

Obtaining Mathematical Models Combined with Infrared Spectroscopy Data and the Use of *Artemia salina* as a Biological Indicator to Predict the Toxicity of the Biochars

Obtenção de Modelos Matemáticos Combinado com Espectroscopia de Infravermelho e o Uso de *Artemia salina* como Indicador Biológico para Prever a Toxicidade de Biocarvões

Jeferson B. Eilert,^{a,b} Flavia De Mello,^b Estela M. C. C. Batista,^{c,*} Jaqueline Nicolini,^b Keller P. Nicolini^b

^a Residente Técnico no Instituto Água e Terra, Rua Quintino Bocaiúva, Centro, CEP 84600-265, União da Vitória-PR, Brasil

^b Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia do Paraná, Laboratório de Corantes e Processos Pirolíticos - LACOPPI, campus Palmas, CEP 85555-000, Palmas-PR, Brasil

^c Universidade Federal do Paraná, Centro Politécnico, Jardim das Américas, CEP 81531-990, Curitiba-PR, Brasil

*E-mail: estelamcc@gmail.com;
jaqueline.nicolini@ifpr.edu.br;
keller.nicolini@ifpr.edu.br

Recebido em: 28 de Julho de 2022

Aceito em: 18 de Outubro de 2022

Publicado online: 8 de Fevereiro de 2023

The simple analytical method described herein involves the use of infrared spectroscopy to analyze residues, consisting of biochar (C) and pyrolytic acid (PA), obtained from *Pinus*. The values for the concentration which is lethal to 50% of a sample of brine shrimp (*Artemia salina*) organisms (LC₅₀) were determined. For the chars produced at 400, 450 and 500 °C the LC₅₀ values were > 5000 ppm. The LC₅₀ value for PA is related to an increase in the intensity of the absorption bands of phenolic compounds at 1389 cm⁻¹ and the C=C bands of aromatics at 1492 cm⁻¹. Pyrolysis temperatures of 250 and 300 °C are associated with the production of PA with LC₅₀ ≥ 715 ppm, accompanied by a lower intensity of the bands associated with the C-H of aromatic compounds (vibrational frequencies for C-H bending mode of benzene derivatives are observed from around 720 to 850 cm⁻¹). The biomodel results show that it is possible to predict the LC₅₀ value through the application of mathematical models obtained from infrared spectroscopy data. The proposal explores the use of infrared spectroscopy combined with mathematical models (speed of analysis) and the use of *Artemia salina* as a biological indicator (low cost).

Keywords: Infrared spectroscopy; bioassays; mathematical models, biomass.

1. Introduction

The use of mathematical models is a promising strategy in different areas of application, used to predict the susceptibility of microorganisms to drugs, for example, has been shown to be important in several areas of medicine using different strategies.¹⁻³ Studies have shown that changes in the Fourier transform infrared spectra can be used to quantify lignin (ν C=C at 1514 cm⁻¹),⁴ characterize the adsorption kinetics,⁵ monitor chemical reactions,⁶ monitor the production of stable aromatic rings,⁷ and identify the functional groups.⁸ The use of the absorption intensities of C=C in aromatics (close to 1640 cm⁻¹) and C-H in aliphatics (close to 2920 cm⁻¹) has been proposed to study stability index parameters.⁹⁻¹² The application of biological models is a useful strategy in ecotoxicology studies.^{13, 14} Reports in the literature describe the use of infrared as a rapid analytical method to investigate, for example, biological activity in soil¹⁵ and in a sealed container,¹⁶ and to simulate the inhibition of the biological activity of benzoic acid derivatives.¹⁷

The brine shrimp (*Artemia salina*) is a small crustacean,¹⁸ that was first used as a biological model in the area of nanoeotoxicology.²⁰ It has also been used to study the toxicity of oxides in saltwater ecosystems²¹ and as a biomodel in other environmental toxicology assessments.²² Tests based on crustaceans,²³ fish and algae require long exposure times and thus toxicity measurements based on microorganisms, which are more cost effective, are gaining popularity.²⁴ *Artemia salina* has been used as an experimental model to study the potential risks associated with biochars (derived from biomass) in ecosystems.¹⁹

