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Published Version:

Hierarchical chitinous matrices byssus-inspired with mechanical properties tunable by Fe(III) and oxidation / Montroni D.; Palanca M.; Morellato K.; Fermani S.; Cristofolini L.; Falini G. - In: CARBOHYDRATE POLYMERS. - ISSN 0144-8617. - STAMPA. - 251:(2021), pp. 116984.116984-116984.116993. [10.1016/j.carbpol.2020.116984]

Availability:

This version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/11585/802272 since: 2021-02-19

Published:

DOI: http://doi.org/10.1016/j.carbpol.2020.116984

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Devis Montroni, Marco Palanca, Kavin Morellato, Simona Fermani, Luca Cristofolini, Giuseppe Falini "Hierarchical Chitinous Matrices Byssus-Inspired with Mechanical Properties Tunable by Fe(III) and Oxidation" Carbohydrate Polymers 251 (2021) 116984

The	final	published	version	is	available	online	at:		
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.carbpol.2020.116984									

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Hierarchical Chitinous Matrices Byssus-Inspired with Mechanical Properties Tunable by Fe(III) and Oxidation

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ABSTRACT: In this study the multi-scale hierarchical structure of the β -chitin matrix from the squid pen of 15 Loligo vulgaris was used as substrate to prepare new bio-inspired materials. Finding inspiration from the 16 byssus, aiming to mimic its peculiar mechanical properties, we chemically functionalized the β-chitin matrix 17 18 with catechols, one of the main functional groups of the byssus. The obtained matrix preserved its multi-scale 19 structural organization and was able to chelate reversibly Fe(III). Thus, it behaved as the byssus, acting as a metal cross-linkable matrix that upon metalation increased its Young's modulus, E (> 10 times). The 20 functionalized matrix was also cross-linked by oxidation provoking an increase of the E (> 10 times) and first 21 22 failure stress (> 5 times). The oxidation of the functionalized matrix followed by metalation slightly increased 23 the material mechanical properties. In conclusion, we showed that specific bio-inspired functionalities can be 24 added in a multi-scale and natural matrix tuning its mechanical properties without altering its overall 25 organization.

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- 27

28 **Keywords**: chitin; catechols; metal ions; hierarchical structures; bioinspired

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33 1. INTRODUCTION

Nature is able to produce materials with a multi-scale ordered hierarchical structure. Those materials can be
organic (mostly polymeric), inorganic, or organic-inorganic composites.(Eder, Amini, & Fratzl, 2018; Holland,
Blanford, Do, & Stein, 1999; Meyers et al., 2006; Seto et al., 2012) In them an ordered hierarchical structure
provides functional advantages compared to unstructured or disordered materials, such as mechanical
properties and biocompatibility.(Kennedy et al., 1999)

39 Chitin, poly-(β -(1–4)-N-acetyl-D-glucosamine), is the most abundant biopolymer in the animal kingdom. It is 40 also widely diffused among all the known species (being present in over 70 % of them), making it the most 41 common polymeric material used by nature. (Fernandez & Ingber, 2013; Montroni, Fermani, et al., 2019; 42 Montroni, Marzec, Valle, Nudelman, & Falini, 2019; Muzzarelli, 2013) It is present in a huge variety of 43 hierarchical organizations aimed to different purposes, being the most common for protective or structural 44 functions.(Al-Sawalmih et al., 2008; Ehrlich et al., 2010; Montroni, et al., 2019; Weaver et al., 2012; Yang et 45 al., 2019) Some examples of structured chitinous materials are found in sponges, where they occur as 46 nanostructured micro-porous skeletal elements. (Shaala et al., 2019; Wysokowski et al., 2015) In many 47 butterflies, such as the *Morpho* genus, chitin-based wings exhibit a photonic behaviour due to their periodic 48 structure.(Ghiradella & Radigan 1994; Kinoshita, Yoshika, Fujii, & Okamoto, 2002) In the squid pen of Loligo vulgaris a hierarchical self-similar structure with micro-fibers of different size, composed themselves of 49 50 crystalline nano-fibrils, is observed and it is oriented along the long axis of the pen. Those fibers compose 51 different layers that overlap forming the squid pen.(Hunt & El Sherief, 1990)

52 Chitin has been widely applied in material science, drug delivery, medicine, optic, water remediation, 53 etc.(Anitha et al., 2014; Chabbi et al., 2020; Dev et al., 2010; Shams, Ifuku, Nogi, Oku, & Yano, 2011; K. Zhu 54 et al., 2019) This variety of fields of application is due to chitin's multi-properties, among which mechanical 55 resistance, biodegradability, biocompatibility, transparency, etc.(Pillai, Paul, & Sharma, 2009; Ravi Kumar, 56 2000; Singh, Dutta, Kumar, Kureel, & Rai, 2018; Tsai, Payne, & Shen, 2018) Chitin is frequently utilized in its 57 deacetylated form, named chitosan when the chitin's degree of acetylation (DA) is lower than 35 %. (Pillai et 58 al., 2009) Chitin is hardly soluble only in some strong polar organic solvents, while chitosan is easily 59 solubilized in acid solutions. (Ravi Kumar, 2000) Moreover, chitin has better mechanical properties than 60 chitosan, especially in the wet state, and a higher tendency to self-assemble in fibers. (Harmoudi et al., 2014; Ifuku et al., 2013; Rathke & Hudson, 1994) 61

