

THE NATURE OF THE FAR-UV BREAK IN THE ENERGY DISTRIBUTION OF QUASARS

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RESUMEN

Se observa un fuerte empinamiento en la distribución espectral de energía de los cuásares alrededor de 1100Å. Revisamos posibles interpretaciones para el origen físico de este quiebre en el ultravioleta lejano.

ABSTRACT

A prominent continuum steepening is observed in quasar energy distributions near 1100Å. We review possible interpretations for the physical origin of this so-called far-UV break.

Key Words: ISM: dust, extinction — galaxies: active — radiative transfer — ultraviolet: general

1. INTRODUCTION

The spectra of quasars and Seyfert galaxies show strong emission lines superimposed onto a bright continuum. The continuum contains a significant feature in the optical-ultraviolet region, known as “the Big Blue Bump” (BBB). Full coverage of the BBB region can only be gathered from significantly redshifted objects, since the Galaxy is opaque to the Lyman continuum. Although it has been possible to infer the UV Spectral Energy Distribution (SED) of quasars down to ~ 350 Å, it remains poorly known between the extreme UV and the X-rays. In the X-rays, a soft excess component is reported (Figure 1), which cannot be reduced to a simple extrapolation of the far-UV powerlaw (Haro-Corzo 2008 and Haro-Corzo et al. 2007, hereafter H07).

Composite energy distributions of the BBB were derived by Zheng et al. (1997) and later by Telfer et al. (2002, hereafter TZ02; reproduced in Figure 1) using archived HST-FOS spectra. Before averaging, each spectrum was dereddened for Galactic absorption as well as statistically corrected for the absorption due to intergalactic Ly α absorbers and Lyman limit systems. The transmission function for intergalactic absorption is illustrated in the inset of Figure 1 for redshifts 1, 2 and 3. Without such a correction, the far-UV continuum appears suppressed, as shown by the SDSS composite.

A striking feature of the composite quasar SED of TZ02 (see Figure 1) is that a significant steepening occurs around 1100Å, leading to a far-UV powerlaw

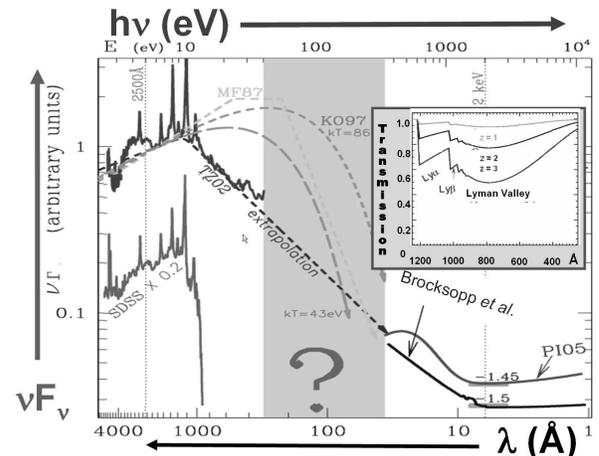


Fig. 1. Figure showing the UV composite spectra for quasars derived by TZ02 and SDSS (Vanden Berk et al. 2001) (the SDSS curve is moved down by 0.7 dex to avoid cluttering). The individual quasar spectra used in the TZ02 composite were divided by the transmission function (see inset) appropriate for their redshift before being averaged. The SDSS composite did not consider such a correction. Also shown are the averages of two series of X-ray models that fit individual XMM-Newton spectra. They correspond to the powerlaw+blackbody fits of Piconcelli et al. (2005, hereafter P105) and to the broken power-law fits of Brockopp et al. (2006), respectively. The vertical positions of these X-ray composites were arbitrarily set to reproduce an α_{OX} of -1.45 and -1.50 , respectively. If, instead of composites, we considered SEDs from *individual* quasars, it could be shown that the extrapolation of the far-UV does *not* connect smoothly with the soft-X-ray excess component (see H07 for further details).

