

The Silence of the Gods: Supernatural Phenomena in Tacitus' *Annales*

D. Feeney suggests in a brief statement that Tacitus' accounts of the superstitious in the *Annales* are part of a general technique that he uses in order to form a sense of high-pitched strain (2011). Using this framework, I began mining data from Krauss' categorization of Tacitus' supernatural phenomena. I added the use of Perseus and other web tools in order to create an accounting of these events. I used generally accepted terms such as *prodigium*, *omen*, *interpretatio*, *portendo*, *deus*, *divus*, and other variants. Certain events did not have special superstitious language, but were generally agreed on (at least three other scholars) as portents-- such as the appearance of the phoenix, lightning and other events at 15.22. Through extensive research and analysis, it is apparent that there are almost as many accounts of prodigies under Nero as in all the other extant books combined-- books 13-16 have 11, books 1-12 have 14. Tacitus, as an annalist, dutifully records significant portents, prodigies, and omens in his narrative. However, his placement of these events varies depending on whether he wishes to convey the sense of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty that prevailed, most notably, through the years of Nero's reign, or an increasing public disillusionment.

The most egregious example of Tacitus' explication of the silence of the gods occurs when Tacitus writes of Germanicus' death. He relates that the funeral takes place amid storms so violent "that the common people thought the heavens were portending the anger of the gods against such a crime," *adeo turbidis imbribus, ut vulgus iram deum portendi crediderit adversus facinus* (*Ann.* 13.17). Yet both the demand and the portent go unanswered and unfulfilled; Nero continues to reign for years. The significance of an expectation of *ira deum* is in its refusal. Tacitus relates the mood of the *vulgus* in his statement, although the common people were unlikely to have witnessed the funeral itself in reality, but are in the *Annales* an ever-present

spectator and victim of the times. Though the fictive crowd wishes to tie the vicious rainfall to divine retribution, Tacitus does not state the rains as factual prodigy or portent, simply storms so great that the mob believed in it.

At the end of book 14, Tacitus remarks, “these [portents] occurred without the care of the gods to such a degree that for many years thereafter Nero continued his rule and crimes” *quae adeo sine cura deum eveniebant ut multos post annos Nero imperium et scelera continuaverit* (14.12). Tacitus plainly states that the expected *ira deum* is absent, as is even the *cura deum*. This statement of Tacitus’ follows a train of terrific portents, including lightning being seen in all fourteen districts of Rome, a woman giving birth to a snake, an eclipse of the sun, and a woman being struck by lightning while in her husband’s arms (14.12). Similarly, the comet of 60 CE was seen as a portent of revolution, and the lightning that struck Nero’s dining table was an added confirmation of change (14.22). Yet Tacitus immediately comments that the lightning strike increased the rumor with an equal emptiness, *auxit rumorem pari vanitate orta interpretatio fulguris* (14.22).

In the final books, the number of recordings increases. However, they become simple foot-notes, tacked on to the ends of years, more and more brief lists of frequent, foreboding, and completely unfruitful portents. While in books 1-6, the phenomena are limited to *omen* and *portendo*, and to a lesser extent, *superstitio* and *divina*, the events of books 11-16 include significantly more instances of *prodigium*, an indication of a state-related problem. In the later books, he moves from gently hinting at the expectations of the people to refraining from any interpretations or indications of specific events that led to the prodigies, as warnings of wrongdoing or future misdeeds. His silence on the matter follows the silence of the gods; as the public outcry diminishes into discontented murmurs, Tacitus’ own protestations seem to fall away into

disillusionment and bitterness. As the voices of the gods fade away, their influence seems to follow, and the silence they leave behind is profound.

Bibliography

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