

Viaggio al centro del protone

Alessandro Bacchetta

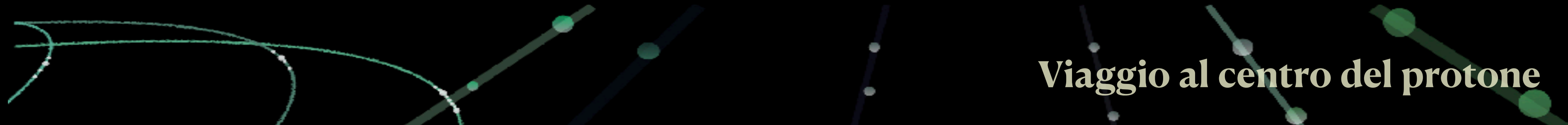
Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Pavia

Introduzione



“[...] Esplorare in modo chiaro e comprensibile il mondo della scienza e della ricerca nei suoi vari aspetti.

Il titolo “QUARK” è un po’ curioso e l’abbiamo preso in prestito dalla fisica, dove molti studi sono in corso su ipotetiche particelle subnucleari, chiamate appunto “quarks”, che sarebbero i più piccoli mattoni della materia finora conosciuti. È quindi un po’ un andare dentro alle cose.”

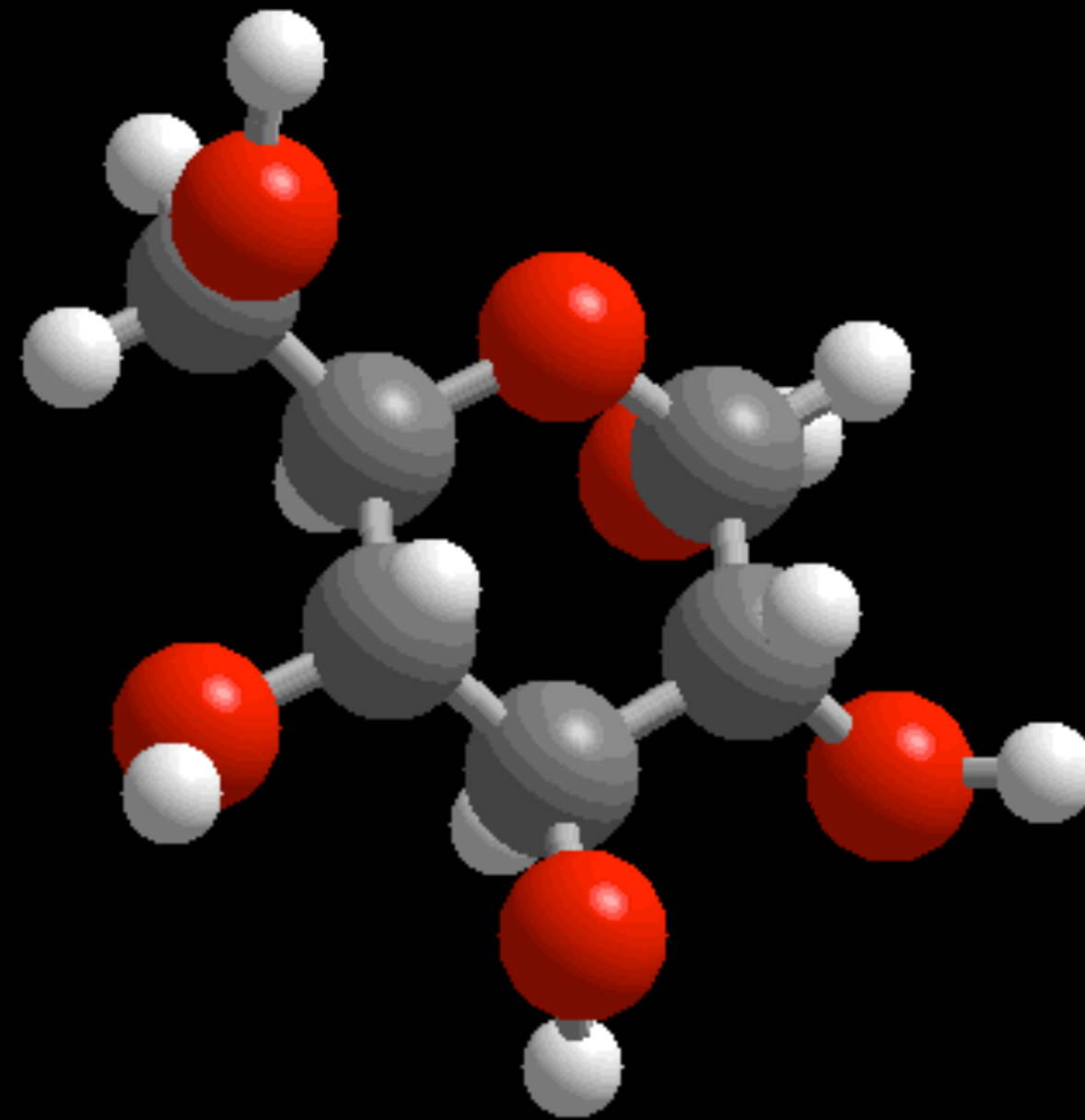


**Granello di sabbia
(Ministruttura)**

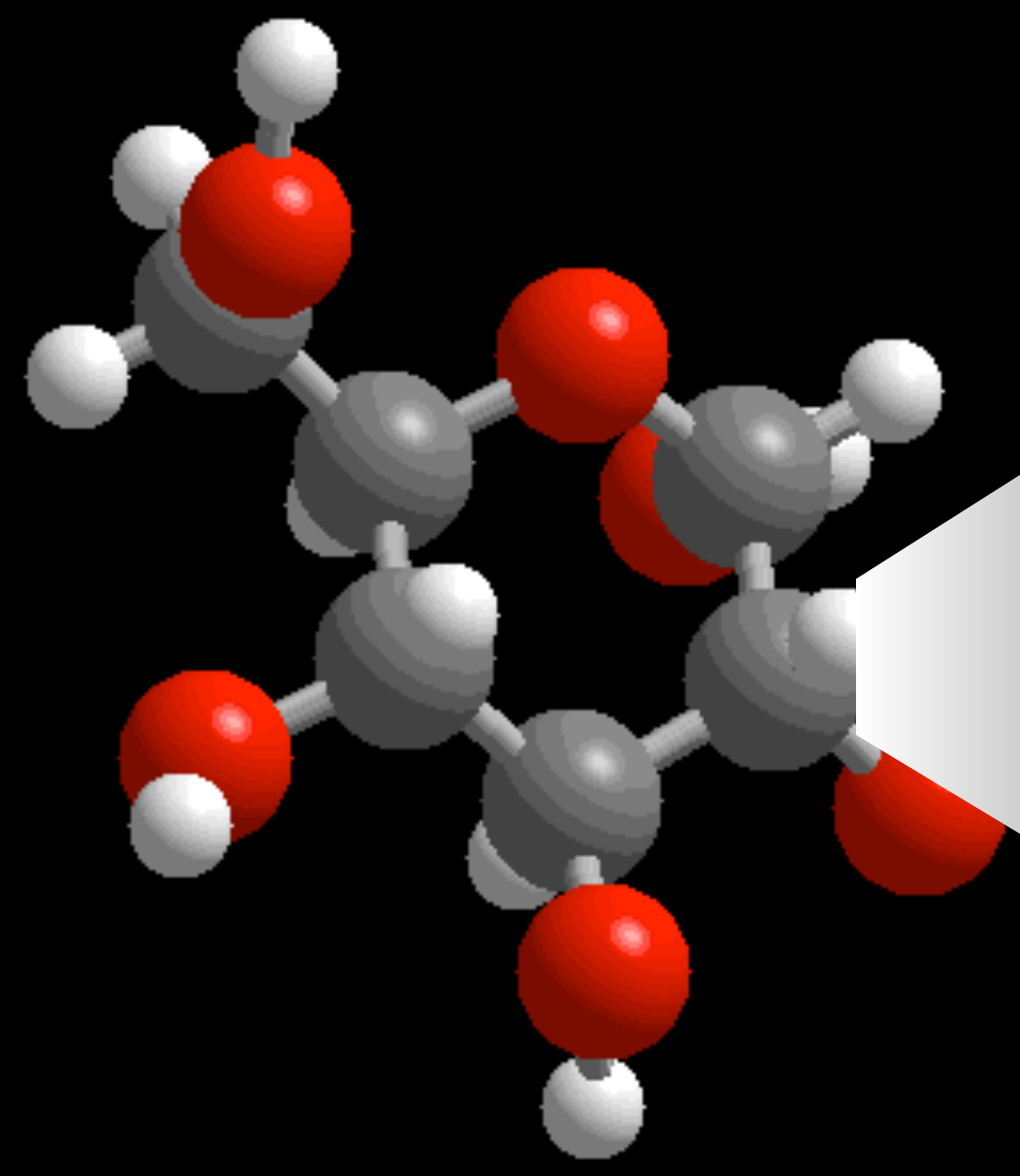


10^{-3} m

Glucosio (Nanostruttura)



10^{-9} m



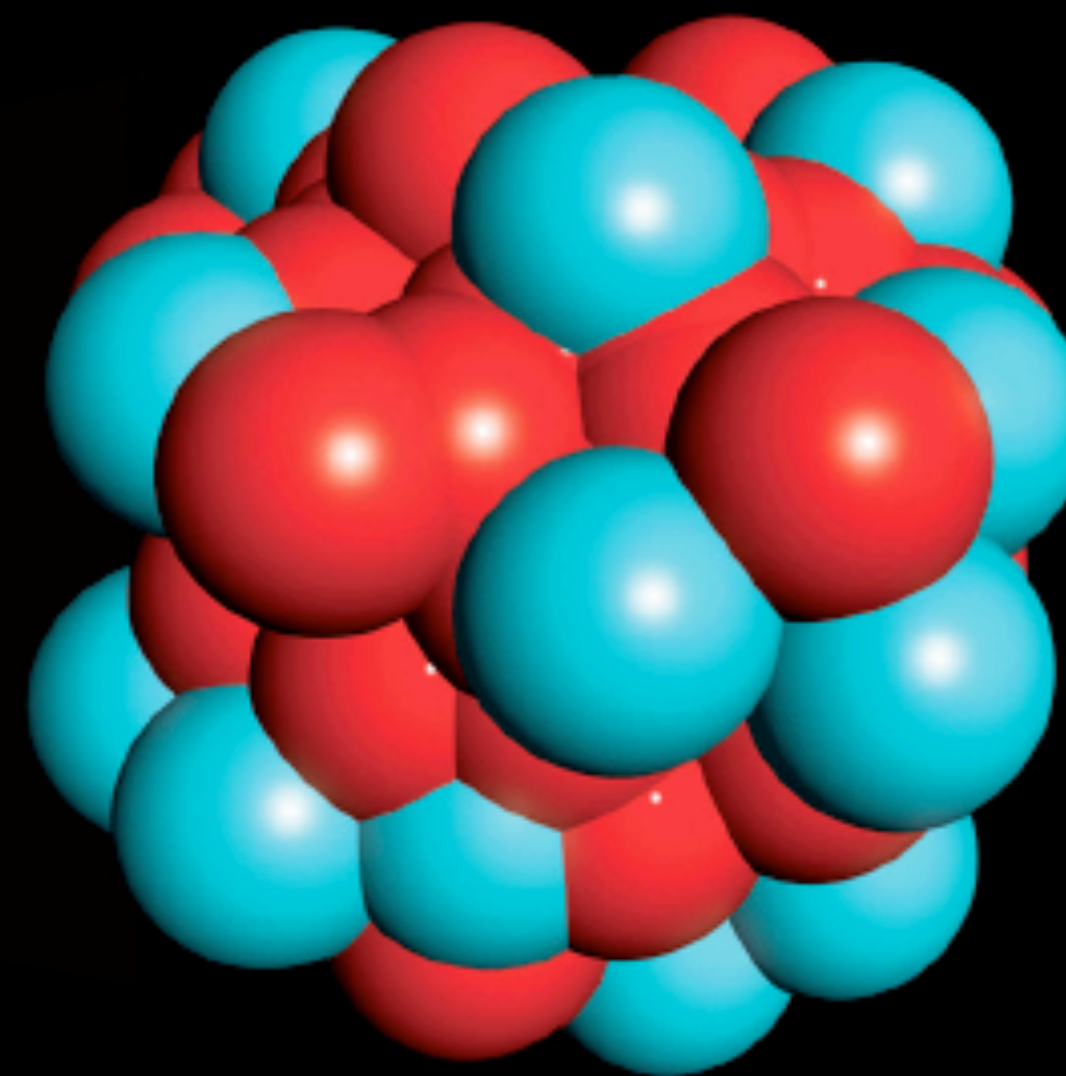
elettroni



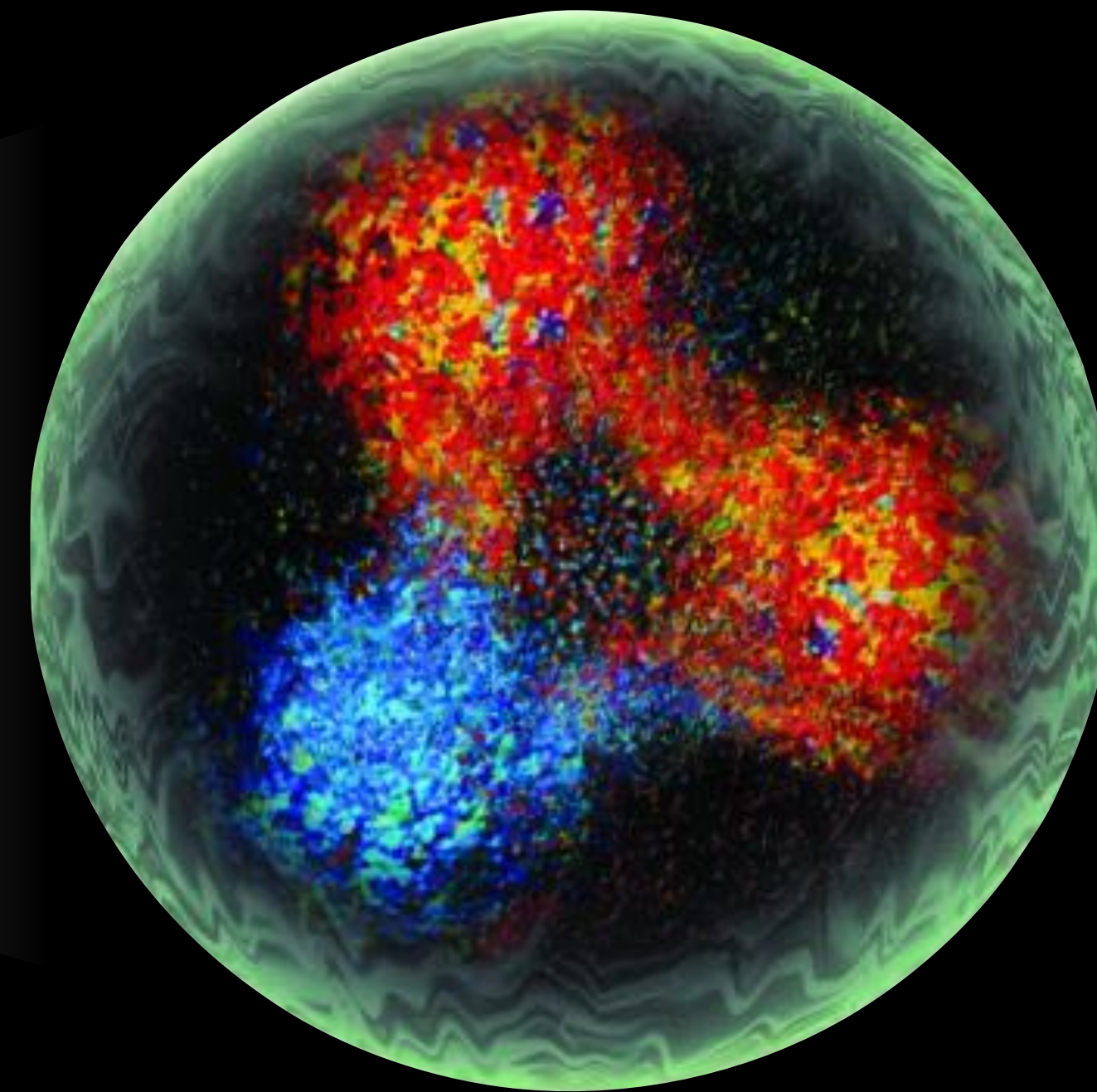
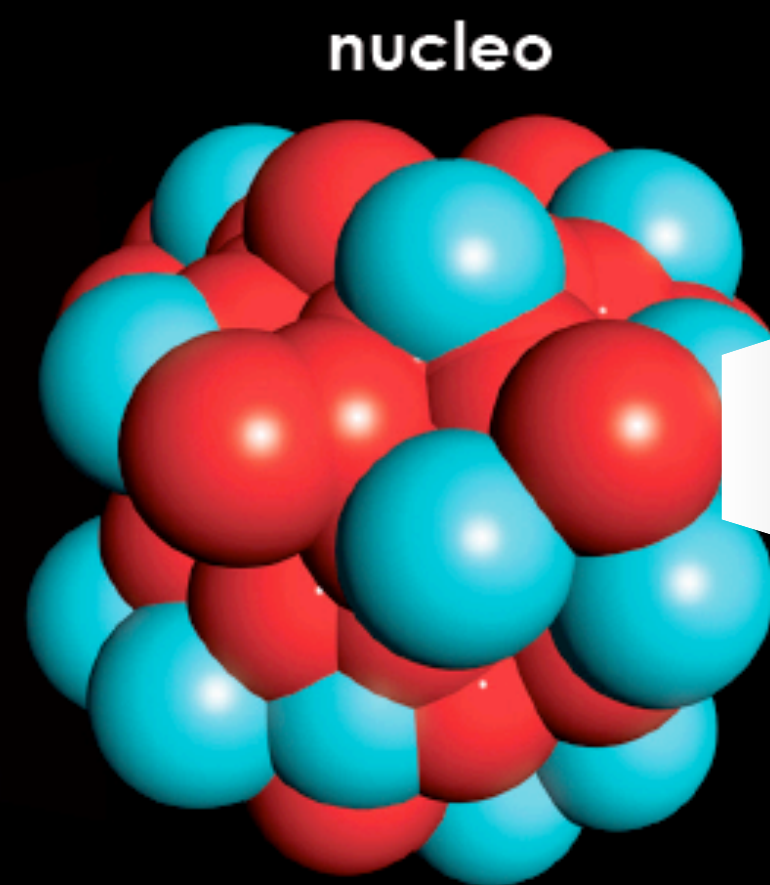
elettroni



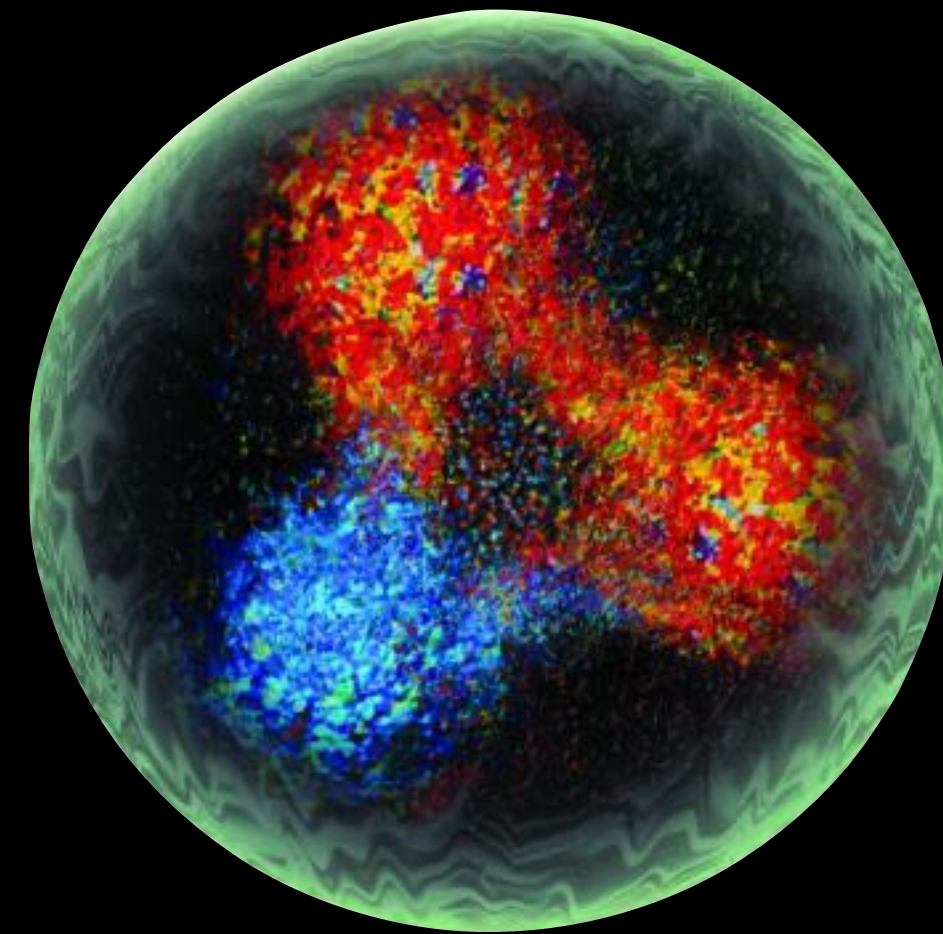
nucleo



quark e gluoni



Protone (Femtostruttura)

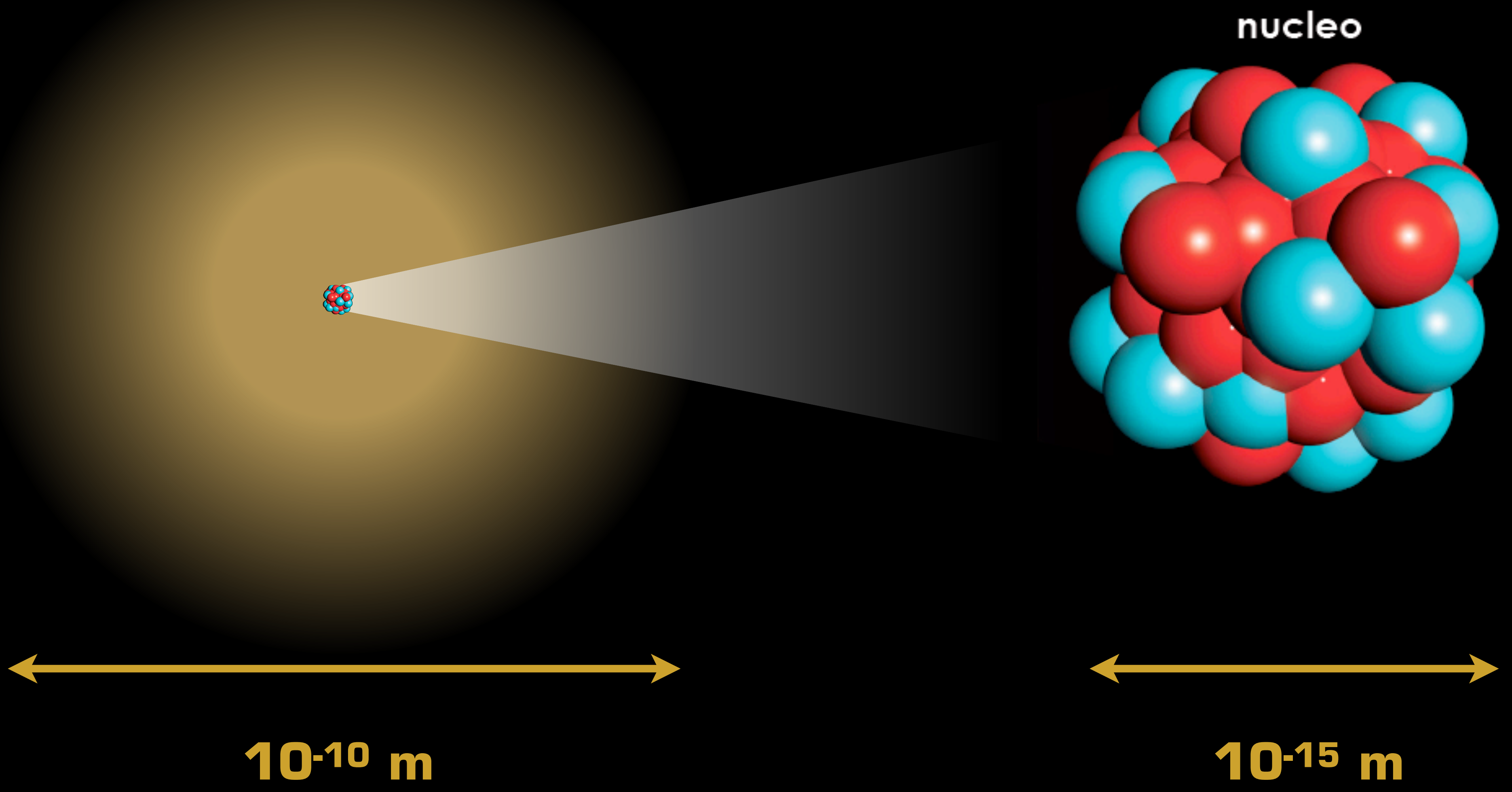


10^{-15} m

Elettrone (Zeptostruttura?)



10^{-21} m



Fisica nucleare

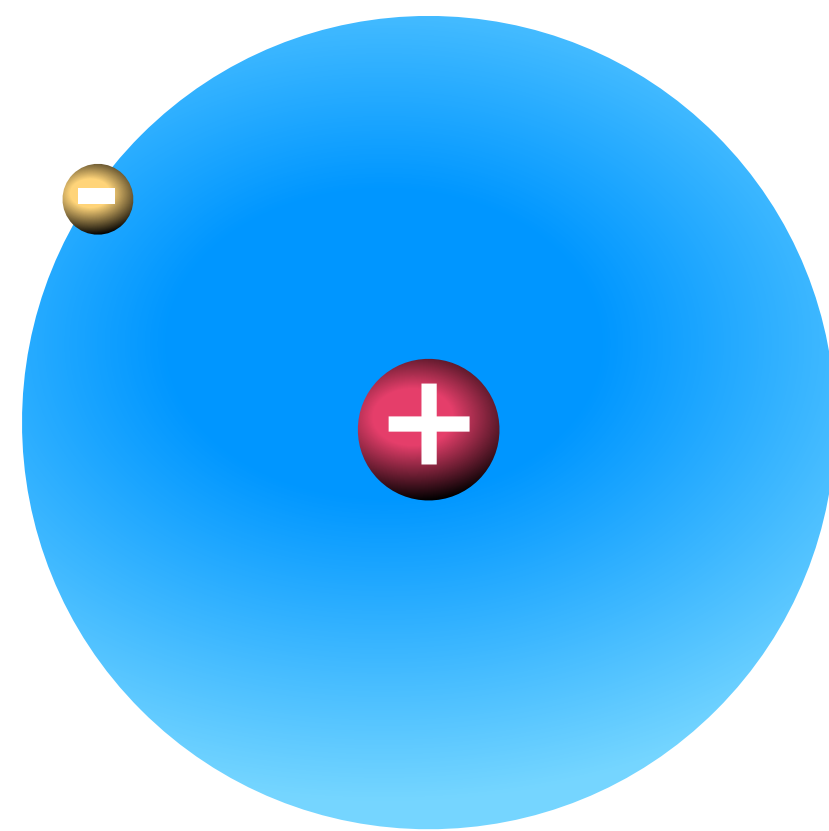
IL NEUTRONE E GLI ISOTOPI

Il neutrone venne scoperto da Chadwick nel 1932

 elettrone

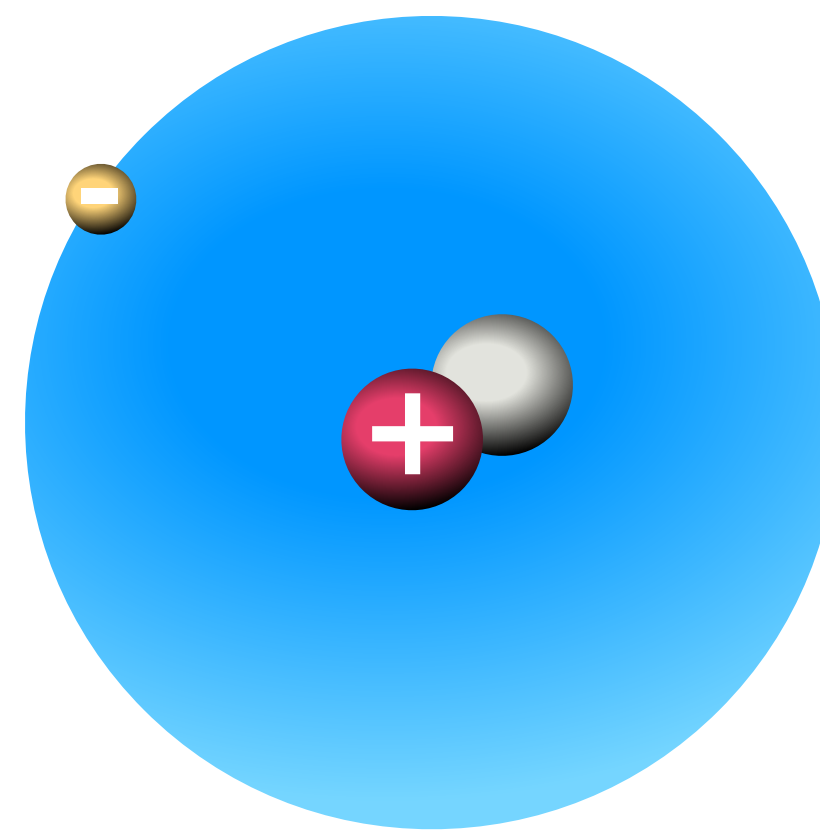
 protone

 neutrone



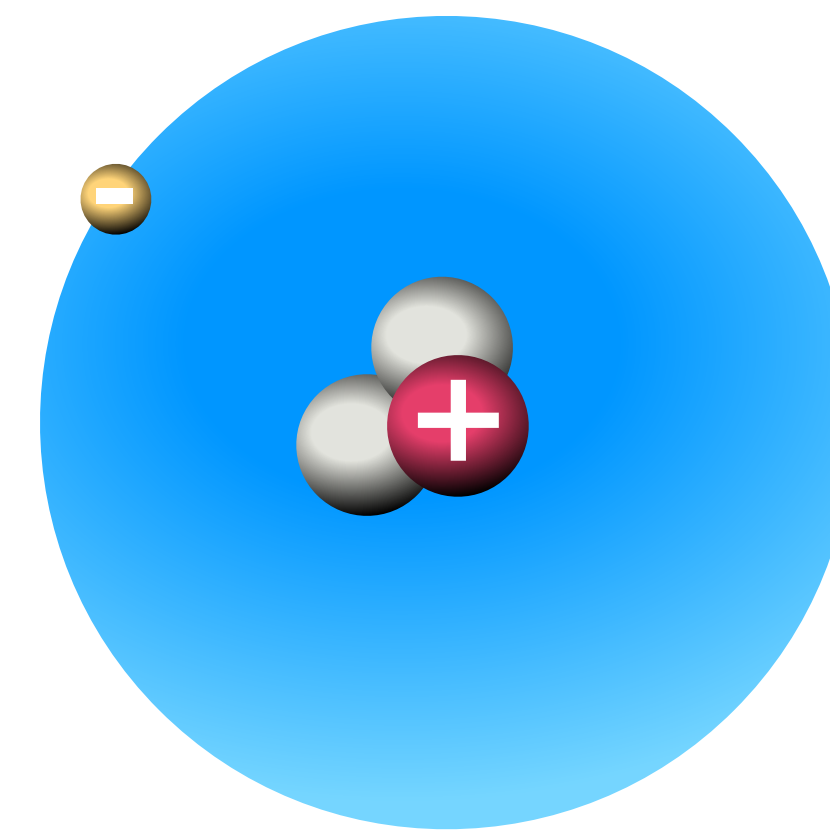
1_1H

idrogeno



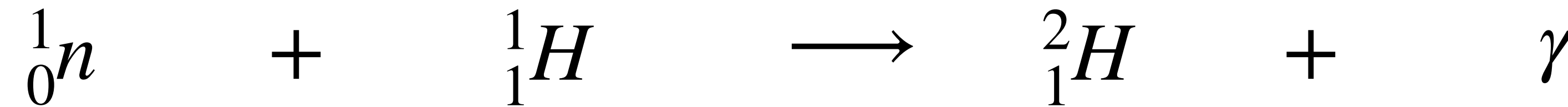
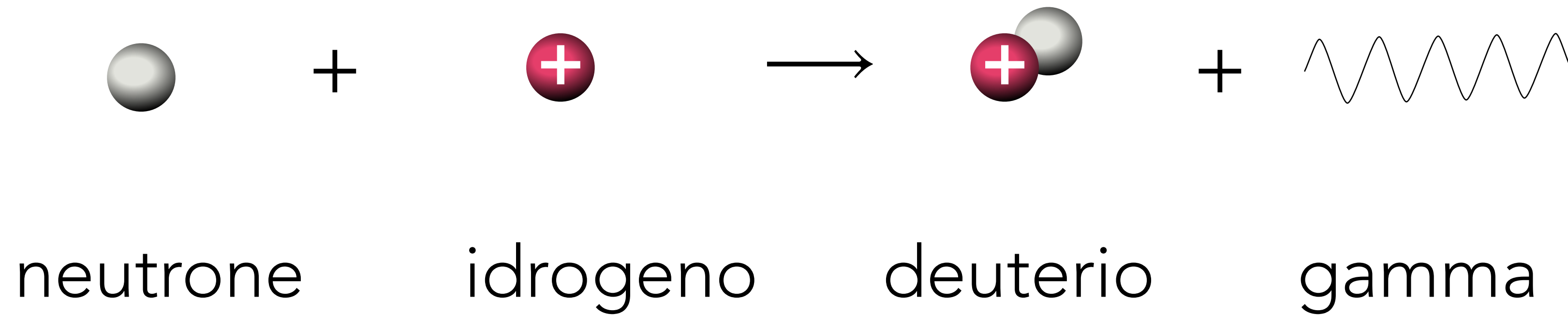
2_1H

deuterio



3_1H

trizio



$$E = mc^2$$

Massa del neutrone: 939.6 MeV

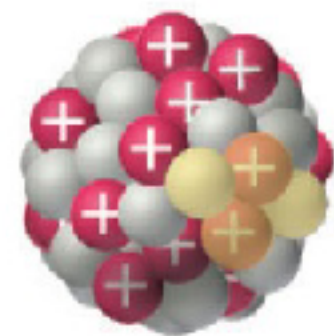
Massa del protone: 938.3 MeV

Massa del deuterio: 1875.7 MeV

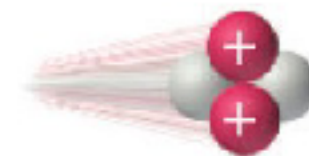
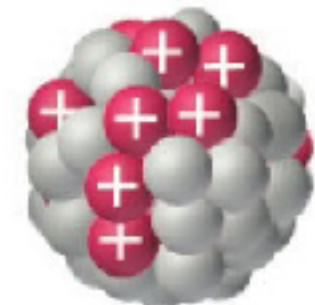
Differenza di massa: 2.2 MeV

LA RADIOATTIVITÀ NATURALE

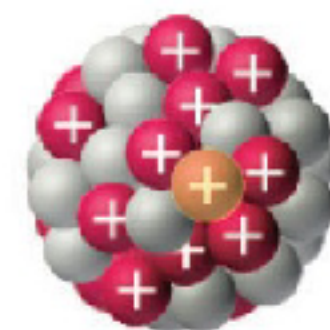
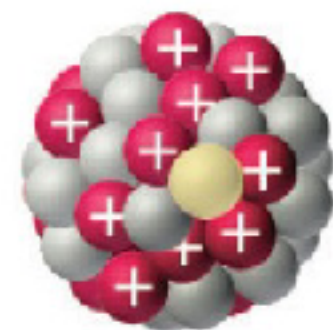
nucleo padre



