

# Balancing Activity and Stability in Phenol Oxidation via In Situ H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> Generation Over Fe-Modified AuPd Catalysts

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Harnessing the in situ generation of hydrogen peroxide (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) and associated reactive oxygen species (ROS) from molecular hydrogen (H<sub>2</sub>) and oxygen (O<sub>2</sub>) offers a powerful and sustainable alternative to conventional oxidative treatments for water purification. In this contribution, we explore the potential of AuPdFe-based catalysts to achieve the in situ, oxidative degradation of phenol, a widely studied representative organic pollutant. By finely tuning the AuPd/Fe ratio, it is possible to balance H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis with Fe-mediated ROS generation, achieving effi-

cient phenol degradation and high selectivity toward deeply oxidized products. The optimized catalyst formulation outperforms its bimetallic counterpart by a factor of 10 in conversion efficiency. However, this enhanced activity comes at a cost, with the formation of strongly oxidized species such as formic, oxalic, and malonic acids resulting in the leaching of the active metal components, highlighting a critical trade-off between catalytic performance and long-term stability, particularly in the presence of highly concentrated chelating agents.

## 1. Introduction

Persistent organic contaminants, including dyes, pharmaceuticals, pesticides, and agrochemicals, typically exhibit high chemical stability and strong bioaccumulation potential and thus represent a significant threat to ecological safety and public health globally,<sup>[1–3]</sup> particularly given their resistance to traditional water remediation processes, which are reliant on chlorination.<sup>[4–6]</sup> As such, there is a growing reliance on adsorption and filtration technologies to ensure removal from waste streams, with the fouled adsorbents, which require regular replacement, ultimately taken to landfill or incinerated, where pollutants may be released back into the wider environment, either directly, or as CO<sub>2</sub> in the latter scenario. Therefore, there is an urgent need for alternative remediation technologies.

Advanced oxidation processes (AOPs) have emerged as promising and sustainable solutions for effectively degrading persistent organic pollutants.<sup>[7,8]</sup> Among the various AOPs, the utilization of Fenton-type systems (including those that combine pre-formed H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> with ozone (O<sub>3</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) or ultraviolet light (UV/H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>)), has attracted substantial attention, owing to their capability to generate hydroxyl radicals (•OH), which offer high oxidative potential.<sup>[9,10]</sup> However, practical and economic factors, primarily the high financial costs associated with reagents such as O<sub>3</sub> or H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> or indeed with high-energy light sources, have prevented implementation of these methods at scale.<sup>[11]</sup> Similarly, the generation of •OH radicals from H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> via the use of Fenton(-type) reagents, typically homogenous species,<sup>[12]</sup> has suffered from the need to remove active species from waste streams (often as Fe-rich sludge) and continually control pH to achieve optimal performance. Additionally, reliance on externally supplied commercial H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> elevates treatment costs,<sup>[13]</sup> while the storage of highly concentrated H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (typically shipped at concentrations in excess of 30 wt.%) poses considerable safety concerns.


The direct synthesis of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> from molecular H<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> represents an attractive alternative approach to producing H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> on-site,<sup>[14]</sup> at concentrations required by the end-user, considerably lowering safety risks compared to those associated with handling industrially sourced H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, while also avoiding the presence of stabilizing agents (typically halides and acids), which are ubiquitously utilized to prolong the shelf life of commercial H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>.<sup>[15]</sup> Indeed, there is growing interest in the utilization of in situ generated H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (and associated ROS) for oxidative chemical valorization.<sup>[16–18]</sup> The application of such ROS, generated as reaction intermediates during H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis, has found further application in water disinfection, offering bactericidal and virucidal efficacy several orders of magnitude greater than that offered by preformed H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> or chlorination under equivalent conditions.<sup>[19]</sup> However, despite their ability to generate


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**Table 1.** The effect of Fe loading on the performance of 0.5%Au–0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalysts toward the direct synthesis and subsequent degradation of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>.

Catalyst	H <sub>2</sub> O <sub>2</sub> Productivity (mol <sub>H2O2</sub> kg <sub>cat</sub> <sup>−1</sup> h <sup>−1</sup> )	H <sub>2</sub> O <sub>2</sub> Conc. (ppm)	H <sub>2</sub> Conv. (%)	H <sub>2</sub> O <sub>2</sub> Sel. (%)	H <sub>2</sub> O <sub>2</sub> Degradation (mol <sub>H2O2</sub> kg <sub>cat</sub> <sup>−1</sup> h <sup>−1</sup> )
0.5%Au–0.5%Pd/TiO <sub>2</sub>	35	694	20	33	568
0.5%Au–0.5%Pd–0.1%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	31	613	22	27	1022
0.5%Au–0.5%Pd–0.5%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	31	611	23	26	853
0.5%Au–0.5%Pd–1%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	7	132	26	5	780
0.5%Au–0.5%Pd–2%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	2	33	30	1	589
0.5%Au–0.5%Pd–3%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	2	31	30	1	540
0.5%Au–2%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	0	2	N.D	N.D	32
0.5%Pd–2%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	7	148	33	4	288
0.5%Au/TiO <sub>2</sub>	0	13	2	8	24
0.5%Pd/TiO <sub>2</sub>	29	582	21	26	580
2%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	0	0	0	0	56

**H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> direct synthesis reaction conditions:** catalyst (0.01 g), H<sub>2</sub>O (8.5 g), 5% H<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (420 psi), 25% O<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (160 psi), 0.5 h, 20 °C, 1200 rpm. **H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> degradation reaction conditions:** catalyst (0.01 g), H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (50 wt% 0.68 g), H<sub>2</sub>O (7.82 g), 5% H<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (420 psi), 0.5 h, 20 °C, 1200 rpm. **N.D:** unable to determine due to limits of detection.

