Ancient Divination and Experience

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Prodigies in the Early Principate?

Federico Santangelo

The question mark in the title of this chapter reflects a twofold set of concerns. On the one hand, it seeks to problematize the notion of prodigy in the Roman world, and to prompt wider questions on the place of prodigies in Roman public divination and in Roman approaches to the relationship between gods and mankind. On the other hand, it is intended to draw attention to a familiar feature of modern scholarship on prodigies in ancient Rome, which I shall aim to question in what follows. Modern accounts of prodigy and expiation in Roman religion, from the old treatments by L. Wülker and F. Luterbacher to the more recent studies of B. MacBain, S. Rasmussen, and D. Engels, end with the fall of the Republic and do not provide any discussion of prodigies under the Principate.\(^1\) Hence the central question of this paper: can we still speak meaningfully of prodigies for the early Principate?

The view that a substantial change intervened with the advent of monarchy has found many proponents. The fundamental shift is usually identified in the transition from prodigies that affect and pertain to the *res publica* as a whole to portents that affect the person of the emperor, and portend either the beginning of a reign or its imminent, traumatic end.\(^2\) The transition from public prodigies to private portents is viewed as a symptom of the wider change in the nature of the political regime under which Rome is ruled. Engels has noted that the system of public prodigies can only function in a setup where the Senate is central as the main body of religious authority and can play a leading role in the process of interpretation and expiation. When that morphs into a monarchic regime, prodigies are

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\(^1\) Wülker 1903; Luterbacher 1904; MacBain 1982; Rasmussen 2003; Engels 2007.

replaced by private portents and omena, which focus on the emperor, and reflect either his own preoccupations or wider concerns about his power. Broadly speaking, this account is sound; in what follows, however, I shall try to offer some correctives to it. The starting point must be a closer look at the evidence for prodigy reporting and expiation in the final decades of the Roman Republic.

1. Beyond neglectentia: Late Republican Prodigies

There is an increasing range of evidence for events of divinatory import that involve the emperor and are associated with his rise to power or with threats to his rulership, and the sources that show a system of prodigy recording and expiation become considerably less frequent. The trend begins in the late Republican period, and cannot be explained merely with the loss of Livy’s account after book 45 (167 BCE). The epitome on prodigies by Julius Obsequens, probably compiled in the fourth or early fifth century CE and heavily reliant on Livy, strongly suggests that the system of prodigy expiation played a far less significant role in the final section of Livy’s work than was the case in the central section devoted to the mid-Republican period. A taster of what is to come is offered by Livy himself in a passage that has served as the cornerstone of many modern accounts of the alleged decline of Roman Republican divination, or indeed of religion as a whole. As he discusses the events of the year 169 BCE, Livy precedes his overview of the prodigies that were reported and expiated then with a remark that is both a disclaimer and a serious political and intellectual statement:

non sum nescius ab eadem neglectentia, quia nihil deos portendere vulgo nunc credant, neque nuntiari admodum ulla prodigia in publicum neque in annales referri. ceterum et mihi uetustas res scribenti nescio quo pacto antiquas fit animus, et quaedam religio tenet, quae illi prudentissimi uiri publice suscienda censuerint, ea pro indignis habere, quae in meos annales referam.


I am not unaware that, because of the same neglect that has people generally think that the gods do not give warnings of the future, prodigies are nowadays neither announced publicly nor recorded in the annals. Nonetheless, while I write of these days of old, somehow my old spirit becomes ancient, as it were, and keeps me from considering unworthy of inclusion in my annals the things which those exceptionally knowledgeable men judged worthy of acting upon in the public domain.

(transl. J. Davies, slightly modified)

In his view, the dominant trait of his time is widespread negligence in matters religious, based on a novel conception of the gods: in the view of some, they do not give any premonitory signs to mankind. This fundamental rejection of the long-established premise on which divinatory activity rests has two fundamental implications. First, prodigies are no longer discussed in public contexts—they do not inform the political debate and do not receive any attention from the political and religious authorities. Moreover, they are no longer recorded in historical accounts. Livy explicitly takes issue with this (allegedly) dominant approach and makes a point of including prodigies in his own historical work, not least because the prudent men of times gone by used to include them at the core of political action. But there are two further implicit connections to his discussion. In Livy’s view, prodigies still occur, and the gods do convey signs to mankind. Moreover, his emphasis on the fact that they are no longer discussed in public settings leaves open the possibility that prodigies may still be recognized and interpreted by those who can see and understand them. What is missing is appropriate ritual action on the public level, and such an absence has wide-ranging implications for the relationship between the gods and the city.

