

# Mapping the aurora on a rare magnetic white dwarf binary

Scientific Category: Stellar Physics and Stellar Types

Scientific Keywords: Binary Stars / Trinary Stars, Stellar Phenomena, Variable Stars, White Dwarf Stars

Instruments: COS

Exclusive Access Period: 6 months

Proposal Size: Small

UV Initiative: Yes

Orbit Request

Prime

Parallel

Cycle 29

5

0

## Abstract

We propose to obtain 5 orbits of COS ultraviolet spectroscopy of the close white dwarf/M dwarf binary system CC Cet. Existing COS spectroscopy has revealed that the white dwarf is magnetic, and is accreting the stellar wind of the M dwarf along the magnetic field lines to produce aurora-like surface features. Magnetic systems in close but detached binaries are extremely rare, a mystery given the one-third magnetic incidence in the Cataclysmic Variables that they will evolve into. The white dwarf is also spinning much faster than the orbital period.

Whilst the two existing COS spectra show that the observed magnetic field strength and metal distribution vary with time, the phase of the observations are unknown and the S/N too low to extract meaningful time series spectroscopy. With five additional orbits we will measure the spin period of the white dwarf, resolve the changes in magnetic field strength and metal abundances as a function of spin, and obtain the radial velocity curve of the white dwarf.

This rich dataset will allow us to solve the magnetic field structure, map out the distribution of the wind accretion across the white dwarf photosphere, and solve for the binary masses and inclinations. With all the relevant parameters of the system known, we will be able to tightly constrain formation models of the system, and perhaps gain insight into why magnetic white dwarfs in binaries are so rare. There is also a possibility that the M dwarf will flare during our observation, providing a multi-wavelength dataset that can probe the physics of stellar activity.

**Target Summary:**

Target	RA	Dec	Magnitude
V-CC-CET	03 10 55.0405	+09 49 24.42	

**Observing Summary:**

Target	Config Mode and Spectral Elements	Flags	Orbits
V-CC-CET	COS/FUV Spectroscopic G130M (1291)		5

Total prime orbits: 5

**Investigators:**

*Investigators and Team Expertise are included in this preview for your team to review. These will not appear in the version of the proposal given to the TAC, to allow for a dual anonymous review.*

	Investigator	Institution	Country
	Dr. Jeremy J. Drake	Smithsonian Institution Astrophysical Observatory	USA/MA
*	Prof. Boris T. Gaensicke	The University of Warwick	GBR
!	Dr. John D. Landstreet	The University of Western Ontario	CAN
*	Dr. Odette Fabiola Toloza Castillo	The University of Warwick	GBR
	Dr. David John Wilson	University of Texas at Austin	USA/TX

Number of investigators: 5

\* ESA investigators: 2

! CSA investigators: 1

**Team Expertise:**

David Wilson is a PI of two previous HST programs (13719, 15189) obtaining ultraviolet spectroscopy of stars using both COS and STIS, and has published multiple first-author papers based on HST data. He was the PI for the original COS observations of CC Cet, and has completed bright-object protection checks for that and multiple other programs. He is PI of the TESS DDT program that these observations compliment, and has led multiple coordinated Swift observations of the kind that will be used here.

Boris Gaensicke is a leading expert in observations of white dwarfs, and has multiple HST programs amounting to hundreds of orbits observing white dwarfs. He has published dozens of papers on white dwarfs, including co-authoring a major review on magnetic white dwarfs.

John Landstreet has studied magnetic white dwarfs for decades, having been involved in the discovery of the first one known. He is the developer of the ZEEMAN.F code that we use here to fit the magnetic line profiles.

## Mapping the aurora on a rare magnetic white dwarf binary

Odette Toloza is an expert in ultraviolet spectroscopy of white dwarfs, having lead several HST programs observing variable white dwarfs. She has a particular focus on the model atmosphere fitting and time-resolved observations, both of which will be utilised in this program.

Jeremy Drake is a member of the Chandra science division and has published multiple studies on the high energy environment of stars.

