

The Great Star

Stars were venerated and celebrated by many Amerindian tribes. Of all the stars, the Morning Star stands out for its prominent role in sacred mythology and ritual. Less well known, but evident nevertheless, is the Star's importance in the sacred iconography of the Amerindians. How the mythological traditions interface with, or help explain, the specific iconography associated with the Morning Star has scarcely been addressed to date but this would appear to be a ripe field for research and analysis. It is this question that we will explore in this article.

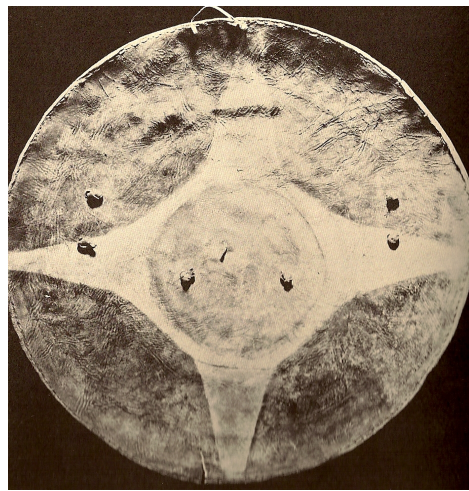


Figure one

Among the images consistently associated with the mythical Morning Star or “Great Star” is that depicted in figure one, taken from a Pueblo shield.¹ As it turns out, the image in question figures prominently in the art of various indigenous cultures across the American Southwest, being especially popular among the Hopi², Jemez Pueblo³, and Navaho.⁴ The same image is attested across the North American continent, appearing

¹ The image is taken from Barton Wright, *Pueblo Shields* (Flagstaff, 1976), p. 50.

² D. Miller, *Stars of the First People* (Boulder, 1997), p. 185.

³ See figure three in J. Sando, “Jemez Pueblo,” in A. Ortiz ed., *Handbook of North American Indians: Southwest*, Vol. 3 (Washington, 1979), p. 424.

⁴ See the picture of Manuelito Segundo in R. Williamson, *Living the Sky* (Norman, 1984) opposite page 176.

among the sacred symbols of the Plains Indians, such as the Skidi Pawnee⁵, Blackfoot, and Crow⁶; among the Eastern Woodland Indians⁷; and among the indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest.⁸ Early examples of the same basic image appear on prehistoric O'otam bowls from the American Southwest.⁹ Far from being unique to North America, analogous stellar-forms occur around the inhabited globe and are attested from as far afield as Mesopotamia and Polynesia.¹⁰

The same image is also attested in Amerindian rock art. Figure two is an Anasazi petroglyph from Santa Fe, New Mexico.¹¹ Figure three shows a Piro rock painting.¹² Other examples appear on the spectacular rock face at San Cristobal near Santa Fe, New Mexico.¹³

⁵ For a classic example of the symbol see the hat worn by the Pitahawirata chief Captain Jim in V. Del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth* (Los Altos, 1982), p. 109. See also M. Naylor, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

⁶ T. McCleary, *The Stars We Know: Crow Indian Astronomy and Lifeways* (Prospect Heights, 1997), p. 35.

⁷ M. Naylor, *Authentic Indian Designs* (New York, 1975), p. 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁹ See figure two in C. Di Peso, "Prehistory: O'otam," in A. Ortiz ed., *Handbook of North American Indians: Southwest*, Vol. 3 (Washington, 1979), p. 94.

¹⁰ See figure seventeen from Wallis and Futuna in R. Jewell, *Pacific Designs* (London, 1998).

¹¹ See figure 3.13.c in P. Schaafsma, *Warrior, Shield, and Star* (Santa Fe, 2000), p. 46. See also the illustrations opposite page 176 in R. Williamson, *Living the Sky* (Norman, 1984).

¹² See figure 3.17.b in P. Schaafsma, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹³ See figure seven in V. Del Chamberlain & P. Schaafsma, "Origin and Meaning of Navaho Star Ceilings," in V. del Chamberlain et al eds., *Songs From the Sky* (Leicester, 2005), p. 88.

