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# Control of the interaction between pinning disorder and domain walls in Pt/Co/AlOx ultrathin films by He<sup>+</sup> ion irradiation

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## ABSTRACT

We have studied the effect of He<sup>+</sup> irradiation on the dynamics of chiral domain walls in Pt/Co/AlOx trilayers in the creep regime. Irradiation leads to a strong decrease in the depinning field and a non-monotonous change of the effective pinning barriers. The variations of domain wall dynamics result essentially from the strong decrease in the effective anisotropy constant, which increases the domain wall width. The latter is found to present a perfect scaling with the length-scale of the interaction between domain wall and disorder,  $\xi$ . On the other hand, the strength of the domain wall–disorder interaction,  $f_{pin}$ , is weakly impacted by the irradiation, suggesting that the length-scales of the disorder fluctuation remain smaller than the domain wall width.

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One of the most critical technological issues that hinders the application of magnetic textures, such as domain walls (DWs) and skyrmions, to high performance spintronic devices is their interaction with defects. Material inhomogeneities act as pinning sites for magnetic textures, limiting their velocities for small driving torques (i.e., for fields or currents below the depinning threshold, in the so-called creep regime) and preventing reproducible displacement events. To control the motion of magnetic textures, a better understanding of their interaction with the pinning disorder would be particularly welcome.

In this frame, ion irradiation is an interesting tool since it allows both tuning the magnetic properties of ultrathin films<sup>1–8</sup> and modifying DW dynamics.<sup>9,10</sup> Early studies on Pt/Co/Pt multilayers showed that He<sup>+</sup> ions with energy in the 30 keV range provoke short-range (0.2–0.5 nm) atomic displacements through low energy collisions.<sup>1,2,11</sup> The resulting Co/Pt intermixing gradually evolves with increasing fluences, therefore tuning the interfacial perpendicular magnetic anisotropy (PMA).<sup>12</sup> Although ion irradiation has been observed to change the DW dynamics of several ultrathin films in the creep regime,<sup>9,10</sup> the

microscopic origin of these effects remains an open issue, as ion irradiation may modify both the pinning disorder and the DW magnetic texture (via the film PMA) and, thus, the DW-disorder interaction.

Recent developments in the understanding of pinning dependent dynamics of DWs driven by a magnetic field<sup>13,14</sup> and an electrical current (via the spin transfer torque)<sup>15</sup> provide quantitative assessments on DW–disorder interactions. The pinning dependent dynamics of DWs results from the interplay among DW elasticity, weak pinning, thermal activation, and a driving force.<sup>16</sup> The thermally activated creep regime<sup>13</sup> and depinning<sup>14</sup> regime observed below and just above the depinning threshold present well studied universal behaviors, which are in agreement with predictions for the quenched Edwards–Wilkinson universality class.<sup>17</sup> Combining a self-consistent description of the creep and depinning regimes and a scaling model of DW depinning, the analysis of domain wall dynamics allows extracting the parameters characterizing the interaction between domain walls and weak pinning disorder.<sup>18</sup>

**TABLE I.** Micromagnetic parameters measured for the Pt/Co/AlOx film in the pristine state and after irradiation with He<sup>+</sup> ions. For each sample, the table indicates the He<sup>+</sup> irradiation fluence, the spontaneous magnetization  $M_s$ , the anisotropy field  $\mu_0 H_K$ , the anisotropy constant  $K_{eff} = \mu_0 H_K M_s / 2$ , the DW width parameter  $\Delta = \sqrt{A/K_{eff}}$ , the DW saturation velocity  $v_{sat}$  obtained for high magnetic fields, the interfacial DMI constant  $D$  obtained using  $D = 2M_s v_{sat} / (\gamma\pi)$ , and the DW energy  $\sigma = 4\sqrt{AK_{eff}} - \pi D$  using  $A = 16 \text{ pJ/m}$ .