## ■ Scientific Justification

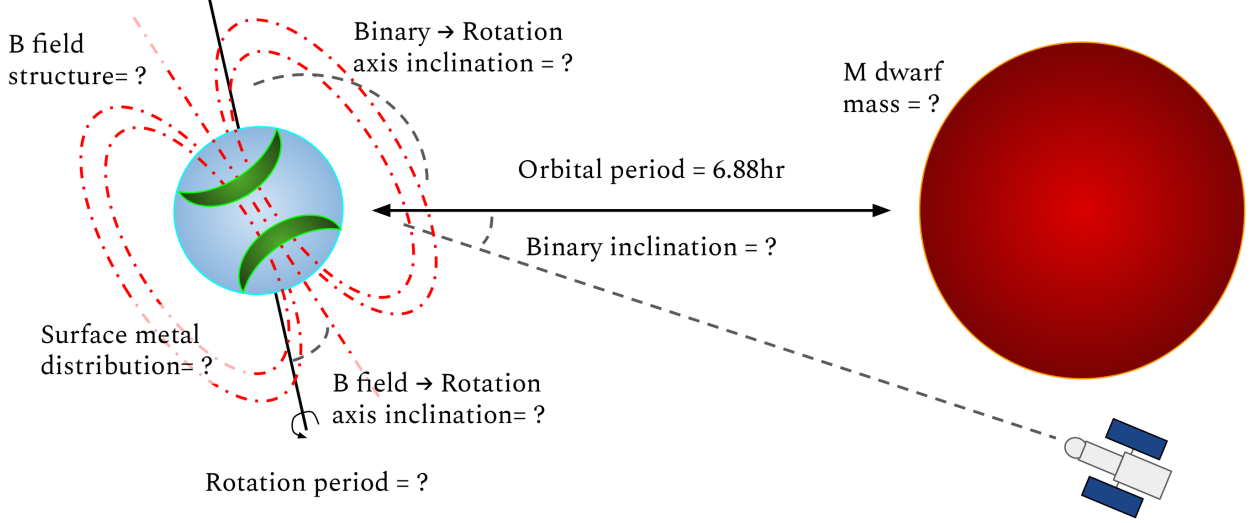


Figure 1: Schematic of the CC Cet binary system (not to scale), a white dwarf accreting magnetically channelled stellar wind from an M dwarf companion. Our proposed *HST* observations will enable measurements of all of the unknown parameters labelled as “?”, including the spin period of the white dwarf, inclination of the system, and aurora-like distribution of wind accretion on the white dwarf surface.

The analysis of the first *Gaia*-based, volume limited sample of Cataclysmic Variables (CVs) revealed that one-third of the systems contain magnetic white dwarfs (Pala et al., 2020). However, magnetic fields are exceedingly rare among their progenitor systems, close, detached white dwarf-M dwarf binaries known as Post Common Envelope Binaries (PCEBs). Since this conundrum was first identified (*Where Are the Magnetic White Dwarfs with Detached, Nondegenerate Companions?*, Liebert et al. 2005), fewer than twenty magnetic white dwarfs in close, detached binaries have been discovered (Parsons et al., 2021). All of the known examples are relatively cool ( $\lesssim 10000\text{ K}$ ) and old ( $\gtrsim 1\text{ Gyr}$ ), and have likely gone through at least one period of mass transfer, i.e. they are not true “Pre-CVs”. Most proposed mechanisms for the formation of magnetic fields in white dwarfs occur before or during evolution through the giant stages, so there should be: a. Many more magnetic white dwarfs in PCEBs in general, to match the distribution in CVs, and b. a continuous spread in ages among the magnetic binaries.

Using two short *HST* observations, we have identified the first PCEB with a hot (25000 K) and young ( $\approx 13\text{ Myr}$ ) magnetic white dwarf. Here we propose to characterise the physical properties of this remarkable system in detail with deeper *HST* spectroscopy.

CC Cet is a PCEB consisting of a low-mass white dwarf and an M-4.5 companion (Saffer et al., 1993). Figure 1 shows a schematic of the system, as well as the unknown parameters that our program will quantify. Two spectra of CC Cet were obtained with the Cosmic Origins Spectrograph (COS) onboard *HST* in 2018 August and 2019 January. The spectra show multiple deep absorption lines from C III, Si III and Si IV in addition to the broad H I Lyman  $\alpha$  line characteristic of hydrogen atmosphere white dwarfs. The high surface gravity of white dwarfs causes them to chemically stratify on very short timescales, leaving pure hydrogen or helium atmospheres. The metals seen in CC Cet must therefore be currently accreting from an external source, in this case the stellar wind of the companion (Debes, 2006).

