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Spectroscopy and high-power laser operation of monoclinic Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ crystal

PAVEL LOIKO,^{1,3} MENGTING CHEN,^{1,4} JOSEP MARIA SERRES,¹
MAGDALENA AGUILÓ,¹ FRANCESC DÍAZ,¹ HAIFENG LIN,² GE ZHANG,²
LIZHEN ZHANG,² ZHOUBIN LIN,² PATRICE CAMY,³ SHI-BO DAI,⁴
ZHENQIANG CHEN,⁴ YONGGUANG ZHAO,⁵ LI WANG,⁵ WEIDONG CHEN,^{2,5,*}
UWE GRIEBNER,⁵ VALENTIN PETROV,⁵ AND XAVIER MATEOS,¹

¹Física i Cristal·lografia de Materials i Nanomaterials (FICMA-FiCNA)-EMaS, Dept. Química Física i Inòrganica, Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV), Campus Sescelades, E-43007 Tarragona, Spain

²Key Laboratory of Optoelectronic Materials Chemistry and Physics, Fujian Institute of Research on the Structure of Matter, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Fuzhou, 350002 Fujian, China

³Centre de recherche sur les Ions, les Matériaux et la Photonique (CIMAP), UMR 6252 CEA-CNRS-ENSICAEN, Université de Caen, 6 Boulevard du Maréchal Juin, 14050 Caen Cedex 4, France

⁴Department of Optoelectronic Engineering, Jinan University, Guangzhou 510632, China

⁵Max Born Institute for Nonlinear Optics and Short Pulse Spectroscopy, Max-Born-Str. 2a, D-12489 Berlin, Germany

*Corresponding author: chenweidong@fjirsm.ac.cn

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Monoclinic (wolframite-type) monotungstate crystals are promising for rare-earth-doping. We report polarized room- and low-temperature spectroscopy, and efficient high-power laser operation of such a Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ crystal featuring high stimulated-emission cross-section ($\sigma_{SE} = 6.2 \times 10^{-20} \text{ cm}^2$ at 1056.7 nm for light polarization $E \parallel N_m$), large Stark splitting of the ground-state (765 cm⁻¹), large gain bandwidth (26.1 nm for $E \parallel N_g$) and strong Raman response (most intense mode at 916 cm⁻¹). A diode-pumped Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ laser generated 18.2 W at ~1056 nm with a slope efficiency of ~89% and a linearly polarized laser output. © 2019 Optical Society of America

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Recently, monoclinic wolframite-type ((Fe,Mn)WO₄, sp. gr. *P2/c*) magnesium tungstate crystals, MgWO₄, have emerged as promising host materials for doping with rare-earth ions (RE³⁺) [1-3]. They belong to the crystal family of monoclinic transition metal monotungstates M²⁺WO₄ (where M = Mg, Zn, Mn, Fe, Ni, etc.) [4]. So far, MgWO₄ ($a = 4.6889 \text{ Å}$, $b = 5.6753 \text{ Å}$, $c = 4.9289 \text{ Å}$, $\beta = 90.726^\circ$ [5]) crystals were mostly studied for scintillators and for doping with transition-metal ions, e.g., Cr³⁺ [5,6]. MgWO₄ exhibits good thermo-mechanical properties (high thermal conductivity $\langle \kappa \rangle$ of 8.7 W/(mK) [7] and low anisotropy of thermal expansion: $\alpha_a = 11.22$, $\alpha_b = 8.09$ and $\alpha_c = 8.77 [10^{-6} \text{ K}^{-1}]$ [3]). These properties are

superior compared to another well-known crystal family of monoclinic double tungstates, KLn(WO₄)₂ [8], for which $\langle \kappa \rangle \approx 3.5 \text{ W/mK}$ and the thermal expansion tensor shows a significant anisotropy [9]. Besides, RE³⁺-doped MgWO₄ shows attractive spectroscopic properties (broad and intense emission bands for polarized light, large Stark splitting, high luminescence quantum yield and Raman activity) [1-3]. These advantages originate from the low-symmetry structure and the substantial difference in ionic radii of the RE³⁺ dopants and the host-forming Mg²⁺ cations [10].

