

Recent experiments on the hydrodynamics of laser-produced plasmas and Smoothing of laser energy deposition conducted at the PALS.

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Abstract

We present a series of experimental results, and their interpretation, connected to various aspects of the hydrodynamics of laser produced plasmas. Experiments were performed using the Prague PALS iodine laser working at 0.44 μm wavelength and irradiances up to a few 10^{14} W/cm^2 . By adopting large focal spots and smoothed laser beams, the lateral energy transport and lateral expansion have been avoided. Therefore we could reach a quasi 1-D regime for which experimental results can be more easily and properly compared to available analytical models.

Introduction

The hydrodynamics of laser produced plasmas is a field which is of interest both in itself (for the study of fluid dynamics of plasmas) and for its various applications, starting with Inertial Confinement Fusion of thermonuclear targets, and continuing with the physics of shock waves, the realization of huge pressures and of extreme states of matter, the study of hydrodynamics instabilities (Rayleigh-Taylor to start with), the study of laser-matter interaction including the problems of energy transport and smoothing of energy deposition.

All of these topics have been the subject of intense research starting from the ‘70s in the context of laser-matter interaction. Despite this, there are still some very good and important reasons to continue and update such research. Indeed, progress in laser technology have allowed new regimes to be obtained (especially the fact that much higher

laser intensities are available today) and also to realize *cleaner* experiments, which allows for conditions closer to those for which theoretical models have been derived. In particular, laser-smoothing techniques have been introduced in the '80s and in the '90s allow the realization of improved irradiation conditions. Indeed it turns out that most past studies were done by focusing the laser energy to small focal spots in order to achieve intensities of $10^{13} - 10^{15} \text{ W/cm}^2$. Thereby, experimental results were affected by strong 2-D effects (lateral transport of thermal energy, lateral flow of mass).

Even when large spots were used, these were not optically smoothed (the first smoothing technique, Random Phase Plates, was introduced in the '80s [1]) and were then characterized by the presence of "hot spots" in the intensity profile. The effects of short-scale inhomogeneities therefore often dominated the measured parameters.

Among optical smoothing techniques, the use of Phase Zone Plate optical smoothing [2-4] (see next section) has allowed a flat-top intensity distribution to be produced. This is important since the parameters in the central flat region of the focal spot can be directly compared to analytical results obtained from 1-D models, which very often by definition assume a spatially uniform intensity.

In this paper, we will present a series of experiments respectively dedicated to the study of shock (ablation) pressures vs. laser intensity; the generation of extreme states of matter by laser compression and the application to the study of equation of state of material in the Mbar pressure range (here we have used carbon); the study of shock acceleration in foams (a problem which is important also in connection to astrophysical situations); and finally the study of smoothing of laser energy deposition by foams and gas jets.

All experiments were performed using the Prague PALS iodine laser working at $0.44 \mu\text{m}$ wavelength and irradiances up to a few 10^{14} W/cm^2 , and by applying optical smoothing techniques.

1. Experimental Set-up

The iodine laser of PALS [5] delivers a single beam, 29 cm in diameter, with energies up to 250 J per pulse at $0.44 \mu\text{m}$. The laser pulse is Gaussian in time with a Full Width at Half Maximum (FWHM) of 350 ps. The schematic experimental set-up is shown in Fig. 1. The focusing lens had a focal length $f = 600 \text{ mm}$ ($f/2$ aperture). A blue filter before the entrance window did cut ω and 2ω light.

In all experiment, we used a time-resolved *self-emission* diagnostics. Such a diagnostics was used to detect the shock breakout from the target rear face and consisted in a pair of lenses imaging the rear face onto the slit of a streak camera (Hamamatsu C7700 with S-1 photocathode). The first one was a complex $f/2$ objective, with $f = 100 \text{ mm}$, producing a parallel beam between the two lenses. A red filter RG60 before the streak camera cut out any 3ω light. The second lens had $f = 98 \text{ cm}$, giving a total optical magnification $M = 9.8$. The CCD had 512×512 pixel and 16 bits dynamic range. The spatial resolution was measured to be $2.6 \mu\text{m/pixel}$, and the temporal resolution 3.12 ps/pixel (choosing a 1600 ps time window)

Also in all experiments (except those on smoothing presented in section 5 of this paper) we used phase zone plates (PZP) [2-4] with the goal of producing uniform irradiation conditions. In this case the intensity distribution is characterized by a central flat-top region with Gaussian wings.

In our experiment, the PZP, half of the laser beam size, was placed at $f/2$ from target. The characteristics of our optical system (PZP + focusing lens) implied a focal spot of $560 \mu\text{m}$ FWHM, with a $400 \mu\text{m}$ flat central region, corresponding to peak intensities up to $2.4 \times 10^{14} \text{ W/cm}^2$.

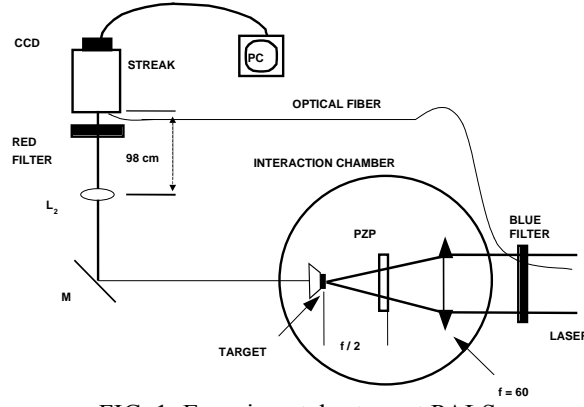


FIG. 1: Experimental set-up at PALS.