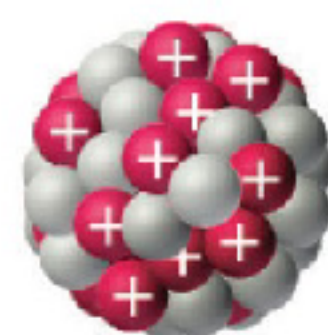
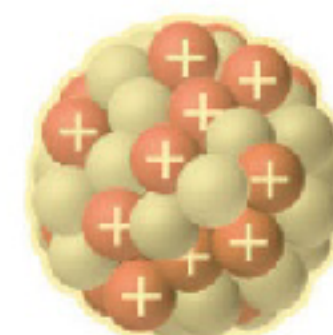
nucleo figlio



particella alfa

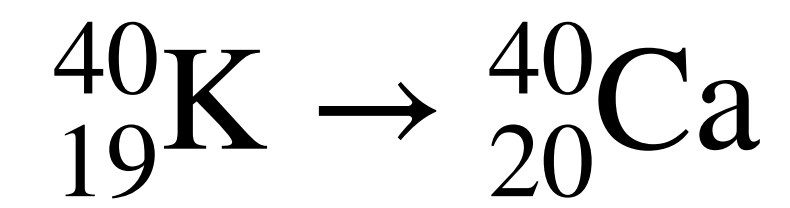
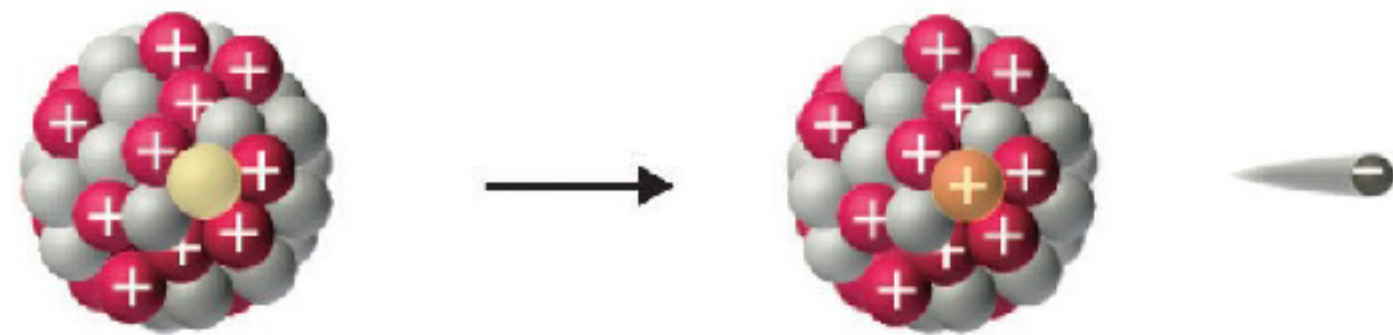
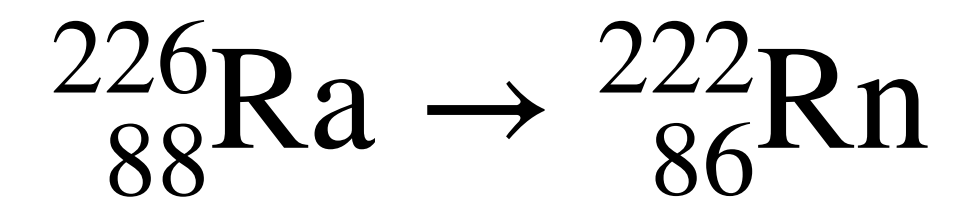
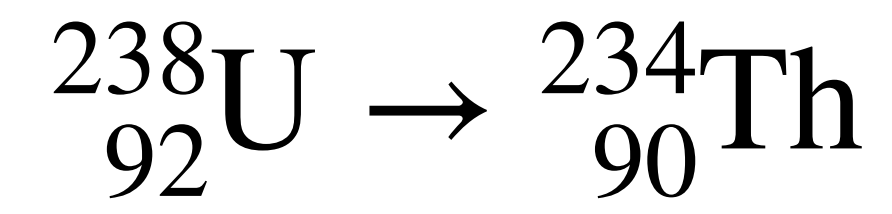
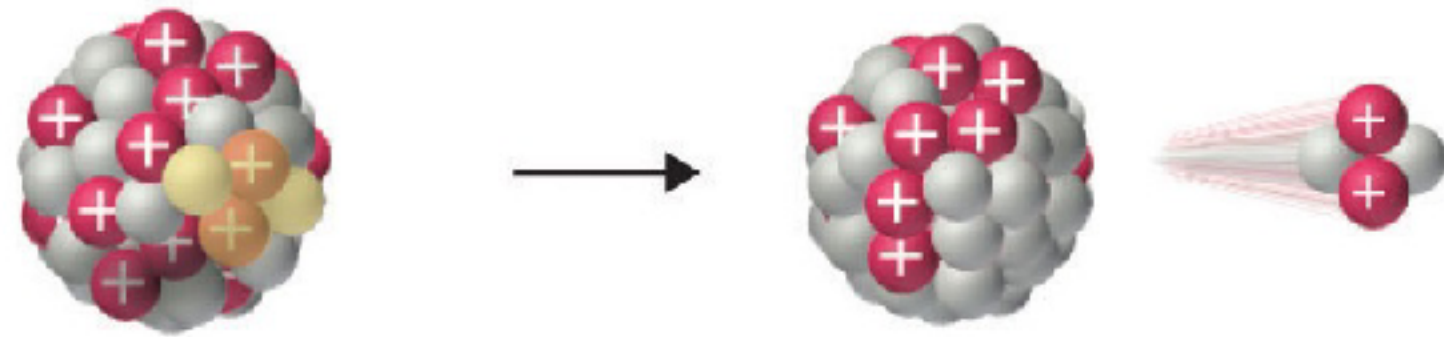


particella beta



particella gamma

ESEMPI

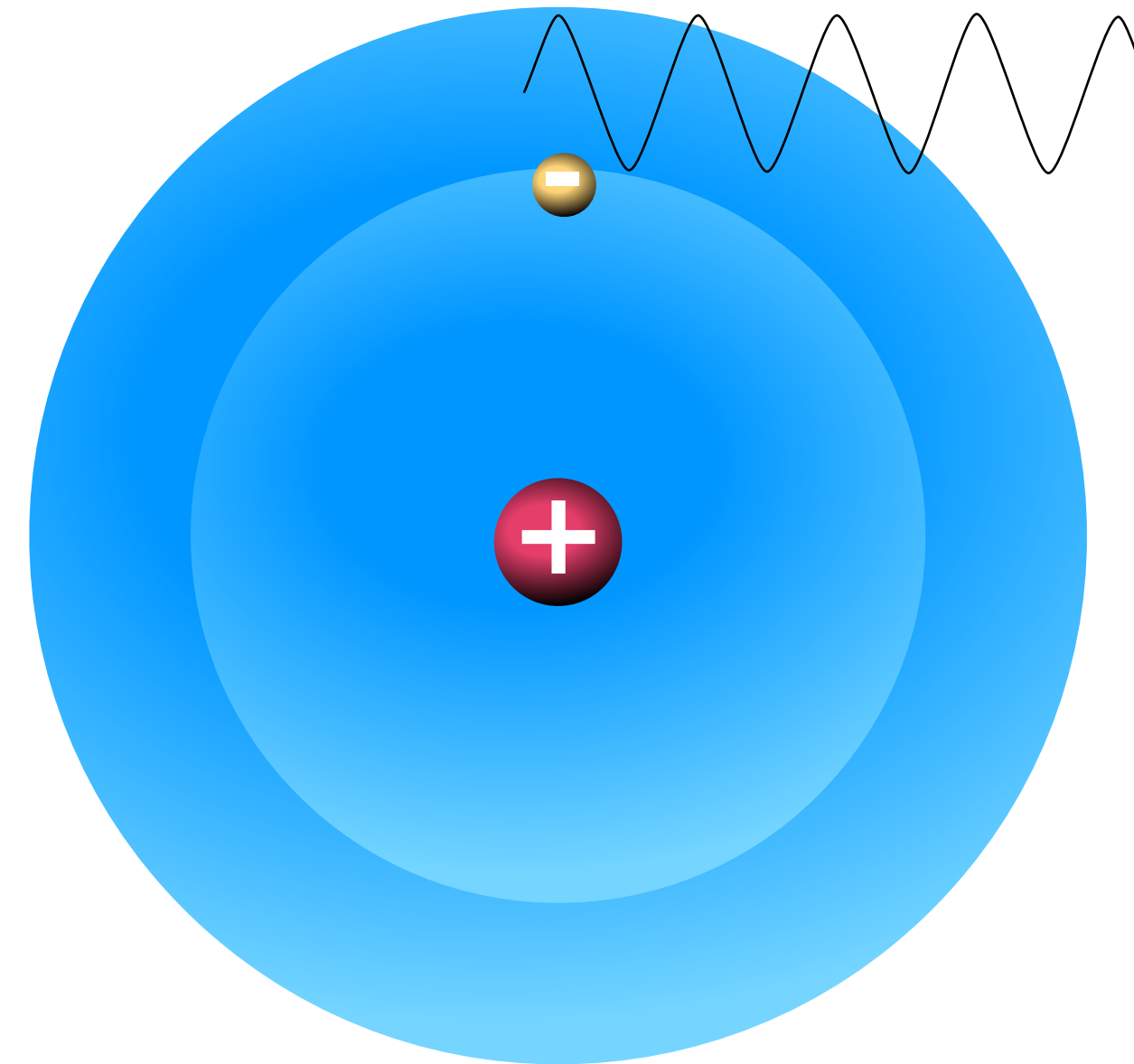


ATOMI E FOTONI

● elettrone

⊕ protone

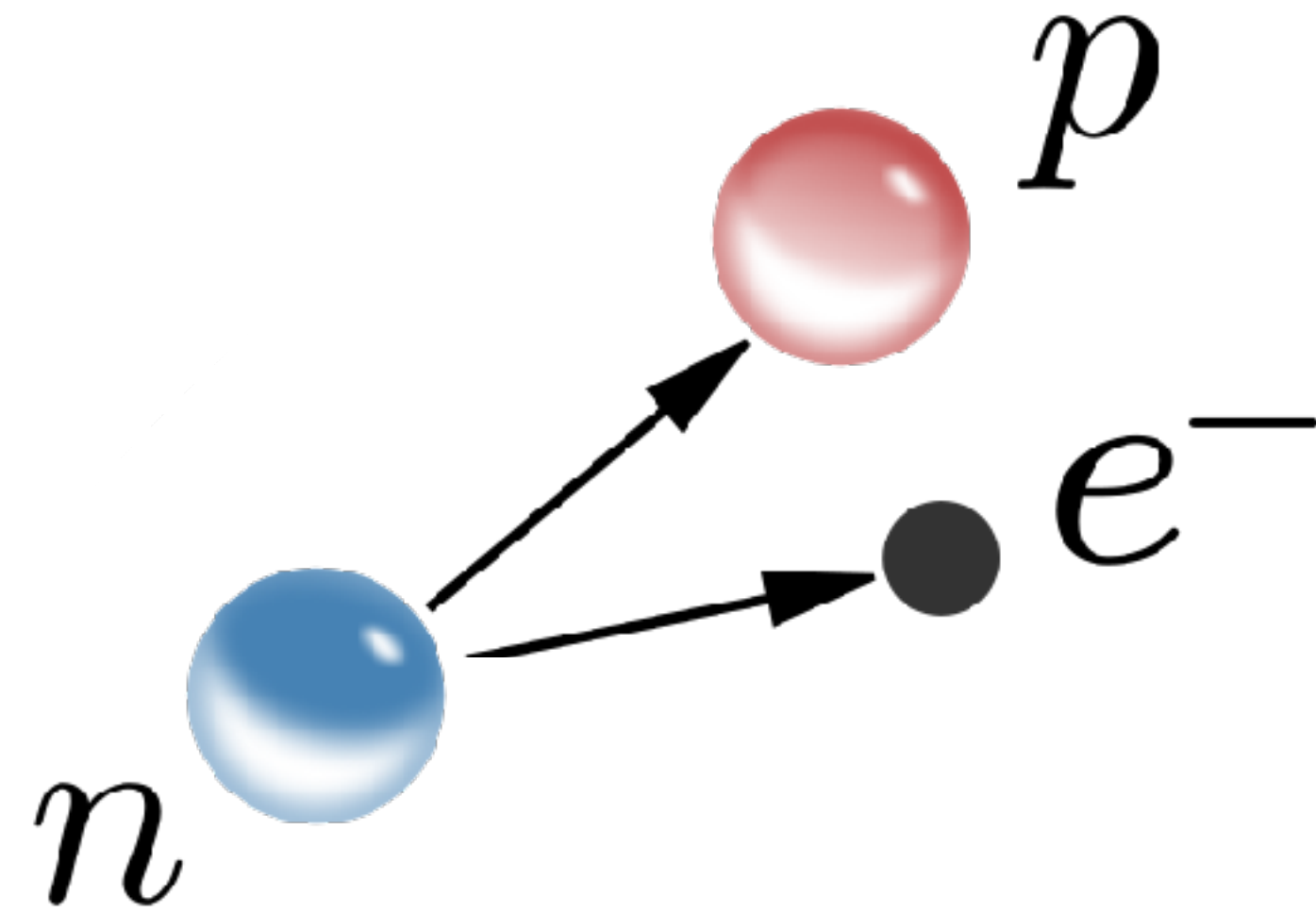
☞ fotone



idrogeno

La radiazione gamma nei nuclei si comporta in maniera simile

IL PROBLEMA DEL DECADIMENTO BETA E FERMI



Massa del neutrone: 939.6 MeV

Massa del protone: 938.3 MeV

Massa dell'elettrone: 0.5 MeV

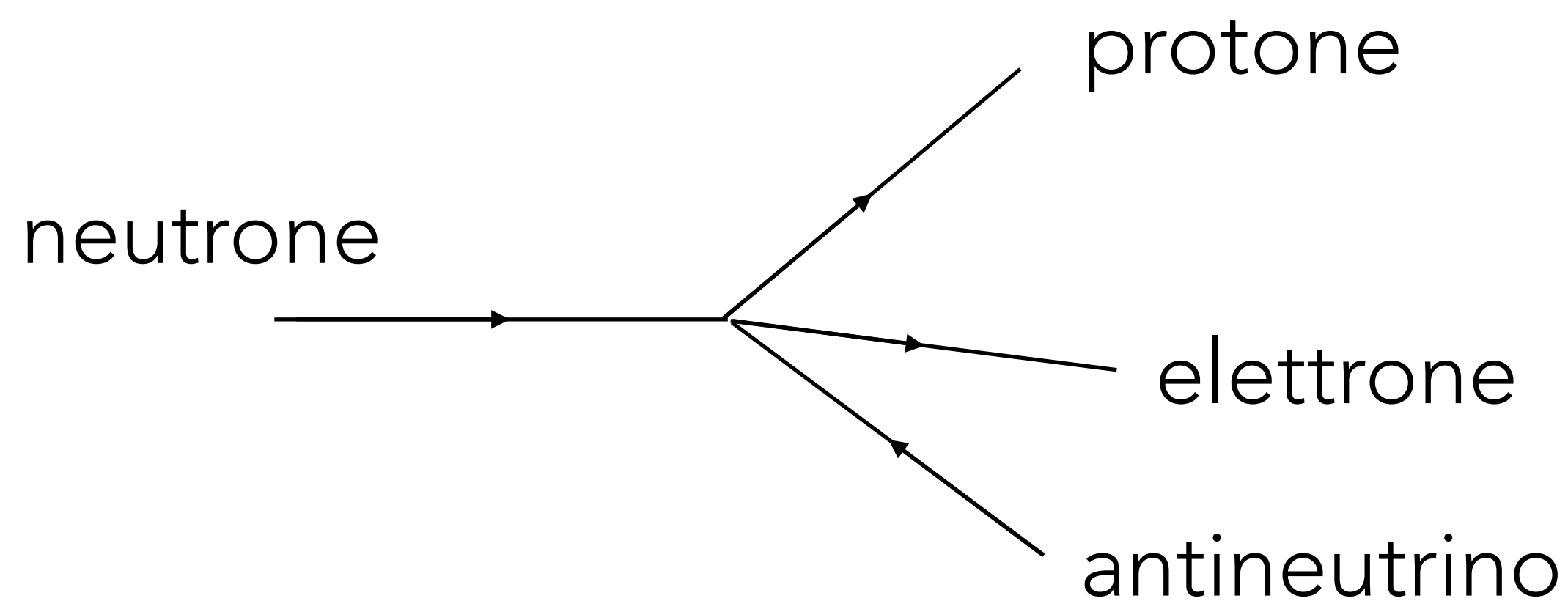
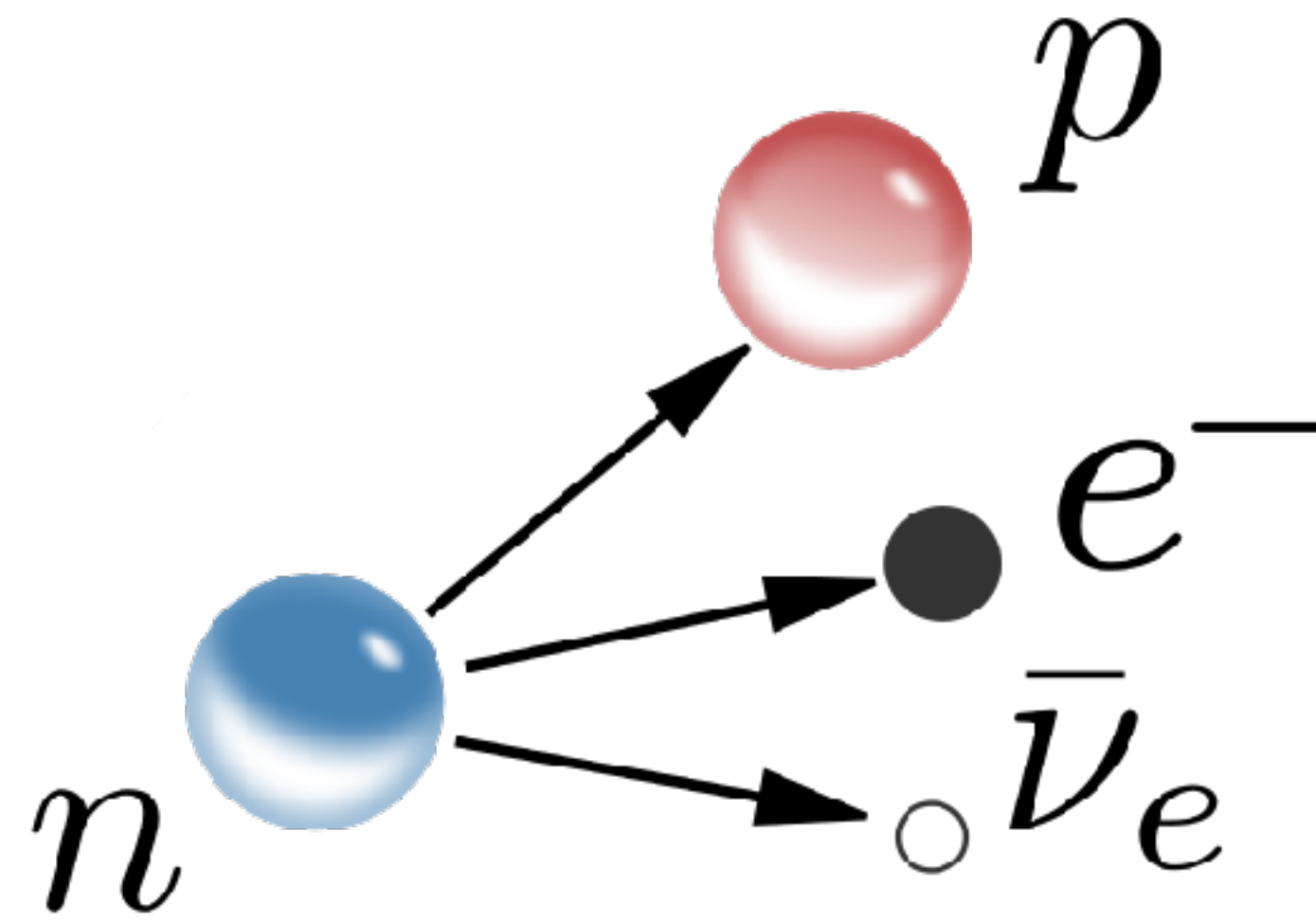
Differenza di massa: 0.8 MeV

L'energia finale dell'elettrone non tornava con i calcoli!

Pauli postula l'esistenza di una nuova particella, che Amaldi e Fermi battezzarono "neutrino"

LA TEORIA DEL DECADIMENTO BETA

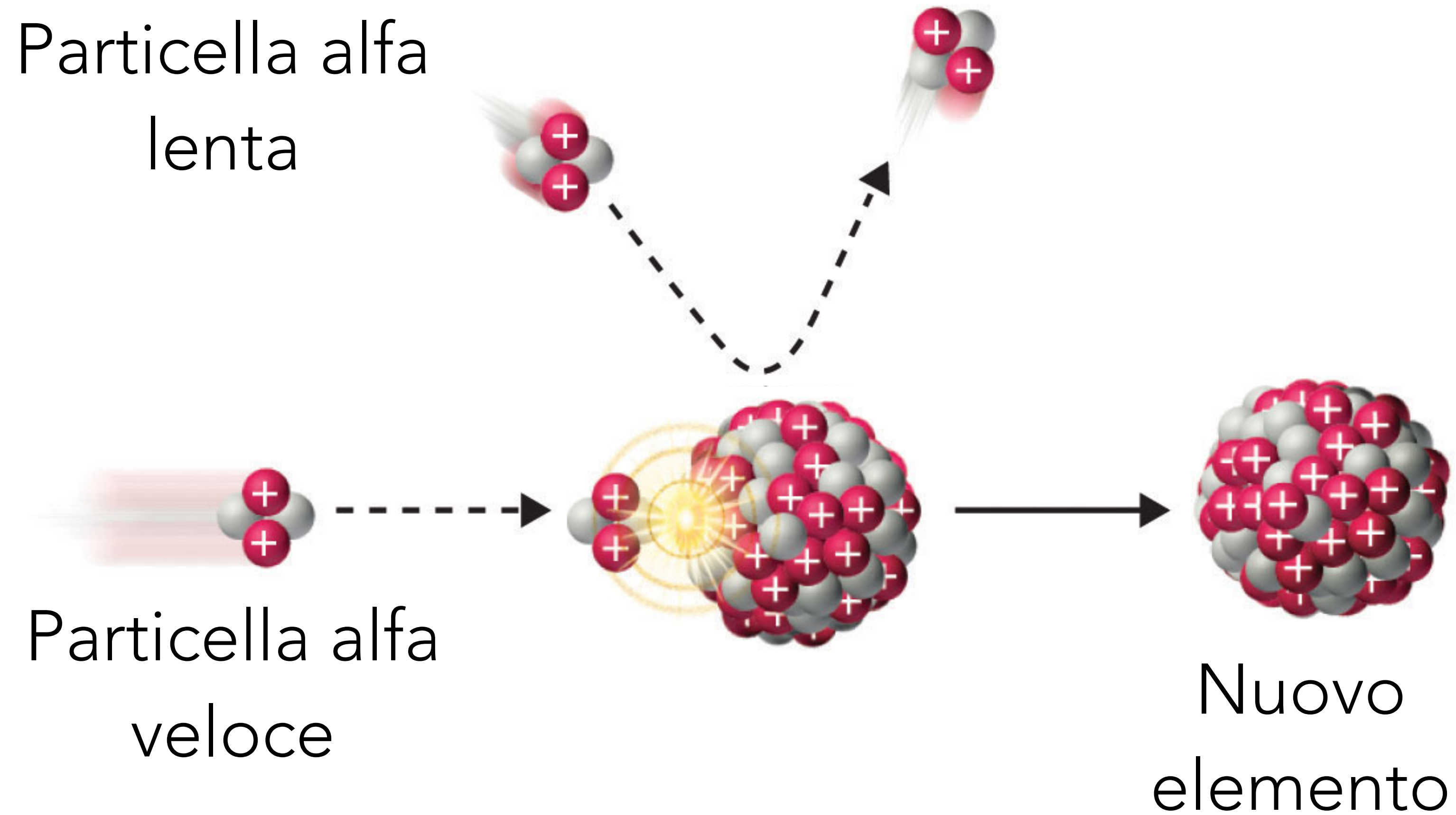
1933



Il decadimento del neutrone è dovuto alla "forza debole", la cui intensità è misurata dalla costante di Fermi.

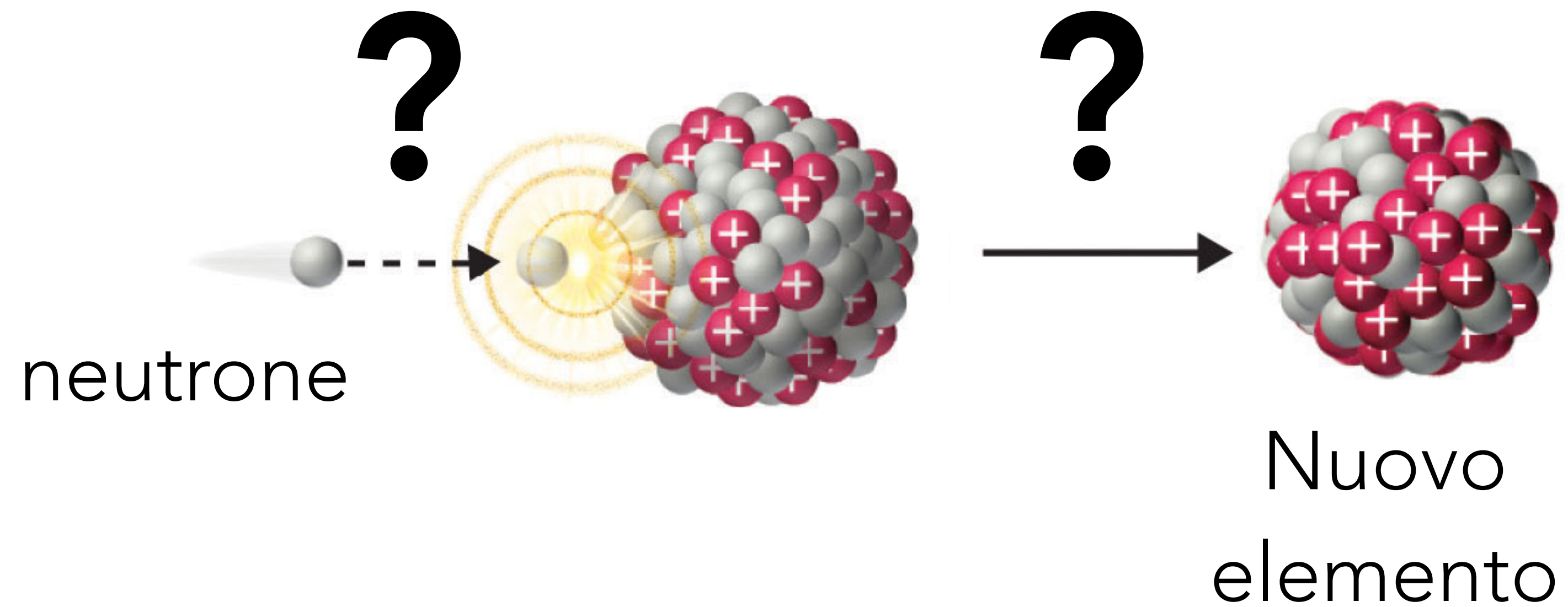
RADIOATTIVITÀ ARTIFICIALE

Nel 1934 Irène Joliot-Curie e suo marito Frédéric avevano reso radioattivi elementi che non lo erano



RADIOATTIVITÀ ARTIFICIALE

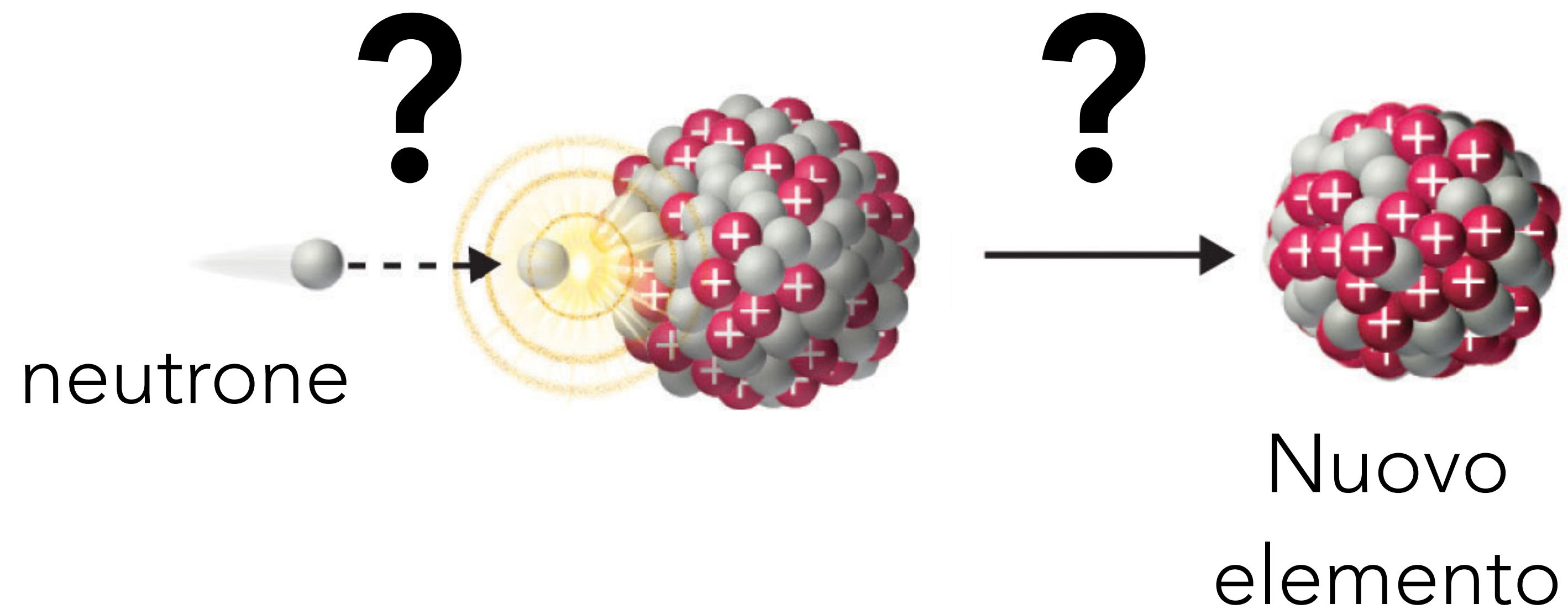
Fermi pensa di bombardare i nuclei con neutroni,
invece che con particelle alfa





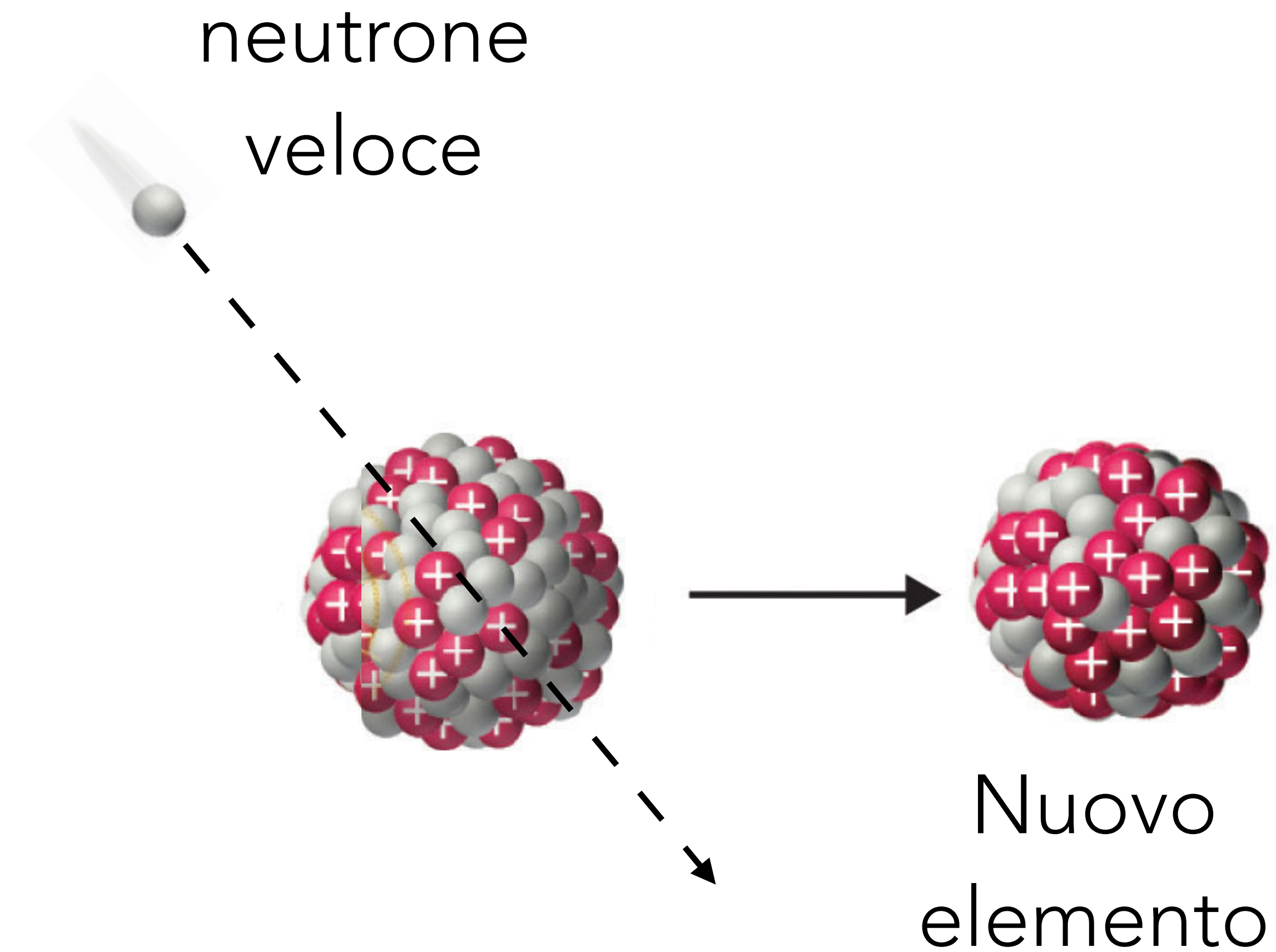
LA SCOPERTA DEI "NEUTRONI LENTI"

L'intensità e il tipo di radioattività indotta sembravano variare da un tentativo all'altro e soprattutto sembravano dipendere dal tavolo dove si svolgeva l'esperimento.



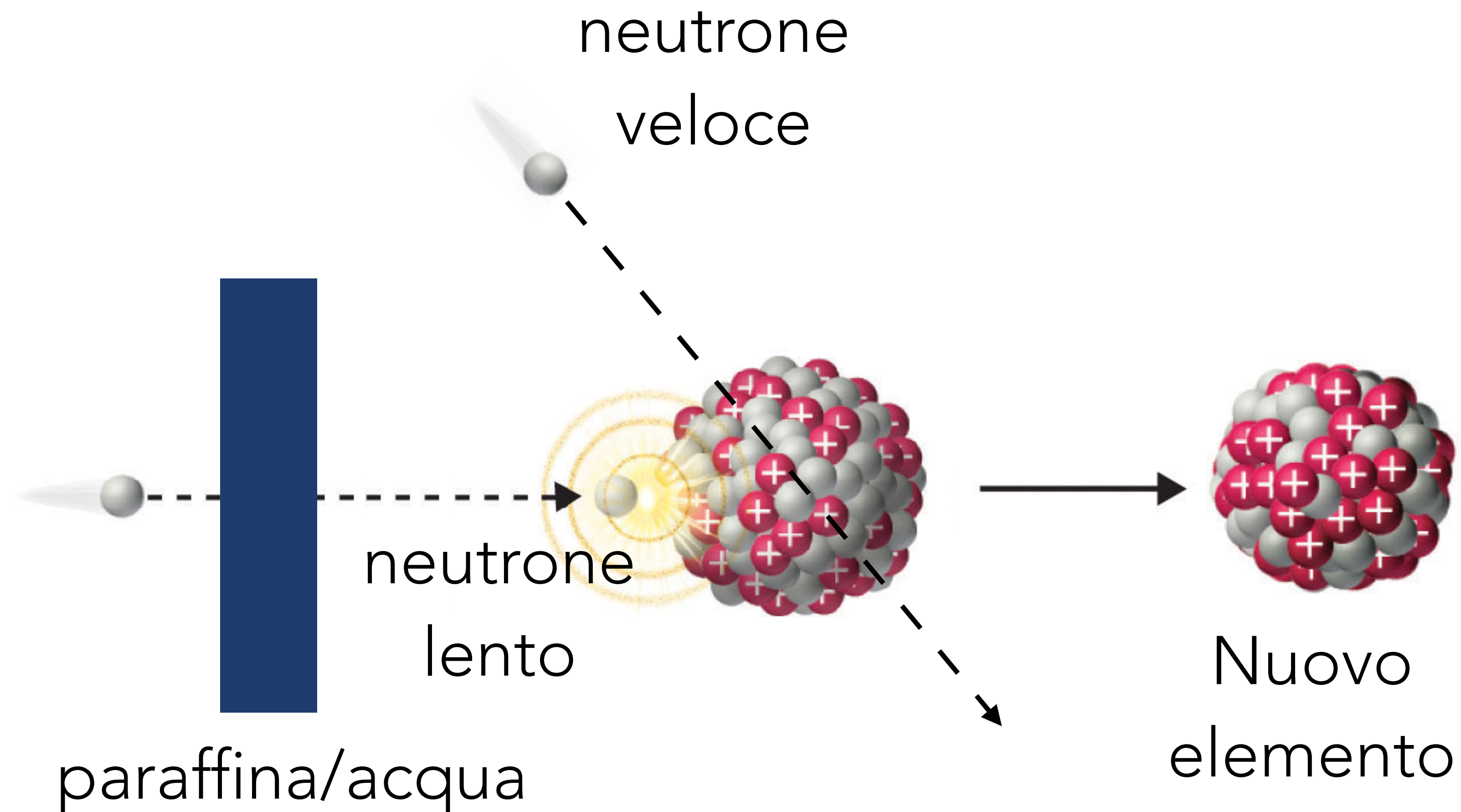
LA SCOPERTA DEI "NEUTRONI LENTI"

«No quello che voglio qui non è un pezzo di piombo, ma uno di paraffina!»



LA SCOPERTA DEI "NEUTRONI LENTI"

«No quello che voglio qui non è un pezzo di piombo, ma uno di paraffina!»





