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Substrate Grain-Dependent Chemistry of Carburized Planar Anodic TiO₂ on Polycrystalline Ti

Celine Rüdiger, Marco Favaro, Carlos Valero-Vidal, Laura Calvillo, Nathalie Bozzolo, Suzanne Jacomet, Jennifer Hein, Luca Gregoratti, Stefano Agnoli, Gaetano Granozzi, and Julia Kunze-Liebhäuser

ABSTRACT: Mixtures or composites of titania and carbon have gained considerable research interest as innovative catalyst supports for low- and intermediate-temperature proton-exchange membrane fuel cells. For applications in electrocatalysis, variations in the local physicochemical properties of the employed materials can have significant effects on their behavior as catalyst supports. To assess microscopic heterogeneities in composition, structure, and morphology, a microscopic multitechnique approach is required. In this work, compact anodic TiO₂ films on planar polycrystalline Ti substrates are converted into carbon/titania composites or multiphase titanium oxycarabides through carbothermal treatment in an acetylene/argon atmosphere in a flow reactor. The local chemical composition, structure, and morphology of the converted films are studied with scanning photoelectron microscopy, micro-Raman spectroscopy, and scanning electron microscopy and are related with the crystallographic orientations of the Ti substrate grains by means of electron backscatter diffraction. Different annealing temperatures, ranging from 550 to 850 °C, are found to yield different substrate grain-dependent chemical compositions, structures, and morphologies. The present study reveals individual time scales for the carbothermal conversion and subsequent surface re-oxidation on substrate grains of a given orientation. Furthermore, it demonstrates the power of a microscopic multitechnique approach for studying polycrystalline heterogeneous materials for electrocatalytic applications.

1. INTRODUCTION

In catalysis and electrocatalysis, a detailed understanding of the local physicochemical properties of the active materials is of utmost importance to develop optimized functional materials. Many fundamental investigations on catalytic materials are based on the study of single crystalline substrates because their well-defined surfaces facilitate the relation of materials properties to observed processes, such as pathways of catalytic reactions that are promoted on differently oriented crystalline surfaces. However, real catalyst materials require a high surface area and are synthesized in the form of supported nanoparticles or high-surface-area powders, which in most cases bring about nanoscopically or microscopically heterogeneous physicochemical properties. In view of the important role of the support, which needs to stabilize the catalyst nanoparticles, to ensure electrical conductivity or which under certain conditions can positively influence the overall catalytic performance, it is necessary to devote sufficient research efforts to the investigation of innovative support materials on a microscopic basis. A model system that constitutes a compromise between real high-surface-area powders and a well-defined single crystalline surface with assessable properties is provided by a polycrystalline planar substrate. With the emergence of experimental methods that combine microscopy with comple-

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mentary analysis methods, such as photoelectron or vibrational spectroscopy, diffractometry, or electrochemistry, the investigation of planar polycrystalline materials has opened up new perspectives in materials research.4−7 Hybrid or composite materials of titania and carbon (Ti−O−C) have gained remarkable interest in the search for suitable catalyst support materials for proton-exchange membrane fuel cells, as they may provide a higher corrosion resistance than that of commonly used carbon-based supports in combination with a high electrical conductivity8−10 and may enhance the overall catalytic activity.11−13 Planar model systems consisting of thermally carburized compact anodic titania films on a polycrystalline titanium substrate (Ti poly) provide a flexible model system to study the relationship between the physicochemical properties of Ti−O−C materials, which can be tailored via the synthesis conditions, and their electrochemical and electrocatalytic performances.14−16 In particular, different annealing temperatures during the carbothermal treatment of anodic TiO2 yield significantly different average physicochemical properties of the obtained Ti−O−C films.14 which in turn strongly affect the catalytic properties of Ti−O−C-supported Pt nanoparticles (Pt/Ti−O−C) toward the electrochemical oxidation of ethanol in an acidic electrolyte.15 Interestingly, a clear influence of the Ti substrate grains on the local (electro)chemical stability of Pt/Ti−O−C on Ti poly was observed,15 which demonstrates the necessity for the use of microscopic analysis tools to gain a deep understanding of the local property–performance relationships on such model systems. In a previous publication, we have investigated the effect of titanium substrate grain orientations on the crystallization of compact anodic TiO2 and on the reactive decomposition of acetylene during carbothermal treatment with acetylene at a relatively low annealing temperature. A substrate grain-dependent chemical composition and structure of the obtained C/TiO2 composite material has been observed in this study.7 The effect of annealing temperature on the final average composition of Ti−O−C films, prepared at relatively high temperatures, has been explained with a thermodynamic model, where diffusion of carbon and oxygen in the compact anodic TiO2 has been taken into account.14 A common consideration of both substrate grain orientation and annealing temperature is still missing. However, it is necessary to gain a deeper understanding and control of the synthesis of such Ti−O−C systems.

