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### Spatially Modulated Phase in Holographic Quark-Gluon Plasma

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We present a string theory construction of a gravity dual of a spatially modulated phase. Our earlier work shows that the Chern-Simons term in the 5-dimensional Maxwell theory destabilizes the Reissner-Nordström black holes in anti-de Sitter space if the Chern-Simons coupling is sufficiently high. In this paper, we show that a similar instability is realized on the worldvolume of 8-branes in the Sakai-Sugimoto model in the quark-gluon plasma phase. Our result suggests a new spatially modulated phase in quark-gluon plasma when the baryon density is above  $0.8N_f$  fm<sup>-3</sup> at temperature 150 MeV.

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#### INTRODUCTION

The 5-dimensional Maxwell theory with the Chern-Simons term is tachyonic in the presence of a constant electric field [1]. The tachyonic modes with non-zero spatial momenta destabilize the Reissner-Nordström black holes in 5-dimensional anti-de Sitter space  $(AdS_5)$  if the Chern-Simons coupling is larger than a certain critical value. If its holographically dual quantum field theory exists, the instability would imply a spatially modulated phase transition in the theory. It would be interesting to construct a model exhibiting such an instability *ab initio* from superstring theory so that we can be certain that the dual theory exists and know what it is. This has not been demonstrated so far. For example, it was shown in [1] that the three-charge extremal black hole in the type IIB superstring theory on  $AdS_5 \times S^5$  is barely stable.

In this paper, we show that such an instability is realized in the quark-gluon plasma phase of the Sakai-Sugimoto model for QCD with  $N_f$  flavors of massless quarks [3]. On the worldvolume of the 8-branes, there is a  $U(N_f)$  gauge field, and its diagonal U(1) part is dual to the quark number (=  $N_c$  times the baryon number). The baryons are identified with instanton solutions on the worldvolume in this model [4]. Worldvolume solutions representing QCD states with finite baryon density and temperature have been studied [3, 5–9].

Most of the solutions with finite baryon density are singular at the sources of baryons charges, and it is not clear whether the supergravity approximation is applicable. One of the exceptional cases is the quark-gluon plasma phase, where there is a smooth solution representing a finite baryon density configuration.

In the Sakai-Sugimoto model, the gluon degrees of freedom are realized on  $N_c$  D4 branes compactified on a circle  $S_c^1$  with supersymmetry breaking boundary condition [10]. At finite temperature, we compactify the Euclidean time on another circle  $S_T^1$ , and the D4 brane world volume has the topology of  $S_c^1 \times S_T^1 \times \mathbb{R}^3$ . In the confinement phase,  $S_c^1$  is contractible in the bulk, and the topology of the bulk geometry is then  $S_T^1 \times \mathbb{R}^3 \times S^4$  times a disk bounded by  $S_c^1$ . Each 8-brane wraps the thermal  $S_T^1 \times S^4$ and is extended in  $\mathbb{R}^3$ . In this phase, the 8-brane starts as a D8 brane at a point on  $S_c^1$ , meanders in the bulk, and ends as a  $\overline{\text{D8}}$  brane at another point on  $S_c^1$ .

In the deconfinement phase, the thermal  $S_T^1$  becomes contractible in the bulk geometry [10]. Depending on the relative locations of the 8-branes, the chiral symmetry restoration takes place at or above the deconfinement temperature [3, 5, 6]. Above the chiral symmetry restoration temperature, D8 and  $\overline{D8}$  branes become separated, and each of them has the topology of a disk bounded by  $S_T^1$  times  $S^4$ . This describes a holographic dual of the quark-gluon plasma. In this phase, it is possible to construct a solution with finite baryon density that is smooth everywhere on the worldvolume, as we will discuss below. In this paper, we will focus on this case.

The dynamics of the 8-brane worldvolume is described by the Dirac-Born-Infeld (DBI) action with the Chern-Simons term. We show that there is a critical baryon density above which the brane configuration becomes unstable by tachyonic modes carrying non-zero momenta. This suggests a spatially modulated phase with a baryon density wave.

A holographic dual of a baryon density wave was discussed in the "bottom-up" model in [11]. The instability of the Sakai-Sugimoto model has been studied earlier, for example in [12], but not in the chiral symmetric phase. To our knowledge, it has not been shown whether the Chern-Simons coupling on the worldvolume theory on the 8-branes is large enough to trigger the spatially modulated phase transition. In this paper, we give the first demonstration of a spatially modulated phase transition in a "top-down" model with a well-understood dual pair.

