Continuously graded anisotropy in single (Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47})\textsubscript{100-x}Cu\textsubscript{x} films

C. L. Zha, R. K. Dumas, Y. Y. Fang, V. Bonanni, J. Nogués, and Johan Åkerman

Material Physics, Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Electrum 229, 16440 Kista, Sweden
NTNU NanoLab, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), 7491 Trondheim, Norway
Department of Physics, University of Gothenburg, 41296 Gothenburg, Sweden
Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats (ICREA) and Centre d’Investigació en Nanociència i Nanotecnologia (ICN-CSIC), Campus Univ. Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, Spain

Received 15 June 2010; accepted 5 October 2010; published online 3 November 2010

We report on continuously graded anisotropy. During deposition, a compositional gradient is achieved by varying the Cu concentration from Cu-rich (Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47})\textsubscript{70}Cu\textsubscript{30} to Cu-free Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47}. The anisotropy gradient is then realized after annealing using the composition dependence of the low-anisotropy (A1) to high-anisotropy (L1\textsubscript{0}) ordering temperature. The critical role of the annealing temperature on the resultant anisotropy gradient is investigated. Magnetic measurements support the creation of an anisotropy gradient in properly annealed films which exhibit both a reduced coercivity and moderate thermal stability. These results demonstrate that an anisotropy gradient can be realized, and tailored, in single continuous films without the need for multilayers.

The roadmap to magnetic recording media with areal bit densities beyond 1 Tbit/in\textsuperscript{2} is plagued by the so-called magnetic recording “trilemma” where the thermal stability and signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) must be simultaneously balanced with the writability of a given bit. To maintain both a sufficient SNR and high bit density, the volume of the individual grains that constitute a given bit must approach the superparamagnetic K\textsubscript{u} materials, such as L1\textsubscript{0} FePt alloys, would dramatically improve thermal stability, the magnetic fields required for switching such a high K\textsubscript{u} bit far exceed the capabilities of the write head. Tilted, and exchange coupled composite (ECC) media, as well as heat-assisted magnetic recording, and microwave-assisted magnetic recording techniques, have been proposed to lower the necessary writing field. An extension of ECC media is termed graded media where the anisotropy is varied, either discretely or continuously, over many layers and is predicted to provide additional gains in writability over conventional bi-layer hard/soft ECC media. In graded media, the low K\textsubscript{u} layers act to reduce the switching field while the high K\textsubscript{u} layers preserve thermal stability.

Graded K\textsubscript{u} materials are also potentially useful in devices which rely on spin transfer torque (STT) phenomena, such as spin torque oscillators and STT magnetoresistive random access memory. Recent work has shown a considerable reduction in the critical current densities necessary for the switching of a composite hard/soft free layer. A free layer with a graded K\textsubscript{u} is the next step in further reducing the current density. Fabrication of graded media, in particular the realization of a continuous gradient, is challenging and has, until now, been based on multilayered structures.

In this letter, we report on a simple approach to fabricate continuously graded-K\textsubscript{u} single films based on the strong dependence of the A1 (low K\textsubscript{u}) → L1\textsubscript{0} (high K\textsubscript{u}) ordering temperature on the Cu content in (Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47})\textsubscript{100-x}Cu\textsubscript{x} films. First, a compositional gradient is achieved by varying the Cu concentration from Cu-rich (Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47})\textsubscript{70}Cu\textsubscript{30} at the bottom to Cu-free Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47} at the top during film deposition, as schematically represented in Fig. 1 (left panel). The K\textsubscript{u} gradient is then realized after proper annealing. The Cu-rich regions transform from the as-deposited low K\textsubscript{u} cubic A1 phase into the high K\textsubscript{u} tetragonal L1\textsubscript{0} phase at a lower annealing temperature than the Cu-poor regions, thus establishing an K\textsubscript{u} gradient through the thickness of the film. Magnetic measurements support the creation of an K\textsubscript{u} gradient with reduced coercivity and moderate thermal stability.

The (Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47})\textsubscript{100-x}Cu\textsubscript{x}, (x = 0–30) (called graded FePtCu hereafter) films (20 and 50 nm thick) were deposited at room temperature on thermally oxidized Si substrates by magnetron sputtering in a chamber with a base pressure of better than 5 × 10\textsuperscript{-8} Torr. During the co-sputtering of high purity Fe, Pt, and Cu targets the compositionally graded films were realized by gradually decreasing the sputtering power of the Cu gun from 35 to 0 W. Therefore, the bottom of the film is Cu-rich (Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47})\textsubscript{70}Cu\textsubscript{30} while the top is Cu-free Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47}. A compositionally uniform sample with the same total Cu content as the graded sample, (Fe\textsubscript{53}Pt\textsubscript{47})\textsubscript{72}Cu\textsubscript{15} (called uniform FePtCu hereafter), was deposited as a reference. To improve surface roughness, (111)-texture, and lower the chemical ordering temperature of the L1\textsubscript{0} phase, the FePtCu films were...

