



Disentangling the Components of the Milky Way

Inferring the Structure of the Milky Way in Phase-Space Using Gaussian Mixture
Modelling with Extreme Deconvolution

A REPORT PRESENTED

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29th June 2025

Abstract

Contents

1	Introduction	5
1.1	Components of the Milky Way	5
1.2	Metallicity as a Cosmic Clock	5
1.3	Λ CDM: hierarchical growth and a lopsided halo	6
1.4	Accretion versus <i>in-situ</i> disc formation	6
1.5	Origins of very-metal-poor disc candidates	7
1.6	This Work	7
2	Data	8
2.1	Sample construction	8
2.2	Galactocentric Positions and Velocities	8
3	Methodology	11
3.1	Gaussian Mixture Model	11
3.2	Number of Components	12
4	Results	13
4.1	Extreme Deconvolution	13
5	Extension direction	14
6	Conclusion	14

List of Figures

1	Properties of the final RGB sample after all quality and footprint cuts. <i>Left</i> : heliocentric-distance histogram for the whole sample (grey); the subsets with $-3 < [M/H] < -1$ and $-3 < [M/H] < -2$ are shown in solid red and dashed blue, respectively. <i>Middle</i> : density map in Galactocentric cylindrical coordinates. The empty band at low $ Z $ is a selection artefact of our latitude/extinction cuts, which deliberately remove the thin-disc mid-plane; the concentration around $R \simeq 5\text{--}8\text{ kpc}$ reflects the volume accessible to bright RGB stars interior to the Solar circle and coincides with the molecular ring region where the stellar surface density peaks. <i>Right</i> : Metallicity distribution of our data sample. Line colours are the same as in the left panel.	9
2	Column-normalised density in the v_ϕ – $[M/H]$ plane. <i>Left</i> : the bright- <i>RGB</i> catalogue of Andrae et al. [2023] . <i>Right</i> : the same sample after all distance, dust, and quality cuts. Greyscale pixels show the normalised counts in each metallicity bin; the red dashed curve is the median v_ϕ , and the black curves trace the 16 th and 84 th percentiles.	10
3	Galactocentric velocity distributions as a function of metallicity. Each panel shows the column-normalised density of stars in the v_R – v_ϕ plane for the metallicity interval printed at the top. With increasing metallicity the distribution contracts in both directions—signalling lower velocity dispersion—while the bulk of stars moves upward to larger prograde azimuthal velocity.	10
4	Ellipses mark the approximate extent of the thin disc (black), thick disc (grey), Gaia–Sausage/Enceladus debris (pink) and the pressure-supported stellar halo (purple). The figure serves as a visual key for interpreting the data panels in Fig. 3.	11
5	BIC distributions as a function of the number of GMM components in each metallicity bin. The optimum number of components is shown in red. .	12
6	Gaussian Mixture Model (GMM) decompositions of the stellar velocity distribution in the v_R – v_ϕ plane for each metallicity bin. The bottom panel of each subfigure shows the 2D velocity distribution with GMM components overplotted as ellipses representing the 1σ contours in v_R – v_ϕ . The top panel shows the fractional contribution.	13

List of Tables

1	Parameters of the Gaussian mixture model fittings in different metallicity bins. The unit for all velocity columns is km s^{-1}	14
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1 Introduction

The Milky Way Galaxy, host to our solar system, is a spiral galaxy with a centre located approximately 150 000 trillion miles (or 25 000 lightyears) from Earth. Its formation history is complex and remains an active area of research. Being embedded within the Milky Way means we can study it in greater detail than any external galaxy, testing models of galaxy formation with high-precision observational data. One of the central aims of Galactic Archaeology is to reconstruct the Milky Way’s assembly by examining the chemical compositions and dynamical properties of its stars.

In this project, we replicate and extend the analysis of [Zhang et al. \[2024\]](#), who investigated a very metal-poor disc component in the Milky Way. Very metal poor stars, formed from an interstellar medium unpolluted by earlier generations of supernovae, are among the oldest relics in the Galaxy. Discovering them on disc-like orbits would challenge the conventional view that the disc formed later from already enriched gas [[Bland-Hawthorn and Gerhard, 2016](#)], implying instead an earlier onset of disc assembly. Using Gaia DR3, the original study applied a Gaussian Mixture Model with Extreme Deconvolution to the velocity distributions of stars across metallicity bins, probing whether a coherent disc signal persists down to the lowest metallicities.

