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(54) Title: METHOD OF REFINING METAL ALLOYS

(57) Abstract: Method of refining metal alloys A method of refining the grain size of (i) an alloy comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon or (ii) an alloy comprising magnesium, comprises the steps of (a) adding sufficient niobium and boron to the alloy in order to form niobium diboride or Al_3Nb or both, or (b) adding niobium diboride to the alloy, or (c) adding Al_3Nb to the alloy, or (d) any combination thereof.

Method of refining metal alloys

The present application relates to a method of refining the grain size of a metal alloy, and in particular a method for refining the grain size of aluminium-silicon alloys and magnesium alloys (both including and excluding aluminium).

5 An important objective in the production of metal alloys is the reduction in grain size of the final product. This is known as “grain refinement” and is commonly addressed by adding so-called “grain refiners” which are substances thought to promote inoculation of metal alloy crystals. Grain refinement by inoculation brings many benefits in the casting process and has significant influence on improving mechanical 10 properties. The fine equiaxed grain structure imparts high yield strength, high toughness, good extrudability, uniform distribution of the second phase and micro-porosity on a fine scale. This in turn results in improved machinability, good surface finish and resistance to hot tearing (along with various other desirable properties).

15 Aluminium is a relatively light metal and is therefore an important component of metal alloys. There are two groups of aluminium alloys, namely wrought alloys and casting alloys. For wrought alloys, titanium-based grain refiners such as Al-Ti-B (in the form of $Al-xTi-yB$ with $0 \leq x \leq 5$ and $0 \leq y \leq 2$) and Al-Ti-C based master alloys are commonly used. However, for casting alloys, the addition of titanium-based grain refiners is less effective, particularly in the case of aluminium-silicon alloys with a 20 silicon content above 3%. When the silicon level is above 3%, it is believed that the positioning effect (consumption of titanium by the formation of Ti-Si compounds) takes place.

It is important to note that the most aluminium casting alloys include silicon at levels well above 3wt%. In Britain, for example, most cast aluminium alloy components are 25 made from only few alloys designated as LM2, LM4, LM6, LM21, LM24 and LM25. In all these alloys silicon levels are between 6wt% and 12wt%.

Depending on silicon concentration, aluminium-silicon alloys are classified as hypo-eutectic ($Si < 12\text{wt\%}$) such as LM2 LM4, LM6, LM21, LM24 and LM25 mentioned above or hyper-eutectic ($Si > 12\%$). Hypereutectic Al-Si alloys have excellent wear and corrosion resistance, lower density and higher thermal stability. These alloys have

5 been widely used for wear-resistant applications (such as piston alloys). In a hypereutectic system the primary phase is silicon and it exhibits irregular morphologies such as coarse platelets and polygons, which have detrimental effects on the fracture toughness of hypereutectic Al-Si alloys. Therefore, these silicon particles must be effectively refined.

10 Phosphorus is well accepted as one of the most effective refiners of primary silicon (at addition levels of a few ppm) and is generally used due to formation of aluminium phosphide (AlP) particles (with a lattice parameter $a = 0.545\text{ nm}$) in the melt. It is suggested that silicon can nucleate heterogeneously on a substrate of AlP with a cube-cube orientation relationship and solidify to form a faceted silicon particle due to the 15 very similar parameters with AlP. Addition of phosphorous is observed to refine the grain size of silicon from about $100\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ to $30\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ under practical solidification conditions. However, phosphorus does not refine the grain size of alloys with a eutectic structure. In addition, for better wear-resistant applications, particularly at high temperatures, it is important to refine further the grain size of primary silicon.

20 Magnesium is the lightest structural metal and is therefore used in many important industrial alloys. As with aluminium alloys, the addition of grain refiners to the magnesium alloy melt before a casting process has been regarded as an important method to optimize the grain size of commercial castings. The use of grain refiners not only enhances the mechanical properties of the alloy but also induces a uniform 25 distribution of intermetallics and solute elements in order to improve machinability, gives a good surface finish, a favorable resistance to hot tearing and a prominent extrudability.

Zirconium has been found to be an effective grain refiner for aluminium-free magnesium alloys (such as ZE43, ZK60 and WE43). However, it has not been

possible to employ zirconium as a grain refiner for aluminium-containing magnesium alloys (AZ series alloys and AM series alloys) due to the undesirable reaction between zirconium and aluminium forming stable intermetallic phases which adversely effects grain size refinement. Moreover, although carbon inoculants (such as graphite, Al_4C_3 or SiC) are observed to refine the grain size of Al containing Mg commercial alloys, such chemical additives are not commercially used in the magnesium industry, due to processing difficulties associated with mixing carbon-based phases uniformly in large quantities of liquid. Specifically, it is not possible to produce a master alloy because of stability problems, and the grain refinement of magnesium alloys is not sufficient.

10 Various prior art references include long lists of alloyants which are thought to act as hardness or grain refiners. See for example GB 595,214 (Brimelow); GB 595,531 (Bradbury); GB 605,282 (The National Smelting Company); GB 563,617 (The National Smelting Company); EP 0 265 307 A1 (Automobiles Peugeot); US 2005/0016709 A1(Saha); US 2008/0219882 A1 (Woydt); EP 1 205 567 A2 (Alcoa, Inc.) and WO 91/02100 (Comalco). However, none of these prior art references disclose examples of alloys which include both niobium and boron in elemental form, let alone niobium diboride as required by the present invention.

20 JP 57-098647 (Nissan Motor) discloses an aluminium alloy material with superior wear resistance to which it is disclosed that various materials may be added as solid lubricants or wear-resistant materials, among them NbB . There does not appear to be any disclosure of using NbB_2 as a grain refiner.

25 There are various prior art references which disclose the use of grain refiners for aluminium alloys having low amounts of silicon as an alloyant (typically less than 3wt%), for example GB 1244082 (Kawecki); GB 605282 (National); GB 595531 (Bradbury); GB 563617 (National); and HE Calderón, “TMS 2008, 137th Annual Meeting & Exhibition, Supplemental Proceedings”, 2008, Metals & Materials Society, pp. 425-430, “Innocation of aluminium alloys with nanosized borides and microstructural analysis”. US 6,416,598 (Sircar) discloses the use of high melting point constituents to provide enhanced machining capability of low silicon content

aluminium alloys. However, as noted above, the particular technical problems addressed by the present invention are in relation to aluminium alloys having silicon levels higher than 3wt%.

SU 519487 (Petrov) discloses an aluminium-based alloy including silicon, copper, 5 magnesium, manganese, titanium and boron to which zirconium, niobium, molybdenum, cadmium, barium, calcium, sodium and potassium have been added in specific ratios in order to improve the mechanical properties and manufacturability of the alloy.

Although the Petrov reference discloses an alloy which may be formed with trace 10 elements of niobium and boron, it is not believed that any niobium diboride is formed because the niobium and boron atoms preferentially react with other elements. Specifically, based on enthalpies of formation of titanium boride, zirconium boride and niobium diboride, we believe that niobium diboride does not form in Petrov's alloy.

15 For example, the maximum amount of titanium present in Petrov's alloy (0.2wt%) takes about 0.09wt% of boron atoms to form titanium boride, whereas the maximum amount of boron in specified to be present is lower than this (0.05wt%). As a result of titanium boride formation, therefore, there will not be any boron left in Petrov's alloy to form niobium diboride.

20 In addition, the maximum amount of zirconium which can be present (0.2wt%) reacts with about 0.047 wt% boron atoms to form zirconium boride. This is close to the maximum of boron atoms which can be present (0.05wt%).

Petrov's alloy also contains calcium. Formation of calcium boride (CaB_6) consumes a significant amount of boron, and it is thought that this happens preferentially.

25 In accordance with a first aspect of the present invention, there is provided the use of niobium diboride to refine the grain of (i) an alloy comprising aluminium and at least

3% w/w silicon or (ii) an alloy comprising magnesium. The alloy comprising magnesium may for example additionally comprise aluminium or be aluminium-free.

By “niobium diboride” is meant a compound formed of one mole of niobium to two moles of boron represented by the formula NbB_2 , and not the equivalent compound

5 formed of one mole of niobium to one mole of boron represented by the formula NbB . When Nb and B are added with NbB_2 molar ratio, phase diagrams suggests NbB does not form. The crystal structure of NbB is orthorhombic (3.298 Å, 8.724 Å, 3.166 Å) and is not likely to act as an effective nucleation site for aluminium.

Without wishing to be constrained by theory, it is believed that niobium diboride

10 forms fine phase inclusions and that certain planes of these inclusions act as heterogeneous nucleation sites for the alloy. However, in order to refine the grain of aluminium-silicon alloys, it is strongly preferred that a phase of Al_3Nb is also present. Again, without wishing to be constrained by theory, it is believed that a layer of Al_3Nb may form at the NbB_2 melt interface which layer can in turn can nucleate Al grain.

15 In the case of alloys comprising magnesium, it is believed that, when niobium and boron a niobium diboride phase is responsible for the observed grain refinement. It is unlikely (though not impossible) that an Al_3Nb phase forms in aluminium-containing magnesium alloys. Experiments have shown that the addition of niobium and boron to aluminium-free magnesium alloys does result in grain refinement.

20 Accordingly, in a second aspect of the invention, there is provided a method of refining the grain size of (i) an alloy comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon or (ii) an alloy comprising magnesium, comprising the steps of

- (a) adding sufficient niobium and boron to the alloy in order to form niobium diboride or Al_3Nb or both, or
- 25 (b) adding niobium diboride to the alloy, or
- (c) adding Al_3Nb to the alloy, or
- (d) any combination thereof.

In a third aspect of the invention, there is provided a method of refining the grain size of (i) an alloy comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon or (ii) an alloy comprising magnesium, comprising the steps of

(a) adding sufficient niobium and boron to a portion of a first alloy in order to

5 form niobium diboride or Al_3Nb or both, and

(b) adding the product of step (a) to a portion of a second alloy,

wherein the first and second alloy are the same or different.

In other words, the alloy may be refined by first producing a masterbatch (a small portion of an alloy comprising the grain refiner) and then adding this masterbatch to

10 the bulk alloy.

In a fourth aspect of the invention, there is provided a method of producing a masterbatch alloy for refining the grain size of a bulk alloy which is (i) an alloy comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon or (ii) an alloy comprising magnesium, comprising the step of:

15 (a) adding sufficient niobium and boron to a portion of the alloy in order to form niobium diboride or Al_3Nb or both.

For example, a masterbatch for adding to an aluminium alloy may have the general formula $\text{Al}-(X\text{wt\% } (\text{Nb: 2B in molar ratio}))$ where X can be from 0.1 to a very high number (perhaps as much as 99). In an alternative embodiment, the masterbatch may

20 comprise elemental niobium and boron in amounts sufficient to form sufficient niobium diboride in the final alloy product.

The alloy used in the present method is preferably an aluminium-silicon alloy (most preferably an aluminium-silicon alloy such as LM6) or a magnesium alloy (most preferably a magnesium-aluminium alloy such as AZ91D) but the method may be

25 used with any alloy for which grain refinement is required.

In a preferred embodiment, the alloy which is being refined comprises aluminium and silicon and at least some of the niobium diboride reacts to form Al_3Nb . Alternatively or additionally, the Al_3Nb can be formed directly from aluminium and niobium.

5 In one embodiment, the amount of niobium diboride is at least 0.001% by weight of the alloy. In another embodiment, the amount of niobium diboride is no more than 10% by weight of the alloy.

When the present method is employed to refine the grain of any aluminium-silicon alloy having at least 3wt% aluminium, it is preferably used in alloys with from 3 to 25 wt% silicon.

10 In a fifth aspect of the invention, there is provided the use of Al_3Nb to refine the grain of alloys comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon.

In a fifth aspect of the invention, there is provided an obtainable by the method or use as defined above.

15 Niobium diboride grain refiner is observed to refine grain size significantly and it is expected that it could play a key role in the wider use of lightweight aluminium instead of steel and cast iron in transport vehicles. It is important to note that, to have better fluidity, castings will be normally carried around 40°C superheat, which is 700 °C for commercial pure aluminium. Superheat normally refers to the temperature of the liquid above the melting temperature of the alloy. The melting temperature of 20 commercial pure Al is 660 °C. Fluidity of alloy increases as the temperature increases. Normally, from the viewpoint of better fluidity, the casting temperature would be in the range from 40 °C to 100 °C above the melting temperature depending on alloy. So, in industry, commercial pure Al or dilute Al alloys are cast at least 40 °C superheat temperatures. Note that very high superheat is not a good choice because 25 the risk of melt oxidation is severe.

A number of preferred embodiments of the invention will now be described with reference to the drawings, in which:

Figure 1 is a graph showing grain size as a function of amount of niobium diboride for an LM6 alloy. This amount represents the starting composition of the masterbatch

5 alloy. The actual NbB_2 concentration could be much lower;

Figure 2 is a graph showing grain size as a function of addition of niobium and boron for commercially pure aluminium;

Figure 3 is a graph showing grain size as a function of addition of niobium and boron for an LM6 alloy;

10 Figure 4 shows photographs of a cross-section of commercially pure aluminium without and then with niobium and boron as a grain refiner;

Figure 5 (a) and (b) are photographs of specimens of commercially pure aluminium without and with niobium and boron as a grain refiner; Figure 5 (c) is a graph of grain size as a function of pouring temperature for the specimens of (a) and (b);

15 Figure 6 (a) is a graph of grain size as a function of type of grain refiner for alloys with differing amounts of silicon;

Figure 6 (b) shows micrographs of two different aluminium alloys showing grain size;

Figure 7 is a graph showing grain size as a function of pouring temperature for an LM25 alloy depending on type of grain refiner;

20 Figure 8 is a graph showing grain size as a function of pouring temperature for an LM24 alloy depending on type of grain refiner;

Figure 9 is a graph showing grain size as a function of pouring temperature for an LM6 alloy depending on type of grain refiner;

Figure 10 is a bar chart showing grain size as a function of type of grain refiner added to an LM6 alloy;

Figure 11 is graph plotted for elongation and ultimate tensile strength (UTS);

5 Figure 12 (a) is a graph showing grain size as a function of cooling rate for an LM25 alloy with and without a niobium grain refiner;

Figure 12 (b) shows photographs of an LM6 alloy specimens formed with and without a niobium diboride grain refiner to demonstrate the effect cooling rates have on grain size;

10 Figure 12 (c) is a graph of eutectic Si needle size as a function of cooling rate. Two microstructures are also shown to reveal differences in the eutectic grain structure;

Figure 13 is a bar chart showing the area fraction of porosity as a function of the type of grain refiner added to an LM6 alloy;

Figure 14 is a microstructure of Al-14Si alloy (a) without and (b) with 0.1wt%Nb + 0.1wt% B.

15 Figure 15 shows SEM and optical micrographs of an Al-Nb-B master alloy;

Figure 16 shows the grain structure of a commercially pure Al alloy (a) without and (b) with the addition of Al-Nb-B master alloy.

Figure 17 shows micrographs of an LM25 alloy microstructure without and with an Al-Nb-B master alloy;

20 Figure 18 is a graph showing grain size as a function of holding time for an LM6 alloy having a niobium diboride grain refiner.

Figure 19 depicts an LM6 alloy cast using a high pressure die cast process;

Figure 20 is a graph showing grain size as a function of niobium diboride addition to an AZ91D alloy;

Figure 21 shows micrographs of the structure of an AZ91D alloy cast without and with a niobium diboride grain refiner;

5 Figure 22 shows the grain size and microstructures of a prior art alloy without and with additional niobium;

Figure 23 is a graph of temperature as a function of time during the solidification of an LM6 alloy with and without a niobium diboride grain refiner;

10 Figure 24 depicts the thermal analysis of Al- 5Si alloy in the form of cooling curves of a) Al-5Si with undercooling of 0.4 °C b) Al-5Si with Nb-B addition with undercooling of ~0.1 °C. The scanned images of macro-etched cross-sections of solidified samples for Al-5Si alloy without addition and with Nb-B addition are also shown. The grain size of Al-5Si is about 1cm and when Nb-B is added it is decreased to 380μm;

15 Figure 25 shows optical micrographs of binary alloy Al-14Si with and without addition of Nb-B. Micrographs at various magnifications reveal the Si particle size and distribution. Large (~100 μm) sized primary Si are uniformly distributed in entire TP1 sample. When Nb-B is added, the primary silicon particle size is smaller (1-5 μm). A small fraction (<2%) of fish-bone type Si particles are also observed;

20 Figure 26 shows typical microstructures of Al-14Si without addition, with 0.1wt% Al-5Ti-B and 0.1 wt% Nb-0.1 wt% B additions;

Figure 27 shows a schematic cross-section of the TP-1 sample of Al-14Si with addition of Nb-B and different microstructures;

Figure 28 shows microstructures of a sample of Al-14Si without any addition and with Nb-B. Melt was cast into two types of moulds providing cooling rates of 1 °C/s and 5 °C/s;

5 Figure 29 relates to an Al-16Si alloy cast in a mould with cooling rate of about 5°C/s and depicts a) microstructures showing primary silicon particles in Al-Si eutectic, and b) a histogram showing the particle distribution in Al-16Si without and with Nb-B addition;

Figure 30 relates to an Al-18Si alloy and depicts a) microstructures of eutectic, and b) a histogram showing the eutectic size distribution in Al-18Si without and with Nb-B;

10 Figure 31 includes microstructures of the LM13 alloy; LM13 with 0.1%Nb-0.1%B and with 0.1%Nb-0.1%B-0.02%Sr;

Figure 32 includes microstructures of the LM13 alloy with and without Nb-B-P, addition of which resulted in fine grain structure for both primary Al and primary Si;

15 Figure 33 is a graph showing the influence of Nb-B on the size of secondary dendrite arm spacing for Al-Si binary alloys;

Figure 34 is a graph showing secondary arms spacing and grain size as a function of cooling rate for Al-6Si without any addition and with Nb-B (the secondary arm spacing decreases as the cooling rate increases);

20 Figure 35 depicts microstructures of Fe phases in LM6 without and with Nb-B addition;

Figure 36 depicts microstructures of high pressure die cast LM24 alloy without and with Nb-B addition;

Figure 37 is a graph showing ultimate tensile strength versus elongation for LM6 & LM24 alloys processed using high Pressure Die Casting method;

Figure 38 includes (a) a graph showing grain size as a function of cooling rate for LM6 with and without Nb-B addition and (b) pictures of macro-etched samples;

Figure 39 is a graph of tensile strength as a function of elongation for LM25 without and with Nb-B addition, with heat treatment and without;

5 Figure 40 is a graph depicting recycling of LM6 with the addition of 0.1 wt% Nb - 0.1wt% B;

Figure 41 shows microstructures of LM25 alloy enriched with 1% Fe and 1% Fe /0.1 wt% Nb/0.1wt% B;

10 Figure 42 shows a Transmission Electron Microscopy analysis of particle/matrix interface. A good lattice match (<1%) between particle (p) and Al matrix (m). Coherent interface with dislocations observed; and

Figure 43 shows the microstructure of master alloy with the starting composition of Al-2Nb-B showing Nb based particles.

