

PERPENDICULAR MAGNETIC RECORDING MEDIUM AND METHOD OF MANUFACTURING THE MEDIUM

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001]

The present invention relates to a perpendicular magnetic recording medium and a method of manufacturing the medium, and particularly relates to a perpendicular magnetic recording medium used for various magnetic recording devices including an external storage device for a computer, and a method of manufacturing the medium.

DESCRIPTION OF RELATED ART

[0002]

As a technique for achieving increase in recording density in magnetic recording, a perpendicular magnetic recording method is attracting attention as an alternative of a usual longitudinal magnetic recording method. This is because, compared with the usual longitudinal magnetic recording method, the perpendicular magnetic recording method has advantages of high density, high thermal stability, and sufficient writing capability even to a recording medium having high coercive force, making it possible to exceed a limit of recording density of the longitudinal magnetic recording method.

[0003]

In a perpendicular magnetic recording medium, since information is recorded with a direction of magnetization being perpendicular to a film plane of a magnetic recording layer, magnetization needs to be stably kept in the direction perpendicular to the film plane. Therefore, a magnetic recording layer used for the perpendicular magnetic recording medium is required to have a high perpendicular magnetic anisotropy coefficient (K_u value). The K_u value of a magnetic recording layer of a perpendicular magnetic recording medium being currently studied is approximately 1×10^6 erg/cm³ or more.

[0004]

In magnetic grains having uniaxial magnetic anisotropy, magnitude of a magnetic field necessary for reversal of magnetization is called anisotropy field H_k , and H_k is generally expressed as $H_k = 2K_u/M_s$ in terms of saturation magnetization M_s and the K_u value. Therefore, to induce reversal of magnetization, a magnetic field of H_k or more is required, and a value of the magnetic field is proportional to the K_u value. In a magnetic recording medium, when H_k is excessively high, reversal of magnetization becomes insufficient during writing by a magnetic head, and thus normal operation is disabled, therefore a moderate H_k value is needed.

[0005]

In a magnetic recording medium being an aggregate of

magnetic grains, an average magnetization reversal field, of which the value is called coercive force H_c , is determined by distribution of the H_k values and axes of easy magnetization of individual magnetic grains, and strength of magnetic interactions between the magnetic grains and the like. When the magnetic interactions between the magnetic grains are small, the H_c value approaches the H_k value.

[0006]

Moreover, an energy barrier E necessary for magnetization reversal is expressed as $E = k_u V (1 - H/H_k)^2$, where H is a magnetic field applied in a direction of the axis of easy magnetization, and V is volume of a grain. When the energy barrier E is not sufficiently high compared with thermal energy $k_B T$ (k_B is Boltzmann constant, and T is the absolute temperature), magnetization is reversed due to an effect of the thermal energy. This is called thermal fluctuation (or thermal disturbance) of magnetization, and implies loss of information in the magnetic recording medium, therefore the $k_u V$ value, which determines the energy barrier E , needs to be kept relatively high. Even if thermal fluctuation of magnetization does not lead to loss of information, it surfaces as a medium noise called reverse magnetic domain noise due to partial reversal of a recorded bit.

[0007]

Typically, $K_u V / k_B T$ is used as an index of the thermal

fluctuation. However, in this case, an external magnetic field is assumed to be not being applied, and when a magnetic field H is being applied, the index is expressed as $k_u V (1 - H/H_k)^2 / k_B T$ using the energy barrier E .

[0008]

Furthermore, to reduce medium noises and thus improve quality of a recorded information signal, that is, improve a signal-to-noise ratio (SNR), it is necessary to reduce a value of activation grain size $D = V/\delta$ (here, δ is thickness of a magnetic recording layer), that is, reduce a unit of reversal of magnetization. When the unit of magnetization reversal is small, a minute recording bit can be properly written, consequently SNR is improved. Therefore, many studies have been made to reduce the D value in the perpendicular magnetic recording medium. To reduce the D value, it is effective to reduce crystal grain size of the magnetic recording layer, and reduce the magnetic interactions between crystal grains.

[0009]

From the above, when the D value is reduced to improve SNR, the V value is reduced, therefore a high k_u value is needed to keep a value of the energy barrier E necessary for stably keeping magnetization. On the other hand, when the high k_u value is kept, the H_k value is increased, that is, a magnetic field necessary for magnetization reversal is increased, leading to difficulty in writing of information by a magnetic

head. That is, in the magnetic recording medium, it is extremely difficult to satisfy all of three factors of 1) improvement in SNR, 2) thermal stabilization of magnetization (decrease in reverse magnetic domain noise), and 3) ease of writing by the magnetic head, which are in a relationship of tradeoff to one another.

[0010]

As a perpendicular magnetic recording medium aiming to compatibly achieve improvement in SNR and thermal stabilization of magnetization among the three factors, a perpendicular magnetic recording medium has been proposed, the medium having a magnetic recording layer of a so-called functionally separated type in which a plurality of magnetic recording layers having different K_u values are stacked (see, for example, JP-A-11-296833 (USP 6,183,893 as U.S. counterpart patent), and JP-A-2000-76636 (USP 6,426,157 as U.S. counterpart patent)).

