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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed May 17, 1932

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,  
Authority on Meteorology.

ANCIENT IDEAS ABOUT WEATHER

The reader of classical poetry is likely to gather the impression that the superstitious interpretation of weather was universal among the ancient Greeks and Romans. The fact is, however, that many of the ancients, including most of the philosophers, rejected the popular myths on this subject. Thus thunder and lightning, which the masses attributed to the caprice of Zeus or Jupiter, were discussed by the philosophically-minded as purely natural phenomena, and though the explanations they offered for these things would hardly pass muster in a modern work on meteorology, they were at least non-superstitious.

Prof. E. S. McCartney, of the University of Michigan, writing about the meteorological notions of antiquity, quotes Ovid as declaring prayers for rain to be useless. Cyrus the Elder, according to Xenophon, expressed the opinion that a steersman who did not know his business had no right to expect the gods to save his ship in response to prayer.

"After a thunderbolt had fallen into a camp of Pericles," says Prof. McCartney, "and utterly terrified his soldiers, he took stones and struck a spark from them, explaining that bolts were generated in the same way by the clashing of clouds. Manilius asserted with confidence that reason or science had taken away from Jupiter the thunderbolt and the power of thundering. This idea, however, never reached the masses, and when Jupiter died in the conflict with Christianity, the people merely transferred the bolt. The striking of a building by lightning is still 'an act of God.'"

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