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DOI
10.1093/mnrasl/slt029

Publication date
2013

Document Version
Final published version

Published in

Citation for published version (APA):

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Download date: 28 May 2024
**R144 revealed as a double-lined spectroscopic binary***


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Accepted 2013 February 25. Received 2013 February 25; in original form 2012 December 20

**ABSTRACT**

R144 is a WN6h star in the 30 Doradus region. It is suspected to be a binary because of its high luminosity and its strong X-ray flux, but no periodicity could be established so far. Here, we present new X-shooter multi-epoch spectroscopy of R144 obtained at the ESO Very Large Telescope. We detect variability in position and/or shape of all the spectral lines. We measure radial velocity variations with an amplitude larger than 250 km s\(^{-1}\) in N\(^{\text{IV}}\) and N\(^{\text{V}}\) lines. Furthermore, the N\(^{\text{III}}\) and N\(^{\text{V}}\) line Doppler shifts are anticorrelated and the N\(^{\text{IV}}\) lines show a double-peaked profile on six of our seven epochs. We thus conclude that R144 is a double-lined spectroscopic binary. Possible orbital periods range from two to six months, although a period up to one year is also allowed if the orbit is highly eccentric. We estimate the spectral types of the components to be WN5–6h and WN6–7h, respectively. The high luminosity of the system (log\(L_{\text{bol}}/L_{\odot} \approx 6.8\)) suggests a present-day total mass content in the range of about 200–300 M\(_{\odot}\), depending on the evolutionary stage of the components. This makes R144 the most massive binary identified so far, with a total mass content at birth possibly as large as 400 M\(_{\odot}\). We briefly discuss the presence of such a massive object, 60 pc away from the R136 cluster core in the context of star formation and stellar dynamics.

**Key words:** binaries: spectroscopic – stars: early-type – stars: formation – stars: individual: RMC 144 – stars: Wolf–Rayet.

1 INTRODUCTION

Massive stars strongly contribute to the light from distant star-forming regions and dominate the production of ionizing radiation. The most massive stars are important contributors to the feedback from stars on the interstellar medium (Crowther 2007). Yet, how massive a star can be is still poorly constrained. In the quest for a firm grip on the maximum stellar mass limit, hydrogen-rich Wolf–Rayet (WNh) stars have been identified as the most massive stellar objects (de Koter, Heap & Hubeny 1998), with typical dynamical masses over 75 M\(_{\odot}\) (Rauw et al. 2004; Gamen et al. 2006; Niemela et al. 2008; Schnurr et al. 2008a, 2009). Crowther et al. (2010) have recently re-analysed known WNh stars in R136, the central cluster in 30 Dor, and derived probable present-day masses up to 250 M\(_{\odot}\). Other very massive WNh stars are found in apparent isolation in the 30 Dor region, among them R145 (Schnurr et al. 2009) and VFTS 682 (Bestenlehner et al. 2011). Unless these stars are all ejected from the cluster core through dynamical interactions or supernova explosions, their presence challenges the view in which massive stars formed along with a cortege of lower mass stars in a dense cluster environment.

With \(v = 11.15\) (Breysacher, Azzopardi & Testor 1999), the WN6h star R144 (RMC 144, Brey 89, BAT99-118, HD 38282) in 30 Dor is the visually brightest Wolf–Rayet star in the Large Magellanic Cloud (LMC) and it is one of the early-type objects isolated from the R136 core. Because of its brightness and its strong X-ray emission, R144 has been proposed as a binary candidate, but no definitive proof of the orbital motion has been obtained so far. Moffat (1989) performed the first multi-epoch spectroscopic
Table 1. Journal of the observations. Columns 3 to 5 give the primary \((v_1)\) and secondary \((v_2)\) radial velocities measured from N \(\nu \lambda4944\) \((v_1)\) only and N \(\nu \lambda4058\) \((v_1\text{ and } v_2)\).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>HJD(^{a}) – 2 400 000</th>
<th>N (\nu \lambda4944) (v_1) (km s(^{-1}))</th>
<th>N (\nu \lambda4058) (v_1) (km s(^{-1}))</th>
<th>(v_2) (km s(^{-1}))</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>55 585.650</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>55 673.479</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \(^{a}\)Heliocentric Julian date at the beginning of the exposure.

