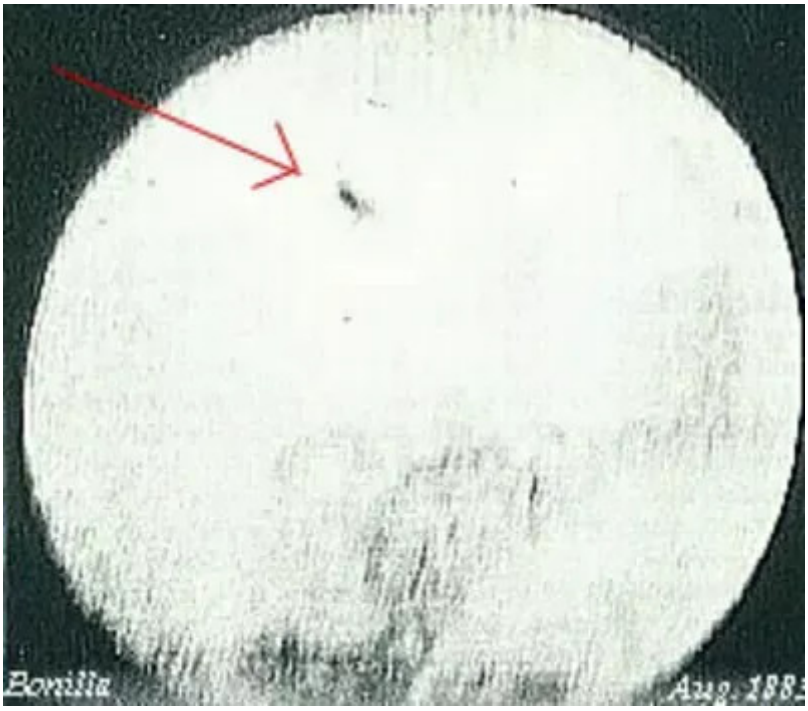
In 1883, an astronomer observed hundreds of UFOs near the Sun



In August 1883, Mexican astronomer José Bonilla photographed an armada of unidentified objects filing across the solar disk. Ridiculed by Paris, ignored for a century, he would finally be vindicated by modern science — which revealed that the Earth may have narrowly escaped total annihilation that very day.

An ordinary morning at the desert observatory

On August 12, 1883, José Árbol y Bonilla, director of the Astronomical Observatory of the State of Zacatecas, was preparing his instrument for a session of solar sunspot observations. Nothing foretold the extraordinary. The sky was clear over the high plateaus of Zacatecas, at an altitude of 2,400 metres, and the morning light was sharp. The observatory itself was a young institution: inaugurated on December 6, 1882 — barely nine months earlier — it was the first major Mexican observatory founded outside the capital. Bonilla was its founding director, a man of scientific rigour who had trained in celestial photography during a stay at the Paris Observatory.

Then the objects appeared.

Dark, hazy, silhouetted against the white disk of the sun, they crossed the field of the telescope in successive groups. Bonilla observed them, counted them, sketched them, noted the precise time of their entry into and exit from the solar background. Some passed alone; others came in clusters of fifteen to twenty at a time. Their speed was variable — a fraction of a second to a full second to traverse the disk — their shapes, elongated and blurred, resisted all classification. The astronomer made a decision: he would photograph them.

Using the wet collodion plate process — the cutting-edge photographic technique of the era, which he had mastered in Paris — Bonilla exposed his plates at one hundredth of a second, keeping pace with the relentless appearance of the bodies. This work extended over two days: on August 12 he counted 283 distinct objects; on August 13, 164 more followed. In total, 447 entities crossed the sun over less than three and a half days of observation. Not a single other observatory in the world — neither Mexico City, nor Puebla, nor any European post — reported anything comparable.

Bonilla's silence, Paris's condescension

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Bonilla's conduct in the aftermath of the observation is itself worthy of note. The astronomer did not yield to the temptation of sensationalism. He scrupulously recorded what he had seen, filed his plates, copied out his notes — and said nothing. He proposed no explanatory hypothesis. He invoked neither meteors, nor atmospheric phenomena, nor any pre-established category that might have allowed him to neatly close this inconvenient dossier.

It was not until two and a half years after the events that Bonilla resolved to submit his report to Camille Flammarion, founder and editor of the journal *L'Astronomie*, published in Paris since 1882. Flammarion was at the time one of the most influential figures in European scientific popularisation — author of *Astronomie populaire*, published in 1880, founder in 1887 of the Société astronomique de France, an unclassifiable personality hovering between rationalism and mysticism. It was he who received the document from Zacatecas.

Paris's response was published on January 1, 1886, in the first issue of *L'Astronomie* for the new year. It was withering. The editorial staff proposed that the objects photographed by Bonilla were, in all likelihood, migratory birds flying at high altitude, or insects resting on the objective lens of the telescope. The argument was clever in its way: if the bodies had been a few centimetres from the lens — rather than out in space — their presence would have been detectable only at Zacatecas, which would account for the absence of any simultaneous observation elsewhere. Bonilla rejected this interpretation. But he did not press the matter. He had no counter-hypothesis to offer, and the Parisian journal had moved on.

For one hundred and twenty-eight years, the Zacatecas observation remained what astronomers call a *curiosity without explanation* — a documented fact, orphaned of meaning.

