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Search for the Decay of the Higgs Boson to Charm Quarks with the ATLAS Experiment

M. Aaboud et al.*
(ATLAS Collaboration)

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A direct search for the standard model Higgs boson decaying to a pair of charm quarks is presented. Associated production of the Higgs and Z bosons, in the decay mode $ZH \rightarrow \ell^+\ell^-cc$ is studied. A data set with an integrated luminosity of 36.1 fb$^{-1}$ of $pp$ collisions at $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV recorded by the ATLAS experiment at the LHC is used. The $H \rightarrow cc$ signature is identified using charm-tagging algorithms. The observed (expected) upper limit on $\sigma(pp \rightarrow ZH) \times B(H \rightarrow cc)$ is 2.7 (3.9) pb at the 95% confidence level for a Higgs boson mass of 125 GeV, while the standard model value is 26 fb.

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In July 2012, the ATLAS and CMS collaborations announced the discovery of a new particle with a mass of approximately 125 GeV [1,2] in searches for the standard model (SM) Higgs boson at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) [3]. Subsequent measurements indicate that this particle is consistent with the SM Higgs boson [4–10]. Direct evidence for the Yukawa coupling of the Higgs boson to the top [11] and bottom [12,13] quarks was recently obtained. Measurements of the Yukawa coupling of the Higgs boson to quarks in generations other than the third are difficult at hadron colliders, due to small branching fractions, large backgrounds, and challenges in jet flavor identification [14,15]. This Letter presents a direct search by the ATLAS experiment for the decay of the Higgs boson to a pair of charm ($c$) quarks. This search targets the production of the Higgs boson in association with a $Z$ boson decaying to charged leptons: $Z(\ell^+\ell^-)H(cc)$, where $\ell = e, \mu$.

The SM branching fraction for a Higgs boson with a mass of 125 GeV to decay to a pair of charm quarks is predicted to be 2.9% [16]. The inclusive cross section for $\sigma(pp \rightarrow ZH) \times B(H \rightarrow cc)$ is 26 fb at $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV [17]. Rare exclusive decays of the Higgs boson to a light vector meson or quarkonium state and a photon can also probe the couplings of the second-generation quarks to the Higgs boson [18–21]. Previously, the ATLAS Collaboration presented an indirect search for the decay of the Higgs boson to $c$ quarks via the decay to $J/\psi\gamma$, obtaining a branching fraction limit of $1.5 \times 10^{-3}$ at the 95% confidence level (C.L.), which approximately corresponds to a limit of 540 times the SM branching fraction prediction [14,20]. Bounds on the Higgs boson branching fractions to unobserved final states and fits to global rates constrain $B(H \rightarrow cc) < 20\%$ at the 95% C.L., assuming SM production cross sections [22]. These limits can still accommodate large modifications to the Higgs boson coupling to charm quarks from new physics [22]. In this Letter, a new approach is introduced to investigate the coupling of the Higgs boson to charm quarks.

The search is performed using $pp$ collision data recorded in 2015 and 2016 with the ATLAS detector [23] at $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV. The ATLAS detector at the LHC covers nearly the entire solid angle around the collision point [24]. It consists of an inner tracking detector surrounded by a thin superconducting solenoid, electromagnetic and hadronic calorimeters, and a muon spectrometer incorporating three large superconducting toroidal magnets. An additional pixel layer was installed for the $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV running period [25]. After the application of beam, detector, and data-quality requirements, the integrated luminosity corresponds to $36.1 \pm 0.8$ fb$^{-1}$, measured following Ref. [26]. Events are required to contain exactly two same-flavor leptons with an invariant mass consistent with that of the $Z$ boson, and at least two jets of which one or two are identified as charm jets ($c$ jets). In this Letter, lepton refers to only electrons or muons. The analysis procedure is validated by measuring the yield of $ZW$ and $ZZ$ production, where the sample is enriched in $W \rightarrow cs, cd$ and $Z \rightarrow cc$ decays. Further details can be found in Ref. [12].

