Room temperature mid-infrared fiber lasing beyond 5 μm in chalcogenide glass small-core step index fiber


1Mid-Infrared Photonics Group, George Green Institute for Electromagnetics’ Research, Faculty of Engineering, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK
2Department of Telecommunications and Teleinformatics, Faculty of Electronics, Wroclaw University of Science and Technology, Wybrzeze Wyspianskiego 27, 50-370 Wroclaw, Poland
3Fibercore Limited, Fibercore House, Southampton Science Park SO16 7QQ, UK
4School of Science and Technology, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham NG11 8NS, UK
5e-mail: angela.seddon@nottingham.ac.uk

Received 7 May 2021; revised 27 May 2021; accepted 27 May 2021; posted 3 June 2021 (Doc. ID 430891); published 19 July 2021

This Letter, to the best of our knowledge, reports mid-infrared fiber lasing beyond 5 μm at room temperature for the first time, Ce3+ doped, chalcogenide glass, step index fiber employed in-band pumping with a 4.15 μm quantum cascade laser. The lasing fiber is was 64 mm long, with a calculated numerical aperture of 0.48 at the lasing wavelengths. The core glass was Ge15As21Ga1Se63 atomic % (at. %), doped with 500 parts-per-million-by-weight Ce, with a 9 μm core diameter. The cladding glass was Ge21Sb10Se60 at. % with a 190 μm outer diameter. As pump power increases continuous wave lasing corresponding to the $^2F_{7/2}\rightarrow ^2F_{5/2}$ transition in the Ce$^{3+}$ ion occurs at 5.14 μm, 5.17 μm, and 5.28 μm.

Published by The Optical Society under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License. Further distribution of this work must maintain attribution to the author(s) and the published article’s title, journal citation, and DOI. https://doi.org/10.1364/OL.430891

The mid-infrared region (MIR; defined as 3–50 μm in [1]) enables direct molecular sensing with high selectivity/specificity. MIR fiber lasers offer excellent beam quality of bright, spatially and temporally coherent light, routable in MIR fiber-optics for applications such as narrow-band sensing, clinical diagnostics, new medical laser wavelengths, and pulsed seeding of MIR-supercontinua for MIR broadband sensing [2].

The longest wavelength room temperature continuous wave (CW) fiber lasing to date is 3.92 μm in Ho$^{3+}$ doped fluoroindate glass fiber [3], enabled by the lower phonon energy [4] (509 cm$^{-1}$) fluoro-indate glass host compared to prior fluorozirconate glass hosts. However, 509 cm$^{-1}$ is still too high for laser operation $> 4$ μm [5]; thus, chalcogenide glass hosts, with phonon energies down to 200 cm$^{-1}$, are prime candidates [6] to achieve this goal. Selenide-chalcogenide glasses sufficiently combine low phonon energy with good glass stability.

Covalent chalcogenide glasses exhibit large linear refractive indices, so large absorption/emission cross-sections of doped-in lanthanide-ions provide promising short, active devices. Chalcogenide glasses are based on sulfur S, selenium Se, and tellurium Te; thus, adding Groups 14 and 15 elements increases chemical/mechanical robustness. Chalcogenide fibers are weaker than silica fibers, exhibiting a Young’s modulus of $\sim 1/5$ x silica [7] and a Vickers’ hardness of $\sim 2$ GPa [8] (cf. window-glass: 5.5 GPa). Chalcogenide glasses/fiber are exceptionally stable in liquid water/water–vapor at ambient temperature, unlike fluoride glasses [9], and they are not oxidized in air below the glass transition temperature, beyond a protective oxide nanolayer [10] analogous to ambient silicon oxidation [11]. Plastic-coated/uncoated chalcogenide fibers older than 2 years, stored under ambient conditions, retained respectable ultimate fracture stress median of $\sim 80$ MPa [12]. Coated/uncoated fibers can maintain optical transmission for over 7 years. Furthermore, high optical damage thresholds have also been reported [13].

The MIR-PL (photoluminescence) emission of lanthanide ions in selenide glasses occurs across the wavelengths 3–10 μm [14]. Calculated non-radiative transition rates are orders of magnitude lower than fluoride glasses [15], and hence, they offer higher efficiencies and lower thermal problems. We reported first-step index Pr$^{3+}$ doped chalcogenide fiber MIR-PL emission, and long milli-second MIR-PL lifetime equivalent to bulk-glass, showing fiber processing had not compromised the lanthanide local environment [16]. With Churbanov and Shiryayev [17], we demonstrated record low optical loss GeAsSe fiber. Recently, we have announced gain in Pr$^{3+}$ doped selenide fiber [18]. In addition, Tb$^{3+}$ and Pr$^{3+}$ doped chalcogenide bulk
glass lasers have been reported [19,20]. However, the multiple excitation levels of Tb$^{3+}$ and Pr$^{3+}$ give rise to excited state absorption at some wavelengths, and this can reduce population inversion.

