

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE ETESIANS

In ancient times the heliacal rising of the Dog Star--i.e., its earliest appearance in the eastern sky before sunrise, occurring toward the latter part of July--was recognized as ushering in the season of the etesian winds in the region of the eastern Mediterranean, where these winds prevail through the late summer and early autumn, blowing, as a rule, strongly by day, and dying down at night.

The etesians are dry winds and raise great clouds of dust where they blow over the land. In the isles of the Aegean windbreaks of cypress are planted to protect orchards from their desiccating effects and their occasional violence. For ages they have opposed an obstacle to the voyages of sailing vessels bound for northern ports. It is not uncommon during the season of these winds to see hundreds of sailboats waiting at the island of Tenedos for a shift of the breeze enabling them to enter the Dardanelles.

Aristotle advanced the curious idea that the etesians were caused by the melting of ice and snow in more northerly regions, supporting this view by the fact that the winds subside at night when melting also ceases. Another ancient notion about the etesians was that they caused the annual overflow of the Nile by blowing the water upstream.

A glance at a modern map of normal barometric and wind conditions in summer over Eurasia will show that these northerly winds form part of the "clockwise" circulation of air around a vast anticyclone central over the eastern North Atlantic and also part of the "counter-clockwise" circulation around a center of low barometric pressure over southwestern Asia. They thus form an extension of the north-east trade winds that border the anticyclone, and are part of the circuit of winds around the Asiatic "low" that, to the southward, constitutes the southwest monsoon of Indian seas.

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