

[Document Name] Specification

[Title of the Invention]

IRIDIUM ALLOY EXCELLENT IN HARDNESS, WORKABILITY AND ANTI-
CONTAMINATION PROPERTIES

5 [Technical Field]

 [0001]

 The present invention relates to an iridium alloy suitable for a wire rod
constituting a probe pin for inspecting the electrical properties of a
semiconductor integrated circuit and the like, and a method for manufacturing
10 the same.

 [Background Art]

 [0002]

 An inspection of the electrical properties of a semiconductor integrated
circuit and the like is carried out by bringing probe pins into contact with a
15 large number of electrode pads of the semiconductor integrated circuit and
the like. Constituent materials for probe pins are required to have hardness
for ensuring wear resistance against inspection which is repeatedly carried
out millions of times, oxidation resistance for suppressing the contamination
of objects to be inspected by the formation of oxide films, and other
20 properties, such as low specific resistance for improving signal delays.
Examples of conventional materials for probe pins include materials in which
beryllium-copper (Be-Cu), phosphor bronze (Cu-Sn-P) and tungsten (W) are
used, and materials in which alloys obtained by adding silver (Ag) to
palladium (Pd) are used.

25 Patent Document 1: JP Patent Application Laid-Open No. 10-038922
 Patent Document 2: JP Patent Application Laid-Open No. 05-154719
 Patent Document 3: JP Patent Application Laid-Open No. 2004-093355

 [0003]

The above-described conventional materials do not provide all of the required properties. That is, copper alloys and tungsten are materials which are oxidized relatively easily although their mechanical properties are sufficient. On the other hand, palladium alloys are somewhat inferior in hardness and the like although they have good oxidation resistance.

[0004]

Hence, iridium is attracting attention as a new constituent material for probe pins. Since iridium is a metal excellent in oxidation resistance, electrical properties and current resistance and is also adequate in terms of hardness, this metal is suitable as a material for probe pins which are subjected to repeated contact.

[Disclosure of the Invention]

[Problems to be Solved by the Invention]

[0005]

However, iridium has some inadequate points for meeting the properties which are required of probe pins in the future. For example, in recent semiconductor integrated circuits and the like, the trend is toward narrower pitches between electrode pads due to high density designs and, therefore, it is required that the wire diameter of probe pins be made fine. In this respect, iridium has high hardness and it is difficult to design fine wires. Therefore, wires are often broken during working and hence it is difficult to meet this requirement.

[0006]

In addition to the above-described high density designs, probe pins are required to adapt to an increase in the inspection speed of circuits. However, an increase in the inspection speed increases loads due to friction and it is feared that a decrease in strength might be caused by heat generation due to increased loads. This problem can occur also in iridium,

and an improvement in mechanical properties at high temperatures is required.

[0007]

5 The present invention has been made against a background of such circumstances, and the invention provides a material for probe pins of which further miniaturization is required in the future, whose use environment becomes severe, and which can meet these requirements.

[Means for Solving the Problems]

[0008]

10 To solve the above-described problems, the present inventors earnestly conducted research and examined the possibility of an improvement in workability and the like by the addition of trace amounts of additive elements to pure iridium, which is the above-described conventional material. The present inventors found out from the examination that a wire
15 rod for probe pins obtains desirable properties by combined addition of zirconium, aluminum and copper.

[0009]

That is, the present invention provides a wire rod for probe pins, consisting of: at least any of zirconium, aluminum or copper, as additive
20 elements of 1 to 1000 ppm; and the balance being iridium.

[0010]

The addition of trace amounts of these additive elements contributes to refining the crystal grains of an iridium material, thereby increasing workability and high-temperature strength. As a result of this, inherent
25 workability is improved compared to pure iridium and working at high temperatures becomes easy. As a result of this, a material according to the present invention permits working into 0.05-mm to 0.5-mm ultrafine wires, and can adapt to high density designs of probe pins. Furthermore, an

increase in high-temperature strength leads to an increase in hardness, and the surface hardness of the material shows not less than 700 Hv in a condition immediately after working. Thus the material can maintain a surface hardness value of not less than 600 Hv even if subjected to 1000°C heat treatment. Even when the temperature of the material becomes high due to a temperature rise caused by repeated contact, the material can maintain stable contact properties.

