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Magnetic Ground State of an Experimental $S = 1/2$ Kagome Antiferromagnet

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We present a detailed analysis of the heat capacity of a near-perfect $S = 1/2$ kagome antiferromagnet, zinc paratacamite $\text{Zn}_x\text{Cu}_3\text{Cl}_2$, as a function of stoichiometry $x \rightarrow 1$ and for fields of up to 9 T. We obtain the heat capacity intrinsic to the kagome layers by accounting for the weak Cu$^{2+}$/Zn$^{2+}$ exchange between the Cu and the Zn sites, which was measured independently for $x = 1$ using neutron diffraction. The evolution of the heat capacity for $x = 0.8 \ldots 1$ is then related to the hysteresis in the magnetic susceptibility. We conclude that for $x > 0.8$ zinc paratacamite is a spin liquid without a spin gap, in which unpaired spins give rise to a macroscopically degenerate ground state manifold with increasingly glassy dynamics as $x$ is lowered.

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Physical realizations of the $S = 1/2$ kagome Heisenberg antiferromagnet have been long sought after because it is expected that the ground state of this system can retain the full symmetry of the underlying effective magnetic Hamiltonian [1,2]; the geometry of the kagome lattice frustrates the classical Néel antiferromagnetic ordering, and no symmetry-breaking transition is expected even at $T = 0$ [3–7]. It has been suggested that even in the thermodynamic limit the symmetric quantum-mechanical electronic ground state is protected from quantum-mechanical dissipation [8] by a gap between the nonmagnetic ground state and the lowest magnetic (triplet) excitations [9,10]. In practice, however, a gap of order $J/20$ [5] may be too small to expect a nonmagnetic ground state in real materials.

Shores et al. [11] have shown that in the Cu salt herbertsmithite [12] $\text{Zn}_x\text{Cu}_3(\text{OH})_6\text{Cl}_2$, depicted in the inset of Fig. 1) antiferromagnetically coupled Cu$^{2+}$ ions are located at the vertices of a kagome lattice. Muon experiments have shown that the ground state of this system is either paramagnetic or (quantum) spin liquid. Almost no muon relaxation was observed even at 50 mK [13], despite the large Weiss temperature $\theta_w = -300$ K [11,14]. Separating the kagome layers are Zn sites of $O_h$ symmetry, which can also host Cu$^{2+}$ ions to form the zinc paratacamite family of stoichiometry $\text{Zn}_x\text{Cu}_3(\text{OH})_6\text{Cl}_2$ with $0.3 \leq x \leq 1$. For Zn$^{2+}$ stoichiometries $x < 0.3$, the Zn site is mainly occupied by Jahn-Teller active Cu$^{2+}$ ions and becomes angle distorted. At this point the symmetry of the lattice changes from rhombohedral ($x > 0.3$) to monoclinic, forming the end-member clinoatacamite [15]. Because of the strong Jahn-Teller distortion of the Cu sites on the kagome lattice, the mixing of Cu$^{2+}$ and Zn$^{2+}$ between the Cu and the Zn sites (antisite disorder) in the $x = 1$ phase can be expected to be low, but exactly how low has not previously been measured. From the magnetic susceptibility of samples with $x < 1$ it is clear that the Cu$^{2+}$ ions on the interplane Zn site are only weakly coupled to the kagome layers, and it has been suggested that the divergence of the magnetic susceptibility for $x = 1$ at low temperatures can be explained by antisite permutations of 6%–7% of the Cu$^{2+}$ ions with $\sim 19\%$ of the Zn$^{2+}$ [16–18].

To be able to account for the antisite disorder in the further analysis of the system, the Cu$^{2+}$/Zn$^{2+}$ mixing was measured using neutron powder diffraction at the Rotax neutron time-of-flight diffractometer at the ISIS facility.

