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(72) Inventeurs/Inventors:
VAN DER KOOIJ, FELIX, NL;
LEKKERKERKER, HENK, NL;
BOEK, EDO SICCO, GB
(73) Propriétaire/Owner:
M-I L.L.C., US
(74) Agent: SIM & MCBURNEY

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(54) Title: PROCESS FLUIDS COMPRISING CLAYS AND COLLOIDAL PARTICLES

(57) Abrégé/Abstract:

A water-based, shear-thinning process fluid comprises bentonite, aluminium hydroxide particles, and salt. The median diameter (by weight) of the aluminium hydroxide particles does not exceed 2 µm.

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- (71) Applicant (*for all designated States except US*): **M-I L.L.C.** [US/US]; 5950 North Course Drive, Houston, TX 77072 (US).
- (72) Inventors; and
- (75) Inventors/Applicants (*for US only*): **VAN DER KOOIJ, Felix** [NL/NL]; Kortlandstraat 5-14, NL-3117 NA Schiedam (NL). **LEKKERKERKER, Henk** [NL/NL]; Maarnse Grindweg 21, NL-3951 LJ Maarn (NL). **BOEK, Edo, Sicco** [NL/GB]; 17 Garden Walk, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire CB4 3EW (GB).
- (74) Agents: **BRASNETT, Adrian, H.** et al.; Mewburn Ellis, York House 23 Kingsway, London, Greater London WC2B 6HP (GB).
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(54) Title: PROCESS FLUID

(57) Abstract: A water-based, shear-thinning process fluid comprises bentonite, aluminium hydroxide particles, and salt. The median diameter (by weight) of the aluminium hydroxide particles does not exceed 2 µm.

PROCESS FLUIDS COMPRISING CLAYS AND COLLOIDAL PARTICLESField of the Invention

The present invention relates to a water-based process
5 fluid, such as a drilling fluid, and particularly a process
fluid exhibiting shear-thinning behaviour.

Background to the Invention

Thickened, water-based, process fluids which exhibit
10 shear-thinning behaviour are useful in a number of
technical fields.

In particular for hydrocarbon well applications such
fluids are used as e.g. drilling fluids, water control
fluids and fracturing fluids. A typical rheological
15 requirement for the fluids is a reversible and severe drop
in viscosity when the shear rate imposed on the fluid is
increased.

Aqueous drilling fluids commonly contain clay
particles and thickening agents. For example US-49990268
20 discloses a drilling fluid which contains negatively
charged bentonite particles and positively charged mixed
metal hydroxide particles and which is thickened by a
heteroflocculation mechanism involving the formation of a
gel network based on Coulombic (electrostatic) attraction
25 between the bentonite and mixed metal hydroxide particles.
A commercially available calcined mixed metal hydroxide
powder thickening agent supplied by M-I L.L.C. is sold
under the name VisplexTM.

Clay-free drilling fluids containing viscosifying
30 aluminium hydroxide compounds are also known, as disclosed
e.g. in US-4240915, US-4389319, US-4349443 and US-4486318.

However, the stability of the rheological behaviour of
these fluids may be threatened by e.g. degradation at
elevated temperatures, oxidation and/or the presence of
35 contaminating salts, and an object of the present invention

is to provide a water-based process fluid which exhibits acceptable rheological behaviour over a wide range of operating conditions.

5 Summary of the Invention

In general terms, a first aspect of the present invention provides a shear-thinning, water-based process fluid comprising clay particles, colloidal particles, and salt.

10 In such a fluid at 20°C (and preferably also at higher temperatures), primarily van der Waals interactions between the clay and colloidal particles can organise the clay and colloidal particles into a gel network which thickens the fluid. These interactions can be broken and reimposed as
15 the shear rate experienced by the fluid respectively increases and decreases, leading to reversible shear-thinning behaviour.

The process fluid may be e.g. a drilling fluid, water control fluid, fracturing fluid, or other treatment fluid
20 for use in a hydrocarbon well.

A primary purpose of the salt is to form ions in solution which electrostatically screen the clay and the colloidal particles. This prevents or reduces electrostatic interactions between the particles so that
25 van der Waals interactions can be established. Thus by "salt" we mean any soluble compound or compounds which is/are able to provide such ions. Preferably the salt comprises NaCl and/or KCl. In a process fluid such as a sea water-based drilling mud these salts can be provided by
30 the sea water. However, if salts of higher-valency cations are used, these will be effective at lower concentrations than NaCl or KCl, following the Schulze-Hardy rule for the screening of double layer repulsions.

Thus, whereas known drilling fluids which are
35 primarily thickened by electrostatic attractions between

particles (e.g. bentonite base muds containing Visplex) are sensitive to salt contamination (we believe the salt reduces the efficiency of the heteroflocculation mechanism by promoting aggregation of like particles, thus disturbing desirable electrostatic attractions and reducing the amount of thickening), the process fluid of the present invention is generally insensitive to or unaffected by such contamination because most salts do not reduce the van der Waals attractions between the particles. Indeed the process fluid of the present invention includes salt. This can be a significant advantage e.g. in off-shore hydrocarbon well applications where it is often convenient to make up process fluids from sea water.

The fluid may further comprise a fluid loss control agent, such as FloplexTM, IdFloTM (both supplied by M-I L.L.C.) or other modified starch based agent for reducing fluid loss during well drilling operations. Like salt additions, these types of agent tend to decrease the effectiveness of process fluids in which thickening is caused by electrostatic attractions between particles. However, we have found that they do not, in general, degrade the performance of fluids according to the present invention. In particular, because fluids according to the present invention already contain salt, they are relatively insensitive to further additions of charged species. Thus it becomes possible to use fluid loss control agents which form charged species in solution and therefore would have downgraded the rheological performance of conventional drilling fluids.

The clay particles may be of bentonite. Preferably, the clay particles (which are generally in the form of platelets) have an average diameter in the range 0.1 to 2 μm and/or an average thickness in the range of 0.01 to 0.001 μm .

The colloidal particles may be formed from any suitable compound(s) which promotes van der Waals interactions between the clay and colloidal particles. Thus the colloidal particles may be of metal oxides and/or hydroxides, which have in general relatively large Hamaker constants characterising the interactions between macroscopic particles in liquids (see e.g. chapter 11 and table 11.2 of J.N. Israelachvili: "Intermolecular and surface forces", 2nd edition, Academic Press, London, 1992) and therefore promote van der Waals attractions. For example, the particles may be of aluminium, magnesium and/or zirconium oxide and/or hydroxide. Preferably the particles include aluminium hydroxide compounds.

In one embodiment, the median or mean diameter (by weight) of the colloidal particles does not exceed 2 μm , and preferably does not exceed 1 μm . By limiting the size of the colloidal particles, the particles more readily form a colloidal suspension in the fluid. Also their weight-efficiency for thickening the fluid increases.

Where it pertains to colloidal particles, use herein of the term "diameter" does not imply that the colloidal particles are required to be spherical. The term is to be understood as encompassing the spherical-equivalent diameter of non-spherical colloidal particles as well as the "true" geometrical diameter of spherical colloidal particles, as the case may be.

Clay and colloidal particle sizes may be measured by transmission electron microscopy (TEM). Alternatively or additionally they may be measured indirectly from sedimentation rates determined by ultra-centrifuge experiments (see e.g. J.L. Cole and J.C. Hansen, *Journal of Biomolecular Techniques*, 10, (1999), 163). This technique is particularly suitable for measuring the spherical-equivalent diameter of non-spherical colloidal particles.

For the interpretation of sedimentation rates, the sedimentation coefficient, s , is given by the slope of $\ln(r(t) - r(t_0))$ versus $\Omega^2 t$; where $r(t)$ is the amount of sedimentation (as measured e.g. by absorbance) at a radial distance r from the center of rotation at a time t , and Ω is the angular velocity of the ultra-centrifuge. However, s , is also defined in the Svedberg equation (T. Svedberg and K.O. Pedersen, *The Ultracentrifuge*, Theodor Steinkopff, Dresden, Germany, 1940) by $s = V\Delta\rho/f$, where V (which equals $(4/3)\pi R^3$) is the volume of the particle, $\Delta\rho$ is the mass density difference between the particle and the solvent, and f is the Stokes friction factor equal to $6\pi\eta R$ (R being the radius of particles in the case of spherical particles or the sphere-equivalent radius in the case of non-spherical particles, and η being the solvent viscosity). Thus, R (and hence the particle diameter, $2R$) can be determined from a measured value for s , and knowledge of $\Delta\rho$ and η . Using the ultra-centrifuge technique average particle diameters and particle diameter distributions can be determined.

Thus one preferred embodiment of the present invention provides a water-based, shear-thinning process fluid comprising bentonite, aluminium hydroxide particles, and salt, wherein the median or mean diameter (by weight) of the aluminium hydroxide particles does not exceed 2 μm .

The fluid may have a pH at or above the isoelectric point of the colloidal particles. For example, aluminium hydroxide particles (as exemplified by gibbsite or boehmite) have an isoelectric point of about pH 9.5 (A. Wierenga et al., *Colloids Surfaces A*, Vol. 134, (1998), 359). Thus, if the particles are of aluminium hydroxide, the pH of the fluid is preferably in the range 9.5-11. Generally clay particles carry a negative charge in aqueous suspension at pH 7 and above, and by imposing a pH at or above the isoelectric point the colloidal particles will

lack an opposite charge. This has the effect of further promoting van der Waals over electrostatic attractions.

Preferably the colloidal particles are non-spherical. More preferably they have a platelet (e.g. as in gibbsite) and/or rod-like (e.g. as in boehmite) morphology. In terms of promoting gel networks based on van der Waals interactions, these morphologies seem to be compatible with the plate-like shape of most clay (and particularly bentonite) particles. Also, we believe the larger surface area of non-spherical particles promotes van der Waals interactions.

In one embodiment a surfactant is provided on the surfaces of the colloidal particles. Particles with surfactant appear to be more easily dispersed when formulating the fluid. We believe that, by reducing inter-colloidal particle aggregation and enhancing clay-colloid heteroflocculation, they also increase the amount of thickening of particularly bentonite-containing process fluids.

Preferably the concentration of the colloidal particles in the fluid is in the range 0.5 to 6 g/l, and more preferably in the range 1 to 4 g/l. Preferably the concentration of the clay particles in the fluid is in the range 5 to 60 g/l, and more preferably in the range 15 to 40 g/l. Preferably the concentration of the salt in the fluid is in the range 5 to 150 g/l, and more preferably in the range 10 to 80 g/l.

The process fluid may have a 10" gel strength at 20°C in the range 15 to 70 Pa. By '10" gel strength' we mean the stress measured at a shear rate of 5 s⁻¹ after a 10 second shear-free period.

Preferably the process fluid maintains a 10" gel strength at 20°C in the range 15 to 70 Pa after ageing at a pressure of 1.7 MPa for consecutive periods of 16 hours at 240°F (115.6°C) and 16 hours at 300°F (148.9°C).

The process fluid may exhibit reversible shear-thinning behaviour at 20°C for all shear rates in the shear rate range 5 to 1000 s⁻¹.

5 The process fluid may have a rate of change of viscosity with shear rate at 20°C of between -10 and -0.01 Pa.s for all shear rates in the shear rate range 5 to 1000 s⁻¹.

10 Such performance characteristics suggest that the fluid has rheological properties suitable for hydrocarbon well applications.

In a further aspect, the present invention provides for the use of a water-based process fluid of the previous aspect for drilling or treating a hydrocarbon well.

15 Brief Description of the Drawings

Specific embodiments of the present invention will now be described with reference to the following drawings in which:

20 Figure 1 shows a TEM micrograph of typical gibbsite particles.

Figure 2 shows typical flow curves of example and comparative example systems.

25 Figure 3 shows the influence of NaCl concentration on the 10" gel strength of an aqueous fluid containing 33 g/l of bentonite and 3.3 g/l of colloidal gibbsite.

Figure 4 shows the 10" gel strengths at 20°C for fluids before and after the addition of a 0.02 M PO₄²⁻ concentration in each fluid.

30 Figure 5 shows the effect on the 10" gel strength at 20°C for example and comparative example systems.

Figure 6 shows the API fluid loss and 10" gel strengths at 20°C for fluids before and after the addition of an amount of fluid loss control agent.

35 Figures 7a-c show respective electron micrographs of M111, M107 and BN-2 powders.

Figures 8a-c show respective electron micrographs of AS 100, AS 200 and AS 520 powders.

Figure 9 shows an electron micrograph of MH-1 powder.

Figures 10a-c show values of the yield points, 10" gel strengths at 20°C and plastic viscosities of various muds. Figure 10a shows these values for muds containing 28 g/l of bentonite and different amounts of M111; Figure 10b shows these values for muds containing 33 g/l of bentonite and different amounts of M107; and Figure 10c shows these values for muds containing 33 g/l of bentonite and different amounts of BN-2.

Figures 11a-d respectively show flow curves for four mixtures before hot rolling (BHR) and after hot rolling (AHR) at ageing temperatures of 250, 300 and 350°F, the mixtures containing (a) 28 g/l bentonite and 1.2 g/l M111, (b) 33 g/l bentonite and 3.4 g/l M107, (c) 33 g/l bentonite and 5.6 g/l BN-2, and (d) 33 g/l bentonite and 3.3 g/l GW3A.

Figure 12 shows the 10" gel strengths at 20°C of the mixtures of Figures 11a-d as a function of the consecutive ageing temperatures.

Figure 13 shows the results of API fluid loss tests performed on the muds of Figures 11a-c, and the results of further tests after the addition of 11 g/l of Floplex to each mud. The Figure also shows the result an API fluid loss test performed on the mud of Figure 11d after an addition of 11 g/l of Floplex.

Figure 14 shows flow curves before static ageing (BSA) for three Aluminasol-containing muds, and the M111 and GW3A muds of Figures 11a and d.

Figure 15 shows flow curves for the AS 520 mud of Figure 14 before static ageing (BSA) and after static ageing (ASA) at consecutive temperatures of 250, 300 and 350°F.

Figure 16 show a flow curve for a mud containing 33 g/l of bentonite and 10 g/l of MH-1.

Figure 17 shows an electron micrograph of rod-like colloidal particles formed as a result of hydrothermal
5 treatment of ACH.

Figure 18 shows flow curves for a 33 g/l bentonite mud with and without in situ precipitated $\text{Al}(\text{OH})_3$.

Detailed Description

10 Example systems of bentonite-containing aqueous fluids according to the present invention were produced. These were compared in rheological and fluid loss tests with comparative example systems. Thereafter, a number of gibbsite and boehmite samples were sourced from commercial
15 suppliers, and their suitability for use in the present invention was tested.

Example Systems

Example systems were produced containing bentonite,
20 NaCl and either gibbsite or boehmite colloidal particles. The gibbsite and boehmite particles were formed in aqueous suspension from fine chemicals as described e.g. by A. Wierenga et al., *Colloids Surfaces A*, Vol. 134, (1998), 359, A.P. Philipse et al. *Langmuir*, Vol. 10, (1994), 4451,
25 and F.M. van der Kooij et al., *J. Phys. Chem. B*, Vol. 102, (1998), 7829. The average largest dimension of the (plate-like) gibbsite particles was around 200 nm (Figure 1 shows a TEM micrograph of typical gibbsite particles). The average largest dimension of the (rod-like) boehmite
30 particles was also around 200 nm. Thus the median diameter of the colloidal particles did not exceed 1 μm .