Even Livy’s bleak assessment of the changed place of prodigies in Roman public religion, therefore, leaves room for a differentiated picture. In his view, there has been not a shift from public prodigies to private portents, but an unwelcome tendency to remove prodigies from the centre of the political discourse. However, the factual accuracy of this statement should not be taken at face value. Subjecting it to a full-blown critique is perhaps somewhat unfair, since no doubt Livy came back to this point and had a chance to qualify his views in a later section of his narrative that no longer survives. On the one hand, it is far from apparent that there was a widespread decline in the reliance on prodigies as tools for predicting the future in the late Republic. On the other, there are, as is well known, clear instances of prodigies that prompted appropriate ritual action during Livy’s lifetime.
Some of these are known from the epitome of Julius Obsequens, which records a number of occurrences for the years between 48 and 42 BCE. Obsequens is usually uninterested in supplying detail on the methods through which the expiation of prodigies took place, and the notices for these years are no exception. There is, however, a reference to the interpretation of a prodigy supplied by the haruspices in 42 BCE (70.12). Most of the prodigies recorded by Obsequens are from the city of Rome, and this seems to record a shift in the way in which the system operates. For the best part of the Republican period, prodigy reports had reached the Roman authorities from a broad range of Italian communities. However, even the brief summary of Obsequens records the flood of the Po river in 44 BCE among the prodigies of that year. The vivid detail with which the escape of a number of vipers from the river is related suggests that it might derive from an official report; Livy will no doubt also have had access to local eyewitness accounts.

An intriguing episode is recorded a few years earlier at Patavium, no doubt reflecting the local interests of the historian. In 48 BCE, the local 'augur' C. Cornelius read a sign of Caesar's imminent victory in the performance of an ornithomantic ritual. This is not a prodigy report to the Senate, and it is unlikely that the episode was ever noted or debated in Rome at the time. In fact, it is not even a prodigy, or the summary of a prodigy interpretation. It is a fair guess that we know about this incident just because Livy is from Patavium; he is likely to have witnessed it himself. This episode, however, is a remarkable symptom of an important and poorly documented phenomenon: the existence of a local level of divinatory activity that took place in the cities of Roman Italy. The extent to which it intersected with the divinatory practice and discourse at Rome is unclear. It was nonetheless a lively and significant strand of religious action, and could engage with events at Rome. The plethora of augurs and haruspices that are attested across the communities of the Roman West throughout the first two centuries of the Principate should encourage us to take that background seriously.

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6 Rosenberger 2005; Berthelet 2013.
7 Obs. 65a.8. See also Plut. Caes. 47.3–6 and Cass. Dio 41.61.4–5; Westall 2017: 56–7 questions Dio's reliance on Livy in this instance.
8 As Rüpke 2014: 127–32 makes clear, however, there is no straightforward correspondence between Roman traditional priesthoods and the priesthoods attested in municipal and colonial contexts. North 2000 is a classic discussion of the Italian background of Roman divination in the mid-Republican period.
Obsequens’ summary breaks off in 42 BCE, only to resume with two final notices in 17 and 11. It is unlikely that this is an accurate reflection of the contents of Livy’s narrative. Some gaps are filled by Cassius Dio, who shows that several prodigies were put on record and appropriate ritual action was taken in the late Republican period. Even if one does not go so far as to admit that Dio derived the bulk of his material from Livy, it is difficult to argue that Livy could have systematically overlooked or omitted a considerable number of episodes that Dio narrated some two centuries later. Dio’s interest in prodigies and portents has long been recognized: the item ‘prodigia’ in H. Smilda’s Index historicus takes up nearly nineteen columns. At the same time, it has long been recognized that Dio is fundamentally uninterested in providing a detailed analysis of them or the contribution that they could make to the interpretation and understanding of a certain historical period: they should be read as eminently narrative devices.

However, some important historical implications may be drawn from Dio’s evidence. One passage in particular conveys a sense of how the system of prodigy reporting and expiation may have come close to imploding in the dying days of the Republic. In book 50, he keenly records a series of portents that took place in 31 BCE, the most important of which is a series of fires affecting major buildings in the city (50.10–11). They were widely regarded to have been caused by freedmen: there is no reference to official expiation directed by the Senate, and Dio says that the events were regarded as prodigies despite being widely deemed a conspiracy of the freedmen, who were asked to contribute a fraction of their assets to the treasury. There is no reference to a centralized interpretation, although mention is made of the recording of the fires, surely in an official context (50.10.6: eisegraphē); popular perception, rather than correct ritual interpretation, is the dominant feature at this junction, and Octavian and Antony are said not to have been in any way bothered by the signs. However, such a chaotic state of affairs appears to be exceptional even in the thirties. At 48.43, for example, Dio has a list of prodigies that were reported in 38 BCE, and records the decision to

9 On the prodigies of 17 BCE, see Satterfield 2016: 330–45, who argues that they were fabricated in order to provide a suitable background to, and justification for, the ludi saeculares.
11 Smilda 1926: 532–42.
12 Millar 1964: 77, 179. On Cassius Dio’s debt to the annalistic tradition, see Kemezis 2014: 90–149, where the handling of prodigies receives hardly any discussion; Westall 2017 discusses Dio’s account of the omens associated with the battle of Pharsalos (53–5) and Philippi (68–70). On Cassius Dio’s interest in, and knowledge of, religious matters, see Scheid 2016 (on the Augustan and Julio-Claudian period) and Rüpke and Santangelo 2017: 19–25.
consult the Sibylline Books, which provided a complex set of advice on how to purify a statue of Virtus that had suddenly fallen on its face.

