

The circumstellar envelope of IRC+10216 from milli-arcsecond to arcmin scales [★]

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ABSTRACT

Aims. Analysis of the innermost regions of the carbon-rich star IRC+10216 and of the outer layers of its circumstellar envelope have been performed in order to constrain its mass-loss history.

Methods. High dynamic range near infrared adaptive optics and high angular resolution deep V-band images of its circumstellar envelope collected with VLT/NACO and VLT/FORS1 instruments have been analyzed.

Results. Maps of the sub-arcsecond structures, or clumps, in the innermost regions are derived from the near-infrared observations. The morphology of these clumps is found to strongly vary from J- to L-band. Their relative motion appears to be more complex than proposed in earlier works: they can be weakly accelerated, have a constant velocity, or even be motionless with respect to one another. From V-band imaging, a high spatial resolution map of the shell distribution in the outer layers of IRC+10216 is presented. Shells are well resolved up to a distance of about 90'' to the core of the nebula and most of them appear to be composed of thinner elongated shells. Finally, by combining the NACO and FORS1 images, a global view, showing both the extended layers and the bipolar core of the nebula together with the real size of the inner clumps is presented.

Conclusions. This study confirms the rather complex nature of the IRC+10216 circumstellar environment. In particular, the coexistence at different spatial scales of structures with very different morphologies (clumps, bipolarity and almost spherical external layers) is very puzzling. This confirms that the formation of AGB winds is far more complex than usually assumed in current models.

Key words. stars: AGB and post-AGB – stars: variables: general – stars: individual: IRC+10216 – stars: mass-loss – stars: circumstellar matter – techniques: high angular resolution

1. Introduction

Low- and intermediate-mass stars lose a large amount of their initial mass when they evolve along the Asymptotic Giant Branch (AGB) and beyond. During these mass-loss events, a huge circumstellar envelope (CSE) is formed. IRC+10216 is the best-known example of such evolved stars with an optically thick CSE. Indeed, its envelope almost completely absorbs the central stellar photons in visible light and at shorter wavelengths. This circumstellar environment has therefore been mostly studied in the infrared and millimeter domains, spectral regions where the envelope radiates itself and scatters the stellar light.

At very small scales (arcsec and below), a detailed picture of the IRC+10216 central regions has already been presented

by several groups (see e.g. Haniff & Buscher 1998; Weigelt et al. 1998, 2002; Tuthill et al. 2000, 2005). The central core appears to be composed of a series of clumps whose positions and luminosities vary on time-scales of a few years. The complexity of the structures detected has led to several hypotheses regarding the precise location of the central star.

At much larger scales (up to arcmin), Maun & Huggins (1999, 2000, MH99-00 hereafter) have shown that the IRC+10216 CSE can also be studied in visible wavelength if enough deep images are collected. The nebula brightness then results from galactic ambient light scattered by its dust particles. It is detected up to very large distances to the central star (up to about 6 000 stellar radii) and thus carries information about the mass-loss history during the last few thousand years. MH99-00 have also shown that this fairly round circumstellar envelope is consistent with an isotropic galactic radiation field and a spherically symmetric dust shell (see also Maun et al. 2003). However, on a better spatial resolution (~ 1 arcsec), the envelope consists of a series of discrete and nested multi-

[★] Based on observations collected with the VLT/Antu and Yepun telescopes (Paranal Observatory, ESO, Chile) using the FORS1 and NACO instruments (programs ID 63.I-0177A, 70.C-0565A, 70.C-0271B, 70.D-0271B).

ple shells (or arclets) whose origin is still debated. Although IRC+10216 is the only known AGB with such shells, similar morphology has already been detected around a dozen of planetary nebulae (PN) and about six proto-planetary nebulae (PPN). However, all these PN and PPN are bipolar, contrary to what we observe for their progenitor (assuming that IRC+10216 CSE properties are common for AGB stars). The cause and occurrence of the transition from a spherical multiple-shell CSE to a bipolar one is crucial for the understanding of the mass-loss phenomenon on the AGB and the evolution of the material ejected into the interstellar environment.

To date, no global view of the morphology of the IRC+10216 CSE at different scales exists. The aim of this work is to provide such a global description by combining new high dynamic and high spatial resolution images of its innermost regions collected with adaptive optics techniques together with new deep images of its most external layers. These observations are presented in Sect. 2. We analyze in Sect. 3 the morphology of the innermost regions and their temporal variations. Sect. 4 is devoted to the analysis of the numerous shells found in this envelope and to some of their properties. We then discuss, in Sect. 5, the coexistence of the different morphologies found in the CSE of IRC+10216. Finally, a conclusion is presented in Sect. 6.

2. Observations and reductions

2.1. NACO observations

Infrared images of IRC+10216 were recovered from ESO Science Archive Facility. They were obtained in November 2002 and March 2003, using the adaptive optics system NACO at the ESO/VLT Yepun telescope. NACO is an association of the adaptive optics system NAOS (Rousset 2000) and the spectro-imager CONICA (Lenzen 2003).

We have recovered observations of IRC+10216 obtained with the narrow-band filters NB 1.24 (centered at $\lambda_c = 1.237 \mu\text{m}$, $\Delta\lambda = 0.015 \mu\text{m}$), NB 1.26 ($\lambda_c = 1.257 \mu\text{m}$, $\Delta\lambda = 0.014 \mu\text{m}$), NB 1.64 ($\lambda_c = 1.644 \mu\text{m}$, $\Delta\lambda = 0.018 \mu\text{m}$), NB 1.75 ($\lambda_c = 1.748 \mu\text{m}$, $\Delta\lambda = 0.026 \mu\text{m}$), NB 2.17 ($\lambda_c = 2.166 \mu\text{m}$, $\Delta\lambda = 0.023 \mu\text{m}$) and the broad-band filter L' ($\lambda_c = 3.80 \mu\text{m}$, $\Delta\lambda = 0.62 \mu\text{m}$). The pixel scale on CONICA was respectively 13.27 mas in the narrow-band filters and 27.15 mas in the L' filter. Observation conditions, as well as total on-source integration time for each filter, are summarized in Tab. 1. Calibration files (flat fields and dark exposures) and observations of the PSF reference star HR 3550 were also recovered. The Jitter technique was used in all observations. The box size of the L' broad-band image was about $7'' \times 7''$, and the box sizes in the narrow-band images varied between about $4'' \times 4''$ and $7'' \times 7''$. As shown in Tab. 1, the seeing conditions were variable, ranging between about $0.5''$ and $0.8''$. The best dynamic ranges of the IRC+10216 final images (not deconvolved) were around 7 000, 40 000, 6 000 and 90 000 AFU (Arbitrary Flux Units) for the J, H, K and L bands, respectively. The noise level was found to be smaller than 30 AFU in all images. In the PSF observations, the seeing varied between $0.5''$ and $0.6''$ and the air-masses between about 1.3 and 1.4. The estimated FWHM

Table 1. NACO observations log of IRC+10216.