Nature's huge pool of efficient and performing materials has stimulated different bioinspired synthetic approaches to emulate them. The synthesis of those new materials when performed by the bottom-up approach fails in obtaining multiscale hierarchical ordered structures, as those produced by nature. An alternative approach is using a natural material, in which the hierarchical structure is preserved at a defined scale, and adding one or more levels of complexity. This approach allows combining the properties of the

two levels of complexity in a new functional material.(Ianiro et al., 2014) From the chemical point of view, the easiest way to add a property to a hierarchical material, as a polymeric one, is by functionalization with a chemical moiety. The wide application of chitinous materials has stimulated the development of different chemical routes to modify their properties.(Kurita, 2001; Sashiwa & Aiba, 2004) However, in these studies chitosan was mainly involved, even if reported as chitin.(Macquarrie & Hardy, 2005; Martin et al., 2002; Mi, Shyu, Chen, & Lai, 2002)

Among chemical functional groups, catechols have been widely used to obtain materials with high mechanical and adhesive properties, especially in wet environments.(J. Chen et al., 2020; Filippidi et al., 2017) This functionalization has been inspired by the studies on the byssus, the proteic thread produced by mussels to anchor to a substrate and resist to currents and waves. It presents catechol moieties, as 3,4dihydroxyphenylalanine (DOPA), that are responsible for the thread's mechanical, self-healing, and adhesive properties.(Harrington, Masic, Holten-andersen, Waite, & Fratzl, 2010; Hwang et al., 2012; Montroni et al., 2018; Nicklisch & Waite, 2012)

80 Two catechol's chemical properties have stimulated its utilization in material sciences: i) the ability to chelate 81 in reversible way transition metal ions as a bidentate ligand, and ii) the ability to cross-link covalently by the 82 Michael addition reducing back to its dihydroxy state, upon oxidation to quinone.(Asghari et al., 2015; Guo, 83 Ni, Wei, & Ren, 2015; L. Li, Smitthipong, & Zeng, 2015; Y. Li, Wen, Qin, Cao, & Wang, 2017; Qiao et al., 2014; 84 H. Xu et al., 2012; Z. Xu, 2013) The catechol functionalization has been observed to increase the 85 mucoadhesive property of materials.(Kim, Kim, Hyun, & Lee, 2015; L. Li et al., 2015; J. Xu, Strandman, Zhu, 86 Barralet, & Cerruti, 2015) Chitosan functionalized with catechols produced a biocompatible mucoadhesive 87 patch that was studied as drug delivery system.(Xu et al. 2015) Qiao at al. 2014, developed a solution of 88 catechol-derived chitosan and Fe(III) that formed a gel upon an increment of pH.(Qiao et al., 2014) This 89 material was studied as drug delivery system for Doxorubicin. Kim et al. 2015 tested the mucoadhesion 90 capability of a chitin-catechol polymeric film defining it as "the most potent mucoadhesion polymers 91 reported to date".(Kim et al., 2015) A catechol-chitosan coating was also applied to prevent oxidative stress 92 to interfere with bone implant healing process.(W. Chen et al., 2017) Catechol-chitosan polymers were 93 applied by Ryu et al. 2014 as a material self-converting in water insoluble dehydrated film, with application 94 in food packaging.(Ryu, Jo, Koh, & Lee, 2014) Moreover, the metal-chelating ability of catechol-based 95 matrices have also been exploited in water remediation. (Montroni et al., 2017) Most importantly, this 96 chelating ability is also responsible for the self-healing properties of the byssus. In fact, along with traction 97 the catechol-metal bond acts as sacrificial bond, avoiding initial critical damages, to reform after the stress is 98 removed. Following this knowledge in 2017, Filippidi et al. developed a byssus inspired hydrogel exhibiting 99 self-healing properties. (Filippidi et al., 2017)

100 The aim of our study is to modify chemically the hierarchically organized natural chitin matrix from the pen 101 of the squid *L. vulgaris*, increasing its complexity by functionalization with catechols. This material is actually 102 a good candidate for this synthetic approach. In fact, when an alkaline treatment at high temperatures is 103 used it can induce up to 45 % of deacetylation, producing glucosamine units, with minimal changes in 104 morphology and structure of the scaffold.(Montroni, Fermani, et al., 2019; Montroni, Sparla, Fermani, & 105 Falini, 2020) Those amino groups are supposed to be mainly located in amorphous regions or in the external 106 surface of the fibrils, and represent a perfect target for a coupling reaction. The final goal of this study is to 107 obtain a structured material at which the functional properties of catechols can be added, as occurs in the 108 byssus. The hypothesis is that the chemical functionalization will allow the control of the mechanical 109 properties upon reversible chelation of Fe(III), or by covalent cross-linking by oxidation.

