

MARVELS AND DIVINATION  
IN ANCIENT ITALY

Among the multiple aspects that are apparent to us in the religious life of the ancients, our attention is quite naturally directed toward the extremely important occurrences which interrupt the normal course of things and reveal the intrusion of the sacred into the life of men. These phenomena, called *τέρατα* in Greek, *prodigia* in Rome, are of diverse, but always significant, value, according to the particular case. They sanction the privileged state of being of people who are marked by the imprint of the divine, they adduce irrefutable confirmation of the will of the gods, they interpret the joy and, far more frequently, the anger of the all-powerful beings who decree the course of the world.

Proofs, confirmations, warnings, or threats—these exceptional matters weighed heavily upon man's religious conscience during ancient times. Man, who instinctively experiences a reverential awe for the forces of the sacred, is deeply distressed by the formidable presence of invisible beings. And these admonitions resound deeply in his soul.

However, the diversity of religious temperament among the ancient peoples intervenes at this point. And while some, exhibiting more pro-

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## *Marvels and Divination in Ancient Italy*

nouncedly rationalist tendencies, are not often inclined to acknowledge the intervention of the sacred in the course of events, others, of a more troubled and somber nature, feel without cease the thunderbolts of divine anger breaking over them. This profound diversity is quite apparent to the historian of ancient regimes, such as those of Greece, Etruria, and Rome. Our purpose here is mainly to analyze the attitude of the inhabitant of ancient Italy—the Etruscan, and then of the Roman, virtually up to the imperial era when, to a large extent, the ancient superstitions gave place to new beliefs, thanks to the influx of Oriental religions. Yet we cannot avoid alluding to Hellenic ideas: first, in order to orient the ideas of the Tuscans and of the Romans in relation to them, and also because the influence of Greece, in matters of religion as well as of art, had, as we know, been felt very early on the soil of the peninsula; we must take this into account in order to explain the complex religion which developed among the Italian peoples.

In attempting to analyze the problems raised by Etruscan and then by Roman marvels, one must state clearly two important points. As in any occurrence of a religious nature, the historian can assume two very different attitudes: he can study these marvels from an external point of view, if you will, and present verifications, statistics, explanatory essays. The monographs of Luterbacher and of Wülker<sup>1</sup> on marvels exhibit in the main this attitude. But historians can also attempt to analyze the profound attitude of the Roman in regard to these phenomena believed to be the result of the act of gods, and they can try to uncover the echo of this belief in his religious conscience. I regard these two points of view as complementary and believe that the one must not be sacrificed to the other. It is often the subjective analysis, the more 'difficult, it is true, which is nonetheless the most valuable for the history of religions.

Furthermore, it is impossible to study ancient Italy's belief in marvels in some sort of statistical, general fashion without paying the most minute attention to the continuous and profound evolution which the Roman religious conscience experienced without interruption during the entire course of the history of the *Urbs*. One is inevitably led to distinguish clearly between the different periods, and the historical point of view is absolutely essential. The historian encounters here, as elsewhere, sinuous and shifting paths; he is not confronted with stable and enclosed realities. As we know,

1. L. Wülker, *Die geschichtliche Entwicklung des Prodigenwesens bei den Römern*, Diss. Leipzig, 1903 and F. Luterbacher, *Der Prodigien Glaube und Prodigienstil der Römer*, Diss. Burgdorf, 1904.

there was no people in the West more attached to rites of all kinds than the Etruscans. And the increasingly uneasy attitude toward the divine powers which rule over the life of man is doubtless one of the typical characteristics of this particular nation. Livy writes that the ancients themselves remarked upon this attitude of a people that was all the more attracted to religious rites because it excelled in the art of putting them into practice. A good deal later Arnobius had not forgotten the memory of Etruria, mother and generatrix of superstitions.<sup>2</sup> And, in truth, the entire life of the Etruscans was enclosed in a network of proscriptions and interdictions. For them there seems to have been no progressive separation between religious and profane life, whereas such was the case in Greece, and later in Rome.

This places the Etruscans squarely apart from Greco-Roman paganism, and their particular position is clearly evident in their attitude toward supernatural events. Indeed, during the course of the centuries, the world became normalized in a certain sense for the Greek and later for the Roman mind, as we shall see. While the primitive assumes a constant interpenetration between the profane and the sacred world, the progress of knowledge has, here and there, led people to accept the regular interrelationship of numerous phenomena and their appearance without the necessary intervention of a divine power. Curiously enough, this does not seem to have been the case in the Etruscan world. Until the very end of its history, it continued to see all the acts of men as literally immersed in the sacred; the most frequent and explicable phenomena, both in inanimate and in animate nature, remained, in their eyes, indissolubly linked with the presence and constant action of the mysterious forces of Heaven and Hell.

