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An extremely bright gamma-ray pulsar in the Large Magellanic Cloud

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Pulsars are rapidly spinning, highly magnetized neutron stars, created in the gravitational collapse of massive stars. We report the detection of pulsed GeV gamma rays from the young pulsar PSR J0540–6919 in the Large Magellanic Cloud, a satellite galaxy of the Milky Way. This is the first gamma-ray pulsar detected in another galaxy. It has the most luminous pulsed gamma-ray emission yet observed, exceeding the Crab pulsar’s by a factor of twenty. PSR J0540–6919 presents an extreme test case for understanding the structure and evolution of neutron star magnetospheres.

The first pulsar was discovered in 1967 as a puzzling celestial source of periodic radio pulses. Nearly 2500 pulsars have since been detected, mostly in the Milky Way but also in other nearby galaxies, and their characteristic pulsed emission has been observed across the electromagnetic spectrum. The energy source for emission from pulsars is the rotation of a magnetized neutron star. The mechanism is radiation by particles accelerated by intense electric fields in the neutron star magnetosphere. The pulsar spins with period P , and the observed rate at which it slows down $\frac{dP}{dt} = \dot{P}$ sets the scale of the power reservoir for particle acceleration and emission processes. Spin-down power is $\dot{E} = 4\pi^2 I \dot{P} / P^3$, where I denotes the neutron star moment of inertia, taken to be 10^{45} g cm² (I), which roughly corresponds to a solid sphere of

21 10 km radius and the mass of the Sun.

22 The Large Area Telescope (LAT), an imaging instrument on the *Fermi* satellite sensitive to
23 gamma rays with energies 20 MeV–300 GeV (2), has detected gamma-ray pulsations from over
24 160 pulsars (see the second *Fermi*-LAT pulsar catalog (3), and the public list of LAT-detected
25 gamma-ray pulsars (4)). Gamma-ray pulsars have $\dot{E} > 10^{33}$ erg s⁻¹, and a significant fraction
26 (>30% in many cases) of their spin-down power is converted into gamma-ray luminosity L_γ . In
27 contrast, radio emission represents a negligible fraction of the total energy output (3). Gamma-
28 ray observations thus probe the sites and processes of particle acceleration and radiation in
29 pulsars. Candidate emission regions range across the magnetosphere out to the “light cylinder”,
30 where co-rotation with the neutron star would reach the speed of light (5–7). In these regions,
31 curvature or synchrotron radiation from accelerated electrons initiates electromagnetic cascades
32 by interacting with the strong magnetic field or with ambient photons; the electron-positron
33 pairs produced are accelerated and radiate in turn, giving rise to further pairs. Emission may
34 also originate in the pulsar’s plasma wind, beyond the light cylinder (8).

35 Discriminating between emission scenarios requires spectra and light curves in various
36 wavebands for pulsars with different ages, magnetic field strengths, and viewing geometries.
37 Few pulsars younger than several thousand years are known. The pulsar in the Crab supernova
38 remnant is the best studied and was the most powerful known in pulsed gamma rays (9). The
39 Crab pulsar has $\dot{E} = 4.5 \times 10^{38}$ erg s⁻¹. Only one known pulsar has a larger spin-down power,
40 PSR J0537–6910 with $\dot{E} = 4.9 \times 10^{38}$ erg s⁻¹, whilst PSR J0540–6919, only 16 arcmin away,
41 has the third highest $\dot{E} = 1.5 \times 10^{38}$ erg s⁻¹. Both of the latter are located in the Large Mag-
42 ellanic Cloud (LMC), a satellite galaxy of the Milky Way at a distance $d \sim 50$ kpc (10). PSR
43 J0537–6910 is a 16-ms pulsar associated with the ~ 5000 -year old supernova remnant LHA
44 120-N 157B (11, 12), while PSR J0540–6919 is a 50-ms pulsar associated with the ~ 1140 -year
45 old supernova remnant SNR 0540-69.3 (13–15). Although these two pulsars are of compara-

46 ble age and energetics, their gamma-ray behavior appears to be markedly different. This paper
47 reports the detection of gamma-ray pulsations from PSR J0540–6919 and an upper limit on
48 gamma-ray pulsations from PSR J0537–6910.

