Spin Liquid State in the S = 1/2 Triangular Lattice Ba₃CuSb₂O₉

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The synthesis and characterization of Ba₃CuSb₂O₉, which has a layered array of Cu²⁺ spins in a triangular lattice, are reported. The magnetic susceptibility and neutron scattering experiments of this material show no magnetic ordering down to 0.2 K with a \( \theta_{CW} = -55 \) K. The magnetic specific heat reveals a \( T \)-linear dependence with a \( \gamma = 43.4 \) mJ K⁻² mol⁻¹ below 1.4 K. These observations suggest that Ba₃CuSb₂O₉ is a new quantum spin liquid candidate with a \( S = 1/2 \) triangular lattice.

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One of the current thrusts of modern condensed matter science has been the realization of an important model compound known as the quantum spin liquid (QSL) [1,2]. The existence of these materials, in which magnetic spins remain quantum disordered in the limit of zero Kelvin, underpins much of modern condensed matter theory. Previous studies have shown that QSL ground states tend to emerge in the geometrically frustrated materials, in which the interactions among the limited magnetic degrees of freedom lead to a strong enhancement of quantum fluctuations. For example, the organic salts \( \kappa \)-(BEDT-TTF)₂Cu₂(CN)₃ [3,4] and Et₄Me₄₋ₙSb[Pd(DMIm)₄]₂ [5–7] with a \( S = 1/2 \) triangular lattice, and ZnCu₃(OH)₆Cl₂ with a \( S = 1/2 \) kagome lattice [8,9] are all QSL candidates. While the study of the QSL state in the organic compounds remains a hot topic, there are very few inorganic materials identified as model systems for QSL ground states. Many efforts to synthesize spin liquids on triangular lattices in inorganic materials have failed. In this Letter, we unveil a new candidate for a spin liquid compound—Ba₃CuSb₂O₉—in which Cu²⁺ species form a geometrically frustrated triangular lattice. The magnetic susceptibility and neutron scattering experiments on this material show no magnetic ordering down to 0.2 K despite moderately strong antiferromagnetic interactions with \( J \sim 32 \) K. The magnetic specific heat reveals a \( T \)-linear dependence with a \( \gamma = 43.4 \) mJ K⁻² mol⁻¹ below 1.4 K, suggesting that a Fermi surface forms at finite temperatures in this inorganic insulator. These behaviors fit the predicted signatures of a spin liquid ground state with low amounts of chemical disorder.

Polycrystalline Ba₃CuSb₂O₉ samples were prepared by a solid state reaction. Appropriate mixtures of BaCO₃, CuO and Sb₂O₅ were ground together, pressed into pellets, and then calcined in air at 1070 °C for several days. The crystal structure of this 6-\( H \) perovskite-related material with \( a = b = 5.8090 \) Å and \( c = 14.3210 \) Å can be represented as a framework consisting of corner-sharing SbO₆ octahedra and face-sharing CuSbO₉ bioctahedra, as shown in Figs. 1(a) and 1(b). In the bioctahedra, the Cu and Sb cations are well ordered [10]. The Cu ions occupy the 2b Wyckoff site of space group \( P6₃mc \), and this site forms the triangular lattice in the \( ab \) plane [Fig. 1(c)]. Therefore, the structure can be seen as a two-dimensional triangular magnet; i.e., the Cu magnetic triangular lattices are magnetically separated by the two nonmagnetic Sb layers [Fig. 1(b)]. The powder x-ray diffraction (XRD) data of the as-prepared sample shows a single phase and no chemical disorder between Cu and Sb down to the few per cent level. The distance between two Cu ions in one triangle from the XRD refinement is uniformly 5.809(1) Å.

