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(Article begins on next page)

12 May 2024

A 64-channel waveform sampling ASIC for SiPM in space-born applications

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ABSTRACT: The architecture of a 64-channel ASIC for the readout of Silicon Photomultipliers in space experiments is described. Each channel embeds a front-end amplifier with a common gate topology followed by a 256 cells analogue memory with a sampling frequency of 200 MHz. A single memory cell includes a storage capacitor, a single-slope Analog-to-Digital Converter (ADC) with programmable resolution between 7 and 12 bits and the digital control logic. To save power, the A/D conversion is carried-out only when a trigger signal is received. The trigger can either be generated inside the ASIC or provided by an external source.The analogue samples are digitized in parallel, thus reducing the conversion dead time. The memory cells can be arranged in a single array or they can be grouped in shorter slots of 32 or 64 cells that work in a multi-buffer configuration. The channels can work independently or they can be synchronised to acquire the same time-frame in the full chip. The target power consumption is 5 mW/channel. The ASIC is being designed in a 65-nm CMOS technology. A digital-on-top flow is applied for the integration and final validation of the chip. The tape-out is scheduled in the first quarter of 2023.

KEYWORDS: VLSI circuits, Front-end electronics for detector readout

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Contents

1   Introduction

Silicon Photomultipliers (SiPMs) are today employed in many different fields such as High Energy Physics (HEP) instrumentation [1], LIDAR [2], Positron Emission Tomography (PET)[3]. Due to their good detection efficiency, compactness and capability to work with moderate power supply voltages they are becoming more and more attractive also for space-born applications. SiPM are considered, for instance, to equip on board cameras of future satellite-based cosmic ray observatories. In this context, they will be used to detect the Cherenkov light produced by the interaction of Ultra-High Energy Cosmic Rays (UHECRs) and neutrinos with the terrestrial atmosphere [5].

Two common approaches to readout SiPMs rely on charge integration [6] or photon counting technique [7]. However, these solutions do not allow to study in detail the signal waveform and, as a consequence, to distinguish the signal of interest from spurious signals created by the direct interaction of cosmic rays within the sensor. For the method to be effective, the waveform should be captured with a sampling frequency of at least 100 Ms/s. A large dynamic range (up to 12 bits) is also required as the energy of the primary particle can span several orders of magnitudes. High integration density is desired to keep the overall system compact and lightweight and low power dissipation is mandatory. Therefore, a single channel should offer a complete signal processing chain with a power budget of only a few milliwatts. Care must be paid to radiation tolerance as well, with particular emphasis on Single Event Effects. On the basis of these considerations, the design of a custom ASIC optimized to read-out a SiPM-based Cherenkov radiation imager has been undertaken. The key target specifications are a sampling frequency of 200 Ms/s, a maximum power consumption of 5 mW/channel and a dynamic range of 12 bits.

2   ASIC architecture

The 64-channel ASIC is being designed in a commercial 65-nm CMOS technology and must operate with a power supply of 1.2 V. The choice of the technology stems from the fact that it provides a good integration density and its radiation tolerance has been extensively studied. The straightforward approach in a waveform sampling system, is having one free running ADC per channel followed by a digital signal processor. Despite the impressive progress made in ADC developments [8], [9], the

use of one 12-bit ADC per channel would hardly be compatible with the target power consumption. Furthermore, since the flux of UHECRs is extremely low (0.1 to 100 particles per hour are expected [10]), a continuous digitization is unnecessary. Analog memories provide instead an interesting alternative to capture fast transient signals occurring sparsely in time.

The block diagram of one channel is shown in figure 1. The current pulse coming from the sensor is amplified and converted into a voltage by the input amplifier. The resulting voltage is buffered into a 256-cells analog memory which is used to store temporarily the signal information.
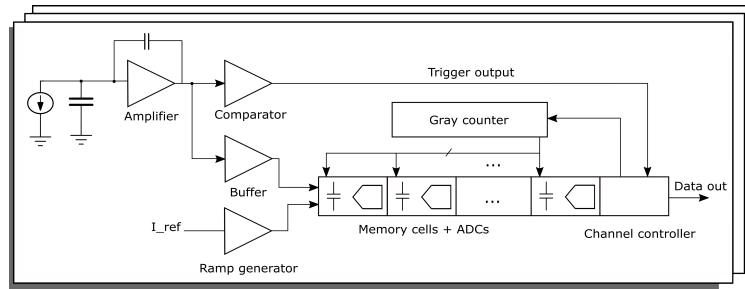

Figure 1: Channel block diagram.

