

The peculiar dipping events in the disk-bearing young-stellar object EPIC 204278916

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Accepted XXX. Received YYY; in original form ZZZ

ABSTRACT

EPIC 204278916 has been serendipitously discovered from its *K2* light curve which displays irregular dimmings of up to 65% for ≈ 25 consecutive days out of 78.8 days of observations. For the remaining duration of the observations, the variability is highly periodic and attributed to stellar rotation. The star is a young, low-mass (M-type) pre-main-sequence star with clear evidence of a resolved tilted disk from ALMA observations. We examine the *K2* light curve in detail and hypothesise that the irregular dimmings are caused by either a warped inner-disk edge or transiting cometary-like objects in either circular or eccentric orbits. The explanations discussed here are particularly relevant for other recently discovered young objects with similar absorption dips.

Key words: stars: individual (EPIC 204278916), stars: peculiar, comets: general, planets and satellites: dynamical evolution and stability, stars: early-type

1 INTRODUCTION

Studies of light curves of stars are a proxy for several physical processes, both at the stellar surface or in their surroundings. Periodic variability of the observed stellar flux has long been used to measure stellar rotation periods (e.g. Stassun et al. 1999). Variability in young stellar objects (YSOs) is also related to the presence of a protoplanetary disk. Material in the disk can obscure the central star (e.g. Herbst et al. 1994; Alencar et al. 2010), and the highly variable accretion onto the central star modifies the emission from the system (e.g. Bertout et al. 1988; Bouvier et al. 2007). The variability of YSOs is known to have different degrees of periodicity and flux symmetry which are possibly related to different processes (Cody et al. 2014). Recently, *CoRoT* and *Kepler/K2* observations of main sequence stars and YSOs have shown deep and short dips in light curves that can

be explained by the presence of a family of comets orbiting around the stars (Boyajian et al. 2016; Bodman & Quillen 2015) or more generally transiting circumstellar material (Ansdell et al. 2016b), or through occulting material at the inner edges of a circumstellar disk (McGinnis et al. 2015; Ansdell et al. 2016b). The latter is possible if the inner disk is observed almost edge-on, and offers a unique opportunity to study the properties of dust and gas in the inner region of protoplanetary disks. If the dimming events are caused by transiting circumstellar clumps originating in the disk, these can be used to constrain the size of planetesimals in the disk, which is a necessary step for planet formation but difficult to observationally detect Testi et al. (2014).

More recently, Ansdell et al. (2016a) have found 3 YSO dippers with a wide range of inclination angles, demonstrating how edge-on disks are not a defining characteristic of dipping YSOs. At this stage it is important to study a variety of dipper YSOs in detail and explore possible scenarios

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to explain their behaviour and their relevance for planet formation studies.

We have serendipitously discovered a YSO dipper star observed with *K2*, giving us the possibility to further investigate these peculiar systems. The target discussed here (EPIC 204278916, 2MASS J16020757–2257467) is a young star located in the Upper Scorpius sub-group of the Scorpius-Centaurus OB association (Preibisch & Mamajek 2008) with very high membership probability based on proper motion studies (99%, Bouy & Martín 2009). This region has a mean age of ~ 5 Myr (Preibisch et al. 2002, with an upper limit of ~ 11 Myr; Pecaute et al. 2012). Our target is a single star (Kraus & Hillenbrand 2007) of spectral type M1 and has a logarithmic bolometric stellar luminosity $\log L_*/L_\odot = 0.15$ (Preibisch et al. 2002). The inferred radius of this star is $R_* = 0.97 R_\odot$, while the stellar mass is $M_* \sim 0.5 M_\odot$, depending on the evolutionary models used (Baraffe et al. 1998; Siess et al. 2000).

At this age, the majority of young stars have already dispersed their circumstellar disk and are not accreting material from the disk anymore (e.g., Fedele et al. 2010). Spectroscopic observations of the H α line of this target report a very small equivalent width (EW = -3.2 \AA , Preibisch et al. 2002), consistent with very little or no accretion. However, this target shows an infrared excess due to the presence of a protoplanetary disk in WISE data (Luhman & Mamajek 2012).

The next section will introduce the *K2* and ALMA data and analysis procedure to obtain the reduced light curve (with corresponding Fourier transform) and the ALMA intensity map. Section 3 discusses the observations in the context of various interpretations, including a protostellar disk origin and cometary-like transits in either circular or eccentric orbits. We discuss our results in section 4 and give our conclusions in Section 5 with future prospects for determining the real nature of EPIC 204278916.

2 DATA REDUCTION AND ANALYSIS

2.1 *K2* light curve

EPIC 204278916 was observed by the *K2* mission (Borucki et al. 2010) during Campaign 2 between August 23 and November 13 2014 (78.8 days) and has a registered *Kepler* magnitude (Kp) of 13.8 in the *K2* Ecliptic Plane Input Catalog (EPIC). Here we analyse long cadence (LC, 29.4 minutes) data obtained from the Mikulski Archive for Space Telescope (MAST) archive¹. The data is provided in raw format, consisting of target pixel data. For each 29.4 minute exposure we thus have a 12×11 pixel image centred on the target.