The most significant moment of late Republican history in which a prodigy made a major mark on current political developments occurred in 36 BCE, when a lightning bolt hit a section of Octavian's house on the Palatine and he sought appropriate ritual action; the episode is recorded by Suetonius and Cassius Dio, but not by Obsequens. On the face of it, that incident was hard not to report—many people in Rome will have taken notice of it—and therefore does not contradict Livy's assessment in 43.13. Unlike the birth of a hermaphrodite child or the appearance of tears on the statue of a god in small-town Italy, it was an episode that occurred in a very prominent location and a natural event that attracted action. It could not be easily or lightly overlooked. The choice to treat it as a prodigy, however, was always a political decision, and could not be taken for granted; a whole host of arguments could be invoked against regarding it as such. The event had indeed occurred on private land, and there were therefore good grounds for not treating it as a public prodigy. Suetonius and Dio record it in passing, and both in a context that is far removed from that of annalistic history: the biographer deals with it in a discussion of the public buildings associated with the princeps, while Dio mentions it retrospectively, in the discussion of the honours that the people granted to Octavian, including the dedication of a house on the Palatine. The episode, however, revolves around the use of the system of public reporting and expiation. The prodigy is brought to the attention of the haruspices, who provide a general ritual recommendation, upon which Octavian decides to act. What appears to have changed from established tradition is that the process is tightly policed by the Triumvir, and that the focus of the prodigy is strongly associated to his own person and public role. The prodigy is still brought into the public domain through the customary official channels, in publicum relatum, albeit along lines that reflect a different political setup.

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14 Cf. the prodigies that are not deemed as such in Livy 43.13.6, with Berthelet 2013: 104–9.
15 It is unclear whether this consultation took place in a private or public context; it should, at any rate, be read against the background of a trend of increasingly tight monarchic control on Roman public religion (Santangelo 2013: 140–1). Scheid 2016: 789 points out that the imperium of Octavian in his capacity as Triumvir entitled him to make public dedications.
2. Prodigies between Princed and Senate

Narrow political readings of Republican *Prodigienwesen* have long been challenged and effectively superseded. The dynamic of prodigy reporting and expiation plays a central role in the established sequence of government activity and has major implications for the ties between Rome and Italy. More importantly, it defines the religious climate across the city and creates the very conditions for the unfolding of the annual cycle of political deliberation and military action through which the Republic operates. Its role in setting the correct psychological and environmental conditions across the city has been effectively established in some important modern discussions. To argue that it was lightly dismissed because of a regime change is to underestimate the long-term importance of the phenomenon. There is a case for looking harder for prodigies—their recording and their expiation in public settings—under the early Principate than has usually been done.

Even on a narrow political reading, there are good arguments for pursuing the matter. The system of public prodigies was strongly linked with the operation of the Senate and its role in the running of public religion. The political role of the Senate in the early Principate has received increasing attention in modern scholarship, and convincing attempts have been made to recognize its continuing significance in a number of areas, including the handling of religious affairs. Even under the Principate, the Senate remained home to a considerable reserve of religious knowledge: a number of senators were members of priestly colleges and were in a position to express weighty rulings on aspects of religious significance. Several of them will have been members of colleges that were invested with matters of divinatory significance: the quindecemvirate, the augurate, and, to a lesser extent, the pontificate. If the Senate retains some significance even under the new regime, its role in the handling of religion is worthy of attention.

At the same time, it is crucial not to lose sight of the political context, and the fundamental change that intervened in Rome after Actium. In the

16 Rosenberger 2005 explores this issue very effectively.
17 Satterfield 2012.
19 Expiation also retains a place in Seneca’s assessment of the limits of divination and prediction, and of their relationship with the natural order: see Q Nat. 2.38.4, where the haruspex is labelled *fati minister* (‘servant of fate’), with Inwood 2000: 40–1 and Williams 2012: 323–4. On Seneca and divination, see also Berno 2003: 225–33.
20 Brunt 1984 (esp. 436–8 on religious matters); see also Potter 1994: 172.
21 Scheid 2005.
Republican period, prodigies are an indicator of pluralism and a factor of controversy. They point to the existence of a number of critical fronts in Rome and across the Italian peninsula and are, at the same time, a vector of integration.\textsuperscript{22} It is doubtful that there ever was an ‘independent system’ of prodigy reporting in the Republic.\textsuperscript{23} Prodigy reports were always politically charged matters, and reflected the preoccupations of sectors of Roman and local elites, often in highly competing ways. They always were, in other words, highly embedded affairs. L. Raphael’s recent comparative work on Chinese divination shows that in the Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE), prodigies turned into a powerful means of political communication and rhetoric, which could be used ‘both to control subordinates and to criticize superiors’.\textsuperscript{24} Similar considerations may be invoked for Rome.\textsuperscript{25} Recognizing the weight of that dimension does not amount to underestimating the psychological and emotional impact that they had on their recipients, nor does it entail denying that prodigies reflected genuinely and widely held views on the role of the gods in human affairs.\textsuperscript{26}

However, it is hard to escape the conclusion that a substantial change in the way in which prodigies are recorded and acted upon intervenes in the Principate. Their circulation appears to be more tightly controlled by the princeps; there is far less strong evidence for prodigies being reported to the Senate from Italy, and the cycle of prodigy reporting and expiation appears to play a far less prominent role than had been the case in the middle and late Republic (I do not think we can make informed judgments on the developments in the early Republican period). This may have to do with the literary choices of the surviving sources, however. Neither Tacitus nor Cassius Dio is interested in reproducing the annalistic framework on which Livy works, and Livy himself strongly suggests that his choice of placing prodigies at the core of his own historical account is at odds with the practice of some of his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{27} Even so, the surviving ancient narratives suggest a picture of greater complexity than usually envisaged.