Date (UT)	Filter	On-source exp. time (sec)	Seeing (")	Air- mass	Dyn. range (AFU)
22 Nov 02	NB 1.64	128	0.6	1.5	28 700
	NB 2.17	120	0.6	1.6	6 200
16 Mar 03	NB 1.26	120	< 0.5	1.3	6 900
	NB 1.64	70	< 0.5	1.3	8 300
	NB 2.17	60	< 0.5	1.3	4 800
18 Mar 03	NB 1.24	210	0.6	1.3	7 200
	NB 1.75	103	0.7	1.3	41 500
	NB 2.17	200	0.8	1.3	5 200
	L'	183	0.6	1.3	92 500

of the PSF star was around 70 mas in the J and H bands, 80 mas in the K-band and 120 mas in the L-band.

Standard reduction procedures were applied using self-developed routines. The raw images were sky subtracted, then divided by the flat-field and corrected from hot pixels. In each filter, the images were cross-correlated and aligned by sub-pixel shifting, and then combined to produce the final images, eliminating cosmic rays hits. Finally, they were deconvolved with the PSF reference star. We used the Richardson-Lucy algorithm (Richardson 1972; Lucy 1974). Since no PSF data for IRC+10216 were found in the November 22, 2002 observations, we have developed for that night pseudo-PSF images, by analyzing and comparing the other IRC+10216 observations with their corresponding PSF data. Constancy of prominent features present in deconvolved images showed that the PSF selection and the number of iterations (25 typically) for the deconvolution process was performed carefully and conservatively. We have then summed the deconvolved images in each band (see Fig. 1). The highest dynamic range J-band image was obtained from the $1.24\mu\text{m}$ and $1.26\mu\text{m}$ images, which leads to about 14 000 AFU. For the H-band, we have summed both $1.64\mu\text{m}$ and $1.75\mu\text{m}$ narrow-band images, obtaining a dynamic range of about 78 000 AFU. The three $2.17\mu\text{m}$ narrow-band images were combined to build a K-band image ($\sim 16 000$ AFU). Finally, the L-band image has about 92 000 AFU. These images have thus the best dynamical range ever published (see e.g. Tuthill et al. 2005). We note that, over the interval of about 4 months between the first and last observations studied here, no clear variations of the positions of the structures were found.

2.2. FORS1 observations

The observations were collected with the VLT-Antu telescope, equipped with the FORS1 focal reducer. The detector is a 2048×2048 thinned $24\mu\text{m}$ pixel Tektronix chip. The field of view of individual images is $6.8' \times 6.8'$ with a pixel size of 0.2 arcsec (see Appenzeller et al. 1998). All the exposures were acquired in standard FORS1 service mode using a classical Bessel V-band filter. The available data consists of eight 10-min exposure and two 20-min exposure frames collected from 10 to 11 January, 2000, leading to a total observing time of 2 hours. The selected exposures were taken in dark time under

very good seeing conditions and photometric sky. A few other 10-min frames were indeed rejected due to their moderate seeing conditions. The mean airmass was 1.3. The telescope was shifted by a few arcseconds between each individual image.

It was found that individual images reduced by the standard ESO reduction pipeline (which includes standard corrections such as bias subtraction, flat fielding, etc., see Hanuschik & Amico 2000) were of rather poor quality. We suspect this was due to the use of a corrupted flat field. Therefore, a new reduction procedure was performed for all individual exposures (removal of cosmic and aberrant pixels, flat-fielding with a specific mean sky flat for each night, etc.). All exposures taken on the same night were then shifted and stacked. The final reduced image was built by adding the summed exposures collected during the same night, taking into account of their respective total exposure time. It consists of 1900×1900 pixels corresponding to a total field of view of $6.3' \times 6.3'$. The resulting mean seeing, measured from the brightness profile of individual stars, is found to be around $0.65''$. The central core of IRC+10216 is measured with a S/N ratio larger than 100 per pixel and the S/N of the envelope at $20''$ from the center is around 5–6 per pixel. For a more detailed description of this reduction procedure see Vandame (2002), and a preliminary presentation of this image can be found in de Laverny (2003). Due to the wide field of this image, we have estimated a PSF reference by using the median average of a set of suitable point-like stars, that have been, firstly, background-subtracted, centered with sub-pixel accuracy and normalized. The final FORS1 image (see Sect. 4) has been deconvolved using a Richardson-Lucy algorithm (Richardson 1972; Lucy 1974). This procedure has slightly improved the spatial resolution (to less than about $0.6''$) and the S/N ratio (to about 7–8 per pixel at $20''$ from the center).

3. The CSE innermost regions

The JHKL diffraction-limited images of IRC+10216 are displayed in Fig. 1 with a log-scale for the brightness, so that details of the morphology at all flux levels can be seen. The labels A to D shown in the H-band image indicate the features identified and labeled by Haniff & Buscher (1998). The images have been centered at the central star location estimated by Murakawa et al. (2005). These authors have performed a polarimetric study of IRC+10216 in H-band which has independently provided a possible central star position, after series of contradictory hypothesis (see Weigelt et al. 2002 and Tuthill et al. 2005). Following Murakawa et al. (2005), we have used clump A as reference to identify the central star position. We note that their observations were made at the same epoch as the images presented here.