Therefore, in the present study, the effect of annealing temperature on the substrate grain-dependent physicochemical properties of carburized planar anodic TiO2 films on Ti poly is investigated using both microscopic and spectroscopic

<table>
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<th>tilt angle $\Phi$ of Ti</th>
<th>0° ≤ $\Phi$ ≤ 15°</th>
<th>15° ≤ $\Phi$ ≤ 40°</th>
<th>40° ≤ $\Phi$ ≤ 50°</th>
<th>50° ≤ $\Phi$ ≤ 90° (−Ti{hki0})</th>
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Figure 1. Scanning electron micrographs of TiOC. High-magnification insets: areas on differently oriented substrate grains (TiOC550, TiOC650, TiOC750) or areas with different TiOC morphologies (TiOC850). Projected hexagonal cells: approximate crystallographic orientation of the Ti substrate grains.
techniques. Ti–O–C films are synthesized via carbothermal treatment with acetylene at four different annealing temperatures, that is, 550, 650, 750, and 850 °C. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM), scanning photoelectron microscopy (SPEM), and micro-Raman spectroscopy results of the carburized films are correlated with the crystallographic orientation of the substrate grains, which is assessed through electron backscatter diffraction (EBSD).

2. RESULTS

EBSD was used to generate crystalline orientation maps of the Ti<sub>poly</sub> substrates, which will be represented as surface-normal projected inverse pole figure orientation maps in the following. From these maps, the orientations of the hexagonal lattice of Ti with respect to the substrate surface, defined by the three Euler angles, are extracted for individual grains.

To define the crystallographic plane parallel to the sample surface, only the two Euler angles, Φ and φ<sub>2</sub>, need to be considered. Angle Φ describes the tilt of the c-axis of the hexagonal unit cell with respect to the substrate surface, and φ<sub>2</sub> describes the azimuthal rotation of the hexagonal unit cell about its c-axis with respect to a reference orientation with φ<sub>2</sub> = 0°. Because of the hexagonal symmetry, the values of the orientation angles can be restricted to 0° ≤ Φ ≤ 90° and 0° ≤ φ<sub>2</sub> ≤ 30°. According to our previous work, it is sufficient to take into account four ranges of tilt angles, Φ, to gain insight into the physicochemical properties of thermally treated planar anodic TiO<sub>2</sub> films. In addition, we subdivide the orientations with Φ > 50° into 0° ≤ φ<sub>2</sub> ≤ 15° and 15° ≤ φ<sub>2</sub> ≤ 30°. Table 1 lists the five groups of Ti substrate orientations that are considered in the present study and shows the surface-projected hexagonal cells that are used for labeling.

Figure 1 shows scanning electron micrographs of TiOC, synthesized at different temperatures. After the thermal treatments at temperatures of up to 750 °C, the grain boundaries of the Ti substrate are still visible through the TiOC. The morphology of TiOC<sub>550</sub> and TiOC<sub>750</sub> is clearly affected by the crystallographic orientation of the underlying Ti substrate grains. In particular, substrate grains with tilt angles 0° ≤ Φ ≤ 40° can be easily distinguished from substrate grains with tilt angles Φ ≥ 50°, due to apparent differences in the morphologies of the TiOC overlayers. TiOC<sub>850</sub> is characterized...
by a granular morphology with no pronounced substrate grain dependency; only the grain boundaries can be recognized. After carbothermal treatment at 850 °C, the initial grain boundaries of the substrate disappeared and extended areas of uniform morphology formed. No interdependence between morphology and the original substrate grain orientation is visible due to significant substrate grain growth at this temperature.18

The comparison between the morphologies of TiOC750 and TiOC850 suggests that the surface undergoes an ordering at high annealing temperatures. The high-resolution micrographs (insets) of TiOC850 show ordered morphologies, such as triangular shapes (left bottom) or stepped terraces (right top). The phase change of the Ti substrate from α-Ti (hcp structure) to β-Ti (bcc structure) does not happen below 882 °C and can therefore not be responsible for this ordering.19

