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Observation of electroweak production of two jets and a Z-boson pair

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ATLAS Collaboration*

Electroweak symmetry breaking explains the origin of the masses of elementary particles through their interactions with the Higgs field. Besides the measurements of the Higgs boson properties, the study of the scattering of massive vector bosons with spin 1 allows the nature of electroweak symmetry breaking to be probed. Among all processes related to vector-boson scattering, the electroweak production of two jets and a Z-boson pair is a rare and important one. Here we report the observation of this process from proton–proton collision data corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 139 fb^{-1} recorded at a centre-of-mass energy of 13 TeV with the ATLAS detector at the Large Hadron Collider. We consider two different final states originating from the decays of the Z-boson pair: one containing four charged leptons and another containing two charged leptons and two neutrinos. The hypothesis of no electroweak production is rejected with a statistical significance of 5.7σ, and the measured cross-section for electroweak production is consistent with the Standard Model prediction. In addition, we report cross-sections for inclusive production of a Z-boson pair and two jets for the two final states.

Electroweak symmetry breaking (EWSB) plays a central role in the Standard Model (SM) of particle physics, as it explains the origin of elementary particle masses via the interactions of each particle with the Higgs field. Following the discovery of the Higgs boson[1,2], scrutiny of EWSB has become a primary focus of research at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC). In addition to direct measurements of the Higgs boson's properties, the scattering of two massive vector bosons (VBS) offers another key avenue to probe the EWSB mechanism[3–5]. As a result of the delicate configuration of quantum field interactions for the SM VBS processes[3], the presence of the Higgs boson is predicted to exactly cancel out the otherwise diverging VBS amplitudes at high energies and prevent unitarity violation at the TeV scale. Any significant deviation from the predicted high-energy behaviour of VBS would point to new phenomena in the EWSB sector which are motivated by many plausible extensions to the SM[6–8]. Moreover, VBS offers a sensitive means to search for anomalies in the weak-boson self-interactions[9–11], which are precisely predicted by the gauge theory in the SM.

The LHC provides an unprecedented opportunity to study the VBS process in proton–proton (pp) collisions owing to the high collision energies and large luminosity. At the LHC, VBS occurs when two vector bosons (V) are radiated from the initial-state quarks in the colliding protons and then scatter into another pair of vector bosons in the final state. The detector signature of VBS includes the decay products of the pair of outgoing bosons and a pair of hadronic jets (j), which originate from the deflection of the initial-state quarks that radiated the weak bosons. The most promising channel to measure VBS is the purely electroweak (EW) production of $VVjj$ (EW $VVjj$) in pp collisions, in which the contributions from the non-VBS processes (such as triboson production) could be sufficiently suppressed with a proper choice of kinematic selections. Thus far, the EW $W^{\pm}W^{\pm}jj$ and $WZjj$ processes have been observed using LHC Run 2 data[12–15], and no significant deviations from the SM predictions have been found. The Compact Muon Solenoid Collaboration has searched for EW $ZZjj$ production using 137 fb^{-1} of 13 TeV pp collision data with an observed significance of 4.0 s.d.[16]. Despite the small rate, EW $ZZjj$ production is of great interest owing to the low background and the unique feature of a fully reconstructed final state when both of the Z bosons decay into charged leptons. The complete reconstruction of the final-state bosons provides maximal information in which the properties of the VBS process that are sensitive to EWSB can be probed. Furthermore, of

*A list of authors and their affiliations appears at the end of the paper. e-mail: atlas.publications@cern.ch

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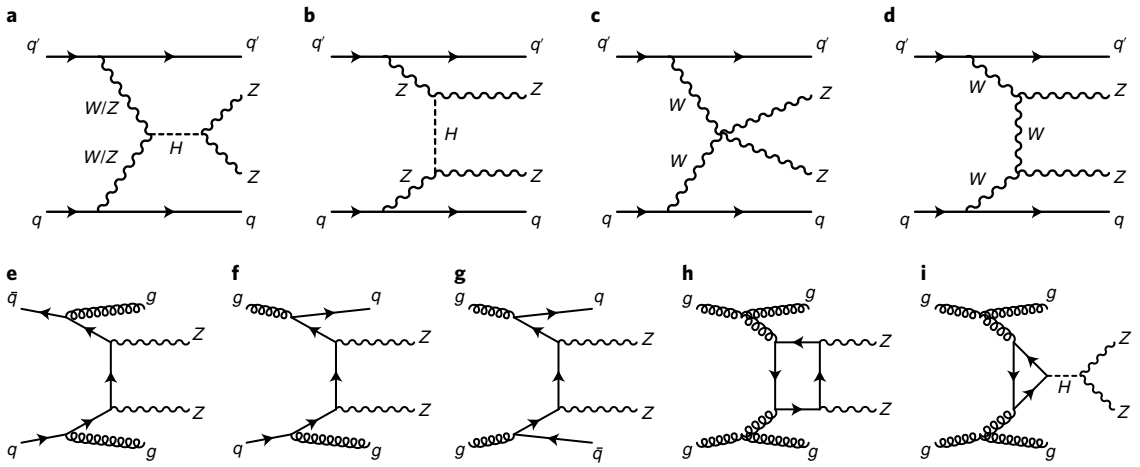

Fig. 1 | Typical Feynman diagrams for the production of *ZZjj*. **a**–**d**, The relevant EW VBS diagrams for the s-channel (**a**) and the t-channel production (**b**) through a Higgs boson, the weak-boson self-interaction process (**c**) and the production through exchange of a *W* boson (**d**). **e**–**i**, The relevant QCD diagrams for the tree-level production with different quark and gluon initial states (**e**–**g**), the box diagram without a Higgs boson (**h**) and the triangle diagram through a Higgs boson (**i**). Straight lines represent quarks (q, q'), spiral lines represent gluon (g), wavy lines represent *W* and *Z* bosons and the dashed lines represent the Higgs boson.

all the measurements to date, VBS *ZZ* production is uniquely sensitive to the possible anomalous interaction between four *Z* bosons. This is forbidden at tree level in the SM, and the study of EW *ZZjj* production is therefore a direct test of an important prediction of the EW theory. Finally, precision measurements of high-mass VBS *ZZ* production also allow an almost model-independent measurement of the Higgs boson width. The Higgs width is precisely predicted by the SM and is sensitive to new phenomena in the Higgs sector. However, the current methods to extract the Higgs width (using the gluon–gluon fusion production mechanism) are known to fail for certain types of new phenomena, and the use of the VBS production mechanism was proposed to alleviate this problem[17].

This article reports observation of EW *ZZjj* production at the LHC, as well as a measurement of the cross-sections of the inclusive (EW and non-EW) *ZZjj* processes. The set of 13 TeV *pp* collision data recorded by the ATLAS experiment during LHC Run 2 is used. The search is performed in two final states where both *Z* bosons decay leptonically in final states with either four charged leptons and two jets ($\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$), or two charged leptons, two neutrinos and two jets ($\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$). The definition of the signal region (SR) is optimized to suppress the reducible backgrounds coming from processes with different final states. Multivariate discriminants (MDs) are used to further separate the EW signal from the remaining backgrounds, including both the reducible ones and the irreducible non-EW *ZZjj* process, which contains two strong interactions at the lowest order in perturbation theory and is referred to as quantum chromodynamics (QCD) *VVjj* production. Figure 1 depicts the typical diagrams for both the EW VBS and QCD *ZZjj* processes. These MDs exploit the characteristics of VBS production, such as a large separation in rapidity between the two jets ($\Delta y(jj)$) as well as a large invariant mass of the jet pair (m_{jj}). The production of *ZZjj* in which one or both *Z* bosons decay into electrons or muons via τ leptons is considered as signal, but it makes a negligible contribution to the selected event sample.

Experimental apparatus

The ATLAS experiment[18–20] at the LHC uses a multipurpose particle detector with a forward–backward symmetric cylindrical geometry and a near 4π coverage in solid angle. ATLAS uses a right-handed coordinate system with its origin at the nominal interaction point in the centre of the detector and the z-axis along the beam pipe. The x-axis points from the interaction point to the centre of the LHC ring, and the y-axis points upwards. Cylindrical coordinates (r, ϕ) are used in the transverse plane, ϕ being the azimuthal angle around the z-axis. The pseudorapidity is defined in terms of the polar angle θ as $\eta = -\ln\tan(\theta/2)$. The angular distance between two physics objects is measured in units of $\Delta R \equiv \sqrt{(\Delta\eta)^2 + (\Delta\phi)^2}$. The ATLAS detector consists of an inner tracking detector surrounded by a thin superconducting solenoid providing a 2 T axial magnetic field, electromagnetic and hadron calorimeters and a muon spectrometer. The inner tracking detector covers the pseudorapidity range $|\eta| < 2.5$. It consists of silicon pixel, silicon microstrip and transition radiation tracking detectors. Lead/liquid argon (LAr) sampling calorimeters provide electromagnetic energy measurements with high granularity. A steel/scintillator tile hadron calorimeter covers the central pseudorapidity range ($|\eta| < 1.7$). The endcap and forward regions are instrumented with LAr calorimeters for electromagnetic and hadronic energy measurements up to $|\eta| = 4.9$. The muon spectrometer covers the pseudorapidity range $|\eta| < 2.7$ and is based on three large air-core toroidal superconducting magnets with eight coils each. The field integral of the toroids ranges between 2.0 and 6.0 T m across most of the detector. The muon spectrometer includes a system of precision tracking chambers and fast detectors for triggering. A two-level trigger system[21] is used to select events for offline analysis. The first-level trigger is implemented in hardware and uses a subset of the detector information. This is followed by the software-based high-level trigger, which reduces the event selection rate to about 1 kHz.