3 VARIABILITY AND RV MEASUREMENTS

We search for line profile variability in the time series formed by our spectra via visual inspection and by using a temporal variance spectral analysis (TVS; Fullerton, Gies & Bolton 1996). Significant line profile variability is detected in most of the spectral lines. The associated TVS spectrum is often double-peaked, which is indicative of large radial velocity (RV) variations, hence of a potential binary motion. We will return to this aspect later.

Fig. 2 shows a selection of N \(\nu\), N \(\nu\) \(\lambda4944\) and N \(\nu\) \(\lambda4058\) lines observed during our campaign. N \(\nu\) \(\lambda4944\) and N \(\nu\) \(\lambda4058\) has a single component whose position varies by over 4 Å. N \(\nu\) \(\lambda4058\) has single comparable components from each of the two stars, hence the line is double-peak, with the two peaks changing in position. N \(\nu\) \(\lambda4640–42\) effectively has two components from each star, thus a total of four. The line profile changes from a single peak to double as a result of line blending.

As illustrated in Fig. 2, the N \(\nu\) line and the dominant N \(\nu\) components present anticorrelated RV variations. Further visual
Figure 2. N V $\lambda$4944, N IV $\lambda$4058 and N III $\lambda$4640–42 lines at different epochs. The vertical dashed lines indicate the rest wavelength of N V, N IV and both N III components, shifted to the LMC rest frame (i.e. shifted by $+270$ km s$^{-1}$). The red lines show our best-fitting RV measurements from Table 1.

inspection of our spectra indicates that the positions of the Si IV and N V lines also vary in opposite direction. Finally, the widths and centroids of hydrogen and helium lines are found to be variable, but the lines remain single peaked, probably due to their intrinsically broad nature.

To quantify the amplitude of the RV variations, we use the fitting method described in Sana et al. (2013), which adjusts Gaussian(s) to line profiles accounting simultaneously for all the observations. We separately adjust the N V $\lambda$4944 and N IV $\lambda$4058 line profiles and we weight the fit by the S/N. The best fitting Gaussian(s) are overlaid in Fig. 2. The associated RV measurements are listed in Table 1 and displayed in Fig. 3. A local renormalization has been applied for N V $\lambda$4944 given that the line is positioned in the wing of He I $\lambda$4922.

The N V $\lambda$4944 line is well fitted by a single Gaussian and displays a peak-to-peak RV variation of 280 km s$^{-1}$. The typical measurement errors are about 6 km s$^{-1}$. In the following, we arbitrarily refer to the component associated with the N V $\lambda$4944 emission as the primary, hotter star in the system.

The wings of the N IV $\lambda$4058 line are not properly represented by a Gaussian profile and we limit the fit to the central part of the line only. Two Gaussians are used and Fig. 2 only shows the sum of the fitted Gaussians. The N IV $\lambda$4058 RVs somewhat depend on the wavelength range adopted for the fit. Combined with the fact that this line profile is not Gaussian, we estimate error bars of the order of 15–20 km s$^{-1}$ on the RV values. While the peak of the blue component of N IV $\lambda$4058 remains more or less at the same location, its width and the shape of its blue wing changes. The best-fitting solution thus indicates that the two components of N IV $\lambda$4058 do actually exchange position at epochs 3–5 with respect to the other epochs. In this case, the primary and secondary components display a peak-to-peak RV variation of about 320 and 260 km s$^{-1}$, respectively.

