

meditative understanding only, and not to the imagination or to a desponding condition of mind, modern science has been accused, and not entirely without reason, of not attempting to allay apprehensions which it has been the very means of exciting. It is an inherent attribute of the human mind to experience fear, and not hope or joy, at the aspect of that which is unexpected and extraordinary.* The strange form of a large comet, its faint nebulous light, and its sudden appearance in the vault of heaven, have in all regions been almost invariably regarded by the people at large as some new and formidable agent inimical to the existing state of things. The sudden occurrence and short duration of the phenomenon lead to the belief of some equally rapid reflection of its agency in terrestrial matters, whose varied nature renders it easy to find events that may be regarded as the fulfillment of the evil foretold by the appearance of these mysterious cosmical bodies. In our own day, however, the public mind has taken another and more cheerful, although singular, turn with regard to comets; and in the German vineyards in the beautiful valleys of the Rhine and Moselle, a belief has arisen, ascribing to these once ill-omened bodies a beneficial influence on the ripening of the vine. The evidence yielded by experience, of which there is no lack in these days, when comets may so frequently be observed, has not been able to shake the common belief in the meteorological myth of the existence of wandering stars capable of radiating heat.

From comets I would pass to the consideration of a far more enigmatical class of agglomerated matter—the smallest of all asteroids, to which we apply the name *aërolites*, or *meteoric stones*,† when they reach our atmosphere in a fragmentary condition. If I should seem to dwell on the specific enumeration of these bodies, and of comets, longer than the general nature of this work might warrant, I have not done so undesignedly. The diversity existing in the individual characteristics of comets has already been noticed. The imperfect knowledge we possess of their physical character renders it

* Fries, *Vorlesungen über die Sternkunde*, 1833, s. 262–267 (Lectures on the Science of Astronomy). An infelicitously chosen instance of the good omen of a comet may be found in Seneca, *Nat. Quæst.*, vii., 17 and 21. The philosopher thus writes of the comet: “*Quem nos Neronis principatu lætissimo vidimus et qui cometis detraxit infamiam.*”

† [Much valuable information may be obtained regarding the origin and composition of aërolites or meteoric stones in Memoirs on the subject, by Baumbeer and other writers, in the numbers of Poggendorf's *Annalen*, from 1845 to the present time.]—*Tr.*