

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE SMELL OF LIGHTNING

That a discharge of lightning produces at times a perceptible odor has been noted from remote antiquity. Homer mentions this smell in both the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey." In the former Ajax hurls a rock at Hector, who falls "like a mountain oak struck by lightning, which lies uprooted, and from which the fearful smell of smoking sulphur rises." In the "Odyssey" Jupiter strikes a ship with a thunderbolt "quite full of sulphurous odor." A traveler named Wafer, who crossed the Isthmus of Darien many years ago, stated that the thunderstorms there were accompanied by "a sulphurous odor powerful enough to take away the breath." Other observers report that the smell is like that of onions.

An electrical discharge through air converts a certain amount of oxygen into ozone; a gas that owes its name to the fact that it has a strong odor. Lightning discharges doubtless produce ozone; hence such discharges should be smelled by persons in their vicinity -- but how often are they?

It is curious that the older books on meteorology all mention the smell of lightning, while the recent works on this subject, as well as most recent descriptions of lightning and thunderstorms, generally ignore it.

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