[0011]

In JP-A-11-296833 (USP 6,183,893 as U.S. counterpart patent), it is disclosed that a medium, which is high in thermal stability of magnetization and excellent in SNR, can be produced by stacking a layer of a region having a high K_u value so that thermal stability of magnetization is high (upper layer), and a layer of a region having a somewhat low K_u value so that magnetic interactions between crystal grains are small

and therefore SNR is high (lower layer). In an aspect, it is disclosed that the K_u value of the upper layer is adjusted to be 2.5×10^6 erg/cm³ to 5×10^6 erg/cm³, and the K_u value of the lower layer is adjusted to be 1×10^6 erg/cm³ to 2.5×10^6 erg/cm³.

[0012]

Moreover, in JP-A-2000-76636 (USP 6,426,157 as U.S. counterpart patent), a similar technical idea is disclosed, that is, it is disclosed that similar effects are obtained by stacking magnetic recording layers having different K_u values and crystal orientations.

[0013]

However, while the JP-A-11-296833 (USP 6,183,893 as U.S. counterpart patent) and JP-A-2000-76636 (USP 6,426,157 as U.S. counterpart patent) disclose the contents on compatibly achieving improvement in SNR and thermal stabilization of magnetization, they make no consideration on ease of writing by the magnetic head.

[0014]

With increase in recording density, demand for reducing the D value and keeping the high K_u value in a medium is increased more and more in order to stably keeping a small recording bit. In such a medium, it is extremely important to secure ease of writing by the magnetic head.

[0015]

In view of the above, the inventors applied an invention

described in JP-A-2005-222675 (US2005/0181237A1 as US counterpart laid-open patent) aiming to provide a perpendicular magnetic recording medium in which thermal stabilization of magnetization and ease of writing by the magnetic head were compatibly achieved, and furthermore SNR was improved.

[0016]

Summary of the invention described in JP-A-2005-222675 (US2005/0181237A1 as US counterpart laid-open patent) is as follows. That is, a perpendicular magnetic recording medium includes at least a nonmagnetic underlayer, a magnetic recording layer, and a protective layer formed in this order on a nonmagnetic substance, wherein the magnetic recording layer includes a low K_u layer having a perpendicular magnetic anisotropy constant (K_u value) of 1×10^5 erg/cm³ or less, and a high K_u layer having the K_u value of 1×10^6 erg/cm³ or more.

[0017]

According to such a configuration, thermal stabilization of magnetization and ease of writing by the magnetic head can be compatibly achieved. Such operation is described below. In the magnetic recording layer in a two-layer structure including the low K_u layer and the high K_u layer, it is assumed that magnetic coupling of magnetization occurs in a thickness direction, and simultaneous magnetization reversal is thus induced. When a K_u value of the low K_u layer is approximately

ignored, the total K_u value of the stacked films is decreased in accordance with increase in thickness, however, since the M_s value is kept even in the low K_u region, the total M_s value of the films is not significantly changed, and consequently as clear from the above $H_k=2K_u/M_s$, the H_k value is effectively decreased, consequently reversal of magnetization is easily induced.

[0018]

On the other hand, when the energy barrier $E=k_uV(1-H/H_k)^2$ is taken into consideration, since the V value can be regarded as the total volume of the films, the total K_uV value of the stacked films is larger than a K_uV value in the case of only the high K_u region. Here, since the H_k value is decreased as above, decrease in energy barrier can be controlled at a small level, provided the externally applied magnetic field H is relatively low. That is, a medium is easily produced, in which thermal stabilization of magnetization and ease of writing by the magnetic head are compatibly achieved.

[0019]

According to the invention described in JP-A-2005-222675 (US2005/0181237A1 as US counterpart laid-open patent), a perpendicular magnetic recording medium can be provided, in which thermal stabilization of magnetization, and ease of writing by the magnetic head, particularly an overwrite characteristic described later, are improved, and furthermore

SNR is improved. Meaning of the above overwrite is writing a new signal over an originally recorded signal without erasing the originally recorded signal. In a magnetic recording device, when data are overwritten, if the original data are not fully replaced by new data, an error may occur. The overwrite characteristic generally means a ratio of decay of an original signal when the original signal is overwritten with a subsequent signal, which represents overwrite performance.

[0020]

Among patent documents, JP-A-2003-132532 and JP-A-2003-178416 are described while being compared with an embodiment of the invention in the section of SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0021]

An important point in the perpendicular magnetic recording medium as described in the JP-A-2005-222675 (US2005/0181237A1 as US counterpart laid-open patent) is that the stacked, two recording layers are accurately controlled in physical property values (perpendicular magnetic anisotropy K_u and saturation magnetization M_s) of the high K_u layer and the low K_u layer. In the high K_u layer, the physical property values can be appropriately adjusted using a composition or a layer configuration. On the other hand, in

a soft magnetic layer used as the low K_u layer, since a soft magnetic property of the layer is significantly changed not only by the composition or the layer configuration, but also crystal grain size or distortion in crystal, which is considered to be changed depending on a deposition process, the physical property values are hard to be controlled. Moreover, it is an important issue to reduce a value of the activation grain size D in order to obtain a sufficient medium characteristic.

