Chandra Science Highlight

Giant X-ray Light Echo from Flaring Neutron Star Circinus X-1

Chandra image of Circinus X-1 taken after a bright flare. Four separate rings of dust scattering echoes due to four separate interstellar dust clouds are visible in the image. Red, green and blue colors correspond to low (1-2 keV), medium (2-3 keV) and high (3-5 keV) X-ray energies, respectively. The sharp edges are caused by the large size of the X-ray rings relative to the field-of-view of the Chandra detectors, providing only partial coverage.

- Circinus X-1 exhibited a bright X-ray flare in late 2013. Follow-up observations with Chandra and XMM-Newton from 40 to 80 days after the flare revealed a bright X-ray light echo in the form of four well-defined rings with radii from 5 to 13 arcminutes, growing in radius with time.
- Radio data from the Mopra radio telescope in Australia show several intervening clouds of dust and gas along the line of sight.
- The light echoes are produced by X-rays bouncing off the clouds and arriving at Earth from different angles.
- Observations of the sizes of the rings at a known time after the flare provide the distance to the source, and an accurate estimate of the energy in the flare.


Credit: X-ray: NASA/CXC/Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison/S.Heinz et al; Optical: DSS

Instrument: Chandra ACIS Observation

Scale: Image is 34 arcmin across (about 300 light years)

Distance Estimate: 31,000 light years

CXC Operated for NASA by the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory

July 2015