

1 Review

# 2 Bitumen aging – a serious technological and environmental is- 3 sue: A review of laboratory evaluation and prediction methods

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16 **Abstract:** Changes in the properties of bitumen binders that occur as a result of aging have a huge  
17 impact on the durability of products made of them. In particular, asphalt pavements, which con-  
18 stitute the most common use of petroleum bitumen, are susceptible to damage resulting from the  
19 increasing stiffness of the bitumen during its life cycle. Increased stiffness of asphalt pavements  
20 reduces the pavement resistance to low-temperature cracks and fatigue cracks, ultimately leading  
21 to the loss of their functional properties and the need for road repair. The rate of changes in bitu-  
22 men properties is influenced by many factors, the most important of which are environmental  
23 conditions, technological parameters of binder processing, and physicochemical properties. The  
24 greatest impact on minimizing the adverse effect of aging is the use of asphalt suitably resistant to  
25 aging and changing the technological parameters of its application. This article reviews the litera-  
26 ture on the key bitumen aging laboratory procedures that are used to assess bitumens for their  
27 suitability for use in road construction. The short-term (RTFOT test) and long-term (RTFOT tests  
28 followed by PAV test) methods are most commonly used in the world to simulate bitumen aging.

29 The review also presents the most important steps of aging procedures, their advantages and  
30 limitations as identified by the authors of this publication, and a review of new laboratory tests that  
31 are proposed as more effective and reliable methods of aging.

Citation: To be added by editorial  
staff during production.

Academic Editor: Firstname Last-  
name

Received: date

Accepted: date

Published: date

32 **Keywords:** Bitumen; Asphalt binder; Laboratory aging methods; Roads; Chemical degradation;  
33 Oxidation.

34  
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36 neutral with regard to jurisdictional  
37 claims in published maps and  
38 institutional affiliations.



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## 1. Introduction

Petroleum bitumen is a well-known product for the construction of asphalt pavements. In Poland, at the end of 2019, over 80% of the roads in the highest traffic category were made with asphalt binder [1, 2]. On the other hand, in Europe, this share amounts to about 90%, although it is difficult to verify because relevant statistics are not available. In the United States, according to the analysis based on 2014 data, there are about 94% of roads with asphalt surfaces [3]. Currently, both in Poland and throughout Europe, a wide range of bitumens for road construction is available, ranging from traditional petroleum bitumens produced during the processing of crude oil through polymer modified bitumens, and ending with special bitumens containing additives improving the functional properties of the product. Depending on the end use of a given road, the correct selection of bitumen and asphalt for the pavement structure largely determines its durability.

47 The properties of bitumen are variable in its life cycle. Bitumen is susceptible to ag-  
48 ing, which depends on the type of crude oil it comes from, through the production  
49 technology to the technology of application of the final product. In addition, asphalt ag-  
50 ing continues over the entire life cycle of the end product. In simple terms, this process  
51 changes the chemical composition of the binder and, consequently, the physicochemical  
52 parameters, resulting in an increased hardness of asphalt, resistance to flow as well as  
53 brittleness. Considering the durability of the road surface, the changes that occur during  
54 the aging process are unfavorable. Although it would seem that the hardness of the  
55 binder, which increases with time, allows for increased resistance to road rutting, in the  
56 overall balance, changes in asphalt adversely affect the life of the pavement, causing its  
57 significant reduction. The changes taking place in the asphalt during the use of the road  
58 contribute to the deterioration of low-temperature properties and the reduction of the  
59 fatigue resistance of the asphalt pavement, which determine the durability and suitability  
60 of the pavement for carrying traffic loads.

61 The phenomenon of changes in the properties of asphalt was described, among  
62 others, in the work from the 1960s [4], where it was proved that the changes occur most  
63 intensively in the outer layer of the road, the so-called wearing course. Bituminous  
64 binder parameters currently characterized by a dynamic shear rheometer (DSR) include  
65 the complex shear modulus ( $G^*$ ) and the phase angle ( $\delta$ ). With the aging of the asphalt  
66 pavement, higher  $G^*$  and lower  $\delta$  are recorded in the binders recovered from the upper  
67 layers compared to the bitumens used in the binder and subbase layers [5]. The binder  
68 undergoes chemical and physical changes under the influence of cycles of temperature  
69 changes, contact with moisture, air, especially oxygen, and civilization pollution occur-  
70 ring in it, as well as UV radiation and transferred loads. The deeper layers of the surface,  
71 *i.e.* the binder layer and subbase, have limited contact with factors accelerating the aging  
72 process compared to the wearing course.

73 When the road requires renovation, the available road technologies make it possible  
74 to recover the previously used construction material from the pavement, which is called  
75 reclaimed asphalt. It consists of aggregate surrounded by asphalt mastic, *i.e.* a binder  
76 with a mineral filler. During the renovation, after several dozen years of pavement  
77 use, with increasing inflation, the material used often has a value many times higher than  
78 during road construction. Therefore, one of the aspects driving the development of recy-  
79 cling is financial benefits. In addition to the aspects resulting from technical or business  
80 requirements, the use of sustainable development strategies, especially limiting the im-  
81 pact on the natural environment, is becoming more and more popular in organizations.  
82 Therefore, the future of solutions based on the reuse of recovered asphalt for the con-  
83 struction of new roads looks bright.

## 84 2. Chemical structure of bitumen and effects of hardening of binder on the chemical 85 composition

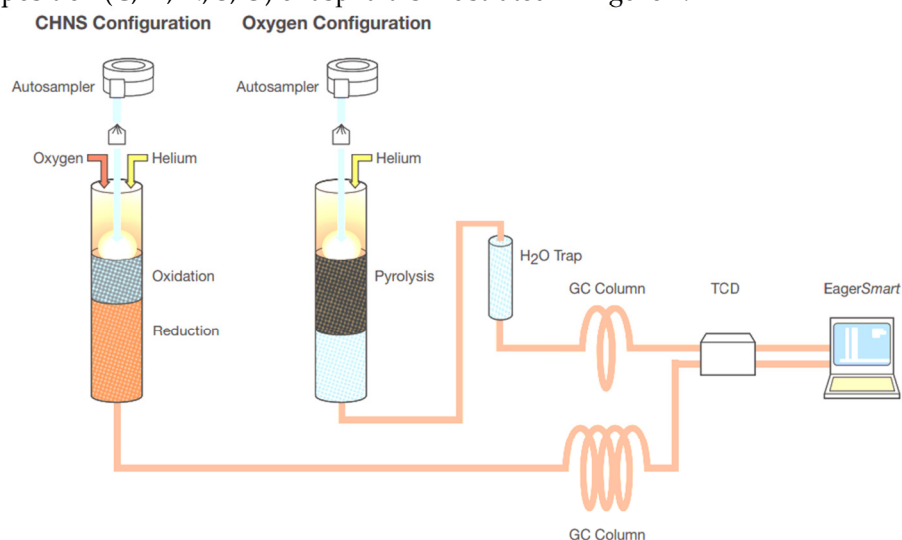
86 The chemical structure of petroleum asphalt is determined by the properties of  
87 crude oil and the production technology used to achieve the final parameters of the bi-  
88 tuminous binder. Bitumen is usually one of the highest boiling, high viscosity fractions  
89 obtained in the process of refining crude oil. Only the residues after extraction with  
90 propane or butane of vacuum fractions and petroleum coke are characterized by a higher  
91 concentration of compounds with the highest (relative to crude oil components) boiling  
92 point and the largest number of carbon atoms.

93 Detailed chemical analysis of asphalt is practically impossible to perform, mainly  
94 because of the complex structure of chemical compounds and the number of isomers  
95 present in the asphalt and their variability, depending on the variability of the crude oil  
96 composition. Therefore, in the oil and construction industry, there is no bitumen speci-  
97 fication based on a chemical analysis of its composition, and there are no known correla-  
98 tions between the chemical properties of bitumen binders and the performance parame-

ters of bitumen, which can be used universally, *i.e.* regardless of the origin of crude oil and bitumen production technology. Application of methods of instrumental analysis such as visible light (VIS) and near ultraviolet (UV) spectroscopy, Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FT-IR), nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy (NMR) combined with mass spectrometry (MS), allows to obtain still incomplete knowledge about the chemical structure of asphalt binders [6]. Nevertheless, the analysis of the composition enables the explanation of changes in properties that occur, for example, with aging. In addition, chemical analysis allows for the identification of changes caused by chemical modification of bitumen, the assessment of the effectiveness of such modification, or the durability of the modification effects during the life cycle of the asphalt pavement (durability and stability of bitumen modification). However, it should be borne in mind that in most cases the identified chemical changes are not consistent with changes in the rheological properties of bitumen [7].