\textsuperscript{22} MacBain 1982: 34–42, 60–81.  
\textsuperscript{23} Cf. Davies 2004: 194.  
\textsuperscript{24} Raphael 2013: 299–301, esp. 301.  
\textsuperscript{25} Cf. on the Imperial period Potter 1994: 172.  
\textsuperscript{26} Cf. on the weight of psychological factors in the public prodigies system, see Loriol 2016; on their role in Roman Republican religion, cf. Champion 2017: esp. 175–221. On the emotions evoked by unfavourable sacrifices (sometimes considered prodigious), see Driediger-Murphy, this volume.  
\textsuperscript{27} Damon 2003: 274–5 points out that in the Annales prodigies tend to feature ‘in some of the diminuendo miscellanies at year-end’.
A well-known incident from the first few months of Tiberius’ reign (15 CE) is revealing of the nature and scale of the problems involved. As Tacitus relates towards the end of the first book of the *Annales*, a series of rain storms had caused a flood of the Tiber into the flat areas of the city, and in turn caused grave damage to people and buildings (1.76). The historian explicitly refers to a report of the prodigy to the Senate, but mentions the intervention of C. Asinius Gallus (cos. 8 BCE), who proposed (*censuit*) to consult the Sibylline Books; the implication is that the flooding is a prodigy that requires appropriate ritual interpretation and action, which can only be decided upon and initiated by the Senate. There is little doubt that Asinius’ motion was addressed to the Senate. Asinius was not just an authoritative member of that body; he also sat on the quindecemviral college, which had played a prominent role in the *ludi saeculares* of 17 BCE. His proposal to resort to the Books was therefore invested with the ritual expertise that his priestly membership entailed. Tacitus does not state that Asinius’ intervention was in any way exceptional. He is keen, on the contrary, to stress the extraordinary response of the emperor. Tiberius intervened and argued that the Books did not have to be consulted. In Tacitus’ view, this response was a symptom of the emperor’s preference for secrecy in matters human and divine: it was, in other words, the exception rather than the default reaction that one could have expected to an event of that sort. Tacitus’ emphasis on the behaviour of the emperor suggests that, under normal circumstances, the preferred response would have been to treat an episode of that sort as a prodigy and to seek appropriate redress by bringing the matter into the public domain. There is no intimation that Tiberius shared the *neglegentia* towards prodigies lamented by Livy. However, the emphasis on his readiness to conceal prodigies from the public discourse and to dispose with their appropriate expiation is intended to cast doubts on his religious views. While he may regard prodigies to have predictive value, he did not appear to regard their proper expiation as an inescapable necessity. Even an occurrence that cannot possibly be concealed—the flooding of the Tiber—was not recognized as a public prodigy, and was not debated or

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28 Rüpke 2005: 785 no. 741. On the interaction between princeps and priestly colleges in the early Principate, see Santangelo 2016 (esp. 357–8 on this episode).
29 Tac. *Ann.* 1.76.1: *perinde divina humanaque obtegen*, ‘concealing divine and human things alike’.
expiated in the appropriate manner. As J. Davies has noted, Tiberius’ conduct contributes to the breakdown in the transmission and deployment of religious knowledge that Tacitus identifies as a crucial theme of his historical work.31

However, on closer inspection, even the princeps’ decision appears to have clear foundations in established practice. As the list reported by Livy in 43.13 shows (along with other comparable examples), it was not unprecedented for prodigies that were reported to the Senate to be ruled out of consideration on a variety of grounds.32 As W. Liebeschuetz pointed out, societies that rely heavily on divination tend to have within their cultural coordinates a set of arguments that problematize divinatory signs. Such a mindset is not to be confused with wider scepticism towards divination as a practice and as an interpretative framework of reality and of the relationship between men and gods.33 Moreover, the nature of the event—an occurrence that also requires some direct practical interventions—enabled Tiberius to shift the emphasis from the alleged religious implications of the event to the practical ones. He therefore entrusted two prominent members of the senatorial order with the task of bringing a remedy to the overflowing of the river or of reinforcing its banks.34 Tacitus does not devote any further attention to the episode: Tiberius’ intervention must have settled the matter.