[0022]

The invention was made in the light of the above points, and an object of the invention is to provide a perpendicular magnetic recording medium in which the soft magnetic layer used as the low K_u layer can be stably produced with high performance, and thermal stabilization of magnetization, ease of writing by the magnetic head, and SNR are further improved, and provide a method of manufacturing the medium.

[0023]

The object is attained according to the following. (1)
A perpendicular magnetic recording medium includes at least a nonmagnetic underlayer, a magnetic recording layer, and a protective layer formed in this order on a nonmagnetic substrate; wherein the magnetic recording layer includes a low K_u layer having a relatively small perpendicular magnetic anisotropy constant (K_u value), and a high K_u layer of which

the K_u value is relatively large, and the low K_u layer includes a soft magnetic thin film including an iron-group-element based microcrystal structure, in which a nitrogen element is added to a ferromagnetic material mainly containing one of metals of Co, Ni and Fe or an alloy of the metal, the thin film having a crystal structure of a face-centered cubic lattice or hexagonal close package, and a preferred crystal orientation plane parallel to a plane of the film is made to be a (111) plane in the face-centered cubic lattice structure, and a (002) plane in the hexagonal close package structure.

[0024]

As aspects of (1), the following (2) to (6) are preferably given. (2) In the perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to (1), the magnetic recording layer includes the low K_u layer having the K_u value of 1×10^5 erg/cm³ or less, and the high K_u layer having the K_u value of 1×10^6 erg/cm³ or more. (3) In the perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to (1) or (2), the low K_u layer includes crystal grains including ferromagnetic metal, and nonmagnetic grain boundaries for magnetically separating the crystal grains from one another, and the nonmagnetic grain boundaries contain a nonmagnetic oxide as a main component.

[0025]

(4) In the perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to any one of (1) to (3), the high K_u layer includes

an alloy thin film that contains Co as a main component, and is added with at least Pt, and has a crystal structure of the hexagonal close package, and a preferred crystal orientation plane parallel to a plane of the film is made to be the (002) plane. (5) In the perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to any one of (1) to (4), the high K_u layer includes crystal grains including ferromagnetic metal, and nonmagnetic grain boundaries for magnetically separating the crystal grains from one another, and the nonmagnetic grain boundaries contains a nonmagnetic oxide as a main component. (6) In the perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to any one of (1) to (5), a ratio of a saturation magnetization value (M_s value) of the low K_u layer to an M_s value of the high K_u layer is adjusted to be 0.8 to 1.2.

[0026]

As an embodiment of the invention of a method of manufacturing a perpendicular magnetic recording medium, the following (7) is preferably given. (7) In a method of manufacturing the perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to any one of (1) to (6), the low K_u layer is formed by sputtering a material exhibiting ferromagnetism using a sputter gas containing a gas material including a nitrogen compound.

[0027]

Next, operation and effects of the above (1) to (7) are

described. Differences from inventions described in JP-A-2003-132532 and JP-A-2003-178416, which disclose techniques comparatively similar to the technique of an embodiment of the invention, are described together. According to (1), as described in detail later, physical property values such as K_u and M_s of a soft magnetic layer used as the low K_u layer can be controlled by the amount of nitrogen to be added, in addition, crystal grain size (activation grain size) can be reduced with respect to the amount of nitrogen to be added. Such operation is described below.

[0028]

In a magnetic recording medium, a soft magnetic film including an FeNi based alloy (permalloy) or FeAlSi based alloy (sendust) is usually used for a material for a magnetic recording head, and recently, in the perpendicular magnetic recording medium, a soft magnetic film as a backing layer is used between the substrate and the magnetic recording film to efficiently perform recoding and reproduction at high density.

[0029]

Hereinafter, typical soft magnetic materials are described.

[1] FeNi based alloy formed by vacuum deposition or electroplating.

[2] FeAlSi based alloy formed by vacuum deposition.

[3] A soft magnetic film including iron-group-element

based microcrystal structure in which a ferromagnetic material (iron, nickel, or cobalt) is added with a metalloid element represented by carbon (C), silicon (Si), boron (B), nitrogen (N), and phosphorous (P) (see JP-A-2003-132532).

[4] A soft magnetic film including a soft magnetic material (CoZr based alloy) added with nitrogen (N) (see JP-A-2003-178416).

[5] A soft magnetic film including a granular structure such as FeAlO.

[6] A soft magnetic film including a stacked structure such as Fe/C or Fe/SiO₂.

[0030]

The JP-A-2003-132532 discloses that a soft magnetic film is formed by sputtering a material exhibiting ferromagnetism using a sputter gas containing a gas material including a compound of hydrogen and the metalloid element. The JP-A-2003-178416 discloses that a low-noise perpendicular magnetic recording medium is obtained by depositing a soft magnetic layer containing nitrogen between a substrate and a magnetic recording layer by a reactive sputtering method using a mixed gas of argon and nitrogen.

[0031]

As described later, the material used for the soft magnetic film for the low K_u layer of an embodiment of the invention belongs to the above [3], which is formed by

sputtering a ferromagnetic material mainly containing one of metals of Co, Ni and Fe or an alloy of the metal using a sputter gas containing a gas material including a nitrogen compound. While the ferromagnetic material used in an embodiment of the invention is similar to that of the invention of JP-A-2003-132532, since an embodiment of the invention is considered to be apparently most similar to JP-A-2003-178416 in that the soft magnetic layer added with nitrogen is deposited, differences between an embodiment of the invention and the invention of JP-A-2003-178416 are described below, and consequently operation and effects of an embodiment of the invention are described in detail.

