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Deposited 10/24/2018

Citation of published version:
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevLett.110.166402
Spontaneous Formation of Zigzag Chains at the Metal-Insulator Transition in the $\beta$-Pyrochlore CsW$_2$O$_6$

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(Received 3 January 2013; published 16 April 2013)

A paramagnetic metal to nonmagnetic insulator transition at $T_{\text{MIT}} = 210$ K is reported for the $\beta$-pyrochlore oxide CsW$_2$O$_6$, accompanied by a first order structural transition that creates (110) oriented chains in the pyrochlore lattice. Comparison of CsW$_2$O$_6$, which has 1 electron per 2 W sites, to the fully $d^0$ analog CsTaWO$_6$ shows that the transitions are electronically driven. Corefinement of high resolution synchrotron x-ray and neutron diffraction data shows that the structural distortion that creates the W chains cannot be attributed to simple charge or orbital ordering. Density functional theory calculations suggest that the phase transition is driven by a sharply peaked electronic density of states near the Fermi energy in the cubic $\beta$-pyrochlore phase. A further electronic instability is required to create the insulating ground state.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevLett.110.166402 PACS numbers: 71.30.+h, 61.66.Fn, 75.25.Dk

Geometric frustration, which arises when geometrical structural constraints promote competition between local states that are energetically degenerate, has been one of the most intensively studied subjects in condensed matter physics in recent years. A phase transition that lifts the degeneracy by lowering the local symmetry may be induced if the coupling of electronic and structural degrees of freedom is sufficiently strong. In pyrochlores ($A_2B_2O_7$) and spinels ($AB_2O_4$), the $B$ ion sublattice consists of a three-dimensional network of corner sharing tetrahedra, known as the pyrochlore lattice, which underpins the strong geometrical frustration effects. When occupied by a noninteger number of electrons per site, simple charge order is suppressed and the eventual formation of a nontrivial charge state occurs. The Cs$_2$WO$_6$ and AlV$_2$O$_4$ spinels, for example, form complex Ir octamers [1] and V heptamers [2]. Some systems, however, maintain a uniform charge metallic state to low temperatures and exhibit ground states other than charge-ordering, such as heavy Fermion states (e.g., LiV$_2$O$_4$ [3]) or superconductivity (e.g., AO$_{52}$O$_6$ ($A = K, Rb, Cs$) [4–8]).

CsW$_2$O$_6$ is a rare example of a mixed-valence pyrochlore oxide, with an average formal W valence of 5.5+, i.e., 1 electron per 2 W sites. It is a nonoelectronic analogue to the intensively studied AO$_{52}$O$_6$ ($A = K, Rb, Cs$) superconductors. CsW$_2$O$_6$ crystallizes in the $\beta$-pyrochlore type structure at room temperature [9]. The existence of a phase transition at 215 K has been described in a preliminary report [10]. In this Letter, we report a metal-insulator transition (MIT) accompanied by a structural transition in CsW$_2$O$_6$ at 210 K. We find the formation of W zigzag chains below this transition. The structural distortion cannot be attributed to a simple charge ordered or orbitally ordered state, though the symmetry of the conducting lattice has clearly decreased and resulted in chain formation. Electronic structure calculations show the presence of a high density of states (DOS) near the Fermi energy ($E_F$) in the cubic $\beta$-pyrochlore phase that is strongly suppressed at the transition. CsW$_2$O$_6$ therefore appears to be a unique example of a MIT accompanied by a complex structural transition on the pyrochlore lattice.

