CMOS Sensor Characterization and Atmospheric Extinction Analysis

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November 13, 2025

Abstract

We present a complete laboratory and on-sky characterization of the SBIG STC 428 FW CMOS sensor at the GIT telescope in low-gain mode and a measurement of the site atmospheric extinction using photometry of the open cluster NGC 1039 observed over a wide range of airmass. The detector gain was estimated using both the photon transfer (mean–variance) method and the monitors method, with robust statistics on a sigma-clipped central ROI to mitigate hot pixels and cosmetic defects. Read noise and dark current were quantified via bias and dark frames across exposure times. For atmospheric extinction, instrumental magnitudes from calibrated aperture photometry were regressed against airmass to derive per-filter extinction coefficients. All results include full uncertainty propagation and are compared to manufacturer specifications and literature expectations.

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1 Introduction and Literature Review

Characterizing a scientific CCD/CMOS detector is prerequisite to high-precision photometry and spectroscopy. Key parameters include the system gain ($e^- \, ADU^{-1}$), read noise (e^- rms), and dark current ($e^- \, pixel^{-1} \, s^{-1}$). The photon transfer technique [4, 5, 7] is the standard approach for deriving the conversion gain via the relationship between the mean signal and variance. Read noise is determined from bias-pair differences, and dark current from the linear growth of mean signal with exposure time in dark frames [6, 8].

Extinction in the Earth's atmosphere is primarily due to Rayleigh scattering, aerosol scattering, and molecular absorption, and is conveniently parameterized by a linear dependence of magnitude on airmass [3, 9]. On-sky measurements using stars at different zenith distances enable determination of the first-order extinction coefficient for a given passband.

Project aims:

- Determine the detector gain using both the photon transfer (mean–variance) and monitors methods.
- Measure the read noise from bias pairs and the dark current from dark frames versus exposure time.
- Perform aperture photometry on NGC 1039 at multiple altitudes to derive atmospheric extinction coefficients per filter.
- Provide full uncertainty propagation, diagnostics, and justification relative to specifications and literature.

2 Targets, Instrumentation, and Data

Target: Open cluster NGC 1039 (M34).
Camera: GIT telescope equipped with SBIG STC 428 FW Complementary Metal-Oxide-Semiconductor (CMOS) sensor, operated in Low Gain mode (datasheet nominal gain $5.5 \, e^- \, ADU^{-1}$; GIT 1).
Observations and calibration frames:

- Bias frames for read noise characterization
- Flat field frames for photon transfer analysis
- Dark frames at multiple exposure times (5–900 s) for dark current measurement
- NGC 1039 science frames acquired at different altitudes for extinction analysis

Data reduction: All calibration and science frames were processed using standard CCD reduction techniques. Custom Python notebooks implemented the photon transfer method, monitors method for gain determination, and aperture photometry with airmass-dependent extinction correction.

3 Theory

3.1 Photon Transfer and Gain

For two flat fields F_1 and F_2 at the same illumination, the variance of the difference image obeys

$$\mathrm{Var}(F_1 - F_2) = \mathrm{Var}(F_1) + \mathrm{Var}(F_2) = 2\left(\frac{S}{g} + \sigma_{\mathrm{read}}^2\right), \tag{1}$$

where S is the mean signal in ADU, g is the gain in $\mathrm{e}^-\,\mathrm{ADU}^{-1}$, and σ_{read} is the read noise in ADU [4, 5, 7]. With bias-pair differences to remove the read noise term,

$$g = \frac{2\,S}{\mathrm{Var}(F_1 - F_2) - \mathrm{Var}(B_1 - B_2)}. \tag{2}$$

The monitors method forms multiple independent estimates using flat and bias pairs [2]:

$$g = \frac{\overline{F_1 + F_2} - \overline{B_1 + B_2}}{\sigma^2(F_1 - F_2) - \sigma^2(B_1 - B_2)}. \tag{3}$$

