Quantum-Classical Reentrant Relaxation Crossover in Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ Spin Ice

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We have studied spin relaxation in the spin ice compound Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ through measurements of the ac magnetic susceptibility. While the characteristic spin-relaxation time ($\tau$) is thermally activated at high temperatures, it becomes almost temperature independent below $T_{\text{cross}} \sim 13$ K. This behavior, combined with nonmonotonic magnetic field dependence of $\tau$, indicates that quantum tunneling dominates the relaxational process below that temperature. As the low-entropy spin ice state develops below $T_{\text{ice}} \sim 4$ K, $\tau$ increases sharply with decreasing temperature, suggesting the emergence of a collective degree of freedom for which thermal relaxation processes again become important as the spins become strongly correlated.

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Geometrically frustrated magnetic materials, in which the geometry of the spin lattice frustrates the spin-spin interactions, have been shown to display a wide range of novel ground states [1,2]. There has been especially strong recent interest in the so-called “spin ice” pyrochlore materials (such as Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ and Ho$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$) in which the rare-earth spins are highly uniaxial due to strong crystal fields [3]. Ferromagnetic and dipolar interactions between these spins on this lattice of corner-sharing tetrahedra are frustrated in a manner analogous to that of protons in ice leading to a variety of exotic behavior [4–16]. While the spin entropy freezes out only below $T_{\text{ice}} \sim 4$ K in Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ [9], magnetic susceptibility studies show a strongly frequency-dependent spin freezing at $T \sim 16$ K [10,11]. In contrast to traditional spin glasses, the spin-freezing transition is associated with a very narrow range of relaxation times and thus represents a rather unusual example of glassiness in a dense magnetic system.

Here we report a study of the spin-relaxation processes in the spin ice compound Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$. We find that, while the characteristic spin-relaxation time is thermally activated at high temperatures, it becomes almost temperature independent below $T_{\text{cross}} \sim 13$ K. We interpret the data in terms of a crossover from thermal to quantum mechanical relaxation mechanisms, direct evidence for which is provided by data taken in an applied magnetic field. While most previous studies of such crossovers involve isolated moments, this material represents a field. While most previous studies of such crossovers which is provided by data taken in an applied magnetic field.

In Fig. 1, we show the temperature dependent susceptibility ($\chi_{\text{ac}} = dM/dH$) measured with a Quantum Design SQUID magnetometer, as well as the real and imaginary parts ($\chi'$ and $\chi''$) of the ac susceptibility ($\chi_{\text{ac}}$) measured with either the Quantum Design physical properties measurement system or a simple inductance coil in a dilution refrigerator at low temperatures.

In Fig. 2, we show the ac susceptibility measured with either the Quantum Design physical properties measurement system or a simple inductance coil in a dilution refrigerator at low temperatures. We interpret the data in terms of a crossover from thermal to quantum mechanical relaxation mechanisms. Direct evidence for which is provided by data taken in an applied magnetic field. While most previous studies of such crossovers involve isolated moments, this material represents a field. While most previous studies of such crossovers which is provided by data taken in an applied magnetic field.

The spectrum of spin-relaxation times can be determined from the frequency dependence of $\chi''$, which we have measured as a function of temperature and field (Fig. 2). For a single characteristic relaxation time, $\tau$, $\chi''(f)$ has a well-defined form with a maximum at $f = 1/\tau$ [18]. Experimentally, in a glassy system, one typically finds broadening associated with a spread of relaxation times, but $\chi''(f)$ for Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ in zero magnetic field is only slightly broader than the single-$\tau$ form for our entire temperature range [10], indicating the existence of...
a temperature dependent characteristic spin-relaxation time with a narrow distribution at any given temperature. The spectrum does broaden somewhat in a magnetic field (especially near $H = 0.5$ T and $T \approx 12$ K, as discussed below), but there is a clear local maximum to $\chi''(f)$ for almost our entire temperature and magnetic field range, which we take to indicate the characteristic relaxation time, $\tau$, where $\tau = 1/f_{\text{max}}$. While the form of the peak in $\chi''(f)$ is somewhat broadened relative to the ideal case and there is a broad background underneath the peak at the lowest temperatures and highest fields, the resultant uncertainty in the determination of the peak frequency does not qualitatively change the temperature or magnetic field dependence of $\tau$, and thus does not affect the discussion below.

