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Formation of a vortex crystal cell assisted by a background vorticity distribution

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A vortex crystal is a quasistationary, symmetric array of intense vortices (clumps). A low level of background vorticity is experimentally observed to assist three clumps in forming an equilateral triangle starting from initial positions on a linear array. The triangle constitutes a unit cell of a crystal in a many-vortex system. The background vortex curbs the orbital motion of the clumps with unequal strengths to arrest them at the vertices of an equilateral triangle by wrapping them with different sized belts of depleted vorticity (ring holes). We characterize the contributions of a low-level background vorticity distribution on the formation of ordered states of clumps in light of the experimental results and existing theories.

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I. INTRODUCTION

We report an experimental study of a process characterizing one of the most striking features in the relaxation process of two-dimensional (2D) vortical dynamics that leads to an ordered array of intense vortices (vortex crystal). Coherent patches of vorticity are generated from large variety of initial conditions, and often dominate the subsequent evolution of 2D turbulent flows with high Reynolds number [1]. The coherent structures were observed to form spontaneously in numerical studies of freely relaxing 2D turbulence with patches of like sign vorticity [1–4]. A clear experimental demonstration of this process has been given by Fine et al. using a strongly magnetized pure electron plasma [5].

The experimental study of 2D vortex dynamics with a magnetized pure electron plasma is based on the equivalence of the macroscopic dynamics of guiding centers to the incompressible fluid. Guiding centers of electrons gyrating in a strong uniform magnetic field \( B_0 = B_0 \hat{z} \) drift with the velocity of \( \mathbf{v} = \hat{z} \times \mathbf{v} \) driven by the electric field \( -\nabla \phi(x,y) \) of \( B_0 \). The associated flow is characterized by the vorticity \( \zeta = \nabla \times \mathbf{v} = -v_0 \mathbf{B}_0 \times \mathbf{v} = e n \mathbf{v}_0 B_0 \), for a pure electron plasma with particle density \( n(x,y) \). Here, \( e \) is the dielectric constant in vacuum. In macroscopic scales larger than the gyroradius, this flow is isomorphic to 2D Euler flow in the sense that \( \mathbf{v} \cdot \nabla = 0 \), \( \zeta(x,y) \propto n(x,y) \), and the stream function is given as \( \psi(x,y) = \phi(x,y)/B_0 \) [6,7]. The electric properties of the guiding-center particles allow precise control of the initial conditions of \( \zeta(x,y) \) and detailed measurements of \( \zeta(x,y) \) in its relaxation process. This feature has benefited electron plasma experiments in demonstrating fundamental features of vortex dynamics such as Hamiltonian properties of vortex strings in vacuum [8–10], merging of discrete vortices [11], climbing motion of vortex string (clump) along the slope of the background vortex [12–14], dynamics of vorticity holes in the background vortex [13–15], and the formation of vortex crystals [5,16,17].

The dynamics of mutually interacting point vortices has been the subject of theoretical and simulational studies of 2D turbulence [18–20]. The experiment by Fine et al. [5] and a subsequent simulational study by Schechter et al. [16] were the first to reveal the important role of the interaction between the strong patches of vorticity (clumps) and the low-level vorticity filling the space around the clumps in the vortical relaxation processes toward the crystal structures. In addition, the background vorticity (BGV) was called for in the statistical model that successfully reproduced the observed crystal arrays of electron vortices [17].

The purpose of this paper is to experimentally examine the contribution of the BGV to the relaxation of the clumps’ dynamics toward the formation of a crystal structure. To simplify the problem and quantify the degree of order, we focus on the dynamics of three clumps which are the minimum to form a unit cell in 2D crystal structures. The major difference from previous work is that the shape and level of the initial distribution of the BGV are controlled by preparing the BGV separately before immersion of clumps whose circulations and positions are also controlled. In previous work [11], the clumps were generated by diocotron instability (equivalent to Kelvin-Helmholtz instability) which inevitably deteriorates the reproducibility of the repeated experimental shots coupled with destructive observation of the vorticity distributions made at different times in the relaxation process.

The outline of this paper is as follows: First we examine the time evolution of the triangle pattern of three clumps initially placed either in vacuum or in different levels of the BGV distribution (BGVD). Then quantitative analyses are made in terms of the degree of symmetrization. Finally, we report the observation that even clumps with unequal circulations can form a symmetric cell when surrounded by unevenly depleted zones in the BGVD.