In reality the intensity profile produced by PZPs is not really flat but characterized by small scalelength speckles (of typical dimension less than 10 microns). However, small speckles are rapidly washed away by thermal smoothing [6], so they are not expected to influence our measurements. In any case the spatial and temporal resolution of our diagnostics is not sufficient to see such effects. The effects of speckles on shock breakout were observed in [7] by using a diagnostics with higher space and time resolution. However, it was not large, inducing local differences in shock breakout time of the order of 10 ps, which does not appreciably influence our measurement of shock velocity (which is determined by a shock transit time in the step of the order of 1 nsec).

2. Scaling of shock pressure with laser intensity

The process of laser ablation of low- and medium-Z targets is fundamental for laser-driven inertial confinement fusion since it is the source of the driving pressure in ablative compression of fusion targets. In particular, studies have focused on establishing the scaling laws vs. laser intensity and laser wavelength, to be used as a guide in the selection of laser parameters, in order to obtain the highest hydrodynamic efficiency in laser-driven implosions.

As recalled before, the progress in laser technology, and in particular the introduction of smoothing techniques, allows cleaner experiments to be performed and justifies the interest in the field. However there are also other more specific reasons:

i) At the shortest laser wavelengths, there is still some incertitude concerning the scaling vs. laser intensity. For instance, measurements at 0.351 μm by Key et al. [8, 9] showed a scaling $\approx I^{0.3}$, very different from what predicted by various theoretical models (usually $\approx I^{0.7}$). 2D and drilling effects dominated indeed such experimental results. Also, to our knowledge, data for 0.351 μm laser ablation of aluminum targets in the range 10^{13} to 10^{14} W/cm^2 have not been reported. This is important because shorter laser wavelengths (third and fourth harmonics of Nd, as well as other wavelengths from gas lasers) have the advantage of giving higher ablation rate and pressure, and are thereby envisaged as future drivers for ICF direct drive experiment [10].

ii) Still some details are not clear in the literature concerning the very mechanism of laser ablation. For instance, even recent important reviews [11] report the scaling law:

$$P \text{ (Mbar)} = 8.6 (I / 10^{14})^{2/3} \lambda^{-2/3} (A/2Z)^{1/3} \quad (1)$$

where I is the laser intensity on target in W/cm^2 , λ is the laser wavelength in μm , and A and Z are the mass number and the atomic number of the target. This is obtained by considering that laser light is absorbed at the plasma critical layer.

In reality, the mass ablation rate scaling should also include a time dependence. Indeed the plasma corona size becomes larger during the interaction, and the distance between the absorption region and the ablation surface ($n_e \approx$ solid material) increases with time. This brings to a decoupling of the laser beam from the target and, as a result, the mass ablation rate decreases with time. In particular it is found that the shock pressure is related to laser and target parameters by [12]

$$P \text{ (Mbar)} = 11.6(I/10^{14})^{3/4} \lambda^{-1/4} (A/2Z)^{7/16} (Z^* t/3.5)^{-1/8} \quad (2)$$

where the time t is in ns. As with the previous scaling law (1), pressure strongly depends on laser parameters and only weakly on the material. The decrease in time of ablation pressure, even for constant laser irradiation, has been first described by Caruso and Gratton [13] and later by Mora [12]. The difference between de-localized absorption and localized (at critical density) models is discussed in detail by Meyer et al. [14].

In order to address such questions, we performed an experiment at the PALS laboratory, using beam-smoothing in order to avoid the "drilling effect" from hot spots [15].

In the past, several experimental techniques have been used in order to measure the mass ablation rate and pressure (see [16] for a brief introduction). Here we obtained the shock (ablation) pressure from the experimental measurement of shock velocity, taking advantage of the recent advancement in the generation of high quality shocks and in the measurements of shock velocities with stepped targets [17-19]. As compared to other methods, this is a quite direct measurement of ablation pressure, and less prone to 2D effects (since we measure shock velocity in the central region of the focal spot where shock dynamics is practically 1D thanks to the use of PZPs, and since the measurement takes place at very early times).

Fig. 2 shows a streak image of shock breakout from an Al flat target and from an Al stepped target. The first image shows that indeed by using PZPs it is possible to get quite uniform shocks. The second image allows calculating the shock velocity in the material (Al): the time delay between the breakout at the base and at the step gives the average shock velocity in the step. From shock velocity we determine the shock pressure using the Hugoniot data for Al from the Sesame tables [20]. Such shock pressure is the pressure produced by the laser beam on the irradiation side, i.e. the ablation pressure.

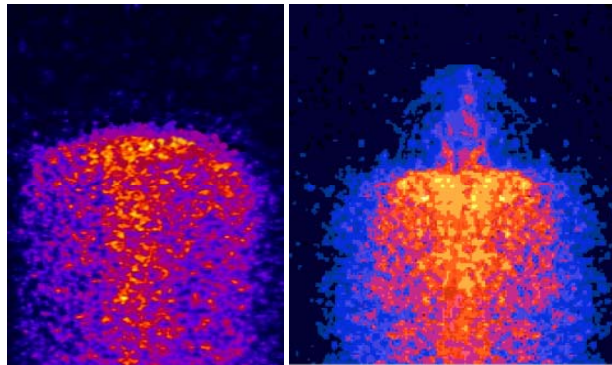


FIG. 2: Left: shock breakout from a flat aluminum target. Image $1.69 \text{ ns} \times 1300 \text{ } \mu\text{m}$; Right: Shock breakout image from an Al target for laser energy $E_L = 108 \text{ J}$. The dimensions of the images are $1.69 \text{ ns} \times 1300 \text{ } \mu\text{m}$. Times flows up to down. The time delay between base and step is $\Delta t = 267 \text{ ps}$ giving a shock velocity $D = 31.84 \text{ } \mu\text{m/ns}$.

