



**HAL**  
open science

# Investigation of the hydro-mechanical behaviour of compacted bentonite/sand mixture based on the BExM model

Qiong Wang, Anh Minh A.M. Tang, Yu-Jun Cui, Jean-Dominique Barnichon, Wei-Min Ye

► **To cite this version:**

Qiong Wang, Anh Minh A.M. Tang, Yu-Jun Cui, Jean-Dominique Barnichon, Wei-Min Ye. Investigation of the hydro-mechanical behaviour of compacted bentonite/sand mixture based on the BExM model. *Computers and Geotechnics*, 2013, 54, pp.46-52. 10.1016/j.compgeo.2013.05.011 . hal-00926870

**HAL Id: hal-00926870**

**<https://enpc.hal.science/hal-00926870>**

Submitted on 26 Apr 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

1 Investigation of the hydro-mechanical behaviour of compacted  
2 bentonite/sand mixture based on the BExM model

3 Qiong Wang<sup>a</sup>, Anh Minh Tang<sup>a</sup>, Yu-Jun Cui<sup>a,c</sup>,

4 Jean-Dominique Barnichon<sup>b</sup>, Wei-Min Ye<sup>c</sup>

5  
6 <sup>a</sup> *Ecole des Ponts ParisTech, Navier/CERMES, 6-8 av. Blaise Pascal, Cité Descartes,*  
7 *Champs-sur-Marne, 77455 MARNE LA VALLEE, France*

8 <sup>b</sup> *Institut de Radioprotection et de Sûreté Nucléaire (IRSN), PRP-DGE/SRTG/LETIS, BP 17,*  
9 *Fontenay-aux-Roses, France*

10 <sup>c</sup> *Tongji University, 1239 Siping road, 200092, China*

11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17 **Corresponding author:**

18 Prof. Yu-Jun CUI

19 *Ecole des Ponts ParisTech*

20 6-8 av. Blaise Pascal, Cité Descartes, Champs-sur-Marne

21 77455 MARNE LA VALLEE

22 France

23  
24 Telephone: +33 1 64 15 35 50

25 Fax: +33 1 64 15 35 62

26 E-mail: yujun.cui@enpc.fr

30 **Abstract:**

31 This study focuses on the hydro-mechanical behaviour of a MX80 bentonite/sand  
32 mixture. Barcelona Expansive Model (BExM) was used to describe this behaviour. For  
33 this purpose, experimental data obtained in the laboratory were analysed, allowing  
34 determination of the parameters used in the model. These parameters were then used to  
35 simulate the hydro-mechanical (H-M) responses of the material from other tests with  
36 different stress paths. It was observed that the model reproduced well the main feature  
37 of swelling pressure development and micro-structural volume change during suction  
38 decrease. On the other hand, the simulations also showed some limitations of the model  
39 which is based on the consideration of two levels of soil structure or double structure:  
40 the pore size distribution curve determined by the technique of mercury intrusion  
41 porosimetry (MIP) in the range of low suctions (4.2 and 1 MPa) being revealed to be  
42 tri-modal, the BExM model cannot capture this aspect to correctly describe the  
43 macro-structural and micro-structural void ratio changes. Moreover, because the BExM  
44 model lumps clay intra-particle spaces and inter-particles voids together as micro-pores,  
45 it leads to overestimation of the micro-structural water content compared to the  
46 experimental value.

47

48 **Keywords:** bentonite/sand mixture; hydro-mechanical behaviour; constitutive  
49 modeling; volume change; microstructure.

50

## 51 **1 INTRODUCTION**

52 Compacted bentonite-based materials have been proposed as engineering barriers in the  
53 deep geological repository for high-level radioactive wastes (HLW) in several  
54 countries. Thanks to their low permeability, high swelling and high radionuclide  
55 retardation capacities [1-3], they are expected to limit the release of radionuclide to the  
56 surrounding host rock [4]. After installation in the repository, the engineering barriers  
57 will simultaneously undergo the intrusion of groundwater from the host rocks or  
58 geological barriers, and the stress changes mainly due to the bentonite swelling.  
59 Therefore, the hydro-mechanical performance of engineering barriers is a key issue in  
60 assessment of the overall repository safety.

61 Various laboratory studies have been conducted on the H-M behaviour of  
62 bentonite-based materials [5-9]. Based on the experimental results, a number of  
63 constitutive models have been developed such as the model of Gens and Alonso [10],  
64 the model of Alonso et al. [11] and the model of Cui et al. [12], etc. To the authors'  
65 knowledge, the elasto-plastic model developed by Alonso et al. [11], namely Barcelona  
66 Expansive Model (BExM), is the most widely used one in describing the mechanical  
67 behaviour of unsaturated expansive soils.

68 In the BExM model, the authors incorporate the microstructure effects by introducing  
69 two levels of soil structure: a microstructure level that corresponds to the active clay  
70 minerals with prevailing physico-chemical effects, and a macrostructure level that  
71 accounts for the larger scale structure of the soil. The coupling between the two levels is

72 described by means of the interaction functions capable of describing, in a  
73 phenomenological fashion, the occurrence of macro-structural elasto–plastic strains as  
74 a consequence of micro-structural strains.

75 Because of the complexity of the model, there have been few experimental works that  
76 allow the determination of the full set of its parameters, especially for the  
77 bentonite-based materials. In this study, the hydro-mechanical behaviour of compacted  
78 MX80 bentonite/sand mixture was investigated based on the BExM model. The  
79 determination of the model parameters was first conducted by matching the model  
80 equations with the laboratory experimental results. The parameters thus determined  
81 were then used to simulate the H-M behaviour of the material in the swelling pressure  
82 and water retention tests. The performance and limitation of the model were further  
83 analysed by comparing the model and experimental results and by considering the  
84 microstructure changes upon wetting or suction decrease.

## 85 **2 BARCELONA EXPANSIVE MODEL**

86 As mentioned previously, Barcelona Expansive Model (BExM) proposed by Alonso et  
87 al. [11] accounts for two levels of soil structure [10, 13]: micro- and macro-structural  
88 levels. The micro-structural level corresponds to the aggregates of active clay particles  
89 with intra-aggregate pores, whereas the macro-structural level corresponds to the larger  
90 scale soil structure [14-15]. Following this concept, the void ratio ( $e$ ) can be split into  
91 two parts:

$$92 \quad e = e_m + e_M \quad (1)$$

93 where  $e_m$  and  $e_M$  are micro- and macro-structural void ratios, respectively.

94 The micro-structural pores are assumed to be always saturated, thus the Terzaghi's  
 95 effective stress concept holds: any given changes in suction ( $s$ ) induce the same volume  
 96 change as that induced by the same changes in mean net stress ( $p$ ). The volume change  
 97 in this level is reversible and independent of macro-structural effects [10]. Thereby, the  
 98 micro-structural elastic volumetric strain is calculated as follows:

$$99 \quad d\varepsilon_{vm}^e = \frac{de_m}{1 + e_m} = \frac{d(p + s)}{K_m} \quad (2)$$

$$100 \quad \text{with } K_m = \frac{\exp[\alpha_m(p + s)]}{\beta_m} \quad (3)$$

101 where  $K_m$  is the micro-structural modulus; it increases with increase in  $p$  or  $s$ .  $\alpha_m$  and  $\beta_m$   
 102 are model parameters which define the micro-structural bulk modulus  $K_m$ .

103 In the macro-structural level, both elastic and plastic strains can develop as a result of  
 104 stress/suction changes. The macro-structural elastic volumetric strain is expressed as a  
 105 function of mean net stress and suction:

$$106 \quad d\varepsilon_{vM}^e = \frac{de_M}{1 + e_M} = \left( \frac{\kappa}{1 + e_M} \right) \frac{dp}{p} + \left( \frac{\kappa_s}{1 + e_M} \right) \frac{ds}{s + p_{atm}} \quad (4)$$

107 where  $\kappa$  and  $\kappa_s$  are the macro-structural elastic compressibility parameters for changes  
 108 in stress and in suction, respectively,  $p_{atm}$  is the atmospheric pressure.