As shown in Fig. 3, the temperature dependence of $\tau$ for $T > T_{\text{ic}}$ is quite striking. Above a crossover temperature, $T_{\text{cross}} \approx 13$ K, $\tau$ is thermally activated, as expected from the Arrhenius behavior of $T_f$. Below $T_{\text{cross}}$, however, we find that $\tau$ is almost temperature independent ($\tau \sim 5$ ms at $H = 0$) down to $T \sim T_{\text{ic}}$. The weak temperature dependence raises a new question of how the spins are relaxing for $T < T_{\text{cross}}$, since $\tau(T)$ is not consistent with a thermally activated process (which would require an unphysically weak energy barrier of $E_A < 2$ K). Since the Hamiltonian of this pure ordered system is relatively simple, it is difficult to imagine how any combination of thermal processes could result in the observed $\tau(T)$. We conclude instead that the relaxation process for $T_{\text{ic}} < T < T_{\text{cross}}$ is through quantum tunneling between the
two accessible Ising states, as has been suggested for different Dy systems [20], other systems in which the relaxation rate changes from being thermally activated to almost constant [21], and for Ho$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ from neutron spin echo studies [15].

As indicated by the three $\tau(T)$ curves in Fig. 3, the application of a magnetic field [22] significantly affects the spin-relaxation process. Importantly, the application of a field also confirms the coexistence of classical and quantum spin-relaxation processes near $T_{\text{cross}}$, as can be seen in the $\chi''(f)$ data taken at $T = 12$ K and $H = 5$ kOe [Fig. 2(b)]. At that field, the relative efficiency of the two relaxation processes is such that the peak of $\chi''(f)$ has both a maximum and a broad shoulder, indicating the existence of two different relaxation processes. This coexistence is even more apparent in the data of Fig. 2(d) taken on a sample diluted with Y on the Dy sites [10] in which the two relaxation modes have similar efficiencies at $H = 5$ kOe but better-separated frequencies (presumably due to the altered spin-spin and spin-lattice interactions, not chemical inhomogeneity since the shoulder is observed in the pure compound [23]). These data clearly demonstrate the evolution with decreasing temperature from a temperature dependent (classical relaxation) peak to a temperature independent (quantum relaxation) peak.

As shown in Fig. 4, the relaxation time has a non-monotonic dependence on magnetic field. For small fields ($H < 5$ kOe), $\tau$ decreases with increasing field, but for larger fields $\tau(H)$ increases and then saturates (the field required for saturation increases with decreasing temperature). We interpret the measured $\tau(H)$ in terms of a simplified spin Hamiltonian: $H = -D S_z^2 - g\mu_B S \cdot H_{\text{applied}} - g\mu_B S \cdot H_{\text{dipole}}$ where $D$ represents the local anisotropy, $H_{\text{applied}}$ is the applied dc field, $H_{\text{dipole}}$ is the local dipolar field, and we neglect the relatively weak exchange interactions [5]. Given the four different [111] directions of the Dy spins in Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ and that our samples are polycrystalline, the applied field has components both transverse and along the axis of almost all spins in the sample. The low field decrease in $\tau(H)$ can be partially attributed to enhanced quantum tunneling through coupling to the transverse components of $H_{\text{applied}}$ [24]. The applied field also can enhance tunneling by locally canceling the longitudinal component of $H_{\text{dipole}}$, and thus making the $\pm S_z$ states degenerate. This latter effect is evident in a numerical evaluation [25] of the quantum tunneling barrier (averaging over the directions of both $H_{\text{dipole}}$ and $H_{\text{applied}}$), which indicates that $\tau(H)$ should exhibit a minimum when the cancellation is optimized. Indeed, the field at which we observe a minimum ($\sim 5$ kOe) corresponds approximately to an energy scale of 1.7 K—only slightly smaller than the dipolar interaction of $\sim 2.35$ K [5,14]. The corresponding minimum in the data of Fig. 4 shifts to lower field at higher temperatures, as expected from the reduction of the mean dipolar field with increasing thermal fluctuations.

