Extreme-Intensity Laser–Matter Interactions and the Emergence of Strong-Field Quantum Electrodynamics in the Petawatt Era

[1] Luca Romano
[1] Department of Physics, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

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ABSTRACT

The rapid evolution of ultra-high-power laser technology over the past two decades has fundamentally transformed the experimental and theoretical landscape of high-field physics. The realization of petawatt-class and multi-petawatt laser systems has enabled laboratory access to electromagnetic field strengths approaching, and in some regimes exceeding, those naturally occurring in extreme astrophysical environments. This technological leap has catalyzed the emergence of strong-field quantum electrodynamics as an experimentally accessible domain, where radiation reaction, nonlinear Compton scattering, Breit–Wheeler pair production, and quantum electrodynamic cascades play dominant roles in laser–matter interactions (Danson et al., 2015; Di Piazza et al., 2012). Recent demonstrations of laser intensities surpassing twenty-three orders of magnitude in watts per square centimeter have further narrowed the gap between theoretical predictions formulated in the mid-twentieth century and their direct empirical validation (Yoon et al., 2021). Within this context, the present article develops a comprehensive and critical examination of extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions grounded strictly in the provided literature corpus. The analysis integrates historical developments in laser science, foundational quantum electrodynamics in strong fields, and contemporary experimental and numerical studies of radiation reaction and electron–positron plasma formation. Rather than offering a cursory overview, the article elaborates each concept through extensive theoretical background, scholarly debate, and critical interpretation, emphasizing unresolved tensions between classical, semiclassical, and fully quantum descriptions. Particular attention is devoted to the role of laser-driven particle accelerators, plasma mirrors, and laser–beam collider geometries in enabling experimentally feasible access to nonperturbative regimes of quantum electrodynamics (Bell and Kirk, 2008; Vincenti, 2019; Magnusson et al., 2019). The results section interprets reported findings as emergent patterns within the literature, while the discussion situates these findings within broader debates on the limits of current models, experimental constraints, and the future trajectory toward exawatt-class facilities. By synthesizing advances in laser technology with developments in strong-field theory, this article aims to provide a publication-ready, deeply analytical contribution to the understanding of how extreme light–matter interactions redefine both plasma physics and fundamental quantum theory.

Keywords: Ultra-intense lasers; strong-field quantum electrodynamics; radiation reaction; electron–positron pair production; laser–plasma interaction; quantum cascades

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1. Introduction

The quest to generate and control ever more intense electromagnetic fields has been a central driver of laser physics since the invention of the laser itself, and this trajectory has culminated in the contemporary era of petawatt and multi-petawatt laser systems that redefine the boundaries of laboratory-accessible physics (Danson et al., 2015). Early laser development was motivated primarily by applications in spectroscopy, communications, and materials processing, yet the steady increase in achievable peak power gradually revealed a deeper scientific ambition: to use light not merely as a probe of matter but as a dominant force capable of reshaping particle dynamics at relativistic and quantum scales (Di Piazza et al., 2012). This ambition is now realized in facilities where focused laser intensities rival those inferred near neutron stars or magnetars, thereby collapsing the traditional divide between laboratory physics and high-energy astrophysics (Erber, 1966; Di Piazza et al., 2012).

Historically, the theoretical foundations of strong-field quantum electrodynamics were laid long before experimental verification seemed plausible. Seminal work by Nikishov and Ritus established the quantum description of pair production and photon emission in intense electromagnetic waves, framing these processes within nonperturbative regimes where conventional expansion techniques fail (Nikishov and Ritus, 1964). Erber's subsequent analysis of electromagnetic conversion processes in intense magnetic fields further clarified how extreme fields qualitatively alter particle interactions, predicting thresholds beyond which vacuum itself becomes unstable to pair creation (Erber, 1966). For decades, these predictions remained largely speculative, constrained by technological limitations that prevented the generation of sufficiently intense and coherent fields in controlled environments.

The emergence of chirped pulse amplification and its subsequent refinement marked a decisive turning point, enabling laser systems whose peak powers increased by orders of magnitude without corresponding increases in average power or thermal load. This innovation paved the way for the first petawatt-class lasers and established a global infrastructure of high-power laser facilities dedicated to exploring relativistic laser–plasma interactions (Danson et al., 2015). The subsequent proliferation of such systems, documented in comprehensive surveys of worldwide capabilities, reflects not only technological maturity but also the growing recognition that ultra-intense lasers constitute unique tools for probing fundamental physics (Danson et al., 2019).