49 *Fermi*-LAT predominantly operates in all-sky survey mode; hence the LMC has been ob-
50 served regularly since launch. Gamma-ray emission from the LMC is particularly prominent
51 near the Tarantula nebula (30 Doradus) (16), a very active star-forming region hosting extremely
52 massive stars (17, 18). PSR J0537–6910 and PSR J0540–6919 lie in this area, but until now
53 neither could be identified as discrete gamma-ray sources. Now, over six times more data are
54 available compared to the earlier *Fermi*-LAT study (16), and the recent revision of LAT event re-
55 construction, called Pass 8, significantly enhanced the sensitivity of LAT data analyses (19). We
56 thus revisited the gamma-ray emission from the LMC, and the 30 Doradus region in particular.

57 We analyzed Pass 8 events from 75 months of *Fermi*-LAT all-sky survey observations (43).
58 The gamma-ray emission from the LMC is shown in Figure 1, after subtracting fitted models of
59 the Galactic foreground emission, an isotropic background, and point-like sources outside the
60 LMC. The improved angular resolution with increasing gamma-ray energy makes two point-
61 like sources coincident with the pulsars stand out above 2 GeV.

62 The source coincident with PSR J0540–6919 is detected with a statistical significance of
63 17σ . Its photon spectrum is well described by a power law with exponential cutoff, typical
64 of gamma-ray pulsars (3). To search for pulsations, we built a rotation ephemeris using Rossi
65 X-ray Timing Explorer (RXTE) (20) observations recorded between modified Julian day 54602
66 (2008 May 16) and 55898 (2011 December 3), shortly before the end of the RXTE mission (see
67 Table S1). We phase-folded the gamma-ray data from the first 3.5 years of the *Fermi* mission
68 corresponding to the ephemeris. We used the LMC emission model to assign each photon
69 the probability that it originated from PSR J0540–6919, based on reconstructed positions and
70 energies and the instrument response functions (21). Figure 2 shows the probability-weighted

71 $E > 100$ MeV gamma-ray pulse profile for probabilities > 0.1 . The weighted H-test parameter
72 (21, 22) is 63.5, corresponding to a significance of 6.8σ , making this the first extragalactic
73 gamma-ray pulsar.

74 Time-averaged gamma-ray emission from the source coincident with PSR J0537–6910 is
75 detected with significance 11σ . Its spectrum is consistent with a simple power law with photon
76 index 2.1 ± 0.1 extending to > 50 GeV without evidence for a cutoff. A weighted phase-fold of
77 the LAT data based on an RXTE ephemeris limited any pulsed emission to significance $< 1\sigma$
78 (see Table S2). The 95% confidence level upper limit on the 0.1–10 GeV pulsed luminosity for
79 this pulsar is 1.9×10^{35} erg s⁻¹. This and the lack of a spectral cutoff suggest that strongly
80 pulsed emission is at most a small fraction of the total signal from the source. The gamma-
81 ray signal may instead result from the superposition of weakly modulated pulsar emission and
82 radiation from the pulsar wind nebula and the supernova remnant, in unknown proportions.

83 Figure 2 also shows the X-ray pulse profile for PSR J0540–6919, obtained by integrating
84 all the RXTE data used to build the timing solution. The profile matches previous results (23).
85 The optical light curve was evaluated using the RXTE ephemeris to fold data from the Iqueye
86 photometer mounted on the ESO 3.6-m New Technology Telescope (NTT) in January and De-
87 cember 2009 (24). We also show a radio profile formed from the sum of 18 bright giant pulses
88 recorded at the Parkes telescope at 1.4 GHz in August 2003 (25). Emission components from
89 radio to gamma rays are aligned, but the shape of the pulse varies over the different bands. The
90 radio profile exhibits two narrow peaks separated by $\Delta \sim 0.25$ in pulse phase. This double-
91 peak pattern is still visible on top of a broader component in the optical profile. Structures in
92 the X-ray and perhaps gamma-ray profiles are reminiscent of the double radio peaks separated
93 by $\Delta \sim 0.25$, but both profiles are consistent with a single bump spanning the interval between
94 the radio peaks. In outer-magnetosphere models, the pulse peak profiles are sensitive to the
95 magnetic geometry. In the classical vacuum ‘outer gap’ model (5), pulse separations as small

