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# Role of the ionic liquid $C_6C_1ImTFSI$ in the sol-gel synthesis of silica studied by *in situ* SAXS and Raman spectroscopy<sup>†</sup>

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The sol-gel synthesis of a silica based ionogel using the ionic liquid 1-hexyl-3-methylimidazolium bis(trifluoromethanesulfonyl)imide ( $C_6C_1ImTFSI$ ) as the solvent has been followed *in situ* by combined  $\mu$ -focused x-ray scattering and  $\mu$ -Raman spectroscopy. By covering the momentum transfer range  $0.2 < q < 30 \text{ nm}^{-1}$  we probe the evolution of the ionic liquid's characteristic peaks, associated to the existence of polar and non-polar domains, as a function of reaction time. Our detailed analysis of the small angle x-ray scattered (SAXS) pattern reveals that the ionic liquid's nano-structure is partially retained during the sol-gel synthesis, as indicated by the broader yet distinguishable SAXS signatures. We also observe that the signature associated to the non-polar and polar domains shift to higher and lower  $q$ -values, respectively. Interestingly, this behavior correlates with the evolution of the chemical composition of the sol as probed by Raman spectroscopy. More precisely, we observe that both the nano-structural changes and the production of polar molecules arrest at the point of gelation. This is rationalized by the tendency of reagents and products of the sol-gel reaction to locate in different portions of the ionic liquid's nano-structure.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Ionogels are emerging materials prepared *via* the sol-gel synthesis by reacting a tetra-alkyl orthosilicate with a carboxylic acid within an ionic liquid.<sup>1–3</sup> In an ionogel, the ionic liquid is capable of retaining liquid-like properties, such as high ionic conductivity and low viscosity, despite the nano-confined state. This has been verified by magic angle spinning nuclear magnetic resonance (MAS NMR),<sup>4</sup> diffusion NMR,<sup>5</sup> and conductivity measurements.<sup>6</sup> Ionogels have therefore attracted considerable attention for use in both electrolytic and catalytic applications.<sup>1,3,7</sup> Compared to the classical sol-gel synthesis routes, the preparation of ionogels does not require the use of acids or bases. Moreover, ionogels result in a more

intimately mixed biphasic system than by swelling previously synthesized aerogels.<sup>6</sup> The most attracting aspect with ionogels, however, is that ionic liquids can be selected to be multifunctional, *i.e.* to act as structure directing agents and conduction or catalysis promoters at the same time. By providing the unique combination of affinity to other molecules and H-bond driven solvent structure, ionic liquids have the potential to be the key tools in the preparation of new chemical nano-structures.<sup>8</sup>

The research field has rapidly moved from the demonstration of a simple one-pot synthesis to obtain functional ionogels (avoiding the use of volatile compounds and supercritical conditions),<sup>2</sup> to their characterization on a more advanced level.<sup>5</sup> Some of these studies have focused on the effect of nano-confinement on the ionic liquids' physico-chemical properties. Le Bideau *et al.*<sup>4</sup> for instance have shown that ionic liquids are only marginally slowed down upon confinement and can maintain liquid-like behavior well below their normal crystallization temperature. The phase behavior of ionic liquids is also affected, with the crystallization being frustrated in the nano-confined state.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the conducting properties have been shown to be thermally stable, making ionogels interesting materials for fuel cells operating in temperature ranges where other electrolytes are not suitable.<sup>6</sup> The structural properties of ionogels have been mainly investigated by small angle x-ray scattering. These studies have revealed that ionogels consist of a silica network that is highly porous,

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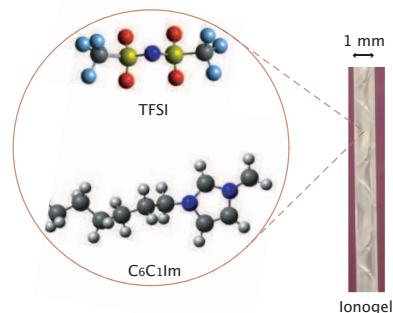
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has low mass fractal dimensions, pores in the size domain 2–20 nm and a large surface area, typically between 300 and 850 m<sup>2</sup>g<sup>-1</sup>.<sup>2,10–13</sup> These pioneering studies have also revealed that the type of anion can have an impact on the structural features,<sup>14</sup> for instance that the use of BF<sub>4</sub><sup>-</sup> results in larger pores than when using TFSI<sup>-</sup> or CF<sub>3</sub>SO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>.<sup>11</sup> The choice of the cation is also important since it can determine the type of nano-structure formed, *e.g.* worm-like or lamellar.<sup>10,15</sup>