ROS, these systems, which are based on supported AuPd catalysts, have so far offered only a limited reactivity towards the remediation of organic pollutants.<sup>[20]</sup> Building on these studies, the coupling of Pd, responsible for H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis, with Fenton(-type) metals responsible for ROS generation has been investigated for pollutant remediation,<sup>[21]</sup> and while such formulations offer improved activity compared to their bimetallic AuPd counterparts, they still typically suffer from limited reactivity.

With these studies in mind, and building on the extensive H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> direct synthesis literature, which outlines the synergistic effects that may be achieved from the alloying of Pd with Au,<sup>[22–24]</sup> we now investigate the efficacy of trimetallic AuPdFe-based catalysts that combine the direct H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis activity of AuPd nanoalloys with the ability of Fe to generate ROS via Fenton's pathways for the remediation of phenol, with a proposed reaction schematic for the oxidative degradation of this model recalcitrant reported in Figure S1.

## 2. Results and Discussion

Under reaction conditions considered sub-optimal for H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> production (i.e., ambient temperature<sup>[25]</sup> and in the absence of the alcohol co-solvent typically utilized to promote H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> stability and gaseous reagent solubility), but relevant to the real-world oxidative treatment of aqueous waste streams, our initial studies evaluated catalytic performance of a series of TiO<sub>2</sub>-immobilized AuPdFe catalysts (with AuPd content fixed at 1 wt.% and Au/Pd = 1 (wt/wt)) toward the direct H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis and subsequent degradation of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (Table 1, with further detailed evaluation of key catalytic formulations over extended reaction time reported in Figure S2). In keeping with earlier works,<sup>[26–28]</sup> the incorporation of Au into a supported Pd catalyst was found to improve catalytic activity toward H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> production, with H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis rates (35 mol<sub>H2O2</sub> kg<sub>cat</sub><sup>−1</sup> h<sup>−1</sup>), observed over the bimetallic catalyst somewhat greater than that offered

by the Pd-only catalyst with an equivalent Pd content (29 mol<sub>H2O2</sub> kg<sub>cat</sub><sup>−1</sup> h<sup>−1</sup>). Notably, this improved performance can be related to enhancements in catalytic selectivity, rather than increased reactivity, as indicated by the near-identical H<sub>2</sub> conversion rates observed over these formulations (33% and 26% H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> selectivity for the 0.5%Au–0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> and 0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalysts, respectively, at approx. 20% H<sub>2</sub> conversion). For a comprehensive overview of the role of Au in promoting catalytic performance toward the direct synthesis of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> and an in-depth discussion of the H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> direct synthesis mechanism, the reader is directed to the seminal works from the Yoshizawa and Flaherty laboratories.<sup>[23,27,29]</sup>

We have previously reported that the incorporation of tertiary base metals, including Fe, into AuPd nanoalloys can result in a considerable improvement in H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis rates, with this enhancement a result of the electronic modification of Pd through the formation of trimetallic nanoalloys.<sup>[30,31]</sup> Our analysis of the as-prepared AuPdFe formulations by CO-DRIFTS (Figure S3 and associated text) and XPS (Figure S4 and associated text) aligns well with these earlier studies and reveals that the introduction of Fe can indeed result in a modification of Pd speciation, with no considerable variation in mean nanoparticle size observed across the catalytic series (Figures S5 and S6 and Table 2). However, under our chosen reaction conditions, we do not observe the promotive effect on H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis activity previously reported to result from the formation of AuPdFe nanoalloys.<sup>[30]</sup> While such discrepancies may be attributed to the use of reaction conditions considered far more favorable toward H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> stability in these earlier works (i.e., sub-ambient temperatures and an alcohol co-solvent), it is important to note that the Fe-content of the catalysts investigated in this study are significantly higher than those formulations found to be optimal for H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis in our previous investigations, where a considerable promotive effect was observed upon the addition of dopant concentrations of Fe (in the range of 2%–5% of the total metal loading). Indeed, we have previously identified that out-

**Table 2.** Mean particle size of key AuPdFe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalysts, as determined by TEM analysis.

Catalyst	Mean Particle size (nm)	Standard Deviation (nm)
0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO <sub>2</sub>	4.4	1.7
0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-0.1%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	3.9	2.1
0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-0.5%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	3.2	1.2
0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-1%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	3.7	1.9
0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	4.9	2.1
0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-3%Fe/TiO <sub>2</sub>	6.1	2.7

Note: catalysts exposed to a reductive heat treatment prior to analysis (5% H<sub>2</sub>/Ar, 400 °C, 4 h, 10 °C min<sup>-1</sup>).

side this narrow concentration range, the introduction of tertiary metal dopants may result in a considerable loss in catalytic activity toward H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> production.<sup>[32]</sup> In this context, it is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that the incorporation of Fe, especially at higher loadings, into the bimetallic 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> formulation was found to result in a deleterious effect on H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis rates. Notably, this loss of performance, particularly observed at higher Fe loadings, can be associated with a decrease in catalytic selectivity toward H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, which aligns well with our earlier studies into alternative, non-Fe-containing trimetallic formulations.<sup>[31,32]</sup>

