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## Modelling transient dynamics of granular slopes: MPM and DEM

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### Abstract

Transient granular flows, such as rock falls, debris flows, and aerial and submarine avalanches, occur very often in nature. In the geotechnical context, transient movements of large granular slopes are a substantial factor of risk due to their destructive force and the transformations they may produce in the landscape. This paper investigates the ability of MPM, a continuum approach, to reproduce the evolution of a granular slope destabilised by an external energy source. In particular, a central issue is whether the power-law dependence of run-out distance and time observed with respect to the initial geometry or energy can be reproduced by a simple Mohr-Coulomb plastic behaviour. The effect of base friction on the run-out kinematics is studied by comparing the data obtained from the DEM and MPM simulations. The mechanism of energy dissipation is primarily through friction and the MPM is able to predict the run-out response in good agreement with the DEM simulations. At very low excitation energies, the DEM simulations show longer run-out in comparison to the MPM due to local destabilization at the flow front. At low input energies, a larger fraction of the energy is consumed in the destabilisation process, hence the amount energy available for flow is less. However, at higher input energy, where most of the energy is dissipated during the spreading phase, the run-out distance has a weak dependence on the distribution of velocity in the granular mass.

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**Keywords:** MPM; granular dynamics; transient flows; continuum; discrete element modelling.

### 1. Introduction

Transient granular flows occur very often in nature. Well-known examples are rockfalls, debris flows, and aerial and submarine avalanches. They form a major element of reshaping the landscape and their high destructive potential is a substantial factor of risk. Natural granular flows may be triggered as a result of different processes such as gradual degradation, induced by weathering or chemical reactions, liquefaction and external forces such as earthquakes.

Granular flows have been studied in laboratory experiments in different geometries such as tilted slopes leading to slope failure and surface avalanches [1–3] or by considering vertical columns of grains collapsing and spreading under their ownweight [4,5]. The dynamics observed in the experiments is often nontrivial in the sense that the final

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configurations after the dissipation of the whole kinetic energy can not be readily predicted by means of simple laws based on the Mohr-Coulomb nature of the material. For example, in collapsing columns, the runout distance is found to obey a power-law dependence with the initial aspect ratio of the column.

The observed nontrivial transient dynamics is often correctly reproduced by the discrete element method (DEM), which provides a powerful tool for the grain-scale analysis of the trigger and its subsequent dynamics [6,7]. However, even in simplified geometries such as those investigated in the experiments, the DEM suffers from a serious shortcoming in the number of particles that can be simulated in a reasonable time. This is a critical issue when more complex geometries or long-time granular processes are considered, or when particle size distributions are broad. For this reason, most numerical studies are performed in 2D or simple particles shapes and size distributions are considered.

It is also obvious that classical modeling strategies based on the finite element method (FEM) cannot be used for the simulation of very large deformations. In various application of FEM, this problem is treated by means of technical tools such as remeshing. Such methods are, however, not robust and lead to round-off errors and mesh-sensitivity. In contrast, the Material Point Method (MPM) is an alternative approach for continuum problems that allows for indefinitely large deformations without remeshing [8–11]. In this method, the material points carry the information on state variables and a background fixed grid is used to solve the governing equations. The information between the material points and the grid is exchanged via suitable shape functions. The MPM has been applied with success to a number of solid mechanics problems and its theoretical foundations have recently been investigated by several authors.

In this paper, we investigate the ability of the MPM, as a continuum approach, to reproduce the evolution of a granular slope when destabilized by energy input. In particular, a central issue is whether power-law dependence of the runout distance and timewith respect to the initial geometry or energy can be reproduced by a simple prescription of the Mohr-Coulomb plastic behavior within a MPM code. We therefore perform extensive simulations by varying continuously different input parameters and compare the data with those obtained from DEM simulations of the same system. We compare in detail the evolution of the profile of the slope and its total kinetic energy between the two methods and for different initial states. As we shall see, the MPM can successfully simulate the transient evolution with a single input parameter, namely the internal angle of friction. This opens the way to the simulation of geological-scale flows on complex topographies.

