THE SET OF NONSQUARES IN A NUMBER FIELD IS DIOPHANTINE

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Abstract. Fix a number field \( k \). We prove that \( k^\times - k^{\times 2} \) is diophantine over \( k \). This is deduced from a theorem that for a nonconstant separable polynomial \( P(x) \in k[x] \), there are at most finitely many \( a \in k^\times \) modulo squares such that there is a Brauer-Manin obstruction to the Hasse principle for the conic bundle \( X \) given by \( y^2 - az^2 = P(x) \).

1. Introduction

Throughout, let \( k \) be a global field; occasionally we impose additional conditions on its characteristic. Warning: we write \( k^n = \prod_{i=1}^n k \) and \( k^{\times n} = \{ a^n : a \in k^\times \} \).

1.1. Diophantine sets. A subset \( A \subseteq k^n \) is diophantine over \( k \) if there exists a closed subscheme \( V \subseteq A_k^{n+m} \) such that \( A \) equals the projection of \( V(k) \) under \( k^{n+m} \to k^n \). The complexity of the collection of diophantine sets over a field \( k \) determines the difficulty of solving polynomial equations over \( k \). For instance, it follows from \([\text{Mat70}]\) that if \( \mathbb{Z} \) is diophantine over \( \mathbb{Q} \), then there is no algorithm to decide whether a multivariable polynomial equation with rational coefficients has a solution in rational numbers. Moreover, diophantine sets can be built up from other diophantine sets. In particular, diophantine sets over \( k \) are closed under taking finite unions and intersections. Therefore it is of interest to gather a library of diophantine sets.

1.2. Main result. Our main theorem is the following:

Theorem 1.1. For any number field \( k \), the set \( k^\times - k^{\times 2} \) is diophantine over \( k \).

In other words, there is an algebraic family of varieties \((V_t)_{t \in k}\) such that \( V_t \) has a \( k \)-point if and only if \( t \) is not a square. This result seems to be new even in the case \( k = \mathbb{Q} \).

Corollary 1.2. For any number field \( k \) and for any \( n \in \mathbb{Z}_{\geq 0} \), the set \( k^\times - k^{\times 2n} \) is diophantine over \( k \).

Proof. Let \( A_n = k^\times - k^{\times 2n} \). We prove by induction on \( n \) that \( A_n \) is diophantine over \( k \). The base case \( n = 1 \) is Theorem [1.1]. The inductive step follows from

\[ A_{n+1} = A_1 \cup \{ t^2 : t \in A_n \text{ and } -t \in A_n \} \]

\[ \square \]
1.3. **Brauer-Manin obstruction.** The main ingredient of the proof of Theorem 1.1 is the fact the Brauer-Manin obstruction is the only obstruction to the Hasse principle for certain Châtelet surfaces over number fields, so let us begin to explain what this means. Let \( \Omega_k \) be the set of nontrivial places of \( k \). For \( v \in \Omega_k \), let \( k_v \) be the completion of \( k \) at \( v \). Let \( A \) be the adele ring of \( k \). For a projective \( k \)-variety \( X \), we have \( X(A) = \prod_{v \in \Omega_k} X(k_v) \); one says that there is a **Brauer-Manin obstruction to the Hasse principle for** \( X \) if \( X(A) \neq \emptyset \) but \( X(A)^{Br} = \emptyset \). See [Sk00](#) §5.2.

1.4. **Conic bundles and Châtelet surfaces.** Let \( E \) be a rank-3 vector sheaf over a base variety \( B \). A nowhere-vanishing section \( s \in \Gamma(B, \text{Sym}^2 E) \) defines a subscheme \( X \) of \( \mathbb{P}E \) whose fibers over \( B \) are (possibly degenerate) conics. As a special case, we may take \( (E, s) = (L_0 \oplus L_1 \oplus L_2, s_0 + s_1 + s_2) \) where each \( L_i \) is a line sheaf on \( B \), and the \( s_i \in \Gamma(B, L_i^{\oplus 2}) \subset \Gamma(B, \text{Sym}^2 E) \) are sections that do not simultaneously vanish on \( B \).

We specialize further to the case where \( B = \mathbb{P}^1 \), \( L_0 = L_1 = \mathcal{O}, L_2 = \mathcal{O}(n) \), \( s_0 = 1, s_1 = -a, \) and \( s_2 = -\tilde{P}(w, x) \) where \( a \in k^\times \) and \( \tilde{P}(w, x) \in \Gamma(\mathbb{P}^1, \mathcal{O}(2n)) \) is a separable binary form of degree \( 2n \). Let \( P(x) := \tilde{P}(1, x) \in k[x] \), so \( P(x) \) is a separable polynomial of degree \( 2n - 1 \) or \( 2n \). We then call \( X \) the conic bundle given by

\[
y^2 - ax^2 = P(x).
\]

A **Châtelet surface** is a conic bundle of this type with \( n = 2 \), i.e., with \( \deg P \) equal to 3 or 4. See also [Poo01](#).

