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First measurement of proton decay from a transfer reaction to 21 Na

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Abstract

Decay protons from excited states in ²¹Na populated through a previously reported $^{24}Mg(p,\alpha)^{21}Na$ transfer reaction [Cha *et al.*, Phys. Rev. C **96**, 025810 (2017)] were analyzed to extract the proton branching ratios of the energy levels. By utilizing 31-MeV proton beams from the Holifield Radioactive Ion Beam Facility of Oak Ridge National Laboratory and isotopicallyenriched ²⁴Mg solid targets, the decay protons were detected in coincidence with α particles from the (p,α) reaction using a silicon strip detector array. Proton decay branching ratios of several ²¹Na levels were deduced for the p0 and p1 decay channels to the ground and first excited states in ²⁰Ne, respectively.

I. INTRODUCTION

Transfer reactions provide a powerful tool in nuclear spectroscopy studies. By measuring the energies and angular distributions of reaction products, critical properties of the populated levels such as the excitation energies, spins and parities, and spectroscopic factors can be extracted. As well summarized in Ref. [1], various types of single- and multi-nucleon transfer reactions, including (p,d), (p,t), $({}^{3}\text{He},d)$, and $({}^{3}\text{He},n)$, were utilized to study the structure of the nuclei in normal and inverse kinematics. When energy levels above particle thresholds are populated through transfer reaction experiments, measuring the properties of particle decay channels may also provide useful information such as branching ratio and angular correlations for states, as previously shown in Refs. [2–7].

The ²⁴Mg $(p,\alpha)^{21}$ Na transfer reaction in normal kinematics was previously performed to study the spectroscopy of the radionuclide ²¹Na [8]. A total of 12 ²¹Na energy levels were identified at energies less than $E_x = 7.2$ MeV, of which two levels located at 6.594 and 7.132 MeV were observed for the first time. The empirical angular distributions of reaction α particles were compared with Distorted Wave Born Approximation (DWBA) calculations to constrain the spin and parity assignments of populated levels. Using the spectroscopic information, the astrophysical ¹⁷F $(\alpha,p)^{20}$ Ne reaction rate was obtained at temperatures relevant to X-ray bursts. In the present work, the measurement of proton decay from ²¹Na levels, which were populated from the transfer reaction, is reported as a follow-up analysis.

The branching ratios of energy levels often play important roles in nuclear reaction rate calculations. In recent work by Lalanne *et al.* [9], for instance, the 37 Ca(p,d)³⁶Ca reaction



FIG. 1. A schematic diagram of the experimental setup for the ${}^{24}Mg(p,\alpha){}^{21}Na^*(p){}^{20}Ne^*$ measurement is shown.

was measured at the GANIL facility using a radioactive beam of ³⁷Ca and the liquid hydrogen target to study the ³⁵K(p,γ)³⁶Ca reaction rate at stellar temperatures. The energies and proton branching ratios of several ³⁶Ca levels that fall in the Gamow window for X-ray bursts were obtained. Using the empirical spectroscopic information and theoretical predictions of γ -decay widths, the reaction rate could be well constrained. The authors concluded that the ³⁵K(p,γ)³⁶Ca reaction does not show a strong impact on the X-ray light curve. Similarly, the proton branching ratios of ²¹Na levels studied in the present work may provide useful information for the astrophysical ¹⁷F(α,p)²⁰Ne rate determination. Informing such reaction rate calculations is beyond the scope of the present work.

II. EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

A schematic illustration of the ${}^{24}Mg(p,\alpha){}^{21}Na^*(p){}^{20}Ne^*$ experimental setup is shown in Figure 1. A 31-MeV proton beam was produced and accelerated from the 25 MV electrostatic tandem accelerator at the Holifield Radioactive Ion Beam Facility (HRIBF) of Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) [10] to bombard isotopically-enriched (99.9%) ${}^{24}Mg$ solid targets. Recoiling α particles from the (p,α) reaction and decay protons from the ${}^{21}Na$ heavy recoil were detected at forward angles by the Silicon Detector Array (SIDAR) [11]. The SIDAR was configured with four trapezoidal wedges of ΔE (100- μ m thick) and E(1000- μ m thick) telescopes. Each SIDAR detector is segmented into 16 annular strips. The angles covered by the SIDAR were from 17° to 44° in the laboratory frame. Light charged particles from the reaction were identified using standard energy loss techniques.



FIG. 2. (Color online) Particle identification (energy loss vs total energy) plot obtained at $\theta_{\text{lab}} = 23.6^{\circ}$ from the $p + {}^{24}\text{Mg}$ reaction. Events falling in the gates (I) and (II) are identified as the α particles and protons, respectively.