[0032]

While a structure of the layer is intentionally made amorphous in the soft magnetic layer of JP-A-2003-178416, the soft magnetic layer of an embodiment of the invention is basically different in a point of having a crystal structure. In an embodiment of the invention, since the low K_u layer as the soft magnetic layer also takes part of magnetization reversal as a magnetic recording layer, the layer has a crystal structure (face-centered cubic structure or hexagonal close package structure) as a precondition. In the amorphous structure in JP-A-2003-178416, such control of magnetization reversal cannot be performed.

[0033]

The basic difference is essentially due to a fact that objective functions are completely different between the soft magnetic layer (low K_u layer) of an embodiment of the invention and the soft magnetic layer (soft magnetic backing layer) of JP-A-2003-178416. A function required for the soft magnetic backing layer used in JP-A-2003-178416 is to effectively concentrate recording fluxes from a recording section of a head in a direction of the recording layer during recording. Moreover, a direction of magnetization in the soft magnetic backing layer is in an in-plane direction of a substrate, therefore the head and the soft magnetic backing layer are made to be in a kind of magnetic circuit. Such a magnetic backing layer is provided in a perpendicular magnetic recording medium so as to take roles of improving recording resolution and increasing reproduction output.

[0034]

On the contrary, the low K_u layer of an embodiment of the invention is completely different from the soft magnetic backing layer, and functions as a recording layer that actually records information in conjunction with the high K_u layer. Moreover, a direction of magnetization of the low K_u layer, which is important for the perpendicular magnetic recording medium, is in a direction perpendicular to a film plane, and in this regard, the low K_u layer is significantly different from that of the soft magnetic backing layer.

[0035]

Next, as a difference between an embodiment of the invention and the invention of JP-A-2003-178416, difference in the reason why nitrogen addition is effective is described. The reason why nitrogen addition is effective in the invention of JP-A-2003-178416 is, to quote description of the paragraph [0012] of the specification of JP-A-2003-178416, that nitrogen is introduced into the soft magnetic layer, exchange coupling force between grains in the soft magnetic layer is reduced, resulting in stabilization of a Neel wall, that is, control of the exchange coupling force is achieved. On the contrary, a purpose of adding nitrogen in an embodiment of the invention is to induce a soft magnetic property due to reduction in crystal grain size in accordance with increase in amount of nitrogen to be added. Specifically, when a film is formed by a sputter method, N is added to a sputter gas such as Ar, thereby crystal grain size of a film to be formed is reduced.

[0036]

On the other hand, when crystal grain size (D) of a ferromagnetic material is gradually reduced, coercive force is initially increased in reverse proportion to D, however, when D is decreased to a certain size (about 40 nm in α -Fe) or less, coercive force is conversely decreased abruptly in proportion to D^6 . The reason for this phenomenon is considered to be that crystal magnetic anisotropy is averaged due to

exchange interactions exerted between nanocrystalline grains, and thereby the anisotropy is apparently reduced. By using this operation, even if a material having a comparatively large crystal magnetic anisotropy such as α -Fe is given, an excellent soft magnetic property can be achieved. Moreover, since a perpendicular magnetic anisotropy constant (k_u value) and a saturation magnetization M_s value are decreased approximately linearly to the amount of nitrogen to be added, each of the values can be controlled by optimizing the amount of nitrogen to be added.

[0037]

In JP-A-2003-178416, "control of perpendicular magnetic anisotropy by adding nitrogen" refers to controlling a magnetic wall structure, namely, suppressing generation of perpendicular magnetic anisotropy. However, in an embodiment of the invention, since the soft magnetic layer takes part of magnetization reversal as a recording layer, the layer essentially has a crystal structure, that is, "control of perpendicular magnetic anisotropy by adding nitrogen" refers to performing control such that the layer always has perpendicular magnetic anisotropy in a certain direction. That is, the control in terms of nitrogen addition is not for suppressing generation of perpendicular magnetic anisotropy.

[0038]

Furthermore, as described before, the purpose of

providing the soft magnetic layer is essentially different between the invention of JP-A-2003-178416 and an embodiment of the invention. That is, since the former uses the soft magnetic layer as the soft magnetic backing layer, and the latter uses the layer as a part of the recording layer (low K_u layer), desired thickness is different between them. The soft magnetic backing layer used in JP-A-2003-178416 needs to have a somewhat large thickness, because it is provided to take part of improving recording resolution, and increasing reproduction output as described before. Specifically, as described in the paragraph [0017] in JP-A-2003-178416, thickness of the soft magnetic layer is preferably 50 nm or more, more preferably 80 nm or more, and particularly preferably 100 nm or more.

[0039]

On the contrary, in an embodiment of the invention, a case that total thickness of the magnetic recording layer is 30 nm or more is not appropriate, because simultaneous magnetization reversal becomes hard to be induced in a thickness direction, as described later. Furthermore, the total thickness of the magnetic recording layer is desirably small, 15 nm or less, in order to efficiently apply a magnetic field generated from a magnetic head to the layer. That is, thickness of the soft magnetic layer (low K_u layer) used in an embodiment of the invention is 30 nm or less, and preferably

less than 50 nm at the maximum, which is minimally necessary thickness for the soft magnetic backing layer.

