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Formation of an embryonic supermassive star in the first galaxy

Kohei Inayoshi,1,2 Kazuyuki Omukai3 and Elizabeth Tasker4

1Department of Physics, Graduate School of Science, Kyoto University, Kyoto 606-8502, Japan
2Department of Astronomy, Columbia University, 550 West 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, USA
3Astronomical Institute, Tohoku University, Sendai 980-8578, Japan
4Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, Hokkaido University, Sapporo 060-0810, Japan

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ABSTRACT

We studied the gravitational collapse of a warm (∼8000 K) primordial-gas cloud as a candidate progenitor for a supermassive star (SMS; ≥10⁵ M⊙) using a three-dimensional hydrodynamical simulation including all the relevant cooling processes of both H₂ and H, which can potentially induce cloud fragmentation. This is the first simulation of this kind to resolve protostar formation. We find that from a weakly turbulent initial condition, the cloud undergoes runaway collapse without a major episode of fragmentation. Although the H₂ fraction jumps by a large factor via the three-body reaction at ∼10⁻¹³ g cm⁻³, its cooling remains inefficient due to the optical thickness, and the temperature remains ≥3000 K. When the central core of the cloud becomes opaque to continuum radiation at ∼10⁻⁸ g cm⁻³, a hydrostatic protostar with ≥0.2 M⊙ is formed. The protostar grows to the mass ≥1 M⊙ and the radius ≳2 au within ∼1 yr via rapid accretion of dense filamentary flows. With high accretion rate, ∼2 M⊙ yr⁻¹, the protostar is expected to turn into an SMS within its lifetime, eventually collapsing to a seed for the supermassive black hole observed in the early Universe at z ≈ 7.

Key words: stars: formation – quasars: supermassive black holes – cosmology: theory – dark ages, reionization, first stars.

1 INTRODUCTION

Recent observations reveal the existence of supermassive black holes (SMBHs) with masses ≥10⁵ M⊙ as early as redshift z ≳ 7 (e.g. Fan 2006; Mortlock et al. 2011). Their very existence puts a strong constraint on the origin and formation pathway of SMBHs, since the time required to form such massive objects from stellar-mass seed BHs (∼100 M⊙) exceeds the then Hubble time. As a solution to this conundrum, the formation from massive seed BHs originating in the collapse of supermassive stars (SMSs; ≥10⁵ M⊙) has been suggested (e.g. Begelman, Volonteri & Rees 2006). Seed BHs formed in this way are expected to grow to ≥10⁷ M⊙ by z ≳ 7 via subsequent gas accretion (Di Matteo et al. 2012).

SMSs can be formed within primordial-gas clouds in massive haloes with virial temperature ≥10⁴ K, providing that H₂ cooling is prohibited throughout the protostellar collapse. Without this latter constraint, the gas would rapidly cool via H₂ and fragment into smaller pieces. H₂ has to therefore be dissociated e.g. via the photodissociation by far-ultraviolet (FUV) radiation from nearby star-forming galaxies (Omukai 2001; Bromm & Loeb 2003; Shang, Bryan & Haiman 2010; Inayoshi & Omukai 2011) or the collisional dissociation in the shocked gas (Inayoshi & Omukai 2012). This in place, the cloud can collapse almost isothermally at ∼8000 K solely by the H-atomic cooling. Previous numerical studies (e.g. Bromm & Loeb 2003; Wise, Turk & Abel 2008; Shang, Bryan & Haiman 2010) have implied that such a cloud collapses monolithically without efficient fragmentation. After a protostar is formed at the centre, it then grows rapidly to an SMS via accretion from the envelope at a rate ≥0.1 M⊙ yr⁻¹. Under such a high accretion rate, its growth is not hindered either by strong radiative feedback (Hosokawa, Omukai & Yorke 2012; Hosokawa et al. 2013) or by mass-loss due to stellar pulsations (Inayoshi, Hosokawa & Omukai 2013).

