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# **From Fractals to Relaxed Clusters:**

## **Hierarchical Star Formation in the Large Magellanic Cloud**

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# Abstract

Stars do not form in isolation: most stars form in hierarchical associations. These star-formation structures span a large range in length scales, from small clusters to large complexes. They have complex fractal structures, owing to the physical processes occurring in the gas clouds from which they form and evolve. The youngest and most embedded clusters are not visible at optical wavelengths; therefore, we must use infrared observations to study them. The following major unanswered questions related to star-formation through young stellar structures are as follows:

- ii How does the star cluster formation process depend on environment?
- ii Are there preferred scales in star formation?
- ii Which physical processes are dominant in star formation?
- ii What causes the observed patterns in star formation?
- ii How do relaxed star clusters form from the fractal young stellar hierarchy?

My thesis work, in collaboration with my coauthors, aims to shed light on these pressing questions by studying star formation through near-infrared observations of young stellar structures in the Large Magellanic Cloud (LMC). The LMC is an excellent target, due to its orientation, proximity, and small line-of-sight depth. It has also been observed by state-of-the-art ground-based observatories, such as VIRCAM on the VISTA telescope at the Cerro Paranal Observatory and DECam on the Blanco telescope at the Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory. In particular, the VISTA survey of the Magellanic Clouds (VMC) mapped the LMC in the near-infrared bands  $Y$  (central wavelength of  $1.02 \frac{1}{4}\text{m}$ ),  $J$  (central wavelength of  $1.25 \frac{1}{4}\text{m}$ ), and  $K_s$  (central wavelength of  $2.15 \frac{1}{4}\text{m}$ ), which are ideal for studying young stars and star clusters. Although ground-based observations of the LMC are limited by their angular resolution, it is imperative to use the ground-based data we have as a bedrock on which to base future observations with cutting-edge space-based facilities, which have a much smaller field-of-view. Further, we can use the LMC to test theories of star and cluster formation, because we have a wide range of data, spanning a range of angular resolution.

I show that the VMC data can be exploited to study young stellar systems in a variety of ways. First, I use point-spread function (PSF) catalogs that cover the entire main body of the LMC. I show the PSF catalogs can be used to select young stars, create stellar density maps, and then detect young stellar structures. The statistical properties of these young stellar structures are then used to study the dominant physical processes behind star formation and whether there seem to be any characteristic scales associated with star formation in the LMC. I find that supersonic turbulence seems to be a major driver of star formation, and that the stellar structures are scale-free. This indicates that there is no universal, characteristic scale of star formation.

I also exploit the VMC data in a novel way to detect semi-resolved young star clusters. Semi-resolved star clusters are clusters where the cluster radius is larger than the observational PSF, but the stellar separations are much less than the PSF. Semi-resolved star clusters have previously only been found in imaging data by eye. To detect them, I create a pipeline to remove nebular emission, model the PSF, and remove point-sources from the near-infrared images using the PSF models. Then, the leftover objects in the image are extended objects like semi-resolved star clusters. I next employ a custom isophotal analysis to detect and characterize the extended objects. I find over 600 candidate star clusters in a  $1.77$  square degree region covering the busiest star-forming regions of the LMC. I also split these detections into 15,000 higher-significance detections by detecting their nested isophote structures. I estimate there is about a 15% contamination rate from background galaxies and blended point-sources. Then, I demonstrate the veracity of our method by showing that we successfully detect 85-100% of star clusters previously identified through manual searches and higher-resolution data. Finally, I look at my detections in publicly available *James Webb Space*

*Telescope* images to further suggest that at least 80% of the detections are star clusters. In the final stage of this thesis, I present a novel method of tracking the transition from the fractal young stellar hierarchy to relaxed star clusters. Using the 600 candidate semi-resolved star clusters and their nested isophote structures, I create a pure cluster catalog by removing spurious objects. I create a unique roundness statistic to study each isophote detection. If a cluster has a high roundness value, I suggest it is dynamically relaxed. I use molecular cloud maps from the Magellanic Mopra Assessment survey of the same sky region to determine that the ages of most of the clusters are  $\leq 5$  Myr. I demonstrate that hierarchically-nested clusters exhibit rounder morphologies as we observe them at smaller spatial scales; I show that this is not an effect of the observational PSF. I suggest that this change reflects the evolution of young stellar populations from a fractal arrangement typical of newly-formed stars to a dynamically stable state akin to older bound stellar groups like open and globular clusters. Our analysis reveals that our hierarchical cluster dataset undergoes the transition to a dynamically stable state at size scales approximately around 1 parsec and free-fall times  $\leq 2$  Myr. The size scale we find seems to be one around which star clusters congregate; the physical mechanisms for generating this size scale remain elusive.