The method works if the shock is stationary, and we designed the targets to get a stationary shock in the step. This can be addressed by using hydrodynamics simulations or analytical models [19, 21], which approximates the Gaussian with a trapezoidal time shape.

Typical errors were calculated by considering the error on target thickness (including surface roughness), the streak camera resolution, as determined by the time window (1.69 nsec) and the slit size (115 μm), and the error in data reading. The error on shock velocity D was then propagated, giving a $\pm 20\%$ error bar on pressure.

The laser intensity on target is obtained by measuring the laser energy shot by shot (through a calibrated reflection from the entrance window of the chamber) and includes the losses (about 20 %) due to the use of PZPs. Also it is calculated taking into account the flat-top intensity profile, i.e. it corresponds to the effective intensity in the central region of the focal spot. As for the time dependence, the x-axis in Fig. 3 reports the time-averaged intensity over the laser pulse duration.

Fig. 3 summarizes our experimental results for ablation pressure vs. laser intensity on target. It also shows two theoretical curves corresponding to the law given by Mora, and to the law:

$$P \text{ (Mbar)} = 12 (I / 10^{14})^{2/3} \lambda^{-2/3} (A/2Z)^{1/2} \quad (3)$$

This corresponds to eq. (1) except for the factor 12, which is what was originally derived theoretically [22]. The interpolation of experimental data with Mora's law requires some care. Indeed in the case of delocalized absorption the shock pressure (and shock velocity) decrease with time. Hence weaker shocks, produced at lower intensities, travel more slowly in the target and break out later; thereby they have more time to slow down. Shock velocity is measured at shock breakout, but the shock breakout time (the time t to be inserted in eq. 2) is different for low and high laser intensity.

In order to take this effect into account, we write that

$$d = \int D(t) dt \quad (4)$$

where d is the target thickness, and the time integral goes from 0 to the breakout time. The relation between the shock velocity D and the shock pressure P is [23]

$$D = \left(\frac{(\gamma+1) P}{2 \rho_0} \right)^{1/2} \quad (5)$$

where γ is the adiabatic constant of the material and ρ_0 is the unperturbed target density ($\rho_0 = 2.7 \text{ g/cm}^3$ for Al). Eqs. (4) and (5) allow the shock breakout time to be determined, and by inserting it into eq. (2) we finally get an equation, which is formally independent on time, but dependent on target thickness, i.e.:

$$P \text{ (Mbar)} = 15.63 (I / 10^{14})^{0.8} \lambda^{-4/15} \rho_0^{-1/15} d^{-2/15} \quad (6)$$

where d is in μm and where the coefficient was calculated for $A = 27$ and $Z = Z^* = 13$ (however the dependence on the ionization degree Z^* is practically negligible). Here we simplified the calculation by assuming an "average" thickness $d = (d_{\text{base}} + d_{\text{step}})/2$. This may be done because the time exponent in Mora's law (0.125) is very small, i.e. the shock decreases quite slowly with time.

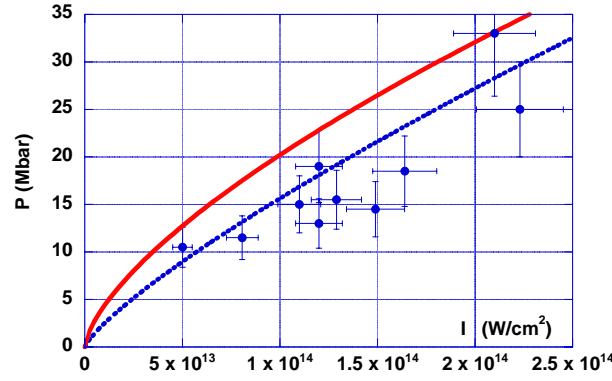


FIG. 3: Our experimental results (dots) with scaling laws for absorption at the critical density [11] (continuous line, eq. 3), and delocalized absorption [12] (dotted line, eq. 6)

As can be seen, our experimental data are more close to Mora's law, as compared with eq. (3). This concerns not only the values of pressures but also the trend vs. laser intensity. From this point of view, substituting the factor 12.3 with the factor 8.6, i.e. using eq. (1) instead of (3), may be a tentative of fitting the theoretical scaling obtained for localized absorption with experimental data.

In summary, the laser ablation pressure at 0.44 μm has been measured in planar Al targets at irradiance up to $2 \times 10^{14} \text{ W/cm}^2$. By adopting relatively large focal spots and a smoothed laser beam, the later energy transport and the "drilling effect" were avoided. Our results show a scaling vs. laser intensity, which is quite close to the theoretical prediction and gives some evidence for the mechanism of delocalized absorption.

3. Equation of state of carbon

In the Megabar pressure range, extreme states of matter are reached and many materials undergo interesting phase transitions. For instance, materials like hydrogen and carbon are expected to become metals.

The knowledge of such states of matter, and in particular of the equation of states of materials, are of extreme importance in astrophysics and planetology since pressures of several Megabars or tens Megabars are indeed reached in the interior of planets, giant planets, and brown dwarfs.

High-energy lasers are nowadays the only laboratory tool, which can achieve pressures of a few tens Mbars [11, 12]. In recent years, it has been well established that laser-shocks are a useful tool for high-pressure physics, to compress materials at Megabar pressures and measure their EOS [17, 24-27].

One particularly interesting material is carbon. Its equation of state (EOS) at high pressures (Megabar or Multi-Megabar regime) is of interest for several branches of physics, namely:

- * Material Science: carbon is a unique element due to its polymorphism and the complexity and variety of its state phases. The EOS of carbon has been the subject of several recent important experimental and theoretical scientific works [28-36]. The important phenomenon of carbon metallization at high pressure has long been predicted theoretically but until now never experimentally proved. At very high pressures the regime of non-ideal strongly-correlated and partially-degenerate plasmas is approached, which is characterized by an almost complete absence of experimental data [37-39].

