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THE RELIGIO-POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE REIGN OF AUGUSTUS: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF PUBLIC PRODIGIES

The article explores the causes which led to the final disappearance of the Roman Republican practice of the expiation of public prodigies (ill-boding divinatory signs) in the beginning of the principate. After a short exposition of the system of Roman expiation of public prodigies, individual theories explaining their disappearance are explored in greater detail. These theories are dismissed as either erroneous or incomplete, e.g. these operating with the general decline of Roman republican religion, philosophical criticism of superstitious religious practices, abuse of prodigies in political controversies or for self-advertisement of important noblemen, loss of their importance after the political unification of Italy, etc. In conclusion, the author of this article formulates an alternative theory explaining the reasons behind their ultimate disappearance: they were so closely connected with the values of Roman political and religious elites and played such an important role in the process of building Roman national identity that they lost their rationale after the establishment of the principate, since from that time these values were invested into and this role played by Roman emperors and their families.

Keywords: Public prodigies, expiation of prodigies, Roman priestly collegia, disappearance of prodigies, *omina imperii*.

In the Roman cultural context the term *prodigium*¹ (pl. *prodigia*) labelled unusual events and phenomena that were supposedly caused by the act of some powerful deity. They heralded a breach of the *pax deorum*, the har-

¹ In addition to that term some other expressions were used in connection with these phenomena, e.g. *portentum*, *ostentum*, *monstrum*, *praesagium* or *miraculum*. It is impossible to establish precise distinctions in their meaning and it can be even doubted that some rigorous criterion has ever existed. See BLOCH (1963: 84); MOUSSY (1977: 346–348). With certain amount of generalization we can note that the words *ostentum* and *portentum* related especially to inanimate objects, while *monstrum* and *miracu-*

monious relationship of the Roman nation with their gods, triggered either by an intentional transgression or by unintended negligence. As such, they could occur at any moment and were, at least during the Roman Republic, considered extremely propitious.

This category embraced a great number of events and phenomena.² On the basis of Roman prodigy list, extracted from works of ancient authors, they can be further divided into three typological subcategories.³

- a) Common and natural events that took place at special places or under unusual circumstances; natural events of unusual force and intensity. This subcategory includes e.g. floods, conflagrations, storms, earthquakes, buildings, temples or walls struck by lightning, solar or lunar eclipses, etc.
- b) Extraordinary events of *counterintuitive* character⁴ that violated intuitive expectations connected with ontological categories. A violation is either a *breach* of expectations about any of five ontological categories (person, animal, plant, natural object, artefact) or a *transfer* of psychological abilities or biological functions on inanimate objects which do not (and cannot have) any.⁵ This category includes e.g. speaking animals, sweating statues or spontaneously moving objects (statues, spears in a temple etc.).
- c) Common events that did not violate intuitive expectations connected with ontological categories, but overstepped the limits of normality by their intensity or some strange concomitant circumstances, so they could be considered bizarre.⁶ This subcategory embraces e.g. de-

lum to animate. The word *prodigium* can be regarded as a general term of description for these phenomena.

² WÜLKER (1903: 6–26); MACBAIN (1982: 82–106); RASMUSSEN (2003: 53–116).

³ LISDORF (2004: 168–169).

⁴ A comprehensive explanation of this concept can be found in the works of Pascal Boyer, see BOYER (1994: 91–124; 2001: 58–105; 2002) or Illka Pyysiäinen, see PYYSIÄINEN (2004: 39–52).

⁵ BOYER (2000: 198); cf. LISDORF (2004: 152–153).

⁶ This subcategory was introduced by Justin Barrett and Melanie A. Nyhoff (2001). The fact that some events or phenomena are considered bizarre is determined culturally and is totally independent of the innate human intuitive expectations. For this reason the taxonomy will be different from place to place: what is seen as bizarre in one culture can be regarded perfectly normal or uninteresting in another. It cannot be denied that the decision to place some prodigies either to category a) or c) is sometimes, in

fective births of humans⁷ or animals⁸, incursions of animals into the city (wolf), temples (owls) or military camps (wolf, bee swarms)⁹ or unusual animal behaviour (a bull copulating with a bronze statue of a cow).