The use of heterogeneous Fe species to catalyze the formation of reactive oxygen species (ROS, including •OOH, •OH, and •O<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup>) from preformed and in situ generated H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> for use in chemical valorization and pollutant remediation is an area of growing interest, and indeed we have recently demonstrated that the combination of Pd with Fenton's-type metals represents an attractive route for the oxidative degradation of organic contaminants.<sup>[33]</sup> However, the extent to which the high cost of preformed H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, and the presence of proprietary stabilizing agents used to prolong H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> shelf life, would preclude application in pollutant remediation should be considered. With these earlier works in mind, and building on our initial studies, we next evaluated efficacy of these AuPdFe-based catalysts toward the oxidative degradation of phenol via the in situ production of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> and associated reactive oxygen species (Figure 1, with additional data reported in Figure S7). We note that it was not possible to measure residual H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> via standard titration or colorimetric procedures given the strong reddish color that results from the formation of the aromatic oxidation products (catechol, hydroquinone, etc.), generated as a result of phenol oxidation. A stark divide in catalyst performance was observed, with the Fe-rich (>1 wt% Fe) catalysts offering significantly higher rates of phenol conversion than the lower Fe-loaded analogues. Notably, this is despite the higher rates of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis observed over the Fe-lean formulations (Table 1), which suggests that H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> itself may not be the primary reactive oxygen species responsible for the observed catalysis. Rather, this observation implicates the role of the oxygen-based radical species generated via Fenton's pathways from H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, as the key driver of oxidative degradation. Regardless, the relatively high selectivity of all catalysts stud-

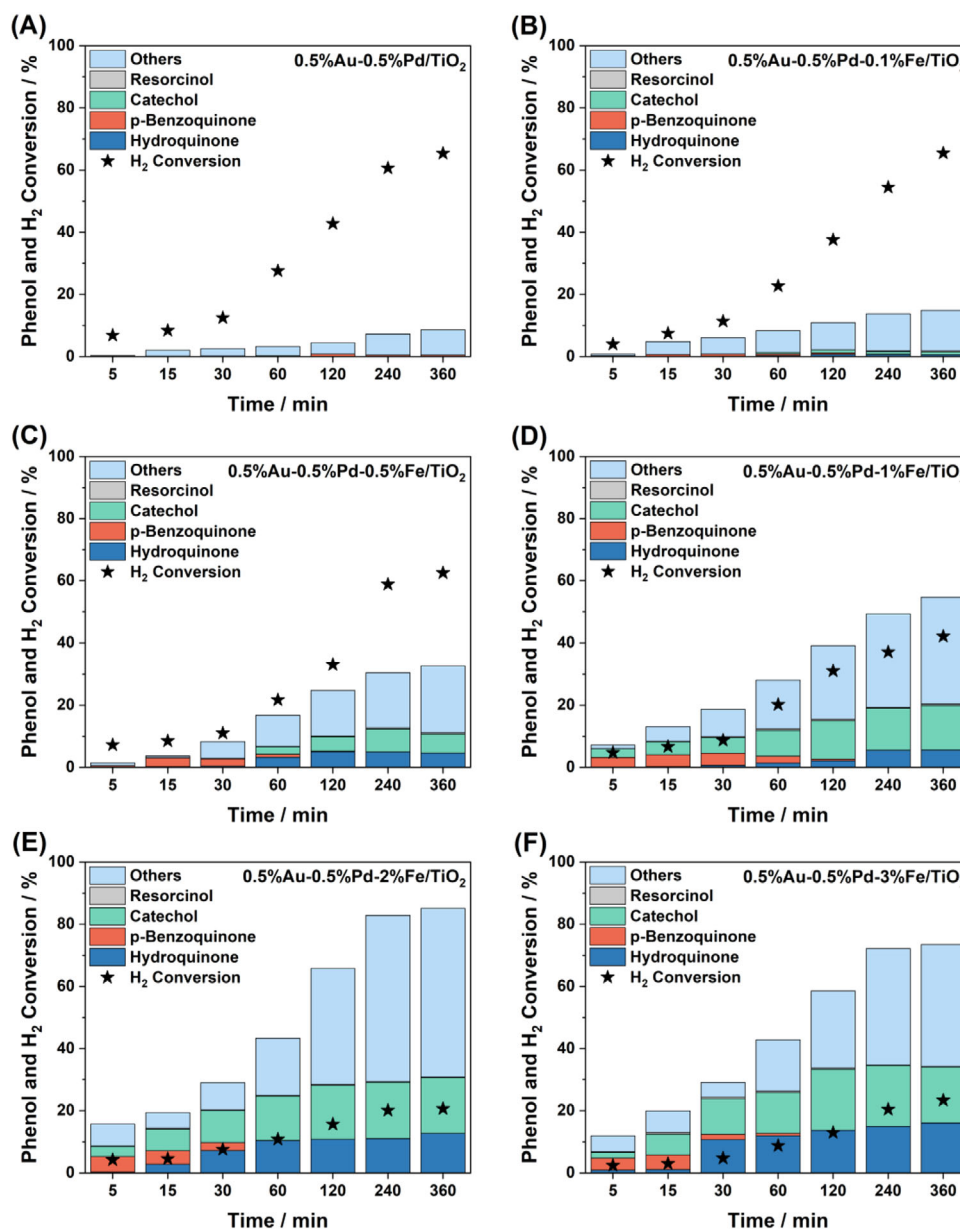
ied, towards the highly oxidized products (i.e., oxalic, maleic, and fumaric acids, etc.), rather than the phenolic derivatives (catechol, resorcinol, etc.), is highly promising given the significant health risks posed by partially oxidized phenolic intermediates, which are typically considered more harmful than phenol itself.

Investigation of the AuPd/Fe ratio identified the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst as the optimal formulation, achieving phenol conversion rates (83% at a reaction time of 6 h) in excess of ten times that offered by the bimetallic AuPd-based parent material (8% at a reaction time of 6 h) and far greater than that offered by the bimetallic 0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst (58% at a reaction time of 6 h), highlighting the key role of Au (Figure 1, with additional data reported in Figure S8). The reader is directed to Table S1, which proved a comparison of catalytic performance of the key formulations reported in this work with that of alternative formulations reported in the literature.