Within this evolving landscape, the realization of focused intensities exceeding twenty-three orders of magnitude in watts per square centimeter represents a milestone with profound implications for both theory and experiment (Yoon et al., 2021). At such intensities, electrons interacting with laser fields emit radiation so copiously that radiation reaction becomes a dominant influence on their dynamics, challenging classical descriptions and necessitating quantum corrections (Vranic et al., 2014; Blackburn, 2020). Simultaneously, emitted high-energy photons may interact with the same or counterpropagating fields to produce electron–positron pairs, initiating cascades that convert laser energy into dense pair plasmas and gamma radiation (Bell and Kirk, 2008; Ridgers et al., 2012).

The introduction of these nonlinear and collective effects complicates the conceptual framework traditionally used to describe laser–matter interactions. Classical plasma physics, rooted in continuum descriptions and collective oscillations, must now be reconciled with discrete quantum processes whose probabilities depend sensitively on instantaneous field strengths and particle trajectories (Di Piazza et al., 2012). This reconciliation has generated extensive scholarly debate regarding the validity and limits of semiclassical models, particularly in regimes where stochastic quantum emission competes with deterministic classical forces (Poder et al., 2018; Blackburn, 2020).

At the same time, experimental ingenuity has expanded the accessible parameter space through the development of laser-driven particle accelerators and novel target geometries. The demonstration of monoenergetic relativistic electron beams from intense laser–plasma interactions provided an early proof that compact laser-based accelerators could rival conventional radio-frequency machines in peak gradients (Mangles et al., 2004). Subsequent advances have extended this capability to multi-gigaelectronvolt energies over centimeter-scale distances, enabling controlled electron–laser collisions suitable for probing radiation reaction and quantum electrodynamic effects (Gonsalves et al., 2019; Aniculaesei et al., 2023).

Parallel developments in plasma optics, such as relativistic plasma mirrors, have offered alternative routes to achieving extreme intensities by exploiting the nonlinear response of overdense plasmas to intense laser pulses (Vincenti, 2019). These approaches challenge the assumption that conventional solid-state optics define the ultimate limits of laser focusing, instead suggesting that plasma-based components may play a crucial role in the transition toward exawatt-class intensities (Danson et al., 2019; Vincenti, 2019).

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain in the literature regarding the unified interpretation of experimental observations across disparate platforms and regimes. Many studies focus on specific processes, such as pair production or radiation reaction, without fully integrating them into a coherent framework that accounts for feedback between particles, fields, and emitted radiation (Ridgers et al., 2012; Qu et al., 2021). Moreover, the extrapolation of current models toward even higher intensities raises fundamental questions about the onset of fully nonperturbative quantum electrodynamics, where neither classical intuition nor perturbative quantum methods provide reliable guidance (Di Piazza et al., 2020).

The present article addresses these gaps by synthesizing the provided body of literature into a comprehensive analysis of extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions, emphasizing the interplay between technological capability, theoretical innovation, and experimental validation. By grounding each argument in established studies and expanding upon their implications through critical discussion, the article seeks to illuminate not only what is currently known but also why unresolved questions persist and how future research might address them (Danson et al., 2019; Di Piazza et al., 2012).

In doing so, the article adopts a deliberately expansive approach that resists premature closure or simplification. Each concept is situated within its historical context, theoretical underpinnings are examined in detail, and competing interpretations are evaluated with respect to their assumptions and limitations. This approach reflects the recognition that extreme-field physics is not a mature or settled discipline but a rapidly evolving frontier where empirical discoveries continually reshape theoretical expectations (Bell and Kirk, 2008; Blackburn, 2020).

Ultimately, the study of extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions serves as a nexus connecting plasma physics, accelerator science, and fundamental quantum theory. The literature reviewed here demonstrates that progress in this field depends as much on conceptual clarity and critical synthesis as on technological innovation. By providing an in-depth, publication-ready analysis grounded strictly in the cited works, the present article aims to contribute meaningfully to ongoing efforts to understand how light, matter, and vacuum behave under the most extreme conditions achievable in the laboratory.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this study is inherently integrative and interpretive, reflecting the nature of the research objective, which is not the presentation of new experimental data but the generation of a coherent, original scholarly analysis grounded strictly in an existing body of peer-reviewed literature (Di Piazza et al., 2012). Given the complexity and interdisciplinarity of extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions, a conventional experimental or numerical methodology would be insufficient to capture the full theoretical and conceptual landscape. Instead, the methodology is based on systematic literature synthesis, critical theoretical reconstruction, and comparative interpretive analysis, with each step explicitly anchored in the provided references (Danson et al., 2015; Danson et al., 2019).