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111 2. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

2.1 Materials: All reagents and solvents were purchased from Sigma Aldrich and utilized without any further
 purification. Squid pens from Loligo vulgaris were collected from a local market. Once hydrated, the lateral
 blades were isolated, cleaned with abundant distilled water (carefully eliminating eventual residual tissues)

and ethanol 70 vol.%, cleaned again using distilled water, and then stored dry in a desiccator.

2.2 Synthesis of the matrices: The squid pen was initially deproteinized inserting 2.5 g of squid pens, previously washed as described, in 100 mL of a boiling 1 M NaOH solution and stirring gently for 1 h. (laniro et al., 2014; Montroni et al., 2020) After that, the solution was changed with a fresh 1 M NaOH solution and refluxed for 1 h. The obtained chitin films were washed at room temperature first with a 1 M NaOH solution and then with distilled water until the washing solution had neutral pH. The films were stored dry in a desiccator.

The chitin was successively deacetylated by adding 400 mg of the deproteinized chitin in 20 mL of a 5 M NaOH boiling solution for 2 h under a gentle stirring.(Montroni, et al., 2019) The obtained chitin was then washed at room temperature first with a 5 M NaOH solution and then with distilled water until washing solution had neutral pH. The deacetylated chitin (DC) was stored dry in a desiccator.

The DC (800 mg) was then soaked in 90 mL of a pH 4.0 HCl solution for 15 minutes. In 45 mL of a 1:1 mixture of ethanol and water, acidified to pH 4.0, 466 mg (2.5 eq. respect to the deacetylated glucosamine units) of 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)carbodiimide and 266 mg (1.5 eq. respect to the deacetylated glucosamine units) of 3,4-dihydroxyhydrocinnamic acid were solubilized and stirred for one minute.(Kim et al., 2015; Qiao et al., 2014; Ryu et al., 2011; Zvarec, Purushotham, Masic, Ramanujan, & Miserez, 2013) The ethanol/water solution was slowly dropped on the former one under stirring. The reaction mixture was set

- 132 on a rocking table in a dark room at 25 °C for 24 h. The catechol-functionalized deacetylated chitin matrices
- (Cr-DC) were washed soaking them three times in an HCl pH 4.0 solution for 10 minutes. The matrices were
 conserved wet in the pH 4.0 solution at 4 °C in the dark.
- 135 The crosslinking of the C_f-DC was induced soaking the previously prepared matrices in 200 mL of a carbonate
- 136 buffer 50 mM pH 9.5 for 24 h on a rocking table.(H. Lee, Dellatore, Miller, & Messersmith, 2007) The cross-
- 137 linked C_{f} -DC (CC_f-DC), were conserved in water at 4 °C in the dark.
- The metal insertion in the matrices was performed using a 10 mM bicine buffer at pH 7 containing FeCl₃ or VCl₃ in a 1:3 ratio between the deacetylated units and the metal ions.(Filippidi et al., 2017) The appropriate amount of matrices were then soaked in the metal solution to get a 10 mg·mL⁻¹ dispersion of matrix in the solution and set on a rocking table for 30 minutes. The specimens were then washed four times in water, soaking the specimens for 5 minutes each time. The specimens were conserved in water at 4 °C in the dark.
- The metal removal was performed soaking 10 mg·mL⁻¹ of sample in an EDTA 10 mM solution and setting the solution on a rocking table for 30 minutes. The specimens were then washed four times in PremilliQ water, soaking the specimens for 5 minutes each time, and conserved in PremilliQ water at 4 °C in the dark.
- 146 2.3 Determination of the degree of acetylation: The degree of acetylation (DA) of chitin was determined using 147 solid-state nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR). The NMR experiments were performed on a Bruker Advance 148 spectrometer operating at the frequency of 300 MHz for proton (equipped with a 4 mm MAS BB probe) using 149 the combined techniques of cross-polarization and magic angle spinning. Field strengths corresponding to 90° pulses of 4.5 µs were used for the matched spinlock cross-polarization transfer ¹H to ¹³C. The contact 150 151 time was 1 ms, and the recycle delay 10 s. A typical number of 500-3000 scans were acquired for each 152 spectrum. The chemical shifts were externally referred by setting the carbonyl resonance of glycine to 176.03 ppm. Glycine full width at half-height better than 27 Hz. The spinning speed was set at 8000 Hz for all 153 154 specimens. The assignment of NMR signals and the DA calculation was done according to literature.(Heux, 155 Brugnerotto, Desbriéres, Versali, & Rinaudo, 2000)
- 156 2.4 Swelling measurement: The measure of the chitin specimen swelling in water was carried out first 157 weighting a dry specimen, conserved overnight in a desiccator under vacuum, and secondly weighting it after 158 soaking in water overnight, prior blotting it on a paper towel. The measures at pH 4 were performed using 159 an HCl solution at pH 4.0. Mass measurements were performed using a Sartorius CP225D (± 0.01 mg) on at 160 least 50 mg of initial dry specimen. The swelling measurements were performed at least on three 161 independent specimens.
- *2.5 Spectroscopic analysis:* UV-Vis spectra were collected in transmission acquiring between 240 and 800 nm
 with a 1 nm resolution, and an average time of 0.1 s using a Varian Cary 300 Bio spectrophotometer.
 - 6

