hydroxide solutions were made by diluting a 10N concentrated NaOH solution (Fisher Scientific Company) with distilled water. Anhydrous sodium sulfate powder (Baker) with a nominal purity of 99.9 percent was used to prepare the 0.1 M Na_2SO_4 solutions.

RESULTS

The photocurrents obtained with illumination of the Mg-doped iron oxide discs used as cathodes are directly proportional to the amount of hydrogen that can be produced by the photodissociation of water. First, the results of preparative methods are presented followed by the potoactivity differences that were obtained by varying the dopant levels of magnesium, altering sintering temperature, changing the pH of the electrolytic solution, and subjecting the samples to oxidative conditons. Our results are presented in terms of the photocurrents defined as the difference in magnitude of the current obtained under illumination and in the dark. The data are plotted in the figures as current densities ($\mu A/cm^2$) against the applied potential voltage with respect to a reversible hydrogen electrode RHE. The dark currents are not displayed, but they are smaller and within the same order of magnitude as the photocurrents.

3.1 Influence of Sintering Temperature on the Photoconductivity of of the Mg-doped Iron Oxide.

In a photovoltaic cell, a low resistivity of the working electrode is of crucial importance. High resistivities may be the reason why earlier studies on Mg-doped iron oxide gave no measurable photocurrents.[7] By sintering samples of iron oxide with Mg/(Mg+Fe) = 5 atom percent at temperatures of 1425-1480°C and rapidly quenching them in water, dark resistivities in the range of 10^1-10^2 Ωcm were obtained. When cooling from the sintering temperature was in air and at a much slower rate, much higher sample resistivities of the order

of 10^3–10^5 Ωcm were obtained (see Table 1). The same table also shows that sintering the pellets at temperatures of 1350°C or lower resulted in higher resistivities and that the resistivity at a given sintering temperature increased with decreasing doping level. Photocurrents of 5 percent Mg-doped samples sintered at three temperatures are shown in Fig. 3. A marked influence of sintering temperatures on photocurrent is observed with the photoactivity increasing in the order of 1480°C < 1350°C < 1425°C.

3.2 The Effect of Oxygen Purging of the Electrolyte Solution on the Photocurrent.

It was observed that purging the electrolyte with oxygen gas increases the photocurrents (and dark currents) of the p-type iron oxide samples. The effect of oxygen purging for 5 minutes is seen in Fig. 4 for the same Mg-doped iron oxide discs as shown in Fig. 3. Before oxygen purging there is a wide variation in the photocurrents of samples sintered at the three different temperatures of 1350°C, 1425°C, and 1480°C. After oxygen purging the photocurrents are higher in magnitude and the photoactivity of all three samples appears to be very similar. Although the photocurrent of the 1350°C sintered sample after oxygen purging is slightly lower than the photocurrents of the samples sintered at 1425°C and 1480°C, it should be noted that the resistivities of the 1425°C and 1480°C sintered samples were the same (50 Ωcm) within the experimental accuracy, while that of the 1350°C sintered sample was higher (5000 Ωcm).

3.3 Photocurrent Response to Variations in Mg Dopant Levels

Four oxides were prepared and studied under identical conditions except that the atomic percent of magnesium (Mg/(Mg+Fe)) was altered between 1, 5, 10 and 20 percent. Photocurrents measured in an 0.01N NaOH electrolyte solution are shown in Fig. 5. The samples doped with 5 and 10 percent Mg have an onset potential of 950 ± 50 mV vs. RHE and exhibit photocurrents which increase monotomically with a more cathodic applied potential. The 20 percent doped oxide has an onset potential approximately 125 mV more negative than for samples with 5 and 10 percent doping levels but the photocurrent rises steeply so that 5, 10, and 20 percent doping levels differ only slightly once very cathodic potentials are reached (100-200 mV vs. RHE). The photocurrents when only 1 percent magnesium doping was used were quite low. A corresponding study carried out in a 0.1 M Na_2SO_4 solution yielded qualitatively identical results although the magnitudes of the current densities are somewhat higher.

3.4 pH Dependence of the Photocurrents.

Figure 7 depicts the results of measurements taken from a single p-type iron oxide sample in electrolytic solutions of 1N, 10^{-2} N and 10^{-4} N NaOH. The largest photocurrents were obtained in the 10^{-2} N solution with slightly lower values in the 1N solution. The photoactivity in 10^{-4} N NaOH was low and relatively constant even when extensively polarized.

3.5 Stability of the Photocurrents of the Mg-doped Iron Oxide Samples.

During prolonged polarization of the order of 10 hours, the photocurrents of Mg-doped samples showed no measurable alteration.

