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Prodigies in Republican Rome. The Absence of God

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Summary: As opposed to the traditional view of the prodigium as a part of a divination that augurs divine wrath, in this article we regard episodes of prodigies as ancient societies’ expression of their connection with their gods. Prodigious episodes are the evidence of divine presence or absence within a community.

Keywords: Prodigium, Republican Rome, Religion, Historiography, Protection, Divine absence

1. Traditional Definition and View of Prodigy

In 1963 Raymond Bloch stated, „Un thème d’étude comme celui du prodige dans l’Antiquité grecque, étrusque et romaine n’est pas seulement vaste et complexe: il nécessite, pour être justement compris, le recours à des perspectives multiples, à des angles de vision divers“1. In fact, prodigious phenomena are studied in a profusión of very different works. From the critical rationalism of Krauss, who judges stories of prodigies as an indication of ancient societies’ ignorance of natural laws2, to the views of Rasmussen, who interprets prodigies as reaffirming elements of Roman collective identity3, authors such as Wülker4, Luterbacher5, Wissowa6, Bouché-Leclercq7, Bloch8, MacBain9, Rosenberger10 have examined the idea of the prodigy from “multiple perspectives and diverse viewpoints”.

1 Bloch 1963.
2 Krauss 1930.
3 Rasmussen 2003.
4 Wülker 1903.
5 Luterbacher 1904.
6 Wissowa 1912, 390–391.
7 Bouché-Leclercq 1882, 75.
8 Bloch 1963.
9 MacBain 1982.
10 Rosenberger 1998.

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Their approaches, however, have not notably altered or disputed the three fundamental principles on which the definition and concept of the prodigy are traditionally built. On the contrary, these authors more or less concur that a prodigy (1) is a phenomenon clearly beyond the limits of nature, (2) pertains to divination and (3) warns of an imminent peril, often caused by divine wrath. Let us analyse these three aspects in turn:

1.1 A Prodigy is a Phenomenon against Natural Laws

The traditional definition of *prodigium* is a phenomenon that unmistakeably surpasses the limits of nature. This simple definition may work for events such as the birth of a pig with a human face (Liv. 27.4.14), animals that speak (an ox, Liv. 24.10.10; a dog, Obseq. 43), unnatural deliveries (a cow giving birth to a colt, Liv. 23.31.8, a mule giving birth, Liv. 37.3.3); or several suns or moons in the sky (Obseq. 32; Liv. 28.11.3). However, this definition can hardly include such things so natural (and nonetheless so recurrent in the records of prodigies) as lightning strikes (hitting, walls, temples, people, etc. Liv. 24.44.8), fires (Obseq. 19; 39), plagues (Liv. 38.44.7; Obseq. 22), wolves and owls entering a city (Obseq. 13; 52), animals in temples (crows, Liv. 24.10.6; a vulture, Liv. 27.23.3; a kite, Obseq. 52; wasps, Liv. 35.9.4, etc; snakes, Liv. 28.11.2), a swarm of bees in the forum (Liv. 24.10.11; Obseq. 35), or plagues of locusts (Liv. 30.2.10). Besides, this definition also excludes events that bear no relation to nature at all, such as the unexpected opening of doors (of the temple of Neptune, Obseq. 52; of the Penates, Obseq. 13), and falling objects (Liv. 27.11.3).

These difficulties lead Bouché-Leclercq to claim that a prodigy is not necessarily an event against nature, but simply an uncommon or incidental event that draws spectators’ attention:

„Un prodige est essentiellement un accident fortuit, mais n’est pas nécessairement un phénomène contre nature, comme l’espèce appelée d’ordinaire monstrum. Il suffit qu’il soit inaccoutumé et attire l’attention par quelque particularité étrange ou effrayante“\(^{11}\).

Such a broad, imprecise, ambiguous definition often requires a classical author’s commentary before the events at issue can be deemed prodigious phenomena.

\(^{11}\) Bouché-Leclercq 1910, 667; Bouché-Leclercq 1882, 75: „Le prodige, dans la langue des devins, est bien un phénomène extraordinaire et remarqué pour cette raison; mais il n’est pas nécessairement contraire aux lois de la nature, à celles même que connaissaient les anciens“.
Modern research has not refined the definition of prodigy. In order to define this important and complex concept, Wissowa uses the words „aussergewöhnliche Naturereignisse und Schreckenszeichen“12, MacBain says prodigies „occurrence signified to the Roman mind a rupture of the pax deorum which required healing through expiatory rites“13, Distelrath expresses prodigies as „[natural] events perceived as extraordinary“14, Rasmussen, as „any unusual occurrence“15, and Rosemberger refers to „ungewöhnliche Geschehnisse“16. These definitions could be said to have served Franklin Brunell Kraus in his classic An interpretation of the Omens, Portents, and Prodigies Recorded by Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius17 to attempt to explain prodigious phenomena rationally based on natural laws unknown to the ancients, and they have led some scholars to raise the fruitless controversy of distinguishing between „genuine‘ and „false‘ prodigies18.

The ambiguity in the definition of the concept of the prodigy shows clearly in the differences between the lists of marvels compiled by modern authors. Rasmussen lists 150 prodigies19, while MacBain lists 19120.

1.2 A Prodigy is a Divinatory Sign that Reveals Divine Will

Bouché-Leclercq states that the extraordinary phenomenon or unexpected event was caused by the direct action of a deity seeking to reveal (prodere, prodicere) its intentions to humans21. Thus, prodigies became a type of divinatory sign, namely ablative signs: unsolicited signs to humans by the gods22. In this view prodigies were a special type of omen23.

