



A statistical study of the O₂Atm(0-0) aurora observed by the Swedish satellite MATS

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Abstract.

This study conducts a statistical analysis of the aurora observed by the Swedish satellite MATS. MATS' main instrument is a telescope that performs limb imaging at six different wavelengths intervals, among them the 762 nm wavelength emission in the O₂ atmospheric band. This emission, even though it can not be observed from the ground, plays a big role in the study of atmospheric airglow and aurora. Here, some auroral properties of this emission, such as peak altitude, geomagnetic location, and auroral intensity, are examined and compared to the global auroral activity indicator known as Kp-index. A total of 378 events are analyzed. An average geomagnetic latitude of 67.7° is found in both hemispheres, and an average peak altitude of 103 km is obtained. The peak altitude shows dependence on the magnetic local time. Auroral intensities of the order of 10²-10³ kR are observed.

1 Introduction

The O₂ atmospheric band emission at 762 nm or O₂Atm(0-0) is produced by radiative transition of the O₂(*b*¹Σ_g⁺, *v* = 0) state down to the O₂(*X*³Σ_g⁻, *v* = 0) fundamental state. This emission is known to be one of the main emissions in atmospheric airglow and one of the least understood auroral emissions.

The main mechanism that produces the O₂(*b*¹Σ_g⁺, *v* = 0) state during aurora is based on the energy transfer from the O(¹D) state to the O₂(*X*³Σ_g⁻, *v* = 0) ground state (Deans et al., 1976; Wallace and Chamberlain, 1959), while excitation of the ground state by direct electron impact has been found to contribute less than 5% to the total O₂Atm(0-0) emission (Feldman, 1978). O(¹D) is produced in aurora mainly by the impact of secondary electrons on atomic oxygen and dissociative recombination of O₂⁺ (Solomon et al., 1988). At mesopause altitudes, where the airglow originates, the main sources of O(¹D) during daytime are the dissociation of ozone and molecular oxygen (Grygalashvily et al., 2021). During nighttime, several weak sources of O(¹D) had been identified, but the Kalogerakis-Sharma mechanism (Sharma et al., 2015; Kalogerakis et al., 2016) has recently been proposed to be the major source of O₂(*b*¹Σ_g⁺, *v* = 0) (Kalogerakis, 2019). According to this mechanism, nighttime O(¹D) is populated from the five highest vibrationally excited hydroxyl levels.



Direct observations of the $O_2\text{Atm}(0-0)$ band are not possible from the ground due to the absorption by O_2 below the emitting region. Some measurements have been inferred from other $O_2\text{Atm}$ bands of higher vibrational levels (Vallance Jones and Gattinger, 1973; Gattinger and Jones, 1974). However, the vibrational development of the system is still uncertain, and the inferred values are inconsistent with measurements in situ (Deans et al., 1976; Gattinger et al., 2010).

Rocket observations of the auroral $O_2\text{Atm}(0-0)$ emission have been studied by Deans et al. (1976), Feldman (1978) and McDade et al. (1985). Deans et al. (1976) measured a height integrated intensity of the 762 nm emission above 90 km of 28 kR, with an observed ratio with the N_2^+ at 427.8 nm of $I(762)/I(427.8) = 4.5$, and the peak volumetric emission rate of the $O_2\text{Atm}(0-0)$ band emission was found to be around 105 km altitude. Feldman (1978) found similar values for the integrated 762 nm emission and its peak altitude, but the value of the ratio $I(762)/I(427.8)$ was higher and increased monotonically with decreasing altitude below 120 km instead of decreasing, as found in Deans et al. (1976). McDade et al. (1985) reported measurements of the $O_2\text{Atm}(0-0)$ emission during pulsating aurora. They reported an auroral component of 2 kR, and a ratio $I(762)/I(427.8)$ of ~ 0.3 , revealing the high variability of the $O_2\text{Atm}(0-0)$ emission intensity.

Even though $O_2\text{Atm}(0-0)$ aurora must have also been observed from most satellites able to measure airglow, surprisingly little has been published on the topic. Gattinger et al. (2010) published a study on auroral emissions measured by the OSIRIS spectrograph on board the Odin spacecraft. All wavelengths from 275 to 815 nm were exposed simultaneously, and the auroral spectrum averaged over limb tangent altitudes from 100 to 105 km was obtained. This study revealed the $O_2\text{Atm}(0-0)$ emission at 762 nm to be the brightest feature in the spectrum when viewed from space, measuring a limb brightness of 4000 kR and a ratio $I(762)/I(427.8) = 19.4$.