Regarding laser operation of RE³⁺-doped MgWO₄ crystals, previous studies focused mostly on the spectral range of ~2 μm using thulium (Tm³⁺) [2, 10-12] and holmium (Ho³⁺) [3] ion doping. A diode-pumped continuous-wave (CW) Tm³⁺:MgWO₄ laser generated 3.09 W at 2022-2034 nm with a slope efficiency η of 50% [11]. A graphene mode-locked (ML) Tm³⁺:MgWO₄ laser delivered 86 fs pulses at 2017 nm featuring a bandwidth of 53 nm at a repetition rate of 76 MHz [12].

For laser emission at ~1 μm , ytterbium (Yb³⁺) ion doping holds a huge potential. This is because Yb³⁺ has a simple energy-level scheme eliminating the unwanted energy-transfer processes and leading to high Stokes pump efficiency and weak heat loading [13]. The larger Stark splitting of the ground-state (²F_{7/2}) (as compared to Nd³⁺) is a prerequisite for broader emission at ~1 μm . So far, the growth and preliminary spectroscopy of Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ crystal were reported [1,14]. A semiconductor saturable absorber mirror

Fig. 1. (a) Orientation of the optical indicatrix axes (N_p , N_m and N_g) in monoclinic Yb:MgWO_4 crystal: $\mathbf{a}$, $\mathbf{b}$ and $\mathbf{c}$ – crystallographic axes, C_2 – 2-fold symmetry axis; (b) crystal structure in projection to the $\mathbf{a-c}$ plane.

(SESAM) ML $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$ laser delivered 125 fs pulses at 1065 nm at a repetition rate of 117 MHz [15].

In this work, we report a detailed room- and low-temperature polarization-resolved spectroscopy of $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$ paving the way towards its highly-efficient and high-power diode-pumped laser operation. We consider this work as a first step towards high-power mode-locked bulk and thin-disk lasers based on $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$.

The 1.25 at.% $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$ crystal was grown by the Top-Seeded Solution Growth (TSSG) method using Na_2WO_4 as a solvent [1,3]. Its structure (monoclinic, sp. gr. $C_{2h} - P2/c$) [16] was confirmed by using X-ray powder diffraction. In MgWO_4 , the Yb^{3+} ions are replacing the Mg^{2+} ones in a single type of sites (Wyckoff position: $2f$, site symmetry: C_2 , VI-fold oxygen coordination in distorted $[\text{MgYbO}_6]$ polyhedra), Fig. 1(b). Charge compensation is provided by Na^+ cations entering from the melt [3]. The corresponding ionic radii are $R_{\text{Yb}} = 0.868 \text{ \AA}$, $R_{\text{Mg}} = 0.72 \text{ \AA}$ and $R_{\text{Na}} = 1.02 \text{ \AA}$. The concentration of Yb^{3+} ions in the crystal N_{Yb} was $1.82 \times 10^{20} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ (as determined by Inductively Coupled Plasma Atomic Emission Spectroscopy). Note that the increase of Yb^{3+} doping level is mainly limited by the heterovalent doping mechanism; this would also lead to the deteriorated thermal properties of the crystal.

Monoclinic $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$ is optically biaxial (point group $2/m$). At the wavelength of $\sim 1 \mu\text{m}$, the principal refractive indices are $n_p = 1.97$, $n_m = 2.03$ and $n_g = 2.13 \pm 0.02$ according to the $n_p < n_m < n_g$ convention. One of the optical indicatrix axes (N_m) coincides with the C_2 symmetry axis (the $\mathbf{b}$ -axis) and other two (N_p and N_g) are lying in the orthogonal mirror plane (the $\mathbf{a-c}$ plane), Fig. 1. The angle $N_p \wedge c = 37.1^\circ$, measured within the obtuse angle β .