When the sampling is enabled, the cells are written with a frequency of 200 MHz and the memory works as a ring buffer. If an event occurs, a trigger signal is issued and the cells enter the digitization phase, otherwise they are overwritten. In order to perform background monitoring, an external trigger can be sent to the chip. The analog memory can work as a single buffer or it can be divided into a maximum of 8 segments of 32 cells each thus enabling multi-buffering mode. By segmenting the analog memory, the data are derandomized, so the system can acquire an event even if the processing of the previous one is still in progress. Furthermore, the channels of the ASIC can be programmed to operate in parallel (imaging mode) or independently from each others (sparse mode). The digitized data are transmitted off-chip by employing a 8-channel Double Data Rate (DDR) serializer operating with a frequency of 400 MHz.

2.1 Front-End

The front-end amplifier is based on the common gate topology [11]. Both polarities of the amplifier have been implemented to read positive and negative pulses thus increasing the flexibility of the chip. The two schematics are shown in figures 2a and 2b. This stage includes also a comparator to provide a local trigger. In sparse mode, each channel is triggered independently. In imaging mode, two trigger modalities are foreseen: a fast or between the channels and a topological trigger that looks at the firing on nearby channels. The generated information can either be used to trigger a readout sequence directly on the chip or it can be provided as primitive to an external trigger processor, that looks at the trigger outputs of different ASICs before issuing a final trigger decision.

2.2 Analog Memory

The basic building blocks of the analogue memory is the sampling cell. Several options can be considered to digitize the sampled data. One possibility is to have a fast ADC per channel or per group of channels. However, even using a moderate speed ADC (e.g. 20 Ms/s), 12.8 μs are

(a) Front-end amplifier with NMOS input. (b) Front-end amplifier with PMOS input.
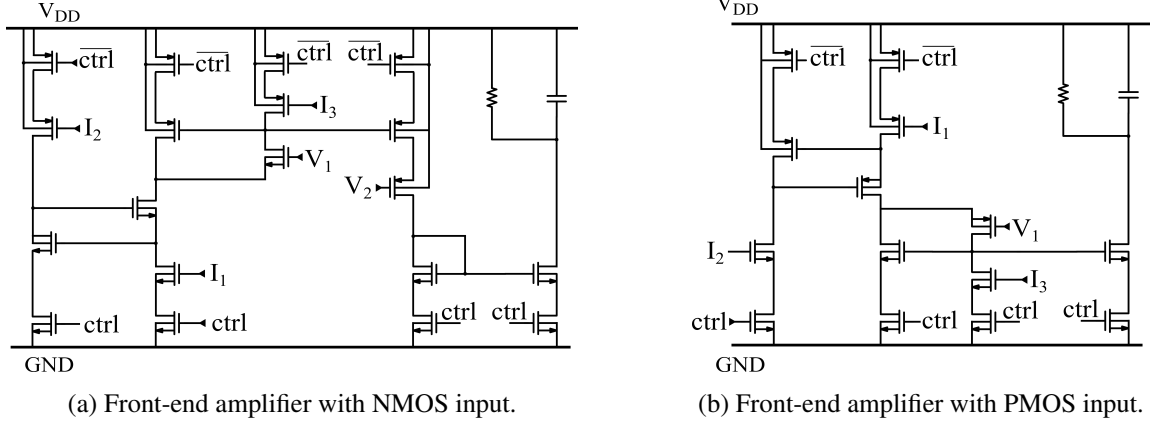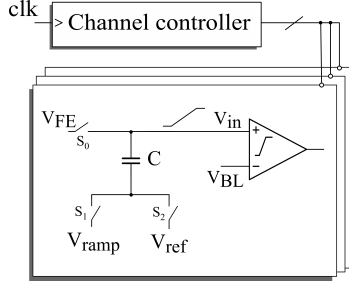
Figure 2