# Zusammenfassung

Sterne entstehen nicht isoliert: Die meisten Sterne entstehen in hierarchischen Verbänden. Diese Sternentstehungsstrukturen erstrecken sich über einen großen Längsbereich, von kleinen Sternhaufen bis hin zu großen Komplexen. Aufgrund der physikalischen Prozesse, die in den Gaswolken, aus denen sie entstehen und sich entwickeln, ablaufen, weisen sie komplexe fraktale Strukturen auf. Die jüngsten und am stärksten eingebetteten Haufen sind bei optischen Wellenlängen nicht sichtbar, was bedeutet, dass wir Infrarotbeobachtungen verwenden müssen, um sie zu untersuchen. Es gibt große, unbeantwortete Fragen im Zusammenhang mit der Sternentstehung durch junge, eingebettete Sternentstehungsstrukturen: 1) Wie hängt der Prozess der Sternhaufensbildung von der Umgebung ab? 2) Gibt es bevorzugte Skalen bei der Sternentstehung? 3) Welche Prozesse dominieren bei der Sternentstehung? 4) Was verursacht das beobachtete Muster bei der Sternentstehung? 5) Wie bilden sich gebundene Sternhaufen aus der fraktalen Hierarchie junger Sterne? In meiner Abschlussarbeit möchte ich Licht auf diese drängenden Fragen werfen.

Um zu versuchen, solche Fragen zu beantworten, untersuche ich die Sternentstehung über junge Sternstrukturen durch Nahinfrarotbeobachtungen der Großen Magellanschen Wolke (Large Magellanic Cloud, LMC). Die LMC ist aufgrund seiner Ausrichtung, Nähe und geringen Sichtlinientiefe ein ausgezeichnetes Ziel. Sie wurde auch von hochmodernen bodengestützten Observatorien wie VIRCAM am VISTA-Teleskop und DECam am Blanco-Teleskop beobachtet. Insbesondere die VISTA Magellanic Clouds (VMC)-Durchmusterung kartierte die LMC im nahen Infrarot, was sich ideal für die Untersuchung junger Sterne und Sternhaufen eignet. Obwohl bodengestützte Beobachtungen der LMC durch ihre Winkelauflösung begrenzt sind, ist es unbedingt erforderlich, die uns vorliegenden bodengestützten Daten als Grundlage für zukünftige Beobachtungen mit modernsten weltraumgestützten Einrichtungen zu nutzen, die über ein viel kleineres Gesichtsfeld. Darüber hinaus können wir die LMC nutzen, um Theorien zur Stern- und Haufensbildung zu testen, da wir über eine große Bandbreite an Daten mit verschiedenen Winkelauflösung verfügen.

Ich zeige, dass die VMC-Daten auf vielfältige Weise zur Untersuchung junger Sternsysteme genutzt werden können. Zuerst habe ich Point-Spread-Function (PSF) Kataloge verwendet, die den gesamten Hauptteil des LMC abdecken. Ich zeige, dass die PSF-Kataloge genutzt werden können, um junge Sterne auszuwählen, Sterndichtekarten zu erstellen und dann junge Sternstrukturen zu erkennen. Anschließend habe ich die statistischen Eigenschaften dieser jungen Sternstrukturen verwendet, um die dominierenden Prozess in der Sternentstehung zu untersuchen und um herauszufinden, ob es charakteristische Skalen gibt, die im Zusammenhang mit der Sternentstehung in der LMC stehen. Anschließend habe ich die statistischen Eigenschaften dieser jungen Sternstrukturen verwendet, um die dominierenden Prozess in der Sternentstehung zu untersuchen und um herauszufinden, ob es charakteristische Skalen gibt, die im Zusammenhang mit der Sternentstehung in der LMC stehen. Meine Untersuchung hat gezeigt, dass scheinbar die überschallschnellen Turbulenzen der Hauptantreiber für die Sternentstehung sind und, dass die Sternstrukturen skalenfrei sind. Dies deutet darauf hin, dass es keine universelle, typische Skalenlänge in der Sternentstehung gibt.

