THE CHANDRA HETGS X-RAY GRATINGS SPECTRUM OF η CARINAE

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Received 2001 May 21; accepted 2001 August 2

ABSTRACT

η Carinae may be the most massive and luminous star in the Galaxy and is suspected to be a massive colliding-wind binary system. The Chandra X-ray observatory has obtained a calibrated high-resolution X-ray spectrum of the star, uncontaminated by the nearby extended soft X-ray emission. Our 89 ks Chandra observation with the High-Energy Transmission Grating Spectrometer (HETGS) shows that the soft gas near the star is nonisothermal. The temperature distribution may represent the emission on either side of the colliding-wind bow shock, effectively “resolving” the shock. If so, the preshock wind velocities are ~700 and ~1800 km s⁻¹ in our analysis, and these velocities may be interpreted as the terminal velocities of the winds from η Carinae and from the hidden companion star. The forbidden-to-intercombination (f/i) line ratios for the He-like ions of S, Si, and Fe are large, indicating that the line-forming region lies far from the stellar photosphere. The iron fluorescent line at 1.93 Å, first detected by ASCA, is clearly resolved from the thermal iron line in the Chandra grating spectrum. The Fe fluorescent line is weaker in our Chandra observation than in any of the ASCA spectra. The Chandra observation also provides an uninterrupted, high time resolution light curve of the stellar X-ray emission from η Carinae and suggests that there was no significant coherent variability during the Chandra observation. The η Carinae Chandra grating spectrum is unlike recently published X-ray grating spectra of single massive stars in significant ways and is generally consistent with colliding-wind emission in a massive binary.

Subject headings: binaries: general — stars: early-type — stars: individual (η Carinae) — X-rays: stars

1. INTRODUCTION

The superluminous star η Carinae has been observed by nearly every X-ray satellite flown. Einstein observations (Seward et al. 1979; Seward & Chlebowski 1982; Chlebowski et al. 1984) first resolved the star’s X-ray emission from the rest of the Carina Nebula and mapped out point-like emission centered on the star and an elliptical X-ray ring around the star extending out to ~15°. Ginga (Koyama et al. 1990) and the Broad Band X-Ray Telescope provided the first clear measures of the strong Fe K line, indicative of thermal emission probably produced by shocked gas. ROSAT discovered the variable nature of the hard source (Corcoran et al. 1995), while ASCA discovered the ≥50-1000 times solar abundance of nitrogen (Tsuboi et al. 1997) in the outer homunculus and fluorescent Fe K emission (Corcoran et al. 1998) unresolved from the strong thermal line. A hard X-ray tail extending to ~50 keV was observed with the BeppoSAX Phoswich Detector System (Viotti et al. 2001). A 2–10 keV X-ray light curve obtained by the Rossi X-Ray Timing Explorer (consisting typically of one observation per week since 1996) revealed small amplitude periodic flares with P ~ 85 days (Corcoran et al. 1997) and confirmed that the variability seen in 1992 by ROSAT recurred (Ishibashi et al. 1999; Corcoran et al. 2001) on the same 5.5 yr period that fits the He I 10830 Å line variability reported by Damineli (1996). These recent X-ray measurements along with variations in the radio (Duncan et al. 1995) and near-IR (Damineli et al. 2000) all suggest that η Carinae may be the Galaxy’s most massive binary system (Damineli, Conti, & Lopes 1997; Corcoran et al. 2001) in which the hard X-ray emission is produced by shocked gas in the region where the wind from η Carinae collides with the wind from the companion star. An early observation of η Carinae by the Advanced CCD Imaging Spectrometer (ACIS) on board Chandra in 1999 September (Seward et al. 2001) provided the first image of the X-ray regions at a resolution of ~1°, although owing to degradation produced by charged particle damage of the CCDs, this observation could not be precisely calibrated spectrally.