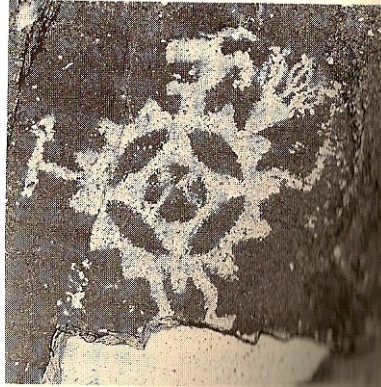


Figure two



Figure three

The same image appears frequently in Kiva mural paintings. Figure four shows a Pueblo shield from Kiva 2 at Pottery Mound in New Mexico.¹⁴ According to Polly Schaafsma, this early Classic period site was occupied between A.D. 1325 and 1450.¹⁵

¹⁴ See figure 3.30a in P. Schaafsma, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

¹⁵ P. Schaafsma, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

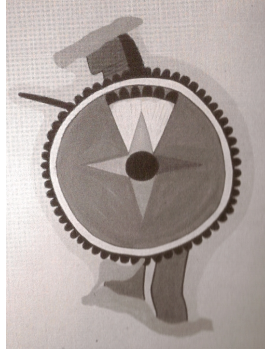


Figure four

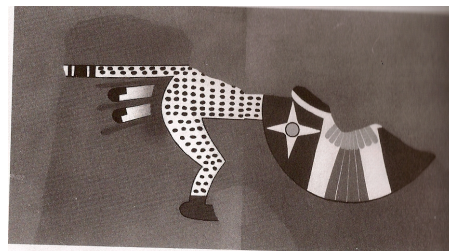


Figure five

Figure five shows a four-pointed star on a shield from the so-called Jeddito (Hopi) murals at Kawaika-a (Test 5, Room 4).¹⁶ Of the imagery depicted on Pueblo shields in the rock art of the Southwest Indians, Polly Schaafsma had this to say:

“Although the meaning of the designs on many of the Pueblo IV shields is not always clear from today’s perspective, others incorporate extant symbolism of the most powerful supernaturals associated with Pueblo warfare, supreme sources of strength and protection...Stars are one of the most frequently encountered symbols on rock-art shields. The four-pointed and often feathered Pueblo star with an expanding center is a multivalent symbol embodying several interrelated meanings and implications of war. The motif is by no means confined to shields, however, and it occurs in rock-art panels as an element in its own right, and occasionally even as a mask...The Morning Star was

¹⁶ Taken from P. Schaafsma, op. cit., p. 92.

especially popular on shields during Pueblo IV and has persisted in use on historic shields.”¹⁷

What are to make of the stellar image in question? The most striking feature of the so-called “Great Star” image is the presence of a dark orb at the center or “core” of a four-pointed star. As a general rule the central orb is painted red or darker than the rays of the star.

As for which celestial body is being referenced by the four-pointed “Great Star,” there would appear to be a general consensus among modern scholars that it represents the planet Venus. Thus, in a discussion of the notorious human sacrifices that the Skidi Pawnee offered to the Morning Star, the astronomer John Carlson offered the following pronouncement:

“The war-related context of these sacrifices is indisputable and current scholarship argues that the Star symbol was most always understood as referring specifically to Venus as Morning and/or Evening Star.”¹⁸

Yet there’s a problem here: How are we are to understand the reddish orb that typically appears in the center of the four-pointed star? Carlson claims that it represents the Sun. Thus, with respect to the Pueblo shield depicted in figure one, Carlson states that it shows “the most common form of the Southwestern four-pointed Great Star symbol and the Sun in center.”¹⁹ By this reasoning, figure one shows a conjunction between the Sun and the planet Venus. Yet this interpretation of the image, it must be said, doesn’t make much sense from an astronomical standpoint insofar as the Sun can never appear in inferior conjunction with Venus. Nor, for that matter, can the current Sun ever appear as a central orb set within a larger star.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁸ J. Carlson, “Transformations of the Mesoamerican Venus Turtle Carapace War Shield: A Study in Ethnoastronomy,” in V. del Chamberlain et al eds., *Songs From the Sky* (Leicester, 2005), p. 116.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 115.

An alternative hypothesis would understand the “Great Star” image as abstract in design—as a juxtaposition of otherwise unrelated stellar forms. Yet this hypothesis ignores the fact that the image in question was expressly identified as the Morning Star and has close structural parallels elsewhere (the “Great Star” was represented by a four-cornered star in Mesoamerica as well, as we will see below). Indeed, the mere fact that a darker orb is so often depicted within the center of a four-pointed star suggests that we have to do with some memorable or readily observable celestial phenomenon—a conjunction of planets, for example—rather than an abstract design.

