Shear transformation zone analysis of anelastic relaxation of a metallic glass reveals distinct properties of $\alpha$ and $\beta$ relaxations

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Metallic glasses with pronounced high-frequency $\beta$ relaxation in their dynamic-mechanical response have been observed to exhibit large plasticity. Due to their disordered atomic structure, it is challenging to identify the microscopic mechanisms of their relaxation behavior. Quasistatic anelastic relaxation measurements have been performed over 10 orders of magnitude of time on La$_{55}$Ni$_{20}$Al$_{25}$ metallic glass, which exhibits a strong $\beta$ relaxation. The corresponding time-constant spectra were computed from the data—they contain a series of peaks corresponding to an atomically quantized hierarchy of shear transformation zones (STZs), where both the $\alpha$ and $\beta$ relaxations are consistent with the STZ model. Two different regimes of activation-volume increment between the peaks are observed, suggesting the involvement of different elements in STZs corresponding to $\alpha$ vs $\beta$ relaxations. Room-temperature structural relaxation significantly affects the former but not the latter.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Metallic glasses (MGs) are known to exhibit high strength and elastic limit, making them attractive for structural applications. However, a main limitation on their applications is their very limited macroscopic plasticity due to catastrophic failure resulting from strain localization within dominant shear bands [1,2]. Much work has been conducted to improve MG plasticity, but the deformation mechanism has yet to be fully understood [1,3,4]. The deformation of MGs is believed to be accommodated by shear transformation of atomic clusters, termed shear transformation zones (STZs) [5,6]. At small strain, STZs are few and isolated, and the overall strain can be reversed due to back stress in the elastic matrix, which gives rise to anelastic behavior. At high strain, the larger number of STZs leads to loss of back stress, resulting in plastic deformation.

Johari and Goldstein identified two relaxation processes in supercooled liquids and glasses: a main $\alpha$ relaxation and a secondary $\beta$ relaxation at higher frequency/lower temperature [7]. In molecular glasses, these two modes can be attributed to intermolecular vs intramolecular motion. However, the two modes have also been observed in metallic glasses, where such a distinction is not possible [8]. Even when it is less distinguishable as a tail in the loss modulus vs temperature/frequency, the $\beta$ relaxation has been argued to originate from a different mechanism than that of the $\alpha$ relaxation [9], based on a discrepancy between experimental data and a stretched exponential relaxation—the Kohlrausch-Williams-Watts (KWW) function [10]. However, the application of KWW to anelastic relaxation well below the glass transition temperature ($T_g$) is phenomenological and often results in inconsistent fitting parameters [11]. For an Al-based MG, Ju and Atzmon showed that both the main peak ($\alpha$) in the loss modulus and the tail ($\beta$) can be explained with a single, atomically quantized STZ hierarchy; the former (latter) results from large and slow (small and fast) STZs [12]. A similar conclusion applies to our analysis of the dynamic-mechanical response of a Zr-based alloy [13]. While conventional wisdom holds that the $\alpha$ relaxation is irreversible and occurs only above $T_g$, Refs. [12,14,15] show that it is reversible at small strain and can be observed well below $T_g$ if a sufficiently long time scale is employed. This is a reminder that $T_g$ is defined kinetically. Recently, Yu et al. reported that MGs with a distinct and pronounced $\beta$ relaxation exhibit relatively high tensile plasticity [16]. They also suggested that the STZ mechanism underlies the $\beta$ relaxation [17].