EXAMPLES

15 Example 1 – niobium diboride as a grain refiner for LM6 alloy

We have introduced NbB_2 phase (pre-synthesized in the form of Al-5wt% of (Nb: 2B molar ratio) into LM6 alloy (an aluminium alloy comprising the following elements at the following weight-percents: Si= 10-13%; Fe = 0.6%; Mn=0.5%; Ni = 0.1%; Mg= 0.3%; Zn= 0.1%; and Ti=0.1%). As shown in the Table 1 below and in Figure 1, grain size decreases as the Nb and B concentration increases, confirming that NbB_2 and/or Al_3Nb enhances the heterogeneous nuclei in the melt.

Table 1

wt% NbB_2 (based on	Grain size
--	-------------------

starting composition)	
0	622
0.025	442
0.05	405
0.1	339
0.2	340

Example 2 - niobium diboride as a grain refiner for commercially pure aluminium

Figure 2 shows the grain size of an aluminium alloy procured from Norton Aluminium Ltd. and consisting of impurities of Si-0.02; Fe=0.07; Mn=0.001; 5 Zn=0.02; Ti=0.006; Ni=0.001 (all amounts in wt%) with various amounts of Nb and B addition. It can be seen from the Figure that combination of Nb and B addition is highly effective.

Similar results are obtained for Al-Si casting alloy (LM6) as shown in Figure 3.

Example 3: Grain refinement in Al-Si binary alloys

10 Alloys shown in Table 2 below were melted in an electric furnace at the temperature range 750-800 °C and held for 2 hours. An equal amount of Nb powder was mixed with boron in the form of KBF₄ powder. The reaction between KBF₄ and Al is exothermic and the local temperatures can be in excess of 1500 C for a short period of time. Approximately 0.1wt% Nb and 0.1wt% B was added to the melt of the alloys 15 shown in Table 2. Experiments were also conducted with a wide range (0.1 to 5 wt%) of Nb and B levels, which corresponds to 0.12wt% to 6.1wt% of NbB₂. The standard test procedure, commonly known as TP1 mould, was used to cast with and without grain refiner addition. TP1 mould offers the cooling rate of 3.5K/sec, which is similar to that of large industrial casting conditions. For comparative purpose experiments 20 with Al-5Ti-B grain refiner addition were carried out. Chemical electro-polishing (HClO₄+CH₃COOH) and Baker's anodizing were used to reveal grain boundaries. A Zeiss polarized optical microscope with an Axio 4.3 image analysis system was used

to measure the grain size using the linear intercept method. The macro-etching was performed with Keller's solution to have a visual comparison of the grain size.

Table 2

Composition/ Alloys	Si	Mg	Fe	Mn	Ni	Zn	Cu	Ti	Al
Commercial pure Al	0.02	-	0.07	0.001	0.001	0.002	-	0.006	99.5%
Al-1Si	1±0.2	-	<0.07	<0.001	<0.001	<0.002	-	<0.006	remaining
Al-2Si	2±0.2	-	<0.07	<0.001	<0.001	<0.002	-	<0.006	remaining
Al-4Si	4±0.2	-	<0.07	<0.001	<0.001	<0.002	-	<0.006	remaining
Al-6Si	6±0.2	-	<0.07	<0.001	<0.001	<0.002	-	<0.006	remaining
Al-7Si	7±0.2	-	<0.07	<0.001	<0.001	<0.002	-	<0.006	remaining
Al-8Si	8±0.2	-	<0.07	<0.001	<0.001	<0.002	-	<0.006	remaining

5

Results

The effect of the addition of 0.12wt% niobium diboride to commercial pure aluminium is shown in Figure 4. The grain size is observed to reduce significantly

10 with the addition of Nb-based chemicals. Fine grain structure brings several benefits (e.g, reduced chemical segregation, reduced porosity, absence of hot tearing) when large sized billets are manufactured.

Figure 5 shows the surface of macro-etched TP-1 test mould specimens produced from commercially pure aluminium, revealing grain size for aluminium (a) without 15 and (b) with niobium diboride addition. Figure 5(c) shows the measured grain size as a function of pouring temperature for Al alone and Al combined with niobium diboride.

For Al-Si casting alloys, it is known that the Al-5Ti-B master-alloy is not an efficient grain refiner and can even have an adverse effect. Our series of experiments in Al-Si

20 binary alloys shows (see Figure 6) that the niobium diboride grain refiner works better than Al-5Ti-B when Si content is >5wt%.

Example 4: Grain refinement in commercial casting alloys

Table 3 shows list of commercial casting alloys that are commonly used for casting large structures (all amounts in wt%). All these alloys were melted between 750 - 800°C. 0.1wt% Nb and 0.1 wt% of boron in the form of KBF₄ were added to the melt. A TP1 mould (cooling rate of 3.5K/sec) was used. For LM25, in addition to TP1 mould two other types of moulds (0.7K/s and 0.0035K/s) were used. These low cooling rates were used to simulate sand casting conditions, where the cooling rate can be as low as 0.1K/s.

Table 3

Alloy	Si	Mg	Fe	Mn	Ni	Zn	Cu	Ti	Al
LM6	10-11	0.3	0.6	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.01	0.1	remaining
LM24	8.54	0.13	1.2	0.19	0.04	1.36	3.37	0.04	remaining
LM25	6-8	0.3	0.5	0.005	--	0.003	0.003	0.11	remaining

10

Experiments with LM25 casting alloy confirms that addition of niobium diboride decreases the grain size more effectively than that of TiB as shown in Figure 7. The cooling rate was 3.5K per second, and this was the cooling rate for all Examples as they all used the same TP1 mould.

15 Experiments with LM24 casting alloy confirms that addition of niobium diboride decreases the grain size more effectively than that of Al-Ti-B as shown in Figure 8. It can be seen that this effect is apparent at a range of temperatures, which is important because the usual industrial practice is to pour molten alloy at least 40-50°C above the liquidus temperature.

20 Experiments with LM6 casting alloy confirms that addition of niobium diboride decrease the grain size more effectively than that of Al-Ti-B as shown in Figure 9.

Influence of Nb and B on grain refinement in LM6 alloy

In the literature, it is claimed that for Al-Si alloys, addition of boron, instead of Al-Ti-B addition refines the grain size. To verify this, we have added boron (in the form of KBF_4), niobium, Al-5Ti-1B and a combination of niobium and boron (in the form of Nb-KBF_4). As can be seen in Figure 10, neither Nb nor B alone refines grain size.

5 Only the combination of Nb-B refines the grain size effectively.

Mechanical properties:

To produce tensile bars, cylindrical rod shaped (13 mm diameter and 120 mm length) LM6 alloy samples were cast with steel mould and machined the tensile bar specimens with dimensions specified by ASTM standards. The exact dimensions of

10 the tensile test specimens are 6.4 gauge diameter, 25 mm in gauge length and 12 mm in diameter of grip section. The tensile property testing was carried out using a universal materials testing machine (Instron ® 5569) at a cross head speed of 2 mm / minute (strain rate: $1.33 \times 10^{-3} \text{ s}^{-1}$). It is observed that the non-refined LM6 has an ultimate tensile strength (UTS) of 181 MPa, but that after grain refinement the UTS is 15 improved by 20% to 225 MPa. Furthermore, the elongation has improved in LM6 with niobium diboride addition from 3% to 4.6%. The results are shown in Figure 11.

Effect of cooling rate

Figure 12 (a) shows the average grain size as a function of cooling rate. For LM25, the grain size significantly increases at lower cooling rates (sand casting mould

20 cooling rate). Fine grain structure has been observed for Nb-B added alloy, which re-confirms its grain refining efficiency.

Figure 12 (b) shows photographs of an LM6 alloy specimens formed with and without a niobium diboride grain refiner to demonstrate the effect cooling rates have on grain size

In addition to primary Al grain size, fine Al-Si eutectic structure is also obtained at wide range of cooling rates – see Figure 12 (c). This fine eutectic structure and reduced porosity improves the ductility of the alloy.

Porosity

5 An example of a casting defect is the porosity of a solidified alloy. Figure 13 shows the comparison of porosity area fraction for three different casting conditions. It can be seen that Al-Nb-B master alloy addition reduces porosity significantly.

Example 5: Grain refinement for hyper-eutectic alloys

With an aim to investigate the effect of addition of Nb-B we have initially produced
10 Al-14%Si alloy ingot and confirmed the uniformity of Si concentration across the block by sampling at various places in a master block using a foundry master. This alloy is melted at 750C and 0.1wt% niobium and 0.1wt% boron (corresponding to 0.123 wt% NbB₂) were added to the melt before casting with TP1 mould (3.5K/s) and steel mould (1K/s).

15 Results

Figure 14 shows the microstructure of Al-14Si with and without the addition of NbB₂. An extremely fine primary Si phase is observed. In addition, a fine eutectic needle structure is observed. It is important to note that no other processing methods are known to result in such fine grain structure.

20 Example 6: Method to produce Al-NbB₂ master alloy

We have developed a practical method by which the newly discovered novel grain refiner with chemical combination of Nb and B can be added to the Al-Si based melt in simplistic way. In this method we first produce Al-Nb-B master alloy and we then demonstrate that by simply adding a small piece of this master alloy to the melt of Al-Si based alloy can result fine grain structure in solidified metal.
25

5 Addition of grain refiner in the form of master alloy is a common practice in the industry. It avoids use of corrosive KBF_4 salt in the casting process. Instead of salt addition, we show that one can add the niobium diboride grain refiner in the form of a small metal piece of Al-Nb-B master alloy to the Al-Si based liquid alloys to obtain a fine grain size. Addition of concentrated Al-Nb-B alloy ensures the uniform dispersion of NbB_2 into the aluminium melt.

The general formula for the master alloy is $\text{Al- x wt.\%Nb - y wt.\% B}$. The range for x is 0.05 to 10 and the range for y is 0.01 to 5. Three examples are provided here:

10 Example 6A: Processing of Al-4.05Nb-0.09B (equivalent to Al-5wt% of (Nb: 2B molar ratio))

15 Commercial pure Al ingot was melted in an electric furnace at the temperature range 800-850 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ and held for 2 hours. 5wt % NbB_2 (mixture of Nb and KBF_4) was added to the melt in order to form a NbB_2 phase. It is important to note that Al_3Nb phase inclusions may also form. Reaction between KBF_4 and Al is exothermic and the local temperatures can be in excess of 1500 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ for a short period of time and is believed that the high temperatures promote Nb dissolution into Al. The melt was stirred with a non-reactive ceramic rod for about 2 minutes every 15 minutes. Dross on the surface of the melt was scooped and the liquid metal was cast into a cylindrical mould. The cast metal is referred to as Al-Nb-B grain refiner master alloy. The microstructure of 20 Al-Nb-B is shown in Figure 15, which reveals fine inclusions and finely structured Nb based particles uniformly distributed in Al matrix. TEM study suggests the interface between Al and inclusion is highly coherent, suggesting that they may be enhancing heterogeneous Al nuclei formation.

Example 6B: Addition of Al-5Nb-1B master alloy to commercial pure aluminium

25 Commercial pure Al was melted in an electric furnace at the temperature range 750-800 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ and held for 2 hours. A small piece of Al-5wt% NbB_2 master alloy (equivalent to 0.1wt% NbB_2 w.r.t weight of Al) was added to the melt. 15 minutes later, the melt

was stirred for about 2 minutes and cast into a TP1 mould. The samples were polished and anodized to reveal grain boundaries. Figure 16 shows the grain size of commercial pure Al added with small amount of Al-Nb-B grain refiner master alloy addition. It can be seen that fine grain structure can be also obtained with this 5 practical route. The microstrucural features look similar to that of Figure 4.

Example 6C: Addition of Al-5Nb-1B master alloy to commercial Al-Si alloy (LM25)

LM25 alloy was melted in an electric furnace at the temperature range 750-800 °C and held for 2 hours. A small piece of Al-5wt%NbB₂ master alloy (equivalent to 0.1wt%NbB₂ w.r.t weight of LM25) was added to the melt. 15 minutes later, the melt 10 was stirred for about 2 minutes and cast into a TP1 mould. Figure 17 shows the grain size of LM25 added with Al-Nb-B master alloy addition and is compared without addition. It can be seen that the refined grain structure can be obtained through the addition of Al-Nb-B mater alloy.

Example 7: Fading study

15 Nucleant phase particles in an aluminium liquid melt can form agglomerates and this agglomeration behaviour increases with time. As a result, the grain refinement efficiency deteriorates with time. Hence, from the view point of industrial application, where liquid remains at high temperatures for at least 30 -60 minutes, the fading study is quite important.

20 Experiment: about 2 Kg of LM6 alloy melt was prepared in an electric resistance furnace. A test sample was cast using a TP1 mould. Nb/B was added to the melt and stirred. Samples at various time intervals were cast into the TP1 mould. Prior to casting, the melt was stirred gently with a ceramic rod. Figure 18 shows the grain size as a function of time. Grain size is almost unaffected up to 1h and then observed to 25 increase slightly with time. It is important to note that, even after 3h, the grain size is about 515µm, which is significantly lower than the LM6 grain size.

Example 8: Tensile properties of grain refined LM6 and LM24 produced with high pressure die casting

The earlier examples employ gravity casting to produce LM6 alloys. However, industrial processes produce small alloy components using high pressure die casting

5 (HPDC), which is a very high speed manufacturing process. LM24 alloy is a specially designed alloy for HPDC. In this study, both LM24 and LM6 alloys with and without addition of Nb/B were cast using an HPDC machine. Note that the cooling rate provided by HPDC is $>10^3$ K/s. Even at such high cooling rates, refinement of grain size is observed (see Figure 19). Elongation has been improved from 6.8% to 7.7%
10 for LM6 alloy and from 3% to 3.6% for LM24 alloy. If two materials have the same strength and hardness, the one which has higher ductility is more desirable for practical applications.

Example 9: NbB₂ addition for Magnesium (AZ91D) alloys

The Al-5wt% NbB₂ master alloy synthesised in Example 6 above was added to

15 AZ91D alloy in liquid and cast form. As shown in Figure 20, the grain size for AZ91D alloy decreases as the NbB₂ concentration increases, confirming that NbB₂ enhances the heterogeneous nuclei in the Mg alloy melt. Without wishing to be constrained by theory, it is thought that the reason for the decreased grain size is primarily due to the matching between NbB₂ and Mg phase crystals. Both crystal
20 structures are hexagonal and the lattice mismatch in the basal plane is 1.8%. It is known that the energy barrier for the formation of heterogeneous nuclei is negligible when their lattice mismatch is small (<5%).

Example 10: Grain refinement in Mg alloy

AZ91D alloy was melted in an electric furnace at 680 °C and held for 2 hours.

25 SF₆+N₂ gas mixture was used to protect the melt from oxidation. Approximately 0.1wt% Nb and 0.1wt% B (about 0.123 wt% NbB₂) was added to the melt and stirred for 1 minute with an impeller. A steel cylindrical mould with 33 mm inner diameter

was preheated to 200 °C and the melt containing NbB₂ was poured into the mould. For comparative purpose an experiment without any NbB₂ addition was also carried out. Both cast samples were polished and chemical etched. A Zeiss polarized optical microscope with an Axio 4.3 image analysis system was used to measure the grain size using the linear intercept method. Very fine grain structure was observed as shown in Figure 21.

Example 11: Comparative experiment

An alloy with the composition set out below was prepared with and without the addition of 0.15wt% niobium. The alloy having 0.15wt% Nb falls within the range of 10 alloys disclosed in SU 519487 (Petrov). TP1 cast samples were produced at similar condition for both alloys. As can be seen in Figure 22, the addition of niobium did not result in grain refinement, which is consistent with niobium diboride not being formed in the alloy disclosed in Petrov.

Composition (wt%)

15	Silicon	10
	Copper	3.5
	Magnesium	0.4
	Manganese	0.25
	Titanium	0.2
20	Zirconium	0.2
	Boron	0.025
	Molybdenum	0.2
	Cadmium	0.02
	Barium	0.05
25	Calcium	0.05
	Sodium	0.005
	Potassium	0.025
	Aluminium	remainder

Example 12: Measuring the cooling curve for an LM6 alloy

LM6 alloy samples with and without 0.1wt% Nb + 0.1wt% B (in the form of KBF₄) were placed in a pre-heated (800 °C) steel crucible (equivalent to 0.123 wt% NbB₂).

The temperature of the sample as a function of time was monitored using K-type thermocouple (0.5 mm in diameter) and recorded by data acquisition software. The measured cooling curves are presented in Fig. 23. It can be seen that the cooling rate for pure LM6 liquid and LM6 with 0.1wt.%Nb + 0.1% B (equivalent to 0.123 wt% NbB₂) liquid are similar (about 0.5 °C/s and 0.3 °C/s, respectively). The undercooling for LM6 is measured to be 1.5 °C, whereas the addition of 0.1wt%Nb + 0.1wt% B dramatically decreased the undercooling (ΔT is about 0.5 °C). The decreased undercooling clearly demonstrates that the existence of Nb based inclusions in the Al-Si liquid metal can enhance the heterogeneous nucleation process and as a result reduce the grain size of castings from 1-2 cm to about 440 μm.

Example 13: Cooling curves for Al-5Si alloy

The thermal analyses were conducted on the measured cooling curves for the Al-5Si melt with and without addition of Nb-B (see Fig. 24). The measured undercooling is measured to be 0.4 and 0.1 °C for Al-5Si alloys without and with Nb-B addition. The macro-etched surfaces of ingots that are produced as a result of cooling curve measurements are also shown. A big difference in grain size is achieved with the usage of Nb-B addition for very slow cooling rates of 0.04°C/s, similar to the sand casting process that is commonly used by industries to produce large cast structures for automotive applications.

