

In modern times, reported sightings of strange objects or lights in the sky have fuelled heated debate over whether our planet is receiving visitors from outer space. For the Romans, however, there was no doubt: each of the planets was identified with a god or goddess, who paid regular visits to Earth, influencing people's lives and even historical events such as the outcome of battles. Even today the planets of our solar system bear the Roman god-names Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Moreover, many of the stars and constellations were believed to be human or semi-divine mythological characters who had been transformed into luminous bodies, such as Andromeda, Orion, and the Pleiades. Since the heavenly bodies were thus thought of as being "alive", the existence of extraterrestrial life-forms was not difficult to accept. As Lucretius says in his philosophic poem *On the Nature of the Universe*, "You are bound to admit that in other parts of the universe there are other worlds inhabited by different races of people and different species of beasts" (2.1074-78).

*Figure 1. Bronze Age rock-carving from the Camonica valley in northern Italy, showing men and animals being watched by two spectators in a round-roofed structure topped by antennas. Archaeologists interpret this as a building; others claim it "resembles a Flying Saucer landed".*

The Romans further believed that strange happenings in the sky were the gods' way of foretelling the future. Cicero, in his treatise *On Divination*, refers to occasions "when two suns had been seen or when three moons had appeared, and when fiery flames were noticed in the sky, and the heaven itself seemed to burst open, and strange globes were observed in it" (ch. 43). The annals of Livy, and the *Book of Prodigies* of Julius Obsequens (based on Livy) are full of references to double and triple moons and suns, and other unnatural phenomena. On some occasions, the sun was reportedly seen at night: at other times, it rained fire, or a blazing timber was seen in the sky. Glowing spheres from the heavens were especially common; for instance, in 91 BC Obsequens reports, "About sunrise a ball of fire flashed forth from the northern heavens with a great noise in the sky....Near Spoletium a gold-coloured fireball rolled down to the ground; increased in size, it seemed to move off the ground towards the east, and was big enough to blot out the sun". Such sightings sound very similar to modern reports of UFOs. In 73 BC, according to Plutarch's life of Lucullus, a battle between the Roman army and King Mithridates of Pontus was called off because of one such apparition: "All of a sudden, the sky burst open as a huge, flame-like body was seen to fall between the two armies. In shape it resembled a wine jar, and in colour it was like molten silver. Both sides were astonished at the sight and separated" (8.6).

Actual reports of spaceships and spacemen are rarer. In 218 BC Livy reports that "phantom ships were seen gleaming in the sky....In the district of Amiternum, in many places, apparitions of men in shiny clothing appeared in the distance but did not get close to anyone" (21.62). Similarly Obsequens tells us that in 173 BC "at Lanuvium the appearance of a great fleet was seen in the sky". In 152 BC, "in many places at Rome, apparitions in togas were seen, and on approaching, they vanished from view". Plutarch, in his biography of Marius, reports that in 103 BC "in the night sky were seen flaming spears and shields, which at first moved in different directions, and then clashed together, adopting the formations and movements of men in battle; and finally some of them retreated, while others pressed on in pursuit, and they all streamed off towards the west" (17.4). Star Wars, Roman style?