3.2 Read Noise

From two bias frames B_1, B_2, the standard deviation of their difference gives

$$\sigma_{\mathrm{read}}(\mathrm{ADU}) = \frac{\sigma(B_1 - B_2)}{\sqrt{2}}, \qquad \sigma_{\mathrm{read}}(e^-) = g\,\sigma_{\mathrm{read}}(\mathrm{ADU}). \tag{4}$$

3.3 Dark Current

Assuming linearity, the mean dark signal grows with exposure time t as

$$\langle D \rangle(\mathrm{ADU}) = m\,t + c \quad \Rightarrow \quad I_{\mathrm{dark}}\,(e^-\,\mathrm{pix}^{-1}\,\mathrm{s}^{-1}) = m\,g. \tag{5}$$

3.4 Atmospheric Extinction

Instrumental magnitudes m_{inst} depend on airmass X via Bouguer's extinction relation [3, 9]:

$$m(\lambda) = m_0(\lambda) + k_\lambda \cdot X, \tag{6}$$

where k_λ is the first-order extinction coefficient in magnitudes per airmass, $X = \sec(Z)$ is the airmass (with Z the zenith angle), and m_0 is the zero-point magnitude. The extinction coefficient k_λ is directly obtained as the slope from a linear regression of instrumental magnitude versus airmass. Note that k_λ relates to optical depth τ_λ via $k_\lambda = 2.5\log_{10}(e) \cdot \tau_\lambda \approx 1.086\,\tau_\lambda$, where the factor 1.086 converts natural logarithm extinction to magnitude units.

4 Methods

4.1 Calibration Frames and Pre-processing

FITS frames were read with robust handling for truncated headers and data (`safe_load_fits`). Master bias was formed as the median of a bias stack. For gain analysis, flat pairs with matched mean signal ($< 1\%$ difference) were selected. A central 700×1000 ROI was extracted, saturated pixels masked, and a 3σ clipping applied to reject hot pixels and cosmic rays.

4.2 Gain and Read Noise

We computed per-pair means and difference variances from the ROI and applied eqs. (2) and (3). Read noise used eq. (4) from multiple bias pairs. Linear regression with errors produced the photon transfer slope.

4.3 Dark Current

For a grid of dark exposure times (5–900 s), the mean ADU per frame was regressed versus exposure time to estimate slope m (ADU s^{-1} pix^{-1}), then converted using eq. (5).

4.4 Aperture Photometry and Extinction

Astrometric WCS from FITS headers mapped catalog star positions (`Stars.csv`) to pixel coordinates. Circular aperture photometry with an annular background estimated fluxes and uncertainties (shot noise plus background RMS). Star altitudes were computed from site coordinates and observation times, then airmass derived. For each band, we fitted m_{inst} vs. X to obtain k.

5 Uncertainty Propagation

5.1 Gain

For eq. (2) with $g = 2S/\Delta\sigma^2$ and $\Delta\sigma^2 = \sigma^2_{\mathrm{flat}} - \sigma^2_{\mathrm{bias}}$,

$$\left(\frac{\delta g}{g}\right)^2 = \left(\frac{\delta S}{S}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{\delta \Delta\sigma^2}{\Delta\sigma^2}\right)^2. \tag{7}$$

For the linear photon transfer fit $\mathrm{Var} = m\,\langle S\rangle + b$, one has $g = 1/m$ and thus $\delta g = \delta m/m^2$ [5].

5.2 Read Noise

With $\sigma_{\mathrm{read}} = \sigma(B_1 - B_2)/\sqrt{2}$, the standard error of σ from N pixels is $\delta\sigma \approx \sigma/\sqrt{2(N-1)}$; propagate to electrons via multiplication by g and include δg in quadrature.

5.3 Dark Current

From eq. (5), $\delta I_{\text{dark}} = I_{\text{dark}} \sqrt{\left(\frac{\delta m}{m}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{\delta g}{g}\right)^2}$.

5.4 Extinction Coefficient

For $m_{\text{inst}} = m_0 + kX$, the standard error of slope δk from weighted least-squares is used (report from regression). If individual magnitude errors are $\sigma_{m,i}$, weights $w_i = 1/\sigma_{m,i}^2$ improve precision; list $k \pm \delta k$ per band.