Visual inspection of the iron oxide cathodes after the electrochemical measurements in the aqueous solutions of different pH in the range of 6 to 14 showed no signs of corrosion. In fact, the photocurrents of a 5 atom percent Mg-doped sample polarized at 600 mV (RHE) in the 0.01 N NaOH solution increased over an 8 hour period by 50 percent and in the 0.1 M Na_2SO_4 solution by 30 percent during the same time span.[6]

DISCUSSION

DC conductivity and Seebeck voltage measurements of pure α-Fe_2O_3 have shown that above 1000°C the ferric oxide equilibrates with the surrounding oxygen containing atmosphere.[8] From the increase in oxygen deficiency with increasing temperature[9] a corresponding increase in conductivity has been observed.[8] These earlier findings are in qualitative agreement with our study which shows an increase in conductivity with sintering temperature (Table 1). The importance of rapid quenching from the sintering temperature to obtain high conductivity samples can be explained by the tendency of ferric oxides to adsorb oxygen at grain boundaries below 450°C resulting in a decrease in conductivity.[10] This was illustrated in our study by exposing samples containing 5 atom percent Mg and which had been rapidly quenched from 1480°C to a subsequent anneal for 2 hours in flowing oxygen at 500°C and 800°C, respectively. Slow cooling from these temperatures resulted in resistivities of around 5×10^4 Ωcm and $>10^6$ Ωcm, respectively, as opposed to 50 cm after rapid quenching from 1480°C.

Because of its high oxygen vacancy concentration obtained at higher (>1000°C) temperatures ferric oxide has been classified as an n-type oxide semiconductor.[8] The undoped ferric oxide shows solely n-type behaviour in photoelectrochemical measurements despite being produced by a great variety of sample preparation techniques.[11-14] When introducing magnesium into the ferric oxide lattice, each Mg^{2+} ion contributes one positive carrier.[15] The Mg-doped iron oxide samples

exhibit p-type behaviour in the whole investigated Mg-concentration region of 1-20 atom percent. We find that the conductivities of the Mg-doped samples increase with Mg-dopant concentration (Table 1).

Sintering at different temperatures results in photocurrents which are higher in samples sintered at 1350°C and 1425°C than at 1480°C (Fig. 3). The oxygen deficiency at elevated temperatures may result in the formation of a surface region containing Fe_3O_4 or Mg-doped Fe_3O_4 (undetectable by x-ray analysis), with amounts that increase with sintering temperature. It has been suggested[16] that the presence of Fe_3O_4 in the surface layer decreases the photoactivity because of recombination of holes and mobile electrons in the highly conductive surface region. The presence of an oxygen deficient, Fe_3O_4 containing surface layer could then also explain the loss in photoactivity in our samples, especially at the highest sintering temperature.

Attempts to reduce the surface oxygen deficiency by preoxidizing the samples were made in two ways; a) oxygen purging of the solution while the sample was kept polarized under potentiostatic conditions, or by b) annealing the samples at 500°C or 800°C in flowing oxygen gas. As seen in Fig. 4, oxygen purging for 5 minutes rsulted in a significant increase in photoactivity which was most pronounced for the Mg-doped samples sintered at 1480°C. ESCA measurements of a Mg-doped iron oxide sample were taken before and after oxygen purging. The spectra (Figure 2) show a substantial increase in oxygen content following the oxygen treatment. Before oxygen purging, the O(1s)

peaks for both the Fe_2O_3 lattice (529.2 eV) and the peak for MgO and adsorbed oxygen (532.0 eV) are present. After the oxygen treatment only the higher binding energy peak is visible indicating the presence of a significant amount of adsorbed oxygen and hydroxyl species. This change in the surface composition of the iron oxide samples greatly improves their photoactivity (see Figures 3 and 4).

Grain boundaries and weakly or partially bonded surface atoms are known to provide surface states with energies between the valence and conduction band edges.[20] We believe that as the oxygen and hydroxyl ions strongly chemisorb on the surface a sufficient amount of free energy is released to shift these surface or grain boundary states outside of the bandgap region. This displacement would result in increased free electron lifetimes and reduced recombination rates of photoelectrons produced, which could explain the increased photoactivity of the oxygen treated samples. It is interesting to note that after oxygen purging, all three samples show similar photoactivities. This indicates that an equilibrated carrier concentration state is reached during oxygen purging which is different from the carrier concentration states obtained upon rapid quenching from different sintering temperatures.

Annealing the samples at 500°C or 800°C in flowing oxygen gas had no beneficial effect on photoactivity. As discussed earlier the reason is a marked increase in resistivity after this oxidation pre-treatment caused by the oxidation of grain boundaries of the ferric oxide matrix.

