Backward proton production in $\pi^+$ and $K^+$ collisions with Al and Au nuclei at 250 GeV/c


Abstract. Backward proton production is studied in interactions of $\pi^+$ and $K^+$ mesons with Al and Au nuclei at 250 GeV/c. The proton momentum spectra are measured at different emission angles. From the two-proton correlations, it is found, that a significant part (26$\pm$4)% for Al and (44$\pm$6)% for Au of the backward proton production can be attributed to secondary pion absorption by a nucleon pair in the nuclear medium, $\pi^+(pn)\rightarrow p\pi$ and $\pi^0(pp)\rightarrow p\pi$. It is found that the share of the secondary pion absorption can be fitted by a power dependence $\alpha \cdot A^\beta$, with $\beta = 0.27 \pm 0.05$. An upper limit of the cross section for the colour-charge-exchange mechanism of backward proton production is estimated.

1 Introduction

Backward proton production (BPP) is kinematically forbidden in the lab. frame if the interaction takes place on a free nucleon. Selecting on backward protons, one therefore can select processes in which two or more nucleons of the nucleus are involved. Two classes of these processes can be distinguished. The first one is a "direct" (spectator type) mechanism of projectile collision with two (or more) nucleons or multiquark compositions in the nucleus (see e.g. [1,2]). The contribution of this mechanism has experimentally been estimated for $\nu Ne$ and $pNe$ -interactions and found to be (25$\pm$8)% and (17$\pm$8)%, respectively [3]. The second class are two (or multi)-step mechanisms of secondary inranuclear collisions (see e.g. [4,5]).

One of the simplest two-step mechanisms of BPP is the absorption of a low-energy secondary pion ($SPA$) by a pair of nucleons in a nucleus, $\pi NN\rightarrow p N$. As recently observed in collisions of hadrons with light nuclei (carbon, neon) [6-8], the contribution of $SPA$ to BPP with momenta $p_{lab} > 0.2 - 0.25$ GeV/c is significant (20 - 25%). Up to now, no experimental results exist for heavy nuclei, except for an indication obtained in neutrino interactions with freon ($CF_3Br$) [9].

As another interesting multi-step mechanism of BPP, double colour-charge exchange (CCE) has been proposed in [10,11] for diffractive-like hadron-nucleus interactions. A possible observation of CCE has been reported recently in $\pi^-Be$ interactions at 40 GeV/c [12], but further experimental investigations are necessary.

A third multi-step contribution to BPP is secondary elastic rescattering. As theoretically estimated (see e.g. refs. [4,5] and references therein), it can play a significant role in BPP. However, the estimates of the absolute yield of backward protons suffers large uncertainties.

In this paper, we present results on BPP in interactions of $\pi^+$ and $K^+$-mesons with Al and Au nuclei at 250 GeV/c from the NA22 experiment, performed at the CERN SPS with the help of the European Hybrid Spectrometer EHS. The experimental procedure is described in the following section. The multiplicity distribution of backward protons and their inclusive spectra in different angular intervals are presented in Sects. 3 and 4. Particular mechanisms of BPP are considered in Sect. 5. Conclusions are summarized in Sect. 6.
2 Experimental procedure

The experimental set-up of EHS is described in detail in [13], the data reduction procedure in [14-16]. A rapid cycling bubble chamber RCBC, 80 cm in diameter and filled with hydrogen, was used as vertex and track detector, as well as an ionization device. A 2T magnetic field was applied along the cylinder axis. The RCBC was equipped with two nuclear targets consisting of an aluminium and a gold foil of thickness 2.5 mm and 0.64 mm, respectively, corresponding to 0.5 % of an interaction length. The foils were placed side by side, orthogonally to the beam, 15.5 cm behind the entrance window of the chamber.

Tracks of secondary charged particles, leaving RCBC through the exit window, are reconstructed from hits in the wire and drift chambers of the spectrometer and from measurement in RCBC. The backward tracks (i.e. tracks with a lab frame production angle $\theta_{lab} > 90^\circ$) are reconstructed from measurement in RCBC. The average momentum resolution for charged particles varies from 1 to 2% for tracks reconstructed in the bubble chamber and from 1 to 2.5% for those reconstructed in the spectrometer. For reconstructed tracks with lab momentum $p_{lab} < 1.2$ GeV/c, the ionization strength was estimated visually on the scanning table.