Overall there is a reasonable agreement between the primary RVs obtained from the two lines. N IV $\lambda$4058 seems to display a slightly larger RV amplitude than N V $\lambda$4944, although the obtained values remain within the uncertainties of the RV measurement method.

4 THE NATURE OF R144

4.1 Spectral type

We first classify the composite spectrum of R144 as if it were a single star. The criteria of Smith et al. (1996), which are based on ratios of peak intensities of H, He, C and N lines, unambiguously confirm the WN6h type of the composite spectrum. Given the blue-shifted weak absorptions in each of the He I and He II emission lines, the final composite spectral type is WN6ha.

As mentioned earlier, the dominant component of the N III $\lambda$4640–42 lines moves opposite to N V $\lambda$4944 (Fig. 2). The fainter N III $\lambda$4510–14 multiplet shows a similar behaviour. This suggests that the N III lines are predominantly associated with the secondary, cooler star. In order to qualitatively reproduce the profile variations of the N III $\lambda$4640–42 complex, the primary, hotter star is still expected to make a small contribution to N III $\lambda$4640–42, possibly with a peak intensity no larger than half that of the secondary. A peak intensity of a third of that of the secondary, or less, would imply a WN5h classification, which we consider to be within uncertainties. A complete spectral disentangling with a larger data set is, however, needed to properly quantify the amount of N III $\lambda$4640 in the primary star.

If most of the N III emission in the R144 spectrum originates in the secondary star, accounting for the dilution of the secondary N III line by the primary light suggests that the secondary may be of a slightly later spectral type. We thus adopt WN5–6h+WN6–7h as our best estimate of the system spectral types.
4.2 Orbital constraints

Mass ratio

The mass ratio of a double-lined binary system can in principle be constrained directly from the RV measurements of the two components. We use the orthogonal least-squares regression method of Sana, Gosset & Rauw (2006) to fit the \( v_1 \) versus \( v_2 \) relation, allowing for different apparent systematic velocities for the two components. We obtain a mass ratio of \( M_2/M_1 = 1.17 \pm 0.06 \), which implies that the primary, hotter star is the less massive star in the system. While it is possible that systematics in the RV measurements of the N IV \( \lambda 4058 \) line might actually invert the mass ratio, our results clearly indicate that the masses of the two components do not differ by more than a few tens of percent from one another.

Orbital period

Our data only cover one epoch of large RV variations and do not allow us to constrain the periodicity of the system. The large RV change (>200 km s\(^{-1}\)) between observations 5 and 6, separated by only two weeks, suggests either a relatively short period or a significant eccentricity, or possibly both. Combining the epoch of variability observed in our X-shooter data with those in Schnurr et al. (2008b, 2009) does allow us to obtain a first constraint on the orbital period. Significant variability is observed by Schnurr et al. at \( t_0 \approx 2452.630 \) and at \( t_1 \approx 2453.000 \), hence a \( \Delta t \) of about 370 d. Our RV variations lie at \( t \approx 2455.586 \) (Table 1), hence almost exactly \( 8 \times \Delta t \) from epochs \( t_0 \) (respectively \( 7 \times \Delta t \) from \( t_1 \)). This strongly suggests that the maximum orbital period of R144 is about 370 d.

Submultiple integer values (i.e. \( P \approx 370/n \), with \( n = 1, 2, 3, \ldots \)) constitute a family of possible solutions, where \( n = 4, 5 \) (\( P \approx 90 \) or 70 d) and \( n \geq 7 \) (\( P \leq 50 \) d) are unlikely, as large RV variations are predicted at epochs where Moffat (1989), Schnurr et al. and/or our X-shooter observations show a constant signal. This deduction assumes that the peak of the RV variations is concentrated over a time span of 15 d but the same constraints are obtained by assuming 10–20 d. The most favoured periods are thus about 2, 4, 6 and 12 months.