It is certainly not an easy task to analyze the complex beliefs of this people, given the lack of any Etruscan literature and the unfortunately incomplete knowledge that we possess as yet of the Tuscan language. Nevertheless, the revealed writings which contained the whole of the doctrine are partially known to us, thanks to a few fragments that remain in Latin translations and thanks also to the commentaries, by Latin and Greek authors, that have survived. The sum of the Etruscan discipline was taught in these books which—we know this, thanks specifically to Cicero's *De divinatione*—were divided into series: the *libri haruspici*, which were concerned with the examination and study of the entrails of victims, the *libri fulgurales*, which dealt with thunderbolts, their origin, their significance, and their value, the *libri rituales*, the largest, since they contained proscrip-

2. Livy, V, I, 16 and Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes*, VII, 26.

## *Marvels and Divination in Ancient Italy*

tions relating to the life of men and of states, the doctrine concerning death, and, finally, the *ostentaria*, which are of the greatest interest to us since they are concerned with texts about marvels.<sup>3</sup>

This necessary division of the *disciplina etrusca* immediately brings to light a major fact in our study, the primordial importance represented by the art of divination in Tuscan religious life. Theory of the thunderbolt, examination of the entrails of victims, analysis of marvels—all these have no other meaning nor any purpose than that of enabling us to deduce the will of the gods, the ceremonies to be enacted, the near or distant future of phenomena especially endowed with sacred attributes.

Thus, the importance with which divination, the *Mantikè*, is invested among the Etruscans is plainly revealed—this curious and complex art which seems to have dominated the whole of their actions and their life. The haruspex had the permanent function of noting the portents sent to earth by the gods and of drawing the necessary conclusions from them in regard to the conduct of man. The *ostentum*, the sign, was merely one portent among others, doubtless more grave, more weighty, but no distinction was made between these portents of divine origin. Belief in prodigies, or marvels, also insinuated itself into the more general tendency to read in the book of the world both revelations of the past and pronouncements on the future. Everything was an omen among people profoundly steeped in the sacred, and prodigies were but important omens.

Although the Greek mentality was extremely far removed from this constant concern of the Etruscans with the future and with the gods, we must point out their belief in prodigies did cause them to penetrate deeply into the domain of manticism. In ancient Hellas, omen and prodigy were closely linked in the same way. To understand this, one has only to glance at the venerable *Histoire de la Divination* of Bouché-Leclercq, which, although it was written three-quarters of a century ago, retains to this day the major part of its worth.<sup>4</sup> In divining portents which destroy in a sense the veil of the future, prodigies differ from the ordinary omens perceived by the inquisitive Greeks only in their exceptional nature and in the momentary split with natural laws which they represent.

But this similarity in basic concept and this common penchant for

3. A good study has been made by C. O. Thulin, *Die etruskische Disciplin*, 3 vols. (Göteborg, Zachrissons, 1906–1909), the bibliography for which can be found in A. Grenier, *Les Religions étrusque et romaine*, "Collection Mana" (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1948).

4. A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la Divination dans l'Antiquité*, 4 vols. (Paris, Leroux, 1879–82).

divination must not mislead us. The religious atmosphere of Greece is altogether different from that of Tuscany. Although manticism is very popular in Hellas, as is evidenced by the number and importance of its oracles, the Greek people nevertheless adopted an extremely reserved attitude toward exceptional and rationally inexplicable phenomena. The immortals of Olympus could, to be sure, interrupt the normal course of events by prodigies, but they usually respected the order of nature and made their desires and their will known only in the form of omens, more discreet portents which did not infringe natural laws; or else they relied upon the inspired voices of their soothsayers and of their priestesses.<sup>5</sup>

Rarely does one witness their direct intervention upon the earth in the form of an earthquake, or of thunder and lightning such as Apollo used to safeguard the sanctuary of Delphi from the Celtic invaders' sacrilegious attacks. Usually the Hellenic mind was not inclined to conjure up divine beings who deliberately intervened in the regular course of the world. And this is a fact which is fundamentally distinct from the Etruscan mentality, constantly detecting the serene or violent imprint of divine intervention in the apparition of phenomena. Moreover, the Greeks were hesitant in regard to the very terms to be used in designating prodigies. Probably only *τέρας* can be said to represent this meaning exclusively. Usually the words have a broader connotation like *φάσμα*, which denotes meteorological phenomena, and *σημείον*, signifying the body of portents, of omens, or like *δύωνος*, portents originally appearing essentially through the intermediary of birds. Often, too, the Greeks used substantive adjectives which, like *θείον*, *Μαράδοξον*, denoted the divine and unprecedented nature of phenomena which had taken place.

Actually, Greek philosophy very quickly opposed the popular belief in events that were contrary to nature. Heraclitus and Anaxagoras deliberately rejected belief in prodigies. This was also the well-known attitude of Epicurus, imitated by his disciples, of whom Lucretius was to become the most illustrious. Yet certain schools, the Stoics in particular, conceded at least the real existence of divination and of diverse omens. The popular strata, for their part, were inclined to accept the various forms of the prodigy and remained attached to the oldest beliefs. Quite naturally, it was the statues of the gods which gave rise to the most frequent and the most

5. Two already outmoded dissertations treat the subject: P. Stein, Marburg, 1909 and K. Steinhauser, *Der Prodigien Glaube und das Prodigienwesen der Griechen*, Tübingen, 1911. The correct note is struck by Martin P. Nilsson in his work *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*: Vol. I, *Bis zur Weltherrschaft*, Vol. II, *Die hellenistische und römische Zeit* (Munich, Beck, 1941–50).

amazing prodigies; for example, statues like the *Xoana* which the impious tried to burn and which resisted the sacrilegious fire, or that other wooden statue representing the figure of Hera of Samos which, stolen by Tyrian pirates, prevented their ship from setting sail. Sanctuaries were the scene of exceptional episodes; the extraordinary cures demonstrated in the sanctuary of Epidaurus are examples; Asclepius, God of medicine, who was worshipped there, naturally chose this place to prove his powers.

