Searching for the QCD Axion with Gravitational Microlensing

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The phase transition responsible for axion dark matter (DM) production can create large amplitude isocurvature perturbations, which collapse into dense objects known as axion miniclusters. We use microlensing data from the EROS survey and from recent observations with the Subaru Hyper Suprime Cam to place constraints on the minicluster scenario. We compute the microlensing event rate for miniclusters, treating them as spatially extended objects. Using the published bounds on the number of microlensing events, we bound the fraction of DM collapsed into miniclusters $f_{MC}$. For an axion with temperature-dependent mass consistent with the QCD axion, we find $f_{MC} < 0.083(m_a/100 \mu eV)^{0.12}$, which represents the first observational constraint on the minicluster fraction. We forecast that a high-efficiency observation of around ten nights with Subaru would be sufficient to constrain $f_{MC} \lesssim 0.004$ over the entire QCD axion mass range. We make various approximations to derive these constraints, and dedicated analyses by the observing teams of EROS and Subaru are necessary to confirm our results. If accurate theoretical predictions for $f_{MC}$ can be made in the future, then microlensing can be used to exclude or discover the QCD axion. Further details of our computations are presented in a companion paper [M. Fairbairn, D. J. E. Marsh, J. Quevillon, and S. Rozier (to be published)].

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M_0 = \frac{4}{3} \pi \frac{\pi}{a(T_0)} \frac{H(T_0)}{a(T_0)}^3, \quad (1)

where $a$ is the cosmic scale factor of the Friedmann-Lemaître-Robertson-Walker metric, and we have considered a spherical patch of radius $R = \pi/k_0$ for comoving wave vector $k_0 = a(T_0)H(T_0)$ (here and throughout $\hbar = c = 1$). The definition of $M_0$ depends upon the filtering of the mass function [22]. Ours differs from others in the literature that take a cubic volume $\sim k_0^{-3}$.

The temperature $T_0$ sets the time when the axion field goes from having an equation of state $w = -1$ to $w = 0$ and therefore, depends on the temperature evolution of the axion mass $m_a(T) = m_{a,0}(T/T_c)^{-n}$, with $m_a(T < T_c) = m_{a,0} \equiv m_a$. The index $n$ parameterizes the sharpness of the phase transition and the critical temperature $T_c \approx \sqrt{m_a f_a}$ for the QCD axion, $T_c \approx \Lambda_{QCD} \approx 200 \text{ MeV} \approx 2.5 \sqrt{m_a f_a}$; the case $T_c > \sqrt{m_a f_a}$ occurs for some axionlike particles [23] and is equivalent to $n = 0$. This phase transition also determines the axion DM density [24–26]. Fixing the DM density $\Omega \approx 0.12$ [27] determines an $n$-dependent relationship between $m_a$ and $f_a$ such that $M_0 = M_0(m_a, n)$.

Following the standard computation for the axion DM density [28] and accounting for uncertainties due to anharmonicities in the axion potential and the decay of topological defects [15], we compute $M_0(m_a, n)$ for various $n$ (see Fig. 1). As a representative of the QCD axion, we take $n \approx 3.34$ from the “interacting instanton liquid” model for the QCD topological susceptibility [28], which is consistent with the results from lattice simulations ($n \approx 3.55 \pm 0.30$ [29,30]).

After their initial formation, miniclusters of mass $M_0$ undergo hierarchical structure formation and collapse into
larger “minicluster halos” (MCHs) as the substructure within larger galactic halos. Miniclusters collapse much earlier and on different scales than galactic halos, and so we treat these two periods of structure formation independently.

Hierarchical structure formation can be computed following the Press-Schechter [31] approach, as shown in Fig. 2. The slope of the MCH mass function is fixed by the (cut white noise) initial conditions, giving a mass variance \( \sigma^2(M, n, t_0, x) \) for \( M < M_0 \), constant \( M < M_0 \). The maximum MCH mass is determined by the Jeans scale or de Broglie wavelength [34,35] and is cutoff dependent. MCHs with \( M \ll M_0 \), however, play little role in microlensing for the QCD axion for the surveys considered.

We normalize the substructure mass function to

\[ f_{MC}(M) = \frac{1}{M_{host}} \int M \, dM \]  

for host galaxy mass \( M_{host} \) and minicluster fraction \( f_{MC} \).