needed to readout 256 cells. The Wilkinson ADC topology is attractive for its simplicity, but it has long conversion time. However, it requires a limited number of hardware resources. Therefore, a massive parallelism can be used to keep the overall conversion time of the memory to an acceptable level. For instance, in [12] a fast sampling ASIC with an analog memory of 128 cells is described. The digitization is fulfilled by using 128 10-bit single-slope ADCs placed at the periphery of the chip. Therefore, all the cells in a single channel are converted in parallel. However, the scaling in CMOS technologies allows to develop chip with even higher integration density. Hence, in our device a 12-bit single-slope ADC has been embedded direcly in each memory cell. This allows to digitize all the samples in the ASIC in parallel thus reducing the dead time. The time needed for the conversion is given:

$$2^N \times T_{clk} = 20.48 \, \mu m \tag{2.1}$$

where N is the resolution and T_{clk} represents the clock period of 5 ns. The resolution of the converter can be programmed between 8 and 12 bits. Hence, with a lower resolution, this time interval is decreased. For instance, for a 10-bit resolution (that could still adequate for our purpose) the conversion shrinks to $5.12 \, \mu s$. However, in a waveform sampling ASIC an important contribution to dead time is also given by data transmission. In fact, the digital data stream is composed of a 27-bit long header and the digitized data. By selecting the maximum resolution for the ADC, an amount of 3099 bits per channel must be transmitted to readout 256 cells. Even using 10 Gbit/s serializer per chip the time to send the raw data out would be $19.83 \, \mu s$. Data could be of course zero-suppressed and compressed on chip before transmission. However, it has been preferred to defer a more elaborated signal processing to the on-board FPGA. To increase the system modularity and thus its fault tolerance, instead of using a single, fast serializer 8 DDR serializers working with a 400 MHz clock have been implemented. This allows to segment the ASIC in modules of 8 channels which are basically independent of each other. The data transmission time thus becomes $30.99 \, \mu s$ in the worst case in which all the 256 cells are used to capture a single event.

The building blocks of the memory cell are shown in figure 3a. Each cell includes the sampling capacitor, the comparator of the ADC, some switches and a control logic (not illustrated in the figure). A single Gray counter whose outputs are shared among the ADCs, is embedded in each

(a) Memory cell building blocks.
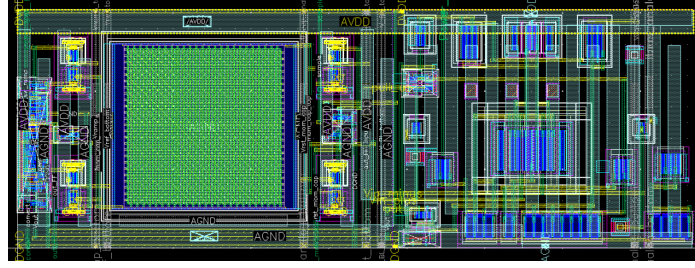
(b) Layout of the memory cell.

Figure 3

channel. In the sampling phase, the storage capacitor is charged to a voltage equal to $V_{FE} - V_{ref}$, where V_{FE} is the output of the input amplifier and V_{ref} is a reference voltage. In contrast with the most common architecture [13], the minus terminal of the comparator is not connected to a ramp generator. In fact, this solution can deteriorate the linearity of the system because the common mode of the comparators changes between the cells. A possibile solution consists in fixing the threshold to a steady value while charging the capacitor through a constant current generator. However, the mismatch between the current sources can lead to gain variation between the cells. Hence, a single ramp generator is applied to all the storage capacitor. During the digitization the top plate of the capacitor is connected only to a gate terminal of a MOS transistor, so this node remains floating. Hence, if a ramp generator is connected to the bottom plate, the same voltage variation is replicated on the top thanks to charge conservation. When the voltage on this terminal reaches the threshold, the comparator flips triggering the storage into local latches of the output of the Gray counter. This allows to embed a single ramp generator which is common to all the cells in a single channel as shown in ref. [13], but this alternative approach ensures good gain uniformity between the cells.
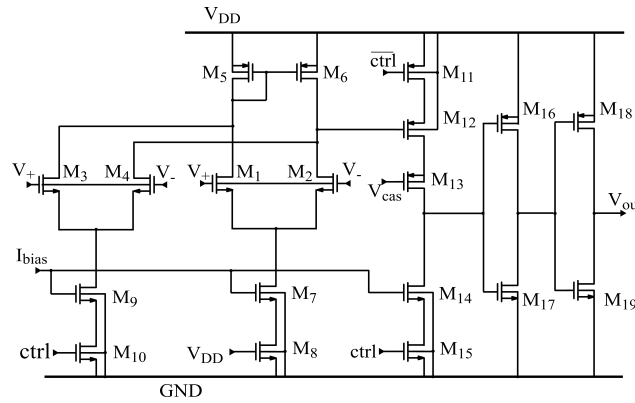
Figure 4: Comparator schematic.

