Strong coupling between magnetic and structural order parameters in SrFe$_2$As$_2$

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(Received 4 July 2008; revised manuscript received 26 September 2008; published 13 November 2008)

Compounds with FeAs layers have recently attracted considerable interest because they present an intriguing magnetic and structural transition, which gets suppressed upon doping resulting in the appearance of high-temperature superconductivity (SC). This behavior was observed in the RFeAsO series of compounds (R=La-Gd) (Refs. 1–5) and more recently in the AFe$_2$As$_2$ class of materials (A=Ca, Sr).⁶–¹⁰ The onset of SC at the disappearance of a magnetic phase distortion and to a commensurate antiferromagnetic Fe ordering with a larger distortion and larger size of the ordered moment than reported for BaFe$_2$As$_2$. The structural and the magnetic order parameters present a remarkable similarity in their temperature dependence from $T_D$ down to low temperatures, showing that both phenomena are intimately connected. Accordingly, the size of the ordered Fe moments scales with the lattice distortion when going from SrFe$_2$As$_2$ to BaFe$_2$As$_2$. Full-potential band-structure calculations confirm that the columnar magnetic order with propagation vector (1,0,1) and the orthorhombic lattice distortion are intrinsically tied to each other.

A strong connection between both order parameters.

X-ray and muon spin-relaxation experiments performed on SrFe$_2$As$_2$ polycrystals confirm a sharp first-order transition at $T_0=205$ K corresponding to an orthorhombic phase distortion and to a commensurate antiferromagnetic Fe ordering with a larger distortion and larger size of the ordered moment than reported for BaFe$_2$As$_2$. The structural and the magnetic order parameters present a remarkable similarity in their temperature dependence from $T_D$ down to low temperatures, showing that both phenomena are intimately connected. Accordingly, the size of the ordered Fe moments scales with the lattice distortion when going from SrFe$_2$As$_2$ to BaFe$_2$As$_2$. Full-potential band-structure calculations confirm that the columnar magnetic order with propagation vector (1,0,1) and the orthorhombic lattice distortion are intrinsically tied to each other.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevB.78.180504 PACS number(s): 71.20.Lp, 74.70.Dd, 75.30.Fv

