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From Spin Glass to Quantum Spin Liquid Ground States in Molybdate Pyrochlores


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We present new magnetic heat capacity and neutron scattering results for two magnetically frustrated molybdate pyrochlores: \( S = 1 \) oxide \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) and \( S = \frac{1}{2} \) oxynitride \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_5\text{N}_2 \). \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) undergoes a transition to an unconventional spin glass ground state at \( T_f \sim 16 \) K. However, the preparation of the corresponding oxynitride tunes the nature of the ground state from spin glass to quantum spin liquid. The comparison of the static and dynamic spin correlations within the oxide and oxynitride phases presented here reveals the crucial role played by quantum fluctuations in the selection of a ground state. Furthermore, we estimate an upper limit for a gap in the spin excitation spectrum of the quantum spin liquid state of the oxy nitride of \( \Delta \sim 0.05 \) meV or \( \Delta/|g| \sim 0.004 \), in units of its antiferromagnetic Weiss constant \( \theta \sim -121 \) K.

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Geometric magnetic frustration results when the arrangement of magnetic moments on an ordered lattice prevents the satisfaction of magnetic exchange interactions [1]. This can generate a macroscopic ground state degeneracy, whereby spins on the vertices of the frustrated lattice fluctuate within a manifold of non-ordered states. In materials with both strong geometric frustration and small \( (S = \frac{1}{2}) \) magnetic moments, quantum fluctuations can induce a quantum spin liquid (QSL) ground state [2], [3]. There are now several promising materials that host this state in two-dimensional frustrated lattices [4], [5], [6], [7], [8]. However, examples of three-dimensional QSL candidates, such as a \( S = \frac{1}{2} \) pyrochlore antiferromagnet that possesses a frustrated magnetic lattice of corner sharing tetrahedra, remain scarce [9]. There is some uncertainty regarding the exact nature of the ground state of a \( S = \frac{1}{2} \) pyrochlore antiferromagnet [10], [11], [12] and the synthesis and study of such materials remain important tasks [13].

Frustration in rare earth molybdate pyrochlores, \( \text{R}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \), arises from exchange interactions between \( \text{Mo}^{4+} \) \( 4d^2 \) \( S = 1 \) spins residing on a network of vertex sharing tetrahedra. Among the phenomena observed in these materials [14], the spin glass state in the apparently disorder free \( \text{Y}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) is of particular interest [15], [16], [17], [18], [19]. As this state — a spin glass in the absence of any significant chemical or bond disorder — is very unusual, its realisation in a similarly simple material may be revealing. \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) is a sister compound to \( \text{Y}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) and exhibits strong antiferromagnetic exchange, with the Weiss constant \( \theta \sim -160 \) K, as well as a spin freezing transition at \( T_f \sim 16 \) K [20]. These parameters are remarkably close to \( \text{Y}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) with \( \theta \sim -200 \) K and \( T_f \sim 22 \) K.

A group of materials related to the \( \text{R}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) pyrochlores are the corresponding oxy nitride phases. Oxy nitrides are mixed anion materials that are often prepared by topochemical nitridation of an oxide precursor. As such, oxy nitrides of \( \text{R}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) retain the cubic pyrochlore structure. The incorporation of the nitride \( (\text{N}^{3-}) \) anion into the oxide \( (\text{O}^{2-}) \) framework is accompanied by oxidation of the molybdenum cations to maintain charge neutrality. Oxy nitrides of composition \( \text{R}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_5\text{N}_2 \) possess \( S = \frac{1}{2} \) spins from \( \text{Mo}^{5+} \) \( 4d^1 \). Therefore, they are the first potential realization of a \( d^1 \) Heisenberg pyrochlore antiferromagnet and are excellent candidates for the study of QSL phenomena [21]. Here we present a comparison of low temperature heat capacity and neutron scattering studies of \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) and \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_5\text{N}_2 \).