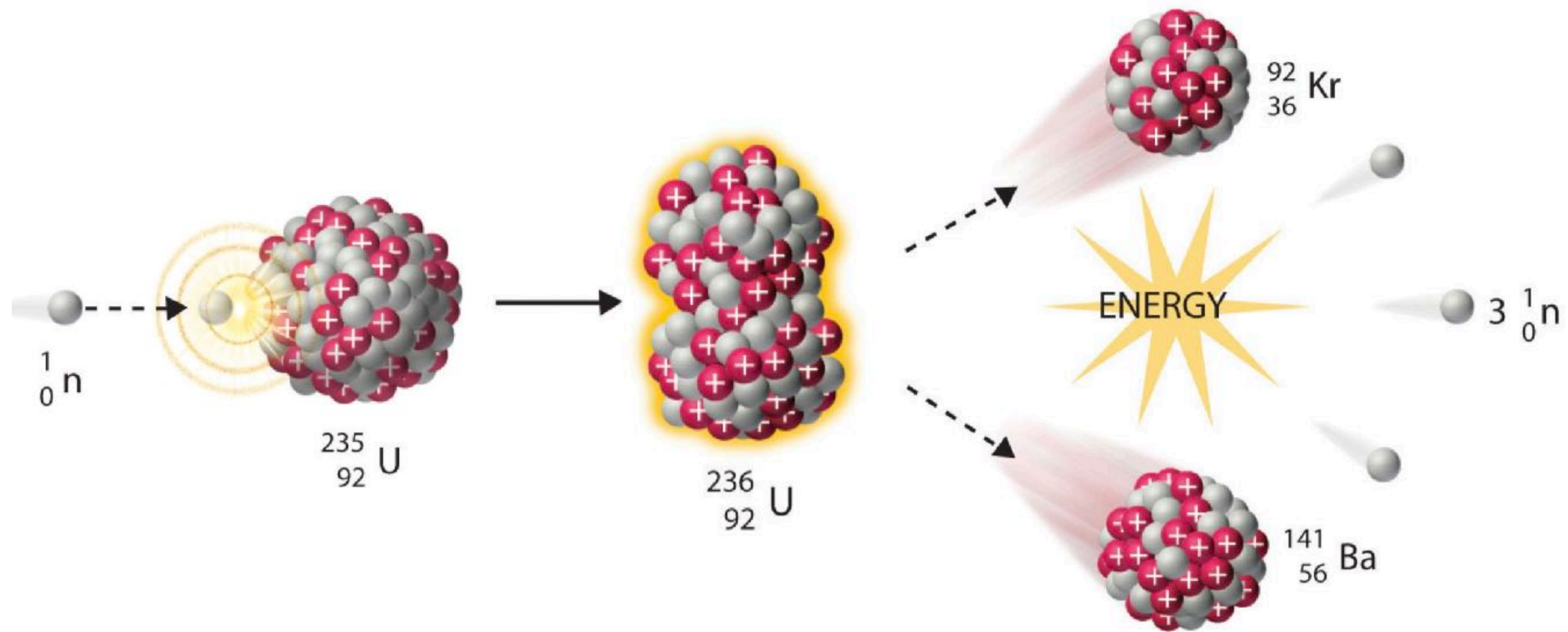
Rai

TAVOLA PERIODICA DEGLI ELEMENTI

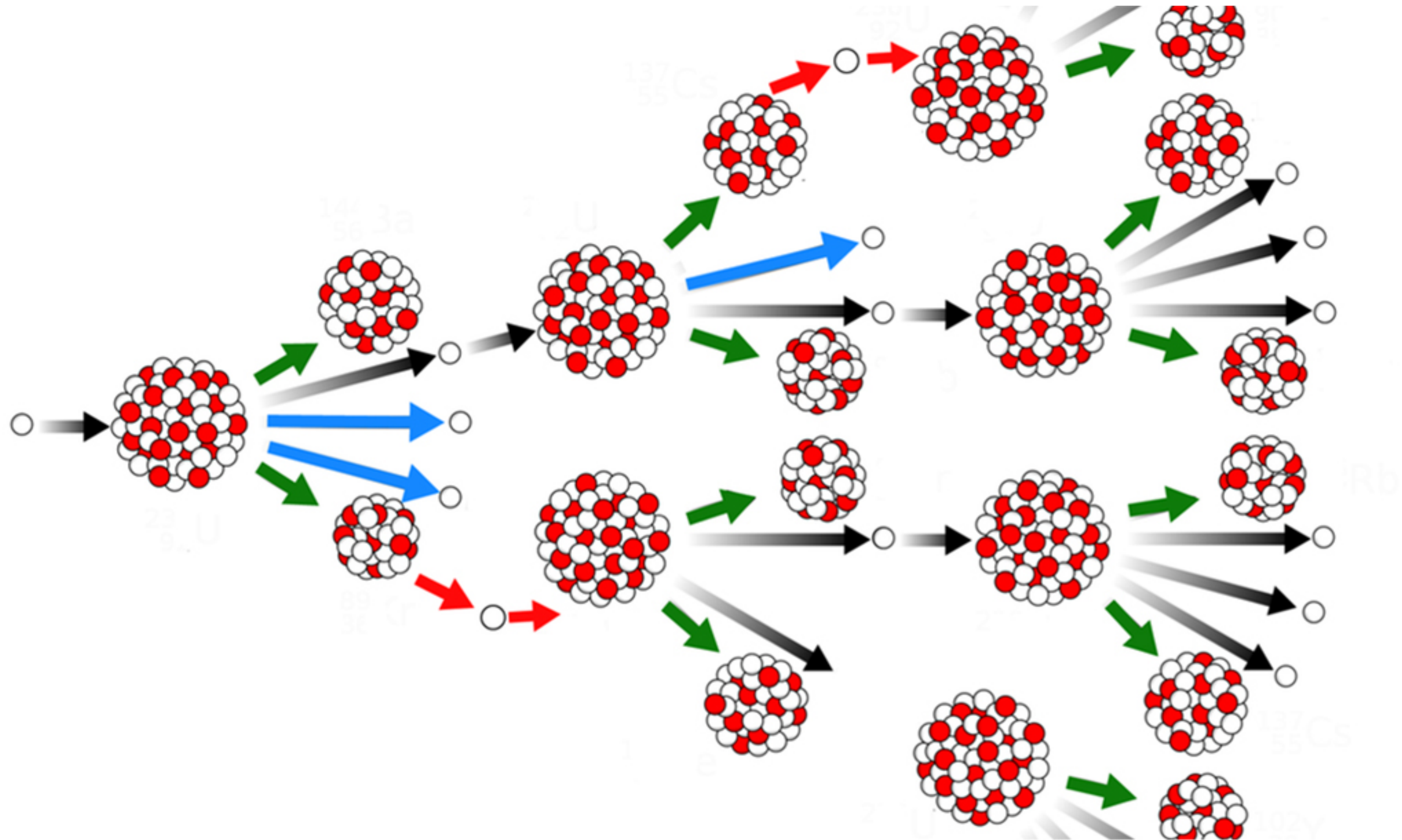
GRUPPO 1	GRUPPO 2	GRUPPO 3-12										GRUPPO 13	GRUPPO 14	GRUPPO 15	GRUPPO 16	GRUPPO 17	GRUPPO 18		
1,008 1 H Idrogeno 2.1 ±1 1s ¹	6,941 3 Li Litio 1.0 1 1s ² 2s ¹	9,012 4 Be Berillio 1.5 2 1s ² 2s ²	44,956 21 Sc Scandio 1.3 3 (Ar)3d ¹ 4s ²	47,867 22 Ti Titanio 1.5 4,3 (Ar)3d ² 4s ²	50,942 23 V Vanadio 1.6 5,4,3,2 (Ar)3d ³ 4s ²	51,996 24 Cr Cromo 1.6 6,3,2 (Ar)3d ⁵ 4s ¹	54,938 25 Mn Manganese 1.5 7,6,4,2,3 (Ar)3d ⁵ 4s ²	55,845 26 Fe Ferro 1.8 2,3 (Ar)3d ⁶ 4s ²	58,933 27 Co Cobalto 1.8 2,3 (Ar)3d ⁷ 4s ²	58,993 28 Ni Nichel 1.8 2,3 (Ar)3d ⁸ 4s ²	63,546 29 Cu Rame 1.9 2,1 (Ar)3d ¹⁰ 4s ¹	65,409 30 Zn Zinco 1.6 2 (Ar)3d ¹⁰ 4s ²	10,811 5 B Boro 2.0 3 1s ² 2s ² 2p ¹	12,011 6 C Carbonio 2.5 ±4,2 1s ² 2s ² 2p ²	14,007 7 N Azoto 3.0 ±3,5,4,2,1 1s ² 2s ² 2p ³	15,999 8 O Ossigeno 3.5 -2,-1 1s ² 2s ² 2p ⁴	18,998 9 F Fluoro 4.0 -1 1s ² 2s ² 2p ⁵	20,180 10 Ne Neon - 1s ² 2s ² 2p ⁶	
22,990 11 Na Sodio 0.9 1 (Ne)3s ¹	24,305 12 Mg Magnesio 1.2 2 (Ne)3s ²	39,098 19 K Potassio 0.8 1 (Ar)4s ¹	40,078 20 Ca Calcio 1.0 2 (Ar)4s ²	88,906 39 Y Ittrio 1.3 3 (Kr)4d ¹ 5s ²	91,224 40 Zr Zirconio 1.4 4 (Kr)4d ² 5s ²	92,906 41 Nb Niobio 1.6 5,3,4 (Kr)4d ⁴ 5s ¹	95,94 42 Mo Molibdeno 1.8 6,5,4,3,2 (Kr)4d ⁵ 5s ¹	(98) 43 Tc** Tecnezio 1.9 7 (Kr)4d ⁵ 5s ²	101,07 44 Ru Rutenio 2.2 2,3,4,6,8 (Kr)4d ⁷ 5s ¹	102,906 45 Rh Rodio 2.2 2,3,4 (Kr)4d ⁸ 5s ¹	106,42 46 Pd Palladio 2.2 2,4 (Kr)4d ¹⁰	107,868 47 Ag Argento 1.9 1 (Kr)4d ¹⁰ 5s ¹	112,41 48 Cd Cadmio 1.7 2 (Kr)4d ¹⁰ 5s ²	69,723 31 Ga Gallio 1.6 3 (Zn)4p ¹	72,64 32 Ge Germanio 1.8 4 (Zn)4p ²	74,922 33 As Arsenico 2.0 ±3,5 (Zn)4p ³	78,96 34 Se Selenio 2.4 6,4,-2 (Zn)4p ⁴	79,904 35 Br Bromo 2.8 ±1,3,5 (Zn)4p ⁵	83,798 36 Kr Krypton - (Zn)4p ⁶
85,468 37 Rb Rubidio 0.8 1 (Kr)5s ¹	87,62 38 Sr Stronzio 1.0 2 (Kr)5s ²	132,905 55 Cs Cesio 0.7 1 (Xe)6s ¹	137,327 56 Ba Bario 0.9 2 (Xe)6s ²	174,967 71 Lu Lutezio 1.2 3 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ¹ 6s ²	178,49 72 Hf Afnio 1.3 4 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ² 6s ²	180,948 73 Ta Tantalio 1.5 5,4 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ³ 6s ²	183,84 74 W Tungsteno 1.7 6,5,4,3,2 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁴ 6s ²	186,21 75 Re Renio 1.9 -1,7,6,4,2 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁵ 6s ²	190,23 76 Os Osmio 2.2 2,3,4,6,8 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁶ 6s ²	192,217 77 Ir Iridio 2,2 2,3,4,6 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁷ 6s ²	195,078 78 Pt Platino 2,2 2,4 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁸ 6s ²	196,967 79 Au Oro 2,4 3,1 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ¹⁰ 6s ¹	200,59 80 Hg Mercurio 1,9 2,1 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ¹⁰ 6s ²	69,723 31 Ga Gallio 1.6 3 (Zn)4p ¹	72,64 32 Ge Germanio 1.8 4 (Zn)4p ²	74,922 33 As Arsenico 2.0 ±3,5 (Zn)4p ³	78,96 34 Se Selenio 2.4 6,4,-2 (Zn)4p ⁴	79,904 35 Br Bromo 2.8 ±1,3,5 (Zn)4p ⁵	83,798 36 Kr Krypton - (Zn)4p ⁶
(223) 87 Fr* Francio 0.7 1 (Rn)7s ¹	(226) 88 Ra* Radio 0.9 2 (Rn)7s ²	Lantanoidi		174,967 71 Lu Lutezio 1.2 3 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ¹ 6s ²	178,49 72 Hf Afnio 1.3 4 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ² 6s ²	180,948 73 Ta Tantalio 1.5 5,4 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ³ 6s ²	183,84 74 W Tungsteno 1.7 6,5,4,3,2 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁴ 6s ²	186,21 75 Re Renio 1.9 -1,7,6,4,2 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁵ 6s ²	190,23 76 Os Osmio 2.2 2,3,4,6,8 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁶ 6s ²	192,217 77 Ir Iridio 2,2 2,3,4,6 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁷ 6s ²	195,078 78 Pt Platino 2,2 2,4 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ⁸ 6s ²	196,967 79 Au Oro 2,4 3,1 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ¹⁰ 6s ¹	200,59 80 Hg Mercurio 1,9 2,1 (Xe)4f ¹⁴ 5d ¹⁰ 6s ²	204,383 81 Tl Tallio 1.8 3,1 (Hg)6p ¹	207,2 82 Pb Piombo 1.8 4,2 (Hg)6p ²	208,980 83 Bi Bismuto 1.9 3,5 (Hg)6p ³	(209) 84 Po* Polonio 2.0 4,2 (Hg)6p ⁴	(210) 85 At* Astatio 2.2 ±1,3,5,7 (Hg)6p ⁵	(222) 86 Rn* Radon - (Hg)6p ⁶
orbitali di tipo "s"		orbitali di tipo "d"										orbitali di tipo "p"							
138,906 57 La Lantanio 1.1 3 (Xe)5d ¹ 6s ²	140,116 58 Ce Cerio 1.1 3,4 (Xe)4f ¹ 6s ²	140,908 59 Pr Praseodimio 1.1 3,4 (Xe)4f ² 6s ²	144,24 60 Nd Neodimio 1.2 3 (Xe)4f ³ 6s ²	(145) 61 Pm* Promezio 1.2 2 (Xe)4f ⁴ 6s ²	150,36 62 Sm Samario 1.2 2,3 (Xe)4f ⁵ 6s ²	151,964 63 Eu Europio 1.5 2,3 (Xe)4f ⁶ 6s ²	157,25 64 Gd Gadolinio 1.1 3 (Xe)4f ⁷ 5d ¹ 6s ²	158,925 65 Tb Terbio 1.2 3,4 (Xe)4f ⁸ 6s ²	162,500 66 Dy Disprosio 1.2 3 (Xe)4f ⁹ 6s ²	164,930 67 Ho Olmio 1.2 3 (Xe)4f ¹⁰ 6s ²	167,259 68 Er Erbio 1.2 3 (Xe)4f ¹¹ 6s ²	168,934 69 Tm Tulio 1.2 2,3 (Xe)4f ¹² 6s ²	173,04 70 Yb Itterbio 1.2 3,2 (Xe)4f ¹³ 6s ²	(227) 89 Ac* Attinio 1.1 3	232,038 90 Th* Torio 1.3 4	231,036 91 Pa* Protoattinio 1.5 5,4	238,029 92 U* Uranio 1.7 6,5,4,3	(237) 93 Np** Nettunio 1.3 6,5,4,3	(244) 94 Pu** Plutonio 1.3 6,5,4,3

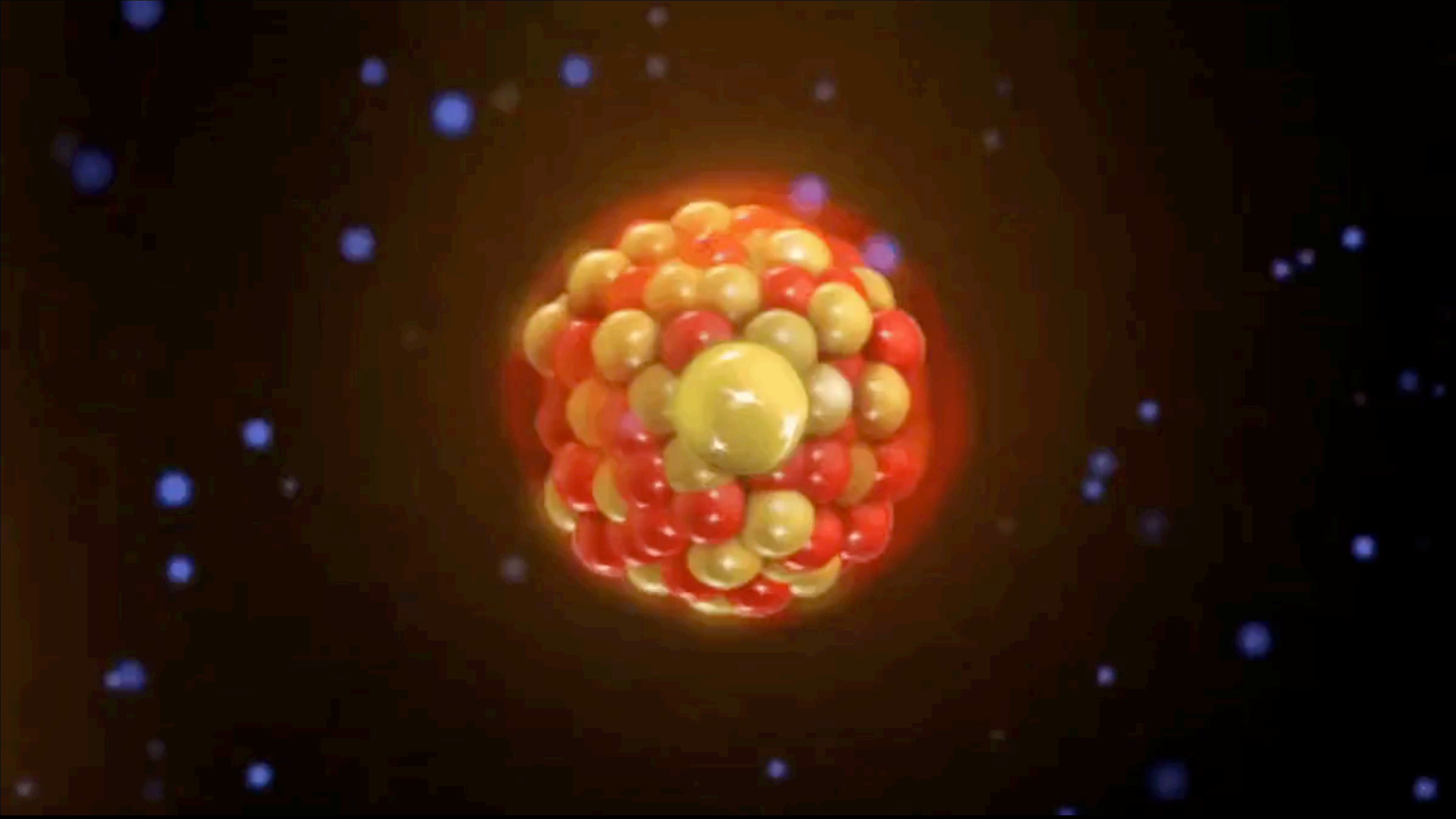


LA FISSIONE NUCLEARE



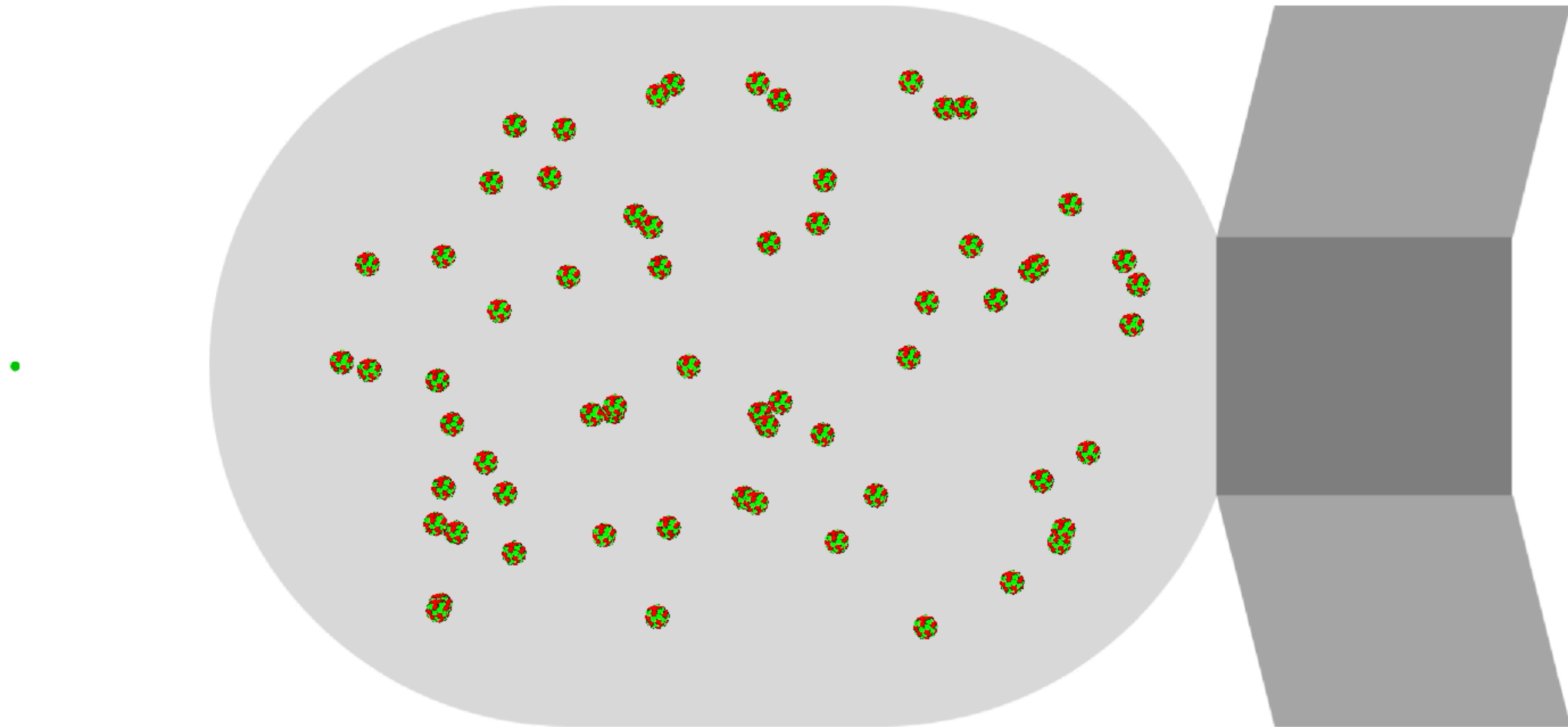
LA REAZIONE A CATENA





NUCLEAR CHAIN REACTION

📄 DongJoon | 🕒 2018-11-24 | 📁 Radioactivity Simulation



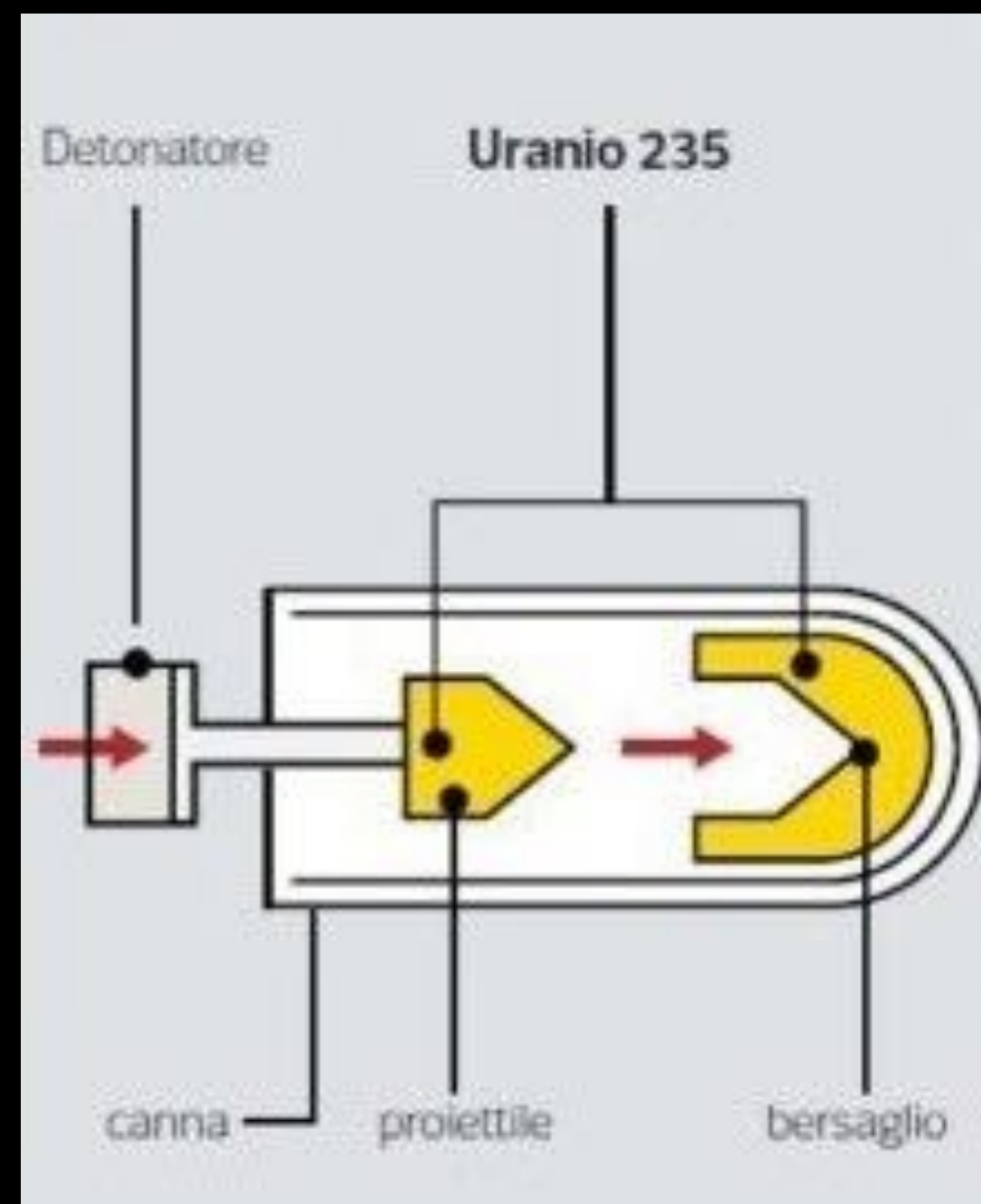
Concentration of Uranium-235



Run

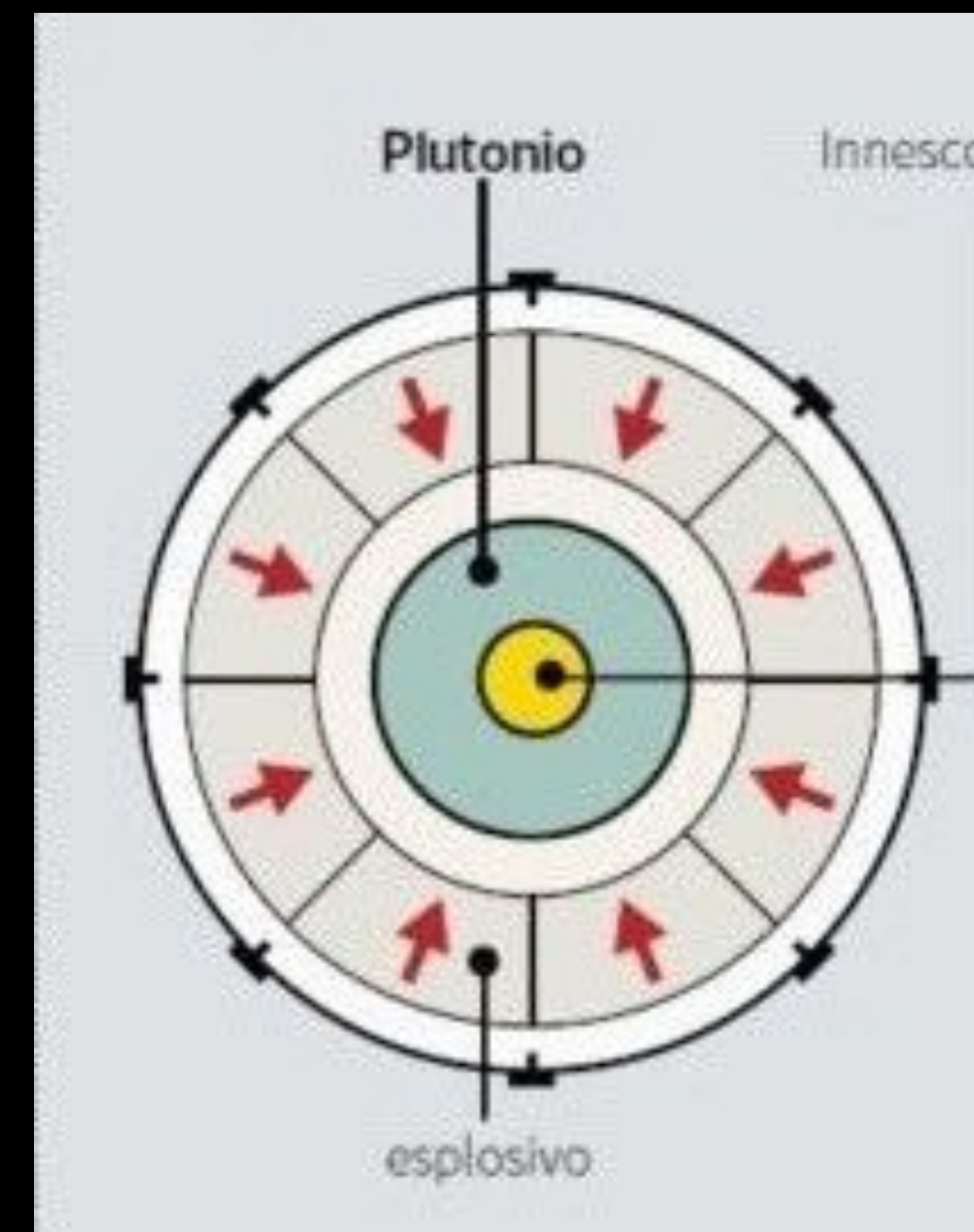
LA BOMBA ATOMICA

Uranio 235



Little Boy
(Hiroshima)

Plutonio



Fat Man
(Nagasaki)



"Trinity Test", 16 luglio 1945

I quark

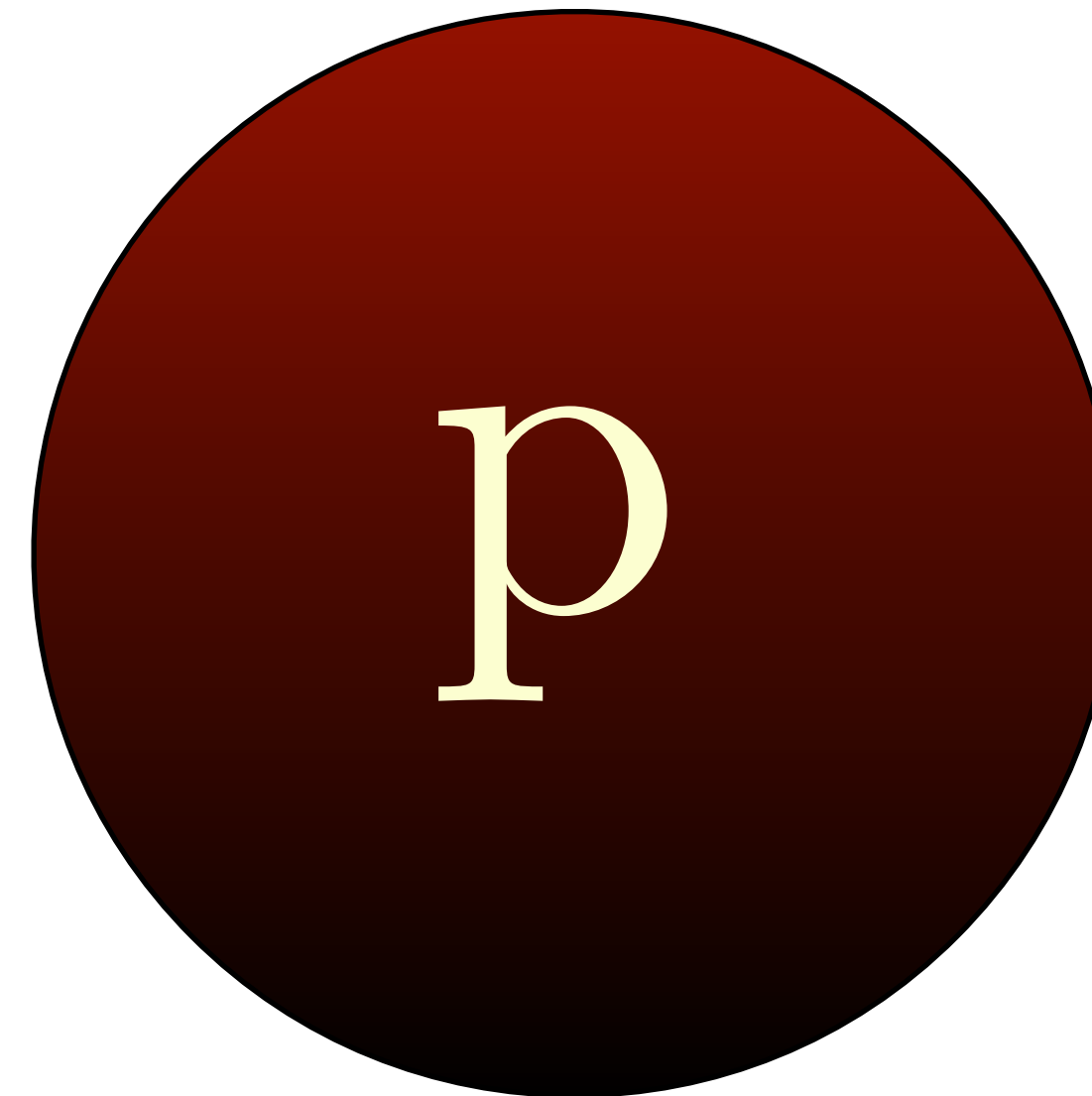
Identikit

Massa: $1.6726 \times 10^{-27} \text{ kg}$

$$E = mc^2$$

Carica: $+e$

Spin: $1/2$

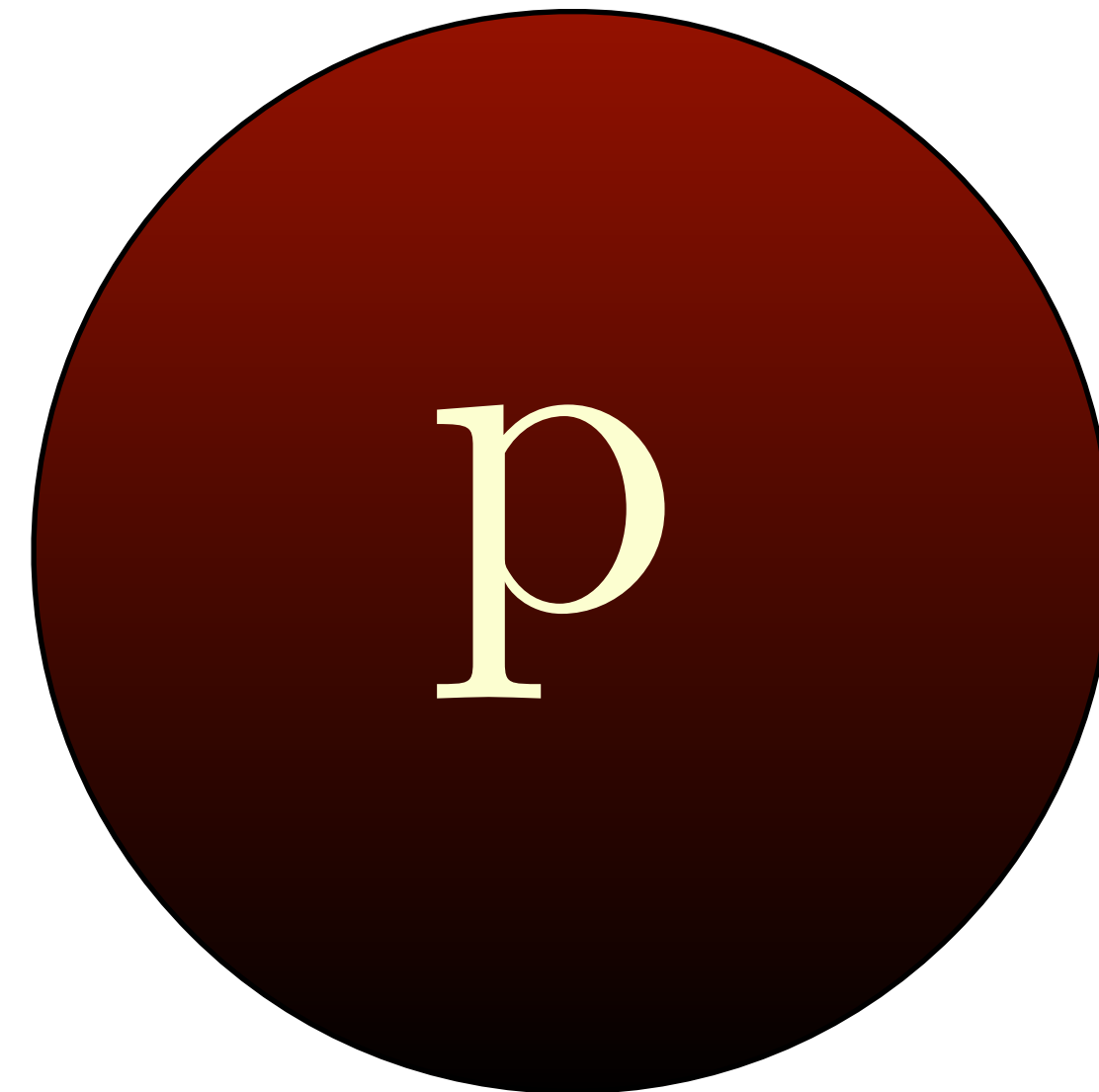


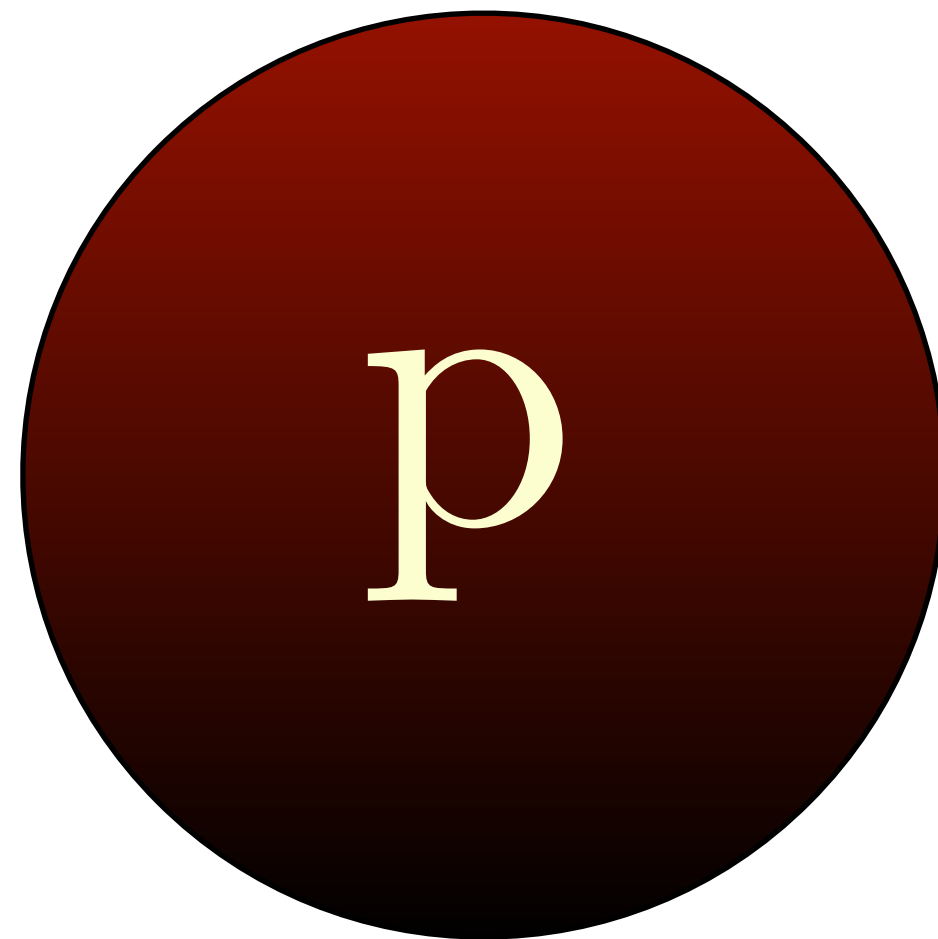
Identikit

Massa: 938.27 MeV

Carica: $+e$

Spin: $1/2$





Carica:

$+e$

0

Massa:

938.27 MeV

939.56 MeV

Spin:

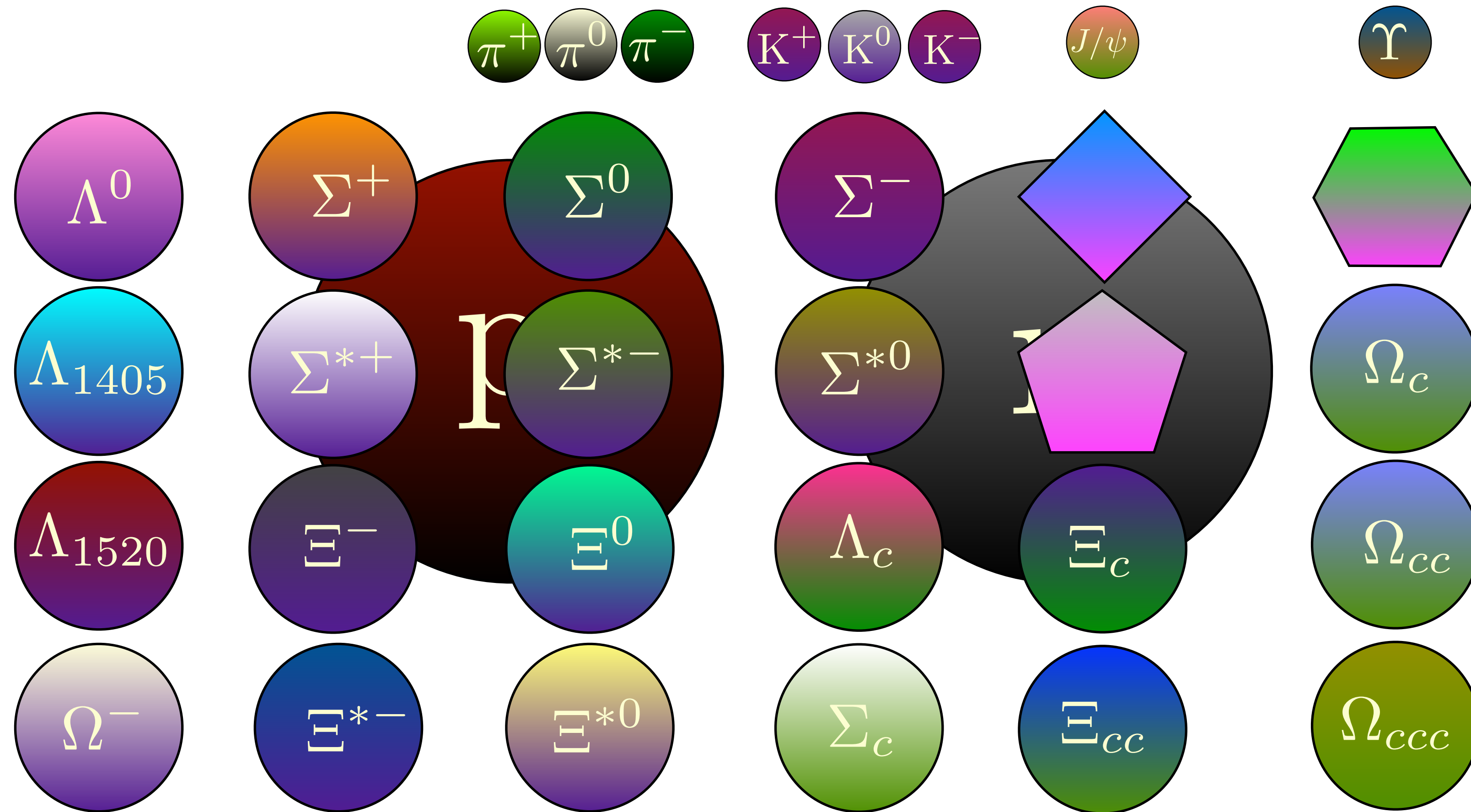
$1/2$

$1/2$

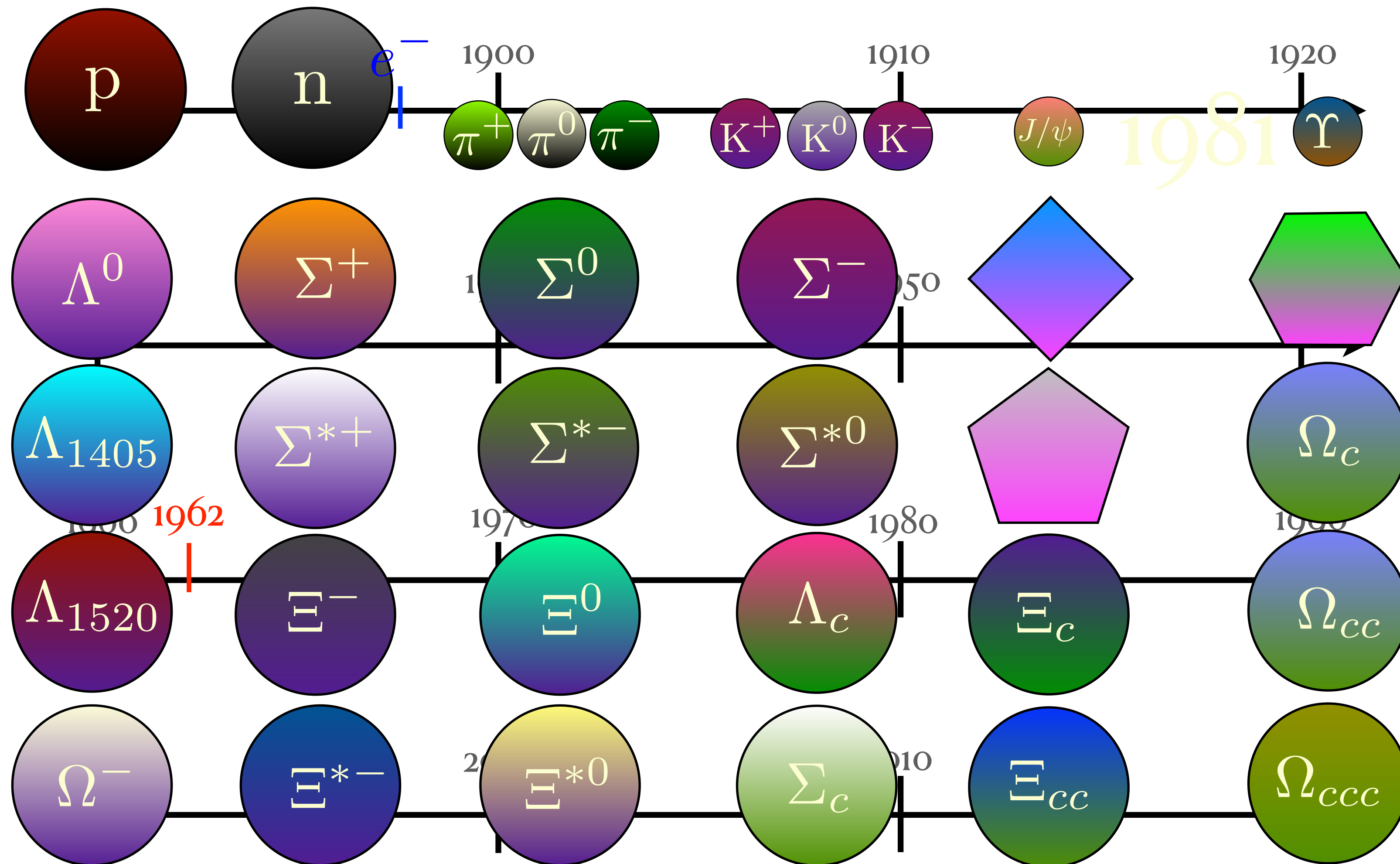
Esistono particelle simili?