Biomass is the matter originating from living organisms and thus includes trees, shrubs, herbaceous species, aquatic plants and algae, as well as animal residues and waste from agricultural harvesting and the processing of seeds or fruits.²⁵ Soft woods have ash contents of around 1% while the corresponding value for herbaceous biomass and agriculture residues is 15%.²⁵ One method for transforming biomass into energy is the thermochemical conversion process known as pyrolysis.²⁶ The conversion of the raw material into liquid fuel, which has

a higher energy density, facilitates transport and storage.²⁷ In general, the rapid pyrolysis of biomass results in different percentages of aromatic carbon and fixed carbon, respectively, according to the pyrolysis temperature as follows: 450 °C (21% and 37.5%), 500 °C (21% and 40.7%), 550 °C (25% and 42.2%), 600 °C (25% and 31.4%) and 732 °C (10% and 21.8%).^{28,29} In the thermal decomposition of biomass, the formation of oxygenated gases, such as H₂O, CO and CO₂, starts at 150 °C and continues up to 300 °C. In the case of biomasses that have higher concentrations of alkaline metals and alkaline earth metals, such as Na, Mg, K and Ca, the formation of oxygenated gases starts at 200 °C, with a maximum peak at around 300 °C.³⁰ In the wood processing industry, in the south region of Paraná, *Pinus* is used as a feedstock and generates a large amount of waste. The aim of this study was to obtain mathematical models combined with infrared spectroscopy data and the use of *Artemia salina* as a biological indicator to predict the toxicity of the biochars (derived from *Pinus*) as an environmental potential plan, promoting sustainable development through an innovative approach in the context of the local wood processing industry.

2. Experimental

2.1. Pyrolysis

The mixture of residues from various *Pinus* species (mainly *Pinus taeda* and *Pinus elliottii*) employed in this study originated from tree trunks during wood processing. The material is a sample composed of approximately 25 kg of pine wood residues. The material was mixed, quartered, sized (particle size of less than 0.1 mm) and pyrolyzed at 6 different temperatures (250, 300, 350, 400, 450 and 500 °C) to give 6 samples of the biochar (C) and 6 samples of the liquid product (pyroligneous acid, PA). Slow pyrolysis was carried out in an anaerobic reactor coupled to a Liebig condenser, with a heating ramp of 15 °C min⁻¹, at temperatures (°C) of 250 (C₂₅₀ and PA₂₅₀), 300 (C₃₀₀ and PA₃₀₀), 350 (C₃₅₀ and PA₃₅₀), 400 (C₄₀₀ and PA₄₀₀), 450 (C₄₅₀ and PA₄₅₀) and 500 °C (C₅₀₀ and PA₅₀₀) for 3 h.^{14,28,31} Each sample remained under heating (separately) for 3 h. Pyrolysis was carried out (separately) in triplicate. The pyrolyzed materials were then ground ($\leq 150 \mu\text{m}$) and homogenized. The gravimetric yields were determined for the different temperatures as percentage biochar mass (C), pyroligneous acid (PA) and ash content (AS).

2.2. Infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy and aromaticity index

Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy (Bio-Rad, USA) was carried out at the Laboratory of Automotive Fuels Analysis (*Laboratório de Análise de Combustíveis Automotivos* - LACAUT) on KBr plates. The samples were prepared by mixing 2 mg of each sample with 300 mg of

anhydrous KBr (Neon, Brazil). The mixture was crushed in an 8-ton hydraulic press for the preparation of the pellets. The spectra for the samples were obtained within the range of 400 to 4000 cm⁻¹, with a scanning rate of 32 scans min⁻¹.

The aromaticity index⁹⁻¹² was calculated using the ratio $I_{\text{C}=\text{C}}/I_{\text{C}-\text{H}}$, where $I_{\text{C}=\text{C}}$ is the absorption intensity of the C=C of aromatics at 1640 cm⁻¹ and $I_{\text{C}-\text{H}}$ is the absorption intensity of the C-H of aliphatics at 2920 cm⁻¹.

