Detection of bridge emission above 50 GeV from the Crab pulsar with the MAGIC telescopes

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Submitted 18 February 2014, Accepted 24 April 2014

ABSTRACT

Context. The Crab pulsar is the only astronomical pulsed source detected at very high energy (VHE, E\textgreater;100GeV) gamma rays. The emission mechanism of VHE pulsation is not yet fully understood, although several theoretical models have been proposed.

Aims. In order to test new models, we measured the light curve and the spectra of the Crab pulsar with high precision by means of deep observations.

Methods. We analyzed 135 hours of selected MAGIC data taken between 2009 and 2013 in stereoscopic mode. In order to discuss the spectral shape in connection with lower energies, 5.5 years of Fermi-LAT data were also analyzed.

Results. The known two pulses per period were detected with a significance of 8.0 \(\sigma\) and 12.6 \(\sigma\). In addition, significant emission was found between the two pulses with 6.2 \(\sigma\).

Conclusions. We discovered the bridge emission above 50 GeV between the two main pulses. This emission can not be explained with the existing theories. This data can be used for testing new theoretical models.

Key words. pulsars: individual: Crab pulsar – gamma rays: stars

1. Introduction

The Crab pulsar and the surrounding Crab nebula are the remnant of the supernova of AD 1054. It is one of the youngest pulsars known and its spin down luminosity (4.6 \times 10^{38} \text{erg/s}) is the highest among Galactic neutron stars. A remarkable feature of the Crab pulsar is that it is visible at all wavelengths, from radio (10^{-3} \text{eV}) to VHE gamma rays (> 10^{11} \text{eV}). To date, this pulsar is the only one for which pulsed emission has been detected above 100 GeV.

Gamma-ray pulsation from the Crab pulsar up to \textsim 10 GeV had been known since the 1990s from EGRET observations (Nolan et al. 1993). In 2008, pulsations were found by the MAGIC telescope at energies above 25 GeV (Aliu et al. 2008). This result suggested that the emission originates in the outer magnetosphere. The simplest curvature radiation scenario in
the outer magnetosphere predicts an exponential cutoff in the energy spectrum at GeV energies (e.g., Muslimov & Harding 2004; Takata et al. 2006; Tang et al. 2008). Fermi-LAT observations from 100 MeV to a few tens of GeV, which started in August 2008, showed a clear break in the spectrum at ~ 6 GeV (Abdo et al. 2010) supporting this scenario. A few years later, however, MAGIC and VERITAS (Aleksič et al. 2011, 2012a; Aliu et al. 2011) found that the energy spectrum of the Crab pulsar extends up to 400 GeV following a power law. The emission above 100 GeV is difficult to explain only with the curvature radiation, and additional or different emission mechanisms are required. Several new models were recently proposed to explain the energy spectrum of the Crab pulsar (e.g., Aleksič et al. 2011; Aharonian et al. 2012).

Here we present new results from the continuing monitoring of the Crab pulsar with the MAGIC telescopes that will help to constrain any model for the emission. In order to discuss the Crab pulsar spectra at energies lower than those accessible to MAGIC, Fermi-LAT data were also analyzed.

2. Instruments, data sets, and analysis methods

2.1. The MAGIC Telescopes

The MAGIC telescopes are two Imaging Atmospheric Cherenkov Telescopes located on the island of La Palma (Spain) at 2200 m above sea level. Both telescopes consist of a 17 m diameter reflector and a fast imaging camera with a field of view of 3.5°. The trigger threshold for regular observations at zenith angles below 35° is around 50 GeV and the sensitivity above 290 GeV (in 50 h) is 0.8% of the Crab nebula flux with an angular resolution better than 0.07° (Aleksič et al. 2012b). The first telescope started operation in 2004, while the second one became operational in 2009.

For this study we used 135 hours of data taken at zenith angles below 35° during optimal technical and weather conditions between September 2009 and April 2013. Standard MAGIC analysis, as described in Moralejo et al. (2009) and Aleksič et al. (2012b), was applied to the data. The conversion from event arrival times to pulsar rotational phases used Tempol2 software (Hobbs et al. 2006) and a dedicated package inside MARS (López 2006). The spin parameters of the Crab pulsar were taken from the monthly reports of the Jodrell Bank Radio telescope¹ (Lyne et al. 1993).

2.2. Fermi-LAT

The Large Area Telescope (LAT) is a pair conversion gamma-ray detector on board the Fermi satellite (Atwood et al. 2009). It can detect high-energy gamma rays from 20 MeV to more than 300 GeV. It has been operational since August 2008 and all the collected data are publicly available. In this work, we have used 5.5 years of Pass 7 reprocessed data² from 2008 August 4 to 2014 January 31. The region of interest was chosen to be 30° around the Crab pulsar.

