Towards the high spin–isospin frontier using isotopically-identified fission fragments

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Abstract

Measurements of prompt $\gamma$ rays in coincidence with isotopically-identified fission fragments, produced in collisions of $^{238}\text{U}$ on a $^9\text{Be}$ target, at an energy around the Coulomb barrier are reported. This technique provides simultaneous access to the spectroscopy of many nuclei, extending to very neutron-rich isotopes and fairly high angular momenta. The structural evolution of the neutron-rich zirconium isotopes is discussed in the light of the present measurements in $^{105,106}\text{Zr}$ and in the context of the interacting boson model with a global parameterization that includes triaxiality but no shape coexistence.

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The fission process, though discovered more than 70 years ago, continues to be a fertile ground to study structural and dynamical aspects of quantum many-body systems [1]. It is also an important avenue for the production of nuclei far from stability. In fission reactions, several hundreds of nuclei around and far from the valley of stability are produced, with comparable excitation energies and fairly high angular momenta. These nuclei exhibit a variety of phenomena ranging from single-particle excitations near shell closures to collectivity resulting in vibrations or deformations, and can be used to probe the evolution of nuclear structure as a function of energy, angular momentum, and isospin (i.e., neutron–proton asymmetry). Present and next-generation facilities, producing beams of nuclei far from stability but generally at low angular momentum (with the exception of high spin isomers). The measurement of the response to extremes in both angular momentum and neutron–proton asymmetry, especially over long isotopic series, could lead to new discoveries and provide yet more stringent tests of our understanding of nuclear structure.

In this letter we report on in-beam studies of neutron-rich nuclei based on prompt $\gamma$-ray spectroscopy of isotopically-identified fission fragments which represents a step towards the study of nuclear properties as a function of both angular momentum and isospin. Of the large number of isotopes measured, the results for the very neutron-rich isotopes of zirconium ($Z = 40$) are presented. The Zr chain provides a long series of isotopes with varying properties: The neutron-deficient $^{80}\text{Zr}$ ($N = Z$) is found to be strongly deformed [8]. An addition of ten neutrons yields a doubly magic...
spherical $^{90}$Zr. Between N = 50 and N = 60 the Zr isotopes display a complex and rapidly changing behavior, presumably related to shape coexistence. It is still an open question whether this coexistent nuclear behavior persists beyond $^{100}$Zr or there is return to a more normal, deformed state. Further towards the neutron dripline, exotic octupole (tetrahedral) shapes with a zero quadrupole moment are predicted around N = 70 [9], as well as ‘giant’ halos beyond N = 82 [10]. Additional interest in the neutron-rich Zr isotopes is raised by the recent observation of an unexpected long-lived isomer in $^{102}$Zr [11,12], the nature of which is still unclear. The present work reports on the systematic investigation of the structure of $^{104,105,106}$Zr to further understand the evolution of nuclear structure in neutron-rich Zr isotopes.

The measurements were performed at GANIL using a $^{238}$U beam at 6.2 MeV/u ($\sim$0.2 pA), on a 10-micron thick $^{58}$Be target. The advantage of the inverse kinematics is that the fission fragments are forward focused and have a large velocity, resulting in both an efficient detection and isotopic identification in the spectrometer. A single magnetic field setting of the large-acceptance spectrometer VAMOS++ [13,14] (momentum acceptance of around ±20%), placed at 20° with respect to the beam axis, was used to identify the fission fragments. The detection system ($1 \times 0.15$ m$^2$) at the focal plane of the spectrometer was composed of (i) a Multi-Wire Parallel Plate Avalanche Counter (MWPPAC), (ii) two Drift Chambers (x, y), (iii) a segmented Ionization Chamber ($\Delta E$, and (iv) 40 silicon detectors ($E_v$). The time of flight (TOF) was obtained from the two MWPPACs, one located after the target and the other at the focal plane (flight path $\sim$7.5 m). The measured parameters [(x,y), $\Delta E$, $E_v$, TOF] along with the known magnetic field were used to determine, on an event-by-event basis, the mass number (A), charge state (q), atomic number (Z), and velocity vector ($\vec{v}$) for the detected fragment [13]. Improvements of the setup as compared to our earlier work [13-15] led to the isotopic identification of elements till Z = 63 with a mass resolution of $\Delta A/A \sim 0.4%$. Fig. 1 shows the isotopic identification obtained in the present work. The prompt $\gamma$ rays were measured in coincidence with the isotopically-identified fragments, using the EXOGAM array [16] consisting of 11 Compton-suppressed segmented clover HPGe detectors (15 cm from the target). The $\vec{v}$ of the fragment along with the angle of the segment of the relevant clover detector was used to obtain the $\gamma$-ray energy in the rest frame [17].

