

A Science Service Feature

Released upon receipt
but intended for use
October 1, 1932

? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed September 24, 1932

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PILLARS OF SAND

Dust whirls and sand whirls, a common atmospheric phenomenon of deserts and dry plains, occur in a wide range of shapes and sizes; in this respect resembling the analogous phenomenon of the waterspout. Some specimens of imposing magnitude were encountered in the Nubian Desert by the eighteenth century Scottish explorer James Bruce, who thus describes them in his "Travels":

"At one o'clock we alighted among some acacia trees at Wady-el-Halboub, We were here at once surprised and terrified by a sight surely one of the most magnificent in the world. We saw a number of prodigious pillars of sand at different distances; at times moving with great velocity, at others stalking on with majestic slowness. At intervals we thought they were coming in a very few minutes to overwhelm us and small quantities of sand did actually more than once reach us; again they would retreat, so as to be almost out of sight, their tops reaching the very clouds. The tops often separated from the bodies, and these, once disjoined, dispersed in air and did not appear any more; sometimes they were broken in the middle as if they were struck by large cannon shot.

"At noon they began to advance with considerable swiftness upon us, the wind being very strong at north. Eleven ranged alongside of us, about the distance of three miles; the greater diameter of the largest appeared to me at that distance as if it would measure ten feet. They retired from us with a wind at southeast, leaving an impression on the mind to which I can give no name, though surely an ingredient in it was fear, with a considerable deal of wonder and astonishment."

Lane, the famous Arabic scholar, measured one of these sand pillars at Thebes and found its height to be about 750 feet.

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