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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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PINNACLED SNOWFIELDS

When Charles Darwin, in the course of his famous voyage around the world, crossed the Andes in the year 1835, he was much struck by the appearance of some of the fields of perpetual snow encountered near the summit of the Portillo Pass. "These frozen masses," he says in his Journal, "during the process of thawing, had in some parts been converted into pinnacles or columns, which, as they were high and close together, made it difficult for the cargo mules to pass."

Nearly all subsequent travelers in the high Andes of Chile and Argentina have brought back accounts of similar pinnacled snowfields. The jagged hummocks of snow or ice are usually from three to six feet high, but occasionally much higher. Seen at a distance, and especially by moonlight, they bear a certain resemblance to white-robed human beings engaged in some solemn religious ceremony; whence the natives named them "la nieve de los penitentes" - the snow of the penitents. This name has been shortened for international use to "nieve penitente."

This phenomenon is now known to occur at high altitudes in many other parts of the world, but its most striking developments appear to be confined to tropical or subtropical regions. Though discussions about its origin have raged in the scientific journals for nearly forty years, the question is still unsettled.

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