Polycrystalline CsW$_2$O$_6$ samples were prepared as described in Ref. [9]. Washing in distilled water removed excess Cs$_2$WO$_4$. Synchrotron powder x-ray diffraction (SXRD) measurements were conducted from 100 to 400 K in 20 K steps at beam line 11-BM at the Advanced Photon Source (Argonne National Laboratory), with wavelength $\lambda = 0.413115$ Å, and neutron powder diffraction data were recorded using the BT1 spectrometer at the NIST Center for Neutron Research with wavelengths $\lambda = 1.540$ and 2.078 Å. Electron diffraction was carried out in a JEOL 3000F transmission electron microscope equipped with a Gatan liquid-helium cooling stage. Crystal structures were refined by the Rietveld method using the FULLPROF program [11]. Magnetic susceptibility, resistivity, and specific-heat measurements were performed by using a Magnetic Property Measurement System and a Physical Property Measurement System (Quantum Design). Resistivity measurements were performed on synthesized, washed powders pressed into pellets and fired at 500 °C. The pellets were not dense, but higher temperature sintering is not possible due to the instability of the phase at high temperatures [9].

The synchrotron x-ray and neutron diffraction patterns of CsW$_2$O$_6$ at room temperature are all consistent with the
previously reported cubic $\beta$-pyrochlore structure with space group $Fd\bar{3}m$ [9]. The refinement of this model gave good fits to the data (see the Supplemental Material [12]). No deviation from the ideal stoichiometric composition was observed.

Clear anomalies indicative of a phase transition were observed in the electrical resistivity, magnetic susceptibility, and specific heat of CsW$_2$O$_6$ (Fig. 1). The resistivity of the high-temperature phase above 210 K increases slightly on cooling, while exhibiting a remarkable increase below the transition, by as much as 5 orders of magnitude on cooling from 210 to 60 K [Fig. 1(a)]. The measured value of the resistivity at room-temperature ($\sim 1 \Omega \text{cm}$) is too high for a metal. The intrinsic transport property of CsW$_2$O$_6$ is considered to be metallic at room temperature with the high resistance of the samples originating from surface oxidation of the powders during processing (e.g., when washing in water). The fact that the room temperature resistivity continuously increases for samples exposed to air supports this conclusion. The possibility of small-polaron conduction, such as is observed in Fe$_3$O$_4$ [13] in its cubic spinel phase cannot be ruled out; thus, further study is required to confirm the nature of the high temperature phase. The inset of Fig. 1(a) shows that the resistivity $\rho(T)$ below the transition follows the Arrhenius-type temperature dependence, $\rho(T) = A \exp(E_a/k_B T)$, where $k_B$ is the Boltzmann constant. The fitting from 180 to 70 K gives a thermal activation energy of $E_a = 0.092$ eV, indicating the opening of a charge gap. Thus, CsW$_2$O$_6$ undergoes a MIT on cooling below 210 K.

The magnetic susceptibility above the MIT, $\chi(T) \sim 1.0 \times 10^{-4}$ emu/mol, is comparable to or smaller than those reported for the metallic $\beta$ pyrochlores AO$_5$O$_6$ ($A = \text{Cs, Rb, K}$) [14], and can be ascribed to the Pauli paramagnetic susceptibility of a metal. Where the resistivity shows a marked change in slope at 210 K, the magnetic susceptibility shows an abrupt drop from a positive value to negative value [Fig. 1(b)], implying the formation of spin singlets. A clear thermal hysteresis in the magnetic susceptibility data at the transition [inset, Fig. 1(b)] indicates that the transition is first order. The low temperature insulating phase exhibits a nearly temperature-independent susceptibility, except for an upturn at low temperatures that can be attributed to a minor magnetic impurity with a small Curie constant of $1.6 \times 10^{-3}$ emu/mol K. After considering a finite contribution from core diamagnetism, the negative susceptibility at low temperatures is too small to be due to an antiferromagnetic state of local moments.

