

A History of Lightning in Roman Thought, Politics, & Culture



Vanda Strachan

Faculty of Classics
Merton College, University of Oxford

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Ancient History

Trinity Term 2025





Lightning strikes St Peter's dome at the Vatican, Rome.
FILIPPO MONTEFORTE AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Table of Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The Gathering Storm	1
Landscapes of Lightning: Environments & Conceptualisations	7
- <i>Dreams of Lightning</i>	8
- <i>Thunderbolts & Truffles: an unnatural history of lightning</i>	15
- <i>Chances of Storms: the ancient weather forecast</i>	29

Part One: Mythological Case Studies

<i>Flashpoint One: Romulus and the Legacy of Lightning in Roman Kingship</i>	37
<i>Flashpoint Two: Numa's Bargain. Dangerous knowledge & the cost of fair weather</i>	57
<i>Flashpoint Three: Tullus Hostilius - misappropriation, failure, & destruction</i>	81
<i>Conclusions:</i>	
Lightning and the Environmental Imagination in Rome's Founding Narratives	96

Part Two: Republican Case Studies

<i>Flashpoint Four: Summanus Loses his Head</i>	
- fulminating deities & Rome's religious firmament	102
<i>Flashpoint Five: Juno Regina on the Aventine - divination, experts, & authority</i>	133
<i>Flashpoint Six: Helvia is Struck from her Horse - expiation, panic, & blame</i>	168
<i>Flashpoint Seven: Pompey Strabo is Struck in his Tent</i>	
- burials, bidentals, & the tangible	190

Part Three: Imperial Case Studies

<i>Flashpoint Eight: Sulla is Handed a Thunderbolt - iconography & tyranny</i>	214
<i>Flashpoint Nine: Augustus has a Near Miss - ideology & imperialism</i>	258
<i>Flashpoint Ten: Domitian is Disarmed - despotism, religion, & the weather</i>	300
<i>Conclusions:</i>	
Striking at the Heart of the Matter	317

Epilogue	323
-----------------------	-----

List of Figures

Figures

Bibliography

Abstract

Lightning has long been hidden in plain sight of scholarship. So powerful and so conspicuous as a natural phenomenon and so prevalent in the ancient sources, it is familiar and therefore easy to overlook. It is easy also to assume that as a common artistic and literary device, it is straightforward and well-understood. This thesis seeks to overturn such assumptions and to refresh our vision of ancient Roman lightning-ways.

Moving scholarly consideration of lightning beyond its habitual confines in the terrain of divination and natural philosophy, this study presents a cultural history of lightning in the Roman world. In form, it comprises a series of case studies that are simultaneously thematic and diachronic in nature. These are organised into three main sections. The first considers mythological case studies and lays out three models which allow for an examination of some conceptual frameworks of lightning, particularly those pertaining to political power. The second section presents republican cases and considers the social world of lightning, its organisation and dynamics. The third section consists of imperial case studies and tracks the evolving relationship between lightning and one man rule. Incorporating fluid and dynamic categories such as religion, folklore, politics, philosophy, art, architecture, and everyday life, the scope is broad and the timeframe expansive. However, the arguments presented are all grounded in the ancient experience of real lightning. It is that reality and the danger it entailed which were the crucible for Roman ideas about lightning and how to deal with it. In the resulting frisson between belief, behaviour, and environment, the thesis points to a flickering network of new connections, revealing the central though problematic role lightning played in Roman history.

Acknowledgements

It has been my enormous good fortune to have Nicholas Purcell as my supervisor. His brilliant mind, expansive knowledge, and penchant for the quirkiest corners of the ancient world have been such an inspiration. There are not many who would have had the constitution or capacity to let me run so freely with ideas through my unorthodox writing process and I am as grateful for his kind and constant support as I am for his keen eye and academic rigour. It has been a privilege and an absolute delight.

I would like to thank the generous benefactors who saw promise in my proposals and funded my studies. My scholarship at Ertegun House was life-changing. Sadly, Mica Ertegun died while I was working on this thesis, but it was through her generosity that I was first able to come to Oxford and her vision lives on in the strong and vibrant community she created here. Likewise, it was only through the sponsorship of the Christopher Duggan Scholarship at Merton College that I was able to take on my doctoral studies and all my thanks go to those kind donors who have opened so many doors for me and have asked nothing in return. I hope this thesis does justice to the spirit of the scholarship and I intend to pay the good faith of its donors forward.

I am grateful to Anna Clark, Ed Bispham, and Lewis Webb for the time they took in scrutinising earlier phases of my work and for being agreeable but thorough examiners for Transfer and Confirmation of Status. Peter Thonemann and Greg Woolf were my final examiners, who kindly read this thesis perspicaciously. I am super grateful to both for the time they spent on my ideas, for their supportive advice, and for a genial and interesting viva discussion. Thanks are also due to Robert Coates-Stephens whose inimitable 'City of Rome' course at the British School of Rome sparked my first lightning questions, to Martin Goodman in whose seminar I first began to explore these questions and who first believed there was mileage in the topic, and to Abigail Graham who was so enthusiastic about it on her wonderful epigraphy course in Rome.

I am indebted to Maria Kouroumali at Ertegun House not only for her administrative support but for her many other kindnesses. Her thoughtfulness and logistical wizardry have saved me from much stress over these past years. Christine Martin has also been a steadfast champion and thanks to her organisation, I was able to finish writing this thesis at the British School at Rome to the sound of rolling summer storms.



Introduction

The Gathering Storm

On the night of February 11th, 2013, after Pope Benedict XVI had shocked Catholics everywhere by announcing his resignation, (the first pope to do so in 600 years), lightning struck the Vatican. In fact, as the *Mirror* announced in its sensational headline, the lightning struck ‘not once but *twice*.’¹ An image of the lightning bolt piercing the skies and hitting the dome of St Peter’s went viral on the internet (fig. 1) Some declared this an ‘act of God’ and interpreted it as a divine response to the pope’s resignation. Others, who preferred to rationalise the phenomenon away as coincidence could, nevertheless, appreciate the portentous impression the lightning made. This event and the ensuing media fuss vividly recalls the city’s ancient past where an abundance of recorded lightning strikes scattered through the sources can often seem far-fetched and their foreboding timing and pertinent targets suspiciously convenient. It reminds us that behind Roman attitudes and behaviour towards it lies the experience of real lightning. That experience and the Roman panoply of responses which, in all their many permutations and iterations, tried to deal with and make sense of it, are the subject of this thesis.

This is a cultural history of Roman lightning. It is, more specifically, a study into how Roman society handled lightning. That is, how the inhabitants of the ancient capital and

¹ Cockerton (2013).

its environs handled lightning: phenomenologically as a meteorological reality; conceptually as a divine sign, which had meaning and purpose; ritually, as a divine force with which people had to reckon; ideologically, as a political weapon to be wielded; and iconographically as an artistic representation of a weapon to be wielded and handled in the most literal sense. The study is cultural, in that it encompasses the various societal facets - ideas, beliefs, customs, and behaviours - that collectively constitute 'culture', and a history in that it sets out on the premise that these variables were neither constant nor consistent over time. The intention is to provide the beginnings of an integrated picture of the life of lightning in the city of Rome. A key aim is to rescue lightning from the undifferentiated agglomeration of ideas in which it currently languishes. To do so, it must move beyond its current scattered appearances in the study of divination, natural philosophy, isolated historical incidents, and ideas about the thunderbolt as a 'metaphor' or 'trope' or 'attribute'. Once attention is focused on lightning for its own sake and once it is released from the confines of the other topics for which it provides incidental support, it comes into its own as a powerful, animating social and historical force.

Strangely, for all its drama and power, lightning in the Roman world has not received such attention. Historically, this lacuna seems largely attributable to the assumption that Roman notions about thunder and lightning were more or less the same as Greek ones and that Jupiter was more or less the same as Zeus. So, whereas thunder and lightning in the Greek world received comprehensive if somewhat outdated treatment a century ago in A. B. Cook's (1914) two-volume study of Zeus, the Roman world has seen no such study.² Recently, Julia Hejduk has criticised the "Jupiter: see ZEUS" approach to the chief

² Cook (1914) occasionally called upon Roman material haphazardly, generally assuming it to conform to Greek culture albeit 'corrupted' by Roman input. Antipathy is barely concealed when describing a Graeco-Roman bronze as an 'insipid' and 'tasteless aggregate' (vol. 2., p.748-9). On a Roman piece he finds more

deity of the Roman pantheon. She disambiguates Jupiter from his Greek counterpart in Augustan literature, showing the Jupiter of those poets to be part of a conversation in which he was a 'living reality' that evolved with the culture and politics of the times.³ Hejduk notes that save for a thin German volume, no monograph on Jupiter, the superlative god of Rome, exists.⁴ This being so, it follows that his thunderbolts and lightning have also escaped proper attention.⁵

Lightning is even surprisingly absent from studies in the burgeoning field of ancient environmental history, where its periodic, violent intrusions upon daily life would be well placed and have much to offer scholarship. While Christopher Schliephake has pioneered the study of the ancient environment, in even his most recent co-edited volume specifically on chaos and environmental disorder, lightning is peculiarly absent.⁶ Lisa Taub's *Ancient Meteorology* is the first modern attempt at a book on the broader subject of meteorology.⁷ Unfortunately, the book is largely a collection and reiteration of how various ancient writers, Greek and Roman, explained various phenomena.⁸ Thunder and

tasteful, he agrees with contemporaries that it 'must have been made by an artist thoroughly imbued with the Greek spirit' (p.755). Cook cites Eméric-David (1833) as his predecessor of almost a century. Although entitled 'Jupiter', it concerns Greek religion. Hermann Usener's roughly contemporary paper 'Zeus *Keraunos*' focused also on the Greek cult of Zeus, dividing its evolution into three phases each associated with lightning. Sjövall's (1931) volume *Zeus im altgriechischen Hauskult* is a substantial monograph on Greek cult. 'Le Zeus Cretois' received specific treatment by Verbruggen in 1981. Lightning is rarely the focus of Roman studies.

³ Hejduk (2020), 298. See Flashpoint 9.

⁴ Hejduk (2020) in her introduction, referring to Koch (1937).

⁵ Notable exceptions in augury and divination: e.g., Bouché-Leclercq (1879) on *la 'science fulgurale'*; Thulin (1906) on *Blitzlehre*; Weinstock (1951) on the *libri fulgurales*; Bloch (1963) on lightning prodigies, also MacBain (1982), Rasmussen (2003) Driediger-Murphy (2019); Linderski (1986) on augural law. Williams (2012) on how Seneca's explanation of lightning fits his Stoic, cosmic philosophy; Wildfang (2000) attempting to classify ancient lightning; Fears (1981/2016) on Rome's 'theology of victory' featuring the thunderbolt; and Hekster & Rich (2006) on Octavian's relationship with the thunderbolt. A doctoral thesis on celestial signs, Madge (2022), has a section on lightning as a 'divine sign' decently collecting relevant material but with superficial readings and predictable conclusions.

⁶ Schliephake (2017, 2020). On chaos, Eidinow and Schliephake (2024).

⁷ A better volume is forthcoming by Brill: Korobili & Tieleman (2026).

⁸ Cf. Bakker (2016), which although focused on Epicurean meteorology gives a better precis of ancient meteorological thought through a series of comparative tables of contents, allowing structural comparison from Aristotle through Lucretius to Syriac meteorology.

lightning are scattered throughout but there is no development beyond a sampling of what some ancient people said about it. Taub's interest in genre notwithstanding, there is little environmental, cultural, or historical contextualisation and no discussion of the social ramifications of meteorological ideas. For current purposes, isolated statements such as '[m]any practical activities (including farming and seafaring) are, to some extent, determined and circumscribed by meteorological events' or 'the desire to account for and predict weather phenomena is shown in the literature that survives' barely get the subject off the starting blocks.⁹ And so, that is where we must begin, in the realm of real world thunder and lightning and the ancient people exposed to and watching it.

With those people and the ancient skies above them in view, the question about Roman handling of lightning is not philosophic or theoretical, but societal, enquiring into real and practical responses to the real and powerful experience of lightning. The fundamental terrain here is uncertainty. To an English-speaking mind, 'weather' is a neutral word, but it is significant that the Latin *tempestas* had an inbuilt ambiguity. As Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights* 12.9) noted when listing the word among those that 'could signify and include two opposite things', *tempestas* meant both 'weather' generically but also specifically 'storm'. This is indicative of a cultural perception prevalent in Roman literature that weather, fair or foul, was in its totality perceived to embody the uncertain conditions of human life.¹⁰ Although it could be pleasant and enjoyable, it was unpredictable and changeable and so weather, *in toto*, was unsettling and in its extremes a liability.

⁹ Taub (2003). Quotes from p.7. but not ideas developed in the book. The focus is on philosophical traditions.

¹⁰ Cf. French '*le temps*' encompassing time, periodicity, & the weather: '*le temps qu'il fait = le code parlé par le moment, le jour, l'heure, l'individuation de l'existence, c'est a -dire qui accomplit, ou qui déjoue*' (Roland Barthes lecture 1979, see Barthes, 2003).

As a result, just as fickle fortune and the fickleness of the weather were often equated to describe life's unpredictable turns, so the storms of human adversity were often equated to real storms.¹¹ Thus, lightning, the most unpredictable and dangerous component of a storm, regularly stood metaphorically for the sudden reversals of fortune and cataclysms inherent in mortal existence.¹² Most disconcerting was the bolt from a cloudless sky, which came without warning and signified a twist of fate or dire revelation that could not have been foreseen.¹³ Lightning was therefore a physical and metaphysical fear, which conflated weather conditions with the human condition. Hurlled from the hands of the gods, moreover, its explosive volatility was a forceful reminder of the limited scope of human knowledge and foresight.

Roman society thus perceived itself to be under divine but capricious skies. Acting beneath them always entailed risk. If the conceptual terrain of lightning in this study is uncertainty, then the operative force is risk. A combined sense of uncertainty and risk underpins all the historical interactions with lightning in the chapters ahead. Risk itself entails both danger and opportunity, and these competing concerns and impulses will often be seen in tension in the central though problematic role lightning played in Rome's history.¹⁴ These are the organising principles of the work, which is structured around a series of flashpoints. Each flashpoint is a lightning strike that has been carefully selected either for marking a key moment of change or as exemplifying a central thematic concern.

¹¹ See Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares* 6.14. Also, Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 99; *Nihil non lubricum et fallax et omni tempestate mobilis*.

¹² E.g., Livy 10.29.6; Horace, *Carmina* 2.10; Ovid, *Tristia* 3.1.1., 5.3.1; Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.34.

¹³ E.g., Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.11; Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 37.25.1, 75.7.5; Vergil, *Georgics* 1.461; Ovid, *Fasti* 3.361; Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 2.51; Silius Italicus, *Punica* 13.16; Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 1.590, 2.300. Vargunteius was struck by a bolt from the blue in Julius Obsequens, *Liber Prodigiiorum* 61. The exception is *auspicia impetrativa* when signs were sought (see Flashpoints 1 & 5).

¹⁴ Pace Beard (2011), Beerden (2013), & Eidinow (2007). Cf. Vădan (2022). Discussed in Flashpoint 6.

Individually, these flashpoints comprise a series of case studies that allows thematic exploration of various aspects of handling lightning and the opportunities and challenges these presented. Collectively, their intertwining themes offer a diachronic history tracking developments and nuancing the various ways Romans thought about, interacted with, and responded to lightning over time.

The first section consists of three mythological flashpoints from which three different models for handling lightning will be laid out. These models anchor the argument by providing useful points of reference with which to approach the historical material. Section two is a series of four republican flashpoints concerned, broadly, with societal organisation and the traditions and institutions in place for coping with lightning. Risk in these case studies falls largely in the domain of danger. The third section comprises three imperial case studies concerned, broadly, with societal reorganisation and the ways in which approaches to lightning evolved in response to one-man rule. Danger remains a constant, but risk in these imperial cases also introduces an element of attractive, if perilous, opportunity.

Given the vast tract of time covered, this study cannot be exhaustive. The flashpoints are intended as vignettes around which some key ideas and information pertinent to the Roman world of lightning can cluster and thereby show where the major contours lie. Since the subject has not yet received proper attention, my hope is firstly to show that studying lightning on its own terms is a rich and worthy endeavour, offering much that is fresh and new. Consequently, if successful in that aim, I hope this thesis navigates a useful and thought-provoking path through the abundant material and lays a solid groundwork for further research.



Landscapes of Lightning

Environments and Conceptualisations

This introductory chapter is concerned with how lightning was imagined, discussed, and experienced. It is exploratory in nature and ranges widely with the intention of familiarising what may be unfamiliar about the relevant thought worlds on one hand and on the other to reorient and refresh our vision of what may be overly familiar. The purpose is to provide texture, substance, and background to the historical survey that follows. Here we consider the handling of lightning through experiences of and interactions with the real inhabited landscape.

For some initial soundings of lightning in the ancient imaginary, we turn to the most inaccessible and perhaps least intentionally constructed stratum of this conceptual territory. We begin in the landscape of dreams. More precisely, we begin with an ancient dream dictionary and the entries it contains about lightning-related phenomena.



Dreams of Lightning

Artemidorus of Daldis composed his *Oneirocritica* in stages over the second century CE.¹⁵ His dream dictionary stood in a long tradition of such divinatory guides. Working with the texts of his predecessors, sixteen of whom he names, he followed their practice of combining received wisdom with his own direct experience.¹⁶ Being from Asia Minor, Artemidorus was a Greek in the Roman world of the second century CE. He claims to have conversed with all manner of oneiromancers and the dreams he collected from his extensive travels across Asia, Greece, and Italy represent a cross-section of society not only in status but also differing cultural backgrounds.¹⁷ His work therefore belongs to the Graeco-Roman world in the broadest sense.¹⁸

Since this is in essence a collection of the dreams of countless anonymous people gathered widely over generations, as a historiographical source it is a hopeless jumble.¹⁹ However, as a historical record of thought and culture, it is also a unique repository. Artemidorus' recorded dreams present, scrapbook-style, a collection of ancient mental images generated impressionistically through the dreamer's experience of and reaction to the external world. Through analysis and interpretation, the dream dictionary adds an additional conceptual layer by consciously explaining those subconscious images. In Book

¹⁵ Thonemann (2020: 9-11) for possible dates. The reign of Septimius Severus is suggested.

¹⁶ Davies (2019) for overview.

¹⁷ Biographical details are within the work. See, Thonemann (2020), chapter 2. Also, Harris-McCoy (2012).

¹⁸ Artemidorus nevertheless identifies as Greek. At 1.35.8, he equates gaining Roman citizenship as a loss of former status. Rome is present but not foregrounded. See Bowersock (2004) & Thonemann (2020), chapter 12.

¹⁹ By usual contextual criteria: chronologies, geographies, source demographics, reliability, etc.

2, a book expressly concerned with dreams about the external world, Artemidorus presents the results of his investigations into what it means to dream about thunder and lightning.²⁰

Ancient dreams of lightning could be informed by a multitude of artistic representations of thunderbolts circulating in various media, but, most pressingly, there was the electrical phenomenon flashingly present in its unmediated form.²¹ The lightning conjured in dreams is a confluence in the imagination of the natural and human environments. Artemidorus, himself, sees dreams in a continuum with the natural world believing them to arise from φύσις; he calls dream images εἰκόνες φυσικαί (1.2). As a result, the sensorially charged experience of an electrical storm presented in his *Oneirocritica*, offers a brief fireworks of how lightning appeared and how it behaved when liberated from the laws of the physical world, from the circumscriptions of religion, and from literary contrivances and political machinations.

Although the dreams Artemidorus presents could be fabrications or situations extrapolated from other dreams, this is not the methodology he professes. His practice, based on direct experience (πεῖρα), was, he claims, to learn about dreams and then observe their outcomes.²² A practice which may be glimpsed in action when he cites his encounter with a man who dreamed that his bedframe was struck by a thunderbolt and whose wife, in real life, subsequently died (2.9). It is not hard science, but it is empirically

²⁰ Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 2.8-9. Tellingly, in dealing with the experiences of the external world, Book 2 begins with the weather.

²¹ At 2.20.2, Artemidorus mentions sculptural representations of the imperial eagle affecting dream imagery.

²² E.g., 1. Preface 3-4. in which he also professes to have acquired every book available on the subject. See Thonemann (2020:22): 'The *Oneirocritica* is expressly both a compilation of practical wisdom obtained 'on the job', and a summation of all that is valuable in the existing technical literature'.

gathered data of sorts.²³ Artemidorus would then apply this supposed cause-and-effect to future interpretations of similar dreams. It is perhaps testimony to the earnestness of Artemidorus' endeavour that the famous lightning and thunderbolt dreams of some of the most powerful men in the classical world go unmentioned.²⁴ It seems that Artemidorus was genuinely motivated to understand the meaning of real dreams as applicable to people generally. Roman dictators and emperors were superlative individuals by nature and so their alleged dreams were beyond the remit of that more generalising goal and, moreover, might be suspected of propagandistic manipulations and therefore of limited value.²⁵ We will encounter those other dreams of lightning later, but we begin with the subconscious imaginings of ordinary, forgotten people.

Thus, we are presented with dream thunderbolts from an unusually egalitarian viewpoint. They strike slaves and freedmen, rich and poor alike. Sometimes, people are completely engulfed in the bolt, sometimes they are struck on the head or chest, and other times only on the extremities. Some are struck when sailing, or when travelling abroad, some when sitting, or standing, or lying in bed. Property and land might also be struck. It strikes the married and unmarried, and those with and without families. It can make athletes, orators, and other public figures famous and depending on the person stricken it can predict the outcome of court cases (2.9).²⁶ What we enter is a world in which anyone might be struck without warning in any situation. This is, of course, the world of the

²³ Harris-McCoy (2012:36-38) locates Artemidorus among Empiricists in terms of methodology. See flashpoint 5.

²⁴ On his earnestness: at 2.69 he places himself among respectable diviners to distinguish himself and his methods from what he considers the quackery of less respectable practitioners.

²⁵ He ignores famous Greek and Roman lightning dreams equally. However, in *Oνειροcritica*, the emperor, himself, is a 'distinctly hazy figure', Thonemann (2020:199). A notable exception is 2.20.2, where dreaming of riding on an eagle foretells death for emperors and preeminent men.

²⁶ This is my summary of the relevant passages. Harris-McCoy's (2012) Greek text has no line numbers. All thunder and lightning dreams discussed herein are from 2.8-9.

ancient Mediterranean and the reality of its tempestuous climate - but in dream form.

Not unlike the act of dreaming itself, the act of divining meaning from it allowed for free association and purely personal interpretation.²⁷ So, for example, that trees are brittle and lose their shoots after being struck - a fact informed, no doubt, by observation of the natural world - leads to interpretation by allegory: since children are to people what shoots (βλαστοί) are to trees, a person who dreams they are struck by a thunderbolt may therefore lose or be separated from their children. In this allegorical way, the dreamer's immediate or imminent situation is always addressed. Thunder without lightning signifies trickery and ambush because it arrives unexpectedly, whereas lightning without thunder, by the same logic, is an empty threat and so signifies the dreamer is harbouring an unjustified fear (2.8).

Scattered throughout his treatment of thunder, lightning, and thunderbolts, Artemidorus makes statements which are explicit appeals to common knowledge and what he imagines is common sense. These are clearly meant to cue the reader into the logic behind his interpretations, but the assumed knowledge they are based on gives precious glimpses of the attitudes and behaviour in the world beyond. We learn, for example, that lightning-stricken land becomes barren because nobody wants to spend time there. Nevertheless, we hear also that land otherwise unremarkable (ἄσημα) becomes remarkable (ἐπίσημα) because of the altars erected and sacrifices that take place there. We also learn that slaves who are struck by lightning are manumitted.²⁸ Further, we are

²⁷ E.g., 4. Preface 1. Analogy and direct experience with the possibility for new outcomes. See, Thonemann (2020), 37-40.

²⁸ I cannot find any other mention of this or discussion, but the legal landscape Artemidorus depicts generally is Roman.

told that no one who is struck is without honour (οὐδεις γὰρ κεραυνωθεὶς ἄτιμος ἐστίν) since such people are honoured like a god (ὡς θεός). A point seemingly contradicted immediately by the following sentence in which Artemidorus records the colloquialism that those found guilty in a lawcourt were said to be ‘thunderstruck’ (κεκεραυνῶσθαί). There is also an ambiguous statement that just as thunderbolts never escape notice since they fall with great noise amidst storms, it is not possible for someone who has been struck by a thunderbolt to escape notice. The reason why is not explained although previously he has mentioned that a thunderbolt makes a poor man more famous (παρασημότερος). Later, Artemidorus also mentions that anyone who dies from such a strike must not be moved but be buried on the spot.²⁹ It is upon these ‘facts’, which Artemidorus assumes his audience will know and accept, that he parses out his interpretative framework.

Overall, in dreams as in real life, what emerges from Artemidorus’ treatment of ‘heavenly fire’ is the perception that the thunderbolt had powerful transformative properties. Although it could fall on people of any background and status, its meaning would differ greatly depending on these and other variables – but not in socially or morally predictable ways.³⁰ He describes in some detail why much earlier dream dictionaries were divided about the significance of being struck on the head by a thunderbolt (2.9). He explains that those previous works posited that it was a good dream for poor men but a bad dream for rich ones on the premise that the thunderbolt would destroy the poverty of the former but the wealth of the latter. He adds that previous dream-diviners had also noted the

²⁹ See Flashpoints 6 & 7.

³⁰ Annequin (1987) for the special case of slaves in the *Oneirocritica* generally. Kudlien (1991) on the fears and desires of the unfree as glimpsed through divination (discussion on the *Oneirocritica* specifically pp.61-81). Hall (2011:204-228) on Artemidorus’ “egalitarian” treatment of the dreams of the enslaved: unique in assuming ‘that slave dreams merit analysis alongside those of higher-status individuals’ (p.208).

special case of slaves, stating that slaves who were struck by a thunderbolt were fortunate because those κεραινωθέντες were relieved of their masters and duties and were instead dressed like freedmen in bright clothes and treated as though they had been honoured by Zeus.³¹ Artemidorus makes his own contribution by nuancing this further. He claims that the dream, in fact, only frees slaves who are not trusted; those who are trusted, he states, will lose that trust along with their honour and any possessions. By contrast, for free men, he claims it elevates those who have nothing to hide but exposes those who are concealing a wrongdoing. Furthermore, for rich men, it bodes well for those about to take up office or a priesthood but otherwise it warns that the dreamer's wealth is about to be destroyed.

While there is some logic to the justifications Artemidorus makes for arriving at his interpretations, the dream thunderbolt itself does not seem to have an obvious moral compass. That it was a good sign for people taking up office or priesthods is in keeping with Roman traditions which will, in later chapters, be seen to regard auspicious lightning as a source of divine legitimation and election.³² By extension, that it promised elevation in the lot of the poor and enslaved is perhaps logical and seemingly borne out in practice by the manumission of stricken slaves. Conversely, that it exposed those with something to hide resonates with the 'thunderstruck' recipients of a guilty verdict in court. This is further in line with wider ideas about divine justice and the punitive thunderbolt.³³ Indeed, Artemidorus clearly states that people and places struck by lightning were considered as touched by the divine but through his examples, he shows that this had two completely opposite interpretative possibilities: the stricken person had been singled out

³¹ Lightning here an interesting reversal of fortunes. Being 'honoured' by Zeus/Jupiter or punished by him is a fine line, as this thesis will show.

³² Inauguration and endorsement of magistracies, see Flashpoint 1.

³³ Lloyd-Jones (1971).

as either honoured or condemned. To this extent, the meaning and function of the dream thunderbolt aligns with interpretations of its worldly counterpart.

Yet, in this assortment of dreams, it also falls randomly at will, works mercurially on people's fates, bringing the happy down, the high low, while elevating the untrustworthy and undeserving as readily as those divinely honoured. That it only boded well for bad slaves while honest slaves were ruined is not an inherently useful societal model. Nor is warning the rich of their ruin, families of their imminent separation, or hostility between siblings and friends. It blocks people and stops them moving forward or ejects them from their property or makes them grieve. In these regards, it seems to be altogether capricious and haphazard.³⁴ Artemidorus sums up its disruptiveness by stating that the thunderbolt 'unites nothing and divides everything': οὐδὲν γὰρ ὁ κεραυνὸς ἐνοῖ ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ ἡνωμένα χωρίζει. While his rationalisations demonstrate a compulsion to make sense of its behaviour in a culturally coherent manner, the chaos of dream thunderbolts seems, in fact, to reflect the experience in nature. What we seem to have in the *Oneirocritica* is, in fact, a collection of real dreams exhibiting the complex human response to the random and meaningless behaviour of real lightning.

The *Oneirocritica* offers an invaluable glimpse into the internalised encounter with a chaos of fulminations percolating through the ancient sleeper's psyche. To begin, the most salient point is that all manner of ancient people from different times and places across the Mediterranean world had their dreams punctuated by disruptive, destructive, and inscrutable thunderbolts.

³⁴ Annequin (1987:77) points out that Artemidorus' world of anxieties and desires is the same as that of *defixiones* but voiced through a different medium. Weber (2015) on the emotions of the *Oneirocritica* generally. He notes fear and anxiety dominate (p.60).



Thunderbolts and Truffles

An unnatural history of lightning

To continue taking some cultural soundings of ideas about lightning-related phenomena away from the grand historical narrative and to sample how these were experienced and thought about in the waking state, we may turn to folk beliefs and practices. The following is a miscellanea. Its purpose is not to synthesise but simply to collect in order to illustrate the wide variety of ways people considered and encountered lightning in their daily lives. This is the chaotic and colourful cultural ferment from which the dreams above emerge and in which this thesis is situated. Apart from its intrinsic interest for revealing via assorted snippets the vibrant ancient thought-worlds of lightning, the use of gathering these curiosities together here in the introduction is that many of them will later be relevant. Directly or indirectly, much of what appears in this section also percolates through the ideas and incidents of the historical enquiry to follow. Therefore, rather than interrupting arguments later to explain unfamiliar practices or connections, it is best to set them out now such as they are. We will see behind these assorted beliefs that lightning was keenly observed by ancient people and much discussed.

A foothold in that ancient discussion is provided by Plutarch (*Quaestiones Conviviales* 4.2), who records a conversation on the subject. Plutarch was, like Artemidorus, a Greek in the Roman world of the first and second centuries. He was a Roman citizen who had spent

time in Rome and was well-connected there, but he lived on the Greek mainland.³⁵ His *Moralia*, in which this conversation occurs, ranges across ethical issues pertinent to both Greek and Roman interests. Like Artemidorus, Plutarch's thunderbolts belong to the 'Graeco-Roman' world broadly defined and are a mixture of experience and speculation.

The discussion takes place at a dinner party. Admiring a plate of giant truffles as they were served, one of the guests rused: 'These are worthy of the recent thunder' (ἄξιά γε τῶν βροντῶν τῶν ἐνάγχος γενομένων). The joke, for that is what it was, came at the expense of those who believed that thunder created truffles; a view maintained by the host, Agemachus himself, who, in response, argues in defense of this position. Agemachus points out that strangeness is no cause for disbelief since 'everyone knows' thunder and lightning and other *diosemia* have a great many peculiar effects though the causes of these are difficult if not impossible to discover.³⁶ The ensuing debate, as Plutarch recounts it, contains many interesting details about what ancient observers perceived and understood to be the weird and wonderful effects of thunder and lightning in the natural world.

We learn, for example, that objects struck by lightning gave off a sulphurous smell; that lightning passes through dry wood but sets green wood alight; and that shepherds taught their sheep to flock together in a thunderstorm because if they were scattered and solitary, they miscarried (ἐκτιπρώσκειν) out of fear.³⁷ We learn that stricken snakes lose their venom and that drinking stricken wine causes insanity.³⁸ We also learn that

³⁵ Roskam (2022) is a thorough, recent biographical study.

³⁶ On the world of ancient *diosemia*, Beerden (2013).

³⁷ Sulphurous smells often noted: e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 14.415, *Odyssey* 12.417; Lucretius 6.219-221; Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.21, 2.53; Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 35.50.1.

³⁸ Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.31.2, 2.53.1.

‘practically everyone knows’ that the bodies of lightning-stricken victims never decay. Contrary to Artemidorus above who relates that such people must be buried on the spot, in Plutarch we hear they must neither be cremated nor buried but simply fenced off undisturbed where they lie.³⁹ There is a discussion about why sleeping people are immune to thunderbolts; a ‘fact’ which Plutarch does not dispute, he only searches for a natural explanation.⁴⁰ While Artemidorus provides the contents of the dreamers’ minds, here we get an external perspective on the sleeping body. Immunity comes, according to Plutarch, because sleeping people are oblivious and relaxed, unlike those in the waking state who are ‘doomed by their imaginations’ because they hear the thunder coming and are afraid.⁴¹ Their bodies are thus tense, and this rigidity causes resistance to the flow of a striking thunderbolt which therefore blasts them open instead of passing through. In the same way, iron, copper, silver, and gold all melt when stricken because their density blocks the lightning and is resistant to it (προσμάχεσθαι καὶ ἀντερείδειν).⁴²

Dorotheus recounts a story he heard about a soldier posted in front of a temple in Rome whose shoelaces were burned up (διακαῦσαι) by a lightning strike, though he escaped unharmed.⁴³ This is entirely possible (fig. 2). Moist feet cause vaporisation which often blows people’s shoes off as the bolt seeks to make a connection with the ground.⁴⁴ Plutarch (666b-c) who presents himself as the voice of reason at the party, explains that, in fact, thunder and lightning kill many people through fear alone. His evidence is that

³⁹ Flashpoint Seven deals with the treatment of lightning-stricken bodies.

⁴⁰ Cf Pliny *HN* 2.55.4: people who are struck while awake are found with closed eyes while those struck while sleeping are found with eyes open.

⁴¹ ‘Doomed by their imaginations’ is the Clement & Hoffleit Loeb translation of ‘καὶ ταῖς προπαθείαις ἀναλίσκονται (p.331).

⁴² 665F. Whereas, in fact, they are good conductors. Nevertheless, the observation is reasonable.

⁴³ 665C. See, Helvia, Flashpoint 6., whose shoes and clothes were ripped off.

⁴⁴ Rakov & Uman (2006) 647.

countless numbers of people have been killed this way without any sign of a wound or burn from being struck.⁴⁵ Again, this is possible: the invisible but devastating effects of lightning strikes include cardiovascular and respiratory complications and various kinds of internal haemorrhaging.⁴⁶

In support of Aemilius' argument for the strangeness of lightning, Dorotheus also provides a first-hand account of a thunderbolt landing on a house in his town. Among the strange havoc it wrought, he says, wine leaked out of a *pithos* without any damage to the clay and, similarly, the bolt passed through a sleeping man without harming him or affecting his clothes, yet completely melting and fusing the copper coins in the money pouch he was wearing. Pliny (2.52.2) also mentions the ability of thunderbolts to drain *dolia* while leaving their lids intact and no other traces. He likewise mentions gold, copper, and silver being melted in money pouches without the pouch being singed or the wax seal even melting. Other recorded strikes were less benign. Accounts of lightning shattering infrastructure, setting buildings alight, and even striking people directly are a familiar refrain in the sources and, of course, improbable sounding prodigious lightning bolts are often recorded among other such marvels as rains of blood, hermaphroditic births, and wolves howling in the streets of Rome.⁴⁷

The discussion among Plutarch's dinner guests reminds us that quite aside from those familiar omens of classical literature and its associated political concerns about what thunder and lightning meant and how best to appease the gods, there were ordinary

⁴⁵ Cf. Livy (10.29.6) on lightning leaving no wound. Wounds are possible though, see Flashpoint 7.

⁴⁶ Pliny (2.55.4) notes humans are the only creature that can survive a strike. On the wide variety of symptoms, Andrews et al. (2018); On neurological effects, Cherington (2006). Keraunoparalysis occurs in 70% of lightning victims, Warrell et al. (2005:988). See also, Naik & Murali Krishna (2018).

⁴⁷ Julius Obsequens' *Liber Prodigiorum* abundantly collects such curiosities.

people trying to deal with its violence in pragmatic ways. While lofty temples were particularly susceptible to strikes, so too were the exposed wide-open spaces of fields and farms. Agricultural almanacs were therefore concerned with what lightning could do to crops and livestock and what practical precautions may be taken to mitigate damage. The resulting folk wisdom is an erratic mixture of keen observation, superstition, and a fundamental misunderstanding of the relevant science.

Columella (10.346-7), for example, suggests bryony planted around the perimeter of a field serves to avert lightning strikes. He also warns that the sound of thunder will kill unhatched farm eggs (8.5.12). The popular remedy to this, he notes is to put grass, laurel branches, and heads of garlic fixed with iron nails under the nests of sitting hens. Some of the rationale behind this peculiar assemblage may be deduced. Laurel was known to be beloved by Jupiter and as a result it was widely believed that it was never struck by lightning.⁴⁸ The head of garlic is perhaps a corollary of the head of onion used in the expiatory rites for lightning strikes.⁴⁹ Iron was heavily associated with thunderbolts partly because these were imagined to be wrought like iron on an anvil.⁵⁰ Iron is also a conductor of electricity and piercing the garlic with iron nails is reminiscent of magical practices.⁵¹ What was placed beneath the hen's nest seems therefore to have been a magical pseudo-scientific recipe for warding off lightning strikes.

We learn from Varro (*Rerum Rusticarum* 1.40.5) that even such experts as the haruspices

⁴⁸ Pliny, *HN* 2.56, 15.40; Servius, *Vergil Aeneid* 1.394; John Lydus, *De Ostentis* 45A.

⁴⁹ Plutarch, *Numa*, 16; Ovid, *Fasti* 3.337-44. See Flashpoint 2.

⁵⁰ Mythically, re. Vulcan and the Cyclopes forging thunderbolts, Pliny, *HN* 7.198: iron working invented by the Cyclopes, see below. On meteoric iron, anvils, and thunderbolts: Curtius (1879), followed by Whitman (1970), Janko (1994) 229-30. Cf. Beckwith (1998).

⁵¹ Dickie (2001), 16-17.

involved themselves in agricultural matters. When discussing the grafting of various types of trees, he notes that those who paid close attention to the haruspices took the matter seriously since the latter advised that a tree struck once would multiply the strike into as many bolts as there were species grafted.⁵² Certainly, lightning regularly struck trees as the sources abundantly record. Sometimes, these were in sacred groves. Lucilius makes a relatively early reference to an ‘overseer of the Alban groves and the trees which have been struck by lightning’.⁵³ The epigraphic records of the Arval Brethren record when trees were struck in their groves (fig. 3). Festus alludes to certain people called *strufertarii* who were apparently tasked with making a special kind of sacrifice near trees that had been struck.⁵⁴ These bloodless sacrifices involved a special cake.⁵⁵ Festus also tells us that lightning-stricken trees were known as *arbores fanatici*.⁵⁶

Trees were often noted among things that smell pungently sulphurous when stricken.⁵⁷ Lightning either vaporises them and blows them apart or travels through the sap in the living bark to the ground (fig. 4). Lightning-smitten trees were found readily enough that a bite from their bark could be prescribed as a remedy for toothache. However, this was apparently only efficacious if the sufferer approached the stricken tree with hands tied behind their back.⁵⁸

⁵² ‘*uno ictu tot fulmina fieri illud quod fulmen concepit*’, *Rerum Rusticarum* 1.40.5. Cf Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 15.17.

⁵³ Lucilius, *Saturae* 26.6.719: *lucorum exactorem Albanum et fulguritarum arborum*. An unplaced fragment in Nonius.

⁵⁴ O. Müller’s reconstruction in *Sexti Festi de verborum significatu quae supersunt* (Lepizig 1839: 295): *strufertarios dicebant, qui quaedam sacrificia ad arbores fulguritas faciebant, a fertio scilicet, quodam sacrificii genere*.

⁵⁵ Spelling variation ‘*struferctarius*’ derived from the sacrificial cakes ‘*strues*’ and ‘*ferctum*’, Festus s.v. *firtum* Müller p.85: *Ferctum genus libi dictum, quod crebrius ad sacra ferebatur, nec sine strue, altero genere libi, quae qui adferebant struferctarii appellabantur*. On this word and discrepant spelling, Vine (1986:113).

⁵⁶ 92M=82L: *Fanatica dicitur arbor fulmine icta*.

⁵⁷ Notably, the metaphor of Hector’s death *Iliad* 14.414-19, when the fallen hero is compared to a lightning-stricken oak, uprooted and giving off an ‘appalling stench of sulphur’: δεινὴ δὲ θεεῖου γίνεταί ὀδμηῆξ αὐτῆς.

⁵⁸ Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 28.11. Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.31.2: splinters on a stricken tree stick up in opposite direction to the strike.

In the imagined transformative properties of lightning there is a distinct sense scattered through the sources that lightning had generative qualities and could be fertile. At his dinner party, Agemachus states plainly that ‘farmers assert and believe that lightning which comes with rainfall is fertilising’.⁵⁹ Again, when Plutarch argues against Agemachus, he does not contest that lightning makes the rain more fertile, he only provides a natural explanation as to why: lightning simply heats and energises the rain.⁶⁰ Just like the truffles believed to be spawned by thunder, there is something strangely fructuous in a lightning strike. Here, too, Plutarch (664E) does not disagree; his own theory is that thunderbolts cracked the earth open, and the heat and the warm rain effectively tilled and penetrated the soil and for that reason truffles appeared after storms. Zeus and Jupiter were emblematic of masculine power and fertility, so it stands to reason that the thunderbolt had such properties. Indeed, just like Semele’s simultaneous death and impregnation by lightning strike, Alexander’s mother Olympias was divinely impregnated by Zeus on her wedding night *in a dream* by a lightning bolt to her belly.⁶¹ Alongside the thunderbolt, promiscuity was, of course, a defining characteristic of the king of the gods.⁶²

Jupiter Frugifer was a fecund agricultural deity who bore fruits to and from the earth.⁶³

⁵⁹ 664D: τὰ δ’ ἀστραπαῖα τῶν ὑδάτων εὐαλδῆ καλοῦσιν οἱ γεωργοὶ καὶ νομίζουσιν.

⁶⁰ In fact, true. Lightning releases atmospheric nitrogen: Hill et al. (1980); Drapcho et al. (1983).

⁶¹ Semele: e.g., Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 4. 2.; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.255; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3. 26-27. Olympias: Plutarch, *Alexander* 2.3. Also, Quintus Fabius Maximus Eburnus called ‘pullus iovis’ because he was struck by lightning on his buttocks (Festus 285L).

⁶² E.g., Zeus the ‘Begetter’. See Belfiore (2000), 55-56.

⁶³ Apuleius, *De Mundo* 37: *plures eum frugiferum vocant*. Particularly popular in North Africa, see Cadotte (2003) for a possible independent divinity in Punico-Libyan culture. Dökü & Kileci (2023) for thunderbolt rock reliefs in south-western Turkey connected to fertility.

Truffles and bulbs seem particularly associated with this sort of fulminating fruition.⁶⁴ Theophrastus (*Enquiry into Plants* 1.6.5) had long before noted their rootless nature and had listed thunder-truffles (ῥόδνον κεραύνιον) among plants that had no roots at all. The pungent smells associated with these and garlic and onions perhaps made it seem as though they had been penetrated with the sulphurous smells of lightning-smitten things.⁶⁵ The bulbs of the tassel hyacinth (βολβός) may also be added to this list. Edible if twice boiled, Galen (*De Alimentorum Facultatibus* 2.64) recommends they are eaten with vinegar, oil, and garum but notes that their pungency gives them medicinal properties if only boiled once. Apart from curing phlegm, he records that men who ate them to excess produced more semen and experienced aphrodisiac effects. Since the tassel hyacinth was another lightning-related bulb, it may be that the fecundity of the thunderbolt had something to do with its aphrodisiac properties. Agemachos (664c) tells his guests that despite all the ridicule (presumably about its sexual benefits) the little bulb had the ability to fend off thunderbolts (διαφεύγει τὸν κεραυνόν) due to mighty resistant properties. The flowers on the stem, in fact, look like little thunderbolts and perhaps this similarity suggested something by association about its bulbs (fig. 5). The thunderbolt was usually depicted as a fiery weapon wrought of iron or a bundle of iron rods, but sometimes it was also depicted emerging from vegetal trappings as though blooming with petals (fig. 6 & 7).⁶⁶ The underused German word, *Blitzblume*, describes thunderbolt flowers. Perhaps in ancient iconology, such depictions obviously alluded to the fertility of the thunderbolt and

⁶⁴ Among others e.g., Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 14.62 mentions a tree growing out of a stricken tomb, which grew to a large size and bore fruit twice a year. Diodorus Siculus (17.75.9) mentions a special insect in Hyrcania said to make honeycombs in lightning-stricken trees from which hollow trunks came excellent honey.

⁶⁵ In a 19th century manual of gypsy sorcery and fortune-telling, Romany gypsies use garlic in spells against the Evil Eye because of the sulphurous smell of garlic after a lightning strike (Leland, 1891:52).

⁶⁶ Dökü & Kileci (2023) on one representation of the thunderbolt doubling as a bundle of wheat. See also Sulla's cornucopia and thunderbolt (Flashpoint 8, fig.52).

the god wielding it.

The fertile properties of lightning might explain the strange behaviour we hear about from Democritus, the pre-Socratic philosopher who supposedly also composed an entire volume on the special properties of chameleons. He recommends burning the head and throat of a chameleon on logs of oak to invoke a storm and thunder. The same would result, he averred, from burning the liver of the creature on roof tiles. This is related by Pliny, who states that the rest of what Democritus says in his book is outright sorcery (*veneficia*) and although he finds it entertaining reading, he laments that Democritus, who was otherwise of sound mind and learning, could have stooped to passing on such nonsense.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Pliny himself repeats with apparent credulity the *remedium* of putting iron nails under hen nests to ward off the ill effects of thunder (10.151-3). Furthermore, he adds that soil scraped from the plough (*terra ex aratro*) will also serve this purpose. In fact, Pliny records many details about the effects of lightning on the natural world as simple truths: catfish, which suffered strokes at the rising of the dog-star, became drowsy in the presence of lightning, and startled oysters would clam shut in terror and miscarry their pearls.⁶⁸

It is possible that the people trying to invoke storms from their rooftops were doing so in a drought for the benefit of crops.⁶⁹ The more prominent aspect of lightning, however, was its violence and conjuring thunderbolts generally fell into the domain of ‘magic’, or here as Pliny has it, *veneficia*. Thunderbolts feature in the world of *defixiones*, where they were

⁶⁷ Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 28.29. A misattribution which outrages Aulus Gellius (10.12) who criticises Pliny for believing ‘foolish and outrageous absurdities’ were genuinely Democritus’ work.

⁶⁸ Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 9.25, 9.54.

⁶⁹ On conjuring storms, the *lapis manalis* and *aquaelicism*, see Flashpoint 2.

sometimes invoked on curse tablets as part of the horrible fates people wished upon one another.⁷⁰ The unusual gods called upon often subvert religious norms as well as ordinary weather.⁷¹ A Greek magical papyrus from Egypt for example memorably invokes a ‘star-grouping god, you thunderbolt-with-great-clap-Zeus-confining-world-flashing-abundant-bolt-bestowing daimon’ who is further described as ‘cracking-through-the-air, ray-producing, mind-piercing’.⁷² An interesting late example is a 3rd-4th century curse found in a well in Antioch, which combines Jewish and Graeco-Roman magic to repeatedly plead that Babylas the greengrocer and his livestock be blasted from existence.⁷³ Given this neighbourly behaviour (and the weather), protection to ward off lightning strikes was understandably felt necessary.

What knowledge we have of folk remedies is surely but a fraction of the superstitions and practices that existed. In a small aside, Pliny gives a glimmer of what we lack. While discussing the remedies derived from men (*ex homine remediorum*), he considers human words and incantations and, noting cultural variations among these, he mentions one universal:

Fulgetras poppysmis adorare consensus gentium est.

(Historia Naturalis 28.5)

Apparently, there was consensus across all nations that clucking the tongue was the appropriate response to lightning flashes.⁷⁴ The verb *adorare* indicates that this was considered ‘worship’, but presumably the same form of worship as Catholics crossing

⁷⁰ Lightning also features in the Greek magical papyri: Betz (1986).

⁷¹ See, Luck (1985/2006) *passim*. I.O.M. *custos conservator* might not acquiesce, see Simón (2010). Conversely, I.O.M. might be invoked for justice through curse tablets, see Gager (2002), 196, no.2.

⁷² PGM XII 75–77, trans. R.F. Hock in Betz (2022:160).

⁷³ Hollman (2011). The god invoked is Iao, the Jewish (YHWH). A fascinating mixture of cultures is evident in the tablet.

⁷⁴ A *hapax legomenon* from the noun *poppysmus*.

themselves when they sense danger.⁷⁵ Although it is not mentioned elsewhere, Pliny could not make such a statement if it were not readily recognisable as true among his readers so we must assume the habit of clucking tongues during a storm was common practice.

Other precautions are better known. Amulets and charms were commonly worn as protection against the Evil Eye and lightning strikes. These often portray the eye being attacked by a multitude of threats, including a thunderbolt from above (fig. 8 & 9).⁷⁶ Also popular was the collection of various ‘thunder-stones’. There were neolithic axe-heads thought to be remnants of thunderbolts which were repurposed in Classical antiquity with inscriptions as charms against being struck.⁷⁷ These might be the *brontea* Pliny mentions, which were tortoise-head-shaped stones thought to fall from thunderclaps and extinguish fires caused by lightning.⁷⁸ There were also *astrapaea* which had vivid streaks running through them that looked like lightning.⁷⁹ And *ceraunia* which caught the flashing of the stars.⁸⁰ When Pliny describes *magi* out in the desert searching for the rare stones made only in places struck by thunderbolts, it seems neither he nor the *magi* were deluded.⁸¹ They were seemingly searching for fulgurites, formed when lightning strikes the earth in places where there is a substantial component of silica, such as soil and sandy

⁷⁵ Pliny (HN 28.3) divides incantations into three groups according to function: seeking omens, averting evil, and commendations (*alia sunt verba inpetritis, alia depulsoriis, alia commendationis*). Tongue clucking must fall under the second.

⁷⁶ Engemann (1975) for the thunderbolt on such amulets.

⁷⁷ See Faraone (2014) for a collection and discussion of the evidence. Pliny (HN 37.51) mentions these ‘axe-like’ stones.

⁷⁸ Pliny HN 37.51.

⁷⁹ Pliny HN 37.74: *astrapaea in candido aut cyaneo discurrentibus in medio fulminis radiis*. There is no mention of whether these had properties. We might assume so.

⁸⁰ Pliny 37.51: *fulgorem siderum rapiens*.

⁸¹ Pliny, HN 37.5: *faciunt et aliam raram admodum, Magorum studiis expetitam, quoniam non aliubi inveniatur quam in loco fulmine icto*.

beaches. The intense heat vitrifies the silica as it passes through, and the result is a gritty, 'fossilised' lightning bolt (fig.10).⁸²

As well as numbering among the list of misfortunes that a person might wish to ward off with charms, lightning strikes were also the ultimate manifestation of the divine gaze infected with *invidia*.⁸³ There was more to fear than the wrath of angry gods in response to private or public shortcomings. Within the domain of the *malus oculus*, lightning takes on quite a different aspect from the usual Olympian one.⁸⁴ Unlike the thunderbolts hurled from the hand of an angry or righteous Jupiter, these bolts tend to be conceived of as falling from his jealous flashing eye.⁸⁵ The divine eye that flickered with jealousy singled out the wealthy, the famous, the beautiful, and the powerful; in other words, targeting everything Roman culture held up as virtuous and worthwhile.⁸⁶ If lightning could come not only for those who had committed crimes, but also for people's success and prosperity, there were good reasons for even the morally upright to flinch in a storm.⁸⁷ To that end, the *fascina* on walls and mosaic floors like the rattling *crepundia* worn on wrists and the tinkling *tintinnabula* hung from awnings were all participating, like amulets, to some degree in the effort to ward off thunder and lightning.⁸⁸

⁸² A fulgurite was excavated from the ash altar of Zeus at Mount Lykaion: Romano & Voyatzis (2010). Their excavation report in *Hesperia* (2014) omits this finding.

⁸³ Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 2.790-4) personifies Invidia in meteorological terms, enshrouded in a black cloud (*adopertaque nubibus atris*) bringing a foul storm into people's lives.

⁸⁴ Elliot (2016) for a comprehensive overview. Cook (1914:501-5) on lightning from the eye.

⁸⁵ Eyes in general too, due to extramission theory: Plato, *Timaeus* 45b-d; Euclid, *Optika*; Galen *De Usu Partium* 10. cf. Aristotle *De Anima* Book II, 418a 26 – 499a 18. The poisoned gaze: Plutarch *Quaestiones Convivales* 5.7. *Baskania* in Greek: e.g., Aeschylus (*Agam.* 947) when Agamemnon steps on purple robes: 'μή τις πρόσωθεν ὄμματος βάλοι φθόνος (may no jealous eyes strike from afar). Pliny (*HN* 7.2, 28.7).

⁸⁶ E.g., Vergil's ominous suggestion that Jupiter might look upon Aeneas with *invidia* in *Aeneid* 4.232-4. Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 2.9 1386 b17) distinguishes Phthonos from Nemesis explaining the latter represents the righteous destruction of wrongdoers. Kaster (2007: 88) 'Invidia loves to target *virtus*'.

⁸⁷ Livy (8.31.8-9) compares lightning to jealousy stating *invidia* like 'fire' seeks out the highest places (*invidiam tamquam ignem summa petere*).

⁸⁸ Not to say lightning was their sole or even primary concern, but part of the apotropaic complex. *Fascina* were phalluses (Fascinus was, himself, a phallus: Pliny *HN* 28.7) and *tintinnabula* with bells to

Part of the utility of wearing laurel wreaths was the lightning protection they afforded since it was believed laurel was never struck.⁸⁹ Beyond land, the great trunks of trees that served as ship masts were vulnerable and the pelt of a hyaena attached to the mast was believed to ward off lightning strikes at sea.⁹⁰ The skin of the monk seal, which was also believed impervious to lightning, was used as protection by nervous sailors (and several nervous emperors).⁹¹

Although these ideas are clearly in the realms of the fantastical in terms of understanding, they are nevertheless the product of real-world observations. This assortment of snippets from ancient conversations and agricultural handbooks reveals a discussion not only about how to prevent thunderstorms from ruining eggs although the practical quotidian concerns should not be underestimated; where it affected people's crops, livestock, and the very roofs over their heads, it threatened livelihoods as well as lives. Yet, it was also full of wonder and interest in the strange interactions people experienced first-hand with lightning or heard rumoured from others. While ideas abounded that seem outlandish, it must be stressed that the above miscellanea of confusion came from an alert and attentive place. People in the ancient world generally were keen observers of the natural world. Fulgurites are one example; volcanic lightning is another. Little-known to modern people, it was well-established in the classical repertoire that volcanoes are sources of lightning

ward off thunder and lightning were often phallic. See, Elliott (193-207) and Parker (2018). The origin of church bells ringing in storms? (See Jupiter Tonans temple in Flashpoint 9). Plautus mentions *crepundia*: (*Miles Gloriosus* 1399). On material evidence, Faraone (2018), 58 and passim.

⁸⁹ On laurel above, note 48. Suetonius on Tiberius' laurels and fear of lightning (*Tiberius* 69).

⁹⁰ Plutarch, *Quaestiones Conviviales* 4.2 (664b-d).

⁹¹ Plutarch, *ibid* (684c); Pliny, *HN* 2.146.5. Johnson & Lavigne (1999), 36-7.

(fig. 11).⁹² Mythologically, this manifested in volcanoes as the divine forge of Vulcan where the Cyclopes hammered out thunderbolts in this clanking smithy.⁹³ Volcanic lightning is poorly understood because it is difficult to access and, until the advent of aviation and drones, difficult to record, but it is easy to imagine that once observed (from a safe distance) communities would preserve and transmit this sort of knowledge whether in scientific treatises or in myth. Pliny the Younger (*Epistulae* 6.20) evidently experienced it up close while escaping Vesuvius.

In a world with no understanding of electricity, thunder and lightning were understandably sensational. In fact, they were not only baffling in their effects but improbable in their very existence. As Agemachus points out to Plutarch and his other guests, it is absurd to be amazed at all its peculiar consequences when the most incredible part of all is plainly observable to all: fire coming forth from moisture and hard, cracking noises from soft clouds (ἐκ μὲν ὑγρῶν φλόγας ἐκ δὲ μαλακῶν νεφῶν ψόφους σκληροῦς ἀναδιδόμενους 4.2.1). This defamiliarisation of the most obvious characteristics of thunder and lightning is instructive; small wonder then if burnt chameleon entrails gather storms and thunderbolts create truffles.

⁹² Volcanic activity was categorised under meteorology. Alongside earthquakes, it was thought that the rumbles below ground were related to the rumbles above and were part of the same atmospheric system, often explained via Aristotle's 'exhalations': *Meteorologica* 2.7–8. Also, Pseudo-Aristotle, *De Mundo* 4, 395b18–26. See, Baksa (2020).

⁹³ E.g., Hesiod, *Theogony* 139ff; Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 1. 73; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3. 302; Virgil, *Aeneid* 8.418, *Georgics* 4.171.

What I hope to have shown is that while thunder and lightning were poorly understood, they were keenly watched and discussed, and that these phenomena entered people's lives far more pervasively and intimately than in the way generally viewed in scholarship through the regulated and austere apparatus of state augury. What all this amounts to is a longstanding cultural awareness of and relationship with lightning.

The question that must arise from all these incidents, accidents, symptoms, and rules alongside the ongoing effort to avoid being struck is that of probability and how real a threat lightning actually posed to the inhabitants of ancient Rome. Plutarch's matter-of-fact reference to large numbers of victims (μυρίους) is telling. It alerts us to a certain frequency of lightning that facilitated all these various observations and encounters just as it necessitated taking all possible precautions. Before moving any further, we must therefore consider the weather.



Chances of Storms: the ancient weather forecast

In modern idiomatic usage, being struck by lightning denotes something highly unlikely to happen. Popular wisdom describes the chances as 'one in a million'.⁹⁴ This sense of slim chance contrasts sharply with what appears to be an ancient preoccupation with the magnitude of the danger. In Roman culture it presents itself as an ever-looming threat. If that problem were vanishingly rare, why would it receive such undue attention?

⁹⁴ The internet abounds with examples. Lightning and the lottery are standard clichés for one-in-a-million chances.

Conversely, if it was such a problem, why does scholarship pay it so little attention? The answer to the latter question appears to be that the abundance of recorded lightning strikes scattered throughout our historical sources often seems far-fetched. Their foreboding timing and pertinent targets make them appear as a predictable element in Roman constructions of danger. In moments of divine displeasure and imminent socio-political doom, lightning comes as an unsurprising feature of that rhetorical package. As such, they are often skimmed over as embellishments to historical events. Yet even if lightning is ignored, perhaps justly, when it is recorded among a cluster of unlikely prodigious occurrences such as sweating statues, mice nibbling shields, and blood flowing from broken bread, there are enough straightforward historical accounts of destructive bolts of lightning that the accumulative effect is startling.⁹⁵

As a random sampling: in 214 BCE, the Atrium Publicum on the Capitoline was struck.⁹⁶ The Temple to Ceres on the Aventine was struck in 206 BCE and again in 84 BCE.⁹⁷ Nero's baths were struck and destroyed in 62 CE.⁹⁸ The Temple to the Flavian Gens was struck in 96 CE.⁹⁹ Domitian's Pantheon was destroyed by a lightning strike in 110 CE.¹⁰⁰ In 217 CE, the Colosseum was struck and put out of service for several years.¹⁰¹ The Capitoline Temple itself was regularly struck.¹⁰² In fact, a tour of the ancient monuments of Rome reveals that destruction by lightning is a common refrain in the lifecycle of buildings

⁹⁵ These are among the list of prodigies of 91BCE at the outbreak of the social war: Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.98-99; Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 2.119, 8.221; Obsequens 54; Orosius 5.18.3-6.

⁹⁶ Livy 24.10.9.

⁹⁷ Livy 28.11.4; Appian, *Bellum Civile* 1.78.

⁹⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.22.

⁹⁹ Suetonius, *Domitian* 15.2.

¹⁰⁰ SHA, *Hadrian* 19.10; Orosius 7.12.5.

¹⁰¹ Cassius Dio 79.25.2-3; SHA *Heliogabulus* 17.8, *Alexander Severus* 24.3.

¹⁰² E.g., Livy, *Epitome* 14; Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.16, 1.19, 2.45, *In Catilinam* 3.19, 2.45; Cassius Dio 41.14.3, 42.26.3, 55.1.1; Tacitus, *Annales*. 13.24.

across the city.¹⁰³ Overall, the impression received is of a thunderous world in which lightning bolts were hurtled down from the heavens with terrifying and devastating regularity. This discrepancy between ancient accounts and modern experience was noted in passing in a 1932 article on conflagrations in ancient Rome. In researching that topic, H.V. Canter was evidently surprised at the number of fires in the city that were caused by lightning. He was sufficiently impressed to conclude:

One cannot read the references to fire originating from lightning without reaching the conclusion that the thunderbolt in ancient Rome, either because of climatic conditions which are no longer operative or from some other cause not easily discoverable, was at once more frequent and more destructive than it is today.¹⁰⁴

To my knowledge, Canter's observation has never been addressed.¹⁰⁵ As any visitor knows, Rome is a thundersome place. Lightning density maps, indeed, reveal Italy and the Dalmatian coast to be the most lightning stricken area of Europe (fig. 12) with Rome and its surroundings the most densely stricken part of the Italian peninsula after the region around the Alps (fig. 13). It is worth considering the effect of the meteorological backdrop on scholarship. The data from *Meteorage* Global Lightning Detection Specialist for yesterday's activity shows 1,311 lightning discharges across Italy while England received none (fig. 14). This is indicative of the meteorological norm with Italy experiencing 67,851 discharges to date this year and England only 913.¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, Britain barely registers on the strike density map with Oxfordshire receiving a mere 0.6 lightning events per square kilometre per year, while Rome and its environs receives a striking thirteen to

¹⁰³ One study of recorded fires in ancient Rome finds that of the 88 fires collected between 460 BCE and 410 CE, fully 18 were started by lightning, Desmond (2019). Obviously working from imperfect data, which among other problems only records larger and more publicly significant fires.

¹⁰⁴ Canter (1932), 281.

¹⁰⁵ Desmond (2019:8, 27) cites this passage but criticises Canter's 'uncritical approach'. She dismisses his point about the environment by simplistically referring to 'the symbolism' of lightning'.

¹⁰⁶ Data from *Meteorage* website for 13.03.2024.

sixteen.¹⁰⁷ As a result, scholars in colder or drier climes, for whom lightning is an unlikely threat, may be inclined to read ancient accounts of frequent lightning as exaggeration and literary hyperbole.

Rome's thundersome nature was well noted by ancient authors. Diodorus Siculus (3.34.2) marvels at the hardships endured in other, colder climates. Apart from frozen rivers and sleet, he remarks that those regions do not experience thunder and lightning because, so he had heard, the clouds were too dense. This reasoning is the same as found later in the Elder Pliny (2.51), who also remarks that winter climates create dense *aer* thick with heavy cloud and the earth's exhalations are so frigid and cold they simply extinguish all 'fiery vapours'.¹⁰⁸ Pliny singles out Scythia as being free of thunderbolts for this reason. Conversely, excessively hot climates do not have cloud cover at all because the exhalations are too dry to allow condensation. Pliny notes Egypt as thunderbolt-free for this reason. Away from the extremes of winter and summer, spring and autumn are thus signalled to have the climates most suitable for the formation of thunderbolts. The significance for Italy is that because of its milder winters (*mitiore hieme*) and cloudy summers (*aestate nimbosa*) it is 'always somewhat vernal or autumnal' (*quodammodo vernat vel autumnat*). Pliny explains that as Italy slopes down towards the warmth, in the region around Rome and Campania, it is therefore always thunderbolt weather. He observes that Rome receives thunderbolts not only in spring and autumn but also in winter and summer and claims that this does not occur anywhere else.

¹⁰⁷ Data from 2016 to 2023 collected by Vaisala's National Lightning Detection Network (NLDN) and Global Lightning Dataset (GLD360), which monitor in-cloud and cloud-to-ground lightning 24/7 worldwide: <https://interactive-lightning-map.vaisala.com/>.

¹⁰⁸ Pliny, *HN* 2.51: *hieme densatus aer nubium crassiore corio spissatur, omnisque terrarum exhalatio rigens ac gelida quicquid accipit ignei vaporis exstinguit*.

These climatic observations are not misguided. Although the science is faulty, the observation is correct that the desert climes of North Africa and the wintry climes of Scythia or Britain do not produce many thunderbolts (fig.15). Likewise, if inhabitants of Rome perceived themselves to be living in the most thundersome part of the known world, they were not wrong.¹⁰⁹ This means that for the inhabitants of the ancient city, Jupiter Optimus Maximus was always looming in Rome, not just in his giant temple on the Capitoline but in the storm clouds often rumbling overhead.

The answer to its greater destructiveness, however, is not correlated to a higher frequency of lightning but instead to the lack of infrastructure to deal with it. The lightning rod, which conducts the immense voltage of lightning safely to the ground, was not invented until Benjamin Franklin's famous kite experiments of the mid-eighteenth century.¹¹⁰ Since its invention, people have lived in cities in relative safety and the very real and ever-present threat lightning once posed has largely been forgotten. It is a simple explanation but one which carries serious implications for the conditions of life in the ancient city. Scientific understanding of electricity and the social impact of such understanding marked a cognitive shift which is as significant as it is modern. Even after Franklin published his ideas about lightning and how to deal with its 'mischievous effects', it took time to work out how such electrical knowledge would best be applied.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Also, the Roman Climatic Optimum. See McCormick et al. (2012) collecting available environmental data and Bernard et al. (2023) for a 'climate history' of Roman imperial expansion. Relevant because thunderstorms increase in the atmospheric instability of warmer weather. A rise of one degree in average air temperature corresponds to a twelve percent increase in lightning strikes (Romps et al., 2014).

¹¹⁰ Doubt now surrounds their factuality as reported, see Dray (2005). Nevertheless, the idea was correct and following it, experimentation at Marly la Ville near Paris finally confirmed lightning to be electrical in nature, Anderson (1885), 17-20

¹¹¹ Franklin (1767). From the title of his paper: 'Of Lightning, and the Method (Now Used in America) of Securing Buildings and Persons from Its Mischievous Effects'.

To get a sense of how transformative this knowledge and consequent technology has been, it is instructive to compare the figures for lightning fatalities in Europe between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹¹² There are, of course, serious methodological obstacles to making such a comparison; systematic recording did not begin until the 20th century and the sophistication of the equipment able to register this developed radically over this period. In addition, modern communications mean that people are more likely to report a fatality than in the past. Altogether, however, all else being equal, these factors should skew results significantly towards a seeming increase in lightning fatalities. This only makes the findings to the contrary more impressive. Results presented at a 2010 International Lightning Detection conference showed that deaths per million dropped to an almost negligible number in Europe in the 20th century (fig.16).

For the pre-modern, agricultural societies of the ancient world and for inhabitants of the flammable, often rickety, unprotected buildings of urban centres like Rome, the ramifications are clear.¹¹³ The implications for modern understandings of that ancient environment are equally clear: in the relative safety of cars and lightning-protected buildings, we can greatly underestimate the danger lightning posed and the vulnerability felt by everyone exposed. Had the Vatican not been properly earthed, the newspaper headlines mentioned in the introduction would have been far more sensational: the basilica would have been torn open and could well have gone up in flames. That was the ancient experience. Inhabitants of modern developed nations can overlook the fact that being indoors offered no protection from bolts that could tear out beams and rafters and strike people in their beds at night.¹¹⁴ It is easy to forget that lightning could (and

¹¹² Cooper et al. (2010).

¹¹³ Living conditions: Yavetz (1958), Aldrete (2018).

¹¹⁴ E.g., Lucretius 6.241-2; Pliny *Historia Naturalis* 2.55.4; Plutarch; *Quaestiones Convivales* 4.2 (665a-b);

regularly did) blast through walls, burn buildings to the ground and even reduce entire sections of a city to ashes.¹¹⁵

Without taking seriously the terror often directly or indirectly expressed in the sources, the thunderbolt and its concomitant thunder and lightning can often be skimmed over as somewhat trivial. As has hopefully become apparent, however, fear was not only genuine, it was justified.

We thus set out with the understanding that it was the experience of electrical storms which epitomised for Roman society the turbulent precariousness of human life and that the experience of real-world lightning was what gave vitality, importance, urgency, and meaning to the question of what it meant and what ought to be done in response to it. Flickering across dream dictionaries and farmer's almanacs, and falling from divine eyes and erupting from volcanoes, this confused and colourful chaos was the lived experience of lightning, and this is the tempestuous backdrop to the history we now begin.

Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 2.9. A privilege still not afforded to many in developing countries today. Tragic news stories are common e.g., Vaidyanathan (2023), Picheta (2024). See Mazumder & Saroar (2025); Cooper et al. (2022).

¹¹⁵ Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.21.2.

part one

Mythological Case Studies



Flashpoint One

Romulus and the Legacy of Lightning in Roman Kingship

We begin in imagined time, in Rome's myth-history. Our first three flashpoints consider in turn the imagined relationship to lightning of the nascent capital's first three kings. Although these may not have been historical figures, the stories told about their various interactions with lightning nevertheless provide important historical information; not because they recount factual deeds but rather, in the spirit of Sallustius' fourth-century insight that myths are 'things that never happened but always are', these are lightning strikes with which Roman society lived and evolved for centuries.¹¹⁶ What was said about these archaic fulminations by later generations provided a lens through which to view those later times and a legendary bedrock to orient and anchor a changing and often turbulent society. If recent thinking is correct and these myths only began to crystallise in the fourth to third centuries BCE, then they become an important backdrop to and element in the responses and behaviours considered presently in our historical case studies, the earliest of which occurs also in the early third century BCE.¹¹⁷ It will be seen that in the telling and retelling of the myth-history of the early city as well as in its politico-religious ceremonials, Rome came to represent itself as a state that had always defined its powers in terms of thunder and lightning. In the Roman imagination, at least, the history of lightning at Rome was a history as old as the city itself, and so, naturally, it is a history that begins with Romulus.

¹¹⁶ Sallustius, *De Deis et Mundo* 4: Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγένετο μὲν οὐδέποτε, ἔστι δὲ αἰεὶ

¹¹⁷ E.g., Cornell (1975); Wiseman (1995); Bremmer (2014); Feeney (2016).

Our first flashpoint is Rome's seminal burst of lightning by which Romulus accedes to power. Its significance and the importance of lightning more generally across the legend of Romulus is easy to overlook because as Rome's idealised first ruler, myths about him were moulded around ideal behaviour and societal norms. Romulus therefore seems predictable. His activities, even if presented aetiologically as occurring for the first time, are as familiar to modern readers as they were to ancient ones and the familiarity of his actions can make them seem routine and even unremarkable. They exemplify what Roman society presented to itself (and what comes down to us) as being the quintessential and proper Roman attitude towards lightning. For this reason, lightning in the myths of Romulus has been hidden in plain sight and has received little attention. This first chapter therefore looks carefully at what lightning is doing in the myths about Romulus, but then, more revealingly, what Romulus is doing with lightning. This is a map of the territory in that it lays out the socio-religious norms that inform many of the ideas and much of the behaviour to be encountered in the chapters ahead, but it is also a critical re-evaluation of that conceptual landscape. Romulus will be shown to have set a place for thunderbolts and lightning in Roman monarchic rule that would echo through the centuries of Roman political power.

The founding flash occurs in Dionysius' account (*Roman Antiquities* 2.4-5) after Romulus had made a carefully worded speech to the people leaving to them the decision of what sort of government the new city should take. Their consensus was, as anticipated, that they wanted a monarchy, and that Romulus should be king. Dionysius tells us that Romulus was enormously satisfied to have been judged worthy of kingship by men (βασιλείας ἄξιος ὑπ' ἀνθρώπων κριθείς), but that he declared he would not accept the

honour until the heavens had, by auspicious omens, likewise given sanction (ἐπιθεσπίση δι' οἰωνῶν αἰσίων). A day was therefore appointed to consult the auspices, and, on that day, Romulus rose at dawn and performed his sacrifices and prayers to 'King Jupiter' (Δί τε βασιλεῖ) and the other gods in a 'ritually pure space' (ἐν καθαρῷ χωρίῳ) under the 'open sky' (ὑπαίθριος). When he asked for a heavenly sign from the gods whether it would please them that he should be king of the city, a great flash of lightning (ἀστραπή) shot across the sky from left to right (2.5). With this sign, Romulus received the sanction of heaven and Rome's first political seat was established.

Dionysius' account may be read straightforwardly, as it usually is, as pertaining primarily to augury. The flash from left to right, in this view, is simply the favourable omen marking a successful conclusion to Romulus' auspication. Embedded into Rome's legendary foundation in this way, lightning is presented as a divine sign which was from the outset fundamental to the identity of the city and its governance.¹¹⁸ In this sense, the passage is programmatic for the future of Roman lightning-ways: it describes the precedent by which future rulers and augurs would include lightning in matters of state.

Dionysius certainly intended his account to evoke the world of Roman republican augury and he draws the comparison explicitly several times.¹¹⁹ The ritual that he describes Romulus undertaking on the appointed day, for example, is an episode of 'sky-watching' (*servare de caelo*), which are occasions especially familiar in accounts of republican politics.¹²⁰ Signs solicited this way through the ritual ceremonials of taking the auspices

¹¹⁸ Although scholarship on Romulus mythology often emphasises themes of citizenship and the creation of civic institutions, the role of lightning is absent from these. E.g., Scheid (1994), Smith (2011), Carandini (2006, 2014); Stem (2007) Tennyson (2022).

¹¹⁹ See below.

¹²⁰ Excellent overview in Driediger-Murphy (2019), 127-158.

were *auspicia impetrativa*. These lent themselves to straightforward interpretation occurring as they did under orchestrated ritual conditions with the necessary officiating experts on hand and coming in answer to specific questions: in this case, the question of Romulus' kingship. Generally, they were declarations of divine approval or disapproval and confirmed what was *fas* or *nefas*.¹²¹ Conversely, bolts from the blue, unsolicited and unexpected were *auspicia oblativa*.¹²² These spontaneous signs were more ambiguous and, without ritual or ceremonial contexts, usually more worrying. As we shall see in our republican case studies, they were often classified as *prodigia* and a matter for public concern. Dionysius, from his late first century BCE perspective was well aware of these disruptive prodigal lightning strikes as well as the political machinations by which they could be manipulated.¹²³ Here, however, he explains, the ἐκ τῶν ἀριστερῶν ἐπὶ τὰ δεξιὰ ἀστραπὰς given to Romulus was consummately auspicious (ἀΐσιος). This is partly because the sign offered was impetrative and partly because it was a bolt of lightning rather than, say, the birds by which he won his contest against Remus. In Roman divinatory taxonomies, lightning strikes were *signa ex caelo*.¹²⁴ Of all divine *signa*, they were the *auspicia maxima*: the superlative and most forceful.¹²⁵ Cicero (*De Div.* 2.42–43, 2.74) called lightning the *optimum auspicium*. Theoretically, it overrode all other signs and had the power either to confirm or annul prior omens.¹²⁶ The sign Romulus received was

¹²¹ A full appraisal of these terms in Cipriano (1978).

¹²² Linderski (2007:10) distinguishes *auspicia* pertaining to action and *auguria* pertaining to status.

¹²³ On manipulation and contesting the auspices, Konrad (2022). On the limits of manipulation, Driediger-Murphy (2019), esp. 86-93, 179-188, 193-201.

¹²⁴ Among four categories: *ex avibus*, *ex tripudiis*, *ex quadrupedibus*, and *ex diris*.

¹²⁵ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 2.5.5; Cassius Dio 38.13.3-4. Servius *auctus*, *Aeneid* 2.693.

¹²⁶ Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.34 argues against this. *Fata Deum* is a notorious problem for divination insofar as it suggests fate can be changed. Seneca takes particular issue with a hierarchy of omens and the logic that one fate can cancel out another. Cf. Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.376 where the Sibyl warns fate cannot be bent by prayer and 3.375–6 where Jupiter allots fate. See Zanker (2023). Servius (*ad Aeneid* 2.54) contrasts *fata* with *laeva*, which he says is unlucky except in the case of thunder and lightning.

also αἰσιος because of all auspicious lightning that which came from the left was the ultimate good omen.

Although seemingly a minor detail, this preference for left-sided lightning, in Dionysius as elsewhere, reveals distinct topographical and cosmological orientations that situate the myth geographically and conceptually in the landscape of ancient Rome. A localised understanding of the sign given to Romulus explains why Dionysius feels compelled to explain to a Greek audience why lightning from the left was considered so auspicious by Romans.¹²⁷ He states that he is unsure whether it was something they learned from the Etruscans or from their own Latin ancestors; a comment that alerts us to a departure from the world of Greek divination which favoured lightning from the right, but which also acknowledges the existence of divinatory traditions prior to Romulus.¹²⁸ Left, in Dionysius' explanation, is relative to the topography of Rome itself; it is not discerned in relation to the individual's body but rather in relation to the cardinal points when standing in a specific place and facing a specific direction in the ancient city. He describes the augurs taking the auspices looking east 'from the best seat and station', by which he seems to have the Auguraculum on the Arx in mind. He describes Romulus following (what would become) Roman custom with the ritual specifications of a pure space and open sky above. Befitting this requirement, the Auguraculum, like other temples related to fulgural activities and fulminating deities was hypaethral in nature; that is, such

¹²⁷ Ennius also describes the good fortune of signs from the left: Nonius, 51.7: '*Laevum*' significari veteres putant quasi a levando... Ennius annali lib. III—*Olim de caelo laevum dedit inclutus signum*' (The ancients believed 'left' as if derived from 'to life/elevate'... Ennius Annals Book III – Once the All-Glorious gave a sign from the left of the heavens).

¹²⁸ Dionysius makes his own explanations (2.5.2-4) and offers an alternative origin story (2.6.5) Cf. Livy 1.18.6; Cicero, *De Officiis* 3.66; Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 7.8; Valerius Maximus 8.2.1.

structures had an open space in the ceiling or lacked a ceiling altogether.¹²⁹ This allowed for unobstructed communication between the heavenly source of the lightning, the earth consecrated to it, and the people watching it. Dionysius pans out from this spot on the Capitoline to a sweeping cosmic vision in which the augurs who stand there face the direction from which the sun, moon, and fixed stars rise and are aligned with the northern axis of the revolving firmament to the left. In other words, lightning from the left as observed facing south-east from the Auguraculum always came from the same part of the sky. This satisfies Dionysius' logic because it equates the auspicious Greek north with the left side of anyone so positioned. Greeks and Romans therefore both preferred lightning from the same part of the sky despite perceiving it as right versus left respectively the distinction in perception being due only to the different directional orientations during divination.¹³⁰ This is not particularly intuitive to viewers of modern maps oriented northwards, but it is apparent in older maps which traditionally positioned east upwards.

This east up, left-sided orientation is evident also in Ovid (*Fasti* 4.833-4) when describing similarly auspicious flashes of lightning for Romulus in the very act of founding the city. Asking favour from the gods, Ovid has Romulus pray that they will grant the new city longevity, prosperity, and world domination. To this Jupiter agrees with doubly auspicious omens by sending both thunder and lightning on the left: *tonitru dedit omina laevo Iuppiter, et laevo fulmina missa polo*.¹³¹ Here, again, left is expressly not relative to

¹²⁹ Platner–Ashby 61; Richardson 45; Coarelli in Steinby (ed.) s.v. 'Auguraculum (Arx)', *LTUR* I, 142-43. On hypaethral openings, Vitruvius 1.2.5, 3.2.1, 8); e.g., Capitoline Temple: Livy, 1.55.3-4; Festus 505L. Semo Sancus, 'perforatum tectum' Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 5.66. See, Platner & Ashby (1929) 469-70.

¹³⁰ Greek practices traditionally faced north: Smith (1875), 378.

¹³¹ The omen in the fragment of Ennius above (n.12) is given to Tarquinius Priscus on his way to Rome and kingship. Skutsch (1985) rejects the general consensus since Vahlen (1854) that this leftward sign refers to an eagle removing and replacing Priscus' cap, finding Timpanaro's (1978) interpretation of thunder or lightning as 'greatly superior'. Clearly, the latter would sit well in the current argument.

Romulus personally but to the *polus*, ('axis' or 'heavens') meaning the lightning came from a fixed cardinal direction and thus a recognisable region of the celestial vault. Under such locally oriented heavens, the conceptual terrain of lightning mapped onto the physical landscape and the sky above Rome becomes as intrinsic to the capital's topography as its terrestrial landmarks.

The lightning that established Romulus as king was therefore local and, at least to the myth's later audiences, intimately tied to the physical and social fabric of Rome itself.

Divine Permission and Political Power

The lightning from the left it was so compelling a sign, Dionysius explains, that when Romulus gathered the people together in an assembly and described the omen given to him, they elected him king without deliberation.¹³² Within the logic of the myth, lightning was reliable as a sign because it was timely and intentional; and it was authoritative because it had a divine origin with a discernible message for mortals. This reflects the rationale for and understanding of real-world practices of Roman augury. It is familiar, of course, that Romans, broadly defined, saw Rome as a divinely endorsed project overseen and protected by the gods. It is equally familiar that certain individuals were believed particularly favoured by the gods and that the senate worked in careful tandem with the divine will in order to maintain the *pax deorum*. Divination - by lightning, livers, and flights of birds - is a well-known and integral part of that equation.¹³³ Traditionally, Romulus was

¹³² Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 2.6.1.

¹³³ Notably, Weinstock (1951); MacBain (1982); Rosenberger (1998); Wildfang & Isager (1999); Rasmussen (2003); Engels (2007); Turfa (2012); Driediger-Murphy (2019).

Rome's first augur.¹³⁴ Portrayed as deferring to divine signs and actively seeking them out, he behaves in the familiar manner so often idealised in the annals of Roman history. That is, rather than hubristically or ambitiously seizing power when the opportunity arises, he seeks the advice of the gods and is only satisfied when he knows he is acting in accordance with their will. At surface level, the myth thus establishes him as a pious ruler. He exemplifies the reverence and restraint so often described as desirable in Roman leaders real and legendary. Moreover, consent bestowed through auspication is not only established as the appropriate mode of communication with the gods but is also revealed to be the definitive check and balance on human action relative to them.

