Non-Newtonian fluid flow through three-dimensional disordered porous media

Apiano F. Morais\(^1\), Hansjoerg Seybold\(^2\), Hans J. Herrmann\(^{1,2}\) and José S. Andrade Jr.\(^{1,2}\)

\(^1\)Departamento de Física, Universidade Federal do Ceará, 60451-970 Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil
\(^2\)IFB, HIF E12, ETH Hönggerberg, 8093 Zürich, Switzerland

(Dated: May 21, 2009)

We investigate the flow of various non-Newtonian fluids through three-dimensional disordered porous media by direct numerical simulation of momentum transport and continuity equations. Remarkably, our results for power-law fluids indicate that the flow, when quantified in terms of a properly modified permeability-like index and Reynolds number, can be successfully described by a single (universal) curve over a broad range of Reynolds conditions and power-law exponents. We also study the flow behavior of Bingham fluids described in terms of the Herschel-Bulkley model. In this case, our simulations reveal that the interplay of (i) the disordered geometry of the pore space, (ii) the fluid rheological properties, and (iii) the inertial effects on the flow is responsible for a substantial enhancement of the macroscopic hydraulic conductance of the system at intermediate Reynolds conditions. This anomalous condition of “enhanced transport” represents a novel feature for flow in porous materials.

PACS numbers: 47.55.Mh, 05.40.-a, 47.15.Gf

The research on flow through porous media has great relevance for many problems of practical interest in several fields, including physics, medicine, biology, chemistry, mechanical and mechanical engineering and geology [1-3]. The disordered aspect of most natural and artificial porous materials is directly responsible for the presence of local flow heterogeneities that can dramatically affect the behavior, for example, of the transport of heat and mass through the system. Under this framework, the standard approach to investigate single-phase flow in porous media is to apply Darcy’s law [1-3], which simply assumes that a global permeability \(k_D\) relates the average fluid velocity \(u_0\) in the field with the pressure drop \(\Delta p\) measured across the system,

\[
u_0 = -\frac{k_D \Delta p}{\mu} L
\]

where \(L\) is the length of the sample in flow direction and \(\mu\) is the viscosity of the fluid. As a macroscopic index, the permeability reflects the relation between the complex pore space morphology and fluid flow.

In previous studies [4-10], detailed models of pore geometry have been used in combination with computational fluid dynamics simulations to predict permeability coefficients and validate classical semi-empirical correlations for real porous materials. In principle, the original concept of permeability as a global index for flow in porous media, however, is only applicable in the limit of Stokesian flow (linear). Strictly speaking, the validity of Darcy’s law should be restricted to (i) Newtonian fluids and (ii) flows under viscous conditions, i.e., flows at very low Reynolds numbers, defined usually as \(\text{Re} \equiv \rho u_0 d_p / \mu\), where \(\rho\) is the density of the fluid and \(d_p\) is the grain diameter. The departure from Darcy’s law due to the contribution of inertial forces (convection) to the flow of Newtonian fluids has been the subject of several studies in the past [10-12]. In particular, it has been experimentally and numerically observed that the breakdown of condition (ii) can take place even under laminar flow conditions, i.e., before fully developed turbulence effects become relevant to momentum transport.

In order to understand the physics of important problems like blood flow through the kidney [13] or oil flow through porous rocks [14], for example, one has to overcome the restriction (i) mentioned above by explicitly considering the nonlinear behavior of these fluids under shear, namely, their specific Non-Newtonian properties. Although these fluids have been known for a long time, technological applications which directly make use of their anomalous rheological behavior have come into...
focus only recently. For instance, shear thinning solvents are present in dropless paints [15], and shear thickening fluids are currently used as active dampers and components of enhanced body armors [16]. While the physical properties of Newtonian fluid flow through irregular media are theoretically well understood and have been confirmed by many experiments, Non-Newtonian systems lack a generalized description. In this Letter we investigate the flow of non-Newtonian fluids through three-dimensional porous media by direct numerical simulation of momentum and continuity equations. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that non-linear effects coming from both rheological and inertial aspects of the fluid flow are considered simultaneously in the framework of a disordered three-dimensional pore space.