Data and simulation

The data for this analysis were recorded using single-lepton and multi-lepton triggers, corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 139 fb^{-1}. The overall trigger efficiency for the inclusive *ZZjj* events selected for this analysis ranges from 95% to 99% for the inclusive sample of all final states considered.

The EW *ZZjj* production was modelled using the POWHEG-BOX v2 event generator[22] with matrix elements (ME) calculated at next to leading order (NLO) in perturbative QCD (pQCD) and with the NNPDF3.0LO[23] parton distribution functions (PDF). The contributions from triboson and VH processes in $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channels were estimated using the MADGRAPH5_AMC@NLO 2.6.1 event generator[24] with ME calculated at leading order (LO) in pQCD with the NNPDF3.0LO PDF. Reweighting factors were calculated as a function of m_{jj} from the MADGRAPH5_AMC@NLO events and applied to the POWHEG-V2 events. The effect is found to be below a few per cent level. The QCD *ZZjj* production

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Table 1 | Observed data and expected event yields in 139 fb^{-1} of data in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ SRs. All the minor backgrounds are summed together as 'Others', and the *WWjj* and $t\bar{t}$ processes are referred to as the non-resonant-$\ell\ell$ backgrounds. Uncertainties in the predictions include both the statistical and systematic components on the predicted yields before fit

Process	$\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$	$\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$
EW *ZZjj*	31.4±3.5	15.0±0.8
QCD *ZZjj*	77±25	17.2±3.5
QCD *ggZZjj*	13.1±4.4	3.5±1.1
Non-resonant-$\ell\ell$	—	21.4±4.8
WZ	—	24.6±1.1
Others	3.2±2.1	1.2±0.9
Total	124±26	82.9±6.4
Data	127	82

was modelled using SHERPA 2.2.2 (ref. [25]) with the NNPDF3.0NNLO[23] PDF. The events with up to one outgoing parton were generated at NLO in pQCD, while those with two or three partons were modelled with LO accuracy. The production of *ZZjj* from the gluon–gluon initial state with a four-fermion loop or with the exchange of a Higgs boson was generated separately. This process, referred to as the *ggZZjj* process, was modelled using SHERPA 2.2.2 with the NNPDF3.0NNLO PDF and GG2VV[26] with the CT10NNLO[27] PDF in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channels, respectively, and normalized to a calculation accurate to NLO in pQCD. The leptonic decays of *Z* bosons are included in the simulation. Interference between EW and QCD *ZZjj* was modelled with MADGRAPH5_AMC@NLO 2.6.1 calculated at LO and is treated as systematic on the predicted EW process. The effect is far smaller than the statistical uncertainty from data.

The production of *WWjj* and *WZjj* with the subsequent leptonic decays of vector bosons were modelled with SHERPA 2.2.2. Diboson processes with the subsequent semileptonic decays were modelled using POWHEG-BOX v2 (ref. [28]). Triboson production not in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ or $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channels was modelled using SHERPA 2.2.2. For top-quark pair production, POWHEG-BOX v2 was used. The production of single top quarks was simulated using POWHEG-BOX v1 (refs. [29–31]). The production of $t\bar{t}$ in association with vector bosons (*ttV*) was modelled with MADGRAPH5_AMC@NLO 2.3.3 for *ttW*, with SHERPA 2.2.1 and MADGRAPH5_AMC@NLO 2.3.3 for *ttZ* and with MADGRAPH5_AMC@NLO 2.2.2 for *ttWW*. The *Z* + jets processes were modelled using SHERPA 2.2.1.

The above theoretical calculations are accurate to a given order in perturbation theory for partonic final states. To correctly model the hadronic final state that interacts with the detector, parton showering, hadronization and underlying event algorithms were applied to the partonic final states predicted from each calculation. Those were modelled with PYTHIA 8.186[32] using the NNPDF2.3LO[33] PDF and the A14 set of tuned parameters[34] for all the samples except for the ones from SHERPA, where those were simulated within the SHERPA program.

All samples were passed through a detailed simulation of the ATLAS detector[35] based on GEANT4[36], to produce predictions that can be directly compared with the data. Furthermore, simulated inelastic *pp* collisions were overlaid to model additional *pp* collisions in the same and neighbouring bunch crossings (pile-up)[37]. Simulated events were reweighted to match the pile-up conditions in the data. All simulated events were processed using the same reconstruction algorithms as used in data.

Event selection

The selection of the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ events relies on multiple physics objects, including electrons, muons and jets. The SR is defined with a set of selection criteria which were optimized to preferentially select the EW *ZZjj* events.

Events are first required to have a collision vertex associated with at least two tracks each with transverse momentum (p_{T}) of >0.5 GeV. The vertex with the highest sum of p_{T}^2 of the associated tracks is referred to as the primary vertex.

Muons are identified by tracks reconstructed in the muon spectrometer and are matched to tracks reconstructed in the inner detector (ID). In the region $2.5 < |\eta| < 2.7$, muons can also be identified by tracks from the muon spectrometer alone, and these are called stand-alone muons. Identified muons are required to have $p_{\mathrm{T}} > 7$ GeV. In the gap region ($|\eta| < 0.1$) in the muon spectrometer, muons are identified by a track from the inner tracking detector with $p_{\mathrm{T}} > 15$ GeV associated with a compatible calorimeter energy deposit and are called calorimeter-tagged muons. Muons are required to have $|\eta| < 2.7$ and satisfy the 'loose' identification criterion[38] in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ channel, while they must satisfy $|\eta| < 2.5$ and the 'medium' identification in the $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channel. Electrons are reconstructed from energy deposits in the electromagnetic calorimeter matched to a track in the ID. Candidate electrons must have $p_{\mathrm{T}} > 7$ GeV and $|\eta| < 2.47$, and satisfy the 'loose' and 'medium' identification criteria[39] in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channels, respectively. All electrons and muons must be isolated and satisfy the 'FixedCutLoose' and 'loose' isolation criteria[38,39] in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channels, respectively. Furthermore, electrons (muons) are required to have associated tracks satisfying $|d_0/\sigma_{d_0}| < 5\,(3)$ and $|z_0 \times \sin\theta| < 0.5$ mm, where d_0 is the transverse impact parameter relative to the beam line, σ_{d_0} is its uncertainty and z_0 is the longitudinal impact parameter relative to the primary vertex.

Jets are reconstructed from clusters of calorimeter energy deposits using the anti-k_t algorithm[40,41] with radius parameter $R = 0.4$. The jet energy scale is calibrated using simulation and further corrected with in situ methods[42]. A jet vertex tagger[43] is applied to jets with $p_{\mathrm{T}} < 60$ GeV and $|\eta| < 2.4$ to preferentially suppress jets that originated from pile-up. In addition, jets containing *b*-hadrons (*b*-jets) are identified using a multivariate *b*-tagging algorithm[44]. The chosen *b*-tagging algorithm has an efficiency of 85% for *b*-jets and a rejection factor of 33 against light-flavour jets.

An overlap-removal procedure detailed in ref. [45] is applied to the selected leptons and jets in the $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channel, to avoid ambiguities in the event selection and in the energy measurement of the physics objects. A similar approach is adopted in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ channel, except that leptons are given a higher priority to be kept when overlapping with jets, to enhance the selection efficiency.

The neutrinos in the $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ final state do not interact with the ATLAS detector and cannot be reconstructed. Their presence is identified using the missing transverse momentum vector ($\vec{E}_{\mathrm{T}}^{\mathrm{miss}}$), which is computed as the negative of the vector sum of transverse momenta of all the leptons and jets, as well as the tracks originating from the primary vertex but not associated with any of the leptons or jets[46]. The statistical significance of $E_{\mathrm{T}}^{\mathrm{miss}}$ ($E_{\mathrm{T}}^{\mathrm{miss}}$-significance) is calculated using resolution information of physics objects used in the $E_{\mathrm{T}}^{\mathrm{miss}}$ reconstruction[47].

