

The 1608 Enigma: When the Skies Over Provence Allegedly Witnessed a Battle of "Celestial Beings"



MARSEILLE, Nice, Genoa – August 1608. As Europe was only just emerging from the Wars of Religion and aviation remained three centuries away, a troubling account began circulating through southern France and Liguria: "terrible and dreadful signs" appeared in the sky, mysterious beings clashed mid-air, and a rain red as blood fell upon the region. Nearly four centuries later, this story resurfaces regularly in ufology circles as one of the oldest documented "UFO sightings" on record. But what do the sources actually say?

[A Tale Born from a 17th-Century Sensational Pamphlet](#)

The origin of this affair traces back to a popular brochure of the era, titled *Discourse on the Terrible and Dreadful Signs Appeared Over the Sea of Genoa*, attributed to one Pierre Ménier, "gatekeeper of the Saint-Victor gate" in Marseille. This type of publication, known in French as a "canard," was the equivalent of today's tabloid newspapers: short texts, sold cheaply, blending news, wonders, and religious morality to captivate a popular audience.

According to the version most often cited by UFO enthusiasts, on the evening of August 25, 1608, near Martigues (a few leagues from Marseille), a "metallic vessel" allegedly appeared in the sky, performing erratic maneuvers before coming to a halt. Two beings reportedly emerged and engaged in an aerial duel, exchanging what witnesses described as "lightning" or "beams of light." The same phenomenon was said to have been observed in Nice on August 5, then in Genoa on August 22, where "carriages drawn by flaming dragons" supposedly flew over the harbor, even withstanding 800 cannon shots fired by authorities.

One week after these events, a "rain of blood" allegedly fell over Provence, reinforcing the idea of divine punishment in the eyes of the populations of the time.

[What Historians Say: Faith, Folklore, and Context](#)

For specialists in early modern history, this account fits within a well-identified literary tradition. As noted by scholars of historical skepticism, the "canards" of the 16th and 17th centuries were not intended to report facts in the contemporary journalistic sense, but to deliver a moral lesson, often religious in nature. Celestial apparitions, aerial battles, and meteorological prodigies were recurring motifs, notably inspired by the Apocalypse or medieval chronicles.

The phenomenon of "red rain," meanwhile, is very real and documented by modern science: it is generally explained by the transport of desert dust (notably from the Sahara) or algal spores, which color precipitation. The naturalist Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, who investigated a red rain in Provence in 1608, actually attributed it to... butterfly excrement.

Furthermore, research conducted in Genoese archives by historian Diego Cuoghi revealed no official trace of the events described in the *Discourse*: neither in Senate records, nor in military or ecclesiastical reports of the period. A silence that raises questions, especially considering the supposed scale of the events.

A Modern Reinterpretation: When Ufology Rereads the Past

Beginning in the 1970s, certain UFO researchers began rereading these ancient accounts through the lens of contemporary UFO observations. Elements such as "metallic vessels," "beings in scaly suits," or "light-energy weapons" are then highlighted, sometimes at the cost of very liberal interpretations of the original text.

As noted by compilations of such testimonies, the Martigues incident of August 25, 1608, is presented as a "close encounter of the third kind" case, featuring "humanoid beings" and "physical aftermath" such as red rain and a sulfuric odor. These descriptions, while captivating, depart significantly from the allegorical and religious style of the source document.

Why Does This Story Continue to Fascinate?

Beyond the question of its historical veracity, the 1608 narrative touches on universal themes: fear of the unknown, the quest for meaning in the face of inexplicable phenomena, and the thin boundary between the sacred and the supernatural. In an era when modern science did not exist, interpreting extraordinary events as divine signs was a rational response within the framework of thought of the time.

Today, this story also illustrates how myths transform over time. What was a moral warning in the 17th century becomes, four hundred years later, an argument for some proponents of the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

In Conclusion: An Open Mystery, Prudence Required

The "1608 affair" remains unresolved to this day. No material evidence confirms the reality of a "non-human" visit to the Mediterranean coasts that summer. But Pierre Ménier's document is very real: it testifies to how societies of old made sense of the incomprehensible.

As historian Yannis Deliyannis reminds us, this type of literature must be read with the keys of its era: "The reporters of the 16th and 17th centuries, just like their readers, were more concerned with the 'moral' of the information than with its novelty or sensational aspect."

Perhaps the true lesson of this story is not whether "vessels" flew over Provence in 1608, but understanding how, across the centuries, humanity continues to gaze at the sky in search of answers—whether they come from God, from elsewhere, or from within ourselves.