

Egypt – A papyrus recounts the appearance of a UFO in ancient times



A thirty-five-century-old Egyptian papyrus records what may be the earliest written account of unidentified objects ever set down in writing. But did this crucial — and untraceable — document ever truly exist?

Year 22 of the Reign: A Morning Like No Other

In the twenty-second year of the reign of Thutmose III, during the third month of winter, at the sixth hour of the day — roughly noon by the solar reckoning of ancient Egypt — the scribes of the "House of Life" noticed something unusual in the sky. What they saw brought them to their knees. They prostrated themselves, then ran to warn the Pharaoh.

The House of Life — the *Per Ankh* — was no mere scriptorium. It was the highest intellectual institution in Egypt, a place where astronomers, physicians, and theologians worked side by side under the protection of Thoth, god of knowledge. By the standards of their time, the men who witnessed this phenomenon were the most qualified observers imaginable.

Here is the translation of the text as established by Prince Boris de Rachewiltz in the 1950s:

"In the year 22, in the third month of winter, at the sixth hour of the day, the scribes of the House of Life perceived a circle of fire coming from the sky. It had no head; from its mouth came a foul breath. Its body was one rod long and one rod wide. It had no voice. The hearts of the scribes were troubled and they threw themselves upon their bellies. They went to report it to Pharaoh. His Majesty ordered that the scrolls kept in the House of Life be consulted."

Several days later, according to the same text, the phenomena multiplied until they outshone the sun itself and filled "the four corners of the sky." The Pharaoh's army watched them in formation. Fish and birds fell from the sky. The Pharaoh ordered incense to be burned, commanded that the event be recorded for all eternity in the Annals of the House of Life, and declared the day worthy of remembrance.

Thutmose III, the Napoleon of the Pharaohs

To grasp the weight of this testimony, one must understand its context. Thutmose III — also spelled Tuthmosis or Thothmes — is regarded by Egyptologists as one of the greatest rulers ancient Egypt ever produced. His official reign stretches from approximately 1479 to 1425 BCE, though he first served as co-regent under his stepmother Hatshepsut for nearly twenty-two years.

Nicknamed the "Napoleon of Ancient Egypt," he led seventeen major military campaigns, pushing the empire of the Nile north to the Euphrates and south to the Fourth Cataract of the Nile. His victory at the Battle of Megiddo in 1457 BCE — whose account was engraved on the walls of the temple of Karnak by his personal secretary Tjaneni — remains one of the earliest documented battles in human history.

It was a man accustomed to military marvels, to grandeur and the close observation of the world, who found himself facing the blazing sky of that mysterious winter. That this pharaoh, who had erected stelae from the Euphrates to Sudan, judged this aerial phenomenon remarkable enough to immortalise it in his official annals speaks volumes about what his scribes reported.

Alberto Tulli and the Cairo Bazaar

The papyrus would never have entered modern consciousness without an incident that took place in 1933 in a Cairo bazaar. Alberto Tulli, then director of the Egyptian section of the Vatican Museums, was browsing among antique dealers when he reportedly came across a papyrus fragment bearing, he believed, a passage from the Annals of Thutmose III. The asking price exceeded his means. He therefore had the text copied by hand, replacing the original hieratic script with hieroglyphics — a procedure then common in scholarly circles.

Tulli returned to Rome with his transcription. The original papyrus remained in Cairo in the hands of a dealer known as "Tano" — most likely Phokion J. Tanos, a well-regarded Cairo antiquarian. What became of the original document thereafter is unknown.

Upon Alberto Tulli's death, his papers were bequeathed to his brother, a priest at the Lateran Palace. When that brother died in turn, his possessions were dispersed among various heirs. The papyrus transcription vanished in the process.

Prince de Rachewiltz Steps onto the Stage

The affair resurfaced in 1953. Prince Boris de Rachewiltz — an Italo-Russian scholar, self-taught Egyptologist, and, by marriage, son-in-law of the poet Ezra Pound — claimed to have found the famous transcription among the late Tulli's papers. He published a translation in *Doubt*, the journal of the Fortean Society, and declared that the text formed an integral part of the Annals of Thutmose III.