The schematic of the comparator is shown in figure 4. It has two possible states which are called power-up and power-down mode. In power-up mode, a bias current of $2\,\mu A$ is provided to this block. On the other hand, when the digitization is disabled, the current is reduced by three quarter in order to reduce the power wasting when the comparator is not operating. However, this

block is not completely switched off thus allowing a fast warm-up. Hence, before digitization, 1-2 clock cycles are dedicated to power up of the converters and to switch the bottom plates of the capacitors from the fixed reference to the voltage ramp.

The final layout of the cell has a size of $43.62 \times 15.20 \, \mu m^2$ and it is illustrated in figure 3b. This sizing allows to integrate the analog memory in a chip with final dimensions of $6mm \times 4mm$.

The analog cell is integrated with a digital-on-top methodology. Figure 5 reports a preliminary layout where the Wilkinson ADC is included alongside the latches. The upper part of the image depicts the layout of block named section in which the cells are hierarchically organized and the ensemble of the eight sections. Each section is managed by a digital channel controller (not shown in the layout) where dedicated Finite State Machines (FSMs) are implemented. These FSMs take into account the partitioning of cell array by appropriately managing the sampling, digitizing and readout states. The channel controller also drives the configurable Gray counter whose output is distributed to each section. A first estimate of the digital power was evaluated by synthesizing each block and the consumption is limited to 1.3 mW per channel. Since this value does not consider the final routing, a variation around 30 % is typically expected.
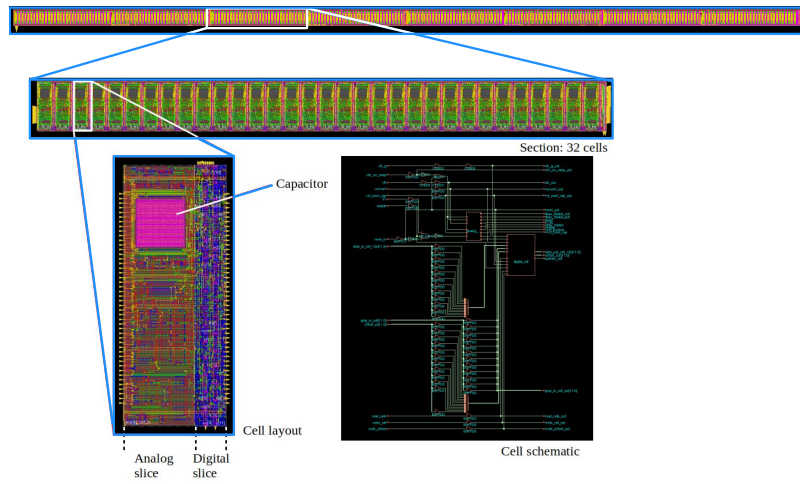
Figure 5: Layout of a section

3   Conclusions

This paper presented the architecture of a 64-channel ASIC for SiPM readout in space environment. The input current pulse is amplified, converted into a voltage value and stored into a 256-cells analog memory. The memory cells allow to acquire a snapshot of the incoming event with a resolution of 12 bits. Sampling and digitization steps are decoupled since the conversion starts only if a trigger signal (both generated internally or provided from the outside) is received. This allows to obtain lower power consumption compared to the implementation of a free-running converter. The chip flexibility has been increased by applying the derandomization technique. The ASIC is being designed in a commercial 65-nm CMOS technology. The power consumption aims to be 5 mW/ch considering both analog and digital circuits. The integration of the building blocks is ongoing and the chip tape-out is scheduled at the beginning of 2023.

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