The effect of different Mg-doping levels is illustrated in Fig. 5 for 0.01 N NaOH and in Fig. 6 for 0.1M Na_2SO_4. In both solutions

the higher doping levels (10-20 atom percent) result in higher p-type photocurrents at more cathodic applied potentials, presumably as a result of lower resistivities at higher Mg-dopings. The onset potential for p-type photocurrent production, on the other hand, is higher (more anodic), the lower the Mg-doping levels are (see Table 2). This behaviour is qualitatively explained by the variation of the width of the space charge region which decreases with increasing doping level. Near the onset potential the space charge region approaches near flat-band conditions. From this it follows that the space charge width rather than the sample resistivity seems to be of critical importance for preventing electron hole recombination near flat-band conditions. Higher polarizations result in stronger band bending and the sample resistivity rather than the space charge width seems to have the strongest influence on the photocurrents obtained.

While n-type iron oxide shows a monotonic increase in photoactivity with the pH of the NaOH solutions[16] the pH dependence of the photoactivity for p-type iron oxide is different. As illustrated in Fig. 7 the photocurrent for the same Mg-doped sample was highest in 0.01 N NaOH and significantly lower in less basic and in more basic NaOH solutions. Assuming simple H^+/OH^- equilibria at the iron oxide surface the pH of the solution should have no effect on band bending or other thermodynamic criteria required for efficient photoelectrolysis of water. This has been verified on a number of oxide photoanodes.[17] The strong pH dependence on the photoactivity of n-type $SrTiO_3$ has been suggested to be due to the involvement of hydroxide ions in a rate-limiting step, such as the formation of

surface hydroxyl groups, which act as hole acceptors and thereby decrease the probability of electron-hole recombination.[18] Similar arguments on p-type photocathodes would imply that a larger surface concentration of hydrogen ions, acting as electronacceptors, could also decrease the probability of electron-hole recombination. The reason why a peak in photoactivity is obtained around 0.01 N NaOH is, however, not clear and is the subject of further investigations.

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Table 1. Sample Characterization of p-type Mg-doped Iron Oxides.

Sample	Mg/Mg+Fe Atom	Sintering Temperature (°C)	Resistivity ( )
Mg/(Mg+Fe) = 1 atom	≤ 1	1350	$10^6 - \infty$
5		1350	$10^3 - 10^4$
10	6-8	1350	$10^3 - 10^4$
20		1350	$10 - 10^2$
5		1350	$10^3 - 10^4$
5		1425	$10^2 - 10^3$
5		1480	$10 - 10^2$

Table 2. Onset Potentials of p-type Mg-doped Iron Oxides vs. RHE (±50 mV)

Solution		0.1N NaOH			0.1M Na_2SO_4
Sintering Temperature		1350°C	1425°C	1480°C	1350°C
Mg/(Mg+Fe) =	1 atom	900 mV			900 mV
	5 atom	950 mV	900 mV	700 mV	850 mV
	10 atom	990 mV			850 mV
	20 atom	825 mV			650 mV

FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Scanning electron microscopy photographs of sintered and water quenched p-type iron oxide with Mg/(Mg+Fe) = 5 atom percent. Sintering temperatures 1350°C (left) and 1480°C (right).

Figure 2. X-ray photoelectron spectra of Mg-doped iron oxide before (left) and after (right) oxygen purging.

Figure 3. Photocurrent density as a function of electrode potential in 0.01 N NaOH for various sintering temperatures. Mg/(Mg+Fe) = 5 atom percent.

Figure 4. Photocurrent density as a function of electrode potential for various sintering temperatures and after oxygen purging the 0.01 N NaOH solution for 5 minutes. Mg/(Mg+Fe) = 5 atom percent.

Figure 5. Photocurrent density as a function of electrode potential for various Mg-doped iron oxides in 0.01 N NaOH.

Figure 6. Photocurrent density as a function of electrode potential for various Mg-doped iron oxides in 0.1 M Na_2SO_4.

Figure 7. Photocurrent density as a function of electrode potential for various concentrations of NaOH solutions. Mg/(Mg+Fe) = 5 atom percent.