As no other sources were present within the 12×11 pixel images, we create the light curve by manually defining a large target mask as well as a background mask. A large target mask is required due to occasional small scale jittering of the spacecraft, resulting in the target moving slightly from its nominal position. The dataset consists of 3856 individual target images. From these we remove 93 observations because of bad quality due to occasional spacecraft rolls or

due to cosmic rays. We produce the light curve by summing together all target pixels for each exposure, and subtract the average background obtained from the background pixel mask. The obtained light curve is shown in Fig. 1. The same procedure has been used to extract other *K2* light curves of isolated sources (Scaringi et al. 2015b,a).

To locate any significant periodicities we carry out a Fourier transform of the light curve excluding the first 30 days (in order to not be affected by the initial dipping period, see Fig. 1). Fig. 2 shows our result, revealing two distinct periodicities of 3.646 days ($F_1 = 0.2743$ cycles/day) and 0.245 days ($f_1 = 4.080$ cycles/day), together with corresponding harmonic frequencies. We associate the 3.646-day signal to stellar rotation, as this is a typical rotational period for young stars stars observed by *Kepler* (Ansdell et al. 2016b; Vasconcelos & Bouvier 2015), and show the phase-folded profile in Fig. 3. The 0.245-day signal is associated with the spacecraft thruster firing to re-adjust attitude every ~ 6 hours.

To study the dipping behaviour in more detail we have removed the 3.646-day periodicity from the full light curve. To do this we first determined an accurate ephemeris of

$$\text{BJD}_{\min} = 2456955.7082(18) + 3.646221(53) \times N, \quad (1)$$

where N is the cycle number and the ephemeris are given in Barycentric Julian Date (BJD) at minimum light.

We then expand and replicate the phase folded light curve shown in Fig. 3 to match the full light curve and interpolate it on the same temporal grid. Fig. 4 shows the full light curve with the 3.646-day periodicity removed. The periodicity removal is not perfect (probably due to small changes in the pulse profile over time) but shows a significant improvement over the original light curve. We use this curve in subsequent analysis.

2.2 ALMA observations

ALMA Cycle 2 observations of EPIC 204278916 were obtained on 2014 June 30 and 2014 July 7 (UT) in four spectral windows centred at 334.2, 336.1, 346.2, and 348.1 GHz for a mean frequency of 341.1 GHz (0.88 mm). The bandwidth of each window is 1.875 GHz. Thirty six antennas were included in the array, with baselines ranging from 16-650 m for an angular resolution of 0.34 arcseconds. The ALMA data were calibrated using the CASA package. The reduction scripts were kindly provided by NRAO. These include atmospheric calibration using the 183 GHz water vapour radiometers, bandpass calibration, flux calibration, and gain calibration. For further details on the observations and data reduction, see Barenfeld et al. (2016). The protoplanetary disk in EPIC 204278916 is resolved with ALMA at high signal-to-noise, both in the continuum (see Fig. 5) and in the CO(J=3–2) line (Barenfeld et al. 2016). An elliptical Gaussian fit of the surface brightness profile to the continuum visibility data results in an axis ratio of 0.55 ± 0.13 , implying a disk inclination of 57 ± 9 degrees and assuming a circular disk.