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The sample preparation and characterization have been described in detail in our previous paper.⁸ The main aspect of our synthesis process is to allow for a slow and progressive reaction of a stoichiometric amount of pure elements by increasing slowly and stepwise the reaction temperature up to 1150 °C. This results in polycrystalline samples with an excellent resistivity ratio $\rho_{300 K}/\rho_{1.5 K}=32$, better than in most of the reported single crystals. Susceptibility $\chi(T)$, specific heat $C(T)$, and resistivity $\rho(T)$ measurements were carried out using standard techniques in commercial equipments physical property measurement system and magnetic property measurement system of Quantum Design. Temperature-dependent x-ray powder pattern were obtained using an imaging plate Guinier Camera HUBER G670 (Co-Kα radiation) equipped with a closed cycle cryostat. Zero-field muon spin-relaxation ($\mu$SR) experiments were performed between 1.6 and 300 K using the General Purpose Surface-Muon Instrument at the Paul Scherrer Institute. To gain deeper insight into the relation of magnetism and the orthorhombic distortion in SrFe$_2$As$_2$ on a microscopic level, we performed density functional band-structure calculations within the local (spin) density approximation. Using the experimental structural parameters of the tetragonal cell¹¹,¹²,¹³ as a starting point, we applied the full-potential local-orbital (FPL0) code¹⁶ (version 7.00–28) in both scalar-relativistic and fully relativistic versions, respectively, with the Perdew-Wang exchange correlation potential.¹⁷ A well-converged $k$ mesh of at least 18³ points within the Brillouin zone of the larger orthorhombic cell has been used.
In Fig. 1(a) we show the anomalies in ρ(T), χ(T), and C(T), which evidence a sharp first-order transition in our polycrystalline SrFe₂As₂ sample, as discussed in our previous paper. While ρ(T) is only weakly decreasing with temperature between 300 and 205 K, it presents a 5% drop at T₀ followed by a further strong decrease to low temperatures. The susceptibility, except for a Curie-type contribution likely due to paramagnetic impurities or a small amount of foreign phases, seems to be T independent above and below T₀, but presents also a drop of Δχ = 1.1 × 10⁻⁹ m³/mol at T₀. The specific-heat measurement shows a sharp peak at T₀, which was interpreted as first-order transition with a latent heat ΔH = 200 J/mol. We shall first focus on the results of the x-ray measurements. At room temperature and down to 210 K the powder-diffraction pattern evidenced an undistorted tetragonal (TT) ThCr₂Si₂ structure type. In contrast, in all patterns taken at 205 K or lower temperatures, some of the Bragg peaks are well split, while others are not, demonstrating the structural distortion [Fig. 1(b)]. The pattern at 205 K and below can be well fitted with an orthorhombic (OT) unit cell (Fmmm) with a₁/₄TT = 2(1 + δ) and b₁/₄OT = 2(1 − δ) in analogy to the structure proposed for BaFe₂As₂ (Ref. 6) and in accordance with Ref. 13. So, δ corresponds to the order parameter of the structural phase transition. A lattice parameter fit at the lowest investigated temperature T = 60 K gave a = 5.5746(4) Å, b = 5.5130(8) Å, and c = 12.286(4) Å, corresponding to a saturation value of the distortion δ₀ = 0.56(1) × 10⁻² at low T. The evolution of δ with temperature was determined by analyzing precisely the splitting of the 400/040 Bragg peaks [Figs. 1(b) and 2(a)]. Here we included data taken upon cooling and heating the sample. We did not observe any differences between both sets of data. Between 210 and 205 K, the 220 peak of the TT high-temperature phase disappears abruptly, being replaced by the 400 and 040 peaks of the OT low-temperature phase. At 210 K, shoulders on both sides of the 220 peak indicate that a small amount of OT phase is coexisting with the TT phase, in accordance with a first-order transition. The presence of this OT phase above T₀ might be due to strain or defects induced by the powdering process. The distortion δ increases steplike to 70% of δ₀. This is a further clear evidence for a first-order transition. However, δ continues to increase with decreasing temperatures, indicating a further strengthening of the order parameter below the transition. A comparison with the data reported previously by Yan et al. is due to Sn incorporation. However, both the absolute value of the splitting at low T and that at the transition are very similar to our results. Thus, while the transition temperature and the sharpness of the transition are quite sensitive to defects, the splittings at T₀ and at T → 0 K, as well as the increase in δ(T) below T₀, are not.

