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Science Focus

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A double whammy

The blue ring is what makes this image so special. It shows a supernova remnant known as SNR 0509-67.5 and the blue ring is the first recorded evidence of a star that has exploded not once, but twice.

The star in question was a long-dead white dwarf. It was part of a binary system until it went supernova around 300 years ago. According to astronomical models, white dwarfs in binary systems produce type 1a supernovae, which are triggered when a 'dead' white dwarf draws so much material off its nearby 'living' companion star that it becomes unstable and detonates.

But recent research suggests that some type 1a supernovae actually explode twice. The first detonation occurs when the white dwarf has stolen so much helium from its companion that the gas ignites. The explosion triggers a shockwave that shatters the white dwarf's core, triggering the second detonation.

Although it was only a theory, astronomers suspected such an explosion would leave a telltale mark in the glowing remains left behind: two separate shells of calcium. Which is exactly what they detected in the blue ring in this image.

ESO/P DAS ET AL

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