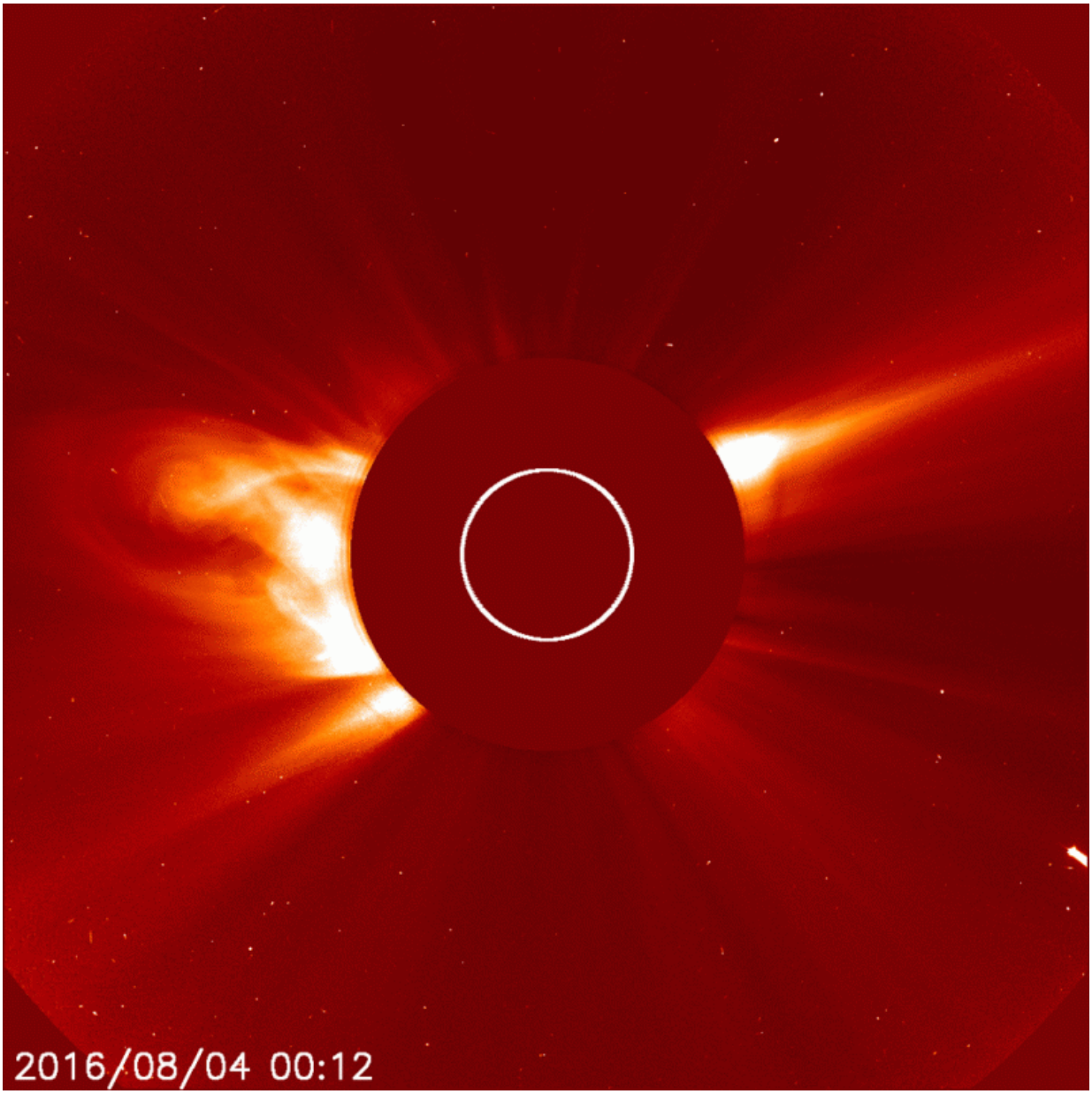
Image: ESA, NASA's SOHO sees bright sungrazer comet

August 5 2016, by Sarah Frazier



Credit: ESA/NASA/SOHO/Joy Ng

ESA and NASA's Solar and Heliospheric Observatory, or SOHO, saw a bright comet plunge toward the sun on Aug. 3-4, 2016, at nearly 1.3 million miles per hour. Comets are chunks of ice and dust that orbit the sun, usually on highly elliptical orbits that carry them far beyond the orbit of Pluto at their farthest points. This comet, first spotted by SOHO on Aug. 1, is part of the Kreutz family of comets, a group of comets with related orbits that broke off of a huge comet several centuries ago.

This comet didn't fall into the sun, but rather whipped around it – or at least, it would have if it had survived its journey. Like most sungrazing comets, this comet was torn apart and vaporized by the intense forces near the sun.

The disk of the sun is represented by the white circle in this image.

Provided by NASA

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