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12 Wissowa 1912, 390.
13 MacBain 1982, 7.
14 Distelrath 2007, 931–932.
15 Rasmussen 2000, 11; Rasmussen 2003, 35: „unusual event“.
17 Pennsylvania, 1930.
Classical authors support this stance by providing interesting etymologies of the words typically associated with prodigies. As Cicero puts it,

„Indeed, the inherent force of these means of divination, as you like to observe, is clearly shown by the very words so aptly chosen by our ancestors to describe them. Because they ‘make manifest’ (ostendunt), ‘portend’ (portendunt), ‘intimate’ (monstrant), ‘predict’ (praedicunt), they are called ‘manifestations’, ‘portents’, ‘intimations’, and ‘prodigies’ (Cic. Div. 1.93)”

Saint Isidore offers further details:

„Portents are also called signs, omens, and prodigies, because they are seen to portend and display, indicate and predict future events. (3) The term ‘portent’ (portentum) is said to be derived from foreshadowing (portendere), that is, from ‘showing beforehand’ (praeoestendere). ‘Signs’ (ostentum), because they seem to show (ostendere) a future event. Prodigies (prodigium) are so called, because they ‘speak hereafter’ (porro dicere), that is, they predict the future. But omens (monstrum) derive their name from admonition (monitus), because in giving a sign they indicate (demonstrare) something, or else because they instantly show (monstrare) what may appear; and this is its proper meaning, even though it has frequently been corrupted by the improper use of writers. (4) Some portents seem to have been created as indications of future events, for God sometimes wants to indicate what is to come through some defects in newborns, and also through dreams and oracles, by which he may foreshadow and indicate future calamity for certain peoples or individuals, as is indeed proved by abundant experience.“ (Isid. Etym. 11.3.2–4)

Nevertheless, R. Bloch points out that he conception of prodigies as divinatory signs presents some difficulties. For the French historian, in the early Latin mindset, prodigies did not predict the future, but were terrifying signs of divine wrath:


“Pour la mentalité latine, le prodige n’est pas un signe préfigurant un avenir proche ou lointain, c’est un phénomène imprévu, terrible, contre nature et qui exprime sur terre la colère des Dieux. L’attitude psychologique est différente ici de celle que nous avons observée en Grèce et en Étrurie. Présages et prodiges ne sont pas des signes préfigurant l’avenir et que sépare seulement leur différence d’intensité et de force annonciatrice, le présage avertit l’homme de poursuivre ou d’arrêter son entreprise, le prodige révèle, pour sa part, que la paix des Dieux est rompue et que les individus et la cité sont gravement menacés par le courroux divin”26.

Bloch goes on to state that toward the end of the Republic the concept mutated and prodigies resumed the divinatory nature they had in the Greek world27. Notably, despite the proposed etymologies, Livy’s and Obsequens’ records of prodigies scarcely allude to the alleged consequences prodigies were thought to augur. When they did, the consequences were haruspices’ answers to a consultation by the Senate.

As I hope to show later, the prodigy in Republican times was simply the manifestation of a concrete reality: the absence of the protective gods. A prodigy did not reveal the gods’ intentions to humans. It did not announce the future. It simply showed the absence of God.

Obviously, the absence of God spelled consequences for a community’s future, hence the need to analyse and interpret the absence. At that point a prodigy can be regarded as a divinatory sign.

1.3 The prodigy portends a threat to humans

As Saint Isidore noted, the view of the prodigy as a divine sign often boded an upcoming threat for humans – *hominibus futuram cladem* (Isid. Etym. 11.3.4). For Bouché-Leclercq, the revelatory essence of the prodigy often entails a close threat of this kind28. G. Wissowa and R. Bloch are more specific about the threat. These authors suggest that a prodigy warned humans that their relationship with the gods (traditionally known as *pax deorum*) was broken, which could only bring

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26 Bloch 1963, 82.
28 Bouché-Leclercq 1910, 667: „L’idée de révélation, avertissement impliquant d’ordinaire une menace pour un avenir prochain, apparaît dans tous les termens latins, à peu près synonymes, entre lesquels les érudits anciens et modernes ont vainement cherché à introduire des nuances fixes: ostentum de ostendere; monstrum de monstrare ou monere; portentum de portendere.“
negative consequences\textsuperscript{29}. For Lisdorf, „they [prodigia] are signs that the state is on the way towards some misfortune“\textsuperscript{30}.

Livy, for instance, mentions that in 461, due to a large number of prodigies, the sacred duumvirs consulted the Sybilline books, which presaged menaces from a group of foreigners, attacks on Rome and death (Liv. 3.10.7)\textsuperscript{31}. Obsequens said that in 152 BC the haruspices announced that the prodigies portended the death of judges and priests (Obseq. 18)\textsuperscript{32}. For this reason, all the magistrates resigned as quickly as they could. Lastly, Cicero stated that, for the year 65 BC, the haruspices foreboded not only massacres, fires and civil war, but also the absolute ruin of the City and the Empire (Cic. Catil. 3.19–20)\textsuperscript{33}.

These misfortunes could be averted through a series of expiatory and propitiatory ceremonies ordered by the religious authorities to restore the community’s relations with the gods, the \textit{pax deorum}. All the deeds, tributes, sacrifices and purification for restoring relations were part of what known as \textit{procuratio prodigiorum}. This was an essential procedure for the protection of Rome, entrusted to the highest political authorities, the consuls\textsuperscript{34}.

