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(54) **EQUAL CHANNEL ANGULAR EXTRUSION METHOD**

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Related U.S. Application Data

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(51) **Int. Cl.**⁷ **B21C 23/00**

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **72/253.1; 72/272; 72/364**

(58) **Field of Search** **72/253.1, 272, 72/273, 364**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

According to one embodiment of the present invention, an equal channel angular extrusion (ECAE) method includes extruding a billet of material along a first axis in a first orientation through an ECAE die, extruding the billet along the first axis in a second orientation through the ECAE die, the second orientation oriented approximately 180° from the first direction, extruding the billet along the first axis in a third orientation through the ECAE die, the third orientation oriented approximately 90° from the second orientation, and extruding the billet along the first axis in a fourth orientation through the ECAE die, the fourth orientation oriented approximately 180° from the third orientation.

20 Claims, 5 Drawing Sheets

QUALITATIVE COMPARISON OF RECRYSTALLIZED MICROSTRUCTURES RESULTING FROM DIFFERENT ECAE PROCESSING ROUTES

MATERIAL	UNIFORMITY OF RECRYSTALLIZED MICROSTRUCTURE	LEVEL OF TEXTURE AS-WORKED
INITIAL CONDITION	NON-UNIFORM	ZERO (UNWORKED)
ONE ECAE PASS		
ROUTE A	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
TWO ECAE PASSES		
ROUTE A	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
ROUTE B	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
ROUTE C	NON-UNIFORM	LOW
FOUR ECAE PASSES		
ROUTE A	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
ROUTE B	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
ROUTE C	UNIFORM	LOW
ROUTE D	UNIFORM	LOW
ROUTE E	UNIFORM	LOW
ROUTE F	UNIFORM	LOW