1.1 Components of the Milky Way

The Milky Way is commonly decomposed into four stellar components: a *thin disc*, a *thick disc*, a central *bulge/bar*, and a roughly spherical *halo* [[Bland-Hawthorn and Gerhard, 2016](#), [Helmi, 2020](#)]. The thin disc dominates, containing $\sim 90\%$ of all stars and most of the interstellar gas. Ongoing star formation is concentrated in the “molecular-gas ring” at Galactocentric radii $R \simeq 4\text{--}8$ kpc, where young ($\lesssim 1$ Gyr), metal-rich stars trace nearly circular, co-rotating orbits with low velocity dispersion ($\sigma_\phi \simeq 20$ km s $^{-1}$). Above the mid-plane lies the thick disc: an older ($\gtrsim 8\text{--}10$ Gyr), moderately metal-poor population with $[\text{Fe}/\text{H}] \sim -0.6$ to -1.0 , a scale height of $z_{\text{scale}} \approx 1$ kpc, and hotter kinematics ($\sigma_z \simeq 40$ km s $^{-1}$) while still retaining net prograde rotation. Inside $R \lesssim 2$ kpc, the central bulge—partly bar-shaped—hosts both old, metal-rich stars and a younger, actively forming component; stellar motions there combine bar-driven streaming with high random velocities ($\sigma \sim 100$ km s $^{-1}$). Encasing all of these is the stellar halo, which contributes only a few per cent of the total stellar mass yet harbours the Galaxy’s oldest, most metal-poor stars ($[\text{Fe}/\text{H}] \lesssim -1.5$) on highly eccentric or even retrograde orbits. Its low density, rich substructure, and extreme kinematics reveal an origin in the hierarchical accretion and tidal disruption of dwarf galaxies and globular clusters. Together, the spatial distribution, chemistry, and dynamics of these four components encode the Milky Way’s star-formation history and its sequence of merger events.

1.2 Metallicity as a Cosmic Clock

Precise ages for individual old stars are notoriously difficult to measure, so their chemical composition - most commonly the iron-to-hydrogen ratio, $[\text{Fe}/\text{H}]$ - is often used as a surrogate clock. Very metal-poor (VMP) stars must have formed before successive generations of Type II and Type Ia supernovae had substantially enriched the interstellar medium, and therefore exhibit low $[\text{Fe}/\text{H}]$ values. Metallicity is inferred spectroscopically from the equivalent widths of metal absorption lines such as Fe I and the Ca II K line; after

correcting for effective temperature and surface gravity, their relative strengths give elemental abundances. Large surveys (for example APOGEE, GALAH, LAMOST, and the Gaia XP spectra) now provide such measurements for millions of stars, enabling empirical age–metallicity relations that link chemistry to stellar chronometry [e.g. [Nordström et al., 2004](#), [Haywood et al., 2013](#), [Leung and Bovy, 2019](#), [Anders et al., 2023](#)]. These studies consistently show that stars with $[\text{Fe}/\text{H}] \lesssim -1$ are typically older than ~ 10 Gyr, making low-metallicity populations valuable probes of the Milky Way’s earliest disc-building epochs.

1.3 Λ CDM: hierarchical growth and a lopsided halo

In the concordance Λ CDM model, galaxy-sized haloes assemble *hierarchically*: small dark-matter clumps form first and then merge to build larger structures. Cosmological N -body simulations demonstrate that the number of subhaloes of mass M obeys $dn/dM \propto M^{-1.9}$, a near power-law over many decades in mass [[Cooper et al., 2010](#), [Fall and Chandar, 2012](#)]. For a Milky-Way-sized halo this translates to

- $\sim 10^2$ **minor** accretions with $M_{\text{sub}} \lesssim 10^9 M_{\odot}$, and
- a few **major** events with $M_{\text{sub}} \gtrsim 10^{10} M_{\odot}$

over a Hubble time.

Only a small subset of these haloes ever form appreciable numbers of stars. Below a critical virial mass $M_{\text{vir}} \sim 10^{11} M_{\odot}$, re-ionisation and stellar feedback drastically reduce the efficiency of turning gas into stars. Consequently, the stellar-mass–halo-mass (SMHM) relation becomes very steep at the low-mass end [[Purcell et al., 2007](#), [Bullock and Boylan-Kolchin, 2017](#)]: most low-mass subhaloes are effectively “dark”, whereas a few relatively massive dwarfs are luminous.

Hence, while the Milky Way has absorbed *hundreds* of subhaloes, **one or two** of the most massive dwarfs contribute the majority of the halo’s stellar mass; the rest add little more than dark matter and dynamical substructure.

Once accreted, dynamical friction drags the most massive satellites deep into the Galactic potential, their orbits radialise, and their debris is dispersed throughout the *inner* halo. The disrupted stars inherit coherent signatures—high radial anisotropy, distinctive angular momenta, and chemically narrow sequences—that survive to the present [e.g. [Helmi and Tim de Zeeuw, 2000](#)]. Consequently, the stellar halo is not a smooth spheroid but a map of the Galaxy’s merger history, with the inner halo overwhelmingly shaped by a few dominant progenitors (e.g. Gaia–Sausage/Enceladus), and the outer halo supplied by many low-mass accretions.