It is here that ancient mythological traditions can help elucidate the Amerindian artworks and symbols. Certainly it is relevant to find that various Amerindian cultures described the mythical Morning Star as red in color. This was the case among the Skidi Pawnee, Cheyenne, Osage, Delaware, Snuqualmi²⁰, and Zuni, among others. The testimony of the Skidi is exemplary on this score. James Murie offered the following summary of the Skidi traditions surrounding Morning Star:

“The first one he [the Great God Tirawahat] placed in the heavens was Morning Star...This being was to stand on a hot bed of flint. He was to be dressed like a warrior and painted all over with red dust. His head was to be decked with soft down and he was to carry a war club. He was not a chief, but a warrior. He was to follow up all other stars and was to have greater powers than any other god in the heavens. Through him people were to be created and he would demand of the people an offering of a human being. He was to preside over one council of the gods and was to replenish the fire for his brother, Sun. He was also to be the one great power on the east side of the Milky Way. This is Mars, *u-pirikucu*, (literally, ‘big star’), or the god of war.”²¹

²⁰ H. Haeberlin, “Mythology of Puget Sound,” *Journal of American Folklore* 37 (1924), p. 375.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

The Pawnee priest Tahirussawichi likewise called attention to Morning Star's red color: "The Morning Star is like a man; he is painted red all over."²²



Figure six

As was the case with many Amerindian cultures, the Skidi traced their origins to events involving the respective stars. For the Skidi, the mythical Morning Star was revered as a tribal ancestor or culture hero who had taught the Indians their way of life. As the prototypical male power, it was Morning Star who served as a patron of war and instructed the ancestors in how to use the fire-drill and make fire. (Figure six shows a Pawnee chief with a headdress showing a four-pointed star with a red disc in the middle).

It is significant to note that the Skidi expressly distinguished the mythical Morning Star from the planet Venus.²³ Indeed, the Skidi identified the mythical Morning Star with the planet Mars and it was his "marriage" to Venus that set Creation in motion. In summarizing the events in question, Ralph Linton stated simply "The Morning Star

²² H. Alexander, "North American," in L. Gray ed., *The Mythology of All Races*, Vol. 10 (Boston, 1917), p. 93.

²³ See the discussion in E. Cochrane, *Starf*cker* (Ames, 2006), pp. 12-18.

married the Evening Star.”²⁴ This prototypical conjunction of planetary powers was reflected in Skidi rituals reenacting Creation:

“The Skiri also conceive of the firesticks as male and female. The idea is that the kindling of fire symbolized the vitalizing of the world as recounted in the creation. Specifically, the hearth represents the Evening Star and the drill the Morning Star in the act of creation.”²⁵

Similar conceptions are to be found among the Cheyenne of Montana. The Cheyenne Morning Star, like the Skidi Mars, was renowned as a great warrior and culture hero, being credited with introducing the fire-drill.²⁶ And as was the case among the Skidi, the mythical Morning Star was described as distinctly red in color: “He was painted red all over.”²⁷

For the Zuni Pueblo of New Mexico, the mythical Morning Star was recalled as a great warrior and culture hero.²⁸ An association between Morning Star and the color red is also apparent in Zuni lore²⁹ and it is known, moreover, that the planet Mars could serve as the Morning Star.³⁰ Interestingly, during the New Year ceremony celebrating Creation a new fire was drilled at the first appearance of the Morning Star.³¹

There is a wealth of evidence that the planet Mars, rather than Venus, was the “Great Star” celebrated in Amerindian myth and art. In the important study *When Stars Came Down To Earth* (1982), the astronomer Von Del Chamberlain conducted an extensive analysis of the Skidi traditions with respect to the stars. As he documented, various anthropologists familiar with Skidi lore, such as George Dorsey, Gene Weltfish, Clark

²⁴ R. Linton, “The Sacrifice to the Morning Star by the Skidi Pawnee,” *Field Museum of Natural History Anthropological Leaflets* 6 (1923), p. 5

²⁵ J. Murie, op. cit., p. 40.

