

Polarization fingerprints in the clear blue sky

Prof. Michael Berry, Bristol University

Daylight is polarized, the strength being greatest at points in the sky at right angles to the sun, and zero at four points: above and below the sun and anti-sun. The zero-polarization points are ‘fingerprint’ singularities, around which the polarization direction makes a half-turn. Using elementary singularity theory, the polarization pattern across the whole sky can be described in a way that fits recent observations with accuracy comparable to that of conventional elaborate multiple-scattering calculations. This recent work is a contribution to a story that started in 1817 and has been central to our understanding of polarized light. There is an intriguing and controversial connection with Viking navigation.