The proof of Theorem 1.1 relies on the Châtelet surface case of the following result about families of more general conic bundles:

**Theorem 1.3.** Let \( k \) be a global field of characteristic not 2. Let \( P(x) \in k[x] \) be a nonconstant separable polynomial. Then there are at most finitely many classes in \( k^\times/k^\times 2 \) represented by \( a \in k^\times \) such that there is a Brauer-Manin obstruction to the Hasse principle for the conic bundle \( X \) given by \( y^2 - ax^2 = P(x) \).

**Remark 1.4.** Theorem 1.3 is analogous to the classical fact that for an integral indefinite ternary quadratic form \( q(x, y, z) \), the set of nonzero integers represented by \( q \) over \( \mathbb{Z}_p \) for all \( p \) but not over \( \mathbb{Z} \) fall into finitely many classes in \( \mathbb{Q}^\times/\mathbb{Q}^\times 2 \). J.-L. Colliot-Thélène and F. Xu explain how to interpret and prove this fact (and its generalization to arbitrary number fields) in terms of the integral Brauer-Manin obstruction: see [CTX07](#) §7, especially Proposition 7.9 and the very end of §7. Our proof of Theorem 1.3 shares several ideas with the arguments there.

1.5. **Definable subsets of \( k_v \) and their intersections with \( k \).** The proof of Theorem 1.1 requires one more ingredient, namely that certain subsets of \( k \) defined by local conditions are diophantine over \( k \). This is the content of Theorem 1.5 below, which is proved in more generality than needed. By a **\( k \)-definable subset** of \( k^n \), we mean the subset of \( k^n \) defined by some first-order formula in the language of fields involving only constants from \( k \), even though the variables range over elements of \( k_v \).

**Theorem 1.5.** Let \( k \) be a number field. Let \( k_v \) be a nonarchimedean completion of \( k \). For any \( k \)-definable subset \( A \) of \( k^n_v \), the intersection \( A \cap k^n \) is diophantine over \( k \).
1.6. Outline of paper. Section 1.3 shows that Theorem 1.5 is an easy consequence of known results, namely the description of definable subsets over \( k_v \), and the diophantineness of the valuation subring \( \mathcal{O} \) of \( k \) defined by \( v \). Section 1.6 proves Theorem 1.3 by showing that for most twists of a given conic bundle, the local Brauer evaluation map at one place is enough to rule out a Brauer-Manin obstruction. Finally, Section 1.7 puts everything together to prove Theorem 1.3.

2. Subsets of global fields defined by local conditions

Lemma 2.1. Let \( m \in \mathbb{Z}_{>0} \) be such that \( \text{char} \ k \nmid m \). Then \( k_v^{\times m} \cap k \) is diophantine over \( k \).

Proof. The valuation subring \( \mathcal{O} \) of \( k \) defined by \( v \) is diophantine over \( k \): see the first few paragraphs of §3 of [Rum80]. The hypothesis \( \text{char} \ k \nmid m \) implies the existence of \( c \in k^\times \) such that \( 1 + c\mathcal{O} \subset k_v^{\times m} \), fix such a \( c \). The denseness of \( k^\times \) in \( k_v^\times \) implies \( k_v^{\times m} \cap k = (1 + c\mathcal{O})k^{\times m} \). The latter is diophantine over \( k \).

Proof of Theorem 1.3. Call a subset of \( k_v^m \) simple if it is of one of the following two types: \( \{ x \in k_v^m : f(x) = 0 \} \) or \( \{ x \in k_v^m : f(x) \in k_v^{\times m} \} \) for some \( f \in k[x_1, \ldots, x_n] \) and \( m \in \mathbb{Z}_{>0} \). It follows from the proof of [Mac76, Theorem 1] (see also [Mac76, §2] and [Den84, §2]) that any \( k \)-definable subset \( A \) is a boolean combination of simple subsets. The complement of a simple set of the first type is a simple set of the second type (with \( m = 1 \)). The complement of a simple set of the second type is a union of simple sets, since \( k_v^{\times m} \) has finite index in \( k_v^\times \). Therefore any \( k \)-definable \( A \) is a finite union of finite intersections of simple sets. Diophantine sets in \( k \) are closed under taking finite unions and finite intersections, so it remains to show that for every simple subset \( A \) of \( k_v^m \), the intersection \( A \cap k \) is diophantine. If \( A \) is of the first type, then this is trivial. If \( A \) is of the second type, then this follows from Lemma 2.1. \( \square \)