FIG. 1. (Color online) Left panel: schematic of the Cu content depth profile in a graded FePtCu film. Right panel: XRD patterns of (a) uniform and (b) graded FePtCu (20 nm) films annealed at 300, 400, 500 °C. (c) (111) peak position and (d) in-plane coercivity of the uniform (blue circles) and graded (red squares) samples as a function of annealing temperature T\textsubscript{A}.

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A capping layer of Ta (5 nm) was deposited to prevent oxidation. The as-deposited uniform and graded samples were simultaneously annealed at $T_A = 300, 400,$ and $500 \, ^\circ C$ for 35 min in vacuum. The composition of the films was determined by energy dispersive x-ray spectrometry and the crystallographic structure was investigated by x-ray diffraction (XRD) with Cu K$_\alpha$ radiation. Magnetization measurements were performed at room temperature with in-plane fields on an alternating-gradient magnetometer (AGM) and a home-built longitudinal magneto-optical Kerr effect (MOKE) setup.

The structural properties of the uniform and graded FePtCu samples are shown in Fig. 1(a)–1(c) for $T_A = 300, 400,$ and $500 \, ^\circ C$. We clearly observe a strong for all annealing temperatures [Figs. 1(a) and 1(b)]. For both the uniform and graded samples, as the annealing temperature is raised, the intensity of the (111) diffraction peak progressively increases, indicating an improvement in the (111)-textured crystallization. Importantly, for both uniform and graded samples the (111) peak shifts to higher angles, Fig. 1(c), with increasing annealing temperature. This, in turn, implies an enhancement of the chemical ordering degree of the $L1_0$ phase for higher annealing temperatures.$^{21}$ Note that the (111) peak is shifted to angles higher than that of fully ordered FePt ($41.08^\circ$) due to the Cu dopant which has been shown to decrease the $c$ lattice parameter.$^{19}$ While an increase in $L1_0$ order is found with increasing annealing temperature, how the structural $A1$-$L1_0$ ordering gradient (and thus the magnetic $K_u$ gradient) is manifested through the thickness of the film is not readily accessible from the XRD measurements.

Magnetic measurements, on the other hand, not only show enhanced $L1_0$ chemical ordering with $T_A$ but also provide unambiguous evidence of the graded nature of the properly annealed films. First, the major loop coercivity ($H_C$), Fig. 1(d), is increased with $T_A$, consistent with the XRD data and the improved high $K_u$ $L1_0$ order. Additional insight into the graded nature of the samples is found by analysis of the major hysteresis loops. Major loops measured using an AGM, Figs. 2(a), 2(c), and 2(e), along with the derivatives of the descending branches of the major loops, Figs. 2(b), 2(d), and 2(f), highlight the important role of proper $T_A$ in establishing the $K_u$ gradient.

At a low $T_A$ of $300 \, ^\circ C$, Figs. 2(a) and 2(b), both the uniform and graded samples remain relatively soft (note the field scale), consistent with the as-deposited, low $K_u$ $A1$ phase. The graded sample shows a small increase in $H_C$ compared to the uniform sample annealed at the same temperature indicating the onset of $L1_0$ ordering of the Cu-rich fractions of the film. The loop derivative is also significantly broader for the graded sample, which is also in agreement with the existence of a high $K_u$ phase and the incipient $K_u$ gradient in this film.

At an intermediate $T_A$ of $400 \, ^\circ C$, Figs. 2(c) and 2(d), the $H_C$ of both the graded and uniform films dramatically increases as a larger fraction of the films transforms into the high $K_u$ $L1_0$ phase. Interestingly, after annealing at $400 \, ^\circ C$, the graded film exhibits a fundamentally different reversal path compared to the uniform film. As we can clearly see from the derivatives, Fig. 2(d), the graded sample exhibits an asymmetric peak with an extended switching shoulder. This shoulder corresponds to the softer portions of the film beginning to reverse first. In fact, the overall shape of the loop is reminiscent of simulated hysteresis curves of films with a graded $K_u$ that show an initial linear decrease in the magnetization [see arrow in Fig. 2(c)].$^{22}$ The initial linear decay of the magnetization can be associated with the formation of a partial domain wall through the film thickness that precedes switching. Actually the plateau in the major loop derivative [see arrow in Fig. 2(d)] directly indicates this initial linear decrease in the magnetization. Most importantly, the coercivity of the compositionally graded film, $H_C = 5.67 \, kOe$, is smaller than the uniform film, $H_C = 7.21 \, kOe$, which is also consistent with the existence of an $K_u$ gradient. Additionally, the remanence ($M_r/M_s$, where $M_r$ and $M_s$ are the remnant and saturation magnetizations, respectively) of the graded sample, $M_r/M_s = 0.91$, is larger than the uniform sample, $M_r/M_s = 0.79$. This implies that the graded sample has a substantial fraction of soft phase.

