

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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HALOS

A few weeks ago some unusual displays of solar and lunar halos were seen at several places in the northern United States. Judging from newspaper clippings that have reached me, these manifestations stirred up a good deal of popular excitement, affording an illustration of the fact that while halos have been known and recorded in all ages, they have never become really familiar to mankind. With the exception of the ordinary ring of 22 degrees radius around the sun or moon, which is visible in our latitudes about every three days on an average, halos impress most observers as being abnormal and mysterious things, though they are no longer generally regarded, as they once were, as miraculous.

Because they were formerly looked upon as signs and portents, records of their occurrence are very common in the old chronicles, where, however, the descriptions of them are often more or less fanciful.

Perhaps the most famous of supposedly miraculous halos was the "flaming cross" that the Emperor Constantine the Great is said to have seen in the sky. If he really saw this cross and did not (as some accounts say) dream it, he saw a rather rare but well-known combination of two halos -- a vertical sun pillar intersecting, at the sun, an arc of the parhelic circle.

The five moons mentioned by Shakespeare in "King John" can be identified as the real moon plus four moondogs, or paraselenae -- members of the halo family -- but science is not willing to admit that one of them "did whirl about the other four."

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