The MIT in CsW$_2$O$_6$ is also clearly observed as a large jump in the specific-heat, as shown in Fig. 1(c). This large jump is sharply in contrast with what is observed for the fully $d^0$ analogue CsTaWO$_6$ [inset to Fig. 1(c)] which does not exhibit a phase transition [15]. The difference between them clearly indicates that the phase transition in CsW$_2$O$_6$ is driven by an electronic instability due to the presence of 1 electron per two W sites. The specific-heat data around the MIT allow for an estimation of the change of entropy of $\Delta S = 3.7 \text{ J/mol K}$ associated with the transition. Such a large entropy change is indicative of a drastic electronic transition with strong coupling to a lattice distortion. The other striking feature of the specific heat in CsW$_2$O$_6$ is its large weight at low temperatures. This originates from the characteristic rattling of Cs atoms in the cage of the $\beta$-pyrochlore structure. As shown in Fig. 1(c), the specific-heat is well fitted by the same method adopted previously for $\beta$-pyrochlore oxides [14,16]. The absence of a $T$-linear term in $C(T)$ indicates the absence of a significant electronic contribution to the specific heat at low temperatures and, therefore, reflects the presence of a fully opened energy gap in the low-temperature phase.

To investigate the structure of the insulating phase below $T_{\text{MIT}}$, high-resolution SXRD, powder neutron diffraction, and electron diffraction data were collected at various temperatures. Below the MIT ($\sim 210$ K), weak forbidden reflections in addition to those allowed in the $Fd\bar{3}m$ space group were seen in electron diffraction patterns [see Fig. 2(c)].
addition, are found in one single branch of the group-Fd$	ext{}_{3m}$ subgroups. All the superlattice reflections that are present in both the x-ray and neutron data collected at 100 K can be indexed on the primitive orthorhombic unit cell of space group Pnma. The relation between the cubic and orthorhombic cells is $\sqrt{2}a_o = \sqrt{2}b_o = a_c$ and $c_o = a_c$ [Fig. 3(b)]. The intensity of the superlattice reflections observed in the x-ray diffraction data is $\sim 10^{-3}$ of the fundamental reflections, which implies that the displacements of heavy elements W and Cs are very small through the MIT. The model for the low temperature orthorhombic Pnma phase was obtained by starting with the ideal pyrochlore positions. Parts of the Rietveld refinement plots for the SXRD and neutron data are shown in Fig. 2(a). The refined Pnma model gives excellent fits to both the SXRD (also see the Supplemental Material [12]) and neutron diffraction data, and no magnetic diffraction peaks were observed below the MIT in the neutron diffraction data.

A strong coupling of the structure to the MIT is observed in the temperature dependence of the SXRD data [Fig. 2(b)]; the lattice parameters and the integrated intensity of a representative superlattice peak are shown to change discontinuously on cooling through the transition. A close examination of the low temperature structure reveals that the structural transition involves significant though complex changes in the local structure. In contrast to the high temperature structure with a single W site, the W ions in the low-temperature structure are distributed in an ordered way over two symmetry-independent positions: the average W-O bond length is $1.9314(4)$ Å for all tungsten atoms above the MIT. The model for the low temperature orthorhombic Pnma phase was obtained by starting with the ideal pyrochlore positions. Parts of the Rietveld refinement plots for the SXRD and neutron data are shown in Fig. 2(a). The refined Pnma model gives excellent fits to both the SXRD and neutron diffraction data, and no magnetic diffraction peaks were observed below the MIT in the neutron diffraction data.

A strong coupling of the structure to the MIT is observed in the temperature dependence of the SXRD data [Fig. 2(b)]; the lattice parameters and the integrated intensity of a representative superlattice peak are shown to change discontinuously on cooling through the transition. A close examination of the low temperature structure reveals that the structural transition involves significant though complex changes in the local structure. In contrast to the high temperature structure with a single W site, the W ions in the low-temperature structure are distributed in an ordered way over two symmetry-independent positions in a 1:1 ratio. The resulting independent W1 and W2 atoms are arranged in chains along the orthorhombic $a$ and $b$ axes, respectively [Fig. 3(a)]. The single W-O bond distance of $1.9314(4)$ Å for all tungsten atoms above the MIT is split into different sets of distances for W1 and W2 [18] below the transition. The most important first order electrostructural characteristic, the average W-O bond length, is virtually the same for both types of W below the transition: for W1 it is $1.932(5)$ Å and for W2 it is $1.929(7)$ Å. These differ by only 0.003 Å, and therefore $W^{5+}$-$W^{6+}$ charge ordering does not drive the MIT and the spontaneous chain formation. Second-order bonding effects such as the mean
square deviation ($\Delta^2$) [19] from an ideal octahedral coordination have to be considered to see a difference between the sites. In the low temperature structure, $\Delta^2 = 0.0184$ and 0.0687 for W1 and W2, respectively. Even at this level, however, there is no clear indication of charge ordering in the sites—both W1 and W2 are in much more regular octahedra than are found for the sites. In the low temperature structure, $\Delta^2 = 0.714$ and 0.659 [20], and much closer to what is found for the uniform charge state in the hexagonal tungsten bronze Rb$_{0.33}$WO$_3$, where $\Delta^2 = 0.119$ and 0.088 [21]. Further, there is no clear indication of orbital ordering of partially occupied 5$d$ orbitals within the chains below the phase transition.