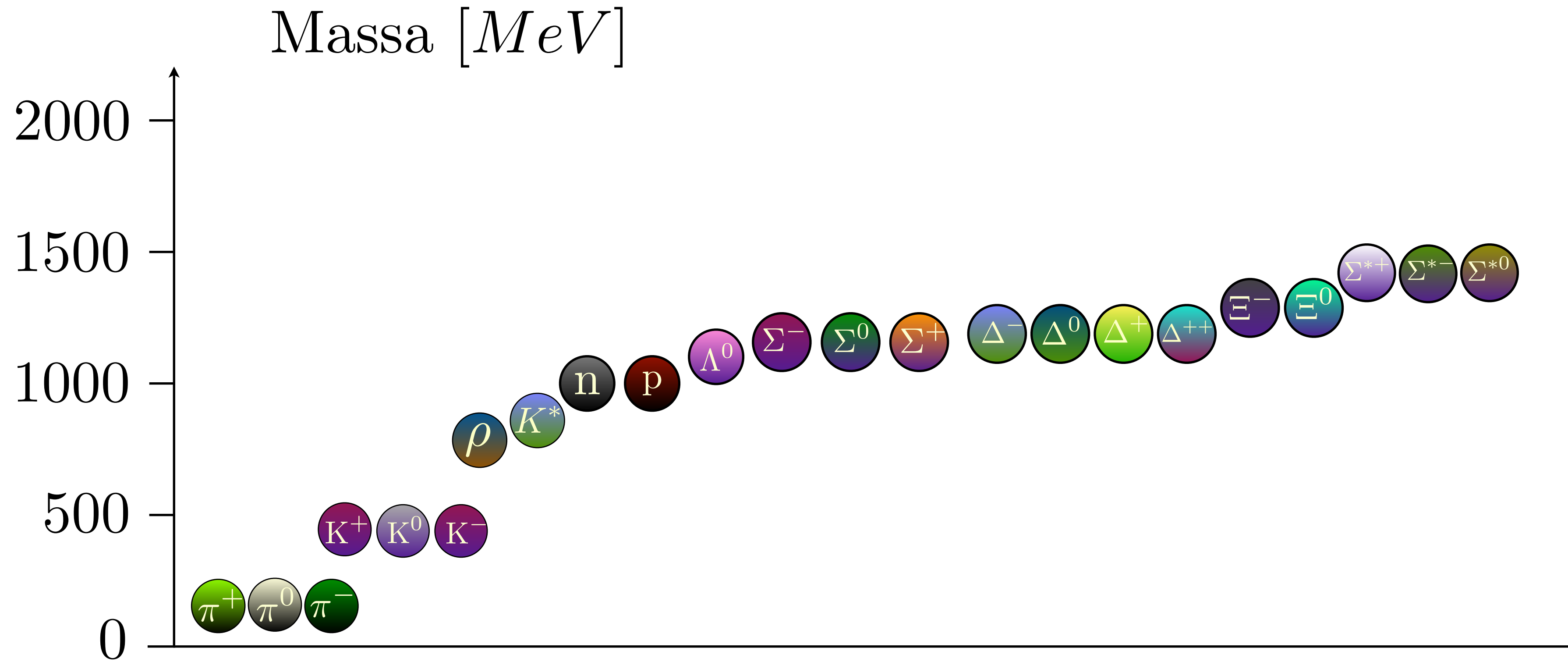
Esistono particelle simili?



Uno "zoo" di particelle



Uno "zoo" di particelle



Modello a quark



1969: “Per i suoi contributi e le sue scoperte riguardo alla classificazione delle particelle elementari e le loro interazioni”

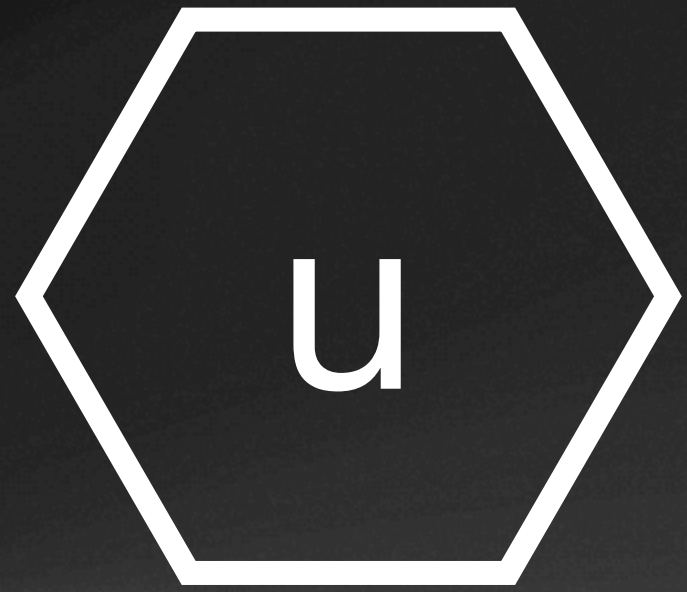
Le particelle elementari che costituiscono gli adroni sono detti quark.

I quark esistono in tre “sapori” diversi: up, down, strange

I quark sono dotati di una carica di “colore”

Ogni quark ha il suo antiquark

l quark



$$+\frac{2}{3}e$$

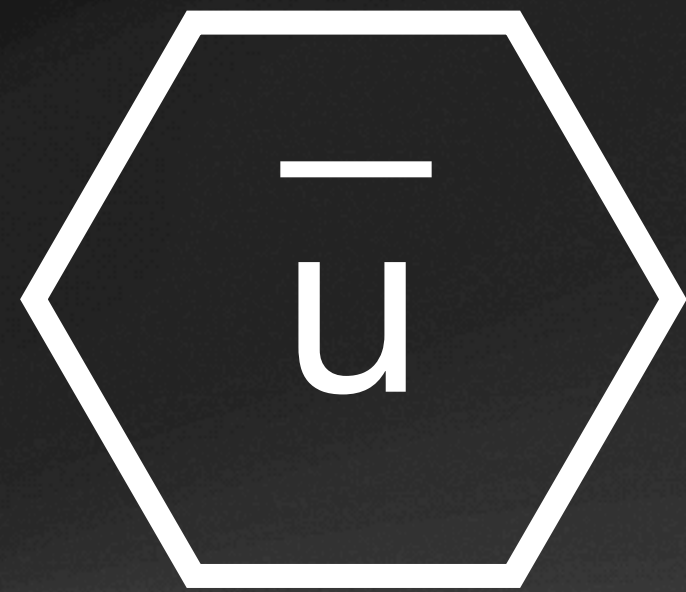


$$-\frac{1}{3}e$$

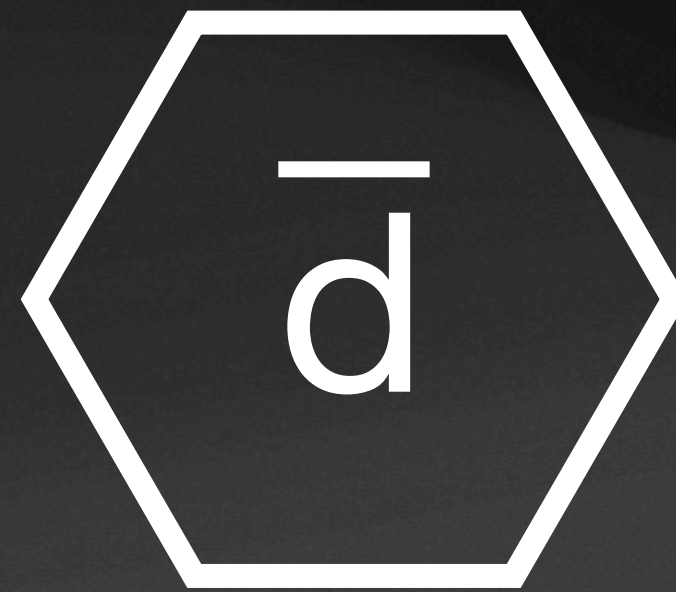


$$-\frac{1}{3}e$$

Gli antiquark



$$-\frac{2}{3}e$$



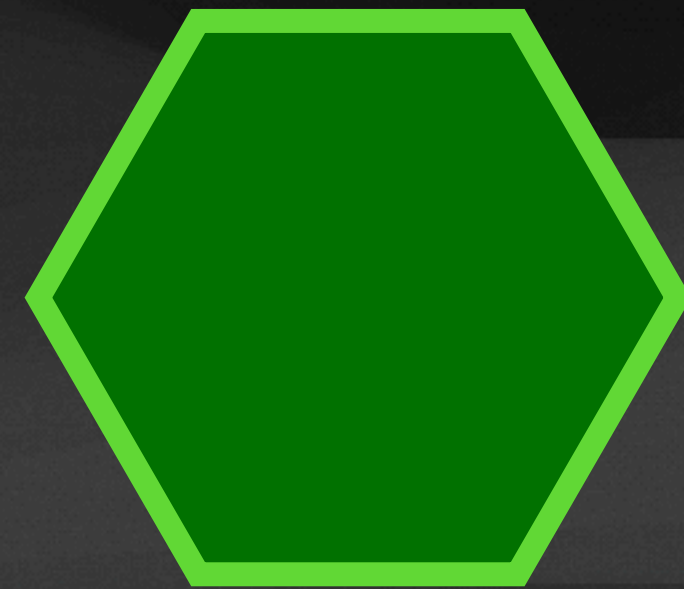
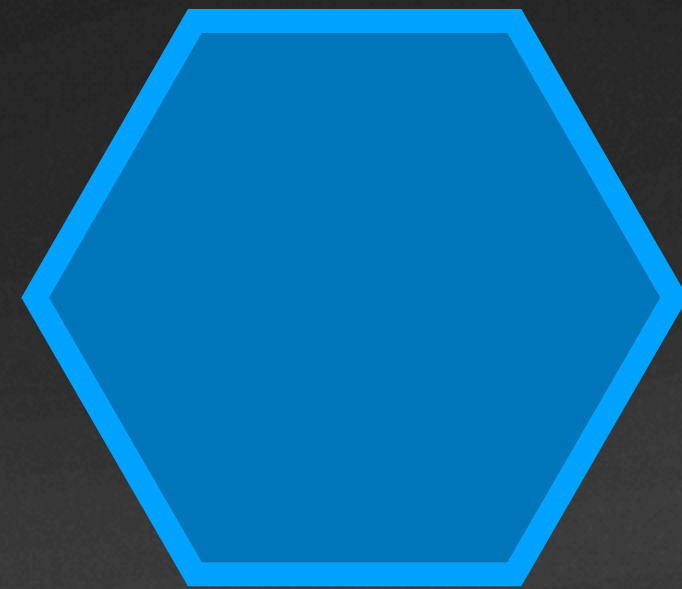
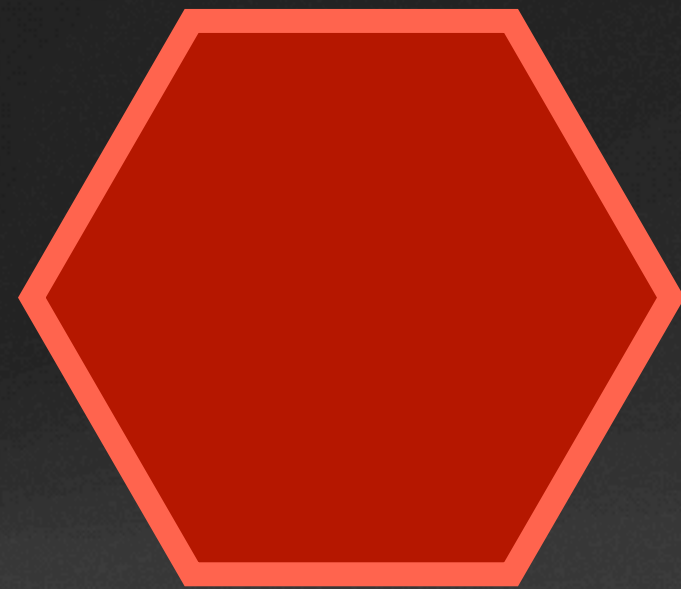
$$+\frac{1}{3}e$$



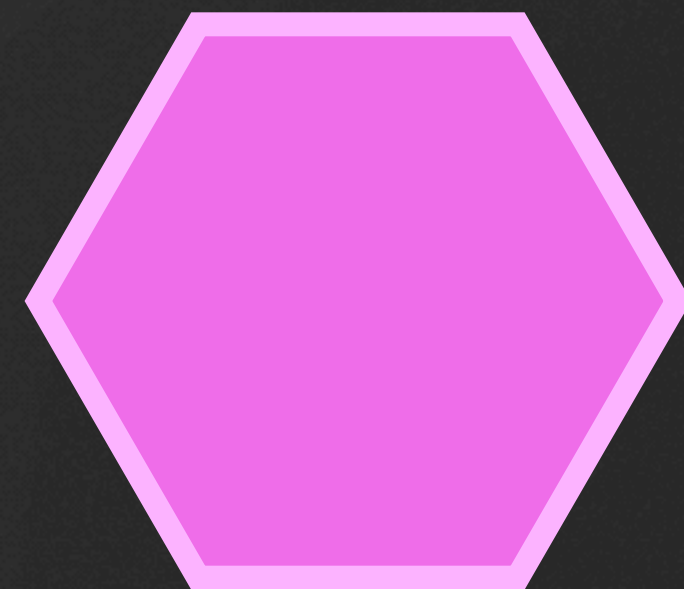
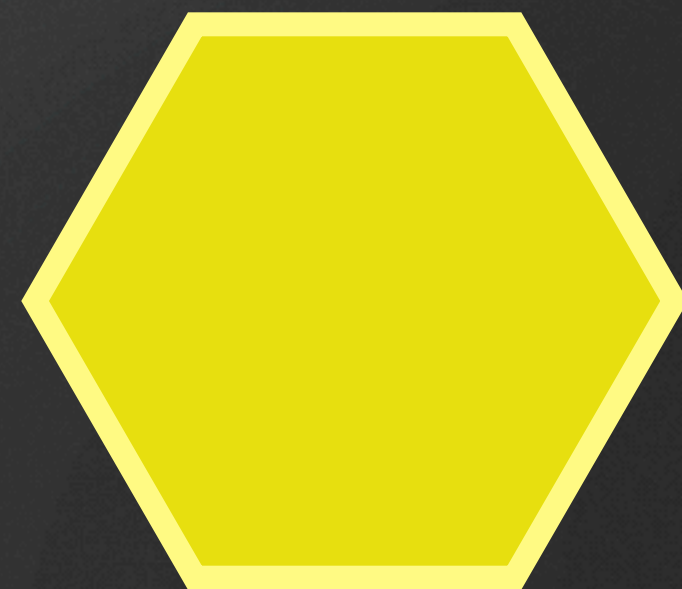
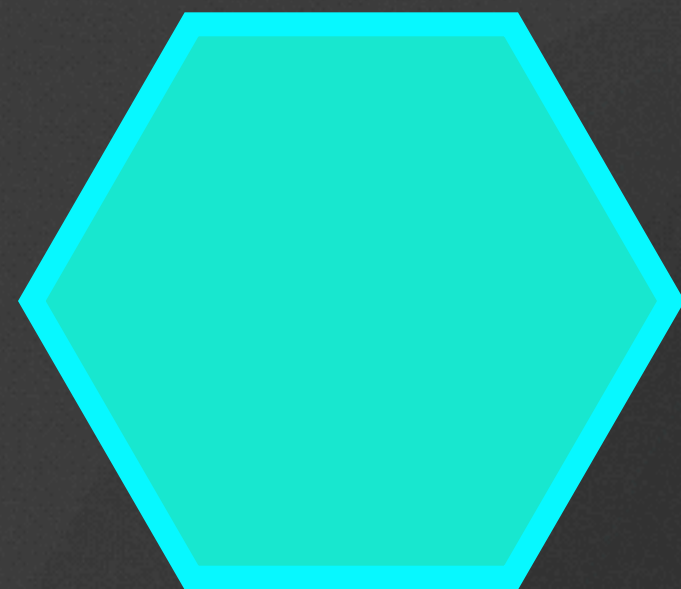
$$+\frac{1}{3}e$$

Carica di colore

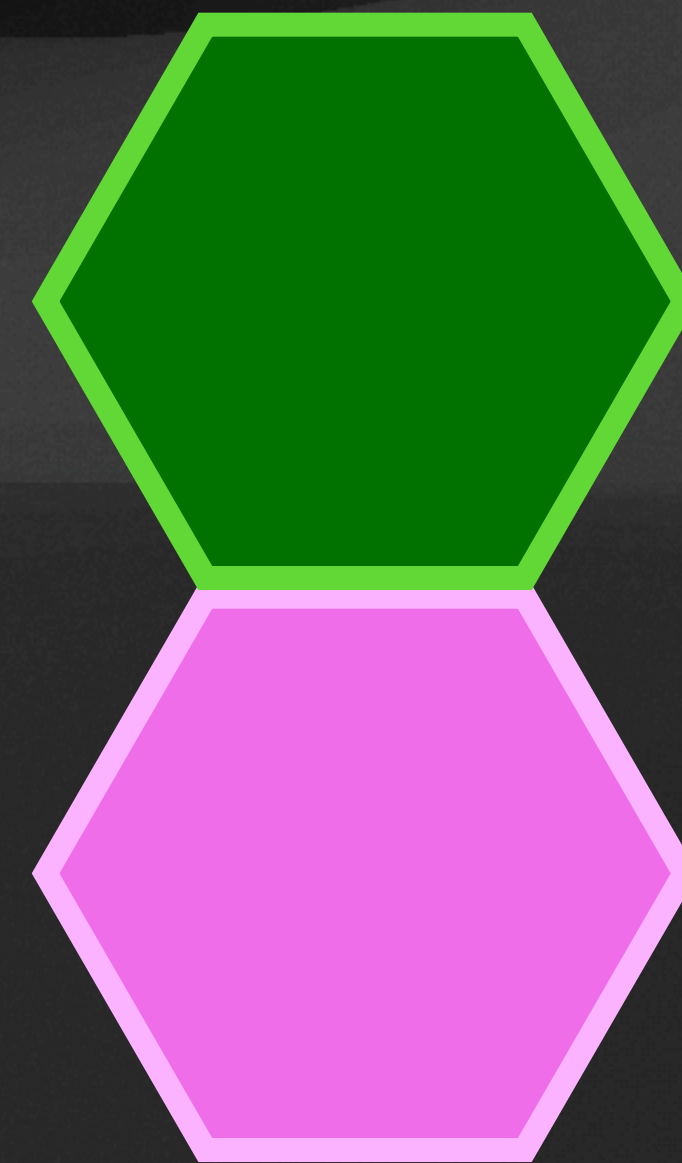
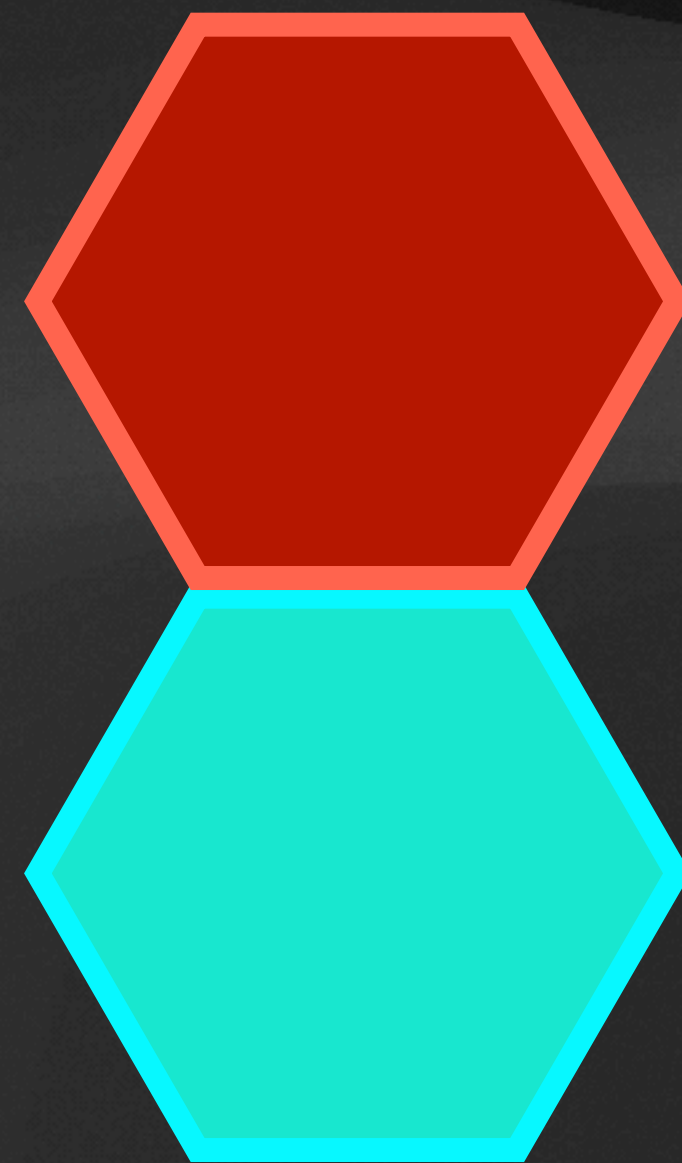
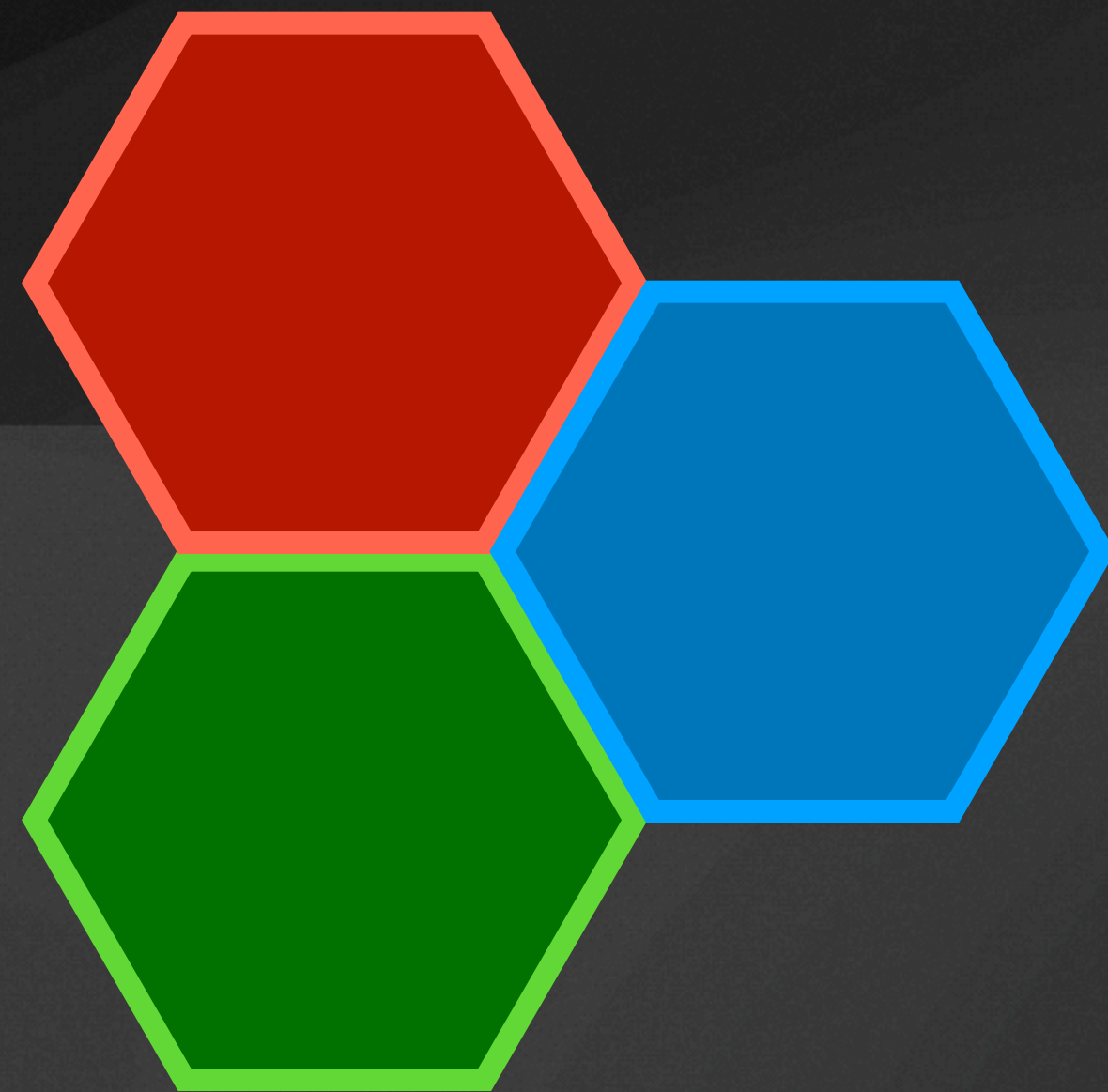
quark



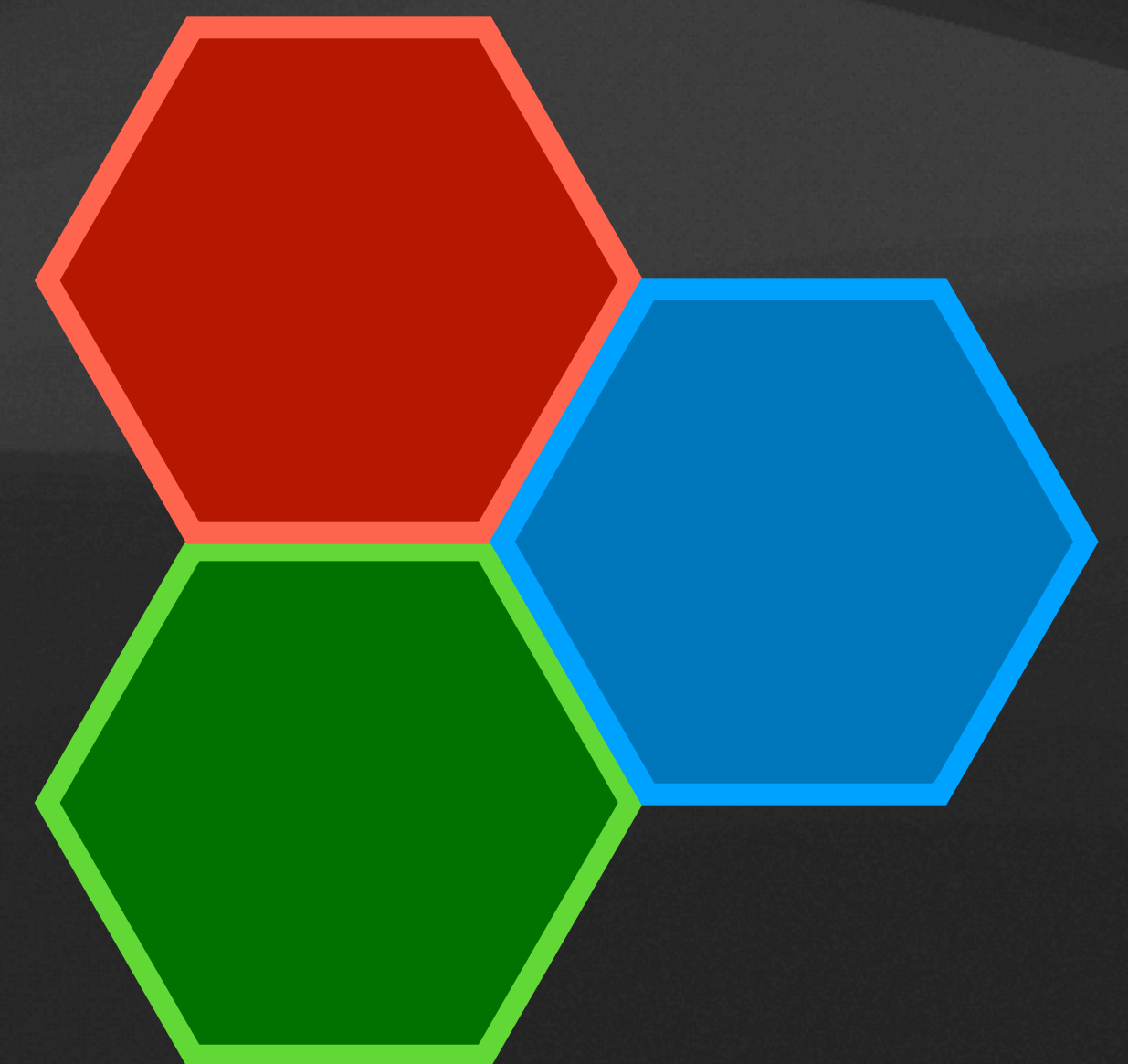
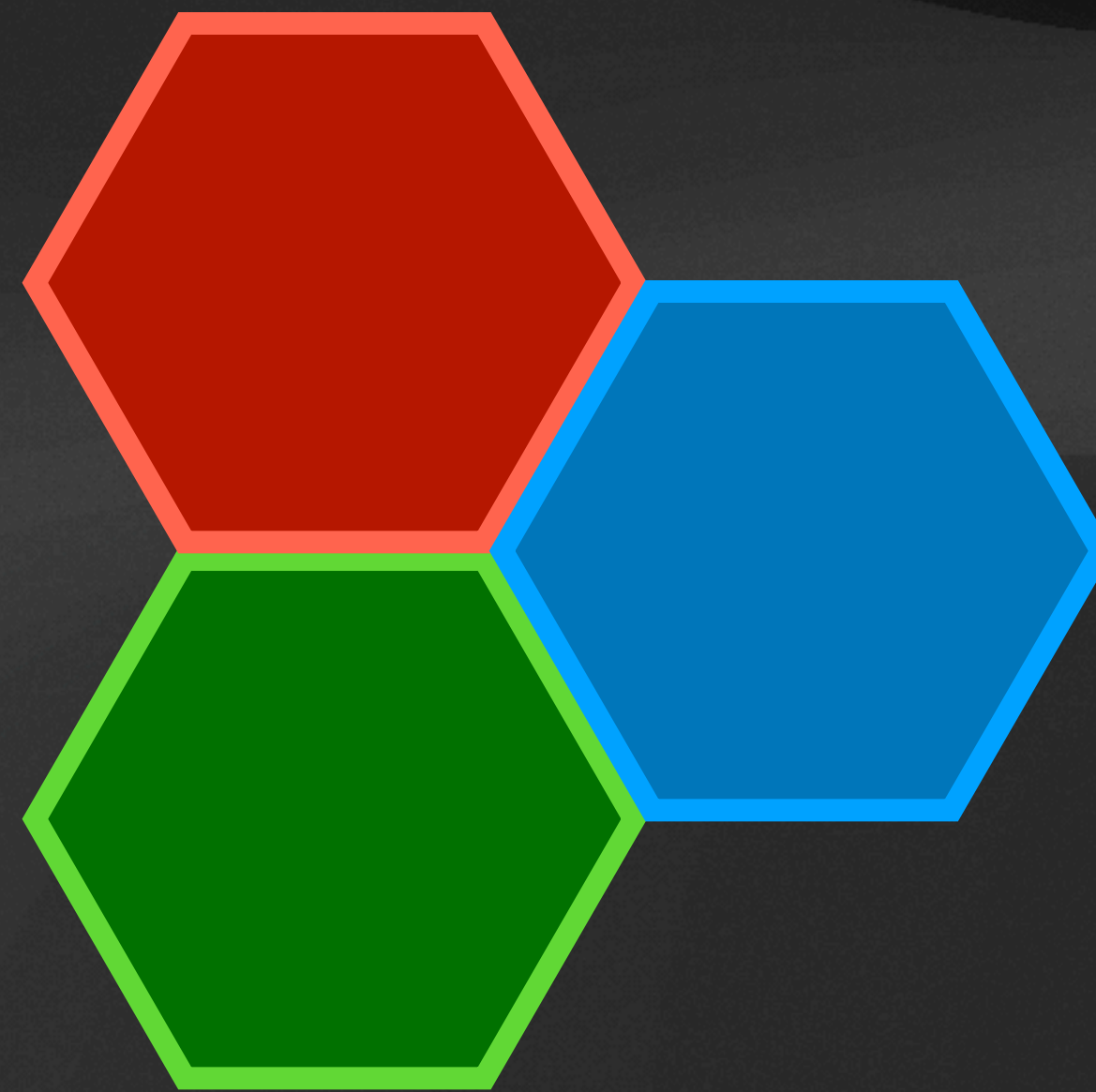
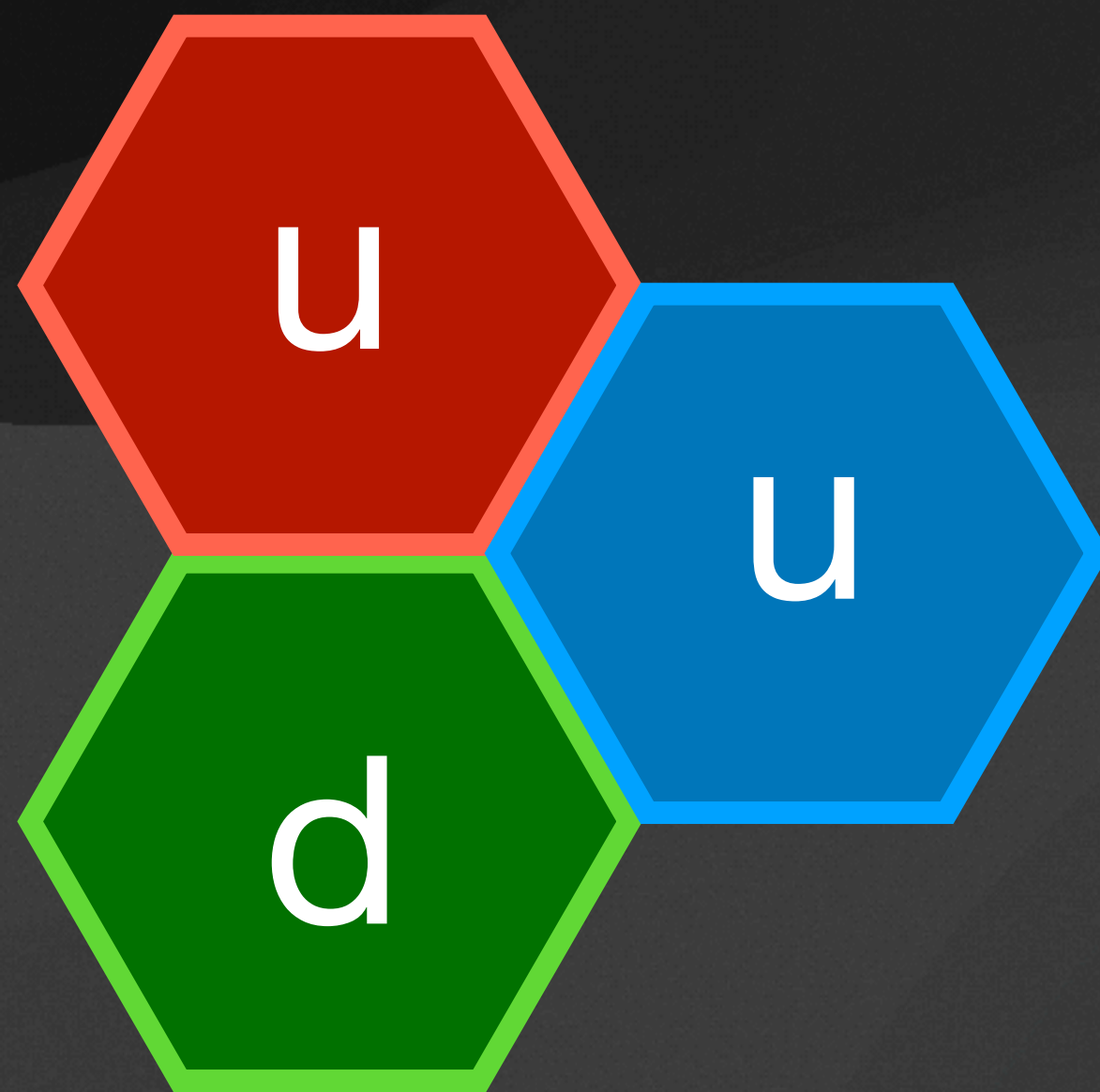
antiquark