Figure 2 depicts chemical maps of the Ti 2p3/2 and C 1s core-level electrons extracted from SPEM of TiOC and the corresponding EBSD maps of the Ti substrate. Apparently, the surface chemistry of TiOCS and TiOC750 is affected by the orientation of the substrate grains: TiOC films on type A and B grains (0° ≤ Φ ≤ 40°, ~Ti(0001)) show a clearly different average brightness in the chemical maps than that of films on type D and E grains (50° ≤ Φ ≤ 90°, ~Ti(hk0)). In the case of TiOC750, several grain boundaries can be identified. On the other hand, the surface of TiOC850 has a relatively homogeneous composition that is independent of the substrate grains in the mapped area. The chemical maps of TiOC650 show several areas with dark spots and less pronounced grain boundaries.

For each type of substrate grain, X-ray photoelectron (XP) spectra of the Ti 2p3/2 and C 1s core levels are extracted from the photoelectron maps and plotted in Figure 3. Each spectrum is obtained from a rectangular area on a substrate grain and represents the average surface composition of TiOC on that grain. An alternative representation of the XP spectra is given in Figures S1 and S2 in the Supporting Information (SI). The Ti 2p3/2 signals show that all TiOCs contain TiO2 (459 eV)5 and that TiOC650 and TiOC750 additionally contain a considerable fraction of TiC and/or TiO species (454.9 eV)5,20 and some TiOx sub-oxides (456−458 eV, 1 < x < 2)5,14 at the surface. In the case of TiOC550, TiOC650, and TiOC750, the pronounced peak in the C 1s spectra, centered at 284.5 eV, is attributed to an sp2-hybridized (graphitic) carbon (C=C) (Figure 3e−g).5,21 The C 1s peak found for TiOC850 (Figure 3h) is shifted toward the binding energy of an sp3-hybridized (diamond-like) carbon (C−C at 285.6 eV),5,21 indicating the presence of amorphous carbon on the surface.22 It can be seen that only TiOC650 and TiOC750 contain a notable amount of carbidic carbon (281.7 eV) within a film depth of ~1.4−2.3 nm (calculated for TiO2 and C=C), which is analyzed with SPEM.21

Figure 3. Spectra from Ti 2p3/2 (top) and C 1s (bottom) core-level maps of TiOC, acquired on top of substrate grains with five different orientations, as indicated by the hexagonal cells using the color-orientation code. (a, e) TiOC550, (b, f) TiOC650, (c, g) TiOC750, and (d, h) TiOC850. The spectra in (b, c) are scaled to the TiO2 component height.
XP spectra of TiOC650 (Figure 3b,f) suggest an exceptional surface chemistry on top of substrate grains of type D (°Ti{1010}), see Table 1: on these grains, the conversion of the anodic film to TiC (TiO) and TiO₂ phases is significantly lower and slightly less graphitic carbon is generated on the surface. This is in line with the TiC/TiO₂ and C/BG chemical maps (Figure 2c), which show a high density of dark spots and thus a lower average content of TiC (TiO) and carbon in the TiOC on top of these grains. The variation in the surface chemistry thus a lower average content of TiC (TiO) and carbon in the overall amount of (amorphous or graphitic) carbon is found in TiOC650 and TiOC750; whereas the contrary is found for TiOC750 on top of substrate grains of type D and E, with 50° ≤ Φ ≤ 90° (°Ti{hk0}), and the lowest, on substrate grains A and B, with 0° ≤ Φ ≤ 40° (°Ti(0001)), which is in accordance with the chemical maps (Figures 3c,g and 2b). At the same time, the total amount of graphitic and carbidic carbon species in TiOC750 is slightly lower on substrate grains with 50° ≤ Φ ≤ 90° (°Ti{hk0}) than that on substrate grains with 0° ≤ Φ ≤ 40° (°Ti(0001)). An intermediate composition is found on substrate grains C, with 40° ≤ Φ ≤ 50°. No difference is visible in the XP spectra of TiOC850 on differently oriented substrate grains, which confirms the homogeneous contrast of its chemical maps (Figures 3d,h and 2d). The highest overall fraction of TiC is found in TiOC750 on top of °Ti{hk0} grains. The highest overall amount of (amorphous or graphitic) carbon is found in TiOC650 on top of all substrate grains except for °Ti{1010} (Figures 3f and S2). Considering only TiOC650 and TiOC750, an almost opposite chemical surface composition is observed on °Ti{1010} and °Ti(0001) substrate grains: TiOC650 contains a high amount of TiC and C on °Ti(0001) and a low amount on °Ti{1010}, whereas the contrary is found for TiOC750.

