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Irreversible proliferation of magnetic moments at cleaved surfaces of topological Kondo insulator SmB$_6$

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The compound SmB$_6$ is the best established realization of a topological Kondo insulator, in which a topological insulator state is obtained through Kondo coherence. Recent studies have found evidence that the surface of SmB$_6$ hosts ferromagnetic domains, creating an intrinsic platform for unidirectional ballistic transport at the domain boundaries. Here, surface-sensitive X-ray absorption (XAS) and bulk-sensitive resonant inelastic X-ray scattering (RIXS) spectra are measured at the Sm N$_{4,5}$-edge, and used to evaluate electronic symmetries, excitations and temperature dependence near the surface of cleaved samples. The XAS data show that the density of large-moment atomic multiplet states on a cleaved surface grows irreversibly over time, to a degree that likely exceeds a related change that has recently been observed in the surface 4f orbital occupation.

The topological Kondo insulator (TKI) state is a variant of the topological insulator state$^{1-4}$, in which a topologically ordered insulating electronic band structure is obtained from Kondo physics. The realization of a TKI state in mixed-valent SmB$_6$ was strongly indicated by early theoretical investigations$^{4,5}$, and has now been established through direct measurement of the topological surface states via angle resolved photoemission$^{6-11}$ and transport studies$^{12,13}$. Strong evidence has recently been found suggesting that the surface of polished SmB$_6$ samples can also host ferromagnetic domains$^{14}$, a property that is theoretically associated with exotic axion electrodynamics, an inverse spin-galvanic effect, and ballistic one dimensional transport channels at domain boundaries$^{2,14-16}$. Moreover, surface sensitive X-ray photoemission (XPS) measurements have shown that the surface 4f occupation evolves irreversibly towards 4f$^5$ as a function of time following cleavage in ultra high vacuum (UHV)$^{17}$. Here, multiplet-dominated X-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS) and resonant inelastic X-ray scattering (RIXS) measurements in the vacuum ultraviolet (VUV) regime are used as a symmetry-sensitive probe to map the Sm N$_{4,5}$-edge excitations and show that a similarly large change in the density of large-moment samarium sites accompanies this time evolution. This evolution is consistent with expectations for the transition from a Kondo insulating state to magnetism, and represents a means for incrementally tuning the strength of the surface magnetic instability.

Measurements were performed at the beamline 4.0.3 (MERLIN) RIXS endstation (MERIXS)$^{18,19}$ at the Advanced Light Source (ALS), Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Large single crystals of SmB$_6$ were grown by the Al flux method as in Ref.$^{17}$, cleaved at low temperature, and maintained at a UHV pressure of approximately $3 \times 10^{-10}$ Torr. The photon beam had a grazing 30° or angle of incidence to the cleaved [001] sample face, and scattered photons were measured at 90° to the incident beam trajectory. XAS was measured using the total electron yield (TEY) method, and the expected penetration depth of measurements is roughly $d \lesssim 2$ nm for XAS$^{20}$ and $d \sim 10-30$ nm for RIXS$^{21}$. To minimize sensitivity to surface inhomogeneity, the beam profile on the sample was configured as a very broad strip with dimensions of roughly $10 \times 600 \mu$m$^2$ (similar results from additional cleaves are shown in the online Supplemental Material (SM)$^{22}$).

Atomic multiplet simulations were performed with typical renormalization values for the multipolar Slater-Condon interaction parameters$^{22}$. Similar multiplet models that focus on Sm f-electrons, disregarding the itinerant 5d electron gas, have been remarkably successful in reproducing XAS and XPS features of SmB$_6^{11,23}$. The multiplet ground states have f-electron angular momentum quantum numbers of (4f$^5$) J=5/2 and (4f$^4$) J=0, representing the presence or absence of a hole in the J=5/2 4f bands. The atomic multiplet picture is expected to be most accurate as a description of the resonance states, which are dominated by extremely strong angular momentum coupling between the 4d core hole and 5d electrons on the scattering site (a $\sim 20$eV combined energy scale). Multiplet state energetics in the VUV are defined in terms of coherent local moment symmetries. In contrast to the previous study of 4f charge density at the SmB$_6$ surface$^{17}$, atomic multiplet measurements in the VUV are sensitive to the coherent multiparticle symmetry of electrons in hybridized electronic orbits involving both the scattering site and neighboring atoms$^{24,25}$. This multiplet symmetry can be thought of as the ‘nominal valence’ state defining local moment degrees of freedom, and can deviate significantly from the atomically resolved charge density.