- Astrophysics: description of high pressures phases is essential for developing realistic models of planets and stars [40, 41]. Carbon is a major constituent (through methane and

carbon dioxide) of giant planets like Uranus and Neptune. High pressures are thought to produce methane pyrolysis with a separation of the carbon phase and possible formation of a diamond or metallic layer [42-44]. Metallization of the carbon layer in the mantle of these planets (the “ice” layers”) could give high electrical conductivity and, by dynamo effect, be the source of the observed large magnetic fields [45, 46].

In Fig. 4 we have reported a simplified version of Grumbach and Martin’s phase diagram [32] to which we added the Hugoniot curves corresponding to the initial densities $\rho_0 = 1.6 \text{ g/cm}^3$ and $\rho_0 = 1.45 \text{ g/cm}^3$ (the two values used in our experiment), calculated following the Sesame tables [37]. Again, the liquid metallic phases can be easily reached with laser shocks.

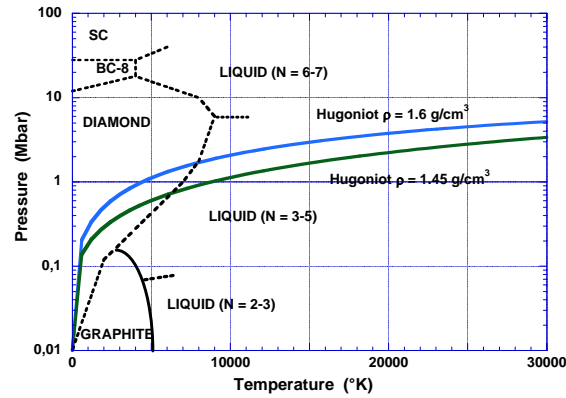


FIG. 4. Grumbach and Martin’s phase diagram [32] and the two Hugoniot curves corresponding to the initial densities $\rho_0 = 1.6 \text{ g/cm}^3$ and $\rho_0 = 1.45 \text{ g/cm}^3$.

Our group has been the first one to obtain Hugoniot data for carbon with laser-driven shocks. We began the exploration of carbon EOS in the pressure range 1 - 15 Mbar and got the first experimental points at pressures higher than 8 Mbar [47]. Moreover, we substantially increased the number of EOS data for carbon at pressures > 1 Mbar (in Ref [47], we presented 9 new EOS points against a total of about 20 points which, to our knowledge, were available in literature [48-52]).

One general limitation of shock-wave EOS experiments is that only data on the Hugoniot curve of the material are obtained. This is due to the fact that shocks compress and heat the material at the same time, so pressure and temperature are no longer two independent variables. One way to overcome such limitation is to use a sample with reduced density ρ_0 (porous or foam target). This changes the initial conditions in the material so that data along *different* Hugoniot curves are obtained. Hence by changing ρ_0 the whole EOS plane can be explored. In particular, by reducing the initial density ρ_0 of the sample, the same shock pressure P will correspond to a higher temperature T (internal energy E) and a reduced final density ρ .

The experiment is based on generating high quality shocks and using "two steps - two materials" targets (Fig. 2). Relative EOS data of “unknown” materials (here C) are obtained by using a “well-known” reference (here Al). Al behavior at high pressure is well known, making it a typical reference material for shock experiments. The method is described in detail in refs. [25].

Fig. 5 shows a SEM photo of the carbon steps deposited on a CH/Al substrate, at the University of Milan [53]. The deposition technique allowed the realization of targets with an

acceptable surface roughness (less than 0.5 micron, i.e. $\approx 3\%$ of step thickness which was of the order of 15 μm). These give an error comparable to the typical $\leq 5\%$ due to streak camera resolution. The Al step thickness was 5 μm .

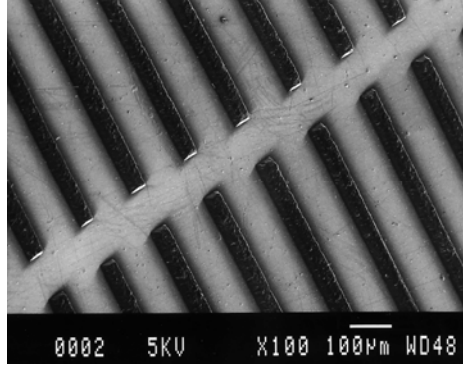


FIG. 5 SEM image of carbon steps with $\rho_o = 1.45 \text{ g/cm}^3$ deposited on a CH/Al substrate. Al steps are not present since they were deposited later.

Other carbon targets were fabricated at General Atomics using a completely different technique based on the use of colloidal carbon. In this case, carbon with initial density $\rho_o = 1.6 \pm 0.10 \text{ g/cm}^3$ was produced. Stepped targets were made of lathe machining of bulk aluminum. The Al base was $\approx 8 \mu\text{m}$, and the step thickness was $\approx 8.5 \mu\text{m}$. The carbon layer was then produced and the target was machined again to produce the C step (with thickness $\approx 10 \mu\text{m}$). The use of two different type of targets allow a comparison of measurements and a better confidence in our results.