Here, a statistical study of $O_2\text{Atm}(0-0)$ aurora using measurements obtained from the limb instrument on the MATS satellite is presented. In Section 2, the main instrumentation used is described, followed by an explanation of the analysis performed on the measured data in Section 3. In the results, the Magnetic Local Time (MLT) / magnetic latitude distribution of all auroral events is presented, together with the associated Kp-index. A statistical analysis of the MLT and the monthly dependence of the auroral altitude is also performed. Finally, the discussion is presented in Section 5, and the conclusions are stated at the end.

2 Instrumentation

The primary goal of the Swedish MATS (Mesospheric Airglow/Aerosol Tomography and Spectroscopy) satellite mission is to determine the global distribution of gravity waves and other structures in the mesosphere and low thermosphere region. MATS was launched on November 4, 2022, into a sun-synchronous orbit at an altitude of 585 km. It has nominal equator passages at around 05:30 and 17:30 local time, and its main targets are airglow in the O_2 atmospheric band and sunlight scattered from noctilucent clouds (Gumbel et al., 2020). The main instrument on the MATS satellite is the limb instrument, which provides a horizontal (limb) view of the atmosphere between 75 and 115 km altitude.

The Limb instrument uses a single off-axis three-mirror reflective telescope with a focal ratio of $f/7.3$ and an entrance pupil diameter of 35 mm to capture a $260 \text{ km} \times 40 \text{ km}$ atmospheric scene at the tangent point (Megner et al., 2025; Hammar et al.,



2019). It has six spectral channels, two in the ultraviolet with central wavelengths at 270 and 304.5 nm for the measurement of NLC and four in the near-infrared with central wavelengths at 762, 763, 754, and 772 nm for the measurement of airglow and aurora (Gumbel et al., 2020). The 763 nm channel or "IR2", which we use in this study, has a bandwidth of 8 nm and a sampling of approximately $5.7 \text{ km} \times 290 \text{ m}$ (horizontally/vertically) at the tangent point. The IR2 filter transmission wavelengths include almost the entire emission band (98.1% at 200 K rotational temperature, 96.9% at 250 K, and 95.4% at 300 K).

MATS takes an image every 6 seconds. The calibration of the images uses a parameterized model that takes into account transmissivity of the optics, dark current, and quantum efficiency variations so that the image pixel values display the actual measured radiance (Gumbel et al., 2020; Megner et al., 2025).

3 Analysis

The data set used in this study spans from February 8 to April 30, 2023, corresponding to the period when the satellite was in continuous operation with nominal pointing. Data with tangent point latitude above 45° in both hemispheres are used in the study.

Figures 1a-d show an example of four limb images taken by the limb instrument. In these images, the Earth is located below the field of view. In a) and d), the airglow layer can be observed around pixel row 120, while aurora can be seen in b) and d) as irregular increases in brightness. To visualize the time sequence of the observations, the central column of each consecutive image is put next to the following one to form a keogram (see panel e). Auroral structures can be distinguished in the keogram as parabolic-shaped increases in radiance imposed over the constantly present airglow layer. This is explained by the perspective of the aurora in relation to the orbit of MATS: aurora appears from the bottom of the image as the satellite approaches it (see Figure 1g)i.), it reaches a peak when viewed from the tangent point (ii.), and it disappears again to the bottom of the image as the auroral structure gets out of the instrument's field of view (iii.).

While the airglow layer is always present in the images, its brightness and position change in the course of the orbit. To remove the airglow contribution from the keograms in order to detect the emissions related to the aurora, a third-order polynomial regression is applied to all the keogram rows above 130. The regression fits the background, excluding the auroral data points. This fit is then subtracted from the entire row of data. In Figure 1f the pixel values of three of the keogram rows in panel e) have been plotted, and a solid line of the same color indicates the background subtracted from the data. In this particular case, the background variation is small.