3.1. Morphology at different wavelengths

The images exhibit a bright and inhomogeneous structure which roughly looks like a ring (with a diameter of approximately $0.5''$) composed of clumps (including clumps A to D) around an approximately circular depression. The depression is located at about $(0.15, 0.15)''$ from the image center and has

about 6% of the intensity peak. Clumps A and C are the brightest features. Clump B appears as an elongated feature, at about the NE direction from clump C, and clump D seems to be a more spread out feature. In addition, there is a faint and almost spherical extended envelope (from $\sim 0.5''$ to more than $1''$ from the image center), which also appears to have its center in the ring depression. This depression could thus correspond to an apparent center of the images. Regarding the central star, it is located in the fainter SE region of the mentioned ring. Its position also coincides with a particular elongation in the ring brightness distribution, well seen in the H-band image. Finally, we have verified that the faintest structures seen in the J-band are ghosts, probably due to the light reflected in the NACO optics.

On another hand, a clear difference between the JHKL images concerns the brightness variations of clumps A to D with respect to the images peaks. Clump A remains close to the intensity peak in all bands whereas clumps B and D are brighter at larger wavelengths (from about 10% and 20%, respectively, of the intensity peak in J to about 100% in L). The brightness of clump C increases more slightly and is always brighter than 80%. We also note that the brightness difference between the four clumps strongly decreases with increasing wavelength. The SE region of the ring, close to the assumed location of the central star, remains faint, varying from about 8% to 20% of the intensity peak from J to L. Finally, the extent of the external envelope seems to decrease with increasing wavelength. Considering its limits at 0.2% of the image peak brightness, we have calculated its mean extent as being about $4.8''$, $3.5''$, $2.7''$ and $2.0''$ in the J-, H-, K- and L-band, respectively.

The clump brightness variations as well as the extent of the envelope at different wavelengths may reveal that we mostly detect, in K & L, the emission of the heated dust, whereas at shorter wavelengths the scattered stellar emission becomes more important. This is in agreement with models of the spectral energy distribution computed for IRC+10216 (see e.g. Maun et al. 2003). In the K & L bands, the dust emission is indeed ~ 100 times larger than the scattered stellar light which becomes dominant below $\sim 1\mu\text{m}$. Therefore, we can deduce that most of the clumps seen close to the star in the L-band have approximately the same temperature. On the contrary, in the J-band optical depth effects could explain the different brightness of the clumps.

3.2. Temporal variations

Temporal changes of the IRC+10216 innermost regions have already been reported by Tuthill et al. (2000), Weigelt et al. (2002) and references therein. Weigelt et al. (2002) have estimated approximately linear displacements between clumps A-C and A-D, and a possible acceleration of 5 mas yr^{-2} for the separation A-B. Tuthill et al. (2000, 2005) have identified two sub-components in clump B: NE1 and NE2 close and far from clump C, hereafter referred as B_1 and B_2 , respectively. They have proposed that clumps B_1 , B_2 and D move away from A, apparently with an uniform acceleration of 3.4 mas yr^{-2} .

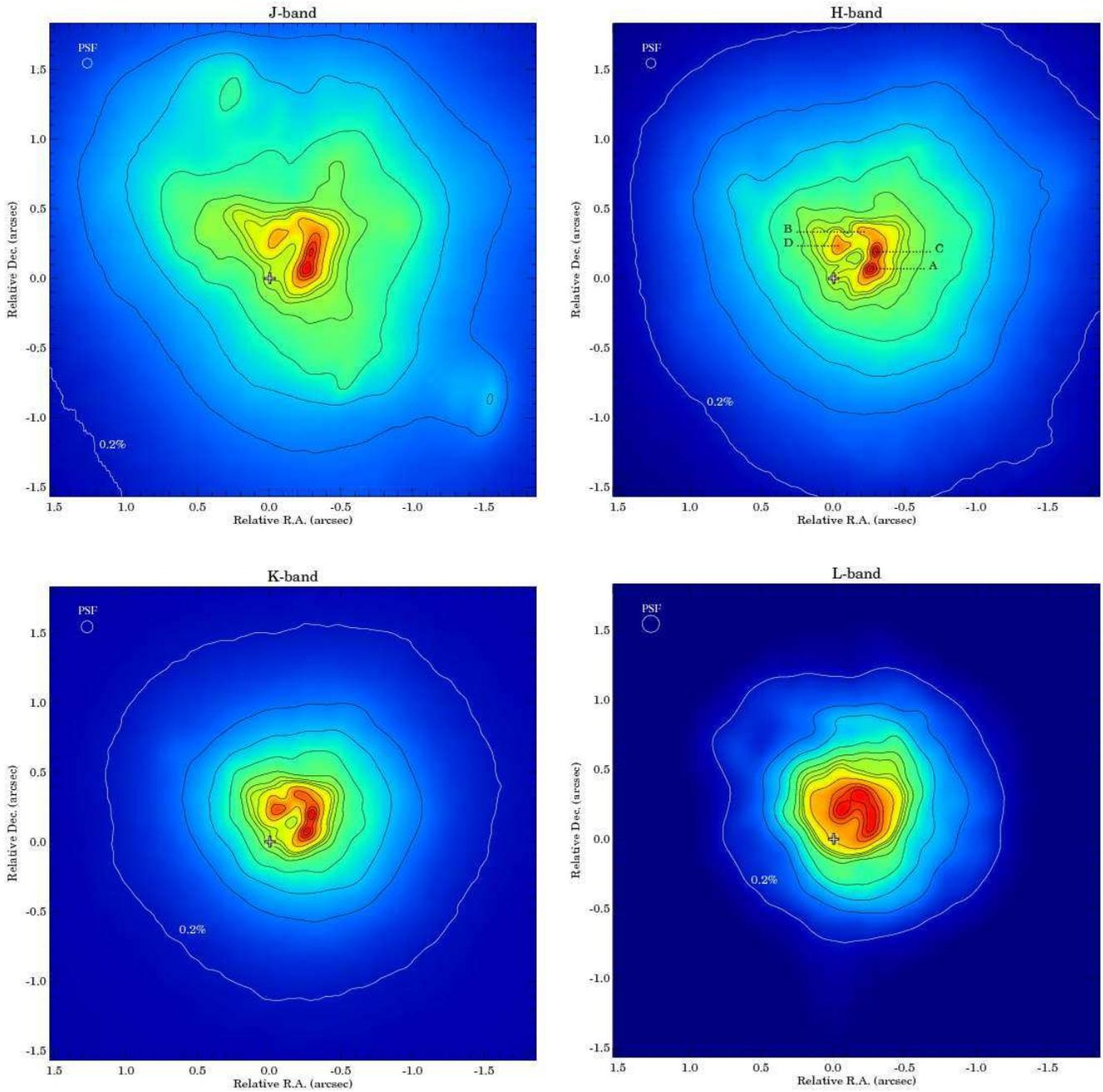


Fig. 1. NACO JHKL images of IRC+10216. Contour levels are 80, 60, 40, 20, 10, 8, 6, 4, 2, 1, 0.5, and 0.2% of the peak surface brightness. North is up and East is left. The white cross at each image center represents the assumed central star position and its size is proportional to the error of $0.03''$ as given by Murakawa et al. 2005. Clumps A to D of the H-band follow the Haniff & Buscher (1998) clump nomenclatures. The resolution is about 70 mas in the J and H bands, 80 mas in K and 120 mas in L (represented by the circles at each image corner).

