

Auroral folklore

Auroras have entered into the folklore of peoples living at high latitudes. Here are some examples of these beliefs (Bone, 1991).

Norse mythology makes frequent reference to the bridge Bifrost, a burning, trembling arch across the sky, over which the gods could travel from Heaven to Earth. It is not unlikely that the inspiration for the bridge was the aurora. Similarly, the vivid red sometimes seen in intense auroral displays can probably be associated with the Viking 'vigrod', or war-reddening. In some traditions, auroral rays were perceived as lights carried by the Valkyries as they rode the sky. In a parallel to the bridge Bifrost Finnish mythology refers to a river - Rutja - which stood in fire, and marked the boundary between the realms of the living and the dead.

In the Norwegian folklore, the aurora has been described as a harbinger of harsh weather: snow and wind are believed to follow bright displays. Another Norwegian folk-legend suggest that the aurora is a celestial dance by the souls of dead maidens.

Eskimo peoples in the Hudson Bay area of North America, and elsewhere, are naturally very much aware of auroral phenomena. A common belief among the Eskimos is that the aurora can be attracted by whistling to it, while a hand clap will cause it to recede. Other Eskimo beliefs suggest that the aurora is produced by spirits playing a game of celestial football with the skull of a walrus. (One group, on Nanivak Island, suggested that a human skull was, indeed, used by walrus spirits!).

Some Eskimo groups regard the aurora as an indicator of good weather to be brought by the spirits. Alaskan Eskimos at Point Barrow saw the aurora as malevolent, and carried weapons for protection if venturing outside when it was present. It was also said by some Eskimos that, 'He who looks long upon the aurora soon goes mad!'

Some tribes of North American Indians believed the aurora to be the light of lanterns carried by spirits seeking the souls of dead hunters. Like the Point Barrow Eskimos, Fox Indians in Wisconsin feared the aurora, seeing in it the ghosts of their dead enemies. Other tribes perceived the aurora as the light of fires used by powerful northern medicine men.

The aurora has also entered the folklore of the Australian aborigines, who saw it as the dance of gods across the sky.

Aurora may well have been the source of Chinese dragon legends. The twisting snake-like forms of active auroral bands are often portrayed as celestial 'serpents' in ancient chronicles. European dragon legends, too, may have their origin in auroral activity. The English patron saint St George may have had his legendary battle with a most Scottish of phenomena, aurora, rather than a dragon.

In ancient Roman and Greek records, references may sometimes be found to 'chasmata' in the sky, the auroral arc structure being regarded in such instances as being the mouth of a celestial cave. The term isochasms is used nowadays to relate two geographical point which share an identical frequency of auroral occurrence.

In more modern times, misconceptions regarding the cause of the aurora are still common among the general public. For example, people in mid-west America widely believed the aurora to be reflection of sunlight from the polar ice, disregarding the perpetual darkness of the winter months at Arctic latitudes! Another romantic notion was that auroral light result from icebergs crashing together in the polar seas.

The present day Finnish word for auroras is "revontuli", i.e., foxfire.

References

- Neil Bone, The Aurora, Sun-Earth Interaction, 1991