Example System 1 contained 33 g/l of bentonite, 3.3 g/l of plate-like gibbsite and 15 g/l of NaCl.

Example System 2 contained 33 g/l of bentonite, 5.4
35 g/l of rod-like boehmite and 15 g/l of NaCl.

Example System 3 contained 33 g/l of bentonite, 3.9 g/l of plate-like gibbsite and 15 g/l of NaCl.

Comparative Example Systems

5 Comparative System 1 was a simple reference slurry containing 38 g/l of bentonite.

Comparative System 2 contained 28 g/l of bentonite and 3.3 g/l of proprietary (Visplex) calcined mixed metal hydroxide powder.

10 Comparative System 3 contained 33 g/l of bentonite and 4.2 g/l of an earlier form Visplex which was produced by a chemical synthetic route and contained an amount of glycerol.

Comparative System 4 contained 33 g/l of bentonite and 15 3.3 g/l of calcined Visplex.

Comparative System 5 contained 33 g/l of bentonite and 3.6 g/l of calcined Visplex.

20 Calcined Visplex is predominantly formed of mixed metal hydroxide (see e.g. US-49990268) and has a mean particle size of at least 4 μm which is expected to be too large for the formation of a colloidal suspension. The predominant interaction between the bentonite and Visplex particles is believed to be electrostatic. Aqueous fluids containing bentonite and Visplex have been used 25 commercially as drilling fluids.

Rheological Tests

30 These were performed on a Chan 35TM rheometer. The pH of the Example Systems and Comparative Systems was adjusted to 10.5 before rheological measurements were made. The pH was chosen in order to favour van der Waals interactions between the bentonite and colloidal aluminium hydroxide particles of the Example Systems.

35 Figure 2 shows typical flow curves measured in a shear sweep at 20°C for Example Systems 1 and 2 and Comparative

Systems 1 and 2. Shear-thinning behaviour was shown by all the fluids, but as expected the fluids containing gibbsite, boehmite and Visplex additions were significantly thicker than the reference fluid containing only bentonite.

5 Example Systems 1 and 2 and Comparative System 2 had viscosities of the order of magnitude needed for drilling fluid applications.

It was noted that the 10" gel strength at 20°C for Example Systems 1 and 2 was always close to the 5 s⁻¹ stress measured in the shear sweep of Figure 2. This indicates that the gel networks of these fluids are formed almost instantaneously. Thus if used as drilling fluids these fluids should adapt rapidly to local shear rate conditions.

15 Figure 3 shows the influence of NaCl concentration on the 10" gel strength at 20°C of an aqueous fluid containing 33 g/l of bentonite and 3.3 g/l of colloidal gibbsite. The maximum gel strength is reached at about 18 g/l of NaCl (in a similar test using colloidal boehmite instead of gibbsite the maximum was at about 15 g/l of NaCl). Thus these fluids attain their maximum gel strengths at salt concentrations similar to those found in sea water (sea water is essentially 0.5 M NaCl = 14 g/l), and could conveniently be formed from sea water in offshore drilling applications.

Evidence of the difference in mechanism underlying gel network formation in the case of the Example Systems and the Comparative Systems is provided by the effect of additions of low concentrations of phosphate anions. Figure 4 shows the 10" gel strengths at 20°C for Example System 3 and Comparative Systems 3 and 4 before and after the addition of a 0.02 M PO₄³⁻ concentration in each fluid. The screening of the positive charge on the Visplex particles by the trivalent anions led to a dramatic loss in gel strength of the Comparative Systems, while the strength

of the gel network in Example 3 was practically unimpaired. This insensitivity of gel networks produced by van der Waals interactions to anionic contamination should offer substantial advantages in hydrocarbon well applications.

5 Next the thermal stabilities of various fluids were investigated. Example Systems 1 and 2 and Comparative Systems 1 and 2 were each subjected to 16 hour periods at temperatures of 240, 300, 350 and 375°F (115.6, 148.9, 176.7 and 190.6°C) in rolled autoclave bombs prepressurised
10 to 1.7 MPa. Between each ageing period each fluid was homogenised and had its pH readjusted to 10.5 before its 10" gel strength at 20°C was measured.

Figure 5 shows the results of the ageing tests. The ability of Comparative System 2 to form a gel network was
15 clearly compromised by ageing above 240°F. In contrast, Example Systems 1 and 2 were thermally stable for temperatures up to at least 375°F.

This thermal stability can be explained by the fact that the gel network generated by van der Waals
20 interactions only requires the presence of small particles (i.e. the gibbsite and boehmite) to bridge the bentonite - a condition which is less likely to be threatened by temperature-induced conversion than the particle surface charge required to form the gel network in the Visplex-
25 based fluids.

Fluid Loss Tests

API RP 13B fluid loss tests (see API Recommended Practice Standard Procedure for Testing Drilling Fluids,
30 8th Edition, 1980, American Petroleum Institute, Washington D.C.) were performed on Example Systems 1 and 2 and Comparative System 5. The results of the tests are shown in Figure 6. The fluid losses of the Example Systems were comparable with those of the Comparative System.

The tests were then repeated after 11 g/l of Floplex fluid loss control agent had been added to each system. Again the fluid losses of the Example Systems were comparable with those of the Comparative System.

5 However, the 10" gel strengths at 20°C of the Example Systems were increased by the Floplex additions, while the 10" gel strength at 20° of the Comparative System was reduced. This further demonstrates the ability of the process fluids of the present invention to maintain
10 desirable rheological characteristics under a range of conditions.

Commercial Gibbsite and Boehmite Samples

Next, gibbsite and boehmite samples obtained from
15 several commercial suppliers were investigated.

Martinswerk GmbH (PO Box 12 09, D-50102 Bergheim, Germany)

Three powder samples were received from this
20 supplier: Martinal™ OL 107 (M107), Martinal OL 111/LE (M111), both specified by the supplier as fine precipitated aluminium tri-hydrates ($\text{Al}(\text{OH})_3$) with plate-like crystal morphologies, having median particle sizes of approximately 0.7 μm (M111) and 1.5 μm (M107) (as
25 determined by the supplier using light scattering); and Martoxal™ BN-2 (M BN-2), a boehmite (AlOOH) with a median particle size of approximately 1 μm . The specific surface areas of the three samples are in the range 3 to 20 m^2/g . By a combination of TEM and ultracentrifuge
30 measurements we confirmed the presence of particles having diameters slightly below 1 μm in M111 and slightly above 1 μm in M107 and BN-2. The particles of the M111 material contain a small amount of polyacrylate surfactant to facilitate redispersion, which makes the
35 surface anionic at neutral pH. At the pH of 10.5 adopted throughout this study, these particles are anionic as are the gibbsite and boehmite

particles of samples at that pH which do not contain surfactant. Figures 7a-c show respective electron micrographs of the M111, M107 and BN-2 powders.

5 *Nissan Chemical Industries, Ltd. (7-1, 3-chome, Kanda-Nishili-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan 10)*

Three samples were received from this supplier: Aluminasol™ (AS) 100, 200 and 520, all three being in the form of colloidal suspensions. TEM and ultracentrifuge
10 measurements showed that the AS 200 and AS 520 particles were about 50 nm in diameter, whereas the AS 100 particles were about 150 nm in diameter. Figures 8a-c show respective electron micrographs of the AS 100, AS 200 and AS 520 powders.

15

Malakoff Industries Inc. (PO Box 457, Malakoff, Texas 75148-0487, USA)

One sample of powdered gibbsite was received from this supplier: MH-1. The median particle size was
20 specified as being 3 μm. This was confirmed by TEM observations. Figure 9 shows an electron micrograph of the MH-1 powder.

For comparison with these commercial samples, a
25 gibbsite suspension (designated GW3A) was prepared in a similar manner to the gibbsite used in the Example Systems discussed above.

*Rheology, Thermal Stability and Fluid Loss of Muds
30 Containing M111, M107 and BN-2*

Each of M111, M107 and BN-2 was mixed as a dry powder to a bentonite base and then dispersed in water to form a mud. Further muds were formed by varying the amounts of the M111, M107 and BN-2 powders in the
35 mixtures. Each mud was then rheologically and thermally tested in a similar manner to the Example and Comparative Systems described

above (i.e. subjected to consecutive 16 hour periods of hot rolling at temperatures of 240, 300, 350°F with rheological testing being performed before thermal ageing and between each period).

5 Figures 10a-c show values of the yield points (the shear stress at zero shear rate, calculated by extrapolation of measured shear stress vs. shear rate flow curves to zero shear rate), 10" gel strengths and plastic viscosities (the slope of the measured shear stress vs. shear rate curve at the highest measured shear rates) at 10 20°C of various unaged muds. Figure 10a shows these values for muds containing 28 g/l of bentonite and different amounts of M111; Figure 10b shows these values for muds containing 33 g/l of bentonite and different amounts of 15 M107; and Figure 10c shows these values for muds containing 33 g/l of bentonite and different amounts of BN-2.

 Although all three Martinswerk products do increase the gel- and shear thinning characteristics of bentonite mud, the M111 agent is the most reproducible and effective 20 among them. We believe this reproducibility is due to the surfactant which is present only on the M111-particles, and which facilitates dispersion of the powdered material into a suspended colloid. The less strong correlation between thickener concentration and gel strength in the case of 25 M107 and BN-2 may be caused by the poorer dispersability of these surfactant-free powders.

 A surprisingly low concentration of M111 material is required to produce a thickening effect in the bentonite mud. We believe this is also connected with the surfactant 30 present on the M111 particles: the surfactant allowing heteroflocculation between M111 and bentonite particles while opposing mutual aggregation between M111 particles. That is, the surfactant apparently promotes selective inter-particle bridging.

Flow curves, measured in shear sweeps at 20°C, for four mixtures before hot rolling (BHR) and after hot rolling (AHR) at ageing temperatures of 250, 300 and 350°F are shown respectively in Figures 11a-d, the mixtures
5 containing (a) 28 g/l bentonite and 1.2 g/l M111, (b) 33 g/l bentonite and 3.4 g/l M107, (c) 33 g/l bentonite and 5.6 g/l BN-2, and (d) 33 g/l bentonite and 3.3 g/l GW3A. Mixture (d) is similar to Example System 1 discussed above.

For all of the muds, ageing up to 300°F led to a
10 decrease in stress at medium and high shear rates compared to the stress BHR, while leaving the low shear rate gel characteristics substantially unchanged. Thus the measured stress profiles became flatter than before ageing, which suggests that wall-slip could be affecting these
15 measurements.

The low shear rate stresses are several times higher than the shear stress measured for the unaged bentonite base mud without thickener (see Figure 2). Combined with the very low plastic viscosities observed for the aged
20 muds, this indicates that the muds would make useful drilling muds (i.e. the shear thinning behaviour is conserved after ageing at temperatures of up to 300°F).

A general characteristic of the behaviour of all the muds, except for the BN-2 boehmite mud, is an increase in
25 stress at all shear rates after the final ageing step at 350°F. However, from Figure 5 we expect this trend to be reversed again at even higher temperatures/ageing times, and therefore we do not regard this as a threat to practical use.

30 The 10" gel strengths at 20°C of these muds is shown in Figure 12 as a function of the consecutive ageing temperatures.

API fluid loss tests were performed on the M111, M107 and BN-2 muds, and then re-performed after the addition of
35 11 g/l of Floplex to each mud. An API fluid loss test was

also performed on the GW3A mud after an addition of 11 g/l of Floplex. The results of the tests are shown in Figure 13. With Floplex added, the fluid loss of the M111 mud was slightly higher than that of the GW3A mud, but the fluid losses of all the muds with Floplex added were comparable to those shown in Figure 6. It was noted that the addition of Floplex also gave rise to a moderate increase in the gel strengths of the muds.

10 *Rheology and Thermal Stability of Mud*s Containing AS 100,
AS 200 and AS 520

Three muds containing 33 g/l of bentonite and 5.4 g/l of respectively AS 100, AS 200 and AS 520 were prepared. Because the pH of the Aluminasol suspensions was low (pH about 4) to ensure the stability of the positively charged particles in the suspensions, care had to be taken to prevent the bentonite mud collapsing at low pH values when the Aluminasol suspensions were added to the mud. Therefore each suspension was added in a sequence of small additions, with pH readjustment of the mud between each addition. Each mud was then rheologically and thermally tested in a similar manner to Martinswerk samples, except that (i) a BohlinTM rheometer with a Couette geometry was used instead of the Chan rheometer, and (ii) the thermal ageing was performed without rolling of the autoclave bombs.

Figure 14 shows flow curves, measured in shear sweeps at 20°C, for the three Aluminasol-containing muds and, for comparison, the M111 and GW3A muds previously described. Of the Aluminasol muds, only the one containing AS 520 had rheological characteristics comparable to the model gibbsite GW3A and M111 muds. The poorer performance of AS 100 and AS 200 does not seem to be connected with their particle sizes, which are practically equal to that of AS 520. It seems more likely that the difference in

performance stems from unidentified chemical additives whose presence was indicated by ultra centrifuge measurements on the Aluminasol suspensions.

5 The stability of the rheological behaviour of the AS 520 mud was tested as a function of ageing history. Figure 15 shows flow curves, measured in shear sweeps at 20°C, for the AS 520 mud before static ageing (BSA) and after static ageing (ASA) at consecutive temperatures of 250, 300 and 350°F. The flow curves were more or less stable with
10 ageing up to 300°F, but the shear stress reduced dramatically after the last ageing step at 350°F. This may be due to the unidentified chemical additives in the AS 520 suspension.

15 *Rheology of a Mud Containing MH-1*

MH-1 was mixed as a dry powder to a bentonite base and then dispersed in water to form muds containing up to 10 g/l of MH-1 and 33 g/l of bentonite. The muds were then rheologically tested in a similar manner to Martinswerk
20 samples. Thermal ageing was not performed.

Figure 16 show the flow curve, measured in a shear sweep at 20°C, for the mud with 10 g/l of MH-1. Although the MH-1 concentration was varied up to 10 g/l, the Malakoff gibbsite did not thicken the 33 g/l bentonite mud.
25 We believe the reason for this was the size of the MH-1 particles, which was too large for the gibbsite to form a colloidal suspension in the mud. This prevented a gel network mediated by van der Waals interactions between the bentonite and MH-1 particles from being formed.

30

Synthesis of Gibbsite

Synthesis routes for the preparation of gibbsite were investigated to provide alternatives to the commercially available gibbsites and boehmites discussed above.

An amount of $\text{Al}_2(\text{OH})_5\text{Cl}\cdot 3\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (ACH) was received from Hoechst under the name of Locron PTM. ACH solutions were treated hydrothermally for 24-96 hours at 85°C. Figure 17 shows an electron micrograph of the rod-like (which is characteristic of boehmite) colloiddally suspended particles which were formed as a result of the hydrothermal treatment. Laser beam scattering indicated that longer treatment periods led to higher concentrations of the particles.

However, after hydrothermal treatment the concentration of Al^{3+} in solution was still very high and $\text{Al}(\text{OH})_3$ precipitated when the solution was brought to pH 10.5.