Notably, in the case of the trimetallic series, phenol degradation activity was observed to decrease with the introduction of Fe in excess of 2 wt%. The performance of the optimal 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst is particularly noteworthy given the relatively high selective utilization of H<sub>2</sub> offered by this material (21% H<sub>2</sub> conversion at a reaction time of 6 h), with poor H<sub>2</sub> efficiency a longstanding hurdle for numerous processes that seek to utilize the in situ approach, particularly for chemical synthesis.<sup>[34]</sup> Furthermore, based on a comparison of catalytic performance toward individual reaction pathways (i.e., H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> direct synthesis and the oxidative degradation of phenol, Table 1 and Figure 1, respectively), it is clear that H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis activity is not a strong indicator for catalytic performance in the in situ cascade, which further supports our hypothesis that H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> itself is not the key oxidative species responsible for phenol oxidation. Indeed, based on this metric alone, one would not have expected the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst to offer any reasonable activity towards the degradation of phenol.

Notably, while the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst offered reasonably high selectivities toward the highly oxidized products (i.e., the acids), a considerable proportion of hydroquinone and catechol was still observed in post-reaction product streams, even at extended reaction times (15% and 21% selectivity toward hydroquinone and catechol, respectively, at a reaction time of 6 h). Such data correlates well with our investigations into the efficacy of the in situ route to the oxidative degradation of the various phenolic derivatives (Figure S9) and indicates the relative variation in the efficacy of reactive oxygen species towards the degradation of the various phenolic derivatives.

Subsequent studies established the requirement for the active metals to be immobilized on the same support grain, with the activity of the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst (83% phenol conversion) far superior to that of a physical mixture of the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> and 2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalysts (22% phenol conversion) when using an identical metal concentration to that used in the optimal trimetallic analogue (Figure S10). The observation of phenolic degradation in the absence of Fenton's active metals (i.e., over the bimetallic AuPd catalyst) is indeed interesting, and when considered alongside earlier works that have reported the ability of Au to promote the release of ROS from Pd-based surfaces,<sup>[17,19,23]</sup> may imply multiple routes to ROS



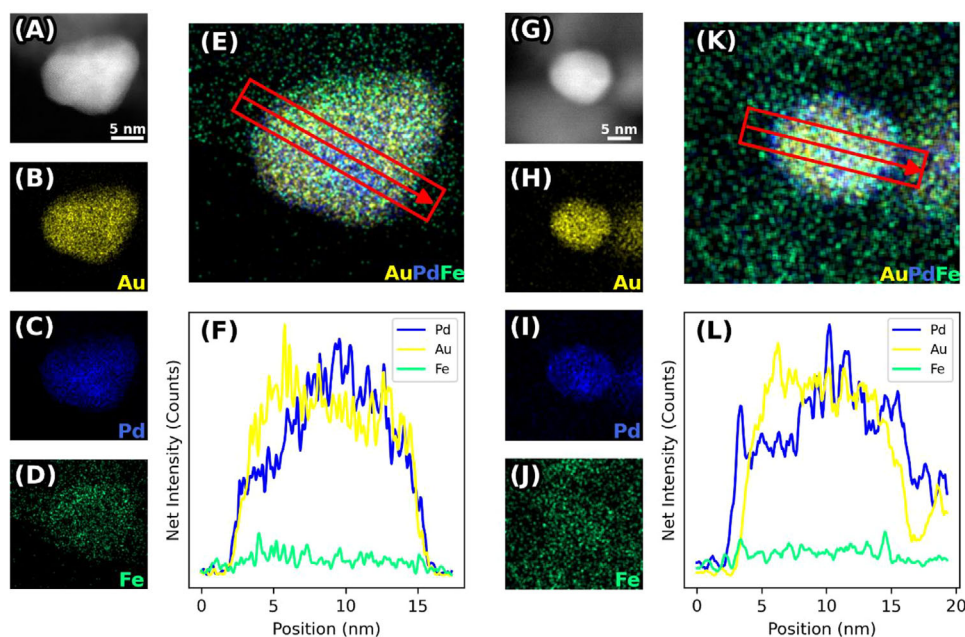
**Figure 1.** Catalytic activity of AuPdFe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalysts toward the oxidative degradation of phenol, via in situ H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> production, as a function of AuPd/Fe ratio. Phenol degradation reaction conditions: catalyst (0.01 g), phenol (1000 ppm, 8.5 g), 5% H<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (420 psi), 25% O<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (160 psi), 20 °C, 1200 rpm.

generation. Namely, it is hypothesized that these highly potent oxidizing species are generated primarily as reaction intermediates formed during H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis over AuPd surfaces, while Fenton-type pathways are considered to be the dominant route to their formation upon Fe incorporation. A significant improvement in phenol conversion was observed in the presence of both H<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> (i.e., under in situ conditions), in comparison to that observed when using either molecular H<sub>2</sub> (3% phenol conversion) or O<sub>2</sub> (1% phenol conversion) or indeed in the presence of pre-formed H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (4% phenol conversion with H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> alone and 14% phenol conversion in the presence of catalyst and H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, when utilizing a H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> concentration equivalent to that which may be achieved if all the H<sub>2</sub> in the in situ system was selectively converted to H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) (Figure S11). Crucially, these latter experiments further implicate the highly reactive oxygen-

based radical species other than H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> as primarily responsible for the observed activity. Further, support for the key role of ROS, rather than H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, in the oxidative degradation of phenol is provided from radical quenching experiments (Figure S12), where a substantial decrease in phenol conversion was observed in the presence of *t*-butanol, a widely utilized scavenger for O-based radical species.<sup>[35]</sup>

Returning to our investigation into catalyst performance over extended reaction times and with a focus on the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst, ICP-MS analysis of post-reaction solutions revealed the relative stability of both Au and Pd (Table S2). However, a significant proportion of leached Fe was observed, with the extent of Fe loss correlating well with the extent of phenol conversion (Figure S13), which may be indicative of product-mediated leaching. Indeed, further experiments under