The semi-amplitudes of the observed RV variations (Table 1) provide a lower limit on the true semi-amplitudes of the RV curves. For given stellar masses and eccentricity, they constrain the maximum orbital period. Adopting masses of 120 and 140 M\(_{\odot}\) for both components (see Section 5.1), and eccentricities of 0.3, 0.5 and 0.7, the upper limit on the period is 4.5, 6 and 10.5 months, which matches the range of possible periods discussed above.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Stellar mass content

Mass estimates can be obtained from the spectral types. WN6h stars have typical (present-day) masses in the range 130–250 M\(_{\odot}\), while WN6h and WN7h stars have masses between 80 and 130 M\(_{\odot}\) (Crowther et al. 2010, and references therein). This suggests that R144 is formed by two \( \gtrsim 80 \) M\(_{\odot}\) stars, making it one of the most massive binary systems known.

The total mass content of R144 can also be estimated from its bolometric luminosity (\( L_{bol} \)). We use the narrow-band photometry of Breyssacher et al. (1999, \( v = 11.15, b\, -\, v = -0.11 \)). We estimate the visual extinction in two different ways: (i) we deredden the X-shooter flux-calibrated spectrum to the Rayleigh–Jeans slope, yielding \( A' \approx 1.1 \pm 0.2 \); (ii) we use the colour excess \( E(b\, -\, v) \approx 0.21 \) and \( R_v = 4.12 \) (corresponding to \( R_v = 3.1 \); Turner 1982), resulting in \( A' \approx 0.9 \). Both extinction estimates agree within the uncertainties. To avoid overestimating the bolometric luminosity, we conservatively adopt the latter value and obtain an absolute visual magnitude \( M_v = -8.2 \) for the system. The visual magnitude of R144 is thus about 1 mag brighter than other WN6h binaries such as R145 (\( M_v = -7.2 \); Schnurr et al. 2009) and WR20a (\( M_v = -7.04 \); Rauw et al. 2008b, 2009). Given that both R145 and WR20a have a total mass content of 160 M\(_{\odot}\) or larger, the brightness of R144 suggests an even larger mass content.

While the bolometric correction remains uncertain without a detailed atmospheric modelling, it is likely in the range 4.0 (a typical early O star) to 4.7 mag (see e.g. Bestenlehner et al. 2011), yielding \( \log L_{bol}/L_{\odot} \approx 6.8 \). The total luminosity of R144 is thus very similar to that of the other WN6h stars in the core of R136 and brighter than VFTS 682 in the surrounding nebula.

Adopting \( \log L_{bol}/L_{\odot} = 6.8 \) and a mass–luminosity relation appropriate for very massive stars (Köhler et al., in preparation), we estimate masses of 170 + 205 M\(_{\odot}\) if the stars are on the zero-age main sequence (MS) and of 80 + 95 M\(_{\odot}\) if the stars are close to the MS turn-off, i.e. the TAMS.

5.2 ‘Isolated’ formation; or dynamical ejection

R144 is located at a projected distance of about 60 pc from the central cluster R136. The presence of very massive stars outside cluster cores is not predicted by most massive star formation theories, which expect that massive stars form as part of a cluster (Zinnecker & Yorke 2007). R144 may thus have been ejected from the cluster core, in which case R144 would have needed a (projected) runaway velocity of \( \sim 60 \) km s\(^{-1}\) to travel from R136 to its current location in \( \sim 10^6 \) yr. Because the two components of R144 are both very massive stars (i.e. with a short evolutionary time-scale), the supernova kick scenario is unlikely. In the runaway scenario, R144 then needs to have been ejected from R136 through dynamical interactions.

In dense stellar environments such as R136, the most massive stars tend to sink quickly to the cluster centre where they dynamically interact with each other. During such interactions, the less massive object is typically ejected (Heggie 1975) and the standard theory thus requires an even more massive object to have caused the ejection of R144. Such an object is not seen. In principle, this object might already have terminated its evolution despite the young age of the region. However, stars of hundreds of solar masses are all expected to have a similar lifetime of about 2.3 Myr (Köhler et al., in preparation). As other very massive stars are still present in the core of R136, this scenario would require significant fine tuning.