¹ <http://archive.stsci.edu/k2/>

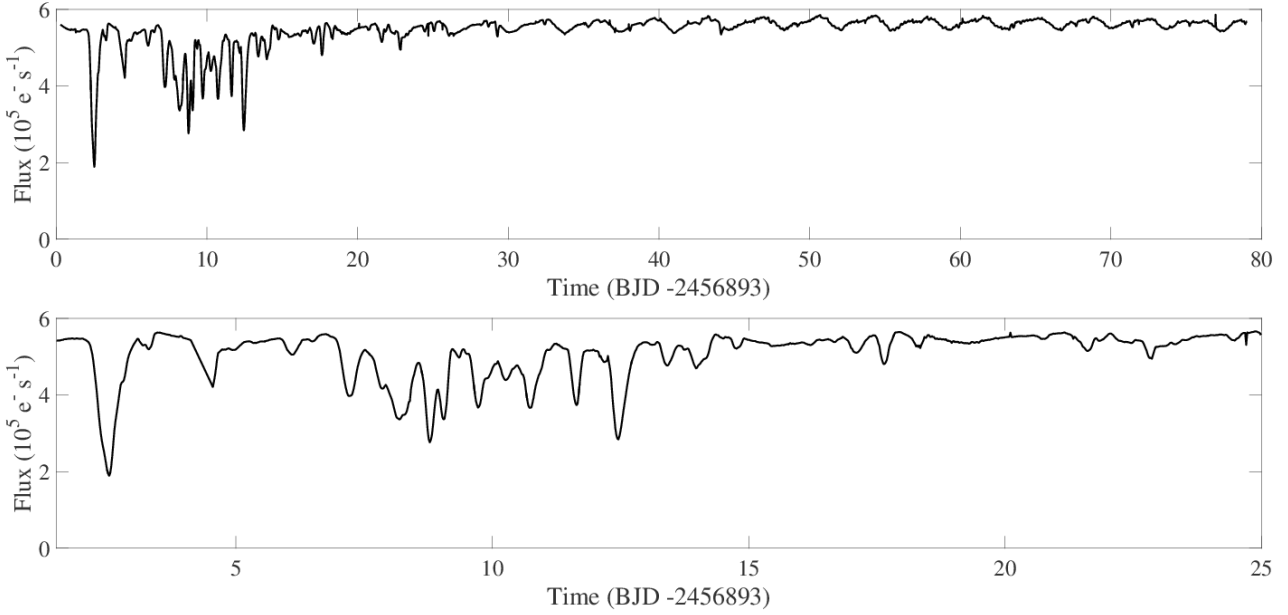


Figure 1. EPIC 204278916 light curve. The system was observed for over 78.8 days at 29.4 minute cadence. The units on the y-axis are electrons/second, and can be converted to *Kepler* magnitudes Kp using the conversion found in the *Kepler* Instrument Handbook. The top panel shows the full light curve, whilst the bottom panel zooms into the first 25 days of observation where the dipping events are observed.

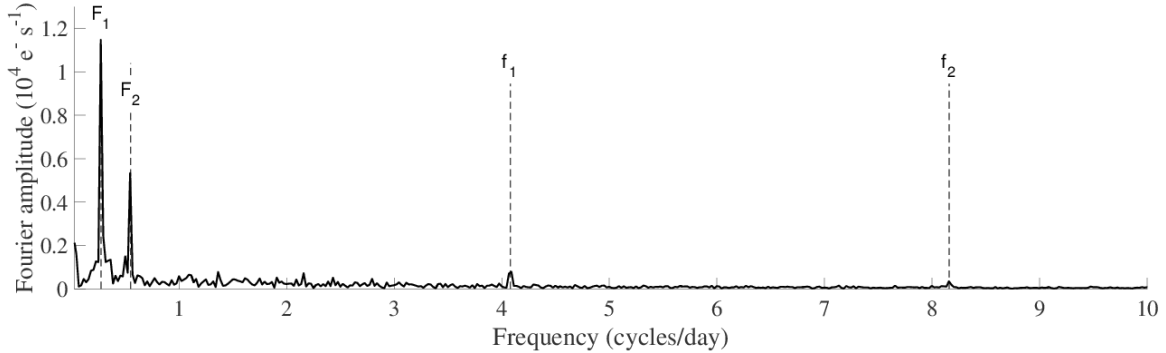


Figure 2. Fourier transform of LC *K2* data for EPIC 204278916 starting from day 25. A peak at $F_1 = 0.2743$ cycles/day (with corresponding harmonic F_2) is visible and at $f_1 = 4.080$ cycles/day (with corresponding harmonics f_2, f_3, f_4) and f_5 . We associate F_1 to the possible stellar rotation, whilst f_1 can be attributed to spacecraft attitude adjustments.

3 RESULTS

In this section we will go through possible scenarios to explain the observed large amplitude dipping events in EPIC 204278916.

3.1 Proto-stellar disk origin

Provided with a favourable disk inclination, the observed dips in the EPIC 204278916 light curve could be caused by non-axisymmetric structures in the inner disk edge occulting the star. Because of the large observed dips ($\approx 65\%$), the occulting material must have a large scale height comparable to the size of the star. If the disk warps producing the occultations are orbiting the star with a Keplerian pe-

riod equal to the stellar rotation, we can infer a maximum co-inclination (Ansdell et al. 2016b) in degrees

$$i_{max} \lesssim 27 \frac{R_*}{R_\odot} \frac{P_{rot}}{\text{days}}^{-2/3} \frac{M_*}{M_\odot}^{-1/3}. \quad (2)$$

Adopting $P_{rot} = 3.646$ days, $R_* = 0.97R_\odot$ and $M_* = 0.5M_\odot$ we obtain a maximum inclination $i_{max} = 14$ degrees. This is somewhat in contrast with the 3σ level for the disk inclination of $i = 57$ degrees obtained from the ALMA image.

Other YSOs have been observed to display non-periodic dipping events (see e.g. Sousa et al. 2016; Ansdell et al. 2016b,a), and it is possible EPIC 204278916 is also part of this ‘‘dipper’’ class of YSOs. In particular, EPIC 204278916 supports the idea that nearly edge-on viewing geometries are not a defining characteristic of dippers. This in turn motivates the exploration of alternative models. More specifi-

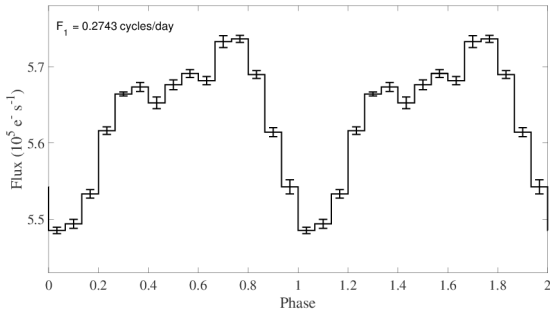


Figure 3. EPIC 204278916 light curve folded on the stellar rotation period of 3.646 days.