## 2. Numerical set-up

The DEM sample was composed of  $\sim 13000$  disks with a uniform distribution of diameters by volume fractions ( $d_{max} = 1.5d_{min}$ ). The mean grain diameter and mass are  $d \approx 2.455$  mm and  $m \approx 0.0123$  kg, respectively. The grains are first poured uniformly into a rectangular box of given width and then the right-hand side wall is shifted far to the right to allow the grains to spread. A stable granular slope of  $13.2^\circ$  is obtained when all grains come to rest. The initial slope configuration is shown in fig. 1. This procedure leads to a mean packing fraction (fraction of space filled by disks)  $\approx 0.82$ . Soil grains with a mean density of  $2600$  kg/m<sup>3</sup> and internal friction coefficient of  $0.4$  between grains are considered. For grain-scale simulations, classical DEM approach was used [12].

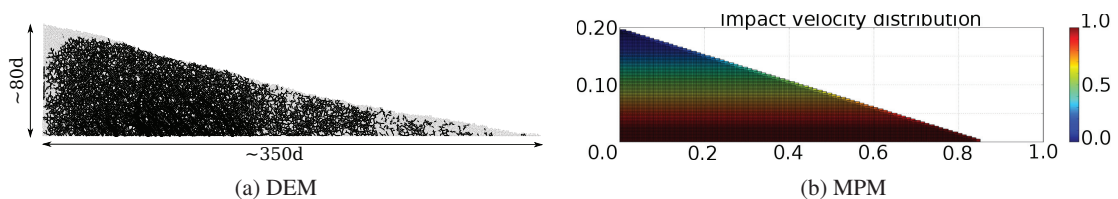


Fig. 1: Initial geometry and dimensions of the slope subjected to a horizontal velocity of 50J.

In the present study, Generalised Interpolation Material Point Method is used to avoid cell crossing noise [13,14]. In MPM simulations, the material point spacing is adopted to be the same as the mean grain diameter in DEM. A mesh size of  $0.0125$ m is adopted with 25 material points per cell. The effect of mesh size and the number of

material points per cell was investigated by Soundararajan[15]. The initial configuration of the slope used in the MPM simulations is shown in fig. 1b. Frictional boundary conditions are applied on the left and the bottom boundaries by applying constraints to the nodal acceleration. Mohr-Coulomb model with no dilation is used to simulate the continuum behaviour of the granular slope. Periodic shear tests in DEM reveals a macroscopic friction coefficient of 0.22. Further details about DEM and MPM parameters and set-up can be found in Soundararajan[15].

The initial static slope was set into motion by applying a horizontal gradient velocity  $v_{0x}(y) = k(y_{max} - y)$  with  $k > 0$ . The evolution of the slope geometry and the total kinetic energy as a function of the initial input energy  $E_0$  is studied. The run-out distance  $L_f$  is the distance of the rightmost grain, which is still in contact with the main mass when the slope comes to rest. The run-out will be normalised by the initial length  $L_0$  of the slope, as in the experiments of collapsing columns. The total run-out duration  $t_f$  is the time taken by the slope to reach its final run-out distance  $L_f$ . The natural units of the system are the mean grain diameter  $d$ , the mean grain mass  $m$  and acceleration due to gravity  $g$ . For this reason, the length scales are normalised by  $d$ , time by  $(d/g)^{1/2}$ , velocities by  $(gd)^{1/2}$  and energies by  $mgd$ .

### 3. Evolution of slope geometry and run-out

Figure 2a shows the initial evolution of the granular slope subjected to an initial horizontal energy  $E_0 = 61$  (in dimensionless units) using MPM. As the granular slope is sheared along the bottom, the shear propagates to the top leaving a cavity in the vicinity of the left wall. This cavity gets partially filled as the granular mass at the top collapse behind the flowing mass due to inertia. Similar behaviour is observed during the initial stages of the flow evolution using DEM (fig. 2b). Due to inertia, the grains at the top of the granular heap roll down to fill the cavity, while the slope continues to spread.