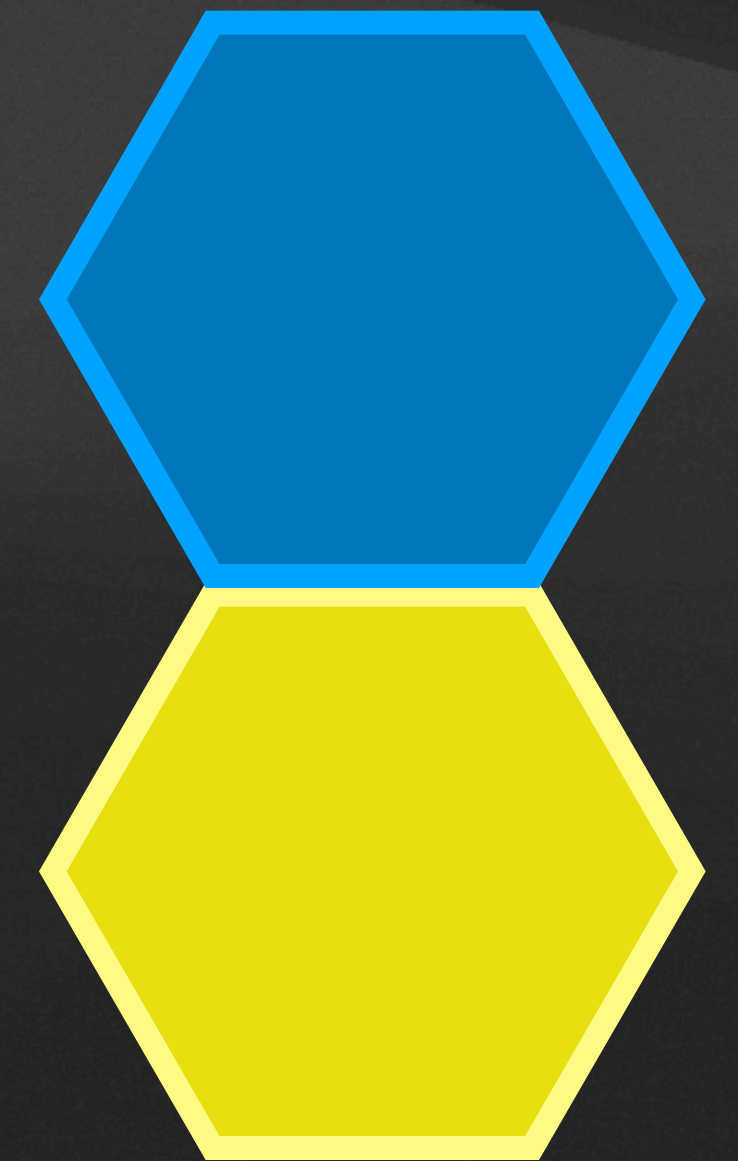
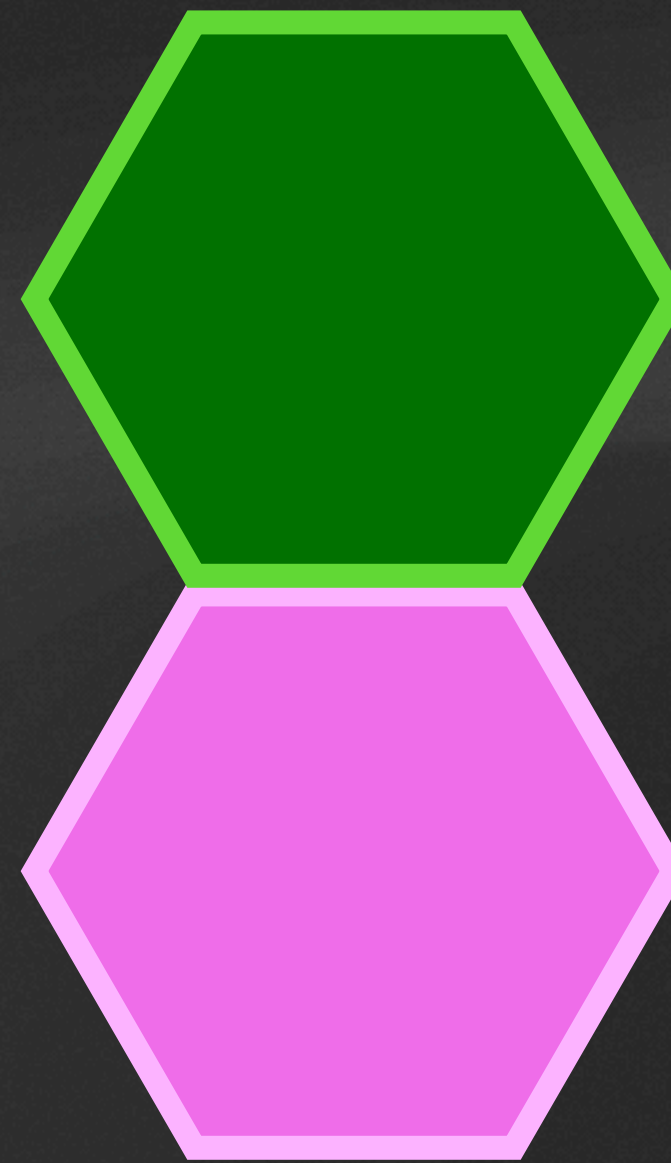
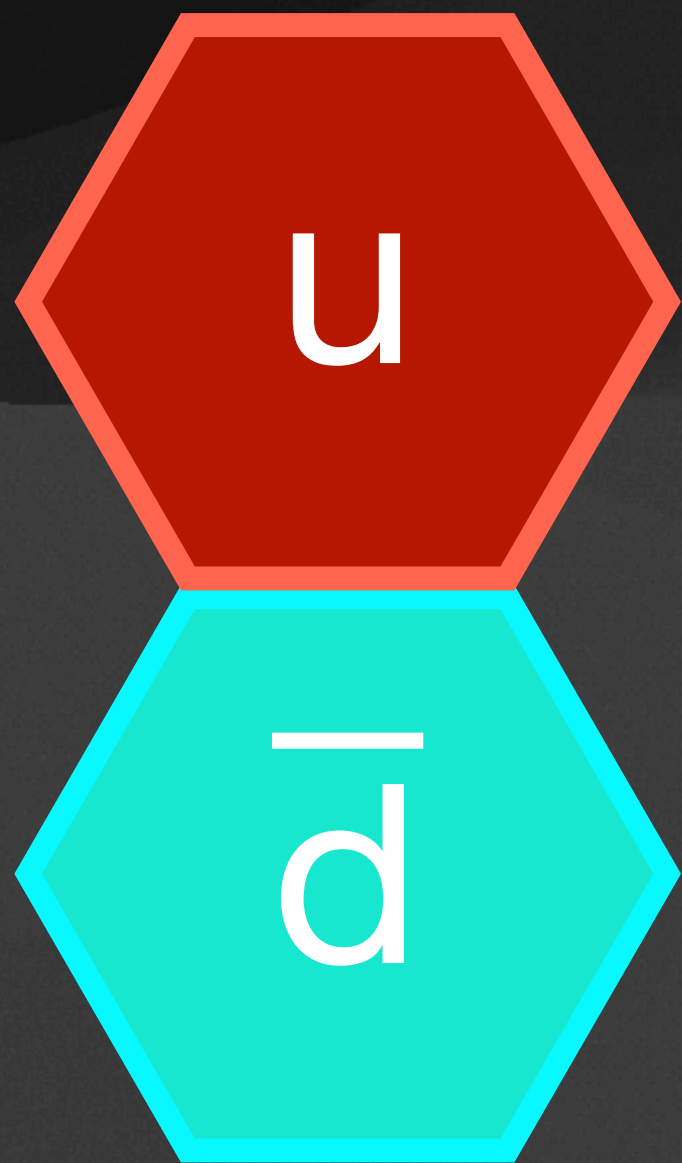
Combinazioni per fare il “bianco”



Esempi di “triquark”



Esempi di “biquark”

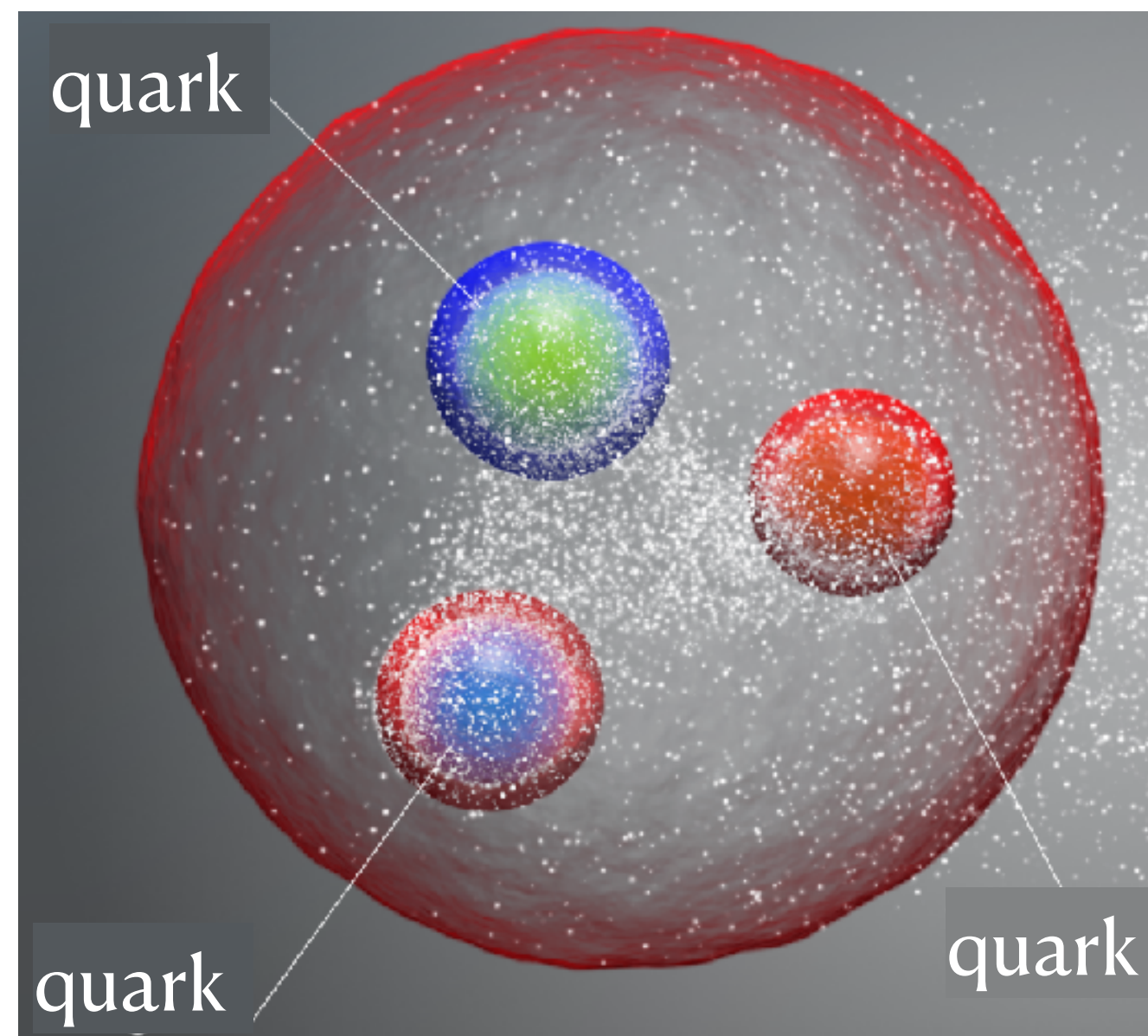


Gli adroni

Sono particelle composte da una certa combinazione di quarks

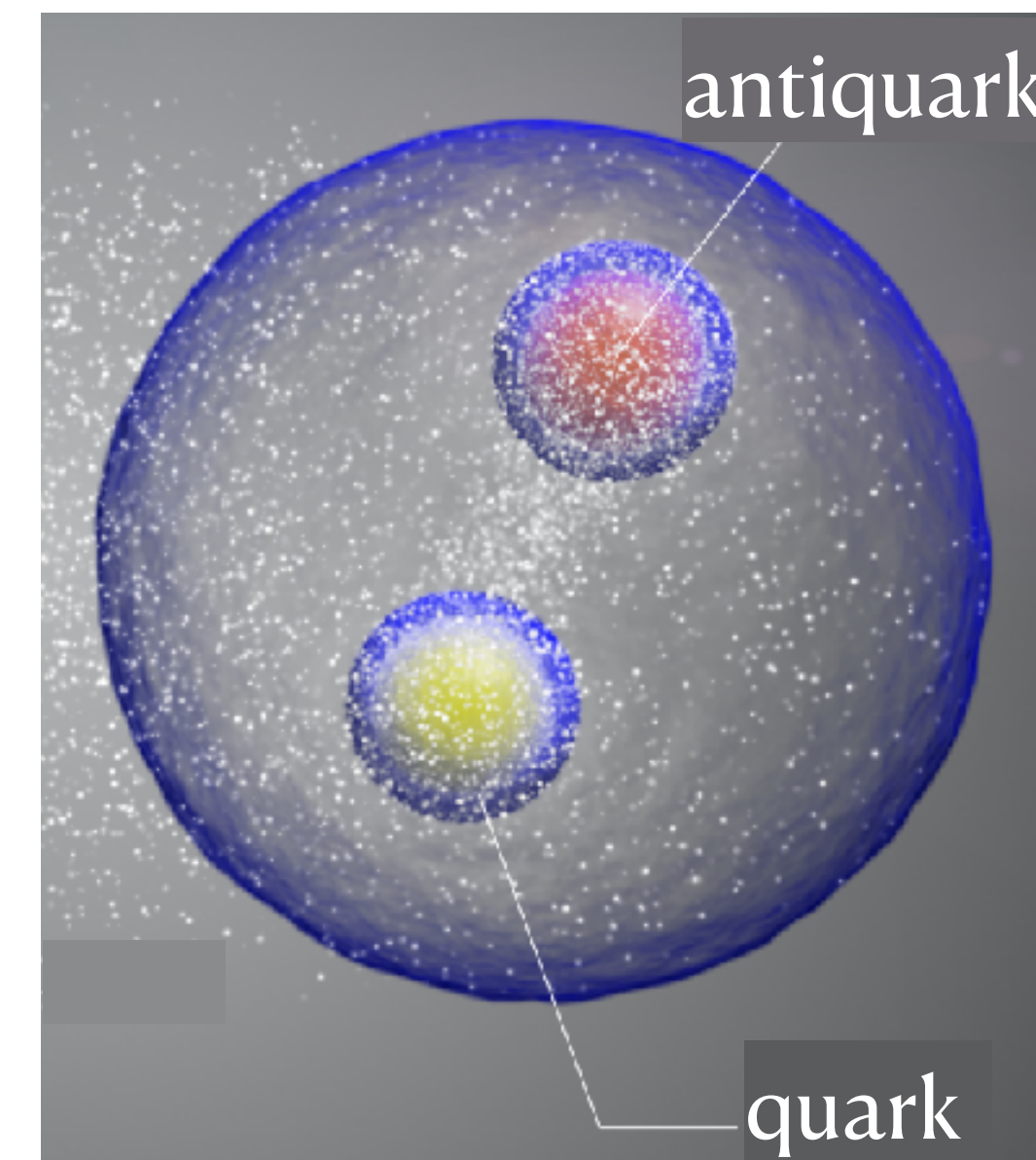
BARIONI

Statistica di Fermi-Dirac

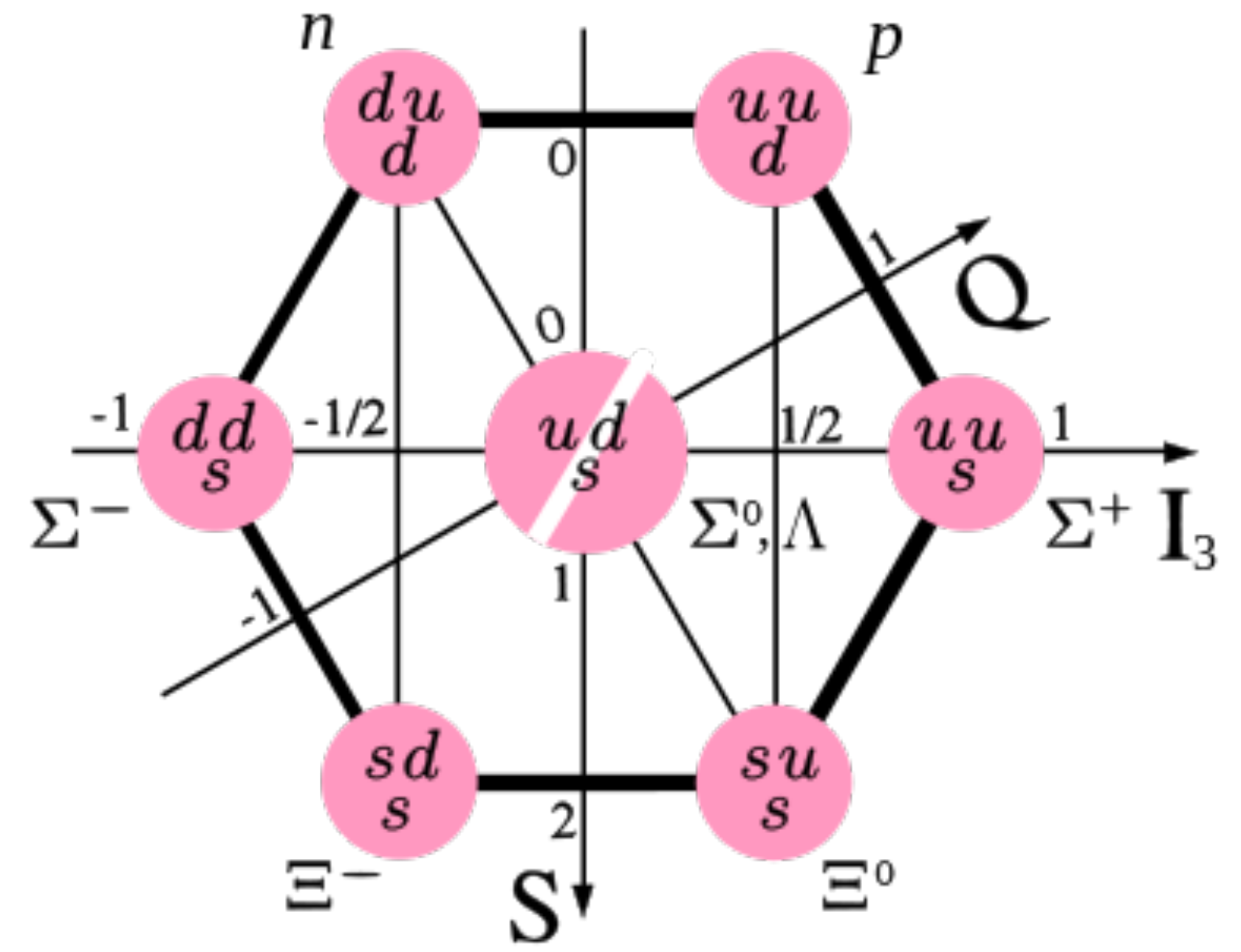
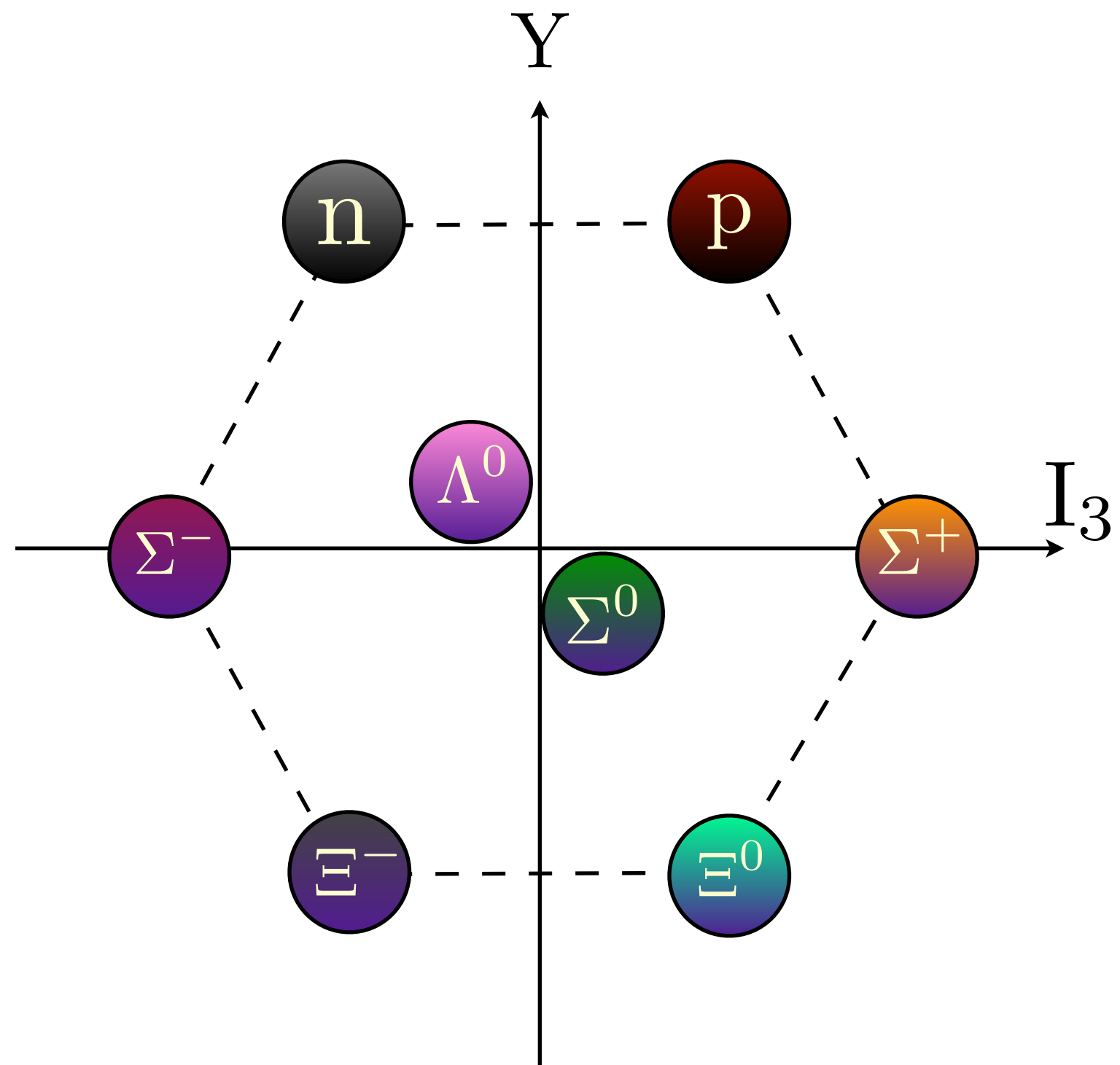


MESONI

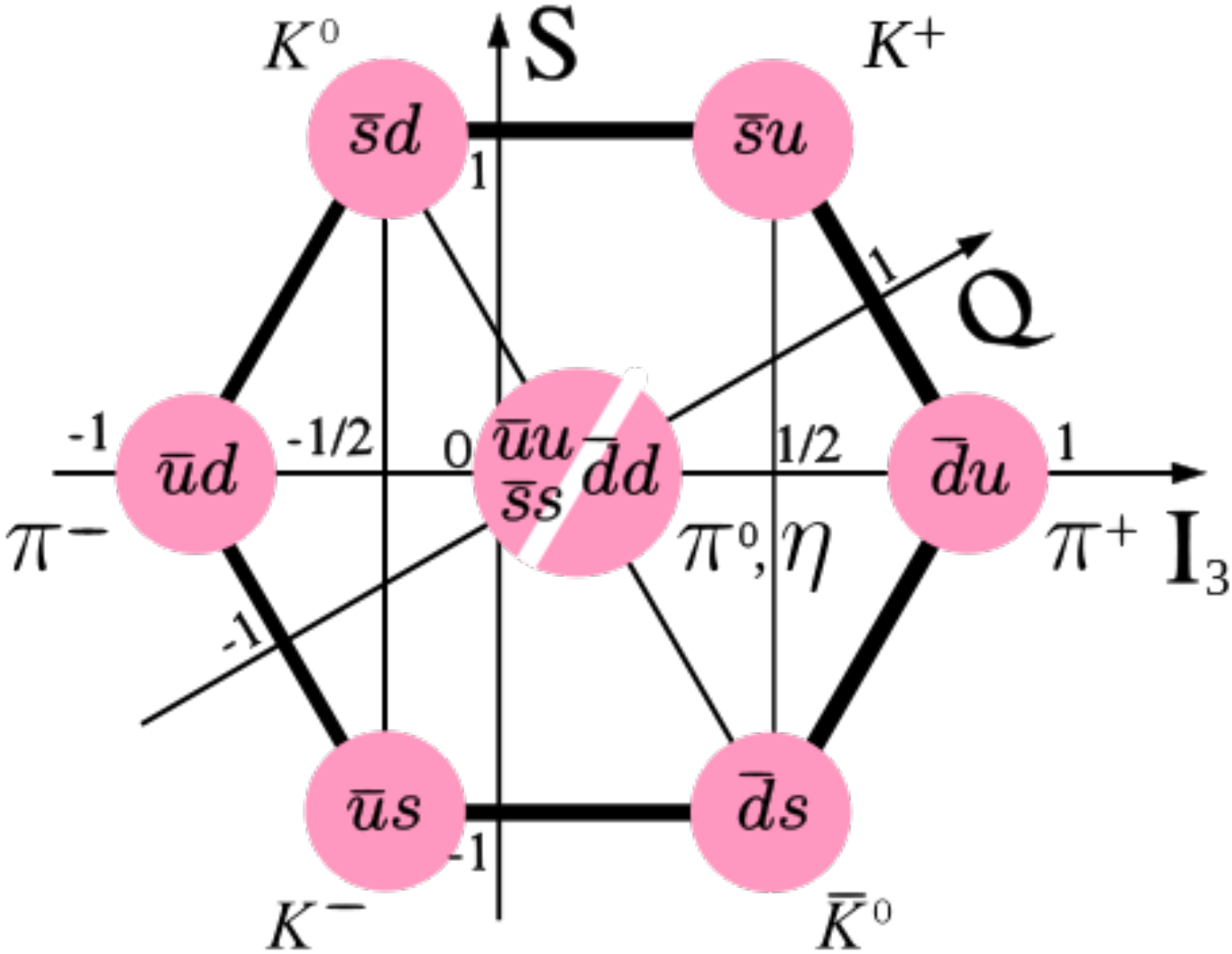
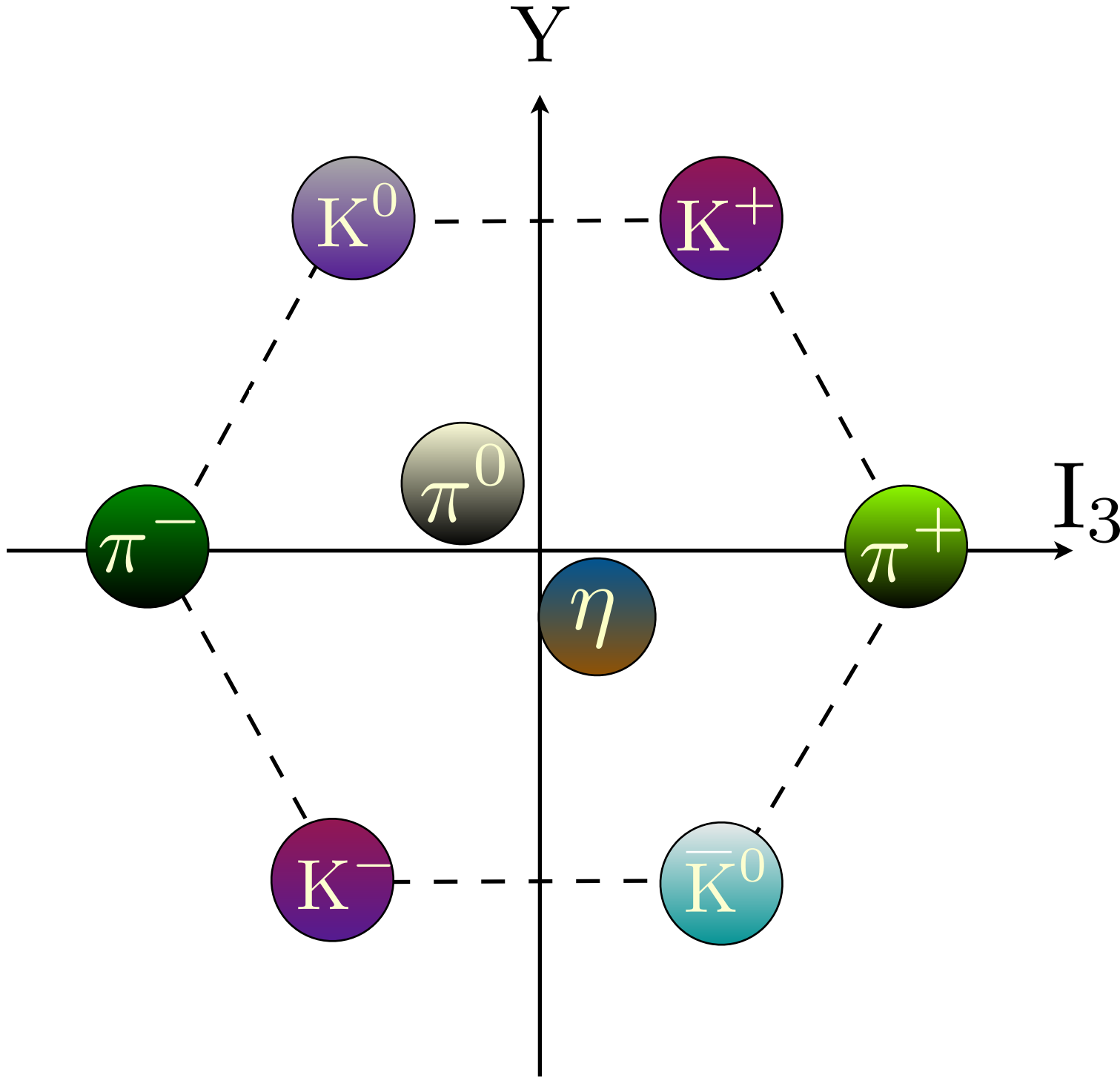
Statistica di Bose-Einstein



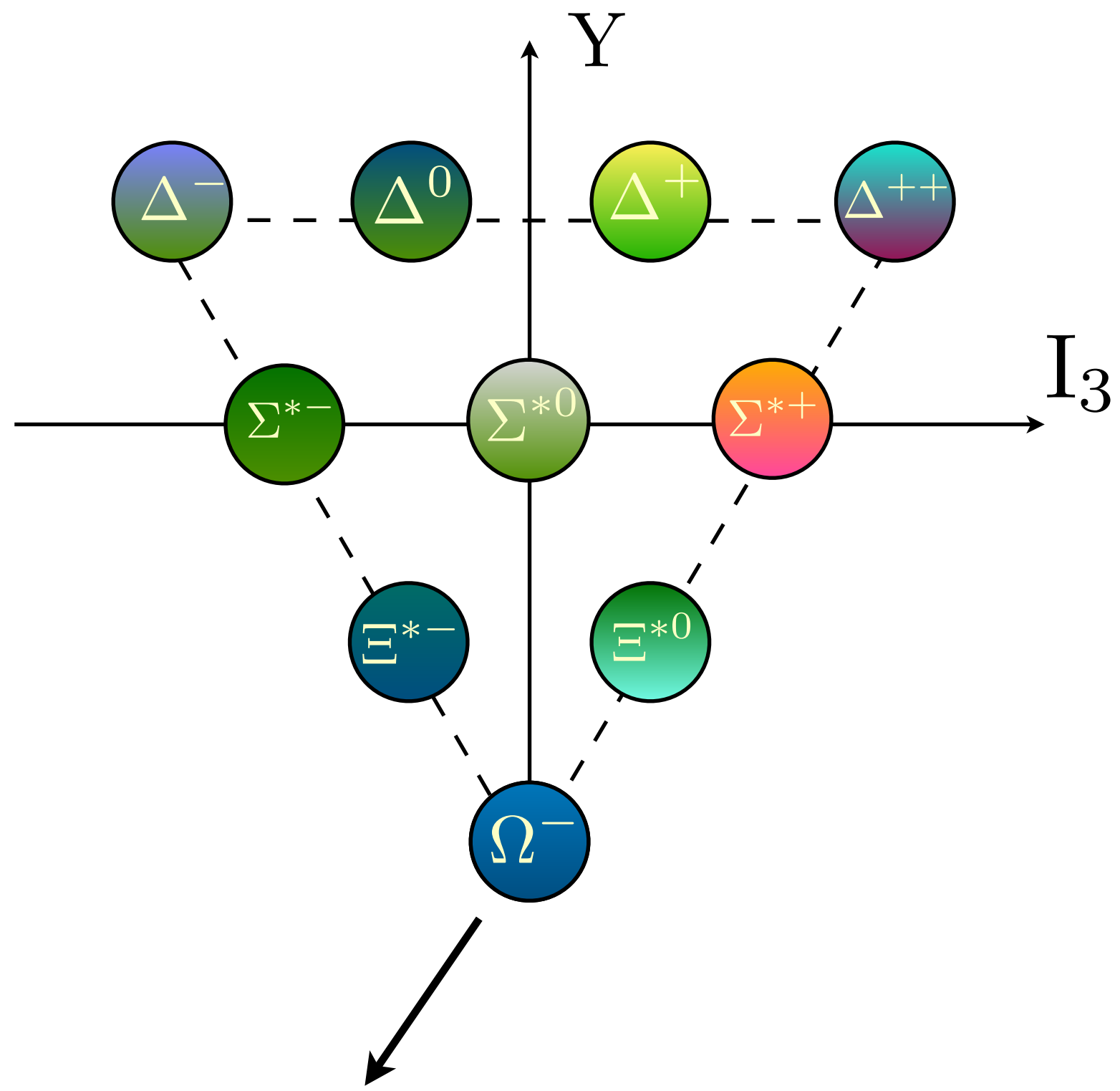
BARIONI



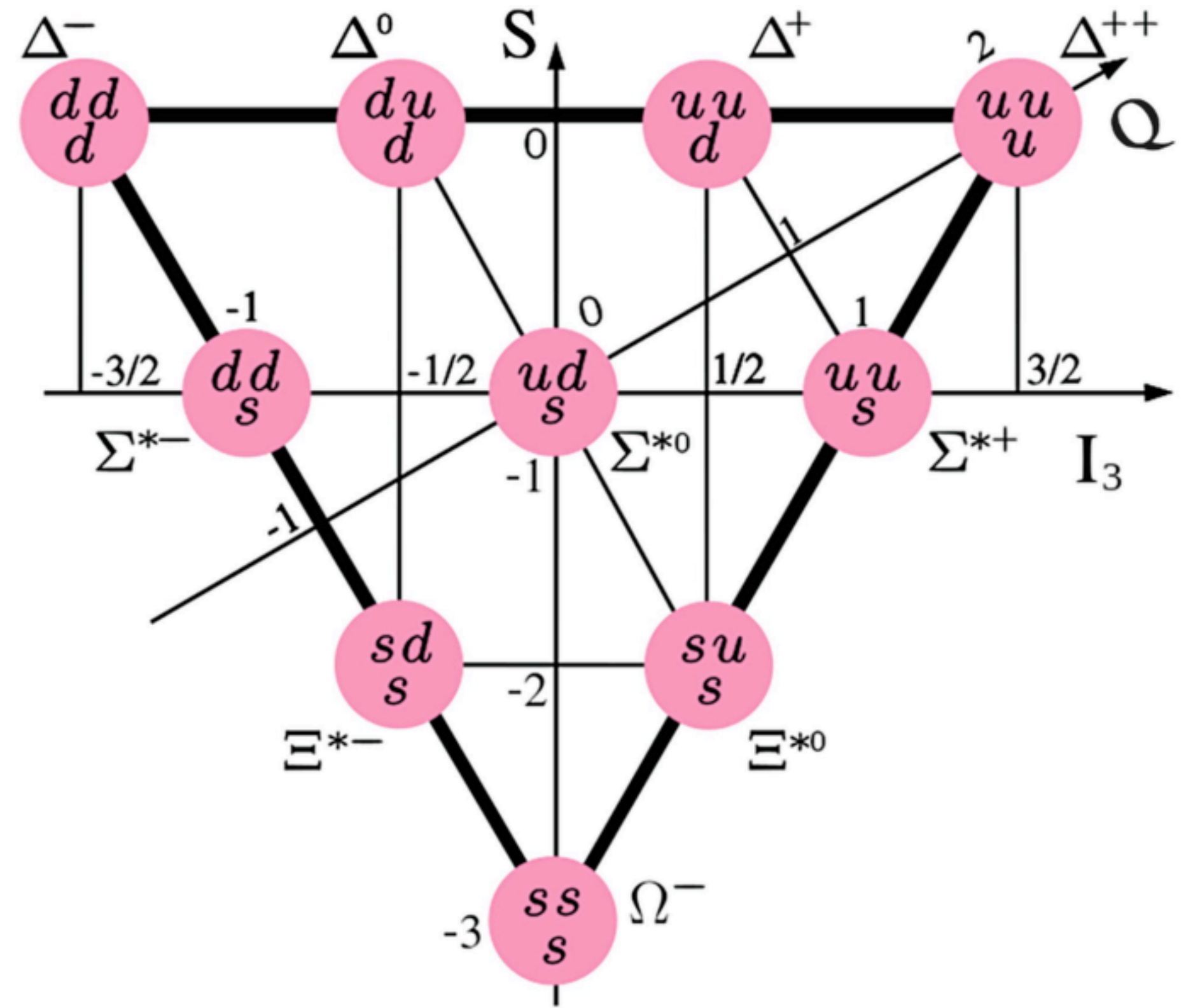
MESONI



BARIONI



scoperta 2 anni dopo!!