In the present study, the microscopic origin of the $\alpha$ and $\beta$ relaxations and the microscopic effect of structural relaxation (aging) on them have been investigated in amorphous La$_{55}$Ni$_{20}$Al$_{25}$, which exhibits a distinct and pronounced $\beta$ relaxation [18]. Room-temperature (RT) quasistatic anelastic relaxation measurements were performed after RT aging for varying amounts of time. The range of time constants has been extended by orders of magnitude compared to Ref. [15] to include the $\beta$ relaxation. The time-constant spectra consist of distinct peaks over the entire range. By employing a standard linear solid model and STZ-based constitutive law, size-resolved STZ properties are obtained, exhibiting an atomically quantized STZ hierarchy. Two different regimes are identified, corresponding to $\alpha$ and $\beta$ relaxations. While the STZ hierarchy exhibits a smooth transition between the regimes, the main result is the striking difference between the properties of STZs associated with the $\alpha$ vs $\beta$ relaxation: the latter indicates a smaller atomic-volume increment in the
STZ hierarchy than the former and is independent of prior aging.

II. BACKGROUND

Purely anelastic deformation at small strain is an ideal regime in which to study STZ properties, since STZs occupy a small volume fraction and interact with each other only weakly, through long-range stress fields. This interaction is neglected in the present work. Ju et al. performed quasistatic anelastic relaxation measurements on an Al-based MG at RT using a combination of nanoindenter cantilever bending and bend relaxation over times ranging from 1.0 to 200 s and from \( \sim 10^4 \) to \( 1.1 \times 10^8 \) s, respectively [14,19]. The evolution of anelastic strain was used to compute the corresponding relaxation-time spectra \( f(\tau) \) as a function of relaxation time \( \tau \).

A series of distinct peaks were observed in the spectra. The data were analyzed using a standard linear solid model consisting of Voigt units, each corresponding to a peak, in series with each other and with a spring representing the elastic component. The peaks were shown to correspond to a quantized hierarchy of STZs, with their volume values spaced by the atomic volume of Al, the majority element. STZs with time constants within the measured range comprised \( 14–22 \) atoms. The spectra also yielded the size-density distribution of potential STZs, i.e., atomic clusters capable of undergoing shear transformations, as reviewed below.

The relaxation time constant for each \( m \)-type STZ, \( \tau_m \), was taken as the median of the corresponding spectrum peak. Combining the expression for the macroscopic shear strain rate [5] and the activation free energy of shear transformation for \( m \)-type STZs [20], and bend relaxation (“mandrel”) for longer times [14], as shown in Fig. 1 and described below, were performed to monitor RT quasistatic anelastic relaxation. All results shown originate from a single batch. Samples were kept under inert atmosphere during aging and relaxation.

For nanoindenter cantilever bending, each measurement cycle consisted of a fixed load of 200 \( \mu \)N for a duration of 200 s, during which the vertical displacement was monitored as a function of time, and a small load of 2 \( \mu \)N for 200 s to verify reversibility. Three samples were examined for each aging time, with 20 measurement cycles for each sample. The elastic and anelastic strain, \( \varepsilon_{el}^0 \) and \( \varepsilon_{el}(t) \), were determined from the instant and time-dependent deflection following load application, respectively [14].

For mandrel measurements, samples were constrained around mandrels of radii \( R \) ranging from 0.348 to 0.802 cm for and bend relaxation (“mandrel”) for longer times [14], as shown in Fig. 1 and described below, were performed to monitor RT quasistatic anelastic relaxation. All results shown originate from a single batch. Samples were kept under inert atmosphere during aging and relaxation.

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FIG. 1. Schematic illustration of (a) nanoindenter cantilever bending and (b) bend relaxation (“mandrel’’). For the former, a fixed load \( P \) is applied on the sample for 200 s. The vertical displacement \( h \) is monitored as a function of time. For the latter, the sample is constrained around a mandrel with a radius \( R \) for 2.0 \( \times \) 10\(^8\) s and then relaxed stress-free for up to 3.2 \( \times \) 10\(^7\) s while monitoring the evolution of radius of curvature \( r(t) \).
2.0 × 10⁶ s and then relaxed stress-free for up to 3.2 × 10⁷ s. For each value of RT aging time 3–7 samples were used. The evolution of radius of curvature, \( r(t) \), during stress-free relaxation was monitored using a digital camera. The camera’s optical axis was aligned perpendicular to the sample plane, and a stage micrometer was used for calibration. Diffuse backlight was employed for optimal image quality. An automated image analysis and curvature-fitting method was developed, which significantly limits the error in the strain. The equilibrium elastic strain at the end of the constraining period and the maximum bending strain at time \( t \) after constraint removal, both attained at the surface, were determined from the curvature evolution [14].