Thus two different methods were investigated for the formulation of bentonite-base muds. In the first method, the pH of an ACH solution was adjusted to pH 10.5 prior to its addition to a bentonite-base mud. This led to $\text{Al}(\text{OH})_3$ precipitation before contact with the mud. In the second method, ACH powder was added directly to the alkaline bentonite mud, leading to in situ $\text{Al}(\text{OH})_3$ precipitation.

The first method yielded particles which were colloidal-sized (about 150 nm according to ultra-centrifuge measurements) and could be expected to be rather poorly defined in shape. Visual inspection of a mud containing 35 g/l bentonite and 5 g/l ACH-colloid mixture indicated that excellent rheological behaviour was obtained.

In the second method, the addition of the ACH powder gave rise to instantaneous gelation of the bentonite mud. We believe that the Al^{3+} precipitated immediately, probably as amorphous $\text{Al}(\text{OH})_3$ particles of undefined shape. In situ preparation of $\text{Al}(\text{OH})_3$ particles may have practical advantages as a method of thickening drilling fluids.

Figure 18 shows flow curves, measured in shear sweeps at 20°C, for a 33 g/l bentonite mud with and without in

situ precipitated $\text{Al}(\text{OH})_3$ formed by the addition (to the mud at pH 10.5) of 5 g/l of ACH.

While the invention has been described in conjunction
5 with the exemplary embodiments described above, many
equivalent modifications and variations will be apparent to
those skilled in the art when given this disclosure.
Accordingly, the exemplary embodiments of the invention set
forth above are considered to be illustrative and not
10 limiting. Various changes to the described embodiments may
be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the
invention.

Claims

1. A water-based, shear-thinning process fluid comprising:

- 5 bentonite,
 aluminium hydroxide particles, and
 salt,

the median diameter by weight of the aluminium hydroxide particles not exceeding 2 μm .

10

2. A process fluid according to claim 1, wherein the median diameter of the aluminium hydroxide particles does not exceed 1 μm .

15

3. A process fluid according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the salt comprises NaCl and/or KCl.

20

4. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 3, having a pH at or above the isoelectric point of the aluminium hydroxide particles.

5. A process fluid according to claim 4, having a pH in the range 9.5 to 11.

25

6. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 5, wherein the aluminium hydroxide particles are non-spherical.

30

7. A process fluid according to claim 6, wherein the aluminium hydroxide particles are platelets and/or rods.

8. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 7, wherein a surfactant is provided on the surfaces of the aluminium hydroxide particles.

35

9. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 6, wherein the concentration of the aluminium hydroxide particles in the fluid is in the range 0.5 to 6 g/l.

5 10. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 9, wherein the concentration of the bentonite in the fluid is in the range 5 to 60 g/l.

10 11. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 10, wherein the concentration of the salt in the fluid is in the range 5 to 150 g/l.

12. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 11, further comprising a fluid loss control agent.

15

13. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 12, having a 10" gel strength at 20°C in the range 15 to 70 Pa.

20

14. A process fluid according to claim 13, which maintains a 10" gel strength at 20°C in the range 15 to 70 Pa after ageing at a pressure of 1.7 MPa for consecutive periods of 16 hours at 240°F (115.6°C) and 16 hours at 300°F (148.9°C).

25

15. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 14, exhibiting reversible shear-thinning behaviour at 20°C for all shear rates in the shear rate range 5 to 1000 s⁻¹.

30

16. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 15, having a rate of change of viscosity with shear rate at 20°C of between -10 and -0.01 Pa.s for all shear rates in the shear rate range 5 to 1000 s⁻¹.

17. A process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 16, which is a drilling fluid.

18. A water-based, shear-thinning process fluid
5 comprising:

clay particles,
colloidal particles, and
salt,

the median diameter by weight of the colloidal particles
10 not exceeding 2 μm .