The samarium N$_{4,5}$-edge XAS spectrum of a pristine SmB$_6$ surface that has been recently cleaved and main-
FIG. 1: Irreversible proliferation of local moments. (a) X-ray absorption measurements of the surface of topological Kondo insulator SmB$_6$ show increasingly rapid irreversible surface changes as the sample is aged. The sample was maintained below 100K for the first 4.5 hr after cleavage, and was then heated to 300K. The spectrum that resulted after cycling back to room temperature is shown in black, and a sample that had been stored in ambient air is also shown (red curve). (b) Difference curves, subtracting the base (t=3 hr) XAS profile. (black curve) A sample that has been cycled to room temperature continues to resemble the high temperature spectrum upon cooling back to T=20K. The trend of changes from aging resembles (red curve) the result of oxidation from air exposure. (c) Numerical simulations of magnetically inert J=0 (4f$^8$) sites and large-moment J=5/2 (4f$^5$) sites. Red arrows highlight the anomalous h$\nu$=126.6 eV feature.

A charge transfer threshold at h$\nu$~133 eV$^{25,26}$. The spectrum changes pronouncedly as the sample is aged. Difference spectra in Fig. 1(b) show that as time progresses, spectral intensity shifts into higher energy features at $h\nu > 136$ eV, and the sharper 126-133 eV features shift into a new spectral pattern that bears little resemblance to that seen initially. Even though the time interval between each pair of successive curves is approximately the same (45 to 60 min), the magnitude of the change is significantly larger for the interval from 4.5 to 5.5 hr, in which the sample was heated to room temperature. Cycling back to low temperature (black curve) resulted in only small quantitative changes. Later scans did not reveal continued changes, however the aging trend can be taken further still by exposing the sample to air (see red curve), suggesting that aging the surface is promoting changes in the f-electron count that resemble oxidation. The fractional change in feature intensities after thermal cycling is dramatic, and ranges from 10-50% throughout most of the spectrum.

To identify the physical significance of the surface evolution, a multiplet simulation in Fig. 1(c) shows the features expected in Sm N$_{1.5}$-edge XAS from J=0 and J=5/2 sites. Dashed drop-lines highlight an excellent qualitative match between the regions that lose intensity during the aging process and the J=0 features, while the J=5/2 features correlate with a gain (or reduced loss) of intensity. Only one feature is clearly anomalous in this analysis. The lowest energy XAS peak at h$\nu$=126.6 eV is not reproduced by either the J=0 or the J=5/2 multiplet calculation, and has temperature dependence consistent with a J=5/2 symmetry attribution.

Similar XAS measurements have also been performed as a function of time on an electron doped sample with the composition Sm$_{0.98}$La$_{0.02}$B$_6$ (see Fig. 2). In this case, the sample was maintained at T<100K for a much longer 46 hr period, and the measurements confirm earlier observations that the aging process at low temperature proceeds on a time scale longer than 1 day$^{17}$. Heating to T=250K produced small changes that were fully reversed upon cycling back to T<100K. This is in contrast to the more rapid measurement on undoped SmB$_6$, and suggests that the physical end-point of low temperature aging is the same as the rapidly achieved end-point of room temperature aging.

Lanthanum is expected to act as a net electron donor, entering an ionization state much closer to 3+ as compared to Sm. Doping into the Sm 4f orbitals of roughly 0.3e$^-$/La atom is attributed from susceptibility studies$^{31}$. The initial Sm$_{0.98}$La$_{0.02}$B$_6$ XAS spectrum is nearly identical to the slightly aged t=4.5 hr spectrum of undoped SmB$_6$, and the final aged (cycled) curve is qualitatively identical to XAS from the fully aged undoped SmB$_6$ sample. The fact that J=5/2 features in the base (t~3 hr) spectrum of Sm$_{0.98}$La$_{0.02}$B$_6$ are more prominent than in the low temperature spectrum of SmB$_6$ is at odds with the identification of La as an electron donor, and suggests some variability in the nature of the cleaved surface (this
FIG. 2: Slow surface evolution at low temperature. (a) X-ray absorption measurements as a function of time for slightly doped Sm$_{0.96}$La$_{0.04}$B$_6$ maintained beneath T=100K. High temperature (T=200K) and cycled T<100K post-evolution curves are also shown. The final cycled curve (black) is nearly identical to the 46 hr curve (yellow), and the two cannot be easily distinguished by eye. (b) Difference curves, subtracting the base (t~ 3 hr) XAS profile. (c) Numerical simulations of magnetically inert J=0 (4f$^6$) sites and large moment J=5/2 (4f$^6$) sites. Red arrows highlight the anomalous h$\nu$=126.6 eV feature.

is confirmed in Fig. S3 of the SM$^{22}$).