A typical particle identification plot from the experiment obtained at $\theta_{\text{lab}} = 23.6^{\circ}$ is shown in Figure 2. Events falling in gates (I) and (II) are identified as the α particles and protons, respectively. As shown in the figure, the light charged particles were clearly identified without significant evidence of contamination. Since the experimental setup such as beam energy, target thickness, and detector thicknesses were optimized for the $^{24}\text{Mg}(p,\alpha)^{21}\text{Na}$ transfer reaction measurement, energetic protons with energies of approximately 7.2 MeV and greater punched through the *E* layer and caused the "back-bending" locus as shown in the figure. Therefore, only low energy protons falling in the gate (II) and the ones stopped in the ΔE detectors were considered in the present analysis. The validity of the choice of gate (II) is confirmed by Monte Carlo simulations using computer code VIKAR (Virtual Instrumentation for Kinematics and Reactions) [12].

III. COINCIDENCE BETWEEN REACTION α PARTICLES AND DECAY PROTONS

To correctly estimate the energies of detected charged particles, the energy response of each silicon strip and associated electronic channel was calibrated using an α -emitting source



FIG. 3. (Color online) Decay proton energy versus coincident α -particle energy plot is shown for all identified events. Events falling in the red, blue and green gates are associated with the ground state (p0), first excited state (p1), and second excited state (p2) of ²⁰Ne, respectively.

composed of ²³⁹Pu (5.157 MeV), ²⁴¹Am (5.486 MeV), and ²⁴⁴Cm (5.805 MeV). Energy resolutions were measured to be approximately 1%. The calibrations were performed before and after the in-beam measurements to correct for any gain changes that might have occurred.

Since the energies of the reaction α particles observed in the (p,α) transfer reaction range from approximately 9.8 to 23.3 MeV, which is well above the energy calibration range of about 5 MeV, the α -energy spectrum obtained at each detector strip was internally calibrated using five strongly populated energy levels of ²¹Na: the ground state and excited states at $E_x = 0.332$, 2.798, 4.419, and 6.879 MeV. As described in Ref. [8], the internal energy calibration resulted in good agreement between the empirical excitation energies and literature values. Such additional energy calibrations could not be performed for the proton energies because the proton energy spectra obtained from the measurements were rather featureless. However, because the energies of the protons considered in the present analysis range from about 0.5 MeV to 7.2 MeV, the α source calibrations worked well for the protons (see Section IV for details).

To identify events from the proton decay of radionuclide ²¹Na, we simultaneously detected the α particles from the ²⁴Mg $(p,\alpha)^{21}$ Na transfer reaction and protons from the decay of ²¹Na. Events were considered to be coincident when two particles fell within a timing gate of about



FIG. 4. (Color online) (a) ²¹Na excitation energy spectrum obtained from the ²⁴Mg $(p,\alpha)^{21}$ Na reaction measurement [8]. Identified levels are labeled with their excitation energies. All energies are in MeV. (b) Spectra gated on decay proton coincidences. The spectra gated on the p0, p1, and p2 groups of Figure 3 are shown as red dashed, blue dotted, and green solid lines, respectively.

4 μ s. Figure 3 shows the decay proton energy versus coincident α -particle energy plot for all identified events. Several diagonal groups of events are evident in the figure. Events falling in the red, blue and green gates are associated with decays to the ground state ($J^{\pi} = 0^+$), first excited state ($E_x = 1.634$ MeV, $J^{\pi} = 2^+$), and second excited state ($E_x = 4.247$ MeV, $J^{\pi} = 4^+$) of ²⁰Ne, respectively. Each group is labeled as p0, p1, or p2 in the figure. Several groups of events that originate from different ²¹Na states are clearly identified in the p0 and p1 gate. For example, the lower rightmost group in the p0 gate corresponds to the events from the decay of the $E_x = 3.675$ MeV level in ²¹Na. Similarly, another intense group in the same gate that appears near the proton energy of 4 MeV represents the events from the E_x = 6.879 MeV level.

IV. BRANCHING RATIOS OF ²¹Na

Figure 4 (a) shows the ²¹Na excitation energy spectrum obtained from the ²⁴Mg(p,α)²¹Na reaction measurement [8]. Excitation energies are shown in MeV for the identified ²¹Na levels. The α -energy spectra were first extracted from 16 angles. The α energies were internally calibrated at each angle and then converted to the ²¹Na excitation energy using the known detector geometry and reaction kinematics. The figure is the resultant energy spectrum summed over all angles.