[0011]

The reason that the additive amount of the additive elements be set to 1 to 1000 ppm is that the range of concentration is necessary to solve the problem of the present invention. Namely, the amount of additive elements of less than 1 ppm cannot contribute to an improvement of workability sufficiently, and that exceeding 1000 ppm will exacerbate the workability, thereby might cause breaking of wires during working of thin wires, and further cracking or the like sometimes occurs, if thin wires are successfully made, during subsequent workings. Another reason is that excessive addition of additive elements will raise specific resistance, thereby exacerbate an electric property. More preferable concentration of additive elements is 3 to 600 ppm, and yet more preferably be 5 to 4000 ppm.

[0012]

The additive elements to be added to iridium can be zirconium, aluminum, or copper alone or in combination. Preferably, zirconium should be an essential additive element. In the case, zirconium may be a sole additive element, however at least aluminum or copper can be further added to zirconium. The reason why zirconium is desirable as an essential additive element is that zirconium, which has the action of raising the recrystallization temperature of iridium in addition to the refinement of crystal

grains, is suitable for an increase in high-temperature strength and for ensuring workability at high temperatures.

[0013]

In the event, as described above, which involves adding at least either
5 aluminum or copper while using zirconium as an essential additive element, it is preferable to limit the zirconium concentration to 100 to 500 ppm, and the aluminum concentration and the copper concentration to 10 to 500 ppm (a total concentration of both aluminum and copper).

[0014]

10 An iridium alloy suitable for a wire rod for probe pins according to the present invention is manufactured by manufacturing an ingot and a bar composed of an iridium alloy having a prescribed composition to which zirconium, aluminum and copper are added and subjecting the ingot and bar to wire rod working. Concretely, a manufacturing method composed of the
15 following steps is preferable.

[0015]

(a) A step of casting an alloy consisting of any one or more of zirconium, aluminum and copper in the range of 1 to 1000 ppm and the balance iridium, and making a bar from a casting.

20 (b) A step of forming a wire rod having a wire diameter of 0.5 to 1.0 mm by hot-working the bar.

(c) A step of subjecting the wire rod, at least once, to a combination of annealing at 1000 to 1200°C and wire drawing of not less than one pass under heat by electric current application.

25 (d) A step of subjecting the wire rod after wire drawing under heat by electric current application, at least once, to a combination of annealing at 900 to 1200°C and cold wire drawing of not less than one pass.

[0016]

In the above-described manufacturing process, the casting of an alloy and the forging of a casting into a bar as well as the drawing of the bar into wire rods having wire diameters of 0.5 to 1.0 mm (hereinafter referred to as rough-worked wire rods) can be performed by publicly known methods. In
5 the present invention, the working of rough-worked wire rods is performed by combining wire drawing under heat by electric current application and cold working, whereby the rough-worked wire rods are worked into wire rods of not more than 0.5 mm while ensuring material hardness and suppressing the occurrence of defects. Working methods according to the present invention
10 is described in detail below.

[0017]

In the casting of an alloy, high-energy-density casting methods, such as arc melting and high-frequency melting, are applied because iridium has a high melting point. The zirconium concentration is adjusted during casting
15 and, either powdery or nubbly raw materials can be used at this time. Hot forging and hot rolling are applied for working an ingot after alloy casting into a bar, and may be performed repeatedly. As a rough standard for working sizes in this step, a bar whose section has a rectangular shape of about 3 to 10 mm square is desirable (the foregoing is a description of the step (a)).