Sample	He <sup>+</sup> fluence (ions/cm <sup>2</sup> )	$M_s$ (MA/m)	$\mu_0 H_K$ (T)	$K_{eff}$ (10 <sup>5</sup> J/m <sup>3</sup> )	$v_{sat}$ (m/s)	$\Delta$ (nm)	$D$ (mJ/m <sup>2</sup> )	$\sigma$ (mJ/m <sup>2</sup> )
Pristine	0	1.13 ± 0.03	785 ± 40	4.44 ± 0.25	260 ± 15	6.0 ± 0.2	1.06 ± 0.08	7.32 ± 0.6
F1	4.0 × 10 <sup>14</sup>	1.13 ± 0.03	727 ± 40	4.11 ± 0.24	270 ± 15	6.3 ± 0.2	1.10 ± 0.08	6.78 ± 0.6
F2	1.0 × 10 <sup>15</sup>	1.16 ± 0.03	446 ± 25	2.59 ± 0.15	270 ± 15	7.9 ± 0.2	1.13 ± 0.08	4.58 ± 0.6
F3	1.5 × 10 <sup>15</sup>	1.17 ± 0.03	305 ± 16	1.78 ± 0.10	270 ± 15	9.5 ± 0.2	1.14 ± 0.08	3.17 ± 0.6

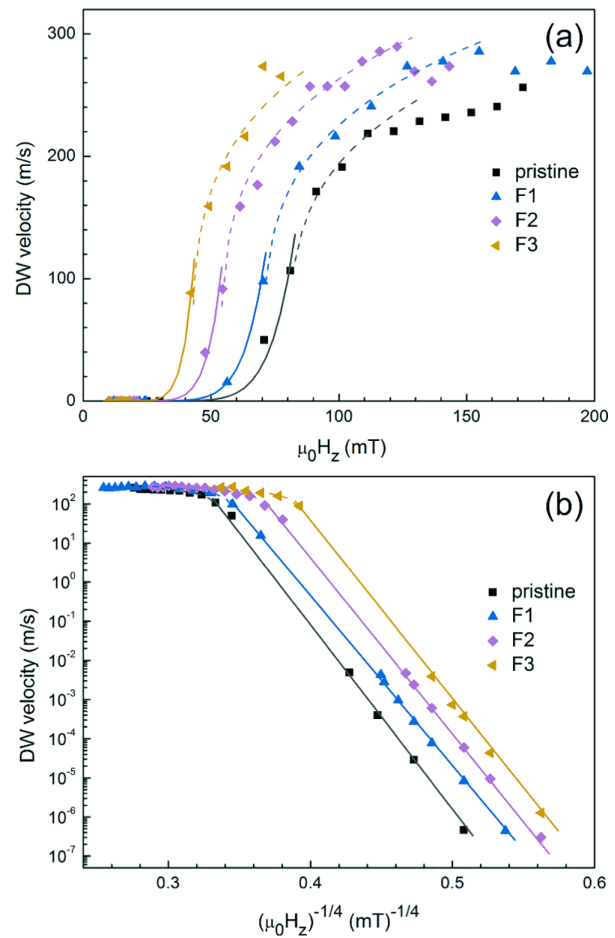
In this work, we analyze the evolution with He<sup>+</sup> fluence of micromagnetic parameters and DW dynamics in a series of Pt/Co/AlOx ultrathin films presenting the same initial disorder. We evidence a perfect scaling between DW width parameter and DW-disorder interaction length scale, directly reflecting the strong decrease in the PMA. On the other hand, the strong correlation between the pinning strength and DW energy is compatible with negligible effect of He<sup>+</sup> irradiation on the pinning disorder.

Ta(4)/Pt(4)/Co(1.1)/Al(2) magnetic stacks (thicknesses in nm) were deposited by magnetron sputtering on Si/SiO<sub>2</sub> wafers; the Al layer was consequently oxidized with an oxygen plasma. The film was diced into small samples: one of them was kept in the pristine state, while the others were irradiated at room temperature with 15 kV He<sup>+</sup> ions, with fluence ranging from 4 × 10<sup>14</sup> to 1.5 × 10<sup>15</sup> He<sup>+</sup>/cm<sup>2</sup>. The measured magnetic parameters are presented in Table I. The spontaneous magnetization  $M_s$  and the anisotropy field  $\mu_0 H_K$  were measured by superconducting quantum interference vibrating sample magnetometry. All the samples present an out-of-plane easy magnetization axis. The in-plane saturation field strongly decreases as the He<sup>+</sup> fluence increases, while the spontaneous magnetization is, within the uncertainty of the measurement, unchanged.

