

Silence of the Gods: Supernatural Phenomena in Tacitus' *Annales*1 Tacitus, *Annales* 1.28 (year 14 CE)

noctem minacem et in scelus erupturam fors enivit: nam luna claro repente caelo visa languescere. id miles rationis ignarus omen praesentium accepit, suis laboribus defectionem sideris adsimulans, prospereque cessura qua pergerent si fulgor et claritudo deae redderetur...

utendum inclinatione ea Caesar et quae casus obtulerat in sapientiam vertenda ratus circumiri tentoria iubet.

Fortune tranquilized a night which threatened to erupt into crime: for the moon, in a clear sky, suddenly seemed to become faint. This the soldiery, ignorant of reason, regarded as an omen of their present condition, comparing the failure of the heavenly body to their own labors, and that they might finish these things fortunately if the light and splendor should be returned to the goddess...

Caesar (Drusus) thinking that he ought to make use of this changing bias and which chance had brought forth, in wisdom he ordered that the tents be visited in turn.

2 *Ann.* 15.22 (year 62)

isdem consulibus gymnasium ictu fulminis conflagravit effigiesque in eo Neronis ad informe aes liquefacta. et motu terrae celebre Campaniae oppidum Pompei magna ex parte proruit; defunctaque virgo Vestalis Laelia, in cuius locum Cornelia ex familia Cossorum capta est.

While the same men were consuls, a gymnasium burned with a bolt of lightning, and in it, a statue of Nero was melted down to shapeless bronze. Also, a large part from the populous city of Pompeii in Campania tumbled down by an earthquake; and the Vestal Virgin Laelia died, in whose place Cornelia of the family of the Cossi was taken up.

3 *Ann.* 13.17 (year 55)

nox eadem necem Britannici et rogum coniunxit, proviso ante funebri paratu, qui modicus fuit. in campo tamen Martis sepultus est adeo turbidis imbribus, ut vulgus **iram deum** portendi crediderit adversus facinus cui plerique etiam hominum ignoscebant, antiquas fratrum discordias et insociabile regnum aestimantes.

The very night joined together the death of Britannicus and his funeral, preparations for the funeral already provided, which were modest. Nevertheless he was buried in the campus Martius, amid storms so violent that the public believed they portended the **anger of the gods** against a crime which many men were even ignored, valuing the old discord of brothers and incompatible rule.

4 *Ann.* 14.12 (year 59)

prodigia quoque crebra et inrita intercessere: anguemenixa mulier et alia inconcubitu mariti fulmine exanimata; iam sol repente obscuratus et tactae de caelo quattuordecim urbis regiones.

quae adeo sine **cura deum** eveniebant ut multos post annos Nero imperium et scelera continuaverit.

Numerous and fruitless prodigies also passed: a woman birthed a snake, and another [woman] was killed by a thunderbolt in the [sexual] embrace of her husband; then the sun was suddenly darkened, and the fourteen districts of the city were struck by lightning.

These things happened with such little **concern of the gods** that for many years afterward Nero continued his reign and his crimes.

5 *An.* 16.13 (year 65)

tot facinoribus foedum annum **etiam dii** tempestatibus et morbis **insignivere**. vastata Campania turbine ventorum, qui villas arbusta fruges passim disiecit pertulitque violentiam ad vicina urbi; in qua omne mortalium genus vis pestilentiae depopulabatur, nulla caeli intemperie quae occurreret oculis...

A detestable year with so many outrages even the **gods marked off** by storms and maladies. Campania was devastated by a hurricane, which destroyed villas, plantations, and crop far and wide, and carried its violence to the neighborhoods of the city; in which every class of mortal was swept away by the force of the disease, with no intemperance of the sky which were visible.

