

VARIABILITY OF SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN SKR PERIODICITIES

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Abstract

Among the persistent questions raised by the existence of a rotational modulation of the Saturn Kilometric Radiation (SKR), the origin of the variability of the 10.8 hours SKR period at a 1% level over weeks to years remains intriguing. While its short-term fluctuations (20-30 days) have been related to the variations of the solar wind speed, its long-term fluctuations (months to years) were proposed to be triggered by Enceladus mass-loading and/or seasonal variations. This situation has become even more complicated since the recent identification of two separated periods at 10.8h and 10.6h, each varying with time, corresponding to SKR sources located in southern (S) and northern (N) hemispheres respectively. Here, six years of Cassini continuous radio measurements are investigated, from 2004 (pre-equinox) to the end of 2010 (post-equinox). From S and N SKR, radio periods and associated phase systems are derived separately for each hemisphere. Fluctuations of radio periods are investigated at time scales of years to a few months, while the S SKR rotational modulation is shown to be consistent with an intrinsically rotating phenomenon, in contrast with the early Voyager picture.

1 Introduction

The Saturn Kilometric Radiation (SKR) is an intense non-thermal radio emission produced by auroral electrons moving along magnetic field lines, predominantly on the dawn sector (Kaiser et al, 1980). Its regular pulsation, whose origin remains unexplained yet, was originally interpreted as a clock-like rotational modulation triggered by the planetary magnetic field, and thus directly relating to the planetary interior. The Voyager determination of the SKR period ($10\text{h}39\text{min}24\pm 7\text{s}$ or $10.652\pm 0.002\text{h}$) (Desch and Kaiser, 1981) was adopted as the official rotation rate of the planet by the International Astronomical Union (Seidelmann et al, 2001), and used to define the first Saturn Longitude System (or SLS 1). In this system, the SKR occurrence or intensity is organized by sub-solar longitudes and peaks at a fixed arbitrary value (historically set at 100°).

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Ulysses observations later showed that the observed SKR period (~ 10.8 h) is not constant but varies with time by 1% over years (Galopeau and Lecacheux, 2000). Further Cassini studies identified short-term 20-30 days oscillations of the southern SKR period (Zarka et al, 2007) correlated to the fluctuations of the solar wind speed (while the SKR intensity is correlated to the solar wind dynamic pressure) supporting previous modeling work (Cecconi et al, 2005), together with long-term yearly oscillations also found in magnetospheric plasma and magnetic field data and attributed to Enceladus mass-loading (Gurnett et al, 2007). New longitude systems (SLS 2,3), based on polynomial fits of the SKR long-term phase variations successively replaced SLS 1 (Kurth et al, 2007; 2008).

The identification of a second SKR period around 10.6h (Kurth et al, 2008) has strong implications on the validity of the longitude systems described above. Indeed, radio periods at ~ 10.8 h and ~ 10.6 h respectively were attributed to SKR emissions emanating from southern (S) and northern (N) hemispheres (Gurnett et al, 2009). It is interesting to note here that Voyager essentially observed northern SKR, while its orbital motion out of the ecliptic enabled Ulysses to observe both hemispheres. As both Cassini-derived SKR periods vary with time and come close together about Saturn's equinox (Aug. 2009), these authors proposed that seasonal variations of the solar illumination may induce a different magnetosphere-ionosphere coupling in each hemisphere, and trigger different S,N radio periods varying in opposite ways, with an expected crossing about equinox, when the sun illuminates equally both hemispheres.

Section 2 describes the employed radio dataset and the periodogram technique used to derive separately S and N SKR periodicities as a function of time. Section 3 investigates fluctuations of radio periods at time scales of years to a few months, and implications on magnetospheric dynamics. Separate long-term phase systems are then built for each hemisphere. Finally, section 4 investigates the organization of S SKR sources as a function of S phase.