Fig. 2(a) shows the measured relative yields of the isotopically-identified fission fragments. The effect of the acceptance of VAMOS++ on the measured yields has been calculated based on the procedure discussed in Refs. [13,14]. The geometrical acceptance of VAMOS++ is around 13%–15%, for A $\sim$ 80–145 and rapidly drops to 7% for A $\sim$ 160 in the present case. The selection of VAMOS++ in the magnetic rigidity ($B_0 \sim Av/q$) further reduces the acceptance for the fragments with decreasing values of Z due to the dependence of q(Z, $\vec{v}$). While the acceptance depends strongly on Z, being $\sim$2.0%, 5.0%, 7.5%, 6.0% for Z = 30, 40, 50 and 60 respectively, it has a weak dependence on A for a given Z. This variation is less than 0.5% within an isotopic chain. Hence the limit of the sensitivity of the measurement in reaching the most exotic nuclei is mainly constrained by the production mechanism itself. Also shown are the normalized results of PROFI calculations [18] corrected for the acceptance of VAMOS++. The PROFI code uses a semi-empirical description of the fission partition, including the excitation-energy-dependent influence of nuclear shell effects and pairing correlations. The model is used in the present work to calculate the isotopic yields of the fragments resulting from the decay of $^{247}$Cm ($E^* \approx 45$ MeV) and $^{248}$Pu ($E^* \approx 19$ MeV), arising from fusion- and $\alpha$-transfer-induced fission, respectively. For an optimal reproduction of the experimental yields, the relative contributions of these processes are found to be around 80% and 20%, respectively, in agreement with earlier cross-section measurements [19]. The measured and calculated yields compare well in Fig. 2(a). The small observed differences in the tails suggest that the model predicts a slightly wider A and Z distribution. The measured yield of $^{102}$Zr represents a small fraction ($\sim 2.5 \times 10^{-5}$) of the total number of the isotopically-identified nuclei ($\sim$400 different isotopes corresponding to various elements) detected in coincidence with prompt $\gamma$ rays and highlights the large selectivity and sensitivity achieved. Besides its relevance for studying nuclear structure far from stability, the measurement of the complete mass and charge distribution populated by fission in coincidence with $\gamma$ rays, reported here for the first time, are necessary to understand fundamental aspects of the fission mechanism [21].

Fig. 2(b) displays the limits of detection, reached in studies of neutron-rich nuclei from Z = 38 to Z = 50, involving $\gamma$-ray spectroscopy. A more quantitative estimate of the measured $\gamma$-ray yields can be obtained from the following. $\gamma$-ray efficiency corrected, intensities for the 4$^+$ to 2$^+$ transitions for the even isotopes. $^{100}$Sr: 713(80), $^{102}$Zr: 278(70), $^{110}$Mo: 1384(180), $^{114}$Ru: 8527(470), $^{120}$Pd: 6370(300) and $^{126}$Cd: 777(300). The population of excited states through $\beta$ decay depends on the J$^\pi$ of the decaying parent nucleus, implying that high-spin states can be populated only in rare cases. Similarly, the detection of the $\gamma$ decay of an isomer, e.g. at the focal plane of a separator, is also restrictive. The high-fold $\gamma$-coincidence method depends on both the ease of gating and the knowledge of the $\gamma$ rays either from the relevant fragment or from its complementary fragments. The present method does not suffer from the above restrictions. Fig. 2(b) shows that the sensitivity of $\gamma$-ray spectroscopy reached in the present...
in-beam measurement of excited states in exotic nuclei is comparable to that obtained following off-beam $\beta$-decay measurements.

Fig. 3(a) shows the Doppler-corrected $\gamma$-ray energy as a function of the mass number of the Zr fragment identified in VAMOS++. Also shown in Fig. 3(b) is the $\gamma$-ray spectrum for the detected $^{104}$Zr fragment but Doppler-corrected for the complementary fragment. Prior to the present work, no states in $^{105}$Zr and, from $\beta$-decay [11], only two states ($2^+$ and $4^+$) in $^{106}$Zr were known. Intensity and energy balance arguments, combined with the limited statistics of the coincidence data and a comparison with the systematics of lower-mass odd-N Zr isotopes [6,22], were used to suggest the level scheme of $^{105}$Zr shown in Fig. 4. The placement of the $124(1)$, $161(3)$, $222(1)$, and $285(2)$ keV transitions (Fig. 3(c)) is confirmed from their definite coincidence relation, while indications for $319(1)$ and $374(1)$ keV transitions in the $222$ keV gate were less conclusive. The $98(2)$ keV and $464(2)$ keV transitions could not be placed in the level scheme because of the lack of coincidence information. The spins of the states could not be measured directly. Hence tentative assignments (Fig. 4) were obtained based on the systematics for the observed band structure for lighter odd-N Zr isotopes. The ground-state configurations of $^{101}$Zr and $^{103}$Zr have been identified to be $5/2^-[532]$ [22] and $3/2^+[411]$ [23], respectively. The quasiparticle rotor model calculations [22] and the Projected Shell Model (PSM) calculations [24] predict the neutron $5/2^+[413]$ to be the lowest configuration for $^{105}$Zr. The observed band is found to be consistent with such a $5/2^+$ assignment.

