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In Situ Measurement of Three-Dimensional Ion Densities in Focused Femtosecond Pulses

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We image spatial distributions of Xe$^+$ ions in the focus of a laser beam of ultrashort, intense pulses in all three dimensions, with a resolution of $\sim$3 $\mu$m and $\sim$12 $\mu$m in the two transverse directions. This allows for studying ionization processes without spatially averaging ion yields. Our in situ ion imaging is also useful to analyze focal intensity profiles and to investigate the transverse modal purity of tightly focused beams of complex light. As an example, the intensity profile of a Hermite-Gaussian beam mode HG$_{1,0}$ recorded with ions is found to be in good agreement with optical images.

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After the development of chirped pulse amplification [1] in the late 1980s and the discovery of self-mode-locking [2] in 1991, laser sources emitting femtosecond-duration pulses have become routinely available. Laboratories around the world have used such sources for extensive studies of intense-field processes such as multiphoton ionization, tunneling ionization, and above-threshold ionization, of atoms and of molecules [3]. The required atomic electric field of about $10^9$ V/cm or more is created by focusing the ultrashort pulses in a target gas.

A direct consequence of carrying out intense-field experiments with focused laser light is the presence of a broad range of peak intensities across the focal region. To understand some of the experimental consequences of this let us consider a process for which the probability to produce a certain product particle is $P(I)$ when the pulse has peak intensity $I$. Following common practice, we might study the process by adjusting the laser pulse energy such that the highest peak intensity found in the focus equals $I_0$ and then collecting product particles from all over the focal region. Doing so, we obtain a volume-integrated product yield $Y(I_0)$ given by

$$Y(I_0) \approx \int_0^{I_0} P(I) \left| \frac{dV[I,I_0]}{dI} \right| dI,$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

in which $V[I,I_0]$ is the volume in which the local peak intensity exceeds some value $I$ [4]. Because of the volumetric weighting in Eq. (1), the measured yield $Y(I_0)$ differs from the probability $P(I)$ under investigation. For instance, when $I_0$ is increased, $Y(I_0)$ ultimately becomes proportional to $I_0^{3/2}$ once the saturation intensity [for which $P(I_0) \rightarrow 1$] is exceeded [5]. This masks the decrease of $P(I)$ that is often expected for intensities greater than the saturation intensity due to competing higher-order processes. Also, subtle features in $P(I)$ [6,7] tend to be washed out by volume integration.

In this Letter, we present spatially resolved images of 3D densities of ion charge states as they are created in focused ultrashort pulses. Thus, what we have realized for use in intense-field ionization research is a photodynamical test tube, i.e., a volume of known, $\mu$m-sized dimensions exposed to peak intensities that are essentially constant across the volume. This allows measuring $P(I)$ without spatial integration: one simply defines a sufficiently limited spatial region of interest in the ion image and determines the yields originating from this region.

Another goal of our investigations is to analyze focal intensity distributions. These can be inferred because volume elements having the same peak intensity contain identical ion charge state distributions. The target gas then acts as an in situ sensor of local intensity. In this Letter we analyze images, made with Xe ions, of the transverse profile of an intense, ultrashort focused Hermite-Gaussian HG$_{0,1}$ transverse beam mode. The HG modes are related to the Laguerre-Gaussian modes LG$_{p,l}$ [8]. We are particularly interested in LG modes because they carry a sharply defined amount of optical orbital angular momentum (OAM) [9], and we wish to study the effect of this quantity on intense-field processes. For this, we need modally pure LG modes. In situ ion imaging will be helpful to assess the degree of modal purity: modal interferences due to contaminating mode components (which have different Gouy phases [8]) should show up in the ion image.

Other techniques have been reported to image foci and/or circumvent volumetric weighting. First, the intensity-selective scanning (ISS) technique [4,10–13] utilizes a narrow slit perpendicular to the laser propagation direction, so ion yields are still integrated over two dimensions. To obtain yields free of volume integration raw ISS data must be deconvolved, which adds noise and only works for Gaussian intensity distributions. Second, the intensity-difference spectrum (IDS) technique [14,15] has been shown to work only for a two-dimensional Gaussian profile, and is inherently prone to statistical noise. Last, a number of time-of-flight techniques allow ions created at different locations to arrive at different times [6,16–18]. The technique of [16] was demonstrated to work well for...
~200 μm resolution [17], but more systematic investigations are required [16] to explore its applicability for resolutions of a few micrometer. We lowered the background pressure of about 3 mm away. The uniform electrostatic field between the plates causes target gas cations created in the focus to be accelerated toward and pass through the slit. The slit is rectangular, measuring [see coordinate system in Fig. 1(a)] Δz ∼ 400 μm by Δy ∼ 12 μm. Assuming their initial kinetic energy is negligible, ions created at a distance x away from the slit enter the TOF tube with kinetic energy proportional to (x/d)VR. The total TOF of an ion with mass m = Mu (a = 1 a.m.u. = 1.67 × 10^{-27} kg) and charge q = Qe (e is the elementary charge = 1.60 × 10^{-19} C) equals

\[ t = \sqrt{\frac{M}{Q} \tau(x)}. \]  

