The binary black hole scenario for the BL Lacertae object AO 0235+16

G.E. Romero 1, J.H. Fan2, S.E. Nuza3
1. Instituto Argentino de Radioastronomía, C.C.5, (1894) Villa Elisa, Bs. As., Argentina
2. Center for Astrophysics, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou 510400, China
3. Departamento de Física J.J. Giambiagi, FCEN, UBA, Pabellón 1, Ciudad Universitaria, 1428 Buenos Aires, Argentina

ABSTRACT

Recent analysis of the long term radio lightcurve of the extremely variable BL Lacertae object AO 0235+16 by Raiteri et al. (2001) have revealed the presence of recurrent outbursts in this source with a period of $\sim 5.7 \pm 0.5$ yr. Periodicity analysis of the optical lightcurve also show evidence for a shorter period. Here we discuss whether such a behavior can be explained by a binary black hole model where the accretion disk of one of the supermassive black holes is precessing due to the tidal effects of the companion. We estimate the mass of the accreting hole and analyze under what constraints onto the secondary mass and the orbital parameters of the system it is possible to provide a viable interpretation of the available multiwavelength data.

Subject headings: Galaxies: active – BL Lacertae objects: individual: AO 0235+16 – Gamma rays: theory – Black hole physics

1. Introduction

The BL Lacertae object AO 0235+16 ($z = 0.94$) is one of the most variable blazars across the entire electromagnetic spectrum. Fan & Lin (2000) have compiled the historical optical lightcurves, which present large amplitude outbursts. At short timescales, strong radio variability has been found by Quirrenbach et al. (1992), Romero et al. (1997), and Kraus et al. (1999), among others. Very rapid (timescales of hours) optical variations were reported in several opportunities (e.g. Rabbette et al. 1996, Heidt & Wagner 1996, Noble & Miller 1996, Romero et al. 2000a). The intranight optical duty cycle of this source seems to be close to 1 (Romero et al. 2002). The X-ray flux also displays significant and rapid outbursts (e.g. Madejski et al. 1996). At gamma-ray energies the source has been detected by EGRET experiment onboard the Compton satellite (Hunter et al. 1993, Hartman et al. 1999). All this activity
makes of AO 0235+16 an outstanding candidate to probe the most extreme physical conditions in blazars.  

The radio structure of the source has been studied at ground-based (e.g. Jones et al. 1984, Chu et al. 1996, Chen et al. 1999) and space (Frey et al. 2000) VLBI resolutions. The object is very compact at sub-milliarcsecond angular scales. Superluminal components with velocities up to \( \sim 30c \) have been detected (e.g. Fan et al. 1996 and references therein). Chen et al. (1999) have argued, based on the variations of the position angle of the superluminal components from 1979 till 1997, that it is possible that the jet is rotating. The evidence, however, is far from conclusive.

Very recently, Raiteri et al. (2001) have reported the results of a very extensive multifrequency monitoring of AO 0235+16. On the long term, variations of 5 magnitudes in the \( R \) band and up to a factor 18 in the radio emission were found. Periodicity analysis of the radio data based on the discrete autocorrelation function, the discrete Fourier Transform, and folded lightcurves, covering a time-span of \( \sim 25 \) yr, reveal the likely existence of a period of \( 5.7 \pm 0.54 \) yr (Raiteri et al. 2001). Additional analysis of the optical lightcurve with the Jurkevich method by Fan et al. (2002) shows a different periodic signal at \( 2.95 \pm 0.15 \) yr. The significance of this latter periodicity is confirmed by Monte Carlo simulations of random lightcurves (see Fan et al. 2002 for details).

Periodic signals in the lightcurves of different blazars have been interpreted by a number of authors in terms of supermassive binary black holes systems (e.g. Sillampää et al. 1988, Katz 1997, Villata et al. 1998, Romero et al. 2000b, Rieger & Mannhaeim 2000, de Paolis et al. 2002). In the present paper we will discuss whether the binary black hole hypothesis can be adapted to the interesting case of AO 0235+16. The existence of abundant multiwavelength data on this source will help to constrain the model parameters. In the next section we shall present the basic features of the precessing jet model for AGNs. Then we will apply the model to AO 0235+16 and discuss the results. We close the paper with some brief conclusions.

