

SINTER HARDENING OF Cr-Mo PRE-ALLOYED STEELS AS A FUNCTION OF THE CARBON CONTENT

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Abstract

Sinter hardening is a technique that is frequently employed in powder metallurgy parts production since it is an economical, clean, and environmentally friendly procedure. Since the cooling rates are however significantly lower than e.g. in water or oil quenching, alloy systems have to be used that ensure martensite formation already at moderate cooling rates. In the present study, quenching dilatometry was used to investigate the hardenability of two types of Cr pre-alloyed steels, Fe-3Cr-0.5Mo and Fe-1.5Cr-0.2Mo, the carbon content being varied, and sinter hardening diagrams were plotted. It showed that this parameter has a pronounced influence on the hardenability of the 3 % Cr alloy; in particular in the range 0.3...0.4 % combined C. For the lower alloyed system, in contrast, even 0.52 % combined C was insufficient to ensure martensite formation at the cooling rates typical for industrial sinter hardening. Finally, impact test specimens were prepared by sinter hardening at cooling rates typical for industry, and hardness, as well as impact energy, were determined.

Keywords: *sintered steels, sinter hardening, Cr pre-alloyed, martensite, dilatometry.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the main reasons for the ubiquitous use of steels is the chance to modify their properties in a wide range by heat treatments [1-3]. Compared to other metals, the ferrite-austenite transformation is the basis for many more variants of heat treatment, in particular the quench-and-temper treatment that has been used for millennia to increase the strength and hardness of steel products. This holds for wrought steels but also for powder metallurgy steels which may differ from wrought steels in composition and microstructure but for which the same fundamentals hold.

With the trend to higher performance combined with lower weight in many areas of technology, in particular in the automotive sector, improved mechanical properties are required also for sintered steels used in powder metallurgy precision parts for highly loaded applications e.g. in automotive engines and transmissions. In this case, advanced alloying concepts are studied, considering the many more alloying variants PM has to offer compared to ingot metallurgy but also the trend to more cost-effective and ecological alloy elements than the usual Cu and Ni in classical PM steels. Here, primarily Cr and Mn are options, to some extent also Si, and prealloying, admixing, diffusion bonding, and master alloys are all viable to produce low alloy steels through the press-and-sinter route.

As stated above, heat treatment is a further and widely used route to improve the mechanical properties of sintered steels. This is possible by numerous techniques: the usual quench-and-temper treatment can be applied, this however requires additional manufacturing steps and, since the PM parts contain predominantly open porosity, necessitates careful and extensive cleaning operations to remove the quenching fluid – typically oil – from the pores which is also an ecological penalty. Induction hardening is a standard procedure with high productivity but is restricted to parts such as sprockets with circular symmetry. An elegant and cost-effective method that can be applied to virtually all particle shapes is sinter hardening, i.e. quenching the parts with cold gas – typically nitrogen – immediately after they leave the high-temperature zone of the sintering furnace [4-9]. Sinter hardening furnaces have been available for many years, and this technique has entered large-scale production because of the economical combination of sintering and heat treatment [10]. There is a drawback insofar as sizing is hardly possible with these very hard materials; this is an aspect that has to be considered.

A further limitation is the fairly low cooling rate attainable through gas quenching. In an empty furnace, cooling rates up to 8 K/s are possible but in a fully loaded furnace rates of 2-3 K/s are more realistic. Furthermore, as shown by Bocchini et al [11], the ratio surface/volume also plays a major role since the factor that determines the cooling rate is the heat transfer specimen-atmosphere. Heat conducting within the part itself is usually sufficiently fast to ensure fairly homogeneous cooling – and thus transformation – within the body; here the fact is also beneficial that most PM parts are complex-shaped and thus have a high surface-to-volume ratio and typically low wall thickness.

To compensate for the slow cooling compared e.g. to oil quenching, the alloying system has to be adapted accordingly, with higher alloy element contents being required. Special PM steel grades have been developed for sinter hardening, e.g. based on pre-alloyed Fe-Mo powder with diffusion bonded Cu or Cu+Ni [5, 12]. These alloy elements have been popular in PM because of their low oxygen affinity. Therefore, any oxides present in the compacts can be easily reduced during sintering, and also the risk of oxygen pickup from the sintering atmosphere is marginal. However, these elements are expensive, and Ni is classified as carcinogenic; consequently, elements such as Cr are increasingly regarded as attractive [13], and Cr and Cr-Mo pre-alloyed powders are now commercially available at an acceptable cost. These powders result in tighter requirements regarding the chemistry of sintering, but this is manageable today, and it has been shown that this class of materials is also well suited for sinter hardening [7], at least if martensite is the desired microstructure.