In $^{106}$Zr, in addition to the known $152(2)$ and $324(1)$ keV $\gamma$ rays [11], the two new transitions, $470(1)$ and $625(2)$ keV (Fig. 3(d)) are assigned to the decay of the higher-spin states of the ground-state band. The observed lower intensity of the $152(2)$ keV transition is attributed to an expected half-life of a few ns for the $2^+$ state (similar to that reported in $^{104}$Zr [25]) and in part due to the internal conversion ($\alpha = 0.242(7)$ [26]). The placement of the transition around 350 keV could not be made. The level scheme of $^{106}$Zr, shown in Fig. 4, is constructed on the basis of ar-
The presence of a long-lived isomer is necessary. This unexpected isomer is from Ref. [12]. Also shown are predictions of the Projected Shell Model (PSM) [24] (105Zr) and the global IBM calculation including triaxiality (104, 106, 108Zr). The levels corresponding to different bands (see text) are suitably displaced. The tentative assignment of the 108Zr ground-state band (up to 8+ level, 1 1+ level, 1 2+ level, and 1 3+ level) is based on the assumption that nuclear collectivity can be expressed in terms of a scheme of 108Zr is from Ref. [12].

The number of valence neutrons and protons, n and z, are counted from the closed shells N = 50 and Z = 28. The number of bosons is NS = Nn + Np with Nn = min(n, (Ωn − 18 + z) − n)/2 and Np = min(z, Ωn − z)/2, where Ωn and Ωp are the neutron and proton shell sizes, respectively. Ωn = 32 and Ωp = 22. This defines an effective boson number that takes account of (sub-)shell effects for the neutrons which may depend on the number of protons. From studies with IBM-2 (which distinguishes between neutron and proton bosons) it is known that the Hamiltonian parameters are smooth functions of n and z [29], and in this study they vary linearly with n and z. The resulting Hamiltonian can be projected onto IBM-1, as long as no mixed-symmetry states are considered in the global fit. The global IBM-1 Hamiltonian used in this study therefore implicitly takes account of shell structure through the use of effective neutron and proton boson numbers of IBM-2.

A structural feature of many nuclei in this region is the presence of a Kπ = 2+ γ band at low energy, built on a vibrational mode that breaks axial symmetry. This indicates that (either rigid or soft) triaxiality plays an important role in the concerned nuclei. A cubic term is therefore added which introduces triaxial features in the IBM, in line with a recent microscopic derivation [32]. The adopted Hamiltonian is identical to the one of Ref. [33],

\[
\hat{H} = \epsilon_d \hat{d} + \kappa \mathbf{Q} \cdot \hat{\mathbf{Q}} + \kappa' \hat{L} \cdot \hat{L} + \lambda \hat{d}^2 + \nu \mathbf{d}^2 \times \mathbf{d} \times \mathbf{d} \times \mathbf{d} (3) + \mathbf{d} \times \mathbf{d} \times \mathbf{d} (3),
\]

where \( \hat{d} \) is the d-boson number operator, \( \hat{Q}_{\mu} = [\mathbf{d}^2 \times \hat{s} + s^3 \times \mathbf{d} \mathbf{d}^2]_\mu + \chi [\mathbf{d} \mathbf{d}^2]_\mu \) is the quadrupole operator and \( \hat{L} \) is the angular momentum operator. The parameters in this Hamiltonian are varied linearly with numbers of valence neutrons and protons, in the spirit of the global fit of Ref. [30]. In all, 380 levels in 50 even-mass nuclei are considered, yielding a root-mean-square deviation of 127 keV. Fig. 5 illustrates a result of this global calculation, showing the evolution of the inverse of the excitation energy of the 2+ level, 1/\( E_2(2^+) \), as a function of neutron and proton numbers. This is a sensitive indicator of shell and sub-shell structure, the effects of which can be accounted for with an effective boson number. The pathological behavior of the 50–98Zr nuclei, associated with the combined sub-shells at N = 50, 56 and Z = 40 is chart in a parameterization similar to the one used in Ref. [30]. Calculations are limited to the even-mass Zr isotopes since a global parameterization for odd-mass nuclei with the interacting boson-fermion model [31] is currently not available.

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...nvenient neutron-rich fission fragments, complementary to those obtained from \( \beta \) decay at isotope separators or through multiple coincidences with \( \gamma \)-ray detector arrays, are reported. In particular, results on the prompt \( \gamma \)-ray spectroscopy of the neutron-rich \( ^{105,106}Zr \) isotopes are presented, and interpreted in an improved global IBM calculation that includes triaxial deformation. The present work shows that their structure changes rather smoothly as a function of N consistent with nuclei in this region and there are no surprises unlike the presence of an unexpected isomer in \( ^{108}Zr \) as reported by Refs. [11,12]. The obtained fission-fragment mass distribution extended to fragments with large N/Z at relatively large angular momentum. Thus the present method when coupled with new-generation \( \gamma \)-ray tracking detector AGATA [34] to EXOGAM and VAMOS++, exploiting both stable and next-generation ISOL beams, will open avenues for understanding nuclei under extreme conditions of neutron–proton asymmetry and angular momentum and also enable detailed investigation of the fission mechanism.

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