Observation of a Coherence Length Effect in Exclusive $\rho^0$ Electroproduction

The HERMES Collaboration

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Exclusive incoherent electroproduction of the $\rho^0(770)$ meson from $^1\text{H}, ^2\text{H}, ^3\text{He},$ and $^{14}\text{N}$ targets has been studied by the HERMES experiment at squared four-momentum transfer $Q^2 > 0.4 \text{ GeV}^2$ and positron energy loss $\nu$ from 9 to 20 GeV. The ratio of the $^{14}\text{N}$ to $^1\text{H}$ cross sections per nucleon, known as the nuclear transparency, was found to decrease with increasing coherence length of quark-antiquark fluctuations of the virtual photon. The data provide clear evidence of the interaction of the quark-antiquark fluctuations with the nuclear medium.

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The space-time evolution of a virtual quantum state, such as a quark-antiquark ($q\bar{q}$) fluctuation of a photon, can be probed by studying its propagation through a perturbing medium. The unperturbed virtual state can travel a distance $l_c$, known as the “coherence length,” in the laboratory frame during its lifetime. The interactions between the state and the medium can be studied at different values of $l_c$ by varying the kinematics at which the state is produced. In this letter, interactions of a $q\bar{q}$ fluctuation with the nuclear medium are studied by measuring the nuclear dependence of the exclusive $\rho^0$ electroproduction cross section.

Studies of the hadronic ($q\bar{q}$) structure of high-energy photons started with ground-work by Yang and Mills, Sakurai, Gell-Mann and Zachariasen, and Berman and Drell in the early 1960’s [1]. The hadronic structure arises from fluctuations of the (real or virtual) photon to short-lived quark-antiquark states of mass $M_{q\bar{q}}$ and propagation distance $l_c = 2\nu/(Q^2 + M_{q\bar{q}}^2)$, where $-Q^2$ and $\nu$ are the squared mass and laboratory-frame energy of the photon (adopting units where $\hbar = c = 1$). The $q\bar{q}$ fluctuations are assumed to dominate many photon-induced reactions in the laboratory frame [3]. For example in exclusive production of the $\rho^0$ meson, a $q\bar{q}$ pair is scattered onto the physical $\rho^0$ mass shell by a diffractive interaction with the target [2][3].

In nuclear targets, photon-induced reactions can be affected by the initial state interactions (ISI) of the $q\bar{q}$ states with the nuclear medium. The ISI are maximized when $l_c$ is large compared to the nuclear radius $R_A$, and the photon converts to the $q\bar{q}$ pair before entering the nucleus [2][3]. The hadronic ISI vanish in the limit $l_c \ll R_A$ of negligible $q\bar{q}$ interaction path. The dependence of the ISI on $l_c$ can be measured explicitly in exclusive $\rho^0$ production experiments, where a single mass—namely, the $\rho^0$ mass—dominates $M_{q\bar{q}}$ and $l_c$ [2][3]. Due largely to limited coverage in $l_c$, previous experiments have not yet seen the expected $l_c$ dependence [3][3].

In exclusive reactions a specific final state is produced without additional particles, for example $eN \to e\rho^0N$ (here $N$ is a nucleon). The effect of the nuclear medium on the particles in the initial and final states of such reactions can be characterized by the nuclear transparency $T_A$. It is defined as the ratio of the measured cross section to that expected in the absence of these initial and final state interactions (ISI and FSI). If the ISI and FSI amplitudes factorize from the exclusive scattering amplitude, then $T_A$ is the probability that no significant ISI or FSI occur. The transparency has been used to study the space-time dynamics of several exclusive reactions [2][3][4]. This paper reports measurements of the nuclear transparency for exclusive incoherent $\rho^0$ electroproduction on $^2\text{H}, ^3\text{He},$ and $^{14}\text{N}$ targets at $Q^2 > 0.4 \text{ GeV}^2$, 9 GeV $< \nu < 20 \text{ GeV}$, and 0.6 fm $< l_c < 8 \text{ fm}$. The data provide an explicit demonstration that the interactions of the photon with the nuclear medium depend on the propagation distance $l_c$ of the $q\bar{q}$ pair.

The data were obtained during the 1995-1997 running periods of the HERMES experiment using $^1\text{H}, ^2\text{H}, ^3\text{He},$ and $^{14}\text{N}$ internal gas targets in the 27.5 GeV HERA positron storage ring at DESY. The scattered $e^+$ and the $\pi^+\pi^-$ pair from the $\rho^0$ decay (≈ 100% branching ratio) were detected in the HERMES forward spectrometer [3].

