

Part One

Ancient Sirius

More than any other star, with the obvious exception of the sun, Sirius has fascinated and intrigued humans. This fascination extends far back into the prehistory and antiquity of many cultures. The two main influential tributaries of this ancient stream of myth and legend are those of Dynastic Egypt and the later Greek and Roman civilizations. For the Egyptians, Sirius was quite literally an aspect of the goddess Isis, who played a key role in their mythology and religion. On a more practical level they used Sirius to regulate the Egyptian calendar and to serve as a harbinger of the annual flooding of the Nile River. For the Greeks and Romans, Sirius was never a god, like Mars or Jupiter, but rather was associated with a number of distinct beliefs and ideas. Some of these are still part of our culture and language and even now and then manage to inspire intriguing lines of contemporary scientific inquiry. The first two chapters of this book are a guide to the sources of these ancient beliefs and lore, from their earliest origins in prehistory up to the end of the Roman Empire. What makes this part of the journey especially interesting is how seemingly ancient beliefs, ideas, and discoveries about Sirius and the stars reappear in later eras in the most unexpected ways.