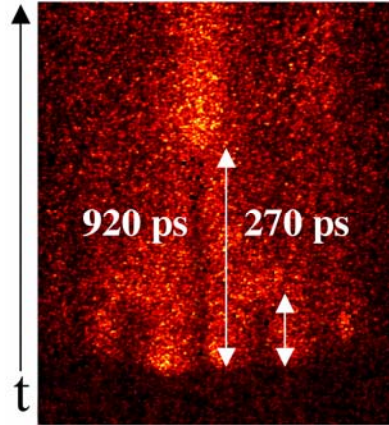


FIG. 6. Shock breakout streak image of the target rear side in emission. Shot energy was 25.3 J. Arrows indicate the shock breakout from the Al step (right) and from the C step (left). Image size 600 $\mu\text{m} \times 1.7 \text{ ns}$.

Fig. 6 shows a typical result obtained from the emissivity diagnostics. In total we obtained 2 good experimental points for $\rho_o = 1.45 \text{ g/cm}^3$ and 7 good points for $\rho_o = 1.6 \text{ g/cm}^3$. These are shown in Fig. 7 with all the other experimental results already available in the literature in the pressure range $P \geq 1.5 \text{ Mbar}$. Data, grouped according to their initial density ρ_o , are compared to the shock polar curve derived from the Sesame tables (the model QEOS [54] yields practically identical results for carbon, even if usually it does not describe the Hugoniot with the same accuracy like the SESAME EOS does).

The errors on pressure and fluid velocity are $\approx 15 \%$ and $\approx 20 \%$ respectively; these error

bars have been estimated by calculating the propagation of experimental errors on shock velocity (5%) on the quantities determined by the mismatch method. The error on shock velocity is instead determined from the experimentally measured uncertainties on step thickness and by streak-camera temporal resolution.

All our data, for both initial densities, are below the shock polar curve derived from the Sesame tables. Despite our quite large error bars (which make most points compatible with the theoretical curve), such results show a systematic deviation, and indicate a compressibility of carbon, at these pressures, much higher than what predicted by most models (the density ρ of the compressed sample is obtained from the Hugoniot - Rankine relations for shocks, namely from $\rho (D-U) = \rho_0 D$). However such behavior could be also due to the presence of systematic errors in our experiment. One possible cause often cited for explaining errors in laser-shock EOS experiments is preheating induced by X-rays. In our case, preheating was probably small due to the presence of a CH layer on laser-irradiated side, which reduces X-ray generation (as shown experimentally in [55]). Moreover, if preheating was the source of deviation, it should affect more data at higher laser intensity (higher pressure), which is not really the case. Therefore preheating is probably not the cause of deviation from theoretical curves (or at least not of the whole deviation). Another possible systematic effect could be due to the high porosity of the targets, even if porous and foam targets are routinely used in EOS experiments. Hence, even if this point requires further future work and analysis, for the moment we can conclude that at very high pressures carbon is likely to be more compressible than predicted by Sesame or QEOS. Let's notice that a deviation from Sesame is also observed for other points obtained at high shock pressure (for instance the point at ≈ 3 Mbar for carbon with $\rho_0 = 1.85$ g/cm³ reported by Pavlovskii and Drakin [48]). Even more interestingly, the same behavior was observed by Nellis et al. [49] who, using underground nuclear explosions as a compression tool, report two EOS points for graphite ($\rho_0 = 2.2$ g/cm³) at 4.76 and 7.61 Mbar.

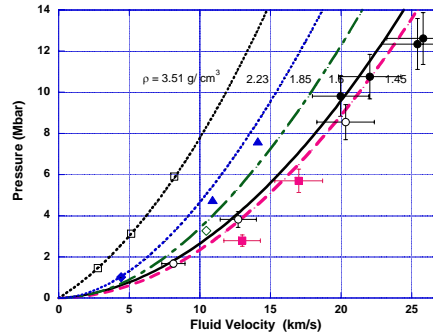


FIG. 7. Experimental EOS results from shock experiments. Only data with $P \geq 1.5$ Mbar and corresponding Hugoniot are shown. Our points: full squares, 1.45 g/cm³ LULI; empty circles, 1.6 g/cm³ LULI; full circles, 1.6 g/cm³ PALS. Previous points: empty diamond, 1.85 g/cm³ Pavlovskii et al. [48]; triangles, 2.2 g/cm³ Nellis [49]; full diamond, 2.23 g/cm³ Pavlovskii et al. [48]; empty squares, 3.51 g/cm³ (diamond) Pavlovskii [50].

The relation between shock velocity D and fluid velocity U for carbon in the Megabar range is linear ($D = C + SU$, where C is the sound velocity in the material in that pressure range). For carbon with $\rho_0 = 1.6$ g/cm³, from Sesame (or QEOS), we get $C \approx 5$ km/s and $S \approx 1.27$ [56]. A linear interpolation of our points instead yields $S \approx 1.08 - 1.14$. From this we get an “experimental” shock polar $P = \rho_0 D U = \rho_0 U (C + SU)$ which of course nicely

interpolates our results in the (P,U) plane. Such curve is above the thermodynamic limit $P = \rho_0 U^2$ corresponding to infinite compressibility (all our experimental points are above such limit). However, it seems too close to the shock polar for a perfect gas, which again could indicate an influence from systematic effects. For the case $\rho_0 = 1.45 \text{ g/cm}^3$ we didn't make any attempt to determine S since we had two points only.

The observed increased compressibility of carbon, suggests that at a given pressure along the Hugoniot, the density in the final liquid state (see Fig.4) is smaller than that for solid. Transitions to less dense phases also enhance thermal contributions, explaining the observed pressure discrepancy. This agrees with the conclusions by Nellis et al. [49] and reinforces their observations.

4. Shock acceleration in foams

In recent years, laser-plasmas have also been used as a tool to simulate astrophysical events in the laboratory. This has opened the new research field of “*Laboratory astrophysics*”. In particular, up to now, experiments have addressed problems related to the development of hydrodynamical instabilities [57] (Rayleigh Taylor instability in particular), the physics of shock waves (in particular of radiative shocks [58, 59]), the formation of astrophysical jets [60], equation of state and opacities of materials [61], etc.

