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<th>Citation</th>
<th>Han, T. et al. “Synthesis and characterization of single crystals of the spin-1/2 kagome-lattice antiferromagnets Zn$<em>{x}$Cu$</em>{4-x}$(OH)$<em>{6}$Cl$</em>{2}$.” Physical Review B 83 (2011). ©2011 American Physical Society.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As Published</td>
<td><a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevB.83.100402">http://dx.doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevB.83.100402</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>American Physical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Version</td>
<td>Final published version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessed</td>
<td>Tue Feb 05 22:01:54 EST 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citable Link</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/65831">http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/65831</a></td>
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Synthesis and characterization of single crystals of the spin-$\frac{1}{2}$ kagome-lattice antiferromagnets Zn$_x$Cu$_{4-x}$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$

T. H. Han, J. S. Helton, S. Chu, A. Prodi, D. K. Singh, C. Mazzoli, P. Müller, D. G. Nocera and Y. S. Lee

1Department of Physics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139, USA
2NIST Center for Neutron Research, Gaithersburg, Maryland 20899, USA
3Center for Materials Science and Engineering, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139, USA
4Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742, USA
5European Synchrotron Radiation Facility, FR-38043 Grenoble, France
6Department of Chemistry, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139, USA

(Received 17 December 2010; published 3 March 2011)

The Zn-paratacamite family, Zn$_x$Cu$_{4-x}$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$ for $x \geq 0.33$, is an ideal system for studying spin-$\frac{1}{2}$ frustrated magnetism in the form of antiferromagnetic Cu$^{2+}$ kagome planes. Here we report a new synthesis method by which high-quality millimeter-sized single crystals of Zn-paratacamite have been produced. These crystals have been characterized by metal analysis, x-ray diffraction, neutron diffraction, and thermodynamic measurements. The $x = 1$ member of the series displays a magnetic susceptibility that is slightly anisotropic at high temperatures with $\chi_\perp > \chi_\parallel$. Neutron and synchrotron x-ray diffraction experiments confirm the quality of these $x = 1$ single crystals and indicate no obvious structural transition down to temperatures of $T = 2$ K.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevB.83.100402 PACS number(s): 75.30.Gw, 81.10.-h, 75.50.Ee, 61.05.cp

Geometrically frustrated magnetism is a forefront area of research in condensed matter physics, as such systems offer a unique terrain in which to search for novel magnetic ground states. The spin-$\frac{1}{2}$ nearest-neighbor Heisenberg antiferromagnet on the kagome lattice, which consists of corner-sharing triangles, is a particularly promising system in which to search for unique quantum phases including the “resonating valence bond” (RVB) state proposed by Anderson or other quantum states. Recent anomalous x-ray diffraction (XRD) measurements indicate that dilution of the kagome plane sites with Zn ions is not significant. Studies on Zn-paratacamite samples indicate that dilution of the kagome plane sites with Zn ions is not significant. Studies on Zn-paratacamite samples with $x < 1$ can be useful in determining the effect of any out-of-plane impurities that might be present even in the nominal $x = 1$ samples, as well as serving as model systems for weakly coupled kagome planes.

Previous studies of Zn-paratacamite have utilized powder samples grown by hydrothermal methods. The failure of these methods to produce large single crystals has been ascribed partly to the low decomposition temperature of Zn$_{1-x}$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$. However, the primary reason for the lack of single-crystal synthesis is likely the fact that the reported synthesis produces bubbles of CO$_2$, resulting in an unstable crystallization environment. Further understanding of the spin behavior of Zn$_{1-x}$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$ and further insight into the ground state of the spin-$\frac{1}{2}$ kagome lattice antiferromagnet will require studies on single-crystal samples. Here we report a new synthesis method by which high-quality millimeter-sized single crystals have been successfully produced. These samples have been characterized by a variety of measurements.