1.4 Accretion versus *in-situ* disc formation

Chemical and kinematic evidence confirms that the metal-poor halo is primarily accreted. The debris of the Gaia–Sausage/Enceladus (GSE) event, for instance, is traced by stars with $-2 < [\text{Fe}/\text{H}] < -1$ and extreme orbital anisotropy ($\beta \gtrsim 0.8$; [Belokurov et al. 2018](#), [Helmi et al. 2018](#)). At $[\text{Fe}/\text{H}] \lesssim -2$ an even broader mix of minor mergers emerges, erasing any global rotation signal [[Lancaster et al., 2019](#), [Bird et al., 2021](#)].

Against this backdrop, a number of studies have uncovered stars in the range $-2 < [\text{Fe}/\text{H}] < -1$ whose velocities resemble a *disc*: modest eccentricities and net prograde rotation [Norris et al., 1985, Chiba and Beers, 2000, Carollo et al., 2019, An and Beers, 2020]. Gaia has pushed this frontier to $[\text{Fe}/\text{H}] < -2$ [Sestito et al., 2019, Venn et al., 2020, Cordoni et al., 2020, Mardini et al., 2022]. Whether these objects represent (i) an *in-situ* metal-poor disc or (ii) the spun-up debris of earlier mergers remains hotly debated.

1.5 Origins of very-metal-poor disc candidates

Three broad formation scenarios have been proposed:

1. **Early *in-situ* disc.** Stars form in a gas-rich disc before $z \sim 4$, and later migrate outward or are dynamically heated; such stars would share the chemistry of the proto-Galaxy.
2. **Proto-galactic building blocks.** VMP stars originate in several massive, gas-rich satellites accreted at high redshift; their debris is dragged into the disc plane as the gaseous disc settles [e.g. Sestito et al., 2020].
3. **Late, minor prograde mergers.** Low-mass satellites on aligned orbits are assimilated after the disc forms, depositing a thin layer of metal-poor stars that retain disc-like kinematics [Santistevan et al., 2021].

Cosmological simulations generally reproduce scenario 2, finding that early mergers dominate the VMP budget while a coherent disc does not appear until $z \lesssim 2$ [Gurvich et al., 2023].

Observationally, Belokurov and Kravtsov [2022] identified *Aurora*, a kinematically hot, weakly rotating population with $-2 \lesssim [\text{Fe}/\text{H}] \lesssim -1.3$, arguing against an extremely early disc. Follow-up work shows *Aurora* to be centrally concentrated [Rix et al., 2022, Arntsen et al., 2020a,b], consistent with heated debris rather than a long-lived thin disc. Furthermore, secular processes such as bar–halo resonances can impart a modest prograde bias to halo stars, mimicking a disc signal [Dillamore et al., 2023].

Unravelling these possibilities demands six-dimensional phase-space information and precision abundances—the focus of the present study.

1.6 This Work

In this study we assess the claim that the Milky Way hosts a *very-metal-poor* (VMP; $[\text{Fe}/\text{H}] < -2$) stellar disc. Our data set is drawn from *Gaia* DR3, which supplies six-dimensional phase-space coordinates—sky position, parallax-based distance, proper motions, and radial velocity—for each star, together with homogeneous metallicity and α -element abundances from the *Gaia* XP pipeline. To disentangle kinematic sub-populations we model, in successive narrow metallicity bins, the full three-dimensional velocity distribution (v_R, v_ϕ, v_z) with a Gaussian Mixture Model whose parameters are inferred via *Extreme Deconvolution*; the XD formalism explicitly folds the individual distance and proper-motion uncertainties into the likelihood, ensuring that measurement noise does not bias the recovered velocity moments.

Astrophysically, a genuine disc should manifest itself as a high-weight Gaussian centred near the Local Standard of Rest ($v_\phi \simeq 220 \text{ km s}^{-1}$) with small tangential and vertical

dispersions ($\sigma_\phi, \sigma_z \lesssim 30 \text{ km s}^{-1}$) and negligible mean radial motion, whereas the halo or any heated component should appear as a broad, almost isotropic Gaussian with little net rotation and dispersions of order $120\text{--}150 \text{ km s}^{-1}$. By tracking how the weight of the cold, rotating component varies with metallicity we can determine when ordered rotation first emerged and test whether VMP stars were formed in situ or accreted from a satellite.

2 Data

2.1 Sample construction

Our parent catalogue is the bright ($G < 16$) red-giant-branch sample of [Andrae et al. \[2023\]](#). Stellar metallicities are predicted with an eXtreme-Gradient-Boosting model trained on high-resolution APOGEE DR17 spectra and a supplementary set of very metal-poor stars, ensuring reliable performance down to $[M/H] \simeq -3.5$. For each of the 17.6 million giants the catalogue delivers homogeneous values of $[M/H]$, T_{eff} , and $\log g$ with a quoted random uncertainty of $\simeq 0.1 \text{ dex}$ in $[M/H]$ at $G \lesssim 15$. We retain only entries flagged as “high-confidence” and lying in $-3.5 < [M/H] < +0.5$.