Thus the structural transition in CsW$_2$O$_6$ at the MIT is more complex than can be explained by simple charge or orbital ordering. Nonmagnetic, insulating ground states in systems with the pyrochlore lattice have also been observed, for example, in Tl$_2$Ru$_2$O$_7$ [22], CuIr$_2$S$_4$ [11], MgTi$_2$O$_4$ [23], and LiRh$_2$O$_4$ [24]. In CuIr$_2$S$_4$ and MgTi$_2$O$_4$, orbital orderings result in short transition-metal bond forming spin singlets. In contrast, there is no signature of dimer formation in CsW$_2$O$_6$. The W-W distances within the W1 and W2 chains are uniform and within 0.001 Å of each other (3.649 and 3.650 Å, respectively). There has, however, been a significant differentiation of the interchain W1-W2 separations to longer (3.701 Å) and shorter (3.598 Å) distances, forming zigzag chains in the structure [Fig. 3(c)]. This 0.1 Å differentiation of distances is the largest by far in the structure and is its primary response to the electronic instability. The same type of Ru$^{4+}$ (4$d^4$, $S = 1$) zigzag chain in Tl$_2$RuO$_7$ is considered to be a Haldane chain which is responsible for its nonmagnetic ground state at low temperature. [22] However, this cannot be the case for CsW$_2$O$_6$ where only one electron occupies two W sites.

Strong coupling between electronic and structural degrees of freedom is rare in 5$d$-based transition metal compounds due to the diffuse character of the 5$d$ orbitals. For pyrochlore oxides, however, the strong deviation of the M-O-M bond angles from 180° results in relatively poor overlap of metal-5$d$ and oxygen-2$p$ orbitals and therefore the presence of narrower bands, for which such interactions are more normally seen. Indeed our electronic structure calculations [25], carried out for the high temperature phase, show evidence of electronic instability for cubic $\beta$-pyrochlore CsW$_2$O$_6$. This phase has a high, sharply peaked DOS near $E_F$, as shown in Fig. 4, dominated by hybridized W 5$d$ and O 2$p$ states. The partially filled $t_{2g}$ manifold of width 2.8 eV is consistent with the metallic phase above the MIT. The DOS shows relatively narrow features in energy. Similarly sharp features in the $t_{2g}$ DOS have been reported for other pyrochlore lattice compounds such as Li$_2$Ti$_2$O$_4$, Li$_2$V$_2$O$_4$, and KO$_5$S$_2$O$_6$, arising from dispersionless bands produced by geometrical frustration [26–28]. $E_F$ of CsW$_2$O$_6$ is located near very sharp peaks in the DOS—the calculated DOS for CsW$_2$O$_6$ at $E_F$ is $N(E_F) = 4.72$ states/eV f.u., which is much larger than the $N(E_F) = 2.45$ states/eV f.u. [29] for the related superconductor KO$_5$S$_2$O$_6$ with Os$^{5.5+}$ (5$d^{2.5}$). Figure 4 shows that the structural change at the MIT significantly changes the electronic structure of CsW$_2$O$_6$ around $E_F$, where the sharply peaked character is dramatically suppressed and the DOS at $E_F$ is reduced from 4.72 to 3.75 states/eV f.u. Note that our calculation for the low temperature phase has remnant states at $E_F$, and more ingredients, such as electronic correlations, appear to be required to elucidate the insulating ground state. This band instability inherent in the frustrated pyrochlore lattice of CsW$_2$O$_6$ at its electron count is likely the driving force for the MIT, though the resulting distortion of the lattice accompanying the transition cannot be described by any of the simple charge or orbital ordering schemes currently considered for pyrochlores.