So far, however, most studies (e.g. Regan & Haehnelt 2009; Choi, Shlosman & Begelman 2013; Latif et al. 2013b) have utilized several simplifying assumptions in studying the fragmentation process, e.g. turning off the H₂ cooling, adopting optically thin treatment of Lyα cooling, or using insufficient chemical networks that neglect the H₂ formation. Yet the efficiency of fragmentation depends strongly on the thermal evolution determined by the cooling processes and chemical reactions. As a result, it still remains unresolved whether the cloud fragments during the isothermal collapse at ∼8000 K before forming the protostar. In this Letter, we use a three-dimensional hydrodynamical simulation to study the gravitational collapse of a turbulent primordial-gas cloud with mass ≥10⁵ M⊙. We follow the evolution until the formation of the protostar, including all relevant processes required for examining possible fragmentation during this collapse. Among these, the H₂-line cooling is of primary importance due to its ability to rapidly drop the temperature via thermal...
instability if the gravitational collapse is delayed, a process possible due to turbulence generated during the virialization of the halo. If the thermal instability occurs, the cloud can fragment into many smaller mass clumps instead of forming a single SMS. We therefore simulate the collapse to determine the likelihood of the outcome being a monolithic collapse to a single star or fragmentation into a binary or multiple member system.

2 METHODOLOGY

We performed a three-dimensional hydrodynamical simulation of the gravitational collapse of a primordial-gas cloud using the adaptive mesh refinement code, ENZO (Bryan et al. 2014). Our main purpose is to investigate the gas dynamics over a wide range of the densities \((10^{-21} \lesssim \rho \lesssim 10^{-7} \text{ g cm}^{-3})\). The cloud initially has a spherically symmetric density profile enhanced by a factor \(f(=1.6)\) above the critical Bonnor–Ebert (BE) distribution, an isothermal sphere embedded in a pressurized medium and supported in marginal hydrostatic equilibrium against gravitational collapse. According to cosmological simulations (e.g. Wise et al. 2008), at the centre of a first galaxy with virial temperature \(\gtrsim 10^4\) K, forming in an environment where the \(H_2\) formation is suppressed, a warm \((T \sim 8000\) K) cloud with \(\sim 10^5\) \(M_\odot\) becomes gravitationally unstable at \(\rho \sim 10^{-20}\) g cm\(^{-3}\) and collapses. Based on this, we set the central density and temperature of the cloud to \(\rho_c = 1.67 \times 10^{-20}\) g cm\(^{-3}\) and \(T = 8000\) K, giving a mass and radius of \(1.17 \times 10^5\) \(M_\odot\) and 10.8 pc, respectively. Although we here do not impose an external FUV radiation, \(H_2\) is collisionally dissociated for \(\rho \gtrsim 10^{-20}\) g cm\(^{-3}\) and \(T \gtrsim 6000\) K. Note that we neglect the dark-matter gravity since the cloud is already bound by the self-gravity of its gas. Our simulation box size is \((50\) pc\(^3\)) and refinement is controlled by insisting that one Jeans length is resolved by at least 64 grid cells (e.g. Turk et al. 2012). Under this condition, the simulation uses 23 out of the allowed 25 refinement levels, ensuring we are resolved by the above criteria at all times and giving a limiting resolution of \(\lesssim 0.1\) au.

The development of turbulence in the central region of forming first galaxies has been suggested by numerical simulations (e.g. Wise & Abel 2007; Greif et al. 2008). In the initial phase of collapse with \(\sim 10^{-20}\) g cm\(^{-3}\), the turbulence is still subsonic in the cloud. To consider the density and velocity perturbations due to the turbulence, we initially impose a subsonic velocity field (the root mean square of the velocity is set to \(0.1c_s\)) with power spectrum \(P(k) \propto k^{-4}\), which corresponds to the so-called Larson’s law for the contemporary star-forming regions (Larson 1981). To ensure that the turbulence is adequately resolved, we select the maximum k-mode value of 1/10 of the number of cells across the cloud.