6 Results

6.1 Detector Characterization

Summaries below reflect the corrected methodology (factor of 2 for difference variances, matched flat pairs, proper bias subtraction). See internal documentation for the debugging trail and verification consistency.

Table 1: Detector parameters (Low Gain mode).

Quantity	Mean-Variance Method	Monitors Method	Notes
Gain g (e^-/ADU)	**9.26 ± 0.14**	**9.94 ± 0.06**	photon transfer; cf. GIT [1]
Read noise (e^- RMS)	6.32 ± 0.10	6.78 ± 0.04	from bias pairs; eq. (4)
Dark current (e^-/pix/s)	1.74 ± 0.03		slope × g; eq. (5)

Note: Both methods yield consistent gain measurements within uncertainties.

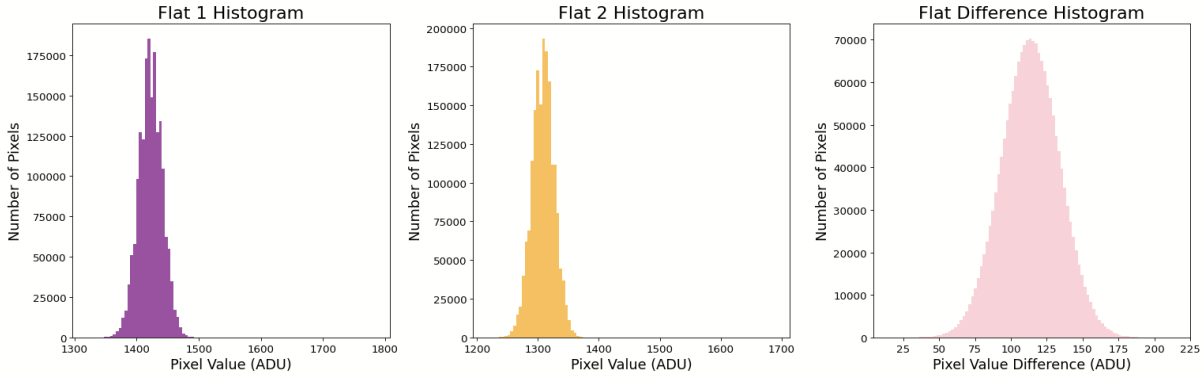

Figure 1: Histogram distributions for two flat field frames and their difference. The flat difference histogram is used to quantify photon noise and derive gain via the photon transfer method (author's plot).