#### INSTABILITY OF HOMOGENEOUS SOLUTION

The bulk geometry above the deconfining temperature is the near horizon geometry of the  $N_c$  D4 branes at finite temperature compactified on the supersymmetry breaking circle  $S_c^1$  [10]. In the notation of [13], the metric is,

$$ds^{2} = \left(\frac{U}{R}\right)^{\frac{3}{2}} \left(-f(U)dX_{0}^{2} + d\vec{X}^{2} + dX_{4}^{2}\right) + \left(\frac{R}{U}\right)^{\frac{3}{2}} \left(\frac{dU^{2}}{f(U)} + U^{2}d\Omega_{4}^{2}\right),$$
(1)

where  $U_T = (\frac{4\pi}{3}RT)^2 R$  is the location of the horizon at temperature T,  $f(U) = 1 - U_T^3/U^3$ ,  $R^3 = \pi g_s N_c l_s^3$ , and  $d\Omega_4^2$  is a metric for a unit four-sphere. The coordinate Uand the four-sphere represent the transverse directions to the D4 branes. The temperature T sets the periodicity of the imaginary time (Im  $X_0$ ) direction, while the period of the compact  $X_4$  direction is arbitrary. In the chiral symmetry restoration phase, each 8-brane is located at a constant  $X_4$  [3, 5, 6].

The D8 and  $\overline{D8}$  branes are separated in the chiral symmetric phase. Let us focus on the dynamics on the D8 branes. The DBI action on the D8 brane is given by

$$S = -T_{D8} \int d^9 \sigma e^{-\phi} \sqrt{-\det(g_{\alpha\beta} + 2\pi\alpha' F_{\alpha\beta})} + S_{CS} , \qquad (2)$$

where  $T_{D8} = (2\pi)^{-8} l_s^{-9}$  and the dilaton is given by  $e^{\phi} = g_s (U/R)^{3/4}$ . The Chern-Simons action is

$$S_{CS} = \frac{1}{48\pi^3} \int_{D8} F_4 \wedge \omega_5(A) , \qquad (3)$$

where  $F_4 = dC_3$  is the RR 4-form field which satisfies  $\frac{1}{2\pi} \int_{S^4} F_4 = N_c$  and  $\omega_5(A)$  is the Chern-Simons 5-form.

For our purpose, it is sufficient to turn on the U(1)part of the gauge field on the worldvolume. To the quadratic order, the U(1) part does not couple to the  $SU(N_f)$  part of the gauge field or fluctuations of the 8brane in the transverse direction. Couplings to the bulk degrees of freedom are suppressed by  $1/N_c$ . To simplify our equations, we rescale the gauge field and the metric as  $A = \frac{R^2}{2\pi\alpha'}\tilde{A}$  and  $g_{\alpha\beta} = R^2\tilde{g}_{\alpha\beta}$ . We also rescale the coordinates as U = Ru,  $X_0 = Rt$ ,  $\vec{X} = R\vec{x}$  and  $X_4 = R\tau$ . Following [3], we assume that the gauge field is constant on the  $S^4$  and obtain the effective 5-dimensional action,

$$S/c = -\int_{M_4 \times \mathbb{R}} dt d^3 x du \, u^{\frac{1}{4}} \sqrt{-\det(\tilde{g}_{\alpha\beta} + \tilde{F}_{\alpha\beta})} + \alpha \int_{M_4 \times \mathbb{R}} dt d^3 x du \, \epsilon^{\mu_1 \mu_2 \mu_3 \mu_4 \mu_5} \tilde{A}_{\mu_1} \tilde{F}_{\mu_2 \mu_3} \tilde{F}_{\mu_4 \mu_5} .$$

$$\tag{4}$$

with the 5-dimensional metric,

$$ds^{2} = u^{\frac{3}{2}} \left( -f(u)dt^{2} + d\vec{x}^{2} + d\tau^{2} \right) + \frac{1}{u^{\frac{3}{2}}f(u)}du^{2},$$
  
$$f(u) = 1 - \frac{u_{T}^{3}}{u^{3}}, \quad u_{T} = \left(\frac{4\pi}{3}RT\right)^{2}.$$
 (5)

The Chern-Simons term induces anomaly in the vector current on the boundary. In general, one needs to add the Bardeen counter-term to restore the current conservation. With only the vector electric field turned on, the counter-term vanishes. In particular, the definition of the chemical potential below is not modified by this. The Chern-Simons coupling  $\alpha$  is fixed to be 3/4 and the factor c is

$$c = \frac{8\pi^2}{3} T_{D8} N_f g_s^{-1} R^9.$$
 (6)

Note that, modulo the overall factor c, the action (4) depends only on  $u_T$ .

