

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed March 4, 1935

NAMES FOR CORPOSANTS

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Authority on Meteorology

The brush discharges of electricity best known to the English-speaking world as St. Elmo's fire, or corposants, have been called by dozens of other names. To the sailors of antiquity two of them seen at once were known as Castor and Pollux, while a single one was called Helena. In later times the lights have been called corposants, composants, comozants, corpusants, etc., from the Portuguese, Italian or old Spanish corpo santo, meaning "holy body"; also the fire of St. Helena, St. Helmes, St. Anne, St. Peter, St. Nicholas and several other saints. Old English names include storm-fire and furole.

The origin of the name St. Elmo's fire has been the subject of some controversy. Elmo or Ermo is an Italian corruption of Erasmus, and one of the two saints bearing this name was formerly invoked by Mediterranean sailors in time of danger. There is a legend that the saint, having been rescued from drowning by a shipmaster, promised as a reward to display a warning light for the benefit of mariners whenever a storm was at hand. Dr. Gockel, in his German book on thunderstorms, suggests that the name is derived from Helena; others have derived it from Hermes, and still other explanations have been proposed.

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