6 : References to Omens, Prodigies, and Portents in Tacitus' *Annales*

Ref	Year	Details	Result	Vocabulary used
1.28	14 CE	Eclipse, soldiers cowed because they are superstitious.	Drusus takes advantage of soldiers, obedience returns.	<i>omen, superstitionem, portendi</i>
1.76	15 CE	Tiber overflows, Sibylline books to be consulted.	Tiberius refuses.	<i>divina humanaque obtegens</i>
2.13	16 CE	One of the soldiers of Arminius goes around promising German women to Romans if they desert, Romans take as omen of Roman victory, and capturing of German women.	Germans lose.	<i>omen</i>
2.14	16 CE	Germanicus dreams: engaged in sacrifice, robe sprinkled with sacrificial blood, given another by grandmother Augusta. Suggests fighting in woods and forests, if science used.	Enthusiasm in soldiers, leads to victory (2.17).	<i>omine</i>
2.17	16 CE	Eight eagles seen flying to woods, Romans follow, breaking German line.	Romans win.	<i>augurium-- aquilae</i>
2.47*	17 CE	12 famous cities of Asia fall by earthquake in night, unforeseen and fearful. Vast mountains collapse, fires blaze out amid ruin.	Emperor dedicates some temples to the gods (2.49)	<i>No specific words</i>
4.64	27 CE	Fire damages Capital to unusual extent, Mt. Caelius reduced to ashes, Tiberius' statue remains and votes to call it Mt. Augustus. Claudia Quinta had this happen previously.	Tiberius retires to Capri.	<i>ominibus</i>
6.28*	34 CE	Appearance of the Phoenix	According to McCulloch, the phoenix and ficus at 13.58 allude to the fate of Rome (1984, 207).	<i>No specific words</i>
6.37	35 CE	Euphrates River rises without storms, white foam rises in shape of diadem, omen of prosperous passage.	Good passage.	<i>omina, portenderentur</i>
11.4	47 CE	Petra brothers are destroyed, because one supposedly had a dream in which Claudius was crowned with a garland of wheat, the ears of which were turned down, and therefore foretold scant harvests. Some say it was a vine-wreath, with white leaves, foretelling the death of the emperor after autumn. The other brother spread it around, and both brothers died.	Claudius does not die until 54.	<i>ostendi (rarer term than others, but accepted by Krauss (1930), 32.</i>
11.11	47 CE	Nero is rumored to be guarded by snakes; claims only 1.	<i>Future rule?</i>	<i>No specific words</i>
11.21	47 CE	Curtius Rufus heard from an apparition that he would become proconsul of Africa.	Becomes proconsul of Africa.	<i>omine</i>
12.43	51 CE	Birds of ill omen perch on Capitol, frequent earthquakes, scanty crops and famine.	Agrippina?	<i>prodigia; prodigium</i>
12.64	53 CE	Succession of prodigies (prodigies: standards and tents set aflame by lightning, bees on Capitol, births of monsters, half human, half beast, pig with talons; portent: every order of magistracy had number reduced, quaestor, aedile, tribune, praetor and consul died within a few months).	Agrippina is ousted, Claudius dies following year.	<i>portendi, prodigiis, ostenta</i>
13.17	55 CE	Britannicus dies, funeral that night-- amid storms so violent popular belief portends wrath of heaven against crime.	No result.	<i>portendi</i>
13.58	59 CE	The tree in the Comitium begins to wither, accounted a portent, until it was renewed.	No result.	<i>prodigii</i>
14.12	59 CE	Lightning seen in all 14 regions of Rome, woman gave birth to a snake, another woman killed by thunderbolt in husband's arms, sun was eclipsed. All this happens without providential design-- so much so that for many years following Nero still ruled.	No result.	<i>prodigia</i>

14.22	60 CE	Comet blazes, in popular opinion portends revolution to kingdoms, casts doubt on Nero's reign. Lightning strikes Nero's dinner table, shatters. Nero swims in the source of the stream which Quintus Marcius used to get to Rome, and it was thought he polluted the sacred waters and the sanctity of the spot, a fit of illness follows, convincing people of divine displeasure.	No result.	<i>portendat</i>
14.32	61 CE	Statue of Victory at Camulodunum fell prostrate, turned its back on the enemy, as though fleeing from them. Women excited to frenzy prophesy destruction, uttering ravings in a strange tongue in Senate, theater, seen in estuary appearance of ruins, even ocean had appearance of blood, when tide ebbed, impression of human bodies in sand, interpreted by Roman soldiers as good, veterans as alarming.	Britons won.	<i>No specific words</i>
15.7	62 CE	Passing Euphrates, horse carrying consul's official emblems took fright without apparent cause, fled to rear. Victim ran away, soldiers' javelins gleamed with light, significant because Parthians fight with missiles.	Paetus despises omens (15.8), before fortifying, hurries army across Mount Taurus, behaves badly	<i>omine, prodigio</i>
15.22*	62 CE	A gymnasium was consumed by lightning, a statue of Nero within was melted down to bronze. Earthquake demolishes large part of Pompeii, one of the Vestals dies (Laelia), replaced with Cornelia (family of Cossi).	No result.	<i>No specific words</i>
15.38	64 CE	Great fire at Rome, levels much of city. Nero rumored to sing the fall of Troy; fire ends and rekindles, people compare to Senones.	Nero's death?	<i>No specific words</i>
15.47	64 CE	Flashes of lightning, comet, humans and other animals with two heads seen, even in pregnant animals that were sacrificed, calf born with head on leg, meaning new head prepared for world.	Pisonian conspiracy?	<i>prodigia</i>
15.74	64 CE	A consul-elect proposed to raise a temple to Deified Nero, on grounds that the prince had risen above rank of mortal, later considered a presage of his death (only dead are deified).	Nero dies eventually.	<i>omen</i>
16.13	65 CE	Campania devastated by hurricane (<i>turbina ventorum</i>), carries to Rome, where plague was sweeping away all classes. Yet the deaths of knights and senators were less deplored, because they seemed to forestall the emperor's cruelty by ordinary death.	A year of shame and so many evil deeds heaven marked by storms and pestilence.	<i>dii insignivere</i>

*Asterisks mark those records in which a remarkable, portentous event is recorded (e.g., appearance of a phoenix) without use of specific terminology. Methodology: I searched through Krauss (1930) and manually added records, and checked against Heubner text for errors and to mine for information and wording; then searched through Perseus using key words such as prodigium/a, omen, interpretatio, portendo, deus, divus, and variants for the most coverage. I also took special note of those events that are marked and generally agreed upon (at least three scholars) as portents, for instance, the phoenix (6.28) and the lightning and other events at 15.22 I do not claim that these records are fully inclusive, especially as regards those events without supernatural language (other scholars include the Great Fire of 64 in 15.38, so I have it listed here, but I could not justify it by the context, because it is merely recorded as a disaster, a *clades*).

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