The choice not to consult the Books on that occasion marked a further development in an extraordinary trajectory that had begun several decades before. Far from being confined to the realm of obscurity or negligence, the Books had received very close attention from Augustus. Under the right set of conditions, they could be turned into an asset. In 12 BCE, shortly after taking up the highest pontificate, Augustus carried out a comprehensive review of the collections of prophetic texts (libri fatidici) in both Greek and Latin that circulated in the city, and salvaged only the Sibylline Books among them. Even within that corpus, he carried out a robust selection, the lines of which are left unclear by Suetonius’ brief summary of the episode.35 This operation of religious policing was arguably not the most remarkable step he took on that occasion. The resulting collection was transferred from the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus and moved to the newly dedicated temple of Apollo Palatinus. Such a decision reflected a clear intention to

32 See the cases discussed in Davies 2004: 39–41.
bring the Books under the control—not just in a political sense, but in a physical one too—of the princeps. It is not a symptom, however, of an attempt to remove the Books and their consultation from the picture or to drive them into oblivion: quite the contrary, they are given a renewed, if not altogether desirable centrality. Tiberius' strategy is closely aligned with the Augustan precedent, and takes its underlying logic to its full consequences: precisely because it is so valuable, the access to Sibylline lore is regulated by the princeps. The decision not to consult the Books in 15 CE has more to do with his own preoccupations with the control of the quindecemviral college than with a wish to make a major feature of Roman public religion redundant or irrelevant. Recognizing the flood of the Tiber as a prodigy that warranted the consultation of the Books was a matter of interpretation, and Tiberius' decision rested on arguments that involved some consideration of the circumstances and an awareness of relevant precedents.

3. The Survival of Prodigy Reports

Let us turn to the sporadic but clear traces of the survival of the infrastructure that enabled prodigy reports and expiation in the following decades. The first prodigy notice in Tacitus' Annales belongs in the narrative of the year 51, at the end of the account of the events in the city of Rome, when a number of prodigies are said to have occurred (12.43). These are all events that took place in Rome and could hardly have been overlooked, such as an earthquake and a famine. No mention is made of their expiation, but much is made of the emotional impact they had on the populace: many people died in the stampede that followed the earthquake (cf. also 1.28.2–3, 4.64.1,

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Cf. also Tiberius' attempt to contain divinatory practice in private contexts (sources and discussion in Buongiorno 2016: 250–4).

In January 27 BCE, a flood of the Tiber was regarded as a favourable prodigy: see Cass. Dio 53.20.1, with Santangelo 2013: 243–4. This precedent may conceivably have played a part in informing Tiberius' deliberations, but the view that the flood was a natural event that did not require ritual action may also have had some traction.

See Malloch 2009: 120; Shannon-Henderson 2018: 269–71, 311–12. It is of course possible that the lost books of the Annales included other prodigy notices: cf. Plin. HN 10.35 on a lustratio in 43 CE after an eagle-owl had flown into the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus. On Claudius' scrupulousness in religious matters, see Suet. Claud. 22; cf. also the notice on the dedication of an altar to Zeus Alexiakos ('Jupiter the Averter of Evil') on the Capitol upon the visit to Rome of a maiden who had turned into a man (Phlegon, Mir. 6.4). North 1986: 256 stresses that prodigy notices feature only occasionally in Tacitus, while pointing out that '[t]he apparatus of interpretation certainly survives'.

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Moreover, there is a brief allusion to how they were received: many viewed them as evidence for divine displeasure with Claudius, and Tacitus refers to ‘whispered complaints’ (occulti... questus), which shortly afterwards take the form of a physical attack on the emperor by an angry mob in the Forum. The tendency to regard prodigies as judgments on the rule of an emperor is unsurprising, but it would be reductive to view a shift from public prodigies to private portents that are merely concerned with the position of the emperor. Moreover, the prodigies that are recorded in the following sections of Tacitus’ narrative show that the prodigies that were brought into the public domain were not just events that occurred under everybody’s eyes, and could hardly be ignored or concealed. We also find references to episodes that required the initiative of a group of individuals in order to be reported and brought into the public domain: in 12.64.1 there is a reference to the birth of a hermaphrodite child and of a pig with the talons of a hawk in 54 CE. Moreover, the focus of the prodigy system is not just on events within the city of Rome. Tacitus records the earthquake at Pompeii in 62 CE (15.22.2) and the storm and plague epidemic in Campania (16.13.1-2) in compressed accounts that are strongly reminiscent of the annalistic prodigy lists, although he does not mention any expiation. That omission may be explained with the need to keep the narrative concise and well paced, but another consideration could also be at play, here and elsewhere: Tacitus may be suggesting that, regardless of what ritual action is being taken, the gods are no longer listening.

At the end of Annales 13, Tacitus records the ostensible death in 58 CE of the ficus Ruminalis (13.58), the tree that was said to have served as a shelter for Romulus and Remus in their infancy, and he explicitly states that the event was regarded as a prodigy. No expiation is recorded, and no explanation is given for the later sudden regrowth of the tree. The presence of this episode in Tacitus’ narrative, however, is explained by the dynamic of his

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account, rather than by a sudden revival of interest in divination and prophecy among the inhabitants of Neronian Rome: civil discord and fraternal disputes loom large in the following books of the *Annales*.

Early in book 14, more prodigies are reported—ostensibly from the city of the Rome—in the aftermath of Agrippina’s death. They are listed right after some honours that were decreed to Nero by the Senate, and it is likely that Tacitus’s account derives from senatorial records. Tacitus points out that the frequency of prodigies in those years was hollow: had the gods been truly angered, Nero’s reign would not have carried on for several years. One is reminded of Livy’s comments on *neglegentia*.