To our great surprise, we found that the metal absorption lines are Zeeman split, demonstrating the presence of a magnetic field. Figure 2 shows the Si IV lines in the two *HST* spectra, clearly Zeeman-split in comparison with a non-magnetic object. Similar splitting is seen in C III and Si III line features. The splitting at each line is consistent with a magnetic field of  $\approx 700$  kG.

The Zeeman-splitting was not the only remarkable feature of the absorption lines. We also found that the lines are velocity broadened well beyond the instrumental broadening. We measure a  $v \sin i$  of  $\approx 40 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ , implying a rotation period of  $\approx 30$  minutes, depending on the inclination. This is much faster than either the  $\sim$ day long orbital periods of single white dwarfs or of the 6.88 hour binary orbital period of CC Cet, implying that the white has been spun up to a much greater extent than if tidal forces alone are acting.

Furthermore, the line profiles in the two COS spectra are subtly different, with changes both to the magnitude of the Zeeman-splitting and the line strength, implying a different mean magnetic field and mean metal abundance over the observed hemisphere respectively. The line variations imply that the magnetic dipole is offset from the rotation axis, and that the Mdwarf wind is not accreting uniformly onto the white dwarf surface, but is instead being channelled down the magnetic field lines onto the magnetic poles of the white dwarf. Inhomogeneous accretion of stellar wind governed by magnetic field is essentially the same process that produces the Aurora on Earth — at CC Cet, we are seeing aurora on a star!

The relatively low S/N and unknown phase coverage of the existing spectra preclude a precise measurement of the white dwarf spin period or further characterisation of the magnetic behaviour. We therefore request additional, deeper COS observations to measure the spin, produce a map of the surface metal distribution and magnetic field configuration, and find a complete solution for the masses and orbital inclination of the binary system.

Using the same set-up as the previous COS observations, we will observe CC Cet for 5 orbits, for a total exposure time of roughly 9000s covering ten or more rotations. Using the COSTOOLS routines we will extract time series spectra and measure the variation of the absorption lines with time to establish the white dwarf spin period, along with the white dwarf radial velocity curve. The spectra will then be phase-folded onto the spin period and combined into  $\approx 10$  phase-bins. The phase-resolved spectra will provide a measure of the mean magnetic field strength and mean metal abundance of the facing hemisphere as a function of rotation phase. With the magnetic field measurements, we will be able to

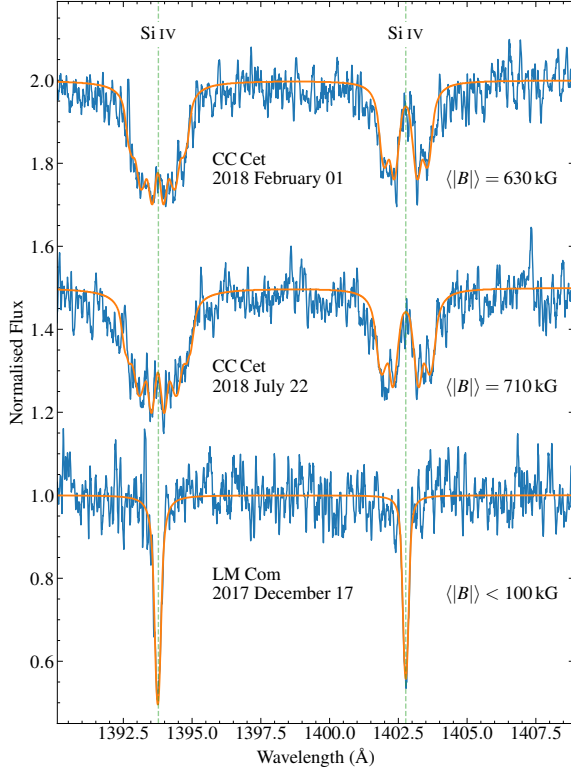


Figure 2: Silicon Si IV lines in the two *HST*/COS spectra of CC Cet, along with a spectrum of LM Com, another PCEB with a similar  $T_{\text{eff}}$  and  $\log g$ . The difference between the Zeeman-split lines in CC Cet and the non-magnetic LM Com is readily apparent. The orange line shows the best-fit magnetic model to the lines, and the dashed vertical lines show the rest wavelengths. The date and best-fit mean field modulus are given under each spectrum. The absorption lines of CC Cet are heavily Doppler-broadened, implying that the white dwarf is rapidly rotating, and the strength and splitting of the lines vary between the spectra, demonstrating that the metals are unevenly distributed across the white dwarf surface.

determine the global strength and structure of the magnetic field, as well as its offset from the spin axis. The changes in metal abundance will provide the relative coverage of the white dwarf surface as a function of rotation phase. Combining the two, we will create a map of the white dwarf surface showing the coverage of its stellar aurora.