Precise information on the evolution of the magnetic order parameter was obtained from μSR experiments. Muon spin relaxation is a well-established method for revealing and studying magnetic order. It probes the local field induced at the site(s) of the muon by slowly fluctuating or ordered nearby magnetic moments. For temperatures above 205 K we observe only a slow decay of the muon polarization, as expected for a nonmagnetic material. Below 205 K, well-defined and strong oscillations appear in the time dependence of the muon polarization, as shown in the inset of Fig. 3, evidencing a precession of the muon in an internal field. A Fourier analysis of the signal reveals two distinct components with very well-defined frequencies: one at f₁ ≈ 44 MHz corresponding to ≈ 70% of the signal and one at f₂ ≈ 13 MHz corresponding to ≈ 30% of the signal. This indicates the presence of two distinct muon sites, one being more strongly and one more weakly coupled to the Fe moments. This resembles the situation in LaFeAsO where also two components—one with a larger frequency f₁ ≈ 23 MHz corresponding to 70% of the muons and one with a lower
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Preliminary Fe Mössbauer experiments evidenced very well-defined hyperfine splitting at low $T$, corresponding to a hyperfine field of 8.5 T, which is identical to the value reported for EuFe$_2$As$_2$. The ratio between the respective $f_1$ frequencies in SrFe$_2$As$_2$ and LaFeAsO is similar to the ratio of the hyperfine field measured in Mössbauer experiments and, thus, to the ratio of the ordered Fe moments. This suggests that the muon site corresponding to $f_1$ is the same in both types of compounds and likely located within the FeAs layers, while the muon site corresponding to $f_2$ is probably in the region separating the FeAs layers, which differs between different types of compounds. The oscillations we observed in SrFe$_2$As$_2$ are much better defined than those reported for LaFeAsO, which is likely related to a much better crystallinity and higher homogeneity of the AFe$_2$As$_2$ compounds compared to the RFeAsO ones. On the other hand it indicates that the internal field at each muon site in SrFe$_2$As$_2$ is sharply defined, implying a well-defined long-range commensurate magnetic order. This was confirmed by neutron-scattering experiments, which revealed sharp magnetic Bragg peaks below $T_0$, similar to those reported for BaFe$_2$As$_2$. The higher precision of our measurement allowed to uniquely fix the magnetic structure as a columnar antiferromagnetic order with propagation vector $(1,0,1)$ and Fe moment of $\mu_B$ oriented along the $a$ axis. A neutron-scattering study on a SrFe$_2$As$_2$ single crystal confirmed this columnar magnetic structure with moments ordered antiferromagnetically along the large Fe-Fe distance and ferromagnetically along the short Fe-Fe distance. Furthermore, the same antiferromagnetic structure was also reported for CaFe$_2$As$_2$. In the main part of Fig. 3, we show the temperature dependence of $f_1$ in SrFe$_2$As$_2$, $f_1$ is proportional to the size of the ordered moment and, thus, to the magnetic order parameter. In contrast to LaFeAsO, where $f_1$ is increasing continuously below a second-order transition at $T_N \approx 134$ K, we observe in SrFe$_2$As$_2$ at 205 K a sharp steplike increase in $f_1$ to 66% of its saturation value at low $T$ ($f_1^{\text{sat}} \approx 44$ MHz). This is again an indication for a first-order transition. However, as already noticed for the $T$ dependence of the lattice distortion $\delta$, also the magnetic order parameter further increases below $T_0$ with decreasing $T$. We compare in Fig. 2(b) the $T$ dependence of $\delta(T)$ and $f_1(T)$ normalized to their saturation values at low $T$. The $T$ dependencies are identical within the accuracy of the experiments. In the inset of Fig. 2(b), $f_1$ is plotted as a function of $\delta(T)$ with $T$ as an implicit parameter, clearly evidencing a linear dependence between both parameters. A straight line drawn through the data points almost extrapolates to $f_1 = \delta = 0$. This demonstrates that both order parameters are intimately coupled to each other. A strong coupling between the magnetic and the structural order parameter, as well as a clear evidence for a first-order transition, was nicely demonstrated in the neutron studies on SrFe$_2$As$_2$ of Goldman. All these results indicate that the smooth increase in the intensity of the neutron Bragg peaks reported for BaFe$_2$As$_2$ by Ref. 14 do not reflect the real increase in the intensity of the ordered moment maybe because of problems due to weak intensity and reduced coherence length.

To elucidate the role of various possible magnetic orderings for the OT distortion of the crystal structure for SrFe$_2$As$_2$ and the related Ba compound, we performed bandstructure calculations for various spin configurations within the FeAs layers. Starting from different initial ordering patterns, we obtained self-consistent solutions for (i) nonmagnetic, (ii) ferromagnetic, (iii) Néel ordered, and (iv) columnar ordered FeAs layers. For both systems the lowest energy was found for the columnar ordered state. Starting from the experimental structural parameters for the TT unit cells we varied the axis ratio $b/a$, keeping the other parameters and the cell volume constant. The resulting curves for the Néel ordered and columnar ordered FeAs layers are shown in Fig. 4. Except for the columnar magnetic order [(iv)] that yields a significant OT split for the TT axes, all other patterns [(i)–(iii)] resulted in an energy minimum for an undistorted TT structure. The inclusion of spin-orbit coupling did not change this result within the numerical error bars. In surprisingly good agreement with our neutron experiments, we obtain a shortening of the $b$ axis along the ferromagnetic columns compared to the $a$ axis along the antiferromagnetic propagation, resulting in a $b/a$ ratio of 0.984 for SrFe$_2$As$_2$ and...
0.987 for the Ba system. These values are only slightly larger than the experimentally observed distortions extrapolated to zero temperature and in excellent agreement with respect to the relative changes between both compounds. Thus, obtaining an OT axes split for the columnar magnetic order only, together with its lowest energy, indicates that this magnetic order and the OT lattice distortion in both compounds are intrinsically tied to each other.