The presence of \( f_{MC} \) as a free parameter accounts for the fact that, due to the axion population from topological defect decay and the effects of, e.g., tidal stripping [36], only a fraction of axions end up bound in miniclusters.

In some cases, miniclusters and MCHs can be massive enough and dense enough to impact gravitational microlensing. Thus, searches for axion miniclusters are related to searches for nonparticle DM candidates, such as massive compact halo objects (MACHOs) [37,38] and primordial black holes (PBHs, see, e.g., Refs [39,40]).

We compute the lensing signal for miniclusters, treating them as extended objects. Miniclusters can remain isolated from each other as they join larger haloes, form dense MCHs, or become disrupted into diffuse MCHs. We consider all of these possibilities below and in more detail in Ref. [22]. The true model of structure formation with miniclusters must be determined by simulations; our models bracket the possibilities.

We computed the gravitational microlensing signal from axion miniclusters and MCHs for the EROS survey of the large magellanic cloud (LMC) [41] and for the Subaru Hyper Suprime-Cam (HSC) survey of Andromeda (M31) [40]. EROS has a high microlensing efficiency for time scales between one day and 1000 days, while HSC observations have high efficiency for time scales between two minutes and seven hours. Thus, the two surveys probe different characteristic lens masses [38]. We make various approximations in order to handle the constraints from these surveys in a simple manner and emphasize that a dedicated analysis by observers is desirable.

**Microlensing with Miniclusters.**—A key quantity in gravitational microlensing is the Einstein radius

\[ R_E(x, M) = \frac{2GMx(1-x)d_s}{d_L} \]  

where \( M \) is the lens mass, \( d_s \) is the distance from the observer to the source, and \( x = d/d_s \), where \( d \) is the distance from the observer to the lens. For a pointlike lens, the Einstein radius defines the shape of the “microlensing tube” [38]. This is the volume within which a lens must pass for the lensing amplification \( A \) to exceed \( 1.34 \), \( A = 1.34 \) being the threshold applied to the lightcurves in Refs. [40,41].

Miniclusters are extended objects with scale radius determined by the characteristic density. The characteristic
The parameter \(\delta\) is the characteristic overdensity of a microlensing at the time of formation. In numerical simulations, microlenses are observed to have a distribution for \(\delta\) given by the value of \(\delta\) after fixing the total mass \(M\) of the microlens/MCH and assuming the profiles extend to 100 \(r_s\). An alternative microlens/MCH density profile fixes \(\rho_c\) as the core density and the radial dependence as \(r^{-9/4}\) from self-similar infall [43] and is explored in Ref. [22].

We integrate the three dimensional density profile along the line of sight towards the center of the halo to obtain a surface density for lensing. We then calculate the magnification for an axisymmetric mass distribution with impact parameter \(\ell'\) from the line of sight

\[
A = \frac{1 - B(1 + B - C)}{\Sigma_c \ell' \rho_c \ell'^2} - \frac{1}{4\pi G d_s x (1 - x)}.
\]

In this way, we compute the shape of the microlensing tube given by the value of \(\ell'\) corresponding to a magnification of \(A = 1.34\) for a microlense defined by \((M, \delta)\).

From our numerical lensing calculations, we find that the shape of the microlensing tube is still reasonably well described by \(R_E(x, M)\), but with a rescaling factor \(R\) that depends on \(\delta\) and \(M\) [22] such that the microlens micro-lensing tube is given by

\[
R_{MC}(x, M, \delta) = R(\delta, M) R_E(x, M).
\]

When a microlens/MCH is diffuse, the tube is smaller. There is a minimum value of \(\delta\), below which, there is no value of impact parameter \(\ell'\) for which \(A \geq 1.34\), i.e., \(R(\delta < \delta_{\text{min}}) = 0\), with \(\delta_{\text{min}} = \delta_{\text{min}}(M)\) given approximately by \(r_s/R_E > 1\). This reduces considerably the expected number of microlensing events for microlusters compared to point masses (MACHOs, PBHs). For \(\delta \gg \delta_{\text{min}}\), the limiting behavior is that of a point mass, \(R \rightarrow 1\).
We model the efficiency from Fig. 14 of Ref. [40] as a step function, with $e = 0.5$ between the sampling of two minutes and the observing time of seven hours. We normalize the exposure to reproduce the bound on the PBH fraction (e.g., Fig. 21 of Ref. [40]) using our methods.