600 →

↖ 602

↖ 604

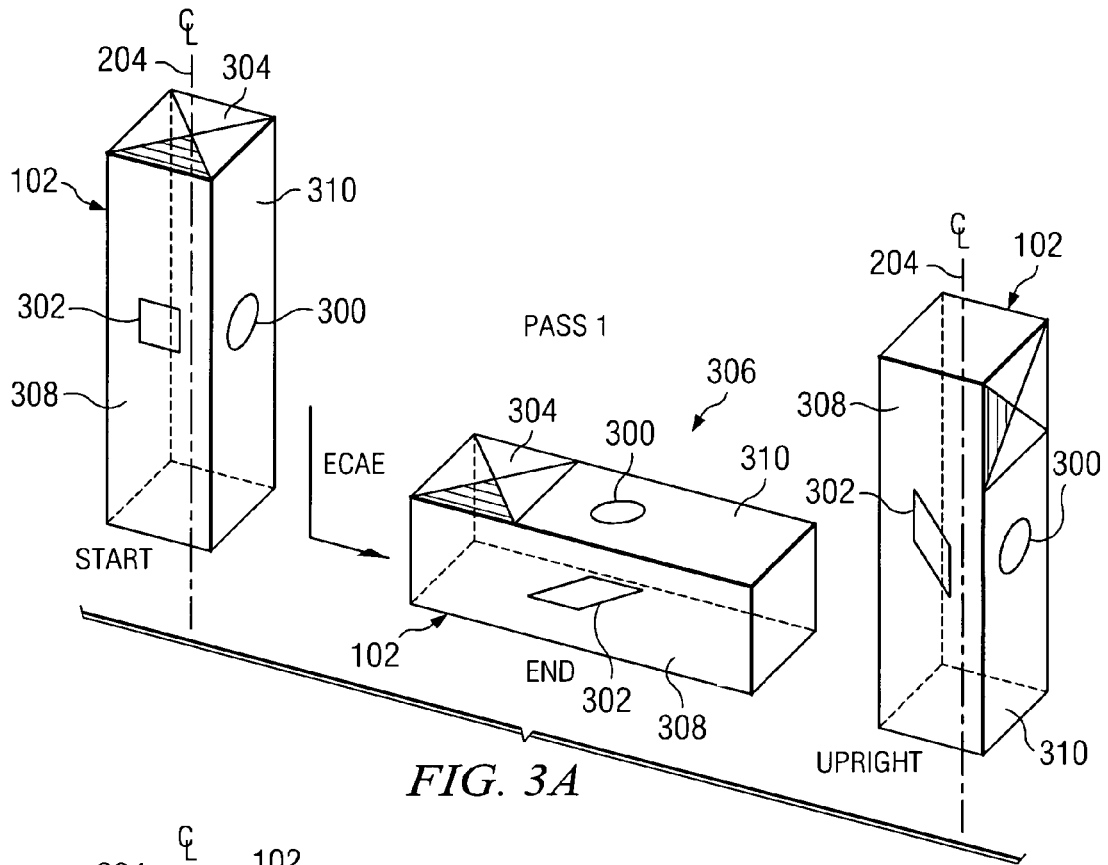


FIG. 3A

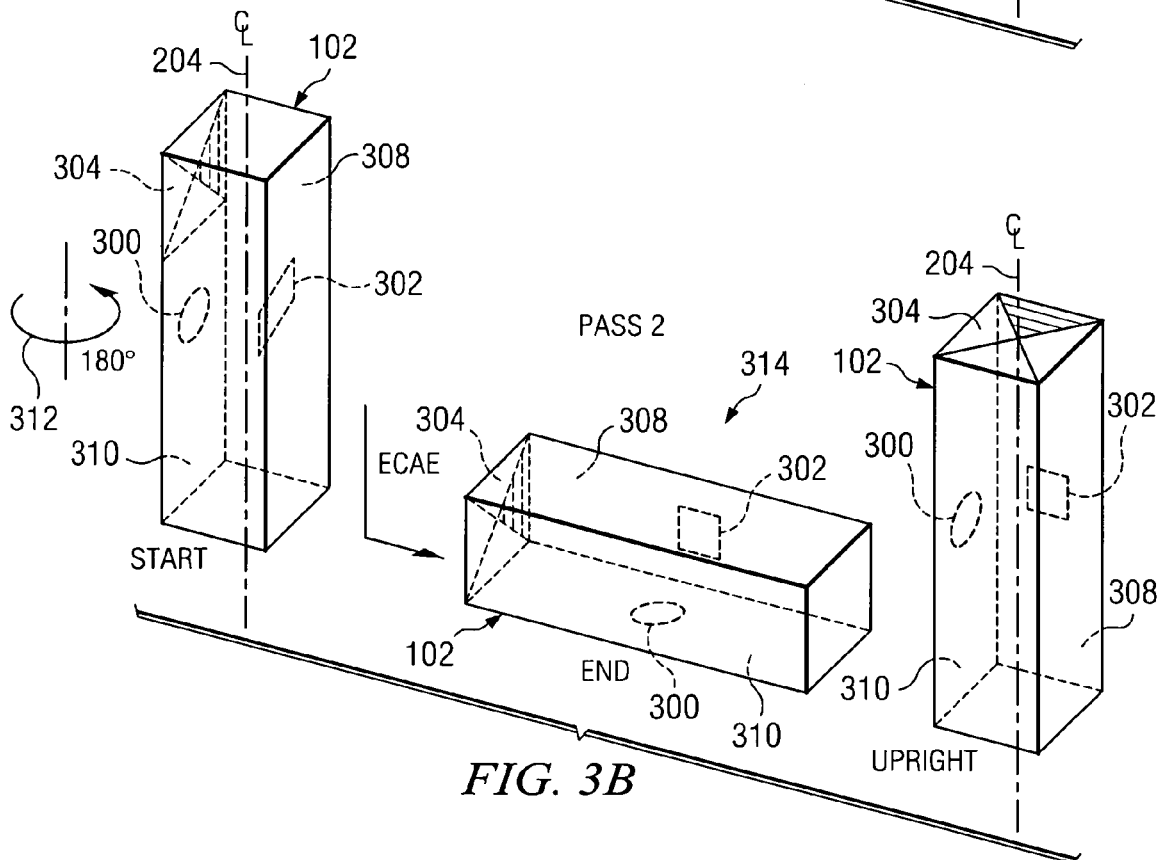


FIG. 3B

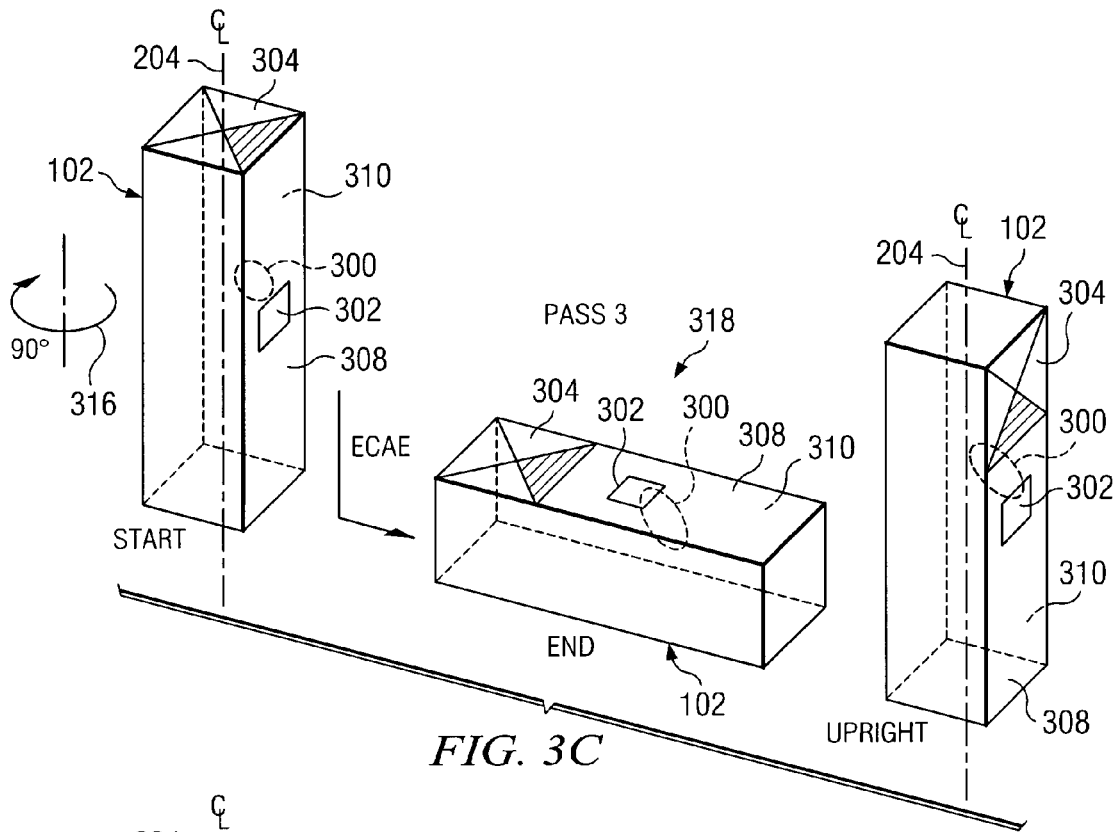


FIG. 3C

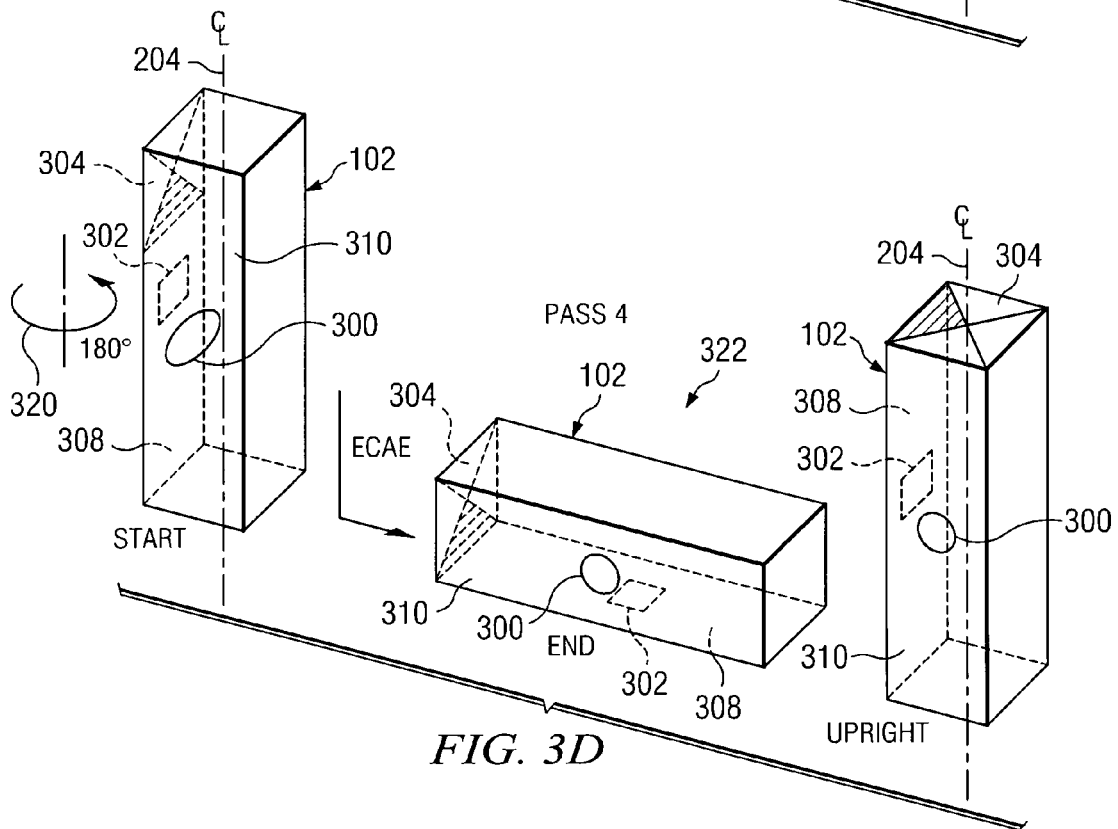


FIG. 3D

FIG. 4

MATERIAL YIELD FOR DIFFERENT ROUTES OF MULTIPASS ECAE PROCESSING⁽¹⁾

400 ↘

ROUTE	NUMBER OF PASSES				
	1	2	3	4	8
A	83.3	75.0	66.7	58.3	25.0
B	-	66.7	58.3	55.5	34.5
C	-	75.0	-	75.0	75.0
D	-	-	-	41.6	0.0
E	-	-	-	72.2	72.2
F	-	-	-	72.2	72.2

↙ 404 ↙ 406 ↙ 402

⁽¹⁾ FOR BILLET OF DIMENSIONS SCALED TO RATIO 1x1x6

FIG. 6

QUALITATIVE COMPARISON OF RECRYSTALLIZED MICROSTRUCTURES RESULTING FROM DIFFERENT ECAE PROCESSING ROUTES

600 ↘

MATERIAL	UNIFORMITY OF RECRYSTALLIZED MICROSTRUCTURE	LEVEL OF TEXTURE AS-WORKED
INITIAL CONDITION	NON-UNIFORM	ZERO(UNWORKED)
ONE ECAE PASS		
ROUTE A	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
TWO ECAE PASSES		
ROUTE A	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
ROUTE B	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
ROUTE C	NON-UNIFORM	LOW
FOUR ECAE PASSES		
ROUTE A	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
ROUTE B	NON-UNIFORM	MEDIUM
ROUTE C	UNIFORM	LOW
ROUTE D	UNIFORM	LOW
ROUTE E	UNIFORM	LOW
ROUTE F	UNIFORM	LOW