Along with the public data, the LAT team provides the corresponding analysis software and instrument response functions (IRF) designed for the analysis of that particular dataset. We have used the version v9r32p5 of the Fermi-LAT ScienceTools³ and the P7REP_SOURCE_V15 IRF. From the downloaded data we have discarded events taken at zenith angles above 100° to reduce the contamination of albedo gamma rays coming from the Earth’s limb. To compute the pulse phase, we used the same spin parameters as for the MAGIC analysis. The obtained fluxes were computed by maximizing the likelihood of a given source model using the gtlke tools. The binned likelihood method was adopted and a 40° square area with 0.2° bin width was used for the likelihood maximization. Apart from the Galactic (gal_irm_v05.fits) and extragalactic (iso_source_v05.txt) diffuse emission, we considered as background sources for the likelihood fits all sources listed in the second LAT source catalogue (Nolan et al. 2012). The data taken during the periods when the Crab nebula was flaring were not excluded from the analysis. These flares should not have any impact on the pulsed emission results because it is known that the pulsation component did not change during the flares (Buehler et al. 2012), and the average nebula flux including flare periods was subtracted when the pulsar signal was determined. Regarding the reported Fermi-LAT spectrum from the Crab nebula, the six Crab flares that lasted a few days might be responsible for a few percent of the photons below 1 GeV in the overall 5.5 year dataset. Given that the effect is expected to be small, and that this paper focusses on the emission from the pulsar, we did not correct for this effect.

3. Results

3.1. Light curve above 50 GeV

Figure 1 shows the light curves of the Crab pulsar measured by MAGIC. Two peaks are clearly visible. Following our previous study (Aleksič et al. 2012a), we define phase ranges for the two peaks as P1M (phase ~0.017 to 0.262) and P2M (0.377 to 0.422). The background level (hadrons and continuum gamma rays) is estimated using the phase range between 0.52 and 0.87 and is then subtracted from the histograms⁴. The number of excess events in P1M between 50 GeV and 400 GeV is 930 ± 120 (8.0 σ) and in P2M is 1510 ± 120 (12.6 σ).

In addition to the two main peaks, significant emission between them is also visible. The region between the peaks is generally called the Bridge. Defining the Bridge region as the gap between P1M and P2M, namely, between 0.026 and 0.377 (hereafter BridgeM), we obtain an excess of 2720 ± 440 (6.2 σ) events in this region. Adopting the definition used at lower energies for the Bridge as the region 0.14 – 0.25 from Fierro et al. (1998) (hereafter BridgeG), then the number of excess events is 880 ± 200 (4.4 σ). This excess increases to 1940 ± 370 (5.2 σ) if we extend BridgeG with the so-called trailing wing of P1 and the leading wing of P2, namely to the interval of 0.04 – 0.32 (see Fierro et al. 1998). It should be noted that this detection confirms the hint of bridge emission already reported in (Aleksič et al. 2012a).

3.2. Comparison with lower energies

Figure 2 shows the light curves at optical, X-ray, and gamma-ray energies obtained with various instruments, together with the 50 – 400 GeV light curve from the bottom panel of Fig. 1. The background was subtracted in the same way as the MAGIC light curves (see Sect. 3.1). The intensity and morphology of the

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¹ http://www.jb.man.ac.uk/pulsar/crab.html
² http://fermi.gsfc.nasa.gov/ssc/data/analysis/documentation/Pass7REP_usage.html
³ http://fermi.gsfc.nasa.gov/ssc/data/analysis/scitools/overview.html
⁴ An estimation of the background using the off-peak interval from the LAT Second Pulsar Catalog, namely the phase range between 0.61 and 0.89, lead to very similar results.
bridge emission varies considerably with energy. It is very weak at optical wavelengths and in the 100 – 300 MeV range, while there is an appreciable difference at X-rays and soft gamma rays. At the energies covered by MAGIC, the peaks get much sharper and a prominent bridge emission appears.

It is known that the flux ratio between the two peaks strongly depends on energy, as does the ratio between the first peak and the bridge (see, e.g., Kuiper et al. 2001). Fig. 3 shows the flux ratio between P2_M and P1_M and that between Bridge_E and P1_M as a function of energy from optical (~ 2 eV) to 400 GeV. Steady emission was subtracted before the ratios were computed. The ratios P2_M/P1_M and Bridge_E/P1_M behave similarly. These ratios increase with energy up to 1 MeV, decrease up to 100 MeV, and increase again from that energy on. At 50 – 400 GeV, the ratios basically follow the trend seen at lower energies.

3.3. Spectral energy distribution

The spectral energy distributions (SEDs) of the P1_M, P2_M, Bridge_M, and Bridge_E between 100 MeV and 400 GeV are shown in Fig. 4, together with the Crab nebula SED obtained with a subset of the data used for the pulsar analysis. The SEDs were calculated using Fermi-LAT data below 50 GeV (below 200 GeV for the nebula), and MAGIC data above 50 GeV. The nebula SED is connected smoothly between the two instruments. The Fermi-LAT data were fit with a power law with an exponential cutoff, while the MAGIC data were fit with a simple power-law function. The obtained fit parameters are summarized in Table 1. The power-law indices between 50 GeV and 400 GeV are about 3 and no significant difference is seen between different pulse phases. The uncertainty in the absolute energy scale is estimated as 17%, whereas the systematic error of the flux normalization is estimated to be 18%. The difference between this number and the one given in Aleksić et al. (2012b) is mainly due to a more precise background estimation from the off-peak re-
4. Discussion

In summary, the Crab pulsar above 50 GeV exhibits a light curve with a significant bridge emission between two sharp peaks (Fig. 1). The flux ratios $P2/P1M$ and $Bridge/P1s$ increase with increasing photon energy between 100 MeV and 400 GeV (Figs. 2 and 3). Between 30 GeV and 400 GeV, the fluence in the bridge phase is comparable to that in the P1 phase (Fig. 4). The SEDs in the $50-400$ GeV range could be fit with power-law functions for the three phases.