So far, then, the Romulean model for interacting with lightning may be summarised as deferential, pious, and restrained: Romulus seeks and is granted divine permission for his actions. This model assumes a genuine divine-human relationship which put distance between political power and the person who would assume it. Lightning from this perspective is authoritative and unambiguous: it counters doubt by supposedly leaving nothing to human fallibility or ambition. By mediating human competition, it put ultimate authority beyond mortal control. Romulus was thus the myth-historical archetype for the modality of power characteristic of Rome: a power that presented itself as governed and protected by the divine thunderbolt.¹³⁵ By creating a ritual space for requesting, interpreting, and heeding its celestial communications, he represents a system that deferred to the gods in its collective decision-making processes.

¹³⁴ *'optimus augur fuisse traditur'*: Cicero (*De Divinatione* 1.2). Also, Dionysius Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 14.2.2). His supposed *lituus* was kept in the Temple of the Salii on the Palatine, (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.30, 2.80).

¹³⁵ This will become apparent if it is not already.

For Dionysius, this deferential model was already well-established. In the Rome of the early second century, almost two centuries prior, Ennius had also engaged with the Romulus myth and similarly emphasised the central role of augury in Roman kingship. After the quarrel between the twins, Ennius stages the contest of the birds on the Aventine.¹³⁶ In a notoriously difficult passage, he describes the divine sign which reveals Romulus' choice of location for the ancient capital as the one favoured also by the gods, after which Ennius states:

*Conspicit inde sibi data Romulus esse priora, auspicio regni stabilita scamna
solumque.*

Then Romulus perceived that he had gained a throne whose source and prop was augury.¹³⁷

Famously, the divine sign given Romulus was a flock of birds although I have argued elsewhere that the *candida lux* that accompanies their sighting in this passage might easily have been understood by contemporaries to have indicated, in addition, a brilliant flash of dawn lightning.¹³⁸ Ennius certainly acknowledges here the value of divination and its mediating capabilities in the accession to kingship. Indeed, the passage survives courtesy of Cicero where it appears in a discussion about the integrity of augury.¹³⁹ Cicero has his brother Quintus quote these lines as evidence that knowledge of the augural arts in the capital had a trustworthy pedigree. For his argument, Ennius was evidently a robust

¹³⁶ Ennius, *Annales* 77-96 Vahlen = 72-91 Skutsch.

¹³⁷ This is W.A. Falconer's 1923 translation for the Loeb, which apparently treats *scamnum* advisedly as 'throne' per Lewis' *Elementary Latin Dictionary* of 1890. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (1968) s.v. *scamnum* gives (1) a stool or bench or (2) (figuratively) a tier or stage (for supporting something), also citing Ennius (*Ann.*95) as potentially a throne. The main point stands regardless: Romulus' position relied on augury.

¹³⁸ Strachan (2026a).

¹³⁹ Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.107-8.

authority since by quoting this passage he is satisfied that he has established the reliability and honest origins of augury in Rome.¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless, if the foundation and stability of Roman kingship depended on auspices, then necessarily augurs and diviners were required as human intermediaries, and consequently, the entire premise was compromised: human machinations and interventions were thereby implicated as much as divine ones.¹⁴¹ Besides piety and deference, what the Romulus myth clearly also shows, and what history will periodically enact, is that quite contrary to restraining ambitious designs on human power, lightning as divine endorsement could, in fact, facilitate them. We must therefore look beneath the ostensibly passive attitudes of divination to see what lightning embeds in Roman power structures.

Beyond Divination: from signs to summons

When Romulus first raised his city, quarrelled with his brother out of what Livy calls 'the greed of kingship' (*regni cupido*, 1.6.4), and became sole ruler (*solus potitus imperio*, 1.7.3), he had to negotiate his place not only in human society but his place in relation to the divine. Accordingly, the myths about him are not so much about divination as about establishing power and about the source and nature of that power. The act of taking up *imperium* as the first king of Rome raises the same questions that confront all rulers: Who has the right to such power? Who gets it? Why? And by what means is it exercised? Throughout history, the response has been varying incarnations of the same answer: God,

¹⁴⁰ He turns to a different issue thereafter as if the point has been well made.

¹⁴¹ See Flashpoint 5.

the gods, the divine.¹⁴² Ideologically, kings stand in their elevated positions as mediators between heaven and earth. This is a very ancient and fairly universal phenomenon that was formulated very exactly in the early modern legal terms of the divine right of kings.¹⁴³ Livy (1.8.1-2) imagines Romulus dealing with this problem at the beginning of his rule and excusing him for assuming the spectacle of grandeur since he did this, Livy says, because he had been persuaded that his new laws would not seem binding to the eyes of a rustic people unless he invested his own person with greater majesty (*habitus augustior*) and adopted the emblems of authority (*insignia imperii*). He claims something similar in his preface (7), disclaiming the veracity of his account, stating it is the privilege of antiquity to mingle divine and human things in order to add more sacred majesty (*augustiora facere*) to the beginnings of cities.¹⁴⁴ Fundamentally, to appear legitimate and to act as if one is legitimate, there needs to be a source of legitimation. Lightning took on this role and was a vital element in the Roman presentation of divinely endorsed power. It is my contention that lightning provided the Roman world with something akin to the divine right of kings.¹⁴⁵

To show how lightning was woven into the nature and narrative of divine kingship at Rome, we may turn to Vergil, who was composing his Roman epic around the same time that Dionysius was composing his history. There will be more to say about that vital historical context later when we discuss Augustus. The concept of a divine mandate or divine right to rule becomes crucial when there is no established route to power as with Romulus' inaugural kingship or when traditional routes to power break down as they did

¹⁴² Globally, Moin & Strathern (2022). Ancient world, Brown (2000), Brisch (2008).

¹⁴³ Figgis (1865). Cf., Burgess (1992).

¹⁴⁴ Woodman (2023) examines this famous passage.

¹⁴⁵ On 'divine right' more generally in the ancient world and, later, imperial power, see Fears (1977).

in the late Republic when questions of legitimacy and authority arose. The *Aeneid* addressed those questions and answered them with heavenly rumbles and flashes. For now, the aim is only to show how these work conceptually.

Vergil surrounds Romulus' own legendary forebears with epiphanic thunder and lightning which, like that of Romulus, go beyond the straightforward remit of divination. The omen that portended the future sovereignty of Roman kings and the Julian line, for example, comes in book two of the *Aeneid* (2.682-704) when a numinous flame suddenly appears and licks about the head of young Iulus. This convinces Anchises to embark on the journey west with Aeneas. Upon seeing the flame, Anchises raises his eyes and hands to the heavens and supplicates *Iuppiter omnipotens* asking him to ratify this omen. Ratification comes immediately with a crash of thunder on the left (*subitoque fragore intonuit laevum*) and a shooting star.¹⁴⁶ The shooting star was added in obvious reference to Caesar and the *Sidus Iulium* and, likewise, the ratifying thunderbolt is loaded with future kingships real and imagined.¹⁴⁷ Such foreshadowing is evident in *Book 8* when Vulcan visits his subterranean smithy in Aetna. Vulcan arrives at dawn as Vergil takes some time to emphasise (8.407-15) and the Cyclopes are working on a thunderbolt at the forge. The unfinished thunderbolt is clearly not ready, but it foreshadows the flash of Aeneas' regal future.¹⁴⁸ In the narrative, Aeneas, himself, is also not ready for kingship as he has only just arrived on the future site of Rome. In fact, as Vulcan visits his forge, Aeneas is waking for the first time in the house of Evander on the Palatine. Vulcan calls the

¹⁴⁶ i.e., in Troy, the legendary forebears of the Roman people are oriented skywards as if they are already in Rome.

¹⁴⁷ *Sidus Iulium*: Pandey (2020), chapter 2.

¹⁴⁸ Understanding the role the thunderbolt played in political power significantly changes the reading of this passage. Compare e.g., Fratantuono and Smith (2018:516): 'The emphasis in the description of the bolt is on the god's use of the weapon in punishment and retribution; the delay in the completion of the Jovian thunder implies a reprieve for hapless mortals.'

Cyclopes away to put those same skills they are applying to the thunderbolt - perhaps the same elements - to work on the armour which will win kingship for Aeneas.

It is surely no accident that Vergil has the Cyclopes turn their attention mid-thunderbolt into forging instead a shield that not only secures but even portrays images of future Roman triumphs. This is redolent with the sign Aeneas will imminently be sent to inform him his new armour is *en route* (8.524-29). At that time, Vergil describes a sudden cacophony of thunder and lightning in the skies (*vibratus ab aethere fulgor cum sonitu*) among which Aeneas sees armour flashing and thundering in the clouds. Such fulminations are doing more than simply ratifying. Vergil articulates this clearly. He describes Aeneas hesitating on the brink of seeking Etruscan military aid and so beginning the process that will lead to violent war and, eventually, the establishment of Rome and the Julian line. It is Venus who sends the unexpected sign from a clear sky to convince Aeneas to take the necessary action. Upon seeing the cacophonous bolts from the blue, Aeneas is immediately resolved and makes the telling statement: "I am summoned by Heaven" (*ego poscor Olympo*, 8.353). This is the key moment when Aeneas definitively decides to step up to his destiny. The thunder and lightning in the first instance galvanise his resolve and call him to arms, but beyond that, as Aeneas declares, they signify the divine call for him to become the leader the future Rome needs.¹⁴⁹ The nature of that leadership was ultimately for Aeneas, as for Romulus and, indeed, for Augustus and his successors, monarchic. The thunderbolt and its concomitant thunder and lightning in this configuration, have moved beyond the ratifying signs of divination and have become a divine summons.

¹⁴⁹ It is of no small significance that Venus should pick up the thunderbolt to convey divine election to the Julian line; Augustus was working with precisely such ideas in Vergil's Rome and there were important precedents as I will presently show. See Flashpoint 10.

When Romulus receives his seminal sign, the lightning is likewise an active instrument of sovereignty, by which divine favour and earthly rule converge in a single, decisive flash. His reign thus sanctified, Romulus becomes the archetypal Roman king, establishing a precedent whereby lightning becomes a fundamental component of the legal and ceremonial fabric of Roman power.¹⁵⁰

A Flash Across Time

While Romulus' reception of lightning consolidated his reign in the mythic past, the political role of such divine endorsement was not, of course, confined to legend. Our enquiry will later explore some key historical moments, but at this point, it is worth briefly contextualising Dionysius' use of lightning in his narrative within his contemporary political landscape. Writing during the reign of Augustus, Dionysius lived in a moment of political stability which was nevertheless riddled with uncertainties: he had seen the return of autocratic power to Rome, but dying before the first *princeps* did, he could not know whether the Republic would survive this aberration or whether it would be permanently replaced by hereditary monarchy.¹⁵¹ He had witnessed the thunderbolt evolve ideologically in Augustan propaganda.¹⁵² Furthermore, Dionysius had lived through the late republic when augury had become a political tool frequently used to obstruct opponents.¹⁵³ Magistrates with the power of *spectio* could block procedures

¹⁵⁰ Not 'sacrosanct' in the strict legal sense of divine right in the 16th and 17th centuries although such inviolability was conferred upon tribunes (Livy 3.55.3; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 6.89.4), but 'sanctified' in the sense of divinely sponsored power inherent in *imperium*: Romulus' '*solus potitus imperio*' (Livy 1.7.3); Cicero's *imperium* sanctioned by the auspices (*De Legibus* 2.12: *imperii nostri... auspicio auctoritas*); and the '*imperium sine fine*' which Jupiter famously grants Rome (Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.278-279). See Pellam (2015). On the divine nature of *imperium*, see Richardson (1991), Woolf (2008, 2009), & Hejduk (2009).

¹⁵¹ Hunter & Jonge (2019).

¹⁵² See Flashpoint 9.

¹⁵³ Lebovitz (2015).

by announcing inauspicious lightning flashes, annulling decisions, and cancelling assemblies.¹⁵⁴ Lightning had therefore been implicated repeatedly in the political upheavals of his own lifetime. This perspective is crucial for his framing of the myth.

Dionysius interpolates his retelling of Rome's distant past with brief snapshots of current augural and political practice. His depiction of Romulus' flashing inauguration conveys nostalgia for an imagined Roman past when people were honest and pious and divine signs behaved as true manifestations of the gods' will, but he contrasts this with what he perceived as corrupted contemporary practice. In the sequence of events Dionysius describes for Romulus' auspication, for example, it will be recalled that the lightning by which he was elected was not observed by the people; its occurrence was merely announced to them (*Antiquitates Romanae* 2.6.1). Announcement alone was sufficiently persuasive. An idealised populace may be permitted such trust in their morally upright leaders of legend. The lack of transparency this process entails, however, sits in stark contrast with the clarity and certainty such lightning was meant to relay. Indeed, an unverifiable announcement of a lightning flash leaves room for precisely the sort of dishonesty observed in republican misuses of *obnuntiatio*, where fake signs, *auspicia ementita*, could be weaponised for political gain.¹⁵⁵ A critical reading of lightning as a force of divine legitimation in the Romulus myths might therefore view his use of confirmatory lightning as a calculated move to garner public approval.¹⁵⁶ As a political strategy, such conspicuous piety is self-serving in that it consolidates power and reduces the possibility of opposition.

¹⁵⁴ Driediger-Murphy (2019), 127-158.

¹⁵⁵ Lebovitz (2015); Konrad (2022).

¹⁵⁶ Driediger-Murphy (2019:93-108), however, on excessive cynicism.

Dionysius, himself, interrupts his account of Romulus' auspication to reinforce this cynical view. He relates that in his day magistracies remained conditional upon receiving the same omen supposedly vouchsafed to Romulus: namely, a lightning bolt from the left. At his time of writing, however, Dionysius describes it as a corrupted charade in which magistrates-to-be spent the night outdoors and at dawn, they prayed under the open sky like Romulus, and an augur *paid by the state* (μισθὸν ἐκ τοῦ δημοσίου φερόμενοι) declared that the requisite lightning bolt had been spotted.¹⁵⁷ Dionysius does not delineate the temporal boundaries of these supposedly corrupted rituals, whether the late Republic or early Principate, but the critique may equally be directed at both. His idealisation of Romulus at any rate juxtaposes the moral certainty of lightning with the uncertainties and immoral conduct he witnesses in the first century BCE.

Such regular and timely strikes received by real-world magistrates can hardly be assumed to have happened according to the idealised model Romulus set for them. Yet, the fact that the ritual continued to be conducted reveals much about how the power that came with office was meant to be perceived. While the campaigning that secured those positions was entirely human, the office itself and the power it entailed was still, in theory at least, divinely sponsored. In the republican context, the absolute power that would otherwise be wielded by a king was divided among a ruling elite and the lightning bolt that would have endorsed one man, like Romulus, was required to endorse each of these men individually so that collectively their powers were complete and equal to a kingship shared.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 2.6. On this myth and the rites of accession: Van Haepelen (2007).

¹⁵⁸ Of course, one-man rule was not alien to Rome in republican times; perhaps the temple to Quirinus was vowed in 325 BCE by L. Papirius Cursor when he was dictator. The divine Romulus may well have come to the mind of someone in that superlative position (Livy 10.46.7; Pliny, *HN* 7.213).

Lightning thus straddled a tension between autocratic and collective power. This is a tension that the Romulus myths also straddle. Although his kingship was sanctified by the gods, this king was supposed to model ideal citizenship.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, to posterity, he occupied a rejected space as the founding monarch of a city that would later expel monarchy and develop a deep-seated antipathy toward autocratic rule. In the Romulean model of handling lightning, deference, piety, and restraint may be viewed as a response to that tension. In the context of kingship, they are strategies to navigate what we shall see was difficult ideological territory. They allowed adherents of this model to maintain a humble and unassuming demeanour while backing into power.

From Kingship to Godhood

The third and final place Romulus set for lightning and thunderbolts in Roman constructions of power was that of divinisation. Lightning provided Romulus passage from mortal to god. There are varying accounts of the king being taken up by 'a blast' in the Campus Martius having been enveloped in an electrical storm. After this, his body mysteriously vanished, and the soldiers hailed him as a god.¹⁶⁰ This lightning can be seen as the ultimate divine validation of Romulus' life and rule. Apotheosis demonstrates Jupiter's highest approval. This transcendence therefore marks the culmination of the argument I have been making in this chapter: that lightning was the definitive modality of power and divine endorsement in the myths of Romulus. Now it becomes a sublimating

¹⁵⁹ On exemplary ideals, Stem (2007) although he does not notice Romulus' relationship with lightning.

¹⁶⁰ Livy 10.6; Dionysius. Hal. 2.56; Plutarch, *Romulus* 27; Ovid, *Fasti* 2.491, *Metamorphoses* 14.806-51; Cicero, *De Republica* 2.17. Ennius also wrote of a divinised Romulus, Servius, *ad Aen.*, 6.763, 6.77. Plutarch describes the soul leaving the body like lightning from a cloud (*Romulus* 28.6).

force transforming Romulus from a divinely favoured mortal into a divinity in his own right.¹⁶¹ Romulus became the deity Quirinus.

The shift from being the recipient of divine signs to becoming a divine power is a radical one. If Romulus' earlier deference to augury upheld a structured political order whereby political power remained distanced from the divine, his apotheosis by lightning dissolves that distance and merges divine and mortal spheres. Romulus ultimately transcends the 'Romulean model' I have proposed. He no longer receives signs but becomes himself part of the city's divine apparatus. Quirinus, with his temple on the Quirinal, is often viewed as a civic god presiding over Roman institutions.¹⁶² Significantly, he was a fulminating deity, guarding oaths, and his temple was accordingly hypaethral. His incorporation into the pantheon as a governing force therefore effectively extended Romulus' foundational lightning-endorsed rule into an ongoing divine guardianship of the city.¹⁶³

The alternative myth recounting an altogether earthlier demise for Romulus need not be seen as entirely at odds with his apotheosis legend.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, that the alternative to lightning striking a divinely-favoured king and divinising him, is a senatorial conspiracy leading instead to his assassination and dismemberment seems to reflect the perennial discourse in Roman political thought: the balance of power and rejection of tyranny. Lightning was, as mentioned earlier and as we shall repeatedly see, always embroiled in

¹⁶¹ Guarisco (2016) discusses the complete disappearance of his body.

¹⁶² Lucrezi (2024).

¹⁶³ An important model for imperial apotheosis. See Erker (2023:116–151) for Romulus' apotheosis influencing that of Caesar & Augustus. Gosling (2002) on Ovid's retelling of Romulus' apotheosis in the Augustan context.

¹⁶⁴ Plutarch, *Romulus* 27.5-7; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 2:56: 1-7; Dio Cassius. Robertson's (1987) observations about 'weather magic' related to the *poplifugia* and the apotheosis of Romulus become interesting in this context. I am compelled to see another collision of lightning, death, dismemberment, which will be a theme moving forward.

this tension between autocratic and collective power. If assassination here represents the deep-seated senatorial fear of autocratic rule, the alternative myth is simply one of collective governance trumping a lightning-endorsed autocrat and his divine right to rule.

By the fourth century CE, the impulse to surround Romulus with lightning lore seems to have resulted in lightning becoming involved even in the manner of his conception.¹⁶⁵ While earlier versions had Rhea Silvia conceive by an eclipse, the *Origo Gentis Romanae* (20.1) records a version supposedly of Fabius Pictor whereby Mars impregnates her, as Zeus had supposedly impregnated Olympias, with a thunderbolt.¹⁶⁶ With this one cosmic event swapped out for a meteorological one, the Roman populace thus became from the outset, a people born of the thunderbolt. Lightning again acts as a conduit between divine and mortal realms but here lightning functions as a generative force, bringing divine favour into the world in an extremely literal sense. In both his conception and apotheosis, lightning thus came eventually to bookend the entire arc of Romulus' life and myth.

Conclusion: The 'Romulean Model' for handling lightning

From first to last flashes, we have seen lightning play a vital though overlooked role within the mythology of Romulus and, from divination to divinisation, Romulus has been shown to handle lightning in a culturally appropriate manner.¹⁶⁷ He maintains distance from and assumes the proper attitude towards the gods and, as Rome's first augur, he exemplifies

¹⁶⁵ Context matters: this is the legacy of several centuries of imperial ideology. See, Smith (2005) on *Origo Gentis Romanae* as a source. It also inserts lightning in the contest with Remus, giving weight to the argument in Strachan (2026a) despite the late date: '*ac repente duodecim vultures apparuisse subsecuto caeli fulgore pariter tonitruque*' (23.1).

¹⁶⁶ This is either a late source recording a contemporary version of the myth, or truly recording a fragment of Fabius Pictor, which would be very interesting in recording a very early version. Olympias' conception: Plutarch, *Alexander* 2.3. See below, p. 240.

¹⁶⁷ The key detail in his apotheosis is that Romulus demonstrates it to be a post-mortem phenomenon.

Roman ideals about how lightning works in relation to both the topography of Rome and the governance of the city. For this reason, the lightning he receives is largely impetrative: sought in an act of auspication and arriving in response to a request for permission or endorsement. The lightning itself is presented as unambiguous and beneficent. The proposed Romulean model for handling it is thus characterised by deference, piety, and restraint.

However, this model has been problematised by showing that as Rome's first king, Romulus also exemplifies how lightning works in relation to power. Rather than indicating personal virtue, adherence to lightning as a divine sign could equally mask political posturing and ambition. In that capacity, lightning acts like a divine justification for power, especially in those circumstances where no established source of legitimation existed. Just as the character of Romulus ideologically straddled republican ideals and the kingship which was anathema to it, so Romulus' divine election and, less subtly, his birth and apotheosis by lightning has been shown to introduce the possibility of more grandiose claims.

Lightning across Romulean mythology reflects worldly tensions which the Romulean model also encompasses. This was one modality of handling lightning and a way of maintaining or bridging the gap between the presentation of mortal authority and the divine power behind it. It was always remembered as the right way according to Roman *mores*. Romulus is therefore the point of reference from which all deviance may be measured. In the following flashpoint, such a reference point will be useful as we turn to Numa, who navigated the gap between mortal authority and divine power in a very different and problematic manner.



Flashpoint Two

Numa's Bargain

dangerous knowledge and the cost of fair weather

In the continuum of mythical interactions between Roman kings and lightning, Numa Pompilius initially appears to follow closely on the heels of the precedents set by Romulus. In particular, in Livy's account of his inauguration, he appears to be, himself, a perfect representation of the Romulean model. Numa's initial steps toward kingship adhere closely to the augural protocols that defined his predecessor's governance. Livy (1.18) tells us that it was in direct emulation of Romulus (*sicut Romulus*) that Numa sought divine approval for his kingship by taking the auspices:

sicut Romulus augurato urbe condenda regnum adeptus est, de se quoque deos consuli iussit.

Just as Romulus assumed kingship when founding the city after taking the auspices, he also ordered that the gods should be consulted about himself.

Just as Romulus exemplified how to wield political power in harmony with the gods by paying due attention to lightning and seeking out and deferring to its ratifying flashes, so Numa likewise conducts a ritual in which he also leaves the decision to the heavens. Livy's account is familiar because it echoes the procedure Romulus followed according to Dionysius. This is the procedure discussed in the previous chapter entailing dawn sacrifices and prayers conducted outdoors in a clear space with the divine sign requested and delivered: the same ritual Dionysius also described happening, albeit hollowly, in his own day. Livy was a contemporary of Dionysius and their agreement attests to first-century BCE practices rather than sixth-century ones, but Livy nevertheless provides an

excellent example of the Romulean model in action. He reaffirms the fixed, locally oriented nature of Roman divination with the same topographical precision: he locates the Arx by name (*in arce*) and sits Numa on a stone facing south (*ad meridiem versus*) with an augur seated to his left with his head covered. The augur holds a *lituus* in his right hand which he uses to 'demarcate the heavens from east to west' (*regiones ab oriente ad occasum determinavit*); the significance of this becomes clear because next 'he declared the south parts to be right and the left parts to be north' (*dextras ad meridiem partes, laevas ad septentrionem esse dixit*). Determining left in order to obtain the most auspicious sign is so vital that the delineation is here seen incorporated into the ritual. The *lituus* is then moved to the left hand and with his right hand on Numa's head, the augur presents the formal request directly to Jupiter. Livy (1.18.9-10) treats us to his words which may provide a glimpse of the kind of language used for actual impetrative auspications:

Iuppiter pater, si est fas hunc Numam Pompilium, cuius ego caput teneo, regem Romae esse, uti tu signa nobis certa adclarassis inter eos fines quos feci.

Father Jupiter, if it is *fas* for this Numa Pompilius, whose head I hold, to be king of Rome, may you give us unmistakable signs and make them clear to us within the boundaries I have set.

Disappointingly, he then dispenses with the denouement of the ritual quite summarily (1.18.10). The augur:

Tum peregit verbis auspicia quae mitti vellet. quibus missis declaratus rex Numa de templo descendit.

Then specified in words the signs he wished to be sent and once sent, Numa was declared king and he descended from the sacred space.

Livy's approach to the culminating moment of Numa's inauguration is characteristic of his ambivalence toward the supernatural.¹⁶⁸ Livy's Numa is less concerned with supernatural engagement than the virtues of early Romans. His focus is on how a leader should behave in relation to the gods and to the community. This is, of course, why he portrays Numa so much in the Romulean model. Although the requisite divine sign is present, his focus lies in describing the ritual details, not divine intervention *per se*. He does not even record what *signa certa* Numa actually received. Following Romulus' example and with the left so carefully demarcated, we might suppose it was the superlative left-sided lightning flash that was requested but this goes beyond the text. It was probably obvious to ancient readers but Livy, at rate, seems disinterested in playing it up or drawing attention to it.¹⁶⁹ Numa's inauguration instead shows a continuation of Romulus's dependence on augury: Ennius' throne with auspices as its 'foundation and prop'.¹⁷⁰

In this portrayal, Numa formalises and institutionalises these practices. Alongside the ritualised activities described, a significant addition is the appearance of an augur. Unlike Romulus, who personally mediated his own lightning omen, Numa defers to this augur, who, as intermediary, places even more distance between himself and the sign (power) he seeks. Livy notes that the augur was granted a permanent state priesthood after the ceremony.¹⁷¹ Here, then, we witness the official embedding of divination in the Roman political framework. Roman tradition always held Numa as a sacred king who introduced

¹⁶⁸ On myth and history in Livy, Woodman (2023). On generic differences between *historia* vs *fabula*, Walbank (1960).

¹⁶⁹ Other signs were possible, birds in particular. Plutarch (*Numa* 7.3) has the augur simply look all about for any sign and 'good birds' appear from the right and 'grant permission': προύφάνησαν ὄρνιθες ἀγαθὸι καὶ δεξιὸι ἐπέτρεψαν.

¹⁷⁰ Ennius, *Annales* 90-91 Skutsch = Cicero, *De Div.* 1.108.

¹⁷¹ The augur: *cui deinde honoris ergo publicum id perpetuumque sacerdotium fuit.*

religion and religious institutions to Rome.¹⁷² Divine consultation is thus introduced to Rome as a structured, repeatable process codified and overseen by an emerging class of priestly experts.¹⁷³ The *pontifices* and *augures* supposedly instituted by Numa are vital figures in mediating the historical lightning strikes to be considered in later chapters. They are part of the state apparatus for dealing with lightning and their elevation in this legendary foundation narrative befits their central role. The austere ceremonial Livy describes on the Capitoline reflects the *gravitas* and procedural precision expected of state divinatory practice. In light of all this, however, what is not to be expected is what Numa was also always remembered for doing on the Aventine, which represents, on a different hill, a very different kind of engagement with lightning and divine power.

Magic and Coercion

Numa's measured, public performance on the Capitoline stands in stark contrast to the astonishing moment when, by means of a spell procured by trickery, he coerces Jupiter from the heavens and channels him down to the Aventine in a bolt of lightning. In a dramatic deviation from the Romulean model, Numa here, in fact, deviates also beyond the pale of respectable Roman religion.

These Aventine activities are reported in multiple ancient sources over a long period of time. It seems to have been a myth of great antiquity that was still being retold into the fourth century. Wiseman suggests that early versions were circulating long before our sources record them.¹⁷⁴ The Elder Pliny (*HN* 28.14) notes L. Calpurnius Piso's reference to it in the late second century BCE. Livy (1.19.4, 1.20.7, 1.31.6–8) also mentions it but, in

¹⁷² Humm (2025).

¹⁷³ North (2023), 77-83.

¹⁷⁴ Wiseman (1998:17-24, 2008).

keeping with his sanitised Numa above, avoids engaging with its content. The main classical sources that recount the full story are in Ovid's *Fasti* (3.277–374) from the early first century CE and Plutarch's *Life of Numa* (15) from late in that same century or early in the next. A full account is also provided in *Adversus Nationes* (5.1-4): an apologetic Christian text composed by Arnobius of Sicca sometime in the third to fourth centuries CE but which quotes Valerius Antias' annals of the early first century BCE.¹⁷⁵ Driediger-Murphy points out that each author uses the myth to serve different ideological and theological purposes and she argues for flexibility in its retelling.¹⁷⁶ Authorial intention notwithstanding, however, there remains a core story about esoteric knowledge and control over divine forces that persisted over this long period, and it is that core myth which matters here.

In sum, the episode occurs because Rome was being battered by terrible lightning storms. Numa sought the solution, which involved capturing, by another magical charm, Faunus and Picus who under duress reveal to Numa how he can summon Jupiter from the sky (*deducere caelo*) by powerful art (*valida arte*).¹⁷⁷ He may then learn how to expiate lightning and stop the meteorological onslaught.¹⁷⁸ Numa accordingly summons Jupiter, who comes down in an electrifying epiphany revealing that his requirement to expiate lightning was a head. Numa specifies 'of an onion' to steer away from the obvious implication that the head he wanted was human. Jupiter, however, insists that the head he wants is *hominis/άνθρώπων*.¹⁷⁹ Numa prevaricates suggesting 'hairs' rather than heads. Jupiter again demands living things (*έμψύχοις*) and Numa equivocates by offering

¹⁷⁵ Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes* 5.1 (Valerius Antias, fr. 6 Peter = fr. 8 Cornell).

¹⁷⁶ Driediger-Murphy (2021).

¹⁷⁷ Ovid, *Fasti*, 3.317, 3.321.

¹⁷⁸ Ovid, *Fasti* 3.311: *piari*. 3.333 *certa piamina*. In Plutarch, *Numa* 15, 'purification' rites: καθαρός. Cf Livy 1.20.7:

¹⁷⁹ Plutarch, *Numa* 15.

sprats (μαινίδες). The god, then appeased, left. Ovid describes his retreat with a mighty thunderclap overhead (*ingenti tonitru super aethera*). Fair weather returns. Plutarch relates that:

τὸν δὲ τόπον Ἰλίκιον ἀπ' ἐκείνου προσαγορευθῆναι καὶ τὸν καθαρμὸν οὕτω συντελεῖσθαι.

the place was from then on called Ἰλίκιον (Elicius) and the purification rites have been performed in this way ever since.

In a peculiar oversight, wherever scholarly focus falls regarding this myth, lightning itself is usually relegated to the background. Bremmer and Horsfall so underrate its significance, for example, as to call the story something off a mythological 'assembly line'.¹⁸⁰ Ignoring the lightning entirely, their characterisation of this story as a stock plot focuses on the trickery by which the spell was procured. Driediger-Murphy, despite her careful and in-depth analysis, likewise also skips over the lightning to concentrate primarily on the bargaining aspect of the various accounts, examining how different ancient authors frame Numa's negotiation with Jupiter.¹⁸¹ Peter Wiseman is the notable exception for engaging directly with the element of lightning in the Numa myths.¹⁸² Wiseman rightly stresses the impropriety of Numa's behaviour in the context of mainstream republican religion. Furthermore, he recognises Numa's summoning of Jupiter through lightning as a magical act. Ultimately, he is more concerned with the political and social consequences of magic rather than the intrinsic importance of lightning in Numa's myth so as his argument progresses, focus moves away from the elicitation of lightning to the evolution of attitudes toward magic. He discusses the

¹⁸⁰ Bremmer & Horsfall (1987), 5-6.

¹⁸¹ Discussed below.

¹⁸² Wiseman (2008), chapter 7.

prohibition of magical practices - perceived as dangerous by the state - in later Roman history. So, while Wiseman starts out by insightfully discussing the elicitation of lightning in the context of magic and deviant religious behaviour, in the final analysis, he views the myth as 'an old story designed to encourage the Roman people to believe that their wise king could call on magical powers'.¹⁸³ From a Roman perspective, this is, in itself, a troubling statement. Consequently, the task here is to pick up where Wiseman leaves off to engage with the crucial and underexplored significance of lightning in the myth of Numa and the deeper symbolic and practical work this was doing in the wider context of Roman society. I will argue that it is pulling much more cultural weight than simply informing the audience that Numa had magical powers. By foregrounding lightning as the critical aspect of the myth, the entire plot can be seen to revolve around it. While trickery and coercion are important themes, Numa is, in fact, conjuring Jupiter in the form of lightning in order to negotiate the expiation of lightning strikes. Lightning is thus doubly implicated as both the method of the negotiation and its subject. We will consider both in turn, focusing first on the act of conjuring lightning.

A Roman Prometheus

Numa's summoning of Jupiter's lightning epiphany to the Aventine can be understood as Rome's Promethean moment. For the first time Rome's divine power is forcibly snatched from the gods in the form of lightning, also a divine fire, by human ingenuity.¹⁸⁴ Just as Prometheus' theft of fire from the gods represented a turning point in the relationship between primeval humans and divine power, so too does Numa's act of conjuring lightning signify a new mode of interaction between early Roman people and their gods.

¹⁸³ Wiseman (2008), 165. He thinks the extant version originated as comedy for the stage.

¹⁸⁴ Servius (*on Virgil's Eclogues*, 6.42) makes the comparison explicitly, stating that Prometheus was versed in the art of drawing down lightning.

Unlike the passive attitudes of divination, by which human agency is limited to attendance upon and interpretation of divine signs, conjuring lightning is a proactive usurpation of those signs, their trajectory, and, alarmingly, the divine power behind them.

As a Roman Prometheus, Numa draws Jupiter's lightning down to the Aventine through dubiously acquired esoteric knowledge. With it, he introduces a new modality of harnessing its power, and new risks. The Numan model for lightning is therefore one of dangerous technological mastery. It marks a radical departure from traditional piety: Numa, no longer a king passively awaiting divine signs, is now capable of compelling divine hands and obtaining what he seeks by force. This overturns the attitude and very premise of its Romulean counterpart: it is deviant not pious, coercive not deferential, and disruptive not restrained. It is also not public but shrouded in secrecy. This, indeed, puts Numa's behaviour very much in the world of magic.¹⁸⁵

In another context, Livy refers to this specific behaviour as *prava religio*.¹⁸⁶ As Wiseman shows, in its very vocabulary, *inlicere* and *elicere*, to 'entice' or 'bring in', the language describing Numa's act taps into 'the foul and barbaric sorcery', which Lucan (6.732-3) describes of Thessalian witches capable of summoning (*elicere*) the Furies themselves.¹⁸⁷ Beyond the sordid world of witches in Latin poetry, Wiseman also notes Cicero (*In Vatinius* 14) in the real world employing the same vocabulary to indict a Pythagorean witness, who, in Cicero's polemic, indulged in *nefaria sacra* to summon (*elicere*) the spirits of the dead. Thus, Numa's traditional connection to Pythagoreanism, itself often tied to mysticism and esoteric knowledge, further situates him in a real-world web of supposed

¹⁸⁵ On 'deviance', Rüpke (2016), Gordon (2023). On illegality, Rives (2003).

¹⁸⁶ Livy (1.31.8). Tullus Hostilius' sequel to Numa's conjuring act is discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁸⁷ Wiseman (2008).

magic.¹⁸⁸ The term 'magic', however, is notoriously problematic. It is well established in scholarship that rather than being any discernible and specific set of practices, it is a word that 'others' any behaviour deemed suspect from the perspective of a person who would condemn it.¹⁸⁹ Pythagoreans did not, presumably, consider themselves to be engaged in magic in that sense.

As a label, 'magic' served as a tool for social control, used to police the boundaries of acceptable religious practice. As a practice, it was usually understood to be forcibly compelling a deity, by spells, incantations, and the black arts, to act as opposed to making requests by prayers and offerings.¹⁹⁰ Something to unpick is therefore how the memory of Numa managed historically to stay on the right side of this boundary and how Numa was remembered as Rome's most pious king despite his most memorable activity being also the most conspicuously 'magical' and deviant.

One answer is that just as the boundaries of what constitutes magic move depending on the speaker, so they also move also over time. As beliefs and practices change, so behaviour that was once acceptable becomes marginalised. This is certainly, at least in part, what is happening with Numa. Wiseman's exploration of the myth aims specifically to show 'how something that belonged exclusively to the archaic world of pre-literary Rome can nevertheless become visible to us, even though the medium of literature itself'.¹⁹¹ I would argue against the confinement of these practices to the distant past

¹⁸⁸ Colman (2015) views Numa's Pythagoreanism as indicative of the intellectualism and rationality of a 'philosopher king'. However, Ogden (2002:9-13) lists Pythagoreanism under Greek sorcery. See, Kingsley (1995). On Numa's Pythagoreanism, Wiseman's recent (2026) article is compelling.

¹⁸⁹ Graf, F. (1990). Gordon (1999). On the label: Giordano (2018).

¹⁹⁰ Dickie (2001), 120-137 concludes: 'Romans by the middle of the first century BC and in all likelihood earlier had come to disapprove of the rituals practised by persons claiming to have the power to upset the normal course of nature and had come to think of these practices as aberrations from proper religious observance (p.37). Cf Rüpke (2016), chapter 2 on religious normativity.

¹⁹¹ Wiseman (2008),166.

although I agree the origins of the myth lie there. In some regards, I think its central message was always current, sometimes pressingly so. Before turning to these perennial concerns, however, the older practices should be addressed.

As Wiseman points out, although 'magical' practices had once been the norm, attitudes had shifted fundamentally between the time Numa's activities were supposed to have happened and the times they were recorded.¹⁹² His argument would have been helped significantly by a passage in Pliny (2.54) who records a first-century CE memory not only of an earlier imagined Rome but also Etruria.¹⁹³ It is worth quoting in full:

Exstat annalium memoria sacris quibusdam et precationibus vel cogi fulmina vel inpetrari. vetus fama Etruriae est inpetratum, Volsinios urbem depopulatis agris subeunte monstro quod vocavere Oltam, evocatum a Porsina suo rege. et ante eum a Numa saepius hoc factitatum in primo annalium suorum tradit L. Piso, gravis auctor, ...

There exists a memory in the annals that through certain rites and prayers, thunderbolts could either be forced or obtained. There is an old tradition of Etruria that it was obtained when a monster called Olta, advancing upon the ravaged fields, approached the city of Volsinii, it was summoned by their king, Porsenna. And before him, Numa had performed this frequently and more often, as recorded by L. Piso, a reliable authority, in the first book of his annals...

Pliny thus records a lingering memory of past times when kings summoned thunderbolts. The verbs describing this activity are *cogi* and *inpetrari*: passive infinitives both denoting coercion and force. Provided as alternatives, (*vel...vel...*), *inpetrari* has the sense of procuring the desired result whereas *cogi* emphasises more the force of eliciting thunderbolts in this way.¹⁹⁴ Often used in situations where something is restricted or condensed physically, (for example, a crowd being funnelled to a particular spot or troops

¹⁹² 'the disciplines of the city-state defined more rigorously what was acceptable in the community's relationship with the gods, and what was not.' (p.158).

¹⁹³ On this passage, Cornell et al. (2016), vol.1. 200.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Terence, *Adelphi* 490: *quod vos vis cogit, id voluntate impetret.*

being brought up the rear) *cogi* also entails a sense of constraint, of something done against the will. All of these connotations seem appropriate for a rite that concentrates magical power to such a point that a thunderbolt is forced into being, and yet perhaps coaxes it out against the will of Jupiter. Pliny says the thunderbolt was obtained (*est inpetratum*) during the episode at Volsinii and then adds that it was summoned (*evocatum*) by Porsenna. This useful gloss shows that *inpetrari* in this rite clearly means more than simply obtaining. If it is, in this instance, synonymous with *evocare* then the coercion was certainly more forceful. Given the rites of *evocatio*, by which tutelary deities could be drawn forth from hostile cities and summoned to Rome, it is difficult not only to see a summoning of divine thunderbolts in this activity but also some level of evoking the divinity to whom they belong.¹⁹⁵ This is, of course, Numa's intention in the central episode of this flashpoint as we will see, but it is also the attendant danger in this kind of activity: wherever a thunderbolt is conjured, there too is the eye of Jupiter inevitably drawn.

While Lars Porsenna seemingly conjured his thunderbolt in urgent defence of his people, Pliny casually drops Numa in as performing the same act regularly as a matter of course. Modern translations detect tautology in the Latin and for style conflate *saepius* (more often) with *factitatum* (frequently done).¹⁹⁶ However, the stress on frequency in Numa's case is crucial here. The fact that he did this frequently supports the idea that Numa's engagement with lightning was a fundamental part of his religious model. Pliny nonchalantly shows that Numa's activity on the Aventine was not always remembered as a one-off event. Intriguingly, he draws on the authority of Lucius Calpurnius Piso's *Annales* for this information. What we receive therefore is a rare glimpse of a second-

¹⁹⁵ Ferri (2010:33-50). Nb. p.34 re. terminology: '*evocatio*' as a noun less satisfactory than an adjective describing 'evoked deities'.

¹⁹⁶ E.g., Rakham's (1938) Loeb translation: "this was frequently practised by Numa..."

century BCE perspective on Numa, one that reflects a still earlier memory of his frequent engagement with lightning conjuring.

This certainly aligns with the view of a version of Rome in which summoning lightning was an acceptable if not common practice. Obviously, the suggestion is not that people were truly capable of this, but rather that some people believed other people were capable of this - and some people claimed to do it.¹⁹⁷ Conjuring lightning was not unique to mythical kings. Other figures in the Graeco-Roman world engaged in similar practices, though unofficially and inducing greater suspicion. Pliny (28.3) again provides a glimpse of both an old habit of storm-conjuring and a sober first-century perspective on it:

Prisci quidem nostri perpetuo talia credidere, difficillimumque ex his, etiam fulmina elici, ...

Indeed, our forebears perpetually believed such marvels, and most difficult of these, that even thunderbolts can be conjured, ...

Lightning was described in the introductory chapter in the world of *veneficia, defixiones*, and charms. Against that backdrop, this magical conjuring act itself adds another reason for concern. It reveals that not only gods but humans, and even dastardly neighbours, could compel lightning to strike. In which case the perceived sense of danger exponentially compounded, and anxieties were understandably roused by people of dubious expertise claiming to have lightning-conjuring powers.

¹⁹⁷ Nb., *CIL*, XI, 6363: the bilingual epitaph from Pesaro of Lars Cafates/Lucius Cafatius, in Etruscan, a *netsvis trutnut frontac*, in Latin *haruspex fulguriator*. The rare occurrence of '*fulguriator*' is generally translated as divining by lightning; Turfa (2012:48-49), 'thunder-diviner' (sic) cf. Zavaroni (2003) who problematises the linguistic squeezing of *frontac* to render an Etruscan equivalence to Greek βροντή. This objection is supported by the subject matter; since it equates to Latin *fulguriator*, it refers specifically to lightning (ἀστραπή) not thunder. Is *fulguriator* not *fulgurator* attributable to 'provincial inaccuracy' (Crawford, 1872:82) or does it attest to a haruspex doing something specific? *Fulgurator*, indeed, is an epithet of Jupiter, alongside *tonitrualis* and *fulminator* (Apuleius, *De Mundo* 37). These epithets signify Jupiter actively causing those weather effects. Was Lars Cafates potentially a lightning-conjurer?

Although context and attitudes changed over time, the historical evidence thus shows that belief in lightning-conjuring was ongoing, albeit in practices that were suppressed or marginalised. This circles back to my earlier point about archaic versus perennial concerns about magic. Numa's myth may be read not only as a relic of archaic practices but as speaking to ongoing concerns about what people were doing or claiming they could do with lightning. In extant versions of the myth, Numa engaged in this magic only once. Narratively, the act was thereby restricted to a singular action in the distant past. This contained it, demonstrating that no one else was expected, or even allowed, to repeat it. Just as Prometheus did not have to repeatedly steal fire from the gods for humankind, Numa's Promethean moment with lightning came to be presented as a very specific, one-off case. However, since in practice these magical conjuring rituals did not disappear, widespread belief in (and fear of) deviant practices of summoning lightning may be seen as an ongoing cultural context for the myth. Despite its ostensible singularity, Numa's unconventional behaviour is in that sense aetiological, speaking to an ever-present undercurrent in Roman religious life.

The overt magic in Numa's lightning-conjuring would have been obvious to any ancient audience. Yet, Numa was not blamed for it. It was not seen as improper religious practice because of his indubitable piety, his good intentions, and the favourable outcome of the encounter, to which we next turn. His behaviour, which was otherwise deviant to later recipients of the myth, seems to have been countered by his reputation as Rome's most pious king.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, since the act was conducted in dire times for the benefit of the Roman populace, Numa was presented as having safely navigated the dangerous

¹⁹⁸ Emphasised good intentions: Ovid, *Fasti* 3.309-10. Numa rewarded with '*imperii pignora certa*' 3.343-6.

boundary between divine and mortal on their behalf, ostensibly resolving the matter of lightning once and for all, and removing the need for any repetition of this behaviour.

The first conclusion to draw about the Numan model for handling lightning is therefore that the dangerous technological mastery it entailed was not, in theory, to be repeated. This is true also of the second part of the myth when Numa bargains with Jupiter. Having summoned the god's electric epiphany, Numa's purpose is to permanently settle a deal favourable to mortals on how to expiate lightning strikes.

Striking a Deal: Of Hills, Heads, and Onions

That Numa's summoning of Jupiter through lightning occurs not on the Capitoline, the centre of state-sanctioned religious activity, but on the Aventine, is not without significance. The Aventine, traditionally associated with plebeians and outsiders, stands as a marginal space within Roman topography.¹⁹⁹ Its long exclusion from within the *pomerium* has often led to its perception as peripheral, but archaeological evidence reveals that it was far from marginal in terms of urban development and religious significance. Recent scholarship has even begun to challenge its long-assumed plebeian identity while temples such as those dedicated to Diana and Juno Regina attest to the hill's religious importance.²⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the Aventine has a discernibly different character in the ways people discussed and remembered it. Mythologically, it was remembered as the hill which Remus chose for his city and on which he lost his competition with Romulus so in that sense it represents the city's alter ego as the Rome that never was.²⁰¹ Furthermore, the presence of an alternative 'Aventine Triad' in the form of the Temple to

¹⁹⁹ Welch (2005:40-41); Orlin (2002, 2010).

²⁰⁰ Mignone (2016) surveys the evidence.

²⁰¹ The location of the 'Remuria' is contested. Skutsch (1985:222) maintains it was a south-eastern outcrop on the Aventine but there are other possibilities. On the 'Saxum/Murcus', see Skutsch (1961).

Ceres, Liber, and Libera has also been posited as a cult centre set up in competition with, if not opposition to, the patrician-led cult on the Capitoline.²⁰² I would suggest that an additional part of its ‘otherness’ was also wrapped up in being the locus of a peculiar cluster of lightning-related traditions that gave it an alterity suitable for Numa’s magical act of lightning-conjuring.

In the half-light of myth and ritual in which dim recollections and associations can be malleable but persistent, the Aventine had, by the time of our written sources, accumulated a number of traditions linking this hill to ‘weather-magic’ and lightning. Of these, Numa is the most conspicuous, but he is only part of the Aventine’s mythical stratigraphy. He was joined in the legendary past by Aventinus, after whom the hill was named. Aventinus was an ancient king of Alba Longa and an ancestor of Numa himself. He was perceived as part of an older world, more venerable even than that of Rome’s foundations.²⁰³ According to Appian (1.3), Aventinus descended from Aeneas through the long line of Ascanius and was the son of ‘the Romulus who was struck by a thunderbolt’ (...τοῦ δὲ Ῥωμύλον. καὶ τόνδε μὲν βληθῆναι κεραυνῶ). This *other* Romulus is named by Livy (1.3.9) as Romulus Silvius, but Dionysius (1.71.3) calls him Allocius. Ovid (*Metamorphosis* 14.615) calls him Remulus, stating simply: ‘*fulmineo periit, imitator fulminis, ictu*’. Dionysius adds details describing Aventinus’ father as tyrannical and so contemptuous of the gods that he terrified his people into believing he was a god by imitating thunder and lightning. Divine retribution quickly caught up with him for this hubris and Dionysius describes ‘rain and lightning’ falling on his house, a flood, and his annihilation along with his entire household. In Livy’s version (1.3.9), Romulus Silvius,

²⁰² Forsythe (2005:173-177); Lipka (2009:43-44).

²⁰³ Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 5.7; Livy 1.3.9; Appian, *Historia Romana* 1.3; Ovid, *Fasti* 4.6; Dio Cassius 1.5.1; Dionysius 1.71.3; Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.665 has him as a son of Hercules, a different father also struck by lightning but as apotheosis not punishment (Apollodorus 2.7.7; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.271-2).

fulmine ipse ictus, passes kingship to Aventinus who was buried on the hill that took his name. The burial site of a (legendary) king was usually something of cultural significance. Certainly, one major prohibition which the *pomerium* regulated was burial within the land it encompassed and so the Aventine's exclusion from its perimeters until the time of Claudius was at least consonant with this memory.²⁰⁴ Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* 13.14) explains that one reason it was excluded until then was because the Aventine was always considered ill-omened due to Remus' auspication there.

The hill was also the location of the *Lucus Stimulae*, the Grove of Stimula, where the scandalous Bacchic rites were conducted.²⁰⁵ Stimula was a goddess conflated with Semele, who was, of course, Dionysus' lightning-stricken mother.²⁰⁶ There was a *sacrarium* to the goddess in the grove.²⁰⁷ Without deducing the channels of communication between these myths or trying to harmonise them or extract any coherent information from them, what may be observed lingering even in the very name of the Aventine Hill is a constellation of ideas concerning kingship, lightning, death, and burial.

This comes into better resolution in the cults and rituals associated with the hill itself. Most notably, the Aventine was the site of a cult to Jupiter Elicius. The *elicere* observed earlier in the world of magic is embedded in this divine epithet suggestive of the summoning of divine forces: seemingly, a Jupiter who may be summoned.²⁰⁸ The god had

²⁰⁴ On lightning, burial, and the pomerium, see Flashpoint 7.

²⁰⁵ Livy 39.12. Platner & Ashby (1929), 319.

²⁰⁶ Ovid, *Fasti* 6.503. See, Turcan (2003).

²⁰⁷ An association with Liber is assumed. Lipka (2009:18-19) associates this grove with the nearby 'Aventine triad'.

²⁰⁸ '*eliciunt caelo te, Iuppiter*' Ovid, *Fasti* 3.326. Rubins (1932) on the name is interesting even if her conclusions do not hold.

an altar on the Aventine.²⁰⁹ Although who Jupiter Elicius was and what he represented in practice is open to debate, clearly such a deity is relevant to Numa's lightning-conjuring activities on the same hill. Indeed, the Numan lightning model of coercion seems to find its cultic expression here.²¹⁰ This connection is deepened by association with the archaic ceremony of the *aquaelicism* by which rain was 'lured' in times of drought.²¹¹ Here, too, we see *elicere* designate a ritual that Warde Fowler described as a 'rain spell'.²¹² This ritual involved a rock, apparently the Lapis Manalis, which was carried into the city in a collective, public act of divine coercion to coax down rain. The rock was carried through the Porta Capena at the intersection of the Caelian, Palatine, and Aventine hills from the once wooded area associated with the sacred grove of the Camenae. This was where Numa was supposed to have taken nightly counsel with the nymph Egeria about how best to appease each god.²¹³ Early 20th century scholarship often wrestled with how the Lapis Manalis, the *aquaelicism*, and Jupiter Elicius should be reconciled but the problem, as intractable as ever, is now rarely discussed. For our purposes, whichever way the sources are interpreted, the same constellation of associations flickers through the confusion: weather, divine forces, and coercive practices.

To this characterisation of the more occult aspects of the Aventine, the presence of Summanus must be added. From at least the early third century, this chthonic god of night lightning had his temple at the foot of the hill. Summanus was powerful and his importance in Rome's catalogue of fulminating deities will warrant his own flashpoint

²⁰⁹ Livy 1.20.7. Platner & Ashby (1929), 293.

²¹⁰ Richardson (1992: 218-9) following Livy states Numa was believed to have consulted Jupiter at this altar by augury, but clearly those were not the rites conducted.

²¹¹ Callahan (1952) for a thorough presentation of the evidence.

²¹² Fowler (1899), 233. Cf. Fowler (1911), 52.

²¹³ On *Camenae* Livy 1.21.3. On the location at Porta Capena, Ovid, *Fasti* 3.275-76.

presently.²¹⁴ For now, it will suffice to note his nocturnal, fulminating presence here, adding yet another layer to the hill's tempestuous, cultic associations. Altogether, the Aventine's relationship with lightning takes on a very different texture to lightning in the formal, codified world of augury and divination. As a location, it contrasts with practices on the Capitoline which may be seen to represent order and state-sanctioned religion. The Aventine emerges as an alternative centre evocative of thundersome gods, coercive weather-related practices, and even, the burial of a king with a lightning-stricken father. All of which make it a fitting stage for Numa's negotiation with Jupiter.

Numa's encounter with Jupiter is all about lightning. The point needs stressed because just as the role of lightning in the first part of the myth tends to be overlooked or downplayed in scholarship, so, too, the central themes and ultimately the point of the second part of the myth gets subsumed in scholarly analysis of its minutiae. Various readings all recognise that at the heart of the myth there is a tension between divine and human, submission and control, but focus always seems to fall on the negotiation. When Numa engages with Jupiter, he is proactive, assertive, and does not simply submit. He negotiates with Jupiter and just as he coerced this divine epiphany, he similarly coaxes a deal out of the king of the gods regarding expiation. The expiatory ritual finally agreed upon is one agreeable to human desires rather than Jupiter's demands. This has been read in many ways.²¹⁵ Most straightforwardly, it provides an aetiology for some bizarre components of expiatory practice; namely, why the burial of onions, hair, and sprats were part of the solemn proceedings following a lightning strike. In terms of literary genre, as

²¹⁴ See Flashpoint 4.

²¹⁵ Driediger-Murphy (2021), n.16 for bibliography.

already noted, Horsfall and Bremmer identify stock mythological plots and see Numa taking on the archetypal role of trickster.²¹⁶ Wiseman, moreover, sees in Ovid's depiction of the negotiation an origin on the stage in the generic trope of comedy.²¹⁷ The myth has also been parsed ideologically as exemplifying a 'contractual' relationship between gods and mortals. Scholars like Scheid and Prescendi, for example, have interpreted the myth as evidence that divine demands could be negotiated.²¹⁸ Scheid particularly emphasises the civic aspect of this, arguing that the myth portrays a divine realm which is integrated into Rome's political structure. Jupiter, in his view, submits to Numa's authority as a Roman magistrate and agrees to what thereafter become Roman religious norms. Driediger-Murphy also addresses the power dynamics in the Numa-Jupiter exchange but as more of a theological interaction exemplifying a negotiation between gods and mortals with a 'yielding' Jupiter indicating a limitation on divine demands.²¹⁹

None of these arguments factor in the fundamental social and meteorological context: the problem of lightning strikes and the anxiety surrounding what to do about them. Yet this is the overriding premise of the myth: Numa's magical conjuring of lightning is itself a way of controlling lightning, the context is a city where lightning is out of control, and the purpose is to rein it in by learning from Jupiter how to atone for it. According to its own plot, then, the myth should be read as concerned with and about lightning. It speaks directly to cultural anxieties about the limits of human power in the face of divine forces and natural phenomena. Although Scheid necessarily positions Numa's activities broadly in the *systeme des auspices et des prodigies*, it is only by playing down the importance of lightning and expiation altogether – '[p]eu importe pour notre propos la manière dont les

²¹⁶ Horsfall & Bremmer (1985).

²¹⁷ Wiseman (2008).

²¹⁸ Scheid (1985); (Prescendi (2007:197-8). Also, Raccanelli (2017).

²¹⁹ Driediger-Murphy (2021).

foudres sont a expier...' – that he can consider the myth indicative of the orderly *religio* of the city. It is true, as Scheid argues, that aetiologically a new order is portrayed as being arranged between the gods and the populace, but it is hard to agree that Numa's Aventine episode shows him to be *religiosus* rather than *superstitiosus* or that his behaviour is proper: '*...et par les artes, les techniques appropriées, il conjure la foudre*'.²²⁰ There was nothing appropriate about his methods and it was explicitly towards the chaos of lightning that they were directed. Strangest of all is the fact that the question of expiation is so side-lined in scholarly discussions and considered so peripheral when in fact answering this question is Numa's express purpose in conducting these rites and attempting this bargain.²²¹

Myths, of course, work in strange ways and on many levels but the entire premise and central plot features cannot be entirely ignored. Expiation is the point. The straightforward, real-world question that the myth tackles is what to do when lightning strikes? How to respond? How to make it stop? What will satisfy the gods? Jupiter's awful answer is a human head. The myth thus alarmingly reveals that fear surrounding lightning was not limited to the physical danger of the strike itself, nor even the belief that it carried divine wrath, but fear extended to uncertainties about what the gods might demand in exchange for their clemency. We learn that lightning not only brought death but could demand life in return. It is within this context of ominous reciprocity that the question of expiation in Numa's bargain with Jupiter takes on its full weight. Certainly, not be underestimated is the element of fun and the fact that such stories were related

²²⁰ Scheid (1985), 49. It is a stretch to discern *prudentia* and a kind of senatorial *consilium* in Numa's encounters with Egeria. Ovid (*Fasti* 3.323-5) stresses these are things forbidden for man to know: *scire nefas homini*.

²²¹ As above. E.g., Ovid, *Fasti* 3.333: *da certa piamina*.

for entertainment, but to be relevant, they also needed to be relatable in some way and the world of myth often playfully confronts dark truths.

The fact that in the Ovidian account the god is not angry, nor threatening punishment, and yet casually and repeatedly demands decapitation is an unsettling vision. That he laughs or smiles (*risit*) in the end has been interpreted as indicative of his underlying goodwill, but it takes a suspicious amount of scholarly explanation to sanitise his bloodthirsty demands.²²² What does it mean that Rome's protecting deity, even if smiling, requests such a terrible price for appeasement? Scheid claims that Jupiter is only testing Numa's good judgement by making the same demand three times. Numa evades in the 'right' way, in his reading, and thus attests to the benevolence of the gods and the fact that it is *impensabile* that they would make such a request.²²³ I would contest the idea that it is benevolence on display here and also question how unthinkable this request really was.

Human sacrifice in the ancient world is an unpopular subject that nevertheless haunts classical mythology, and it lurks in various diluted forms in some long-lived rites and traditions.²²⁴ I believe the expiation of lightning is one of them. The myth quite clearly tells its audience to understand expiatory offerings as ritual substitutes, symbolically standing in for human lives. The question is whether there is any basis for believing it to be true. Substitutes cannot be evidence that an earlier practice had once involved humans; what they do affirm is the *idea* that the substitute *could* have been human instead.²²⁵ In the most moderate reading, then, the Numa myth serves as a window into

²²² Cf. Arnobius (5.4) who has Jupiter leaving irritated: *doleas*. Driediger-Murphy (2012:273-4) emphasises the smile in response to 'fearless' Numa.

²²³ Scheid (1985), 49.

²²⁴ Greece: Hughes (1991). Etruria: Bonfante (1984); de Grummond (2016). Rome: Farron (1985); Rives (1995); Grottanelli (2000); Schultz (2010); Stern (2020). Suggested archaeological evidence: Ottini (2003).

²²⁵ Note Dionysius' (2.10.3) matter-of-fact statement that it was customary among Romans (έν ἔθει) to dedicate the corpses of those they wished dead to chthonic deities (τοις καταχθονίοις).

the Roman counterfactual: a history in which Numa had not intervened and a Rome in which the expiation of lightning strikes necessitated human heads. Even at its most restrained, the myth therefore put lightning strikes in the shadow of human sacrifice. It is a shadow that had a long reach and while I do not plan to make an argument on the topic here, I will refer back to it as we move forward and point it out where it arises because it will become apparent that this darker side to lightning was a palpable undercurrent to fears and reactions to historical strikes.

Burial, heads, and decapitation is also not an idea *ex nihilo*. Without overstating the connection, we might note, for example, the pertinent example of the Capitoline, Jupiter's own hill, which took its name from '*caput*', head, and which had its own myth involving an exhumed head and a haruspex.²²⁶ Even in Livy's description of Numa's orderly inauguration on that hill, one phrase in the auspicatory formula he preserves seems relevant here. Livy (1.18.9-10) says the augur put his hand on Numa's head when he invoked the god and asked for his sign, we assume lightning. The preserved words suggest more a holding action than a touch: Numa '*cuius ego caput teneo*'. The would-be king's head seems thus held up to Jupiter's adjudicating thunderbolt.²²⁷ In the relationship between lightning and kingship, the king's head was raised highest and was therefore the most exalted but also the most vulnerable lightning rod.²²⁸ Perhaps, we might wonder where on the spectrum of kingship, lightning strikes, and expiation to situate Aventinus, remembered as a buried king whose father was struck by lightning. The point is not to insist that these things add up to anything that evinces archaic Roman

²²⁶ Thein (2014); Zavaroni (2013).

²²⁷ Cf. Livy (3.48.5) when desperate Verginius stabs his own daughter and declares to his enemy: '*Te...Appi, tuumque caput sanguine hoc consecro*.' Livy does not say to which god Appius' head was consecrated. Lightning targeted the head: Jupiter '*cum emisit ignes quibus innoxia capita percuteret*' (Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.42.2).

²²⁸ See below, pp.97-98.

practices of human sacrifice but rather to suggest that something in the collective memory or imagination provided context for the myth of Numa and the idea that Jupiter may once have needed steering away from a taste for human heads.²²⁹

If we take the spectre of human sacrifice seriously whether as a memory of a distant past, an experience with neighbouring cultures, or simply as a persistently horrifying idea, we are far removed from the supposed rhetoric of civic order and the elevation of Roman magistracies. Even if we read Numa's myth as a simple folk aetiology, retroactively trying to explain why the burial of onions and sprats were part of the expiatory rituals following a lightning strike, it only makes sense when read against and in the context of human sacrifice. Whether we want to take that as purely conceptual or something that had once been in practice, a terrible fragility is exposed in Numa's negotiation with Jupiter. Challenging the idea that Jupiter is benevolently 'yielding' or 'tricked' by Numa is the darker and less controllable side of divine power on display here and the sheer unpredictability of the divine will. Even the relative worthlessness of these token substitutes – vegetables and fish for human heads - underscores a divine flippancy and the precariousness of mortal existence subject to it. The underlying threat in the superficially affable exchange, as Ovid portrays it, is therefore less in divine wrath than in the cruel arbitrariness of divine power, which is also the arbitrariness of lightning itself: like the volatile 'bolt from the blue' even in a moment of calm, the gods might demand something as extreme as human life.

²²⁹ Prescendi (2007:195) notes that Numa's myth prevents further human sacrifice in this case but does not dispense with it in other circumstances. The topic resurfaces in Flashpoints 4 & 6.

Conclusion: The 'Numan Model' for handling lightning

As with Romulus in the previous chapter, in this chapter, we have seen lightning play a vital though overlooked role within the myth of Numa. I have argued for a Numan model for handling lightning that strays significantly from the Romulean *exemplum* of deference, piety, and restraint. Numa is not passive but proactive in his interactions with lightning: interactions that are characterised by coercion, disruption, and esoteric practices best situated in the world of ancient magic. Numa bridges the gap between mortal authority and divine power directly by seizing control of lightning in a much more aggressive and tactile manner than Romulus. The human agency in his model is greatly increased. Although unquestionably pious, we have nevertheless found Numa cueing us into an alternative world of lightning that is darker, more visceral, and more hands-on than the world of celestial signs. Numa emerges as a counterpoint to Romulus in terms of providing an alternative modality for handling lightning, just as the Aventine has been noted as a fitting stage for his activities and potentially a topographic counterpoint to the ritual world of lightning on the Capitoline. Like Romulus, Numa evokes the connection of lightning to kingship and political power, but he also evokes the danger inherent in this relationship, revealing the precarious balance in which it hangs, and the high stakes involved in appeasing the gods wherever lightning is concerned. Our next flashpoint is a continuation and culmination of these ideas, illustrating what happens when lightning is poorly handled.



Flashpoint Three

Tullus Hostilius

misappropriation, failure, and destruction

Tullus Hostilius is the last in this trilogy of kings and our final mythological case study. His flashpoint stands as an admonitory counterpoint to Numa and a coda to the arguments advanced in the previous chapter. Unlike his pious if pioneering predecessor, Livy (1.31) recounts that this warlike king was neglectful of the gods until he encountered crisis. He then became fervent and superstitious and, in attempting to remedy a *pestilentia* that had fallen upon Rome, he tried to simulate Numa's ritual of calling down the lightning. Indeed, he managed to do so - but not successfully. For his impropriety, the lightning he conjured struck him dead and in the ensuing conflagration, he burned alongside his entire household. Tullus Hostilius is therefore a cautionary tale. If Numa's success embodied the Promethean gift, bringing down the divine fire in service of mortals, Tullus' failure is the enactment of the Promethean punishment. The divine retribution he suffers exposes the danger latent in those rituals performed by Numa. Lightning in the 'Hostilian' model is still predicated on human agency, but here it is punitive, and its handling is characterised by misappropriation, failure, and destruction.

Lightning in the punitive framework as an instrument of ruin draws upon a familiar and long-standing mythological trope of figures punished for overstepping their bounds. Tullus becomes part of a lineage of Roman kings, for example, whose bad behaviour resulted in a lightning strike. Anchises, the Trojan progenitor of Rome, was struck at

Venus' request for his loose tongue about their affair (Vergil, *Aeneid* 2.648–9). This was a punishment, but not a deadly one; Anchises was nevertheless marked and crippled in a visible manner.²³⁰ His scar prefigures all Rome's future rulers as touched by lightning one way or another. Focusing on the pattern of punishment, among the Alban kings, we find Romulus Silvius, who tries to imitate Jupiter's lightning, demands to be worshipped as a god, and is struck dead by lightning in punishment. This king, encountered in the previous chapter, was, according to Appian (*Historia Romana* 1.3), Aventinus' father: the Romulus 'who was struck by a thunderbolt' (τόνδε μὲν βληθῆναι κεραυνῶ).²³¹ Dionysius (1.71.3) calls him Allocius, perhaps conflating yet another myth. Allocius, as previously noted, was described as tyrannical and so contemptuous of the gods that he terrified his people into believing he was a god by imitating thunder and lightning. Divine retribution also quickly caught up with him for this hubris and Dionysius describes 'rain and lightning' falling on his house, a flood, and his annihilation along with his entire household.²³² The chronology of these myths does not, of course, reflect their relative antiquity. What is significant is simply that eventually they were maintained and cobbled together to create a genealogy in which lightning repeatedly punishes kings for their behaviour.

Many scholars have described these legends as a Roman calque of the Greek myth of Salmoneus.²³³ This is, in the details, true. Salmoneus, the tyrannical ruler of Elis and brother of Sisyphus, was also described as being so arrogant as to declare himself an equal

²³⁰ Especially, Vergil, *Aeneid* 2.648–649. On sources Park, (2016:24). On the affair in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, Faulkner (2008).

²³¹ Dionysius 1.71.3.

²³² Dionysius 1.71.3.

²³³ Weinstock (1951:144). Frier (1999:55): 'The trapping of early Roman history in the accoutrement of Greek literary myth is characteristic of the 'Hellenistic' annalists in the mid-second century B.C.'

of Zeus and have the sacrifices of Zeus made instead to himself.²³⁴ He too attempted to imitate divine thunder and lightning by various contrivances such as dragging clanging bronze kettles behind his chariot to emulate the thunderous sound and having lighted torches shot into the sky, which he claimed to be lightning bolts that he had thrown.²³⁵ Salmoneus was furthermore hated by his people for his overbearing demeanour and Zeus, who was inevitably enraged by the charade, struck Salmoneus dead with a real thunderbolt.²³⁶ In our earliest account of the myth - a fragment of Hesiod - Zeus is so enraged he kills not only Salmoneus but the entire populace whom 'he struck with his thunder and smoky lightning' (ἔβαλεν βροντι τε καὶ αἰθαλόεντι κεραυνῶι) for tolerating such a hubristic king.²³⁷ Clearly, in both the general plot and many of the narrative details, Salmoneus finds direct parallels in the wayward Latin kings. Tullus Hostilius also bears this comparison insofar as he sits within the tradition of impious monarchs who challenge divine authority by claiming control over lightning only to be struck down by it.

Beyond the clear parallels, however, a sharper insight would be that these are Roman iterations of Salmoneus presented in a Roman context, and so, the more historically compelling question is: to what effect? How did these stories resonate in that different political climate? Overlapping cultures and literary emulation aside, they can be seen collectively as presenting a fairly consistent *speculum principum*: thunderbolts revealing the moral compass of kings. Just as Jupiter elects and endorses Rome's rulers, these punitive blasts set up an expectation that Jupiter would also police their behaviour. Zeus,

²³⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 4.68.1-3, 6.6.4-5, 6.7.1-3; ps.-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.89; ps.-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 239; Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.592-594. Cowan (2014), on Sophocles' satyr play *Salmoneus* has many interesting details, including the sulphurous stench of thunderbolts noted in the introductory chapter.

²³⁵ Smith et al. (2005) for conjecture about Salmoneus' 'thunder-machine'. See Flashpoint 10.

²³⁶ Whitmarsh (2018:27:32) for sources and discussion.

²³⁷ Hesiod, fr. 30 Merkelbach-West (1960).

of course, was imagined patrolling rulers of the Greek world in similar fashion but Roman paradigms of stricken kings have a particular resonance in a state whose ideologies and configurations of political power increasingly identified with the thunderbolt.²³⁸ Read in dialogue with each other, a message about the divine right to rule can be seen woven through the narrative of Rome's earliest kings, providing a moral rationale to their power (or loss of it). The models these kings provide will inform our historical enquiry, moving forward, as all three serve as important points of reference in thinking about how lightning could or should be engaged with. Overall, these models align with the general scholarly appraisal of the nature of Rome's first three kings: Romulus the founder-king, Numa the priestly king, and Tullus Hostilius the warrior king.²³⁹ Yet, when lightning is the focus, the contours shift slightly: Romulus appears more pious than we tend to imagine, Numa more deviant, and Tullus, as I hope to show, an altogether more sympathetic character. His fate illustrates a broader Roman truth familiar in everything from divination to expiation and the meticulous attention to ritual precision: any attempt to engage with or control divine power through lightning treads a dangerous path and people must do so in keeping with divine will or face violent retribution.

Tullus Hostilius as Failed Heir to Numa

Although the destruction Tullus brings upon himself broadly fits the narrative pattern of hubris and nemesis, in the particulars of how this myth engages with its local socio-political inheritance, it departs from the straightforward crime and punishment moral of figures like Salmoneus. The most salient difference here is that Tullus does not rattle bronze kettles and pretend to cause thunder and lightning; he tries to summon the real

²³⁸ As already observed in terms of kingly/political power. Discussed in terms of iconography and ideology in the imperial flashpoints of part 3.

²³⁹ Aligning, albeit imperfectly, with Dumèzil's '*roi-magicien, roi-prêtre, roi-guerrier*' (1946, 1974:90-91).

thing. This activity was inherently presumptuous in its transgression of the human-divine boundary, but Tullus crosses this line out of desperation rather than arrogance. His crime is not so much the mimetic hubris of attempting to rival or imitate Jupiter as an ill-advised attempt to imitate Numa. His downfall is framed within the context of a plague and the ritual he conducted in attempt to remedy it.²⁴⁰ For this, Numa is the explicit point of comparison.

Tullus' failure to replicate Numa's rites perfectly are usually viewed as the reason for his destruction, categorising his crime as one of ritual misconduct. Yet, as we have seen, Numa's rites, even if conducted properly, could not themselves be categorised as 'proper' by the times of our various sources. Having already situated that ritual in Rome's religious underbelly, it is easy to understand why Livy presents Tullus' ritual as a mistake rooted in *superstitio* (1.31.6). In terms of religious practice, Livy expressly portrays Tullus as having swung from one extreme to the other. Initially scorning religious behaviour as unworthy of a king (*minus regium*), Tullus prioritises war and action over piety. Only when illness strikes, and his fierce spirit breaks does he reconsider his impious rejection of *religio* and begin to engage fervently in all manner of misguided practices culminating in the secret rite that killed him. Indeed, Livy's description of Tullus' fatal ritual as *prava religio* (wrong or perverted religious practice) suggests more than technical incompetence; it indicates that the ritual Tullus performed was itself fundamentally improper. We are again in the realm of magic and the darker side of lightning.

²⁴⁰ Discussed below.

Wiseman uses the clear deviance in accounts of Tullus' activities to introduce the dangerous practices of coercive magic evident in Numa's case. He points out that 'incorrect ritual' is hardly a sufficient explanation for the violent turn against Tullus: 'It must have been self-evident to Livy's readers,' he states, 'that someone who tried to compel a god to appear before him was asking for a thunderbolt'.²⁴¹ Wiseman's discussion concerns the magical implications of these accounts, and his focus remains on the act of summoning (*elicere*) as a form of magical practice. Again, we can push his useful insights further. The key question must be *in what way* did Tullus misinterpret the rites? Wiseman overlooks Livy's (1.31.8) quiet answer: the crucial detail is that Tullus' failed ritual is described as a *sacrificium* to Jupiter Elicius.²⁴²

This is the deity Livy played down in his clean presentation of Numa but here he acknowledges what he previously refused to relate: that Numa's rites were indeed occult and, moreover, sacrificial in nature. It was the initiation and conduct of this *sacrificium* that was the core problem: '*non rite initum aut curatum id sacrum*' (1.31.8). When Hostilius undertakes the *sollemnia sacrificia* 'not properly begun nor properly performed', we discover that there was not just a failure in summoning but a failure in the sacrificial process itself. This could allude simply to the ritual precision always emphasised in Roman custom: perhaps Tullus failed to perform the ritual with the requisite purity, or omitted crucial components, or, without the piety and religious *auctoritas* of Numa, perhaps Tullus simply lacked the skills to successfully conduct this invocation. However, if so, death seems a disproportionate punishment. In practice, improperly conducted

²⁴¹ Wiseman (2008), 157. Mackey (2022:274): 'a breach of orthopraxy norms.'

²⁴² Since Livy (1.31.8) specifies the sacrifice is to Jupiter Elicius, we might assume Hostilius not only repeated the rites but returned to the appropriate topographic location, i.e., the altar on the Aventine.

sacrifices were rendered null, and required repeat performance.²⁴³ Since Tullus' death by lightning was clearly not a punishment for hubris *per se* nor even a magical spell gone wrong but a violent rejection of a failed *sacrificium*, we are left wondering what he did that was so objectionable. Modern readers, used to hearing about ancient sacrifices and libations at every turn, may not be attuned to the undertones of this particular ritual. However, Tullus certainly cued ancient readers into the problematic ritual and expiatory offerings at the heart of the Numa myth.²⁴⁴ In the context in which I have presented it and in light of Jupiter's prior demand for human lives, we might wonder what getting these rites wrong entailed exactly and what kind of sacrifice lurked beneath Livy's laconic text.²⁴⁵ If Numa had safely navigated these occult rites in order to replace the demand for human heads with ritual substitutes, Tullus' attempt to repeat the procedure could be viewed as dangerously reopening a closed door.

Indeed, Livy's own framing of Tullus' ill-fated performance contextualises it as a response to abandoned rites and traditions (1.31.3-4). After recounting Tullus' military conquest of the Sabines and declaring Rome to be *in magna gloria magnisque opibus* (1.31.1), his focus and tone shifts abruptly with news of a rain of stones on the Alban Mount. This is the first event in a series that ends with Tullus' death. It reads as a domino chain rather

²⁴³ Declaring a *vitium* was exclusive to augury (Paschall, 1936). Sacrifice could be repeated *usque ad litationem* (Livy 41.14–15), but initial failure could have ramifications (Vigourt, 2001:190-5). Driediger-Murphy (2019b) for an excellent discussion of failed sacrifice. She contests that repeat sacrifices were common practice and insists that sacrifice was a fragile and unpredictable process with uncertain outcomes. Sacrifice in the context of lightning-conjuring could only be more fraught.

²⁴⁴ The idea he 'botched' Numa's rites is often repeated, but not that the problem was the sacrifice.

²⁴⁵ Livy's Hostilius was no stranger to bloody executions and punishments and his myth is quite concerned with sacrifice and expiating murders: 1.25.12. Horatius dedicates two of the slain to the shades of his brothers; 1.26. for Horatius' murder of an innocent maiden purifying rites were conducted with certain expiatory sacrifices; *piacularibus sacrificiis factis*; 1.28.9. Tullus orders the Alban Mettius Fufetius to be torn apart by horses for treachery (which Livy describes as beyond the laws of humanity and not repeated in Roman history).

than a series of discrete incidents although the causal connections are not always explicit. Roman envoys, sent to confirm the *prodigium*, see the fallen stones and also hear an immense voice emanating from the grove on the mountain. The nature of this *vox ingens* (1.31.3) is not described but such divine voices on sacred mountaintops often denote thunder.²⁴⁶ This voice reveals the source of the divine displeasure which the prodigious weather speaks to: the Albans had forsaken their old religious practices. They had done so either, Livy asserts, out of discontent with the gods or because they had taken up Roman practices (*Romana sacra susceperant*).²⁴⁷ The voice commands the Albans to perform rites according to their own ancestral custom (*patrio ritu*). This establishes a backdrop of older customs and neglected rites for Tullus' imminent revisitation of Numa's rites. Livy does not mention what the Albans must do to satisfy their ancestral deity, but it might be noted that Jupiter Latiaris was the deity of the Alban Mount, and thus the god implicitly associated with the voice and the *prodigium*. He was known to be blood-thirsty; his cult statue was washed with human blood.²⁴⁸ The allusion seems to be human sacrifice though this is contested.²⁴⁹ There is no mention of what ancestral rites the Albans had abandoned, but context perhaps more than hints at it. The significance for Rome is that a new religious observance is introduced to the capital: the *novendiale sacrum*. This nine-day series of rites is presented as new and a distinct departure from whatever the tradition was to which the Albans were being recalled. These rites are now established as the proper Roman response to this kind of prodigy.

²⁴⁶ The Old Testament god is an obvious example (Botterweck et al., 1974:586-587). Livy says the need for the *novendiale sacrum* was revealed either by the thunder or the haruspices (1.31.5) which are in effect the same thing.

²⁴⁷ Levene (1993: 138-140) sees this as indicative of *Roman impiety*, thus a Roman problem to expiate.

²⁴⁸ Porphyry, *De Abstinencia* 2.56.9 a 'pagan' source. The practice is otherwise attested in Justin Martyr, 2 *Apologia* 12.5; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 30.1; Tertullian, *Apologia* 9.5- i.e., Christian sources. On the problematic accusations of human sacrifice among 'pagans' and Christians, see Rives (1995).

²⁴⁹ Gradel (2002) & Mahieu (2010) make the case.

Until this point, if we suspect that the ancient Alban rites were undesirable in some way, perhaps even raising the spectre of human sacrifice, then positive echoes of Numa may be perceived in Tullus' actions in that he, too, guides Rome into more salubrious expiatory territory. The cultural moment which this episode represents seems, in any case, to be one of innovation rather than the traditionalism it is usually assigned. Woodman, for example, who focuses on how Livy's narrative constructs a specific image of Rome's past to serve contemporary concerns, has recently situated these rites within a larger context of Livian historiography, where prodigies and omens serve as narrative devices to explore themes of legitimacy and moral decay.²⁵⁰ The forgotten Alban rites, in that view, are symbolic of a broader struggle over the preservation of tradition amidst Rome's evolving religious landscape. Yet, while the Albans are drawn back to their ancestral customs, Rome can be seen, to the contrary, forging new ritual practices. These are the solution rather than the problem. The institution of the *novendiale sacrum* replaces archaic (and potentially dangerous) traditions with rituals more in line with contemporary Roman *mores*. By contrast, the mistake Hostilius makes with his second, more desperate ritual seems therefore to lie in not learning this very lesson.

By attempting to repeat whatever Numa had done, Hostilius was revisiting a practice that ought to have been abandoned, thereby potentially compromising Numa's volatile expiatory bargain. In this light, the failed ritual was also a dangerous failure to read the religious climate. Tullus Hostilius represents a turning point in Rome's religious and civic evolution whereby his violent death by lightning stands as a mythological endpoint to

²⁵⁰ Woodman (2023)

outdated and ‘othered’ practices. It is a warning about the perils of conjuring of thunderbolts and whatever sacrificial and expiatory rites this entailed. His fate moreover reminds readers of the stakes involved when navigating the dangerous world of Roman lightning particularly since Jupiter did, after all, get his head.

Historical Resonances: Lightning and Control in the Roman Republic

In the broader historical context, Tullus Hostilius’ failed ritual and subsequent punishment articulates something important about a Roman desire to control certain facets of religious practice concerning lightning. This was partly an environmental concern, which arose from the persistent physical and metaphysical fears about lightning described in the introduction. It was partly social, as we have seen with Numa, speaking to dubious cultural practices. Partly, however, it was also political. The attempt to ensure that lightning was wielded and interpreted only through proper, state-sanctioned channels derives from the need to mediate and regulate access to divine power.

A vivid illustration of this is the infamous episode of book burning in 181 BCE. Numa’s *commentarii*, his sacred books, were supposedly discovered on the Janiculum Hill buried in a coffin alongside some Pythagorean texts.²⁵¹ Modern scholarship suspects these were planted in an attempt to validate Pythagoreanism by establishing its traditional though chronologically problematic connection to Numa.²⁵² For us, the important detail is that the senate immediately ordered their destruction.

²⁵¹ Varro *apud* Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 7.34; Livy 40.29.3–8; Plutarch, *Numa* 22. Beck (2018) n 9. lists other scattered fragmentary evidence. Some variances in the details of these sources need not detain us, see Della Corte (1974).

²⁵² Humm (2014) on the tradition. Prowse (1964) in relation to this incident.