We consider the non-equilibrium primordial chemistry of 9 species (\(H\), \(H_2\), \(e^-\), \(H^+\), \(H_2^+\), \(He\), \(He^+\), and \(He^{++}\)) and 13 hydrogen reactions selected to reproduce the correct thermal/chemical evolution of the warm atomic-cooling cloud (reactions 3, 4, 7–10, 12, 15–18, 28, and 32 in table 2 of Omukai 2001). We adopt the reaction rate coefficients updated by the following studies: 7–10 (Coppola et al. 2011), 15 (Martin, Schwarz & Mandy 1996), 17 (Stibbe & Tennyson 1999), and 28 (Ferland et al. 1992). The four helium reactions originally included in ENZO are also present, although they are not relevant in our calculation. We initially assume a uniform distribution of ionization degree with \(10^{-4}\) and \(H_2\) molecular fraction with \(10^{-7}\), respectively (e.g. Shang et al. 2010).

At high density, the chemical reactions proceed faster than the cloud collapse and chemical equilibrium is achieved. To smoothly connect the non-equilibrium chemistry to that of equilibrium, we solve the chemical network including both the forward and reverse reactions for dominant processes. To solve the chemistry equations, we employ the piecewise exact solution method (Inoue & Inutsuka 2008) instead of the original ENZO solver, which cannot follow the chemical evolution with high enough density to reach the chemical equilibrium. For the radiative cooling, we consider atomic cooling (H Lyα, two-photon emission, and \(H^-\) free–bound, free–free emission) and \(H_2\) cooling (ro-vibrational line and collision-induced emission). We also include the suppression of the cooling rate in the optically thick case by using the optical depth estimated as \(\rho x L_c\) (e.g. Omukai 2001; Shang et al. 2010), where \(x\) includes the \(H_2\)-line opacity and the Rosseland mean opacity considering the H Rayleigh scattering, the \(H_2\) collision-induced absorption, and the \(H^-\) bound-free and free–free absorption, and \(L_c\) the size of the central core, which is approximately given by the Jeans length for the spherically symmetric cloud in the runaway collapse. Finally, note that we do not include the heating/cooling associated with the chemical reactions because their effect is negligible during the thermal evolution of the atomic-cooling clouds.

3 RESULTS

Fig. 1 shows the density distribution at the end of the simulation, where the central density reaches \(\sim 10^{-7}\) g cm\(^{-3}\), for four different spatial scales: from the top-left clockwise, large-scale gas distribution \((-1\) pc), the collapsing core \((-0.1\) pc), the central \(-100\) au region, and the protostar formed at the centre \((-10\) au). The central portion of the cloud undergoes the runaway collapse. The turbulence forms filamentary structures that channel material into the central region \((\rho \sim 10^{-8}\) g cm\(^{-3}\)), feeding the protostar. The left-bottom panel presents the density distribution around the protostar. At the end of this simulation, the protostellar mass reaches \(\sim 1\) \(M_\odot\) and its radius \(\gtrsim 2\) au. These values are consistent with the result of the stellar-structure calculation by Hosokawa et al. (2012), who assumed a steady and spherical accretion.

Fig. 2 shows the evolution of mass-weighted radial profiles of (a) density, (b) temperature, and (c) \(H_2\) fraction. During collapse,
Formation of a supermassive star

Figure 2. Mass-weighted radial profiles at different evolutionary stages of (a) mass density, (b) temperature, and (c) H$_2$ fraction. The time sequences are indicated by numbers: (1) $8.0 \times 10^5$ yr after the initial state of our simulation. (2) $9.3 \times 10^4$ yr after (1): the main coolants are the Ly$\alpha$ and two-photon emissions. (3) $1.6 \times 10^4$ yr after (2): dominant cooling process shifts to the H$^-$ free–bound emission in the central core. (4) $1.8 \times 10^3$ yr after (3): H$_2$ formation via the three-body reaction becomes active at the centre. (5) $2.8 \times 10^2$ yr after (4): the cloud becomes optically thick to dominant H$_2$ lines. (6) $1.8 \times 10^1$ yr after (5): the cloud becomes optically thick to the continuum opacities and a hydrostatic core is formed at the centre. (7) 1.2 yr after (6): the final state of the simulation.