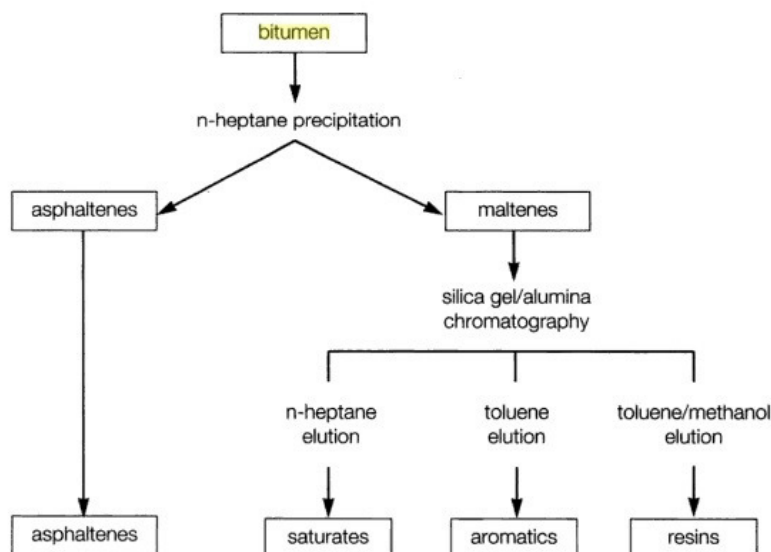
Due to the complexity of its structure, in order to determine the approximate chemical structure of bitumen, both elemental analysis (C, H, N, S, O) and the group composition analysis, the so-called SARA (the name comes from the first letters of four hydrocarbon groups, *i.e.* *Saturates Aromatics, Resins, Asphaltenes*) are still used today. The group composition test divides the binder sample into hydrocarbon compounds that differ in polarity, *i.e.* from the least polar saturates, through aromatics, resins and asphaltenes.

Elemental analysis is an analytical technique that is used in a wide range of applications and industries. The most commonly used technique for analyzing the elemental composition CHNSO is the procedure involving the combustion of a sample and then analyzing the gaseous combustion products ( $\text{CO}_2$ , CO,  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ,  $\text{NO}_x$ ,  $\text{SO}_2$ , etc.). The combustion products are determined by gas chromatography, with which the percentages of C, H, N, and S can be determined. The oxygen content is determined in the second stage of determination by pyrolysis. The diagram of the determination of the elemental composition (C, H, N, S, O) of asphalt is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** CHNS/O configuration [8].

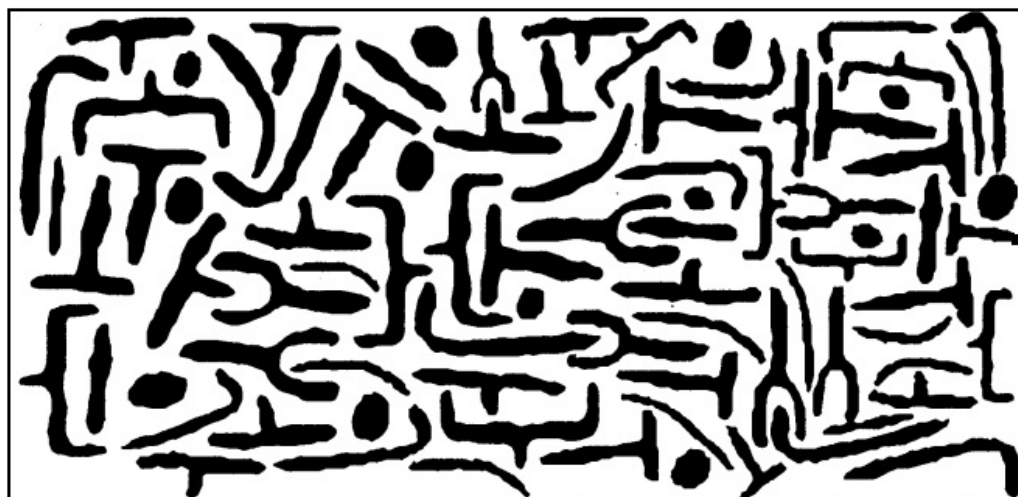
The separation of asphalt into group components is most often carried out by following ASTM-D4124 [9]. The method involves the separation into four defined fractions of petroleum hydrocarbons, *i.e.* saturated, naphthenic-aromatic, polar aromatic (resins), and insoluble in *n*-heptane (or isoctane) asphaltenes. The standardized method was developed and is evolving based on the analytical procedure used by Corbett-Swerbrick [10]. The principle of dividing into individual groups is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Schematic for the group separation of chemical constituents in bitumen.

In terms of its chemical composition, the bituminous binder produced by the processing of crude oil is a mixture of high-boiling hydrocarbons, most of which have a boiling point above 525 °C. The elemental composition by weight of the binder used in road construction is usually 80-88 % carbon, 8-12 % hydrogen, 0-9 % sulfur, 0-2 % nitrogen, and 0-2 % oxygen. The remaining elements, such as vanadium, nickel, and magnesium, are within a maximum range of several hundred ppm [11]. In terms of its chemical structure, the binder is described in the literature using colloidal or micellar models and recently using the so-called microstructural model. As part of the SHRP program, which is described in more detail in the sections on aging and bitumen specification, a chemical model of bitumen was also developed which, according to the authors, better explains the viscoelastic behavior of the binder than, for example, the micellar model. In the micellar model, the molecules with the highest molar mass – asphaltenes, form agglomerates that are dispersed in a matrix of maltenes consisting of resins, aromatic and saturated hydrocarbons. The microstructural model assumes that bitumen is a monophasic mixture of very complex hydrocarbons of polar (asphaltenes and resins) and nonpolar (aromatic and saturated hydrocarbons). In this system, there are no micelles, networks, or “floating” islands of asphaltenes. However, the fact is that a mixture of fractions with different polarities and molar mass interact with each other to form chemical complexes. Between nonpolar compounds, polar substances form these complexes as a result of weak electrostatic attractions, hydrogen bonds, and, to a lesser extent, through  $\pi - \pi$  bonds of aromatic hydrocarbon rings or van der Waals forces in the case of long-chain hydrocarbons [12]. Intermolecular bonds can be broken by temperature increase or shear forces; thus, the bitumen binder after the destruction of these assemblies, *e.g.* as a result of increasing the temperature, behaves like a Newtonian liquid, and when it is supercooled, the bonds re-form, but in a slightly different configuration. An illustration of the microstructural model is presented in Figure 3.

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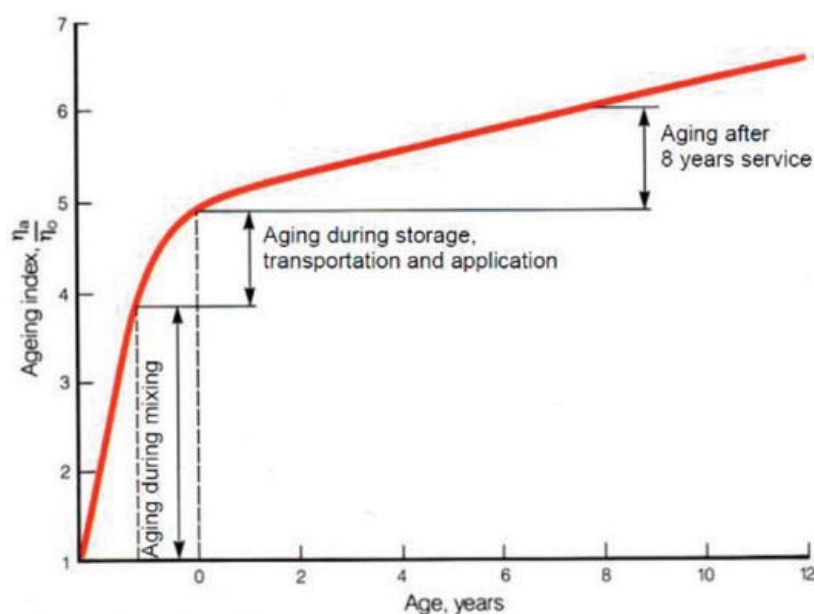
**Figure 3.** Model of the chemical structure of bitumen developed in the SHRP program [13]. The polar hydrocarbon systems are shown in black, while the white fields are the area representing nonpolar hydrocarbons.

Bitumen with the desired properties and chemical composition is a material characterized by the appropriate proportion of polar and nonpolar fractions. The share is difficult to define unequivocally as it depends on the source of origin and the technology of production of the bituminous binder. However, this specific balance in the chemical composition is a balance of substances that ensures the desired resistance of the material to damage. The low-temperature stability is determined mainly by the composition of the nonpolar fraction, while the fatigue cracking resistance and high-temperature deformation resistance depend on the share of polar fractions. The higher the share of polar fractions, the higher the properties of asphalt at a higher temperature, while the resistance to damage at intermediate temperatures decreases.

Aging should be defined as a change in the properties of the asphalt binder as a result of chemical and physical changes that take place under the influence of environmental conditions such as oxygen, temperature, moisture, civilization pollution present in the air, and radiation (especially in the UV range). When used in road construction, there is an additional impact of vehicle traffic and the influence of components used for the production of asphalt mix. The oxidations by oxygen as well as evaporation and adsorption of fractions in the mineral components of asphalt mix, taking place at high processing temperatures, have the greatest impact on the rate and scope of changes in asphalt. The most intensive changes registered during the life cycle used in road construction (Figure 4) are related to the asphalt mix production process [14]. The subsequent stages associated with transport and asphalt mix incorporation are of lesser importance, and due to the decreasing asphalt mix temperature compared to the previous stages, the aging process of the binder strongly slows down at the stage of usage of the asphalt pavement. On the other hand, the use of an asphalt road is designed for at least 30 years, and more often for about 50 years, so due to the duration of the road's operation, the long-term aging stage also plays a significant role in the durability of roads.