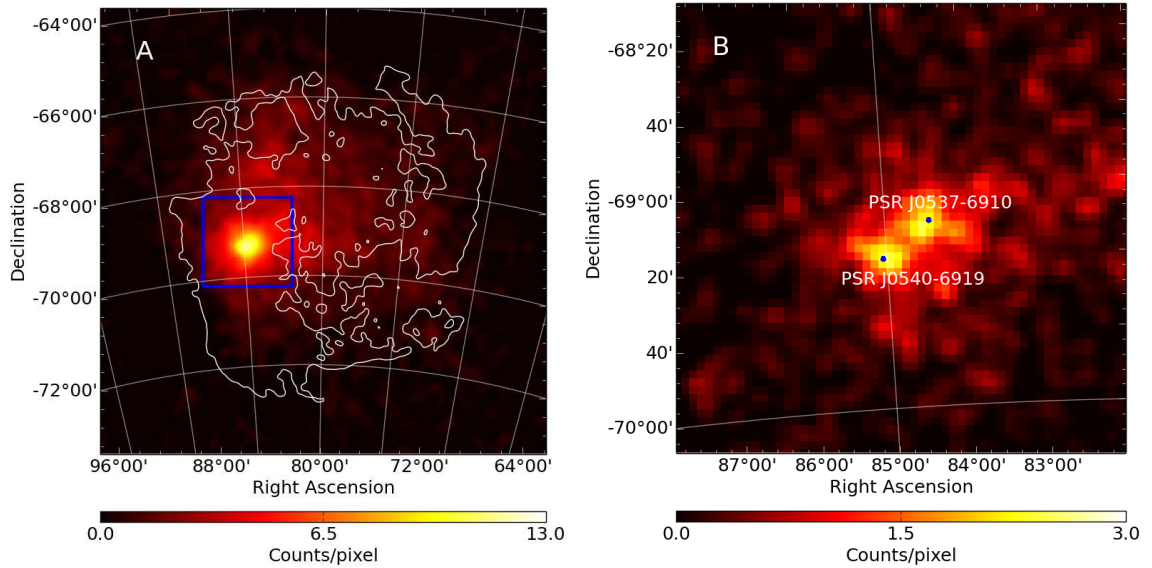


Figure 1: **Sky maps of the LMC.** (A) 0.2–200 GeV gamma-ray emission in a $10^\circ \times 10^\circ$ region encompassing the LMC. The map was smoothed using a Gaussian kernel with $\sigma = 0.2^\circ$. Emission is strongest around 30 Doradus (approximately delimited by the blue box), but also fills much of the galaxy. Contours show the atomic gas distribution. (B) 2–200 GeV gamma-ray emission in a $2^\circ \times 2^\circ$ region around 30 Doradus. The map was smoothed using a Gaussian kernel with $\sigma = 0.1^\circ$. Better angular resolution at higher energies resolves two components coincident with PSR J0540–6919 and PSR J0537–6910, whose locations are indicated as blue dots. Both maps are given in J2000 equatorial coordinates.

96 as $\Delta = 0.25$ occur for high \dot{E} , narrow-gap pulsars when the spin-axis viewing angle ζ is $> 80^\circ$
 97 and the magnetic inclination α is $< 30^\circ$ (26). Models with partly resistive magnetospheres and
 98 emission extending beyond the light cylinder point to $\zeta \approx 60^\circ$ and $\alpha \approx 30^\circ$, but differing resis-
 99 tivity prescriptions may allow larger ζ (7). For such geometry, the low-altitude classical radio
 100 emission would not be observable, leaving only the high-altitude giant pulse component.

101 The signal above the background estimate in Figure 2 suggests a steady component of the
 102 gamma-ray emission from the direction of PSR J0540–6919. Likelihood analysis of the data
 103 in the off-pulse phase interval 0.3–0.8 shows a significant ($\sim 5\sigma$) point source at the position
 104 of PSR J0540–6919. The spectrum is consistent with that of the full phase interval, but may