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The following selection criteria are used for the events (see details in [16,17]): the interaction vertex is within one of the nuclear foils; the event is satisfactorily measured and reconstructed and is not a candidate for a quasi-elastic or coherent interaction with the nucleus. The events are weighted with a multiplicity dependent weight in order to compensate for those reconstructed in the spectrometer. For reconstructed tracks with lab momentum $p_{lab} < 1.2$ GeV/c, the ionization strength was estimated visually on the scanning table.

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The relation between momentum $p_{curv}$ (in GeV/c) and range $l$ (in cm),

$$R = 0.96194 \log_{10} p_{curv} - 0.27328 \log_{10} l$$

is expected to give $R = -0.82$ for protons, $-0.61$ for deuterons, $-0.50$ for tritons and $-0.25$ for $\alpha$-particles. The distribution in $R$ for positive stopping tracks with ionization compatible with the proton hypothesis, $(\Delta p/p)_{curv} < 0.3$ and production angle in the full angular interval $0^\circ \leq \theta_{lab} \leq 180^\circ$ is shown in Fig. 1a. The proton and deuteron peaks are clearly seen. Tracks with $R < -0.69$ are accepted as protons (see also [18]). The corresponding distribution for tracks with $\theta_{lab} > 90^\circ$ is shown in Fig. 1b. Also here, the cut $R < -0.69$ is applied to define protons.

b) For tracks with ionization compatible with the proton hypothesis, but leaving the fiducial volume, we check the consistency between the measured path $l$ of the track in RCBC and its measured momentum $p_{curv}$ for the proton hypotheses. We accept a track as a proton if the potential path calculated for a proton with momentum $p = (p + \Delta p)_{curv}$ in hydrogen exceeds $l$. (This limit is used, in order to avoid proton losses due to momentum resolution).

At the relatively large momenta of $p_{lab} > 0.5$ GeV/c of backward tracks, some contamination is possible from misidentified $\pi^+$ mesons and from deuterons. From the available high-energy data [19] on backward $\pi^+$ meson production off nuclear targets, and from our measurement of the backward produced particles (see Sect. 4 below), the contamination from $\pi^+$ mesons is found to be negligible. The contamination of the proton sample at $p_{lab} > 0.5$ GeV/c by deuterons is, however, estimated to about 20% [20].

In the relatively low-momentum region of $p_{lab} < 0.5$ GeV/c, the proton momenta are corrected for ionization losses in the nuclear foils (see also [17]). In the further analysis, we exclude protons with $p_{lab} < 0.24$ GeV/c (kinetic energy $T \approx 0.03$ GeV), since these can mainly be attributed to nuclear "evaporation" products. (We have checked that varying this limit to $p_{lab} = 0.274$ GeV/c ($T = 0.04$ GeV) does not change the results beyond errors.)

c) We further exclude protons with polar angle $90^\circ < \theta_{lab} < 100^\circ$, in order to avoid large correction for losses due to bad reconstruction of protons at $\theta_{lab} > 90^\circ$.

Since we do not observe any significant difference between the $\pi^+$ and $K^+$ samples, we enhance the statistical significance by presenting the combined sample of $\pi^+$ and $K^+$ collisions. This sample will be denoted as "M" collisions. The total number of events, the number of accepted BPP events and the total number of accepted backward protons and their average per event are presented in Table 1, separately for $M^*Al$ and $M^*Au$ collisions.
3 The multiplicity distribution of backward protons

In Fig. 2, we show the multiplicity distribution for protons with $p_{lab} > 0.24 \text{ GeV/c}$ and $\theta_{lab} > 100^\circ$, both for $M^*Al$ and $M^*Au$ interactions. Assuming a power dependence of the backward proton yield ($\langle n_{p} \rangle$) (Table 1) as a function of the mass number $A$, $\langle n_{p} \rangle \propto A^\alpha$, we obtain $\alpha = 0.70 \pm 0.03$.

As one can see from Fig. 3, the average multiplicity $\langle n_{p} \rangle$ of backward protons increases (for $Au$ almost linearly) with increasing multiplicity of all protons $n_p$. A similar dependence has been observed for the (lighter) nucleus in $pNe$-interactions at 300 GeV/c [8].