We have also applied on the H-band¹ image a Fourier filtering procedure in order to remove the structures of lower spatial frequencies (see Fig. 2). We have then identified new features,

¹ We have selected the H-band image (instead of the K-band most commonly analyzed) because of its better spatial resolution and considerably better dynamic range. We have verified that the detected clumps and their estimated positions are similar to those found in the K-band.

in particular, the sub-features B'_0 , B'_1 and B'_2 , in clump B. We found a feature, not identified in previous works, close to the assumed star position (labeled H). We note that the star position assumed in this work could still be discussed and its connection with clump H is very unclear. This clump could be, for instance, a dust cloud just passing between the star and the observer. Future observations are needed to study the evolution of this clump with respect to the central star position.

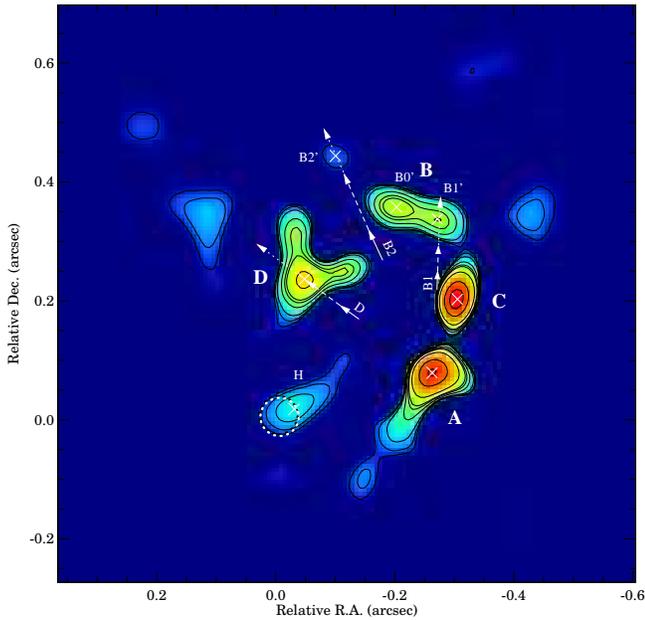


Fig. 2. H-band map of IRC+10216, where only the highest spatial frequencies of the brightness in the Fourier space have been kept. The contour levels are 80, 50, 20, 10, 8, 5, 2, 1 and 0.5% (this minimum level being the estimated noise). The dotted circle is the assumed star position, as in Fig. 1. Main clumps are indicated by the labels A to D, and some sub-features by the smaller labels. The positions of these clumps are shown by the white crosses. Estimated trajectories (from the results of Tuthill et al. 2000) for some clumps with respect to clump A are also shown (see text for details).

Fig. 2 shows estimated apparent trajectories for the previously detected clumps B_1 , B_2 and D, with respect to A. These estimations were made by assuming that the clumps move away from A, as proposed by Tuthill et al. (2000), and by taking into account of their spatial separations. The solid arrows represent the displacement of these clumps during the interval time of their observations, i.e. from 1997 January to 1999 April. The dashed arrows show a prediction for the clumps displacements up to 2003 March, by assuming the averaged velocity of Tuthill et al. (2000). The dotted arrows represent an alternative prediction by assuming the acceleration law proposed by Tuthill et al. (2000). The error margins are about 10 mas for the dashed arrows and 30 mas for the dotted ones. We can see that the previous clumps B_1 and B_2 are most probably the current sub-features B'_1 and B'_2 , respectively. They are currently separated by 258 ± 20 , 394 ± 20 and 261 ± 20 mas from A. B_1 and B_2 thus appear to be less accelerated than expected. At the same time, clump D appears to have moved with a constant velocity. From the clumps separations given by Weigelt et al. (2002), we have also verified that clump C (currently located at 131 ± 20 mas from A) appears to be approximately motionless. Note that choosing clump A as reference could give the illusion that the clumps escape from it. The clumps motions are therefore not compatible with the uniform acceleration law

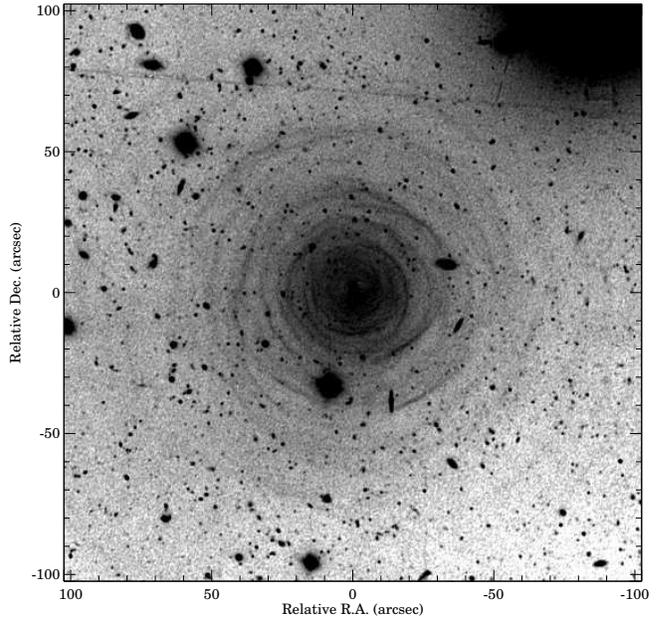


Fig. 3. FORS1 deconvolved V-band image of IRC+10216. North is up and East is left.

proposed by previous studies, although some accelerations may exist for clumps B_1 and B_2 . New high angular resolution observations are needed to disentangle the three-dimensional morphology of the innermost environment of IRC+10216 and to study the temporal variations of these clumps.