2 Radio observations and harmonic analysis

2.1 Northern and southern SKR emissions

Taking advantage of quasi-continuous SKR observations acquired by the Cassini Radio and Plasma Wave Science (RPWS) experiment since 2004, radio data were processed as detailed in (Lamy et al, 2008) to obtain regular dynamic spectra of circular polarization degree V and radiated power P (in $W.sr^{-1}$) from 3.5 to 1500 kHz between days 1 January 2004 (DOY 1) and 19 October 2010 (DOY 2484) with a 3 min time resolution. A time series of the total radiated power $P_{SKR}(t)$ is then obtained by integrating P over the spectral range 40 to 500 kHz, that corresponds to well-defined SKR bursts and avoids narrowband low frequency emissions below 40 kHz, that display periods comparable to SKR ones but with a significant phaseshift (Ye et al, 2010).

To discriminate between southern (S) and northern (N) SKR, I used (i) its property to be primarily emitted on the extraordinary mode (Kaiser et al, 1984; Lamy et al, 2010 and references therein), that displays left-handed (LH, $V \geq 0$) and right-handed (RH,

$V \geq 0$) circular polarization for S and N radio sources, and (ii) its visibility domain, that mainly illuminates its hemisphere of origin and extends down to 20° latitude in the other hemisphere (see Fig. 11 of Lamy et al, 2008). S and N SKR emissions were thus identified by LH and RH emissions respectively observed from latitudes $\lambda \leq 20^\circ$ and $\lambda \geq -20^\circ$, and integrated between 40 and 500 kHz to build time series $P_{SKR,S}(t)$ and $P_{SKR,N}(t)$. This technique permits one to consider all near-equatorial observations where S and N SKR are observed together (most of Cassini measurements), generally excluded by separating S,N SKR from a single geometrical selection on the spacecraft latitude.

2.2 Lomb-Scargle normalized periodogram

The Fast Fourier Transform (FFT) is the most employed technique to perform the spectral analysis of regular time series. However, it cannot deal with unevenly spaced data and, when applied to discontinuous series re-interpolated on a regular basis, it yields noisy power spectra with a significant spectral leakage. The Lomb-Scargle (LS) normalized periodogram is a powerful alternate technique directly applicable to irregularly sampled data that possesses useful properties (Lomb, 1976; Scargle, 1982; Horne and Baliunas, 1986). The periodogram analysis is equivalent to least-squares fitting of weighted sine curves to the data. Its normalization by the total variance leads to less noisy power spectra and, while the FFT spectral resolution is fixed by the time step of the original time series, the periodogram can be oversampled in order to improve the determination of significant spectral peaks. Due to non strictly continuous RPWS measurements together with the applied data selection, regular SKR power series described above intrinsically contain unevenly spaced non-null signal, for the spectral analysis of which the LS technique is particularly adapted.

3 Variability of SKR periodicities

3.1 Long-term variations

Figure 1 displays 2D periodograms of the LS power spectra of $\log P_{SKR}(t)$, $\log P_{SKR,S}(t)$ and $\log P_{SKR,N}(t)$ as a function of period and time, computed with a 200-days long sliding window and a time resolution of 1 day. Figure 1a reveals the two main SKR periods around 10.8h and 10.6h, each slowly varying with time, corresponding to southern and northern SKR sources. This is illustrated in Figures 1b and 1c, where S and N SKR mainly pulse at periods about 10.8h and 10.6h, identified by solid yellow lines hereafter labelled $T_{S,N}(t)$. In Figure 1a, the intensity of the S peak is dominant over 2004-2007 and then decreases relative to the intensity of the N peak by approaching the equinox. This reflects the dominant observed signal which corresponds, for comparable observing conditions, to the intrinsic SKR power radiated by each hemisphere, observed to change with seasons: while N SKR was more intense during northern summer at the Voyager epoch (Kaiser et al, 1984), S SKR was predominant during first years of southern summer conditions observed by Cassini (Lamy et al, 2008).