II. EXPERIMENTAL APPARATUS AND METHOD

The experiment is conducted using a Malmberg-type trap as shown in Fig. 1. An axially confining electrostatic potential is maintained in a homogeneous magnetic field of strength \( B_0 = 0.048 \) T by grounding the axially aligned 11 conducting cylinders and by negatively biasing the 54-mm-long plug cylinders at both ends. The diameter of the conducting wall...
is 64 mm. With this vacuum field configuration, the typical axial length of the trapped electron distribution is 235 ± 5 mm.

The electrons are injected from preselected cathode elements, which constitute a cathode array as shown in Fig. 1, into the central region through the temporarily decreased potential barrier at the left end plug. The emission current from each of the selected cathodes is adjusted independently by variable external resistors in order to control the initial vorticity distribution. The BGV with a smooth distribution is generated by mixing and relaxation of hundreds of vortex strings which are repeatedly injected and trapped and then partially ejected leftward. We inject clumps on top of the established BGV.

Vortex electrons are dumped along the magnetic field lines and collected on the conducting phosphor screen on elimination of the potential barrier at the right end plug. The emission current from the cathode at \( t = 18 \mu s \) from the initial distribution aligned in a straight line with the same circulation \( \Gamma_c = \int \int dxdy \zeta_c(x, y) = \frac{\epsilon N_c}{\epsilon_0 B_0 L} = 1.64 \times 10^{-6} N_c \). Here, \( N_c \) is the total number of electrons constituting each clump with the length of \( L = 235 \pm 5 \) mm. The time of observation is indicated at the upper left corner. In vacuum, the clumps continue orbital motion with the period of \( \tau_R \approx 50 \mu s \) without showing any stationary configuration [20]. The collision with residual neutral atoms acts on the dynamics of the clumps as a viscous effect in the time scale of 1 sec. In the time range of \( t > 100 \) ms, the number of the clumps tends to decrease by collision with residual gas or on hitting the conductor wall after distant excursions.

In the presence of the BGV as shown in Fig. 2(b), however, the clumps move in a limited region to go into an ordered state. Here the initial BGV is a continuous distribution with the maximum height of \( \zeta_b = \zeta_{c,0}/60 \), where \( \zeta_{c,0} \) is the height of a clump’s vorticity and the ratio of the circulation is \( \Gamma_b/\Gamma_c = 12.7 \). At first, clumps show orbital motion with an averaged period of \( \tau_R = 25 \mu s \) locally wrapping the background vortex around them (\( t = 75,150 \mu s \)). Then, the BGV becomes increasingly fine structured in the differential rotation around the clumps [12]. The maximum level of perturbed BGV is \( |\delta \zeta_b/\zeta_b| = |\delta n_b/n_b| = 0.49 \). The perturbations surrounding the clumps eventually evolve into ring holes [16,17,22,23].

In the later stage, the clumps settle down to form a symmetric triangular array and the fine structures in BGV are smoothed out in our coarse-grained observation (\( t = 5,10 \) ms). In vacuum, such a symmetric configuration can be established only when the three clumps are of equal circulation and placed initially in symmetric locations [9,10,20].

For a quantitative analysis of the formation of the symmetric cell, we introduce a symmetry parameter defined as

\[
S = 12 \sqrt{\frac{A}{l^2}}.
\]

Here \( A \) is the area and \( l \) is the peripheral length of a triangle that has three clumps at its vertices. \( S \) is maximized at 1 when the clumps form an equilateral triangle. We examine the clumps’ dynamics in different shapes and levels of the BGV as described in Fig. 3(a). Initially, the clumps are placed in a straight line at the points indicated by arrows
with equal circulations $\Gamma_{\theta} \times N_i / 10^7 = 0.74$. The time evolution as illustrated in Fig. 2(b) is summarized in Fig. 3(b) in terms of $1 - S$, representing the degree of deviation from symmetry. The symbols employed in Figs. 3(a) and 3(b) correspond to each other. Two symbols added in Fig. 3(b) represent the cases with $N_b / 10^7 = 0.25 (\bigtriangledown)$ and $0 (\times)$, i.e., vacuum. The density distribution for $\nabla$ is close to the sensitivity limit of the diagnostics and cannot be determined.