However, as Orosius notes (Hist. 4.1.19; 5.6.2), the course of the process (prodigy = revelation of misfortunes = \textit{procuratio prodigiorum} = restoration of \textit{pax deorum}) did not correspond to the reality of certain prodigious phenomena that did not foreshadow a threat but instead were misfortunes in themselves, as in the case of earthquakes, pestilences, fires and volcanic eruptions, to which the clas-

\textsuperscript{29} Wissowa 1912, 390–391: „Lustrationen geschehen [...] insbesondere [...], wenn aussergewöhnliche Naturereignisse und Schreckenszeichen (prodigia) darauf hinweisen, dass das normale Verhältnis zwischen Gemeinde und Gottheit eine Störung erfahren hat und der ersteren daraus ernste Gefahren drohen. Diese Anzeichen konnten ihrer Art nach sehr verschieden sein, von dem häufigsten und am wenigsten bedrohlichen, dem Blitzschlage, an bis zu Sonnenfinsternissen, Stein- und Blutregen, Missgeburten (namentlich Zwittergeburten) und anderen beängstigenden Abweichungen vom natürlichen laufe der Dinge.“ Bloch 1963, 82.

\textsuperscript{30} Lisdorf 2007, 205.

\textsuperscript{31} Libri per duumviris sacrorum aditi; pericula a conuentu alienigerarum praedicta, ne qui in loca summa Vrbis impetus caedesque inde fierent.

\textsuperscript{32} Cumque aruspices respondissent magistratum et sacerdotum interitus fore.

\textsuperscript{33} Caedes atque incendia et legum interitus et bellum ciuile ac domesticum et totius urbis atque imperi occasum appropinquare dixerunt [...] ac se sperare dixerunt. fore ut ea consilia quae clam essent inita contra salutem urbis atque imperi inlustrarentur. See Obseq. 28; Obseq. 29; Obseq. 37; Obseq. 44; Obseq. 46; Obseq. 48; Obseq. 57; Obseq. 61; Obseq. 65; Obseq. 68, etc. Ors. 5.4.8; Ors. 5.4.19; Ors. 5.6.2; Ors. 5.18.3–6. The threats involved in the prodigies may also explain that they often collocate with negative adjectives (obscenus, gravis, dirus, tristis, infamis) or a series of displays or expressions of fear (Oros. 1.13.2; 2.5.1; 4.1.16; 4.4.1; 4.13.12; 4.15.1; 5. 15.20; 5.18.3; 5.18.9; Liv. 30.38.8).

\textsuperscript{34} Bloch 1949, 119–131.
sical authors ascribed thousands of casualties and disasters (Liv. 4.25.3; Obseq. 29, etc.). In these cases the prodigy was clearly not a divinatory sign, but the clear manifestation of the absence of divine protection.

In contrast with the conception of the prodigy as an omen of future tragedies, authors such as Livy, Obsequens and Orosius provide numerous cases of prodigies linked to positive episodes for Rome and its citizens. For instance, the extraordinary flooding of the lake of the sacred forest of Alba in the year 398 BC foretold the victory of the Romans over the Veientes (Liv. 5.15.11); the prodigies of the year 205 BC announced the victory of the Romans (Liv. 29.10.4–8), and prodigies in the year 172 BC, the expansion of borders and the extermination of enemies (Liv. 42.20.2). According to Obsequens, in the year 98 BC a hail of white clay in the theatre foretold of good harvests and fine weather (Obseq. 47); in the year 86 BC, a lightning strike presaged the Roman victory in the assault of the Piraeus (Obseq. 56b). Also in the year 86 BC, the burning of a temple dedicated to Minerva where the statue of the goddess was undamaged preluded the restoration of Ilion (Obseq. 56b); and, in the year 75 BC, blood stains on defensive weaponry meant a good omen for Sertorius and his soldiers (Obseq. 60).

Dramatising the adverse consequences boded by prodigies, some authors have even suggested that prodigious episodes were signs of divine wrath against humans as a consequence of humankind’s reprehensible actions, mistakes, or oversights. Wülker stated that „ein prodigium ist ein naturwidriges oder aussergewöhnliches Vorkommnis, das als Zeichen göttlichen Zornes gilt. Aus letztergenannter Eigenschaft ergibt sich, was scharf betont werden muss, dass ein ‚gutes’ Prodigium ein Widerspruch in sich selbst ist“. For Bloch, the prodigy in the Latin mind was a terrifying sign of the divine wrath: „il est le signe terrifiant de la colère des Dieux et suscite chez l’ homme un sentiment d’horror, un frémississement qui le saisit devant l’intervention tangible des forces divines“. According to Scheid, „[L]es prodiges et les catastrophes apprenant aux magistrats la colère de dieux et les incitaient à en rechercher la cause“. The prodigy revealed that the peace with the gods had been broken and the city lay in dire peril of divine wrath: „tandis que le presage avertit l’homme, de poursuivre ou d’arreter sa route, le prodige revele, pour sa part, que la paix des dieux est rompue et que la cite est gravement menacee par le courroux divin. [...] Le prodige

35 Luterbacher 1904, 6; Engels 2007, 44–45; Scheid 2014, 99.
36 Wülker 1903, 1.
37 Bloch 1963, 85–86.
38 Scheid 2014, 126.
est funeste et reclame une expiation rapide“. The *procuratio prodigiorum* was meant to appease the fury of the gods.