If the kinetic term for the gauge field were of the Maxwell form  $\tilde{F}^2$ , the electric field strength could be made arbitrarily high by raising the baryon density, and any non-zero value of the Chern-Simons coupling would induce an instability of the type discovered in [1]. With the DBI action, there is an upper bound for the field strength, and it requires a more careful analysis to determine whether the instability takes place.

Let us consider a background configuration with nonzero  $\tilde{A}_0 = \tilde{A}_0(u)$ . The equation of motion gives,

$$\tilde{E}(u) = \frac{\tilde{\rho}}{\sqrt{\tilde{\rho}^2 + u^5}} , \qquad (7)$$

where  $\tilde{E} = -\tilde{F}_{tu} = \partial_u \tilde{A}_0$ . The integration constant  $\tilde{\rho}$ will be identified as a rescaled value of the quark density  $\rho$  (=  $N_c$  times the baryon density). As advertised in the introduction, this finite quark density solution is regular everywhere on the brane. We choose the gauge so that  $\tilde{A}_0(u)$  vanishes on the horizon. Note that, although the action includes the CS term, the equations of motion are gauge invariant. The chemical potential  $\tilde{\mu}$  is given by the asymptotic value of  $\tilde{A}_0$  at  $u \to \infty$ .

$$\tilde{\mu} = \tilde{A}_0(u = \infty) = \int_{u_T}^{\infty} du \frac{\tilde{\rho}}{\sqrt{\tilde{\rho}^2 + u^5}} \,. \tag{8}$$

Let us perturb this configuration as  $\tilde{F} \to \tilde{F} + \delta \tilde{F}$ . To find an onset of the instability, we look for a static normalizable solution in the linearized equation for  $\delta \tilde{F}$ ,

$$\partial_u \left[ \frac{u^{\frac{5}{2}} f(u)}{\sqrt{1 - \tilde{E}(u)^2}} \delta \tilde{F}_{ui} \right] - u^{-\frac{1}{2}} \sqrt{1 - \tilde{E}(u)^2} \partial_j \delta \tilde{F}_{ij}$$
(9)
$$- 2\alpha \epsilon_{ijk} \tilde{E}(u) \delta \tilde{F}_{jk} = 0.$$

If we apply the operator  $\epsilon_{ijk}\partial_j$  and use the Fourier mode  $\delta \tilde{F}_{ij} = \epsilon_{ijk}v_k e^{-ik_lx^l}\phi(u)$  with an eigenvalue  $ik = i|\vec{k}|$  (the eigenvalue -ik gives the same result),  $\phi(u)$  obeys a second order ordinary differential equation,

$$\left[-\frac{d}{du}f(u)\sqrt{\tilde{\rho}^2+u^5}\frac{d}{du}+\frac{-4\alpha\tilde{\rho}k+u^2k^2}{\sqrt{\tilde{\rho}^2+u^5}}\right]\phi(u)=0.$$
(10)

At the horizon  $u = u_T$ , we use the in-going boundary condition for static waves.



FIG. 1: The critical quark density  $\tilde{\rho}$  as a function of the Chern-Simons coupling  $\alpha$ . The instability takes place in the shaded region with  $\alpha > \alpha_{\rm crit} = 1/4$ . The value  $\alpha = 3/4$  for the Sakai-Sugimoto model is indicated by the red vertical line.

We solved the linearized equation (10) numerically for general values of the Chern-Simons coupling  $\alpha$ . For each value of the Chern-Simons coupling  $\alpha > 1/4$ , we found a critical value of  $\tilde{\rho}$  above which the instability takes place. Figure 1 depicts the critical quark density  $\tilde{\rho}_{\rm crit}$  as a function of  $\alpha$ . We note that  $\tilde{\rho}_{\rm crit}$  diverges as  $\alpha \to 1/4$ .

