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***Photocatalytic degradation of methyl green dye in aqueous solution over natural clay-supported ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub> catalysts***

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Graphical abstract

Schematic illustration of the formation of ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalysts.

**Highlights**

- ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst prepared using natural clay
- ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay shows higher activity than TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay in methyl green degradation
- ZnO has a promoting effect on photocatalytic activity
- Almost complete mineralization upon 30 min UVA irradiation

**Abstract**

A ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst was prepared using a natural Tunisian clay as support. Its activity was assayed in the photocatalytic degradation of methyl green in aqueous solutions, in the presence of UVA irradiation. The photocatalyst was synthesized using a metal organic chemical vapor deposition (MOCVD) with Ti (OPri)<sup>4</sup> deposited on the natural Na<sup>+</sup>–Clay, followed by a modified sol–gel synthesis method for introduction. The sample was then characterized by scanning electronic microscopy (SEM), High-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM), N<sub>2</sub> adsorption, X-ray diffraction (XRD) and titration for the determination of the zero point charge (pH<sub>ZPC</sub>). The activity tests showed that the photodegradation efficiency for ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay is higher than for the TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay catalyst, clearly pointing to a promoting effect of ZnO. The influence of operational parameters such as pH, catalyst dosage, initial dye concentration, UV irradiation intensity, as well as the influence of the presence of different oxidants was evaluated. Almost complete mineralization was obtained upon 30 min of light irradiation in the presence of the ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay catalyst.

**Keywords**

Methyl green, Water treatment, Tunisian Clay, TiO<sub>2</sub>, ZnO, Photodegradation, Heterogeneous photocatalyst

## 1. Introduction

Organic dyes represent an important source of environmental contamination, since they are toxic and mostly non-biodegradable [1]. Conventional treatment methods, such as biodegradation, adsorption flocculation–coagulation, electro-coagulation and conventional chemical oxidation, are not effective enough in achieving complete removal of these organic compounds from industrial wastewaters [2]. Therefore, different advanced oxidation processes, AOPs, have been developed in the last decades in order to boost the oxidation of recalcitrant pollutants, through the generation of highly reactive hydroxyl radicals ( $\bullet\text{OH}$ ) [3–6].

Among the different AOPs, heterogeneous semiconductor photocatalysis has been recently presented as a promising technology allowing the total mineralization of different refractory organic compounds, in the presence of either natural or artificial light. Titanium dioxide ( $\text{TiO}_2$ ) is one of the most commonly used materials for photocatalytic applications due to its high chemical stability, low cost, low toxicity, and excellent oxidation properties [4,5].  $\text{TiO}_2$  is a semiconductor with a bandgap energy range of 3–3.2 eV, depending on its crystalline structure (rutile or anatase) [4,5].  $\text{TiO}_2$  fine powders such as DEGUSSA P25 have been commercially available for several years. Nevertheless, the photocatalyst must still be removed from the treated suspension through an additional separation step that represents an important drawback towards the practical application of these processes [4]. In order to avoid this separation step, the photocatalytically active phase (e.g.  $\text{TiO}_2$ ) can be immobilized on the surface of a structured support. Different materials such as silica [7], perlite [8], fly ash [9], zeolites [10] activated carbons [11,12] and clays [13–16] have been used with this purpose. Among them, clays and clay-based materials represent a highly promising alternative due to their high mechanical and chemical stability, high surface area and high adsorption capacity

[13–15]. Moreover clays are environmental friendly, low-cost and offer an interesting route for the revalorization of local resources.

Doping or surface modification by transition metals is considered one of the most efficient methods in reducing electron–hole recombination [6, 17–24]. The metal on the surface of the photocatalyst can act as a trap site for the photo-generated electrons, which can prevent electron–hole recombination, and thereby improve photocatalytic activity. For instance, Zhang and co-workers prepared a novel  $\text{SnO}_2\text{--TiO}_2\text{--Clay}$  synthesized by attachment of  $\text{SnO}_2\text{--TiO}_2$  oxides onto the surface of the clay (palygorskite, attapulgite) by in situ sol–gel technique. Compared with origin clay and pure  $\text{TiO}_2$ , these materials exhibited considerably higher photocatalytic activity in the photodecomposition of phenol and methyl orange in water solution [21,22]. In a subsequent work [24], Zhang et al. reported the preparation of a magnetically recoverable  $\text{TiO}_2\text{--Fe}_x\text{O}_y$  composite loaded onto the surface of attapulgite. This material showed significant photocatalytic activity in the degradation of methyl orange (MO) under visible light irradiation. Enhanced activity was attributed to the modification of the electronic energy band structure of  $\text{TiO}_2$  in the presence of nearby  $\text{Fe}_x\text{O}_y$ , resulting in extended photocatalytic absorbance in the visible light region.  $\text{ZnO}$  can be as well used as a promoter of photocatalytic activity. In fact, bulk systems containing  $\text{ZnO}$  have been deeply studied in the last decade [25–29]. However, only few and recent works focus on the preparation of  $\text{TiO}_2\text{--ZnO}$  supported heterogeneous catalyst for the photocatalytic degradation of organic pollutants in wastewaters [30–32]. Among them,  $\text{TiO}_2\text{--ZnO/BC}$  composites exhibited a high photocatalytic activity and could remove humic acids from water efficiently under visible light irradiation [30]. To date, the use of  $\text{ZnO}$ -promoted  $\text{TiO}_2$  systems supported on clays has been never considered.

In the present study, a natural Tunisian clay was used as the matrix for the immobilization of  $\text{TiO}_2$  and  $\text{ZnO}$ . These compounds were loaded on the clay surface by

means of in-situ metal organic chemical vapor deposition (MOCVD) and via sol-gel synthesis, respectively. The photocatalytic activity of this clay-supported ZnO-promoted TiO<sub>2</sub> was assayed in the oxidation of methyl green (MG) dicationic dye. The influence of key operational parameters, such as pH, catalyst dosage, initial dye concentration, oxidant type (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, K<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>8</sub>, Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>), has been as well considered.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Raw materials and reagents

A natural clay from the Jebel Tejera-Esghira deposits located in the Southeast of Tunisia (Medenine) was used in this study. This natural clay was first purified by dispersion in water, decantation and extraction of the fraction with a particle size smaller than 2 µm, and subsequently modified through sodium ion-exchange, as carefully described in previous works [14, 33]. Titanium (IV)-isopropoxide, (Ti(OPr<sup>i</sup>)<sub>4</sub>, TTIP, 97 %), zinc acetate dehydrate (Zn(CH<sub>3</sub>COO)<sub>2</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O ≥98%) and Methyl Green dye (MG, cationic, C.I. 42000, chemical formula C<sub>23</sub>H<sub>25</sub>N<sub>2</sub>Cl, FW = 364.91 g/mol) were used without further purification.

### 2.2. Preparation of the photocatalysts

The TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst was prepared following a metal organic chemical vapor deposition method (MOCVD), in a similar way to the procedure reported by Omri et al. [11]. The desired amount (4.0 g) of the ion-exchanged Na<sup>+</sup> - Clay (particle size < 63 nm) was introduced in a quartz reactor, and dehydrated under a stream of dry nitrogen at 400°C for 3 h. Then, the temperature of the reactor was raised to 600 °C. Once the temperature was stable, the vapor deposition of TiO<sub>2</sub> was initiated through the evaporation of TTIP contained in a flask at 100°C, under a nitrogen flow of 200 mL/min for 5 h. The gas line was heated to prevent TTIP condensation. At the end of the deposition, the reactor was purged with nitrogen for about 15 min.

ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay was synthesized via an optimized sol–gel route [34]. 4.38 g of dehydrated zinc acetate were dissolved in 100 ml of ethanol and stirred in a water bath at 50°C. 2.98 g of tri-ethanol amine were subsequently added to the solution while stirring was continued for 1 h. The mixture was then placed under vibration and heated for 0.5 h at 40°C, resulting in a colorless and transparent sol. At this instant, 3 g of TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay were added to this sol. The suspension was further agitated under vibration for another 0.5 h, filtered, dried and calcined for 4 h at 300°C.

### **2.3. Characterization of the photocatalysts**

In order to determine the structure and morphology of ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay, TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay and the original clay were examined by scanning electronic microscopy (SEM, Hitachi SU-70) and high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM, JEOL JEM 2011 equipped with LaB6 filament). The HRTEM images were collected with a 4008 × 2672 pixel CCD camera (Gatan Orius SC1000) coupled with the DIGITAL MICROGRAPH software. Coupled chemical analyses were obtained by an EDX microanalyzer (PGT IMIX PC). Nitrogen adsorption–desorption isotherms for the different materials were acquired at -196 °C on a Micromeritics ASAP 2010, after out gassing (10<sup>-5</sup> Pa) for 24 h at ambient temperature. Surface areas were calculated using the BET equation, whereas mean pore size, pore size distribution and pore volume were estimated using the BJH method. X-ray diffraction patterns (XRD) were acquired in a Philips–PW 1710 diffractometer (CuK $\alpha$ , 40 kV/40 mA, scanning rate 2 degree/min). Crystal sizes were calculated through X-ray line broadening analysis using Scherrer equation. The relative content of anatase and rutile, was estimated using Spurr–Myers equation [11]. The zero point charge (pH<sub>ZPC</sub>) of the prepared materials was determined following the method described by Bouzid et al. [35].

#### 2.4. Photocatalytic tests

The photocatalytic experiments were carried out in a static quartz reactor (500 mL), equipped with a cold finger to avoid thermal reactions. A UV-A lamp ( $\lambda_{\text{max}} = 365\text{nm}$ , Black-Ray B 100 W UV-lamp, V-100AP series) was placed next to the reactor, at 30 cm of the liquid surface. In each experiment, 1g of photocatalyst was added into 250 mL of MG solution (75 mg/L, pH = 5.2). Before illumination, the dispersion was magnetically stirred for 20 min (in the dark), in order to ensure adsorption equilibrium between the photocatalyst surface and the organic dye.

The influence of the pH of the initial solution was evaluated at pHs from 2.5 to 10 (adjusted using HCl (0.1 M) and NaOH (0.1 M)), while MG concentration was fixed at 75 mg/L, for 1 g/L of ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst. Catalyst dosage was varied from 0.1 to 2 g/L, for 75 mg/L of MG solution, at pH=6.32. The influence of the MG dye concentration was also evaluated by varying its concentration from 25 mg/L to 150 mg/L, at a fixed pH of 6.32, in the presence of 0.8 g of ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst. 8 mL of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, K<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>8</sub> or Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> (prepared from 250 mg/L of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (35%), K<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>8</sub> (98%) or Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> (98%)) were added into the reaction solution just before switching on the light, with the aim of assaying the influence of the presence of an oxidizing agent, or, in the case of Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> as a way to buffer the solution pH into basic values.

The stability of the ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst was assayed by means of performing five consecutive experiments by using fresh 75 mg/L MG solutions, at pH 6.32 and 0.8 g/L catalyst. Between each experiment, the photocatalyst was removed by filtration, carefully washed with distilled, and dried at 110 °C for 12 h.

Solution aliquots were periodically withdrawn from the reaction vessel with the aid of a syringe and at predetermined intervals. Upon filtration using a 0.45  $\mu\text{m}$  membrane, the dye



concentration was determined in a Shimadzu 160A UV–visible spectrophotometer, at the maximal adsorption wavelength of MG,  $\lambda_{\text{max}}=632$  nm.

The decolorization efficiency was calculated as follows (1):

$$R(\%) = \left( 1 - \left( \frac{A_t}{A_0} \right) \right) \times 100 \quad (1)$$

where,  $A_0$  represents the initial absorbance of the MG solution, and  $A_t$  its absorbance after  $t$  minutes of irradiation/reaction.

Chemical oxygen demand (COD) was determined using the reactor digestion method based on the method of acidic oxidation by bichromate.

### 3.1. Physico-chemical characterization

The SEM micrographs acquired for the raw and the modified clays are presented in Fig. 1. Upon  $\text{TiO}_2$  addition, the surface morphology of the  $\text{Na}^+$ -exchanged clay changes significantly (Fig. 1 a vs. Fig. 1 b). The unloaded clay presents large particle aggregates with smooth surfaces whereas after MOCVD of Ti isopropoxide, an homogeneous distribution of  $\text{TiO}_2$  grains completely covers the surface of the original clay. The  $\text{ZnO-TiO}_2/\text{Clay}$  catalyst, Fig 1. c, shows the spongelike surface with ZnO particles covering the  $\text{TiO}_2$  structures. TEM images further confirm these changes in the morphology of the different materials (Fig. 2). ZnO and  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanocomposites are observed on to the surface of the clay, with an average particle size was about 10 nm.

The X-ray diffraction patterns for  $\text{Na}^+$ -Clay,  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{Clay}$  and  $\text{ZnO-TiO}_2/\text{Clay}$  are shown in Fig. 3. The typical diffraction peaks of quartz, kaolinite and illite are evidenced in the spectrum acquired for the clay, pointing to their presence as the main crystalline phases [14, 36]. The XRD patterns of  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{Clay}$  catalyst show the appearance of peaks at  $2\theta$  angles of  $25.3^\circ$ ,  $37.9^\circ$ ,  $48.4^\circ$ ,  $55.3^\circ$  and  $62.7^\circ$  corresponding to the (101), (103), (200), (105) and (213)

crystalline planes of its anatase form [12, 14, 16, 24] (JCPDS Card No. 21-1272). Upon ZnO loading, new peaks are observed pointing to the presence of a ZnO zincite phase in the ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay material ( $2\theta = 31.8, 34.4, 36.2, 47.5, 56.6, 62.9$  and  $67.9^\circ$  corresponding to (100), (002), (101), (102), (110), (103) and (112) reflections, JCPDS Card No. 001-1136. The diffraction peaks at  $25.3^\circ, 37.9^\circ, 48.376^\circ, 55.3^\circ$  and  $62.7^\circ$  correspond to the (101), (103), (200), (105) and (213) planes of anatase [37, 38], JCPDS Card No. 21-1272. Other peaks mainly at  $27.2^\circ$  can be assigned to (101) diffraction planes of rutile, JCPDS No. 21-1272 [39].

The relative content of anatase and rutile was estimated using Spurr–Myers equation [40]:

$$A (\%) = \frac{I_A}{I_A + 1.265 \times I_R} \times 100 \quad (2)$$

Where A (%) is the relative content of anatase,  $I_A$  and  $I_R$  are the intensities of the anatase (101) peak at  $2\theta = 25.3^\circ$  and the rutile (101) peak at  $2\theta = 27.2^\circ$ . The anatase content of ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay around 97% points to the predominant presence of this phase in the prepared photocatalyst. Anatase content further increases upon the addition of ZnO.