However, there is very little evidence connecting prodigies with the presumed divine wrath. Of the more than 60 prodigious episodes present in his work, Livy speaks unambiguously about divine wrath (*ira deum*) – only on three occasions. The first two are in relation to epidemics that caused countless casualties (in the year 433 BC, 4.25.3; in the year 180 BC, 40.37.2), and the third appears during the war against Hannibal (in the year 217 BC, 22.9.10). Not a single allusion to this connection is found in Obsequens. Dionysus of Halicarnassus refers to divine wrath in prodigies three out of nine times: in the year 483 BC, *Θείου χόλου* (8.89.3), in 472 BC *χόλου δαμόνων* (9.40), and in 398 BC *ὡς δαμονίου τινός μηνίοντος τῇ πόλει* (12.10.2). Orosius cites celestial wrath (*caelestis ira*) in relation to an epidemic that caused numerous victims (4.5.7), although, faithful to his Christian apologetic character, he attributes this to God by replacing the expression *iratos deos* in the Sybiline books by *iram caestelem*.

As will be seen below, in the Greco-Roman tradition, invocations of alleged celestial wrath were unlikely. Such a fear could have been considered a *supersticio*.

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Despite the contradictions and problems mentioned above, recent scholarly research has not substantially altered the three basic principles upon which the concept of the prodigy has been traditionally defined and viewed. In 2003 S.W. Rasmussen defines the prodigy as follows: „I define as a *prodigium* any unusual event reported to the Senate and approved by that body as a *prodigium publicum*, an unfavourable portent that is usually relevant to society as a whole and requires ritual expiation. Thus, a prodigy is a peculiar event described in the sources as a sign that the *pax deorum* has been disturbed, and this type of portent calls for expiation to be performed in public“.

A few years later, in the entry for „prodigien“ in the *Thesaurus Cultus at Rituum Antiquorum* (2005), Veit Rosenberger stated: „Als Prodigien (oder auch *portenta, ostenta*) galten ungewöhnliche Geschehnisse, die eine Störung der pax

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40 Sed, ne quemquam quasi temptatae caulliationis offendat quod cum Sibylla iratos deos dixerit, nos iram caelestem dixisse videamus, audiat et intellegat quia haec, etsi plerumque per aerias potestates fiunt, tamen sine arbitrio omnipotentis Dei omnino non fiunt.
41 Rasmussen 2003, 35.
deorum und den Zorn der Götter verkündeten. Prodigien waren stets ungünstige Zeichen“ 42.

In the rest of this paper, I will try to show that an approach from a different perspective would change the concept of prodigies considerably and solve the problems and contradictions of the traditional definition and view noted above. In particular, I propose to analyse the prodigy on the basis of the ancient population’s perception of nature and how nature is organised, instead of regarding the prodigy as a divinatory sign and the aftermath of the divine wrath. Thus, I endorse R. Bloch’s view of an evolution in the perception of the prodigy from its origins to the end of the Roman Republic period, by which time, as Livy affirms (43.13.1–3), the original sense of the concept had been lost.

2. Prodigy and Chaos

We face a great deal of uncertainties and remarkable differences when attempting to interpret and evaluate the literary testimonies handed down to us about the origin of the world. However, we can state that numerous ancient cosmogonies start with a primitive element under some name, such as Chaos, Nyx (Night), Tartarus, Aether, Hades, Porus, Erebus or Nu, in the form of darkness, empty space, unformed matter, primordial water, chaos, and a range of often negative values associated with anarchy and disorder. This primitive chaos is transformed by the intervention of a „Supreme Being“, „demiurgic genesis“ or „Demiurge“ into an ordered world, a „cosmos“/κόσμος, where gods and humans can live in peace and harmony43.

This „Cosmic Orderer“ separates light from darkness, earth from sky, dry from wet and good from evil. It upholds order and justice on Earth, the fertility of lands, livestock and humans, the regular cycle of the seasons, the orbit of the stars, the usual flow of the rivers, the customary evolution of things – in a nutshell, the established and ordered cycle of life on Earth.

In the first lines of his Metamorphoses, Ovid perfectly encapsulates the popular belief in the existence of a demiurge responsible for organising the original chaos:


\[\text{43 Kirk – Raven 1966; Martinez Nieto 2000.}\]
“Before the ocean and the earth appeared—
before the skies had overspread them all—
the face of Nature in a vast expanse
was naught but Chaos uniformly waste.
It was a rude and undeveloped mass,
that nothing made except a ponderous weight;
and all discordant elements confused,
were there congested in a shapeless heap.
As yet the sun afforded earth no light,
nor did the moon renew her crescent horns;
the earth was not suspended in the air
exactly balanced by her heavy weight.
Not far along the margin of the shores
had Amphitrite stretched her lengthened arms,—
for all the land was mixed with sea and air.
The land was soft, the sea unfit to sail,
the atmosphere opaque, to naught was given
a proper form, in everything was strife,
and all was mingled in a seething mass—
with hot the cold parts strove, and wet with dry
and soft with hard, and weight with empty void.
But God, or kindly Nature, ended strife—
he cut the land from skies, the sea from land,
the heavens ethereal from material air;
and when were all evolved from that dark mass
he bound the fractious parts in tranquil peace.
The fiery element of convex heaven
leaped from the mass devoid of dragging weight,
and chose the summit arch to which the air
as next in quality was next in place.
The earth more dense attracted grosser parts
and moved by gravity sank underneath;
and last of all the wide surrounding waves
in deeper channels rolled around the globe” (Ov. Met. 1.4–30).
Ancient societies soon identified this „Cosmic Orderer“ with their protective gods, as expressed in the etymology of the term ‘gods’ as attributed by Herodotus to the Pelasgians, based on the assumption that θεός meant „a disposer“ connected with Θεσμός, τίθημι, etc.45

„Formerly, in all their sacrifices, the Pelasgians called upon gods (this I know, for I was told at Dodona) without giving name or appellation to any; for they had not as yet heard of such. They called them gods because all things and the due assignment thereof were by them set in order“ (Hdt. 2.52.1)46

Thus, such deities as An, Marduk, Bel, Ahura Mazda, Yahveh, Zeus and Jupiter are regarded as ordering gods, protectors of order on Earth and guarantors of the justice, welfare and survival for their communities.

