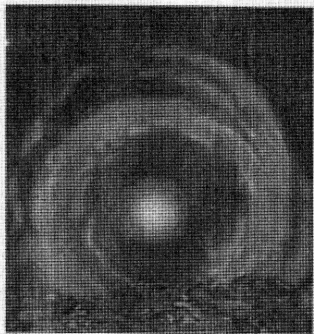


Starry eruption on a grand scale

For nearly a decade, astronomers have patiently watched Rho Cassiopeiae, a bloated, relatively cool star 500,000 times brighter than the sun. They knew it was just a question of time before the star would erupt, but the scientists were still astonished at the fireworks they witnessed about 2 years ago.

Visible to the eye even though it resides 10,000 light-years away, the star first dimmed for several months as its outer atmosphere collapsed, heated, and then shot upward. This eruption hurled the equivalent of 10,000 Earths into space, which is more mass than has been expelled by any other stellar explosion ever observed, report Alex Lobel of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Mass., and his colleagues in the Feb. 1 *Astrophysical Journal*.

By monitoring the star's convulsions, Lobel and his colleagues believe they have solved a stellar riddle: Why are there no cool stars more than a million times brighter than the sun? Using the new data, the team calculated that Rho Cassiopeiae and other so-called yellow hypergiant stars periodically blow out gargantuan amounts of mass. These explosions raise the surface temperature of the stars and their luminosity, preventing cool stars from becoming any brighter than a million suns, Lobel suggests. —R.C.



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Illustration of the unstable hypergiant star Rho Cassiopeiae.

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