This deliberate and public act of erasure would be a strong and surprising response to the sacred books of a beloved king. Pythagoreanism seemingly played a role in the perceived dangers of these controversial ‘discoveries’. It has been suggested, among many other things, that this aggression towards Pythagoreanism was veiled political aggression towards the Scipio family.²⁵³ Alternatively, Gruen’s analysis of foreign influence in Roman religion describes the symbolic eradication of foreign practices perceived as threats to the state.²⁵⁴ The foreign nature of the Pythagorean texts would therefore be the main problem. We have already noted that Numa’s association with Pythagoreanism implicated him in the world of esoteric knowledge and magic. An intriguing comment dropped in passing by Plutarch (*Quaestiones Conviviales* 4.2) is worth mentioning because it suggests that part of first-century CE Pythagorean expertise was also fulgural.

Plutarch recounts someone describing a local house that experienced the many strange electrical effects of being struck by a thunderbolt. The occupant consulted a Pythagorean about what this all meant. It is an unexpected choice of expert and, admittedly, the Pythagorean was unhelpful.²⁵⁵ Nevertheless the matter-of-course manner in which the consultation was made suggests that esoteric lightning expertise was within the Pythagorean remit: not an insignificant detail considering Numa’s secret Aventine rites. If this was a longstanding part of their repertoire, it is possible that the Pythagorean texts supposedly discovered in Numa’s coffin compounded what Numa’s own sacred books were supposed to contain: namely, instructions for the *sollemnia sacrificia Iovi Elicio* that

²⁵³ Grilli (1982).

²⁵⁴ Gruen (1992:259): ‘a public exorcism of material that allegedly linked the beginnings of Roman religion to Greek philosophy’. Ogden (2002:39-40) believes the problem was actually hydromancy; Willi (1998:146) suggests it was the written form itself.

²⁵⁵ *Moralia* 665b: The Pythagorean advises him ‘to look to one’s own affairs and pray to the gods’: τὰ καθ’ ἑαυτὸν ὁρᾶν καὶ προσεύχεσθαι τοῖς θεοῖς.

Livy (1.31.8) tells us Hostilius found in Numa's *commentarii* - the very same instructions which he followed to call down the lightning that destroyed him.

The drastic action of burning these book speaks volumes about official attitudes towards the sort of knowledge they contained. It is important to the larger argument about misappropriating and mishandling lightning that the subversive and destabilising content of these texts was what Tullus Hostilius was remembered to have consulted for his act of *prava religio*. None of which is to say that books *were* discovered or that they, indeed, belonged to Numa. Rather, in response to the supposed discovery, the symbolic value of the burning was clear: this was knowledge that had no place in Rome. So, if they did (or were alleged, or were imagined to) contain knowledge of how to summon lightning, the senate conspicuously and officially put this permanently beyond the pale of even direct circumstance. Curiously, Livy states that the books were burned in the Comitium in front of the people with a fire made by the *victimarii* (*igne a victimariis facto*). The books therefore seem to have been sacrificed rather than simply destroyed.²⁵⁶

It is worth considering, then, what circumstances would make Numa, Pythagoreans, and the resurgence of esoteric, fulgural, knowledge a particular concern in 181 BCE. The case of Tullus Hostilius may shed some light here. Like Numa, himself, it was in dire circumstances that Hostilius had turned to Numa's rites. He was attempting to quell the plague that was ravaging the population. It may therefore be no incidental detail that for three years, from 182-180 BCE a pestilence was also ravaging Rome and its environs. Livy (40:19) describes the plague being so virulent that Libitina struggled to keep up with the

²⁵⁶ Lennon (2015). *Victimarii* typically sacrificed animals.

funerals and enough troops could not be mustered for urgent deployment abroad due to the sheer number of the dead and ailing.²⁵⁷ Livy (40.29.2) also says the year was remarkable for crop failures and a six-month drought. Prior to recounting the discovery of the books, he has described the devastation and anxiety of the times. He has also already described the religious response: state interventions required the consuls to sacrifice fully grown victims to whichever gods they thought appropriate, the *decemviri* were asked to consult their books and, in response, they advised a day of special attendance upon all the *pulvinaria* of Rome, as well as calling three days of *supplicatio* and *feriae* across Italy (40.19).

What might be suspected beneath Livy's text is that in such desperate times, desperate measures may have been sought out. Old practices remembered to have helped *in extremis* in former times might have resurfaced as a last resort. Some might have deemed lightning-conjuring and bargaining with Jupiter anew to be necessary, and some might have reconsidered what sort of sacrifices were required to appease the gods.²⁵⁸ This is speculation, of course, but the book burning incident does not serve any obvious narrative purpose in Livy; it is immediately followed by the outbreak of war in Spain.²⁵⁹ It seems rather to have been such a conspicuous and strange historical event that it was remembered and demanded inclusion in his account of the year. In its historical rather than narrative context, however, the incident, so concerned with purging Roman religious practice, best makes sense at a moment when undesirable practices were happening or being demanded.²⁶⁰ In a similar context of ongoing, plague, drought, and famine, real

²⁵⁷ He repeats this at 40.26.6. Also, *Obsequens* 6.

²⁵⁸ Just as Livy (1.31.7) says the populace demanded of Hostilius during the plague and deprivations.

²⁵⁹ All other scholarly interpretations connecting the incident to the Scipiones, the Bacchic scandals, etc. are equally hypothetical.

²⁶⁰ In relation to lightning-conjuring, there is a repeating circumstantial pattern.

people, like Tullus in myth, may have turned to more superstitious, occult, or desperate solutions in attempt to placate the gods and alleviate their suffering.

What stands out is that Livy records the praetor who read Numa's newly discovered books observing in them that: *pleraque dissolvendarum religionum esse*. With the force of necessity in the gerundive *dissolvendarum*, Livy seems to be asserting what he believes and what the senate carries through: that much of the content was 'of religious observances to be abolished'.²⁶¹ In other words, the texts contained practices the senate *wanted* to eradicate, and whatever the historical reality of the books, the episode was a performative abolition of what they were said to contain.

Having incited the *ira Iovis* with his *prava religio*, Livy (1.31.8) states Tullus Hostilius was *fulmine ictum* alongside his entire household. He thus stood as a perennial warning to recipients of the myth who might be inclined to turn to Numa's occult lightning practices rather than marking a definitive end to them in the distant past. Tullus Hostilius was a mythological *exemplum* warning against any attempt to repeat Numa's practices, and the book-burning was a real-world enactment of that same warning.

Conclusion: The Hostilian Model of handling lightning

Tullus Hostilius has been shown to be no mere 'Salmonean trope' borrowed from Greek mythology but rather, in the Roman context, his myth is concerned with lightning in local beliefs, fears, and practices. If we read sympathetically, his fate clearly falls into that category of figures who are riding high one moment and struck low the next. The fact that

²⁶¹ Cf. Loeb translations: Yardley 'undermining' and Sage 'subversive of' religion.

Livy prefaces his downfall with the information that he and the capital itself were *in magna gloria magnisque opibus* sets up that sudden change in fortune for which lightning was both figuratively and literally so notorious. The fulminating resonance of the rain of stones and thunderous voice on the Alban Mount breathes through the *pestilentia* that falls upon Rome and culminates in the act of lightning-conjuring that Tullus resorts to in response.²⁶² Part of his punishment was deserved and self-inflicted; according to the narrative logic of lightning which seeks out and destroys overreaching individuals, his attempt to coerce Jupiter was impious in intent and, moreover, wrongly conducted and he was therefore duly punished. Part of his destruction, however, comes down to human weakness and fallibility in the face of misfortune and forces beyond mortal control.

His crime, of course, was trying to control what he could and should not. Whatever expiatory and sacrificial mistakes he made resound with that fragile bargain with the gods about what conditions human peace and stability rest upon. What distinguishes Tullus' story from Numa's, apart from its outcome, is the underlying message about the frailty and folly of mortal claims upon lightning. This is the main insight of the Hostilian model. Characterised by misappropriation, mishandling, and failure, this punitive model is concerned with the limits of human control. Whether arising out of ambition or desperation, the attempt to manhandle Jupiter's thunderbolt is shown to be ill-advised and met with swift retribution. Ultimately, and as a direct result of his behaviour, the legacy of Tullus Hostilius was to be Rome's archetypal victim of a self-inflicted lightning strike.²⁶³

²⁶² *Pestilentia*, breath, and lightning constitute a confluence familiar to the Roman *imaginaire*: e.g., Petronius, *Satyricon* (2.7). Cf. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 1.5, Plutarch, *Pericles* 8.3. Contra Mommsen (1889), Book IV, *Die Revolution* chapter 9, n.3., lightning strikes are evocative of the world of *invidia* and pestilential breath, e.g., Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 2.790-4). Also, Livy's *sidus pestifer* (8.9.10).

²⁶³ This constituted a very specific category, horrifying to Roman sensibilities. See Flashpoints 6 & 7.



Lightning and the Environmental Imagination in Rome's Founding Narratives

Across this trilogy of Rome's first kings, lightning is present in three distinct dynamics which provide a key to Rome's foundational narratives and beyond, in various permutations, to Rome's myth-historical identity: Romulus as *fulgurator* takes a passive, interpretative role awaiting lightning signs; Numa as *fulgurator* actively conjures them and bargains with divine epiphanies in bolts of lightning, while Tullus Hostilius as *fulguritum*, seeks to control lightning only to be struck by it.

Formulated into the three models I have presented, these clearly diverge not only in their respective approaches to lightning but also in the respective tensions each myth must navigate. Thus, for Romulus, the tension is fundamentally political, and lies in negotiating the balance between autocratic power and collective governance within the limits of sanctioned authority. For Numa the tension is largely one of ritual and lies between pious and *prava* religion, balancing, in particular, proper expiation and dangerous sacrifice. For Tullus Hostilius, who represents a collapse of both models, political and ritual, the tensions emerging from his misjudgement and mismanagement expose the limits of religious propriety and the boundaries of mortal power. Across all of these tensions, lightning flickers.

That lightning is drawn into Rome's configurations of kingship and political power is unsurprising in an environment so prone to impressive electrical storms. Close

correlations were naturally drawn between the behaviour of lightning and its perceived meaning. Because it aims for the highest places, lightning inevitably involved itself in the built environment of kings.²⁶⁴ From the splendid edifices they erected for worship and for living to the conceptual environment in which kings themselves sat in the most elevated positions, in both literal and metaphorical senses, anyone who elevated themselves above others in this way also stepped up as a potential target for lightning bolts. This is as true of kings in (legends of) the regal period as of the generals, politicians, and *principes* of republican and imperial Rome.²⁶⁵ In this regard, lightning seemed primarily to concern itself with superlatively powerful individuals.²⁶⁶

This correlation of lightning to power was further compounded by its correlation to justice. Here, morality and meteorology most conspicuously collide. Explanation of the moral purpose in striking the highest places had a long pedigree which Rome inherited from the Greek world averring that lightning came for those overreaching individuals who aimed above their mortal station. Most famous in Greek history, perhaps, is King Xerxes whose arrogant ambition was portrayed as bringing about his own downfall.²⁶⁷ In Herodotus' account, Xerxes' ambition is reprimanded with a warning about how lightning patrols the divine limitations set on *phusis*:

²⁶⁴ As the weapon of the king of the gods, its divine source was also regal.

²⁶⁵ The imperial case studies to follow will bear this out.

²⁶⁶ Juvenal's comment (*Saturae* 3.145-6) that thunderbolts were not the concern of the impoverished was true in so far as positions of political power were beyond their reach: *contemnere fulmina pauper creditur*. Juvenal, though, is rehashing the idea of the 'carefree pauper'.

²⁶⁷ König (2022) for a good ecocritical reading of Herodotus' account of Xerxes earthworks at the Hellespont. In Greek myth and cult, Aesculapius embodies this same message of mortal limits as a figure who both transgressed *phusis* and yet was divinised. He raised the dead and for this transgression was struck down by Zeus. Enraged, Apollo, Aesculapius' father, killed Zeus' sons, who forged thunderbolts, in retaliation. (e.g., Hesiod, *Catalogues of Women* Frag. 90; Ovid, *Fasti* 6.733-762; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 4.71.3; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.10.3-4). Ultimately, Aesculapius was deified so the lightning that struck him was ambiguous and double-edged. See, Piguet (2017).

ὄρᾱς τὰ ὑπερέχοντα ζῶα ὡς κεραυνοῖ ὁ θεὸς οὐδὲ ἑᾷ φαντάζεσθαι, τὰ δὲ
σμικρὰ οὐδὲν μιν κνίζει: ὄρᾱς δὲ ὡς ἐς οἰκήματα τὰ μέγιστα αἰεὶ καὶ
δένδρεα τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀποσκήπτει τὰ βέλεα: φιλέει γὰρ ὁ θεὸς τὰ
ὑπερέχοντα πάντα κολούειν.

You see that it is the surpassing creatures that are struck by thunderbolts;
the god does not allow them to exalt themselves whereas the little ones do
not provoke him. You see that it is always upon the loftiest dwellings and
trees that his bolts are hurled. For the god loves to bring down all
overreaching things.

(Herodotus, *Histories* 7.10E)

The very behaviour of lightning therefore reinforced the cultural expectation that it
would police the power and morality of rulers. Rome can be seen codifying this in its
foundational myths in which I have suggested lightning acts as a *speculum principum*.

Nevertheless, in these myths, lightning is not represented entirely as it was experienced:
it is not unpredictable and senseless. An important point to note from our first three
flashpoints is that there was no ambiguity surrounding mythological lightning. This was
because in the narrative medium, its purpose was explicit, the moral was clear, and the
divine will was known. Since lightning could be controlled narratively in this way and
made to act according to the expectations of prevailing worldviews, the way lightning
behaves in the myths of early Rome is indicative of how it was generally *supposed* to
behave. The accounts of lightning in the city's myth-history thus provide important
conceptual snapshots of lightning properly embedded and fully functioning in its cultural
framework.

Yet, while myth rendered lightning meteorologically compliant and morally
comprehensible, the real-world experience was always one of a force inherently untamed
and ungovernable that perpetually resisted the human desire for order and
predictability. Its meaning was always a matter of interpretation not fact. In the three
models we have derived from these mythical encounters, lightning has been seen to

perform many functions: it endorses and legitimates or punishes and nullifies, it admonishes, it kills, and occasionally it divinises. This is a broad spectrum. Although a narrator was able to explain that one thunderbolt was hurled in exuberant confirmation whereas another was hurled in anger, to an observer it would be impossible to know whether the flashing in the sky signified ratification or ruination. Similarly, although it is ostensibly the same death, Romulus achieves apotheosis via the thunderbolt while Tullus Hostilius is ignominiously fried to a crisp. Such ambiguity in meaning and message is, of course, the basis for the fulgural experts and diviners we will soon encounter in our historical flashpoints. It is also the basis for all the confusion, chaos, and anxiety surrounding historical encounters with lightning. By assigning lightning meaning and even giving it agency in human affairs, an inevitable tension was set up between two registers of lightning: the 'lightning of the world' and the 'lightning of the mind'. Myth thereby mapped onto lived realities in palpable if misleading ways. The dissonance between the two is a fault line that runs through the rest of this thesis as I will argue it did through Roman history.

In the real and meteorologically noncompliant world, a heavenly mandate meted out in divine flashes was an inherently problematic narrative. These ideas about how lightning ought to behave had no bearing on what lightning actually did. By turning to lightning as its ultimate theophanic adjudicator, Roman society had, in fact, settled on one of nature's most tempestuous and capricious elemental forces as its source of guidance, legitimation, and justice. In that imagined environment in which the machinations of government turned, the risk and uncertainty lightning entailed carried with it both danger and opportunity. Moving forward into the historical contours of that precarious landscape, the models provided by Rome's first three kings will act as reference points by which to

gauge the handling of lightning at various levels: as a society *en masse*, by specific special interest groups, and by ambitious, overweening individuals. The mythical *exempla* of *fulgurator*, *fulguriator*, and *fulguratum* will help anchor and orient us, as they did for ancient Romans, in the chaos of historical thunder and lightning bolts to which we now turn.

part two

Republican Case Studies



Flashpoint Four

Summanus Loses his Head

fulminating deities & Rome's religious firmament

In 278 BCE a bolt of lightning struck the Capitoline temple. It hit a statue on the roof and blasted its head clean off. The incident is recounted by Cicero (*De Divinatione* 1.10) who has his brother Quintus recount the strange events that followed. The head seems to have been a matter of some importance because, since it could not be found, the haruspices were called to the scene to help. They predicted that the head was to be found in the Tiber. Despite the seeming unlikelihood that it could be jettisoned so far, that is, we are told, where the head was recovered – in precisely the spot (*eo loco*) the haruspices had said it would be.

The first of our historical flashpoints thus begins with a beheading, albeit of a statue, but a statue, nonetheless, of a god. That god was Summanus. Who he was and what he represented are questions at the heart of this chapter. By simply posing these questions and by paying more attention to both ancient and modern responses than is habitual, we are led into conceptual territory that problematises Rome's terrain of divine fulminations from the very top. Summanus provides a useful case study to unsettle common assumptions about the world of Roman lightning. He points to a messier and more complex reality than is generally supposed. This is important to establish as we move beyond mythical *exempla* into ancient questions about how to handle lightning in the real world because so much historical behaviour was predicated on the many uncertainties

by which lightning confronted society and on the many perceived risks inherent in acting in those uncertain circumstances. What Summanus and other deities like him will show is that these risks and uncertainties ran deeper even than ascertaining what lightning meant or what was to be done about it. He represents a subcurrent of anxiety about to whom, precisely, Rome's thunderbolt belonged.

Jupiter as the king of the Roman pantheon and the god of empire *par excellence* is the obvious claimant and Jupiter certainly became and remained Rome's pre-eminent thunderer. As a narrative and theological veneer, Jupiter's dominance, even exclusivity, in the realm of lightning is undisputed. Yet, in practice, this vision becomes less tidy, less consistent, and less settled than we may be led to believe. The chapter ahead does not seek to deny the obvious Jupiter-centrism of Roman thunderbolts but rather to complicate it by showing that there was a range of other divinely fulminating gods clustering around that centre and to show that, where lightning was involved, this variety was part of a billowing cloud of anxieties looming in Rome's religious firmament. Accordingly, we must push the question of identity upon the god of the Capitoline a little more than is habitual because the statue which lost his head up there in 278 BCE was of no minor deity: Summanus, too, was a powerful, thunderbolt-hurling storm god.

Summanus: *quisquis is est*

We have already encountered Summanus briefly on the Aventine where the presence of his temple was noted as part of that hill's lightning-suffused landscape. This Aventine temple is directly related to Jupiter's temple, and to the current flashpoint, historically and topographically because it is generally thought to have been dedicated after the

statue on the Capitoline rooftop was struck by lightning.²⁶⁸ Since Summanus thereby lost his head, the new Aventine temple is thought to have been dedicated to him in response. This immediately raises questions about who Summanus was at that moment, what he represented, and what sort of trajectory his worship was on. Having left the tidier realm of myth behind, the 278 BCE strike thus launches us *in medias res* into the real world of lightning in Rome in the early third century.

The incident is notable for being the first appearance in the extant literature of the haruspices being called upon and acting in an official capacity at Rome.²⁶⁹ In the dialectic context of Cicero's *De Divinatione* (1.10), Quintus recounts the remarkable accuracy of their advice in order to support his argument for the truth and reliability of divination. What impressed him was the reliability of the diviner's knowledge and the accuracy of this particular prediction. Quintus only briefly refers to the episode suggesting it was a well-known point of reference. He is not concerned with what happened to the head once it was recovered nor is he interested in anything else the haruspices prognosticated. Crucial for his argument is simply that the haruspices were right.²⁷⁰ Crucial for the current argument, however, is that Quintus/Cicero was apparently indifferent to the fact that it was a statue of Summanus that was struck. Underlying this is a casual familiarity that seems equally expected of the audience. This is our foothold into re-evaluating the world of Summanus because familiarity is not what the scholarly *communis opinio* of this deity would have us expect.

²⁶⁸ Ovid, *Fasti* 6.731-2; Pliny, *HN* 29.57. Platner & Ashby (1929), 502.

²⁶⁹ See, MacBain (1982), 47.

²⁷⁰ Divination itself is the subject of the next chapter.

Since he is poorly known to modern scholarship, it has become a commonplace in the secondary literature to assign Summanus also to obscurity in Roman culture. This position, which I want to contest, is reinforced because, of the handful of literary sources that mention him, two are always understood as direct expressions of his unknown and enigmatic nature. Most damning to modern appraisals of his importance in the Roman pantheon is Ovid:

*Reddita, quisquis is est, Summano templa feruntur,
tum, cum Romanis, Pyrrhe, timendus eras.*

They say a temple was granted to Summanus, whoever he may be,
back when you, Pyrrhus, were feared by the Romans.

(*Fasti* 6.731-2)

This is invariably taken to mean Ovid had no real idea who Summanus was and that this was indeed an obscure, archaic deity.²⁷¹ The second comment which has been so damning to Summanus' memory occurs in a passage which comes, it is assumed, from Varro as quoted by Augustine. This is a direct statement of a diminution in the importance of Summanus over time:

*Romani veteres nescio quem Summanum, cui nocturna fulmina tribuebant,
coluerunt magis quam Iovem, ad quem diurna fulmina pertinerent. Sed
postquam Iovi templum insigne ac sublime constructum est, propter aedis
dignitatem sic ad eum multitudo confluit, ut vix inveniatur qui Summani
nomen, quod audire iam non potest, se saltem legisse meminerit*

The ancient Romans worshipped someone or other called Summanus, to whom they attributed night-time thunderbolts, more than Jupiter, to whom daytime thunderbolts belonged. However, after a splendid and lofty temple was built for Jupiter, the crowd flocked to him because of the temple's grandeur so that hardly anyone is found who remembers at least having read the name of Summanus, which now cannot even be heard.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Discussed below.

²⁷² Varro, *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum* 1 fr. 42 C. = Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 4.23.

By stressing a change in the deity's status, juxtaposing the *Romani veteres* with those of his own day, Varro is true to his self-proclaimed mission of writing this work in attempt to save Rome's ancient gods from oblivion.²⁷³ A Summanus vanishing from the edge of remembrance suits that objective. Equally, the folly of the crowd abandoning one previously popular deity for another with a better temple also suits Augustine's purposes of undermining the city's pre-Christian past.²⁷⁴ However, to what extent is it sensible to accept these statements at face-value? Given that we know Varro's enterprise was one of organising and canonising Roman religion, just as Ovid's was of sanitising it for the Augustan period,²⁷⁵ and Augustine's, where Rome's traditional religion was concerned, was of composing a Christian work of ridicule, recontextualization, and polemic, to what extent should we assume their asides about Summanus reflected reality?

In fact, Varro knew who Summanus was - or at least, as he states, he knew that he was a Roman god of nocturnal thunderbolts. Festus, in the second century, also states plainly this point which has become so axiomatic to repeat about Summanus: that he was the deity in charge of night lightning whereas Jupiter was in charge of lightning by day.²⁷⁶ Yet, this formulation, so routinely repeated in scholarship, entirely compromises Jupiter's supremacy. It implies a shared control of lightning - and therefore power - which is an

²⁷³ To what extent Varro was earnest in his mission to preserve Rome's ancient beliefs is itself open to debate. In writing an antiquarian work against which to set contemporary Roman religion, he was, in fact, engaged in an act of defining and formulating contemporary religion. The distinctions he draws are not innocent and his work is arguably therefore as much an act of creation as preservation. See, Rüpke (2014); Rolle (2022).

²⁷⁴ On Augustine's authorial intentions generally, Toom (2013); attitudes towards 'paganism' Irwin (2000); Dupont (2013).

²⁷⁵ Not straightforwardly, however. Just as Wallace-Hadrill (1987) revealed Ovid's *Fasti* to effectively rewrite time to incorporate Augustus and his reforms but in ambiguous ways that belied tensions, we will see similarly ambiguous attitudes in his deference to Augustus' thunderbolt in Flashpoint 9.

²⁷⁶ (254L), *Itaque Iovi Fulguri et Summano fit quod diurna Iovis, Nocturna Summani Fulgura habentur.*

exceedingly un-Olympian idea and not something we might expect in our received vision of Jupiter's Rome. The idea that there was an imbalance in this relationship and that Summanus was once more exalted than Jupiter is even more astonishing. It is less surprising from a Christian Roman like Augustine who wanted to detract from 'pagan' religion but for Varro, who was in the process of formulating it, this is a statement worth taking seriously.²⁷⁷ To say *nescio quem* Summanus while claiming the god had once been more powerful than Jupiter, credits enormous significance to Summanus even if in the same breath Varro undermines him. This sharing of Rome's thunderbolt in shifts is no comfortable conclusion if we want to relegate Summanus to obscurity.

Pliny the Elder's comment on the topic only reinforces his centrality. Pliny (2.53) is generally tacked onto modern glosses on Summanus to buttress the diurnal/nocturnal dichotomy. While explaining the nine fulminating deities of the Etruscan pantheon, he writes:

Tuscorum litterae novem deos emittere fulmina existimant, eaque esse undecim generum, Iovem enim trina iaculari. Romani duo tantum ex iis servavere, diurna attribuentes Iovi, nocturna Summano, rariora sane eadem de causa frigidioris caeli.

The Etruscan writers believe that nine gods hurl thunderbolts, and those are of eleven types: indeed, Jupiter hurls three kinds. The Romans have preserved only two of these gods, attributing daytime thunderbolts to Jupiter, and night-time thunderbolts to Summanus – certainly, these are rarer because of the colder sky.

This repetition of the idea that Summanus was a Roman deity of night lightning does nothing to further the argument that Summanus was obscure and insignificant. To the contrary, here is a writer in the latter half of the first century CE, still attributing night lightning to Summanus rather than Jupiter. Crucially, he does this in reference to the

²⁷⁷ Volk (2019:201-2) finds Varro 'wistful' about this change. He seems to me, disingenuous.

present.²⁷⁸ There is nothing to suggest Pliny is referring to a bygone belief. Moreover, he is referring to a *Roman* belief.²⁷⁹ The passage is often cited in discussions of Summanus' origins when debating whether or not Summanus belonged in the Etruscan pantheon. Pliny seems confident that he did, but Varro, despite professing not to know who he was, also knew enough to assert that he was a Sabine deity. Varro lists him among the gods introduced to Rome by Titus Tatius, Romulus' Sabine co-ruler, at the very founding of the city.²⁸⁰ Regardless of origins, however, the largely overlooked point Pliny is making is that this is a deity that became, and remained to his day, part of the Roman pantheon: one who shared the thunderbolt with Jupiter, no less. This must have been an unproblematic statement for a contemporary audience, which makes it problematic to the idea that nobody remembered who Summanus was.

It is also problematic to Jupiter's role in the world of Roman lightning. Perhaps for this reason, we might sense in Pliny a desire to downplay the presence of a nocturnal Summanus. Pliny, too, seems to attempt to subordinate his relative importance to Jupiter, but not through chronology, like Varro, but meteorology: his comment that night lightning is *rariora* seems to slant the balance of power in Jupiter's favour. The insinuation would be that Jupiter is the more active and therefore the more important deity. Yet, the comment is complicated even by common experience. While Pliny is right that summer lightning is most common in the late afternoon (due to convections and surface heating),

²⁷⁸ 'have preserved', *servavere*, contracted perfect tense (i.e., with bearing on the present) & 'attributing', *attribuentes*, present active participle.

²⁷⁹ Capdeville (1989: 1174) incorrectly interprets Pliny as asserting: '*Rome ne reconnaisse que deux dieux fulgurants suffit apparemment à assurer que toute attribution de foudre à une autre divinité ne peut être qu'une croyance étrusque*'. Rather, he is asserting that Rome only maintained two of the nine Etruscan fulminating deities. There were plenty of other non-Etruscan fulminating deities in Rome (see below). Capdeville's larger point is that Pliny's nine fulminating Etruscan deities is a misunderstanding based in part on a misinterpretation of the *dii Novensiles*.

²⁸⁰ Varro, *Lingua Latina* 5.74.

night lightning is often associated with large, elevated storm systems that form at higher altitudes and are sustained by upper atmospheric moisture and wind flows, rather than surface heating.²⁸¹ As a result, these storms tend to produce lightning that spans greater areas, persists for longer durations, and occurs at greater altitudes as compared to typical daytime convections.²⁸² Therefore, alongside the more impressive visual contrast in flashing out of the darkness, night lightning tends to put on a more sustained and powerful spectacle. Anyone who has spent summers in Rome can attest that these nocturnal displays are dramatic and are not, as Pliny suggests, rare.²⁸³

Writing roughly contemporaneously with Varro, Lucretius was also clearly aware of both the god and his nocturnal associations. He creates an adjective of his name, *summania*, which is dropped without expansion in his mechanistic explanation of the movement of the celestial bodies (5.521). Lucretius is explaining why the stars move although the heavens are static. He makes a few suggestions including that there may be ‘swift tides of ether’ that are locked in and rolling about in the sky searching for an escape: *et ignes passim per caeli volvunt summania templa*. He then moves on with other suggestions. Gale, in her commentary, identifies Summanus, as usual, as ‘an obscure deity’ and sees the name occurring here as if in inverted commas to highlight the contrast between the scientific phenomena Lucretius describes and popular superstitious thinking surrounding them.²⁸⁴ She explains Lucretius’ intention here as elsewhere is to demythologise the natural world. Why not, then, if it was the prevalent view, simply

²⁸¹ ‘Elevated thunderstorms’, Coleman (1990); Grant (1995); Houze (2018). Especially, mesoscale convective systems: on characteristics, Schumacher & Rasmussen (2020); nocturnal peaks, Da Silva & Haerter (2023:2).

²⁸² In terms of electrical voltage or actual power there is little difference.

²⁸³ There have been two spectacular night storms in Rome this August as I work on this chapter, one of which sent lightning strokes for hours.

²⁸⁴ Gale (2008), 146. Cf. Fratantuono (2015:341-2).

characterise the night sky as Jovian?²⁸⁵ It would suit his didactic purpose if the name was well-known and readily understandable. Yet, ‘fires rolling everywhere in the night sky’ might, indeed, conjure visions of Summanus and as intended, this mechanistic explanation might somewhat diminish fear of his night-lightning.²⁸⁶

The aggregate of all these literary attestations is that Summanus was repeatedly asserted to be a shadowy, nocturnal counterpart to Jupiter and night lightning was attributed to him. Moreover, just as Lucretius and Cicero reference Summanus with casual familiarity, so Pliny includes him in the weft of contemporary religious practice similarly assuming audience familiarity. In fact, besides Ovid, Varro, and Augustine there seems little to indicate that this was, in any period, an obscure deity. Plautus (*Bacchides* 892-895), for example, writing in the latter half of the third century BCE, names Summanus among a familiar list of venerable Roman gods; one character swearing an oath, swears by Jupiter, Juno, Ceres, Minerva, Latona, Spes, Ops, Virtus, Venus, Castor, Pollux, Mars, Mercury, Hercules, Summanus, Sol, Saturn, and ‘all the gods’ (*dique omnes*). That this is comedy, and the list is laughably long need not worry us here since the list comprises Rome’s most conspicuous and respectable deities.²⁸⁷ It is not a list of comically obscure gods among whom Summanus is situated.²⁸⁸ Furthermore, he is named in the list without a hint of incongruity though he could easily have been tossed into the residual category of ‘all the

²⁸⁵ As he does, for the day sky, e.g., at 6.379-422 when mocking the idea of the thunderbolt as Jupiter’s weapon. Cf. Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* 5.12.5-8), Diespiter, ‘*appellatus, id est diei et lucis pater*’ and Diovis and Lucetius because ‘*nos die et luce ... iuaret*’.

²⁸⁶ The *summania templa* of the sky might be strata rather than regions. As explained above, night lightning sometimes does occur at greater altitudes than its day counterpart but due to visibility and cooler temperatures in any case often appears to. This may be a simple and overlooked explanation of his name ‘most high’ observed in nature as he seems to thunder from the highest heavens. (Standard explanations of his name discussed *passim* below).

²⁸⁷ Clark (2007:77), Plautus needed to be ‘topical’ for a Roman audience.

²⁸⁸ He is the butt of the joke in Plautus’ *Curculio*, where Summanus is an alias for a one-eyed conman, who gives a comic etymology of the name (about wetting himself when he sleeps at night in a drunken stupor). See, Geller-Goad (2021:43).

gods' if he were unimportant or out of place in the main list. Summanus' Aventine temple was built only a couple of decades before Plautus was born and there is no reason to suspect that the recipient of such a new temple had already faded from memory.²⁸⁹ Indeed, Ovid, himself, two centuries later, informs us that the *natalis* for Summanus' Aventine temple was June 20th. The very fact of its inclusion in the *Fasti* (6.729-732) with Summanus receiving, moreover, an entry to himself in the work should alert us to the continuing presence of the deity in the city and in the rhythms of its festival calendar.

Jumping all the way forward to the second century CE, we find Festus (474.17 L) describing the same public celebrations of Summanus' feast day which Ovid had also recorded. He tells us festivities included wheel-shaped cakes called '*summanalia*'.²⁹⁰ Epigraphic evidence also reveals that sacrifices to Summanus involved black animals.²⁹¹ Again, a deity for whom animals are slaughtered, cakes are made, and a festival is celebrated yearly cannot be considered a forgotten deity. Nor was Summanus sequestered away. Located near the *carceres* of the Circus Maximus, his temple occupied a highly visible site in a busy and popular part of the city.²⁹² The location of the temple by the thundering chariots of the circus perhaps had some resonance in those wheeled-shaped cakes. In any case, this is not insignificant activity surrounding a god whose name everyone has supposedly forgotten.

²⁸⁹ I wonder the one-eyed conman 'Summanus' whose disguise is a comedic eye-patch references the stricken statue head of Summanus, which may afterwards have had a damaged eye. On Curculio's eyepatch, see Marshall, (2006:152-3). Marshall, too, calls Summanus 'an obscure god'.

²⁹⁰ '*liba farnacea in modum rotae ficta*'.

²⁹¹ *CIL* vi.2107, 2-13. See Beard et al. (1998), 151-2. This is part of a series of sacrifices made by the Arval Brothers after lightning struck and destroyed trees in the grove of Dea Dia. Note: Jupiter receives rams while Summanus receives black rams reinforcing that same contrast.

²⁹² Platner & Ashby (1929), 502.

As a god in control of nocturnal lightning, we are already in fearsome terrain, but the black sacrificial animals mentioned above suggest, moreover, that Summanus was a chthonic deity. This moves him into a blacker realm than simply night itself. The remit of the god of night lightning seems to have extended to dark, subterranean forces.²⁹³ Underworld connotations ripple through the various, fragmentary evidence for his cult.²⁹⁴ It seemed to some intrinsic to his very name. One fifth-century etymology, for example, recorded by the polymath Martianus Capella (*De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* 2.161) parsed it as *summus Manium*, meaning ‘the greatest of the Manes’, a designation that imbues Summanus with dominion over the ancestral dead. Martianus Capella, in fact, clearly thought his remit included the spirits of the dead. He states explicitly that Summanus was an alternative name for the sovereign of the underworld, Pluto: *qui etiam Summanus dicitur quasi summus Manium*. He also includes the peculiar plural ‘Summanes’ in a group of infernal deities (Mana, Mantuona, and Mater Mania, Fura and Furina, and Intemperiae) to whom, with an interesting and not irrelevant meteorological slant, Capella refers as gods called the ‘dark’ or ‘wintry’ north winds (*aquilos dicunt*), generally associated with stormy, dangerous weather (2.164).

This late antique impression of a cold and blustery underworld Summanus might be deemed an anachronistic Christian misunderstanding, but it does find another Christian parallel in Arnobius’ over a century earlier.²⁹⁵ In his apologetic *Adversus Nationes* (5.37.1), Arnobius also straightforwardly designates Summanus a Plutonian role. As with Capella,

²⁹³ Zavaroni (2013) sees Summanus presiding over dark, subterranean waters.

²⁹⁴ Contra Wissowa (1912:135), who argued emphatically that Summanus did not have chthonic connections and deems these ideas a corruption of the god’s original celestial character. He brings no evidence to this assertion, however, except that it fits his vision of Summanus as a hypostasis of Jupiter (p.53-54). Hypostasis discussed below.

²⁹⁵ On dating Arnobius, Edwards (2016).

this is the more telling for being an incidental reference. In criticising allegorical interpretations of classical myths, he turns to the abduction of Proserpina as an example where he names not Pluto or Hades bursting out of the earth on his chariot, but Summanus. It is Summanus who seizes the girl while picking flowers and bears her down into the earth. Arnobius takes no issue with the myth in its simple telling; everybody knows what a girl and a flower is, he states, and Summanus bursting from the ground in a chariot is 'equally simple and straightforward' (*simplex et hoc aeque est*), he says, because 'a chariot and Summanus require no interpretation' (*currus atque Summanus interpretationem desiderant nullam*). He goes on to criticise the trend of allegorical readings, which in Proserpina's case includes agricultural symbolism about burying seeds and which, generally, make myths about topics other than the stories themselves purport. What stands out for the current argument is, again, his familiarity with Summanus; the very presence of the god, first and foremost, but also the casual certainty with which Arnobius makes this prominent underworld identification. The fact that he assumes his readers are also perfectly cognisant of what Summanus and his chariot represent (even stating that these need *nullam interpretationem*) strongly suggests an ongoing presence and cultural relevance. This, too, stands in direct opposition to statements such as '*nescio quem*' and '*quisquis is est*'.

Is it problematic that these are Christian commentators? Perhaps. Certainly, we are not receiving this information from unbiased sources who understood the cult sympathetically from an insider's perspective. Yet, the fact that references are peripheral to the point being made and, again, assume audience familiarity at least supports the immediate point that Summanus was neither forgotten nor obscure, even in later periods. He was clearly still in the cultural *Zeitgeist*. It is also interesting that the imagery evoked

is of Summanus *and* his chariot, which recalls once more the location of the Aventine temple next to the circus, near the *carceres*, and the wheel-shaped cakes. This combined with his night-thundering and chthonic aspects evidently bestowed powerful underworld associations that put him in a position to be mistaken for, if not conflated with, Pluto.

Whoever he was, then, Summanus' nocturnal association with lightning clearly evoked darkness, danger, and death. This would in itself justify a wariness of the god and perhaps explains the apparent aversion to him. If elements of Summanus and his cult were somehow undesirable, there may have been something about him from which people would have *liked* to distance themselves. Perhaps, like the clucking of tongues to ward off lightning strikes, there might even be something apotropaic in those disclaimers accompanying mentions of his name. Ovid's *quisquis is est* might otherwise be understood as dismissive rather than confused. Tacking 'whoever he is' onto someone's name is a distancing technique that could easily sound contemptuous.²⁹⁶ Likewise, Varro's *nescio quem Summanum* easily reads as offhand if not derisive. Such attitudes might have informed Pliny's downplaying of the relative power of nocturnal lightning. Feigned ignorance expressed by these authors may have been misinterpreted and distaste or aversion mistaken for genuine confusion.

Finally, however, and most significantly, similar phrases act as disclaimers or waivers in both Greek and Roman prayers more generally. In the context of polytheism, a pantheon

²⁹⁶ Ovid, indeed, uses the phrase elsewhere and scholarly discussions elsewhere do consider whether contempt or ignorance is implied in those cases. In *Heroides* (13.65), it clearly denotes ignorance (about Hector's identity). However, in *Metamorphoses* (13.467-9), Polyxena, also refers to Achilles, to whom she will be sacrificed, with *quisquis is est*. Bömer (1982) views this as contempt for Achilles. Hopkinson (2000), however, finds it possible that Polyxena did not know the Greek hero. Curley (2013) finds this unlikely, reading the phrase instead as a refusal to recognise him, thus imitating (via Ovid's ruse), Iphigenia's inability to do so on the brink of her own sacrifice (Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis* 1338).

of gods always posed the problem of deciding which one was implicated and choosing which one to propitiate at any given moment.²⁹⁷ These phrases, which Versnel calls 'hesitative and dubitative formulas' allow other deities to be addressed or not be left out accidentally. As Versnel explains:

'Zeus, or by what (other) name you wish to be invoked;' "listen to me, lord, whoever you may be;" "whichever god it may be that lives in this place;" "whether god or goddess:" these are some common expressions of doubt in Graeco-Roman antiquity.²⁹⁸

Such phrases allay concerns about naming a deity incorrectly or naming the wrong deity or not including other necessary but unknown deities.²⁹⁹ If *nescio quem* and *quisquis is es* fall into this pattern, as seems reasonable, then the entire question of Summanus' obscurity based on these two seeming asides has no basis and dissolves.

Overall, then, it does not seem correct to diminish and side-line Summanus' presence and relevance in Rome. The balance of evidence does not support it. Moreover, the idea that Summanus had faded from Roman culture and memory can be challenged further if we turn from literature to archaeology. In the material record, we find Summanus implicated in the ritual world of Roman lightning in palpable ways which testify to his real-world presence and ongoing significance beyond elite, literary posturing. This is because Summanus played a significant role in the custom of burying lightning and the creation of bidentals.

²⁹⁷ A problem discussed below and in the next chapter. I am grateful to Peter Thonemann and Greg Woolf for drawing the larger context of prayer formulae to my attention.

²⁹⁸ Versnel (2011:37-60), quotations pp.49-50. See his footnote 92 for bibliography on the phenomenon.

²⁹⁹ Hickson (1993:39-43) discusses how Roman prayers and invocations dealt with this uncertainty in Latin. Bömer (1957-58) sees Ovid simply retaining the prayer formula at *Fasti* 6.731.

The Evidence on the Ground

Being divine in origin, lightning turned any stricken place into the locus of existential encounter. In its aftermath, according to Varro (*De Lingua Latina* 5.70) that which was struck by a thunderbolt was called a *'fulguritum'*: *fulguritum id quod est fulmine ictum*. A couple of centuries later, Festus (253 L) quoted this adding that such a place was believed to have become instantly *'religiosus'* because it seemed that the god had claimed it for himself.³⁰⁰ The spot and any associated rubble and debris was therefore not *sacer*, 'sacred', as in dedicated to the gods by people; rather, directly claimed by the gods, *religiosus* meant that it was removed from human remit and thus taboo.³⁰¹ The *bidental* and the associated *puteal* were the primary manner by which Roman society navigated this sanction in the built environment.³⁰² Ancient writers tell us repeatedly that anything scorched or burned by lightning was not to be touched or stepped upon nor even, according to some sources, to be looked at.³⁰³ Ashes and rubble were carefully swept up by officiating priests and ceremonially buried.³⁰⁴ The ritual itself was one of expiation in which affected material was removed from sight, touch, and circulation in the human realm by burying it in the ground in a stone pit and sealing it off with stone slabs.³⁰⁵ The resultant site and structure was known as a *bidental*.³⁰⁶ It was considered a place of 'buried lightning'.

³⁰⁰ *qui locus statim fieri putabatur religiosus, quod eum deus sibi dicasse videretur*. Festus also notes that trees hit by thunderbolts were called *arbores fanatici* (92 M), see below.

³⁰¹ E.g., Gaius, *Institutes* 2.1-10 on the division of things into two classes subject either to divine or human right. See Watson (1992:56-57), for the legal implications of *res sacrae* and *res religiosae*. Rüpke (2007:9-10) on the terminology more generally.

³⁰² For discussion on the distinction, see Strachan (2026b).

³⁰³ See Flashpoint 7. Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 5.70; Ovid, *Tristia* 3.5.1.; Pliny, *Natural History* 2.145; Quintilian *Declamationes Minores* 274; Plutarch *Quaestiones Conviviales* 4.2.3.665; Ammianus Marcellinus 23.13; Festus s.v. *occisum*.

³⁰⁴ Juvenal, *Saturae* 6.587; Quintilian, *Declamationes Minores* 274; Lucan, *Bellum Civile* 1.606-8; Sidonius, *Carmina*, 10.191-3.

³⁰⁵ Apuleius (*De Deo Socratis* 7) calls the ritual a *piaculum*. Cf. Ovid, *Fasti* 3.277-374; Plutarch, *Numa* 15.

³⁰⁶ So-called, allegedly, because the sacrificial victim was of an age to have only two teeth protruding, e.g., Festus (33M). The scholiast Ps. Acro (Horace, *Ars Poetica* 471) discounts this explanation. Nigidius Figulus (in Nonius Marcellus, *De Compendiosa Doctrina* 75 (ed. Lindsay) states that the name refers instead to two sacrificial animals. Cf. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 6.9.5. See also Thulin (1906:92); Cook (1914:805-6); Turfa (2012:59-60).

The pit was submerged below ground, but part of the stone structure was left protruding above. This was marked with plaque bearing a formulaic, often abbreviated inscription alerting passers-by to the fact that 'lightning' was buried here.³⁰⁷ The formula varies slightly in terms of how abbreviated it is: sometimes the inscription simply reads 'fulgur'; sometimes it reads '*fulgur conditum*', which may be abbreviated to F.C.; and sometimes, it comprises three words, often reduced to three letters, which are, in varying combinations F.C.D. or F.C.S. These latter inscriptions are particularly interesting because the additional information supplied by the third word is the deity held responsible for sending the lightning bolt. F.C.D. is some form of *fulgur conditum di(v)um*; F.C.S. is *fulgur conditum Summanium* and is explicit about the deity involved.³⁰⁸

Broadly, there were therefore two possibilities for the divine origin of 'buried' lightning. By the turn of the twentieth century, the axiomatic distinction between Jupiter and Summanus was already the standard explanation distinguishing the two deities indicated on bidental inscriptions. The *Revue Épigraphique* of 1901 describes a plaque from Montbazin, France reading FVLGVR DIVOM and notes: '*c'est la foudre de jour, celle de Jupiter; la foudre de nuit, que l'on attribuait à Summanus, se nommait, pour cette cause, fulgur Summanum*'.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Van Andringa (2021) on the phenomenon

³⁰⁸ Five dedications to Summanus have been found in Rome alone: EDR114978 (Fulgur/Sum./condit.); EDR115876 (F.S.C.); EDR115877 (F.C.S.); EDR119315 (Summanium Fulgur/conditum); EDR161310 (Fulgur/Summani.).

³⁰⁹ Inscription 1437: *sur un lieu frappé de la foudre*.

A couple of rare inscriptions do mention Jupiter-Summanus, which muddies the waters somewhat.³¹⁰ These two inscriptions are the standard evidence supplied to assert that Summanus was merely an epithet of Jupiter.³¹¹ They are outliers, however, and this assertion requires overlooking entirely that all other *bidentalìa* inscriptions refer to one or the other deity but not both. Schilling offers the simple solution: '*Encore réservait-on les cas où la distinction entre les deux n'apparaissait pas clairement, la prudence recommandant alors de s'adresser à la fois à Iuppiter et à Summanus*'.³¹² Indeed, Festus (254L) names '*provorsum fulgur*' as lightning about which it is 'unknown whether it occurs by night or by day'. In such cases, Festus explains it is assigned to both Jupiter Fulgur and Summanus.³¹³

Therefore, what we see across these inscriptions is care taken over the day/night dichotomy: the sharing of the thunderbolt put into effect in practiced religion and ritual. Moreover, we see Summanus as a deity acknowledged in these permanently visible and immovable markers which anchored him inviolably in the physical landscape. Clearly, chronology is important, but unfortunately, the dating of *bidentalìa* is notoriously difficult. Many of the inscribed plaques were long-since removed from their findspots by antiquarian collectors. Nevertheless, they are generally dated within a range between the first centuries BCE and CE.³¹⁴ In other words, at precisely the time Ovid claims ignorance

³¹⁰ An altar near Verona (*CIL* V, 3256: *Iovi Summano*) and an inscription from Barzano near Lake Como (*CIL* V, 5660: *Iovi Atto Summano*). *Attus* is thought to mean 'father' locally. See, Zavroni (2006), 299.

³¹¹ See below.

³¹² Shilling (1974), 686. Roman responses were nothing if not cautious and inclined to cover all bases (see Flashpoint 5).

³¹³ Festus (254L): '*Provorsum fulgur appellatur, quod ignoratur noctu an interdiu sit factum. Itaque Iovi Fulguri et Summano fit*'.

³¹⁴ That is the range on the *Epigraphic Database Roma* (EDR) for example, though the dates can only be approximate.

of Summanus and Varro claims his name was barely remembered and *nowhere to be read*.³¹⁵

The geographical spread of these inscriptions is also important to note. Bidentals have been discovered in both public and private situations across the Italian peninsula: in Ostia,³¹⁶ Pompeii,³¹⁷ Todi,³¹⁸ and Minturno,³¹⁹ as well as in provinces such as Britain,³²⁰ Gaul,³²¹ Dacia³²² and even Numidia and Mauretania where lightning is quite rare.³²³ A preponderance of bidentals cluster in south-east of France, among which Summanus is attested.³²⁴ A number of Summanus inscriptions also come from Rome itself (fig.17).³²⁵ This relatively wide geographical spread is surely evidence to the contrary, again that Summanus was not so very obscure.

It must be said that of the numerous bidental plaques recorded, the proportion that name Summanus is a small minority.³²⁶ Known examples are accidents of survival, of course, and what is extant is not necessarily representative of the real proportionate balance of inscriptions made. Yet, even as a minority, what they do compellingly provide is evidence of real historical lightning strikes attributed to Summanus by the people affected and a

³¹⁵ As above: Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 4.23.

³¹⁶ Van der Meer (2005)

³¹⁷ Maiuri (1941); Van Andringa et al. (2010)

³¹⁸ Manconi & Spiganti (2017).

³¹⁹ Degrassi (1971).

³²⁰ Tomlin (1986).

³²¹ Rémy (1993); Heijmans & Rémy (1999); Burnelli (2004); Frei-Stolba & Morel (1999).

³²² Szabó (2018), 41; Carbó García (2022).

³²³ Khanoussi & Maurin (2000:348); Le Glay (1959).

³²⁴ Perhaps a syncretic practice (Laubry, 2016). Summanus may have resonated with inhabitants of that region as Taranis was the local storm god whose iconic wheel represented, among other things, the thundering clatter overhead (Green, 1984). Taranis was sometimes equated with the Etruscan storm god, Tinia, who was himself equated with Jupiter.

³²⁵ n.303 above. Barbera et al (2008).

³²⁶ Roughly a tenth by my count. The evidence needs to be collected and studied properly.

lasting presence in the material record that, despite Varro, was intended to be read in perpetuity.

Let Summanus Be

At this juncture, I will stop making the case against Summanus' obscurity. It has been necessary to labour this somewhat in order to push back against the received wisdom, which is so ingrained it goes largely unexamined. If the point may be considered sufficiently made, the larger, more pressing question is what his presence and role as night-thunderer does to Rome's religious landscape of lightning. For this, we can return to 278 BCE and the lightning strike on Jupiter's Capitoline temple.

The historicity of the event may be taken at face-value at least in terms of the strike itself. While the haruspices and their specific and accurate prognostications about the missing head may seem unlikely, there is nothing improbable about the beheading of a statue by lightning.³²⁷ This can happen and, indeed, continues to happen as is well illustrated by the recent decapitation of a statue of Our Lady of Fatima atop Laventille's Marian Shrine in Trinidad and Tobago. The eerie effect of the blackened headless statue produced a flurry of newspaper articles tellingly recording the anxious moralising of locals who interpreted the mishap as a sign of divine anger (figs.18-19).³²⁸ An equally emotional response to such an occurrence is easy to imagine in Rome in the aftermath of a damaging strike that left Summanus headless. The problem is who and what Summanus represented at that moment in the early third century BCE.

³²⁷ MacBain (1982:47) calls it a 'spectacular "*coup de théâtre*'.

³²⁸ Espinet (2020); Rampersad (2020).

Since Wissowa, it has regularly been asserted that the strike on the Capitoline marked the moment a cult of Summanus was born.³²⁹ This view holds that Summanus separated *from* Jupiter into a subordinate aspect or hypostasis, primarily associated with nocturnal lightning.³³⁰ Summanus is thereby denied full status as a god in his own right. In the opposite direction, if not a third-century innovation, other scholars hold that Summanus was an older god who later became syncretised *with* Jupiter and subordinated as one of his aspects.³³¹ Either way, Summanus is thus subordinated to Jupiter by making him very old or very new. Otherwise, he is explained away as essentially non-existent: Livy (*Periochae* 14) is usually brought in to support this extreme view, which dispenses entirely with the notion of Summanus. Because, in recounting the strike on the Capitol, Livy refers to the decapitated statue as simply 'Jupiter', some scholars follow him and do the same.³³² Yet, the idea that Summanus can be dismissed as a name interchangeable with Jupiter's is untenable because it is not consistent with Livy's treatment of Jupiter or his references to temples of Jupiter's other well-known aspects.³³³ It also ignores the specificity with which Livy elsewhere names Summanus in relation to his Aventine temple.³³⁴ Beyond Livy, moreover, as we have seen other writers refer to him as a distinct god.

³²⁹ Wissowa (1912), 48-49, 53. Cf. Palmer (1974:141).

³³⁰ Wissowa, above, in fact, associates Summanus with Nocturnus.

³³¹ Fratantuono (2015:341), 'an obscure, mysterious deity' 'conflated' with Jupiter.

³³² MacBain (1982:47), for example, names the stricken statue straightforwardly as Jupiter without mention of Summanus. He also states the new temple was dedicated to Jupiter Summanus, which is nowhere attested for the temple. Discussion in Timpanaro (1988:47), 244-5.

³³³ The Temple to Jupiter Stator is not simply 'Stator', for example. Likewise, Livy does not refer to Jupiter Elicius by only the epithet (e.g., Iuppiter Stator (10.38.15, 27.37.7); Iuppiter Feretrius (1.10.6, 4.20.3, 4.32.5, *Periochae*); Iuppiter Elicius (1.30.7, 1.31.8), or, indeed, Iuppiter Optimus Maximus.

³³⁴ Aside from the two attested epigraphic instances of Jupiter-Summanus already discussed, Summanus is simply Summanus. Livy, himself, uses it standing alone as a proper name: 32.29.1.

A greater antiquity is, at least, in keeping with ancient appraisals, which understood him to be an early inhabitant of Rome's religious landscape. Our sources disagree about whether he was an Etruscan or Sabine import but none of them suggest Summanus *was* Jupiter or that he was a late and Roman invention.³³⁵ The narrative of decline in Varro takes this view with Jupiter and his new temple superseding Summanus' prior popularity. It is through his supposed fading from memory that modern scholarship explains the subsequent obscurity of his cult that I have argued against. In fact, the whole notion of decline is challenged by the very dedication of a new temple to Summanus (whether or not a hypostasis) as this is not an activity indicative of a waning god. Moreover, as Lipka has recently pointed out, the striking of a temple terracotta would be an unusual route to hypostasis.³³⁶ Refreshingly, he views Summanus as an independent deity although he also sees the god declining in historical times.

Lipka even suggests an element of suppression in his rooftop position, drawing a parallel between the old solar deity Sol Indiges who ended up in a chariot on the roof of the temple to Apollo, who usurped him.³³⁷ An attractive, if suspiciously tidy, progression would therefore be to view Summanus as a god demoted first to the roof and then marginalised altogether by removing him from the pinnacle of the Capitoline to the foot of the Aventine where his temple sat outside the pomerium and Jupiter's sacred boundary. Early Roman temples, however, often had multiple gods in the ornamental statue groups and so Summanus may not have been particularly important deity in the overall composition.³³⁸

³³⁵ Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 5:74 says his cult was instituted by Sabine Titus Tatius. Pliny (2.53) says he is Etruscan.

³³⁶ Lipka (2009:80). Until Augustus, it was also an unusual response to a lightning strike, as we will see.

³³⁷ Lipka (2009:79-80). He views explaining '*sub-manus*' as 'before dawn' as a new etymology since his original height was lost when removed from the Capitoline. Cf. Palmer (1974:141).

³³⁸ Winter (2005) for terracotta statue groups on temple rooftops.

If the statue had stood on the apex of the roof, however, he would have been prominent. Palmer's view is that the name 'Summanus' referenced the final placement of this statue.³³⁹ This would also make the statue a lightning rod which would, from a scientific perspective, explain the particular targeting of the strike. Platner, however, took Summanus' position on the roof (*in fastigio*) to mean he was an acroterion.³⁴⁰ Both are possible, but it may not be without significance that after this event, the curule aediles, the Olgunii brothers, had a statue of Jupiter in his chariot set upon the roof.³⁴¹ Perhaps Jupiter resplendently and rather pointedly replaced the position Summanus had previously held. The most important point however is that Summanus had apparently been present on the Capitoline and recognisable prior to the lightning that struck him. He was present and, crucially, he was removed.

It seems significant that at the very moment the haruspices arrive in our sources in an official capacity at Rome, it is to oversee Summanus, a god who may have been of some significance to them, beheaded and apparently ousted from his lofty perch. It is possible that the dedication of a new temple was part of their own haruspical *responsum* to the lightning prodigy.³⁴² At this relatively early date, when Rome was still settling its relationship with newly conquered Veii and officially employing Etruscan haruspices for state divination, we might wonder to what extent these events were leveraged to settle

³³⁹ Palmer (1974:141) although he views the name as given in retrospect to the hypostasised god after the strike. Cf. Sabbatucci, (1988:216, n.34): '*Summano ci fa pensare a Giove, quale dio delle sommità, o comunque a un dio che con Giove divideva le sommità*'.

³⁴⁰ Platner (1929), 298.

³⁴¹ Livy (10.23.12). The passage indicates other dedications of bronze and silver, so the new statue is thought probably to be bronze (Platner & Ashby, 1929, 298). Nb. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 35.157, names Vulca of Vulci as the artist who had made the terracotta cult statue of Jupiter and also the clay quadriga on the roof (*in fastigio templi*). He mentions the quadriga for the roof (*in fastigium*) also at 28.16. Although we assume Jupiter, he does not name the driver or even indicate that there was one.

³⁴² As noted above, this was an unusual response to a lightning strike, but it may have served them well.

certain questions about fulgural beliefs, sacerdotal hierarchies, and religious practices.³⁴³ Relocating Summanus could have been an intentional demotion of his cult, putting some distance between him and the sacred heart of the city. Topographically, in any case, this arrangement is in tune with the distinction I have made between the Capitoline and Aventine regarding the handling of lightning. Conceptually, this location situates Summanus in that edgier, troubling world of sacrifice and expiation; a position no doubt magnified by his chthonic connotations.

The topography also resonates in the consecration of bidentals. This is when the peculiar offerings of onions and sprats were made ostensibly in the place of human heads and where Numa's bargain with Jupiter was put to good use. The bidental was therefore a physical reminder of that freighted question about what the gods might demand for their peace. In this context, through his underworld connections and his role in *bidentalibus*, perhaps the loss of Summanus' own head to a lightning strike had deeper symbolic value. That a god of lightning lost his own head to a lightning strike perhaps settled some historical and cultural tensions. Cicero does not tell us why the haruspices were asked to locate the head nor what happened to it once it was found. By rights, as something touched by lightning, the literary and archaeological evidence suggests that the statue head dredged out of the Tiber should itself have ended up in a bidental.

The shift in focus I have advocated towards aversion rather than obscurity surrounding Summanus makes better sense in view of his chthonic connotations and his role in the

³⁴³ MacBain (1982) sees diplomatic expediency in how prodigies were dealt with generally across Italy and on this occasion perceives a performative procedure. If the haruspices were involved in theatricals staging the 'discovery' of the head, perhaps this was part of a negotiation settling their new position in the state while at the same time one of their key deities was demoted.

creation of bidentals. The practice of burying lightning was a pragmatic one that dealt with the aftermath of a destructive strike, tidying up and physically containing the fulgent rubble on one hand, and expiating the prodigy and appeasing the gods on the other. Yet, for all that they were perceived to contain debris touched by the divine fire, bidentals were not perceived as positively charged places. They reified the terror wrought by destructive strokes of lightning and were maintained with care and cautious reverence. They were circumscribed with rules preventing any future disturbance, removal, or even touch.³⁴⁴ Rather than becoming the focus of wonder, there was instead a palpable sense of dread if not abjection about them that seems to have evoked negative emotions. Persius' statement (*Saturae* 2.1.24-29) that bidentals were sad and to be avoided (*triste...evitandumque*) echoes Horace's (*Ars Poetica* 147) *triste bidental*, Sidonius' (*Carmina* 10.193) *saeptum bidental*, and [Quintilian]'s (*Declamationes Minores* 274) *infausti cineres*.

The sombre shadow these places clearly cast perhaps darkened where it mingled with ideas, if not memories, about what could be buried there. Persius (*Saturae* 2.27) calls those sepulchred in a bidental '*triste iaces*' and the scholiast explains that this is due to the mandated lack of proper burial for the lightning-stricken and 'because others become gloomy upon reading the names' of such people.³⁴⁵ This combination of practices and collective imaginings may well have contributed to fear of and aversion towards Summanus and may have percolated in some circles through attitudes towards him and the things he represented.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Flashpoint 7 for full discussion.

³⁴⁵ '*quod lecto nomine tuo alii tristes efficiantur*', *Scholia in Persium* 2.27 (Cornutus, eds. Clausen & Zetzel 2012:54-55).

³⁴⁶ Interesting, then, that Jupiter is quite rarely named specifically on *bidental*ia - the usual formula focusing rather on *fulgur dium, divum, divom* etc. for day lightning.

Despite the distance put between his cult and that of the Capitoline, and despite the official position and some elite posturing, I think Summanus remained conceptually if not physically near the centre of divergent Roman theologies about how thunderbolts worked and what was to be done about them. The evidence allows at least the minimal conclusion that Summanus remained well into the first century CE a contender for the crucial responsibility of nocturnal lightning representing a co-existence of something both different and compromisingly similar to Jupiter. It is this similarity to Jupiter which seems to have troubled scholars old and new. This fundamental encroachment upon what Jupiter is supposed to represent has driven ancient and modern attempts to negate or side-line Summanus or to harmonise him one way or another with the familiar vision of the Roman pantheon.

Altogether, although scattered and fragmentary, the evidence for Summanus adds up to something larger than the parts. The problem he poses is one of incongruity. Yet, incongruity is also the insight he provides. If we do not try to reconcile his presence with the dominant narrative by trying to diminish Summanus either as an epithet, a parvenu spin-off or as a barely remembered archaism, we are faced with a problem more in keeping, I think, with what Roman society itself seems to have faced: a richness, messiness, and plurality endemic to polytheism generally.³⁴⁷ Beneath the familiar veneer of Graeco-Roman religion as it crystallised with its mythological narratives and inbuilt hierarchies, the question of ownership of and access to the thunderbolt exposes a very

³⁴⁷ 'Polydoxy' rather than orthodoxy, see Keller & Schneider (2011).

different religious landscape; one riddled with confusions and contradictions due to the presence, and prominence, of other deities without narratives, who did not fit that mould.

In another incidental reference to Summanus, Arnobius seems to make this very point in his Christian critique. He mocks Roman polytheism as unstable and self-contradictory and lists the deities Janus, Liber, and Summanus to show that the Romans themselves were unsure about who their gods were and what roles they played:

Quare si vobis liquet, in sublimibus palatiis caeli habitare, consistere multitudinem istam quam enumeratis deorum, in unius proloqui finibus convenit vos stare nec per varias distractos repugnantisque sententias fidem ipsis rebus quas struitis derogare. Si Janus est, Janus sit, si Liber est, Liber sit, si Summanus, Summanus sit:

Therefore, if it is clear to you that this multitude of gods which you enumerate dwell in the lofty palaces of heaven, then it is consistent that you remain within the bounds of a single discourse, and do not, through various divided and opposing opinions, undermine faith in the very things which you construct. If Janus is, let Janus be; if Liber is, let Liber be; if Summanus, let Summanus be.

(Adversus Nationes 3.44)

This situates Summanus in a diverse, contested, and ambiguous cultic landscape alongside well-known deities like Janus and Liber. Unfortunately, Arnobius does not expand on his choice of deities here but again, even in the context of polemic, the inclusion of Summanus again indicates audience familiarity both with the god and apparent disagreements about him.

Summanus was not alone in providing thundersome alternatives to Jupiter. Paired uneasily as Jupiter's direct counterpart, he best illustrates the point, but other deities might have been discussed in this chapter. We could have thought about Vulcan, for example, who not only forged Jupiter's thunderbolts but in older local incarnations also

hurled them himself;³⁴⁸ or the mysterious committee of the *Di Consentes* with whom Jupiter sometimes had to consult and ask permission to hurl certain thunderbolts;³⁴⁹ or Quirinus, the deity Romulus became once deified by lightning;³⁵⁰ or the divinised Aeneas who became a form of Jupiter himself: Jupiter Indiges.³⁵¹ We could at least nod to Fulgora, a lonely goddess of lightning who almost escaped us but for a mention by Augustine (*De Civitate Dei* 6). He lists her disparagingly among unmarried goddesses and states that he is hardly surprised she has no suitors, leaving us to imagine what sort of divinity she might have been or what about her lightning made her so undesirable.³⁵²

There are the stormy Tempestates to whom a temple in Rome was vowed during the first Punic war by Lucius Cornelius Scipio for delivery from a storm at sea.³⁵³ There is Semo Sancus who had a temple on the Quirinal, who patrolled oaths with his thunderbolts, and whose priests, revealingly named the *sacerdotes bidentales*, had expertise in consecrating lightning-stricken places (fig.20).³⁵⁴ There is Juno Caelestis, a Roman syncretisation of the Punic goddess Tanit, who was brought by *evocatio* to Rome and who hurled thunderbolts unlike her classical counterpart (fig.21).³⁵⁵ There is also Jupiter Dolichenus, a Roman reinvention of the powerful storm god, Teshub, from Doliche, Commagene, whose mysteries were widespread and exceedingly popular in the second and third centuries

³⁴⁸ Vulcan (Muciber) in the Etruscan pantheon presided over one part of the heavens from which his lightning came (de Grummond, 2016b:187). On archaic Roman Vulcan, Rose (1933) is interesting.

³⁴⁹ Weinstock (1946) *passim*; Long (1987). Cf. Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.42.1.

³⁵⁰ See Flashpoint 1.

³⁵¹ Livy (1.2.6). Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.64.

³⁵² She is usually equated with Greek *Astrape* but her Roman character seems quite distinct.

³⁵³ *CIL* VI 1286-87. This name is attested in both the singular and plural: e.g., Ovid, *Fasti* 6.193 (Tempestatas). See, Richardson (1992:379). s.v. *Tempestatas*, *Aedes*.

³⁵⁴ Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 5.52; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.49.2; Ovid, *Fasti* 6.217-18. See Platner & Ashby (1929:469-70); Lipka (2009:25). *Sacerdotes bidentales*: *CIL* VI 30994; *CIL* XIV 188. A statue of Semo Sancus was also discovered on Tiber Island: *CIL* VI.567.

³⁵⁵ Mastrocinque (2017) on the goddess in Severan Rome. See Juno's complaint (*Aeneid* 1.39-48,) that while Minerva was granted permission to throw thunderbolts at Ajax, she was not granted access.

CE.³⁵⁶ Likewise, there is the Roman cult of Mithras, regularly if mysteriously connected to thunderbolts and lightning, who bore the splendid epithet *astrobrontodaimôn*.³⁵⁷ If we were to examine Rome's sacred stones and black rocks, we would likely find lightning behind many of them with deities such as Terminus as immovable as a bidental even in Jupiter's own temple with an obligatory hypaethral opening above it just as the lightning-stricken bidental dictates.³⁵⁸ Then there is Vediovis: another strong candidate for contesting Jupiter's sole dominion.

Veiovis or Vediovis was understood to be an anti-Jupiter, sometimes portrayed as a young Jupiter, whose character was malevolent and whose 'arrows' were feared.³⁵⁹ There are some splendid representations of this poorly understood deity wielding thunderbolts (fig.22).³⁶⁰ Like Summanus, he received black animals in sacrifice, and adding to their already fraught chthonic connotations, they were sacrificed *humano ritu*. This term, found in Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* 5.12) has long confounded scholarship although its underlying intentions seem clear enough. It seems again to remind us of that ominous reciprocity between mortals and gods and what might be demanded when lightning strikes were involved.³⁶¹ Veiovis, moreover, had not one but two temples on the Capitoline

³⁵⁶ On the god and his Romano-Syrian contexts, Blömer (2017a & b). On the role of the military in dissemination of his cult, Collar (2013) chapter 3. In Rome, Fowlkes-Childs (2018).

³⁵⁷ From an inscription from Trastevere. See, Gordon (2006).

³⁵⁸ Servius, *ad Aeneid* 9.448, Kaster & Murgia (2018:67 ad loc.) emend the disputed '*in Capitolio prona pars tecti patet*' to *prona*, thereby situating the hypaethral opening in the temple porch. Cf. Ovid, *Fasti* 2.667-672. Space does not allow it but baetyls and meteorites could be shown to be thunderbolt-related.

³⁵⁹ Aulus Gellius (5.12.8-9) claims the *ve-* is privative, taking away his power to help (*iuvare*). Thus, he harms. Cf. Ovid (*Fasti* 3.435-48) who tackles the *novitas numini*, protesting perhaps too loudly that Veiovis was a 'harmless' young Jupiter with a youthful face (*iuvenalis aspice*). On the god, Palmer (1974), 137-9, 142-146.

³⁶⁰ Cf Ovid (*Fasti* 3.438-9) suspiciously insisting his hand wielded no thunderbolts (*fulmina nulla tenet*). Weinstock (1971;10-12) also views him with a soft focus through his connections with the gens Iulia.

³⁶¹ Versnel (1993:144, n.41) for chthonic aspects. He dismisses outright the idea that '*ritu humano*' signifies human sacrifice but without providing any justification for his position.

situated on the Arx and another on Tiber Island, situating him from an early date at the very heart of Roman religious life.³⁶²

All these deities signal the co-existence of a varied and kaleidoscopic world of lightning and thunderbolts that sits awkwardly alongside the usual tidy vision of Jupiter's dominion. Jupiter was indubitably the city's first and foremost deity, but what I hope the case study of Summanus has shown is that his primacy did not negate these other powerful deities so much in practice as it did in rhetoric and myth. In visual terms, we might even wonder about the appearance of Summanus himself.

There are no physical descriptions of him and, unfortunately, no known artistic depictions of him exist. In later imaginings, as we have seen, he becomes a Pluto-esque figure, but what did the head that came out of the Tiber look like? There are many depictions of a bearded thunderbolt-hurling figure on oil lamps that are accompanied by a crescent moon. Museum labels and catalogue entries invariably describe this figure as 'Jupiter'. Perhaps, though, being nocturnal, it is Summanus (figs.23-24). If Jupiter and Summanus held twin roles, maybe they looked similar. Then, again, perhaps Summanus looked entirely different. Sometimes representations of deities in museums are labelled 'Jupiter' simply because they are wielding a thunderbolt even if nothing else about the representation would suggest so. For example, a collection of Etruscan bronze figurines representing a beardless thunderbolt-hurling deity in Rome's Villa Giulia is surely not Jupiter (fig.25). Conversely, it must have been an act of imagination (or insight) that compelled one curator at Rome's Museo Centrale Montemartini to label with a tentative

³⁶² Capitoline: Vitruvius 4.8.4; Aulus Gellius 5.12.5. Archaeology, Tiber: Livy 31.21.12; Ovid, *Fasti* 1.289-94. Pliny (*HN* 16.216) claims his cypress wood cult statue had survived from the founding of the city.

question mark a strange winged, serpentine thunderbolt-wielding deity as, among other possibilities, Summanus (fig.26). Whoever it is, this unknown figure reminds us that the serene anthropomorphic forms of the classical pantheon must be tempered with any number of thunder-wielding anomalies which sometimes came from incorporation of foreign elements, and which were sometimes survivals and long continuities from very different times.

To which point, finally, attention must be drawn to an overlooked terracotta acroterion in Rome's Villa Giulia (fig.27). To my knowledge, this is the only depiction in the classical world (indeed, in the ancient world more broadly) of a thunderbolt held in a mouth. Clenched in a grimace between the teeth, it is an extraordinary image and anathema to Rome's later iconographically systematised modes of manually wielding thunderbolts. Perhaps it was something like this that was blasted from the roof of the Capitolium in 278 BCE. In any case, it is another conundrum: another unknown character, doing something un-Jovian with thunderbolts.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this chapter has been to unsettle the simplicity, clarity, and concomitant certainty that comes with assumptions about lightning in Rome and ideas about its divine provenance. While it may have seemed pedantic at first to pose the question about to whom, precisely, Rome's thunderbolt belonged, I hope over the course of this argument, it has become clear the answer in practice is not as obvious and unequivocal as it is in theory. In considering the overarching question of this thesis about how Roman society handled lightning, Summanus is significant at a practical level for his

role in *bidentalìa*. At a more fundamental level, however, he is significant for providing a good glimpse of the confusions, contradictions, and conflations integral to the roily substrata of what Roman religion became or, at least, how it came to be presented. If these are perplexing to modern scholarship it is because they were also perplexing to Romans of the later republic and beyond.

Thus, upon entering the world of historical lightning, the clarity of the mythological realm immediately dissolves. The messy confusion of evidence resists the oversimplifications of a Jupiter-centric narrative revealing uncertainties even at the most basic ontological level. Etruscan fulgural expertise was sought out, bidentals were consecrated to Summanus, and all these other fulminating divinities all received due worship and attention, their temples and altars jostling for space in the city's topography as well as its festive calendar. What this means in a practical sense is that a lively plurality multiplied not only the number of possibilities in terms of belief but liabilities in terms of interpreting and responding correctly to lightning strikes. That is, I believe, the necessary backdrop to Rome's historical behaviour involving lightning. As we turn to other themes and questions, we must remember that this is the bustling backdrop ever-present in the anxieties and confusions of the flashpoints that follow.



Flashpoint Five

Juno Regina on the Aventine

divination, experts, and authority

Viewed as a natural phenomenon, a lightning strike is over in a flash. However, through a Roman cultural lens, viewed as a prodigy, a burst of electrical discharge had human repercussions beyond the immediate damage caused. It could instigate a chain of interpretations, prognostications, recommendations, and responses, some with lasting ramifications. Through the institutional procedures of divination and expiation the perceived rupture lightning signified could be successfully negotiated and Rome maintained a host of fulgural experts for this task. It is to these experts and their *ars* or *scientia* that we now turn.

In the previous chapter, we saw Cicero's Quintus (*De Divinatione* 1.10) recount in the spirit of certainty the extraordinary powers of such experts. In the strike of 278 BCE, it was the unlikely findspot of the statue head combined with the fact that the haruspices were right about its whereabouts that made the case compelling evidence for Quintus. He straightforwardly attributes such diviners with the knowledge to read the scene of the strike accurately and to make a precise though unlikely prediction. About the divinatory powers of lightning, he exclaims: '*Quid? de fulgurum vi dubitare num possumus?*'. Yet, in the previous chapter, we also saw certainty falter at the first hurdle because even in the most basic terms of determining divine provenance, lightning was potentially messier and more complex than we tend to imagine. In the very case Quintus cites to assert confidence

in the diviner's skill, the presence of Summanus raised our own doubts about the deities lightning involved. Moreover, this led us to question the motivations of the presiding experts and even suspect politicking behind the scenes. Focus pans out in our second historical flashpoint from the confines of lightning's divine provenance to those broader, busier vistas of human interpretation and reception. This chapter deals with lightning in its most familiar domain, that of augury and divination, but we will not be rehashing old arguments. Since divination is here considered as one facet of the world of lightning rather than the other way around, we will parse out the whole process of divination by lightning as much as possible with the aim of better understanding social realities than ideals. The central incident in this chapter was always remembered as a divinatory success story. It therefore provides an example of Rome's divinatory apparatus when perceived to be working well and consequently it also offers an opportunity to consider how the institution of divination and all its multifarious fulgural traditions, tools, and texts operated together as a unified whole.

Livy (27.37.1-15) is the source for our fifth flashpoint. He provides an account of the incident, which occurred in 207 BCE amid a series of ominous events. The sequence begins with a nine day ceremonial, the *novendiale sacrum*, which we saw instituted supposedly by Tullus Hostilius in response to the thunderous voice and prodigy of raining stones.³⁶³ This was in response to another prodigal shower of stones, this time at Veii (*de caelo lapidaverat*). After this was announced, other prodigies were reported, 'as usual' (*ut*

³⁶³ Flashpoint 2.

fit), Livy adds, giving a sense of how a situation often escalated. After the troubling birth of a hermaphrodite, the haruspices were called in from Etruria to interpret the anomaly. They declared the birth to be a foul and loathsome prodigy (*foedum ac turpe prodigium* 27.37.6). They advised that the unfortunate child must be removed from Roman territory, kept from any contact with the ground, and drowned at sea.³⁶⁴ In addition to this haruspical advice, the pontifices then further advised that a procession of maidens should parade through the city singing a hymn. However, when the young women were duly in the forum rehearsing this hymn in the Temple to Jupiter Stator, lightning struck the temple to Juno Regina on the Aventine.³⁶⁵

The haruspices were again called in to interpret this new prodigy. They deduced that the lightning affected Rome's *matronae*. They said Juno needed appeasing (*placandam esse*) and recommended that the *matronae* should present the goddess with a gift. The curule aediles took on this task. They rounded up all the married women within a ten-mile radius, gathered them on the Capitoline, and collected money from their dowries. These funds were used to commission a golden bowl for Juno, which was then dedicated in her temple with sacrifices and purification rituals. That was apparently not enough, however, because the *decemviri sacris faciundis* then arrive to announce the necessity of yet another procession of maidens and another sacrifice to Juno. Livy (27.37.11-15) provides a long description of this second round of ceremonials. It centred on two cypress wood statues of Juno, which were carried through the city from the Porta Carmentalis through the forum to the Aventine where two oxen were sacrificed while the girls sang and stomped their feet (*pulsu pedum*).

³⁶⁴ *'procul terrae contactu alto mergendum'*, interesting vis-à-vis treatment of lightning-stricken people and objects which, conversely, were buried and/or not to be moved. (Flashpoint 7).

³⁶⁵ A bespoke hymn composed by Livius Andronicus.

The lightning strike therefore caused a great song and dance both literally and metaphorically. To begin to dissect this social performance and all the cultural forces at work here, we will start at the beginning and consider its catalyst: lightning itself as a sign.

The Nature of the Sign

That lightning was understood to deliver a divine communication is a commonplace in Roman history. The idea lies at the heart of all the case studies we have considered so far, and augury and divination have been presented in the case of Romulus as the appropriate modality of receiving such messages. The problem lay in understanding its meaning. Since the supposed communication was not linguistic in nature, nor was it constituted of sensible words, the message lightning delivered was enigmatic if powerful. To understand how this worked at a ritual level, linguistic theory (counterintuitively) provides some useful delineations.

In his seminal 1955 series of Harvard papers 'How To Do Things with Words', John Austin theorised 'speech acts'. These are performative utterances that *do* something rather than *say* something. His classic example is the two key words of a wedding vow, 'I do', which do not signify a person reporting a marriage but a person actually 'indulging' in one.³⁶⁶ One place this comes to the fore for the current argument is in the importance Austin placed on context. As he explained, marriage is not simply a matter of saying those two words, they must be said under the right conditions. Crucially, these are not internal. They are not dependent on personal mental conditions but the external circumstances in which

³⁶⁶ Austin (1955), 5-11.

they are said: in his example, marriage ceremonials in the presence of a legitimate wedding officiant. He formulated two ‘rules’, as follows:

A.1, that there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances; and rule A. 2 of course, completing it, was that the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.³⁶⁷

Two further rules (B.1&2) specify that ‘the procedure must be executed by all participants *correctly*’ and ‘the procedure must be executed by all participants *completely*’. In the context of Roman augury and divination, such specifications already sound familiar. Indeed, in the interpretation of lightning, the conditions and external circumstances of fulminating signs played a similarly important role in what the lightning was perceived to be doing or saying. Thinking in terms of linguistic performativity helps to distinguish the very different character of ‘utterances’ either side of the taxonomic divide between signs solicited through the ritual ceremonials of taking the auspices (*auspicia impetrativa*) and bolts from the blue, unsolicited and unexpected (*auspicia oblativa*).³⁶⁸

While augurs were engaged in the ritual of sky-watching (*servare de caelo*) and soliciting a divine sign, lightning seems usually to have been positive in meaning because it tended to ratify whatever was being proposed.³⁶⁹ This is the lightning observed in the Romulean

³⁶⁷ Austin (1951), Lecture 3, 26-35.

³⁶⁸ Loriol (2025) has recently argued that these terms are anachronistic and should be abandoned by scholarship in favour of more nuanced categorisation of signs according to Roman designations. I agree in theory but in practice, as this chapter aims to show, the reality was messy and inexact even in ancient times. While “impetrative” and “oblativa” signs may not have been the official Roman terms, they were evidently a useful heuristic for Servius (*Ad Aeneid* 6.190, 12.248) who was far more familiar with Roman divination than we can hope to be. I follow Servius and use these terms, *pace* Loriol, because they succinctly describe the fundamental procedural divide in question here. Cf. Linderski (1986: 2195-2203).

³⁶⁹ Servius auctus, *ad Aeneid* 6.198: *servare enim et de caelo et de avibus verbo augurum dicitur*.

model bestowing kingship upon Romulus and magistracies upon anyone appointed.³⁷⁰ *Inauguratio* performed by augurs was expressly a transformative process marking a change of state, which the lightning (or other requested sign) brought about.³⁷¹ The major exception is the case of *obnuntiatio* in which case thunder and lightning was a *vitium* preventing popular assemblies from gathering.³⁷² Historically, such a divine veto could be politically expedient and so these negative signs were sometimes also sought out.³⁷³ All such cases may be understood as a divine ‘I do’ – or don’t – (or better, *fas* or *nefas*) in the manner of a divine speech act. The conditions already being set up, the question defined, and official eyes turned skyward, Jupiter had only to ‘speak’ for the magistrate to find himself divinely endorsed or the assembly to find the day’s proceedings nullified. In these terms, since impetrative lightning was a complete performative utterance, the meaning was clear, and the humans involved had simply to accept the judgement and proceed accordingly.

Unsolicited lightning, on the other hand, was more compromising. Without an organised procedural context and without ritual framing of a specific question or proposition posed by an auspiciant, to what Jupiter’s rumblings and flashings pertained was open to interpretation. On a battlefield, it might signal imminent victory as it is famously seen on the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius intervening for Rome (figs.28-29).³⁷⁴

³⁷⁰ The verb *impetrare* from which the post-classical term derives means ‘to achieve’, ‘gain one’s end’, or ‘procure’. The ritual conventions under which a sign was sought therefore pre-empted a favourable interpretation.

³⁷¹ Linderski (2007:10) explains, contra Skutsch, that *auspicia* pertained to action whereas *auguria* pertained to status.