Now, this „order“ established by the primitive Demiurge is eternally threatened by a number of primeval forces that seek to re-establish the original chaos and are prepared to fight to return to the primitive ἀρχη. Only the ongoing dramatic fight of the saviour gods against those formless, evil primeval forces preserves the „order“ required for the survival of human on Earth. This is why Cronus, leading the forces of order, fought against Ophioneus, commander of the army of chaos and anarchy (Orig. C. Celsum, VI 42); why Zeus defeated the Titans (Hes. Theog. 616–820), Typhon (Hes. Theog. 820–885) and the Gigantes (Apollod. I 6); and why Osiris and Horus fought against Typhon/Set (Plut. Mor. 355B–358D), to name just a few examples.

Without the repeated victory of the „Superior Being“ who orders and governs the „cosmos“, the world would return to „chaos/χάος“, disorder, and all the adverse effects thereby unleashed: injustice, darkness, drought, floods, earthquakes, monstrous births, death, sterility, the chaotic movement of celestial bodies, colossal rainstorms, etc. The return to chaos is a recurrent fear in all societies, and the eternal fight between order and chaos – in many cases seen as the fight between good and evil – also stands as a perennial though all times and all cultures.


45 Godley 1946, 341, note 1.
46 Ἔθυον δὲ πάντα πρότερον οἱ Πελασγοὶ θεοῖσι ἐπευχόμενοι, ώς ἐγὼ ἐν Δωδόνῃ οίδα ἀκούσας, ἐπωνυμίαν δὲ οὐδ’ οὖνομα ἐποιεύτων οὐδὲν αὐτῶν· οὐ γάρ ἄκηκοεσάν κω. θεοὺς δὲ προσυνήμασαν σφέας ἀπὸ τοῦ τοιοῦτον ὅτι κόσμῳ θέντες τὰ πάντα πρήγματα και πάσας νομάς εἶχον. Traducción de Godley 1946.
Only under the protection of the „Cosmic Orderer“ or „Protective God“, victor over evil and anarchy, can humans live in peace and abundance. The gods’ protection from chaos and its allied forces constitutes the basis upon which human stability and survival rest. The main duty of humans on Earth is to keep that protection. The phrase *pax deorum*, mentioned above, conveys that essential relationship between humans and gods. This relationship is built on criteria comparable to those of any patronage system whereby the patron (god) protects his clients (humans) in exchange for a series of services, properties and offerings.

Without divine patronage humans would find themselves vulnerable to terrible primitive forces. For this reason, ancient societies feared that the formless powers would take advantage of any rift in the alliance between gods and humans to restore the grievous pre-cosmic disorder. Two causes could prompt such a distressing prospect:

1. The protective gods might be defeated and forced to abandon a territory or a community.
2. The gods might deliberately cease to protect humans due to some human negligence or action.

The first cause (1) is particularly dramatic, as it means a community’s patron gods have been temporarily defeated by the evil primitive forces, which will prevent the gods from continuing in their role of orderers and protectors. A distressed Plutarch wonders (Mor. 171D) what sacrifices and sacred rites the Typhons or the Giants would have demanded if they had ruled after defeating the gods:

„Yet, if Typhons or Giants were ruling over us after they had expelled the gods, with what sort of sacrifices would they be pleased, or what other holy rites would they require?“

Humans feared the protective gods’ defeat at the hands of the pre-cosmic gods and the restoration of primitive chaos and darkness in the world. This is clearly expressed in ancient societies’ perception of eclipses. Eclipses are mentioned in the list of prodigies given abode and were commonly regarded as clear evidence of the terrible fight between good and evil spirits, represented by light and darkness, respectively.

An eclipse was interpreted as an attempt by the spirits of the night to put an end to the moon’s dim light or even to seize the power of the protective gods,

the bright day. The fear of a final victory by the evil spirits and an eternal darkness invading human life prompted humans to take part in this dramatic war on the side of their protective gods\textsuperscript{49}. Classical authors tell of the popular custom of pounding bronze objects, blowing on trumpets, yelling, and making as much noise as possible to help gods frighten evil spirits away when an eclipse occurred\textsuperscript{50}. The belief that in so doing humans struck a blow in the terrible fight between good and evil is present in the Christian sermons of the Middle Ages, as Maximus of Turin reflects\textsuperscript{51}.

However, apart from the cosmogonical fear of the defeat of the guardian gods of order, all ancient societies were afraid of a much closer reality: the defeats of their community’s patron gods by the protective deities of an enemy city. Such defeat often resulted in the defeated god’s taking flight and abandoning the community. The evil, formless primitive forces would take advantage of the absence of a protective deity, so the community would stand before an uncertain fate of undesirable consequences. The numerous prodigies that were often reported as coinciding with the war crises of ancient cities (Liv. 21.63.13–15; Sil. 5.53–76; etc.), and coupled with the defeats of their armies are the fearsome testimony of the forced retreat of the defeated protective gods.

