

BeppoSAX monitoring of the “anomalous” X–ray pulsar 4U 0142+61

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Abstract. The 8.7 s X–ray pulsar 4U 0142+61 was monitored by BeppoSAX between January 1997 and February 1998. This source belongs to the rapidly growing class of “anomalous” X–ray pulsars (AXPs) which have pulse periods in the 6–12 s range and no plausible optical, infrared or radio counterparts. The BeppoSAX periods measurements show that 4U 0142+61 continues its spin–down at a nearly constant rate of \( \dot{P} \approx 2 \times 10^{-12} \text{ s}^{-1} \). The 0.5–10 keV pulse shape is double peaked. The phase–averaged spectrum can be described by a steep absorbed power–law (Γ ~ 4) plus a blackbody with \( kT \sim 0.4 \) keV.

4U 0142+61 was also detected serendipitously in a March 1996 RXTE observation pointed towards the nearby 1455 s X–ray pulsar RX J0146.9+6121. The timing analysis results are reported for this observation and the spin history of 4U 0142+61 since 1979 is discussed.

Key words: stars: evolution — stars: neutron — pulsars: individual (4U 0142+61) — X–rays: stars

1. Introduction

The properties of 4U 0142+61 (White et al. 1987) remained puzzling for a long time, owing to confusion with a nearby pulsating and transient Be/neutron star system RX J0146.9+6121 (Motch et al. 1991; Mereghetti et al. 1993). The 1–10 keV spectrum is extremely soft (power law photon index of ~ 4, White et al. 1987) and led to the initial classification of 4U 0142+61 as a possible black hole candidate. ASCA observations provide evidence for a ~0.4 keV blackbody component contributing ~40% of the 0.5–10 keV band X–ray flux (White et al. 1996). The X–ray luminosity of 4U 0142+61 has not shown substantial secular variations around an average value of ~6 \times 10^{34} \text{ erg s}^{-1} (assuming a distance of 1 kpc). Despite the small error box (5′′ radius), no optical or IR counterpart has yet been identified, down to \( V < 24, R < 22.5, J < 20 \) and \( K < 17 \) (Steinle et al. 1987; White et al. 1987; Coe & Ppecting 1998). These limits rule out the presence of a massive companion. Using data from the EXOSAT archive, Israel et al. (1994) discovered pulsations at 8.7 s, which were later confirmed with ROSAT (Hellier 1994). No delays in the pulse arrival times caused by orbital motion were found, with upper limits on \( a_x \sin i \) of about ~0.37 lt–s for orbital periods \( P_{\text{orb}} \) between 7 min and 12 hr (Israel et al. 1994). Tighter upper limits on the \( a_x \sin i \) (~0.26 lt–s for 70 s \( P_{\text{orb}} \leq 2.5 \text{days} \) have been recently obtained with a RXTE observation (Wilson et al. 1998). This yield strong constraints on the orbital inclination and the mass of the possible companion star in the case of normal or helium main sequence star and giants with helium core. A white dwarf companion would be compatible both with current optical photometric and pulse arrival time limits. The EXOSAT and ROSAT period measurements, obtained in 1984 and 1993, provide a spin–down rate of \( 2.1 \times 10^{-12} \text{ s}^{-1} \).

The properties of 4U 0142+61 are similar to those of a small group of “anomalous” X–ray pulsars (AXPs), with spin periods within a narrow range (6–12s; Mereghetti & Stella 1995). Among these are 1E 2259+586, 1E 1048.1–5937, 1E 1841–045 (Vasisht & Gotthelf 1997), 1RXS 170849–400910 (Sugizaki et al. 2000).
Table 1. 4U 0142+61 BeppoSAX Observation log

| Start Time   | Stop Time   | MECS $T_{\text{exp}}$ | Active MECSs | Count Rate LECS c/s | MECS c/s | Off–axis obs |
|--------------|-------------|------------------------|--------------|---------------------|----------|--------------|
| 97 Jan 03    | 05:47      | Jan 04 02:09           | 48226        | 3                   | 1.03±0.01 | 1.70±0.01    | 5 A          |
| 97 Aug 09    | 23:13      | Aug 10 07:38           | 16757        | 2                   | 1.01±0.02 | 1.47±0.02    | 3 B          |
| 98 Jan 26    | 12:13      | Jan 27 00:23           | 21785        | 2                   | (4.2±0.4)×10$^{-2}$ | 0.47±0.01 | 20 C         |
| 98 Feb 03    | 09:11      | Feb 04 02:37           | 31150        | 2                   | 0.97±0.02 | 1.36±0.01    | 5 D          |