109 The variation of pre-consolidation mean net stress ( $p_0$ ) with suction is given by an LC  
 110 (Loading Collapse) yield curve function in the ( $p$ ,  $s$ ) plane (Figure 1):

$$111 \quad \frac{p_0}{p_c} = \left( \frac{p_0^*}{p_c} \right)^{\frac{\lambda(0) - \kappa}{\lambda(s) - \kappa}} \quad (5)$$

112 with  $\lambda(s) = \lambda(0)[r + (1 - r)\exp(-\beta s)]$  (6)

113 where  $p_c$  is a reference stress,  $p_0^*$  is the net mean yield stress at zero suction,  $\lambda(0)$  is the  
 114 macro-structural compressibility parameter for changes in  $p$  at zero suction (saturated  
 115 state),  $\lambda(s)$  is the macro-structural compressibility parameter for changes in  $p$  at suction  
 116  $s$ ,  $r$  is a parameter that defines the minimum compressibility of soil and  $\beta$  is a parameter  
 117 that controls the rate of compressibility decrease with increasing suction.

118 The micro-structural deformations-induced plastic strains are described by two  
 119 additional yield curves SI (suction increase) and SD (suction decrease) in Figure 1. The  
 120 SI yield curve is defined by the expression  $p + s_I = 0$  and the SD yield curve is defined  
 121 by the expression  $p + s_D = 0$  where  $s_I$ ,  $s_D$  are both hardening parameters. For a reason of  
 122 simplicity, it is assumed that the SI and SD yield curves are always activated thereby  
 123 inducing irreversible macro-structural deformations. Under this assumption the SI and  
 124 SD curves are masked by the Neutral Line (NL). Note that Alonso et al. [15], Sánchez  
 125 et al. [16], Tang and Cui, [17] also considered the NL solely to separate micro-structural  
 126 swelling from micro-structural compression. Upon hydro-mechanical loadings, the NL  
 127 moves following the current stress ( $p$ ) and current suction ( $s$ ). Therefore, the following  
 128 two parts of irreversible volumetric strains are taken into account:

129 1) When the yield curve LC is reached by a mechanical loading:

130 
$$d\varepsilon_{vML}^p = \frac{\lambda(s) - \kappa}{1 + e_M} \frac{dp_0}{p_0}$$
 (7)

131 2) As mention above, the SI and SD yield curves are assumed to be always activated,  
 132 the macro-structural plastic strain induced by micro-structural strain is:

133 
$$d\varepsilon_{vMSI}^p = f_I d\varepsilon_{vm}^e \quad (8)$$

134 
$$d\varepsilon_{vMSD}^p = f_D d\varepsilon_{vm}^e \quad (9)$$

135 where  $f_I$  and  $f_D$  are the interaction functions between micro- and macro-structural levels  
 136 in case of suction increase and suction decrease, respectively.

137 Regarding the hardening law for LC yield curve, the yield stress at zero suction ( $p_0^*$ ) is  
 138 expressed as a function of the total macro-structural strain ( $\varepsilon_{vM}^p$ ).

139 
$$\frac{dp_0^*}{p_0^*} = \frac{(1 + e_M) d\varepsilon_{vM}^p}{\lambda(0) - k} \quad (10)$$

140 Note that the increment of the total macro-structural plastic strain ( $d\varepsilon_{vM}^p$ ) is the sum of  
 141 the increment of the macro-structural plastic strain resulted by hydraulic and mechanic  
 142 loading ( $d\varepsilon_{vML}^p$ ) and that resulted by the micro-structural interactions ( $d\varepsilon_{vMSI}^p$  or  
 143  $d\varepsilon_{vMSD}^p$ ), as follows:

144 
$$d\varepsilon_{vM}^p = d\varepsilon_{vML}^p + d\varepsilon_{vMSI}^p + d\varepsilon_{vMSD}^p \quad (11)$$

### 145 **3 PARAMETERS DETERMINATION**

146 The model parameters were determined on the basis of the experimental results  
 147 obtained on the MX80 bentonite/sand mixture. The soil microstructure was  
 148 investigated using mercury intrusion porosimetry (MIP) by Wang et al. [18], and the  
 149 results allow determining the initial micro- and macro-structural void ratios ( $e_m$  and  $e_M$ ).  
 150 Montes-H et al. [20] investigated the swelling of a single clay aggregate under relative  
 151 humidity changes using the technique of environmental scanning electron microscopy  
 152 (ESEM) in conjunction with a digital image analysis. The observed volume changes



153 were used to calibrate the variation of  $e_m$  with suction changes. The volume changes  
154 upon wetting and loading were studied by carrying out suction controlled oedometer  
155 tests [18]. The results obtained were used for the determination of the model parameters  
156 related to the hydro-mechanical behaviour. It is important to note that the notation “ $p$ ”  
157 used in the BExM refers to “mean stress”. As the results from oedometers tests were  
158 considered for parameters’ determination. In the following, the notation “ $p$ ” used refers  
159 to the vertical stress in oedometer condition.

160 Figure 2 depicts the pore size distribution (PSD) curve of the compacted MX80  
161 bentonite/sand mixture having an initial suction of 65 MPa and a void ratio of 0.635.  
162 The incremental pore volume was represented by the change of void ratio  $e$  divided by  
163 the change of the logarithm of pore diameter  $d$ :  $de/d\log d$ , corresponding to the total  
164 volume of the pores having similar entrance pore diameter  $d$ . A clear double structure  
165 can be observed, defining a population of intra-aggregate pores (micro-pores) with a  
166 mean size of 0.02  $\mu\text{m}$  and a population of inter-aggregate pores (macro-pores) with a  
167 mean size of 50  $\mu\text{m}$ . The inter-aggregates pores were found to be dependent on dry  
168 density, while the intra-aggregate pores remain unaffected by the compaction [8].  
169 Based on this evidence, a delimiting value of 2  $\mu\text{m}$  between macro-pores and  
170 micro-pores for the MX80 bentonite/sand mixture was defined by Wang et al. [18] from  
171 the PSD curves of different dry densities. Thus, the micro-structural and  
172 macro-structural void ratios can be determined using the limit pore diameter of 2  $\mu\text{m}$ :  
173  $e_m = 0.391$  and  $e_M = 0.244$ , as noted in Figure 3.

174 Regarding the micro-structural volume change, Montes-H et al. [20] examined the

175 swelling potential of a single MX80 aggregate at different relative humidity states using  
176 environmental scanning electron microscopy (ESEM) and the technique of digital  
177 image analysis. From an initial relative humidity of 2.5%, corresponding to 537 MPa  
178 suction, various relative humidity values were applied. The deformations are shown in  
179 Figure 3 versus suction (deduced from the corresponding relative humidity and  
180 temperature applied). Note that the result at the relative humidity of 95% was not taken  
181 into account due to the “water over-saturation of aggregate” appeared in the experiment  
182 [20]. The data show that wetting from the initial suction of 537 MPa to a suction of 13.5  
183 MPa (90% relative humidity) induced a micro-structural volumetric swelling of 21%.

184 Based on the evidence that the swelling of mixture is totally controlled by bentonite and  
185 sand being inert [18,21,22], the experimental data obtained from MX80 bentonite by  
186 Montes-H et al. [20] were used to calibrate parameters  $\alpha_m$  and  $\beta_m$  which define the  
187 micro-structural bulk modulus  $K_m$  (Eq. (2) and (3)). The changes of mixture void ratio  
188 were determined from the corresponding void ratio of pure bentonite based on the  
189 expressions shown in [18], (Eq (5) and (6)). The following parameters were used to fit  
190 the micro-structural volumetric strain to the experimental data:  $\alpha_m = 0.083 \text{ MPa}^{-1}$  and  
191  $\beta_m = 0.011 \text{ MPa}^{-1}$ . Starting from the initial suction of  $s_0 = 65 \text{ MPa}$  (black dot in Figure 3)  
192 with the initial micro-structural void ratio of  $e_m = 0.391$ , both the wetting and drying  
193 paths were considered:  $e_m$  reduced to 0.301 at suction = 537 MPa and increased to  
194 0.474 at suction = 0.1 MPa. With the parameters thus determined, the model can  
195 satisfactorily fit the experimental results (Figure 3).