²⁶ G. Grinnell, “Some Early Cheyenne Tales,” *The Journal of American Folk-Lore* 20 (1907), p. 171.

²⁷ G. Grinnell, “Some Early Cheyenne Tales: II,” *The Journal of American Folk-Lore* 21 (1908), p. 290.

²⁸ E. Parsons, *Pueblo Indian Religion*, Vol. 2 (Chicago, 1939), p. 963.

²⁹ P. Schaafsma, op. cit., p. 146.

³⁰ B. Tedlock, “Zuni Sacred Theater,” *American Indian Quarterly* 7 (1983), p. 100.

³¹ E. Parsons, op. cit., p. 576.

Wissler, and Ralph Linton had concluded that Mars was the mythical Morning Star. The only astronomer to work directly with the Skidi—Forest Moulton—likewise pointed to the red planet as the celestial prototype for the Morning Star:

“Perhaps Moulton’s brief comment is the most significant of all with regard to the identity of the true Skidi Morning Star. Moulton was thoroughly familiar with the planets and stars, and his information was acquired directly from Pawnee informants while they were observing the sky...Apparently Moulton discussed Mars with his informants and concluded that it was the best candidate for the Morning Star. This is the only opinion we have which came from an astronomer who had the benefit of interviews with Pawnee people.”³²

In his analysis Del Chamberlain emphasized the intimate relations between Mars and Venus in Skidi lore. According to him, a conjunction of the two planets was the central theme of the Skidi myth of Creation:

“Watching the sky the way the Skidi might have seen it convinced me that the planets Venus and Mars are the key to understanding the Skidi creation concept, and that Mars was the true Skidi Morning Star...The conjunctions of Venus and Mars do seem to be the key to the Skidi concept of celestial parentage.”³³

With regard to the “Great Star’s” planetary identification, it is instructive to note that a number of otherwise distinct and widely separated Amerindian tribes denoted the mythical Morning Star by a name that signified “red” as well as “great.” Such was the case amongst the Delaware³⁴ and Osage³⁵, for example.

There is compelling evidence that similar conceptions prevailed in Mesoamerica. There too the Morning Star was commonly known as “Great Star” and, amongst the Yucatec Maya at least, the adjective in question (*chak*) signified “red” as well as “great.” In the Dresden Codex, for example, glyphs signifying “Great/Red Star”—T109.T510b—depict

³² V. Del Chamberlain, op. cit., p. 89.

³³ Ibid., p. 84.

³⁴ D. Miller, *Stars of the First People* (Boulder, 1997), p. 56.

³⁵ D. Miller, op. cit., p. 234.

a four-rayed star offering a close resemblance to our figure one (see figure seven).³⁶ The anthropologist Brian Stross called attention to the puzzle presented by the fact that the Maya apparently described the planet Venus as red in color (Stross, like most Mayanists, would identify the Morning Star in question with the planet Venus):

“The planet Venus is associated with the color red among the Maya of Mexico, for its name is given, even in Maya dictionaries from early Colonial times, as ‘red/great star’. The same association holds for the Maya of Classical Times (300-900 AD) and of the Post-Classic period (900-1400 AD). We know this because the Classic and Post-Classic Maya had a glyphic writing system, and in it the glyph collocation representing Venus includes the glyph for the color red. More specifically, the Lamat-Venus glyph (T510) is the glyph of the planet Venus, an identification accepted by virtually every epigrapher concerned with Maya glyphs. The basic form of the glyph—a circled cross with a circlet in each quadrant—is so widespread that it has the meaning ‘Morning Star’ (which we usually interpret as Venus) among the Tarahumara of Northern Mexico. The name that some Mayans have for Venus appears to have been borrowed by Tarascans (as far away as Michoacan, Mexico). More relevant to the Maya area:

‘The red prefix is usually found with the Venus glyph (fig. 42, 31, 33), but rarely on the monuments (fig. 54, 5). One is reminded that one of the names for Venus was *chac ek*, ‘red star’ or ‘giant star’.’