In 64 CE, a number of prodigies are reported: among those, the birth in the territory of Placentia, in northern Italy, of a calf with the head attached to its leg stands out. We are suddenly presented with an isolated instance of a prodigy like many that are attested in the Republican period: a disturbing event in the territory of an Italian community is reported and presented to the attention of the Roman government. The interpretation of the prodigies is entrusted to the haruspices, who in 47 CE had been organized by Claudius into a formal body placed under pontifical (and imperial) supervision. Imperial patronage did not prevent the diviners from expressing a ruling that was not favourable to the ruler: they viewed the episode as a premonition of the birth of a new head for the world. As was often the case in the Republican period, they did not respond on the correct expiation of the prodigy, but offered a statement that had a clear prophetic remit. This prodigy is therefore turned into a premonition of the destiny of the emperor, but is, from a morphological point of view, fully in keeping with the established practice of prodigy reporting and expiation.

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43 Malloch 2009: 120.
45 Tac. *Ann.* 15.47.2. See Ash 2018: 218–19, who draws attention to the birth of a child with the dog head of Anubis near Rome in the following year (Plutarch, *Mir.* 23), and Shannon-Henderson 2018: 324–26. Cf. also the consultation of the Sibylline Books and the subsequent expiation rituals after the fire of Rome (15.44.1); Shannon-Henderson 2018: 321–22 has valuable insights.
46 Tac. *Ann.* 11.15; see Shannon-Henderson 2018: 258, 297–98. Tacitus does not record any expiation, but places this intervention of the haruspices right after other instances of prodigies that were reported in official contexts or detected during the performance of sacrifices (*abieti in publicum aut in sacrificiis . . . reperti*); it is likely that the public body of haruspices, rather than a group of independent haruspices, was invested with the Placentia prodigy.
47 On this episode, see Davies 2004: 157 and 159.
48 See Santangelo 2013: 84–98; for another haruspical intervention, involving a ritual recommendation that the *princeps* seeks and acts upon, in 55 CE, see 13.24.2, with Shannon-Henderson 2018: 289–90 (although this is not the only recorded expiation in what survives of the *Annales*: cf. 15.44.1).
Somewhat provocatively, it may be suggested that this incident fits the definition of what C. Ginzburg called, in his classic study of the ‘divinatory paradigm’ in modern epistemology, a ‘clue’ (spia): the seemingly marginal, even trivial, detail that does not fit the established narratives and prompts a full reconsideration of a familiar problem. Rather than dismissing the ager Placentinus prodigy as a mere anomaly, we should instead consider it as an instance of a line of continuity in Roman public divination that modern treatments have tended to disregard, a line in which prodigies, their reporting, and their expiation keep playing a significant part. An incident reported from Etruria—the discovery of a talking ox—is included in Tacitus’ *Histories* within the long list of prodigies preceding the clash between Otho and Vitellius in 69 CE (1.86), along with some peculiar occurrences in Rome, and just before another devastating flood of the Tiber. The information on these events comes from a number of sources (*diuersis auctoribus*). This may well be, as C. Damon has argued, a passage in which Tacitus is ‘at his most annalistic’. Unlike Livy, though, and in keeping with the strategy pursued in the *Annales*, Tacitus makes no reference to the expiation of these prodigies: the focus is on the reaction that they prompted. He has a scathing comment on the inability of the people of Rome to appreciate that the flood was caused by either natural factors or fortuitous circumstances, and complains that the event was being turned ‘into a prodigy and a premonition of imminent defeats’. As the debate on the flood of the Tiber under Tiberius shows, there was a degree of choice that may be exercised in regarding a given occurrence as a prodigy, and competing views could be voiced. Far from issuing a declaration of scepticism towards divination, Tacitus here reminds us of the risk of misreading divine signs, or detecting some where there are not any, and of the danger entailed by setting the conversation with the gods on the wrong premises.