³⁷² Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2.42: *love tonante, fulgurante comitia populi habere nefas*. For its relatively short existence, the *Lex Aelia et Fufia*, allowed magistrates as well as augurs to perform *obnuntiatio*, provoking the violations which have left generation of scholars sceptical about how genuinely the entire enterprise was taken. For a revision of the ‘manipulation’ model of Roman divination, Driediger- Murphy (2019) is a good corrective.

³⁷³ Lebovitz (2015).

³⁷⁴ Scene XXIV. Kovács (2017:50-55) enumerates historical instances.

However, unsolicited lightning strikes were generally more likely to be taken as a divine warning shot that something was amiss. It is often described in scholarship as signalling a rupture in the *pax deorum*.³⁷⁵ Lightning from a clear sky was a particularly startling example of divine intervention often mentioned metaphorically to denote a sudden reversal of fortune.³⁷⁶ Festus (285 L) accordingly listed thunder in a calm sky as a *portentum*.³⁷⁷ The role of such “utterances” was therefore categorically different from those occurring within a ritually controlled context. In linguistic terms, they were constative and not performative. They constituted a sudden expression of something extraordinary: often, but not always, imbalance, divine displeasure, and the concomitant impending doom.³⁷⁸ Yet, although violent and often destructive, this kind of lightning did not itself perform the requisite act but only signalled that action was required. And here the non-linguistic reality of lightning caused Roman society to dive headlong into a semantic mire because although understood to be a divine communication with discernible meaning for mortals, that meaning was, in its raw form, completely inscrutable.³⁷⁹ This is the fundamental point on which the entire enterprise of divination by lightning turned: it meant something, but what it meant and what action was required was not inherently obvious.

³⁷⁵ A useful shorthand, but an anachronism criticised by Loriol (2023).

³⁷⁶ E.g., Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares* 6.14; Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 99.

³⁷⁷ Festus 285 (L): *Portenta rerum... sereno caelo factum tonitrua*.

³⁷⁸ E.g., in 172 BCE, Livy (42.20.1) explains a *columna rostrata* was shattered to its base, by lightning by a night storm (*nocturna tempestate* = Summanus?). The prodigy was followed by purifications, supplications, and sacrifices. Livy describes an atmosphere of escalating anxiety (*cumularent religiones animis*), but the haruspices predicted a favourable outcome. Contra Rosenberger (2007:293): a prodigium ‘was always a bad sign’. Rather, they were always fraught interactions with the divine, which signified an unstable state requiring action. Interpretations varied. Cf Loriol (2023).

³⁷⁹ In their excellent volume titled, *‘Conversing with Chaos in Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Writing and Reading Environmental Disorder in Ancient Texts’*, Eidinow & Schliephake (2024) really missed an opportunity by not including the chaotic language of lightning.

As Julia Kindt observes in her analysis of Greek oracular practices, the enigmatic nature of divine communication often defied immediate comprehension.³⁸⁰ Indeed, if the Pythia at Delphi delivered verbal utterances that required decoding and this, in turn, created the possibility of misunderstanding, so the non-verbal physicality of unsolicited lightning rendered it even more cryptic with an even greater epistemological gap between 'divine intention' and human decipherment. Without ritual or ceremonial contexts, wider societal and political contexts were generally turned to as interpretative frameworks for oblativ signs. By what criteria unsolicited lightning escalated from *signa privata* to *publica* is not entirely clear but strikes seem to have entered the public arena on the basis of magnitude, location, and timing.³⁸¹ Any of these variables could moreover transform an instance of lightning in status from an *auspicium oblativum* to a *prodigium* which concerned the very condition of the *res publica*.³⁸² Magnitude was self-evidently a cause for alarm with particularly violent electrical storms easily understood to be signalling anger and destruction. The portentous terror lightning was able to strike in the hearts of ancient communities was intensified at those moments the community felt itself threatened by historical contingencies. Powerful strikes on topographically significant spots at moments of high political tension was a most potent combination.

Therefore, in 207 BCE, the lightning striking the Temple of Juno Regina on the Aventine was very quickly seen through the lens of the Hannibalic War, with Rome at its lowest ebb,

³⁸⁰ Kindt (2021).

³⁸¹ Criteria borrowed from the assessment of natural hazards (see following chapter). Frequency seems also a variable: increased prodigies indicating heightening danger.

³⁸² *Prodigium*, *monstrum*, *portentum*, and *ostentum* appear largely synonymous terms used interchangeably and confusingly among different ancient authors. Thulin (1905:201) concluded that precise definition was impossible. See also Rosenberger (1998:7-11). Attempted definitions in Servius, *ad Aeneid* 3.336; Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2.7, *De Divinatione* 1.93; Festus (284 L). Cf. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 21.8. *Prodigium* is used as an umbrella term here for simplicity and because it was the formal legal Roman term.

and the fate of the city uncertain with Carthaginian troops stationed in the Italian peninsula and Hasdrubal and his army on the other side of the Alps waiting for the winter snows to thaw (Livy 27.36.4). Moreover, the lightning strike did not only interrupt preparations for the expiation of a prior prodigy, (the hermaphrodite) but it occurred, supposedly, amid an assault of ominous events such as downpours of stones, rivers of blood, maulings by wolves, and copious assorted other lightning strikes.³⁸³

As a *prodigium*, the strike on Juno Regina's temple was thus understood to be a divine but worrying commentary on current affairs. However, as an *auspicium oblativum*, that commentary was also oblique in meaning. It could only become truly linguistic and intelligible through human mediation. Interpretation was the vital aspect of divination, bridging the gap between the sign, its perceived divine origin, and its message to the community.³⁸⁴ Such mediation was not, of course, open to general speculation; to decipher the strike on the temple to Juno Regina and to learn what was to be done about it, it was necessary to call in the experts.

The Expert Response

One of the most interesting aspects of Livy's account of these events is the sheer variety of experts who emerge on the scene in response to the lightning strike. We see, appearing in order: the haruspices, the pontifices, the haruspices again, and then the *decemviri sacris faciundis*. Through their training in fulgural traditions and privileged access to sacred,

³⁸³ Livy 27.37.1–5.

³⁸⁴ Lorient (2023) resists the idea of rupture in the *pax deorum* because it reduces all prodigies to the same generic meaning: *ira deorum*. The problem, he argues, is that scholarship thus becomes uninterested in the specificities of each sign, which are not always predicated on divine anger as this particular case study also illustrates. Since Roman society itself was preoccupied with the specificities of a sign, his criticism is pertinent to this thesis. Accordingly, I try to highlight variety and texture and support Lorient's advocacy of '*une approche souple des signes divins*' (p.191).

esoteric texts, these different priestly groups were given the important task of divining the meaning of lightning strikes and, equally importantly, deciding how best to mend the rupture they signified.³⁸⁵ After their own deliberations, diviners presented their interpretation, prognostication, and prescription for further senatorial deliberation. This critical information was delivered in an official *responsum*, which was a written document to be read aloud in the senate.

In his *De Haruspicum Responsis* (10-19), Cicero provides our best evidence for what the contents of a haruspical response entailed. Cicero's personal confrontation with a *responsum* occurred in 56 BCE after a strange clash and rumbling in the sky (*strepitus cum fremitu*, presumably some sort of thunder and lightning) were reported as a prodigy and the haruspices were asked to interpret it.³⁸⁶ Their response pointed, among other things, to the violation of a sacred space as the source of divine displeasure and this in turn pointed very easily to Cicero's requisition of his house on the Palatine, which had been turned into a temple due to the machinations of Clodius while he was in exile. His *De Haruspicum Responsis* is essentially an argument for keeping his house but as he lays out his reasons, he provides crucial information that allows a partial reconstruction of the actual *responsum* itself. A document from this late republican date cannot be used to assert how a late third-century BCE counterpart would have been composed, but since Cicero's account provides a rare insight, it is worth using it as a speculative framework to

³⁸⁵ Pace Lorient, above, 'rupture' itself seems a reasonable way to articulate the societal effect of a lightning prodigy; positive or negative, action needed to be taken and this needed to be conducted properly to reach resolution. Discussed further in Flashpoint 6.

³⁸⁶ Cicero states the prodigy is a warning almost by the voice of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, himself: *prope iam voce Iovis optimi maximi* (5).

get a sense of what happened in 207 BCE and of the contents of haruspical *responsa* more generally.³⁸⁷

The haruspical response described by Cicero was divided into three main parts. The first of these (10.20) identifies the prodigy in terms of location and the divinities involved. Here the complications of the previous chapter regarding the whole host of fulminating deities comes into view. In Cicero's case, the strange *strepitus cum fremitu* was determined to be related to Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, Tellus and, for good measure, 'the heavenly gods'. Observe here the variety of offended gods to whom expiation is owed (*expiatio debeatur*) and note especially the all-encompassing waiver *di caelestes*. By comparison, judging from the resulting activities in 207 BCE, the lightning seems to have involved Juno Regina alone. Perhaps the strike on her temple, like the striking of Summanus in the previous chapter, was sufficiently unambiguous to implicate one deity. Still, we might wonder whether she was named alone in the *responsum* or in company with a similarly sweeping waiver.

The second part of the response deals with the interpretation of the sign. This seems a matter of working out why the gods were angry: in other words, a matter of locating blame (*delicta hominum*). In Cicero's case there were a string of unrelated possible causes, and only one clause actually implicated him: the matter of the defilement of a sacred space.³⁸⁸ By contrast, in the case of 207 BCE, the gods do not seem to be considered angry so much as perturbed by the external threat. Blame was not therefore allocated, but rather responsibility, which fell on the shoulders of Rome's *matronae*.

³⁸⁷ He claims he has quoted the haruspices faithfully and has not changed a word of the *responsum*: *Haruspicum verba sunt haec omnia: nihil addo de meo* (19).

³⁸⁸ Improperly performed games (10-12) slain ambassadors (16), broken fealty and oaths (17). Cicero was deemed implicated by the sweeping statement: *'loca sacra et religiosa profana haberi'* (5).

The third section is the crux of the *responsum* itself: what is to be done and what will happen otherwise. In Cicero's case, the haruspices warn not to allow division among the nobility, lose the favour of the gods, or fall into one man rule (*ad unum imperium*). Perhaps the haruspices were leaning on their Brontoscopic calendars, which are quite preoccupied with tyrants getting the upper hand whichever day of the year it thunders.³⁸⁹ In 207 BCE, the tyrants were obviously foreign. In addition to their warnings, recommendations are made as to what reparations are necessary. The recommendations of 207 BCE survive indirectly in Livy's narrative, in the various activities undertaken to expiate the lightning strike on Juno's temple.

The tripartite structure of the *responsum* as Cicero reports it, tallies in form with the overall structure of the general fulgural procedure later described by Seneca. In *Naturales Quaestiones* (2.33), Seneca asserts that the *ars fulgurum* was divided in three parts (*in haec tria dividitur*): '*quemadmodum exploremus, quemadmodum interpretemur, quemadmodum exoremus*'. He describes the first investigative part as procedural, pertaining to established protocols (*ad formulam*); the second interpretative part pertaining to the divination itself (*ad divinationem*), and the third propitiatory part, addresses the actions taken to appease the gods (*ad propitiandos deos*). Perhaps not coincidentally, this mirrors the three parts of Cicero's *responsum*. Seneca's first-century CE testimony lends traction to the idea that, in basic structure at least, there were likely procedural continuities in formal responses to lightning strikes over time.

³⁸⁹ See, Turfa (2012), 71-102. Rawson (1978) on the *disciplina Etrusca* maintained by an Etruscan elite for political ends.

Since all three stages depended on the mediation of experts, the process was, at every phase, dependent on human judgement, and consequently open to human fallibility and error. This potential to go awry is leveraged in Cicero's case. What is interesting in his appeal is that Cicero does not try to undermine the validity of the haruspices or their *responsum*, rather he argues (in the end successfully) that it has been misinterpreted and he points the finger of blame elsewhere (Clodius).³⁹⁰ Cicero effectively reinterpreted a haruspical response in his own favour within the parameters of the *responsum* itself. The crucial point is that there was leeway for alternative interpretations and different paths of action.

In which light, when there were several different groups of experts all recommending different activities, rituals, and offerings, as was the case in 207 BCE, how, combined, could they lead to a successful outcome?

Social Dynamics 1: Cooperation & Competition

The reason the response to the 207 BCE strike was positively remembered was because the existential threats which the city had been facing were subsequently vanquished: Rome triumphed, and the gods therefore seemed suitably appeased. After his description of all the ceremonial expiations, Livy (27.38.1) clearly states: *deis rite placatis*. Since Rome prevailed, the experts appeared to have proven their skills: divining accurately and making suitable recommendations. In other words, it was only historical contingency that seemed to prove the experts right.

³⁹⁰ He does undermine their exclusive powers to interpret though by suggesting (because it suits him) that people might be able to be their own haruspices: '*nos nonne haruspices esse possumus?*' (10.20). However, he professes admiration both for the sign and the diviners' unified and constant response: '*Ego enim fateor me et magnitudine ostenti et gravitate responsi et una atque constanti haruspicum voce vehementer esse commotum*' (9.18). Suspicion and derision of haruspices was also a social norm, nonetheless, see Rawson (1978).

Building on the ancient narrative of success, however, modern scholarship has also viewed this incident positively. The series of expert appearances and various rituals have been taken as an example of collegial cooperation between Rome's priesthods in troubled times. In a 1937 paper on the expiatory rites of 207 BCE, for example, Abaecherli Boyce noted that the pontifices decreed a lustral procession which was an activity in the domain of the *decemviri sacris faciundis*.³⁹¹ She asked why the pontifices would decree rites they could not themselves conduct and concluded that the *decemviri* must first have made the recommendation and then the pontifices, with the backing of the senate, had decided to follow their advice.³⁹² Variations of this fundamental cooperation are often reiterated. O'Lenaghan, for example, viewed the 'dire events' of the year as necessitating Rome's 'combined resources'.³⁹³ He saw the senate 'empowering' the various relevant authorities and upholding their divinatory advice. Rasmussen even discerns 'a division of labour and a parity among the three priesthods without any hint of enmity, competition, or ranking hierarchy according to their prestige as religious specialists'.³⁹⁴

Abaecherli Boyce had, actually, perceived underlying competitiveness. She imagined the various actors were vying for control.³⁹⁵ While fundamentally cooperating, she intuited interested parties attempting to assert their own tradition and expertise as authoritative.³⁹⁶ A similar view was more recently taken by Santangelo, who also sees

³⁹¹ Abaecherli Boyce (1937).

³⁹² This she supports with Livy's account (31.12) of the *decemviri* indeed making a recommendation to repeat the rites in 200 BCE.

³⁹³ O'Lenaghan (1969:34).

³⁹⁴ Rasmussen (2003), 182 citing Dumézil (1970), vol II, 482-483.

³⁹⁵ Abaecherli Boyce (1937:163-4) suggests a second opinion may have been sought but notes the differing perspectives between the haruspices and *decemviri* (for the former a *prodigium*; for the latter perhaps *negligentia rituum*) and differing legal statuses.

³⁹⁶ Abaecherli Boyce (1937:163): 'the *decemviri* felt that someone had invaded their province and were hastening to make clear their primacy in the matter of procuration'.

competition propelling the series of events in 207 BCE. Santangelo points out that in addition to both prognostications by Etruscan haruspices, on the hermaphrodite and then the lightning, there were additional expiatory measures conducted on the recommendations of Roman priestly colleges. He suggests that these alternative measures show that priesthoods held exclusively by Roman citizens 'openly competed with the haruspices and their ritual prescriptions.'³⁹⁷ However, in the final analysis, he too, returns to a harmonious overall vision by noting that whatever tensions lay beneath this competition, ultimately all sets of divergent advice were followed. Their successful conclusion illustrates, in Santangelo's estimation, 'a powerful demonstration of the ability of Roman public religion to accommodate diversity and to negotiate space and power for different actors, including some that came from outside the city.'³⁹⁸ Competition and cooperation have thus both been seen to contribute in this way to an inclusive vision of an organised and functioning state divinatory apparatus.

In his terse account, Livy presents a similar view. Livy's attitude, at least, should not surprise us; comprising various organised groups armed with a battery of received wisdom and venerable sacred texts, Roman divinatory practice presented itself as a well-oiled machine with prescriptive solutions to cope with any eventuality. This was the Roman rhetoric, and it was played out in these highly formalised rituals of consultation, recommendation, and expiation. If scholars still regularly refer to Roman divination in terms of formulaic practices and stock responses to the various omens and prodigies received, it is because Romans themselves talked about their multifarious expiations, offerings, prayers, and consultations with the gods in this way.³⁹⁹ However, tidiness, which

³⁹⁷ Santangelo (2013), 166.

³⁹⁸ Santangelo (2013), 168.

³⁹⁹ Cf. Livy 6.41.4-6.

in scholarship is usually a cause for suspicion, should be no less so here. Having glimpsed, courtesy of Cicero, that there was room for interpretive manoeuvre as well as slippage even at the relatively late stage of senatorial deliberation over a divinatory response, we will roll the question back further now to consider the sources and methods by which experts arrived at their official responses and look more closely at the *ars fulgurum*.

The State of the Ars

The co-operation which scholarship regularly assigns to the events of the 207 BCE prodigy would suggest bounded areas of overlapping expertise in which one college or priesthood acknowledged, if grudgingly, where their remit ended and that of another group began. In terms of institutional organisation, a degree of consensus would thus exist across various expert opinions and recommendations, such as that envisioned when the pontifices decreed a ritual under the purview of the decemviri. One major objection to be raised against consensus, however, is the degree to which any expert fulgural knowledge was, or could be, truly systematised. Rasmussen has lead the field in arguing for Roman divination to be understood as a scientific discipline and to be working on the basis of scientific principles being 'first and foremost characterized by its reliance on the systematic organisation of actual observations.'⁴⁰⁰ She explains her use of 'scientific discipline' to mean 'an institutionalised body of knowledge that builds on systematic, empirical examinations of connections that seek an understanding of the world and include the establishment of sacred and profane contexts.'⁴⁰¹

⁴⁰⁰ Rasmussen (2003), 201.

⁴⁰¹ *ibid*, p.201.

She asserts this by openly rejecting modern rationalism and taking Roman society on its own terms stressing the systematic nature of the discipline and the importance placed on rules and patterns. 'The entire system of divination is grounded in a set of actual observations', she asserts, 'and the empirical analyses are carried out by religious experts who interpret the material'.⁴⁰² This indeed echoes scientific procedure, and the argument is justified in terms of the intentions of practitioners and the worldview in which they operated. Rasmussen's work is valuable and insightful in understanding what Roman society thought it was doing.⁴⁰³ However, through such assertions, she also perpetuates the Roman idea that the system *was* organised, systematic, and authoritative.

It is instructive to note that even if genuinely scientific, the body of divinatory knowledge would not have been decisive in informing unanimous decisions. This is because the very utility of scientific experts rests on the uncertainty of a situation. Otherwise, the course of action would be clear and experts unnecessary. In modern risk management, uncertain circumstances are acknowledged as the basis of expert opinion.⁴⁰⁴ Experts 'render subjective opinions based on existing knowledge and information available to them' and it is a given that such opinions, which cannot be objective, can only be accepted 'as preliminary propositions with claims that are not fully justified or are justified with adequate reliability but are not infallible.'⁴⁰⁵ Divergence of scientific expert opinion is therefore normal because, although ostensibly rooted in the study of objective reality, human methodologies and understanding of this are limited.⁴⁰⁶ Experts inevitably

⁴⁰² *ibid*, p. 207.

⁴⁰³ She is arguing especially against the scholarly view which places ancient divination in the field of magic and superstition.

⁴⁰⁴ Hester (2012).

⁴⁰⁵ Ayyub (2001), 208.

⁴⁰⁶ Lamers et al. (2012).

disagree and, moreover, due to the responsibilities involved, they are professionally reticent about making assertions that sway policies and important decisions.⁴⁰⁷ They tend to distance themselves from actions based on their conclusions.⁴⁰⁸

Moreover, although systematic and empirical in its methodologies, the collection and organisation of scientific data can be disorganised and contradictory. For example, a major problem encountered in the modern management of natural disasters (e.g. lightning strikes) is the lack of standardisation across databases resulting in ‘inhomogeneity in scale, entry criteria, structure, coverage, and information files’ resulting in ‘inconsistent reliability and poor interoperability of diverse disaster data.’⁴⁰⁹ The attempt to standardise haphazard and incompatible knowledge is therefore an ongoing task even in technologically advanced societies working in an environment of transparency and in an age of shared information. Consensus of scientific opinion is, in sum, unlikely.⁴¹⁰ Therefore divination, even if a science, could not have rendered conclusive and unanimous expert opinions.⁴¹¹

Regardless, divination by lightning was no science. Rasmussen’s suggestion that ‘empirical analyses’ could be conducted by ‘religious experts who interpret the material’ glides over the fundamental problem. The tacit assumption is not only that the data made sense and cohered, but that it was accurate, and interpretation was therefore a matter of

⁴⁰⁷ Hansen (2007) dubbed this ‘scientific reticence’, especially prevalent in high-stakes environments.

⁴⁰⁸ Interestingly, diviners cross-culturally claim no responsibility for the messages they relate. See, Boyer (2020) on ‘ostensive detachment’.

⁴⁰⁹ Suraj et al. (2018), 19.

⁴¹⁰ Modern experts distinguish between ‘aleatory uncertainty’, which is an inherent variable due to chance and ‘epistemic uncertainty’ which is due to limited knowledge: Hester (2012:2). Ancient fulgural experts suffered from both.

⁴¹¹ Despite Cicero (*De Haruspicum Responsis* 9.18) admiring the *una atque constans vox* of the haruspices.

straightforward consultation. The diviner as intermediary is more or less perfunctory in this view since the information available is authoritative being ‘grounded in actual observations.’⁴¹² Yet, while modern science and risk governance labours even as it attempts to be transparent and standardised and to share information, ancient divination operated quite otherwise in cloistered seclusion. Different priesthoods maintained different traditions, consulted different sacred texts, and functioned in different urban locations with differing loyalties and internal hierarchies.

The haruspices with their Brontoscopic calendars and famous *libri fulgurales* called in “from all Etruria” were not allowed an official *collegium* at Rome but must have had headquarters in the city with copies of these texts stored safely for them to consult when required.⁴¹³ The *pontifices*, who safeguarded Roman religion against misconduct and foreign abominations, turned to the *libri pontificii* for esoteric advice, which were stored in the *regia* for consultation under the close watch of the *pontifex maximus*.⁴¹⁴ The *pontifices* also kept the *indigitamenta*, an index of divine names, which was consulted for prayers and invocations to ensure the correct deities were propitiated.⁴¹⁵ The *decemviri* were in charge of and had sole access to the Sibylline books stored in the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus himself.⁴¹⁶ They could only be consulted with the authorisation of the senate, and the senate alone received their *responsa* and made decisions about what to make public.⁴¹⁷ Like the *augures* and *pontifices*, the *decemviri* were themselves

⁴¹² Rasmussen (2003), 207.

⁴¹³ Haack (2003) for a good overview.

⁴¹⁴ Capdeville (1989) on fulminating Etruscan deities. North (1998) on the books themselves.

⁴¹⁵ Prescendi (2024). The list itself indicates getting divine names right was not straightforward, reinforcing the point from the previous chapter about the messiness of fulminating deities in practice.

⁴¹⁶ Until Augustus moved them to the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine. (Flashpoint 9).

⁴¹⁷ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4.62.5.

constituted to a significant extent of men who were simultaneously senators.⁴¹⁸ It has often been pointed out that the senate was particularly involved with the *collegium* of *decemviri* and that this college acted in tandem with the senate to politically expedient ends.⁴¹⁹

Logistically, the variety of divinatory experts from diverse traditions with various allegiances and authoritative texts meant that the overall environment in which fulgural expertise functioned was not conducive to consensus. Dissensus was all the more likely because these various sacred texts were sequestered away and not shared but jealously guarded. An even more fundamental obstacle, however, lay in the ontological and epistemological basis of the expertise itself. In taking an emic approach, like Rasmussen, we rightly try to take a Roman worldview and understand decisions and events from that perspective. Yet, the etic perspective must be stressed here since the electro-magnetic reality is that lightning has never had anything to say to human relations. Familiarity with the thought worlds of ancient divination allows sympathetic, even accepting, readings of the ancient interpretations of and responses to lightning strikes. The truth, of course, is that the behaviour of lightning never furnished any expert, fulgural lore, or sacred text with any insight into current affairs. Despite all ancient affirmations to the contrary, the correct course of action for Rome in the face of Hannibal's advances through the Italian peninsula (as with any other socio-political situation) could in no way be determined by interpreting a lightning strike. Decisions made on this basis were paradigmatically misinformed.

⁴¹⁸ Broughton (1951) identifies at least 34 senatorial members among the *augures*, 47 among the *pontifices*, and 24 *decemviri* in the period before 100 BCE.

⁴¹⁹ O'Brien & Vervaet (2020).

With that vital fact front and foremost, how, then, did the entire enterprise of interpreting lightning produce useful results? Given that it was not a science, of what information were the fulgural texts comprised that any sense at all could be derived from a consultation? The answer cannot be the rigid formulaic divinatory processes and empirical clarity the sources suggest. If modern disaster databases struggle even though employing valid scientific methodologies, how much more chaotic a pseudo-science working from a faulty worldview must have been. If interoperability still proves difficult due to inhomogeneity in methods, differing entry criteria, and all the inconsistencies attendant upon diverse users and systems over time, how could any interoperability or consensus be at all expected in the ancient context where different fulgural traditions were not based in anything genuinely empirical, measurable, or true?

Unfortunately, having been so closely guarded, the sacred books and fulgural texts are lost to us. Nevertheless, since they were so central to Roman responses to lightning strikes and since so much hinges on their contents, it is worth speculating what kind of information they contained.

The Fulgural Books

For a sense of what the lost fulgural books contained, Artemidorus and the dream dictionary with which we started, may provide a surprising but useful point of reference. Although Artemidorus positioned himself among reliable diviners, to my knowledge, he has not been considered such nor is his dream dictionary included in scholarly discussions of divination by lightning.⁴²⁰ Clearly, this is because the lightning with which

⁴²⁰ Artemidorus (*Oneirocritica* 2.69). is careful to position *somniorum interpretes* alongside respectable and traditional divinatory experts, and to distinguish his art from the quackery he attributes to charlatans. Nice (2001) for disreputable diviners.

he dealt was not real. This important detail notwithstanding, his dream dictionary might offer insight. Despite being free from the religious and legal constraints of official fulgural experts, Artemidorus portrays his art as following a venerable tradition as though he might reasonably be numbered among them. Taking that proposition seriously, momentarily, we might then speculate whether, working backwards, his methodology might say anything about the lost arts of those among whom he postures.

Indeed, in broad strokes, Artemidorus illustrates, at least, how the effects of a lightning strike could be examined and used to comment on current affairs: Artemidorus connects dream lightning to the dreamer's life through allegory, through comparison, and by projecting attitudes about details of the imagined strike into future events.⁴²¹ This is not an improbable *modus operandi* for diviners of worldly lightning. Indeed, in 207 BCE, the lightning strike on the Temple of Juno Regina on the Aventine, was seen through the lens of the Hannibalic War, and since Juno was the queen and wife of Jupiter, the lightning strike was deemed to have spoken specifically to Rome's *matronae*. Likewise, a precious snippet from the *libri reconditi* preserved in Servius (auctus, *ad Aeneid* 2.649) seems actually to quote the fulgural books and follows a similar associative strategy.⁴²² It states that 'if a prince of the state or a king is struck by lightning and survives, his descendants will be noble and of eternal glory.'⁴²³ Indeed, this is a similar type of formula, extrapolation, and prognostication to that which Artemidorus employs.

⁴²¹ Discussed in introductory chapter. On Artemidorus' hermeneutics, see Hall (2023).

⁴²² Linderski (1985), 233-234.

⁴²³ '*si quem principem civitatis vel regem fulmen afflaverit et supervixerit, posteros eius nobiles futuros et aeternae gloriae*'. Not insignificant for Augustus, see Flashpoint 9.

In terms of methodologies, the comparison may be pressed further. The oneiromancer's method of keeping a running correlation of dreams and the events that followed them likely suggests the sort of information fulgural experts would record.⁴²⁴ It was apparently by similarly observing what happened in the world on days when it thundered, for example, that patterns were extrapolated and brontosopic calendars were collated over time.⁴²⁵ Experts in lightning surely kept similar records. This is the kind of practice Rasmussen is referring to in asserting empiricism in divination's 'systematic organisation of actual observations'.⁴²⁶ Let us see, then, what the prognostications of an extant brontosopic calendar entailed. Here are some successive entries on what will happen if it thunders in August:

- If in any way it should thunder, affairs will change for the worse.
- If in any way it should thunder, it promises deep peace.
- If in any way it should thunder, the men of lowly degree shall be gloomy.
- If in any way it should thunder, it threatens civil war.
- If in any way it should thunder, the women and the servile class will dare to commit murders.
- If in any way it should thunder, it threatens a plague on cattle and disorder in affairs of state.⁴²⁷

Even this short excerpt shows prognostications to be wide-ranging and contradictory. Inevitably, circumstances would prove the Brontosopic calendar relevant one way or another whether affairs were peaceful or war-torn, gloomy, plagued, or murderous, and one of these diagnoses would surely prove to be correct. Similarly, with its array of

⁴²⁴ *Oneirocritica* 1. Preface 3-4. Harris-McCoy (2012:36-38) on Artemidorus' 'empiricism'.

⁴²⁵ Turfa (2006). See below.

⁴²⁶ Rasmussen (2003), 201.

⁴²⁷ From MacIntosh Turfa's translation in DeGrummond & Simon (2006), 184.

variously nuanced possible situations concerning both the dreamer and the dream, the *Oneirocritica* likewise offers consultees their best chance of finding a suitable interpretation. Like the Brontosopic calendar, the *Oneirocritica* also deals only with prognosis and offers the dreamer no practical or preventative advice.

If it were just a matter of picking and choosing which description best suited the situation, interpretation might therefore seem a simple process. However, any attempt to tabularise Artemidorus' multiplicitous thunderbolts and targets quickly reveals problems even with deriving a simple prognosis. This is due to a confusion of overlapping categories. Meaning, in the dream dictionary, is different according to whether one is, for example, enslaved or free, rich or poor, and so on, but the categories are not mutually exclusive. A person might be rich, unmarried, and childless and dream they are struck by lightning when prostrate at home or they might be poor, married with a family and dream they are struck when sitting upright abroad. Any combination of these variables would put the diviner in the position of having to decide which of the multiple possible prognoses was the most relevant or of concocting a suitable concatenation of all of them. Consulting this dream dictionary could not therefore be a simple matter of passively receiving an answer. It required active engagement with a range of answers and was potentially also a creative endeavour.⁴²⁸ Artemidorus' treatment of lightning-related phenomena is relatively short, just four passages in total; yet it already confounds interpretation with all the possible variables. It is therefore easy to imagine dedicated books on lightning divination collated over generations of observation rapidly becoming labyrinthine and complicated.

⁴²⁸ Artemidorus pitches his book to diviners and assumes his readers are professionals (1.Pref. 2, 1.12.1), presuming, it seems, they knew how to use it.

Moreover, when fulgural experts were called to investigate the aftermath of lightning strikes, they were required not only to prognosticate but also to offer specific advice on propitiatory and expiatory measures. Their records should therefore be expected to have been still more detailed, including descriptive details of historical strikes alongside the official *responsa* given, the expiations conducted, and their observed outcomes. These could be supplemented with further fulgural considerations such as, for example, the divisions of the heavens and the respective deities presiding over them (an important factor in the *disciplina Etrusca*, at least) or in determining the type and character of thunder and lightning involved.⁴²⁹ The question of categorisation certainly adds further complications.

The diversity of thunderbolts found in the extant literature raises the same problem of overlapping categories observable of dreams and dreamers in the *Oneirocritica*. Some categorisations are physical in nature and describe characteristics and properties. Pliny (*Historia Naturalis* 2.52) for example describes thunderbolts that are dry, smoky, or clear (*sicca, fumida, clara*). Seneca (*Naturales Quaestiones* 2.40) lists thunderbolts that pierce, shatter, or inflame (*terebrat, discutit, urit*). Aulus Caecina described three main categories of lightning (*fulgur*) based on divine intention: lightning of counsel (*consiliarium*), of authority (*auctoritatis*) and of condition (*status*), the latter being an unbidden warning (*monitorium*).⁴³⁰ The Etruscans also classified thunderbolts according to the timeframe of their effects: perpetual (*perpetua*), finite (*finita*), and deferred (*prorogativa*).⁴³¹ Others were more interpretative and describe meaning much like the dream dictionary. When

⁴²⁹ Cf. the Stoic philosopher Attalus who tried to systematise lightning according to ‘where it happened, when, to whom, in what context, what kind, and how much’: *ubi factum sit, quando, cui, in quare, quale, quantum* (Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.48.2).

⁴³⁰ Preserved in Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.391-3.

⁴³¹ Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.47.

Pliny begins to expound on thunderbolts (2.52), he confirms that there were many kinds of thunderbolts recorded: *fulminum ipsorum plura genera traduntur*. Seneca (2.48.2) claims, in fact, there are so many different kinds, the attempt to categorise them would consume his time entirely. It is, he despairs, a boundless task (*immensa*).

Modern attempts to harmonise Roman taxonomies of thunder and lightning are thwarted by the sheer variety apparent in the sources.⁴³² Any attempt at a definitive classification of lightning in Roman divination seems futile not because confusion and variety is indicative of the piecemeal and incomplete nature of our evidence so much as confusion and variety were inherently the reality of ancient typologies of lightning. Determining what kind of lightning had struck was therefore another complex variable contributing to how cumbersome fulgural texts could become.

Artemidorus probably never saw the carefully guarded divinatory books of the Roman state. Yet, if he was working with similar methods as other diviners - even if only in the broadest terms - and within a similar worldview, then his *Oneirocritica* reveals something important about the nature of those lost fulgural texts. Again, contrary to the impression we tend to receive from our sources that definitive answers could be found via straightforward consultation, the *Oneirocritica* reveals what common sense dictates: the stochastic behaviour of lightning, its inscrutable divine 'language', and the variable and ever-changing social fabric it regularly punctured are not easily tallied with a rigid interpretative framework.

⁴³² Thulin (1906) attempted this nonetheless, with Wildfang's (1999:67-77) optimistic contribution making little headway.

The ambiguity of lightning in this dream dictionary is a crucial clue. Its multiplicity of meaning, and its contradictory possible interpretations provided, I believe, a necessary fluidity that allowed the text to work. What the *Oneirocritica* offers with its variously grouped recordings of event and effect and its incompatible interpolations of extenuating circumstances is an invaluable insight into the kind of resources that may have informed more official decisions based on books such as the *libri fulgurales* and the kind of thinking that underpinned them. Specifically, Artemidorus illustrates why the notion of ‘empirical analyses’ by Roman religious experts oversimplifies or overlooks the fundamentally contingent, subjective, and creative nature of divination by lightning.⁴³³

The Fulgural Arts Revisited: formulae, fixity, & flashes

Despite outward appearances, then (the senatorial deliberations and administrative red tape, the procedural structure, the formulaic calling upon the haruspices from all Etruria, the various priests arriving with their traditions of expertise, the consultations with venerable texts, and the delivery of official *responsa*) the whole system must have been in the details far more fluid and *ad hoc* than the sources depict. In fact, it seems likely that it was the ambiguity of lightning, its complicated taxonomies, contradictions, and multivalence that provided the room for manoeuvre necessary for the *ars fulgurum* to be functional. The ambiguity, multiplicity, and malleability intrinsic to divinatory texts and that initial phase of consultation can now be seen to extend across the larger procedure.

Fitting into this pattern are the official *responsa* of the experts which, as we have seen, were also malleable. They were noncommittal enough to be at least negotiable with

⁴³³ North (1998) reaches a similar conclusion for different reasons about the pontifical books.

leeway again lying in ambiguity and choice: in Cicero's case, not one but a series of offensive activities were listed just as not one, but a variety of gods might have been offended and not one, but a variety of dire outcomes were forecast. This is how the entire divinatory enterprise presents itself after the 207 BCE strike: not one but a variety of expert *collegia* might be called upon, not one but a variety of sacred texts might be consulted; not one but a cross section of political and civilian groups might be implicated; and not one but a series of expiations might be required. Even then, which expiations were required was no matter of rote response. The lustral procession was an innovation. Deemed successful, it was repeated in later years, but it was not a routine ritual expiation at that time; it was formulated and bespoke for the incident at hand. Likewise, the dedication of a golden bowl was not a stock response to a lightning strike. In fact, even a cursory glance over the list of known historical lightning strikes and the responses to them suggests there was no such thing as a stock response to lightning strikes.⁴³⁴ Across the annals, and prodigy lists, and the accounts in various historians, it is difficult to see a tidy rubric. Sometimes lightning strikes required a sacrifice, or a statue to be raised, or a statue to be buried, other times it meant a bidental should be built or a tyrant be toppled, sometimes people got buried alive, sometimes others were not allowed to be buried at all, and sometimes Juno received a golden bowl. There are some patterns, of course, and it might be objected that these were all reparations selected from a catalogue prescribed by fulgural texts but that only reinforces my point that there were a lot to choose from and a great many mitigating circumstances. The appearance of fixity, precedent, and tradition is, I would argue, a façade for a necessarily malleable process.

⁴³⁴ Rasmussen (2003) appends the most useful catalogue.

Social Dynamics 2: *Confusion and Culpability*

Given this indefinite, negotiable nature, we must return to the question of whether a narrative of straightforward prodigy, interpretation, and expiation is accurate or even probable. To what extent can the efforts of 207 BCE really be attributed to bonhomie and co-operation let alone to healthy competition? Underlying these questions is the epistemological fragility of the system. How much confidence should we expect diviners to have had in their prognostications? How forceful, moreover, should we expect them to have been in asserting their advice? To attempt a more granular vision of the social dynamics at work in that troubled year, it would be better to try to roll back the benefit of hindsight and successful outcomes to consider again the series of prodigies, interpretations, decisions, and subsequent actions as they played out in real time. What does human mediation and the long chain of interpretive decision-making reveal about fulgural expertise while the trembling relationship between Rome and her gods was perceived to be off kilter and the future hung in the balance?

The variety and quantity of people from different political, religious, and civic parties is one factor to consider in whatever social dynamics might be discerned here. Another factor is time. Although Livy recounts the elaborate sequence as a quick succession of events, clearly some of the tasks involved were time-consuming and some required significant organisation. Behind the scenes that Livy describes, we must also recognise senatorial decision-making processes and so, at each step in this series of events, the senate should be interpolated receiving advice, debating, and endorsing decisions.⁴³⁵ As a result, the timeframes implicated are relatively lengthy, (days, at least, but easily weeks)

⁴³⁵ Struck's (2016) vision of ancient divination has a place here as a process of constructive equivocation allowing answers and solutions to bubble up out of the intuitions of 'surplus knowledge'.

which itself has potential to impact the process.⁴³⁶ The condensed episode Livy describes is therefore one in which a variety of invested parties are acting in a high-stakes environment over a relatively extended period of time. Time in such an environment allowed not only for the orderly organisation and action usually described but for its opposites: indecision and second thoughts as well mounting confusion and anxiety. This is not only a possible alternative to the usual reading of the episode, it seems, by human nature, the more likely one.

The reason Boyce had difficulty in understanding why the pontiffs would hand proceedings over to another college of priests is because she assumed that the various parties were vying for primacy in handling the interpretation and expiation of the lightning strike. In short, she failed to see why they would voluntarily give up control of the proceedings. In a similar manner, competition for authority and control is why Santangelo sees the various parties advising their own additional expiatory measures.⁴³⁷ Yet, given the imminent danger and the importance laid on interpreting and responding appropriately to the prodigies, and given the state of the *ars fulgurum* as I have described them, how much confidence should we really expect diviners to have had in their interpretations and advice? Even if they deeply respected and believed in the tradition, how much faith could they have in their own ability to access and accurately apply it?⁴³⁸ Moreover, in moments of great uncertainty, how much was control even desirable? Experts in a position to interpret signs were simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. Cicero describes the authority (*ius*) of the augur as the greatest and gravest in the Roman

⁴³⁶ E.g., How long would it take for Livius Andronicus to compose a bespoke hymn and how long again for the maidens to learn it?

⁴³⁷ Santangelo (2016:166-8) to assert their own tradition and its efficacy.

⁴³⁸ The point here is self-doubt not cynicism.

state (*De Legibus* 2. 31). Dire circumstances certainly allow a hero to step forward and save the day, but a safer approach would be to pass the task along to others.

The tendency to envisage a generally competitive environment with experts vying for control, sorely underestimates, I think, the responsibility and culpability of those experts. Likewise, for key political decision-makers, authority carried with it as a subsidiary risk the potential for blame. When the very survival of Rome was at stake, the enormity of the potential blame involved must have seemed unbearable. In the political sciences, it is well-known that prominent political figures are risk averse and spend a disproportionate amount of time engaged in 'blame avoidance'.⁴³⁹ Blame avoidance plays a fundamental role in how modern governing bodies respond to risk and there are some predictable features as to what blame avoidance looks like in practice. Pertinent here is a heavy reliance on rules and protocols which serves the purpose of absolving blame.⁴⁴⁰ This is immediately recognisable in the elaborate Roman politico-religious rituals involved in responding to a lightning strike with all the administrative to-and froing and the reliance on tradition and supposedly prescriptive texts and so on. Rule following is an assurance behaviour.⁴⁴¹

Another key feature of blame avoidance in organisational structures pertains to agency and involves the attempt to obfuscate any clear line of responsibility.⁴⁴² This manifests as

⁴³⁹ Weaver (1986:372), 'Policymakers are often placed in situations in which the opportunities to claim credit that discretion affords are simply not worth the associated political costs. [...] Politicians must, therefore, be at least as interested in avoiding blame for (perceived or real) losses that they either imposed or acquiesced in as they are in 'claiming credit' for benefits they have granted.' Hood (2011:63) blame avoidance will often 'trump other concerns'.

⁴⁴⁰ Hansson (2017), 'protocolisation'.

⁴⁴¹ Hood (2011), 73.

⁴⁴² Cf. McGraw (1990:121) 'diffusion of responsibility'.

chronic delegation resulting in complex webs of interactions, which spreads responsibility and makes it difficult to trace where fault lies.⁴⁴³ The wide range of actors involved in the case of 207 BCE were participants in a decision-making process in conditions of extreme danger and uncertainty – meteorological, societal, and existential. The intense intercollegiate activity and the back-and-forth from the senate may be viewed somewhat differently from the perspective of chronic delegation. Rather than competition and cooperation, that everyone can point the finger elsewhere is exactly what blame avoidance models would predict of a complex governing body in desperate times of extreme uncertainty.

Moreover, in such anxious times, public reception of expertise and official decisions can also become a liability. Uncertainty about expert knowledge can amplify collective fear.⁴⁴⁴ The outbreak and fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic has recently illustrated with startling clarity how divisive and disorienting mistrust of experts can be in a crisis. The response to the pandemic amply illustrates how public hysteria and social stagnation can result from conflicting expert opinions.⁴⁴⁵ In Rome in crisis, just as individual diviners might have had their own qualms about whether they or their peers had interpreted and advised correctly, an extra societal layer of uncertainty should be suspected surrounding their public reception. In the dialogic context of *De Divinatione*, while Quintus expresses certainty about the validity of divination, the very act of arguing his case is indicative of an opposing view and, of course, Marcus himself provides the counterargument. The uncertainty embedded in this inconclusive discussion reflects, it seems safe to imagine,

⁴⁴³ Hood (2011) 'blame games' (pp.66-88). Hood (2002) on delegation and 'muddying the waters of responsibility'.

⁴⁴⁴ Carpurro et al. (2021); Lemor & Montpetit (2024).

⁴⁴⁵ Though opportunists certainly abounded!

the uncertainties surrounding divinatory matters in Cicero's Rome and the inconclusive arguments of his day. Cynical attitudes were certainly also present in 207 BCE: this was the Rome of Cato the Elder, who famously scoffed that he was surprised one haruspex did not burst out laughing when another haruspex passed him on the street.⁴⁴⁶ As our experience with Covid reveals, such mockery may only have deepened general anxieties and confusions rather than dispelled them.



Conclusion:

The Divinatory Handling of Lightning in Republican Rome

We set out by asking what sort of a social performance this was in response to the strike on Juno Regina's temple and what it may tell us about confidence in the fulgural arts and the experts who practiced them. The answer has revolved around ideas of knowledge, authority, and control. The fraught epistemology of lightning, introduced in the previous chapter concerning uncertainties about the divine provenance of thunderbolts, has been built upon in this chapter by exploring how divination by lightning was confronted by the equally volatile tasks of interpreting their meaning and deciding what to do about them. I have argued that the entire fulgural process was systemically uncertain: from the inscrutability of the 'sign' itself to the state of the 'science' applied to it; from the variety of experts available to their differing and incompatible traditions; and from the refractory nature of the sacred texts to the ambiguous and multiplicitous expert *responsa* arising

⁴⁴⁶ Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2.24.

from them, we have seen opacity and contingency emerge at every stage. I have also argued that this lack of exactitude and finality was not a flaw in the system but the structural solution to a paradigm that was itself inherently flawed. An inbuilt capacity at each stage to respond and adapt to different circumstantial cues made the system malleable and thus navigable, allowing it to accommodate and calibrate those two ultimately unrelated variables: socio-political events and the weather.

Social Dynamics 3: Normativity & Conservatism

Where does all this lead in terms of the overarching questions about how ancient Roman society handled lightning? What are the ramifications for the social role of divination by lightning? We may step back now to view the larger picture. In 207 BCE, the threat was external: an enemy presence in Roman territory. Yet the remedy, apart from the successful military manoeuvres that followed, was internal and involved paying the correct respects to the correct deities and obligating a large number of men and women in both secular and priestly society to take part in various religious rituals. Psychologically, as is often argued, this may have served useful purposes such as drawing the community together, distracting them with joint purposes, and allaying fears. Institutionally, however, it asserted a collective desire to avert danger and maintain the status quo.

The various communal activities in this episode all acknowledged and deferred to Rome's civic, political, and religious institutions *en masse*. In this way, although an interventionist force, and ostensibly a divine one, lightning in the republican period tended to result in actions that reinforced the establishment. The example of 207 BCE illustrates like any number of comparable events, lightning strikes taken to be *prodigia* indicated directly and pressingly a threat to socio-political stability. Lightning prodigies considered to speak

directly to the state of the republic, the health of the *res publica*, were aimed at the collective and required a collective response. Whatever multifarious interpretations and expiations were advised, the drive was always to locate anomaly and allocate blame in order to expunge them and return to life as normal. On the republican stage, the entire performance of divining the meaning of lightning strikes and dealing with them thus emerges as a conservative and normative practice. The very logic of the institution revolved around maintaining divine and social equilibrium by diagnosing and correcting causes of social imbalance or irregularity.

Had Carthage prevailed, memory of the proceedings of 207 BCE would no doubt have been very different. Success so contingent on historical outcomes rather than any inherent causality belies the precarious nature of the system and the vulnerability of its human actors. Having considered a success story, the next chapter turns to a disaster story to illustrate that the same social dynamics that allowed divination to succeed in 207 BCE could also lead to calamitous consequences. The normativity and conservatism that fuelled responses to a prodigious lightning strike could turn violently against those it marked as targets wherever blame was assigned.



Flashpoint Six

Helvia is Struck from her Horse

expiation, panic, and blame

In 114 BCE, the Roman populace was horrified by a particularly distressing and ominous event. A young girl named Helvia, daughter of a Roman *eques*, was leaving the capital on horseback when she was struck by lightning.⁴⁴⁷ In the aftermath of the strike, Helvia was found to have been blasted from her horse which was lying a distance from her with all its accessories torn off. Helvia herself was left disturbingly splayed on the ground. The sources all stress the suggestive manner in which she lay exposed.⁴⁴⁸ Plutarch (*Quaestiones Romanae* 83) records that her tunic had been pulled right up from her private parts as if on purpose (ἐπίτηδες). Like the horse, the lightning had also stripped its young rider of her ornaments: her sandals, rings, and hairnet were all scattered about her. In this state of undress and disarray, Helvia lay with her mouth wide open and her tongue hanging out.

If temples and statuary struck by lightning caused the consternation we have seen, and required careful interpretation and action, it is hardly surprising that this sensational incident warranted serious attention. Helvia's tragic death was received with foreboding as only the beginning. It thus became only the first in a series of sensational events. The

⁴⁴⁷ Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae* 83 (*Moralia* 284); Julius Obsequens, (*Liber Prodigiousum* 37) says she was returning to Apulia from the Roman games; Orosius (5.15.20) says she was returning to Rome from Apulia.

⁴⁴⁸ Orosius (5.15.50): '*obscenum in modum nuda et lingua paululum exerta iacuit*'.

drama of the rudely exposed young daughter of a Roman knight caused shockwaves that moved through Roman society. As they did so, the sense of perceived communal threat seems to have escalated. Ultimately, the severity of the measures taken to restore balance were in themselves so dramatic and grim that they are remembered as horrors in their own right. As a result, the fact that lightning was the catalyst for these measures is barely noted in scholarship. Here, however, it is our main concern.

The most confronting aspect of the incident was its uncomfortable sexuality. This was clearly disturbing and is the point our sources stress. Helvia as a παρθένος in Plutarch's words was sexually innocent and yet the strike had spectacularly violated her *pudicitia*. Plutarch's substantive use of the adjective ἀπορρήτα, meaning forbidden and secret, to refer to her genitals (her toga was pulled ἀπὸ τῶν ἀπορρήτων) underscores this sense of transgression. The open mouth with the tongue lolling out is also a repeated detail, presented not just a tragedy but an obscenity.⁴⁴⁹ This is all important because it was the suggestive manner in which Helvia was struck that led to the sexual interpretation of the strike.

Plutarch only relates that the soothsayers (μάντις) were called in. Who these were is not stated but the previous flashpoint gives good indication of their suggestible, interpretative methods in diagnosing the scene. Since Helvia was a virgin, a connection was drawn to the Vestal Virgins and due to the explicit nature of the strike, it was extrapolated that a terrible disgrace (δεινὴ αἰσχύνη) had been perpetrated among them. Since Helvia's horse was also a victim of the lightning bolt, they drew the further

⁴⁴⁹ Julius Obsequens 37 says the tongue protruded as though the lightning had entered her 'lower parts' (*per inferiores locos*) and exited her mouth. Recall the sexual, phallic connotations of the thunderbolt discussed in the introduction.

conclusion that a member of the *equites* was the offending partner in the crime. Anomaly was identified, in other words, and blame was allocated. In this case, the prodigy indicated an internal threat to Rome, among the very people entrusted with safeguarding the city. It is that threat and the strong sense of risk that propel us in this chapter as we unpack the response to this lightning strike focusing now on culpability and blame. The whole concept of risk has been dismissed by some scholars recently as an anachronism that does not apply to the ancient world. By fixating on the ancient lack of the mathematics to formally calculate probability and a lack of perfect terminology to translate the modern concept of risk, such scholarship seems to have limited itself to technical theories of risk.⁴⁵⁰ These it deems inapplicable, while cultural theories of risk are bypassed altogether.⁴⁵¹ Yet, despite its explicitly modern application, even technical risk management is useful in the sphere of natural hazards and provides us with a useful scaffold in this chapter. When applied to ancient lightning strikes, it helps to elucidate the progression of events in Roman responses and gives structure to the activities involved. We will see where ancient and modern thinking indeed diverge but this divergence helps us to understand the ancient experience of risk in fulgural matters and in no way suggests that the sense of risk, *per se*, is an anachronism.

Cultural theory is also useful. This looks beyond the negotiation of objective hazards to existential ones; it is concerned with societal constructions. The questions such analysis poses when applied to the case of lightning in the Roman world, prove thought-provoking and illuminating. These include such practical concerns as:

⁴⁵⁰ Notably, Beard (2011); Beerden (2013:196-203). Vădan (2022) provides the necessary corrective.

⁴⁵¹ E.g., Beerden writes off the entirety of Mary Douglas' *opus* with one sentence in a footnote (2013:199, n.18) despite the fact that *Purity and Danger* (1966) has become a classic of anthropology. While Douglas' follow-up book *Natural Symbols* (1970) has been criticised, it is still engaged with, modified, and taught, and it remains foundational in the study of cultural theory of risk which is now a substantial field.

What criteria are appropriate for dealing with risks? How safe is safe enough? Should society adopt a set of uniform criteria for all types of risk regardless of context? Who should be involved in designing these criteria? Who should be held accountable if the criteria prove inadequate?⁴⁵²

These questions taken from a collection of essays titled '*Social Theories of Risk*' are precisely the concerns of the previous chapter. We have addressed them in terms of fulgural experts and their expertise, the problem of standardisation, senatorial procedures, and public reception. Cultural analysis of risk focuses on which norms and structures are being threatened or buttressed by responses to perceived risks and is predicated on the insight that whatever objective dangers are present and threaten a community, societal organisations will 'emphasize those that reinforce the moral, political, or religious order that holds the group together'.⁴⁵³ This is exactly where the previous chapter brought us; raising the central questions of knowledge, authority, responsibility, and control and leading to the conclusion that when the socio-political fabric was perceived to be threatened by a prodigious strike, lightning became a normative, conservative force provoking responses that buttressed the system itself and the socio-political *status quo*.

This chapter picks up the argument here. Continuing through the conceptual framework of risk governance, I will argue that divination by lightning was not only analogous to risk management in superficial features such as basic function but that it *was* risk management in its modalities and essential character.⁴⁵⁴ This is worthwhile as we turn to the question of culpability because it shows how the apportioning of blame was an inbuilt

⁴⁵² Krinsky & Golding (1992), 54.

⁴⁵³ Rayner (1992), 87.

⁴⁵⁴ Pace Beerden (2013), who argues these are two orthogonal systems: 'What risk assessment does for modern man, was what divination did for ancient man: both risk assessment and divination are thought to reduce uncertainty' (p.203).

feature of the Roman response to prodigious lightning strikes and why, in the context of interpretative malleability, lightning was able to generate panic and even hysteria.

A Chronology of Disaster

Before turning to the details of Helvia's case, it will be useful to lay out the framework by which these will be understood. My framework is informed by both technical and cultural risk theories. Experts in prodigies and divination were called to the sites of lightning strikes in much the same way scientific experts are now called to the sites of natural disasters and for the similar purposes of assessing and mitigating risk. Modern experts may be called to the site of a natural hazard before, during, or after a disaster event. Before and during the event their key roles are risk prevention and risk mitigation respectively. The procedures of ancient fulgural experts are comparable to these proactive and reactive roles. In fact, the aims of risk prevention and mitigation align with the divinatory objectives of *auspicia impetrativa* and *oblative* respectively. Lightning solicited as a sign in advance of an undertaking was sought as a preventative to minimise the risk of future failure and suffering by assessing the will of the gods. Taking the auspices was therefore in quite pragmatic ways an act of risk prevention. An unsolicited lightning strike, on the other hand, often taken as a sign that poor decisions were being made, indicated that concerned parties were already on the path towards future failure and suffering. In this case, experts were required to identify the problem and advise measures to change that path and rectify or manage it. The response to such a lightning strike was, in other words, risk mitigation once the disaster was underway.

For the natural hazard expert, the chronology of disasters is divided into four stages:

- (1) quiescence
- (2) imminent threat
- (3) the event itself
- (4) the recovery stage returning to 'life as normal'.⁴⁵⁵

In Roman society, a similar progression of four stages may be discerned; however, the paradigmatic misunderstanding of causal links discussed in the previous chapter dictated how the chronology of ancient lightning disasters were perceived. Stage two and three were inverted, thus:

- (1) quiescence
- (2) the event itself (thunder and lightning)
- (3) imminent threat
- (4) the recovery stage returning to 'life as normal'.

The first stage, quiescence, denotes a potentially volatile situation in a dormant state. It is not that there is no danger, but rather latent danger is at rest. This correlates with the equilibrium in the Roman sense when the state was safely in harmony with the gods.⁴⁵⁶ When societal conditions were not understood to be provoking divine wrath, Roman communities felt themselves in such a state of quiescence: this is Jupiter, seated, with thunderbolt lowered on his lap. In this state, the potential for rupture is ever-present and constant monitoring is required. The process of *servare de caelo* by officials holding *spectio* comprised one ancient method of such monitoring. In the Roman context, however, the hazardous event itself signalled imminent threat rather than being the culmination of it. Therefore, although lightning strikes are over almost instantaneously,

⁴⁵⁵ Rougier et al. (2018), 5.

⁴⁵⁶ In his criticisms of the term '*pax deorum*', Lorient (2023:189) asks whether we mean a '*bienveillance ponctuelle*' or '*un état de paix statique*'. The dynamic concept of quiescence answers this question without the problematic binary: i.e., a constant, dynamic process. Cf. Champion (2017: xi), 'constant vigilance was required'.

since there was a perceived connection between lightning and future socio-political events, fulgural experts and Roman society at large believed themselves to be in the midst of an unfolding disaster at the site of a smouldering lightning strike rather than in the aftermath of one. This is Jupiter, standing, hurling thunderbolts from his raised right hand in disapproval and warning. Actions taken after a strike therefore still fall under the forward-oriented conceptual rubric of risk mitigation.

This is where ancient and modern risk management diverge, and the epistemological differences become significant. While both parties are employed in determining the nature of a disaster and the correct response to it, the scientific expert will identify a *mechanical* cause-and-effect correlation in the physical world whereas the haruspex or augur identified a *moral* correlation between physical world – a lightning strike – and human society. The resulting recommendations for risk mitigation in the ancient context therefore operated in an entirely different domain. While scientists guard against natural phenomena and their recommendations affect the human realm in practical, logistical terms, such as evacuations or buttoning down hatches etc., their Roman counterparts were oriented towards cultural phenomena and focused on corrective human behaviour. Consequently, in order to avert danger and restore balance, a problem first needed to be identified and therefore responsibility - if not blame. Herein lies the liability of lightning: as a prodigy, it was usually an accusation, which raised the volatile question of where it was directed. In the previous chapter, we observed that culpability could lay a heavy burden on fulgural experts, but, in this risk management model, it may now also be seen that identifying culpable parties was an important part of what diviners did. After ominous or prodigious thunder or lightning, identifying a fault and apportioning blame was often an integral step on the path to recovery.

The recovery phase, signalling a return to life as normal, was thus oriented differently from mechanical and moral perspectives. The recovery phase after a lightning *prodigium* began only once faulty behaviour was rectified, appropriate expiations had been conducted, and the threat was felt to dissipate. Here we see those normative, conservative impulses systemically reinforced by divinatory practices geared generally towards reining in behaviour that was contrary to or endangering societal norms.

It was possible for blame to be located and resolved quite procedurally. In 215 BCE, for example, when the newly elected consul Marcus Claudius Marcellus was about to take up office, a sudden thunderclap brought proceedings to a halt, and the augurs were called in (Livy 23.31.13-14). The augurs announced a *vitium* in response to the election, signifying divine disapproval of something in the undertaking. The senate decided that this disapproval was caused by the fact that both consuls were plebeian: an unprecedented event in Roman history.⁴⁵⁷ As a result, Marcellus resigned rather than taking up his elected office. The normative impulse is obvious here; fault, having been found in unprecedented activity, was simply remedied by abandoning that activity and conforming to precedent. That there was no stigma attached to Marcellus, himself, on account of this divine intervention is evident because he was re-elected (alongside a patrician consul) the following year.⁴⁵⁸ We do not have all the incidental details, but whatever fuss ensued in the moment, the entire event seems ultimately to have unravelled calmly despite the context of the Second Punic War and defeat at Cannae the year prior. This relatively sedate response was perhaps due partly to the mildness of the thunderclap (as opposed to a

⁴⁵⁷ Linderski (1986); Rasmussen (2003:157-8).

⁴⁵⁸ For this reason, Rasmussen, above, sees no reason to suspect foul play in these events. Cf. Scullard (1951:57-59) who, among others, views class struggles manipulating the election.

violent and destructive lightning strike) and partly to the augurs' allocation of blame to a procedural problem (an electoral *vitium* not a state-threatening *prodigium*).⁴⁵⁹ The stakes in this case therefore do not seem to have been heightened by the wider context and the progression from rupture to recovery seems swift.

It was also possible, however, for blame to be located with explosive results. Aulus Gellius (4.5) recounts an incident when a statue of Horatius Cocles in the vicinity of the Comitium was struck by lightning. The haruspices were called in to decide what action to take. They declared that the statue needed to be positioned in a lower, gloomier location. Since Horatius Cocles was a heroized figure from the early Republic who had, according to tradition, almost single-handedly fought off the entire Etruscan army by defending the Sublician bridge, the Etruscan augurs were suspected of being motivated by enmity and a hatred of Rome. They were later betrayed and brought to court where they confessed their treachery in misadvising on the repositioning of the statue. As a result, they were executed. The correct protocol (*verae rationes*) was then determined, and the statue was accordingly erected in an even more elevated location on the Vulcanal above the Comitium.⁴⁶⁰

Gellius recounts the execution blithely, confident that justice had been served. This hangs on his certainty that the lightning strike indeed had meaning, that it demanded a particular course of action which the haruspices were capable of accurately interpreting, and that they had purposely deceived the public about this correct response. If Gellius' account is taken at face value, it reveals powerful haruspices using their privileged

⁴⁵⁹ Not to mention Marcellus' immediate acquiescence in standing down.

⁴⁶⁰ Gagé (1973) discusses the incident at length although his interest is in the statue and its identity.

position to manipulate religious observances for factional gain.⁴⁶¹ The fact that the haruspices confessed to the crime suggests they were guilty as charged and had consciously used the lightning strike as an excuse to impose their will upon their people. Of course, the confession may have come under duress. What the account really highlights is the responsibility placed on the diviner's shoulders and the dangers of control. Since lightning is, in reality, amoral and meaningless there could be no true protocol to determine where the statue of Cocles should be positioned; 'true' in this case can only mean more acceptable and amenable either to public desire or that of the people in power. Most troubling is the fact that in determining the supposed correct protocol, someone was in control of a truth that had no basis in reality and yet which carried a death sentence for those condemned as 'guilty' by it. This is the formula for a witch hunt.

The execution of the haruspices over the positioning of a statue seems disproportionate to the crime. Removing the certainty of justice on which Gellius rests, his account certainly reads as a grim series of events. The same can be said of Helvia's case, in 114 BCE, when it was a young girl not a statue that was struck. Both the severity of the lightning strike and the apportioning of blame raised the stakes in this case exponentially. With our revised disaster chronology in mind and the framework of risk management to guide us, we may return now to the strike that destroyed poor Helvia to try and make sense of the aftermath.

⁴⁶¹ Gagé, above, takes the haruspical advice unproblematically as intentionally misleading.

Plutarch's account is terse but three clear stages can be discerned in the events which he describes unravelling after the official *responsum*: first, an inquiry was conducted, and a scandal was indeed revealed among the Vestals; second, the guilty Vestals were convicted and punished; third, two Greeks and two Gauls were buried alive in response to a consultation with the Sibylline Books.⁴⁶² In this catalogue of harrowing events, it is the spectre of human sacrifice and the unusual practice of live burial that attracts the attention of scholarly discussion. Modern debate has focussed on trying to understand the purpose of the burials, the nature of the ritual that prescribed them, and the status of the victims.⁴⁶³ Romans themselves although the perpetrators alleged the proceedings were thoroughly un-Roman.⁴⁶⁴ Yet, although unpalatable to later Roman sensibilities, they were not unique events although they were exceedingly rare.⁴⁶⁵ Live burial was the prescribed punishment for Vestals found guilty of charges of *incestus*; it had happened before and it is understood that this is what Plutarch meant with his ominously laconic statement that the disgraced victims were 'convicted and punished' (ἐκολάσθησαν ἐξελεγχθεῖσαι).⁴⁶⁶ Plutarch's own purpose in relating the events of 114 BCE is to point out the apparent double-standards in Rome taking such umbrage at the Bletonesii, a Spanish tribe prevented by law from conducting human sacrifice (ἄνθρωπον τεθυκέναι θεοῖς) according to their custom, when Romans themselves had their own customary practices of human sacrifice. It was not the live burial of the Vestals, but the burial of the Greeks and Gauls that Plutarch presents as evidence for this.

⁴⁶² Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae* 83.

⁴⁶³ Discussed below.

⁴⁶⁴ Livy 22.57.6: '*minime Romano*'. Caesar's famous charge of human sacrifice against the Gauls (*Bellum Gallicum* 6.16). Cf. Cassius Dio's charge of the same against Caesar (43.24.4).

⁴⁶⁵ We suppose. Schultz (2012:135) counts over 20 instances between 230-80 BCE. On attitudes, see Rives (1995) for overview. I have already suggested regarding lightning the threat was an ever-looming possibility.

⁴⁶⁶ It may be no coincidence that the live burial of Vestals is described in Plutarch, *Numa* 10.4-7. Numa is credited with instituting the rites of Vesta but also this awful punishment: again, ritual murder is associated with Rome's sacred king.

The fate of the Vestal Virgins was certainly a punishment and some manner of atonement for their scandalous behaviour, whether we adduce a purging, a 'ritual killing', or an execution.⁴⁶⁷ It therefore seems right to distinguish their burial from that of the Greeks and Gauls in terms of what sort of ritual was being conducted.⁴⁶⁸ The latter do not seem to have been accused of any wrongdoing, their individual identities seem unimportant, and consequently their burial cannot be deemed a punishment.⁴⁶⁹ Can we accept Plutarch's account of the activity straightforwardly as one of human sacrifice? If so, within what framework? The question has long perplexed scholarship.⁴⁷⁰ It has sometimes been viewed as an apotropaic reparation for the killing of the Vestals, but to my knowledge it has not been viewed as a direct response to the original lightning strike.⁴⁷¹ Bringing lightning into this discussion may not entirely resolve the issue but it does cast the contours of events rather differently. One of the ways it does this is by framing the *entire* series of events as a response to a lightning *prodigium*.

In reality, what we witness in the case of Helvia, as with other such fraught incidents, is not a lightning strike revealing a scandal, but calling one into being. The experts must cast about for where to lay blame as if lightning was an epiphany of the divine finger pointing accusingly at something. The real question must be how, in this instance, it came to point at the Temple of Vesta and why the interpreted sign was so accurate. Again, timeframes

⁴⁶⁷ Parker (2004:575-580), a sacrificial 'scapegoat'; Wildfang (2006:58-9), an 'expiatory sacrifice' to Vesta; Gradel (2002:297), an 'execution'; Schultz (2010) 'ritual murder'; Schultz (2012): removal of 'irreparable' polluting presence.

⁴⁶⁸ Livy 22.57.6.

⁴⁶⁹ Várhelyi (2007), 'symbolic enemies'.

⁴⁷⁰ Wissowa (1925) viewed it an expiation of a prodigy but interpreted the *incestum* of the Vestals itself as the prodigy. Cornell (1981:32) counters this idea, but although describing the lightning striking Helvia as a prodigy, he moves onto the religious offence of the Vestals without connecting the lightning to the sacrificial burial. This connection only becomes obvious due to my own stress on the repeated idea that lightning strikes could necessitate the taking of human life.

⁴⁷¹ As above. Cf. Musti (1978), atoning for the pollution of executing Vestals.

are important. Following the *responsum* from the μάντεις that disgrace among the Vestals was afoot, Plutarch recounts events tersely:

ἀποφνηαμένων δὲ τῶν μάντεων δεινὴν μὲν αἰσχύνην ταῖς ἱεραῖς παρθένοις εἶναι καὶ γενήσεσθαι περιβόητον, ἄψεσθαι δὲ τινα καὶ ἰππέων ὕβριν, ἐμήνυσε βάρβαρος τινὸς ἰππικοῦ θεράπων τρεῖς παρθένους τῶν ἐστιάδων, Αἰμιλίαν καὶ Λικινίαν καὶ Μαρκίαν, ὑπὸ ταύτῳ διεφθαρμένας καὶ συνούσας πολὺν χρόνον ἀνδράσιν, ὧν εἷς ἦν Βετούτιος Βάρρος τοῦ μηνυτοῦ δεσπότης. ἐκεῖναι μὲν οὖν ἐκολάσθησαν ἐξελεγχθεῖσαι...

After the soothsayers declared that a dreadful shame was among the Vestal Virgins and that it would become notorious, and that some outrage would also be found involving the equestrian order, the barbarian slave of a certain cavalryman informed against three Vestal Virgins, Aemilia, Licinia, and Marcia, who had been corrupted in the same way having cohabited with men for a long time, one of whom was Betutius Barrus, the master of the informer. Those women, therefore, were punished, having been convicted...

(*Quaestiones Romanae* 83 = *Moralia* 284b)

Procedurally, this was clearly protracted. It is unlikely the appropriate diviners were present at the spot where Helvia was struck. They would have had to be called for and might have taken some time to arrive. Then, after retreating for the necessary consultations, results needed to be presented to the senate and deliberated. The slave informer was unlikely to be near the senate to volunteer his evidence when a Vestal scandal was announced and there were, moreover, harsh and time-consuming judicial conditions for information to be accepted legally from such a person.⁴⁷² It is unlikely that the sacred books had an exact interpretation for the specifics of Helvia's case. Rather, given the ambiguity and malleability of fulgural practices established in the previous chapter, we see how situational cues and circumstantial evidence could feed into and

⁴⁷² i.e., Obtaining witness testimony from slaves through torture. However, at least in the later times of Ulpian's digest, slaves were not allowed to give evidence about accused masters. Interesting discussion in Zinsmaier (2015).

guide interpretation. Interpretative flexibility, however, here also reveals ominous implications. In the search for a culprit, a lightning strike could searingly focus attention upon groups already under suspicion. As Plutarch states, the Vestals had long been entertaining their lovers (πολὸν χρόνον). Their deviance was not new and just as Betutius Barrus' slave knew of it, rumours surely circulated. These circumstances are a good example of phase one of the disaster chronology: a state of quiescence. There was latent danger, brewing unacknowledged, beneath apparent normality.

The lightning, constituting phase two, acted as a catalyst drawing submerged anxieties to the surface. The fatal lightning strike delivered its dire warning that something or someone was endangering public safety with imminent divine wrath. Then, in the face of that impending doom, the third phase is the crucial period when interpretations are made, fault is identified, and blame is assigned. As the Vestal scandal surged into public consciousness, so, too, could this knowledge galvanise public opinion and (inadvertently or otherwise) influence interpretative and decision-making processes. In the outcry aroused by the stricken Helvia and in the time that elapsed between the divinatory *responsum* and official senatorial decisions, rumour could circulate, information could be transmitted, opinions would foment, and anxieties would rise.

Scholars have sometimes referred to a general hysteria compelling the extreme measures taken, but I think these events are better understood as a moral panic. This is a mass response to a perceived social problem which becomes construed as a threat to society. It has at its source behaviour or actions which identify participants as deviants who become public enemies. The core underlying emotion is fear and characteristically this is blown out of all proportion to the threat - perceived or actual. The concept of a moral panic had

its genesis in the 1970s with the pioneering work of the sociologist Stanley Cohen.⁴⁷³ His ideas arose from a case study of contemporary UK events but the model it generated has been widely picked up and, as a repeating pattern of human behaviour, it has applications to the ancient world as it does to our own times. A generic explanation from Goode and Ben-Yehuda who developed Cohen's ideas in the 1990s will illustrate its pertinence:

During the moral panic, the behaviour of some of the members of a society is thought to be so problematic to others, the evil they do, or are thought to do, is felt to be so wounding to the substance and fabric of the body social that serious steps must be taken to control the behaviour, punish the perpetrators, and repair the damage. The threat this evil presumably poses is felt to represent a crisis for society: something must be done about it and that something must be done now; if steps are not taken immediately or soon, we will suffer even graver consequences.⁴⁷⁴

Recognisable here is so much of Roman behaviour concerning prodigies. Lightning adds a whole other level of fear to this sort of panic because, in addition to the human deviance that is felt to have tipped society into a crisis, the element of violent divine retribution indicated unequivocally the instability and urgency of the situation. So, whereas the rioting Mods and Rockers of Clacton Beach in 1964 may have ignited an overblown fear that the fabric of British society was falling apart, Romans in 114 BCE saw their fears about what might befall their society on account of these promiscuous Vestals incandesce in the prodigious lightning bolt that so graphically attacked Helvia.

Since the overriding urgency of a moral panic is to rein in deviance, this only reinforces the already normative, conservative Roman response to lightning.⁴⁷⁵ Events would not proceed calmly. Panics often erupt quickly, and excessive public hostility is shown

⁴⁷³ Cohen first published his work in 1972 concerning the case of the Mods and Rockers after the infamous 1964 'riot' of Clacton Beach.

⁴⁷⁴ Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994), 31.

⁴⁷⁵ 'News' as Cohen summarises is a 'source of information about the normative contours of a society' (1972:111).

towards the group seen to be violating social stability.⁴⁷⁶ As a result, the situation becomes volatile and since fear grows vastly disproportionate to the threat posed, responses can be poorly targeted and excessive.⁴⁷⁷ That seems an apt description of the extreme events following Helvia's death.

In a moral panic, Goode and Ben-Yehuda describe three steps by which communities attempt to avert the looming danger: namely, to control the deviant behaviour, punish the perpetrators, and repair the damage.⁴⁷⁸ What leaps out here is that these steps correspond closely to the three phases of activity described by Plutarch: in which case, to control the deviant behaviour, an inquisition was conducted into the affairs of the Vestals; to punish the perpetrators, the Vestals were 'convicted and punished'; and to repair the damage, further live burials of Greeks and Gauls were conducted. Recognisable, here, too, then, is the progression of the modified disaster chronology with a suitably moral orientation. These are the three phases post-quietude, following a lightning prodigy from rupture to recovery.

In that view, punishment of the Vestals only mitigated the risk by ending the initial wrongdoing; it did not expiate the subsequent strike that killed Helvia. In other words, punishment of the Vestals alone was not sufficient to shift events into the recovery phase. As Plutarch explains, since the Vestal's conduct was 'plainly atrocious', the priests (ἱερεῖς; evidently, the *decemviri*) were instructed to consult the Sibylline books.⁴⁷⁹ It was this

⁴⁷⁶ 'Folk devils' in the terminology of moral panics: perceived as 'legitimate and deserving targets of self-righteous anger, hostility, and punishment' (Goode & Ben Yehuda 1994:35).

⁴⁷⁷ Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994), 20.

⁴⁷⁸ *ibid* 35.

⁴⁷⁹ That instruction to make the human sacrifice came from the Sibylline books is repeated in different sources: Livy 22.57.5, *decemviri libros adire iussi sunt*, 22.57.6, instructions from the Books of Fate (*ex fatalibus libris*); Plutarch, *Moralia* 284b-c, τὰ Σιβύλλεια, likewise *Marcellus* 3.4, ἐκ τῶν Σιβυλλείων; Pliny (*HN*

consultation that led to the human sacrifice, which Plutarch explicitly describes as a measure ‘to avert the impending disaster’ (ἀποτροπῆς ἕνεκα τοῦ ἐπιόντος).⁴⁸⁰ Expiation was thus required and, given the gravity of both the offence and the lightning it provoked and also the horrible punishment in response, it seems this was one of those instances when the gods required something awful in return for their peace.

As a response to lightning, we have seen that, conceptually at least, human sacrifice was a horrifying but not unimaginable expiation for a potent strike.⁴⁸¹ It would be an extreme expiation, but the circumstances were also perceived as extreme. The punishment of the Vestals was surely grim and distressing. The ensuing live burials of Greeks and Gauls had occurred previously on two known occasions.⁴⁸² It is regularly noted that one of those instances again followed on the tail of another live burial of disgraced Vestals.⁴⁸³ What must be highlighted here, however, is that the same instance, in 216 BCE, also followed on the back of a series of other prodigies, which may well have included another lightning strike.⁴⁸⁴ While the context of the Second Punic War and defeat at Cannae is usually taken to be the historical catalyst for this prior series of killings, Livy (22.57.1-7), who is our main source for this episode, actually shifts the focus slightly from recounting the hysteria

28.13) specifies the *quindecimviri* making the consultation. This speaks against protestations that the practice was thoroughly un-Roman, which would be more credible had the instruction come from e.g., the *disciplina Etrusca*.

⁴⁸⁰ Erdkamp (2020) stresses that the second set of interments is connected to the first rather than the military threats often suggested. Eckstein (2012) conversely emphasises the external Gallic threat.

⁴⁸¹ Human sacrifice (*homo immolaretur*) was not outlawed until 97 BCE. Pliny, *HN* 30.12 states that such *sacra prodigiosa* were ‘openly celebrated until that time’: *palam in tempus illud celebrata*. Pliny (28.12-13) also mentions the ‘power of the incantation’ (*vim carminum*) offered at this specific sacrifice.

⁴⁸² 228 & 216 BCE. 228 BCE key sources: Plutarch, *Marcellus* 3.3-4; Orosius 4.13.1-3; & Dio Cassius, *Historia Romana* fragment 5. Cf. Dio fragment 50. For 216 BCE: Livy 22.57.2-6. Also, Pliny, *HN* 28.12-13. Várhelyi (2007) for discussion of scholarly readings.

⁴⁸³ E.g., Eckstein (2012:233-4), ‘perhaps it was the Vestal Virgins’ unchastity that triggered the human sacrifice’.

⁴⁸⁴ Given that lightning is common in both prodigy lists and in Roman weather and therefore much more likely to occur than bleeding statues and rains of meat.

of the war losses when he introduces the Vestal scandal. He situates the discovery of their *incestum* amid the terror caused by *prodigia*:

territi etiam super tantas clades cum ceteris prodigiis, tum quod duae Vestales eo anno, Opimia atque Floronia, stupri compertae et altera sub terra, uti mos est, ad portam Collinam necata fuerat, altera sibimet ipsa mortem consciuerat...

They were terrified also on top of such great disasters by other prodigies, especially because in that year two Vestals, Opimia and Floronia, were found guilty of sexual misconduct and one was buried alive at the Colline Gate, as is the custom, and the other killed herself...⁴⁸⁵

Of course, war with Carthage was the larger context and cause for widespread panic. However, Livy's specification of the prodigies over and above the war is presented as the more immediate cause for terror. He describes this terror escalating particularly because (*tum quod*) the Vestal scandal was revealed. The progression thus mirrors our framework: prodigies cause a casting about for blame, fault is found in deviant behaviour among Vestals, and in the resulting terror live burial ensues - first of a Vestal and then, again upon consultation with the Sibylline books, of a Greek and Gallic couple.⁴⁸⁶ That lightning was among the prodigies precipitating the events of 216 BCE is only speculation, but, if correct, then in the divinatory ledgers of lightning strikes, what they signified, and what was to be done about them, there was already at least one previous case of live burial for the augurs of 114 BCE to use as precedent.

⁴⁸⁵ Livy 22.57.2-3.

⁴⁸⁶ Things further escalate in this instance because the male perpetrator of *incestus* with the Vestals was flogged so badly he died, which was considered yet another prodigy and Fabius Pictor was sent to Delphi to discover what should be done (Livy 22.57.3-5). Livy is clear, however, that meanwhile (*interim*) *sacrificia aliquot extraordinaria facta*. This is the continuation of the other process already in motion referring to the live interment of Greeks and Gauls as ordered by the Sibylline Books. Note, Livy is specific: these killings are *sacrificia*.

Livy suggests there were more. His account of 216 BCE includes a small but crucial detail: the *locus saxo consaeptus* in which the Greeks and Gauls were buried, was a place, he says, ‘already soaked by human victims’ (*iam ante hostiis humanis imbutum*). Despite protestations that this practice was *minime Romano*, it would seem nevertheless to have been a practice previously repeated in Rome and, moreover, to have a specific topographic location devoted to it in the Forum Boarium where it was conducted. For Livy’s sanitised vision of Roman history, this is a tellingly large admission.⁴⁸⁷ About this earlier set of live interments, Plutarch also comments that to his own day, ‘mysterious and secret rites’ (ἀπόρρητοι καὶ ἀθέατοι ἱερουργίαι) continued to be conducted at the site in November in memory of its victims. This means that in Plutarch’s experience in the first/second century CE (ἔτι καὶ νῦν) this ritual was still remembered and the spot where it happened still attended with esoteric ceremonials. What sort of a place was this?

The live burial of these victims certainly resonates in form with the burial of human substitutes, and the burial of the ‘*fulgur*’ itself. Enclosing the victims *sub terram* in a place walled with stone (*in locum saxo consaeptum*) also resonates with the structure and containing requirements of the bidental.⁴⁸⁸ I do not mean to insist that this was a spot solely or specifically associated with lightning; yet, it might have been. A substantial bidental was excavated in the Forum Boarium, which caught scholarly attention because of the gilded, presumably lightning-stricken, cult statue of Hercules buried in it.⁴⁸⁹ The

⁴⁸⁷ Plutarch says the live burials took place ‘on the spot/in that very place’ (αὐτόθι), which seems enigmatic. He clearly has a specific place in mind. I would be tempted to say he meant the burials occurred on the spot where the lightning had struck, i.e., a bidental. However, although Plutarch does not mention the Forum Boarium here, perhaps he means this *locus saxo consaeptus* that Livy describes because in *Marcellus* 3.4 he mentions the prior live burials and, like Livy, locates them in the Forum Boarium. Julius Obsequens 37 says Helvia was struck in the ager Stellatis (*in agro Stellati*), which, if true, puts the strike itself far beyond the city walls.

⁴⁸⁸ Livy 22.57.6. Note the language *consaeptum/saepta* bidental etc. physically (and metaphysically) bounded.

⁴⁸⁹ *CIL* VI 1, p.57.

immediate vicinity thus had lightning etched permanently into its topographic memory. Perhaps, the site of this large bidental was also associated with the site of the *locus saxo consaeptus* which received those ill-fated Greek and Gallic couples. In any case, in the context of prodigies and expiations, their live burial certainly contributes to that persistent dark shadow that lingers around the question of how to deal with lightning strikes.

All the while, Helvia must not be forgotten. She generally is. Scholarship always moves quickly to the crime and punishment of the Vestals and the horror of the live burials. Yet, although Helvia was a prodigious warning, and the force of the lightning that struck her rippled through all the ensuing activities, she was also the victim of a lightning strike and as such she was, herself, subject to strict rules circumscribing the treatment of her body and what happened to the spot where she was struck. Therefore, in addition, to the buried Vestals in the Campus Sceleratus outside the Colline Gate, and the buried victims in the Forum Boarium, the burial of Helvia is a third location of abnormal interment to be plotted in the map of events. Although we are not told what happened specifically to Helvia, a Roman audience was well aware. All precedent suggests that while the Temple of Vesta in the forum became the target of turmoil and public outrage, the stricken Helvia remained *in situ*, visible but taboo to all travelling that same road in and out of the city. She lay therefore as a permanent backdrop to the escalating events not only conceptually but as a disturbingly real and terrible reminder of the dire message the lightning had delivered, and the urgent and drastic measures required to address it.⁴⁹⁰ The next chapter turns in detail to the practicalities and problems in dealing with a lightning-stricken body.