We can also show analytically that  $\alpha = 1/4$  is the limiting value of the Chern-Simons coupling. Let us rescale variables as  $\bar{u} = \tilde{\rho}^{-\frac{2}{5}}u$ ,  $\bar{k} = \tilde{\rho}^{-\frac{1}{5}}k$ , and take the limit  $\tilde{\rho} \to \infty$  in the equation (10). We find

$$\left[-\frac{d}{d\bar{u}}\sqrt{1+\bar{u}^5}\frac{d}{d\bar{u}} + \frac{-4\alpha\bar{k}+\bar{u}^2\bar{k}^2}{\sqrt{1+\bar{u}^5}}\right]\tilde{\phi}(\bar{u}) = 0.$$
(11)

We have verified that a solution to this equation approaches the solution to (10) in the sense of the  $\mathcal{L}^2$  measure. From the numerical evaluation of (11), we find that the momentum  $\bar{k}$  with non-trivial normalizable solutions tends to infinity as we take  $\tilde{\rho} \to \infty$  and  $\alpha$  approaches the limiting value. Anticipating this, we take  $\bar{k} \to \infty$  in (11) while keeping  $v = \sqrt{\bar{k}\bar{u}}$  and obtain,

$$\left(-\frac{d^2}{dv^2} - 4\alpha + v^2\right)\tilde{\phi}(\bar{u}) = 0.$$
 (12)

This can be solved by the harmonic oscillator ground state  $\tilde{\phi}(v) = e^{-v^2/2}$  with  $\alpha = 1/4$ .

In the quark-gluon plasma phase, the Chern-Simons coupling on the worldvolume theory is  $\alpha = 3/4$  and is above the limiting value of 1/4. At this value of  $\alpha$ , the

critical quark density is numerically evaluated as

$$\tilde{\rho}_{\rm crit} = 3.714 \ u_T^{\frac{5}{2}}.$$
 (13)

Let us express the critical quark density in the original set of variables. The quark density  $\rho$  is defined by a variation of the Lagrangian density by  $E = \partial_u A_0$ . Note we rescaled the action by the factor c in (6) and the gauge field is rescaled as  $A = \frac{R^2}{2\pi\alpha'}\tilde{A}$ . We should also remember that we rescaled our spacetime coordinates by R. The physical quark density  $\rho$  is then related to  $\tilde{\rho}$  above as

$$\rho = c \left(\frac{R^2}{2\pi\alpha'}\right)^{-1} \frac{\tilde{\rho}}{R^3} = \frac{2}{3(2\pi)^5} \frac{N_f}{g_s} \frac{R^4}{l_s^7} \tilde{\rho}.$$
 (14)

Substituting (13) into this, the critical quark density at  $\alpha = 3/4$  is given as

$$\rho_{\rm crit} = c_0 N_f N_c (g_s N_c l_s)^2 T^5, \tag{15}$$

where  $c_0 = 3.714(2/3)^6 \pi^3 \approx 10$ .

It is important to make sure that we can ignore backreaction of the quark density to the bulk geometry. Note that the critical baryon density is given by dividing the quark density  $\rho_{\rm crit}$  by  $N_c$  and that the result is proportional to  $N_f(g_s N_c)^2 T^5$ . The  $N_c$  dependence comes only in the combination of the 't Hooft coupling  $q_s N_c$ , which is kept finite in the large  $N_c$  limit. Since the baryons can be thought of as D4 branes wrapping  $S^4$  [14, 15], their backreaction becomes significant only when their density scales as  $N_c$  or more and is negligible in the large  $N_c$ limit provided  $N_f \ll N_c$ . Another way to see this is to evaluate the energy density due to the electric field using the action (4) and show that it is proportional to  $N_f/g_s$ times some power of  $g_s N_c$ . This is the same scaling behavior as the tension of the  $N_f$  8-branes, which does not generate backreaction.

It is an interesting exercise to express the critical density in terms of QCD quantities. The string parameters  $g_s$  and  $l_s$  are related to the Yang-Mills coupling  $g_{YM}$  and the Kaluza-Klein scale  $M_{KK}$  for the compactification circle  $S_c^1$  as  $g_{YM}^2 = 4\pi^2 g_s l_s/L$  and  $M_{KK} = 2\pi/L$ , where Lis the circumference of  $S_c^1$  [13]. The critical baryon density can then be written as,

$$\frac{\rho_{\rm crit}}{N_c} = \frac{c_0 N_f}{4\pi^2} \frac{\lambda^2}{M_{KK}^2} T^5, \tag{16}$$

where  $\lambda = g_{YM}^2 N_c$ . The constants  $M_{KK}$  and  $\lambda$  can be determined by fitting, for example, with the pion decay constant and the mass of the  $\rho$ -meson, as  $M_{KK} = 949$ MeV and  $\lambda = g_{YM}^2 N_c = 16.6$  [3]. The deconfinement temperature, where the thermal cycle  $S_T^1$  becomes contractible, is at  $M_{KK}/2\pi = 151$  MeV. Interestingly, this turns out to be close to the critical temperature expected for the quark-gluon plasma [16]. If we substitute T = 150 MeV in (16), for example, the critical baryon density comes out as,

$$\frac{\rho_{\rm crit}}{N_c} \approx 0.8 N_f \,\,{\rm fm}^{-3}.\tag{17}$$

For  $N_f = 2$ , this is about 10 times the nucleon density in atomic nuclei.