4 The inclusive spectra of backward protons

The normalized invariant inclusive cross section per nucleon for backward protons and $\pi^+$ mesons in different angular ranges, as a function of $p_{lab}$, for $M^*Al$ interactions (as shown in Fig. 4) and for $M^*Au$ interactions (as shown in Fig. 5).
Table 2. Fit results for the exponential behavior of the $p_{lab}^2$ spectra of Figs. 6 and 7 for $0.0625 < p_{lab}^2 < 0.6$ (GeV/c)<sup>2</sup>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>target</th>
<th>$\theta$</th>
<th>$a$ (GeV&lt;sup&gt;-1&lt;/sup&gt;sr&lt;sup&gt;-1&lt;/sup&gt;)</th>
<th>$b$ (GeV/c)&lt;sup&gt;-2&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>$\chi^2$/NDF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>$100^0 \pm 120^0$</td>
<td>$3.1 \pm 0.5$</td>
<td>$10.4 \pm 0.8$</td>
<td>41/24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>$120^0 \pm 150^0$</td>
<td>$2.8 \pm 0.6$</td>
<td>$11.5 \pm 1.1$</td>
<td>15/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>$150^0 \pm 180^0$</td>
<td>$2.3 \pm 0.8$</td>
<td>$11.5 \pm 2.1$</td>
<td>5/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>$100^0 \pm 180^0$</td>
<td>$2.6 \pm 0.3$</td>
<td>$10.2 \pm 0.6$</td>
<td>30/26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Au</td>
<td>$100^0 \pm 120^0$</td>
<td>$9.7 \pm 0.8$</td>
<td>$9.7 \pm 0.4$</td>
<td>54/33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Au</td>
<td>$120^0 \pm 150^0$</td>
<td>$9.8 \pm 0.8$</td>
<td>$9.9 \pm 0.4$</td>
<td>32/32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Au</td>
<td>$150^0 \pm 180^0$</td>
<td>$13.8 \pm 2.6$</td>
<td>$14.3 \pm 1.2$</td>
<td>22/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Au</td>
<td>$100^0 \pm 180^0$</td>
<td>$9.3 \pm 0.6$</td>
<td>$9.7 \pm 0.3$</td>
<td>60/35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Mechanisms of backward proton production

5.1 Coulour charge exchange

An interesting multi-step mechanism for BPP in hadron-nucleus interactions has been proposed by Kopeliovich and Nidermayer [9,10]. The incident hadron exchanges colour (by gluon exchange) consecutively with two nucleons in a nucleus and becomes white again. A colour flux tube is stretched between the two coloured "nucleons". As a result, one of them acquires a momentum directed backward. This process is similar to beam diffraction (elastic or inelastic). The colour charge exchange (CCE) model predicts that the momentum spectrum of the backward proton should be harder than in inclusive BPP and should have a maximum at $p_{lab} \sim 500$ to 600 MeV/c. In order to look for CCE, we select diffractive-like events

$$M^+ + A \rightarrow p + M^* + A'$$

with at least one backward proton, no particle produced in the target fragmentation region (except for recoil protons with $p_{lab} < 1.2$ GeV and other nuclear fragments labelled $A'$) and only fast products (with rapidity $y^* > 0$ in the meson-nucleon c.m.) from the fragmentation of the excited mesonic state $M^*$ (the summed charge of which is required to be $Q = +1$). Note, that in the CCE mechanism the second (forward going) nucleon can acquire a relatively large momentum (2 to 4 GeV/c). Since these events are not accepted by our selection criteria, our accepted sample favours the CCE mechanism in which a (pn)-pair is involved, with a forward going neutron not detected in our experiment.

Fig. 8 shows the backward-proton momentum-distributions for reactions (2) (shaded histograms), compared to the
5.2 Secondary pion absorption

Another multi-step mechanism of BPP is the absorption of a secondary pion, SPA, on a correlated nucleon pair or quasi-deuteron within the nucleus,

\[ \pi(NN) \rightarrow \pi p \]  

(3)

The momentum dependence of the cross section for \( \pi^+ \) scattering on a free deuteron, \( \sigma_r(\pi^+d \rightarrow \pi p) \), has a resonance character with a maximum of \( \sigma_r \approx 12 \text{mb} \) at \( p_\pi \approx 0.25 \text{ GeV/c} \), dropping to \( \sim 4 \text{mb} \) at 0.5 GeV/c and \( \sim 2 \text{mb} \) at 0.75 GeV/c [25]. Therefore, one can expect that, in the SPA mechanism, the dominant role is that of low-energy secondary pions (with \( p_\pi < 0.5 \text{ GeV/c} \)).

In order to search for the SPA mechanism, we use the method of kinematical analysis proposed in [6,7]. As a variable describing the kinematical correlation of the secondary protons in subprocess (3) we use

\[ \mu^2 = (T_1 + T_2)^2 - (p_1 + p_2)^2, \]

(4)

where \( T_1, T_2 \) and \( p_1, p_2 \) are the kinetic energies and momenta of the secondary protons. For the reaction on a free deuteron, \( \pi^+d \rightarrow pp \), the relation \( \mu^2 = m_\pi^2 \) would hold. One can show that the binding of the nucleon pair in the nucleus and its Fermi motion lead to a shift of the peak in the \( \mu^2 \) distribution from \( \mu^2 = m_\pi^2 \) towards smaller values by a quantity \( \delta \approx 2 \Delta E(T_1 + T_2) - p_\pi^2 \), where \( \Delta E \) is the average binding energy of the nucleon pair and \( p_\pi \) the average magnitude of its Fermi momentum.

