XAS spectra of Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$] at the Ce-M, Ce-L, Mn-L and N-K thresholds

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Abstract

The X-ray absorption spectroscopy at the Ce-M$_{4,5}$, Ce-L$_3$, Mn-L$_{2,3}$ and N-K thresholds was used to study the electronic and magnetic structure of the recently obtained Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$]. Manganese is found to be in a state similar to that in Mn$_2$N$_3$, with strong covalency between Mn and N. The multiple peaked structure in the Ce-M$_{4,5}$ and Ce-L$_3$ XAS spectra indicates that the valence state of cerium in Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$] is only slightly lower than that found in CeO$_2$, containing Ce$_{IV}$ with a strong covalent mixture between Ce 4f and ligand 2p states. By simulating the Ce-L$_3$ XAS spectrum using a simplified Anderson impurity model the 4f occupancy was found to be 0.52 for Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$] compared to 0.49 for CeO$_2$ in the ground state.

Keywords: Ternary nitrides; Nitridomanganates; XAS; Rare earth; Electronic state

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1. Introduction

During the last decade, the electronic and the magnetic properties of 3d transition metal (TM) compounds have been intensively studied using the high energy spectroscopy stimulated by the discovery of high-$T_c$ cuprates [1]. The combined theoretical and experimental studies of X-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS) at the thresholds provide information on the electronic states of metal atoms and the distribution of the valence electrons between metal and ligand atoms [2–5]. Contrary to the valuable results on oxides and halides obtained with XAS only a small number of reports in the literature deals with nitrides, mostly on binary or quasi-binary systems. Few XAS investigations on nitridometalates have been reported [6–8]. That is partly due to the difficulties in preparation of single phase samples and handling the compounds, which are often highly sensitive to moisture. Extensive exploratory activities in recent years resulted in a number of new nitridometalates with unusual oxidation states of transition metals [9–11]. In comparison with oxide chemistry, low oxidation states seem to be preferred in nitrides, e.g. Mn$^+$, Fe$^+$, Co$^+$, Ni$^+$ [12]. In this work the Mn-L$_{2,3}$, Ce-M$_{4,5}$ and Ce-L$_3$ XAS spectra are used to determine the electronic states of manganese and cerium in the recently described compound Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$] [12]. The three plausible assignments of oxidation states for the metals were previously proposed: (Ce$^{IV}$)$_2$[MnN$_3$]$_2$, (Ce$^{III}$)$_2$[Mn$^{III}$N$_3$], and Ce$^{IV}$Ce$^{III}$[Mn$^{II}$N$_3$], provided that nitrogen is formally N$^{3-}$ [12].

The electronic state of the metal species in such compounds is not a trivial question. Magnetic measurements do not always give a correct formulation, since even the binary cerium nitride, CeN, in which the Ce ion is close to Ce$^{3+}$, shows just Pauli-paramagnetism [13]. From XAS it is well known that cerium ions do not usually follow the simple notations Ce$^{3+}$ and Ce$^{4+}$, but rather exhibit intermediate valence state behavior [14–16]. For example, in the cerium oxide CeO$_2$ the 4f occupancy $n_f$ was found to be $-0.59$ [16]. Therefore, it can be called an intermediate valence state due to the strong 4f configuration.

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tion mixing known from high energy spectroscopy [16–18]. From the viewpoint of chemical bonding, one can still assign the oxidation state four to Ce\(^{IV}\) compounds, but one should bear in mind that the ground state is a mixture of Ce 4f, 5d and/or 6s atomic states with valence states of neighboring atoms, e.g. for oxides \(\alpha_{0,1} \) for \(4f^{n} + \beta_{0,1} \) for \(4f^{L} \) (where \(L \) denotes a hole at the O 2p state), in the same way as for Cu\(^{II}\) in NaCuO and La\(_{2}\)Li\(_{5}\)Cu\(_{15}\)O\(_{23}\) [2,19]. For Ce\(_{2}[\text{MnN}]\) it was concluded from DFT calculations that cerium is Ce\(^{IV}\), and in turn Mn\(^{I}\) [20]. The electronic and magnetic structures of manganese ions are not simple. In oxides, manganese ions usually exist in oxidation states from +2 to +7 and can have both high-spin and low-spin states. Additionally, in nitride chemistry the unusual oxidation state \(+1\) for manganese was recently observed in the phases Li\(_{1-}[\text{Li}_{1-}\text{Mn}_{5/2}]\text{N}\) [21] and Ca\([\text{Li}_{3}[\text{MnN}]\) [22].