19. Use of a water-based process fluid according to any one of claims 1 to 18 for drilling a hydrocarbon well.

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FIGURE 1

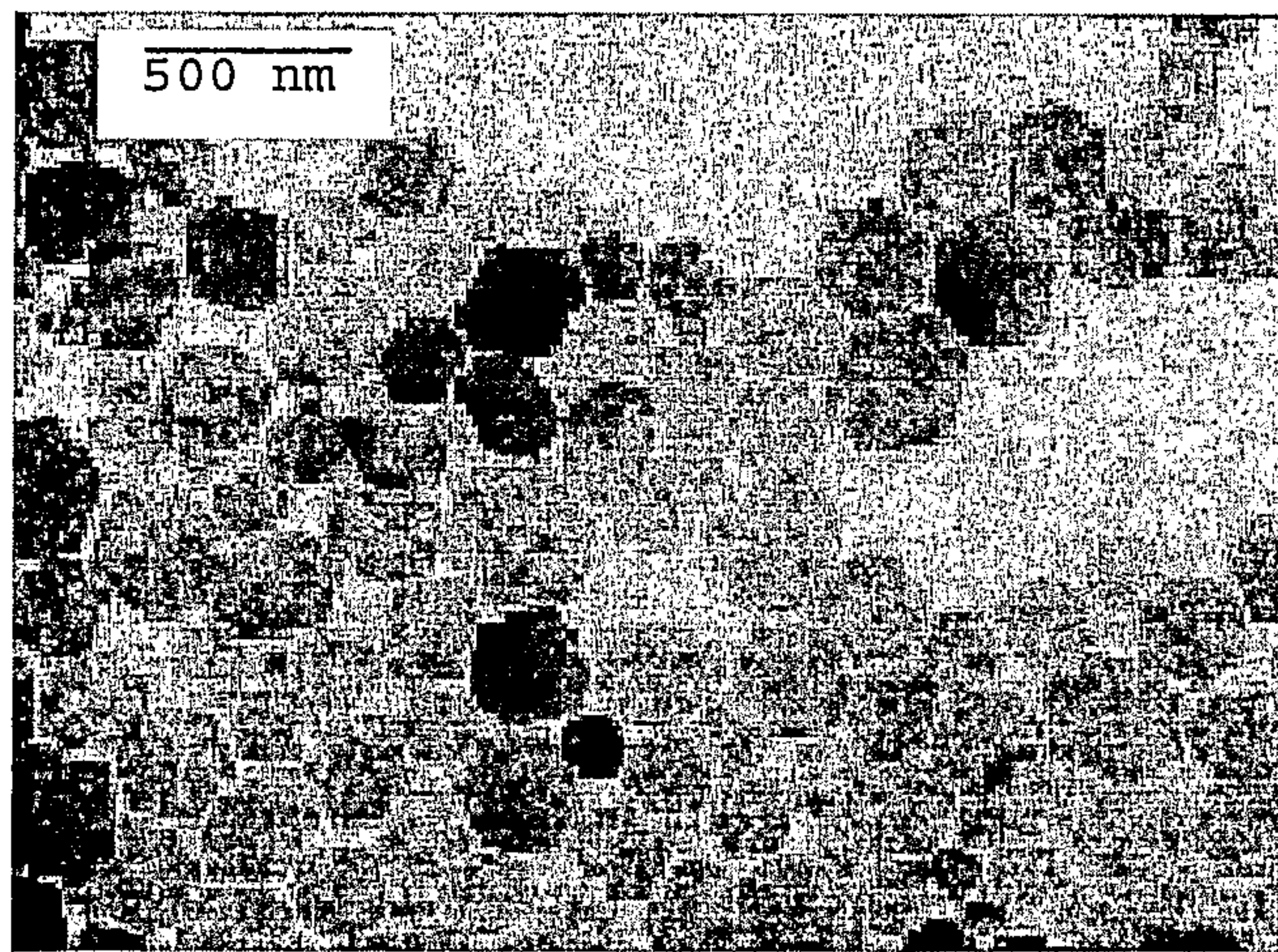


FIGURE 2

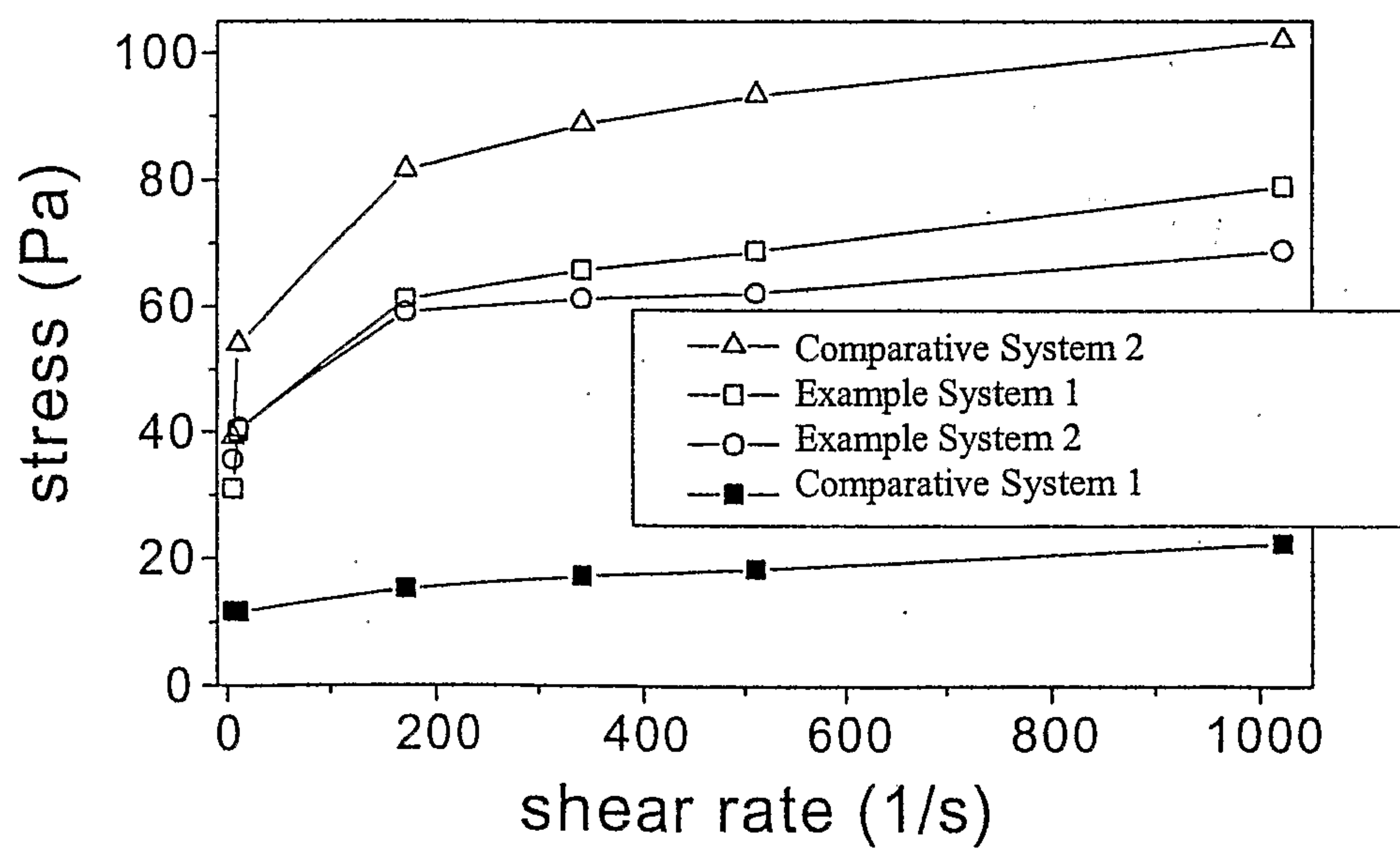


FIGURE 3

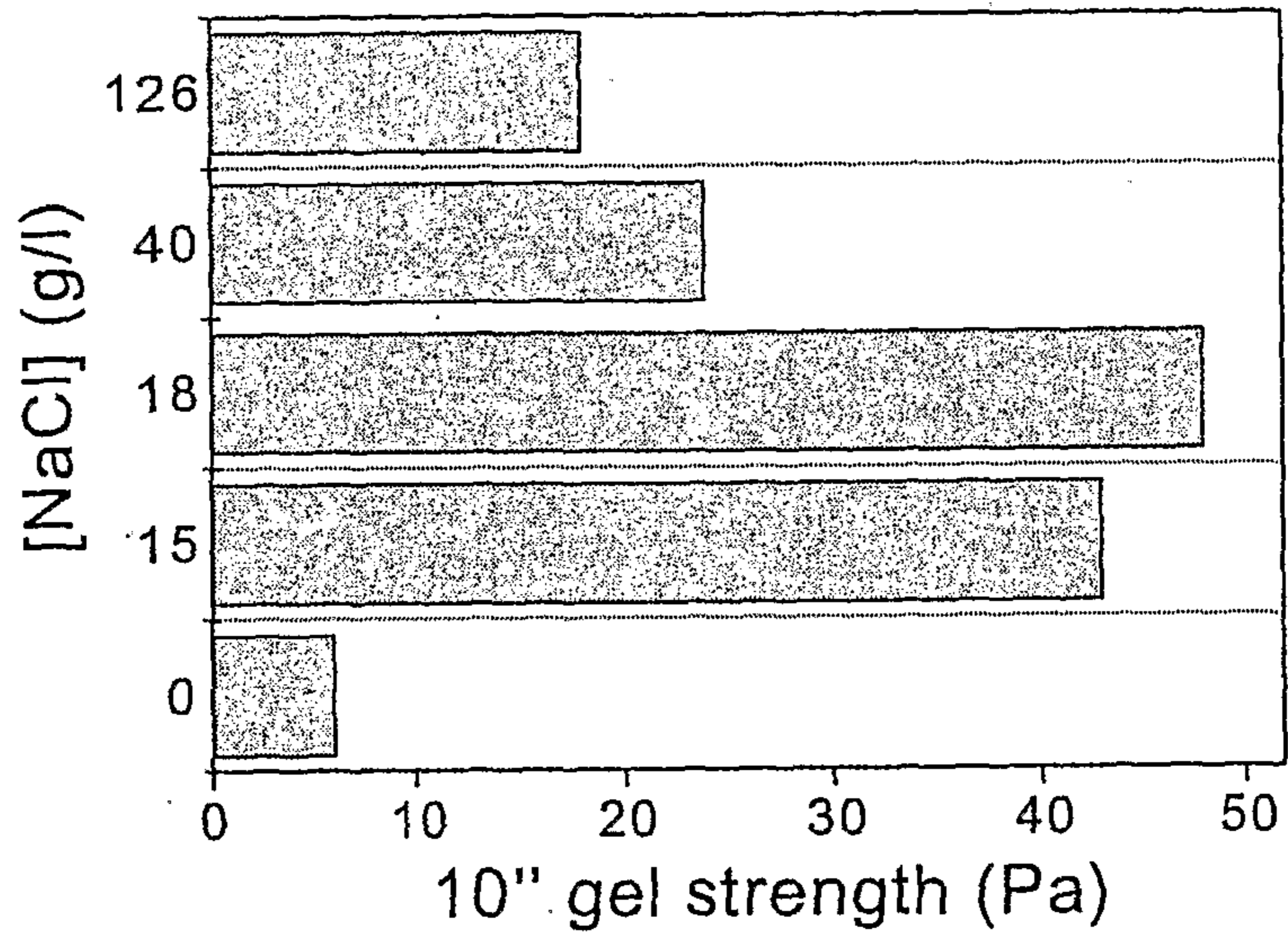


FIGURE 4

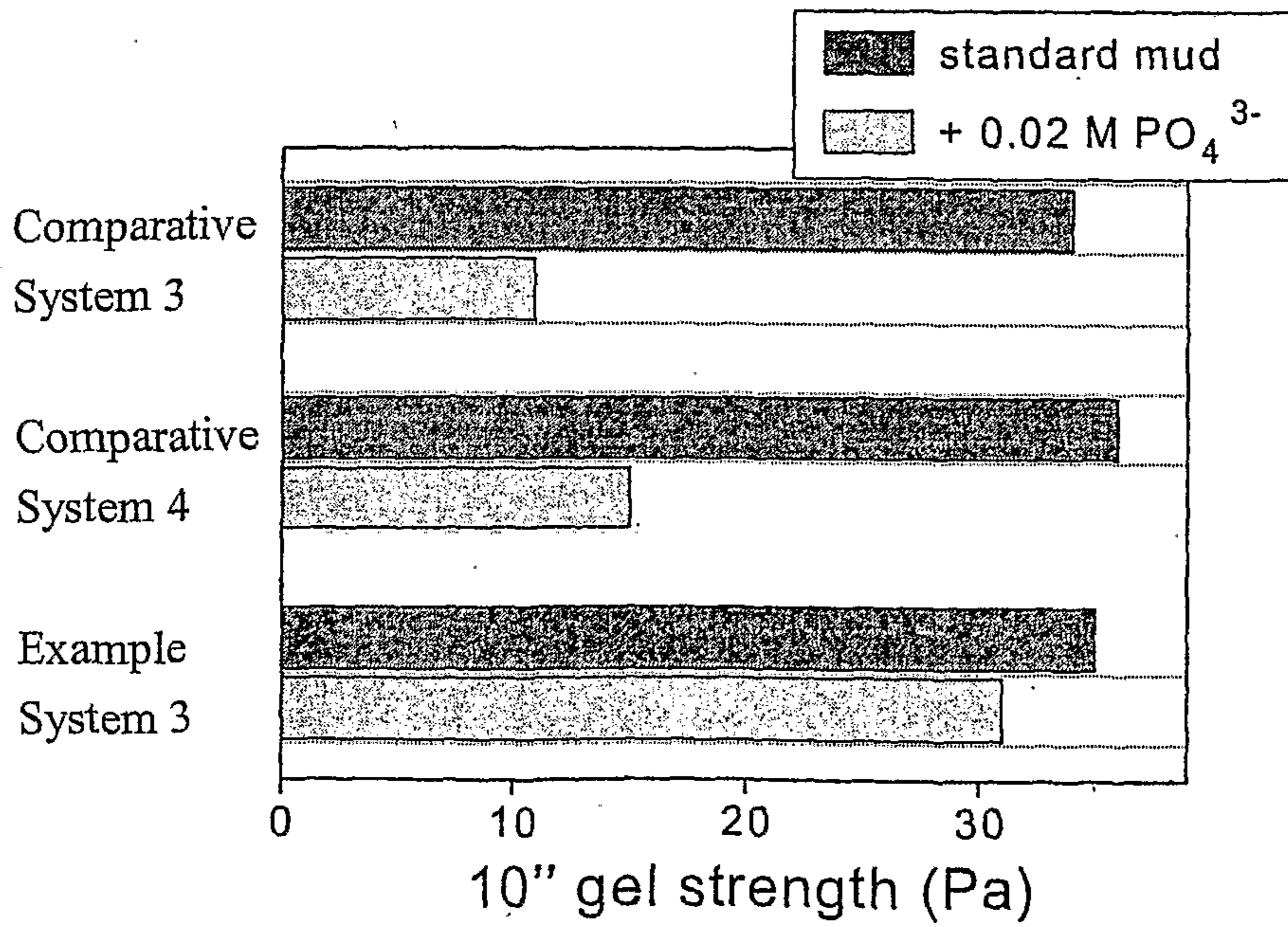


FIGURE 5

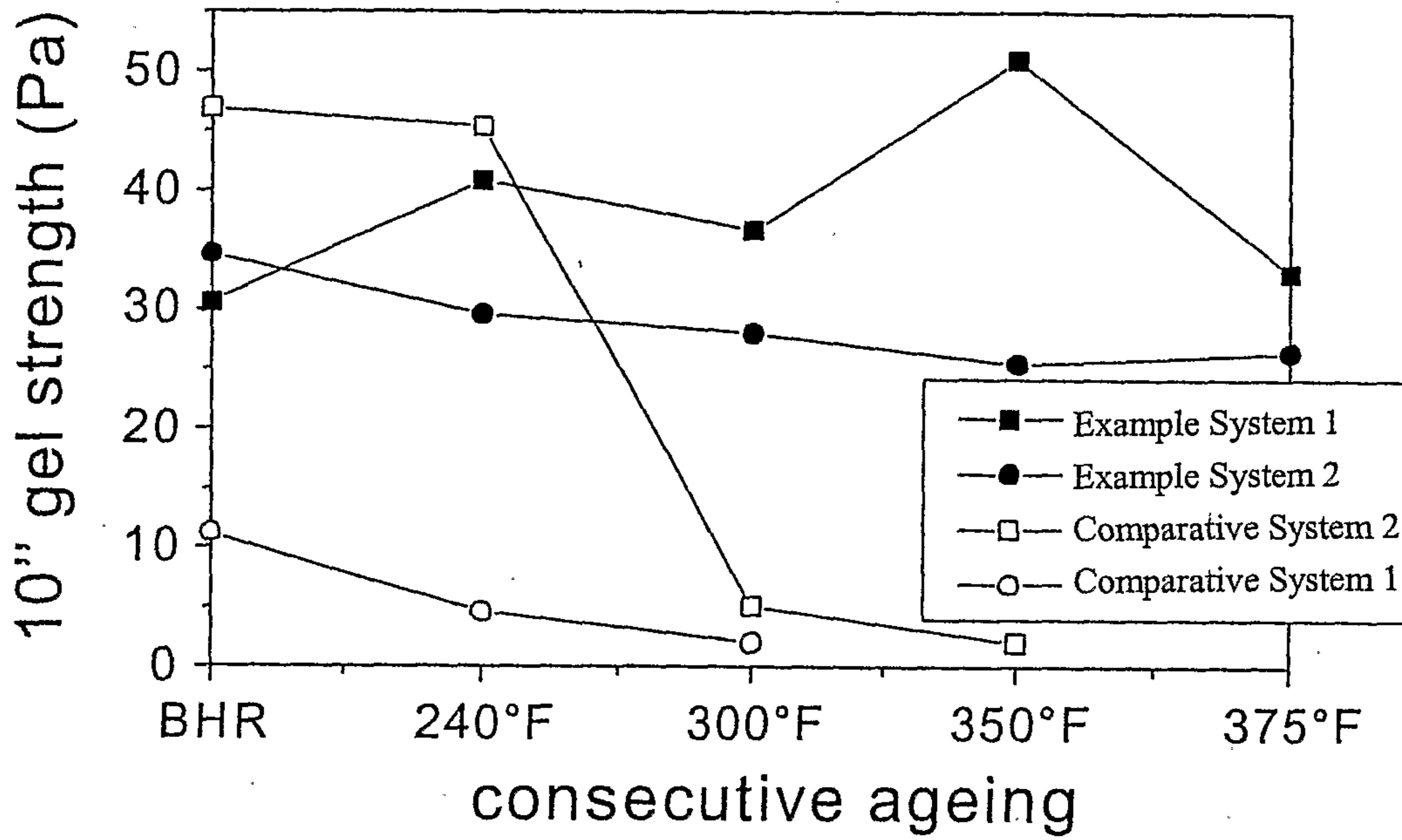
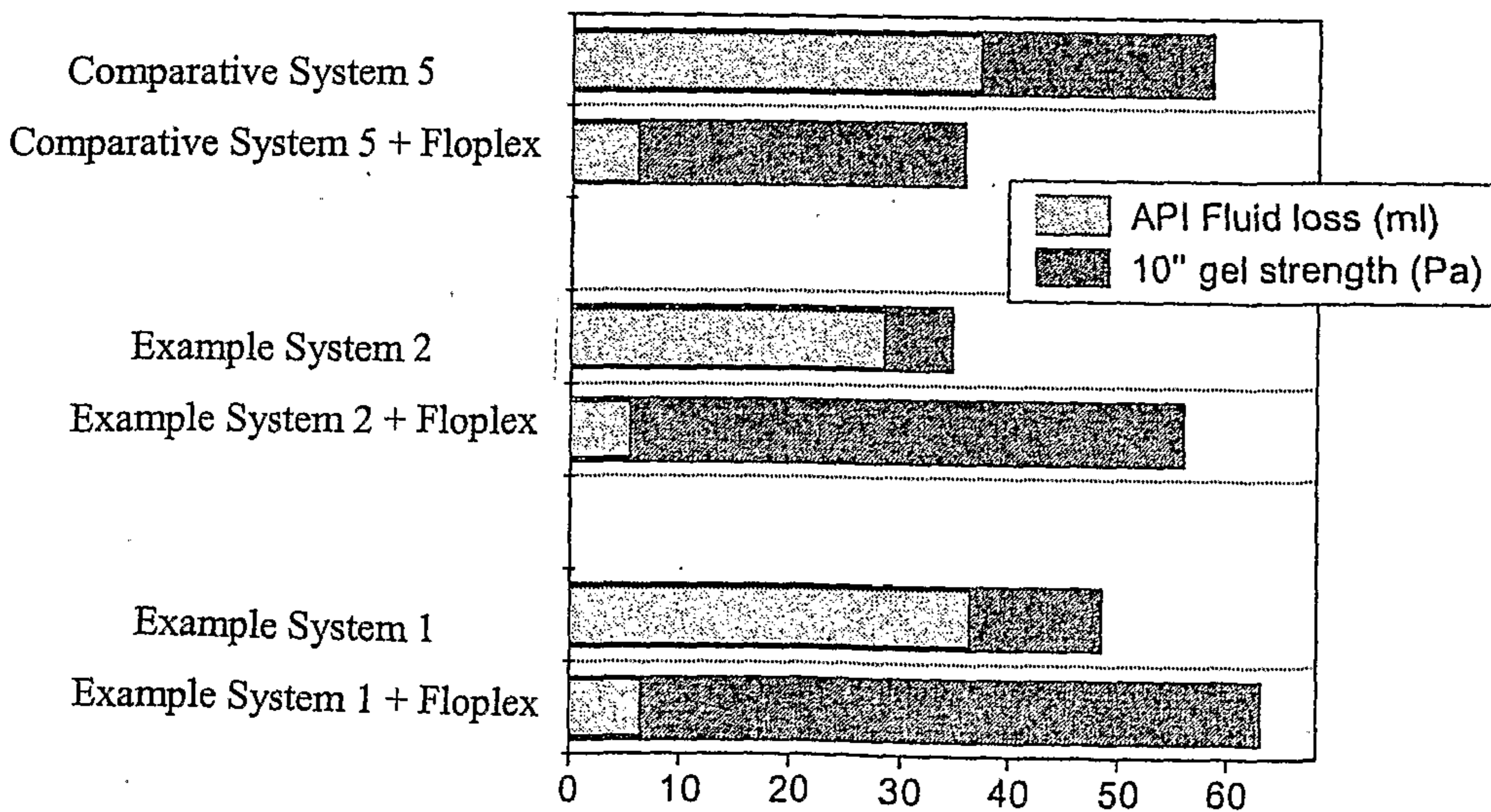