An automated algorithm was developed to detect the aurora. The algorithm searches for peaks in the intensity altitude profile above the airglow layer. The top of the airglow and, thus, the lower limit for auroral detection is taken at row 150, corresponding to an altitude of about 95 km. Keograms for each orbit and hemisphere were generated. For each column of each keogram, the algorithm verifies that its average brightness (over all the pixels above row 150) is above a certain threshold. To ensure that the brightness above the threshold is not due to the upper edge of the airglow layer, the algorithm also verifies that even 10 rows above the top of the airglow, the brightness is still above a certain value. If these two conditions are met, the brightest pixel of the column is selected, and it is considered a candidate sighting of aurora. The threshold values were decided after carefully

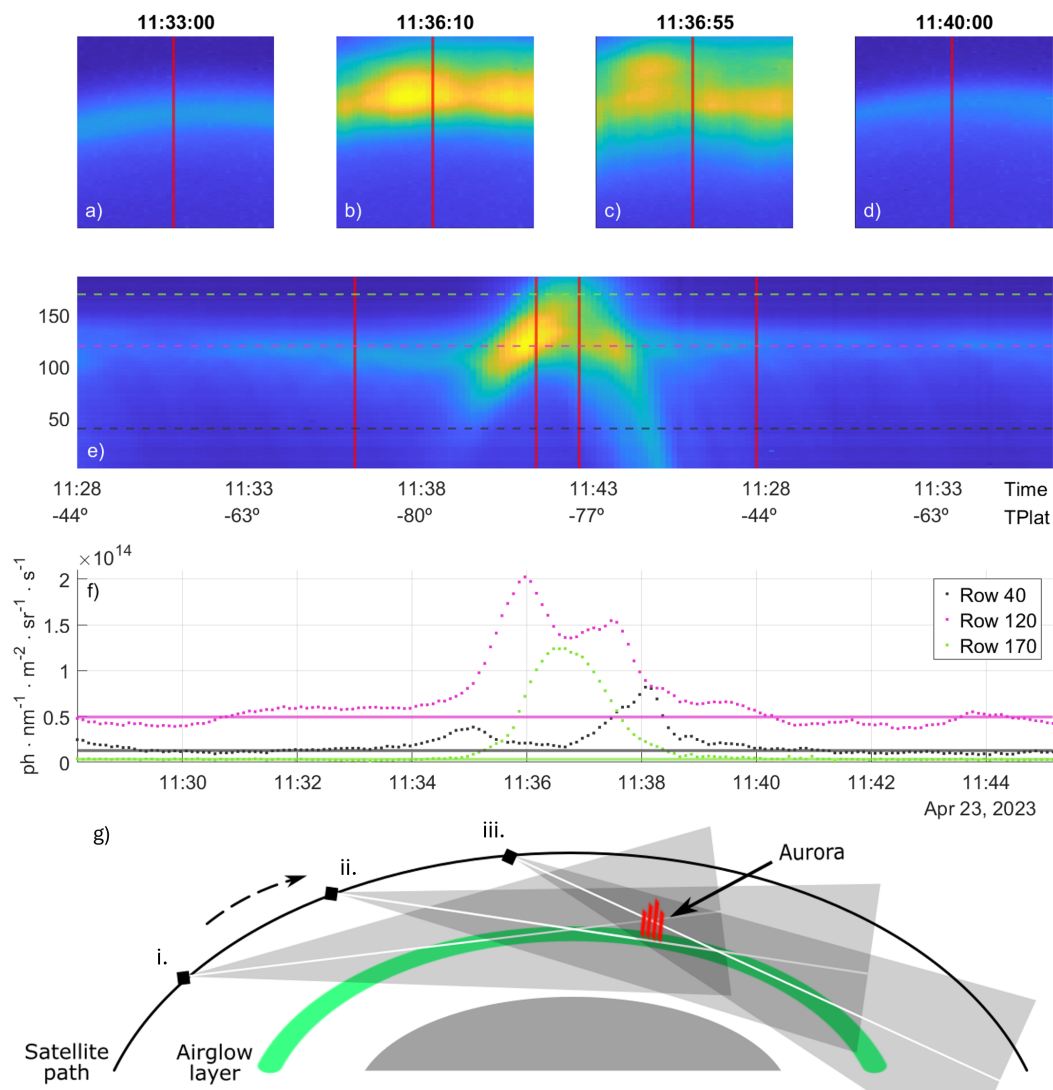


Figure 1. a-d) Processed images taken by the limb instrument at the times indicated on top of each panel. e) Keogram created by adding the central column of each image in chronological order. Vertical red lines indicate the columns corresponding to the images in panels a-d). Horizontal lines correspond to the rows plotted in the next panel. f) Pixel values of three rows of the keogram (dots) together with the fitted background (solid line). g) 2D sketch of MATS perspective of aurora (not to scale), corresponding to the peak of the parabola in the keogram (ii.), and when observed below the airglow before the peak (i.), and after (ii.). The grey area represents the instrument's field of view, while the white line is the tangent line.



inspecting several keograms with and without aurora to achieve a balance between the detection sensitivity and the frequency of spurious detection due to noise.

Potential auroral sightings have several sequential images with an additional brightness peak above the airglow. The time when the altitude of the peak is at its highest corresponds to viewing the peak of the auroral intensity at the tangent point. In the algorithm, the pixels selected as auroral candidates are grouped as long as they are less than 4 minutes apart, and groups with fewer than four pixels are discarded from the database. Then the time of the pixel with the highest row number within a group is taken as a representative of that auroral event. These times are verified visually, discarding the events where the keogram appearance is unclear. The altitude, latitude, and time of the auroral event are taken from the peak brightness pixel. For each auroral event, the brightness is taken as an average of a 3x5 pixel area surrounding the peak brightness pixel, with the background subtracted as outlined above. It should be noted that the parameters are derived from a single image when the aurora is seen at the tangent point, i.e., there are no assumptions about the aurora not varying in time.