Room-temperature (RT, 293 K) absorption, σ_{abs} , cross-sections corresponding to the ${}^2F_{7/2} \rightarrow {}^2F_{5/2}$ transition are shown in Fig. 2(a) for the principal light polarizations $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_p$, N_m and N_g . The maximum σ_{abs} is $6.16 \times 10^{-20} \text{ cm}^2$ at 974.0 nm (the zero-phonon line, ZPL, at RT) and the corresponding full width at half maximum (FWHM) of the absorption peak is 5.6 nm (for $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_g$). The stimulated-emission (SE) cross-sections, σ_{SE} , were calculated using a combination of the Füchtbauer-Ladenburg (F-L) equation [17] based on the measured luminescence spectra, and the reciprocity method (RM) [18] based on the determined Stark splitting. The maximum σ_{SE} reaches $6.2 \times 10^{-20} \text{ cm}^2$ at 1056.7 nm for $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_m$. $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$ exhibits a strong anisotropy of the SE cross-sections at this wavelength: $\sigma_{\text{SE}}(m) : \sigma_{\text{SE}}(g) = 3.7$ and $\sigma_{\text{SE}}(m) : \sigma_{\text{SE}}(p) = 5.5$, which is a prerequisite for a linearly polarized laser emission. From the luminescence spectra (measured with $\lambda_{\text{exc}} = 972 \text{ nm}$), the emission bandwidth is 18.7 nm ($\mathbf{E} \parallel N_m$) and $>50 \text{ nm}$ (structured spectrum, $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_g$). $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$ exhibits a single-exponential luminescence decay with a lifetime τ_{lum} of 366 μs , as measured for a powdered sample to avoid radiation trapping. The ${}^2F_{5/2} \rightarrow {}^2F_{7/2}$ transition of Yb^{3+} represents a quasi-three-level laser scheme with reabsorption.

Fig. 2. RT (a) absorption, σ_{abs} , and (b) stimulated-emission, σ_{SE} , cross-section spectra of Yb^{3+} in monoclinic MgWO_4 for $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_p$, N_m and N_g .

Thus, gain cross-sections, $\sigma_{\text{gain}} = \beta \sigma_{\text{SE}} - (1 - \beta) \sigma_{\text{abs}}$, where $\beta = N_2({}^2F_{5/2})/N_{\text{Yb}}$ is the inversion ratio, and N_2 is the upper laser level population, are calculated to predict the spectral properties of laser emission, see Fig. 3 for $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_m$ and $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_g$. For $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_m$, a local peak in the gain spectra is observed at $\sim 1057 \text{ nm}$ and the gain bandwidth $\Delta \lambda_g$ is 15.1 nm (FWHM, for $\beta = 0.1$). For $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_g$, a similar behavior is observed while the gain spectra are broader, $\Delta \lambda_g = 26.1 \text{ nm}$.

Fig. 3. RT gain cross-sections, $\sigma_{\text{gain}} = \beta \sigma_{\text{SE}} - (1 - \beta) \sigma_{\text{abs}}$, where $\beta = N_2({}^2F_{5/2})/N_{\text{Yb}}$ is the inversion ratio, for Yb^{3+} ions in monoclinic MgWO_4 crystal. The light polarizations are (a) $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_m$ and (b) $\mathbf{E} \parallel N_g$.

The polarized Raman spectra of an N_m -cut $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$ crystal are shown in Fig. 4 for the $m(ij)m$, where $i, j = p, g$, configurations (using Porto's notation). The excitation wavelength is $\lambda_{\text{exc}} = 514 \text{ nm}$. The most intense vibration is observed at 915.7 cm^{-1} (the FWHM of the Raman band is 15.0 cm^{-1}) and assigned to symmetric stretching W–O vibrations $\nu_1(A_{1g})$ in the WO_6 octahedra [2]. $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$ is promising for self-Raman frequency conversion.

Fig. 4. Polarized Raman spectra for $\text{Yb}^{3+}:\text{MgWO}_4$ for the $m(xy)m$ configurations (Porto's notation), numbers indicate the Raman frequencies in cm^{-1} .

To resolve the Stark splitting of Yb^{3+} multiplets, the absorption and luminescence spectra were measured in the temperature range of 6–300 K, Fig. 5. For Yb^{3+} ions in C_2 symmetry sites, there is a total of $2J + 1$ Stark sub-levels for each $2S+1L_J$ multiplet, numbered as 0..3 for ${}^2F_{7/2}$ and 0'..2' for ${}^2F_{5/2}$. The interpretation of the Stark transitions was carried out accounting for the Raman spectra.

