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Signs and wonders



The ancients saw eclipses as bearers of ill omen

ECLIPSE 1999



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In ancient times, eclipses were events of ill omen - the dying Sun. Even today, many people who do not understand their benign nature still fear them. It is a fear that goes back to the dawn of mankind.

"I will make the Sun go down at noon, and darken the Earth in broad daylight." So God told the Old Testament prophet Amos.



For most of human history, people did not understand what a solar eclipse was. Early man must have looked up at the sky with fear and dread as the Sun, the source of all warmth and light, started to disappear.

One can imagine the hominid, ape-like creatures from which we have evolved, shouting in fear and waving their arms to drive away the monster in the sky. They always succeeded.

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A Lunar eclipse just before totality

Chinese dragon

The ancient Chinese believed that solar eclipses were caused by a dragon trying to swallow the Sun. They would shoot fireworks and bang gongs to scare it away. If, that is, they knew the eclipse was coming.

Predicting eclipses and ensuring that the nation was prepared to ward off the dragon was one of the jobs of the court astronomers.



The Chinese believed that a dragon was devouring the sun

Some time between 2165 BC and 1948 BC, the brothers His and Ho were appointed by the Emperor Yao to keep a watch on the skies. Sadly they failed to predict an eclipse and the Emperor, probably feeling that the Earth had a close shave, chopped off their heads.

To this day, the Chinese for a solar eclipse is "resh" or "Sun-eat".

Britain in the 17th Century was not free from superstitions about eclipses. John Milton in

Paradise Lost wrote:

"The Sun in dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds
On half the nations, and with fear of change perplexes
monarchs"

And long before Milton was born, Shakespeare had Gloucester say in King Lear:

"These late eclipses in the Sun and the Moon pretend no good to us."

Sun lover

But not all peoples have been afraid of eclipses. There is an Amazonian myth that describes how the Sun and the Moon were lovers.

They loved each other so much that the Sun's light scorched the Earth and the Moon's tears drowned it.

So it was decided that they should live apart in the sky and only be allowed to touch each other's shadow, during an eclipse.

This page was prepared for the 1999 total solar eclipse on 11 August. The next total eclipse can be seen across southern Africa on 21 June, 2001.

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