In the initial stage within $100 \mu s$, all symbols for $1 - S$ show a common feature of rapid reduction. Here the clumps show kinetic motion weakly modified by the presence of the BGVD. Then comes the next stage of decaying oscillations. The frequency and decay rate of $1 - S$ depend on the BGVD. In the vacuum case ($\times$), $1 - S$ continues undamped oscillation for $\sim 10^5 \mu s$ until one of the clumps disappears and $S$ becomes undetermined. With the addition of a low-level BGVD ($\triangle: N_b / 10^7 = 0.52, \xi_b = \xi_c(400)$), the excursion of the clumps is reduced and the oscillation of $1 - S$ damps in the time scale of $1 \text{ ms}$. These features are more evident for higher levels of the BGVD, $N_b / 10^7 = 9.4$ (closed $\blacklozenge$), $21.0$ (square $\square$), $24.8$ (circle $\bigcirc$), but less clear for the case with $N_b / 10^7 = 0.25 (\bigtriangledown)$. In the third stage of $t \gg 10 \text{ ms}$, $1 - S$ further decreases below $10^{-2}$ without showing strong oscillations. For more than $100 \text{ ms}$ in the last stage, we observe stationary configuration in the shape of an equilateral triangle.

For quantitative examination of the relaxation speed of $S$, we introduce the settling time $\tau_S$ as the time after which $S$ remains above 0.9. Figure 4 shows that $\tau_S$ decreases as the circulation of the BGVD, $\Gamma_{\theta} \times N_i / 10^7$, increases. Almost the same dependence is observed for $\tau_S$ vs $\xi_b$, the height of the BGVD at the initial location of the outermost clump. If $\tau_S$ is normalized by the initial turn-over time $\tau_R$, $\tau_S / \tau_R$ decreases from 120 to 55 as $N_b$ increases. These observations indicate that the BGVD assists the formation of the unit of a vortex crystal.

### IV. CONTRIBUTION OF THE BGVD TO COOLING OF CLUMPS’ MOTION

The BGVD has been called for as a cooler of randomly moving clumps [5,16]. Fine et al. have observed that the average chaotic velocity decreases as $|\delta v| \propto t^{-\alpha}$ with $\alpha = 0.5 - 0.6$ between $10 \tau_R$ and $100 \tau_R$ [5]. Schecter et al. have evaluated that the exponent $\alpha$ lies between $-0.2$ and $+0.6$ depending on $\Gamma_b / \Gamma_{\text{tot}}$ where $\Gamma_{\text{tot}} = \Gamma_b + \Gamma_c$ [16].

From Fig. 3(b), we can evaluate the exponent $\beta$ for the symmetrization by fitting to $1 - S = t^{-\beta}$. Restricting our analysis to the data at $t \geq 200 \mu s$, i.e., excluding the initial orbital motion, we obtain $\beta = 0.05 \pm 0.21$ for $\bigtriangledown$, $0.81 \pm 0.28$ for $\triangle$, $0.66 \pm 0.28$ for closed $\blacklozenge$, $0.82 \pm 0.22$ for $\square$, $0.78 \pm 0.21$ for $\bigcirc$. If we further limit our analysis for $t > 10^4 \mu s$, the asymptotic value of $\beta$ is $\sim 1$. Figure 5(a) summarizes the cooling exponent $\beta$ as a function of $\Gamma_b / \Gamma_{\text{tot}}$. Starting from zero at $\Gamma_b / \Gamma_{\text{tot}} = 0$, $\beta$ approaches $-0.8$ and remains there for $0.15 < \Gamma_b / \Gamma_{\text{tot}} < 0.9$. The exponent $\alpha$ quoted from Fig. 10 of Ref. [16] is shown with solid symbols. The observation that $\beta$ lies around the upper limit of $\alpha$ suggests that $\beta$ indicates the contribution of the BGVD to the cooling of clumps’ motion.

We examine the correspondence between $\alpha$ and $\beta$ in more detail. We evaluate the root-mean-square value of the velocity fluctuation $\delta v_{\text{rms}}$ as defined by $\delta v_{\text{rms}} = (\sum_{i=1}^{M} (\delta v_i^2 / M))^{1/2}$ for $M$ clumps [16]. Here, $\delta v_i = v_i - \mathbf{\bar{v}}$, $\delta \Omega(t) \delta \theta$ is velocity fluctuation about the radial-weighted average rotation $\mathbf{\bar{\Omega}}(t) = \sum_{i=1}^{M} v_{i,\theta} / \sum_{i=1}^{M} r_i$ at the position $r_i$ of
The measured density distribution from the potential distribution $f_{v}$ representing a similar case to closed crystals. In contrast to the previous experiment [5] and simulation [16] where the BGV is generated during the initial instability or through merging between clumps, a smooth distribution of the BGV is imposed in the present experiment. After extensive observations and analyses, we have come to the conclusion that parameters characterizing the initial profile of the BGV are not so influential as the circulation $\Gamma_b$. This may be attributed to the observed fact that the smooth distribution by the clumps’ motion. However, the wavy distribution of $\alpha$ against $\Gamma_b/\Gamma_{tot}$ obtained in the previous work.