Raman spectra were acquired using a Renishaw Raman Invia spectrophotometer interfaced with a Leica DMLM optical microscope. The spectrophotometer was equipped with a diode laser (780.0 nm, P_{max} = 300 mW), an edge filter to remove the Rayleigh scattering, a monochromator (1200 lines·mm⁻¹), and a CCD detector. The instrument was calibrated using a silicon wafer (520 cm⁻¹). The spectra were acquired summing three spectra using a 1 % power and 10 s of acquisition.

2.6 Synchrotron X-ray diffraction: X-ray fiber diffraction diagrams were collected at XRD1 beamline, Elettra,
 Trieste, Italy. Each frame was collected at the peak wavelength (0.9999 Å) using an exposure of 60 s. The X ray diffraction diagrams were analysed using Fit2D software.

2.7 Scanning electron microscopy: SEM images were acquired with a Philips SEM 515 using 15 eV. The wet
 specimens were lyophilized, eventually cut with a scalpel to expose the section, glued on carbon tape, dried
 overnight in a desiccator, and coated with 20 nm of gold prior to image them.

175 2.8 Uniaxial tensile test: Each specimen was cut in a proper dimension using scissors before the de-176 proteination, maintained hydrated after the synthesis and tested hydrated. The actual width and thickness 177 of each hydrated specimen were measured after the synthesis using a SM-LUX POL microscope collecting 178 images with a 5.0 MP digital camera (Motic Moticam 5+). The images were analysed using ImageJ. Each 179 specimen was about 60 mm long, 5 mm wide, and 0.15-0.30 mm thick (the thickness varied between 180 specimens, because of the intrinsic variability of the initial biological specimens). Monotonic uniaxial tensile 181 tests were performed using a universal testing machine (Mod. 8032 with 8800 controller, Instron, UK) and 182 dedicated grips, leaving a free length of about 50 mm between the clamps. The tests were performed at room temperature imposing a strain rate of 0.33 %·sec⁻¹ to all specimens (this resulted in an actuator speed 183 184 of the order of 10 mm min⁻¹, depending on the actual gauge length of each specimen). As the curves were 185 rather linear until failure started, the following parameters could be calculated, taking into account the actual 186 dimensions of each specimen:

187 - The Young's modulus (E), defined as the slope of the linear part of the stress-strain curve;

188 - The stress ($\sigma_{1st failure}$) and strain ($\varepsilon_{1st failure}$) when specimen failure started (yield, detected as a drop 189 of the force by 1 %);

190 - The maximum stress (σ_{max});

191 - The work per unit volume required to reach yield (Work_{1st failure}) in J·mm⁻³.

All specimens failed in one of the two ways: either abrupt fracture, perpendicular to the specimen's axis, or progressive unravelling of the fibers. The two modes of failure were not associated with specific specimen groups. To this reason, the maximum elongation and the total work per unit volume were not evaluated because they were not robust indicators of the specimens' behaviour. At least five specimens were tested 196 for each group. The Peirce criterion was adopted to detect and exclude outliers (15 % of the data had to be 197 excluded).(Ross, 2003) Normality was checked for each treatment group (sample) with the Kolmogorov-198 Smirnov test. As the data did not follow a normal distribution, non- parametric statistical tests were applied 199 to each calculated mechanical parameters: Kruskal-Wallis test followed by a Dunn's post hoc.

200

201 3. RESULTS

In this work the chitinous hierarchical structure of the squid pen of *L. vulgaris* was functionalized on the free
 amino groups with catechols and then treated with Fe(III) and/or oxidized. A schematic of the different
 matrices produced is reported in Figure S1.

