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Experimental demonstration of a compact epithermal neutron source based on a high power laser

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Epithermal neutrons from pulsed-spallation sources have revolutionised neutron science allowing scientists to acquire new insight into the structure and properties of matter. Here we demonstrate that laser driven fast (~MeV) neutrons can be efficiently moderated to epithermal energies with intrinsically short burst durations. In a proof-of-principle experiment using a 100 TW laser, a significant epithermal neutron flux of the order of $10^5$ n/sr/pulse in the energy range 0.5-300 eV was measured, produced by a compact moderator deployed downstream of the laser-driven fast neutron source. The moderator used in the campaign was specifically designed, by the help of MCNPX simulations, for an efficient and directional moderation of the fast neutron spectrum produced by a laser driven source.

There has been over the last decades a sustained interest in laser-driven neutron sources, which are capable of producing sub-ns bursts of fast (MeV energies) neutrons with high brightness[1–5]. Although fast neutrons are useful for many applications, such as imaging [6] and material testing for fusion reactor vessels [7], the arena of neutron science and applications mainly requires slow neutrons (with energies ranging from sub-meV to keV) which are provided at reactor [8] and accelerator [9] based facilities by moderating fast neutrons. In particular, sources of epithermal neutrons (eV-100keV) are of high interest for a wide range of applications, from material science [10–12] to nuclear waste transmutations [13] and healthcare [14, 15]. However, the scale and operational costs involved in accelerator-based facilities not only limit their availability to the scientific community, but also hinder their wide promotion in the industrial, security and healthcare sectors.

In this paper we report experimental demonstration of producing epithermal neutrons from a laser driven source. By directing laser-driven fast neutrons produced by p-Li reactions onto a compact (10 cm×10 cm×8 cm) moderator placed at ~11 cm from the source, a significant flux of epithermal neutrons ~ $5 \times 10^5$ n/sr/pulse in the range 0.5-300 eV was produced. The epithermal neutrons were measured at a distance of 2.58 m from the moderator using 3He detectors in ToF mode. The proof-of-principle results presented here indicate a significant scope for further improvement in terms of attainable flux by optimising the setup and the fast neutron source, as will be discussed in the final section of the paper. In light of the latest development in diode-pumped, high repetition rate high power laser systems, laser-based sources in the future may offer the possibility of developing compact beamlines, closely coupled to the moderator, thanks to the significantly less hostile environment offered by a laser-based system compared to reactor-based and pulsed-spallation facilities.

The experiment was carried out employing the 100 TW arm of the VULCAN laser facility of the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, STFC, UK. A schematic of the experimental setup is shown in Fig. 1. The ~750 fs FWHM laser pulses with energy of ~50 J after the compressor were focused onto 10 μm Au targets by an f/3 off-axis parabola, delivering peak intensities of ~ $5 \times 10^{19}$ W cm$^{-2}$ onto the target. The fast neutrons were produced by impinging the ions from the gold foil (henceforth called pitcher) onto a ~2 cm thick block of lithium (henceforth called catcher) placed ~5 mm away from the pitcher. The spectra of the fast neutrons pro-
tors with respect to the incident neutron energy is given of energy up to $300 \text{ eV}$ could be detected by the $^3\text{He}$ detectors in a ToF mode. The efficiency of the $^3\text{He}$ detector restrained us from measuring the fast neutrons produced along the beam axis at a distance of $2.83 \text{ m}$ from the catcher. The $^3\text{He}$ detectors were placed inside a shielded housing with high voltage ($2 \text{ kV}$) applied across the anodes and cathodes. Due to the high sensitivity of the $^3\text{He}$ detectors, the gamma flash produced by the laser interaction saturated the signal at early times, and only neutrons of energy up to $~300 \text{ eV}$ could be detected by the $^3\text{He}$ detectors in a ToF mode. The efficiency of the detectors with respect to the incident neutron energy is given by the formula, $\eta = 1 - \exp(-0.00482 P d \lambda)$, where $P$ is the gas pressure in bar, $d$ is the tube diameter in mm and $\lambda$ is the wavelength of neutrons in angstroms. One of the $^3\text{He}$ detectors was wrapped with a few mm thick cadmium sheets in order to identify the background level of stray thermal ($\lesssim 0.5 \text{ eV}$ [20]) neutrons hitting the detector. The $^3\text{He}$ detectors were placed behind a $\text{B}_4\text{C}$ cylindrical collimator ($\sim 30 \text{ cm}$ long with $\sim 30 \text{ cm}$ outer diameter and $\sim 5 \text{ cm}$ inner diameter) as shown in Fig. 1.