**Figure 4.** Ageing effects on binder properties represented by the viscosity ratio index during the life of the bitumen [14].

On the basis of infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), it is possible to estimate the changes that occur in bitumen binder, using the identification of asphalt functional groups that undergo oxidation during the life cycle. With the IR spectra of the asphalt before and after aging and using the relationship between the peak area of the group undergoing chemical changes as a result of aging to the peak area, *e.g.* of aliphatic groups ( $-\text{CH}_2\text{CH}_3$  or  $-\text{CH}_3$ ), appropriate aging indices can be determined. An example of the FT-IR spectrum after aging is presented in Figure 5, while the relationship for the calculation of C=O Index is given by the following formula (1):

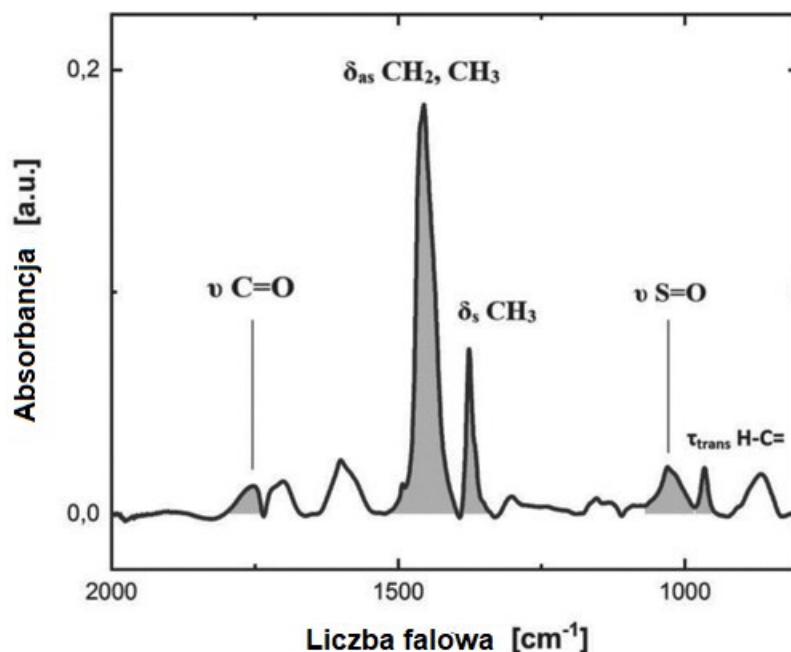
$$\text{ICO} = A_x/A_y, \quad (1)$$

where:

$A_x$  – peak area at wavenumber  $1666\text{--}1746\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , characteristic for vibrations of the  $-\text{C}=\text{O}$  bond,

$A_y$  is the reference peak area of the aliphatic group at  $1319\text{--}1520\text{ cm}^{-1}$ .

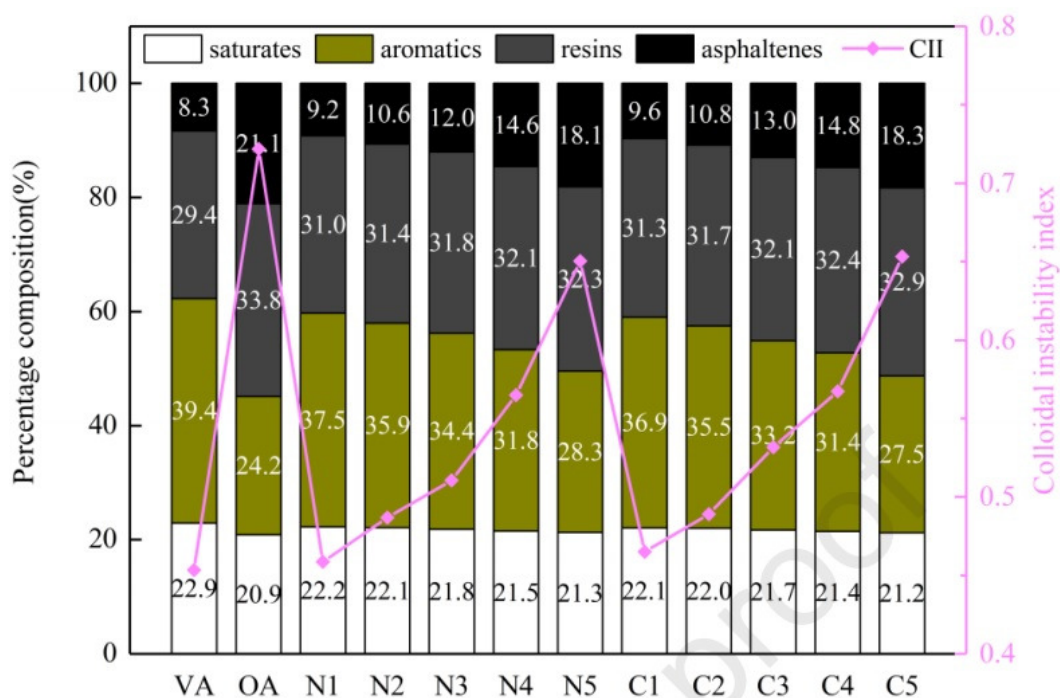
The studies based on the recorded CO and SO indices showed [15] that the identified changes in the chemical composition of the bitumen after short-term aging are insignificant, while only after long-term aging changes indicating a greater intensity of oxidation are detected. However, *e.g.* in modified bitumens, polymer degradation is detected, which is indicated by the SBS index, an aging index suitable for the modifier of the SBS type (styrene-butadiene-styrene block polymer).



Absorbancja = Absorbance. Liczba falowa = Wavenumber

**Figure 5.** An example of an FT-IR spectrum [15].

On the other hand, based on the results of determination of the SARA group composition presented *e.g.* in [16], it can be concluded that in the aged asphalt (designated as OA) the content of aromatic compounds is reduced compared to the proportion of this fraction in unaged bitumen (designated as VA), while the content of resins and asphaltenes increases, respectively. The above changes are a result of the evaporation of light components and the conversion of other hydrocarbons into more complex ones with a higher molar mass. Figure 6 presents the selected research results of the authors of the above work. It should be noted that in the mixtures tested in this paper, unaged and aged bitumen, where selected rejuvenating agents (substances regenerating the properties of the product) were additionally used, it has been shown that it is possible to achieve similar shares of individual groups of hydrocarbons, which were characteristic of asphalt before aging. Samples of mixtures were marked as N1 - N5 and C1 - C5, where N and C denote the type of rejuvenating agent used.



**Figure 6.** The results of the SARA study and the CII values of the tested bitumen in [16].

Based on the study of the group composition, it is possible to determine the so-called colloidal instability index (CII), which is determined according to the formula (2). A higher index (CII) means lower stability of asphaltenes in the system. As a result, bitumen structure tends to gel – creating more and more complex aggregates of polar compounds, which may accelerate the asphalt pavement degradation process.

$$\text{CII} = \frac{\text{saturates} + \text{asphaltenes}}{\text{aromatics} + \text{resins}} \quad (2)$$

Based on the same studies [16], it was shown that aged bituminous binder has the highest CII index, while bitumen resulting from mixing aged bituminous binder and a selected rejuvenating additive showed a lower CII value. This points to the fact that, for example, properly selected rejuvenating agents can restore the balance of colloidal stability of bitumen that has been subjected to excessively high aging, thus effectively rebuilding the colloidal structure of such a mixture. The reference values for the CII index were not found; in this case, this index should be considered tentative and helpful for the comparative analysis of products. In the literature, the CII values reported most often are for crude oil, where it is assumed that when CII is < 0.7, the crude is stable, and when the CII value is > 0.9, crude oil can be considered unstable, and during its storage and processing the precipitation of asphaltenes may take place [17].

However, it should be noted that when assessing the technical characteristics of a product, one should always take into account a set of parameters covering a wide range of properties, which should preferably be correlated with the performance properties. The purpose of this approach is to exclude the use of single selected indicators or parameters, so as not to exclude a product, such as bitumen, that historically showed high durability in asphalt pavement.

Interventionary studies involving animals or humans, and other studies that require ethical approval, must list the authority that provided approval and the corresponding ethical approval code.

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### 3. Laboratory bitumen aging methods

#### 3.1. Short-term aging

Due to the relatively small changes in bitumen properties during service aging, the assessment of bitumen resistance to aging would be time-consuming without the developed and implemented laboratory methods based on the accelerating bitumen aging phenomenon. Currently, there are both standardized methods of short-term and long-term aging of bitumen as well as new solutions being developed in research centers.