Astrometric positions, proper motions, and radial velocities come from the main *Gaia* DR3 tables [[Gaia Collaboration et al., 2023](#)], while heliocentric distances are adopted from the Bayesian photo-geometric catalogue of [Bailer-Jones et al. \[2021\]](#). Because accurate velocities scale with distance precision, we impose a fractional-parallax-uncertainty cut $\sigma_\varpi/\varpi < 0.10$ (FPU); stars that fail this threshold are discarded.

XP spectra are susceptible to reddening: heavy extinction dims the sources, lowers the XP signal-to-noise ratio, and biases the machine-learning metallicities. To minimise such systematics we exclude stars with $E(B-V)_{\text{SFD}} > 0.5$ or Galactic latitude $|b| < 10^\circ$, using colour-excess values from the SFD map accessed via DUSTMAPS [[Green, 2018](#)]. These criteria remove regions where dust corrections are large and spatially variable, at the expense of a modest loss of sky coverage.

Field-star kinematics can also be skewed by dense sub-structures. Accordingly we mask all objects lying within 1° of any known globular cluster or dwarf-galaxy satellite, following the list compiled by [Pace \[2024\]](#). This step eliminates obvious non-field populations (e.g. cluster members and recent accretion debris) without significantly reducing the statistical power of the sample.

After the metallicity flag, distance-quality, reddening, latitude, and sub-structure cuts, our working data set comprises $\sim 3.4 \times 10^6$ red-giant stars possessing homogeneous metallicities and full six-dimensional phase-space information. This curated sample underpins the chemo-kinematic analysis presented in the remainder of this report.

2.2 Galactocentric Positions and Velocities

Six-dimensional phase-space coordinates are obtained with `astropy.coordinates`. We adopt a Galactocentric frame with $R_0 = 8.1 \text{ kpc}$ and $Z_0 = 25 \text{ pc}$ [[McMillan, 2016](#)], and a solar velocity¹ $(U_\odot, V_\odot, W_\odot) = (11.1, 245, 7.25) \text{ km s}^{-1}$ [[Schönrich et al., 2010](#)]. The

¹Cartesian components (U, V, W) , where U is radially outwards, V is aligned with Galactic rotation, and W points to the North Galactic Pole.

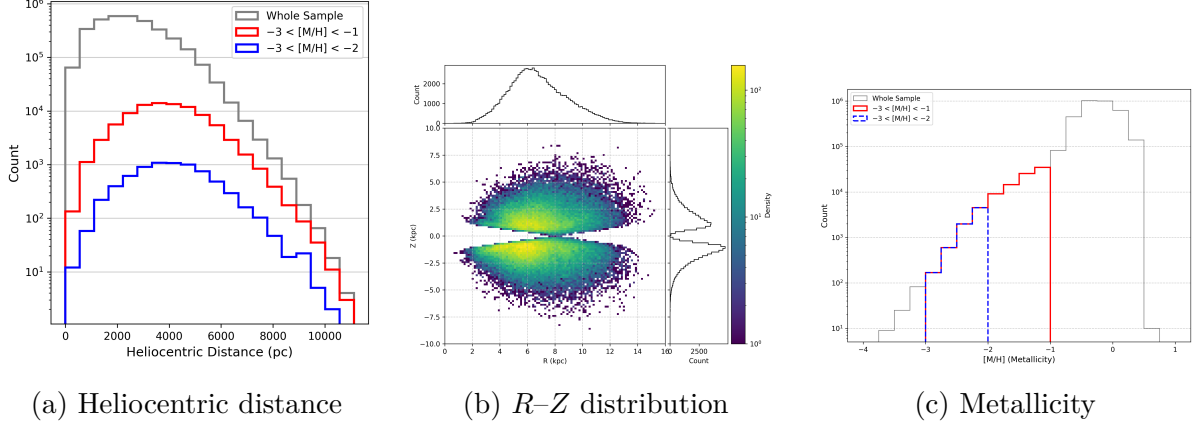


Figure 1: Properties of the final RGB sample after all quality and footprint cuts. *Left*: heliocentric-distance histogram for the whole sample (grey); the subsets with $-3 < [M/H] < -1$ and $-3 < [M/H] < -2$ are shown in solid red and dashed blue, respectively. *Middle*: density map in Galactocentric cylindrical coordinates. The empty band at low $|Z|$ is a selection artefact of our latitude/extinction cuts, which deliberately remove the thin-disc mid-plane; the concentration around $R \simeq 5\text{--}8\text{ kpc}$ reflects the volume accessible to bright RGB stars interior to the Solar circle and coincides with the molecular ring region where the stellar surface density peaks. *Right*: Metallicity distribution of our data sample. Line colours are the same as in the left panel.

cylindrical velocity components (v_R, v_ϕ, v_Z) are extracted from the transformed SkyCo-ord module.