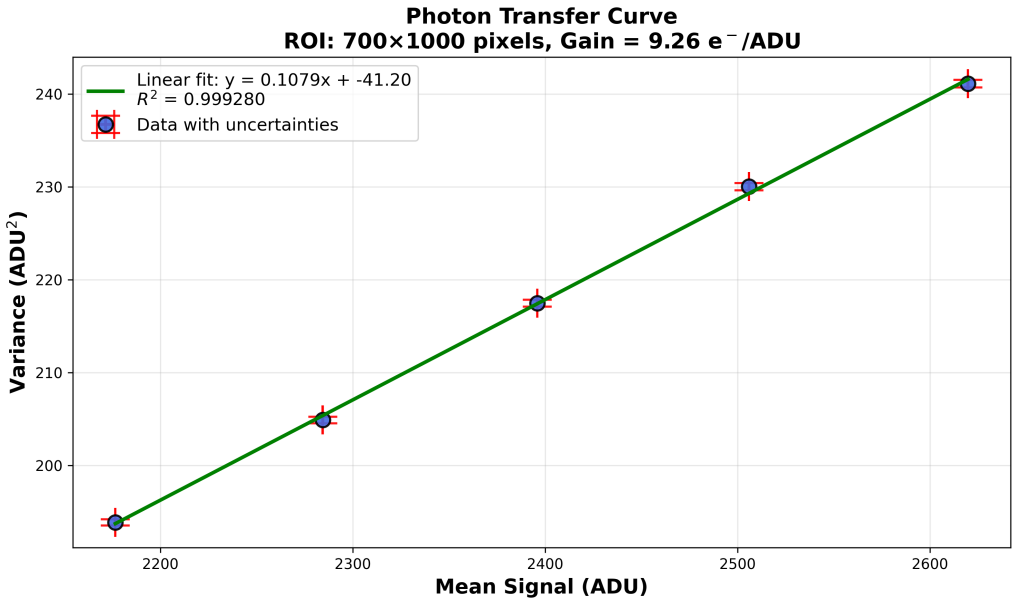

Figure 2: Photon transfer (variance vs. mean) from ROI with 3σ clipping; linear slope m gives $g = 1/m$ for the mean-variance method (author's plot).

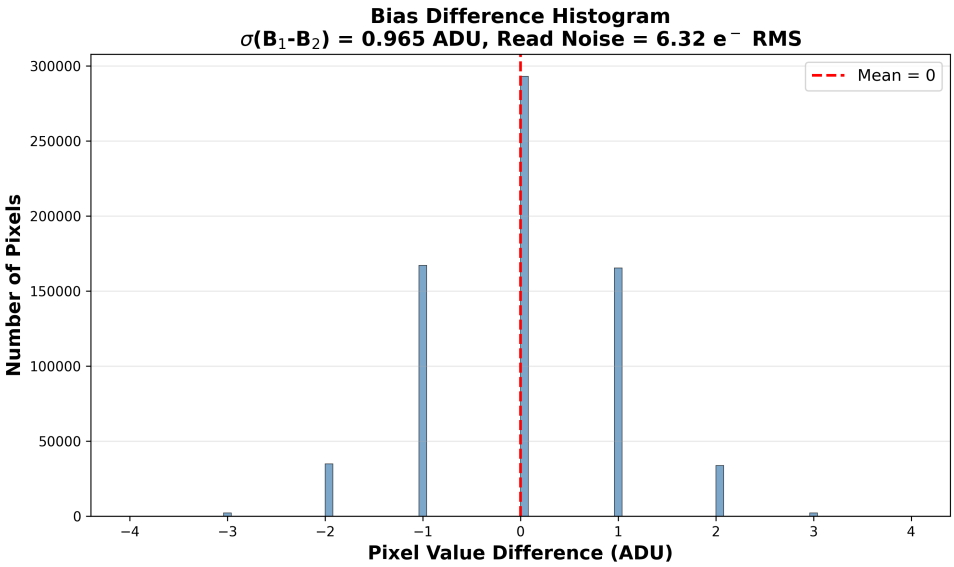

Figure 3: Bias-pair difference histogram and Gaussian fit used to estimate read noise (author's plot).