The temperature dependence of the dc magnetic susceptibility measured with \( \mu_0 H = 0.5 \) T for Ba₃CuSb₂O₉ shows no signature for a magnetic transition above 1.8 K,
as indicated in Fig. 2(a). The temperature dependence of the ac magnetic susceptibility [Fig. 2(b)] further shows no sign of a magnetic transition down to 0.2 K. The neutron powder diffraction pattern obtained at 0.2 K with $\lambda = 1.8$ Å on the Disk Chopper Spectrometer at the National Institute of Standards and Technology [Fig. 2(c)] shows no intensity change nor additional peaks from the 4 K data (not shown here), indicating that there is no magnetic transition nor structural distortion down to 0.2 K. This is consistent with the ac susceptibility measurements. The possibility of mixing between the Cu and Sb sites has been tested by refinement of the neutron diffraction data. The best refinement [Fig. 2(c), using FULLPROF with $R_p = 5.0$, $R_w = 7.5$, and $\chi^2 = 1.2$] shows a full occupancy of Sb(1) on the corner-sharing SbO$_6$ octahedron sites and Cu on one of the ordered bioctahedra sites. There is a slight amount of site mixing [refined from the neutron data to be 5.1(4)%] of the other ordered bioctahedra sites—Sb(2) sites are replaced by Cu ions. The dc magnetic susceptibility contribution from this 5.1% Cu$^{2+}$ orphan spins has been calculated by a simple Curie law. The susceptibility, after subtracting this contribution, is shown as open circles in Fig. 2(a). Its inverse [inset of Fig. 2(a)] deviates from a linear temperature dependence around 30 K. The Curie-Weiss fit of this linear behavior at high temperature gives $\theta_{CW} = -55$ K and an effective moment $\mu_{eff} = 1.79 \mu_B$/Cu, which is consistent with the expected value for Cu$^{2+}$ ($S = 1/2$) ions. This $\mu_{eff}$ gives a Landé $g$ factor $g = 2.07$ [again typical for Cu$^{2+}$ ($S = 1/2$) ions]. Using this $g$ value, the exchange interaction $J$ is estimated to be $J/k_B = 32$ K by fitting the data between 150 and 300 K to the calculation for the spin 1/2 triangular lattice using a high-temperature-series expansion (HTSE) [11]. As a consistency check, another method was used to calculate $J$ based on mean-field theory, considering only $z$ nearest-neighbor ions coupled with exchange interactions. $\theta_{CW}$ is given as $[-zJS(S + 1)]/3k_B$ (the Hamiltonian of the Heisenberg model here is $J\sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} S_i \cdot S_j$). For the $S = 1/2$ triangular lattice with $z = 6$, $J/k_B = -2/3\theta_{CW} = 37$ K, which is consistent with the HTSE calculation.

Figure 3(a) shows the specific heat ($C_P$) measured with a Physical Property Measurement System at different fields for Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$ and the nonmagnetic isostructural lattice standard Ba$_3$ZnSb$_2$O$_9$. The field-dependent specific heat at low temperatures for the nonmagnetic Ba$_3$ZnSb$_2$O$_9$ sample is due to a nuclear Schottky anomaly from the Sb atoms [12], which is estimated to be of the order $10^{-3} \sim 10^{-4}$ JK$^{-1}$ mol$^{-1}$. $C_P$ of Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$ also shows a field-dependent behavior at low temperatures; the shoulder of $C_P$ gradually moves to higher temperatures with increasing field. This anomaly is around $10^{-2} \sim 100$ JK$^{-1}$ mol$^{-1}$, which apparently is not due to the nuclear contribution from Sb. On the other hand, the 5.1% of Cu$^{2+}$ ions on the Sb(2) sites could give rise to such a Schottky anomaly, which also has been found for the Cu$^{2+}$ orphan spins in the spin liquid candidate ZnCu$_3$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$ with Cu$^{2+}$ kagome

![FIG. 2.](image)