### 2. Supermassive black hole binaries and disk precession

Supermassive black hole binaries (SBHBs) are the natural result of galaxy mergers. Their formation and evolution have been extensively discussed in the literature (e.g. Begelman et al. 1980, Roos 1981, Valtaoja et al. 1989). The fact that many (if not most) galaxies contain massive black holes and that galaxies often merge implies a relatively high formation rate of SBHBs. The
Fig. 1.— A sketch of a driven precessing accretion disk in a binary black hole system. Jet direction is indicated by $\vec{\omega}_d$. Adapted from Romero et al. (2000b)
current evidence for central engines of active galactic nuclei formed by massive binary systems includes double nuclei (as in the case of NGC4486B), wiggly jets (e.g. Kaastra & Roos 1992), double emission lines observed in several quasars (Gaskell 1996), and periodic optical lightcurves as in the case of OJ 287 (Sillanpää et al. 1988, Lehto & Valtonen 1996, Villata et al. 1998).

Geodetic precession of relativistic jets in SBHBs has also been often discussed in relation to large-scale helical jets (e.g. Begelman et al. 1980, Roos 1988). This effect is due to the Lense-Thirring dragging of inertial frames and is much slower than the tidally-induced precession produced by the gravitational torque of one of the black holes on the accretion disk of the other. If we are interested in short timescales we should focus on the second phenomenon (e.g. Katz 1997, Romero et al. 2000b). Newtonian precession of an accretion disk (which can be transmitted to the associated jets) has been extensively studied in the context of galactic binaries and microquasars (e.g. Katz 1973, 1980; Katz et al. 1982; Larwood 1998; Kaufman Bernadó et al. 2002). The general situation in an extragalactic scenario is depicted in Figure 1. We have two black holes in a close circular orbit of radius $r_m$. One of the holes has an accretion disk which is non-coplanar with the orbital plane. It is usually expected that the jet is ejected perpendicularly to the disk plane, in the direction of the disk angular velocity $\omega_d$. The gravitational torque of the companion black hole onto the disk will make the innermost part of it to precess, say within a radius $r_d$ where the different parts of the fluid are efficiently coupled at the sound speed $c_s$. This precession will be transmitted to the jets, which will move with a precession half-opening angle $\theta$ and a precession velocity given by (e.g. Katz 1997, Romero et al. 2000b):

$$|\Omega_p| \approx \frac{3}{4} \frac{G m}{r_m^3} \frac{1}{\omega_d} \cos \theta,$$

where $G$ is the gravitational constant and $m$ is the mass of the black hole that exerts the torque upon the disk. By convention we will call this black hole the “secondary” and the accreting hole will be called the “primary” (its mass will be denoted by $M$). This does not necessarily imply that $M > m$. The orbital period $T_m$ is related with the black hole masses and size of the orbit by Kepler’s law:

$$r_m^3 = \frac{G(m + M)T_m^2}{4\pi^2}.$$ 

The ratio between the orbital and the precessing periods can be related through
the disk angular velocity \( \omega_d = (GM/r_d^3)^{1/2} \):

\[
T_m/T_p = \frac{3}{4} \frac{m}{M} \kappa^{3/2} \left( \frac{M}{m + M} \right)^{1/2} \cos \theta,
\]

(3)

where \( T_p = 2\pi/\Omega_p \) and \( \kappa = r_d/r_m \). Since \( \kappa < 1 \), normally \( T_m/T_p < 1 \) too. For X-ray binaries in the Galaxy this ratio is typically \( \sim 0.1 \) (e.g. Larwood 1998).

The precession of the jet results into a variable viewing angle \( \phi = \phi(t) \), which through the flux modulation due to the Doppler factor \( \delta = [\gamma(1 - \beta \cos \phi)]^{-1} \) can produce a periodic signal in the non-thermal jet emission measured in the observer’s frame (e.g. Abraham & Romero 1999):

\[
S^{\text{obs}}(\nu) = \delta^{2+\alpha} S(\nu),
\]

(4)

where \( \alpha \) is the synchrotron spectral index.

In the next section we will constrain the value of the different parameters for the application of this scenario to AO 0235+16 and we will then try to evaluate the likelihood of the binary black hole hypothesis as a viable explanation of the radio periodicity observed in AO 0235+16.

