Microporous Battery Electrodes from Molecular Cluster Precursors

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Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Developing novel energy storage materials is critical to many renewable energy technologies. In this work, we report on the synthesis and electrochemical properties of materials composed of porous cobalt selenide microspheres prepared from molecular cluster precursors. The cobalt selenide microspheres excel as Na+ ion battery electrode materials, with a specific capacity of ∼550 mA h/g and excellent cycling stability of 85% over 100 cycles, and perform equally well as Li+ ion battery electrodes with a specific capacity of ∼600 mA h/g and cycling stability of 80% over 100 cycles. Materials which reversibly store large amounts of Na+ ions are uncommon, and these performances represent significant advances in the field. More broadly, this work establishes metal chalcogenide molecular clusters as valuable precursors for creating new, tunable energy storage materials.

KEYWORDS: cluster compounds, microspheres, electrochemistry, batteries, conducting material

Co6Se8(PEt3)6 using elemental Se as a phosphine scavenger. In this work, we develop a new solution-phase chemical approach to perform equally well as Li+ ion battery electrodes with a specific capacity of ∼600 mA h/g and cycling stability of 80% over 100 cycles. Materials which reversibly store large amounts of Na+ ions are uncommon, and these performances represent significant advances in the field. More broadly, this work establishes metal chalcogenide molecular clusters as valuable precursors for creating new, tunable energy storage materials.

Co6Se-MS

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Cobalt chalcogenides have attracted considerable attention because of their rich structural chemistry and their potential use in hydrodesulfurization,1,2 electrocatalysis,3,4 dye-sensitized solar cells,5,6 supercapacitors,7,8 and battery applications. While a variety of cobalt chalcogenide morphs can be prepared using bulk syntheses (e.g., solid state,9 solution phase,10 and solvothermal reactions11,12), there is a sustained interest in creating nanostructures whose performances can surpass their bulk crystalline counterparts because of unique structures, morphologies, quantum confinement effects, and surface properties.13,14

Here, we report a new material composed of microporous cobalt chalcogenide microparticles synthesized from molecular cluster precursors and their performances as battery electrode materials. Recently deployed as superatomic building blocks to create functional materials,15,16 metal chalcogenide molecular clusters have previously been shown to convert to bulk crystalline solids by removing their passivating ligands via thermolysis.17,18 Other well-defined clusters have been used as electronic or catalytic dopants in hybrid materials.19−21 In this work, we develop a new solution-phase chemical approach to dissociate the capping ligands from the molecular cluster Co6Se8(PET3)6 using elemental Se as a phosphine scavenger. The resulting cobalt selenide microspheres, designated as CoSe-MS, have high surface areas and robust electrochemical properties, a combination that is particularly attractive for battery applications. We find that the material performs best for Na+ ion battery applications relative to similar materials, with a high specific capacity (∼550 mA h/g) and excellent cycling performances (85% retention after 100 cycles). Likewise, CoSe-MS functions well as anode materials for Li+ ions (∼600 mA h/g and cycling stability of 80% over 100 cycles).

Figure 1 illustrates the synthesis of CoSe-MS, starting from the parent molecular cluster Co6Se8(PET3)6. The synthesis of these cluster precursors from Co2(CO)8, PET3, and Se is detailed in the Supporting Information.22 To dissociate PET3 from the Co6Se8 core, we combine the molecular cluster with six equivalents of Se in toluene and heat the suspension to 150 °C in a thick wall vessel sealed under N2 with a Teflon stopper. A black solid, CoSe-MS, precipitates after 24 h and is collected under a N2 atmosphere by filtration and dried in vacuo. The key concept is that the phosphine ligands are somewhat labile at high temperatures in solution and upon dissociation from the core, they become kinetically trapped as Et3P=Se. We propose that upon ligand dissociation, the naked cluster cores first fuse together through Co-Se linkages to form an extended structure. Champsaur et al. recently reported a related fusion reaction in a model Co6Se8 cluster.23

Received: October 17, 2018
Accepted: March 5, 2019
Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) reveals that CoSe-MS consists of microscopic spheres of cobalt selenide with diameters typically in the range 0.5−1 μm (Figure 2). The high-magnification SEM images of the microspheres shown in Figure 2a,b hint at a porous structure. N2 adsorption isotherm measurements and Brunauer−Emmett−Teller analysis confirm this key observation: the N2 isotherms for CoSe-MS in Figure S4 show H4-type hysteresis loops associated with microporous or mesoporous structures.27 CoSe-MS has a specific surface area of ∼130 m2/g and an average pore diameter of ∼1.7 nm, as estimated by Barrett−Joyner−Halenda analysis (Table S2).