Measuring resonant inelastic scattering at the photon energies used for XAS reveals a wide range of excitations, some of which are quite sharp in energy, as seen in Fig. 3(a). Prominent features at E=0.9, 2.5, 3.7 and 5.2 eV appear to be Raman-like (non-dispersive), however the upper bound of intensity on the energy loss axis disperses with a slope similar to 1 as a function of incident energy, starting from ~3 eV at an incident energy of h$\nu$=126.6 eV, as expected for scattering scenarios that involve interplay with degrees of freedom that have similar energetics with or without a core hole present. This suggests that a truly accurate model of the RIXS excitations must incorporate significant non-local physics, going beyond the degrees of freedom on a single scattering site. The RIXS spectrum and optical conductivity$^{32-34}$ both picks up intensity from roughly 1.5eV, suggesting the onset of a large density of itinerant continuum states, however the optical data contain no candidates for any of the energetically sharp features seen by RIXS.

In spite of not fulfilling this requirement, the atomic multiplet model is still expected to be accurate for certain relatively localized excitations, and to yield accurate matrix elements of the ‘direct RIXS’ scattering process$^{27,35}$. One can attribute a tentative correspondence between energy loss regions with large intensity in the J=5/2 simulation and the intensity seen by RIXS (see highlighted regions in Fig. 3(a-b)). The feature at E~0.9 eV gives a particularly close correspondence, and has no competing interpretation within the J=0 simulation (Fig. 3(c)). This E~0.9 eV mode is actually a collection of closely spaced features, with additional peaks visible in the h$\nu$ =127.8 and 130.8 eV curves. Lower energy excitations visible in the simulations are not resolved from the elastic line, which is strong due to the broad off-angle tail of specular reflection in the VUV$^{24}$. The lack of easily identifiable J=0 derived features may indicate that single-atom excitations on 4f$^6$ sites are shorter lived (i.e. broader), possibly because they can easily delocalize into 4f$^6$X states, where ‘X’ indicates an electron that has entered a more delocalized band symmetry. The anomalous h$\nu$ = 126.6 eV resonance, which does not occur in our multiplet simulations, resonates primarily with the 0.9 eV feature, corroborating identification of the h$\nu$ = 126.6 eV resonance with scattering from a J=5/2 site.

A sufficiently large increase in the density of J=5/2 sites in the mixed-valent samarium lattice is expected to destabilize the Kondo insulating state and induce magnetism, as has been seen in high pressure studies$^{36-38}$. The amplitude of the surface change can be evaluated from the XAS data in Fig. 1, if we adopt the approximation that the spectra can be broken down into linear combinations of pure J=5/2 and J=0 curves (see derivations in the SM$^{22}$). The accuracy of this approximation is supported in the present case by the observation of a fairly stable isospectral (constant intensity) point at 136.7-137eV for all warming curves.

Monovalent J=5/2 and J=0 XAS spectra algebraically obtained from comparing SmB$_6$ XAS measurements at the pristine (t=3 hr) and aged (cycled) surface are plotted in Fig. 4(b). Shaded regions represent error margins as described in the caption, and are associated with different extrapolated changes in the population of J=5/2 and J=0 sites over the aging period. The outer shaded boundaries represent extreme scenarios that lead to clear anomalies in the extrapolated monovalent curves, such as duplicated features and negative XAS intensity$^{22}$. The best fit J=0 XAS curve is obtained with the assumption that the J=5/2 population grows by a remarkable 60-80%. Growth estimates beneath 40% lead to multiple significant artifacts in the extrapolated XAS spectrum. Based on the extrapolated XAS curves, we can assess that a single-atom multiplet calculation provides
Intense (arb. units)

0 100 200 300 400 500

11, 43, 44

100 250 300 350 400

ple known surface reconstructions

of cleaved surfaces, and the presence of multi-

tronic structure, the intrinsically polar and anisotropic

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the nature of the magnetic order achieved under pres-

duced X-ray absorption results show that the

density of large-moment Sm sites in the top ∼2 nm of
cleaved SmB₆ more than doubles as the surface ages in