20 [0018]

In the working in the step of working the bar into rough-worked wire rods (the step (b)), after the annealing of the bar, the bar is hot-worked into wire rods having wire diameters of 0.5 to 1.0 mm. The annealing
temperature is 1100°C to 1300°C, and it is preferred that annealing be
25 performed in a non-oxidizing gas atmosphere. Swaging and draw bench working are preferable as hot working, and a combination of swaging and draw bench working is more preferable. At this time, it is possible to perform each working in multiple passes. In this step, annealing may be

performed multiple times. For example, swaging and draw bench working are performed after annealing, and draw bench working is performed after annealing has been performed again, whereby enabling wire rods to have the desired wire diameters.

5 [0019]

The wire drawing under heat by electric current application performed at the step (c), is wire drawing which involves causing a wire rod being worked to pass through a die and pressure rollers. Electric current is applied to the wire rod being worked from outside and the resistance heat generated on that occasion is used as a heat source for ensuring workability. In wire drawing under heat by electric current application, high-temperature and uniform heating is made possible by adjusting the current to be applied, and a zirconium-containing iridium alloy having high high-temperature strength can be relatively easily worked.

15 [0020]

As the condition for the wire drawing by electric current application performed in the present invention, it is preferred that the applied current be 8.0 to 12.0 mA. It is also preferred that a die be used as a working member, and the reduction ratio is set according to the hole diameter of the die. It is preferred that the reduction ratio per pass be set at 15 to 20%. In this wire drawing, it is preferred that a lubricant for lessening the friction between the die and the wire rod to be worked be used. However, it is preferred that a carbon powder be used as a lubricant for suppressing the occurrence of wire breakages and defects.

25 [0021]

Before the wire drawing under heat by electric current application, annealing at 1000 to 1200°C is necessary in order to ensure workability. When a combination of annealing and working of not less than one pass is

regarded as one set, treatment for the working is performed in not less than one set. A rough standard for the wire diameters achieved in this step of wire drawing under heat by electric current application is 0.2 to 0.8 mm, and it is preferred that the rough standard be 0.2 to 0.3 mm particularly when
5 ultrafine wires of not more than 0.15 mm are finally manufactured.

[0022]

The cold wire drawing step (the step (d)) is performed to finally adjust the wire diameter and to impart strength to the wire rod by cold working. In this wire drawing, it is preferred that the reduction ratio per pass be set at 4 to
10 10%. In this cold wire drawing, it is preferred that rapeseed oil be used as a lubricant. Note that, also before this wire drawing, it is necessary to perform annealing at 900 to 1200°C in order to ensure workability. The above-described cold wire drawing allows the material to be worked into wire rods having wire diameters of 0.05 to 0.5 mm.

15 [Effect of the Invention]

[0023]

As described above, the wire rods for probe pins according to the present invention ensures workability by application of iridium alloys containing additive elements of zirconium, aluminum and copper, aiming at
20 an increase in high-temperature strength, and thus enables fine wire designs and high strength that cannot be achieved with pure iridium. The present invention enables manufacture of probe pins of narrow pitch designs, and further enables maintaining stable properties even in use environments subjected to repeated friction.

25 [Best Modes for Carrying Out the Invention]

[0024]

A preferred embodiment of the present invention is described below. In this embodiment, iridium alloys in which the additive amounts of zirconium,

aluminum and copper were appropriately changed were manufactured, and an investigation was made as to whether these iridium alloys can be worked into wire rods.

[0025]

5 Fig. 1 shows the manufacturing process of a wire rod for probe pins in this embodiment. This manufacturing process is broadly divided into a melting (casting) step, a hot working step, a wire rod rough working step, a step of wire drawing under heat by electric current application, and a cold wire drawing step. Each step will be described below.

10 [0026]

<Melting step>: A pure iridium powder and powders of additive elements (zirconium, aluminum, copper) were weighed and mixed to obtain a prescribed composition, and a bar-like iridium alloy ingot was manufactured by arc melting the mixture.

15 [0027]

<Hot working step>: The above-described bar-like ingot was hot forged at 1400°C, and a bar of 8 mm square was obtained. Hot rolling was performed (temperature 1400°C) by using grooved rolling mill rolls and a wire rod of 5 mm square was obtained.