In summary, we report a detailed study of the structural distortion and of the magnetic ordering using x-ray diffraction and µSR experiments, as well as preliminary neutron-scattering and Mössbauer spectroscopy data. We confirm the low-temperature phase to be analogous to that reported for BaFe$_2$As$_2$, with an OT structural distortion, space group $Fmmm$, and a columnar antiferromagnetic ordering of the Fe moment with a propagation vector $(1,0,1)$. However, both the structural distortion and the size of the ordered Fe moment are larger in the Sr compound than in the Ba compound. The magnetic and the structural order parameters do not only show a sharp first-order transition at $T_0$ as previously suggested, but evidence the same $T$ dependence in the whole $T$ range from $T_0$ down to lowest temperatures. At $T_0$ both the OT distortion $\delta$ and the muon precession frequency $f_1$ jump to only $\sim68\%$ of their low-$T$ saturation value. A comparison with x-ray data obtained on single crystals with a lower $T_0$ and a broader transition indicates that the further increase in $\delta(T)$ and $f_1(T)$ below $T_0$ is an intrinsic behavior and not due to defects. The identical $T$ dependence of $\delta(T)$ and $f_1(T)$ proves that the structural and the magnetic order parameters are intimately coupled. In this respect, our data unambiguously indicate that SrFe$_2$As$_2$ behaves very differently from the picture presently proposed for the RFeAsO compounds, where the SDW is suggested to form in a second-order transition at $\sim10$ K below the structural transition, the two order parameters being disconnected. The strong connection between the magnetic and the structural parameter is not only present in SrFe$_2$As$_2$, but seems to be a more general property of the AFe$_2$As$_2$ systems. This is evidenced by a comparison of the magnitude of both order parameters between SrFe$_2$As$_2$ and BaFe$_2$As$_2$. From the data of Rotter et al.\(^6\) one can deduce $\delta_0=0.36\times10^{-2}$ for BaFe$_2$As$_2$, which is $37\%$ smaller than $\delta_0=0.56\times10^{-2}$ in SrFe$_2$As$_2$. The value of the hyperfine field determined in Fe Mössbauer experiments and, thus, the size of the ordered Fe moment also decreases by $36\%$ from $B_{\text{eff}}=8.5$ T in SrFe$_2$As$_2$ to $B_{\text{eff}}=5.4$ T in BaFe$_2$As$_2$.\(^6\) Thus, both the magnetic and the structural order parameters scale by about the same amount when going from SrFe$_2$As$_2$ to BaFe$_2$As$_2$. Fully relativistic band-structure calculations obtain an OT lattice distortion for the columnar magnetic order only, in very good agreement with the experimental data. This yields strong support to the idea that lattice distortion and the columnar magnetic order in these compounds are intrinsically tied to each other. While finalizing our paper, a study of the structural distortion in SrFe$_2$As$_2$ and EuFe$_2$As$_2$ appeared as a preprint, showing similar structural data but suggesting a second-order-type transition.\(^23\)

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18While the lattice parameters reported in Ref. 13 at 300 K are very similar to those presented by other groups, the values they deduced from their low-temperature measurements (Fig. 5 of Ref. 13) are almost 3% lower than our results and incompatible with their own 300 K data since they would require a decrease in $a_{TT}$ by 3% between 300 and 215 K.