FIGURE 6



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FIGURE 7

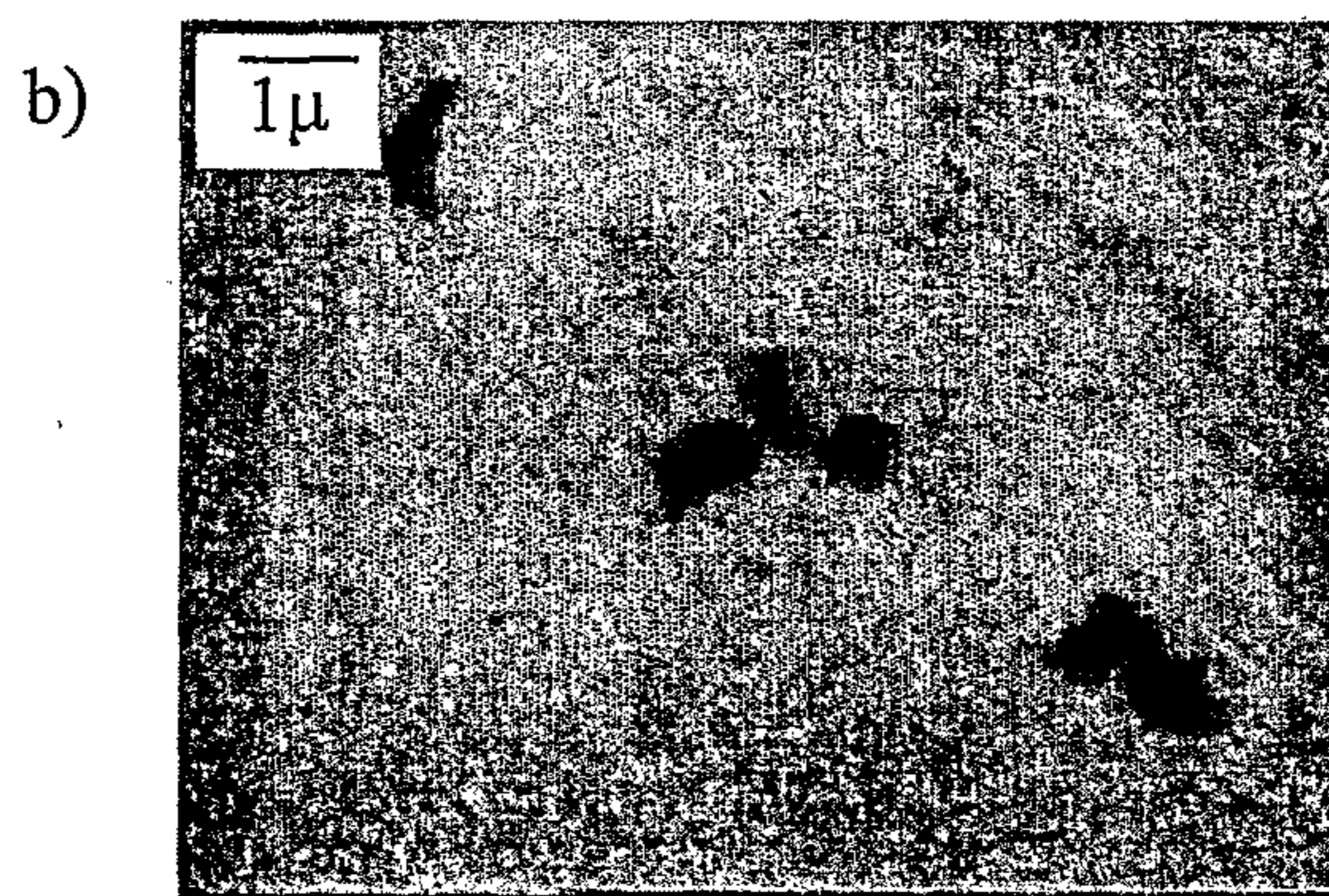
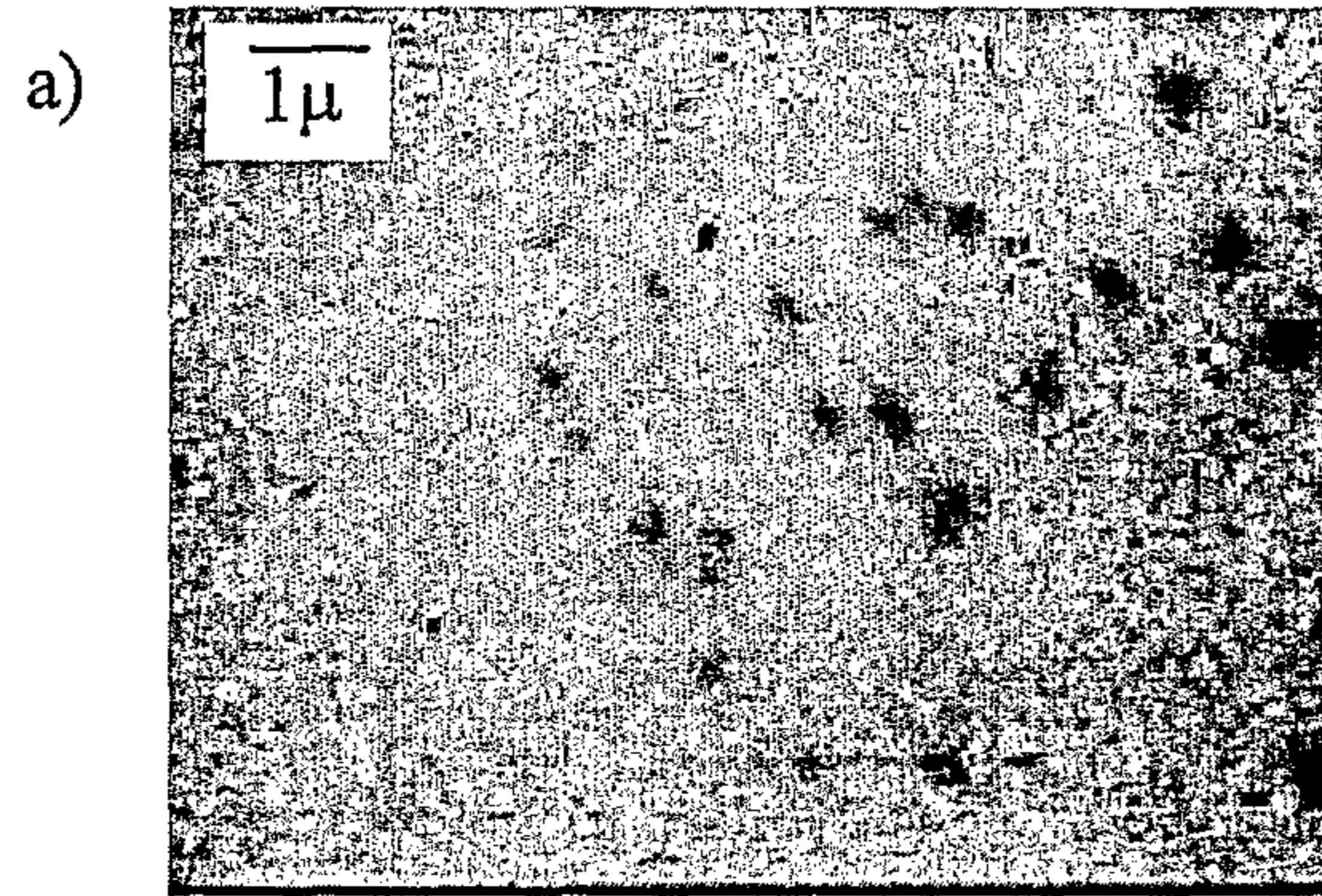


FIGURE 8

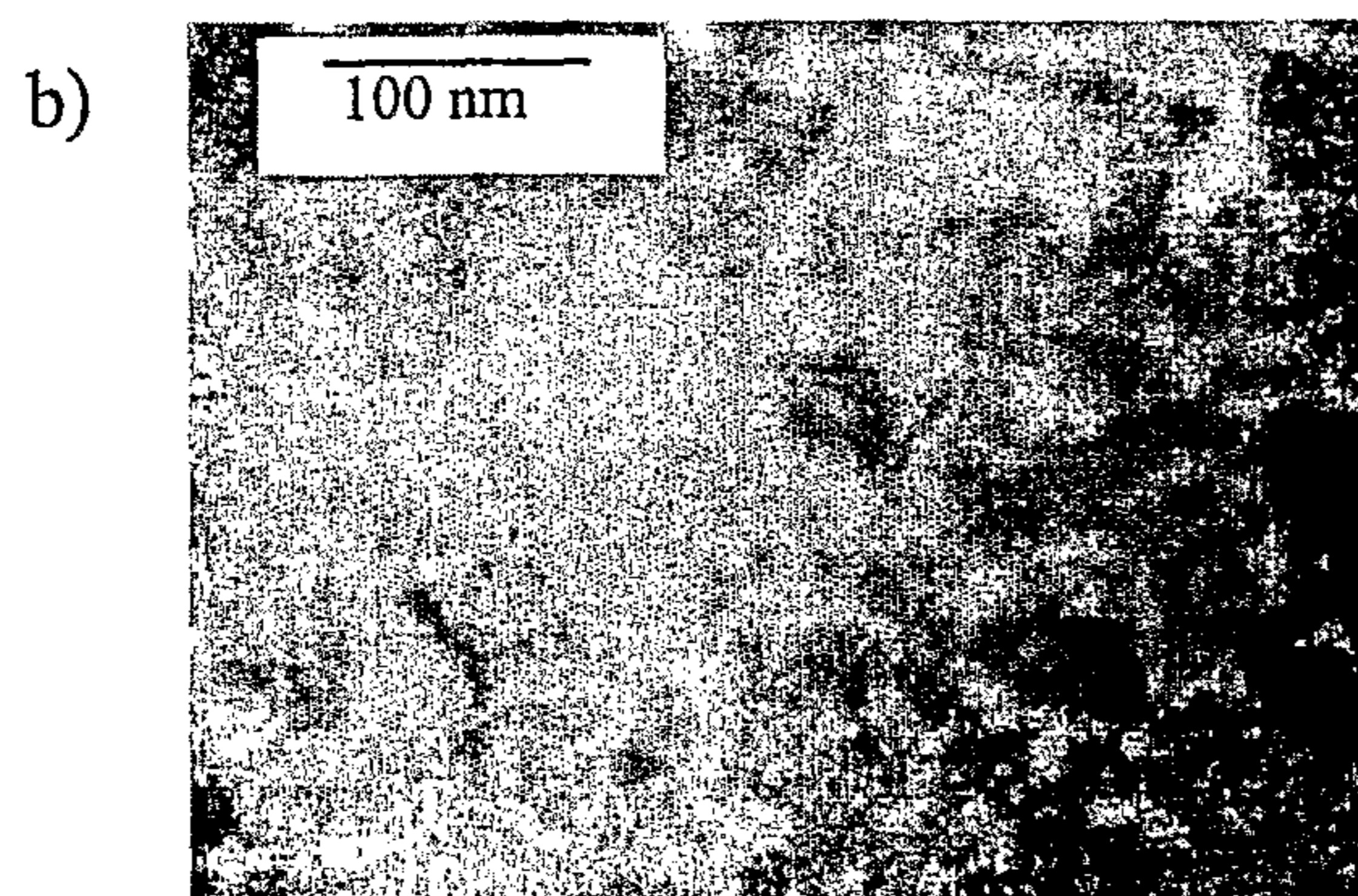
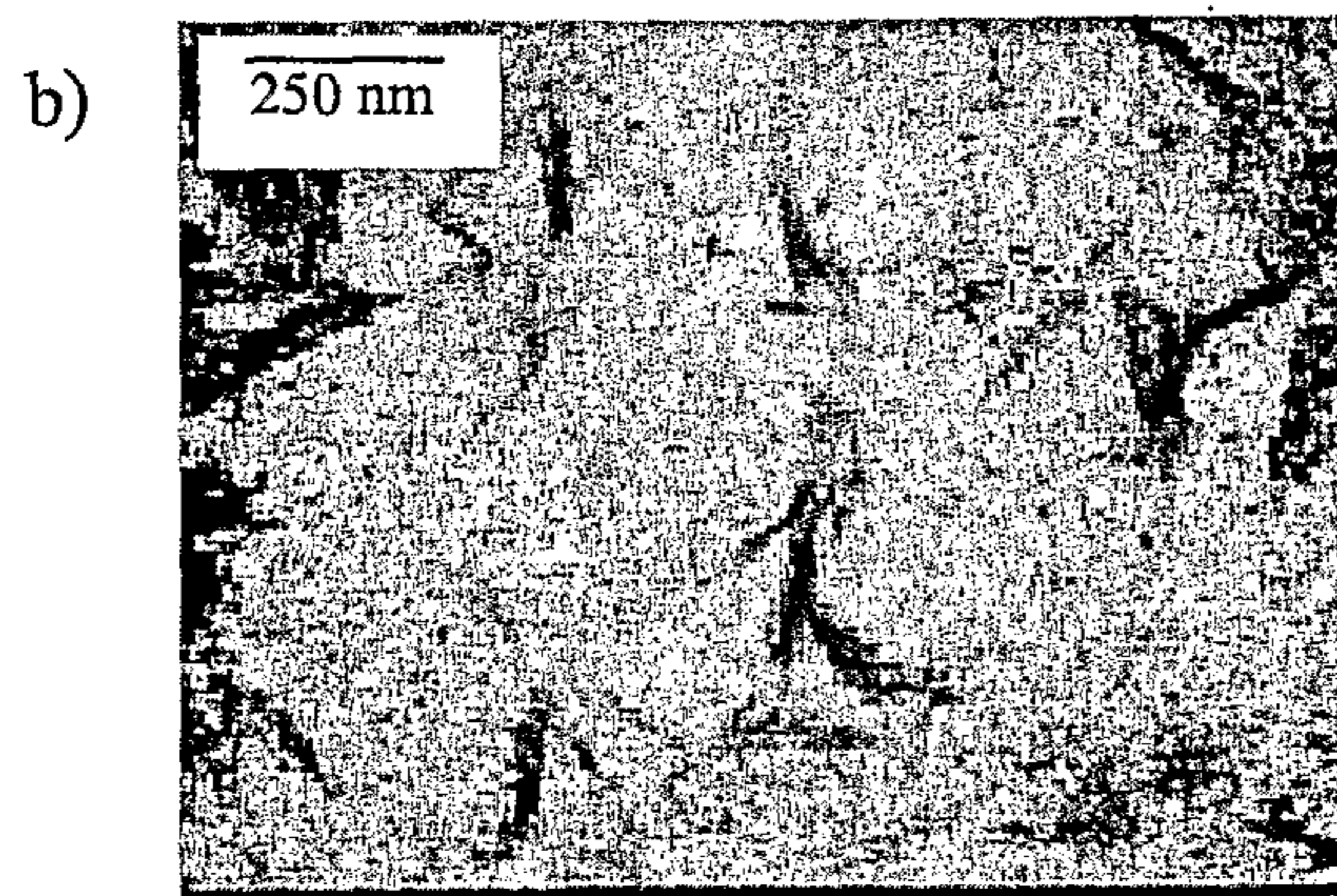
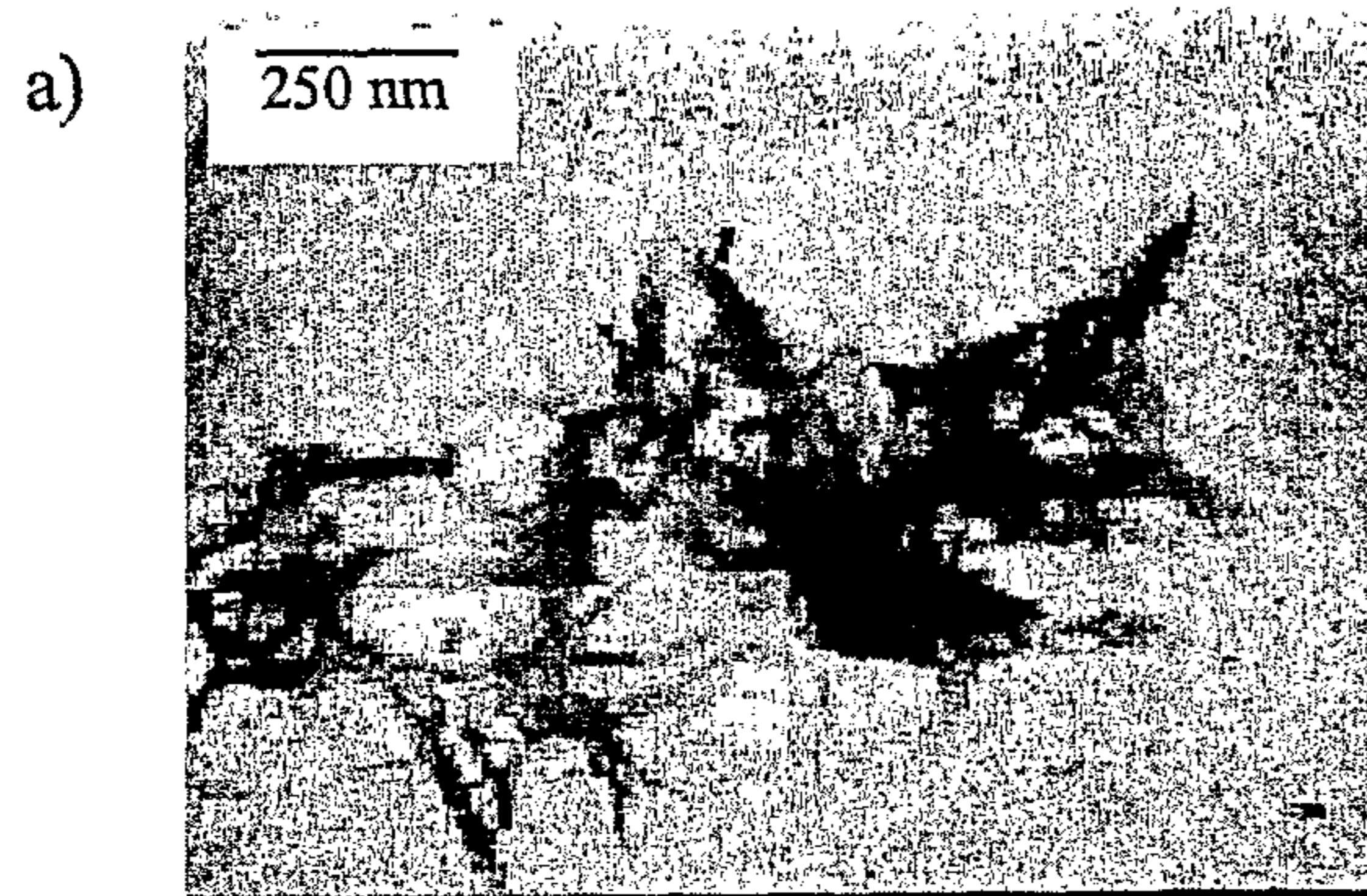