We look for the SPA mechanism in the reaction

\[ M^+ + A \rightarrow \pi p + X, \]

(5)

where the second proton can be produced either in the forward or backward direction. Note, that in subprocess (3) on a free deuteron, the minimal momentum of a secondary proton would be \( p_{\text{min}} = 0.37 \text{ GeV/c} \). However, due to the Fermi motion of the nuclear pair (NN) in the nucleus, this boundary can decrease to 0.2 GeV/c. In the selection of our sample for reaction (5) we, therefore, vary \( p_{\text{min}} \) from 0.25 to 0.35 GeV/c.

Furthermore, it should be taken into account that rescattering of secondary protons in the nuclear matter would result in an additional broadening of the distribution, mainly towards smaller values of \( \mu^2 \). While the protons diverge at large angles in subprocess (3), rescattering preferably leads to a decrease in the angle between protons, i.e. to a decrease in \( \mu^2 \).

The histograms in Fig. 9 show the \( \mu^2 \) distribution for reaction (5) with \( p_{\text{min}} = 0.25, 0.30 \) and 0.35 GeV/c, respectively. The full curves correspond to a "background"
distribution, obtained by combining protons randomly chosen from different events and normalized to the experimental distribution in the region \( \mu^2 < -0.25 \text{ (GeV/c)}^2 \) where the contribution of mechanism (3) is expected to be negligible.

The dashed curve in Fig. 9a demonstrates the result of a Monte Carlo simulation of subprocess (3) for Al. The following values are used: \( \Delta E = 60 \text{ MeV} \) [26] and \( \langle p^2 \rangle = (220 \text{ MeV/c})^2 \) [27]. The momentum dependence of the total and differential cross section of (3) is taken from [25,28,29]. The shape of the simulation is almost insensitive to the momentum of the "incident" pion of (3). Nevertheless, the pion momentum is simulated in the range \( p_x < 0.9 \text{ GeV/c} \) according to the \( \pi^+ \) meson spectrum obtained from our \( M^*\text{Al} \) data. The experimental error in measurement of the final proton momentum \( \langle \Delta p/p \rangle = 2\% \) is also taken into account. This simulated \( \mu^2 \)-distribution has a peak shifted from \( \mu^2 = m_c^2 \) to the left by about 0.1 \( \text{GeV/c}^2 \) and a tail falling below 5% of the total content at \( \mu^2 \approx -0.25 \text{ (GeV/c)}^2 \). The dashed line is normalized to the difference between histogram and solid line of Fig. 9a in the region \( \mu^2 > -0.25 \text{ (GeV/c)}^2 \). One can see that after subtraction of the background distribution (full line) from the histogram, the shape of the resulting distribution would be similar to that of the simulated one (dashed).

Fig. 10 shows the \( \mu^2 \) distribution for \( p_{\text{min}} = 0.25 \text{ GeV/c} \) for the subsample with a single pair of protons. The latter corresponds to more peripheral collisions for which the contribution from secondary interactions is less than for the full sample. As expected for the SPA mechanism, the \( \mu^2 \) -distribution for the single proton pair (Fig. 10) is narrower than that for the full sample (Fig. 9).

The number of combinations in Fig. 9 and 10 above background at \( \mu^2 > -0.25 \text{ (GeV/c)}^2 \) is used as an estimate of the contribution of the SPA mechanism to inclusive \( BPP \), \( r = \sigma^{SPA}(\vec{p}p)/\sigma^{incl}(\vec{p}) \), as presented in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. Within the errors, \( r \) is independent of \( p_{\text{min}} \) for Al. However, our data indicate a possible decrease of \( r \) with increasing \( p_{\text{min}} \) for Au. Comparing Tables 3 and 4, one can note that the share of the SPA mechanism is noticeably smaller for the subsample with a single pair of protons, i.e. for comparatively peripheral collisions. Probably, for this subsample the dominant role in \( BPP \) belongs to other mechanisms, e.g. the spectator type mechanisms suggested in [3] for (anti)neutrino-neon interactions.