X-ray pair distribution function (PDF) analysis28 is performed on CoSe-MS to further investigate its structure. A strategy of testing all the structures composed of Co and Se, available at the Inorganic Crystal Structure Database, (ICSD)29 is used. The best fit is obtained for a nanocrystalline Co3Se4 (NC-Co3Se4) structure model (Figure 2c inset).30 Closer inspection of the fit in Figure 2c suggests that this model fits the PDF peaks well in the high-r region, but additional unit signal is evident in the difference curve in the low-r region. We, therefore, explore a two-phase model where a second structure is added to the NC-Co3Se4 model but given a much shorter range of structural coherence to explain the extra signal in the low-r region. The best agreement was obtained by adding a second NC-Co3Se4 phase with a small spherical particle diameter. The resulting PDF fit of short range-ordered (SRO) NC-Co3Se4 + longer range-ordered (LRO) NC-Co3Se4 model, with a goodness of fit parameter, Rw = 0.159, is shown in Figure 2d. The refined structural parameters are shown in Table S3. The fit is greatly improved over the single-phase fit. The detailed structural modeling and the method for PDF measurements28,31−40 can be found in the Supporting Information.

In agreement with the PDF results, the powder X-ray diffraction pattern of CoSe-MS matches that of Co3Se4 (Figure S1). Energy-dispersive X-ray (EDX) spectroscopy establishes the composition of the solid as CoSe1.2P0.1 (Table S1), suggesting ∼10% Se deficiency in the material.

With a porous structure and spherical morphology, CoSe-MS differs significantly from other cobalt chalcogenide materials. To illustrate this, we annealed CoSe-MS at 400 °C for 4 h (CoSe-1, Table 1). The microsphere morphology is maintained (Figure S2) but the internal surface area of CoSe-1 is dramatically decreased to 7 m2/g. The N2 isotherms show essentially no hysteresis, consistent with a nonporous structure. The final composition of CoSe-1 is CoSe1.1P0.01 as determined by EDX. Note that the annealed compounds show a loss of crystallinity (Figure S1). We also prepared an additional comparison material by sealing pristine microcrystalline Co3Se4(PEt3)6 in a quartz tube and heating the material to 400 °C to dissociate PEt3 (CoSe-2, Table 1). The SEM images of the resulting materials reveal that this approach produces submicron irregular particles (Figure S2) that differ drastically from CoSe-MS.

The combination of the microspherical morphology, micro-porosity, and crystalline structure imparts CoSe-MS with unique electrochemical properties. To explore these properties, we fabricated working electrodes by depositing a slurry of the material, carbon black, and polyvinylidenefluoride onto Cu
substrates. All electrochemical analyses are performed in coin cells with the Li or Na metal as the counter electrode (details of the working electrode, electrolytes, and cell fabrication are in the Supporting Information). We find that CoSe-MS works best as Na+ ion battery electrode materials, although it is an adequate Li+ ion battery electrode material. Highlighting these findings, Figure 3 presents the galvanostatic voltage data of CoSe-MS on both ions.

At a current density of 50 mA/g, the CoSe-MS/Li cell shows an initial capacity of 602 mA h/g. When the current density is increased to 200 mA/g after two cycles, the initial capacity is 507 mA h/g; it remains at ~405 mA h/g after 100 cycles at 200 mA/g, for a capacity retention of 80% (Figure 3a). While the exact reason for this capacity loss remains unclear, we note that it is mainly due to the shortening of the plateau at 1.5 V. One likely cause is the conversion reaction between the material and Li+ ions. SEM confirms that the morphology of the electrode material is essentially unchanged after cycling (Figure S3), indicating that the microporous structure allows the structure to release the strains created by the conversion reaction and prevents the spherical particles from breaking apart, leading to reasonable cycling. Based on the voltage profile and specific capacity, we infer that the overall electrochemical reaction is Co3Se4 + 8Li → 3Co + 4Li2Se for Co3Se4/Li cells and Co3Se4 + 8Na → 3Co + 4Na2Se for Co3Se4/Na cells.18

To gain further insight into the electrochemical properties of CoSe-MS, we performed galvanostatic cycling experiments and compared the performances of these nanomaterials with those of the annealed control samples (Figures 3b and S7). Overall, these measurements confirm the higher capacity and significantly better cycling stability of the microporous CoSe-MS. When comparing CoSe-MS with nonporous CoSe-1, we observe vastly different behaviors: the initial capacity is lower (442 mA h/g at current density 50 mA/g) and decays faster to 156 mA h/g after 100 cycles. This represents a capacity retention of only 35%. Moreover, electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) measurements of CoSe-MS/Li and CoSe-1/Li cells suggest that the microporous structure of CoSe-MS provides better diffusion kinetics for different charge states, when compared to a nonporous material (Figure S8).

Remarkably, CoSe-MS excels for Na+ ions. The design of high-performance anode materials for Na+ ion batteries is more challenging than Li+ ion batteries because of the sluggish solid-state diffusion of Na+.41 Traditional compounds such as metal oxides, metal chalcogenides, and carbonaceous materials suffer from low specific capacities (200–300 mA h/g) at higher current densities and restricted cycle life due to high volume expansion.42−45 As a reference, state-of-the-art chalcogenide-
based Na⁺ ion battery materials such as MoS₂ nanoflowers, Cu-doped CoSe₂ microboxes, and hollow CoSe₂ microspheres show specific capacities of 350 mA h/g after 300 cycles, 400 mA h/g after 500 cycles, and 467 mA h/g after only 40 cycles, respectively.