The short-term aging simulation is intended to represent the conditions under which bitumen is hot-processed (*i.e.*  $> 150\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) into hot mix asphalt (HMA) until it is incorporated into the pavement. The greatest changes in asphalt among the subsequent technological stages of HMA production occur in the drum of the asphalt mix production plant. Bitumen, stored in a tank at a temperature of  $160\text{--}180\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ , is introduced into the drum, where it contacts the surface of the hot aggregate. The standard production temperature is  $170\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Then HMA goes to storage silos and from them it is transported by car to the construction site where HMA is poured and compacted at a temperature below  $150\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The aging changes of the binder are influenced by the high temperature after the stage of contact with the aggregate; the storage and transport time during which the HMA is kept at about  $170\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$  and is in contact with air becomes crucial.

The first common method used to assess changes in bitumen properties after short-term aging is the TFOT (*Thin Film Oven Test*) method. TFOT aging simulation was implemented by Lewis and Welborn in 1940 [18]. It was standardized, among others, by CEN TC 336 as the European standard EN 12607-2 [19]. The determination consists in placing 50 mL of an bitumen sample on a pan with a diameter of 140 mm and a height of 9.5 mm to obtain a thin layer of the binder with a thickness of about 3.2 mm. Next, the samples in the pan are placed on a rotating shelf in an oven for 5 hours at  $163\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$  under atmospheric pressure. The bitumen sample is exposed to temperature and air.

The TFOT method is used to compare the properties of asphalt in terms of resistance to weight loss due to the evaporation of the lowest boiling hydrocarbons and curing due to heating and contact with atmospheric oxygen.

As a result of this test procedure, aging takes place most intensively on the bituminous binder surface, which is its major drawback (beyond the test time), which in extreme cases can lead to the formation of a hard layer, which can prevent uniform aging. Currently, the TFOT method is used only for soft road bitumen, such as V6000 or V12000, which are classified by determining their viscosity at  $60\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ , as the value of penetration of these binders is  $> 400$  (given in units of penetration *ie.* 0,1 mm).

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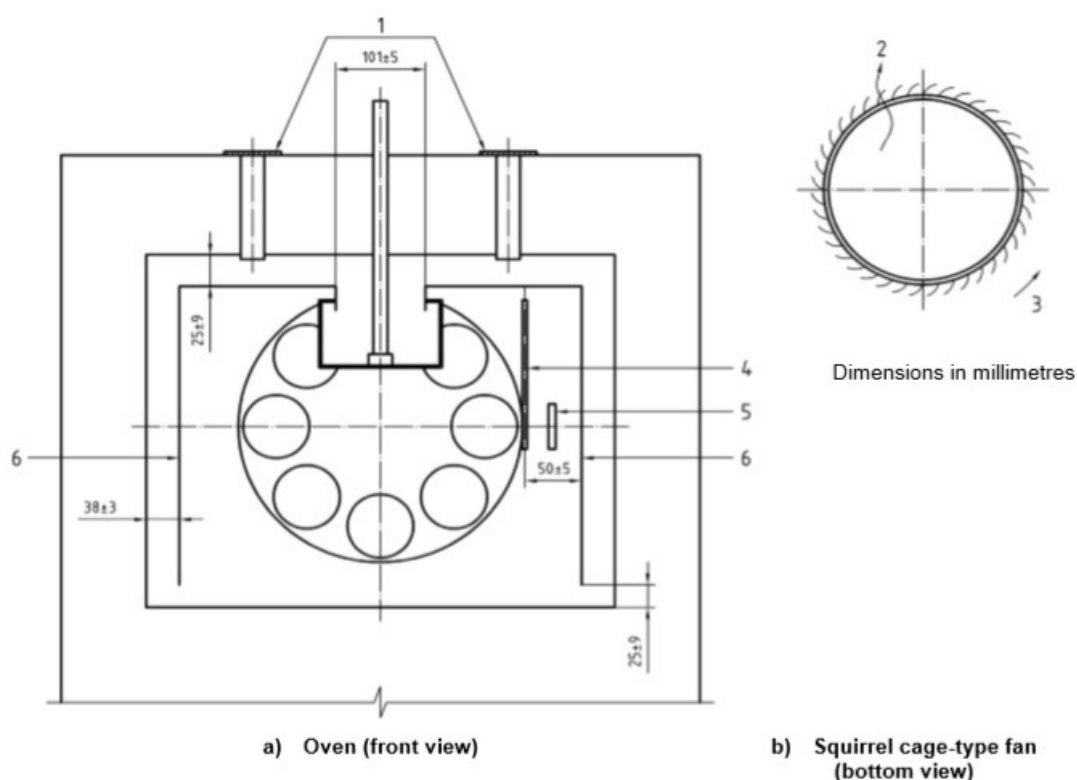
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**Figure 7.** Photograph of a set of pans and an oven for aging bitumen by the TFOT method [own material].

The evolution of the thin film aging test is the RTFOT (*Rolling Thin Film Oven Test*), a method developed by the California Division of Highways [20]. The aging procedure is described, among others, in the EN 12607-1 standard [21]. Currently, RTFOT is used to simulate the short-term aging of the most widely used road and polymer-modified bitumen. The change primarily involved the container in which the sample is placed from a pan to a glass vessel, which is placed in a special holder. During the RTFOT test, the glass vessel is rotated and the binder can flow when exposed to temperature and air. Due to the smaller sample size, approximately 35 g, the rotating layer of asphalt needs a shorter time to reflect the changes occurring in the process of technological aging in the binder. During the test, the samples are rotated 15 times per minute and the airflow is set at 4000 mL/min. The RTFOT aging temperature is identical to that of the TFOT method, *i.e.* 163 °C. On the other hand, the time of the aging procedure was reduced from 5 hours to 75 minutes according to the European specification and 85 minutes in the case of using the AASHTO T240 [22] or ASTM D2872 [23] standards, *i.e.* laboratory procedures used, among others, in the USA.



**Key**  
 1 upper vents 2 air flow 3 direction of rotation 4 thermometer 5 regulation probe  
 6 sheaths

**Figure 8.** Oven and squirrel cage-type fan for aging by the RTFOT method [EN 12607-1:2014].

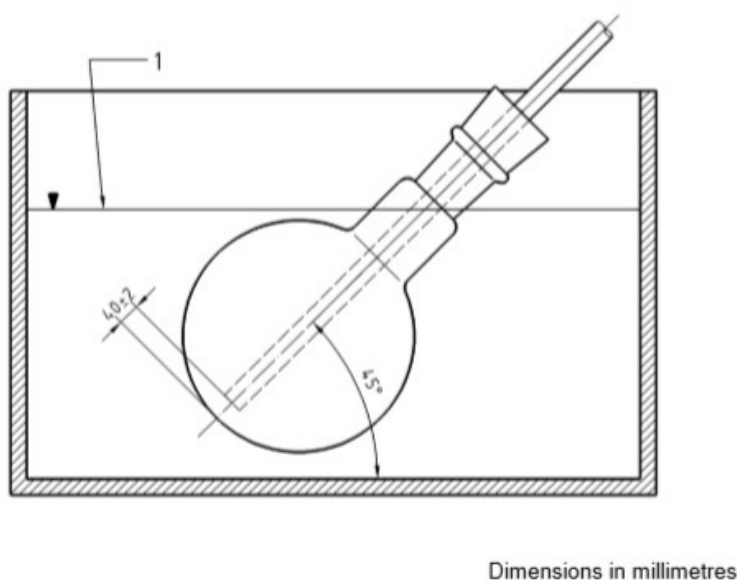
RTFOT aging is the most widely used test method in the world for simulating the short-term aging of bitumen. In the case of testing the resistance to aging of paving grade bitumen, the RTFOT method is sufficient to assess the resistance to aging [24], although the temperature of 163 °C was selected only in terms of the hot technology and does not reflect changes during technological aging in a less energy-consuming warm technology WMA (*warm mix asphalt*).

The greatest difficulties arise when simulating the aging of high-viscosity asphalts, especially those modified with polymers. Bitumen in the vessels does not rotate and, consequently, the thin film is not renewed. Thus, as in the TFOT method, aging occurs on the surface, and the air is not in contact with the entire mass of the sample. Various modifications of the RTFOT test were tried to eliminate this problem, *e.g.* metal rods were introduced into glass containers [25] to generate shear forces and the creation of a thin layer of even highly viscous binders. However, this modification was not accepted by the industry as an effective solution to the problem. Moreover, it is recommended in the EN 14023:2010 standard, specifying polymer modified bitumens (PMB), to increase the RTFOT temperature to 180 °C for hard and highly viscous PMB bitumens. Nevertheless, the temperature increase in the RFTOF method does not fully eliminate the phenomenon of no-rotation of high-viscosity bitumens, thus contributing to an increase in the aging effect of PMBs aged in such a way, which may lead to incorrect assessment of their resistance to high temperature compared to other bitumens aged at a traditionally adopted temperature of 163 °C.

Short-term aging RTFOT undoubtedly has disadvantages in the form of dedication to "hot" technology and difficulties in performing the test for hard or very highly modified bitumens [26]; however, this test allows obtaining samples for further tests that can verify

347 the binders in terms of resistance to technological aging of bitumen. The research con-  
348 firmed that the use of two different bitumens in asphalt mix with the same composition,  
349 produced under the same conditions, will lead to greater aging in asphalt mix with bi-  
350 tumen which showed greater changes in physicochemical parameters after the RTFOT  
351 test [27].

