Comet Caused Dark Ages Says Tree Ring Expert

A comet exploding in the Earth’s atmosphere contributed to the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West and ushered in the Dark Ages, it was claimed yesterday.

Studies of tree rings going back thousands of years have shown that the world experienced a sudden and catastrophic drop in temperatures in 540 AD.

The disaster led to repeated crop failures, famines and the spread of bubonic plague that may have wiped out around a third of the population of Europe, according to Professor Mike Baillie, a tree ring expert at Queen’s University, Belfast.

The plague of 542, triggered by two years of famines and bad harvests also may have hindered the attempts of the Roman Emperor Justinian I to re-conquer Western Europe, altering the political make-up of Europe.

Tree rings can provide valuable clues about historical climate changes. A cold year, for instance, appears in the tree record as a narrow ring. Professor Baillie told the British Association that 540 had been shown to be a catastrophic year in Siberia, Scandinavia, North America, South America and Northern Europe. “It very probably started the Dark Ages,” he said.

He believes that the drop in temperature was caused by fragments of a comet exploding in the atmosphere, surrounding the world with a cloud of dust and water vapour.

Contemporary accounts from China and the Mediterranean reveal high meteorite activity in the 530s.

Professor Baillie called for historians to help to fill the gaps and look again at mythology from the Dark Ages for clues to the comet’s existence.

Other scientists have suggested that a super volcano in the 530s triggered a global climate shift. But Professor Baillie said there was no geological or historical evidence for such a massive explosion.