To propagate measurement errors we generate $N_{\text{MC}} = 100$ Monte-Carlo realisations per star, drawing parallax, proper motions, radial velocity, and distance from their reported uncertainties (the proper-motion covariance is honoured through a bivariate normal). Each realisation is transformed to the Galactocentric frame, yielding distributions of v_R , v_ϕ , and v_Z ; the 1σ widths of those distributions are stored as per-star velocity uncertainties.

As shown in Figure 2, stellar azimuthal velocities evolve increase with metallicity. Halo-like kinematics dominate at $[M/H] \lesssim -1.5$ with statistics indicative of a pressure-supported component. A rapid spin-up appears over the metallicity range $[M/H] \simeq -1.3$ to -0.9 , consistent with Belokurov and Kravtsov [2022]. By $[M/H] \gtrsim -0.5$ the stellar azimuthal velocities reaches the Local Standard-of-Rest value ($\approx 220\text{ km s}^{-1}$) and the velocity dispersion falls, marking the transition to a disc. Visually, using 2, we can observe that the onset of ordered rotation in the Milky Way occurred when the inter-stellar medium reached roughly one-tenth solar metallicity.

As shown in Fig. 3, stars with $[M/H] \geq -1.0$ have a strong prograde bias in azimuthal velocities, with a peak at $v_\phi \gtrsim 180\text{ km s}^{-1}$ and a relatively narrow distribution in v_R . As shown in Fig. 4, this is consistent with the thin- and thick-disc ellipses. Below $[M/H] \simeq -1.0$ the distribution broadens and drops toward $v_\phi \approx 0$, indicating pressure supported kinematics, characteristic of the stellar halo and the radial Gaia-Sausage/Enceladus debris. At the lowest metallicities ($[M/H] \lesssim -1.5$) the contours are nearly isotropic with only a mild prograde bias. Hence, any rotation-supported very-metal-poor disc must contribute at most a small fraction of the population. In subsequent analysis we quanti-

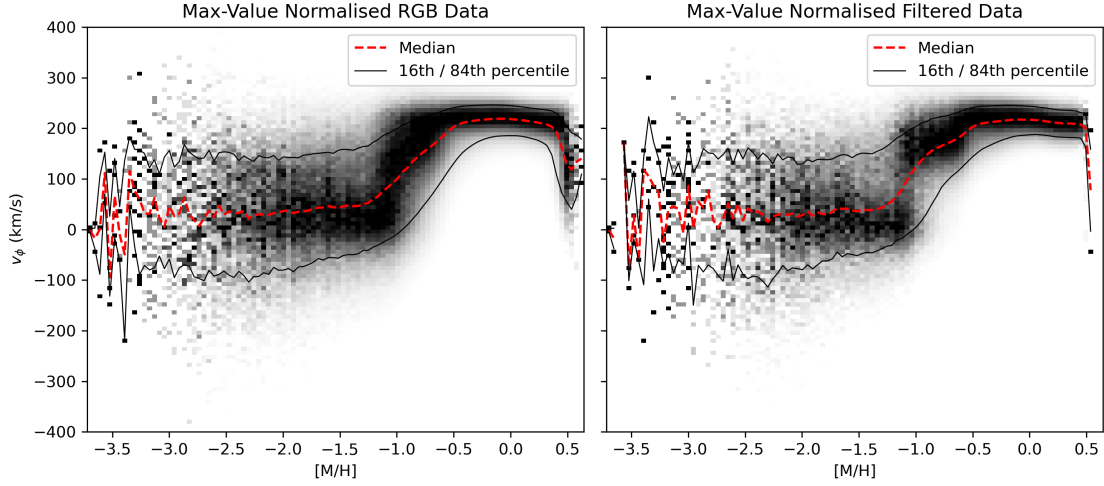


Figure 2: Column-normalised density in the v_ϕ – $[M/H]$ plane. *Left*: the bright-RGB catalogue of [Andrae et al. \[2023\]](#). *Right*: the same sample after all distance, dust, and quality cuts. Greyscale pixels show the normalised counts in each metallicity bin; the red dashed curve is the median v_ϕ , and the black curves trace the 16th and 84th percentiles.