Monte Carlo (MC) simulated samples were produced for signal and background processes using the full ATLAS detector simulation [27] using GEANT4 [28]. Table I provides details of the event generators used for each signal and background sample. Signal events were produced at next-to-leading order (NLO) for the $q\bar{q} \rightarrow ZH$ process and at leading order (LO) for the $gg \rightarrow ZH$ process with POWHEG-BOX v2 [32]. The dominant $Z +$ jets background and the resonant diboson $ZW$ and $ZZ$ processes were generated using SHERPA 2.2.1 [54]. The $t\bar{t}$ background was...
TABLE I. The configurations used for event generation of the signal and background processes. If two parton distribution functions (PDFs) are shown, the first is for the matrix element calculation and the second for the parton shower, otherwise the same is used for both. Alternative event generators and configurations, used to estimate systematic uncertainties, are in parentheses. Tune refers to the underlying-event tuned parameters of the parton shower event generator. MG5_AMC refers to MadGraph5_AMC@NLO 2.2.2 [29]; PYTHIA 8 refers to version 8.212 [30]. Heavy-flavor hadron decays modeled by EvtGen 1.2.0 [31] are used for all samples except those generated using Sherpa. The order of the calculation of the cross sections used to normalize the predictions is indicated. The $q\bar{q} \rightarrow ZH$ cross section is estimated by subtracting the $gg \rightarrow ZH$ cross section from the $pp \rightarrow ZH$ cross section. The asterisk (*) in the last column denotes that the indicated order is for the $pp \rightarrow ZH$ cross section. NNLO denotes next-to-next-to-leading order; NLL denotes next-to-leading log and NNLL denotes next-to-next-to-leading log.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Event Generator (alternative)</th>
<th>Parton Shower (alternative)</th>
<th>PDF (alternative)</th>
<th>Tune</th>
<th>Cross section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$q\bar{q} \rightarrow ZH$</td>
<td>POWHEG-BOX v2 +GoSam [35] +MiNLO [45,46]</td>
<td>PYTHIA 8</td>
<td>PDF4LHC15NLO [33] /CTEQ6L1 [36,37]</td>
<td>AZNLO [34]</td>
<td>NNLO (QCD)* +NLO (EW) [38-44]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$gg \rightarrow ZH$</td>
<td>POWHEG-BOX v2</td>
<td>PYTHIA 8 (HERWIG 7 [47])</td>
<td>PDF4LHC15NLO /CTEQ6L1</td>
<td>AZNLO (A14 [48])</td>
<td>NLO+NLL (QCD) [17,49-51]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t\bar{t}$</td>
<td>POWHEG-BOX v2</td>
<td>PYTHIA 8 (HERWIG 7)</td>
<td>NNPDF3.0NLO /NNPDF2.3LO</td>
<td>NLO</td>
<td>NLO + NNLL [53]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ZW, ZZ$</td>
<td>SHERPA 2.2.1 [54] (POWHEG-BOX)</td>
<td>SHERPA (PYTHIA 8)</td>
<td>NNPDF3.0NNLO /NNPDF2.3LO</td>
<td>SHERPA NLO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Z + jets$</td>
<td>SHERPA 2.2.1 (MG5_AMC)</td>
<td>SHERPA (PYTHIA 8)</td>
<td>NNPDF3.0NNLO /NNPDF2.3LO</td>
<td>SHERPA (A14)</td>
<td>NNLO [55]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

generated using POWHEG-BOX v2. Backgrounds from single top and multijet production and the contribution from Higgs decays other than $bb$ and $c\bar{c}$ are assessed to be negligible and not considered further. The Higgs boson mass is set to $m_H = 125$ GeV and the top-quark mass is set to 172.5 GeV.

Events are required to have at least one reconstructed primary vertex. Electron candidates are reconstructed from energy clusters in the electromagnetic calorimeter that are associated with charged-particle tracks reconstructed in the inner detector [56,57]. Muon candidates are reconstructed by combining inner detector tracks with muon spectrometer tracks or energy deposits in the calorimeters consistent with the passage of minimum-ionizing particles [58]. For data recorded in 2015, the single-electron (muon) trigger required a candidate with $p_T > 24(20)$ GeV; in 2016 the lepton $p_T$ threshold was raised to 26 GeV. Events are required to contain a pair of same-flavor leptons, both satisfying $p_T > 7$ GeV and $|\eta| < 2.5$. At least one lepton must have $p_T > 27$ GeV and correspond to a lepton that passed the trigger. The two leptons are required to satisfy loose track-isolation criteria with an efficiency greater than 99%. They are required to have opposite charge in dimuon events, but not in dielectron events due to the non-negligible charge misidentification rate of electrons. The invariant mass of the dilepton system is required to be consistent with the mass of the Z boson: 81 GeV < $m_{\ell\ell}$ < 101 GeV.