Figure 4 (b) was obtained by requiring decay protons in coincidence with α particles populating states in ²¹Na. The spectra gated on the p0, p1, and p2 groups of Figure 3 (populating the ground, first and second excited states in ²⁰Ne, respectively) are shown. Energy levels located below $E_x \sim 3$ MeV could not be observed in the present work owing to the proton threshold energy of ²¹Na (2.432 MeV) and discriminator threshold. As shown in the figure, three ²¹Na energy levels located at $E_x = 3.675$, 5.825, and 6.879 MeV were clearly identified in the p0-gated spectrum. Similarly, two peaks associated with $E_x = 5.825$ and 6.594 MeV levels in ²¹Na were evident in the p1-gated spectrum. No obvious structure was observed for the p2 group.

The proton branching ratios associated with the p0 (B_{p_0}) and p1 (B_{p_1}) channels for observed ²¹Na energy levels were determined from the ratio of the number of proton-gated decay events (Figure 4 (b)) to the number of times each level was populated, the (p,α) singles events (Figure 4 (a)), after adjusting each for their relative detection efficiencies. The results are summarized in Table I. Although the p2 channel is clearly shown in Figure 3, the branching ratios B_{p_2} could not be extracted due to poor statistics. The geometric detection efficiency was considered in branching ratio calculations because not all protons from the decay were detected by the silicon detector array. The solid angle subtended by the SIDAR was 0.61 sr, which corresponds to about 5% coverage of 4π . Our determination of a proton branching ratio value for the 3.675 MeV level of 0.93, for example, shows that this level will overwhelmingly undergo proton decay, with only a 7% probability for γ -decay; the excitation energy of this level is too low for other decay channels such as α or neutron to be open.

To obtain the precise number of counts for each level identified in the spectrum gated on decay proton coincidences, several background mechanisms were considered. Some back-

TABLE I. Extracted proton branching ratios of the observed ²¹Na energy levels are summarized for the p0 (B_{p_0}) and p1 channel (B_{p_1}) . The threshold for the p0 (p1) channel is located at $E_x =$ 2.432 (4.066) MeV. Excitation energies and spin values are taken from Ref. [8] unless otherwise noted.

E_x (MeV)	J^{π}	B_{p_0}	B_{p_1}
$3.675^{\rm a}$	$3/2^{-b}$	0.93 ± 0.30	-
4.419	$(3/2, 5/2)^+$	0.12 ± 0.04	-
5.036	$(3/2, 5/2)^+$	0.29 ± 0.09	0.31 ± 0.10
5.416	$1/2^+$	0.03 ± 0.01	0.23 ± 0.07
5.825	$7/2^{-b}$	0.67 ± 0.20	0.51 ± 0.15
6.594	$(3/2, 5/2)^+$ or $[(1/2, 3/2)^- + (7/2, 9/2)^+]$	0.01 ± 0.002	0.92 ± 0.28
6.879	$3/2^{-b}$	1.12 ± 0.34	0.11 ± 0.03
7.132	$1/2^+$ or $(1/2, 3/2)^-$	0.05 ± 0.01	0.43 ± 0.13

^a The energy of the level is reported to be 3678.9(4) keV in Ref. [13].

 $^{\rm b}$ Taken from Ref. [13]

ground coincidences attributed to the rather long timing gate of about 4 μ s was evident as shown in Figure 3. By implementing a two-dimensional gate with similar size and shape of the p0 gate at slightly higher α energy region, where particle decay is energetically forbidden, the level of background events was estimated. The result shows that the probability of background coincidence is only about 5%.

As previously done in Refs. [8, 14], possible contaminations in the ²⁴Mg solid targets, such as ¹²C, ¹⁴N, and ¹⁶O, were thoroughly investigated as well. Kinematics calculations show that the ¹⁴N(p,α)¹¹C^{*}(p)¹⁰B and ¹⁶O(p,α)¹³N^{*}(p)¹²C^{*} channels associated with the ground state of ¹⁰B and the first excited state of ¹²C, respectively, can produce decay protons at the energies relevant for the p1 group and the region between p1 and p2 groups of the present work. Although no obvious events from the contaminations were evident in the α energy spectrum, the rather high level of background was observed between the p1 and p2 gate in Figure 3. Therefore, another two-dimensional gate was implemented in this area for better estimations of background events, which affects the proton branching ratios associated with the p1 channel.



FIG. 5. (Color online) Normalized intensity of proton decays from the 5.825 MeV level as a function of relative angle for the p0 (black solid line) and p1 (blue dotted line) channel in panel (a). Similarly, the empirical intensities for the 6.594 and 6.879 MeV levels are shown as a black solid line in (b) and (c), respectively. The calculated distributions assuming isotropic and anisotropic decay are shown as red dashed and green dotted lines, respectively.