Here we report the first calibrated observation of η Carinae with the High-Energy Transmission Grating Spectrometer (HETGS; C. R. Canizares et al. 2001, in preparation) on the Chandra X-Ray Observatory (Weisskopf, O’Dell, & van Speybroeck 1996) using the ACIS linear array (ACIS-S) to read out the dispersed spectrum. The Chandra HETGS is well suited for observing the pointlike hard emission from η Carinae for two reasons: (1) the spectral energy distribution of the emission fits nicely in the HETGS bandpass, and (2) this emission is thought to be dominated by thermal processes, which should produce strong line emission in the dispersed spectrum. Our deep (24.9 hr) observation of η Carinae with the HETGS provides the first spectrally resolved measure of the X-ray spectrum, allowing for the first time a detailed definition of the...
temperature distribution, density, and chemical abundance of the hot unresolved emission from the star. In this first report we discuss the overall spectral morphology of the unresolved X-ray emission, examine the emission-line temperature and density diagnostics, and provide an uninterrupted light curve of the unresolved X-ray source over the length of the observation.

2. OBSERVATION

The Chandra HETGS + ACIS-S observation of η Carinae was performed on 2000 November 19–20. The total exposure time of the observation was 89,546 s. The spacecraft roll was chosen so as to avoid contamination of the dispersed spectra by other bright X-ray sources in the field. The data were cleaned and processed using the standard pipeline processing available at the Chandra X-Ray Center. Images and spectra were extracted from the level 1.5 events using the Chandra Interactive Analysis of Observations (CIAO) analysis package.

The zero-order image, color coded by X-ray energy, is shown in Figure 1. This image is similar to that previously published (Seward et al. 2001), although the energy calibration is better in the new image. In particular, the ACIS-S zero-order image shows the soft elliptical "shell" of emission surrounding the hard X-ray core, which is unresolved to ACIS at scales of ∼0.5 km ≈ 1000 AU. The X-ray flux in the elliptical "shell" is very nonuniform, bright in the south and west (near the "S-ridge" and the "W-condensations" in the outer debris field; Walborn, Blanco, & Thackary 1978), and faint in the north and east. The hard unresolved "core" appears to be surrounded by a halo of X-ray emission at moderate X-ray energies (although the apparent emission at distances between 2.5 and 5" is probably consistent with the point spread of the mirror plus detector; Seward et al. 2001).

3. THE X-RAY GRATINGSPECTRUM OF η CARINA

The ACIS-S image of the dispersed spectrum shows that the hard source is unresolved to Chandra; in particular, there is no observed dispersed spectrum from any other source of emission in the ACIS-S field aside from the unresolved hard core source associated with η Carinae. We extracted the dispersed medium-energy grating (MEG) and high-energy grating (HEG) spectra from the X-ray event file using CIAO. Both plus and minus orders for the first-, second-, and third-order MEG and HEG source spectra were extracted, along with appropriate background spectra. Figure 2 shows the MEG plus first-order spectrum, while Figure 3 shows the HEG plus first order in the vicinity of the Fe K line. The MEG and HEG spectra of η Carinae represent the first calibrated high-resolution X-ray spectra of this star uncontaminated by extended soft emission. The MEG spectrum shows very little emission from the unresolved source at energies less than 1.5 keV (λ > 8.5 Å) owing to strong absorption and reveals a significant X-ray continuum in the 1–8 Å range and the presence of strong line emission from lines of S xv–xvi, Si xiii–xiv, Mg xii, Ca xix, and Fe K. Strong forbidden lines of S xvi, Si xiii, and Mg xii were detected. In the HEG spectrum, the Fe line region shows a thermal emission line produced by Fe xxvi and a blend of fluorescent Fe i K_z1 + K_z2 lines centered at 1.94 Å.

3.1. Modeling the Spectrum

We attempted to fit the MEG spectrum with a combination of optically thin thermal emission models using the XSPEC analysis package (Arnaud 1996). Because the dis-
Fig. 3.—Iron K line region from the HEG plus first-order spectrum of \( \eta \) Carinae. Emission is seen from He-like iron originating in gas at a temperature of \( \approx 8 \) keV. In addition, fluorescent line emission from cool iron is also clearly detected. The spectrum at the bottom is the X-ray background spectrum.