The $\rho^0$ production sample was extracted from events with exactly three tracks: a scattered positron and two oppositely-charged hadrons. The relevant 4-momenta are: $k$ ($k'$) of the incident (scattered) positron, $q \equiv k - k'$ of the virtual photon, $P$ of the struck nucleon, $P_{h^+}$ and $P_{h^-}$ of the detected hadrons, $v \equiv P_{h^+} + P_{h^-}$ of the $\rho^0$ can-
didate, and $P_Y \equiv P + q - v$ of the undetected final state $Y$. The relevant Lorentz invariants are: $Q^2 = -q^2 > 0$; $\nu = q \cdot P/M$ (here $M$ is the proton mass); an exclusivity measure $\Delta E = (P^2 - M^2)/2M$; the invariant mass $M_{\pi\pi} = \sqrt{s'}$ assuming the detected hadrons are pions; the squared 4-momentum transfer $t = (q - v)^2$ to the target; the maximum value $t_0$ of $t$ for fixed $\nu$, $Q^2$, $P^2$, and $M_{\pi\pi}$; and the above-threshold momentum transfer $t' = t - t_0$.

For nuclear targets, the diffractive interaction with the target can occur incoherently from individual nucleons or coherently from the nucleus as a whole. The incoherent exclusive $\rho^0$ production signal was extracted in the kinematic region $t'_f < -t' < 0.4$ GeV$^2$, $-2$ GeV $< \Delta E < 0.6$ GeV, $0.6$ GeV $< M_{\pi\pi} < 1$ GeV, and $9$ GeV $< \nu < 20$ GeV. The lower $-t'$ limit, $t'_f$, is chosen separately for each target and $l$, bin to maximize statistics while keeping small the contribution from coherent scattering; $t'_f$ is $0.03$ to $0.06$ GeV$^2$ for $^2$H, $0.03$ to $0.14$ GeV$^2$ for $^3$He, and $0.05$ to $0.09$ GeV$^2$ for $^{14}$N.

The exclusive $M_{\pi\pi}$ distribution, shown in Figure 1b, is dominated by resonant production of the $\rho^0$ (770), with small interfering contributions from exclusive production of non-resonant $\pi^+\pi^-$ pairs and of the $\omega$ (782) resonance (in its $2\%$ decay branch to $\pi^+\pi^-$). Background from the two-kaon decay of exclusively-produced $\phi$ (1020) mesons, which would appear at $M_{\pi\pi} < 0.5$ GeV, is eliminated by requiring that the two-kaon invariant mass be greater than $1.04$ GeV.

The exclusive $-t'$ distributions for the $^1$H, $^2$H, $^3$He, and $^{14}$N nuclei are shown in Figure 2. The data exhibit the rapid falloff expected for a diffractive process.

The exclusive $-t'$ distributions for the $^1$H, $^2$H, $^3$He, and $^{14}$N nuclei are shown in Figure 2. The data exhibit the rapid falloff expected for a diffractive process. To isolate incoherent scattering, the data are fit to a shape giving the sum of incoherent and coherent contributions, $b Ne^{b_N t'} + f_A e^{b_A t'}$ (solid curves). Here $f_A$ is the ratio of coherent to incoherent total counts and $b_N$ and $b_A$ are fit parameters.
$e^{bN^t}$ ($e^{bA^t}$) represents the product of the $p^0$ and struck nucleon (nucleus) elastic form factors, squared \cite{[2]}. The incoherent slope parameter $b_N$ for each nucleus (measured to an accuracy of about 0.5 GeV$^{-2}$) is consistent with the hydrogen value $b_N = (6.82 \pm 0.15)$ GeV$^{-2}$. The coherent slope parameters $b_{^2H} = (33.3 \pm 9.8)$ GeV$^{-2}$, $b_{^3He} = (32.5 \pm 5.7)$ GeV$^{-2}$, and $b_{^14N} = (57.2 \pm 3.3)$ GeV$^{-2}$ are consistent with the values predicted by the relationship $b_A \approx R_A^2/3$ \cite{[2]} and the measured electromagnetic RMS radii $R_{^2H} = 2.1$ fm, $R_{^3He} = 1.9$ fm, and $R_{^14N} = 2.5$ fm \cite{[2]}. In the absence of ISI and FSI, the cross section $\sigma_A$ for incoherent $p^0$ production from a nucleus with $A$ nucleons would be $A\sigma_H$ (assuming the expected isospin symmetry $\sigma_n = \sigma_H$ \cite{[0]}, where $n$ and $H$ refer to the neutron and $^1$H). The nuclear transparency is therefore $T_A \equiv \sigma_A/(A\sigma_H) = N_AL_H/(ANHL_A)$, where the second equality follows from the $A$-independence of the experimental acceptance. Here $N_{A,H}$ is the number of incoherent events in the range $t' < -t' < 0.4$ GeV$^2$; $N_A$ is corrected for the coherent contribution using the $t'$ fit for each $l_c$ bin ($t'_c$ is chosen so that the correction factor is less than 1.05 with an uncertainty of less than 4%). The integral $L_{A,H}$ of the effective luminosity is determined from the number of inclusive DIS positrons and the published nuclear DIS structure functions \cite{[2]}, with a correction for the efficiency ($\geq 0.8$) for tracking the $h^+h^-$ pair.