↙ 602 ↙ 604

FIG. 5

RECRYSTALLIZED GRAIN SIZE (μm) IN
ECAE PROCESSED Cu, Ta, AND Bi_2Te_3

MATERIAL AND ROUTE	NUMBER OF PASSES			
	0	1	2	4
VAR Ta				
ROUTE A ⁽¹⁾	5K-50K ⁽²⁾	10-250	()	()
C	5K-50K	-	45	34
E	5K-50K	-	-	11
ROUTE A	500-2K	10-200	()	()
C	500-2K	-	21	14
E	500-2K	-	-	13
ROUTE A	20-100	45	()	()
C	20-100	-	18	13
E	20-100	-	-	12
CDA 101 Cu	(RECRYSTALLIZATION INTERVAL)			
ROUTE A		-	-	150-225°C
B		-	-	100-175°C
C		-	175-250	150-175°C
E		-	-	100-175°C
p - Bi_2Te_3 ⁽³⁾				
ROUTE A	100-3K	20-300	()	()
B	100-3K	-	15-150	()
C	100-3K	-	10-100	15-40
E	100-3K	-	-	15-35
n - Bi_2Te_3 ⁽⁴⁾				
ROUTE A	100-3K	10-140	()	()
C	100-3K	-	10-70	()
E	100-3K	-	-	10-40

(1) ECAE PROCESSED VACUUM ARC RE-MELTED (VAR) TANTALUM AT 23°C

(2) 50K MEANS 50,000

(3) p-TYPE Bi_2Te_3 ALLOY, PROCESSED AT 500°C

(4) n-TYPE Bi_2Te_3 ALLOY, PROCESSED AT 450°C

EQUAL CHANNEL ANGULAR EXTRUSION METHOD

RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims the benefit of Ser. No. 60/343,522, entitled "System and Method to Produce Uniform Recrystallized Microstructure," filed provisionally on Dec. 20, 2001.

TECHNICAL FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to materials processing and, more particularly, to an equal channel angular extrusion method.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Bi_2Te_3 (Bismuth-Telluride) alloys are perhaps the best known semiconductor compounds for thermoelectric refrigeration at room temperatures. The crystal structure of Bi_2Te_3 and its alloys shows anisotropy in both thermoelectric and mechanical properties that are originated from the crystal structure. Hence, Bi_2Te_3 and its alloys can be easily cleaved in planes perpendicular to the crystallographic c-direction. The sequence of planes in the unit cell is Te1-Bi-Te2-Bi-Te1- and the adjacent tellurium atoms of successive units are bonded only by weak van der Waal's forces. Thus, extreme care is required for the fabrication and applications of these materials without material fracture during handling.

The mechanical properties of single crystalline Bi_2Te_3 alloys are not appropriate for its fabrication and applications. Therefore, the microstructure of poly-crystal Bi_2Te_3 alloys is important in determining the thermoelectric and mechanical properties of the materials. The microstructure of poly-crystal Bi_2Te_3 alloys, and other materials, may be improved by traditional forming processes, such as rolling, drawing, forging, and extrusion. These processes typically plastically deform the material to improve their properties by reducing the recrystallized grain size and homogenizing the microstructure. However, these processes often produce non-uniform strain, non-uniform recrystallized microstructures and unwanted or non-uniform texture, which are undesirable for some applications, such as certain thermoelectric applications.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to one embodiment of the present invention, an equal channel angular extrusion (ECAE) method includes extruding a billet of material along a first axis in a first orientation through an ECAE die, extruding the billet along the first axis in a second orientation through the ECAE die, the second orientation oriented approximately 180° from the first direction, extruding the billet along the first axis in a third orientation through the ECAE die, the third orientation oriented approximately 90° from the second orientation, and extruding the billet along the first axis in a fourth orientation through the ECAE die, the fourth orientation oriented approximately 180° from the third orientation.

According to another embodiment of the present invention, an equal channel angular extrusion (ECAE) method includes extruding a billet of material along a first axis in a first orientation through an ECAE die, extruding the billet along the first axis in a second orientation through the ECAE die, the second orientation oriented approximately 90° from

the first orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a third orientation through the ECAE die, the third orientation oriented approximately 180° from the second orientation, and extruding the billet along the first axis in a fourth orientation through the ECAE die, the fourth orientation oriented approximately 90° from the third orientation.

Embodiments of the invention provide a number of technical advantages. Embodiments of the invention may include all, some, or none of these advantages. Generally, a method is provided for obtaining an extruded material that has a fine grain size, uniform grain morphology and a substantial amount of high angle grain boundary misorientations for improving, among other things, thermoelectric and mechanical properties. The method effectively plastically deforms all regions of the microstructure such that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for localized microstructural regions to escape plastic deformation during working. This minimizes the amount of unworked or poorly worked material in the interior of the billet caused by advantageous local grain or multigrain region orientations. Furthermore, the volume of non-fully processed material at the ends of the billet are minimized, which results in higher production yields.

In one embodiment, the new method is more efficient in terms of reducing the number of operational steps necessary to refine microstructures than alternative methods. The refinement of the microstructure is achieved with fewer steps giving commensurate savings in the expenditure of energy and time. The reduction in labor results in higher throughput and therefore lower costs. The new method may also be utilized with many different types of materials, at many different temperatures, with many workable die or tool angles, with many different billet cross-sectional geometries, and is especially appropriate for crystalline materials.