cally, the clustering of large-amplitude dipping events such as those observed in the *K2* EPIC 204278916 light curve have not been previously observed in other systems. The only other YSO dipper which appears to resemble EPIC 204278916 as observed with *K2* is EPIC 204530045 (see Fig. 1 of [Bodman et al. 2016](#)). However, on close inspection, it appears that the dipping behaviour between EPIC 204278916 and EPIC 204530045 differs in that a) the dips in EPIC 204278916 always appear to return to the stellar flux whilst there is a clear downward general trend for EPIC 204530045, b) whilst EPIC 204278916 solely displays dipping, the lightcurve of EPIC 204530045 more resembles flickering and c) the dip depth is nearly a factor 3 larger for EPIC 204278916 when compared to EPIC 204530045. All three arguments seem to suggest that whilst the *K2* lightcurves of both EPIC 204278916 and EPIC 204530045 appear similar, the phenomenology observed in EPIC 204530045 seems to be accretion driven (change in instantaneous mass transfer rate on the stellar surface), whilst EPIC 204278916 has all the characteristics of being “transited”. Thus, if EPIC 204278916 is also part of the YSO “dipper” class as those discussed in [Bodman et al. \(2016\)](#), then it constitutes a somewhat special case.

3.2 Hill sphere ring system

The rapid fluctuations over the first 25 days of observations are similar to those seen towards J1407, another young star in the Sco-Cen association. In May 2007 a series of rapid fluctuations was seen over a 56 day period ([Mamajek et al. 2012](#)) and interpreted as a giant ring system filling the Hill sphere of the unseen secondary companion ([Kenworthy et al. 2015; Kenworthy & Mamajek 2015](#)). The series of dips after the first initial deep dip show hints of being symmetric in time, around $T = 10$ days in Fig. 6 (bottom panel), consistent with a ring system that is inclined with respect to our line of sight. The gradient of the light curve of such an inclined ring system will show small gradients near the point of closest projected approach as the star moves parallel to ring edges, and steeper light curve gradients at other times. This is not seen in the gradient of the light curve as a function of time (Fig. 6, top-panel), and so this is considered an unlikely hypothesis for these dips.

3.3 Transiting circumstellar clumps

It is possible that the dips in some YSOs might be caused by transiting circumstellar objects, similar to what has been proposed for KIC 8462852 ([Boyajian et al. 2016; Bodman & Quillen 2015; Marengo et al. 2015](#)). The discussion presented below is tailored to the dipping YSO EPIC 204278916, but can be extended to other dipping YSOs such as those discussed in [Ansdell et al. \(2016a\)](#).

3.3.1 Transiting material in circular orbit

With the assumption that the transiting object(s) are in circular orbits we can place tight constraints on the orbital parameters in a plane defined by the semi-major axis (a) and the transiting clump radius (R_c). These are included in Fig. 7, and described in detail below.

Dip depth: Constraints on the clump size can be obtained from the dip depth τ , defined as 1 minus the normalised absorbed flux during the dipping event (see Fig. 4). In the most extreme scenario where the eclipsing clump is completely opaque, $\max(\tau) = (R_c/R_*)^2$. The deepest event observed in the EPIC 204278916 light curve corresponds to $\tau \approx 65\%$, thus implying that at least some of the clumps are a sizable fraction of the parent star. This is however a strong lower limit since a completely opaque spherical clump would produce a symmetrical dip, which we do not observe in the light curve (see Fig. 1).

Dip duration: A transiting object will have a transverse velocity along the stellar equator of

$$v_t = \frac{2(R_c + R_*)}{t_{dip}}, \quad (3)$$

where t_{dip} is the transit duration. If the object is on a circular orbit around a star of mass M_* with semi-major axis a , then we can estimate the size of the transiting object with

$$R_c = \frac{t_{dip}}{2} \left(\frac{GM_*}{a} \right)^{1/2} - R_*. \quad (4)$$

Thus, the observed dip durations in the EPIC 204278916 light curve can provide an estimate for the transiting clump size for circular orbits. The longest dip duration of $t_{dip} = 1$ day provides the most stringent constraint, and is shown as a solid black line in Fig. 7.

Light-curve gradient: An outer constraint on the semi-major axis can be derived using the largest gradient observed during a transit event. Transiting material will change the light curve most rapidly when it is optically thick and transiting through the stellar equator. [van Werkhoven et al. \(2014\)](#) provides the equation required to translate the observed gradients into a minimum velocity (v_{min}) for transiting material using the so-called “knife edge” model. Assuming then that the material is in a circular orbit and optically thick the obtained minimum velocity constraint of 39km/s translates to a maximum semi-major axis of 0.2916 AU through

$$a_{max} = \frac{GM_*}{v_{min}^2}. \quad (5)$$

Non-periodicity: Given that we do not observe a repetition of the dipping events within the total light curve, we can place a constraint on the orbital period to be longer than