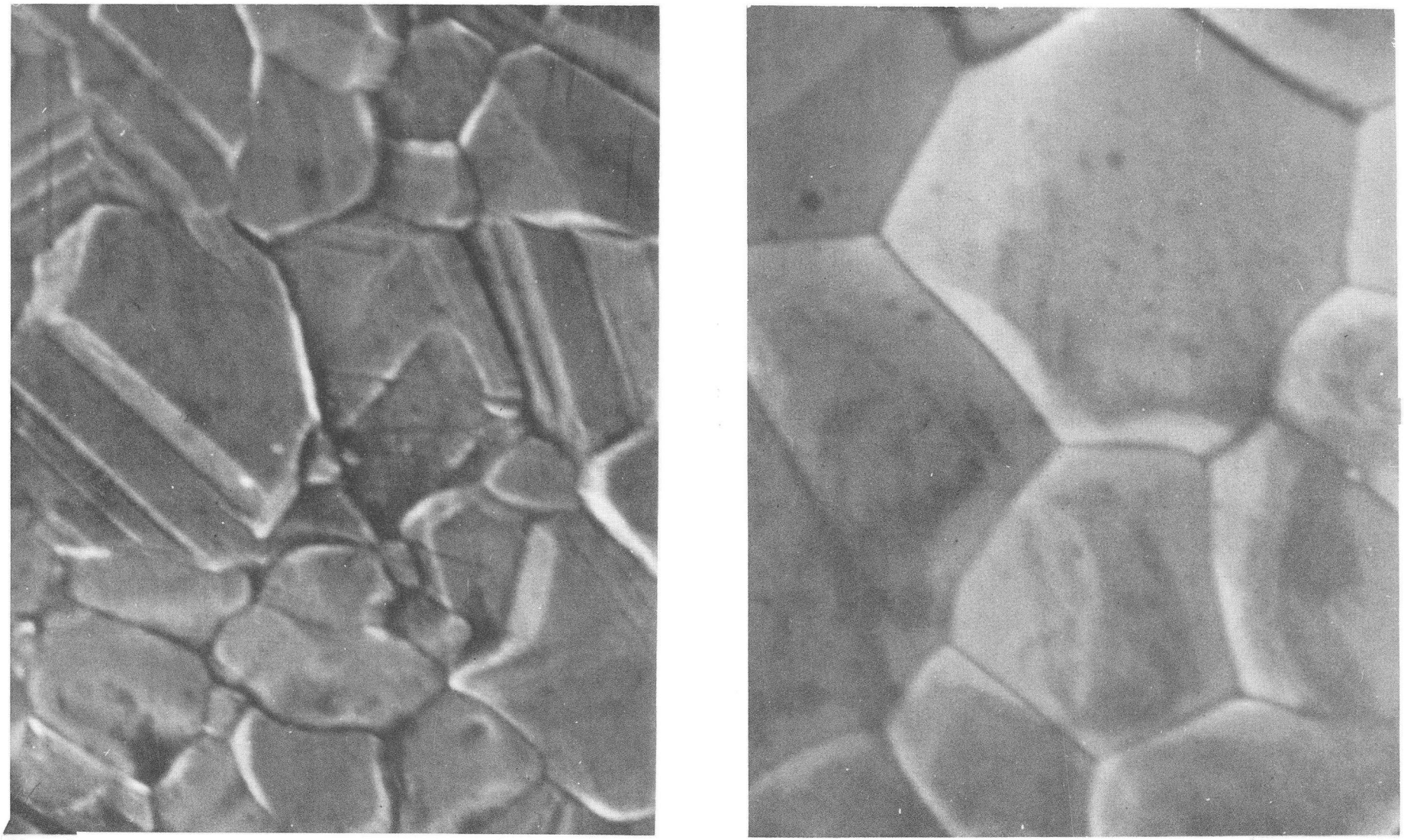

Fig. 1

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10 μm

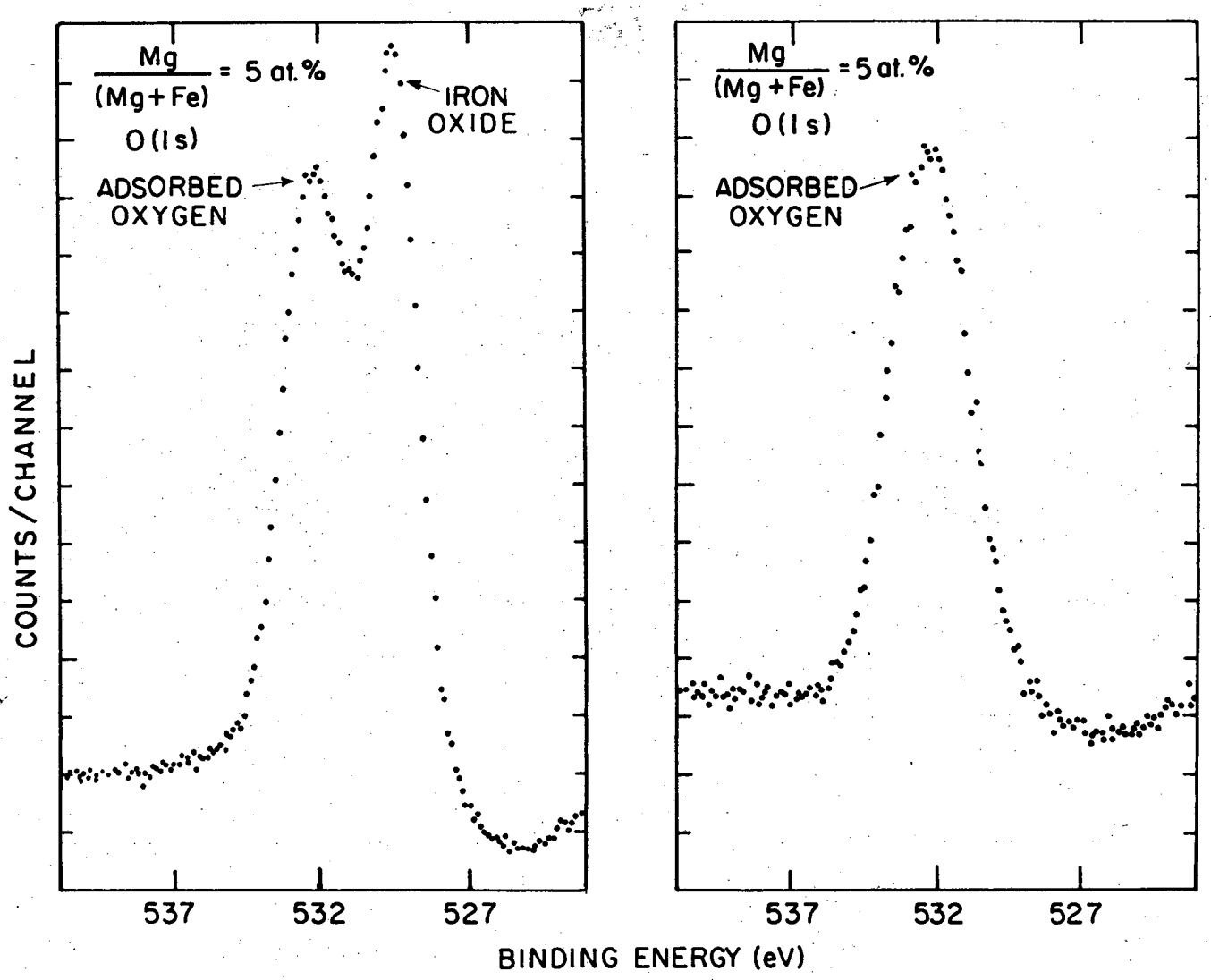

Fig. 2

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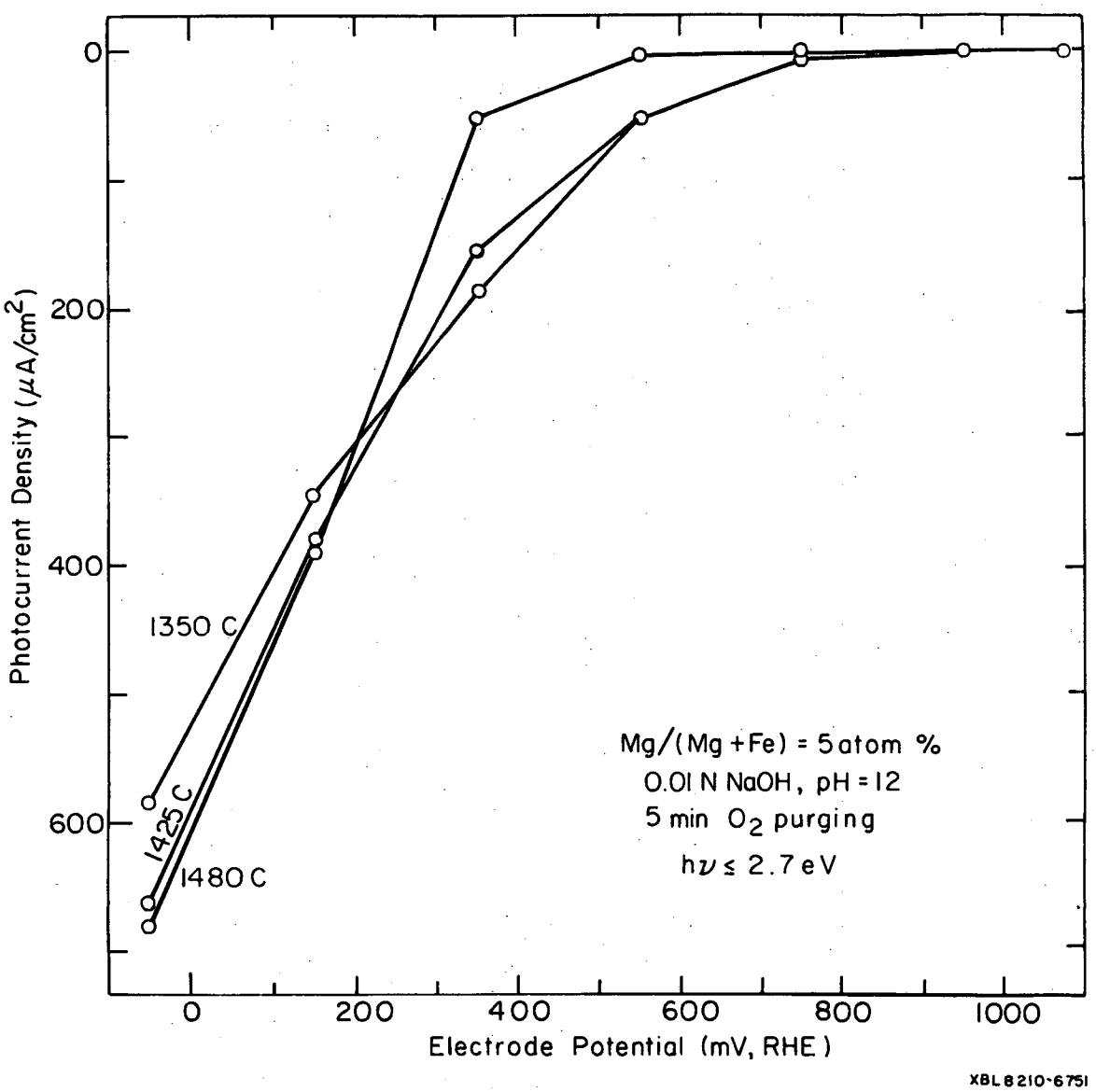
0
200
400
600
Photocurrent Density (μA/cm²)
1350 C
1425 C
1480 C
Mg/(Mg+Fe) = 5 atom %
0.01 N NaOH, pH = 12
5 min O2 purging
hν ≤ 2.7 eV
0
200
400
600
800
1000
Electrode Potential (mV, RHE)
XBL 8210-6751