$T_S(t)$ and $T_N(t)$ are plotted together in Figure 2. They display clear opposite trends, with a correlation coefficient reaching $c = -0.95$ for a lag of 0 days. Both periods cross about day 7 April 2010 (DOY 2050), *i.e.* approximately 8 months after the equinox. The S period is maximal around day 16 June 2007 (DOY 1263) and the N one after 2006 is minimal around 20 October 2007 (DOY 1389). Out of this interval, both periods shift significantly from their extrema.

This anti-symmetrical behaviour supports a seasonal cause. However, the delay of 8 months between the equinox and the actual reversal of both periods indicates a non-linear response of the magnetosphere. Focussing on seasonal variations of the solar illumination, (Gurnett et al, 2009) proposed that the temporal variation of Saturn’s inclination controls the atmospheric Pedersen conductivity in each hemisphere, which in turn triggers the strength of associated auroral field-aligned current systems, and thus the intensity of the torque (opposite to corotation) at the footprint of the magnetic field lines where these currents close. As the Pedersen conductivity varies quasi-instantaneously with the solar illumination, this model needs to be augmented with a significant mechanical slippage responsible for the observed lag. Also, while they are close to each other (within 100 days), the extrema of both periods are shifted with respect to the ones of solar illumination (dashed lines in Figure 2) by approximately 2 years, suggesting that additional effects may affect the variation of radio periods.

Interestingly, N SKR displays a secondary peak at the S period (obvious in 2005 and 2007). Although it cannot be formally excluded, it is unlikely that such an intense secondary peak results from a non-ideal data selection with a possible residual contribution of S SKR sources to $P_{SKR,N}$. Moreover, this secondary peak remains when separating S and N emissions from observing latitudes above thresholds of 10° or 20° . This result is thus likely to reflect a real physical dual modulation. This is not surprising since SKR sources have been identified on closed field lines (Lamy et al, 2010; Bunce et al, 2010), and that auroral electrons accelerated in one hemisphere could ultimately reach the other one, as proposed for interpreting Io’s multiple footprints (Bonfond et al, 2010). Moreover, both periodicities have been noticed in northern electron observations (Carbary et al, 2010), as well as in equatorial magnetic oscillations (Provan et al, 2010).

In a parallel paper, (Gurnett et al, 2010) specifically investigated the crossing of SKR periods. They show that periodicities observed by Ulysses (determined by FFT) are consistent with S,N hemispheres, and crossed about 9 months after the equinox of 1995. With a different technique of period determination, they also identified a crossing of both SKR periods from Cassini data approximately 6 months after the equinox of 2009. Although they are derived with a 240-days sliding window, exclude near-equatorial observations and integrate SKR over 20-500 kHz (with a possible contamination by 20 kHz narrowband periodic emissions), these periods are roughly consistent with the ones derived above. However, the 8 months delay measured from the present LS analysis is in better agreement with the one derived from Ulysses data. Also, The final S SKR period given by combined Ulysses/Cassini data displays significant long-term changes shifting from the simple smooth evolution of the planet inclination.

3.2 Phase systems

SKR continuous periods were used to build separate phase systems for each hemisphere, valid until 12 July 2010 (DOY 2385). The phase of the SKR rotational modulation $\Phi_{S,N}(t)$ was numerically integrated from:

$$\Phi_{S,N}(t) = \int \frac{360}{T_{S,N}(t)} dt + \Phi_{0,S,N} \quad (1)$$

where t is the time and $\Phi_{0,S,N}$ an arbitrary reference. As $\Phi_{S,N}(t)$ is defined modulo 360° , SKR maxima occur at a fixed phase. $\Phi_{0,S,N}$ was chosen to reference SKR peaks at $\Phi_{S,N}(t) = 0^\circ$, by fitting $\log P_{SKR,S}$ and $\log P_{SKR,N}$ (respectively averaged over the intervals 2004-2008 and 2005-2008, where rotational modulations are well defined) as a function of phase to a cosine function.