196 The volume changes of compacted MX80 bentonite/sand mixture upon wetting and

197 loading were investigated by carrying out suction controlled oedometer tests (Wang et  
198 al. [18]). The stress paths followed are presented in Figure 4. Three tests were  
199 conducted on samples with an initial dry density of  $1.67 \text{ Mg/m}^3$  ( $e = 0.635$ ) under  
200 controlled suctions. From the initial state ( $p_{ini} = 0.1 \text{ MPa}$ ,  $s = 65 \text{ MPa}$ ), suctions of 38  
201 MPa, 12.6 MPa, 4.2 MPa were first applied by the vapour equilibrium technique under  
202 a low vertical stress of 0.1 MPa, allowing the development of vertical swelling strain.  
203 After completion of the swelling strain at each suction, loading (up to 30 MPa) was  
204 applied under constant suction condition. An additional test at zero suction was  
205 conducted by considering an annular void between sample and ring. The sample with a  
206 diameter smaller than that of the oedometer cell was used for this purpose (see [18] for  
207 more details).

208 The final void ratio values after suction equilibrium following wetting path are  
209 presented in Figure 5. Due to the annular void that allowed the sample swell in the  
210 radial direction, the sample undergoes first a stress path close to the isotropic conditions.  
211 The significant interaction between micro- and macro-structural levels in this condition  
212 leads to larger volumetric strain as compared to the oedometer condition for other tests.  
213 Therefore, these results for 38 MPa, 12.6 MPa, 4.2 MPa suction were used to calibrate  
214 the parameters related to the macro-structure changes due to suction decrease. Upon  
215 wetting, the macro-structural behaviour involves two mechanisms: (i) elastic  
216 volumetric strain (Eq. (4)) which depends on parameter  $\kappa_s$ ; (ii) plastic volumetric strain  
217 induced by the micro- and macro-structural interaction (Eq. 9) which depends on  $f_D$ . For  
218 simplicity, the elastic volumetric strain (Eq. (4)) was assumed to be insignificant for the

219 high expansive soil considered, and a small value of  $\kappa_s = 0.001$  was given. Note that the  
220 suction-induced macro-structural elastic deformation was ignored (i.e.  $\kappa_s = 0$ ) in the  
221 work of Alonso et al. (2005). The micro-structural void ratio was calculated using the  
222 parameters determined above ( $\alpha_m$  and  $\beta_m$ ). The  $f_D$  was then determined by matching the  
223 void ratio values in Figure 5 with Eq. 4 and Eq.9:  $f_D = 0.8-1.1 \tanh [20 \times (p/p_0 - 0.25)]$ .

224 The parameters that control the hydro-mechanical behaviour can be obtained based on  
225 the compression curves at different constant suctions. The compression curves at  
226 4.2 MPa, 12.6 MPa and 38 MPa suction are depicted in Figure 6. From these curves the  
227 values of  $\lambda(4.2)$ ,  $\lambda(12.6)$ ,  $\lambda(38)$ ,  $p_0(4.2)$ ,  $p_0(12.6)$ ,  $p_0(38)$  and  $\kappa$  can be determined. By  
228 using data of  $\lambda(s)$ , parameters  $\lambda(0)$ ,  $\gamma$ ,  $\beta$  can be obtained through Eq. (6) and the  
229 following values were obtained:  $\lambda(0) = 0.14$ ,  $r = 0.82$ ,  $\beta = 0.07$ . With these parameters  
230 determined,  $p_0^*$ ,  $p_c$  were then determined by fitting the data in terms of  $p_0(s)$ :  $p_0^* = 0.92$ ,  
231  $p_c = 0.005$ . Afterwards, the  $f_I$  (in Eq.8) was obtained by matching the experimental  
232 compression curves:  $f_I = 0.05-1.1 \tanh [20 \times (p/p_0 - 0.25)]$ . Note that during the  
233 mechanical loading, the following volumetric strains were taken into account:  $\varepsilon_{vm}^e$  (Eq.  
234 2),  $\varepsilon_{vM}^e$  (Eq. 4),  $\varepsilon_{vML}^p$  (Eq. 7) and  $\varepsilon_{vMSI}^p$  (Eq.8).

235 A summary of the model parameters thus determined and the initial conditions is given  
236 in Table 1.

## 237 **4 SIMULATION AND INTERPRETATION**

### 238 **4.1 Swelling pressure development during suction decrease**

239 The evolution of swelling pressure during suction decrease was simulated by applying

240 the back compaction method [23]. Following this method, the computation of swelling  
241 induced stress can be performed in two stages at a certain suction and stress state  
242 (Figure 7): 1) to calculate the micro-porosity change and the macro-volume change  
243 potential by allowing swell in the first stage; 2) to press the swelling strain back and  
244 calculate the resulting stress after the compression process. From the initial state ( $p_{ini} =$   
245 0.1 MPa,  $e = 0.635$ ,  $s = 65$  MPa), the simulation decreased the suction of the sample to  
246 0.1 MPa in a series of steps at constant volume conditions. In each step, the back  
247 compaction process was considered as an inverse process of swelling. Thus, the  
248 predicted increase in swelling pressure can be obtained. The deformation under both  
249 swelling process and compression process was assumed to be elasto-plastic. The SI and  
250 SD yield curves were always activated; the loading induced plastic deformation of  
251 macro-pores occurs during wetting when the yield curve LC was reached.

252 The predicted swelling pressure induced by suction decrease within the soil sample is  
253 presented in Figure 8, along with the swelling pressure measured at different suctions  
254 (Figure 8). The swelling pressure evolution observed in the laboratory can be well  
255 reproduced by considering the occurrence of two concurrent phenomena: initially,  
256 when suction is reduced the bentonite aggregates swell and a net pressure increment is  
257 developed to maintain a constant volume condition. During this initial stage, the stress  
258 path is far from the LC yield curve (Figure 8). However, the progressive wetting may  
259 bring the stress state to the LC yield curve and the overall macrostructure is prone to  
260 undergo collapse. Both phenomena co-exist during the wetting path. As noted by  
261 Gens & Alonso [10] and Alonso et al. [15], if collapse strains tend to dominate over

262 other contributions to the total volumetric deformation, the stress path will closely  
263 follow the LC yield locus. A continuous increasing swelling pressure observed in this  
264 study indicates that the macro-pores collapse was fully compensated by the  
265 micro-structural swelling; thus no decrease in macro-pores was observed.

#### 266 **4.2 Microstructure changes during suction decrease**

267 During the swelling pressure simulation under constant volume conditions, the changes  
268 of macro- and micro-structural void ratios were calculated at the end of each stage, as  
269 shown in Figure 9. The measured values from the MIP results were also presented. The  
270 correspondence between the measured and predicted deformations is reasonably good  
271 for both micro- and macro-pores, except in the case of suction of 4.2 and 1 MPa where  
272 the macro-pores quantity increased again with further suction decrease. The  
273 discrepancy was caused by the complexity of microstructure at these suctions (Figure  
274 10): when saturation is approached ( $s < 4.2$  MPa), the macro-pores observed at higher  
275 suction are filled by the swollen bentonite, however, a large quantity of fissure-like  
276 (with very large aspect ratio) 2-dimension pores (2-D pores in Audiguier et al. [24])  
277 with mean entrance diameter of 50  $\mu\text{m}$  appeared due to the division of aggregates  
278 (Figure 11a), leading to the increase of macro-pores. Moreover, a new pore group of  
279 2-D pores of about 1  $\mu\text{m}$  diameter was formed due to the fissuring of aggregates (Figure  
280 11b), leading to a tri-modal pore size distribution [19]. Note that the MIP results  
281 obtained from wetted samples by Romero et al. (2011) also showed the complexity of  
282 the microstructure changes during wetting, with a new pore population appearing  
283 between micro- and macro-pores [25]. Obviously, the two-level soil structure,

284 micro-structural (intra-aggregate) and macro-structural (inter-aggregate), defined in the  
285 BExM model cannot describe this phenomenon.