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of index $\nu^{-1.7}$ ($F_\nu \propto \nu^{+1.7}$). Such a steepening of the continuum is present not only in composite SEDs,

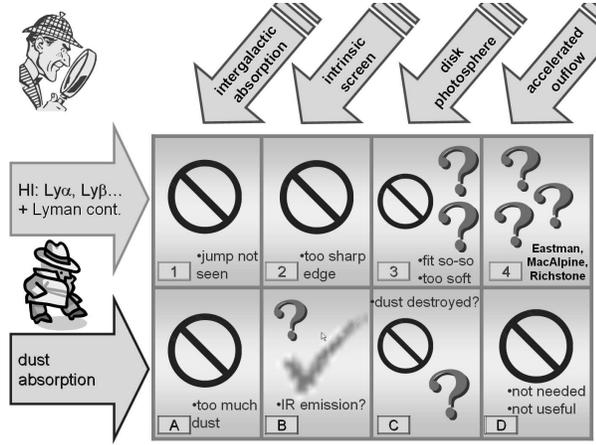


Fig. 4. Diagram illustrating the 8 possible cases arising from either HI or dust absorption. Barred circles denote rejected or unpromising cases, while question marks suggest a certain level of doubt or a conclusion that is possibly premature.

the absorbing medium: (i) intergalactic, (ii) local to the quasar ISM, (iii) accretion disk photosphere and (iv) accelerated outflow. The resulting eight cases are illustrated in Figure 4 with labels 1–4 for HI and A–D for the dust. Among the eight cases reviewed below, many impact positively the softness problem, either because the local BELR sees a different SED than the observer (e.g. intergalactic absorption), or because the absorption in the UV is followed by a flux upturn at higher energies.

Case 1 – Binette et al. (2003) studied the possibility of intergalactic HI absorption. They assumed a behavior of the HI density as a function of z proportional to the gas density expected from the warm-hot intergalactic medium. Although they could reproduce the steepening observed in the TZ02 composite, they rejected this possibility, since it implied a continuum flux discontinuity at 1216 Å (observer-frame) that is not observed.

Case 2 – An intrinsic absorber at a redshift close to the quasar results in a sharp absorption edge near 912 Å as well as in a saturated Ly α absorption line. A sharp edge at 912 Å has been reported in only $\sim 10\%$ of AGN (see KO97) and is unrelated to the far-UV break discussed in this paper, which consists in a change in spectral index rather than a discontinuous edge. The situation described by case 2 is therefore not relevant to our study of the UV break.

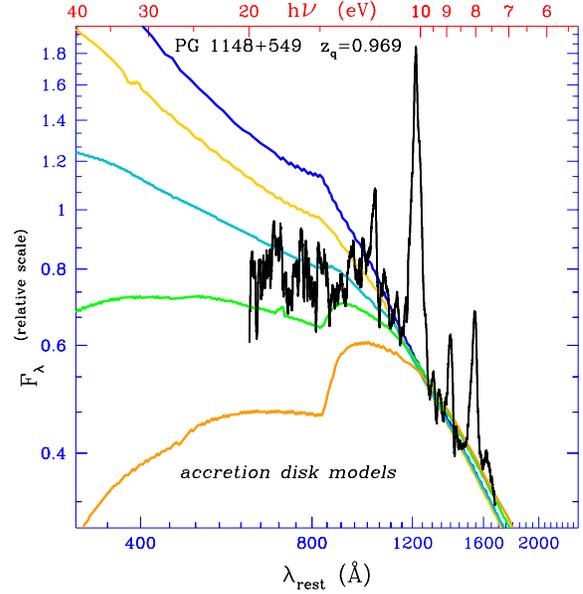


Fig. 5. The thin black line represents the far-UV spectrum of PG 1148+549. Five accretion disk models from Hubeny et al. (2000) are shown for comparison assuming a (face-on) stationary disk structure and a maximum rotating Kerr blackhole of mass $10^9 M_{\odot}$, with accretion rates of 2, 1, 1/2, 1/4 and 1/8 $M_{\odot} \text{ yr}^{-1}$, respectively.