Carica:

$+e$

0

Massa:

938.27 MeV

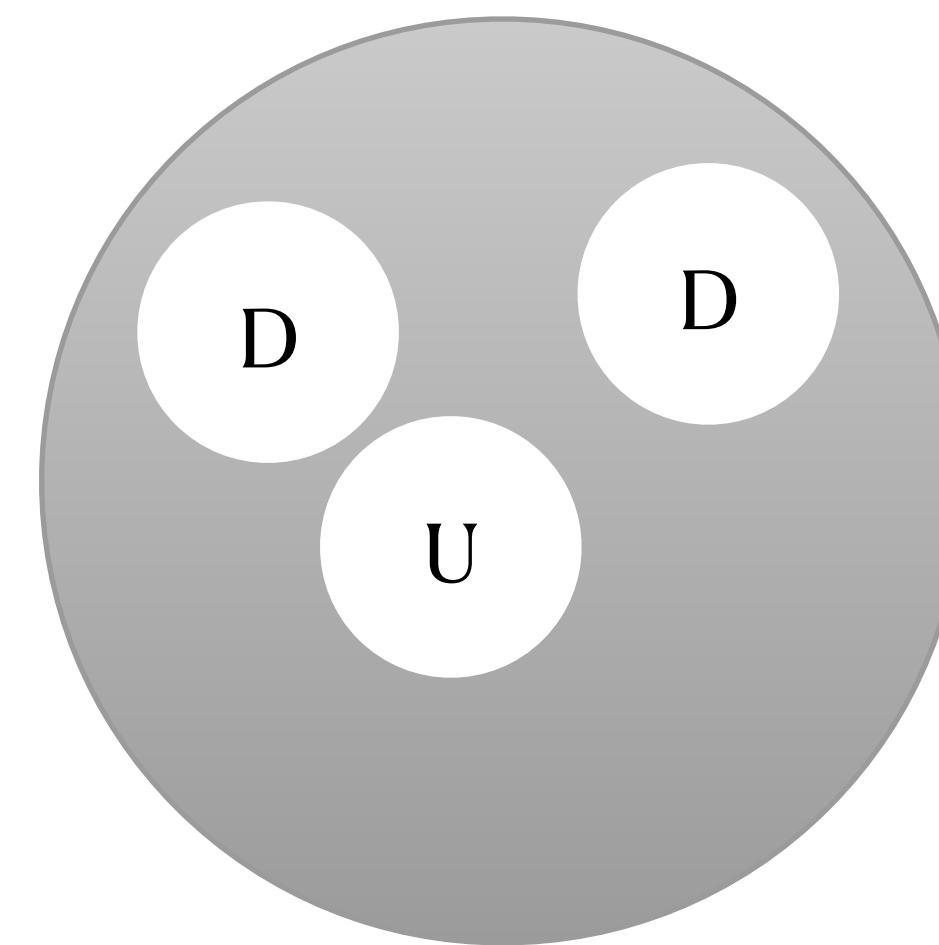
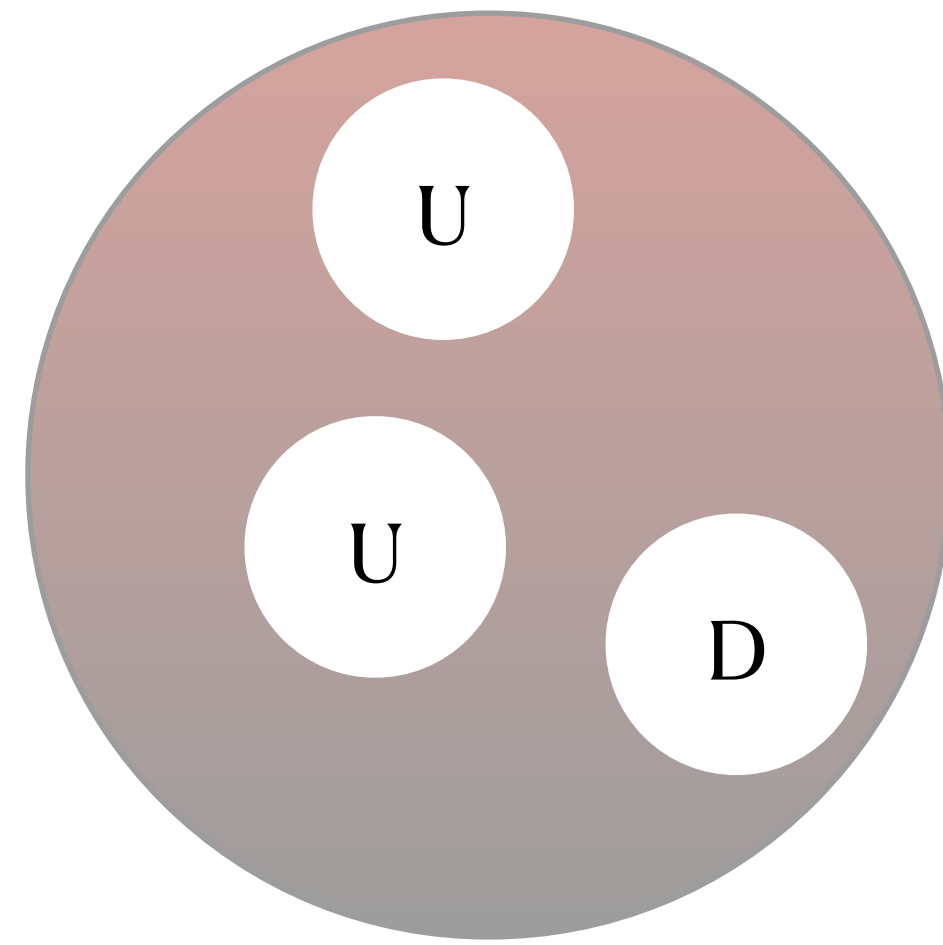
939.56 MeV

Spin:

$1/2$

$1/2$

Come spieghiamo questi numeri?



Carica:

$+e$

0

Massa:

938.27 MeV

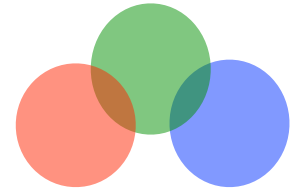
939.56 MeV

Spin:

$1/2$

$1/2$

Modello a quark

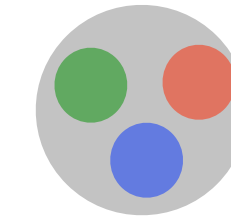


quark **down**

4.8 MeV

quark **up**

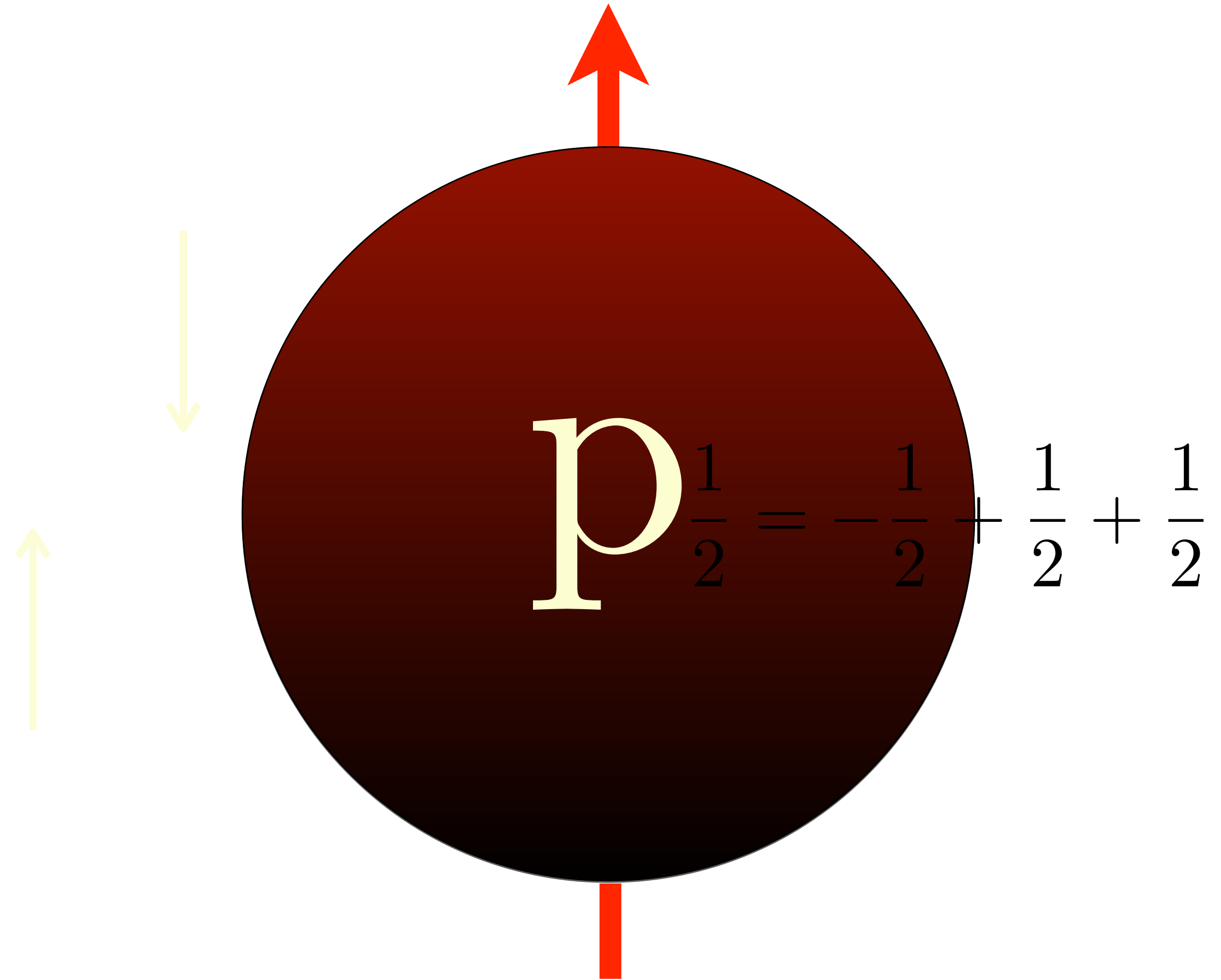
2.3 MeV



protone

938.27 MeV

Modello di Gell-Mann



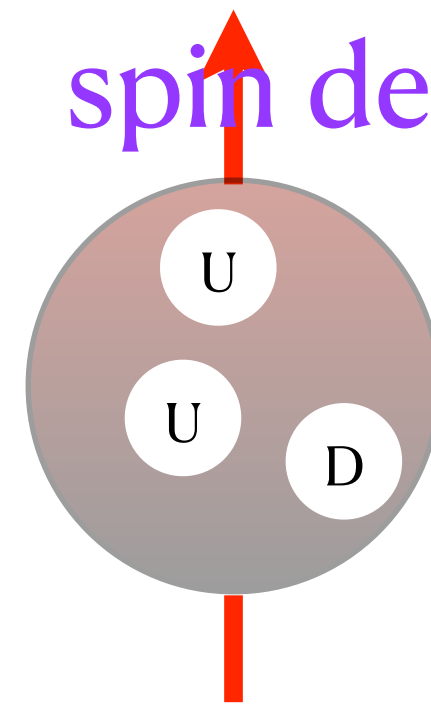
Analisi sperimentale

European Muon Collaboration (EMC, Cern 1987)

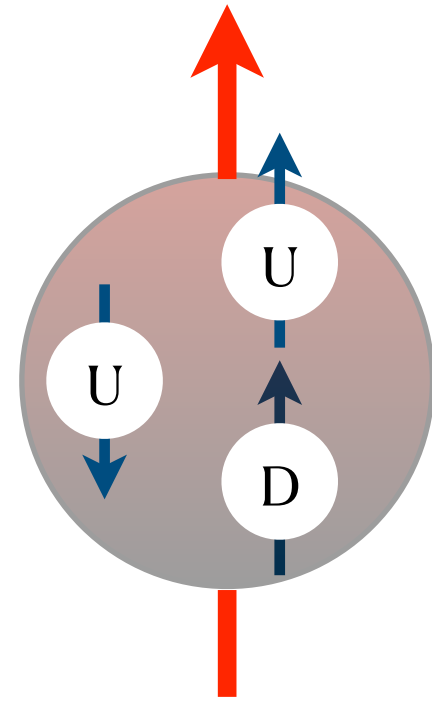
$$\mu^\uparrow p^\uparrow \rightarrow \mu X$$



Misura del contributo dei quark allo
spin del protone



Risultato sperimentale



Modello di Gell-Mann

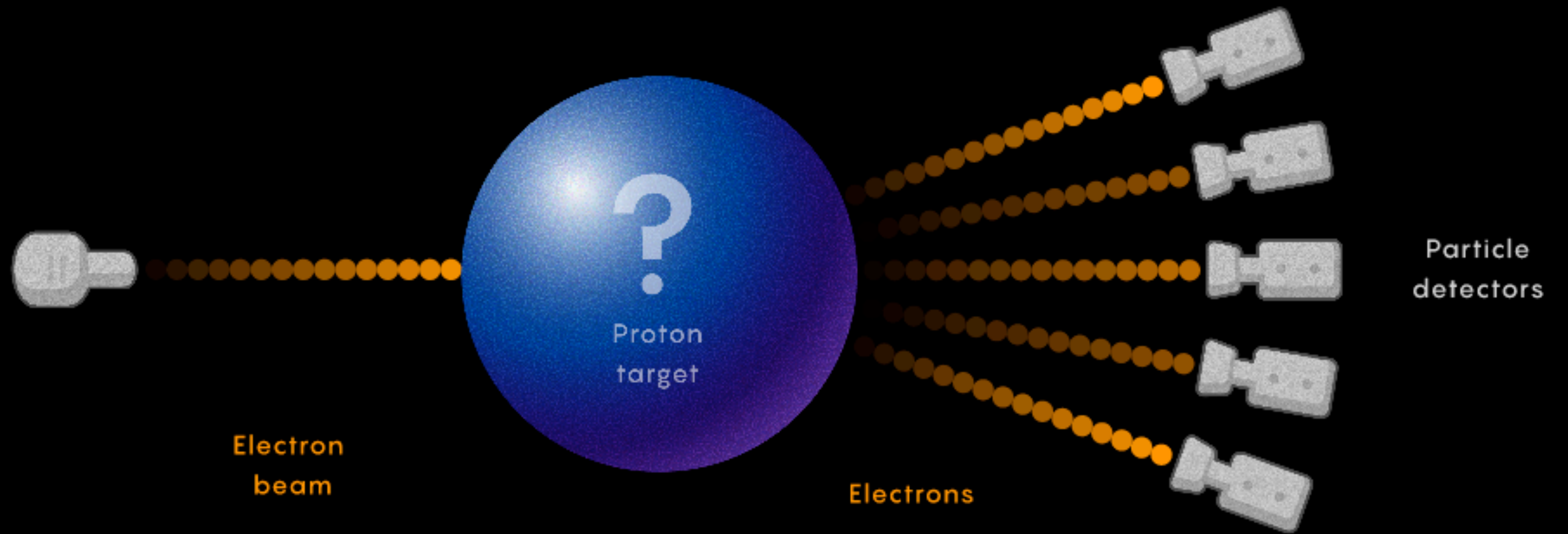
$$\frac{1}{2} = -\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2}$$

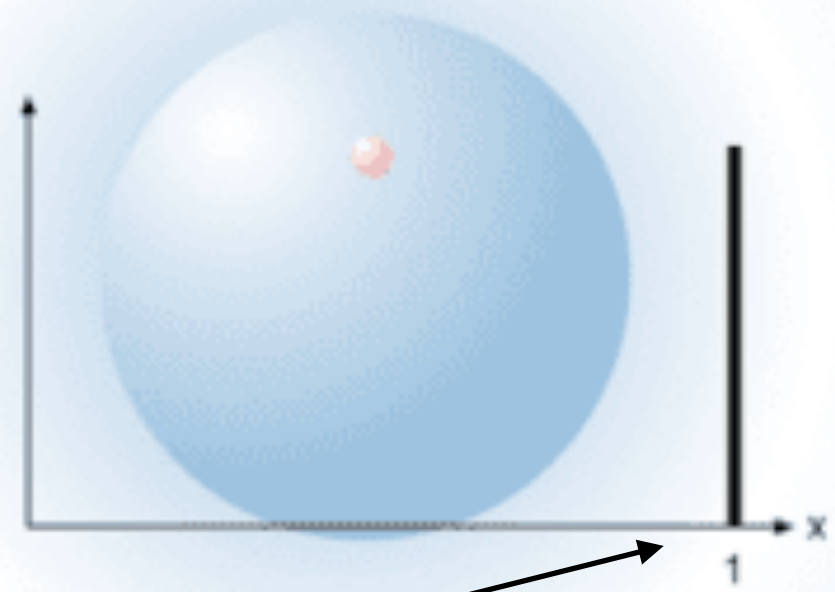
⇒ contributo = 100%

Esperimento EMC

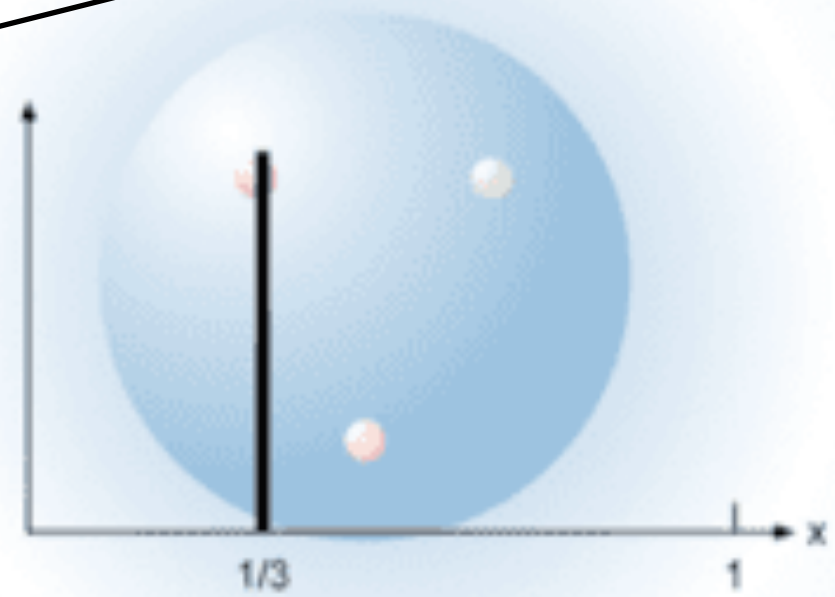
⇒ contributo = 30%

Esperimenti di scattering (diffusione)

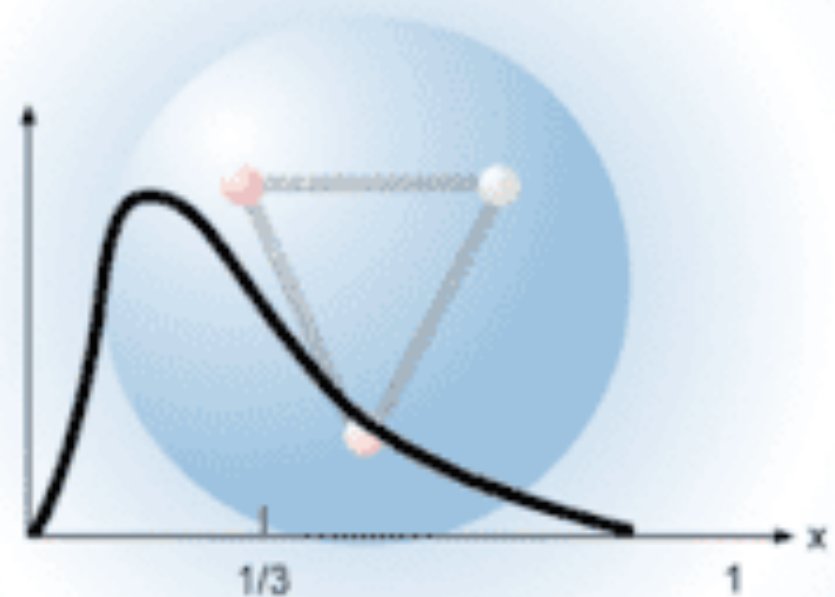




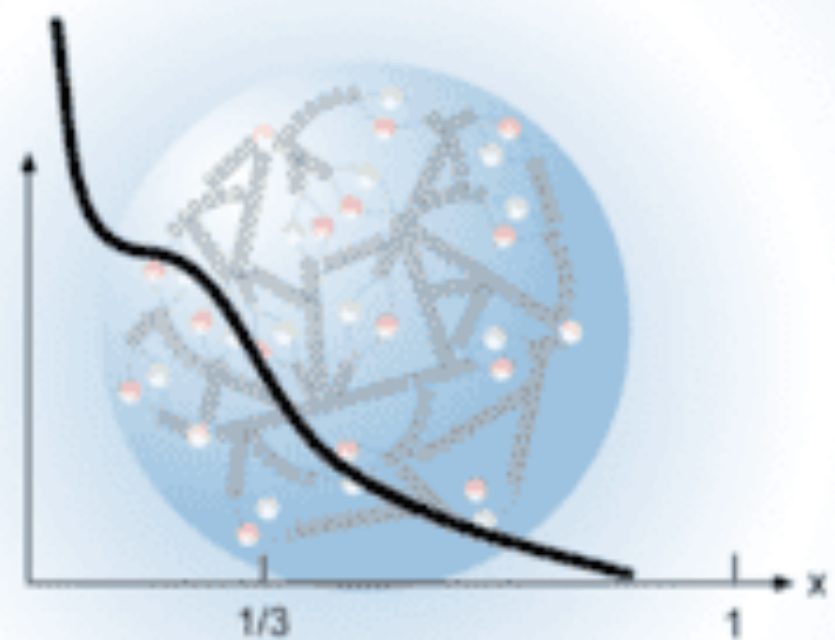
Urto contro una particella puntiforme



Urto contro tre particelle slegate



Urto contro tre particelle legate



Urto contro molte particelle legate

Frazione di
quantità di
moto

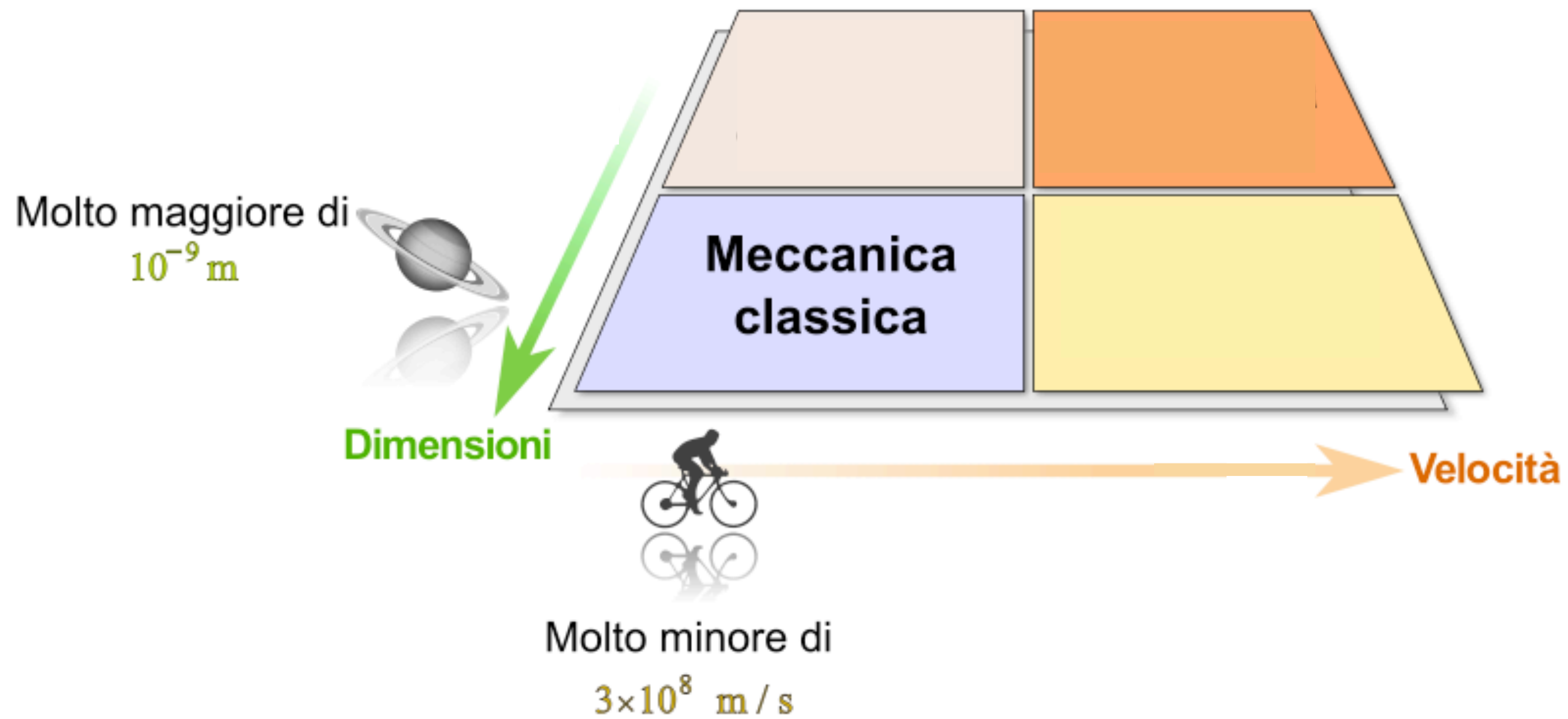


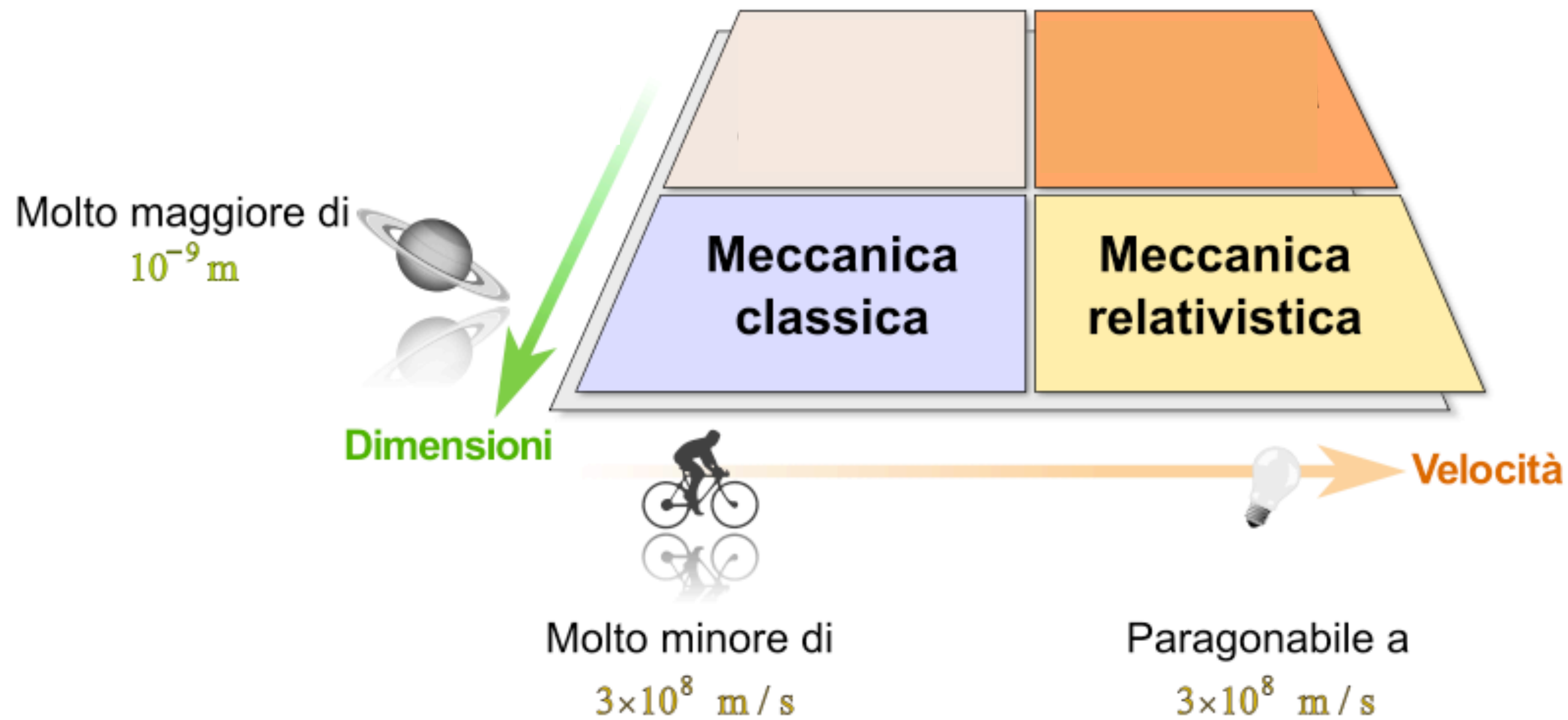


La Cromodinamica Quantistica (QCD)

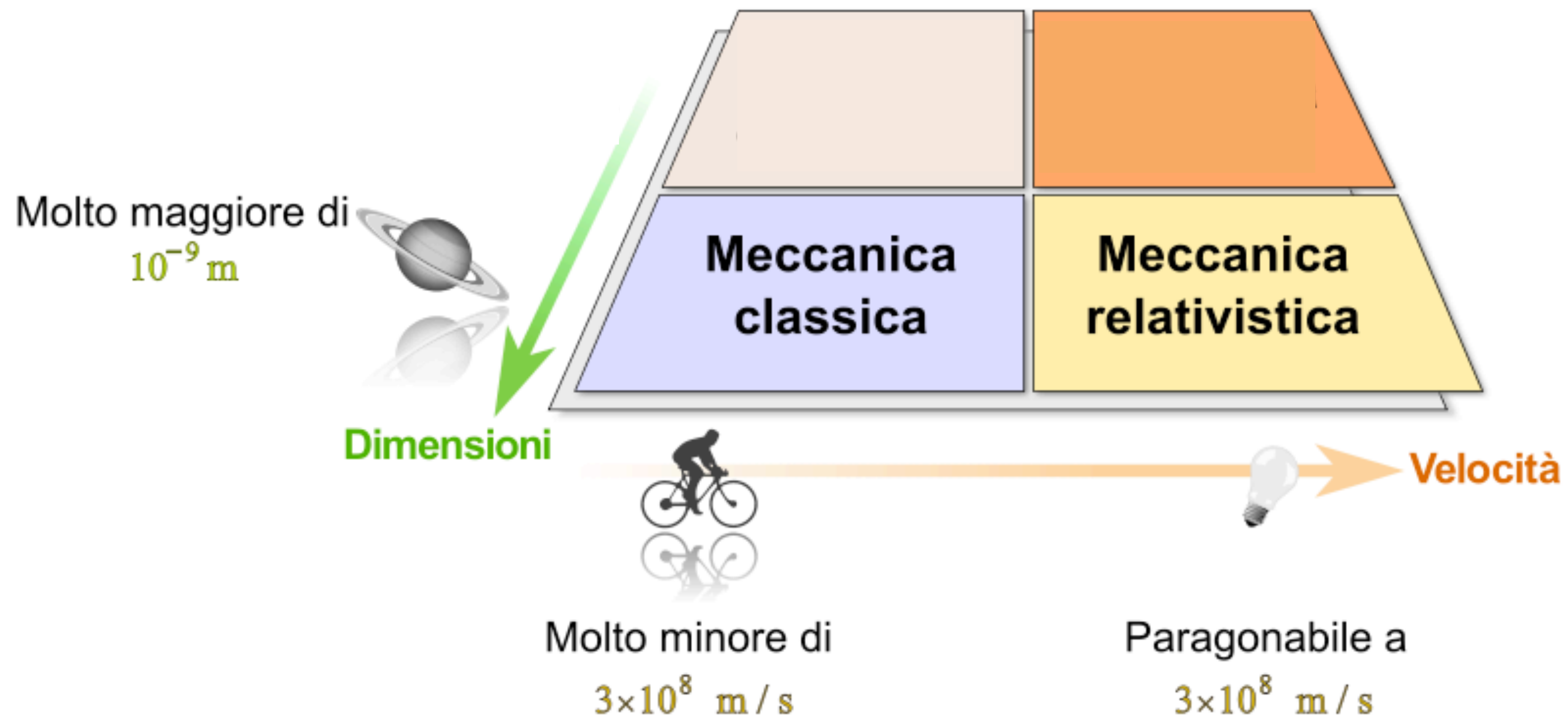
COME DESCRIVIAMO LE
PARTICELLE ELEMENTARI



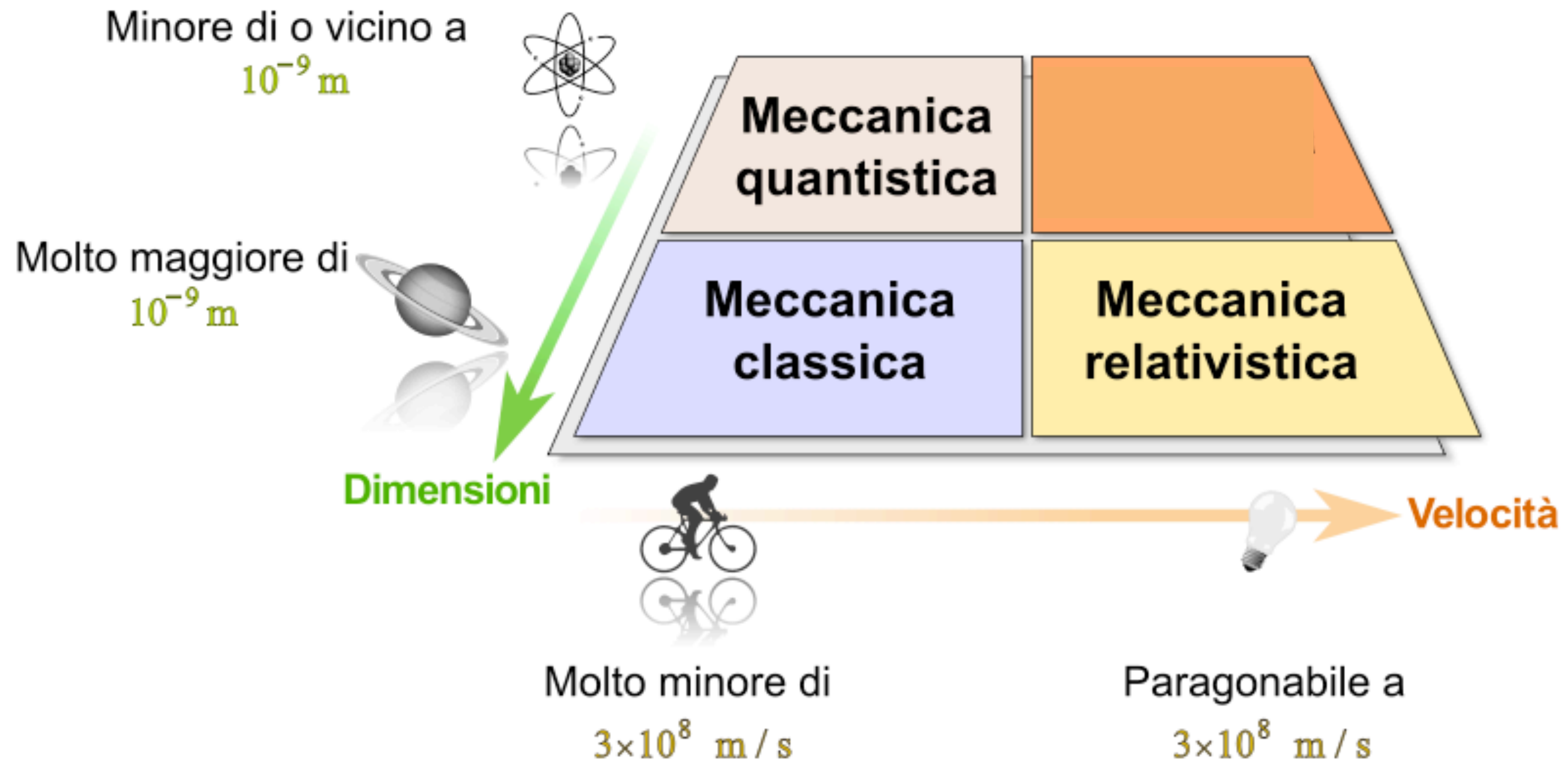


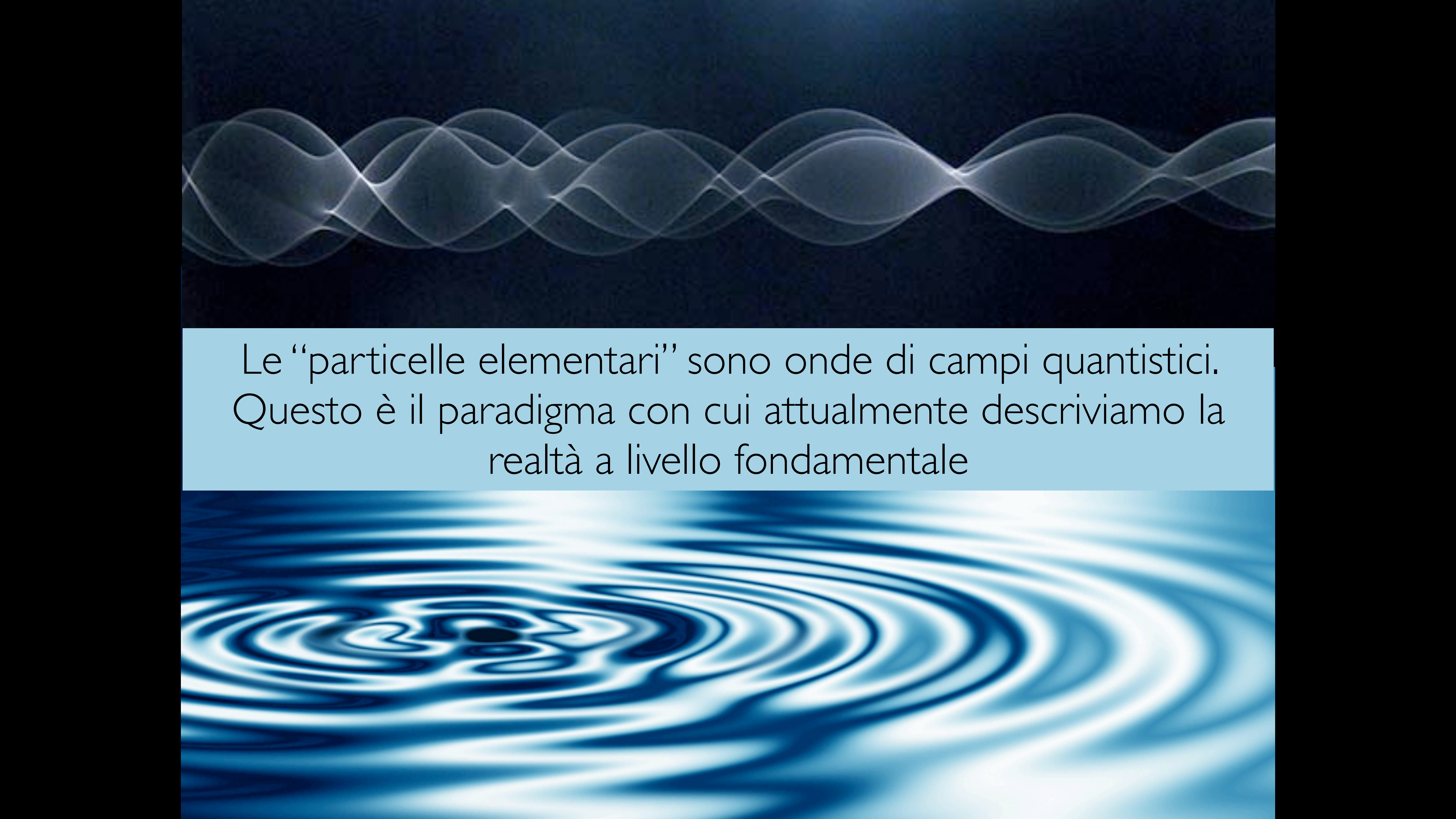


$$E = mc^2$$



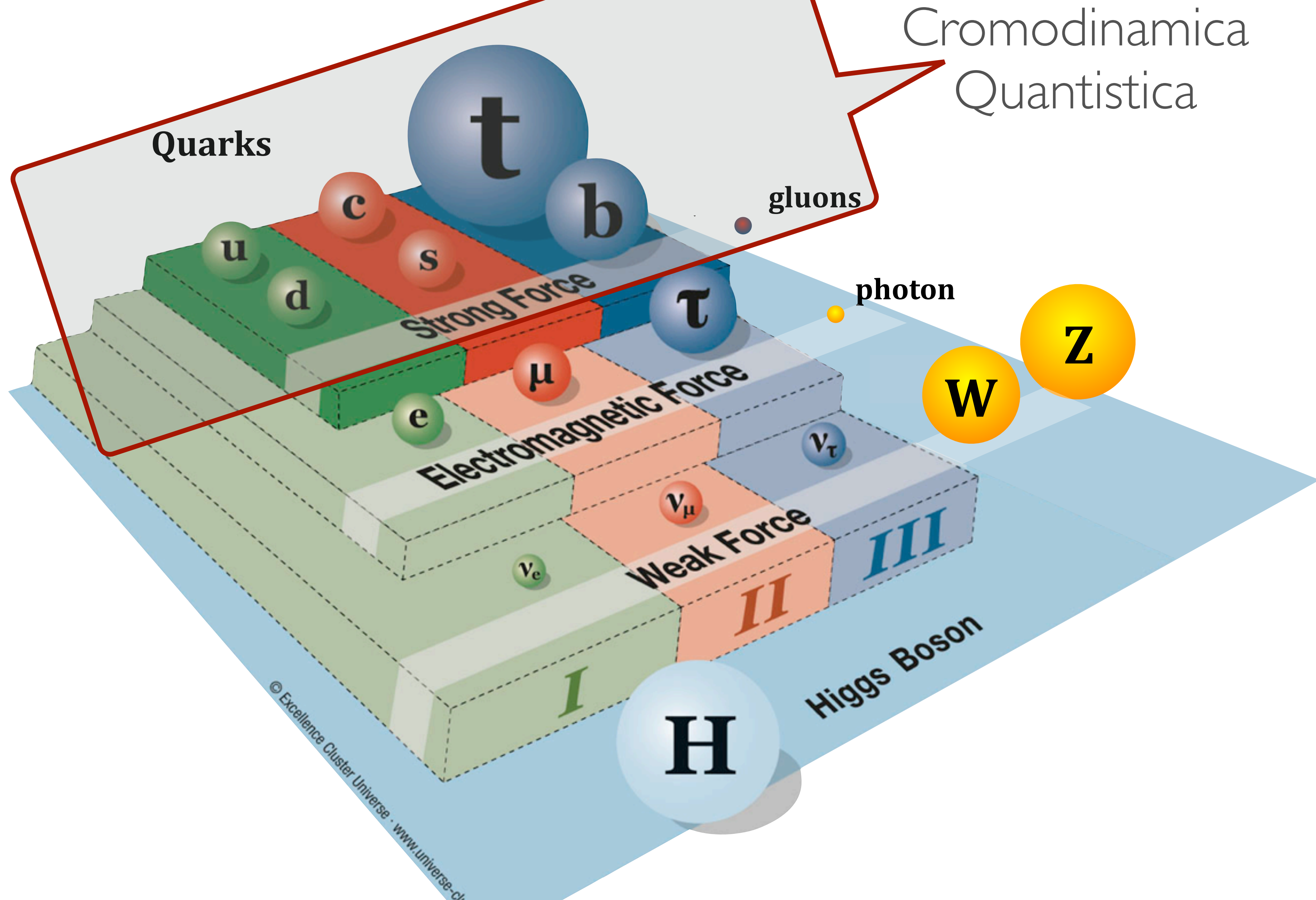
$$\Delta x \Delta p \geq \hbar/2$$



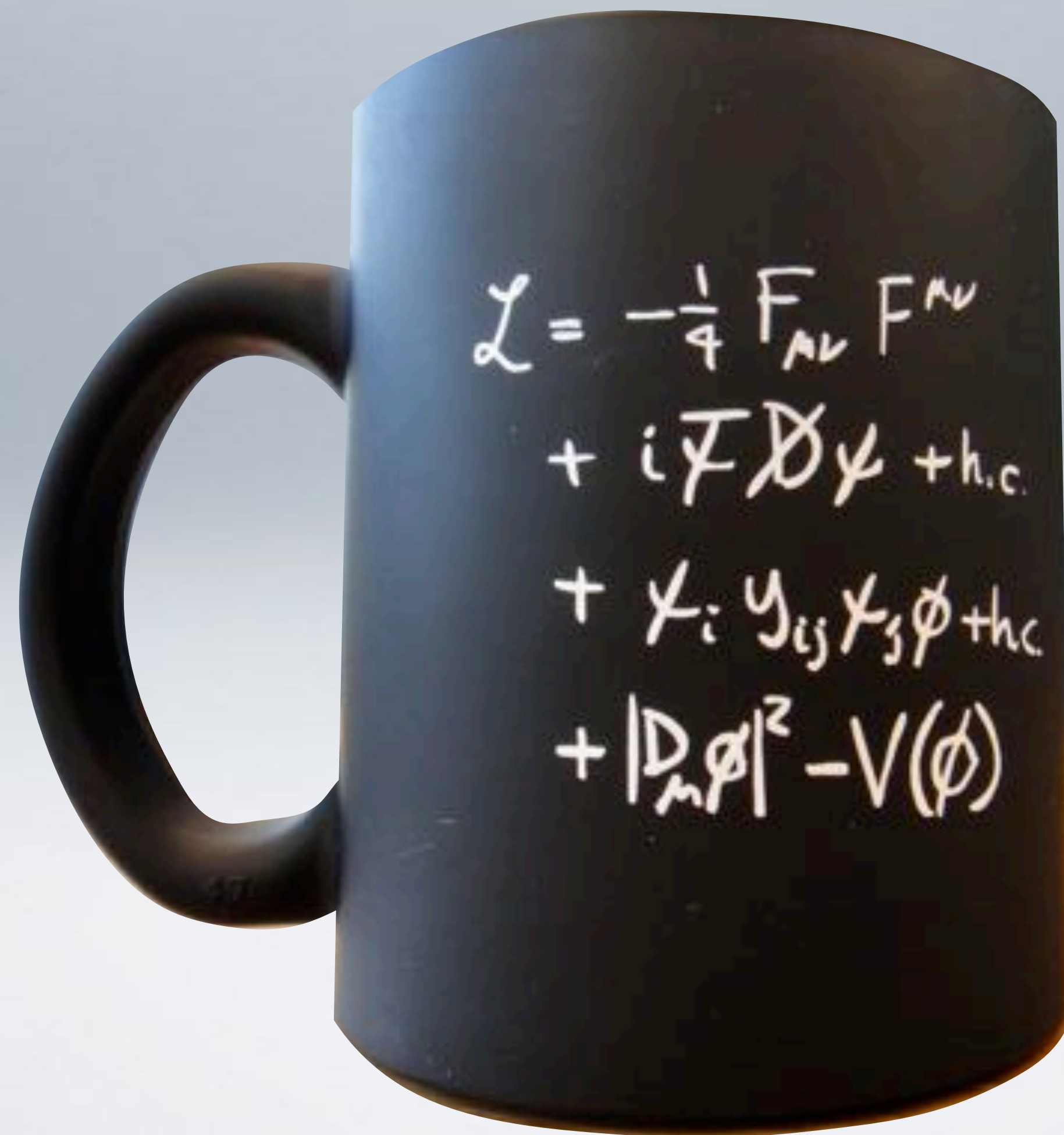
The image features a dark blue background with two distinct wave patterns. The top pattern consists of several overlapping, semi-transparent, light blue waves that create a sense of depth and movement. The bottom pattern is a series of concentric, glowing blue ripples that emanate from a central point, resembling water ripples or a quantum field. A light blue rectangular box is centered in the middle of the image, containing text.