### 286 **4.3 Water retention property**

287 As mentioned previously, the BExM model assumes that the micro-pores remain  
288 always saturated, thus the Terzaghi's effective stress concept holds. Following this  
289 assumption, the amount of water in the micro-pores can be calculated based on the  
290 micro-structural void ratio. The changes in micro-structural water content ( $w_{em}$ ) upon  
291 wetting were calculated and are presented in Figure 12, together with the experimental  
292 water retention curve (WRC, including both micro-structural and macro-structural  
293 waters) determined using vapour equilibrium and osmotic techniques at constant  
294 volume conditions [18,19]. The model depicts well the two regions with different water  
295 retention mechanisms: intra-aggregate and inter-aggregate region. The simulated  
296 micro-structural water content curve and the measured WRC intersect at about 4-5 MPa,  
297 indicating that from this point on, the suction–water content relationship was controlled  
298 by the inter-aggregate pores. Note that this threshold suction is also close to that  
299 observed by Yahia-Aissa et al. [26] on FoCa 7 clay (3-4 MPa) and Cui et al. [27] on the  
300 mixture (7/3 by dry mass) of Kunigel V1 bentonite/Hostun sand (4-5 MPa).

301 On the other hand, the estimated micro-structural water content ( $w_{em}$ ) was found to be  
302 higher than the water content corresponding to the WRC in the intra-aggregate region.  
303 This discrepancy is due to the micro-pores that were unsaturated in reality but assumed  
304 to be saturated in the BExM model. By considering the two levels of soil structure [10],  
305 the BExM model lumps the intra-particles (inter-layer) space and the inter-particles

306 space together as intra-aggregates pores. Actually, the intra-particles pores can be  
307 considered as saturated in the range of suctions of practical interest because it requires  
308 an extremely high level of suction (of the order of  $10^5$  kPa) to remove water from the  
309 inter-layer space. However, air can enter the intra-aggregate pores ( $< 2 \mu\text{m}$  for the  
310 bentonite/sand mixture as shown in Figure 3) at a suction of about 140 kPa, and hence  
311 the corresponding voids can become unsaturated [28], leading to the discrepancy  
312 between the experimental and estimated value of micro-structural void ratio. It should  
313 be noted that in spite of this assumption, the model can predict well the main features of  
314 volumetric strain, swelling pressure evolution etc. of expansive soils. For the  
315 desaturation of micro-pores, the authors think that the model could be improved by  
316 considering degree of saturation as proposed by Romero et al (2011)[25].

## 317 **5 CONCLUSION**

318 The hydro-mechanical behaviour of a compacted MX80 bentonite/sand mixture was  
319 investigated within the framework of the Barcelona Expansive Model (BExM). The  
320 model parameters were first determined based on the experimental results obtained.

321 The changes of swelling pressure, micro-structural volume change and micro-structural  
322 water content were then simulated and compared with the experimental results.

323 The swelling pressure observed under constant volume was well reproduced by the  
324 model. A continuous increasing swelling pressure observed indicates that the  
325 macro-pores collapse was fully compensated by the micro-structural swelling.

326 The macro- and micro-structural void ratio changes upon wetting under constant



327 volume condition were well reproduced in the range of high suctions. However, the  
328 model cannot well describe the changes in the range of low suctions (4.2 and 1 MPa).  
329 Further examination showed that the pore size distribution curve in the low suction  
330 range is tri-modal, different from the assumption of bi-modal distribution in the BExM  
331 model.

332 The model depicts well the two regions of different water retention mechanisms:  
333 intra-aggregate and inter-aggregate regions. However, the predicted micro-structural  
334 water content was found higher than the water content corresponding to the WRC in the  
335 intra-aggregate region. This discrepancy is due to the micro-pores assumed to be  
336 always saturated in the BExM model, but unsaturated in reality.

337 On the whole, the main features of the hydro-mechanical behaviour of bentonite/sand  
338 mixture can be described by the BExM model, demonstrating the performance of this  
339 model in representing the H-M behaviour of bentonite-based materials. However,  
340 further considerations should be done when applying the model such as the formation  
341 of a third pore population under suction decrease and the de-saturation of  
342 intra-aggregate pores at high suctions.

### 343 **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

344 The work was conducted in the framework of the SEALEX project of IRSN and the  
345 PHC Cai Yuanpei project (24077QE). The support of the China Scholarship Council  
346 (CSC) is also greatly acknowledged.

347 **REFERENCES**

- 348 [1] Pusch, R. Highly compacted sodium bentonite for isolating rock-deposited radioactive waste  
349 products. *Nucl. Technol. (United States)*, 45(2) (1979):153-157
- 350 [2] Yong, R.N., Boonsinsuk, P., and Wong, G. Formulation of backfill material for a nuclear fuel  
351 waste disposal vault. *Canadian Geotechnical Journal*, 23(2) (1986):216-228.
- 352 [3] Villar, M.V., Lloret, A. Influence of dry density and water content on the swelling of a  
353 compacted bentonite. *Applied Clay Science*, 39(1-2) (2008):38-49.
- 354 [4] Cho, W.J., Lee, J.O., Kwon, S. Analysis of thermo-hydro-mechanical process in the engineered  
355 barrier system of a high-level waste repository. *Nuclear Engineering and Design*.  
356 240(2010):1688-1698.
- 357 [5] Delage, P., Howat, M. D., & Cui, Y. J. The relationship between suction and swelling  
358 properties in a heavily compacted unsaturated clay. *Engng Geol.* 50(1) (1998): 31 – 48.
- 359 [6] Lloret, A., Villar, M. V., Sanchez, M., Gens, A., Pintado, X. & Alonso, E. E. Mechanical  
360 behaviour of heavily compacted bentonite under high suction changes. *Géotechnique* 53(1)  
361 (2003): 27-40
- 362 [7] Romero, E., Villar, M. V. & Lloret, A. Thermo-hydro-mechanical behaviour of heavily  
363 overconsolidated clays. *Engng Geol.* 81(3) (2005): 255 – 268.
- 364 [8] Lloret, A. & Villar, M. V. Advances on the knowledge of the thermo-hydromechanical  
365 behaviour of heavily compacted « FEBEX » bentonite. *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth*  
366 32(8 – 14) (2007): 701 – 715.
- 367 [9] Agus, S.S., Arifin, Y. F., Tripathy, S., Schanz, T. Swelling pressure–suction relationship of  
368 heavily compacted bentonite–sand mixtures. *Acta Geotechnica*, DOI:10.1007/s11440-  
369 012-0189-0.
- 370 [10] Gens, A. & Alonso, E. E. A framework for the behaviour of unsaturated expansive clays. *Can.*  
371 *Geotech. J.* 29(6) (1992): 1013 – 1032.
- 372 [11] Alonso, E. E., Vaunat, J. & Gens, A. Modelling the mechanical behaviour of expansive clays.  
373 *Engng Geol.* 54(1) (1999): 173 – 183.
- 374 [12] Cui Y.J., Yahia-Aissa M. and Delage P. A model for the volume change behaviour of heavily  
375 compacted swelling clays. *Engineering Geology* 64 (2-3) (2002), 233-250.
- 376 [13] Alonso, E. E., Gens, A., Josa, A. (1990). A constitutive model for partially saturated soils.  
377 *Geotechnique*, 40 (3): 405–430.
- 378 [14] Kröhn, K. P. New conceptual models for the resaturation of bentonite. *Applied Clay Science*,  
379 23(1 – 4) (2003): 25 – 33.
- 380 [15] Alonso, E. E., Alcoverro, J., Coste, F., et al. The FEBEX benchmark test: case definition and  
381 comparison of modelling approaches. *International Journal of Rock Mechanics & Mining*  
382 *Science* 42(5-6) (2005): 611 – 638.