Rachewiltz noted that the retranscription from hieratic into hieroglyphics had been carried out not by Tulli himself, but by Dr. Étienne Drioton, a celebrated Egyptologist and then director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service. Drioton's name lent the enterprise considerable scholarly credibility.

A second, independent translation was produced by American anthropologist R. Cedric Leonard, who described "burning disks" where Rachewiltz had written "circles of fire" — a minor divergence reflecting less a contradiction than the inherent complexity of hieroglyphic language, whose signs may carry several interpretations depending on ritual or astronomical context.

A Chain of Doubts

The story of the Tulli Papyrus is also the story of a chain of intermediaries that no one can verify today. In 1968, investigator Samuel Rosenberg, tasked with writing a section of the Condon Report on UFOs, cabled the Vatican

seeking clarification. The reply from Gianfranco Nolli, then inspector of the Vatican Museums' Egyptian section, was terse: *"Papyrus Tulli not property of Vatican Museum. Now it is dispersed and no more traceable."*

Worse still, Rachewiltz later admitted that he had never held the papyrus in his hands, acknowledging that his translation was based on notes taken by Tulli during a brief consultation of the document at "Tano's" home in Cairo in 1934. What existed, then, was not a papyrus — not even a complete copy — but a translation of a transcription of notes from a viewing of an original document now lost. Ufologists Jacques Vallée and Chris Aubeck, in their landmark reference work *Wonders in the Sky* (2010), described the affair plainly as a hoax.

Rosenberg went further, suggesting that the text might be a disguised borrowing from the Book of Ezekiel — the "wheels of fire" of that prophetic vision bearing a troubling resemblance to the Tulli Papyrus's "circles of fire." Other researchers, less categorical, advanced natural explanations: a grazing comet, a bolide meteor, a St. Elmo's fire-type electrical phenomenon amplified by the atmosphere of the Nile Delta.

What the Text Says — and Does Not Say

Setting aside the authenticity debate, the text itself rewards careful reading. Several details stand out for the analyst. First, the absence of a head: in hieroglyphics, describing an object without a head means it has no visible leading part — a formulation that sits awkwardly with a comet or meteor, both of which present an identifiable trajectory. Second, the foul odour: this unexpected sensory detail appears nowhere in the standard astronomical descriptions left by Egyptian sky-watchers, who concerned themselves with shapes, colours, and movements — never smells. Third, the duration: the phenomenon lasted several days, ruling out most instantaneous meteoritic events.

The unit of measure — one "rod" — equalled approximately 52 centimetres by the Egyptian standard of the era, suggesting an object of relatively modest apparent size, perhaps observed at low altitude from the ground. Several researchers have noted that describing an object as having "no voice" reflects genuine surprise: the scribes expected a sound, and heard none.

A Ghost in the History of Ufology

Whatever the truth of its origins, the Tulli Papyrus has taken on a life of its own in the mythology of the unexplained. It is cited in dozens of works devoted to historical UFO sightings, often presented as the centrepiece of an ancient extraterrestrial contact file. Zecharia Sitchin, author of the controversial *Earth Chronicles* series, even claimed — without ever producing evidence — that Thutmose III had been taken aboard one of these celestial craft.

Yet the document illuminates a broader truth: since antiquity, human beings have looked up at the sky with wonder edged with dread, and even the most learned scribes have sometimes been unable to name what they saw. Whether in Nuremberg in 1561, New Zealand in 1909, or the skies over Boston in 1639, the heavens have always kept their secrets — and they keep them well.

The Tulli Papyrus, authentic or not, embodies a fundamental truth: humanity has been searching for answers up above far longer than it is ready to admit.

Archival Document: Translation of the Tulli Papyrus

Translation by Prince Boris de Rachewiltz, published in Doubt, No. 41, 1953

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They went to report it to Pharaoh. His Majesty ordered that the scrolls kept in the House of Life be consulted. After some days had passed, these things became more numerous in the sky. Their splendour exceeded that of the sun and extended to the four corners of the sky. The army of Pharaoh watched with him in their midst. It was after the evening meal. Then these circles of fire ascended higher in the sky and moved toward the south. Fish and birds rained down from the sky. A marvel never witnessed since the founding of their land [...] And Pharaoh caused incense to be burned to make peace with the Earth [...] and what had happened was ordered to be written in the Annals of the House of Life so that it be remembered for all time."

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