Magnetic transition, long-range order, and moment fluctuations in the pyrochlore iridate \( \text{Eu}_2\text{Ir}_2\text{O}_7 \)

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(Dated: January 19, 2013)

Abstract

Muon spin rotation and relaxation experiments in the pyrochlore iridate \( \text{Eu}_2\text{Ir}_2\text{O}_7 \) yield a well-defined muon spin precession frequency below the metal-insulator/antiferromagnetic transition temperature \( T_M = 120 \) K, indicative of long-range commensurate magnetic order and thus ruling out quantum spin liquid and spin-glass-like ground states. The dynamic muon spin relaxation rate is temperature-independent between 2 K and \(~T_M\) and yields an anomalously long \( \text{Ir}^{4+} \) spin correlation time, suggesting a singular density of low-lying spin excitations. Similar behavior is found in other pyrochlores and geometrically frustrated systems, but also in the unfrustrated iridate \( \text{BaIrO}_3 \). \( \text{Eu}_2\text{Ir}_2\text{O}_7 \) may be only weakly frustrated; if so, the singularity might be associated with the small-gap insulating state rather than frustration.

PACS numbers: 75.20.Hr, 75.40.Cx, 75.50.Ee, 76.75.+i
Geometrical frustration of collinear near-neighbor spin interactions is a consequence of the corner-shared tetrahedral structure of pyrochlore transition-metal oxides, and has motivated considerable study of these materials. Compounds in the pyrochlore iridate family $R_2\text{Ir}_2\text{O}_7$, where $R$ is a trivalent lanthanide, are particularly interesting: $\text{Ir}^{4+}$ ($5d^5$) is expected to be a low-spin $S = 1/2$ ion, and the behavior of the Ir-derived conduction band is unusual. For $R = \text{Pr, Nd, Sm, and Eu}$ these compounds exhibit metallic behavior at high temperatures, while for $R = \text{Gd, Tb, Dy, Ho, Er, Yb, and Y}$ they are semiconducting. This crossover was attributed to reduction of the width of the $\text{Ir}^{4+}$-derived band as the $R$ ionic radius decreases across the rare-earth series.

In early studies spin-glass-like ordering was reported for $R = \text{Y, Lu, Sm, and Eu}$ on the basis of bifurcation of field-cooled (FC) and zero-field-cooled (ZFC) magnetizations and little or no specific heat anomaly at a transition temperature $T_M$. $^{\text{151}}\text{Eu}$ Mössbauer studies of $\text{Eu}_2\text{Ir}_2\text{O}_7$ found no long-range magnetic ordering down to 4.2 K. Subsequently, metal-insulator (MI) transitions at $T_M$ with small specific heat anomalies were reported for $R = \text{Nd, Sm, and Eu}$, and an exotic chiral spin-liquid metallic ground state was found in $\text{Pr}_2\text{Ir}_2\text{O}_7$. The MI transitions were attributed to $\text{Ir}^{4+}$ $5d$ electrons, with complex antiferromagnetic (AFM) ordering. $\text{Y}^{3+}$ and $\text{Lu}^{3+}$ are nonmagnetic, as is $\text{Eu}^{3+}$ in the Hund’s-rule ground state $J = 0$ ($L = S$), so that only $\text{Ir}^{4+}$ $5d$ electrons contribute to magnetism in these compounds. Magnetic ordering of localized $\text{Ir}^{4+}$ ions has been observed in a number of insulating iridates outside the pyrochlore family and is quite anomalous, because overlap of the large $\text{Ir}^{4+}$ wave functions should result in metallic conduction via Ir-derived bands. In the case of (unfrustrated) $\text{Sr}_2\text{IrO}_4$ a detailed treatment involving strong spin-orbit coupling leads to the possibility of a Mott transition, however, and suggests an effective angular momentum $J_{\text{eff}} = 1/2$. Alternatively, a Slater transition, as found in the pyrochlore $\text{Cd}_2\text{Os}_2\text{O}_7$, is suggested by the second-order nature of the transition.