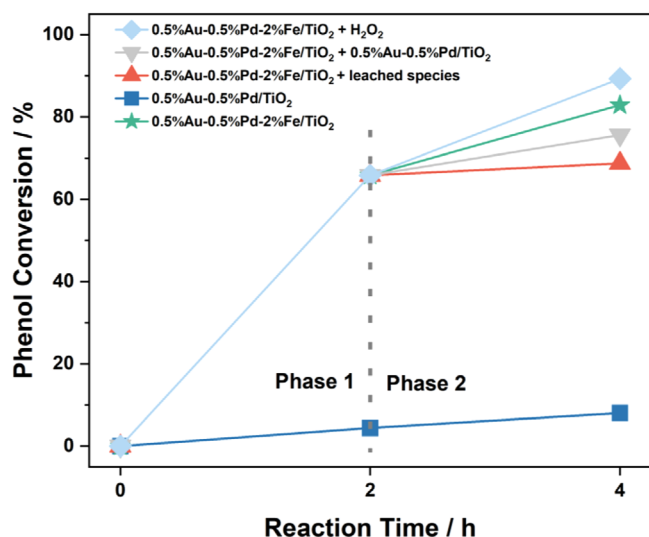
**Figure 2.** Representative HAADF-STEM images and complementary EDX analysis of individual alloy nanoparticles in a)–f) fresh and g)–l) used 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst. Phenol degradation reaction conditions: catalyst (0.01 g), phenol (1000 ppm, 8.5 g), 5% H<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (420 psi), 25% O<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (160 psi), 20 °C, 4 h, 1200 rpm. Note: The fresh catalyst was exposed to a reductive heat treatment prior to use (5%H<sub>2</sub>/Ar, 400 °C, 4 h, 10 °C min<sup>−1</sup>). The used sample was dried (30 °C, under vacuum, 16 h) prior to analysis.

ambient conditions confirm the role of the highly oxidized products (particularly formic, oxalic, and manolic acids), in promoting catalyst deactivation (Table S3). Such observations are in keeping with previous investigations that established the ability of phenolic oxidative products to chelate to heterogeneous Fe species and promote their dissolution. Further investigation into catalyst stability through reuse experiments (Figure S14) revealed a near 50% loss in catalytic performance upon second use and clearly suggests that further catalyst and process design is necessary in order to achieve optimal catalyst performance and stability. Interestingly, while phenolic degradation activity decreases sharply upon reuse, H<sub>2</sub> conversion rates were found to increase considerably from 20% to 48%, which aligns well with our evaluation of catalytic performance towards H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis activity after exposure to phenolic degradation conditions (Figure S15). Such observations align well with the observed stability of the H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesizing component (i.e., Au and Pd) (Table S2) and the observed shift of Pd oxidation state towards Pd<sup>0</sup> (Figure S16), which is well known to offer improved H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> synthesis activity compared to Pd<sup>2+</sup> analogues.<sup>[36]</sup>

HAADF-STEM and corresponding EDX analysis of the as-prepared and used 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst are presented in Figure 2 (with additional data reported in Figures S17–S22). Notably, the extent of intimate incorporation of Fe into the AuPd nanoalloys was limited, with considerable quantities of unalloyed Fe found in addition to AuPd-rich, Fe-lean, trimetallic alloys. Aligning well with the stability of the AuPd component indicated by ICP-MS, we do not observe a meaningful change in particle size upon exposure of the catalyst to phenolic degradation conditions. However, we do observe a limited number of particles in the post-reaction sample that have a clear Pd-

rich shell and Au-rich core morphology (Figure S22), indicating segregation of Pd to the surface of nanoparticles.

With a continued focus on the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst, we subsequently conducted a series of hot-filtration experiments to identify the contribution of leached metal species to catalytic activity (Figure 3). In the absence of the solid catalyst, minimal additional phenol conversion was observed (69%) after a two-part, 4 h experiment. This value was nearly identical to that observed for the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst over a 2 h reaction (66%), with the limited additional conversion of phenol possibly attributed to the contribution from residual H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> generated in the initial 2 h reaction. To determine if the inactivity observed in the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> hot-filtration experiment was due to the limited ability of any potential homogeneous component to synthesize H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (which would align well with our earlier observation of AuPd stability, Table S2, Figure 2), a further hot-filtration experiment was conducted whereby, after the initial 2 h reaction, the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst was replaced with the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> analogue, ensuring that the total moles of Au and Pd were equal to that in the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> formulation. Perhaps unexpectedly, given the activity of the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst toward the oxidative degradation of phenol (Figure 1) an increase in this metric was observed (75%), comparable to the sum of the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> (66%) and 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> (4%) components when used independently over 2 h. Given the ability of the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst to promote the degradation of phenol, this experiment was unable to fully confirm a contribution from homogeneous species. In a final experiment, after the initial 2 h reaction utilizing the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst alone, commercial H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, at a



**Figure 3.** The contribution of leached species in the oxidative degradation of phenol, as identified by hot filtration experiments. Phenol oxidation reaction conditions: catalyst (0.01 g), phenol (8.5 g, 1000 ppm), 5% H<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (420 psi), 25% O<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (160 psi), 1200 rpm, 20 °C, 1200 rpm. Key: 1%AuPd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyzed reaction (green star); 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyzed reaction (blue square); hot filtration reaction where the 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst is removed by filtration after 2 h (red triangles); hot filtration reaction where 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst removed by filtration after 2 h and replaced by 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst for final 2 h of reaction (grey inverted triangles); hot filtration reaction where 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst is removed by filtration after 2 h and replaced by commercial H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (at a concentration identical to that if all H<sub>2</sub> utilized in a standard in-situ reaction was selectively converted to H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) for the final 2 h of reaction (blue diamonds).

concentration equivalent to if all H<sub>2</sub> in a standard phenol degradation reaction was selectively converted to H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, was added to the reaction mixture. After a further 2 h of reaction (carried out in the presence of an atmosphere of CO<sub>2</sub>), a significant increase in phenol conversion was observed (89%), which, when considered alongside our observations of negligible phenol degradation in the presence of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> alone (Figure S11), indicates the contribution of leached metals to the observed catalytic performance. Indeed, such observations align well with additional studies focused on the combination of a heterogeneous 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst and homogenous Fe species (Figure S22), which demonstrate a considerable increase in phenol degradation activity upon the introduction of the homogeneous component.