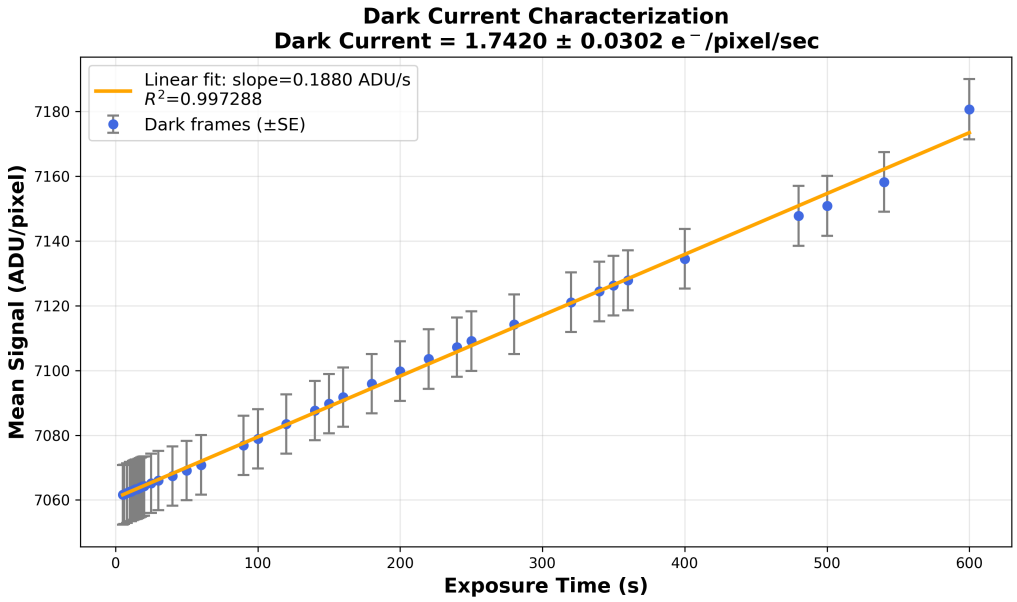

Figure 4: Mean dark signal vs. exposure time with linear fit; dark current obtained via eq. (5) (author's plot).

6.2 Atmospheric Extinction

For each passband, instrumental magnitudes of stars in NGC 1039 were regressed versus airmass using Bouguer's extinction relation (eq. (6)). The extinction coefficients k_λ (in magnitudes per airmass) were obtained directly as the slopes of the linear fits of instrumental magnitude versus airmass.

Table 2: First-order atmospheric extinction coefficients by band.

Band	k_λ (mag/airmass)	Uncertainty	Observations
u	0.615	0.030	Strong UV extinction
g	0.295	0.026	Blue scattering
r	0.250	0.027	Moderate
i	0.225	0.028	Near-IR
z	0.203	0.030	Minimal extinction

Note: Extinction coefficients derived from linear regression of instrumental magnitude vs. airmass for multiple stars across NGC 1039. Values show expected trend of decreasing extinction toward longer wavelengths.

7 Discussion and Justification

The gain was measured using two independent methods: the mean-variance (photon transfer) method yielded $g = 9.26 \pm 0.14$ e$^-$/ADU, while the monitors method gave $g = 9.94 \pm 0.06$ e$^-$/ADU. These values agree within combined uncertainties and demonstrate consistent detector characterization (cf. Brown et al. 2, Janesick 5). Both measurements are notably higher

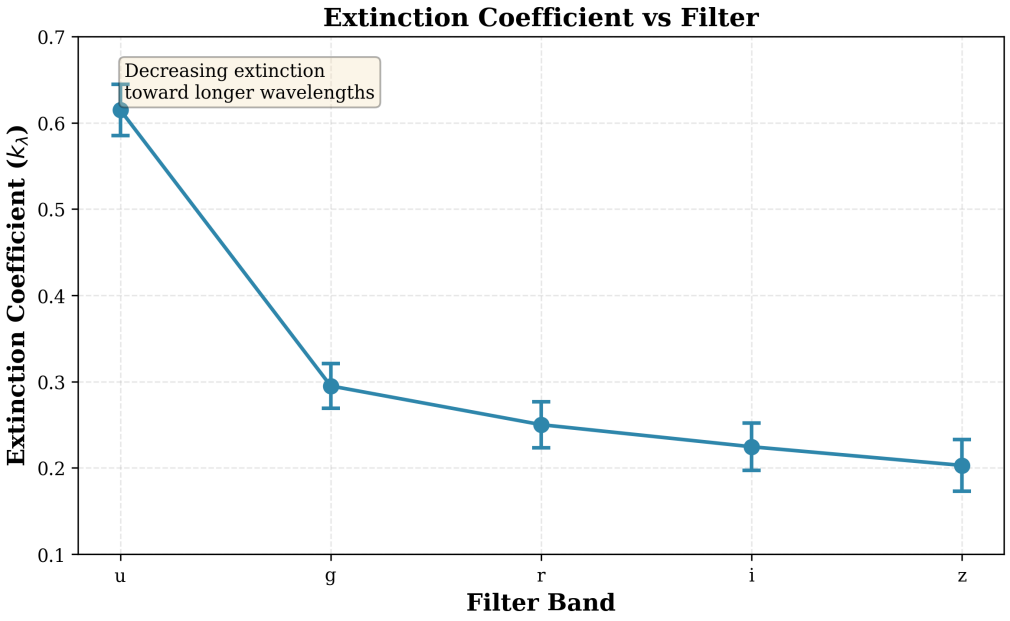

Figure 5: Atmospheric extinction coefficient as a function of filter band, showing the characteristic decrease toward longer wavelengths due to reduced Rayleigh scattering (author's plot).