Case 3 – State of the art models of ‘bare’ accretion disks predict a steepening (i.e. a Lyman edge) near Ly α for a certain range of accretion rates and black hole masses. This is illustrated in Figure 5, where we show different SED models from Hubeny et al. (2000) that include a detailed non-LTE treatment of abundant elements as well as continuum opacities due to bound-free and free-free transitions. We find the fit to the far-UV break in PG 1148+549 to be unsatisfactory. A more important aspect to consider is that disk models that produce a break near the Lyman edge are not followed by a flux upturn at higher energies. Hence the softness problem remains whole with current disk models that intend to reproduce the break. A similar shortage of hard photons also characterizes the comptonized accretion disk model proposed by Zheng et al. (1997), even though in that case the UV break is much better reproduced. We may conjecture that current stationary disks fail, because they do not include thermal inhomogeneities, Parker instabilities or other energy transport mechanisms (Blaes 2007). Therefore, we cannot rule out that the next generation of disk models will succeed to simultaneously be very efficient in the far-UV and yet produce a trough near the Lyman limit. Both

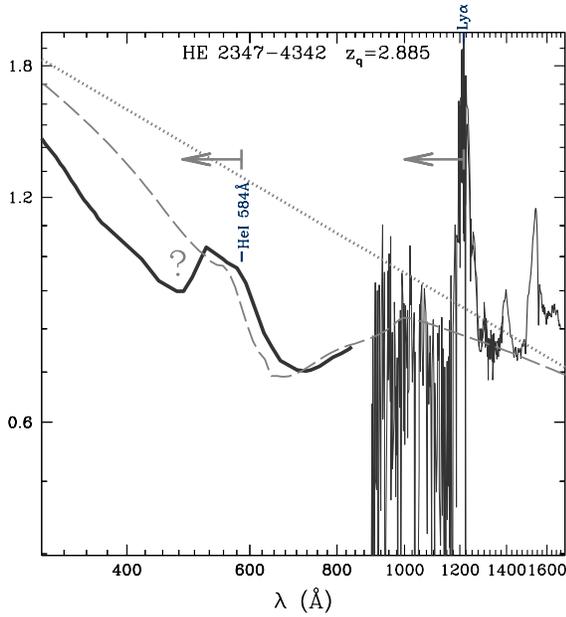


Fig. 6. Spectrum of HE 2347–4342 (thick and thin black lines) extracted from Reimers et al. (1998). The dashed line represents an absorption model of the SED represented by the dotted line, assuming extinction by cubic nanodiamonds.

of these features are required to fit the SED of HE 2347–4342 (Figure 6). Disks are also expected to generate a wind (see Proga 2007a, and references therein). Because a reduction of the surface temperature might be expected at the point where the wind is launched as a result of reduced viscous heating, we may speculate that a narrow disk wind (Proga 2007b), if launched from the position where the bulk of the 1000 Å flux originates, might cause an absorption trough where the break is observed.

Case 4 – Eastman, MacAlpine & Richstone (1983) produced a steepening of the continuum at 1200 Å by integrating the absorption from clouds progressively accelerated up to $0.8c$. Such a model, after inclusion of cloud emission, is represented by the thick grayed line in Figure 7. A more thorough exploration of this type of model would be needed to determine whether it is a promising avenue. Would a wind structure rather than discrete clouds not be preferable? A different behavior of the H I opacity with velocity might be able to shift the break position to the observed value near 1100 Å (instead of $\simeq 1216\text{Å}$). The upturn in flux beyond 20 eV also remains to be calculated. If He I opacity were included, such models might succeed in explaining the odd dip observed at 500 Å in HE 2347–4342,