In the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ channel, quadruplets of leptons are formed by selecting two opposite-sign, same-flavour lepton pairs, where the leptons are required to be separated from each other by $\Delta R > 0.2$. At most one muon is allowed to be a stand-alone or calorimeter-tagged muon, and the three leading leptons must have $p_{\mathrm{T}} > 20$, 20 and 10 GeV, respectively. All the $\ell^+\ell^-$ pairs are required to have an invariant mass ($m_{\ell^+\ell^-}$) greater than 10 GeV, to reject events from low-mass resonances. If multiple quadruplets are found, the one that minimizes the sum of the differences between the dilepton masses and the nominal *Z*-boson mass, $|m_{\ell^+\ell^-} - m_Z| + |m_{\ell'^+\ell'^-} - m_Z|$, is selected. The dilepton masses are required to be within the range 66–116 GeV.

In the $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channel, candidate events are required to have one opposite-sign, same-flavour lepton pair with $m_{\ell^+\ell^-}$ in the range from

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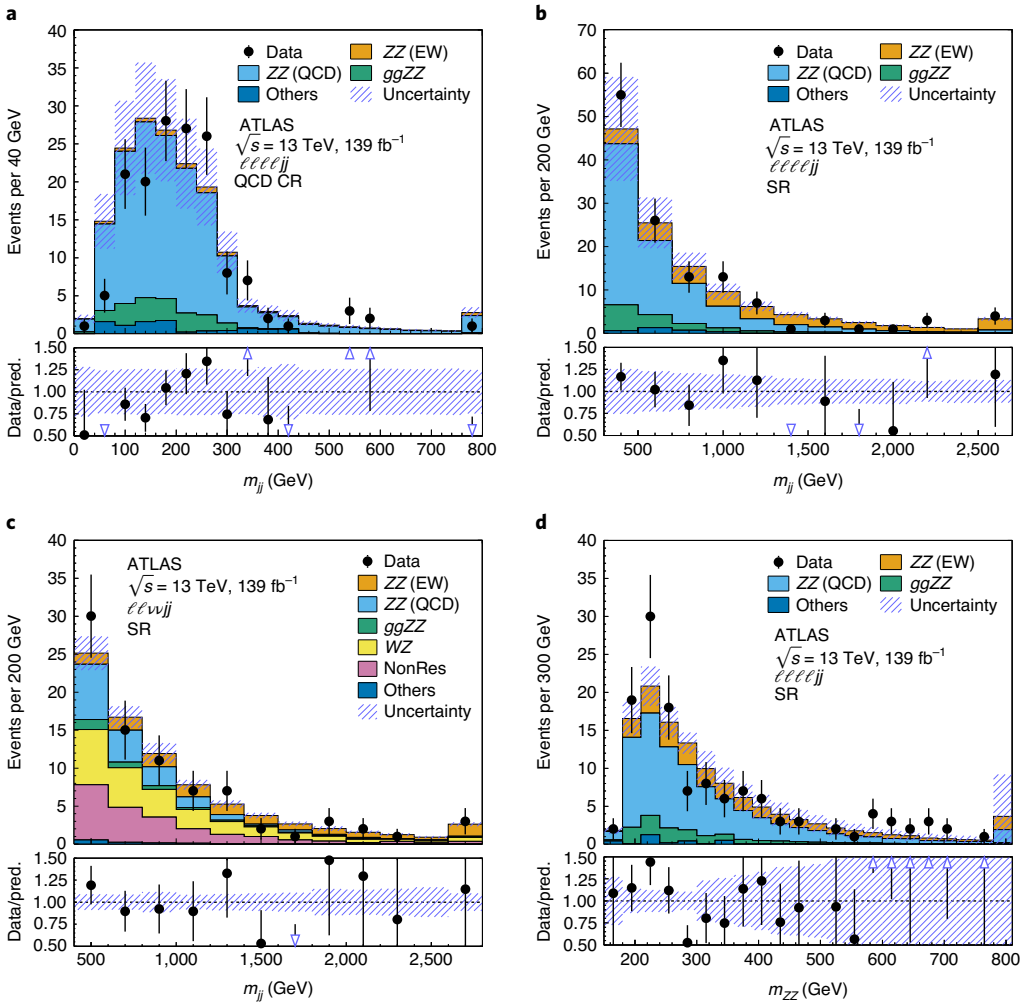

Fig. 2 | Observed and expected distributions. a–d, The m_{jj} distributions in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ QCD CR (**a**) and the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ (**b**) and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ SRs (**c**), as well as the m_{ZZ} distribution in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ SR (**d**). The error bands represent the s.d. and include the expected experimental and theoretical systematic uncertainties. The contributions from the QCD and EW production of *ZZjj* events are scaled by 0.99 and 0.92, respectively, which correspond to the observed normalization factors in the statistical fit to the combined channel (Table 2). *ZZ* (EW), *ZZ* (QCD) and *ggZZ* represent contributions from EW, non-*gg* QCD and *gg* QCD *ZZjj* processes, respectively. *WZ* represents contribution from *WZjj* process. All the minor backgrounds are summed together as 'Others', and the *WWjj* and $t\bar{t}$ processes are referred to as 'NonRes'. The last bin includes the overflow events. The statistical uncertainties of the data are shown as error bars. The open arrows represent the out-of-range markers. The horizontal bin width is indicated on the vertical axis legend.

80 to 100 GeV, and the leading (sub-leading) lepton must have $p_T > 30$ GeV (20 GeV). Events with *b*-tagged jets or additional leptons ($p_T > 7$ GeV and satisfying the 'loose' requirement) are rejected to reduce the background contributions from $t\bar{t}$ and *WZ* events. Events are required to have an E_T^{miss}-significance greater than 12 to suppress the background from Z + jets processes.

In both channels, the two jets with the highest p_T and satisfying a negative product of jet rapidities ($y_{j_1} \times y_{j_2}$) are selected. In the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ channel, the jets are required to have $p_T > 30$ GeV (40 GeV) in the $|\eta| < 2.4$ ($2.4 < |\eta| < 4.5$) region, while in the $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channel the leading (sub-leading) selected jet is required to have $p_T > 60$ GeV (40 GeV). Finally, to further suppress background contributions, $\Delta y(jj)$ is required to be greater than 2, and m_{jj} is required to be greater than 300 and 400 GeV in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channels, respectively. The harsher jet requirement in the $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channel is optimized to suppress the larger contamination from reducible backgrounds.

After selection, the resulting observed and expected yields are listed in Table 1, where in total 127 and 82 data events are selected in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channels, respectively. Several control regions (CRs), defined with dedicated selections optimized to enhance the fractions of background events, are defined to constrain the contributions from the various background processes. The kinematic distributions from both channels, including the m_{jj} spectra in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ SR, QCD *ZZjj* CR and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ SR, as well as the invariant mass of the four-lepton system (m_{ZZ}) in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ SR, are presented in Fig. 2. The background estimates, dedicated CRs and various sources of experimental and theoretical uncertainties are discussed in the following two sections.

The number of events in data is found to be consistent with the SM prediction including the EW *ZZjj* contribution.

Background estimation

The backgrounds arise from two kinds of processes: one with final-state particles that are the same as those in the signal process, and another where one or more lepton candidates are misidentified in data.

In the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ channel, the largest background arises from the QCD *ZZjj* process, which has an identical final state to the EW *ZZjj* process. The kinematic properties of the QCD *ZZjj* background are estimated using the simulated events described in the data and simulation section. However, the simulation is normalized to data in a dedicated EW-suppressed control region, defined by reversing either the m_{jj} or

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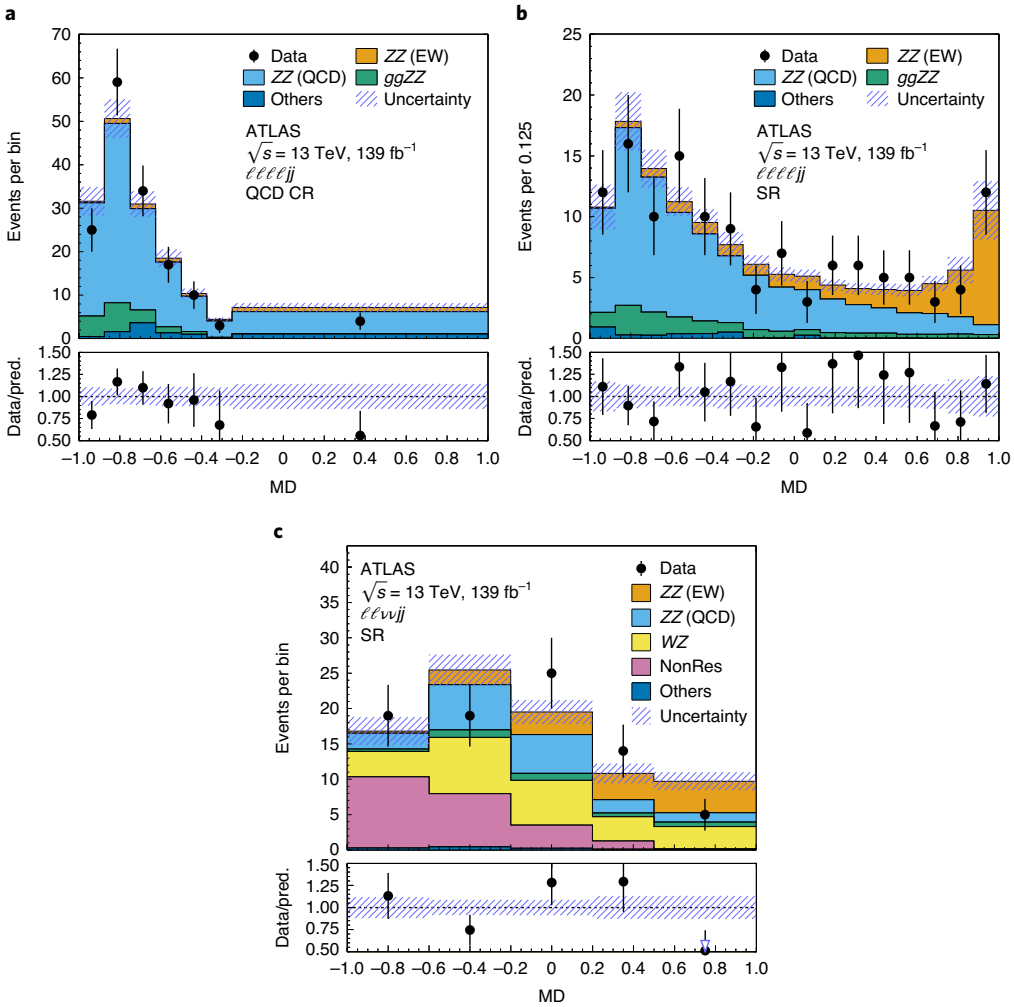