It seems that during the Roman Republic there was a fixed procedure in the treatment of prodigies. Firstly, such an event had to be reported to the Senate. Although theoretically every Roman citizen should be able to report an observation of unusual events, our historiographical sources only rarely mention any other person than one of the consuls or other public officials. Secondly, the Senate had to decide whether a reported event was a public prodigy (*prodigium publicum*) or not.¹⁰ If it was accepted as a public prodigy, it required public expiation. The Senate thus officially assumed the responsibility for any further action necessary to the expiation of this prodigy. Thirdly, the Senate could either act itself or it could consult some religious specialists possessing extensive religious knowledge related to the interpretation of prodigies. As the prodigy list shows, the Senate usually availed itself of three different priestly groups: the *decemviri sacris faciundis*, the *pontifices* and the *haruspices*.¹¹ They examined the relevant event and reported back to the Senate. The Senate could either comply with their judgement or reject it. Finally, if the Senate approved, a recommended expiation was authorized and required expiatory rituals were performed, usu-

contrast with the unproblematic category b), a bit arbitrary. In spite of that, about some events or phenomena it can be said with some degree of certainty that they were considered bizarre by Romans, because they contradicted conventional expectations common in their culture. The typical example of such an event is the appearance of a wolf within the city limits. The wolf was conceptualized as an antithesis of urban civilized life. See DETIENNE – SVENBRO (1989) and a breach of city boundaries by this animal was thus considered bizarre and ominous.

⁷ ALLÉLY (2003).

⁸ BEURET (2001).

⁹ MACINNES (2000).

¹⁰ The exact criteria used by the Senate are still unknown, despite laudable endeavours of some scholars to find some rigid rules. Theodor Mommsen (1909) thought, for example, that an obligatory condition for a prodigy being recognized as public by the Senate was its taking place on property belonging to Roman State, so called *ager publicus*. Cf. WÜLKER (1903: 2–3); RUOFF-VÄÄNÄNEN (1972). Unfortunately, this conclusion is based on a tendentious reading of some sources and it is quite evident that this rule was never in effect. See RASMUSSEN (2003: 219–239); cf. also MACBAIN (1982: 25–33).

¹¹ In exceptional cases the Senate even consulted all of these priestly colleges, one by one, before a satisfactory solution was found. See CHAMPEAUX (1996).

ally by the consuls at the beginning of a new year. However, some prodigies required swift expiation, carried out as quickly as possible.

These procedures connected with the expiation of public prodigies were inherent part of Roman political and religious life in the times of the Roman Republic. The list of known prodigies covers, almost uninterruptedly, the whole period from 250 to 99 B.C.E.¹² After this date, though, there are some substantial gaps in the reporting and expiation of public prodigies and starting from the year 17 B.C.E. they virtually disappear from our sources. This situation was even subject of some comments made by contemporary Latin authors like Livy¹³ or Pliny the Elder.¹⁴

But what was the cause of the disappearance of public prodigies? And is that cause found in the political or religious atmosphere of the Late Republic or in both together? Opinions on this matter are divided.

1. Some scholars contended that the disappearance of public prodigies was a natural consequence of the universal decline of the Roman republican religion caused by the spread of philosophically motivated scepticism in the ranks of Roman aristocracy¹⁵ and by the inundation of the Roman world by superstitious “Oriental” cults.¹⁶ Although this vision of the general decline is seemingly well justified and even finds some support in ancient sources, it is not completely satisfactory, because this explanation given by these sources is of ideological nature in the first place.¹⁷ The scepticism of Roman intellectuals, also, does

¹² RAWSON (1971) has questioned the credibility of this list. But her criticism primarily tries to disprove former assumptions of some scholars. See e.g. CRAKE (1940: 378, 386) that the information about prodigies in the works of ancient authors stems directly from the *annales maximi*. This problem is largely irrelevant for the subject of this study and some of her contentions were convincingly disputed. See MACBAIN (1982: 7–24); cf. also FRIER (1979: 180 and n. 2, 186 and n. 19).

¹³ LIV. XLIII. 13. 1.

¹⁴ PLIN. *nat.* VII. 36; X.20; cf. also GRANDAZZI (1993).

¹⁵ LINDERSKI (1982: 37–38); MOMIGLIANO (1984: 209).

¹⁶ WÜLKER (1903: 70); WARDE-FOWLER (1911: 428–429). The so called “mystery” or “Oriental” cults were certainly an important element in the religious world of the late antiquity, but they were never dominant. They should be seen as an alternative to the traditional religiosity, not as its substitute. See MACMULLEN (1981: 1–7, 62–73); WARDMAN (1982: 108–123); ALFÖLDY (1989: 72–94).

¹⁷ BEARD – NORTH – PRICE (1998: 125–134). We should not confuse the deep political crisis of the Late Republic, which certainly negatively influenced some aspects of Roman public religious practice, with the general decline of Roman religion as a whole. It is very improbable that this crisis had any substantial implications, for example, for the working of Roman domestic cult.

not provide a useful explanation because it originated in relatively isolated philosophical schools and was not religiously motivated.¹⁸ Members of the Roman elite could criticise Roman religious practises on the philosophical level, but they endorsed them completely on the religious or socio-political one.