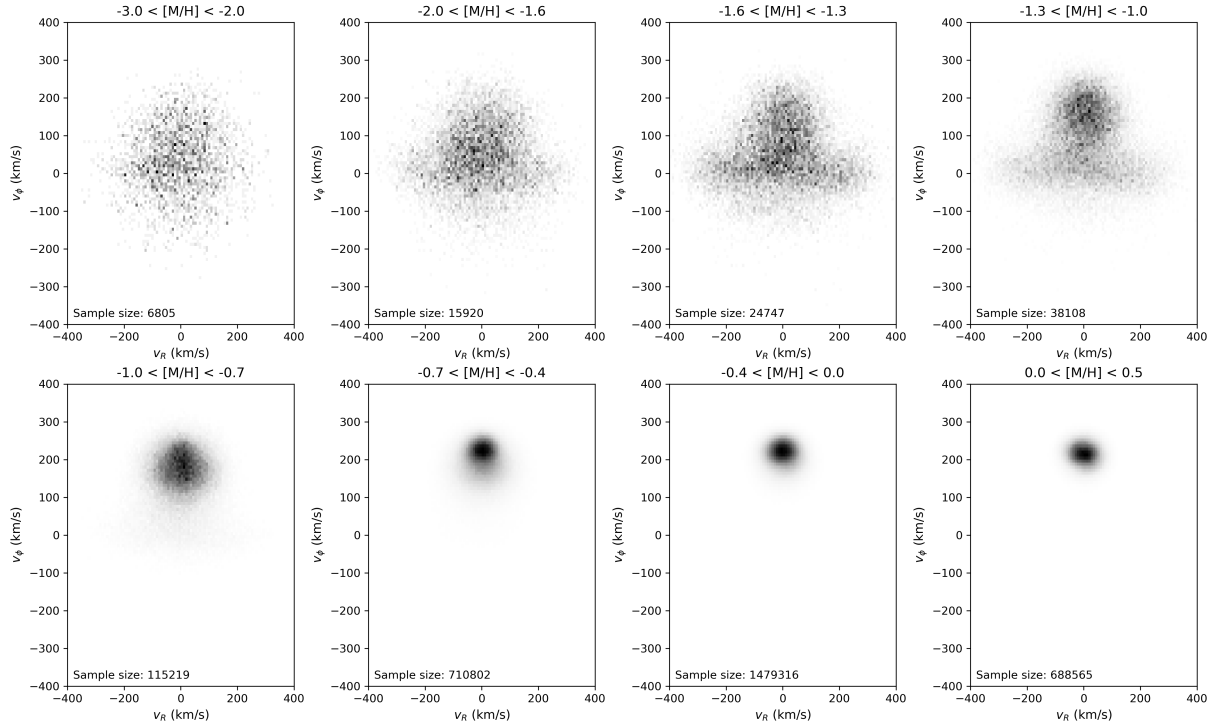


Figure 3: Galactocentric velocity distributions as a function of metallicity. Each panel shows the column-normalised density of stars in the v_R – v_ϕ plane for the metallicity interval printed at the top. With increasing metallicity the distribution contracts in both directions—signalling lower velocity dispersion—while the bulk of stars moves upward to larger prograde azimuthal velocity.

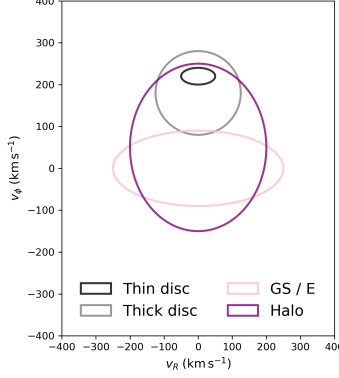


Figure 4: Ellipses mark the approximate extent of the thin disc (black), thick disc (grey), Gaia–Sausage/Enceladus debris (pink) and the pressure-supported stellar halo (purple). The figure serves as a visual key for interpreting the data panels in Fig. 3.

tatively assess these observations.

Given we are testing whether a very-metal-poor stellar disc exists, we naturally restrict the sample to stars within $|Z| < 2.5$ kpc of the galactic mid-plane. This keeps the focus on stars close to the plane, where any disc-like population (whether formed in situ or deposited by mergers) would be found [Tkachenko et al., 2025].

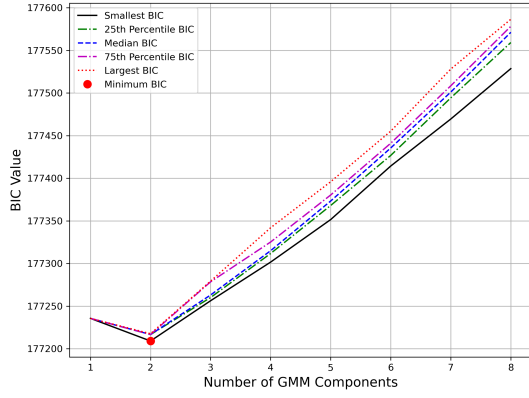
3 Methodology

3.1 Gaussian Mixture Model

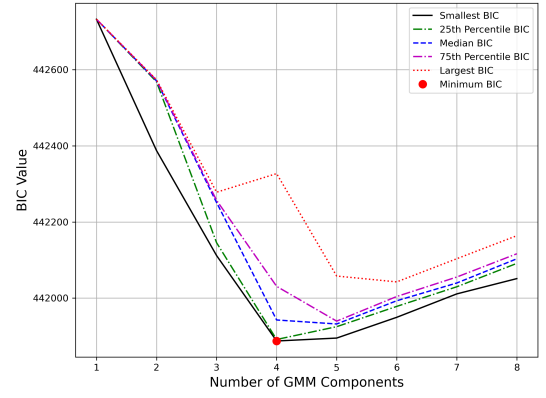
To quantitatively investigate the kinematic structure of metal-poor stars and assess the presence of a potential very-metal-poor disc, we use a Gaussian Mixture Model (GMM) framework. GMMs are a class of unsupervised machine learning algorithms commonly used in data science for clustering and density estimation. They model a dataset as a weighted sum of multivariate Gaussian distributions, each corresponding to a latent sub-population within the data.

