

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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ANCIENT IDEAS ABOUT LIGHTNING

Among the ancient Romans persons killed by lightning were supposed to have called down upon themselves the special wrath of heaven. It was not lawful to burn their bodies and they were buried in unfrequented places, lest the ashes of others should be polluted by their presence. In some cases, indeed, they were permitted to lie where they fell, without receiving interment, so great was the horror in which they were held. Even a spot of ground struck by lightning was walled about and avoided, under the belief that Jupiter had either set the mark of his displeasure upon it or appropriated it as sacred to himself. Such a spot was supposed never to be trodden upon or even looked into. Several of these "bidentals," as they were called, are still extant. One at Pompeii is surrounded by eight Doric columns. From a passage in the "Ars Poetica" of Horace it appears to have been believed that a person who was guilty of profaning a bidental would be punished by the gods with madness.

The Romans believed that lightning never strikes the laurel, among plants, the seal, among mammals, nor the eagle, among birds. Sealskin was worn as a protection against lightning, and tents of sealskin sometimes served as refuges during thunderstorm.

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