In this context, the electrochemical properties of the CoSe-MS/Na cell presented in Figure 3c,d are exciting. The cyclic voltammogram (CV) reveals that the main cathodic and anodic peaks, respectively, at 1.0 and 1.5 V versus Na⁺/Na, are essentially unchanged after cycling, indicating a reversible reaction (Figure S6) similar to other described mechanisms. A new peak at 0.6 V versus Na⁺/Na, which gradually grows in with each cycle, suggests that the structure of the material is changing, potentially forming polyselenides.

The galvanostatic voltage profile of CoSe-MS/Na measured at a current density of 200 mA/g reflects the features in voltammogram (Figure 3c). During discharge, after a short plateau at 1.8 V, the voltage quickly drops down to 1.2 V, at which point a second, longer plateau occurs between 1.2 and 1 V. This plateau corresponds to the major peak at 1.0 V in the CV. Upon cycling, an additional plateau gradually appears at 0.7 V, which is consistent with the peak growing at 0.6 V in the CV.

To evaluate performance in battery applications, the CoSe-MS/Na cell is initially cycled at a current density of 50 mA/g for three cycles: the initial capacity is 554 mA h/g (Figures 3d and S7). The current density is then increased to 200 mA/g for 100 cycles: the capacity starts at 437 mA h/g and decreases to 371 mA h/g at the 100th cycle, for a capacity retention of 85%. By comparison, CoSe-1/Na has lower initial capacities of 520 and 417 mA h/g at current densities of 50 and 200 mA/g, respectively. The capacity decreases to 60 mA h/g after only 70 cycles. Also, CoSe-2 has an initial capacity of 470 mA h/g at 200 mA/g but only has a capacity retention of 50% after 75 cycles (Figure S7). The capacity is also much better than previous reports on transition-metal selenides. These results indicate that the microporous structure of CoSe-MS is critical in determining the electrochemical performance of the material, presumably by enabling transport of the Na⁺ ions and reducing the lattice strains. This is supported by SEM images of the CoSe-MS electrode after 100 cycles, showing intact microspheres. EIS data of CoSe-MS/Na and CoSe-1/Na cells (Figure S8) also strongly imply that the microporous structure of CoSe-MS significantly enhances the diffusion kinetics of Na⁺ ions.

The microporosity also improves the power capacity of the materials as ions can access higher surface areas and the diffusion through the solid is reduced. The CoSe-MS/Li cell delivers capacities of 576, 568, 563, 539, and 467 mA h/g at rates of 0.2, 0.33, 0.5, 1, and 2 C (1 C = 500 mA/g), respectively, which are 95, 94, 93, 89, and 77% of that at 0.1 C (606 mA h/g) (Figure 4). The plateaus at 1.5 V are unchanged, indicating that the reaction mechanism remains the same across different current densities (Figure 4a). Similarly, the CoSe-MS/Na cell shows attractive performance across a wide range of rates, even though the Na⁺ ions are much larger than Li⁺ ions. The cell delivers capacities of 532, 474, 424, and 360 mA h/g at rates of 0.2, 0.5, 1, and 2 C, respectively, corresponding to 87, 77, 69, and 59% of that at 0.1 C (612 mA h/g) (Figure 4b), with the same shape of voltage profiles. When compared to nonporous control material CoSe-1, the power capacity and cycling stability of CoSe-MS are much better (Figure 4b,d). These results show that the high surface area and microporosity of CoSe-MS can improve the reaction and ion-diffusion kinetics, enabling excellent power capacities.

In summary, we have developed a mild chemical approach to convert cobalt selenide molecular clusters into polycrystalline materials.
mesoporous microspheres. Because of their porosities, high surface areas, and robust electrochemical properties, these new materials exhibit excellent performances in Li+ and Na+ ion battery electrode applications. These results chart a clear path to expand the development of energy storage materials using molecular cluster precursors.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/acsami.8b18149.

Experimental procedures, battery fabrication methods, instrumentation details, and supplementary figures and tables are given via a link at the end of the document.

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Material synthesis and structural characterization were supported by the NSF MRSEC program through the Columbia University Center for Precision Assembly of Superstratic and Superatomic Solids (DMR-1420634). Electrochemical measurements were supported in part by the US Air Force Office of Scientific Research (AFOSR) grant FA9550-18-1-0020. A.P. was supported by the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program. Characterization of the materials was performed in the Shared Materials Characterization Laboratory at Columbia University. Use of the Shared Materials Characterization Laboratory was made possible by funding from Columbia University. We thank Prof. Alissa Park and Emily Hsu for use of their N2 adsorption isotherm apparatus. X-ray PDF measurements were conducted on beamline 28-ID-2 of the National Synchrotron Light Source II, a U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Science User Facility operated for the DOE Office of Science by Brookhaven National Laboratory under contract no. DE-SC0012704.

■ REFERENCES