2.3. Mathematical models, validation and statistical analysis

In order to evaluate the biological activity of the biochar and pyroligneous acid, mathematical models were developed with the aid of the BuildQSAR free software program (version 1.0.1.35).³² The evaluation of the degree of prediction of the models was also carried out using the program BuildQSAR. Statistical validation and external validation were performed. A model with objects not included in it will give a high degree of predictability when the cross-validation correlation coefficient (Q^2) is close to 1 and standard deviation of cross-validation (S_{PRESS}) close to zero.³³ The models were generated from a semi-empirical method, considering the experimental investigation of the *in vitro* susceptibility - concentration is lethal to 50% of the organisms (LC₅₀) - of *Artemia salina* toward 6 samples of biochar and 6 samples of pyroligneous acid. The statistical analysis results were treated applying the Tukey test ($p < 0.05$).³⁴

2.4. Lethal concentration (LC₅₀)

Each biological activity test with *Artemia salina* lasted 48 h (i.e., 24 h for the egg eclosion, plus 24 h with the live organisms in contact with the amended medium). The eggs of *Artemia salina* were incubated in artificial seawater with 2‰ (SD ± 0.1) salinity, pH 8.5 (SD ± 0.5), at 27 °C (SD ± 3) for 24 h, being SD standard deviation. In the next step, the medium containing live *A. salina* organisms was amended as follows: a) each sample of C₂₅₀, C₃₀₀, C₃₅₀, C₄₀₀, C₄₅₀ and C₅₀₀ was tested at concentrations of 0, 1,000, 5,000, 10,000 and 50,000 ppm; and b) each sample of PA₂₅₀, PA₃₀₀, PA₃₅₀, PA₄₀₀, PA₄₅₀ and PA₅₀₀ was tested at concentrations of 0, 100, 200, 417, 625 and 1,250 ppm. The counting of the dead organisms was carried out after 24 h to calculate the numbers in the amended aqueous media and determine which concentration is lethal to 50% of the organisms (LC₅₀). The tests were carried out with 10 replicates (10 to 12 individuals per replicate). The percent of dead larvae was calculated based on the number of live individuals at the initial time (24 h) in relation to the number after 24 h in the amended environment,³⁵ using Equation 1.

$$\%D = \left[\frac{(N - B - C)}{N - C} \right] \times 100 \quad (1)$$

where: %D is the percentage of the dead larvae in each sample, N is the average number of larvae before starting the test, B is the average number of dead larvae in each sample and C is the average number of dead larvae in the control samples. The data obtained were converted into percentages based on the relation between the percentage mortality and the sample concentration. The lethal concentration (LC_{50}) was determined from the linear correlation coefficient.

3. Results and Discussion

It can be observed from the infrared spectra (Figure 1) for C_{250} , C_{300} , C_{350} , C_{400} , C_{450} and C_{500} that the intensity of the bands at 3448 cm^{-1} (corresponding to the O-H of hemicellulose and lignin), 2920 cm^{-1} (associated with the C-H of alkyl, aliphatic and aromatic groups),³⁶ 1736 cm^{-1} (corresponding to C=O), 1709 cm^{-1} (associated with the C-H of alkyl, aliphatic and aromatic groups) and 1622 cm^{-1} (related to the C=O of aromatic groups) are lower for the C_{400} , C_{450} and C_{500} samples, which have the highest LC_{50} values (Table 1). After the heating of the material, the aromatic structures, which are more stable than aliphatic structures, show greater resistance to degradation and volatilization and thus they are present in higher concentrations in the biochar samples obtained at higher temperatures. Figure 1 shows that the intensity of the band at 667 cm^{-1} (C-C of aromatics) increases with an increase in the pyrolysis temperature. The intensities of the absorption bands at 622 and 667 cm^{-1} (C-C of aromatics)³⁶ and 3268 cm^{-1} are directly proportional to the LC_{50} while the band at 2949 cm^{-1} (C-H of hydrocarbon)³⁷ (Figure 1) is inversely proportional to the biological activity (Table 1).

