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Spectral measurements of visible coherent transition radiation produced by a laser-plasma accelerated electron beam are reported. The significant periodic modulations that are observed in the spectrum result from interference of transition radiation produced by multiple bunches of electrons. A Fourier analysis of the spectral interference fringes reveals that electrons are injected and accelerated in multiple plasma wave periods, up to at least ten periods behind the laser pulse. The bunch separation scales with the plasma wavelength when the plasma density is changed over a wide range. An analysis of the spectral fringe visibility indicates that the first bunch contains most of the charge.

In a laser wakefield accelerator (LWFA) [1], an intense and ultrashort laser pulse drives a relativistic plasma wave, or wakefield, which can be used to accelerate electrons to high energies in a short distance. With accelerating gradients in excess of 100 GV/m, electron bunches in the 100 MeV-1 GeV range are now produced in mm distances, with few percent energy spreads and charges of 10’s of picocoulombs [2, 3]. These electron bunches also have the characteristic feature of having femtosecond duration and kA peak current [4], which make them good candidates as a compact electron source for a Free Electron Laser. This has triggered a large number of experimental studies aiming at characterizing the temporal structure of these laser-plasma produced electron bunches. The technique of choice has been Coherent Transition Radiation (CTR) which can give insights on the temporal spread of the electron bunches [5]. The first studies have focused on measuring CTR in the THz region, showing that the bunches were sub-100 fs [6]. More recently, several experiments have shown that the electron bunches can be as short as a few femtoseconds in duration [4, 7] but these works focussed on the electron bunch contained in the first bucket of the plasma wave. Few studies have considered the fact that the electron beam can be composed of several beamlets although some publications suggest that it can occur in certain cases [8, 9]. Here, we present a detailed experimental study showing that several short electron bunches can be injected and efficiently accelerated in multiple plasma wave periods, thus forming an electron bunch train.

We use spectral measurements of CTR to diagnose the temporal distribution of electrons. CTR is emitted when the electron bunch passes an interface between two media, e.g. a metallic foil and a vacuum. For a monoenergetic electron beam, the angular radiation field is a hollow cone with half opening angle $\theta = 1/\gamma$. The spectral radiation field at frequency $\omega$ and observation angle $\theta$, is given by [10–12]

$$\frac{d^2W}{d\omega d\Omega} = \left[N + N^2 F(\omega, \theta)\right] \frac{d^2w}{d\omega d\Omega},$$

(1)

where $\frac{d^2w}{d\omega d\Omega}$ is the transition radiation spectrum emitted by a single electron, $\Omega$ is the solid angle and $N$ is the number of electrons in the bunch. The form factor $F(\omega, \theta) = |\int f(\tilde{x}) \exp(-i\tilde{k} \cdot \tilde{x}) d^3\tilde{x}|^2$ is the square amplitude of the Fourier transform of the normalized electron bunch distribution, $f(\tilde{x})$, and $\tilde{k}$ is the wavevector in the direction of observation. The radiation is said to be coherent if the second term in Eq. (1) dominates. This typically occurs only if the electron bunch length is comparable to or less than the observed radiation wavelength. In this case, electrons radiate in phase and the radiation is added coherently.

The experiment was performed using the 10 Hz, multi-terawatt, Ti:Sapphire laser system in “Salle Jaune” at Laboratoire d’Optique Appliquée. The system delivers 30 fs laser pulses containing 1 J of energy at 820 nm. The experimental set-ups for producing electron beams was described in details in previous publications [4] (see also suppl. info. [13]). In this work, we have used two different injection techniques for producing an electron beam: self-injection (SI) and colliding pulse injection (CPI) [14, 15]. In the case of SI, the non-linear spatio-temporal compression of the laser pulse leads to increased peak intensity, a steepening of the plasma wave and eventually transverse wavebreaking [16]. This mechanism can lead to quasi-monoenergetic electron beams [17–19]. For our experimental parameters, the beams obtained from self-injection had a large charge (> 90 pC) and large energy spreads (see Table I, see also suppl. info. [13]). In the case of CPI, the plasma wave was not driven to the breaking point. Instead, electrons were locally injected following the collision between the main pump pulse and a relatively weak, counter-propagating injection laser pulse [2, 20]. This resulted in more stable beams with a narrower energy distribution but with lower charge (≈ 30 pC).

For CTR measurement, a 100 μm Al foil was placed on the path of the electron beam 15 mm from the exit of the gas jet. Forward CTR was generated at the rear surface of the foil which also served to stop the pump laser beam and prevent parasitic radiation from reaching the detection system. Before every shot the foil was translated to provide unexposed material for the electron beam.

The forward CTR propagated in the direction of the
electron beam and was collected and collimated outside the interaction chamber by a 1.5 m-focal-length spherical silver mirror. The CTR spectrum was diagnosed using an imaging Czerny-Turner spectrometer, fitted with a 16-bit CCD camera. The setup was calibrated to give the absolute number of photons per wavelength interval.

With this setup, electron- and optical spectra were measured simultaneously. Spectrally broadband radiation, originating from a well defined point source on the optical axis, was observed, but only in coincidence with the generation of an electron beam. The intensity fluctuated from shot-to-shot, but increased with electron beam charge. The optical transition radiation was found to be coherent because the intensity level was more than 3 orders of magnitude higher than the expected level of incoherent transition radiation (see suppl. info. [13]). Interestingly and unexpectedly, the measured CTR spectrum often showed significant spectral modulation fringes. The modulations were either purely sinusoidal, as shown in Fig. 1, or more complex as shown in Fig. 2. We have found that, in fact, these modulations are spectral interference fringes that contain very interesting temporal information about the electron beam.