It is curious to note that during the Hellenistic era tales of miraculous episodes were legion. However, they were more the result of a literary genre than of a deep-seated belief. The total absence of written rituals proscribing expiatory and propitiatory ceremonies in the event of prodigies, and also the absence of a special college for priests, to whom would have fallen the task of performing these ceremonies, clearly demonstrate how very different the Greek attitude in this domain was from that of the Etruscans and the Romans.

In contrast to the somewhat indecisive and reserved attitude of the Greeks, Etruria, fascinated during the entire course of its history by the tangible manifestations of the sacred, possessed a college for specialized priests, the haruspices. They alone were able to grasp and put into practice the complex information contained in the books of ritual. What an amazing destiny these soothsayers had, appearing as they did on Italian soil at the very beginning of Etruscan civilization, during the seventh century B.C., and again at the end of Roman paganism, holding a place of honor in the entourage of Emperor Julian!

They merit our special attention because their knowledge and their practice played such an important role in the evolution of ancient Italy's religious conscience. As we have pointed out, they had a firm grasp of the Etruscan religion and therefore intervened at the most diverse moments in the life of the Tuscan people. From the point of view of divination, which interests us here, heavenly thunderbolts, entrails of victims, and prodigies all served equally as objects of study. These priests demonstrated the same ingenuity in the interpretation of various portents, and their methods of analysis always sprang from an infinitely complex casuistry. Before dealing with their handling of this or that prodigy, we must first point out that their doctrines concerning thunderbolts and particularly the *exta* of victims, exhibit extraordinarily strange aspects. Lightning, a frequent occurrence in the Tuscan sky where storms often broke out with unpredictable violence, served as an object of investigation, the detailed and systematic nature of which is truly astonishing. Even in the eyes of the an-

cients, the haruspices were the uncontested masters of the art of *fulguratura*.<sup>6</sup> Many of the aspects of lightning were to become, in the eyes of the Romans, an archetype of prodigy.

As for the examination of the *exta*, the liver and viscera of victims sacrificed to the gods, this was the favorite activity of those priests who even derived their name from it. Tuscan bas-reliefs and mirrors show us the haruspex engaged in this strange divining technique which reminds us, naturally, of the old Assyriac-Babylonian practices. The question of the origin of their knowledge has already caused a great deal of ink to flow and it is not my task to speak of it here. I would merely like to mention a very recent and, in my opinion, quite important observation made by an excellent Orientalist, Jean Nougayrol. In a communication to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres which he delivered in January, 1956, he presented the ideas that were suggested to him by the terra-cotta model of a liver. This model originally came from Faléries and was preserved in the Musée de la Villa Giulia and exhibited recently in Paris at an excellent exposition of Etruscan art and civilization. On the surface of this clay liver Nougayrol observed two faint grooves, parallel to each other and similar to the lines to be found in a real liver, but difficult to observe anatomically. These grooves are caused by the pressure of other organs against the liver, but they disappear quickly when the liver has been extracted from a sacrificial animal. Now, these two lines are always carefully noted on the clay livers that are constantly being brought to light by the pickaxes of excavators in various parts of the Asiatic Orient. And they actually are of great, even of essential, importance for Babylonian divination because the presence of one of these lines signified the presence of the god himself whose prodigies were anticipated. If it were absent then the god was not present. This curious and fundamental similarity links Etruscan with Babylonian hepatoscopy, its very early predecessor, more closely than ever today.

Of the *Ostentaria*, which guided the haruspex in his exegesis of prodigies, only a few meager fragments subsist in their Latin translations. But the speech which Cicero delivered in the year 56, *De Haruspicum Responso*, is very precious to us. It actually acquaints us with the conclusions drawn by the haruspices when they were consulted on the subject of a suspicious rumbling heard in the *ager latiniensis*, on the territory of Latium. This answer, as reproduced by the orator, bears on three points. First, it informs us

6. Stefana Weinstock, "Libri fulgurales," in *Papers of the British School at Rome*, XIX, 1951, pp. 122 ff.

## *Marvels and Divination in Ancient Italy*

that the gods have shown their anger in this way, Jupiter, Saturnia, Neptune, the Earth, and the *Dii Caelestes* being involved. In the second place, it explains the reason for this wrath: men's negligence in regard to various religious rites, the impious murder of orators, disregard for sworn faith. Finally, it enumerates the dangers to whose urgent threat the prodigy attests. Rome should fear discord between the *Optimates*, a discord which could cause peril of death for the superior residents of the city; it should also fear plots directed against the state and toward the overthrow of the government. All that is lacking in the precious Ciceronian text is a reminder of the fourth point, truly essential, which always constituted the last part of the *responsa haruspicum*—the announcement of the expiatory ceremonies which might appease the divinity and halt the piling-up of perils. The popularity of the haruspices stemmed from the common people's belief in the effectiveness of their remedies. In a penetrating study A. Piganiol recently indicated the relationship which existed between the Ciceronian text and a Greek calendar, the work of Jean Lydus, thanks to which the Etruscan ritual that Nigidius Figulus had previously made accessible to the Romans in a Latin transcription was transmitted to us. It indicates that the significance of thunder varies according to the days and the months. Here, again, the researcher is asked to turn to Babylonian rituals and hemerologies which indicate, according to the days, the meaning attributable to the heavy rumbling of thunder.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, what remains is to elucidate, as in the pledge of hepatoscopy, the temporal hiatus that separates a divining technique of the second millennium B.C. from a practice that manifested itself in Italy only after the beginning of the seventh century B.C. The progress of Oriental studies seems at present to be multiplying the intermediary stepping-stones. For definitive conclusions, however, we must await the result of current research.