Figure 3 illustrates the temporal evolution of S,N SKR phasedrifts with respect to arbitrary constant rotation periods. Here, yellow solid lines show that the above defined SKR phases correctly track long-term SKR maxima for each hemisphere, with more noisy intervals after the equinox or at the end of 2007. However, the latter intervals correspond to near-equatorial observations from the dusk sector, from which the visibility of dawn radio sources can be questioned (see section 4), as suggested by previous modeling work (Lamy et al, 2008b) and direct observations (Cecconi et al, 2009). $\Phi_S(t)$ compares to the sub-solar longitude defined in previous SLS models. In Figure 3a, $\Phi_S(t) = 0^\circ$ and SLS-3 sub-solar longitude = 100° (solid light blue) match on the interval where the latter is defined, and differ by generally less than 20-30 degrees.

The S and N phase systems have been used to organize successfully the power radiated by UV aurorae (Nichols et al, 2010) in both hemispheres, which demonstrated the existence of a diurnal modulation in atmospheric aurorae, unsuccessfully search for a long time. (Andrews et al, 2010) demonstrated that two systems of magnetic field oscillations, interpreted as independent high-latitude field-aligned current systems, pulse at S and N SKR periods to within 0.01%, with upward current layers matching SKR intense dawn sources during S and N SKR peaks. In addition, (Provan et al, 2010) showed that part of the 'jitter' observed in equatorial magnetic oscillations can be explained by beating effects between both periods.

3.3 Mid-term variations

To investigate fluctuations of SKR periods at shorter time scales, the above LS analysis was applied on the same dataset with a 100-days long sliding window. The resulting S,N periods are plotted in blue in Figure 2. Although less continuously defined, they display clear fluctuations of the order of a few months. Their correlation coefficient reaches $c = -0.41$, which increases to $c = +0.27$ once long-term trends (black) subtracted. Considering the limited number of oscillations, their approximately one-to-one correspondence supports an overall correlation.

A symmetrical behaviour of $T_{S,N}(t)$ could result from either (i) orbital effects affecting the visibility of SKR sources (whose intensity displays a clear LT dependence), or from (ii) a physical mechanism affecting both hemispheres symmetrically. Orbital effects of the order of 15 to 30 days clearly appear in Figure 3a,b and prevent to track 20-30 days fluctuations previously identified by (Zarka et al, 2007) in pre-SOI observations. However, no obvious orbital variations of the order of a few months are visible, which makes plausible a similar control of both SKR periods by a common physical cause. Checking the possible presence of similar fluctuations in other magnetospheric periodicities will help to determine their origin.

4 Nature of the SKR diurnal modulation

While most of periodic features observed in the kronian magnetosphere correspond to rotating phenomena, the SKR rotational modulation has been interpreted since the Voyager epoch as a strobe-like feature pulsing on the dawn sector. However, the radio source locating technique enabled by the goniopolarimetric capability of Cassini radio instrumentation (Cecconi et al, 2009) has provided a new way to check this assumption. Indeed, (Lamy et al, 2009) showed that SKR sources actually exist at all LT, forming a statistical radio oval conjugate to the UV one and whose intensity strongly varies as a function of LT, peaking at 08 LT. This result challenges the Voyager picture.

Here, $\Phi_S(t)$ is used to organize the location of S SKR sources (the most intense ones) obtained from 6 years of 3-antenna measurements. The latter are less numerous than 2-antenna measurements, but are required to derive unambiguous wave directions, and therefore accurate source locus, whatever the wave polarization (for details, see Fischer et al, 2009). The spectral range was limited to the 100-400 kHz SKR spectral peak, within which flux intensities at different frequencies are both high and comparable. Figure 4a shows the median intensity of SKR sources as a function of S phase and source LT, while Figure 4b displays the corresponding orbital coverage as a function of S phase and spacecraft LT. No error propagation has been integrated on Figure 4a, that considers equally measurements of different accuracies to display a statistical average behaviour.