Note — Count rates are not vignetting corrected. Vignetting is a factor 1.10, 1.20 and 3.0 for an off–axis angle of 3, 5 and 20 arcmin, respectively.

Fig. 1. LECS and MECS energy spectra of 4U 0142+61 during observation A (left panel) and D (right panel). The best fit spectral model (PL+BB; see text for details) is also shown together with the $\chi^2$ residuals.

We present here a detailed analysis of the BeppoSAX Narrow Field Instruments (NFIs) observations of the AXP 4U 0142+61. We confirm the presence of a blackbody spectral component in the soft X–ray spectrum as seen in the ASCA data (White et al. 1996) and in other two “anomalous” X–ray pulsars: 1E 2259+589 (Corbet et al. 1995; Parmar et al. 1998) and 1E 1048.1–5937 (Oosterbroek et al. 1998). We also present the results of pulse phase spectroscopy and the pulse period history of 4U 0142+61. We also discuss the timing analysis from a serendipitous Rossi X–ray Timing Explorer (RXTE) observation of 4U 0142+61.

2. BeppoSAX Observations

Results from the Low–Energy Concentrator Spectrometer (LECS; 0.1–10 keV; Parmar et al. 1997) and Medium–Energy Concentrator Spectrometer (MECS; 1.3–10 keV; Boella et al. 1997) on–board BeppoSAX are presented. The MECS consists of three identical grazing incidence telescopes with imaging gas scintillation proportional counters in their focal planes. The LECS uses an identical concentrator system as the MECS, but utilizes an ultra–thin (1.25 $\mu$m) detector entrance window and a drift–less configuration to extend the low–energy response to 0.1 keV. The fields of view (FOV) of the LECS and MECS are circular with diameters of 37$'$ and 56$'$ respectively. The energy resolution of both instruments is $\approx 8.5\sqrt{(0.6\text{keV}/E)}$ % full–width half maximum (FWHM), where E is the energy.

4U 0142+61 was observed by BeppoSAX four times between January 1997 and February 1998 (see Table 1). One of the goals of the program was to monitor the possible X–ray flux variations on a time scale of months with two 40 ks pointings. However between the first and the subsequent observations one of the three MECS units failed (1997 May 9), and data of observations B, C and D were obtained with the remaining two MECS units. Moreover during the second and third observations BeppoSAX experienced pointing failures resulting in a shorter effective exposure time.
2.1. Spectral analysis

Spectra were obtained centered on the position of 4U 0142+61 using an extraction radius of 8′ for both the LECS and MECS. Background subtraction was performed using standard blank field exposures. The average background subtracted source count rates are reported in Table 1 for the four observations, together with the off-axis angle and number of working MECS. The PHA spectra were rebinned so as to have >40 counts in each energy bin and reliably adopt a minimum $\chi^2$ technique for model fitting. All the bins which were consistent with zero after background subtraction were rejected. Moreover the MECS spectra were restricted to the 1.8–10 keV range. Data from observation B and C were not used for spectral fitting. All the bins which were consistent with zero after background subtraction were rejected from the analysis. No significant variation in the spectral parameters and uncertainties were found for either models.

The data from the High Pressure Gas Scintillation Proportional Counter (HPGSPC) and the Phoswich Detector System (PDS) did not hold any useful information on 4U 0142+61. In fact, due to the large FOVs of these instruments and the steep spectrum of 4U 0142+61, the counts above 10 keV were likely dominated by the nearby source RX J0146.9+6121.

