How dusty is $\alpha$ Centauri?∗,⋆,⋆⋆

Excess or non-excess over the infrared photospheres of main-sequence stars


(Affiliations can be found after the references)

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ABSTRACT

Context. Debris discs around main-sequence stars indicate the presence of larger rocky bodies. The components of the nearby, solar-type binary $\alpha$ Centauri have metallicities that are higher than solar, which is thought to promote giant planet formation.

Aims. We aim to determine the level of emission from debris around the stars in the $\alpha$ Cen system. This requires knowledge of their photospheres. Having already detected the temperature minimum, $T_{\text{min}}$, of $\alpha$ Cen A at far-infrared wavelengths, we here attempt to do the same for the more active companion $\alpha$ Cen B. Using the $\alpha$ Cen stars as templates, we study the possible effects that $T_{\text{min}}$ may have on the detectability of unresolved dust discs around other stars.

Methods. We used Herschel-PACS, Herschel-SPIRE, and APEX-LABOCA photometry to determine the stellar spectral energy distributions in the far infrared and submillimetre. In addition, we used APEX-SheFi observations for spectral line mapping to study the complex background around $\alpha$ Cen seen in the photometric images. Models of stellar atmospheres and of particulate discs, based on particle simulations and in conjunction with radiative transfer calculations, were used to estimate the amount of debris around these stars.

Results. For solar-type stars more distant than $\alpha$ Cen, a fractional dust luminosity $f_d \equiv L_{\text{dust}}/L_{\text{star}} \sim 2 \times 10^{-7}$ could account for SEDs that do not exhibit the $T_{\text{min}}$ effect. This is comparable to estimates of $f_d$ for the Edgeworth-Kuiper belt of the solar system. In contrast to the far infrared, slight excesses at the 2.5σ level are observed at 24 μm for both $\alpha$ Cen A and B, which, if interpreted as due to zodiacal-type dust emission, would correspond to $f_d \sim (1-3) \times 10^{-5}$, i.e. some 10⁻³ times that of the local zodiacal cloud. Assuming simple power-law size distributions of the dust grains, dynamical disc modelling leads to rough mass estimates of the putative Zodi belts around the $\alpha$ Cen stars, viz. $< 4 \times 10^{6} M_{\oplus}$ for both $\alpha$ Cen A and B, and $< 4 \times 10^{6} M_{\oplus}$ for $\alpha$ Cen B.
inside 4 AU of each star (Endl et al. 2001). For their part, theoretical models seem to indicate that in situ planet formation is indeed difficult in vast regions around each star, because the outer limit for planet accretion around either star is \(0.5–0.75\) AU in the most pessimistic studies (Thébault et al. 2009) and \(\sim1–1.5\) AU in the most optimistic ones (e.g. Xie et al. 2010; Paardekooper & Leinhardt 2010). However, these estimates open up the possibility that planet formation should be possible in the habitable zone (HZ) of \(\alpha\) Cen B, which extends between 0.5 and 0.9 AU from the star (Guedes et al. 2008). Very recently, based on a substantial body of RV data, Dumusque et al. (2012) have proposed that an Earth-mass planet orbits \(\alpha\) Cen B with a three-day period (but see Hatzes 2013). In other words, the radial distance of \(\alpha\) Cen Bb (0.04 AU), which corresponds to only nine stellar radii, is evidently far inside the HZ, and therefore the surface conditions should be far from able to support any form of life as we know it.

Based on sensitive Herschel (Pilbratt et al. 2010) observations, a relatively large fraction of stars with known planets exhibit detectable far-infrared (FIR) excess emission due to cool circumstellar dust (Eiroa et al. 2011; Marshall et al. 2014; Krivov et al. 2013), akin to the debris found in the asteroid (2–3 AU) and Edgeworth-Kuiper (30–55 AU) belts of the solar system. As part of the Herschel open time key programme DUNES around Nearby Stars (DUNES; Eiroa et al. 2013), we observed \(\alpha\) Cen to search for dust emission associated with the stars, which is thought to develop on planetesimal size scales and to be ground down to detectable grain sizes by mutual collisions. Persistent debris around the stars would be in discs of a few AU in size and would re-emit intercepted starlight in the near- to mid-infrared. To within 16\%, ISO-SWS observations did not detect any excess above the photosphere of \(\alpha\) Cen A between 2.4 and 12 \(\mu\)m (Decin et al. 2003, and Fig. 7 below). On the other hand, a circumbinary Edgeworth-Kuiper belt analogue would be much larger and the dust much cooler, so that it would emit predominantly at FIR and submillimetre (submm) wavelengths. Such a belt would be spatially resolved with the Herschel beam, in principle allowing the detection of structures due to dynamical interactions with, say, a binary companion and/or giant planets (e.g. Wyatt 2008, and references therein), but its surface brightness could be expected to be very low, rendering such observations very difficult.

The DUNES programme focusses on nearby solar-type stars, and the observations with Herschel-PACS (Poglitsch et al. 2010) at 100 \(\mu\)m and 160 \(\mu\)m are aimed at detecting the stellar photospheres at an \(S/N \geq 5\) at 100 \(\mu\)m and has observed 133 nearby Sun-like stars (FGK type, \(d < 25\) pc). Prior to Herschel, little data at long wavelengths that have high photometric quality are available for \(\alpha\) Cen A and B. One reason for this is probably detector saturation issues due to their brightness (e.g. WISE bands W1–W4), and another is due to contamination in the large beams by confusing emission near the galactic plane (e.g. IRAS, ISO-PHOT, and AKARI data).

Due to their proximity and with an age comparable to that of the Sun (4.85 Gyr, Thévenin et al. 2002), \(\alpha\) Cen is an excellent astrophysical laboratory for “normal” low-mass stars, otherwise known to be very difficult to calibrate, not least with respect to their ages. From numerous literature sources, Torres et al. (2010) have compiled the currently best available basic stellar parameters of the \(\alpha\) Cen system. The given errors on the physical quantities are generally small. However, whereas the tabulated uncertainty of the effective temperature of e.g. \(\alpha\) Cen A is less than half a percent, the observed spread in Table 1 of Porto de Mello et al. (2008) corresponds to more than ten times this much. On the other hand, the radii given by Torres et al. (2010) are those directly measured by Kervella et al. (2003) using interferometry, with errors of 0.2\% and 0.5\% for A and B, respectively (Bigot et al. 2006). Masses have been obtained from astroseismology and are good to within 0.6\% for both components (Thévenin et al. 2002).

For such an impressive record of accuracy for the stellar parameters of the \(\alpha\) Cen components, it should be possible to construct theoretical model photospheres with which observations can be directly compared to a high level of precision. Here, we report PACS observations of \(\alpha\) Cen at 100 \(\mu\)m and 160 \(\mu\)m. These single-epoch data are complemented by LABOCA (Siringo et al. 2009) data at 870 \(\mu\)m obtained during two different epochs. The LABOCA observations primarily address two issues: the large proper motion (3\(\alpha\)7 yr\(^{-1}\)) should enable the discrimination against background confusion and, together with SPIRE photometry (see below), these submm data should also provide valuable constraints on the spectral energy distributions (SEDs). This could potentially be useful for quantifying some of the properties of the emitting dust and/or to gauge the temperature minima at the base of the stellar chromospheres. A clear understanding of the latter is crucial when attempting to determine extremely low levels of cool circumstellar dust emission.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines our observations with various facilities, both from space and the ground. Since we are aiming at low-level detections, the reduction of these data is described in detail. Our primary results are communicated in Sect. 3. In the discussion Sect. 4, we examine the lower chromospheres of the \(\alpha\) Cen stars in terms of the radiation temperatures from their FIR photospheres. Possible contributions to the FIR/submm SEDs by dust are also addressed, using both analytical estimations and detailed numerical models. Finally, Sect. 5 provides a quick overview of our conclusions.