In this equation, \( \tau(x) \) is a reference TOF of an ion with \( M = Q \) (e.g., H^+) that was created at position x; this function depends on the electrostatic potentials \( V_2 \) and \( V_3 \) we apply to the meshes [see Fig. 1(a); note that \( V_1 = 0 \) V]. The ion trajectories inside the reflector have a turning point, and the ions are detected on a multi-channel-plate ion detector [multichannel plate (MCP) in Fig. 1(a)], a Galileo chevron type with a time resolution of \( \Delta t = 1.5 \) ns. To record the ion signal from the MCP we used a FAST ComTec model P7886 2-GHz counting card with time bins of 500 ps.

To reconstruct three-dimensional ion distributions, we note that the entrance slit already clips the acceptance volume in the two dimensions y and z to the sizes \( \Delta y \) and \( \Delta z \) of the slit. We reconstruct the initial positions of ions in the third dimension (x) from their TOF spectrum [Eq. (2)]. To obtain a one-to-one correspondence between initial location x of an ion and its TOF for each \( M/Q \) ratio, we adjust the mesh potentials \( V_2 \) and \( V_3 \) so that a monotonically increasing \( \tau(x) \) results. Typical values are \( V_2 = 815 \) V and \( V_3 = 1048 \) V; a graph of \( \tau(x) \) for these values is shown Fig. 1(b). [When \( V_2 \) is lowered to ~800 V, \( \tau(x) \) becomes flat, i.e., independent of x over a wide range. For such a setting there is no longer a one-to-one correspondence between x and TOF, so spatial information would be lost.] For a fixed accumulation time, the signal \( S_j \) recorded in time bin j is proportional to the number of ions with TOF between \( t_j = j \Delta t \) and \( t_{j+1} = (j+1) \Delta t \) (\( \Delta t \) is time bin width). These ions must all originate from a small spatial interval \( \Delta x_j = x_{j+1} - x_j \), with \( t_j = \sqrt{M/Q} \tau(x_j) \) and \( t_{j+1} = \sqrt{M/Q} \tau(x_{j+1}) \). The density of ions \( N_j \) created in the spatial interval \( \Delta x_j \) is thus

\[ N_j \propto \frac{\Delta t_j}{\Delta x_j} S_j \propto \frac{S_i}{\Delta x_j}. \]  

The second proportionality follows because all \( \Delta t_j \) are equal. We may think of the recorded TOF spectrum \( S_j \) as the image in time of the density \( N_j \) of ions in space. The spatial resolution (in the x direction) is
\[ \Delta x_j \approx \sqrt{\frac{Q}{M} \frac{\Delta t}{\partial \tau / \partial x_{x_j}}} \tag{4} \]

For the typical settings we used, the derivative \( \partial \tau/\partial x \) smoothly drops from about 0.250 ns/\( \mu m \) (at \( x = 1.9 \) mm) to about 0.200 ns/\( \mu m \) (at \( x = 2.0 \) mm). To measure \( \tau(x) \) we used a focused attenuated beam, which generates only \( Xe^+ \). We positioned this focus at various \( x \) positions using a translation stage with \( \mu m \) precision, and recorded the TOF of the \( Xe^+ \). The obtained experimental \( \tau(x) \) matched the theoretically predicted curve. Using Eq. (4) with a time resolution \( \Delta t = 1.5 \) ns as set by our MCP, we find our theoretical spatial resolution for \(^{132}Xe^+ \) ranges between 0.52 \( \mu m \) (at 1.9 mm) and 0.66 \( \mu m \) (at 2.0 mm). For \(^{132}Xe^{7+} \), these values would be 1.4 and 1.7 \( \mu m \), respectively. A more realistic estimation of the spatial resolution accounts for the thermal motion of the \( Xe \) gas, the dimensions of the spectrometer entrance slit, mechanical vibrations, and the frequency bandwidth of our detection electronics. A first analysis of these factors indicates the spatial resolution in the \( x \) direction is about \( 3 \) \( \mu m \). In the \( y \) and \( z \) directions the resolutions are mainly determined by the slit dimensions, so 12 and 400 \( \mu m \), respectively. Slits narrower than 12 \( \mu m \) could be used, but the resolution in the \( y \) dimension is ultimately limited by thermal effects, in particular for the lower charge states; this limits our technique to laser foci not smaller than about 10 \( \mu m \). We chose the 400-\( \mu m \) slit length as a compromise between count rate and the need to keep the slit shorter than the Rayleigh range of our focused beam, which is a few millimeters. Pressure-dependent measurements indicated that space charge effects are absent for the pressure we used (\( \sim 5.0 \times 10^{-7} \) mbar).