Relaxation-time spectra were computed from the anelastic strain data using CONTIN [22,23], a portable package for inverse problems that yields stable and consistent fitting of \( \varepsilon_0(t)/\varepsilon_0^0 \). Based on the standard linear solid model used, two fitting equations are obtained:

\[
\varepsilon_0(t)/\varepsilon_0^0 = c_\infty + A t + \sum_{i=1}^{N_1} \varepsilon_i \left[ 1 - \exp(-t/\tau_i) \right],
\]

and

\[
\varepsilon_0(t)/\varepsilon_0^0 = c_\infty + \sum_{i=1}^{N_1} \varepsilon_i \exp(-t/\tau_i),
\]

respectively, where \( c_\infty, A, \) and \( \varepsilon_i \) are fitting parameters. Fixed, logarithmically spaced relaxation-time values \( \tau_i \) were used, \( N_1 \) = 100 ranging from 0.0015 to 400 s for the cantilever bending data, and \( N_2 \) = 65 ranging from 10 s to 6.4 × 10⁷ s for the mandrel data. A regularization term is included in the CONTIN fitting, eliminating sharp, unphysical variations in the spectra that may arise due to numerical artifacts [22,23]. For consistency, similar regularization parameter values were used for all samples. Within a range of values, the computed spectrum does not change significantly. Because of the challenges in solving inverse problems such as spectrum computation, we have conducted numerous consistency checks. By varying the range of data used in fits, we observe that all time constants associated with spectrum peak centroids are obtained consistently as long as they are smaller than the upper limit of the measurement time used. This is also evident in Ref. [19], in which the range of time values is expanded relative to Ref. [14]. Further details, e.g., on consistency checks, are provided in Ref. [14]. Finally, spectrum peak properties were determined from an average over all samples for each aging condition. The standard deviation of the mean was used as an estimate of the random error.

**IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Figure 2 shows the normalized anelastic bending strain, \( \varepsilon_0(t)/\varepsilon_0^0 \), as a function of time. The data are obtained from both cantilever bending and mandrel measurements for La₅₅Ni₂₀Al₂₅ ribbons with different RT aging times. For cantilever bending with time ranging from ∼0.003 s to 200 s, each curve is an average of all samples with the same aging time. Due to the large number of experimental data points (∼60000) for each measurement cycle, the curves displayed consist of an average of every 500 data points. All data points were used in the analysis. For mandrel measurements, from ∼20 s to 3.2 × 10⁷ s, data corresponding to all samples for each aging condition are displayed, and show sample-to-sample reproducibility. The time ranges for the two measurement techniques overlap. The final strain for cantilever bending is much lower than the initial strain in mandrel measurement, since samples do not mechanically equilibrate in the former case. It is noted that samples from different batches for which the strain data are not as extensive exhibit somewhat different anelastic behavior, indicating variations among nominally identical samples, likely due to cooling-rate differences or minor composition differences.