In the present work, sinter hardening of steels prepared from such pre-alloyed powder grades has been investigated with the main focus on the role of carbon in combination with high-temperature sintering [14-16]. Carbon control is essential for sintered steels, being trickier than with wrought steels, and particular with sintered steels alloyed with elements of high oxygen affinity such as Cr, carbon loss during sintering is a crucial topic. This holds true in particular for high-temperature sintering when deoxidation is more complete but at the price of higher carbon loss [17]. Therefore, the role of the combined C content on the sinter hardening response of PM steels is of high practical relevance.

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

As starting materials, the pre-alloyed steel grades Astaloy CrM (Fe-3%C-0.5%Mo) and Astaloy CrL (Fe-1.5%Cr-0.2%Mo) were used, both from Höganäs AB, Sweden. Natural graphite UF4 (Kropfmühl) was admixed as a carbon source, and Licowax C

Micropowder PM (Clariant) was added as a lubricant. The powders were compacted at 800 MPa to test bars $100 \times 10 \times 9 \text{ mm}^3$, the resulting green densities (measured through mass and dimensions) being approx. 7.02 g.cm^{-3} for CrM and 7.07 g.cm^{-3} for CrL. The green compacts were sintered in a push-type furnace with SiC heating elements and gas-tight superalloy muffle (Kanthal APM) for 40 min isothermal at 1250°C (Ast CrM) or 1280°C (Ast CrL), the latter temperature being slightly higher to compensate for the slightly lower sintering activity of CrL as a consequence of its lower Cr content. The sintering atmosphere was high purity N_2 (99.999 %).

At the end of the furnace, a gas quench unit was fixed that allowed defined sinter hardening by nitrogen quenching, the cooling conditions being adjusted by setting the nitrogen flow accordingly, a range of $8 \dots 78 \text{ m}^3/\text{hr}$ being used. The cooling process was recorded by a thermocouple fixed in the bore of a dummy specimen that was placed in the sintering boat together with the specimens to be sinter hardened. Since the gas flow was kept constant during each cooling cycle, exponential cooling graphs were obtained (in contrast to classical CCT diagrams, but similar to the actual conditions in the sinter hardening furnace), and the hardenability was plotted in “sinter hardening diagrams” in which the time axis was set linear (see e.g. [6]). The sintered density was measured through water displacement (after impregnation of the specimens with water stop spray), and apparent hardness HV30 and unnotched impact energy were measured.

From the sinter hardened specimens, small bars of $12 \times 4 \times 4 \text{ mm}^3$ were cut, and thermocouples Type S were welded to the bars. The specimens were then inserted into a quenching dilatometer Bähr type 805, heated at 25 K/s to 1100°C , held there for 5 min in a vacuum, and then quenched with Ar 99.999 %, the desired cooling profile being attained by adjusting the Ar flow. Afterward, the specimens were characterized metallographically.

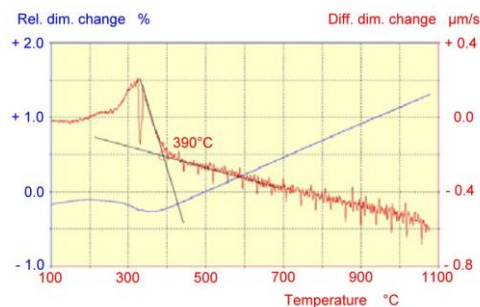
To ease the comparison of the (exponential) cooling cycles, a cooling rate linearized between 1100 and 100°C is given in the following. The austenitizing temperature of 1100°C , which is extraordinarily high for standard CCT diagrams, was used to approximate the conditions for sinter hardening in which case gas quenching is typically done from 1120°C , in part even from 1250°C . The otherwise critical austenite grain coarsening, which would occur in wrought steels at these high temperatures, is not a problem with sintered steels since the pores stabilize the grain structure [18].

RESULTS

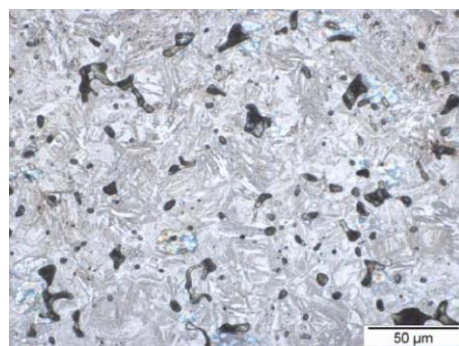
Sinter hardening diagram for Astaloy CrM

For this test run, specimens were prepared to contain 0.4 %, 0.5 %, and 0.6 % C admixed; after sintering the combined carbon content was measured by LECO analysis to be 0.30, 0.39, and 0.49 % C, respectively. Higher C contents were avoided according to the results shown in [19]. Quenching tests were done from 1100°C at different conditions, the linearized cooling rates being varied from 1 to 8 K/s , in part up to 16 K/s .