The crystal size of TiO<sub>2</sub> was calculated from the XRD profiles using the Debye–Scherrer equation. The average sizes of TiO<sub>2</sub> crystallite in the catalyst are listed in Table 1. Crystal sizes around 17 nm were found to be independent of the presence of ZnO in the photocatalyst composition.

Table 1 contains as well the values of surface area, pore volume and mean pore diameter calculated from the corresponding nitrogen adsorption isotherms acquired for each material. The specific surface area increases substantially as a consequence of TiO<sub>2</sub> loading, i.e. from 37 m<sup>2</sup>/g in the Na<sup>+</sup>–Clay to 105 m<sup>2</sup>/g in the ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay. This increase in surface area is due to the creation of a porous TiO<sub>2</sub> phase on the clay surface. Pore volume slightly decreases upon ZnO incorporation to the catalyst, pointing to a slight pore blockage of the

TiO<sub>2</sub> surface. Figure 4 contains the N<sub>2</sub> adsorption isotherms as well as the BJH pore size distributions calculated for the different materials.

Figure 5 shows evolution of  $\Delta\text{pH}$ , i.e., ( $\text{pH}_0 - \text{pH}_f$ ) as a function of pH during  $\text{pH}_{\text{ZPC}}$  measurements. The zero point charge for the TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay and ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay were found to be 7.4 and 6.4, respectively.

### ***3.2. Catalytic activity in the decolorization of Methyl Green solutions***

The photocatalytic activity in the decolorization of MG for the different materials is shown in Figure 6. Under dark reaction conditions, about 29 %; 25 % and 18% decolorization was measured respectively for ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay, TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay and the parent Na<sup>+</sup>–clay, from a 100 mg/L MG solution after 20 min irradiation. This can be simply assigned to the adsorption of the dye organic molecule on the materials' surface, since it is in complete agreement with the increase of surface area upon TiO<sub>2</sub> and ZnO loading. Photolysis of MG under UV irradiation in absence of any photocatalyst results in negligible MG degradation for 60 min. In the presence of UV light and either ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay, TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay or the Na<sup>+</sup>–clay, 98.7%, 87.2% and 32.6% decolorization were respectively measured 60 minutes irradiation. The enhanced photocatalytic activity of ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay can be attributed to the increased presence of anatase in its composition [41], together with the positive influence of ZnO acting as a promoter of the photocatalytic activity, by means of extending the adsorption of the incident radiation [29, 30]. The preparation procedure results in separated TiO<sub>2</sub> and ZnO phases that enhance the adsorption of the incident irradiation and avoiding the combination of electron-hole pairs through a one-way charge transfer mechanism [29].

### ***3.3. Influence of operational parameters***

The photocatalytic activity is strongly affected by the surface charge properties of the material, the charge of the molecule, the adsorption of the organic molecule on the photocatalyst surface and on the concentration of hydroxyl radicals [30, 42-45]. All these properties are pH dependent. Therefore pH is an important operational parameter determining the efficiency of the photocatalytic removal of different pollutants in wastewaters. The effect of varying pH from 3 to 10 in the initial MG solution is shown in Fig. 7, for an initial MG concentration of 75 mg/L, over ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay (1g/L), and under UV irradiation. The decolorization efficiency of MG increases significantly, i.e. from 32.1% to almost 100%, upon an increase in solution pH from 2.8 to 6.32. Decolorization efficiency decreases with a further increase in pH, proving that the pH of the dye solution determines the adsorption of the organic compound on the surface of ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay and represents an important reaction step in the overall mechanism of dye oxidation [46]. Adsorption and thus dye degradation seem to be favored at pH around the zero point charge pH ( $\text{pH}_{\text{zpc}}$ ), i.e. 6.4 for the ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay is. At a pH lower than 6.4 the surface of ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst is positively charged, whereas at pH higher than 6.4 it becomes negatively charged. Since MG is a dicationic type dye, a pH higher than that corresponding to the zero point charge favors the adsorption of MG molecule on the catalyst surface which results in enhanced degradation of MG under neutral and basic conditions. However, a further increase in pH leads to an increase coulombic repulsion between the negative charged ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay surface and the OH<sup>–</sup> species involved in the photocatalytic oxidation mechanism [47], leading to decreased degradation efficiency.

Fig. 8 shows the influence of the catalyst dosage on the decolorization efficiency. When the amount of the catalyst is increased in the range 0.1– 0.8 g/L, the decolorization efficiency increases from 32% to almost 100% after 60 min of irradiation time. This is due to the increase in the catalyst concentration and thus of the amount of sites available for

absorption of photons and dye molecules. However, further increasing the catalyst dosage from 0.8 to 2.0 g/L resulting in a slight decrease in the decolorization efficiency. Excess of catalyst leading to substantial particle agglomeration may explain this fact, as previously described in the existing literature [16, 48]. Moreover, a more concentrated catalyst suspension may lead to decrease of its transparency resulting in less efficient radiation penetration.

In view of the practical application of the photocatalytic process in the presence of the ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay catalyst, the influence of dye concentration on the degradation efficiency must be analyzed [14, 49, 50]. Decolorization efficiency was then measured during the photocatalytic degradation of MG solutions at different concentrations from 25 to 150 mg/L. Results are presented in Fig. 9. As the concentration of MG in the initial solution increases, longer irradiation times are needed for attaining the same decolorization efficiency.

The data plotted in Fig. 9 were used for the calculation of the apparent kinetic constants for different reaction conditions. The rate of degradation of organic compounds in wastewaters can be described by a pseudo-first order Langmuir–Hinshelwood kinetic model:

$$r = -\frac{dC}{dt} = \frac{CKk_r}{1+KC} \quad (3)$$

Where  $r$  stands for the rate of degradation,  $K$  represents the equilibrium constant for the adsorption of MG on the catalyst surface, and  $k_r$  denotes the kinetic constant for the degradation reaction at maximum surface coverage.

On integrating Equation (3), we obtain the irradiation time,  $t$ , for attaining a concentration  $C_t$  of the pollutant:

$$t = \left( \frac{1}{Kk_r} \right) \ln\left(\frac{C_0}{C_t}\right) + \frac{C_0 - C_t}{k_r} \quad (4)$$

Where  $C_0$  represents the initial concentration of MG. Therefore at low  $C_0$ , the second term in Equation (4) becomes insignificant and hence can be neglected:

$$\ln\left(\frac{C_0}{C_t}\right) = k_r K t = k_{app} t \quad (5)$$

With  $k_{app}$  as the apparent rate constant for the photocatalytic degradation reaction.

The almost perfect linearity of the  $\ln(C_0/C_t)$  versus  $t$  plots for various initial MG concentrations, Fig. 10, proves the applicability of the Langmuir–Hinshelwood equation for the photocatalytic degradation of MG. The apparent rate constant,  $k_{app}$ , decreases as the initial concentration of MG increases. At too high MG concentrations, a greater amount of dye molecules adsorb on the catalyst surface blocking the photocatalytically active sites on the catalyst, thus reducing the absorption of photons, their interaction with the active sites and therefore inhibiting the photocatalytic degradation process. In addition, increasing MG concentration leads to a larger fraction of the UV irradiation that is absorbed by the dye molecules in the water solution, instead of being absorbed by the catalytically active sites [16, 47, 48].

