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Effect of annealing high-dose heavy-ion irradiated high-temperature superconductor wires

N.M. Strickland [a,*], S.C. Wimbush [a], P. Kluth [b], P. Mota-Santiago [b], M.C. Ridgway [b], J.V. Kennedy [c], N.J. Long [a]

[a] Robinson Research Institute, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington 6140, New Zealand
[b] Research School of Physics and Engineering, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia
[c] GNS Science, Lower Hutt 5010, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Heavy-ion irradiation of high-temperature superconducting thin films has long been known to generate damage tracks of amorphized material that are of close-to-ideal dimension to effectively contribute to pinning of magnetic flux lines and thereby enhance the in-field critical current. At the same time, though, the presence of these tracks reduces the superconducting volume fraction available to transport current while the irradiation process itself generates oxygen depletion and disorder in the remaining superconducting material. We have irradiated commercially available superconducting coated conductors consisting of a thick film of (Y,Dy)$Ba_2Cu_3O_7$ deposited on a buffered metal tape substrate in a continuous reel-to-reel process. Irradiation was by 185 MeV ^{197}Au ions. A high fluence of 3×10^{11} ions/cm^2 was chosen to emphasize the detrimental effects. The critical current was reduced following this irradiation, but annealing at relatively low temperatures of 200 °C and 400 °C substantially restore the critical current of the irradiated material. At high fields and high temperatures there is a net benefit of critical current compared to the untreated material.

1. Introduction

High-temperature superconductor (HTS) wires are now a mature technology with multiple companies capable of producing long lengths of high-quality conductor having a low frequency of defects. The second-generation HTS wires based on $REBa_2Cu_3O_7$ (REBCO, where RE = rare-earth or yttrium) coated conductors in particular are produced through a number of disparate methodologies that generate a variety of microstructures. The superconducting critical current (I_c) that can be achieved in the presence of a magnetic field is an extrinsic property that depends on magnetic-flux pinning by defects in the HTS material. Controlling the density and morphology of defects in the REBCO films is therefore one of the central tasks required to achieve optimized conductors. Point-like, linear, planar and three-dimensional defects can all be generated through secondary phase inclusions or growth defects, with the specific growth conditions often determining the dimensionality of these defects.

Strong flux-pinning centers can also be introduced after the growth of the HTS material by heavy-ion irradiation. The ions themselves do not play an active role, usually passing all the way through the film; rather it is the damage tracks consisting of columns of amorphized material that subsequently act as pinning defects. The damage tracks have radii up to a few nanometres [1–4] and can be continuous or discontinuous depending on the electronic energy loss of the ion [2,3]. The radius of the damage tracks is similar to the coherence length in the *a-b* plane which makes them near ideal pinning centers for magnetic fields oriented parallel to the irradiation direction, thus significantly enhancing the in-field I_c [1,4–7]. These damage tracks are of great interest in fundamental studies of flux pinning as they can be introduced into a wide range of samples with different initial microstructures independently of the fabrication methodology or conditions, and they can be well controlled with respect to density and to a lesser extent with respect to continuous section length.

The I_c enhancement is most prominent when the magnetic field is applied parallel to the damage tracks [4,6–9]. On the other hand, a high density of irradiation tends to reduce current percolation and the superconducting transition temperature T_c, with the result that I_c can often be reduced for low magnetic fields or for magnetic fields applied in other directions [7,8–10]. A splay in the direction of the tracks, or a combination of multiple irradiation directions, can be used to widen the angular range over which I_c is enhanced

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: nick.strickland@vuw.ac.nz (N.M. Strickland).

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[4,5,8,11]. The angular range of benefit also tends to widen for shorter, more discontinuous tracks [12–14] as these better preserve current percolation and accommodate meandering flux lines.

Systematic studies of irradiation are facilitated by the commercial availability of long-length coated conductor wires with very consistent properties along the length. It is pertinent to note that these conductors have already been engineered for high flux pinning and any improvements in I_c demonstrate the headroom available for performance increases using strong engineered pinning centers. Recently, it has been demonstrated that long lengths of conductor can be irradiated in-line at energies and rates that make incorporation of an ion irradiation treatment into an industrial process plausible [15–17].

The anisotropy of flux pinning with respect to the magnetic field orientation can be measured conveniently with a transport method. This method shows very clear enhancements of I_c when the field is oriented parallel to extended planar or linear defects, including ion damage tracks [7,8,18]. I_c is often measured at 77 K due to the relative simplicity of making measurements in liquid nitrogen and due to the high relative effectiveness of flux pinning at temperatures near T_c. This does have the disadvantage of making the results very sensitive to any reduction in T_c arising from the irradiation treatment.

We have previously shown that annealing samples after irradiation can partially restore T_c while still maintaining flux pinning by damage tracks, thereby increasing I_c at 77 K [8]. In this work we extend this result and show that I_c of a heavily irradiated sample can be improved even at 30 K through annealing for short times at relatively low temperatures.