In this context, the specific role of the ionic liquid during the sol-gel synthesis of silica based ionogels has been an intriguing question. For instance, short-chained ionic liquids such as those based on 1-butyl-3-methylimidazolium (C<sub>4</sub>C<sub>1</sub>Im<sup>+</sup>) were *a priori* not expected to self-assemble into ordered micellar structures as long-chain surfactants do, yet they could result in worm-like silica textures.<sup>10</sup> Hence, to explain the gelation mechanism the importance of H-bonding,  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking, and the role of ionic liquids as condensation catalysts have been invoked.<sup>10,16,17</sup> In our laboratories, we have found that the gelation time strongly depends on the concentration of the ionic liquid.<sup>19</sup> This has tentatively been ascribed to a dual role of the ionic liquid as added salt, hence promoting particle aggregation, and as solvent, hence keeping particles separated, at low and high ionic liquid-to-silica concentrations respectively. It appears that achieving a better knowledge of the gelation mechanism is *per se* of the utmost importance since the specific reaction pathway has an impact on the structural features of the final material.<sup>18</sup> The gelation mechanism is most appropriately investigated by employing time-resolved characterization methods. We have recently demonstrated the use of time-resolved <sup>1</sup>H NMR and Raman spectroscopy to follow the chemical reaction scheme underpinning the sol-gel transition.<sup>19,20</sup> Information on the structural evolution with time, however, is better investigated by x-ray scattering techniques,<sup>21</sup> which have already been employed to follow the growth of silica under classical\* sol-gel synthesis routes. To the best of our knowledge, although x-ray scattering has by now been extensively used to describe the nano-structure in a variety of ammonium and imidazolium based ionic liquids,<sup>24–35</sup> it has never been used as an *in situ* technique to follow the structural features of an ionic liquid during a sol-gel or any other chemical reaction.

In this study we demonstrate how the combined use of *in situ*  $\mu$ -Raman and  $\mu$ -focused x-ray scattering<sup>36,37</sup> can give simultaneous information on the varying chemical composition on one hand, and on the evolving nano-structural features on the other, during the sol-gel synthesis of ionogels. Since this study specifically concerns the use of the ionic liquid 1-hexyl-3-methylimidazolium bis(trifluoromethanesulfonyl)imide (C<sub>6</sub>C<sub>1</sub>ImTFSI), it gives some new insights on the hypothetical ability of long-chained

\**I.e.* the growth of silica by the classical reaction of TEOS in acidic aqueous solutions<sup>22</sup> and by the Stöber synthesis.<sup>23</sup>



**Fig. 1** Molecular structure of the cation (C<sub>6</sub>C<sub>1</sub>Im<sup>+</sup>) and the anion (TFSI<sup>-</sup>) of the ionic liquid C<sub>6</sub>C<sub>1</sub>ImTFSI. A picture of the ionogel inside a capillary with an outer diameter of 1 mm is also shown.

ionic liquids to organize reagents for controlled nano-reaction sites. We expect these results to contribute in directing the development of ionogels to suit specific applications.

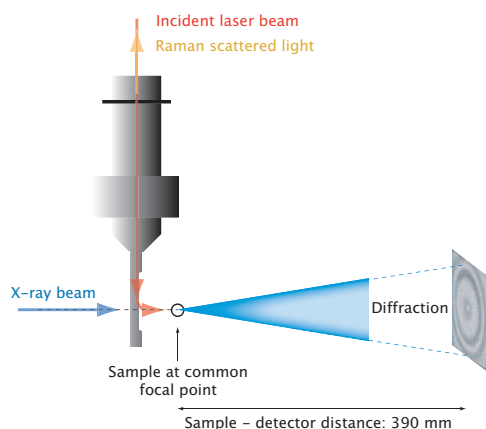
## 2 EXPERIMENTAL

### 2.1 Sample preparation

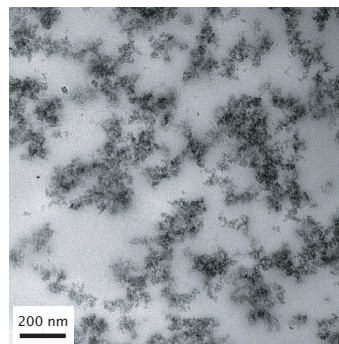
The *ionogels* were prepared following the non-aqueous route reported by K.G. Sharp in the early 90's,<sup>38</sup> that is by the reaction of tetramethylorthosilicate (TMOS, 99% purity, Sigma-Aldrich) with formic acid (FA, containing 4 wt.% of water, Sigma-Aldrich). FA and TMOS were mixed at a molar ratio 4:1 (mole<sub>FA</sub>:mole<sub>TMOS</sub>=4) at room temperature and under vigorous stirring, then the reaction occurred at ambient temperature and pressure conditions. The ionic liquid 1-hexyl-3-methylimidazolium bis(trifluoromethanesulfonyl)imide (C<sub>6</sub>C<sub>1</sub>ImTFSI, Iolitec) was added immediately after mixing the reagents, at a molar ratio with respect to TMOS, *x*, equal to one (*x*=mole<sub>IL</sub>:mole<sub>TMOS</sub>=1). Considering the hydrated state of FA, the sol initially contains ~0.4 moles of water per mole of TMOS. The molecular structure of C<sub>6</sub>C<sub>1</sub>ImTFSI is shown in Fig. 1. Samples with no ionic liquid (*x*=0) and with a higher ionic liquid content (*x*=2) were also prepared and investigated, to achieve complementary information. However, if not otherwise stated the results discussed in this work concern the ionogel with *x*=1. The gelation time, *t*<sub>gel</sub>, is defined as the time at which the solution stops flowing under gravity, *i.e.* by the tilt method turning the vial upside down. During the Raman/SAXS experiments a reference sample was kept under observation outside the hutch to determine *t*<sub>gel</sub>. A picture of an ionogel inside a borosilicate capillary is also shown in Fig. 1.

