

# Explorations of the viability of ARM and Xeon Phi for physics processing

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**Abstract.** We report on our investigations into the viability of the ARM processor and the Intel Xeon Phi co-processor for scientific computing. We describe our experience porting software to these processors and running benchmarks using real physics applications to explore the potential of these processors for production physics processing.

## 1. Introduction

The computing requirements for high energy physics (HEP) projects like the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) [1] at the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) in Geneva, Switzerland are larger than can be met with resources deployed in a single computing center. This has led to the construction of a global distributed computing system known as the Worldwide LHC Computing Grid (WLCG) [2], which brings together resources from nearly 160 computer centers in 35 countries. Computing at this scale has been used, for example, by the CMS [3] and ATLAS [4] experiments for the discovery of the Higgs boson [5, 6]. To achieve this and other results the CMS experiment, for example, typically used during 2012 a processing capacity between 80,000 and 100,000 x86-64 cores from the WLCG. Further discoveries are possible in the next decade as the LHC moves to its design energy and increases the machine luminosity. However, increases in dataset sizes by 2-3 orders of magnitude (and commensurate processing capacity) will eventually be required to realize the full potential of this scientific instrument. The scale and longevity of the LHC computing require continual R&D into new technologies which may be relevant in the coming years. Since around 2005 processors have also hit scaling limits, largely driven by overall power consumption [7], which have led to the introduction of multicore CPUs and which are driving interest in processor architectures other than simple, general purpose x86-64 processors. In this paper we report on our investigations

into two such technologies: low power ARM processors [8] and Intel’s Xeon Phi coprocessor card, for scientific computing. For ARM, we extend and build on our previously reported results [9].

## 2. ARM Investigations

### 2.1. Test Setup

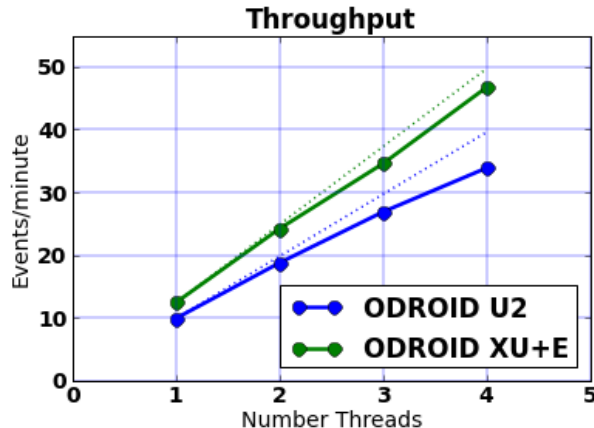
For the tests described in this paper we used two low-cost development boards, the ODROID-U2 (purchased in Feb. 2013) and the ODROID-XU+E (purchased in Aug. 2013) [10]. The processor on the U2 board is an Exynos 4412 Prime, a System-on-Chip (SoC) produced by Samsung for use in mobile devices. It is a quad-core Cortex A9 ARMv7 processor operating at 1.7GHz with 2GB of LP-DDR2 memory. The processor also contains an ARM Mali-400 quad-core GPU accelerator, although that was not used for the work described in this paper. The XU+E board has a more recent Exynos 5410 processor, with 4 Cortex-A15 cores at 1.6GHz and 4 Cortex-A7 cores at 1.2GHz, in ARM’s big.LITTLE configuration, with 2GB of LDDR3 memory, as well as a PowerVR SGX544MP3 GPU (also not used in this work). Both boards have eMMC and microSD slots, multiple USB ports and 10/100Mbps Ethernet with an RJ-45 port. Power is provided via a 5V DC power adaptor. ARM’s big.LITTLE heterogeneous architecture in principle pairs each performance (A15) core with a low-power (A7) core to facilitate a more flexible performance/power response than simple dynamic clock frequency scaling. The architecture allows for a mix of performance and low-power cores, however the implementation in the current generation 5410 chip only allows for switching between the entire A15 core cluster and the entire A7 cluster. The other unique aspect of the XU+E board is integrated power sensors providing access to the power individually used by the A15 cores, the A7 cores, the GPU and the memory. The cost of the U2 board alone was \$89 and with the relevant accessories (cables, a cooling fan, a 64GB eMMC storage module, etc.) the total cost was \$233. The XU+E board alone cost \$199 and with the adaptor, 64GB eMMC storage and a “Smart Power” meter the total cost was \$357. The “Smart Power” meter allows external measurements of the total power use of either board, with the values being made available via USB to the board itself. The extremely modest cost of these boards permitted us to do meaningful initial investigations without investing in full-fledged servers.