⁴⁹⁰ A temple to Venus Verticordia was dedicated as part of the reparations for the compromised *pudicitia* of Helvia and the *crimen incesti* of the Vestals. [Livy] Julius Obsequens 37.

Although objectively a disaster and remembered as a horror, like the previous case of Juno Regina, this series of events was also deemed successful. The recovery stage was reached, and doom eventually averted.⁴⁹¹ Nevertheless, it was not an occasion to celebrate and, unlike the periodically repeated hymns and processions of 207 BCE, a repeat of these rituals, like a repeat of such a lightning strike, was something to be dreaded.



Conclusion

In this chapter, risk theory has provided a conceptual framework for understanding the social dynamics when lightning is perceived as both an objective hazard and an existential one. The disaster chronology used here may be successfully applied to any number of ancient prodigies. Moral panics slot into some of these as a subset. The blame lightning often necessitated could ignite latent suspicions and fears, blame could backfire or escalate, and, in extremity, responses could also be extreme. In the case of 114 BCE, the death of one person by lightning escalated to entail the execution and sacrifice of several more. The salient point is that practices and precedents like this in the historical period surely fed forward into lingering fears about what *could* be done in response to lightning prodigies. This is another reason why the stakes were always high in the interpretative search for where to allocate responsibility and blame after a prodigious lightning strike.

The events of 114 BCE exemplify, I think, why lightning was such an ominously felt presence in Roman society, especially in the realm of bidentals. Despite the lofty

⁴⁹¹ Cf. Livy (22. 57.7) after the live interments of 216 BCE have been described, he states: '*Placatis satis, ut rebantur, deis*', and then focus returns to the political and military action.

Romulean model in which it bestowed honour and divine approval, those fears underlying lightning in the Numan and Hostilian models may be observed here emerging in historical time bringing to the surface those disturbing practices which Roman society preferred to suppress and deny. Whether or not the live burials in the Forum Boarium were a specifically fulgural response, the fact that they happened after a deadly lightning strike and the fact that they happened at all, could only reinforce the idea that Numa's bargain with Jupiter's demand for human heads remained open to renegotiation.



Flashpoint Seven

Pompey Strabo is Struck in his Tent

burials, bidentals, & the tangible

In 87 BCE, Gnaeus Pompeius Strabo was encamped with his army at Rome's Colline Gate in an ambiguous position between the Sullan and Marian factions. The senate had called upon him for help against the approaching forces of Marius and Cinna, but his lack of commitment to either side has led posterity to the same conclusion as his contemporaries: that Strabo was a self-serving opportunist positioned to become as problematic for the state as Sulla and Marius already were.⁴⁹² Fate intervened, however, as a storm rolled over his camp and Strabo was killed by a thunderbolt.

At least that is one version of events. Accounts of this deadly blow come to us from a variety of sources, the majority of which attest to the lightning version of Strabo's death. Some are direct while others allude poetically to it. There is another version, however, that suggests Strabo died due to plague.⁴⁹³ It is possible therefore that our seventh flashpoint is not a flashpoint at all. It is included here nonetheless partly because I believe that the balance of evidence is in favour of a lightning strike but mostly because this incident was generally remembered to have been a lightning strike and thus offers an opportunity to examine in depth the funerary rites appropriate to people killed by

⁴⁹² Syme's (1939:28) appraisal that Strabo was playing an 'ambiguous game' is often echoed: e.g., Southern (2007:273) views Strabo strategically playing a 'silent waiting game' and McCall (2022:131), characterises him as a 'threatening wildcard'. For an overview of the historical context, see Scullard (1982), 66-71. Rawson (1978) for additional cultural context.

⁴⁹³ The sources are listed and discussed below.

lightning. In trying to untangle the contradictions inherent in accounts of Strabo's *post-mortem* treatment, a clearer vision is afforded of some of the finer points of the relevant rituals. These are important because they cue us into behaviours concerning the physical handling of lightning and attitudes that underpinned the social construction of lightning-associated spaces. The case of Pompey Strabo presents an interesting counterpoint to that of Helvia in that the reaction and response to his similar demise was very different.

Lightning, Stars, & Fate: the linguistic question

Ordered chronologically, the sources for Strabo's death are as follows:

Velleius Paterculus (2.21.4) explains that while a plague (*pestilentia*) was ravaging both armies, Pompey died: *Cn. Pompeius decessit*.

Plutarch (*Pompey* 1.2) tells us straightforwardly that Pompey Strabo was killed by a striking thunderbolt: ἀπέθανε κεραυνωθείς.

Appian (*Civil War* 1.68.312) explains that Pompey's camp was bombarded by "many thunderbolts" and Pompey was killed alongside others of the nobility: κεραυνῶν δὲ πολλῶν ἐς τὸ τοῦ Πομπηίου στρατόπεδον καταρραγέντων ἄλλοι τε τῶν ἐπιφανῶν καὶ ὁ Πομπήιος ἀπώλετο.

Granius Licinianus (35.37) explains that Pompey was lying sick (*minus validus*) in the camp when a storm blew up and he himself was struck by a thunderbolt (*ipse fulmine adflatus*) and the top of his tent was blown off. In this account, he does not die immediately. He lies unconscious for some days, revives briefly, and dies on the third day.

Orosius (5.19.18) is also clear on the thunderbolt and its victim: *Pompeius fulmine adflatus interiit*. He adds that his army meanwhile was almost entirely lost to plague (*pestilentia*).

Julius Obsequens (56a) with characteristic drama describes that in Pompey's camp, the sky seems to fall, the weapons and military standards were struck, soldiers died, and Pompey, himself, died from the blast of a star: *ipse Pompeius afflatus sidere interiit*.

There seems no great disagreement among these sources. The only ambiguity is that Velleius and Obsequens do not mention a thunderbolt explicitly. If space allowed, I would argue that Obsequens' nevertheless intends the reader to understand that Pompey was struck by one.⁴⁹⁴ In three of these sources, plague or sickness also feature but it is only in Velleius that plague figures alone without a thunderbolt. Naturally enough, the inference drawn from Velleius has been that Strabo succumbed to the plague: *decedere* is a mundane verb that does not suggest his death was anything remarkable.⁴⁹⁵ There is nothing in the sources themselves that acknowledge there were two competing accounts.

⁴⁹⁴ Because lightning in ancient configurations is sometimes part of the behaviour of stars. Three 'stars' - Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars - were said to send their lightnings to earth and the differing natures of these three heavenly bodies affected the nature of the lightning they sent. E.g., Pliny (*Historia Naturalis* 2.16) explains the different colours of the planets (which he calls *sidera*) and at 2.18 goes on to discuss the thunderbolts they eject. Compare Greek ἀστράπτειν meaning 'to lighten, to flash lightning' with a clearly sidereal origin. The idea is astrological in essence, concerned with the influence of the 'stars' on fate and human life: Pliny, *Natural History* 2.41-43; Seneca, *Natural Questions* 2.32-35. In other words, to be 'struck down by fate/fulmine ictum/de caelo tacta/ afflatus sidere can refer to the same phenomenon. On the 'stellar causation of storms', see Green (2014:129-150).

⁴⁹⁵ Watkins (1988:148) finds it unlikely Velleius would 'forfeit' such a 'vivid detail' since a punishing thunderbolt would serve his purpose of maligning Strabo. This is his rationale for believing Velleius recorded a separate tradition. The reticence might be alternatively explained by the issues raised in this chapter concerning events at Strabo's funeral, which Velleius describes, and which, as we shall see, seem to speak against death by lightning.

By explaining that Strabo had been bedridden due to the plague, and that he was struck in his tent as he lay ailing, Licinianus shows how the two are not necessarily even contradictory.⁴⁹⁶ This is, at least, a plausible sequence of events and one which would explain some public confusion.

Nevertheless, even though the ancient accounts almost unequivocally attribute Strabo's death to lightning, since Mommsen, the *communis opinio* was until recently that this was too sensational to be likely.⁴⁹⁷ I have already shown that although sensational, deaths due to lightning were not at all unlikely in the ancient context. Indeed, exposed in a storm, a makeshift camp was vulnerable and tent poles could become dangerous lightning rods.⁴⁹⁸ The detail Licinianus provides about the top of Strabo's tent being rent open is realistic.⁴⁹⁹ It is therefore easy to undermine the rationale for rejecting the lightning version.

⁴⁹⁶ Hillard (1996: 136) contra Watkins (1988) about a conscious harmonisation of two conflicting accounts. Orosius, like Licinianus, mentions a lightning strike in the context of a plague. The relevant section of Livy is missing but he was an important source for Orosius as he was for Obsequens and Licinianus. It seems likely therefore that Livy included a thunderbolt in his account and possibly also a plague.

⁴⁹⁷ Mommsen (1889), Book IV, *Die Revolution* chapter 9, n.3: '*Adflatus sidere*, wie Livius (nach Obsequens 56) sagt, heißt >von der Pest ergriffen< (Petronius *sat.* 2; Plinius *n.h.*2, 41, 108; Liv. 8, 9, 12), *nicht >vom Blitz getroffen<, wie die Späteren es mißverstanden haben*.' Much has rested on this footnote. Watkins (1988) has shown that that pestilence is neither an accurate nor even sensible translation of all but one of the three references Mommsen offers in support of his otherwise unexplained assertion that we should understand *Pest* not *Blitz*. However, lightning was recognised as associated with stars and sometimes originating from them (see n.494 above). Moreover, lightning was sometimes also associated with plague: e.g., compare Livy's *pestifer sidus* (8.9.10) with Festus' *pestiferum fulgur* (23M=14L). Space prevents full argument here but in every instance where Watkins critiques Mommsen's examples and shows his use of plague to be unsuitable or questionable in context, lightning and thunderbolts could reasonably replace it with more satisfying cultural nuance. Even in Mommsen's one example where plague is a reasonable translation, the 'pestilential breath' Petronius describes is metaphorical and, in satirical context, can be explained very well as the sort of flatulent "thundering" ascribed to overblown rhetoricians. For thunderbolts from the tongues of eloquent speakers, see e.g., Plutarch (*Pericles* 8.3) and Longinus (*On the Sublime* 12.4). On thunderbolts and farting, Cowan (2014: 15-19).

⁴⁹⁸ Being in a tent in an open space in a thunderstorm is a dangerous position; tent poles attract lightning if the highest point in the vicinity - larger generals' tents particularly so. Strabo was not an isolated incident: see, for example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (9.6) for the strike on the tent of the general Gnaeus Manlius, which shredded the tent and killed several people and animals surrounding it. Modern campers use lightning resistant tent poles, but accidents still occur.

⁴⁹⁹ All citations of Licinianus are from Criniti's (1981) reconstruction. Here he renders the text: *et culmen taernaculi dissipat<um>*.

Nevertheless, even though the sources are mostly unanimous that Pompey Strabo was a victim of a lightning strike, the matter of what killed Pompey Strabo is still problematic.⁵⁰⁰ This is because of what several of these accounts tell us about what happened to Pompey *after* he was dead.

Burials & Riots: Strabo as fulguritum

There were strict rules about what may and may not be done with a lightning-stricken body. We encountered these briefly in the conclusion to the previous chapter in the case of Helvia. The relevant religious laws and customs, such as we have them, come from a variety of sources across a vast period of time. Some of these, we have also already encountered. According to Varro (*De Lingua Latina* 5.70), that which was struck by a thunderbolt was called a *fulguritum: fulguritum id quod est fulmine ictum*. A couple of centuries later, Festus (253 L) quoted this adding that such a place was believed to have become instantly '*religiosus*' because it seemed that the god had claimed it for himself (*qui locus statim fieri putabatur religiosus, quod eum deus sibi dicasse videretur*). Ammianus Marcellinus (23.13) records that the *libri fulgurales* mandated that places so touched (*contacta*) were not to be looked upon nor trodden upon (*nec intueri nec calcari*).⁵⁰¹ Elsewhere, Festus records the ancient law supposedly given by Numa that any person killed by a thunderbolt was not to be lifted above the knees nor were they to be afforded funerary rites.⁵⁰² Pliny (*Natural History* 2.145) seems to corroborate this in stating that it was not *fas* to cremate such a person although he says they are to be buried in the earth,

⁵⁰⁰ If I am right about Obsequens, only Velleius does not include thunderbolts in his account.

⁵⁰¹ Note the running metaphor in *Tristia* is that Ovid has been struck by (Augustus') lightning. Politics aside, (discussed in Flashpoint 9), Ovid describes himself as someone no one will touch as a result. At 3.5.1. he thanks the rare friend who dared to touch the body stricken by Jove's lightning.

⁵⁰² Festus s.v. *occisum*: ... in Numa Pompili regis legibus scriptum esse, si hominem fulmen Iovis* occisit ne supra genua tollito. Et alibi, homo si fulmine occisus est ei iusta nulla fieri oportet. (*MS is corrupt. Scaliger reads *fulminibus* but the point remains the same)

presumably on the spot.⁵⁰³ Quintilian (*Lesser Declamations* 274) provides the law that prescribes burial on the spot.⁵⁰⁴ The otherness of a lightning struck corpse is reflected in the belief that it did not corrupt. Plutarch (*Quaestiones Conviviales* 4.2.3.665) claims almost everyone knew this, adding that many neither bury nor cremate such a body but leave it exposed and simply fenced off (περιφράξαντες).⁵⁰⁵ Contradicting Ammianus' assertion that *fulgurita* were not to be looked at, Plutarch describes these bodies lying exposed so that they were visible forever in their uncorrupted state. He notes however that the sulphurous smell was off-putting and this, to his mind, was why dogs and birds did not touch 'Zeus-smitten' bodies (τῶν διοβλήτων σωμάτων). Artemidorus (*Oneirocritica* 2.9) states they must be buried on the spot.

Clearly, there was some variation in the details, explicable no doubt due to the vast swathe of time between 'Numa' and Festus, not to mention the scale of the empire, and disparities between individual beliefs. Overall, however, there is consistency in the attitude towards and treatment of victims of lightning strikes. Whatever else happened, normal funerary rites were denied them, they were not to be moved, and the spot became *religiosus*.⁵⁰⁶ As just such a victim, this is what surely happened to Helvia. It would also be expected that Pompey Strabo received this sort of treatment after his fatal strike. The problem is that he did not.

⁵⁰³ *hominem ita exanimatum cremari fas non est, condi terra religio tradidit*. Cf. Euripides, *Suppliants* 934–35: when Kapanews is killed by a punishing bolt, his body must be cremated on the spot. Here perhaps the discrepancy may involve Greek vs Roman tradition. Plutarch straddles both cultures but his reference to leaving the body untouched and fencing it off is consonant with Roman practice.

⁵⁰⁴ Discussed below: *Quo quis loco fulmine ictus fuerit, eo sepeliatur*.

⁵⁰⁵ Although, Seneca (2.31.2) states that stricken snakes become 'wormy' (*verminant*) after a few days because their poison has been neutralised.

⁵⁰⁶ Not *sacer*, sacred, as in dedicated to the gods by people but rather *religiosus* – claimed by the gods, removed from human remit and thus taboo, e.g., Gaius, *Institutes* 2.1–10. See Watson (1992:56–57), for the legal implications of *res sacrae* and *res religiosae*. Rüpke (2007:9–10) on the language more generally.

The sources such as we have them are quite unanimous about what happened to Strabo's body. Plutarch tells us the crowd snatched it from his bier while it was being carried out and proceeded to "heap insults upon it".⁵⁰⁷ He explains that people felt emboldened and compelled to dishonour a man in death who, in life, they had not dared counter. Similarly, Obsequens (56a) explains that Strabo's funeral bier was snatched, and his body dragged about with a hook because he had failed to come to the aid of his country and fellow citizens in their hour of need even though he had the *imperium* to do so, as well as a very large army.⁵⁰⁸ Certainly, at the downfall of other unpopular political leaders, similar activities had ensued.⁵⁰⁹ That Pompey Strabo was remembered as a consummately unpopular and contemptible individual seems an important element to all accounts of his death. Plutarch (*Pompey* 1) begins the account of his popular son, Pompey Magnus, with derision for his father. He claims that 'never have the Romans harboured such a strong and vehement hatred of a general as they did towards Pompey's father, Strabo'.⁵¹⁰ All other contenders considered, this is harsh judgement. Plutarch describes him as an exceedingly warlike man (άνήρ πολεμικώτατος) and emphasises how the fear people felt for Strabo while he was alive manifested in the humiliation and degradation they inflicted upon his body once he was dead. Licinianus (*Annales* 35.23) cited as a cause his questionable loyalty in response to the senate's call for aid.⁵¹¹ He asserts the general contemporary view, stating that upon his death, everyone agreed (*omnibus consen<ti>entibus*) that 'this maligned man had received just punishment from heaven for his perfidy and greed'.⁵¹² Cicero, closer

⁵⁰⁷ Plutarch, *Pompey* 1.2: έκκομιζόμενον τὸ σῶμα κατασπάσαντες ἀπὸ τοῦ λέχους καὶ καθυβρίσαντες.

⁵⁰⁸ Obsequens (56a): *Lectum eius populus diripuit, corpus unco traxit, quod discrimine civili perseverasset periclitanti patriae non succurrere, cum et imperium et maximos haberet exercitus.*

⁵⁰⁹ As discussed below.

⁵¹⁰ Plutarch, *Pompey* 1: οὔτε γὰρ μῖσος οὔτως ἰσχυρὸν καὶ ἄγριον ἐπεδείξαντο Ῥωμαῖοι πρὸς ἕτερον στρατηγὸν ὡς τὸν Πομπηίου πατέρα Στράβωνα...

⁵¹¹ There is a lacuna in the text, but the point concerns his loyalty. Criniti supplies 'dubia': *a Pompeio <qui dubi>a voluntate.*

⁵¹² Criniti: *omnibus consen<ti>entibus dignam caelo poenam et perfidiae et a<v>a<r>itiae <p>essi<m>um ho<min>em expendisse.*

to the actual events, also notes the hatred Strabo inspired and echoes the popular sentiment that his death had been a divine intervention by describing Strabo as '*dis ac nobilitati perinvisum*'.⁵¹³

Although consonant with public outrage against a maligned man, the violent treatment of Strabo's body goes utterly against everything prescribed for victims of lightning. Not only was his body touched but it was moved, even dragged, about. Moreover, before this interruption, it appears he was having an ordinary funeral. Plutarch states that the body was being carried off (ἐκκομιζόμενον τὸ σῶμα) on a bier (λέχος). He also notes that he was heading for a funeral pyre which was *nefas* for such people according to Pliny (2.145). The contradiction requires explanation. Hillard, who favours the lightning version of Strabo's death, has attempted to explain it by suggesting that the public outrage was, in fact, over these ordinary funerary rites. Pointing out that none of the correct protocol was being observed, he argues that the Roman populace, fearing divine retribution, interrupted the funeral to take expiation into their own hands. Parts of this argument are attractive. It is certainly a problem that, apart from Velleius who also describes the disturbances, it is the same authors who describe Strabo's death as delivered by lightning who go on to recount the funeral and ensuing violence. It makes no sense that Plutarch, for example, can state unequivocally that Strabo died after being struck by a thunderbolt (ἀπέθανε κεραυνωθείς) and in the next breath describe the ordinary funerary rites being prepared. Similarly, it makes no sense that he was instead dragged about and violated.

⁵¹³ Quoted in Asconius 70 (Clark p.79).

If Hillard were correct and the interruption was due to concerns about proper expiation, their actions would have been a matter of piety.⁵¹⁴ Yet Plutarch says nothing of such a motive, nor does he suggest that anything was set to rights by their action. His focus is, as explained above, that people behaved towards Strabo's corpse with the contempt they felt but never revealed to Strabo's living person. Likewise, the connection is not made in the other sources and no other commentators suggest that the uproar at Strabo's funeral was on account of improper funerary rites.⁵¹⁵ Nevertheless, ancient authors citing lightning as the cause of death, should have known that this would be no ordinary funeral and, assuming the relevant laws were generally followed, a bier, a procession, and a funeral pyre had no place there. This raises an important question about how binding the injunctions against touching and moving a lightning-stricken were felt to be and how rigorously they were followed. Considering the malleable nature of interpretations of lightning strikes and the variability that I have argued for even among what seem to be prescriptive books on fulgural proceedings, might it be supposed that there was also flexibility in how those struck by lightning were dealt with in reality? In other words, is it possible that Strabo could have been both struck by lightning *and* carried off to his funeral pyre elsewhere on a bier?

The best source on this point is an overlooked one. [Quintilian] has not been brought to bear on Strabo's case so far as I am aware, but since one of the minor declamations attributed to him speaks directly to the issue of moving a lightning-stricken body, we shall consider that declamation in some detail.

⁵¹⁴ Hillard (1996), 143.

⁵¹⁵ To the contrary, as shown, they are categorical about the cause being Strabo's behaviour.

Strabo, Quintilian, and the *tyrannus fulminatus*

In *Declamation 274*, written sometime in the second century CE, [Quintilian] poses the following dilemma:⁵¹⁶

Tyrannus fulminatus.
Quo quis loco fulmine ictus fuerit, eodem sepeliatur. Tyranni
corpus extra fines abiciatur. Tyrannus in foro fulminatus est.
Quaeritur an eodem loco sepeliatur.

The tyrant struck by a thunderbolt.
In whatever place a man be struck by lightning, in the same let him be buried. Let the body of a tyrant be cast outside the borders. A tyrant was struck by lightning in the Forum. The question is whether he should be buried in the same place.

In this rhetorical exercise, two fraught and ritually circumscribed situations are in conflict: on the one hand, what ought to be done with the body of someone struck by lightning, and on the other, what ought to be done with the body of a tyrant. The two laws prescribing the correct course of action in each situation are brought into tension by supposing a tyrant was struck by lightning in the forum. Since the two laws are in such a case mutually exclusive, the argument is ultimately about which law carries more weight.

Since there was a longstanding horror, self-evident in the sources, about remaining unburied after death, the bodies of tyrants, conspirators, and other state enemies were denied proper burial as *post-mortem* punishment.⁵¹⁷ Their remains were often

⁵¹⁶ The declamation attributed to Quintilian came, at least, from an orator in his tradition.

⁵¹⁷ On the tyrant as a rhetorical character, Dunkle (1971) remains a useful summary. See, Malosse (2006) for constructions of tyranny in different periods of sophistry. Tomassi (2015) for the evolution of the tyrant-figure from the second to third sophistic.

humiliated and cast out as carrion for scavenging animals or thrown into the Tiber.⁵¹⁸ Cassius Dio (35.1), for example, recounts that before his will was read out and the tide of popular opinion began to change, many were considering casting Caesar's body outside the wall unburied. This was a legally ratified practice; families of the condemned might ask permission to bury their dead but even if successful, the grave itself was not protected.⁵¹⁹ A specific element of the horror involved in the ritual humiliation of a tyrant's body was the hook (*uncus*). This seems to be related to a butcher's hook.⁵²⁰ Dragging the corpse about with such hooks was an integral part of its degradation.⁵²¹ The practice is regularly mentioned and seems to have been an accepted, even routine, response to a tyrant's death.⁵²² Under normal circumstances, this is the practice [Quintilian] expects his imaginary tyrant to receive.

The relevance to Pompey Strabo's case is evident. The detail about his body being dragged about with hooks, which Hillard notes as a 'grisly detail' is actually indicative of the hostile sentiment of the crowd. If Obsequens is correct on this point, then the intention of those disrupting the funeral was clearly ritual humiliation.⁵²³ Strabo seems to have been a real-life instantiation of a *tyrannus fulminatus*. He was, at least,

⁵¹⁸ See Varner (2001) for the practice, its reasons and the attitudes involved.

⁵¹⁹ Ulpian, *Digest* 48.24.1; Paulus, *Digest* 47.12.4.

⁵²⁰ Though it was an executioner's hook and I imagine of the same kind the *carnifex* used in the arena. See, Cicero, *Pro Rabirius* 4.

⁵²¹ Witnessing the act seems important: Seneca (*Epistles* 92.35) says the soul is not afraid of the executioner's hook or the disgusting mutilation of the body exposed to the scorn of the crowd. The hook is often mentioned together with the *Scalae Gemoniae* from where the body was eventually tossed. The practice was evidently long-lived: in the fifth century, Sidonius Apollinaris (*Letter to Gaudentius* 12) recounts in a letter the treason trial of his friend, Arvandus, who was waiting in hourly terror of 'uncum et Gemonias' - clearly still a dreaded fate.

⁵²² Suetonius mentions it repeatedly: e.g., *Tiberius* 75.1, *Vitellius* 16-17, and in *Nero* 24.1 even maligned statues are dragged with hooks. Orosius, 5.20 mentions it. Cassius Dio (61.4) suggests that Claudius was dragged to heaven by a hook: ἀγκίστρῳ ἐς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνενεχθῆναι. Elagabalus and his family received this treatment (Herodian, 5.8.9; *Historia Augusta, Elagabalus* 17.4-7, 23.7). In SHA, *Commodus* (18.3-7) the exhortation to 'let him be dragged by a hook' (*unco trahatur*) occurs no less than sixteen times.

⁵²³ Or perhaps it indicates his own authorial intention.

remembered as a potential tyrant against whom the heavens had made a pre-emptive strike. Conveniently, he was already outside the city walls when supposedly struck so the fundamental problem in the case [Quintilian] proposes does not apply.⁵²⁴ However, the question of whether he should be buried on the spot or ritually dragged about and humiliated was still in tension.

What to do with a dead tyrant's body was clear in both law and the experience of long precedent. However, the same was true of death by lightning. [Quintilian] repeats the injunction against moving the body several times, even quoting 'the very words of the law itself' that in such a situation, the law prescribed:

Quo quis loco fulmine ictus fuerit, eo sepeliatur.

In whatever place someone is struck by a thunderbolt, there let him be buried.

In other controversies, [Quintilian] explains in his brief *sermo*, problems arise due to the conflicting interests of private and public law, or military as opposed to civil matters. In this case, however, he deems all things equal (*[h]ic omnia fere cetera paria sunt*).⁵²⁵ On such ostensibly even terms, we are therefore able to watch [Quintilian] weighing up the respective legal obligations implicated by the tyrant and the lightning as well as what threats attended disobedience. It is interesting to see the force of lightning topple this debate.

⁵²⁴ The location was redolent with the type of threat Strabo posed. Strabo was camped on the same spot where Sulla would bring his troops in his fateful march on Rome and won his victory in the so-called Battle of the Colline Gate. The site itself was further inauspicious for being known as the Campus Sceleratus; it was the same site where scandalised Vestal Virgins were brought for live burial (Livy 8.15; Dionysius 2.67; Plutarch, *Numa* 10; Festus 333; Servius *ad Aeneid* 11.206).

⁵²⁵ Presumably meaning both cases are public matters of civic concern.

The first declamation argues in favour of casting out the body of the tyrant. The lightning itself is largely overlooked in this argument with focus instead on the law concerning burial. By focusing on burial alone, [Quintilian] attempts to downplay the lightning in the importance of inhuming a person where they were struck. What use is this burial to the community, he asks, when weighed up against laws and practices concerning matters of national security? Casting the tyrant out unburied concerns matters pertaining to vengeance and to security, he argues, (*ad vindictam, ad securitatem pertinent*) making an added appeal to precedent and the ancestral nature of this punishment. [Quintilian] then plays a sleight of hand. He claims the lightning law is only concerned with the *place* of burial not the fact of burial *per se*.⁵²⁶ In this case, since the tyrant is altogether denied burial, the law, he claims, is moot.⁵²⁷ It is only after asserting the inapplicability of the law that he can turn, albeit briefly, to the real issue, which is the divine provenance of the lightning and its purpose. There is much at stake:

...quoniam scelera eius atque flagitia ab ipsis diis immortalibus condemnata sunt, quoniam patientiam nostram ac servitutem numina non tulerunt, continget illi honor? Hoc enim voluit ille qui fulmen vibravit? Hoc cogitavit cum illud noxium caput sacris flammis petivit?

... since his wickedness and outrages have been condemned by the immortal gods themselves, and since the gods did not bear our patience and servitude, shall this man seize honour? Was this what he who shook the thunderbolt wanted? Was this his intention when he sought out that noxious head with his sacred flames?

Crucially, [Quintilian] takes it as given that divine vengeance killed the tyrant. On both sides of the debate, the thunderbolt is seen to have been sent as divine punishment. [Quintilian] works straightforwardly from the assumption that the man was struck

⁵²⁶ Quintilian seems (perhaps wilfully) unaware of the practice of leaving the body exposed.

⁵²⁷ Not strictly true if the body was left unmoved but exposed per Plutarch, *Quaestiones Conviviales* 4.2.3.665.

because he was condemned by the gods due to his outrages (*scelera*) and crimes (*flagitia*). His accursed head (*illud noxium caput*) is sought out by Jupiter's 'sacred flame' (*sacra flamma*). With such language, the lightning is clearly divine and its target just as surely damned. It is an inconvenient truth for the argument, which would have been much stronger without having to navigate divine intervention. The very fact that [Quintilian] feels obliged to incorporate it and twist his case around it indicates the extent to which divine intervention was understood as an immutable baseline for the dilemma. This is telling since he could have resorted to Lucretius or the other 'scientific' rationalist explanations of lightning available to him. Such explanations would have easily facilitated the case for overriding the lightning law. That [Quintilian] does not take that route suggests it was not a viable or convincing option whether due to his own convictions or those in the majority view. He is thus limited to manipulating the argument by reframing the question and simply asking whether people should honour those whom the gods condemn.

The insult to injury in this rhetorical case is that the tyrant was struck not only within the *pomerium* but in the forum itself. Arguing against the tyrant's burial, [Quintilian] foresees a polluted forum should burials be allowed there. He conjures a forum occupied by tombs and polluted with sinister ashes (*bustis occupabimus, infaustis cineribus polluemus?*). This polluting aspect of the ashes here seems attributable to their location and the fact that the man struck was himself a polluting entity in the state rather than there being something inherently polluting in the strike itself; [Quintilian] even suggests an exception might have been made if instead an outstanding citizen and benefactor had been

struck.⁵²⁸ Nevertheless, the issue of whether it is right to honour with burial a man struck down by the gods is a false ethical dilemma. It is purposely constructed to distract from the moral norms that make the competing case in favour of burial on the spot so compelling.

Although [Quintilian's] exercise is to make an equally strong case in both directions, the conflict is largely resolved when he swaps over and argues the other side. Central to this argument, is the enormity of not attending properly to the gods. The second declamation is significantly shorter than the first, suggesting both that the gravity of its few points are persuasive, and that [Quintilian] assumed his audience could accept them without rebuttal. The argument hinges on the point made in the *sermo* that the law which must be observed is that which was written for the gods not for men: *eam legem magis esse servandam quae deorum gratia scripta sit quam quae hominum*. It only takes one short paragraph to drive this home. In effect, the matter is settled in one short sentence, the paragraph's second: *fas non est visum movere ictum illum*. If it was not *fas* to move the body, the divine imperative trumped the human laws of vengeance and all other concerns of the mortal domain.

The previous false ethical dilemma is then exposed. Burying lightning-stricken bodies is not intended to honour those whom the gods have struck down; [Quintilian] asserts the place is not dedicated to the corpse, it is dedicated to the thunderbolt itself (*fulmini datus*

⁵²⁸ Which, in moral terms, raises the question of why a good man would be struck down and how the death in that case would be interpreted. The cremation of Caesar in the forum was clearly an ancient point of reference here and perhaps Quintilian makes this concession to allow for Caesar's funeral and shrine to avoid inadvertently maligning it.

est).⁵²⁹ The rest of the final paragraph is concerned with justifying burial in the forum on the grounds that it will serve as a constant and prominent reminder that the gods punish tyrants.

The force of '*superstitio sola*' is enough to settle the dispute.⁵³⁰ This seems much the stronger argument of the two within the contemporary conceptual framework in which [Quintilian] was working. The utilitarian premise of the first declamation does not stand up against attending to what is *fas*. For [Quintilian's] purposes, it is the differences in the details that allow for debate at all. For our own purposes, it is the beliefs which remain consistent across both arguments that are key. Whether or not burial in the forum was acceptable was up for debate. It could be construed as pollution or public instruction. However, in both cases the lightning itself is a *sacra flamma*, laws concerning it must be obeyed, and the people and places it strikes must be scrupulously (*religiose*) managed.

The evidence from [Quintilian] directly addresses the question of whether it is possible that Strabo was both killed by lightning and given an ordinary burial.⁵³¹ It would seem not. Following [Quintilian's] argument, if Strabo were a *tyrannus fulminatus*, then the prohibition on touching the body and the mandate to leave it where it fell eclipsed all other inclinations and obligations to the contrary. In fact, the strange detail about not lifting the

⁵²⁹ This is an interesting point because bidentals specifically bury lightning (*fulgur*) not a thunderbolt (*fulmen*). Sometimes, metal models of thunderbolts have been discovered deposited in them, however: e.g., spectacularly, recently in San Casciano. See, Mariotti et al. (2023).

⁵³⁰ As [Quintilian] states at the opening of his *sermo*. Note '*superstitio*' is clearly not negative here and seems to be synonymous with '*religionis esse*' later in the paragraph.

⁵³¹ The assumption here being general continuity in attitudes and practices across the first centuries BCE and CE. Such assumptions are always fraught, although perhaps reasonable here given the breadth of time across which practices seem roughly consistent.

body above the knees is the only indication that it could be lifted at all.⁵³² It seems everything else points to a situation in which to varying degrees it could not even be touched; not by hand, nor by foot, nor in some reckonings even by the line of vision.⁵³³ It also seems that this was a prohibition that people, motivated as much by fear as piety, took seriously. Pliny's claim that it was *nefas* to cremate such a body does allow the inference that burial was possible. This entailed burial on the spot, however, and the site itself, as *Declamation 274* reveals, was non-negotiable. This rules out an ordinary funeral for Strabo, but it also rules out public humiliation of his body.

It is difficult therefore to conclude with Hillard that people bent on the correct conduct of compromised expiatory rites would in the process cause further religious outrage. On balance, insulting and desecrating the body seems only another violation and contrary to their supposed objective. If people were intervening to ensure the body was appropriately dealt with, there is nothing in the religious laws as we have them to suggest violent abuse was the appropriate corrective. Indeed, propriety required them not to touch such a body at all. Perhaps, if the crowd was taking the rites into their own hands, it would have been necessary to arrest the movement of the bier and perhaps a desperate situation necessitated desperate measures such as handling the body to return it to its rightful spot. Licinianus does add the detail that they dragged Strabo's body through the dirt, which would ostensibly comply with the prohibition of lifting it above the knees. At a stretch, a hook might be construed as an attempt to avoid touching it directly.⁵³⁴ However, it is also at this point Licinianus asserts that everyone agreed Strabo got what he deserved (*dignam*

⁵³² Festus s.v. *occisum*. Perhaps this slight lifting was to allow the creation of a stone bidental beneath.

⁵³³ Ancient theories of vision may be relevant here. See, Nightingale (2016:54-67). Since eyes were not passive receptors but were thought to project 'visual rays' into the world in order to see it, it is probably right to imagine that this prohibition was based on looking being another subtle form of touching.

⁵³⁴ This pushes the evidence; Hillard makes no such tenuous suggestions.

caelo poenam).⁵³⁵ Velleius even says the crowds felt delight (*voluptas*) at his death.⁵³⁶ Like others, Velleius describes the anger shown to Strabo's corpse as a manifestation of the emotions he had provoked while alive.

Overall, the outrage seems more in keeping with mortal revenge than with concerns about maintaining the divine order associated with proper expiation. Indeed, the events at Strabo's funeral followed precedent and long-established rituals of post-mortem punishment of tyrants. Licinianus claims that it was the senators and tribunes who eventually took control of the situation and covered Strabo with their own clothes and carried him off for his funeral on 'a common little litter', which does not suggest the crowd had any specific alternative in mind other than insulting the corpse.⁵³⁷

We reach an impasse. It is as difficult to understand how Strabo's body could be humiliated with impunity if it was considered a *fulguritum* as it is to understand why, *fulminatus*, he would be receiving an ordinary funeral in the first place. There is, perhaps, a possible way out of these seemingly intractable contradictions if Licinianus is right in his assertion that Strabo only died three days after he was struck. The solution lies possibly in this delay. According to Licinianus, Strabo lay for a few days unconscious after he was struck, then he

⁵³⁵ The role of the heavens in the phrase *dignam caelo* accommodates both divine justice and a punishing bolt from the sky.

⁵³⁶ Quintilian (274.7) suggests more generally that under normal circumstances people would have enjoyed (*gauderet*) degrading and mocking a fallen tyrant's body. Cf. The treatment of Sejanus' corpse, Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 58.11.

⁵³⁷ Carried *vulgariter* in a *lecticula* does suggest that they had taken the crowd's objections about funerary honours to heart though. It is telling this is the last we hear of the matter. If the crowd were insisting on expiation, the eventual cremation would surely have incited more outrage.

revived and got up. He walked around the camp looking awful and talking to his generals before finally dying of what Licinianus called a 'wondrous wasting disease' (*mira tabe obiit*).⁵³⁸ If we recall that [Quintilian] described the burial of the stricken tyrant on the spot as an act that honoured the bolt not the tyrant, then it is possible the spot where Strabo was struck may not have been considered affected if he lived temporarily and raised himself from it.⁵³⁹ Since the energy of the strike was absorbed by the man and its fatal effect was not immediate, the lightning itself may not have been perceived to have been particularly connected with that specific location. By extension, Strabo's body and the site of the strike may therefore not have been subject to the same circumscriptions as those, like Helvia, who died instantly where they fell. If the fact that the strike had not killed Strabo outright absolved people of the usual observances, this might explain why he would be receiving ordinary funeral rites. This, in turn, would explain why authors like Plutarch could say in the same breath that Strabo was struck by lightning and was nevertheless carried off on a bier to an ordinary funeral. This would furthermore explain how those detractors who claimed lightning struck Pompey Strabo nevertheless felt empowered to desecrate his body.

At any rate, Licinianus unambiguously states that Strabo was struck by lightning and that ultimately, he did not recover after it. Some details about his symptoms are intriguing in view of modern medical knowledge. Strabo's condition and behaviour in his last three days may allow some final observations from a clinical perspective. Lightning strike

⁵³⁸ *Annales* 42.1. This is Criniti's reconstruction: *Pompeius mira t<abe obi>it*. In Licinianus' account, Strabo was lying in his tent ailing from plague when he was struck so what finally killed him may not have been clear to observers. Hillard (1996:144) imagines a situation wherein Strabo's supporters blamed the plague for his death in order to avoid the punitive connotations of a thunderbolt while his detractors blamed the bolt precisely to heap blame upon him. His argument does not hold, however, as that would mean it was those same detractors who sought to properly expiate the strike but then sabotaged the expiation with their own violence.

⁵³⁹ Artemidorus (*Oneirocritica* 2.8-9) states that if a person does not die from a strike but is just hit on various limbs and survives, then all of his previous interpretations of thunderstrikes do not hold and the results are lessened.

victims present with a wide variety of often strange symptoms. Keraunoparalysis, a temporary paralysis of the lower body which lasts a few hours to a few days, is common as is loss of consciousness.⁵⁴⁰ The detail Licinianus provides about Strabo lying lifeless for a couple of days and then suddenly coming around (*convalescit*) is, in fact, consistent with the experience of many victims of lightning strikes. Once keraunoparalysis lifts, patients often return to normal activity.⁵⁴¹ Licinianus describes Strabo's condition upon reviving, however, as visibly deteriorating. People in camp, he claims, could see he was about to die. This tallies perhaps with other, less visible but more devastating effects of lightning, which range from cardiovascular and respiratory complications to various kinds of haemorrhaging.⁵⁴² The nervous system is a particularly susceptible conductor of lightning strikes. It is therefore entirely conceivable that a lightning-stricken Strabo revived a couple of days after being struck whereupon he may even have left his tent and moved around the camp but languishing without proper medical treatment for his incomprehensible symptoms, he was finally overcome by them.

Of course, these details could be attributable to other causes, such as simply succumbing to the plague, reviving temporarily, and then dying.⁵⁴³ Nevertheless, they are details that might also put more credence in the lightning version; especially since something more out of the ordinary than plague is suggested by Licinianus' description of Strabo's 'wasting disease' as *mira*.⁵⁴⁴ On this point, one visible effect of a lightning strike that might rightly

⁵⁴⁰ Occurs in 70% of lightning victims (Warrell et al., 2005:988). See also, Naik & Murali Krishna (2018).

⁵⁴¹ Compare Libanius (*Oration* 1.243) who was himself struck and survived but was troubled with migraines and other symptoms thereafter.

⁵⁴² On the wide variety of symptoms, Andrews et al. (2018); On neurological effects, Cherington (2006).

⁵⁴³ Watkins (1988:147 n.18) suggests such a relapse is characteristic of typhoid. Hillard (1996:144) suggests gangrenous burns.

⁵⁴⁴ Victims of the evil eye were perceived to fall, like Narcissus, into a deathly wasting away, see Elliott (2016:94, 97, 141). Per the introduction, lightning was the ultimate flash of the evil eye when it came from divine eyes. There is thus a further moral element to the fact that Strabo was struck and withered miserably:

be called 'wondrous' should be mentioned in closing. People struck by lightning often receive what are known as Lichtenberg scars. These are fractal patterns that look like lightning streaks across the skin (fig.30).⁵⁴⁵ Perhaps, Pompey exhibited these strange burns in addition to his other symptoms. In any case, any person so marked would understandably cause consternation. Such a visual sign of having been touched by a supernatural force would certainly lend weight to all the prohibitions we have discussed about refraining from any contact with victims of lightning strikes.



The historicity of the events of 87 BCE is lost to us. Fortunately, the matter of whether or not Strabo was truly struck by lightning is not overly important here. We have examined his case in detail not in order to reach a verdict but rather to bring forward the issues underpinning it where lightning is concerned. In relation to the larger argument, we may note that unlike young Helvia's death, which caused panic and had dire consequences for other people - most notably those who were executed on account of it - Strabo's death had repercussions largely for himself.⁵⁴⁶ There was outrage but the bolt that supposedly struck him down was not seen as a harbinger of impending doom. Again, this was clearly a matter of interpretation. Helvia's strike was, as we saw, understood as a *prodigium* and her death was viewed as the collateral damage of a divine warning about a larger societal problem. There are no explicit explanations of how Strabo's death was interpreted but, in

a point which would not have been lost on an ancient audience. Quintilian (274.7) also states that *invidia* is involved in the case of the *tyrannus fulminatus*.

⁵⁴⁵ They are only temporary scars. See, Mutter & Langley (2019) for a couple who received such scars from being struck when lying, like Strabo, in a tent.

⁵⁴⁶ Also compare the interpretation of the thunderbolt that struck the tent of Gnaeus Manlius (Dionysius of Halicarnassus 9.6) which compelled the army to move camp.

its reception, it seems more in the mould of Tullus Hostilius; that is, a punishing blow to a powerful individual who was overstepping the mark: a self-contained delivery of both judgement and punishment.

The thematically significant points arising from this chapter should hopefully be clear. Most importantly, there were binding laws dictating the treatment of a lightning-stricken body and that these were approached with religious zeal since they were fraught with divine imperatives. Moreover, the site where a stricken body fell was - if killed - also a matter of strict religious scruple. The fixity in location of such a site and the bidental created there has been stressed and, moreover, the mandate not to move or touch it. A body touched by lightning was treated with fear if not aversion and any contact with victims of lightning strikes was strictly prohibited. Indeed, the overriding concern in all the various rules and regulations surrounding *fulgurita*, broadly, concern touching, the tactile, and tangibility. Lightning itself is an immensely tactile force, often destroying what it touches. The vocabulary and idiomatic expressions used to describe it highlight this; whether one was *fulmine ictus* or *fulmine afflatus* or *de caelo tactus*, importance was laid on the physical contact made with celestial power. As a divine weapon, the thunderbolt itself was depicted with a handle and the divine hand that wielded and hurled it seems perceived to linger in everything it touched. The physical markings left by lightning on the skin of the stricken must have been particularly compelling evidence of this. The divine fire was perceived to infuse all through which it passed with something powerful and other, and the sites it created thus became, for mortals, untouchable. These were transformed places treated with religious dread and foreboding, carefully and permanently removed from physical contact with the mundane world.

These ideas and behaviour all emerge naturally from the cultural climate observed across both our mythological and republican case studies. They are consonant with the power of lightning, and fear of both its electrical realities and its existential ramifications. The lesson from all experience was that this was a force beyond human comprehension and certainly out of human control except, ostensibly, in ritual. Just as being touched by it was a dreaded fate ever-threatening from above, touching anything it had touched upon falling was not a safe or sane thing to do.⁵⁴⁷

All of which makes sense and coheres culturally, until we reach our series of imperial case studies, where suddenly we encounter Sulla reaching out his mortal hand for the thunderbolt itself.

⁵⁴⁷ E.g., Horace, *Ars Poetica* 147: the extreme madness and depravity of moving a bidental.

part three

Imperial Case Studies



Flashpoint Eight

Sulla is Handed a Thunderbolt

iconography & tyranny

In 88 BCE, at Nola in southern Italy, the night before he marched his troops on the Marian faction at Rome, the general Lucius Cornelius Sulla had a dream. Knowledge of this dream comes to us via Plutarch, who provides the following account:

λέγεται δὲ καὶ κατὰ τοὺς ὕπνους αὐτῷ Σύλλᾳ φανῆναι θεὸν ἣν τιμῶσι Ῥωμαῖοι παρὰ Καππαδοκῶν μαθόντες, εἴτε δὴ Σελήνην οὖσαν εἴτε Ἀθηνᾶν εἴτε Ἐνυώ. ταύτην ὁ Σύλλας ἔδοξεν ἐπιστᾶσαν ἐγχειρίσαι κεραυνὸν αὐτῷ, καὶ τῶν ἐχθρῶν ἕκαστον ὀνομάζουσαν τῶν ἐκείνου βάλλειν κελεῦσαι, τοὺς δὲ πίπτειν βαλλομένους καὶ ἀφανίζεσθαι. θαρσῆσας δὲ τῇ ὄψει καὶ φράσας τῷ συνάρχοντι μεθ' ἡμέραν ἐπὶ τὴν Ῥώμην ἠγεῖτο.

It is also said that in his dreams a goddess appeared to Sulla himself whom the Romans worship having learned from the Cappadocians whether indeed she is Selene, Athena, or Enyo. This goddess seemed to Sulla to be standing over him and she handed him a thunderbolt, and naming each of his enemies, commanded him to strike them down; and those men he struck fell and vanished. Taking courage from the vision, and having told his fellow general, the next day he set out on his march upon Rome.

(Plutarch, *Sulla* 9.4)

Narratives of Roman history both ancient and modern regularly identify this first act of entering Rome in arms as the precedent that set off a domino chain of military interventions which incrementally toppled the faltering republic over the course of the first century BCE and ultimately resulted in imperial rule.⁵⁴⁸ Sulla's dream at Nola therefore takes on portentous significance. It might be argued that with hindsight any

⁵⁴⁸ Not the beginning of political violence, of course, but once the military was brought to bear on factional strife it set a destructive precedent. For a range of views, see Balsdon (1951); Keaveney (1982); Steel (2013); Eckert & Thein (2020).

dream Sulla had that fateful night would intrigue those who, like Plutarch, took an interest in dreaming.⁵⁴⁹ Likewise, it might be expected that tradition would ascribe to the eve of such a watershed historic event something prophetic like a dream. Either way, dream interpretation, ancient and modern, is hardly a science and scepticism is warranted on many levels. An account of a dream written some 150 to 200 years after the death of the dreamer might therefore seem dubious evidence and the analysis of a dream more than two thousand years old an even more dubious enterprise. Nevertheless, we take this dream as the first of our imperial flashpoints because, even in dream form, this lightning can be shown to mark a significant moment of rupture in traditional Roman methods of conceptualising and representing individual power. Not coincidentally, just as Sulla embarked upon an unprecedented course of action, likewise, in his alleged dream, an unprecedented claim was being made.

The previous chapter stressed the extreme caution with which anything that had come into contact with lightning was cordoned off, buried, and cemented over. The imperative not to touch any object so much as singed by the *sacra flamma* of the thunderbolt had real world ramifications which, as we have seen, manifested physically in behaviour as well as the built environment. Bidentals and puteals were permanent fixtures that demanded perpetual navigation. The lengths taken to avoid disturbing these sites of 'buried lightning' as well as the apparent aversion towards them has been stressed. In reality, people who came into contact with thunderbolts had invariably been struck by them. Sometimes these were seen as unfortunate collateral to a prodigy as with Helvia and other times as the subject of divine retribution as with Pompey Strabo. Mythologically, a

⁵⁴⁹ On dreams in Plutarch's *Lives*: Brenk (1975); Fournel (2016).

lightning strike could represent a vehicle of apotheosis, as it did when Romulus was taken up to the heavens and turned into the deity Quirinus. Historically, however, the idea that a living man might wield the divine thunderbolt itself in his own mortal hand was extraordinary in a cultural climate which actively prohibited even touching anything a thunderbolt had so much as touched.

Familiarity with all the multifarious thunderbolts that would haunt imperial rule over the coming centuries, not to mention all those preceding thunderbolts in earlier Mediterranean and Near-Eastern societies, has made the sight of one such a recognisable shorthand for power that Sulla's thunderbolt may seem symbolically rather commonplace or even inevitable. It is for this reason, presumably, it has received so little attention.⁵⁵⁰ Indeed, two thousand years on, we barely need any acquaintance with the ancient world to understand that the dream signified divine endorsement and aid in the military and political struggle to come. It is this familiarity that obscures novelty and innovation. For, although dressed in familiar and readily accessible symbolism, the thought that the gods might hand a thunderbolt to a general of the *populus Romanus* was, at some point, and I suggest this point, a bold new idea flashing in the Roman *imaginaire*.

With both Plutarch's hindsight and our own, we see in this a glint of the future of imperial rule at Rome and the aura of divine endorsement cultivated by the succession of thunderbolt-wielding emperors to come. For this reason, Sulla is positioned here as the first of our imperial case studies despite living and ruling in the late Republic. He represents a key turning point in the iconography and ideology of Roman political power.

⁵⁵⁰ Even Eckert & Thein's recent edited volume (2020), comprehensively discussing aspects of Sulla's life and politics, does not mention lightning or thunderbolts.

Yet, we must relinquish knowledge of that future trajectory to understand what Sulla's thunderbolt was referencing, into what thought worlds it tapped, and how it would have been viewed in the context of first-century BCE Rome. Ideology and iconography are, of course, intertwined but our eighth flashpoint is iconographic in focus. Its two main aims are to consider what precedents existed for this dream imagery and to establish Sulla's configuration of it as the first recorded Roman move into this contentious realm of representation.

The Medium and the Message

Sulla's fulminating vision at its most basic level, (i.e., its narrative function in Plutarch's account,) serves simply to convince Sulla of his decision to march on Rome. A useful comparison may be found in Xenophon's *Anabasis* (3.11.1). At a pivotal moment on the eve of great danger, like Sulla, the general Xenophon also had a dream about thunderbolts and lightning:

ἐπεὶ δὲ ἀπορία ἦν, ἐλυπεῖτο μὲν σὺν τοῖς ἄλλοις καὶ οὐκ ἐδύνατο καθεύδειν· μικρὸν δ' ὕπνου λαχὼν εἶδεν ὄναρ. ἔδοξεν αὐτῷ βροντῆς γενομένης σκηπτὸς πεσεῖν εἰς τὴν πατρῶαν οἰκίαν, καὶ ἐκ τούτου λάμπεσθαι πᾶσα.

Due to this crisis, he was distressed like the others and unable to sleep but having snatched a little sleep he saw a dream. It seemed to him to have thundered and a thunderbolt fell upon his ancestral house and as a result the whole house was illuminated.

Xenophon himself gives the account and is therefore able to relate the thought process as he woke up and turned the dream over in his mind. He decided it was auspicious because in his time of need he had seen this great light from Zeus, but at the same time it seemed a foreboding warning about his chances of ever going home if he did not act. Thus, it stirred him to action. He roused the other generals in the middle of the night, and they

devised the plan that ultimately saved them. Xenophon explains all this to the reader but, according to his account, he did not relate it to the other soldiers. He simply told them he had been unable to sleep. What we have here therefore is a historical dream that was interpreted as advice from the gods and acted upon accordingly. Unlike Sulla, however, it was deemed personal. It does not seem to have been advertised for purposes of self-promotion or validation (until the writing of the memoirs) but taken as a genuinely helpful divine intervention. Sulla, on the other hand, told Lucullus about it the following morning. His purpose in relaying the dream was supposedly to encourage his loyal general as he himself had been encouraged (θαρσήσας). Such a dream could also by extension steady the resolve of the soldiers. In general, good omens before battle served to rally the troops. This would not be the first time a charismatic Roman leader had announced a prophetic dream before battle.⁵⁵¹ Most famously (and perhaps to the fore in Sulla's mind), before attacking Carthage, Scipio had announced that Poseidon had come to him in a dream and given him his battle plan, promising his aid to the soldiers. Polybius (10.11.7-8) suggests that this news combined with the promise of generous rewards was a well-calculated combination that had the desired effect of firing up his soldiers for the attack.⁵⁵² Although he had criticised Timaeus for including dreams in his historiography, Polybius includes Scipio's dream in his own history not to illustrate the participation of the gods but the genius of the general.⁵⁵³ In other words, the dream was effective propaganda.

⁵⁵¹ On the use of dreams in republican politics, see Kragelund (2001).

⁵⁵² Cf Appian, *Hispanica* 101: τὸ δαϊμόνιον ἤκειν τὸ σύνηθες αὐτῷ. Appian probably means Jupiter, see below.

⁵⁵³ By mixing divine providence alongside worldly rationales, Scipio incited 'great eagerness and enthusiasm' (μεγάλη ὄρμη καὶ προθυμία) among his men, Polybius (10.11.8).

We cannot know, of course, whether Sulla really had this dream or whether he concocted it for propagandistic effect. What we do know is that Sulla set great store by dreams. Or, at least, he wanted his dreams (perhaps this one in particular) to be taken seriously.⁵⁵⁴ In the preface to his memoirs, he dedicates his work to Lucullus, the same general to whom he first related his dream. He advises him to consider nothing so reliable as that which divine powers command him by night: παραινεῖ μηδὲν οὕτως ἠγεῖσθαι βέβαιον ὡς ὅ τι ἂν αὐτῷ προστάξῃ νύκτωρ τὸ δαιμόνιον (Plutarch, *Sulla* 6.6). Upon his own reflection, then, Sulla believed or wanted his readers to believe that the gods had guided him well.⁵⁵⁵ Beneath the straight-forward reading, the dream can therefore be viewed as creating a persuasive pretext for Sulla's subsequent actions. Being a morally fraught and bloody act of civil war, his attack on Rome was less heroic in nature than that on Carthage and so the dream was expedient in portraying him as rallying to a force greater than his own ambition. It was an unequivocally clear portent not only of victory but, crucially, of the divine support behind that victory. Such a dream could serve in the aftermath to legitimate and justify Sulla's actions after his coup whether to contemporaries or posterity.

To some extent, then, to borrow Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, the medium was the message: the dream in itself was indicative of Sulla's divine inspiration – an image he certainly cultivated.⁵⁵⁶ The slippery medium of a dream, moreover, was a shrewd manoeuvre in that it both redirected blame for Sulla's actions and, since no one can be expected to control the visions of a dream, simultaneously absolved him of the hubris of

⁵⁵⁴ The dream was probably recorded in Sulla's memoirs, Harris (2009:179-80) although Kragelund (2001:92-93) is sceptical. On Sulla and the supernatural, Wiseman (2009).

⁵⁵⁵ Balsdon (1951) on 'Sulla Felix'.

⁵⁵⁶ McLuhan (1964), 7 and *passim*.

directly making grandiose claims about himself. The presence of the goddess aiding and guiding Sulla, although compelling, should not be assumed to have been overly surprising. According to ancient dream dictionaries, deities apparently visited other dreams to conduct all manner of activities, including even intercourse with the dreamer.⁵⁵⁷ It was the thunderbolt that gave the dream its extraordinary power. The message was not only that a deity had joined forces with Sulla and stood in support of him, but that she had actually given him agency by putting that divine weapon in his mortal hands. Her naming of the enemies which Sulla was to strike down with it aligned Sulla's will with the divine will and underscored the divine power placed directly in his grasp.

Beyond narrative function, the imagery should be considered in terms of iconography. Although the dream comes to us in textual form, in essence it is, and was always, visual. Dreams are, quintessentially, mental images. Recounting a dream, whether by written or spoken word, is to relay a mental image from one mind to another. This process is socially informed and has cultural significance because the individual repertoire is affected by the collective world of images, ideas, and symbols in which it participates.⁵⁵⁸ Hans Belting, who has worked extensively on the interplay between the internal and external worlds in the anthropology of images, describes mental and physical images as inextricably linked:

‘the mental and physical images of any given age (dreams and icons) interact so closely that it is difficult to separate them neatly. Public images have always controlled personal imagination; and the personal imagination, in turn, either cooperates with them or resists them’.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁷ See, Bilbija & Flinterman (2015).

⁵⁵⁸ On the integral role of the external world in mental images, philosopher Bernard Stiegler concludes: *‘il n’y a pas d’image mentale sans image-objet’* (Derrida & Steigler, 1996:168). He makes the comment in the context of technologies and digital media: *‘c’est dire que toute perception est affectée de technique’* but this holds equally true of ancient media, technology, and the wider world.

⁵⁵⁹ Belting (2011), 15.

Sulla's dream *qua* dream in this sense becomes of less importance than those images and ideas it propagated. Iconography was at least partly what the dream was drawing upon, but in turn, the dream was also suggestive of developments which could, and indeed would, be taken up in future iconography. For the dream thunderbolt of 88 BCE, focus must, however, be restricted to the pre-existing world of images that informed Sulla's vision and which provided the shared scaffolding by which others could understand its meaning. Represented visually, the two main events of the dream would look something like:

1. A deity handing a thunderbolt to a Roman general.
2. A Roman general himself wielding a thunderbolt.

The question is therefore where had such imagery been seen, imagined, or enacted prior to this dream? My contention is that in the Roman context it had not and that, in its historical moment, this was a remarkable image and a radical claim.⁵⁶⁰ Nevertheless, because the imagery seems so familiar, intuitive even, to the representation of Roman power, denying its prior presence requires explanation. There are two key points to establish: first, that this was an image that evolved in Roman iconography, and it was a relatively late development; second, that it was always a controversial image that met with both cooperation and resistance as Belting (above) suggests and its prevalence and inevitability in imperial iconography is vastly overestimated by scholarship. The rest of this chapter will deal with the first point and the chapters thereafter will bear out the second.

⁵⁶⁰ Obviously, there is no accounting for obscure events and the fancies of unknown individuals: my claim relates to prominent events and extant evidence insofar as this approaches official or propagandistic use of imagery.

Triumphal Thunderbolts

To consider republican precedents, contexts, and inspirations for the dream imagery in Rome, we may look first, and most revealingly, to the one place where the idea of a thunderbolt-wielding general would be most acceptable and justifiable: the Roman triumph. The general emulating Jupiter in his *quadriga*, with his face painted red and wearing 'the clothes of Jupiter Optimus Maximus' (Livy 10.7.10) exceeded the bounds of normal propriety by receiving adulation as a Jupiter-like figure.⁵⁶¹ On these occasions, with the exceptional elevation of the triumphing general intentionally raising the man to the brink of godhood, thunderbolts have not only been presumed but expected in scholarship. The extent to which the general was temporarily conflated with Jupiter on these occasions has long been debated. In a 1916 article, however, Warde Fowler was already emphatic that they did not: 'the triumphator, then, was not himself Jupiter, and it must remain very doubtful whether he even in any sense personated the god'.⁵⁶² The crux of his argument centred on the symbolic attributes the general carried: namely, a sceptre and victory laurels. If he was truly supposed to be Jupiter, Warde Fowler averred, 'he would surely have also carried the thunderbolt'.⁵⁶³

His search for evidence of this was in vain: 'neither in art nor literature, so far as I can discover, is the bolt to be found. Coins do not show it; and in the solitary passage [of Suetonius] which has been cited as proof, there is as usual no proof to be found'.⁵⁶⁴ Concluding that Roman crowds did not believe triumphing generals were actually Jupiter,

⁵⁶¹ On the *triumphalis vestis* and its non-uniformity, see Beard (2007), 228-231.

⁵⁶² Warde Fowler (1916), 157.

⁵⁶³ *ibid.*

⁵⁶⁴ *ibid.*

the article throws down a gauntlet: 'if anyone can produce a coin or other work of art on which he is represented as holding the thunderbolt, I should at once reconsider the whole question'. As Beard could confirm almost a hundred years later, this was a challenge no one could meet.⁵⁶⁵

For current purposes it is significant, of course, that representations of the triumphator holding a thunderbolt cannot be found. Yet, perhaps more telling is Warde Fowler's conviction that the presence of a thunderbolt would change the message and alter the crowd's perception of the divine status of the *triumphator*. His overall argument that the general although elevated remained consummately human is sound.⁵⁶⁶ Concerning thunderbolts, however, it is worth asking what Warde Fowler imagined a triumphing general *could* hold? Certainly not a real electrical bolt of lightning as hurled by Jupiter. In reality, he could only have held a symbolic representation of one. This would be so feeble an imitation of the real thing as to undermine rather than underscore his power, revealing him to be nowhere near on par with Jupiter. Indeed, on a later occasion when Caligula began carrying around a golden representation of a thunderbolt like a rattle, ancient sources portray the behaviour as deluded and laughable.⁵⁶⁷ Such behaviour pointed inevitably to the tyrannical hubris of Salmoneus and the Hostilian model of mishandling lightning. It is the kind of behaviour that did not elevate status but rather invited thunderbolts upon one's head. Having stressed the attitudes and religious laws prohibiting any kind of physical contact between people and lightning-stricken debris, it should moreover be clear that in the republican context considered so far, the idea of so

⁵⁶⁵ Beard (2007), 227.

⁵⁶⁶ Particularly compelling is the *fascinum* under the chariot to ward off the evil eye: human and divine (i.e., to prevent being struck by the gods for hubris).

⁵⁶⁷ Suetonius, *Caligula* 52. Dio 59.26, Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 75-97. See Flashpoint 10.

manhandling a thunderbolt was transgressive and, simply, outrageous. Thus, while iconographic or literary constructions *could* depict such a scene, they did not - arguably because in reality, it could not happen and, ideologically, the hubristic intention and the comic reality as well as prevailing superstitions prevented this from being a reasonable, flattering, or desirable manner of representation.

A victorious Roman general should not therefore be expected to have paraded in front of the populace with a 'toy' thunderbolt. Nor should we expect him to have been represented artistically this way. Admittedly, reticence to depict living humans on coins until the first century BCE significantly limits the visual evidence available but that resistance to representation itself highlights the wholesale refusal to risk elevating any individual to a kingly let alone godly status.⁵⁶⁸ It is significant therefore that it was Sulla who first ventured into this prohibited numismatic territory. Appearing, tentatively, on coinage in his own lifetime shows that he was willing to break new ground in the manner in which he was portrayed. This is even more significant because on the offending coins he was depicted as triumphator. If there was ever a moment to depict a thunderbolt-wielding general in a triumphal scene, given his dream, this was it. However, in the type of 82 BCE, contemporary depictions reveal even Sulla triumphing normally without thunderbolts. Crowned by a flying Victory, he rides the quadriga, holding the reins in his left hand, and in his right, a caduceus (fig.31).⁵⁶⁹ Appearing again on an *aureus* in 80 BCE towards the end of his dictatorship (fig.32) another type supposedly depicted an equestrian statue of

⁵⁶⁸ On portraits of living people on republican coins, Bieber (1973). Caesar's appearance on coins was 'a revolution in the development of Roman portraiture and in the history of Roman numismatics' (p.880). He was assassinated shortly afterwards.

⁵⁶⁹ Ramage (1991:103): 'The caduceus, a sign of *felicitas*, serves as an important reminder that this success has been aided and authorized by the gods; it comes from Sulla's personal good luck. But this symbol serves as well to announce that Sulla is bringing with him a *felicitas* or prosperity for the state.' Perhaps its unusual appearance draws attention to what Sulla holds instead of the thunderbolt.

Sulla rather than the man himself directly. By this dodge, something approaching a living portrait made another early numismatic appearance. However, again, Sulla's left hand holds the reins, and his right hand is raised in *adlocutio* and empty.

Republican coins, notably the *quadrigati*, routinely depicted the triumphing Jupiter with thunderbolt in hand (fig.33). This is the type Sulla's triumphal coin was modelled on. The thunderbolt is therefore doubly conspicuous by its absence in Sulla's hand: both Jovian iconography and the dream would suggest it. Its absence reinforces both the idea that thunderbolts were not part of triumphal regalia and also the claim that this was an inappropriate manner of representation.

It might be objected that I am overemphasising the importance of the dream and that the absence of a thunderbolt on Sulla's coinage simply reflects this. It will be shown, however, that in the intervening six or so years, (88-82 BCE) Sulla's dream flickered into reality in multiple ways both by design in Sullan iconography and in its reception by contemporaries. To understand the presence and impact of these thunderbolts, however, it is necessary to have a good view of the visual landscape across which they flashed. Since the triumph has not been forthcoming as a precedent for mortal thunderbolt-wielding, the search for precedents must continue first in Rome and then further afield.

Republican Precedents

The search may be expedited by posing a question: if there is no triumphal evidence for fulminating humans even in a crowning moment of victory when a superlative few were consciously elevated towards Jupiter, should we expect to find the idea of thunderbolt-wielding mortals expressed elsewhere in Roman culture? In short, the answer is no. It

was anathema to republican sensibilities. The senatorial preoccupation with avoiding tyranny made this idea not only offensive but dangerous in its claims. Officially, thunder and lightning were properly handled in the Romulean model, which was, as explained, deferential and distant, mediated by divination, by the state, and by careful calibration with the divine will. It did not snatch Jupiter's power directly into human hands but sought it out with due propitiations and waited for endorsement.

On a more personal level, however, special relationships with various gods were cultivated. Prominent Roman families are well-known to have claimed divine ancestries and some prominent individuals claimed a personal relationship with a patron deity.⁵⁷⁰ Among the latter, two may be singled out as exemplifying both how near preeminent generals came to Jupiter and how far they remained from his thunderbolts: Marcus Manlius Capitolinus and Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus. These are two celebrated individuals who cultivated personal relationships with Jupiter that foreshadowed the ideological path Sulla was on. Yet, like the example of the triumph, they also delimit our search by nevertheless showing thunderbolt-wielding to be absent in those cases where it might most reasonably be expected to appear.

Capitolinus was a semi-legendary figure who had defended the Capitoline during the Gallic sack of 390 BCE, been much celebrated, and thereafter lived upon the sacred hill he had saved.⁵⁷¹ As his cognomen suggests, his residence upon that preeminent hill positioned him as a neighbour to Jupiter Capitolinus and his temple. He thus represents an early instance of an individual elevated towards Jupiter in a manner ultimately

⁵⁷⁰ Wiseman (1974); Hekster (2006).

⁵⁷¹ Livy 6.14-20; Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae* 91. On Livy's *exemplum* of Manlius, Jaeger (1993). On Manlius, popularism and tyranny, Kaplow (2012).

perceived as problematic. Despite his service to Rome, for his popularity and populist sentiments he was eventually accused of aspiring to kingly power, (*regni crimen*, Livy 6.19.7, 6.20.4) and thrown from the Tarpeian rock. The key detail here is the fact that his house on the Capitoline was burned down and a senatorial decree thereafter prohibited patricians from living in that elevated location again. This speaks directly to a fear of raising any individual too high and too close to Jupiter and therefore directly against any possibility that someone might go so far as to claim his thunderbolts. Capitoline constitutes a cautionary tale to the ambitious.⁵⁷² His demise was a warning to all successors that ambitions would be curtailed well in advance of scaling the Capitoline.

The historical figure who seems most to have flouted that warning is Scipio Africanus. He encroached into Jupiter's domain to the extent that, upon death, his *imago* was kept inside the Capitoline temple and placed in the very cella to Jupiter.⁵⁷³ This was in keeping with his own self-aggrandising mythology which he propagated while alive.⁵⁷⁴ Most notably, Scipio frequented Jupiter's temple early in the morning for consultations with the god who, it was insinuated, conversed with him. Thus, in the episode mentioned earlier, before attacking Carthage, he could inspire the soldiers by telling them he was advised by the deity 'who customarily visited him'.⁵⁷⁵ His intimate relationship with Jupiter was undoubtedly leverage in Scipio's leadership roles but, more cynically, it was also a

⁵⁷² Jaeger (1993:357-8), 'Moreover, from the Senate's point of view, and from that of an educated Roman reader, Manlius' obsession with the Capitoline is that of a tyrant who lives on the citadel'.

⁵⁷³ Livy 38.56.13; Appian, *Hispanica* 89. Valerius Maximus 8.15.1-2 deems this to be based on Scipio's feeling, while alive, that Jupiter's temple was his second home – the fate of Marcus Manlius Capitolinus' house thereby neatly avoided.

⁵⁷⁴ Livy 26.19 on his pretensions to divine inspiration. On this passage, see Beltramini & Rocco (2020), who view Livy representing Scipio's exploitation of people's beliefs through his *ars* as a way of justifying his huge success at a young age. Cf. Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 6.1.6.

⁵⁷⁵ Appian, *Hispanica* 101.

manipulation of religion that had ongoing benefits for the *gens* Cornelia.⁵⁷⁶ Scipio overtly claimed to have the ear of Jupiter and thereby his favour - but never his thunderbolt. While he pushed his divine relationship further than normal with his visits to the temple bordering on theatrics, and while his performance was certainly a leap in how direct, personal access to a deity could advance prestige and bypass the mediation of the senate and divination, neither Scipio nor anyone else in the extant evidence put a thunderbolt in his hand.

Scipio was, however, memorably called a “thunderbolt”. In 56 BCE, Cicero (*Pro Balbus* 34) called him and his brother ‘*duo fulmina nostri imperii*’.⁵⁷⁷ Around the same time, Lucretius (3.1034) called Africanus a ‘*belli fulmen*’. A few decades later, Vergil (*Aeneid* 6.842-3) similarly called the two Scipiones ‘*duo fulmina belli*’. It must be stressed that there is an enormous difference between being called a thunderbolt, which is a metaphoric comparison, and professing to wield one, which is an ideological claim. The former is like the thunderbolts said to roll off the tongues of orators and politicians.⁵⁷⁸ It had force of imagery and multiple clever allusions, but as a turn of phrase, it was purely descriptive.⁵⁷⁹ The latter is laden with politico-religious baggage and evokes, as we shall see, a dangerous imperiousness. Calling the Scipios ‘thunderbolts of empire’ or ‘thunderbolts of war’ falls into this descriptive category. Yet, it was not innocent. These prominent first-century BCE writers certainly found force in this turn of phrase, but the intervening dictatorship of Sulla had put a recent point of reference between themselves and the men they were

⁵⁷⁶ Polybius himself was cynical as when relating Scipio’s strategic use of dreams noted above. Ennius praises Scipio like a Greek hero but is wary of overstating his divine intentions, (Lactantius quoting Cicero quoting Ennius, see Hornblower, 2024:237-9). On exploiting Scipio’s legacy, Farney (2023).

⁵⁷⁷ In the context of two thunderbolts that had been extinguished and slain: *extincti occidissent*.

⁵⁷⁸ E.g., Plutarch, *Pericles* 8.3; Longinus, *De Sublimitate* 12.4.

⁵⁷⁹ Skutsch (1956).

describing, and first-century connotations of thunderbolts had developed. Moreover, in Vergil's case, the phrase occurs in Anchises' prophecy of the greatness of Aeneas' future lineage, which was obviously also the lineage of Augustus and Augustus' own encounters and innovations with thunderbolts add further layers of meaning. These interpretative layers need peeling back to the times of Scipio Africanus in order to consider what contemporary resonance the descriptor would have.

There is reason to suppose the Scipios may have been called thunderbolts in their own day, not least because their name in Greek could be equated with σκηπτός, thunderbolt.⁵⁸⁰ In that sense, Scipio *was* nominally a thunderbolt. In the wider Mediterranean, he was, moreover, engaged in a world of thunderbolts. His arch adversaries, the Carthaginian Barca family, were also nominally thunderbolts (Barca: Punic: ⵓⵔⵓⵏⵏ , BRQ = lightning). Contemporaries surely noticed this nominative determinism. It was certainly remembered. In the late first-, early second-century history attributed to Lucius Annaeus Florus (1.22.9) Hannibal is described coming out of the *tempestas* of the Punic War as a thunderbolt 'forged in the fires of Saguntum' and a *fulmen* 'long destined for the Romans': *destinatum Romanis iam diu fulmen*.


It is striking, literally, to envision these two cultures clashing in two larger-than-life figures each a national thunderbolt, but perhaps it is not as unbelievably coincidental as it seems. This was an age of thunderbolts and thunderbolt imagery. Beyond Rome, the ancient Mediterranean had always been under the shadow of tempestuous storm gods who ruled supreme with a divine arsenal of meteorological weaponry. If thunderbolt-

⁵⁸⁰ Norden (1927), 333.

wielding mortals are not forthcoming in Republican Rome, even among those who were thunderbolts by name and fame, it might be expected that precedents abounded in the thundersome world of the wider Mediterranean. Yet, in fact, the argument against them in Rome becomes easier to make against that backdrop because, again, although seemingly familiar, they are vanishingly rare. We will take a brief detour to make this point as it is an important one to provide context for Sulla.

A lightning tour of ancient thunderbolts: contexts and precedents beyond Rome



From Gaul to Greece to Anatolia, and from Etruria to Assyria and beyond to India, thundering deities electrified ancient skies.⁵⁸¹ Zeus the thunderer on Olympus is familiar. Gods such as the Anatolian Teshub and Tarhunta, the Levantine Ba'al, and the Mesopotamian Adad likewise all thundered from their own sanctuaries and sacred mountains. These deities were all regularly depicted holding a thunderbolt or lightning bundle in one hand and another weapon in the other, usually an axe or mace (figs.34-36).⁵⁸²

While Egypt was not a thundersome place, the destructive desert god of chaos and storms, Seth, was loosely and indirectly associated with thunderbolts.⁵⁸³ Moreover, Min, a very ancient fertility god whose association with bulls and mountains is redolent with connotations of Near Eastern storm god cults, was known to hurl thunderbolts and was often depicted with a whip. The hieroglyph for his name is  in which the topmost

⁵⁸¹ On storm gods on the ancient Mediterranean, Lebrun & Van Quickenberghe, (2017). On Eastern storm gods, Dietz (2023).

⁵⁸² The axe is a 'thunder weapon' often symbolising the origin of the cracking sound in the sky. See, e.g., Töyräänvuori (2014: 165-166). Cook (1914:764-774) for Near-Eastern 'thunderbolt' iconography.

⁵⁸³ Obsomer (2017). Wainwright (1963, 14, 19) postulated a changing role in a changing climate.

logogram  is the familiar stylised thunderbolt shape. Indeed, Khem, (Greek Letopolis) Min's sacred city in Lower Egypt is written  , literally 'Thunderbolt City'.⁵⁸⁴

Further East, in Hinduism, the thunderbolt was - and is - the Vedic storm-god Indra's most powerful weapon: the *vajra*, which he carries and sometimes hurls (fig.37). Like Zeus and Jupiter, this is the weapon by which he maintains cosmic and moral order. He throws it at wrongdoers and those who trespass among the gods as in this passage from the *Rig Veda*:

Who, thunder-armed, rent Rauhiṇa in pieces when scaling heaven,
He, O ye men, is Indra.
Even the Heaven and Earth bow down before him,
before his very breath the mountains tremble.
Known as the Soma-drinker, armed with thunder, who wields the bolt,
He, O ye men, is Indra.

(*Rig Veda* 2.12-13. Trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith, 1896)

This weapon found its way into Buddhism. In Mahayana Buddhism, for example, it is still found in the right hand of Vajrapāṇi, a ferocious deity who uses it to protect the *dharma* and whose name literally means 'thunderbolt in hand' (fig.38).⁵⁸⁵ In the cultural melting pot of Gandhara between the Hindu Kush and the foothills of the Himalayas, this strong, protective deity became associated with Hercules, which resulted in some remarkable depictions from the third century onwards of Hercules by the Buddha's side, his club swapped out for a thunderbolt (figs.39).⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁴ On the connection between Min and the thunderbolt at Letopolis, see Wainwright (1932) and, the context of Egyptian storm gods more generally (1964).

⁵⁸⁵ A comprehensive introduction to the symbolism of the *vajra* in Beer (2003) 87-92.

⁵⁸⁶ On Herakles- Vajrapāṇi, Yang (2020:234-236) For a history of the development of Herakles-Vajrapani, Galinsky (2020).

The list goes on, but the point is that there was a long-lived and widespread cultural *koiné* in which thunder and lightning bolts were conceived of as weapons wielded by storm deities. This translated into an artistic *koiné* which represented the thunderbolt as a variously flaming or pronged object which could be grasped in one hand and hurled from the sky by potent and formidable deities. Since the immense energy and force of thunder and lightning required an even greater force to handle it, that ability, wherever represented, demonstrated ultimate strength, power, and authority. It is an enormous topic, but since the concern here is to search for the inspiration for Sulla's dream and precedents for his own mortal thunderbolt-wielding, we may, regrettably, cut through it quickly. This is because, with one significant and glaring exception, there is no such imagery to be found. While thunderbolt-wielding was an altogether common and familiar concept wherever one went in the ancient world, it must be underscored, in all cases it was a fearsome deity that was represented doing so.⁵⁸⁷

For all the hyperbole of ancient Near Eastern kingship, which promoted a close relationship between the king and the divine, no king, to my knowledge, was depicted holding the ultimate weapon of the storm gods.⁵⁸⁸ He was often depicted ascending a holy mountain to commune with a god (fig.40).⁵⁸⁹ Often, too, he was passed an object or some knowledge that invested him with authority and divine sanction.⁵⁹⁰ However, he was pious and deferential. As in the Hittite reliefs, he stands before the gods who carry their

⁵⁸⁷ We might quibble that Hercules was a mythical man turned god, but the point stands in terms of historical mortals.

⁵⁸⁸ It is an enormous claim which I have struggled to disprove. If such evidence exists, it is so unforthcoming as to prove the general point.

⁵⁸⁹ Naram-Sin (2254-2218 BCE), king of Akkad, was the first Mesopotamian king to explicitly claim divine status by donning the bull-horned helmet of the gods. See Victory stele (fig.40).

⁵⁹⁰ Hammurabi was handed the law code as was Moses. Hittite royalty was 'beloved of the storm-god' Tešub and were depicted embraced by the god, but never handed his thunderbolts. See, Taracha (2008).

lightning and thunderbolts as something divine and beyond human reach (figs.41-42). This is evident on a stele of the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurnarsipal II from Nimrud, for example, which represents the king pointing to the symbols of his patron deities, among which is the thunderbolt of the storm god Adad (fig. 43). His finger approaches the symbols but does not touch them. His left hand holds a mace. Even in the Achaemenid court, where kings were portrayed as perfected beings emanating the divine, in their hands they were depicted holding no more than the sceptre and lotus flower.⁵⁹¹ In sum, while there was usually a close relationship between king and ruling storm deities and while kings may have associated themselves with these deities and were even described in thundersome terms, neither the artistic nor literary evidence suggests that a king being given direct control of the divine lightning was an idea that murmured through the ancient kingdoms of the Mediterranean and Near East and, accordingly, depictions of this are not forthcoming.

The exception is, of course, Alexander.

Alexander Keraunophoros

The first mortal hand to have reached out and grasped the thunderbolt in the ancient Mediterranean world appears to have been the precocious hand of Alexander III of Macedon. A decadrachm discovered in Kullum in Bokhara depicts a regal figure standing in a cuirass with a sword with a thunderbolt raised in his right hand (fig.44). When Percy Gardner first published the so-called 'Porus medallion' in 1887, he identified this figure as the deified Alexander. On stylistic evidence, he extrapolated a second-century BCE

⁵⁹¹ Panaino (2014: 236): 'It is more probable that Sassanian kings also actually never presumed to be divine, but that their image was an earthly *speculum divinitatis* as it was also for the Achaemenians; simply they increased the kosmokratic function of the king as it happened in the Byzantine context'.

date.⁵⁹² However, in 1906, Barclay Vincent Head re-evaluated the details of the iconography and concluded that it was issued, in fact, in Alexander's own lifetime.⁵⁹³ The elephants on the reverse, the identity of the rider, and the moment depicted have all received much discussion as have details such as the plumes on Alexander's helmet.⁵⁹⁴ It seems clear the obverse refers to the Battle of the Hydaspes of 326 BCE. In this battle, a thunderstorm helped Alexander's troops to victory.⁵⁹⁵ Yet, the thunderbolt in Alexander's hand has, again, been taken largely at face value. Holt, in a monograph on the medallion, notes that it is symptomatic of Alexander's "soaring ambition" and "a bold step in the exaltation of a ruler".⁵⁹⁶ Despite this, it is regularly described as if a routine mode of representation. In his useful book on the legend of Alexander in Greek and Roman coins, for example, Dahmen comments on the Porus medallion that:

"... his representation already alludes to his semi-divine character by equipping him with a thunderbolt on the reverse, the attribute of his alleged father, the god Zeus."⁵⁹⁷

This idea of 'alluding to' Zeus or as commonly appears elsewhere, 'associating' himself with Zeus or 'in the guise' of Zeus' is a common refrain in discussions of this imagery. While the arrogance implicit in this is sometimes noted, the giant leap it constitutes in terms of iconography and ideology is seldom appreciated.⁵⁹⁸ Given the overview of contexts and precedents above, it was clearly no small matter to 'equip' Alexander with a

⁵⁹² Gardner (1887).

⁵⁹³ Barclay (1906:8-9). On the discovery, Holt (2003:53-55).

⁵⁹⁴ Although most see the victory over King Porus, the elephant scene on the reverse is still debated. Compare e.g., Nicolet-Pierre (1978), Holt (2003), Bhandare (2007). The identification of Alexander, however, is unanimously agreed.