The dominant systematic uncertainties are from possible differences in the spectrometer performance for the nuclear and $^1$H data (estimated by studying the time dependence of $N_{A,H}/L_{A,H}$ and other normalized yields) and from the treatment of the non-exclusive background (estimated by studying the dependence of $T_A$ on $\Delta E$). The systematic uncertainty in the overall normalization of $T_{^2H}$, $T_{^3He}$, or $T_{^14N}$ is 2.7%, 5.5%, or 5.9% respectively. The additional point-to-point systematic uncertainty includes the fit uncertainty in the coherent contribution. The $T_A$ results are unchanged at the 3% level (and the systematic uncertainties are essentially unchanged) if the non-exclusive background is not subtracted.

The nuclear transparencies for $^2$H (filled diamond), $^3$He (open square), and $^{14}$N (filled circle) are shown as functions of the coherence length $l_c$ in Figure 3. Within uncertainties the $^2$H and $^3$He transparencies are independent of $l_c$: $T_{^2H} = 0.970 \pm 0.024$ (statistical) $\pm 0.040$ (systematic) and $T_{^3He} = 0.862 \pm 0.042 \pm 0.061$. The consistency of the deuteron transparency with unity suggests that $\sigma_n \approx \sigma_H$ and that the ISI and FSI are small in $^2$H. The average $^3$He transparency is 1.9 standard deviations below unity.

The hydrogen transparency exhibits the decrease expected from the onset of hadronic ISI as $l_c$ increases. The decrease from 0.681 $\pm$ 0.060 at $l_c < 2$ fm to 0.401 $\pm$ 0.054 at $l_c > 3.6$ fm (errors exclude normalization uncertainty) has a 3.5 standard deviation statistical significance. In the absence of ISI variations, the transparency would exhibit a small (< 3%) increase with $l_c$ due to the known

![FIG. 3. Nuclear transparency $T_A$ as a function of $l_c$ for a) $^2$H (filled diamond), b) $^3$He (open square), and c) $^{14}$N (filled circle) targets. The error bars include statistical and point-to-point systematic uncertainties added in quadrature. The systematic uncertainty in the overall normalization of $T_A$ is not shown. Panel (c) includes comparisons with previous experiments with photon (open diamonds) and muon (open circle) beams. Due to the acceptance for $20 < \nu \lesssim 370$ GeV, the three $Q^2$ bins measured by $\bar{e}$ correspond to broad ranges in $l_c$ (horizontal error bars). The dashed curves are the Glauber calculation of Hufner et al. for $^3$He and $^{14}$N.](image-url)
at 40 GeV < ν < 180 GeV and Q^2 > 2 GeV^2 [1] are not included in Figure 3c.

The T_{4N} and T_{3He} data are consistent with a recent prediction (dashed curves in Figure 3) of the coherence length effect [3], although the statistics for T_{3He} are not sufficient to demonstrate the l_c variation. The prediction uses Glauber multiple-scattering theory [17], where the total \rho^0 production amplitude is the sum of the amplitudes from each nucleon, modified by elastic and inelastic rescattering of the outgoing \rho^0 on the other nucleons. In this model, the q\bar{q} fluctuation from which the \rho^0 originates is found to interact with the nuclear medium like a \rho^0 [3]. The strength of the \rho^0 and q\bar{q} interactions govern the transparency at small l_c and its l_c dependence, respectively. The consistency of the model with the data therefore suggests that when l_c is large, the q\bar{q} ISI are approximately as strong as the \rho^0 FSI. For the ν values of the present measurement, color transparency is expected to produce little deviation from the Glauber prediction [3].

The data support the hypothesis [2,18] that absorption of the photon’s q\bar{q} component contributes to the shadowing observed in real and virtual photon nuclear cross sections. Shadowing denotes that the cross sections grow more slowly than linearly in A. It is observed for inclusive DIS at small Bjorken x = Q^2/2Mν and for elastic and inclusive real photon scattering at high energies.

In summary, the transparency of the \(^2\)H, \(^3\)He, and \(^{14}\)N nuclei to exclusive incoherent \rho^0 electroproduction was measured by the HERMES experiment as a function of the coherence length of q\bar{q} fluctuations of the virtual photon. The measured transparencies agree well with previous data and with a prediction using the standard treatment of high-energy initial and final state interactions. The transparency of the nitrogen nucleus exhibits a significant decrease with l_c, which is attributed to initial state interactions of the q\bar{q} fluctuation from which the \rho^0 originates.

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