FIG. 3. (a) Radial profiles of the electron density distribution $n_b(x,y)=e_b \phi_b(x,y)/e$ constituting the background vortices with $N_b/10^7=0.52 (\triangle), 9.4$ (closed $\diamond$), 21.0 (□), and 24.8 ($\bigcirc$). The initial radial locations of the clumps are indicated by arrows. (b) Deviation from the symmetry $1-S$ is plotted as a function of time. Each symbol corresponds to the associated profile in Fig. 3(a). The symbols $\nabla$ and $\times$ stand for the case with $N_b/10^7=0.25$ and 0, respectively.

FIG. 4. The settling time $\tau_s$ for $S=0.9$ is plotted against $N_b$. Symbols correspond to the profiles in Fig. 3(a).

FIG. 5. (a) The exponent $\beta$ is plotted against $\Gamma_b/\Gamma_{tot}$. Open symbols for $\beta$ correspond to the profiles in Fig. 3. Small symbols (closed circle and square) represent the $\alpha$ quoted from Fig. 10 of Ref. [16]. (b) $|\delta v_{rms}|$ is plotted against $1-S$ determined from observed data at $t=200 \mu s$. One can draw an empirical relation $|\delta v_{rms}|=(1-S)^\gamma$ with $\gamma=0.166\pm0.043$. Applying this method to other cases, we obtain $\gamma=0.239\pm0.062$ for $\Delta$, $0.198\pm0.055$ for closed $\diamond$, $0.189\pm0.041$ for □, $0.182\pm0.059$ for $\bigcirc$.

The empirical result $\alpha-0.2\beta$ is useful in the sense that random motion caused by small-scale structures in the electric field can be characterized by the geometrical parameter $S$. While the accuracy in determining the electric field is severely limited by the spatial resolution of the electron density measurement, say due to coarse graining, the positions of clumps are much easier to determine accurately. Though further examinations are required to assert the role of $1-S$ for $|\delta v_{rms}|$, the usefulness of the parameter $S$ may not be overstated in analyzing the relaxation processes to vortex crystals.

We have assumed that there is no essential difference between $\Gamma_b$'s in the two analyses. Some discussion should be in order on the difference of the initial distribution of the BGV. In contrast to the previous experiment [5] and simulation [16] where the BGV is generated during the initial instability or through merging between clumps, a smooth distribution of the BGV is imposed in the present experiment. After extensive observations and analyses, we have come to the conclusion that parameters characterizing the initial profile of the BGV are not so influential as the circulation $\Gamma_b$. This may be attributed to the observed fact that the smooth distribution of the BGV is quickly scabbled into rugged distribution by the clumps’ motion. However, the wavy distribution of $\alpha$ against $\Gamma_b/\Gamma_{tot}$ obtained in the previous work.
Clumps with unequal circulations form an equilateral triangle only in the presence of the BGVD.

V. EQUILIBRIUM STATE OF CLUMPS SUPPORTED BY RING HOLES

An important feature characterizing the structures in the BGVD is a ring hole, a depleted zone of vorticity surrounding a clump. A ring hole is generated when a part of the distribution of an inhomogeneous BGV is advected by a clump [22,23]. Figure 6 shows the vorticity distributions recorded in a quasistationary state at $t \approx 5$ ms for different combinations of clumps immersed in the almost identical initial distributions of the BGVD. Different sizes of ring holes are clearly observed around the clumps. The BGVD enables a set of extremely unbalanced clumps to form an equilateral triangle with their center of mass keeping the orbital motion.