Fig. 3 | Observed and expected MD distributions. a–**c**, Distributions after the statistical fit in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ QCD CR (**a**), and in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ (**b**) and $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ SRs (**c**). The error bands represent the s.d. and include the experimental and theoretical systematic uncertainties, as well as the uncertainties in μ_{EW} and $\mu_{\mathrm{QCD}}^{\ell\ell\ell\ell jj}$. *ZZ* (EW), *ZZ* (QCD) and *ggZZ* represent contributions from EW, non-*gg* QCD and *gg* QCD *ZZjj* processes, respectively. *WZ* represents contribution from *WZjj* process. All the minor backgrounds are summed together as 'Others', and the *WWjj* and $t\bar{t}$ processes are referred to as 'NonRes'. The statistical uncertainties of the data are shown as error bars. The open arrows represent the out-of-range markers. The horizontal bin width is indicated on the vertical axis legend.

the $\Delta y(jj)$ selection criteria. Furthermore, the modelling of the kinematic properties of the QCD *ZZjj* simulation is validated in an additional EW-suppressed validation region, which is defined by requiring the centrality to be larger than 0.5 for at least one of the selected *Z* bosons. The centrality is a variable that estimates the position of a *Z*-boson with respect to the rapidity span of the two outgoing hadronic jets[48]. The EW *ZZjj* contribution is less than 4% in the additional EW-suppressed validation region. More than 70% of the QCD *ZZjj* events in the $m_{jj} > 300$ GeV region is not overlapping with the events in the additional EW-suppressed validation region. Good agreement between data and simulation is found for most kinematic distributions. The impact on the signal extraction of a potential mis-modelling of the m_{jj} distribution in the QCD *ZZjj* simulation (seen in previous analyses[49–51]) is explicitly tested, by reweighting the QCD *ZZjj* simulation in the SR using an m_{jj}-dependent correction factor that is defined as the ratio of data to simulation in the EW-suppressed validation region at high centrality. The signal extracted using the reweighted and nominal QCD *ZZjj* simulations is found to be in agreement when considering the statistical uncertainty on the m_{jj}-dependent correction itself.

Small background contributions from *Z* + jets, top-quark and *WZjj* processes may contain misidentified leptons and are estimated using a method similar to that described in ref. [52], where the lepton misidentification is measured in data regions with enhanced contributions from *Z* + jets and top-quark processes. Minor background contributions from triboson and *ttV* production are estimated from simulation. All of those backgrounds collectively yield an estimated contribution of about 3% to the selected data sample in the $\ell\ell\ell\ell jj$ channel.

In the $\ell\ell\nu\nu jj$ channel, the normalization and kinematic properties of QCD *ZZjj* processes are modelled from simulation due to a large contamination from other processes, which are considered in dedicated CRs. The *WZjj* background, with one lepton produced outside of the detector acceptance, is estimated using a data CR defined by requiring three selected leptons and a looser event selection, following the methodology explained in ref. [53]. The simulation is found to overestimate the *WZjj* contribution by 23% in this CR, and therefore the *WZjj* yield in the SR is scaled by 0.81. The *WZjj* distribution of the MD in the SR is evaluated from simulation, with the contributions from EW *WZjj* processes scaled by 1.77, corresponding to the difference between data and simulation observed in a previous analysis, in a similar phase space[13], where the overall normalization factor is found to be consistent with the one derived in this article. The *WWjj* and $t\bar{t}$ processes are referred to as the non-resonant-$\ell\ell$ backgrounds, since they contain a lepton pair not originating from a *Z* or γ^* boson. The

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Table 2 | Significance of EW *ZZjj* processes. Observed μ_{EW} and $\mu_{QCD}^{\ell\ell\ell\ell jj}$, as well as the observed and expected significance of EW *ZZjj* processes from the individual *ℓℓℓℓjj* and *ℓℓνvjj* channels, and the combined fits. The full set of statistical and systematic uncertainties is included

	μ_{EW}	$\mu_{QCD}^{\ell\ell\ell\ell jj}$	Significance obs. (exp.)
ℓℓℓℓjj	0.97±0.27	0.99±0.22	5.5 (5.6) σ
ℓℓνvjj	0.7±0.5	–	1.3 (2.1) σ
Combined	0.92±0.24	0.99±0.22	5.7 (5.9) σ

non-resonant-*ℓℓ* background is estimated using a CR defined in data by applying the same selection as in the SR with the exception that an *eμ* pair is required, following the methodology explained in ref. [53]. The MD distribution in the SR for the non-resonant-*ℓℓ* process is estimated from simulation.

The *Z* + jets background is largely suppressed, and the yield is evaluated by extrapolating the low E_T^{miss}-significance region distribution in data to the high E_T^{miss}-significance region using an exponential function, while the MD distribution in the SR is modelled by simulation. Uncertainties are assigned to account for variations in the fitting functions as well as differences between estimated and simulated yields and distributions. Small background contributions from triboson and *ttV* production are modelled with simulation. All of those backgrounds collectively yield an estimated contribution of about 1% to the selected data sample in the *ℓℓνvjj* channel.

Experimental and theoretical uncertainties

Systematic uncertainties associated with the prediction of each signal and background process are estimated. These uncertainties are either experimental or theoretical in nature, due to imperfect modelling of the detector in the simulation or the underlying physics of each process.

The major experimental uncertainties originate from the luminosity uncertainty, the energy measurements of leptons and jets, and the lepton reconstruction and selection efficiencies. Smaller experimental uncertainties are also considered, such as those due to the trigger selection efficiency, the calibration of the E_T^{miss} soft-term, the pile-up correction and the *b*-jet identification efficiency. Overall, the total experimental uncertainty in the predicted yields is about 10% and 5% in the *ℓℓℓℓjj* and *ℓℓνvjj* channels, respectively. The dominant uncertainties originate from jet and lepton calibration. The uncertainty in the combined 2015–2018 integrated luminosity is 1.7% (ref. [54]), obtained using the LUminosity Cherenkov Integrating Detector-2 detector[55] for the primary luminosity measurements.

In addition, the uncertainties in the predicted yields from non-*ZZjj* backgrounds are dominated by the statistical uncertainties from data in the dedicated CRs, which are about 15% for the overall backgrounds. The *WZjj* shape uncertainty originates from experimental and theoretical uncertainties as well as from the uncertainty in the quoted EW *WZjj* cross-section measurement. The non-resonant-*ℓℓ* shape uncertainty is estimated by comparing the MD distributions from data and simulation. In addition, an uncertainty is assigned to the QCD *ZZjj* processes by comparing the MD distributions in low and high pile-up conditions, to account for a potential mis-modelling of pile-up in simulation. This uncertainty is only considered for the QCD *ZZjj* background, given its dominant impact in this analysis and the non-negligible probability for QCD *ZZjj* events to contain a pile-up jet. The differences in the predicted yields in different MD regions are below 10%, except in the last bin in the QCD *ZZjj* CR where it reaches 50% due to the statistical uncertainty of the simulated events.