From a probabilistic perspective, the GMM assumes that each observed data point is generated from a hidden (latent) variable indicating membership in one of the Gaussian components. This latent space formulation allows the model to assign probabilistic classifications to data points, providing a soft clustering where each star has a fractional likelihood of belonging to each component. In our case, the data are three-dimensional velocity vectors (v_R, v_ϕ, v_Z) , and the latent space captures distinct kinematic substructures in this space.

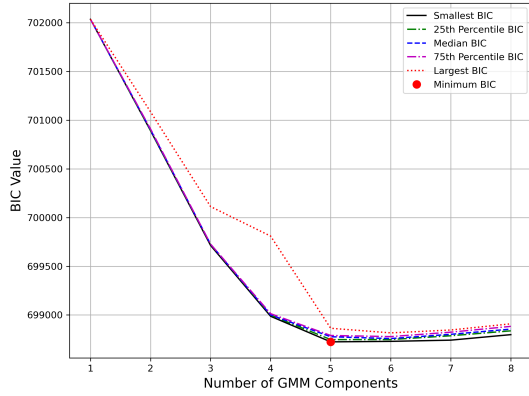
We implement the GMM fitting using the pyGMMis package [Melchior and Goulding, 2016], which extends the standard Expectation-Maximisation (EM) algorithm with the “Extreme Deconvolution” technique developed by Bovy et al. [2011]. This method is particularly well-suited to astronomical datasets, as it incorporates measurement uncertainties into the GMM fitting by modifying the EM updates to account for known errors on each data point. In our case, these uncertainties are derived from the Gaia astrometric and spectroscopic data and are represented by diagonal covariance matrices encoding the squared uncertainties in v_R , v_ϕ , and v_Z for each star.



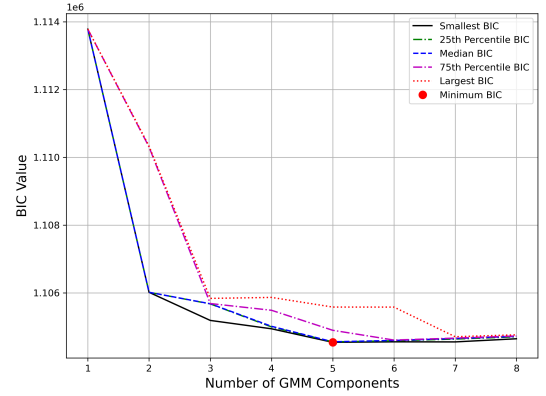
(a) VMP ($-3.0 < [M/H] < -2.0$)



(b) IMP ($-2.0 < [M/H] < -1.6$)



(c) MP1 ($-1.6 < [M/H] < -1.3$)



(d) MP2 ($-1.3 < [M/H] < -1.0$)

Figure 5: BIC distributions as a function of the number of GMM components in each metallicity bin. The optimum number of components is shown in red.

3.2 Number of Components

We apply the GMM separately to each metallicity bin with $[M/H] < -1$, as we are specifically interested in detecting any rotationally supported structure among the very metal-poor stars. An important decision must be made when implementing the appropriate number of components in applying Gaussian Mixture Models. Too few components may underfit the data, missing real substructures, while too many will overfit, leading to spurious and physically uninterpretable results.

We select the optimal number of components using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) [Schwarz 1978](#). The BIC is defined as

$$\text{BIC} = k \ln(n) - 2 \ln \mathcal{L}, \quad (1)$$

where $k = (1 + 3 + 6) \times N - 1$ is the total number of free parameters in a model with N Gaussian components (accounting for the weights, means, and covariances), n is the number of stars in the sample, and \mathcal{L} is the maximum likelihood of the fit. The BIC penalizes model complexity, such that adding extra components without a significant gain in likelihood will result in a higher BIC value.

The Expectation-Maximisation algorithm can become trapped in local minima, so we

performed 50 initialisations for each N and recorded the BIC value for each trial. The minimum BIC value across all trials indicated the statistically preferred model and suggests that the global optimum was likely reached.

To improve convergence and model stability, the GMM components in each trial were initialised using the `kmeans` algorithm. This is due to the sensitivity of GMMs to their starting conditions: poor initialisation can lead to convergence on undesirable solutions, particularly in high-dimensional or overlapping data. KMeans clustering provides an initialisation point by partitioning the velocity space into compact, roughly spherical clusters. This works well with the assumptions of Gaussian components and often gives faster, more stable convergence and more physically meaningful results. In our application, where stellar substructures are partially overlapping in velocity space, this method applies well.