2. Observations and data reduction

2.1. Herschel

In the framework of our observing programme, i.e. the DUNES open time key programme, PACS photometric images were obtained at 100 \(\mu\)m and 160 \(\mu\)m. In addition, from the Hi-GAL survey (P.I. Molinari), we acquired archive data for \(\alpha\) Cen at 70 \(\mu\)m and 160 \(\mu\)m obtained with PACS and at 250 \(\mu\)m, 350 \(\mu\)m, and 500 \(\mu\)m with SPIRE (Griffin et al. 2010). The relative position of the stars in the sky during the observational period is shown in Fig. 1.

2.1.1. DUNES: PACS 100 \(\mu\)m and 160 \(\mu\)m

PACS scan maps of \(\alpha\) Cen were obtained at 100 \(\mu\)m and 160 \(\mu\)m at two array orientations (70° and 110°) to suppress detector striping. The selected scan speed was the intermediate setting, i.e. 20° s\(^{-1}\), determining the PSF at the two wavelengths (7/7 and 12′′, respectively). The 100 \(\mu\)m filter spans the region 85–130 \(\mu\)m and the 160 \(\mu\)m filter 130–210 \(\mu\)m and the observations at 100 and 160 \(\mu\)m were made simultaneously. The data were reduced with HIPE v.8.0.1. The native pixel sizes are 3′′/2 and 6′′/4 at 100 and 160 \(\mu\)m, respectively, and in the reduced images the resampling resulted in square pixels of 1′′ at 100 \(\mu\)m and 2′′ at 160 \(\mu\)m.

The two stellar components are approximated by model instrument PSFs of the appropriate wavelength based on an observation of \(\alpha\) Boo rotated to match the telescope position angle of the \(\alpha\) Cen observations. It is important to match the
As described in detail by Eiroa et al. (2013), the level of the background and the rms sky noise were estimated by calculating the mean and standard deviation of 25 boxes sized 9" × 9" at 100 μm and 14" × 14" at 160 μm scattered randomly at positions lying between 30"–60" from the image centre and within the area of which no pixel was brighter than twice the standard deviation of all non-zero pixels in the image (the threshold criterion for source/non-source determination while high pass filtering during map creation). The calibration uncertainty was assumed to be 5% for both 100 μm and 160 μm (Balog et al. 2013)\(^1\).

Aperture (and potential colour) corrections of the stellar flux densities and sky noise corrections for correlated noise in the super-sampled images are described in the technical notes PICC-ME-TN-037 and PICC-ME-TN-038 and the NHSC/PACS home page\(^2\).

2.1.2. Hi-GAL: PACS 70 μm and 160 μm

As part of the Hi-GAL program, these data were obtained at a different scan speeds, i.e. the fast mode at 60" s\(^{-1}\). The field 314_0, containing α Centauri, was observed at both wavelengths simultaneously and in parallel with the SPIRE instrument (see next section). The scanned area subdends 2" × 2" and these archive data are reduced to Level 2.5. Compared to the data at longer wavelengths, background problems are much less severe at 70 μm. The PACS 70 μm data provide the highest angular resolution of all data presented here (Table 1). As before, no further colour correction was required, but the proper aperture correction (1.22) was applied. After re-binning, the pixel size is the same as that at 100 μm, viz. one square arcsecond, whereas the 160 μm pixels are, as before, two arcseconds squared.

2.1.3. Hi-GAL: SPIRE 250 μm, 350 μm, and 500 μm

At the relatively low resolution of the SPIRE observations, the strong and varying background close to α Centauri presented a considerable challenge for the flux measurements. However, for

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**Table 1. Observing log.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument/ mode</th>
<th>Obs/Pgm ID</th>
<th>Wavelength (μm)</th>
<th>Beam width</th>
<th>Observing date</th>
<th>t(_{\text{int}}) (s)</th>
<th>Centre coordinates(^a) (&quot;')</th>
<th>Offset(^b) (&quot;)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Herschel-PACS</td>
<td>1342224848</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>7&quot;7</td>
<td>2011-01-29</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>14 39 30.200 – 60 49 59.66</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1342224849</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>11&quot;3</td>
<td>2011-01-29</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>14 39 30.115 – 60 49 59.54</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SpirePacsParallel</td>
<td>1342203280</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>5-9 × 12-2</td>
<td>2010-08-21</td>
<td>9490</td>
<td>14 28 59.831 – 60 39 01.60</td>
<td>2° × 2° map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1342203281</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>11-6 × 15-6</td>
<td>2010-08-21</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>17&quot;6</td>
<td>2010-08-21</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>23&quot;9</td>
<td>2010-08-21</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>35&quot;2</td>
<td>2010-08-21</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>380.C-3044(A)</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>19&quot;5</td>
<td>2007-11-10 to 13</td>
<td>34 026</td>
<td>14 39 32.349 – 60 50 00.00</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APEX-SHeFI</td>
<td>090.F-9322(A)</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>27&quot;1</td>
<td>2012-08-16</td>
<td>2646</td>
<td>14 39 35.060 – 60 50 15.1</td>
<td>sp. line map</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes.** \(^a\) Observed equatorial coordinates (J2000) towards the target, i.e. the centre of the fitted point source, which refers to the primary α Cent A, except for Hi-GAL and APEX-SHeFI maps. \(^b\) Offset of observed with respect to intended (= commanded) position. Except for SHeFI, coordinates are corrected for the stellar proper and orbital motions. Not applicable (na) to survey data. \(^c\) According to the SPIRE manual, see [http://herschel.esac.esa.int/Docs/SPIRE/html/](http://herschel.esac.esa.int/Docs/SPIRE/html/), the average beam area is 423 arcsec\(^2\) at 250 μm, 751 arcsec\(^2\) at 350 μm and 1587 arcsec\(^2\) at 500 μm.

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**Fig. 1.** Binary α Cen AB as it appears in the sky on various occasions. Shown is the orbit of α Cen B with respect to the primary A, which is at the origin, and with north up and east to the left. During the observing period, the separation of the stars was greatest in 2005 and smallest in 2011. The relative positions in the PACS (blue) and LABOCA (red) maps are indicated. The proper motion of α Cen for the time span between the LABOCA and PACS observations is shown by the dashed arrow. The separation between the stars at the time of the MIPS observations is indicated by the green dot. Orbital elements are adopted from Pourbaix et al. (2002).

orientation of the PSF due to the non-circular tri-lobal structure of the Herschel-PACS PSF, which exists below the 10% peak flux level.

Fitting of the two components was carried out by subtracting the components in series, starting with the brighter one. Each component model PSF was scaled to the estimated peak brightness and shifted to the required positional offset from the observed source peak before subtraction. The position offset of B relative to A was fixed.

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\(^1\) The PACS calibration scheme is described further in detail at [http://herschel.esac.esa.int/twiki/bin/view/Public/PacsCalibrationWeb#PACS_instrument_and_calibration](http://herschel.esac.esa.int/twiki/bin/view/Public/PacsCalibrationWeb#PACS_instrument_and_calibration)

\(^2\) [https://nhscsci.ipac.caltech.edu/sc/index.php/Pacs/AbsoluteCalibration](https://nhscsci.ipac.caltech.edu/sc/index.php/Pacs/AbsoluteCalibration)
wavelengths beyond 160 μm, the dust emission from the galactic background is expected to be in the Rayleigh-Jeans (RJ) regime, and the emissivity should remain reasonably constant. Therefore, when normalised to a specific feature, the background is expected to look essentially the same at all wavelengths, when disregarding the slight deterioration of the resolution due to the smearing at the longest wavelengths. The result of this procedure is shown in Fig. 4, where α Cen is represented by the scaled PSFs and the background-subtracted fluxes are reported in Table 2. Assuming 10–30% higher (lower) fluxes for depressions (excesses) at the stellar position, which are judged unrealistic. This should therefore provide a reasonable estimate of the accuracy of these measurements. The photometric calibration of SPIRE is described by Bendo et al. (2013).