Thus $\text{Eu}_2\text{Ir}_2\text{O}_7$ is a potential example of a geometrically frustrated system with “spin” = 1/2, and as such is of considerable fundamental interest. This Rapid Communication reports results of muon spin rotation and relaxation ($\mu$SR) experiments on a polycrystalline sample of this compound. A well-defined muon-spin precession frequency is observed below $T_M$, indicating a uniform internal field and thus ruling out significant disorder; the magnetic order is commensurate and long-ranged. The dynamic muon-spin relaxation rate $\lambda_d$ reflects...
anomalously slow spin fluctuations and remains constant to low temperatures. We speculate that this behavior might not be due solely to geometrical frustration, but may signal new low-lying spin excitations associated with a small-gap insulating state. The data show no critical slowing down of magnetic fluctuations as $T \rightarrow T_M$ from above, suggesting a mean-field-like transition.

Polycrystalline samples of Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$ were fabricated using a solid-state reaction technique. dc magnetization data (not shown) are consistent with previous results. $\mu$SR experiments were carried out at the M20 beam line at TRIUMF, Vancouver, Canada, using standard time-differential $\mu$SR. A weak (25-Oe) magnetic field was applied parallel to the initial muon polarization, to decouple muon spins from nuclear dipolar fields in the paramagnetic state. Data were taken in a $^4$He gas-flow cryostat over the temperature range 2–200 K.

Representative early-time asymmetry (signal amplitude) data $A(t)$ are shown in Fig. Damped oscillations are observed below 120 K, due to precession of the muon spins in a quasistatic component $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$ of the local field $B_{\text{loc}}$ at muon sites. This confirms the magnetic transition found from the dc magnetization measurements. The oscillation is weakly damped except for the initial half cycle, indicating that $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$ is relatively homogeneous.

FIG. 1. (Color online) Representative early-time asymmetry data $A(t)$ in Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$, longitudinal field = 25 Oe. Solid curves: fits using Eq. (1).
The late-time asymmetry data (not shown) exhibit exponential relaxation, due solely to dynamic (thermal) fluctuations of $B_{\text{loc}}$. This relaxation is much slower than the oscillation damping rate, indicating that the latter reflects a quasistatic distribution of $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$.

The data were fit using the two-component asymmetry function

$$A(t) = A_s \exp[-(\Lambda_s t)^K] \cos(\omega \mu t + \theta) + A_d \exp(-\lambda_d t).$$

The subscripts $s$ and $d$ denote (quasi)static and dynamic components, respectively. The first term models the damped oscillation, with frequency $\omega \mu$ and spectrometer-dependent initial phase $\theta$. Neither simple exponential damping nor a Bessel function (expected for an incommensurate spin density wave) gave good fits; the phenomenological stretched-exponential damping form of Eq. (1) was used instead, with relaxation rate $\Lambda_s$ and stretching power $K < 1$. The second term describes the late-time dynamic relaxation, which was well fit by a single exponential with rate $\lambda_d$.

The results of these fits are shown in Fig. 1. The data yield a single well-defined frequency (as does the Fourier transform, not shown), consistent with a commensurate magnetic structure and only one muon stopping site. The total initial asymmetry $A(0) = A_s + A_d$ was found to be $\approx 0.21$ independent of temperature and applied field.

The temperature dependence of $\omega \mu / 2\pi$ and $\Lambda_s$ from the fits are shown in Figs. 2(a) and 2(b), respectively. The abrupt onset of $\omega \mu$ and hence $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$ below 120 K indicates a magnetic transition at this temperature. At $T = 2$ K, $\omega \mu / 2\pi = 13.32(3)$ MHz, corresponding to $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle = \omega \mu / \gamma_\mu = 987(2)$ G. A rough estimate of the static Ir$^{4+}$ moment $\mu_{\text{Ir}}$ is given by equating this value to the internal field $4\pi \mu_{\text{Ir}} / v_{\text{Ir}}$ of a uniform Ir$^{4+}$ magnetization, where $v_{\text{Ir}}$ is the volume per Ir ion. This yields $\mu_{\text{Ir}} \approx 1.1 \mu_B$, of the order of the moment expected for $J_{\text{eff}} = 1/2$. The estimate is very crude, however, because neither the Ir$^{4+}$ magnetic structure nor the muon stopping site is known.

As shown in the inset to Fig. 2(a), the late-time fraction $\eta_d = A_d / (A_s + A_d)$ approaches 1 as $T \to T_M$ from below. This is due to the disappearance of $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$, and is consistent with the behavior of $\omega \mu(T)$. At 2 K, $\eta_d = 0.39(1)$, close to the value 1/3 expected from a randomly-oriented $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$. The increase of $\eta_d$ as $T \to T_M$ is smooth rather than abrupt, suggesting a distribution of transition temperatures in the sample.

