Drastic Spectroscopic Variability of the Be/X-Ray Binary
Ariel 0535+262/V725 Tau during and after the 2009 Giant Outburst

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Abstract

We report on high-dispersion optical spectroscopic observations of the Be/X-ray binary A 0535+262/V725 Tau during a giant outburst in 2009 November/December, and after it. The observed emission line profiles, reflecting the structure of the geometrically thin circumstellar envelope of the Be star (Be disk), show drastic variabilities, and indicate the existence of a warped component. The enhanced blue shoulder seen after periastron passage implies a gas stream from a dense part of the Be disk to the neutron star.

Key words: stars: Be — stars: binaries: spectroscopic — stars: emission-line — stars: individual (Ariel 0535+262 = HDE 245770)

1. Introduction

Be/X-ray binaries, which are one of the major subgroups of high-mass X-ray binaries, along with superfast X-ray transients and supergiant/X-ray binaries, consist of a Be star and a compact object, generally a neutron star. Be stars are B-type giant or dwarf stars (luminosity class III–V) that have exhibited Balmer lines in emission at least once. They have a geometrically thin circumstellar envelope, called a Be disk, formed as a result of viscous diffusion (≤ 1 km s⁻¹) of matter ejected from an equatorial region of a rapidly rotating central star (Lee et al. 1991; see also a recent review by Carciofi 2010).

The activity of Be/X-ray binaries in X-rays is divided into three categories with respect to the luminosity: quiescent state (L_X ≤ 10³⁶ erg s⁻¹), normal (type I) outbursts (L_X ~ 10³⁶–3⁷ erg s⁻¹), and giant (type II) outbursts (L_X ≥ 10³⁷ erg s⁻¹). The normal outbursts occur around periastron passage, and last for several days. This type of outbursts is seen in systems with intermediate-to-high eccentricities, where mass transfer from the Be disk to the neutron star takes place at every periastron passage (Okazaki & Negueruela 2001; Negueruela & Okazaki 2001). The giant outbursts, on the other hand, lasting several tens of days, are not well understood, since they show no orbital modulation and occur much less frequently than normal outbursts.

Ariel 0535+262/V725 Tau is one of the best-studied Be/X-ray binaries since its discovery in 1975 (Rosenberg et al. 1975; Coe et al. 1975). This system consists of an X-ray pulsar orbiting around an O9.7 IIIe star (Giangrande et al. 1980) in a relatively wide (P_orb ~ 110 d) and eccentric (≈ 0.47) orbit (Finger et al. 1994).

Giant outbursts of A 0535+262 have been observed eight times: in 1975, 1977, 1980, 1989, 1994, 2005, 2009, and 2011 (see Camero-Arranz et al. 2011b and references therein). Based on long-term photometric observations including a giant outburst in 1994, Haigh et al. (2004) suggested that a reduction of the truncation radius (mass transfer) commenced before the giant outburst. For other systems, several observations including giant outbursts have been reported: EXO 2030+375 (Wilson et al. 2002, 2008), 4U 0115+63 (Negueruela et al. 2001; Reig et al. 2007), for instance. Wilson et al. (2008) found that the orbital phase of the normal outburst around a giant one is shifted by the excitation of a density wave. Negueruela et al. (2001) proposed that enhanced, broad Hα line profiles observed around each giant outburst are from a precessing warped disk.

In 2009 November/December, a giant outburst occurred in A 0535+262. It started brightening in X-rays on November 30, with a couple of precursors in October (Sugizaki et al. 2009). The Swift/BAT team reported that the peak of the giant outburst reached 3.1 Crab in 15–50 keV. After the giant outburst, normal outbursts occurred around three consecutive periastron passages in 2010 March, July, and October, followed by the next giant outburst in 2011 February.

In this letter, we report on the results from optical high-dispersion spectroscopic observations during and after the 2009 giant outburst. This is the first-ever high-dispersion monitoring observations that cover the whole period of a giant outburst. A detailed analysis of the whole dataset will be published in a forthcoming paper.