2.2. APEX

The Atacama Pathfinder EXperiment (APEX) is a 12 m sub-millimetre (submm) telescope located at 5105 m altitude on the Llano de Chajnantor in Chile. According to the APEX home page, the telescope pointing accuracy is 2′′ (rms). The general user facilities include four heterodyne receivers within the approximate frequency bands 200–1400 GHz and two bolometer arrays, centred at 345 GHz (870 μm) and 850 GHz (350 μm), respectively. We used LABOCA and SHeFI APEX-1 for the observations of α Centauri.

2.2.1. LABOCA 870 μm

The Large APEX Bolometer Camera (LABOCA) is a submillimetre array mounted on the APEX telescope (Siringo et al. 2009). The operating wavelength is 870 μm centred on a 150 μm wide window (345 and 60 GHz, respectively). With separations of 36′′, the 295 bolometers yield a circular field of view of 11′. The angular resolution is HPBW = 19′′/5 and the under-sampled array is filled during the observations with a spiral mapping method.

The mapping observations of α Cen were made during two runs, viz. on 10–13 November 2007, and on 19 September 2009. The data associated with the programmes 380.C-3044(A) and 384.C-1025(A) were retrieved from the ESO archive. Since this observing mode is rather inefficient for point sources, we performed additional test observations with the newly installed telescope wobblor on 20 May and 13–14 July 2011. While centring α Cen B on LABOCA channel 71, the chopping was done by a fixed ±25′′ in east-west direction, which resulted in asymmetric sky-flux pickup in this confused field, and these data therefore had to be discarded.

The map data were reduced and calibrated using the software package CRUSH 2 developed by Attila Kovács5. The data have been smoothed with a Gaussian of HPBW = 13′′, resulting in an effective FWHM = 23′′/4. However, fluxes in Jy/beam are given for an FWHM = 19′′/5.

2.2.2. SHeFI 230 GHz (1300 μm)

Complementing observations were made with the Swedish Heterodyne Facility Instrument (SHeFI) APEX-1 during Director’s Discretionary Time (DDT) on 16 August 2012. APEX-1 is a single-sideband receiver that operates in the 230 GHz band (211–275 GHz) with an IF range of 4–8 GHz. At the CO(2–1) frequency, 230.5380 GHz, the half-power-beam-width is 27′′. The estimated main beam efficiency is η_{mb} = 0.75, and the kelvin-to-jansky conversion for the antenna is 39 Jy/K at this frequency.

The observing mode was on-the-fly (OTF) mapping with a scan speed of 6′′ s−1, which resulted in a data cube for the 5′×5′ spectral line map with 441 read-out points (Fig. 6). The reference, assumed free of CO emission, was at offset position (+1500′′, −7200′′). During the observations, the system noise temperature was typically T_{sys} = 200 K. As backend we used the fast Fourier transform spectrometer (FFTS) configured to 8192 channels having velocity resolution 0.16 km s−1, yielding a total Doppler bandwidth of 1300 km s−1.

These ON-OFF observations generate a data cube with two spatial dimensions (the “map”) and one spatial dimension (intensity vs frequency spectrum). The data were reduced with the xs-package by P. Bergman6. This included standard, low order, baseline fitting, and subtraction, yielding for each “pixel” a spectrum with the intensity given relative to the zero-kelvin level (see Fig. 6a).

Notes. (1) Asterisks indicate values determined using S_{α Cen}/S_{α Cen B} = 2.25 (see Lisieux et al. 2013).


Table 2. Photometry and FIR/flux densities of α Centauri.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>λ_{eff} (μm)</th>
<th>α Cen A</th>
<th>α Cen B</th>
<th>Photometry &amp; reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.440</td>
<td>2215 ± 41</td>
<td>536 ± 10</td>
<td>B (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.550</td>
<td>3640 ± 67</td>
<td>1050 ± 19</td>
<td>V (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.790</td>
<td>4814 ± 89</td>
<td>1654 ± 30</td>
<td>I (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.440</td>
<td>2356 ± 43</td>
<td>572 ± 10</td>
<td>B (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.550</td>
<td>3606 ± 66</td>
<td>1059 ± 20</td>
<td>V (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.640</td>
<td>4295 ± 78</td>
<td>1387 ± 26</td>
<td>R (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.790</td>
<td>4784 ± 88</td>
<td>1666 ± 31</td>
<td>I (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.215</td>
<td>4658 ± 86</td>
<td>1645 ± 30</td>
<td>J (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.654</td>
<td>3744 ± 69</td>
<td>1649 ± 31</td>
<td>L (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.179</td>
<td>2561 ± 47</td>
<td>1139 ± 21</td>
<td>K (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.547</td>
<td>1149 ± 22</td>
<td>521 ± 10</td>
<td>L (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.769</td>
<td>592 ± 11</td>
<td>258 ± 5</td>
<td>M (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>30.84 ± 0.76</td>
<td>13.63 ± 0.33</td>
<td>MIPS (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>3.35 ± 0.28</td>
<td>1.49 ± 0.28</td>
<td>PACS (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.41 ± 0.05</td>
<td>0.67 ± 0.037</td>
<td>PACS (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>160</td>
<td>0.56 ± 0.06</td>
<td>0.21 ± 0.06</td>
<td>PACS (5), (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250</td>
<td>0.24 ± 0.05</td>
<td>0.11 ± 0.05</td>
<td>PACS (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>350</td>
<td>0.15 ± 0.028</td>
<td>0.064 ± 0.028</td>
<td>PACS (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500</td>
<td>0.08 ± 0.03</td>
<td>0.04 ± 0.03</td>
<td>PACS (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>870</td>
<td>0.028 ± 0.007</td>
<td>0.012 ± 0.007</td>
<td>LABOCA (7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 See: http://www.submm.caltech.edu/~sharc/crush/download.htm
5 http://www.chalmers.se/rss/oso-en/observations/data-reduction-software

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3. Results

3.1. Herschel PACS and SPIRE

The stars were clearly detected at both PACS 100\(\mu\)m and 160\(\mu\)m, as expected on the basis of the adopted observing philosophy of the DUNES programme. The last entry in Table 1 refers to the difference between the commanded position, corrected for proper and orbital motion, and the observed position, determined from the fitting of Gaussians to the data, and these are found to clearly be less than 2\(''\). This compares very favourably with the findings for PACS of the average offset of 2\(''4\) by Eiroa et al. (2013) for a sample of more than 100 solar type stars. Similarly, observed offsets are also acceptable for the LABOCA data, i.e. within 2\(\sigma\) of the claimed pointing accuracy (Table 1).

Observed flux densities of \(\alpha\) Cen A and B are given in Table 2, where the quoted errors are statistical and only refer to relative measurement accuracy. Absolute calibration uncertainties are provided by the respective instrument teams and cited here in the text. Together with complementing Spitzer MIPS data, these data are displayed in Fig. 7. For both \(\alpha\) Cen A and B, a marginal excess at 24\(\mu\)m corresponding to 2.5\(\sigma\) and 2.6\(\sigma\) is determined, respectively. The measured flux ratio at this wavelength corresponds well with the model ratio, i.e. 2.26 ± 0.11 and 2.25 respectively.

\(\alpha\) Cen was detected at all SPIRE wavelengths, but with a marginal result at 500\(\mu\)m (Fig. 5 and Table 2). As is also evident from these images, the pair was not resolved.

3.2. APEX LABOCA

The LABOCA fields are significantly larger than those of the PACS frames, and they contain a number of mostly extended sources of low intensity. However, \(\alpha\) Cen is clearly detected (Fig. 5), but the binary components are not resolved. In Table 2, only the average is given for the 2007 and 2009 observations, because these flux densities are the same within the errors.