In Figure 5, we show the distribution of BIC values across four metallicity bins as a function of N . The resulting preferred number of components are 2, 4, 5, and 5 for the VMP, IMP, MP1, and MP2 bins.

4 Results

Using the number of components selected by the BIC criteria, we fit the GMM to the data in each metallicity bin as shown in Figure 6.

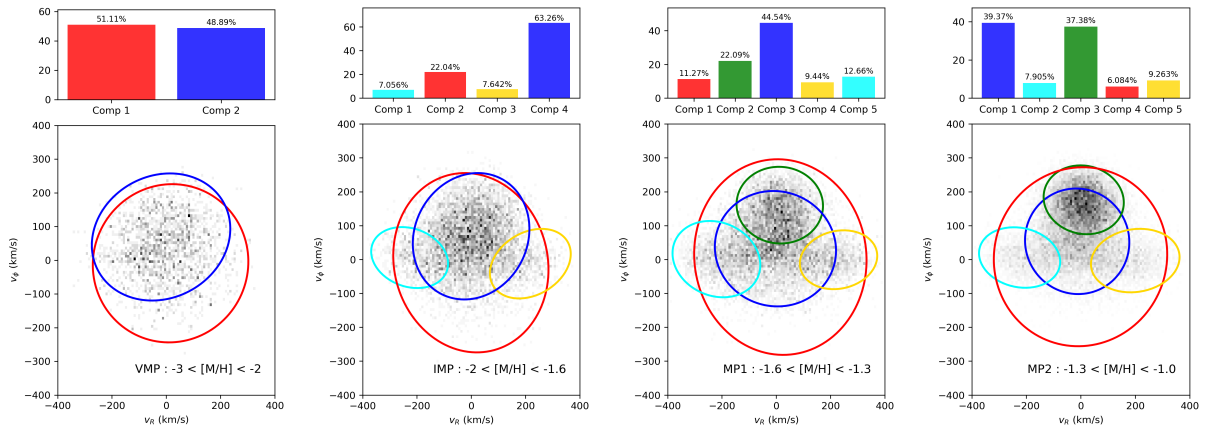


Figure 6: Gaussian Mixture Model (GMM) decompositions of the stellar velocity distribution in the v_R - v_ϕ plane for each metallicity bin. The bottom panel of each subfigure shows the 2D velocity distribution with GMM components overplotted as ellipses representing the 1σ contours in v_R - v_ϕ . The top panel shows the fractional contribution.

4.1 Extreme Deconvolution

Discussion of XD.

What you found.

Components	Weights (%)	v_R	σ_R	v_ϕ	σ_ϕ	v_Z	σ_Z
VMP: $-3.0 < [M/H] < -2.0$ (4768 stars)							
Stationary halo	51.1	15.86	143.17	-9.13	117.36	-0.08	122.64
Prograde halo	48.9	-19.14	127.43	68.86	94.28	-0.90	82.89
IMP: $-2.0 < [M/H] < -1.6$ (12052 stars)							
Stationary halo	22.0	-1.45	142.88	-9.59	132.32	-0.91	124.92
Prograde halo	63.3	-0.58	107.32	68.52	93.27	-1.16	72.56
GS/E(1)	7.1	-226.92	70.78	5.60	44.98	8.43	88.40
GS/E(2)	7.6	217.52	74.41	-12.35	51.35	-4.22	89.78
MP1: $-1.6 < [M/H] < -1.3$ (19142 stars)							
Stationary halo	11.3	15.09	158.68	7.11	144.33	-2.55	132.08
Prograde halo	44.5	-3.02	111.54	31.79	85.15	-0.54	70.36
GS/E(1)	12.7	-220.40	80.76	1.01	56.29	0.47	91.00
GS/E(2)	9.4	229.32	71.22	-0.82	43.42	1.42	92.69
Thick disc	22.1	12.93	79.56	160.32	56.58	-2.31	68.83
MP2: $-1.3 < [M/H] < -1.0$ (30892 stars)							
Stationary halo	6.1	-1.17	159.06	8.07	132.05	-3.37	120.46
Prograde halo	39.4	-13.47	95.65	53.64	77.86	-3.04	71.00
GS/E(1)	7.9	-224.68	74.44	5.73	44.63	2.41	87.27
GS/E(2)	9.3	199.71	81.28	-3.30	46.84	-2.07	88.99
Thick disc	37.4	10.56	73.55	176.07	50.79	0.85	62.03

Table 1: Parameters of the Gaussian mixture model fittings in different metallicity bins. The unit for all velocity columns is km s^{-1} .

5 Extension direction

6 Conclusion

Summary of your findings.

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