The total time-on-target of the observations (including portions of the orbit in Earth’s shadow) will be approximately 8 hours, covering the full 6.8 hour binary period of CC Cet. We will therefore be able to measure the radial velocity of the white dwarf across the entire orbit. The velocity curve of the companion has been well characterised by Saffer et al. (1993), so we will then have the velocity ratio and hence the mass ratio of the system. Model atmosphere fits to the white dwarf spectrum have tightly constrained the white dwarf mass, and thus these measurements will return the mass of the M dwarf companion and orbital inclination of the system. A difference between the spin axis of the white dwarf and the binary plane could indicate that the white dwarf has been torqued by the magnetic field, providing a clue as to how the white dwarf has been spun up.

In summary, our observations will fully characterise this fascinating and thus-far unique binary system, filling in all of the unknown parameters in Figure 1:

- With time-series spectra we will measure the rotation period of the white dwarf. As  $v \sin i$  is known, this will also provide the rotation inclination.
- Phase-folding those spectra will reveal the change in Zeeman-splitting and strength of

the metal absorption lines as a function of phase. This will provide the magnetic field structure and surface metal distribution.

- The radial velocity curve of the absorption lines will provide the M dwarf mass and binary inclination.

**Secondary science: Flares:** Although existing optical data (and the original COS observations) indicate that the M dwarf in CC Cet is relatively quiet, there is a reasonable chance that it will flare during the observation as even “quiet” Mdwarfs flare regularly in the ultraviolet (France et al., 2020). The serendipitous detection of a flare would be exciting secondary science from this dataset. To maximise the science return from a flare we will request *Swift* TOO time to monitor the star during the COS observations, adding U-band and X-ray photometry to the dataset. Multi-wavelength observations of flares are rare, and provide insight into the physics of flare generation and their link with particle emission.

## References

- Parsons, S. G., Gänsicke, B. T., Schreiber, M. R., et al. 2021, *MNRAS*, 502, 4305.  
 Ferrario, L., de Martino, D., & Gänsicke, B. T. 2015, *Space Sci. Rev.*, 191, 111.  
 Pala, A. F., Gänsicke, B. T., Breedt, E., et al. 2020, *MNRAS*, 494, 3799  
 Liebert, J., Wickramasinghe, D. T., Schmidt, G. D., et al. 2005, *AJ*, 129, 2376  
 Saffer, R. A., Wade, R. A., Liebert, J., et al. 1993, *AJ*, 105, 1945  
 Schmidt, G. D., Szkody, P., Vanlandingham, K. M., et al. 2005, *ApJ*, 630, 1037  
 Sion, E. M., Schaefer, K. G., Bond, H. E., et al. 1998, *ApJL*, 496, L29  
 Parsons, S. G., Marsh, T. R., Gänsicke, B. T., et al. 2013, *MNRAS*, 436, 241  
 Debes, J. H. 2006, *ApJ*, 652, 636.  
 France, K., Duvvuri, G., Egan, H., et al. 2020, arXiv:2009.01259

## ■ Description of the Observations

We will observe CC Cet for 5 consecutive orbits using the G130M grating with a central wavelength of 1291 Å. Based on the previous COS observations we conservatively estimate an exposure time per orbit of 1800s, for a total of 9000s. Using a white dwarf model atmosphere spectrum fit to CC Cet, we used the ETC to predict achieving a S/N of 30 in  $\approx 900$ s around the key Si IV 1400 Å lines, allowing us to resolve  $\approx$ ten phases of line variation. The observations will span roughly 8 hours, covering the entire 6.8 hour binary period and thus allowing a measurement of the full radial velocity curve of the white dwarf. The radial velocity of the two existing spectra is different by  $\approx 80 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ , so measuring the full curve is well within the resolution capabilities of COS. The target has already passed Bright Object Protection analysis for the previous COS observations.

## ■ Special Requirements

None

## ■ Coordinated Observations

None

## ■ Justify Duplications

CC Cet has already been observed twice using the setup requested here. As described in the science justification, these observations showed that the target is variable, so further spectra are required to improve the signal-to-noise ratio and characterise the variation.