The theoretical uncertainties of the EW and QCD *ZZjj* processes include the uncertainties from PDFs, QCD scales, strong coupling constant (α_S), parton showering and hadronization. Those are estimated with the MadGraph5_aMC@NLO 2.6.1 for EW *ZZjj* and Sherpa 2.2.2 for QCD *ZZjj* processes. The PDF uncertainty is estimated following the PDF4LHC[56] procedure. The effect of the QCD scale uncertainty is estimated by varying the renormalization and factorization scales following the procedure described in ref. [57]. The parton showering and hadronization uncertainty is estimated by comparing the nominal Pythia 8 parton showering with the alternative Herwig 7[58,59] algorithm. The effect of the α_S uncertainty is estimated by varying the α_S value by ±0.001. The total theoretical uncertainties in the reconstructed event yields for the EW and QCD *ZZjj* process are estimated to be about 10% and 30%, respectively. Those uncertainties have been checked to confirm that the nuisance parameters associated with them are not over-constrained with the current dataset. Therefore, it is inferred that this analysis is not sensitive to theoretical uncertainties beyond the LO. The interference effect between the EW and QCD processes is studied using MadGraph5_aMC@NLO 2.6.1 interfaced to Pythia 8.186 and found to make a relative contribution (to the EW signal) varying from 10% to 2% in the different MD regions, much smaller than the statistical uncertainty from data. This effect is taken as an uncertainty in the EW *ZZjj* predictions. An additional uncertainty in the modelling of the QCD *ZZjj* process is considered by comparing the predicted MD shapes from Sherpa to MadGraph5_aMC@NLO 2.6.1 at particle level in the case where two partons are explicitly required at LO in the ME calculation. The differences in the predicted yields in different MD regions range from −30% to +20%.

Observation of EW *ZZjj*

To separate the EW *ZZjj* processes from their backgrounds, MDs based on the gradient boosted decision tree algorithm[60] are trained with simulated events using the Toolkit for Multivariate Data Analysis framework[61]. In each channel, a single MD is trained in the SR, which uses event kinematic information sensitive to the characteristics of the EW signal. The resulting MDs provide an optimal separation of the EW *ZZjj* signal and the backgrounds, where signal-like and background-like events are featured in the high- and low-MD regions, respectively. In the *ℓℓℓℓjj* channel, 12 input variables are used: m_{jj}, $\Delta y(jj)$, p_T of the leading and sub-leading jets (p_T^{j1} and p_T^{j2}), $y_{j1} \times y_{j2}$, p_T of the *Z* boson reconstructed from the charged-lepton pair with the mass closer to the *Z*-boson mass, rapidity of both *Z* bosons (y_{Z1} and y_{Z2}), p_T and mass of the four-lepton system, p_T of the third lepton, p_T of the *ZZjj* system divided by the scalar p_T sum of *Z* bosons and two jets (S_T). Thirteen input variables are utilized in the *ℓℓνvjj* channel: m_{jj}, $\Delta y(jj)$, $y_{j1} \times y_{j2}$, p_T^{j2}, E_T^{miss}, E_T^{miss}-significance, S_T, pseudorapidity and azimuthal angle differences between two charged leptons ($\Delta\eta$, $\Delta\phi$), ΔR, invariant mass of the charged-lepton pair and p_T of leading and sub-leading leptons. The jet-related information provides the greatest sensitivity in the *ℓℓℓℓjj* channel, while both the jet-related and the dilepton-related variables are important in the *ℓℓνvjj* channel.

In the *ℓℓℓℓjj* channel, the MD distributions in both the QCD *ZZjj* CR and the SR are used in the statistical fit, while only the MD distribution in the SR is fitted in the *ℓℓνvjj* channel. The binning of MD distributions in the SRs (Fig. 3) is chosen to maximize the sensitivity of detecting EW *ZZjj* events. In the *ℓℓℓℓjj* channel, the normalization of QCD *ZZjj* production ($\mu_{QCD}^{\ell\ell\ell\ell jj}$) is varied simultaneously in the fit in the SR and QCD CR. The ratio of measured fiducial cross-section (with the fiducial region detailed in Section 8) to the SM prediction for EW *ZZjj* production (μ_{EW}) is taken as the parameter of interest.

To examine the compatibility of the data and the signal-plus-background hypothesis, a test statistic is defined using the profile likelihood ratio method[62]. The statistical tests are performed in both the individual *ℓℓℓℓjj* and *ℓℓνvjj* channels, and in the combined channel. The experimental systematic uncertainties are considered as correlated in all the bins and regions whenever applicable. The theoretical uncertainties for *ZZjj* production are treated as uncorrelated between the *ℓℓℓℓjj*

Table 3 | Measured and predicted fiducial cross-sections. Cross-sections are presented in both the *ℓℓℓℓjj* and *ℓℓνvjj* channels for the inclusive *ZZjj* processes. Uncertainties due to different sources are presented explicitly, including the one from the statistical uncertainty of the data and simulated samples (stat), the one from the theoretical predictions (theo), the experimental ones due to the lepton and jet calibrations (exp), the ones from background estimates (bkg) and the one from the luminosity (lumi)

	Measured fiducial σ (fb)	Predicted fiducial σ (fb)
ℓℓℓℓjj	$1.27 \pm 0.12(\text{stat}) \pm 0.02(\text{theo}) \pm 0.07(\text{exp}) \pm 0.01(\text{bkg}) \pm 0.02(\text{lumi})$	$1.26 \pm 0.04(\text{stat}) \pm 0.22(\text{theo})$
ℓℓνvjj	$1.13 \pm 0.28(\text{stat}) \pm 0.04(\text{theo}) \pm 0.06(\text{exp}) \pm 0.15(\text{bkg}) \pm 0.02(\text{lumi})$	$1.11 \pm 0.01(\text{stat}) \pm 0.12(\text{theo})$

and *ℓℓνvjj* channels, due to the different fiducial volume definitions. The QCD scale uncertainty for QCD *ZZjj* production can be assessed in various ways in terms of correlations between different fitted regions and is conservatively treated as uncorrelated between the SR and the QCD CR in the *ℓℓℓℓjj* channel. Furthermore, the generator modelling uncertainty for QCD *ZZjj* production is treated as uncorrelated between the low- and high-MD regions.

The results are presented in Table 2. From the combined channels, the observed μ_{EW} is 0.92 ± 0.24, while $\mu_{\text{QCD}}^{\ell\ell\ell\ell jj}$ is determined to be 0.99 ± 0.22. The statistical component accounts for 88% of the total uncertainty in μ_{EW}. The probability that the background can randomly fluctuate to produce a measured likelihood ratio at least as signal-like as the excess observed in the data is 1.6×10^{-8}, leading to the observation of EW *ZZjj* production. Correspondingly, with a normalized Gaussian distribution, the background-only hypothesis is rejected at 5.7σ (5.9σ) from the data (expectation). The EW *ZZjj* cross-section in the combined fiducial volume, formed by combining the respective fiducial regions in the *ℓℓℓℓjj* and *ℓℓνvjj* channels, is found to be 0.70 ± 0.18 fb, calculated as μ_{EW} multiplied by the SM prediction of 0.76 ± 0.04 fb.

Measurement of fiducial cross-sections

In addition to the observation of the EW *ZZjj* process, the cross-sections for the production of inclusive *ZZjj* are also measured in the *ℓℓℓℓjj* and *ℓℓνvjj* channels. This measurement, corrected for detector inefficiency and resolution without any further theoretical interpretation, provides the most model-independent results. The cross-sections are measured following the formula $\sigma = (N_{\text{data}} - N_{\text{bkg}})/(L \times C)$, where N_{data} and N_{bkg} refer to the number of events in data and the expected number of background events from non-*ZZjj* processes, respectively, L refers to the integrated luminosity and C is the correction factor to extrapolate the QCD and EW *ZZjj* events from detector level to the fiducial volume, calculated as the ratio of the number of *ZZjj* events passing the detector-level event selection to the number of events selected in the fiducial volume.

The definitions of the fiducial volumes closely follow the detector-level selections, using 'particle-level' electrons, muons, $E_{\text{T}}^{\text{miss}}$ and jets, which are reconstructed in simulation from stable final-state particles, before their interactions with the detector, following the procedure described in ref. [57]. In the *ℓℓℓℓjj* channel, the dilepton mass requirement is relaxed (relative to the detector-level selection) to the wider range of 60–120 GeV to ensure compatibility with the previous Compact Muon Solenoid publication[63]. In the *ℓℓνvjj* channel, both the electrons and muons are selected in the $|\eta| < 2.5$ region to simplify the charged-lepton selections. In addition, no requirement is placed on the $E_{\text{T}}^{\text{miss}}$-significance due to the complexity of defining this variable at particle level; however, the particle-level $E_{\text{T}}^{\text{miss}}$ is required to be greater than 130 GeV. All the other kinematic selection requirements have the same definition as the detector-level ones.