### 3. Conclusion

We have demonstrated that the incorporation of Fe into supported AuPd nanoalloys can offer enhanced catalytic performance towards the oxidative degradation of phenol via in situ production of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> and associated reactive oxygen species, compared to the parent bimetallic formulation, with the activity of the optimal 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst approximately 10 times greater than that offered by the AuPd-analogue. Here it is important to note that identifying the origin of these ROS is particularly challenging, given the potential for them to form

through direct combination of O<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub> over Pd-based surfaces or through the successive degradation of formed H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> via Fe-mediated pathways.

Catalyst stability was found to be a considerable concern, with substantial leaching of Fe observed, mainly promoted by the formation of deeply oxidized products (primarily formic, oxalic, and muconic acids). While we consider that these catalysts represent a promising basis for further exploration for the oxidative degradation of a range of recalcitrants. However, it is clear that additional efforts are required to 1) fully understand the origin and contribution of individual reactive oxygen species to the observed catalysis, 2) gain insight into the mechanism by which phenolic degradation products promote the leaching of active metals, and 3) evaluate the dynamic nature of metal species under exposure to reaction conditions via a range of operando techniques to inform future improvements in catalyst design.

## 4. Experimental Section

### 4.1. Catalyst Synthesis

A series of mono-, bi-, and tri-metallic 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-X%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> (X = 0–3) catalysts have been prepared by a wet co-impregnation procedure, based on a methodology previously reported in the literature.<sup>[29]</sup> The procedure to produce 0.5%Au-0.5%Pd-2%Fe/TiO<sub>2</sub> (1 g) is outlined below. In all cases the combined loading of the precious metals is 1 wt% and the Au/Pd ratio is 1:1 (wt/wt).

Aqueous solutions of HAuCl<sub>4</sub>·3H<sub>2</sub>O (0.403 mL, [Au] = 12.4 mg mL<sup>-1</sup>, Strem Chemicals), PdCl<sub>2</sub> (0.586 mL, [Pd] = 8.5 mg mL<sup>-1</sup>, Sigma-Aldrich) and FeCl<sub>3</sub> (4.032 mL, [Fe] = 4.96 mg mL<sup>-1</sup>, Sigma Aldrich) were mixed in a 50 mL round-bottom flask and heated to 65 °C with stirring (1000 rpm) in a thermostatically controlled oil bath, with total volume fixed to 16 mL using H<sub>2</sub>O (HPLC grade, Fischer Scientific). Upon reaching 65 °C, TiO<sub>2</sub> (0.97 g, P25, Degussa) was added over 10 min with constant stirring. The resulting slurry was stirred at 65 °C for a further 15 min; following this, the temperature was raised to 85 °C for 16 h to allow for complete evaporation of water. The resulting solid was ground before heat treatment in a reductive atmosphere (5%H<sub>2</sub>/Ar, 400 °C, 4 h, 10 °C min<sup>-1</sup>).

### 4.2. Catalyst Testing

**Note 1:** Reaction conditions used within this study operate under the flammability limits of gaseous mixtures of H<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>.

### 4.3. Direct Synthesis of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>

Hydrogen peroxide synthesis was evaluated using a Parr Instruments stainless steel autoclave with a nominal volume of 50 mL, equipped with a PTFE liner so that the total volume is reduced to 33 mL, and a maximum working pressure of 2000 psi. The autoclave liner was charged with catalyst (0.01 g) and H<sub>2</sub>O (8.5 g, HPLC grade, Fischer Scientific). The charged autoclave was then purged three times with 5%H<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (100 psi) before filling with 5%H<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> to a pressure of 420 psi, followed by the addition of 25%O<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (160 psi), with the pressure of 5%H<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> and 25%O<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> given as gauge pressures. The reactor was not continually fed with reactant gas. The reaction was conducted at room temperature of 20 °C for 0.5 h with

stirring (1200 rpm). It should be noted that individual experiments were carried out, and the reactant mixture was not sampled on line.

To determine net  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  concentration, the solid catalyst was removed via filtration, and an aliquot (2.0 mL) of the post-reaction solution was combined with potassium titanium oxalate dihydrate solution acidified with 30%  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  (0.02 M, 2.0 mL), resulting in the formation of an orange perititanic acid complex. This resulting solution was analyzed spectrophotometrically using an Agilent Cary 60 UV/Vis Spectrophotometer at 400 nm by comparison to a calibration curve. Catalyst productivities are reported as  $\text{mol}_{\text{H}_2\text{O}_2} \text{kg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ .

The catalytic conversion of  $\text{H}_2$  and selectivity toward  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  were determined using a Varian 3800 GC fitted with TCD and equipped with a Porapak Q column.

$\text{H}_2$  conversion (Equation 1) and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  selectivity (Equation 2) are defined as follows:

$$\text{H}_2 \text{ Conversion (\%)} = \frac{\text{mmol}_{\text{H}_2(t(0))} - \text{mmol}_{\text{H}_2(t(1))}}{\text{mmol}_{\text{H}_2(t(0))}} \times 100 \quad (1)$$

$$\text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \text{ Selectivity (\%)} = \frac{\text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \text{ detected (mmol)}}{\text{H}_2 \text{ consumed (mmol)}} \times 100 \quad (2)$$

The total autoclave capacity was determined via water displacement to allow for the accurate determination of  $\text{H}_2$  conversion and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  selectivity. When equipped with the PTFE liner, the total volume of an unfilled autoclave was determined to be 33 mL, which includes all available gaseous space within the autoclave.