The S hemisphere was mainly visible when Cassini lied between 23 and 11 LT. However, SKR sources were, as expected, detected at all longitudes, with a LT dependence of their intensity peaking about 08. The low statistics for dusk SKR sources is likely due to the poor dusk orbital coverage, together with the result of the point-source assumption used for goniopolarimetry (that derives the direction of the vectorial sum of all incoming radio waves at a given frequency, thus favouring most intense ones).

Then, while a clock-like pulsation shall have corresponded to highest intensities concentrated around $\Phi_S = 0^\circ$, SKR sources surprisingly display a clear linear organization as $LT(\Phi_S)$ (contrary to the orbital coverage) consistent with an intrinsically rotating phenomenon. The phase reference has been shifted here, so that the rotating active zone starts from midnight and passes on the dawn sector around 0° . Its longitudinal extent is significant and covers more than one quadrant in LT.

While this result needs to be comforted by the symmetrical organization of SKR N sources (unfortunately much less well located until the equinox) and the statistical analysis of 2-antenna measurements, it breaks with the Voyager picture and reconciles the dynamics of SKR sources with the ones of other periodic magnetospheric phenomena. The above phase systems remain reliable in the sense that $\Phi_{S,N}(t) = 0^\circ$ indicate the pass of the rotating feature about 08 LT. Indeed, the good organization of SKR maxima observed in Figure 3a,b suggests that, in spite of strongly changing visibility conditions, auroral radio sources of the active morning region have been detected by Cassini most of the mission.

5 Conclusions

In this article, accurate SKR periods were derived for each hemisphere from a 6-years long Cassini radio dataset analyzed by the Lomb-Scargle periodogram technique. S and N periods display clear anti-symmetrical yearly variations, consistent with a seasonal effect, together with symmetrical shorter term oscillations of the order a few months, whose origin, yet unknown, may be physical too. The continuous determination of S and N long-term varying periods was used to build accurate phase systems for both hemispheres, valid until, and freely available on the Cassini/RPWS/HFR data website: <http://www.lesia.obspm.fr/kronos>

The S phase has been used to organize the locus of S SKR sources, which reveals that S SKR emissions are consistent with an intrinsically rotating phenomenon. However, contrary to Jupiter, the search-light rotational modulation is affected by a strong LT dependence, which may explain why the clock-like picture has remained a good approximation of the SKR periodic behaviour since Voyager.