For the Linux operating system on the U2 (XU+E) board we used Fedora 18 (19) ARM Remix with kernel version 3.0.75 (3.4.5), provided by Hardkernel, the vendor for the ODROID boards. We chose Fedora due to its similarities to Scientific Linux CERN (SLC). It is fully hard float capable and uses the floating point unit on the SoC. The kernel was reconfigured to enable swap devices/files, which is required for CMSSW compilation. All build tests were done using a 500GB 3.5" ATA disk connected via USB or with the eMMC storage. Run-time tests were done with output written to the eMMC storage.

In order to compare results from the ARM board we also used two typical x86-64 servers currently deployed at CERN. The first is a dual quad-core Intel Xeon L5520 @ 2.27 GHz (Nehalem) with 24GB of memory. The second is dual hexa-core Intel Xeon E5-2630 @ 2.00GHz (Sandy Bridge) with 64GB of memory. Both machines were equipped with a large local disk for output and used software installed on an AFS filesystem at CERN. These machines were purchased about three years apart and very roughly represent the range of x86-64 hardware being operated at the time of our ARM tests.

### 2.2. Software Environment

The software environment used here was as described in our earlier results [9], except that we updated to a newer CMS software version: a nearly-final pre-release of CMSSW\_7\_0\_0. The main software problem reported earlier was a problem with ROOT dictionaries. Some bugs and problems have been fixed, but as of this paper output via ROOT on ARMv7 still does not work. Thus event output was turned off when running the CMS test application.



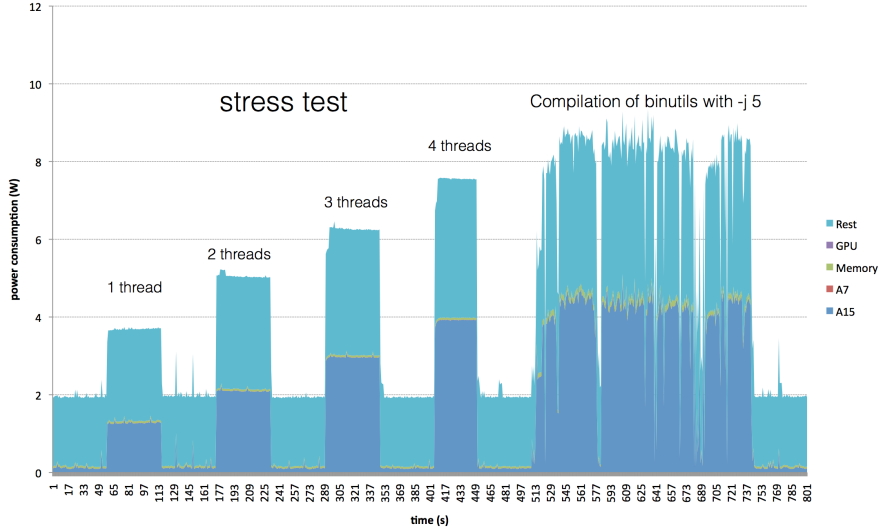
**Figure 1.** Throughput of the multi-threaded “FullCMS” application with varying numbers of threads. Points and solid lines indicate measurements, dotted lines indicate the extrapolation of the single core results to show more clearly deviations from scaling.

### 2.3. Experimental Results

We have run again, with the newer CMSSW version, the same test done previously: a Monte Carlo simulation of 8 TeV LHC minimum bias events using Pythia8 [11] (event generation) followed by simulation with Geant4 [12]. This time we tested both the U2 board and the XU+E board. This test ran on a single core and we scaled the results by the number of physical cores to estimate the total possible throughput for the chips. In order to load all cores with a realistic benchmark we ran in addition a second application using a beta version of Geant4 version 10 which provides support for event-based multi-threaded applications. We did not use the full CMS simulation for this, but instead a simpler benchmark application (FullCMS) which uses the actual CMS geometry imported from a GDML file. The results are reported in table 1. Here TDP (Thermal Design Power) numbers for the Intel processors were taken from their website [13] and those for the ODROID boards were estimated from our own measurements. As before, while the individual ARM cores are less performant than the x86-64 cores, a significantly better performance per Watt is obtained. In figure 1 we show also the performance of the multi-threaded FullCMS application with varying numbers of threads. Some deviations from linear scaling are seen, especially for the U2 board.

**Table 1.** Results of run time tests for single core CMSSW (GEM-SIM) and a multi-threaded version of the Geant4 benchmark “FullCMS” with 4 threads (G4MT).