Several works in the existing literature point to the addition of oxidants as an efficient way of improving the photodegradation of organic pollutants in waste waters [14, 47, 48]. The influence of the presence of different oxidizing agents such as hydrogen peroxide ( $H_2O_2$ ), and potassium peroxodisulfate ( $K_2S_2O_8$ ), together with sodium carbonate ( $Na_2CO_3$ ) as pH buffer, on the degradation of MG was studied at an initial pH of 6.32, on a 100 mg/L of dye solution and in the presence of 0.8 g.L<sup>-1</sup> of the ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay catalyst. Table 2 contains the decolorization efficiency measured after 60 min irradiation in the presence of the different oxidants. As expected, the addition of these compounds enhances the photodegradation of MG. This is due to the photo-activated formation of  $\bullet OH$ ,  $SO_4^{\bullet -}$  and  $CO_3^{\bullet -}/HCO_3^{\bullet}$  radicals during reaction that contribute to faster dye oxidation. Among the three oxidants assayed,

H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> was found to be the most efficient in enhancing the degradation of MG, followed by K<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>8</sub> and Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>. Note that the effect of Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> may be rather assigned to a basification of the reaction pH, or even to a catalytic effect in the presence of sodium ions [49].

### 3.4. Mineralization

UV-vis absorption spectra of the dye solution were acquired at different reaction times and are presented in Figure 11. The degradation experiment was performed at pH = 6.3, 75 mg/L dye concentration, 0.6 g/L of ZnO-TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst. The initial Methyl green (MG) solution UV-visible spectra presents four absorption peaks the prominent peak at 632 nm and other peaks at 420 nm, 315 nm and smaller peak at 256 nm. The peak at 632 nm decreases gradually by the addition of ZnO-TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay and disappears within 30 min. The decrease of the sample's absorbance intensity at its  $\lambda_{\max}=632\text{nm}$  is indicated by the photodegradation of the dye in the applied conditions. As a consequence the decrease of samples absorbance due to decrease of the dye concentration was recorded for measurement of photodegradation rate in all above-mentioned parameters. ~~Since there are no additional peaks appearing in the UV-vis spectra the dye is thus completely degraded.~~ The percentages of COD reduction measured are presented in Table 2. These values point to almost complete mineralization even in the absence of oxidant, i.e. upon 30 min irradiation, 100% decolorization is achieved corresponding to a percentage of COD reduction of 89.3%. Using H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> as oxidant leads to faster and more efficient mineralization than when using the two other chemical agents.

### 3.5. Stability of the ZnO-TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst

The stability of the ZnO-TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst was evaluated in five consecutive experiments by using fresh MG solutions at concentration of 75 mg/L, pH 6.3, and 0.8g/L

catalyst. Between each experiment, the photocatalyst was removed by filtration, then washed with distilled water several times, and dried at 110 °C for 12 h.

Degradation efficiency of the Methyl Green by ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst was still higher than 95% after being used in the three subsequent cycles. The photocatalytic degradation efficiency was 98.3% during the first 2 cycles (Fig. 12). The photocatalyst activity slightly dropped in runs 4 and 5, resulting in 97.2% and 95.81% degradation, respectively. The deactivation of the photocatalyst is likely related to some surface poisoning that may be induced by adsorbed intermediates. We could also note, after analyzing the solutions after runs, that no species coming from catalysts were detected. The experimental observation of Dutta and Ray [50] indicated that strongly adsorbed intermediates occupied the active sites on the catalyst surface and led to a slight loss of photocatalytic activity. As conclusion, this result further proves that such ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay catalysts possess an adequate stability, presenting only small decay in its degradation efficiency.

## Conclusions

ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub> was successfully supported on a ion exchanged Tunisian clay and used as a photocatalyst for the degradation of methyl green aqueous solutions.

The experimental results indicate that this ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay catalyst shows high photocatalytic activity, higher than the Na<sup>+</sup>–exchanged clay and TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay, pointing to a positive effect of the presence of ZnO in the catalytic composition, due to the suitable arrangement of their respective valence and conduction bands, favoring both electron and hole transfer and hindering their recombination. The photodegradation of MG was significantly influenced by the initial pH of the solution, the catalyst dosage and the initial dye concentration. The addition of oxidants modestly enhanced the degradation rate, since almost



complete mineralization remains possible in the single presence of the ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay catalyst upon only 30 minutes of irradiation. The Tunisian clay was thus found to be a suitable support for preparing well dispersed and highly active TiO<sub>2</sub> and ZnO phases, showing at the same time good chemical stability through catalyst use.

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### Figure Captions

Fig.1. SEM images for (a) Raw clay (b) TiO<sub>2</sub>–Clay and (c) ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay

Fig.2. TEM images and EDS spectra for (a) Raw clay (b) ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay

Fig.3. XRD patterns for the raw clay, TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay and ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay

Fig.4. N<sub>2</sub> adsorption isotherms and BJH pore size distribution calculated for the different materials

Fig.5. pH<sub>zpc</sub> for the TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay and ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay photocatalyst

Fig.6. Photocatalytic decolorization of MG solutions in absence and in the presence of the Na<sup>+</sup>-clay, the TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay and ZnO–TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay catalysts, [MG]<sub>0</sub> = 75 mg·L<sup>-1</sup>, [catalyst]<sub>0</sub> = 1 g·L<sup>-1</sup> pH = 6.32, T = 25°C

Fig.7. Influence of initial solution pH on the decolorization efficiency ([MG]<sub>0</sub> = 75 mg·L<sup>-1</sup>, [catalyst] = 1 g·L<sup>-1</sup>, T = 25°C)

Fig.8. Influence of catalyst dosage on the decolorization efficiency, [MG]<sub>0</sub> = 75 mg·L<sup>-1</sup>, pH = 6.32, T = 25°C,

Fig.9. Influence of dye concentration on decolorization efficiency, [catalyst] = 0.8 g·L<sup>-1</sup>, pH = 6.32, T = 25°C,

Fig.10. Pseudo-first order kinetics plots. Inset shows rate constants for the photocatalytic degradation of MG. [catalyst] = 0.8 g·L<sup>-1</sup>, pH = 6.32, T = 25°C.

Fig.11. Evolution of UV–vis spectra acquired at different stages of the photocatalytic treatment

Fig.12. Decolorization efficiency through five consecutive catalyst reuse cycles.



## Tables

Table 1 Textural and structural properties of the ion-exchanged and the TiO<sub>2</sub>-photocatalysts.

<i>Catalyst</i>	<i>S<sub>BET</sub></i> (m <sup>2</sup> /g)	<i>Pore</i> <i>volume</i> (cm <sup>3</sup> /g)	<i>Mean</i> <i>pore size</i> (nm)	<i>TiO<sub>2</sub> crystal</i> <i>size (nm)</i>	<i>Anatase</i> <i>content</i> (%)	<i>TiO<sub>2</sub></i> <i>content</i> (%)	<i>ZnO</i> <i>content</i> (%)
Na <sup>+</sup> -Clay	36.6	0.131	1.2	-	-	-	-
TiO <sub>2</sub> /Clay	113.1	0.255	3.5	16.9	94.2	17.8	-
ZnO- TiO <sub>2</sub> /Clay	105.1	0.196	3.6	16.8	97.1	16.7	11.0

Table 2. Influence of the presence of the different oxidants on degradation of MG in the presence of ZnO-TiO<sub>2</sub>/Clay under UV irradiation.