The SPEM results reveal that both annealing temperature and substrate texture determine the TiOC surface chemistry. TiC-rich TiOC can be synthesized through carburization of anodic TiO₂ at 650 or 750 °C. However, it depends on substrate texture, whether a higher average TiC content is obtained in TiOC650 or in TiOC750 under the given annealing conditions (see Figure S1): in the case of a Ti substrate with a large fraction of °Ti{hk0} grains, the average TiC content can be expected to be higher in TiOC750 than that in TiOC650; a Ti substrate with grain orientations restricted to 40° ≤ Φ ≤ 50° yields most likely a similar average TiC content in TiOC650 and TiOC750; finally, a Ti substrate with mainly °Ti(0001) grains can be expected to yield a higher average TiC content in TiOC650 than that in TiOC750.

Micro-Raman spectroscopy was performed to gain information on the substrate grain-dependent structure and chemical composition of the anodic TiO₂ before and after carbothermal treatment at different temperatures. Figure 4 depicts the Raman spectra of as-anodized TiO₂, and of TiOC550, TiOC650 and TiOC750 on top of °Ti{1010} and °Ti(0001) substrate grains, for which SPEM reveals a clearly different TiOC composition. As the initial grain boundaries of the titanium substrate vanished after carbothermal treatment at 850 °C, Raman spectra of TiOC650 were acquired on several spots of different appearance in the optical microscope (black and gray spectra in Figure 4). Photographs of the TiOC surfaces are shown in Figure 4e. An alternative representation of the micro-Raman spectra is given in Figure S3. The peaks at 1350 and 1600 cm⁻¹ in Figure 4a,c correspond to the D and G bands of the nanocrystalline graphitic carbon. Figure 4b,d depicts the spectral range of the bands associated with Raman-active TiO₂.
TiO$_x$ or TiC$_y$ phases. Anatase and rutile TiO$_2$ are characterized by vibrational bands marked with dashed lines and are labeled as A and R, respectively. Peaks at ~267 and ~347 cm$^{-1}$, marked with dotted lines, can be attributed to the most intense Raman signals of Ti$_2$O$_3$. Stoichiometric TiC has no Raman-active vibrational modes. However, the disorder in the cubic (NaCl) crystal structure of TiC (with $y < 1$) that is induced by carbon vacancies activates the $A_{3g}$, $E_{1g}$, and $T_{2g}$ modes for Raman scattering.

The absence of distinct bands associated with crystalline rutile or anatase TiO$_2$ evidences that the as-grown anodic film is amorphous (purple spectrum in Figure 4a). Carbothermal treatment at 550 °C leads to crystallization of the oxide, generating a mixed phase of rutile and anatase, and to a slight reduction, which is evidenced by the features ascribed to Ti$_2$O$_3$. The highest fraction of rutile is detected on top of different grain orientations for the diode Ti poly under ultrahigh vacuum conditions using ethylene as a carbon source.

The presented results show that the final physicochemical properties of carbothermally produced TiOC on Ti$_{poly}$ such as the chemical composition, phase composition, and surface morphology, depend on the annealing temperature and underlying substrate grain orientations. It should be noted that the gas atmosphere during the carbothermal treatment constitutes an important synthesis parameter as well: very similar chemical maps to those of TiOC$_{750}$ are obtained by carburization of planar anodic TiO$_2$ films on Ti$_{poly}$ under ultrahigh vacuum conditions using ethylene as a carbon source.

3. DISCUSSION

The absence of exclusive bands associated with Anatase and Rutile TiO$_2$ phases is not visible in the spectra of corresponding anodic TiOC films. Therefore, the observed differences between the Raman responses of TiOC$_{650}$, TiOC$_{750}$, and TiOC$_{850}$ can only be interpreted in a qualitative manner and suggest an effect of the annealing temperature on the stoichiometry and/or defectivity of the converted films. The Raman spectrum of the compact, as-grown anodic TiO$_2$ film is on the Raman response can also be observed (see Figure S3). A relation of the properties of TiOC$_{550}$ with the initial substrate grains is not possible, but local variations in phase composition are evidenced by notable differences between the black and gray spectra in Figure 4b,d (see also Figure S3).