[0040]

As described above, according to (1), since physical property values such as K_u and M_s of the soft magnetic layer used as the low K_u layer can be controlled by the amount of nitrogen to be added, in addition, crystal grain size (activation grain size) can be reduced with respect to the amount of nitrogen to be added, further improvement in medium characteristic can be achieved, and the soft magnetic layer used as the low K_u layer can be stably produced with high performance.

[0041]

While operation and effects of the aspects of (2) to (6) are as described in JP-A-2005-222675 (US2005/0181237A1 as US counterpart laid-open patent), the points made by them are as follows. The configuration for forming the nonmagnetic grain boundaries according to the above (3) or (5) is preferable in the light of improving SNR. The configuration of the above (4) is preferable for forming the high K_u layer since high K_u is obtained by appropriately adjusting a composition of the configuration or a layer configuration. Furthermore, in an embodiment of the invention, while a plurality of magnetic recording layers having different K_u values are stacked to induce simultaneous magnetization reversal, when saturation

magnetization M_s values of respective magnetic recording layers are extremely different from one another, a leakage field is generated at an interface and acts as a demagnetizing field, thereby magnetization reversal tends to be induced more than necessary. From a viewpoint of preventing this, the above (6) is preferable.

[0042]

According to an embodiment of the invention, a perpendicular magnetic recording medium can be provided, in which the soft magnetic layer used as the low K_u layer can be stably produced with high performance, and thermal stabilization of magnetization, ease of writing by the magnetic head, and SNR are further improved, and a method of manufacturing the medium can be provided.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0076]

Fig. 1 is a schematic section diagram of a perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to an embodiment of the invention;

Fig. 2 is a diagram showing results of obtaining K_u values and crystal grain size of low K_u single-layer films in examples of an embodiment of the invention and comparative examples; and

Fig. 3 is a diagram showing an evaluation result of an

electromagnetic conversion characteristic in examples of an embodiment of the invention and comparative examples.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0043]

Next, an embodiment of the invention is described according to Fig. 1. Fig. 1 is a schematic section diagram of a perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to an embodiment of the invention.

[0044]

The perpendicular magnetic recording medium of an embodiment of the invention as shown in Fig. 1 has a structure where at least a nonmagnetic underlayer 2, a magnetic recording layer 3, and a protective film 4 as a protective layer are formed in this order on a nonmagnetic substrate 1. Even if a seed layer or the like is added between the nonmagnetic underlayer 2 and the nonmagnetic substrate 1 for controlling crystal orientation or crystal grain size of the nonmagnetic underlayer 2, an advantage of an embodiment of the invention is similarly exhibited. In addition, even if a comparatively thick (about several hundred nanometers) soft magnetic layer, which is typically called backing layer, is added between the nonmagnetic underlayer 2 and the nonmagnetic substrate 1 for improving recording/reproduction sensitivity, the advantage is similarly exhibited. Furthermore, a liquid lubricant such

as perfluoro polyether may be coated on the protective film 4.

[0045]

For the nonmagnetic substrate 1, materials used for a typical magnetic recording medium can be used, such as Al alloy applied with NiP plating, chemical strengthening glass, and glass ceramics.

[0046]

The nonmagnetic underlayer 2 is used for appropriately controlling crystal grain size, a grain boundary segregation structure, and crystal orientation of the magnetic recording layer 3 formed thereon, and not particularly restricted in material or thickness. For example, a thin film about 3 nm to 30 nm in thickness can be used, which includes a Co alloy containing Cr of about 30 at% or more, or a metal such as Ti, Ru or Pt, or an alloy containing the metal.

[0047]

As the protective film 4, for example, a thin film mainly containing carbon is used.

[0048]

Next, the magnetic recording layer 3 is described. As described before, the magnetic recording layer 3 includes a layer of a low K_u region 31 having a small perpendicular magnetic anisotropy constant (K_u value), and a layer of a high K_u region 32 of which the K_u value is large. While a stacking order of

the low K_u region 31 and the high K_u region 32 is not limited, it is desirable to stack the low K_u region 31 and the high K_u region 32 in this order on the nonmagnetic underlayer 2 in order to efficiently apply a magnetic field generated from a magnetic head to the high K_u region 32, as shown in Fig. 1. Moreover, to obtain an excellent medium characteristic, it is particularly desirable that a K_u value of the low K_u layer is adjusted to be 1×10^5 erg/cm³ or less, and a K_u value of the high K_u layer is adjusted to be 1×10^6 erg/cm³ or more.

[0049]

While thickness of each region is not particularly limited, a case that total thickness of the magnetic recording layer is 30 nm or more is not appropriate, because simultaneous magnetization reversal is hard to be induced in a vertical direction. Furthermore, total thickness of the magnetic recording layer is desirably small, 15 nm or less in order to efficiently apply the magnetic field generated from the magnetic head to the layer. Since ease of reversal of magnetization and a level of thermal stability of magnetization can be controlled by changing a thickness ratio between the low K_u region 31 and the high K_u region 32, the thickness ratio between them is desirably determined depending on a magnetic head to be used or temperature.