FIGURE 9

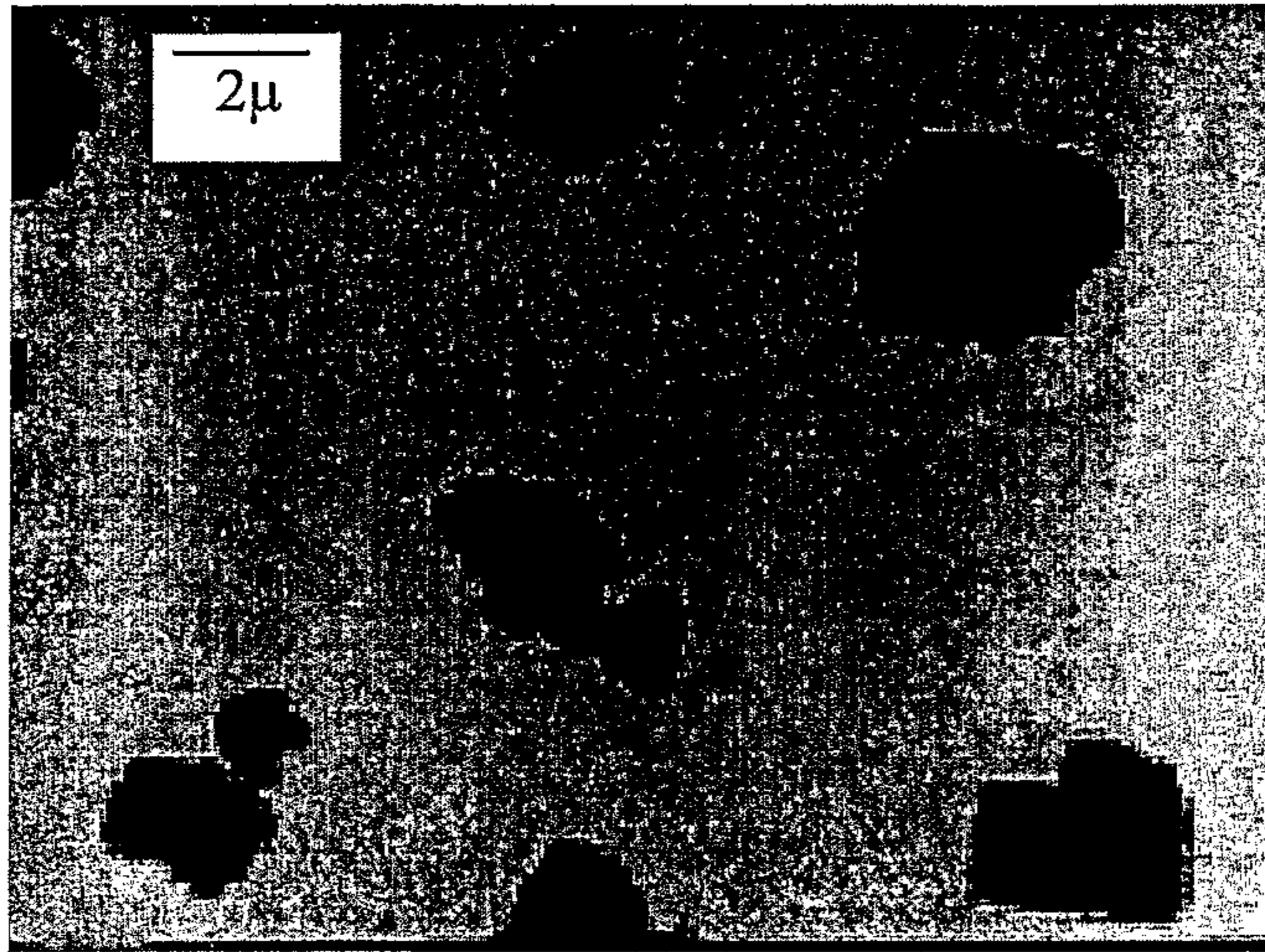


FIGURE 10

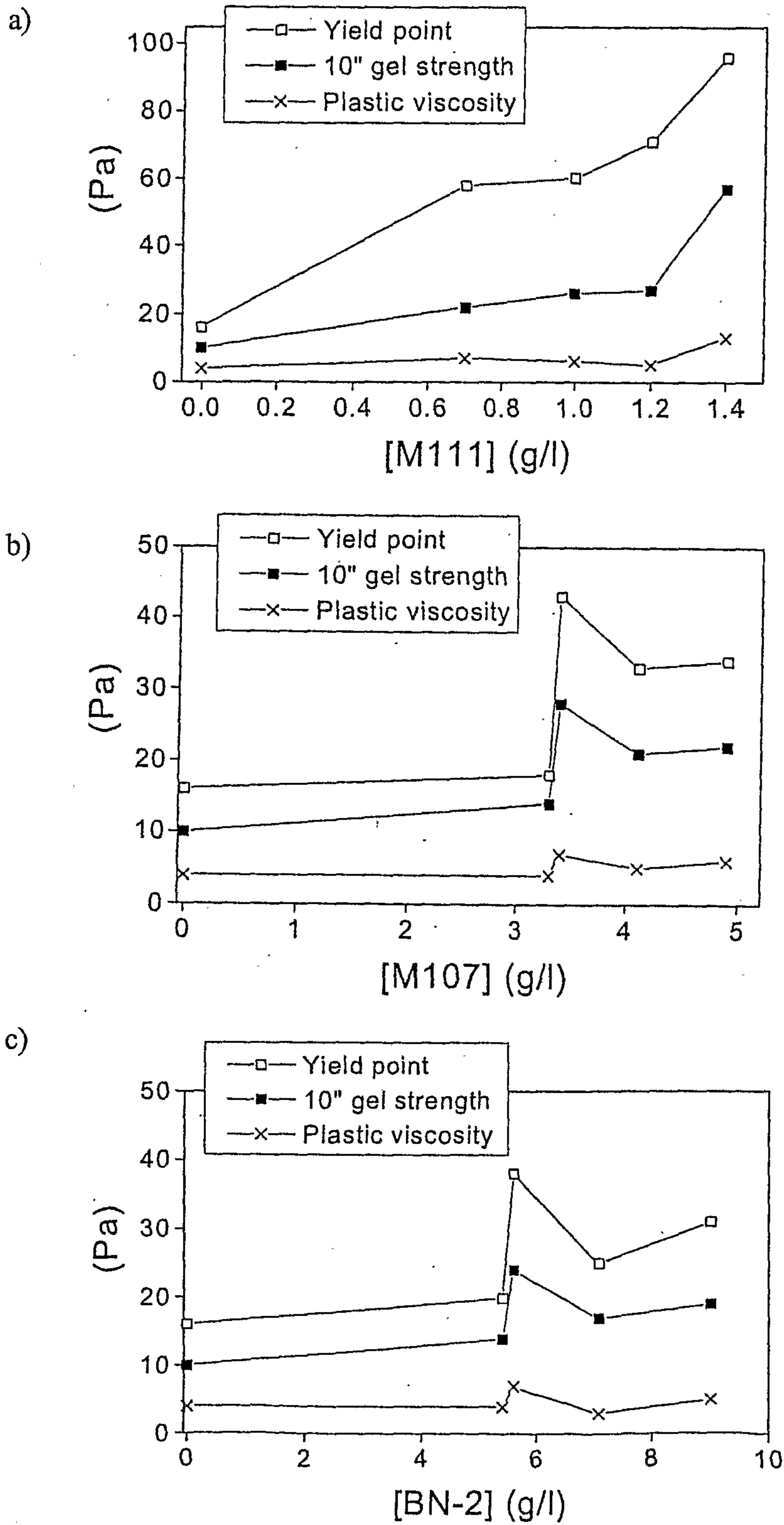
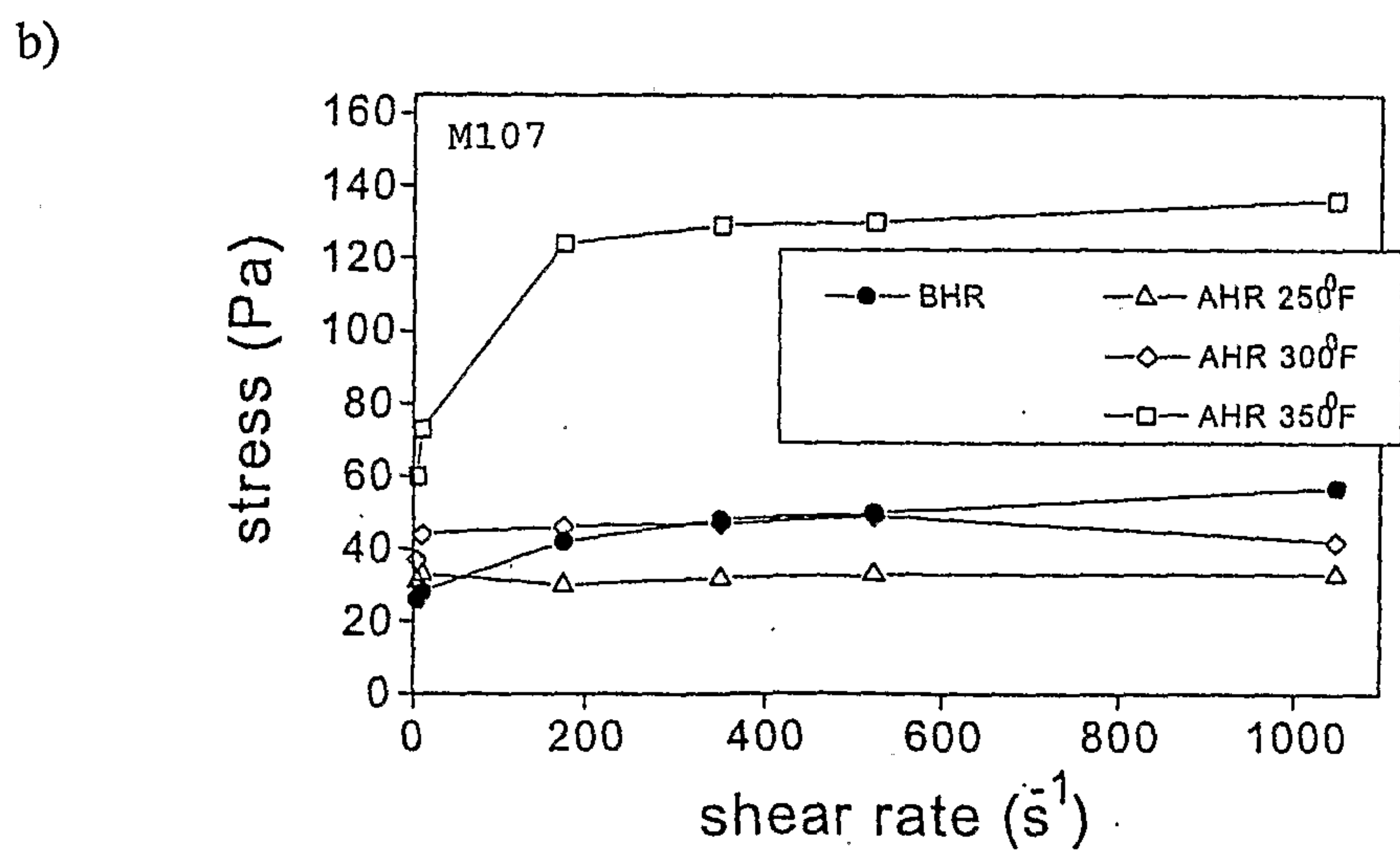
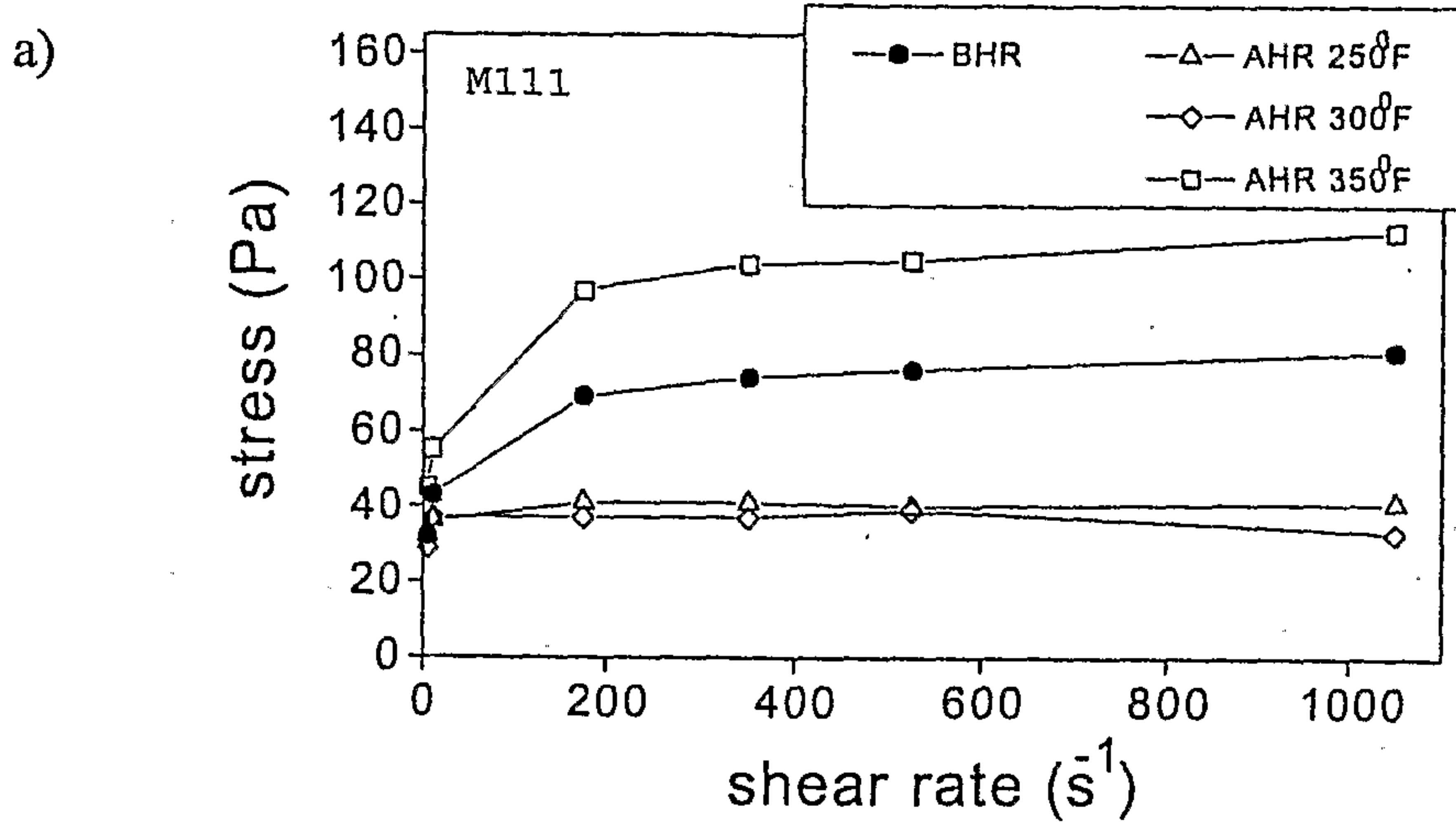