Fig. 3

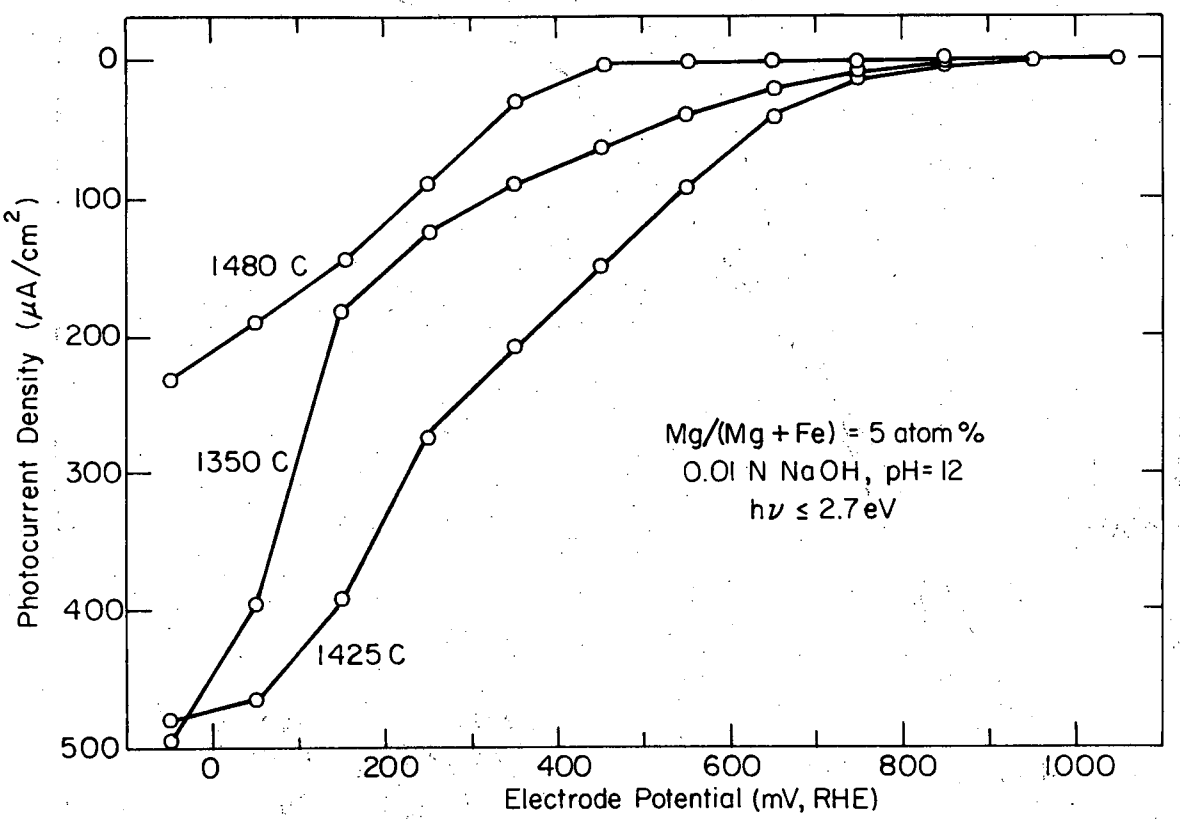

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Fig. 4

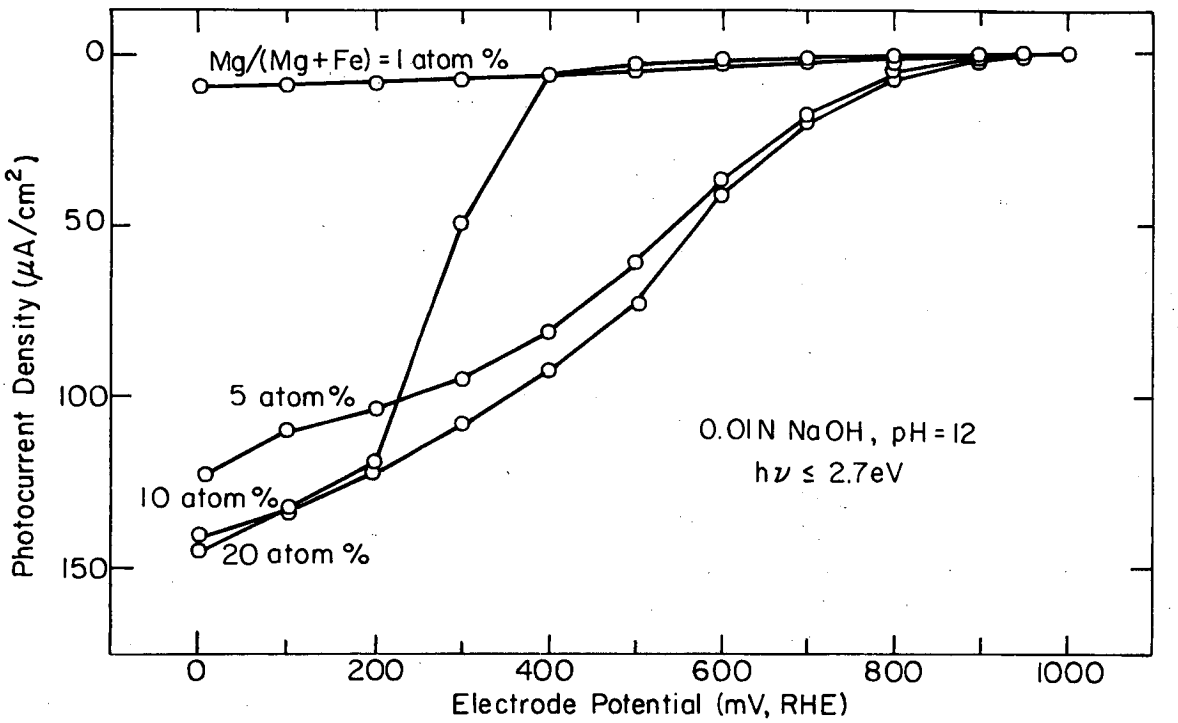