The configuration of the compact moderator used in the experiment is shown in Fig. 2(a). The fast neutrons from the catcher, were directed to impinge onto the moderator, which was aligned along the beam axis as shown in Fig. 1. The thickness and materials used in the moderator were chosen based on MCNPX [21] simulations, with the aim of optimizing the flux of epithermal neutrons from the exit plane of the moderator. The choice of materials for the experiment was restricted by radiation safety and manufacturing constraints. Within the overall moderator size, the main component was a $5 \times 5 \times 4 \text{ cm}$ block of high density polystyrene, which was designed to slow down $>\text{MeV}$ neutrons to the epithermal range (mean free path of $1 \text{ MeV}$ neutron is $\sim 3 \text{ cm}$ [22]). Under the condition of the experiment, the high Z front layers (2.4 cm thick lead and 1.2 cm thick tungsten) mainly served as reflectors to the moderated neutrons produced by the polystyrene block. However in presence of higher energy ($>10 \text{ MeV}$) neutrons, this design would also increase the neutron population by $(n,xn)$ reactions inside the thick layers of lead and tungsten. The polystyrene, tungsten and lead blocks were housed in a $\text{cm}$-thick aluminium structure, surrounded by $1.5 \text{ cm}$ thick lead to reduce neutron leakage from the side walls of the moderator. In order to produce a pure epithermal beam and filter the lower energy neutrons, a $2 \text{ mm}$ cadmium sheet was placed at the exit plane the moderator.

As can be seen in Fig. 2(a), the moderator produces an anisotropic flux distribution of epithermal neutrons. While the front layers of lead and tungsten may contribute by pre-moderating and multiplying high energy neutrons, the sub-MeV neutrons are efficiently moderated to the epithermal range inside the polystyrene block. The neutron spectra emerging from the exit plane and the side of the moderator for different input neutron energies are shown in Fig. 2(b), which illustrates the effectiveness of the design in moderating neutrons of $\text{MeV}$ energies, as produced in abundance in our experiment (see Fig. 3(a)).

The experiment was carried out in two stages. Since the moderator and the $^3\text{He}$ detector restrained us from measuring the fast neutrons produced along the beam axis, the first stage was devoted to characterising the spectra and angular distribution of the fast neutrons produced by the catcher, before deploying the moderator and the $^3\text{He}$ detectors. The data collected by the two scintillator detectors over a number of dedicated shots showed fairly similar spectral profiles as shown in Fig. 3(a)). The neutron flux above $2.5 \text{ MeV}$ was measured as $\sim 10^7 \text{ n/Sr}$, whereas the spectra indicates that the highest flux lies in the sub-MeV region (estimated to be of the order of $10^9 \text{ n/sr}$ between $0.1$-$1 \text{ MeV}$). The ratio of the fast neutron fluxes recorded by ND-1 and ND-2 was found to be $\sim 0.6$ over a number of shots taken at similar laser and pitch/catcher conditions. When the ND-1 became redundant in the following stage (due to the installation of the on-axis $^3\text{He}$ detector, see Fig. 1), the data obtained by the ND-2 was used as a reference to infer the on-axis fast neutron spectra.