At the critical density  $\rho = \rho_{\rm crit}$ , the instability begins to occur at the momentum  $k = 2.39 u_T^{1/2}$ , which in the original coordinates is given by  $k/R \approx 10T$ . If we set T = 150 MeV, the momentum is about 1.5 GeV, and the corresponding wave length is 0.8 fm.

#### NON-LINEAR SOLUTION

We can construct a solution to the full non-linear equations carrying a fixed non-zero momentum whose energy is lower that that of the original translationally invariant state. Following [2], we make the ansatz,

$$\tilde{A}_t = a(u), \quad \tilde{A}_x + i\tilde{A}_y = h(u)e^{-ikz} , \qquad (18)$$

with all other components vanishing. Although there may be a non-linear solution with even lower energy, it is interesting that one can construct a candidate ground state with such a simple ansatz

With this ansatz, the equations of motion become,

$$\partial_u \left[ \frac{u\sqrt{u^3 + k^2 h(u)^2 a'(u)}}{\sqrt{1 - a'(u)^2 + f(u)h'(u)^2}} \right] + 4\alpha kh(u)h'(u) = 0$$
  
$$\partial_u \left[ \frac{uf(u)\sqrt{u^3 + k^2 h(u)^2 h'(u)}}{\sqrt{1 - a'(u)^2 + f(u)h'(u)^2}} \right] + 4\alpha ka'(u)h(u)$$
  
$$- \frac{k^2 uh(u)\sqrt{1 - a'(u)^2 + f(u)h'(u)^2}}{\sqrt{u^3 + k^2 h(u)^2}} = 0.$$
(19)

We assume that the embedding coordinate  $\tau$  is constant, which is consistent with the equations of motion. The first equation can be integrated easily, and gives us the quark density,

$$\frac{u\sqrt{u^3 + k^2h(u)^2}a'(u)}{\sqrt{1 - a'(u)^2 + f(u)h'(u)^2}} + 2\alpha kh(u)^2 = \tilde{\rho} .$$
(20)

Using this expression, the second equation becomes

$$K(u)\partial_{u} (K(u)f(u)h'(u)) - k^{2}u^{2}h(u) +4k\alpha h(u)(\tilde{\rho} - 2k\alpha h(u)^{2}) = 0, \qquad (21)$$

where

$$K(u) = \sqrt{\frac{\tilde{\rho}^2 + u^5 + kh(u)^2(ku^2 - 4\tilde{\rho}\alpha + 4k\alpha^2h(u)^2)}{1 + f(u)h'(u)^2}}.$$
(22)

The equation (21) can be solved numerically. Since we have a family of solutions parametrized by the momentum k, we can look for the one which minimizes the free

energy density  $\mathcal{F}$ , given by

$$\mathcal{F}(\rho) = \mu \rho + \int du \, \mathcal{L}_E, \qquad (23)$$

where  $\mathcal{L}_E$  is the DBI Lagrangian plus the Chern-Simons term. Note that the free energy  $\mathcal{F}$  is a function of  $\rho$ , and not  $\mu$ . We have identified the momentum with the lowest value of the free energy, and the expectation value of the current operator  $\langle \tilde{J} \rangle$  dual to h(u) can be read off from the asymptotic behavior of the normalizable solutions.

So far, we have focused on the dynamics on the D8 brane worldvolume. The analysis on the  $\overline{D8}$  branes is identical except that the Chern-Simons coupling has the opposite sign due to the CPT invariance. There are separate gauge fields  $A_L$  and  $A_R$  on the D8 and  $\overline{\text{D8}}$  branes, respectively, and they cause the instability above the critical charge density. The baryon vector current is dual to  $(A_L + A_R)$  and the axial current is dual to  $(A_L - A_R)$ . The baryon charge density turns on the same amount of chemical potentials for both  $A_L$  and  $A_R$ . Above the critical baryon density, the instability will take place on both branes, and both vector and axial baryon currents are generated on the boundary. In fact, directions of the momenta on the D8 and  $\overline{D8}$  branes can be different, and the currents  $J_L$  and  $J_R$  dual to  $A_L$  and  $A_R$  can carry momenta in different directions.

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