2.2. Pulse timing, folded light curves and phase resolved spectroscopy

The arrival times of the 0.5–10 keV photons from 4U 0142+61 were corrected to the barycenter of the solar system and 1 s binned light curves accumulated for each observation. The average count rates are reported in Table 1.

The MECS counts were used to determine the 4U 0142+61 pulse period. The data from observations A, B and D were divided into 6, 4, and 5 time intervals, respectively and for each interval the relative phase of the pulsations was determined. These phases were then fit with a linear function giving a best-fit period of 8.68804 ± 0.00007 s for observation A (see Table 3). For observation B a period of 8.6882 ± 0.0002 s was obtained, while during observation C pulsations were not detected owing to poor statistics (∼11000 photons) to detect such a weak (∼6% pulsed fraction) signal. Finally for observations D we determined a period of 8.69007 ± 0.0001 s. The BeppoSAX pulse period values are plotted in Fig. 4 to-
The first harmonic shows a nearly constant value (corresponding light curves with two sinusoidal functions. The harmonics. These values were obtained by fitting the cor-
mation versus energy during observation A for the first two
cumulated light curves.

short or long–term variations in any of the
played by high accretion rate X–ray pulsars; we found no
observations B and D.

energy bands, respectively. Similar results are obtained for
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Table 3. Period history for 4U 0142+61. 90% uncertainties are reported.

| Mission     | Instrument | Period (s) | Date (year) | Reference                      |
|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Einstein    | SSS        | 8.68707±0.00012 | 1979.16     | White et al. 1996              |
| Einstein    | MPC        | 8.68736±0.0007  | 1979.67     | White et al. 1996              |
| it EXOSAT   | ME         | 8.68723±0.00004 | 1984.66     | Israel et al. 1994             |
| ROSAT       | PSPC       | 8.68784±0.00004 | 1993.12     | Hellier 1994                   |
| ASCA        | GIS        | 8.68791±0.00015 | 1994.72     | White et al. 1996              |
| RXTE        | PCA        | 8.6881±0.0002   | 1996.32     | this work                      |
| RXTE        | PCA        | 8.688068±0.000002 | 1996.24 | Wilson et al. 1998              |
| BeppoSAX    | MECS       | 8.68804±0.000007 | 1997.01     | this work                      |
| BeppoSAX    | MECS       | 8.6882±0.0002   | 1997.61     | this work                      |
| BeppoSAX    | MECS       | 8.6883±0.0001   | 1998.10     | this work                      |

Note — Fluxes are not corrected for the interstellar absorption. Flux uncertainties are about 10%. The source luminosities were derived by setting \( N_H = 0 \).

a Only MECS2 and MECS3 considered.

b Only LECS data considered.

gather with the previous measurements (see Sect. 3 for the
RXTE measurement). The background subtracted light
curves from observation A, folded at the best period in
different energy ranges (Fig. 3; first three panels) show a
double–peaked profile (see also White et al. 1996). The
pulsed fraction (semiamplitude of modulation divided by
the mean source count rate) was 7.1±1.5%, 7.5±0.5% and
13±2% in the 0.5–1.5 keV, 1.5–4.0 keV and 4.0–10 keV en-
ergy bands, respectively. Similar results are obtained for
observations B and D.

Flux variations on several timescales are usually dis-
played by high accretion rate X–ray pulsars; we found no
short or long–term variations in any of the BeppoSAX
accumulated light curves.

The upper two panels of Fig. 5 show the pulsed fraction
versus energy during observation A for the first two
harmonics. These values were obtained by fitting the cor-
responding light curves with two sinusoidal functions. The
first harmonic shows a nearly constant value (≈ 6%) up
to 4 keV, while at higher energies increases to about 15%.
A constant value of 5–7% is inferred for the second har-
monic. We calculated also the root mean square variability
(rms; defined as \( \sqrt{V_{ob}} - V_{exp} \)) devided by the mean source
count rate, where \( V_{ob} \) and \( V_{exp} \) are the observed and ex-
pected variance, respectively) of the folded light curve at
different energies (third panel). Finally the ratio between
the power–law and the total flux for the blackbody plus
power–law spectral model is shown (lowest panel). From
the comparison of these quantities we can infer that: (i)
since the rms variability of the folded light curves is \( \pi^{-1/2} \)
times the geometric sum of the amplitudes in all available
harmonics (mainly the 1st and 2nd in the present case), it
is apparent that the behaviour is consistent with the de-
vised amplitudes of the 1st and 2nd harmonics; (ii) there is
extremal feedback of the folded light curves at energies above 5 keV; (iii) there is no
a simple relationship between the pulsed fraction and the
flux in either of the two spectral component adopted in
our analysis.