In this work, we present the combined N-K, Mn-L\(_{2,3}\) and Ce-M\(_{4,5}\) XAS spectra of Ce\(_{2}[\text{MnN}]\), CeN, \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{N}\), and \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\) in order to obtain information on the electronic states of both Mn and Ce in the ternary nitride. The crystal structure of Ce\(_{2}[\text{MnN}]\) contains quasi-one-dimensional Mn–N chains formed by vertex sharing of nearly square planar Mn\(_N\) units, resulting in chains \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{N/2}\). These are three-dimensionally connected via cerium atoms. Ce\(_{2}[\text{MnN}]\) is a metallic conductor and exhibits no localized magnetic moments in the susceptibility; that is, it is Pauli paramagnetic with \(\chi = 4.05(2) \times 10^{-7}\) emu/g \((1.53 \times 10^{-7}\) emu/mol\) [12]. \(\eta\)-Mn\(_N\) and \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\) crystallize in tetragonal distorted rocksalt structures. In the crystal structure of \(\eta\)-Mn\(_N\) [23], the nitrogen species occupy 2/3 of the octahedral sites in an ordered way, while they are statistically disordered in the crystal structure of \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\) [24]. Both \(\eta\)-Mn\(_N\) and \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\) order antiferromagnetically below 660 K \((\eta\)-Mn\(_N\)\) and 913 K \((\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\)\) and have small, nearly temperature-independent magnetic susceptibilities below ambient temperatures with \(\chi = 10.4 - 10.8 \times 10^{-6}\) emu/g \((\pm 7.0 \times 10^{-6}\) emu/mol Mn\) and \(\chi = 7.0 - 8.0 \times 10^{-6}\) emu/g \((\pm 4.8 \times 10^{-6}\) emu/mol Mn\), respectively [25]. The local magnetic moments of the different crystallographic sites of manganese were determined to range from 3.3 to 3.8 \(\mu_B\) by neutron diffraction [24].

2. Experimental details

Ce\(_2[\text{MnN}]\) was prepared from CeN, manganese and nitrogen as described in Ref. [12]. CeN, \(\eta\)-Mn\(_N\) and \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\) were prepared as spectroscopic reference materials, \(\eta\)-Mn\(_N\) was obtained from manganese powder and sodium azide at 750 \(^\circ\)C, \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\) \((\chi = 0.26)\) from manganese powder and ammonium [24]. The quality of the samples was checked using X-ray powder diffraction and elemental analysis as given in Ref. [24].

The Ce-L\(_{3}\) XAS spectra of polycrystalline Ce\(_2[\text{MnN}]\) were recorded in transmission geometry at the EXAFS-II beaml ine of HASYLAB/DESY in Hamburg, using a Si(111) double-crystal monochromator. This resulted in an experimental resolution of \(\approx 1.5\) eV (FWHM) at the Ce-L\(_{3}\) threshold (5720 eV). Due to its slight sensitivity against moist air, the sample of Ce\(_2[\text{MnN}]\) was encapsulated in vacuum-tight stainless-steel containers, sealed by an In-metal wire, and equipped with 0.5-mm-thick Be windows. Homogeneous absorbers were prepared by grinding the studied material together with dry B\(_2\)C powder.

The Ce-M\(_{4,5}\), and Mn-L\(_{2,3}\) XAS measurements were recorded in total electron-yield and the N-K XAS measurements in fluorescence yield at the SX700-II monochromator operated by the Freie Universitat Berlin at the Berliner Elektronenspeicherring f€ur Synchrotronstrahlung (BESSY I). The experimental resolution at the Mn-L\(_{2,3}\) threshold was 0.5 eV. The samples were ground together with gold powder, pressed into pellets and then transferred from a glovebox filled with purified Ar to the experimental chamber with a base pressure of \(P = 10^{-10}\) mbar. The surfaces of the pellets were cleaned in UHV by scraping with a diamond file.