Fig. 5. Low temperature spectroscopy of Yb:MgWO₄: (a) absorption spectra for $E \parallel N_m$; (b) luminescence spectra for $E \parallel N_g$, $\lambda_{exc} = 972$ nm. The “+” marks indicate Stark transitions.

The energy-level scheme of Yb³⁺ ions in MgWO₄ is shown in Fig. 6(a). The ZPL (the transition between the lowest sub-levels of both multiplets) has an energy $E_{ZPL} = 10275$ cm⁻¹. The partition functions for the lower and upper multiplets are $Z_1 = 1.352$ and $Z_2 = 1.469$, respectively ($Z_1/Z_2 = 0.920$). The total Stark splitting of the ground-state, $\Delta E(^2F_{7/2}) = 765$ cm⁻¹, exceeds that in other known tungstate crystals [8,19], Fig. 6(b). For the RE³⁺ ions, the barycenter of any $2S+1L_J$ 4fⁿ multiplet shows a linear variation vs. the barycenter of any other isolated multiplet, which is expressed as a barycenter plot [20], see Fig. 6(c). The barycenter energies $\langle E(^2F_{5/2}) \rangle$ and $\langle E(^2F_{7/2}) \rangle$ for Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ agree well with this plot.

In Table 1, we compare the emission properties of Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ with other well-known tungstate laser crystals, namely, monoclinic (sp. gr. C2/c) Yb³⁺:KLu(WO₄)₂ [8] and tetragonal disordered (sp. gr. I4₁/a) Yb³⁺:NaY(WO₄)₂ [21]. Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ has higher SE cross-sections, while its gain bandwidths are comparable to those of monoclinic double tungstates.

Table 1. Spectroscopic Properties* of Yb³⁺ in Tungstate Crystals

Crystal	Site	λ_{em} , nm	$\Delta\lambda_g$, nm	σ_{SE} , 10 ⁻²⁰ cm ²	τ_{lum} , μ s	Ref.
NaY(WO ₄) ₂	S ₄	1018(π)	33.9(π)	1.38(π)	309	[21]
		1024(σ)	25.9(σ)	0.86(σ)		
KLu(WO ₄) ₂	C ₂	1026.7(m)	20.2(m)	2.6(m)	275	[8]
		1041.2(p)	28.0(p)	1.3(p)		
MgWO ₄	C ₂	1056.7(m)	15.1(m)	6.25(m)	366	*
		1056.6(g)	26.1(g)	1.68(g)		

* λ_{em} – emission wavelength, $\Delta\lambda_g$ – gain bandwidth ($\beta = 0.1$), σ_{SE} – SE cross-section, τ_{lum} – reabsorption-free luminescence lifetime.

For laser experiments, a rectangular sample was cut from the 1.25 at.% Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ crystal for light propagation along the N_p optical indicatrix axis (N_p -cut). It had a thickness of 3.1 mm and an aperture of 4×4 mm². This crystal orientation was selected because it gives access to the high-gain light polarization ($E \parallel N_m$). The uncoated crystal was mounted in a Cu-holder using Indium foil for better thermal contact from all lateral sides. The holder was cooled to ~14 °C by circulating water. The crystal was inserted in a compact plano-plano (microchip-type) laser cavity, Fig. 7, formed by a flat pump mirror (PM) coated for high transmission (HT) at 0.88-0.99 μ m and for high reflection (HR) at 1.02-1.23 μ m, and a set of flat output couplers (OCs) with a transmission T_{OC} of 0.5%–10% at the laser wavelength. Both the PM and the OC were placed close to the crystal with minimum air gaps, so that the geometrical cavity length was ~3.1 mm. The microchip laser concept benefits from a robust and compact design and good cavity stability.

Fig. 6. Stark splitting of Yb³⁺ multiplets in MgWO₄: (a) Energy-level scheme, numbers indicate the energy in cm⁻¹, Z_1/Z_2 are the partition functions; (b) Stark splitting of Yb³⁺ in tungstate crystals: MgWO₄, KLu(WO₄)₂ [8], NaGd(WO₄)₂ [19] (C₂ and S₄ – Yb³⁺ site symmetries); (c) barycenter plot [20] for Yb³⁺ ions showing the result for MgWO₄.

