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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THUNDERBOLTS

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Ages ago lightning was supposed to be the weapon of the gods. Its destructive effects naturally suggested the idea that a solid object of some sort was hurled to the ground with the lightning flash, and hence arose the belief, found nearly all over the world, in the existence of "thunderbolts," or "thunderstones." In some parts of Europe various objects popularly identified as thunderbolts are preserved in the homes of the peasants as charms against lightning, as well as other harmful agencies, real and imaginary. Many of these things are really prehistoric flint axes and arrowheads, and their supposed connection with lightning is probably based on the fact that flint was once commonly employed in making fire. Others are natural stones of unusual shape, or fossils, such as belemnites.

Less than fifty years ago an English meteorologist, G.J. Symons, collected from contemporary newspapers numerous accounts of cases in which thunderbolts were alleged to have fallen with strokes of lightning; indicating that a belief in the reality of this phenomenon prevailed widely among generally well-informed people at that time. Is it necessary to inform the twentieth century American reader that lightning does not smite the earth with anything more tangible than electricity?

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