3. Results and discussion

The Mn-L\(_{2,3}\) XAS spectra are known to be sensitive to the electronic state, including the spin state, and to the local environment of Mn [26]. Fig. 1 shows the Mn-L\(_{2,3}\) XAS spectrum of Ce\(_2[\text{MnN}]\) together with those of MnO and \(\eta\)-Mn\(_N\), which serve as references of Mn\(^{II}\), and \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\) \((\chi = 0.26)\) and LiMn\(_2\) as references of Mn\(^{III}\). While the main peak of Ce\(_2[\text{MnN}]\) lies at the same energy position as those of MnO and \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\), it is shifted to lower energy by \(\approx 1.5\) eV with respect to LiMn\(_2\)O\(_2\). This shift is very similar to those observed in the TM-L\(_{2,3}\) XAS spectra going from TM\(^{II}\) to TM\(^{III}\) in 3d TM systems [2,5,26] and indicates the increase in the Mn oxidation state. Therefore, the manganese should have a similar electronic state in both Ce\(_2[\text{MnN}]\) and \(\eta\)-Mn\(_N\) as that in MnO, but one has to bear in mind the larger covalency in nitrides compared with oxides (see below).

The multiplet structures of the Mn-L\(_{2,3}\) XAS spectra of Ce\(_2[\text{MnN}]\) and \(\eta\)-Mn\(_N\) are much broader than those of MnO, which originates from delocalization of the valence electrons in the metallic nitrides. Similarly, the multiplet structure of \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\) is broader than that of LiMn\(_2\)O\(_2\). The intensities of the absorption maxima of \(\eta\)-Mn\(_{5/2}\) are between those obtained from the Mn\(^{II}\) and Mn\(^{III}\) compounds, what can be well understood from the average oxidation state of \(\approx 2.5\) referring to the ideal composition Mn\(_N\)\(_{\chi}\), or \(x = 0.26\), respectively. Unfortunately no spectra of Mn\(^{II}\) compounds for comparison purpose are known in the literature. In Fig. 1, we present the theoretical spectra as a solid line below the data points for MnO and Mn\(^{III}\).
Fig. 2. N-K XAS spectra of Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$], $\eta$-Mn$_3$N$_2$, and $\theta$-Mn$_3$N$_{5+x}$. Strong deviations of the branching ratios of nitridomanganates from those obtained from oxides were previously already observed [7].

Fig. 3 shows the Ce-M$_4$ XAS spectra of Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$], CeF$_3$, CeN, Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$], and CeO$_2$ for comparison.
together with those of CeF$_3$, CeN, and CeO$_2$ for comparison. Since rare-earth (RE) 4f electrons are more localized than TM-3d electrons the multiplet structures in the RE-M$_{4.5}$ XAS spectra of RE$^{II}$ and RE$^{III}$ compounds are scarcely affected by the local environment. The appearance of RE$^{IV}$ spectral features depends on the degree of covalent mixing between 4f and valence electrons. From Fig. 3, one can see that the main structure of the spectrum of CeN is very similar to that of CeF$_3$, therefore it is close to Ce$^{III}$. This result obviously disagrees with previous magnetic and XPS studies [30,31] which indicated the cerium state in CeN closer to Ce than to CeF$_3$. Thus, we can conclude that the electronic state of CeN is very similar to that of CeF$_3$, therefore it is close to Ce$^{III}$. This result obviously disagrees with previous magnetic and XPS studies [30,31] which indicated the cerium state in CeN closer to Ce than to CeF$_3$, but confirms that this Ce$^{III}$ component does not originate from surface decomposition, we turned to the surface-insensitive hard X-ray measurement at the Ce-L$_3$ threshold (Fig. 4).

