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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Clouds, filaments, and protostars: The Herschel* Hi-GAL Milky Way


(Affiliations are available in the online edition)

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ABSTRACT

We present the first results from the science demonstration phase for the Hi-GAL survey, the Herschel key program that will map the inner Galactic plane of the Milky Way in 5 bands. We outline our data reduction strategy and present some science highlights on the two observed 2 × 2 tiles approximately centered at l = 30° and l = 59°. The two regions are extremely rich in intense and highly structured extended emission which shows a widespread organization in filaments. Source SEDs can be built for hundreds of objects in the two fields, and physical parameters can be extracted, for a good fraction of them where the distance could be estimated. This outlines an exciting scenario where diffuse clouds first collapse into filaments, which later fragment to cores where the column density has reached a critical level. In spite of core L/M ratios being well in excess of a few for many sources, we find core surface densities between 0.03 and 0.5 g cm⁻². Our results are in good agreement with recent MHD numerical simulations of filaments forming from large-scale converging flows.

Key words. stars: formation – ISM: structure – ISM: clouds – Galaxy: general

1. Introduction

From the diffuse cirrus to the molecular clouds, onto the formation and death of stars, the Galactic plane is the set where all the phases of the Galaxy life-cycle can be studied in context. Dust, best observed in the infrared and in the submillimeter, cycles through all these phases and is, as such, a privileged tracer for the Galactic ecology. IRAS (Neugebauer et al. 1984) and COBE (Mather et al. 1990) were of tremendous importance in boosting the Galactic plane at λ ≥ 800 μm (Schuller et al. 2009; Rosolowsky et al. 2009), are assembling a picture where the galactic plane has become accessible at sub-30″ resolution over three decades of wavelength. The exception is the critical interval between 70 and 500 μm where the bulk of the cold dust in the Galaxy emits and reaches the peak of its spectral energy distribution (SED). The Hi-GAL key program (Herschel Infrared GALactic plane survey) will fill this gap.

Hi-GAL is the key program (KP) of the Herschel satellite (Pilbratt et al. 2010) that will use 343 h observing time to carry out a 5-band photometric imaging survey at 70, 160, 250, 350, and 500 μm of a | b | ≤ 1°-wide strip of the Milky Way Galactic plane in the longitude range −60° ≤ l ≤ 60°. Hi-GAL is going to be the keystone in the multiwavelength Milky Way, opening up unprecedented opportunities with a promise of breakthroughs both in the mid-infrared at λ ≤ 70 μm (Omont et al. 2003; Price et al. 2001; Benjamin et al. 2003; Carey et al. 2009) and in the submillimeter at λ ≥ 800 μm (Schuller et al. 2009; Rosolowsky et al. 2009), are assembling a picture where the galactic plane has become accessible at sub-30″ resolution over three decades of wavelength. The exception is the critical interval between 70 and 500 μm where the bulk of the cold dust in the Galaxy emits and reaches the peak of its spectral energy distribution (SED). The Hi-GAL key program (Herschel Infrared GALactic plane survey) will fill this gap.

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in several fields of Galactic astronomy. A full description of the survey and its science goals are given elsewhere (Molinari et al. 2010b). This contribution presents the first Hi-GAL data obtained in the Herschel science demonstration phase (SDP) and describes a few of the main early results that will be detailed in other contributions in this volume.

2. Observations and data reduction

The Herschel PACS (Poglitsch et al. 2010) and SPIRE (Griffin et al. 2010) imaging cameras were used in parallel mode at 60′′/s satellite scanning speed to obtain simultaneous 5-band coverage of two 2″ × 2″ fields approximately centered at [l, b] = [30°, 0′] and [59°, 0′]. The detailed description of the observation settings and scanning strategy adopted is given in Molinari et al. (2010b). Data reduction from archival data to Level 1 stage was carried out using the Herschel interactive processing environment (HIPE, Ott 2010) using, however, custom reduction scripts that considerably departed from standard processing for PACS (Poglitsch et al. 2010) and, to a lesser extent, for SPIRE (Griffin et al. 2010). Level 1 time ordered data (TODs) were exported from HIPE into FITS files. Further processing including the map generation was carried out using dedicated IDL and FORTRAN codes. Saturation conditions were reached for all detectors only in SPIRE 250 μm and 350 μm images in correspondence with the 3 brightest peaks in the l = 30° field. The prescribed flux correction factors for PACS (Poglitsch et al. 2010) and SPIRE (Swinyard et al. 2010) were applied to the maps since their photometric calibration was carried out using the default calibration tree in HIPE. A detailed description of the entire data processing chain, including the presentation of the maps obtained in the five bands for the two observed fields, can be found in Traficante et al. (in prep.). In the present letter we present in Figs. 1 and 2 the three-color images obtained using the 70, 160, and 350 μm data (l = 30° and l = 59°, respectively).

These amazing maps convey the immediate impression of extended filamentary structures dominating the emission on all spatial scales. Measurements of the standard deviation of the signal at all wavelengths in the lowest brightness regions of the l = 59° field yield average values a factor two higher than the sensitivity predictions for point source sensitivity from the HSInt time estimator for all bands except at 70 μm where the predicted limit is effectively reached, confirming that the noise in our maps is dominated by the cirrus confusion at all wavelengths. A more detailed quantitative analysis is presented by Martin et al. (2010).

3. Results and science highlights

3.1. From IRDCs to mini-starburst and their impact on the ISM

Herschel’s ability to observe such large areas with unprecedented wavelength coverage and extraordinary signal dynamical range allows us to image simultaneously progenitors clouds for massive protoclusters to entire clusters of young stellar objects (YSOs) in active star forming regions, while also measuring the effect of their strong stellar winds and powerful outflows on the surrounding medium.

