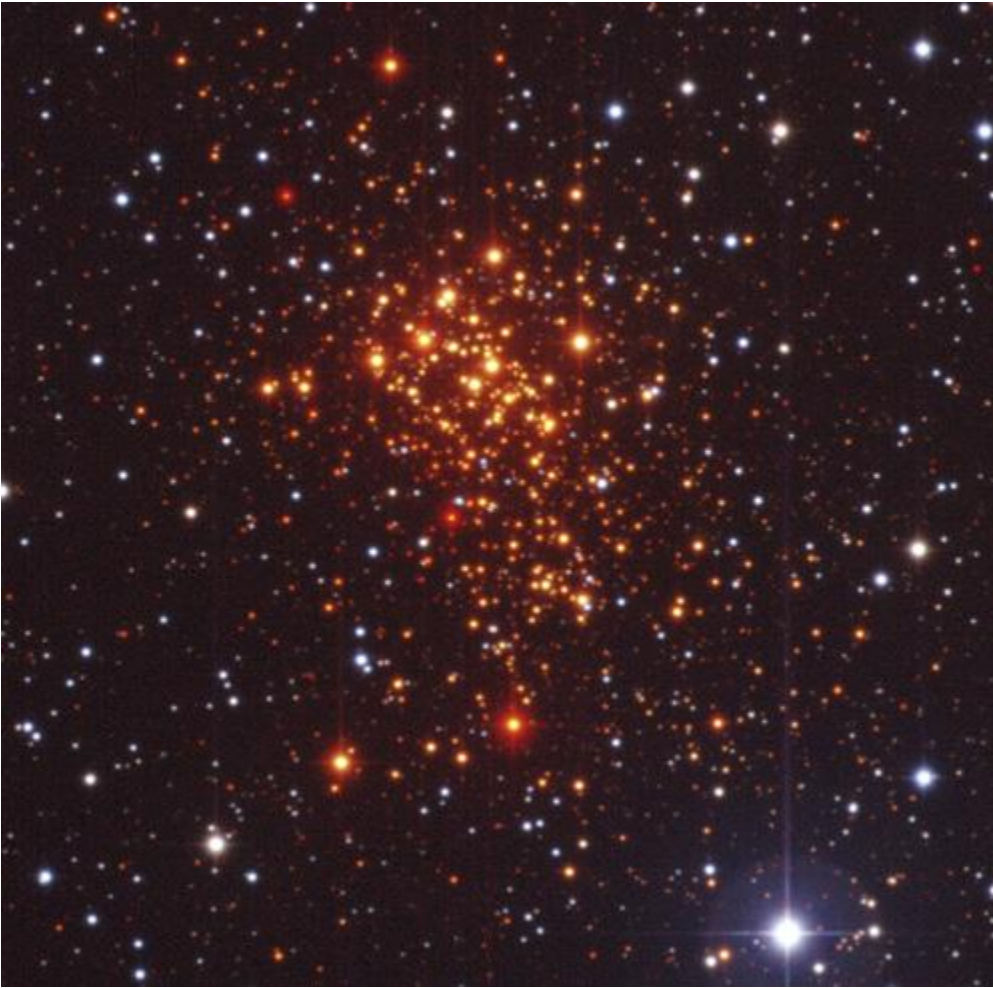


Milky Way super star cluster



ESO [larger image]

A thick veil of interstellar dust prevents us from seeing Westerlund 1 for what it really is — the first "super star cluster" found in the Milky Way. Astronomers estimate its total mass at more than 100,000 suns, comparable to a typical globular cluster. All these stars are packed into a region just 6 light-years across. Astronomers say Westerlund 1 is the most massive, compact young cluster yet seen in the Local Group.

The cluster was discovered in 1961 and lies 10,000 light-years away in the southern constellation Ara. The European Southern Observatory's 2.2m Wide-Field Imager captured this dust-reddened picture of Westerlund 1.

As discussed in *Astronomy's* [May 2005 issue](#), young, massive clusters in other galaxies seem to bridge the gap between open and globular clusters we see in the Milky Way. Astronomers suspect as many as 100 of these clusters exist in our galaxy.