A set of four phase–resolved spectra (phase bound-
aries 0.06, 0.26, 0.5, 0.78) were accumulated for observa-
tion A (i.e. the observation with the highest number of
source counts). These were then fit with the power–law
plus blackbody model described in Sect. 2.1, with \( N_H \) fixed
at the phase–averaged best–fit value. Initially, the black-
body temperature was fixed at its phase–averaged best–fit
value and only the power–law parameters and blackbody
normalisation were allowed to vary. The fits were then re-

Table 2. BeppoSAX phase averaged fit of 4U 0142+61.

| Spectral Parameter | Obs. A | Obs. A² | Obs. D | Obs. D² | Obs. A²+D | Obs. (A+D)² |
|--------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|-----------|-------------|
| \( N_H \left(10^{22}\text{atoms cm}^{-2}\right) \)       | 1.11±0.07 | 1.1 ±0.1 | 0.98±0.06 | 1.2±0.1 | 1.12±0.06 | 1.0±0.1       |
| \( \Gamma \)        | 3.86±0.06 | 3.8 ±0.3 | 3.58±0.12 | 4.0±0.2 | 3.95±0.05 | 3.6±0.3       |
| PL flux \((\text{erg s}^{-1}\text{cm}^{-2}; 0.5–10 \text{ keV})\) | 7.4×10^{-11} | 6.0×10^{-11} | 7.3×10^{-11} | 8.4×10^{-11} | 7.9×10^{-11} | 7.7×10^{-11} |
| BB KT \((\text{keV})\) | 0.42±0.02 | 0.37±0.02 | 0.36±0.01 | 0.41±0.04 | 0.40±0.01 | 0.36±0.02 |
| BB radius \(((\text{km} @ 1 \text{ kpc})\) | 1.5±0.2 | 2.2±0.5 | 2.1±0.2 | 1.5±0.5 | 1.8±0.2 | 2.3±0.4       |
| BB flux \((\text{erg s}^{-1}\text{cm}^{-2}; 0.5–10 \text{ keV})\) | 2.9×10^{-11} | 2.6×10^{-11} | 4.1×10^{-11} | 2.1×10^{-11} | 3.0×10^{-11} | 2.3×10^{-11} |
| \( \chi^2/\text{dof} \) | 440/344 | 283/279 | 283/279 | 283/279 | 283/279 | 283/279       |

\( L_X \left(10^{34} \text{ erg s}^{-1} @ 1 \text{ kpc}; 0.5–10 \text{ keV}\right) \) | 7.9 | 8.3 | 6.3 | 7.5 | 9.3 | 5.7 |
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Fig. 3. The 4U 0142+61 MECS light curves for obs. A (first three panels) folded to the best period (P=8.68804 s) in the 0.5–1.5 keV, 1.5–4 keV and 4–10 keV energy bands. Zero phase was (arbitrarily) chosen to correspond to the minimum in the 1.5–4 keV folded light curve. The results of the pulse phase spectroscopy of obs. A (last two panels) are also reported for two spectral parameters. For clarity two pulse cycles are shown.

peated with Γ fixed and blackbody parameters and power–law normalisation free (see Fig. 3). No significant changes were detected for Γ and $kT$ as a function of the pulse phase. Similar results were obtained for the fluxes of the two spectral component.