FIGURE 11



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FIGURE 11

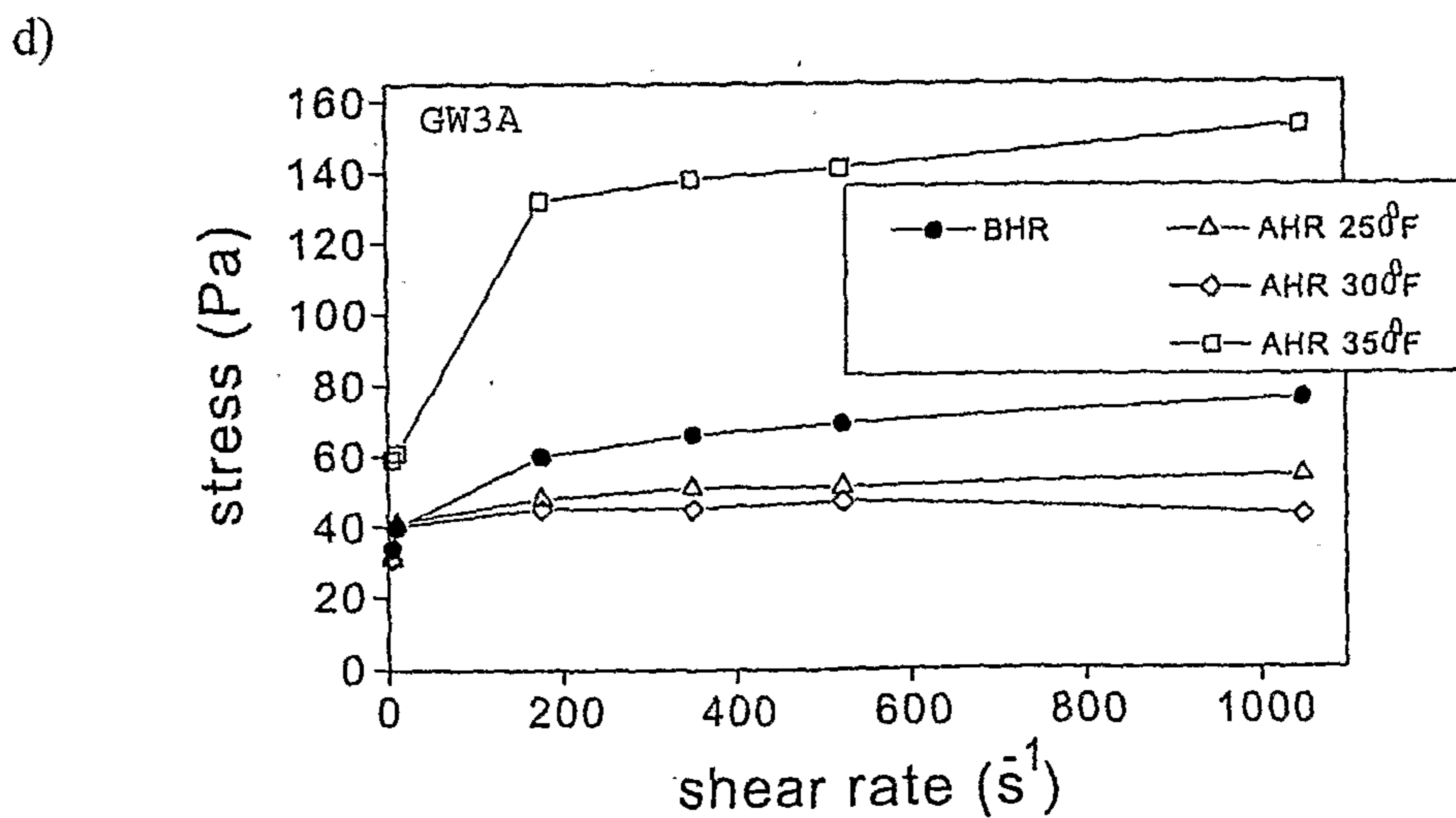
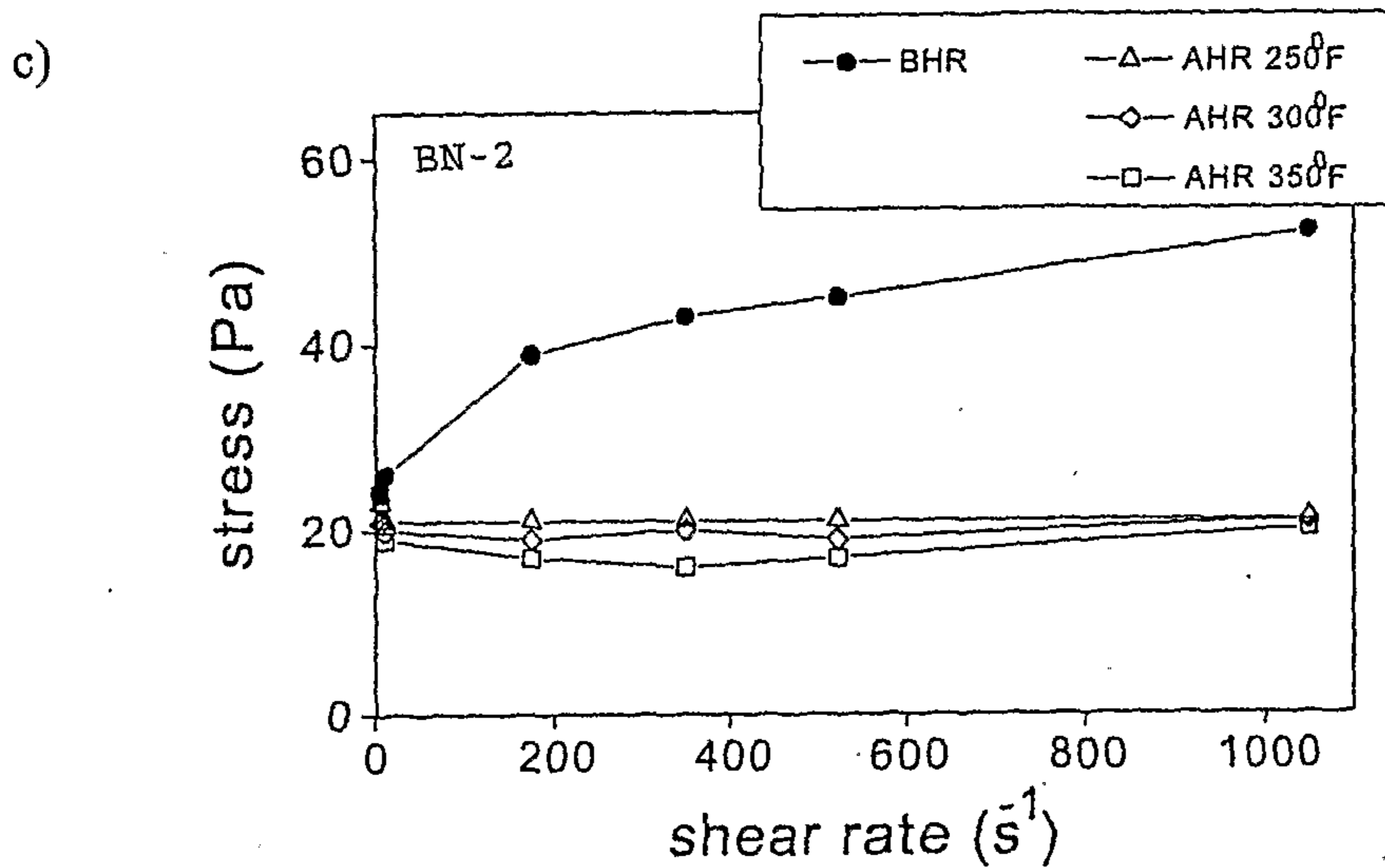