Unlike the RE$^{II}$ and RE$^{III}$ compounds with a single peak structure in the RE-L$_3$ XAS spectra, the RE-L$_3$ XAS spectrum of the RE$^{IV}$ compounds shows a double-peaked structure as shown for CeO$_2$ due to RE-4f/ligand-2p covalence in the sense of $u_0[4f^8] + v_0[4f^4L] + w_0[4f^6L^2]$ (compare Fig. 4). The observed spectral features can be well reproduced by a many-electron bonding scheme of a simplified Anderson impurity model [17].

From CeO$_2$ to Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$], the spectral weight of the lower energy peak increases by 10% indicating a decrease in the oxidation state, or, in other words, an increase in the 4f occupancy. The large linewidth in the spectrum of CeO$_2$ is attributed to the large crystal field splitting compared with the nitrides. The spectral intensity for each eigenvalue $E_i$ is given by

$$I(E_i) = (u_i u_i + v_i v_i + w_i w_i)^2$$

and the average 4f electron occupancy by

$$n_i = |v_i|^2 + 2|w_i|^2$$

With this simple approach, the increase in the spectral weight of the lower energy peak from CeO$_2$ to Ce$_2$[MnN$_3$] can be understood by an increase in the 4f occupancy in the ground state from $n_e=0.49$ to 0.52 using a decrease in $\Delta$ by 0.4 eV, while the other parameters $V=3$ eV, $U_{ct}=12.6$ eV, $U_{ct}=9.5$ eV, and $U_{ca}=U_{da}=4.5$ eV stay nearly the same.

$^1$The Hamiltonian and wavefunction in the ground state and the final state are given by the following equations:

$$\begin{pmatrix} 0 & V & 0 \\ V & U_1 & \sqrt{2}V \\ 0 & \sqrt{2}V & U_2 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} u_i \\ v_i \\ w_i \end{pmatrix} = E \begin{pmatrix} u_i \\ v_i \\ w_i \end{pmatrix}$$

(3)

$|\Phi_1 \approx u_0[4f^8] + v_0[4f^4L] + w_0[4f^6L^2] \rangle$ (4)

$$|\Phi_2 \approx u_1[2p4f^35d^6] + v_1[2p4f^4L5d^6] + w_1[2p4f^6L^25d^6] \rangle \quad (f=1, 2, 3)$$

(5)

Here $f=0$, $U_1=\Delta$, and $U_2=\Delta + U_{ct}$ for the ground state, and $f=1, 2, 3$, $U_1=\Delta - U_{ct}$ and $U_2=2U_{ct} + U_{ct}$ for the final state. $\Delta$ denotes the charge transfer energy and the parameter $V$ represents the hybridization between the RE-4f and ligand-2p. $U_{ct}$ is the 4f/4f Coulomb interaction, while $U_{ct}$ and $U_{da}$ denote the 2p core-hole/4f and 4f/5d Coulomb interaction, respectively.
same. These results show that the cerium can be described as CeIV with a small occupation of a band mostly f in character by approximately 0.2 electrons per two Ce centers, as earlier was indicated from measurements of the magnetic susceptibility [12]. Calculations on the DFT level of theory also resulted in states immediately below the Fermi level that contain reasonably sized contributions from Ce 4f and Ce 5d orbitals [20].

4. Conclusion

The results indicate that the electronic states of the metal species in ternary rare earth-metal compounds are more complicated than expected from the oxidation states if the RE-4f electrons take part in bonding or if there is 4f covalence. In Ce2[MoN4]2, the oxidation state of manganese is found to be close to that in Mn2N2, rather than in θ-Mn2N4 or LiMnO. The cerium 4f occupancy is about 0.52 versus 0.49 for CeO2. Therefore, the valence state is slightly lower than 4 usually called for CeO2. The main difficulty in interpreting the obtained spectra of manganese with respect to the electronic and the spin state is the absence of any manganese(1) spectra in the literature for comparison purposes. With advancing preparative techniques, and thus, increasing knowledge on low valency transition metal compounds, we suggest collecting a broader base of spectroscopic data.

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