Conversely, the gods might also deliberately cease to protect humans\textsuperscript{(2)}, and leave them at the mercy of evil spirits, which always lurked, awaiting their chance.

Numerous classical passages of all times and cultures confirm the universal fear of divine desertion. In the ancient Near East, the well-known Hittite myth of Telepinu clearly reflects this idea. The retreat of a god enraged with his people made the mist and darkness invade their dwellings, made mothers leave their sons, made the flocks choke and made the natural order of things change. The natural order of the community and divine protection could only be recovered with the return of the god (Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, edited by James B. Pritchard, Princeton 1950, 126–128). Jerusalem was taken by Nebuchadnezzar when Yahveh abandoned his temple (Ez. 11. 23; Ios. bell. Iud. 5. 412). The fall of Troy occurred when the gods abandoned their temples (Verg. Aen. 2.351–352). The entrance of the Persians in Athens coincided with the disappearance of the goddess that protected the city (Hdt. 8.41; Plut. Them. 10.1).

\textsuperscript{49} Lunais 1979, 209–212.
\textsuperscript{50} Liv. 26.5.9; 44.379; Ov. Met. 4.332–333; Iuv. 6.442–443; Sen. nat. 71.2.
\textsuperscript{51} Max. Taur. Sermo 30 (De defectione lunae); Corpus Christ. serie latina, 23, 117–119. See Giordano 1983, 189–190.
Livyy suggests that the abandonment of the goddess Juno, invoked by the Romans, made the fall of the Veii into the hands of Rome (5.21.3ss) inevitable\textsuperscript{52}.

If we see the prodigy as the absence of gods and therefore the absence of godly protection, we can understand that from a Roman perspective there could be positive prodigies showing that the gods have ceased to protect an enemy community.

The reasons why a deity might purposefully leave the community he had hitherto protected are varied. The patron god may be unhappy with some deed, error or neglect by his people, usually in relation with the god’s worship, or another city may pledge superior offerings, provisions or statues. This pecuniary facet is present in one of the most interesting Roman institutions, the euocatio\textsuperscript{53}.

The abandoned community can struggle to re-establish its relationship with the protective gods by making amends for the deeds that caused the rift (purifying the city – Obseq. 42a; 49; 52; 63; Liv. 21.62.7 –, repeating the rite, Liv. 41.15.1–3; SHA. Pert. 11.2, etc.), and/or offering better and greater gifts to the gods (sacrifices, as in Obseq. 28; 35; 39; 46; Liv. 21.62.7; 27.11.1–6; offerings, as in Obseq. 28; 43; Liv. 21.62.7, temples, as in Obseq. 37; Liv. 4.25.3; Plin. nat. 18.286; donations, as in Obseq. 43; 46; 53; representations, as in Obseq. 43; 46; 48; Val. Max. 8.15.12; Liv. 21.62.7). The gods could then show their appreciation for the effort at redemption by agreeing to renew their alliance with the distressed community.

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Changes in the natural order of life warn humans that one of these two terrible and unfavourable situations has occurred: Their protective deity either has been forcibly evicted or has deliberately abandoned them. There are tangible signs of the collapse or destruction of the universal order established by the „Supreme Being“ after his fight against evil: days blackening unexpectedly, an influx of wolves and owls, statues weeping, sweating, moving or falling down, earthquakes, bleeding lands, freak rains (of meat, milk, stones or blood), speaking animals, fertile mules, flames or other sorts of meteors in the sky, the birth of monstrous aberrations, visions, plagues, fires, etc. Lack of divine protection leads to the return of disorder and primitive chaos amongst humans, and only unfortunate consequences can follow.

For a community a prodigy is the obvious manifestation of the absence of their protective god. The god who, after his battle with chaos and its dwellers,
organised life on Earth, regulated the cycle of seasons for harvest, divided day and night and civilised from savage, favoured natural births, enforced justice and even kept diseases away. In short, the god who supports a regular order of the world that enables humans to live in peace and harmony.

Now, if prodigies are by and large the evidence of a lack of divine protection due to forced or deliberate abandonment, we could further distinguish between (1) those prodigies that reveal the specific action of the divine desertion and (2) those prodigies that clearly show that the gods have already gone.

Amongst the former, we find, for instance, earthquakes, perspiration or motion by divine simulacra and temple doors that suddenly open. Such episodes simply and naturally express the flight of the god from the place where he lived and was worshipped.

Miguel Requena notes in a recent paper that earthquakes (Liv. 4.21.5; 41.28.2; Obseq. 59, etc.) were seen in the ancient times as the result of the emergence of a divine power from inside the Earth, sometimes to help the community, sometimes to leave it54.

We may interpret the prodigy of perspiration by a divine simulacrum along the same lines (Liv. 22.1.12; 27.4.14; Plu. Alex. 14.8–9; Cic. Div. 1.74; 1.98; 1.99; Sil. 1.98; Cass. Dio 40.17.1–2; 40.47.2: SHA. Comm. 16.4–5, etc.). A simulacrum sweating must be seen as evidence that the divine power that entered the object during consecration was now leaving the effigy and therefore giving up its role as protector of the person or city responsible for the object’s consecration. Thus, for instance, shortly before the destruction of Troy, „salt sweat coursed over the limbs“ (Verg. Aen. 2.173–174)55 of the Palladium, the statue of Pallas Athena to which the fate of the city was bound; Virgil insists that the Trojans had lost the divine favour.