For cantilever bending with short measurement time, RT aging does not significantly affect the anelastic strain magnitude and evolution [Fig. 2(a)]. However, a dramatic effect of prior RT aging is observed at longer time, similar to our previous observations for La₇₀NiₓCu₁ₓ₅Al₁₅, x = 0, 1 [Fig. 2(b)] [15]. The overall strain magnitude decreases with increasing aging time, and two regimes of strain evolution...
are observed. For measurement times up to \( \sim 10^4 \)–\( 10^5 \) s, the absolute strain relaxation rate is the same for all aging times [see dashed lines in Fig. 2(b)]. For \( t > 10^4 \)–\( 10^5 \) s, the strain evolution varies with prior aging time: “younger” samples have higher strain that decreases at a higher absolute rate. It is apparent that the difference in the strain magnitude among different aging times is mainly due to processes with large time constants. Similar to Ref. [15], the time at which the transition between the two regimes occurs, \( \sim 10^4 \)–\( 10^5 \) s, is much shorter than the shortest aging time (2.6 \( \times \) 10^6 s). This indicates that the processes of structural relaxation and anelastic relaxation have different mechanisms. As in Ref. [15], two additional observations are made: (a) the strain of the “oldest” sample approaches zero at long measurement time, and (b) while the “youngest” sample still exhibits high normalized anelastic strain after being relaxed stress-free for one year at RT, its strain drops to zero after annealing at 353 K for 3600 s. Both observations indicate that the strain measured is fully reversible, i.e., anelastic.

As in Ref. [15], we have further confirmed our identification of the \( \alpha \) and \( \beta \) regimes with La70Ni15Al15, for which dynamic-mechanical-analysis (DMA) data have been published [8], by extrapolating [12] our STZ data for the same alloy [15,26] to the peak temperature of Ref. [8] and comparing the reciprocal time constants with the DMA frequency. Because even a single time constant in the spectrum results in a Cauchy-shaped loss modulus as a function of frequency, the atomically quantized hierarchy cannot be discerned in the loss modulus. However, for data with sufficiently small scatter, the spectrum can be obtained using a computational approach similar to that employed in the present work [13].

It is noticed that for the same aging condition, the intensity of the last peak from cantilever bending is different from that of the first peak from mandrel measurement, even though they are expected to correspond to the same process. A possible explanation is that the standard linear solid model employed does not adequately describe the difference between fixed-load and stress-free relaxation. Differences in the peak medians obtained by the two measurement techniques are within sample-to-sample variability. With increasing aging time, peak positions for small time constants do not vary significantly, while the position of the last peak obviously shifts to longer time. A similar observation was reported in Ref. [24] for a far narrower range of time constants. The peak intensities for small time constants are not visibly affected by RT aging either. However, the \( m = 8 \) peak area, \( c_8 \), decreases dramatically with increasing aging time. This is a manifestation of the observations in Figs. 2 and 3 that the difference in the strain magnitude among different aging conditions is mainly due to processes with larger time constants. These results are qualitatively similar to those we reported for La70(Ni5Cu1-x)15Al15, x = 0, 1 [15]. However, while the latter showed a significant decrease in large time constants due to cryogenic rejuvenation, the present La55Ni20Al25 alloy does not. Ten cryogenic cycles between liquid-nitrogen temperature and RT, performed after aging for 5.2 \( \times \) 10^7 s and prior to anelastic relaxation measurements, did not change the peak positions or intensities. It only slightly broadened the last two peaks.
To further study the microscopic effect of structural relaxation, STZ properties are now examined as a function of aging time. Figure 5 shows the evolution with RT aging time of relaxation time constants, $\tau_m$, taken as the corresponding peak medians. Figure 5(a) shows $\tau_m$ as a function of STZ type, $m$, for varying RT aging times. One observes two different regimes for each aging time—the slope for large time constants is larger than for smaller time constants. We note that this slope difference is not an experimental artifact, since corresponding data for an Al-rich alloy [14] all lie on a single line. Furthermore, RT aging does not affect the small time constants significantly, as the corresponding slopes are very similar for all aging times. However, large time constants are influenced by aging by up to a factor of 10, as seen by the increasing slope with increasing aging time. This behavior corresponds to the shift in the peak position with increasing aging time for large time constants in Fig. 4. Figure 5(b) shows each $\tau_m$ as a function of aging time, where the dashed lines are power-law fits. It is clear that the slope is very small for $m = 1-4$ and larger and similar for $m = 5-8$. As detailed below, we attribute the evolution of $\tau_m$ to an increasing shear modulus during structural relaxation.