Jets are reconstructed from topological energy clusters in the calorimeters [59,60] using the anti-$k_T$ algorithm [61] with a radius parameter of 0.4 implemented in the FastJet package [62]. The jet energy is corrected using a jet-area-based technique [63,64] and calibrated [65,66] using $p_T$- and $\eta$-dependent correction factors determined from simulation, with residual corrections from internal jet properties. Further corrections from in situ measurements are applied to data. Selected jets must have $p_T > 20$ GeV and $|\eta| < 2.5$. Events are required to contain at least two jets. If a muon is found within a jet, its momentum is added to the selected jet. An overlap removal procedure resolves cases in which the same physical object is reconstructed multiple times, e.g. an electron also reconstructed as a jet.

![ATLAS Simulation](image)

**FIG. 1.** The c-jet-tagging efficiency (colored scale) as a function of the $b$ jet and $l$ jet rejection as obtained from simulated $t\bar{t}$ events. The cross, labeled as working point, WP, denotes the selection criterion used in this analysis. The solid and dotted black lines indicate the contours in rejection space for the fixed c-tagging efficiency used in the analysis and two alternatives.
JETS IN SIMULATED EVENTS ARE LABELED ACCORDING TO THE PRESENCE OF A HEAVY-FAVORHadRON WITH $p_T > 5$ GEV WITHIN $\Delta R = 0.3$ FROM THE JET AXIS. IF A $b$ Hadron is FOUND THE JET IS LABELED AS A $b$ JET. IF NO $b$ Hadron is FOUND, BUT A $c$ Hadron is Present, THEN the JET IS LABELED AS A $c$ JET. OTHERWISE the JET IS LABELED AS A LIGHT-FAVOR JET (I JET).

Flavor-tagging algorithms exploit the different lifetimes of $b$, $c$, and light-flavor hadrons. A $c$-tagging algorithm is used to identify $c$ jets. Charm jets are particularly challenging to tag because $c$ hadrons have shorter lifetimes and decay to fewer charged particles than $b$ hadrons. Boosted decision trees are trained to obtain two multivariate discriminants: to separate $c$ jets from $l$ jets and $c$ jets from $b$ jets. The same variables used for $b$ tagging [67,68] are used. Figure 1 shows the selection criteria applied in the two-dimensional multivariate discriminant space, to obtain an efficiency of 41% for $c$ jets and rejection factors of 4.0 and 20 for $b$ jets and $l$ jets. The efficiencies are calibrated to data using $b$ quarks from $t \rightarrow Wb$ and $c$ quarks from $W \rightarrow cs$, $cd$ with methods identical to the $b$-tagging algorithms [67].

Statistical uncertainties in the simulation are reduced, by weighting events according to the tagging efficiencies of their jets, parametrized as a function of jet flavor, $p_T$, $\eta$ and the angular separation between jets, rather than imposing a direct requirement on the $c$-tagging discriminants.

Data are analyzed in four categories with different expected signal purities. The dijet invariant mass, $m_{c\bar{c}}$, constructed using the two highest-$p_T$ jets, is the discriminating variable in each category. Categories are defined using the transverse momentum of the reconstructed $Z$ boson, $p_T^Z$ $(75 \text{ GeV} \leq p_T^Z < 150 \text{ GeV}$ and $p_T^Z \geq 150 \text{ GeV}$) and the number of $c$ tags amongst the leading jets (either one or two). The $p_T^Z$ requirements exploit the harder $p_T^Z$ distribution in $ZH$ compared to $Z +$ jets production. Background events are rejected by requiring the angular separation between the two jets constituting the dijet system, $\Delta R_{c\bar{c}}$, to be less than 2.2, 1.5, or 1.3 for events satisfying $75 \leq p_T^Z < 150 \text{ GeV}$, $150 \leq p_T^Z < 200 \text{ GeV}$, or $p_T^Z \geq 200 \text{ GeV}$. The signal acceptance ranges from 0.5% to 3.4% depending on the category. A joint binned maximum-profile-likelihood fit to $m_{c\bar{c}}$ in the categories is used to extract the signal yield and the $Z +$ jets background normalization. The fit uses 15 bins in each category within the range of 50 GeV $< m_{c\bar{c}} < 200$ GeV, with a bin width of 10 GeV. The parameter of interest, $\mu$, common to all categories, is the signal strength, defined as the ratio of the measured signal yield to the SM prediction.