[0050]

To obtain a perpendicular magnetic recording medium

suitable for increase in recording density by using a layer configuration as above, it is desirable that a thin film of an alloy is used for the high K_u region 32, which mainly contains Co as described before, and is added with at least Pt, and has a crystal structure of the hexagonal close packing (hcp), and a preferred crystal orientation plane parallel to a plane of the film is made to be a (002) plane.

[0051]

Moreover, to improve SNR, there is a method of adding a nonmagnetic metal such as Cr, Ta, B or the like to accelerate formation of nonmagnetic grain boundaries in a CoPt based magnetic recording layer having the hcp structure. However, as described before, it is desirable to form nonmagnetic grain boundaries mainly containing an oxide in order to effectively reduce magnetic interactions between crystal grains to improve SNR. As the nonmagnetic oxide, known SiO_2 , or Cr_2O_3 , MgO , ZrO_2 or the like can be used.

[0052]

The low K_u region of an embodiment of the invention can be formed by sputtering a ferromagnetic material mainly containing one of metals of Co, Ni and Fe, or an alloy of the metal using a sputter gas containing a gas material including a nitrogen compound. While the ferromagnetic material to be used is not particularly limited, for example, a material is preferably used, which is an alloy including Co, Ni and Fe being

added with Cr and Pt of 20 at% or less respectively, and Nb, Mo and Cu of 10 at% or less respectively.

[0053]

On the other hand, as the sputter gas used in sputtering such materials, a gas is used, which includes a typically used gas of Ar (argon), Xe (xenon), or Kr (krypton) being added with an approximate amount of nitrogen. Since the amount of nitrogen to be added differs depending on ferromagnetic materials to be used, the amount is desirably determined for each of the ferromagnetic materials. Moreover, while a method of introducing the sputter gas is not particularly limited, it is desirable that the sputter gas is uniformly introduced into a vacuum deposition chamber.

[0054]

Furthermore, the low K_u layer includes a thin film of metal or alloy having a crystal structure of the face-centered cubic lattice (fcc) or hexagonal close packing (hcp), and a preferred crystal orientation plane parallel to a plane of the film is made to be preferably a (111) plane in the former, and a (002) plane in the latter. The (111) plane is oriented parallel to the film plane in the former, fcc structure, and the (002) plane is oriented in the latter, hcp structure, thereby crystal orientation can be appropriately controlled when the magnetic recording layer as the high K_u region 32 is deposited on the low K_u layer.

[0055]

Here, since the low K_u region 31 formed according to the above method is added with nitrogen, crystal grain size (activation grain size) is reduced compared with the low K_u region of the invention described in the JP-A-2005-222675 (US2005/0181237A1 as US counterpart laid-open patent). Furthermore, the interactions between crystal grains are desirably reduced to improve SNR, and in this case, the nonmagnetic grain boundaries mainly containing the oxide are desirably formed.

[0056]

In an embodiment of the invention, a plurality of magnetic recording layers having different K_u values are stacked to induce simultaneous magnetization reversal. However, when values of saturation magnetization M_s of respective magnetic recording layers are extremely different from one another, a leakage flux is generated at an interface. Therefore, in order to prevent it, a ratio of the M_s values of the layers is desirably adjusted to be within a range of 0.8 to 1.2.

Examples

[0057]

Next, examples of the invention are described in conjunction with comparative examples according to Figs. 1 to 3. First, examples 1 to 4 and comparative examples 1 to 2 are

described. In the description hereinafter, when pressure is represented in a unit of Torr, if the pressure is expressed in terms of Pa (Pascal) as the SI unit, the unit can be converted using $1 \text{ Torr} = 133 \text{ Pa}$ (hereinafter, both units are substantially written). Moreover, while a magnetic field is sometimes represented in a unit of Oe (oersted), when the magnetic field is expressed in terms of A/m (ampere per meter) as the SI unit, the unit can be converted using $1 \text{ Oe} = 79.58 \text{ A/m}$. Furthermore, while the K_u value is represented in a unit of erg/cm^3 , when the value is expressed in terms of J/m^3 as the SI unit, the unit can be converted using $1 \text{ erg/cm}^3 (\text{erg/cc}) = 0.1 \text{ J/m}^3$.

[0058]

Example 1

A 2.5 inch disk-shaped chemically strengthened glass substrate was used for the nonmagnetic substrate. The substrate was washed and then introduced into a sputter apparatus. Then, a nonmagnetic underlayer including Ru 20 nm in thickness was formed on the substrate by a DC magnetron sputter method at Ar gas pressure of 2.66 Pa (20 mTorr). Next, a low K_u layer was formed by an RF magnetron sputter method in which 90 mol% Ar-10 mol% N_2 was used for a sputter gas, Ar gas pressure during deposition was 0.67 Pa (5 mTorr), and a target of 90 mol% (70Co-20Cr-10Pt)-10 mol% SiO_2 (figures in parentheses show at%, likewise hereinafter) was used. While thickness of the low K_u layer was not particularly limited,

it was set to be 10 nm herein.