In the following analysis, we first assume that the same constitutive law, and therefore Eq. (2), applies to all STZ types. Using Eq. (2) with a shear modulus value $\mu = 16.6 \text{ GPa}$ [3], $\gamma_0^T = 0.2$ [14,15], and Poisson’s ratio of 0.326 [25], we obtained the STZ volume values $\Omega_m$ as a function of peak index $m$ (Fig. 6) for samples aged $2.9 \times 10^7 \text{s}$, assumed to have stabilized. The random error in these values is less than 0.7%, because $\Omega_m$ appears in the exponent in the strain-rate expression [20]. Note that the activation volume is $\gamma_0^T \Omega_m$. The present experiments do not offer an independent determination of $\mu$, $\gamma_0^T$, and $\Omega_m$, but the latter two are determined independently in a separate study [26]. As in Fig. 5(a), two different linear regimes are observed, indicated by two fit lines. The fit quality is good, with $R^2$ values of 0.999 for each. The slope in Fig. 6 corresponds to the volume increment between two adjacent $\Omega_m$ values. The slope for the first regime, which corresponds to the $\beta$ relaxation, is $0.161 \times 10^{-28} \text{ m}^3$, close to the atomic volume of elemental Al, $0.166 \times 10^{-28} \text{ m}^3$. For comparison, the atomic volumes of elemental Ni and La are $0.110 \times 10^{-28}$ and $0.372 \times 10^{-28} \text{ m}^3$, respectively. For the second regime, the slope corresponding to the $\alpha$ relaxation is $0.236 \times 10^{-28} \text{ m}^3$, close to the average atomic volume of the alloy, $0.267 \times 10^{-28} \text{ m}^3$. The random error in these slopes is
These results suggest that Al atoms are more likely involved in the $\beta$ relaxation, while the $\alpha$ relaxation involves all constituent elements. One could argue that the transformation shear strain $\gamma_T^0$ may be smaller for small STZs. However, the opposite trend is expected if a shear transformation involves atomic displacements to the nearest potential well. For comparison, Ju et al. observed the same volume increment for all STZs corresponding to both the $\alpha$ and $\beta$ relaxation in an alloy with 86.8% Al, where the $\beta$ relaxation is only a tail in the loss modulus [14]. The two regimes we observe suggest a possible chemical composition difference between the STZs corresponding to the two relaxation modes. The role of the shear modulus is discussed next.

To explore the reason for the increase in relaxation time constants with aging time, we employ Eq. (2) for the relaxation time constant of $m$-type STZs [12]. In it, the only parameter expected to evolve significantly with aging time is the shear modulus $\mu$. The contribution of the last term $\sigma_{STZ}/\mu$ is insignificant [20]. Since the effect of structural relaxation on STZ volume is expected to be negligible, the same STZ volume values as in Fig. 6 are now assumed for all aging times in the computation of $\mu$. Its evolution with aging time, obtained from mandrel measurements, is shown in Fig. 7. It exhibits an $\sim$5% increase during RT structural relaxation, which is consistent with other reports [15,27]. In Ref. [15], using Young’s modulus measurements, we confirmed the role of shear modulus evolution in the reversal by cryogenic cycling of relaxation-induced increase in $\tau_m$. It is important to note that the trend in $\mu$ is not observed for small and fast STZs from cantilever bending ($\beta$ relaxation), for which the time constants are unaffected by aging. This suggests that the continuum elastic model may not apply for smaller and faster STZs [5]. In such a case, an alternative interpretation of the smaller slope in Fig. 6 becomes necessary. Such an interpretation would need to account for both the gradual increase in apparent STZ volume and the abrupt slope change in Fig. 6. In this context, we note that Lerner and Bouchbinder [28], using molecular dynamics, observed that relaxation dynamics of local strain dipoles are a function of the local modulus and not its bulk-averaged value.