4 Results

A total of 378 events were analyzed, 146 of which occurred in the northern hemisphere (NH) and 232 in the southern hemisphere (SH). Figure 2 shows the MLT/magnetic latitude disposition and the Kp index associated with each of the events. The black paths indicate the geomagnetic location of the limb instrument's tangent point. With a local time of ascending node of 17:30, the orbit passes on the dayside of the pole in the northern hemisphere. As seen in Figure 2, the satellite has very limited measurements in the night portion of the auroral oval (19:00 to 5:00 MLT) in the northern hemisphere, compared to the southern hemisphere. The wider spread in the southern hemisphere is because the magnetic south pole is located at a lower latitude than the magnetic north pole.

The events are mostly observed between 60° and 75° magnetic latitude, with an average at $\pm 67.5^\circ$. Regarding the distribution in relation to their Kp-index, Figure 2 shows that, in both hemispheres, MATS observed auroral events with a higher Kp-index at lower latitudes, while events with a lower Kp-index were more common at higher latitudes.

Figure 3a shows the altitude distribution of the events as a function of MLT. The data are binned according to hemisphere (SH/NH), Kp-index (low/moderate/high), and MLT (one-hour bins). The average values have been plotted together with the standard error of the mean for each bin with more than two events. Horizontal lines indicate the average altitude for all events in each Kp-index bin. The total average of all events analyzed is around 104 km altitude. The average altitude for events with a Kp-index between 6 and 9 is slightly higher than for lower Kp. As mentioned before, because of the satellite's orbit, only events in the southern hemisphere can be seen during the night hours, while more northern hemisphere data points are visible in the morning and evening hours. A notable feature of this plot is the lower altitude of events between 5 and 7 MLT, especially in the southern hemisphere.

Figure 3b shows a scatterplot of the peak intensity vs the peak altitude for all events analyzed, with different colors and markers for different bins of Kp-index and hemispheres, respectively. Most events have altitudes between 95 and 110 km, and