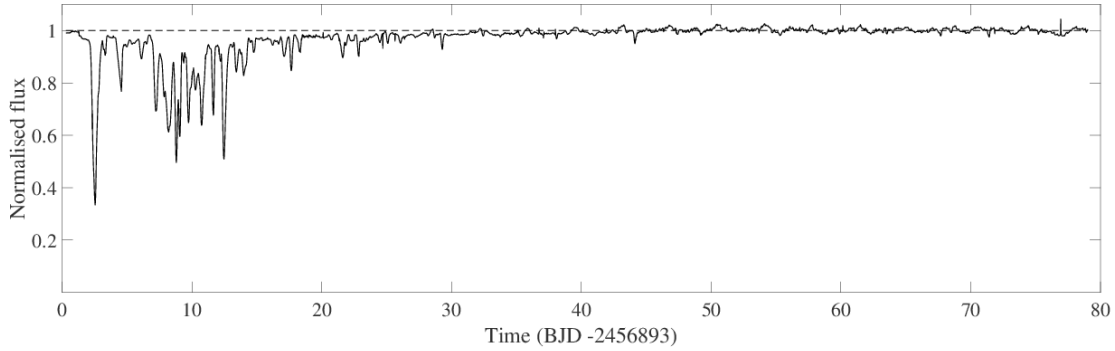


Figure 4. Normalised EPIC 204278916 light curve with the 3.646-day periodicity removed.

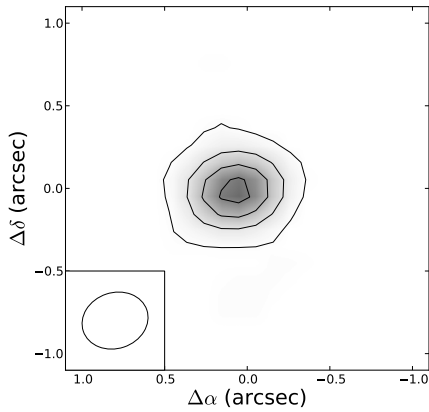


Figure 5. ALMA continuum intensity map for EPIC 204278916. Isocontours for 3-,10-,17- and 23- σ are overlaid on the image. The ALMA beam size is shown in the bottom-left corner.

78.8 days. This in turn sets a lower limit on the semi-major axis of 0.2855 AU for circular orbits.

All constraints for circular orbits are displayed in Fig. 7. The very tight semi-major axis constraints raise some doubts on this interpretation, since they imply that the orbital period of the transiting material is just slightly longer than the 78.7 day *K2* observations. Furthermore it is possible that the dipping events began before the start of the *K2* observations, in which case circular orbits would be fully ruled out. It is also important to note that the resulting size for the transiting clump would be very large at $R_c \approx 1.5R_{sol}$.

3.3.2 Transiting material in eccentric orbit

ALMA observations have revealed the inclination of the circumstellar disk to be 57 ± 9 degrees. It is thus plausible that the transiting material orbits out of the disk plane, in which case its motion does not need to be constrained to a circular orbit. Introducing an eccentric orbit is far less constraining than assuming circular orbits. We can nevertheless use the observed minimum velocity (obtained through the light curve gradient) and the minimum semi-major axis (obtained through the non-periodicity of the dips) to provide some constraints.

For eccentric orbits with eccentricity e , the orbital ve-

locity at pericentre and apocentre respectively are defined as

$$v_{per} = \sqrt{GM_* \frac{1+e}{a(1-e)}} \quad (6)$$

and

$$v_{apo} = \sqrt{GM_* \frac{1-e}{a(1+e)}}. \quad (7)$$

Fig. 8 shows these velocities as a function of eccentricity adopting the derived minimum semi-major axis of $a_{min} = 0.2855$ AU. The obtained velocities represent maximum velocities at both pericentre and apocentre, since increasing the semi-major axis will result in lower velocities. Plotted in Fig. 8 is the observed minimum velocity of $v_{min} = 39$ km/s obtained from the light curve gradient of the dips. This already shows that if the orbit is eccentric, then we are most likely observing the transit away from apocentre.

We can further expand on this analysis and speculate what the eccentricity would be if the transiting material has broken into smaller clumps due to a close passage to its parent star at pericentre. The pericentre and apocentre radii respectively are given by

$$r_{per} = a(1-e) \quad (8)$$

and

$$r_{apo} = a(1+e). \quad (9)$$

Fig. 9 shows these radii as a function of eccentricity adopting the same minimum semi-major axis as used in Fig. 8. The obtained radii in this case can be thought of as lower limits, since increasing the semi-major axis will result in larger pericentre and apocentre radii. The dashed line in Fig. 9 shows the Roche radius below which a cometary-like object with a density of 0.5 g/cm^3 would break-up. The eccentricity would have to be very large ($e > 0.95$) for this case, and might resemble the Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 event that broke apart and collided with Jupiter in July 1994 (see e.g. Chodas & Yeomans 1996).

3.3.3 Mass constraint of transiting clumps

We can place a lower constraint on the mass of the transiting material (independent of eccentricity) by assuming that the