Other technical advantages of the present invention will be readily apparent to one skilled in the art from the following figures, descriptions, and claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

For a more complete understanding of the invention, and for further features and advantages, reference is now made to the following description, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which:

FIG. 1 is a schematic of an equal channel angular extrusion (ECAE) process showing a partially extruded billet in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIGS. 2A through 2E illustrate billet orientations during multiple pass ECAE processing: a) starting billet orientation, b) first extrusion completed, c) orientation for second and subsequent extrusions via Route A, d) orientation for second extrusion via route B and e) orientation for second extrusion via Route C;

FIGS. 3A-3D illustrate an ECAE method according to one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a table illustrating material yield for different routes of multiple pass ECAE processing in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 5 is a table illustrating recrystallized grain sizes (μm) and recrystallization temperature intervals in ECAE processed Bi_2Te_3 , tantalum, and copper in accordance with various embodiments of the present invention; and

FIG. 6 is a table illustrating qualitative comparisons of recrystallized microstructures resulting from different ECAE processing routes.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Example embodiments of the present invention and their advantages are best understood by referring now to FIGS. 1-6 of the drawings, in which like numerals refer to like parts.

FIG. 1 is a schematic of an equal channel angular extrusion (ECAE) process 100 showing a partially extruded billet of material 102 in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. ECAE process 100, which is illustrative of a conventional ECAE process, is utilized within the teachings of the present invention, as described below in conjunction with FIGS. 3A-3D, to produce a uniform microstructure within billet 102 that has a uniformly worked microstructure within the fully worked central region of the billet, a fine as-worked or recrystallized fine grain size, equi-axed grains, and minimal as-worked texture. Obtaining superior grain refinement improves, among other things, the thermoelectric and mechanical properties, as well as the mechanical properties desired for subsequent mechanical processing steps, of billet 102. In addition, ECAE process 100 is utilized within the teachings of the present invention, as described below in conjunction with FIGS. 3A-3D, to effectively plastically deform all regions of the microstructure of billet 102 such that it is very difficult for localized microstructural regions to escape plastic deformation during the extrusion process. This greatly improves microstructural homogeneity and material yield.

Billet 102 may be any suitable size having any suitable shape and may be formed from any suitable material. For purposes of clarity and consistency, billet 102 is described herein as being formed from bismuth-telluride (Bi_2Te_3), which is used extensively in thermoelectric applications. One reason why Bi_2Te_3 is used in this detailed description is that the method as outlined below in conjunction with FIGS. 3A-3D has been successfully tested by using Bi_2Te_3 for billet 102. Other materials, including tantalum and copper have also been successfully tested with the method outlined below; thus, the present invention does not seek to limit the material type for billet 102. Material types for which the present invention is particularly advantageous are materials which solidify with a large grain size and may be highly textured or have non-uniform texture, such as superalloys, refractory metals and alloys, and pure metals.

ECAE process 100 includes an ECAE die 104 having an inlet channel 106 and an outlet channel 108, the axes of which create an ECAE die angle 110. ECAE die 104 may be any suitable size and shape and may be formed from any suitable material. Inlet channel 106 and outlet channel 108 have nominally the same dimensions and area, which is typical in the conventional ECAE process (hence the name "equal channel"). ECAE die angle 110, in the illustrated embodiment, is approximately 90° ; however, other suitable angles may be utilized.

Having inlet channel 106 and outlet channel 108 at ECAE die angle 110 creates a shear plane 112 at the transition from inlet channel 106 to outlet channel 108 that functions to plastically deform the material of billet 102 as it passes through shear plane 112. To briefly illustrate the simple shear that billet 102 is subjected to, one face of an original volumetric material element 114 of billet 102 is illustrated within inlet channel 106 to be generally square. Material element 114 represents one face of a volume element that passes through the billet to the opposite side of the billet. For clarity, material element 114 may be thought of as a single grain of billet 102. After passing through shear plane 112,

material element 114 is sheared into a sheared material element 116. In essence, the grains of billet 102 elongate as a result of a single pass through shear plane 112.

In order for billet 102 to be extruded through inlet channel 106 and outlet channel 108, a pressure 118 is applied to the top of billet 102. This pressure 118 may be applied by any suitable method, such as a punch, hydrostatic pressure, or other suitable method. The amount of pressure 118 applied is dependent upon billet material and processing parameters. Once billet 102 exits outlet channel 108 this is referred to in the conventional ECAE process as one "pass." In one embodiment, for each pass, a strain of approximately 1.16 is obtained. As described in further detail below in conjunction with FIGS. 2A through 2E, multiple passes may be performed utilizing ECAE process 100.

The microstructure of billet 102 may be controlled via many process parameters, such as extrusion temperature, extrusion speed, ECAE die angle 110, and other suitable parameters. In one embodiment, an extrusion temperature at or near the recrystallization temperature (T_R) of the material of billet 102 is utilized. In this manner, dynamic recrystallization may be achieved during each pass. In other embodiments, the extrusion temperature is either substantially below, or substantially above, the recrystallization temperature of the material of billet 102. With respect to extrusion speed, any suitable extrusion speed may be utilized because extrusion speed is dependent upon temperature and material properties. For example, in an embodiment where Bi_2Te_3 is utilized, an extrusion speed within a range of approximately 0.01 to 1.0 inches per minute is utilized.

