Twofold spontaneous symmetry breaking in a heavy fermion superconductor UPt₃

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(Dated: January 31, 2013)

The field-orientation dependent thermal conductivity of the heavy-fermion superconductor UPt₃ was measured down to very low temperatures and under magnetic fields throughout three distinct superconducting phases: A, B, and C phases. In the C phase, a striking twofold oscillation of the thermal conductivity within the basal plane is resolved reflecting the superconducting gap structure with a line of node along the a axis. Moreover, we find an abrupt vanishing of the oscillation across a transition to the B phase, as a clear indication of a change of gap symmetries. We also identify extra two line nodes below and above the equator in both B and C phases. From these results together with the symmetry consideration, the gap function of UPt₃ is conclusively determined as an $E_{2u}$ representation characterized by a combination of two line nodes at the tropics and point nodes at the poles.

PACS numbers: 74.20.Rp, 74.25.fc, 74.70.Tx

Spontaneous symmetry breaking is one of the fundamental paradigms encompassing from condensed matter physics to high energy physics, constituting the foundation of modern physics. This paradigm is crucial sometimes because it can give a handle to discover some unknown exotic ordered phase. This is particularly true when broken symmetry is extremely low, that is, the “residual symmetry” is so small, one may effectively and self-evidently narrows down possible ordered phase to identify.

Understanding the unconventional superconductivity, in which electron pairs are formed without phonon, has been a challenge. Part of the problem in uncovering the mechanism is that little is known about the pairing symmetry. The heavy-fermion superconductor UPt₃ is one of the examples whose pairing symmetries are as yet to be clarified. The most intriguing feature of this material is the existence of a multiple phase diagram; UPt₃ undergoes a double superconducting transition at the upper critical temperature $T_{c2} \sim 540$ mK into the A phase and at the lower critical temperature $T_{c1} \sim 490$ mK into the B phase [1]. In addition, the third (C) phase is stabilized at low temperatures under high magnetic fields [2]. A crucial role of a weak antiferromagnetic order below $T_N \sim 5$ K for the phase multiplicity is indicated by the pressure studies [3]. Power law dependence of the thermodynamic and transport quantities reveal the presence of nodes in the superconducting gap [4,5]. Moreover, a possibility of an odd-parity pairing is inferred from the nuclear magnetic resonance studies of the Knight shift [5] and is supported theoretically [6] by eliminating the singlet even parity scenario.

Extensive theoretical efforts have been devoted to explain these disparate experimental results [7–11]. Among them, the $E_{2u}$ scenario with a line node in the basal plane and point nodes along the c axis has been regarded as one of the promising candidates [12]. Several experimental results, such as the anisotropy of the thermal conductivity [13] and the ultrasonic attenuation [14] as well as the recent small-angle neutron scattering [15] and the Josephson tunnel junction [16], have been claimed to be compatible with this model. On the other hand, there exist some controversies in explaining the following experiments; 1) the spontaneous internal field due to the broken time-reversal symmetry is most likely absent [17], 2) the $d$-vector has two components in the B phase [8, 3) a point where the three superconducting phases meet is a tetracritical point [2]. Moreover, to date no experimental evidence for the gap structure of each phase associated with the $E_{2u}$ model has been provided. The pairing symmetry of UPt₃, therefore, remains unclear.

One of the most conclusive ways to identify the pairing symmetry is to elucidate the gap structure by the thermal conductivity measurements with rotating magnetic fields relative to the crystal axes deep inside the superconducting state. This technique has been successful to probe the nodal gap structure of several unconventional superconductors by virtue of its directional nature and sensitivity to the delocalized quasiparticles [18]. In this paper, we present a decisive experiment of the angular dependence of the thermal conductivity of UPt₃ revealing the spontaneous rotation symmetry lowering, namely the unusual gap structure with a lower rotational symmetry than the crystal structure.

High quality single crystal of UPt₃ with the high residual resistivity ratio of 800 was grown by the Czochralski pulling method in a tetra-arc furnace [19]. We measured the thermal conductivity along the hexagonal c axis (heat...
superconductivity is a fascinating issue to be addressed. The search of the relevance of this behavior to the odd-parity comes from the Doppler shift of the QP energy spectrum, up to $H$ at 55 mK near $\kappa$. The determined $H$ shows a steep increase up to $\sim 0.3$ K without apparent anomalies at $T_c^+$ and $T_c^-$. On further cooling, $\kappa(T)/T$ considerably decreases due to a reduction of the QP densities, and takes an extremely small value at the lowest $T \sim T_c^+/20$, consistent with the previous measurements. In the normal state (3T), $\kappa(T)/T$ appears to continuously increase down to the lowest $T$. The dashed line denotes $\kappa(T)/T$ obtained from the normal-state resistivity $\rho(T)$ using the Wiedemann-Franz law, $\kappa(T)/T = L_0/\rho(T)$ ($L_0$: the Lorentz number). Importantly, we confirm that $\kappa(T)/T$ is close to $L_0/\rho(T)$ at low temperature $T < 100$ mK, indicating the dominant electronic contribution in the heat transport. In this $T$-range, the $H$ dependence of the thermal conductivity $\kappa(H)/T$ at 55 mK shows a remarkable $H$-linear dependence at low fields for both $c$ and $b$ directions (the main panel of Fig. 1) in contradiction to the field-insensitive behavior of fully gapped superconductors except in the vicinity of $H_{c2}$, providing evidence for the nodal superconductivity in UPt3.