Also, certain movements by consecrated simulacra clearly showed that the deity was deserting the community or the person he had protected until then (Artemid. 2.33; Plu. Alex. 24.5–7; SHA. Comm. 16.4). Particularly noteworthy is the narrative that recounts that one of the presages of the death of emperor Comodus was that „footprints of the gods were seen in the Forum departing from it“ (SHA. Comm. 16.1)56. Likewise, the sudden opening of temple doors is a sign of the departure of the god from his erstwhile abode (Obseq.13; 52, Tac. Hist. 5.13.1; Ios. bell. Iud. 6.293–299; SHA. Comm. 16.4)57.

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54 Requena Jiménez 2014b.
57 Weinreich 1968.
However, in most cases, a prodigy is only the manifestation that a community has already been abandoned by its protective god (2), that is, that a temple, city or territory is bereft of the required divine presence/protection. It is in this sense that we must understand such phenomena as the arrival of wolves and owls to the city, the toppling of divine simulacra, lightning strikes in temples, aberrant births, unusual rainstorms, etc.

In the case of the arrival of wolves and owls (Liv. 5.29.9; 27.37.3; Obseq. 63), the prodigy signifies actual evidence that the wild world, symbolised by both animals, has intruded into the human civic and religious centre that the city in general, and the city of Rome in particular, epitomises\(^58\). The irruption of the wild into a civilised space may have only become possible because the gods have ceased to protect the place and gone away. Thus, all evil may seize the now-defenceless area.

This same belief in the absence of protective gods enables us to understand, for instance, prodigious phenomena like the toppling of divine simulacra. It was believed that with consecration the god’s power filled the object – made of wood, clay, stone, bronze, or any other material – that represented the deity. From that moment on, the mysterious godly power turned the object into an animate beings able to speak, laugh, move, and otherwise interact with devotees. The consecrated statue thus became the god’s abode and the vehicle of demonstration his divine power, and from that moment on possession of the statue and ritual connection with the statue enabled humans to share the divine power and its protection. However, when the deity left, the object turned back into mere wood, stone, bronze, etc., and could then suffer adversity, as it was devoid of divine force. It was for this reason that temples might also be struck by lightning (App. civ. 1.78; Cic. Catil. 3.19–20; Div. 1.19–20; Obseq. 12; 61; Tac. 13.24; Oros. 4.4.1), destroyed by fire (Obseq. 8; 19) and devastated by storms (Obseq. 16) or animals might even make their nests inside them (Tac. Ann. 13.64; Obseq. 14; 20). Without the divine presence, the sacred area was vulnerable. And hence, for instance, as Livy says, in 210 BC some birds flew their nests in the trees of a holy forest (27.4.12).

Without the divine presence, chaos and primeval forces would resettle and regain control of the world, bringing down all sorts of misfortunes for humans. The end of the order established by the protective gods set humans adrift in an era of helplessness and chaos resulting in the birth of monstrous creatures (Liv. 31.12.5–10; Obseq. 14; 22; 25; 27a; Oros. 5.4.8; 5.11; Tac. Ann. 13.64), talking animals (Liv. 41.13.1–3; Obseq. 15; 26; Plin. nat. 10.50), sex changes (Plin. nat. 7.36; Diod. 32.12.2), hails of stones, blood, milk, meat, etc. (Liv. 1.31; 3.10.5–7; 5.13, 4–8; 7.28.6–

\(^{58}\) Trinquier 2004.
8; Dion. Hal. ant. 10.2.2–6, Plin. nat. 2.147; Aug. civ. 3.17), plagues (Liv. 3.7.6–8; 4.25.3; 5.31.5; 5.27.1; Obseq. 22; Oros. 2.12.2; 3.4.1–6), cannibalism (Obseq. 40) and devastating storms (Liv. 40. 2.1–4; Obseq. 5). Not even the stars would preserve their prescribed order, and the sky might contain many suns and moons (Plin. nat. 2.98; Oros. 4.15.1; 6.13.12), shrinking suns (Oros. 4.15.1), or flames (Plin. nat. 2.98; Oros. 2.12.2; 4.13.12), etc.

Seen from this new stance, a prodigy is not so much a presage of a rift between gods and humans, but the realisation of the end of the divine protection of a community or person. That is to say, prodigies should not be regarded as messages, but as symptoms of a frightening situation: the desertion or absence of a community’s protective deity, resulting in the return of primitive chaos and the collapse of the regular cycle of life. It is in this sense that we might take the evidently ironical question „where were those gods?“ (Vbi ergo erant illi dii?), posed repeatedly by Saint Augustine in his narration of the misfortunes of Rome throughout its history (Aug. civ. 3.17).

A prodigy could also be a sign that the gods had abandoned an enemy community, and therefore it could be seen as positive for Roman society.

Thus, a prodigy was not actually a divinatory sign. It did not augur anything. It was a symptom, a particular situation stemming from the absence of the gods that protected a community or a person. Obviously, the gods’ absence could only bring misfortunes. This could have led to the subsequent consideration of prodigy as a divinatory sign of ill omen. We must bear in mind that our sources come from a time in history when, as Livy points out, the original meaning and judgement of prodigies were no longer understood (43.13.1–3).