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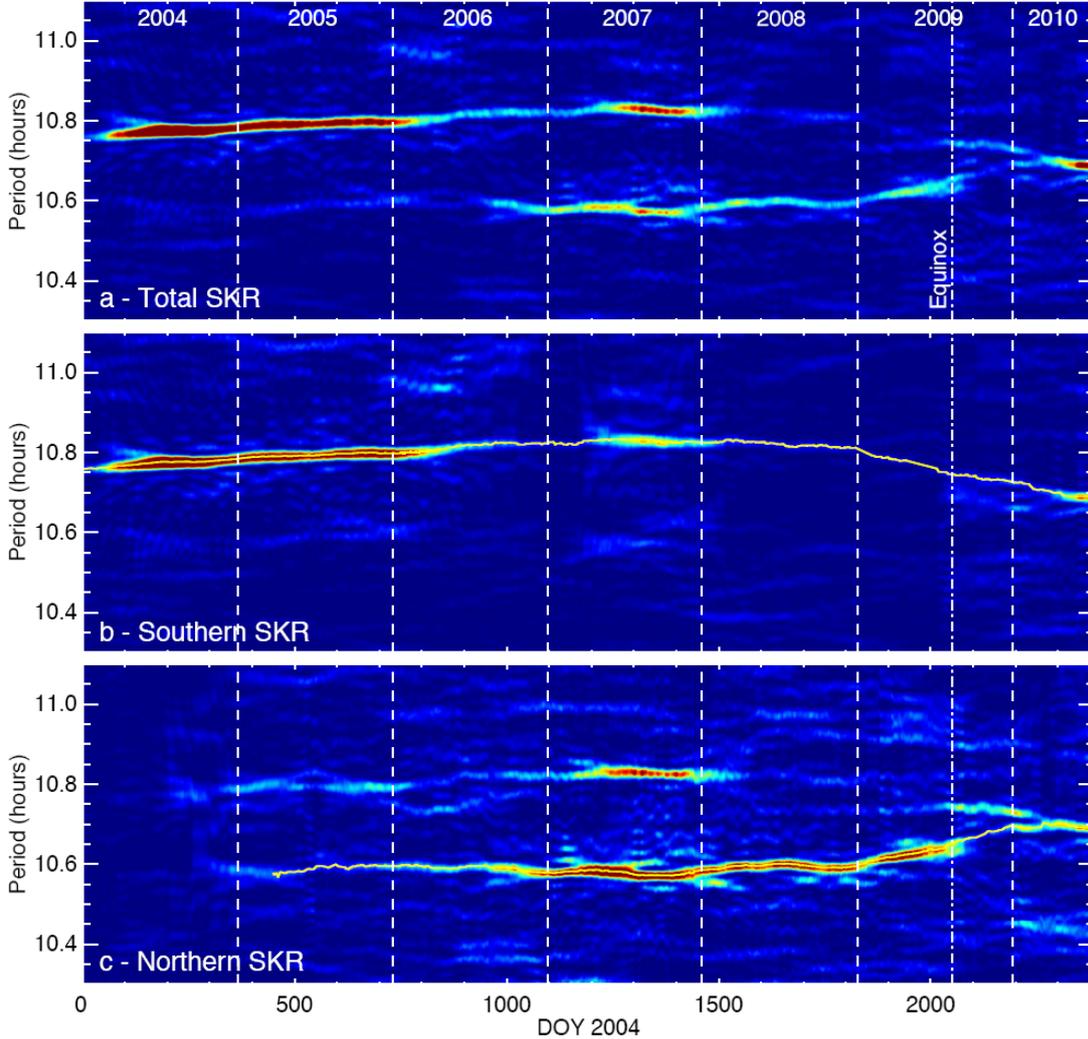


Figure 1: Lomb-Scargle periodograms of (a) total, (b) southern and (c) northern SKR power radiated between 40 and 500 kHz as a function of period and time. Individual power spectra (columns, in arbitrary units) were computed over a 200-days long sliding window with a time step of 1 day. Solid yellow lines show S and N periods, as derived from panels (b) and (c).

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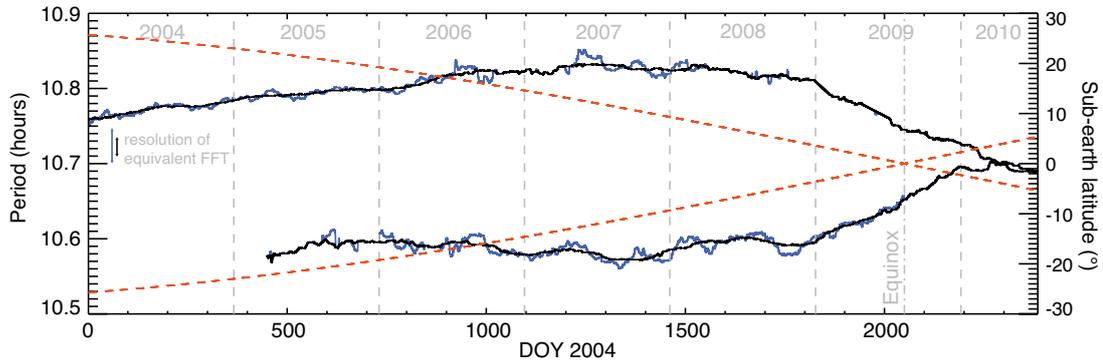


Figure 2: *S* and *N* SKR periods derived from a Lomb-Scargle analysis of SKR power using 200-days long (black, Figures 1b,c) and 100-days long (blue) sliding windows. The equivalent resolution of FFT is indicated by double arrows on the left hand. Both periods cross at day 2010-097 (DOY 2289). Orange dashed curves indicate the sub-earth latitude λ_{earth} and $-\lambda_{earth}$ (right axis) that cross at the equinox of 11 Aug. 2009 (2009-223 or DOY 2050).