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Fig. 5

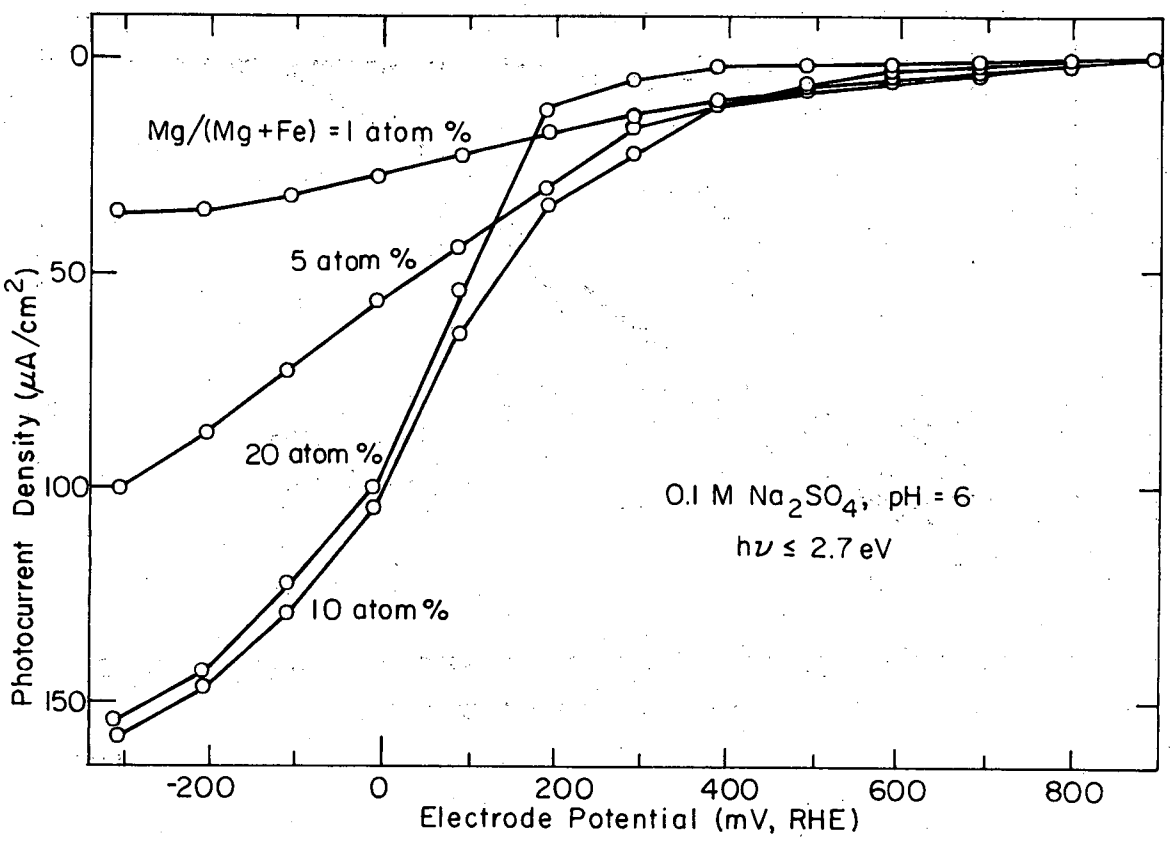

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