3. Models for AO 0235+16

The non-thermal radio emission of AO 0235+16 is interpreted as incoherent synchrotron radiation produced by a power-law population of relativistic electrons in the jet of the object. Hence, the radio periodicity identified by Raiteri et al. (2001) should be related to processes occurring in the jet. We shall assume that the observed period is the consequence of the precession of the jet. In the observer’s frame, this period is \( T_p^{\text{obs}} \approx 5.7 \) yr. Due to relativistic effects, the intrinsic period in the blazar will be (e.g., Roland et al. 1994, Rieger & Mannheim 2000, Britzen et al. 2001):

\[
T_p^{\text{obs}} = (1 + z) \int_0^{T_p} (1 - \beta \cos \phi(t)) dt.
\]

(5)

For small viewing angles, as it is the case with AO 0235+16, this yields:

\[
T_p \approx \frac{2\gamma^2 T_p^{\text{obs}}}{1 + z}.
\]

(6)

As mentioned by Romero et al. (2000b) for the case of 3C273, a secondary black hole in a non-coplanar circular orbit around an accreting black hole must penetrate the outer parts of the disk, producing optical flares. A similar scenario
has been discussed in connection to OJ 287 by Letho & Valtonen (1996). Since two black-hole/disk collisions are expected per orbit, the periodicity of the optical flares should be $\sim T_m/2$.

We shall assume that the optical periodicity found by Fan et al. (2002) in AO 0235+16 corresponds to the disk penetration by the secondary. Correcting by redshift, we get $T_m \approx 3$ yr. Since this emission is originated in the accretion disk, which can be considered stationary in the observer’s frame, no relativistic corrections should be applied to this period. Just as an example, we mention that in the case of a jet with a Lorentz factor $\gamma = 2.5$ we have a ratio $T_m/T_p \sim 0.08$, which is quite reasonable from a dynamical point of view (Katz 1973, Larwood 1998). Several specific models will be calculated below.

Estimates of the central black hole mass of AO 0235+16 can be obtained using high-energy data. The object has been observed by ROSAT and ASCA at soft X-ray energies (Madejski et al. 1996). The ROSAT data show rapid ($\sim 3$ days) and significant variability whereas the ASCA data present a steady source with a hard power-law energy index $\alpha_x = 0.96 \pm 0.09$ and a flux of $0.3 \mu$Jy at 1 keV. A small part of the X-ray emission is expected to be an isotropic field produced by the innermost part of the accretion disk whereas the remaining X-rays are probably beamed radiation from the jet, as suggested by the rapid variability observed by ROSAT. Gamma-rays produced close to the black hole will be absorbed in the isotropic X-ray fields by pair production (Becker & Kafatos 1995, Blandford & Levinson 1995). The region at which the opacity to pair creation drops to 1 for a given energy $E$ defines the concept of a $\gamma$-sphere: no photons with energy larger than $E$ will escape from the interior of the corresponding $\gamma$-sphere. Hence, if we have an adequate model for the accretion disk generating the absorbing field and an independent estimate (e.g. through high-energy variability observations) of the size of a given $\gamma$-sphere, we can calculate the mass of the black hole (see details in Section 3.3 below). This procedure has been adopted by a number of authors in studies of the central objects of gamma-ray blazars (e.g. Becker & Kafatos 1995; Fan et al. 1999, 2000; Cheng et al. 1999; Romero et al. 2000c). In particular, Fan et al. (2000) have estimated the mass of the accreting black hole in AO 0235+16 in the range $(3.5 - 5.4) \times 10^8 M_\odot$. In their calculation they assume a Schwarzschild black hole, with a specific two-temperature disk model which is responsible for the bulk of the X-ray emission. In the present work we will relax these assumptions, calculating a variety of models for both the black hole and the accretion disk. In addition, we will separate the X-ray emission in a jet-beamed component and an isotropic component following the technique introduced by Kembhavi (1993).
and Kembhavi & Narlikar (1999).

3.1. Separation of the X-ray components

In 1987, Browne and Murphy assumed that the X-ray luminosity of active radio sources, $L_x$, can be separated into two parts, namely a beamed part, $L_{xb}$ and an unbeamed part, $L_{xu}$, which gives, $L_x = L_{xb} + L_{xu}$.