In addition, we find distinct anomalies associated with a transition from the B to C phase at $H_{BC}$ (open arrows). The fact that the BC transition manifests by a sharp change of the slope implies a suppression of one of the degenerate order parameter components in the B phase. This behavior can be more clearly resolved for the $b$ axis. The determined $H_{BC}$ together with $H_{c2}$ denoted by the solid arrows are summarized in Fig. 3(d) for $H \parallel b$. We also note that a striking anisotropy is found in $\kappa(H)/T$ at 55 mK near $H_{c2}$: $\kappa(T)$ for $H \parallel c$ shows a rapid increase just below $H_{c2}$, while the one for $H \parallel b$ linearly increases up to $H_{c2}$, as similarly observed in Sr2RuO4. A search of the relevance of this behavior to the odd-parity superconductivity is a fascinating issue to be addressed.

Next, to shed light on the nodal topology in the superconducting phases, we concentrate on the angular dependence of $\kappa$. The most significant effect on the thermal transport for nodal superconductors in the mixed state comes from the Doppler shift of the QP energy spectrum, $E(\mathbf{p}) \rightarrow E(\mathbf{p}) - \mathbf{v}_s \cdot \mathbf{p}$, in the circulating supercurrent flow $\mathbf{v}_s$. This effect becomes important at such positions where the gap becomes smaller than the Doppler shift term ($\Delta < \mathbf{v}_s \cdot \mathbf{p}$). The maximal magnitude of the Doppler shift strongly depends on the angle between the node direction and $H$, giving rise to the oscillation of the density of states (DOS). Consequently, $\kappa$ attains the maximum (minimum) value when $H$ is directed to the antinodal (nodal) directions.

FIG. 1: (color online). Magnetic field dependence of the thermal conductivity $\kappa(H)/T$ along the $c$ and $b$ axes at various temperatures. The open and closed arrows represent the B $\rightarrow$ C transitions $H_{BC}$ and the upper critical fields $H_{c2}$, respectively. Inset: temperature dependence of $\kappa(T)/T$ under zero field and at 3 T for $H \parallel b$. The dashed line shows $\kappa(T)/T = L_0/\rho$ ($L_0$: the Lorentz number) obtained from the normal-state resistivity $\rho$ using the Wiedemann-Franz law.
$H/H_{c2}$, where $H_{c2} = 2.6$ T for $H \parallel b$. It can be clearly seen that $|C_{2b}/\kappa_n|$ suddenly appears to be finite $\sim 3\%$ in the C phase, implying a change of the gap symmetries across the BC transition that is of second order. We note that $|C_{2b}/\kappa_n|$ obtained by rotating $H$ conically around the $c$ axis at fixed $\theta = 63^\circ$ is same order of magnitude with the values at $\theta = 90^\circ$ as denoted by an open circle in Fig. 2(e).

To further elucidate the gap symmetry, we present the polar angle ($\theta$) dependence of $\kappa$ in Fig. 3, showing $\kappa(\theta)/\kappa_n$ measured by rotating $H$ within the $ac$ plane (green circles) and the $bc$ plane (orange circles) at 50 mK at $|\mu_0 H| = (a)$ 1.5 T, (b) 1.0 T, and (c) 0.5 T. Here, $\kappa_n$ is measured at 50 mK above $H_{c2}$ for $H \parallel c$. The dominant twofold oscillation is found in all the fields with maxima at $\theta = 90^\circ$, which could be attributed to, such as the Fermi surface and/or the gap topology or the difference in transport with $H$ parallel to and normal to the heat current $q$. Regardless of the origin, the fact that $\kappa(\theta)/\kappa_n$ is maximized at $\theta = 90^\circ$ excludes an artificial origin of the in-plane twofold oscillation in the C phase due to a misalignment of $H$ relative to $q$. We thus conclude that the in-plane twofold symmetry in the C phase is a consequence of the node.

In the B phase (0.5 T), the two different scanning procedures within the $ac$ and $bc$ planes well converge with each other, consistent with the $\phi$-independence of $\kappa$. In addition, we find extra two minima at $\theta = 20^\circ$ and $160^\circ$. By plotting $\Delta \kappa(\theta)/\kappa_n \equiv (\kappa(\theta) - \kappa_0 - \kappa_{2b})/\kappa_n$ vs $\theta$ after the subtraction of $\kappa_0$ and $\kappa_{2b} = C_{2b} \cos 2\theta$, the minima become clearly visible at $35^\circ$ and $155^\circ$ (Fig. 3(c)). This double-minimum structure is also found in the C phase (Fig. 3(a)). We infer that these minima are derived from the two horizontal line nodes at the tropics as discussed below. In contrast to the B phase, the two scanning results do not coincide in the C phase (Fig. 3(a)); the difference is diminished at the poles and maximized at $\theta = 90^\circ$, being consistent with the in-plane twofold symmetry. Moreover, a significant appearance of the twofold symmetry across the BC transition can be seen at 1.0 T (Fig. 3(b)), in which one experiences the BC (CB) transition twice by varying $\theta$ because of the anisotropy of $H_{BC}$. Indeed, the transitions occur at $\theta = 30^\circ$ and $150^\circ$ taking distinct kinks. Remarkably, the difference between the two scanning procedures becomes finite upon entering the C phase, providing the compelling evidence for the twofold symmetry of the gap structure in the C phase. Moreover, the fact that $|C_{2b}/\kappa_n|$ takes same order of the magnitude at $\theta = 90^\circ$ and $63^\circ$ is in favor of a line node along the $a$ axis rather than the point nodes in the basal plane. Notably, although a mechanism which fixes domains is a puzzle, the in-plane twofold symmetry of $\kappa(\phi)$ indicates a single superconducting domain.