Example 14: Addition of Nb-B to the hypereutectic Al-Si Alloys

Al-14 Si near eutectic point was melted at 800°C. Melt with and without addition of 0.1wt% Nb + 0.1wt% B were cast at 700 °C into the TP-1 mould that provides a cooling rate of 3.5 °C/s.

From Fig. 25, it is noticeable that Al-14Si alloy with addition of Nb-B consists of a very few primary large silicon particles. There are different shapes: hopers (square shape) and fish-bone (long looking like a fish bone). Fish-bone shape primary silicon particles are observed at the edges of the sample (near the mould wall) whereas the hoper shapes are at the middle of the sample. For comparison addition of Ti-B grain refiner to Al-14 Si is shown in Fig. 26.

Figure 27 presents the schematic cross-section of the TP-1 sample of Al-14 Si with Nb-B addition and the microstructural differences within the sample are shown in micrographs.

5 The cross-section of the TP-1 sample of Al-14Si revealed that the Si particles are bigger at the edge of the sample. However the most of the sample consists of fine Si particles and eutectic structure.

10 Two different moulds are used to achieve 1 °C/s and 5 °C/s cooling rates. Figure 28 shows the difference in primary silicon size with increasing the cooling rate. The 15 hoppers like crystals are dispersed only near the wall where the higher cooling rate is and their area fraction is about 10% of the whole sample area. However in the middle of the sample the primary silicon particles grew as fishbone morphology.

A high cooling rate and a short solidification time can lead to the formation of a more refined microstructure. The primary silicon particles size is decreasing with a higher cooling rate for Al-14Si with Nb-B from 55 μm to 17 μm . In the case of Al-14Si 15 without addition the change of the Si particles size is not significant. Particle size is decreased from 50 μm to 35 μm . Also change in the size of α -Al (white in contrast regions in Fig. 28) was noticeable, in alloys containing Nb-B the α -Al is much finer than in samples without addition.

20 Figure 29 shows that the addition of Nb-B to Al-16Si decreases the primary silicon. Nb-B addition has not resulted in reducing the size of all Si particles. The sample has some big and very small particles when compared with Al-16Si without any addition

25 The quantitative analysis was performed for eutectic size. It is clearly seen from Figure 30, that the eutectic is much finer with addition of Nb-B. It can be assumed that the Nb-B is refining α -Al and primary silicon. The eutectic of α -Al and silicon is more fibrous and is not a coarse-like structure, as is commonly seen in Al-18Si without any addition.

Example 15: Effect of Nb-B addition for LM13 alloy (Al-13Si-0.8Cu) along with Sr or P additions

(a) Sr addition: The alloy LM13 is used in production of pistons for automotive applications. The influence of Nb-B as well as Sr and P addition to LM13 are investigated. Eutectic Si size and morphology modification is a common practise for LM13 alloys to improve mechanical properties through promoting a structural refinement of the inherently brittle eutectic silicon phase. It is well known that additions of strontium to Al-Si alloys result in a transformation of the eutectic silicon morphology from coarse plate like structure to a well refined fibrous structure. The experiments were conducted to investigate the addition of Nb-B and Sr to the LM13 alloy. Figure 31 demonstrates the morphological difference in macrostructures.

In LM6 with Nb-B + Sr addition the refining of α -Al is still taking place as well as modification of eutectic.

(b) P addition: Since the well known primary silicon refiner is phosphorus, a series of casting experiments were carried out to investigate the influence of Nb-B - P addition and the results are shown in Figure 32. Finer aluminium grain structure is present even in the presence of P suggesting that, depending on alloys composition, Nb-B grain refiner could be used along with Sr or P additions

(c) Ti rich alloys: Most of the commercially available Al-Si alloys consist of Ti levels of up to 0.2%. Since Ti is known to poison grain refinement effect in Al-Si alloys by the formation of Ti-Si, it is important to investigate the effect of Nb-B addition to the alloy that consists of higher Ti levels. LM25 and LM24 alloys shown in this study consist of 0.1wt% Ti. In all these alloys addition of Nb-B is observed to refine the grain size significantly as described in the examples. In another experiment, LM25 alloy is enriched with Ti to the overall content of 0.2wt%. It is experimentally confirmed that the grain refinement is observed when 01.wt% Nb + 0.1wt% B is added to the alloy.

Example 16: Effect of Nb-B on secondary dendrite arm spacing (SDAS) for Al-Si binary alloys

Historically, the cooling rate has been proven to be one of the effective parameters to control the microstructure of as cast alloys. By increasing the cooling rate the

5 secondary arm spacing of the alloys decreases and the strength of the alloy increases.

Slow cooling rate in sand casting normally result in larger dendrite arm spacing and lower tensile strength. By reducing the grain size and dendrite arm spacing, one can improve the mechanical properties of the alloys. SDAS measurements suggest that Nb-B grain refiner has an effect on SDAS formation as shown in Figure 33. The

10 secondary dendrite arms spacing is observed to decrease with higher silicon additions in the grain refined samples.

Figure 34 presents dependency between the cooling rate, the secondary arms spacing and grain size. SDAS is higher for samples cast at low cooling rates when compared to higher cooling rates.

15

Example 17: Effect on intermetallics size

The effect of Nb-B addition on intermetallics observed in LM6 and LM24 alloys is investigated. The iron phases in LM6 without and with Nb-B have mostly the Chinese script morphology, however, the size and dispersion of the particles is smaller (Fig.

20 35) when Nb-B is added to the melt. They are dispersed uniformly everywhere.

The cubic morphological intermetallics were found in the LM24 and LM6 samples processed with the high pressure die casting method (Figure 36). The iron particles are smaller by 40 % in LM24 with Nb-B due to smaller grain size and eutectic phases.

25 Example 18: Mechanical properties of high pressure die cast LM24 and LM6 alloys

Figure 37 shows the tensile test results for LM6 and LM24 without and with Nb-B addition. The diagram presents the average ultimate tensile strength of six samples and their corresponding elongation values are presented in this figure.

5 Example 19: Influence of Cooling Rate and Nb-B Addition on Grain Structure

The LM6 alloy was melted at 800 °C, without and with Nb-B addition and cast into different moulds to achieve diverse cooling rates. Figure 38 shows the grain sizes as a function of cooling rate. It can be seen that the grain refiner is less sensitive to different cooling rates. Even with a cooling rate as low as 0.03 °C/s the grain sizes are 10 still smaller when Nb-B is added. Cross sections of sample produced under such slow cooling are shown in the figure.

Example 20: Influence of Nb-B on heat-treatment of Al-Si alloys

Most aluminium castings are used in the 'as cast' condition, but there are certain 15 applications that require higher mechanical properties, or different properties from the as cast material. The heat treatment of aluminium castings is carried out to change the properties of the as cast alloys by subjecting the casting to a thermal cycle or series of thermal cycles. The experiments were carried out to compare the tensile properties of LM25 without any addition and with Nb-B. Also the heat treatment was performed on 20 the tensile bars to analyse the heat treatment influence on the metal. The samples were melted at 800 °C and poured into the preheated cylindrical mould for tensile bars preparation. The LM25 was solution treated and stabilized for 5h at 532 °C and then quenched in hot water followed by stabilizing treatment at 250 °C for 3h (TB7). The diagram shown in Figure 39 presents the maximum value of measured elongation as a 25 function of the corresponding tensile stress for LM25 without addition and with Nb-B, heat treated and not heat treated.

As it is seen from diagram Figure 39, the heat treatment of LM25 has improved its tensile strength. The addition of Nb-B improves the elongation and tensile strength of

LM25. The heat treatment of LM25 with Nb-B improved significantly the elongation from 3.3-3.7 % for LM25 without any addition to 14.7%.

Example 21: Recycling of the LM6 alloy

5 Recycling of return process scraps is a general practice in aluminium foundries. 1 kg of LM6 melt was produced with 0.1 wt% Nb- 0.1 wt% B addition. The sample was cast into the cylindrical mould preheated to 200 °C with the pouring temperature of 680 °C. The sample then was cut and the microstructure analyses were done. The rest of the metal was melted again without any additional Nb-B. The procedure was
10 repeated 4 times. Figure 40 shows the grain sizes versus different recycling steps. Similar experiment is repeated to LM25 alloy and confirmed to retain fine grain structure even after recycling 3 times.

The grain sizes are smaller after first casting then slightly increased after first re-melt. The second and third re-melt have still positive grain refinement sign. The nucleation
15 sites are still active in the melt which will be beneficial for the recycling of the alloys after Nb-B grain refiner addition. It is possible to get smaller grains with additional levels of Nb and B to the melt and this study will be important from industrial application view point.

20 Example 22: Fe impurity tolerance in LM25 alloy

Iron content in scrap alloy is generally higher than the specified iron levels for most of the commercial alloy compositions. Increased concentration of Fe results in larger needle shaped AlFeSi phase particles. These large sized needles are detrimental to mechanical properties in particular to the ductility. The effect of Nb-B addition to the
25 LM25 enriched with 1wt% Fe has been investigated and it is identified that the AlFeSi needle particle size is significantly reduced when Nb-B is added as shown in Figure 41.

Example 23: Transmission electron microscopy study of Al-5wt%NbB₂ master alloy

TEM analyses were done for the Al-5NbB₂ to investigate the phase contrast between the Al and NbB₂ or Al₃Nb. Phase contrast results whenever electrons of different phase are allowed to pass through the objective aperture. Since most electron

5 scattering mechanisms involve a phase change then that some sort of phase contrast is presents every image. The most useful type of phase contrast image is formed when more diffracted beams are used to form the image. Selecting several beams allows a structure image, often called as a high-resolution electron microscope (HREM) image, to be formed. The many lattice fringes intersect and give a pattern of bright spots
 10 corresponding to atom columns as it seen at the Figure 42. It can be seen a coherent interface between the Nb based particle and Al. The lattice mismatch between Nb-based particle and Al matrix is 0.1%. Such small lattice mismatch between a foreign solid phase and Al suggests that these particles could act as effective heterogeneous nucleation sites.

15

Example 24: Processing of Al-Nb-B master alloys

In addition to alloys described in Example 6, master alloys with compositions given in Table 4 have been prepared. Nb metallic powder and Boron in the form of KBF₄ are added to aluminium liquid with required quantities shown in Table 4. The melt is cast

20 to produce Al-Nb-B master alloys. All these master alloys have been tested with grain refinement for LM6 alloy and another alloy where Si is ~10%. Grain sizes are measured with ruler and the error is $\pm 0.05\text{mm}$.

Table 4

Master alloy composition	Nb addition level (wt%)				
	0	0.01	0.025	0.05	0.1
Al-1Nb-1B	3-4 mm	1 mm	0.8 mm	0.7 mm	0.35 mm

Al-1Nb-3B	3-4 mm	0.9 mm	0.6 mm	0.4 mm	0.3 mm
Al-1Nb-4B	3-4 mm	0.9 mm	0.6 mm	0.4 mm	0.3 mm
Al-2Nb-1B	3-4 mm	1 mm	0.65 mm	0.5 mm	0.4 mm
Al-2Nb-4B	3-4 mm	-	0.6 mm	0.4 mm	-
Al- 3Nb-1B	3-4 mm	-	0.6 mm	0.4 mm	-

Example 25: Processing of Al-Nb-B master alloy through the addition of Boron to Al-Nb master alloy

A commercial Al-10Nb master alloy is melted at 900 °C and added pure Al to dilute the alloy to form Al-2Nb master alloy. Then the 1wt% Boron is added to the melt to with an aim to reach the master alloy composition of Al-2Nb-B. Alloy is cast into cast iron mould. Figure 43 shows the microstructure of this alloy, revealing needle shaped aluminides (Al_3Nb) and borides particles. This master alloy is added to Al-10Si alloy to verify the grain refinement. Grain refinement is confirmed for this master alloy.

10

Example 26: Mg based alloys

The following Mg alloys have been cast with and without 0.1wt% Nb + 0.1wt% B addition with TP1 mould at pouring temperature of 660 °C. Grain refinement has been observed for all these alloys.

15

Al-containing Mg alloys

AZ91	9Al	1Zn	bal. Mg
AZ31	3Al	1Zn	bal. Mg

AZ61	6Al	1Zn	bal. Mg
AJ62	6Al	2Sr	bal. Mg
AM60	6Al	0.13-0.6 Mn	bal. Mg

CLAIMS

1. The use of niobium diboride to refine the grain of (i) an alloy comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon or (ii) an alloy comprising magnesium.

5 2. A method of refining the grain size of (i) an alloy comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon or (ii) an alloy comprising magnesium, comprising the steps of

- (a) adding sufficient niobium and boron to the alloy in order to form niobium diboride or Al_3Nb or both, or
- (b) adding niobium diboride to the alloy, or
- (c) adding Al_3Nb to the alloy, or
- (d) any combination thereof.

3. A method of refining the grain size of (i) an alloy comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon or (ii) an alloy comprising magnesium, comprising the steps

15 of

- (a) adding sufficient niobium and boron to a portion of a first alloy in order to form niobium diboride or Al_3Nb or both, and
- (b) adding the product of step (a) to a portion of a second alloy, wherein the first and second alloy are the same or different.

20 4. A method of producing a masterbatch alloy for refining the grain size of a bulk alloy which is (i) an alloy comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon or (ii) an alloy comprising magnesium, comprising the step of:

- (a) adding sufficient niobium and boron to a portion of the alloy in order to form niobium diboride or Al_3Nb or both.

25 5. The use as claimed in claim 1 or the method as claimed in any of claims 2 to 4, wherein the alloy which is being refined comprises aluminium and silicon and wherein at least some of the niobium diboride reacts to form Al_3Nb .

6. The use as claimed in claim 1 or the method as claimed in any of claims 2 to 4, wherein the alloy which is being refined comprises magnesium and aluminium.

7. The use as claimed in claim 1 or the method as claimed in any of claims 2 to 6, wherein the amount of niobium diboride is at least 0.001% by weight of the alloy.

5 8. The use as claimed in claim 1 or the method as claimed in any of claims 2 to 7, wherein said amount of niobium diboride is no more than 10% by weight of the alloy.

9. The use as claimed in claim 1 or the method as claimed in any of claims 2 to 8, wherein the alloy comprises aluminium and from 3 to 25 wt% silicon.