The proximity of the \(\alpha\) Cen system leads to angular size scales that are rarely ever encountered among debris discs, which are generally much farther away. The PACS field of view is 105\('' \times 210''\), so that a Edgeworth-Kuiper belt analogue would easily fill the images. The LABOCA frames contain structures similar to those discernable in Fig. 2. Although at faint levels, most of these sources are definitely real, because they repeatedly show up in independent data sets at different wavelengths obtained with different instruments and at different times. Knotty, but seemingly coherent, arcs and ring-like features on arcmin scales mimic the morphology of belt features. If these features were associated with the \(\alpha\) Cen stars, they should move in concert with them at relatively high speeds. At 870\(\mu\)m, the strongest feature lies less than one arcminute southeast of \(\alpha\) Cen and is barely detectable at 100\(\mu\)m, but clearly revealed at 160\(\mu\)m. Measurements of the sky positions for both this feature (“Bright Spot”) and \(\alpha\) Cen are reported in Table 3. For the Bright Spot these differ by +1''2 in right ascension (RA) and +0''9 in declination (Dec.), which provides an estimate of the measurement error, i.e. ~1'' for relatively bright and centrally condensed sources.
Table 3. Dual epoch position data with LABOCA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>RA (J2000)</th>
<th>Dec (J2000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>α Centauri AB</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>14 39 32.174</td>
<td>-60 50 02.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>14 39 31.246</td>
<td>-60 49 59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright Spot</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>14 39 33.953</td>
<td>-60 50 44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>14 39 34.120</td>
<td>-60 50 43.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Owing to its high proper motion, these values are significantly higher for α Cen, viz. ΔRA = -6°8 and ΔDec = +2°9, at position angle PA = 247°. Neglecting the 0°1 parallactic contribution, SIMBAD6 data for α Cen yield for the 1.856 yr observing period ΔRA = -6°7, ΔDec = +1°3, and PA = 259°.

Similar results are obtained involving other features in the 870 μm images. This provides firm evidence that the inhomogeneous background is stationary and an unlikely part of any circumbinary material around α CenAB. A few notes concerning the nature of this background are given in the next section.

6 http://simbad.u-strasbg.fr/simbad/

3.3. APEX-1 SHIFl

In the direction of α Cen, strong CO (2−1) emission lines are found at local-standard-of-rest (LSR) velocities of −30, −50, and −60 km s⁻¹, with a weaker component also at +40 km s⁻¹. This is entirely in accord with the observations of the Milky Way in CO (1−0) by Dame et al. (2001). As an example, the distribution of the integrated line intensity of the −50 km s⁻¹ component is shown in Fig. 6, providing an overview of the molecular background in this part of the sky. With the line widths typical of giant molecular clouds, this confusing emission is certainly galactic in origin and not due to an anonymous IR-galaxy because the lines would be too narrow. We can also exclude the possibility of a hypothetical circumbinary dust disc around the pair α Cen AB, since the observed lines fall at unexpected LSR-velocities (ν𝛼Cen ~ −3 km s⁻¹) and are also too wide and too strong. Since these data do not reveal the continuum, the stars α Cen AB are not seen in the CO line maps.

4. Discussion

4.1. FIR and submm backgrounds

At a distance of 1.3 pc and located far below the ecliptic plane, any foreground confusion can be safely excluded. At greater distances, bright cirrus, dust emission from galactic molecular clouds, PDRs, H II regions, and/or background galaxies potentially contribute to source confusion at FIR and submm wavelengths. However, the projection of α Cen close to the galactic plane makes background issues rather tricky (see Sect. 2.1.3). In particular, extragalactic observers tend to avoid these regions, and reliable catalogues for IR galaxies are generally not available. However, as our spectral line maps show (Fig. 6), the observed patchy FIR/submm background is clearly dominated by galactic emission.

4.2. The SEDs of α Cen A and α Cen B

4.2.1. The stellar models

For the interpretation of the observational data we need to exploit reliable stellar atmosphere models and stellar physical parameters. The model photosphere parameters are based on the weighted average as the result of an extensive literature survey. The models have been computed by a 3D interpolation in a smoothed version of the high-resolution PHOENIX/GAIA grid (Brott & Hauschildt 2005) and with the following parameters from Torres et al. (2010) and the metallicities from Thévenin et al. (2002): (T_{eff}, log g, [Fe/H]) = (5824 K, 4.3059, +0.195) for α Cen A and (5223 K, 4.5364, +0.231) for α Cen B. These models are shown in Fig. 7, together with the photometry (Table 2). We wish to point out again that these data have not been used in the analysis, but merely serve to illustrate the goodness of the models.

As a sanity check we compared the integrated model fluxes with the definition of the effective temperature, \[ S_{\nu} dv \int B_{\nu}(T_{eff}) dv. \] The luminosities are conserved to within 0.6% for α Cen A and 0.1% for α Cen B, which is well within the observational errors of 2% and 5%, respectively (Torres et al. 2010), which in turn are comparable to the errors of the theoretical model (e.g. Gustafsson et al. 2008; Edvardsson 2008). These small differences can probably be traced back to the re-gridding of the high-resolution models onto a somewhat sparser spectral grid.
4.2.2. The temperature minima of α Cen A and α Cen B

At heights of some five hundred kilometers above the visible photosphere (h \(\lesssim\) 10^{-3} R_\odot), the Sun exhibits a temperature minimum, i.e. \(T/T_{\text{eff}} < 1\), beyond which temperatures rise into the chromosphere and corona. Theories attempting to explain the physics of the heating of these outer atmospheric layers generally invoke magnetic fields (Carlsson & Stein 1995), but the details are far from understood and constitute an active field of solar research (e.g. de la Cruz Rodríguez et al. 2013). Such atmospheric structure can be expected to also be quite common on other and, in particular, solar-type stars. There, the dominating opacity, viz. H\(^{-}\) free-free, limits the visibility to the FIR photosphere. For instance, on the Sun, \(T_{\min}\) occurs at wavelengths around 150 μm. This is very close to the spectral region, where this phenomenon has recently been directly measured for the first time also on another star (viz. α Cen A, Liseau et al. 2013), where in contrast to the Sun, the spatial averaging over the unresolved stellar disc is made directly by the observations. Since it is so similar in character, α Cen A may serve as a proxy for the Sun as a star (see also Pagano et al. 2004).

This \(T_{\min}\)-effect has also been statistically observed for a larger sample of solar-type stars (see Fig. 6 of Eiroa et al. 2013), a fact that could potentially contribute to enhancing the relationship between solar physics and the physics of other stars. In the end, such observations may help to resolve a long-standing puzzle in solar physics concerning the very existence of an actual gas temperature inversion at 500 km height and concerning whether this is occurring in the Quiet Sun or in active regions on the Sun (e.g., Leenaarts et al. 2011; Beck et al. 2013). Theoretical models have hitherto been inconclusive.

For α Cen A, Liseau et al. (2013) find that \(T_{\min} = 3920 \pm 375\) K, corresponding to the ratio \(T_{\min}/T_{\text{eff}} = 0.67 \pm 0.06\). This is lower than observed for the Sun from spectral lines in the optical, viz. \(~0.78\) from analysis of the Ca ii K-line (Ayres et al. 1976). These authors also estimated this ratio for α Cen B, i.e. 0.71 and 0.72 using \(T_{\text{eff}} = 5300\) and 5150 K, respectively. For the data displayed in Fig. 7, we arrive at an estimate of \(T_{\min} = 3020 \pm 850\) K near 160 μm for this star. This results in \(T_{\min}/T_{\text{eff}} = 0.58 \pm 0.17\), with \(T_{\text{eff}} = 5223 \pm 62\) K. This value for α Cen B is slightly lower than the optically derived value, but the error on the infrared ratio is large. However, also for the Sun itself, \(T_{\min}\) determinations at different wavelengths show a wide spread of several hundred Kelvin (Avrett 2003).