![Intensity (arb. units)](http://example.com/fig1.png)

FIG. 1 (color online). Section of the neutron-diffraction pattern of $\text{ZnCu}_3(\text{OH})_6\text{Cl}_2$ at 10 K, and the result of the structure refinement (residuals $\chi^2 = 13.95$, $R_p = 2.83\%$, $R_{wp} = 2.73\%$). The inset shows two kagome layers with Cu sites (black), and the interplane Zn site (gray) of the zinc paratacamite structure. The antisite disorder means that a fraction of the Cu$^{2+}$ ions interchange with (for $x = 1$ an equal number of) Zn$^{2+}$ ions.
United Kingdom. We used a 4 g powder sample of deuterated $x = 1$ zinc paratacamite, synthesised using the hydrothermal method as described in [11]. The purity of the samples and Cu$^{2+}$ to Zn$^{2+}$ ratio were verified with powder x-ray diffraction and inductively coupled plasma auger electron spectroscopy (ICP-AES) with an accuracy of $\pm 0.03$ in $x$. Neutron-diffraction data were collected at 285, 150, and 10 K, and Rietveld analyzed against the structure as reported in [11]. No structural changes were observed with temperature, and the level of deuteration was refined to 94.0(6)%$^a$. During the refinement the total Cu$^{2+}$ : Zn$^{2+}$ ratio was fixed at 3:1, as measured directly using ICP-AES. It was further assumed there were no vacant Zn or Cu sites. In this way the Cu$^{2+}$ occupancy on the kagome lattice was refined to 91(2)%, corresponding to a Zn$^{2+}$ occupancy of the interplane Zn site of 73(6)%$^a$ [19], for the highest-statistics data set taken at 10 K. The result is given in Fig. 1. The refinements of a Quantum Design PPMS system, on stated.

reduction of the Cu and Zn site occupancies, which also was a small further reduction of the residues for a slight constraints the solution was stable, but no longer unique. There was a small further reduction of the residues for a slight reduction of the Cu and Zn site occupancies, which also suggests that the experimental error will be large than stated.

The heat-capacity measurements were carried out using a Quantum Design PPMS system, on $\sim 5$ mg dye-pressed pellets of Zn$_{1-x}$Cu$_x$(OH)$_2$Cl$_2$ with $x = 0.5, 0.8, 0.9$ and 1.0. We could reproduce the heat capacity for $x = 1$ in 0, 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 9 T fields as reported by Helton et al. [14]. Figure 2 presents the heat capacities of samples with $x = 0.8, 0.9$, and $x = 1$ in 0 and 9 T and for $x = 0.5$ in 0 T. For intermediate fields, not shown here for clarity, the shoulder gradually moves to higher temperatures while the total entropy below $\sim 24$ K remains constant. The magnetic susceptibility of samples with $x = 0.8, x = 0.9$, and $x = 1$ as shown in Fig. 3 was measured with a Quantum Design MPMS system, on $\sim 50$ mg pellets.