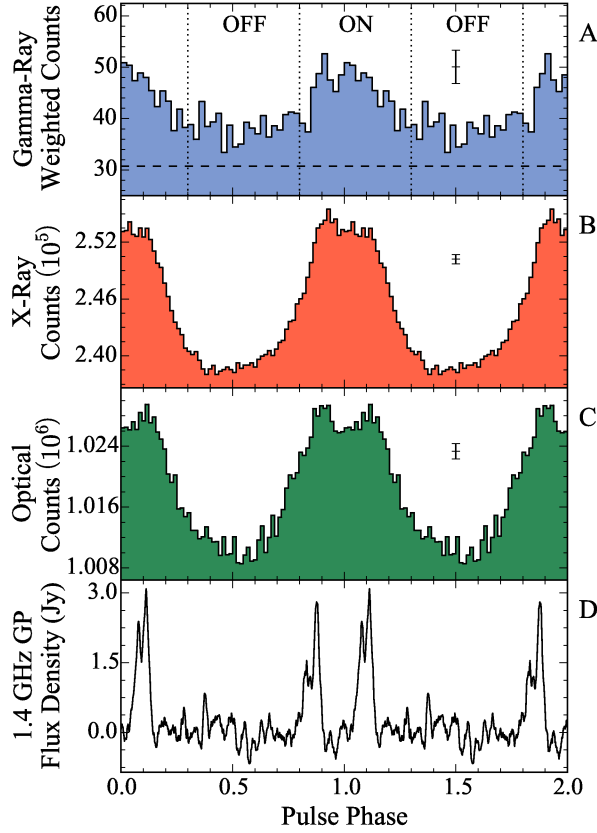


Figure 2: **Pulse profiles for PSR J0540–6919.** (A) Probability-weighted LAT count profile. The horizontal dashed line approximates the background level. Vertical lines indicate the on- and off-pulse regions used for the LAT spectral analysis. (B) RXTE X-ray integrated count profile. (C) NTT optical count profile. (D) Parkes radio flux profile from summing 18 bright giant radio pulses at 1.4 GHz. Two complete cycles are shown. The error bars in the top three panels represent the median phase bin errors.

105 be almost as well described by a single power law (see Figure S1). We cannot currently dis-
 106 tinguish whether this represents an unpulsed magnetospheric component, emission from the
 107 associated pulsar wind nebula LHA 120-N 158A or from the surrounding supernova remnant
 108 SNR 0540–69.3, or residual emission from the LMC itself. Comparing with the flux in the on-
 109 pulse phase interval, we estimate that the pulsed component is $\approx 75\%$ of the total. The choice of
 110 the off-pulse phase interval, hence the unpulsed flux estimate, is conservative because it clearly

111 includes pulsed optical and X-ray emission (see Figure 2).

112 Figure 3 shows the phase-averaged spectrum of PSR J0540–6919. The photon spectrum is
113 well described by a power law with photon index 2.2 ± 0.1 and exponential cutoff at $E_{\text{cut}} = 7.5 \pm$
114 2.6 GeV. This photon index follows the trend of increasing index with \dot{E} described in (3). This
115 correlation can be explained by stronger pair formation activity in high- \dot{E} pulsars, reprocessing
116 the radiation to lower energies and leading to steep radiating particle spectra. PSR J0540–6919
117 has the second largest magnetic field at the light cylinder of any gamma-ray pulsar known, after
118 the Crab pulsar, with $B_{\text{LC}} = 4\pi^2 (I\dot{P})^{1/2} (c^3 P^5)^{-1/2} = 3.62 \times 10^5$ G. Our E_{cut} measurement
119 favors the trend of increasing cutoff energy as a function of B_{LC} , also noted in (3), suggesting
120 emission originating from the outer magnetosphere of the neutron star.

121 The total phase-averaged luminosity of PSR J0540–6919 above 100 MeV is $L_\gamma = 4\pi f_\Omega h d^2 =$
122 $7.6 \times 10^{36} (d/50 \text{ kpc})^2 \text{ erg s}^{-1}$, where $h = (2.6 \pm 0.3) \times 10^{-11} \text{ erg cm}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1}$ is the energy flux,
123 and the geometry-dependent beaming correction factor $f_\Omega \sim 1$ for young pulsars with the most
124 probable viewing angle $\sim 90^\circ$ (26), consistent with the geometrical setting derived above. As
125 stated above, $\approx 75\%$ of the total luminosity is pulsed and may be safely attributed to the pul-
126 sar, i.e. $5.7 \times 10^{36} \text{ erg s}^{-1}$. The systematic uncertainties in the spectrum and luminosity of the
127 source due to the complete LMC emission model were found to be smaller than the statistical
128 uncertainties (27). And while other pulsars’ luminosities can be severely affected by distance
129 uncertainties (e.g. 25% for the Crab pulsar), for PSR J0540–6919 the distance to the LMC is
130 known to 2% accuracy (10).