3. Family of conic bundles

Given a \( k \)-variety \( X \) and a place \( v \) of \( k \), let \( \text{Hom}'(\text{Br} \ X, \text{Br} \ k_v) \) be the set of \( f \in \text{Hom}(\text{Br} \ X, \text{Br} \ k_v) \) such that the composition \( \text{Br} \ k \to \text{Br} \ X \to \text{Br} \ k_v \) equals the map induced by the inclusion \( k \subseteq k_v \). The \( v \)-adic evaluation pairing \( \text{Br} \ X \times \text{Br}(k_v) \to \text{Br} k_v \) induces a map \( X(k_v) \to \text{Hom}'(\text{Br} \ X, \text{Br} k_v) \).

Lemma 3.1. With notation as in Theorem 1.3, there exists a finite set of places \( S \) of \( k \), depending on \( P(x) \) but not \( a \), such that if \( v \notin S \) and \( v(a) \) is odd, then \( X(k_v) \to \text{Hom}'(\text{Br} \ X, \text{Br} k_v) \) is surjective.

Proof. The function field of \( \mathbb{P}^1 \) is \( k(x) \). Let \( Z \) be the zero locus of \( \tilde{P}(w, x) \) in \( \mathbb{P}^1 \). Let \( G \) be the group of \( f \in k(x)^\times \) having even valuation at every closed point of \( \mathbb{P}^1 - Z \). Choose \( P_1(x), \ldots, P_m(x) \in G \) representing a \( \mathbb{F}_2 \)-basis for the image of \( G \) in \( k(x)^\times /k(x)^{\times 2}k^\times \). We may assume that \( P_m(x) = P(x) \). Choose \( S \) so that each \( P_i(x) \) is a ratio of polynomials whose nonzero coefficients are \( S \)-units, and so that \( S \) contains all places above 2.

Let \( \kappa(X) \) be the function field of \( X \). A well-known calculation (see [Sko01, §7.1]) shows that the class of each quaternion algebra \((a, P_i(x))\) in \( \text{Br} \kappa(X) \) belongs to the subgroup \( \text{Br} \ X \), and that the cokernel of \( \text{Br} k \to \text{Br} X \) is an \( \mathbb{F}_2 \)-vector space with the classes of \((a, P_i(x))\) for \( i \leq m - 1 \) as a basis.
Suppose that $v \notin S$ and $v(a)$ is odd. Let $f \in \text{Hom}'(\text{Br} X, \text{Br} k_v)$. The homomorphism $f$ is determined by where it sends $(a, P_i(x))$ for $i \leq m - 1$. We need to find $R \in X(k_v)$ mapping to $f$.

Let $O_v$ be the valuation ring in $k_v$, and let $\mathbb{F}_v$ be its residue field. For $i \leq m - 1$, choose $c_i \in O_v^\times$ whose image in $\mathbb{F}_v^\times$ is a square or not, according to whether $f$ sends $(a, P_i(x))$ to 0 or 1/2 in $\mathbb{Q}/\mathbb{Z} \simeq \text{Br} k_v$. Since $v(a)$ is odd, we have $(a, c_i) = f((a, P_i(x)))$ in $\text{Br} k_v$.

View $\mathbb{P}^1 - Z$ as a smooth $O_v$-scheme, and let $Y$ be the finite étale cover of $\mathbb{P}^1 - Z$ whose function field is obtained by adjoining $\sqrt{c_i P_i(x)}$ for $i \leq m - 1$ and also $\sqrt{P(x)}$. Then the generic fiber $Y_{k_v} := Y \times_{O_v} k_v$ is geometrically integral. Assuming that $S$ was chosen to include all $v$ with small $\mathbb{F}_v$, we may assume that $v \notin S$ implies that $Y$ has a (smooth) $\mathbb{F}_v$-point, which by Hensel’s lemma lifts to a $k_v$-point $Q$. There is a morphism from $Y_{k_v}$ to the smooth projective model of $X$ over $k$, which in turn embeds as a closed subscheme of $X_{k_v}$, as the locus where $z = 0$. Let $R$ be the image of $Q$ under $Y(k_v) \to X(k_v)$, and let $\alpha = x(R) \in k_v$. Evaluating $(a, P_i(x))$ on $R$ yields $(a, P_i(\alpha))$, which is isomorphic to $(a, c_i)$ since $c_i P_i(\alpha) \in k_v^{\times 2}$. Thus $R$ maps to $f$, as required.

**Lemma 3.2.** Let $X$ be a projective $k$-variety. If there exists a place $v$ of $k$ such that the map $X(k_v) \to \text{Hom}'(\text{Br} X, \text{Br} k_v)$ is surjective, then there is no Brauer-Manin obstruction to the Hasse principle for $X$.