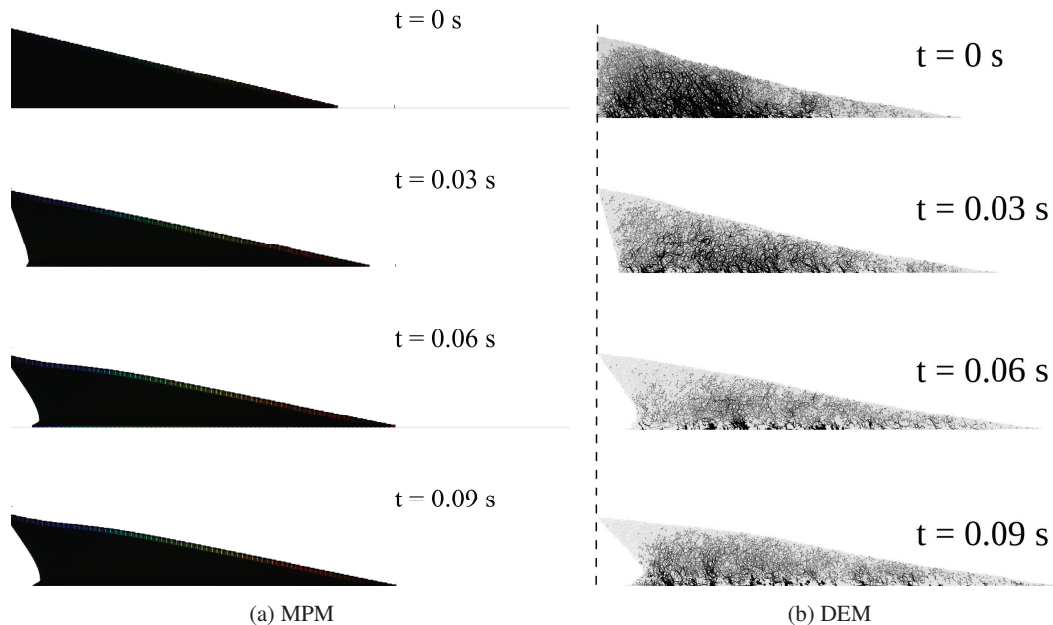


Fig. 2: Evolution of granular slopes subjected to a gradient horizontal energy  $E_0/(mgd)$  of 61.

The flow involves a transient phase with a change in the geometry of the slope followed by continuous spreading. The gradient of input energy applied to the granular slope mimics a horizontal quake. Despite the creation of a cavity behind the flowing mass, the granular heap remains in contact with the left wall irrespective of the input energy. Figure 3a shows the normalised run-out distance  $(L_f - L_0)/L_0$  and total run-out time  $t_f$  as a function of the input energy  $E_0$ . Two regimes characterised by a power-law relation between the run-out distance and time as a

function of  $E_0$  can be observed. In the first regime, corresponding to the range of low input energies  $E_0 < 40 \text{ mgd}$ , the run-out distance observed varies as  $L_f \propto (E_0)^\alpha$  with  $\alpha \simeq 0.206 \pm 0.012$  over nearly one log cycle. Overall, the run-out distance predicted by the continuum approach matches the DEM simulations. At very low energies, DEM simulations show longer run-out distance due to local fluidisation, mainly controlled by failure of the soil mass at the top of the pile. A critical energy is required, before the entire soil mass participates in the flow. This results in an almost constant normalised time in DEM, which is absent in MPM due to the continuum nature.

While the run-out exhibits a power-law relation with the initial input energy, the DEM simulations show that the flow duration remains constant at a value  $t_f \simeq 60 (d/g)^{0.5}$  irrespective of the value of  $E_0$ . The constant run-out time, in grain-scale simulations, indicates the collapse of grain into the cavity left behind the slope. An average run-out speed can be defined as  $v_s = (L_f - L_0)/t_f$ . According to the data,  $v_s \propto (E_0)^{0.52 \pm 0.012}$ . The error on the exponent represents the error due to the linear fit on the logarithmic scale. Since the initial average velocity varies as  $v_0 \propto (E_0)^{0.5}$ , this difference between the values of the exponents suggests that the mobilised mass during run-out declines when the input energy is increased.