⁵⁹⁵ Plutarch, *Alexander* 60. See Bosworth (2003) on the Indian campaigns.

⁵⁹⁶ Holt (2003), 123-4.

⁵⁹⁷ Dahmen (2007), 110.

⁵⁹⁸ A notable exception is Price (1982:85) who recognised it as a watershed in numismatics, and Zanker (2004:139-143) who likens this innovation to the shocking leap in Hellenistic poetry that broke classical norms of the clear divide between encomium and hymn.

thunderbolt. Stewart rightly argues that the depiction cannot be Alexander *as* Zeus, noting the idea had no place in Greek thought and pointing out the lack of precedent anywhere in Greek art for a mortal to be represented with divine attributes.⁵⁹⁹ The tension caused by Alexander's divine pretensions among his fellow Macedonians is well-known, but these pretensions are often excused as his way of appealing to eastern aesthetics of kingship.⁶⁰⁰ However, as should now be clear, picking up a thunderbolt was no standard imagery among any of those eastern kingdoms either.⁶⁰¹ Unless we assume delusion on the part of Alexander, this imagery demands explanation.

The motif was not restricted to coinage. Alexander *keranophoros*, the 'thunderbolt-wielder', also appeared in other media, which seem to have been endorsed by Alexander himself and to have comprised part of his official public image.⁶⁰² Another image possibly from Alexander's reign or soon thereafter is found on an engraved carnelian known as the Neisos gem, now in St Petersburg's Hermitage Museum. Its date is debated but scholars largely settle on the late fourth, early third century.⁶⁰³ It shows Alexander as a heroic nude in a diadem standing *contrapposto* with an aegis in his draped left hand and in his raised right hand, a thunderbolt (fig.45). The heroic nude was an artistic mode treading the line between mortal and divine, but the thunderbolt in Alexander's hand definitively crossed it. The eagle of Zeus perched by his side underscores the point that Alexander is not only being portrayed with divine attributes but specifically with those attributes of

⁵⁹⁹ Stewart (1993). Badian (2012) discusses the deification of Alexander but does not give the wielding of the thunderbolt much attention. See also Fears (1977:58-60) and for an insightful discussion Lane Fox (1996).

⁶⁰⁰ See, for example, the outrageously sumptuous regal display described by Phylarchos (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 12, 537f).

⁶⁰¹ Pace Stewart (1993:203), who, like many classicists, believes the image was 'tailor-made for the East'.

⁶⁰² Stewart (1993) for comprehensive list of sources.

⁶⁰³ Pollitt (1986/2006: 23); Mihalopoulos (2009:191-2).

Zeus. The gem portrait was small and was seen, presumably, by only a small and intimate audience. However, another *keraunophoros* portrait was large scale, public, and famous in both the ancient and modern worlds.⁶⁰⁴ The painting by Apelles of Colophon, which Alexander himself dedicated in the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus seems to have reached a celebrity not unlike the fame of Michelangelo and his masterpiece in the Sistine Chapel. This comparison can be pushed: both adorned a sacred space, both were magnificently expensive (twenty talents in Apelles' case), and both portray a mortal hand touching the divine (fig.46). In describing the painting, Pliny (*Historia Naturalis* 35.92) notes *digiti eminere videntur et fulmen extra tabulam esse*. It seems that not only was Alexander portrayed holding the thunderbolt (*fulmen tenentem*) but this particular detail was painted with perspectival realism making it extend out towards the viewer.

The painting was much discussed. Plutarch quotes a popular aphorism that of the two Alexanders, that of Philip was invincible but that of Apelles was inimitable.⁶⁰⁵ Clearly, ἀμίμητος refers to Apelles' artistic skill and *how* he represented his subject. However, perhaps there is more than a hint here that the painting was inimitable also because of *what* was represented. It certainly did not go uncriticised. Callisthenes, who called Alexander "*keraunophoros*" in his history of the expedition, was scorned as a flatterer (κόλαξ).⁶⁰⁶ Polybius (12.12b-c) states that Callisthenes' own fate was also punishment from the gods for putting the thunderbolt upon 'mortal nature' (θνητῆ φύσει). The sculptor Lysippus, a contemporary, criticised Apelles because of the thunderbolt he placed in Alexander's hand. Lysippus reproached Apelles saying he himself had represented Alexander holding only a spear, the glory of which 'no time shall take away,

⁶⁰⁴ Cicero, *In Verrem* 4.60; Pliny, *NH* 35.92; Plutarch, *Moralia* 335A, 360D, *Alexander* 4.1.

⁶⁰⁵ Plutarch, *De Alexandri Magni Fortuna aut Virtute* 2.2 (*Moralia* 335a).

⁶⁰⁶ Callisthenes, *FGrHist* 124 T 20.

being honest and his own by right'.⁶⁰⁷ Plutarch's gloss on this must be contextualised in the first century in which he wrote, but it contributes to a point he is making about how quickly vainglorious boasts burn out and prove untrue.⁶⁰⁸ The propriety and morality of mortal *keraunophoros* imagery would prove a perennial concern.

Unfortunately, Apelles' masterpiece is lost. There is speculation that the fresco in the House of the Vettii in Pompeii is a Roman reproduction of the Ephesus temple painting. This fresco portrays a young man seated in the posture of Zeus, seated on his throne holding a sceptre in his right hand and the thunderbolt in his lap (fig.47). The figure has the tell-tale curls of Alexander's leonine hair and his upward gaze full of *pothos*. The fresco certainly seems to be a first-century CE, Roman painting of Alexander. It is at least possible that this was a copy of Apelles' painting since this was still extant in the first century.⁶⁰⁹ If so, this would have been the most grandiose of all Alexander *keraunophoros* portraits since Zeus enthroned with his thunderbolt is the ultimate expression of Zeus as king of the gods.

The assumption is naturally that Alexander intended to display himself as being in some part divine. Certainly, after his visit to Siwah, he could claim to be a son of Zeus directly rather than a descendant through his Argead lineage to Hercules and therefore ultimately Zeus. His conquest of Egypt, moreover, gave him a taste of the transcendent powers of a pharaoh. His emulation of Achilles and the Homeric heroes likely also encouraged him to aspire for 'godlike' status. All this plus his unprecedented accomplishments across the known world accumulatively gave him license to claim greater status than was

⁶⁰⁷ Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 24: οὐδὲ εἷς ἀφαιρήσεται χρόνος ἀληθινὴν καὶ ἰδίαν οὐσαν.

⁶⁰⁸ See Flashpoint 10.

⁶⁰⁹ Pliny, *HN* 35.92 is familiar with it and speaks of it in the present tense.

traditional.⁶¹⁰ Was this enough for him therefore to reach for the thunderbolt himself? Did his divine lineage allow him to inherit the thunderbolt? What exactly was he claiming? An answer may be sought among the thunderbolts with which Alexander grew up.

Macedonian Thunderbolts

The thunderbolt was as powerfully associated with Zeus in Macedonia as it was in Greece. However, in Macedonia it arguably conveyed in addition a more nationalistic symbolism. Whereas Athens held Athena as patron goddess and her owl regularly symbolised her city, Zeus and the thunderbolt were central to Macedonian monarchy. With Mount Olympus on its southern border, geographically as well as culturally, the seat of the gods loomed large. The cult of Zeus was prevalent in Macedon and the kings considered themselves descendants of Zeus.⁶¹¹ Legend told that Makedon, the eponymous ancestor of the kingdom, had been sired by a union of Thyia and “thunder-loving” Zeus (τερπικέρανος).⁶¹² It seems also that on the eve of Alexander’s ascendance to the throne, his father Philip II was already pushing this association to the extreme. According to Diodorus Siculus (16.92), at any rate, in a lavish festival with much pomp, Philip had twelve exquisite statues of the Olympian gods carried in procession and a thirteenth ‘statue worthy of the gods’ (θεοπρεπής εἶδωλον) was carried among them. This new addition was a statue of Philip himself so that, as Diodorus describes, he seemed to enthrone himself among the Olympian twelve (σύνθρονον ἑαυτὸν ἀποδεικνύντος τοῦ βασιλέως τοῖς δώδεκα θεοῖς). He did not, it seems, depict himself as Zeus but elevated

⁶¹⁰ On Alexander’s divine aspirations generally: Balsdon (1950). Fredricksmeier (2004) on Alexander’s ‘religion’. Mitchell (2013) for the legal dimensions of Alexander’s godhood.

⁶¹¹ For a good overview, see le Bohec-Bouhet (2002).

⁶¹² Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Thematis* 2 citing fragment 7 of Hesiod’s *Catalogue of Women* (Merkelbach–West).

himself to a peer, taking his seat alongside the gods on Olympus.⁶¹³ It should be noted that this was the day Philip was assassinated.

Alongside the Star of Vergina, Macedonian royal insignia incorporated the thunderbolt and eagle, the iconography of Zeus. These were familiar motifs across the Greek world. From Homeric times, the eagle had been the 'surest of winged omens' (αἰετὸς τελειότατος πετεηνῶν). Hecuba refers to the eagle as Zeus' most beloved of birds (φίλτατος οἰωνῶν).⁶¹⁴ The eagle was associated with the thunderbolt as it was believed to be the only bird able to carry it.⁶¹⁵ Eagles and thunderbolts had regularly appeared on Greek coinage.⁶¹⁶ It was during Philip II and Alexander's time that the iconic combination of the eagle *on* the thunderbolt seems to have crystallised. Many issues from the Macedonian mints at Pella and Amphipolis through the 330s and 320s BCE bear this motif (fig.49). The eagle and thunderbolt was a powerful and triumphant combination befitting Alexander's extensive conquests.

As part of his royal insignia, the thunderbolt moreover became incorporated into the legends surrounding Alexander. It did not only allude to his supposed descent from Zeus, it was the vehicle by which Zeus impregnated his mother. According to his mother, Olympias, the night before she consummated her marriage to Philip, she dreamed there was a thunderclap and a bolt of lightning struck her belly (βροντῆς γενομένης ἔμπεσεῖν

⁶¹³ An inscription from Eresos on Lesbos, makes a dedication to Zeus Philippios. (Rhodes-Osborne no. 83 = Harding 112). It is unclear what form this divine Philip took. Lott (1996) suggests an altar had been set up before statues of Zeus and Philip.

⁶¹⁴ Homer, *Iliad*, 8.247, 24.315, 24.293.

⁶¹⁵ Pliny, *HN* 10.4: *negant umquam solam hanc alitem fulmine exanimatam; ideo armigeram iovis consuetudo iudicavit.*

⁶¹⁶ They are particularly conspicuous, for example, on coins from Elis, from the fifth century BCE and ongoing through the third. As organiser of the Olympic Games and host to its competitors, Elis had good reason to portray superlative Jovian imagery on its currency.

αύτῃς τῇ γαστρὶ κεραυνόν, *Alexander* 2.2). In this way, Alexander was supposed actually sired by lightning. To Macedonian ears, this likely recalled Alexander's ancestor Makedon who had also been conceived by Zeus although we do not know by what means.⁶¹⁷ Alexander's birth had coincided with an arson attack that razed the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus to the ground (*Valerius Maximus*, 8.14.5, Plutarch, *Alexander* 3.5). This was interpreted badly by the soothsayers of the city who ran about prophesying that the day marked the arrival of something calamitous that would bring about the destruction of all Asia (Plutarch, *Alexander* 3.7). This is the same temple for which, once rebuilt, Alexander's enormous *keranophoros* portrait would later be commissioned. The extraordinary choice of representation there perhaps answered the prophecy by proclaiming the establishment of Alexander in Asia but in terms more messianic than destructive. With a few leaps in the mythological family tree, it possibly also recalled Alexander's other ancestor, Hercules. The apotheosis of this man-turned-god was facilitated by a thunderbolt through which Zeus freed him of his mortal coils and brought him up to Olympus.⁶¹⁸ With lightning enveloping Alexander's birth, perhaps in this temple which prophesied his arrival, Alexander's thunderbolt also foreshadowed his death and apotheosis.

There can be no doubt that divine claims were being made in these images and that Alexander was advertising both his divine and his royal Macedonian lineage. Certainly, the romanticisation of his character in keeping with the Homeric heroes suited

⁶¹⁷ On Makedon's conception, n.612 above. Ogden (2011) usefully discusses various Alexander birth myths and their dates (pp. 12-14 for the thunderbolt). He speculates that the thunderbolt version may have been propagated by the Ptolemies. What is striking, however, is the lack of *keranophoros* imagery among the Hellenistic successor kings (discussed presently in this chapter).

⁶¹⁸ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 4.38.4-5: εὐθὺς δὲ καὶ κεραυνῶν ἐκ τοῦ περιέχοντος πεσόντων, ἢ πυρὰ πᾶσα κατεφλέχθη. Afterwards, Hercules' companions found no bones in the pyre. The disappearance of the body is a recurring theme in apotheosis by lightning. Cf. Romulus, Flashpoint 1.

Alexander's own aesthetic, but there was something altogether more worldly and political underpinning this. While the focus has been on what these images say about Alexander's divinity, it seems they speak rather more loudly about his earthly status. Stewart sees the thunderbolt on the Neisos gem and Porus coins as metaphorical and, on the latter, in awkward juxtaposition with the general in military garb. He equates the giant leap in iconography with the giant leap in Alexander's powers and argues that Alexander *keraunophoros* should be understood as occupying on earth the position Zeus holds in the heavens.⁶¹⁹ There is no reason to see the military garb as awkward in that equation. In fact, it rather tidily delineates the two spheres of influence.⁶²⁰ The point about earthly power is important. Whatever divine affiliation was indicated, in practical terms, it was a claim to establish and justify earthly power.⁶²¹ I would push Stewart's point further to say that this was a culminating moment in the politicisation of the thunderbolt. In the equation of earthly and heavenly kings, the thunderbolt here specifically became the conduit between the two, and in the hands of an extraordinary human it represented the clutch of autocratic political power divinely endorsed.

Greek and Hellenistic thunderbolts

The world of Greek thunderbolts would be a whole other thesis but again we would find scant evidence of mortal thunderbolt-wielding. Relevant flashpoints in Greece would include Alcibiades who scandalised Athens by having had a golden shield made for himself on which he replaced his family device with an Eros *keraunophoros*. This, combined with his extravagant lifestyle, made respectable citizens nervous as it had

⁶¹⁹ Stewart (1993), 194-205.

⁶²⁰ Lane Fox (1996:101) is insightful on its worldly message: 'This clear context of human victory limits the scope of the thunderbolt: it need only signify that Alexander conquered barbarian India with the special aid of Zeus'. However, the mode of representation must still be recognised as extraordinary.

⁶²¹ Cf. Mitchell (2013) about how Alexander's divinity helped negotiate the legalities of his regal position.

distinctly regal connotations and they looked upon him ὡς τυραννικὰ καὶ ἀλλόκοτα (Plutarch, *Alcibiades* 16.1-2).⁶²² The reaction to this motif emblazoned on a shield and the threat seen in its implications as ‘tyrannical and strange’ illustrates that the idea was not only alien to contemporary Athenian society but perceived as dangerous to its democracy. It also provides good indication of how far a depiction of a thunderbolt was at the time from falling into Alcibiades’ own hands.⁶²³ Also included in the list would be Clearchus the fourth-century BCE tyrant of Heraclea on the Black Sea, who aggrandised himself and his relationship to Zeus to an unprecedented degree.⁶²⁴ He wore a gold crown, purple robes and called his son Keraunos. It is important to note that Clearchus was not claiming to be Zeus but his son. In his fancy dress, he intended to present himself in a kingly manner but with overt allusions to Zeus, most notably in a golden eagle carried in front of him. Such affectations sat no better with Clearchus’ contemporaries who soon thereafter assassinated him to put an end to these outrages.⁶²⁵ Menecrates of Syracuse would also feature. He became Philip of Macedon’s physician and, in awe of his own medical skills and ability to save lives, decided he had supernatural powers and went by the nickname ‘Zeus’. Athenaeus recounts his antics as ridiculous, describing him surrounded by medical staff also in divine guise, dressed as Hermes, Apollo, and Asklepius (288 a-f). Menecrates, himself, dressed up as Zeus and wielded, note, a sceptre. Philip only laughed at his insanity, which Aelian (*Varia Historia* 12.51) also underscores.⁶²⁶ Again, these examples constitute an argument from extreme example: even when Clearchus and Menecrates took their affectations towards Zeus to an extreme,

⁶²² Also, Athenaeus 534E.

⁶²³ Wohl (2002:130-158) describes the Eros of Alcibiades as a challenge to democratic desire.

⁶²⁴ Justin, *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus’ Philippic Histories* 16.5.

⁶²⁵ According to Pompeius Trogus, the ‘indignant’ assassins were liberating the people from a tyrant: *indignantem patriam liberaturi in necem tyranni* (*Philippic Histories* 16.5).

⁶²⁶ Which begs the question how seriously Philip meant others to take his own godhood.

wearing purple and diadems, holding sceptres with golden eagles carried before them, even they did not reach for the thunderbolt.⁶²⁷ This is the cultural climate in which Alexander first seized the thunderbolt in his mortal hand. And Alexander was *the* precedent for Sulla's dream.

We might expect that, having broken the mould, Alexander would be followed by a succession of thunderbolt-wielding rulers. That he was not perhaps tells us more than all his forebears about the power of this imagery and the reticence to employ it. Although the Hellenistic world erupted into a proliferation of thunderbolts and divine kings taking their cue from Alexander, it is noteworthy that none of them, to my knowledge, went so far as to represent themselves holding the thunderbolt again. This may be surprising as it seems natural to the pomp and ceremony of Hellenistic kings.⁶²⁸ Indeed, the thunderbolt was used in the service of various dynastic successors and ruler cults who looked, at first, to Alexander for legitimacy. Nevertheless, however grand their claims and however regularly they propagated the iconography of Zeus or Alexander, none of these powerful rulers presumed to reproduce *keranophoros* imagery of their own. This is surely indicative of the power of this image and the taboo surrounding it.

⁶²⁷ Only Plutarch tells us that Clearchus Ηρακλείας τύραννος γενόμενος σκηπτὸν ἐφόρει (*Moralia* 338b). The σκηπτὸν here seems the result of an 18th century textual emendation of σκῆπτρον confused by a comment in the marginalia of two 15th century manuscripts. See Burstein (1974). Even if he did hold a representation of a thunderbolt, Clearchus' display was so outrageous and fatal, as a precedent it would only prove the point.

⁶²⁸ Thus, an esteemed authority, R.R.R. Smith (1988:38): 'In the Classical period, images of the gods had been given various attributes which helped to distinguish them and to define their separate characteristics and powers; the thunderbolt of Zeus or the lion scalp of Herakles are familiar examples'. Too familiar, it seems. On Alexander wielding the thunderbolt, Smith advocates well-advised caution: 'this attribute was perhaps unusual: it is not attested elsewhere for a Hellenistic king. But with so few full figures we should perhaps be cautious' (p.40)

The connection to Alexander was important early in his successors' claims to legitimacy. Ptolemy I therefore experimented with Alexander *keraunophoros* imagery on his own coinage. The earliest coins depict the head of the deified Alexander with Zeus or Athena on the reverse. From the beginning of the third century, by which time Ptolemy was not ruling Egypt on behalf of the Macedonian alliance but as king/pharaoh in his own right, several series of gold staters appear with the head of Ptolemy himself on the obverse with the deified Alexander in an elephant-drawn chariot on the reverse. In Alexander's left hand he holds the reins and a cornucopia; in his right hand, he holds the thunderbolt (fig.50). Minted in Alexandria where the commandeered body of Alexander was enshrined, this coin made a clear statement about where Alexander's true legacy lay and from whom Ptolemy drew legitimate power.⁶²⁹ The thunderbolt even seems to point at the words above it: *Ptolemaiou Basileos*. Yet, it is noteworthy that this type was discontinued after a few decades, no Ptolemy Keraunophoros types were issued, nor was Alexander Keraunophoros imagery revisited in Ptolemaic coinage.

Unsurprisingly, the Antigonid dynasty that ruled the environs of Macedonia continued the same thunderbolt iconography that had long been characteristic of the region. In addition, however, in the Hellenistic world, post-Alexander, Athena Alkidemos first appeared brandishing the thunderbolt.⁶³⁰ As examples from the mint at Amphipolis show, Athena Alkidemos strides out wedged between the words *Basileus Antigonou* – there is no doubt in whose aid she wields her thunderbolt (fig.51) Note, however, that it is not Antigonus himself that holds it.

⁶²⁹ Johnson (1999) on 'divinisation' in Ptolemaic iconography.

⁶³⁰ Livy 42.51. See Brett (1950). In myth and literature, Athena was on rare occasions granted access to Zeus' thunderbolt. See the late but memorable description in Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica* 14.44-540.

The Seleucids also cultivated a connection to both Zeus and Alexander. The thunderbolt appeared on Seleucid coinage from its first minting. Supposedly, a thunderbolt omen from Zeus had shown Seleucus I where to build his capital of Seleucia in Pieria.⁶³¹ Although Appian suggests this was the reason why the inhabitants worshipped the thunderbolt as a god and sang hymns to it, Seleucia in Pieria already had a powerful local storm and well-established in the area. Nearby Mount Kasios was a thundersome place associated with the worship of a venerable thunder deity. Known in Ugaritic texts as the ba'al of the north or in Hebrew Ba'al Zaphon, בעל צפון, Ba'al of the 'Mount' the Hellenistic identity of this deity eventually became Zeus Kasios.⁶³² It was no doubt wise to accommodate local religion, but it equally served Seleucus I and his claims upon Alexander's legacy to put a familiar face on this Mediterranean port city connected by sea to the rest of the Greek world. Zeus types were disseminated on coinage across the kingdom and the Zeus *keranophoros* type was distinctive of the port capital.⁶³³

Seleucus I was murdered by the firstborn son of Ptolemy I, who was later nicknamed Κεραυνός. Pausanias (10.19.7) tells us this was on account of his daring and reckless nature. The ambiguity of *τολμηρός* does not make this an obvious compliment. There was also a Κεραυνός among the early Seleucids: Seleucus III Keraunos, who reigned 225-223 BCE. Plutarch is disparaging but comments that at least as heirs to Alexander, the successor kings may have been somewhat justified in their inflated egos (μέγα φρονεῖν). It will be observed meanwhile that the thunderbolt has returned to the hand of deities

⁶³¹ Appian, *Roman Histories*, 11.58.

⁶³² Toorn (1999:152-4).

⁶³³ On choosing the site: Libanius, *Orations* 11.84.

with powerful kings under their aegis. Among their many grandiose claims, it does not seem that any of these kings followed Alexander in seizing upon the thunderbolt again.⁶³⁴

This is the world in which we find the Scipios fighting the Barcids and why as a name and as a concept it is not so improbably coincidental as it first seems that two national thunderbolts might end up clashing in war. This is the wider context for Scipio Africanus' behaviour in presenting himself as an intimate favourite of Jupiter and the cultural climate, which on the one hand marvelled at divinely-inspired leaders like Alexander and on the other was deeply suspicious of their power and ambitions. It is a world in which thunderbolts abounded and yet the thunderbolt itself straddled an uneasy divide being sublime in divine hands but in human hands tyrannical and ridiculous. That was the dilemma confronting anyone who approached it in their propaganda or self-promotion and that was another reason, on top of the more local, specifically Roman reasons, why mortal *kerounophoros* imagery had no place in Republican Rome. Alexander was the only one to confidently and officially portray himself picking up the thunderbolt. It was a famous but controversial move in his day that to posterity spoke to both his brilliance and his hubris.

Whatever is missing from this brief overview, the most important conclusion this flickering tour across the ancient Mediterranean compels is that whatever else thunderbolts symbolised, wielded in the interests, let alone hands, of an individual they were representative of three things: gods, kings, and tyranny. It is vital to understand the universal legibility of this imagery because none of these things were desirable

⁶³⁴ Per Smith (1988:40) above who cannot find Hellenistic examples either.

aspirations for a politician and general of the sober Roman Republic. Yet, on the brink of his march on Rome, this was the conceptual world into which Sulla was stepping.



Returning now to the question with which we set out, which asked how Sulla's thunderbolt would have looked to his contemporaries and how it would have been interpreted in the context of first-century Rome, a clear and quite consistent answer has emerged. According to the lessons of history and all previous ideology and iconography, Sulla's picking up of a thunderbolt pointed in no uncertain terms to an autocratic power that bypassed the senate and was derived directly from a divine sponsor. It cued Sulla into the world of Hellenistic kings vaunting their power and proximity to the gods, in which context the thunderbolt approximated a divine legitimacy to rule. In that outward-facing perspective, it gave Sulla a foothold in the lightning lore that surrounded many of those kings, most pressingly, that of Mithridates whose legend abounded with miraculous encounters with lightning.

When Mithridates was born, for example, a storm supposedly gathered above his cradle and a thunderbolt (κεραυνός) struck him and scarred his forehead: a sign that marked him out for kingship. As an adult another thunderbolt struck his bedroom and burned the arrows in his quiver. This was interpreted as a sign of the future victories of his archers.⁶³⁵ Plutarch states that these incidents were so well-known that many people called Mithridates 'Dionysus' because he had similarly been delivered from 'thunderboltings'

⁶³⁵ Plutarch, *Quaestiones Conviviales* 1.6.2.

(ἀπὸ τῶν κεραυνοβολιῶν).⁶³⁶ Against such a formidable adversary it was perhaps psychologically prudent for Sulla to fortify himself with some lightning lore of his own. In its prophetic capacity, the dream thus served two purposes. It guaranteed success in the imminent battle in Rome, which had been precipitated by Marius stealing the eastern command away from Sulla. It also guaranteed Sulla's success in the east once he had regained his rightful command. Moreover, as we can now see, the act of clutching a thunderbolt cast Sulla in the same vein as Alexander the Great; a comparison he may well have encouraged as he set out on his eastern campaign casting Mithridates as another doomed Darius.

Some suspected the goddess who handed Sulla the thunderbolt was Ma, a formidable eastern goddess from Cappadocia.⁶³⁷ This bore ideological heft because Cappadocia had been a bone of contention in the political manoeuvring leading up to the Asian Vespers and was at the time under the control of Mithridates. Ma was an Anatolian goddess associated with Cybele, but although her name suggests a mother goddess, she was a deity of war. Her epithet Ἀνίκητος meant 'invincible'.⁶³⁸ She was a moon goddess and had a famous temple at Comana in Cappadocia. Strabo describes the temple and equates Ma with the Greek Enyo, sister of Mars and a fearsome martial goddess (*Geographica* 12.2.4). In Rome, she was the war goddess Bellona; 'dark Bellona' as Statius called her, with 'bloody hand' and 'blood-stained whip' (*Thebaid*, 7. 64 ff, 10. 855 ff).⁶³⁹ In Sulla's own

⁶³⁶ From the local perspective, Mithridates' fulminating legend seems rooted in Median beliefs that the king was an incarnation of Mithra and, like him, was born of a descending star and heavenly lightning, See Widengren (1955: 247-8). Cf. Gordon (2006).

⁶³⁷ Plutarch, (*Sulla* 9.4) states she is from Cappadocia, but her identity is ambiguous to him; he suggests Σελήνη, Ἀθηνᾶ, Εὐνώ corresponding to Luna, Minerva, and Bellona in Rome of whom, only Minerva traditionally had access to thunderbolts.

⁶³⁸ Højte (2009), 283.

⁶³⁹ Cf. Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.700-3; Ovid, *Heroides* 15.135; Statius, *Thebaid* 8.655. On the temple to Bellona Victrix in Rome, see Humm (2005), chapter 10.

mythology, however, Fortuna was his abiding divine patroness. The ambiguity of the identity of the dream goddess arming Sulla was no doubt part of its use. In terms of propaganda, Sulla's thunderbolt was altogether a deft move and, looking east from Rome, it successfully carried the ideological weight of multiple complementary messages.

Looking to Rome itself and back to the foundation of the city, Sulla's dream conveyed a similar message about the divine right to rule playing out against the local backdrop. We have seen thunder and lightning bolts woven through the narrative of Rome's early kings and in the tumultuous politics of the first century BCE, a worrying rise of overly powerful individuals had made concerns about monarchic intentions all too relevant. Although Sulla's supporters might have taken his thunderbolt-wielding as an exceptionally good omen about their prospects, in the bigger picture, the one viewed more cynically by his opponents, it was a perfect image of too much power concentrated in the hands of one man.

To Roman contemporaries, the most obvious and disturbing implication of the dream must have been that the thunderbolt, which had previously been a corporate entity protecting the Roman collective, was now being taken up by an individual for private gain in a factional dispute. This image removed all mediation or ambiguity about in precisely whose hands Sulla envisioned power and for whose purposes. It will be recalled that after the goddess put the thunderbolt in his hand, Plutarch tells us she named each of his enemies and ordered him to strike them down with it (καὶ τῶν ἐχθρῶν ἕκαστον ὀνομάζουσαν τῶν ἐκείνου βάλλειν κελεῦσαι). Sulla's enemies were thus conflated with enemies of the state. Indeed, his famous justification for marching on Rome 'to free her

from tyrants' claimed that his ends were noble, but with hindsight, the thunderbolt becomes a grim foreshadowing of the horrors of proscription.⁶⁴⁰

In Sulla's adoption and refashioning of what *dictator* could mean, is a man casting about for ways to represent innovation as tradition.⁶⁴¹ It may be Sulla's masterstroke that he introduced his *keranophoros* imagery to Rome in a dream. As noted earlier, it allowed him to be simultaneously endorsed by the gods and mitigated from any blame. More than that, however, it suggested a direct source of immense power when his route to office was illegitimate.⁶⁴² The thunderbolt was a motif that seems to have had ongoing resonance throughout the rest of his career. Though unnoticed now, it seems to have been associated with his brand of power in his own times. It was imagery too potent to simply serve its immediate purpose in Nola and then dissolve from memory.

Sulla's Perfect Storm

Just as Alexander had his 'divine' storm at the Hydaspes, real storms obliged Sulla's legend. In 88 BCE, only months after the dream, Mithridates suffered his first defeat of the war when the Siege of Rhodes was swung for the Roman allies by a fortuitous bolt of lightning. Most dangerous to Rhodian defences was the enormous siege engine moving to attack the city walls by the Temple of Isis. What happened is rather mysterious. Appian tells us the contraption suddenly collapsed under its own weight and an apparition of Isis was seen hurling a great fire down upon it (καὶ φάσμα τῆς Ἰσιδος ἔδοξε πῦρ ἀφιέναι πολὺ κατ' αὐτοῦ, *Mithridatic War* 27). Julius Obsequens states that the apparition was of Isis

⁶⁴⁰ Sulla's intentions are a notorious conundrum, e.g., Keaveney (2005); Santangelo (2007); Thein (2014b); Urso (2016); Eckert & Thein (2020), chapter 9.

⁶⁴¹ Steel (2014). Previously the dictatorship had been a pragmatic administrative office used in the third century BCE largely for election purposes.

⁶⁴² Strachan (2026b).

hurling a thunderbolt (56). Both sources are late although Obsequens leans heavily on Livy. In the space between what happened and what was remembered, some compulsion to superimpose thunderbolts perhaps shaped the public recollection of events.

Isis could be expected to come to the aid of her own temple and the Rhodians under her protection.⁶⁴³ Rhodes had sided with Rome, but they were fighting for themselves primarily. Sulla, himself, was not present on the island. Nevertheless, he was consul at the time, and this was his campaign. Following so closely after his dream and as his first successful blow against Mithridates, it is tempting to view the dream behind the impulse to interpolate thunderbolts. Isis was certainly an 'eastern' female deity, and her fulminating apparition here resonates with the dream imagery.⁶⁴⁴

In another incident the following year, during the Siege of Athens, Sulla *was* present, and the thunderbolt was real. Its target, however, was not one of his enemies, but one of his own soldiers. Julius Obsequens (*Liber Prodigiorum* 56a), at least, relates that one of Sulla's soldiers was struck dead by lightning. Despite this, the thunderbolt was again interpreted as a good omen for Sulla. Like Helvia, the hapless soldier was not thought guilty of anything but was merely the unfortunate vessel of a divine message. Diviners read the scene and decided that because the head of the corpse was facing towards the city, Sulla's troops would soon enter and take the city – which they did. No doubt Sulla's presence influenced the haruspical response. The dream thunderbolt seems to resonate again in this lightning strike heralding a major victory for Sulla.⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴³ Dunand (1973:18-28); Bricault & Versluys (2014), 16-18.

⁶⁴⁴ Rhodian bronze coins issued in response to these events depict Isiac imagery and a thunderbolt, see Ashton (2001).

⁶⁴⁵ Plutarch (7.3-4) recounts a series of strange prodigies prior to Sulla's march on Rome, heralding what obliging Etruscan seers would interpret as the beginning of a new age.

87 BCE was also the year Gnaeus Pompeius Strabo was supposedly struck by lightning in his tent. We have already considered the particulars of his case in the previous flashpoint. In addition to the cultural details already discussed, Sulla provides further historical and ideological reasons to consider Pompey Strabo's death as caused by lightning. Planning to attack a Rome that had fallen once more to Marius in Sulla's absence, Pompey might seem to have been acting in Sulla's interests. However, by seizing the city, he would have put himself in Marius' stead potentially thereby setting himself up as Sulla's rival.⁶⁴⁶ Before leaving Rome, Sulla had attempted to transfer command of Pompey's troops to a more trusted general. This went down badly and the replacement was murdered by the troops shortly after arrival.⁶⁴⁷ Being no friend of Sulla certainly put Pompey Strabo in line for a thunderbolt only a year after the dream. This event, too, reinforces the idea that the gods would help Sulla smite his enemies.

In 87 BCE, the Marian faction in Rome stripped Sulla in his absence of what he would later call his dignity, his property, his priesthood, and all his other honours (Appian, *Bellum Civile* 1.9.79). The priesthood (ἡ ἱερωσύνη), however, was the augurate which was inviolable with no legal recourse to annulling it.⁶⁴⁸ Sulla responded by focusing on his augurate as his remaining claim to legitimacy and the illegality of his enemies' actions. He issued coins displaying the *lituus* to highlight his tenure of this priestly office.⁶⁴⁹ It is no small detail of his self-styling that his sole recourse to legitimacy was the augurate and

⁶⁴⁶ On political loyalties at the time, Keaveney (1982b); Hillman (1996).

⁶⁴⁷ Appian, *Bellum Civile* 1.63-64.

⁶⁴⁸ Pliny, *Epistulae* 4.8; Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae* 99.

⁶⁴⁹ The *lituus* and *sitella* surrounding two trophies reading IMPER.ITERV[M]. *RRC* 359/2. See, Frier (1969) & Badian's (1968) prior criticism. Cf. Luce (1968), 27.

that as augur with *lituus*, Sulla himself had the right and ability to take the auspices and to read, among other things, lightning strikes.

The most compelling indication that thunderbolts were commonly known to fall in Sulla's favour, however, is an elusive and almost throwaway comment from Pliny the Elder (2.143-144). In his description of the different directions of lightning and their meaning, when he is describing which parts of the sky send forth auspicious or foreboding lightning, he remarks that lightning which returns to the first part of the sky is the most auspicious. Lightning that both originates from and returns to this part of the sky, Pliny explains, is a portent of 'supreme good fortune' (*summa felicitas portendetur*). Then he states apropos of nothing: *quale Sullae dictatori ostentum datum accepimus*. What makes this comment leap out of the text is the fact that it is the only mention of a person or a historical event in what has otherwise been a long 'scientific' treatment of lightning and its interpretations. It seems that this particular type of lightning was so synonymous with Sulla that a century and a half later in mentioning one, Pliny impulsively mentions the other. The verb *accipere* suggests that this is the received wisdom, and in the first-person plural gives the impression that it is a firm fixture in the collective historical memory. The comment apparently needs no qualification or further elaboration, and Pliny moves straight on. His assumption is clearly that this is common knowledge. It is even more startling that it was Sulla who sprang to Pliny's mind at the mention of this type of portent since there were other prestigious candidates: Romulus being the obvious example.⁶⁵⁰ Sulla must have been conspicuously endorsed at some point by superlatively auspicious lightning to make his connection with it so reflexive. This consolidates the idea that part

⁶⁵⁰ See Flashpoint 1.

of Sulla's (in)famous good fortune was wrapped up in thunderbolts and his dream seems to have been borne out in part by the weather.

A perfect iconographic expression of this appears on a silver *denarius* issued at the height of his power, between 82-80BCE (fig.52).⁶⁵¹ It is a reissue of a rare type issued only once before but particularly suited to the occasion: during his years as dictator, Sulla circulated a coin depicting a cornucopia superimposed on a thunderbolt.⁶⁵² Seized by an individual, with risks taken for individual gain rather than collective security, we begin now to see glimmers of the opportunity the thunderbolt afforded. This coin encapsulates the shapes of things to come: Sulla's fortune and the supposed fecundity of his dictatorship resting on a thunderbolt.



Conclusion

No Remedy for a Thunderbolt

It may now be seen that to a public familiar with these events and associations, there is much deeper significance to the description of Sulla as '*iste scaevos Romulus*' (Sallust, *Historiae* 1.55.5) as found in Lepidus' speech against the tyranny of Sulla (*advorsum tyrannidem L. Sullae*).⁶⁵³ It is not simply, as the Loeb gloss explains, a derogatory

⁶⁵¹ RRC 371/1.

⁶⁵² Ramage (1991:105), 'Clearly the cornucopia once again symbolizes the *general felicitas* or prosperity coming from Sulla Felix and the wreath reinforces this idea. The thunderbolt is something new and apparently suggests a connection with Jupiter'. The confusion over the thunderbolt here is representative of how unrecognised its importance has been in scholarship on Sulla.

⁶⁵³ If not a textual corruption. Note '*saevus*' variation in Servius, *In Vergilii Eclogarum commentarii* 3.13: '*sic Sallustius 'saevus iste Romulus'*'. If *saevus* is correct, the point still holds but with focus on the savagery of Sulla's thunderbolt-wielding rather than his perversion of the Romulean model in dealing with it.

description of Sulla as another founder due to his reorganisation of the state.⁶⁵⁴ It is a specific reference to his perversion of the Romulean model. Sulla has corrupted the proper modality of power and the manner in which lightning ought to endorse it. Drawing attention to his hand indicates the nature of that perversion: Sulla's snatching up of the thunderbolt directly. The left-handedness of *scaevos* cleverly contrasts the supreme auspiciousness of heavenly left-sided lightning received by auspication with the sinister and unlucky connotations of the left hand itself. Sallust was looking back to the ravages of Sulla from the political turmoil of his own day a few decades later in the 40s BCE. He has Lepidus beseech the people reminding them that their ancestral rights to 'liberty, a home for each, and to be subject to nothing but the laws' are now held (*tenet*) by Sulla as though snatched (*rapta*) from foreigners.⁶⁵⁵ These seized rights are what a tyrannical thunderbolt represents.

A bronze *quinarius* was issued in Rome in 85 BCE: the year Sulla made peace with Mithridates VI and prepared to return to Rome where another civil war would ensue.⁶⁵⁶ The obverse of this coin shows nothing but a standing cupid deliberately breaking a thunderbolt over his knee (fig.53). It is a startling image, and the only depiction I know of violence done to the thunderbolt. It is certainly the only coin cast with such a die. It is little known and little discussed and deserves far more attention in light of the current argument. Was this really issued by a moneyer loyal to Sulla? Or is this broken thunderbolt that of his dream, the thunderbolt of tyranny?⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁴ Loeb (trans. Ramsey p41 n5).

⁶⁵⁵ Sallust, *Historiae* 1.55.5: *libertas et suae quoique sedes, neu quoi nisi legibus pareremus.*

⁶⁵⁶ *RRC* 352/2.

⁶⁵⁷ Luce (1968) is a useful discussion, but neither his argument that it is Apollo hurling the thunderbolt on *CRR* 732, nor that Sulla himself issued the *quinarius* *CRR* 730 are robust. Luce, himself, notes that the Sullan link to *CRR* 730 through L. Iulio Bursio is tenuous (p.38 n.66).

When, in Augustan Rome, Livy (6.39.7) in a completely different and unrelated context talks about someone 'picking up the thunderbolt of dictatorship' (*dictatorium fulmen*) it was surely Sulla's precedent he had in mind. Around the same time, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (5.77.4) reflects that the dictatorship became an object of reproach and hatred under Sulla: '... so that the Romans then perceived for the first time what they had had all along been ignorant of, that the dictatorship is a tyranny.'⁶⁵⁸ Sulla's dictatorship was certainly remembered as monarchical by later generations; the *regnum Sullanum* would be conjured only 20 years later by Cicero to characterise the kind of rule to which Caesar was aspiring.⁶⁵⁹

A couple of *sententiae* from Publilius Syrus about *fulmen* are particularly interesting in this regard for their timing. Writing in Rome in the decades immediately after Sulla, his attitudes towards thunderbolts and what they mean seem informed by the contemporary political climate. He quips: *Fulmen est ubi cum potestate habitat iracundia* (214). Although this could conceivably be a maxim for any age, the thunderbolt arising from the combination of power and anger in his own age was nuanced by recent experiences of thunderbolts and dictatorship. Therefore, we might wonder about the possible political nuances when he further quips: *Remedium frustra est contra fulmen quaerere* (640). Practically, this could mean the folk remedies against lightning discussed in the introduction were ineffective. Metaphorically, it could mean that it is pointless to look for antidotes for things beyond one's control. Politically, however, it could speak to the inevitability of dictatorship, which in Syrus' time was a prevalent fear: he died in 43 BCE.

⁶⁵⁸ Steel (2014) argues for Sulla's reshaping of the role of dictator as innovative.

⁶⁵⁹ Cicero, *Epistulae ad Atticum* 8.11.2.

Given the trajectory of Roman history after Sulla's watershed march on Rome, later Romans naturally looked back at his thunderbolt as the moment autocratic power crystallised in Rome in an intractable form. Although supposedly a good omen for Sulla and his supporters, his fulminating imagery was remembered as ill-omened for republican ideals. Sulla's hand and what it held thus persisted as an imagined locus for the power struggle between the old *res publica* and the autocracy to which it was giving way.

In this chapter, we set out to establish that the imagery of Sulla's dream, namely 1) a deity handing a thunderbolt to a Roman general and 2) a Roman general himself brandishing a thunderbolt, was a new and startling development in Roman iconographies of power. We have seen not only that it had not previously been part of the official artistic repertoire but that conceptually it had no place there. Sulla created its place. However, it was an ideological minefield as the next chapter will illustrate.



Flashpoint Nine

Augustus has a Near Miss

ideology & imperialism

In 26 BCE, during his Cantabrian campaign, lightning blazed across the litter in which Augustus was travelling and struck dead the torchbearer ahead of him. The brief account from Suetonius is as follows:

... cum expeditione Cantabrica per nocturnum iter lecticam eius fulgur praestrinxisset servumque praelucentem exanimasset.

... when, on a night journey during the Cantabrian campaign, lightning scorched his litter and killed the slave lighting the way ahead.

(Augustus 29.3-4)

Given all precedents, the incident could easily have been interpreted as menacing. Apart from initial horror in the immediate aftermath, looking ahead, it might have seemed to bode ill for Augustus, who had only the year prior made the settlements that reorganised the state and effectively ended forever the old republican system of government. However, what could have been a very bad omen for Augustus, was turned instead into a characteristically effective publicity stunt. He was to be no Pompey Strabo. He singled out Jupiter Tonans as the deity responsible for the incident and this close shave offered him an opportunity to build a temple to this god. Suetonius (29.3) mentions the incident to explain the foundation of the temple which he states was consecrated by Augustus for having been delivered from danger: *Tonanti Iovi aedem consecravit liberatus periculo.*

Nothing more is said of what happened to the stricken slave. Presumably, he was left on that distant spot in a *triste bidental*.⁶⁶⁰

Peter Wiseman has suggested that by building this temple Augustus could have been positioning himself in direct competition with and in contrast to Sulla 'whose *felicitas* ran out before he could dedicate *his* Jupiter temple on the Capitol'.⁶⁶¹ Sulla was certainly an important precedent and point of reference for Augustus. Whereas Sulla had only sought to rebuild the original temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Augustus now erected a new temple in front of it to a particularly tempestuous and thundersome aspect of Jupiter. Ostensibly, it was built out of piety. Certainly, the narrow escape from real danger must genuinely have scared Augustus.⁶⁶² Suetonius describes him in terror at that moment as *consternatus*.⁶⁶³ However, the ideological insinuations and advances made on the back of it have a hubristic rather than timorous flavour which, as we shall see, apparently made even Augustus uncomfortable. Temple building was not the only ideological interface between Sulla and Augustus on the Capitoline. In Jupiter's thundersome capital, this temple and this specific incarnation of the god plug directly into the world of *keraunophoros* imagery which Alexander had innovated and with which Sulla had tentatively experimented. Sulla's *dictatorium fulmen* was a necessary consideration in Augustus' renegotiation of autocratic power. Our ninth flashpoint thus marks another vital turning point in the history of singularly powerful Romans approaching and

⁶⁶⁰ Horace, *Ars Poetica* 147. An epigraphic fragment preserved in a church in Braga, ancient Bracara, northern Portugal attests to a bidental dedicated in the area by Augustus: *CIL* II 2421. Augustus is named *pater patriae* so it must be dated post 2 BCE, but both the location and the fact that it is the only known imperial bidental are intriguing. See, Montero & Perea (1996).

⁶⁶¹ Wiseman (2009), 119. Tacitus, *Historiae* 3.72.3: *curam victor Sulla suscipit, necque tamen dedicavit; hoc solum felicitate eius negatum*.

⁶⁶² He was supposedly inordinately superstitious (Suetonius, *Augustus* 92.1).

⁶⁶³ Suetonius, *Augustus* 90. His fear of lightning is discussed below.

navigating the divine thunderbolt. As noted earlier, iconography and ideology are obviously intertwined but where the case of Sulla provided opportunity to focus more on iconography, Augustus, for reasons that will become apparent, now tilts the argument towards ideology and the role of the thunderbolt in imperial Roman rule.

This chapter will argue that the Temple to Jupiter Tonans was an important step in the development of imperial *keranophoros* imagery providing it a physical space in the city, a site for worship, and a respectable justification. Two key questions arise from this claim. First, to what extent did Augustus seek to establish and propagate his connection to Jupiter Tonans? Second, how far did he actually go in representing a conflation of god and man? Addressing these questions divides the chapter into two main parts focusing on ideology and its artistic outputs respectively.

The Temple to Jupiter Tonans: a ruler cult with bells on

With Suetonius' focus on the lightning strike (*fulgur*), Augustus' choice of Jupiter Tonans seems perhaps odd; a more obvious choice might have been Jupiter Fulgur or Fulgens.⁶⁶⁴ In the way he phrases it, Suetonius also accentuates the visual aspect of the incident: *praestringere* stresses the blinding visual force of the lightning as it darted across the litter.⁶⁶⁵ Suetonius, of course, was not present and perhaps, as is common, the deafening sound simply made the greater impression on those that were.⁶⁶⁶ That acoustic

⁶⁶⁴ Nb., this was a night journey (*per nocturnum iter*) and thus nocturnal lightning, but Summanus is nowhere in view.

⁶⁶⁵ Livy (40.68.5) used the verb in this way to describe the Gauls at Delphi being blinded by lightning: *fulguribus praestringentibus aciem oculorum*.

⁶⁶⁶ Witnesses often recount that the sound of a lightning strike is the loudest noise they have ever heard. It is often, literally, deafening: Mora-Magaña et al. (1996).

experience notwithstanding, however, in terms of religious cult and precedent, this was definitely an odd choice.

Jupiter Tonans can nominally be equated to Zeus the Thunderer, variations of whom can be found in Greek all the way back to Homer.⁶⁶⁷ Yet, evidence for Jupiter the Thunderer is conspicuously thin compared to his Greek counterpart.⁶⁶⁸ Eventually, Latin *Tonans* did become a much-used epithet not only for the god but for emperors and if we were to search for the origin for this connection, it would be difficult to find a better place and time for its genesis than Augustus' erection of the Temple to Jupiter Tonans on the Capitoline. It was the building of this temple and its subsequent popularity that seems to have thrust Jupiter Tonans into the conceptual landscape. Although still Jupiter and therefore not a new god, it was a novel aspect of him, and a novel name. The novelty Cassius Dio (54.4) highlights in this regard deserves better attention. He notes that there was something strange or foreign (ξένος) in both the name of the god and also in his cult statue. Jupiter Tonans was clearly not at this point a quintessential Roman god nor does he seem to have had a temple in Rome prior to this one.

Jupiter Fulgur, on the other hand, had long had a temple in the city.⁶⁶⁹ Innovation rather than tradition must be stressed with the Tonans temple because the utility of this seems to have been that Augustus could veer away from the familiar face of an old god and

⁶⁶⁷ Cook (1914:835): 'The Roman Iuppiter Tonans, a very different deity, was likewise represented in Greek by Zeus βροντών': Cassius Dio, 54.4. Also, not to be confused with *kerainios*, κεραύνιος which pertains to the thunderbolt and smiting, not the acoustics. On Bronton, Brontaios etc., see Cook (1914: 833-840). The deity was particularly popular in Phrygia & Bithynia: Chiai (2020).

⁶⁶⁸ Henriksén (2012), 340.

⁶⁶⁹ Vitruvius, *De Architectura* 1.2.5. Somewhere in the Campus Martius. See, Richardson (1992:219), s.v. Iuppiter Fulgur; Manacorda (1996), s.v. 'Iuppiter Fulgur, *aedificium*', *LTUR* III, 136-38.

whatever personality and associations accrued to him.⁶⁷⁰ His 'new' god offered a relatively blank slate. The main novelty here was arguably that the man behind the temple came to be closely associated with the deity inside it. Tonans became not only a new aspect of Jupiter but also of Augustus, who had taken his new august name only the year prior. The evolution of the public personae of both god and man seems to have evolved in tandem.

In terms of responses to lightning strikes, the construction of a temple was itself an innovation. The divinatory repertoire was quite *ad hoc*, as we have seen, but the extravagance of temple-building was not a known response.⁶⁷¹ Divination does not seem to have demanded it; Augustus vowed the temple, himself, in thanks, as Suetonius records, not expiation. The precedent for such a response, he had himself set a decade earlier. It is worth briefly revisiting that famous earlier strike on his house on the Palatine before turning to the details of the Tonans temple because in terms of Augustus' handling of lightning it shaped what was to come.

In 36 BCE while Augustus, or Imperator Caesar as he was then called, was away on campaign, a thunderbolt struck his house on the Palatine.⁶⁷² Then, too, he erected a prominent temple in response; this one to Apollo. Hekster and Rich have viewed this lightning strike as luck, which is true in that it provided him the excuse to build a temple

⁶⁷⁰ In all his building projects in Rome, only four were new temples (Mars Ultor, Divus Iulius, Apollo Palatinus, Jupiter Tonans). His regeneration of the city focussed on restoring selected traditional gods, making innovation here next to Jupiter Optimus Maximus the more noteworthy.

⁶⁷¹ Summanus being the only known precedent apart from Augustus' own precedent on the Palatine. See below. Hekster & Rich (2006:158) also note this innovation and speculate the temple to Jupiter Fulgur may have been precipitated by a lightning strike although that is pure conjecture.

⁶⁷² Cassius Dio 49.15.5: a thunderbolt, κεραυνός, fell on it. Suetonius, Augustus 29.3 the temple was erected on the part of his domus, '*quam fulmine ictam*'. The conventional pre-Augustan name 'Octavian' will be used for convenience and clarity.

on that spot and associate it with his house.⁶⁷³ These authors also recognise the innovation in the decision to build a temple in response to the strike and they view Octavian's intentions behind this as opportunism, which undoubtedly it was. Moreover, they point out the innovation in the choice of Apollo as this had not been a deity previously understood to send lightning prodigies in Rome.⁶⁷⁴ What goes unacknowledged, however, and what must be stressed, is how unlucky the strike could have seemed. The fact that it was taken as a prodigy in the first place alerts us to the fact that it had been reported to the senate, discussed, and officially declared as such. This further alerts us to the fact that it was taken to be a public prodigy although affecting a private house and that it therefore signified something amiss in the state.⁶⁷⁵

It is an accomplished *volte face* that Octavian was able not only to neutralise the ill-omened aspect of the lightning strike – designating a temple on the spot is conveniently devoid of both wrath and its target (whose identity in this case would have been patently obvious) – but also to turn it so much to his advantage.⁶⁷⁶ The prestige of the celebrated temple aside, perhaps the most strategically advantageous thing to come out of the Palatine strike was the eventual relocation there of the Sibylline Books from the Capitoline. Thereafter, they were housed in Apollo's new sanctuary with Octavian's home attached: whose control they had come under can hardly be doubted.⁶⁷⁷ Since real control

⁶⁷³ Hekster & Rich (2006) for a full discussion of the political circumstances.

⁶⁷⁴ *CRR* 732 is usually said to depict Apollo hurling a thunderbolt but for this reason, among others, Vediovis is a more compelling identification. Cf. Luce (1968). The choice of Apollo was driven by his success at Naulochus. The haruspices' *responsum* may have listed several deities as in Cicero's case where similarly a house and a shrine shared a contested space on the Palatine provoking prodigious thunder. It could be that Augustus cherry-picked the deity that suited him from a similar list.

⁶⁷⁵ It is characteristic of Augustus to conflate his *fata privata* with *fata publica*. See, Pairault (1991).

⁶⁷⁶ Success as a result of spin implicates Octavian in manipulating the situation and Hekster and Rich (2006) see a complicity of the haruspices in this.

⁶⁷⁷ Suetonius, *Augustus* 31.1. He did this upon becoming Pontifex Maximus 13 BCE. As *quindecimvir*, he had previously also had access to the Sibylline books. Wiseman (2019) optimistically views Augustus as

of lightning was impossible, a narrative control over its interpretation was a shrewd move for the *imperator* and *princeps*-to-be.⁶⁷⁸ Evidence that he intended to disseminate this message is found in his seizure of all prophetic books, Greek and Latin, circulating among the people (*vulgus*). According to Suetonius (*Augustus* 31.1), he targeted books with unknown or little known authors and burned over two thousand of them. He supposedly kept only the Sibylline Books but even burned some of those. It would be interesting to know by what criteria he made his selections. The logistics of this endeavour must have been sensational as he seized books from everywhere (*contracta undique*) and we must wonder how they were located and confiscated and assume that many were not pleased to part with them. Recalling the burning of Numa's supposed books, this was another performative erasure of unofficial, and therefore uncontrollable, authorities. Centralising the interpretation of prodigies this way officially put the state, in reality the *princeps*, in control and disqualified anyone consulting the incinerated texts from future interference.⁶⁷⁹ Beneath this intention, we glimpse again that busy, chaotic world of popular beliefs and practices continuing unabated and potent enough for Augustus to consider it a threat.

Just as Sulla, in the previous chapter, was seen to have taken narrative control by incorporating auspicious thunderbolts into his self-promotion and by this turn, spinning historical lightning strikes, even those that might have looked ill-omened, into his vaunted

protecting them from meddling oligarchs, which may be true, but the self-interest here is difficult to ignore. Cf. Santangelo (2019).

⁶⁷⁸ An instructive example is Augustus' restoration of the *augurium salutis* (Cassius Dio, 51.20.5). Kearsley (2009:152): this 'secured for himself alone the right to decide if the State was at war by the sacred role of *interpres* of Jupiter', i.e., despite the fact Rome was at war in Germania.

⁶⁷⁹ Howley (2017:218), akin to *damnatio memoriae*, 'illustrating an act of excision by making the excisions and erasures visible'. Cf. Rohmann (2013), who views book-burning as 'conflict management' with the senate.

felicitas, so Augustus took a more permanent and systematic approach. He indirectly took control of the thunderbolt from this moment by commandeering the books that interpreted it. Apollo as patron was useful in this capacity as a god of prophecy and divination. Nevertheless, Jupiter still had to be reconciled and integrated into Octavian's emerging framework of power.

Augustus' predicament was that the overbearing position he had assumed needed to be seen as divinely endorsed otherwise it would have been intolerable and prodigious lightning strikes signalling the *ira deorum* could be expected to rain in response. Yet, in taking up his elevated position and claiming it was divinely endorsed, Octavian was actually embarking on exactly the kind of behaviour that *should* have attracted Jupiter's punishing blows. From that view, the strike in 26 BCE aimed not at his house but at Augustus' very person should have been a sure sign of divine displeasure. His excessive fear of thunder and lightning, which Suetonius reports, was therefore consistent with his worldview and, given his behaviour, entirely justified.⁶⁸⁰ Indeed, Suetonius, (*Augustus* 90) attributes his fear to his near miss in Spain. After this, he carried a seal-skin at all times for protection and at the slightest sign of a storm, he would retreat to an underground chamber. Perhaps his famous humility in insisting he was only *primus inter pares* was not only intended to massage egos in the senate as is so often explained; from Octavian's own dangerously vertiginous perspective, he needed to assuage the gods and convince them that his was not a head raised above others in need of striking down.

⁶⁸⁰ Suetonius, *Augustus* 90: *Tonitrua et fulgura paulo infirmius expavescebat.*

The thunderbolt was therefore problematic, but it was also inevitable in the assumption of power. In the traditional frameworks of its societal and religious functions, in its topographical and political centrality on the Capitoline, and in the inconvenient meteorological fact that lightning kept striking things, Augustus had little choice but to contend with thunderbolts.⁶⁸¹ It demanded attention moreover because Sulla had drawn attention to its ideological force: if Augustus did not control the narrative, his enemies could. Yet, as I argued, Sulla's manhandling of the divine weapon had created very bad press. Public censure was another factor to avoid in this minefield.⁶⁸² Altogether, Augustus' challenge was to control the thunderbolt like Sulla but to seem nothing like Sulla in doing so and to raise his head above the political parapet without getting struck in the process.⁶⁸³ The temple to Jupiter Tonans seems a very elegant reconciliation of all these opposing pulls and constraints.

What, then, did Jupiter Tonans represent? From his second century CE perspective, the grammarian and rhetorician Marcus Cornelius Fronto (*Epistulae, Ad Verum Imp.* 2.8) is well placed to inform us of the *tonandi potestas* after almost two centuries of imperial rule. He emphasises the role of thunder in the fear the thunderbolt generates, claiming the thunderbolt would not be nearly as terrifying if it did not fall to the sound of thunder: *Ne fulmen quidem aequè terreret nisi cum tonitru caderet*. In context, Fronto's focus on the aural is to stress the power of eloquence, but he makes several interesting comments

⁶⁸¹ Illustrating the underestimation of the thunderbolt, Zanker (1990) in his excellent treatment of Augustan imagery only mentions thunderbolts incidentally a few times as they appear on coins or statuary. He notes the 26 BCE strike, rhetorically asking: 'Was this not a sign he was the chosen of Jupiter, on intimate terms with the thundering sky god?' (p.108) and notes the temple to Jupiter Tonans was built in response, only adding later in passing that it 'recalled how Jupiter had with his thunderbolt designated the victor over the Parthians as his chosen deputy' (p.187).

⁶⁸² Cf. Smith (2009:79) on Augustus taking Sulla's lead.

⁶⁸³ Raaflaub & Toher (1993) for an overview of readings on Augustus' ambivalent role. Wallace-Hadrill (1982) on the idea of the *civilis princeps* beyond Augustus.

about thunderbolts in developing this comparison. He states the power of thundering was given to no other gods but exclusively to *imperatorum summo Iovi*.⁶⁸⁴ He goes on to say that the crashing clouds and raging storm speak as though a voice from the highest heavens with the purpose of saving *imperium* from contempt (*imperium a contemptu vindicaret*).⁶⁸⁵ The description of Jupiter as a thundering emperor with *imperium* conflates worldly and heavenly roles. Such parallelism was *de rigueur* for Fronto and his contemporaries, but it would have been outrageously bold for Augustus and contrary to his own self-consciously modest and humble public image. Nevertheless, the Temple to Jupiter Tonans was a large step in this direction.

The location of the temple was obviously a power move. It was not built on the spot struck by lightning in far off Spain; it was dedicated in 22 BCE in the very heart of Rome, on the Capitoline, in the *Area Capitolina*.⁶⁸⁶ This made it the first temple encountered upon ascending the sacred summit.⁶⁸⁷ In the city's most central and visible location and in close proximity to Rome's most revered deity, it elevated Augustus topographically and psychologically in dubious ways. It will be recalled that since the downfall of Marcus Manlius Capitolinus, no one had been allowed to build their house in this locale.⁶⁸⁸ The temple, of course, was considered to house the god and not the man who dedicated it, but this conflation seems to have set in early. Reading between the lines, the message the new temple sent out indeed seems to have caused some religious upheaval. It became enormously popular. Suetonius relates that Augustus, himself, was constantly making

⁶⁸⁴ An example of the Jupiter-centric narrative flashpoint four contests.

⁶⁸⁵ Poignault (2016:165): '*Ce qui caractérise l'imperium est une éloquence d'autorité, qui force en quelque sorte le respect.*'

⁶⁸⁶ *Res Gestae* 19; Suetonius, *Augustus* 29.3; Cassius Dio 54.4.2.

⁶⁸⁷ On the location, Richardson (1992:226-7)

⁶⁸⁸ Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae* 91. Livy 6.14-20. Flashpoint 8.

visits (*assidue frequentare*) to it. Augustus' presence and his patronage no doubt encouraged anyone who wanted to publicly display their allegiance to the *princeps* to be seen here. Supposedly on account of its popularity, Augustus had a dream.⁶⁸⁹ He dreamed, so he claimed, that Jupiter came to him complaining that the popular new temple was stealing away his devotees. In the dream, Augustus assured him that he had only put Tonans so close to serve as his doorkeeper (*ianitor*). Accordingly, to convince the god of his intentions in real life, Augustus hung bells, depending on which account we use, either on the *fastigia* of the new temple or on the cult statue itself.⁶⁹⁰

On the surface, the dream and its publicly enacted consequences are another instance of Augustus' modesty and his deference to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. In backing away from that ultimate throne and clearly diminishing his new temple by comparison, Augustus carefully positioned himself in relation to Rome's supreme power. Scratching the surface, we see Augustus, like Sulla, navigating fraught ideological ground publicly via a dream. Rather than an act of humility, the efficacy of this dream is consistent with Augustus' habit of backing into honours: through his association with Jupiter Tonans, Augustus himself became by extension doorkeeper to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. The purpose of the bells, however, often goes misunderstood. These are not symbolic of doorbells and gatekeeping, they are surely apotropaic.⁶⁹¹ Recall, the *tintinnabula* mentioned in the introduction as part of the Roman repertoire of folk remedies to ward off the *malus oculus* and invidious thunderbolts: festooning the temple with bells in submission to Jupiter's jealous gaze is

⁶⁸⁹ Wiseman (2009:119) regards this dream as one from Augustus' memoirs or possibly a speech and rare in that Augustus claimed to have had it himself rather than his preference for recalling dreams other people had about him.

⁶⁹⁰ Suetonius, *Augustus* 91.2; Dio 5.4.3-4.

⁶⁹¹ Gros (1997), 159-60. Dio (5.4.4) equates them to the warning bells carried by nightwatchmen.

behaviour in keeping with Augustus' superstitions and guilty concerns about being struck.

Augustus Keraunophoros

While reconciling the dream may have been a demotion for Tonans, it was an enormous promotion for Augustus. What I want to show is that in essence if not in name, the Temple to Jupiter Tonans doubled as a ruler cult temple in the manner of Hellenistic kings. The claim can be supported from several directions.

First, indirectly: by the time the Temple to Jupiter Tonans was dedicated in 22 BCE, Augustus had already recently been established in the role of doorkeeper to the gods in the arrangement of the statuary in the Pantheon. There his statue was placed in the *pronaos* after conspicuously declining to have it placed inside.⁶⁹² In this elevated but hierarchically lesser position at the main door, he was already, quite literally, *ianitor*.⁶⁹³ The Pantheon sat on the site where Romulus had supposedly been apotheosised and was therefore the location of one of Rome's most important strikes.⁶⁹⁴ This was a particularly important strike for Augustus, as *divi filius*, and a point of reference not only for his relationship with the gods, and with Romulus, but for his own divinity and future apotheosis. Whatever else the Pantheon was, it should also be seen as an early

⁶⁹² Reluctantly, allegedly (Dio 53.27).

⁶⁹³ A year after renouncing the consulship in 23 BCE, lightning struck this statue and blasted the spear from Augustus' hand (Cassius Dio 54.1). This disarmament could simply have been read as divine confirmation that Augustus had relinquished his consular powers. Counterintuitively, (perhaps nodding to his control of the narrative), it was interpreted as a bad sign which could only be rectified by Augustus assuming other, more pervasive powers in perpetuity. Given the timing, if lightning removed the spear from his hand, we might wonder what could have been imagined replacing it.

⁶⁹⁴ Ovid, *Fasti* 2.491. Palus Caprae, see Richardson (1992), 66; Coarelli (1997), *passim* concluding (p.601) that the site of Romulus' apotheosis was significant for a succession of buildings near the site. As the site of a lightning strike, however, there is much to consider also in the shape and design of the Pantheon, including e.g., the *oculus* in its Hadrianic incarnation which fulfils the mandatory requirement for a hypaethral ceiling. On the Augustan structure, (La Rocca 2015).

architectural instantiation of Augustus' negotiation of imperial power via a lightning strike.⁶⁹⁵ He was established in the role of *ianitor* to the gods at the Pantheon before doing the same for Jupiter on the Capitoline.

Recalling that Dio said the new temple was strange and foreign due both to its name and its cult statue, Tonans evidently introduced something new to Rome. Yet, with the perspective of hindsight, the temple seems so traditional, it is worth further considering what Dio meant. I have already argued that the novelty of the name, and thus the cult attached to it, gave Augustus leeway to forge a new *numen* of Jupiter. The cult statue itself, moreover, directed this new identity towards ruler worship. This was through the careful choice of sculpture. A new bespoke statue was not commissioned. Pliny (*Historia Naturalis* 34.79) relates that the cult statue in Augustus' Jupiter Tonans temple had been created by Leochares, the Athenian master sculptor of the fourth century.⁶⁹⁶ Fortuitously, an Augustan *aureus* from a Spanish mint of around 19 BCE depicts the Tonans temple inside which the cult statue is clearly visible (fig.54).⁶⁹⁷ This is a standing nude figure with a spear in his left hand and a lowered thunderbolt in his right. The heroic nudity and *contrapposto* stance are evocative of Polykleitos' Doryphoros and, later, of Hellenistic rulers who adopted the classical spear-bearing masterpiece as their model. Leochares is important in this regard as a choice of sculptor because he was not only alive in the time of Alexander, he was also one of two artists officially commissioned to make Alexander's

⁶⁹⁵ The placement of Julius Caesar inside with the Olympian cult statues seems to intensify the divine familial connection, but Fishwick (1992) rightly insists this statue was honorific and of the man not the *divus*, based on Dio's use of *andrias* to describe it. Those lines might blur in practice, however. Lightning itself is still not factored into the building's design or message, e.g., the recent volume (Marder & Wilson Jones 2015) although Coarelli (1983, 1997) has long shown the importance of the location for associating the two apotheoses.

⁶⁹⁶ Koortbojian (2013:17) sees 'no religious rationale' for this choice, suggesting the statue was simply part of Augustus' spoils. This, in a book dedicated to Augustus' divinisation, indicates how generally overlooked in scholarship the pivotal role of this temple remains.

⁶⁹⁷ *RIC* 66. Also, *RIC* 63a & 64. A denarius also circulated of the same type.

portraits.⁶⁹⁸ In addition, he had also made statues of Philip II and Olympias as well as Alexander's grandfather and grandmother.⁶⁹⁹ Not insignificantly, these latter sculptures were made for the Philippeion, a dynastic monument in Olympia. They were notable for being the only human depictions within the Altis, the sacred grove of Zeus.⁷⁰⁰ Moreover, the statues were chryselephantine, which linked them visually to the enormous chryselephantine cult statue of Zeus nearby.⁷⁰¹ Much of the treading on the toes of the gods of which I am accusing Augustus in his Tonans temple is present in this Macedonian tholos. A cult statue by this same artist therefore connected Augustus' temple to that ideological matrix: it connected worship of Tonans culturally to the Greek and Hellenistic worlds in which ruler cults were the norm; temporally, it connected the temple to the times of Alexander specifically; the cult statue was a touchstone to Alexander, himself; and by extension the thunderbolt in the hand of Tonans evoked the divine thunderbolt-wielding ruler, Alexander *keraunophoros*.

This subtle network of allusions and iconographic cross-references to both Romulus and Alexander rendered the Temple of Jupiter Tonans a thinly (but sufficiently) veiled ruler cult on the Capitoline. With Tonans, Augustus made no explicit claim to wield a thunderbolt himself; the statue was unquestionably of the god, yet in so much of its iconographic, topographic, and historic calibrations it was fine-tuned to be suggestive of Augustus.

⁶⁹⁸ Plutarch, *Alexander* 40.4–5, 74.6. See Stewart, (1993), 105-8, 270-274.

⁶⁹⁹ Unfortunately, none survive. Pausanias 5.17.4; 5.20.9-10. Leochares was also commissioned for the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Pliny, *HN* 36.30-31.

⁷⁰⁰ Schultz (2009).

⁷⁰¹ Lapatin (2001), 115-119.

An illuminating discovery supports this conflation in practice (fig.55). A dedication to Jupiter Tonans by procurator called Aravos names Augustus in addition to the god as 'his saviour' (*servatoris sui*).⁷⁰² It has been suggested that this dedication was made by a litter-bearer who had survived the Cantabrian expedition lightning-strike and that he credited Augustus' divine powers for his survival.⁷⁰³ This attractive speculation need not be true; whoever made it and for whatever reason, what the dedication reveals is Augustus receiving semi-divine honours in tandem with Jupiter Tonans.⁷⁰⁴ Crucially, the dedication was found on the slopes of the Capitoline Hill and so presumably came from the temple.⁷⁰⁵ It was therefore not only an abstract or metaphorical elision but a real one with cultic ramifications demonstrating in practice, what the cult statue was intended to suggest: a close connection perceived between the god, the temple, and the man.

Augustus Tonans

Given all this, the Temple to Jupiter Tonans should reveal something about Augustus' self-fashioning. It becomes necessary to understand what sort of thunderbolt Augustus was imagined to wield, against whom, and for whom. His true motivations and intentions in seizing power remain a notoriously contentious question but as I have suggested, his interactions with the thunderbolt had at least to *seem* different from Sulla's. Sulla's dream thunderbolt had primarily been presented as a military weapon which he wielded with divine support. Its target was straightforwardly Sulla's enemies, whom the goddess

⁷⁰² Discovered beneath the caretaker's residence of the *Antiquario Comunale del Celio*: Panciera (1975-1976).

⁷⁰³ Panciera (1975-1976); Rodriguez-Almeida (1991), 547-550.

⁷⁰⁴ Identifications of Aravos aside, the inscription might be counted '*fra le testimonianze di onori quasi divini tributati a questo imperatore, sia pure in un ambito non rigidamente ufficiale, anche in Occidente mentre era ancora vivo*' Panciera (1975-1976).

⁷⁰⁵ Discovered during excavations around S. Omobono in 1937. Panciera, above, p.294 notes its recovery in archival records.

named, and Sulla accordingly struck down. In his proscriptions Sulla's named enemies became anyone who opposed Sulla or had wealth that Sulla coveted.⁷⁰⁶ The *fulmen dictatorium* served him in that modern sense of 'dictator', which Sulla helped to shape. In his hand, the thunderbolt was an instrument of brute force.

While Augustus also needed to co-opt the thunderbolt, in contrast to Sulla he did this via the narratives and performances of Roman religion; by controlling the fulgural books and the processes of divination, as well as by physically altering the landscape of ritual, renovating those temples that suited his vision and adding a few significant new ones.⁷⁰⁷

While Augustus certainly had employed brute force, in terms of the presentation of his power, the most important difference seems to be the nature of the thunderbolt itself: in Augustus' hand, it was less a military weapon than a moral one.

A moral thunderbolt had two main avenues of utility for Augustus. The first is that it spoke directly to the morality of his own unprecedented position. 'Speak' here in relation to *Tonans* is meant quite literally: thunder was sometimes conceived of as the voice of Jupiter, himself. This is what Vergil's Juno means (*Aeneid* 10.628) when she begs Jupiter to give what his voice prevents (*quae voce gravaris*). Commenting on this line, Servius equates thunder with the voice of Jupiter and also with fate itself: *vox enim Iovis fatum est*.⁷⁰⁸ Destiny was, of course, an important part of Augustus' self-presentation and in the

⁷⁰⁶ Hinard (1985) on republican proscriptions and for a measured view of those of Sulla.

⁷⁰⁷ Later, seated, hipmantled representations of emperors as Jupiter appear to reference the Sullan cult statue of Jupiter Capitolinus. See Pollini (1993), 260-261. *Tonans*, as an alternative, therefore allowed Augustus to bypass Sullan overtones to his ambitions.

⁷⁰⁸ In the *Aeneid*, Vergil, himself, is inconsistent about how much control Jupiter has over fate. See, Casali (2023).

literature of the golden age, the thunderbolt proved to be a useful medium to express the salvific role Augustus was construed to play in the destiny of Rome.⁷⁰⁹

As we have seen, thunder and lightning in the *Aeneid* call Aeneas to arms and beyond that constitute the divine call for him to become the leader the future Rome needs.⁷¹⁰ It was noted earlier that leadership was for Aeneas, as it would be for Romulus and, ultimately, for Augustus, monarchic. It was also noted as unusual that Venus should, uncharacteristically, pick up the thunderbolt to convey divine election to the Julian line.⁷¹¹ As I have stressed, who holds the thunderbolt matters and anomalous behaviour should particularly attract our attention. Here it signals a revolution. Courtesy of Caesar, Venus was the established divine lineage Augustus had to work with.⁷¹² With her unfamiliar thunderbolt, Venus signals legitimation not only of Augustus' kingship looking backwards via Aeneas but also looking forwards to a new future of inherited monarchy at Rome. To a Roman audience, the image of a thunderbolt hurling Venus was as new as the presence of Augustus in the Roman body politic.⁷¹³ The goddess of love and beauty was perhaps suitably far removed from those familiar warning signs of tyranny sent by Jupiter and a gentler, less menacing deity to usher in the new thunderbolts of the new political system.

Nevertheless, in the new Augustan reality, the thunderbolt still belonged to Jupiter. The king of the gods had therefore to be understood as using those signs to endorse for

⁷⁰⁹ Just as fate, by Aeneas' own admission, is the sole justification of his invasion of Latium (*Aeneid* 11.112).

⁷¹⁰ Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.520-541. On the *Aeneid* as altogether a 'drama of election', see Bacon (1986), esp. 331-334 for the thunderbolt omen.

⁷¹¹ Bacon, above, rightly points out the peculiarity of Venus sending thunderbolts but in focusing on the 'cosmic power of love' and the 'cosmic revolution' by which Venus is promoted in the Roman pantheon, the political implications of the thunderbolt slip attention.

⁷¹² On Augustus' treatment of Caesar and Venus, see Ramage (1985).

⁷¹³ Venus is not otherwise a fulminating deity nor is the 'star' Venus one of the three that fulminate (i.e., Jupiter, Saturn, & Mars: Pliny, *HN* 2.16-18).

Augustus what he had throughout the republic been understood to use them to deter. An underrated practical achievement of Vergil's grand narrative is that it allowed Augustus' personal scrapes with lightning to be reframed: not warning shots from the heavens but, like Aeneas, a divine summons. Like the near-miss Augustus experienced in Spain which could have been a prodigiously bad sign, narrative control again forged a different path ahead. Through its appeal to Rome's legendary past, the intervening *mores* of the republic were bypassed and with it the concomitant questions about the morality of Augustus' unorthodox route to power.⁷¹⁴ It can be no coincidence that the Temple to Jupiter Tonans was vowed, constructed, and completed while the *Aeneid* was being written.⁷¹⁵ If Augustus, too, was summoned by Olympus, then his temple to the Thunderer on the Capitoline was an architectural and topographic manifestation of his arrival.

The second avenue of utility for Augustus, was that a moral thunderbolt was unusually well-suited to his self-presentation due to its ability to cast the *princeps* as a moral force. Morality is, of course, a prominent feature of Augustus' time in power, which was stressed through his self-proclaimed rehabilitation of Roman religion and his renovation of temples in the capital, and reinforced through his reforming moral legislation, such as that on marriage and adultery.⁷¹⁶ If in the first instance, the Augustan thunderbolt was inward facing in that it was portrayed as a divine voicing of approval for Augustus, in its second move, oriented outwards, it was bolder in giving Augustus more agency in voicing his own will. Shifting from being the target and subject of thunderbolts to a wielder of one allowed

⁷¹⁴ His appropriation of lightning is apparent in Plutarch (*Antony* 16.923) recounts that Antony dreamed his right hand was blasted by a thunderbolt (ἔδόκει γὰρ αὐτοῦ τὴν δεξιὰν χεῖρα βεβληθῆσθαι κεραυνῶ). The significance of this was revealed a few days later when he learned Octavian was plotting against him. Augustus' right to rule still in question after Actium: Raaflaub & Samsons (1993).

⁷¹⁵ The temple was vowed in 26 BCE and dedicated in 22 BCE. Vergil was working on the *Aeneid* until his death in 19 BCE.

⁷¹⁶ Galinsky (1981). Cf. des Bouvrie (1984).

some vital reshuffling in the imagined balance of power: it allowed Augustus, *pater patriae*, to be aligned with *pater* Jupiter; the *patria potestas* which he held over the Roman people could thus be viewed as an extension of the divine will; and the venerable ‘justice of Zeus’, which in Rome was the justice of Jupiter, thus became synonymous with imperial justice. The culminating vision of these inferences is that the cosmic balance which kept mortals in check via divine thunder and lightning were made manifest in the just, moral worldly patrol of the *princeps*.

Striking a balance: the Augustan thunderbolt

To qualify these assertions, we can turn to the Augustan literature, which provides abundant evidence that this was a contemporary vision widely propagated.⁷¹⁷ Published in 23 BCE as the temple neared completion, Horace’s *Odes*, for example, establish an overt relationship between Augustus and Jupiter.⁷¹⁸ Overall, he positions Augustus as Jupiter’s second in much the same way Augustus’ dream would later position the Tonans temple in relation to that of Optimus Maximus.⁷¹⁹ Keeping the new temple in view alongside the novelty in Rome of a divine Tonans, several famous and much discussed passages bear fresh reading. One such piece is the opening verse of *Carmen* 3.5 (lines 1-4).

*Caelo tonantem credidimus Iovem
regnare: praesens divus habebitur
Augustus adiectis Britannis
imperio gravibusque Persis.*

⁷¹⁷ Although unrecognised now. In a monograph of responses to early imperial iconography in Latin poetry, for example, neither thunderbolts nor Jupiter Tonans is discussed (Pandey 2018). This is not a criticism but rather a measure of how overlooked these things generally are.

⁷¹⁸ A nuanced treatment of dating and individual publication of the odes in Hutchinson (2002).

⁷¹⁹ Hejduk (2020) is concerned with poetry and literary representations but is sensitive to political allusions. In her excellent treatment of Horace’s political allusions (pp. 111-123) thunderbolts abound.

We have believed Jupiter thundering in the heavens
to reign: now Augustus will be regarded as a god amongst us
having added the Britons to the empire
and the formidable Persians.

The thundering in heaven with which the poem begins has been described as being for Jupiter what military conquests will be for Augustus.⁷²⁰ The imminent divinisation of the princeps in this view sets up a parallel with Augustus more palpably present as a god-in-our-midst (*divus praesens*) than a distant Jupiter in the sky. However, the verse takes on a different and quite specific additional meaning if we imagine Horace and his contemporaries watching the Temple to Jupiter Tonans going up on the Capitol. The *caelo tonantem* by which people 'have believed' (*credidimus*) Jupiter to reign seems to be undergoing a change; the use of the perfect tense to express what people *have* believed seems to beg an 'until now'. The inference is that the heavens are going to have to accommodate a new earthly god: Augustus. His future military conquests postpone his divinisation temporally but that is not the point. The thundering itself can now be seen to be playing into this juxtaposition more directly. Rather than mere metaphor as the celestial prototype for Augustus' military conquests, Jupiter's thundering is in the sky what Augustus' thundering becomes on earth as focalised in the Tonans temple. With the new cult of Tonans imminent, the future sense of *habebitur* seems even to nod towards the completion of the temple.

While the cult statue was being chosen, delivered, and installed, it was no doubt an ongoing topic of conversation. Pliny (*HN* 34.79) in the first-century CE could comment that this statue was 'worthy of praise above all others' (*ante cuncta laudabilem*). The

⁷²⁰ Putnam (2008:46-8); Citroni (2009:258).

temple itself was a virtuoso work: it was made of blocks of solid marble whereas even the Capitoline temple only had the usual marble veneers.⁷²¹ Moreover, given its location, the temple construction itself was conspicuous. Amongst whatever artistic sensation the statue and temple caused, as the marble blocks were being hauled up the Capitoline, there was surely sensation also about what it might represent. Part of the politico-religious negotiations familiar in Horace's *Odes* can be seen to reflect those conversations. Hejduk has pointed out that Horace 'delicately' negotiates the 'rhetorical postures' of the Greek and Hellenistic poets who glorified their kings.⁷²² Again, this has more resonance if read against those contemporary discussions about the new temple and its antique cult statue. Through the poetic medium, Horace navigates tradition and innovation, simultaneously evoking the supreme god of Rome while evoking the statue's former world of institutionalised ruler worship.

Augustus as a *praesens divus* was still an uncomfortable thought in the Rome of the 20s BCE although he had been a *divi filius* for long enough for the idea to have become less shocking. As the idea was solidifying in the new temple and all its connotations, we would therefore expect to see the Augustan poets trying to work out how to configure Augustus as Thunderer. Indeed, tensions and contradictions are evident in contemporary portrayals of Jupiter and Augustus. This is a common topic in scholarly appraisals of the literature of the golden age and need not be rehashed here.⁷²³ My contribution is to focus solely on Augustus' relationship with the thunderbolt in this literature since it is always

⁷²¹ Pliny, *HN* 36.50. It was a gem-like structure, much smaller than the Capitolium.

⁷²² Hejduk (2020), 124.

⁷²³ E.g., Beller (1979); Hejduk (2009, 2020); Xinyue (2022). Weinstock (1971) for the conceptual territory of 'Divus Julius'.

taken as an incidental detail rather than the explosive point of contact between mortal and divine.