The dispersed spectrum has many bins with few counts and because background does not contribute significantly in the energy range of interest (\( E > 1.5 \) keV or \( \lambda < 8 \) Å), we used a modified version of the “C statistic” (Cash 1979) on the total (non-background subtracted) spectrum instead of the \( \chi^2 \) statistic. Previous analyses indicated that the emission at energies above 1.5 keV could be fit by emission at a single temperature (e.g., Corcoran et al. 2000). As shown in Figures 4 and 5, a variable-abundance single-temperature thermal model (VMEKAL-XSPEC; Mewe, Kaastra, & Liedahl 1995) provided a good fit to the continuum emission and most of the resolved emission lines. The parameters of the best-fit single-component model are given in Table 1. The single-component temperature is \( kT = 4.4 \) keV with a column density of \( N_H = 4.9 \times 10^{22} \) cm\(^{-2}\), in reasonable agreement with earlier results. However, we found that no isothermal model could simultaneously match the strengths of the H-like and He-like lines of Si in the \( 4.5 \) Å < \( \lambda < 6 \) Å range. Fitting both the He-like and H-like ions required the addition of at least one additional thermal component. Our best-fit two-temperature model is given in Table 2 and shown in Figures 4 and 5. This two-temperature model adequately matches the strength of both the He-like and H-like lines. This is the first time that the unresolved X-ray emission from \( \eta \) Carinae has been shown to require a nonisothermal temperature distribution. The maximum temperature we derive, \( kT \approx 8.7 \) keV, is a factor of nearly 2 larger than most other published temperatures for \( \eta \) Carinae and to our knowledge represents the highest temperature ever associated with an early-type star.

In our modeling of the X-ray spectrum we held most elemental abundances at their solar values (Anders & Grevesse 1989) but allowed the abundances of Si, S, and Fe (all of which have strong lines in the X-ray spectrum) to vary. The derived abundances for the one- and two-temperature models for these three elements are given in Table 1. In each case the abundances of the Si, S, and Fe were slightly non-solar: Si was found to be slightly overabundant, S was significantly overabundant (by about 70%), while Fe was slightly underabundant.

3.2. He-like Lines and the f/i Ratio

The ratio of the intensity of the forbidden component to the intercombination component of the He-like lines (the f/i ratio) is a density diagnostic (Gabriel & Jordan 1969), although the ratio may be also increased by UV photoexcitation (Kahn et al. 2001), which can suppress the forbidden line and enhance the intercombination line. We fit the Si \( \text{XIII} \), S \( \text{XV} \), and Fe \( \text{XXV} \) lines in XSPEC by first isolating the wavelength region around the line complex of interest and using Gaussians to model the lines with inclusion of a power-law component to describe the background. The fits are shown in Figures 6, 7, and 8, and the fit parameters are given in Table 2. The intercombination lines for all three ions are weak, and our analysis yields only upper limits for the intensities of these lines. We measure f/i values of greater than 1.0 for Si \( \text{XIII} \), greater than 2.0 for S \( \text{XV} \), and greater than 2.1 for Fe \( \text{XXV} \). These values correspond to electron densities of less than \( 10^{14} \) cm\(^{-3}\) for Si \( \text{XIII} \) and less than \( 10^{15} \) cm\(^{-3}\) for S \( \text{XV} \) and Fe \( \text{XXV} \).