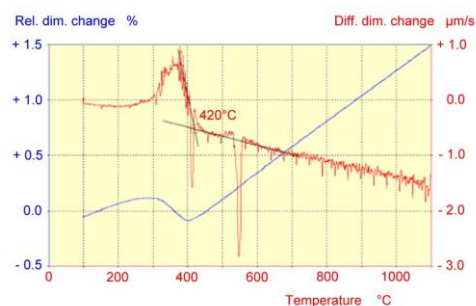
In Fig. 1, typical dilatometric graphs and the resulting microstructures are shown. As can be seen, at 1 K/s bainitic transformation occurs, while at 2.5 K/s a mixed bainitic-martensitic microstructure is generated, and at 4 K/s fully martensitic transformation is recorded. This however means that for industrial practice, at this carbon content the material is not sufficiently reliable for sinter hardening since no fully martensitic microstructure can be expected.



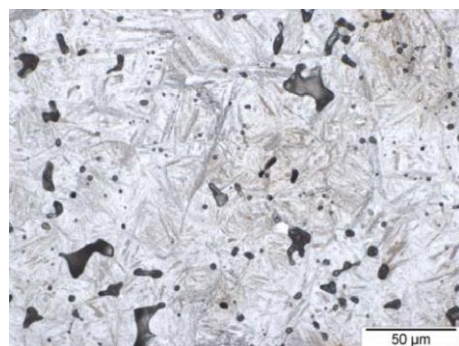
a) dilatometric graph



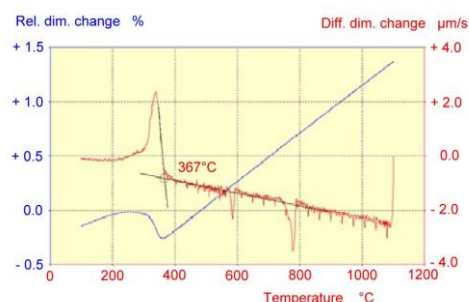
b) section, Nital etched



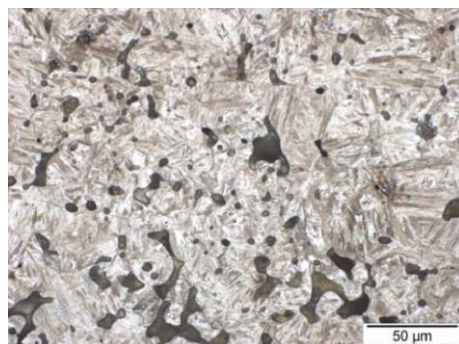
c) dilatometric graph



d) section, Nital etched



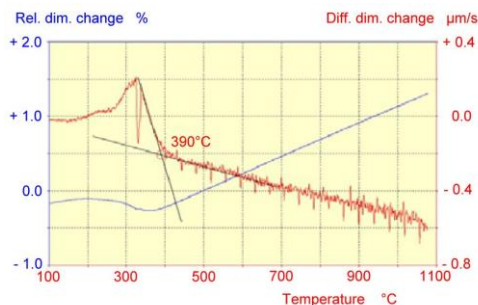
e) dilatometric graph



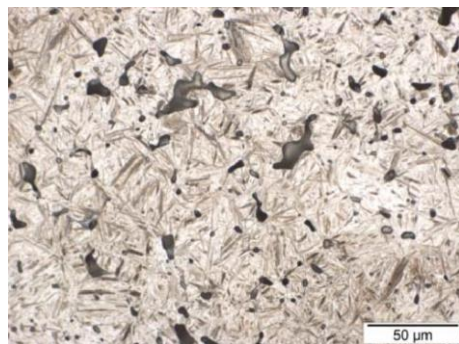
f) section, Nital etched

Fig. 1. Quenching dilatograms and microstructures of Astaloy CrM-0.30%C(combined), differently cooled: a,b) linearized cooling rate 1 K/s; c,d) linearized cooling rate 2.5 K/s; e,f) linearized cooling rate 4 K/s.