The field-driven domain wall dynamics was measured using polar magneto-optical Kerr microscopy. For the lowest DW velocities, out-of-plane magnetic field pulses were applied using an electromagnet (maximum pulse amplitude  $\mu_0 H_z = 25 \text{ mT}$ , minimum duration 20 ms). For the higher velocities, pulses of maximum amplitude  $\mu_0 H_z = 200 \text{ mT}$  and minimum duration 30 ns were delivered by a 200  $\mu\text{m}$ -diameter microcoil associated with a fast pulse current generator.<sup>19</sup> The film magnetization was first saturated in the out-of-plane direction. An opposite magnetic field pulse was then applied to nucleate a reverse domain. The velocity of DWs was deduced from their displacement observed after the magnetic field pulse and corresponds to the ratio between the displacement and the pulse duration. The presence of left-handed homochiral Néel walls<sup>20</sup> associated with the presence of Dzyaloshinskii–Moriya interaction (DMI)<sup>21,22</sup> was confirmed by the non-isotropic displacement of the DWs in the presence of a static in-plane magnetic field  $\mu_0 H_x$  (not shown). The strength of the DMI interaction was obtained from the DW saturation velocity at large  $B_z$  fields  $v_{sat} = \gamma\pi D / (2M_s)$ , using the experimental values of  $M_s$ .<sup>19,23</sup>

The domain wall velocities driven by out-of-plane magnetic fields up to 200 mT are reported in Fig. 1 for the samples in the pristine state and after irradiation. As it can be observed, the strongest trend is a

shift of the curves toward low field values with increasing irradiation fluence. More quantitative insight into the DW dynamics can be deduced from the self-consistent description of the creep and depinning regimes proposed in Refs. 13, 14, and 24



**FIG. 1.** Effect of He<sup>+</sup> ion irradiation on domain wall dynamics: (a) domain wall velocity vs out of plane field pulse amplitude  $\mu_0 H_z$  for different irradiation fluences; (b) the same curves plotted in the semi-log scale as a function of  $(\mu_0 H_z)^{-1/4}$  showing the linear trend expected for the creep regime. The solid and dashed lines correspond to fits of Eqs. (1) for the creep and depinning regime, respectively.

$$v(H_z) = \begin{cases} v(H_d) \exp \left[ -\frac{T_d}{T} \left( \left( \frac{H_d}{H_z} \right)^\mu - 1 \right) \right] & \text{creep : } H_z < H_d, \\ \frac{v(H_d)}{x_0} \left( \frac{T_d}{T} \right)^\psi \left( \frac{H_z - H_d}{H_d} \right)^\beta & \text{depinning : } H_z \geq H_d, \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

where  $\mu = 1/4$ ,  $\beta = 0.25$ , and  $\psi = 0.15$  are universal critical exponents and  $x_0 = 0.65$  is a universal constant.<sup>14,25</sup> In Eqs. (1), the three adjustable parameters depend on the film magnetic and pinning properties: the depinning temperature  $T_d$  characterizing the height of the effective pinning barrier, the depinning field  $H_d$  and the velocity  $v(H_d)$ , corresponding to the coordinates of the crossover between creep and depinning. Good agreement between the experimental curves and the fit using Eqs. (1) [Figs. 1(a) and 1(b)] indicates the crossover between the creep and depinning regimes. The evolution of the depinning parameters with the irradiation fluence is reported in Fig. 2. The irradiation has no effect on the depinning velocity  $v(H_d)$ , which remains rather constant.  $T_d$  varies slightly with a non-monotonous trend. In contrast,  $H_d$  decreases by a factor  $\approx 2$  with the irradiation fluence (from around 80 mT for the pristine sample down to 40 mT for  $1.5 \times 10^{15}$  He<sup>+</sup>/cm<sup>2</sup>). As a consequence, in the irradiated samples, the DWs can reach the largest velocities for lower applied