[0059]

Subsequently, the high K_u region was formed by the RF magnetron sputter method using a target of 90 mol% (85Co-15Pt)-10 mol% SiO₂ at Ar gas pressure of 0.67 Pa (5 mTorr). While thickness of the high K_u layer was not particularly limited, it was fixed to 10 nm herein. Moreover, while thickness of each of other regions is not particularly limited, a case that total thickness of the magnetic recording layer is 30 nm or more is not appropriate, because simultaneous magnetization reversal is hard to be induced in the thickness direction, therefore the total thickness was set to be 30 nm or less. Furthermore, total thickness of the magnetic recording layer is desirably small, 15 nm or less, in order to efficiently apply a magnetic field generated from a magnetic head to the recording layer.

[0060]

Subsequently, a carbon protective layer 10 nm thick was stacked on the magnetic recording layer by the DC magnetron sputter method, and then the substrate was removed from a vacuum, consequently a magnetic recording medium in a configuration as shown in Fig. 1 was produced.

[0061]

Example 2

A perpendicular magnetic recording medium was produced

in the same way as in the example 1 except for using 70 mol% Ar-30 mol% N₂ for the sputter gas in forming the low K_u region.

[0062]

Example 3

A perpendicular magnetic recording medium was produced in the same way as in the example 1 except for using 50 mol% Ar-50 mol% N₂ for the sputter gas in forming the low K_u region.

[0063]

Example 4

A perpendicular magnetic recording medium was produced in the same way as in the example 1 except for using 30 mol% Ar-70 mol% N₂ for the sputter gas in forming the low K_u region.

[0064]

Comparative example 1

A perpendicular magnetic recording medium was produced in the same way as in the example 1 except for using pure-Ar for the sputter gas in forming the low K_u region.

[0065]

Comparative example 2

A perpendicular magnetic recording medium was produced in the same way as in the example 1 except for using pure-N₂ for the sputter gas in forming the low K_u region.

[0066]

Fig. 2 shows a result of obtaining the K_u values of single low-K_u-layer films being 10 nm in thickness respectively by

correcting demagnetizing field energy using a magnetic torque meter, the films having been formed according to the production methods described in the examples 1 to 4 and the comparative examples 1 to 2, and a result of measuring crystal grain size of the single-layer films. According to Fig. 2, in the comparative example 1 using pure-Ar to form the low K_u layer, since a film formed as the low K_u layer is a ferromagnetic film, coercive force H_c of the single-layer medium is extremely large, 7.2 kOe, in addition, a K_u value of the medium is large, 3.2×10^6 erg/cm³.

[0067]

On the other hand, in the examples 1 to 4 and the comparative examples 2, with increase in amount of nitrogen added to the sputter gas, significant decrease in coercive force H_c was found in accordance with reduction in crystal grain size in the formed low K_u layers. In particular, in the examples 2 to 4 and the comparative examples 2 using the sputter gas added with nitrogen of 70 mol% Ar-30 mol% N₂ or more, it was confirmed that the single-layer films had a soft magnetic property. On the other hand, the perpendicular magnetic anisotropy K_u value is also decreased with increase in amount of nitrogen to be added as shown in Fig. 2, and for example, in the example 3 showing an excellent soft magnetic property, the K_u value is 6.6×10^4 erg/cm³, that is, a desired K_u value can be obtained.

[0068]

However, in the materials used for the low K_u layers herein, a single-layer film of the comparative example 2, which was formed using pure nitrogen, was an amorphous film, and therefore orientation necessary for an embodiment of the invention was not able to be obtained. Therefore, "-" was shown in a column of crystal grain size of the comparative example 2 in Fig. 2.

[0069]

Regarding the crystal grain size, the size is 7.2 nm in the comparative example 1 using only Ar gas as the sputter gas for film production. The crystal grain size is decreased with increase in concentration of nitrogen to be added, and for example, a value of the crystal grain size is decreased to 3.8 nm in the example 3 using 50 mol% Ar-50 mol% N_2 for the sputter gas for film production.

[0070]

As described above, the amount of nitrogen added to the sputter gas is controlled according to an embodiment of the invention, thereby the K_u value of the low K_u layer can be controlled. Since the K_u value is differently changed to the amount of nitrogen in the sputter gas depending on a composition of the ferromagnetic material used for forming the low K_u layer, the amount of nitrogen to be added is preferably optimized for each of ferromagnetic materials to be used.

[0071]

Next, evaluation of an electromagnetic conversion characteristic of the perpendicular media produced using an embodiment of the invention was carried out. A result of the evaluation is described according to Fig. 3. First, as a typical example of an embodiment of the invention, the example 3 was subjected to evaluation of the electromagnetic conversion characteristic. Moreover, an example 5 and a comparative example 3 produced according to the following methods were similarly subjected to evaluation of the electromagnetic conversion characteristic. As the evaluation of the electromagnetic conversion characteristic, the overwrite characteristic and the ratio of signal to noise SNR were evaluated using a spin stand tester and a single pole type head (written track width $0.25\ \mu\text{m}$) for perpendicular magnetic recording, and a result of the evaluation is shown in Fig. 3. Overwrite values were evaluated in a manner of overwriting a 45 kFCI (kilo Flux Change per Inch) signal on a signal recorded at 336 kFCI. Furthermore, as values of SNR, values measured at 336 kFCI are shown. For each of the media that were subjected to evaluation of the electromagnetic conversion characteristic, a K_u value of a single-layer film including only the low K_u layer was also shown in Fig. 3.