<i>Activity test</i>	<i>Time (min)</i>	<i>R (%)</i>	<i>% of COD reduction</i>
No oxidant	30	100	89.3
H <sub>2</sub> O <sub>2</sub>	17	100	98.9
K <sub>2</sub> S <sub>2</sub> O <sub>8</sub>	20	100	88.4
Na <sub>2</sub> CO <sub>3</sub>	36	100	75.6

Fig.1.

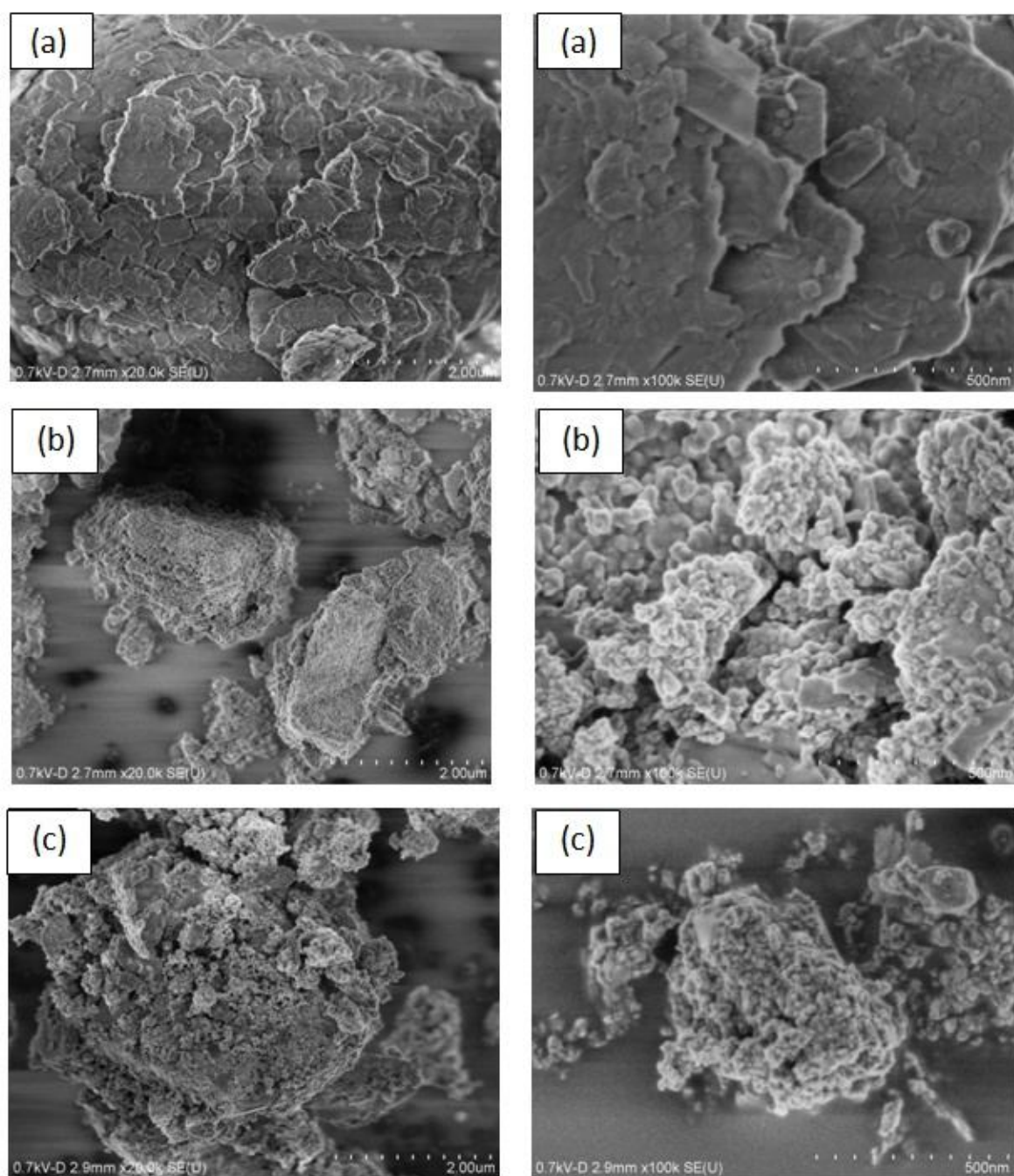


Fig.2.