352 Another standardized method is the RFT (*Rotating Flask Test*) asphalt aging simulation,  
353 initially described in the 1980s in the German standard DIN 52016 [28]. The European  
354 standard EN 12607-3 [29] describing the test procedure was developed by the technical  
355 committee TC 336 in 2000. The method uses a rotary evaporator into which 100 g of  
356 bitumen sample is introduced. The conditions of the RFT aging procedure are 165 °C,  
357 time 150 min, and rotation speed of 20 rpm. In addition, air is supplied to the flask at a  
358 rate of 500 mL/min. An unquestionable advantage of the RFT method compared to  
359 RFTOT is the possibility of obtaining a single homogeneous sample of the aged binder for  
360 further tests, *i.e.* 100 g instead of 35 g from one container. Admittedly, as many as 8  
361 containers can be used in the RFTOT test, but the removal of bituminous binder from  
362 these containers is problematic and if a sample larger than 35 g is required, the test ma-  
363 terial from at least two containers must be combined.



364 **Figure 9.** Schematic of RFT aging setup [EN 12607-3:2014].  
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367 Other short-term asphalt aging methods are not standardized but only tested and de-  
368 veloped by scientists. However, very good data validation with asphalt field measure-  
369 ments may result in changing the reference methods to one of the methods described  
370 below.

Due to the increasing popularity of long-term aging tests and the need to evaluate the  
binder during pavement operation, increasingly larger sample sizes are needed for test-  
ing after the technological aging tests. To obtain larger sample sizes (*e.g.* to simulate  
long-term aging), a preliminary method based on the RFT test was developed in the USA  
[30]. A 200-g sample is placed in a larger flask (1000 mL), and the test is carried out at 165  
°C for 210 min. The airflow is set at 2000 mL/min and the rotation of the flask at 20 rpm.  
The modified RFT method achieves aging changes similar to the RTFOT method.

Another published modification of the RFT method [31] involves encasing the oil bath to  
stabilize the test temperature as well as to be able to use a higher temperature, *e.g.* 200 °C.



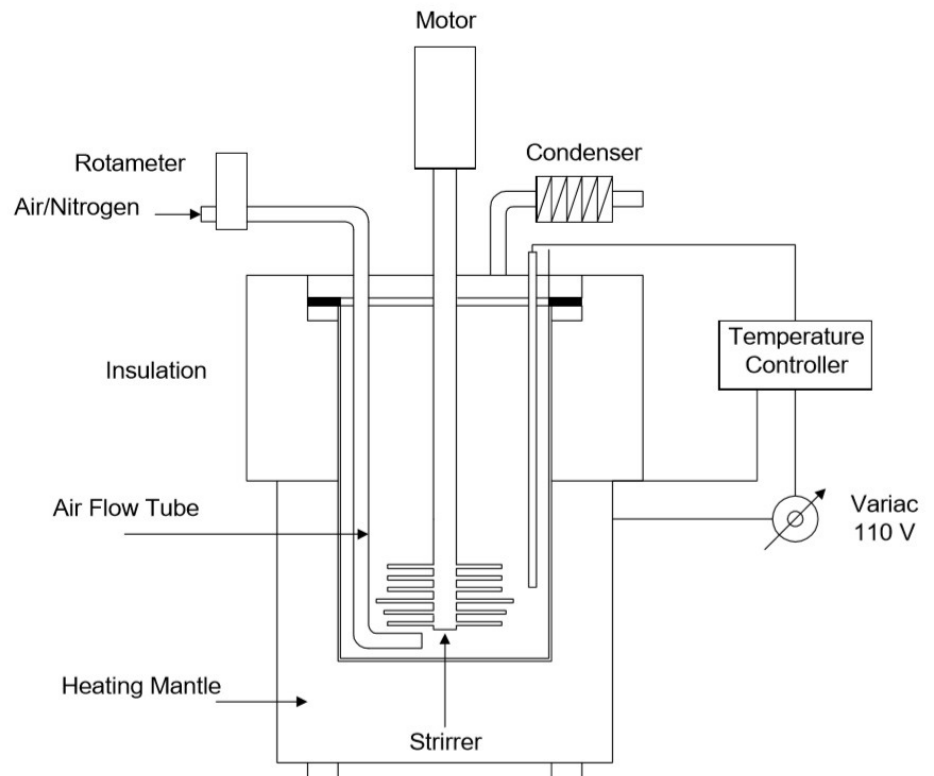
380 Furthermore, the flask was placed in the evaporator at an angle of 45° to ensure that the  
381 entire sample volume was always below the oil level. The rotation speed was increased to  
382 60 rpm and the airflow from 500 mL/min to 4000 mL/min. The modified RFT test using,  
383 for example, a test time of 85 min and a 50-g sample, allows for a similar aging effect as  
384 the RTFOT method, and after 60 minutes the effect is similar to TFOT. The equipment  
385 modified in this way provides greater possibilities for selecting different conditions for  
386 accelerated bitumen aging. Depending on the needs and asphalt mix production tech-  
387 nology, the conditions of the RFT method can be selected in such a way as to correlate  
388 changes in bitumen during heating and contact with air.

389 Another proposed procedure mapping the technological aging of bitumen is Stirred Air-  
390 flow Test (SAFT) method, which was supposed to solve the disadvantages associated  
391 with the aging of polymer-modified bitumen (insufficient flow in RTFOT containers,  
392 formation of a “crust” on the surface of the binder) [32]. The SAFT aging apparatus has a  
393 structure that is somewhat reminiscent of bitumen oxidation reactor, as it contains a  
394 vessel in which the temperature of the medium is controlled, along with an air or nitro-  
395 gen inlet and a stirrer. Comparative tests of the viscosity after SAFT versus RTFOT aging  
396 using the developed laboratory conditions performed both on paving grade and modi-  
397 fied bitumen samples, revealed a satisfactory correlation [33].

398 Moreover, the advantage of the SAFT method over RTFOT results mainly from two as-  
399 pects. Firstly, the time needed to perform the test is reduced to 45 min (including the 15  
400 minutes needed to heat the sample to 160 °C), and secondly, the sample is always aver-  
401 aged due to its placement in one container and the use of stirring with the installed stir-  
402 rer. The test temperature is the same as in the case of RTFOT, *i.e.* 163 °C, the mass of the  
403 sample subjected to aging is 250 g, the airflow during the aging period was set at 2000  
404 mL/min, and the stirrer speed at 700 rpm. The aging cycle, where the bitumen is exposed  
405 to elevated temperature and oxygen in the air, is 30 min.

406 Despite solving the problematic technical aspects of the RTFOT method, the SAFT test  
407 was not generally accepted by the industry and science. It was noted in [34] that the  
408 SAFT method, carried out using commercially available equipment, ages bitumen to a  
409 lower degree, especially in the case of high G\* bituminous binders, hence the need to  
410 consider whether the procedure time should be extended from 30 to at least 35 minutes.  
411 In addition, a sample degassing step has been proposed, because air bubbles trapped in  
412 the bitumen affect the values of rheological properties measured. The studies con-  
413 ducted by the authors of the report revealed a worsened correlation of changes in the  
414 properties of bitumen after aging compared to the RTFOT method and bitumen recov-  
415 ered from short-term aged asphalt mix. Ultimately, the SAFT method was not recom-  
416 mended for an introduction to the specification.





**Figure 10.** Schematic of the SAFT aging setup [33].

Table 1 summarizes the three most commonly used methods of short-term technological aging of bitumen, covered by the European standards of EN 12607-1, 2, and 3 series. Additionally, different aging conditions are included, provided in the standards used, among others, in North America, *i.e.* AASHTO and ASTM.

**Table 1.** Conditions for short-term aging of bitumen using the three methods described in European standards.

Method	Aging time [min]	Sample mass [g]	Air flow [mL/min]	Temperature [°C]	Remarks
TFOT	300	50	Without forced circulation	163	Currently used for soft paving grade bitumen, <i>i.e.</i> V6000 acc. to EN 12591
RTFOT	75	35 ( 8 x 35 g = 280 g)	4000	163	According to AASHTO T240, aging time is 85 min
RFT	150	100	500	165	

### 3.2. Long-term aging

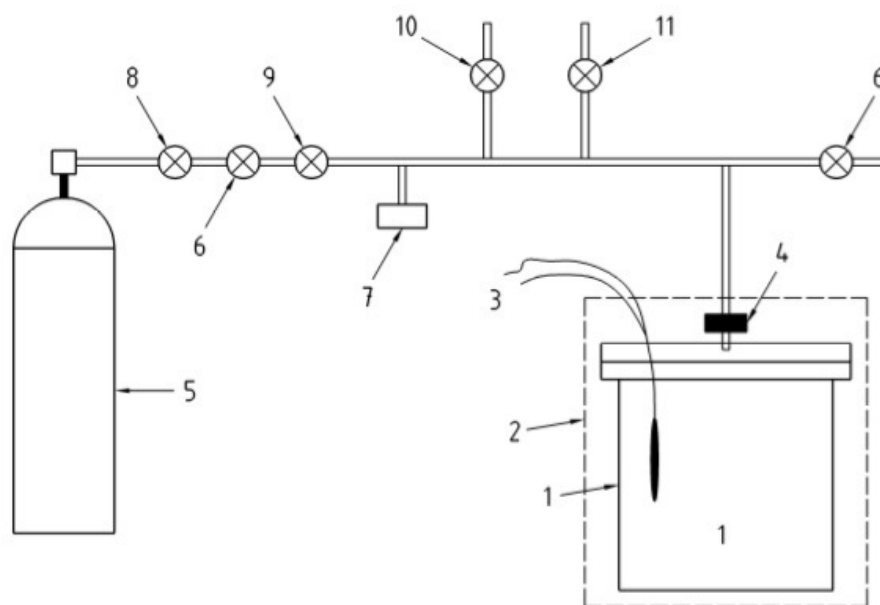
Understanding the behavior of bitumen during technological aging prevents the use of binders with insufficient parameters for pavement construction, whereas to obtain a more complete characterization of changes in bitumen properties after several years of operation, additional tests should be performed. Long-term aging tests are most often performed on bitumen samples that have undergone a short-term aging cycle.