In this Letter, we report MIR fiber lasing > 5 µm in a step-index selenide-chalcogenide fiber. The step index fiber comprised core glass: 500 ppmw (parts-per-million-by-weight) Ce$^{3+}$-doped Ge-$\text{Ge}_{15}\text{As}_{21}\text{Ga}_{3}\text{Se}_{63}$ at. % and cladding glass Ge$_{21}$Sb$_{10}$Se$_{69}$ at. %. The Ce$^{3+}$ ion dopant was selected due to its simple energy level structure, which, in principle, excludes excited state absorption and co-operative up-conversion phenomena, while allowing efficient in-band pumping, with a small quantum defect. Thus, this choice mimics Yb$^{3+}$-doped silica glass, both reducing heating in the cavity and with potential for becoming the MIR analogue of the Yb$^{3+}$-doped silica glass fiber laser. This contribution, besides reporting the MIR fiber lasing beyond 5 µm also displays results on Ce$^{3+}$-MIR-PL.

To create the step index lasing fiber, arsenic As (7N5, Furukawa Denshi), antimony Sb (5 N, Materion), and selenium Se (5N, Materion) were heated under vacuum (10$^{-3}$ Pa), to remove anionic impurities; germanium Ge (5N, Cerac) was used as supplied. Melt-containment was a silica glass ampoule, purified by heating at 1000°C/6 h (hours), first in air (removed carbonaceous impurities), then in vacuum (10$^{-3}$ Pa) (removed physi-/chemi-sorbed water). Precursors were batched under N$_2$ gas (MBraun Glovebox: < 1 ppm O$_2$; < 1 ppm H$_2$O). Cladding glass, Ge$_{21}$Sb$_{10}$Se$_{69}$ at. %. (M287RC), was melted at 900°C/12 h. Core-glass constituents 0.99 (Ge$_{15}$As$_{21}$Se$_{63}$) at. % were pre-melted at 850°C/12 h. Glasses were quenched and annealed, in situ inside the ampoule. The Ge$_{21}$Sb$_{10}$Se$_{69}$ at. %. cladding glass was then extruded [2] to form a tube (E093RC) of 10.22 mm outside diameter (OD), inside diameter 900 µm and 60 mm long. The pre-melted core glass 0.99 (Ge$_{15}$As$_{21}$Se$_{63}$) at. % had gallium Ga (1 at. %, Alfa Aesar) plus 500 ppmw Ce foil (3 N, Alfa Aesar)batched on and remelted at 850°C/6 h, then quenched/annealed, to make the 500 ppmw Ce-doped Ge foil (3 N, Alfa Aesar) batched on and remelted at 850°C/6 h, then quenched/annealed, to make the 500 ppmw Ce-doped Ge$_{15}$As$_{21}$Ga$_{3}$Se$_{63}$ at. % core-glass rod preform (M259REZQT), which was drawn to unstructured fiber (F109REZQT(RCJN)), termed intermediate fiber, and it had a 900 µm diameter cane. To fabricate the step index lasing fiber (F130RERC), a rod-in-tube [16] preform was fiber drawn in a radio frequency furnace on a customized heathway fiber-drawing tower within a class-10,000 cleanroom (e.g., see Further details on equipment and Ce$^{3+}$-MIR-PL will be discussed in a follow-up paper. From Fig. 2(b), Ce$^{3+}$-PL spanned 3.4–6 µm. A Ce$^{3+}$-MIR-PL lifetime of 3.6 ms was measured at wavelengths 3.8, 4.6, and 5.2 µm, compared to Ce$^{3+}$-PL lifetime 2.5 ms in [21].

The optical loss spectrum of the 500 ppmw Ce-doped GeAsGaSe intermediate glass fiber with an OD 246 ± 8 µm and 2.75 m long was collected using the cutback method. From Fig. 3, the Ce$^{3+}$ electronic absorption due to $^{2}F_{7/2}$→$^{2}F_{5/2}$ overlays vibrational absorption due to hydride impurity in the glass host [cf. Fig. 1(a)]. The lowest optical loss was 2.16 dB m$^{-1}$ across the 6.6–7.1 µm wavelength.

The refractive index dispersion of bulk annealed core and cladding glass samples, which constituted the core and cladding of the step index lasing fiber, were measured on an ellipsometer (Woollam IR-VASE Ellipsometer Mark II). Variable angle spectrometric ellipsometry (V.A.S.E) was employed on the bulk cladding glass samples, which constituted the core and cladding of the step index lasing fiber, were measured on an ellipsometer (Woollam IR-VASE Ellipsometer Mark II). Variable angle spectrometric ellipsometry (V.A.S.E) was employed on the bulk cladding glass samples, which constituted the core and cladding of the step index lasing fiber, were measured on an ellipsometer (Woollam IR-VASE Ellipsometer Mark II). Variable angle spectrometric ellipsometry (V.A.S.E) was employed on the bulk cladding glass samples, which constituted the core and cladding of the step index lasing fiber, were measured on an ellipsometer (Woollam IR-VASE Ellipsometer Mark II).