Modification of the BGVD in the shape of ring holes has been observed in experiments [5] and in a simulation [16]. It was called for in a statistical model [17]. We evaluate the circulation $\Gamma_h$ of the ring holes by integrating the deficit of the vorticity $\delta \zeta_b$ from the smoothly interpolated distribution $\tilde{\zeta}_b(x,y)$ of the BGVD, i.e., $\Gamma_h = \iint dxdy \, \delta \zeta_b(x,y) = \iint dxdy \, \{\tilde{\zeta}_b(x,y) - \zeta_b(x,y)\}$. Here, $\delta \zeta_b(x,y)$ is schematically illustrated by the hatch in the inset of Fig. 7. Figure 7 plots $N_h \times \Gamma_h$ as a function of $N_c \times \Gamma_c$ for each clump shown in Fig. 6. It indicates that $\Gamma_h$ increases with $\Gamma_c$ for each combination of the clumps and that all the data points lie within a narrow belt demonstrating a good positive correlation between $\Gamma_h$ and $\Gamma_c$. It should be noted, however, that $\Gamma_h$ remains less than 20% of $\Gamma_c$. Therefore, the effective circulations, $\Gamma_{eff} = \Gamma_c - N_c \times (N_c - N_h)/10^6$, are (7.9, 7.5, 8.2) for $\Delta$, (13, 6.1, 6.6) for $\bigcirc$, and (14, 7.3, 6.2) for $\square$. In a statistical model, it is requested for crystallization of vortices that the distributions of the clumps are not fully canceled by the holes in the BGVD [17].

The symmetric distribution as observed in Fig. 6(a) is understandable in terms of the force balance among three clumps if their effective circulations $\Gamma_{eff}$ are equal. We have confirmed experimentally that three clumps with equal circulation $\Gamma_c$ in the absence of the BGVD are able to maintain the equilateral triangle for more than 100 turns when they were initially placed in the symmetrical position far from the wall. However, there is no clear experimental observation that three clumps with unequal circulation $\Gamma_c$ can maintain the initial pattern of the equilateral triangle in the vacuum. The role of the BGVD on symmetrization of clumps is discussed in the following section.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Aref has predicted that an equilateral configuration can be maintained in the absence of the BGVD if three point vortices with unequal circulations are placed at the vertices of the equilateral triangle [20]. Lansky and O’Neil, on the other hand, have pointed out destabilizing effects of boundary wall unless it is far apart from the clumps even with equal circulations [24]. We extend our discussion in light of these theories.

Our observation indicates that the BGVD plays a decisive role in advecting the clumps from the initial positions aligned in a straight line toward vertices of an equilateral triangle. This process is accompanied by generation of rough structures in the BGVD with length scales larger or comparable with the clumps’ radii. As indicated by oscillations of $1-S$, the clumps do not settle down there until the length scales of the BGVD structure decrease further. The observed correlation between $1-S$ and $\partial\delta_\zeta$ indicates that fluctuations in the BGVD cool the clumps’ motion and help them settling down at the vertices of the equilateral triangle with $S=1$. Another contribution of the BGVD sets in when the clumps are enclosed by the macroscopically smooth and almost flat BGVD. Observation indicates that equilateral triangle of clumps with unequal circulations is maintained as theoretically predicted by Aref. A difference is that it is realized experimentally only in the presence of the BGVD.

Theoretical analyses on stability have been concentrated on arrays of clumps without the BGVD [24,25]. A well-known prediction is that a conducting wall surrounding the clumps has a destabilizing effect on the array and it has been confirmed in experiments on two-clumps’ motion without the BGVD [8]. There is an interesting theoretical finding that a disk-shaped BGVD generates images of clumps at the periphery and behaves as a boundary wall [17]. If this process
is singly dominant, the BGVD may destroy the equilateral triangle configuration contrary to our observation. Ito et al. have pointed out experimentally that a BGVD extending beyond the clamp tends to shield or at least smear the clamp-induced image charge distribution on the wall [21]. If a distinct image of each clamp is blurred, the clamp-wall interaction is less positionally sensitive, and destabilizing effect of the wall weakens. This process fits more comfortably to our observation than the Jin-Dubin process. The mildly descending profile of the actual BGVD at the periphery may cause the departure from the theoretical model assuming a clear-cut boundary.

In conclusion, we have reported an observation revealing a strong influence of a low-level BGVD on the formation of ordered states of clumps. The BGVD curbs the motion of three clumps to arrest them at the vertices of an equilateral triangle constituting a unit cell of vortex crystal. The settling time to the quasistationary state is shorter for the higher levels of the BGVD. The settling process quantified by the symmetry parameter $S$ is related to the reduction of random velocities $\delta v$ of the clumps. The clumps generate ring holes (depleted zone of vorticity) around them and tend to partially compensate the imbalance among the circulations. Mixing processes beyond the holes in the BGVD lead to a macroscopically smooth disk-shaped vorticity distribution, and it prepares conditions to support an equilateral triangle array of clumps with unequal circulations, which was predicted by Aref to exist without the BGVD.

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