Horace takes care to insist on the primacy of Jupiter in his partnership with Augustus.

Carmen One sets up this hierarchy unambiguously:

*Gentis humanae pater atque custos,
orte Saturno, tibi cura magni
Caesaris fatis data: tu secundo
Caesare regnes.*

Father and guardian of the human race,
son of Saturn, to you fate has given care
of mighty Caesar: may you rule
with Caesar as your second.

(1.12.49-52)

Here, Jupiter as father and guardian of the human race has been especially tasked with the care of *magnus Caesar*. While this clearly distinguishes Jupiter as superior, his duty of care places Augustus in close proximity. The fact that this was given by fate (*fatis data*) emphasises again the role of destiny in Augustus' ascendancy. Augustus is no acolyte here, Jupiter rules with Augustus as his second, which is another way of saying that Augustus shares in Jupiter's rule, albeit in second place.⁷²⁴ One stanza down, however, Horace is emphatic about who has control of the thunderbolts and who hurls them:

*te minor laetum reget aequus orbem:
tu gravi curru quaties Olympum,
tu parum castis inimica mittes
fulmina lucis*

Subordinate to you, justly he will rule the happy world,
you will shake Olympus with your heavy chariot,

⁷²⁴ Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (15.857-60): Jupiter and Augustus share a name - Jupiter being father of gods, and Augustus the father of men.

you will hurl wrathful thunderbolts
upon polluted groves.

(1.12.57-60)

Addressing Jupiter directly, Horace tells the god that Augustus is *te minor*. Each subsequent line begins with an insistent *tu* which is asserting *you, Jupiter, not Augustus*. The first ode thus insists that although Augustus rules as Jupiter's second, in this arrangement, it is Jupiter who hurls the thunderbolts.⁷²⁵ With that thunderbolt above him, we are told Augustus will rule the happy world and his rule will be *aequus*: a moral judgement characterising his power as fair and just.⁷²⁶ Horace's famous conversion from an Epicurean believer in carefree and disinterested gods to a believer in the more traditional engaged and watchful thunderbolt-hurling Jupiter should, perhaps, be read against the developing Tonans cult in Rome. His epiphany in *Carmen* 1.34-1-12 comes about through a bolt from the blue, which he describes in thundering terms as Jupiter's thundering chariot shaking the earth to its very limits.⁷²⁷

Horace (*Carmina* 3.4.42-45) uses the verb *temperat* to describe how Jupiter administers his 'just' *imperium*. Paradoxically, the ability to violently strike down the impious, such as the *impios Titanas* of this passage, allows for a righteous governance over gods and mortals with distinct overtones of fair weather. By extension, a sense of moderation and restraint inheres in the conflation of divine might with Roman imperial might. Horace makes the point that order imposed by brute force destroys itself and that it is temperate power (*vis temperata*) that the gods advance. This moral framework is, arguably,

⁷²⁵ Nisbet & Hubbard (1970:164) point out many Hellenistic precedents for this hierarchy. They view Horace as unsuccessfully trying to graft the rhetoric of Hellenistic kingship onto the new Augustan order. They see ambition here but miss his subtle concern about who exactly has access to the thunderbolt.

⁷²⁶ At Horace, *Carmina* 3.4.48 Jupiter rules alone with 'just imperium' (*imperio regit unus aequo*).

⁷²⁷ Hardie (2010:111-3) reads this as a response to Lucretius, calling it Horace's 'anti-conversion'.

prescriptive for Augustus. Thus, later, (*Carmina* 3.6.1-8) when insisting on the necessity of rebuilding Rome's temples to restore the favour of the gods, we are compelled to see Augustus, who by his own account restored eighty-two temples in the city (*Res Gestae* 20). Horace addresses the reader as 'Roman' and states that 'you rule because you keep yourself lesser than the gods'. This is in keeping with the general Roman sense of piety but, in its historical moment, the need to keep mortals in their appropriate place speaks particularly to Augustus who, for all his piety, was compromising this traditional value.

Warning shots

Amidst the familiar elevation of Augustus to a semi-divine status, the Augustan poets seem nevertheless to voice tacit concerns about the extent of his thunderbolt-wielding.⁷²⁸ These earlier poets did not hesitate to portray him as divinely endorsed by lightning, as we have seen, and he could himself take on the thundering aspect of the heavens. In the proem of the *Georgics*, for example, Vergil portrays Octavian as a storm which he must supplicate (*tempestatum potens* 1.27). He calls Octavian *victor Quirinus*, which equates him with Romulus and thus a king divinised by lightning (3.27).⁷²⁹ More boldly, he could be inflated in status to become an earthly avatar of Jupiter so that towards the end of the *Georgics* (4.560-62), Octavian even fulminates in battle (*fulminat*). The flashing of weapons had long been equated to lightning, so this is not an unusual description except that as he triumphs, he appears to be transcending, perhaps transgressing, his mortal limits: he imposes his laws on conquered lands and aims for the path to Olympus

⁷²⁸ For subversion and dissent in Augustan literature generally, see Phillips (1983); Wallace-Hadrill (1985); Miller (2004).

⁷²⁹ Propertius, too, when describing his victory at Actium (*Elegies* 4.6), refers to him as 'victor Quirinus'.

(*viamque adfectat Olympo*).⁷³⁰ Transgressive undertones seem sometimes discernible when the poets insist on proper hierarchies even as they elevate Augustus.

This sometimes seems more pointed. Subtle approbation is possible when poets recall mythological transgressors who suffered as a result of hubris. Horace, for example, after laying the groundwork for admonishing excessive human ambition, provides three mythological *exempla* in which he upbraids human stupidity (*stultitia*) in ‘aiming for heaven itself’. Revealingly, his first *exemplum* is of none other than that of Prometheus, whose *vetitum nefas* was stealing the fire of the gods. We have already considered the ramifications of this myth for both the Numan and Hostilian models of handling lightning. Now, held up to the Tonans temple, the message about its suggestive cult statue is obvious.⁷³¹ Like all good poetry, multiple readings are possible, and Horace is, unsurprisingly, not blatant: he frames the problem as ‘our’ wickedness (*nostrum scelus*) blaming Roman society and perhaps humanity more generally for its foolish ambitions. The particular target of an admonishment regarding stealing the fire of the gods is nevertheless clear when read against Augustus’ evolving Tonans.

Vergil makes the same point in the *Aeneid* but less subtly. In book six, while the Trojan hero visits the underworld, he sees the fortress of Rhadamanthus where the wickedest evildoers are punished. Perpetrators of dreadful crimes are pointed out by the Sibyl as they progress. Hejduk has insightfully analysed the first three of these sinners and in order to engage with her analysis, she is worth quoting in full:

⁷³⁰ An interesting commentary in Xinyue (2020) pointing out that by the end of the poem Octavian is diverging from Vergil’s advised route to divinisation via poetry and is taking his own route by force as a conqueror.

⁷³¹ Horace’s other two *exempla* are Daedalus and Hercules: the former for flying on wings not given to man (*pinnis non homini datis*), the latter for triumphing over death in the underworld.

The first three groups or individuals named, the Titans (6.580-81), the Aloidae (582-84), and Salmoneus (585-94), are all punished for attempting to usurp the role of Jupiter, but the length and vividness of the descriptions increase as the magnitude of the threat decreases. The Titans are disposed of in two lines. The Aloidae, giant figures who tried to pile up mountains to reach Olympus, are not attested as appearing in Tartarus before Virgil; these receive three lines. By contrast, Salmoneus who tried to pass himself off as Jupiter gets a full ten lines, more space than any other sinner [...] – a striking disproportion.⁷³²

The attention that Salmoneus receives seems disproportionate for Hejduk because he is only a ‘human upstart with a tinfoil thunderbolt’.⁷³³ He posed the least threat to Jupiter in objective terms when compared to Titans and Giants of superhuman strength. As she points out, Vergil’s long description of Salmoneus’ impersonation of Jupiter singles it out as a ‘crime worthy of special attention’. Yet, within the framework she is working in (here largely from Jupiter’s point of view), the crime seems only to be a general warning about overstepping mortal boundaries. The special attention it demanded from Vergil’s contemporaries, however, was surely the Jupiter/Augustus Tonans dichotomy. Vergil’s warning is the same as Horace’s about aiming for the heavens, but Salmoneus is a hit closer to home in terms of human pretensions to the thunderbolt.

Vergil explains what we have configured earlier in the Hostilian model, that Salmoneus received a cruel punishment for ‘imitating the flames of Jove and the thunder of Olympus’ (*dum flammis Iovis et sonitus imitatur Olympi* 6.586). After describing the king’s arrogance in brandishing a torch as his *faux* thunderbolt and ‘thundering’ on a quadriga with pots and pans demanding the honours of the god, Vergil has the Sibyl rebuke this hubris not as *stultitia* like Horace, but as *dementia*:

⁷³² Hejduk (2020), 88.

⁷³³ *ibid.*

*demens, qui nimbos et non imitabile fulmen
aere et cornipedum pulsu simularet equorum.*

Madman, to imitate storm clouds and the inimitable thunderbolt
with bronze and the beating of horses' hooves!

The *non imitabile fulmen* belittles the would-be fulminations of the mortal impostor when Jupiter blasts Salmoneus to Tartarus with real thunderbolts that ridicule his feeble imitation. Hejduk is right to stress the weight given to this particular crime. It is not disproportionate, however, if we view the trespass not from the perspective of Jupiter but from that of Augustus' peers. The *princeps'* elevation in status and his intimate new association with Jupiter Tonans must have looked like it was in danger of heading down a similar road. The *exempla* of Prometheus and Salmoneus remind readers that ideologically Augustus was playing with fire.

In a similar vein, in the earliest of Ovid's works, the *Amores*, during a playful rebuke of overweening human genius, Ovid (8.8.50) makes an interesting comment.⁷³⁴ Not content with land and sea, the poet asks why human genius does not aspire also to the skies as a third dominion: *cur non et caelum, tertia regna, petis?* This he follows with the assertion that, in fact, it has been done, *qua licet*, since 'Quirinus has a temple, as does Liber, Alcides, and now Caesar'. In context, the divinisation of mortals is presented unflatteringly as part of humankind's rapacious endeavours. Ovid stops at Caesar but Augustus the *divi filius* was clearly heading in the same direction.⁷³⁵

⁷³⁴ *Amores* was published around 15 BCE after years of recitals, see Holzberg (2002), 31-4.

⁷³⁵ The reference to Quirinus could double as an allusion to Augustus. On Ovid and 'Augustan discourse', see Barchiesi (1997).

Writing slightly later than Vergil and Horace, Ovid knew what they did not in terms of the popularity of the temple and Augustus' subsequent dream. This timing places the *fulmen* in *Amores* (2.1) as one of the strangest thunderbolts in Roman literature:

*In manibus nimbos et cum Iove fulmen habebam
quod bene pro caelo mitteret ille suo -
Clausit amica fores: ego cum Iove fulmen omisi;
excidit ingenio Iuppiter ipse meo.
Iuppiter, ignoscas, nil me tua tela iuvabant;
clausa tuo maius ianua fulmen habet.*

The surface reading of this passage is confusing because of its awkward mixing of metaphors. It describes Ovid as once capable of writing epic but since his girlfriend rejected him, he has forgotten all such elevated themes. In the writer's block of his disappointment, he takes up his pen to the lesser task of elegy.⁷³⁶ That point is simple enough; it is the imagery and language he uses to convey it that make it denser and more difficult to untangle. The image of a thunderbolt doubling up as a metaphor for a girlfriend's locked door is particularly cumbersome. The English 'bolt' and 'thunderbolt' makes for an easy play on words here and translations accordingly generally revolve around a 'bolted' door. While Ovid is going for a similar idea, the Latin is less obliging. A *fulmen* simply does not act as a synonym for a *claustrum* (lock or bolt) nor is there any assonance to play with. The girlfriend, in fact, closed or shut her door (*clausit*) rather than specifically bolted it and the door is closed (*clausa*) rather than bolted. Nevertheless, there *is* a thunderbolt at the door. It is altogether a strange place to find one and this peculiar metaphor could be deemed unsuccessful unless it alerts the reader to more going on beneath the surface.

⁷³⁶ The emasculation of the poet in Roman elegy has been read subversively as a form of political dissent. Sullivan (1972); Miller (2009). Also, on Lucan with reference to Ovid, Seidler (2024).

Ovid's own *fulmen* is his dropped pen, and the phallic overtones of his frustrated love. The fulmen at the door blocking him, however, has made him forget Jupiter and lofty themes: Ovid 'drops' him and his thunderbolt altogether. While Augustus is often suspected behind Jupiter in this passage, his specific role as Tonans nuances this reading.⁷³⁷ If we suspect here a *fulmen* from another *ianitor*, these cue us in more sophisticated ways into the socio-political landscape of Ovid's day. The *fulmen* then becomes the moral thunderbolt of the *princeps* blocking Ovid's amorous visit to his lover. A pertinent contemporary context would be the Julian laws against adultery passed by Augustus in 17 BCE.⁷³⁸ The thunderbolt that made Ovid drop his pen would in that case be Augustan moral legislation. The timing is right: Ovid was composing the *Amores* around this period. Moreover, the Tonans temple had at this point been open for around five years, meaning its popularity had been established and therefore also Augustus in his 'door-keeping' role.

In this sense, Augustus can be seen enforcing his reforms and thwarting Ovid's immoral inclinations with the force of Tonans behind him.⁷³⁹ That would make better sense of an earlier line in which Ovid admits he must supplicate the doorkeeper because he holds the thunderbolt that can destroy him: *tu, me quo possis perdere, fulmen, habes* (1.6.16). From the amorous poet's viewpoint, the harsh punishment for adultery is portrayed as a devastating blow to both his trysts and his inspiration. Augustus' thunderbolt at the *ianua*

⁷³⁷ Hunter (2012:251), for example, reads the poem in Callimachean terms, with Ovid's abandonment of epic subject matter like Gigantomachy as an excuse to Maecenas 'for not writing hexameter verse encomiastic of Augustus and his patron'.

⁷³⁸ On the *Lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis* and associated legislation, McGinn (1998), chapter 5.

⁷³⁹ Ovid, *Amores* 1.9.1 On which Sullivan (1972:22) comments 'the life of adulterous leisure (*otium*) is as strenuous as that of the warrior' Here, however, he is defeated.

clausa seems more powerful to Ovid than Jupiter's own. The view from exile would later give him a more perfect vision of this.

Crossing the line

It is only after 8 CE, when Ovid has committed his double *crimen*, his lamented *carmen et error*, and is sent in exile to the Black Sea, that we may read in unveiled terms a description of Augustus as Tonans in his own right: a divine thunderbolt-hurling emperor.⁷⁴⁰ The Tonans temple had been open for thirty years by this point, and it may be that the trepidation surrounding the cult's early stages had given way to this kind of unfettered conflation or it may be that from exile Ovid turned up this obsequy in a bid to glorify the emperor and humble himself into forgiveness. Whatever the case, in the extant literature it is not until the first century CE in Ovid's exilic poetry that we receive the first fully matured vision of Augustus throwing *fulmina* with his own hands according to his own will and moral framework. The works from exile erupt into a veritable imperial storm. In *Tristia* (1.1.81-82) Ovid turns into a Phaethon figure, quaking at every thunderstorm and in *Ex Ponto* (3.1.50-5), he recalls Capaneus, 'made more famous by the thunderbolt's blow' (*notior est factus Capaneus a fulminis ictu*). Both mythological figures were punished justly and struck down by Jupiter's thunderbolts for their impious ambition. In Ovid's case there is no question who threw the thunderbolt: it landed on his head straight from the Palatine, which he calls the abode of the gods (1.1.69-72).⁷⁴¹ Interestingly, Augustus does not even channel power through the Capitoline deities in Ovid's description; he is now seated as a fulminating deity in his own right in his Palatine residence. Ovid compares

⁷⁴⁰ His *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* are both full of thunderbolts often hurled explicitly from the hand of Augustus.

⁷⁴¹ Cf. *Tristia* 2.22-40.

himself to a bidental or the debris buried in one, when he thanks a friend for daring to touch what 'Jupiter' had touched when all else turned away (*Tristia* 3.5.1).

It is impossible to say whether this final step in putting the thunderbolt unambiguously in Augustus' hand was a breakthrough made by Ovid or whether he was simply putting to paper what was already in common parlance. Either way, the imperial moral thunderbolt of Ovid's desperation would become such a standard literary trope, they became unremarkable. Valerius Maximus (*Factorum et dictorum memorabilium* 7.7.4), for example, writing not much later under Tiberius, describes a court case that once came to *divus* Augustus in which a woman was acting immorally in terms of the Julian laws about marriage. He ruled against her, which Valerius describes without flourish as her being struck down to hell by a heavenly thunderbolt (*ad inferos usque caelesti fulmine afflata es*).⁷⁴² Divine and imperial justice were now forged into one thunderbolt.

The point which these literary examples set out to illustrate was that the Augustan thunderbolt was presented within a moral rather than military framework. Since this is hopefully now clear, a few conclusions may be drawn about how far this takes us in terms of imperial *keranophoros* imagery. First, the Tonans temple is an important lens through which to read much of the thundering in Augustan literature. It provided a *bona fide* pretext for associating Augustus with the Thunderer. It was of relevance to contemporary audiences since it was either going up or newly opened as the poetry was published. It

⁷⁴² See Wardle (1998:485-6) on the legalities of this case. Also, Wardle (2015) on Augustan legislation in Suetonius.

provided a religious context in which to situate Augustan policy and a thunderbolt to patrol it which was represented as a force of justice and *vis temperata*. Moreover, a moral thunderbolt was extremely compelling ideologically in allowing an alignment between the justice of Augustus and Jupiter and this provided poets an opportunity for new imagery and new ways of representing Augustus' unfamiliar hold on political power.

Nevertheless, I have argued that this was not an unproblematic ideology since seizing the thunderbolt was itself a morally fraught aspiration. The morality of the *fulmen* thus worked against Augustus as well as for him and the poets mediated this carefully, restraining the extent of the power attributed to him. This is observable in the poets' uses of mythological *exempla* to warn against stealing the fire of the gods, which have been shown not only to bear timeless wisdom about excessive ambition but to specifically address the *numen* of Augustus rising out of the cult statue of Jupiter Tonans. An identifiable 'Augustan' thunderbolt emerges which is characteristic of the princeps' morality and style of power; yet, for all their hyperbolic praise, the poets of the twenties BCE continuing into the following decade seem, in fact, quite ambivalent about Augustus as a thunderbolt-wielding semi-deity. The insinuation was clearly there, as I am arguing was also the case in the Tonans temple, but like the temple this was not made explicit. Overall, there was reticence until Ovid's exile to put a thunderbolt directly in his hand.

Reticence must have been in part due to the fact that this was an ideology in its infancy. These poets, like Augustus and the rest of Rome, were still in the process of working out what it meant to have a *princeps* and how to represent his position and power. After the Temple to Jupiter Tonans opened, I have argued it doubled as the site of a thinly disguised ruler cult but the fact that it was disguised at all, and needed to be, is indicative of the

novelty and controversy inherent in the evolving idea of the emperor *kerounophoros*. This is reflected in the literature of the early Augustan age. The later barrage of imperial thunderbolts in Roman literature should not blind us to the long and lingering reluctance to cross that hubristic line.

The first of the two guiding questions with which this chapter opened asked to what extent Augustus himself sought to establish and propagate his connection to Jupiter Tonans. I have stressed that Augustus' assimilation with Jupiter should not be seen, as it usually is, as an obvious and easy move. In his programme of self-presentation, his opaque handling of the thunderbolt was the Augustan masterstroke. We may conclude, nevertheless, that this connection was established quite early in his reign, galvanised by, and centred on the Temple to Jupiter Tonans on the Capitoline. This provided a sacred space for free-flowing associations between the god and the man, which Augustus evidently did not prohibit even if he made a show of demurring from such ambitions.

One striking piece of evidence indeed suggests that Augustus himself encouraged the mental image of his conflation with Jupiter. Suetonius (*Augustus* 94.5) tells us that after being told in a prophesy that the ruler of the world had been born, Augustus' father had once seen the future Augustus in a dream. Augustus appeared in that dream 'more majestic than a mortal man' holding the thunderbolt, sceptre, and insignia of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.⁷⁴³ The timing of this alleged dream, or rather, of its public dissemination would tell us much but whatever the case, it is reasonable to suspect that it had Augustus as its source.⁷⁴⁴ Here, then, is another large leap in imagined iconography

⁷⁴³ Suetonius, *Augustus* 94.5. Supposedly, lightning had once struck the walls of Velitrae and it was interpreted as signifying that one day one of the town's citizens would rule the world (94.1).

⁷⁴⁴ Perhaps it was a story circulated by Octavia or perhaps it was recorded in Augustus' memoirs.

mediated by a dream. This time, there is no ambiguous goddess handing over a thunderbolt with instructions; Augustus appears *as* Jupiter thunderbolt and all. This dream presents the culminating image of the ideological development over Augustus' time in power.

So much for dreams, words, and mental images. The second of our two guiding questions asks how far Augustus and his circle went in physically representing the *princeps keraunophoros*. Therefore, we turn now to the tangible, artistic realisations of Augustan ideology.



In the main foyer of the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli* stands a bronze statue from the so-called basilica in Herculaneum (fig.56). It depicts Rome's first emperor in heroic nude holding a sceptre in his right hand and in his left, the thunderbolt. It is, in effect, a bronze manifestation of the thunderbolt-wielding dream Augustus' father had of him. Given everything argued so far, it should be apparent how powerful and how shocking such a statue must have seemed when it first appeared in Rome. The question is when did such statues first appear? An Augustan date is sometimes confidently proposed for this statue.⁷⁴⁵ It is assumed that alongside the eagle and sceptre, the emperor would naturally take up Jupiter's thunderbolt. The emperor's fraught and problematic relationship with the thunderbolt is so overlooked that in his useful conceptual study of Roman religion, Michael Lipka is able to state:

⁷⁴⁵ E.g., West (1933) through Lipka (2009), 94.

The emperor could be represented in the posture of Iuppiter, or with an eagle or a thunderbolt or the aegis, or a combination of these: the principle of similarity allowed for countless substitutions and omissions as long as recognizability was guaranteed.⁷⁴⁶

Similar statements are regularly repeated about emperors ‘in the guise of Jupiter’. This formulaic phrase, like others that reduce the thunderbolt to a mere ‘attribute’ of Jupiter diminish its visual and conceptual power to an iconographic shorthand of no real iconic presence or import to be casually swapped in or out with other ‘substitutions’. My objection, simply put, is that there was no substitute for a thunderbolt. It was the most powerful symbol in the artistic repertoire and one with political impact and theological repercussions.⁷⁴⁷ Given the reticence in the Augustan literature to put one too overtly in Augustus’ hand, a similar reticence should be expected in contemporary artistic representations of the princeps. This, indeed, seems to be the case.

A survey of contemporary depictions showing Augustus holding a thunderbolt would be brief. They do not exist to my knowledge, nor do I think we ought to expect to see them.⁷⁴⁸ This was a moment when portraying a living man on coinage was still a maverick move. Augustus was ground-breaking enough in presenting himself as a living son of a god.⁷⁴⁹ He even went so far as to sit in poses purposely evocative of Jupiter. Between 29-27 BCE,

⁷⁴⁶ Lipka (2009) 95. Again, not a criticism but a representative example from a respectable authority.

⁷⁴⁷ Madge (2022) on Augustus’ ‘positive relationship with lightning’ and ‘the thunderbolt motif’ is a simplistic summary of this relationship. However, he at least recognises the prevalence of these in Augustan ideology and beyond even if the interpretation is lacking – understandable since this is neither established territory nor his main focus.

⁷⁴⁸ The famous Actium cameo (*Kunsthistorisches Museum* Cat. 10.137) depicts a man not a god, seemingly Alexander although supposedly it is Octavian in the guise of Alexander in the guise of Neptune. It is supposed to represent Octavian’s victory at Nauclous but the dating of the cameo to the 20s BCE rests solely on the fact that coinage of that time references the battle (Zanker 1990:97-98; Lapatin 2015:248). Gołyźniak (2020:158) points out that this is a Roman triumphator, not a deity. Here, the most important detail is that he carries a torch not a thunderbolt, so the rest of the argument is moot (*pace* Madge 2022:81). Indeed, Smith (2021:87) emphasises the contrast of Augustus’ sober toga and laurel branch against the ‘extravagant mythological frame’.

⁷⁴⁹ Koortbojian (2013) is excellent despite the lack of thunderbolts.

for example, he was depicted on a coin seated and holding Victory in overt allusion to the cult statues of Zeus at Olympia and Jupiter Optimus Maximus in the Capitolium (fig.57).⁷⁵⁰ Yet he is togate and sitting on a curule chair which grounds him firmly within the Roman political apparatus. And there is no thunderbolt except behind his head on the obverse. Contemporary portraiture depicts him in human terms: in religious roles, such as pontifex maximus in the Labicana relief or as statesman, as in the Prima Porta statue, where he presents as an impressive military man.⁷⁵¹

Again, if we search for a depiction of a thunderbolt-wielding Augustus where one might most be expected, the *Gemma Augustea* is the best contender. This cameo depicts Augustus seated among the gods, crowned by Victory, with an eagle at his feet. Yet, although he sits in the pose of a seated Jupiter with his sceptre, in his right hand it is not a thunderbolt he holds (fig.58). Even at these dizzy heights, he holds a *lituus*. The controversy surrounding the date of the cameo and whether it is late Augustan or early Tiberian makes little difference here.⁷⁵² The point is that even in such a blatantly divinised portrait, where the thunderbolt would make good iconographic sense, it is eschewed for its priestly, mortal counterpart.⁷⁵³ It is a detail often pointed out that Augustus holds a *lituus* 'instead of' a thunderbolt as if this is to be expected.⁷⁵⁴ The surprise, in fact, would be if he *was* holding one.

⁷⁵⁰ *RIC* 270, *RSC* 116. For precedents, see chapter one in Masségia (2015) on sculptural representations of Hellenistic rulers in divine poses without the corresponding attributes.

⁷⁵¹ Smith (1996) for a comprehensive typology of Augustus portrait types.

⁷⁵² See Pollini (1993). However, his claim that holding the thunderbolt would indicate that Augustus had already had his apotheosis is problematic since this was still an unprecedented leap in Roman iconography. Pollini (2012) provides excellent overview of imperial visual rhetoric, esp.69-115.

⁷⁵³ It would be strange for a god to need a *lituus* to divine the intentions of the gods.

⁷⁵⁴ Zanker (1990:230-38) on Augustus as Jupiter but, tellingly, he has little to say about thunderbolts, except from remarking that on the *Gemma Augustea*, Augustus holds a *lituus* 'instead of the thunderbolt' (p.230).

Nevertheless, Augustus did some notable things with thunderbolts in his iconography which highlight his important and novel relationship with them, but these are incorporated in a suggestive but socially acceptable manner. A good example is an odd denarius from an Italian mint dating to 29-27 BCE. On the obverse, Augustus is shown with a bare head and, on the reverse, his name, Imperator Caesar, straddles a herm that bears his own face. The herm stands on a large, winged thunderbolt (fig.59).⁷⁵⁵ On other issues, Augustus appears on the reverse as a laureate bust of a herm with a large, winged thunderbolt behind his head. Both types are clearly related but the position of the thunderbolt beneath the herm is both unusual and, I think, more powerful. It is tempting to frame this as an early, experimental prototype of Augustan *kerounophoros* imagery. Standing on the thunderbolt puts Augustus in physical contact with it but only in statue form: a statue, crucially, without arms and therefore with no possibility of seizing or wielding anything. It is an expression of control but, perhaps a welcome one since he was reforming a state that had been out of control. The herm seems indicative of this. It denotes Roman stability, the integrity of its borders, and the expansion of the empire - the notable recent addition being Egypt.⁷⁵⁶ At the battle of Actium, as Manilius (*Astronomica* 1.918) would later reflect, the 'very thunderbolt' of Rome, *ipsa fulmine*, had been threatened by the sistrum of Isis. This coin seems to provide reassurance that Rome had prevailed over Egypt (and Antony): the national thunderbolt was safe under the stabilising force of Imperator Caesar and the formidable power marshalled in his support.

The view from Egypt in the first imperial issues from Alexandria is worth noting in this context. A type probably minted under the supervision of Gallus in the same post-Actium

⁷⁵⁵ RIC 269a, RSC 114.

⁷⁵⁶ Cf. Zanker (1990:54-5): 'This must surely represent some public monument in Rome and suggests that Octavian had now reached the stage of blending his own image with that of a god'.

period (30-28 BCE) shows Octavian bare headed on the obverse with the Greek ΘΕΟΥ YI[OY], advertising his inherited divinity (fig.60).⁷⁵⁷ On the reverse, an eagle clutches a thunderbolt with a cornucopia in the exergue encircled by the words ΚΑΙΣΑΡΟΣ ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ. With *autokratoros* being the Greek equivalent of *imperator*, it seems quite standard in appearance and theme. In Egypt, however, the symbolism of that eagle and thunderbolt perceptibly shifted. The motif was Macedonian, as we have seen, used by Alexander, and propagated so widely by the Ptolemies that it was recognised across the Mediterranean until this point as the Ptolemaic insignia.⁷⁵⁸ Other states had used it to advertise affiliation with the Ptolemies and it appeared on most Ptolemaic coinage with ‘a consistency unparalleled in any other Hellenistic coinage’.⁷⁵⁹ Now coupled with the name and bust of Octavian, however, the political infrastructure behind the eagle and thunderbolt motif was clearly under upheaval. While there was continuity in design, the message from the local view must have been that their thunderbolt was no longer Ptolemaic but in the possession of the Caesars. Manilius’ statement is unintentionally ironic in pitting Rome’s thunderbolt against Egypt’s sistrum at Actium; in fact, it was not until this moment that Rome monopolised the motif. With the annexation of Egypt, Augustus inherited Alexander’s thunderbolt in quite real terms and this may have contributed to the inspiration (and boldness) behind the Hellenistic flavour of his Temple to Jupiter Tonans and its thunderbolt-wielding connections to Alexander.

⁷⁵⁷ RPC 1, 5001.

⁷⁵⁸ Meadows (1998), 128. From the third century BCE to anyone in the Greek world, the numismatic design ‘could have had but one iconographic reference’. Meadows makes a compelling argument about the Ptolemaic heritage of the design and its relevance to gold coins minted in Rome during the Hannibalic War.

⁷⁵⁹ Meadows (1998:128): ‘...appropriation of the badge of the Eagle on Thunderbolt became the standard means to claim a link with the Ptolemies or their coinage’.

The bronze statue from Herculaneum which portrays Augustus not only as a Jupiter-like figure but, it seems, Augustus in role of Jupiter Tonans, was clearly beyond the pale of what was tolerable in Augustan Rome. The question therefore still remains as to when such imagery could appear and where the bronze Augustus Tonans sits in this evolving iconography. The obvious answer is after Augustus' death and apotheosis. Once the matter was no longer in the contentious realm of worshipping a living man as a god and once Augustus had officially become one, this would be the moment when images of Augustus Tonans might respectably proliferate. A thunderbolt in this context would recall the lightning strike that first divinised a Roman ruler by facilitating the apotheosis of Romulus. Lightning had allegedly foreshadowed Augustus' apotheosis. Suetonius (*Augustus* 97) recounts that his imminent deification was known in advance due to two omens. The first involved an eagle and the second was a miraculous lightning strike, which melted the first letter of the name, 'Caesar', on one of his statues. This was interpreted, by haruspices it seems, to mean that Augustus would only live a hundred more days, (the number represented by the letter C) and, since the remaining word *aesar* meant 'god' in Etruscan, that Augustus would on his death become one. In a similar manner to Caesar's comet, which was a celestial event that signalled Caesar's godhood, upon his death, Augustus was said to have been seen ascending as an eagle.

When Tiberius succeeded Augustus, he minted coins as Augustus had done for Caesar, proclaiming the new god. The legend *Divus Augustus pater* appears with the star that denoted Caesar's divinity above Augustus' portrait bust. Significantly, the new symbol that is added to mark Augustus' divinity in his own right is a thunderbolt (fig.61).⁷⁶⁰ Other

⁷⁶⁰ RIC 72.

coins might depict a head on the obverse and the thunderbolt on the reverse but this combination on one side with Augustus facing the thunderbolt heralds its new imperial significance. It connotes Augustus' own particular encounters with Tonans and his ascension to the heavens but also the hereditary divine power now invested in the role of *princeps*.

Unfortunately, space does not allow an investigation of the Julio-Claudian inheritance of thunderbolts except to say there continues to be scant evidence for imperial *keranophoros* imagery. In fact, with the exception of Claudius there is no extant evidence at all. Caligula's ridiculous antics (if Suetonius is to be believed) will be discussed in the following chapter but in terms of iconography, it is Claudius who finally picked up the artistic gauntlet and took firm hold of the thunderbolt. In a cameo now in the Art Institute of Chicago, Claudius appears standing alone, nude except for a modest draping of his cloak, with an eagle at his feet, a sceptre, and, unmistakably, a thunderbolt in his right hand (fig.62). What possessed him to make this leap can only be guessed but of all the Julio-Claudians, he was the weakest, physically and politically. Frustrated by physical handicaps and, again if the sources are to be believed, having come to power almost by accident, he was on poor terms with the senate and may have felt the need to assert his strength more vigorously, more decisively, than his predecessors.⁷⁶¹

There is a cluster of artistic and literary evidence suggesting that Claudius encouraged and propagated his own *keranophoros* imagery. It is in this context that, I believe, the

⁷⁶¹ Claudius' accession: Suetonius, *Claudius* 10; Cassius Dio 60.1; Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 2.206-13, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 19.236-45. See, Levick (1990), Major (1992), Renucci (2012); Bingham (2013:25-28).

bronze statue of Augustus from Herculaneum should be situated. The findspot of the statue is of controversial date and function but Najbjerg's comprehensive study suggests it was a Porticus associated with the College of Augustales.⁷⁶² Her Claudian dating of the sculptural group, which includes the thunder-wielding Augustus, hinges on chronological details of the dedicatory inscriptions.⁷⁶³ A Claudian artistic milieu of *keranophoros* imagery supports this.⁷⁶⁴ Contemporary literature also reinforces it.⁷⁶⁵ Claudius' own statue stood next to that of Augustus. This proximity to his thunderbolt-wielding forebear no doubt reflected some of that divine flash upon himself. It was then a small but loaded ideological leap from the divine ancestral Augustus holding the thunderbolt to Claudius, the living emperor, finally taking it up himself.

Sulla and Augustus have provided case studies for exploring thunder, lightning, and thunderbolts in the evolving iconography and ideology of one-man rule in Rome. Holding them up to our myth-historical models, Sulla emerged as a *scaevos* Romulus, seizing control of the divinatory narrative to have fortuitous portents follow him around while the idea of a *fulmen dictatorium* hovered about his hand. Augustus took this idea forward

⁷⁶² Najbjerg (2002). Dating of sculptural groups, pages 147-8.

⁷⁶³ This is the date accepted by Koortbojian (2013:214). On this statue, he comments: 'Only the thunderbolt of Jupiter in his hand signalled the *divus*' preeminence...'. Quite the understatement!

⁷⁶⁴ Including: 1) The Ravenna relief variously dated as Tiberian or Claudian, depicting the deified Augustus with an entourage of the imperial family holding the broken but visible remains of a thunderbolt. Torelli (1982:78). Pollini (1981) sees Augustus depicted as Mars rather than Jupiter, holding a parazonium not a thunderbolt but later he opts for the thunderbolt (2012:90). Koortbojian (2013:280 n.59) also sees a thunderbolt. 2) The colossal marble statue from Lanuvium now in the Vatican depicting Claudius as Jupiter. Both hands have been restored: the left holds sceptre and the right a patera. Hannestad (1986:105) asserts that originally Claudius no doubt held a thunderbolt, which in Claudius' case, at last seems possible. 3) The *Gemma Constantiniana* in Leiden depicting a thunderbolt-wielding emperor. Of contentious date but a Constantinian reworking of a Claudian cameo is suggested: Bastet (1968); Halbertsma (2015); Stephenson (2015), Smith (2021:92-93, 118-120).

⁷⁶⁵ It seems to be a Claudian motif: Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* 10-11 vs *De Consolatione ad Polybium* 13.4. On Seneca's praise of Claudius' divinity: Gloyn (2014).

and embedded it in his principate. Yet, divine summons and apotheosis aside, Augustus fits better the Numan model of lightning handling; he actively took control of lightning which was acceptable only because it was veiled, cloaked in piety and, supposedly, done in the interests of the people. Ideologically, he was bargaining with Jupiter for his place. His popularist thunderbolt became more moral than military and symbolised his control of the welfare of the state rather than its maintenance by brute force.

This remained powerful but volatile and difficult imagery to work with partly because of its cultural and political history but partly also because thunderbolts remained a real risk, a worldly force that continued to wreak destruction and fear regardless of who was claiming to have hold of it. Our final chapter therefore returns to meteorology, to the Hostilian model, and the problematic presence of lightning in imperial rule.



Flashpoint Ten

Domitian is Disarmed

despotism, religion, & the weather

Continuis octo mensibus tot fulgura facta nuntiataque sunt, ut exclamaverit: "Feriat iam, quem volet." Tactum de caelo Capitolium templumque Flaviae gentis, item domus Palatina et cubiculum ipsius, atque etiam e basi statuae triumphalis titulus excussus vi procellae in monimentum proximum decidit.

For eight continuous months so many lightning strikes occurred and were reported, that he exclaimed: "Strike now, whomever he wishes." The Capitoline temple was struck and the Temple of the Flavian family, likewise his house on the Palatine and his own bedroom. Even the inscription from the base of a triumphal statue of his was torn off in by the force of the storm and fell upon a nearby tomb.

(Suetonius, *Domitian* 15.2)

Our final flashpoint is a bout of very bad weather: eight successive months of electrical storms in which lightning strikes seem to be seeking Domitian out, circling ever closer to his bedroom where he would, eventually, be murdered. Rome's political climate here, as so often, is seen to manifest in the tempestuous climate of the capital. Perhaps it is true that 96 CE was an exceedingly stormy year, but it seems more likely that all the usual lightning strikes were viewed at that time as bolts pointing to Domitian and, accumulatively, the message was thunderously clear. In Suetonius' account, Domitian himself read the lightning this way. Taking it personally, it fuelled his paranoia until he reached breaking point. His defiant incitement to go ahead and let the lightning fall at will was the moment he cracked. It was a shout to the heavens, to Jupiter, and to fate, to do its bidding, and from this moment Domitian was doomed.

Domitian was remembered as tyrannical. Modern rehabilitations view his activities more subtly and with more sympathy but for current purposes what matters is that the ancient sources branded him a tyrant.⁷⁶⁶ This prodigious amount of lightning near his end, true or not, reminds us that while tyrants might pick up thunderbolts, the gods, as a result, might strike them down. That tension between power and punishment, endorsement and death, is one that has been observed running through all our case studies in various ways. It has been stressed repeatedly that any ideology or cultural construction about how lightning was supposed to behave was severely limited and complicated by the unpredictable and destructive way it did behave. This chapter will follow that faultline and turn away from ideology and iconography, which can be controlled, and return to the weather which cannot.

In the case of Domitian, we will think less about how the thunderbolt continued to evolve emblematically in imperial self-presentation and more about the real-world lightning which challenged all advertised control and remained a persistent liability. First, Domitian's misappropriation and mishandling of lightning will be situated in the Hostilian model, then tyrannical interactions with lightning will be considered in the Roman framework, and finally Domitian's personal confrontation with lightning will be extrapolated out to assess how successful fulminating phenomena were, in reality, as a vehicle for expressing and representing power.

⁷⁶⁶ E.g., Tacitus, *Agricola* 3.2; *Historia* 4.39.9, 4.68.5, a reign of *saevitia* and *libido*; Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus* 48.3, a monstrous beast, '*inmanissima belua*'; Cassius Dio 67.4.5, treacherous and characterised by *avaritia*; Suetonius, *Domitian* 12.1-2, *avaritia* and *cupiditas*; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.17, a persecutor of Christians emanating *crudelitas*. Cf. Dunkle (1971), a 'rhetorical tyrant'; Southern (2013), a 'tragic tyrant', Raimondi (2021), a 'neglected emperor'.

Domitian's fatalistic cry to Jupiter to strike at will was a desperate admission that he had lost control or had no control over what lightning may come. It is immediately after reporting this outburst from Domitian that Suetonius describes the lightning stalking him in ever decreasing circles, striking increasingly personal Flavian landmarks. Characterised by misappropriation, failure, and destruction, Domitian's handling of lightning falls into the Hostilian model. In that punitive framework, lightning came for Domitian as an instrument of ruin. While the destruction Hostilius brought upon himself by incorrectly and inappropriately summoning thunderbolts was positioned broadly in the established trope of hubris and nemesis, in the Roman context, it was seen more specifically as exemplifying the folly of mortal claims to divine power and the limits to human control of lightning. The key lesson of the Hostilian model was that attempts to manhandle Jupiter's thunderbolt were ill-advised and harshly punished. This is, of course, the model Sulla and Augustus had worked hard to avoid evoking.

Domitian had gone a different route. Abandoning all humility, nuance, and ambiguity, he seems to have stepped boldly into his divine role.⁷⁶⁷ Complete with his own priesthood, the Flaviales, he was supposedly addressed as '*dominus et deus*'.⁷⁶⁸ As emperor, Domitian erupts into the visual and literary sources surrounded by lightning. The eight month barrage in Suetonius' account is representative of this. It is a darkening tension taken to portend Domitian's downfall, but this is only the culmination of what had been a thundersome reign. Domitian's coinage is replete with thunderbolts, often carried by his

⁷⁶⁷ Fears (1981:75-6) describes increased prominence of Jovian ideology under Domitian in attempt to establish the divine sanction of his rule.

⁷⁶⁸ Suetonius, *Domitian* 13.2; Martial, *Epigrammata* 5.5; Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* 45.1 (κύριος καὶ θεός). De Vera (2019) on the Flavian priesthood. Thompson (1984) successfully questions *dominus et deus* as a contemporary title.

patron goddess Minerva (fig.63).⁷⁶⁹ Most importantly, however, in his own portraiture, Domitian appears *kerounophoros* brandishing the thunderbolt unabashedly. This was the first time a thunderbolt-wielding emperor appeared on a Roman coin.⁷⁷⁰ As such it was the first time such an image was propagated widely.⁷⁷¹ The powerful image was matched in the literature by the overt claims to divinity this entailed.

In his *Silvae*, Statius who has been called ‘abandoned in his flattery’ describes the fulminating Domitian in glowing terms.⁷⁷² He presents a fully matured vision of the emperor *tonans*, thundersome and righteous. Likewise, Martial, in his sycophantic praise, describes Domitian’s thunderbolts as benevolent. In an epigram addressed to Domitian (6.83) he declares they are more clement than Jupiter’s. By recalling an *eques* from exile, Martial says he has ‘recalled a thunderbolt sent from his own right hand’ (*nam tu missa tua revocasti fulmina dextra*). He also fawns that ‘if only the highest Thunderer had your nature, Caesar, a rare hand will use the full thunderbolt’ (*Si tua sit summo, Caesar, natura Tonanti / Utetur toto fulmine rara manus*). Note that Martial is comparing the thundering Domitian to *Tonans* not *Capitolinus*. He even refers to Domitian as ‘*noster Tonans*’ (e.g., 6.10, 7.56); *Tonans* as the divine proxy for the emperor’s own godhood was clearly embedded now in the conceptualisation of imperial power. It is a repeated refrain in Martial’s praise, the excessive elevation of which only underscores the fact that he is addressing an authoritarian ruler.

⁷⁶⁹ Morawiecki (1977).

⁷⁷⁰ Claudius *kerounophoros* was a cameo; no such Claudian coinage. This Domitianic coinage is the first known publicly circulating advertisement of ‘divine investiture’, Fears (1977:134-6).

⁷⁷¹ *RIC* II, Domitian 752. Minted in Rome with findspots in northern France and north Africa. A low denomination, bronze sestertius, therefore common.

⁷⁷² Scott (1933), 247.

Given his alleged cruelty and his grandiose propaganda, Domitian could only be remembered as wielding the thunderbolt tyrannically. Authoritarianism is stressed by Pliny the Younger who had worked for Domitian and had lost several friends to his executions and exiles. Perhaps trying to exonerate himself for his own success in the regime, he claims he too had felt himself in a perilous situation.⁷⁷³ In a letter to a friend, he describes the danger Domitian had posed in terms of augury and fulminations:

[T]ot circa me iactis fulminibus quasi ambustus mihi quoque impendere idem exitium certis quibusdam notis augurarer.

With so many thunderbolts hurled all around me, as if scorched, I divined from certain unmistakable signs that the same fate was hanging over me too.

(Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 3.11)

The thunderbolts Domitian extends over the younger Pliny's head are here both tyrannical and deadly.⁷⁷⁴ Christian accounts particularly emphasise this despotism in order to highlight and exaggerate his persecutions of Christians.⁷⁷⁵ The thunderbolts by which Domitian attempted to elevate the imperial position into the sublime became in their Christian reception the very vehicle of his descent into damnation.⁷⁷⁶ A Domitianic date is often posited for the *Book of Revelation*, for example, which, if correct, cast Domitian himself as the unholy enemy ushering in the apocalypse.⁷⁷⁷ The imperial thunderbolts of this stormy political era are, in this strange Christian text, outshone and

⁷⁷³ See Strunk (2013) for Pliny's encounters with Domitian.

⁷⁷⁴ Cf Pliny, *Panegyricus* 2.2-3, where Trajan is praised for avoiding such behaviour.

⁷⁷⁵ Domitian's persecutions are doubted. This seems to be Christian spin on isolated incidents in response to rejection of the imperial cult. See Brent (1999) 140-44 for overview of the evidence.

⁷⁷⁶ Brent (1999:178-209) for a thorough contextualisation of Domitian and the imperial cult in *Revelation*. Slater (1998) for *Revelation* as 'a Christian response to religio-political pressures by indigenous Asian pagans upon Christians to conform to traditional social practices in Roman Asia'.

⁷⁷⁷ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5.30.3; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.18. Brent (1999:165-9) for Domitianic date; Jones (1992:116) posits a Neronian date.

bulldozed by the destructive missiles of end times. *Revelation* describes thunder and lightning flashing from the throne of God (4.4-5). The angel takes fire from the altar before the throne and hurls it at the world below filling it with thunder, lightning, and earthquakes (8.3-5). Thunder and lightning accompany the breaking of the seventh seal (8.5). The 'seven thunders' come and reveal something to John which a voice from heaven prohibits him from writing down (10.3-4) but then it is announced that this is the end of ages. Everything about this text is disputed but it shows, at least, how much thunder and lightning as the articulation of divine supremacy were in the zeitgeist.⁷⁷⁸ In this Christian vision, they do not come for Domitian alone but obliterate the entire earthly order.

We will think more about how the true power of lightning could undermine mortal claims upon it. First, however, in terms of despotism and thunderbolts, the important historical precedent for Domitian should be considered. This was Caligula, whom the literary sources present as having pathologically divine aspirations, wandering around uttering oracles with a gold-painted beard and holding a fancy-dress thunderbolt.⁷⁷⁹ Not to say that Domitian emulated Caligula, but since his pretensions to divinity and the thunderbolt were of an ilk, and since both were considered tyrants, Caligula was an important, if inconvenient, point of reference.

The sources are quite consistent in painting an outrageous picture of Caligula whose sacrilegious behaviour seems often contemptuous of the gods and even fatalistic in the attempt to rouse them. Suetonius (*Caligula* 33), who was of course also familiar with Domitian's reign, refers to Caligula's antics as comedic in intention (*iocos*). Some modern

⁷⁷⁸ Hidalgo (2023) for a survey of scholarly views of Rome as the historical context for *Revelation*.

⁷⁷⁹ Suetonius, *Caligula* 52. Dio 59.26, Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 75-97. Nevertheless, he represented himself on coinage as pious and restrained.

scholars are of the same view while others argue that there was behind them a serious attempt to elevate his status.⁷⁸⁰ It is difficult to get a sense of in what spirit any of his seemingly delusional activities were conducted; however, it does appear that whatever else he was doing, he was experimenting with his divine status and how to represent it.

Dio's account (59.28.3) of Caligula's desire to set up a residence on the Capitoline seems to build on ideas from the previous chapter. His wish was supposedly to live with Jupiter (τῷ Διὶ συννοικίη), which was stymied because he disdained the idea of taking second place (τὰ δευτερεῖα) in this cohabitation. He decided to make a second temple on the Palatine instead. This seems in direct dialogue with the Augustan rhetoric that insisted the *princeps* was Jupiter's second, and Tonans subordinate to Optimus Maximus. Indeed, Dio appears to make this reading plain when he continues that Caligula wanted to house in this new temple Phidias' statue of Zeus from Olympia. Mirrored here is Augustus' importation of Leochares' cult statue. Moreover, Caligula wanted the face of the Olympian Zeus remodelled into his own. Therefore, taking some steps forward, what Augustus had hinted at with his cult statue, Caligula was making explicit. Phidias' masterpiece, of course, did not hold a thunderbolt but a sceptre and Nike; it was not the gatekeeping *numen* but the divine king enthroned.

The enterprise was appropriately prevented when the ship sent to ferry back the statue was blasted by a thunderbolt (ἐκεραυνώθη): meteorological evidence again that Jupiter would not tolerate such affronts.⁷⁸¹ Thwarted, Caligula eventually went ahead and simply

⁷⁸⁰ Gradel (2004:146-149) believes they were serious attempts to elevate his status. Adams (2007) sees his incongruous behaviour as emulating Hellenistic kings. On his 'madness', see Yavetz (1996). On the abuse of power, Barrett (2015).

⁷⁸¹ Cassius Dio 59.28.4.

set up a statue of himself in the temple instead of Zeus. Further details in this passage of Dio suggest that in these activities Caligula, whether seriously or disdainfully, was consciously positioning his new cult temple in relation to Augustus and the cult of Jupiter Tonans. He laid a path from the forum up to his Palatine temple which cut right through the Temple of Castor and Pollux and ran between the statues of the two brothers (59.28.5). The significant detail is that Dio notes Caligula's habit of saying that in this way he had the Dioscuri as doorkeepers (πυλωρός). Caligula's 'doorkeepers' have distinct echoes of Jupiter's *ianitor* – more so because the Temple to Jupiter Tonans also had two statues of Castor and Pollux outside.⁷⁸² The major difference here is that Caligula in his temple would be the one elevated by, not diminished as, the doorkeeper. It is an overlooked piece of a messy puzzle that has glimmers of underlying method to the madness. It suggests that Augustus' legacy of Tonans was something that had to be contended with, reconciled, or incorporated and this is what Domitian, too, seems to have understood.

Dio (59.28.5) recounts that Caligula fashioned himself after Jupiter Latiaris, perhaps searching for his own Jupiter cult in contradistinction to that of his divine forebear.⁷⁸³ So many of the details, however, such as appointing his horse a priest in his service, the sacrificial flamingos, and so forth, make a mockery of the entire endeavour. There is apparent contempt either on the part of the writers who distort and exaggerate or from Caligula himself, which again is true of historiographical treatments of Domitian.⁷⁸⁴ Notably, we are told that Caligula had made some thunder-rivalling machinery (ἐκ

⁷⁸² Pliny, *HN* 34.78-9.

⁷⁸³ Cf. Suetonius, *Caligula* 22.2.2-3. Ominous aspects of this cult suited Caligula's supposed sadism, see Gradel (2002), 245-252.

⁷⁸⁴ As above, especially the 'rhetorical tyrant' per Dunkle (1971).

μηχανῆς τινοῦ ἀντεβρόντα) that seems to turn him into a demented Salmoneus.⁷⁸⁵ Using this contraption, whenever it thundered, he thundered back (ἀντεβρόντα), whenever there was lightning, he lightened back (ἀντήστραπτε), and when a thunderbolt fell, he hurled a rock in reply. Dio states that while so engaged, he would quote Homer (*Iliad* 23.724): ‘ἢ μ’ ἀνάειρ’ ἢ ἐγὼ σέ’. The quote is from Ajax during his wrestling match with Odysseus. He tells his opponent: ‘Either lift me or I will lift you’. It is a challenge which, if the anecdote is true, tells us something about the nature of Caligula’s attempted fulminations. If the resolution of the Homeric scene was also in his mind (namely, that it was a stalemate because the two were equally matched), then Caligula’s challenge was either in jest and laughing in the face of divine retribution or genuinely as delusional as the ancient authors would have us believe. In either case, it is less Caligula ‘in the guise’ of Jupiter so much as attempting to oust him. Against this account, however, Suetonius (*Caligula* 51) claims Caligula was actually so afraid of lightning, he winced at the slightest rumble of thunder and hid under his bed if it grew worse. Both accounts are comically ridiculous but not irreconcilable: if Caligula behaved so outrageously towards the gods, he may well also have cringed in fear that a thunderbolt was coming for him. If he grew paranoid about it, his thunder machine may have temporarily relieved some tension.

In the same vein, Domitian’s bombastic claims about thunderbolts made his own head a target for one and any stroke of lightning might suggest one was coming for it. Therefore, also like the excessive fear his imperial predecessors bore towards lightning, Domitian’s paranoia, in his own worldview, was also warranted. Thus, in Suetonius’ eight months of storms, in the bombardment of lightning that seemed to threaten Domitian and mock all

⁷⁸⁵ Cassius Dio 59.28.6. Indeed, the rare ἀντεβρόντα appears in Lucian (*Timon* 1) in relation to Salmoneus as Dio may have known.

his claims, the undoing of his own narrative is made clear. Just like Caligula threatening the heavens with his catapult, Domitian's indignant cry to Jupiter relinquishes control to fate by exhorting the lightning to fall as it will.⁷⁸⁶

We will not dissect further the manifestation of the thunderbolt in Domitian's rule as *divus praesens*. While interesting, at this point hopefully it is also self-explanatory. This is Sulla's *fulmen dictatorium* remembered poorly, Augustus' moral, *caeleste fulmen* emerging by degrees, and Claudius' *iustissima fulmina* now fully fledged and wielded by Domitian as an effulgent indomitable leader: the 'swift thunderbolt of invincible Caesar' (*invicti rapidum Caesaris fulmen*) as Statius (*Silvae* 4.7.50) enthuses. Again, that push and pull between acceptance and rejection of the mental image is evident in the literature as a writer's political allegiances determine whether Domitian's thunderbolt is benevolent and clement or perilous and oppressive.

All this praise and blame is expressed through imagery that has slowly become normalised: the emperor *tonans* and the emperor *keraunophoros*. It is focused on how the emperor wields his power, how his thunderbolt falls upon the *populus Romanus*. From the perspective of the populace, the lingering question was how Jupiter would wield his own, superlative thunderbolt upon the *princeps* in response. Just as in the myths of the regal period where lightning acted as a *speculum principum*, in the imperial age, signs in the skies came to bear increasingly on how an emperor was faring in the eyes of the

⁷⁸⁶ Madge (2022:118) also recognised this parallel between Caligula and Domitian but concludes that with these two emperors 'disregarding the threat of lightning had become a symbol of hubris and, subsequently, a mark of tyranny' whereas we know this had long been the case. While certainly true, the fatalism here seems rather more indicative of the tyrants' complex fear and expectation of divine retribution.

gods.⁷⁸⁷ Sulla and Augustus have been shown to have successfully navigated the quandary of historical strikes by casting them at an angle favourable to themselves even if (especially if) this angle was contrary to how they might otherwise have been interpreted. This was described earlier as narrative control, which was seen to be necessary since actual control of lightning strikes was impossible. In practice, narrative control involved patronising literary circles as well as controlling divination and the interpretation of prodigies, which we have also seen to be a malleable and suggestible process.⁷⁸⁸ Accordingly, as is often observed, divination in the imperial age shifted focus and the interpretation of thunder and lightning came to pertain more to the emperor and his personal behaviour and fate than to the state and the common weal.⁷⁸⁹

What is not discussed is that having asserted this kind of control, and having accepted this kind of imagery, the emperor was still faced with the inconvenient fact of the weather. Storms and lightning strikes in the capital were still frequent, terrifying, and randomly destructive. As always, real lightning was a problematic and arbitrary interjection into the political dialogue but now it was also potentially subversive to imperial propaganda: the impotency of any claim to control was searingly revealed in the presence of real lightning.

Domitian, who had advertised his grasp on the thunderbolt so boldly, could not maintain a handle on it. His loss of control is underscored by the divinatory messages he receives, which Suetonius recounts for this reason after describing the lightning strike on the

⁷⁸⁷ But not exclusively, ordinary life continued as normal, and all the folk traditions described in the introduction continued regardless of politics. See Santangelo (2019) for prodigies in the principate.

⁷⁸⁸ Flashpoint 5.

⁷⁸⁹ Santangelo (2019).

bedchamber where he would soon be killed. The first of these comes in yet another prophetic dream, which Domitian himself receives. In it, Minerva, his favoured goddess, left her shrine (*excedere sacrario*) and came to him declaring she could protect him no further because she had been disarmed by Jupiter (*quod exarmata esset a Iove*).

It is an extraordinary image, which seems to be in direct opposition to Sulla's dream.⁷⁹⁰ Here is a protecting goddess relinquishing her protection. She does not furnish Domitian with thunderbolts as Sulla's goddess had done. Rather, we are given to understand that she is withdrawing them. Her disarmament by Jupiter surely referred to the thunderbolt Minerva so prominently wielded on Domitian's coinage; the thunderbolt with which she protected Domitian, and which was, by extension, passed onto him by her. It is an interesting hierarchical detail, then, that Jupiter should step in to remove it. It suggests that Minerva cannot help Domitian now even if she wanted to but also, more importantly, that Domitian is no longer endorsed by Jupiter. This dream message is a clear retraction of the divine right to rule. Whether Domitian really had this dream or not again need not detain us. The importance lies in the imagery through which its message was conveyed because this was not only culturally legible but, for anyone remembering Sulla's momentous dream, historically significant: the tyrant's thunderbolt had been confiscated, Domitian was disarmed.

Although clearly powerful when read in tandem with the lightning falling all around him, this dream was not even the worst omen. Suetonius explains Domitian was even more disturbed by the divinations of an astronomer called Ascleparion (*nulla tamen re perinde*

⁷⁹⁰ Cf. Fortuna's bestowal and withdrawal of her support for Galba (Suetonius, *Galba* 4.3 vs 18.2). Hekster (2010) on 'reversed epiphanies' and 'divine desertion'. Artemidorus (*Oneirocritica* 2.33) states that deities departing of their own volition spells death for the dreamer or their family.

commotus est). We are not told what he foresaw, only that he learned these things *ex arte* and formulated his *responsum*. It was clearly dire; Domitian's reaction was to have him executed, which is a rather more direct way of controlling the divinatory narrative. The astronomer's funeral was botched, however, and this realised another of the astronomer's prophecies, which only gave weight to whatever he had revealed to Domitian and thereby further stoked his paranoia.

On the day he would be murdered, Domitian was still trying to silence diviners, this time a haruspex from Germany. He was conducting a trial because this particular haruspex had been consulted about all the excessive lightning falling and had predicted a change of rulers (*mutationem rerum praedixerat*). Again, Domitian condemned him to death. It was one of his last acts of state, however, because soon thereafter he was assassinated. In Suetonius' account, Domitian's ideological thunderbolt is confiscated, he has no control over the real lightning coming for him, and he has no control over the narrative about it despite repeatedly executing diviners who made unflattering or inauspicious prophecies. This is a literary configuration of events designed to let the audience know Domitian had received his comeuppance according to the divine will.⁷⁹¹ His failure and mishandling is characteristic of the Hostilian model by which his punishment was deserved and self-inflicted. Suetonius' audience would readily have understood Domitian's downfall as dispensed by the punitive justice of lightning which sought out and destroyed this overreaching and overbearing individual.

⁷⁹¹ Adams (2005) for Suetonius' treatment of Domitian.

Nevertheless, it will be remembered that Tullus Hostilius was viewed within that model as a somewhat sympathetic character. He was described as a failed heir to Numa and although his behaviour was intolerable, part of his destruction was attributed to human weakness and fallibility in the face of misfortune and forces beyond mortal control. In this regard, Domitian too can be viewed sympathetically, I think. He, too, may be viewed as a failed heir to the thunderbolt. Whether that of Sulla, Augustus, Caligula, or Claudius, by his cultural and political inheritance, he was figuratively handed a thunderbolt to deal with. His father and brother seem largely to have ignored it. However, Domitian had tried to find a way to forge his own imperial identity with it. His choice of parading it boldly and elevating his status to unparalleled heights was an experiment that failed.⁷⁹² Yet, if he was following the example set by his predecessors, as Tullus Hostilius had unadvisedly followed Numa, his experiment was a natural step in an experimental evolution that was largely not of his making.

The Inevitability of the Thunderbolt

It is worth asking what choice Domitian had in his participation and involvement with fulminating propaganda. While he could have presented himself with a veneer of humility, ruling moderately and taking a deferential position toward the heavens, if his intention was to glorify and sanctify the role of *princeps* and if he wanted to raise his status to that of a living god then he had to reconcile himself eventually with Jupiter. Indeed, it is with Domitian that Jupiter's Capitoline temple received its final and most splendid rebuilding and rededication.⁷⁹³ Plutarch (*Publicola* 15) describes Domitian turning a Midas touch

⁷⁹² Failure in terms of the imagery and Domitian's own reception. Domitian was otherwise a skilled statesman and successful in much imperial administration. See Gering (2012) for a reappraisal of his accomplishments.

⁷⁹³ After being destroyed by fire in 80 CE: Suetonius, *Domitian* 5; Cassius Dio 66.24. In 69 CE, Domitian had sheltered here claiming Jupiter's protection when the Capitoline was taken by Vitellius' troops (Tacitus,

upon the temple, such that its gilding alone amounted to more than the entire wealth of Rome's richest private citizen: more than twelve thousand talents of gold were lavished on its ornamentation. This was clearly the pinnacle of Domitian's propitiations to Jupiter as well as the crowning moment of his own Jovian trajectory.⁷⁹⁴ In this capacity, the thunderbolt was difficult to ignore. As the ultimate symbol of divine power and as the power behind the king of the gods himself, it was also the power which Jupiter was believed to extend to the city of Rome, the power that emanated from the *axis mundi* of the Capitoline across Rome's dominions, and the power that gave Rome its victories and successes. So omnipresent on coinage and so recognisable empire-wide by this time as emblematic of Roman *imperium*, someone with Domitian's aspirations was almost forced to take on the thunderbolt somehow. Like Augustus, even simply by virtue of having to contend with and control what was said about wayward strokes of lightning, the thunderbolt thrust itself into his sphere uninvited. This was Domitian's inheritance and he dealt with it by taking it on brazenly and unapologetically. His was the culminating move in a trajectory set in motion long ago by the likes of Scipio in Rome and Alexander before him. While Domitian may be blamed for how he executed this move, that he did so was, in fact, a long time coming.

It is an instructive thought experiment to consider, if not the thunderbolt, what alternatives were there in the configurations of Roman power? Certainly, there was Apollo, who Augustus had favoured early in his career, and who was later emulated by

Historiae 3.74.6-8). Nb. also the dedication on the Capitoline of a temple to Jupiter Custos for this reason (Tacitus, *Historiae* 3.74).

⁷⁹⁴ Fears (1981) describes the Jovian trajectory of the Flavian dynasty stressing the centrality of the Capitolium in negotiating a direct relationship between *princeps* and Jupiter. However, while Vespasian's rebuilt temple had been restrained and traditional, Domitian, in keeping with his self-presentation had opted for unparalleled grandeur.

Nero.⁷⁹⁵ There was also Hercules, who would later be emulated in particular by Commodus and later again feature as a lesser-partner to Jupiter in the tetrarchic system.⁷⁹⁶ Likewise, the Dioscuri incorporated into the imperial cult offered a useful vision of *concordia* and military prowess.⁷⁹⁷ Additionally, Mars was a figure more mythologically invested in Rome and an old and local deity ingrained in Roman religion and agriculture.⁷⁹⁸ But the lyre, the club, the felt caps, and the helmet and spear did not and could not convey the formidable, all-encompassing, invincible power of the thunderbolt. They did not carry all at once those connotations of morality and justice, kingship, military might, divine power and divine will so intrinsic to the representation of Roman *imperium*. Nor did they convey the terror and sheer awe-inspiring force which the thunderbolt represented, not least because none of those other gods nor their symbols demanded frequent attention by manifesting themselves violently and regularly in the weather. The brilliance of the thunderbolt as an idea and an image was that it had the momentum of both history and meteorology behind it. This was ultimately its greatest strength but also its greatest weakness.

The power of lightning as a natural phenomenon which was so attractive to autocrats for its irresistible force was simultaneously incendiary and subversive precisely because that coveted power was, as it remains, a force far beyond human control. Real lightning resoundingly brought the lie to human aspirations. Its very nature continually compromised the message projected onto it. Just as artistic representations could not capture the raw, electrical force of its impact, as we have seen, the depiction of a human

⁷⁹⁵ Augustus: Lange (2009), Miller (2009). Nero: Champlin (2003).

⁷⁹⁶ Hercules generally Ogden (2021). Commodus: Hekster (2001), Hoff (2005). Late antiquity: Allan et al. (2020)

⁷⁹⁷ Gartrell (2021,2023).

⁷⁹⁸ Rosivach (1983); Barchiesi (2002).

holding a thunderbolt for a long time seemed worryingly hubristic on one hand and, on the other, deluded and laughable. In its behaviour, its habit of striking the highest places, which had a logic serviceable to the egalitarian ideals of the consular system, was a rationale that broke down in the imperial system where it often embarrassed and threatened the elevated individual most associated with it. Although attempts were always made to reframe its disruptive and destructive nature as divine benevolence, justice, and a kind of righteous tough love, by common experience it remained mercurial, violent, and terrifying which, as a modality of power, remained characteristic of a despot. Therefore, while it was in the Roman context a necessary force with which to reckon and while there was a certain inevitability about its use as the imperial insignia *par excellence*, it was always, ideologically and meteorologically, a difficult force to work with.

The case of Domitian exemplifies this point. The tempest supposedly raging towards the end of his reign and the fact that diviners were interpreting this as a change of ruler or even a regime change (*mutationem rerum* is open to interpretation) illustrates how difficult thunderbolt ideology was to manage in the face of real thunder and lightning. The execution of diviners in failed attempt to silence their message only reinforces the point that even the divinatory message of lightning was difficult to control in the face of a hostile senate and public. Suetonius' account of a storm tearing up a triumphal statue and dumping it in a nearby tomb encapsulates the poetics of lightning in his reign. His abortive encounter with the thunderbolt followed that trajectory from triumph to tomb.



Conclusion

Striking at the Heart of the Matter

In the longer arc of the thunderbolt as the emblem of political power and imperial rule, let us step back now to view the bigger picture. In book two of his *Natural Questions*, when discussing different types of lightning and their various meanings, Seneca briefly named the different categories according to Aulus Caecina, a leading authority on Etruscan divination in the first century BCE active in the time of Pompey and Caesar. Wedged between the ‘overwhelming lightning’ (*fulmina obruta*), which strikes objects that have not been expiated although they have previously been struck, and the ‘infernal lightning’ (*fulmina inferna*) which causes fire to leap forth from the earth, he lists the *fulmina regalia*: a royal lightning. This, Seneca tells us, can be discerned by the places it strikes, which may be the forum, the *comitium*, or the government buildings of a free city. The *fulmina regalia* warned the state that it was threatened with the menace of tyranny (2.49.2). This image of lightning striking the political meeting places of the people - the vital organs of the *Res Publica* - is a dramatic illustration of how lightning mediated the relationship between the Roman people and their governing power structures. It encapsulates a long history of interactions with and interpretations of lightning that had twisted over and back on themselves. Whereas in the myths of early Rome, if not a historical regal period, lightning was described as endorsing and legitimating kings, in Caecina’s Rome of the first century BCE, lightning endorsed magistracies and while it still implicated kings, republican values had turned it into a warning against them. In Caecina’s times, suspended between Sulla and Augustus, such warnings were pertinent. By Seneca’s Rome of the first century CE, indeed, kings had returned in imperial guise and the

philosopher's historical vantage point was one familiar with the evolution of thunderbolt-wielding ideology since Augustus across the entire line of Julio-Claudian emperors. This brief mention of *fulmina regalia* in Seneca's grand tour of thunderbolts therefore offers a condensed glimpse into the political flux of Roman lightning-ways in which the same meteorological phenomenon was interpreted and reinterpreted in changing political climates.

Following on from Seneca, Plutarch bears an interesting witness since his life (c.40-120s CE) spans much of the later evolution we have considered. Plutarch's interest in thunderbolts is evident as he mentions them in his biographies wherever they illuminate character. Perhaps his most telling commentary on the topic, however, comes from his exposition on how to govern, *In Principe Requiri Doctrinam*, in his *Moralia* written in the post-Domitianic years. He advises reason, humility, and law. Having suggested a ruler's work is to serve the god (ὕπηρετεῖν θεῷ) for the wellbeing of the people, he suddenly waxes lyrical about the sky (780d-f). He describes the heavens nourishing and pouring forth all that the earth requires to grow and flourish and amongst his outpouring he notes that the sun adorns or orders all things: κοσμεῖ δ' ἥλιος ἅπαντα. He then explains that justice and law are required for human societies to benefit from these gifts and the ruler's role is to administer these.

Plutarch states that law and justice are the work of the ruler and 'the ruler is the likeness of the god who fashions everything': ἀρχων δ' εἰκὼν θεοῦ τοῦ πάντα κοσμοῦντος. This likeness is iconic in the true sense, Plutarch explains, and needs no master sculptor. He describes the beauty of the sun and the moon in the heavens as the most perfect vision of the divine, which the good ruler mirrors by radiating the light of righteousness and, in his

wisdom, such a ruler holds intelligence (διάνοια) rather than ‘a sceptre, thunderbolt, or trident’: οὐ σκῆπτρον οὐδὲ κεραυνὸν οὐδὲ τρίαιναν. By those contrivances, Plutarch says, unwise rulers ‘inscribe themselves onto the unattainable’: ἑαυτοὺς καὶ γράφουσι τῷ ἀνεφίκτῳ. We glimpse public criticism of these hyperbolic representations when Plutarch says that by so presenting themselves such rulers ‘cause foolishness to draw invidious hostility’: ποιῶντες ἐπίφθονον τὸ ἀνόητον. Here ἐπίφθονος is that specific kind of hostility drawn by φθόνος, the Evil Eye, which in the flashing of a jealous divine eye is lightning itself. It cues us again into that cycle of hubris and nemesis. Thus, Plutarch ends his thought by saying that the god punishes (through Nemesis) those who imitate his thunders, thunderbolts, and rays of brilliant light: νεμεσᾷ γὰρ ὁ θεὸς τοῖς ἀπομιμουμένοις βροντὰς καὶ κεραυνοὺς καὶ ἀκτινοβολίας.

In this passage, Plutarch thus provides an ancient confirmation of the argument spanning so many of our flashpoints. The two rulers in Plutarch’s own lifetime who propagated *keranophoros* imagery were the two that have been revealed crucial to its artistic rendering: Claudius and Domitian. When Plutarch calls the imagery folly, when he describes the thunderbolt as unattainable, when he asserts that such overblown claims invite hostility among men while paltry imitations rouse the anger of the gods, and when he proclaims that this kind of behaviour will be met with divine retribution, we remember Salmoneus, Romulus Silvius, Numa, Tullus Hostilius, Sulla, Augustus, Caligula, Claudius, and Domitian. In offering his opinion, Plutarch also reveals that even in the second century CE, this imagery was still controversial and not the widely accepted, unproblematic trope scholarship so often asserts it to be.

Moreover, Plutarch's focus on the sun as the radiant omnipresent heart of the divine cosmos tacitly acknowledges the larger problem of the weather and the difficulty in casting the thunderbolt in this role. The passage offers the meteorological alternative: sunny days and blue skies. These were literally and metaphorically the antidote to storms. While fickle fate and downturns in human fortunes were often spoken of in the language of tempests and bolts from the blue, fair weather was the celestial manifestation of hope, beneficence, and well-being. Olympus itself was always said to bask in eternally lovely weather untroubled by storms.⁷⁹⁹

The sun, then, as a universal and constant presence was powerful but benign and was therefore a far better source upon which to rest mortal hopes and configure human power. Plutarch does so in terms of virtue with the virtuous ruler radiating justice and everyone prospering for it.⁸⁰⁰ Looking ahead, to later imperial experimentations with Sol Invictus, especially in the third century, the attractiveness of this ideology is obvious in its environmental dynamics. Droughts and eclipses notwithstanding, the sun was consistent and reliable. It shone across the entire empire and while mighty neither induced fear, nor wrought destruction, and most importantly, it was predictable. It circled like clockwork at a suitable distance and never did anything to destroy property, take lives, interrupt proceedings, or embarrass or undermine the emperor.⁸⁰¹ The splendour of this imagery and the ease of an ideology based upon it shores up everything that was fraught, confusing, bedevilled, and beleaguered about an ideology based on lightning. In the calm, constant brilliance of the sun, we see most clearly the volatile, chaotic energy with which lightning charged so much of Roman thought, politics, and culture.

⁷⁹⁹ E.g., Homer, *Odyssey* 6.43-6; Pseudo-Aristotle, *De Mundo* 400a 1-15; Philostratus, *Imagines* 1. 26.

⁸⁰⁰ On the sun in Plutarch's cosmological ethics, Demulder (2022), 156-165.

⁸⁰¹ No doubt this is why sun kings have ruled from Egypt's Old Kingdom to France's Louis XIV.

While we could profitably continue along these meteorological lines and observe the environmental dynamics of Roman society and imperial cult continuing into the second century and beyond, we end with Domitian, who as the culminating flash of misguided ambition rounds out the historical instantiations of the three mythological models with which we set out. All other interactions and representations of Roman lightning may be read against these and other evidence, new or known, may nuance the argument I have presented. This thesis has aimed to provide a framework for that future work and to organise the rich, varied, and strangely overlooked body of material so that the bigger picture may come into focus. All the holes in that picture that thereby also come into focus show the way ahead. There is much to be done. There are many questions and themes that I have not been able to address here. An environmental history of lightning in the Roman world clearly needs to be written. A topography of lightning in the city of Rome is also required as the places and spaces of lightning in the ancient capital have much new to say even about some very familiar monuments and buildings. The epigraphic and archaeological evidence for bidentals and puteals needs to be collated and studied properly. Among many other niches and tangents there is also the enormous question of early Christianities. A history of the thunderbolt and the cross would be dense and compelling. It has become increasingly apparent to me that the evolving church was in dialogue with the Roman thunderbolt and wrestling with how to deal with it as it set itself in opposition to traditional Roman religion but encountered the same weather.

In the end, it was those volatile skies of Rome and the wider Mediterranean, that gave force and urgency to all ancient ideas about lightning and how to handle it. In Roman society's unusual calibration with its tempestuous weather, risk and uncertainty have

been shown to be the fundamental hinge on which Roman thought-worlds of lightning and responses to it swung back and forth between divine and mortal, power and destruction, confusion and clarity, tradition and improvisation, danger, safety, opportunity, and, on reflection, good and bad decisions. In effect all efforts to handle lightning, whether to deal with its aftermath, or to explain it or expiate it, to cultivate indifference to it or commandeer it for personal gain were all efforts, one way or another, to control something that was utterly beyond human control or comprehension. The uncertain conditions of human life were epitomised by its destructive caprice and drove the desire for control, for prophetic foresight and the ability to forecast and temper the storms - political, personal, and climatic. These are the competing concerns and impulses that were always in tension as Roman society navigated its long and lightning-perforated history.



Epilogue

In 408 CE, on the brink of Alaric's first cataclysmic invasion almost a hundred years into Rome's Christian transformation, the old Roman thunderbolt had an extraordinary last flash. As Zosimus (5.41) relates, with the Visigoths almost at the gates, the prefect of the city, Pompeianus, learned that the town of Narnia in Etruria had successfully warded off danger by appealing to their ancestral rites (κατὰ τὰ πάτρια θεραπεία). Having conjured extraordinary thunder and a fire storm of swirling lightning, the barbarian onslaught was repelled (βροντῶν ἐξαισίων καὶ πρηστήρων ἐπιγενομένων τοὺς ἐπικειμένους βαρβάρους ἀποδιῶξα). Here even at the city's last gasp, we see what we have suspected all along: that Numa's secret knowledge and that world of alterity and undesirable knowledge had never been successfully suppressed or eliminated. Even into the Christian age, there were people who knew how to conduct the dubious rites. Whatever various emperors were doing with thunderbolts, there remained among the populace a subcurrent in Rome's religious underbelly that believed themselves (or their nefarious neighbours burning chameleons on the rooftop) capable of conjuring one themselves.

Having been convinced of the efficacy of these ancient rites, Pompeianus met with the bishop Innocentius to discuss urgent measures. The bishop decided that the preservation of the city was more important than his own religious convictions and agreed that the ancient rites should be conducted, but privately. The rites, however, demanded public performance and for all the necessary sacrifices to take place on the Capitoline and in the various markets of the city. We might wonder which rites exactly they had wanted to

perform but at any rate no one dared to take part in them, so the Etruscans left, and the city fell to the Goths. The perceived power and danger of this forbidden knowledge is still palpable and persistent, revealing itself again *in extremis* not as the solution the city wanted, but the one even its Christian bishop suspected it needed.

To the bitter end, Numa's bargain was never entirely settled.



List of Figures

Fig. 1. Lightning strikes St Peter's dome at the Vatican, Rome

Image: Filippo Montforte AFP/Getty Images.

Available: <https://www.gettyimages.it/detail/fotografie-di-cronaca/lightning-strikes-st-peters-dome-at-the-vatican-fotografie-di-cronaca/161482140> [Accessed 12.09.2025].

Fig. 2. Smoking boots. ABC NEWS (June 14th 2014).

Available: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/lightning-knocks-atlanta-area-man-clean-smoking-boots/story?id=24262532> [Accessed 12.03.24].

Fig. 3. Acts of the Arval Brethren. Recording trees that were struck by lightning. 224 CE..

Terme di Diocleziano, Epigraphic Museum, Rome. Image: author.

Fig. 4. A lightning stricken oak and stripped bark.

Available: <https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/lightning-strikes-100-year-old-tree-at-ben-lomond> [Accessed 12.09.2025].

Fig. 5. Tassel hyacinth (*Muscari comosum*)

Available: <https://www.natureplprints.com/staffan-widstrand/tassel-hyacinth-muscari-comosum-18783334.html?srsId=AfmBOoq3G0m8xqepAsfivC6VjJF6Z-5R1i-19fhoHUDYpRfdlwFCDD7s> [Accessed 12.09.2025].

Fig.6. Jupiter/Tinia/Zeus holding three-pronged thunderbolt with closed 'bud' tip.

Etruscan red figure krater late 5th century BCE. National Archaeological Museum of Spain.

Available: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Calyx-krater_olympian_assembly_MAN.jpg © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons [Accessed 12.09.2025].

Fig. 7. Blitzblume. Thunderbolt encased in vegetation. Lagrasta tomb, Canusium.

Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. inv. no. 24807: 'oggetto, cosi-detto "fulmine".

Image: Courtesy of Ed. Bispham.

Fig. 8. Amulet against the Evil Eye. Thunderbolt at top. Gold, 2 cm, Roman, ca. 1st – 4th century. British Museum 1814,0704.1172. Available:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1814-0704-1172 [Accessed 12.09.2025].

Fig. 9. Amulet against the Evil Eye with pearl and amethyst beads. Thunderbolt at top right.

John Hopkins University Archaeological Museum. Available:

<https://archaeologicalmuseum.jhu.edu/class-projects/archaeology-of-daily-life/jewelry/gold-amulet-pendant/> [Accessed 21.03.2024].

Fig. 10. 'Fossilised lightning'. A large fulgurite.

Available: <https://www.geoengineer.org/news/fulgurite-a-rare-phenomenon> [accessed 12.09.2025].

Fig.11. Volcanic Lightning. Mount Sakurajima erupting in Japan in 2018.

Image: Asahi Shimbun via Getty Images

Available: <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/editorial-images/news/event/the-asahi-shimbun-weekly/657799809> [Accessed 12.09.2025].

Fig. 12. Lightning density map of Europe.

Map generated using Vaisala's first interactive lightning map, published 2022. Maps use lightning

data from 2016 to 2023 collected by Vaisala's National Lightning Detection Network (NLDN) and Global Lightning Dataset (GLD360), which monitor in-cloud and cloud-to-ground lightning 24/7 worldwide. Available: <https://interactive-lightning-map.vaisala.com/> [Accessed 13.03.2024].

Fig. 13. Lightning density map of Italian peninsula showing Rome and its environs.

Map generated using Vaisala's first interactive lightning map, published 2022. Maps use lightning data from 2016 to 2023 collected by Vaisala's National Lightning Detection Network (NLDN) and Global Lightning Dataset (GLD360), which monitor in-cloud and cloud-to-ground lightning 24/7 worldwide. Available: <https://interactive-lightning-map.vaisala.com/> [Accessed 13.03.2024].

Fig. 14. Lightning data from Meteorage for 13 March 2024.

Available: <https://www.meteorage.com> [Accessed 13.03.2024].

Fig. 15. Lightning density map of wider Mediterranean.

Showing North Africa and Britain thunderbolt-free and Scythia barely to register.

Map generated using Vaisala's first interactive lightning map, published 2022. Maps use lightning data from 2016 to 2023 collected by Vaisala's National Lightning Detection Network (NLDN) and Global Lightning Dataset (GLD360), which monitor in-cloud and cloud-to-ground lightning 24/7 worldwide. Available: <https://interactive-lightning-map.vaisala.com/> [Accessed 13.03.2024].

Fig. 16. Comparison of lightning fatalities in Europe between the 18th and 19th centuries.

Image: Ronald L. Holle (2008), *Annual Rates of Lightning Fatalities by Country*, 20th International Lightning Detection Conference. Tuscon Arizona. p.9-10. Available: https://www.vaisala.com/sites/default/files/documents/Annual_rates_of_lightning_fatalities_by_country.pdf [Accessed 12.09.2025].

Fig. 17. Bidental plaque indicating the buried lightning of Summanus.

Fulg(ur) / condit(um) / summa / nium. Rome. Viale Giotto. Capitoline Museum NCE 13. (Image: author).