Fig. 6

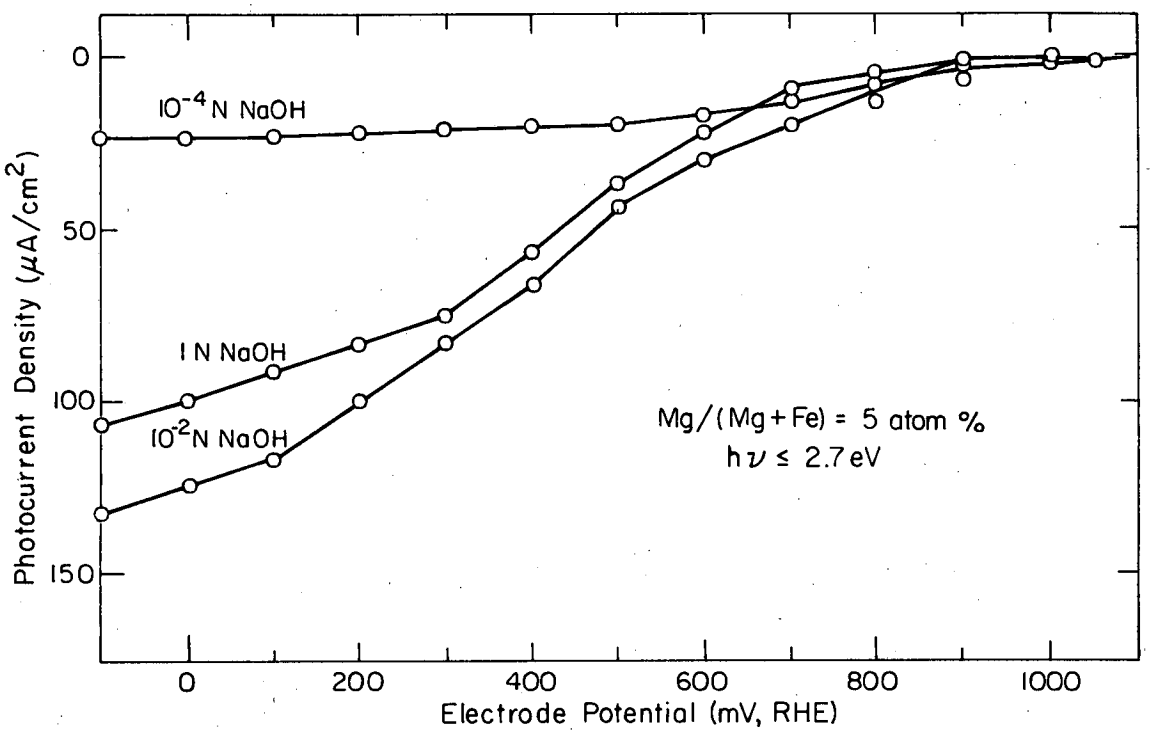

Fig. 7

XBL 8210-6749

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