

St Elmo's Fire

A strange light which hovers at the tips of masts after intense thundery sea storms is known to sailors as *corpuzanto* or St Elmo's fire. This phenomenon is actually a corona of hot ionised gas which surrounds raised pointed objects that act as conductors during storms. First hand accounts from sailors, pilots and people observing tornadoes describe it as a bluish to whitish light, sometimes accompanied by a hissing sound.

The phenomenon is widely regarded as a weather indicator. Pliny in his *Natural History*, that wonderful compendium of classical popular belief, mentions the glow as a way to forecast the severity of storms at sea. A single corona indicated a severe storm, and the storm would be even more severe if the glowing ball rolled about and did not stay in one place. Two however was a good sign, while three was very bad. There is also some indication that the eerie light was associated with the twins Castor and Pollox, sons of Zeus one of whom was immortal and one not, who formed the constellation Gemini. In his account of the *Gallic Wars*, Julius Caesar described a terrestrial occurrence of the strange glow. After a fierce February hailstorm, the points of spears carried by the 5th Legion glowed with a mysterious light.

The name, St Elmo's Fire, derives ultimately from St Erasmus which was shortened to Ermo and then allegedly to Elmo. St Erasmus is an important bishop and hermit saint in the Eastern Church. His cult is strong in parts of Greece and Macedonia. Like so many early saints, the story of his life acquired legendary elements and was relocated. In this case, Erasmus became a bishop/martyr living in Formiae in Campagna, Southern Italy about 300 a.d. According to his *Acta*, namely the legendary lives of saints aimed at popular piety, the saintly bishop was tortured and then martyred during the time of the Emperor Diocletian (or alternatively by heretic Arian Lombards) by having his intestines wound onto a winch or capstan and then decapitated. Often in saints' legends, it is the manner in which they are tortured that determines what aspect of life comes under their care. St Elmo's gruesome death makes him the patron saint of stomach complaints, while the winch and capstan link him to sailors and the sea. Another legend claims that a thunderbolt struck the ground near him during one of her sermons, and the saint continued to preach unperturbed by the vagaries of nature.

The fiery glow associated with his name, is also linked to another saint, St Niccolò (St Nicholas) a well-known patron of sailors throughout the western Mediterranean and beyond. This is the saint who eventually becomes Santa Claus, but Nicholas too is sometimes associated with the glowing storm light. Several medieval paintings depict sailors invoking the help of St Nicholas during storm. Such paintings depict a dramatic storm at sea. The ship is in distress, sometimes with a broken mast, and the sailors are praying desperately. Tattered sails are flying against black storm clouds, and the lifeboat is usually pictured drifting away from the vessel. Often a sea monster or mermaid (both very bad omens) swims up from below as if to drag the ship under. In one of the upper corners, a figure surrounded by an eerie light is suspended against a clear, calm section of sky. Clad in full bishop's regalia hovering above the masts of a storm-tossed ship surrounded by a glowing light, he calms the storm around him. The light is very like St Elmo's Fire, although the saint is St Nicholas. Bishop/martyr

figures were common among these early semi-legendary saints. Another early bishop/martyr, St Hermes (the Ermo could equally well be a contraction of his name too) a bishop in Dalmatia is also occasionally associated with the phenomenon, especially when religious sites dedicated to him are in close proximity to the sea. For example, an abbey dedicated to St Hermes was located at Palermo. An alternative name for the light is *corposanto*, which means, literally, 'holy body' (i.e. a saint), and there are undoubtedly other local variations. Saint (or Blessed) Peter Gonzalez, born 1190, became a Dominican and devoted his life to preaching, largely to the mariners of Spain and Portugal. He became their special patron and was called 'Telmo', or 'Elmo', after the patron saint of mariners. Cults dedicated to these storm-calming saints were, and still are, important in Mediterranean countries, and have spread from there.