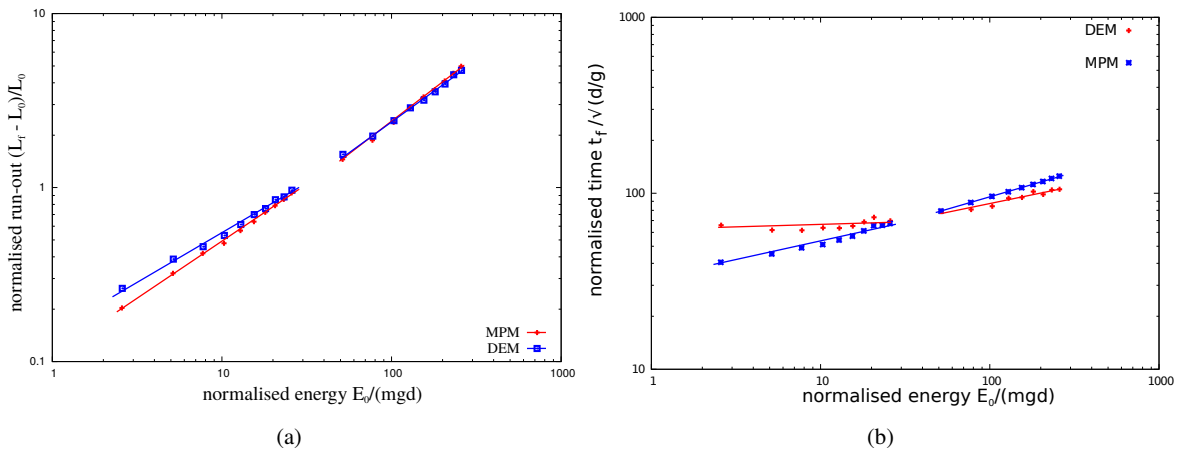


Fig. 3: Evolution of run-out and time as a function of the normalised input energy for a slope subjected a gradient horizontal energy. (a) Run-out as a function of  $KE_0$ , (b) Duration of run-out as a function of  $KE_0$ .

In the second regime, corresponding to the range of high input energies  $E_0 > 40 \text{ mgd}$ , the run-out distance varies as  $L_f \propto (E_0)^{\alpha'}$  over one cycle with  $\alpha' \simeq 0.56 \pm 0.04$  while the duration increases as  $t_f \propto (E_0)^{\beta'}$  with  $\beta' \simeq 0.33 \pm 0.02$ . Hence, in this regime the average run-out speed varies as  $v_s \propto (E_0)^{0.498 \pm 0.01}$ . This exponent is close to the value 0.5 in  $v_0 \propto (E_0)^{0.5}$ , and hence, within the confidence interval of the exponents. In the second regime, both DEM and MPM predict almost the same run-out behaviour. However, the MPM predicts longer duration with increase in the input energy.

It is worth noting that a similar power-law dependence of the run-out distance and time are found in the case of granular column collapse with respect to the initial aspect ratio. In the column geometry, the grains spread away owing to the kinetic energy acquired during gravitational collapse of the column. Topin et al.[16] found that the run-out distance varies as a power-law of the available peak kinetic energy at the end of the free-fall stage with an exponent  $\simeq 0.5$ . This value of exponent is lower than the run-out evolution observed in the second regime. This is, however, physically plausible since the distribution of kinetic energies at the end of the collapse is more chaotic than in this case where the energy is supplied from the very beginning in a well-defined shear mode. As pointed out by Staron et al.[6], the distribution of kinetic energies is an essential factor for the run-out distance.

#### 4. Decay of kinetic energy

The non-trivial evolution of the slope geometry in two regimes suggests that the energy supplied to the slope is not simply dissipated by shear and friction along the bottom plane. It is important to split the kinetic energy into vertical

and horizontal components ( $K_{E_x}$  and  $K_{E_y}$ ) of the velocity field. Although, the input energy is in the  $x$  component, a fraction of the energy is transferred to the vertical component of the velocity field and dissipated during the transient phase. The evolution of kinetic energy is studied to understand the behaviour of granular flow that is consistent with the evolution of the slope shape.

The evolution of total kinetic energies  $E_k$  with time for different values of the input energy  $E_{ki}$  based on MPM simulations are shown in fig. 4. The MPM simulation shows two distinct regimes in the normalised kinetic energy plot as a function of normalised time in fig. 4a. However, the DEM simulations (fig. 4b) show that the energy evolution corresponding to the low energy regime nearly collapse on to a single time evolution. This is consistent with the observation of run-out time  $t_f$  being almost independent of the input energy. In contrast, MPM simulations predict a power law relation between the run-out duration and input energy. However, the plots corresponding to the high energy regime (fig. 4), collapse only at the beginning of the run-out i.e. for  $t < t_1 \approx 7.5 (d/g)^{0.5}$ . Although MPM simulations show a longer duration of run-out (fig. 4), the total kinetic energy is completely dissipated at  $t = 60 \sqrt{d/g}$ . DEM simulations predict  $t = 80 \sqrt{d/g}$  for the kinetic energy to be completely dissipated, which is due to grain rearrangement at the free surface. The granular mass densifies as the flow progresses, after the initial dilation phase for  $t = 20 \sqrt{d/g}$ .