Figure 8 shows the volume fraction occupied by $m$-type potential STZs, $c_m$ [Eq. (3)], as a function of activation free energy $\Delta F/m$, Eq. (1), divided by $kT$ for different RT aging times. Each symbol corresponds to one aging time value. Arrows show the direction of evolution with RT aging for each $m$. $m = 6$–8 and beyond (not active at RT within the time range used) correspond to the $\alpha$ relaxation, and $m \leq 5$ correspond to the $\beta$ relaxation. The last two data points for $m = 8$ STZs represent an underestimation due to lack of mechanical equilibration at the end of the constraining period for samples with large aging times and associated large $\tau_8$ values (see discussion).
energy $\Delta F_m$ [Eq. (1)] for different RT aging times. Recall that $\Delta F_m \propto \Omega_m$, and note that $\Delta F_m$ evolves with aging, as it is a function of the shear modulus. The trend for each STZ type is indicated by a dashed line with arrows. The random error is small, indicating high reproducibility. With increasing aging time, $c_m$ does not vary significantly up to $m = 7$, but $c_8$ decreases dramatically. One possible artifact needs to be addressed here. For RT aging times up to $5.2 \times 10^7$ s, the time constants of all STZs are smaller than the constraining time, so mechanical equilibrium at the end of the constraining period can be assumed, and $c_8$ values are reliable. However, since $\tau_8$ increases with aging time, it becomes larger than the constraining time for RT aging times equal to and greater than $1.0 \times 10^7$ s, which makes it important to consider the absence of mechanical equilibration for $m = 8$ at the end of the constraining period.

Table I lists $\tau_8$ values for different aging times in the present study and Ref. [14]. It is seen that $\tau_8$ is greater than the constraining time for La55Ni20Al25 aged for $\tau_a = 1.0 \times 10^7$ and $2.9 \times 10^7$ s, causing an underestimation in the corresponding $c_8$ values. Ju et al. calculated the correction to $c_8$ for Al86.8Ni13.7Y9.5 MG [14], but later measurement with longer constraining times showed that the magnitude of this correction was overestimated [19]. In Ref. [15], Lei et al. concluded for La55(Ni1-xCu1-x)15Al5, $x = 0.1$, that the underestimation for the $c$ values of unequilibrated largest STZs was insignificant based on additional information from cryogenically cycled samples. Presently, even though the $c_8$ values for RT aging times $1.0 \times 10^7$ and $2.9 \times 10^7$ s in Fig. 8 are underestimated, we argue that the decreasing trend of $c_8$ persists with increasing aging time, as shown in the column "$c_8$ (actual)" in Table I. The following details the reasoning: In Ref. [19], for Al86.8Ni13.7Y9.5 MG with $\tau_a = 1.25 \times 10^7$ s, the actual $c_8$ value obtained for longer constraining time is twice the apparent value obtained from stress-free relaxation following constraining for $2.0 \times 10^6$ s (Table I) [14]. In the present study, for La55Ni20Al25 MG with RT aging time $2.9 \times 10^7$ s, $\tau_8 = 9.6 \times 10^6$ s is smaller than that of the Al-based MG while the constraining time is the same. As a result, the apparent value of $c_8$ is closer to its actual value for the La-based MG than for the Al-based MG [14]. Therefore, the actual $c_8$ value for La55Ni20Al25 should be smaller than twice that of the apparent value, as shown in Table I. We conclude that the decrease of $c_8$ with increasing aging time persists for RT aging time $2.6 \times 10^6$ s and $2.9 \times 10^7$ s. It is unlikely that $c_8$ for the RT aging time of $1.0 \times 10^7$ s deviates from this trend. In summary, we observe that among all $m$ values, RT aging increases $\tau_8$ and reduces $c_8$ the most.