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50 Cf. the popular reaction following the appearance of a comet in 60 CE, which was readily viewed as a sign of the imminent end of Nero’s reign (14.22.1); in that instance, the prodigy is not mediated by the Senate or through official channels. See Shannon-Henderson 2018: 305.
51 See Damon 2003: 275 on the possibly double-edged implication of this clause (in Livy *auctores* of prodigies are mentioned only when they are questionable). See also Plut. *Otho* 4.4–5; on portents involving Vespasian, Suet. *Vesp.* 5.
52 Damon 2003: 275.
54 Davies 2004: 160 issues a valuable caveat against viewing Tacitus as a forerunner of modern scepticism.
His narrative corroborates a familiar principle: under the Principate, prodigies are occurrences that take place first and foremost in Rome and Italy, just as had been the case under the Republic. However, it is important not to focus exclusively on that context. Prodigies from provincial communities could also require attention and prove deeply divisive. Caesar inserts at a crucial point of his narrative of the civil war the account of prodigies that were reported in Asia Minor after Pharsalos, and which he viewed as a divine endorsement of his rise to power. Their anomalous position in the Commentarii has led some to regard the passage as an interpolation. There is no cogent reason to accept that solution, and it is far preferable to regard them as a symptom of a political climate that has changed beyond recognition. Just as Caesar’s victory becomes apparent, some striking signs of divine favour start coming his way, and powerfully enter a narrative that has until that point been remarkably sparing of references to the religious sphere. Within that new context, there is also scope for taking notice of prodigies that occurred outside Italy and communities of Roman citizens, hence pointing to new levels of connection and integration with a provincial setting. This openness to reports from regions that used not to be part of the ordinary cycle of reporting is also confirmed by other instances. Cassius Dio states that in 37 BCE, a prodigy was reported to Rome from the city of Aspis in North Africa: some dolphins were seen near the city battling with one another and many of them died. The prodigy made a deep impression on the people of Rome. Other events were also being reported in the city. The implication of this account is that at a time of great political tension, the Roman populace was acutely sensitive to signs of divine displeasure, and not just from Italy. On at least one other occasion in Roman history, prodigies reported in North Africa, when Gaius Gracchus had set out to found the colony of Junonia near Carthage in 122 BCE, had not failed to make an impact on the political situation in Rome.

Some decades later, in 61 CE, at the other end of the empire, a statue of Victoria at Camulodunum in Britain fell on its back in the temple: the local women readily regarded it as a sign of impending doom, and many soon

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55 In a similar vein, cf. the evidence for the involvement of the quindecemviral and pontifical colleges with ritual matters in several Italian communities, collected and discussed in Millar 1977: 359–60.
56 Caes. B Civ. 3.105.3–5.
60 Plut. C. Gracch. 11.1; App. B Civ. 1.24.
regarded the near destruction of the colony as a distinct possibility. Shortly afterwards the ocean by the estuary of the Thames appeared to be red, and that was regarded as a further threat. Tacitus intriguingly points out that the prodigies were deeply disturbing for the veterans quartered in the region, but were also known to the indigenous population, who instead regarded them with hope. We are here presented with an unusual case in which a prodigy is received in different, and indeed competing, ways by two constituencies of people—as was customarily the case with portents on the rise or fall of emperors. It is safe to assume that these instances were much more frequent than the occasional references in our Rome-centred sources would lead us to believe. At any rate, the response to the prodigies reported in Britain is remarkable. According to Tacitus’ account, the priority of the Roman recipients of the signs was not to arrange for their expiation, nor to report them to the Senate. The signs were regarded as announcements of imminent danger, and elicited a military response; this, however, proved inadequate and led to defeat. Tacitus does not comment openly on it, but the overall picture that he conveys leaves no doubt that the crisis of religious knowledge should be understood as part of a wider pattern of ineffectiveness in the overall strategy pursued by Rome in Britain.

4. Problems of Periodization

This discussion has so far steered clear from issues of periodization, and from the question of how long the public reporting and expiation of prodigies remained a significant, or at least discernible, element of Roman public religion. Putting forward a clear answer is not unproblematic, but I shall try to address the issue in the final section of this chapter. If one goes through the list of the recorded prodigies, the reign of Trajan stands out as a significant endpoint. After some instances in 69 CE, in the early Flavian period, we hear about an instance of the birth of a two-headed baby in the city of Rome in 112 CE, which received a full expiation on the advice of the ‘sacrificing priests’ (hupothēkais tōn thuoskoōn): the newborn was drowned in the

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62 Cf. Cic. Div. 2.58 for a rationalizing account of the factors that cause water to change colour suddenly.
63 Hist. 5.13 provides a partial analogy: Tacitus stresses the contrasting, and ultimately ineffective, reception of some prodigies in Jerusalem at the time of Titus’ siege of 70 CE; superstitio is central to his account.
This episode is not remarkable just because it shows an instance of expiation at a time for which no other evidence survives, but also because it appears to be very similar to the expiation that was reserved for the births of hermaphrodite children in the Republican period. In addition, it serves as a reminder that general statements in our literary sources on shifts in the interpretation of prodigies should be taken with a degree of caution. About half a century earlier, the Elder Pliny briefly commented on hermaphrodites and their role in the expiation of prodigies (7.34):

\[
gignuntur et utriusque sexus quos hermaphroditos vocamus, olim androgynos vocatos et in prodigis habitos, nunc vero in deliciis
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('Persons are also born of both sexes combined, whom we call hermaphrodites, once called androgoni and classed as prodigies, but now as sources of entertainment'). Pliny states that there has been a shift in the interpretation of these births and that they are no longer treated as episodes that required expiation—an account that may even be regarded as broadly compatible with the trend of negotentia pointed out by Livy. The episode of 112 CE sheds further light upon the process sketched by Pliny: the expiation that used to be applied to hermaphrodite children was not discontinued altogether, but was now applied to babies who were born with deformities.