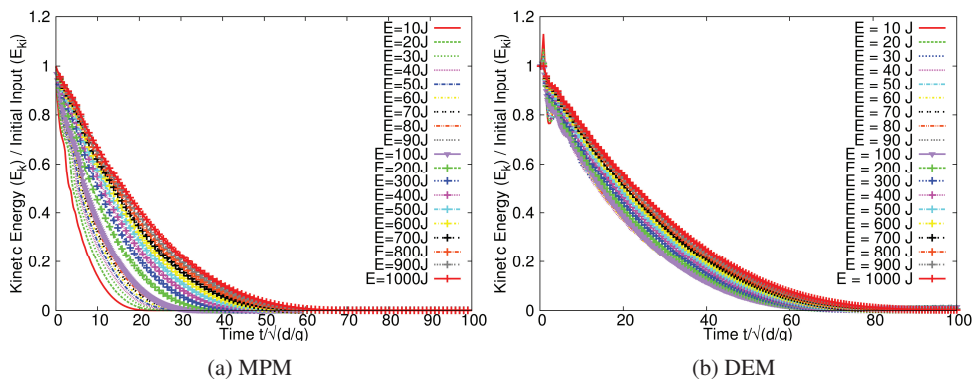


Fig. 4: Evolution of normalised kinetic energy with normalised time for a slope subjected to gradient input velocities.

Figure 5 displays the evolution of kinetic energy in the translational ( $E_x$  and  $E_y$ ) degrees of freedom.  $E_x$  decays similar to the total energy dissipation, but  $E_y$  increases and passes through a peak before decaying rapidly to a negligible level. The transient is best observed for  $E_y$ , which has significant values only for  $t < t_1$ . This energy represents the proportion of kinetic energy transferred to the  $y$  component of the velocity field due to the destabilisation of the slope and collapse of grains in the cavity behind the slope. Higher proportion of vertical acceleration  $E_{ky}/E_0$  is observed for lower values of input energy  $E_0$ . This means that, at lower input energies a larger fraction of the energy is consumed in the destabilisation process, which results in oscillations in the kinetic energy. Whereas at a higher input energies, most of the energy is dissipated in the spreading phase. For this reason, the total duration  $t_1$  of this destabilisation phase is nearly the same in both regimes and its value is controlled by gravity rather than the input energy. The height of the slope being of the order of  $80 d$ , the total free-fall time for a particle located at this height is  $\approx 12 (d/g)^{0.5}$ , which is of the same order as  $t_1$ . DEM simulations show that the contribution of the rotational energy during the transient stage and the spreading stage is negligible.

To analyse the second phase for higher input energies, the kinetic energy  $E'_{kx0}$  at the end of the transient phase is considered. This energy is responsible for most of the run-out, hence it is expected to control the run-out distance and time. A decay time  $\tau$  can be defined as the time required for  $E_{kx}$  to decline by a factor 1/2. Figure 6 shows the same data in which the time  $t'$  elapsed since  $t_1$ , normalised by  $\tau$ . Interestingly, now all the data nicely collapse on to a single curve. However, this curve can not be fitted by simple functional forms such as variants of exponential decay. This means that the spreading of the slope is not a self-similar process in agreement with the fact that the energy fades away in a finite time  $t'_f$ .

The scaling of the data with the decay time  $\tau$  suggests that the run-out time, since the beginning of the second phase,  $t'_f$  might be a simple function of  $\tau$ . Figure 7a shows both  $t'_f$  and  $\tau$  as a function of  $E'_{x0}$ , where a power-law