2. Another explanation is based on the assumption that some important changes in the interpretation of prodigies occurred some time during the second century B.C.E. Whereas they were previously considered only as ominous and relevant to society as a whole, from this time they could be seen as foreshadowing the future success (or fall) of private individuals and thus be, at least occasionally, interpreted in a positive sense.¹⁹ Scholars holding this position usually adduce some evidence for their claim, like the termination of the publication of *Annales Maximi*, reflecting (they claim) the gradual relaxation of the strict procedures connected with their expiation thus far, or they highlight the fact that the successful expiation of prodigies was possible only in a peacefully governed state and that the political turmoil of the last decades of the Roman Republic effectively precluded the implementation of any expiational processes. Finally, it was Augustus and his distrust toward the Senate, traditionally entrusted with supervision over these activities, and its complete incapacitation, which put a definite end to the languishing republican institution of expiating public prodigies.²⁰

Again, these views could be partially true. But the positive interpretation of some exceptional events (in this instance usually called *omina*; sg. *omen*) and their relevance to private individuals could scarcely be considered a new and unprecedented phenomenon in the Roman society. And the question why Augustus, having consolidated his powers, did not re-establish this republican institution under his auspices in his attempt for the 'restoration' of traditional Roman religion is left unanswered.²¹

3. The decision of *pontifices* not to continue the publication of *Annales Maximi* is also interpreted by some scholars as an attempt of socio-political elites to curb the mass hysteria aroused by the expiation of the

18 BEARD (1986); RASMUSSEN (2001, 2003: 183–198).

19 BLOCH (1963: 146).

20 LIEBESCHUETZ (1979: 38, 58).

21 ROSENBERGER (1998: 212).

prodigies,²² or, alternatively, as an evidence of the loss of their credibility, as a consequence of their frequent misuse in the political feuds of rival factions on the Roman political scene.²³ Actually, there are only few traces of this hypothetical mass hysteria left in our sources²⁴ and they are, without any doubt, ideologically biased.²⁵ And concerning the supposed manipulation of prodigies in the political controversies of late Republican Rome, in the society, where the distinction between politics and religion was ambiguous at best, this was probably always a rule rather than an exception.²⁶

4. One distinguished scholar in the field of Roman prodigies, Bruce MacBain, came with an ingenious and unorthodox conclusion.²⁷ Prodigies that were often reported from the regions belonging to Roman allies and consequently expiated by the Roman state should be considered as a channel, through which Roman allies could express their anxieties and Romans could, on the other hand, alleviate their grievances by successful expiation of local prodigies and thus exercise their superiority and power. Nevertheless, after the Social War that ended with the granting of Roman citizenship to all freeborn Italians, this sort of communication lost its justification.²⁸ This solution is certainly able to explain the disappearance of prodigies in Italian towns inhabited by former Roman allies, but almost half of prodigies we are informed about were observed or took place in Rome herself. Their final disappearance thus could not be explained this way.²⁹
5. Another scholar, the author of a recent and perspicacious book about Roman prodigies, Veit Rosenberger, maintains that their final disappearance was caused by the shift in Roman mentality (*der Wandel der*

22 WÜLKER (1903: 72); DUMÉZIL (1970a: 119, 1970b: 513); cf. also ECKSTEIN (1982).

23 DREWS (1988); cf. also GÜNTHER (1964).

24 LIV. I. 62. 1; XXI. 62. 1; XXIV. 10. 6; XXIX. 14. 2.

25 RASMUSSEN (2003: 29–30). – Livy's own attitude to prodigies is at least inconsistent and in some cases even contradictory. Cf. LEVENE (1993: 16–33). Moreover, his overall tendency to depict the Roman Senate as a rational body keeping its temper even in the times of deepest and most severe crises and Roman *plebs* as an intemperate crowd liable to panic is generally known.

26 RASMUSSEN (2003: 50–52).

27 MACBAIN (1982).

28 MACBAIN (1982: 81).

29 ROSENBERGER (1998: 212).

Mentalitäten) at the end of the Republic and by the establishment of a new imperial political system.³⁰

I think that Veit Rosenberger's observations are worth consideration, because they seem, at least partially, to put the rather complex set of influences that changed the face of the Roman world forever into the right perspective. Of course, the term 'shift in mentality' is very vague and should be defined more precisely, perhaps with the help of Dan Sperber's concept of "epidemiology of representations".³¹ For example, while during the Republic the birth of human androgynes³² was considered an extremely ominous and horrifying prodigy (they were to be exposed in an uninhabited land or even thrown into the sea sown in a sack), the situation after the establishment of the principate was rather different. In the first century C.E., androgynes were considered a pure rarity, a freak of nature to be shown around at the court of the emperor³³, or even greedily sought after sexual partners.³⁴ The question of whether this change of opinion about androgyny, or – to phrase it differently – the inability of the old views to be disseminated successfully and, on the other hand, the ability of new views to spread successfully, could be explained as a product of philosophical critique remains highly contentious.³⁵ However, this theory at least potentially shows how some prodigies (especially those belonging to the category of counterintuitive) could now be considered natural phenomena, even though still rare and special.