Atzmon and Ju reported that for Al86.8Ni13.7Y9.5 MG, $c_8$ increased monotonically with $m$ and annealing decreased $c_8$ without affecting $\tau_m$ [19]. Structural relaxation only decreased the number of potential STZs while leaving their properties unchanged. Presently, for La55Ni20Al25, $c_8$ is not monotonic in $m$ (Fig. 8), reflecting the fact that the $\beta$ relaxation is more pronounced. The peak in Fig. 8 at $\Delta F/kT \sim 31-40$, associated with small and fast STZs, corresponds to the high-frequency/low-temperature $\beta$ relaxation in the loss modulus [18]. The role of small and fast STZs in the $\beta$ relaxation was also observed in atomistic simulations [29]. Some studies suggest that only the $\beta$ relaxation occurs by shear transformations [30], but our data and analysis show consistency with the STZ model for both $\alpha$ and $\beta$ relaxations [12], albeit with likely different compositions. In contrast to Ref. [19], we observe aging to not only decrease $c_m$, but also increase $\tau_m$, as we also observed in two other La-based alloys [15].

A main motivation for the present work has been to understand alloy plasticity. We propose the following as a preliminary conclusion: A large concentration of potential STZs favors simultaneous shear transformations in the entire sample and therefore homogeneous strain. In contrast, when the concentration of potential STZs is smaller, increasing local stress favors athermal, autocatalytic strain evolution, shear bands, and catastrophic failure. Such a scenario explains why structural relaxation leads to embrittlement [31]. Along the same lines, separate from a temperature effect on relaxation or rejuvenation, an increasing temperature under isoconfigurational conditions [32] allows activation of additional, larger STZs, explaining the increase in plasticity with temperature [16]. This effect is further enhanced by the fact that extrapolation of Fig. 8 suggests a further increasing volume fraction with increasing STZ size. Similarly, with decreasing strain rate, larger and slower STZs contribute to the strain, in agreement with the corresponding increasing plasticity in Ref. [16]. We finally note that extrapolation of our data for tensile tests at a strain rate of $10^{-6}$ s$^{-1}$ at RT shows that small STZs ($m = 1-5$) corresponding to the $\beta$
relaxation contribute to the tensile ductility while larger STZs ($m = 6−8$) are frozen. This provides a qualitative explanation of the correlation between the magnitude of the $\beta$ relaxation and observed room-temperature plasticity at low strain rate [16]. However, it also suggests that part of the observed time-dependent deformation in Ref. [16] may be anelastic, i.e., reversible. Such a possibility remains to be tested experimentally.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The La$_{55}$Ni$_{20}$Al$_{25}$ metallic glass studied has offered an opportunity to compare the properties of $\alpha$ and $\beta$ relaxations in unprecedented detail. While an atomically quantized hierarchy of shear transformation zones is observed for the entire range of anelastic relaxation, there is a distinct difference between the $\alpha$ and $\beta$ regime. For the former, the time constants increase, and the number of the largest and slowest potential relaxations contribute to the tensile ductility while larger STZs ($m = 6−8$) are frozen. This provides a qualitative explanation of the correlation between the magnitude of the $\beta$ relaxation and observed room-temperature plasticity at low strain rate [16]. However, it also suggests that part of the observed time-dependent deformation in Ref. [16] may be anelastic, i.e., reversible. Such a possibility remains to be tested experimentally.

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STZs decreases, upon structural relaxation, as we have previously observed for other La-based metallic glasses. No effect of structural relaxation is observed for the latter. The effect of structural relaxation on the $\alpha$ relaxation can be explained on the basis of an increase in shear modulus, leaving open the question as to the absence of such an effect for the small and fast STZs corresponding to $\beta$ relaxation. The activation-energy increment in the hierarchy is smaller for $\beta$ relaxation than for $\alpha$ relaxation, suggesting that Al atoms dominate the STZs associated with the $\beta$ relaxation, whereas all constituent elements possibly participate in STZs associated with the $\alpha$ relaxation.

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