This new understanding of prodigies compels us to relativise the importance that many historians have pinned on the idea of the divine wrath. As said above, a prodigy is essentially a sign of the forced or deliberate abandonment of divine protection, not the manifestation of godly wrath. Greco-Roman gods protect, defend and take care of humans; they abandon human but rarely punish them directly. Accordingly, the procuratio prodigiorum, should be seen less as a remedy to appease an aggrieved deity and more as a means of reconciliation with the gods, with the ultimate aim of regaining their protection and having the natural order (the „cosmos“) restored.

The oft-cited phrase placare deum (Liv. 8.25.1), conventionally translated as „appease the gods“⁵⁹, „apaiser les dieux“⁶⁰, should be interpreted as „pleasing the gods“, so they will come back home to their cities, temples or statues, back

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to the bosom of their communities. The actions prescribed in the *procuratio prodigiorum* (present more sacrifices, offer new and precious simulacra, build new temples, offer lectisternia, etc.) address the need to attract the gods again.

During the lectisternium held in Rome to end the plague of 399 BC, the doors of the houses stood wide open and all strangers were welcomed. This action perfectly reflects the wish to held bring the deity back home to the city:

„The severe winter was succeeded, whether in consequence of the sudden change from such inclement weather to the opposite extreme, or for some other reason, by a summer that was noxious and baleful to all living creatures. Unable to discover what caused the incurable ravages of this distemper, or would put an end to them, the senate voted to consult the Sibylline Books. The duumvirs in charge of the sacred rites then celebrated the first lectisternium ever held in Rome, and for the space of eight days sacrificed to Apollo, to Latona and Diana, to Hercules, to Mercury and to Neptune, spreading three couches for them with all the splendour then attainable. They also observed the rite in their homes. All through the City, they say, doors stood wide open, all kinds of viands were set out for general consumption, all comers were welcomed, whether known or not, and men even exchanged kind and courteous words with personal enemies; there was a truce to quarrelling and litigation; even prisoners were loosed from their chains for those days, and they scrupled thenceforth to imprison men whom the gods had thus befriended.“ (Liv. 5.13.4–7)61

Thus, it is from this perspective of abandonment of divine protection that we should interpret the so-called *strictu sensu* prodigies (*prodigia*) and omens of death (*omina mortis*), both of which are present in the classical literature of all times and all cultures.

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Very early on it was interpreted that, if a prodigy is originally negative inasmuch as it reveals a lack of divine protection (an abandonment that can only bring adverse effects), then, just as the alteration of the natural order is a sign of the divine absence, divine presence might also be revealed through similar phenomena.

Indeed, events such as the extraordinary growth of plants, animals or people, the blessing of abundant harvests, the birth of animals or humans of exceptional size or with exceptional features, freedom from natural disasters, animals' respect for sacred places, the divine simulacra's ability to speak or nod, victory in war, flashes of light during the night, etc. are signs of the divine presence in the community. More precisely, these phenomena evince that the community in question has received the god's special protection.

Ancient societies also believed that the cosmic order temporarily destroyed as a result of divine absence could be restored thanks to the intervention or mediation of individuals who enjoyed the approval and special protection of the gods. These people could even augur the creation of a cosmic order superior to the one humans had enjoyed hitherto. In other words, they could further the advent of a new „Golden Age“ when the gods would protect a community more strongly.

Some episodes „that exceed the ordinary limits of nature“ were regarded as sign that portended the creation of a new, superior „order“ by virtue of the presence of a human being „beloved by the gods“; other episodes were seen as the manifestation that some individuals, thanks to divine protection, had power over nature and were able to restore and even improve the existing order. By way of illustration, episodes surpassing normal natural limits included the extraordinary growth of certain trees (Suet. Aug. 94.11; Suet. Vesp. 5.2–3; SHA. Alex. 13. 7); the birth of a young bull of colossal dimensions (SHA. Aurelian. 4.7); the blossoming of purple roses with a rose-like scent but gold petals (SHA. Aurelian. 5.1) coinciding with the birth of several Roman emperors; the presence of a rainbow-like ring around the sun in a calm, clear sky (Suet. Aug. 95; Oros. Hist. 6.20.5), the upwelling of an oil fountain at the very moment Augustus entered Rome (Oros. 6.20.6), and the healing of a blind man and a lame man (a one-armed man according to Tacitus and Cassius Dio) by Vespasian (Suet. Vesp. 7.2.3; Tac. hist. 4.81; Cass. Dio. 65.8.1).

In this latter case, the deity transfers his ordering powers to a member of the community. This new „Cosmocrator“, represented by an emperor, a monarch, a saint, a pharaoh, a hero, or some other appointed person, was in charge of regaining divine protection, and reinstating and improving the ruined order. This is a complex but fundamental aspect for comprehending the worship and even deification of still-living emperors. The subject is also present in apologetic dedications to the Roman emperors (Plin. epist. 10.52; paneg. 67.3), amongst other places.

This second idea helps us understand the true meaning of the innumerable *omens imperii* and miracles with which the literature of all times and cultures has adorned the biographies of people beloved by the gods. This feature was strongly developed in Hellenistic and Imperial times when referring to the benef-
icent nature of certain individuals, who were blessed with the special position of mediators before the gods for the welfare of the community or turned out to be protective gods themselves.

It is from this perspective of divine presence and transfer of the protective and ordering function of the gods to certain individuals that we should see the well-known presages of power (*omina imperii*) and miracles (*miracula*).

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We can conclude by stating that, for ancient societies, during the Republican period prodigious phenomena were the clear manifestation of divine absence within a human community.

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