![FIG. 3.](image)
lattice [13]. Therefore, $C_P$ for Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$ includes four contributions: the lattice, the Sb Schottky anomaly, the Cu$^{2+}$ orphan spins Schottky anomaly ($C_{\text{Schorp}}$), and the magnetic specific heat for the Cu$^{2+}$ triangular lattice ($C_M$). The lattice and Sb contributions are deleted by subtracting $C_P$ of the Ba$_3$ZnSb$_2$O$_9$ sample. The remaining specific heat is $C_{P-Cu} = C_M + C_{\text{Schorp}}$. To separate $C_{\text{Schorp}}$, we have applied a similar analysis as described for the Schottky anomaly arising from the Cu$^{2+}$ orphan spins in ZnCu$_4$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$ [13] and defects in Zn-doped Y$_2$BaNiO$_4$ [14]. The difference was taken between the interpolated $C_{P-Cu}$ curves measured at different fields. Figure 3(b) shows the difference between the 0 and 9 T curves $\Delta C_{P-Cu}/T = [C_{P-Cu}(0 \text{ T})-C_{P-Cu}(9 \text{ T})]/T$. This field-dependent part can be modeled by a dilute uniform distribution of zero-field split doublets, in other words, $S = 1/2$ spins. $\Delta C_{P-Cu}/T$ was fitted with $f(C(\Delta E_{H1}) - C(\Delta E_{H2}))/T$, where $f$ is the fraction of doublets per unit cell (or the percentage of the Cu$^{2+}$ orphan spins) and $C(\Delta E_{H1})$ and $C(\Delta E_{H2})$ are the Schottky anomalies from a $S = 1/2$ spin with level splittings $\Delta E_{H1}$ and $\Delta E_{H2}$, by applying magnetic fields $H1$ and $H2$, respectively. The best fit, as shown in the solid line in Fig. 3(b), results in $f = 4.8(2)\%$. This amount of the Cu$^{2+}$ orphan spins is consistent with the amount obtained from the refinement of the neutron diffraction data. The obtained $\Delta E_H$ is plotted in the inset of Fig. 3(b). The linear fitting of $\Delta E_H$ with $\mu_0H \approx 1$ T results in a Zeeman splitting with $g = 2.1$. The zero-field splitting of the doublet is 0.98 K (0.089 meV).

These orphan spins have a characteristicinelastic neutron scattering signature—namely, a Zeeman-like splitting under applied fields. Figure 3(c) and 3(d) shows the inelastic neutron scattering spectra for Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$ at 0.2 K with $\mu_0H = 0$ and 2 T. A small quasistatic component is visible in the data, with a shoulder extending to higher energies developing with increasing field. The spectra, after correcting with a resolution convolution, can be fit as:

$$I(E) = A\delta(E) + B(n(E) + 1) \frac{E\Delta E_H\Gamma}{(E^2 - \Delta E_H^2)^2 + E^2\Gamma^2}$$

where the first Dirac term represents the incoherent nuclear scattering and the second damped simple harmonic oscillator term represents the quasistatic component ($A$ and $B$ are proportionality coefficients). $n(E)$ is the Bose factor and $\Gamma$ is the damping. The fitting parameters are $\Delta E_H = 0.144$ meV, $\Gamma = 0.316$ for 0 T data, and $\Delta E_H = 0.27$ meV, $\Gamma = 0.36$ for 2 T data. In Figs. 3(c) and 3(d), the fits of the quasistatic component are shown as solid lines. The values of the $\Delta E_H$ obtained here are consistent with the energy splitting obtained from the specific heat analysis, as shown in the inset of Fig. 3(b), which indicates that the excitations observed are due to orphan spins.

The magnetic specific heat ($C_M$) of the Cu$^{2+}$ triangular lattice is finally obtained by subtracting $C_{\text{Schorp}} = fC(\Delta E_H)$. The result for the data is shown in Fig. 4.