The C factors are found to be $(69.9 \pm 3.1)\%$ in the *ℓℓℓℓjj* channel and $(22.4 \pm 1.2)\%$ in the *ℓℓνvjj* channel, where the errors reflect the total uncertainties. The smaller C factor in the *ℓℓνvjj* channel is due to the large event migration effect in events passing the $E_{\text{T}}^{\text{miss}}$ selection requirement at particle level that have a small $E_{\text{T}}^{\text{miss}}$-significance at detector level. The measured and predicted fiducial cross-sections are presented in Table 3. Uncertainties from different sources are presented explicitly. The data statistical uncertainty dominates, while the experimental uncertainties related to jet measurements and the background estimates are the major systematic uncertainties in the *ℓℓℓℓjj* and *ℓℓνvjj* channels, respectively. The measurements of 1.27 ± 0.14 fb for the *ℓℓℓℓjj* channel and 1.13 ± 0.32 fb for the *ℓℓνvjj* channel are compatible with the SM predictions. The measurement precision in the *ℓℓℓℓjj* channel is better than the accuracy of the theoretical prediction.

Outlook

The rare EW production of *ZZjj* events is observed using 139 fb^{-1} of $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV proton–proton collision data collected with the ATLAS detector. The measurement of this rarest EW *VVjj* process is an important milestone in the study of EW physics at the LHC. This result also marks an important step towards understanding the nature of EW symmetry breaking, as it completes the observation of all major channels and confirms the consistency of the experimental results with the mechanism predicted by the SM. This result marks the start of a new era in precision studies of rare processes in the EW sector and in searches for new phenomena that can be investigated with higher precision and in higher energy regimes with future larger datasets.

Online content

Any methods, additional references, Nature Portfolio reporting summaries, source data, extended data, supplementary information, acknowledgements, peer review information; details of author contributions and competing interests; and statements of data and code availability are available at https://doi.org/10.1038/s41567-022-01757-y.

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ATLAS Collaboration

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Valdes Santurio[100,101], M. Valente[26], S. Valentinetti[45,50], A. Valero[84], L. Valéry[66], R. A. Vallance[55], A. Vallier[6], J. A. Valls Ferrer[84], T. R. Van Daalen[148], P. Van Gemmeren[14], I. Van Vulpen[49], M. Vanadia[40,41], W. Vandelli[6], M. Vandenbroucke[69], E. R. Vandewall[79], A. Vaniachine[52], D. Vannicola[82,102], R. Vari[82], E. W. Varnes[137], C. Varni[114,115], T. Varol[160], D. Varouchas[29], K. E. Varvell[106], M. E. Vasile[47], G. A. Vasquez[46], F. Vazeille[30], D. Vazquez Furelos[148], T. Vazquez Schroeder[6], J. Veatch[7], V. Vecchio[144,197], M. J. Veen[49], L. M. Veloce[9], F. Veloso[33,211], S. Veneziano[82], A. Ventura[98,99], N. Venturi[6], A. Verbytskyi[117], V. Vercesi[207], M. Verducci[78,143], C. M. Vergel Infante[67], C. Vergis[109], W. Verkerke[49], A. T. Vermeulen[49], J. C. Vermeulen[49], M. C. Vetterli[97,103], N. Viaux Maira[155], M. Vicente Barreto Pinto[26], T. Vickey[68], O. E. Vickey Boeriu[68], G. H. A. Viehhauser[63], L. Vigani[71], M. Villa[45,50], M. Villaplana Perez[145], E. Vilucchi[80], M. G. Vincter[133], G. S. Virdee[55], A. Vishwakarma[66], C. Vittori[45,50], I. Vivarelli[11], M. Vogel[112], P. Vokac[51], S. E. von Buddenbrock[196], E. Von Toerne[109], V. Vorobel[167], K. Vorobev[135], M. Vos[84], J. H. Vossebeld[149], M. Vozak[138], N. Vranjes[270], M. Vranjes Milosavljevic[270], V. Vrba[51,288], M. Vreeswijk[49], R. Vuillermet[6], I. Vukotic[157], P. Wagner[109], W. Wagner[112], J. Wagner-Kuhr[23], S. Wahdan[112], H. Wahlberg[58], V. M. Walbrecht[117], J. Walder[120], R. Walker[23], S. D. Walker[8], W. Walkowiak[124], V. Wallangen[100,101], A. M. Wang[89], A. Z. Wang[110], C. Wang[164], F. Wang[110], H. Wang[39], H. Wang[145], J. Wang[179], J. Wang[71], P. Wang[139], Q. Wang[4], R.-J. Wang[19], R. Wang[3], R. Wang[14], S. M. Wang[160], W. T. Wang[3], W. X. Wang[3], Y. Wang[3], Z. Wang[164], C. Wanotayaroj[66], A. Warburton[38], C. P. Ward[123], D. R. Wardrope[116], N. Warrack[60], A. Washbrook[187], A. T. Watson[55], M. F. Watson[55], G. Watts[59], B. M. Waugh[116], A. F. Webb[70], C. Weber[104], M. S. Weber[72], S. A. Weber[133], S. M. Weber[74], A. R. Weidberg[63], J. Weingarten[184], M. Weirich[19], C. Weiser[87], P. S. Wells[6], T. Wenaus[92], T. Wengler[6], S. Wenig[6], N. Wermes[109], M. D. Werner[67], M. Wessels[74], T. D. Weston[72], K. Whalen[54], N. L. Whallon[59], A. M. Wharton[120], A. S. White[65], A. White[105], M. J. White[204], D. Whiteson[81], B. W. Whitmore[120], W. Wiedenmann[110], C. Wiel[146], M. Wielers[27], N. Wieseotte[19], C. Wiglesworth[10], L. A. M. Wiik-Fuchs[87], H. G. Wilkens[6], L. J. Wilkins[8], H. H. Williams[176], S. Williams[123], C. Willis[154], S. Willocq[5], I. Wingerter-Seez[20], E. Winkels[11], F. Winklmeier[54], O. J. Winston[11], B. T. Winter[87], M. Wittgen[118], M. Wobisch[268], A. Wolf[19], T. M. H. Wolf[49], R. Wolff[1], R. Wölker[63], J. Wollrath[87], M. W. Wolter[108], H. Wolters[33,211], V. W. S. Wong[192], N. L. Woods[28], S. D. Worm[66], B. K. Wosiek[108], K. W. Woźniak[108], K. Wraight[60], S. L. Wu[110], X. Wu[26], Y. Wu[3], T. R. Wyatt[138], B. M. Wynne[187], S. Xella[10], Z. Xi[65], X. Xiao[65], I. Xiotidis[11], D. Xu[2], H. Xu[3], H. Xu[3], L. Xu[92], T. Xu[69], W. Xu[65], Z. Xu[195], Z. Xu[118], B. Yabsley[106], S. Yacoob[94], K. Yajima[234], D. P. Yallup[116], N. Yamaguchi[246], Y. Yamaguchi[88], A. Yamamoto[83], M. Yamatani[18], T. Yamazaki[18], Y. Yamazaki[248], J. Yan[164], Z. Yan[159], H. J. Yang[164,245], H. T. Yang[39], S. Yang[3], T. Yang[254], X. Yang[189,195], Y. Yang[18], W-M. Yao[39], Y. C. Yap[66], Y. Yasu[83], E. Yatsenko[164,245], H. Ye[177], J. Ye[139], S. Ye[92], I. Yeletskikh[36], M. R. Yexley[120], E. Yigitbasi[159], K. Yorita[244], K. Yoshihara[176], C. J. S. Young[6], C. Young[118], J. Yu[67], R. Yuan[195,280], X. Yue[74], M. Zaazoua[122], B. Zabinski[108], G. Zacharis[48], E. Zaffaroni[26], A. M. Zaitsev[150,175], T. Zakareishvili[174], N. Zakharchuk[133], S. Zambito[89], D. Zanzi[6], D. R. Zaripovas[60], S. V. Zeißner[184], C. Zeitnitz[112], G. Zemaityte[63], J. C. Zeng[95], O. Zenin[150], T. Ženiš[93], D. Zerwas[29], M. Zgubič[63], B. Zhang[177], D. F. Zhang[178], G. Zhang[178], H. Zhang[177], J. Zhang[14], L. Zhang[177], L. Zhang[3], M. Zhang[95], R. Zhang[110], S. Zhang[65], X. Zhang[164], X. Zhang[195], Y. Zhang[2,182], Z. Zhang[179], Z. Zhang[29], P. Zhao[85], Z. Zhao[3], A. Zhemchugov[36], Z. Zheng[65], D. Zhong[95], B. Zhou[65], C. Zhou[110], M. S. Zhou[2,182], M. Zhou[132], N. Zhou[164], Y. Zhou[137], C. G. Zhu[195], C. Zhu[2,182], H. L. Zhu[3], H. Zhu[2], J. Zhu[65], Y. Zhu[3], X. Zhuang[2], K. Zhukov[44], V. Zhulanov[76,77], D. Zieminska[163], N. I. Zimine[36], S. Zimmermann[87,289], Z. Zinonos[117], M. Ziolkowski[124], L. Živković[270], G. Zobernig[110], A. Zoccoli[45,50], K. Zoch[7], T. G. Zorbas[68], R. Zou[157] & L. Zwalinski[6]