Le “particelle elementari” sono onde di campi quantistici.
Questo è il paradigma con cui attualmente descriviamo la
realtà a livello fondamentale

Il Modello Standard



LA LAGRANGIANA DEL MODELLO STANDARD



IL MODELLO STANDARD E OLTRE

Elettrodebole

Beyond the Standard Model

Dark matter

Supersymmetry

Neutrinos Strings

Quantum Gravity

Higgs

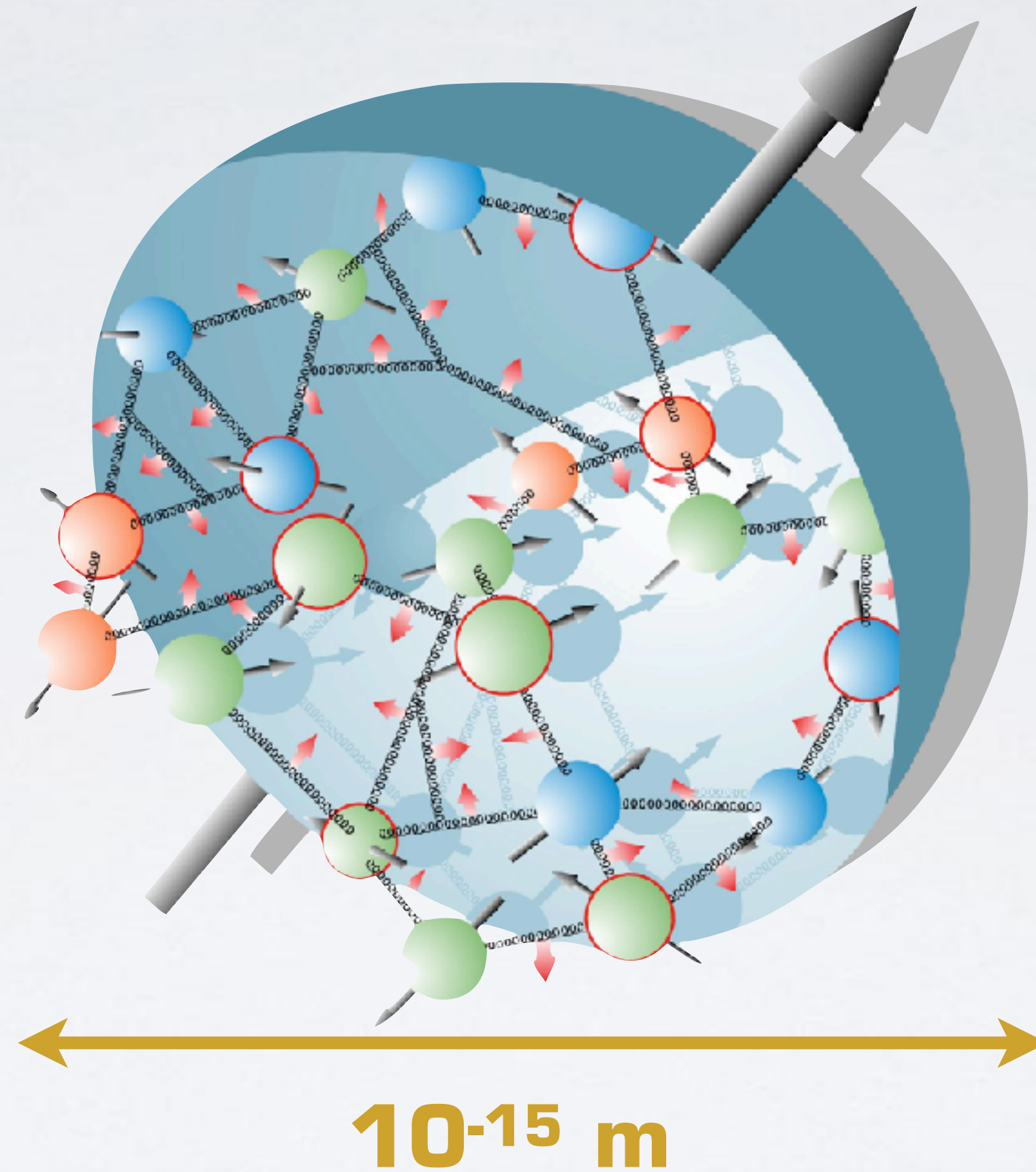
Cromodinamica Quantistica

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{QCD}} = \sum_q \bar{\psi}_q (i \not{\partial} - g \not{A} + m) \psi_q - \frac{1}{4} G_{\mu\nu}^a G_a^{\mu\nu}$$



QCD: il LATO SELVAGGIO del Modello Standard
sono più le cose che NON sappiamo ancora spiegare rispetto a quelle che
sappiamo spiegare...

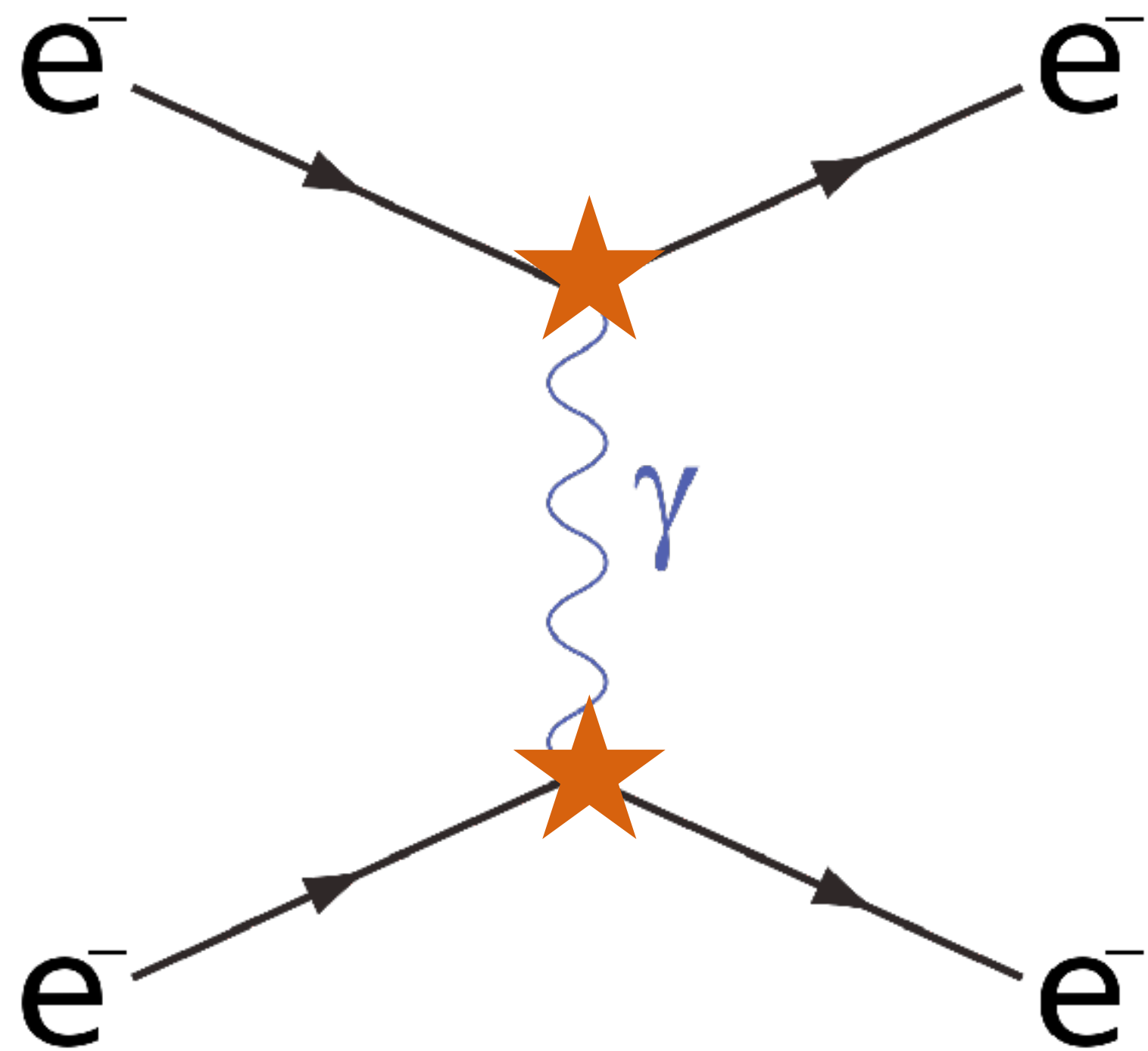
L'OBIETTIVO DELLA FISICA ADRONICA



Spiegare le proprietà degli adroni (=particelle formate da quark e gluoni) partendo dalla Lagrangiana di QCD

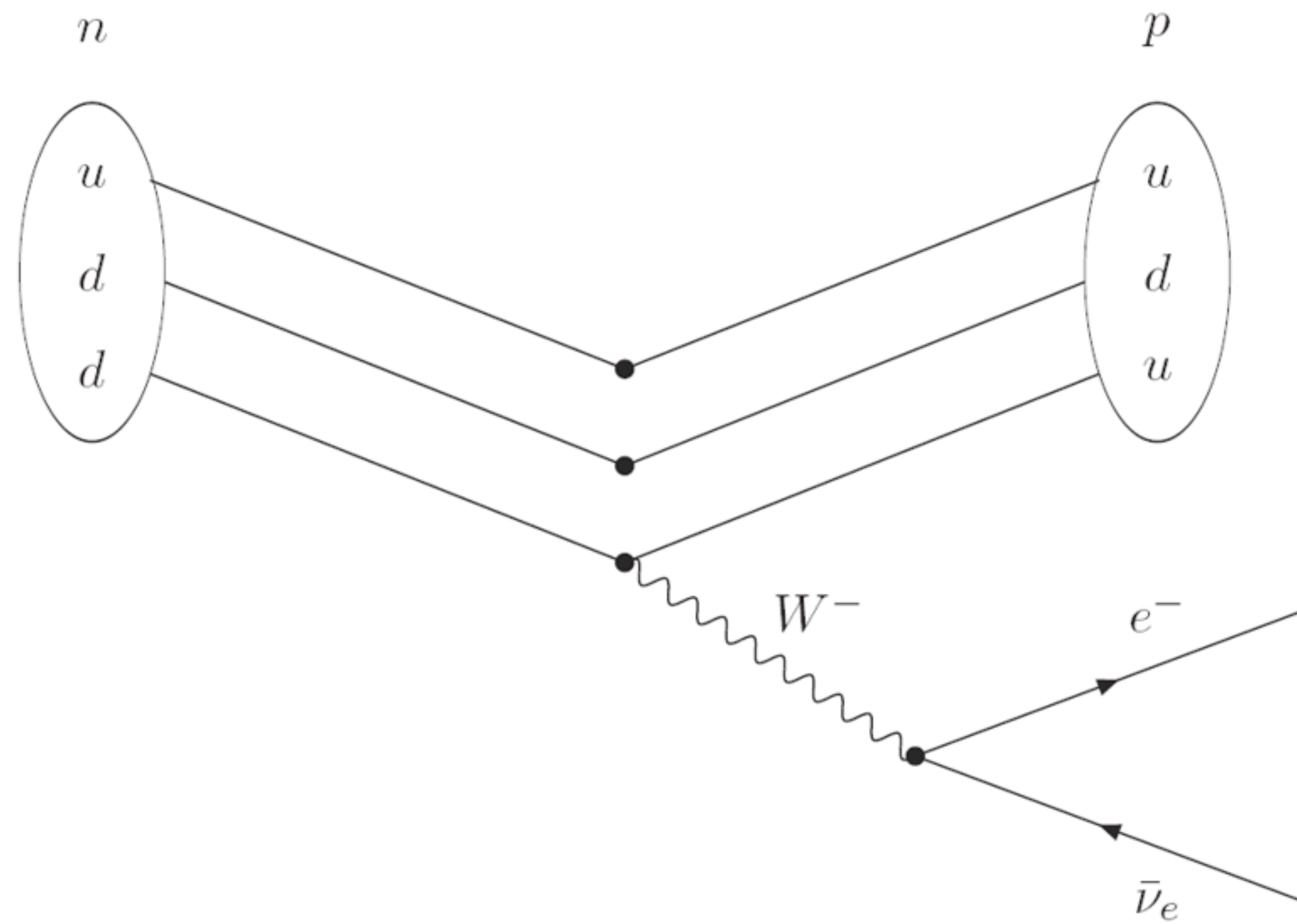
DIAGRAMMI DI FEYNMAN- ELETTRODINAMICA

★ proporzionale a
costante di accoppiamento



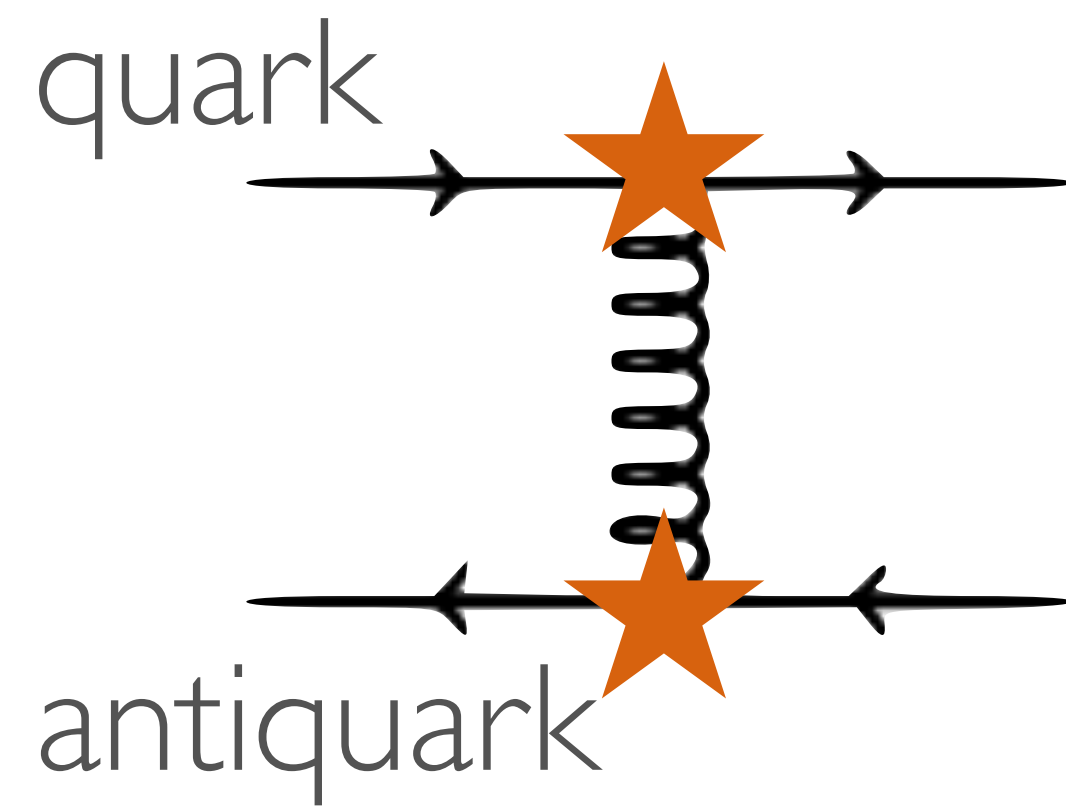
La costante di accoppiamento è piccola
Il fotone è di un solo tipo
Il fotone è neutro

DIAGRAMMI DI FEYNMAN- INTERAZIONE DEBOLE



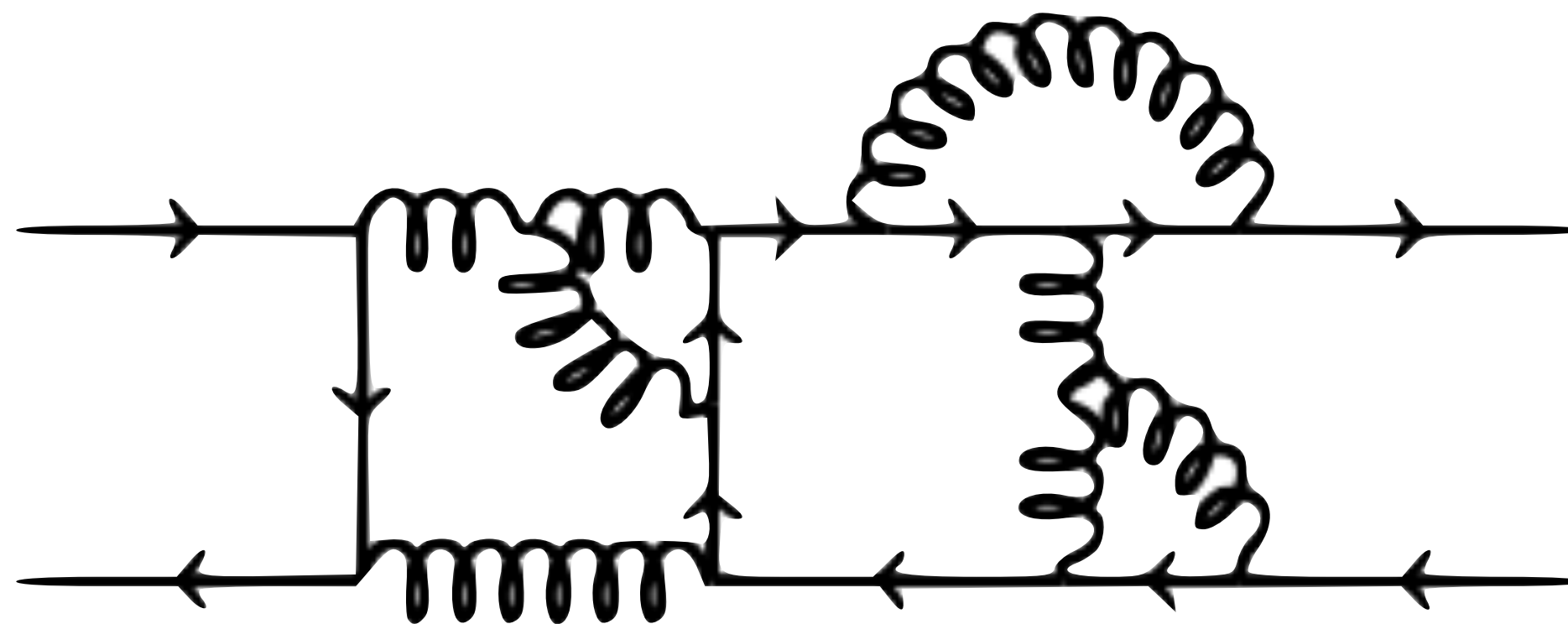
La costante di accoppiamento è piccola
Esistono tre mediatori della forza
Possono avere carica elettrica

DIAGRAMMI DI FEYNMAN- QCD



★ proporzionale a
costante di accoppiamento

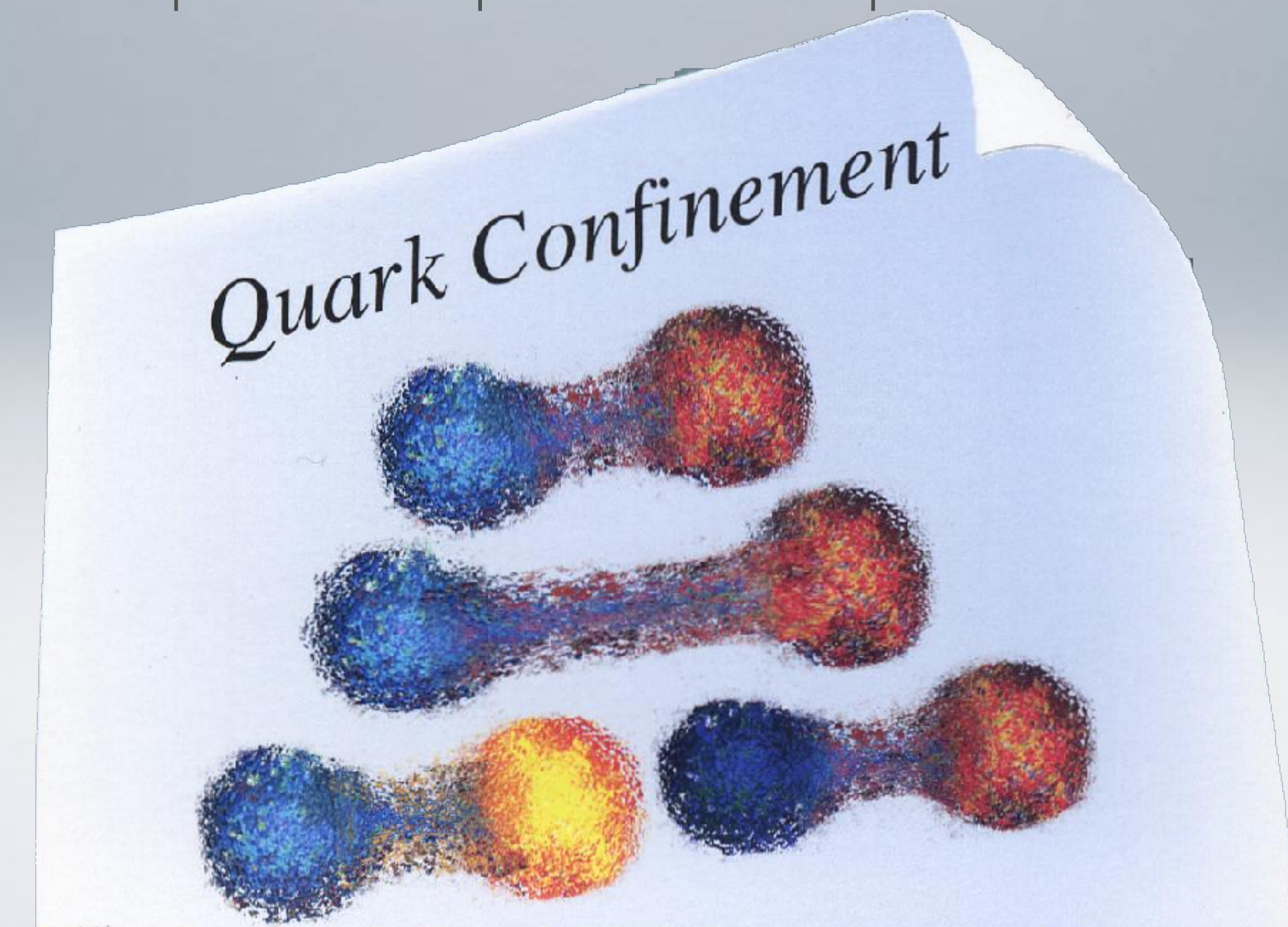
La costante di accoppiamento è grande
Ci sono 8 tipi di gluoni
I gluoni portano carica di colore



Se la costante di accoppiamento
è piccola, possiamo fermarci a
un certo punto, altrimenti
bisogna includere infiniti
diagrammi

IL CONFINAMENTO

Se si tenta di separare due quark, l'attrazione tra i due è talmente forte che diventa energeticamente favorevole creare una coppia di quark-antiquark. Non è possibile avere quark isolati.



IL CONFINAMENTO

È uno dei “Millennium Problems”
del Clay Mathematics Institute

<http://www.claymath.org/millennium-problems>

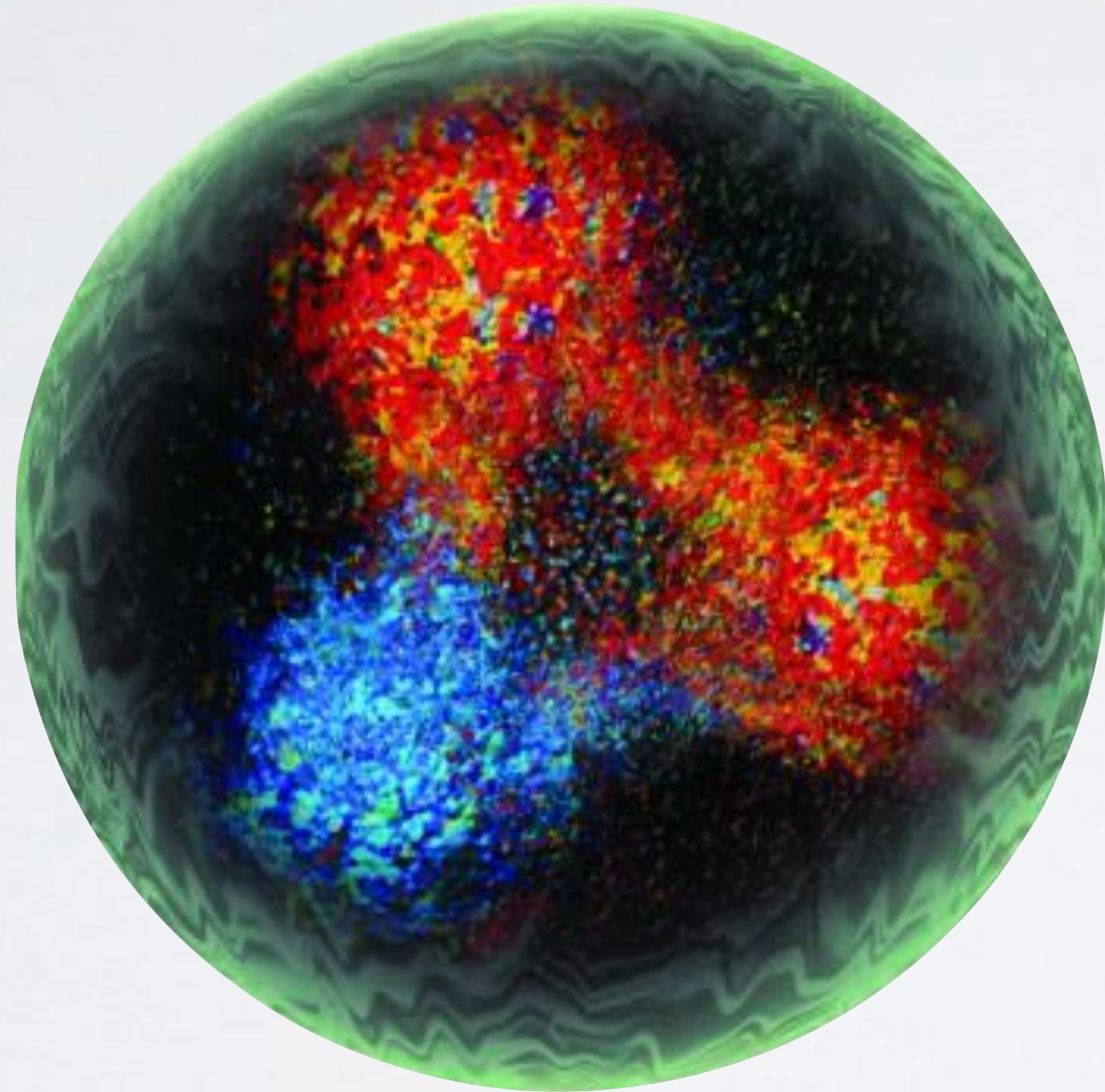
Problema aperto

“ Yang-Mills Existence and Mass Gap: Prove that for any compact simple gauge group G , quantum Yang-Mills theory of R_4 exists and has a mass gap $\Delta > 0$. ”

Per intenderci, sta insieme alla prova che esista una soluzione delle equazioni di Navier-Stokes

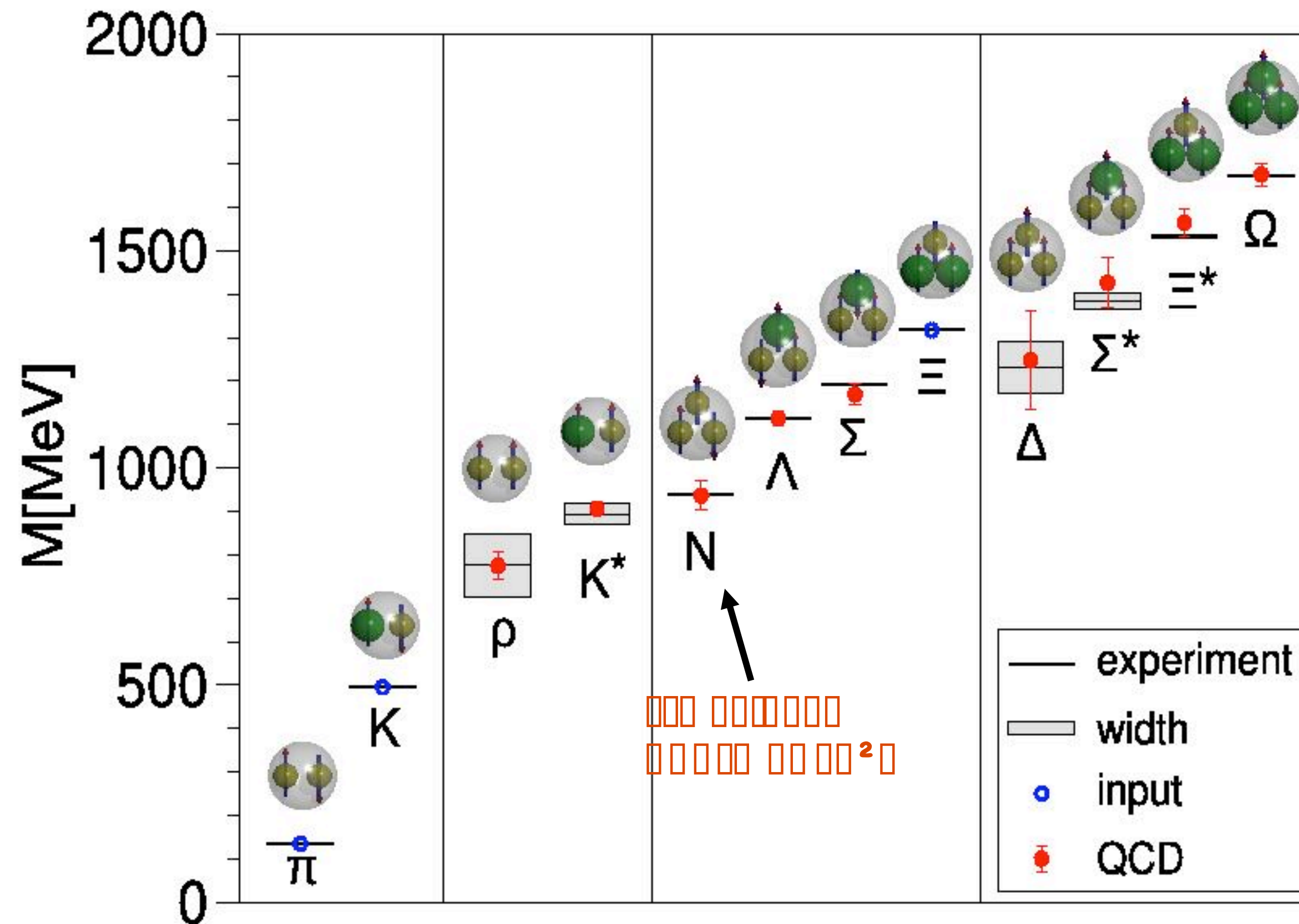
LA MASSA

$$M_p = 938 \text{ MeV}$$



Quasi tutta la massa del protone (e quindi della materia intorno a noi) è dovuta all'energia di legame creata dai gluoni.