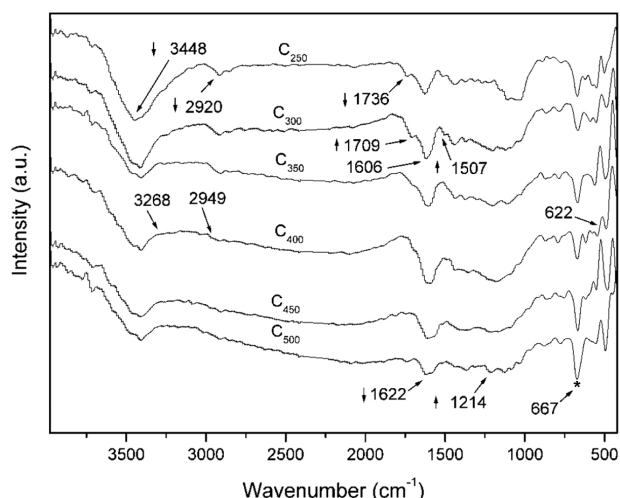


Figure 1. Infrared spectra for biochar samples obtained from pyrolysis of *Pinus* spp. at 250, 300, 350, 400, 450 and 500 °C

The lethal concentration, aromaticity index and absorption intensities at 3448 cm^{-1} (O-H), 2920 cm^{-1} (C-H), 1622 cm^{-1} (C=O) and 667 cm^{-1} (C=C) (Figure 1 and Table 1) showed that, for the biochars, higher LC_{50} values are

associated with higher aromaticity indexes, higher intensity at 667 cm^{-1} , lower intensities at 3448 , 2920 and 1622 cm^{-1} and pyrolysis temperatures of 400, 450 and 500 °C.

The reduction in the intensity at around 3440 cm^{-1} (Figure 1) with an increase in the pyrolysis temperature ($250 \rightarrow 500\text{ °C}$) suggests the removal of hydroxyl groups from the cellulose.³⁸ In a similar study, Park *et al.* (2018) reported the generation of pyroligneous acid, containing phenol, 2-methoxy, phenol, 2,6-dimethoxy, E-11-hexadecanoic acid and ethyl ester as the major components,³⁹ and biochar with a high content of condensed aromatic structures.^{40, 41}

At the pyrolysis temperatures (Figure 1) of 250, 300, 350, 400, 450 and 500 °C the C-C stretching (622 cm^{-1}) bonds are maintained, increasing the gravimetric biochar yield. The results for the biochar samples obtained from pyrolysis at 250, 300, 350, 400, 450 and 500 °C show that the higher the pyrolysis temperature the higher the aromaticity index and LC_{50} will be. The results for the pyroligneous acid obtained at pyrolysis temperatures of 250, 300, 350, 400, 450 and 500 °C indicate that increasing the pyrolysis temperature leads to a higher aromaticity index and greater toxicity (Table 1).

In the case of PA, the samples generated at 250 °C showed the highest LC_{50} values and thus had the lowest toxicity toward *Artemia salina*, while for the biochar samples (C), those produced at temperatures $\geq 400\text{ °C}$ had the highest lethal concentrations, as shown in Table 1.

Based on the linear correlation coefficient, the lethal concentration (LC_{50}) was determined and Table S1 shows the percentage mortality values for each temperature. The biochar samples obtained at 400, 450 and 500 °C show the lowest toxicity and all samples of pyroligneous acid with concentrations above 417 ppm showed lethality of 100% (Table S1).

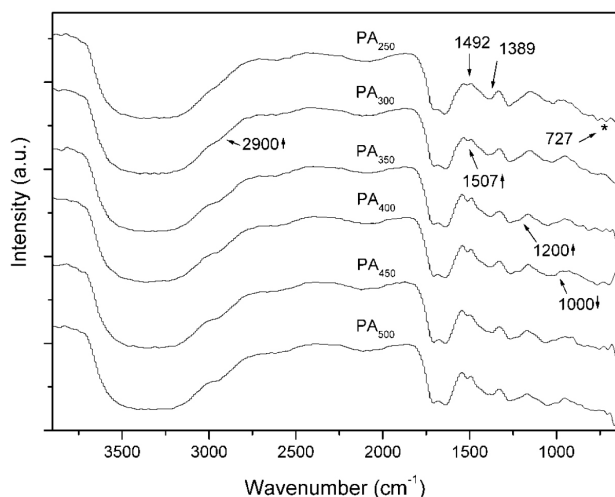
Figure 2 shows the infrared spectra for the samples PA_{250} , PA_{300} , PA_{350} , PA_{400} , PA_{450} and PA_{500} , where the appearance of bands is directly proportional to the pyrolysis temperature: at 2900 cm^{-1} , corresponding to the C-H of alkyl, aliphatic and aromatic groups;³⁶ at 1507 cm^{-1} , related to the C=O of ketone and carbonyl groups,³⁶ and at 1200 cm^{-1} , associated with the C-O of alcohols, esters, carboxylic acid and ethers as well as phenolic compounds. The presence of the band at 1000 cm^{-1} related to C-O and C-H groups is inversely proportional to the pyrolysis temperature. Studies using infrared spectra are versatile and this technique speeds up the monitoring process.