10. The use of Al_3Nb to refine the grain of alloys comprising aluminium and at least 3% w/w silicon.

11. An alloy obtainable by the method or use as claimed in any preceding claim.

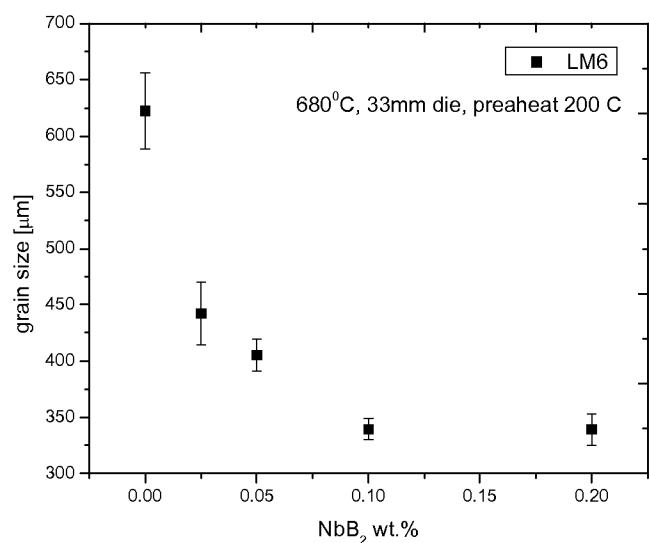


Fig. 1

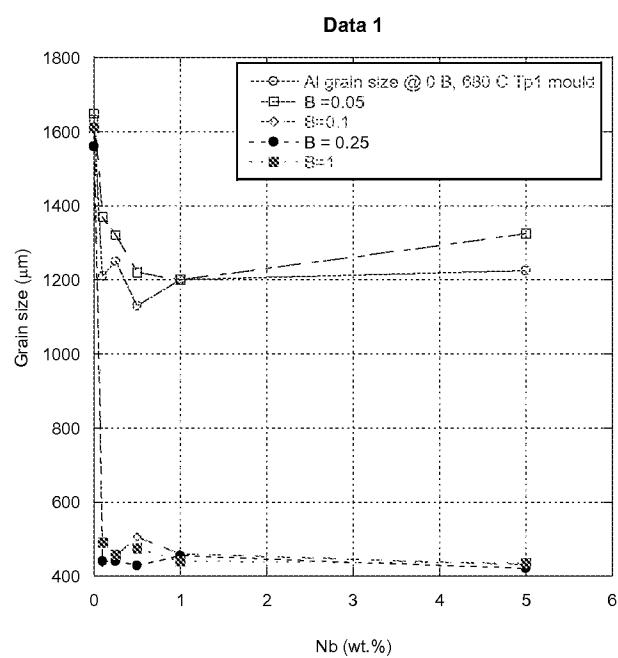


Fig.2

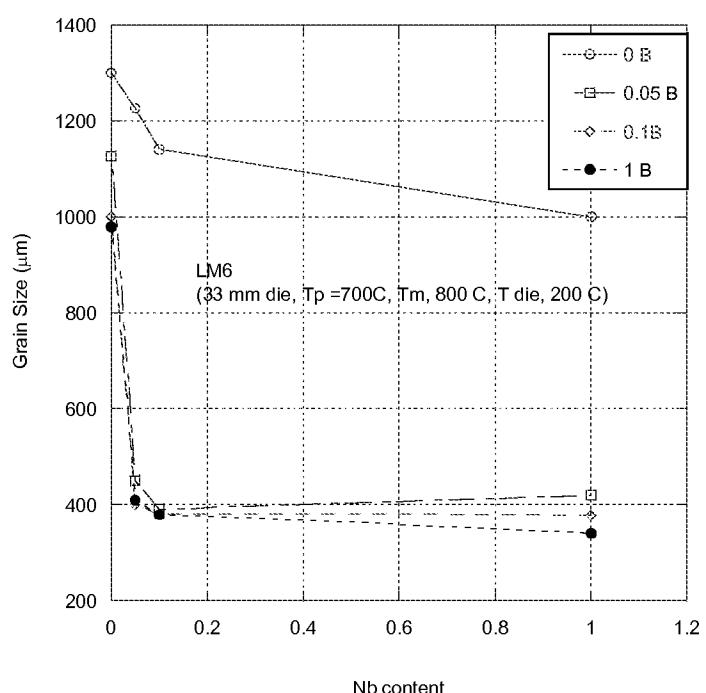


Fig.3

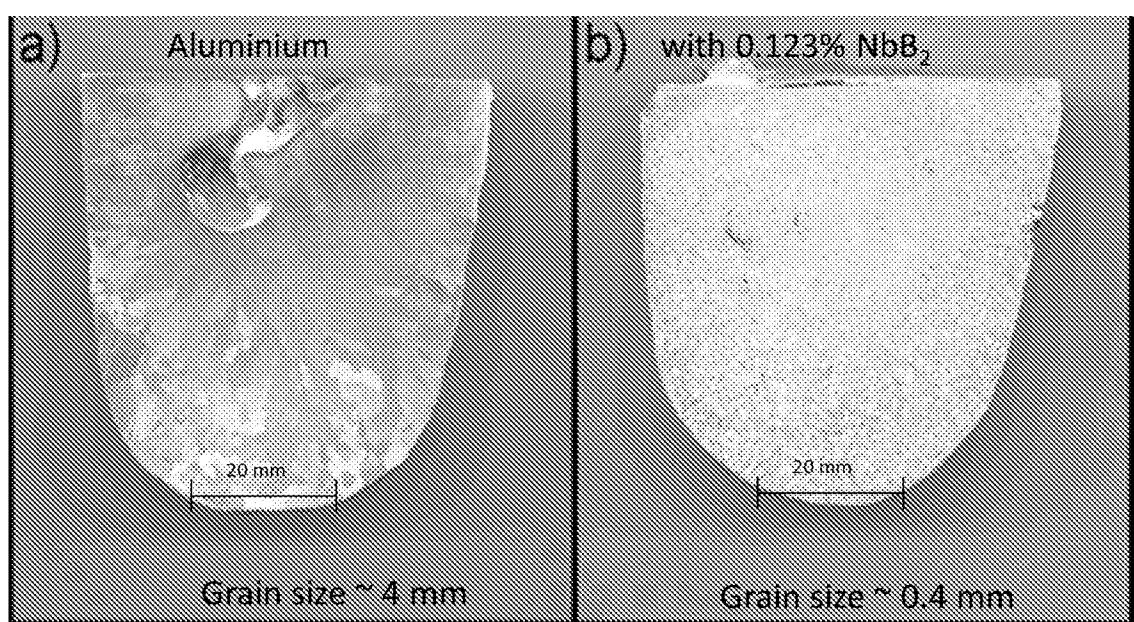


Fig.4

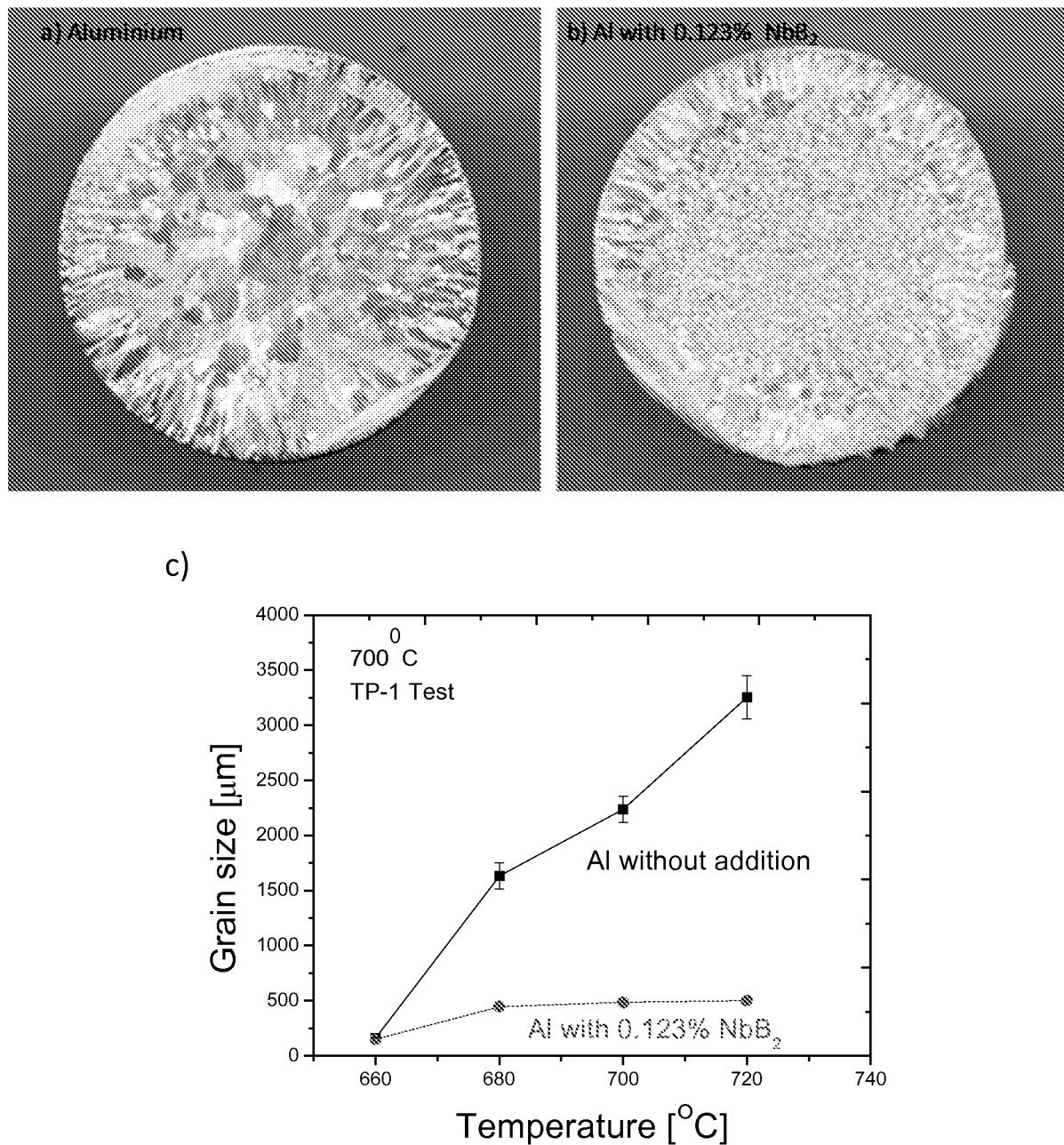


Fig.5

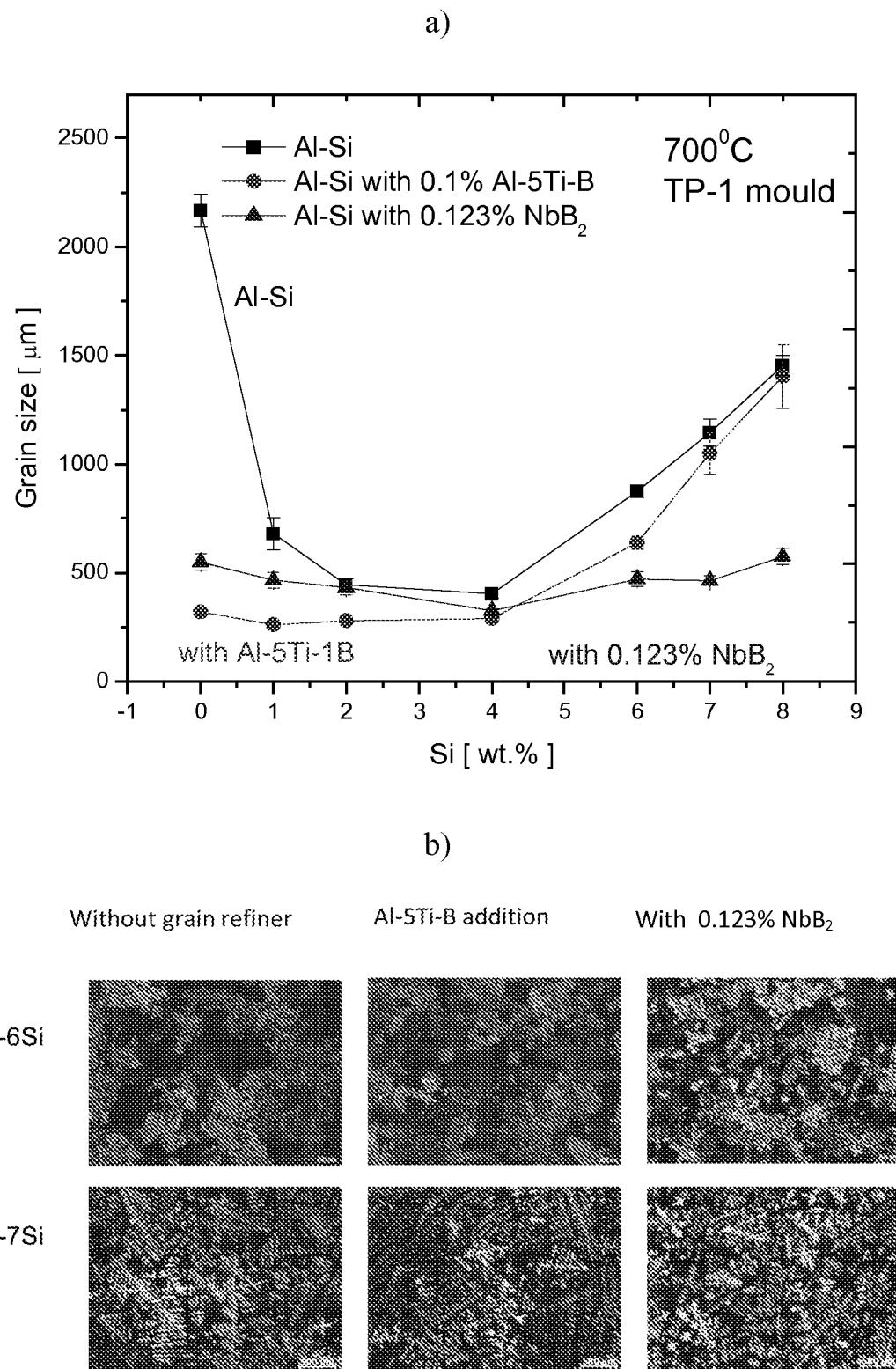