Figure 3. Phase diagrams showing the distribution of (a) density–temperature and (b) density–H$_2$ fraction of the collapsing cloud at the end of the simulation. The colours represent the total mass at the respective density and temperature.

The density profile obeys the self-similar solution, which consists of the central core with flat density distribution and envelope with the $\rho \propto r^{-2}$ law (e.g. Larson 1969). The central core collapses almost isothermally until $\sim 10^{-8}$ g cm$^{-3}$ and a hydrostatic core, i.e. a protostar, with its mass $\simeq 0.2$ M$_\odot$ and radius $\simeq 1$ au is formed at the centre, where the core temperature is $\sim 4000$ K. As the protostar grows to $\sim 1$ M$_\odot$, the temperature inside the protostar adiabatically increases to $\sim 10^4$ K.

The mass-weighted H$_2$ fraction initially approaches the equilibrium value ($\sim 10^{-8}$), where the formation through the electron-catalysed reaction (H + e$^-$ → H$^-$ + $\gamma$; H$^-$ + H → H$_2$ + H) balances the collisional dissociation (H$_2$ + H → 3H). At $\rho > 10^{-12}$ g cm$^{-3}$, the H$_2$ fraction jumps up to $\sim 0.1$ by the three-body reaction (3H → H$_2$ + H) in the inner region ($r \lesssim 10^3$ au). However, neither the H$_2$-line nor collision-induced-emission (CIE) cooling plays a significant role in the thermal evolution: H$_2$ lines are optically thick for $\rho > 10^{-10}$ g cm$^{-3}$ and other continuum cooling is more important than the H$_2$ CIE cooling. After the protostar formation, the H$_2$ is dissociated inside owing to the high temperature.

Figure 3 presents the phase diagrams showing the distribution of (a) temperature and (b) H$_2$ fraction as a function of the density at the end of the simulation. The cloud consists of two thermal phases of the gas, i.e. hot ($\sim$ several $10^3$ K) and cold ($\sim 10^3$ K) components. As seen in Figs 2(b) and 3(a), most of the collapsing gas resides in the hot component, which ultimately forms a protostar at the centre. Note that since the density profile follows the self-similar form during the runaway collapse and thus the radial position has one-to-one correspondence with the density (Fig. 2a), the density–temperature distribution of the hot component is just a reflection of the temperature profile (Fig. 2b). The H$_2$ fraction in the hot component remains almost constant at $\sim 10^{-8}$ up to $10^{-13}$ g cm$^{-3}$ and then increases almost proportionally to the density for higher density by
the three-body reaction until finally dissociated at \( \gtrsim 10^{-8} \text{ g cm}^{-3} \) as a result of the protostar formation.

Meanwhile, the cold component exists over the wide density range, \( 10^{-18} \lesssim \rho \lesssim 10^{-11} \text{ g cm}^{-3} \). This gas is produced by the thermal instability induced by the combination of the adiabatic cooling due to the turbulent expansion and the subsequent \( \text{H}_2 \) cooling. Once the temperature decreases via adiabatic cooling, the \( \text{H}_2 \) dissociation becomes inefficient, enhancing the \( \text{H}_2 \) fraction and its cooling rate, causing the temperature to plummet. This process is known as the chemothermal instability associated with the \( \text{H}_2 \) formation/dissociation (Yoshii & Sabano 1979; Silk 1983).