Infrared dark clouds (IRDCs) have received considerable attention in recent years (e.g. Rathborne et al. 2006; and Peretto & Fuller 2009) as potential sites for precursors of cluster forming sites. Found in silhouette against the bright mid-IR background, they shine in emission with Herschel. Peretto et al. (2010) shows how temperature effectively decreases from ambient values (20–30 K) down to T = 8–15 K toward the densest (∼10^23 cm^-2) peaks of these objects, resolving further temperature substructures that can be proxies for subsequent fragmentation.

At the other end of the massive star formation timeline, we find W43, visible in the left portion of Fig. 1, as an outstanding case of Galactic mini-starburst. Detailed SED construction and luminosity estimates allow us to assess the very early evolutionary stage of the most luminous and massive YSOs in the region. It is remarkable how the same images show a prominent ridge extending southward which encompasses a 70 pc-wide large cavity excavated by the W43 cluster and which possibly triggers further star formation (Bally et al. 2010). Triggered star formation in less extreme environments can also be studied in statistically significant fashion modeling the SED of the sources found in correspondence of the multitude of HII-driven bubble-like structures found in the images, as shown for the bubble N49 by Zavagno et al. (2010).

Feedbacks from massive star formation, together with the intricate relationship between the interstellar radiation field and molecular clouds, are at the origin of the observed complexity of the ISM emission structure, where temperature ranges from ~10 K of pre-stellar cores to ~40–50 K of the photodissociation regions (Bernard et al. 2010).

3.2. Census of compact sources

The extraction of compact sources is quite a challenging task in these fields, which we faced using a novel approach based on the

Fig. 1. Three-color image (blue 70 μm, green 160 μm, red 350 μm) of the 2″ × 2″ field around l = 30°.

Fig. 2. Three-color image (blue 70 μm, green 160 μm, red 350 μm) of the field around l = 59°.
The ubiquitousness of dense filaments in the ISM, the high degree of association between bright filaments and cores, and the suggestion of a column density threshold for the appearance of dense cores, all appear to coherently support a formation scenario that starts with the condensation of diffuse clouds into long filaments. As the column density increases, a threshold is exceeded and denser star-forming (or potentially star forming) condensations start to appear. A preliminary association with Spitzer 24 μm counterparts (Elia et al. 2010) suggests that our detected sources may be a mixture of protostellar and pre-stellar objects, although more work will be needed to ascertain the composition of this mixture.
Since our source extraction also yields a measure of the core sizes, we are in the position to estimate their surface density $\Sigma$. These values appear to be on average a factor $3-5$ higher than the column densities of the underlying filaments as reported in Fig. 4, spanning a range of $0.03 \text{ g cm}^{-2} \leq \Sigma \leq 0.5 \text{ g cm}^{-2}$, after changing units, with a mean value of $0.1 \text{ g cm}^{-2}$. It is puzzling that the number of cores exceeding $\Sigma$ of a few (the exact number depending on the core masses), corresponding to the critical surface density threshold of $1 \text{ g cm}^{-2}$ for the formation of massive stars (Krumholz & McKee 2008), is not consistent with very few of the cores actually exceeding that critical threshold (see also Elia et al. 2010). The difference of a factor $\sim 2$ between the dust opacities that we used compared to Krumholz & McKee (2008) is not sufficient to reconcile this apparent discrepancy. This result deserves more attention and needs to be confirmed in the future with more detailed and accurate analysis.

Testing of large-scale “dynamical” star formation scenarios (e.g., Hartmann et al. 2001), where filaments are formed in the post-shock regions of large HI converging flows, is one of the original science goals of HI-GAL. It is remarkable how the predictions from recent MHD numerical simulations (Banerjee et al. 2009) of formation and subsequent fragmentation of filaments, agree with our results. Besides the morphological resemblance of these simulations with the structures we see in our Herschel maps (Fig. 3), there is striking agreement of their predictions with the N(H) regime we measured for our core-hosting filaments, as well as with the mass regime of the cores being formed.

Instability and fragmentation of dense filaments has also been investigated in the context of helical magnetic fields enclosing the filaments by Fiege & Pudritz (2000); interestingly, the models predict the formation of regularly spaced condensations at length scales that depend on the properties of the magnetic field, the velocity dispersion, and density of the filament. The predicted length scale for filament velocity dispersion of $0.5 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ and density of $10^4 \text{ cm}^{-3}$ is $2.8 \text{ pc}$, and curiously this is not at all far from the median distance of each source to its nearest neighbor: $\sim 1.8 \text{ pc}$ for the $250 \mu \text{m}$ sources in the $l = 59^\circ$ field for the sources’ average distance (Russell et al., in prep.). It is also interesting that the typical fragmentation length scale decreases with increasing filament density, in broad qualitative agreement with a higher spatial density of sources in the brightest filaments. This clearly deserves further investigation to be confirmed as a viable hypothesis.

4. Conclusions

The first science highlights presented in this paper, as well as in the accompanying papers in this volume and elsewhere, show that owing to its optimal use of unique Herschel characteristics of wavelength coverage, spatial resolution and mapping speed, the Hi-GAL survey has the potential to lead to a quantum leap in our understanding of large-scale Galactic star formation from cloud to cluster-forming clump formation and of the evolution of protoclusters and massive protostars.

The outstanding feature emerging from these first images is the impressive and ubiquitous ISM filamentary nature. Dense cores seem to appear when a certain beam-averaged column density threshold is exceeded in close spatial association with these filaments.

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