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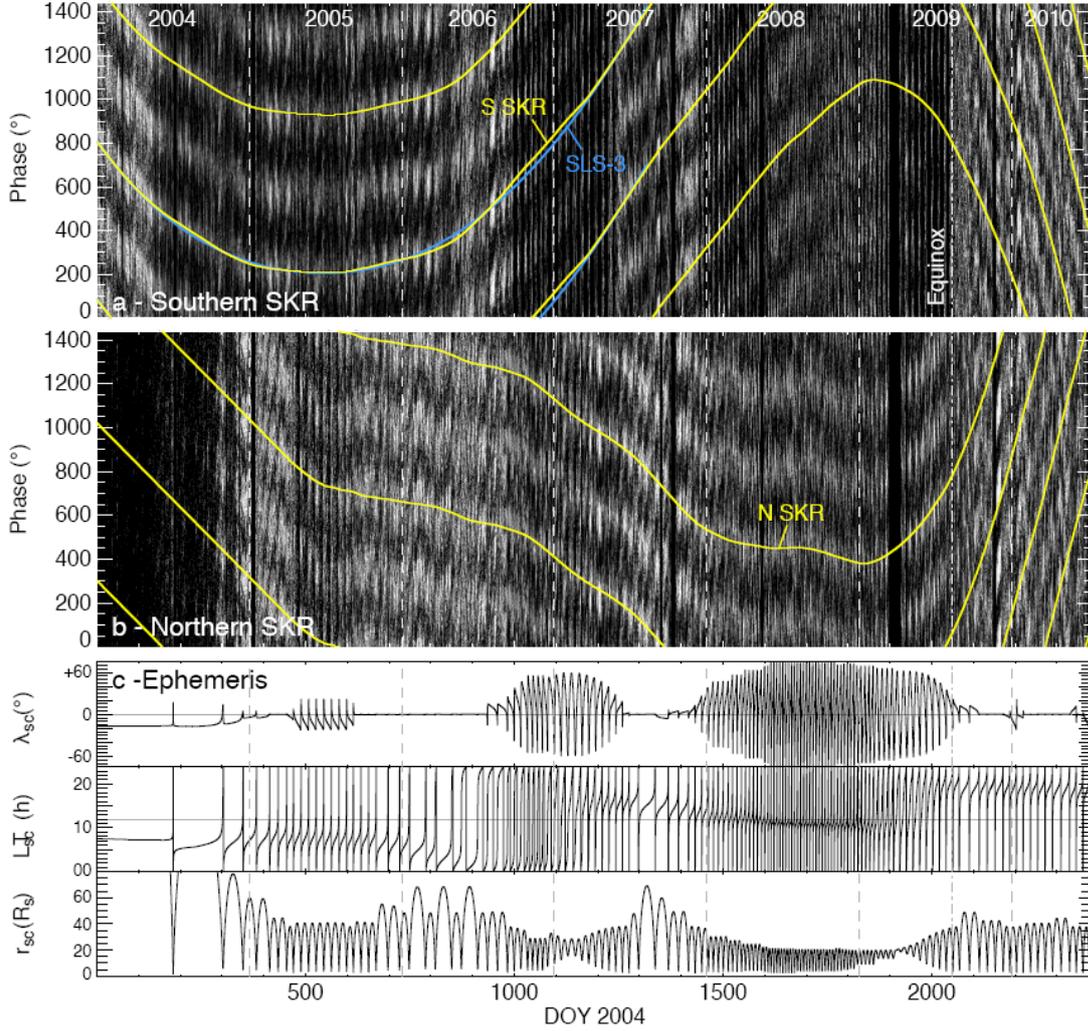