Fig. 6

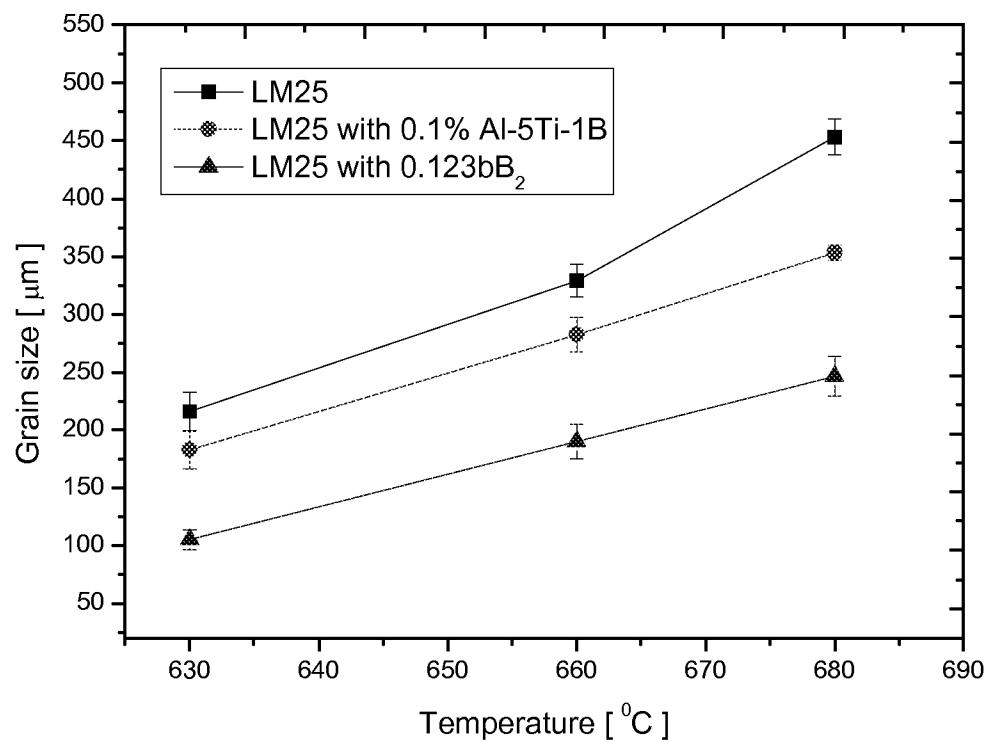


Fig. 7

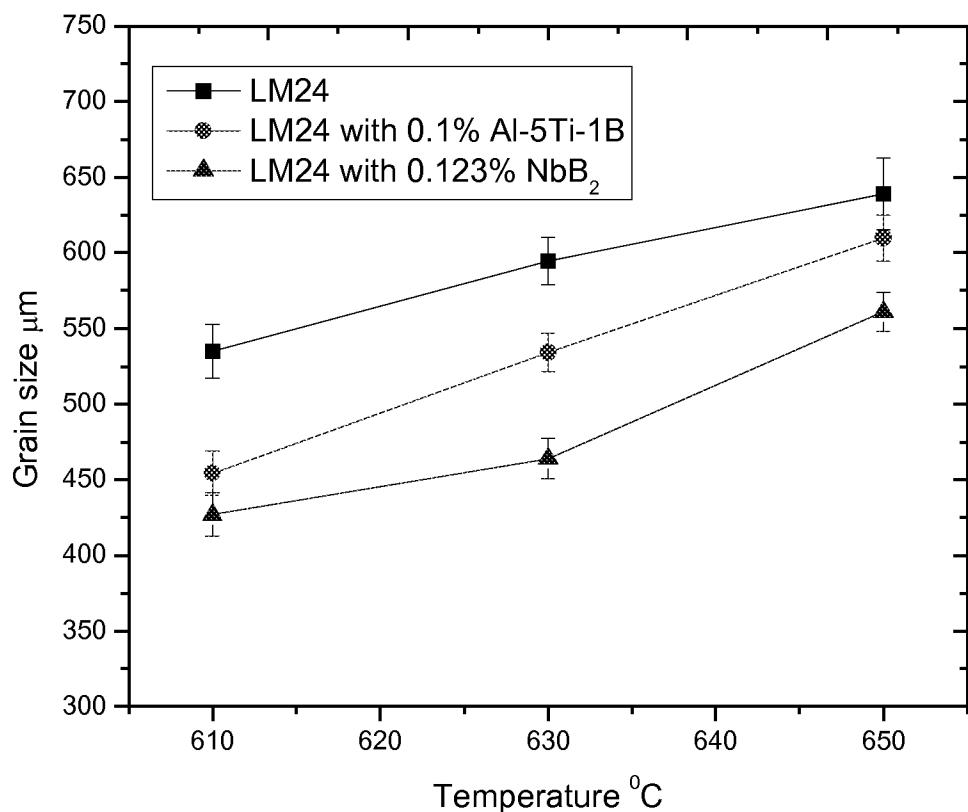


Fig. 8

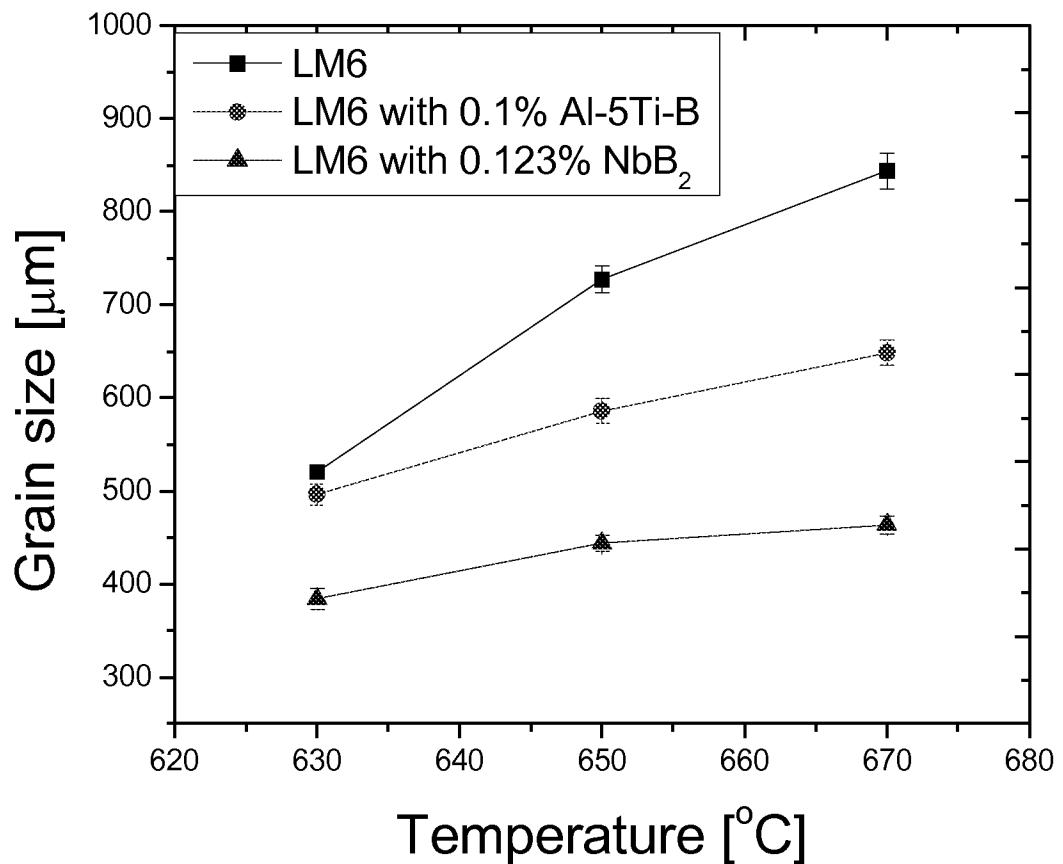


Fig.9

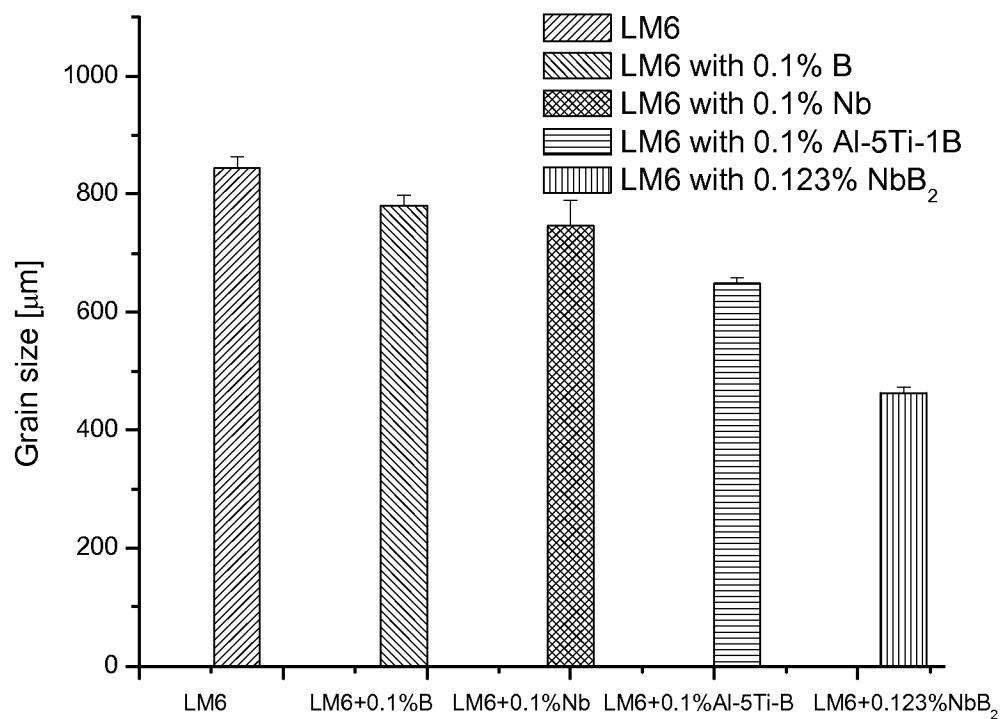


Fig.10

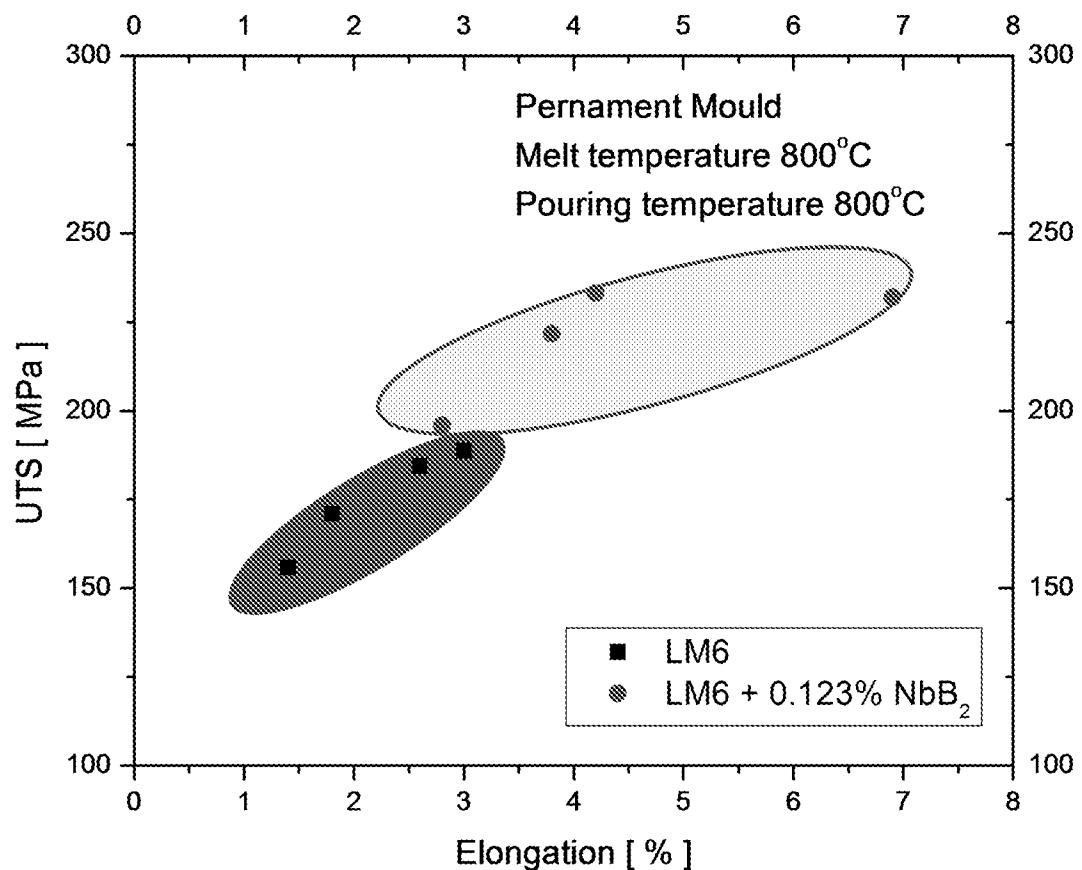


Fig. 11

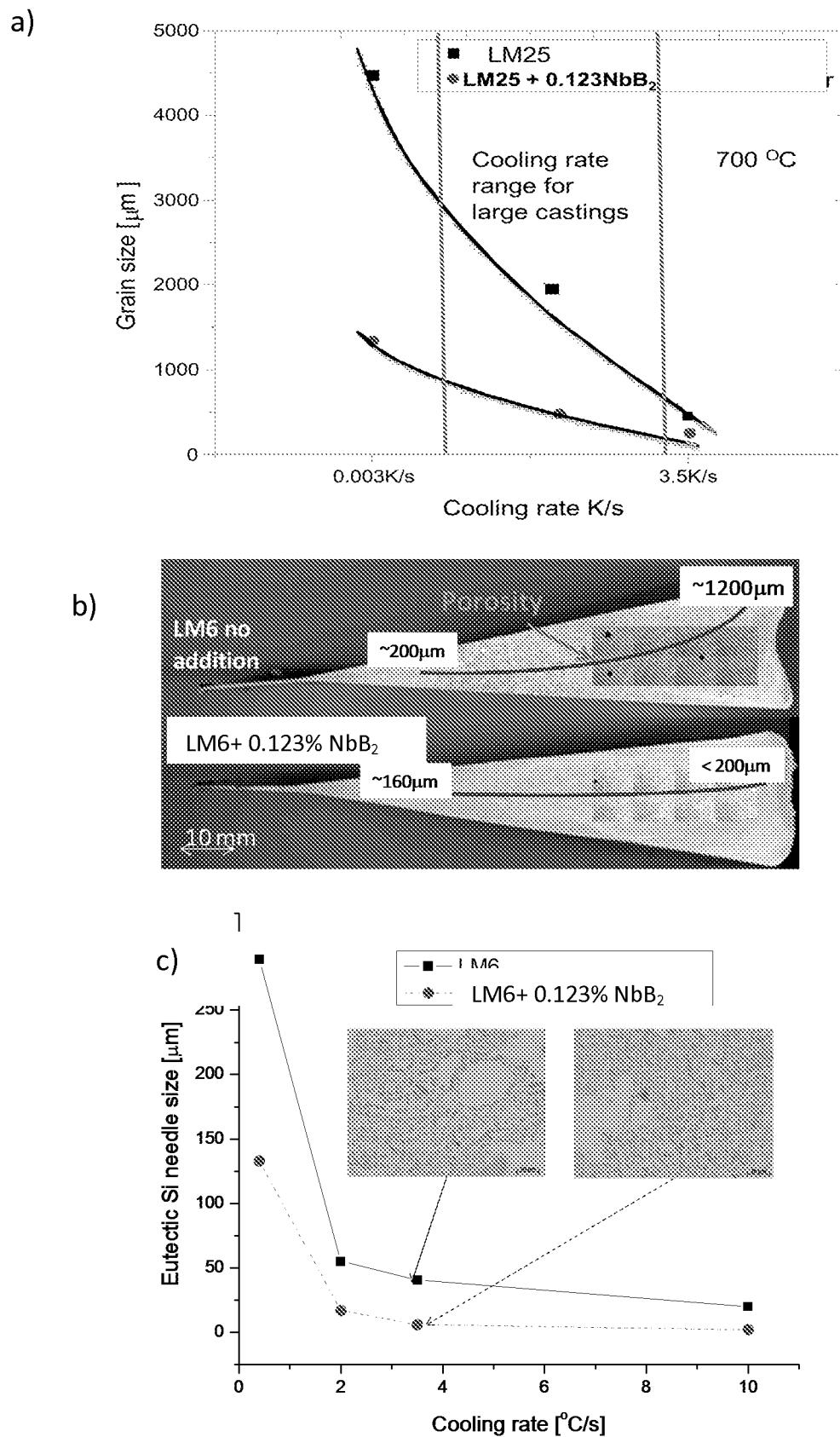


Fig.12

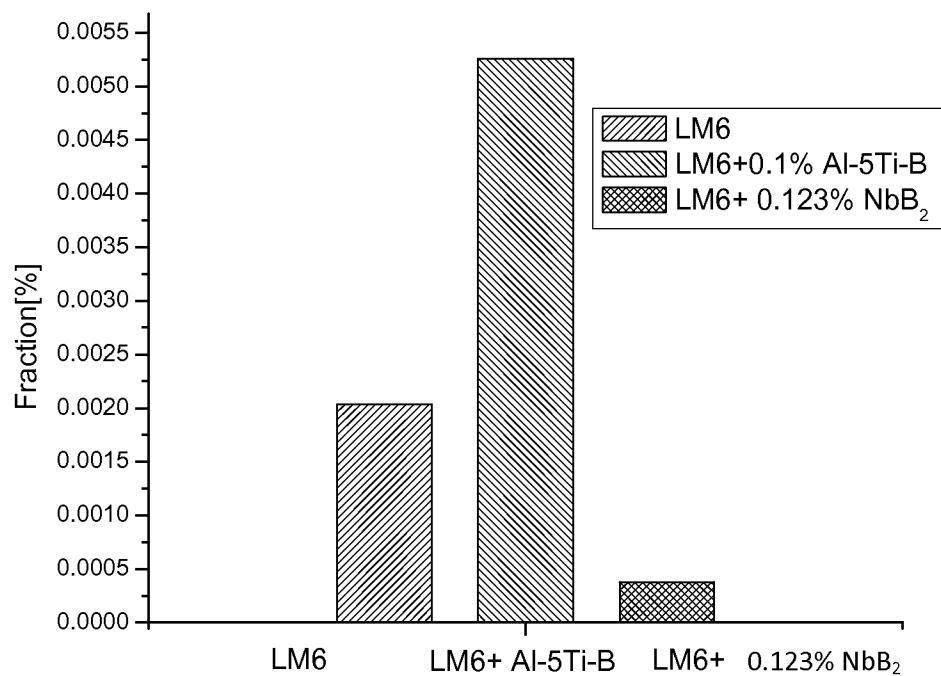


Fig.13

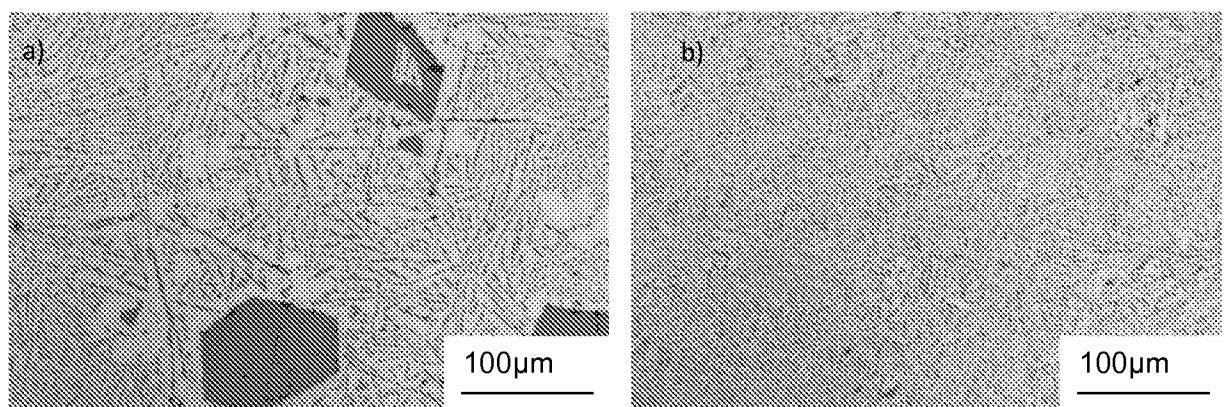


Fig.14

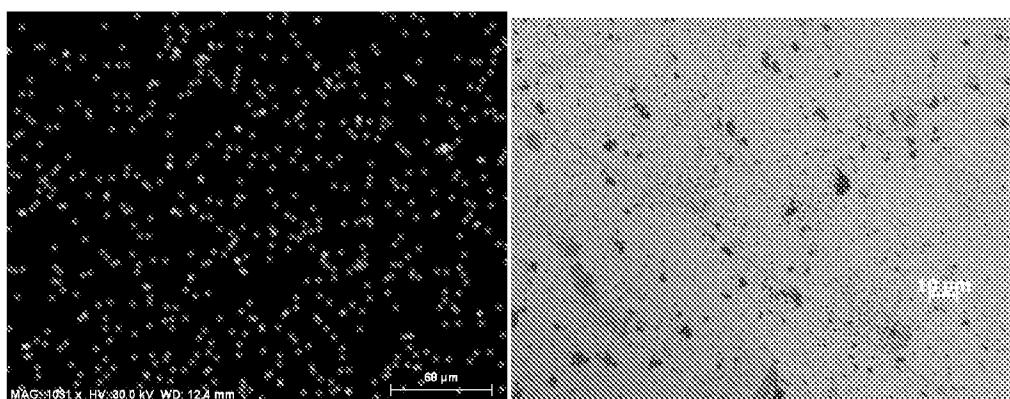


Fig.15