## 2.2 Small angle x-ray scattering

The time resolved small angle x-ray scattering (SAXS)/Raman experiments were performed at the ID13 microfocus beam line of the ESRF facility in Grenoble (France). The beam of photons,  $\lambda=0.98 \text{ \AA}$ , with a focal size of around  $1 \mu\text{m}^2$  resulted in flux densities of around  $1 \times 10^{10} \text{ photons s}^{-1} \mu\text{m}^{-2}$ . Patterns were recorded on a 16 bit readout FReLoN charged coupled device (CCD) detector with  $2048 \times 2048$  pixels of  $51 \times 51 \mu\text{m}^2$ . The sample-to-detector distance was 390 mm giving an accessible  $q$ -range from  $\sim 0.2$  to  $\sim 30 \text{ nm}^{-1}$  (see Fig. 2). The measuring time for the x-ray scattering experiments was 2 seconds and, in order to minimize the risk of radiation damage, the sample was moved  $1 \mu\text{m}$  along the capillary direction between subsequent measurements. The time resolved spectra were taken at intervals of 10 minutes with the 2 seconds SAXS measurement immediately followed by the Raman measurement. The Fit2D software package (developed at the ESRF) was used for data reduction and to convert the SAXS images to plots of radially averaged scattered intensity versus wave vector  $q$ , *i.e.*  $I(q)$ . Immediately after mixing the reagents the solutions were injected into capillaries of borosilicate, having an outer diameter of 1 mm and a wall thickness of 0.01 mm. Capillary and background contributions have been taken into account in the peak fitting procedure. Before further analysis, x-ray data were compensated for intensity fluctuations in the incoming x-ray beam. Nevertheless, due to the beam line setup constraints, x-ray transmission could not be measured whereby the measured x-ray intensities could not be normalized.



**Fig. 2** Schematic representation of the experimental set up with the x-ray beam and the incident laser beam impinging on a common  $\mu$ -focal spot in the sample (reproduced from reference [36]).