3.3. The Fe Fluorescent Line

We fit the Fe I fluorescent line from the HEG spectrum in XSPEC by isolating the Fe K region and using a single
FIG. 5.—Same as in Fig. 4, but emphasizing the S and Si line region

TABLE 1

| Parameter                              | One-Component Fit | Two-Component Fit |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| $N_{H}$ ($\times 10^{22}$ cm$^{-2}$)   | 4.9               | 5.1 ($\pm 0.4$)   |
| $kT$ (keV)                             | 4.4               | 1.1 ($\pm 0.1$)   |
| Emission measure ($\times 10^{57}$ cm$^{-3}$) | 4.0               | 1.8 ($\pm 0.1$)   |
| $L_2$ (2–10, absorbed, ergs s$^{-1}$)  | 2.6               | 3.0               |
| $L_2$ (2–10, unabsorbed, $10^{46}$ ergs s$^{-1}$) | 3.9               | 4.5               |
| Si/\text{Si$_{0}$}                     | 1.5               | 1.1 ($\pm 0.2$)   |
| S/\text{S$_{0}$}                       | 1.4               | 1.7 ($\pm 0.4$)   |
| Fe/\text{Fe$_{0}$}                     | 0.6               | 0.9 ($\pm 0.2$)   |
| $kT_2$ (keV)                           | ...               | 8.7 ($\pm 1.7$)   |
| Emission measure$_2$ ($10^{57}$ cm$^{-3}$) | ...               | 2.9 ($\pm 0.3$)   |
| C statistic                            | 2035              | 1619              |

$^1$ Calculated assuming a distance of 2100 pc (Corcoran et al. 2001).

TABLE 2

| Line         | $E$ (keV) | $E_{measured}$ (keV) | Equivalent Width (eV) | Intensity (photons s$^{-1}$ cm$^{-2}$) |
|--------------|-----------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Si xii (r)   | 1.864     | 1.866                | 38                     | 0.009                                  |
| Si xii (i)   | 1.853     | 1.859                | $<4.3$                 | $<0.002$                               |
| Si xii (f)   | 1.839     | 1.839                | 21.4                   | 0.002                                  |
| S xvi (r)    | 2.460     | 2.460                | 33.1                   | 0.009                                  |
| S xvi (i)    | 2.450     | 2.450                | $<6.0$                 | $<0.001$                               |
| S xvi (f)    | 2.431     | 2.434                | 25.6                   | 0.002                                  |
| Fe xxiv (r)  | 6.700     | 6.700                | 261                    | 0.034                                  |
| Fe xxiv (i)  | 6.682     | 6.680                | $<42$                  | $<0.007$                               |
| Fe xxv (f)   | 6.636     | 6.640                | 42                     | 0.015                                  |
| Fe i         | 6.424     | 6.407                | 39.4                   | 0.009                                  |
Gaussian line plus power-law background component. The line parameters are given in Table 2. The measured equivalent width of the line is only 39 eV, which is about half the value of the smallest equivalent width seen by \textit{ASCA} (Corcoran et al. 2000).