131 PSR J0540–6919 is often called the ‘Crab’s twin’ because they have similar magnetic field
132 strengths, rotation rates, and ages, so a comparison is in order. The Crab pulse profile has two
133 peaks, phase-aligned from the radio to the gamma-ray band, while PSR J0540–6919 has a
134 broad gamma-ray pulse straddling the phase-range of the two narrow radio peaks, with struc-
135 tures in the optical and X-ray reminiscent of the radio peaks. The similarity in their radio behav-

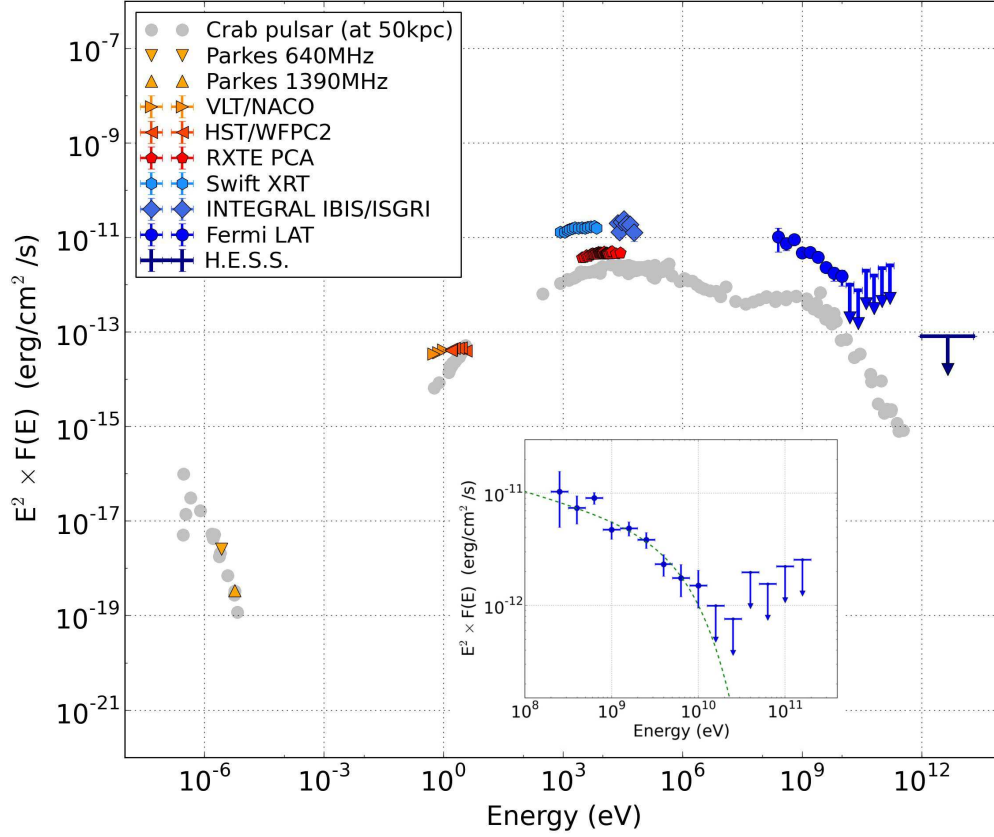


Figure 3: **Spectral energy distribution of PSR J0540–6919.** Pulsed radio data from (25, 28); extinction-corrected phase-averaged near-infrared and optical fluxes from (29, 30); X-ray fluxes from (23), including pulsed RXTE data and total spectra for the pulsar and its nebula from Swift and INTEGRAL; TeV upper limit from (31). The LAT data points correspond to the phase-averaged emission, which includes an estimated 25% of unpulsed emission. Crab pulsar phase-averaged data rescaled to a 50 kpc distance are shown for comparison in light grey (9). Inset: LAT data fit to a power law with an exponential cutoff.

136 ior is particularly significant, as for both pulsars the radio emission is dominated by so-called
 137 ‘giant pulses’, sporadic radio bursts with sub-microsecond durations and fluxes with a power-
 138 law distribution extending to $> 10^3$ times the average value (32). In (25) it is suggested that the
 139 co-location of the giant pulses with high-energy emission occurs in pulsars with high magnetic
 140 fields at the light cylinder, and very robust and extensive outer magnetosphere pair production.

141 Prior to this work, only six other pulsars showed giant pulse emission associated with strong
142 optical, X-ray, or gamma-ray components (33). The discovery of gamma-ray emission from
143 PSR J0540–6919 provides a new look at these rare sources.