20 [0028]

<Wire rod rough working step>: Before the working, annealing was performed at 1200°C for 30 minutes in a nitrogen atmosphere, and hot swaging and draw bench working were performed. In the hot swaging, the wire rod was caused to pass through a swager while being heated, and the
25 wire rod was reduced to a wire diameter of 3.04 mm by repeating this swaging in 10 passes. Next, this wire rod was worked by use of a draw bench while being heated by means of a burner, and the wire rod was reduced to a wire diameter of 1.90 mm by performing the draw bench

working in 20 passes. Then, annealing was performed again, draw bench working was performed in 20 passes, and a rough-worked wire rod having a wire diameter of 0.51 mm was obtained.

[0029]

- 5 <Step of wire drawing under heat by electric current application>: The rough-worked wire rod worked through these steps was subjected to wire drawing by use of a device for wire drawing under heat by electric current application. In this device for wire drawing under heat by electric current application, the rough-worked wire rod is drawn by being caused to pass
- 10 through a die while being fed from feeding rolls. In the heating by electric current application at this time, electric current is applied by using the feeding rolls and the die as electrodes and the rough-worked wire rod is heated by electric current application. Note that, the die is individually heated. The working conditions adopted in this embodiment were as follows: electric
- 15 current of 9.5 mA and feeding rate of 2.72 m/min. Immediately after the feeding rollers, a carbon powder was applied to the wire rod.

[0030]

- Before the wire drawing under heat by electric current application, annealing was performed at 1100°C for 30 minutes in a nitrogen atmosphere.
- 20 Wire drawing was performed in 4 passes under the above-described conditions. This combination of annealing and wire drawing under heat by electric current application was performed twice and a wire rod having a wire diameter of 0.27 mm was obtained.

[0031]

- 25 <Cold wire drawing step>: Annealing was performed at 1100°C for 30 minutes in a nitrogen atmosphere and cold wire drawing was performed. This combination of heat treatment and cold wire drawing was performed 10 times and finally a wire rod having a wire diameter of 0.1 mm was obtained.

[0032]

In this embodiment, in the above-described manufacturing process, the number of wire breakages during working for obtaining one lot (total length: 300 m) of wire rods (wire diameter: 0.1 mm) was recorded. The

5 bending test was conducted for the manufactured wire rods. In this bending test, wire rods are bent 90° and unbent until they were broken and the number of bends performed until breakage occurs is measured.

Furthermore, for the manufactured wire rods, heat treatment was performed immediately after the manufacture and at 1000°C for 30 minutes and the

10 surface hardness after the heat treatment was measured with a Vickers hardness meter. The results of these investigations are shown in Tables 1 to 4.

[0033]

[Table 1]

15

* Al, Cu and Zr were singly added

	Concentration of additive elements (ppm)			Evaluation of workability ^{*1}		Evaluation of hardness	
	Al	Cu	Zr	Number of wire breakages	Number of bends	After manufacture	After heat treatment
Reference example 1	1	-	-	2	4	720	643
Reference example 2	10	-	-	1	5	740	641
Reference example 3	100	-	-	0	6	783	703
Reference example 4	1000	-	-	1	7	807	734
Reference example 5	-	1	-	2	4	700	617
Reference example 6	-	10	-	1	5	750	654
Reference example 7	-	100	-	1	6	772	700
Reference example 8	-	1000	-	0	7	810	725

Reference example 9	-	-	1	1	5	740	651
Reference example 10	-	-	10	0	5	765	701
Reference example 11	-	-	100	0	7	790	727
Reference example 12	-	-	1000	0	7	837	740

*1 Evaluation of workability:

Number of wire breakages = Number of wire breakages that occurred during wire rod working

Number of bends = Number of bends performed until the breakage of a manufactured wire rod occurred

5

[0034]

[Table 2]