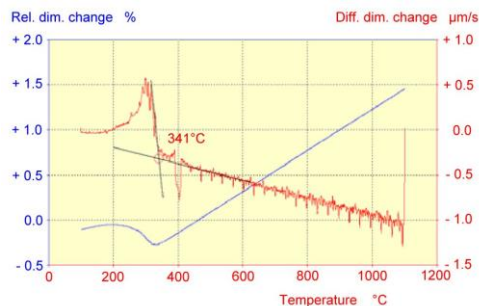
When the carbon content is increased to 0.39 % combined, significantly different behavior is observed (Fig. 2). At 1 K/s a mixed bainitic-martensitic transformation is recorded, but already at 1.5 K/s a virtually martensitic microstructure is generated, and the same holds for 2 K/s. This means that this material is already suited for application in industrial sinter hardening furnaces, at least if the precise adjustment of the carbon content is granted.



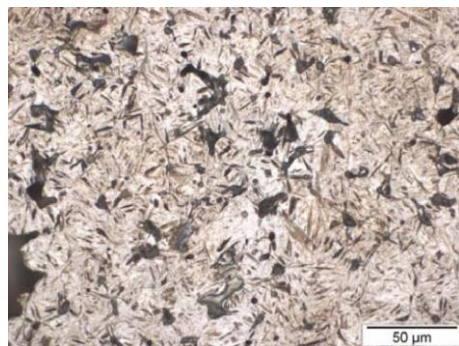
a) dilatometric graph



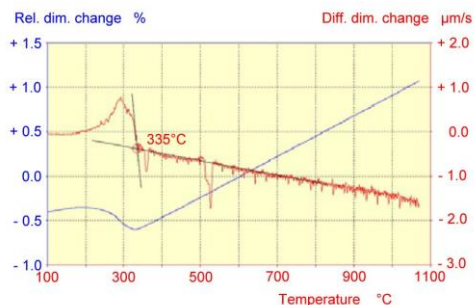
b) section, Nital etched



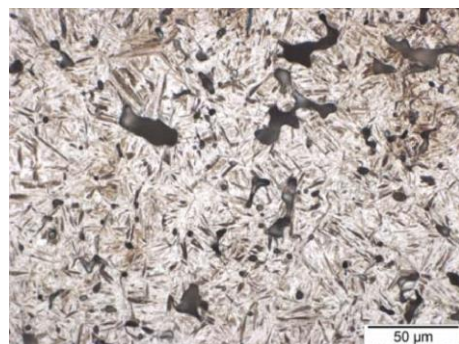
c) dilatometric graph



d) section, Nital etched



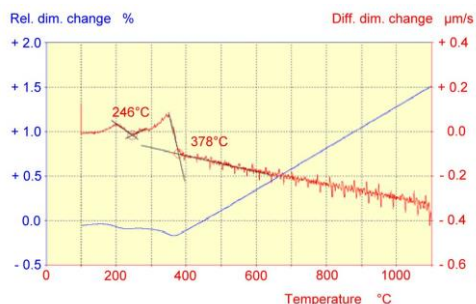
e) dilatometric graph



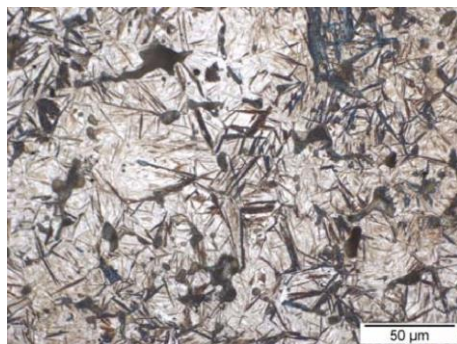
f) section, Nital etched

Fig. 2. Quenching dilatograms and microstructures of Astaloy CrM-0.39%C(combined), differently cooled: a,b) linearized cooling rate 1 K/s; c,d) linearized cooling rate 1.5 K/s; e,f) linearized cooling rate 2 K/s.

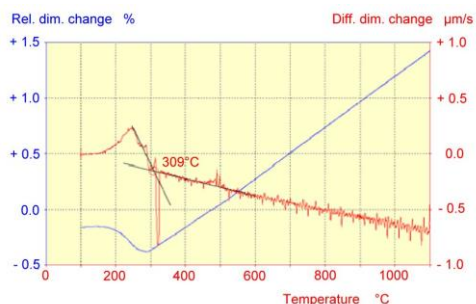
If the carbon content is further increased, to 0.49 % combined, the hardenability is improved once more (Fig. 3): here, even at a cooling rate of 0.5 K/s some martensite is formed alongside bainite, and at 1 K/s fully martensitic microstructure is generated. This indicates that the material is very robust in sinter hardening, even larger and thick-walled specimens transforming fully martensitic under industrial cooling conditions.