In any case, one can observe a very clear tendency on the part of the haruspices to interpret prodigies politically. This attitude was to remain unchanged throughout the entire course of the history of Rome. These priests, recruited from the aristocratic class of their people, delighted in bidding the client to beware of domestic quarrels within the city, of troubles that threatened the state, especially the Senate and the *Optimates*.

7. A. Piganiol, "Sur le Calendrier brontoscopique de Nigidius Figulus," in *Studies in Roman Economic and Social History in Honor of Allan Chester Johnson* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 79 ff. The point is again evoked by the same author in a study entitled "Les Étrusques, Peuple d'Orient," in *Cahiers d'Histoire mondiale*, Vol. I, No. 2, Oct., 1953, p. 328 ff.



From start to finish, there was an astonishing constancy in the political orientation of a college, as faithful to its aristocratic traditions as to the laws of ritual carefully handed down from generation to generation. Guardians of sacred proscriptions, the haruspices were apparently always inclined to play the role of protectors of the established order.

The scraps of the *Ostentaria* which Macrobius, Servius, and Amien Marcellin have preserved for us are striking because of the singular and sometimes puerile nature of the interpretations suggested. A lamb or a ram whose coat is spotted with gold or with purple presages fame and power for the prince of the city and for his offspring. Trees and animals are grouped into opposite categories: those whose portents are favorable and others whose portents presage disaster. Etruscan discipline complacently made use of this fundamental division between *arbores felices* and *arbores infelices*, between *animalia infelicia* and *felicia*. This same comparison of values distinguished between good and bad omens derived from the livers of victims (the criterion was the area of the liver under consideration), or between favorable and unfavorable omens evidenced by heavenly lightning (the criterion here was the place where the lightning occurred). But in this instance the grouping of trees and animals into opposite categories seems to give human society an image of its own condition. Any anomaly in the *arbores infelices* might be the presage of an ill that would affect men, while the *arbores felices*, on the other hand, regulated the rhythm of their growth, of their full development. Thus, the different domains of nature seem to be linked to one another by deep and mysterious bonds. But we must make a more detailed analysis if we want to understand the incredible complexity of a doctrine that assumed the appearance of a true science despite its basic inconsistency.

In contrast to this system of unusual stability which time apparently could not affect, the Roman vision of the prodigy presents an entirely different picture. To speak in a general and statistical manner of Roman prodigies, which has already been done far too often, would be to attempt something foredoomed to failure. A careful study, however, will enable us to distinguish clearly between the very different stages of this belief, and it is these successive stages that we must analyze, in retracing the sinuous path of this curious evolution.

Excellent material is at our disposal for this kind of study. The texts are extremely numerous, particularly in the writings of Cicero and Livy; but there are also many other authors who tell us about the marvels that occurred during various periods. The Roman populace believed in these

prodigies and feared them. Of course very few figurative representations of such episodes have come down to us. It seems, in fact, that at least until a relatively late period, the art of describing scenes in which the laws of nature were temporarily violated was often proscribed by a kind of religious taboo. A few inscriptions relating to the *putealia*, those pits in which all traces of the passage of lightning were literally buried, are direct proofs of the frequent expiatory ceremonies performed in Rome as well as in Etruria. But, again, it is the literary tradition, extremely rich in material, which gives us, essentially, our view of the problem.

During the two and a half centuries which correspond to the era of Roman sovereignty, from the middle of the eighth century B.C. to the departure of the Tarquins from Rome in 509, mythical elements, obvious anachronisms, and precise facts are intermingled in the texts of their tales and, as we know, it is not easy to separate the true from the false in this complex whole. In reading Livy's first book and his admirable account of early Roman times, one enters a world adorned with the mystery with which the Romans tended to surround the very distant past of the *Urbs*. And of course the miraculous occupies a large part of it. Romulus, removed by a storm from the view of his subjects and immortalized, Numa's colloquies with the nymph Egeria, Tullus Hostilius, struck with lightning by Jupiter for his impiety—all these are episodes dear to a later chronology, ready to endow the archaic era with the allure of legend.

However, when we approach the reign of the Etruscan tyrants, the Tarquins, the impression is somewhat different. The omens and prodigies that are recounted evoke two tales which the Etruscan haruspex was always called upon to interpret. This cannot be mere chance but rather evidence of a reliable faithfulness in the transmission of memories. Such, for example, is our impression on reading the tale of the prodigy that marked the arrival in Rome of Lucumon, the inhabitant of Tarquinii, who came and settled in the *Urbs* and who was soon to assume power under the name of Tarquinius Priscus. When Lucumon, seated upon a chariot at the side of his wife, Tanaquil, arrived at the Janiculum, an eagle swooped down and snatched his headdress, then flew around the chariot screeching and, as if it were accomplishing a divine mission, replaced the headdress on Lucumon's head and took flight again. An interpretation of this astonishing prodigy was immediately formulated by Tanaquil who, Livy writes, "possessed the knowledge, a widespread one in Etruria, of celestial prodigies."<sup>8</sup>

According to her, all the circumstances permitted Lucumon to entertain

8. Livy, I, XXXIV, 8.

the highest hopes—the very nature of the bird that intervened in this amazing episode, the region of the heavens whence it descended, the god whose messenger it was, who must have been Jupiter, king of the gods, just as the eagle was king of the birds, and finally, the part of the body upon which the omen centered—that supreme part of man, his head.