Suppose that two electron bunches arrive at the radiator with some time difference $T$. Each bunch produces a continuous spectrum but, since the time of emission is slightly different, interference leads to a spectrum modulated by $g(\omega) = \cos(\omega T)$. The period of the modulation is directly related to the temporal bunch separation.

It is straightforward to calculate the separation between two bunches. For one oscillation, $\Delta \omega = \omega_1 - \omega_2 = 2\pi/T$, which, if expressed in wavelengths, gives the bunch separation $L = cT \simeq \lambda_p^2/\Delta \lambda$. Applied to Fig. 1a, this simple estimate gives $L = 54 \mu m = 5.1 \lambda_p$. These estimates, however simple, are strong indications that the spectral interference fringes originate from electrons which have been trapped and accelerated in multiple plasma wave periods.

Figure 1 shows selected and sorted examples of CTR spectra with sinusoidal modulations. The central panels in Fig. 1 show the square amplitude of the Fourier transform of the modulated CTR spectra. The Fourier transform here goes from the frequency domain to the time domain. For clarity, the temporal axis has also been multiplied by $c$ and divided by $\lambda_p$. Interestingly, the positions of the peaks in the Fourier transform coincide with multiples of the plasma wavelength, as marked by the vertical
lines in Fig. 1(h–n). The CTR spectra are sinusoidal and the Fourier Transforms contain a single significant peak. This suggests that, in these measurements, two electron bunches were accelerated in two plasma wave periods, separated by up to $9\lambda_p$ (see Fig. 1n). The rightmost panels in Fig. 1 show electron spectra, measured on the same laser shot. For some measurements, the electron spectrum contains several peaks. However, no clear correlation between the observation of multiple components in the electron spectrum and spectral oscillations in the CTR spectrum was evident when considering the complete dataset. This is the first indication that one of the bunches contains most of the charge.

In some cases, the oscillations were more complex. Figure 2 shows some selected examples of such CTR spectra. For these examples, the Fourier transform contains several peaks. But, as in Fig. 1, each of these peaks is precisely centered on multiples of the plasma wavelength. Although the oscillations in the CTR spectrum change significantly from shot to shot, the peaks in the Fourier Transform are always centered on multiples of the plasma wavelength. These examples show that multiple electron bunches were trapped and accelerated in separate wave periods, at least ten plasma wave periods apart. However, as in Fig. 1, there is no consistent and clear signature of multiple components in the electron spectrum, indicating that a single bunch dominated the spectrum. Moreover, in Fig. 2g, there are Fourier peaks at $3\lambda_p$ and $9\lambda_p$. Interference between these two bunches should generate a peak at $6\lambda_p$. The fact that this peak is absent in Fig. 2g is another strong indication that the interferences are generated by a single, dominating pulse (presumably the first bunch, immediately behind the laser pulse), and the rest of the bunch train.

The depth of the modulations fluctuated from shot to shot, but had a tendency to be small when the modulation period was small, an indication that less charge was trapped far behind the laser pulse. The modulation depth of a function $f$ is described by the fringe visibility,

$$V = \frac{f_{\max} - f_{\min}}{f_{\max} + f_{\min}}.$$  

Figure 3 shows the visibility of sinusoidal modulations that contained only one significant Fourier peak. These interferences were produced by only two electron bunches.

We now discuss the additional information that can be extracted from these spectral modulations. Consider two electron bunches separated by time $T$ and described by their normalized distribution $f_1(\vec{x})$ and $f_2(\vec{x})$. We assume that these electron bunches have a similar electron distribution and they radiate CTR which is collected through an angle $\theta_0 > 1/\gamma$. The visibility of the spectral modulation is determined by the maximum and minimum values of the form factor $F(\omega) = |q_1 f_1(\omega) + q_2 f_2(\omega)|^2$, where $f_i(\omega)$ is the Fourier transform of $f_i(\vec{x})$, and $q_i$ is the charge of bunch $i$:

$$V(\omega) = \frac{F_{\max} - F_{\min}}{F_{\max} + F_{\min}} = \frac{2\xi(\omega)}{1 + \xi(\omega)^2},$$  

where $\xi(\omega) = (q_2/q_1)\frac{f_2(\omega)}{f_1(\omega)}$. For instance, for two gaussian pulses of RMS dura-
The mechanism for injection is either self-injection (SI) or colliding pulse injection (CPI), depending on the plasma density, \( n_e \) and the plasma wavelength, \( \lambda_p \). \( N_t \) is the number of measurements and \( N_m \) is the number of measurements with modulations. \( Q \) is the average charge and \( T_{max} \) is the maximum bunch separation in the dataset.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mech.</th>
<th>( n_e ) (cm(^{-3}))</th>
<th>( \lambda_p ) (( \mu )m)</th>
<th>( N_t )</th>
<th>( N_m/N_t )</th>
<th>( Q ) (pC)</th>
<th>( cT_{max}/\lambda_p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>( 13 \times 10^{18} )</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI</td>
<td>( 10 \times 10^{18} )</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI</td>
<td>( 7 \times 10^{18} )</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
bunches can be produced and that they are separated by multiples of $\lambda_p/c$. Several experimental evidence indicate that a single electron bunch contains most of the charge. The possibility of producing one or several electron bunches shows another interesting feature of laser plasma accelerators. For the development of Free Electron Lasers, where the temporal structure of the electron bunches as well as the peak current are of prime importance, it appears that enhanced control over the injection mechanism and beam loading might become necessary.

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