For the PA samples, an increase in the LC_{50} value is also associated with a reduction in the intensity of the absorption band at 727 cm^{-1} (C-H of aromatics, vibrational frequencies for C-H bending mode of benzene derivatives)³⁶ and increases in the intensity of the absorption bands at 1389 cm^{-1} (phenolic compounds) and 1492 cm^{-1} (C=C of aromatics)³⁶, as shown in Figure 2. The presence of aromatic compounds alters the metabolism of carbohydrates⁴² and proteins⁴³, these being metabolized by bacteria and converted into CO_2 .⁴⁴

Table 1. Aromaticity index and toxicity toward *Artemia salina* and pyrolysis temperature used to obtain biochar (C) and pyrolygneous acid (PA)

Samples	$I_{C=C}/I_{C-H}$	LC_{50} (ppm)	$\left(\log \frac{1}{LC_{50}}\right)$ (ppm)
	Biochar		
C ₂₅₀	1.164	18438	-4.266
C ₃₀₀	1.135	5171	-3.714
C ₃₅₀	1.130	7845	-3.894
C ₄₀₀	1.150	≥50000	-4.699
C ₄₅₀	1.174	≥50000	-4.699
C ₅₀₀	1.173	≥50000	-4.699
Pyrolygneous acid			
PA ₂₅₀	0.277	733	-2.865
PA ₃₀₀	0.268	715	-2.854
PA ₃₅₀	0.296	518	-2.714
PA ₄₀₀	0.308	607	-2.783
PA ₄₅₀	0.339	512	-2.709
PA ₅₀₀	0.335	645	-2.810

$I_{C=C}$: absorption intensity of the C=C of aromatics at 1640 cm⁻¹. I_{C-H} : absorption intensity of the C-H of aliphatics at 2920 cm⁻¹. $I_{C=C}/I_{C-H}$: aromaticity index.⁹⁻¹² LC_{50} : toxicity toward *Artemia salina*. $\left(\log \frac{1}{LC_{50}}\right)$: base 10 logarithm of toxicity toward *Artemia salina*

**Figure 2.** Infrared spectra for samples of pyrolygneous acid obtained from *Pinus* spp. pyrolyzed at 250, 300, 350, 400, 450 and 500 °C

After the gravimetric analysis of the pyrolyzed material (Figure S1) it was observed that the sample obtained at 400 °C shows a biochar (C) yield of 35.4% (± 1.6) and a pyrolygneous acid (PA) yield of 38.9% (± 1.6). Figure S1 shows that the gravimetric yields of biochar and pyrolygneous acid are equivalent (37.0%) at a temperature of 385 °C (intercept). In general, the ash content is inversely proportional to the gravimetric biochar yield.

Based on the intensities of the bands on the infrared spectra we obtained Equation 2, to predict the biological activity $\left(\log \frac{1}{LC_{50}}\right)$ of the biochar samples through a linear

model with $R^2 = 0.956$ and $Q^2 = 0.860$. The I parameter corresponds to the intensity of the absorption unit, at 667 cm⁻¹, R^2 represents the correlation coefficient of the equation and Q^2 is related to the prediction capacity of Equation 2.

$$\log \frac{1}{LC_{50}} = 0.22429I_{[667]} - 20.97423 \quad (2)$$

Also, based on the intensities of the bands on the infrared spectra at 727 cm⁻¹, Equation 3 is proposed, to predict the biological activity $\left(\log \frac{1}{LC_{50}}\right)$ of the pyrolygneous acid samples through a linear model with $R^2 = 0.972$ and $Q^2 = 0.923$.