Polycrystalline \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) was synthesised as described elsewhere [20]. An oxy nitride phase with a composition close to the ideal \( S = \frac{1}{2} \) stoichiometry was prepared by thermal ammonolysis of a \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) precursor [22]. The oxy nitride system adopts the \( F\bar{d}3m \) pyrochlore structure with oxide and nitride anions disordered over the two available anion sites (Fig.S1). Magnetic susceptibility of the oxy nitride (Fig.S2) reveals an absence of long range order or spin freezing down to 2 K despite \( \theta = -121(1) \) K. \( \mu_{\text{eff}} = 1.11(1) \mu_B \) per Mo cation reflects the oxidation of \( \text{Mo}^{4+} \) to \( \text{Mo}^{5+} \). The 64 % reduction of the observed \( \mu_{\text{eff}} \) from the expected spin-only value for \( S = \frac{1}{2} \) is consistent with the 67 % reduction from the expected \( S = 1 \) spin-only moment displayed by \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) [20]. This suggests that spin-orbit coupling is significant in both of these \( 4d \) systems.

Heat capacity of \( \text{Lu}_2\text{Mo}_2\text{O}_7 \) was measured on a 9.0 mg
pellet in a Quantum Design PPMS. The high-temperature data were modelled by the Debye equation (Fig.1(a)) which gave a Debye temperature $\theta_D = 540$ K. Upon subtraction of this estimated lattice contribution, a broad hump centred ~50 K is observed in the magnetic heat capacity $C_{\text{mag}}$, typical of a spin glass system. Heat capacity of the oxynitride was measured on a 8.9 mg sample over 0.5 – 30 K using a $^3$He insert. Given the similar structure and formula weight of the oxide and oxynitride phases, the lattice contribution estimated for Lu$_2$MO$_2$O$_7$ was also used to extract the magnetic heat capacity of the oxynitride. A comparison of the low temperature magnetic heat capacities of the oxide and oxynitride are shown in Fig.1(b). The temperature dependencies are markedly different with $C_{\text{mag}} \propto T^2$ for the oxide and $C_{\text{mag}} \propto T$ for the oxynitride.

Diffuse magnetic neutron diffraction was measured for both pyrochlores on the D7 Spectrometer at the Institut Laue-Langevin [28]. $xyz$ polarisation analysis was used to separate the components of total neutron scattering [29], [30]. Data were collected with an incident wavelength $\lambda = 4.8$ Å, at which final energies are integrated up to $E \sim 3.5$ meV. A detailed experimental account is given in the Supplemental Material [22]. Fig.2 shows the magnetic scattering cross sections $(d\sigma/d\Omega)_{\text{mag}}$ of the oxide and oxynitride at 1.5 K, well below $T_J \sim 16$ K. The magnetic diffuse scattering from the oxide displays a broad peak centred around 0.6 Å$^{-1}$ that indicates the presence of static short ranged molybdenum spin correlations, which were modelled by [31],

$$
\left( \frac{d\sigma}{d\Omega} \right)_{\text{mag}} = \frac{2}{3}(\gamma_n r_0)^2 \left( \frac{1}{2} g F(Q) \right)^2 \times \left( S(S + 1) + \sum_i Z_i \langle S_0 \cdot S_i \rangle \frac{\sin Qr_i}{Qr_i} \right)
$$

where $\langle S_0 \cdot S_i \rangle$ gives the correlation between a spin and its $Z_i$ nearest neighbours at a distance $r_i$. $\gamma_n$, $r_0$ and $g$ take their usual definitions and $F(Q)$ is the molybdenum form factor [32]. The best fit to the data (Fig.2) was obtained by allowing for nearest- ($r_1 = 3.581$ Å, $Z_1 = 6$) and next-nearest-neighbour ($r_2 = 6.203$ Å, $Z_2 = 12$) correlations ($\langle S_0 \cdot S_1 \rangle = -0.029(6)$ and $\langle S_0 \cdot S_2 \rangle = -0.056(7)$, respectively. In contrast, the magnetic diffuse scattering of the oxynitride at 1.5 K is much weaker than that of the oxide and appears to follow $F(Q)^2$. These data were thus modelled using Eqn.1 with $\langle S_0 \cdot S_i \rangle = 0$ for all $i$ [33]. The fit is shown as the solid line against the oxynitride data in Fig.2. The effective magnetic moment extracted from the fit to the data, 0.11(1) $\mu_B$, corresponds to only 6% of the expected $S = \frac{1}{2}$ spin-only value, suggesting that most of the scattering from the oxynitride is inelastic and thus outside the energy range over which D7 integrates energy [34].