An alternative scenario for ejecting R144 from R136 that does not require such an extremely massive object is offered by recent theoretical work. Fujii & Portegies Zwart (2011) calculated that the gravothermal collapse of a cluster core produces, in the core, a binary that is formed by the most massive stars in the cluster. This binary then dominates the dynamical interaction in the core, frequently ejecting other stars. It hardens by each dynamical encounter until it gets ejected as well. In that scenario, R144 is a candidate ‘bully binary’, possibly formed in the gravothermal collapse of the cluster core. This hypothesis is not without drawbacks. First, single stars more massive than the R144 components likely exist in the cluster core (Crowther et al. 2010), so that the bully binary is not formed by the most massive stars. Secondly, its orbital period (\( \lesssim 370 \) d) seems too short compared to the typical periods of
systems predicted to form during the collapse ($P \sim 1000$ d; Fujii 

If R144 is not a runaway system, it has thus formed in situ 
in relative isolation from R136. One possibility is that R144 
is part of an older association along the line of sight towards the 
northern part of 30 Dor. R144 is indeed located in the vicinity of the 
 luminous WN stars, R146 and R147 (projected distance of about 
22pc), and within a giant high-velocity/X-ray shell that is most 
likely a supernova remnant (Feast, Thackeray & Wesselink 1960; 
Walborn, Barbá & Sewilo 2013). This scenario, however, supposes 
the entire dispersion of the parent association to explain the low 
surface density of O- and B-type stars in the vicinity of R144. 

The last scenario, in which R144 has actually formed in situ 
and independently of a parent cluster or OB association, would pose a 
serious challenge to massive star formation scenarios that rely on 
a dense stellar environment, such as formation through mergers of 
lower mass protostellar cores (Bonnell & Bate 2002) or through 
competitive accretion (Bonnell & Bate 2006). The formation of 
very massive stars in relative isolation is compatible with a fractal 
vision of star formation, where a giant molecular cloud fragments 
in various cores. which then form stars stochastically. As discussed 
in Bressert et al. (2012), discriminating between these scenarios 
is not only important for our understanding of high-mass star for-

5.3 Evolutionary stage 

While awaiting an accurate determination of the orbital properties, 
the fact that the primary, hotter star seems to be less massive than the 
secondary, cooler component is intriguing. A lower mass primary 
component is typically the indication of past or ongoing binary 
interaction. Given the relatively large separation of the R144 system, 
the stars are only expected to fill their Roche lobe towards or after 
the end of the MS. It is, however, possible that a high eccentricity 
allows for interaction close to periastron passage. The binary orbit 
may also have been widened by mass-loss through stellar winds or 
as a result of a past mass-transfer event, so that R144 may have been a 
tighter binary in the past.

Alternatively, the primary star may have been the more massive 
component at birth. Given its larger mass, it may have entered the 
WR-wind mass-loss regime earlier than the secondary, and thus 
shedding mass at such an accelerated rate that it became the less 
massive component in the system. A qualitative comparison with 
the Köhler et al. (in preparation) evolutionary tracks indicate that a 
260+175 M⊙ pair at zero-age MS evolves, after 2 Myr, into a 
90+120 M⊙ system with a total present-day luminosity of 10^9 L⊙ 
and, indeed, with a hotter and less massive primary component. 

Characterizing both the orbit and the physical properties of R144 
components may further help to elucidate the evolutionary status 
of the object, hence to better constrain stellar evolution at very 
high masses. Gathering high-quality spectra with a sufficiently good 
phase coverage to enable the determination of the full orbital so-

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 

We are grateful to K. Köhler and collaborators for providing mass- 
luminosity relations of very massive stars prior to publication. We 
also thank the referee, Nolan Walborn, for his help clarifying the 

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