#### 4.4. Degradation of $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$

Catalytic activity toward  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  degradation was determined in a similar manner to the direct synthesis activity of a catalyst. The autoclave liner was charged with solvent  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (7.82 g, HPLC grade, Fischer Scientific) and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  (50 wt%, 0.68 g, Sigma Aldrich), with the solvent composition equivalent to a 4 wt%  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  solution. From the solution, two 0.05 g aliquots were removed and titrated with an acidified  $\text{Ce}(\text{SO}_4)_2$  solution using ferroin as an indicator to determine an accurate concentration of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  at the start of the reaction. Subsequently, the catalyst (0.01 g) was added to the reaction media, and the autoclave was purged with 5%  $\text{H}_2/\text{CO}_2$  (100 psi) before being pressurized with 5%  $\text{H}_2/\text{CO}_2$  (420 psi). The reaction medium was conducted at a temperature of 20 °C, and stirred (1200 rpm) for the desired reaction time. After the reaction was complete, the catalyst was removed from the reaction mixture, and two 0.05 g aliquots were titrated against the acidified  $\text{Ce}(\text{SO}_4)_2$  solution using ferroin as an indicator. The degradation activity is reported as  $\text{mol}_{\text{H}_2\text{O}_2} \text{kg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ .

In all cases, reactions were run three times over multiple batches of catalyst for the optimal formulation, with the data being presented as an average of these experiments. The catalytic activity toward the direct synthesis and subsequent degradation of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  was found to be consistent to within  $\pm 2\%$  on the basis of multiple reactions.

#### 4.5. Phenol Degradation via the In Situ Synthesis of $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$

Catalytic activity toward the degradation of phenol was evaluated using a Parr Instruments stainless steel autoclave with a nominal volume of 50 mL, equipped with a glass liner so that nominal volume is reduced to 33 mL, and a maximum working pressure of 2000 psi. In a typical test the autoclave was charged with catalyst (0.01 g) and aqueous phenol (8.5 g, 1000 ppm). The charged autoclave was then purged three times with 5%  $\text{H}_2/\text{CO}_2$  (100 psi)

before filling with 5%  $\text{H}_2/\text{CO}_2$  to a pressure of 420 psi, followed by the addition of 25%  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$  (160 psi). The pressure of 5%  $\text{H}_2/\text{CO}_2$  and 25%  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$  are given as gauge pressures. Reactant gases were not continually supplied. The reactor was then heated to 20 °C followed by stirring (1200 rpm), typically for 4 h. After 4 h gas mixtures were sampled and analyzed via GC (Varian 3800 GC fitted with a TCD and equipped with a Porapak Q column). The catalyst was removed from the reaction solution via filtration, and the post-reaction solution was subsequently analyzed using high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) fitted with an Agilent Poroshell 120 SB-C18 column.

Throughout this study, phenol oxidation product distribution has been grouped into two categories, namely the phenolic derivatives (catechol, hydroquinone, resorcinol, and benzoquinone) and others, which include the organic acids (formic acid, acetic acid, fumaric acid, maleic acid, malonic acid, muconic acid, and oxalic acid), water, and carbon dioxide (i.e., the products of total oxidation). Note that while it is possible for the completed oxidation of phenol to occur, the presence of water as a reaction medium and carbon dioxide as a reagent gas diluent prevents the detection of these products.

Phenol conversion (Equation 3), selectivity toward phenolic derivatives (PD) (Equation 4) or others (organic acids,  $\text{CO}_2$ , and  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ) (Equation 5) are defined as follows:

$$\text{Phenol Conversion (\%)} = \frac{\text{mmol}_{\text{Phenol}(t(0))} - \text{mmol}_{\text{Phenol}(t(1))}}{\text{mmol}_{\text{Phenol}(t(0))}} \times 100 \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Selectivity towards PD (\%)} = \frac{\text{mmol}_{\text{PD}}}{\text{mmol}_{\text{phenol converted}}} \times 100 \quad (4)$$

$$\text{Selectivity towards others (\%)} = \frac{\text{mmol}_{\text{phenol}(t(1))} - \text{mmol}_{\text{PD}(t(1))}}{\text{mmol}_{\text{phenol}(t(1))}} \times 100 \quad (5)$$

Comparative phenol degradation experiments were conducted using commercial  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  (50 wt%, Merck), at a concentration equal to that produced if all  $\text{H}_2$  in a standard in situ reaction was selectively converted to  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ .

To probe the contribution of alternative pathways to phenol conversion (i.e., via aerobic or reductive pathways), an identical procedure to that outlined above for the oxidative degradation of phenol was followed, with the reactor charged with 5%  $\text{H}_2/\text{CO}_2$  (420 psi) or 25%  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$  (160 psi) reagent gases; total pressure was maintained at 580 psi using  $\text{CO}_2$ .

In all cases, reactions were run three times over multiple batches of catalyst for the optimal formulation, with the data being presented as an average of these experiments. Catalytic activity toward the oxidative degradation of phenol was found to be consistent to within  $\pm 4\%$  on the basis of multiple reactions.