Single-crystal samples of Zn paratacamite, Zn$_x$Cu$_{4-x}$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$, were grown hydrothermally in furnaces that were setup similarly to those used to grow small single-crystal samples of the atacamite family and Mg$_x$Cu$_{4-x}$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$. Here, starting materials of CuO, ZnCl$_2$, and H$_2$O, in amounts listed in Table I, were charged into a fused quartz tube (ID 6 mm, OD 13 mm for $x = 0.8$ and 1.0, or ID 9 mm, OD 15 mm for $x = 0.9$). The quartz tube was sealed after purging air with a mechanical pump. The sealed quartz tube was preheated for 2 days in a box furnace at 185 °C. After preheating, a green-blue microcrystalline powder was formed. Powder XRD measurements of this product indicated the presence of Zn$_x$Cu$_{4-x}$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$. This shows successful synthesis by the reaction

$$(4 - x)\text{CuO} + \text{ZnCl}_2 + 3\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow \text{Zn}_x\text{Cu}_{4-x}(\text{OH})_6\text{Cl}_2 + (1 - x)\text{ZnO}. \quad (1)$$

This synthesis without the production of CO$_2$ suggests the possibility of an environment stable enough for single-crystal growth.
Millimeter-sized single crystals were synthesized through a recrystallization process in a three-zone gradient tube furnace. A schematic of such a furnace is shown in Fig. 1(c). The sealed, prereacted quartz tubes were placed horizontally into the furnace at room temperature. The furnace temperature was isotropically increased to a fixed temperature, ranging from 165 to 180 °C in various reactions. The temperature of the cold end was then slowly lowered. The sample and all growth parameters were undisturbed for roughly 20 weeks until large crystals were formed at the cold end. In the region where the crystals nucleated and grew, the temperature gradient was measured to be approximately 1 °C/cm. At the end of the synthesis, the sample tubes were cooled down to room temperature at 1 °C/min. Crystals were then rinsed with deionized water, dried in air, and kept in a desiccator for storage. No decomposition of the crystals has been observed in air, water, or acetone. Precise control of the starting concentrations of CuO and ZnCl2 allows for synthesis of samples with variable Zn concentration, x. Data on crystals with x = 0.8, 0.9, and 1.0 are shown in Table I. More syntheses than listed in Table I were performed with ZnCl2 to CuO molar ratios ranging from 2 to 10 and with ZnCl2 to H2O concentrations ranging from 1.2 to 7.7 mmol/ml. However, the x values of the final products were fairly stable over this range of starting concentrations. At a fixed ZnCl2 to CuO ratio, the x value of the product increased with increasing ZnCl2 concentration, from x = 0.8 with 1.2 mmol/ml of ZnCl2 to x = 1.0 with 2.8 mmol/ml of ZnCl2. Products with x = 1.0 were also obtained for starting ZnCl2 concentrations up to 5.6 mmol/ml, while even higher ZnCl2 concentrations resulted in a slight lowering of x. This diminishment of x with very high ZnCl2 concentrations is likely due to a more acidic pH in those reactions, which dissolves more CuO. The ZnCl2 to CuO molar ratio of the starting products had no obvious effect on the x values of the product over the range of syntheses performed. The compositions of the crystals were measured by metal analysis taken with an inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometer (ICP-AES) with an error of ±0.04 on x. Standards were prepared from commercially purchased solutions from Sigma-Aldrich, specific for ICP-AES measurements and designated as Trace SELECT grade or better. Five to ten well-rinsed, small single crystals from each synthesis tube, approximately 0.1 mg each, were dissolved into 2% w/w dilute nitric acid for measurement. Unlike powder samples, the ease to rinse single crystals dramatically reduced the ambiguity from possible chemical contamination. The relative amounts of Cu and Zn determined from ICP metal analysis were used to calculate the values of x listed in Table I. As previously determined via anomalous x-ray scattering,21 our nominal x = 1 sample has the structural composition (Zn0.85Cu0.15)Cu3(OH)6Cl2. Here, the kagome planes are fully occupied with Cu, and anti-site disorder26,27 with Zn on the Cu kagome site is not apparent.

Single-crystal XRD was performed on a three-circle diffractometer coupled to a CCD detector. All samples were refined in the rhombohedral space group R3m (trigonal setting) and with lattice constants consistent with previous reports. The largest (3–300 mg) crystals typically grow as a bar shape similar to the crystal shown in Fig. 1(b). From XRD on more than 30 crystals, all of the side long faces were indexed as (1 0 1) [the faces were normal to the (1 0 1) reciprocal lattice vector]. Some of the smaller (<1 mg) crystals were octahedrally shaped, with all eight faces indexed as (1 0 1). Based on these observations, we propose the following growth process: during the early stage of crystallization, primitive micrometer-sized crystals form as 12-faced polyhedra due to the symmetry of the (1 0 1) directions. As the crystals grow larger in size, 8 of the 12 (1 0 1) faces, possibly due to the specific local hydrodynamic condition, grow faster, which transforms the crystals into larger, submillimeter octahedra. Eventually, four of these eight (1 0 1) faces form the four large side faces of millimeter-sized bar-shaped crystals.