![FIG. 2](image1.png)

![FIG. 3](image2.png)
We discuss the order parameter symmetry of UPt$_3$ within the triplet category. The present experiments indicate (i) the line node along the $a$ axis in the C phase, (ii) the absence of in-plane gap anisotropy in the B phase, and (iii) the two line nodes at the tropics in both B and C phases. Taking into account all these results and the $d$-vector configurations assigned by the Knight shift \[8\], the order parameter is unambiguously determined with a form of $(k_a \hat{b} + k_b \hat{c})(5k_c^2 - 1)$ for the B phase, where $\hat{b}$ and $\hat{c}$ are unit vectors of the hexagonal axes representing the directions of $d$-vectors. This state belongs to two-dimensional $E_{1u}$ representation with the $f$-wave character, the so-called planar state in triplet pairing in the $D_{6h}$ hexagonal symmetry, and to degenerate $E_{2u}$ state for the recent claimed $D_{3d}$ trigonal symmetry \[23, 24\]. The gap structure consists of the two horizontal line nodes at the tropics ($k_c = \pm 1/\sqrt{5}$, $\theta = 63^\circ$ and $117^\circ$) and the point nodes at the poles ($k_c = k_b = 0$). Note that although the locations of the horizontal line nodes estimated by assuming a spherical Fermi surface do not agree with the observation ($\theta = 35^\circ$ and $155^\circ$), it could be changed by considering the realistic Fermi surface \[12\].

By lifting the doubly degeneracy, the order parameter for the C phase is given by $k_b \hat{c}(5k_c^2 - 1)$ for $H \parallel ab$ and $k_b \hat{a}(5k_b^2 - 1)$ for $H \parallel c$, respectively. In the same manner, $k_b \hat{c}(5k_c^2 - 1)$ state is readily assigned for the A phase. The schematic shapes of the gap symmetries in the three phases are shown in Fig. 3(d). We emphasize that this state is compatible not only with the hybrid gap state indicated by the several experiments \[13, 14\], in the sense that the line and point nodes simultaneously exist, but also with some experimental results for which the $E_{2u}$ model \[8\] has failed to describe, i.e., the absence of the internal magnetic field \[17\], the two-component $d$-vector for the B phase \[8\], and the tetracritical point in the phase diagram \[2\].

To further strengthen our identification, in particular on the existence of the horizontal line nodes on the tropics, we calculate the angle-resolved DOS by solving the Elienberger equation \[25\] for several possible gap functions. We compare here putative three gap functions in the C phase relative to the data in Fig. 4 where $\kappa(\theta)/\kappa_n$ and the DOS differences along the vertical nodal and antinodal $\theta$-scannings are depicted. The double peak structure characteristic in $E_{2u}$ and $E_{1g}$ whose origin comes from the horizontal node on the equator is not supported by the data that are consistent with the present $E_{1u}$ with the horizontal nodes on the tropics. In view of the Doppler shift idea mentioned above the QPs in the horizontal node on the equator contribute more when the field direction is away from $\theta = 90^\circ$.

In summary, we find striking twofold oscillations in angle-resolved thermal conductivity measurements at low temperatures in a strongly correlated heavy fermion superconductor UPt$_3$. This spontaneous symmetry lowering, which is the lowest possible rotational symmetry breaking in hexagonal crystal fortuitously and effectively narrows down the possible symmetry classes and leads us to uniquely identify the pairing symmetry for each phase in the multiple phase diagram. We conclude that the realized pairing function is $E_{1u}$ with the $f$-wave character, i.e., the so-called planar state in the triplet pairing. This state is analogous to the B phase in superfluid $^3$He, and obviously bears the Majorana zero mode at a surface \[26, 27\], namely a topological superconductor that is quite rare to find. Thus it is worth exploring further to understand this interesting material as a new platform for topological physics.

We acknowledge insightful discussions with T. Ohmi, M. Ozaki, M. Ichioka, H. Kusunose, and K. Ueda. This work is partially supported by grants-in-aid from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science; by grants-in-aid for Scientific Research on Innovative Areas “Heavy Electrons” (20102006) from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), Japan; and by Global COE Program from the MEXT through the Nanoscience and Quantum Physics Project of the Tokyo Institute of Technology.

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