To probe their full static and dynamic behaviour, both samples were studied on the Cold Neutron Chopper Spectrometer (CNCS) [35] at the Spallation Neutron Source of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Measurements were performed on cooling to 1.5 K with an incident neutron energy $E_i = 3.3$ meV. The inset of Fig.2 shows the elastic scattering from the oxide and oxynitride at 1.5 K, obtained by integrating the inelastic spectra over the energy of the elastic line, $E = [-0.1, 0.1]$ meV. A broad peak at low $Q$ is observed for the oxide, which can again be modelled by Eqn.1. To confirm the consistency of the analyses of the CNCS and D7 data sets, a scaled version of the fit to the CNCS data is plotted with the D7 fit in the main panel of Fig.2; agreement is excellent. Remarkably, the scattering collected for the oxynitride at 1.5 K within the narrowly defined elastic window on CNCS is consistent with no elastic magnetic scattering,
as shown in the inset to Fig.2.

The temperature dependencies of the background corrected, normalised and $Q$-integrated ($Q = [0.5, 2.0] \text{ Å}^{-1}$) inelastic scattering for the oxide and oxynitride are shown in the top panels of Figs.3(a) and 3(b), respectively. The oxide (Fig.3(a)) presents a broad spectrum at $T > 50$ K, well above the spin freezing transition. Upon cooling, low energy spin fluctuations develop. The transition is clearly marked by a collapse of inelastic scattering intensity into the elastic line as static short range spin correlations build up. The inelastic scattering data were fitted to the general form of the scattering function [17],

$$S(E) = \frac{1}{\pi} \chi''(E)[1 + n(E)]$$

where $n(E)$ is the Bose-Einstein thermal population factor and $\chi''$ is the imaginary part of the dynamic susceptibility. A good description of the data was obtained with,

$$\chi''(E) = \chi_{0}\arctan\left(\frac{E}{\Gamma}\right)$$

where $\Gamma$ is related to the energy width of the inelastic spectrum. Representative fits to the oxynitride data are shown in Fig.4. The bottom panel of Fig.3(a) shows the temperature dependence of $\Gamma$ for the oxide, which goes to zero at or near $T_f \sim 16$ K, consistent with spin glass freezing. The overall dynamic behavior of Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ is thus very similar to that of its sister “disorder free” spin glass pyrochlore Y$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ [17]. Again in rather stark contrast, the oxynitride displays a temperature-independent energy width of $\Gamma \sim 0.08$ meV, consistent with that of Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ near 30 K, almost twice $T_f$ (Fig.3(b)). Therefore the temperature dependence observed in $S(E)$ for the oxynitride originates entirely from the Bose-Einstein factor in Equation 2.

Fig.5 compares the inelastic scattering integrated over $Q = [0.5, 2.0] \text{ Å}^{-1}$ from the both samples at 1.5 K. Given that the inelastic scattering from Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ is strongly suppressed below $T_f$, the scattering from the oxide at 1.5 K is a good measure of the background. The oxynitride sample clearly shows an enhanced inelastic signal on either side of the elastic line. The persistence of inelastic scattering, particularly on the neutron energy gain side where the incident neutron destroys a spin fluctuation, directly demonstrates that the oxynitride remains strongly fluctuating at $1.5 \sim \frac{\theta}{100}$ K. By subtracting the 1.5 K oxide data from the oxynitride data and integrating in energy ($E = [0.2, 1.5] \text{ meV}$) the $Q$-dependence of the inelastic scattering from the oxynitride is obtained (see Fig.5, inset). The form of this inelastic scattering reveals the nature of dynamical spin correlations within the oxynitride. The $Q$-dependence is well described by the magnetic form factor, $F(Q)^2$. The inelastic magnetic scattering from Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_5$N$_2$ strongly suggests a gapless QSL state at 1.5 K, with few or no structured spatial correlations between the $S = \frac{1}{2}$ spins.