FIGS. 2A through 2E illustrate an orientation for billet 102 at the start of the first pass and subsequent second pass for multiple pass ECAE processing. FIG. 2A illustrates billet 102 in its starting orientation about its long axis 204 prior to being extruded through ECAE die 104 (FIG. 1) and FIG. 2B illustrates billet 102 after being extruded through ECAE die 104, thereby completing its first pass. As illustrated in FIG. 2A, a shaded area 200 represents the top of billet 102 during the first pass. Shaded area 200 moves from the top of billet 102 to a side 202 of billet 102, as illustrated in FIG. 2B, at the completion of the first pass. Also shown in FIG. 2B is a cross-hatched area 205. Behind cross-hatched area 205 is fully strained ECAE processed material. Note the triangular unprocessed volumetric regions 206 and 207 at each end of billet 102. For subsequent passes, conventional ECAE processing recognizes four separate "Routes," three of which are illustrated in FIGS. 2C through 2E.

FIG. 2C illustrates "Route A" processing. In Route A processing, billet 102 is inserted into inlet channel 106 with the same orientation that was used during the initial pass. Hence, with reference to FIG. 2A, side 202 of billet 102 faces the same zero degree orientation as was used during the first pass. In other words, for Route A processing, billet 102 is not rotated about long axis 204 for subsequent passes. The designation given to material processed via Route A is nA, where "n" refers to the number of passes experienced by billet 102. For Route A processing, the texture obtained for the material for billet 102 is similar to a texture obtained from a conventional rolling process.

FIG. 2D illustrates "Route B" processing. In Route B processing, billet 102 is rotated either plus 90° or minus 90° about long axis 204 from its starting position before being inserted into inlet channel 106 for a second extrusion. In the illustrated embodiment, billet 102 has been rotated plus 90° . For a third pass for Route B, billet 102 is rotated minus 90° about long axis 204 before extrusion. The texture obtained

for the material for billet **102** in Route B processing is similar to a texture obtained from a conventional drawing process.

FIG. 2E illustrates "Route C" processing. In Route C processing, billet **102** is rotated 180° from its starting position before being inserted into inlet channel **106** for a second extrusion. For Route C processing, the texture obtained is minimized as compared to the texture obtained as a result of either Route A, Route B, or a combination of these two routes.

Another Route that is conventional to ECAE processing is "Route D." Although not illustrated, Route D (sometimes referred to as Route C') involves rotating billet **102** either plus 90° for four consecutive passes or minus 90° for four consecutive passes.

Routes A through D, as described above in conjunction with FIGS. 2A through 2E, utilizing multiple passes, have not been adequate to obtain the best combination of grain refinement, microstructural uniformity, and material yield, especially for materials such as Bi₂Te₃ and tantalum (either VAR or EB cast). Thus, the present invention seeks to address this problem, and others, by introducing an equal channel angular extrusion method, as outlined below in conjunction with FIGS. 3A through 3D.

FIGS. 3A through 3D illustrate an equal channel angular extrusion method according to the teachings of one embodiment of the present invention. For simplicity purposes, this method is referred to herein as "Route E." Route E processing includes a minimum of four passes, each of which is respectively shown in FIGS. 3A through 3D. Throughout the description of these FIGURES, a circular material element **300** and a square material element **302** that are associated with billet **102** are used to illustrate both the orientation of billet **102** during each pass and the shear strain that each of the elements **300** and **302** realize during each pass. To further aid in understanding the position and/or orientation of billet **102** during each pass, billet **102** has an area **304** marked with an "X." The method outlined in FIGS. 3A through 3D is also described with reference to FIG. 1 in which ECAE die **104** is assumed to be used for the Route E processing.

FIG. 3A illustrates the first pass of Route E processing. Accordingly, billet **102** is inserted in inlet channel **106** in a particular orientation and exits outlet channel **108** in a position **306**. In position **306**, a side **308** of billet **102** shows square material element **302** after undergoing a shear strain, as illustrated by the elongation of square material element **302**. A side **310** of billet **102** shows circular material element **300** essentially unchanged. Billet **102** is then raised on its end to prepare for the second pass.

FIG. 3B illustrates the second pass for Route E processing. Accordingly, billet **102** is rotated 180° about long axis **204**, as indicated by reference numeral **312** before being inserted into inlet channel **106**. Billet **102** exits outlet channel **108** in a position **314**. As illustrated by position **314**, side **308** shows that square material element **302** is returned to its original shape. In addition, side **310** shows that circular material element **300** is still unchanged. Billet **102** is then raised on its end to prepare for the third pass.

FIG. 3C illustrates the third pass for Route E processing. Accordingly, billet **102** is rotated either positive or negative 90° about long axis **204**, as indicated by reference numeral **316**. Billet **102** is then inserted into inlet channel **106** and exits outlet channel **108** in a position **318**. As illustrated by position **318**, side **310** shows circular material element **300** after undergoing a shear strain, as illustrated by the elongation of circular material element **300**. A side **308** of billet **102**

shows square material element **302** essentially unchanged. Billet **102** is then raised on its end to get ready for the fourth pass.