Systematic uncertainties affecting the signal and background predictions include theoretical uncertainties in the signal and background modeling and experimental uncertainties. Table II shows their relative impact on the fitted value of $\mu$. Uncertainties in the $m_{c\bar{c}}$ shape of the backgrounds are assessed by comparisons between nominal and alternative event generators as indicated in Table I.

Systematic uncertainties are incorporated within the statistical model through nuisance parameters that modify the shape and/or normalization of the distributions. Statistical uncertainties in the simulation samples are accounted for. The $Z +$ jets background is normalized from the data through the inclusion of an unconstrained normalization parameter for each category. The fitted

### Table III: Postfit yields for the signal and background processes in each category from the profile likelihood fit. Uncertainties include statistical and systematic contributions. The prefit SM expected $ZH(c\bar{c})$ signal yields are indicated in parenthesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>1 $c$ tag Yield, 50 GeV $&lt; m_{c\bar{c}} &lt; 200$ GeV</th>
<th>2 $c$ tags Yield, 50 GeV $&lt; m_{c\bar{c}} &lt; 200$ GeV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$75 \leq p_T^Z &lt; 150$ GeV</td>
<td>$p_T^Z \geq 150$ GeV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Z+$ jets</td>
<td>$69400 \pm 500$</td>
<td>$15650 \pm 180$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ZW$</td>
<td>$750 \pm 130$</td>
<td>$290 \pm 50$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ZZ$</td>
<td>$490 \pm 70$</td>
<td>$180 \pm 28$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\bar{t}$</td>
<td>$2020 \pm 280$</td>
<td>$130 \pm 50$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ZH(b\bar{b})$</td>
<td>$32 \pm 2$</td>
<td>$19.5 \pm 1.5$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ZH(c\bar{c})$ (SM)</td>
<td>$-143 \pm 170$ (2.4)</td>
<td>$-84 \pm 100$ (1.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$72500 \pm 320$</td>
<td>$16180 \pm 140$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>$72504$</td>
<td>$16181$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[211802-3]
normalization parameters range between 1.13 and 1.30. All other background normalization factors are correlated between categories, with acceptance uncertainties of order 10% to account for relative variations between categories.

The dominant contributions to the uncertainty in \( \mu \) are the efficiency of the tagging algorithms, the jet energy scale and resolution, and the background modeling. The largest uncertainty is due to the normalization of the dominant \( Z + \) jets background. The typical uncertainty in the tagging efficiency is 25% for \( c \) jets, 5% for \( b \) jets, and 20% for \( l \) jets.

Table III shows the fitted signal and background yields. The \( m_{c\bar{c}} \) distributions in the 2 \( c \) tag categories are shown in Fig. 2 with the background shapes and normalizations according to the result of the fit. Good agreement is observed between the postfit shapes of the distributions and the data.

The analysis procedure is validated by measuring the yield of \( ZV \) production, where \( V \) denotes a \( W \) or \( Z \) boson, with the same event selection. The fraction of the \( ZZ \) yield from \( Z \to c\bar{c} \) decays is \( \sim 55\% \) (20\%) in the 2 \( c \) tag (1 \( c \) tag) category, while the fraction of the \( ZW \) yield from \( W \to c\bar{s} \), \( cd \) is \( \sim 65\% \) for both the 2 and 1 \( c \) tag categories. Contributions of Higgs boson decays to \( c\bar{c} \) and \( b\bar{b} \) are treated as background and constrained to the SM predictions within its theoretical uncertainties. The diboson signal strength is measured to be \( \mu_{ZV} = 0.6_{-0.3}^{+0.3} \) with an observed (expected) significance of 1.4 (2.2) standard deviations.