In standard radio beaming models it is usually assumed that the ratio of the beamed radio emission, at transverse orientation to the line of sight, to the extended radio emission is a constant. Browne and Murphy (1987) extended this to the X-ray luminosity and assumed that the beamed X-ray luminosity at transverse orientation is also proportional to the extended radio emission, i.e. $L_{xb}(90\ deg) = A L_{r,\ ext}$, with $A = \text{constant}$. The beamed luminosity for an inclination angle $\phi$ between the beam direction and the line of sight is $L_{xb}(\phi) = g_x(\beta, \phi) L_{xb}(90\ deg)$, where $g_x(\beta, \phi)$ is the X-ray beaming factor, given by

$$g_x(\beta, \phi) = \frac{1}{2}[(1 - \beta \cos \phi)^{-2+\alpha_x} + (1 + \beta \cos \phi)^{-2+\alpha_x}].$$ (7)

Here, $\beta$ is the bulk velocity of the beamed flow in units of $c$, and $\alpha_x$ is the spectral index of the beamed X-ray emission. The expression $\beta \cos \phi$ can be obtained for each source from the following relation derived by Orr & Browne (1982) for radio quasars:

$$R_{\text{radio}} = R_{90} \frac{1}{2}[(1 - \beta \cos \phi)^{-2} + (1 + \beta \cos \phi)^{-2}],$$ (8)

where $R_{\text{radio}} = L_{rc}/L_{r,\ ext}$ is the core-dominance ratio with $L_{rc}$ and $L_{r,\ ext}$ being the core and extended luminosities, and $R_{90} = 0.024$ according to a statistical analysis by Orr & Browne (1982) for a sample of 38 flat-spectrum ($S_\nu \propto \nu^{-\alpha}$, $\alpha = 0$) quasars taken from Jenkins et al. (1977) sample. Then the ratio of the beamed to unbeamed X-ray luminosity can be written as:

$$R_x = \frac{L_{xb}}{L_{xu}} = R_{tx} g_x(\beta, \phi), \quad R_{tx} = \frac{L_{xb}(90\ deg)}{L_{xb}}.$$ (9)

In this latter expression $R_{tx}$ is assumed to be a constant.

There are two problems with the Browne-Murphy model, i.e., a) it is not suitable for radio quiet quasars, and b) the correlation $L_{xu} \propto L_{r,\ ext}$, depends on the redshift (see Kembhavi & Narlikar, 1999). In order to overcome these problems Kembhavi (1993) proposed a beaming model that uses the formalism
suggested by Browne and Murphy but with a different scheme for separating the X-ray luminosity into beamed and isotropic parts. He considered a subset of 34 quasars with \( \frac{L_{\text{rc}}}{L_{\text{r, ext}}} > 10 \) (selected from Browne and Murphy) for which a significant correlation was found between \( \log L_x \) and \( \log L_{\text{rc}} \). Because the fit is dominated by beamed emission, the \( \log L_x - \log L_{\text{rc}} \) relation suggests that there is a relation between the beamed X-ray and radio components. Following this method, we considered a sample of 19 gamma-ray loud blazars with \( \frac{L_{\text{rc}}}{L_{\text{r, ext}}} > 10 \) and found a correlation

\[
\log \left( \frac{L_x}{\text{WHz}^{-1}} \right) = (0.64 \pm 0.14) \log \left( \frac{L_{\text{rc}}}{\text{WHz}^{-1}} \right) + 3.49.
\]

Then we assumed that a relation

\[
\log \left( \frac{L_x}{\text{WHz}^{-1}} \right) = 0.64 \log \left( \frac{L_{\text{rc}}}{\text{WHz}^{-1}} \right) + \log k
\]

holds for all gamma-ray loud blazars, where \( k \) is a constant. In this sense, the total X-ray luminosity is given by

\[
L_x = L_{\text{xb}} + L_{\text{xu}} = L_{\text{xb}} \left( 1 + \frac{1}{R_{\text{tx}} g_x(\beta, \phi)} \right)
\]

\[
= k L_{\text{rc}}^{0.64} \left( 1 + \frac{1}{R_{\text{tx}} g_x(\beta, \phi)} \right).
\]

The two constants, \( \log k = 3.48 \) and \( R_{\text{tx}} = L_{\text{xb}}(90 \text{ deg})/L_{\text{xu}} = 5.9 \times 10^{-3} \), were determined by minimizing \( \sum \left[ \log(L_x/L_x^{\text{obs}}) \right]^2 \) as in Browne & Murphy (1987) and Kembhavi (1993). For the specific case of AO 0235+16 we get (all specific luminosities expressed in units of W Hz \(^{-1}\)): \( \log L_{\text{rc}} = 27.6 \), \( \log L_{\text{r, ext}} = 26.41 \), \( \log L_x = 21.97 \), and \( L_{\text{xb}}/L_{\text{xu}} = 1030 \). This means that only a fraction \( \sim 10^{-3} \) of the total X-ray flux can be attributed to the accretion disk. A detail discussion is presented in a separating paper by Fan, Romero, Lin, and Zhang (2003, in preparation).