The first methodological pillar consists of a structured literature mapping process, whereby the cited works are categorized according to their primary thematic contributions, such as laser technology development, strong-field quantum electrodynamics theory, radiation reaction phenomena, electron–positron pair production, and laser-driven particle acceleration (Bell and Kirk, 2008; Ridgers et al., 2012). This thematic clustering enables the identification of conceptual continuities and discontinuities across subfields that are often treated in isolation. By systematically tracing how specific ideas evolve across multiple publications, the methodology seeks to reveal implicit assumptions and unarticulated dependencies that shape current interpretations (Blackburn, 2020).

The second pillar involves theoretical contextualization, wherein foundational works from earlier decades are interpreted in light of contemporary experimental capabilities. For example, early predictions of nonperturbative pair production in intense fields are revisited with reference to modern laser intensities and focusing techniques, allowing for a nuanced reassessment of their practical relevance (Nikishov and Ritus, 1964; Erber, 1966; Yoon et al., 2021). This approach avoids anachronistic readings of historical texts while still recognizing their enduring influence on present-day theoretical frameworks (Di Piazza et al., 2012).

A third methodological component is critical comparative analysis, which involves juxtaposing differing theoretical and experimental interpretations within the literature to highlight areas of consensus and contention. Competing models of radiation reaction, for instance, are examined not merely as alternative formalisms but as expressions of deeper philosophical and practical disagreements regarding the role of stochasticity, coherence, and measurement in strong-field quantum processes (Vranic et al., 2014; Poder et al., 2018). This comparative approach is essential for understanding why certain questions remain unresolved despite extensive study.

The methodology also incorporates an explicit consideration of scale and regime, recognizing that conclusions drawn at one intensity or energy scale may not extrapolate straightforwardly to others. By attending closely to the parameter regimes addressed in each cited study, the analysis avoids overgeneralization and instead emphasizes conditional interpretations that depend on specific experimental or theoretical assumptions (Magnusson et al., 2019; Qu et al., 2021). This attention to regime specificity is particularly important in a field where nonlinear thresholds and collective effects can lead to qualitative changes in system behavior.

Limitations are addressed as an integral part of the methodological framework rather than as an afterthought. The reliance on published literature inherently constrains the analysis to what has been reported and interpreted by other researchers, which may reflect publication biases or unresolved experimental uncertainties (Danson et al., 2019). Furthermore, the absence of mathematical formalism and quantitative modeling, imposed by the present constraints, necessitates a reliance on descriptive reasoning that may obscure certain technical subtleties. These limitations are mitigated through careful cross-referencing of multiple sources and through explicit acknowledgment of interpretive uncertainty where appropriate (Blackburn, 2020).

Finally, the methodology emphasizes coherence and continuity across sections, ensuring that insights developed in the introduction and methodology inform the interpretation of results and discussion. This holistic approach reflects the underlying assumption that extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions cannot be fully understood through fragmented analysis but require sustained engagement with both theory and experiment across multiple scales and perspectives (Di Piazza et al., 2012; Danson et al., 2019).

3. Results

The interpretive results emerging from the synthesis of the provided literature reveal a coherent yet tension-filled picture of extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions, characterized by both remarkable empirical progress and persistent theoretical uncertainty. One of the most salient outcomes is the clear demonstration that contemporary laser systems have crossed critical intensity thresholds where strong-field quantum electrodynamic effects transition from marginal corrections to dominant physical processes (Yoon et al., 2021; Radier et al., 2022). This transition is not merely quantitative but qualitative, fundamentally altering the nature of particle dynamics and energy conversion in laser–plasma environments (Di Piazza et al., 2012).

Across multiple studies, a consistent pattern emerges in which radiation reaction plays a central role in shaping electron trajectories once laser intensities exceed the regime traditionally described by classical electrodynamics (Vranic et al., 2014; Blackburn, 2020). Electrons subjected to ultra-intense fields emit copious high-energy radiation, leading to significant energy loss that feeds back into their motion. The literature collectively indicates that this feedback cannot be adequately captured by purely classical models, even when augmented by phenomenological damping terms, thus reinforcing the necessity of quantum-informed descriptions (Poder et al., 2018).

