SQUID magnetometer operating at 37 K based on nanobridges in epitaxial MgB₂ thin films


Faculty of Science and Technology and MESA⁺ Research Institute for Nanotechnology, University of Twente, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE, Enschede, The Netherlands

A. V. Pogrebnyakov and J. M. Redwing
The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802

S. Y. Xu, Q. Li, and X. X. Xi
The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Physics, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802

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Superconducting quantum interference devices (SQUIDs) and magnetometers are fabricated from nanoconstrictions in epitaxial MgB₂ films. The nanobridges are contained within single-crystalline grains, resulting in clean transport, a large critical current density of \(5 \times 10^7 \text{ A/cm}^2\) at 4.2 K, and stable SQUID voltage modulation up to 38.8 K. The magnetometer is realized with an inductively coupled pickup loop, giving rise to a field sensitivity of 1 pT Hz\(^{-1/2}\) down to 1 Hz. The device properties are governed by the two-band superconducting nature of MgB₂, posing, however, no problems to a successful development of boride magnetic field sensing devices. The MgB₂ zero-temperature London penetration depth is measured to be 62 nm, close to theoretical predictions. © 2005 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.2128482]

The relatively large superconducting transition temperature of MgB₂ \((T_c=39 \text{ K})\) and its metallic character make MgB₂ interesting for use in superconducting quantum interference devices (SQUIDs). MgB₂ would fill the existing gap between sensitive but low-\(T_c\) SQUIDs and the less-sensitive but high-\(T_c\) SQUIDs if high-quality magneto-sensing devices could be obtained that operate around 35 K and have good noise properties.

The first MgB₂ SQUID \(^1\) was based on the principle that a nano-constriction with a size smaller than the London penetration depth can act as a weak link. Two nano-constrictions in a loop were focused ion beam etched in a pulsed laser deposited MgB₂ film, thereby forming a SQUID. Soon after, Zhang et al. \(^2\) reported a MgB₂ SQUID based on tunable point contacts in polycrystalline bulk material. Although the method used is not very suitable for applications, the reported noise value for an optimally tuned SQUID \((\beta=1)\) of 35 pT Hz\(^{-1/2}\) above 500 Hz at 19 K is promising. Burnell et al. \(^3\) realized MgB₂ SQUIDs operating up to 20 K by locally degrading the superconducting properties of MgB₂ through focused ion beam irradiation. The obtained voltage modulation is large and the white flux noise of 14 \(\mu\Phi_0\) Hz\(^{-1/2}\) is comparable to noise levels in high-\(T_c\) SQUIDs.

The operating temperature of all MgB₂ thin film SQUIDs reported so far, of about 20 K, is limited by the superconducting transition temperature of the films. In all cases, samples are considered that are polycrystalline and in the electronically dirty limit (scattering lengths are much smaller than device dimensions). It is to be expected that clean and single-crystalline thin films will be of importance in the step towards low-noise and highly reproducible devices. Here, we present the realization of SQUIDs in electronically clean, epitaxial MgB₂ with a high operating temperature. It is anticipated that in these crystalline structures, the multiband superconducting nature \(^4\) of MgB₂ will influence the charge transport through the nano-constrictions.

Epitaxial MgB₂ films with \(T_c=40 \text{ K}\) were obtained by hybrid physical-chemical Vapor deposition (HPCVD), as described in Ref. 5. The 100-nm-thick layers were deposited on 4H-SiC \((5 \times 5 \text{ mm}^2)\) substrates at 718 °C. An increase in grain size was found with increasing \(B_2H_6\) gas flow during deposition, from about 1.4 \(\mu\text{m}\) for samples prepared at 50 sccm \(B_2H_6\) to about 2.2 \(\mu\text{m}\) for samples prepared at 150 sccm \(B_2H_6\). The grain boundaries in MgB₂ act as strong links, \(^6\) but even strong links can in principle still influence the critical current \(I_c\) in a nanobridge in an uncontrollable manner, something one would like to avoid in a SQUID. Here, we have the unique situation in which the dimensions of the nanobridges are much smaller than the grain size, thereby maximizing the chance for realizing a nanobridge within a single grain.

Coarse structures, such as the square-washer SQUID ring, the pickup loop and the contact leads were defined in the epitaxial films by standard photolithography and Ar ion-beam milling. Then, 100- or 140-nm-wide nanobridges were structured in 5-\(\mu\text{m}-\text{wide predefined striplines by focused ion beam (FIB) etching, as described in Refs. 1 and 8. For some SQUIDs, prior to the film structuring, 25 nm of gold was deposited by rf sputter deposition to protect the film from degradation during structuring caused by the sensitivity of the MgB₂ to water.}^{9,10}\) During the nanobridge etching, gold is removed, to make sure that the electrical transport through the bridges is not influenced by this capping layer. The electrical transport properties of the devices were measured in a shielded variable-temperature cryostat.

\(^{a}\)Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; electronic mail: a.brinkman@utwente.nl

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Typically, the current-voltage characteristics are nonhysteretic above 15 K. Hysteresis appears for some SQUIDs below this temperature and is believed to be of thermal nature. The typical critical current of a SQUID with two parallel 140-nm-wide bridges at \( T = 4.2 \) K is measured to be 14 mA. With an estimated bridge cross section of 140 \( \times 100 \) nm\(^2\) this results in an exceptionally high critical current density of \( J_c = 5 \times 10^7 \) A/cm\(^2\), which indicates that the film quality in the bridges is good. The critical current density is still below the MgB\(_2\) depairing current density, due to the onset of moving flux quanta that are released from their pinning sites (typically at the sides of a nanobridge) when the current becomes large.