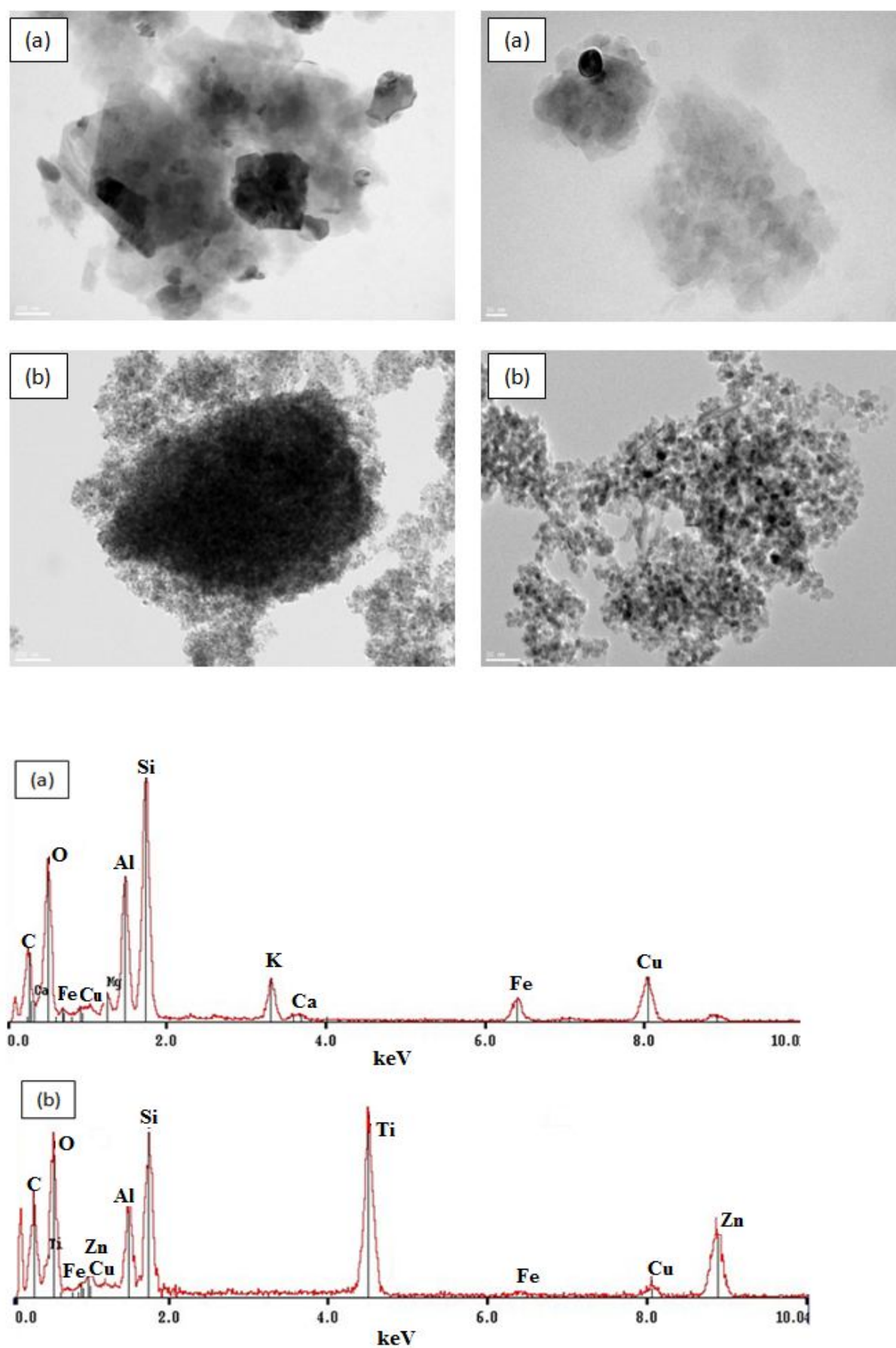


Fig. 3.

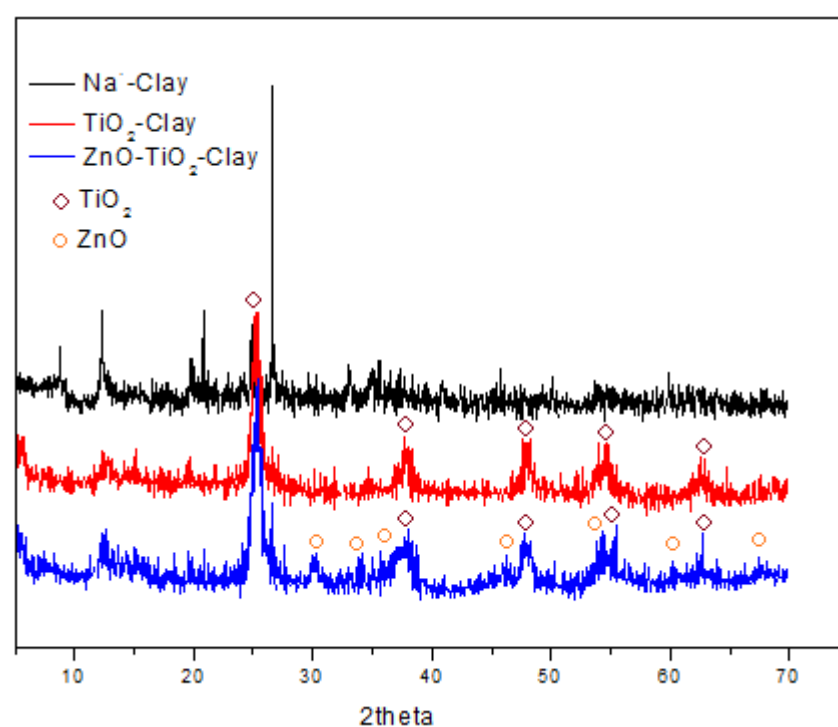


Fig.4.

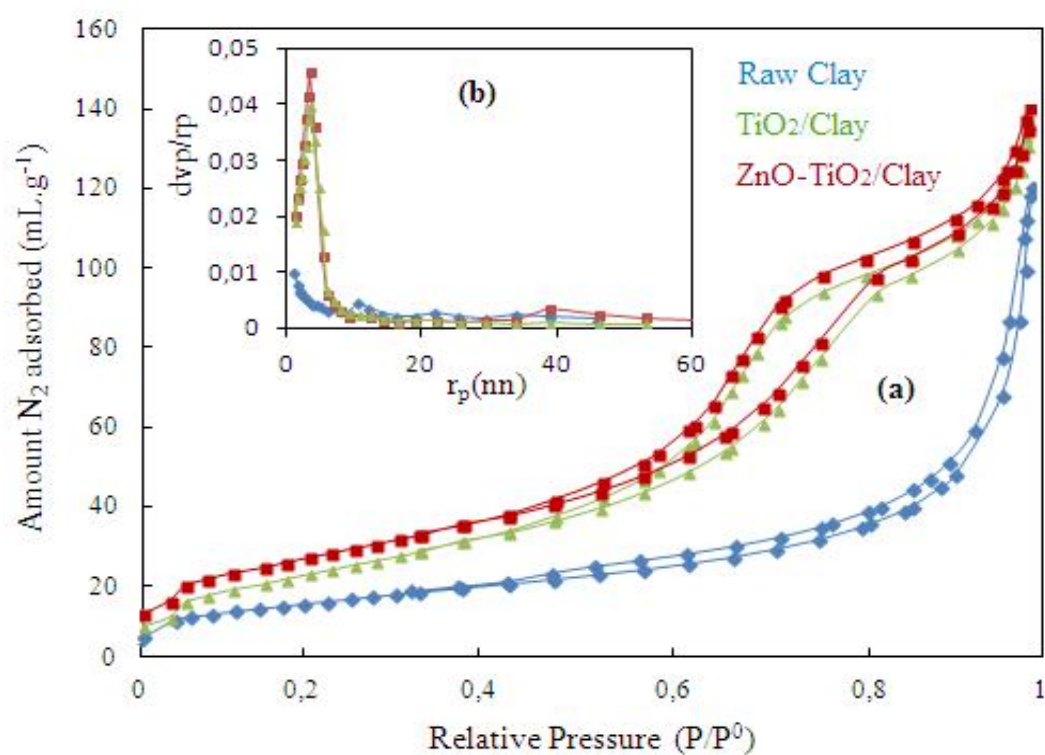


Fig.5.

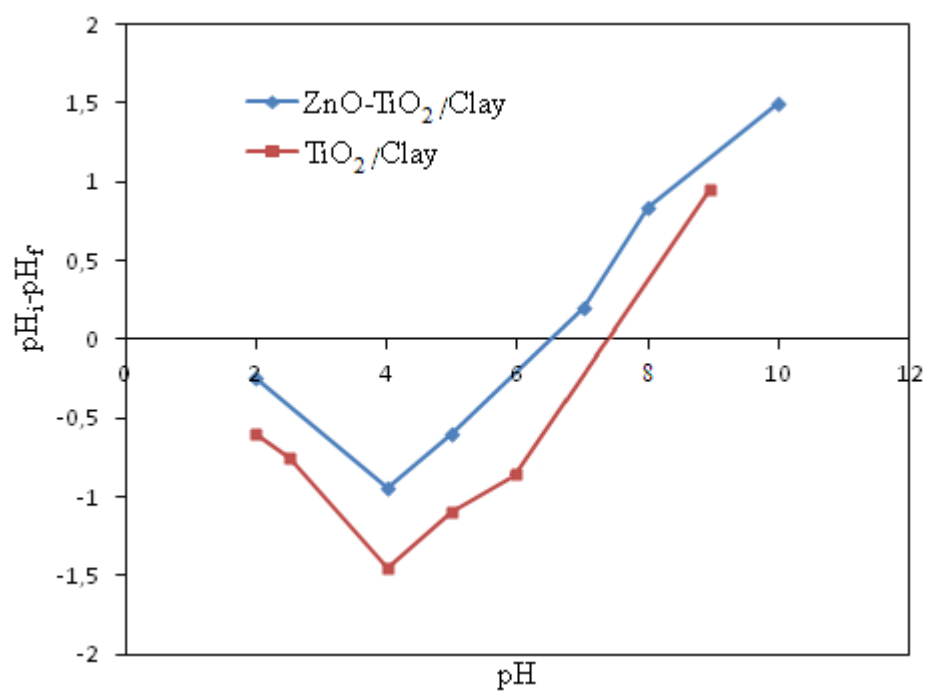


Fig.6.

