

## Accepted Manuscript

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PII: S0009-2614(18)30747-4

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cplett.2018.09.018>

Reference: CPLETT 35930

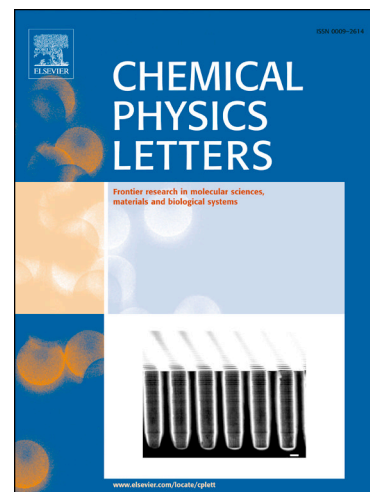
To appear in: *Chemical Physics Letters*

Received Date: 6 August 2018

Accepted Date: 8 September 2018

Please cite this article as: D. Gobrecht, L. Decin, S. Cristallo, S.T. Bromley, A global optimisation study of the low-lying isomers of the alumina octomer (Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>)<sub>8</sub>, *Chemical Physics Letters* (2018), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cplett.2018.09.018>

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# A global optimisation study of the low-lying isomers of the alumina octomer $(\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3)_8$

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## Abstract

We employ the Monte-Carlo Basin-Hopping (MC-BH) global optimisation technique with inter-atomic pair potentials to generate low-energy candidates of stoichiometric alumina octomers  $((\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3)_8)$ . The candidate structures are subsequently refined with density functional theory calculations employing hybrid functionals (B3LYP and PBE0) and a large basis set (6-311+G(d)) including a vibrational analysis. We report the discovery of a set of energetically low-lying alumina octomer clusters, including a new global minimum candidate, with shapes that are elongated rather than spherical. **We find a stability limit for these and smaller-sized clusters at a temperature of  $T \simeq 1300 - 1450$  K corresponding to a phase transition in liquid alumina.**

*Keywords:* aluminum oxide, molecular clusters, global optimisation, nucleation

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## 1. Introduction

Alumina clusters play a role in atmospheric chemistry [1]. Being artificially produced by rocket flights,  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  cluster aerosols impact the Earth's atmospheric chemistry as they act as catalysts. Moreover, owing to their high thermal stabilities and (near)-infrared properties, alumina clusters are promising candidates to form the seed nuclei of dust formation in oxygen-rich AGB stars [2, 3, 4, 5]. Although silicate dust constitutes the major part of oxygen-rich cosmic dust, its nucleation solely from gas-phase precursors is energetically hampered and explicitly ruled out for SiO [6, 7] and MgO [8, 9]. Instead, it is more likely that the silicate dust forms on top of pre-existing seed nuclei. These seed nuclei must form from available atoms and molecules, and have to sustain the extreme thermodynamic conditions close to the stellar surface. In oxygen-dominated regimes, the latter requirement are fulfilled by highly refractory metal oxides such as alumina  $(\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3)$  and titania  $(\text{TiO}_2)$ . Studies on stardust grains from pristine meteorites show

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*Preprint submitted to Chemical Physics Letters*

*September 10, 2018*

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