Vindication from UNAM: a cometary close pass

In 2011, three astronomers from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México reopened the case. Héctor Javier Durand Manterola, of the Geophysical Institute, María de la Paz Ramos Lara, and Guadalupe Cordero published on arXiv, the open preprint platform, a paper entitled: *Interpretation of the observations made in 1883 in Zacatecas (Mexico): A fragmented Comet that nearly hits the Earth.*

Their method was geometrical. By exploiting a simple fact — the objects had been observed only at Zacatecas, and not from Mexico City or Puebla, both situated a few hundred kilometres away — the researchers calculated the maximum distance at which the bodies could have been located and still remained invisible from those two other points. The result was vertiginous. The objects Bonilla photographed were not in the upper atmosphere. Nor were they halfway to the Sun. They were skimming the surface of the Earth.

According to the calculations of Durand Manterola and his colleagues, the fragments passed at a distance of between 538 and 8,062 kilometres from the Earth's surface. To appreciate this proximity: the International Space Station orbits at approximately 400 kilometres altitude. These objects grazed the Earth in the most literal sense of the term — within the low orbital belt, at an altitude humanity itself would not reach for another seventy-eight years.

The estimated dimensions of the fragments are equally unsettling: between 46 and 795 metres in width, between 68 and 1,022 metres in length. The individual mass of the bodies would have ranged from several hundred million to several trillion kilograms. The total mass of the parent object — before fragmentation — would have been comparable to that of Halley's Comet, perhaps several times greater.

The Shoemaker-Levy analogy and the comet that did not strike

The most illuminating scientific precedent is that of Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9. Discovered in March 1993 by astronomers Carolyn and Eugene Shoemaker and David Levy at the Palomar Observatory, it had already been captured by Jupiter and had fragmented during a passage too close to the gas giant in July 1992. In July 1994, its twenty-odd debris fragments struck Jupiter in succession, leaving scars in its atmosphere the size of the Earth, visible through amateur telescopes worldwide. The energy released was estimated at several million megatons of TNT.

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What the UNAM astronomers suggest is that on August 12, 1883, a comet comparable in scale to Shoemaker-Levy — perhaps more massive — grazed the Earth without a single human being, save for José Bonilla, bearing witness. Had the trajectory differed by a few thousand kilometres, had even one fragment struck the atmosphere rather than grazing it, the impacts could have triggered planetary tsunamis, dust clouds blotting out the sun for years, a mass extinction event. The industrial civilisation of the era — at the very dawn of the Belle Époque, a decade before the Berlin Conference and the scramble for Africa — might have been annihilated without ever understanding what struck it.

In his original notes, as reproduced in*L'Astronomie*of 1886, Bonilla himself described the behaviour of the bodies with a precision that strikes with retrospective force:*"Their time intervals were variable, a body passing through would not take more than one third, half a second, or at most one second to cross the disc, and a minute or two passed before others appeared — some passed as 15 or 20 at once, so that it was difficult to count them. I drew the trajectory of many of these bodies on the solar disc, marking their 'entrances' and 'exits' on the paper."*

The photographs: the first images of a UFO?

Bonilla's photographic plates, preserved in the archives of the Zacatecas Observatory, occupy a singular place in the history of astronomical imagery. They constitute one of the very first photographs of unidentified flying objects ever made. This fact, long seized upon by the ufological literature of the latter half of the twentieth century — Jimmy Guieu, Frank Edwards, and Henry Durrant each referenced them in works of widely varying interpretive licence — acquires an entirely different significance in the light of the 2011 research: the photographed objects were real, solid, of colossal dimensions, and situated at near-orbital range from the Earth.

Popular ufology embroidered these images with enthusiasm: extraterrestrial vessels, secret military formations, unknown airships. All such interpretations founder on a single observation: in 1883, no earthly power possessed a fleet of 447 aerial craft capable of orbiting at less than 8,000 kilometres altitude. The truth, as reconstructed by the Mexican astronomers of the twenty-first century, is more dizzying still: these were cometary debris in a grazing transit, a string of celestial boulders of which the smallest exceeded the height of a multi-storey building, and the largest rivalled the largest asteroids of the main belt.

Bonilla, a man of measure before the unnameable

Perhaps the most arresting aspect of this affair remains the intellectual posture of Bonilla himself. Trained in Paris in the tradition of observational rigour, director of a peripheral observatory in a nation still seeking international scientific recognition, this man confronted the inexplicable and chose the only truly scientific attitude: to record without concluding. He did not seek to impose an explanation. He did not inflate his figures. He noted 283 objects on the first day, 164 on the second, described their trajectories, photographed their blurred silhouettes, and submitted his report without embellishment.

The international community treated him with condescension. Paris found birds where Bonilla had seen solid bodies crossing space at prodigious speeds. History proved Paris wrong.

In 2011, a century and a quarter after the events, Mexican astronomers — working in the same country, in the same national tradition that had formed Bonilla — reread his notes, reworked his geometry, and established that on that August morning in 1883, on the high plateaus of Zacatecas, the Earth had narrowly escaped an extinction-level catastrophe without ever knowing it. The solitary observer who had watched the Sun that day and faithfully recorded what he saw was the only human being on Earth to have been, in utter unknowing, witness to one of the greatest close calls in the history of our planet.

Archival Document — Extract from José Bonilla's report, published in*L'Astronomie*, January 1, 1886

"On August 12, 1883, at the Observatory of Zacatecas, I observed a great number of dark, opaque bodies crossing the

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solar disk in various directions. Their intervals were irregular, the duration of their transit varying between one third and one full second. Some moved in isolation; others appeared in groups of fifteen to twenty units, making their enumeration difficult. I traced on paper the trajectories of several of them, noting their points of entry and exit on the disk. Their nature remains, to my mind, unexplained."

— José Árbol y Bonilla, Director of the Astronomical Observatory of Zacatecas, Mexico

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