The best-fit value for the \( ZH(c\bar{c}) \) signal strength is \( \mu_{ZH} = -69 \pm 101 \). By assuming a signal with the kinematics of the SM Higgs boson, model-dependent corrections are made to extrapolate to the inclusive phase space. Hence, an upper limit on \( \sigma(pp \to ZH) \times B(H \to c\bar{c}) \) is computed using a modified frequentist CLs method \([69,70]\) with the profile likelihood ratio as the test statistic. The observed (expected) upper limit is found to be 2.7 (3.9\( ^{+2.1}_{-1.1} \)) pb at the 95\% C.L. This corresponds to an observed (expected) upper limit on \( \mu \) at the 95\% C.L. of 110 (150\( ^{+80}_{-40} \)). The uncertainties in the expected limits correspond to the \( \pm 1\sigma \) interval of background-only pseudoexperiments. With the current sensitivity, the result depends weakly on the assumption of the SM rate for \( H \to b\bar{b} \). The observed limit remains within 5\% of the nominal value when the assumed value for normalization of the \( ZH(b\bar{b}) \) background is varied from zero to twice the SM prediction.

A search for the decay of the Higgs boson to charm quarks has been performed using 36.1 fb\(^{-1}\) of data collected with the ATLAS detector in \( pp \) collisions at \( \sqrt{s} = 13 \) TeV at the LHC. No significant excess of \( ZH(c\bar{c}) \) production is observed over the SM background expectation. The observed upper limit on \( \sigma(pp \to ZH) \times B(H \to c\bar{c}) \) is 2.7 pb at the 95\% C.L. The corresponding expected upper limit is 3.9\( ^{+2.1}_{-1.1} \) pb. This is the most stringent limit to date in direct searches for the inclusive decay of the Higgs boson to charm quarks.

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[20] ATLAS Collaboration, Search for Higgs and Z Boson Decays to J/\( \psi \gamma \) and Y(\( nS \)\( \gamma \)) with the ATLAS Detector, Phys. Rev. Lett. 114, 121801 (2015).
[24] ATLAS uses a right-handed coordinate system with its origin at the nominal interaction point (IP) in the center of the detector and the \( z \) axis along the beam pipe. The \( x \) axis points from the IP to the center of the LHC ring, and the \( y \) axis points upwards. Cylindrical coordinates \((r, \phi)\) are used in the transverse plane, \( \phi \) being the azimuthal angle around the \( z \) axis. The pseudorapidity is defined in terms of
the polar angle \( \theta \) as \( \eta = -\ln\tan(\theta/2) \). Angular distance is measured in units of \( \Delta R \equiv \sqrt{(\Delta \eta)^2 + (\Delta \phi)^2} \).


