An Experimental Study of Two-Phase Flow in Porous Media with Measurement of Relative Permeability

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Abstract: Intrinsic and relative permeability are indispensable parameters for performing transfers in porous media. In this paper, the conception and ensuing exploitation of a new testing ground for measuring the relative permeability of water and nitrogen are presented. The experimental work was elaborated in the Laboratory of Thermal Studies in Poitiers, (France) where brick samples were used to verify the performance of the proposed testing strategy. The results prove the existence of several stages during the drainage and the imbibitions. In particular, the three stages observed for the case of gas permeability reduce to only two steps for liquid permeability. Comparison with others scientific works is considered. In addition, the validity and reliability of the testing ground and associated measuring method are discussed.

Keywords: Gas relative permeability, liquid relative permeability, saturation, porous media, two-phase flow.

Nomenclature

A surface of the sample (m²)
D Diameter of the sample (m)
K Sample permeability (m²)
L Thickness of the sample (m)
m Mass (kg)
P Pressure (Pa)
Q Volumetric rate (m³/s)
S Saturation (%)

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**Greek letters**

\[ \Delta \] Difference  
\[ \phi \] Porosity (%)  
\[ \mu \] Dynamic viscosity of gas (Kg/m.s)  
\[ \rho \] Fluid density  
\[ \nabla \] Gradient

**Subscripts**

\[ c \] capillary  
\[ g \] Gas  
\[ l \] Liquid  
\[ p \] Particle  
\[ r \] Relative  
\[ 0 \] Normal conditions

1 **Introduction**

The subject of porous media still represents an intensive research theme due to its practical applications in several fields (such as chemical reactors, heat exchangers, thermal insulations, electronic cooling, bio-mechanics and various food industries and processes). As a proof of such interest, it is worth mentioning the recent studies by Bataller (2010), Al-Ajmi and Mosaad (2012), Hamimid, Guellal, Amroune and Zeraibi (2012), Choukairy and Bennacer (2012), Labed, Bennamoun and Fohr (2012).

For modeling transport in porous media, two main approaches have been developed over recent years, one dealing with microscopic details, the other providing a macroscopic point of view. Erriguible, Bernada, Couture and Roques (2005), Prat (2002), Quintard and Whitaker (2000), Quintard, Kiviany and Whitaker (1997) and Whitaker (1980) contributed to the development of the first approach applied at the microscopic scale. The main idea underlying this approach is that the media may be
regarded as a combination of solid, liquid and gas phases. Heat, mass and momentum balances are applied for each phase. On the other hand, the second approach assumes the media to be formed by packed beds of spheres [Zou, Opara, and McKibbin (2006), Jammalhamedi, Müller-Steinhagen and Izadpanah (2005), Alvarez, Bournet and Flick (2003)] or cylinders [Takhar, Chamkha and Nath (2002), Yang and Lee (1999)]. Several studies, such as Bennamoun and Belhamri (2008a), Bennamoun and Belhamri (2008b), Bennamoun and Belhamri (2006), Arnaud and Fohr (1988) and Daguenet (1985), have applied heat and mass balances for both solid and fluid phases.

Usually, at low Reynolds number, the momentum equation is represented by the empirical Darcy’s law:

\[
\vec{v} = -\frac{K}{\mu} \left[ \nabla P - \rho g \right]
\]

In the case of more than one fluid phase, Darcy’s law is extended by using relative permeabilities, given by the two following equations:

\[
\vec{v}_g = -\frac{K_g}{\mu_g} \frac{K}{K_g} \left[ \nabla P_g \right]
\]

\[
\vec{v}_l = -\frac{K_l}{\mu_l} \left[ \nabla P_g - p_c \right]
\]

Where:

\( P_c \) is the capillary pressure.

The Darcy’s law involves the velocity, the viscosity of the fluid but also the permeability, written itself as function of the porosity and geometry of the media [Nield and Bejan (2006)]. At high Reynolds number, a second contribution, with the so-called Forchheimer coefficient and permeability, must be added to the first equation [Nield and Bejan (2006), Hsu (2000)]. A more general formula available for a wide range of Reynolds number, still written as function of the permeability was introduced by Hsu (2000). There is evidence that permeability is an essential element deserving special attention. Generally, this parameter is given as function of the particle size, geometry of the media and its porosity as confirmed by Crawford, Jones, You and Wu (2011), Liu, Sano and Nakayama (2009), Dias, Fernandes, Mota and Teixeira (2007), Starov and Zhdanov (2001). The most common mathematical form of the permeability is represented by the following equation:

\[
K = \frac{\phi^3 d_p^2}{a (1 - \phi)^2}
\]
Where $a$ is a parameter accounting for the specific geometry of the media. Shou, Fan, and Ding (2010), Yu, Li, Li, and Zou (2003) have shown that permeability depends on the porosity and the fractal dimension of the studied media. Many scientific works dealing with modeling and simulation permeability can be found. Kantzas and Chatzis, (1988) used preconditioned conjugate gradients methods for the calculus of the permeability. Also, Li, LeBoeuf, Basu, and Mahadevan (2005) used the stochastic method, whereas Hao and Cheng (2010), Singh and Mohanty (2000) apply Lattice Boltzmann method, for modeling permeability in porous media. Network and power law models were developed respectively by Maxiemenko and Kadet (2000) and Reyes, Parades and Gutiérrez (1999). Other scientific works have been concerned with the experimental determination of the permeability. Schembre and Kovscek (2003) presented an innovative experimental method based on X-ray computed tomography scanner. They determined permeability of rock material using saturation profiles and inhibition for water-air and water-oil systems. Based on Darcy’s law, Cai and Oliveira (2007) developed another experimental method. They uses filters, manometers and flow meter to determine permeability of different cases of wood with a particular study of the effect of the pre-treatment of the material. Transversal permeability of saturated paper sheets was experimentally determined by Reverdy-Bruas, Serra-Tosio, Chave and Bloch (2001). The fundamental principle of the method was based on the measurement of water flow across a mechanically strained web pad compressed between two permeable surfaces. In addition, to the measurement of the water flow, the hydrostatic and total pressure, the temperature of the water and thickness of the material were also calculated.

In this paper, we present the design and exploitation of a new testing ground for measuring the relative permeability for water and nitrogen. Brick samples were used to verify the performance of the proposed testing ground.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Sample preparation

Brick samples were specially produced for this study. They have a porosity of about 0.6 and a volumetric mass measured in the laboratory around $1250$ kg$\cdot$m$^{-3}$ [Bennamoun and Belhamri (2009)]. The samples are cylinders of 10 cm diameter and 2 cm thickness. Depending on the required goal, the sample, at the beginning, can be totally dry or completely saturated with water.

For obtaining sample dry mass, we put the sample in the oven for 24 hours under a constant temperature of 105 °C. The mass is weighted using electronic balance 0.01 g accuracy. Total saturated sample can be obtained by putting it in a vacuum
cover, as shown in Fig. 1. A vacuum pump inspires the air existing in the cover and from the sample. After a while, and once the void is established, the non-mineralized water is send for a complete saturation of the sample (Fig. 1). This allows extraction of all air (sample and cover) and filling pores sample by water making it saturated. The manometer which is positioned inside the vacuum cover permits to control the quality of vacuum. At the end, sample is weighted again to obtain the sample wet mass.

It is important to note that, for partial saturations calculus, sample is dried at ambient environment for 12 hours before its weight. This process is repeated until obtaining the whole points of the permeability curve.

![Figure 1: Saturation of the sample](image)

### 2.2 Presentation of the experimental set-up and the used materials

The main aim of the present work is the study of the diphasic flow in a porous media. First of all, we have to measure the relative permeability of many brick samples; the testing ground is represented in Fig 2.

Regarding the complexity of investigated phenomenon, the measuring devices used for the experimental work are of a high quality precision and reliability. We have
Figure 2: Principle of the experimental system for measuring the relative permeability

got a flow-meter with regulation system (from 0 to 1000 ml/min), a “Furness” very sensitive manometer (0 to 20000 Pa). An electronic balance insures the measure of the water mass out of the specimen and calculation of flow. However, the measure pump can deliver a rate ranging from 0.096 to 120 ml/hour by setting piston stroke and frequency of impulsions. An electronic data card linked to a computer allows resembling the different measured data. A particular attention is given to the used testing cylinder device represented in Fig. 2 and details are given in Fig. 3.

The test cylinder is a well designed stainless cylinder with lot of accessories : a couple of porous plates, called "diffusers", two pieces of cylindrical shape with some grooves, called "distributors", which are placed on both sides of the diffusers. A rubber membrane covers the inner part of the specimen and insures the lateral tightness of the whole thing. The use of some removable wedges allows testing samples with different sizes (Fig. 3).

2.3 Principle of the used method: The experiment protocol

First of all, sample is placed in the test cylinder before the setting. Moving through the flow meter and the safety valve, the nitrogen meets the water which is deliv-
An Experimental Study of Two-Phase Flow

Figure 3: Longitudinal section of test cylinder

...er by the pump in order to form a mixture which finally is introduced inside the sample. On its way out from the test cylinder, the mixture passes through a device which separates water from gas, and hence permits the distinct measure of the rate of two flows.

In this study, several tests have been carried out in order to investigate a variety of possible cases. The preliminary stage which concerns the calibrating and the adjustment of the scaling was necessary. Experiments with a single moving fluid were more successful than simultaneous injection of two fluids.