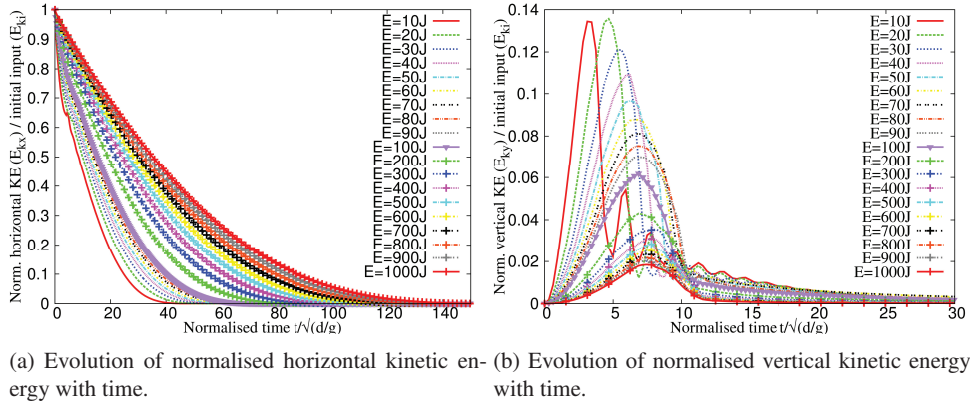


Fig. 5: Evolution of vertical and horizontal kinetic energy with time (MPM) for a slope subjected to gradient input velocities.

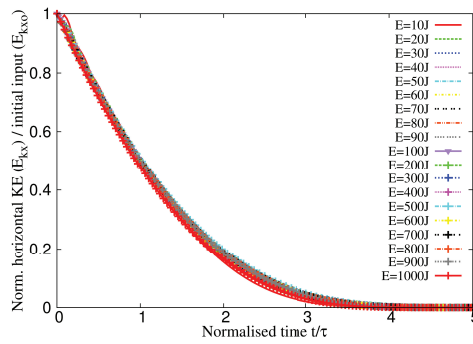


Fig. 6: Evolution of kinetic energy in the x component of the velocity field normalised by the available kinetic energy at the end of the transient as a function of normalised time (MPM).

relation can be observed for both time scales. The run-out time  $t'_f \propto (E'_{x0})^{\beta'}$  has the same exponent  $\beta' \approx 0.33 \pm 0.02$  as  $t_f$  as a function of  $E_0$ . For the decay time we have  $\tau \propto (E'_{x0})^{\beta''}$  with  $\beta'' \approx 0.38 \pm 0.03$ . The relation between the two times can thus be expressed as (fig. 7b)

$$t'_f = k \tau (E'_{x0})^{\beta'' - \beta'}, \tag{1}$$

where  $k \approx 5.0 \pm 0.4$  and  $\beta'' - \beta' \approx 0.05 \pm 0.05$ . This value is small enough to be neglected. It is therefore plausible to assume that the run-out time is a multiple of the decay time and the spreading process is controlled by a single time. A weak dependence on the energy  $E'_{kx0}$  is consistent with the fact that the energy available at the beginning of the second phase is not dissipated in the spreading process (calculated from the position of the tip of the slope) since the slope keeps deforming by the movements of the grains at the free surface even when the tip comes to rest. This can explain the small difference between the two exponents as observed here.

### 5. Effect of friction

The run-out distance, duration of flow, and the dissipation of kinetic energy are controlled by the input energy and collective dynamics of the whole slope. However, the run-out behaviour is also expected to depend on the base friction. A series of simulations with different values of base friction was performed using MPM to analyse the influence of friction on the run-out behaviour. The influence of friction on the run-out behaviour for different input energies is shown in fig. 8a. The run-out distance decreases with increase in the basal friction. The exponent of the power-law relation between the run-out and input energy has a weak dependence on the base friction, however, the

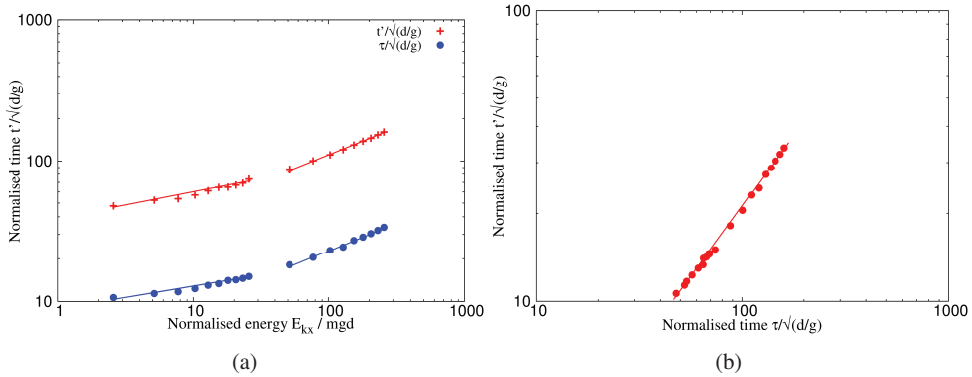


Fig. 7: Decay time and run-out time as a function of the normalised kinetic energy  $E_{kx0}$ : (a) Power law evolution of  $t'_f$  and  $\tau$  as a function of kinetic energy  $E'_{kx0}$  and (b) Linear relationship between decay time and run-out time after the transient as a function of the normalised kinetic energy  $E_{kx0}$ .