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Department of Physics, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Iasi, Romania
National Institute for Research and Development of Isotopic and Molecular Technologies, Physics Department, Cluj Napoca, Romania
West University in Timisoara, Timisoara, Romania
Departamento de Física, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Cavendish Laboratory, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom
Department of Physics, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
CERN, Geneva, Switzerland
Departamento de Física, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile
Instituto de High Energy Physics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China
Department of Physics, Nanjing University, Jiangsu, China
Physics Department, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China
University of Chinese Academy of Science (UCAS), Beijing, China
Department of Modern Physics and State Key Laboratory of Particle Detection and Electronics, University of Science and Technology of China, Anhui, China
School of Physics, Shandong University, Shandong, China
School of Physics and Astronomy, Key Laboratory for Particle Physics, Astrophysics and Cosmology, Ministry of Education; Shanghai Key Laboratory for Particle Physics and Cosmology, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China
Tsung-Dao Lee Institute, Shanghai, China
Université Clermont Auvergne, CNRS/IN2P3, LPC, Clermont-Ferrand, France
Nevis Laboratory, Columbia University, Irvington, New York, USA
Niels Bohr Institute, University of Copenhagen, København, Denmark
INFN Gruppo Collegato di Cosenza, Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati, Italy
Dipartimento di Fisica, Università della Calabria, Rende, Italy
AGH University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Physics and Applied Computer Science, Krakow, Poland
Marian Smoluchowski Institute of Physics, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland
Institute of Nuclear Physics Polish Academy of Sciences, Krakow, Poland
Physics Department, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, USA
Physics Department, University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, Texas, USA
DESY, Hamburg and Zeuthen, Hamburg and Berlin, Germany
Lehrstuhl für Experimentelle Physik IV, Technische Universität Dortmund, Dortmund, Germany
SUPA—School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom
INFN e Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati, Italy
INFN Sezione di Genova, Genova, Italy
E. Andronikashvili Institute of Physics, Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia
High Energy Physics Institute, Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia
II Physikalisches Institut, Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, Giessen, Germany
SUPA—School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom
Laboratoire de Physique Subatomique et de Cosmologie, Université Grenoble-Alpes, CNRS/IN2P3, Grenoble, France
Physikalisches Institut, Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen, Germany
Laboratory for Particle Physics and Cosmology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA
Kirchhoff-Institut für Physik, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany
Physikalisches Institut, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany
Faculty of Applied Information Science, Hiroshima Institute of Technology, Hiroshima, Japan
Department of Physics, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong, China
Department of Physics, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China
Department of Physics and Institute for Advanced Study, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China
Department of Physics, National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan
Department of Physics, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA
Institut für Astro- und Teilchenphysik, Leopold-Franzens-Universität, Innsbruck, Austria
University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA
INFIN Sezione di Pavia, Italy
Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Pavia, Pavia, Italy
Department of Physics, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
National Research Centre “Kurchatov Institute” B.P.Konstantinov Petersburg Nuclear Physics Institute, St. Petersburg, Russia
INFN Sezione di Pisa, Italy
Dipartimento di Fisica E. Fermi, Università di Pisa, Pisa, Italy
Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA
Laboratório de Instrumentação e Física Experimental de Partículas—LIP, Lisboa, Portugal
Faculdade de Ciências, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal
Department of Physics, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
Centro de Física Nuclear da Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal
Departamento de Física, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal
Departamento de Física Teórica y del Cosmos, Universidad de Granada, Granada, Portugal
Dep Física and CEFITEC of Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Caparica, Portugal
Institute of Physics, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague, Czech Republic
Czech Technical University in Prague, Prague, Czech Republic
Charles University, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Prague, Czech Republic
State Research Center Institute for High Energy Physics (Protvino), NRC KI, Russia
Particle Physics Department, Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Didcot, United Kingdom
INFN Sezione di Roma, Roma, Italy
Dipartimento di Fisica, Sapienza Università di Roma, Roma, Italy
INFN Sezione di Roma Tor Vergata, Roma, Italy
Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Roma Tor Vergata, Roma, Italy
INFN Sezione di Roma Tre, Roma, Italy
Dipartimento di Matematica e Fisica, Università Roma Tre, Roma, Italy
Faculté des Sciences Ain Chock, Réseau Universitaire de Physique des Hautes Energies—Université Hassan II, Casablanca, Morocco
Centre National de l’Energie des Sciences Techniques Nucleaires, Rabat, Morocco
Faculté des Sciences Semlalia, Université Cadi Ayyad, LPHEA-Marrakech, Morocco
Faculté des Sciences, Université Mohamed Premier and LPTPM, Oujda, Morocco
Faculté des sciences, Université Mohammed V, Rabat, Morocco
DMS/IRFU (Institut de Recherches sur les Lois Fondamentales de l’Univers), CEA Saclay (Commissariat à l’Energie Atomique et aux Energies Alternatives), Gif-sur-Yvette, France
Santa Cruz Institute for Particle Physics, University of California Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, California, USA
Department of Physics, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA
Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom
Department of Physics, Shinshu University, Nagano, Japan
Department Physik, Universität Siegen, Siegen, Germany
Department of Physics, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada
SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory, Stanford, California, USA
Faculty of Mathematics, Physics & Informatics, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovak Republic
Department of Subnuclear Physics, Institute of Experimental Physics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Kosice, Slovak Republic
Department of Physics, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
Department of Physics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa
School of Physics, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
Department of Physics, Stockholm University, Sweden
The Oskar Klein Centre, Stockholm, Sweden
Physics Department, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden
Departments of Physics & Astronomy and Chemistry, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, New York, USA
Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom
School of Physics, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia
Institute of Physics, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan
Department of Physics, Technion: Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel
Raymond and Beverly Sackler School of Physics and Astronomy, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel
Department of Physics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece
International Center for Elementary Particle Physics and Department of Physics, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan
Graduate School of Science and Technology, Tokyo Metropolitan University, Tokyo, Japan
Department of Physics, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Tokyo, Japan
Tomsk State University, Tomsk, Russia
Department of Physics, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
INFN-TIFPA, Trento, Italy
University of Trento, Trento, Italy
TRIUMF, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
Department of Physics and Astronomy, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences, and Center for Integrated Research in Fundamental Science and Engineering, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Japan
Department of Physics and Astronomy, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA
Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of California Irvine, Irvine, California, USA
INFN Gruppo Collegato di Udine, Sezione di Trieste, Udine, Italy
ICTP, Trieste, Italy
Dipartimento di Chimica, Fisica e Ambiente, Università di Udine, Udine, Italy
Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Uppsala, Uppsala, Sweden
Department of Physics, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, USA
Instituto de Fisica Corpuscular (IFIC), Centro Mixto Universidad de Valencia—CSIC, Spain
Department of Physics, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
Department of Physics, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom
Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan
Department of Particle Physics, The Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel
Fakultät für Mathematik und Naturwissenschaften, Fachgruppe Physik, Bergische Universität Wuppertal, Wuppertal, Germany
Fakultät für Physik und Astronomie, Julius-Maximilians-Universität, Würzburg, Germany
Department of Physics, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA
Yerevan Physics Institute, Yerevan, Armenia
Centre de Calcul de l’Institut National de Physique Nucléaire et de Physique des Particules (IN2P3), Villeurbanne, France
Academia Sinica Grid Computing, Institute of Physics, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan

aDeceased.
bAlso at Department of Physics, King’s College London, London, United Kingdom.
cAlso at Institute of Physics, Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, Baku, Azerbaijan.
dAlso at Novosibirsk State University, Novosibirsk, Russia.
eAlso at TRIUMF, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
fAlso at Department of Physics & Astronomy, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA.
gAlso at Physics Department, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine.
hAlso at Department of Physics, California State University, Fresno, CA, USA.
iAlso at Department of Physics, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland.
jAlso at II Physikalisches Institut, Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen, Germany.
kAlso at Departament de Fisica de la Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain.
lAlso at Tomsk State University, Tomsk, and Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology State University, Dolgoprudny, Russia.
mAlso at The Collaborative Innovation Center of Quantum Matter (CICQM), Beijing, China.
nAlso at Universita di Napoli Parthenope, Napoli, Italy.
oAlso at Institute of Particle Physics (IPP), Canada.
pAlso at Horia Hulubei National Institute of Physics and Nuclear Engineering, Bucharest, Romania.
qAlso at CPPM, Aix-Marseille Université and CNRS/IN2P3, Marseille, France.
rAlso at Department of Physics, St. Petersburg State Polytechnical University, St. Petersburg, Russia.
sAlso at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York, New York City, NY, USA.
tAlso at Department of Financial and Management Engineering, University of the Aegean, Chios, Greece.
uAlso at Centre for High Performance Computing, CSIR Campus, Rosebank, Cape Town, South Africa.
wAlso at Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, LA, USA.
xAlso at Institucio Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avancats, ICREA, Barcelona, Spain.
yAlso at Department of Physics, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA.
zAlso at LAL, Univ. Paris-Sud, CNRS/IN2P3, Université Paris-Saclay, Orsay, France.
aAlso at Graduate School of Science, Osaka University, Osaka, Japan.
bAlso at Fakultät für Mathematik und Physik, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, Freiburg, Germany.
cAlso at Institute for Mathematics, Astrophysics and Particle Physics, Radboud University Nijmegen/Nikhef, Nijmegen, Netherlands.
dAlso at Institute of Theoretical Physics, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia.
eAlso at CERN, Geneva, Switzerland.
fAlso at Georgian Technical University (GTU), Tbilisi, Georgia.
gAlso at Ochadai Academic Production, Ochanomizu University, Tokyo, Japan.