Pressure Aging Vessel (PAV), the most widely used in the world procedure for long-term aging tests, was developed under the SHRP (Strategic Highway Research Program) program in the United States. The entire SHRP research program, completed in 1994 with published reports, was conducted for 5 years and had a budget of \$150 mln. This comprehensive research program was intended to improve the performance of asphalt and concrete products and to develop methods of highway maintenance as well as the issues of long-term durability of road surfaces [35]. Among the significant achievements of the program are the Superpave specifications for asphalt binders and asphalt mixes. The results of the Superpave program led to the publication in the asphalt industry for the first time of bitumen specification related to the functional properties AASHTO M320 [36], which was based on scientific knowledge, in particular the chemistry and mechanics of behavior of construction products such as bituminous binders.

The accelerated long-term aging method in a PAV chamber is described in ASTM D6521 [37] and AASHTO R28 standards [38]. In Europe, however, the method was published as a standard EN 14769, issued in 2005. The procedure involves placing a 50-g sample of asphalt previously subjected to short-term aging in 140-mm diameter trays (TFOT trays can be used). Up to 10 trays can be placed in the PAV apparatus, so – if necessary – a total of about 500 g of asphalt can be simultaneously subjected to the procedure of accelerated long-term aging. Next, the air is supplied to the chamber of the PAV apparatus, which is pressurized to create an overpressure of 2.07 MPa. Aging is



carried out for 20 hours in the temperature range of 90 - 110 °C [39] depending on the grade of bitumen. The lower the penetration or the higher the upper Performance Grade temperature, the higher the aging temperature.



#### Key

1 pressure ageing vessel	5 compressed air cylinder	9 pressure gauge
2 temperature control	6 needle valve	10 bleed valve
3 thermometer	7 rupture disc	11 pressure release valve
4 quick disconnect	8 pressure regulator	

**Figure 11.** Diagram of the PAV aging setup [EN 14769-2012].

PAV provides a picture of changes taking place over a longer period of bitumen oxidation. Nevertheless, there are many objections to this aging method since the mechanism of accelerated hardening of the binder does not take into account all the key phenomena that take place during service life aging of pavement [40]. In particular, the high-pressure nature of aging is emphasized, which minimizes the evaporation of hydrocarbons from the binder sample, and the high test temperature, which is unrealistic compared to the pavement temperature and, therefore, under elevated temperature conditions chemical changes in the bitumen which would not occur at lower temperatures may be preferred – this follows from the activation energy of many chemical reactions that can take place in the binder. Additionally, when testing polymer-modified bitumen, there is concern about the possibility of bitumen-polymer separation due to the static nature of the procedure (containers with bitumen do not rotate or spin).

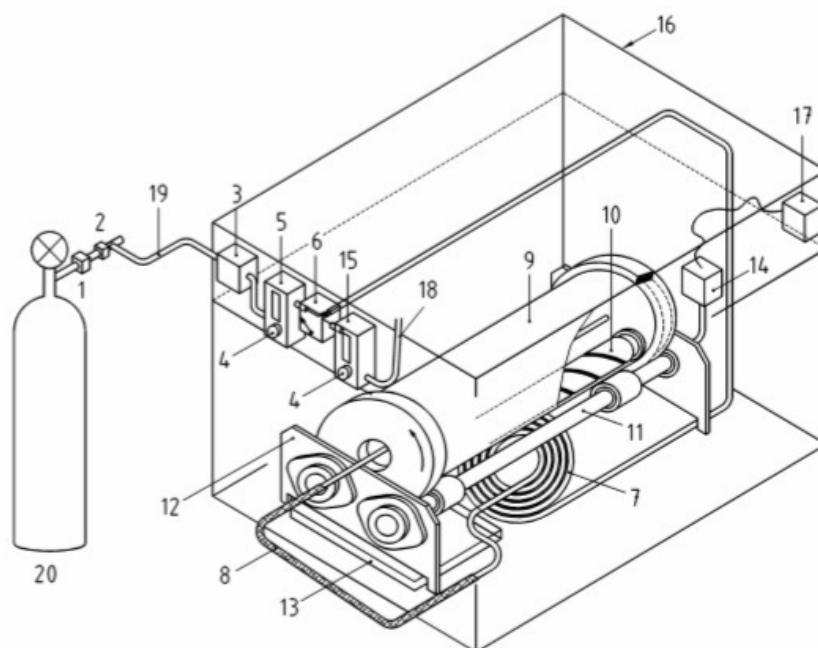
To limit the influence of high temperature on the long-term aging of the bitumen, an alternative procedure called HIPAT (High Pressure Aging Test) based on the PAV method was developed in the United Kingdom [41]. The method uses a lower temperature of 85 °C and extends the aging time to 65 h. Although in the early phase of development the method was indicated as a tool for identifying binders with an increased potential for aging during use, at present HIPAT is not often used in the asphalt industry. The provisions for a special long-term aging procedure at 85 °C are included in the European standard EN 14769 for PAV aging. Currently, only a few

482 studies on the use of this aging method are continued [42], probably due to the time  
483 needed to carry out the research using this method.

484 The second main method used for accelerated aging to simulate long-term changes in  
485 bitumen is RCAT (Rotating Cylinder Aging Test). The method was developed in Europe  
486 at the Belgian Road Research Center [43] at the beginning of the 21st century. The method  
487 was standardized in 2007 in CE TC 336 and EN 15323. According to the procedure  
488 described in EN 15322, the RCAT test involves placing a sample weighing 525-550 g in a  
489 cylinder that has been preheated to the temperature at which the aging will take place.  
490 Bitumen is left at this temperature for about 60 min  $\pm$  5 min. During this time, oxygen is  
491 not fed to the cylinder and the cylinder is not rotated. After 60 min, in which the asphalt  
492 is considered to have reached the RCAT temperature (typically 90 °C), the cylinder is  
493 rotated at 1 rpm and oxygen is pumped to the cylinder at 4500 mL/min  $\pm$  500 mL/min.  
494 The pressure inside the cylinder is kept at 0.1 MPa. The first bitumen samples are  
495 collected after 17 and 65 h to monitor the hardening process. The sample in the RCAT  
496 method is aged for 140  $\pm$  15 min.

497 Moreover, using the RCAT apparatus and changing the aging conditions, an initial  
498 short-term aging cycle can be performed [44]; therefore, it is not necessary to conduct  
499 several RTFOT tests in to obtain a sample mass of about 500 g for the long-term aging  
500 cycle using the RCAT method. In the technological aging cycle, oxygen is replaced with  
501 air at a fixed flow rate of 4000 mL/min  $\pm$  200 mL/min, the test temperature is 163 °C, and  
502 the aging time is 235 min  $\pm$  5 min. The cylinder is rotated five times faster than in the  
503 long-term aging test procedure. After completion of the aging cycle, changes in the  
504 properties of the bitumen are determined both by empirical methods (penetration,  
505 softening point) and by FTIR spectroscopy identifying changes in the bitumen molecules,  
506 which prove that the bitumen aging extent is comparable to that carried out according to  
507 the RTFOT procedure.

508 Despite standardization, the European method is not as popular as the PAV method  
509 developed for the Superpave program and it is not included as an aging procedure in the  
510 specifications of bituminous binders. This is mainly due to the greater availability of PAV  
511 aging equipment and the longer test duration for RCAT. However, it should be  
512 emphasized that RCAT provides a unique opportunity to perform both short- and  
513 long-term aging.

