Optical identification of the transient supersoft X-ray source RX J0527.8-6954, in the LMC *

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ABSTRACT

Context. Close binary supersoft X-ray sources (CBSS) are binary systems that contain a white dwarf with stable nuclear burning on its surface. These sources, first discovered in the Magellanic Clouds, have high accretion rates and near-Eddington luminosities ($10^{37} - 10^{38}$ erg s$^{-1}$) with high temperatures ($T = 2 - 7 \times 10^6$ K). As a consequence, the luminosity of these systems reaches high values ($10^{37} - 10^{38}$ erg s$^{-1}$), and the temperature of the radiation is $2 - 7 \times 10^6$ K. Most of the radiation is emitted in the ultraviolet and supersoft X-ray bands. The first sources were discovered in the Magellanic Clouds (MC) and identified as a class by Trümper et al. [1991].

Methods. The observation was made with the IFU-GMOS on the Gemini South telescope with the purpose of identifying stars with spectral parameters similar to those of the CBSS prototype. The X-ray source is identified with a B5e V star that is associated with subarcsecond extended Hα emission, possibly bipolar.

Conclusions. The primary star is a white dwarf, as suggested by the supersoft X-ray spectrum, the expected orbital period exceeds 21 h; therefore, we believe that the 9.4 h period found so far is not associated to this system.

Key words. binaries: close – Stars: winds, outflows – X-rays: binaries – Stars: individual: RX J0527.8-6954

1. Introduction

Close binary supersoft X-ray sources (CBSS) are binary systems in which a white dwarf displays hydrostatic nuclear burning on its surface (van den Heuvel et al. [1992]). This happens because the accretion rate is very high ($\dot{M} \sim 10^{-7}$ M$_\odot$ yr$^{-1}$). As a consequence, the luminosity of these systems reaches high values ($10^{37} - 10^{38}$ erg s$^{-1}$), and the temperature of the radiation is $2 - 7 \times 10^6$ K. Most of the radiation is emitted in the ultraviolet and supersoft X-ray bands. The first sources were discovered in the Magellanic Clouds (MC) and identified as a class by the ROSAT satellite (Trümper et al. [1991]). Up to now only two sources have been detected in the Galaxy (see Kahabka & van den Heuvel [1997] for a review and references).

The question of why there is such a discrepancy between the MC and the Galaxy has been addressed by Steiner & Diaz [1998], who proposed that the V Sge stars are the galactic counterparts of the CBSS not detected in X-rays. This could happen if the supersoft emission is absorbed by the interstellar gas, much denser and with much higher metallicity in the Galaxy than in the MC.

If the source emits copious radiation that is not detected directly, it could still be noticed if the local environment is photoionized by the radiation. There are enough ionizing photons in these systems to do this, but is there sufficient gas for this to be noticed? All CBSS and V Sge stars seem to present strong winds, escaping from the white dwarf, disk, and even the secondary in many cases (van Teeseling & King [1998]). Other CBSS and V Sge stars produce jets, seen as spectral satellites to the Balmer and H$\alpha$ lines (see Steiner et al. [2007] for references). A significant amount of gas must exist in the immediate environment, perhaps collimated in the form of jets, perpendicular to the disk. In systems seen pole-on (low inclination), this could be noticed as a nebulosity. In systems with high inclination, this would be noticed as extended nebular emission with bipolar geometry. This could have shape of jets or, perhaps, ionization cones (seen also in AGN). Attempts to detect nebular emission from CBSS/V Sge have failed, with the significant exception of CAL 83 (Remillard et al. [1995]). But in that case, the star is located near a massive cloud that has little, if any, to do with the star.

RX J0527.8-6954 was discovered as an LMC supersoft X-ray source by ROSAT observations (Trümper et al. [1991]) with spectral parameters similar to those of the CBSS prototype CAL 83 (Greiner et al. [1991]). It has not been detected by previous Einstein observations of the field, suggesting that it was at least ~ 10 times fainter by that time. In addition, its X-ray flux decreased by a factor of ~ 50 from its discovery in 1990 to ROSAT observations taken in 1995 (Greiner et al. [1996a]). RX J0527.8-6954 is, thus, a special case among the CBSS that concern the X-ray variability.
In this paper, we show that star 1 is a blend of two stars and re-
compasses at least 9 stars that could be associated to the CBSS.
Therefore, that this optical variability is associated to the CBSS.
Harvard variable star HV 2554, but this connection seems to 
the counterpart identification has often approached the elusive 
identification numbers in this work (see Fig. 1). The history of 
all resolved objects inside this error circle, and we adopt those 
period of 9.42 h and 0.052 mag amplitude remained. They suggest, 
removing this long term decline, a sinusoidal variation with pe-

ture of 0.51 mag in the blue for stars 6 or 9 over 4.25 years. After 
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circle (Cowley et al. 1997). Greiner & Hazen (1996) stated the 

structure associated to the brightest of the pair. The ROSAT 5

Fig. 1. GMOS-IFU acquisition image, with stars 1–9 as defined 
by Greiner & Hazen (1996). The ROSAT 5″ error circle and the 
IFU 5″ × 3.5″ field of view are also shown.

