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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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OLD IDEAS ABOUT LIGHTNING

The attempts of primitive races to explain lightning led to the development of numerous myths, most of which identify the discharge of the thunderstorm with the weapons of an avenging deity. This conception, as everybody knows, prevails in Greek and Latin poetry, but, in common with other mythical interpretations of nature, it was discarded by the classical philosophers. In the philosophical writings of Greece and Rome we find several rival hypotheses to account for lightning, but they are all set forth in a rationalistic spirit, and, as a rule, the popular superstitions on this subject are ignored. Aristotle, in his great work on meteorology, reviews the principal explanations of lightning proposed by other Greek philosophers and presents his own ideas regarding this phenomenon.

Even in the darkness of the middle ages, while some writers discussed lightning entirely from the standpoint of theology, there were many who wrote in a more philosophical spirit, borrowing their ideas generally from the classical authorities: in the earlier centuries mainly from Pliny and toward the close of the middle ages almost entirely from Aristotle.

Thus while Tertullian quotes scripture to prove that lightning is identical with hell fire -- whence the sulphurous smell observed during thunderstorms! -- the Dominican monk John of San Geminiano declares that thunderbolts are "forged out of a dry vapor rising from the earth and kindled by the heat of the upper air" -- an echo of Greek philosophy.

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