In the present paper, we are however primarily concerned with the possible effects \(T_{\min}\) might have on estimation of very low emission levels from exo-Edgeworth-Kuiper belt dust. The intensity of the stellar model photosphere beyond 20 to 40 μm is commonly estimated from the extrapolation of the SED into the Rayleigh-Jeans (RJ) regime at the effective temperature \(T_{\text{eff}}\). There is a potential risk that this procedure will overestimate actual local stellar emissions, which may be suppressed at the lower radiation temperatures. In those cases where the SEDs are seemingly well fit by the RJ-extrapolations, the difference may in fact be due to emission from cold circumstellar dust (exo-Edgeworth-Kuiper belts), and here, we wish to quantify the magnitude of such an effect.

4.3. Far infrared: detectability of cool dust from Edgeworth-Kuiper belt analogues

The SED of α Cen A is exceptionally well-determined over a broad range of wavelengths, and we use it here for the estimation of the likely level of this effect on other, non-resolved systems. We do that by “filling the pit with sand” to determine the
Fig. 5. Gallery of SPIRE and LABOCA data for α Centauri, which is inside the circles. Top to bottom: 250 μm, 350 μm, and 500 μm (SPIRE) and 870 μm (LABOCA), where the length of the arrow corresponds to 2′.

corresponding fractional dust luminosity $f_d \equiv L_{dust}/L_{star}$ and the accompanying temperature of the hypothetical dust.

True Edgeworth-Kuiper belt analogues would be extremely faint and very difficult to detect (*$f_d \sim 10^{-7}$; Teplitz et al. 1999; Shannon & Wu 2011; Vitense et al. 2012*). For estimating faint exo-Edgeworth-Kuiper belt levels, we apply simple dust ring models to “fill” the flux-dip of the temperature minimum of α Cen A, i.e. by minimising the chi-square for

$$
\chi^2 = \frac{S_{dust}(\nu) - S_{model}(\nu)}{\sigma}^2,
$$

with limiting $\chi^2 \leq 10^{-4}$. (1)

For illustrative purposes, we place the object at a distance of 10 pc. Several ring temperatures were tested, and dust fluxes were adjusted to match the stellar RJ-SED. The modified black body of the dust was then adjusted to coincide with the difference in flux (i.e. stellar black body minus measured flux) at 160 μm and to a temperature that corresponds to the maximum of this flux difference.

This way of compensating for the $T_{min}$-effect resulted in a dust temperature $T_{dust} = 53$ K at the modified black body radius of 34 AU and a formal fractional luminosity $f_d = (2.2_{-1.3}^{+1.2}) \times 10^{-7}$, almost one order of magnitude below the detection limit of Herschel-PACS at 100 μm ($f_d \sim 10^{-6}$; see e.g. Fig. 1 of Eiroa et al. 2013) and comparable to what is estimated for the solar system Edgeworth-Kuiper belt ($< 10^{-7}$, Vitense et al. 2012). This fit is shown at the bottom of Fig. 8 where it is compared to the stellar SED and the difference between the black body and the
temperature minimum fit, whereas the upper panel shows the observed data points, the adopted run of the \( T_{\text{min}} \)-dip and that of the stellar RJ-SED.

Based on simple arguments, this dust temperature also provides a first-order estimate of the dust mass emitting at these wavelengths (cf. Hildebrand 1983), viz.

\[
M_{\text{dust}} \sim \left[ 1 - \frac{S_{\text{obs}}(\nu)}{S_{\text{model}}(\nu)} \right] S_{\text{model}}(\nu) D^2 \kappa_{\text{ext}}(\nu) B(\nu, T_{\text{dust}}) .
\]  

(2)

For an \( \alpha \) Cen-like star not showing the \( T_{\text{min}} \) effect, i.e. where the observed \( S_{\text{obs}}(\nu) = S_{\text{model}}(\nu) \) (hence \( M_{\text{dust}} = 0 \)), this formula would give a “concealed” dust mass of the order of the solar Edgeworth-Kuiper Belt (see e.g. Wyatt 2008), i.e. \( \lesssim 10^{-3} M_\odot \) for \( \kappa_{150\mu m} \geq 10 \text{ cm}^2 \text{ g}^{-1} \), depending on the largest size \( a_{\text{max}} \), the compactness and the degree of ice coating of the grains. For the cases considered here, reasonable values are within a factor of about 2 to 5 (e.g. Miyake & Nakagawa 1993; Krügel & Siebenmorgen 1994; Ossenkopf & Henning 1994). In general, \( \kappa_{\text{ext}}(\nu) = \kappa_{\text{sc}}(\nu) + \kappa_{\text{abs}}(\nu) \) is the frequency-dependent mass extinction coefficient. At long wavelengths, say \( \lambda > 5 \mu m \), the scattering efficiency becomes negligible for the grains considered here, and \( \kappa_{\text{ext}} \) reduces to \( \kappa_{\text{abs}} (\kappa_{\nu} \text{ henceforth}) \).

In the FIR, i.e. for low frequencies, one customarily approximates the opacity by a power law, i.e. \( \kappa_{\nu} = \kappa_0 (\nu/\nu_0)^\beta \) when \( \nu \leq \nu_0 \), and where \( \lambda_0 = c/\nu_0 > 2\pi a \) is a fiducial wavelength in the Rayleigh-Jeans regime, e.g. \( \lambda_0 = 250 \mu m \) (Hildebrand 1983). For spherical Mie particles, the exponent of the frequency dependence of the emissivity \( \beta \) is in the interval 1 to 2 for most grain materials (Emerson 1988). For blackbody radiation, \( \beta = 0 \). For circumstellar dust, \( \beta \)-values around unity have commonly been found (e.g. Krügel & Siebenmorgen 1994; Beckwith et al. 2000; Wyatt 2008).

The rough estimate from Eq. (2) only refers to the \( a \lesssim 1 \) mm regime and will thus not account for larger bodies, in many cases dominating the mass budget of debris discs (as in the solar system). As is commonly done in debris-disc studies, we distinguish between the dust mass and the total disc mass. To retrieve the mass of the unseen larger objects, numerical collisional models or analytical laws can be used (e.g. Thébault & Augereau 2007; Wyatt 2008; Löhne et al. 2008; Heng & Tremaine 2010a,b; Gáspár et al. 2012), but we focus here solely on the dust mass.
on the observable dust mass, which can be reasonably derived from infrared and submillimetre observations (Heng & Tremaine 2010b; Heng 2011). Even when obtained with an expression as simple as Eq. (2), these estimates are uncertain by at least a factor of several, because of uncertainties in the dust opacities.

From the dynamics of the binary system, we deduce (Appendix A) that a circumbinary disc is possible at a distance larger than 70–75 AU from the barycentre of the stars (see also Wiegert & Holman 1997; Jaime et al. 2012). Comparing the synthetic image of such a ring with an assumed outer radius of 105 AU in Fig. 3 with our observed continuum maps (Figs. 2 and 5), we find seemingly coherent structures at the proper distances of a face-on circumbinary ring. It is important to note that the circumbinary’s inclination may be unconstrained in contrast to the circumstellar discs that are dynamically limited to inclinations smaller than about 60° (Wiegert & Holman 1997; see also Moutou et al. 2011 for a more general spin-orbit-inclination study). Also, Kennedy et al. (2012) report a circumbinary and circumpolar dust disc around 99 Herculis, which supports this possibility of non-coplanarity.

Regarding the possible detection of a circumbinary dust disc around α Cent AB, our single-epoch, multi-wavelength images would appear inconclusive. However, both proper motion and spectral line data obtained with APEX essentially rule out this scenario. If there is really a circumbinary disc or ring around α Centauri, it remained undetected by our observations.