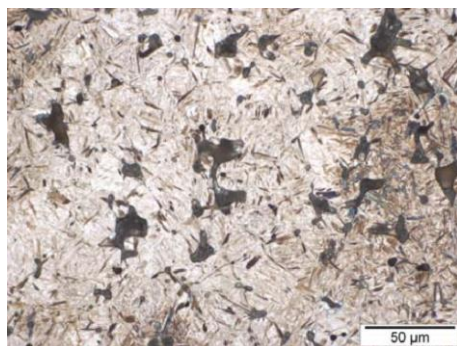
a) dilatometric graph



b) section, Nital etched



c) dilatometric graph



d) section, Nital etched

Fig. 3. Quenching dilatograms and microstructures of Astaloy CrM-0.49%C(combined), differently cooled: a,b) linearized cooling rate 0.5 K/s; c,d) linearized cooling rate 1 K/s.

When a sinter hardening diagram is plotted for the materials, the very pronounced effect of the carbon content is evident. As expected, the M_s temperature drops with higher C levels and the bainite area is shifted significantly to the right: while at 0.30 % C 3 K/s cooling rate is barely sufficient to generate martensite, at 0.49 % C even at 1 K/s fully martensitic structure is attained. This strong dependence of the hardenability on the carbon content underlines the enormous importance of careful carbon control which on one hand means control of the sintering atmosphere – to avoid decarburization –, but on the other hand also precise control of the starting oxygen content of the steel powder. The reason is that, as shown e.g. in [17, 20] in this type of PM steel, carbon is the only effective reducing agent; even if sintering in an H_2 -containing atmosphere, the fraction of oxygen removed by the formation of H_2O in the 400°C range is rather insignificant [17], and any change of the starting oxygen content means a change of the combined carbon and thus of the hardenability.

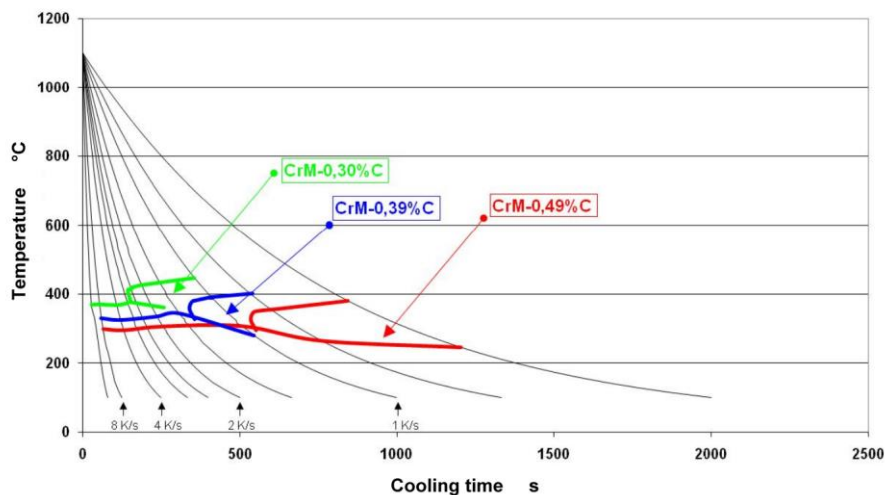


Fig. 4. Sinter hardening diagram of Astaloy CrM-x%C with varying carbon contents. Compacted at 800 MPa, sintered 40 min at 1250°C in N₂.

It can therefore be concluded that a carbon content of 0.4 % C (combined) is sufficient to ensure sinter hardening under industrial conditions. Another fact that should be considered however is the hardness attained through a martensitic transformation; hardness and hardenability are different properties [4]. It is well known (see e.g. [3]) that the hardness of martensite depends on the carbon content. To check the hardness attainable here, the microhardness was measured on specimens cooled with a rate that granted fully martensitic transformation. The results are shown in Tab. 1.

Tab. 1 Microhardness HV0.05 of Astaloy CrM-C with varying C contents, sintered 40 min at 1250°C and quenched to martensitic microstructure.

Carbon content wt. %		Microhardness HV 0.05	
C admixed	C combined	Cooling rate 4 K/s	Cooling rate 8 K/s
0.40	0.30	467	472
0.50	0.39	588	592
0.60	0.49	691	690

These data clearly show that even if sintered steel is hardened to fully martensitic microstructure, only moderate matrix hardness is attained at low carbon levels. This means that for attaining high hardness the carbon content has a double effect, on the one hand improving the hardenability – i.e. the probability to obtain martensitic microstructure at a given cooling regime – and on the other hand to establish sufficient hardness of this martensite. There is of course also the question of toughness, which is also related to the hardness; this will be discussed later.