The glyphic prefix for red given with the Venus glyph; a Yucatec Maya name for Venus with a focal meaning of ‘red’. This is persuasive evidence that the color red is connected with Venus. To be sure, the Yucatec term *chak* means both ‘red’ and ‘great, giant’ as well as ‘intense’; and it is also the case that such Maya names for Venus as Tzotzil *muk’ta k’anal*, literally ‘large star’, and Chuj *niwan k’anal*, literally ‘large star’ have no apparent connection with red. However, the colonial Tzeltal term *tzajal ek*, ‘red star’, refers to ‘red’ and not to ‘large’, and presumably names Venus. Furthermore, ‘red’ and ‘great’ appear to have some color symbolic affinity, for the terms are not only homophonous in Yucatec; they are homophonous in a number of other languages as well;

³⁶ Dresden Codex 50.

e.g., Chinese *hong* (rising tone)—‘red, great, grand, magnificent’ and Russian *krasni* (or *krasnoy*)—‘red, magnificent’.

Connecting Venus with the color red is surprising, of course. Venus, if it could be said to have a color, would have to be described as silvery. Only Mars, of the planets, could be described as ‘red’ or ‘reddish’. Oddly, Venus was given by the Maya a Martian color attribute; and further, the death and calamity distributed by Venus, with its apparently warlike nature, again suggests the planet Mars from the perspective of Old World symbolism.”³⁷

The fact that this curious homophony between “great” and “red” is found in conjunction with the Morning Star among speakers of the Algonquian (Delaware), Siouan (Osage), Caddoan (Skidi Pawnee), and Mayan (Yucatec) languages suggests this sampling represents but the tip of the proverbial iceberg and that similar homophonies are (or were) present elsewhere as well and may be much more extensive than hitherto realized. Considered alongside the Skidi Pawnee and Cheyenne testimony describing the mythical “Morning Star” as red in color, this linguistic evidence strongly supports a Martian identification for the “Great Star” in question.

The same conclusion is supported by the otherwise inexplicable fact that in each and every culture sampled thus far—Zuni, Osage, Delaware, Aztec, Maya—the “Great Star” in question was conceptualized as masculine in nature, thereby paralleling the Skidi traditions with respect to the Morning Star Mars. While this conforms precisely with the universal perception of the planet Mars as a masculine warrior, it contrasts sharply with the abundant ancient testimony that Venus was typically conceptualized as the “Queen of Heaven” and hence feminine in nature.

The evidence enumerated here suggests that a reappraisal of the Maya testimony with respect to the Morning Star may well be in order. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, there is much reason to believe that the mythical Morning Star of Mesoamerican lore was originally the planet Mars (or at least Mars and Venus in conjunction). Of the wealth of

³⁷ B. Stross, “Venus and Sirius: Some Unexpected Similarities,” *Kronos* XII:1 (1987), pp. 26-27.

evidence that can be brought to bear on this important question, perhaps the most compelling is the testimony describing the Morning Star as the “first light” to appear at Creation. In the *Codex Telleriano Remensis*, a colonial text providing commentary on prehispanic paintings and sacred lore, it is stated that Quetzalcoatl—as the Morning Star—was regarded as the first “light” to appear at Creation.³⁸ The Codex also includes the following gloss offered by an anonymous scribe: “Properly speaking, the first light that appeared in the world.”³⁹

The *Codex Vaticano Latino* contains a very similar report regarding Quetzalcoatl’s alter ego—Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli. There it is written:

“This was the Dawn god or the god of Light when day wants to come in...at daybreak. They say that it was created before the sun.”⁴⁰

Morning Star’s reputation as the “first star” to appear at Creation offers a striking parallel to the Skidi report that the planet Mars, as Morning Star, was the first star to appear in heaven. Recall again Murie’s account of Creation: “The first one he placed in the heavens was Morning Star.”⁴¹

It is also significant to find that Quetzalcoatl is depicted working the fire-drill, a tool he is said to have invented at the Dawn of Time while acting as the Mixtec culture hero (see figure eight). Yet this is exactly the invention ascribed to the Skidi Morning Star Mars. The fact that Australian skywatchers likewise conceptualized the red planet as the “fire-drill” star confirms that we have to do with a very widespread belief-pattern and offers compelling support for the fundamental reliability of the sacred astronomical lore of the Skidi and Aztecs.⁴²

³⁸ E. Keber, *Codex Telleriano Remensis* (Austin, 1995), p. 175.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁴⁰ 3738, quoted from E. Florescano, *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl* (Baltimore, 1999), p. 53.