In this context, we have addressed one particular problem, i.e. the acceleration of shocks as they travel in a decreasing density profile. This situation is met in the explosion of supernovae where the shock accelerates as it propagates through the less and less dense atmosphere of the supernova. As the shock accelerates, the matter behind the shock front becomes hotter and hotter and finally is so hot to give rise to a large emission of X-rays (XUV burst).

In our case, we measured the shock acceleration at the interface between two materials, with a decreasing density jump. The case of a discontinuous density jump, may somewhat be considered as limiting case of a continuous decreasing profile, therefore it is important to validate physical laws for shock propagation in such simple limiting case [63].

In our experiment the shock accelerated when it crossed the interface between an aluminum layer and a very-low density material (foam). Our plastic foams were produced at the Target Material Laboratory of ILE, Osaka University, by the aerogel method, which allows the production of films with area of mm^2 order and density in the range 50 to 150 mg/cm^3 with chemical composition CH_2 (poly(4-methyl-1-pentene)). Several-ten-nanometer sized crystals are aggregated, and macroscopic-pore void size was $\leq 2 \mu\text{m}$ over an area $< 1 \text{ mm}^2$ and for density $> 50 \text{ mg/cm}^3$ [64] (see Fig. 8). The foam film was put in contact with the aluminum foil using the single molecule glue method [64].

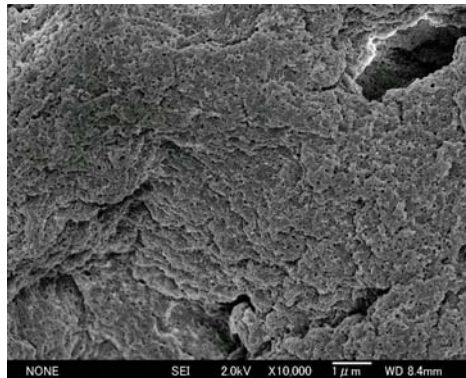


FIG. 8: Scanning electron microscope image of the foams produced at ILE used in the experiment.

In the experiment, we used 3-layer-targets. The first layer was a 4 μm plastic (CH) ablator, which was present to reduce preheating [55]. The second was a 10 μm Al foil followed by a foam layer of typical thickness 100-190 μm (the foam thickness was measured on each single sample). Such a foam layer was finally covered on half size by a thin (500 \AA) Al deposition. Our foams are transparent to visible light, and here we used their transparency to detect a shock breakout from the Al base through the foam (as previously done in [65]). However, unlike in that experiment, we did use quite thick foam layers (typically $\approx 100\text{--}190$ μm against ≈ 20 μm). Indeed, provided the shock velocity is constant in the foam (i.e. the shock is stationary), the precision in the measurement of the shock velocity in the foam is inversely proportional to the foam thickness. However, in this case it became impossible to use an Al stepped target as reference (as done in [65]). In fact, with thin steps (5 – 10 μm as in [65]) the time difference between breakout at base and step is not easily detectable on the same streak image of the foam shock breakout. On the other side, using thick steps would imply a non stationary shock in Al. Therefore, in our case, shock velocity was determined by measuring the time difference between shock breakout on the rear side of the Al flat layer (base), and the arrival of the laser pulse on the target front side (as determined with a time fiducial implemented through an optical fiber carrying a small part of the laser signal onto the streak camera slit, see Fig. 9).

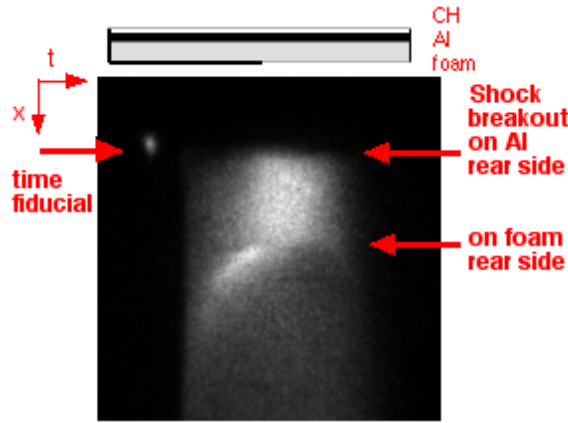


FIG. 9: Shock breakout image from an Al/foam target for laser energy $E_L = 215$ J and a foam density $\rho_f = 0.055$ g/cm^3 (target scheme on the top). Image size is 10 ns \times 1300 μm . Time flows up to down. The time between the fiducial maximum and the breakout on Al rear is $\Delta t = 9$ ps. We did run MULTI simulations by adjusting the laser intensity so to obtain the same fiducial-to-shock delay as in the experiment. These showed that a stationary value of the shock velocity ($D_{\text{Al}} = 33.9$ $\mu\text{m/ns}$) was reached in the last 2 μm of the Al base). The time between shock breakouts on Al and foam is $\Delta t = 3088$ ps giving $D_{\text{foam}} = 59.9$ $\mu\text{m/ns}$ (foam thickness was 185 μm on this shot)

Fig. 9 shows instead a streak image from an Al/foam target (in this case only, the target front was not covered by the CH layer). All other shots were realized with a 4.9 ns window (instead of 10 ns) in order to increase the accuracy of the measurement. The left side of the target rear is covered with a very thin Al layer. When the shock reaches the Al rear side, its breakout produces a strong luminosity, which is detected through the transparent foam (but it is partially masked on the left by the thin Al layer). On the contrary the luminosity due to the shock breakout on the foam rear side is strongly enhanced on the left by the presence of the Al thin layer.