Fig. 7. (a) Scheme of the compact diode-pumped Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ laser: LD – laser diode, PM – pump mirror, OC – output coupler; (b) typical profile of the laser beam in the far-field (the beam ellipticity originates from the astigmatic thermal lens), $P_{abs} \approx 10$ W.

The N_p -cut Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ crystal generated a maximum output power of 18.2 W at ~1056 nm with a slope efficiency η of ~89% (vs. the absorbed pump power P_{abs}), Fig. 8(a). The laser threshold was at $P_{abs} = 0.54$ W and the optical-to-optical efficiency η_{opt} amounted to 33.7% (vs. the pump power incident on the crystal). All these values are specified for $T_{OC} = 10\%$. The laser output was linearly polarized ($E \parallel N_m$) and the polarization was intrinsically selected by the gain anisotropy, Fig. 2(b). For all studied OCs, the emission wavelength was ~1.06 μ m, Fig. 3(a), in agreement with the gain spectra. A slight blue-shift of the laser wavelength with increasing output coupling was detected, Fig. 8(b), and ascribed to the quasi-three-level nature of the Yb³⁺ laser scheme exhibiting reabsorption at the laser wavelength. The laser operation in the plano-plano cavity was supported by a positive (focusing) thermal lens. For $T_{OC} < 10\%$, power scaling was limited by a thermal roll-over probably because of too high intracavity laser intensity. The determined laser slope efficiency gives an estimation of the roundtrip passive loss L of 0.35% (loss coefficient: $\delta_{loss} = 0.0056$ cm⁻¹). No crystal fracture was observed up to at least $P_{abs} = 22.5$ W (limited by the available pump).

In Table 2, we compare the output characteristics of compact diode-pumped lasers based on Yb³⁺-doped oxide crystals and reported recently. The superior laser results achieved with Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ compared to previous studies with other tungstate crystals, Yb³⁺:NaY(WO₄)₂ and Yb³⁺:KLu(WO₄)₂, are attributed to its better thermo-mechanical properties. crystals, Yb³⁺:NaY(WO₄)₂ and Yb³⁺:KLu(WO₄)₂, are attributed to its better thermo-mechanical properties.

Fig. 8. Diode-pumped compact Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ laser: (a) input-output dependences, η – slope efficiency; (b) typical laser emission spectra. The crystal orientation is N_p -cut, the laser polarization is $E \parallel N_m$.

Table 2. Output Characteristics* of Compact Diode-Pumped Ytterbium Lasers Based on Oxide Crystals Reported So Far

Crystal	Yb, at. %	P_{out} , W	λ_L , nm	P_{th} , W	η , %	Ref.
Yb:LuVO ₄	1.5	8.3	1031	2.6	80	[22]
Yb:CaGdAlO ₄	8	7.79	~1061	2.0	84	[13]
Yb:LuAlO ₃	2	9.6	1041	~1.5	74	[23]
Yb:NaY(WO ₄) ₂	4.8	5.2	1045	1.20	50	[24]
Yb:KLu(WO ₄) ₂	5.2	11.0	~1045	0.61	80	[25]
Yb:MgWO ₄	1.25	18.2	~1056	0.54	89	**
Yb:Ca ₄ GdO(BO ₃) ₃	10	18.2	1032	~1	70	[26]
Yb:YAl ₃ (BO ₃) ₄	5.6	10.6	1042	0.79	72	[27]
Yb:Lu ₃ Ga ₅ O ₁₂	7.1	8.97	1040	1.22	75	[28]

* P_{out} – output power, λ_L – laser wavelength; P_{th} – threshold pump power, η – slope efficiency (vs. absorbed pump power); **This work.

To conclude, monoclinic Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ is a promising crystal for compact, highly-efficient and high-power lasers at ~1 μ m thanks to a combination of attractive thermal and spectroscopic properties. We report on the first laser operation of Yb³⁺:MgWO₄ in a microchip-type laser cavity yielding >18 W of linearly polarized output at ~1.06 μ m with a slope efficiency (88.8%) almost approaching the Stokes limit, $\eta_{St} = \lambda_P/\lambda_L = 91.7\%$. This is attributed to weak non-radiative relaxation, low optical losses and good mode-matching provided by the positive thermal lens for the selected crystal orientation and the results achieved in this work represent a record for Yb³⁺-doped tungstate laser crystals.

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