The porous medium studied here is a three-dimensional realization of the Swiss-Cheese model [17]. Spherical particles (solid obstacles) of diameter \( d_p \) are sequentially and randomly placed in a box of length \( L \) in the \( x \)-direction and square cross-section of area \( A \). Particle overlap is allowed and the allocation process continues up to the point in which a prescribed value for the porosity (void fraction) \( \varepsilon \) is achieved. The mathematical formulation for the fluid mechanics in the interstitial pore space is based on the assumptions that we have a continuum and incompressible fluid flowing under steady-state and isothermal conditions. Thus, the momentum and mass conservation equations reduce to,

\[
\rho \ddot{u} \cdot \nabla \ddot{u} = -\nabla p + \nabla T \quad (2)
\]

\[
\nabla \ddot{u} = 0 , \quad (3)
\]

where \( \ddot{u} \) and \( p \) are the velocity and pressure fields, respectively, and \( T \) is the so-called deviatoric stress tensor given by,

\[
T_{ij} = p \delta_{ij} + 2 \mu \dot{\epsilon}_{ij} , \quad (4)
\]

where \( \dot{\epsilon}_{ij} = \frac{1}{2} \left( \frac{\partial u_i}{\partial x_j} + \frac{\partial u_j}{\partial x_i} \right) \) is the strain rate tensor. The variable \( \mu \) is the dynamic viscosity, for which a constitutive relation must be provided in order to describe the specific non-Newtonian behavior of the fluid. Here we investigate the flow of two different types of rheologies, namely, the cross-power-law (PL) fluid and the Bingham fluid. The constitutive relation for a PL fluid can be written as,

\[
\mu = K \dot{\gamma}^{n-1}, \quad \mu_1 < \mu < \mu_2, \quad (5)
\]

where the constants \( \mu_1 \) and \( \mu_2 \) are the lower and upper cutoffs, \( \dot{\gamma} \equiv \sqrt{\frac{1}{2} \dot{\epsilon}_{ij} \dot{\epsilon}_{ij}} \) is the effective strain rate, \( K \) is the consistency index, and \( n \) is the power-law exponent. For \( n = 1 \) we recover the behavior of a Newtonian fluid. Fluids with \( n > 1 \) are shear-thickening, while shear-thinning behavior corresponds to \( n < 1 \).

In the case of Bingham fluids, the rheology is commonly approximated by the Herschel-Bulkley model [18, 19] which combines the effects of Bingham and power-law behavior for a fluid. For low strain rates, \( \dot{\gamma} < \tau_0 / \mu_0 \), the material acts as a very viscous fluid with viscosity \( \mu_0 \). As the strain rate increases and the yield stress threshold \( \tau_0 \) is surpassed, the fluid behavior is described by,

\[
\mu = \frac{\tau_0 + K_B \dot{\gamma}^n - (\tau_0 / \mu_0)^n}{\dot{\gamma}}, \quad (6)
\]

where \( K_B \) is the consistency factor and \( n \) is the power-law index. Here we restrict our simulations to the case Bingham fluids \( n = 1 \), i.e., the fluid is still Newtonian at large strain rates, with a viscosity \( \mu = K_B \).

Non-slip boundary conditions are applied along the entire solid-fluid interface and end effects on the flow field, which become significant at high Reynolds numbers, are minimized by attaching ancillary zones at the inlet and outlet of the two opposite faces in the direction of the flow (i.e., \( x \)-direction). At the inlet, a constant infow velocity in the normal direction to the boundary is specified, whereas at the outlet we impose gradientless boundary condition. Finally, the four remaining faces are considered to be solid walls.