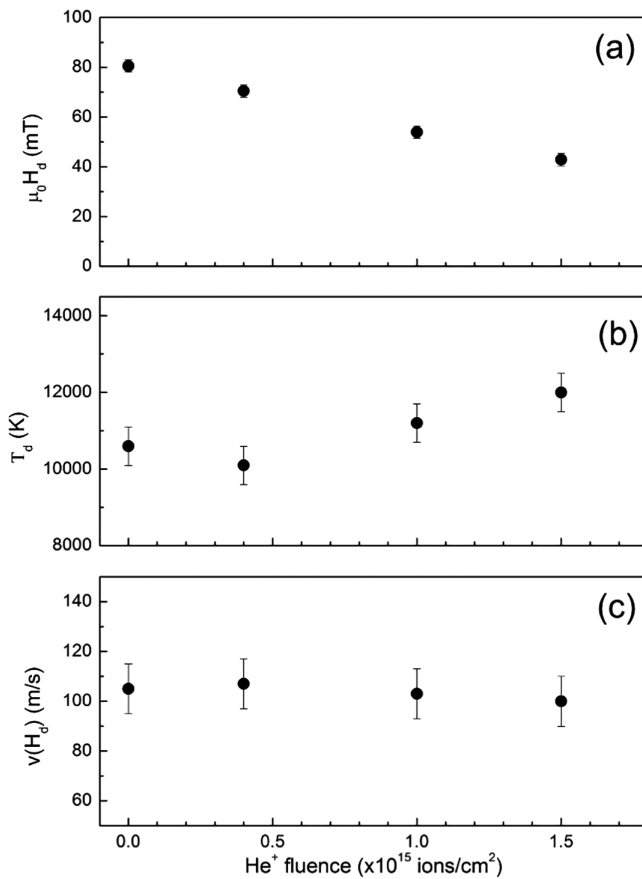


FIG. 2. Effect of He<sup>+</sup> ion irradiation on the depinning parameters: (a) depinning field  $\mu_0 H_d$ , (b) depinning temperature  $T_d$ , and (c) depinning velocity  $v(H_d)$ .

magnetic fields. Note that our results are not compatible with the assumption  $\sigma \sim T_d H_d^{1/4}$  proposed by Je *et al.*<sup>26</sup> The slope of the creep law in Fig. 1(b) ( $\propto T_d H_d^{1/4}$ ) does not vary with the He<sup>+</sup> fluence. The DW energy is defined<sup>20</sup> by  $\sigma = 4\sqrt{AK_{eff}} - \pi D$ , where  $A$  is the exchange stiffness,  $K_{eff}$  is the effective anisotropy constant, and  $D$  is the DMI constant. Using the measured  $K_{eff}$  and  $D$  and setting  $A = 16$  pJ/m (the value we estimated for similar Pt/Co/AlOx trilayers in Ref. 19), we find, on the other hand, that the DW energy varies by more than a factor 2 (see Table I).

In order to discuss the evolution of the interaction between DWs and disorder as a function of the irradiation fluence, we use the scaling model developed in Ref. 18. This model allows us to link the characteristic length scale  $\zeta$  and the force  $f_{pin}$  of the interaction between DW and disorder to the measured depinning field  $H_d$ , the temperature  $T_d$ , and the micromagnetic parameters, i.e., the DW energy  $\sigma$  and the spontaneous magnetization  $M_s$ ,

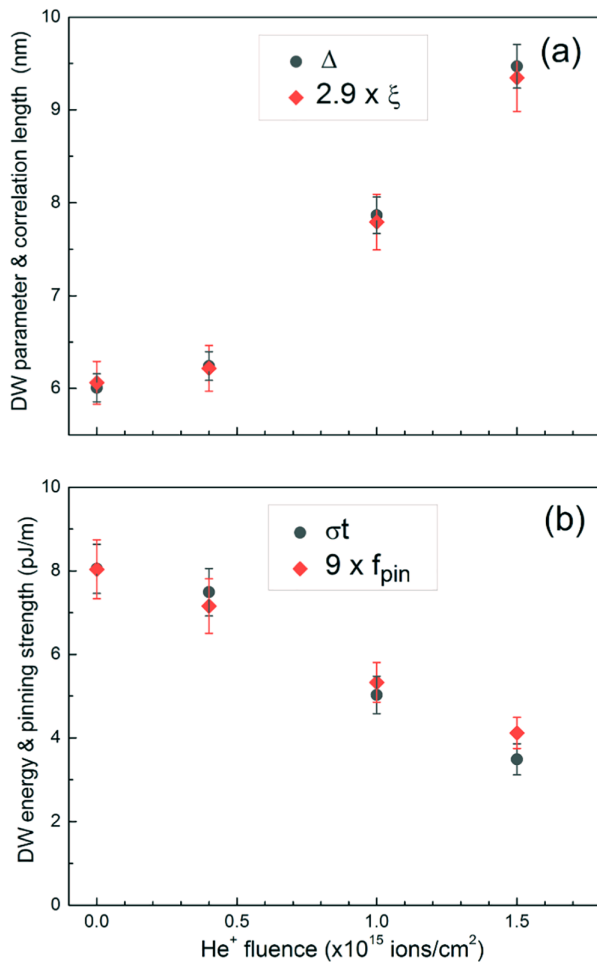
$$\zeta \sim [(k_B T_d)^2 / (2\mu_0 H_d M_s \sigma t^2)]^{1/3}, \quad (2)$$