Detection of pulsed VHE emissions favors emission sites in the outer part of the magnetosphere because a strong source attenuation is expected at lower altitudes at these energies. The outer-gap (OG) and the slot-gap models are the most probable explanation of these pulsed $\gamma$-rays (Harding et al. 2008; Watters & Romani 2011; Venter et al. 2012). Using an ad hoc extension of the two dimensional meridional OG model to three dimension, Tang et al. (2008) and Takata et al. (2008) reproduced the bridge emission. However, a fully three-dimensional electrodynamical structure is required to model the phase resolved SEDs (Hirotani 2011, 2013).

Alternatively, if a very strong magnetic-field-aligned electric field arises near the light cylinder (LC), pulsed VHE photons might be also emitted there (Bednarek 2012). Emission from beyond the LC can also explain the double-peaked light curves. Arka & Dubus (2013) demonstrated that a sufficient luminosity and a hard spectrum extending to 100 GeV can be obtained for P1 and P2 via the synchrotron emission by a hot plasma from the current sheet slightly outside the LC, but in this scenario the bridge emission should disappear above 10 GeV. Chkheidze et al. (2013) proposed that synchrotron radiation generated near the LC during the quasi-linear stage of the cyclotron instability can produce the phase-aligned pulsation between radio and $\gamma$-rays. However, the formation of a bridge component is not explained in this model.

Although synchrotron luminosity declines sharply beyond the LC, the inverse-Compton process may still be effective there. Aharonian et al. (2012) demonstrated that the observed pulsed flux of the Crab pulsar between 70 GeV and 400 GeV can be explained by up-scattered photons by a particle-dominated wind whose Lorentz factors exceed $5 \times 10^5$ at $20-50$ LC radii. Although a phase-resolved spectrum is not provided in their paper, the observed P2/P1 ratio in VHE could be reproduced if one considers an anisotropic wind. The bridge emission is also predicted, but a special density profile is required to explain both the bridge and the narrow peak emissions at the same time (Khangulyan et al. 2012).

In closing, none of the current models can consistently account for the properties of the pulsed and bridge emission from the Crab pulsar.

Acknowledgements. We would like to thank Felix Aharonian and Dmitry Khangulyan for useful discussions on the pulsar emission models. We would also like to thank the Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias for the excellent working conditions at the Observatorio del Roque de los Muchachos in La Palma. The support of the German BMBF and MPG, the Italian INFN, the Swiss National Fund SNF, and the Spanish MINECO is gratefully acknowledged. This work was also supported by the CPAN CSD2007-00042 and MultiDark CSD2009-00064 projects of the Spanish Consolider- Ingenio 2010 programme, by grant D002-353 of the Bulgarian NSF, by grant 127740 of the Academy of Finland, by the DFG Cluster of Excellence “Origin and Structure of the Universe”, by the DFG Collaborative Research Centers SFB823/C4 and SFB876/C3, by the Polish MNiSW grant 745/ N-HESS-MAGIC/2010/0, by the Croatian Science Foundation (HrZZ) Project 09/186 and by the Formosa Program between National Science Council in Taiwan and Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas in Spain administered through grant number NSC100-2923-M-007-001-MY3.

References

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Table 1. Spectral Parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>phase</th>
<th>$F_1$ [10^{-11}MeV^{-1}cm^{-2}s^{-1}]</th>
<th>$E_1$ [GeV]</th>
<th>$F_1$ [10^{-11}TeV^{-1}cm^{-2}s^{-1}]</th>
<th>$E_1$ [TeV]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1M</td>
<td>8.87 ± 0.14</td>
<td>3.74 ± 0.15</td>
<td>4.18 ± 0.59</td>
<td>3.25 ± 0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2M</td>
<td>3.14 ± 0.07</td>
<td>1.97 ± 0.01</td>
<td>8.48 ± 0.62</td>
<td>3.27 ± 0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BridgeM</td>
<td>7.70 ± 0.11</td>
<td>1.74 ± 0.01</td>
<td>12.2 ± 3.3</td>
<td>3.35 ± 0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BridgeE</td>
<td>0.95 ± 0.04</td>
<td>1.44 ± 0.04</td>
<td>3.7 ± 1.1</td>
<td>3.51 ± 0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Spectral parameters obtained by fitting a function $F(E) = F(E/100 ~GeV)^{-1.7} \times \exp(E/E_c)$ to Fermi-LAT data between 100 MeV and 300 GeV

(b) Spectral parameters obtained by fitting a function $F(E) = F_100(E/100 ~GeV)^{-1.7}$ to MAGIC data between 50 GeV and 400 GeV