Type	Cores	Power (TDP)	GEN-SIM Events /minute /core	GEN-SIM Events /minute /Watt	G4MT Events /minute (threads)	G4MT Events /minute /Watt
ODROID U2	4	4W	1.08	1.08	34.2 (4)	8.6
ODROID XU+E	4/4	5W	1.47	1.07	47 (4)	9.4
dual Xeon L5520 @2.27GHz	2 × 4	120W	3.37	0.22	307.2 (16)	2.6
dual Xeon E5-2630L @2.0GHz	2 × 6	120W	3.46	0.35	N/A	N/A



**Figure 2.** Power consumption on the XU+E board as measured by the integrated power sensors and the external Smart Power meter (labeled “Rest”), for tests (from left to right) with *stress* using 1,2,3,4 threads and when compiling a software package (binutils) with “-j 5”.

#### 2.4. Power investigations

We also performed more detailed investigations into the power use on the ODROID U2 and XU+E using the “Smart Power” meter and the sensors on the XU+E board. Table 2 shows results from the “Smart Power” meter for the U2 board for various running conditions. These are consistent with our estimate of  $\sim 4\text{W}$  in table 1 for the TDP-equivalent power use. In figure 2 we show power measurements for the XU+E board when loading 1-4 cores and when compiling. The latter is consistent with our  $\sim 5\text{W}$  TDP equivalent for the XU+E.

**Table 2.** Power measurements on the ODROID U2 board using the “Smart Power” meter. Here “fan” and “ethernet” indicates whether the cooling fan and ethernet were on or not.

ODROID U2	Voltage (V)	Current (mA)	Power (W)
idle, no fan, no ethernet	5.02	280	1.4
idle, fan, no ethernet	5.02	360	1.8
idle, no fan, ethernet	5.02	322	1.6
idle, fan, ethernet	5.02	400	2.0
full CPU load, no fan, ethernet	5.02	900	4.5
full CPU load, fan, ethernet	5.02	970	4.9

### 3. Xeon Phi Investigations

As there is some interest in the Xeon Phi among our collaborators, we have created a basic HEP software development environment to facilitate certain types of application and benchmark tests which can run directly on the Phi card.

#### 3.1. Test Setup

For the tests described here we used a Xeon Phi 7110P, with 61 in-order cores (and up to 4-way Hyperthreading). The card was used with a standard Intel Xeon box with 32 logical cores as

the host.

### 3.2. Software Environment

There are two practical difficulties when setting up a software environment for the Phi. First, no compilation environment is available on the Phi itself, and cross-compilation must be done on the host. Second, currently only the Intel compiler can be used for the compilation.

We chose to create what looks like a normal SCRAM [14] environment for the user on the host system. A user can create a SCRAM development area, with some number of previously cross-compiled externals visible, and then (cross-)compile their own code with SCRAM in a standard fashion. They need only switch to a shell on the Phi to actually run it. We made a special CMSSW release which had cross-compiled externals and just the subset of CMSSW packages which compile with the Intel compiler. Most externals were built by just setting `CXX="icpc -fPIC -mmic"` and `CC="icc -fPIC -mmic"` and `-host=x86_64-k10m-linux` to configure scripts for cross compilation. A few special cases include:

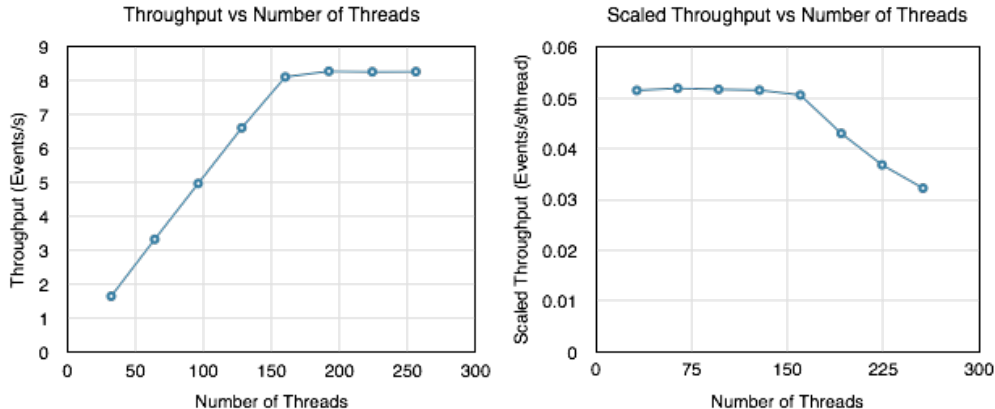
- Boost: Patched a couple of files and used `TOOLSET intel`
- Python: Needed to be built twice, once for build system and once for Xeon Phi cross compilation.
- Fastjet: Compiled without `-msse3`
- GSL: Fixed configure script to not run test when cross-compiling
- OpenSSL: Configured without `-fstack-protector` and `-with-krb5-flavor`
- Root: Patched to build some executables without `-mmic`. Built without `fftw3`, `castor` and `dcap` dependency. Configured for `linuxx8664k10micc` along with a couple of patches to use `freetype` and `pcre` from cms externals. Option `-mmic` passed to `icc` fortran compiler.