$$f_{pin} \sim \frac{b}{\zeta} \sqrt{2\mu_0 H_d M_s k_B T_d}. \quad (3)$$

In the above equations,  $k_B$  is the Boltzmann constant,  $t$  is the magnetic film thickness, and  $b$  is the characteristic distance between pinning sites. Figure 3(a) compares the evolution of  $\zeta$  and of the DW parameter  $\Delta$  as a function of the irradiation fluence. As it can be observed, rescaling  $\zeta$  with a single adjustable parameter ( $\Delta \approx 2.9\zeta$ ) leads to a superposition with the values of  $\Delta$ . This almost perfect scaling strongly suggests that the characteristic distance between pinning sites  $b$  is smaller than  $\Delta$ , so that the latter fixes the length-scale of the DW-disorder interaction.<sup>18,27</sup> As a consequence, the predicted short-range atomic displacements produced by He<sup>+</sup> ions irradiation<sup>2,3</sup> have no impact on the characteristic length of DW-pinning interaction  $\zeta$ . The observed variation of  $\zeta$  only reflects the strong decrease in the effective anisotropy constant with the increasing irradiation fluence.

Figure 3(b) compares the evolution of the pinning force  $f_{pin}$  and the DW energy per unit length  $\sigma t$ . In this case, we assumed a common distance between pinning sites  $b = 1$  nm, and we used a single scaling parameter ( $\approx 9$ ) to superimpose the data points corresponding to the pristine film.  $f_{pin}$  and  $\sigma t$  are observed to follow a similar decreasing trend with irradiation fluence. Note that a similar phenomenon was already observed for Pt/Co/Pt, Pt/Co/Au, and Au/Co/Pt trilayers in Ref. 18. In that work, the samples had a fixed disorder, and the DW width and energy were controlled by an in-plane magnetic field.<sup>18</sup> In the present case, as the samples share initially the same pinning disorder, the observed close trend of  $f_{pin}$  and  $\sigma t$  suggests a weak change of the disorder by irradiation. Assuming a perfect scaling between  $f_{pin}$  and  $\sigma t$  [i.e., adjusting the value of  $b$  to perfectly superimpose the data points in Fig. 3(b)] leads a rough estimate of the maximum variation of  $b \approx -15\%$ . These insights suggest that the He<sup>+</sup> irradiation has little impact on the pinning disorder, and the variation of the strength DW-disorder interaction  $f_{pin}$  essentially reflects the decrease in the effective anisotropy constant with irradiation fluence.

In conclusion, light He<sup>+</sup> irradiation in Pt/Co/AlOx ultrathin films causes a strong reduction in the depinning field, leading to an increase the DW mobility at low magnetic fields. Through a self-consistent description of the creep and pinning dynamics completed by a scaling model of DW depinning (relating DW pinning properties



**FIG. 3.** Effect of He<sup>+</sup> ion irradiation on DW-disorder characteristic length scale and force: comparison between (a) characteristic length scale  $\xi$  and DW parameter  $\Delta$  and (b) pinning force  $f_{pin}$  and DW energy per unit length  $\sigma$ .

to depinning and micromagnetic parameters), we reveal an excellent scaling between the variations of the DW-disorder interaction length scale  $\xi$  and the DW width parameter. This scaling strongly suggests that the modifications of the DW pinning are essentially dominated by the variations of the DW magnetic texture (via the variation of the film anisotropy) while the short range atomic displacements produced by the irradiation have a weak impact on the pinning disorder.

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## AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts to disclose.

### Author Contributions

**Cristina Balan:** Conceptualization (equal); Investigation (equal)  
**Johannes W. van der Jagt:** Conceptualization (equal); Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal).  
**Jose Peña Garcia:** Software (equal); Visualization (equal).  
**Jan Vogel:** Investigation (equal).  
**Laurent Ranno:** Conceptualization (equal); Supervision (equal).  
**Marlio Bonfim:** Methodology (equal).  
**Dafiné Ravelosona:** Conceptualization (equal); Funding acquisition (equal); Methodology (equal); Supervision (equal).  
**Stefania Pizzini:** Conceptualization (lead); Funding acquisition (equal); Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal); Supervision (equal); Visualization (equal); Writing – review and editing (lead).  
**Vincent Jeudy:** Conceptualization (equal); Software (lead); Methodology (equal); Visualization (equal); Writing – review and editing (equal).

### DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available within the article.

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