For a given realization of the porous medium and a given set of flow and constitutive parameters of the fluid, the numerical solution of the partial differential equations (2) for the local velocity and pressure fields in the fluid phase of the void space, head and recovery zones is obtained by discretization using the control volume finite-difference technique [20]. An unstructured grid with up to three million cells is adapted to the geometry of the porous medium. For comparison, entirely consistent numerical solutions have also been calculated with a finite-volume scheme [21]. Finally, from the area-averaged pressures at the inlet and outlet positions, the overall pressure drop can be readily calculated.

In Fig. 1 we show a three-dimensional plot of a typical realization of the porous medium through which a PL fluid flows. Clearly, the complex geometry of the pore space induces preferential channels on the flow whose localization and strength are significantly dependent on the rheological properties of the fluid as well as on the imposed inlet-outlet boundary conditions. For PL fluids, this intricate interplay between geometry and flow can nevertheless be macroscopically quantified in terms of an analogous to a permeability index, namely a hydraulic conductivity, defined in terms of Darcy’s law as \( k_D \equiv K u_0 L / \Delta p \). As shown in the inset of Fig. 2, the general behavior of \( k_D \) is qualitatively similar for different values of the exponent \( n \). Moreover, it follows the characteristic trend of a simple Newtonian fluid (\( n = 1 \)), namely that \( k_D \) remains essentially invariant for low Re values up to a crossover point \( Re_x \) where it starts to decrease due to the onset of non-linear convective effects on the flow [7, 10, 22]. Quantitatively, however, we observe that both the upper limit for \( k_D \) and \( Re_x \) are strongly dependent on \( n \).
Rean average effective pore diameter, and the hydraulic conductivity as \[23\], the ratio lapse onto a single curve for the entire range of (mod-
dimensional porous media. The inset shows the variation of of the power-law exponent \( n \) against \( R_e \) for different values of the power-law exponent \( n \). The reference parameter \( k_1 \) corre-
responds to the value of \( k_D \) calculated for a Newtonian fluid \(( n = 1) \) under very low Reynolds conditions, i.e., the porous medium permeability according to Darcy’s law Eq. (1). The resulting data collapse presented in the main plot confirms the adequacy of our rescaling procedure in terms of the modified permeability index \( k/k_0 \) and the modified Reynolds number \( R_e' \) (see text).

For PL fluids, however, it is more appropriate to define the hydraulic conductivity as [23],

\[
k = u_0 K \left( \frac{\Delta p}{L} \right)^{-1/n}.
\]  

(7)

As shown in Fig. 3, this generalized index when calculated at low Reynolds numbers, namely \( k_0 \), can be consistently correlated with intrinsic properties of the fluid and porous medium by means of the following semi-empirical expression [24, 25]:

\[
k_0 = \frac{12 n (75k_1)^{1/n} d_p^{(n+1)/n} K^{(n-1)/n}}{25 \Delta p_{\text{crit}}^{(n+1)/n} L^{2(1-n)/n} K^{(n-1)/n}},
\]  

(8)

where \( d_p \) is the only fitting parameter corresponding to an average effective pore diameter, and \( k_1 \) corresponds to the value of \( k_D \) calculated for a Newtonian fluid \( n = 1 \) under very low Reynolds conditions.

In order to substantiate the non-Newtonian aspect of the fluid, it is also necessary to redefine the Reynolds number as [23],

\[
R_e' = \frac{k_0 n \mu u_0^{2-n} L}{2K d_p} 1 - \frac{\epsilon}{\epsilon^3}.
\]  

(9)

In the main plot of Fig. 2, we show that all data sets of \( k/k_0 \) against \( R_e' \), with \( k_0 \) obtained from Eq. (8), collapse onto a single curve for the entire range of (mod-
ified) Reynolds numbers, independent of the numerical values of \( \epsilon \) and \( n \). Despite the details of the model porous medium geometry employed here as well as the complexity of the fluid rheology, this remarkable invariance of behavior suggests that the resulting flow properties of the system remain in the same universality class of Newtonian fluid flow in disordered porous media.