This work began using version 13.1.3 of the Intel compiler, however it lacked sufficient C++11 support to compile CMSSW, and in particular the core framework, used by much of the rest of the code. We switched to version 14.0.0 when it was released, and indeed the C++11 support had improved. We were then stopped by another bug [15], but 369 out of 1106 CMSSW packages do now compile. As the goal here was not necessarily to run full CMS applications, but rather to permit tests with more narrow benchmarks, this is already an interesting software environment.

### 3.3. Experimental Results

Performance tests were run on the Xeon Phi using a toy version of the threaded event processing framework being developed for CMS [20]. The framework uses Intel's Threading Building Blocks library to schedule the running of both events and modules within an event concurrently. The toy framework does not use actual CMS algorithms for the modules but instead emulates the timing and dependencies between the algorithms based on measurements from the full CMS framework. Each module in the toy framework just does a simple numeric integration and continues the integration for as long as the emulated CMS framework module would run. Figure 3 shows the toy framework scales linearly until around 150 threads at which time it plateaus. We believe we understand this behavior based on the Xeon Phi design. Although the Xeon Phi has four hardware threads per core, the documentation states that only two of the threads can run simultaneously. The third and fourth hardware threads are used in the cases where a running thread has a memory access latency. In that case, the hardware can set aside that waiting thread and use the core to process instructions for another hardware thread. Therefore the plateau at 150 can be explained by the fact that the numerical integral work does not require long memory accesses and therefore we can saturate the hardware with less than 3 hardware threads per core.

We also ported to the Xeon Phi a real world C++ application used for the photon energy regression training in the search for Higgs boson decaying to two photons. The application,



**Figure 3.** Toy event processing framework scaling tests on Xeon Phi

based on ROOT and multithread-enabled via OpenMP, is very demanding in terms of CPU: when executed on a 4-way SandyBridge E5-4620, it fully uses the 64 cores (32 real plus 32 in HyperThreading), exceeding 6000% CPU usage as reported by *top*. The porting on the Phi was not straightforward due to the inability to compile on the Phi: the initial ROOT application was using a mixture of compiled libraries, and code compiled on the fly by ROOT using ACLiC. While the libraries were cross-compiled on the host system, the auto-compiled part could not be executed due to the lack of a compilation environment on the Phi itself. We had to revert to fully compiled code, which meant losing some features of the ROOT environment like fast turnaround code changes and debugging. The application was able to spawn up to 243 threads on the Phi, but CPU occupancy, as reported by both *top* and the *micrsmc* tool, never exceeded 20% of the maximum theoretical load. Indeed the total testing time, found to be about 6 hours on the Sandy Bridge, exceeded 24 hours, at which point the process was killed by us; we estimate that it had reached by then around 40% of the application workflow. Further optimisations and specific Phi changes are certainly possible, but the interesting test for us was to check whether the porting of a working multi-threaded application, designed for a standard x86 architecture, would be just a simple recompilation; from this point of view we cannot declare the test successful.

## 4. General Tools Support

### 4.1. IgProf Profiler

When comparing and optimizing for various architectures, understanding the performance obtained in detail is as important as obtaining overall benchmark numbers. For large C++ applications like those used in HEP, we have been using the IgProf [16, 17] profiling and analysis tool. We report that as of version 5.9.10, IgProf itself has initial support for both performance sampling and memory profiling also on ARMv7 processors. There are currently still limitations from ARM stack unwinding as implemented in libunwind, for speed in both modes, and due to crashes in performance profiling mode. The next step will likely be improvements to libunwind, much like those we contributed for similar problems on x86-64.

### 4.2. Distributed MultiThreaded CheckPointing (DMTCP)

In complex computing environments there are a number of use cases for checkpointing the state of a running process to disk and restarting it later. One technology providing this functionality is the Distributed MultiThreaded CheckPointing (DMTCP) package [18]. We have previously described the use cases which are interesting for HEP and reported results [19] for the use of checkpoint-restart for HEP applications on x86-64 and on the Xeon Phi. From version 2.0.1, we

can now also report that DMTCP functions for HEP applications on ARMv7.

## 5. Conclusions

We report here on our evolving series of tests with the ARMv7 processor. Single core performance is much lower for ARMv7 than x86-64, however the performance per watt is much better for the ARMv7 processors. Here the potential for use in scientific (general purpose) computing is clear. As part of this work, we can also report successful ports of both the IgProf profiler and the DMTCP checkpointing package to ARMv7. We also report on our work to create a software development environment to facilitate basic tests and benchmarking on the Xeon Phi. We now have a reasonable software environment and report on a couple of initial tests, however the potential for use in general HEP computing is not yet clear.

## Acknowledgments

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