We meet in this tale certain traits that are characteristic of the Etruscan *haruspex*, for example, the importance attributed to the orientation of the portent-presage and the interplay of purely material elements with the moral significance to be deduced from them. Similarly, the flames that surrounded the child Servius Tullius' head without burning him, or the intact head of a man discovered in the earth when the Capitoline Temple of Jupiter was being built, are prodigies analogous to the preceding one and forerunners of future greatness, one of man, the other of the sanctuary which was to be the scene of it.

Thus, the Etruscan masters of Rome in the sixth century B.C. really seem to have brought with them divining concepts and techniques that were honored in the country they came from. The tale about the ambassador sent, according to tradition, by Tarquin the Proud to the Delphic oracle confirms the interest this Tuscan dynasty entertained in the most diverse forms of manticism.

In order to give a precise idea of the situation during the epochs which followed we must carry our research down to a rather late date, until the time when the Table of the Pontiff began to be written in Rome. As we know, it was at the beginning of the third century B.C. that this precious official document in which the principal events of the year were recorded was made public. From then on we feel that we are really on firm ground, and for this and subsequent periods the Livian tale is bereft of a solid foundation. Now, starting precisely with Livy's Book X, which is the beginning of the discussion of this period, the account of prodigies takes on an altogether new aspect. At the commencement of each year, the historian recalls all the prodigies which took place on Roman soil during the preceding twelve months and whose importance was recognized by the Senate. Then comes a reminder of the various ceremonies designed to expiate them. These passages are edited with a sober precision and certainly go back, further than the analysts, to the *tabula* hung on the walls of the *Regia*.

They immediately bring to light two essential facts: on the one hand, the unbelievable number of natural phenomena included in the category of prodigies; on the other, the very special attitude of the Roman, who was not in the least concerned with interpreting these indications of divine in-

## *Marvels and Divination in Ancient Italy*

tervention according to scientific casuistry but who merely sought to expiate them in the most effective and methodical manner possible. These two facts call for closer study.

It would take too long, of course, to enumerate the infinite variety of phenomena wherein the Roman thought to recognize the hand of god. Those that made their appearance in inanimate nature were usually called *ostentum* or *portentum* and phenomena that affected the animal or human species were termed *miraculum* or *monstrum*. The word *prodigium* was used for all such occurrences. Contrary to the popular interpretation of the ancients, these words in no way implied the notion of prediction, of presage. *Prodigium*, having a short *i*, cannot stem from *prodicere*, which has a long *i*. As for the verbs *ostendere* and *portendere*, whereas at a later date they signified the idea of forecasting the future, originally they merely meant to show, to present. *Ostentum* and *portentum*, the passive form, merely denoted the spectator's amazement. Nowhere do we find the notion of the presage that the Romans of the classical epoch believed they recognized in everything.

Many monographs have carefully listed the various kinds of Roman prodigies. Some of these, like that of Brunell Krauss,<sup>9</sup> described the natural phenomena that the prodigies embodied. In nature, solar phenomena impressed people a great deal—eclipses, for instance, of which Greek philosophy was soon to teach the cause, as well as parhelions, that is to say the appearance of luminous circles around the sun, mirroring it many times by refraction. Lunar eclipses and paraselenes were generally noted with care and greatly feared. Lightning was a prodigy of the state only when it struck a public building. It was taken most seriously when it struck a consecrated place, the portals of the town or a temple. Storms when unusual matter fell caused the Romans a good deal of anxiety. We are reminded of those rains of blood that scarcely ever occurred in Rome save at the foot of the Palatine hills. This illusion is doubtless explicable by the fortuitous presence there of tiny plant particles floating in the air which made the drops of rain look reddish, blood-colored. We are more perplexed, we must admit, when we note that the Senate ordered atonement for rains of milk. These have been explained by the whitish, milky foam that can form on water streaming over the ground after very heavy rainfall. As for rains of flesh, our curiosity increases and we hesitate to follow Brunell Krauss when he suggests that the great number of worms that come out of the

9. Franklin Brunell Krauss, *An interpretation of the omens, portents, and prodigies recorded by Livy, Tacitus and Suetonius* (Phila., Pa., Publication of the University of Pennsylvania, 1931).

ground after torrential rains was responsible for this belief and that the Romans believed they fell from the sky.

A famous poem by José-Maria de Hérédia evokes the moisture that cloaked the statues of certain gods at the time of the second Punic War. According to Livy, statues also shed tears. This must refer to the condensation of humid and hot air on cold marble or bronze. Most of the earthly phenomena that terrified the masses were of volcanic origin—earthquakes, spontaneous movements of divine objects such as Mars's lance and shields, flames spontaneously appearing in nature.

As for the animal world, the mere presence of an unwonted animal within the walls of a temple was placed in the category of prodigies; as, for example, mice that came to gnaw on the food of a sacred repast. And the innumerable freakishnesses of nature that create strange two-headed animals or animals with five feet were considered particularly ominous. Rome looked with horror upon any deviation among the species. In the same way, cases of hermaphroditism in the human world were literally considered a blot on the national soil, and the unfortunate androgynes had to be expelled from the city. They were placed in coffins, still living, carried out to the high seas and thrown in the water. The ancient material concept of contamination is manifest here as well as its corollary, expiation by transfer to a river or sea and immersion along its coast.