2. Experimental

The virgin coated conductor samples were cut from a long length of wire insert taken from the HTS wire production line at American Superconductor Corp. (Devens, MA) [19] prior to lamination. In these coated conductors, a 1.4 μm thick (Y,Dy)BCO layer was deposited by metal-organic deposition on a Ni-5 at%W foil substrate buffered with 75 nm thick layers of Y_2O_3, Y_2O_3-stabilized ZrO_2 and CeO_2. Crystallographic texture was imparted to the substrate by the RABiTS deformation-annealing process and the buffer and HTS films grew epitaxially on that surface, with the *c*-axis of (Y,Dy)BCO lying perpendicular to the substrate surface. A 1 μm thick Ag capping layer was deposited on top of the HTS layer. The process conditions were those of the standard coil wire product of American Superconductor, which optimizes the conductor for high I_c at 20–40 K and 2–5 T.

Irradiation with 185 MeV ^{197}Au ions was performed at the Australian National University's Heavy Ion Accelerator facility. In this work the irradiation was performed with the ion beam directed perpendicular to the surface, so the damage tracks were on average parallel to the (Y,Dy)BCO *c*-axis. An irradiation time of 2 min was sufficient to accumulate a total fluence of 3×10^{11} ions/cm^2.

The Ag capping layer on top of the HTS is somewhat thinner than that usually employed in the American Superconductor process to facilitate penetration by irradiating ions with minimal energy loss. The capping layer significantly reduces the energy of the irradiating ions entering the HTS film thus affecting the average electronic energy loss and the damage track morphology. In Fig. 1a the lower dashed curve depicts the energy profile of the Au ions entering at 185 MeV and passing through silver, as calculated using SRIM software [20]. After 1 μm passage through Ag, the energy drops to 145 MeV. In our earlier work using the same ions and a similar coated conductor, the Ag layer was instead the more standard 2.6 μm thickness and in that case the Au ion energy drops to 90 MeV before entering the YBCO layer. The two solid line segments represent the subsequent passage of the ions through the 1.4 μm thick YBCO film. These energies then translate to a range of electronic energy loss S_e in the HTS layer as per Fig. 1b; for the 1 μm Ag cap used in this work S_e ranges from 28.5 keV/nm to 24.5 keV/nm while for the 2.6 μm cap used previously S_e ranges from 22.5 keV/nm to 17.5 keV/nm. We therefore expect that the damage tracks should be nearly continuous for the 1 μm cap used in this work while they would be more discontinuous for the 2.6 μm cap of the previous work [3].

Post-irradiation annealing was carried out in a tube furnace with an O_2 atmosphere at 200 °C and 400 °C for 1 h each. The sample was removed from the hot zone of the furnace at the completion of the anneal and allowed to cool rapidly in the O_2 atmosphere.

I_c was measured using a four-probe transport method in a bespoke measurement system [21]. This is a fully-cryocooled system with an HTS dipole magnet and gas-cooled insert providing sample temperatures to below 15 K. Automated transport I_c measurements can be made at currents up to 875 A. Measurements were made in the usual maximum Lorentz force configuration with the magnetic field applied perpendicular to the transport current direction and using the standard electric field criterion of 1 μV/cm for I_c. The measurement region was defined by a 5 mm × 0.5 mm current-transport bridge created using photolithography and wet chemical etching. Values for I_c plotted in this paper are normalized to unit width of conductor, *w*. The angular convention adopted has 0° perpendicular to the plane of the

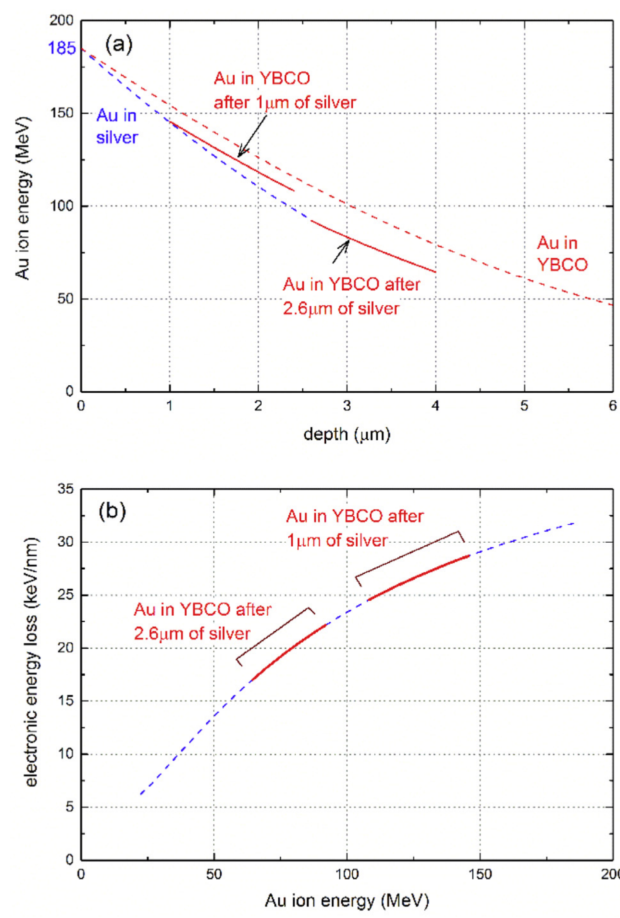

Fig. 1. (a) Reduction in Au ion energy on passage through silver and YBCO, highlighting the relevant energy ranges of the ions in this and earlier work. (b) Electronic energy loss in dependence on Au ion energy, again highlighting the ranges of energy loss in this and earlier work.