4. External layers of IRC+10216

Fig. 3 shows the deconvolved wide-field V-band image of IRC+10216. As already shown by MH99-00, we see an extended halo composed of thin and irregular multiple-shells. They appear to be non-concentric and azimuthally incomplete. The CSE is seen due to external illumination by the ambient Galactic light, scattered by the dust. Since these photons can easily penetrate into the CSE (their optical depth from the outside towards the center being very low), the incomplete shells do reveal lower densities in some parts of the CSE. The shell discontinuities can obviously not be caused by some shadowing effects due to more external material.

4.1. Structure of the external layers

To emphasize the shell morphology, we have removed the central extended halo by applying the same Fourier filtering procedure as for the NACO images. We have also removed several sources (stars or galaxies) by selecting those with observed intensities larger than a prefixed threshold. The source pixels were replaced by averaged values taking into account the local background and the noise level. The resulting image is shown in Fig. 4. We have then applied an azimuthal smoothing of 20° around the center. Although this decreases the spatial resolution in the azimuthal direction, the resulting map (Fig. 5) shows

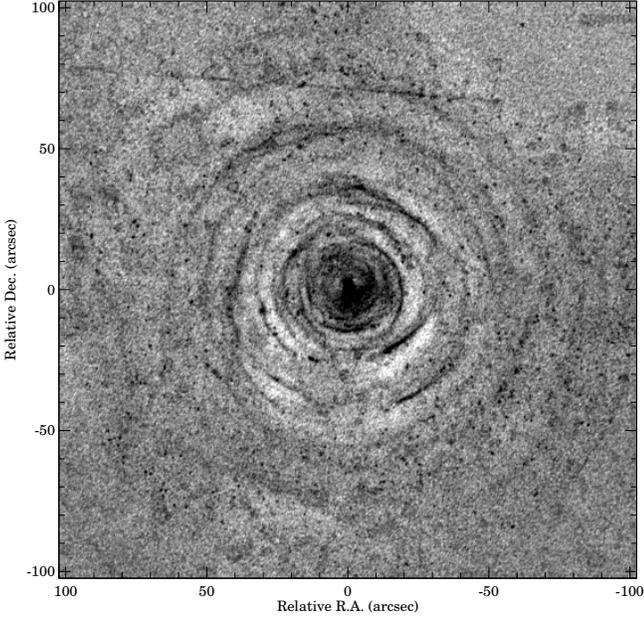


Fig. 4. Deconvolved V-band image after subtraction of the halo of the CSE and removing of most stars and galaxies.

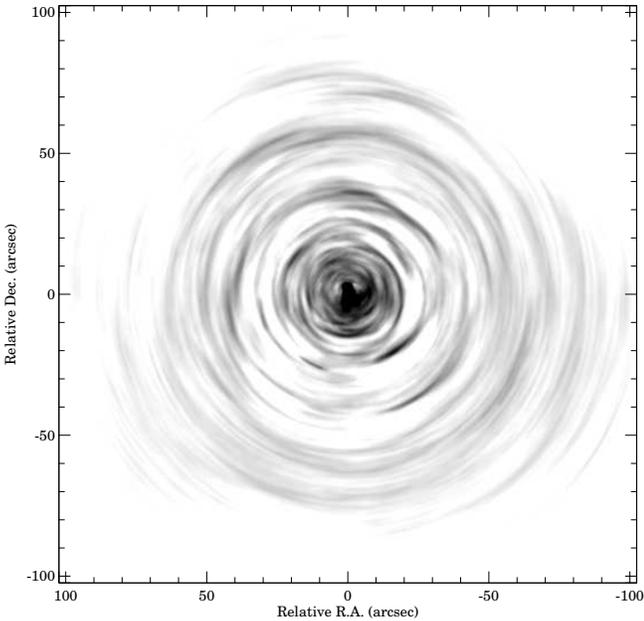


Fig. 5. Schematic map of the shells surrounding IRC+10216 (see text for details).

a clear visualization of the shells, and gives a more realistic and complete pattern than that presented in previous works.

The shell distribution seen in Figs. 4 & 5 are similar to those reported before. For instance, the three faint and apparently thick shells at North, located at about 30–40'', 50–60'' and 70–80'' from the center, can also be seen in the CFHT image (MH99-00). However, these shells, being better resolved in the FORS1 images, appear to be composed of a complex

sub-distribution of thinner ones. Similar thin shells located very close each other are well seen everywhere in the CSE. For instance, the shells labeled *e* and *f* by MH00 (located at distances to the center of about 55'' and 58'', between 347–20° and 23–53°, respectively) are clearly mergers of complex thin shell distributions. Another prominent shell located to the S, at about 15'' from the center, joins series of slightly less prominent thinner ones distributed toward SE, between 10–30'' from center. Moreover, even in the more internal regions, several thin shells seem to merge in thicker ones between about 4'' and 20''. The whole CSE thus appears to be composed of a complex of several thin irregular shells that could be identified as thicker ones in less resolved images. Finally, we note that the separation between apparently thick shells varies a lot with respect to the radial direction.

On another hand, a smooth azimuthally radial profile derived by computing the mean of all the pixels found in annuli 0.9'' thick (see MH99-00 for more details) confirms that the dust is detected up to about 200'' (about 5 800 stellar radii). That corresponds to material ejected about 8 000 years ago (assuming an escape velocity of 14 km s⁻¹ and a distance of 120 pc), i.e. an important fraction of an interpulse on the AGB. Actually, we do not see any edge for the dusty envelope and we are limited by the detector size.

4.2. Thickness of the shells

MH00 have proposed that the shells thickness increases with increasing the distance to the center, in agreement with the natural expansion of the envelope. To analyze the shell profiles and to verify their finding, we propose here a new and more accurate method, by taking into account the non-concentric nature of the shells and the possibility that an apparently thick shell may be resolved into several thinner ones.