Fig. 4 presents the temperature distribution and velocity fields for two different scales. In both panels, the coexistence of the cold and hot components is clearly visible. Turbulence establishes a complex structure of interacting shocks and stagnation points. The cold components in the two scales are produced by the thermal instabilities due to the \( \text{H}_2 \) formation through the electron-catalysed reaction (\(~0.2 \text{ pc}\)) and three-body reaction (\(~200 \text{ au}\)), see also Fig. 3(b). The cold components are not massive enough to be gravitationally bound and have no influence on the evolution of the central collapsing region.

Fig. 5 presents the profiles of the radial and tangential velocities. Also shown for comparison is half of the Keplerian velocity (short-dashed) and sound speed (dotted) are also shown. All the quantities are spherically averaged.

Fig. 5 presents the profiles of the radial and tangential velocities (long-dashed) at the end of the simulation. For comparison, a half of the Keplerian velocity (short-dashed) and sound speed (dotted) are also shown. All the quantities are spherically averaged.

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4 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

We simulated the collapse of a massive (\( \gtrsim 10^5 \text{ M}_\odot \)) and warm (\(~8000 \text{ K}\)) primordial-gas cloud using idealized initial conditions with a weakly turbulent field. We found that the cloud collapses
nearly isothermally through H-atomic cooling and does not undergo a major episode of fragmentation, despite the inclusion of turbulence. Finally, a small protostar with mass \( \sim 0.2 \, M_\odot \) is formed when the central part becomes optically thick to the continuum radiation at \( \rho \gtrsim 10^{-3} \, g \, cm^{-3} \) and grows to the mass \( \sim 1 \, M_\odot \) and radius \( \sim 2 \, au \) by the end of the simulation.

Once formed, the protostar grows via rapid accretion from the dense filamentary flows at an approximately constant rate \( \sim 2 \, M_\odot \, yr^{-1} \). Where the accretion rate is higher than \( 10^{-2} \, M_\odot \, yr^{-1} \) (dashed line in Fig. 6), the protostar is known to develop a giant-like structure with a bloated stellar envelope and contracting central core (Hosokawa et al. 2012, 2013) and grows while avoiding the significant mass-loss due to the stellar pulsation (Inayoshi et al. 2013). Since the effective temperature of such a supergiant protostar is \( \lesssim 10^4 \, K \), the UV feedback is unlikely to prevent the mass accretion on to the star. However, recent simulation by Regan, Johansson & Haehnelt (2014) suggests the possibility of disc fragmentation around the protostar. Further simulations of the disc and the fragments with proper treatment of the H2-line cooling are needed to see whether such a high accretion rate continues to be maintained. After the protostar grows to an SMS \( (\gtrsim 10^5 \, M_\odot ) \) via rapid accretion, it eventually collapses through the general relativistic instability to turn into a seed of high-\( z \) SMBHs (e.g. Mortlock et al. 2011).

In this Letter, we started the calculation from the initial condition of a critical BE sphere with turbulence, and found a single protostar formed without a major episode of fragmentation. Since at \( \lesssim 0.1 \, pc \) the profiles of the density and tangential velocity converge to self-similar forms with \( \rho \propto r^{-2} \) and \( v_{tan} \propto 0.5 \, v_{Kepler} \), independent of the initial conditions (Figs 2 a and 5), we expect that our conclusions depend only weakly on the initial setup. To confirm this speculation, we need to investigate the dependence on the initial conditions. In particular, strong turbulence could prompt the efficient fragmentation, instead of forming a single SMS (e.g. Clark et al. 2011). Similarly, SMS formation from the proper cosmological initial condition remains to be explored for future studies.

In this simulation, we have neglected the effect of magnetic fields. Previous studies suggest that magnetic field strength could rival that of the turbulent energy (e.g. Federrath et al. 2011; Turk et al. 2012; Latif et al. 2013a) with the effect of either increasing accretion efficiency (via magnetic breaking producing a more spherical flow) or decreasing it via protostellar jets (Machida et al. 2006). This exploration will be left for future investigations.

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