4. X-RAY LIGHT CURVE

Though \( \eta \) Carinae is known to undergo significant increases (or “flares”) in its 2–10 keV X-ray flux, sometimes increasing in flux by 20%–50% on a timescale of many days (Corcoran et al. 1997; Ishibashi et al. 1999), no short-term variability on timescales less than a day has ever been detected. The best previous measure of the X-ray light curve from \( \eta \) Carinae was a long (\( \sim 100 \) ks) \textit{ASCA} observation spanning some 2.5 days, which did not find any significant variability in the 2–10 keV X-ray emission (Corcoran et al. 1998). We can reexamine the issue of \( \eta \) Carinae’s short-term X-ray variability using our \textit{Chandra} data since this observation provides a unique uninterrupted view of the source for a period of about a day. We first extracted a light curve from the zero-order image on the S3 chip using a circular 5” diameter region centered on the unresolved source. We also extracted a background light curve from a source-free circular region of diameter 17” centered just beyond the outer elliptical emission region surrounding the hard unresolved source. The net (background subtracted) X-ray light curve of the unresolved source in the zero-order data is shown in Figure 9a. While there is little evidence for variability in this zero-order light curve, the counting rate for the central source in zero order is large enough (\( \sim 0.2 \) counts s\(^{-1}\)) that event pileup is a problem. From the continuous clocking data published by Seward et al. (2001), the unpiled rate of the central source is 1.6 ACIS-I counts s\(^{-1}\), which implies that the unpiled rate in the ACIS-S zero-order image is \( \sim 0.8 \) counts s\(^{-1}\), suggesting a pileup fraction of \( \sim 75\% \). In addition to reducing the observed count rate, this degree of pileup will severely dampen any real source variability in the zero-order data. We used the count rate/pileup estimator tool provided by the \textit{Chandra} X-Ray Center to estimate the sensitivity to source variability in the zero-order data and found that for a source spectrum described by the fit to the dispersed spectrum of the central source, variations of the central source flux by a factor of about 3 imply a change in observed (piled up) count rate of only 30%. Thus, slight variations in the observed ACIS-S + HETG zero-order light curve might imply much larger flux variations in the source, if this analysis is reliable.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig6.png}
\caption{Fit to the \textit{f}, \textit{i}, and \textit{r} lines of Si \textit{XIII}}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig7.png}
\caption{Fit to the \textit{f}, \textit{i}, and \textit{r} lines of S \textit{XV}}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig8.png}
\caption{Fit to the \textit{f}, \textit{i}, and \textit{r} lines of Fe \textit{XXV} (near 1.85 Å) and the Fe \textit{i} fluorescent line (at 1.93 Å).}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig9a.png}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig9b.png}
\caption{(a) Background-corrected light curve of the unresolved hard source derived from the zero-order data. Event pileup is severe (pileup fraction is about 75%), which will severely reduce the observed amplitude of any real source variability. (b) Background-corrected light curve of the unresolved hard source derived from the dispersed MEG minus order for events falling on the S2 chip. Event pileup is not significant in the dispersed data.}
\end{figure}
To further investigate any possible variations in the hard X-ray emission from η Carinae for the duration of the *Chandra* observation, we extracted a light curve from the dispersed spectrum of the central source. Since the dispersed spectrum is spread over a large number of detector pixels, event pileup is not significant. To avoid problems caused by differing chip sensitivities and backgrounds, we considered only the MEG minus-order data from the ACIS-S2 chip. We extracted all dispersed counts in the MEG minus order from a narrow rectangular region centered on the dispersed spectrum and extracted background in a similar region offset from the dispersed spectrum. In the region used for source extraction, the maximum number of counts per unbinned ACIS-S2 pixel was 19 counts, which corresponds to an observed count rate of $2 \times 10^{-4}$ counts s$^{-1}$, or $6 \times 10^{-4}$ counts per readout frame. Figure 9b shows the net light curve of the dispersed MEG minus-order spectrum from chip S2. This light curve shows little evidence of variability, suggesting that η Carinae did not undergo any real coherent variations during the *Chandra* observation.

5. DISCUSSION

Recent evidence suggests that η Carinae may be a massive binary star in which variable X-ray emission is produced by shocked gas at the interface where the wind from η Carinae collides with the wind of its companion (presumably some less massive early-type star). The line complexes resolved in the HETGS spectra provide unique information about the physical condition of the X-ray-emitting region and thus on the single or binary nature of η Carinae. In the colliding-wind model the wind from η Carinae forms a bow shock around the companion since orbital motion has a significant influence on the single or binary nature of η Carinae. In the colliding-wind model, the apex of the bow shock is located at a distance of $d/(1 + \eta^{1/2})$ from η Carinae, where $d$ is the separation of the two stars. At the phase of the *Chandra* observation, $\phi = 0.60$, the two stars are separated by about $4 \times 10^{14}$ cm, using the orbital elements of Corcoran et al. (2001). At this time the bow shock is about $2.5 \times 10^{14}$ cm from η Carinae and about $1.5 \times 10^{14}$ cm from the companion. The density of the wind at a distance $r$ from the photosphere is $n = M/(4r^2V\sin i)$, where $M$ is the mass loss rate and $V$ the wind velocity. Using $M = 10^{-4} M_\odot$ yr$^{-1}$ and $V_{\infty, \eta} \approx 500$ km s$^{-1}$ (Hillier et al. 2001), then the density of the wind from η Carinae at a distance of $2.5 \times 10^{14}$ cm is only $n \approx 8 \times 10^{25}$ cm$^{-3}$. Using $M_\ast = 10^{-3} M_\odot$ yr$^{-1}$ (Corcoran et al. 2001) and $V_{\infty, \eta} = 1800$ km s$^{-1}$ as appropriate values for the companion's wind, the density of the companion's wind at a distance of $r = 1.5 \times 10^{14}$ cm is also only about $10^9$ cm$^{-3}$. The predicted densities are consistent with the upper limits derived from our analysis of the $f/i$ line intensity ratios. However, if the actual density of the emission region is near the limit implied by the $f/i$ ratios, this might indicate that the assumed wind momentum balance is not quite right.