Table 4. Properties of the α Centauri binary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>α Cen A</th>
<th>α Cen B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sp.type$^a$</td>
<td>G2 V</td>
<td>K1 V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$T_{\text{eff}}$ (K)$^b$</td>
<td>5824 ± 24</td>
<td>5223 ± 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$L_{\text{star}}$ ($L_\odot$)$^c$</td>
<td>$1.549^{+0.029}_{-0.024}$</td>
<td>$0.498^{+0.024}_{-0.025}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M_{\text{star}}$ ($M_\odot$)$^c$</td>
<td>1.105 ± 0.007</td>
<td>0.934 ± 0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R_{\text{star}}$ ($R_\odot$)$^c$</td>
<td>1.224 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.863 ± 0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$a_{\text{crit}}$ (AU)$^d$</td>
<td>2.778 ± 1.476</td>
<td>2.522 ± 1.598</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Common parameters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>α Cen A</th>
<th>α Cen B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclination to LOS, $i$ (°)$^c$</td>
<td>79.20 ± 0.04</td>
<td>79.20 ± 0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arg. of periapsis, $\omega$ (°)$^c$</td>
<td>231.65 ± 0.08</td>
<td>231.65 ± 0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long. of asc. node, $\Omega$ (°)$^c$</td>
<td>204.85 ± 0.08</td>
<td>204.85 ± 0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period (yr)$^c$</td>
<td>79.91 ± 0.01</td>
<td>79.91 ± 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eccentricity, $e$</td>
<td>0.5179 ± 0.0008</td>
<td>0.5179 ± 0.0008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance (pc)$^c$</td>
<td>1.348 ± 0.035</td>
<td>1.348 ± 0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (yr)$^c$</td>
<td>$(4.85 ± 0.50) \times 10^{9}$</td>
<td>$(4.85 ± 0.50) \times 10^{9}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References:
(1) Kervella et al. (2003); (2) Torres et al. (2010); (3) Pourbaix et al. (2002); (4) Holman & Wiegert (1999); (5) Thévenin et al. (2002).

4.4. Mid Infrared: warm zodi-dust in asteroid-like belts around α Cen A and α Cen B

4.4.1. Stable orbits

The tentative excursions at 24 μm may be due to warm dust. However, the binary nature of the α Cen system limits the existence of stable orbits to three possibilities. These are one large circumbinary disc with a certain inner radius and two circumstellar discs with maximum (or hereafter, critical) semi-major axes. These critical semi-major axes can be found using the semi-analytical expression of Holman & Wiegert (1999), viz.

$$a_{\text{crit}} = \left( c_1 + c_2 \mu + c_3 \mu e + c_4 \mu e^2 + c_5 \mu e^3 \right) a_{\text{AB}}$$

where $e$ is the eccentricity of the binary orbit, $\mu = M_B/(M_A + M_B)$ i.e. the fractional mass of the stars, $a_{\text{AB}}$ is the semi-major axis of the binary’s orbit, and the coefficients $c_1$ through $c_6$ (all with significant error bars) were computed by Holman & Wiegert (1999).

Using known parameters for α Cen (see Table 4), we can deduce that the circumstellar discs can not be larger than 2.78 ± 1.48 AU around α Cen A and 2.52 ± 1.60 AU around α Cen B, i.e. smaller than ~4 AU around either star (Table 4).

The putative Earth-mass planet, α Cen Bb (Dumusque et al. 2012) is small enough (~1.13 $M_\oplus$) that its Hill radius is just 4 × 10$^{-4}$ AU. Our model discs never reach closer to the star than 0.08 AU, and consequently, this planet was neglected in our disc modelling.

Owing to the large errors of the estimated $a_{\text{crit}}$, it was useful to test these limits with simple test-particle simulations of mass- and size-less particles. The resulting particle discs will also be used as a basis for radiative transfer simulations later. A steady state of these are shown in Fig. 9 where the accuracy of the Holman & Wiegert (1999) estimates is clear. Each simulation run was left for 10$^5$ orbital periods (i.e. ~8×10$^4$ yr). The dynamics had earlier been examined also by others (e.g. Benest 1988; Wiegert & Holman 1997; Holman & Wiegert 1999; Lissauer et al. 2004; Thébault et al. 2009).

These size limits are reminiscent of the inner solar system, i.e. this opens the possibility of an asteroid belt analogue for each star that forms dust discs through the grinding of asteroids and comets. Temperature estimates for the solar system...
zodiacal cloud are around 270 K and that of the fractional luminosity is about $10^{-3}$ (Fixsen & Dwek 2002; Nesvorný et al. 2010; Roberge et al. 2012), i.e. $f_\delta$ has a similar magnitude to the Edgeworth-Kuiper belt (Vitense et al. 2012).

4.4.2. Disc temperatures and snow lines

The *Spitzer* observations at 24\,\mu m (PSF $\geq 6''$, Table 2; see also Kennedy et al. 2012) would not fully resolve these dynamically allowed discs. Strict lower temperature limits are provided by black body radiation from the discs, i.e. $T_{\text{bb}} = \sqrt{R_{\text{dis}}/(2 R_{\text{sb}})} T_{\text{eff}} = 186$ K and 147 K, respectively, for $\alpha$ Cen A and B, where the ratio of absorption to emission efficiency of unity for a black body has been used (e.g. Liseau et al. 2008; Lestrade et al. 2012; Heng & Malik 2013).

The $\alpha$ Cen circumstellar discs are constrained to radii smaller than 10\,AU and should be relatively warm. We need to know, therefore, the locations of the snow lines in order to understand the likelihood of the presence of icy grains on stable orbits around these stars.

The snow line can be defined to be the largest radial distance at which the sublimation time scale is larger than all other relevant time scales of the system (Artymowicz 1997). Our estimations are based on the equations and methods by Grigorieva et al. (2007) and by Lamy (1974). The sublimation time was compared with the orbital time as a lower limit and the system age $(4.85 \times 10^9)$ yr as an upper limit. For the temperature-radius relation, we assumed blackbody emitters. This analysis resulted in sublimation temperatures between 154 K and 107 K for $\alpha$ Cen A, at the radial distances of 4.08 and 8.48 AU, respectively. Therefore, the snow line of $\alpha$ Cen A seems to be outside its dynamically stable region of 2.78 AU, which makes the presence of any icy disc grains not very likely (Fig. 9).

For $\alpha$ Cen B, sublimation temperatures were found to be between 157 K and 107 K, which corresponds to 2.23 and 4.81 AU, respectively. The lower bound is well inside the critical semimajor axis of 2.52 AU (see Fig. 9). Since this is based on an initial grain size of 1 mm (smaller sizes move the snow line outwards, while larger ones move it inwards), we can assume that the existence of a ring of larger icy grains and planetesimals is possible at the outer edge of the $\alpha$ Cen B disc. Such a ring could supply the disc with icy grains. However, these cannot be expected to survive in such a warm environment for long. Thus we assume that the iceless opacities from Miyake & Nakagawa (1993) are sufficient in this case. Ossenkopf & Henning (1994) have computed opacity models for the growth of ice coatings on grains. This conglomeration generally results in higher opacities than for their bare initial state.

We use dust opacities that are based on the models presented by Miyake & Nakagawa (1993), but scaled by a gas-to-dust mass ratio of one hundred. For a “standard” size distribution (Lestrade et al. 2012), i.e. $n(\alpha) \propto \alpha^{-3.5}$, the work by Ossenkopf & Henning (1994) gave similar results (see also e.g. Krügel & Siebenmorgen 1994; Stognienko et al. 1995; Beckwith et al. 2000). These works had different scopes, addressing specifically coagulation processes, rather than destructive collisions. However, for bare grains these opacities may also be applicable to some extent for the dust in debris discs.

In the following sections we present synthetic SEDs obtained with the radiative transfer program RADMC-3D (Dullemond 2012) to assess the disc configurations in more detail.