* Two elements were selected from Al, Cu and Zr and added

	Concentration of additive elements (ppm)			Evaluation of workability ^{*1}		Evaluation of hardness	
	Al	Cu	Zr	Number of wire breakages	Number of bends	After manufacture	After heat treatment
Reference example 13	10	-	10	1	5	731	642
Reference example 14	-	10	10	2	5	725	638
Embodiment 1	100	-	100	0	8	761	690
Embodiment 2	-	100	100	0	7	798	705
Reference example 15	10	10	-	1	5	740	641
Reference example 16	100	100	-	0	8	755	672
Embodiment 3	100	-	300	0	8	820	744
Embodiment 4	-	300	100	0	8	833	750

*1 Evaluation of workability:

Number of wire breakages = Number of wire breakages that occurred during wire rod working

Number of bends = Number of bends performed until the breakage of a manufactured wire rod occurred

[0035]

15 [Table 3]

* The three elements of Al, Cu and Zr were added

	Concentration of additive elements (ppm)			Evaluation of workability ^{*1}		Evaluation of hardness	
	Al	Cu	Zr	Number of wire breakages	Number of bends	After manufacture	After heat treatment
Reference example 17	10	10	10	0	5	755	680
Reference example 18	55	20	25	0	8	770	660
Reference example 19	60	10	30	0	9	778	680
Reference example 20	60	15	25	0	8	776	682
Embodiment 5	30	10	280	0	8	810	725
Embodiment 6	35	40	300	0	9	830	730
Embodiment 7	45	25	330	0	8	826	744
Embodiment 8	100	100	100	0	7	784	721

*1 Evaluation of workability:

Number of wire breakages = Number of wire breakages that occurred during wire rod working

5 Number of bends = Number of bends performed until the breakage of a manufactured wire rod occurred

[0036]

[Table 4]

* The additive concentrations of Al, Cu and Zr were outside the appropriate ranges.

	Concentration of additive elements (ppm)			Evaluation of workability ^{*1}		Evaluation of hardness	
	Al	Cu	Zr	Number of wire breakages	Number of bends	After manufacture	After heat treatment
Comparative example 1	0.5	-	-	8	2	660	298
Comparative example 2	-	0.5	-	7	2	663	303
Comparative example 3	-	-	0.5	9	2	680	310
Comparative example 4	1200	-	-	8	3	822	733
Comparative example 5	-	1200	-	8	3	812	735
Comparative example 6	-	-	1200	9	3	840	763

*1 Evaluation of workability:

Number of wire breakages = Number of wire breakages that occurred during wire rod working

5 Number of bends = Number of bends performed until the breakage of a manufactured wire rod occurred

[0037]

It is confirmable from Tables 1 to 3 that in iridium to which any one of zirconium, aluminum and copper was added by 1 ppm or more, the breakage during working occurs less and that the iridium is strong in the resistance
10 against bending even after the working into the wire rods. The hardness of the iridium exceeds 700 Hv immediately after the working and maintains not less than 600 Hv even after the heat treatment at 1000°C. As an effect of the above-identified additive elements, it is notable that zirconium specifically shows a high improvement effect. As an additive element, zirconium,
15 aluminum or copper may be added singularly, however addition of these elements in a combined manner will show excellent properties.

[0038]

In contrast to this, as is recognizable from the comparative examples of Table 4, iridium alloys whose additive amount of each element is less than
20 1 ppm are inferior in workability, have insufficient hardness, and show a remarkable decrease in hardness due to heat treatment. When a total concentration of the additive elements exceeds 1000 ppm, workability remains inferior although hardness is improved.

[0039]

25 Note that, pure iridium ingots were manufactured without the addition of the additive elements in order to make a comparison with this embodiment, and the manufacture of fine wires was tried in the same process as with this embodiment. As a result, working was successfully performed anyway until the step of wire rod rough working and the wire rod could be reduced to a
30 wire diameter of 1.0 mm. However, when annealing was thereafter

performed at 1000°C for 30 minutes for wire drawing under heat by electric current application, the resultant was a structure with coarsened crystal grains, and frequently followed by wire breakage in the subsequent working. Thus working into fine wires failed.