**Fig. 3** TEM image of the ionogel with  $x=1$ . The silica clusters appear as black regions.

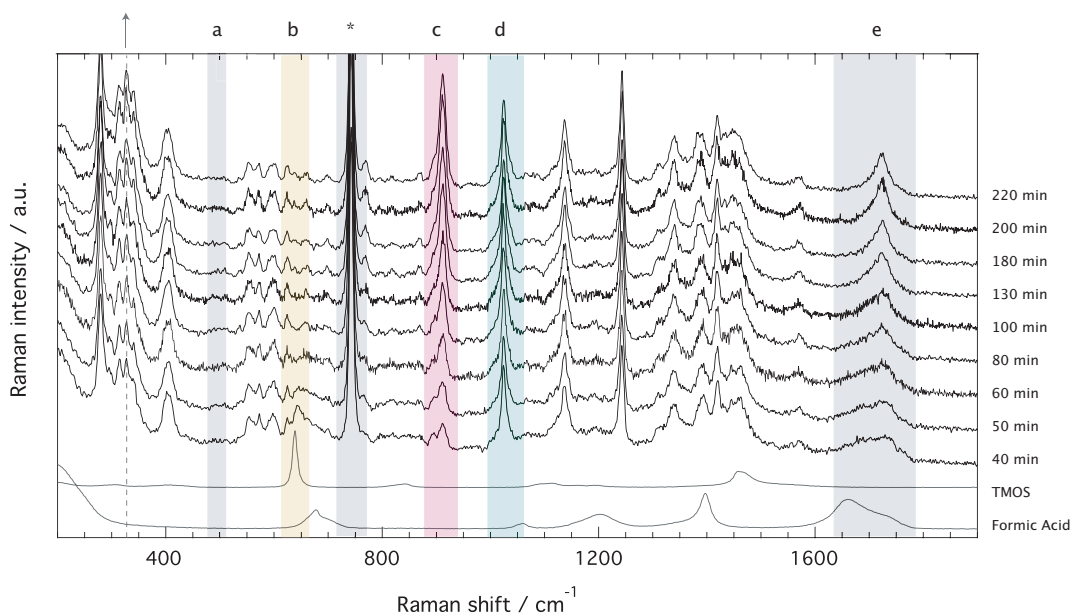
## 2.3 $\mu$ -Raman spectroscopy

Raman spectra were collected with a Renishaw InVia Raman spectrometer, using a 785 nm near-IR diode laser as the excitation source, a Peltier cooled CCD detector, a  $1200 \text{ l/mm}^{-1}$  grating, and covering the spectral range  $100\text{--}4000 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ . Spectra were acquired with a laser power of 130 mW at the sample point, over 240 seconds and every 10 minutes as a compromise between spectral quality and time resolution. The confocality with the x-ray beam was achieved using a Raman remote probe. A schematic representation of the relative position of the capillary containing the sample, the Raman remote probe, and the x-ray beam is given in Fig. 2. In the quantitative analysis of Raman spectra, relative intensities are calculated as integrated areas under a Raman peak (using an incorporated function to the Wire 3.2 software) normalized to the area of the ionic liquid's feature peaked at  $\sim 740 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ , which is thus used as an internal standard. For more details on this analytical approach, see Fig. SI-I.

## 2.4 $\text{N}_2$ adsorption measurements

The BET (Brunauer-Emmett-Teller) surface area of the ionogel was determined by  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption at 77 K on a Tristar 3000 instrument from Micrometrics Instrument Corporation. Before performing the measurements, the ionic liquid was removed by soaking the ionogel in ethanol at  $55 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  for two hours, after which the supernatant was replaced with fresh ethanol and the ionogel was soaked for an additional two hours. This procedure was repeated four times. The same washing procedure was repeated using acetone. Finally, the sample was ultrasonicated in an ethanol-acetone mixture for one hour, centrifuged, and separated from the supernatant. The washed ionogel was then dried in an oven at  $60 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ . The BET measurements were performed after degassing the sample under vacuum at  $100 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  overnight.





**Fig. 4 A:** Evolution of the Raman spectra with time for the solution with  $x=1$ . From bottom to top, spectra recorded after 30, 40, 50, 70, 120, and 214 minutes from mixing the reagents. The gelation time for the  $x=1$  sample was 85 minutes. Letters indicate the characteristic Raman vibrations of silica ( $\sim 490\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , a), TMOS ( $\sim 643\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , b), methyl formate ( $\sim 910\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , c), methanol ( $1020\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , d), formic acid ( $\sim 1650\text{--}1800\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , e), and the ionic liquid ( $\sim 740\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , \*).

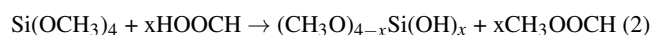
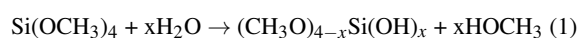
## 2.5 Transmission electron microscopy

Samples for transmission electron microscopy (TEM) analysis were prepared by plastic embedding the gel/ionogel in a TLV resin (TAAB Laboratories Equipment Ltd., Berks, England), without removing the ionic liquid. Thin sections of about 60 nm were cut using a diamond knife (DiATOME, Biel, Switzerland) with a PowerTome XL (RMC products, Boeckeler Instruments Inc., Tucson, Arizona) and then mounted onto 200-mesh carbon support film Cu-grids (C101/100, TAAB Laboratories Equipment Ltd., Berks, England). TEM imaging was carried out using a FEI Titan 80-300 (FEI Company, Eindhoven, Netherlands) operating at 80 kV. All images were acquired in the bright field mode.

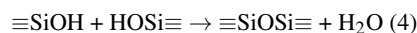
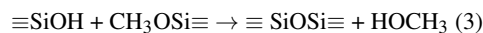
## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 3.1 The sol-gel reaction

As already discussed in previous works,<sup>19,20</sup> the reactions that take place during the sol-gel synthesis can be summarized as the 'hydrolysis' of TMOS ( $\text{Si}(\text{OCH}_3)_4$ ):



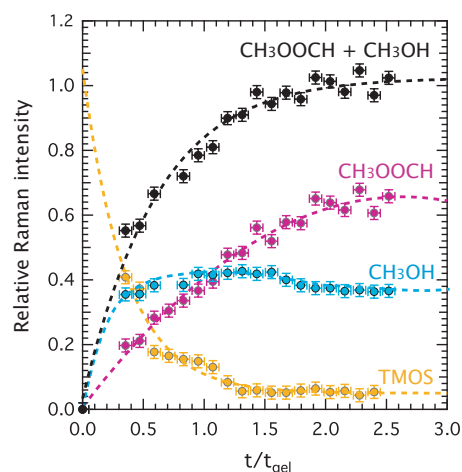
and the condensation of OH-substituted, or 'hydrolyzed', TMOS species:



As these reactions compete and proceed, an extended network of Si-O-Si bonds grows that is three-dimensionally interpenetrated by the ionic liquid.<sup>39</sup> The TEM image of the ionogel prepared through this sol-gel synthesis reveals a heterogeneous structure of aggregated clusters with inter-cluster distances of several tens of nanometers, Fig. 3. BET analyses, performed after the removal of the ionic liquid, reveal a large surface area, of  $710\text{ m}^2/\text{g}$ , and an average pore diameter of 9 nm. Moreover, a recent Raman spectroscopic study has indicated that the clusters consists of silica ( $\text{SiO}_2$ ) with on average six membered rings and Si-O-Si bond angles of about  $146^\circ$ .<sup>20</sup> Hence, the ionogel consists of a highly porous and amorphous silica network.