Fig. 6 shows the CSE morphology in a map of narrow² radial strips. From this diagram, we clearly see the non-concentric nature of the shells as well as the complexity of their spatial distribution. For instance, the long and thin shell located at distances to the center of about 15–20'', between 220° and 340° from North, has an inclination of about 4° in this diagram with respect to the vertical axis. The shell located at distances to the center of about 30–35'', between 300° and 360° from North, has an inclination of about 17°. At the same time, there are shells with opposite orientations, as those found at distances to the center of about 25–30'' and 45'', from 210° to 260°, and from 200° to 230°, respectively, which make angles of about -16° and -2° with respect to the vertical axis.

Regarding the profile of the thickest shells, we have carefully analyzed the shell labeled *d* in MH00. Fig. 7(a) shows its profile by applying the same method as those authors. Fig. 7(b) shows the profile of the same shell estimated from the more restricted region located at a distance to the center of about 39'', between 70–90°, where it appears more regular. We have then integrated profiles perpendicular to its direction and subtracted

² Radial sections with thickness of 1 pixel and a rotation step of 0.2°. Interpolations between the original image pixels were applied for each step.

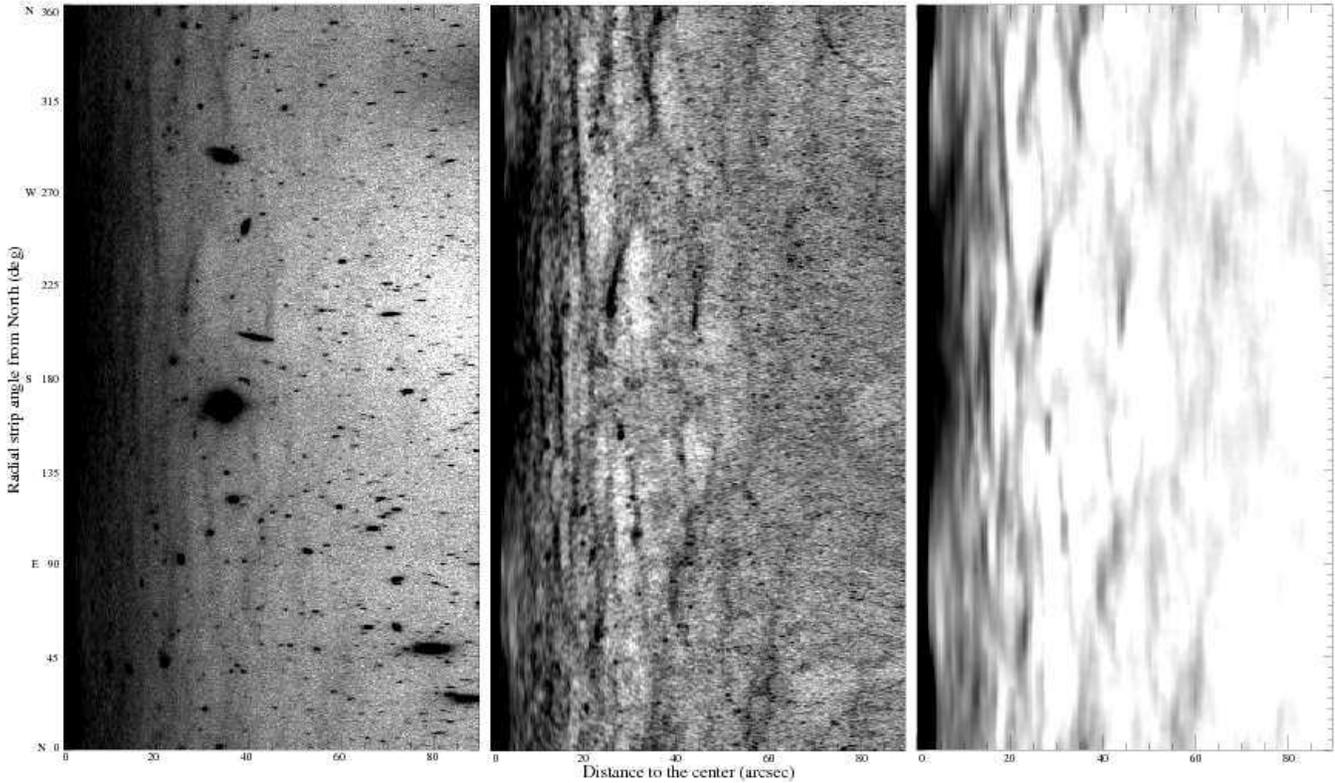


Fig. 6. Map of the shells transformed from polar coordinates to a Cartesian representation. Each horizontal section of these maps represents a narrow radial strip of the FORS1 images, the angles of the strips being with respect to North. Maps to the left, center and right were derived from Figs. 3, 4 & 5, respectively.

the extended halo contribution. The estimated FWHM of the profile (a) is about $3.0''$ (as in MH00), whereas it is about $2.6''$ for the profile (b). The error margins are around $0.4''$. Although both estimates are in agreement within the error bars, a deeper analysis of this shell reveals that even our profile (b) could be widened due to a merging of two thinner ones. Indeed, the profiles shown in Fig. 7 have two close peaks at offsets of about $\pm 0.5''$, which leads us to suspect that there are two thin shells close together in this region and, hence, not well spatially resolved. We note that this shell was carefully analyzed, this pair of peaks being identified in every derived profiles. If we decompose the profile (b) in two close shells, their estimated FWHM are about $1.8'' \pm 0.4''$. In consequence, we have derived several shell profiles by identifying, as above, well resolved thin shells at different distances to the center, (see Fig. 8). The profiles (a) to (d) have good S/N ratios. The profile (e) having a worse S/N ratio is actually a thin feature composing an apparently thicker shell which was also detected by MH00. The FWHM of the two features in the profile (a) and the other four features in the profiles (b) to (e) are, respectively, about: $1.2''$, $1.6''$, $1.5''$, $1.7''$, $1.6''$ and $1.4''$. The error margins are around $0.4''$. In a more general way, we have estimated the FWHM of 23 shells at radial distances from $4''$ to $80''$ (see Fig. 9). We found a mean FWHM value of $1.6''$, with a standard deviation of $0.3''$. The minimum FWHM value of $1.2''$ is found for the innermost analyzed shell, located at about $4''$ from center between $40\text{--}100^\circ$, and also for two shells located at about $9''$ and $11''$ from the center, between $150\text{--}180^\circ$ and $205\text{--}255^\circ$, respectively. The