Some curvature of the shock front at the edges is evident when it breaks out from the foam. This is due to the large foam thickness, which begins to be no longer negligible with respect to the focal spot size. However, the shock front in the central part of the image appears still to be reasonably flat. This was confirmed by performing simulations with the codes MULTI 2D [66] and DUED [67], by which we also verified that the change

in shock velocity with respect to the 1D case is negligible in our experimental conditions. They also allowed checking that the shock velocity is stationary in the foam.

From our experimental results it was also possible to deduce the acceleration factor ($g = U_{\text{foam}}/U_{\text{Al}}$) vs. foam density (see Fig. 10). We compared our results to two different models. The first calculates the isentropic release curve, in the perfect gas approximation, of the Al plasma in the foam [63]. In this case the acceleration factor g must be calculated semi-analytically, as described in [68]. The second one is a simple model based on the fact that, in first approximation, the release curve of Al is symmetric to the cold Hugoniot. Thereby this model applies to the case of cold materials and weak shocks [21, 23]. In this last model, the acceleration factor is simply given by $g = 2(1 + (\rho_{\text{foam}}/\rho_{\text{Al}})^{0.5})$.

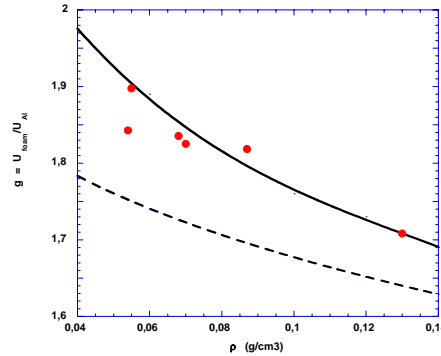


FIG. 10: The acceleration factor ($g = U_{\text{foam}}/U_{\text{Al}}$) from our experimental results (circles) vs. foam density, compared to an “isentropic perfect gas” model ([63], continuous line) and to a “cold material – weak shock” model ([21], dashed line), in which, the release isentropic is symmetric to the cold Hugoniot.

Our results [69] clearly show a much better agreement with the isentropic model. This is due to the fact that in the case of strong shocks, the limiting velocity of expansion of the free surface in vacuum is larger than for cold materials and weak shocks, i.e. $2U_{\text{Al}}$.

5. Smoothing by foams and gas jets

Apart from their use in astrophysical-dedicated experiments, low-density foams are largely studied because they have the potential of allowing the improvement of target design in ICF [70]. This is the main motivation explaining the recent large interest in laser-plasma experiments using foam targets. Indeed, laser imprint may be strongly reduced by thermal smoothing in a relatively-thick, hot, low-density (but overcritical) outer foam layer of ICF targets [71, 72]. Alternatively, very-low-density (undercritical, thin and transparent) foams may reduce the imprint problem by acting as dynamic phase plates [73].

Recently however a new approach to the problem of smoothing has been proposed, namely that of smoothing in a gas jet [74]. In the experiment realized by Malka et al. [74] a laser beam with many speckles was sent through a gas jet and imaged both statically (with a CCD) and dynamically (with a streak camera). Comparison of images before and after passing through a gas jet showed a strong reduction of non-uniformities. Also the authors compared the case in which the gas medium was pre-ionized with an auxiliary laser beam (PP) to the case with no pre-ionization (NPP) and showed that smoothing was sensibly improved in the NPP case. Therefore they concluded that smoothing was due to a combination of ionization, scattering and refraction effects.

This seems to be a new promising scheme, not only because of the results obtained in Ref [74], but also because of its intrinsic simplicity. However the experiment was lacking the measurements of the coupling to a target and on assessing real effect on payload hydrodynamics. This is what we realized in a preliminary experiment done at PALS.

In order to perform such kind of experiment, we do need non-uniform irradiation conditions. Therefore we deliberately didn't use PZPs. Also, of course, well reproducible and known non-uniformities, would of course facilitate the experiment and, finally, we would ideally like to have a 1-D modulation in order to be able to compare our experimental results with theoretical analytical models.

In a first experiment, we realized such condition by putting a prism on half of the laser beam. This deviated half of the beam producing a double-spot in the focal plane. By adjusting the target plane, we could obtain two focal spots with diameter $\approx 50 \mu\text{m}$ separated by $\approx 100 \mu\text{m}$. Therefore we did produce a *very-large* irradiation non-uniformity, which is a-priori very difficult to be smoothed.

As in ref. [74], we obtained static and dynamical images and compared them with and without gases. Our typical results, shown in Fig.11, show that in presence of the gas the space between the two focal spots is *filled-in*, i.e. the non uniformity is strongly reduced.

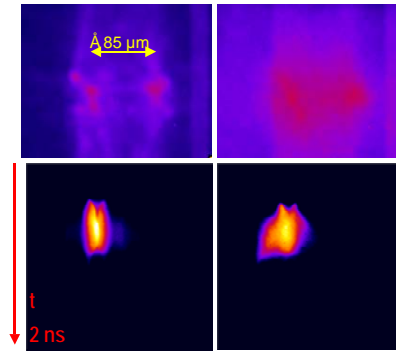


FIG. 11: Gas Jet experiment at PALS, Focal Spot. Static images (up): no gas (left), Ar 5 bar (right). Dynamic images (bottom): no gas (left); Ar 5 bar (right)

We also studied the coupling of the laser beam with/without the gas jet to a payload target (Al $10 \mu\text{m}$) by using our time-resolved self-emission diagnostics again, i.e. by analyzing the shock breakout from the rear side of the target at different gas jet pressures. Our results are shown in Fig. 12.