The optical counterpart of this object, on the other hand, has 
ever been confidently identified. The ROSAT 5″ error circle en-
compasses at least 9 stars that could be associated to the CBSS. 
Greiner et al. (1996b) and Greiner & Hazen (1996) numbered 
all resolved objects inside this error circle, and we adopt those 
identification numbers in this work (see Fig. 1). The history of 
the counterpart identification has often approached the elusive 
Harvard variable star HV 2554, but this connection seems to 
have been lost, since the optical variability of HV 2554 was set 
as doubtful (Greiner & Hazen 1996) and the improved X-ray po-
sition of RX J0527.8-6954 put HV 2554 outside the X-ray error 
circle (Cowley et al. 1997). Greiner & Hazen (1996) stated the 
lack of optical variability of stars 1 to 9 (with some doubt for 
the fainter objects), suggesting that none of them are the opti-
cal counterpart of RX J0527.8-6954. Cowley et al. (1997) de-
termined spectral type B8 IV for star 1 and possibly G giant for 
star 3, while star 2 is supposedly a B type star (Greiner et al. 
1996b). Using MACHO project photometry, Alcock et al. (1997) 
attempted to optically identify the source. From the analysis of 
the lightcurves of all objects 1–9, they proposed a steady decline 
of 0.51 mag in the blue for stars 6 or 9 over 4.25 years. After 
removing this long term decline, a sinusoidal variation with pe-
riod of 9.42 h and 0.052 mag amplitude remained. They suggest, 
therefore, that this optical variability is associated to the CBSS. 
In this paper, we show that star 1 is a blend of two stars and re-
port the optical identification of RX J0527.8-6954 by detecting 
extended nebular emission in Hα, with a bipolar subarcsecond 
structure associated to the brightest of the pair.

2. Observations and data reduction

The data on RX J0527.8-6954 were obtained in queue mode 
on September 2004 on the Gemini South Telescope with the 
Gemini Multi Object Spectrograph (GMOS – Hook et al. 2004 
Allington-Smith et al. 2002), operated in the integral field unit 
(IFU) mode. The GMOS-IFU has two fields of view that simulta-
naneously sample both the target and a contiguous region of sky, 
displaced by 1 arcmin from the object field, by closed packed 
arrays of 1000 and 500 lenslets, respectively. Each lenslet feeds 
light to a coupled optical fiber, which sends the light to a lin-
ear array at the nominal location of the slit of the spectrograph, 
the pseudo slit. The final data are three-dimensional (two spatial 
and one spectral) data cubes that allow either the construction of 
narrow-band images of any desired bandwidth at any slice of the 
spectral dimension or extraction of a spectrum from any point 
in the field of view. We set the GMOS-IFU to operate with one 
pseudo-slit, which resulted in greater spectral coverage at the ex-
pense of field of view area (sampled by 500 lenslets in this con-
figuration). The adopted B600_G5323 grating yielded average 
spectral resolution R=2900 in the range from 4100 Å to 6900 Å 
over an FOV of 5" × 3.5". Three 15-minute exposures were ob-
tained and summed after reduction. Lamp calibration flats, twi-
light flats, CuAr arc exposures, and bias images were also taken 
to calibrate the data. The seeing of the observation was 0.6″.

The data reduction was performed with the IRAF gemini.gmos 
package, comprising bias and background subtraction, cosmic 
ray rejection, spectra extraction, wavelength calibration, CCD 
spatial sampling. As the Atmospheric Dispersion Corrector (ADC) 
at GMOS is not functional, the differential atmospheric refraction implies that the data have a spatial distor-
tion over the spectral range, especially at high airmass. To deal 
with this problem, we implemented an algorithmic procedure 
that corrects this distortion.

3. Data analysis and results

After the data cube (Fig. 2a) was corrected for differential atmos-
pheric refraction, we followed noise reduction and deconvolu-
tion procedures that are fully described and discussed in Steiner 
et al. (in preparation). Basically the following steps were adopted 
and illustrated in Fig. 2:

- We transformed the data cube to Fourier space so that the 
spatial dimensions (x, y) are represented in spatial frequencies 
(ν, v).
- A Butterworth filter was applied to remove high spatial fre-
cy frequency noise.
- The inverse Fourier transform was made (Fig. 2b) and 
Richardson-Lucy deconvolution was applied (Fig. 2c), using 
a Gaussian PSF with FWHM= 0.6″ and 6 iterations.
- A wavelet transform was applied to the spatial dimension of 
the data cube, creating 6 “wavelet cubes” (Fig. 2d shows the 
wavelet of second highest frequency component).
- A 30-iteration Landweber deconvolution was applied to each 
wavelet cube. Figure 2e shows the first two wavelet compo-
nents.
- The blue and red wings of Hα emission were imaged, after 
subtracting the adjacent continuum (Fig. 2f).

Figure 2 shows the result of this procedure; star 1 is actually 
a blend of two quite similar stars named here as 1a (the brightest 
to the left) and star 1b, separated by 0.8″. It is clear that spatially 
resolved Hα emission is seen with subarcsecond structure that 
looks bipolar. The Hα emission is extended but of about 0.3″, 
which corresponds to 0.073 pc (~ 3 light months).