Raman spectra recorded for the ionogel as a function of time are provided in Fig. 4, which evidences the formation of silica (a,  $490\text{ cm}^{-1}$ : Si-O-Si bending),<sup>§</sup> the fast consumption of TMOS (b,  $643\text{ cm}^{-1}$ : Si-OCH<sub>3</sub> stretching), and the production of methyl formate (c,  $910$ : O-CH<sub>3</sub> stretching) and methanol (d,  $1020\text{ cm}^{-1}$ : C-O stretching). In the spectral range  $1650\text{--}1750\text{ cm}^{-1}$  (e, C=O stretch-

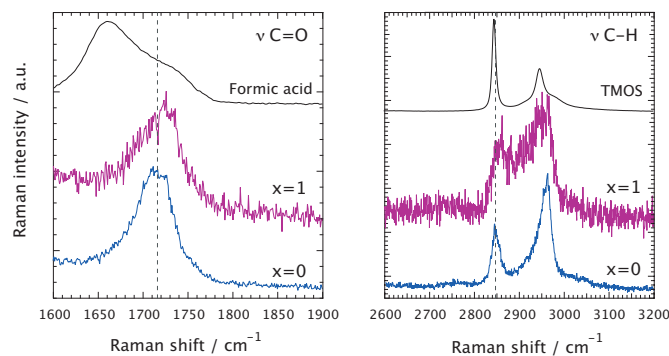
<sup>§</sup> The Raman scattering cross section of silica is relatively low, therefore the  $\sim 490\text{ cm}^{-1}$  mode appears very weak compared to the other Raman signatures. For this reason this feature has not been quantitatively analyzed.



**Fig. 5** Relative Raman intensities calculated with respect to the intensity of the ionic liquid signature at  $740\text{ cm}^{-1}$  as a function of  $t_{gel}$ -reduced time for tetramethyl orthosilicate (TMOS), methanol, and methyl formate. The calculated sum of the relative intensities of methyl formate and methanol is also plotted.

ing) the consumption of formic acid to produce methyl formate is recognized by the sharpening of the broader feature and an overall shift to higher frequencies.<sup>19</sup> The characteristic vibration of the TFSI anion is found at  $\sim 740\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , as also indicated by an asterisk. Since the ionic liquid is not involved in any chemical reaction, the spectral feature at  $\sim 740\text{ cm}^{-1}$  can be used as an internal standard to calculate relative Raman intensities.

Relative Raman intensities are estimated as areas under a peak using a linear baseline between defined spectral limits, as also visualized in Fig. SI-I. The limits used for the features assigned to TMOS, methyl formate and methanol are shown by yellow, purple and emerald shadowed areas in Fig. 4, while the corresponding relative intensities as a function of  $t_{gel}$ -reduced time are given in Fig. 5 using the same color code. This plot reveals that at  $t_{gel}$  the intensity associated to TMOS is almost reduced to zero, while the production of methyl formate continues well beyond this point. By contrast the intensity of methanol shows a faster increase with a weak tendency to decrease at approximately  $t/t_{gel} = 1.5$ . This is in agreement with the behavior previously observed by using time-resolved  $^1\text{H}$  NMR spectroscopy.<sup>19</sup> This evolution reveals that at  $t_{gel}$  the solution contains partially 'hydrolyzed' TMOS,<sup>†</sup> but presumably also linear and cyclic polymeric  $\equiv\text{Si}-\text{O}-\text{Si}\equiv$  species with different degrees of condensation.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the calculated sum of the methyl formate and methanol intensities reveals an increase that attenuates at approximately  $t/t_{gel} = 1$ . This behavior is further confirmed by revisiting previously reported  $^1\text{H}$  NMR intensities<sup>19</sup> recorded during a sol-gel synthesis identical to the one discussed in this work (Figure SI-II). Another interesting spectral evolution can be observed in the low-frequency range of Fig. 4,  $250\text{--}450\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , sensitive to the conformational state of the TFSI



**Fig. 6** Raman spectra recorded at  $t_{gel}$  in the solution with no ionic liquid ( $x=0$ , blue) and in the ionogel ( $x=1$ , purple). In the left and right panels the spectral ranges of the C=O and C-H stretching vibrations are shown, respectively. For comparison, the Raman spectra of the pure reagents, *i.e.* formic acid (left panel) and TMOS (right panel), are also included.