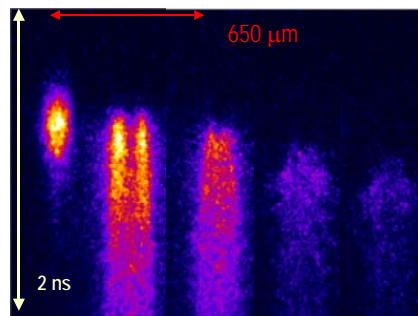


FIG. 12: shock breakout images from the double focal spot on a $10 \mu\text{m}$ Al target. From left to right: 1 bar (as in vacuum) 18 J; 2 bar 18 J; 5 bar 18 J; 10 bar 25 J

We clearly see two effects. First, the shock breakout is delayed when the gas pressure is increased. This corresponds to a reduced laser intensity on target (therefore a reduced shock pressure and shock velocity) because of the losses of energy in gas ionization and because the smoothing effect distributes the energy on a larger area, thereby decreasing intensity (see also Fig. 11). The weaker shock also corresponds to a reduced temperature and therefore a weaker

emissivity when it reaches the target rear side, an effect that is evident in Fig. 12.

Second, the non-uniformity is strongly decreased in presence of the gas jet. Let's notice that images obtained with Ar gas pressure ≤ 1 bar do not differ from images obtained without gas; therefore 1 bar seems to be too low to produce any appreciable smoothing effect (gas density too low). Above 10 bar, the streak camera does not show any shock breakout image: the shock clearly becomes too weak (not much self-emission) and too slow (it may fall outside the observation temporal window).

Finally let's notice that in our experiment we used argon as the gas medium, while helium was used in ref. [74]. In our case, no effect was observed with He. This is certainly due to the fact that we used very large non-uniformities, while non-uniformities in ref. [74] were of a few microns only. Therefore a much larger plasma density is needed to produce an appreciable diffusion / refraction.

In a following experiment, we plan to produce more 1-D and shorter non-uniformities by using a phase plate of new conception [75] which has been designed to produce stripes of about $40\ \mu\text{m}$ width over a focal spot with overall dimension about $400\ \mu\text{m} \times 400\ \mu\text{m}$. We have already performed some preliminary test of the phase plate by imaging the focal spot in static and dynamical mode (see Fig. 13). Also we have impacted such laser beam on a thick Al target ($100\ \mu\text{m}$) at low intensity (5 J on target). The resulting ablation impact (see fig. 14) clearly show the presence of a “*stripy*” focal spot.

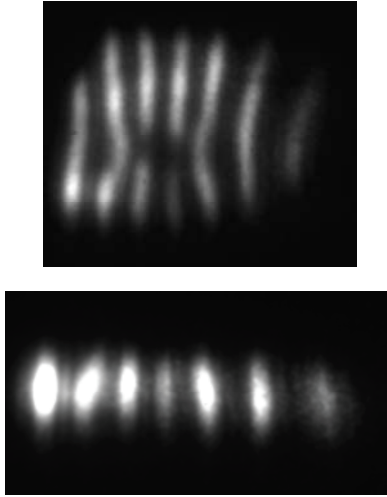


FIG. 13: Static (up, CCD) and dynamic (down, streak camera) images of the stripy focal spot obtained with the new-concept phase plate.

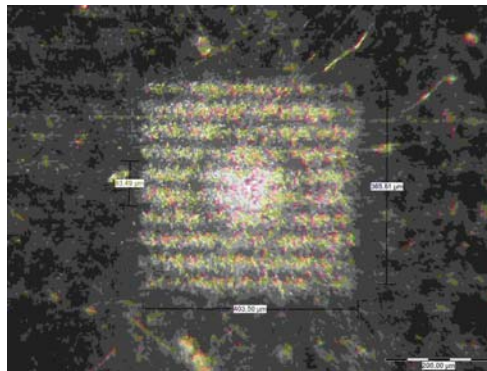


FIG. 14: Ablation impact obtained with a low energy shot using the new phase plate on a thick Al target.

Conclusions

Progress in laser technology allows realizing *cleaner* experiments, and conditions closer to those for which theoretical models have been derived. In particular, laser smoothing techniques like PZPs allows to improve irradiation conditions by getting an almost uniform intensity profile, strongly reducing 2-D effects (lateral transport of thermal energy, lateral flow of mass).

We have will presented a series of experiments respectively dedicated to the study of shock (ablation) pressures vs. laser intensity; the generation of extreme states of matter by laser compression and the application to the study of equation of state of material in the Mbar pressure range (here we have used carbon); the study of shock acceleration in foams (a problem which is important also in connection to astrophysical situations); and finally the study of smoothing of laser energy deposition by foams and gas jets.

Concerning shock pressure, our results show a scaling vs. laser intensity, which is quite close to the theoretical prediction and gives some evidence for the mechanism of delocalized absorption.

Concerning the equation of state of carbon, we have obtained the first Hugoniot data for carbon with laser-driven shocks and got the first experimental points at pressures higher than 8 Mbar. Moreover, we substantially increased the number of EOS data for carbon at pressures > 1 Mbar.

Concerning the problem of the shock-induced acceleration when the shock crosses the Al / foam interface, we performed some measurements by changing foam density and showed that results are in close agreement with the predictions from a theoretical model, which calculates the isentropic release in the perfect gas approximation [22, 23].

Concerning the experiment on smoothing of laser non-uniformities in a gas-jet, we saw that the gas jets give good smoothing effect: very large non-uniformities seem to be smoothed very effectively.

In conclusion, we have shown that laser-plasmas are a very interesting tool for the study of some hydrodynamical problems and their applications. Also, using laser facilities like PALS, it is possible to perform many interesting and useful experiments in plasma physics

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