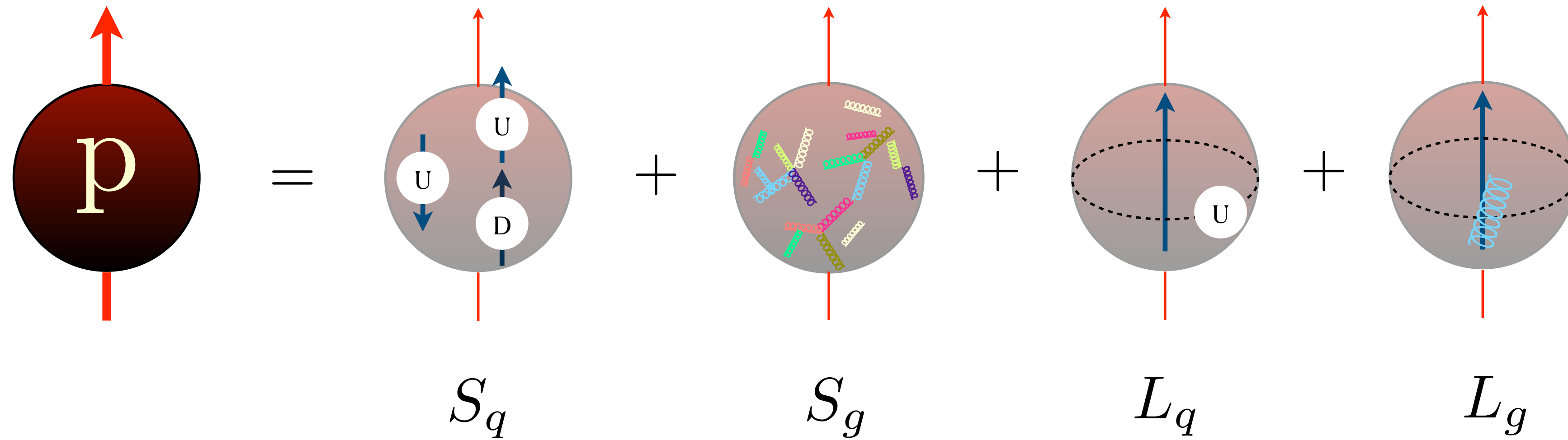
LA MASSA



Durr et al., Science 322 (08)

Calcoli fatti usando la “QCD su reticolo” o “lattice QCD” riproducono correttamente la massa degli adroni

La “crisi dello spin”



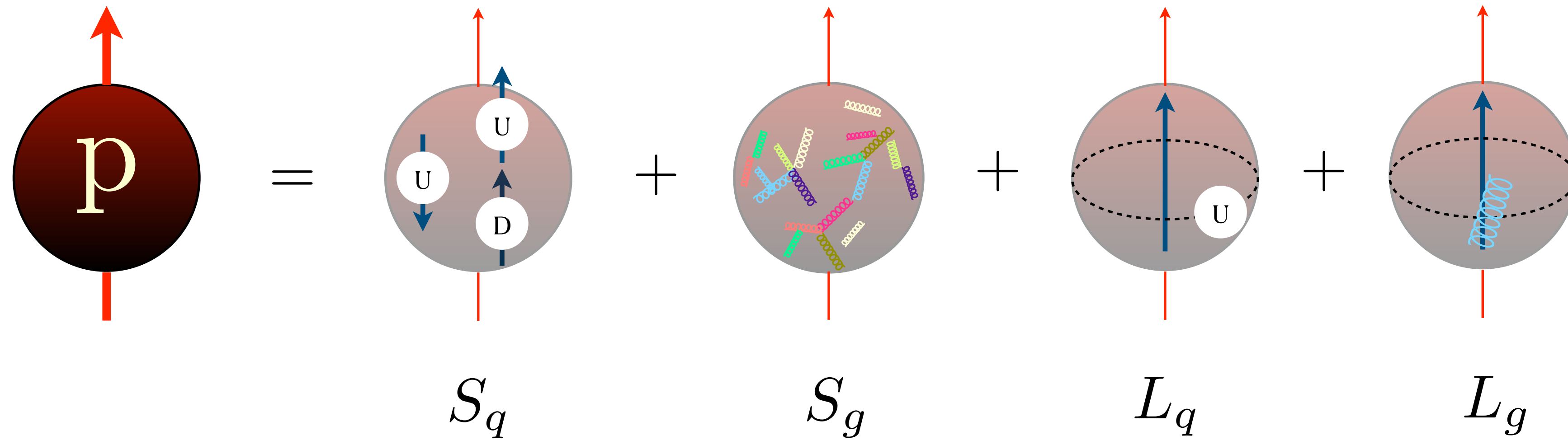
Nuove idee

Contributo del momento angolare L dei quark

Contributo del gluone

Contributo di coppie $q\bar{q}$

La “crisi dello spin”



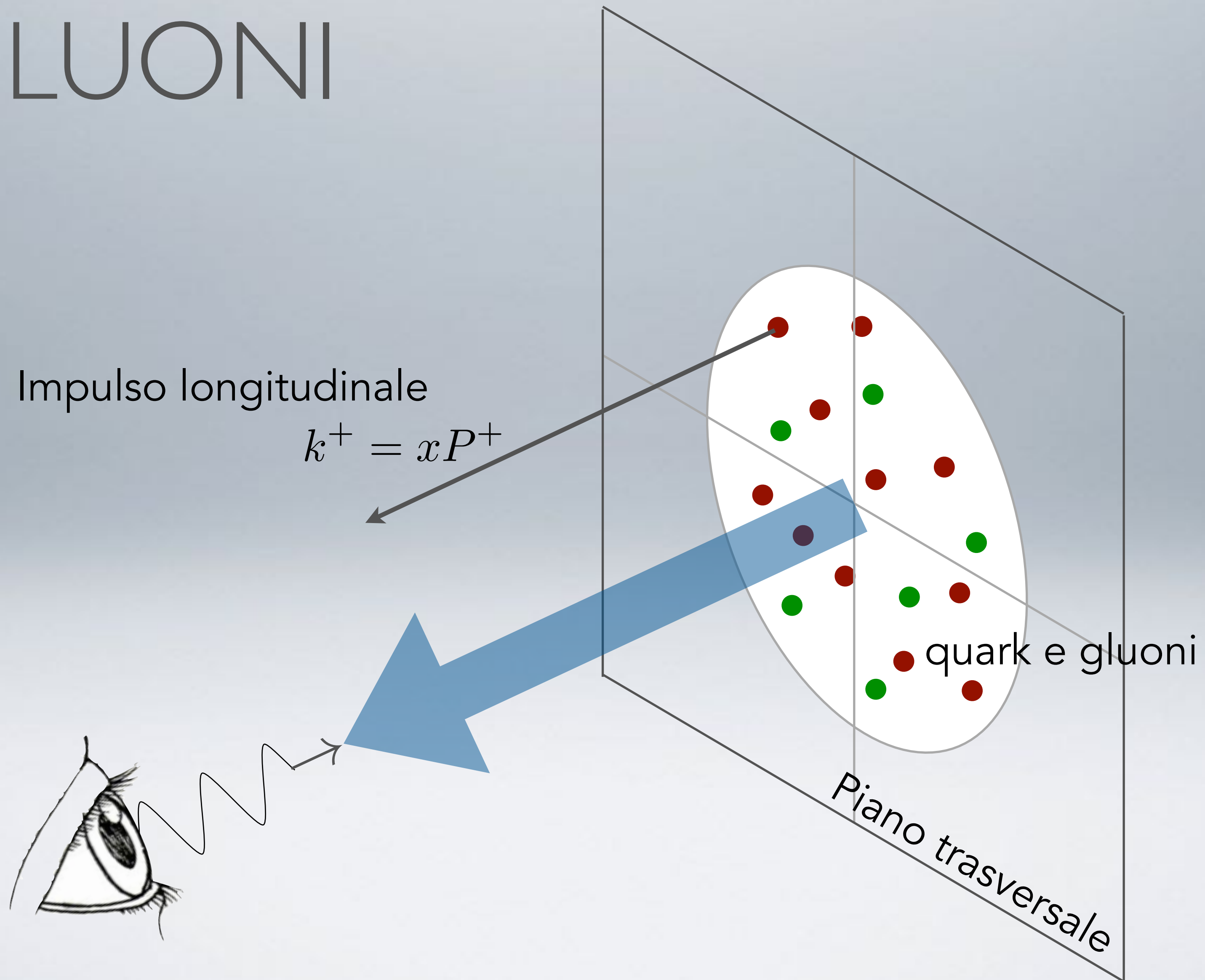
Distribuzioni di momento trasversale dei quark (TMDs)

Nuovi metodi

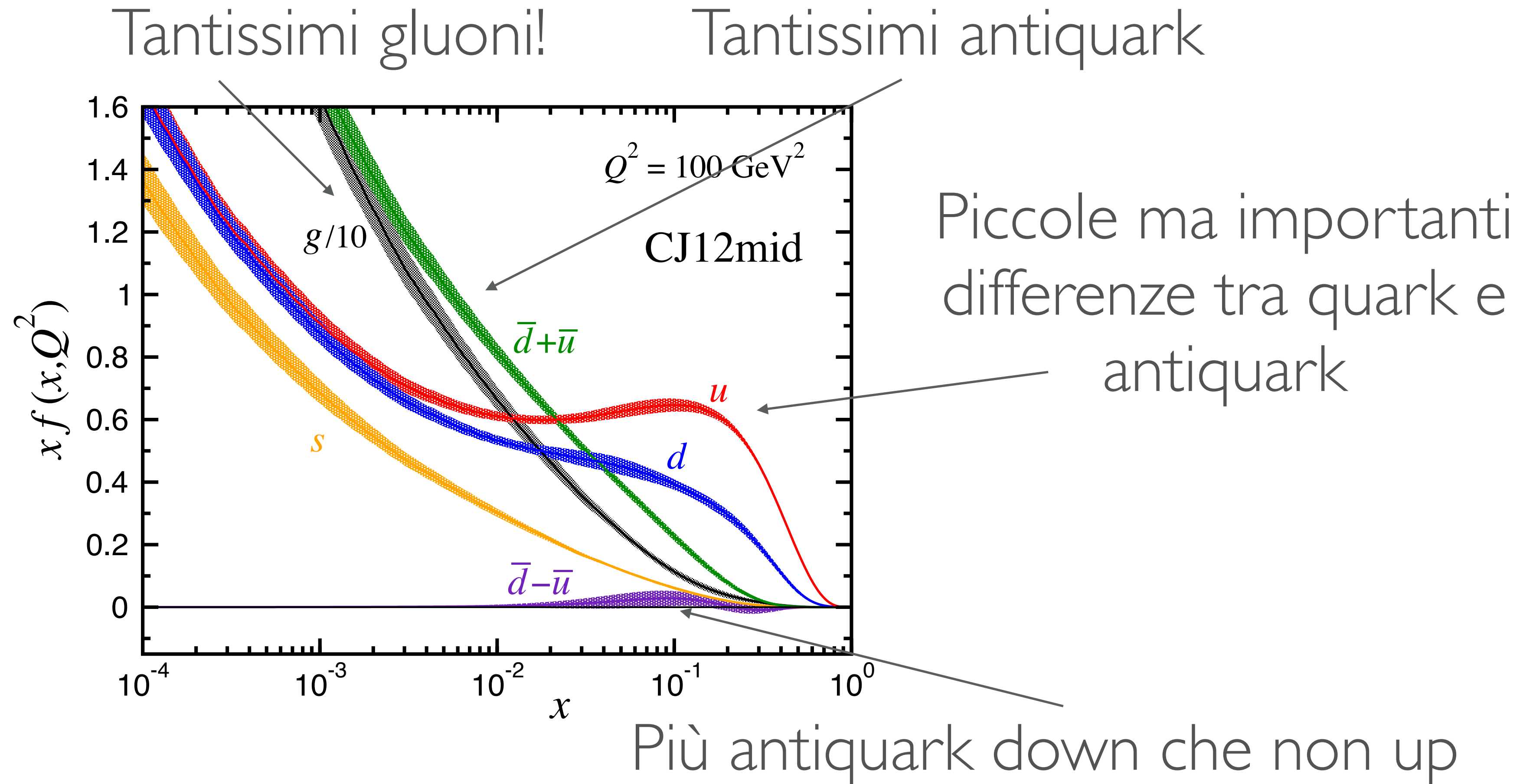
Distribuzioni partoniche generalizzate (GPDs)

Distribuzioni di Wigner

LA DISTRIBUZIONE DI QUARK E GLUONI

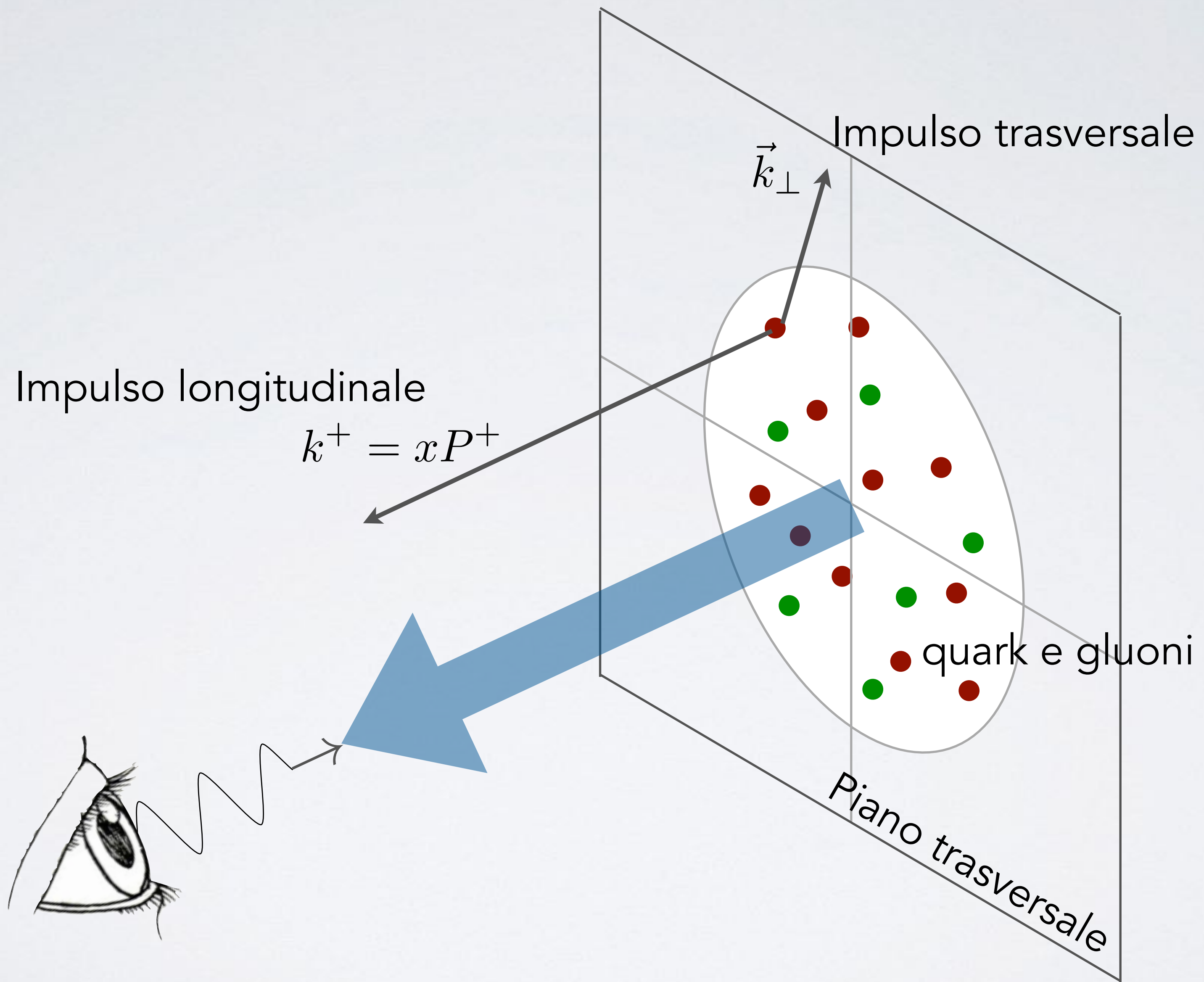


FUNZIONI DI DISTRIBUZIONE



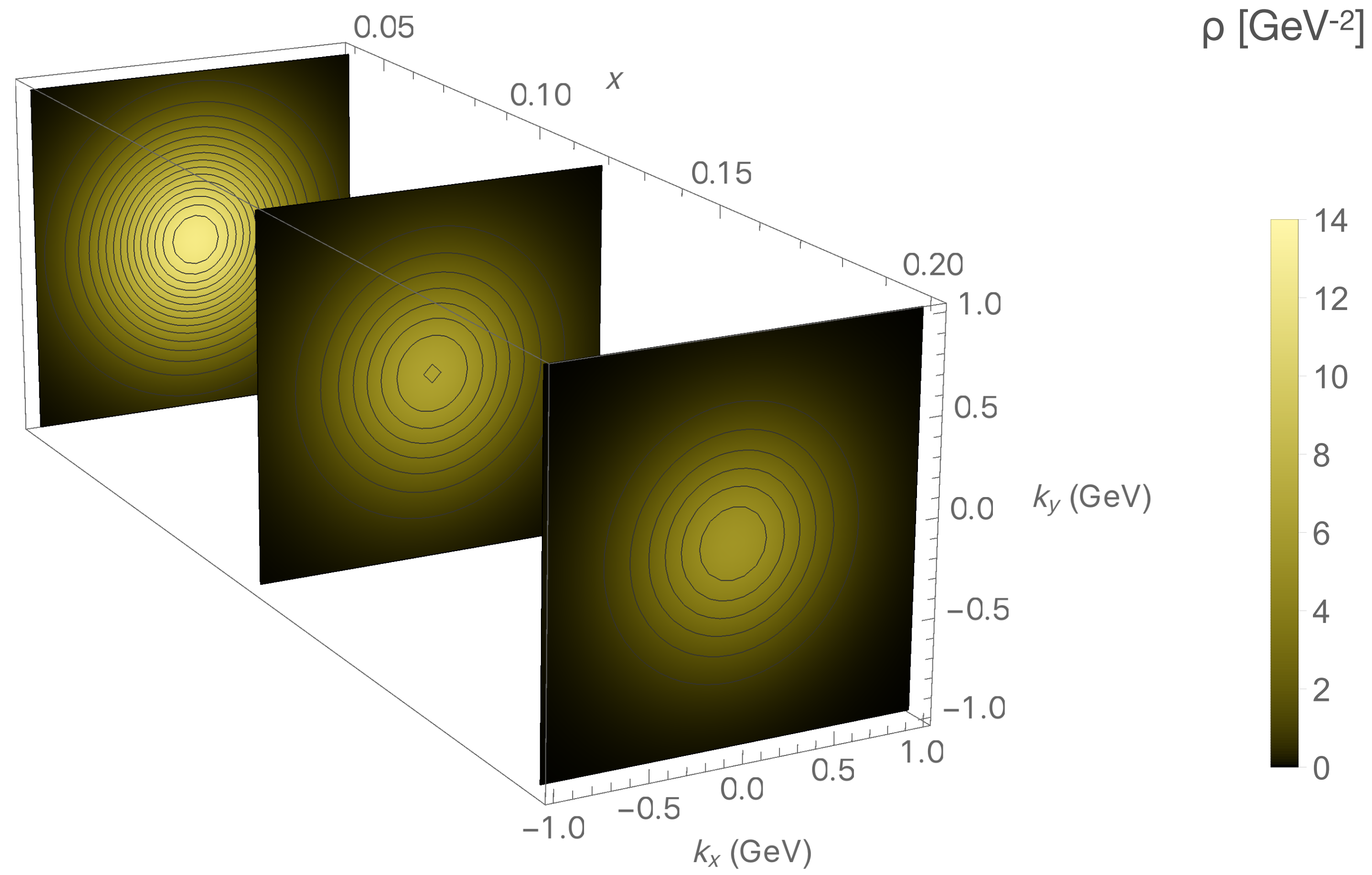
CTEQ - JLAB 12 set, Owens, Accardi, Melnitchouk, PRD87 (13)

DISTRIBUZIONI IN 3D



DISTRIBUZIONI IN 3D

Problema aperto



CERN Accelerator Complex

Large Hadron Collider
(LHC, 2008)

27km long
150m underground

Lake Geneva

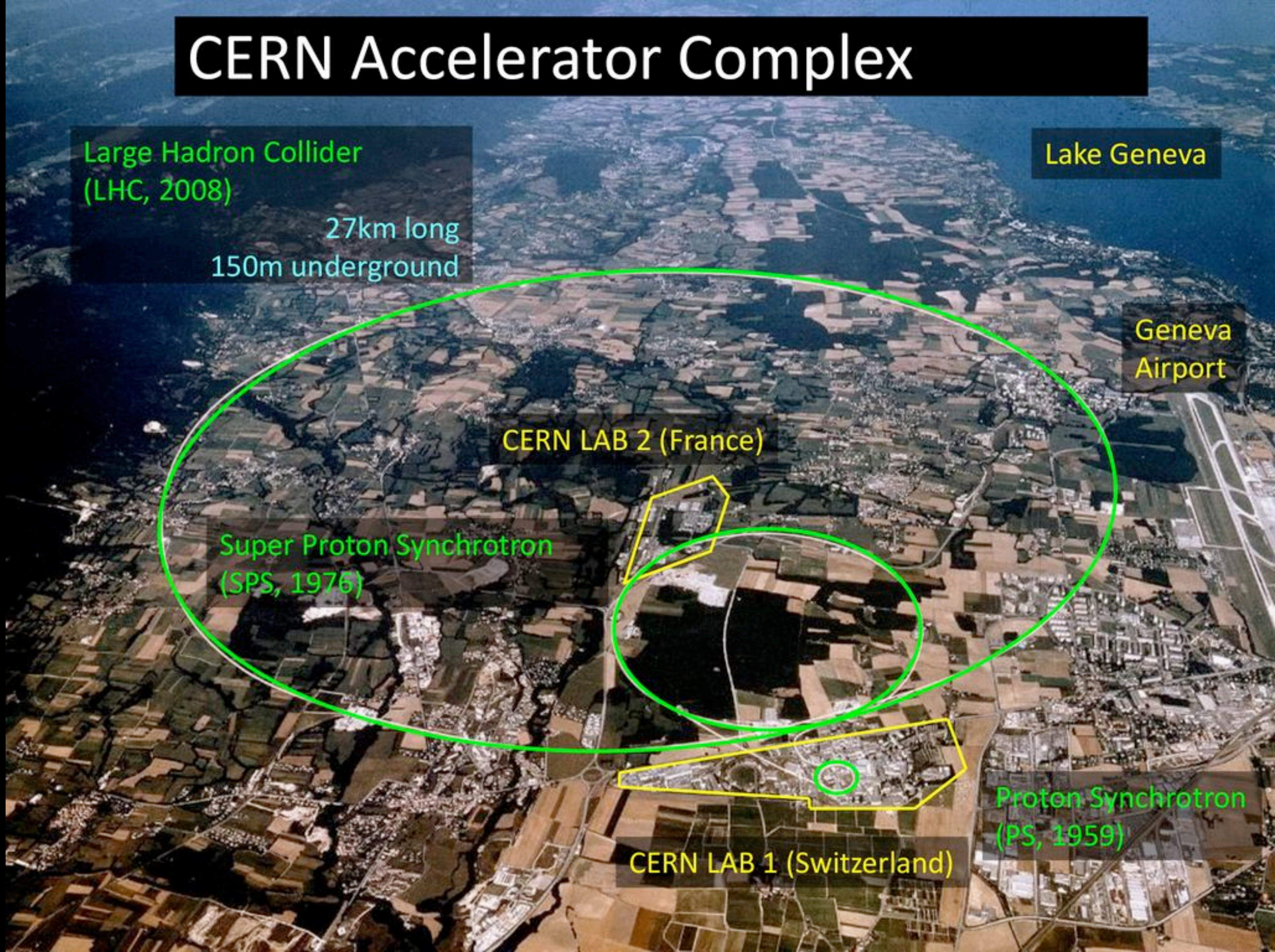
Geneva
Airport

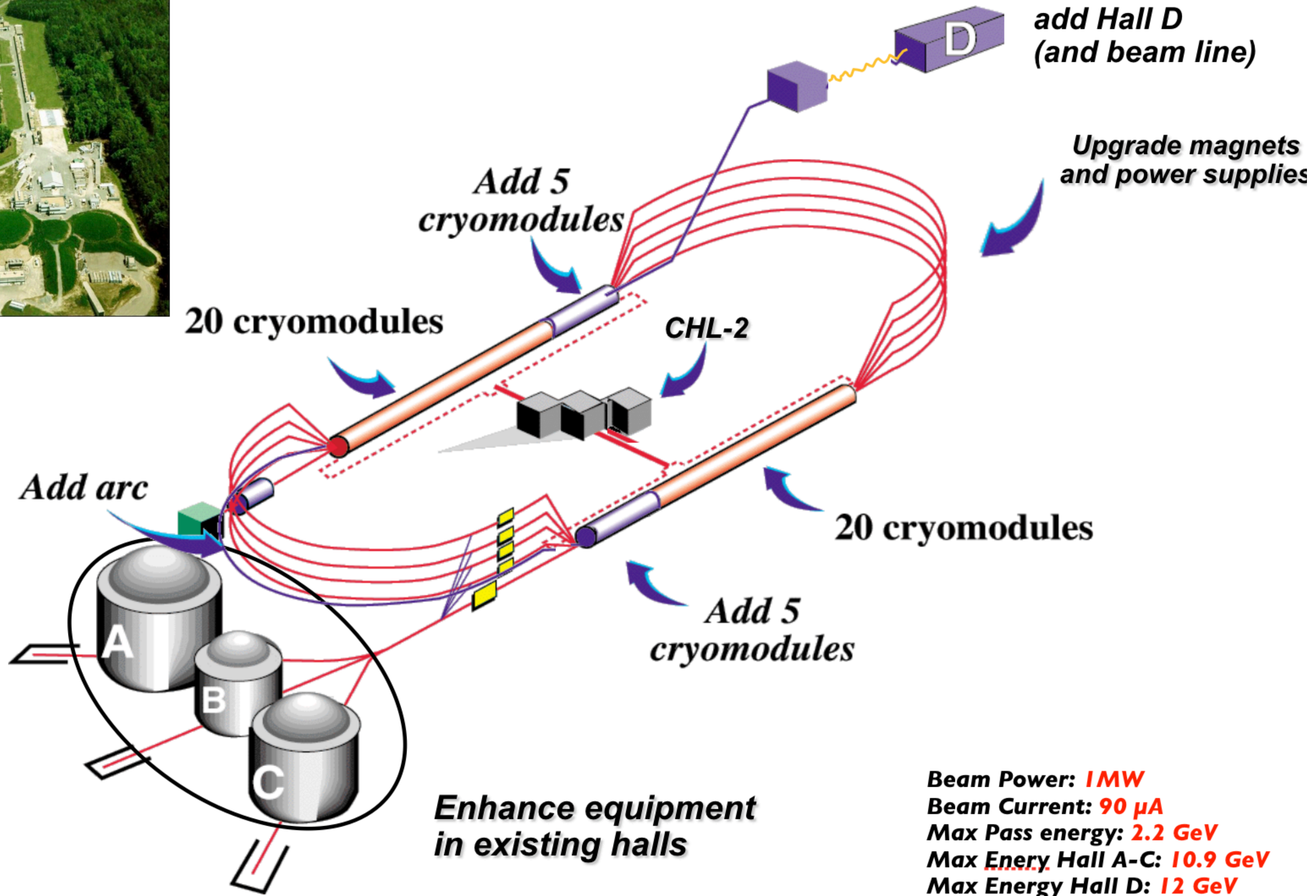
CERN LAB 2 (France)

Super Proton Synchrotron
(SPS, 1976)

Proton Synchrotron
(PS, 1959)

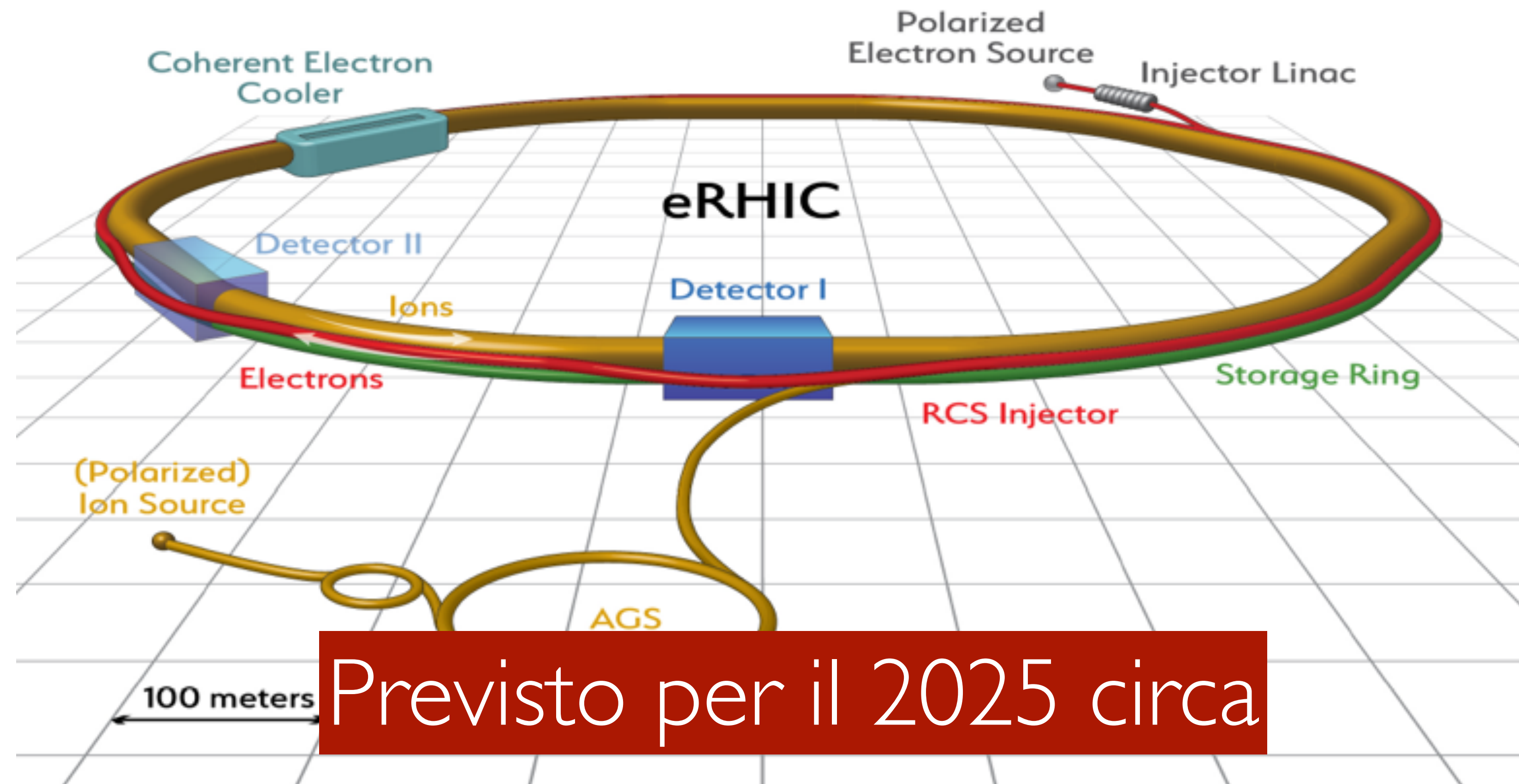
CERN LAB 1 (Switzerland)





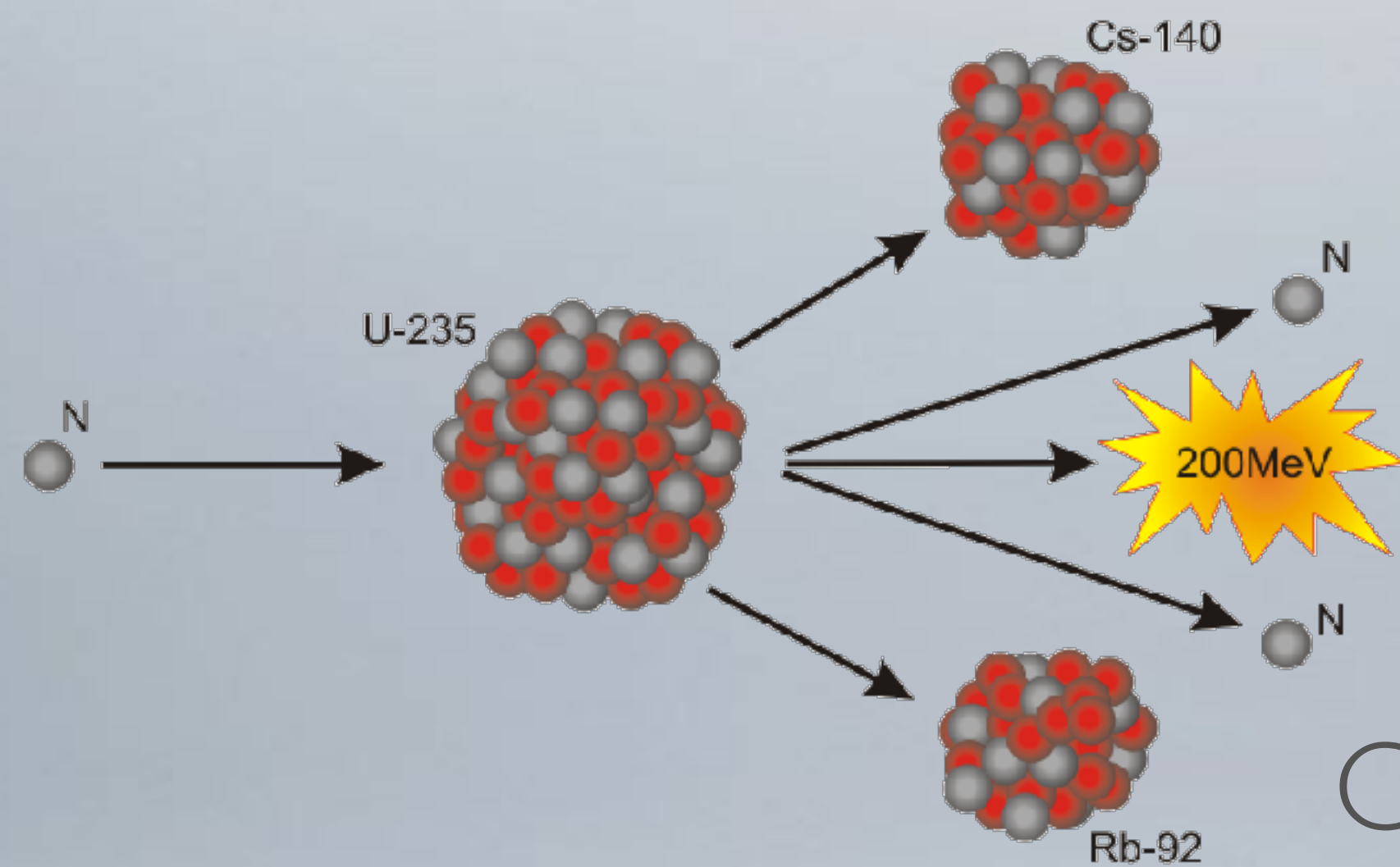
ELECTRON ION COLLIDER

Brookhaven Natl. Lab.



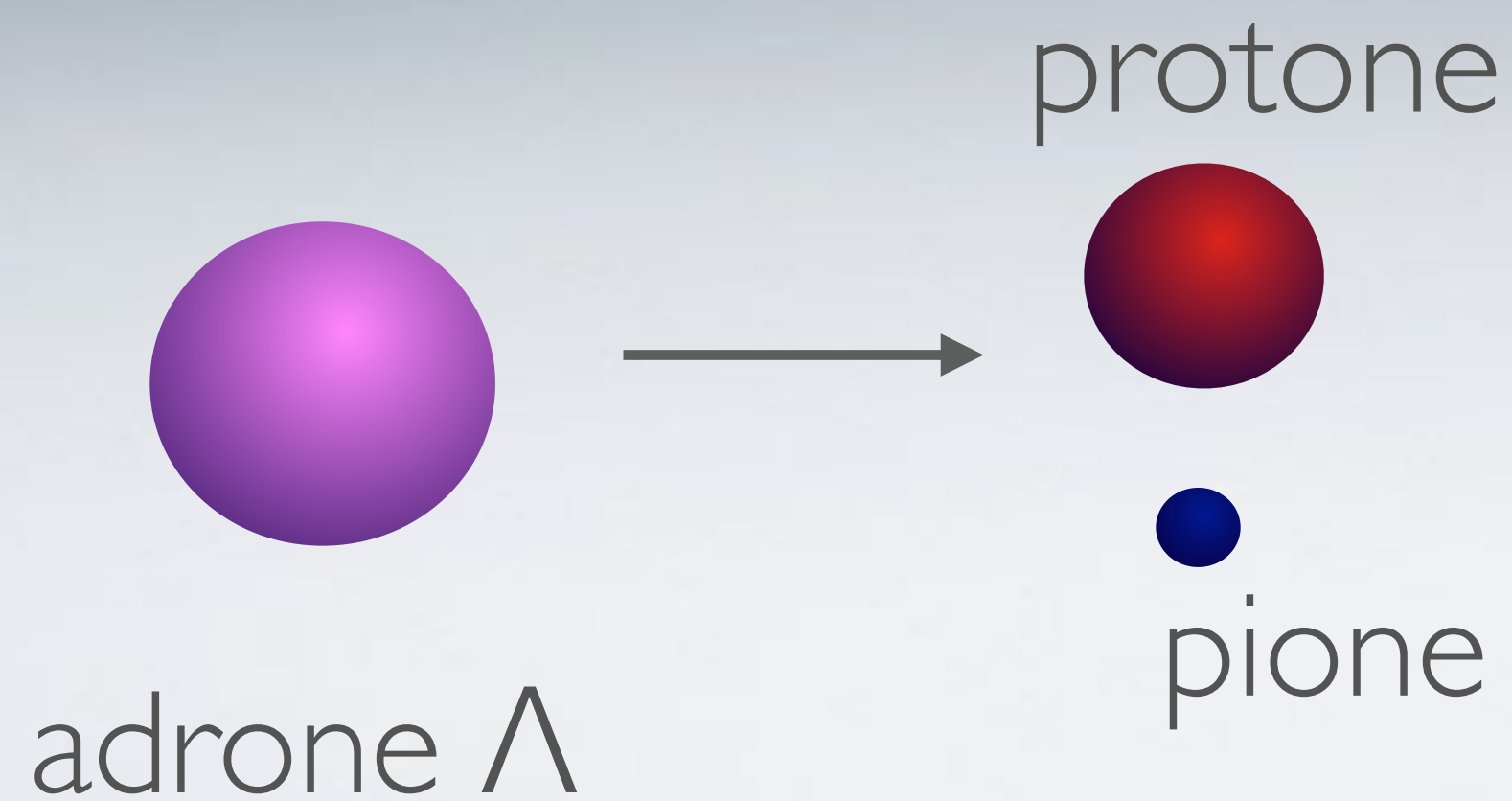
Previsto per il 2025 circa

APPLICAZIONI ?



Fissione nucleare

Circa 1 MeV per nucleone



Decadimento adronico

Circa 100 MeV per nucleone

DAWN OF THE QUARK AGES

Dopo l'era dell'elettronica e della fotonica

A HOST OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES IS SET TO EXPLODE OUT OF THE ATOMIC NUCLEUS. MICHAEL BROOKS REPORTS

ASK them to name their heart's truest desire, and many a science nut might say the answer to life, the universe and everything – or, failing that, a fully functioning lightsaber.

Odd, then, that one field of scientific enquiry that could conceivably provide both gets so little press. After all the hoopla of the past few years, you could be forgiven for believing that understanding matter's fundamentals is all about the Higgs boson – the “God particle” that explains where mass comes from.

The Higgs is undoubtedly important. But it is actually pretty insignificant for real stuff like you and me, accounting for just 1 or 2 per cent of normal matter's mass. And the huge energy needed to make a Higgs means we're unlikely to see technology exploiting it any time soon.

Two more familiar, though less glamorous, particles might offer more. Get to grips with their complexities, and we can begin to explain how the material universe came to exist and persist, and explore mind-boggling technologies: not just lightsabers, but new sorts of lasers and materials to store energy, too. That's easier said than done, granted – but with a lot of computing muscle, it is what we are starting to do.

Chances are you know about protons and neutrons. Collectively known as nucleons, these two particles make up the nucleus, the

meaty heart of the atom. (In terms of mass, the weedy electrons that orbit the nucleus are insignificant contributors to the atom.)

The headline difference between protons and neutrons is that protons have a positive electrical charge, whereas neutrons are neutral. But they also differ ever so slightly in mass: in the units that particle physicists use, the neutron weighs in at 939.6 megaelectronvolts (MeV) and the proton at 938.3 MeV.

That's a difference of just 0.14 per cent, but boy does it matter. The neutrons' extra mass means they decay into protons, not the other way around. Protons team up with negatively charged electrons to form robust, structured, electrically neutral atoms, rather than the world being a featureless neutron gloom.

“The whole universe would be very different if the proton were heavier than the neutron,” says particle theorist Chris Sachrajda of the University of Southampton in the UK. “The proton is stable, so atoms are stable and we're stable.” Our current best guess is that the proton's half-life, a measure of its stability over time, is at least 10^{32} years. Given that the universe only has 10^{10} or so years behind it, that is a convoluted way of saying no one has ever seen a proton decay.

The exact amount of the neutron's excess

baggage that hydrogen, with orbiting electrons, big bang, before fusion in the other chemical neutron mass bigger, adding complex electrical energy barrier impossible” of the Mass. The universe

But had there less, hydrogen changed to helium before the cosmos would disappoint and hydrogen via a process neutrons and the neutrino

All of that conclusion a masses. “We wouldn't exist University of But where The question answer. We've protons and particles, but

Overall balance between colours.

Quarks also carry electrical charge – the up quark has a charge of $+2/3$, the down quark $-1/3$. But oddly they only ever make up larger particles with zero or whole-number electric charge.



WALT DISNEY STUDIOS/SUPPLIED BY LMK

scale. “I think the possibility of powerful X-ray or gamma-ray sources exploiting sophisticated nuclear physics is speculative, but not outrageously so,” says Wilczek.

Gluons, unlike photons, also interact with themselves, and this could conceivably see them confining each other into a writhing pillar of energy – hence Wilczek's tongue-in-cheek suggestion they might make a *Star Wars*-style lightsaber. More immediate, perhaps, is the prospect of better ways to harness and store energy. “Nuclei can pack a lot of energy into a small space,” says Wilczek.

“If we can do really accurate nuclear chemistry by calculation as opposed to having hit-and-miss experiments, it could very well lead to dense energy storage.”

For Fodor, that's still a long way off – but with the accuracy that calculations are now reaching, the road is at last open. “These are mostly dreams today, but now we can accommodate the dreams, at least,” he says. “You've reached a level where these technological ideas might be feasible.”

Welcome, indeed, to the quark ages. ■

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