We have evidence that these multifarious phenomena were carefully observed and expiated. But no conclusions in regard to the future were drawn from them, at least not until the second Punic War. They were not presages but portents, simply signs of the gods' anger, a break with the *pax deorum*. This notion of peace with the gods is especially important in the life of Roman paganism. A kind of tacit understanding reigned in Rome between the sacred and the profane, between gods and men, which the rites and ceremonies of traditional religion helped to maintain. But this was more a truce than a real peace; it was forever threatened and uncertain, since any failure in religious duties might irritate the divinity. Then the prodigy, that dreaded eruption of the sacred amid the profane, occurred, for the gods, benign if they were satisfied, were terrible if their laws were neglected or defied. Then the city and men were surrounded with peril and the human heart found no peace, the city no calm until the ceremonies of atonement, the *procuraciones prodigorum*, reestablished the initial harmony.

Such, in my opinion, is the meaning and the fundamental role of the Roman prodigy; this is a far cry from the divinatory interpretation of the

Greeks and the Etruscans. In Rome, between the fifth and the second centuries B.C. and in contrast to the situation in Greece and in Etruria, the very notion of a good prodigy was inconceivable. Any prodigy was disastrous and had to be expiated. It was different in kind from the presage, the omen. However, we must observe that the Roman attitude was not so very different as regards presages, particularly auguries, which played such an important role in public life. Auguries provided no more precise indications about the future than did prodigies. In observing the signs of the heavens as evidenced through the intermediary of birds, of sacred chickens, of quadrupeds, and of all other fortuitous incidents, the augur merely tried to ascertain whether or not the gods approved of the enterprise conceived by the Roman state and whether the state could rely upon their consent. If there was no ratification by the gods, then, under penalty of the worst dangers, one had to abstain. Here again the technique of divination was actually reduced to a minimum.

But while a penchant for manticism was almost absent from the Rome of that period, on the other hand one observes an extremely complex and solid organization in regard to atonement for prodigies. And I believe that this represents a profound characteristic of the very spirit of the Roman. Little inclined to analyze or dissect with subtlety phenomena endowed with sacred attributes, he displayed, on the contrary, his sturdy sense of juridical and religious organization when the question of putting expiatory and propitiatory ceremonies into practice arose. The strong structure of the stewardship of the state shows very well how the miraculous itself was subject to an ensemble of coherent and effective regulations in the *Urbs*. The highest authorities of the state took part in it. It was the Consul who announced the prodigies of the year to the Senate. The Senate recognized them as valid or not and consulted the pontiff, the Etruscan haruspices or the guardians of the *Sibylline Books* on the ceremonies to be enacted. After which it ordered the carrying-out of prescribed rites and the Consul had the responsibility of supervising their execution.<sup>10</sup>

It is not my purpose to study in detail the respective competence of these various organizations. The knowledge of the pontiffs constituted a national discipline, an old Latin tradition; until the Punic Wars reliance was mainly placed upon it. The pontiffs limited themselves to indicating old remedies of magical origin. For instance, they buried lightning accord-

10. This minute organization of the sacred is analyzed by R. Bloch, "Les Prodiges romains et la Procuratio Prodigiorum," *Mélanges De Visscher*, Vols. 2 & 3, 1949, *Revue Internationale des Droits de l'Antiquité*, p. 119 ff.

ing to rites of a very ancient origin. In other cases, when pontifical knowledge was lacking, the haruspices, whose value Rome recognized, were appealed to. However, tradition says nothing about consultations with the haruspices during the entire course of the fifth century. And this is readily understandable because one had to be wary of the priests of a people whom the expulsion of the Tarquins must have embittered against Rome. During the long wars that caused the destruction of one Etruscan village after another, although the services of these priests were required, they remained suspect for a long time and occasionally paid with their lives for this instinctive distrust of their national loyalty. What Rome demanded of them was, and this we must remember, the most effective way of expiating for the prodigies; what it valued in these priests was their competence in purifying the soil of contamination. And the complicated explanations of their subtle manticism were readily dispensed with.

These practical and efficacious remedies were also, for a long time, what the Senate expected of the *Sibylline Books* and of their guardians. We know what complex problems the origins and evolution of these mysterious books have given rise to. According to tradition, they were supposedly introduced into Rome at the time of the reign of the Tarquins. From the very beginning they represented a compilation of the oracles delivered by the Cumaean Sibyl and sold by her to the Etruscan kings of Rome. But what, in reality, was this record that later on was said to contain the *arcana imperii*, the secrets of the empire, and where did it actually come from? The approach to a study of this delicate question must certainly be from a strictly historical point of view. And, actually, the very history of this collection of writings followed and promoted, in many respects, the evolution of the Roman religious conscience. To judge by the answers found in it, it must in the beginning have been composed essentially of *remedia*—practical religious remedies to be applied upon the appearance of the prodigies that were particularly feared, the *taetra prodigia*. One does not at first discover any trace of oracles pronounced by a ranting priestess, but merely ritualistic prescriptions, the memory of which annalistic tradition has transmitted to us. It is really impossible to recognize the prophecies of Cumae, which, according to the ancients, were apparently never collected in these books. Pausanias writes that the inhabitants of Cumae did not have an oracle in their sibyl. The duumvirs, whose number was later increased to ten and then to fifteen, safeguarded these books; they were mere consultants, not priests. At the behest of the Senate they opened the books and, thanks to a similarity between the situation of the



moment and the text they happened upon, they would recognize appropriate expiatory ceremonies designed to calm divine wrath.