205 The squid pen from L. vulgaris is a chitin based matrix composed of 40-50 wt.% of proteins.(Montroni et al., 206 2019) The proteins were removed from the matrix using an aqueous 1 M NaOH solution treatment under 207 reflux for 2 h. This occurs without inducing any change in the morphology and structure of the chitinous 208 matrix in the pen. (Montroni, Fermani, et al., 2019; Montroni et al., 2020) After this first alkaline treatment, 209 the DA of chitin was about 88 %. (Montroni et al., 2019). A second alkaline treatment was performed using a 210 5 M NaOH solution under reflux for different times, see Figure 1 step 1, to increase the number of free amino 211 moieties in the matrix. (Montroni et al., 2019). The treatment was performed for 2 h, 8 h, or 24 h obtaining a 212 DA of 76.9 ± 0.6 %, 56 ± 1 %, and 32 ± 1 %, respectively (Figure S2). The 24 h treated chitosan matrix appeared 213 curly and not uniform, and was not used for further experiments. The two deacetylated chitin (DC) samples 214 had water swelling higher than 200 wt.%, Table S1, that was reached in less than 15 minutes. The second 215 step of the synthesis was the insertion of the catechol group, Figure 1 step 2. The reaction was performed by 216 applying a standard peptide coupling in water. The synthesis was optimized in pH and time as reported in the SI (Figure S3). After this synthetic step, the catechol-functionalized DC (Cf-DC) obtained from the chitin 217 218 deacetylated for 8 h was in a gel state with swelling of 3000 ± 700 %, Table S1. Despite the birefringence of 219 the matrix appeared conserved, it was impossible to perform uniaxial tensile tests on this set of specimens 220 due to difficulties in handling, even after Fe(III) treatment or crosslinking. Thus, the successive experiments 221 were performed only using the Cf-DC obtained from the chitin deacetylated for 2 h.

222





Figure 1. Scheme of the synthetic steps to functionalize the matrix. 1) Chitin partial de-acetylation, to obtain the DC. 2) DC functionalization with catechols, to obtain the C_f-DC. 3) C_f-DC basic crosslinking, to obtain the CC_f-DC, where X can represents a heteroatom (such as oxygen from –OH groups, or nitrogen from –NH₂ groups) or another aromatic ring. 4) Metal insertion in the C_f-DC, to obtain Fe-C_f-DC.

The Fe(III) chelation in the C_f-DC was optimized testing different pHs of bicine buffer, as reported in Figure S4. UV-Vis spectra of the C_f-DC before and after Fe(III) insertion showed a typical broad catechol—iron peak appearing between 500 and 700 nm in the metal treated matrices.(Guo et al., 2015) This peak came along with a shift of the catechol signal from 280 to 288 nm. Only a weak signal of the o-quinone (oxidized catechol) at 400 nm was observed.(Guo et al., 2015) After Fe(III) insertion, the matrix appeared of a bright blue (Figure 2).



- 235
- Figure 2. Picture of the different matrices obtained in the different stages of the synthesis. Scale bar 5 mm.
- 238 The coloration disappeared after treatment with EDTA and the UV-Vis spectrum restored as in the C_f-DC. The
- presence of catechol-iron(III) complexes was also confirmed using Raman spectroscopy, Figure 3.(Guo et al.,
- 240 2015) No significant change in the swelling was observed after metal insertion, Table S1.



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Figure 3. Raman spectra of the different matrices. According to literature, all the samples containing iron show only catechol-Fe signals (°), as the Fe-O bond vibrations in the 500–700 cm⁻¹.(Guo et al., 2015) Chitin signals (*) were observed in all the samples.(Kaya et al., 2017)

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The mechanical properties were evaluated for each sample group (Table 1, Figure 4). In particular, the C_f-DC showed, in comparison with the DC, lower first failure ($\sigma_{1st failure}$), maximum stress (σ_{max}), work and Young's

- 249 modulus (E), and higher first failure elongation ($\epsilon_{1st failure}$). The Fe-C_f-DC showed, with respect to C_f-DC, an 250 increase of the $\sigma_{1st failure}$ and of the σ_{max} (not statistically significant), and at the same time a significant 251 decrease of $\epsilon_{1st failure}$, with a consequent higher E (> 10 times), both comparable with the DC.
- 252 Catechols can also undergo covalent crosslinking by oxidation, Figure 1, step 3. The Cf-DC was covalently cross-linked using a basic environment as an alternative way to tune its mechanical properties. A basic 253 254 environment was chosen instead of stronger oxidative conditions to get a slow oxidation that would allow 255 the matrix to physically reorganize its structure along the reaction. Moreover, this slower process would help, 256 avoiding as much as possible, to re-oxidize the catechols after the cross-linking. Three different pHs were tested, pH 7, 9.5 and 14, for two different times, 24 h and 48 h. The best mechanical parameter results were 257 258 obtained using the pH 9.5 for 24 h, which showed a higher σ_{max} and E, and a lower swelling (300 ± 100 %), 259 diagnostic for a proper cross-linking, compared to the other conditions (see SI for more details). The values 260 were comparable with those of DC. If compared to the Cf-DC an increment of more than 10 times in E, 3 times 261 in the work, and over 5 times in the $\sigma_{1st\,failure}$ and σ_{max} were observed.

eps 1st failure (p-value: 0.0007)





sigma max - (p-value < 0.0001)





young's modulus (p-value: 0.0002)



Figure 4. Mechanical data of the different matrices synthetized. For each mechanical data the overall
 significance of the Kruskal-Wallis test is reported. The level of Dunn's post-hoc statistical significance is
 reported between groups. ****: p-value < 0.0001; ***: p value < 0.001; **: p-value < 0.01; * = p-value <
 0.05.

