

# Earliest known report of ball lightning phenomenon in England discovered

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uauerat communis transire turba comitante suoz. Qui cu paululu p'stolaretur z seditiones simularozius inspicere pueror conquellu fut puerz quod uo p'ssent reliquitibz pualere eiz implorabant auxilium quo factulus castellu nuueu expugnarent.

Annuit peticionibz pueror z illi co emulstariū q' sedebat calcantibus uirgenis p'fat nuueu ascendit castellu. Qd de facili costatit ai equo uo haret quo cecans pedes figeret nimiru corruat duceimq; deiecit. cuius tibia tā subito tamq; puersle contracta est ut ossis fractura autem p'foraret donum delatus tāto dolore i fetore repleus ē ut eū uiri media de salute duas despatip'fiaserūt ei ut pedē puēdum et ferentē amputare p'mitteret si forte uel sic uinere ualeret. annuit diu amputato pede cū tibia cum fetore orridus augetur uidet: dicit tande obit s: sepeliri uo potuit qz p' captione regis anglic fiat excommunicat. Cuiusq; p' dies septē inhumanē iacet z tenuissimas fetoz intollerabiles esset fili ipi compullus ē anglos obliōs q's p' pecunia nōdum soluta tenebat solite z liberos repatriare. Factis quoq; sacrosas uirant qd uire patris de tanta enormitate iudicio staret ecclie. Sicq; duce sepulto obliōs i angliā redierit.

**XVIII** Mense maris. **M cxcv.** obit hugo duclius ep'e anno e p'scopatus sui cxxi. xli z sepul

tus i senectute bona. Rex francie despulauit sorore regis danor ut l' sic contra regē anglic danor habere adiutoriu. S; subito uescio quid secreta accidit ut rex suam quā optauit regnā impudicaret z ultimū moliretur diuortiu. Eod' anno mense iunio hub' cauf' arep'e aplice sedis legatus effectus occidentales uisitauit ecclias z apud eborac tā amonachs qm actias z laias honorifice susceptus ē. Deposuit autē actis ex causis accusati abbate scē marie eborac z per dudum iudicis iussit abbate tres ut p'ce sua iudicet eborac tunc alias cauiq; politas uisitarent ecclias. festinabat eū reducere londoniā ad expedicanda in negotia que hinc uide exman dato regio distractant. Mense iulio iussit abbate. ioh' uoise lā albani defuncto. V. armo eidē cenobii abbate. Septimo id' iunio hora tertia signū accidit mirabile apud londoniā. Hubes eius densissima z terecuma ouebat in aere celsus ualde sole arcu quaq; clare lucente in cui me dio foramine apto quali deforamine uolendū nescio quid album defuebat. Quod sub uibe nigra in globū crescens i cōfinitis tantis z hol'picio uoz Wycculis ep'i suspensū tenebatur. Inde quali glob; igneus corruit in flumē itaq; turbuc fco deadiit infra cepa curie pre

hoptene

Extract from the Chronicle of Gervase of Canterbury where the medieval monk describes the ball lightning phenomenon. This is the earliest known description of ball lightning in England to have been found. Credit: The Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge. Reference: Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.4.11, p.324.

Researchers have discovered what appears to be the earliest known account of a rare weather phenomenon called ball lightning in England.

Ball lightning, usually associated with thunderstorms, is unexplained and has been described as a bright spherical object on average 25 centimeters, but sometimes up to several meters, in diameter.

Working together, physicist Emeritus Professor Brian Tanner and historian Professor Giles Gasper, of Durham University, UK, made the connection to a [ball lightning](#) event while exploring a medieval text written some 750 years ago.

The account, by the 12th century Benedictine monk Gervase of Christ Church Cathedral Priory, Canterbury, pre-dates the previous earliest known description of ball lightning recorded in England by nearly 450 years.

The findings are published in the Royal Meteorological Society's journal, *Weather*.

In his *Chronicle*, composed around 1200, Gervase stated that "a marvelous sign descended near London" on 7 June 1195. He went on to describe a dense and [dark cloud](#), emitting a white substance which grew



into a spherical shape under the cloud, from which a fiery globe fell towards the river.

The Durham researchers compared the text in Gervase's *Chronicle* with historical and modern reports of ball lightning.

Professor Brian Tanner, Emeritus Professor in the Department of Physics, Durham University, said: "Ball lightning is a rare weather event that is still not understood today.



Cumulonimbus clouds over Chandler, Arizona, USA, in 2018, showing the inverted pyramid with the dark cloud beneath. Credit: Mircea Goia

"Gervase's description of a white substance coming out of the dark cloud, falling as a spinning fiery sphere and then having some horizontal

motion is very similar to historic and contemporary descriptions of ball lightning.

"If Gervase is describing ball lightning, as we believe, then this would be the earliest account of this happening in England that has so far been discovered."

Prior to this account, the earliest report of ball lightning from England is during a great thunderstorm in Widecombe, Devon on 21 October 1638.

Medieval writings rarely survive in the author's original version and Gervase's *Chronicle* and other works now exist in only three manuscripts (one in the British Library, and two at the University of Cambridge). The Latin text was edited by Bishop William Stubbs in 1879 and there is no translation into English.

Professor Giles Gasper, in the Department of History, Durham University, said: "The main focus of Gervase's writings was Christ Church Cathedral Priory in Canterbury, its disputes with neighboring houses and an Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as chronicling the actions of the king and his nobles. But he was also interested in [natural phenomena](#), from celestial events and signs in the sky to floods, famine, and earthquakes."

The researchers looked at Gervase's credibility as a writer and a witness, having previously examined his records of eclipses and a description of the splitting of the image of the crescent moon.

Professor Gasper added: "Given that Gervase appears to be a reliable reporter, we believe that his description of the fiery globe on the Thames on 7 June 1195 was the first fully convincing account of ball [lightning](#) anywhere."

**More information:** A Marvellous Sign and a Fiery Globe: A Medieval English Report of Ball Lightning, Giles EM Gasper and Brian K Tanner, *Weather*, 2022, [DOI: 10.1002/wea.4144](https://doi.org/10.1002/wea.4144)

Provided by Durham University

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