2. Observations

Optical spectroscopic observations of A 0535+262 were carried out on 35 nights from 2009 November to 2010 September at the Okayama Astrophysical Observatory.

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Fig. 1. Intensity of the normalized peak $E/C$ (top) and equivalent width $EW$ (middle) of the obtained Hα line profiles. Bottom: X-ray light curve in 2–10 keV by MAXI/GSC. The dashed lines indicate the $\phi_X = 0$ in M10. The short arrows in the middle panel denote the HJD of 11 representative spectra displayed in figure 2.
3. Results

The representative H\textalpha{} and He\textsc{i} \(\lambda 5876\) profiles from our observations are respectively shown in the left and right panels in figure 2. For reasons of clarity, the spectra have linear offsets along the vertical axis from each other. The observation date and HJD of the mid-exposure time are annotated below each profile on the left and right sides, respectively. The phase, \(\phi_X\), estimated by M10 is also shown above each profile. The He\textsc{i} \(\lambda 5876\) line profile on 2010 March 30 is not presented because of its poor S/N.

Figure 2 shows that the H\textalpha{} line profile drastically changed during the giant outburst (spectra A–E), and afterwords (spectra F–J). The He\textsc{i} \(\lambda 5876\) line profile during this period is characterized by a strongly redshifted triple peak and a broad hump/shoulder in the blue wing. The variation of the He\textsc{i} \(\lambda 5876\) line profile was also significant, although it was not as drastic as that of the H\textalpha{} line. The He\textsc{i} \(\lambda 5876\) line profile was more or less a typical double-peaked profile, seen in many Be stars.

In 2009 October, before the giant outburst, the triple peak of the H\textalpha{} line was already strongly redshifted, while the He\textsc{i} \(\lambda 5876\) line profile was double peaked with \(V \ll R\) (spectrum A). In one month, during the precursor of the giant outburst (Wilson-Hodge et al. 2009; see also figure 1), the intensity of the normalized peak, \(E/C\), of both lines significantly increased, and the blue hump superposed on the smooth slope of the H\textalpha{} line brightened (spectrum B, see also top panel of figure 1). The blue component of the He\textsc{i} \(\lambda 5876\) line profile also became brighter.

Two days before the peak of the giant outburst (2009 December 6, Krimm et al. 2009), the H\textalpha{} line profile changed

Fig. 2. Representative spectra of H\textalpha{} (left) and He\textsc{i} \(\lambda 5876\) (right) lines. The observation date and HJD of mid exposure time are written near the profile on the left and right sides, respectively. The profiles showed drastic variability (see text for details).
drastically: the $E/C$ ratio decreased and a bright “shoulder” appeared around 0 km s$^{-1}$ in the blue wing (spectrum C). A similar, bright feature was seen in the central part of the HeI $\lambda$5876 line profile (between $-50$ km s$^{-1}$ and $+50$ km s$^{-1}$). However, these features were gone by 2009 December 12, six days after the X-ray maximum (spectrum D).

Three weeks later (2010 January 6), in the fading phase of the giant outburst, the blue shoulder in the H$\alpha$ line reappeared (spectrum E). The $E/C$ ratio started decreasing by then, after it gradually increased until 2009 December 22. The HeI $\lambda$5876 line showed similar variability; the $E/C$ ratio increased and then slightly decreased again.

In 2010 February, the double peak of the H$\alpha$ line continued to grow (spectra F and G), and reached the highest intensity during the precursor of a normal outburst (2010 February 24, spectrum G).

On 2010 March 26, near the peak of the normal outburst in the orbital cycle next to the giant outburst, the profile drastically changed; in the H$\alpha$ line, the strongly redshifted double-peak weakened and a huge, broad shoulder appeared in the blue wing, while in the HeI $\lambda$5876 line, a bright component appeared with a similar velocity range to that of the blue hump in the H$\alpha$ line (spectrum H). In the next four days, the bright blue shoulder grew wider and the H$\alpha$ line profile became like a top-hat profile (spectrum I).