The temperature dependence of $\Lambda_s$ is given in Fig. 2(b). The cusp at $\sim T_M$ is probably
FIG. 2. (Color online) (a) Temperature dependence of muon spin precession frequency $\omega_\mu/2\pi$ in Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$. Inset: late-time fraction $\eta_d$. The curve is a guide to the eye. (b) Temperature dependence of quasistatic muon spin relaxation rate $\Lambda_s$ (squares, left axis) and fractional width of field distribution $\Lambda_s/\omega_\mu$ (circles, right axis). Inset: stretching power $K$.

an artifact of the distribution of $T_M$ noted above rather than a critical divergence, since as discussed below there is no sign of critical slowing down in the dynamic relaxation rate $\lambda_d$. The fractional width $\Lambda_s/\omega_\mu$ of the spontaneous field distribution, also plotted in Fig. 2(b), is small (0.05–0.07) at low temperatures and then increases rapidly as $T \to T_M$. Thus the local field is nearly uniform except in the neighborhood of $T_M$; this, like the behavior of $\eta_d$ noted above, suggests a distribution of $T_M$. The stretching power $K$ for the quasistatic damping, shown in the inset of Fig. 2(b), parameterizes the shape of the distribution of $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$: for small $K$ the wings of the distribution become more prominent. The value of $K$ is temperature-independent ($\sim 0.55$) at low temperatures and increases as $T \to T_M$.

The simple exponential form of the late-time relaxation data indicates that the dynamic muon spin relaxation, like $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$ (but unlike $T_M$), is homogeneous. The temperature dependence of the dynamic relaxation rate $\lambda_d$ is given in Fig. 3. We note two features:
(i) $\lambda_d = 0.029(3) \; \mu s^{-1}$ is constant below $\sim 100$ K, and (ii) with decreasing temperature there is an unusual step-like increase in $\lambda_d$ below $T_M$ but no sign of the paramagnetic-state divergence that is often found in frustrated and unfrustrated magnets$^{17,20}$ due to critical slowing down of dynamic fluctuations. This absence suggests a mean-field-like transition.

The relation between dynamic muon relaxation and the moment fluctuations that cause it is generally complex. Limiting cases are (A) quasistatic (slow) fluctuations of $\langle B_{\text{loc}}(t) \rangle$ with zero long-time average, where the relaxation time is essentially the correlation time of $\langle B_{\text{loc}}(t) \rangle$ and (B) fluctuations $\delta B_{\text{loc}}$ about a nonzero static $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$, i.e., $B_{\text{loc}}(t) = \langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle + \delta B_{\text{loc}}(t)$, here the relaxation rate depends on the magnitude and stochastic properties of $\delta B_{\text{loc}}(t)$. Case A describes dynamic relaxation in a paramagnet with extremely slow spin dynamics, and yields a fluctuation rate $\sim \lambda_d \approx 3 \times 10^4 \; \text{s}^{-1}$. The data cannot rule this scenario out in Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$ but it seems quite unlikely, given the phase-transition-like behavior of the muon spin precession frequency (Fig. 2) and the fact that a kilohertz fluctuation rate would be many orders of magnitude lower than any other frequency in the system. We therefore assume Case B in further discussion of the dynamic relaxation.

In the motional narrowing limit $\omega_f \tau_c \ll 1$, $\lambda_d \approx \omega_f^2 \tau_c$, where $\omega_f = \delta B_{\text{loc}} / \gamma \mu$ is the fluctuating field amplitude in frequency units and $\tau_c$ is the correlation time of the fluctuations. Assuming a maximum $\omega_f$ of the order of the full quasistatic field in frequency units ($\omega_f \lesssim \omega_{\mu} \approx 8.5 \times 10^7 \; \text{s}^{-1}$), this yields an upper bound $\tau_c^{-1} \lesssim 2.5 \times 10^{11} \; \text{s}^{-1}$, or $\hbar / k_B \tau_c \lesssim 2 \; \text{K}$. In ordinary antiferromagnets $h / k_B \tau_c$ is of the order of the Néel temperature $T_N$ for $T \lesssim T_N$.  

For Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$, with $T_N = T_M = 120$ K, $\tau_c$ is therefore at least two orders of magnitude longer.
than expected.