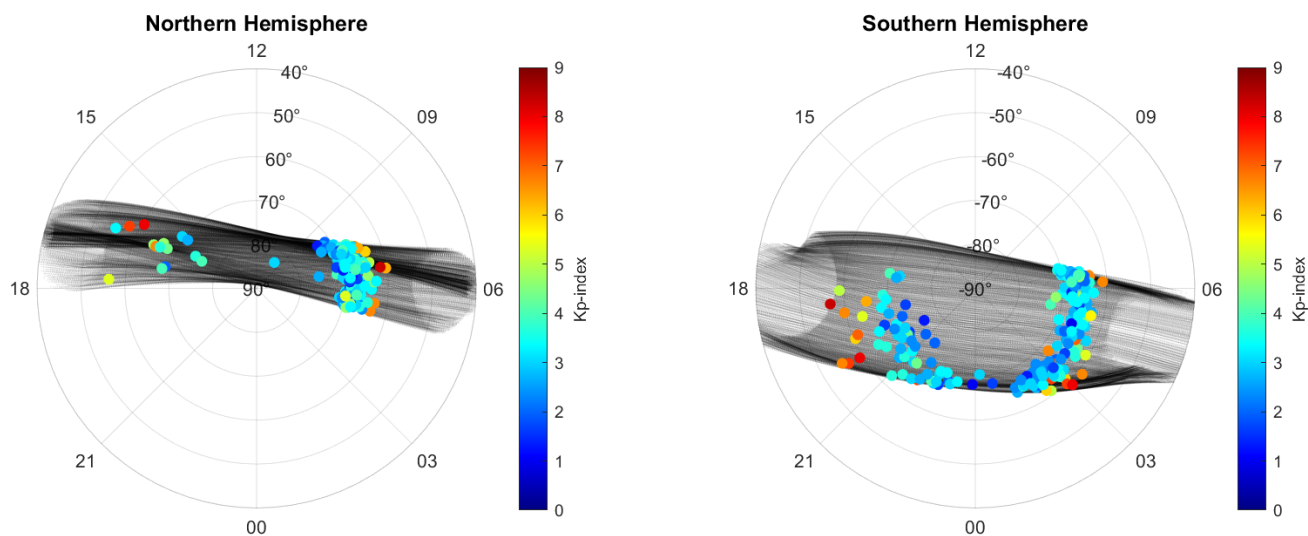


Figure 2. Distribution of the analyzed events in MLT plots for the northern hemisphere (left) and southern hemisphere (right). Color indicates the Kp-index of each event.

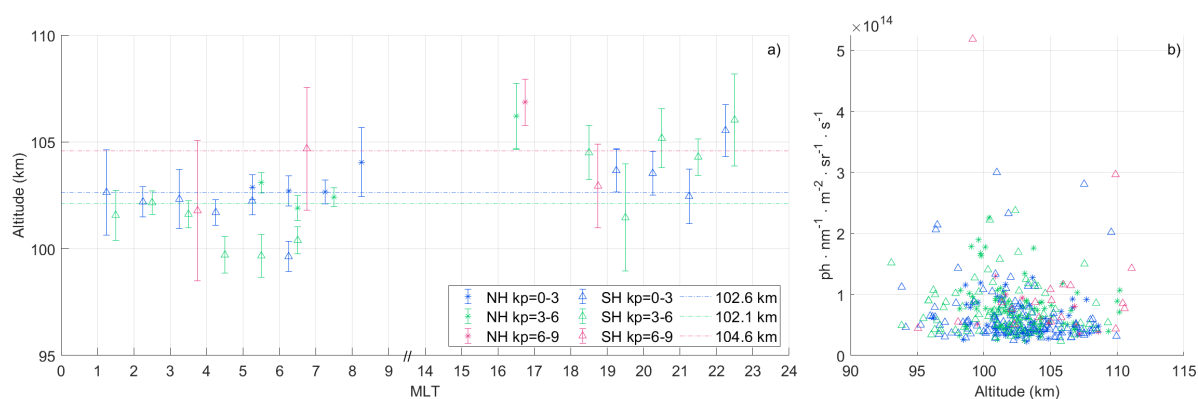


Figure 3. a) One-hour average of auroral event altitudes as a function of MLT. Asterisks represent the northern hemisphere, while triangles represent the southern hemisphere. Blue includes events with Kp-index between 0 and 3, green between 3 and 6, and red between 6 and 9. Error bars indicate the standard error of the mean. Horizontal dashed lines indicate the averaged altitude of all events in each of the Kp-index bins. b) Intensity as a function of altitude for all events analyzed. Colors and markers follow the same pattern as in a).



the intensities range between $0.2 \cdot 10^{14}$ and $5.2 \cdot 10^{14}$ $\text{ph} \cdot \text{nm}^{-1} \cdot \text{m}^{-2} \cdot \text{sr}^{-1} \cdot \text{s}^{-1}$. The spectral intensity can be converted to auroral intensity (in Rayleighs) by multiplying it by $4\pi 10^{-10}$ and the bandwidth of the filter in nm (8 nm for IR2).

