

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed March 5, 1930.

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EUROPEAN DUSTFALLS

The countries of southern Europe have, from remote times, experienced showers of reddish dust, sometimes called "sirocco dust," which, when mingled with rain, produces what once were supposed to be showers of blood. In a more superstitious age people were panic-stricken when these showers occurred. A graphic account of the fright occasioned by a fall of dust in Calabria, Italy, on March 14, 1813, is given in a French memoir by Luigi Sementini, published in 1815. The accidental breaking out of a fire during this shower brought conviction that the end of the world was at hand.

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century much attention was given to these dustfalls by the German naturalist C.G. Ehrenberg, whose investigations led him to a curious hypothesis. He concluded that there exists in the upper atmosphere a mass of permanently suspended living organisms--mainly diatoms--and that the dust showers occur when this upper stratum is so distorted as to come in contact with the land surface. He found in samples of fallen dust diatoms, some living, which he believed to be natives of regions as far away as South America, and he believed that these must have fallen from an aerial ocean of life that was continually being replenished by organisms lifted by the winds from all parts of the earth.

Sirocco dust is now known to come from the Sahara Desert.

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