### 3.2. Characterization of the models

In order to make quantitative estimates for the possible binary systems we shall follow the analytical treatment of Becker & Kafatos (1995) to fix the mass of the accreting black hole \(^1\). In particular we shall assume that the inner disk

\(^1\)Throughout this paper we assume a Hubble constant \( H_0 = 100h \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1} \), with \( h = 0.75 \), and a deceleration parameter \( q_0 = 0.5 \)
emission can be represented by models where the intensity has a dependency
\[ I(E, R) \propto E^{-\alpha_x} R^{-\xi}, \]
where \( E \) is the photon energy and \( R \) is the radial distance
on the disk (\( R_{\text{min}} \leq R \leq R_0 \)). The parameter \( \xi \) characterizes the kind of the disk
emission structure. A value \( \xi = 3 \) corresponds to two-temperature disks where
electrons mainly cool through Compton losses and protons through Coulomb
interactions (e.g. Shapiro et al. 1976). These disks have a flux with a nearly
power-law dependence on the radius \( F(R) \propto R^{-3} \) (as the Shakura-Sunyaev
disks) and an X-ray power-law spectrum with an index

\[ \alpha_x = -\frac{3}{2} + \sqrt{\frac{9}{4} + \frac{4}{y}} \]  

in the source frame, where \( y \sim 1 \) is the Compton \( y \) parameter (e.g. Elieke
& Kafatos 1983). A value \( \xi = 0 \) corresponds to models of uniform bright at
X-rays (no dependence on \( R \)) with a single-temperature hot corona that cools
by interactions with soft photons from an underlying cool disk (e.g. Liang
1979). We shall consider models with Schwarzschild or Kerr black holes, with
disks of single or two temperatures, and different outer radii \( R_0 \) (the inner radii
\( R_{\text{min}} \) corresponds to the last stable orbit in each kind of black hole). We shall
name these models, following Romero et al. (2000b), from model A to H. They
are defined in Table 1. The radii are expressed in units of the gravitational
radius \( R_g = GM/c^2 \). The extent of the X-ray emitting region is not well known.
Typical values for \( R_0 \) are \( \sim 30 R_g \) (e.g. Shapiro et al. 1976), but higher values
are possible. We consider cases with \( R_0 = 30 R_g \) and \( R_0 = 100 R_g \).

| Model | BH Type | Disk Type | \( R_0/R_g \) |
|-------|---------|-----------|--------------|
| A     | Schwarzschild | \( \xi = 3 \) | 100          |
| B     | Schwarzschild | \( \xi = 0 \) | 100          |
| C     | Schwarzschild | \( \xi = 3 \) | 30           |
| D     | Schwarzschild | \( \xi = 0 \) | 30           |
| E     | Kerr     | \( \xi = 3 \) | 100          |
| F     | Kerr     | \( \xi = 0 \) | 100          |
| G     | Kerr     | \( \xi = 3 \) | 30           |
| H     | Kerr     | \( \xi = 0 \) | 30           |
3.3. Mass of the accreting black hole

For each model in Table 1 we can now estimate the optical depth to pair creation for photons of energy $E$ propagating through the accretion disk field:

$$\tau_{x\gamma}(E, z) = \int_{z}^{\infty} \alpha_{x\gamma}(E, z_{s}) \, dz_{s},$$  \hspace{1cm} (15)

where $\alpha_{x\gamma}$ is the photon-photon absorption coefficient along the rotation axis of the disk (coincident with the jet that is nearly pointing to the observer). This coefficient can be calculated as in Becker & Kafatos (1995)–see also Cheng et al. (1999)– using the photon–photon cross section given by (e.g. Lang 1999):

$$\sigma(E_{x}, E_{\gamma}) = \frac{\pi r_{0}^{2}}{2} (1 - \varsigma^{2}) \left[ 2\varsigma (\varsigma^{2} - 2) + (3 - \varsigma^{4}) \ln \left( \frac{1 + \varsigma}{1 - \varsigma} \right) \right],$$  \hspace{1cm} (16)

where

$$\varsigma = \left[ 1 - \frac{(m_{e}c^{2})^{2}}{E_{x}E_{\gamma}} \right]^{1/2},$$  \hspace{1cm} (17)

$r_{0} = 2.818 \times 10^{-13}$ cm is the classical electron radius, $m_{e}$ its mass, and $E_{i}$ the energy of the interacting photons.