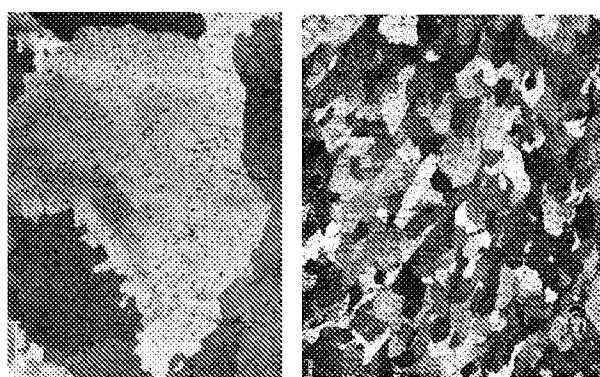


Fig.16

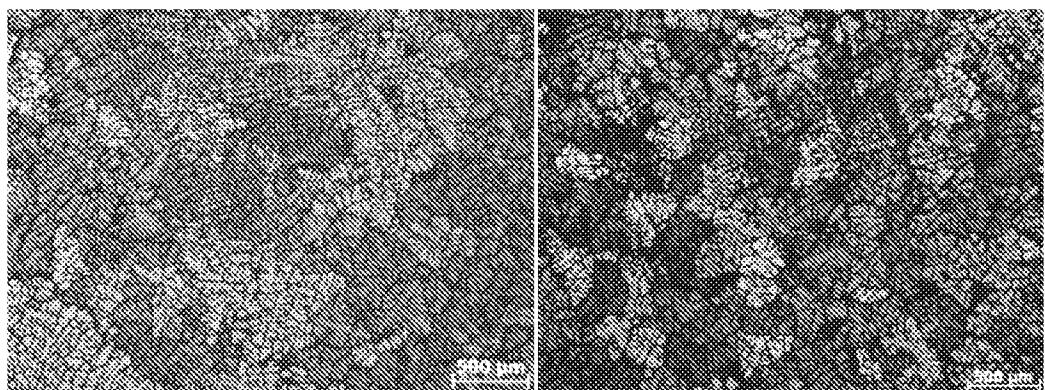


Fig.17

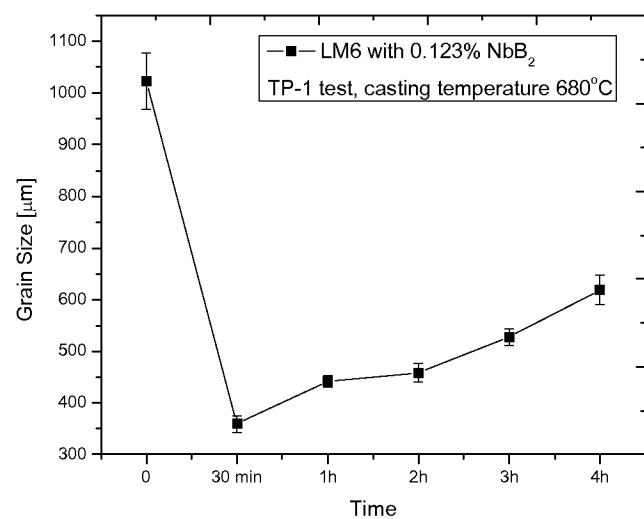


Fig.18

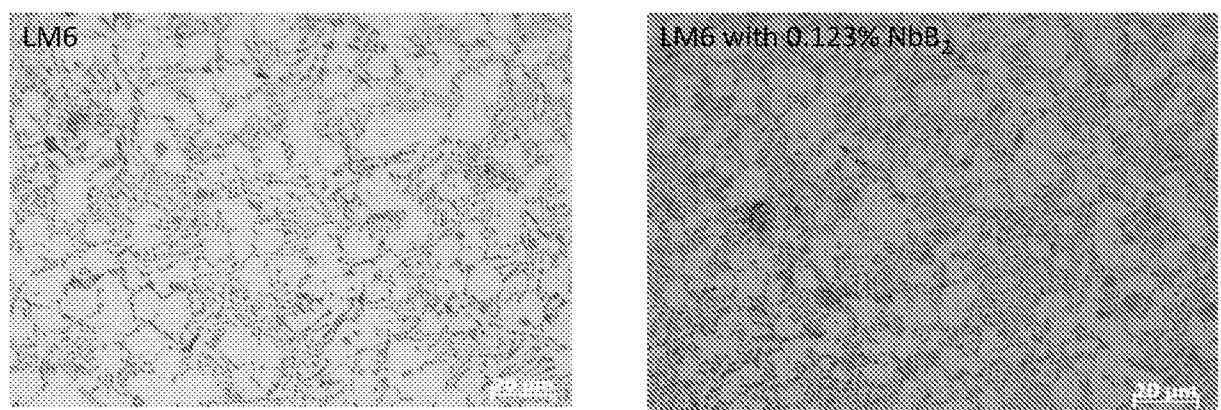


Fig.19

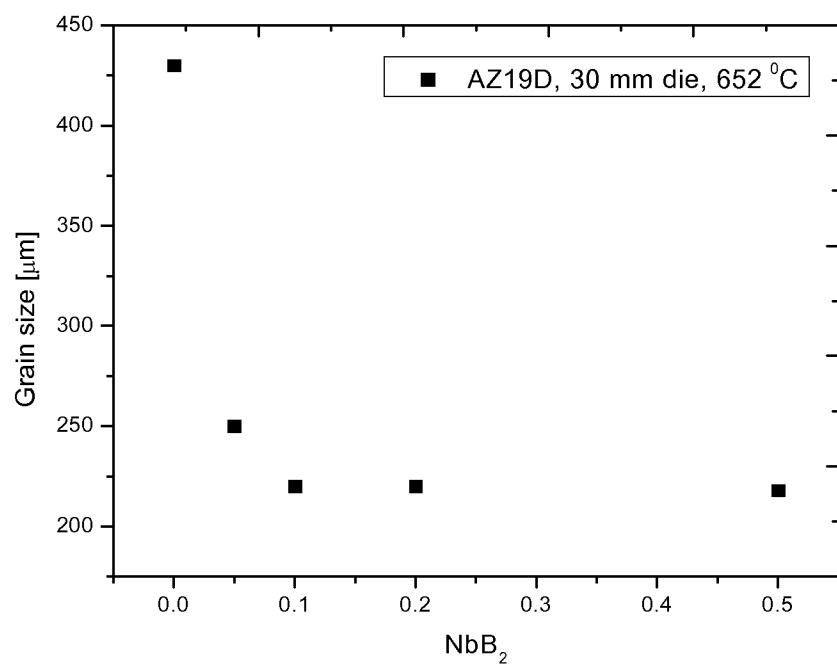


Fig.20

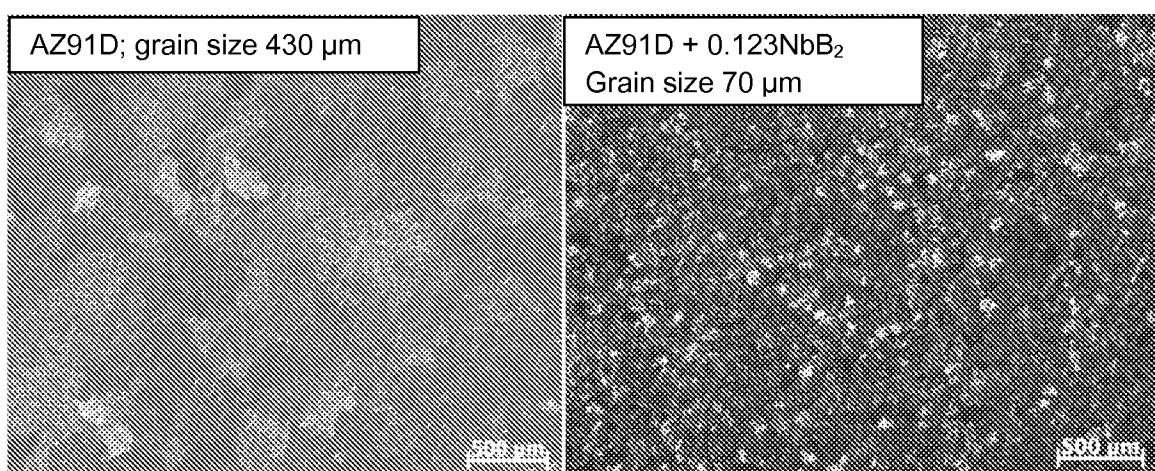


Fig.21

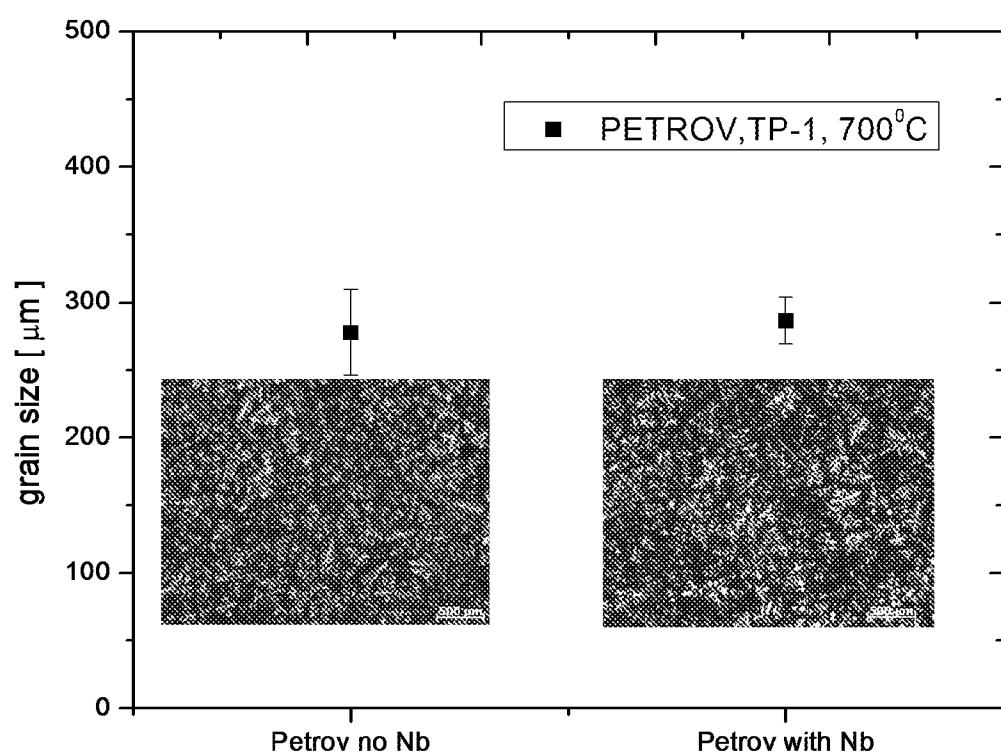


Fig.22

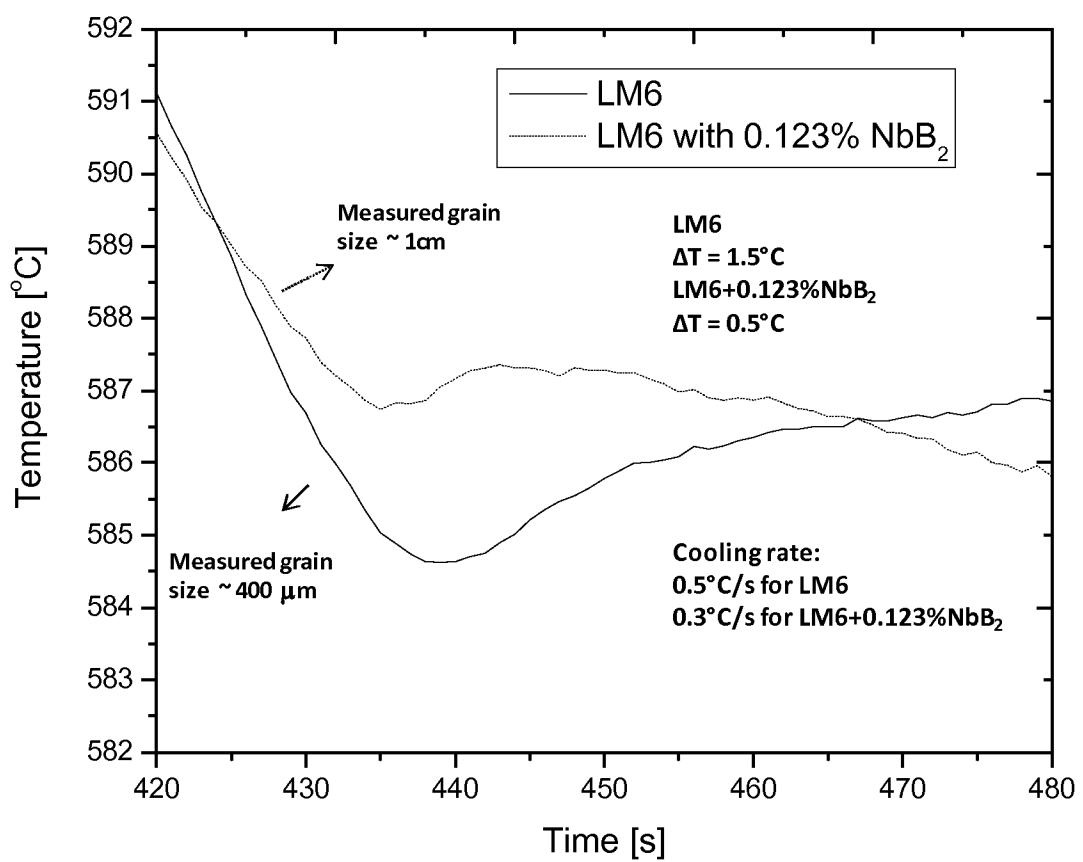


Fig.23

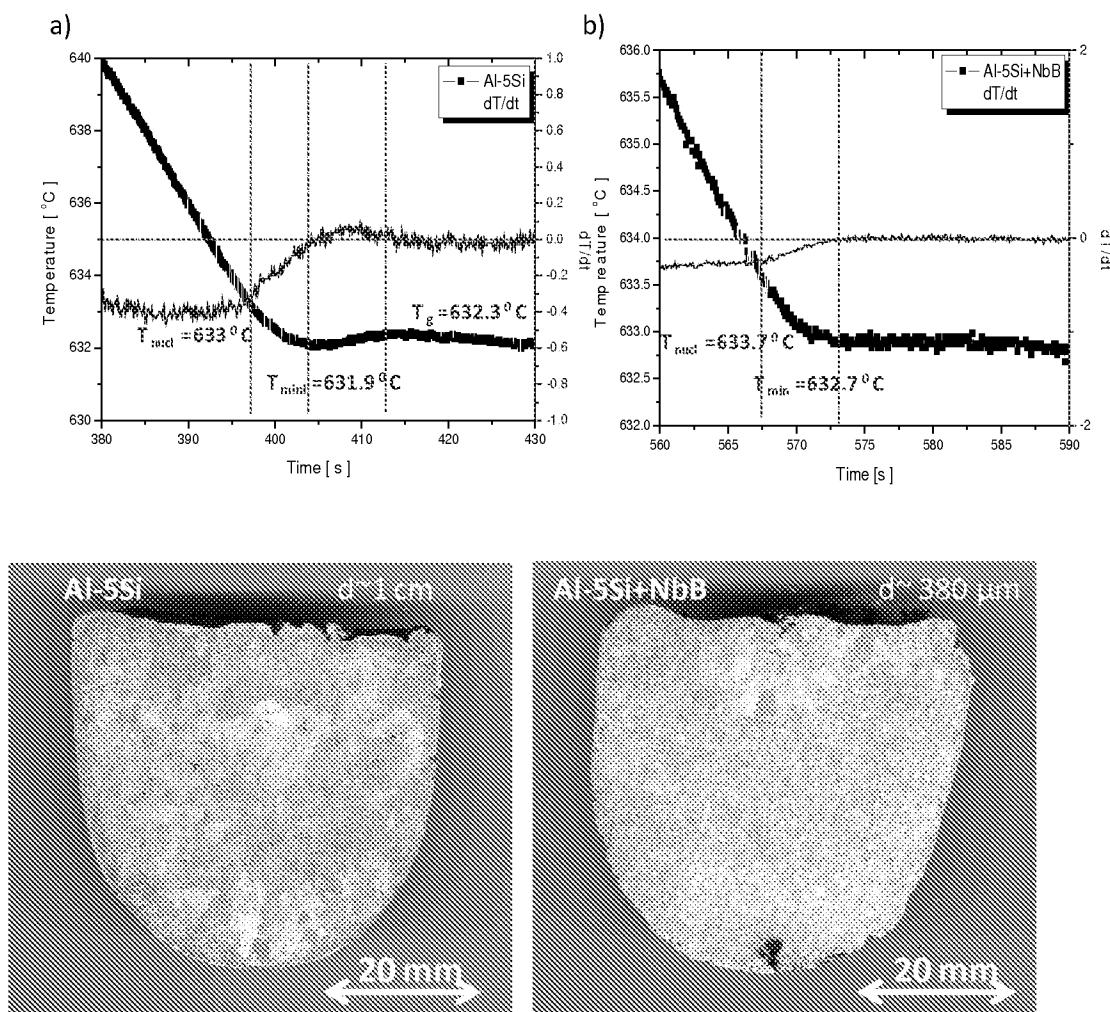


Fig. 24

