

# The big bang: It's still a mystery

**LONDON, AAP. — There has not within recorded history been any event as violent and inexplicable as the gigantic explosion in the basin of the Pookamennaya Tunguska River in central Siberia precisely at 7.17 am on June 30, 1908.**

Whatever it was — and scientists have been arguing about it ever since — it devastated an area 20 to 30 miles (32 to 48 km) from the point of the blast blowing down thousands of trees with their trunks away from direction of the explosion.

There were traces of fire 12 miles (10 km) away and a farmer 37 miles (60 km) from the centre was thrown from the steps of his house and found his shirt charred. Eye-witnesses 300 miles

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witnesses 300 miles (483 km) away said they saw a pale blue fireball so bright it made the sun seem dark.

Behind it trailed a thick veil of dust and when the explosion came they saw a column of burning white-hot material rise 12 miles (19 km) into the sky.

It was heard thousands of miles away. Seismographs registered an earthquake wave that travelled twice around the world.

For nearly two months after the event the nights over western Asia and Europe were unusually bright and even the atmosphere over California was affected.

So what happened in that desolate region with only bands of nomadic reindeer herders anywhere near the scene?

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Because of the political situation in Russia it was 19 years before an expedition of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR managed to examine the site. Many other scientists have been there since.

The science magazine Nature has now taken the opportunity of a new paper on Tunguska to speculate on its cause. This one, by Ari Ben-Menahem of the Adolpho Bloch Geophysical Observatory at Rehovot in Israel, was published recently in Physics of the Earth and Planetary Interiors.

Mr Ben-Manahem estimated the explosion took place about five miles (eight km) above the ground and probably was equivalent to the detonations of millions of tons of explosives.

He did not enter the controversy on what

controversy on what triggered the blast, referring to it only as a UFO (Unidentified Flying Object).

Nature mentions theories that it might have been a "black hole", a tiny, densely compressed mass of star matter so incredibly heavy it might have passed right through the earth; or a critical mass of nuclear material that exploded on entering the atmosphere.

But, it says, the most likely theory is that a small comet struck the earth as some scientists have proposed. This has been partly confirmed by soil samples from the Tunguska site showing the magnetite and silicate globules that might have been expected to accompany such an event.

If it is any comfort.

**If it is any comfort,  
it is estimated that a  
cometary nucleus of  
that size will hit the  
earth only about once  
every 2000 years.**