3. RXTE Observation

The 4U 0142+61 position was included in a RXTE observation pointed at the nearby high–mass X–ray binary pulsar RX J0146.9+6121 (from 1996 March 28 11:16:48 to 22:09:20; ~20 ks of effective exposure time). The results presented here are based on data collected in the so called “Good Xenon” operating mode with the Proportional Counter Array (PCA, Jahoda et al. 1996). The PCA consists of 5 proportional counters operating in the 2–60 keV range, with a total effective area of approximately 7000 cm$^2$ and a field of view, defined by passive collimators, of ~ 1 deg FWHM. The data consist of the time of arrival and the pulse height of each count. In order to minimise the contamination from RX J0146.9+6121 (a much harder spectrum X–ray pulsar), we considered only photons in the 2–4 keV energy interval. In order to reduce the background, only the counts detected in the first Xenon layer of each counter were used.

We obtained for 4U 0142+61 a best pulse period of 8.6881±0.0002 s (see Table 3 and Fig. 4). Figure 6 shows the corresponding folded light curve. Despite the uncertainties in the background subtraction (the contribution from RX J0146.9+6121 is difficult to estimate), it is apparent that the RXTE/PCA pulse profile of 4U 0142+61 is similar to that observed with BeppoSAX. The RXTE value we obtained is consistent to within the statistical uncertainties with that of Wilson et al. (1998; energy range 3.7–9.2 keV). The somewhat different pulse shape is likely due to the different energy band used.

4. Discussion

Several models have been proposed in order to explain the nature of the “anomalous” X–ray pulsars. Mereghetti & Stella (1995) proposed that these sources form a homogeneous subclass of accreting neutron stars, perhaps members of low mass X–ray binaries (LMXBs), which are characterized by lower luminosities ($10^{35} – 10^{36}$ erg s$^{-1}$) and higher magnetic fields ($B$ ~ $10^{11}$ G) than classical LMXBs. However the lack of evidence for a binary nature from any of these systems (Mereghetti et al. 1998; Wilson et al. 1998) argues in favor of models in which the X–ray emission originates from a compact object that is not in an interacting binary system.
The 4U 0142+61 RXTE 2–4 keV light curve folded to the best fit period (P=8.6881 s).

**Fig. 6.** The 4U 0142+61 RXTE 2–4 keV light curve folded to the best fit period (P=8.6881 s).

Van Paradijs et al. (1995) proposed that AXPs are young population I objects, which originate from the evolution of short orbital period High Mass X–ray Binaries (HMXBs), following the expansion of the massive star and the onset of unstable Roche Lobe overflow, before central hydrogen is exhausted (see also Cannon et al. 1992). The resulting common–envelope phase should cause the neutron star to spiral–in and disrupt the companion star after the so–called Thorne–Zytkov stage. Therefore, these sources should consist of an isolated neutron star accreting matter from a residual disk with a mass in the $10^{-3}$–1 $M_\odot$ range. The blackbody component in 4U 0142+61 and, likewise, other AXPs has been interpreted as evidence for quasi–spherical accretion onto an isolated neutron star formed after common envelope and spiral–in of a massive short–period ($P_{\text{orb}} \lesssim 1$ yr) X–ray binary. In this case the remains of the envelope of the massive star might produce two different types of matter inflow: a spherical accretion component with low specific angular momentum giving rise to the blackbody component and a high specific angular momentum component which forms an accretion disk and is likely responsible for the power–law emission (Ghosh et al. 1997). Although some problems remain open in this scenario, we note that a post common–envelope evolutionary scenario for 4U0142+614 is also suggested by the inference that about half of the X–ray absorbing material is close to the source (White et al. 1996). In this context it is interesting to note that independent evidence supports the view that the binary X–ray pulsars 4U1626–67 and HD49798 were formed following a common envelope and spiral–in evolutionary phase (see Angelini et al. 1995 and Israel et al. 1997 and references therein). The different properties of the companion stars in these two cases may reflect the fact that unstable mass transfer set in at different evolutionary phases in the nuclear evolution of their progenitors (in turn, reflecting different initial masses and orbital periods; see also Ghosh et al. 1997).