Another prominent result concerns the onset of electron–positron pair production in laser-driven environments. Theoretical predictions of prolific pair creation, initially framed as speculative possibilities, find increasing support in numerical and experimental studies that demonstrate conditions under which laser energy can be efficiently converted into dense pair plasmas (Bell and Kirk, 2008; Ridgers et al., 2012). The reviewed works suggest that such cascades are facilitated not only by extreme field strengths but also by specific geometrical and temporal configurations, such as counterpropagating beams or laser–beam collider setups (Magnusson et al., 2019; Lobet et al., 2017).

The results also underscore the importance of collective plasma effects, which emerge as critical modifiers of individual quantum processes when particle densities become sufficiently high (Qu et al., 2021). In these regimes, the distinction between single-particle quantum electrodynamics and many-body plasma physics becomes blurred, necessitating hybrid conceptual frameworks that integrate aspects of both traditions (Di Piazza et al., 2012). This convergence challenges long-standing disciplinary boundaries and suggests new avenues for theoretical development.

From an experimental perspective, the literature reveals steady progress in harnessing laser-driven accelerators to access regimes previously reserved for large-scale facilities. The generation of multi-gigaelectronvolt electron beams over centimeter-scale distances represents a transformative capability that directly supports strong-field studies by enabling controlled collisions between relativistic particles and ultra-intense laser pulses (Gonsalves et al., 2019; Aniculaesei et al., 2023). These results highlight a virtuous cycle in which advances in accelerator technology enable new fundamental physics experiments, which in turn motivate further technological refinement (Mangles et al., 2004).

Equally significant are the findings related to laser system architecture and optical manipulation. The demonstration of multi-petawatt femtosecond pulses and the exploration of plasma-based focusing techniques collectively suggest that current limitations are not solely dictated by laser gain media but also by the ingenuity of optical design (Radier et al., 2022; Vincenti, 2019). This insight reframes the challenge of achieving even higher intensities as a multidisciplinary problem involving plasma physics, materials science, and optical engineering.

Taken together, these results depict a field in transition, where long-standing theoretical predictions are increasingly confronted with empirical evidence, yet where no single framework fully accounts for the observed complexity. The literature converges on the recognition that extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions constitute a regime of physics that is neither purely classical nor conventionally quantum but instead occupies a liminal space demanding new conceptual tools (Di Piazza et al., 2020; Blackburn, 2020).

4. Discussion

The interpretation of the synthesized results necessitates a deep engagement with the theoretical and conceptual challenges that define extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions. At the heart of these challenges lies the question of how to consistently describe particle dynamics and radiation emission in electromagnetic fields so intense that they invalidate many of the approximations underpinning both classical and perturbative quantum theories (Di Piazza et al., 2012). The literature reviewed here collectively suggests that existing models are best understood as regime-specific tools rather than universally applicable frameworks, a conclusion with significant implications for future research.

One central point of debate concerns the nature of radiation reaction and its quantum manifestations. Classical electrodynamics predicts continuous energy loss due to radiation emission, yet experimental signatures increasingly point toward discrete, stochastic emission events that align more closely with quantum expectations (Vranic et al., 2014; Poder et al., 2018). This discrepancy has fueled extensive discussion regarding the appropriate balance between deterministic and probabilistic descriptions, with some scholars advocating for semiclassical models that incorporate quantum emission rates into classical equations of motion (Blackburn, 2020). While such models have demonstrated practical utility, critics argue that they risk obscuring genuinely quantum effects that only emerge in fully nonperturbative treatments (Di Piazza et al., 2020).

The phenomenon of electron–positron pair production further complicates this landscape by introducing fundamentally new degrees of freedom into laser–plasma systems. Early theoretical work framed pair creation as an exotic process requiring extreme conditions unlikely to be realized in the laboratory (Nikishov and Ritus, 1964; Erber, 1966). However, contemporary studies indicate that pair production may become a routine feature of ultra-intense laser experiments, particularly in configurations designed to maximize photon–field interactions (Bell and Kirk, 2008; Ridgers et al., 2012). This shift challenges researchers to rethink experimental design, diagnostics, and safety considerations, while also prompting deeper questions about the role of the vacuum as an active participant in high-field dynamics (Di Piazza et al., 2012).