- 383 [16] Sánchez, M., Villar, M. V., Gens, A., Olivella, S. & do N. Guimaraes, L. Modelling the effect of  
384 temperature on unsaturated swelling clays. Proc. of the 10th International Symposium on  
385 Numerical Models in Geomechanics (Numog X), Rhodes, Greece, (2007): 57-62.
- 386 [17] Tang, A. M., Cui, Y. J. Modelling the thermomechanical volume change behaviour of  
387 compacted expansive clays. *Géotechnique*, 59 (2009): 185-195
- 388 [18] Wang, Q., Tang, A. M., Cui, Y.J., Delage, P., Barnichon, J.D., & Ye, W.M. The effects of  
389 technological voids on the hydro-mechanical behaviour of compacted bentonite-sand mixture.  
390 *Soils and Foundations*, Vol.53, No.2 (2013) in Press.
- 391 [19] Wang, Q., Tang, A. M., Cui, Y.J., Delage, P., Barnichon, J.D., & Ye, W.M. Hydraulic  
392 conductivity and microstructure changes of compacted bentonite/sand mixture during  
393 hydration. (2012) submitted to *Engineering Geology*.
- 394 [20] Montes-Hernandez, G, Duplay, J., Martinez, L. & Mendoza, C. Swelling-shrinkage kinetics of  
395 MX80 bentonite. *Applied Clay Science*, 22(6) (2003): 279 – 293.
- 396 [21] Karnland, O., Nilsson, U., Weber, H., and Wersin, P. Sealing ability of Wyoming bentonite  
397 pellets foreseen as buffer material-Laboratory results. *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth*,  
398 Parts A/B/C, 33(2008), S472-S475.
- 399 [22] Wang Q., Tang A.M., Cui Y.J., Delage P., Gatmiri B. Experimental study on the swelling  
400 behaviour of bentonite/claystone mixture. *Engineering Geology* 124 (2012), 59-66.
- 401 [23] Xie, M. L., Wang, W. Q., De-jonge, J., and Kolditz O. Numerical Modelling of Swelling  
402 Pressure in Unsaturated Expansive Elasto-Plastic Porous Media. *Transport in Porous Media*,  
403 66 (2007):311–339
- 404 [24] Audiguier, M., Geremew, Z., Cojean, R. Relations enter les microstructures de deux sols  
405 argileux de la région parisienne et leur sensibilité au retrait gonflement. SEC2008, Sécheresse  
406 et constructions, Paris, France, 1-3 sept. Editions du LCPC(2008), 235-243.
- 407 [25] Romero, E., G. Della Vecchia, C. Jommi,. An insight into the water retention properties of  
408 compacted clayey soils. *Géotechnique*. 61 (4) (2011): 313-328.
- 409 [26] Yahia-Aissa, M.,Delage, P., Cui, Y.J. In: Adachi, Fukue (Ed.), Suction–water Relationship in  
410 Swelling Clays, *Clay Science for Engineering*, IS-Shizuoka Int Symp on Suction, Swelling,  
411 Permeability and Structure of Clays. In Balkema, (2001): 65–68.
- 412 [27] Cui, Y. J., Tang, A. M., Loiseau, C., Delage, P. Determining water permeability of compacted  
413 bentonite–sand mixture under confined and free-swell conditions. *Physics and Chemistry of*  
414 *the Earth*, 33(2008): S462–S471.
- 415 [28] Sharma, R.S. Mechanical behaviour of unsaturated highly expansive clays. University of  
416 Oxford. PHD thesis (1998).  
417  
418

419 **List of Tables**

420 Table 1. Parameters used in the simulation

421

422 **List of Figures**

423 Figure 1. BExM yield loci in the  $p$ - $s$  plane (after Alonso et al. 2005)

424 Figure 2. Pore size distribution of the compacted MX80/sand mixture

425 Figure 3. Micro-structural volumetric strain of MX80 bentonite and micro-structural void ratio  
426 of mixture versus suction

427 Figure 4. Stress paths followed in the suction controlled oedometer tests

428 Figure 5. Void ratio changes upon wetting under a vertical stress of 0.1 MPa

429 Figure 6. Void ratio changes during mechanical loading at constant suction

430 Figure 7. Stress path followed during the swelling pressure simulation

431 Figure 8. Changes of swelling pressure during suction decrease under constant volume  
432 condition

433 Figure 9. Changes in the  $e_m$  and  $e_M$  during suction decrease under constant volume condition

434 Figure 10 Pore size distribution changes

435 Figure 11 2-D pores with diameter of  $50\mu\text{m}$  and  $1\mu\text{m}$

436 Figure 12. WRC and calculated micro-structural water content

437

438

439

440 Table 1. Parameters used in the simulation

Initial state		Hydro-mechanical behaviour	
$e$	0.635	$\kappa$	0.006
$e_m$	0.391	$\kappa_s$	0.001
$e_M$	0.244	$\lambda(0)$	0.14
$s_0$	65 MPa	$p_c$	0.005
$p_{ini}$	0.1 MPa	$r$	0.82
$p_0^*$	0.92 MPa	$\beta$	0.07
		$\alpha_m$	0.083 MPa <sup>-1</sup>
		$\beta_m$	0.011 MPa <sup>-1</sup>
		$f_D = 0.8-1.1 \tanh [20 \times (p/p_0 - 0.25)]$ .	
		$f_I = 0.05-0.8 \tanh [20 \times (p/p_0 - 0.25)]$	