However Erasmus (as St Elmo) may have gained popularity as the source of the *corpo santo* towards the end of the fourteenth century when the cult of the Fourteen Holy Helpers began to take hold throughout Christian Europe. Prayers were offered to these saints in times of need. Each one had a special area of care. As part of this group, which was a popular subject for religious art, the saint is usually called St Erasmus and is dressed in full medieval bishop regalia carrying a winch. St Erasmus is painted on a series of panels depicting the Holy Helpers in St Andrew's Church, Hempstead (Norfolk), and there is a 15th century painting of St Erasmus in St Saviour's chapel in Norwich Cathedral. An early 17th century painting by Matthias Grunwald, depicts St Erasmus disputing with St Maurice. Chapels dedicated to a particular Holy Helper often included the others as well. For example in St Barbara's Chapel in Banska Bystrica, the Helpers are grouped around the main saint. Although the saint holds a windlass as an attribute, many depictions do not indicate any clear links with the sea. A damaged medieval martyrdom of St Erasmus survives in Chippenham Church (Camb). The saint is in the foreground with his entrails being wound onto a capstan and behind the saint is a crowned figure, possibly the emperor Diocletian in whose reign he was martyred. The martyrdom is quite graphic, and this general arrangement is found in other paintings as well. A 15th century triptych of which the martyrdom of St Erasmus is the centrepiece by Dietric Bouts the elder is now in St Peter's Kirk, Leuven. Master Paul of Loese and an early copper plate engraving both depict the martyrdom in this way. Early in the 16th century Pope Nicholas V attached special indulgences to the veneration of the Holy Helpers and their popularity increased further. Nicholas Poussin's dramatic depiction of the Martyrdom of St Elmo (as he is now being called) painted in 1629 for an altarpiece in the St Peter's Basilica (now replaced by a mosaic copy) in the Vatican dates from this period. The altar contained relics of Erasmus from the Old church of St Peter's where veneration of the saint had been popular since the beginning of the 12th century.

Elmo as a Holy Helper is invoked primarily against stomach complaints. But the capstan (and one suspects the presence of other legendary bishop martyrs) also linked him to the sea, and these two areas of care come together in some of the devotional practices associated with the saint. The Acciano area of the Abruzzi holds an annual procession in honour of the saint and the Virgin during the summer months. Loaves of bread are dedicated during that time and are later placed on window ledge to protect the home against hail and thunder. The Oratory of St Erasmus, not far from Genoa in Liguria, was originally built in the middle of the 14th century. The church contains *ex voto* ships' models, placed to protect ships and sailors, as well as a statue of the saint

and the crosses carried in procession on his feast. The Confraternity of St Erasmus founded in 1638 was made up of sailors who performed charitable works under the aegis of the saint. The town of Gaeta in Italy now has the saint's relics. They were brought there in the 9th century to protect them from Moslem invaders and a cathedral dedicated to the saint was built in the 13th century. The indulgences and the official feast days were suspended as a result of liturgical calendrical reform in 1969 after the Second Vatican Council, but many practices still continue. On Santa Cruz de la Palma in the Canary islands, the processions devoted to the Madonna and St Telmo is still held in September.

Although not linked to the appearance of lights, the importance of St Elmo and the sea is certainly reflected in the location of Fort St Elmo on the Island of Malta. Built on a promontory by the Knights of St John when they relocated to Malta from the Island of Rhodes, it was the site of an important battle against the Ottoman Turks in 1565. The Palacio de San Telmo in Seville also reflects the importance of this maritime saint. It was the centrepiece of a training college for navigators. The 18th century Baroque frieze adorning the palace depicts San Telmo complete with sea charts flanked by symbols of Spanish sea power.

The appearance of St Elmo's fire was regarded as a good omen as it usually appears after the worst of a storm has passed. Famous notices of this phenomenon occurs in Christopher Columbus's account of the second voyage where he notes that thundery weather was followed by the appearance of corpuzante, the fire of St Elmo which he compares to candle lights. 'When he appears there can be no danger.' A diary kept by Antonio Pigafetta during Magellan's voyage also mentions the appearance of the phenomenon as the holy body of St Elmo which lasted quite some time. During his famous lightning experiments in 1749, Ben Franklin described 'what the sailors called corpuzante' and linked it to static electricity in the atmosphere. Darwin witnessed it during his voyage on the Beagle.

Literary references to St Elmo's Fire sometimes depict it as a negative force. Coleridge's narrator in *The Rhyne of the Ancient Mariner* says the 'death fires danced at dawn' and William Wordsworth Longfellow in the poem *The Golden Legend* declares that 'St Elmo's Stars' bring 'foul weather'. However Starbuck sights 'the corposants' after a storm in *Moby Dick*, and Captain Ahab's crew give thanks. Shakespeare's Ariel imitates St Elmo's fire in the storm he conjures at the beginning of *The Tempest*

Although the phenomenon has come to be seen as a natural event which can be explained by physics, it still retains something of the uncanny. Since the sighting of St Elmo's Fire on Columbus's second voyage occurred in the Caribbean, it is sometimes linked to the Bermuda Triangel, and this despite the fact that Columbus makes it clear that it was a good sign. One of the suggestions put forward for the 1937 Hindenburg disaster was that St Elmo's Fire set the hydrogen gas alight. This is unlikely in the absence of a storm, but events with seemingly 'mysterious' elements such as the Hindenburg attract 'uncanny' explanations.