For calculation purposes, we can write the disk X-ray intensity as:

$$I(E_{x}, R) = I_{0} \left( \frac{E_{x}}{m_{e}c^{2}} \right)^{-\alpha_{x}} \left( \frac{R}{R_{g}} \right)^{-\xi}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (18)

Then, the differential absorption coefficient will be

$$d\alpha_{x\gamma} = \frac{I}{cE_{x}} \sigma(E_{x}, E_{\gamma})(1 - \cos \Theta)dE_{x}d\Omega,$$  \hspace{1cm} (19)

where $\Theta$ is the angle between $d\Omega$ and the direction of propagation of the $\gamma$-ray. When these rays propagate mainly along the rotation axis $z$, as expected for jet beamed emission, we can use eq. (15) and introduce geometrical simplifications due to the axial symmetry. After some algebra, this yields:

$$\tau_{x\gamma}(E_{\gamma}, z) \approx \frac{AR_{g}}{2\alpha_{x} + 3} \left( \frac{z}{R_{g}} \right)^{-2\alpha_{x} - 3} \left( \frac{E_{\gamma}}{4m_{e}c^{2}} \right)^{\alpha_{x}}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (20)

Here,

$$A \equiv \frac{\pi I_{0}\sigma_{T}\Psi(\alpha_{x})}{(2\alpha_{x} + 4 - \xi)c} \left[ \left( \frac{R_{g}}{R_{\text{min}}} \right)^{2\alpha_{x}+4-\xi} - \left( \frac{R_{\text{max}}}{R_{g}} \right)^{2\alpha_{x}+4-\xi} \right],$$  \hspace{1cm} (21)

with $\sigma_{T}$ the Thomson cross section, and $\Psi(\alpha_{x})$ a function plotted in Fig. 1 of Becker & Kafatos’ paper ($\Psi(\alpha_{x}) \approx 0.18$ for AO 0235+16). The intensity $I_{0}$ can
be estimated from the observed X-ray flux, $F_{\text{keV}}$, by equation (5.1) of the same paper along with the condition imposed by our eq. (13).

Since it is an observational fact that AO 0235+16 emits photons with energies $E = 1$ GeV (Hartman et al. 1999) we can impose the condition $\tau_{x\gamma} \sim 1$ for photons of such energy. This condition along with an independent estimate of the size of the gamma-ray emitting region obtained from high-energy variability observations allows to estimate the mass of the accreting black hole through eq. (20). Notice that the mass of the central black hole determines the gravitational radius $R_g$. The constraint on the size of the $\gamma$-spheres is:

$$z_\gamma \leq c t_v \frac{\delta}{1 + z} \text{ cm.}$$

(22)

For AO 0235+16 $t_v \sim 3$ days (Fan et al. 2000). The Doppler factor $\delta$ of the underlying jet flow is unknown. It should be significant smaller than the extreme Doppler factor inferred for the superluminal component, which are usually interpreted as relativistic perturbations or shocks propagating downstream. Fan et al. (2000) estimate a value $\delta \sim 2$. Madejski et al. (1996) give a higher value $\delta \geq 3.1$. Zhang et al. (2002) suggest $\delta = 8.9$. We will perform our calculations for three different values: $\delta = 2$, $\delta = 5$, and $\delta = 10$.

The results of our estimates of the mass of the accreting black hole are shown in Tables 2 - 4. The obtained values for the different models range from $3 \times 10^8 M_\odot$ (e.g. models B and F for $\delta = 2$) up to $\sim 17 \times 10^9 M_\odot$ (model G for $\delta = 10$). The mass we obtain here for the case considered by Fan et al. (2000) –model C in Table 2– is higher because of the refinement introduced in this paper with the separation of the isotropic and beamed X-ray components.

We turn now to the secondary black hole mass and the orbital parameters in order to establish at least an upper bound on them.

### 3.4. Mass of the secondary

A close supermassive black hole system will lose energy by gravitational radiation and these losses will affect the orbital parameters. Hence, the errors in the determination of any periodic signal related to the orbital motion should impose an upper bound on these losses. From the work by Fan et al. (2002) we find that in the case of AO 0235+16, $\Delta T_m/T_m \sim 0.05$. The orbit of the binary will decay on a timescale of (e.g. Shapiro & Teukolsky 1983):

$$\tau_0 = |r/\dot{r}| \sim \frac{5}{256} \frac{c^5}{G^3} \frac{r_m^4}{(m + M)^2 \mu}.$$

(23)
Table 2: Results for different models with $\delta = 2$.