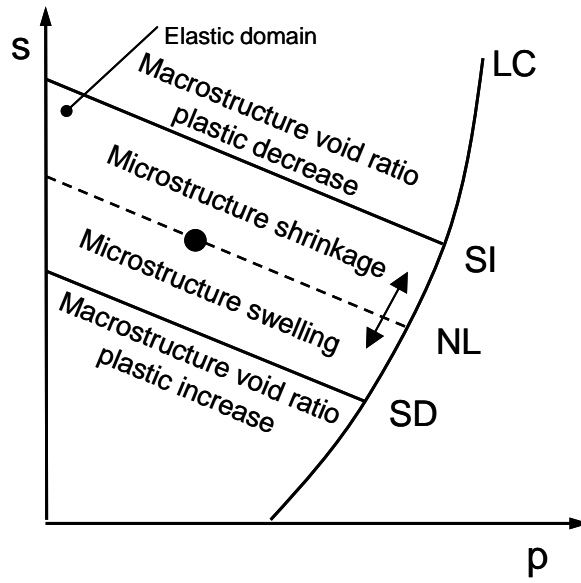
441

442

443

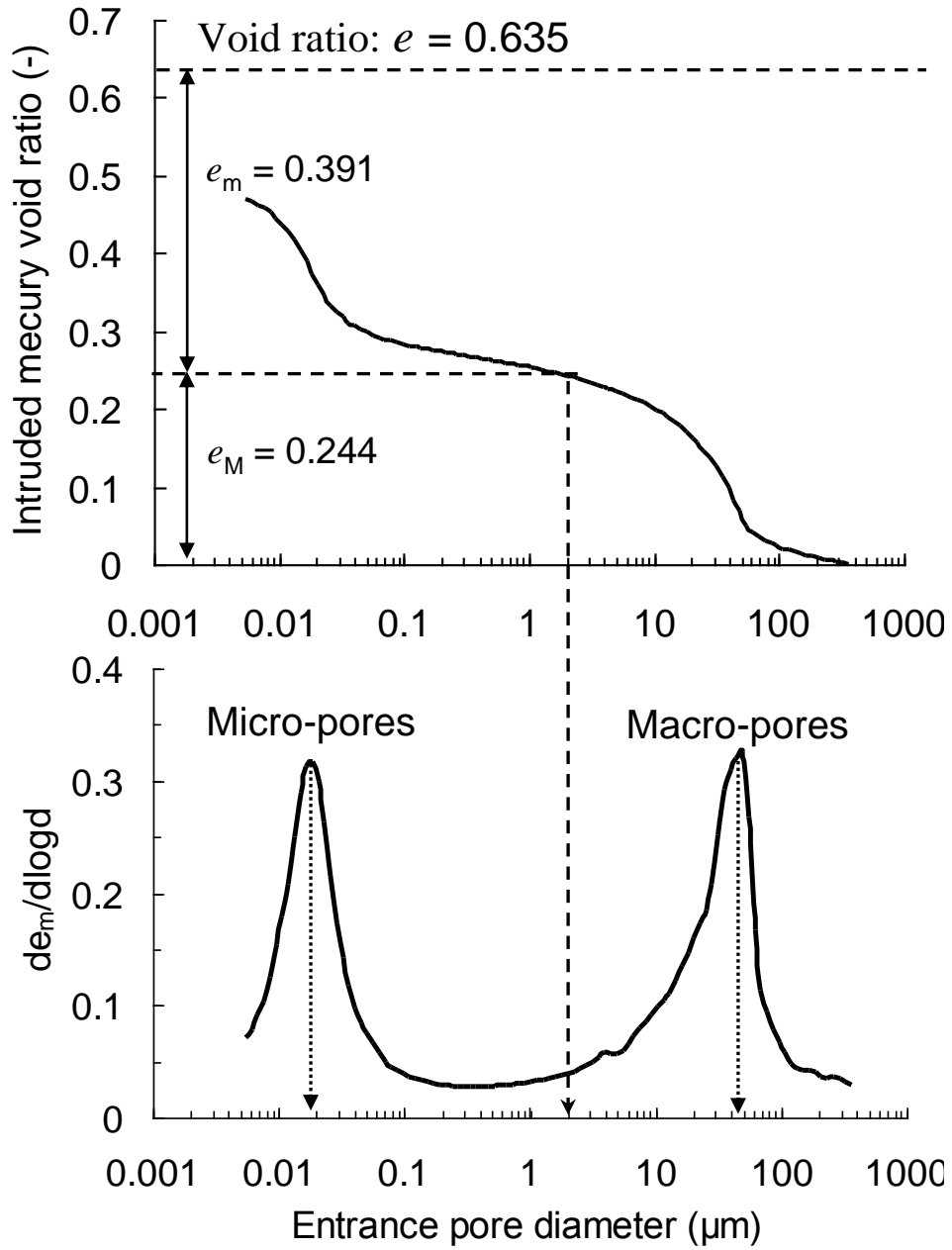
444

445



446

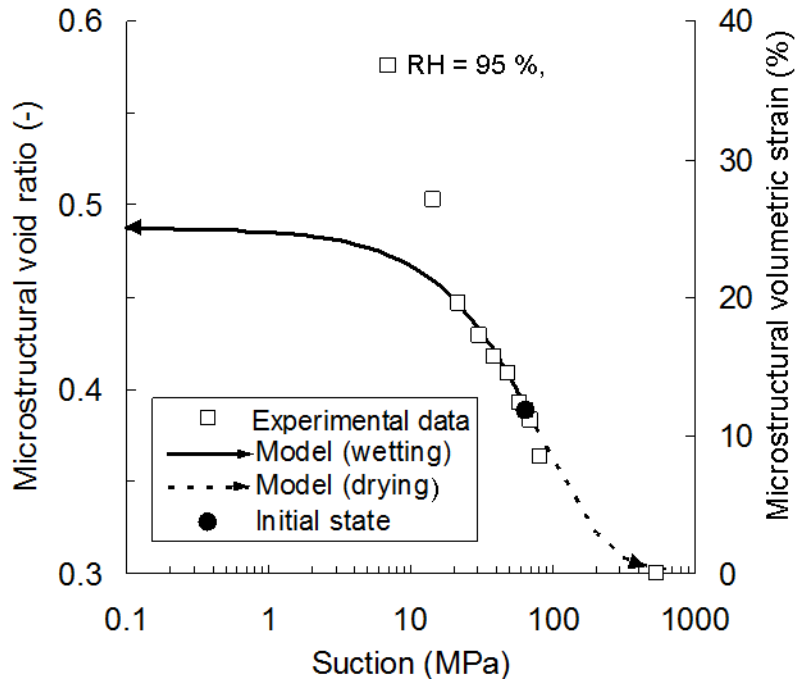
447 Figure 1. BExM yield loci in the  $p$ - $s$  plane (after Alonso et al. 2005)



448

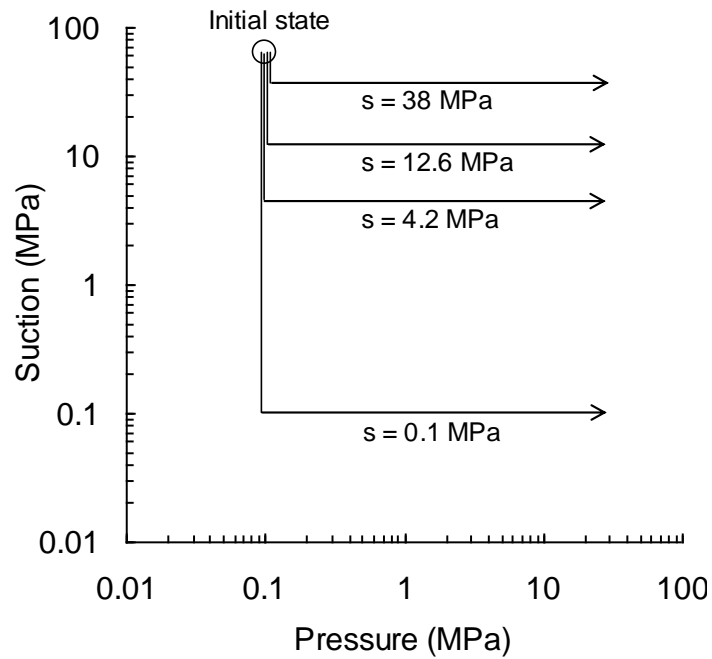
449 Figure 2. Pore size distribution of the compacted MX80/sand mixture

450



451  
 452  
 453  
 454  
 455

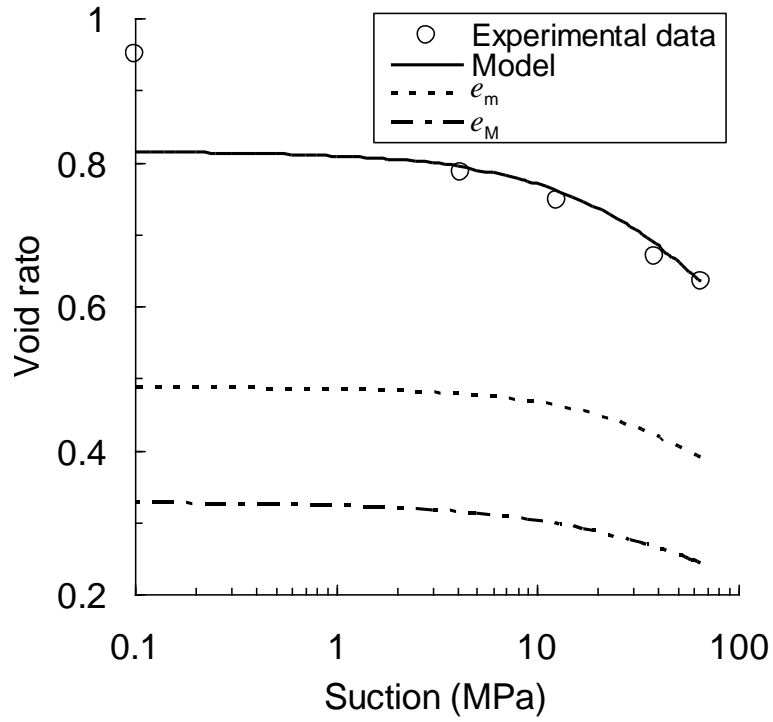
Figure 3. Micro-structural volumetric strain of MX80 bentonite and micro-structural void ratio of mixture versus suction