A thorough investigation of TiOC$_{550}$ with micro-Raman spectroscopy is reported in ref 7, in which a marked relation between the substrate grain orientations and crystalline phases of TiO$_2$ as well as the amount of deposited graphitic carbon was found.

3. DISCUSSION

The absorption of distinct bands associated with crystalline rutile or anatase TiO$_2$ evidences that the as-grown anodic film is amorphous (purple spectrum in Figure 4a). Carbothermal treatment at 550 °C leads to crystallization of the oxide, generating a mixed phase of rutile and anatase, and to a slight reduction, which is evidenced by the features ascribed to Ti$_2$O$_3$. The highest fraction of rutile is detected on top of different grain orientations for the diode Ti poly under ultrahigh vacuum conditions using ethylene as a carbon source.

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assumed to remain constant for all carbothermal treatments. Compositional gradients are simplified to defined phase boundaries. Carburization at 650 and 750 °C is found to generate TiOC films with an inhomogeneous surface chemistry on individual grains: in the case of TiOC650, SPEM reveals micrometer-sized spots on ∼Ti(1010), with compositions that differ from the average (Figure 2c), and in the case of TiOC750, a different chemical composition is observed at grain boundaries (Figure 2b). Furthermore, on the nanometric scale, a patched surface composition of TiO2 with carbon, TiO2 and TiOCx (if present) side by side, is possible. For the sake of simplicity, only the grain area-averaged chemical composition is considered in Figure 5. This gives rise to the layered film structure of the models, which is in line with previously performed angle-resolved XPS measurements on TiOX-rich TiO2 and is supported by the present results of XP and micro-Raman spectroscopies, which reveal that the TiOCx phase in TiOC850 is covered by a TiO2 film of at least ∼1.4 nm (estimated from the photoelectron escape depth in TiO2).

Carbothermal treatment at 550 °C yields a C/TiO2 composite, with TiO2 species in the oxide film and a substrate grain-dependent amount of graphitic carbon on the surface, which is higher on top of ∼Ti(0001) than that on top of ∼Ti(1010), as reported in ref 7. At 650, 750, and 850 °C, the anodic TiO2 film is converted to TiOxCy in the bulk, as suggested by the Raman results (Figure 4), but contains temperature- and substrate grain-dependent fractions of TiO2 and carbon at the surface, as seen with SPEM (Figures 2 and 3). The carbon is mainly graphitic (denoted by graphite) on TiOC650, TiOC650, and TiOC750 and amorphous (denoted by C amorph) on TiOC850. In the case of TiOC650 there is more TiO2 and less carbon on ∼Ti(1010) than those on ∼Ti(0001). In the case of TiOC750 there is less TiO2 and more carbon on ∼Ti(1010) than those on ∼Ti(0001). The fractions of TiO2 and carbon in TiOC650 on ∼Ti(1010) are similar to the respective fractions in TiOC750 on ∼Ti(0001), but there is more TiO2 and C in TiOC650 on ∼Ti(0001) than those in TiOC750 on ∼Ti(1010). After carburization at 850 °C, the amount of carbon is significantly lower and the amount of TiO2 is significantly higher than those after carburization at 750 and 650 °C.

The physicochemical properties of TiOC can be understood as resulting from several parallel processes during and after carburization that are affected by temperature and substrate texture, which will be discussed in the following.

3.1. Crystallization of TiO2 and Reactive Decomposition of C2H2. During carbothermal treatments at high temperatures, the amorphous anodic TiO2 crystallizes to anatase and/or rutile phases before C2H2 is added to the process. The crystallization kinetics depends on the temperature and orientation of the Ti substrate, which has consequences for the reaction of the surface with C2H2.7 Because of the higher activity of anatase TiO2 compared to that of amorphous TiO2 toward the reactive decomposition of C2H2, the substrate grain-dependent crystallization results in a substrate grain-dependent amount of graphitic carbon on the surface of TiOC650.7 Also, at higher temperatures, the substrate texture may affect the crystallization of anodic TiO2 and thus the reactive decomposition of C2H2. In particular, the peculiar properties of TiOC650 on top of ∼Ti(1010), namely, the presence of spots with a lower carbon coverage and a lower fraction of TiC compared to the average, may be ascribed to the formation of a polycrystalline TiO2 film on these grains, exposing facets of very different reactivities. Furthermore, the significantly lower amount of carbon on TiOC850 could be related to a low reactivity of the, most likely rutile-rich, TiO2 film that forms at 850 °C prior to the addition of C2H2.75 Besides the reactivity of the surface, the sticking coefficient of C2H2 on TiO2 and the desorption probability of possible reaction intermediates, both of which depend on temperature and surface structure, can play a role in the substrate grain-dependent decomposition efficiency. Because of the concomitant diffusion of carbon into the bulk and generation of TiC at temperatures of 650 °C and higher, the final carbon content at the surface is not determined only by carbon layer formation.