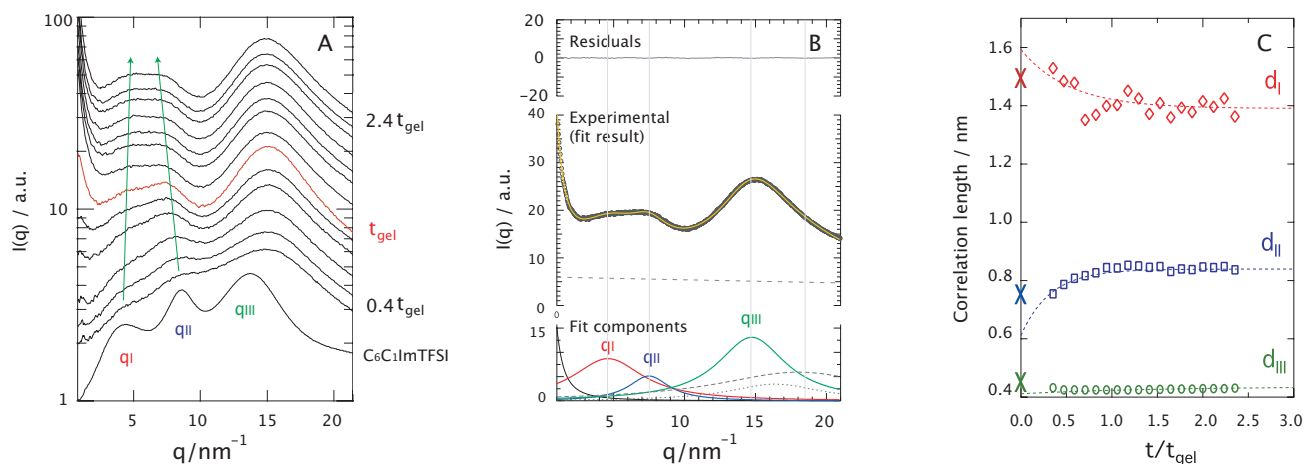
anion.<sup>40</sup> The vibrational mode at  $326\text{ cm}^{-1}$  increases with reaction time (see dashed line and arrow) probing an increased population of the *cisoid* conformers with respect to the *transoid* ones as the sol turns into a gel.

A comparison of Raman spectra recorded at  $t_{gel}$  in the solution with no ionic liquid ( $x=0$ ) and in the ionogel ( $x=1$ ) is given in Fig. 6. This shows a close-up of the spectral ranges where the C=O (left) and the C-H (right) stretching modes are found. At  $t_{gel}$  the Raman spectra of the gel and the ionogel are considerably different from those of the reagents, formic acid and TMOS, but sufficiently similar to each other, in terms of relative intensities of the shown low- and high-frequency contributions, to conclude that at the point of gelation the 'hydrolysis' reaction has progressed to a comparable degree. See also Figure SI-III for the full time evolution of the Raman spectra in the C-H stretching region. Hence, the presence of the ionic liquid does not seem to influence the chemical reaction *per se*. That the ionic liquid does not affect the progress of the reaction is also evidenced in Fig. SI-IV, where time-resolved Raman spectra are shown for different ionic liquid contents, with  $x$  varying from 0.05 to 2.

### 3.2 Nano-structural evolution

Fig. 7A shows the evolution of the SAXS diffraction patterns recorded during the sol-gel reaction, with reaction time increasing from bottom to top. For comparison, the SAXS pattern of the neat ionic liquid  $\text{C}_6\text{C}_1\text{ImTFSI}$  is also included in this plot, as the bottom-most trace. This displays three distinct diffraction peaks in the  $q$ -range  $2\text{--}20\text{ nm}^{-1}$ , which reflect the segregation into non-polar (peak  $q_I$ ) and polar (peak  $q_{II}$ ) nano-domains, as well as the presence of alkyl chain correlations sometimes referred to as tail-to-tail correlations (peak  $q_{III}$ ). This is in full agreement with the nano-structure observed and discussed for similar ionic liquids having an alkyl chain longer than butyl.<sup>24–35</sup> It is common place in this field to use the Bragg's diffraction law  $d_i = 2\pi/q_i$  as an approximation to estimate the correlation distances  $d_I$  and  $d_{II}$ . Although a partitioning analysis by

<sup>†</sup> That is  $\text{Si}(\text{OH})_i(\text{OCH}_3)_{4-i}$  species with  $i$  larger than one. By virtue of being asymmetric, the presence of these species reduces the intensity of the  $643\text{ cm}^{-1}$  mode, attributed exclusively to symmetric  $\text{Si}-\text{OCH}_3$  stretching modes.