456

457 Figure 4. Stress paths followed in the suction controlled oedometer tests



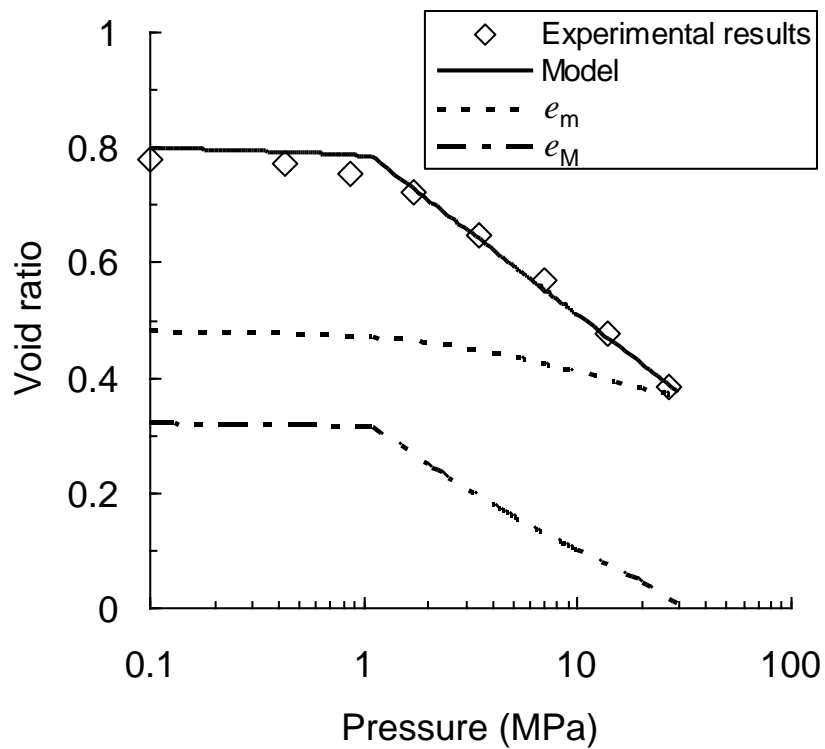


458

459 Figure 5. Void ratio changes upon wetting under a vertical stress of 0.1 MPa

460

461



(a)  $s = 4.2$  MPa

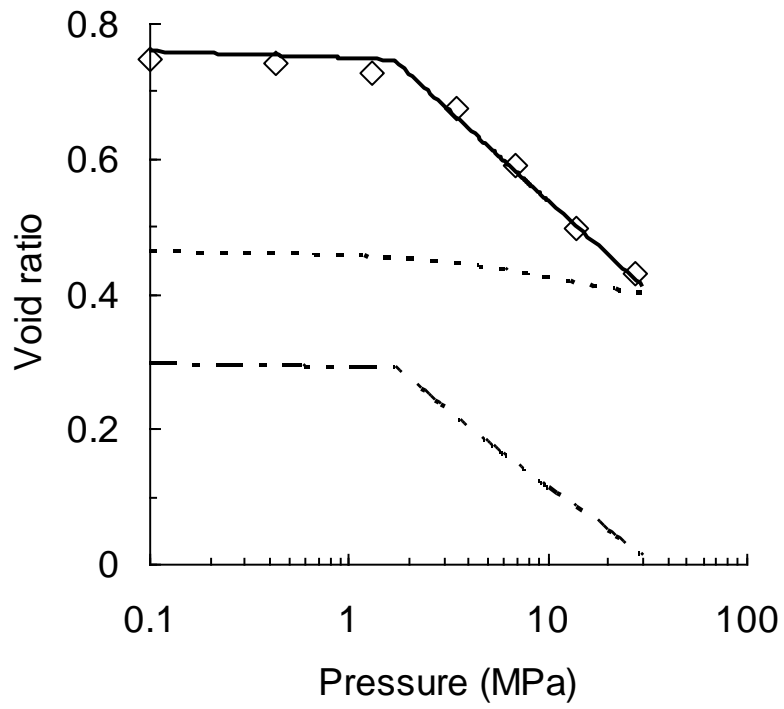
462

463

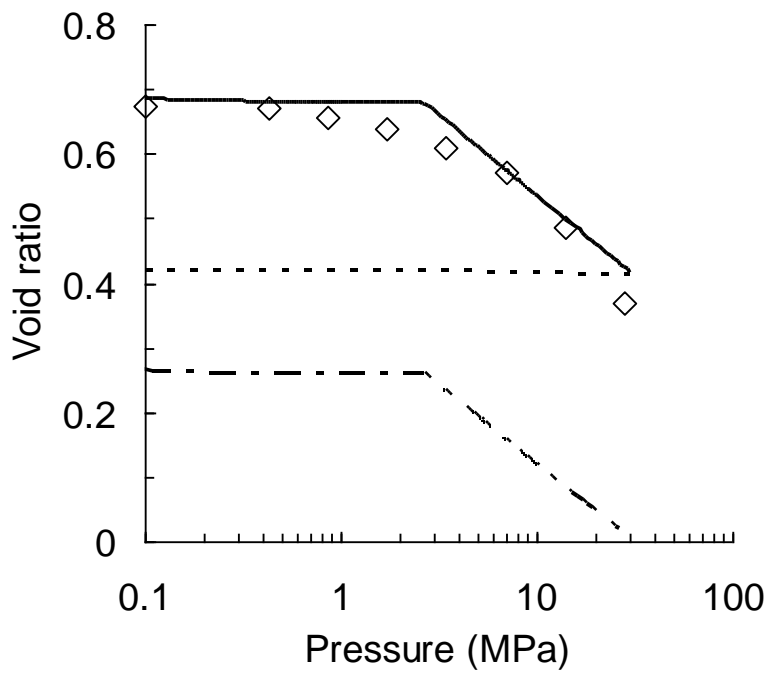
464

465

466



(b)  $s = 12.6$  MPa

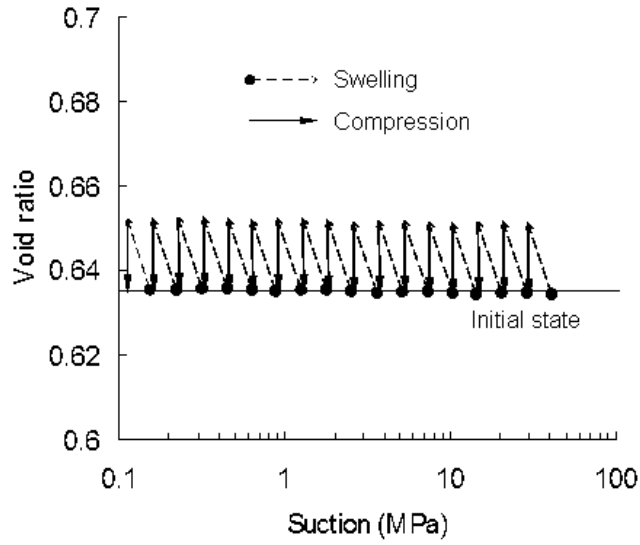


(c)  $s = 38$  MPa

Figure 6. Void ratio changes upon mechanical loading at constant suction

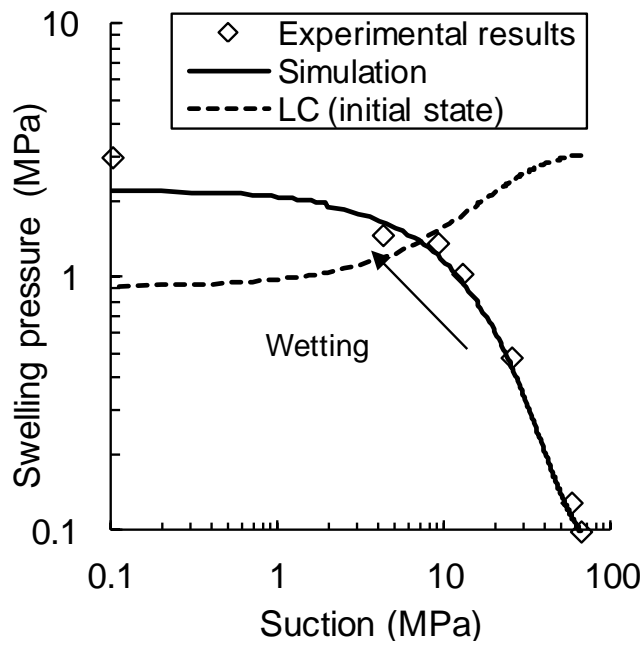
467  
468  
469

470  
471  
472  
473



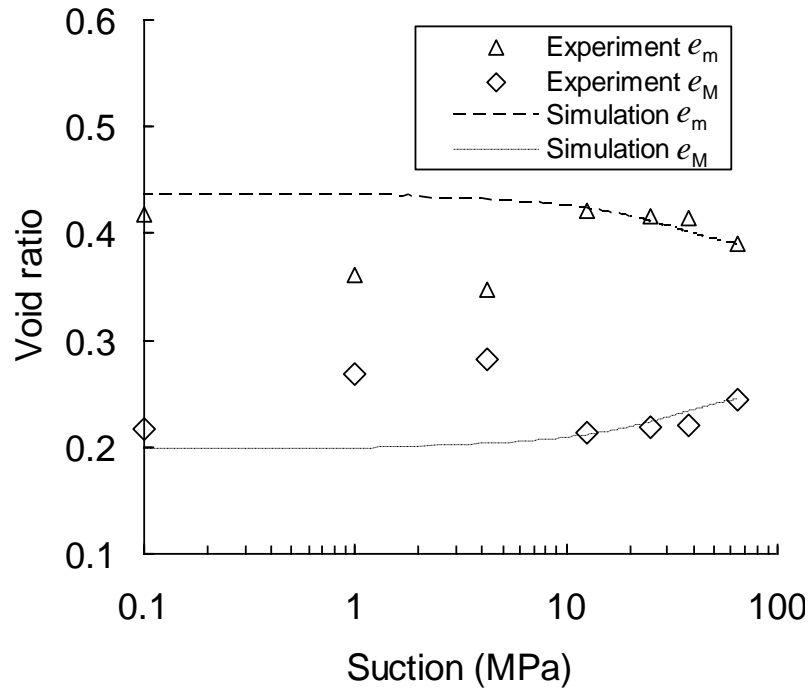