Finally, after annealing at $500 \, ^\circ C$, Figs. 2(e) and 2(f), the uniform and graded samples essentially become identical. We find that the $H_C$, the location of the (111) peak, the loop derivatives, and even the overall shape of the loops become nearly indistinguishable for the uniform and graded samples. We, therefore, conclude that a significant amount of interdiffusion occurs at this elevated $T_A$. It is also not surprising that the compositionally uniform and graded samples become virtually identical in that they both contain the same total Cu concentration.

To assess the thermal stability of our graded samples we have carried out dynamic $H_C$ measurements. The dynamic $H_C$, $H_{C,dyn}$, is the field required to bring the magnetization to zero after a characteristic time, $\tau_p$, and functionally obeys Sharrock’s equation.$^{23}$ In our calculations, an attempt frequency $f = 5 \times 10^7 \, Hz$ is used and we can presume $n = 1.24$. From this analysis, the thermal stability factor, defined as $\beta = \Delta E_s/k_BT$, and time independent intrinsic $H_C$, $H_{int}$ can then be extracted. Here $\Delta E_s$ is the energy barrier and $k_BT$ is the thermal activation energy. The $H_{C,dyn}$ measure-
ments for the uniform and graded films annealed at 400 °C are shown in Fig. 2(g) where we find $H_c = 7.99 \pm 0.03 \text{ kOe}$, $\beta = 190.2 \pm 4.6$ and $H_a = 6.17 \pm 0.01 \text{ kOe}$, $\beta = 163.6 \pm 1.8$, for the uniform and graded samples, respectively. Although the graded sample shows a small, 14%, decrease in thermal stability, it also shows a significantly larger, 23%, decrease in $H_a$.

The AGM, which measures the total magnetic moment, is not able to directly determine how the $K_u$ varies through the thickness of the film. To probe the graded $K_u$ we have measured surface magnetic properties of a 50 nm thick graded FePtCu film using the MOKE setup where the finite penetration depth of light (∼30 nm in FePt) can be exploited. The MOKE and AGM in-plane loops are shown in Fig. 3(a) for a sample annealed at 300 °C. Clearly the MOKE loop has a smaller coercivity, $H_{c, \text{MOKE}} = 1.31 \text{ kOe}$, than the AGM loop, $H_{c, \text{AGM}} = 1.92 \text{ kOe}$ and exhibits a different reversal path. As expected, the MOKE loop, which only probes the upper portions of the film, is significantly softer because the Cu-poor regions near the top of the film have not fully transformed into the high $K_u$ L10 phase at this particular $T_A$. These depth sensitive results, along with the observed in-plane easy axis (induced by the thin film shape anisotropy), confirm that the anisotropy varies through the film thickness instead of forming, e.g., random L10 clusters embedded in an A1 matrix. However, after annealing at 400 °C both the AGM and MOKE loops, Fig. 3(b), have the same $H_c$, $H_{c, \text{AGM}} = H_{c, \text{MOKE}} = 7.03 \text{ kOe}$, and nearly identical loop shape. This indicates that after annealing at 400 °C the 50 nm graded FePtCu film has achieved a uniform $K_u$ distribution, similar to the 20 nm thick sample annealed at 500 °C. As reported for uniform FePtCu films, the L10 chemical ordering process also depends on film thickness and is actually promoted in thicker films.

In summary, we propose and demonstrate a simple procedure to establish a continuous $K_u$ gradient through the thickness of FePtCu films. The $K_u$ gradient is realized after proper annealing of compositionally graded films. In addition, similar L10 FePtCu (111) films have been reported to have tilted anisotropies. This fact, combined with the advantages of graded $K_u$ may result in a very versatile magnetic structure, which may not only be appealing for magnetic recording but also for STT applications. We anticipate that the experimental procedure presented here can be further improved and extended to other, e.g., perpendicular and/or granular, material systems where a graded anisotropy is desired.

C.Z. thanks Mr. Majid Mohseni for his help in XRD measurements. Support from The Swedish Foundation for Strategic Research (SSF), The Swedish Research Council (VR), the Göran Gustafsson Foundation, and the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation is gratefully acknowledged. J.N. thanks the Catalan DGR (Grant No. 2009SGR1292) and the Spanish MICINN (Grant No. MAT2010-20616-C02) projects for partial financial support. J.Å. is a Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences Research Fellow.