Next we present results for flow through three-dimensional porous media of Bingham fluids with rheology given approximately by the Herschel-Bulkley model Eq. (6). The proper way to quantify inertial and viscous forces in this case is to define the Reynolds number as \( R_e B = \mu u_0 d_p/L V_B \). In Fig. 4 we show that the linear hydraulic conductivity, defined as \( K_B \equiv K_B u_0 L/\Delta p \), remains constant up to a certain crossover that is proportional to the threshold \( \tau_0 \), \( R_e \sim \tau_0 \). Below this crossover, since the fluid has Newtonian behavior with high viscosity \( \mu_0 \) everywhere in the pore space, the flow can be macroscopically described by Darcy’s law. Above this crossover, the presence of low and high strain rates zones in the flow leads to a nonuniform spatial distribution of fluid viscosity, therefore increasing the overall permeability index \( k_B \) of the system. This behavior persists up to the point in which inertial forces become relevant. While the specific fluid rheology investigated here tends to enhance the flow at high \( R_e B \), the effect of inertia is to reduce the permeability index under the same conditions [7, 10]. As a result of this competition, a maximum hydraulic conductivity can be observed at an intermediate value of \( R_e B \) that is also dependent on the threshold \( \tau_0 \). As shown in Fig. 4, this effect is better illustrated when we observe contour plots of the local ratio \( |\vec{u}|/|\nabla p| \) calculated at the middle cross-section of

![FIG. 2: (Color online) Flow of power-law fluids through three-dimensional porous media. The inset shows the variation of the ratio \( k_D/k_1 \) with Reynolds number \( R_e \) for different values of the power-law exponent \( n \). The reference parameter \( k_1 \) corresponds to the value of \( k_D \) calculated for a Newtonian fluid \( n = 1 \) under very low Reynolds conditions, i.e., the porous medium permeability according to Darcy’s law Eq. (1). The resulting data collapse presented in the main plot confirms the adequacy of our rescaling procedure in terms of the modified permeability index \( k/k_0 \) and the modified Reynolds number \( R_e' \) (see text).](image1)

![FIG. 3: (Color online) Dependence of the hydraulic conductivity at very low Reynolds numbers \( k_0 \) on the power-law exponent \( n \) for different values of porosity \( \epsilon \). The solid lines are the least-squares fits to the simulation data using Eq. (8) with parameter \( d_p = 1.58 \) and 0.35, for \( \epsilon = 0.5 \) and 0.7, respectively.](image2)
Summarizing, in spite of the non-linear nature of the physical problems. Finally, at sufficiently large values of Re_B, the viscosity of the fluid and therefore the local permeabilities become all the same, regardless of the value of Re_B and \( \tau_0 \). In this situation, all curves of \( k_B \) collapse.

FIG. 4: (Color online) Flow of Bingham fluids (Herschel-Bulkley model) through three-dimensional porous media. The plot shows the variation of the ratio \( k_B/k_1 \) with Reynolds number Re_B for different values of the parameter \( \tau_0 \), as defined in Eq. (6). Here \( k_1 \) corresponds to the lower limit of \( k_B \) at very low Reynolds conditions. The presence of maxima in all cases is a distinctive result of the competition between rheology and convective non-linearities. The contour plots in (a), (b) and (c) show the spatial variation of the magnitude of the local ratio \( |\bar{u}|/|\nabla p| \) calculated on the cross-section through the middle of the porous medium parallel to the flow, for \( \tau = 0.1 \) and Re_B = 3.5 \times 10^{-2}, 1.7 and 35, respectively. Their colors ranging from blue (dark) to red (light) correspond to low and high values of \( |\bar{u}|/|\nabla p| \), respectively.

We thank CNPq, CAPES, FUNCAP, FINEP for financial support.

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