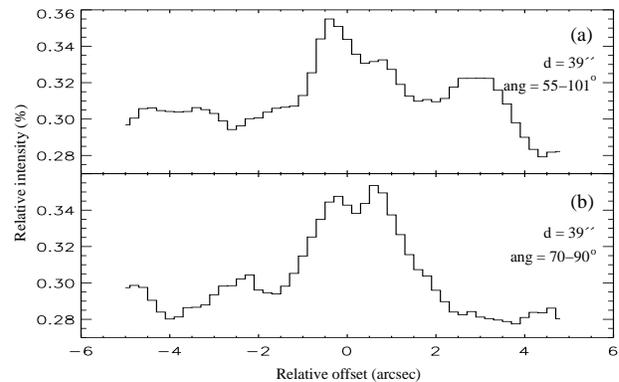


Fig. 7. Comparison of the profile of the shell d estimated as in MH00 (top panel) with its profile derived by our more complex method (bottom panel, see text for details). The distances to the center, d , of the shells and the ranges of their azimuthal angles from north, ang , are given. The relative intensity is with respect to the central peak brightness of the original image.

maximum FWHM value of $2.0''$ is found for the shells located at about $24''$ and $25''$, between $105\text{--}135^\circ$ and $60\text{--}85^\circ$, respectively. The furthest analyzed shell, located at about $80''$ from center, between $30\text{--}45^\circ$, has a FWHM $\approx 1.9''$. The error bars vary between $0.3''$ and $0.6''$. Thin shells are thus detected in the whole envelope and even far from center. We therefore cannot derive a clear increasing relation between the shell thickness

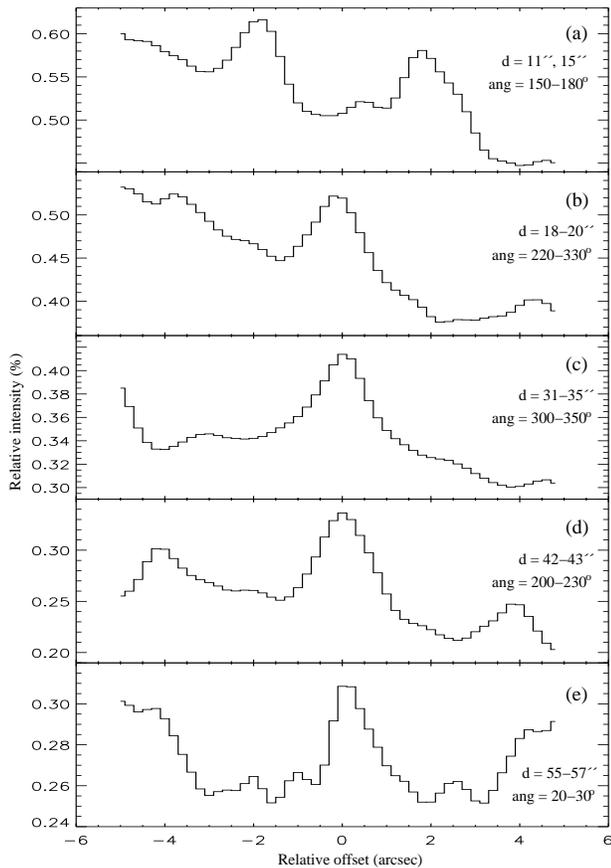


Fig. 8. Profiles of some shells considering their non-concentric nature (see text for details). There are two shells in the panel (a) and one in the others. The given parameters follow the same definitions as in Fig. 7. The ranges in the shell distances to the center, d , are due to their non-concentric nature.

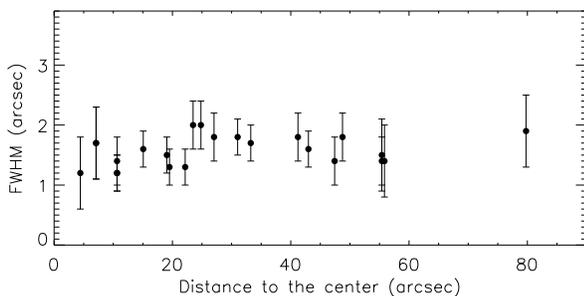


Fig. 9. Relation between the thickness of the shells and their distance to the center.

and the distance to the center such as that proposed by MH00. However, the shells found rather close from center could be resolved into even thinner ones. We therefore could have overestimated their thickness. In consequence, either the slope of the thickness variation with distance proposed by MH00 could still be valid but with very thin shells close to the star, or the shell thickness increases much less than that estimated by these authors.

5. Global view of IRC+10216

In order to better understand the possible links existing between the almost spherical shells and the inner clumps, we describe here the morphology of the inner CSE from the FORS1 image together with the NACO data.

Fig. 10 (left panel) shows a closer view of Fig. 4. MH99-00 have detected three structures suspected to be shells in regions within about $3.1''$ from the center, whereas no such shells are found in our data, possibly because the HST data have a better spatial resolution, despite their lower S/N ratio. The closest identifiable structures are located between $\sim 3''$ and $16''$ from center. Regarding the core of the nebula, it appears clearly asymmetric. Two dominant lobes much brighter than the rest of the envelope lie around the center, making together a direction of about $22^\circ \pm 2^\circ$ with respect to North. The southern lobe being 40% brighter than the northern one. These features likely result from scattered stellar photons in contrast to the reflected galactic light seen elsewhere in the envelope. Such bipolar morphology could be an indication that scattering is more efficient in the polar direction. It could be roughly reproduced by a simple model of scattering dust grains in a non-spherical dusty envelope, with evacuated polar regions, around the star, the system being tilted away from the observer (see e.g. Men'shchikov et al. 2001). We however note that the main shape of the bipolar nebula slightly differs from the one reported by MH00 from their HST image, possibly due to the different spatial resolution.

