

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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WEATHER PROPHETS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The palmy days of weather prophecy began after the close of the Middle Ages. A new style of prophetic literature then came into vogue, consisting of small tracts known as "prognostica", most of them written in Latin, each of which contained a prediction of the weather for a single year, prepared in accordance with the rules of astrology. These predecessors of the almanacs appeared in astonishing numbers. In the sixteenth century fully 3,000 of them were issued. One industrious German, Hans Virdung, published such weather forecasts annually for 58 years.

A memorable episode of this period was the much-predicted flood that failed to arrive in February, 1524. Authorities were divided as to whether this was to be a universal deluge, like the Noachian one, or merely an exceptionally rainy spell, causing local inundations; but in the scores of works published on the subject in different parts of Europe the fact that three planets would be in the watery constellation of Pisces at one time during the month in question was declared to be a sure sign of tremendous downpours.

These prophecies caused general consternation. Everywhere people left their homes and took refuge on hilltops, where they remained until the fatal month had passed. The weather proved to be entirely normal - and the reputations of the astrologers apparently did not suffer in the least from the fiasco!

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