Comple	σ_{1st} Failure	6	Work1st Failure	σ_{max}	E
Sample	(MPa)	د1st Failure	(MPa)	(MPa)	(MPa)
DC	12 ± 8	0.07 ± 0.02	0.4 ± 0.3	15 ± 7	300 ± 100
C _f -DC	1.7 ± 0.8	0.12 ± 0.03	0.06 ± 0.04	2.2 ± 0.8	30 ± 10
Fe-C _f -DC	6 ± 3	0.03 ± 0.01	0.06 ± 0.04	7 ± 3	300 ± 200
CC _f -DC	11 ± 5	0.07 ± 0.03	0.21 ± 0.06	12 ± 5	300 ± 300
Fe-CC _f -DC	12 ± 5	0.06 ± 0.04	0.2 ± 0.2	14 ± 6	400 ± 200
EDTA-Fe-CCf-DC	8 ± 3	0.05 ± 0.03	0.1 ± 0.2	9 ± 3	260 ± 60
V-CCf-DC	10 ± 1	0.03 ± 0.02	0.15 ± 0.08	12.4 ± 0.8	320 ± 60
EDTA-V-CCf-DC	13 ± 5	0.05 ± 0.02	0.4 ± 0.3	14 ± 4	360 ± 90

Table 1. Mechanical parameters of the matrices synthetized.

Successively, Fe(III) was inserted in the cross-linked matrices in a 3:1 molar ratio between the free amine groups and Fe(III) (Fe-CCf-DC), Figure 1 step 4. The UV-Vis absorption peak for catechol-Fe(III) complexes was observed and the Raman spectra showed signals of catechol-Fe(III) complexes (Figure 3 and S6). The Fe-CCf-DC was then treated using EDTA inducing a loss of the UV-Vis absorption band of the catechol-Fe complex and a change in the color, Figure 2.

The Fe-CCf-DC showed a slight improvement (about 20 %) of the E, $\sigma_{1st failure}$, σ_{max} , and Work, and an equal decrease in the $\varepsilon_{1st failure}$ compared to the CCf-DC, but all the differences between the two groups were not statistically significant. A decrease in the swelling to 260 ± 40 % was observed. Once treated with EDTA, the parameters became more similar to the ones of CCf-DC.

To test the effect of massive oxidation on the system in comparison to the metal coordination we exposed the CC_f-DC to V(III) that has a chelating ability similar to Fe(III), but that instead of complexation induces oxidation on the catechols. The matrix exposed to V(III) (V-CC_f-DC) showed a broad peak at about 550 nm (Figure S6) but no signals of the catechol-V(III) complex were detected using Raman spectroscopy (Figure 3).

The V-CC_f-DC showed similar mechanical properties to the CC_f-DC, despite a drop of the swelling to 230 ± 10

285 % occurred due to the further cross-linking of the matrix. Contrary to the Fe(III) treated sample, the V-CC_f-DC

one when treated with EDTA did not change properties (Figure 4; Tables S1 and S2).

287 The overall structural integrity of the matrices was investigated by fiber XRD using synchrotron radiation, 288 Figure 5 and Table S2. The diffraction images showed how all specimens maintained a comparable fibril 289 alignment, evaluated by the azimuthal angular spread of the reflection (002), Table S2. Indeed, the full width 290 at half maximum along the angle ranged between 30° and 34°, without any evident trend. The diffracted 291 intensity changed among the samples, Table S2. This could be due to a diverse crystallinity among them, 292 which reflected the variability always present in biological samples. Those containing Fe(III) or vanadium ions 293 showed a higher diffracted intensity, probably due to the positive contribute of the metal ions to the 294 coherent scattering of the structure. A slight structural reorganization was observed in the inter-planar 295 distance associated to the reflection (010). When the strongest catechol oxidation was performed (V-CCf-DC 296 sample) this distance was maximum at 11.1 Å, while in the starting sample (DC) was 10.7 Å.

297



Figure 5. Synchrotron X-ray fiber diffraction images of the samples. In DC the Miller index of the reflection
are indicated. The diffraction peaks were indexed according to the monoclinic unit cell of β-chitin (Gardner,
& Blackwell, 1975). The dotted lines limit the angular spread of the reflection (002).

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303 Interestingly, the presence of Fe(III) (Fe-C_f-DC) on the catechol functionalized chitin (C_f-DC) induced an 304 increase of the inter-planar distance from 10.5 Å to 10.9 Å.