Our study of Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ and Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_5$N$_2$ present both interesting similarities and contrasts. They share the same structure and their magnetic interactions are antiferromagnetic and of similar strength. Yet the $S = 1$ Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ undergoes a freezing transition at $T_f \sim 16$ K, while the $S = \frac{1}{2}$ Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_5$N$_2$ remains in a dynamic state to temperatures $\sim \frac{\theta}{100}$. Even though structural disorder and magnetic frustration often lead to spin freezing, Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_5$N$_2$ does not find a frozen ground state despite O/N disorder, unlike both Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ and Y$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$. These contrasts are clearly expressed in the low temperature magnetic heat capacities, where $C_{mag} \propto T^2$ for the oxides and $C_{mag} \propto T$ for the oxynitride. The $T^2$-dependence may arise from the coupling between spin and orbital degrees of freedom in Y$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ [19] and this spin-orbital frustration was also shown to be an important parameter in the spin glass ground state of $R_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ in recent density functional theory calculations [36]. Linear temperature dependencies have been observed in a number of QSL candidate materials [7], [37], [38]. The pronounced $C_{mag} = \gamma T$ form, where $\gamma$ is the Sommerfeld coefficient, is in spite of insulating behaviour is argued to arise from the presence of a spinon Fermi surface [39]. There are examples of frustrated systems in which doping results in a significant enhancement of the linear $\gamma T$ term of heat capacity, such as Yb$_4$As$_3$,P$_x$ [40] and Y$_{1-x}$Sc$_x$Mn$_2$ [41]. In the latter, Sc-doping of only $x = 0.03$ is sufficient to break the antiferromagnetic order observed in the parent YnMn$_2$ and a ten-fold increase in the magnitude of $\gamma$ [42]. For Yb$_4$As$_3$,P$_x$, doping with phosphorous increases $\gamma$ by a factor of two (for $x = 0.3$), heightening quantum mechanical effects that disrupt long range order in the process. A similar mechanism of the enhancement of quantum fluctuations upon doping with N$^{3-}$ is likely to be responsible for the pronounced linear term in the heat capacity of Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_5$N$_2$ in comparison to Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$. The low temperature heat capacity of Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_5$N$_2$ also provides an upper limit for any gap in the spin excitation spectrum, $\Delta \sim 0.5$ K $\sim 0.05$ meV. Neutron spectroscopic data (Figs.3(b) and 5) set the upper limit for a gap at $\sim 0.1$ meV.

We finally turn to the relationship between the ground states of Lu$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ and Y$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$. The ionic radius of Lu$^{3+}$ is $\sim 4$ % smaller than that of Y$^{3+}$ [43], yet both oxides are “disorder free” spin glasses with similar $T_f$. It is intriguing that a second pyrochlore antiferromagnet with a single magnetic site displays such similar behaviour. If weak disorder is responsible for this state, it would imply that this disorder is very similar in the two materials, which is not obvious based on their ionic radii. Short range spin correlations within these two spin glass ground states are similar but distinct. Y$_2$Mo$_2$O$_7$ [17] displays a broad elastic magnetic peak centred at 0.4 Å$^{-1}$, as compared
with the peak at 0.6 Å⁻¹ reported here for Lu₂Mo₂O₇. The lower Q position of the peak of Y₂Mo₂O₇ indicates that its magnetic correlations have a longer ranged spatial extent. Indeed, those in Y₂Mo₂O₇ were found to form domains extending over an entire unit cell, whereas those in Lu₂Mo₂O₇ are confined to a next-nearest-neighbour length scale, roughly half a unit cell.

To conclude, the unconventional spin glass state observed in Lu₂Mo₂O₇ is similar to that shown by Y₂Mo₂O₇, but with shorter range static correlations peaked at Q = 0.6 Å⁻¹. In contrast to the oxide, Lu₂Mo₂O₅N₂ shows no evidence for any transition to a frozen or or-
dered state to 0.5 K. The strength of the quantum fluctuations induced by the the reduction of $S$ in the oxytnitride overcomes any competition with disorder in the selection of a ground state and gives rise to a QSL, with an upper bound on a gap in the spin excitation spectrum of $\Delta \sim 0.05 \text{ meV} \sim 0.5 \text{ K}$ or $\Delta \sim 0.004$. This study demonstrates the potential of nitriding oxide precursors as means of tuning the oxidation state on magnetic ions, and therefore the spin degree of freedom and strength of quantum fluctuations. This is a relatively unexplored route to exotic magnetic ground states, but one with the potential to be very rewarding.

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[22] See Supplemental Material at [URL will be inserted by publisher] for further experimental details regarding sample synthesis, susceptibility, neutron scattering measurements and includes Refs. [23 – 27].