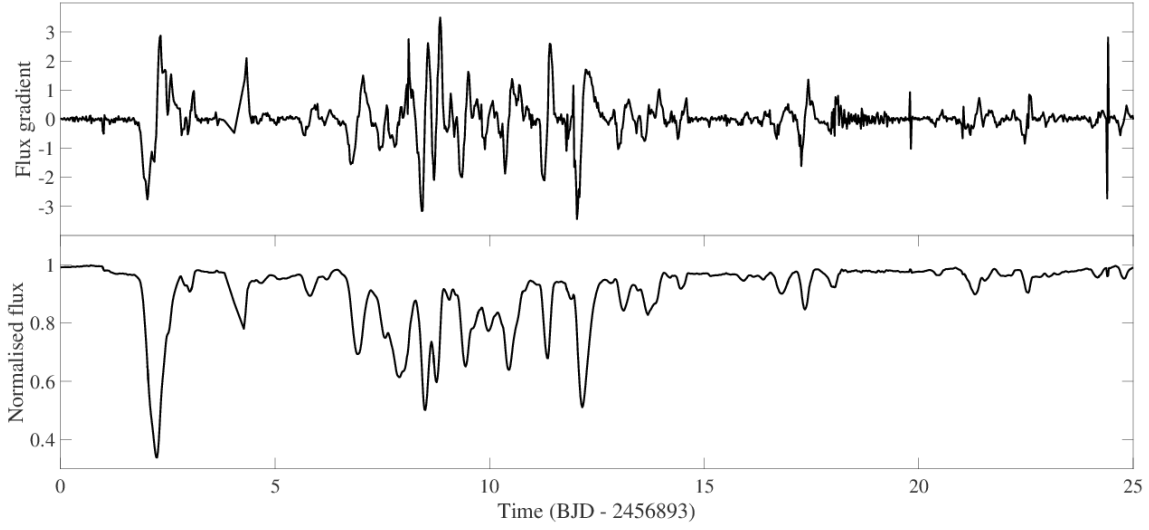


Figure 6. Bottom-panel: Normalised EPIC 204278916 light curve (with the 3.646-day periodicity removed) for the first 25 days of observation. Top-panel: Corresponding lightcurve gradient.

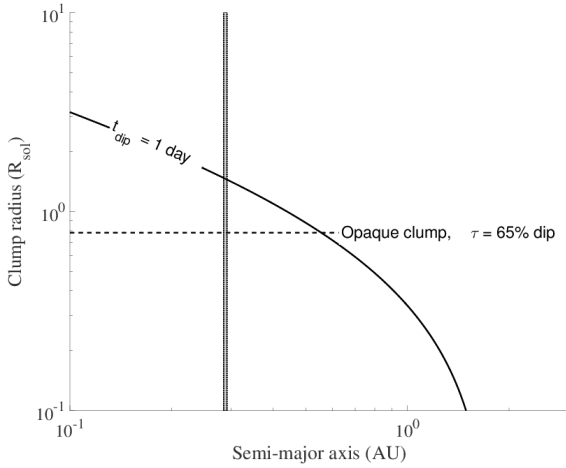


Figure 7. Assuming 1-day dips, the figure shows the possible semi-major axis vs. clump radius values with the solid black line. The minimum clump size, obtained through the observed dip amplitude, is shown with the dashed line. The two vertical dotted lines show the minimum and maximum semi-major axis obtained with the non-periodicity and observed minimum velocity (for optically thick material) constraint respectively.

observed individual dips are caused by a cluster of objects, each of a different mass and size. The mass of each clump is defined by

$$M = m_g \rho V, \quad (10)$$

where m_g is the average grain mass, ρ the object density and V its volume. In turn the volume can be estimated by

$$V = \pi R_c^2 \Delta R, \quad (11)$$

where ΔR is the clump depth along the line of sight. We can

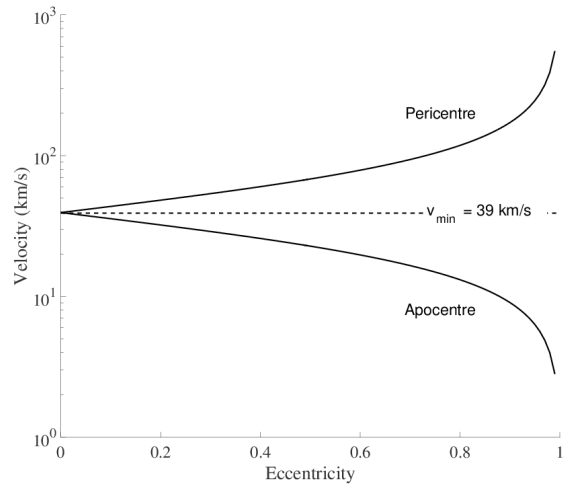


Figure 8. Pericentre and apocentre orbital velocities for varying eccentricities with a constant semi-major axis of $a = 0.2855$ (solid black lines). The dashed horizontal line marks the observed minimum velocity of 39 km/s. If the observed dips in EPIC 204278916 are caused by transiting material on an eccentric orbit, then the observed transit must occur away from apocentre.