To the eye, the field dependence of the heat capacity is similar to the Schottky anomaly arising from defects in Zn-doped Y$_2$BaNiO$_5$ and [Ni(C$_2$H$_4$N$_2$)$_2$(NO$_3$)$_2$]ClO$_4$ (NEEP) 21]. Hence, we have applied a similar analysis as described in [20]. To study the field-dependent part of the heat capacity, for each sample ($x$) the difference was taken between the interpolated heat capacity curves measured in different fields. The inset in Fig. 2 shows the difference between the 0 and 9 T curves $\Delta C_V(T)/T = (C_V(H = 0 T) - C_V(H = 9 T))/T$ for $x = 0.8$ (crosses) and for $x = 1$ (squares). We found that the field-dependent part of the heat capacity can be modeled by a small number of zero-field split doublets, i.e., interacting $S = 1/2$ spins or $S = 1/2$ excitations. $\Delta C_V(T)$ was fitted with $f(C_V^{S = 1/2}(\Delta E_H^{1}))$, where $f$ is the fraction of doublets per unit cell (or their spectral weight). $C_V^{S = 1/2}(\Delta E_H^{1})$ is the heat capacity from a $S = 1/2$ spin with a level splitting $\Delta E_H^{1}$, which for fields $H \geq 2$ T, equals the Zeeman splitting with $g = 2.2$, as shown in the inset of Fig. 4. The shoulder in the heat capacity in zero-field, which corresponds to a zero-field splitting of the doublets of $\Delta E \sim 1.7$ K (0.15 meV) for $x = 1$, $\Delta E \sim 2.1$ K for $x = 0.9$ and $\Delta E \sim 2.2$ K for $x = 0.8$ indicates that the levels involved are part of an interacting system, and cannot be ascribed to a paramagnetic impurity phase. The best agreement with experiment was obtained when a small Gaussian spread $\sigma$ in level splittings $\Delta E$ was taken into account, indicated as the error bars in the inset of Fig. 4. This brings the number of fit parameters to 5. The lines through the data points in the inset of Fig. 2 are the fit results for $x = 0.8$ and $x = 1$. We find that $f = 0.21(1), 0.22(1)$, and...
of the lowest magnetic (J = d) as described here has also been observed in neutron data. It should be noted that a doublet with a field dependence is a magnetic level too. Several models have been tried, of which only the doublet giving rise to a field dependence is a magnetic level too. Most likely, the lowest energy level involved in the system is lowered (the Cu^2+ concentration is increased), while the muon relaxation increase is indicative of a slowing down of the spin dynamics [13]. The hysteresis is a history dependence which rules out a macroscopic quantum state for the system as a whole, since such a state would have a unitary time evolution as described by the Schrödinger equation. That the latter is not the case here is also clear from the energy gap for the antisite spins in zero field, which increases as x is lowered. Using our model this increase is quantified as a gap of 1.7 K for x = 1 to 2.2 K for x = 0.8. This may be the strongest indication that the energy gap corresponds to local excitations rather than coherent many-body quantum states of the total system. In the latter case, the time dependence should follow the Schrödinger equation where a larger gap leads to faster dynamics.

We suggest, as is also done in [16–18], that the fraction f of zero-field split doublets, which models the field dependence in the heat capacity for 0.8 ≤ x ≤ 1, are weakly coupled S = 1/2 spins from Cu^2+ ions residing on interplane Zn sites (antisite spins). For x = 1 an identical fraction f of Zn^2+ ions must occupy Cu sites on the kagome lattice. Once f(x) is known the Cu^2+ coverage c(x) of the three Cu sites per unit cell is given by c = 4 − x − f(x). An important assumption in our argument is that the heat capacity of a slightly diamagnetically doped kagome lattice is field independent, which is reasonable as long as gµBH ≪ θ_w [6,23]. For the deuterated x = 1 sample used for the neutron-diffraction measurements it follows that the antisite disorder is 6.3(3)% in Cu^2+ or 19.0(9)% in Zn^2+, in rough agreement with the neutron-diffraction result.

Comparing the heat capacity data of several x = 1 samples, all synthesized at a temperature of 484 K, an average antisite disorder of ~6.0(6)% in Cu^2+ is derived, as listed in Table I, along with the results for x = 0.8 and x = 0.9. The chemical potential behind the Cu^2+ /Zn^2+ partitioning can now be estimated to ~1400 K, a plausible value given that most likely the Zn sites becomes locally slightly angle-distorted, if occupied by an otherwise orbitally degenerate Cu^2+ ion. The Cu sites on the kagome lattice are energetically favored by the Cu^2+ ions, and there is only a slow increase of the Cu^2+ occupancy on the Zn sites until the Cu^2+ occupancy of the kagome lattice (c in Table I) is almost complete. For x = 0.8 the magnetic hysteresis is too large to be ascribed to impurities or local variations in Zn stoichiometry (Fig. 3). Since even at x = 0.8 only ~20% of the Zn sites are occupied by Cu^2+, this hysteresis must be due to the higher connectivity of the 3D lattice, which is mainly due to the higher Cu^2+ occupancy of the kagome planes (see Table I). Hence, for the phases x < 1 which have a magnetic hysteresis the kagome layers must be in a magnetic state; i.e., both singlet and triplet states mix into the ground state. Since no quantum phase transition occurs between x = 0.8 and x = 1 as is clear from our heat-capacity data, the ground state of the ka-