5 [0040]

Next, fine wires were arbitrarily selected from the above-described embodiments and comparative examples. These fine wires were cut and the leading ends thereof were worked into probe pins, and the anti-contamination properties were examined by repeated contact. As described
10 earlier, probe pins have the problems of contamination, such as the formation of oxide films on the probe pins themselves due to repeated use and the adherence of foreign substances from objects in contact with the probe pins, and the resistance to contamination has also become an important property.

[0041]

15 The evaluation of the anti-contamination properties was carried out using the simulator shown in Fig. 2. In this test, a probe pin which has been manufactured is set on the simulator and electric resistance is measured by repeated contact under the following conditions. In the test, electric resistance increases with increasing number of contacts. The point in time
20 when electric resistance exceeds 5 Ω is regarded as a point in time when cleaning becomes necessary due to the contamination, and the number of contacts until this point in time was measured. The measurement results of the number of contacts occurring until resistance due to contact exceeds 5 Ω are shown in Table 5. Note that test results of tungsten, which is a
25 conventional material, are also shown in Table 5.

Test conditions

- Object in contact: Aluminum pad
- Contact pressure: 8 g/pin

- Applied electric current: 100 mA/pin

[0042]

[Table 5]

	Concentration of additive elements (ppm)			Number of contacts ^{*2}
	Al	Cu	Zr	
Embodiment 5	30	10	280	1.56 million times
Embodiment 7	45	25	330	1.60 million times
Embodiment 8	100	100	100	1.51 million times
Comparative example 1	0.5	-	-	950,000 times
Comparative example 5	-	1200	-	800,000 times
Tungsten	-	-	-	10,000 times

*2 Number of contacts: Number of contacts made until contact resistance exceeded 5 Ω

[0043]

It was ascertained from Table 5 that in the probe pins made of materials according to each embodiment, the number of contacts made until cleaning becomes necessary becomes not less than 150 times the number of contacts in tungsten, which is a conventional material, and that these probe pins have excellent anti-contamination properties. Although in this respect the effect of the improvement of the anti-contamination properties is observed in comparative examples 1 and 5, it is recognizable that the anti-contamination properties are inferior to those of each embodiment. The high anti-contamination properties of the probe pins according to the present invention were ascertained from the results of the simulation, and these high anti-contamination properties lead to the fact that also in an actual test apparatus, cleaning-less inspection on probe pins (a decrease in the frequency of cleaning) can be achieved and that the total inspection time can be substantially shortened.

[Brief Description of the Drawings]

[0044]

[Fig. 1] A diagram to explain the manufacturing process of a wire rod for probe pins according to a first embodiment; and

[Fig. 2] A diagram to explain the construction of a simulator for
5 evaluating anti-contamination properties.

[Document Name] Scope of Claim for Patent

[Claim 1]

An iridium alloy suitable for a wire rod for probe pins, with zirconium as an additive element contained as an essential element and with aluminum and/or copper further added, wherein the additive concentration of zirconium is 100 to 500 ppm, and the total additive concentration of aluminum and copper is 10 to 500 ppm.

[Claim 2]

The iridium alloy according to claim 1, wherein the total concentration of additive elements is not more than 600 ppm.

[Claim 3]

A manufacturing method of the wire rod for probe pins, said wire rod for probe pins defined in claim 1 or 2, comprising the steps of:

- (a) casting an alloy consisting of additive elements consisting of zirconium and aluminum and/or copper and the balance iridium, and making a bar from a casting;
- (b) forming a wire rod having a wire diameter of 0.5 to 1.0 mm by hot working the bar;
- (c) subjecting the wire rod, at least once, to a combination of annealing at 1000 to 1200°C and wire drawing of not less than one pass under heat by electric current application; and
- (d) subjecting the wire rod after wire drawing under heat by electric current application, at least once, to a combination of annealing at 900 to 1200°C and cold wire drawing of not less than one pass.