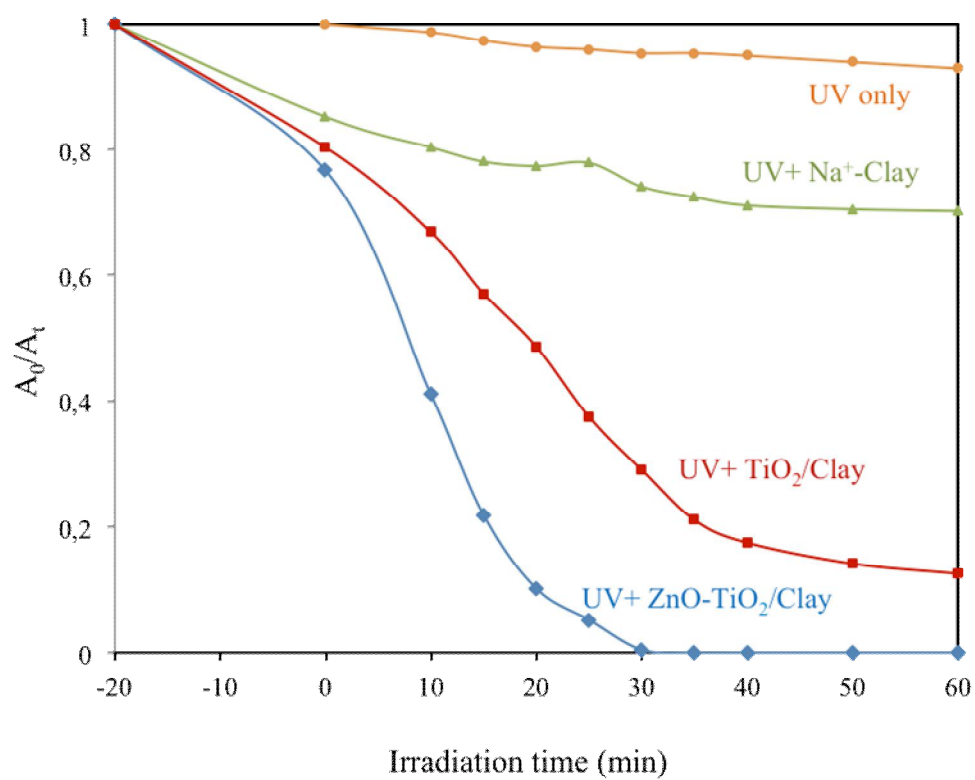


Fig.7.

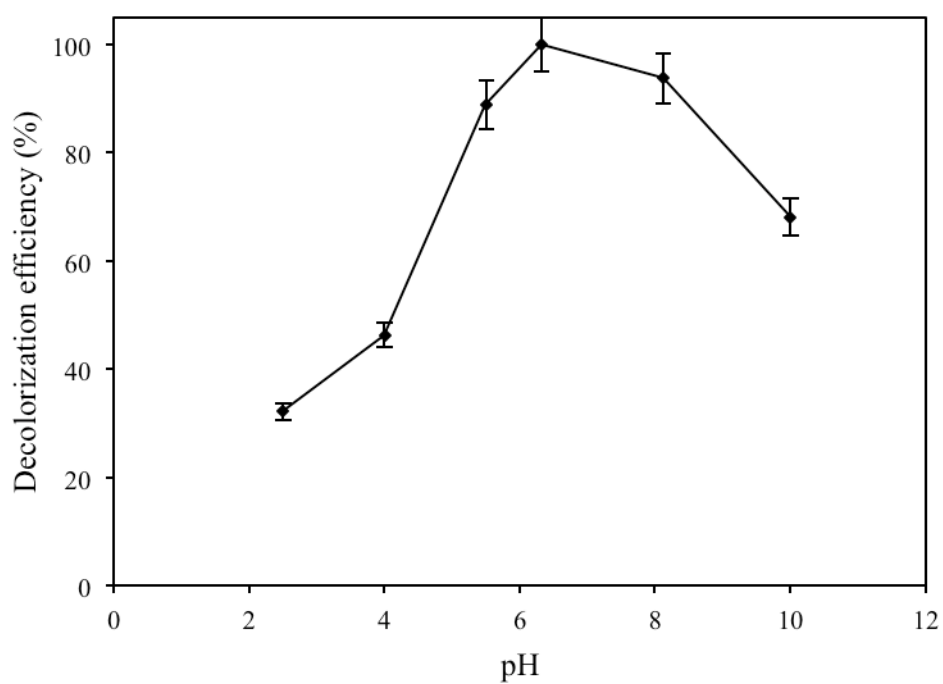


Fig.8.

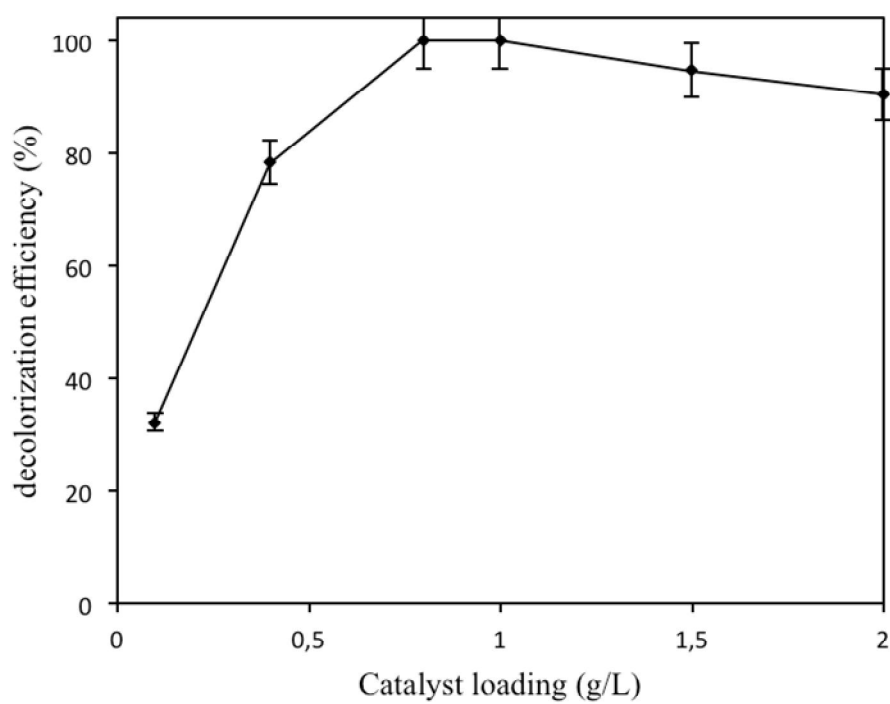


Fig.9.