474

475 Figure 7. Stress path followed during the swelling pressure simulation



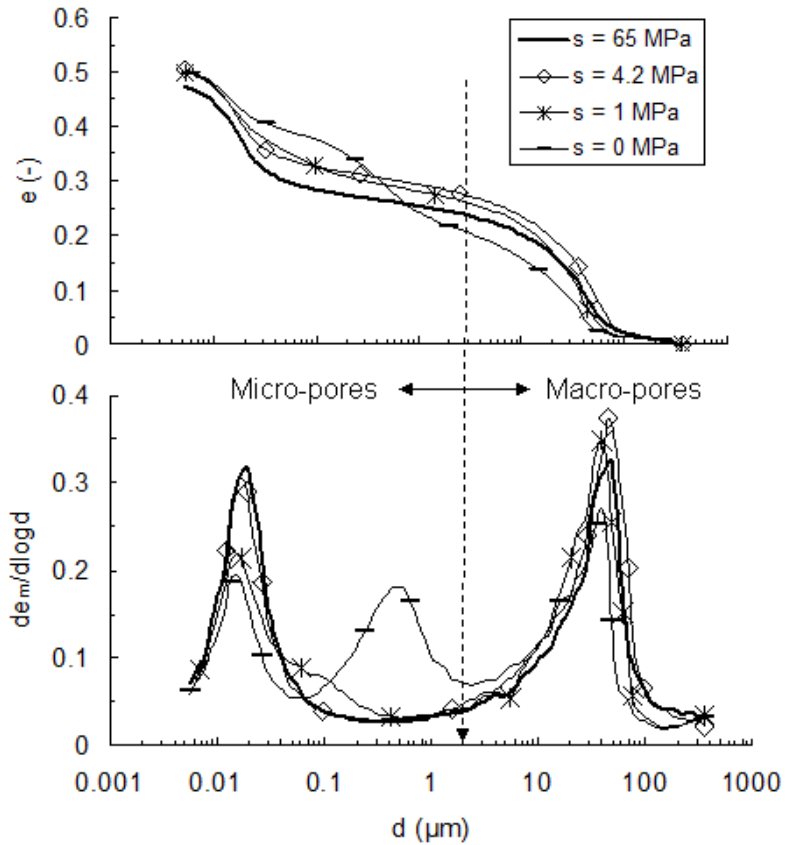
476

477 Figure 8. Changes of swelling pressure during suction decrease under constant volume  
478 condition



479

480 Figure 9. Changes in the  $e_m$  and  $e_M$  during suction decrease under constant volume condition



481

482

483

Figure 10 Pore size distribution changes

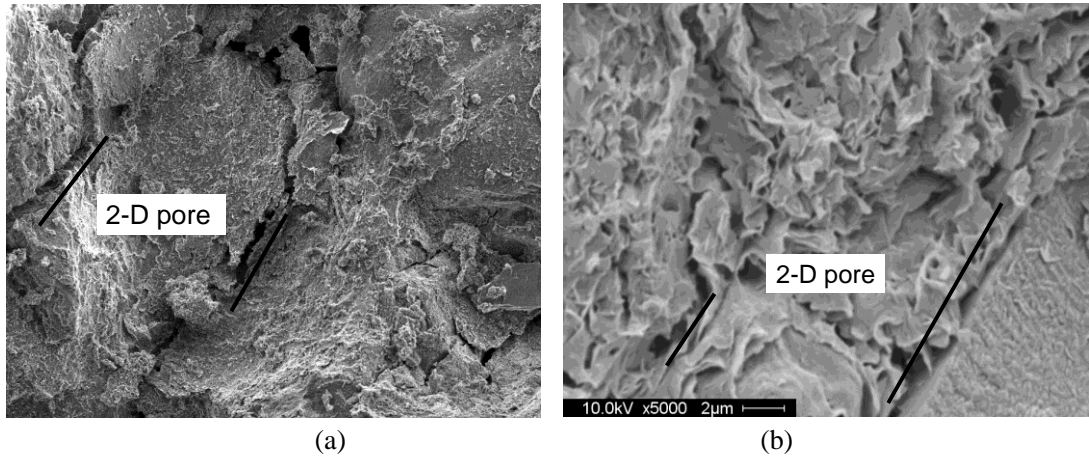


Figure 11 2-D pores with diameter of 50µm (a) and 1µm (b)

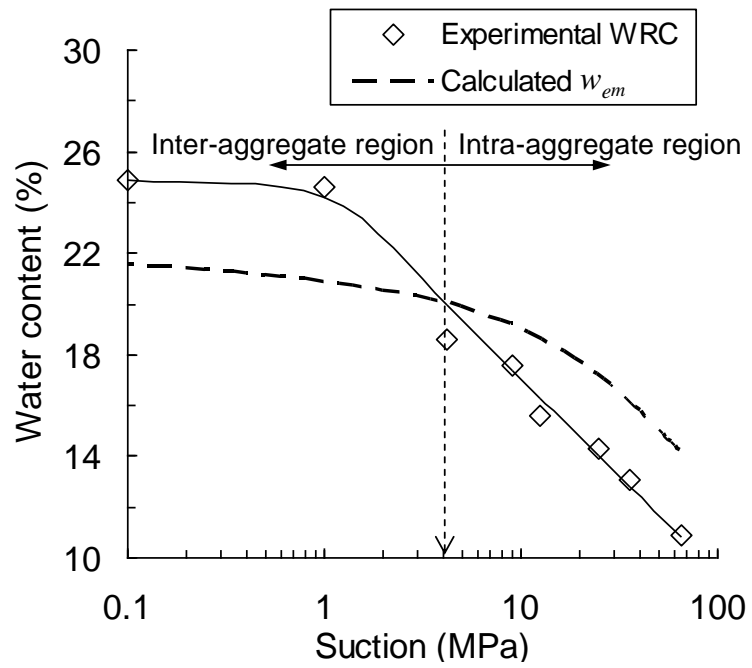


Figure 12. WRC and calculated micro-structural water content