The morphology and micro-structural organization of the specimens were examined using SEM, observing the specimen's longitudinal section and external surface (Figure 6). The initial DC scaffold presented an almost homogenous surface with a parallel fibrous organization and a lamellar structure in the section. As

- 308 reported in Montroni et al. 2019 and 2020, the alkaline treatment does not interfere with the chitinous 309 structure of the squid pen, therefore the DC is representative of the initial multi-scale structure of the pristine 310 pen.(Montroni, Fermani, et al., 2019; Montroni et al., 2020) A SEM image of a pristine squid pen is reported 311 in Figure S9. The specimen surface was almost unaltered in all specimens examined becoming a little more 312 homogenous compared to the DC but still showing an aligned fibrous arrangement. A difference in 313 morphology was observed in sample Cf-DC where it was not possible to observe the lamellar structure in the 314 section, which appeared in a foam-like state. This structure was restored after the metal insertion, in sample 315 Fe-C_f-DC, or alkaline cross-linking, in sample CC_f-DC. A clustering of the layers was observed after Fe(III) and 316 V(III) treatment of the CC_f-DC. This clustering disappeared after EDTA treatment in sample Fe-CC_f-DC (EDTA-317 Fe-CC_f-DC) but not in sample V-CC_f-DC (EDTA-V-CC_f-DC).
- As observed in Figure 2 the overall macro-structure of the squid pen was conserved along all the syntheticsteps.



Figure 6. SEM images of the matrices synthetizes. For each specimen is reported, on the left, an image of a
longitudinal section showing the lamellar structure of the chitinous matrix and, on the right, an image of the
sample surface.

326 4. DISCUSSION

327 The emulation of the complex hierarchical structures produced by the organism is the main goal of biomimetic and bioinspired syntheses. The achievement of this goal has involved the research activity of a 328 329 plethora of scientists. Although many biomimetic materials have been produced, the faithful reproduction 330 of the evolutionary evolved hierarchical structure of natural materials has been rarely, if ever, achieved. 331 Approaching this research, we realized this difficulty and decided to change the synthetic approach. We used 332 as matrix a hierarchical natural material, not obtainable in laboratory and with the complexity of the 333 variability typical of the natural materials. In it, we added a level of complexity by chemical functionalization. 334 Accordingly, this work produced a family of chitin-based materials from the squid pen, in which the structure 335 of the chitin matrix is preserved and catechol functionalities bioinspired from mussel's byssus thread have 336 been added.

The catechol functionalization has been reported for chitosan gels, although in several cases was named chitin functionalization despite the fact that chitin does not form gels in water.(Guo et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Kim, Ryu, Lee, & Lee, 2013; Qiao et al., 2014; Ryu et al., 2011; J. Xu et al., 2015; Zvarec et al., 2013) No work has been reported on actual chitin (with a high DA), or on a chitin hierarchically organized material. Filippidi et al. used also a synthetic approach inspired by mussel byssus, incorporating sacrificial, reversible catechol-Fe(III) cross-links into loosely cross-linked epoxy network.(Filippidi et al., 2017) In this case, a hierarchical structure was missing in the epoxy network.

344 The functionalization with catechols has required an optimization that was governed by the conflicting needs 345 of preserving the native structure of the matrix and maximize its functionalization with catechols. This goal 346 has been achieved as shown by the diffractometric and microscopic investigations and by the observation 347 that the covalently catechol functionalized matrix was able to bind reversibly Fe(III). As consequence of the 348 functionalization, a decrease of the evaluated mechanical properties was observed without a radical change 349 of the crystalline structure of the matrix. This decrease in the mechanical parameters was predictable 350 considering that the specimens were tested hydrated and the functionalized matrix contained over two times 351 the water of the DC. After metal insertion the structurally and crystalline intact matrix obtained, Fe-Cr-DC, 352 differed significantly from the C_f-DC in E (> 10 times) appearing as a stiffer material, but not able to absorb 353 more energy.

354 The catechols offer also the possibility to generate crosslinking by oxidation with the formation of covalent 355 bonds.(Guo et al., 2015; Pillar, Zhou, & Guzman, 2015) In nature, catechol cross-linked protein networks, 356 such as sclerotized cuticle and byssal threads of the mussel, have been shown to exhibit excellent mechanical 357 properties. (A. Miserez, Schneberk, Sun, W. F., & H. J., 2008; Z. Xu, 2013) According to this information, Cr-DC 358 was covalently cross-linked to tune the mechanical resistance in the matrix and induce a slight clustering of 359 the material to favour metal bridges formation. The material obtained showed a marked stiffer behaviour 360 compared to the functionalized matrix having comparable mechanical parameters to that of DC. It is also 361 remarkable that cross-linking reduced variability inside the sample for most mechanical parameters, except 362 for the Young's modulus. The decrease in swelling observed was a validation that a cross-linking occurred. 363 This matrix showed only a slight reversible increase in the stress and work, upon chelation of Fe(III). Thus, 364 the Fe(III) chelation did not add cross-linking useful for the increase of the mechanical performances.

The effect of a high level of cross-linking in the matrix was studied in comparison to Fe(III) cross-linking. V(III) was used as oxidant since it has coordination chemistry similar to Fe(III) and the presence of catechol-V(III) complexes can be efficiently detected by Raman spectroscopy.(Montroni et al., 2018) The spectrum excluded the presence of this complex. In addition the UV-Vis spectrum indicated the presence of V(III).(C. Choi et al., 2017; N. H. Choi, Kwon, & Kim, 2013) The V(III) treated matrix did not show significant differences with the CC_f-DC except in the swelling, as a hint that the matrix undergoes a further cross-linking. These results show

how the exposure to a stronger oxidant did not further increase the mechanical performances of the matrix
despite a higher cross-linking occurred. This might be due to the formation of bridges not influencing the
mechanical properties.