3.2. Conversion of TiO2 to TiC and Material Transport in TiO2 and Ti. To explain the observed temperature-dependent average chemical composition of TiOC, thermodynamic considerations need to be taken into account. First, sufficiently high temperatures are required to convert TiO2 into a solid solution of TiC and TiO. Second, the final bulk composition is mostly determined by thermally activated diffusion of both carbon into the compact anodic TiO2 and oxygen and carbon into the Ti substrate.14 The average amount of carbon on the surface decreases from 650 to 850 °C, which can be attributed partly to the higher diffusion kinetics of carbon at higher temperatures and partly to the lower carbon-formation efficiency. It is noteworthy that the amorphous carbon found on TiOC850 most likely originates from contamination of TiO2 that is not covered by graphitic carbon from the thermal C2H2 treatment, after exposure to ambient air. The results obtained with micro-Raman spectroscopy suggest a temperature- and substrate grain-dependent stoichiometry and/or defectivity of the TiOCx phase in TiOC, which is very likely a consequence of the temperature- and substrate grain-dependent carbon supply and diffusion kinetics. At 850 °C, both oxygen and, in particular, carbon can diffuse into the Ti substrate, promoting the formation of a carbon-poor TiOCx phase.14

The main influence of substrate grain orientations on the conversion may be an indirect effect controlled by the initial formation of polycrystalline TiO2y with a substrate grain-dependent phase composition and preferential orientation. First-principles calculations suggest anisotropic migration of carbon in the tetragonal lattices of anatase (c/a = 2.51) and rutile TiO2 (c/a = 0.64).38,39 Therefore, substrate grain-dependent material transport in TiO2y, which brings about substrate texture-dependent conversion time scales of the anodic TiO2 at a given temperature, may be responsible for the substrate grain-dependent chemical compositions of TiOC650 and TiOC750. When oxygen and carbon start to diffuse into the Ti substrate, the grain-dependent orientation of the hexagonal Ti lattice (c/a = 1.58) is likely to determine the diffusion kinetics39,41 and therewith not only the fractions of C and O that remain in the TiOCx phase adjacent to the Ti substrate but also the thickness of the TiOCx layer. In addition, the substrate grain boundaries can affect the conversion of the anodic TiO2. From the chemical maps of TiOC750 (Figure 2b), a different conversion behavior of the anodic film at the boundaries compared to that in the area within the substrate grains can be inferred, suggesting a lower reactivity and/or faster carbon diffusion at the substrate grain boundaries. At 850 °C, substrate grain growth becomes important as well, generating fresh grain boundaries in the oxide film, which can facilitate diffusion of carbon into the bulk.
3.3. Surface Re-Oxidation of TiO$_2$C$_x$. Besides the temperature- and grain-dependent conversion of TiO$_2$ to TiO$_2$C$_x$, the final composition of TiOC is affected by the subsequent re-oxidation of the TiC, TiO, and TiO$_2$ species near the surface to TiO$_2$ and graphitic carbon, due to their relative thermodynamic instability at room temperature and in the presence of oxygen. Re-oxidation was reported to happen during exposure of TiO$_2$C$_x$-rich films to ambient air and even during cooling down in reducing atmosphere at the end of a carbothermal treatment, when the temperature dropped below a certain threshold value. As the intrinsic inertness toward re-oxidation depends on the chemical composition of TiOC (in particular, on the stoichiometry of the TiO$_2$C$_x$ phase), a substrate grain effect on the re-oxidation rate can be expected for TiOC$_{550}$ and TiOC$_{750}$. In the case of TiOC$_{850}$, for which local variations in chemical composition that cannot be related to initial substrate grain orientations are observed, the intrinsic inertness is likely to vary accordingly on areas of different compositions. A high amount of graphitic carbon on the surface of TiO$_2$ after carburization could retard the re-oxidation process, as carbon doping or carbon coating of TiO$_2$ is known to suppress the crystalline phase transformations of TiO$_2$ and reduce TiO$_2$ crystallite growth, both of which are processes that require atomic re-organization, as does re-oxidation. This provides a possible explanation for the observation that there is less TiO$_2$ on TiOC$_{550}$ and TiOC$_{750}$ than that on TiOC$_{850}$. Furthermore, the inverse trend of carbon and TiO$_2$ at the surfaces of TiOC$_{550}$ and TiOC$_{750}$ on top of TiO$_2$ leads to a partial retardation of TiO$_2$ re-oxidation on those substrate grains on which TiOC contains a high fraction of carbon. Therefore, not only the TiO$_2$ conversion time scale but also the TiOC re-oxidation time scale is effectively determined by the substrate texture. Independent of the substrate texture, the surface oxide of TiOC$_{550}$ is almost stoichiometric within the depth that can be analyzed with SPER so that no substrate grain-dependent intrinsic stability can be deduced here. It is noteworthy that the substrate grain-dependent fraction of TiO$_2$ observed with SPER on TiOC$_{550}$ is a consequence of the substrate grain-dependent thickness of the carbon layer, which attenuates photoelectrons from the covered TiO$_2$.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The presented results on the annealing temperature and substrate grain-dependent conversion of compact anodic TiO$_2$ on Ti$_{pol}$ to TiOC reveal that both annealing temperature and substrate texture majorly influence this process. By means of a spectromicroscopic multimodal approach, employing EBSD, SEM, SPER, and micro-Raman spectroscopy, it was found that the anodic films on top of differently oriented substrate grains have individual conversion and re-oxidation time scales. A combination of temperature- and substrate grain-dependent processes, such as crystallization, reactive carbon deposition, conversion to TiO$_2$C$_x$, and re-oxidation of the surface, plays a major role in the definition of the heterogeneous physicochemical properties of TiOC films. A deep understanding of such an interplay constitutes an essential point toward the development of novel transition metal oxy carbide-based synergistic supports for use in (electro)catalytic systems with improved performance. On the basis of the present findings, the spatially selective degradation of Pt/TiO$_2$C$_{750}$/Ti$_{pol}$ during ethanol electro-oxidation can be ascribed to the substrate grain-dependent chemical composition of TiOC$_{750}$, which determines the overall chemical stability of the catalytic system in concentrated phosphoric acid at elevated temperatures.

5. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

5.1. Sample Preparation. Disks of 1 mm thickness and 10–15 mm diameter were cut from a 20 mm diameter Ti$_{pol}$ rod (99.6% purity, temper annealed; Advent Ltd., England). One side of the disks was mechanically and electrochemically polished, following the procedures described in refs 7 and 14. The areas of investigation were marked with a cross-scratch on the samples using a tungsten needle. The electropolished Ti disks were thoroughly cleaned in an ultrasonic bath with ethanol (technical grade), isopropanol (high purity), and deionized (DI) water (Millipore-Milli-Q system, 18.2 MΩ).

Carbothermal treatment was conducted in a tabular quartz reactor under controlled gas flow. For carburization, the following procedure was applied: (i) purging for 2 h with a high flow of Ar to remove air, (ii) heating at a constant rate to $T = 550$, 650, 750, or 850 °C in 200 standard cubic centimeters per minute (sccm) Ar, (iii) dwelling for 60 min at $T$, (iv) addition of 0.5% flow % of acetylene (C$_2$H$_2$, solvent free; Linde, Germany) for 5 min, (v) dwelling for 60 min at $T$ in Ar, (vi) cooling to room temperature. The carburized anodic films are termed TiOC$_x$ throughout the text, where $T$ represents the annealing temperatures 550, 650, 750, and 850 °C.