144 PSR J0540–6919 and the Crab also share many spectral similarities, as illustrated in the
145 radio-to-gamma-ray spectral energy distribution (Figure 3). With large powers in both pulsed
146 X-rays and gamma rays and the absence of a strong high-energy cutoff, PSR J0540–6919 is
147 similar to the Crab and unlike most middle-aged pulsars where GeV gamma-ray power domi-
148 nates. Both characteristics may originate from the higher pair densities that allow synchrotron
149 self-Compton emission to dominate and produce higher-energy pulsations. It remains to be seen
150 whether PSR J0540–6919 follows the Crab in exhibiting a high-energy tail of pulsed emission,
151 extending far above E_{cut} and likely attributable to inverse Compton scattering (34, 35). The
152 source is currently undetected in TeV gamma rays (31), but may be in reach of future instru-
153 ments such as the Cherenkov Telescope Array.

154 Yet, while the radio, optical, and X-ray luminosities of PSR J0540–6919 and the Crab
155 are within a factor of ~ 2 , PSR J0540–6919 is much brighter in gamma rays. Its isotropic
156 pulsed gamma-ray luminosity is about 20 times more than the Crab pulsar’s, $L_{\gamma} = 3.2 \times$
157 $10^{35} (d/2 \text{ kpc})^2 \text{ erg s}^{-1}$ (3). PSR J0540–6919’s pulsed luminosity remains larger than the Crab
158 pulsar’s even when including their intense X-ray emission: combining the 2–10 keV and 20–100
159 keV pulsed flux measurements from (23) gives an integrated luminosity for PSR J0540–6919 of
160 $L_{X+\gamma} \sim 9.7 \times 10^{36} (d/50 \text{ kpc})^2 \text{ erg s}^{-1}$, while it becomes $L_{X+\gamma} \sim 2.4 \times 10^{36} (d/2 \text{ kpc}) \text{ erg s}^{-1}$
161 for the Crab (36).

162 The contrast with PSR J0537–6910 is even more striking: it has more than three times
163 greater spin-down power, but its pulsed gamma-ray luminosity may be at least 30 times less
164 than PSR J0540–6919’s. This confirms that L_{γ} values can vary by more than an order-of-
165 magnitude for a given \dot{E} range (3). Mis-estimated distances and deviations from $f_{\Omega} = 1$ can

166 account for only part of this difference. The magnetic inclination may play a significant role,
167 beyond its effect on the beaming (37, 38).

168 As mentioned above, the pulse profile of PSR J0540–6919 suggests a high viewing angle
169 $\zeta > 80^\circ$ and a low magnetic inclination $\alpha < 30^\circ$. Fits to *Chandra* observations of the pulsar
170 wind nebulae shapes of PSR J0540–6919 and PSR J0537–6910 indicate that both pulsars have
171 similar viewing angles $\zeta \sim 90^\circ$ (39). In such conditions, the non-detection of radio emission
172 from PSR J0537–6910 implies either a high magnetic inclination and a radio luminosity at most
173 half that of PSR J0540–6919, or a misaligned radio beam, hence a low magnetic inclination
174 similar to PSR J0540–6919 (40). The former case would confirm the role of the magnetic incli-
175 nation in the observed dispersion of L_γ ; the latter case would mean that the large difference in
176 pulsed luminosity between both pulsars does not stem from different geometries. Alternatively,
177 the non-detection of pulsations from PSR J0537–6910 may imply a weakly modulated gamma-
178 ray light curve. The ‘outer gap’ model predicts such flat pulse profiles for $\zeta = 90^\circ$, $\alpha = 15^\circ$,
179 and a narrow gap (26), a geometry quite similar to that inferred for PSR J0540–6919. Very
180 similar ages, energetics, and geometries for PSR J0540–6919 and PSR J0537–6910 would
181 therefore result in remarkable emission differences.

182 Our gamma-ray measurements of PSR J0540–6919 and PSR J0537–6910 offer a new look
183 at the high-altitude accelerators in the magnetospheres of rare very young pulsars. They also
184 have profound implications for our understanding of the high-energy emission from the LMC:
185 $\approx 60\%$ of the GeV flux density previously attributed to the 30 Doradus nebula (16) is now seen
186 to be emission from PSR J0540–6919. With an additional $\approx 25\%$ attributable to the source
187 coincident with PSR J0537–6910, only a small fraction of the signal may originate in cosmic
188 rays in 30 Doradus. This calls for further investigation of the relation between star-forming
189 regions and the origin and transport of cosmic rays.

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- 242 43. Materials and methods are available as supplementary materials on Science Online.

243 **Supplementary Materials**

244 www.sciencemag.org

245 Materials and Methods

246 Figure S1

247 Tables S1, S2

248 References (41-42)

249

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256 at <http://fermi.gsfc.nasa.gov/ssc/>.

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