⁴¹ J. Murie, “Ceremonies of the Pawnee,” *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology* 27 (Cambridge, 1981), p. 38.

⁴² D. Tunbridge, *Flinders Ranges Dreaming* (Canberra, 1988), p. 142.

To return to the four-pointed star which forms the subject of this inquiry (figure one): It is curious to note that Navaho artists employed the very same image to denote the “Red Star” or “Big Red Star” (*sq’ coh licí*).⁴³ Here one recognizes the very same tendency to conflate the concepts of “red” and “big” or “great” that we have documented among other Amerindian cultures.

The Navaho tell a very interesting story in conjunction with the big red star in question, which they identified as Coyote’s star.⁴⁴ According to a Navaho myth of Creation, it was said that “Coyote queered things in the beginning” and maliciously scattered the Milky Way before setting his own star within its midst.⁴⁵ As a result of its capricious behavior, Coyote’s star was considered a portent of war and “Patron of Disorder”⁴⁶:

“The Holy People were placing the stars. *Ma’ii* (Coyote) came in and got annoyed by their slowness. He picked out a red star (*ma’ii sq*) from the bag with stars and placed it in the south. He said, ‘This is going to be my star.’ He took the bag of stars and threw it over his head. That is how *Yikaisdáhi* (Milky Way) was formed...Because Coyote picked his star in such a way, he said it would announce trouble, war or bad times.”⁴⁷

Yet this is exactly how the planet Mars was described in astronomical texts the world over. Thus, in China, as in Babylon, Mars was deemed to portend war and disorder:

“(Mars) governs states that lack the Way, Causing disorder, robbery, sickness, mourning, famine, and warfare.”⁴⁸

⁴³ B. Haile, *Starlore of the Navaho* (Sante Fe, 1977), pp. 41 and frontispiece.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

⁴⁶ T. Griffin-Pierce, “Ethnoastronomy in Navaho Sandpaintings of the Heavens,” in *Archaeoastronomy* 9 (1986), p. 63.

⁴⁷ R. Pinxten & I. Van Dooren, “Navajo Earth and Sky,” in R. Williamson & C. Farrer, *Earth and Sky* (Albuquerque, 1992), p. 108.

⁴⁸ J. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought* (Buffalo, 1993), p. 74.

It will be noted that, in ancient China, the planet Mars was explicitly associated with causing disorder. This report parallels the Navaho tradition that Coyote's star was known as the Patron of Disorder.

One final tradition is relevant here: The Navaho identified the "Big Red Star" as the "igniter" (*b⁴kq*) of the Fire god.⁴⁹ This peculiar tradition naturally recalls the Skidi tradition identifying the "big" red planet with the fire-drill.

Conclusion

A wealth of circumstantial evidence suggests that the "Great Star" of Amerindian myth was actually the planet Mars, rather than Venus. Thus the Skidi and Cheyenne, among others, describe the mythical Morning Star as a red warrior. Amerindian artworks purporting to depict the Morning Star routinely show a four-pointed star featuring a central red disc with four white rays. Amerindian languages from the East Coast to the West, including Mesoamerica, describe the Morning Star by a phrase meaning at once "Great Star" but also "Red Star." Such evidence is best explained by reference to the red planet Mars, not Venus.

The question arises as to how to explain the peculiar image depicted in figure one. Taking our cue from the Skidi myth of Creation, wherein a spectacular conjunction of Mars and Venus was conceptualized as a sacred marriage or mating, it is our opinion that the so-called "Great Star" of figure one actually depicts a conjunction of Mars and Venus, wherein Mars is the central red orb and Venus is represented by the four radiating rays. In fact, of the present planets Mars is the only body—apart from Mercury—small enough to actually appear set within the body of Venus. That said, Mars does not currently move on an orbit that would allow it to ever appear in inferior conjunction with the larger Venus. Yet as we have documented elsewhere, there is a wealth of evidence

⁴⁹ B. Haile, *Starlore Among the Navaho* (Sante Fe, 1977), p. 7.

that Mars formerly moved on a radically different orbit, one that brought it dangerously close to Earth and, at times, positioned it in front of Venus.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ E. Cochrane, *Martian Metamorphoses* (Ames, 1997); *The Many Faces of Venus* (Ames, 2001); *Starf*cker* (Ames, 2006).