#### 4.6. Hot Filtration Experiments for In Situ Phenol Degradation

An identical procedure to that outlined above for the oxidative degradation of phenol was followed for a reaction time of 2 h. Following this, the stirring was stopped, and the reactant gas mixture was vented prior to the removal of the solid catalyst via filtration. The post-reaction solution was returned to the reactor, reagent



gases were reintroduced, and the reaction was allowed to run for a further 2 h to identify the contribution of leached species to the observed activity. Further experiments were conducted, where fresh 1% AuPd/TiO<sub>2</sub> catalyst (0.01 g) or preformed H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (1.93 mmol), comparable to that if all the H<sub>2</sub> converted in the first 2 h reaction was converted selectively to H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, was added to the reaction mixture prior to running the reaction for a further 2 h.

#### 4.7. Catalyst Characterization

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) measurements were performed on a Kratos Axis Ultra-DLD photoelectron spectrometer utilizing a monochromatic Al K<sub>α</sub> X-ray source operating at 144 W (12 mA × 12 kV). Samples were pressed onto silicone-free double-sized Scotch tape and analyzed using the hybrid spectroscopy mode, giving an analysis area of ca. 700 × 300 microns. High-resolution and survey spectra were acquired at pass energies of 40 eV (step size 0.1 eV) and 160 eV (step size 1 eV), respectively. Charge compensation was performed using low-energy electrons, and the resulting spectrum was calibrated to the lowest C(1s) peak from the fitted carbon core-level spectra, taken to be 284.8 eV. The suitability of the C(1s) referencing was confirmed by a secondary reference point, taken to be the Ti(2p<sub>3/2</sub>) peak with a binding energy of 458.7 eV, characteristic of that for virgin TiO<sub>2</sub>. All data were processed using CasaXPS v2.3.24 using a Shirley background and modified Wagner factors as supplied by the instrument manufacturer. Peak fits were performed using a combination of Voigt-type functions (LA line shape in CasaXPS) and models derived from bulk reference samples where appropriate.

The bulk structure of the catalysts was determined by powder X-ray diffraction using a (θ–θ) PANalytical X'pert Pro powder diffractometer using a Cu K<sub>α</sub> radiation source, operating at 40 keV and 40 mA. Analysis was carried out using between 2θ values of 20°–80°.

**Note 2:** X-ray diffractograms of the as-prepared catalysts are reported in Figures S23 and S24, with no reflections associated with active metals, indicative of the relatively low total loading and high dispersion of the immobilized metals.

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) was performed on a JEOL JEM-2100 operating at 200 kV. Samples were prepared by dispersion in ethanol by sonication and deposited on 300-mesh copper grids coated with holey carbon film. To allow for the determination of mean particle size, a minimum of 300 particles were measured. Aberration-corrected scanning transmission electron microscopy (AC-STEM) was performed using a probe-corrected ThermoFisher Spectra 200 S/TEM operating at 200 kV and a convergence semi-angle of 29.5 mrad. High spatial resolution STEM imaging was acquired with a high-angle annular dark field (HAADF) detector an inner collection angle of approximately 56 mrad (outer angle of approximately 200 mrad). Energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) was performed using a ThermoFisher Super-X detector, and the data was analyzed using Thermo Scientific Velox Software. CO-DRIFTS measurements were taken on a Bruker Tensor 27 spectrometer fitted with a mercury cadmium telluride (MCT) detector. The sample was loaded into the Praying Mantis high temperature (HVC-DRP-4) in-situ cell before exposure to N<sub>2</sub> and then 1% CO/N<sub>2</sub> at a flow rate of 50 cm<sup>3</sup> min<sup>−1</sup>. A background spectrum was obtained using KBr, and measurements were recorded every 1 min at room temperature. Once the CO adsorption bands in the DRIFT spectra ceased to increase in intensity, the gas feed was changed back to N<sub>2</sub> in order to evacuate gaseous CO. Measurements were repeated until no change in subsequent spectra was observed.

Total metal leaching from the supported catalyst under in situ phenol degradation conditions, or under model leaching conditions, where the catalyst was exposed to phenolic degradation products

(1000 ppm, 0.5 h, 1200 rpm under ambient conditions), was quantified via inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS). Post-reaction solutions were analyzed using an Agilent 7900 ICP-MS equipped with I-AS auto-sampler. All samples were diluted by a factor of 10 using HPLC grade H<sub>2</sub>O (1% HNO<sub>3</sub> and 0.5% HCl matrix). All calibrants were matrix-matched and measured against a five-point calibration using certified reference materials purchased from Perkin Elmer and certified internal standards acquired from Agilent.

To allow for the quantification of total metal loading, catalysts were digested via an aqua-regia-assisted microwave digestion method using a Milestone Connect Ethos UP microwave with an SK15 sample rotor. Digested samples were analyzed by inductively coupled plasma–optical emission spectroscopy (ICP-MS). All calibrants were matrix-matched and measured against a five-point calibration using certified reference materials purchased from Perkin Elmer and certified internal standards acquired from Agilent. Actual metal loadings of key catalytic samples are provided in Table S4.

Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) surface area measurements were conducted using a Quadrasorb surface area analyzer. A 5-point isotherm of each material was measured using N<sub>2</sub> as the adsorbate gas. Samples were degassed at 250 °C for 2 h prior to the surface area being determined by 5-point N<sub>2</sub> adsorption at −196 °C, and data were analyzed using the BET method. Surface area measurements of key samples (and corresponding bare supports) are reported in Table S5, with a minor loss in surface area found to result from metal deposition and thermal treatment of the catalytic samples.

#### Author Contributions

R.L. and R.J.L. conducted testing experiments and corresponding data analysis. R.L., D.J.M., and E.K. conducted catalyst characterization and corresponding data processing. R.J.L. and G.J.H. contributed to the design of the study and provided technical advice and result interpretation. T.S. provided technical advice. R.L. and R.J.L. wrote the manuscript and Supporting Information, with all authors commenting on and amending both documents. All authors discussed and contributed to the work.

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#### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.



## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article.

**Keywords:** Gold · Hydrogen peroxide · Iron · Palladium · Phenol oxidation

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