[1]CPPM, Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS/IN2P3, Marseille, France. [2]Institute of High Energy Physics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China. [3]Department of Modern Physics and State Key Laboratory of Particle Detection and Electronics, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, China. [4]Homer L. Dodge Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA. [5]Department of Physics, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, USA. [6]CERN, Geneva, Switzerland. [7]II. Physikalisches Institut, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany. [8]Department of Physics, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, UK. [9]Department of Physics, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. [10]Niels Bohr Institute, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark. [11]Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK. [12]Raymond and Beverly Sackler School of Physics and Astronomy, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel. [13]Department of Physics, Technion, Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel. [14]High Energy Physics Division, Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, IL, USA. [15]INFN Gruppo Collegato di Udine, Sezione di Trieste, Udine, Italy. [16]ICTP, Trieste, Italy. [17]Department of Physics, King's College London, London, UK. [18]International Center for Elementary Particle Physics and Department of Physics, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan. [19]Institut für Physik, Universität Mainz, Mainz, Germany. [20]LAPP, University Savoie Mont Blanc, CNRS/IN2P3, Annecy, France. [21]AGH University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Physics and Applied Computer Science, Krakow,

Poland. [22]Department of Physics, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, USA. [23]Fakultät für Physik, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany. [24]Department of Physics, Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey. [25]Department of Physics, Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey. [26]Département de Physique Nucléaire et Corpusculaire, Université de Genève, Geneva, Switzerland. [27]Particle Physics Department, Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Didcot, UK. [28]Santa Cruz Institute for Particle Physics, University of California Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA, USA. [29]IJCLab, Université Paris-Saclay, CNRS/IN2P3, Orsay, France. [30]LPC, Université Clermont Auvergne, CNRS/IN2P3, Clermont-Ferrand, France. [31]Institute for Mathematics, Astrophysics and Particle Physics, Radboud University/Nikhef, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. [32]Department of Physics, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Iasi, Romania. [33]Laboratório de Instrumentação e Física Experimental de Partículas - LIP, Lisbon, Portugal. [34]Instituto de Fisica Teorica, UAM/CSIC, Madrid, Spain. [35]Departamento de Física Teórica y del Cosmos, Universidad de Granada, Granada, Spain. [36]Joint Institute for Nuclear Research, Dubna, Russia. [37]Institute of Physics, Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, Baku, Azerbaijan. [38]Department of Physics, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. [39]Physics Division, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA. [40]INFN Sezione di Roma Tor Vergata, Rome, Italy. [41]Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Roma Tor Vergata, Rome, Italy. [42]Faculty of Science, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan. [43]Fysiska institutionen, Lunds Universitet, Lund, Sweden. [44]P.N. Lebedev Physical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia. [45]INFN Sezione di Bologna, Bologne, Italy. [46]Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. [47]Horia Hulubei National Institute of Physics and Nuclear Engineering, Bucharest, Romania. [48]Physics Department, National Technical University of Athens, Zografou, Greece. [49]Nikhef National Institute for Subatomic Physics and University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. [50]Dipartimento di Fisica e Astronomia A. Righi, Università di Bologna, Bologne, Italy. [51]Czech Technical University in Prague, Prague, Czech Republic. [52]Tomsk State University, Tomsk, Russia. [53]INFN Sezione di Milano, Milan, Italy. [54]Institute for Fundamental Science, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA. [55]School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK. [56]INFN Sezione di Napoli, Naples, Italy. [57]Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Napoli, Naples, Italy. [58]Instituto de Física La Plata, Universidad Nacional de La Plata and CONICET, La Plata, Argentina. [59]Department of Physics, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA. [60]SUPA - School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK. [61]Departamento de Física Teorica C-15 and CIAFF, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, Spain. [62]Universidade Federal do Rio De Janeiro COPPE/EE/IF, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. [63]Department of Physics, Oxford University, Oxford, UK. [64]Department of Physics, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA. [65]Department of Physics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA. [66]Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron DESY, Hamburg and Zeuthen, Germany. [67]Department of Physics and Astronomy, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, USA. [68]Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK. [69]IRFU, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, Gif-sur-Yvette, France. [70]Department of Physics, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA. [71]Physikalisches Institut, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany. [72]Albert Einstein Center for Fundamental Physics and Laboratory for High Energy Physics, University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland. [73]Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Milano, Milan, Italy. [74]Kirchhoff-Institut für Physik, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany. [75]Nevis Laboratory, Columbia University, Irvington, NY, USA. [76]Budker Institute of Nuclear Physics and NSU, SB RAS, Novosibirsk, Russia. [77]Novosibirsk State University Novosibirsk, Novosibirsk, Russia. [78]INFN Sezione di Pisa, Pisa, Italy. [79]Department of Physics, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA. [80]INFN e Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati, Italy. [81]Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of California Irvine, Irvine, CA, USA. [82]INFN Sezione di Roma, Rome, Italy. [83]KEK, High Energy Accelerator Research Organization, Tsukuba, Japan. [84]Instituto de Física Corpuscular (IFIC), Centro Mixto Universidad de Valencia - CSIC, Valencia, Spain. [85]Department of Physics, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA. [86]Group of Particle Physics, University of Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. [87]Physikalisches Institut, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany. [88]Department of Physics, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Tokyo, Japan. [89]Laboratory for Particle Physics and Cosmology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA. [90]Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Uppsala, Uppsala, Sweden. [91]LPMR, Faculté des Sciences, Université Mohamed Premier, Oujda, Morocco. [92]Physics Department, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Upton, NY, USA. [93]Faculty of Mathematics, Physics and Informatics, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia. [94]Department of Physics, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa. [95]Department of Physics, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, USA. [96]Institut für Physik, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. [97]TRIUMF, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. [98]INFN Sezione di Lecce, Lecce, Italy. [99]Dipartimento di Matematica e Fisica, Università del Salento, Lecce, Italy. [100]Department of Physics, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden. [101]Oskar Klein Centre, Stockholm, Sweden. [102]Dipartimento di Fisica, Sapienza Università di Roma, Rome, Italy. [103]Department of Physics, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada. [104]Department of Physics, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA. [105]Department of Physics, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX, USA. [106]School of Physics, University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. [107]Department of Particle Physics and Astrophysics, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel. [108]Institute of Nuclear Physics, Polish Academy of Sciences, Krakow, Poland. [109]Physikalisches Institut, Universität Bonn, Bonn, Germany. [110]Department of Physics, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, USA. [111]Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA. [112]Fakultät für Mathematik und Naturwissenschaften, Fachgruppe Physik, Bergische Universität Wuppertal, Wuppertal, Germany. [113]School of Physics, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. [114]Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Genova, Genoa, Italy. [115]INFN Sezione di Genova, Genoa, Italy. [116]Department of Physics and Astronomy, University College London, London, UK. [117]Max-Planck-Institut für Physik (Werner-Heisenberg-Institut), Munich, Germany. [118]SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory, Stanford, CA, USA. [119]Konstantinov Nuclear Physics Institute of National Research Centre "Kurchatov Institute", PNPI, St. Petersburg, Russia. [120]Physics Department, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK. [121]Physics Department, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine. [122]Faculté des sciences, Université Mohammed V, Rabat, Morocco. [123]Cavendish Laboratory, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK. [124]Department Physik, Universität Siegen, Siegen, Germany. [125]California State University, Long Beach, CA, USA. [126]LPNHE, Sorbonne Université, Université Paris Cité, CNRS/IN2P3, Paris, France. [127]Department of Physics and Astronomy, Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA. [128]Department of Physics, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland. [129]Department of Physics, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK. [130]Department of Physics Engineering, Gaziantep University, Gaziantep, Turkey. [131]Faculty of Engineering and Natural Sciences, Bahcesehir University, Istanbul, Turkey. [132]Departments of Physics and Astronomy, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, USA. [133]Department of Physics, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. [134]Physics Department, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece. [135]National Research Nuclear University MEPhI, Moscow, Russia. [136]Faculté des Sciences Ain Chock, Réseau Universitaire de Physique des Hautes Energies – Université Hassan II, Casablanca, Morocco. [137]Department of Physics, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA. [138]School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK. [139]Physics Department, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, USA. [140]School of Physics and Astronomy, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK. [141]Fakultät für Physik und Astronomie, Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany. [142]Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. [143]Dipartimento di Fisica E. Fermi, Università di Pisa, Pisa, Italy. [144]INFN Sezione di Roma Tre, Rome, Italy. [145]Department of Physics, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. [146]Institut für Kern- und Teilchenphysik, Technische Universität Dresden, Dresden, Germany. [147]Department of Physics, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway. [148]Institut de Física d'Altes Energies (IFAE), Barcelona Institute of Science and Technology, Barcelona, Spain. [149]Oliver Lodge Laboratory, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK. [150]Institute for High Energy Physics of the National Research Centre Kurchatov Institute, Protvino, Russia. [151]Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA. [152]Physics Department, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa. [153]Department of