But this change of opinions about some prodigies does not explain the disappearance of the public institution concerned with their expiation, because it is improbable, even impossible, that all prodigies were now considered natural or uninteresting. The greater part of them would still violate panhuman intuitive expectations connected with ontological categories (as they would do even these days) and as such they would be attention-grabbing and easily memorable. And our sources tell us that this is really the case: the prodigies, now called usually *omina*,³⁶ were still observed and considered important, but now in a completely different context.

³⁰ ROSENBERGER (1998: 210–240).

³¹ SPERBER (1996).

³² ALLÉLY (2003: 136–139).

³³ PHLEG. *Mirabilia* 6.

³⁴ PLIN. *nat.* VII.34.

³⁵ ROSENBERGER (1998: 223–233).

³⁶ A different opinion was expressed by LISDORF (2004: 161). According to him: „Omens can not be, contrary to prodigies, counterintuitive“. A cursory look into the detailed

In her seminal book about public portents in Republican Rome, Susanne Rasmussen expressed her opinion that the system connected with expiation of prodigious functioned during the Republic as an important tool in the process of defining Roman identity.³⁷ But two things changed this situation rather dramatically. First, the Roman Senate, which once played the primary role in the process of defining Roman identity and religious orthopraxy, was relegated into still prestigious but in fact innocuous advisory body.³⁸ Second, after the establishment of a multicultural empire the problem of defining Roman identity (what exactly it meant to be “Roman”) became more problematic and simultaneously more insistent.³⁹ It seems from that time it was the Roman emperor who in some way embodied the “Roman-ness” of the Empire. All the prodigies, which used to be relevant to the Roman state as a whole, now centred on him and were interpreted in a view of his personality and the events taking place in his household. For example, the catastrophic floods during the reign of Augustus (when the swollen Tiber inundated and destroyed large regions of the city) were interpreted, either positively or negatively, in connection with his personality and acts concomitant with his political life.⁴⁰ His birth and future greatness were foreshadowed by many “miracles”,⁴¹ prodigies now called *omina imperii*,⁴² and similar events accompanied his entire life.⁴³ The same is true with regard to other emperors.⁴⁴ What really disappeared, then, was the *institution*, not the prodigies (events) themselves, and the emperor became henceforth the only object of divine attention in public area became. And last but not least, the emperor also became the only person who could successfully assuage the rage of gods and restore the peace with them (*pax deorum*).

list of *omina* diligently collected by VIGOURT (2001: 22–74) seems to confirm this contention – the recorded events or phenomena from the reign of emperors Augustus up to the age of Domitian are really predominantly natural or bizarre – but some of them are evidently counterintuitive, even though they are, admittedly, relatively rare. The question why and what caused this change of opinions (or of contemporary taste) is very interesting, but lies, unfortunately, outside the scope of the present study.

37 RASMUSSEN (2003: 241–256).

38 LINDERSKI (1990).

39 GORDON (1990a, 1990b).

40 BECHER (1985).

41 GRANDET (1986: 370–372); BERTRAND–ENCAVIL (1994: 490–495); WILDFANG (2001).

42 VIGOURT (2001).

43 FLORY (1989).

44 E.g. MORGAN (2001).

The final disappearance of public prodigies – more exactly, of the public institution connected with their expiation – was caused by interaction of profound political and socio-cultural changes. Or, to put it more simply, this institution just became obsolete and useless, because in the new era it no longer had any meaning whatsoever.

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RESUMÉ

Studie prozkoumává okolnosti, které vedly k opuštění římské republikánské praxe veřejného usmiřování prodigií, neblahých věštných znamení, v období pozdní republiky a na počátku principátu. Po krátkém nástupu samotné praxe usmiřování prodigií jsou podrobněji pojednány jednotlivé teorie, s pomocí kterých byl zánik této praxe vysvětlován v předchozím bádání. Mnohé z těchto teorií jsou pak odmítnuty jako nepřesvědčivé nebo neúplné (např. teorie vysvětlující zánik prodigií všeobecným úpadkem náboženství v období pozdní republiky, jako důsledek filosofické kritiky náboženských praktik, využívání prodigií v politickém boji a k sebestpropagaci významných členů republikánské nobility, poklesem významu prodigií po politickém sjednocení Itálie atd.). V závěru autor formuluje alternativní vysvětlení zániku praxe usmiřování veřejných prodigií: celý systém ohlašování a usmiřování prodigií byl natolik úzce propojený s hodnotami republikánských politických a náboženských elit a tvořil natolik důležitý prvek při formování národní identity Římanů, že po ustavení principátu ztratil svůj smysl, neboť tyto hodnoty a tato role byly od této doby spojovány převážně s postavou císaře a jeho rodiny.