**Key**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1) Pressure-reducer   | 10) Inner grooved stainless steel roller            |
| 2) General control needle valve (or excess flow valve)  | 11) Driving mechanism to rotate the cylinder        |
| 3) Oxygen temperature safety break  | 12) Steel stand for all the system                  |
| 4) Adjusting needle valve   | 13) Tray to collect leaking binder                  |
| 5) Oxygen flow meter  | 14) Driving connection (1 r/min or 5 r/min)         |
| 6) Inverter air/oxygen  | 15) Air flow meter                                  |
| 7) Stainless steel spiral (heating entering gas)  | 16) Thermostated oven                               |
| 8) Stainless steel tube for oxygen supply (enters cylinder almost until the bottom of the cylinder) | 17) Contact for rotation speed (1 r/min or 5 r/min) |
| 9) RCAT ageing cylinder   | 18) Air line  |
|   | 19) Oxygen line                                     |
|   | 20) Compressed oxygen bottle                        |

**NOTE** In the case of short-term ageing, compressed air bottle is connected through inlet 18 and switching between long-term and short-term conditioning is selected by means of 6.

**Figure 12.** Schematic diagram of the RCAT ageing apparatus [EN 15323:2017].

A comparison of aging by PAV and RCAT methods shows that the values of bitumen tests made after long-term aging can be comparable. In particular, in the case of bitumen modified with SBS copolymer, when considering the softening point difference parameter, it was shown that PAV aging at 100 °C for 20 h compared to the RCAT procedure at 90 °C for 140 h causes a greater degradation of the polymer. Higher temperature and pressure are important in this case. On the other hand, the polymer-modified asphalt recovered from the exploited asphalt pavement did not show such hardening characteristics as would follow from the PAV procedure. In this case, the analysis of the molecular weight distribution using gel permeation/size exclusion chromatography (GPC/SEC) proves to be helpful in the interpretation of the results. The determinations carried out with GPC/SEC revealed that after 9 years of use of pavement asphalt, there was an even greater degradation of the polymer (decrease in molecular weight) and the compounds resulting from its degradation became a kind of plasticizer,



530 preventing bitumen from strong hardening [45]. The usefulness of GPC/SEC for this  
531 type of investigation was described in detail in [46].

532 In Austria, a long-term simulation method called 3xRTFOT was used to specify paving  
533 grade bitumen characteristic. The requirement for the softening point after aging RTFOT  
534 + 3xRTFOT was defined as the maximum increase of 15 °C with respect to the softening  
535 point of the unaged binder. The 3xRTFOT involves performing 3 cycles according to the  
536 RTFOT methodology (3x75 minutes), leaving the conditions unchanged. The assessment  
537 of changes after long-term aging was introduced to more thoroughly verify the  
538 susceptibility of bitumens to overly quick aging. The 3xRTFOT method is sensitive to  
539 bitumen containing raw materials from visbreaking installations which, when used in the  
540 production of paving grade binders, can cause accelerated and significant adverse  
541 changes in asphalt [47]. The process of visbreaking of heavy oil fractions (carried out at T:  
542 455-510 °C, and P: 0.3-2 MPa) is considered a mild type of thermal cracking which  
543 became very popular in the 1980s. As a result of the conversion of the vacuum residue  
544 from the crude oil distillation, additional fuel fractions are obtained. Although the  
545 conversion with this technology amounts only to 10 to 25 %, refineries which in those  
546 years had a visbreaking installation in their configuration achieved better financial ratios.  
547 Bitumen produced with the use of raw materials from the cracking process, such as e.g.  
548 made in a visbreaking installation compared to binders produced from distillation  
549 fractions, show higher temperature sensitivity and lower resistance to oxidation and,  
550 consequently, more pronounced changes during use [48]. The source of accelerated aging  
551 is unsaturated hydrocarbons (olefins) and aromatic hydrocarbons, which are generated  
552 during thermal cracking at low pressure [49]. The research [50] compared the content of  
553 carbon and hydrogen in aromatic structures (C arom. and H arom.) for the vacuum  
554 residue (feedstock) and the visbreaking residue (product) using nuclear magnetic  
555 resonance (NMR) spectroscopy. As can be seen from the data in Table 2, high molecular  
556 weight olefins behave very unstably in petroleum fractions, especially at elevated  
557 temperatures. Compounds from this group undergo secondary oxidation reactions,  
558 yielding a less useful raw material than the crude vacuum residue.

559 **Table 2.** Measurement of H arom. and C arom. using NMR of residues from Iranian  
560 heavy crude oil and Kirkuk crude oil [50].

Parameter	Iranian heavy crude oil		Kirkuk crude oil	
	Vacuum residue	Visbreaking residue	Vacuum residue	Visbreaking residue
H arom.	5.40	7.50 (+ 38.8 %)	5.20	7.90 (+ 51.9 %)
C arom.	25.00	31.00 (+ 24 %)	23.50	31.00 (+ 31.9 %)

The unquestionable advantage of the 3xRTFOT method is the possibility of using the same research equipment for both technological and operational aging tests. However, taking into the real temperature of pavement use compared to the aging process at 163 °C, different physical and chemical transformations take place than would be expected from a method simulating the long-term aging of bitumen.

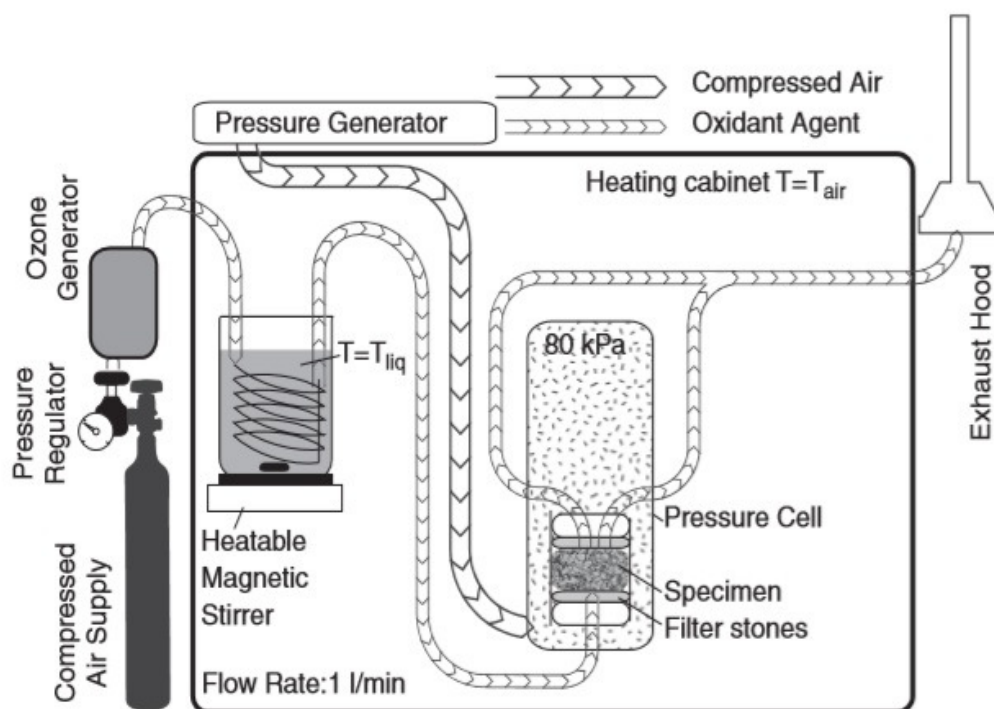
566 A similar approach, the so-called ERTFOT163sra, was presented in South Africa [51],  
567 where the time of the RTFOT method to simulate the effect of long-term aging was  
568 extended to 325 min. In the meantime, at 205 min, a sample is taken to determine the  
569 trend of changes in the characteristics of the bituminous binder. The second version of  
570 alternatively modified RTFOT, ERTFOT100sra, additionally had the following  
571 parameters changed compared to the RTFOT method: the temperature was reduced to  
572 100 °C and the procedure time was extended to 48 h. In addition, metal rods were  
573 introduced to aid the spinning of the bitumen layer as described in the fragment with the  
574 modified RTFOT method for short-term aging simulation. The study of the correlation  
575 of the ERTFOT163sra and ERTFOT100sra methods with PAV performed on asphalts  
576 from 7 sources, revealed that aging proceeds more gently at a lower temperature, despite  
577 the extended time. On the other hand, RTFOT extended to 325 minutes allows for  
578 obtaining changes in bitumen corresponding to the PAV method. It should be  
579 emphasized that the ERTFOT163sra method does not require a prior RTFOT test, as  
580 within 325 minutes there are aging changes taking into account both short- and long-term  
581 oxidative hardening of the bitumen.

582 Currently, the PAV method is often criticized. It has been demonstrated that it does not  
583 reflect changes taking place in asphalt during the service life of the road surface. Due to  
584 the complexity of the processes occurring in bitumen during pavement exploitation, it  
585 appears that none of the methods described above will fully reflect the phenomena  
586 taking place in reality [52]. At present, aging procedures are being developed that take  
587 into account, in addition to the effects of heat and oxygen as an oxidant, also the effect of  
588 UV, moisture and exhaust gases, especially in the case of bitumens used for the wear  
589 layer of asphalt mix. In addition, accelerated aging tests are sought to take into account  
590 also the characteristics of the filler used in the asphalt mix and its structure. For example,  
591 asphalt mix defined as porous asphalt contains a relatively large amount of void space,  
592 hence the oxidative aging of such a mix is increased compared to more packed asphalt  
593 mix, such as asphalt concrete.