Thompson & Duncan (1993, 1996) proposed that the AXPs are “magnetars”, neutron stars with a superstrong magnetic field ($\sim 10^{14}$–$10^{15}$ G). This proposal is supported by the similarity in the pulse periods (8.05, 7.5 s and 5.16 s) and of $\dot{P}$ values measured in the Soft $\gamma$–ray Repeaters SGR0520–66 , SGR1806-20 and SGR1900+14, respectively (Kouveliotou et al. 1998; Hurley et al. 1998). If this connection proved correct, AXPs, would be quiescent soft $\gamma$–ray repeaters. Heyl & Hernquist (1997) argued that their emission may be powered by the cooling of the core through a strongly magnetised envelope of matter (made up mainly by hydrogen and helium). Pulsations would originate from a temperature gradient on the surface of the star. Moreover Heyl & Hernquist (1998) showed that in this scenario, spin–down irregularities, observed in the period history of two “anomalous” X–ray pulsars (1E 2259+58 and 1E 1048–59), may be simply accounted for with glitches like those observed in young radio pulsars.

The 0.5–10 keV spectrum of 4U 0142+61 is well modelled by the sum of an absorbed steep power–law and a low–energy blackbody. The latter component was introduced by White et al. (1996) based on the ASCA data; the corresponding blackbody radius and flux were $\sim 2.4 \pm 0.3$ km (at 1 kpc) and $\sim 40\%$ of the total, respectively. Neither the power–law photon index nor the blackbody temperature show evidence of changes across different BeppoSAX observations. We found marginal ev-
idence (at about 2σ confidence level) for changes relative to previous observations. A comparison of the ASCA and BeppoSAX results show that: (i) the power–law photon index increases by about 4% (observations A and D); (ii) the blackbody radius decreased by about 37% (A) and 32% (D); (iii) the blackbody flux decreased to ∼30% (A) and ∼35% (D) of the total flux therefore showing a ~10%–5% decrease with respect to that of the ASCA observation; (iv) the 0.5–10 keV total flux decreased of about 15–12%.

By fixing the parameters $N_H$, $kT$ and $\Gamma$ to the values inferred by ASCA, the BeppoSAX observation A spectrum gives a $\chi^2_{dof}/348$. In this case the blackbody component accounts for ~30% of the total flux (~10% lower than that of ASCA). As an additional test we also merged the data for observation A (MECS 2 and 3 only) and D and fit them with the power–law plus blackbody model (see Table 2). While a small change in the spectral parameters is found relative to observations A and D, separately, the blackbody flux is ~30% of the total.

To remove possible effects introduced by the vicinity of the lower end of the energy range of the MECS and the peak of the blackbody component, we also fitted the spectrum of observations A, D and A+D by using only the data as accumulated by the LECS, the energy band of which uninterruptedly covers the range 0.5–9.0 keV and allows a better fit in the energy interval (1–4 keV) where the power–law and the blackbody components overlap. Again we obtained results similar to the LECS+MECS case, but with a larger uncertainty. All these results point to a marginal variation of the spectral parameters of 4U 0142+61, if any.

The BeppoSAX data suggest that the pulsed fraction for energies above 4 keV decreased (from 25%±5% with ASCA to 13%±2% with BeppoSAX; 90% uncertainties). For these energies the counts are almost entirely dominated by the power–law component (in the spectral model assumed).

The pulse periods measured by BeppoSAX show that 4U 0142+61 has continued its secular spin–down during 1996–1998 (see Fig. 4). The period derivative inferred from the BeppoSAX observations alone (~6.0±5.1 × 10⁻¹² s s⁻¹) is consistent with the average spin–down rate (~2×10⁻¹² s⁻¹) inferred over the 19 yr span of the historical dataset (note that in the period list we did not include the low significance detections inferred on 1985 November 11 and December 11 with EXOSAT ME, and on 1991 February 13 with ROSAT HRI; Israel et al. 1994). The inferred $\dot{P}$ for 4U 0142+61 is consistent with the uncertainties of all pulse period measurements except, perhaps, one (the 1979 Einstein SSS one; see Fig. 4) implying that, so far, no “glitches” have been observed yet.

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