Figure 3: (a) Plot of $\log P_{SKR,S}(t)$ normalized to the average over one rotation as a function of an arbitrary phase computed from a fixed reference period of 10.7928 h (enabling direct comparisons with Kurth et al, 2010), between 2004-001 and 2010-193. Each rotation is replicated four times along the y axis for clarity. The S SKR rotational modulation (given by $\Phi_S(t) = 0^\circ$) is displayed in solid yellow, while the SLS-3 one (given by sub-solar longitudes = 100°) is shown in solid light blue. Both correctly track S SKR maxima. (b) Identical plot for $\log P_{SKR,N}(t)$ and an arbitrary reference period of 10.6 h. (c) Cassini orbital parameters.

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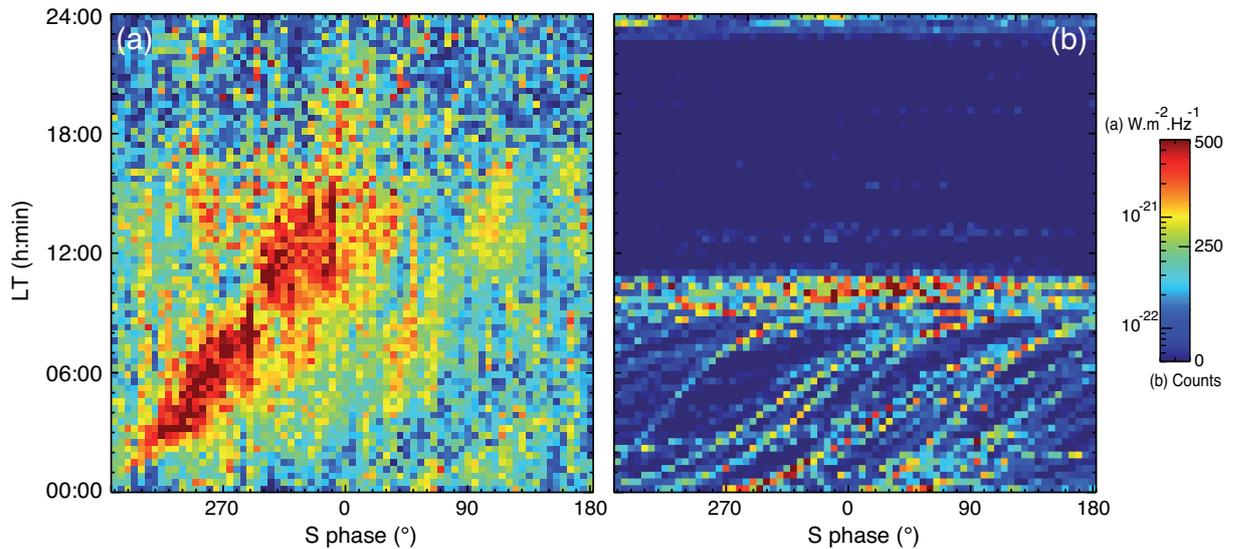


Figure 4: (a) Median intensity of S SKR sources (normalized to 1AU) and (b) corresponding Cassini orbital coverage (in counts) as a function of LT and S SKR phase (in bins of 20 min and 5°) between days 2004181 and 2010193. LT of SKR sources have been obtained from the locating technique detailed in (Cecconi et al, 2009) applied to 3-antenna measurements only (231 effective days of observations) between 100 and 400 kHz, for observing distances below $20 R_S$, source footprint latitudes between -85° and -60° (consistent with the location of the radio auroral oval), and standard data selection (see e.g. Lamy et al, 2010).

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