**Proof.** If $X(A) = \emptyset$, then the Hasse principle holds. Otherwise, pick $Q = (Q_w) \in X(A)$, where $Q_w \in X(k_w)$ for each $w$. For $A \in \text{Br} X$, let $\text{ev}_A : X(L) \to \text{Br} L$ be the evaluation map for any field extension $L$ of $k$. Let $\text{inv}_w : \text{Br} k_w \to \mathbb{Q}/\mathbb{Z}$ be the usual inclusion map. Define

$$\eta : \text{Br} X \to \mathbb{Q}/\mathbb{Z} \simeq \text{Br} k_v$$

$$A \mapsto -\sum_{w \neq v} \text{inv}_w \text{ev}_A(Q_w).$$

By reciprocity, $\eta \in \text{Hom}'(\text{Br} X, \text{Br} k_v)$. The surjectivity hypothesis yields $R \in X(k_v)$ giving rise to $\eta$. Define $Q' = (Q'_w) \in X(A)$ by $Q'_w := Q_w$ for $w \neq v$ and $Q'_v := R$. Then $Q' \in X(A)^{\text{Br}}$, so there is no Brauer-Manin obstruction.

**Proof of Theorem 1.3.** Let $S$ be as in Lemma 3.1. Enlarge $S$ to assume that $\text{Pic} O_{k,S}$ is trivial. Then the set of $a \in k^\times$ such that $v(a)$ is even for all $v \notin S$ has the same image in $k^\times/k^{\times 2}$ as the finitely generated group $O_{k,S}^\times$, so the image is finite.

Suppose that $a \in k^\times$ has image in $k^\times/k^{\times 2}$ lying outside this finite set. Then we can fix $v \notin S$ such that $v(a)$ is odd. Let $X$ be the corresponding surface. Combining Lemmas 3.1 and 3.2 shows that there is no Brauer-Manin obstruction to the Hasse principle for $X$.

4. The set of nonsquares is diophantine

**Proof of Theorem 1.1.** For each place $v$ of $k$, define $S_v := k^\times \cap k_v^{\times 2}$ and $N_v := k^\times - S_v$. By Theorem 1.3, the sets $S_v$ and $N_v$ are diophantine over $k$.

By [Poo09, Proposition 4.1], there is a Châtelet surface

$$X_1 : y^2 - bz^2 = P(x)$$

over $k$, with $P(x)$ a product of two irreducible quadratic polynomials, such that there is a Brauer-Manin obstruction to the Hasse principle for $X_1$. For $t \in k^\times$, let $X_t$ be the (smooth
We claim that the following are equivalent for \( t \in k^\times \):

(i) \( U_t \) has a \( k \)-point.
(ii) \( X_t \) has a \( k \)-point.
(iii) \( X_t \) has a \( k_v \)-point for every \( v \) and there is no Brauer-Manin obstruction to the Hasse principle for \( X_t \).

The implications (i) \( \implies \) (ii) \( \implies \) (iii) are trivial. The implication (iii) \( \implies \) (ii) follows from [CTCS80, Theorem B]. Finally, in [CTCS80], the reduction of Theorem B to Theorem A combined with Remarque 7.4 shows that (ii) implies that \( X_t \) is \( k \)-unirational, which implies (i).

Let \( A \) be the (diophantine) set of \( t \in k^\times \) such that (i) holds. The isomorphism type of \( U_t \) depends only on the image of \( t \) in \( k^\times /k^\times 2 \), so \( A \) is a union of cosets of \( k^\times 2 \) in \( k^\times \). We will compute \( A \) by using (iii).

The affine curve \( y^2 = P(x) \) is geometrically integral so it has a \( k_v \)-point for all places \( v \) outside a finite set \( F \). So for any \( t \in k^\times \), the variety \( X_t \) has a \( k_v \)-point for all \( v \notin F \). Since \( X_1 \) has a \( k_v \)-point for all \( v \) and in particular for \( v \in F \), if \( t \in \bigcap_{v \in F} S_v \), then \( X_t \) has a \( k_v \)-point for all \( v \).

Let \( B := A \cup \bigcup_{v \in F} N_v \). If \( t \in k^\times - B \), then \( X_t \) has a \( k_v \)-point for all \( v \), and there is a Brauer-Manin obstruction to the Hasse principle for \( X_t \). By Theorem [1.3], \( k^\times - B \) consists of finitely many cosets of \( k^\times 2 \), one of which is \( k^\times 2 \) itself. Each coset of \( k^\times 2 \) is diophantine over \( k \), so taking the union of \( B \) with all the finitely many missing cosets except \( k^\times 2 \) shows that \( k^\times - k^\times 2 \) is diophantine. \( \square \)

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References


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