A Science Service Feature

Released upon receipt
but intended for use
November 5, 1929.

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed October 29, 1929.

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COMETS AND WEATHER

Because the appearance of a comet in the sky is a rare occurrence, it was quite naturally supposed by our superstitious forefathers, who knew nothing about the real nature and distances of these objects, to be a "sign" of various coming events on earth, including weather events. Even Aristotle fell into the popular error of supposing comets to be connected with weather. He says in his "Meteorology":

"When there are many comets and they are dense ... the years are clearly dry and windy. When they are fewer and fainter, this effect does not appear in the same degree, though as a rule the wind is found to be excessive either in duration or strength."

Prof. E.S. McCartney, summarizing the views of several classical and post-classical writers says:

"The comet called 'lampas' ('torch'), when it appeared in the east, involved all the lands of the Orient in misty weather, injurious to crops; in the south it caused Africa to struggle with drought and a plague of snakes; in the west it brought to Italy continual overflowing of the streams; in the north it meant hunger. The comet called 'lampadias' ('torch-bearer'), when turned toward the east, portended for Persia and Syria drought, thunderbolts, destruction of crops, and the burning of palaces. The Chaldeans believed that comets as well as both lunar and solar eclipses signified wind, rain and terrible heat."

The ancient and still prevalent notion that comets are associated with hot weather is probably perpetuated by the fact that in such weather there is a preponderance of clear skies, favorable for the discovery of these celestial visitors.

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