



The *Tulli Papyrus*

A Disputed Account of Anomalous Aerial Phenomena in the Reign of Thutmose III, New Kingdom

Egypt, circa 1440 BCE

DATE	LOCATION	SOURCE	CLASSIFICATION
circa 1440 BCE	Upper Egypt	Royal Annals of Thutmose III	Ancient Text / Disputed
HYNEK CATEGORY	OFFICIAL STATUS		
N/A – Pre-modern	No investigation possible		

The Document and Its History

In the early twentieth century, Alberto Tulli, then director of the Egyptian Section of the Vatican Museum, reported the discovery of a fragmentary papyrus in an antique shop in Cairo. The document, which Tulli claimed dated to the reign of Thutmose III of the 18th Dynasty — the most powerful pharaoh in Egyptian history, ruler of an empire stretching from Nubia to the Euphrates — appeared to describe an anomalous aerial event witnessed by members of the royal court.

Tulli did not purchase the original. He made a transcription, which was later translated and published. The original papyrus has never been located. The Vatican has confirmed that the

document is not in its collection. This absence is the central complication of the Tulli Papyrus: the evidence for the evidence is the transcription of a man who no longer possessed what he claimed to have seen.

The document was brought to wider public attention in 1953, when it was referenced in a study of ancient aerial phenomena. Since then, it has occupied an uncertain position in the historical record — neither confirmed as authentic nor definitively proven to be false.

I.02 // THE ACCOUNT *What the Text Describes*

The translated text records, in the style of Egyptian royal annals, that in the twenty-second year, the third month of winter, in the sixth hour of the day, a scribe of the House of Life perceived that circles of fire were coming from the sky. The text notes they had no heads — a phrasing interpreted variously as describing their circular shape or their voiceless, incomprehensible nature.

According to the record, the objects emitted foul odours. Their bodies were one rod in length and one rod in width. They had no voice. The scribes fell upon their faces and reported the event to Pharaoh. Thutmose III ordered the matter investigated and recorded.

After several days, the text continues, the circles of fire became more numerous and shone with greater brightness than the sun. They extended to the limits of the four supports of the heaven. Pharaoh and his army observed them. The text concludes by noting that the event was understood as miraculous, and that frankincense was offered to appease the gods.

"Circles of fire, coming from the sky... they shone more in the sky than the brightness of the sun."

— FROM THE TULLI PAPYRUS TRANSCRIPTION, TRANSLATED BY PRINCE BORIS DE RACHEWILTZ, 1953

Egyptologists who have examined the transcription have raised several concerns. The language of the text, as rendered, contains formulations inconsistent with the grammar of New Kingdom Egyptian. Some scholars argue the translation introduced errors. Others suggest the document may be a later compilation drawing on original annals but filtered through medieval copyists — a not uncommon fate for ancient Egyptian administrative records.

Supporters of the document's authenticity point out that the Annals of Thutmose III were extensive and detailed administrative records, and that unusual celestial events were routinely recorded by Egyptian court scribes, who were responsible for cataloguing anything that might be interpreted as an omen. A genuine record of an unusual atmospheric or astronomical event, they argue, would fit naturally into the annalistic tradition.

HISTORIAN'S NOTE

The most common sceptical interpretation is that the "circles of fire" describe a meteor shower, a solar halo, or another natural atmospheric phenomenon — all known to occur and all capable of producing the effects described. The offering of frankincense in response is consistent with Egyptian interpretive frameworks: anomalous celestial events were religious events. The text's meaning may be clear even if its subject remains contested.

<p>PRIMARY SOURCE</p> <p>Alberto Tulli transcription, date unknown</p>	<p>ORIGINAL LOCATION</p> <p>Unlocated; not in Vatican collection</p>	<p>KEY TRANSLATION</p> <p>Prince Boris de Rachewiltz, 1953</p>
<p>SCHOLARLY STATUS</p> <p>Disputed; cannot be verified</p>	<p>NATURAL EXPLANATIONS</p> <p>Meteor shower; solar halo; lenticular cloud</p>	<p>PHARAOH'S RESPONSE</p> <p>Recorded; offered frankincense; ordered investigation</p>

Whether the Tulli Papyrus is a genuine ancient document, a medieval compilation, an early twentieth-century fabrication, or an authentic record of a misidentified natural event, its place in the history of unexplained phenomena is established. It is routinely cited as the earliest known written account of what might be described as a mass aerial sighting — objects observed simultaneously by multiple witnesses, understood as extraordinary, and formally recorded by a governing authority.

That Thutmose III — a figure of genuine historical importance, the commander of the battle of Megiddo and one of the most thoroughly documented rulers of the ancient world — appears in the account lends it a historical texture that purely anonymous ancient reports lack. Whatever the scribes of his court saw or recorded, they saw or recorded it in the service of one of history's most meticulous administrative traditions.

The original, if it ever existed, is gone. The copy of the copy survives. This is, in the study of unexplained phenomena, a more common situation than one might wish.

"The oldest mystery is not what was seen, but whether the record of seeing it can be trusted. The Tulli Papyrus asks both questions simultaneously."