Results.—We show the expected number of microlensing events in the minicluster scenario as a function of $M_0$ in Fig. 3 for HSC and EROS, with $f_{MC} = 1$. The number of events in HSC is far larger than for EROS due to the huge volume of DM between Earth and M31, leading to a larger optical depth to microlensing for HSC [40]. To show the effects of our modeling, we show four different calculations of $N_{\text{exp}}$ for HSC.

In the first, we compute the event rate for PBHs (i.e., pointlike object) of fixed mass $M_0$ (i.e., Dirac-delta-function mass distribution) to normalize the exposure and efficiency.

We then compute the case of isolated miniclusters, with density profiles determined by $dn/d\delta$. This reduces the number of events by a factor of $O(10^5)$ due to the requirement of large $\delta$ such that $R > 0$. We consider this most conservative: miniclusters are too dense to suffer much disruption on mergers, and MCHs are likely to be a “plum pudding” of $M_0$ objects. In this case, for the HSC cadence and QCD axion, the modulating role of the MCH mass function is not relevant.

The dense MCH case includes, in addition, the effects of $dn/dM$. A microlensing survey is sensitive to objects of fixed mass $M$. The mass function spreads the MCHs to $M > M_0$ (with more total mass at larger $M$), shifting the central $M_0$ to smaller values. The density profiles of the dense MCHs are also computed using $dn/d\delta$; i.e., mergers forming MCHs are assumed to preserve the distribution of halo concentrations.

Finally, the diffuse minicluster case uses $dn/dM$ but assumes that all MCHs with $M$ outside a small window near $M_0$ have too low a density for microlensing. The cut in $dn/dM$ reduces the number of events. This is the most pessimistic model, corresponding to an effective reduction in $f_{MC}$ caused by mergers.

Taking both EROS and HSC to have observed zero microlensing candidates, the Poisson statistics 95% C.L. limit on the number of expected events is $N_{\text{exp}} \leq 3$ [40,41]. Using this limit, we find the constraints on $f_{MC}$ as a function of axion mass $m_a$, presented in Fig. 4. We find that EROS is unable to place a bound on $f_{MC} < 1$.

HSC, on the other hand, does. The shaded band shows the allowed mass for the QCD axion fixed by $m_a = 6.6 \, \mu eV (10^{12} \, \text{GeV}/f_{\text{a}})$ [1,2] and the relic density $50 \, \mu eV \lesssim m_a \lesssim 200 \, \mu eV$ [46]. The solid lines show the HSC constraint: where the $n = 3.34$ line intersects the shaded band, $f_{MC}$ is bounded for the QCD axion, and we find $f_{MC} < 0.083 (m_a/100 \, \mu eV)^{0.12}$ in the isolated minicluster case.

These results could be improved, as shown in Fig. 4 (inset), where the magenta line shows a hypothetical improved observation by HSC, extending to ten nights with an efficiency $e \sim 1$, leading to a forecast bound of $f_{MC} \lesssim 0.004$ for the QCD axion in the isolated miniclusters case. The improved observation would also be able to bound $f_{MC} \lesssim 0.1$ in the more pessimistic dense MCH scenario. We advocate a dedicated analysis of the HSC microlensing data to place more rigorous bounds on $f_{MC}$ than we have approximated and for a longer microlensing survey in order to improve those bounds further. Reference [22] includes the necessary light curves. Reference [22] also discusses various theoretical uncertainties and modeling that can give small shifts in the constraints. The largest uncertainty comes from our simplified modeling of the lensing efficiency. We are confident, however, that a more thorough analysis by the observing teams will show that HSC, and microlensing in general, is now a powerful tool to constrain the QCD axion.

In this Letter, we have used microlensing to place the first observational bounds on the DM axion minicluster fraction...
stripping of miniclusters allows finally is an important task.

the Earth and a minicluster. Constraining mass range, e.g., by “MADMAX” [48], would be much more difficult due to the small probability of an encounter between the Earth and a minicluster. Constraining $f_{MC}$ observationally is an important task.

If axions are ever detected directly in the lab, then tidal stripping of miniclusters allows $f_{MC}$ to be measured from the phase-space distribution [36,43]. Independently of $f_{MC}$, axions in the mass range accessible to microlensing can be detected via the force they mediate using the proposed experiment “ARIADNE” [49].

If accurate theoretical predictions for $f_{MC}$ are made through numerical simulation, then our results and future microlensing surveys could be used to exclude the existence of the QCD axion or indeed discover evidence for it.

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