The single-crystal samples obtained by this synthesis were characterized by a variety of methods. Single-crystal susceptibility measurements of an x = 1 sample were performed on a superconducting quantum interference device (SQUID) magnetometer (Quantum Design) using a 55.5 mg sample [different from the one in Fig. 1(b)] with an almost cubic shape (2.3 × 2.5 × 2.7 mm). Figure 2(a) shows the bulk
susceptibility, $\chi \equiv M/H$, as a function of temperature. The susceptibility of the crystal closely follows that measured on a powder sample with $x = 1$ (also plotted), which confirms that the stoichiometry and homogeneity of the single crystals match those of previously measured powders. The inset of Fig. 2(a) shows the specific heat of an $x = 1$ single crystal compared with powder data (with $H = 0$). (b) $MT/H$ vs temperature, showing the anisotropy $\chi_c > \chi_{ab}$ at high temperatures. Inset: $M$ vs $H$ at 80 and 300 K along different directions.

Among the various predicted ground states for the spin-$\frac{1}{2}$ nearest-neighbor Heisenberg kagome antiferromagnet, several theoretical studies have suggested a 36-site valence bond solid.11,12 This proposed ground state features a 36-site valence bond solid with a 3% reduction in the bond length of the static dimer pairs. The susceptibility of crystals with $x = 0.8$ and 0.9 are also consistent with powder samples (not shown). A detailed study of the susceptibility and specific heat of samples with different $x$ values is a topic of ongoing investigation.

We performed diffraction measurements on our single crystals with $x = 1$. Figure 3(a) shows a $\theta$ -scan through the (1 1 0) Bragg reflection of an $x = 1$ single crystal measured with the SPINS, (b) Synchrotron XRD intensity of a scan along the (4 + $c$ $c$ $c$ 4) direction at three temperatures. The extremely weak peaks observed in this range arise from powder contamination and have no temperature dependence. The solid lines are a simulation of the superlattice peaks arising from a 36-site valence bond solid with a 1% reduction in the bond length of the static dimer pairs.
x rays of energy of 8.979 keV (λ = 1.381 Å). The sample was cooled with a closed-cycle Displex and was mounted on a four-circle goniometer. The measurements indicate that the sample remains in space group R3m down to the lowest measured temperature \( T \simeq 2 \) K. The high x-ray flux available at a synchrotron is ideal to look for very subtle superlattice reflections that would arise if a VBS ground state resulted in a structural distortion. The 36-site VBS would lead to an enlarged unit cell that is a factor of \( \sqrt{2} \) longer on each side and rotated 90° from the original unit cell. We searched for the superlattice reflections along the high-symmetry (1 1 0) direction between the (4 0 4) and (5 1 4) peaks. This scan [Fig. 3(b)] showed no observable superlattice peaks above the background. The only scattering features in this range were very weak powder peaks (roughly 250 000 times weaker than background. The blue solid lines in Fig. 3(b) are a calculation of the upper bound on the possibility of any superlattice reflections.

The lack of evidence for the emergence of superlattice peaks at low temperatures. Hence, any possible lattice distortions associated with a valence bond solid are subtle, if they exist. Clearly, further measurements on these single-crystal samples should help reveal the physics of the \( S = 1/2 \) kagome ground state.

In summary, high-quality single crystals of \( \text{Zn}_2\text{Cu}_{x-\delta} \) \((\text{OH})_6\text{Cl}_2 \) were synthesized and characterized. The bulk properties of \( x = 1 \) single crystals are consistent with the previously published powder results. The susceptibility measured along different crystallographic directions shows clear anisotropy. This indicates the presence of additional terms in the spin Hamiltonian, such as a small Dzyaloshinskii-Moriya interaction or exchange anisotropy. Synchrotron x-ray scattering experiments did not show evidence for the emergence of superlattice peaks at low temperatures. Hence, any possible lattice distortions associated with a valence bond solid are subtle, if they exist. Clearly, further measurements on these single-crystal samples should help reveal the physics of the \( S = 1/2 \) kagome ground state.

We thank E. A. Nytko, D. Freedman, and T. McQueen for useful discussions. The work at MIT was supported by the US Department of Energy (DOE) under Grant No. DE-FG02-07ER46134. This work utilized facilities supported in part by the National Science Foundation under Agreement No. DMR-0454672.

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1tianheng@alum.mit.edu

1Present address: Niels Bohr Institute, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

yonglee@mit.edu