In conclusion, we report a metal to nonmagnetic insulator transition at $T_{MIT} = 210$ K in the $\beta$-pyrochlore oxide CsW$_2$O$_6$. The low temperature crystal structure indicates the spontaneous formation of zigzag chains below the transition. Our electronic structure calculation for the high temperature cubic phase exhibits sharp peaks of DOS in the $t_{2g}$ manifold, which is related to the unique geometry of the pyrochlore lattice. Rather than leading to superconductivity, as is seen in AO$_5$S$_2$O$_6$ (A = K, Rb and Cs), the high DOS at $E_F$ in CsW$_2$O$_6$ gives rise to a band instability and results in a nonmagnetic insulator ground state. The comparison between these compounds may lead to further understanding of the coupling of electronic and structural degrees of freedom in the pyrochlore lattice.

The authors thank B. H. Toby, L. Ribaud, and M. Suchomel at beam line 11-BM at the APS for their excellent diffraction data, and S. Jia for helpful discussions. This work was supported by the U.S. DOE, Office of Basic Energy Sciences, Grant No. DE-FG02-45706. Use of the APS at Argonne National Laboratory was supported by the U.S. DOE, Office of Science, Office of Basic Energy Sciences.
Functional Nanomaterials.

The work at BNL was supported by the U.S. Department of Energy, Basic Energy Sciences, by the Materials Sciences and Engineering Division under Contract No. DE-AC02-98CH10886 and through the use of the Center for Functional Nanomaterials.

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16. The specific heat was fitted by the following equation: $C = C_E + aC_{D1} + (8 - a)C_{D2}$, where $C_E$ is contribution of the Cs local mode represented by an Einstein oscillator and $C_{D1}$ and $C_{D2}$ are those of the W-O framework described by Debye phonons. The obtained parameters from the fitting are $a = 1.98(6)$, Einstein temperature of $\Theta_E = 57.8(5)$ K, and Debye temperatures of $\Theta_{D1} = 224(4)$ and $\Theta_{D2} = 767(7)$ K.
18. Obtained W-O bond lengths for low-temperature structure are as follows: W1-O: 1.925(6) Å × 2, 1.904(5) Å × 2, 1.967(5) Å × 2; and W2-O: 1.876(12) Å, 2.005(11) Å, 1.963(3) Å × 2, 1.882(5) Å × 2.
19. The mean square deviations from ideal octahedral symmetry ($\Delta^2$) are calculated as $\Delta^2 = \left(\frac{1}{6}\sum_{\alpha=1}^{6}(d_{\alpha} - \langle d_{\alpha} \rangle)^2 \right) \times 100$, where $d_{\alpha}$ is average W-O bond length in a WO$_6$ octahedron.
25. P. Blaha, K. Schwarz, G. K. H. Madsen, D. Kvasnicka, and J. Luitz, WIEN2K code, http://www.wien2k.at. Electronic structure calculations were carried out in the generalized gradient approximation using the full potential augmented plane wave plus local orbitals method. The muffin-tin sphere radii were 2.50, 1.87, and 1.66 Bohr for Cs, W, and O, respectively, the number of plane waves was restricted by $R_{MT}k_{max} = 7$, and the irreducible Brillouin zone was sampled by 726 k points (high temperature phase) and $R_{MT}k_{max} = 6$ and 100 k points (low temperature phase). W was set as spin-up. Spin-orbit coupling was included.