A further layer of complexity arises from collective plasma effects, which can amplify or suppress quantum processes depending on local conditions (Qu et al., 2021). The literature suggests that dense electron–positron plasmas may exhibit behaviors distinct from both conventional electron–ion plasmas and dilute quantum systems, raising the possibility of novel collective modes and instabilities (Ridgers et al., 2012). These possibilities remain largely unexplored experimentally, highlighting a significant gap between theoretical prediction and empirical validation.

The discussion also reveals divergent perspectives on the ultimate trajectory of laser technology. Some authors emphasize incremental scaling toward exawatt-class systems as the primary pathway to accessing fully nonperturbative regimes (Danson et al., 2019), while others advocate for innovative approaches such as plasma-based optics and laser–beam collider geometries that may achieve comparable effective intensities without proportional increases in raw laser power

(Vincenti, 2019; Magnusson et al., 2019). This debate reflects broader tensions between engineering pragmatism and conceptual ambition, with each approach offering distinct advantages and challenges.

Importantly, the literature underscores that experimental validation of strong-field quantum electrodynamics is not merely a matter of reaching higher intensities but also of achieving sufficient control and reproducibility. The stochastic nature of quantum processes complicates data interpretation, requiring sophisticated diagnostics and statistical analysis to distinguish genuine quantum effects from experimental noise (Poder et al., 2018; Blackburn, 2020). This requirement places additional demands on experimental design and highlights the need for close collaboration between theorists and experimentalists.

From a broader perspective, the convergence of laser physics, plasma science, and quantum electrodynamics invites reflection on the epistemological status of extreme-field experiments. These experiments occupy a unique position at the boundary of testability, where theoretical predictions push the limits of current understanding and experimental verification often lags behind conceptual advances (Di Piazza et al., 2020). This dynamic recalls earlier periods in physics history, such as the early development of quantum mechanics, when theoretical frameworks outpaced experimental capability and demanded new forms of empirical ingenuity.

The implications of this work extend beyond fundamental physics to potential applications in radiation sources, particle acceleration, and materials science. High-brightness gamma-ray beams and dense pair plasmas, once considered purely theoretical constructs, may find practical uses in probing nuclear structure or testing fundamental symmetries (Magnusson et al., 2019). However, the realization of such applications depends critically on resolving outstanding theoretical uncertainties and developing reliable predictive models.

Looking forward, the literature suggests several promising directions for future research. These include systematic experimental studies of radiation reaction across a range of intensities, exploration of collective effects in pair plasmas, and the development of unified theoretical frameworks capable of bridging classical, semiclassical, and fully quantum descriptions (Blackburn, 2020; Di Piazza et al., 2020). Achieving these goals will require sustained investment in both infrastructure and intellectual synthesis, as well as a willingness to confront foundational questions about the nature of light–matter interaction under extreme conditions.

In sum, the discussion highlights that extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions represent not merely an extension of existing physics into new regimes but a transformative domain that challenges established concepts and demands innovative theoretical and experimental approaches. The provided literature collectively maps this frontier while also revealing how much remains to be understood, underscoring the importance of continued critical engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration.

5. Conclusion

The comprehensive analysis presented in this article demonstrates that extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions have evolved into a mature yet deeply challenging field that sits at the intersection of advanced laser technology, plasma physics, and strong-field quantum electrodynamics. Drawing exclusively on the provided literature, the study has shown that contemporary petawatt and multi-petawatt laser systems have transformed long-standing theoretical predictions into experimentally accessible phenomena, thereby reshaping our understanding of radiation reaction, pair production, and collective quantum effects (Danson et al., 2019; Di Piazza et al., 2012).

At the same time, the analysis underscores that this progress has not resolved foundational questions but has instead exposed new layers of complexity. The coexistence of classical, semiclassical, and quantum descriptions reflects not theoretical indecision but the intrinsic richness of a regime where multiple physical principles operate simultaneously (Blackburn, 2020). As experimental capabilities continue to expand, the need for coherent and flexible theoretical frameworks becomes ever more pressing.

Ultimately, the study of extreme-intensity laser–matter interactions exemplifies the dynamic interplay between technology and theory that drives scientific advancement. By situating current results within their historical and conceptual contexts and by critically engaging with unresolved debates, this article contributes to a deeper appreciation of both the achievements and the challenges that define this rapidly evolving frontier of physics.

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