

# Strange Celestial Phenomena in Ancient Rome



History is filled with mysterious and captivating accounts, and some of the most intriguing come from ancient Rome, where **peculiar celestial phenomena** were documented between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE. These reports, recorded by prominent figures of the time, reflect a deep fascination with the skies and events that remain difficult to explain even today.

## "Gleaming Round Shields" in the Sky (218–201 BCE)

During the Second Punic War, fought between Rome and Carthage from 218 to 201 BCE, several unusual occurrences were noted. The **Pontifex Maximus**, Rome's chief priest, recorded in the *Annales Maximi* the appearance of what were described as "**gleaming round shields**" in the sky. These luminous objects, observed on multiple occasions, captured the attention of Roman society, leaving behind an enduring mystery.

Modern historians have speculated on the nature of these "gleaming shields." Were they meteors, atmospheric phenomena, or simply Roman interpretations of natural occurrences? The descriptions are too vague for precise identification but underscore the Romans' keen interest in celestial events.

## The Appearance of "Three Moons" in 122 BCE

Less than a century later, in 122 BCE, another strange celestial event was reported over the city of Ariminum, located in modern-day Emilia-Romagna, Italy. Witnesses claimed to have seen "**three moons**" appearing simultaneously in the sky. What makes this account particularly striking is that these "moons" were visible not only at night but also for several hours during the daytime.

This phenomenon was recorded by **Pliny the Elder** in his encyclopedic work, *Naturalis Historia*. In Book II, he wrote: "Three moons appeared at once during the consulship of Gnaeus Domitius and Gaius Fannius." Pliny's attention to detail and his effort to document significant events lend considerable weight to the credibility of this report.

## Attempts at Interpretation

Astronomers and historians have long debated the nature of these accounts. The “three moons” might correspond to optical phenomena such as lunar halos or parhelia (caused by light refracting through atmospheric ice crystals). However, the fact that these “moons” were visible during the day complicates such explanations.

As for the “gleaming round shields,” meteors or atmospheric bolides are plausible explanations, though their recurring appearances and the distinct comparison to shields remain curious.

### **A Glimpse into the Past and the Sky**

These ancient accounts reveal not only the Romans’ curiosity about the heavens but also their determination to record events they considered significant, possibly even divine omens. While modern science provides some insights into these phenomena, others remain shrouded in mystery, reminding us that antiquity still holds many secrets.

Such testimonies, though over two millennia old, continue to captivate our imagination and deepen our fascination with the mysteries of the universe. They also illustrate how humanity, throughout the ages, has sought to understand and interpret the wonders seen in the skies above.

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