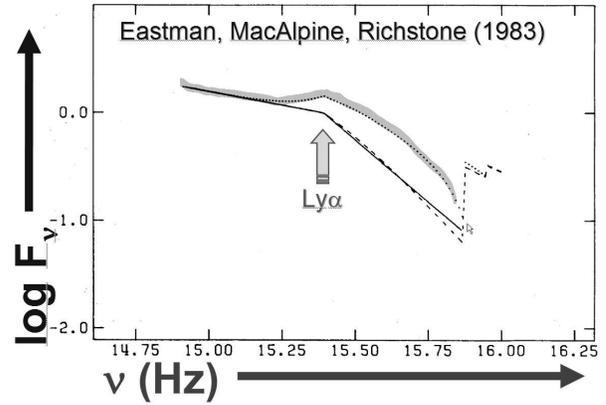


Fig. 7. The accelerated cloud absorption model (top grayed line) proposed by Eastman, MacAlpine, & Richstone (1983).

one of the most studied quasars (see Figure 6). Interestingly, both breaks at 1100 Å and 500 Å are blueshifted with respect to rest-frame Ly α from He I and H I, at 584 Å and 1216 Å, respectively.

Case A – B05 studied the possibility of absorption by intergalactic dust consisting of nanodiamond grains (other dust compositions were unsuccessful). They could reproduce the wide dip centered on $z \simeq 1$ displayed by the far-UV indices α_{FUV} when plotted with redshift (Figure 12 in B05). This possibility was rejected, since it required too much intergalactic dust ($\sim 17\%$ of all cosmic carbon!).

Case B – Shang et al. (2005) previously explored the possibility of ISM and SMC-like extinction to explain the break. They rejected this hypothesis, because the absorption resulted in a broad curvature for the SED, which is not observed. Assuming a dust component composed of crystallite carbon grains, B05 successfully reproduced the far-UV break observed in individual quasars of the TZ02 sample. The case of PG 1008+1319 is illustrated in Figure 2. The softness problem disappears, since the dust becomes transparent at higher energies and a flux upturn is therefore predicted below 650 Å. This allows the intrinsic SED to be much harder in the extreme UV than the flux measured next to the break suggests. Two other examples of an upturn in the extreme UV are presented here: Ton 34 (Figure 3) and HE 2347–4342 (Figure 6).

Case C – B05 found that the column of dust required to fit the far-UV break was about the same for the majority of their quasars. This is an

improbable situation for the above case B, where the dust screen is presumed independent of the continuum source. Such a narrow range in dust opacities would make more sense if the dust screen was somehow connected to the continuum source. What about the possibility of the dust being part of the plasma where the UV is produced? Even though nanodiamond formation is favored by the presence of UV radiation⁵ (Duley & Grishko 2001; Kouchi et al. 2005), the high temperatures of the inner disk coupled with its high gas density would certainly destroy the dust before it reaches the radius where the UV is radiated. We can therefore rule out this possibility. An interesting variant of case C that cannot so easily be ruled out is provided by having the dust manufactured within the much cooler outer regions of the disk and then launched as part of a funneled disk wind. We may conjecture that this dusty wind would later intercept our line-of-sight to the inner UV-emitting regions of the disk.

Case D – We consider the hypothesis of acceleration of dusty material to *high* velocities superfluous, for it is neither needed nor useful for the purpose of reproducing the far-UV break.

3. DISCUSSION

Crystallite carbon dust has not been yet observed in emission in the mid-IR. De Diego et al. (2007) actually ruled out meteoritic nanodiamond emission in 3C298 using *Spitzer* data. H07 has modified the original model of B05 by discarding meteoritic nanodiamonds and making use of cubic nanodiamonds only (i.e. gains without surface adsorbates). Attempts will be made to detect emission due to bulk impurities from this type of grains. A possible problem of the dust screen model is the absence of absorption lines associated with the dust screen (but see Binette & Krongold 2008).

To summarize, out of the 8 possibilities of Figure 4, we favor case B as our overall favored model. This is possibly more a reflection of this case having been a simpler paradigm to develop and later closely compared with the spectra. We consider the remaining three alternative cases 3, 4 and C as certainly worth being explored further.

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⁵It is interesting to note that via the mid-IR emission bands observed at 3.43 and 3.53 μ m (van Kerckhoven et al. 2002), nanodiamonds have so far only been identified around 3 stellar disks that turn out to be heated by the UV radiation from the central star.

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