Another parameter of relevance is the Ms temperature. In Tab. 2, the Ms temperatures measured from the cooling curves for 4 and 8 K/s (linearized), respectively, are plotted; as stated above, at these cooling rates fully martensitic microstructure was obtained in all cases. As expected, the Ms temperature drops with higher carbon content

while the differences between the cooling rates are within the experimental scatter. To check if the measured Ms temperatures agree with the models available in the literature, the equations proposed by Steven and Haynes [21] and Andrews [22], respectively, as given in [3] were used, and the calculated values are depicted in Tab. 2.

Tab. 2 Ms temperatures, measured vs. calculated, of Astaloy CrM-C with varying C contents, sintered 40 min at 1250°C and quenched to martensitic microstructure.

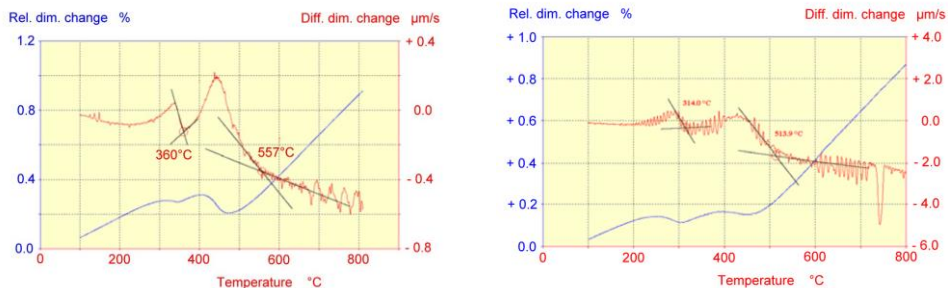
Carbon content wt. %		Ms temperature exper. °C		Ms calculated °C		
C admixed	C combined	Cooling rate 4 K/s	Cooling rate 8 K/s	Steven and Haynes	Andrews linear	Andrews product
0.40	0.30	367	370	357	372	375
0.50	0.39	325	330	314	334	329
0.60	0.49	295	299	267	292	283

The formula given by Steven and Haynes somewhat underestimates the Ms temperature while the equations from Andrews (product) and in particular Andrews (linear) predict the temperature quite reliably within the tolerated scatter. This once more confirms that such data available for wrought steels can be applied to sintered steels as well, at least for those with fairly homogeneous microstructure, as is the case with the pre-alloyed steels investigated here.

When taking the final dimensional changes observed from the dilatometric graphs – as far as can be derived from these graphs - it can be seen that the behavior is close to dimensional stability, the net dimensional change being close to +/-0 in most cases without much dependence on the carbon content or the microstructure. Here, however, more detailed investigations are currently being carried out with a newly acquired quench dilatometer.

Sinter hardening diagram for Astaloy CrL

For Astaloy CrL-C with the same nominal carbon contents, similar experiments were carried out. Here it showed that irrespective of the carbon content the hardenability is much lower than for CrM, which underlines the high relevance of the metallic alloy elements Cr and, to a lesser degree, Mo. In Fig. 5, typical dilatograms are shown, and it is evident that even at fairly high cooling rates bainite predominantly is formed. The respective sinter hardening diagram is shown in Fig. 6.



a) 0.32 % C combined, 8 K/s (linearized) b) 0.42 % C combined, 4 K/s (linearized)

Fig. 5. Quenching dilatograms of Astaloy CrL-x%C, compacted at 800 MPa, sintered 40 min at 1280°C in N₂.