**Fig. 7** Diffraction patterns recorded for increasing ionic liquid contents (from left to right). In the panels showing the ionogels ( $x > 0$ ), the bottommost trace is the diffraction pattern of the bulk ionic liquid  $C_6C_1ImTFSI$  (blue). In all panels, the diffraction pattern recorded at  $t_{gel}$  is shown in red. The arrows in the panel corresponding to  $x=1$  indicate the position trend of peak I and peak II as a function of time. As a guide, some relative times of reaction are given to the right of each panel, along with the time of gelation  $t_{gel}$  (shown close to the red trace). The reaction time increases from bottom to top.

means of MD simulations has revealed that the x-ray diffraction pattern displayed by 1-alkyl-3-methylimidazolium ionic liquids consists of a complex combination of cation–cation, anion–anion, and cation–anion correlation functions that contribute positively and negatively to the total x-ray structure function,<sup>41</sup> the overall interpretation is that  $d_I$  and  $d_{II}$  are associated to the size of the non-polar and polar domains, respectively. For a pictorial representation of the nano-segregation in imidazolium ionic liquids, we refer to Fig. 3 in reference [26] as well as Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 in reference [32]. The scattered intensity increasing with time in the  $q$ -range below  $2 \text{ nm}^{-1}$  in Fig. 7A is due to the growing silica network. However, the local structure of silica in terms of for instance fractal dimension will not be discussed in this paper since the relevant  $q$ -range to well below  $0.2 \text{ nm}^{-1}$  could not be covered.

A first observation is that despite the complex and varying chemical composition,<sup>‡</sup> the signatures associated to the nano-structure of the ionic liquid can be distinguished even during the reaction (see arrows). These signatures appear initially weak and broad but become better resolved as the sol-gel reaction proceeds. To get deeper insights into this behavior, all diffraction profiles recorded during the sol-gel reaction have been peak-fitted with a linear combination of Lorentzian functions, taking into account the intrinsic nano-segregation of the ionic liquid ( $q_I$ ,  $q_{II}$ ,  $q_{III}$ , see also Fig. SI-V)<sup>24,26,28,33,34</sup> as well as the contributions from TMOS/silica and the capillary containing the sample (all peaked in the  $q$ -range  $15\text{--}20 \text{ nm}^{-1}$ ). That TMOS contributes in the  $q$ -range  $15\text{--}20 \text{ nm}^{-1}$  has been confirmed by time-resolved SAXS measurements performed for the gel with no ionic liquid (Fig. SI-VI,  $x=0$ ). More specifically TMOS/silica contributes with a peak at  $\sim 16.5 \text{ nm}^{-1}$ , which

is attributed to silica polyhedrons<sup>42</sup> and does not change significantly in position during gelation.<sup>42,43</sup> Nevertheless, in the presence of the ionic liquid the TMOS/silica contribution becomes less important and appears as a right-side shoulder to peak  $q_{III}$ . An additional power-law function is used to model the scattering profile at  $q \leq 2 \text{ nm}^{-1}$  associated to the growth of the silica network. The details of this fitting procedure are better visualized in Fig. 7B, for the ionogel ( $x=1$ ) at  $t/t_{gel}=2$  as a representative case. It can be appreciated that the proposed model describes very well the experimental data.

Using the  $d_i=2\pi/q_i$  approximation the time evolution of the correlation lengths,  $d_I$ ,  $d_{II}$ , and  $d_{III}$ , could be investigated, Fig. 7C. This figure reveals that while  $d_I$  decreases with time,  $d_{II}$  increases. In addition, judging from the fit of these trends  $d_I$  is initially larger, and  $d_{II}$  initially smaller, than the values found for the bulk ionic liquid, indicated by crosses at  $t/t_{gel}=0$ . By contrast,  $d_{III}$  does not change significantly with time, indicating that the connectivity between alkyl chains is maintained during the reaction. Assuming that  $d_I$  and  $d_{II}$  relate to the size of the segregated nano-domains, these results suggest that during the reaction the non-polar domains decrease in size while the polar domains increase. To rationalize this trend we have analyzed the x-ray diffraction pattern of the binary mixtures  $C_6C_1ImTFSI:TMOS$  (at a 1:1 molar ratio) and  $C_6C_1ImTFSI:formic\ acid$  (at a 1:4 molar ratio). This analysis shows that formic acid preferably resides in the polar domains, as indicated by a shift to lower  $q$ -values of peak II in the binary mixture (Fig. SI-VII, right). The affinity of formic acid with the polar domains is consistent with some recently published results, which point to the location of polar solutes like water or methanol in the polar domains of imidazolium or ammonium based ionic liquids.<sup>44–49</sup> By contrast, TMOS distributes throughout the whole space, as revealed by the appearance of a broad feature at high- $q$  values in the x-ray diffraction pattern of the  $C_6C_1ImTFSI:TMOS$  binary mixture (Fig. SI-VII, left). The re-

<sup>‡</sup> Which includes between two and five compounds, *i.e.* TMOS, FA, water, methanol, and methyl formate, at a relative concentration that progressively varies with time.

**Table 1** Dipole moment values for different molecules.

\*Discussed for the first time in this study.