The second problem is more difficult to solve—that of the precise origin of these books. Were they, from the moment of their appearance, Greek, as the chronicles maintained? To be sure, they contributed to the dissemination of Greek rites in the religion of the Romans. From a very early date Hellenist remedies must have found a place in the development of Greater Greece. But at the same time one must also acknowledge the presence of religious remedies that stemmed from the early Italians, Etruscans, and Latins; these must have been indissolubly interwoven with Hellenic remedies.<sup>11</sup>

And so it was not a manual of manticism that the Senate decreed should be consulted when religious panic spread in Rome, but a complex collection of writings in which, as was its wont, Rome had gathered the teachings of diverse religions.

Yet at the time of the second Punic War the situation changed profoundly on all levels. Many works have stressed, and with good reason, the real split that occurred in the Roman religious conscience at the time of the great disasters of 217 and 216 B.C.<sup>12</sup> As so often happens, this moment of acute crisis determined the religious evolution of an entire people. Fear increased superstition, prodigies were announced to the masses, and terror—inspired by the successive and repeated defeats of the legions and by the prodigies to which these defeats lent credence—awakened tendencies, needs, and fresh searchings. The ancient rites obviously no longer sufficed; new divinities had to be introduced. At the same time an imperious need to know the future arose or developed. This is a religious phenomenon that has been noted in all countries and during the most diverse epochs. When a community is exposed to the peril of death its citizens try anxiously and by all kinds of means to apprehend the future which will, perhaps, represent a deliverance for them. Never do oracles or prophecies, fortune-tellers or soothsayers enjoy as much favor and success as during periods of

11. These are the conclusions developed in the following studies: W. Hoffmann, *Wandel und Herkunft der Sibyllinischen Bücher*, Leipzig, 1933, and R. Bloch, "Origines étrusques des Livres Sibyllins," *Mélanges Ernout*, 1940, p. 21 ff. The problem is again considered in the recent thesis of J. Gagé, *Apollon romain; Essai sur le Culte d'Apollon et le Développement du "Ritus graecus" à Rome des Origines à Auguste*, Bibliothèque des Ecoles françaises de Rome et d'Athènes (Paris, de Boccard, 1955).

12. W. Warde Fowler, *Religious Experience of the Roman People from the Earliest Times to the Age of Augustus* (London, Macmillan & Co., 1911); G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 2d ed. (Munich, Beck, 1912), and Cyril Bailey, *Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome* (Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1932).



civil or foreign war. This is precisely what happened when Rome was threatened by the lightning thrust of Hannibal's troops.

A new penchant for divination, for predictions and oracles spread throughout the city. In 216 Fabius Pictor was sent as ambassador to the Delphic oracle to find out how long the Roman misfortunes would last. At the same time that they turned toward Greek manticism, the Romans unconsciously decided upon the Hellenization of their cult. In 212, at the command of Apollo, the Apollonian games were celebrated. The prodigy was consulted in a new fashion from then on. What do these increasingly numerous phenomena, which traditional rites were unable to expiate, indicate about Rome's destiny? Predictions spread in Rome; prophecies multiplied and some of them, like the poems of a soothsayer called Martius, which were doubtless written in Latin on tree bark, *corticibus caducis*, were judged in 213 to be worthy of being transcribed in the famous *Sibylline Books*. Indeed, one of these prophecies correctly announced the defeat at Cannae. But it is true that history does not tell us whether this was written before or after the battle.

Forthwith, the concept of the prodigy and the nature of these collected Capitoline writings changed simultaneously. From then on the prodigy had the power to destroy the obscure veil of the future. As for the sacred books, their guardians were thereafter able to find in them oracles which, anachronistically enough, dated from the very origins of these books. When, in 88 B.C., a blazing fire on the Capitoline destroyed them, a mission charged with their restoration was sent to the various Greek and Italian localities where it was thought that true Sibylline oracles could be found. From this time on the collection of writings merited the name by which it was to become famous.

The nature of the consultations with the haruspices changed in the same way. The latter were still consulted about the expiations demanded of them by prodigies, but the ancient science of the soothsayers was also appealed to. Curiously enough, it was only after the second century B.C., by a kind of return to the distant past, that the haruspex reappeared in Rome, with all the complexity of his divining techniques. The haruspices called upon by the Senate no longer limited their activity to expiating impurities. They could, from then on, put into practice the subtlety of their knowledge and the astuteness of their minds and forecast the destiny that awaited Rome. During the first century B.C. consultations with them greatly increased. Although they had previously competed with the Senate over the *Sibylline Books*, now public and private interest was increasingly directed toward them.