$$\log \frac{1}{LC_{50}} = 0.03673I_{[727]} - 2.84998 \quad (3)$$

An evaluation of the degree of predictability of the model calculated using the BuildQSAR software program (version 1.0.1.35)³² indicated that there is a high degree of predictability when the cross-validation correlation coefficient (Q^2) is close to 1 and S_{PRESS} close to zero,³³ as calculated from Equations 2 and 3 (Table S2). Equations 2 and 3 were validated by statistical validation based on R^2 , s , F , Q^2 and S_{PRESS} (Table S2). The parameter s is the standard deviation, S_{PRESS} is the standard deviation of cross-validation, and F is the ratio between the variability explained by the model and the variability that remains unexplained. The

equations were also validated using external validation,⁴⁵ where the value of $\left(\log \frac{1}{LC_{50}}\right)_{Observed}$ is close to the value of $\left(\log \frac{1}{LC_{50}}\right)_{Predicted}$ (Table S2). Equations 2 and 3 show good degrees of predictability of the toxicity of samples of biochar (C) and pyroligneous acid (PA) derived from *Pinus* sp. obtained by pyrolysis in a reducing atmosphere at 250 - 500 °C.

Studies have demonstrated that pyroligneous acid is effective as a fungicide, due to the presence of phenolic compounds,⁴⁶ and as an insecticide, due to the presence of hexadecanoic acid and fatty acids derived from octadecanoic acid.⁴⁷ In this study, the highest aromaticity indexes for C and PA (Table 1) were obtained at 450 °C, which is consistent with reports in the literature.^{28, 48-50} The pyrolysis temperature of 450 °C is associated with the lowest LC₅₀ for PA (higher toxicity) and one of the highest LC₅₀ values for C (lower toxicity), as shown in Table 1.

A decrease in the toxicity of the biochars (higher LC₅₀ value) is also associated with an increase in band intensity in the region of 667 cm⁻¹, which is attributed to the C-H of mono-substituted aromatics³⁶ from of lignin degradation. Studies demonstrate that hemicellulose is reactive at 160-360 °C, cellulose decomposes at 240-390 °C and lignin undergoes degradation at 200-850 °C.²⁹ Based on this finding, it is proposed that biochars produced through slow pyrolysis above 400 °C would show lower toxicity toward *Artemia salina*.

The proposed procedure does not generate hazardous waste, highlighting the environmental potential of this strategy, promoting sustainable development through an innovative approach. Infrared is a spectroscopic technique that has been previously applied for the investigation of the biological activity of natural products.⁵³ In this study, the determination of biological activity is approached in two ways: a) experimentally: using *Artemia salina* applying a classic and low cost method with an average analysis time of 48 h; and b) theoretically: using infrared spectroscopy combined with mathematical models. This approach brings as a novelty a rapid analysis strategy (around 30 min) that is able to predict the biological activity, with results of around 86.0% (Q² = 0.860) and 92.3% (Q² = 0.923), for C and PA, respectively.

4. Conclusions

The biochar with the highest toxicity toward *Artemia salina* was the sample produced at 300 °C and biochars produced at 400, 450 and 500 °C showed the lowest toxicities. In the case of pyroligneous acid, the highest toxicity toward *Artemia salina* was observed for the sample generated at 450 °C while the sample generated at 250 °C showed the lowest toxicity. Thus, the biochars generated at higher temperatures have lower toxicity and they generate pyroligneous acid with

higher toxicity toward *Artemia salina*. Biochars produced by slow pyrolysis at 400, 450 and 500 °C have LC₅₀ > 5000 ppm. Based on the biomodel results of this study, the biological activity of *Pinus* spp. biochars and pyroligneous acid was correlated mathematically with the infrared spectroscopy data, applying simple and safe procedures.

Supplementary data

Table S1. Sample lethality (%) as a function of concentration (ppm). Table S2. QSARs Validation. Figure S1. Relation between gravimetric biochar (C) yield, pyroligneous acid (PA) yield and ash content (AS), obtained for samples of *Pinus* spp. biomass subjected to pyrolysis at 250, 300, 350, 400, 450 and 500 °C. Supplementary data associated with this article can be found free of charge in the online version at <https://rvq.s bq.org.br/>.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to SBQ and the editors of the RVq by the invitation, to the Programa Institucional de Apoio à Iniciação Científica da Fundação Araucária (PIBIC-FA), Programa Institucional de Bolsas de Incentivo à Inovação do Instituto Federal do Paraná (PIBIN/IFPR), Laboratório de Análises de Combustíveis Automotivos (LACAUT) and Laboratório de Corantes e Processos Pirolíticos (LACOPPI).

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