![FIG. 4 (color online). The field-independent part of the heat capacity as obtained from the 0 and 9 T data of samples with x = 0.8, 0.9, and 1. The dotted lines (blue online) give fits to the corrected heat capacity for x = 1 with γTα with α = 1.3 and 1.7. The inset shows ΔE as a function of H between 0 and 9 T, compared to the Zeeman splitting with g = 2.2. Sample 2 is the deuterated x = 1 sample which was used in the neutron-diffraction experiment.](image)
visible at a slightly higher temperature than the shoulder in independent part of the heat capacity a weak shoulder is likely corresponds to the kagome layers. In this field-data are identical within the experimental error, which account the distortive effect of the shoulder due to couplings between the kagome layers, which are connected via the antisite spins, kagome layers follows a power-law for decouple. If the heat capacity from perfectly 2D kagome layers, which are connected via the antisite spins, the entropy recovered per Cu$^{2+}$ spin.

The heat capacity of the kagome lattice can be estimated by subtracting the heat capacity from the Cu$^{2+}$ spins on the Zn sites. The result for the data with $0.8 \leq x \leq 1$ is shown in Fig. 4. For all $x$ the curves obtained from the 0 and 9 $T$ data are identical within the experimental error, which follows from the quality of the fit as described in the previous paragraphs. This part of the heat capacity most likely corresponds to the kagome layers. In this field-independent part of the heat capacity a weak shoulder is visible at a slightly higher temperature than the shoulder due to the antisite spins. As $x \rightarrow 1$ the shoulder becomes less pronounced, and hence, it may be interpreted as due to the entropy release when the fluctuations in neighboring kagome layers, which are connected via the antisite spins, decouple. If the heat capacity from perfectly 2D kagome layers follows a power-law for $T \rightarrow 0$, then taking into account the distortive effect of the shoulder due to couplings between the kagome layers, 0.17 $^u$mol$^{-1}$ formula units with $\alpha = 1.3(1)$ is our best estimate. An exponent $\alpha = 2$ cannot be brought into agreement with our data.

In summary, based on the field dependence of the shoulder in the low-temperature heat capacity, which corresponds to the weakly dispersive feature observed at the Zeeman energy in neutron spectroscopy data, we rule out interpretations based on a singlet-triplet splitting. Rather, the feature remains a doublet over the entire range of applied fields. We suggest these doublets are the magnetic states of the Cu$^{2+}$ antisite spins, which raises an important question as to the origin of the observed zero-field splitting of the antisite spins. From analysis of the heat capacity and the magnetic susceptibility as a function of $x$ we further conclude that even for $x = 1$ the ground state of the kagome system is a gapless spin liquid.

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TABLE I. The fitted fraction of antisite spins per unit cell $f$, the corresponding Cu$^{2+}$ occupancy of the kagome lattice $c = 4 - x - f$, the total entropy from the antisite spins $S_f$, the measured total entropy $S(T)$ up to 24 K, and the percentage of the entropy recovered per Cu$^{2+}$ spin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$x$ (mol)</th>
<th>$f$</th>
<th>$c$</th>
<th>$S_f/R$</th>
<th>$S(T)/R$</th>
<th>$S(T)\rightarrow 0$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.346(8)</td>
<td>1.061(12)</td>
<td>43.9(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.210</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.993(11)</td>
<td>44.7(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.220</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.959(9)</td>
<td>44.8(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.933(9)</td>
<td>44.8(2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here $f$ not obtained from the heat capacity, which at this level of doping is altered due to a cooperative transition. However, for $x = 0.5$ it is safe to assume that $c = 3.0$ (full occupancy) and hence $f = x$.

For $T > 24$ K no relative changes in $S(T)$ occur between samples with different $x$.

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[19] The stated error bar is $3\times\sigma$ estimated in the Rietveld refinement, corresponding to a 99% confidence interval.