594 To more adequately reflect the wear and tear of bitumen over 5 to 10 years, the Vienna  
595 University of Technology developed the VAPro (Viennese Aging Procedure) method  
596 [53], which uses conditions similar to the natural aging conditions occurring during their  
597 use. The method is an extension of the procedure proposed in the SHRP-A-383 report  
598 [54]. The temperature of the VAPro procedure is 60 °C, an overpressure of about 80 kPa,  
599 and the flow of air enriched with ozone and nitrogen oxides at the level of 0.9 – 1.1 L/min.  
600 Ozone and nitrogen oxides are produced using an ozone generator. The entire long-term  
601 aging procedure takes 3 days and is intended to reflect all changes occurring during the  
602 short and long term hardening of bitumen.

603 In the VAPro method, unlike the others described, the asphalt mix sample is aged, and  
604 then, following the aging cycle, the asphalt is recovered and the tests in parameters are  
605 performed for the recovered binder. On the one hand, it is justified, as it takes into  
606 account the interaction of asphalt mix components and the type of asphalt mix, on the  
607 other hand, it complicates the preparation of the sample and its recovery after aging.

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**Figure 13.** Schematic diagram of the VAPro aging apparatus [53].

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The test results for bitumens after VAPro aging compared to RTFOT + PAV aging differ significantly. Reported changes in binder properties are always greater after the VAPro procedure. In particular, the Austrian procedure provides greater changes than PAV, especially for asphalt samples from less typical sources, and better reflects the changes in the properties of low-temperature binders during operation. In the case of assessment of  $\sigma$  in the bending beam rheometer (BBR), polymer-modified bitumens showed the expected change in  $\sigma$  after long-term aging (VAPro), while for the same samples after RTFOT + PAV procedures the changes were only slight [55].

A drawback of the VAPro procedure is the time necessary to prepare the sample because the sample is not only a binder as in the methods described previously but also a concentrated asphalt mix. As a result, the method takes into account the effect of mineral components and the packing density of the sample, but at the same time increases the requirements for the amount of material, time-consuming mixing of components, and compaction of asphalt mix. In addition, the time of the procedure is also 52 hours longer than in the case of the PAV method.

Table 3 summarizes the most commonly used long-term (service life) aging methods, covered by European EN standards as well as AASHTO and ASTM standards used, among others, in North America.

**Table 3.** Long-term aging conditions for basic methods standardized in EN, AASHTO and ASTM standards.



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633  
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Method	Aging time [h]	Sample mass [g]	Gas flow rate [mL/min]	Temperature [°C]	Pressure [MPa]	Remarks
PAV	20	500 (10 x 50 g)	Air is used without forced flow	90 - 110 °C	2.07	110 °C is used to simulate <i>e.g.</i> desert conditions
RCAT	140	525 -550	Oxygen 4500 mL/min	typical 90 °C, max 100 °C	0.1	Cylinder rotations 1 rpm
PAV(H IPAT)	65	500-50(10x50g)	Air is used without forced flow	85 °C	2.07	If 85°C is used, the time should be extended to 65 h.

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This review does not cover test methods that take into account the role of UV and moisture in the aging of bituminous binders. These methods are of importance primarily to the bitumen used for the wearing course of road surfaces.

#### 4. Suggestions for the future work

This literature review, taking into account the industry standards used in laboratory practice in Europe and North America, and the authors' experience in testing bitumen binders, allows to propose the following changes with respect to the developed or currently modified methods of bitumen aging:

- a) For short-term aging, differentiation of the aging temperature or the aging time should be used to identify realistic changes to the bitumen during its processing to asphalt mix. For example, when bitumen is used at 180°C, this temperature should be used for the RTFOT procedure or the conditioning time of the sample should be extended with respect to reference parameters.
- b) Correlate the method of short-term aging of bituminous binders and the test conditions with the end use in such a way that the test results recorded after aging provided a realistic reference to the changes occurring in the product during its processing. For example, classify the applications depending on the technological

654 temperatures into hot, warm, semi-warm or cold technologies and select the appropriate  
655 aging parameters for the technologies mentioned.

656 c) The long-term aging of the bitumen, depending mainly on the chemical properties  
657 of the bitumen and climatic conditions, should also differ in relation to the location of the  
658 given bitumen in a specific layer of the pavement. Depending on whether the bitumen  
659 is used for the wearing course (most exposed to environmental aging) or for the  
660 foundation (the lowest asphalt mix layer of the road), it should be subjected to long-term  
661 aging under appropriately selected conditions (conditioning time, temperature, air  
662 pressure, etc.). Such differentiation would allow the elimination of bitumen most  
663 susceptible to changes in the properties of the wearing courses and, at the same time, if  
664 the criteria are met, enabling their use for the lower layers of asphalt pavements. The  
665 application of these proposals will have an impact on obtaining changes in bitumen  
666 similar to the real ones, which is important both in the research aspect and in industrial  
667 application. Omitting these issues in product specifications or newly developed  
668 bituminous binder formulations in relation to the actual changes taking place in bitumen,  
669 when applying them to a given technology and end use, reduces the credibility of the  
670 results and conclusions.

## 671 5. Conclusions

672 The aging process of the asphalt binder in the road surface is very complex. It is affected  
673 by climatic conditions (temperature, especially extreme temperatures and the number of  
674 passes through 0 °C, air humidity, number of hours of sunshine, precipitation, and air  
675 pollution), technological conditions (temperature and time of further processing) as well  
676 as conditions resulting from its chemical structure (oil source, production technology,  
677 additives and modifiers used). Therefore, it has not been possible to develop a method to  
678 simulate the actual bitumen aging so far, and this task seems difficult to implement at the  
679 moment.

680 In laboratory practice, the most frequently used test procedures and equipment are in  
681 line with the RTFOT methodology in the case of short-term aging and the PAV method  
682 for the assessment of changes after long-term aging. This is mainly due to the imposition  
683 of these procedures in technical specifications, the availability of laboratory equipment,  
684 and the simplicity of laboratory procedures. Other methods are used to a negligible  
685 extent, mainly in scientific research or in the validation stages of new promising bitumen  
686 aging tests.

687 An important issue, which is not fully understood with the currently used different  
688 bitumen application technologies, is the assumption of one aging temperature in RTFOT  
689 (most often it is 163°C). In the case of very hard asphalts, e.g. 10/20 or 20/30, and on the  
690 other hand relatively soft asphalts 100/150 or 160/220, the use of the same laboratory  
691 aging temperature significantly differs from the temperatures used in the production  
692 technology of both hot mix asphalt and warm mix asphalt. The changes recorded under  
693 the test conditions often do not correspond to the actual changes taking place during the  
processing of bitumen using the technology suitable for the production of the product for  
its intended final application. It seems a better option to use a different temperature or  
shorten the aging time to improve the assessment of the suitability of a given type or  
source of bitumen depending on the intended use of a given grade of bituminous binder.

The same applies to the PAV procedure, although compared to RTFOT the choice is most  
often made between the temperatures of 80, 90, and 100 or 110 °C. The selection is made



701 based on inaccurate criteria, where a temperature of 100 °C is often used with a 20-h  
702 conditioning time of the sample in the apparatus. For example, a temperature of 110 °C  
703 is used in desert climates with relatively high air temperatures.

704 Undoubtedly, a fairly important aspect is the amount of material that is used in bitumen  
705 aging procedures. One aging cycle is often insufficient to fully characterize changes in  
706 bitumen properties or to prepare samples of special asphalt mixes. This leads to the need  
707 to prepare another series of samples and perform additional aging cycles. Obviously,  
708 this is time-consuming and, in the case of the need for quick tests, may introduce errors in  
709 the determinations due to the omission of averaging the samples from individual aging  
710 cycles.

711 Moreover, the simulation time of long-term aging is long as far as performing the test is  
712 concerned. Performing the full bitumen aging cycle using the most popular procedures  
713 requires nearly 24 h, because the preparation of the sample for RTFOT takes  
714 approximately 30-90 min depending on the consistency of the sample, the RTFOT takes  
715 another 75 min, then the preparation of samples for PAV another 30-60 min and  
716 performance of PAV usually takes 20 h, followed by the degassing of the samples  
717 removed from the PAV apparatus (approximately 60 min).

718 A significant disadvantage of the bitumen aging procedures described in this article is  
719 the inability to record changes in bitumen parameters automatically during the aging  
720 simulation process. If a test sample has to be collected while the procedure is in progress,  
721 it is necessary to pause, draw samples manually, and restart aging to complete the cycle.  
722 Arguably, the development of bitumen testing methods should focus on the automation  
723 of procedures in which parameters can be dynamically changed with simultaneous  
724 recording of the sample properties.

725 New methods of simulation of aging focus on the need to eliminate the above-mentioned  
726 inconveniences, but none of the methods described so far has been accepted by scientists  
727 or the industry.

728 **Author Contributions:** Czajkowski Paweł: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original  
729 draft. Andrzej Przyjazny: Writing - review & editing. Grzegorz Boczkaj\*: Conceptualization,  
730 Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Project administration.

731 **Conflicts of Interest:** "The authors declare no conflict of interest."

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