The combination of a well-defined muon spin precession frequency (Fig. 1), i.e., homogeneous magnetic order, and the persistence of $\lambda_d$ to low temperatures (Fig. 3) is unexpected. In conventional ordered magnets nuclear or muon spin relaxation below the ordering temperature is due to thermal spin-wave excitations, and $\lambda_d$ decreases with decreasing temperature as the thermal population of such excitations decreases. Such a conventional scenario seems to be ruled out in Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$.

Persistent low-temperature muon spin relaxation is observed in a number of geometrically frustrated systems. It indicates an enormously enhanced and possibly singular density of low-lying excitations, but is not well understood. In compounds containing non-Kramers rare-earth ions with nonmagnetic crystal-field ground states, fluctuations of hyperfine-enhanced nuclear magnetism can couple to muon spins and lead to persistent relaxation. This mechanism requires rare-earth ions with magnetic Hund’s-rule ground states. A similar effect is associated with the low-lying Eu$^{3+}$ spin-orbit-split $J \geq 1$ multiplets; this, however, results in reduction rather than enhancement of Eu nuclear moments. The persistent spin dynamics in Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$ must therefore be electronic in origin and associated with Ir$^{4+}$ magnetism.

The relatively high transition temperature of Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$ suggests that the AFM exchange constant is not much larger than $T_M$, in which case Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$ is a weakly frustrated material. Noting that the unfrustrated iridate BaIrO$_3$ also exhibits persistent muon spin relaxation, we consider the possibility that frustration may not be the primary cause of persistent relaxation in Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$ and we look for another mechanism.

In iridate compounds, frustrated or unfrustrated, the large Ir 5$d$ wave functions are expected to weaken the on-site repulsion relative to the width of the 5$d$ conduction band. If an AFM state associated with a metal-insulator transition is nevertheless retained (perhaps because of strong spin-orbit coupling), but the electrons are not well localized, the gap energy $\Delta_g$ can be comparable to $k_BT_M$. The resistivity of single-crystal Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$ in fact yields a maximum gap value $\approx 10$ meV $\approx k_BT_M$ We speculate that charge fluctuations and accompanying spin fluctuations over this gap might be involved in the enhanced density of spin excitations. Topological Mott insulating states have been proposed for some of these systems, but spin effects in a 3D topological insulator are confined to the sample surface and seem unlikely to contribute to the bulk muon spin relaxation. A spectroscopic study
of low-lying fluctuations and $\Delta_g$ in Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$ would elucidate the situation, as would $\mu$SR experiments on the frustrated hyperkagomé iridate Na$_4$Ir$_3$O$_8$ and the (unfrustrated) weak Mott insulator Sr$_2$IrO$_4$.

In summary, the uniform spontaneous local field observed at muon sites below the MI/AFM transition indicates that Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$ exhibits long-range magnetic order, ruling out both quantum-spin-liquid (at least within the $\mu$SR time window) and spin-glass ground states. The magnetic structure cannot be obtained from $\mu$SR experiments alone, and neutron scattering in iridates is prohibitively difficult because of the high neutron absorption cross-sections of Ir nuclei. Resonant x-ray magnetic diffraction would be a useful alternative.

The dynamic muon spin relaxation rate $\lambda_d(T)$ shows no sign of critical slowing down above $T_M$, suggesting a mean-field-like transition, and in the ordered state $\lambda_d(T)$ reveals an anomalous persistence of slow Ir$^{4+}$ spin fluctuations to low temperatures. Although geometric frustration may play a role in this behavior, the weakness of frustration in Eu$_2$Ir$_2$O$_7$, evidenced by the relatively large transition temperature, leads us to speculate that low-lying excitations associated with small-gap insulating behavior may be involved. Studies of other iridates, frustrated and unfrustrated, are clearly desirable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for technical assistance from the staff of the TRIUMF Center for Molecular and Materials Science. We would like to thank W. P. Beyermann and J. Morales for their help with the susceptibility measurements, and L. Balents, S. Raghu, and C. M. Varma for useful comments. This work was partially supported by the U.S. NSF, Grants 0801407 (UCR) and 0604105 (CSULA), by a Grant-in-Aid (No. 21684019) from JSPS, Japan, and by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research on Priority Areas (19052003) from MEXT, Japan.

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correlation time of $\langle B_{\text{loc}} \rangle$.

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