FIG. 3D illustrates the fourth, and final pass of one complete cycle of Route E processing. Accordingly, billet **102** is rotated 180° about long axis **204**, as indicated by reference numeral **320** before being inserted into inlet channel **106**. Billet **102** exits outlet channel **108** in a position **322**. As illustrated by position **322**, side **310** shows that circular material element **300** is returned to its original shape. In addition, side **308** shows that square material element **302** is still unchanged. This effectively ends one full cycle of Route E processing according to the teachings of one embodiment of the present invention. In a particular embodiment, Route E processing is repeated twice, which means that a total of eight passes are performed.

According to the teachings of another embodiment of the present invention, an ECAE process is now described. For simplicity purposes, this method is referred to herein as "Route F." Route F differs from Route E as described above only in that the billet orientations prior to each pass are different by reordering. More specifically, in Route F processing, before the second pass billet **102** is rotated either positive or negative 90°. Then, before the third pass, billet **102** is rotated 180°. And finally, before the fourth pass billet **102** is rotated negative or positive 90°, respectively, depending on the rotation that was performed before the second pass. In other words, if billet **102** was rotated negative 90° before the second pass, then billet **102** is rotated positive 90° before the fourth pass. Conversely, if billet **102** is rotated positive 90° before the second pass, then billet **102** is rotated negative 90° before the fourth pass. This ensures that circular material element **300** and square material element **302** experience similar shear strains during both Route E and Route F processing.

The methods described above and illustrated by FIGS. 3A through 3D (i.e., Route E and Route F processing) facilitate the orientation of shear strains to be at intersecting directions, as illustrated by the change in shapes of both circular material element **300** and square material element **302** during the four passes. Both Route E and Route F processing obtain a favorable combination of worked microstructural uniformity, grain refinement, texture, and material yield compared to Routes A through D. These advantages are generally described below in conjunction with FIGS. 4 through 6.

FIG. 4 is a table **400** illustrating the theoretical or ideal material yield for different Routes of multiple pass ECAE processing assuming sharp boundaries between the worked and unworked end regions of billet **102** in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. During actual ECAE processing, the boundary between the worked and unworked billet end regions may be spread to a nominal thickness of from 0.05 to 0.3 times the billet thickness. FIG. 4 is based on the ratio of billet dimensions of 1 by 1 by 6. For shorter or longer billets, the fractions of fully worked material as shown in FIG. 4 will decrease or increase, respectively. As illustrated by a column **402** of table **400**, both Route E and Route F processing have substantially better material yields than four-pass Routes A, B, and D, and similar material yields to a four-pass Route C. The benefit of Route E and Route F over a four-pass Route C is that Routes E and F result in a more uniformly refined microstructure and refined grain size for the material for billet **102**, as illustrated below in conjunction with FIG. 5. In addition, the one and two-pass Route A are shown in columns **404** and **406** to have better material yields than either Route E or

Route F. However, the benefits of Routes E and F over either a one or two pass Route A process are that Routes E and F result in a more uniform microstructure as illustrated in FIG. 5, a more refined grain size, as illustrated in FIG. 5, and a more minimized texture, as illustrated in FIG. 6 below.

Referring to FIG. 5, a table 500 illustrates recrystallized grain sizes in ECAE processing of various materials in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. Referring to a column 502, the benefits of Route E with respect to grain size are illustrated. For vacuum arc remelted (VAR) Tantalum, Route E is shown in column 502 to have a smaller grain size than a four-pass Route C process. Reference numeral 504a illustrates the average grain size for both four-pass Route C and Route E when starting with billet 102 having an as-cast grain size, reference numeral 504b illustrates the average grain-size for both four-pass Route C and Route E when starting with billet 102 having a large grain-size, and reference numeral 504c illustrates the average grain size for both four-pass Route C and Route E when starting with billet 102 having a medium grain-size. Note a column 512, which designates starting grain-sizes for purposes of the data in FIG. 5.

For CDA 101 Copper, column 502, reference numeral 506 indicates a lower recrystallization temperature interval associated with Route E as compared to four-pass Route A and four-pass Route C, and a similar recrystallization temperature interval as compared to a four-pass Route B. The lower recrystallization temperature interval indicates that smaller grains are likely to be produced.

For a p-type Bi_2Te_3 alloy, column 502, reference numeral 508 indicates a smaller grain-size and a smaller range of grain-size for Route E compared to a four-pass Route C. And for n-type Bi_2Te_3 alloy, column 502, reference numeral 510 indicates that a small grain-size and small grain-size range are obtained with Route E.

Referring to FIG. 6, a table 600 illustrates a qualitative comparison of recrystallized microstructure resulting from different ECAE processing Routes. A column 602 illustrates that both Routes E and F have a uniform recrystallized microstructure after four passes, which is better than all Routes except for a four-pass Route C and a four-pass Route D. In addition, a column 604 illustrates that both Routes E and F have a low level of as-worked texture, which is better than all Routes except for a two or four-pass Route C and a four-pass Route D. However, the benefits of Routes E and F over Routes C and D have been illustrated above in conjunction with FIGS. 4 and 5.

As described above and generally illustrated by FIGS. 4 through 6, both Route E and Route F processing obtain a favorable combination of grain refinement, microstructural uniformity, texture, and material yield compared to Routes A through D. This facilitates the improvement of, among other things, thermoelectric and mechanical properties of Bi_2Te_3 , its alloys, and other suitable materials. In addition, Routes E and F effectively plastically deform all regions of the microstructure such that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for localized microstructural regions to escape plastic deformation during working. This minimizes the amount of inefficiently worked material in the central portion of the billet as well as at the ends of a workpiece, which results in higher production yields, thereby leading to cost savings.