We start by measuring the intrinsic permeability to water $K$, by only introducing water for long laps of time. The data are recorded every 10 seconds. A second test is performed by injecting of very small rate of nitrogen. After the establishment of the regime, and the calculation of $K_g$ and $K_l$, the rate of nitrogen slightly decreased and, once again, the stationary regime is sought. This process is repeated until obtaining the complete curve of $K_g$ and $K_l$ in terms of saturation.

The determination of $K_g$ was made possible by integrating the equation which results from the combination of Darcy’s Law, law of perfect gas and the equation of continuity. The influence of the gravity was neglected.

The used equation is presented in the following form [Perré (1987)]:

$$K_g = \frac{L \mu_g}{(\Delta P - \Delta p_c) A} \frac{Q}{P_1 + P_2} \frac{2P_0}{P_1 + P_2}$$

(5)
Index '0' is relative to the normal conditions of T and P.

$P_1$ and $P_2$ are respectively pressures at the above and the lower sides of the treated sample. The term of $\frac{2P_0}{P_1+P_2}$ is used as correcting factor of compressibility of the gas. Nevertheless, concerning the experience, this term has a maximal value of 1.07.

with:

$$\Delta P = P_1 - P_2$$  \hspace{1cm} (6)

For the calculation of water permeability, the following equation is used:

$$K_l = \frac{Q_l \mu_l}{\Delta P_l \frac{4L}{\pi D^2}}$$  \hspace{1cm} (7)

Relative permeability is written:

$$K_{rg} = \frac{K_g}{K}$$  \hspace{1cm} (8)

and

$$K_{rl} = \frac{K_l}{K}$$  \hspace{1cm} (9)

Figure 4: Variation of gas permeability
3 Results

3.1 Determination of the gas relative permeability

Fig. 4 plots $K_g$ vs. saturation $S$ and three stages can be clearly seen. The first stage is very short, where we notice an important decrease of $S$ (from 100 to 50%) and approximately $K_g$ is kept constant. This phase starts few seconds after the injection of the nitrogen in the water saturated sample and has duration of a few minutes. During this phase, we observe an important and swift decrease of saturation from 100% to around 50% occurring with quasi-constant gas permeability.

The second stage ($S = 50$ to 35%) is longer than the first one, and corresponds to almost a linear variation of $K_g$ in terms of $S$. It is characterized by a decrease of the material saturation from 50% to 35% and linear variation of $K_g$ with saturation.

The third stage is characterised by a strong increase of $K_g$ for a small decrease of $S$. This stage is very slow and takes several hours. This phase is a very slow as it takes many hours with nitrogen flow attaining 25 ml/mn, which is considered as the maximum flow that can be used. It is observed that we have attained a saturation of 12%, instead of 5% and this probably due to the nitrogen pressure constraints. Also, several other reasons may play a role for reaching this saturation value. Indeed, a deterioration of the sample can occur at high pressure difference, as the measure of the manometer is limited to 20000 Pa.

3.2 Determination of the liquid relative permeability

Curve of relative permeability of water can be obtained after neglecting the effect of the capillary pressure [Souriau (1985)]. On the other hand, intrinsic water permeability was measured by Labed (1988).

Fig. 5, which represents the variations of the liquid permeability as function of the sample saturation, is divided into two main phases. The first phase corresponds to the range of saturation between 100% and 60%. In this interval a consequent variations of the liquid permeability is observed. This may due, essentially, to the existence of an in-stationary pulsed liquid flow, at the exit of the sample. It is important to note that the liquid is a mixture of the injected nitrogen gas and water. This measure is opposing to the measure of $K_g$, unhurried in stationary regime. The figure shows an important decrease of the liquid permeability with the saturation decrease.

The second phase corresponds to a very weak decrease of the liquid permeability with variation of saturation. Dispersion is less important than precedent phase.
4 Comparison with other studies and conclusions

Fig. 6 shows a comparison of our experimental results with those reported in the theoretical study by Haramathy (1969) for $K_g$ of brick sample, and by Hanarpour, Koedreritz and Harvey (1987) for case of sand. The general shape of the curves is respected. However, we notice an apparent difference for permeability of the gas for $S = 60$ down to $20\%$, and for water permeability at $S = 80$ to $40\%$. This difference could be due to the simplifications proposed in the theoretical model.

The results presented in this study show that testing ground can be used for measuring the gas relative permeability $K_{rg}$. The obtained values of $K_l$ are acceptable. Dispersion noticed in Fig. 6 is due to nature of the flow and not to the measure itself. Many measuring tests were conducted to confirm the reproducibility of our results.

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References

Figure 6: Comparison between experimental and theoretical results