FIGURE 12

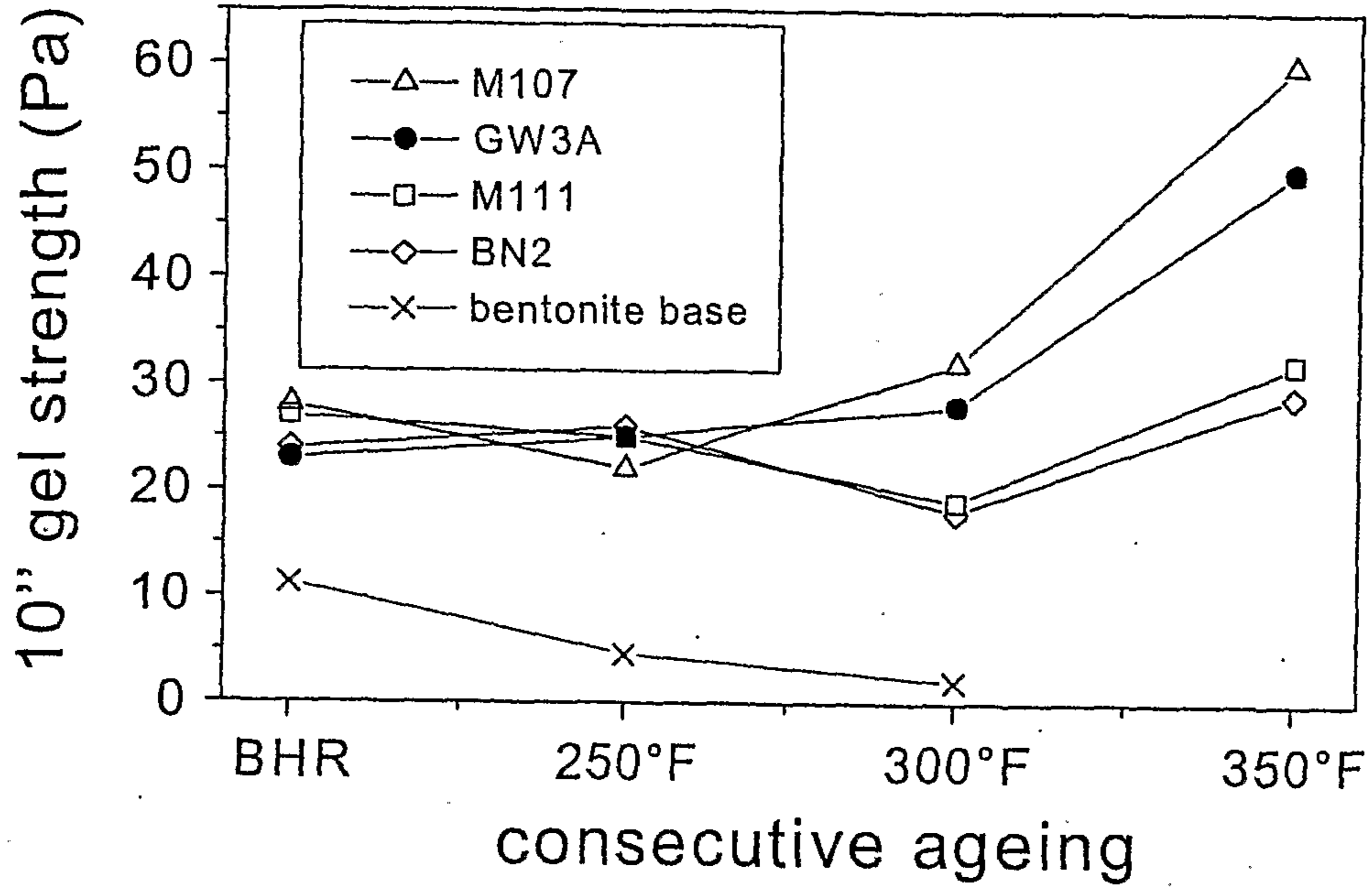


FIGURE 13

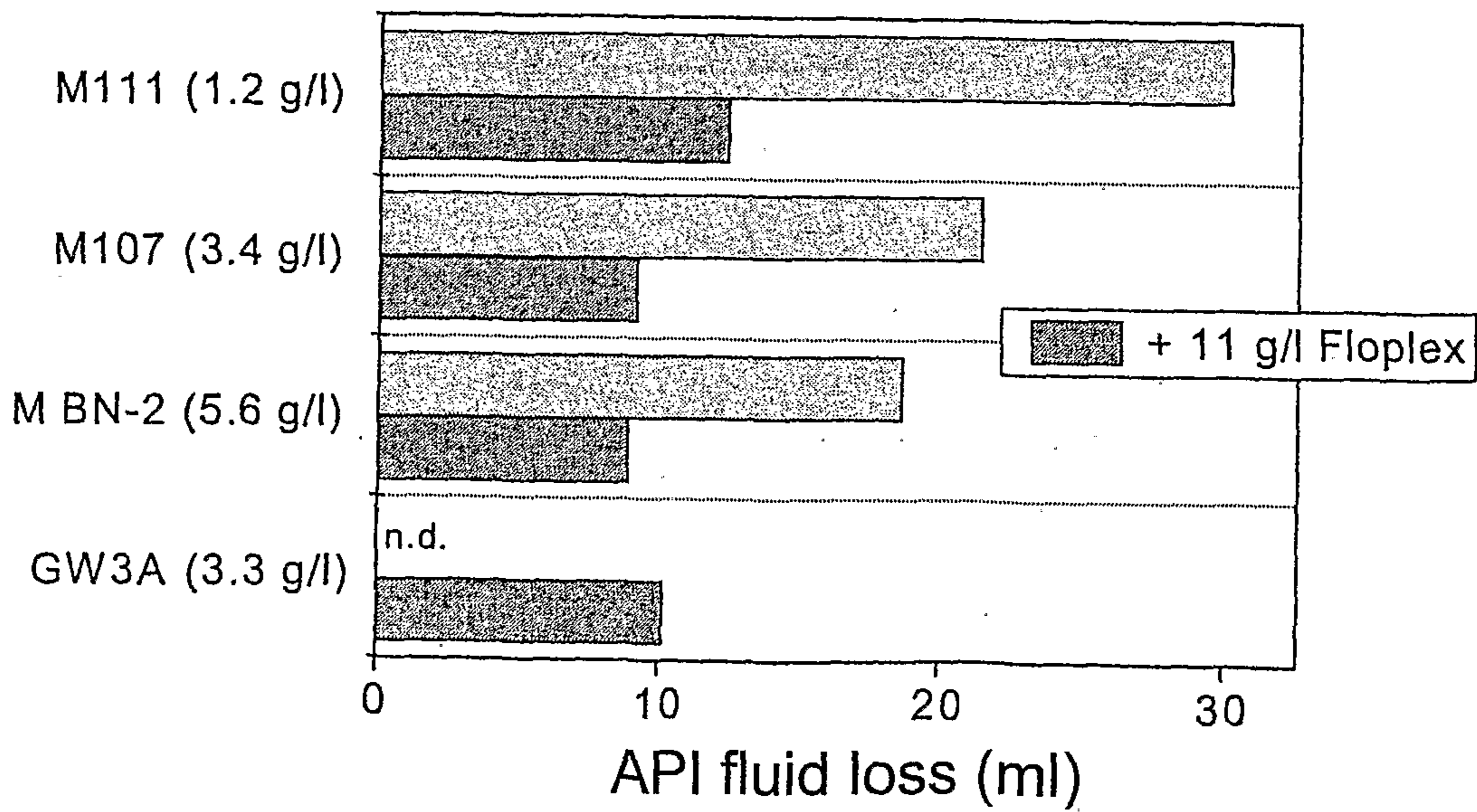


FIGURE 14

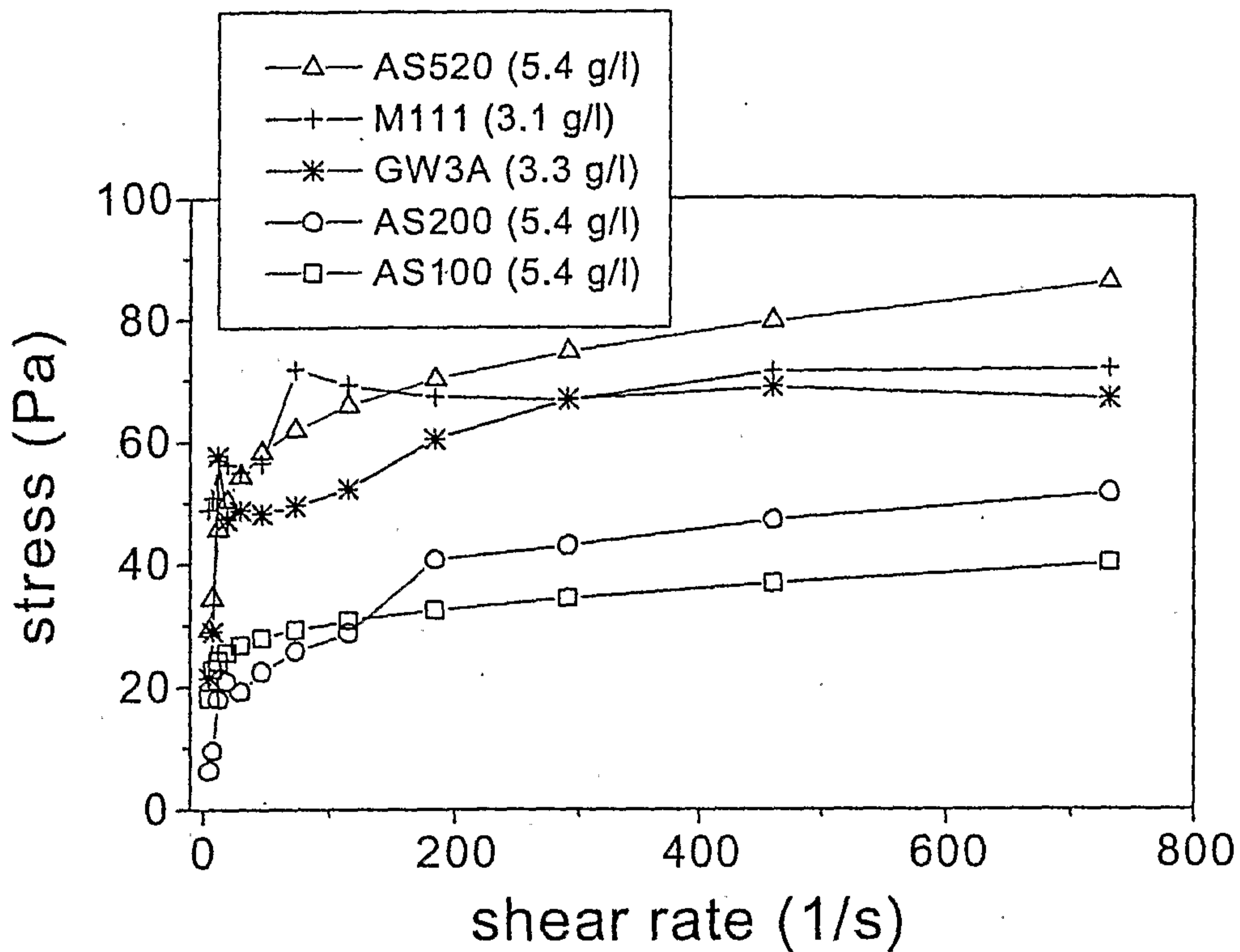
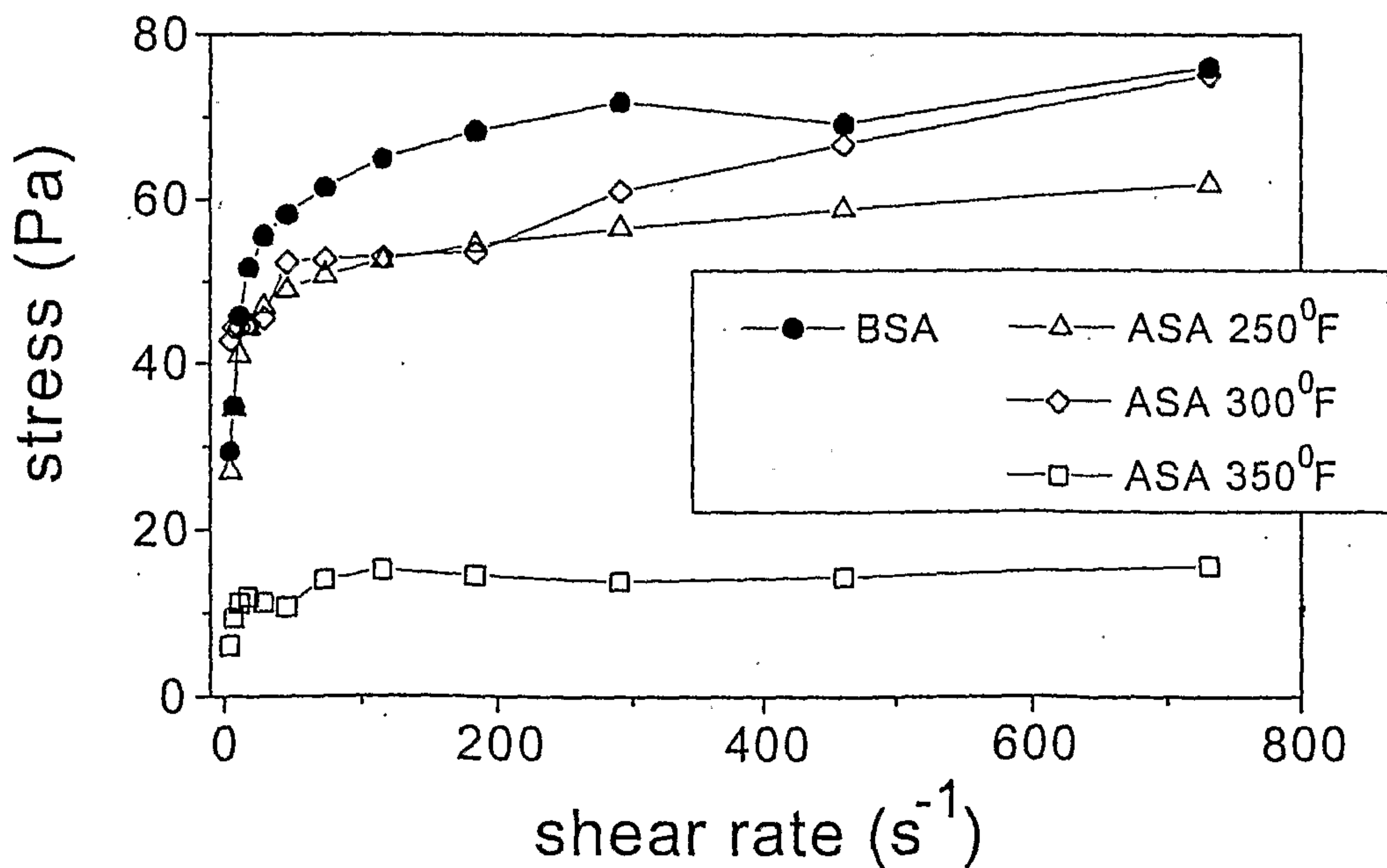


FIGURE 15



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FIGURE 16

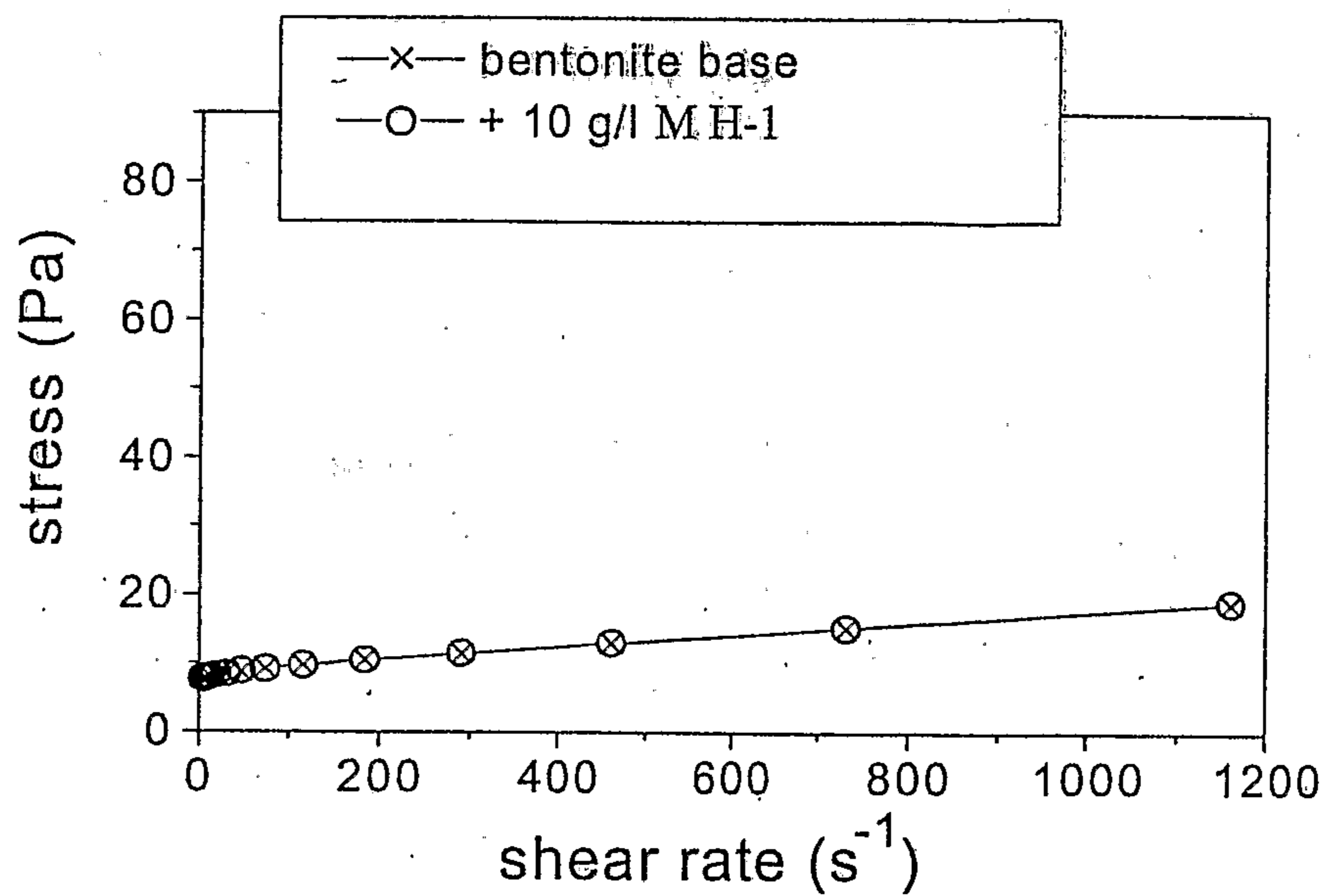
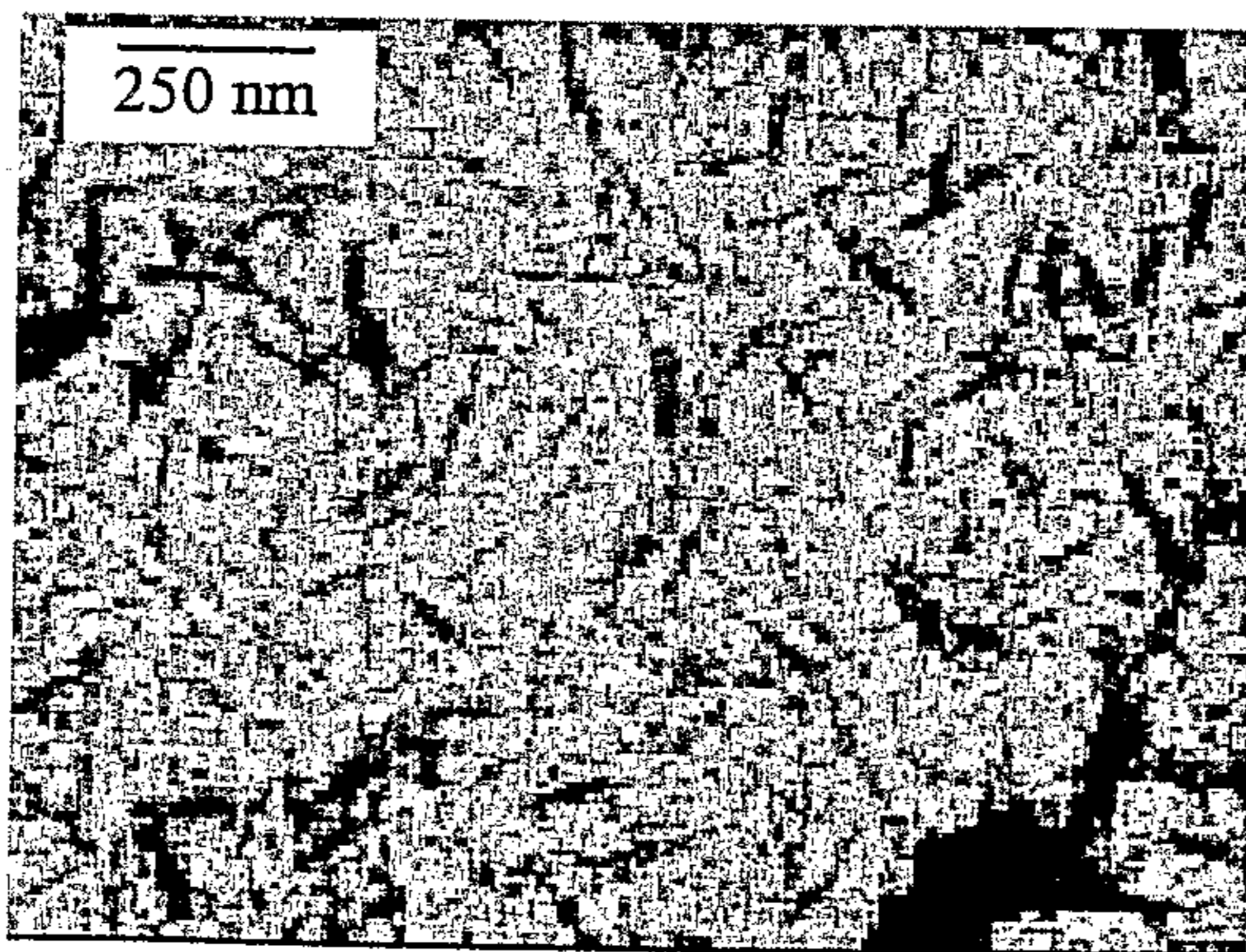


FIGURE 17



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FIGURE 18