Embodiments of the present invention and some of their advantages have been demonstrated on pure copper, pure tantalum and Bi_2Te_3 alloys, as evidenced by data presented in FIGS. 4 through 6. These materials are representative of face centered cubic (fcc) crystal structured (Cu), body

centered cubic (bcc) crystal structured (Ta), and complex crystal structured (Bi_2Te_3) materials. Thus, Routes E and F are widely applicable for all crystalline materials. They are especially advantageous for cast pure metals, alloys and intermetallic compound materials with large grains and highly textured and/or non-uniformly textured microstructures. The methods described herein should be economically attractive for microstructural improvements to these classes of materials: pure metals (such as copper) and alloys (such as stainless steel), refractory metals (such as Nb, Mo, Ta and W) and alloys, superalloys (such as inconel 718) and intermetallic compounds (such as Bi_2Te_3 and TiAl).

Although embodiments of the invention and some of their advantages are described in detail, a person skilled in the art could make various alterations, additions, and omissions without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention as defined by the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. An equal channel angular extrusion (ECAE) method, comprising:
 - extruding a billet of material along a first axis in a first orientation through an ECAE die;
 - after extruding the billet in the first orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a second orientation through the ECAE die, the second orientation oriented approximately 180° from the first orientation;
 - after extruding the billet in the second orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a third orientation through the ECAE die, the third orientation oriented approximately 90° from the second orientation; and
 - after extruding the billet in the third orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a fourth orientation through the ECAE die, the fourth orientation oriented approximately 180° from the third orientation.
2. The method of claim 1, further comprising repeating each of the extrusion steps in order.
3. The method of claim 1, wherein the ECAE die comprises an angle of ninety degrees.
4. The method of claim 1, further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at a temperature at or near the recrystallization temperature of the material whereby dynamic recrystallization is achieved during each extrusion step.
5. The method of claim 1, further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at a temperature substantially less than the recrystallization temperature of the material.
6. The method of claim 1, further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at a temperature substantially greater than the recrystallization temperature of the material.
7. The method of claim 1, wherein the material is Bismuth-Telluride and further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at an extrusion speed within a range of approximately 0.01 to 1.0 inches per minute.
8. The method of claim 1, wherein the material is selected from the group consisting of a superalloy, a refractory metal, a refractory metal alloy, and a pure metal.
9. An equal channel angular extrusion (ECAE) method, comprising:
 - extruding a billet of material along a first axis in a first orientation through an ECAE die;
 - after extruding the billet in the first orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a second orientation through the ECAE die, the second orientation oriented approximately 90° from the first orientation;
 - after extruding the billet in the second orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a third orientation

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through the ECAE die, the third orientation oriented approximately 180° from the second orientation; and after extruding the billet in the third orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a fourth orientation through the ECAE die, the fourth orientation oriented approximately 90° from the third orientation.

10. The method of claim 9, further comprising repeating each of the extrusion steps in order.

11. The method of claim 9, wherein the ECAE die comprises an angle of ninety degrees.

12. The method of claim 9, further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at a temperature at or near the recrystallization temperature of the material whereby dynamic recrystallization is achieved during each extrusion step.

13. The method of claim 9, further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at a temperature substantially less than the recrystallization temperature of the material.

14. The method of claim 9, further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at a temperature substantially greater than the recrystallization temperature of the material.

15. The method of claim 9, wherein the material is Bismuth-Telluride and further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at an extrusion speed within a range of approximately 0.01 to 1.0 inches per minute.

16. The method of claim 9, wherein the material is selected from the group consisting of a superalloy, a refractory metal, a refractory metal alloy, and a pure metal.

17. An equal channel angular extrusion (ECAE) method, comprising:

- extruding a billet of material along a first axis in a first orientation through an ECAE die;
- after extruding the billet in the first orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a second orientation through the ECAE die, the second orientation oriented approximately 180° from the first orientation;
- after extruding the billet in the second orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a third orientation

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through the ECAE die, the third orientation oriented approximately 90° from the second orientation;

after extruding the billet in the third orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a fourth orientation through the ECAE die, the fourth orientation oriented approximately 180° from the third orientation;

after extruding the billet in the fourth orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a fifth orientation through the ECAE die, the fifth orientation oriented approximately 90° from the first orientation;

after extruding the billet in the fifth orientation, extruding the billet of material along the first axis in a sixth orientation through the ECAE die, the sixth orientation oriented approximately 180° from the fifth orientation;

after extruding the billet in the sixth orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in a seventh orientation through the ECAE die, the seventh orientation oriented approximately 90° from the sixth orientation; and

after extruding the billet in the seventh orientation, extruding the billet along the first axis in an eighth orientation through the ECAE die, the eighth orientation oriented approximately 180° from the seventh orientation.

18. The method of claim 17, further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at a temperature at or near the recrystallization temperature of the material whereby dynamic recrystallization is achieved during each extrusion step.

19. The method of claim 17, further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at a temperature substantially less than the recrystallization temperature of the material.

20. The method of claim 17, further comprising performing each of the extrusion steps at a temperature substantially greater than the recrystallization temperature of the material.

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