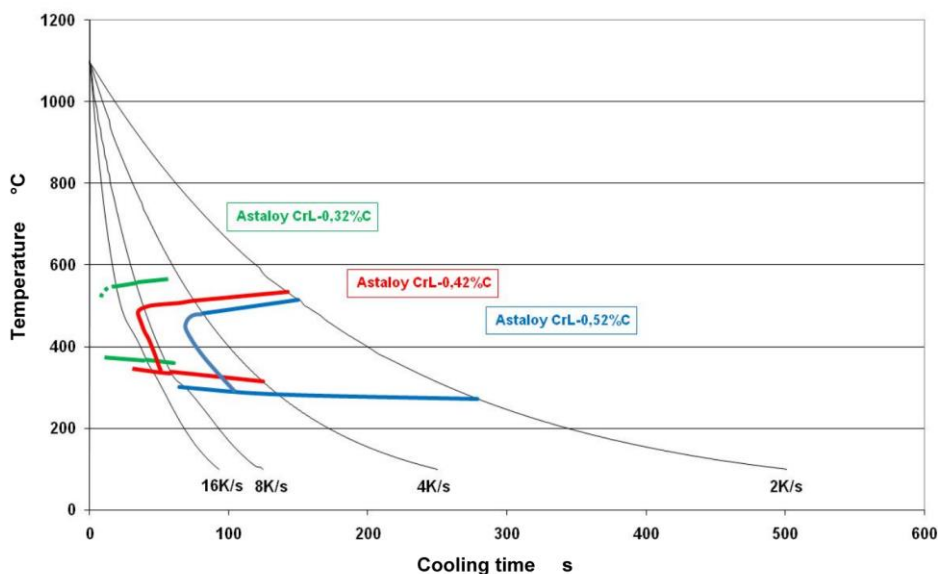


Fig. 6. Sinter hardening diagram of Astaloy CrL-x%C, compacted at 800 MPa, sintered 40 min at 1280°C in N₂.

From this diagram, it stands out clearly that the effect of carbon on the hardenability is markedly less pronounced for Astaloy CrL than for CrM. Even for the highest carbon content of 0.52 % C combined (0.6 % C nominal) cooling rates > 4 K/s are required to obtain martensitic microstructures. For lower C levels, accordingly higher cooling rates are required, > 8 K/s for 0.42 C combined and >16 K/s for 0.32 % C combined. These cooling rates are far higher than what can be attained in industrial practice; i.e. in contrast to Astaloy CrM, CrL by itself is not suited for sinter hardening even at higher carbon contents (too high C levels should be avoided to prevent loss of ductility). If sinter hardening is being aimed at, further alloy elements should be added such

as e.g. Cu [13, 23], but also master alloys containing Mn, Cr, and/or Si are effective [24-26].

Mechanical properties

Typically, the penalty to be paid for high hardness is low ductility, in sintered steels measured best through the impact energy. Therefore, it was to be checked if the positive hardening behavior of the CrM materials was combined with at least acceptable impact resistance.

To assess the properties of sinter hardened specimens prepared from both starting powder grades, impact test bars were prepared and sintered at 1250/1280°C, respectively, with subsequent sinter hardening in the gas quenching unit of the sintering furnace. By adjusting the N₂ flow, 2 cooling rates were attained, 2.2 and 2.7 K/s (linearized) to approximate the upper and lower boundaries of the cooling rate range in industrial furnaces. The properties are shown in Tab. 3.

Tab. 3 Dimensional and mechanical properties of Cr-Mo pre-alloyed sintered steels, compacted at 800 MPa, sintered 40 min in high purity N₂, sinter hardened at 2 different rates, and tempered 40 min at 200°C.

C (admixed) wt. %	C (combined) wt. %	Green density g.cm ⁻³	Cooling rate K/s lin.	Sintered density g.cm ⁻³	Apparent hardness HV30	Impact energy (unnotched) J.cm ⁻²
Astaloy CrM, sintered at 1250°C						
0.40	0.30	7.019	2.2	7.191±0.013	307±9	34.7±2.1
0.40	0.30	7.019	2.7	7.203±0.000	320±9	33.9±3.1
0.50	0.39	7.011	2.2	7.195±0.000	398±2	34.1±2.8
0.50	0.39	7.011	2.7	7.201±0.001	411±5	38.3±1.2
0.60	0.49	7.008	2.2	7.193±0.008	434±9	36.0±3.6
0.60	0.49	7.008	2.7	7.203±0.002	444±9	38.0±2.8
Astaloy CrL, sintered at 1280°C						
0.40	0.32	7.073	2.2	7.258±0.003	194 ± 2	42.5±3.5
0.40	0.32	7.073	2.7	7.256±0.000	186 ± 1	43.6±1.5
0.50	0.42	7.064	2.2	7.249±0.002	204 ± 1	42.4±1.9
0.50	0.42	7.064	2.7	7.250±0.002	207 ± 4	41.7±1.4
0.60	0.52	7.059	2.2	7.252±0.003	216 ± 4	40.2±0.8
0.60	0.52	7.059	2.7	7.253±0.002	229 ± 6	42.4±2.1

As can be seen from the table, in agreement with the previously shown results Astaloy CrM exhibits hardening at both cooling rates while Astaloy CrL remained soft regardless of cooling rate and carbon content, which corroborates the findings from quench dilatometry that this latter material is not suited for industrial sinter hardening, unless further alloy elements are added.

