

Part Four

A Controversial and Occult Sirius

Sirius, perhaps more than any other star, has inspired a host of controversies. Chief among these is the notion, prompted by Ptolemy's famous comment, that in ancient times Sirius was a fiery red star and that it changed its appearance some time between the 2nd century and the 9th century AD. A more modern controversy is the idea that the Sirius System harbors a faint third companion. Sightings of such a third component have been reported from time to time, and it is held to be responsible for small perturbations in the orbit of Sirius that have been found by some investigators since the 1930s. These aspects of Sirius are amenable to scientific investigation. However, there are also a number of persistent beliefs that have become part of modern popular culture that have taken on a life of their own. These include the mythology of the Dogon tribe in the African nation of Mali, a best-selling book postulating ancient aquatic visitors from Sirius, and a cult whose beliefs in Sirius helped propel them to oblivion.