In contrast, new published X-ray grating spectra of θ¹ Ori C (Schulz et al. 2000), ζ Ori (Waldron & Cassinelli 2001), and ζ Pup (Kahn et al. 2001) all have $f/i$ ratios lower than the values we derive from the η Carinae X-ray line spectrum. None of these stars are known to show any colliding-wind effects, and apparently, in these massive stars the X-ray lines form relatively near the stellar photosphere, probably within a few stellar radii. This is not the case for η Carinae.

The strength of the Fe fluorescent line is related to the column density of scattering material by $EW \approx 2.3 N_{\lambda, d}$ keV, where $EW$ is the equivalent width of the line in keV and $N_{\lambda, d}$ the total column density of cold material in units of $10^{24}$ cm$^{-2}$ (Kallman 1995). The *ASCA* spectra suggest that $EW \approx (4-7) N_{\lambda, d}$ for η Carinae outside of eclipse (Corcoran et al. 2000). Thus, at the time of the HETGS observation the equivalent width of the Fe fluorescent line implies that $N_{\lambda, d} \approx 0.006-0.02$, i.e., that the column density of cold material is $N_H \approx 6 \times 10^{11}-2 \times 10^{12}$ cm$^{-2}$. This
value is in fair agreement with the value of $N_H = 5 \times 10^{22}$ derived from fitting the X-ray continuum in the MEG spectrum, suggesting that some of the same material that produces the X-ray absorption is also responsible for producing the Fe fluorescent emission. The equivalent width of the line that we derive here is much smaller than any values given in either Corcoran et al. (2000) or Corcoran et al. (1998). This may be the result of the difficulty in determining the actual width of the fluorescent line in the ASCA spectra since the line is not resolved from the thermal component. However, if this variation is real, it may represent a real decrease in the scattering optical depth. Such a decrease is not unexpected in the binary model since at the time of the HETGS observation, the companion is nearly in front. Since the companion's wind is less dense this could produce a decrease in the scattering optical depth at the time of the HETGS observation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

We have presented here the first high-energy X-ray grating spectrum of the supermassive star $\eta$ Carinae. This grating spectrum shows strong line emission from H-like and He-like ions of S, Si, Mg, Ca, and Fe and confirms the presence of the Fe fluorescent line discovered by ASCA. The forbidden lines of the He-like ions are strong and the intercombination lines weak, indicating that the line-forming region is far from the stellar photosphere. These results are all consistent with the current picture of $\eta$ Carinae as a colliding-wind binary. We expect that interesting variations in the X-ray spectrum will occur as the two stars approach periastron (which should next occur on 2003 June 20). In particular, we expect that the strength of the forbidden lines will weaken near periastron as the density in the X-ray region increases and the UV photospheric flux in the line region intensifies. Additional HETGS observations as the stars approach periastron, especially in conjunction with UV spectroscopy, will provide unique and significant constraints on the orbital geometry, the strengths of the winds from both stars, and the evolutionary stages of the stellar components.

We would like to thank Fred Seward for important contributions to this paper, in particular in emphasizing the importance of pileup in measuring the variation of the central source. We also gratefully acknowledge the Chandra staff at the SAO/CIA and the HETGS team at MIT for their help in scheduling the observation and analyzing the data. We made use of the FTOOLS suite of software supported by the HEASARC. This research has made use of NASA's Astrophysics Data System Abstract Service.

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