Isotropic decay in the center of the mass frame was assumed for the branching ratio calculations. A simple test was used to evaluate the assumption of isotropy. As shown in Figure 4 (b), for instance, decay protons from the 5.825 MeV state were clearly identified in both the p0 and p1 channel. For each identified decay event, the relative angle between the recoiling α particle and decay proton was deduced using the strip number and detector wedge number (i.e., the polar angle and azimuthal angle). The normalized intensities of proton decays from the 5.825 MeV level plotted as a function of relative angle for the p0 and p1 channels are shown in Figure 5 (a). Although the spin values of the ²⁰Ne levels associated with each channel are different - $J^{\pi} = 0^+$ and 2^+ for the p0 and p1 channel, respectively - the curves show very similar patterns over the relative angle range, which means the decay can be reasonably approximated as isotropic. Additional support for the isotropy can be found in Figure 5 (b) and (c), which show the normalized intensity plots for the 6.594 and 6.879 MeV level, respectively. Since the distribution for the 6.594 MeV (6.879 MeV) level extracted from the p0 (p1) channel was rather featureless because of low statistics, a comparison between the normalized intensities obtained from both channels could not be made. Therefore, another test was implemented for the isotropy evaluation. By considering all possible combinations of the detector strip hits, a relative angle histogram for isotropic decay was obtained as shown in Figure 5 (b) and (c). A relative angle histogram for anisotropic decay assuming a cosine variation among many different possible variations is also shown in Figure 5 (b) and (c). No significant difference was observed between the data and the expectations for isotropic decay. It is therefore a reasonable approximation to treat the decay as largely isotropic. As previously reported [4–6], a conservative systematic uncertainty of 30% was introduced to account for any discrepancies between isotropic and anisotropic decays, which was the dominant uncertainty in extracted proton branching ratios.

In recent work by Lund *et al.* [15], β -delayed proton emissions from ²¹Mg were measured to study the decay scheme. A total of 27 branches were observed at the energy range of $E_{c.m.}$ = 0.4 - 7.2 MeV. Relative intensities of identified decay channels were reported. Similarly, Wang et al. [16] also reported results from β -delayed particle emission experiment. Together with a silicon detector array for charged particle detection, high-purity germanium detectors were used to detect the γ -rays emitted from the decay. Characteristic 1.633 MeV γ -rays originating from the deexcitation of the first excited state in ²⁰Ne were clearly observed, which results in an improved proton spectrum coincident with γ -rays. By considering the excitation energies and spins of reported levels, it can be concluded that the 5.036 MeV level of present work likely corresponds to levels previously identified in the β -delayed proton emission measurements: $E_x = 5.020(9)$ MeV in Ref. [15] and 5.013(20) MeV in Ref. [16]. However, the interpretations of the level are different to some extent. Lund *et al.* concluded that the decay protons with the energies of about $E_p = 2.587$ MeV are associated with the level. The protons then should be the result of the p0 channel. No protons related to the p1 channel were identified. On the other hand, Wang et al. concluded that the protons at the energies of about 0.987 MeV produced through the p1 channel are the evidence of the level. No events from the p0 channel could be identified. The proton branching ratios of the p0 and p1 channel obtained from the present work, however, 0.29(9) and 0.31(10), respectively, are still different from previous results. Further high-resolution decay spectroscopy is encouraged to resolve this discrepancy.



FIG. 6. (Color online) Proton energy spectra are shown as black solid lines for the coincident events falling in the p0 (top) and p1 (bottom) gates. Several apparent peaks associated with ²¹Na levels are labeled with their excitation energies in MeV. Expected proton energy spectra are also shown in the figure as red dotted lines.

Since internal energy calibrations could not be performed for proton energies as mentioned above, the validity of using the energy calibration obtained from an α -emitting source was investigated using the proton energy spectra. The proton energy spectra of coincident events for the p0 and p1 gate are shown in Figure 6. The corresponding spectrum for the p2 channel could not be obtained due to poor statistics. Several peaks associated with ²¹Na levels are labeled with their excitation energies in MeV. The expected proton energy spectra obtained by assuming the production of ²¹Na levels through the ${}^{24}Mg(p,\alpha){}^{21}Na$ reaction and isotropic decay are also shown in the figure as red dotted lines. The detector geometry and reaction kinematics of the experiment, typical silicon detector energy resolution of about 5%, proton branching ratios obtained from the present work and relative cross sections of various ²¹Na energy levels reported in Ref. [8] were considered in the calculations. As shown in Figure 6, the empirical proton energy spectra can be well reproduced by calculations, demonstrating that the energy calibrations obtained from the α source calibration are appropriate. Larger widths for the empirical proton spectra are caused by the lack of internal energy calibrations mentioned above. Observed and calculated proton energies and their uncertainties are summarized in Table II for five identified transitions.