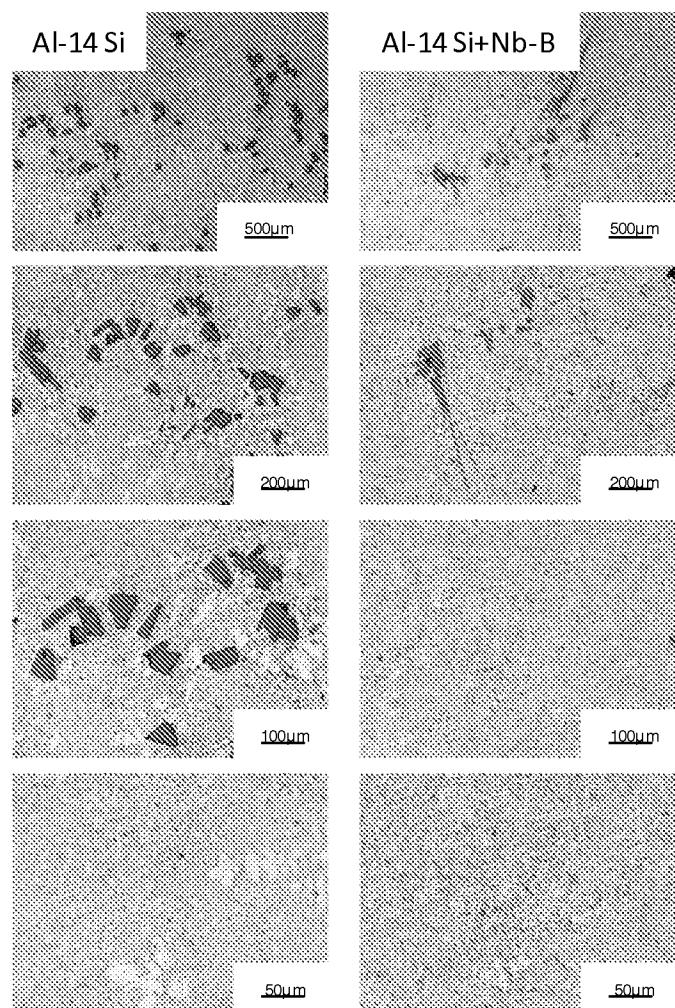


Fig. 25

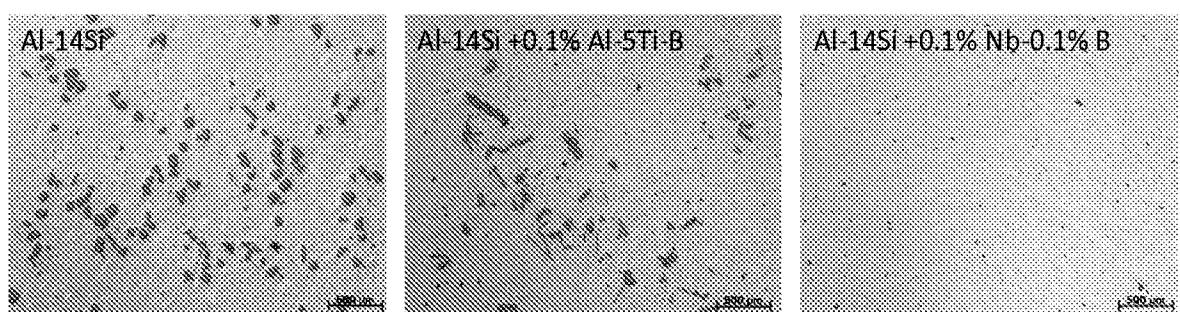


Fig. 26

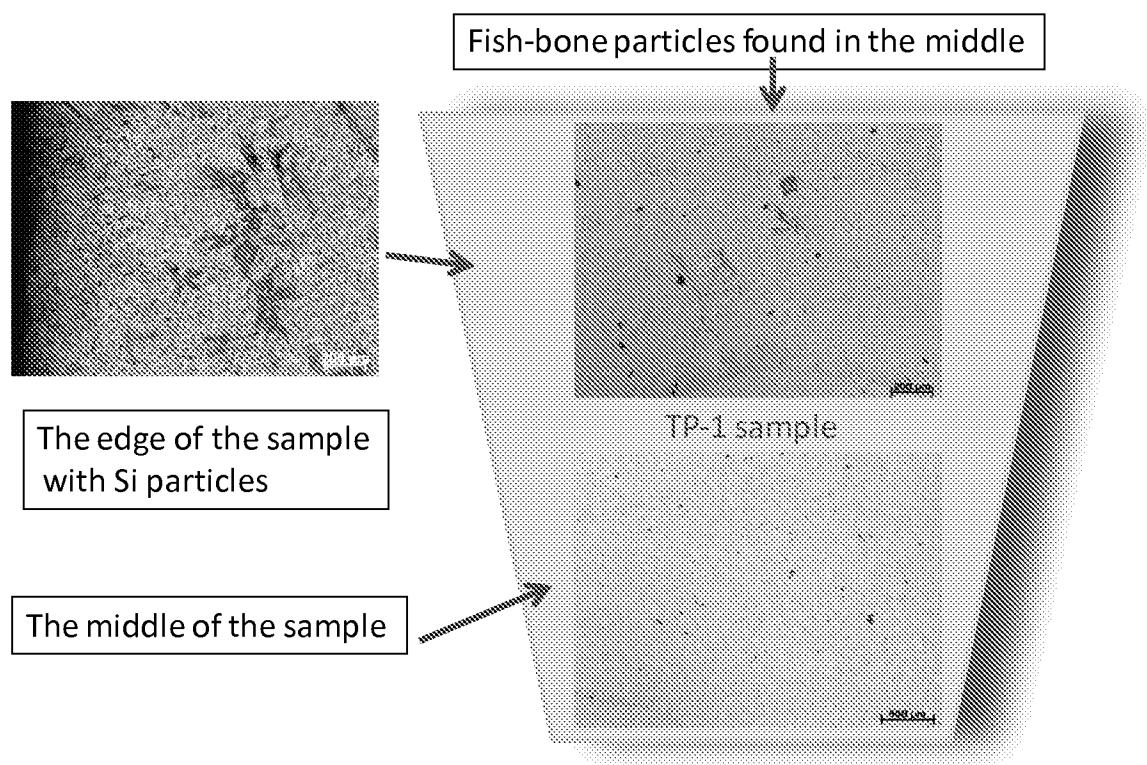


Fig. 27

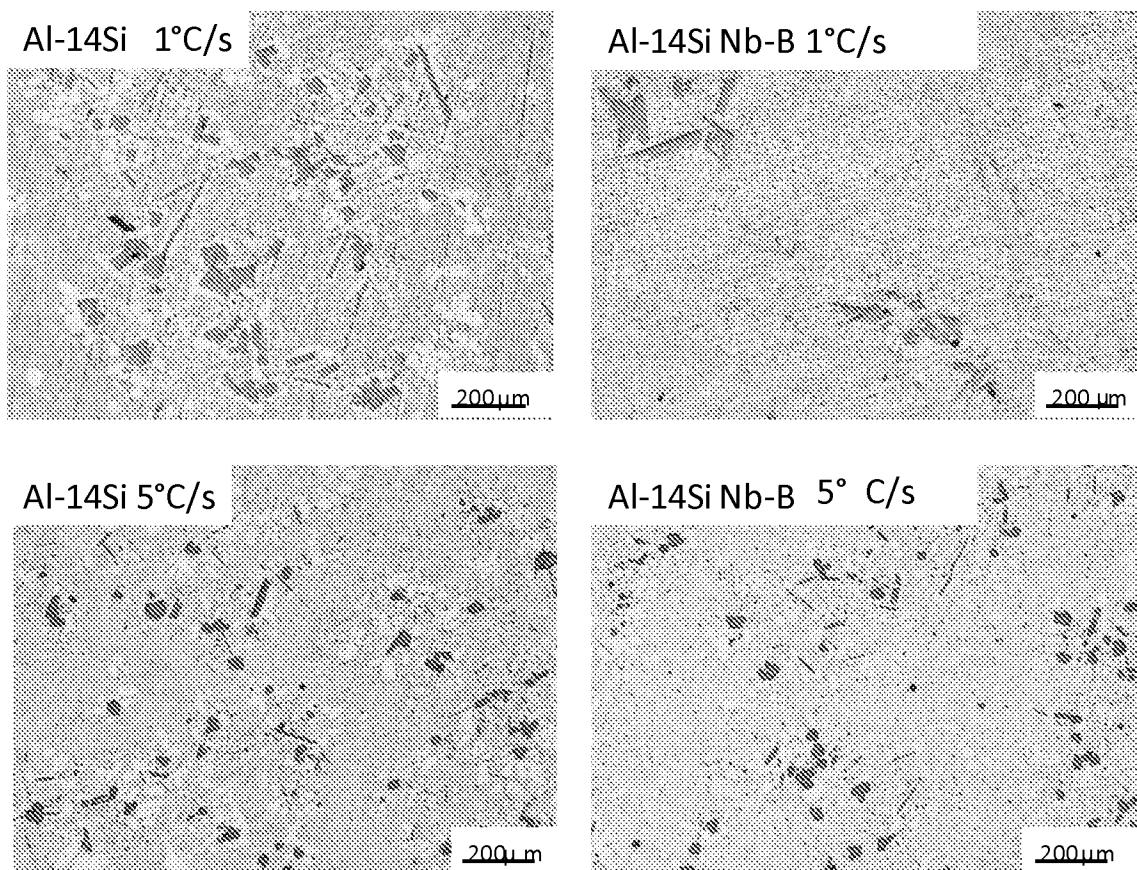


Fig. 28

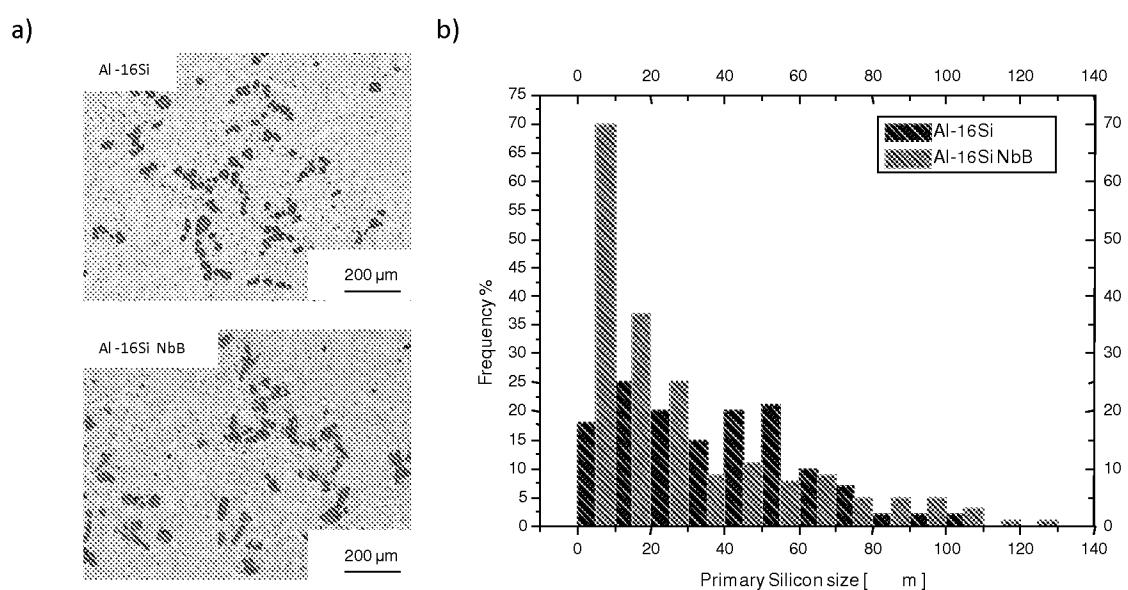
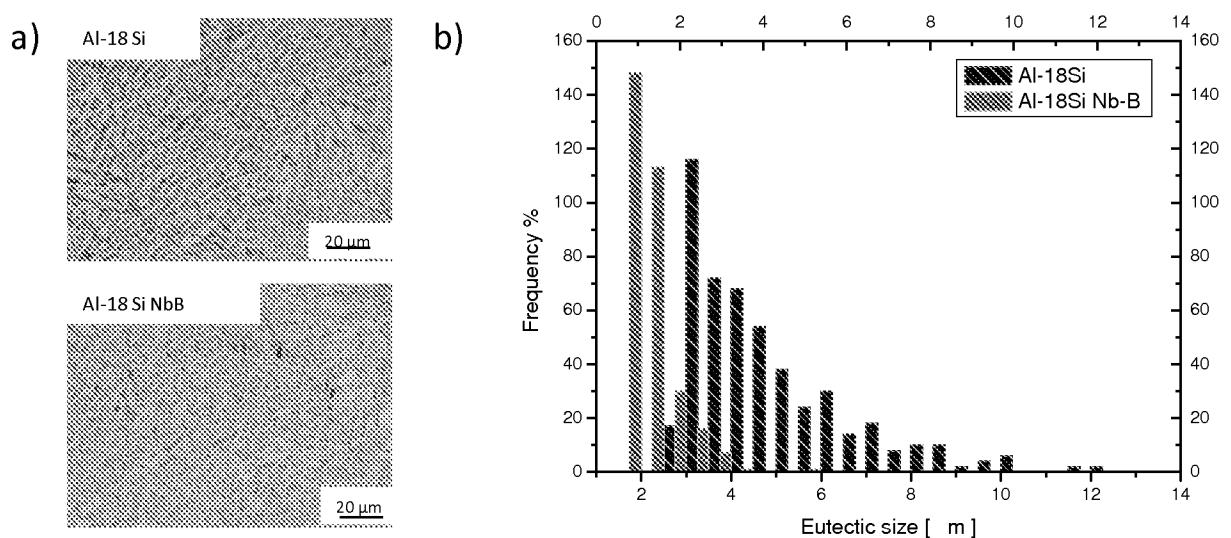


Fig. 29

**Fig. 30**

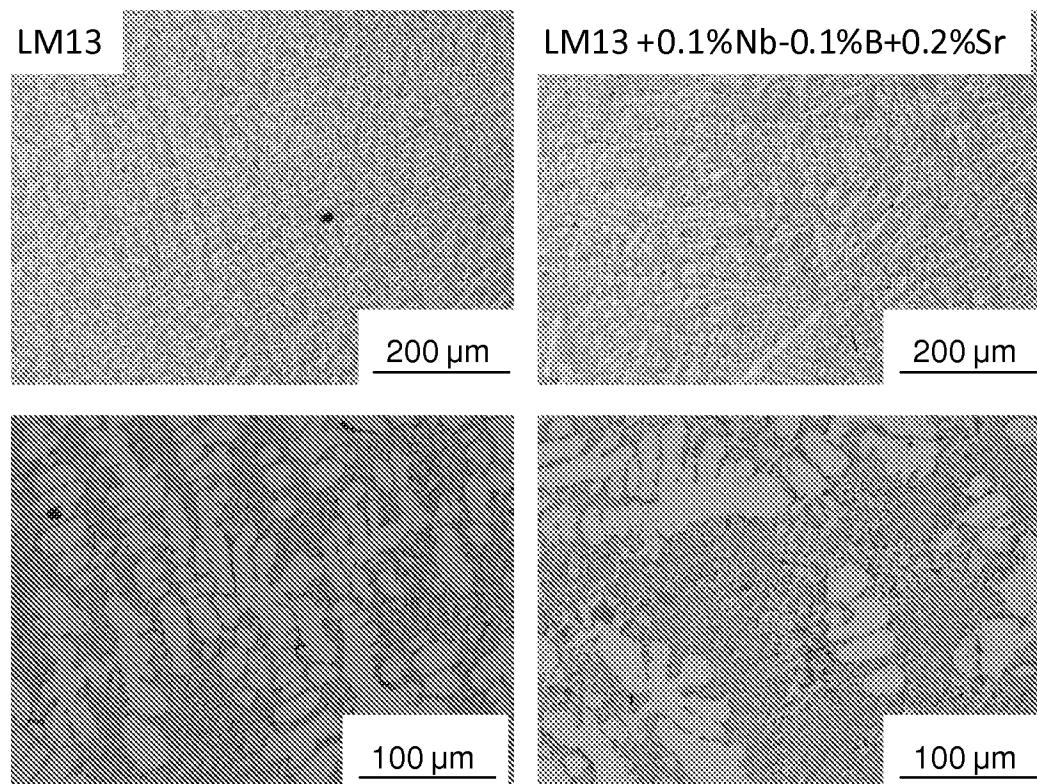


Fig. 31

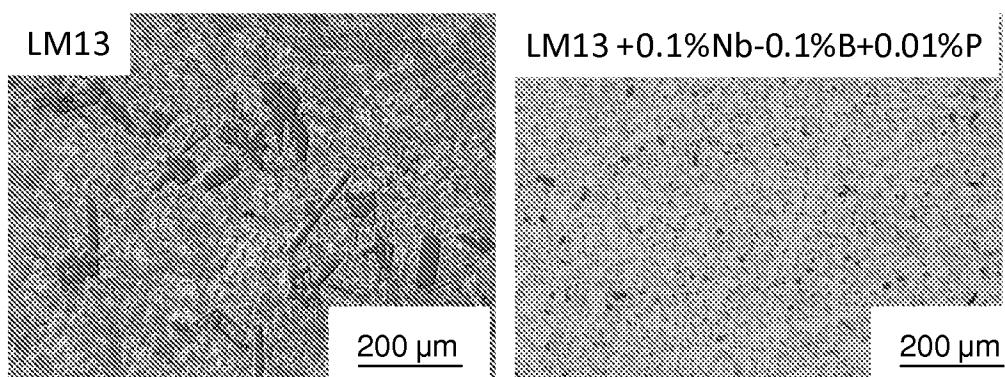
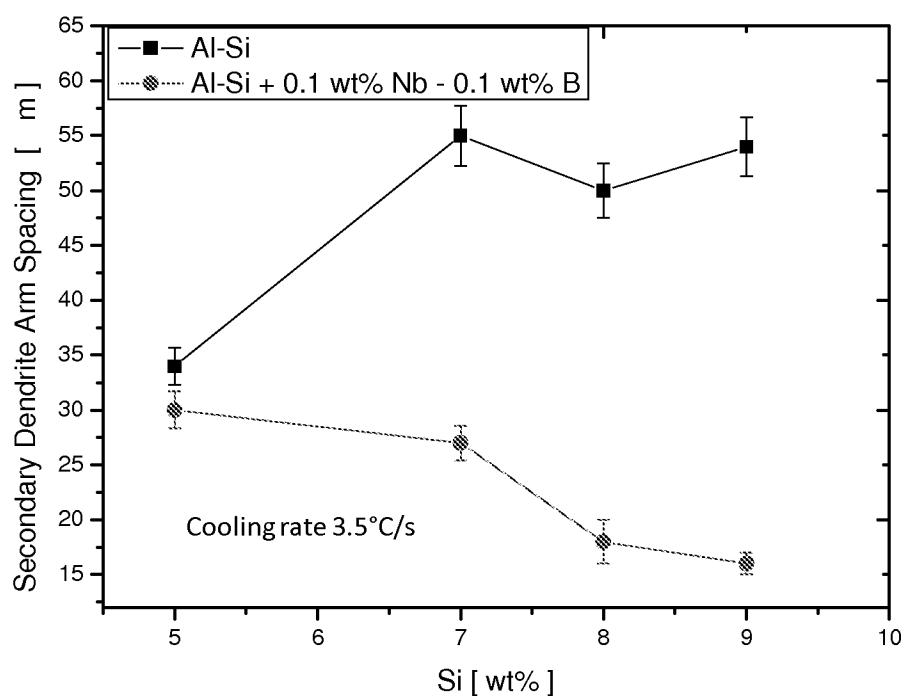
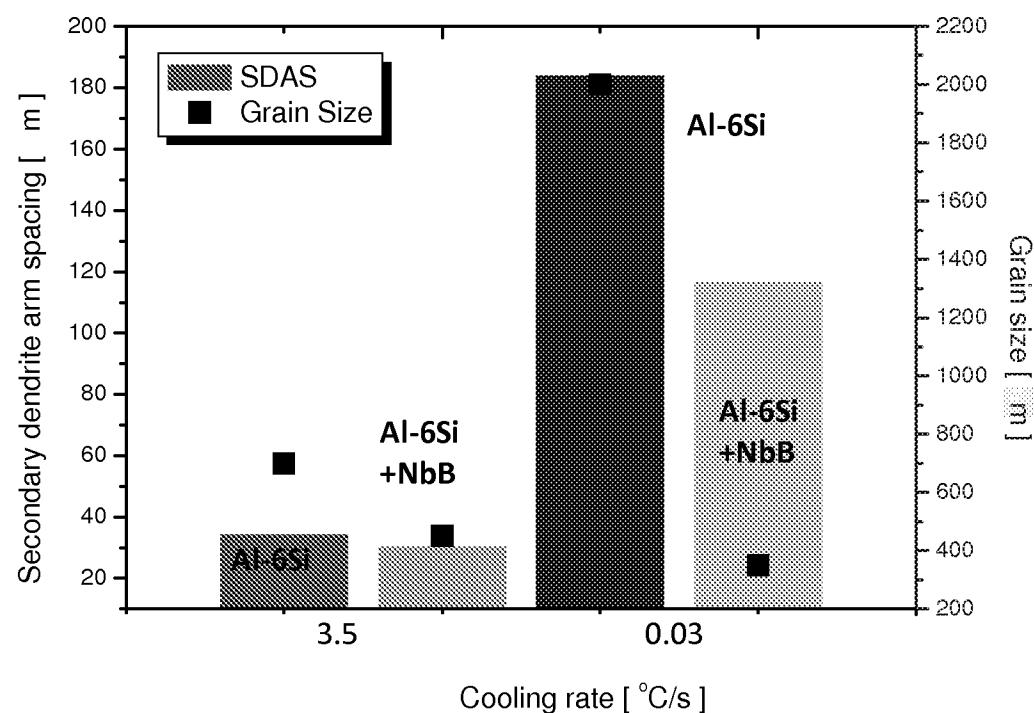