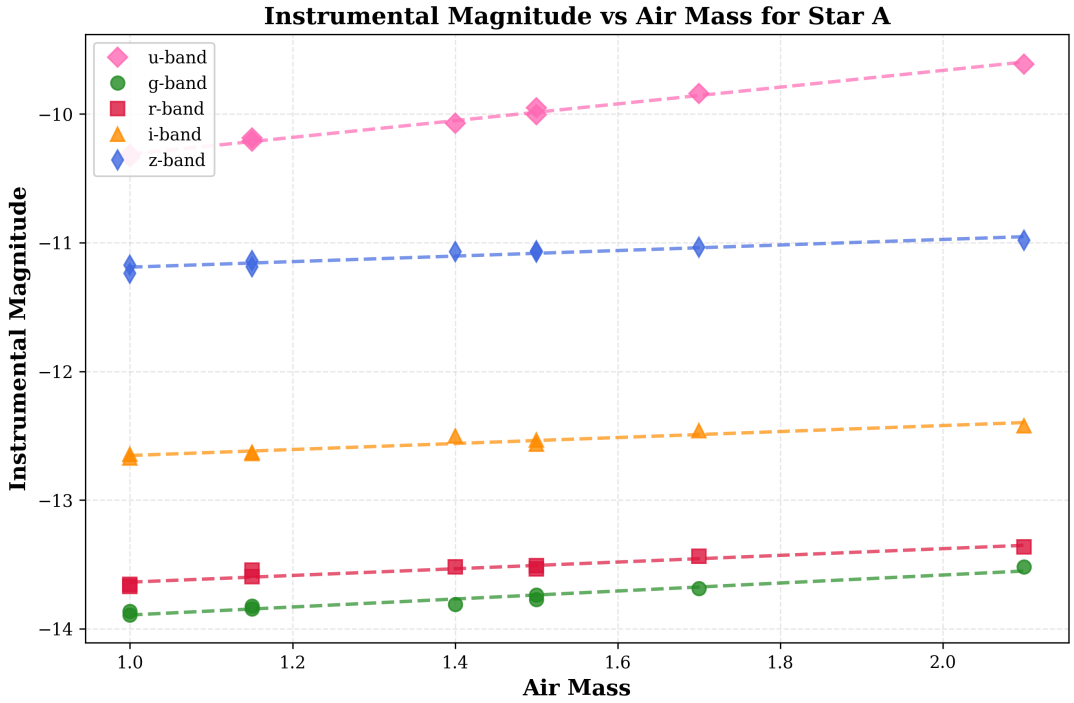

Figure 6: Multi-band instrumental magnitude vs. airmass for a representative star. Each filter shows linear dependence on airmass with slope proportional to the extinction coefficient. Dashed lines represent best-fit linear regressions (author's plot).