4.5. Energy balance, temperature, and density distributions

Isothermal blackbody emission from thin rings would not make a realistic scenario for the emission from dust belts or discs. In particular, we need to specify the run of temperature and density, which is obtained from the solution to the energy equation, balancing the radiative heating with the cooling by the optically thin radiation.

In this balance equation, the loss term expresses the flux density of this thermal dust emission from an ensemble of grains received at the Earth, viz.

$$S_{\text{dust}}(\nu) = \int \int Q_{\nu, \text{abs}}(a) \pi B_{\nu}(T, r) \frac{n(a, r) da}{4\pi D^2}$$

where $4\pi a^2 Q_{\nu, \text{abs}}(a)$ is the emissivity of the spherical grains with radius $a$, $Q_{\nu, \text{abs}}(a)$ is the absorption coefficient, $n(a, r)$ is the volume density of the grains at location $r$, $\pi B_{\nu}$ is the thermal emittance at the equilibrium temperature $T$ at $r$, and $D$ is the distance to the source (so that $4\pi D^2 \int S_{\text{dust}}(\nu) d\nu = I_{\text{dust}}$). The absorption coefficient $Q_{\nu, \text{abs}}$ is related to the dust opacity through $Q_{\nu, \text{abs}} \propto (4/3) \kappa_{\nu} \rho a$, where $\rho$ is the grain mass density. $Q_{\nu, \text{abs}}$ is shown as a function of wavelength for a variety of materials and compositions for two grain sizes (10 and 1000\,\mu m) in Fig. 4 of Krivov et al. (2013). We discuss grain sizes in the next section.

4.5.1. Grain size distribution

It is often assumed that $n(\alpha) \propto \alpha^{q}$ describes the distribution in size of the grains (e.g. Miyake & Nakagawa 1993; Krügel & Siebenmorgen 1994; Ossenkopf & Henning 1994; Krivov et al. 2000). However, the shape, the existence, and magnitude of the power-law exponent $q$ have been a matter of intense debate since Dohnanyi’s classic work on interplanetary particles in the solar system (Dohnanyi 1969). For a collision-dominated system at steady state, his result is summarised in a nutshell by the parameter $s = 11/6$, implying that $q = 2 - 3s = -3.5$ (see e.g. Dominik & Decin 2003; Wyatt 2008). This original work referred to the zodiacal cloud, but more recent estimates also for the much larger “grains”, i.e. Edgeworth-Kuiper belt objects

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7 See also the homepage of B.Draine: http://www.astro.princeton.edu/~draine/dust/dustmidx.html
(TNOs), by Bernstein et al. (2004) lead to a similar frequency spectrum for the diameters, \( dn/D \propto D^{-q} \) and \( q = 4 \pm 0.5 \), so that \( q = -3 \pm 0.5 \) (see also Fraser & Kavelaars 2009).

More recent works have been following the collisional time evolution of dusty debris discs using numerical statistical codes. They have found rather strong deviations from true power laws, showing wiggles and wavy forms due to resonances (Krivov et al. 2006, 2013; Thébault & Augereau 2007; Löhne et al. 2008; Kral et al. 2013). However, mean values of these oscillations may still be consistent with power-law exponents that are not too dissimilar from the steady state Dohnanyi-distribution. In fact, Gáspár et al. (2012) find, from a large number of simulations, that \( q \sim -3.65 \), i.e. slightly steeper than commonly assumed. Quoting Miyake & Nakagawa (1993), “\( q \) will be large (\( \sim -2.5 \)) if the coagulation processes are dominant, whereas \( q \) will be small (\( \sim -3.5 \)) if the disruption processes are dominant”, one might infer that disruptive collisions would dominate in debris discs, as expected. To be consistent with the exploited opacities, but also for comparison reasons, we are using a Dohnanyi distribution, i.e. \( n(a) \propto a^{-3.5} \) that we use henceforth. For simplicity, the distribution of particle sizes in the disc is assumed to be homogeneous\(^8\) since the grains are large enough not to be significantly affected by drag forces and radiation pressure.

In Eq. (4), the integral over \( a \) extends over the finite range \( a_{\text{min}} \) to \( a_{\text{max}} \), where we adopt for \( a_{\text{max}} \) the upper bound for the \( \kappa_r \)-calculations, i.e. 1 mm. The smallest size, \( a_{\text{min}} \), is found for grains that are large enough not to be susceptible to the combined radiation pressure and stellar wind drag (Strubbe & Chiang 2006; Pavchan et al. 2009), i.e.
\[
a_{\text{min}} > a_{\text{blow}} \approx \frac{3}{8 \pi G M_{\text{star}} \rho_{\text{grain}}} \left[ \frac{L_{\text{star}}}{c} + M_{\text{star}} \upsilon_0 \right],
\]
where we have set the radiative and wind coupling coefficients to unity for this order of magnitude estimate. Inside the brackets are the radiative and the mechanical momentum rates (“forces”), respectively. The stellar mass loss rate of \( \alpha \) Cen A is close to that of the Sun, i.e. \( 2 \times 10^{-14} M_{\odot} \text{yr}^{-1} \), and also the average wind velocity is similar, viz. \( \upsilon_0 \sim 400 \text{km s}^{-1} \) (Wood et al. 2001, 2005)\(^9\). This implies that the second term in Eq. (5) is negligible and that \( a_{\text{blow}} = 0.64 \mu m \) for the stellar parameters of Table 4 and a grain density of \( 2.5 g \text{ cm}^{-3} \) (for \( \alpha \) Cen B, the corresponding \( a_{\alpha} \)-value is about three times lower). It has been shown that the lower cut-off size is smooth (e.g. Wyatt et al. 2011; Löhne et al. 2012, and references therein) and up to about six times the blow-out radius, i.e. \( a_{\text{min}} \sim 4 \mu m \).

In the next section, we calculate a number of numerical models for Eq. (4) by varying parameter values to get a feeling for how well (and uniquely) the observations can be reproduced. There were marginal excesses corresponding to 2\(^5\) \( \frac{\alpha}{\text{d}r} \) at 24\( \mu m \) for both \( \alpha \) Cen A and \( \alpha \) Cen B.

4.5.2. RADMC-3D exozodi-disc calculations

RADMC-3D is a Monte-Carlo radiative transfer code, written primarily for continuum radiation through dusty media in arbitrary three-dimensional geometry (developed by Dullemond 2012)\(^{10}\). It might seem an enormous “overkill” to use a radiative transfer program for the optically very thin discs discussed here, where the optical depth \( \tau \) is comparable to the fractional luminosity \( f_d \) of the dust disc. However, RADMC-3D is a convenient and user-friendly means to solve the energy equation, calculate SEDs, and convolve the model-images with the appropriate response functions of the used equipment for the observations (e.g. transmission curves, PSFs or beams, etc.). Details regarding the computational procedure can be found in Appendix A and examined parameters are presented in Table 5.

The basic input to RADMC-3D is a stellar model atmosphere (we use 3D interpolations in the PHOENIX/GAIA grid, Brott & Hauschildt 2005), a grid with dust densities for each included dust species, and absorption and scattering coefficients at each wavelength and for each dust species. The inner disc radii are given by the dust vaporation temperature\(^{11} \) of \( \sim 750 \text{K} \) and the outer radii determined by the binary dynamics. The discs have assumed height profiles \( h \sim 0.05 \rho^2 \), with \( \beta = 0 \) (or \( \beta = 1 \); e.g., Wyatt 2008).

Also based on the dynamical model parameters are the dust mass estimations for various power-law exponents of the surface density, \( \Sigma \propto r^\gamma \), where \( \gamma \geq 0 \). For reference, the solar minimum mass nebula (SMMN) has \( \gamma = 1.5 \) (Hayashi 1981). For the SMMN, at \( r_0 = 1 \text{ AU} \), \( \Sigma \sim 2 \times 10^5 \text{ g cm}^{-2} \), whereas exo-planet systems may have slightly steeper laws and somewhat higher \( \Sigma_0 \) (Kuchner 2004).