Fig. 10 (right panel) gives a representation of the IRC+10216 core, by superposing the NACO and FORS images. The two images were arbitrarily positioned by coinciding their intensity peaks. We are conscious that this assumption may be crude since the V and IR images result from very different physical processes. However, this composite image represents for the first time both the extended layers and the bipolar core together with the real size of the inner clumps, and puts forward the difficulty of finding a link between such small and large scale morphologies. Firstly, evidence of clumps far from the center was not found by Huggins & Maun (2002) in a previous analysis of the same FORS1 image. Secondly, shells cannot be identified in the NACO images. We note that, although the region composed of clumps A to D roughly looks like a ring, its center (the depression feature) is not compatible with the star position estimated by Murakawa et al. (2005). Finally, the bipolar structure detected in V-band is also not clearly identified in the near-IR.

6. Conclusion

We have described in this work very high quality images of the CSE of IRC+10216, from its most inner regions to the most external ones. In the central arcsec scale of the JHKL images, sub-arcsec structures (or clumps) identified by other authors have been recovered about 4 years later. We have also derived a map of the brightest clumps found close to the core of IRC+10216. The morphology of these clumps varies strongly with increasing wavelengths and we propose that the closest structures have about the same temperature. Furthermore, by

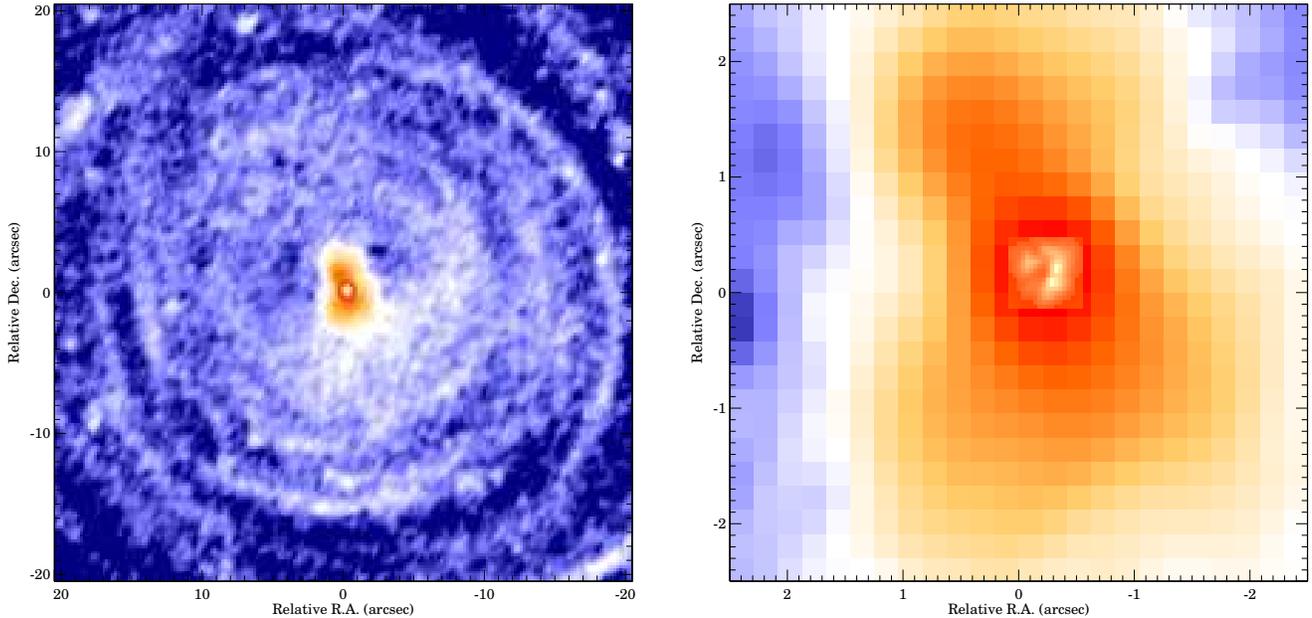


Fig. 10. View of the IRC+10216 CSE inner morphology. Left panel shows the closest structures around the center detected in V-band. Right panel shows the V-band image core, on which has been superposed the NACO H-band image. The overlapping has been done by assuming that the NACO and FORS peak brightness are found at the same location.

analyzing their apparent relative motion, we cannot confirm the uniform outflow acceleration previously proposed since only two bright clumps appear to be accelerated (but at a smaller rate than that already estimated), whereas others clumps could have a constant velocity or even no relative motion. At much larger spatial scales (up to a few arcmin), we present a new map of the non-spherical incomplete shells characterizing the CSE of IRC+10216. Owing to the high spatial resolution of our image, most of the thicker shells actually appear to be composed of thinner elongated ones. Their thicknesses appear rather uniformly distributed between about $1''$ and $2''$, regardless of the distance to the center. Finally, we have combined the NACO and FORS images in order to provide a more global view of this CSE and to compare the typical size of the clumps found very close to the center with the bipolar nebula and with the much more external shells.

This study has confirmed the very complex nature of the IRC+10216 envelope with asymmetries already present on the AGB. Neither the morphology at different spatial scales nor the motions detected very close to the center can be satisfactorily explained by current models on the mass-loss mechanisms in AGB stars and their typical time-scales. For instance, Sandin & Höfner (2004 and references therein) have predicted shell density distributions not compatible with those observed around IRC+10216 (see also on the same topic Meijerink et al., 2003). Another scenario for the formation of the shells in a spherically symmetric stellar wind has been explored by Soker (2000, 2002). He proposed that these shells could be connected to cool magnetic spots on the stellar surface. If these spots are more concentrated near the equator, the mass-loss geometry could

deviate from sphericity and thus favor the formation of shell-like features and/or clumps.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the very complex structures found around IRC+10216 may affect the chemical composition of its envelope. For instance, the clumps detected very close to the central core may favor, by their thermodynamical properties, the formation of the graphite observed in presolar dust grains (Bernatowicz et al. 2005). Furthermore, the presence of high density shells in the photochemically active regions could change the molecular distribution in the envelope by blocking external UV photons (see e.g. MH00; Brown & Millar 2003). Then, high contrast shells of complex molecules may be formed more easily, as confirmed by some millimeter observations (see for instance, HCO^+ , C_2H , C_4H and HC_5N maps by Guélin et al., 2000, and CO maps by Fong et al., 2003).

Finally, future high spatial resolution images of this CSE are still mandatory in order to better understand the motions of its clumps (and in particular the clump H superposed on the assumed central star), their formation/fading, the central star position and the possible evolution of the external shells as their three-dimensional morphology.

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List of Objects

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