The increase can be accelerated by heating to room
temperature, and is taken further through exposure to

Lower energy excitations of SmB₆ are mapped with

RIXS, providing a window into dynamics and energetics

of the valence electrons, which will serve as a reference

future theoretical and spectroscopic investigations. The

large surface changes seen by electron yield XAS are dis-

tinct from the lack of extraordinary temperature depen-
dence at depths of 10-30 nm, as evaluated from RIXS
spectra. The increased density of large-moment sites on
aged samples provides a plausible explanation for the re-
cent observation of ferromagnetic domains at a polished
SmB₆ surface. More generally, the apparent sensitiv-
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1 L. Fu, C. L. Kane, and E. J. Mele, Topological Insulators

FIG. 3: Sharp inelastic excitations. (a) RIXS spectra of recently cleaved SmB₆ maintained at T=20K using the labeled incident photon energies, which are also indicated on (inset) the T=20K XAS profile. Numerical simulations are presented for RIXS from (b) J=5/2 (4f⁵) and (c) J=0 (4f⁶) local moment sites. Curves at the anomalous hv∼126.6 eV resonance peak are plotted with a thicker line, and four energy loss regions (A-D) that contain strong scattering within the J=5/2 simulation are highlighted in yellow.

many matrix elements of the N₄.5-edge resonance pro-
cess, but is of marginal use for understanding the RIXS
excitations, and omits XAS features that appear to be
associated with coupling to itinerant states.

High pressure studies have found that a new mag-
netic ground state has been realized in bulk SmB₆ beyond a
crossover point thought to occur when the fractional
density of 4f⁵ sites reaches roughly n_{5/2} ∼ 0.65.⁴⁰,⁴¹
Combined examination of the extrapolated J=5/2 and
J=0 curves enables an algebraic derivation of the t=3 hr
J=5/2 site density as

n_{5/2} = 0.39 ± 0.05,⁴² with a surface evolution plotted in Fig. 4(a). In distinguishing n_{5/2} from the nominal bulk 4f occupancy, which is thought to be n_f ∼ 5.5,⁴¹,⁴⁷,⁴⁸ this picture suggests that the transition is from one with a singlet-dominated low temperature dominated regime, with fewer observed large-moment sites than the 4f occupancy alone would suggest, to an aged surface in which local moments are less screened. This scenario matches the attributed behavior as the crystal is driven into a magnetic state under pressure.⁴⁷,⁴⁸ We note that the nature of the magnetic order achieved under pressure is not definitively understood, however a proximate ferromagnetic state can be achieved from 1% Fe doping at ambient pressure.⁴¹ The air-exposed end point of n_{5/2} ∼ 0.9 is consistent with the proposed interpretation of an earlier soft X-ray M-edge XAS measurement.⁴²

A comprehensive interpretation of the mechanism be-
hind the observed irreversible surface changes is beyond
the scope of the present study. Such a theory may need to
address multiple factors including the correlated elec-

tronic structure, the intrinsically polar and anisotropic

nature of cleaved surfaces, and the presence of multi-

ple known surface reconstructions.⁴¹,⁴³,⁴⁴ The bulk of the

sample also evolves towards a lower 4f occupancy

with increasing temperature.⁹,¹¹,¹³,³⁷,³⁹,⁴⁰ However, the

bulk-sensitive RIXS spectrum undergoes no easily visi-
table changes as a function of temperature, suggesting that surface aging is a far more dramatic effect. The La

doped sample is thought to have roughly identical bulk
temperature dependence.⁴¹

These resonant X-ray absorption results show that the
density of large-moment Sm sites in the top ∼2 nm of
cleaved SmB₆ is more than doubles as the surface ages in

UHV. The increase can be accelerated by heating to room
temperature, and is taken further through exposure to

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FIG. 4: A path to magnetism. (a) The surface aging trend of the J=5/2 site fraction is estimated from extrapolations of the pure J=5/2 and J=0 single-site XAS curves. The sample was heated to 300K after 4.5 hours, resulting in more rapid aging. The estimated density of J=5/2 sites in an air-exposed sample is indicated with a star. (b) Algebraically determined pure J=5/2 and J=0 XAS curves. Shaded regions indicate variability based on (darker) ±1 and (lighter) ±0.4 differences in the estimated ratios of monovalent site densities of the J=5/2 site fraction is estimated from extrapolations of the J=5/2 fraction (n). Resulting error in the aging trend curve is indicated by the same shading in panel (a).

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