obtain an estimate on R_c from the observed dip depths, but it is non-trivial to obtain ΔR . However, from the definition of optical depth (τ) we find that

$$\tau = \rho \sigma \Delta R, \quad (12)$$

where σ is the cross-section of the particles causing the obscuration. Through some algebraic manipulation we can substitute Eq. 12 and Eq. 11 into Eq. 10 to obtain

$$M = \frac{m_g \pi R_c^2 \tau}{\sigma}, \quad (13)$$

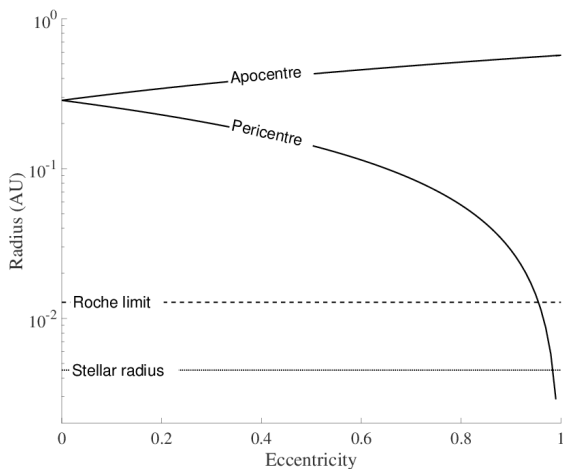


Figure 9. Pericentre and apocentre radii for varying eccentricities adopting the observed minimum semi-major axis of $a = 0.2855$ AU. The dashed line marks the Roche radius below which a large cometary-like body with density $\rho = 0.5$ gm/cm³ would break-up. The dotted line marks the stellar radius, below which orbiting clumps would crash into the star. For this scenario the eccentricity can be constrained to be above 0.95.

and note that both the density and clump depth cancel out. Eq. 13 is useful in obtaining a lower mass limit on the transiting material, since we know the minimum clump radii from the dip depths and also that $\tau \geq 1$. The only unconstrained parameters are the cross-section σ and the grain mass m_g , which we fix to 10^{-8} cm² and 10^{-14} grams respectively, typical for dust grain sizes of $\approx 0.1\mu\text{m}$. These values should be regarded as lower limits from derived dust grain mass distributions (e.g. Li & Greenberg 1998).

To obtain the number and radius of the transiting clumps, we perform a multi-gaussian fit to the EPIC 204278916 light curve (after removing the 3.646-day periodicity) shown in Fig. 4. Using a local peak finding algorithm (FINDPEAK implemented in MATLAB) we identify 53 dips. Fig. 10 shows the first 25 days of observations fitted with 53 gaussians of differing widths and amplitudes and one broad Poisson function covering the timespan of the smaller dips. We find that the Poisson component is necessary to obtain a good fit to the data, but that the goodness-of-fit is not sensitive to the exact number of gaussians used. For each gaussian component we obtain the related R_c and estimate the mass of each individual component using Eq. 13. The sum of all gaussians then yields a reasonable lower mass limit for the whole clump of $M_c = 7 \times 10^{17}$ grams (≈ 3.2 times the mass of Halley’s Comet).

4 DISCUSSION

The large-amplitude dipping events observed in the *K2* lightcurve of EPIC 204278916 superficially resembles other systems recently discovered with *K2*. Most notably, KIC 8462852 (Boyajian et al. 2016) was observed to have similar dip durations to those observed in EPIC 204278916. However, aside from this, KIC 8462852 and EPIC 204278916 differ in many other respects. Firstly, EPIC 204278916 shows

much deeper dips than KIC 8462852. Furthermore, the dipping patterns observed in EPIC 204278916 are clustered in time, with an initial deep dipping event being followed by smaller ones for ≈ 25 days before returning to the normal, presumably quiescent state of the star. The dips observed in KIC 8462852 are not clustered, but are spread out over a period of several years. More importantly however, KIC 8462852 displays an ordinary F-type star spectrum (Boyajian et al. 2016) showing no accretion signatures, whilst EPIC 204278916 is a YSO still surrounded by a disk, based on both the ALMA image shown in this work (Fig. 5), its spectral features (e.g., presence of lithium absorption line and H α emission line, Preibisch et al. 2002), and its membership in the Scorpius-Centaurus OB association (Preibisch & Mamajek 2008).

More recently Ansdell et al. (2016a) have discovered 3 objects which more resemble EPIC 204278916 when compared to KIC 8462852. These also belong to the Upper-Scorpius association and are YSOs. Similar to what has been presented here for EPIC 204278916, Ansdell et al. (2016a) have resolved the disks with ALMA, and demonstrated that large-amplitude dipping events are not only observed in edge-on systems. Given that both the objects presented by Ansdell et al. (2016a) and EPIC 204278916 belong to the same star-forming association, and all show large dipping events, one might consider them to be part of the same class of dipping systems. However, the peculiarly clustered dipping structure displayed by EPIC 204278916 distinguishes it from previously reported YSO dipping systems. The only exception might be EPIC 204530046 (presented in Bodman et al. 2016), although we discussed in Section 3.1, why we think EPIC 204278916 is qualitatively different.

Given the large range of inclination angles inferred from the resolved ALMA images of EPIC 204278916 and the sample of Ansdell et al. (2016a), it is unlikely that the observed dips are related to the outer-edges of the proto-stellar disk. It is however possible that an inclined and variable inner dust disk could cause some of the observed dips (see e.g. HD 142527, Marino et al. 2015). This is particularly relevant for some of the systems discussed in Ansdell et al. (2016a) and Bodman et al. (2016), where the dipping events are observed to persist throughout the full ≈ 3 months of *K2* observations and some display quasi-periodic dips that repeat on the period of the stellar co-rotation radius. If a similar mechanism were responsible for the observed dips in EPIC 204278916, the inclined inner disk would have to be transient on a relatively short timescale of a few weeks, making this interpretation also unlikely. Furthermore we find no relation between the repeating dip patterns in EPIC 204278916 with the stellar rotation. Thus both the transient nature of the observed dips and the fact that they do not repeat (quasi-)periodically makes EPIC 204278916 stand out even more from previously observed YSO dippers.