Star 1, defined as such by Greiner et al. (1996b), was ob-
erved by Cowley et al. (1997), who found it to be a B8 IV with 
magnitude of V = 17.3; B − V = 0.1 and U − B = −0.2. They

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name it star 4. Our GMOS-IFU observations comprise stars 1, 9, 6, and 7 (Fig. 1). The flux ratio in the V band between 1a and 1b is 1.43 so, considering the apparent magnitude of both as determined by Cowley et al. (1997), star 1a has $V = 17.9$ and star 1b has $V = 18.3$, which yields absolute magnitudes of $-0.9$ and $-0.5$, respectively. We classify star 1a as B5e V. Such a star has a mass of $M \sim 6 M_\odot$ and a radius of $R_\odot \sim 3.8 R_\odot$. For this star to have a white dwarf companion, it would need a minimum orbital period of 21 h. We conclude that the 9.4 h period, found by Alcock et al. (1997) and suggested by them as associated either to star 6 or 9, is probably not the orbital period of the supersoft X-ray source (SSS).

The spectra of stars 1a and 1b are shown in Fig. 4. They appear very similar. The ratio of the two spectra enhances the narrow Balmer lines and Hβ also appears, although no hint of it is visible in the original spectrum. Star 6 has $V \sim 19.0$, and its optical spectrum is about G III, with an absolute magnitude of $M_v \sim -0.2$. Star 9 is a main sequence B star with $M_v \sim -0.1$.

The narrow and weak Hα that stands out from the broad absorption of star 1a has an equivalent width of $W = -2.27$ Å. This corresponds to a luminosity of $L_{H\alpha} \sim 1.6 \times 10^{32}$ erg s$^{-1}$ ($\sim 0.039$ $L_\odot$). Given the dimension of 0.073 pc, this implies (Osterbrock 1989) that its nebular density is $140$ cm$^{-3}$ for a filling factor $f \sim 1$. Photoionization models using CLOUDY show that this would produce too strong an emission of [OIII] 4959 Å. Notice that the [OIII] 5007 Å line is in the CCD gap. No forbidden line is, in fact, observed in the spectrum. A self-consistent photoionization model can be produced with an ionization temperature of $T \sim 200\,000$ K, $L_{bb} \sim 10^{34}$ erg s$^{-1}$, a filling factor of $f \sim 10^{-2}$, and an electron density of $N_e = 10^3$ cm$^{-3}$. This model predicts weak [OIII] emission, consistent with the observation.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The main result of this work is the identification of the optical counterpart of RX J0527.8-6954 by the discovery of a bipolar Hα subarcsecond extended emission. We found that star 1 is a blend of two stars with quite similar brightness and spectral types. Star 1a (the brightest one) is associated to the Hα emission. The extended character of Hα is expected, as many
CBSS show spectroscopic evidence of jets and winds and are supposed to be copious UV sources that certainly produce ionization cones.

If there is indeed a white dwarf companion, it must be quite massive, most likely above 1 $M_\odot$. Kahabka (1995) found a mass of $M_{wd} \approx 1.14$ to 1.34 $M_\odot$ and a temperature of 5 to $6 \times 10^5$ K, from both the decay and recurrence times of X-ray outbursts, but admitted a high uncertainty to these parameters. Fitting a model atmosphere to ROSAT X-ray spectra, Suleimanov & Ibragimov (2003) have derived a mass for the white dwarf of 1.2 to 1.4 $M_\odot$, one of the highest masses estimated among the CBSS. For star 1a to accommodate a white dwarf companion, their orbital period has to exceed 21 h. Given the uncertainties involved in the fit to the ROSAT data, one should also consider the possibility that the compact star is not a white dwarf. If it is a neutron star of higher mass, the orbital period could be shorter, perhaps as short as 9 h.

RX J0527.8-6954 is a transient SSS with a bolometric luminosity between $0.4 \times 10^{37}$ and $0.9 \times 10^{37}$ erg s$^{-1}$ (Suleimanov & Ibragimov 2003), the X-ray lightcurve showed a steady decay along 5 years (Greiner et al. 1996b). This differentiates the system from other known CBSS. A second difference is that the total optical brightness of the compact component, which usually dominates the optical emission, is not seen here. These characteristics suggest that the system belongs to a distinct class of SSS. Three other SSS, in the LMC, SMC and M31 (Kahabka et al. 2006, Takei et al. 2008) Nelson et al. 2010, may also be Be/WD binaries where the supersoft emission is due to stable nuclear burning of the white dwarf’s envelope. This kind of sources may be associated to SSS observed in young stellar populations like the spiral arms of some galaxies. The supersoft X-ray emission of RX J0527.8-6954 was only detected a single time, no source being registered at its position in historical archives. This is also the case of the Be SSS transient detected in the SMC (Takei et al. 2008). In the present case the Be classification probably derives only from the bipolar emission and not from a circumstellar disc, as is usually the case in Be stars implying, perhaps, in a distinct nature for its accretion process.

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