	0	
Transition	E_p observed	E_p calculated
3.675 ightarrow 0.000	1.06 ± 0.34	1.01 ± 0.17
$5.825 \rightarrow 0.000$	3.14 ± 0.43	2.99 ± 0.28
$6.879 \rightarrow 0.000$	4.16 ± 0.55	3.99 ± 0.29
$5.825 \rightarrow 1.634$	1.65 ± 0.41	1.50 ± 0.17
$6.594 \rightarrow 1.634$	2.33 ± 0.41	2.23 ± 0.22

TABLE II. Proton decay of excited states in ²¹Na to the ground and first excited ($E_x = 1.634 \text{ MeV}$) states in ²⁰Ne. Observed and calculated proton energies and their uncertainties are summarized for five identified transitions. All energies are in MeV.

V. DISCUSSION

The proton branching ratios obtained from the present work may also be useful to constrain spins and parities of the populated levels. For instance, the spin of the 4.419 MeV level was constrained to be $(3/2^+, 5/2^+)$ in Ref. [8] by comparing the empirical angular distribution of deuterons from the ${}^{24}Mg(p,\alpha){}^{21}Na$ reaction and the results of theoretical DWBA calculations. In the latest compilation, however, $J^{\pi} = 11/2^+$ is assigned for the level [13]. As the proton decay through the p0 channel (i.e., the decay channel to the $J^{\pi} = 0^+$ ground state of ${}^{20}Ne$) was clearly observed in the present work with $B_{p_0} = 0.12 \pm 0.04$, high spin values for the level would be less probable. Therefore, the spin value of $3/2^+$ or $5/2^+$ for the 4.419 MeV level is proposed in the present work.

Another example can be found in the cases of the energy levels with the same spin values. The spins of the energy levels at $E_x = 3.675$ and 6.879 MeV are known to be $3/2^-$. The branching ratios of the levels show that the decay favors the p0 channel as summarized in Table I. Although the proton decays from only 8 ²¹Na energy levels are studied in the present work, this may prove that the proton decays are quite selective. Two ²¹Na levels at $E_x = 6.594$ and 7.132 MeV were observed for the first time in Ref. [8]. The spin of the 7.132 MeV level was constrained to be $1/2^+$ or $(1/2, 3/2)^-$. If the proton branching ratios are indeed sensitive to the spin values, the possibility of $J^{\pi} = 3/2^-$ could be ruled out since the B_{p_0} of the level is measured to be 0.05 ± 0.01 . Moreover, since the ratio of B_{p_0} to B_{p_1} for the level is similar to that of the well-known 5.416 MeV ($J^{\pi} = 1/2^+$) level, the spin of the level is possibly $1/2^+$. In the case of the other new level at 6.594 MeV, the proton decay through the p1 channel is very strong ($B_{p_1} = 0.92 \pm 0.28$). Since no other observed level shows the B_{p_1} value close to 1, we cannot further constrain the spin of the 6.594 MeV level through the present work.

VI. CONCLUSION

Decay protons from the ²⁴Mg(p,α)²¹Na^{*}(p)²⁰Ne^{*} channel were investigated to obtain proton branching ratios of excited states populated in ²¹Na. 31 MeV proton beams from the HRIBF of ORNL bombarded isotopically-enriched ²⁴Mg solid targets. This is a follow-up analysis of previously reported [8] measurements of this reaction. By requiring coincidences between reaction α -particles and decay protons, three groups of events associated with the ground state (p0), first excited state (p1, $E_x = 1.664$ MeV), and second excited state (p2, $E_x = 4.247$ MeV) in ²⁰Ne were identified.

Proton decay branching ratios for excitations in ²¹Na were extracted from coincidences between protons and reaction α particles from the $p + {}^{24}$ Mg measurement. Isotropic decay in the center of the mass frame was assumed for the branching ratio calculations. A total of 14 branching ratios were extracted: 8 branching ratios from the p0 channel and 6 branching ratios from the p1 channel. Evidence of proton decay of ²¹Na excitations to higher lying states in ²⁰Ne was observed. However, branching ratios associated with the channels to the second excited ²⁰Ne state (p2) and higher ²⁰Ne states could not be extracted due to poor statistics. In a future work, we will use our results, along with other considerations, to determine a new ${}^{17}F(\alpha,p){}^{20}Ne$ reaction rate.

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