In Section 3.3 we explored the possibility that the observed dips in EPIC 204278916 are caused by transiting circumstellar clumps. We showed how circular orbits for this interpretation are most likely ruled out and that highly eccentric orbits are consistent with the observations. If transiting cometary-like bodies are responsible for the observed dips, the events are most likely occurring close to periastron passage. If the dips are the result of a previous disruptive event of a larger body, we can further say that the eccentricity

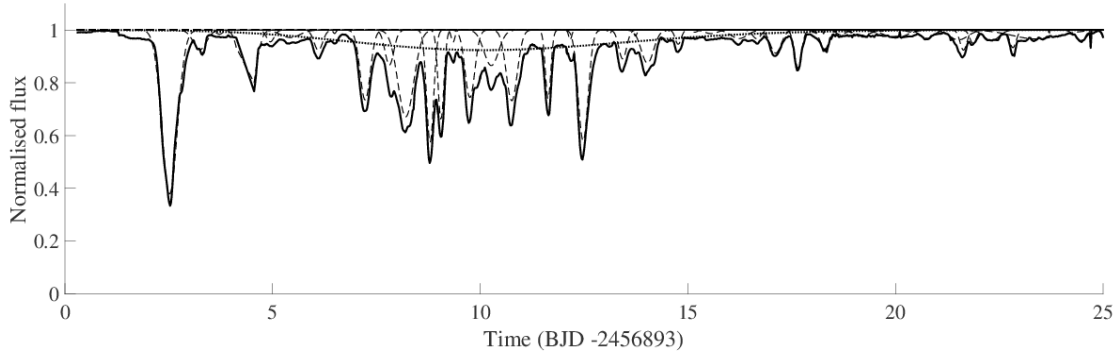


Figure 10. Normalised EPIC 204278916 light curve (solid line, with the 3.646-day periodicity removed) decomposed into 53 gaussians (dashed lines) and one Poissonian component (dotted line).

needs to be larger than 0.95 for previous pericentre passages to be within the Roche radius of the parent star. Similar disruptive events have been witnessed in our Solar System (e.g. Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9), but have never been previously witnessed around other stars. Thus EPIC 204278916 could constitute the first system where a planetesimal-sized body has been witnessed to be tidally disrupted by the parent star upon a close encounter. This would be then a direct evidence of the presence of km-sized bodies in a protoplanetary disk, a crucial step towards planet formation.

Given there is no complete explanation for the mysterious behaviour of EPIC 204278916, more observations and modelling of this system are required to fully explain the clustered large-amplitude dipping events. Continuous photometric monitoring of this system for subsequent dipping events will determine whether this behaviour is periodic or not. Given the dynamics of break-up orbits, we would expect the cometary-like bodies to only survive a few orbits before hitting the parent star. It is thus important to monitor EPIC 204278916 before such an event occurs.

5 CONCLUSION

We have presented the *K2* light curve of the disk-bearing young-stellar object EPIC 204278916, together with a resolved ALMA image constraining its disk inclination to 57 ± 9 degrees. The *K2* light curve displays prominent, large-amplitude, dips during the first ≈ 25 days of observations out of the 78.8 day *K2* observing campaign. Although difficult to establish their true physical origin, we have discussed the observed dips in terms of a warped inner disk transiting circumstellar clumps in circular orbits, and cometary-like debris in an eccentric orbit.

It is clear that further observations of EPIC 204278916 and other YSO dippers will be required in the future, both photometric and spectroscopic, in order to establish their true origin. In particular it is important to determine whether the observed dips in the *K2* light curve of EPIC 204278916 are observed again, in which case infer their recurrence timescale and spectroscopic properties. In this respect we point out the possibility of *K2* to re-observe part of the Scorpius-Centaurus OB association in 2017 during the planned Campaign 15.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We gratefully thank the anonymous referee for providing useful and insightful comments which have improved this manuscript. S.S. acknowledges funding from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. C.F.M acknowledges ESA research fellowship funding. This research has made use of NASA's Astrophysics Data System Bibliographic Services. Additionally this work acknowledges the use of the astronomy & astrophysics package for Matlab (Ofek 2014). This paper includes data collected by the Kepler mission. Funding for the Kepler mission is provided by the NASA Science Mission directorate. Some of the data presented in this paper were obtained from the Mikulski Archive for Space Telescopes (MAST). STScI is operated by the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy, Inc., under NASA contract NAS5-26555. Support for MAST for non-HST data is provided by the NASA Office of Space Science via grant NNX13AC07G and by other grants and contracts. This paper additionally makes use of the following ALMA data: ADS/JAO.ALMA#2013.1.00395.S. ALMA is a partnership of ESO (representing its member states), NSF (USA) and NINS (Japan), together with NRC (Canada) and NSC and ASIAA (Taiwan), in cooperation with the Republic of Chile. The Joint ALMA Observatory is operated by ESO, AUI/NRAO and NAOJ. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship under Grant No. DGE-1144469

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