By 2010 September 16, two orbital cycles after the giant outburst, both lines had significantly weakened (spectrum J).

The equivalent widths of the H$\alpha$ and HeI $\lambda$5876 lines around the giant outburst were highest during the last five years: $EW(\text{H}\alpha)\approx -18$ Å and $EW(\text{HeI}\lambda5876)\approx -1.5$ Å [see figure 1 for $EW(\text{H}\alpha)$, where the error size is denoted by the size of each symbol]. $EW(\text{H}\alpha)$ showed complicated variability during our monitoring period: the absolute value of $EW(\text{H}\alpha)$, $|EW(\text{H}\alpha)|$, monotonically increased for about one orbital period until it temporarily decreased when the X-ray precursor occurred in 2009 October ($\sim$ JD 2455140). Afterwards, it increased for a while until two days before the peak of the outburst ($\sim$ JD 2455170). A brief low state in the H$\alpha$ line flux was seen for $\sim$10 days between JD 2455169 and JD 2455178 (2009 December 3–12), which was followed by a gradual decrease of $|EW(\text{H}\alpha)|$ until the end of the giant outburst. Then, after a rapid increase two weeks prior to the precursor of the normal outburst in 2010 March ($\sim$ JD 2455270), it entered a long-term, declining phase. Since 2010 July, $|EW(\text{H}\alpha)|$ is at a level comparable to that in 2007 (M10, $\sim$9 Å). Camero-Arranz et al. (2011b) reported a similar trend of variability of $|EW(\text{H}\alpha)|$ in their figure 1, although our $|EW(\text{H}\alpha)|$ is approximately 5 Å smaller than theirs.

### 4. Discussion

The H$\alpha$ line profiles have exhibited remarkable variability, not only during the 2009 giant outburst, but also before and after it. The $E/C$ ratio $\gtrsim 3.5$ during the giant outburst and one cycle before/after it (from 2009 August through 2010 March) is significantly higher than the previous values ($\lesssim 2.7$) since 2005. Besides, since 2009 August, after the bright normal outburst, the $V/R$ variability has not followed any longer the 500-day periodic variation found by M10; the expected $V/R$ ratio in this period was $>1$, while the obtained line profiles exhibited $V < R$. These facts indicate that not only the Be disk has grown denser, but also a non-axisymmetric bright region has appeared in the disk. Negueruela et al. (1998) reported that the process that took place at the same time as the 1994 giant outburst resulted in a change of both the period and the phase of $V/R$ variability, which implied a major perturbation of the physical conditions in the Be disk. Haigh et al. (2004) carried out long-term observations including the 1994 giant outburst, and found that the Be disk began changing its structure one year before the giant outburst (see their figure 2). Our observations suggest that, for the 2009 giant outburst, such a profound perturbation in the Be disk began about one cycle before the giant outburst. Further observations are needed to check whether the 500-day period is temporarily hidden and will show up again, or will be replaced by a different period, as seen at the time of the 1994 giant outburst.

The enhanced H$\alpha$ profile has a blue hump and a triple peak. Although both spectral components were seen in the same period, from one cycle before the giant outburst to one cycle after it, only the blue hump exhibited variability that modulated with the orbital phase. The particularly interesting feature of this variability was the appearance of a bright “shoulder” after periastron passage, $\phi_x = 0.1-0.15$ (spectra C, H, and I). Besides, the radial velocity of the blue hump, $\sim -100-0$ km s$^{-1}$, is similar to the velocity of the violet peak of double-peak ed profiles that showed the $V/R$ variability reported by M10. These features imply that the blue hump arises from the outermost region of the Be disk, where the density is higher than usual, possibly due to a one-armed density wave. Given the orbital elements of A 0535+262 (Finger et al. 1994), this part of the Be disk happens to be located near the periastron. In such a situation, when the neutron star passes the periastron, an enhanced mass transfer should take place from the dense part of the Be disk to the neutron star. With the observer’s direction derived by Finger et al. (1994), gas streaming motion associated with this mass transfer also has negative line-of-sight velocities. It is, therefore, likely that the blue shoulder is the observational manifestation of the dense gas stream from the Be disk toward the neutron star.