Fig. 32

**Fig. 33**

**Fig. 34**

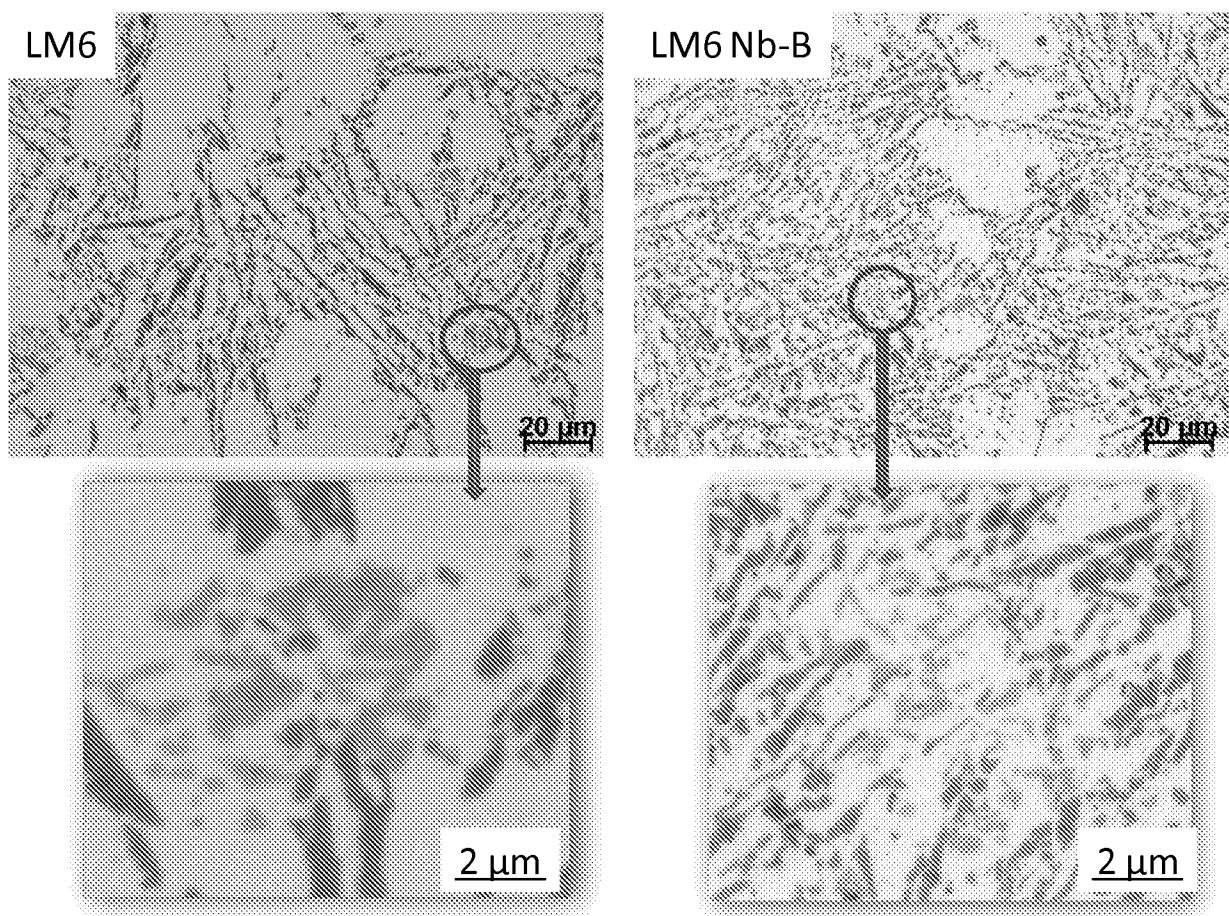


Fig. 35

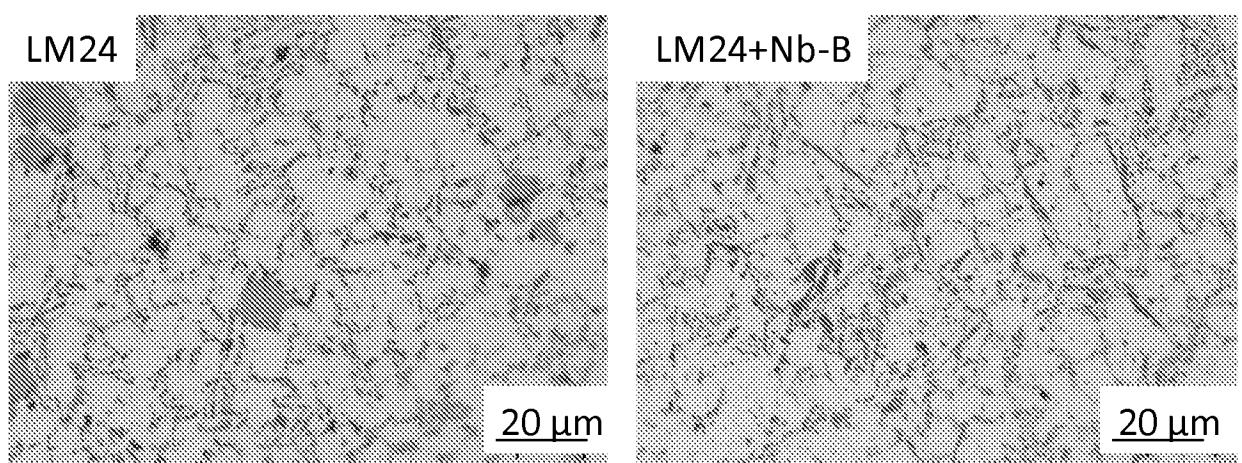


Fig. 36

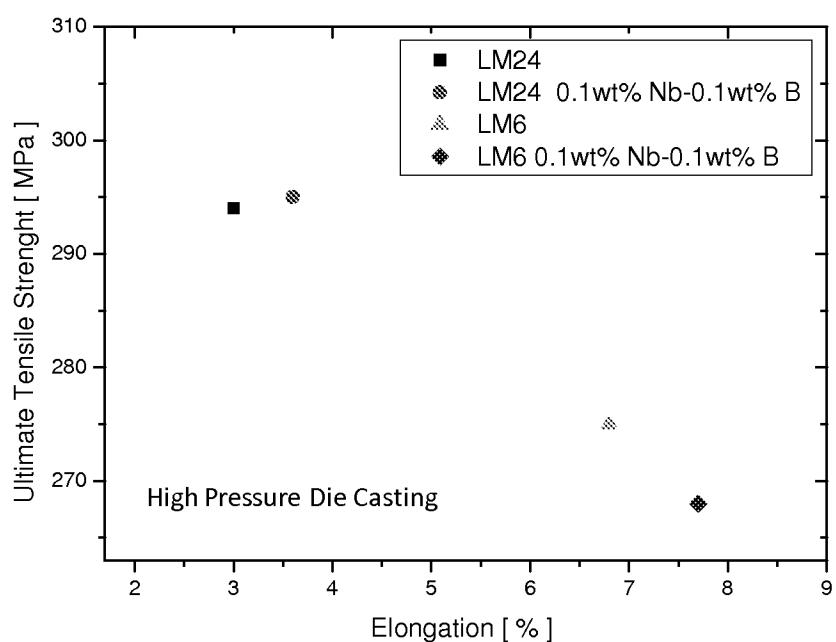


Fig. 37

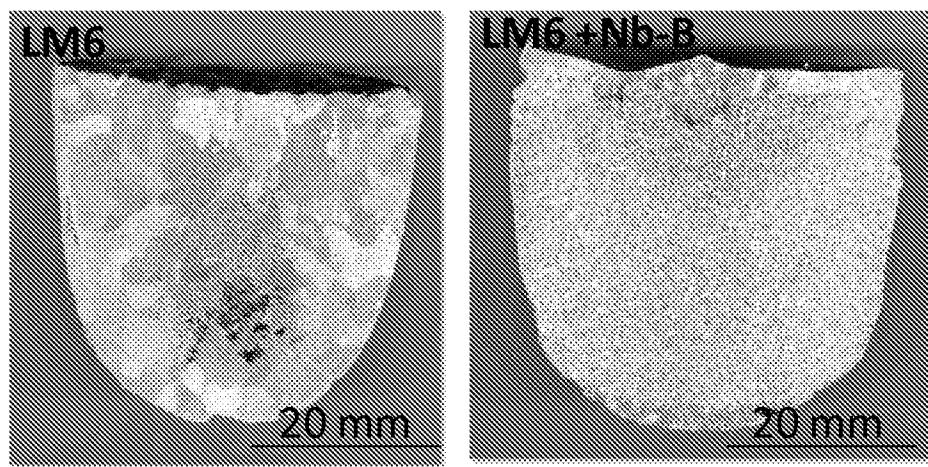
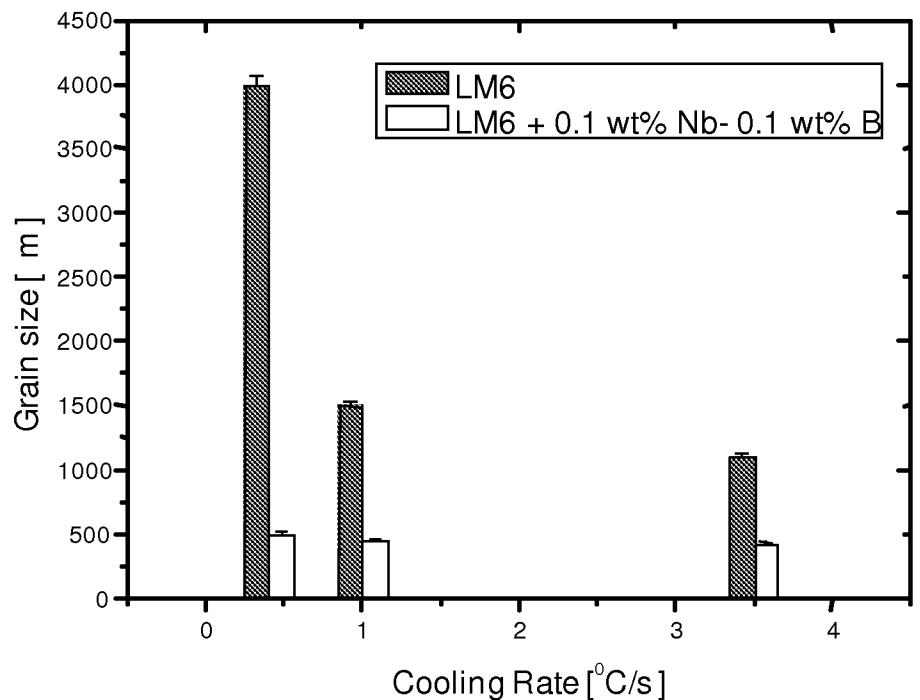
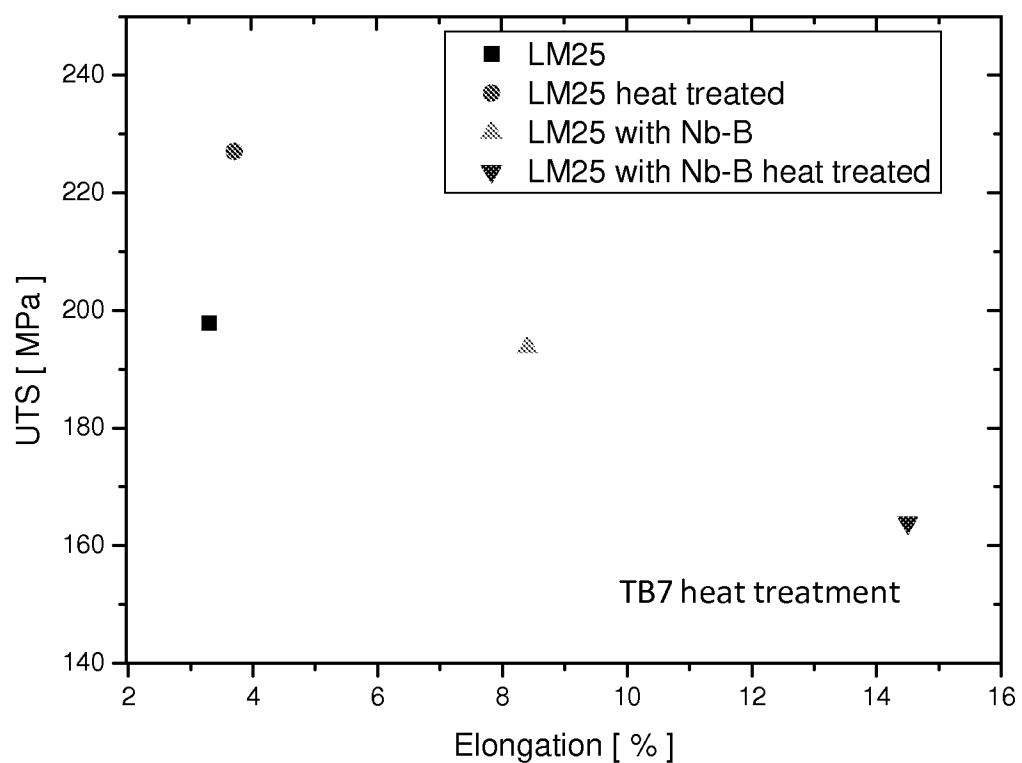
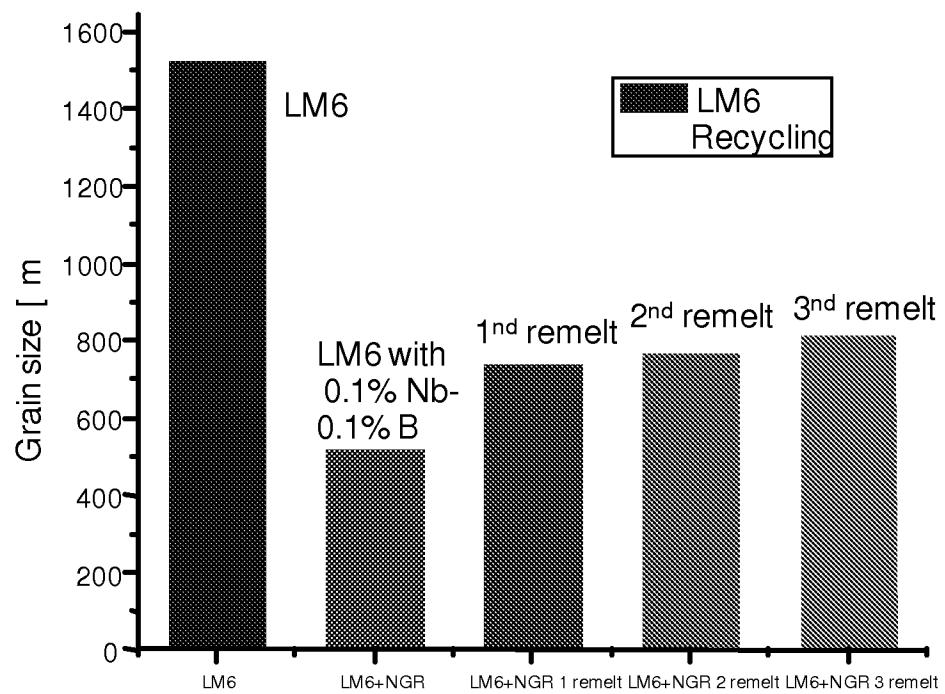


Fig. 38

**Fig. 39**

**Fig. 40**

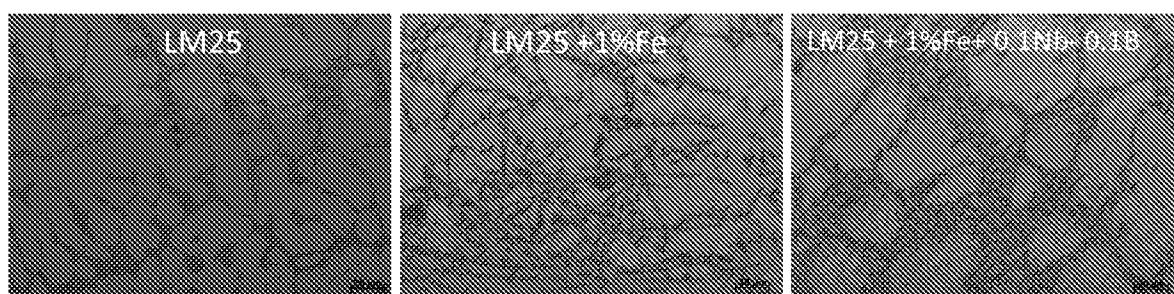


Fig. 41

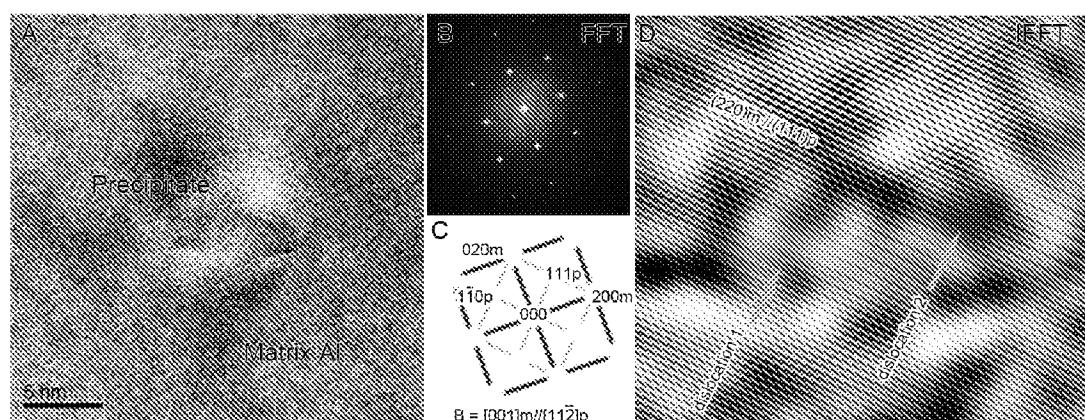


Fig. 42

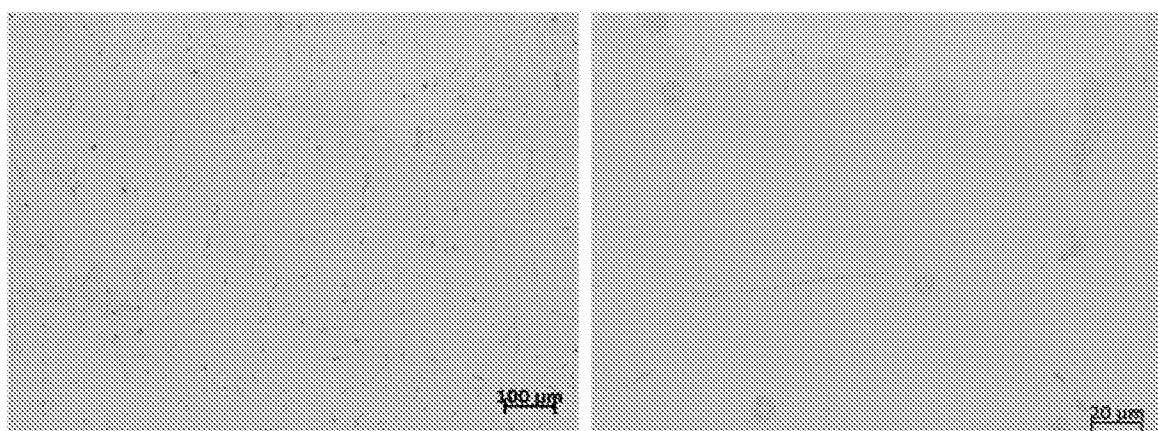


Fig. 43