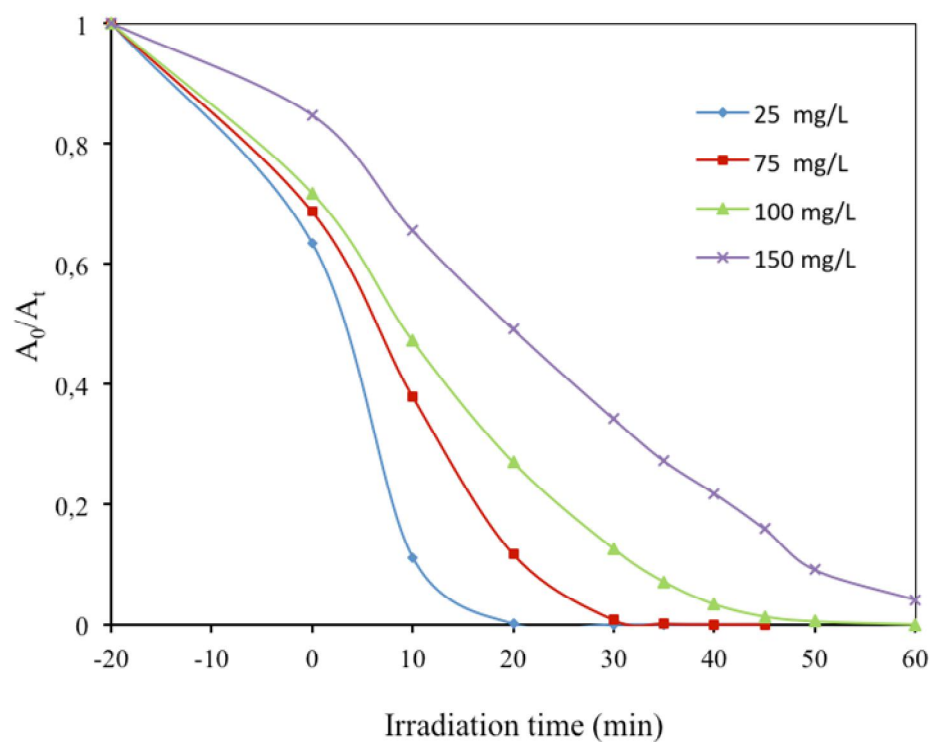


Fig.10.

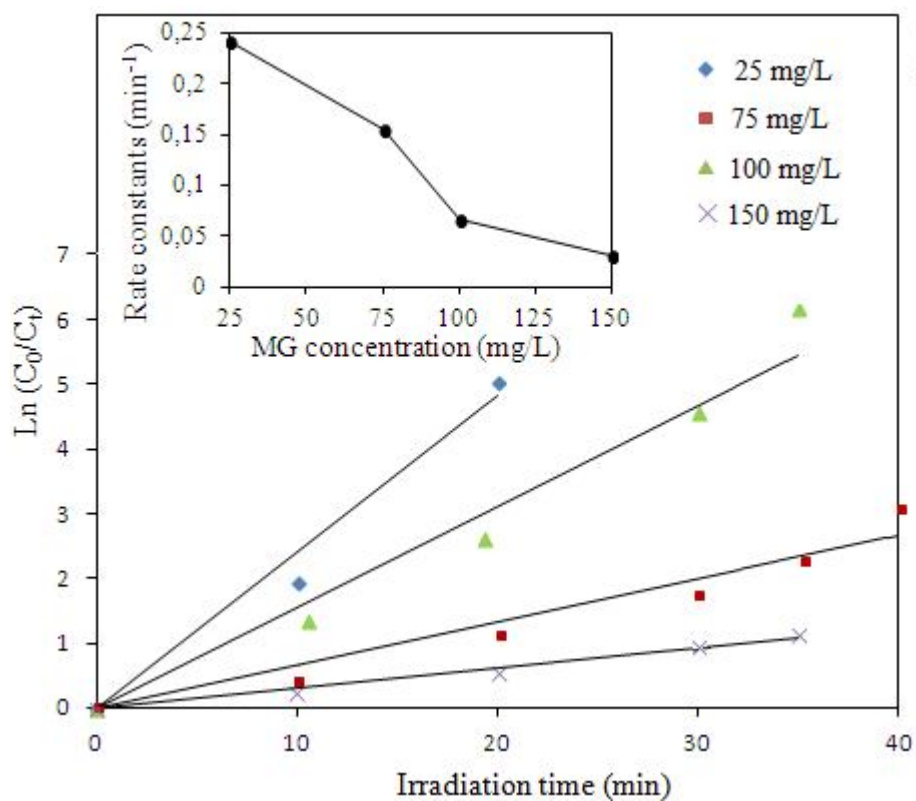


Fig.11.

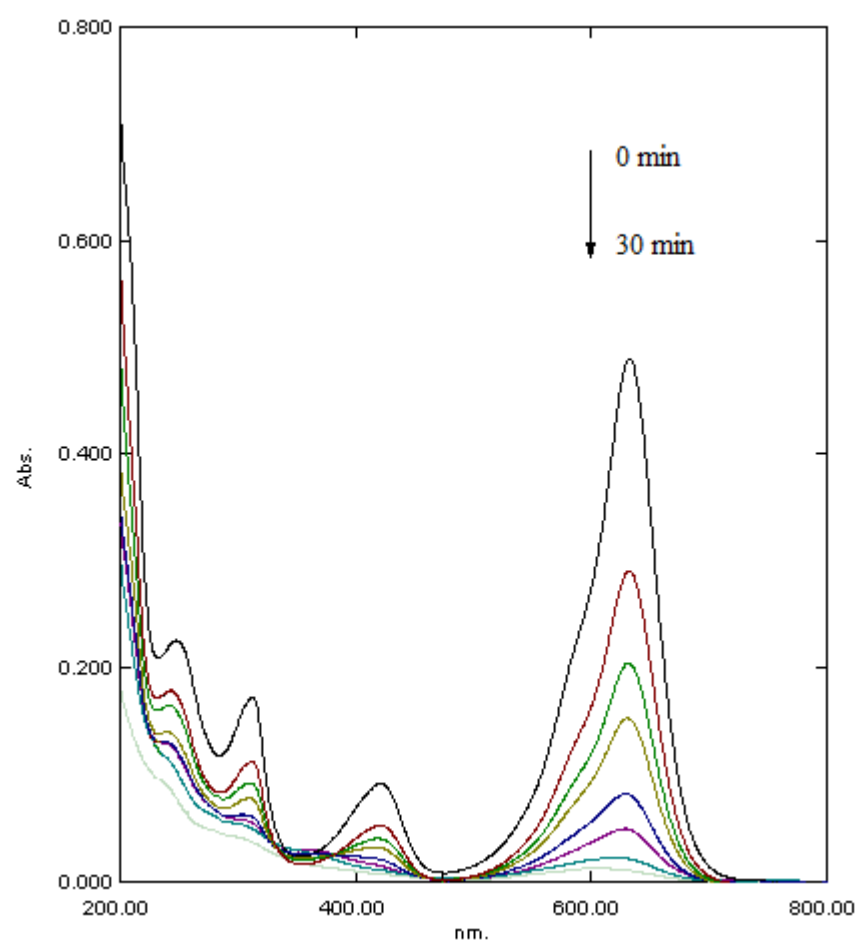




Fig. 12.