Placing the moderator at a distance $\sim 11 \text{ cm}$ behind the catcher produced a significant amount of epithermal
neutrons along the beam axis, in contrast to what detected in shots without the moderator. This is apparent from the increased number of voltage spikes in the voltage versus time/energy plots of Fig. 3(c) and (d), compared to the plot of Fig. 3(b). Each voltage spike is created when a neutron is absorbed in the $^3$He detector via $^3$He(n,p)$^4$H reaction, and the released proton and $^3$H ionize the gas inside the detector generating an electron avalanche. While the incident neutron energy was determined from the ToF, the neutron flux was calculated by counting the number of voltage spikes in the output signal. As expected, the Cd wrapped $^3$He detector showed rapidly decreasing number of neutron hits in the signal trace after ~300 μs, as shown in Fig. 3(d), which is consistent with the absorption cross-section of Cd for low energy neutrons. Taking into account the detector efficiency (as mentioned earlier) and normalising the signal with respect to the incident neutron flux measured by the ND-2 detector in the same shot, the spectrum of the epithermal neutrons was obtained. Fig. 3(e) shows the epithermal neutron spectrum produced by the moderator in the detectable energy range of 0.5-300 eV, by averaging over 8 shots (i.e. 16 measurements). The high energy cut-off is due to the saturation of the $^3$He detectors at early times by the gamma flash. As can be seen in Fig. 3(b), the number of neutron hits in this energy range was insignificant in shots without the moderator. The background-subtracted neutron flux produced by the moderator in the energy range 0.5-300 eV was $(5.1 \pm 0.15) \times 10^5$ n/sr/pulse.

As mentioned earlier, the experiment was designed to assess and demonstrate the feasibility of driving intense bursts of epithermal neutrons with short pulse lasers. The moderator in the current experiment was placed at a distance of ~11 cm from the catcher to monitor shot-to-shot variations in the fast neutron spectra by the ND-2. If the moderator were placed in contact with the catcher, using a minimal (~cm) thickness of high Z material in its front layer, the fast neutron flux per cm$^2$ in the energy range 0.5-300 eV (~ $3 \times 10^4$ n/cm$^2$/pulse for 1 eV - 100 keV) was produced in the current experiment at a nominal distance of 5 cm from the moderator (i.e. at the detector-2 position in Fig. 2(a)).

While these proof-of-principle results are encouraging, there is significant scope for further optimisation of the
epithermal neutrons flux by optimising the moderator design as well as the fast neutron source. The input of fast neutrons can be significantly enhanced by increasing the energy and number of incident ions on the catcher. Order of magnitude higher fast neutron fluxes than produced in the current experiment have been already reported [2–4], and, in principle, can be further improved upon by taking advantage of ongoing developments in laser-driven ion acceleration[23–25]. A credible source of fast neutrons can also be obtained by deploying MeV electron jets from laser-driven exploding foils [5]. High energy electrons efficiently produce neutrons inside a metal converter via photo-nuclear reactions by generating high flux of bremsstrahlung photons. Albert isotropic, such sources produce neutrons of energy in the MeV range highly desirable for moderation. In terms of optimising the moderation process, laser driven sources offer greater flexibility compared to the other facilities, where the formidable heat and extraneous radiations constrain significantly the choice of material, temperature and geometry of a moderator. Finally, it is to be noted that the epithermal bursts produced by the laser-driven neutrons of sub-ns duration would also have an intrinsically short duration (solely determined by the characteristics of the moderator), beyond the capability of the accelerator-driven spallation sources, typically set by the duration (sub-μs - ms) of their proton pulses [26–28].

Laser-based sources are fast approaching a crucial stage in their development for neutron science and applications to complement large-scale facilities. Although sources such as the National Ignition Facility report record yield in fusion neutrons per pulse [29, 30], its scale and repetition rate are inadequate for any credible application related to neutron science. On the other hand, the repetition rates achievable on smaller scale installations could still be too low to guarantee successful exploitation for the aforementioned applications. The future of a laser-based approach would be reliant on the progress in diode-pumped technologies, such as the DiPOLE [31, 32] and HAPLS [33] projects, aiming towards developing 10 Hz, Petawatt-class laser systems.

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