374 As mentioned, the overall structure was maintained in all the matrices obtained. The XRD pattern was 375 examined for all the matrices and the crystalline structure appeared mostly unaltered. Only a small change 376 on the periodicity associate to the inter-planar distance among chitin planes, the (010) planes, was observed 377 in the Fe(III) cross-linked and oxidized samples. This agreed with the hindrance of these chemical moieties. 378 The microscopic images showed that fibril alignment of the structures was maintained in all the synthetic 379 steps. In agreement with the previous observations after Fe(III) insertion, a reversible clustering of the 380 lamellas was observed, supporting the proved metal-induced cross-linking. The un-expected morphological 381 change observed in the C_f-DC, was probably induced by the lyophilisation following highly swelled state, in 382 fact it was not detected in secondary matrices.

383 The experiments performed in this research showed that the improvement of mechanical properties of a 384 hierarchical structured matrix, like the β -chitin squid pen one, can be achieved using two different strategies, 385 i.e. by formation of coordination bonds with metal ions and by covalent cross-linking. The discussed data 386 show that oxidative treatment with V(III) on alkaline cross-linked matrices does not affect significantly the 387 mechanical properties. This latter observation indicated that the alkaline treatment already saturated the 388 cross-links useful for the improvement of the mechanical properties, as Young modulus of about 10 times. 389 Similarly, in a recent study surface-deacetylated chitin nanofibers that were cross-linked by reaction between 390 quinone and amino groups increased almost 10-fold higher tensile strength.(C. Chen, Li, Yano, & Abe, 2019)

391 The mechanical performances did not change significantly in the alkaline cross-linked matrices after metal 392 ion treatment, although a positive trend was observed. Since the formation of coordination bonds occurs on 393 the same functional groups, only a low improvement is expected. These two cross-link strategies have been 394 widely used by organisms that do not use minerals in their structural tissue. Indeed, while the metal ion 395 coordination bonds is observed for example in the byssus, (Harrington et al., 2010) the catechol cross-linking 396 has been reported in their powerful chitin based mouthparts of the Dosidicus gigas (jumbo squids).(Ali 397 Miserez, Li, Waite, & Zok, 2007) Although these studies find inspiration from sclerotization or tanning of 398 chitin in hard tissues of many organisms, they can give hits on the chemical conditions that organisms use to 399 achieve optimal mechanical properties and be of inspiration for synthetic processes. (Cohen, 2010; K. Lee, 400 Prajatelistia, Hwang, & Lee, 2015; A. Miserez et al., 2008; K. Y. Zhu, Merzendorfer, Zhang, Zhang, & 401 Muthukrishnan, 2016)

402

403 5. CONCLUSIONS

We successfully synthetized different advanced materials using a synthetic approach in which a hierarchical natural matrix (i.e. the deproteinized squid pen of *L. vulgaris*) has been functionalized finding inspiration from nature (i.e. byssus).

407 The functionalized matrices were all able to coordinate Fe(III). The material's mechanical properties were 408 tuneable and/or reversible based on the kind of cross-linking, metal ion chelation (reversible) or oxidative 409 (irreversible), induced on the catechol functional groups. The obtained material, according to the exposed 410 environment, changed from stiffer to softer materials (with E ranging from 30 to 400 MPa and σ_{max} from 2.2 to 14 MPa), therefore acting as a stimuli responsive material. Moreover, the two different cross-linking gave 411 412 materials with different mechanical behaviour. Iron insertion showed mostly an influence on the E (increasing it from 30 to 300 MPa), while oxidation affected all the mechanical parameters (shifting $\epsilon_{1st Failure}$ from 0.12 413 414 to 0.07 %, σ_{max} from 2.2 to 12 MPa, and E from 30 to 300 MPa). These chemical processes, when differently 415 performed, can allow a diverse customization of the material.

These chelating tuneable matrices might find application and not only in: medicine, as grafts or wound healing materials (being catechols a mucoadhesive enhancing group); water remediation, as chelating matrices; sensors, as metal-responsive materials.

In conclusion, this work shows for the first time that hierarchically organized matrices can be functionalized
 without altering its multi-scale organization, to get functional materials. This approach could lead to new
 advanced functional materials combining nature's precisely controlled structure and human's chemistry
 expertise.

423

424 ASSOCIATED CONTENT

425 Supporting Information

426 Synthetic details; spectroscopic characterization of the materials; results of the microstructural analysis;

427 data on mechanical and physical characterization of the materials.

428

429 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-forprofit sectors. We thank the XRD1 beamline, Elettra, Trieste, Italy for the collection of the X-ray diffraction
images. GF, SF and DM thank the Consorzio Interuniversitario di Ricerca in Chimica dei Metalli nei Sistemi
Biologici for the support.

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