Figures 2 and 3 show \(^{132}Xe \) ion distributions in the focus reconstructed using Eqs. (3) and (4). The different charge states are color coded: \( Xe^+ \) in red (gray in print), \( Xe^{2+} \) in green (light gray), \( Xe^{3+} \) in blue (dark gray), and \( Xe^{4+} \) in red (gray). The image in Fig. 2 is a cross section in the \( xy \) plane through the focal region, obtained by moving the focus up (\( y \) direction) in steps of 10 \( \mu m \) using a stepper motor, and recording a TOF spectrum for each height. The image in Fig. 3 is a cross section in the \( xz \) plane, obtained by moving the focus along the \( z \) direction in steps of 200 \( \mu m \). Setting up the experiment, we noticed that visible imperfections in the unfocused beam profile go hand in hand with irregular features in the ion charge state distributions. Using this as a guideline, we improved the mode quality of the laser by reducing the aperture of an iris in the regenerative cavity of the amplifier, at the expense of \( \sim 0.1 \) W. The nesting of the various charge states in Figs. 2 and 3 indicates the competition between the processes that create them. The four line graphs in Fig. 2 show the ion yields measured along the dashed line in Fig. 2 (transverse to the laser propagation, same scale). If one moves toward the center of the focus, the yield of each charge state \( Xe^{q+} \) rises, saturates, and is then depleted in favor of the next charge state \( Xe^{(q+1)+} \) in a sequential way, so that a nested pattern of charge states results. The depletion shown in Fig. 2 is in sharp contrast with the 3/2-power rise observed in traditional methods. From the data shown...
in the line graphs, we measured that the count rate of Xe$^+$ and Xe$^{2+}$ in the center of the focus is only a few percent of that of the peaks. Such a degree of observed depletion has no precedence in literature, and underlines our ability to record $P(I)$ free of volumetric weighting.

About $5 \times 10^6$ laser shots (or a runtime of about 2 h including overhead activities) were required to produce each of Figs. 2 and 3. Ion count rates for the line graphs were a few hundred per minute per time channel.

To demonstrate that our ion imaging technique is not limited to only Gaussian intensity profiles, we also imaged a focused beam of ultrashort pulses in the Hermite-Gaussian HG$_{1,0}$ transverse mode [8] (Fig. 4). We created this mode using holographic techniques [19,20]. The intensity of the HG$_{1,0}$ mode is

$$I(x, y, z) \propto \frac{x^2}{w(z)^2} \exp \left( -\frac{x^2 + y^2}{w(z)^2} \right),$$

in which $w(z)^2 = w_0^2(1 + z^2/z_0^2)$ describes the self-similar transverse scaling of the intensity profile ($w_0$ is the beam waist and $z_0$ is the Rayleigh range) [8]. The profile consists of two lobes (see inset a in Fig. 4). For $y = 0$ (dashed line in inset) the maxima of these lobes are separated in the $x$ direction by a distance

$$\Delta x(z) = \Delta x_0 \sqrt{1 + z^2/z_0^2}$$

(see inset b), with $\Delta x_0$ the separation at the waist ($z = 0$). Again using Eqs. (3) and (4), we reconstructed $\Delta x(z)$ (circles in Fig. 4) from TOF spectra.

To verify that this reconstruction is correct we also focused the beam in air using the same lens as in the ionization experiment, and recorded the beam profile as a function of $z$ optically (triangles in Fig. 4) using a CCD camera. In contrast to the ion imaging experiments—taken at full power—this optical experiment required substantial attenuation, to protect the camera from damage and to avoid nonlinear optical effects in air. The ion image and optical image agree within the error limits, which we estimate to be $\sim 8.4 \mu m$ (pixel size) for the CCD data and $\sim 3 \mu m$ for the ion data. This agreement allows a fit to Eq. (6) (solid curve in Fig. 4).

In summary, we used a time-of-flight technique to image ion distributions in the focus of a laser beam of ultrafast pulses. We showed that this (a) allows measurements of ion yields without volumetric weighting, and (b) facilitates investigations of focal intensity distributions, with the target atoms acting as in situ intensity sensors.

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