| Model | $M$ $(10^8 M_\odot)$ | $m_{\text{max}}$ $(10^8 M_\odot)$ | $r_{\text{max}}$ $(10^{16}$ cm $)$ | $r_d/r_{\text{max}}$ |
|-------|----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| A     | 6.0                  | 320.7                            | 10.0                            | 0.20             |
| B     | 3.0                  | 898.1                            | 14.0                            | 0.11             |
| C     | 14.1                 | 93.4                             | 6.9                             | 0.43             |
| D     | 9.9                  | 153.7                            | 7.9                             | 0.32             |
| E     | 9.4                  | 163.8                            | 8.1                             | 0.30             |
| F     | 3.0                  | 893.6                            | 14.0                            | 0.11             |
| G     | 23.1                 | 50.2                             | 6.0                             | 0.67             |
| H     | 10.0                 | 151.5                            | 7.9                             | 0.32             |

Table 3: Results for different models with $\delta = 5$.

| Model | $M$ $(10^8 M_\odot)$ | $m_{\text{max}}$ $(10^8 M_\odot)$ | $r_{\text{max}}$ $(10^{16}$ cm $)$ | $r_d/r_{\text{max}}$ |
|-------|----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| A     | 18.7                 | 64.7                             | 6.3                             | 0.16             |
| B     | 9.4                  | 164.8                            | 8.1                             | 0.09             |
| C     | 44.4                 | 25.7                             | 6.0                             | 0.38             |
| D     | 31.0                 | 36.4                             | 5.9                             | 0.26             |
| E     | 30.0                 | 38.2                             | 5.9                             | 0.25             |
| F     | 9.4                  | 164.8                            | 8.1                             | 0.09             |
| G     | 72.7                 | 17.1                             | 6.5                             | 0.65             |
| H     | 31.3                 | 36.0                             | 5.9                             | 0.27             |

Table 4: Results for different models with $\delta = 10$.

| Model | $M$ $(10^8 M_\odot)$ | $m_{\text{max}}$ $(10^8 M_\odot)$ | $r_{\text{max}}$ $(10^{16}$ cm $)$ | $r_d/r_{\text{max}}$ |
|-------|----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| A     | 44.4                 | 25.7                             | 6.0                             | 0.15             |
| B     | 22.3                 | 35.8                             | 5.6                             | 0.09             |
| C     | 106.0                | 12.8                             | 7.1                             | 0.38             |
| D     | 73.7                 | 16.9                             | 6.5                             | 0.26             |
| E     | 70.5                 | 17.5                             | 6.4                             | 0.25             |
| F     | 22.3                 | 35.8                             | 5.6                             | 0.09             |
| G     | 173.0                | 9.1                              | 8.2                             | 0.66             |
| H     | 74.5                 | 16.7                             | 6.5                             | 0.28             |
where $\mu = mM/(m + M)$. We can rewrite the orbital radius given by eq. (2) as:

$$r_m \approx 1.4 \times 10^{16} (m_8 + M_8)^{1/3} \text{ cm.}$$

(24)

Here we have used $T_m = 3$ yr and the masses are expressed in units of $10^8 M_\odot$. With this, eq. (23) becomes:

$$\tau_0 \approx 2.8 \times 10^5 \frac{(m_8 + M_8)^{1/3}}{m_8 M_8} \text{ yr.}$$

(25)

The relative constancy of the period found by Fan et al. (2002) implies that $\tau_0 > 10^3$ yr, which translates into a maximum possible value of the secondary black hole mass. Eq. (24) then imposes a maximum value to $r_m$. For calculation purposes we shall adopt $\tau_0 = 10^3$ yr (in the source frame) in order to obtain upper limits for parameters. Shorter timescales are unlikely since the system would be in the final steps before the merger and other observational consequences should then manifest (like a tidal disruption of the disk, which is contradicted by the observation of a persistent jet). The resulting values for both $m$ and $r_m$ are shown in the third and fourth columns of Tables 2 – 4.

4. Analysis of the results

Uniform disk precession will occur in the scenario here discussed only if the sound crossing time through the disk is considerably shorter than the characteristic precession period induced by the secondary. This allows the bending waves (which propagates at a velocity $v \sim c_s$ through the disk) to efficiently couple the different parts of the fluid in order to adjust the precession rate to a constant value (Papaloizou et al. 1998). This is confirmed by the numerical simulations performed by Larwood et al. (1996).