Mechanical Engineering Science, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa. [154]Department of Physics and Astronomy, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA. [155]Departamento de Física, Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María, Valparaíso, Chile. [156]Department of Subnuclear Physics, Institute of Experimental Physics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Kosice, Slovak Republic. [157]Enrico Fermi Institute, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA. [158]Department for Physics and Technology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway. [159]Department of Physics, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA. [160]Institute of Physics, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan. [161]II. Physikalisches Institut, Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, Giessen, Germany. [162]Department of Physics, Ankara University, Ankara, Turkey. [163]Department of Physics, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA. [164]School of Physics and Astronomy, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Key Laboratory for Particle Astrophysics and Cosmology (MOE), SKLPPC, Shanghai, China. [165]Dipartimento di Fisica, Università della Calabria, Rende, Italy. [166]INFN Gruppo Collegato di Cosenza, Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati, Italy. [167]Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. [168]TRIUMF, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. [169]Departament de Fisica, Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain. [170]Departamento de Física, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal. [171]Faculty of Engineering and Natural Sciences, Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul, Turkey. [172]Joint Laboratory of Optics, Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic. [173]Departamento de Engenharia Elétrica, Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Juiz de Fora, Brazil. [174]High Energy Physics Institute, Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. [175]Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology State University, Dolgoprudny, Russia. [176]Department of Physics, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA. [177]Department of Physics, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China. [178]Physics Department, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China. [179]Department of Physics, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China. [180]Department of Physics, National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan. [181]Department of Physics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece. [182]University of Chinese Academy of Science, Beijing, China. [183]Institute of Physics, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic. [184]Fakultät Physik, Technische Universität Dortmund, Dortmund, Germany. [185]Department of Experimental Particle Physics, Jožef Stefan Institute and Department of Physics, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia. [186]Department of Physics, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel. [187]SUPA - School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK. [188]Dipartimento Politecnico di Ingegneria e Architettura, Università di Udine, Udine, Italy. [189]LPSC, Université Grenoble Alpes, CNRS/IN2P3, Grenoble INP, Grenoble, France. [190]Instituto Superior Técnico, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal. [191]Università di Napoli Parthenope, Naples, Italy. [192]Department of Physics, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. [193]Institute of Particle Physics, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. [194]Department of Physics, New York University, New York, NY, USA. [195]Institute of Frontier and Interdisciplinary Science and Key Laboratory of Particle Physics and Particle Irradiation (MOE), Shandong University, Qingdao, China. [196]School of Physics, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. [197]Dipartimento di Matematica e Fisica, Università Roma Tre, Rome, Italy. [198]Facultad de Ciencias Exactas y Naturales, Departamento de Física, y CONICET, Instituto de Física de Buenos Aires (IFIBA), Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina. [199]Department of Physics and Astronomy, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. [200]Department of Physics, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia. [201]Departamento de Física, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile. [202]Universidade Federal de São João del Rei (UFSJ), São João del Rei, Brazil. [203]Instituto de Física, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. [204]Department of Physics, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia. [205]National Centre for Scientific Research 'Demokritos', Agia Paraskevi, Greece. [206]Dipartimento di Matematica, Informatica e Fisica, Università di Udine, Udine, Italy. [207]INFN Sezione di Pavia, Pavia, Italy. [208]Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Pavia, Pavia, Italy. [209]Department of Physics, St. Petersburg State Polytechnical University, St. Petersburg, Russia. [210]Physics Department, University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX, USA. [211]Departamento de Física, Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal. [212]Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA. [213]INFN-TIFPA, Rome, Italy. [214]Università degli Studi di Trento, Trento, Italy. [215]Graduate School of Science and Technology, Tokyo Metropolitan University, Tokyo, Japan. [216]Nagasaki Institute of Applied Science, Nagasaki, Japan. [217]Department of Physics, California State University, Fresno, CA, USA. [218]Institute for Theoretical and Experimental Physics named by A.I. Alikhanov of National Research Centre 'Kurchatov Institute', Moscow, Russia. [219]University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, USA. [220]Department of Financial and Management Engineering, University of the Aegean, Chios, Greece. [221]D.V. Skobeltsyn Institute of Nuclear Physics, M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia. [222]Departamento de Física, Faculdade de Ciências, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal. [223]Faculté des Sciences, Université Ibn-Tofail, Kénitra, Morocco. [224]West University in Timisoara, Timisoara, Romania. [225]Department of Physics, California State University, East Bay, CA, USA. [226]Institucio Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avancats, Barcelona, Spain. [227]Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA. [228]IJCLab, Université Paris-Saclay, CNRS/IN2P3, Orsay, France. [229]Graduate School of Science, Osaka University, Osaka, Japan. [230]Division of Physics and Tomonaga Center for the History of the Universe, Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Japan. [231]B.I. Stepanov Institute of Physics, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, Minsk, Belarus. [232]Department of Physics, Shinshu University, Nagano, Japan. [233]Physikalisches Institut, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany. [234]Graduate School of Science, Osaka University, Osaka, Japan. [235]Graduate School of Science and Kobayashi-Maskawa Institute, Nagoya University, Nagoya, Japan. [236]Institut für Astro- und Teilchenphysik, Leopold-Franzens-Universität, Innsbruck, Austria. [237]Research Institute for Nuclear Problems, Byelorussian State University, Minsk, Belarus. [238]Institute for Mathematics, Astrophysics and Particle Physics, Radboud University/ Nikhef, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. [239]Physics Department, SUNY Albany, Albany, NY, USA. [240]E. Andronikashvili Institute of Physics, Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. [241]Institute of Theoretical Physics, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. [242]CERN, Geneva, Switzerland. [243]Department of Physics, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA. [244]Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. [245]Tsung-Dao Lee Institute, Shanghai, China. [246]Research Center for Advanced Particle Physics and Department of Physics, Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan. [247]Institute of Physics, Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, Baku, Azerbaijan. [248]Graduate School of Science, Kobe University, Kobe, Japan. [249]Ochanomizu University, Tokyo, Japan. [250]Application and Research Center for Advanced Studies, Istanbul Aydin University, Istanbul, Turkey. [251]Joint Institute for Nuclear Research, Dubna, Russia. [252]Department of Physics, Universidad Andres Bello, Santiago, Chile. [253]Hellenic Open University, Patras, Greece. [254]Department of Physics and Institute for Advanced Study, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, China. [255]The City College of New York, New York, NY, USA. [256]Department of Physics, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China. [257]Facultad de Ciencias y Centro de Investigaciónes, Universidad Antonio Nariño, Bogotá, Colombia. [258]Department of Physics, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden. [259]Centro de Física Nuclear da Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal. [260]Department of Physics, California State University, Sacramento, CA, USA. [261]Faculty of Applied Information Science, Hiroshima Institute of Technology, Hiroshima, Japan. [262]Faculty of Science, Okayama University, Okayama, Japan. [263]Département de Physique Nucléaire et Corpusculaire, Université de Genève, Geneva, Switzerland. [264]Marian Smoluchowski Institute of Physics, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland. [265]Transilvania University of Brasov, Brasov, Romania. [266]National Institute for Research and Development of Isotopic and Molecular Technologies, Physics Department, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. [267]Centre de Calcul de l'Institut National de Physique Nucléaire et de Physique des Particules, Villeurbanne, France. [268]Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, LA, USA. [269]Institute for Nuclear Research and Nuclear Energy, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria. [270]Institute of Physics, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia. [271]Faculty of Physics, M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia. [272]Department of Applied Physics and Astronomy, University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. [273]Division of Physics, TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara, Turkey.

[274]Institut für Experimentalphysik, Universität Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany. [275]Kyoto University of Education, Kyoto, Japan. [276]CPPM, Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS/IN2P3, Marseille, France. [277]National Research Nuclear University MEPhI, Moscow, Russia. [278]Institute for Particle and Nuclear Physics, Wigner Research Centre for Physics, Budapest, Hungary. [279]Faculty of Engineering, Giresun University, Giresun, Turkey. [280]Department of Physics and Astronomy, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA. [281]Deceased: F. Bauer. [282]Deceased: O. Igonkina. [283]Deceased: B. T. King. [284]Deceased: D. Lellouch. [285]Deceased: P. Mermod. [286]Deceased: A. Ouraou. [287]Deceased: J. Rothberg. [288]Deceased: V. Vrba. [289]Deceased: S. Zimmermann.

Methods

Auxiliary material

Additional auxiliary figures can be found at https://atlas.web.cern.ch/Atlas/GROUPS/PHYSICS/PAPERS/STDM-2017-19/.

Data availability

The experimental data that support the findings of this study are available in HEPData with the identifier https://www.hepdata.net/record/93015 (ref. [65]).

Code availability

The ATLAS software is available at the following link: https://gitlab.cern.ch/atlas/athena.

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Author contributions

All authors have contributed to the publication, being variously involved in the design and the construction of the detectors, in writing software, calibrating subsystems, operating the detectors and acquiring data, and finally analysing the processed data. The ATLAS Collaboration members discussed and approved the scientific results. The manuscript was prepared by a subgroup of authors appointed by the collaboration and subject to an internal collaboration-wide review process. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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