Various grain size distributions were examined in accordance with Fig. 7 of Miyake & Nakagawa (1993), i.e. \(-4 \leq q \leq -2 \). The results of these computations are visualised in Fig. 10. There, we investigate whether any combination of parameters could be consistent with the observed data, i.e. the flux densities at 5, 24, and 70 \( \mu m \). For \( \alpha \) Cen A, acceptable models would imply values of \( f_d \sim 10^{-3} \) for its hypothetical zodi, where \( q \approx -4 \) to \(-3.5 \). This would appear to agree with the result by Gáspár et al. (2012), i.e. \( q = -3.65 \).

However, no such model was found that would fit the data for \( \alpha \) Cen B, as illustrated in the right-hand panel of Fig. 10. These models assume a flat \( \Sigma \)-distribution, i.e. \( \gamma = 0 \). To be compatible with the observations, models for \( \gamma \neq 0 \) would require very high values of \( \gamma \) (up to 10), making these “discs” more ring-like. However, best agreement was still achieved with \( \gamma = 0 \), when the model disc of \( \alpha \) Cen B had less of an extent than the dynamically allowed size, i.e. \( R_{\text{in}} = 0.1 \text{ AU} \) and \( R_{\text{out}} = 0.5 \text{ AU} \). The temperature profile is given by \( T(r) = 745 (r/0.05 \text{AU})^{-0.55} \text{ K} \).

\(^8\) In general, grain sizes may not be homogeneously distributed throughout circumstellar discs. Smaller grains may be more abundant in the outer parts of the discs and may even reside in the dynamical unstable regions in a binary, owing to production through collisions and radiation pressure (e.g. Thébault et al. 2010).

\(^9\) In this work the binary is not resolved into its components A and B, so that the quoted values refer to both of them. Although \( \alpha \) Cen B is the more active star of the two, we simply assumed equal mass loss rates.

\(^{10}\) http://www.ita.uni-heidelberg.de/~dullemond/software/radmc-3d/

\(^{11}\) This corresponds approximately to the low-density extrapolation of the data for olivine given by Pollack et al. (1994).
Black curves depict dust SEDs, whereas blue curves display the total, i.e. $S_{\nu}^{dust} + S_{\nu}^{gas}$. For each $q$, there are graphs for a selection of initial dust mass estimates and the fractional dust luminosity, $f_d = L_{dust}/L_{star}$, is shown next to each curve. The 100 $\mu$m data were not part of the fitting procedure. 

Right: same as the left panel but for $\alpha$ Cen B and with the total emission shown in red.

For both $\alpha$ Cen A and B, these limiting values of $f_d$ and $m_d$, respectively, would correspond to some $10^2$ and 10 times those of the solar system zodi dust in $\leq 100\mu$m size particles (Roberge et al. 2012; Fixsen & Dwek 2002; Nesvorný et al. 2010). Fixsen & Dwek (2002) estimate the total mass of the asteroid belt at about 0.03 $M_\odot$ ($2 \times 10^{24}$ g). Heng & Tremaine (2010a,b) have calculated total disc masses for ages of about 3 Gyr. Their Fig. 7 would indicate that the mass of a “collision-limited” disc with a semi-major axis $\leq$ 4 AU and detected at 24 $\mu$m would amount to $\sim 0.1 M_\odot$. In both cases, these estimations refer effectively to discs around single stars, and it is not entirely clear to what degree this also applies to multiple systems.

5. Conclusions

Based on FIR and submm photometric imaging observations from space (Herschel) and the ground (APEX) of $\alpha$ Cen, the following main conclusions can briefly be summarised as

- Both binary components A and B were detected individually at 70 $\mu$m. At longer wavelengths, 100–870 $\mu$m, the pair was unresolved spatially during the time of observation, i.e. 8$''$/7 in 2011.
• At 100 and 160 μm, the solar twin α Cen A displays a temperature minimum in its SED, where the radiation originates at the bottom of its chromosphere. At longer wavelengths higher radiation temperatures are observed. This $T_{\text{min}}$-effect is also marginally observed for α Cen B.

• For solar-type stars not displaying the $T_{\text{min}}$-phenomenon, compensating for the “missing flux” by radiation from optically thin dust could account for fractional dust luminosities, $f_d \sim 2 \times 10^{-7}$, comparable to that of the solar system Edgeworth-Kuiper belt.

• Combining Herschel data with mid-infrared observations (Spitzer) indicates marginal (2.5σ) excess emission at 24 μm in the SEDs of both stars. If caused by circumstellar emission from dust discs, fractional luminosity and dust mass levels would be some 10 to 100 times those of the solar zodiacal cloud.

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Appendix A: Orbital dynamics and disc modelling

The test particle simulations were done for two reasons: firstly, to assess the binary dynamics per se and, secondly, for the steady state results to be used as disc models for radiative transfer simulations.

The standard equation of motion for circumstellar dust grains (around a single star) sums up most of the physical processes a grain experiences and is written as (Robertson 1937; Stark & Kucزهر 2008)

$$a_n = \frac{G M_*}{r_n^3} (1 - B_n) r_n \left(1 + \frac{SW}{2} B_n G M_* \frac{r_n^2}{n_i} \left(\tilde{r} + e_n\right) + \sum_l \frac{G m_l}{|r_l - r_n|} (r_l - r_n) \right) \quad (A.1)$$

for each test particle $n$. Here $B_n$ is the ratio between radiation pressure and gravitation exhibited on particle $n$, $SW$ is the ratio between stellar-wind drag and Poynting-Robertson drag and is for the Sun about one third ($0.2-0.3$, Gustafsson 1994), and $m_l$ and $r_l$ are the mass and position of any planet in the system.

As hinted in Sect. 4.5.1, we consider grain sizes $\gtrsim 4 \mu$m. This is more than six times the blow-out radius, and consequently, we only solve the classical restricted three-body-problem, i.e.

$$a_n = -\frac{G M_A}{|r_n - r_A|^3} (r_n - r_A) - \frac{G M_B}{|r_n - r_B|^3} (r_n - r_B) \quad (A.2)$$

for each test particle $n$. These simulations implemented a Runge-Kutta 4 integrator to solve the motions.

One particle disc was simulated at a time. The two circumstellar discs had identical initial conditions except for the central star; i.e., they had $10^4$ particles in discs with constant particle density and radii smaller than 5 AU. The circumbinary disc also had constant particle density but was 100 AU in radius. (This was varied, but we only show results from the disc with 100 AU radius.) The circumbinary disc’s outer radius is, in contrast to the circumstellar discs, not constrained by the employed dynamics. Therefore the outer edge seen in Fig. 3 is artificial.

All discs were left to run for $10^3$ periods, i.e. $\sim 8 \times 10^3$ yr, which was found to be sufficient to achieve a steady state. That the disc had settled by that time was verified with much longer runs (e.g. $\sim 8 \times 10^5$ yr). At the inner edge of the circumstellar discs, the grid resolution was up to 0.047 AU. On the much larger scale of the circumbinary disc, time steps of 0.1 yr were sufficient.

Finally, particles that came either closer than 0.001 Hill radii to each star or farther out than 1000 AU from the barycentre were removed. These limits were arbitrarily set on the basis of previous tests. The number of particles remaining varied from run to run with e.g. 2496 as the lowest ($\sim 100$ with initial disc radius of 5 AU) up to 6717 (again $\sim 100$ but with initial disc radius of 0.2 AU). The α Cen A disc with initial radius of 5 AU had 3538 remaining particles.

To compute dust SEDs, the dust disc density grid was obtained directly from the steady state discs. These were converted to a grid of mass densities with a large number of initially guessed dust masses, $m_{\text{dust}}$. The proper temperature and density profiles yielded SEDs, which were compared to the data. The best fit was selected on the basis of its $\chi^2$-value.

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