Ich nutze die VMC-Daten auch auf neuartige Weise, um halbaufgelöste junge Sternhaufen zu entdecken. Halbaufgelöste Sternhaufen sind Haufen, bei denen der Haufenradius größer als die beobachtete PSF ist, der Sternabstand jedoch viel geringer als die PSF ist. Halbaufgelöste Sternhaufen wurden bisher nur in Bilddaten mit dem bloßen Auge gefunden. Um sie aufzuspüren habe ich eine Pipeline kreiert, die erst die Nebelemission entfernt, dann die PSF modelliert und das PSF Modell nutzt um die Punktquellen zu entfernen. Dann sind die übriggebliebenen Objekte im Bild ausgedehnte Objekte wie halbaufgelöste Sternhaufen. Als nächstes wende ich eine benutzerdefinierte Isophotenanalyse an, um die erweiterten Objekte zu erkennen und zu charakter-

isieren. Ich habe damit mehr als 600 potentielle Sternhaufen gefunden. Ich habe diese Detektionen auch in 15.000 Erkennungen mit höherer Signifikanz aufgeteilt, indem ich ihre verschachtelten Isophotenstrukturen genutzt habe. Ich finde sie innerhalb einer 1,77 Quadratgrad großen Region, die die Region mit höchsten Sternentstehungsrate in der LMC abdeckt. Ich schätze, dass die Kontaminationsrate durch Hintergrundgalaxien und gemischte Punktquellen etwa 15 % beträgt. Anschließend demonstriere ich die Richtigkeit unserer Methode, indem ich zeige, dass wir 85–100 % der zuvor in früheren Studien identifizierten Sternhaufen erfolgreich erkennen können. Abschließend gleiche ich meine Entdeckungen mit öffentlich zugänglichen Bildern des James-Webb-Weltraumteleskops ab, was bestätigt, dass mindest 80% meiner Entdeckungen Sternhaufen sind.

In der letzten Phase dieser Arbeit stelle ich eine neuartige Methode zur Verfolgung des Übergangs der fraktalen Hierarchie junger Sterne zu gebundenen Sternhaufen vor. Unter Verwendung der 600 möglichen halbaufgelösten Sternhaufen und ihrer verschachtelten Isophotenstrukturen erstelle ich einen reinen Haufenkatalog, indem ich Störobjekte entferne. Ich kreiere eine einzigartige Rundheitsstatistik, um jede Isophotenerkennung zu untersuchen. Wenn ein Haufen einen hohen Rundheitswert hat, schlage ich vor, dass er dynamisch entspannt ist. Ich verwende Molekülwolkenkarten derselben Himmelsregion, und stelle fest, dass das Alter der meisten Haufen jünger als 10 Mio. Jahre ist. Ich kann zeigen, dass hierarchisch verschachtelte Haufen rundere Morphologien aufweisen, da wir sie auf kleineren räumlichen Maßstäben beobachten und, dass die PSF der Beobachtung darauf keinen Einfluss hat. Vermutlich spiegelt diese Veränderung die Entwicklung junger Sternpopulationen von der typischen fraktalen Anordnung neugebildeter Sterne zu einem dynamisch stabilen Zustand wieder, ganzähnlich wie von offenen zu Kugelsternhaufen. Unsere Analyse zeigt, dass unser Datensatz hierarchischer Sternhaufen den Übergang in einen dynamisch stabilen Zustand bei Größenskalen von etwa 1 Parsec und Freifallzeiten von  $\approx$  2 Myr durchläuft. Die Größenskala, die wir beobachten, scheint eben jene zu sein, um die sich Sternhaufen ansammeln. Die physikalischen Mechanismen zur Erzeugung dieser Größenskala sind noch unklar.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

In this thesis I explore the macroscopic properties of star and star cluster formation on scales ranging from star clusters to galaxies. To do this, I detect and study young stellar structures in the Large Magellanic Cloud, a nearby star-forming dwarf galaxy, using near-infrared data. I also develop and use unbiased detection methods to study young stellar structures in these data. This chapter provides an introduction to the pertinent background material.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, I outline some common features of star forming galaxies, including stellar structures and the interstellar medium. Next, I describe the location of star formation in star-forming galaxies: the hierarchical molecular phase of the interstellar medium. Then I give a basic outline of the process of star formation, followed by a description of the relevant physical processes involved, with an emphasis on supersonic turbulence. I then describe the young stellar hierarchy, the study of which is a focus of my thesis. Finally, I describe the Large Magellanic Cloud and the data I use to detect and study young stellar structures within.

### 1.1 What is a galaxy?

To start, I will give a basic description of one of the fundamental constituents of the universe: a galaxy. My later thesis chapters describe young stars on scales from star clusters to galaxies, so it is essential to introduce the reader to a galaxy.