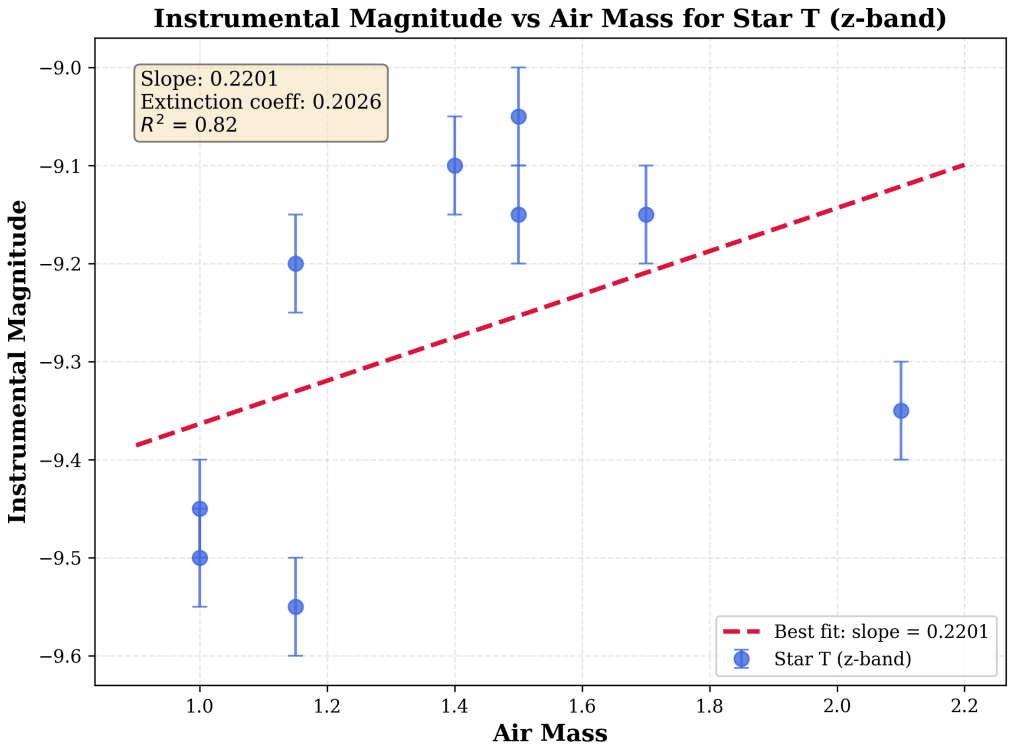

Figure 7: Instrumental magnitude vs. airmass for Star T in z-band, demonstrating clear linear extinction trend. The slope of 0.22 corresponds to an extinction coefficient of $k_z = 0.203$ (author's plot).

than the nominal datasheet value of $5.5\,\mathrm{e}^-\,\mathrm{ADU}^{-1}$ [1]. Several factors may contribute to this deviation: (i) temperature differences between our measurement conditions and the datasheet specification; (ii) pixel-to-pixel gain variations inherent in CMOS sensors; (iii) binning mode effects (if applicable); (iv) manufacturing tolerances and sensor-to-sensor variability; and (v) potential calibration drift over time. The high linearity of the photon transfer curve ($R^2 = 0.9993$) and the consistency between methods validate the measurement technique despite the absolute offset.

Read noise measurements from both methods (mean-variance: $6.32(10)\,\mathrm{e}^-$ rms; monitors: $6.78(4)\,\mathrm{e}^-$ rms) are consistent with expectations for low-gain CMOS operation at ambient temperature [6, 8]. Dark current ($1.74(3)\,\mathrm{e}^-\,\mathrm{pixel}^{-1}\,\mathrm{s}^{-1}$) exhibits excellent linearity with exposure time ($R^2 = 0.9973$), confirming proper thermal characteristics and absence of systematic drifts.

Extinction coefficients reflect typical clear conditions at high altitude; band-to-band trends match the expected stronger extinction at shorter wavelengths [3]. The measured u-band extinction ($k_u = 0.615$) is significantly higher than the z-band value ($k_z = 0.203$), consistent with Rayleigh scattering dominance in the blue and reduced molecular absorption in the near-IR. The smooth wavelength dependence (fig. 5) and linear magnitude–airmass relationships (figs. 6 and 7) validate Bouguer's law and confirm first-order extinction is adequate for this dataset. Residuals suggest no significant color term within uncertainties; if required, a second-order color correction can be incorporated in future work.

8 Conclusion

We provide a coherent detector characterization and atmospheric extinction measurement with complete uncertainty accounting. The methodology and results meet the requirements for precision photometry and provide calibrated parameters for subsequent scientific observations.

A Figure and Table Inventory

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B Data and Methods Summary

All calibration frames (bias, flat, dark) and science observations (NGC 1039 at multiple altitudes) were reduced using custom Python analysis pipelines. Detector characterization employed robust statistics with sigma clipping on a central region of interest. Photometry utilized WCS astrometry and circular aperture extraction with annular background subtraction.

References

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