Unannealed, step-index fiber, with a 500 ppmw Ce-doped GeAsGaSe core with a 9 µm diameter, and 180 µm GeSe$_2$ OD cladding that was 64-mm-long with ~ 90° cleaved-end faces, was prepared. It was mounted to a stainless-steel V-groove with ultraviolet cured polymer and coated with a metal alloy (Gallistan: InGaSn alloy) for thermal management and cladding mode stripping. A 4.421 µm short wave-pass (SWP; 87% reflective, and 0.2% transmission at the lasing wavelengths) was abutted to the fiber, while a gold mirror (95.8% reflective at the lasing wavelengths) was abutted to the opposite end, forming the optical cavity (see Fig. 5). A 4.15 µm QCL beam was passed through a polarizer, and a one-fourth wave.

![Fig. 1](image-url) (a) MIR absorption spectrum of 500 ppmw Ce-doped GeAsGaSe bulk core glass, and (b) Ce$^{3+}$ electronic energy level diagram overlaid with the 4.15 µm QCL and 5.14 µm emission.
Fig. 2. (a) Simplified equipment diagram used for Ce$^{3+}$ PL (photoluminescence) measurements, and (b) Ce$^{3+}$ MIR-PL emission spectrum of 500 ppmw Ce-doped “intermediate” fiber. Note: A 4.203 µm LWP filter was used ≥ 4.4 µm, and no filter was used at ≤ 3.90 µm.

Fig. 3. MIR optical loss of 500 ppmw Ce-doped “intermediate” fiber with an OD = 246 ± 8 µm and length of 2.75 m. The core of the step index lasing fiber has potentially the same optical loss.

plating to prevent reflections and unpolarized Ce$^{3+}$ PL, emanating from the lasing fiber, influencing QCL output power. A 4.203 µm LWP filter was used as a dichroic mirror to reflect the 4.15 µm QCL pump toward the optical cavity. The QCL was then focused through a 4.421 µm SWP filter to block the 4.15 µm QCL pump light reflected from the optical cavity. The MIR output spectrum of the cavity was measured to a spectral resolution of ∼ 15 nm. Interior purged with dry atmosphere.

The MIR electronic configuration of Ce$^{3+}$ is [Xe] 4f$^1$, with the $^2$F$_{5/2}$ ground state and $^2$F$_{7/2}$ excited state. Crystal field and spin-orbit interactions split these two states into three and four energy levels.

power increased to 40 mW, initially, CW lasing was observed at 5.13 µm, 5.17 µm, and 5.28 µm, that is, peaks A, B, and C, respectively.

Figure 6 shows the cavity emission spectrum with increasing pump power. Peaks A and B shifted slightly to longer wavelengths as pump power increased. Above the pump power of 86 mW, the intensity of peak A (but not B and C) grew roughly linearly with increasing pump power, while above 400 mW pump power, peak B plateaus and peak C drops to zero. A cavity fall time of 2.5 µs was measured at the 5.127 µm wavelength.

Figure 7 shows the area under laser peaks A, B, and C as the pump power increases. The area under “Peak A,” and total area under peaks A, B, and C both exhibit a near-linear dependence with increasing pump power > 86 mW.

The MIR electronic configuration of Ce$^{3+}$ is [Xe] 4f$^1$, with the $^2$F$_{5/2}$ ground state and $^2$F$_{7/2}$ excited state. Crystal field and spin-orbit interactions split these two states into three and four energy levels.
energy levels, respectively [24,25]. Ce$^{3+}$-doped glasses and crystals have been investigated as UV-pumped blue lasers [26]. Low-temperature, MIR absorption measurements of Ce$^{3+}$ doped into garnet [24] showed large splitting of the excited $^{2}F_{7/2}$ up to $\sim 4000 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. The theoretical crystal field analysis supported this [25] with 4f–4f intra-shell transitions of Ce$^{3+}$ ions spectrally extending to $\sim 3700 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ due to the large splitting of the $^{2}F_{7/2}$ excited state. Thermal population of the second Stark level of the $^{2}F_{5/2}$ ground state was shown to occur at ambient temperature, called “hot” transitions [25]. Here, we observe more than one MIR lasing line; the Stark intra-levels of the upper/lower states may account for the co-existent lasing lines. The Er$^{3+}$:ZBLAN operated on several wavelength lines in the 2.71–2.79 $\mu$m range [27].

In summary, the narrow peaks, short cavity lifetime, the threshold at the 86 mW pump power, and the near-linear dependence with increasing pump power are all evidence of fiber lasing $>5 \mu$m.

**Funding.** Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyzszego (IP0441/IP2/2015/73); Royal Society (IES\textbackslash R3\183055); Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EP/P013708/1, EP/T010762/1).

**Acknowledgment.** We acknowledge networking support from EU COST Action: MP1401. Authors thank F. Maes and M. Bernier of COPL, Laval University, Canada, for Royal Society funded visit to Nottingham, Oct. 2019, and much insight into fiber cavities.

**Disclosures.** Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Data Availability.** Digital data underlying analogue results may be obtained from authors upon reasonable request.

**REFERENCES**

7. J. S. Sanghera, Naval Research Laboratory (personal communication, 2005).
12. A. Abdulatif and A. Shah, *Undergraduate Project Reports* (University of Nottingham, 2010).