The radius $r_d$ of the precessing part of the disk is related to the disk angular velocity $\omega_d$ by $\omega_d = (GM/r_d^3)^{1/2}$. Then, using Eq. (1) with the observational fact that $\cos \theta \sim 1$ (Fujisawa et al. 1999), we can establish the ratio $\kappa = r_d/r_m$ for each model. Only models for which $\kappa$ is significantly smaller than 1 can display uniform, nearly rigid, precession in their inner accretion disks (e.g. Katz 1973, Larwood 1998). Since we have only an upper bound onto the mass of the secondary black hole, we have plotted the curves $\kappa = \kappa(m)$ for all models whose primary masses are listed in Tables 2 – 4. These curves are presented as Figures 2 – 4. The value of $\kappa$ corresponding to the largest possible value of $r_m$ is given in the last column of Tables 2 – 4.
Fig. 2.— Ratio of the precessing disk to orbital radius as a function of the secondary black hole mass for the different primary models defined in Table 1. The jet Doppler factor is 2 and the precessing period in the source frame is 5.9 yr.
Fig. 3.— Idem Fig. 2 but for a jet Doppler factor of 5. The corresponding precessing period in the source frame is 36.7 yr.
Fig. 4.— Idem Fig. 2 but for a jet Doppler factor 10. The corresponding precessing period in the source frame is 146.9 yr.
From Figures 2 to 4 we see that models with single temperature disks and large outer radii (models F and B) are more prone to display uniform precession. Models with $\delta = 10$ in general imply $M > m$. Nonetheless, some models with $\delta = 2$ and $5$ are possible with $m > M$. We cannot exclude these models based only on a priori considerations. It is possible to imagine, for instance, that the original merger that resulted in the formation of the binary system occurred between an active blazar and a “dormant” quasar with a very massive central object that already swallowed up all available gas. Deep observations of the host galaxy can shed some light onto this particular point. The detection of peculiar Fe Kα line profiles can be used to test whether the secondary has or not associated an accretion disk (Yu & Lu 2001).

The sound speed in the disk of the primary can be approximated by $c_s \sim H\omega_d$, with $H$ the disk half-thickness. In the inner disk, the constraint of efficient physical communication in the fluid imposes $c_s > \Omega_p r_d$. Then, we have that in this region:

$$H > \frac{\Omega_p}{\sqrt{GM}} r_d^{5/2}.$$  \hfill (26)

In our models for AO 0235+16 we found that $H \geq 5 \times 10^{12}$ cm.

5. Additional comments

Precessing jet models are not the only kind of models based on binary black hole systems that can explain periodic behavior in AGNs. Other alternatives are orbital motion of a secondary black hole with an associated jet (e.g. Rieger & Mannheim 2000, De Paolis et al. 2002), accretion disk instabilities (Fan et al. 2001 and reference therein), and pair jets (Villata et al. 1998). The main difference between these models and the precessing jet model is that the latter implies the precession of the innermost part of the accretion disk.

Compton reflection of hard X-ray emission in the cold, outer material can be expected in these kind of systems. The iron Kα line should change in the observer frame, oscillating around an average value with a period $\sim \Omega_p$. Periodic changes in the intensity of the line with amplitudes up to $\sim 30\%$ should be also observed (Torres et al. 2003). Although the detection of the iron Kα line in AO 0235+16 is beyond the current sensitivity of X-ray observatories, future space missions like Constellation-X, with its superb spectral resolution and sensitivity might detect the line and its oscillation, then providing a tool to probe the nature of the periodic phenomena in this blazar, and the particular kind of
models discussed here.

6. Conclusions

We have analyzed the feasibility of precessing disk models for a binary black hole system in the extremely variable BL Lacertae object AO 0235+16. We have presented an improved determination of the black hole mass of the accreting object in the system. We have also determined values and bounds to all other relevant parameters in the system. We found that, if the periodic activity recently reported for this object is based on jet precession induced by the gravitational torque of the companion black hole on the disk, then a large variety of models are possible, including models where either the mass of the primary is larger than the mass of the secondary or vice versa. If the Doppler factor of the relativistic flow is $\sim 10$, as suggested by some authors, then $M > m$ for almost all possible models. We emphasize, however, that the ultimate nature of the central engine in this violent blazar remains an open problem. The models here proposed can be tested through some simple predictions for the periodic behavior of the Fe Kα line. Hopefully, future observational constraints from long-term multifrequency monitoring and space X-ray observations will help to unveil the source of the periodic events reported for AO 0235+16.

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