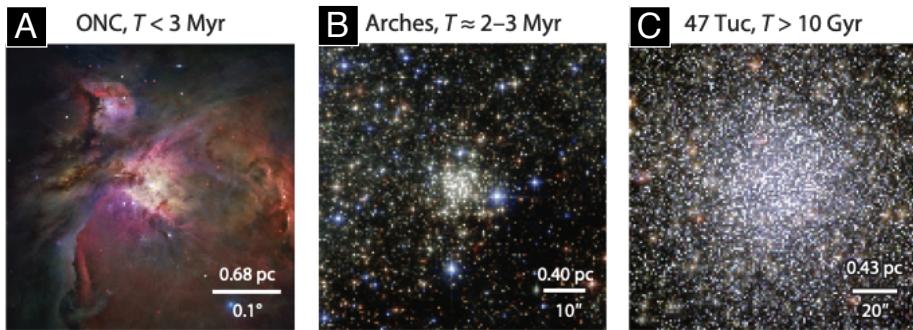
The night sky above us is richly ornamented with galaxies and stars, though most are hidden from the naked eye. There are thought to be a hundred billion galaxies (Steinhardt et al., 2021). Using the near-infrared, the most relevant wavelengths for this work, an estimate for the number of galaxies per square degree is around 300,000 (Retzlaff et al., 2010).

A galaxy is defined as a collection of stars and interstellar gas and dust held together by gravity within a dark matter halo. Despite stars' being typically spaced about 2 parsecs apart in the Solar neighborhood, galaxies are not devoid of matter; the regions between stars are filled by the interstellar medium (ISM), consisting of gas and dust. The interstellar medium primarily consists of hydrogen gas, followed by helium, with trace amounts of heavier elements. The quantities of stars, gas, and dust differ from galaxy to galaxy.

The Milky Way Galaxy<sup>1</sup> has an estimated mass of around 2 billion times the mass of Sun, including stars, gas, dust, and dark matter (Jiao et al., 2023). The Milky Way is comprised of billions of stars with diverse masses, influencing the size, brightness, and lifespan of each star. The emission of these stars forms most of the visible radiation emanating from galaxies. However, galaxies emit radiation across the entire electromagnetic spectrum, with the energy at each wavelength stemming from a number of processes. Consequently, it is vital to observe a galaxy across the entire range of wavelengths in order to understand the underlying physical processes.

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<sup>1</sup>The Milky Way is denoted with a capital 'G' when using the words Galaxy and Galactic.



**Figure 1.1:** This figure is adapted from Krumholz et al. (2019) and shows three types of star clusters: embedded (A), young open (B) and globular (c). ONC stands for the Orion Nebular Cluster.

Large galaxies like our Milky Way are surrounded by smaller galaxies located in and around their haloes. These small galaxies are known as dwarf galaxies and they are the most common type of galaxy in the universe. According to Ł Cold Dark Matter cosmology, a galaxy like the Milky Way forms through the bottom-up structure formation of multiple galactic systems. In this paradigm, larger galaxies are surrounded by smaller galaxies that they eventually consume. There is much evidence for this in the field of galactic archaeology, which documents galactic cannibalism. Two such smaller dwarf galaxies that orbit and interact with our Milky Way are the Large Magellanic Cloud (LMC) and Small Magellanic Cloud (SMC). This thesis is concerned with studying the LMC using near-infrared light.

### 1.1.1 Stellar structures

Inside galaxies, stars can be found in isolation, as ‘field stars,’ and grouped within clusters. Stars form different components of a galaxy. For example, the Milky Way has a stellar bar, a stellar bulge, stellar thin and thick discs, a stellar halo, and stellar spiral arms. The Milky Way also has stellar streams which are relics from past mergers and field stars that are not apparently associated with any of those components.

We can study stars via their photospheres’ emission in the ultra-violet (UV), optical, and infrared wavelengths. Using different wavelengths, different populations can be highlighted. For example, young stars exhibit high emission in the UV. Cooler, evolved stars have higher emission in near-infrared wavelengths compared to hotter stars.

Some stars are obscured by circumstellar and/or interstellar gas and dust, hindering optical observations. Near- and mid-infrared light becomes crucial for studying these dust-shrouded objects. Near-infrared light is particularly sensitive to stars’ photospheres and can penetrate dust, while mid-infrared light reveals emission from dust warmed by starlight.

An example of such objects is evolved asymptotic-giant branch (AGB) stars. Mass loss in this phase of stellar evolution leads to the formation of dusty circumstellar envelopes. AGB stars’ photospheres that are surrounded by dusty environments can be studied using near-infrared wavelengths, while their circumstellar envelopes can be studied using mid-infrared wavelengths, since the dust absorbs and re-emits light in these wavelengths.

Remarkably, the infrared regime also offers a window to the very earliest phases of stars’ lives. Newly formed stars are often totally shrouded by gas and dust, and therefore infrared light is needed to study them. Near-infrared light is often used for determining properties of young stars and young stellar objects inside dusty clouds, and mid-infrared light can be used to study protoplanetary disks and dust near young stars.

Groups of stars of similar ages can be found in spatially and kinematically coherent groups. Types of groups of stars include star clusters, associations, and complexes. The definition of a star cluster varies depending on the study. Lada & Lada (2003) define a cluster as a group of stars possessing

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