proportionality constant is affected by the change in the base friction. This behaviour is similar to that observed in granular column collapse with varying initial properties [5,17].

The effect of friction coefficient is quite important for the run-out. MPM simulations with varying friction coefficient show that both the run-out distance and the decay time decrease as the friction coefficient is increased. This effect is much more pronounced at low values of the friction coefficient. The run-out time, for example, is reduced by a factor of approximately 4 as  $\mu_s$  is increased from 0.1 to 0.2 while the change in the run-out and duration is less affected with increase in friction coefficient. This “saturation effect” can be observed in a systematic way in simple shear tests. The dissipation rate may reach a saturation point where the dilation of granular materials and rolling of the grains change in response to increase in friction coefficient [18].

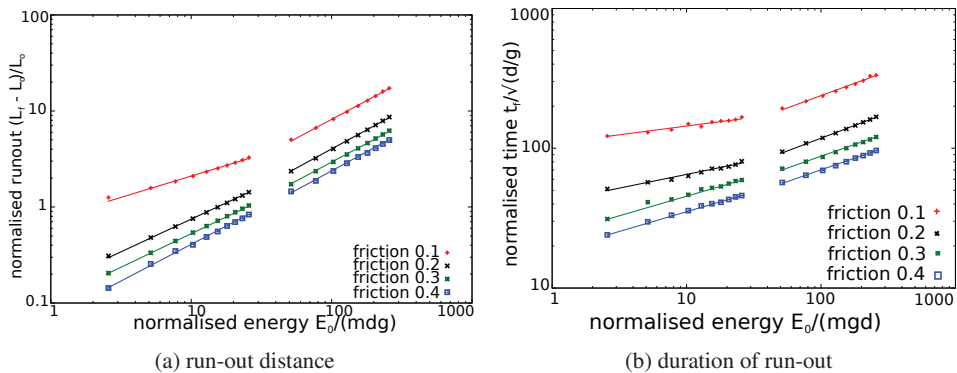


Fig. 8: MPM simulations of effect of friction on the run-out behaviour of slopes subjected to horizontal excitation.

**6. Conclusion**

Natural granular flows are triggered by different mechanisms. The distribution of kinetic energy in the granular mass is found to have an effect on the flow kinematics. A multi-scale analyses of a granular slope subjected to horizontal velocities are performed and the following conclusions are derived:

- A power-law dependence of the run-out distance and time as a function of the input energy is observed. The power-law behaviour is found to be a generic feature of granular flow dynamics. The values of the power-law exponents are not simple functions of the geometry.



- Two regimes with different values of the exponents are observed: a low-energy and a high-energy regime.
- The low energy regime reflects mainly the destabilisation of the slope, with a run-out time independent of the input energy.
- The second regime is governed by the spreading dynamics induced by higher input energy. The evolution of granular slope in the high-energy regime can be described by a characteristic decay time, which is the time required for the input energy to decay by a factor of 0.5.
- The run-out distance and the decay time decrease as the friction increases. This effect is much more pronounced at low values of friction.
- At low input energies, the distribution of kinetic energy in the system is found have a significant effect on the run-out, as the energy is mostly consumed in the destabilisation process.
- At higher input energies, where most of the energy is dissipated during the spreading phase, the run-out distance has a weak dependence on the distribution of velocity in the granular mass.
- The material property and the distribution of kinetic energy in the system has a non-trivial influence on the flow kinematics and the internal flow structure.
- MPM is successfully able to simulate the transient evolution with a single input parameter, the macroscopic friction angle.

This study exemplifies the ability of MPM, a continuum approach, in modelling complex granular flow dynamics and opens the possibility of realistic simulation of geological-scale flows on complex topographies.

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