The increasing $\tau(H)$ at higher magnetic fields is attributable to the longitudinal component of $H_{\text{applied}}$ separating the energies of the $\pm S_z$ states. The weaker field dependence of $\tau(H)$ at the highest fields (at 12 K, for example) presumably marks the return to thermal relaxation processes when the $\pm S_z$ states are highly separated by $H_{\text{applied}}$. A difference between the physics of tunneling at low and high fields is suggested by the magnitude of the maxima in $\chi''(f)$, shown in the inset of Fig. 4, which increase monotonically with decreasing temperature in zero field (as expected from the reduced dissipation at lower temperatures), but decrease monotonically at 10 kOe. The temperature dependences suggest strong coupling of phonons to the quantum spin relaxation as has been previously observed in Mn-12 acetate [21]. The rich behavior of $\tau(H,T)$ in Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ suggests that detailed modeling including the phonon spectrum will be necessary for a complete description of the quantum tunneling phenomena.

While a crossover between thermal and quantum spin relaxation has been observed in many systems, the case of Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ is particularly interesting because it is a dense system in which spin-spin correlations are developing as $T \rightarrow T_{\text{ice}}$. Below $T_{\text{ice}}$, a maximum in $\chi''(T)$ and irreversibility in the dc magnetization [11,14] suggest that $\tau$ again increases with decreasing temperature as the spin ice correlations develop at low temperatures. We have also performed direct measurements of $\tau(T)$ for $T < T_{\text{ice}}$ in a powder sample of Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ potted in epoxy for thermal contact (Fig. 3, inset) [19]. Surprisingly, while $\tau(T)$ is almost temperature independent for $T_{\text{ice}} < T < T_{\text{cross}}$, it increases extremely sharply below $T_{\text{ice}}$. This low temperature increase in $\tau(T)$ indicates the existence of an unusual double crossover in spin relaxation upon cooling: first changing from thermally activated to quantum tunneling at $T_{\text{cross}}$, and then reverting to thermally activated as the

FIG. 4 (color online). The field dependence of the characteristic spin relaxation time, $\tau$. Inset: the magnitude of the peak in $\chi''(f)$ as a function of temperature at $H = 0$ and 10 kOe.
developing spin correlations require that groups of spins must evolve coherently. The authors are unaware of similar behavior in other systems exhibiting spin relaxation through quantum tunneling, suggesting that this phenomenon is associated with the development of correlations and the associated emergence of a collective degree of freedom [26].

Aside from the novelty of a double-crossover in the relaxation mechanism, the observation of quantum relaxation in Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ indicates the importance of such processes in frustrated rare-earth magnets, which display a range of novel low temperature states [27]. The results imply that even such large spin systems, where the spins are typically treated classically, must be considered with the effects of quantum dynamics. As the emergence of thermal relaxation of the correlated spins at low temperatures indicates, the combination of quantum and thermally activated processes in a strongly correlated spin system can form the basis for unanticipated physical phenomena associated with the collective properties of such spin systems.

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[3] The first excited state crystal field in Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$ has an energy scale \( \sim 200-300 \) K. S. Rosenkranz *et al.*, J. Appl. Phys. 87, 5914 (2000).
[17] We have also obtained qualitatively equivalent data on a single crystal sample.
[19] The spin-relaxation times for samples potted in epoxy (nonmagnetic Stycast 1266) are offset relative to those in loose powder samples, presumably resulting from the pressure induced by the differential thermal contraction of the epoxy and the Dy$_2$Ti$_2$O$_7$. S. Snyder (unpublished).
[22] The applied dc field is parallel to the excitation field used for the ac magnetic susceptibility measurements.