Molecule	Dipole moment	Reference
TMOS	0 D	*
<i>n</i> -hexane	0.08 D	45,46,51
Formic acid	1.41 D	*
Methanol	1.69 D	45,46,48,49
Ethanol	1.69 D	45,49
Buthanol	1.75 D	45,49
Methyl formate	1.77 D	*
Water	1.85 D	44,46,49
Acetonitrile	3.92 D	46,47

placement of the distinct peaks of the individual components by one broader feature reflects the miscibility of the liquids and results from a weighted sum of weaker correlations. Nevertheless, the weak but detectable increase of a low- $q$  shoulder to peak I in this binary mixture indicates that a very small portion of TMOS tends to locate in the non-polar domains. This can be compared with the behavior of other non-polar molecules like *n*-hexane that selectively locate in the oily and non-polar domains of ionic liquids.<sup>45,46,51</sup> The fact that this is not observed to an equal extent for TMOS can be due to a too high concentration or a weak affinity between the methyl groups in TMOS and the hexyl chains in  $C_6C_1\text{ImTFSI}$ . In this context, it is notable that for a lower TMOS concentration (or a higher ionic liquid concentration, *e.g.* for  $x=2$ ) the nano-structure of the ionic liquid is better retained during the sol-gel reaction and the effect on  $d_I$  (hence on  $q_I$ ) more evident, Fig. SI-VI. For comparison, the dipole moment values of various molecules investigated upon mixing with nano-structured ionic liquids are given in Table 1.

To summarize, the partitioning model discussed above suggests that the chemical reactions primarily take place in the polar domains of the ionic liquid, driven by the strong affinity of formic acid with this region. This scenario is supported by the observed decrease of  $d_I$  with reaction time, which can be explained by the progressive consumption of the few, yet not zero, TMOS molecules initially segregated in the non-polar domains. The increase of  $d_{II}$  is consequently attributed to an increased population of polar molecules in the polar domains as more TMOS molecules are reacted. Additional support for this scenario is given by the conformational change observed for TFSI (Fig. 4), which is known to occur when the polar head of the imidazolium is at molecular proximity to a silica surface.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the fact that both the nano-structural evolution (Fig. 7C) and the chemical production of polar species (Fig. 5) arrest at approximately  $t_{gel}$  (or  $t/t_{gel}=1$ ) also indicates a correlation between structural re-arrangement and chemical composition. After  $t_{gel}$  the main changes will consist of the evaporation of volatile polar molecules (*i.e.* methanol, water, and methyl formate)<sup>19</sup> and internal condensation reactions that convert linear into cyclic silica species.<sup>20</sup>

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents the first *in situ* investigation of the sol-gel synthesis of silica using an ionic liquid, *i.e.*  $C_6C_1\text{ImTFSI}$ , as the solvent. The simultaneous use of  $\mu$ -Raman and  $\mu$ -focused x-ray diffraction has revealed that the reaction scheme *per se* is not influenced by the presence of the ionic liquid. We also find a correlation between molecular re-arrangement at the nano-scale and the chemical composition of the sol/gel. This indicates that the sol-gel reaction primarily takes place in the polar domains of the ionic liquid's nano-structure, as a result of the different polarity of the reagents. These results represent important new insights on the hypothetical ability of long chained ionic liquids to order reactants in a manner that increases reaction rates and/or creates nano-reaction sites.

The results presented in this paper suggest that this ability should be more pronounced in longer chained ionic liquids, for which the nano-structure is better defined.<sup>24</sup> Our observation that  $t_{gel}$  decreases significantly with the length of the alkyl chain is a preliminary support for this since, *a priori*, the use of longer chained ionic liquids is expected to slow down, rather than accelerate, the reaction due to increased viscosity.<sup>24,25</sup> [Note:  $t_{gel}$  is 92 min for  $C_2C_1\text{ImTFSI}$ , 46 min for  $C_6C_1\text{ImTFSI}$ , and 15 min for  $C_{10}C_1\text{ImTFSI}$ , when  $x=0.5$ ]. Nonetheless, to verify the general validity of our findings, further *in situ* nano-structural studies focusing on either ionic liquids with longer alkyl chains or other sol-gel reactions need to be pursued.

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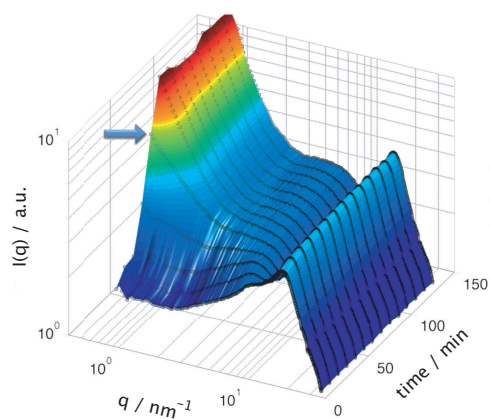
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## 6 TOC Graphic



**Fig. 8** Evolution of the nano-structure of the imidazolium ionic liquid  $C_6C_1\text{ImTFSI}$  during the 'non-aqueous' synthesis of silica. A study by *in situ* x-ray scattering and  $\mu$ -Raman spectroscopy.