The voltage across the SQUID under constant current bias is modulated by an applied magnetic field, as shown in Fig. 1 at 37 K. The modulation is stable and shows no drift over a large number of periods. The period of the voltage modulation versus magnetic field is estimated to be 1.6 \( \mu \)T. The effective SQUID area \( A_{\text{eff}} = \Phi_0 / B_{\text{ext}} \) is then estimated to be about \( 1.3 \times 10^3 \) \( \mu \)m\(^2\), where \( \Phi_0 = 2.07 \times 10^{-15} \) Tm\(^2\). This is well in accordance with the actual SQUID dimensions (20 \( \times 20 \) \( \mu \)m\(^2\) hole in a 40 \( \times 40 \) \( \mu \)m\(^2\) washer), taking flux focusing by the superconducting washer into account. The SQUID inductance is estimated to be 48 pH. A suitable magnitude of the voltage modulation of 8 \( \mu \)V was observed at 37 K (Fig. 1). Voltage modulation was even observed up to 38.8 K, remarkably close to the material’s bulk superconducting transition temperature, which stands in contrast to most high-\( T_c \) SQUIDs.

The SQUID modulation, as well as the large critical current densities of the nanobridges, shows that high-quality superconducting properties can be obtained when the nanobridge is likely to be contained within a single grain. The consequent step now is to investigate what field sensitivity can be obtained from these SQUIDs in a magnetometer configuration.

An inductively shunted magnetometer was designed as depicted in Fig. 2. The inductive shunt enhances the effective SQUID area, while keeping its inductance small. The effective sensing area \( A_{\text{eff}} \) of the magnetometer can be expressed as \( A_{\text{eff}} = (L_c / L_p) A_P \). Here, \( L_c \) is the coupling part of the small SQUID loop inductance, \( L_p = 2.6 \) nH is the inductance of the large pickup loop, with \( A_P \) being its effective pickup area. \( L_c \) is composed of a geometrical inductance and a kinetic inductance. Taking into account that the flux induced by the current \( I_p \) covers 80% of the area enclosed by the striplines [Fig. 2(b)], \( L_c \) is 0.8 times the small SQUID inductance, \( L_{\text{SQ}} \). The geometrical part of \( L_{\text{SQ}} \) is estimated to be 37 pH, while the kinetic inductance of the SQUID striplines is \( L_{\text{SQkin}} = \mu_p \lambda (\ell / w) \coth(d / 2\lambda) \), where \( d = 100 \) nm, and \( \ell \) and \( w \) are measured to be 51 and 6 \( \mu \)m, respectively. \( L_{\text{SQkin}} \) depends on the magnetic field penetration depth \( \lambda \). The effective area is, therefore, a function of temperature. Five SQUIDs can be coupled to the same inductive shunt [Fig. 2(a)]. In the striplines, 100-nm-wide nanobridges were fabricated [Fig. 2(b)]. The device is based on a film deposited with 150 sccm B\(_2\)H\(_6\) flow on a 5 \( \times \) 5 mm\(^2\) SiC substrate.

The measured voltage modulation of the magnetometer as a function of magnetic field under constant bias current is maximum 6 \( \mu \)V in the temperature range of 32–35 K. The measured voltage modulation as a function of temperature is shown in the inset of Fig. 3. The behavior is governed by the temperature dependence of the critical current as well as the SQUID inductance.

The period of the voltage modulation is indeed measured to be temperature dependent. The resulting temperature dependence of \( A_{\text{eff}} \) (see Fig. 3) allows us to obtain the penetration depth in MgB\(_2\) as a function of temperature. Golubov et al.\(^{12} \) obtained a two-band model for the MgB\(_2\) penetration depth as a function of transport orientation and amount of impurities. We find that the temperature dependence of the effective area can be very well fitted with the two-band model in the clean limit,\(^{13} \) the measured \( I_p \) vs \( T \) dependence can again be very well fitted as shown in Fig. 4. These findings support our assumption that transport occurs in crystalline MgB\(_2\) and
magnetic field noise
sne the fact that single-crystalline MgB$_2$ has weaker flux
uper conductivity, lower noise values for a device that has not yet been optimized. For high
problems. The obtained magnetometer noise value is promising for a device that has not yet been optimized. For high temperature semiconductor magnetometers, lower noise values were reported ($\sim$20–100 fT Hz$^{-1/2}$) at 1 Hz at 77 K, see, e.g., Refs. 11 and 15), but these were fabricated on larger samples ($\sim$1–4 cm$^2$). Using larger MgB$_2$ samples, the magnetic field noise level in inductively shunted dc SQUIDs is expected to be reduced as well. The presented work shows that an adult magnetocardiogram measurement is already feasible at this stage.

In conclusion, magnetic sensing above 35 K is shown to be feasible with MgB$_2$. Nanconstrictions were realized in epitaxial HPCVD MgB$_2$ films within the single-crystalline grains of the material. The 100-nm-wide nanobridges show a high critical current density of $5 \times 10^7$ A/cm$^2$ at 4.2 K and SQUID modulation was observed up to 38.8 K, remarkably close to the transition temperature of the film. An inductively shunted magnetometer was realized with a field-noise level of 1 pT Hz$^{-1/2}$ down to 1 Hz. The transport properties of the magnetometer are governed by the two-band nature of superconductivity, which is found not to hamper the successful development of MgB$_2$ SQUIDs.

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13 S. X. Xu, Q. Li, and X. X. Xi, Experimental dependence of the coherence length measured in Penn State University (private communication).