The \( A \)-dependence of the ratio \( r \) at \( p_{\text{min}} = 0.25 \text{ GeV/c} \) is shown in Fig. 11, where the results of other experiments [6,7,8] obtained under very similar conditions are also presented. The share of the SPA increases with increasing \( A \) to become one of the main sources of \( BPP \) for heavy nuclei. It can be fitted by a power dependence \( \propto A^\beta \), with \( \beta = 0.27 \pm 0.05 \) (dashed line on Fig. 11).

So far, we have considered \( SPA \) with two protons in the final state. This corresponds to subprocesses \( \pi^*(pn)\to \vec{p}p \) and \( \pi^0(pp)\to \vec{p}p \). Certainly, other subprocesses such as \( \pi^*(mn)\to \vec{p}n, \pi^0(pn)\to \vec{p}n \) and \( \pi^-(pp)\to \vec{p}n \) can occur with a backward produced proton. As estimated in [5] for the case of carbon nuclei, these subprocesses increase the \( SPA \) contribution by a factor 1.6 with respect to subprocess (3). Assuming the same factor for \( Al \) and \( Au \) nuclei, the \( SPA \) contribution can, therefore, reach \( \sim 40\% \) for \( Al \) and \( \sim 70\% \) for \( Au \) nuclei.

One should also stress that possible rescatterings of the protons produced in subprocess (3) can strongly change their kinematics (including \( \mu^2 \)) and thus lead to an underestimation of the extracted \( SPA \) contribution.

### Table 3. Contribution from the SPA mechanism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( A )</th>
<th>( p_{\text{min}} ) 0.25 GeV/c</th>
<th>( p_{\text{min}} ) 0.30 GeV/c</th>
<th>( p_{\text{min}} ) 0.35 GeV/c</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>26.4 ± 4.0</td>
<td>27.0 ± 4.3</td>
<td>24.5 ± 4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Au</td>
<td>44.4 ± 5.5</td>
<td>40.2 ± 6.0</td>
<td>34.5 ± 5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. Contribution from the SPA mechanism for the events with one pair of protons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( A )</th>
<th>( p_{\text{min}} ) 0.25 GeV/c</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>10.5 ± 4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Au</td>
<td>23.5 ± 5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 11. The contribution of secondary pion absorption to backward proton production, as a function of mass number \( A \). The dashed line corresponds to the best power-law fit (see text)
6 Summary

New experimental data on backward proton production are obtained in $(\pi^+//K^+)$ Al and $(\pi^+//K^+)$ Au interactions at 250 GeV/c with the help of the EHS spectrometer. Multiplicity distributions and inclusive spectra of backward protons are measured. The $A$-dependence of the backward proton yield is consistent with $\propto A^{0.7}$. For Au, the slope parameter of the $p_{\text{lab}}^+$-spectrum increases with increasing emission angle $\theta_{\text{lab}}$, but it is, within statistical errors, independent of $A$.

Semi-inclusive spectra and correlation characteristics of BPP are investigated. From two-proton correlations it is found that a significant part of BPP at $\theta_{\text{lab}} > 100^\circ$ and $p_{\text{lab}} > 0.25$ GeV/c, $(26\pm4)$% for Al and $(44\pm6)$% for Au, can be attributed to secondary pion absorption by a nucleon pair in the nuclear medium, $n^+(pn) \rightarrow p + p$ and $n^0(pp) \rightarrow p + p$. From fitting the contributions of SPA for different nuclei (C, Ne, Al, Au), it is found that the share of the SPA can be described by a power dependence $\propto A^\beta$, with $\beta = 0.27\pm0.05$. An upper limit of the cross section for the double colour-charge-exchange mechanism of BPP is estimated; the contribution of this mechanism is less than 1% of the high-momentum tail ($p_{\text{lab}} > 0.55$ GeV/c) of the inclusive spectrum.

Acknowledgements. It is a pleasure to thank the EHS coordinator L. Mon­tanet and the operating crews and staffs of EHS, SPS and H2 beam, as well as the scanning and processing teams of our laboratories for their invaluable help with this experiment. We are grateful to the III. Physikalisches Institut B, RWTH Aachen, Germany, the DESY-Institut für Hochenergiephysik, Berlin-Zeuthen, Germany, the Department of High Energy Physics, Helsinki University, Finland, and the University of Warsaw and Institute of Nuclear Problems, Poland for early contributions to this experiment. This work is part of the research programme of the "Stichting voor Fundamenteel Onderzoek der Materie (FOM)", which is financially supported by the "Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO)". We further thank NWO for support of this project within the program for subsistence to the former Soviet Union (07-13-038).

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