5 Discussion

This work showed a clear correlation between latitude and Kp-index (see Figure 2). Events associated with lower Kp-index were found to be closer to the poles, while events associated with higher Kp-index were located at lower latitudes. This follows the well-known expansion of auroral ovals to lower latitudes during high geomagnetic activity (Kivelson and Russel, 1995).

Auroral intensities or limb brightness measured in this study are within the range of 200 to 5000 kR, with the majority of the events centered around 600 kR. The obtained values are generally lower than, but comparable to, the limb brightness measured by OSIRIS as reported in Gattinger et al. (2010).

The altitude of the events was analyzed for different magnetic local times, hemispheres, and Kp-indices in Figure 3a. The average altitude was found at about 103 km altitude, which is close to the values reported in the rocket experiments by Deans et al. (1976) and Feldman (1978). All three Kp bins show very close values of the average altitude of the peak. The small differences - if significant - may be related to the combination of the auroral distribution and orbital coverage, rather than to global changes in the auroral characteristics as such. For magnetic local times of 05:00 to 07:00, the average altitude of the peak tends to be below average. This may be related to the precipitation of energetic electrons injected during substorms in this local time sector.

In the left panel of the same figure, the spectral intensity was plotted as a function of altitude. A general trend that relates auroral structures peaking at high altitudes with low brightness was found. Beams carrying a higher energy flux have previously been associated with a higher characteristic electron energy (Cattell et al., 2006). This can explain our results, since higher electron flux results in brighter aurora, and higher electron energy will lead to electrons reaching lower altitudes.

It is important to mention some limitations concerning this work. Our detection algorithm worked well when finding clear and isolated events, but may have missed some events with more complex spatial distribution of the aurora, e.g., with multiple adjacent large-scale structures. During the manual visualization of the detected events, some unclear cases were removed from the database. In some clear cases of aurora, the highest pixel had been automatically selected close to the edges instead of the actual auroral peak and had to be corrected manually. Some bias might also have been introduced when removing the background airglow from the auroral events happening during specific times when the satellite moved into or out of the sunlit portion of the orbit. For limb observations alone, it is difficult to estimate the auroral "thickness", i.e., the horizontal extent along the orbit. This makes it difficult to quantitatively interpret the observed intensity values or compare them to vertical profiles reported from the rocket experiments. A tomographic reconstruction of the aurora could retrieve a 3D distribution of the auroral intensity. This goes beyond the scope of the current study. Besides, this would require the aurora not to vary during the time it is observed by the instrument, about three minutes, which is often not the case. This study relies on the "snapshots" of the aurora when it is at the tangent point in the field of view.



We used the IR2 channel data in this work. This filter is centered at 763 nm and captures the whole (0,0) band. Its bandwidth is 8 nm, which can lead to some pollution from other wavelengths. In future analysis, combining all four IR limb imaging channels can be used to increase the accuracy of the measurements.

6 Conclusions

A statistical study of some properties of O₂Atm(0-0) aurora as measured by the limb instrument on board the MATS satellite has been presented. The auroral events were distributed between 60 and 75 degrees latitude, with events with higher Kp-index located at lower latitudes and events with lower Kp-index closer to the poles, as expected. The average altitude of all the events was 103 km, and lower altitudes were observed for aurora in the post-midnight sector. Limb auroral brightness values between 200 and 5000 kR were observed.

Data availability. The MATS level 1b dataset (as used in this study) is stored in the Bolin centre database <https://bolin.su.se/data/mats-level-1b-limb-cropd-1.0>.

Author contributions. The manuscript was primarily written by JPCJ and NI with contributions and comments from the other coauthors. The auroral detection algorithm was developed by CL. The analysis, visualization and cleaning of the data, as well as the plots and sketches were done by JPCJ. The MATS science mission was conceptually developed, and its instruments were designed by JG, LM, DPM, NI and JH, among others.

Competing interests. No competing interests are present.

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