Some Be stars also have shown triple-peak ed profiles: e.g., $\phi$ Per and 59 Cyg. Maintz et al. (2004) pointed out the possibility that the triple-peak ed profiles of these stars are caused by small absorption by the companion star. A 0535+262 is, however, the binary of a Be star and a neutron star, and the dip between two adjacent peaks is much broader and deeper than that discussed in Maintz et al. (2004). It is therefore unlikely that the neutron star is involved in causing the triple-peak ed profile.

Negueruela et al. (2001) observed a long-term variation of the H$\alpha$ line of another Be/X-ray binary, 4U 0115+63, and found that the profile often shows a succession of single-peaked and shell profiles around a giant outburst (see their figures 2 and 6). Since the single-peaked and shell profiles are typical profiles when a Be disk is seen pole-on and equator-on, respectively, they interpreted this phenomenon as evidence for a precessing, warped Be disk driven by radiation from the central star (Porter 1998). If the red triple-peak ed profile of A 0535+262 is due to a warping of the Be disk, the estimated
time-scale of the precession is \( \sim 30 \) days, using table 1 and equation (8) of Porter (1998). This time-scale is comparable to the time-scale of observed profile variability around the 2009 giant outburst. Although it is difficult to predict when and how the mass is transferred from the warped disk to the neutron star, it seems plausible that such a strong disturbance in the Be disk can shift the phase of maximum mass transfer toward the neutron star, and in turn the phase of X-ray maximum.

The equivalent width of the \( \text{H}_\alpha \) line reflects the density in the outer part of the Be disk, since, in Be/X-ray binaries, the size of the Be disk, which is determined by the tidal truncation by the neutron star, does not change very much. The gradual increase of \( |EW(\text{H}_\alpha)| \) and/or \( E/C \), from 2005 through the 2009 giant outburst (figure 1, see also M10), therefore, indicates that the Be disk grew denser and denser in the outer part. Given this long-term trend, the temporary decrease of \( |EW(\text{H}_\alpha)| \) after each of the precursor and the giant outburst implies that a significant amount of mass in the disk was transferred to the neutron star during these events, and that the Be disk recovered shortly after each event. The optical–IR photometry, including the giant outburst in 1994, shows the same tendency (Haigh et al. 2004).

The \( \text{H}_\alpha \) line and \( \text{He}^+ \lambda 5876 \) showed qualitatively similar variations in the long term until 2010 August. After that, however, the \( \text{He}^+ \lambda 5876 \) line profile became quite different from that of the \( \text{H}_\alpha \) line, e.g., a significant decrease in the flux and the opposite trend in the \( V/R \) ratio. Since the region emitting the \( \text{He}^+ \) line is slightly smaller than that emitting the \( \text{H}_\alpha \) line, it implies that the density and/or the temperature of the \( \text{He}^+ \lambda 5876 \) emitting region decreased after a couple of mass-transfer events.

5. Concluding Remarks

We observed the Be/X-ray binary A0535+262, covering the whole course of the 2009 giant outburst. The observed emission line profiles during the giant outburst imply active components in the Be disk, which cause significant variability in the observation period. The bright blue shoulder indicates the enhanced gas stream from the outermost part of the Be disk to the neutron star at periastron. The highly redshifted, enhanced triple-peaked feature in the \( \text{H}_\alpha \) line profiles is possibly from a warping component. Further study is needed to clarify the nature of these features.

After the 2009 giant outburst, three normal outbursts occurred in A0535+262, followed by the next giant outburst in 2011 February (Camero-Arranz et al. 2011a). As of 2011 March, the Be disk of A0535+262 is still active according to its \( EW \), so that monitoring observations covering several more cycles is important to study in more detail the interaction of the Be disk and the neutron star.

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