The prodigy of 112 is recorded by Phlegon of Tralles, an imperial freedman who wrote under Hadrian. The notice that immediately precedes it is equally remarkable, albeit for different reasons: it records the birth of a bundle of snakes to a woman at Tridentum, in northern Italy, in 83 CE. No reference is made here to the expiation of the prodigy or to its formal reporting at Rome, but its inclusion in the work of a Greek-speaking author from Asia Minor can only be explained by its recording at Rome. This isolated episode is an example of the lasting existence of channels through which prodigies that occurred in communities away from Rome could be conveyed to the Urbs and acted upon by the government.

After Trajan, we have to wait until the late Empire to find instances of the familiar system of prodigy reporting and expiation. The Historia Augusta records several striking episodes. In 241, under Gordian, the Sibylline
Books were consulted after a major earthquake, and the subsequent ritual action was deemed to have yielded an appeasement; in 262, under Gallienus, a full set of prodigies was reported across Italy, North Africa, Greece, and Asia Minor, wherein a series of earthquakes was followed by a plague outbreak. The Sibylline Books were again consulted and prescribed a series of sacrifices to Jupiter Salutaris. On this occasion, however, the author does not comment on the degree of success (or relief) that these measures attained.

A consultation of the Sibylline Books is also reported in the *Life of Aurelian* for 271, and to an extraordinary degree of detail. It is decreed by the Senate, with the strong endorsement of the emperor and the pontifical college, at the beginning of the campaign against the Marcomanni, after some early victories of the enemies had brought about considerable concern in Rome and prompted an act of collective purification. The Books yield valuable ritual recommendations, whose correct performance would secure the victory prospects of Rome. The historicity of this set of events is dubious. However, the picture of earnest debate and well-honed cooperation between Senate, emperor, priests, and magistrates that it conveys may well reflect a state of affairs that did hold true for other times in the Imperial period.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to elicit a coherent account out of such a fragmentary body of evidence. The possibility that other prodigy reports and expiations simply escaped the attention of our surviving sources is very strong. Indirect confirmation comes from a text of the *Codex Theodosianus*, dating to 320/321, where Constantine instructs the *praefectus urbi* Maximus to refer to the haruspices any instance of lightning striking his

closely related to the predicament of the emperor, and should in fact be read as a sort of 'inventaire prodigial du monde' (626); Loriol is fairly confident (621) that a centralized process of reporting and expiation still existed under Antoninus Pius and was enabled by the continued presence in Rome of that emperor.

47 The haruspical consultation recorded in Amm. Marc. 23.5.12–13 for the year 363 CE should not be included in a discussion of public prodigies (*contra* MacBain 1982: 106), as it followed an episode that occurred during Julian’s Parthian campaign: military commanders were entitled to expiate such prodigies without investing the Senate with the matter or consulting a priestly college. However, the incident is remarkable for at least two reasons: the level of detail of the reported haruspical interpretation and the mention of the competing advice offered by a group of unnamed *philosophi* who were in the emperor’s retinue (see Montero Herrero 1991: 106–108).


49 Maxentius’ decision to consult the Sibylline Books in 312 CE does not belong within the domain of prodigy expiation. According to Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 44.7–8, he chose to access the Books when the people of Rome expressed the view that Constantine could not be defeated, and he received a suitably vague response; Zos. 2.16.1 gives no background to the consultation.
palace or other public buildings (we learn a few lines below that the Flavian Amphitheatre had recently been hit), so that its predictive meaning (*quid portendat*) may be assessed according to traditional practice (*more ueteris observanitiae*). Their advice is then to be conveyed to the emperor. Haruspices may also be consulted on the same subject in a private capacity, but domestic sacrifices are strictly forbidden. Not even in this case does the emperor cast himself as the best interpreter of divine signs, but he carefully polices the flow of the information that the diviners are expected to provide. No mention whatsoever is made of the Senate—and it would be anachronistic to expect any at this time.

5. Conclusions

The working hypothesis from which this discussion stemmed is that the development of the public prodigies system in the early Principate may yield more general insights into divinatory practice and culture in the Roman world. Its central contention is that the practice of prodigy reporting and expiation in public contexts did survive in the Principate to a greater extent than is usually recognized, and that such continuity is an historical fact of some religious and intellectual significance. The handling of prodigies was mostly carried out under the supervision and patronage of the emperor, but still required the involvement of the Senate and the direct input of the priestly colleges.

The surviving literary evidence tends to concentrate on prodigies from the city of Rome. However, there is a reasonably good range of prodigies recorded from several locations in Italy, as is the case for much of the Republican period, and a number of prodigies that apparently did not receive any attention from the Roman government are reported from provincial contexts. Envisaging a mechanical transition from a world full of prodigies, open to genuine political competition, to one full of portents and tightly policed by an autocrat is an unhelpful oversimplification. Although the emperor is central to the concerns of the recipients of divinatory signs, as well as to the fabric of the *res publica* itself, he is not the only

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71 Cf. Bowden, this volume on the continuing political significance of divination in Athens in the fourth century BCE.
subject or addressee of those signs, nor their prime interpreter. Prodigies, far from being a vestigial presence, are the symptom of a long-term dynamic in Roman divination and of an important level of continuity that was predicated on a familiar assumption: mankind is the recipient of a set of divine signs, which require thoughtful interpretation and appropriate ritual response, lest dire consequences ensue.72

References


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