But although concepts evolved in this fashion and Rome, by a strange reversal of things, turned toward the Tuscan discipline at the end of the Republican era, critical philosophy penetrated more and more deeply into the cultured class. This philosophy became progressively detached from the popular beliefs which time had not at all eradicated. Already at the beginning of the second century stern Cato declared it was admirable that two haruspices could look at each other without laughing. But although little by little the governing classes moved further away from popular superstition, they did not hesitate, on the other hand, to make use of it for political purposes. The people's fear of the prodigy was unscrupulously exploited by the politicians toward the end of the Republican period. We know how Gaius Gracchus' enemies insidiously spread in Rome the rumor of imaginary prodigies that supposedly took place in Africa and which were said to have clearly indicated that the gods condemned the colonization of New Carthage. From then on the prodigy became an effective weapon in the hands of unscrupulous politicians who knew how to utilize it cleverly and who did not hesitate to stir up among the masses reactions that were all the more dangerous because the agitation was deeply rooted in people's souls. For example, an oracle which the quindecemvirs supposedly discovered in 57 B.C. in the sacred writings forbade Pompey to carry out his plans for an expedition into Egypt because, according to the falsified verdict of the oracle, the gods were plainly opposed to this project. This unabashed exploitation of popular sentiment only served, of course, to detach cultivated minds more thoroughly from old superstitions. In his *De divinatione* Cicero replied with the most radical kind of skepticism to the argument of his brother Quintus in favor of the traditional ways. According to Cicero the very principle of this discipline was contrary to the natural order; he confined himself to admitting halfheartedly that the state could continue to apply traditional rules in order to safeguard the public's religious beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

However, this utilitarian degradation as well as this detachment on the part of the cultured classes did not prevent secular beliefs from being perpetuated. To be sure, the solid organization for the public procurement of prodigies disappeared, and in Livy's time it was scarcely in usage any longer. "I know very well," he wrote, "that one no longer believes that the gods foresee the future, that prodigies are no longer announced to the public, and that they have ceased to be recorded in the Annals." And yet

13. Cf. the annotated edition of the *De divinatione*, made by Arthur Stanley Pease (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1923), Vol. VIII.

this ancient belief continued to persist obscurely in the hearts of the people. According to Tacitus and Suetonius, the gods did not cease to manifest their presence in the eyes of the people, nor did they desist from disseminating their warnings and their threats. Men of high rank, men of great culture continued to share these ancient superstitions during the entire course of the empire. But these superstitions were mingled with a whole complex of astrological and magical beliefs which the Chaldean astrologists and the wise men of Iran, streaming over the soil of the peninsula, helped to spread. The fine works of the late lamented Franz Cumont admirably demonstrate how the fusion between ancient Roman doctrine and new religious contributions took place. The history of this new evolution can only be touched upon here. I would merely like to point out that at present our knowledge does not rest solely upon texts and inscriptions but also upon art. The memory of the most famous prodigies is sometimes immortalized in stone.

For instance, two of the most famous imperial monuments, Trajan's Column and the Wall of Aurelian, preserve on their sculptured friezes the image of divine interventions in behalf of the Roman army in its battle against the Barbarians. On Trajan's Column, thundering Jupiter is depicted hurling lightning to help the legions that were engaged in a stiff combat with the Dacians.<sup>14</sup> On the Wall of Aurelian an allegorical figure of an old man whose hair and beard are dripping wet symbolizes the providential rain that came to the aid of the Romans parched with thirst and encircled by the Quadi. Torrents of water carry off the Barbarians pell mell, along with their chariots and their mounts. But this prodigy introduces us now into a new sacred world, because it was attributed to the powerful Egyptian god Thoth, comparable to the Occidental Mercury and Hermes. And it was an Egyptian priest, Harnouphis, who knew, through the efficaciousness of his evocatory prayer, how to call forth the intervention of the god of his native Egypt. Traditional religious elements are interpreted today in the light of cults emanating from the Orient.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, belief in prodigies never really disappeared from Roman paganism, although, as this article demonstrates, it underwent successive and

14. This episode is reproduced in the classical work of C. Cichorius, *Die Reliefs der Traiansaule* (Berlin, Riemer, 1896-1900), Plate XVIII, 60.

15. A picture of the scene is depicted in the recent book of C. Caprino, A. M. Colini, G. Gatti, M. Pallottino and P. Romanelli, *La Colonna di Marco Aurelio* (Rome, "L'Erma," 1956), pl. 11 and 12, fig. 23 and 24. J. Guey devoted several studies to the analysis of this prodigy in the *Revue de Philologie*, XXII, 1948, p. 16 ff. and in *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire*, LX, 1948, p. 105 ff. and LXI, 1949, p. 93 ff.

*Marvels and Divination in Ancient Italy*

extremely diverse stages. At the beginning of historical times, when the Etruscans lived in Rome, the prodigy entered fully into the world of divination. And the *haruspex* thus embarked upon a career that was of long duration, extending over a millennium, and enjoying at first in Rome the freedom of the city. But after the departure of the Tuscans, there began to spring up typically Latin conceptions that, while attributing great importance to the observation of the prodigy and to its expiation, to a large extent ignored manticism. And so, after the Tarquins, manticism departed from Rome, although a good deal of thought was given to preserving intact the ancient pact with the gods. At that time fear of the future did not stimulate the imagination. The crisis of the Punic Wars provoked among the masses a fresh interest in divination, however, and this was destined to remain to the present day a part of the Roman world. But Rome lacked almost entirely specialists in the kind of oracular art corresponding to the taste of the day. She had to rely upon the most diverse heirs to the ancient tradition of divination—in turn upon the Etruscan *haruspices*, the Greek oracles, the wise men of Iran, the Chaldean astrologers, the Egyptian priests—for replies to questions which preoccupied her people but which she, herself, could not resolve.