5.2. EBSD and SEM. The crystallographic orientation of the electropolished Ti substrate was mapped by EBSD using a FEI XL30 scanning electron microscope operated at 20 kV accelerating voltage and equipped with a TSL-EDAX EBSD detector, a Leica DM LM microscope, and a multiline argon-ion laser. The areas of investigation were marked with a cross-scratch on the sample copy was used to investigate the crystalline phase composition of the carbothermally treated films. A dispersive Renishaw Raman Microscope (Type 1000) equipped with a CCD detector, a Leica DM LM microscope, and a multilane argon gas laser (Star-pro Select 150 of MODU-Laser) set at 514 nm were used to analyze the chemistry and structure of the films. The laser was unpolarized, the size of the focused laser spot on the sample was about 5 μm (using the 50X magnification of the optical microscope), and the excitation energy of the laser was set to ≤20 mW, which was low enough to avoid chemical modifications or sample damage during the selected exposure times. Backscattered Raman signals were recorded with an acquisition time of about 1 cm$^{-1}$ from 2000 to 146 cm$^{-1}$ (lower wavenumbers were cut off by the notch filter), with an acquisition time of 1 × 50 s, and from 800 to 146 cm$^{-1}$, with an acquisition time of 2 × 100 s. For baseline correction (background fluorescence), a fourth-order polynomial function was used to correct the data. A deep understanding of such an interplay constitutes an essential point toward the development of novel transition metal oxy carbide-based synergistic supports for use in (electro)catalytic systems with improved performance. On the basis of the present findings, the spatially selective degradation of Pt/TiO$_2$C$_{750}$/Ti$_{pol}$ during ethanol electro-oxidation can be ascribed to the substrate grain-dependent chemical composition of TiOC$_{750}$, which determines the overall chemical stability of the catalytic system in concentrated phosphoric acid at elevated temperatures.

5.3. Micro-Raman Spectroscopy. Micro-Raman spectroscopy was used to investigate the crystalline phase composition of the carbothermally treated films. A dispersive Renishaw Raman Microscope (Type 1000) equipped with a CCD detector, a Leica DM LM microscope, and a multilane argon gas laser (Star-pro Select 150 of MODU-Laser) set at 514 nm were used to analyze the chemistry and structure of the films. The laser was unpolarized, the size of the focused laser spot on the sample was about 5 μm (using the 50X magnification of the optical microscope), and the excitation energy of the laser was set to ≤20 mW, which was low enough to avoid chemical modifications or sample damage during the selected exposure times. Backscattered Raman signals were recorded with an acquisition time of about 1 cm$^{-1}$ from 2000 to 146 cm$^{-1}$ (lower wavenumbers were cut off by the notch filter), with an acquisition time of 1 × 50 s, and from 800 to 146 cm$^{-1}$, with an acquisition time of 2 × 100 s. For baseline correction (background fluorescence), a fourth-order polynomial function was used to correct the data.
was subtracted from the raw data of the extended spectra and the small-range spectra were only shifted to a common background level.

5.4. SPEM. SPEM was performed at the ESCAmicroscopy beamline at the Elettra Synchrotron Facility in Trieste, where the X-ray photon beam was demagnified by a Zone Plate to a submicron spot of about 150 nm onto the sample, which was then rastered to produce an image by detecting the photoelectrons generated from the sample.44 In this work, the photon energy was set to 756 eV. The incident X-ray beam was normal to the sample surface, whereas angle θ between the hemispherical electron analyzer (HEA) and the sample surface was 30°, providing high surface sensitivity. Photoelectron maps of 50 × 50 μm² were recorded by sampling the surface with a step of 0.2 μm and a dwell time of 60 ms per pixel. The HEA was equipped with a multichannel electron detector, which simultaneously acquires 48 maps (channels), each tuned at a specific photoelectron energy within a selected energy window. This allowed to (i) extract XP spectra from selected areas of the acquired photoelectron micrograph, with an energy window of 7.8 eV and a step of 0.164 eV and (ii) to remove the topographic contributions to the photoelectron micrographs and extract the chemical contrast. The chemical contrast micrographs (chemical maps) were obtained by choosing two sets of maps from the recorded 48 maps that were acquired either in the energy range of a photoelectron peak or in the energy range of the background signal, integrating them to obtain two effective maps corresponding to the photoelectron signal in the two spectral ranges and obtaining their ratio.45 In that way, peak over background (C/BG, TiO₂/BG) or peak A over peak B (TiC/TiO₂, TiO₂/TiO₂) chemical maps were obtained from the photoelectron maps acquired in the spectral regions of the C 1s and Ti 2p₃/₂ core levels.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information
The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/acsomega.6b00472.

Alternative representation of the XP spectra; alternative representation of the micro-Raman spectra (PDF)

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Notes
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ABBREVIATIONS
SEM, scanning electron microscopy; SPEM, scanning photo-electron microscopy; EBSD, electron backscatter diffraction; XP, X-ray photoelectron

REFERENCES