[0072]

Example 5

A perpendicular magnetic recording medium was produced in the same way as in the example 3 except that 100 mol% (70Co-20Cr-10Pt), to which SiO₂ was not added, was used for a target material in forming the low K_u region, in place of 90 mol% (70Co-20Cr-10Pt)-10 mol% SiO₂ used in the example 3.

[0073]

Comparative example 3

A perpendicular magnetic recording medium was produced in the same way as in the example 3 except that 90 mol% (78Ni-18Fe-4Mo)-10 mol% SiO₂, which was used for the material of the low K_u layer of the perpendicular magnetic recording medium described in the above JP-A-2005-222675 (US2005/0181237A1 as US counterpart laid-open patent), was used for a target material in forming the low K_u region.

[0074]

According to Fig. 3, the K_u value of the low K_u single-layer film of each of the perpendicular media is 1×10^5 erg/cm³ or less, that is, a desired physical property value is obtained. Moreover, regarding the overwrite value (O/W), in reflection of improvement in ease of writing as a feature of the layer configuration of an embodiment of the invention, the value is 40 dB or more in any media, that is, a practically sufficient value is given. On the other hand, regarding the SNR value, it is known that when the comparative example 3 is compared to the example 3, while both are added with SiO₂ for

accelerating magnetic separation between crystal grains to improve SNR, in the example 3 as an embodiment of the invention, since the crystal grain size (activation grain size) is further reduced by adding the nitrogen element, the SNR value is improved by 1.2 dB compared with the comparative example 3. Moreover, in the example 5, while the ferromagnetic material used for the low K_u layer is not added with SiO_2 , since the crystal grain size (activation grain size) is similarly reduced by adding the nitrogen element, the SNR value is improved by 0.3 dB compared with the comparative example 3.

[0075]

As described hereinbefore, according to an embodiment of the invention, a perpendicular magnetic recording medium can be produced, in which thermal stabilization of magnetization and ease of writing by the magnetic head are compatibly achieved, and furthermore SNR is improved. Moreover, for the soft magnetic layer used as the low K_u layer of an embodiment of the invention, a ferromagnetic material of a metal of the iron group or an alloy including the metal is used, which is deposited in an atmosphere of the sputter gas added with nitrogen so as to have a soft magnetic property. Thus, the physical property values (M_s and K_u value) of the low K_u layer can be controlled by the amount of added nitrogen gas, and the physical property values of the soft magnetic layer, which have been determined by a target material to be used,

can be easily adjusted, and consequently a medium characteristic is easily adjusted. Moreover, since reduction in crystal grain size (activation grain size) can be concurrently achieved by adding nitrogen to the layer, improvement in SNR necessary for further increase in density can be achieved. Furthermore, since a material used for the high K_u layer can be used for the low K_u layer without any modification, productivity can be improved.

What is claimed is:

1. A perpendicular magnetic recording medium, comprising at least a nonmagnetic underlayer, a magnetic recording layer, and a protective layer formed in this order on a nonmagnetic substrate:

wherein the magnetic recording layer includes a low K_u layer having a relatively small perpendicular magnetic anisotropy constant (K_u value), and a high K_u layer of which the K_u value is relatively large,

the low K_u layer includes a soft magnetic thin film including an iron-group-element based microcrystal structure, in which a nitrogen element is added to a ferromagnetic material mainly containing one of metals of Co, Ni and Fe or an alloy of the metal, the thin film having a crystal structure of a face-centered cubic lattice or hexagonal close package, and

a preferred crystal orientation plane parallel to a plane of the film is made to be a (111) plane in the face-centered cubic lattice structure, and a (002) plane in the hexagonal close package structure.

2. The perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to claim 1:

wherein the magnetic recording layer includes the low K_u layer having the K_u value of 1×10^5 erg/cm³ or less, and

the high K_u layer having the K_u value of 1×10^6 erg/cm³ or more.

3. The perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to claim 1 or 2:

wherein the low K_u layer includes crystal grains including ferromagnetic metal, and nonmagnetic grain boundaries for magnetically separating the crystal grains from one another, and

the nonmagnetic grain boundaries contain a nonmagnetic oxide as a main component.

4. The perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to any one of claims 1 to 3:

wherein the high K_u layer includes an alloy thin film that contains Co as a main component, and is added with at least Pt, and has a crystal structure of the hexagonal close package, and

a preferred crystal orientation plane parallel to a plane of the film is made to be the (002) plane.

5. The perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to any one of claims 1 to 4:

wherein the high K_u layer includes crystal grains including ferromagnetic metal, and nonmagnetic grain boundaries for magnetically separating the crystal grains from one another, and

the nonmagnetic grain boundaries contains a nonmagnetic oxide as a main component.

6. The perpendicular magnetic recording medium according

to any one of claims 1 to 5:

wherein a ratio of a saturation magnetization value (M_s value) of the low K_u layer to an M_s value of the high K_u layer is adjusted to be 0.8 to 1.2.

7. A method of manufacturing the perpendicular magnetic recording medium according to any one of claims 1 to 6:

wherein the low K_u layer is formed by sputtering a material exhibiting ferromagnetism using a sputter gas containing a gas material including a nitrogen compound.