Several features are noteworthy: (i) $C_M$ shows no field dependence with $\mu_0H \leq 9$ T. (ii) The magnetic contribution of the specific heat becomes prominent at around 30 K, which is where the magnetic susceptibility also deviates from the Curie-Weiss behavior. (iii) $C_M/T$ shows a broad peak around 5 K and becomes flat below 1.4 K [Fig. 4(a)]. (iv) The integrated magnetic entropy variation below 30 K is 1.7 J K$^{-1}$ mol$^{-1}$, which is around 30% of $R\ln(2)$ for $S = 1/2$ system, where $R$ is the gas constant. This feature indicates a high degeneracy of low-energy states at low temperatures. (v) As shown in Fig. 4(b) with the log-log scale, between 1.4 and 4 K, $C_M$ can be fit as $C_M = bT^n$ with $b = 37.0$ mJ K$^{-3}$ mol$^{-1}$ and $n = 1.83(2)$. This $n$ value is near 2.0, showing a quadratic temperature dependence. At lower temperatures, between 0.35 and 1.4 K, $C_M$ can be fit as $C_M = \gamma T^\alpha$ with $\gamma = 43.4$ mJ K$^{-2}$ mol$^{-1}$ and $\alpha = 0.99(2)$, giving a linear temperature dependence.

The susceptibility and specific heat both show no magnetic ordering down to 0.2 K for Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$ despite moderately strong nearest neighbor antiferromagnetic interactions with $J \sim 32$ K, which clearly places this compound in the highly frustrated regime. The field-independent $C_M$ is common in spin liquid candidates, which should be resilient to moderate applied fields. This behavior has also been observed for other spin liquid candidates, such as NiGa$_2$S$_4$ with Ni$^{2+}$ ($S = 1$) triangular lattice [15] and Na$_4$Ir$_3$O$_8$ with Ir$^{4+}$ ($S = 1/2$) hyperkagome lattice [16]. On the other hand, the linear dependence of $C_M$ is unusual for 2D frustrated lattices, which should have a quadratic dependence for linearly dispersive
low-energy modes. However a linear-$T$ dependence has been predicted by the resonating-valence-bond (RVB) model of Anderson at low temperatures, due to the pairing of spins into singlets [17]. For example, the studied organic QSL candidate $\kappa$-(BEDT-TTF)$_2$Cu$_2$CN$_3$ with Cu$^{2+}$ triangular lattice also shows $C \propto \gamma T$ with $\gamma = 12$ mJ K$^{-2}$ mol$^{-1}$ of Cu$^{2+}$ [3]. Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$ has a larger $\gamma = 43.4$ mJ K$^{-2}$ mol$^{-1}$. The origin of this linear specific heat term, however, is still a matter of debate by theorists. One current mode of thought is that a Fermi surface of excitations is formed within the liquid state, which gives rise to a linear term even for Mott insulators such as Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$. Lee et al., for example, have proposed an instability of a Fermi surface of spinons in the long-ranged RVB state to explain the experimental results of $\kappa$-(BEDT-TTF)$_2$Cu$_2$CN$_3$ [18]. Related theories also have been proposed for ZnCu$_3$(OH)$_6$Cl$_2$ [19] and Na$_4$IrO$_6$ [20]. One experimental prediction of Lee’s theory, however, is that a spontaneous breaking of lattice symmetry occurs in the liquid state, but no obvious structural distortion has been observed for Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$ in this study. These distortions, however, can be exceedingly small and difficult to detect by conventional scattering techniques. Combining the magnetism and specific heat, the evolution of the spin dynamics of Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$ with decreasing temperature can be described as: (i) by 30 K, there is a buildup of spin fluctuations; (ii) by around 5 K, well below the magnetic interaction energy scale $\sim 30$ K, the system enters a spin liquid ground state whose dynamics has quantum character. At last, we point out that Ba$_3$CuSb$_2$O$_9$ is an excellent model spin liquid due to the clear method of obtaining a nonmagnetic lattice standard (and thus the magnetic specific heat contribution), and it is a relatively clean example of QSL behavior in an inorganic oxide. Future experiments, preferably on single crystals, will be able to answer more fundamental questions about this compound, including the nature of the excitation spectrum (fermionic or bosonic), the possibility of the emergence of new phases under doping (such as the closely related superconducting states in the charge transfer salts), and the true ground state down to temperatures less than 0.2 K [21,22].

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