Astaloy CrM, in contrast, exhibits a surprisingly attractive combination of hardness and toughness, and this is improved at higher carbon levels, the impact energy being virtually independent of the combined carbon while the hardness increases with higher C content, as already indicated by the microhardness data (the differences between apparent hardness HV30 and microhardness HV0.05 are mainly a consequence of pore compression in the former test). The attractive property profile of sinter hardened Astaloy CrM is particularly well visible when plotting the impact energy vs. the hardness, as shown

in Fig. 7. Here it is evident that the CrM based materials exhibit only marginally lower impact energy than the much softer CrL types and that for CrM higher C content results in higher hardness and at least the same if not higher impact energy.

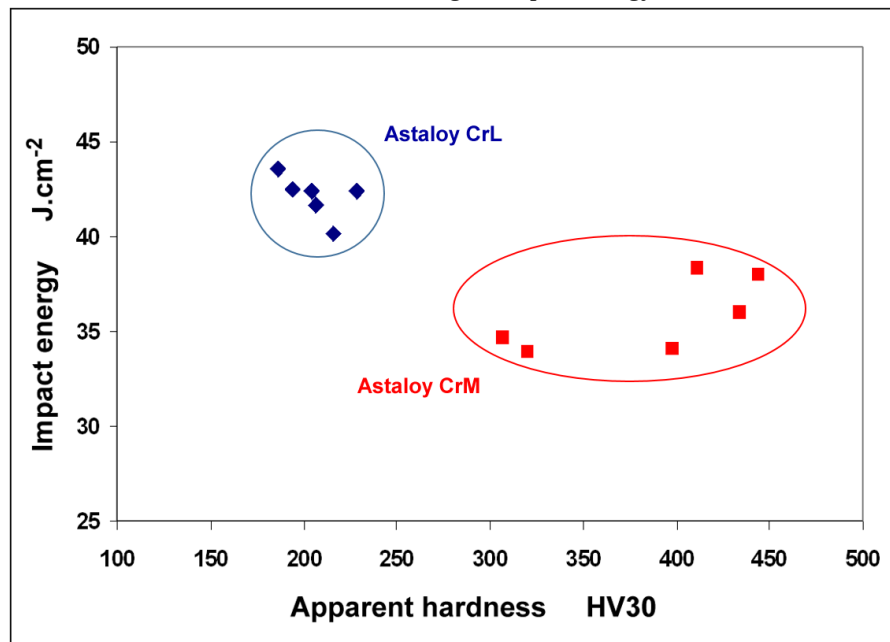


Fig. 7. Impact energy vs. apparent hardness of Astaloy CrM and Astaloy CrL after processing as in Table 2

CONCLUSIONS

Experiments in a quenching dilatometer were performed on sintered steels prepared from Cr-Mo pre-alloyed powders. It showed that for steel grades alloyed with 3%Cr-0.5%Mo, the hardenability strongly depends on the carbon content: while for 0.30 % C combined (0.40 % admixed), a minimum cooling rate of 4 K/s (linearized between 1100 and 100°C) is required to obtain fully martensitic microstructure, at 0.39 % C combined the threshold is at 1.5 K/s, and for 0.49 % C combined a cooling rate as low as 1 K/s is sufficient to percent bainite formation and result in martensite. Sinter hardening diagrams – modified CCT-diagrams – were plotted to show these relationships; for the moderate cooling rates employed for sinter hardening these diagrams with a linear time axis are more significant than classical CCT diagrams.

The lower alloyed system containing 1.5%Cr-0.2%Mo, in contrast, required markedly higher cooling rates; even at carbon levels >0.5 % combined cooling rates >4 K/s are required to ensure martensite formation. Considering that in industrial practice the cooling rates attainable are usually in the range of 2-3 K/s at least in fully loaded furnaces it can be concluded that the higher alloyed grade is well suited for sinter hardening if the carbon content is properly adjusted and carefully controlled while the lower alloyed variant does not sinter harden under industrial conditions unless further alloy elements are added.

Mechanical testing on materials sinter hardened under industry-relevant conditions showed that while the lower alloyed variant exhibited high impact toughness but low hardness, as a consequence of the poor hardenability, the higher alloyed steel had slightly

lower impact energy but much higher hardness, in particular at higher carbon levels, and the impact energy did not decrease with more combined C. This shows that the 3Cr-0.5Mo steel is excellently suited for sinter hardening of highly loaded PM components.

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