Fig.18. Marian shrine damaged by lightning. 'The statue of Our Lady of Fatima at the Marian Shrine in Laventille was damaged by a lightning strike on Wednesday, around 1.30 pm.' Trinidad & Tobago Newsday. Available: <https://newsday.co.tt/2020/09/09/marian-shrine-damaged-by-lightning/> [Accessed 01.09.2025].

Fig. 19. Mary beheaded by lightning. Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, 11 September. Available: <https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/pnm-mp-to-help-repair-lady-of-fatima-statue6.2.1207067.76d0434ce6> [Accessed: 01.09 2025].

Fig. 20. Dedication to Semo Sancus by one of the *sacerdotes bidentales*.

Vatican, Galleria Lapidaria. (Image: author).

Fig. 21. A thunder-wielding 'Juno'.

Obverse: Juno Caelestis (Dea Caelestis/Cybele/Tanit) on a lion wielding a thunderbolt in right hand with sceptre in left. Aureus of Septimius Severus RIC IV, 266. Available: http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.ss.266_aureus [Accessed 09.09.2025].

Fig. 22. Veiovis/Vediovis with thunderbolt

1st century, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Viterbo. Available:

[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veiove#/media/File:Veiovis_\(glove\)_bronzo,_I_secolo_dc._ca._da_montrazzano_02.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veiove#/media/File:Veiovis_(glove)_bronzo,_I_secolo_dc._ca._da_montrazzano_02.jpg) [Accessed 14.09.2025].

Fig.23 & 24. A nocturnal thunderer. Jupiter or Summanus?

Oil lamps with bearded deity with eagle and thunderbolt on a crescent moon. Labelled 'busto di Giove'. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, (Inv. left, NI 3700. right, 119730. (Image: author).

Fig.25. Unknown thunderers.

Spuriously labelled bronze figurines. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. (Image: author).

Fig.26. Unknown thunderer.

Imaginatively labelled marble relief. Museo Nazionale Montemartini. Rome. (Image: author).

Fig.27. Unknown thunderer.

Terracotta antefix. Clenching a thunderbolt between the teeth. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. Rome. (Image: author).

Fig.28. A fulminating Jupiter joins the troops in battle.

Trajan's Column, scene XXIV. (Image: Kovács, P. 2017: 'Deities in Trajan's and Marcus Aurelius' Column', Acta Archaeologica Scientarium Hungaricae 68, p.50).

Fig.29. The 'lightning miracle'.

A thunderbolt strikes enemy defences. Column of Marcus Aurelius, scene XI. (Image: Kovács, P. 2017: 'Deities in Trajan's and Marcus Aurelius' Column', Acta Archaeologica Scientarium Hungaricae 68, p.53).

Fig.30. De Caelo Tacta: fractal patterns of lightning.

Lichtenberg scars on victims of lightning strikes. Available: <https://www.wildernessfirstaidonline.com/sample-lecture.html> [Accessed 12.12.22].

Fig.31. Sulla Triumphator.

Aureus 82 BCE. RRC 367/2. Sulla in quadriga crowned by winged Victory, in quadriga, holding reins in left hand and caduceus in right hand. Available: <https://numismatics.org/crro/id/rrc-367.2> [Accessed 13.09.2025].

Fig.32. Equestrian statue of Sulla.

Aureus 80 BCE. RRC 381/1a. Right hand raised, holding reins in left. Available: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1848-0819-77 [Accessed 13.09.2025].

Fig.33. Jupiter in Triumph

Quadrigatus 225BC-212 BCE. RRC 28/3. Right hand hurling thunderbolt, holding sceptre in left. Available: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_2002-0102-124 [Accessed 14.09.2025].

Fig. 34. Teshub holding thunderbolt and axe.

750-700 BCE. Gaziantep Archaeological Museum, Turkey. Available: <https://www.asor.org/resources/photo-collection/pid000658> [Accessed 20.04.2024].

Fig. 35. Ba'al hurling lightning.

14th-12th century BCE. Canaanite. Minet el-Beida. Available: https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Baal_casting_lightening-AO_11598-IMG_1087-white.jpg [Accessed 14.09.2025].

Fig. 36. Adad with thunderbolts in either hand.

c. 744 - 727 BCE. Nimrud. Available:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stele_of_Adad_0233.jpg [Accessed 14.09.2025].

Fig.37. Indra with vajra in raised right hand.

Image: Nomu420 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, Available:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32744844> [Accessed 25.08.2025].

Fig.38. Vajrapāṇi with thunderbolt in hand.

7th or 8th century, Bihar. Metropolitan Museum, New York. Available:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38559> [Accessed 24.08.2025].

Fig.39. Herakles- Vajrapāṇi guarding Buddha with a thunderbolt.

2nd century Graeco-Buddhist relief from Gandhara. British Museum. Available:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Buddha-Vajrapani-Herakles.JPG> [Accessed 12.08.2025].

Fig.40. Victory stele of Naram-Sin.

The king of Akkad in the bull-horned helmet of the gods conquering the Lullubi.

c. 2254–2218 BCE. Akkadian. Available:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=123638751> [Accessed: 06.08.2025].

Fig.41. King Sulumeli makes offerings to a deity.

The god holds a lightning bundle in left hand. Malatya 1200-700 BCE. Ankara Archaeological Museum. (Image: author).

Fig.42. King makes offerings to a deity.

The god holds a lightning bundle in right hand. Malatya 1200-700 BCE. Ankara Archaeological Museum. (Image: author).

Fig.43. King Ashurnasirpal points to symbols of his protecting deities.

Thunderbolt second from left. 865-860 BCE. Limestone stele. Neo-Assyrian from Temple of Ninurta, Nimrud. British Museum. Available:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1851-0902-32 [Accessed 06.08.2025].

Fig.44. Alexander grasps the thunderbolt.

Porus Medallion. Silver decadrachm. Uncertain mint in Babylon, 326-323 BCE.

Image: Hemingway, S. & Karoglou, K. (eds.) (2019), *Art of the Hellenistic Kingdoms: from Pergamon to Rome*, New York, p.25.

Fig.45. Alexander grasps the thunderbolt.

Neisos gem. Carnelian ringstone. 3rd century BCE. St Petersburg, Hermitage P-20807. Available:

Available: <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/gems/Styles-and-Periods/Hellenistic-period> [Accessed 14.09.2025].

Fig.46. The mortal reaching for the divine.

Alexander's portraits vs Michelangelo's Adam. Detail of the creation of Adam. Available:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1551141> [Accessed: 23.03.22].

Fig.47. Alexander enthroned with thunderbolt and sceptre.

House of the Vettii, 1st C., Pompeii. Available:

https://www.reddit.com/r/ArtefactPorn/comments/egzg6c/alexander_the_great_wielding_a_thunderbolt_as/ [Accessed: 14.09.2025].

Fig.48. Silver drachma from the Amphipolis mint.

Obverse: head of Herakles. Reverse: eagle on thunderbolt. 336-323 BCE.

Fig.49. Silver drachma from the Amphipolis mint

Obverse: head of Herakles. Reverse: eagle on thunderbolt. 336-323 BCE.

Available:

<https://www.forumancientcoins.com/gallery/displayimage.php?album=5140&pid=146176&srsltid=AfmBOorECCdMIDQc7bv3QQYPCD2If7jjwuYZhACK4ofkDRx2s1D8VhO6> [Accessed 14.09.2025].

Fig.50. The deified Alexander rides elephants with the thunderbolt.

Gold stater of Ptolemy I Soter. Alexandrian mint, 299-295 BCE. Available:

http://numismatics.org/pco/id/cpe.1_1.94 [Accessed 13.09.2025].

Fig.51. Athena Alkidemos wields the thunderbolt for the Antigonids.

Silver tetradrachm of Antigonos II Gonatas. Amphipolis mint c. 277-271/0 BCE. Available:

<https://www.vcoins.com/en/stores/zurqieh/171/product/greek-macedon-antigonid-kings-antigonos-ii-gonatas-277239-bc-ar-tetradrachm-amphipolis-mint-struck-c-2772710-bc/668944/Default.aspx> [Accessed 05.06.2023].

Fig.52. Fortune, fecundity, and Sulla's thunderbolt.

Cornucopia resting on a thunderbolt surrounded by a wreath. Silver denarius.

Roman mint. 82-80 BCE. RRC 371/1. Available:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/629087001> [Accessed 14.07.2025].

Fig.53. Cupid breaks the thunderbolt over his knee.

Quinarius, Roman mint. RRC 352/2. 85 BCE. <https://numismatics.org/crro/id/rrc-352.2?lang=it> [Accessed: 14.09.2025].

Fig. 54. Jupiter Tonans in his temple.

Augustan Aureus. Spanish mint. AVGVSTVS CAESAR/ IOVIS TONANT, Jupiter Tonans holding a lowered thunderbolt and sceptre in hexastyle temple. RIC 66. c.19 BC. Available:

<http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/augustus/t.html> [Accessed 02.09.2025].

Fig. 55. Dedication to Jupiter Tonans & Augustus

Aravos names Augustus *servatoris sui*. image: Panciera, S. (1975-1976), 'Un frammento degli Acta Arvalium ed altre novità epigrafiche romane', *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 48. Image p.256. Text reconstruction p.290.

Fig. 56. Augustus with a firm hold on the thunderbolt.

From the 'basilica' in Herculaneum. 1st Century. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. (Image: author).

Fig. 57. Octavian with a thunderbolt behind him.

Obverse: Octavian as laureate herm with winged thunderbolt behind. Reverse: IMP-CAESAR, Togate Octavian seated on curule chair holding Victory. Denarius 29-27 BCE. Uncertain Italian mint. RIC 270, RSC 116. Available:

https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/sear5/s1562.html#RIC_0270 [Accessed 08.09.2023].

Fig. 58. Augustus among the gods holding a *lituus*.

Gemma Augustea. Cameo in Arabian onyx. 1st century. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Available: <https://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=4242> [Accessed: 14.09.2025].

Fig. 59. Octavian as a herm upon a thunderbolt.

Obverse: bare head looking right, IMP – CAESAR. Reverse: Octavian as herm on winged thunderbolt. Octavian Denarius. Uncertain Italian mint, *RIC* 269a, *RSC* 114. Available: <https://www.wildwinds.com/coins/sear5/s1561.html> [Accessed: 12.09.2025].

Fig. 60. Octavian usurps the Ptolemaic thunderbolt.

Obverse: Octavian bare head, ΘΕΟΥ ΥΙ[ΟΥ]. Reverse: Eagle standing on a thunderbolt, ΚΑΙΣΑΡΟΣ ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ.. Alexandrian Diobol, 30-28 BCE. *RPC* 1, 5001. Available: <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coin/409351> [Accessed: 12.09.2025].

Fig. 61. The deified Augustus.

Obverse: DIVVS AVGV-STVS PATER, radiate head left, star above, thunderbolt to left. Reverse: Female seated right, holding patera and sceptre. Augustus As. Struck by Tiberius. Available: <http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/augustus/t.html> [Accessed 12.01.25].

Fig. 62. Claudius Tonans.

Cameo Portraying Emperor Claudius wielding a thunderbolt. 41-54 CE. Art Institute of Chicago. Available: <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/111809/cameo-portraying-emperor-claudius-as-jupiter> [Accessed 25.02.19].

Fig. 63. Minerva holds the thunderbolt for Domitian.

Obverse: laureate head of Domitian. Reverse: Minerva holding thunderbolt and spear. Roman mint. *RIC II*, Part 1 Domitian 687. Available: [http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.2_1\(2\).dom.687](http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.2_1(2).dom.687) [Accessed 14.09.2025].

Fig. 64. Domitian holds the thunderbolt for himself.

Obverse: laureate head of Domitian. Reverse: Domitian being crowned by Victory holding spear and in his right hand, a thunderbolt. Bronze sestertius. Roman mint. *RIC II*, Part 1 (second edition) Domitian 752. Available: [http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.2_1\(2\).dom.752](http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.2_1(2).dom.752) [Accessed: 14.09.2025].

Figures



Fig. 1. Lightning strikes St Peter's dome at the Vatican, Rome



Fig. 2. Smoking boots (ABC News).
The victim from Atlanta was relatively unhurt.



Fig. 6. (left) Jupiter/Tinia/Zeus holding three-pronged thunderbolt with closed 'bud' tip. Etruscan red figure krater late 5th century BCE. National Archaeological Museum of Spain.

Fig. 7. (right) Blitzblume. Thunderbolt encased in vegetation. Lagrasta tomb, Canusium. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. inv. no. 24807: '*oggetto, cosi-detto fulmine*'.



Fig. 8. (left) Amulet against the Evil Eye.
Thunderbolt at top. Gold, 2 cm, Roman, ca. 1st – 4th century.
British Museum 1814,0704.1172.

Fig. 9. (right) Amulet against the Evil Eye with pearl and amethyst beads.
Thunderbolt at top right.



Fig. 10. 'Fossilised lightning'. A large fulgurite.



Fig.11. Volcanic Lightning.
Mount Sakurajima erupting in Japan in 2018.

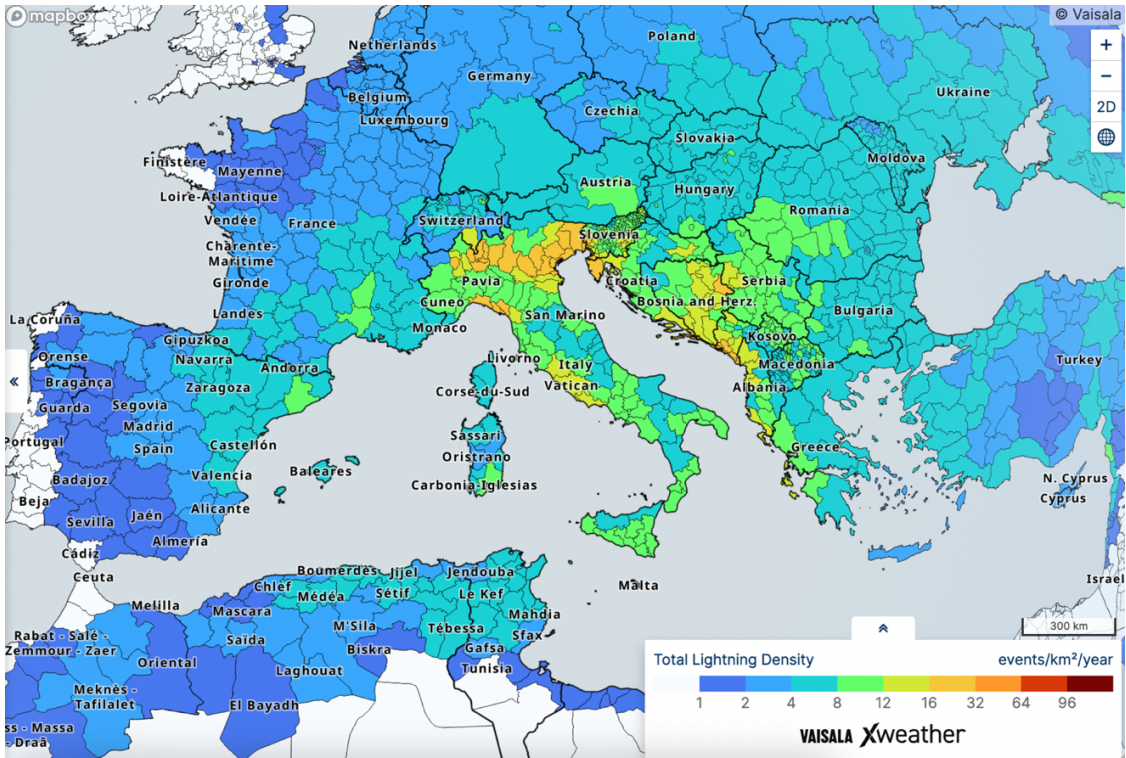


Fig. 12. Lightning density map of Europe

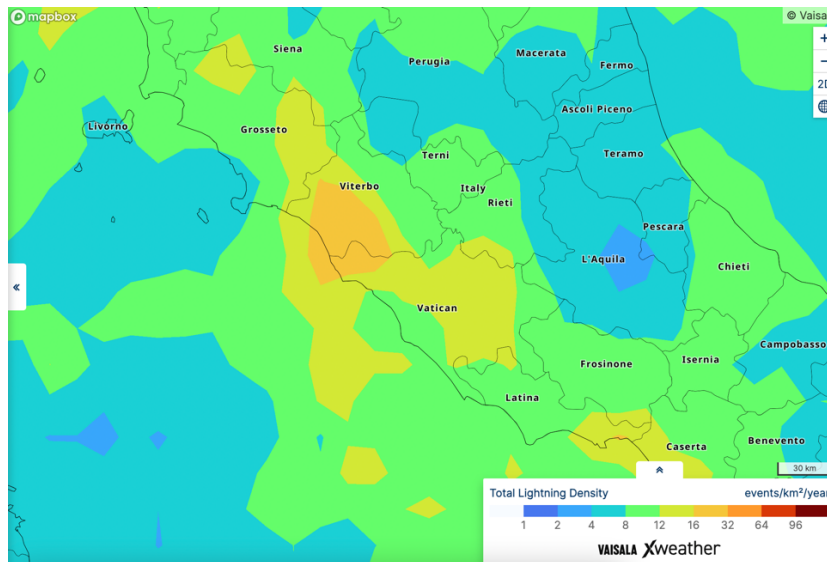


Fig. 13. Lightning density map of Italian peninsula showing Rome and its environs.



Fig. 14. Lightning data from Meteorage for 13 March 2024.

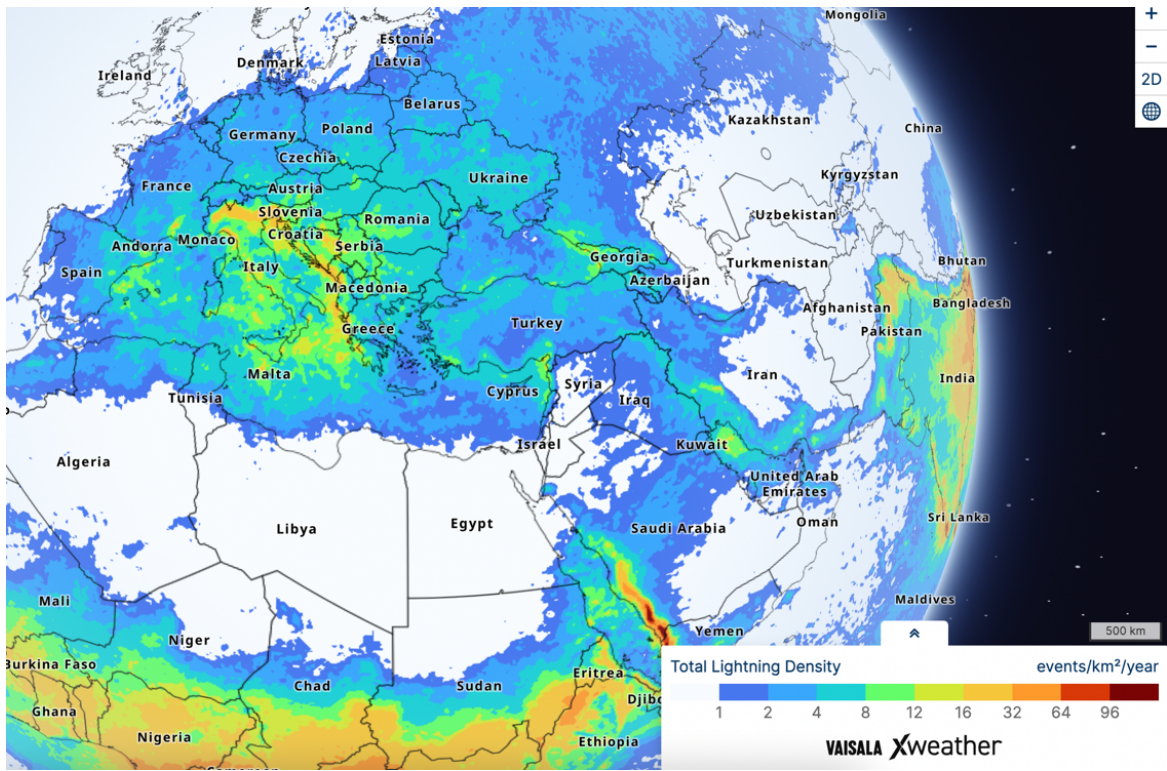


Fig. 15. Lightning density map of wider Mediterranean.
 Showing North Africa and Britain thunderbolt-free and Scythia barely to register.

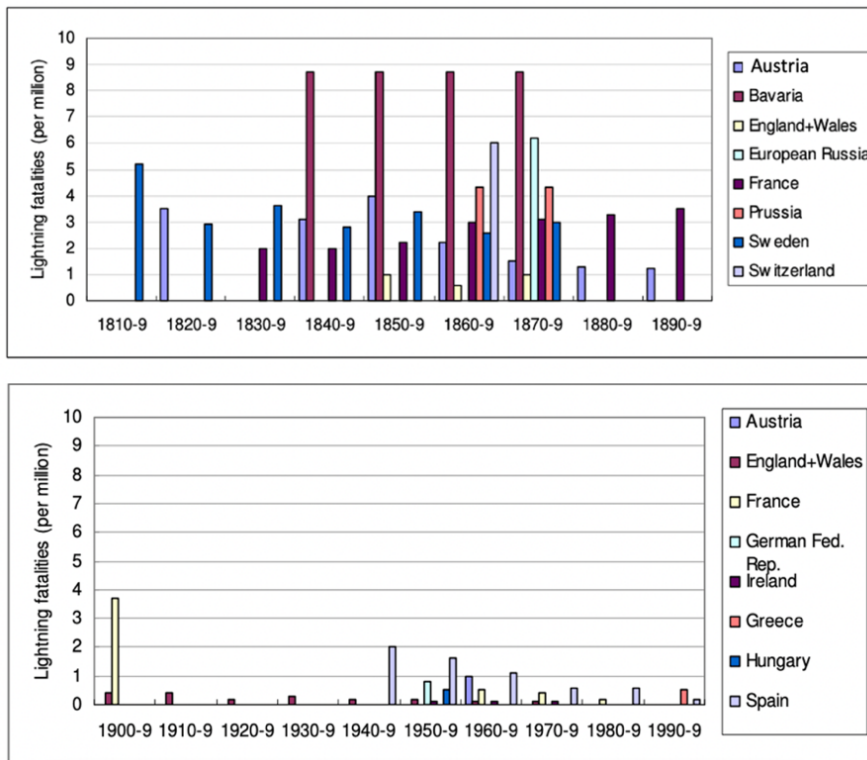


Fig. 16. Comparison of lightning fatalities in Europe between the 18th and 19th centuries



Fig. 17. Bidental plaque indicating the buried lightning of Summanus
Fulg(ur) / condit(um) / summa / nium
Rome. Viale Giotto.



Fig. 18. Marian shrine damaged by lightning.

'The statue of Our Lady of Fatima at the Marian Shrine in Laventille was damaged by a lightning strike on Wednesday, around 1.30 pm.' Headline in *Trinidad & Tobago Newsday*.



Fig. 19. Mary beheaded by lightning

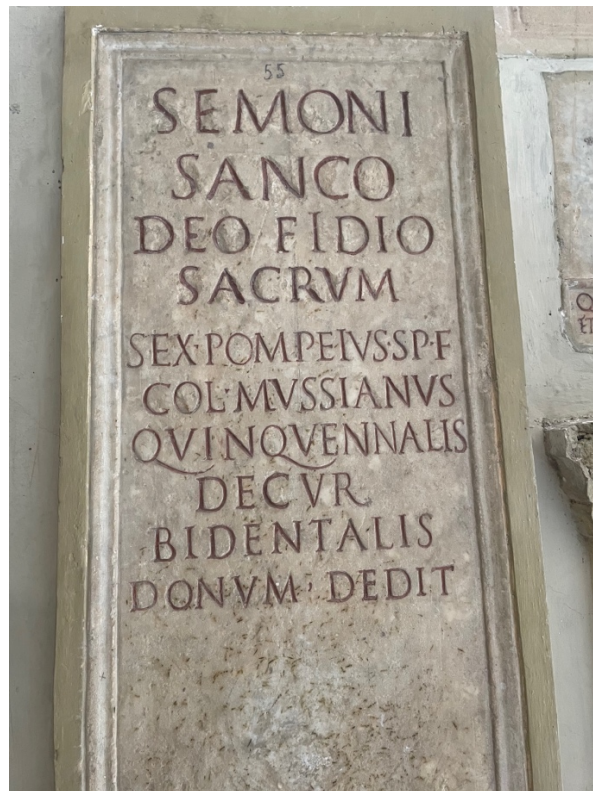


Fig. 20. Dedication to Semo Sancus by one of the *sacerdotes bidentales*
Galleria Lapidaria, Vatican. Rome.



Fig. 21. A thunder-wielding 'Juno'
Obverse: Juno Caelestis (Dea Caelestis/Cybele/Tanit)
on a lion wielding a thunderbolt in right hand with sceptre in left. Aureus of Septimius Severus.



Fig. 22. Veiovis/Vediovis with thunderbolt
1st century, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Viterbo.



Fig.23 & 24. A nocturnal thunderer. Jupiter or Summanus?

Oil lamps with bearded deity with eagle and thunderbolt on a crescent moon. Labelled '*busto di Giove*'.
 Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.



Bronzetti votivi di produzione etrusca e italica
 1. Giove che avanza con il fulmine nella destra. Officina umbra, Maestro Fiesole. 425-400 a.C.
 2. Giove in assalto. Officina umbro-settentrionale. Gruppo Cosenza, Maestro A. 425-400 a.C.

Fig.25. Unknown thunderers.
 Spuriously labelled bronze figurines.
 Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. Rome.



Pediment with Triton
M.C. inv. 1724; marble from Luni
 The small funerary shrine is decorated by the figure of a snake-footed deity (Charon, Winged-Jupiter, Typhoon or Summanus).
 First century BC.
 From a funerary building on the Via Salaria

Fig.26. Unknown thunderer.
 Imaginatively labelled marble relief.
 Museo Nazionale Montemartini. Rom



6. Antefissa a testa di divinità che stringe un fulmine tra i denti (Zeus/Giove/Veiovivis ?); colore ben conservato anche nel nimbo a baccelli (elementi vegetali stilizzati). III-II secolo a.C.

Fig.27. Unknown thunderer.
 Terracotta antefix. Clenching a thunderbolt between the teeth.
 Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. Rome.



Fig.28. A fulminating Jupiter joins the troops in battle.
Trajan's Column, scene XXIV.



Fig.29. The 'lightning miracle'.
A thunderbolt strikes enemy defences (left).
Column of Marcus Aurelius, scene XI.



Fig.30. De Caelo Tacta: fractal patterns of lightning.
Lichtenberg scars on victims of lightning strikes.



Fig.31. Sulla Triumphator.
Aureus 82 BCE. *RRC 367/2*. Sulla in quadriga crowned by winged Victory, in quadriga, holding reins in left hand and caduceus in right hand.



Fig.32. Equestrian statue of Sulla
Aureus 80 BCE. *RRC 381/1a*.
Right hand raised, holding reins in left.



Fig.33. Jupiter in Triumph
Quadrigratus 225BC-212 BCE. *RRC 28/3*.
Right hand hurling thunderbolt, holding sceptre in left.



Fig. 34. (left) Teshub holding thunderbolt and axe. 750-700 BCE. Gaziantep, Turkey.

Fig. 35. (middle) Ba'al hurling lightning. 14th-12th century BCE. Canaanite. Minet el-Beida.

Fig. 36. (right) Adad with thunderbolts in either hand. c. 744 - 727 BCE. Nimrud.



Fig.37. Indra with vajra in raised right hand.



Fig.38. Vajrapani with thunderbolt in hand
7th or 8th century, Bihar.



Fig.39. Herakles- Vajrapāni guarding Buddha with a thunderbolt
2nd century Graeco-Buddhist relief from Gandhara.



Fig.40. Victory stele of Naram Sin.

The king of Akkad in the bull-horned helmet of the gods conquering the Lullubi.
c. 2254–2218 BCE. Akkadian.



Fig.41. King Sulumeli makes offerings to a deity.
The god holds a lightning bundle in left hand.
Malatya 1200-700 BCE.



Fig.42. King makes offerings to a deity.
The god holds a lightning bundle in right hand.
Malatya 1200-700 BCE.



Fig.43. King Ashurnasirpal points to symbols of his protecting deities
Thunderbolt second from left. 865-860 BCE. Limestone stele. Neo-Assyrian from Temple of Ninurta, Nimrud.



Fig.44. Alexander grasps the thunderbolt.
Porus Medallion. Silver decadrachm. Uncertain mint in Babylon, 326-323 BCE.

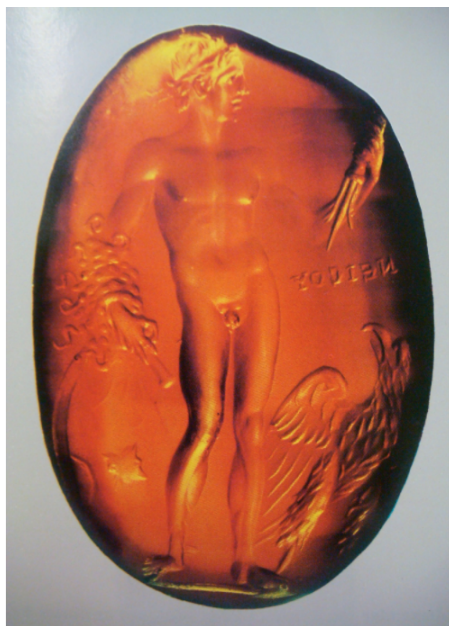


Fig.45. Alexander grasps the thunderbolt.
Neisos gem. Carnelian ringstone. 3rd century BCE? St Petersburg.



Fig.46. The mortal reaching for the divine.
Alexander's portraits vs Michelangelo's Adam.



Fig.47. Alexander enthroned with thunderbolt and sceptre
House of the Vettii, 1st C., Pompeii.



Fig.49. Silver drachma from the Amphipolis mint
 Obverse: head of Herakles. Reverse: eagle on thunderbolt. 336-323 BCE.



Fig.50. The deified Alexander rides elephants with the thunderbolt.
 Gold stater of Ptolemy I Soter. Alexandrian mint, 299-295 BCE



Fig.51. Athena Alkidemos wields the thunderbolt for the Antigonids.
 Silver tetradrachm of Antigonos II Gonatas. Amphipolis mint c. 277-271/0 BCE.



Fig.52. Fortune, fecundity, and Sulla's thunderbolt.
Cornucopia resting on a thunderbolt surrounded by a wreath. Silver denarius.
Roman mint. 82-80 BCE. RRC 371/1.

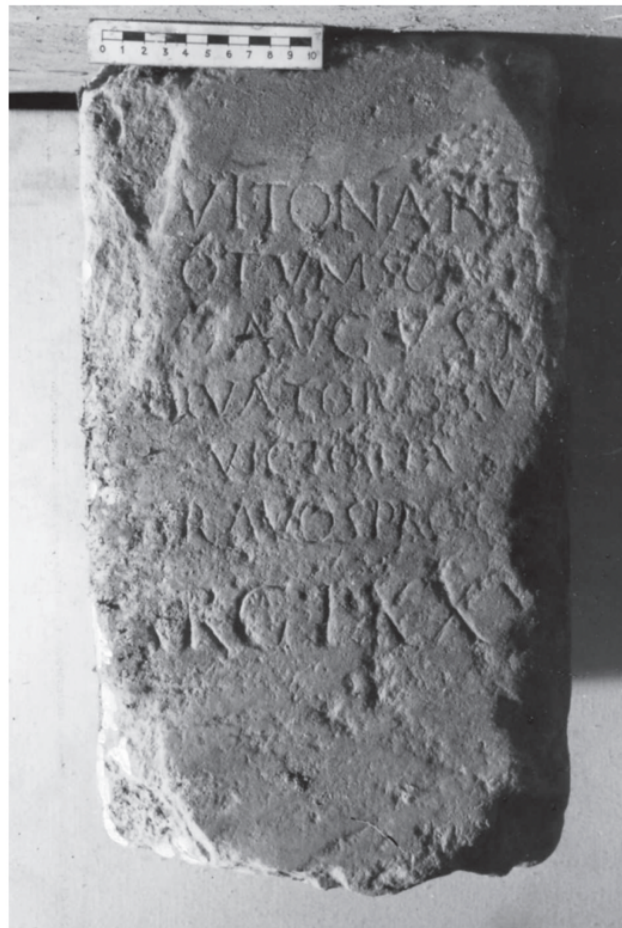


Fig.53. Cupid breaks the thunderbolt over his knee.
Quinarius, Roman mint. RRC 352/2. 85 BCE.



Fig. 54. Jupiter Tonans in his temple.

Augustan Aureus. Spanish mint, AVGVSTVS CAESAR/ IOVIS TONANT.
 Jupiter Tonans holding a lowered thunderbolt and sceptre in hexastyle temple.
 RIC 66. c.19 BC



[Io]vi Tonant[i]
 votum solvit [p]ro Augusti
 servatoris sui
 victoria
 Aravos proc(urator)
 arg(enti) p(ondo) XXX

(Panciera, 1975-1976)

Fig. 55. Dedication to Jupiter Tonans & Augustus
 Aravos names Augustus *servatoris sui*



Fig. 56. Augustus with a firm hold on the thunderbolt
From the 'basilica' in Herculaneum. 1st Century.
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.



Fig. 57. Octavian with a thunderbolt behind him.
Obverse: Octavian as laureate herm with winged thunderbolt behind.
Reverse: IMP-CAESAR, Togate Octavian seated on curule chair holding Victory.
Denarius 29-27 BCE. Uncertain Italian mint
RIC 270, RSC 116.



Fig. 58. Augustus among the gods holding a *lituus*
Gemma Augustea. Cameo in Arabian onyx.
1st century. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Fig. 59. Octavian as a herm upon a thunderbolt
Obverse: bare head looking right, IMP – CAESAR. Reverse: Octavian as herm on winged thunderbolt.
Octavian Denarius. Uncertain Italian mint,
RIC 269a, *RSC* 114.



Fig. 60. Octavian usurps the Ptolemaic thunderbolt
Obverse: Octavian bare head, ΘΕΟΥ ΥΙ[ΟΥ].
Reverse: Eagle standing on a thunderbolt, ΚΑΙΣΑΡΟΣ ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ.
Alexandrian Diobol, 30-28 BCE. *RPC* 1, 5001.



Fig. 61. The deified Augustus.
Obverse: DIVVS AVGVSTVS PATER, radiate head left, star above, thunderbolt to left.
Reverse: Female seated right, holding patera and sceptre.
Augustus As. Struck by Tiberius.



Fig. 62. Claudius Tonans
Cameo Portraying Emperor Claudius wielding a thunderbolt
41-54 CE. Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 63. Minerva holds the thunderbolt for Domitian
Obverse: laureate head of Domitian. Reverse: Minerva holding thunderbolt and spear.
Roman mint.
RIC II, Part 1 Domitian 687.



Fig. 64. Domitian holds the thunderbolt for himself

Obverse: laureate head of Domitian.

Reverse: Domitian being crowned by Victory holding spear and in his right hand, a thunderbolt.

Bronze sestertius. Roman mint.

RIC II, Part 1 (second edition) Domitian 752.

Bibliography

Adams, G.W. (2005), 'Suetonius and his treatment of the emperor Domitian's favourable accomplishments', *Studia Humaniora Tartuensis* 6, 1–15.

Adams, G.W. (2007) *The Roman Emperor Gaius 'Caligula' and His Hellenistic Aspirations*, Boca Raton, Florida.

Aldrete, G.S. (2018), 'Hazards of Life in Ancient Rome,' in Holleran, C. & A. Claridge (eds) *A Companion to the City of Rome*, Chichester, 363–381.

Allan, A., Anagnostou-Laoutides, E. & Stafford, E. (2020) *Herakles inside and outside the Church: from the first apologists to the end of the Quattrocento*. Metaforms: studies in the reception of classical antiquity 18. Leiden & Boston.

Anderson, R. (1885), *Lightning Conductors: Their History, Nature, and Mode of Application*, London & Huddersfield.

Andrews, C.J., Cooper, M.A., Darveniza, M., Mackerras, D. (2018), *Lightning Injuries: Electrical, Medical, and Legal Aspects*, CRC Press.

Annequin J. (1987), 'Les esclaves rêvent aussi... Remarques sur "La clé des songes" d'Artémidore', in *Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne*, vol. 13, 71-113.

Ashton, R.H.J. (2001), 'Rhodian Bronze Coinage and the Siege of Mithridates VI', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 1–14.

Austin, J.L., (1955), *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Oxford.

Ayyub, B.M. (2001), *Elicitation of Expert Opinions for Uncertainty and Risks*, Boca Raton, London, & New York.

Bacon, H.H. (1986), 'The Aeneid as a Drama of Election', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 116, 305-334.

Badian, E. (1968), 'Sulla's Augurate', *Arethusa*, 1(1), 26–46.

Badian, E. (2012), *Collected Papers on Alexander the Great*, London.

Bakker, F. A. (2016), *Epicurean Meteorology: sources, method, scope and organization*, Leiden.

Baksa, I. (2020), 'Meteorology (Chapter 4)', in: Gregorić P & G. Karamanolis (eds), *Pseudo-Aristotle: De Mundo (On the Cosmos): A Commentary*, Cambridge, 121-148.

Balsdon, J.P.V.D. (1950), 'The Divinity of Alexander the Great', *Historia* 1, 363-88.

Balsdon J. P. V. D. (1951), 'Sulla Felix', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 41, 1-2, 1-10.

Barbera, M., Palladino, S., & Paterna, C. (2008), 'La domus dei Valerii sul Celio alla luce delle recenti scoperte', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 76, 75-98.

- Barclay V. Head, (1906), 'The Earliest Graeco-Bactrian and Graeco-Indian Coins', *Numismatic Chronicle* 6, 1–16.
- Barchiesi, A. (1997), *The Poet and the Prince: Ovid and Augustan Discourse*, Berkeley & Los Angeles.
- Barchiesi, A. (2002), 'Martial Arts: Mars Ultor in the Forum Augustum: A Verbal Monument with a Vengeance', in Herbert-Brown, G. (ed.), *Ovid's Fasti: Historical Readings at its Bimillennium* Oxford.
- Barrett, A. (2015), *Caligula: the Abuse of Power*, Second edition, London.
- Barthes, R. (2003) *La Préparation du Roman, I et II: cours et séminaires au Collège de France, 1978-1979 et 1979-1980*. Paris.
- Bastet, F.L. (1968), 'Die Gross Kamee in Den Haag', *BABESCH* 43, 2-22.
- Beard, M. (2007), *The Roman Triumph*, Cambridge.
- Beard M. (2011), 'Risk and the Humanities: *Alea iacta est*', in Skinns L, Scott M, & T. Cox, (eds) *Risk. Darwin College Lectures*, 85-108.
- Beck, H. (2018), 'The Discovery of Numa's Writings: Roman Sacral Law and the Early Historians', in Beck S. K. & C.J. Smith (eds.), *Omnium Annalium Monumenta: historical writing and historical evidence in Republican Rome*, Leiden, 90-113.
- Beckwith, M.C. (1998), *The 'Hanging of Hera' and the Meaning of Greek ἄκμων*, Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, Vol. 98, 91-102.
- Beer, R. (2003), *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, Chicago & London.
- Beerden, K. (2013), *Worlds Full of Signs: ancient Greek divination in context*, Leiden.
- Belfiore, E. S. (2000), *Murder Among Friends: violations of philia in Greek tragedy*, New York & Oxford.
- Beller, M. (1979), *Jupiter Tonans: Studien zur Darstellung der Macht in der Poesie*, Heidelberg.
- Belting, H. (2011), *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, Princeton.
- Beltramini, L. & Rocco, M. (2020), 'Livy on Scipio Africanus. The Commander's Portrait at 26.19.3–9', *Classical Quarterly* 70/1, 230–246.
- Bernard, S. et al. (2023), 'An Environmental and Climate History of the Roman Expansion in Italy', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* [Online] 54/1, 1–41.
- Betz, H. D. (1986), *The Greek Magical Papyri in translation: including the Demotic spells*, Chicago.
- Bhandare, S. (2007), 'Not just a Pretty Face: Interpretations of Alexander's Numismatic Imagery in the Hellenic East', in Ray, H.P. & D. T. Potts (eds), *Memory as History: The Legacy of Alexander in Asia*, New Delhi 208-256.
- Bieber, M. (1973), 'The Development of Portraiture on Roman Republican Coins' in Temporini, H. & and W. Haase (eds), *Philosophie und Wissenschaften, Künste*, Berlin & Boston, 871-898.

Bilbija, J., & Flinterman, J.J. (2015), 'Dreaming of Deities: Athena and Dionysus in the *Oneirocritica*', in Weber, G. (ed.), *Artemidor von Daldis und die Antike Traumdeutung: Texte - Kontexte - Lektüren*, München & Boston, 161-188.

Bingham, S. (2013), *The Praetorian Guard: a history of Rome's elite special forces*, London.

Bloch, R. (1963), *Les Prodiges Dans L'Antiquité Classique* (Collection 'Mythes et religions,' 46), Paris.

Bömer, F. (1957-58), *Die Fasten*, Heidelberg.

Bömer, F. (1982), *P. Ovidius Naso Metamorphosen: Kommentar*, Vol. VI, Buch XII-XIII, Heidelberg.

Blömer, M. (2017a), 'Revival or Reinvention? Local Cults and their Iconographies in Roman Syria', *Religion in the Roman Empire* 3/3, 344–365.

Blömer, M. (2017b), 'The Cult of Jupiter Dolichenus in the East', in Nagel, S. Quack, J.F. & C. Witschel, *Entangled worlds. Religious confluences between East and West in the Roman Empire: the cults of Isis, Mithras, and Jupiter Dolichenus*, Tübingen, 96-112.

Bonfante, L. (1984), 'Human Sacrifice on an Etruscan Funerary Urn', *American Journal of Archaeology* 88/4, 531–539.

Bosworth, A. B. (2003), 'The Indian Campaigns, 327-325 BC', in Roisman, J. (ed.), *Brill's Companion To Alexander The Great*, Leiden, 159–168.

Botterweck, G.J., Ringgren, H., Fabry, H.J. (1974), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament: Volume XII*, (trans. D.W. Stott), Cambridge.

Bouché-Leclercq, A. (1879), *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*, Paris.

Boyce, A. A. (1937), 'The Expiatory Rites of 207 B.C.', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 68157–171.

Boyer, P. (2020), 'Why Divination? Evolved Psychology and Strategic Interaction in the Production of Truth', *Current Anthropology* 61/1, 100–123.

Bowersock, G. (2004), 'Artemidorus and the Second Sophistic', in: Borg, B. (ed.) *Paideia: The World of the Second Sophistic*, Berlin & New York, 53-64.

Bremmer, J. N., & Horsfall, N. (1987), *Roman Myth and Mythography*, Groningen.

Bremmer, J. (2014), 'Three Roman Aetiological Myths', in Richardson, J.H., & F. Santangelo (eds), *The Roman Historical Tradition: Regal and Republican Rome*, Oxford.

Brenk, F.E. (1975), 'The Dreams of Plutarch's Lives', *Latomus*, 34/2, 336-349.

Brent, A. (1999), *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order: Concepts and Images of Authority in Paganism and Early Christianity before the Age of Cyprian*. *Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements* 45, Leiden.

Brett, A. B. (1950), 'Athena Αλκίδημος of Pella', *Museum Notes (American Numismatic Society)*, Vol. 4, 55-72.

Bricault, L. & Versluys, M.J. (2014), 'Isis and Empires', in Bricault, L. & M.J. Versluys (eds), *Politics and the Cults of Isis*, Leiden, 1-35.

Brisch, N. M. (2008), *Religion and Power: divine kingship in the ancient world and beyond*, Chicago.

Broughton, T.R.S. (1951), *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic, Vol. 1: 509-100 BC*, New York.

Brown, J. P. (2000) *Israel and Hellas. Volume 2, Sacred Institutions with Roman Counterparts*, Reprint 2012., Berlin.

Burgess, G. (1992), 'The Divine Right of Kings Reconsidered', *The English Historical Review* 107 (425), 837-861.

Burnelli, St. (2004), 'Il fulgur nelle epigrafi della Cisalpina e delle Gallie', *Epigraphica* 66, 185-214.

Burstein, S.M. (1974), 'Sceptre or Thunderbolt: Plutarch, *Moralia* 338B', *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 7, 89-92.

Cadotte, A. (2003), 'Frugifer en Afrique du Nord: Épithète divine ou dieu à part entière?', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 143, 187-200.

Callahan, P. V. (1952), '*Lapis Manalis, Aquaelicium, Jupiter Elicius: A Study in Roman Weather-Magic*', ETD Collection for Fordham University. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Canter, H.V. (1932), 'Conflagrations in Ancient Rome', *The Classical Journal*, 27/4, 270-288.

Capdeville, G. (1989), 'Les dieux fulgurants dans la doctrine étrusque', *Atti del Secondo Congresso Internazionale Etrusco*, 3, Rome, 1171-1190.

Capurro, G., Jardine, C.G., Tustin, J., Driediger, M. (2021), 'Communicating scientific uncertainty in a rapidly evolving situation: a framing analysis of Canadian coverage in early days of COVID-19', *BMC Public Health* [online] 21/1 Available: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-12246-x> [Accessed 05.25.24].

Carandini, A. (2006), *Remo e Romolo: dai rioni dei Quiriti alla città dei Romani (775/750-700/675 a.C.)*, Torino.

Carandini, A. (2014), 'The Myth of Romulus and the Origins of Rome', in Richardson, J.H. & F. Santangelo (eds) *The Roman Historical Tradition: Regal and Republican Rome*, Oxford.

Carbó García, J.R. (2022), 'Where the lightning strikes, when the gods intervene. Divine agency and space sacralisation in Roman Dacia', in Nemeti, S., Nemeti, I., Fodorean, F.G. & S. Cociş (eds), *Est Modus in Rebus. Essays presented to Professor Mihai Bărbulescu at his 75th anniversary*, Cluj-Napoca, 2183-194.

Casali, S. (2023), 'The Books of Fate: The Venus-Jupiter Scene in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 15 and Its Epic Models', in Farrell, J., Miller, J.F., Nelis, D. & A. Schiesaro (eds), *Ovid, Death and Transfiguration*, Leiden, 386-411.

Champion, C. B. (2017), *The Peace of the Gods: Elite Religious Practices in the Middle Roman*

Republic, Princeton.

Champlin, E. (2003), 'Nero, Apollo, and the Poets', *Phoenix*, 57, 3/4, 276–283.

Chiai, G. F. (2020), 'Le culte de Zeus Brontôn: l'espace et la morphologie du dieu de l'orage dans la Phrygie d'époque romaine', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 21/1, 245–275.

Cherington, M. (2006), 'Lightning Injuries', in R.W. Evans (ed.), *Neurology and Trauma*, Oxford, 559-565.

Cipriano, P. (1978), *Fas e Nefas*, Rome.

Citroni, M. (2009), 'Res publica restituta et la représentation du pouvoir augustéen dans l'œuvre d'Horace', in Hurllet, F. & B. Mineo (eds), *Le Principat d'Auguste: Réalités et représentations du pouvoir*, Rennes, 245-266.

Clark, A. (2007), *Divine Qualities: cult and community in Republican Rome*, Oxford.

Coarelli, F. (1983), 'Il Pantheon, l'apoteosi di Augusto e l'apoteosi di Romolo', *Analecta Romana Instituti Danici. Supplementa*, (*L'Erma*) 10, 41-46.

Coarelli, F. (1997), *Il Campo Marzio: dalle origini alla fine della Repubblica*, Rome.

Cohen, S. (1972), *Folk devils and Moral Panics: the creation of the Mods and Rockers*, London.

Colman, B. R. (1990), 'Thunderstorms above Frontal Surfaces in Environments without Positive CAPE. Part I: A Climatology', *Monthly Weather Review* 118/5, 1103–1122.

Colman, J. (2015), 'The Philosopher-King and the City in Plutarch's Life of Numa', *Perspectives on Political Science* 44/1, 1–9.

Cook, A.B. (1914), *Zeus, A Study in Ancient Religion*, Cambridge.

Cockerton, P. (2013), 'Lightning bolt hit Vatican not once but TWICE hours after Pope's shock resignation', *Mirror* 12 Feb. Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/lightning-bolt-hit-vatican-not-1705156> [Accessed 15.2.19].

Collar, A. (2013), *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire: The Spread of New Ideas*, Cambridge.

Cooper, M.A., Zainal, M., Kadir, Z. (2010), 'Lightning injury continues to be a public health threat internationally', Preprints, 3rd Intl. *Lightning Meteorology Conference*, Orlando, FL.

Cooper, M. A., Tushemereirwe, R., Holle R.L. (2022), 'Mitigating the Hazard of Lightning Injury and Death across Africa', in Anugwom E.E. & N. Awofeso (eds), *Public Health in Developing Countries - Challenges and Opportunities*, London: IntechOpen. Available: <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/70667> [Accessed: 13.05.2025].

Cornell T.J. (1975), 'Aeneas and the Twins: the development of the Roman foundation legend', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 21, 1-32.

Cornell T. (1981), 'Some observations on the "crimen incesti"', *Le délit religieux dans la cité antique, Actes de la table ronde de Rome (6-7 avril 1978)* Rome, 27-37.

- Cornell, T. (ed.) (2013), *The Fragments of the Roman Historians*, Oxford.
- Cornutus, L. A. et al. (2012) *Commentum Cornuti in Persium*. Reprint 2012. Clausen W.V. & J.E.G. Zetzel (eds.), Leipzig.
- Cowan, R. (2014), 'The smell of Sophokles' Salmoneus: Technology, scatology, metatheatre', *Ramus* 43 (1/2), 1–24.
- Crawford, A. C. L. (1872), *Etruscan Inscriptions analysed, translated, and commented upon*, London.
- Criniti, N. (1981), *Grani Liciniani Reliquiae*, Leipzig.
- Curley, D. (2013), *Tragedy in Ovid: Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre*, Cambridge.
- Curtius, G., Windisch, E. (1879), *Grundziige der griechischen Etymologie* 5th ed., Leipzig.
- Dahmen, K. (2007), *The Legend of Alexander the Great on Greek and Roman Coins*, London & New York.
- da Silva, N. A. & Haerter, J. O. (2023), 'The Precipitation Characteristics of Mesoscale Convective Systems Over Europe. Journal of geophysical research', *Atmospheres*, 128/23), 1-20.
- Davies, J.P. (2019), 'Whose Dream is it Anyway? Navigating the Significance of Dreams in the Ancient World', in Driediger-Murphy, L.G. & E. Eidinow (eds), *Ancient Divination and Experience*, Oxford, 87–108.
- Degrassi, A. (1971), 'Il bidental di Minturno', *Scritti vari di Antichita 4, Trieste, Società italiana di archeologia e di storia patria*, 123-128.
- De Grummond, N. T. & Simon, E. (2006), *The Religion of the Etruscans*, Austin.
- De Grummond, N. (2016), 'Etruscan Human Sacrifice: The Case of Tarquinia', in C.A. Murray (ed.), *Diversity of Sacrifice: Form and Function of Sacrificial Practices in the Ancient World and Beyond*, 145-168.
- De Grummond, N.T. (2016b), 'Thunder versus Lightning in Etruria', *Etruscan Studies* 19/2, 183-207.
- Della Corte, F. (1974), 'Numa e le streghe', *Maia* 26, 8-10.
- Demulder, B. (2022), *Plutarch's Cosmological Ethics*, Leuven.
- des Bouvrie, S. (1984), 'Augustus' legislation on morals which morals and what aims?', *Symbolae Osloenses*, 59/1, 93–113.
- Desmond, M. (2019), *Fires in Rome: the ancient city as a fire regime*, [Doctoral dissertation University of Dublin].
- Dickie, M. (2001), *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, First edition. London.
- Dietz, A. (2023), *Der Wettergott im Bild: diachrone Analyse eines altorientalischen Göttertypus im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, Gladbeck.

- Dökü, F. E., Kileci, Ş. (2023), 'Rock Reliefs of Zeus and his Thunderbolt in the High Plateau Settlements of Kabalis/Kabalia', *Anadolu Anatolia* 49, 73-96.
- Douglas, M. (1966), *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London.
- Douglas, M. (1970), *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, London.
- Dunand, F. (1973), *Le Culte d'Isis dans le bassin oriental de la Méditerranée*, Leiden.
- Dunkle, J.R. (1971) 'The Rhetorical Tyrant in Roman Historiography: Sallust, Livy and Tacitus', *The Classical World* 65/ 1, 12-20.
- Derrida, J., Stiegler, B. (1996), *Échographies: de la télévision: entretiens filmés*, Paris.
- De Vera, D.M.E. (2019), 'The Sodales Flauiales Titiales, the Flamen Dialis, and the Propaganda of Domitian', *Illinois Classical Studies* 44/2, 326-343.
- Drapcho, D.L., Sisterson, D., Kumar,R. (1983), 'Nitrogen fixation by lightning activity in a thunderstorm', *Atmospheric Environment* 17/4, 729-734.
- Dray, P. (2005), *Stealing God's Thunder: Benjamin Franklin's Lightning Rod and the Invention of America*, New York.
- Driediger-Murphy, L. G. (2019) *Roman Republican Augury: freedom and control*. Oxford.
- Driediger-Murphy, L. G. (2019b) 'Unsuccessful Sacrifice in Roman State Divination', in Driediger-Murphy, L. G. & Eidinow, E. (eds.), *Ancient Divination and Experience*, Oxford.
- Driediger-Murphy, L. G. (2021), 'Numa and Jupiter: Whose smile is it, anyway?', *Classical Quarterly* 71/1, 259-275.
- Dumézil G. (1946), 'Tripartita fonctionnels chez divers peuples indo-européens', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 131/1-3, 53-72.
- Dumézil, G. (1970), *Archaic Roman Religion; with an appendix on the religion of the Etruscans*, trans. P. Krapp, Chicago.
- Dumézil G. (1974), *La Religion Romaine Archaique*, Paris.
- Dupont, A. (2013), 'Augustine's Attitude towards the 'Religious Other'', *Louvain Studies* 37/2-3, 133-146.
- Eckert, A. & Thein, A. (2020), *Sulla: Politics and Reception*, Berlin & Boston.
- Eckstein, A. M. (2012), 'Polybius, the Gallic Crisis, and the Ebro Treaty', *Classical Philology* 107/3, 206-229.
- Edwards, M. (2016), 'Some Theories on the Dating of Arnobius', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 92, 671-684.
- Eidinow, E. (2007), *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks*, Oxford.

- Eidinow, E. & Schliephake, C. (2024) *Conversing with Chaos in Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Writing and Reading Environmental Disorder in Ancient Texts*. 1st ed. London.
- Elliott, J. H. (2016) *Beware the Evil Eye: Volume 2. The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World*, Oregon.
- Emeric-David, T.B. (1833), *Jupiter: Recherches sur ce dieu, son culte et les monumens qui le representent, precede d'un essai sur l'esprit de la religion grecque*, Paris.
- Engels, D. (2007) *Das römische Vorzeichenwesen (753-27 v. Chr.: Quellen, Terminologie, Kommentar, historische Entwicklung*, Stuttgart.
- Engemann, J. (1975), 'Zur Verbreitung magischer Übelabwehr in der nichtchristlichen und christlichen Spätantike', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 22-49.
- Erdkamp, P. (2020), 'War, Vestal Virgins and Live Burials in the Roman Republic', in Dillon, M. & C. Matthew (eds), *Religion and Classical Warfare. Volume II: The Roman Republic*, Barnsley, 180-215.
- Erker, D. Š. (2023), *Ambiguity and Religion in Ovid's Fasti: religious innovation and the imperial family*. 1st ed. Leiden.
- Espinete, R. (2020), 'Marian shrine damaged by lightning', *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, 9 September. Available at: <https://newsday.co.tt/2020/09/09/marian-shrine-damaged-by-lightning/> (Accessed: 1 September 2025).
- Faraone, C.A. (2014) 'Inscribed Greek Thunderstones as House- and Body-Amulets in Roman Imperial Times', *Kernos - Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique* 27. Available: <https://doi.org/10.4000/kernos.2283> [accessed 25.03.2025].
- Faraone, C.A. (2018,) *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times*, Philadelphia.
- Farney G.D. (2023), 'The Corneli and Jupiter: A case study in the manipulation of traditional religion by an aristocratic kinship group', *Greece and Rome* 70/1, 50-70.
- Farron, S. (1985), 'Aeneas' Human Sacrifice', *Acta Classica* 28/1, 21-33.
- Faulkner, A. (2008), 'The Legacy of Aphrodite: Anchises' Offspring in the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite', *American Journal of Philology*, 129/1, 1-18.
- Fears, R.J. (1977), 'Princeps a diis electus: The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome, Rome.
- Fears, R.J. (1981), 'The Theology of Victory at Rome: Approaches and Problem', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.17.2, Berlin, 736-826.
- Feeney, D. (2016), *Beyond Greek: The Beginnings of Latin Literature*, Cambridge, MA & London.
- Ferri, G. (2010), *Tutela Urbis: Il significato e la concezione della divinità tutelare cittadina nella religione romana*, Stuttgart.
- Figgis, J. N. (1865), *The Theory of the Divine Right of Kings*, Cambridge.

- Fishwick, D. (1992), 'The Statue of Julius Caesar in the Pantheon', *Latomus* 51/2, 329–336.
- Forsythe, G. (2005), *A Critical History of Early Rome: from prehistory to the first Punic War*, Berkeley.
- Fournel, E. (2016), 'Dream Narratives in Plutarch's Lives: The Place of Fiction in Biography', in Liotsakis, V. & S. Farrington (eds), *The Art of History: Literary Perspectives on Greek and Roman Historiography*, Berlin & Boston, 199-216.
- Fowlkes-Childs, B. (2018), 'Pirro Ligorio's Evidence for the Cult of Jupiter Dolichenus in Rome and Religious Life at the Barrack', in Loffredo, F. & G. Vagenheim (eds.), *Pirro Ligorio's Worlds: antiquarianism, classical erudition and visual arts in the late Renaissance*, Leiden.
- Franklin, B. (1767), 'Of Lightning, and the Method (Now Used in America) of Securing Buildings and Persons from Its Mischievous Effects', *Experiments and Observations on Electricity, Made at Philadelphia in America*, 479-85. Available: The American Philosophical Society, Yale University, The Packard Humanities Institute: <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/yale?vol=14&page=260a&rqs=0&rqs=41&rq> [Accessed: 15.03.2024].
- Fratantuono, L. (2015), *A Reading of Lucretius' De Rerum Natura*, Lanham, Maryland.
- Fratantuono, L. & Smith, R. A. (2018), *Virgil, Aeneid 8: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, Leiden.
- Fredricksmeyer, E.A. (2004), 'Alexander's Religion and Divinity', in Roisman, J. (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great*, Leiden, 253-78.
- Frei-Stolba R., & Morel J. (1999), 'La chute de la foudre à Aventicum: une nouvelle inscription', *Pro Aventico* 41, 215-221.
- Frier, B. W. (1969), 'Sulla's Priesthood', *Arethusa*, 2/2, 187–199
- Frier, B. W. (1999), *Libri Annales Pontificum Maximorum: the origins of the annalistic tradition*, Ann Arbor.
- Gale, M.R. (2008), *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura V*, Liverpool.
- Galinsky, K. (1981), 'Augustus' Legislation on Morals and Marriage', *Philologus* 125/1-2, 126-144.
- Galinsky, K. (2020), 'Herakles Vajrapani, the Companion of Buddha', in Allan, A.L., Anagnostou-Laoutides, E. & E. Stafford (eds), *Herakles Inside and Outside the Church: From the first Apologists to the end of the Quattrocento*, Leiden, 315–332.
- Gagé, J. (1973), 'Une Consultation d'Haruspices: sur les tabous étrusques de la statue dite d'Horatius Cocles', *Latomus* 32/1, 3-22.
- Gager, J.G. (2002), *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, Oxford.
- Gardner, P. (1887), 'New Coins of Bactria and India', *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Numismatic Society*, third series, vol. 7, 177-184.
- Gartrell, A. (2021), *The Cult of Castor and Pollux in Ancient Rome: Myth, Ritual, and Society*, Cambridge.

Gartrell, A. (2023), 'The Epiphanies of the Dioscuri: Myth or History?' in Miano, D., Cornell, T., & Meunier, N. (eds), *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Rome*, Leiden, 13–33.

Gellar-Goad, T. H. M. (2021), *Plautus: Curculio*, London.

Gering, J. (2012), *Domitian, Dominus et Deus?: Herrschafts- und Machtstrukturen im Römischen Reich zur Zeit des letzten Flaviers*, (Osnabrücker Forschungen zu Altertum und Antike-Rezeption 15), Rahden.

Giordano, M. (2018), '"Magic" in Rome: Towards a New Taxonomy', *I Quaderni del Ramo d'Oro* 10, 27-41.

Gloyn, L. (2014), 'Show Me the Way to Go Home: A Reconsideration of Seneca's De Consolatione ad Polybium', *American Journal of Philology* 135/3, 451-480.

Gołyźniak, P. (2020), *Engraved Gems and Propaganda in the Roman Republic and under Augustus*, Oxford.

Goode, E. & Ben-Yehuda, N. (1994), *Moral Panics: the social construction of deviance*, Oxford.

Gordon, R. (1999), 'Imagining Greek and Roman Magic', in B. Ankarloo & S. Clark, (eds), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, Philadelphia, 159-275.

Gordon, R. (2006), 'Helios Mithras astrobrontodaimōn? The re-discovery in South Africa of IG, XIV, 998 = IGUR, 125', *Epigraphica* 68, 155-194.

Gordon, R. (2023), 'Constructions of Religious Deviance in the Greek and Roman Worlds', in White, M. H. & T. Rudbøg, (eds) *Esotericism and Deviance*, Leiden, 107–128.

Gosling, A. (2002), 'Sending up the Founder: Ovid and the apotheosis of Romulus', *Acta Classica* 45/1, 51–69.

Gradel, I. (2002), 'Jupiter Latiaris and Human Blood: Fact or Fiction?', *Classica et Mediaevalia* 53, 235-253.

Gradel, I. (2004), *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford.

Graf, F. (1990), 'La Magie Gréco-Romaine, idéologie et pratique', *Annales de l'École pratique des hautes études* 99, 279-284.

Graf, F. (1997), *Magic in the Ancient World*, Cambridge.

Grant, B. N., (1995), 'Elevated cold-sector severe thunderstorms: A preliminary study', *National Weather Digest*, 19/4, 25–31.

Green M.J. (1984), *The Wheel as a Cult-Symbol in the Roman-Celtic World, with Special Reference to Gaul and Britain*, Bruxelles.

Green, S.J. (2014), *Disclosure and Discretion in Roman Astrology: Manilius and his Augustan Contemporaries*, Oxford.

Grilli, A. (1982), *Numa, Pitagora e la Politica Antiscipionica*, Milan.

- Gros, P. (1997), s.v. 'Iuppiter Tonans', in Steinby, E. M. (ed.), *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* vol. 3., Quasar, 159–160.
- Grottanelli, C. (2000), 'Ideologie del sacrificio umano', *Collection de l'Ecole Française de Rome*, 277-292.
- Gruen, E. S. (1992), *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome*, Ithaca.
- Guarisco, D. (2016), 'Ossa Quirini. Romulus' Mortality and Apotheosis Between Caesar and Augustus', *In Gremium* 10, 7-16.
- Haack, M.-L. (2003), *Les Haruspices dans le Monde Romain*, Pessac.
- Halbertsma, R.B. (2015), 'Nulli tam laeti triumphii – Constantine's victory on a reworked cameo in Leiden', *BABESCH* 90, 221-235.
- Hall, C. (2023), 'Artemidorus, Dream Exegesis, and the Case of the Interpolating Expert Dreamer', *Mnemosyne* 76/6, 1000–1025.
- Hall, E. (2011), 'Playing Ball with Zeus: Strategies in Reading Ancient Slavery through Dreams', in Alston, R., Hall, E. & L. Proffitt (eds), *Reading Ancient Slavery*, London.
- Hannestad, N. (1986), *Roman Art and Imperial Policy*, Aarhus.
- Hansen J.E. (2007), 'Scientific Reticence and Sea Level Rise', *Environmental Research Letters* 2, 1–6.
- Hansson, S. (2017), 'Anticipative Strategies of Blame Avoidance in Government: the case of communication guidelines', *Journal of Language and Politics* 16/2, 219-241.
- Hardie, P. (2007), 'Lucretius and later Latin literature in antiquity', in Gillespie, S. & P. Hardie (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, Cambridge, 111–128.
- Harris, W. V. (2009), *Dreams and Experience in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Harris-McCoy, D. E. (2012), *Artemidorus' Oneirocritica: text, translation, and commentary*, Oxford.
- Heijmans, M., Rémy, B. (1999), 'Une "nouvelle" inscription commémorant la chute de la foudre à Arles', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 128, 235-236.
- Hejduk, J. (2009), 'Jupiter's Aeneid: *Fama* and *Imperium*', *Classical Antiquity*, 28/2, 279–327.
- Hejduk, J. D. (2020), *The God of Rome: Jupiter in Augustan poetry*, New York.
- Hekster, O. (2001), 'Commodus-Hercules, the peoples princeps' *Scripta Classica Israelica* 20, 51-83.
- Hekster, O., & Rich, J. (2006), 'Octavian and the Thunderbolt: The Temple of Apollo Palatinus and Roman Traditions of Temple Building', *Classical Quarterly*, 56/1, 149–168.

Hekster, O. (2006), 'Descendants of Gods: Legendary Genealogies in the Roman Empire', in de Blois, L., Funke, P. & and J. Hahn (eds), *The Impact of Imperial Rome on Religions, Ritual and Religious Life in the Roman Empire*, Munich, 24–35.

Hekster, O. (2010), 'Reversed Epiphanies: Roman Emperors Deserted by Gods', *Mnemosyne*, 63/4, 601–615.

Hester, P. (2012), 'Epistemic Uncertainty Analysis: An Approach Using Expert Judgment and Evidential Credibility', *International Journal of Quality, Statistics, and Reliability*, 617481, 1-8.

Henriksén, C. (2012), *A Commentary on Martial, Epigrams Book 9*, Oxford.

Hickson, F. V. (1993), *Roman Prayer Language: Livy and the Aeneid of Vergil*, Berlin, Boston: & Teubner.

Hidalgo, J. M. (2023), 'The Roman Empire in the Book of Revelation', in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, Oxford.

Hill, R., Rinker, R., Wilson, H. (1980), 'Atmospheric Nitrogen Fixation by Lightning', *Journal of the Atmospheric Sciences* 37/1, 179-192.

Hillard, T.W. (1996), 'Death by Lightning, Pompeius Strabo and the People', *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie Neue Folge* 139. Bd., H. 2, 135-145.

Hillman, T. P. (1996), 'Cinna, Strabo's army, and Strabo's death in 87 B.C.', *L'Antiquité Classique* 65, 81–89.

Hinard, F. (1985), *Les Proscriptions de la Rome Républicaine*, Rome & Paris.

Hoff, R. von den (2005), 'Commodus als Hercules', in Giuliani, L. (ed.), *Meisterwerke der Antiken Kunst*, Munich, 115-135.

Højte, J. M. (2009), *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*, Aarhus.

Hopkinson, N. (2000), *Ovid. Metamorphoses. Book XIII*. Cambridge.

Hollman, A. (2011), 'A Curse Tablet from Antioch against Babylas the Greengrocer', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 177, 157-165.

Holt, F.L. (2003), *Alexander the Great and the Mystery of the Elephant Medallions*, Berkeley & London.

Holzberg, N. (2002), *Ovid: the poet and his work*, Ithaca.

Hood, C. (2009), 'Managing risk and managing blame: A political science perspective', in Weal, A., 'Risk, Democratic Citizenship and Public Policy', Oxford, 73-82.

Hood C. (2011), 'Risk and Government: The architectonics of blame-avoidance', in Skinns L, Scott M, & T. Cox (eds), *Risk. Darwin College Lectures*, Cambridge, 62-84.

Hornblower, S. (2024), *Hannibal and Scipio: parallel lives*. First edition. Cambridge.

Houze, R. A. (2018), '100 years of research on mesoscale convective systems', *Meteorological Monographs*, 59/17, 17.1–17.54.

Howley J.A. (2017), 'Book-Burning and the Uses of Writing in Ancient Rome: Destructive Practice between Literature and Document', *Journal of Roman Studies* 107, 213-236.

Hughes, D. D. (1991), *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*, London.

Humm, M. (2005), *Appius Claudius Caecus: la république accomplie*, Rome.

Humm, M. (2014), 'Numa and Pythagoras: The Life and Death of a Myth', in J. H. Richardson & F. Santangelo (eds), Oxford, 35-51.

Humm, M. (2025), 'Le roi Numa, figure fondatrice de normes religieuses dans l'État romain', in Ducoeur, G. & C. Redard (eds), *Traditions écrites, collections et processus de normativité*, Publications de l'institut d'histoire des religions 7, Strasbourg, 87-111.

Hunter, R. (2012), 'Callimachus and Roman Elegy', in Gold, B.K. (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Love Elegy*, Oxford, 153–171.

Hunter, R. L. & Jonge, C.C. de (eds.) (2019), *Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Augustan Rome: rhetoric, criticism and historiography*, Cambridge.

Hutchinson, G.O. (2002), 'The Publication and Individuality of Horace's Odes Books 1–3', *The Classical Quarterly*, 52/2, 517–537

Inscriptions 1437 à 1462 (1901), *Revue Épigraphique*, 4/103, 213-225.

Irwin, T. H. (1999), 'Splendid Vices? Augustine For and Against Pagan Virtues', *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 8 (2), 105-127.

Jaeger, M.K. (1993), 'Custodia Fidelis Memoriae: Livy's Story of M. Manlius Capitolinus', *Latomus*, 52/2, 350-363.

Janko, R. (1994), *The Iliad: A Commentary: Volume 4, Books 13-16*, Cambridge.

Johnson, C. G. (1999), 'The Divinization of the Ptolemies and the Gold Octadrachms Honoring Ptolemy III', *Phoenix* 53, 1/2, 50–56.

Johnson, W.M., Lavigne, D.M. (1999), *Monk Seals in Antiquity: The Mediterranean Monk Seal (Monachus monachus) in Ancient History and Literature*, Mededelingen van de Nederlandse Commissie voor Internationale Natuurbescherming, 35. Nederlandse Commissie voor Internationale Natuurbescherming, Leiden.

Jones, B.W. (1992), *The Emperor Domitian*, London.

Kaplow, L (2012), 'Creating "Popularis" history: Creating Populares History: Sp. Cassius, Sp. Maelius, and M. Manlius in the Political Discourse of the Late Republic', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 55/2, 101–109.

Kaster, R. A. (2007), *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome*, New York & Oxford.

- Kearsley, R. (2009), 'Octavian and Augury: The Years 30-27 B.C.', *The Classical Quarterly*, 59/1, 147-166.
- Keaveney, A. (1982), *Sulla: the Last Republican*, London.
- Keaveney, A. (1982b), 'Young Pompey: 106-79 B.C.', *L'Antiquité Classique* 51, 111-139.
- Keller, C. & Schneider, L. C. (2011,) '*Polydoxy: theology of multiplicity and relation*', London.
- Kindt, J. (2021), 'The enigmatic divine voice and the problem of human misinterpretation', in C. Addey (ed.), *Divination and Knowledge in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, London, 30-48.
- Kingsley, P. (1995), *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*, Oxford.
- Koch, C. (1937), *Der Römische Juppiter*, Frankfurt am Main.
- Konrad, C. F. (2022), *The Challenge to the Auspices: studies on magisterial power in the middle Roman Republic*, Oxford.
- Koortbojian, M. (2013), *The Divinization of Caesar and Augustus: precedents, consequences, implications*, New York.
- Korobili, G. Tieleman, T. (eds) (2026), *Meteorology Beyond Borders: Ancient and Modern Reflections*, Leiden & Boston.
- Kovács, P. (2017), 'Deities in Trajan's and Marcus Aurelius' Column', *Acta Archaeologica Scientarium Hungaricae* 68, 47-58.
- Kragelund, P. (2001), 'Dreams, Religion and Politics in Republican Rome', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 50/1, 53-95.
- Krimsky, S. & Golding, D. (1992), *Social Theories of Risk*, Westport.
- Kudlien, F. (1991), *Sklaven-Mentalität im Spiegel Antiker Wahrsagerei*, Stuttgart.
- Lapatin, K.D.S. (2001), *Chryselephantine Statuary in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Oxford.
- Lenaghan, J. O. (1969), *A Commentary on Cicero's Oration De Haruspicum Responso*, Berlin.
- La Rocca, E. (2015), 'Agrippa's Pantheon and its Origin', in Marder, T. A. & Wilson Jones, M. (eds.), *The Pantheon: from antiquity to the present*, Cambridge, 49-78.
- Lamers, W. S., Boyack, K., Larivière, V., Sugimoto, C. R., van Eck, N. J., Waltman, L., & Murray, D. (2021), 'Investigating disagreement in the scientific literature', *eLife* 10, Available: <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.72737> [Accessed 23.04.25].
- Lane Fox, R.J. (1996), 'Text and Image: Alexander the Great, Coins, and Elephants', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 41, 87-108.
- Lange, C. H. (2009), *Res Publica Constituta: Actium, Apollo and the accomplishment of the triumphal assignment*, Leiden.

- Lapatin, K. (2015), *Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome*, Los Angeles.
- Laubry, N. (2016), 'Les "coups de foudre" de Jupiter et l'exportation de la religion romaine en Gaule', *Gallia - Archéologie des Gaules, CNRS Éditions* 73/2, 123-144.
- Lebovitz, A. (2015), 'Obstruction and Emergency in Late Republican Rome', *History of Political Thought* 36/3, 419-451.
- le Bohec-Bouhet (2002), 'The Kings of Macedon and the Cult of Zeus in the Hellenistic Period', in Ogden, D. (ed.), *The Hellenistic World: New Perspectives*, Swansea, 41-58.
- Lebrun, R. & Van Quickelberghe, É. (2017), *Dieu de l'Orage Dans l'Antiquité Méditerranéenne*, Brussels.
- Le Glay, M. (1959), 'Fulgur conditu: un lieu consacré par la foudre en Grande Kabylie', *Libyca* 7, 101-109.
- Lemor, A. & Montpetit, É. (2024), 'Exploring the role of uncertainty, emotions, and scientific discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Policy and Society*, 43/3, 289-303.
- Lennon, J.J. (2015), 'Victimarii in Roman Religion and Society', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 83, 65-89.
- Levene, D. S. (1993), *Religion in Livy*, Leiden.
- Levick, B. (1990), *Claudius*, Oxon.
- Linderski, J. (1985), 'The Libri Reconditi', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 89, 207-234.
- Linderski, J. (1986), 'The Augural Law', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II 16, 3 (1986), 2146-2312.
- Linderski, J. (2007), 'Founding the City: Ennius and Romulus on the Site of Rome', in J. Linderski (ed.) *Roman Questions II: Selected Papers*, 3-19.
- Lipka, M. (2009), *Roman Gods: a conceptual approach*, Leiden.
- Lloyd-Jones, H. (1971), *The Justice of Zeus*, Berkeley, CA.
- Long, C.R. (1987), *The Twelve Gods of Greece and Rome*, Leiden.
- Loriol, R. (2023), 'Pour en finir avec la « rupture de la pax deorum ». Nouvelles perspectives sur d'anciens signes', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 24/1, 189-224.
- Loriol, R. (2023), 'Signes impétratifs et oblatifs dans la divination romaine: une distinction utile?', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 4, 535-536.
- Lott, J. B. (1996), 'Philip II, Alexander, and the Two Tyrannies at Eresos of "IG" XII.2.526', *Phoenix*, 50/1, 26-40.
- Luce, T.J. (1968), 'Political Propaganda on Roman Republican Coins: Circa 92-82 B. C.', *American Journal of Archaeology* 72/1, 25-39.

- Luck, G. (1985/2006), *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Collection of Ancient Texts*, Baltimore.
- Lucrezi, S. (2024), 'Quirinus, Curiae, Quirites, Ius Quiritium: Quirinus as "civic god"', *Rivista Diritto e Religioni*, Semestrale Anno XVIII – n. 1-2024, Gruppo Periodici Pellegrini, 702-713.
- MacBain, B (1982), *Prodigy and Expiation: a study in religion and politics in Republican Rome*, Brussels.
- Mackey, J. L. (2022), *Belief and Cult: rethinking Roman religion*, Princeton.
- Madge, J. (2022), 'Fires in the sky: celestial signs and the legitimation of imperial authority from 44 BC to AD 96. PhD thesis, University of Warwick.
- Mahieu, V. (2010), 'Note sur Jupiter Latiaris et le sacrifice humain', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 88/1, 93–98.
- Maiuri, A. (1941), 'Fulgur conditum o della scoperta di un bidental a Pompei', *Rendiconti della R. Accademia de Archeologia Lettere e belle Arti* 21, 53-72.
- Major, A. (1992), 'Was he pushed or did he leap? Claudius' Ascent to Power', *Ancient History* 22, 25–31
- Malosse, P.-L. (2006), 'Sophistiques et tyrannies', in E. Amato (ed.), *Approches de la troisième sophistique: Hommages à Jacques Champ*, Brussels, 157–78.
- Manacorda, D. (1996) s.v. 'Iuppiter Fulgur, aedes', in Steinby, E.M. (ed.) *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, vol. 3, Quasar, 136–138.
- Manconi, D., & Spiganti, S. (2017), 'Un fulgur conditum a Todi (Umbria)', *OTIVM* 3, 1-40.
- Marder, T. A. & Wilson Jones, M. (eds.) (2015), *The Pantheon: from antiquity to the present*, Cambridge.
- Mariotti, E., Salvi, A, & Tabolli, J (2023), *Il Santuario Ritrovato 2. Dentro la Vasca Sacra*, Livorno.
- Marshall, C. W. (2006), *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy*, Cambridge.
- Masségli, J. (2015), *Body Language in Hellenistic Art and Society*, Oxford.
- Mastrocinque, A. (2017), 'Juno Caelestis and Septimius Severus', *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 57, 273–278.
- Marty, É. & Léger, N. (eds.) (2015), *La Préparation du Roman. Cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1978–1979 et 1979–1980)*. Lecture: 'Le temps qu'il fait', 20 January 1979. By Roland Barthes. Paris: Seuil.
- Mazumder, T. & Saroar, Md. M. (2025), 'Lightning-induced vulnerability assessment in Bangladesh using machine learning and GIS-based approach', *Progress in Disaster Science* 25, [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdisas.2025.100406>. [Accessed 25.08.2024].
- McCall, J. (2022), *Rivalries the Destroyed the Roman Republic*, Yorkshire.

McCormick, M., Büntgen, U., Cane, M.A., Cook, E.R., Harper, K., Huybers, P.J., Litt, T. (2012), 'Climate Change during and after the Roman Empire: Reconstructing the Past from Scientific and Historical Evidence', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 43/2: 169-220.

McGinn, T.A.J. (1998), *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*, New York & Oxford.

McGraw K.M. (2009), 'Avoiding Blame: An Experimental Investigation of Political Excuses and Justifications', *British Journal of Political Science* 20/1, 119-131.

Meadows, A. (1998), 'The Mars/eagle and thunderbolt gold and Ptolemaic involvement in the Second Punic War' in Burnett A., Wartenberg, U. & R. Witschonke (eds), *Coins of Macedonia and Rome: Essays in Honour of Charles Hersh*, London, 125-134.

Merkelbach, R., & West, M.L. (1960), *Fragmenta Hesiodica*, Oxford.

Mignone, L. (2016), *The Republican Aventine and Rome's Social Order*, Ann Arbor.

Mihalopoulos, C. (2009), 'Official Portraiture of Alexander the Great', in Heckel, W. & L. Tritle (eds), *Alexander the Great: a new history*, Oxford, 276-293.

Miller, J. F. (2009), *Apollo, Augustus, and the Poets*, Cambridge.

Mitchell, L. (2013), 'Alexander the Great: Divinity and the Rule of Law', in Mitchell, L. & Melville (eds), *Every Inch a King: Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, Leiden, 91-107

Moin, A. A. & Strathern, A. (2022), *Sacred Kingship in World History: Between Immanence and Transcendence*, New York & Chichester.

Mommsen, T. (1889), *Römische geschichte Vol. 2., Book IV: Die Revolution*, Berlin.

Montero, S. & Perea, S. (1996), 'Augusto y el Bidental de Bracara (ad CIL II 2421)', in Blazquez, J.M. & J Alvar (eds), *La Romanización en Occidente*, Madrid, 299-315.

Mora-Magaña, I., Collado-Corona, M.A., Toral-Martiñòn, R., & Cano, A. (1996) Acoustic Trauma caused by Lightning, *International Journal of Pediatric Otorhinolaryngology* 35/1, 59-68.

Morawiecki, L. (1977), 'The Symbolism of Minerva on the Coins of Domitianus', *Klio* 59/1-2, 185-194.

Murgia, C. E. & Kaster, R.A. (2018), *Serviani in Vergili Aeneidos libros IX-XII commentarii*, New York & Oxford.

Musti, D. (1978), *Polibio e l'Imperialismo Romano*, Napoli.

Mutter, E. & Langley, A. (2019), 'Cutaneous Lichtenberg figures from lightning strike', *Canadian Medical Association Journal/journal de l'Association Medicale Canadienne* 191/9, E260: <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.181221> [accessed 09.11.2023].

Naik S.B., & Murali Krishna R.V. (2018), 'A Case of Keraunoparalysis: A Bolt from the Blue', *Indian Journal of Critical Care Medicine* 22/11, 804-805.

- Najbjerg, T. (2002), 'A Reconstruction and Reconsideration of the So-called Basilica in Herculaneum.' in *Pompeian Brothels, Pompeii's Ancient History, Mirrors and Mysteries, Art and Nature at Oplontis, and the Herculaneum Basilica* (JRA supp. 47), Portsmouth, 122-65.
- Nice, A. T. (2001), 'Ennius or Cicero? The Disreputable Diviners at Cic. "De Div." 1.132', *Acta Classica* 44/1, 153-166.
- Nicolet-Pierre, H. (1978), 'Monnaies 'à l'éléphant,' *Bulletin de la Société Française de Numismatique* 33, 401-3.
- Nightingale, A. (2016), 'Sight and the Philosophy of Vision in Classical Greece: Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle', in Squire, M. (ed.), *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, London & New York, 54-67.
- Nisbet, R. G. M., & Hubbard, M. (1970), *A Commentary on Horace: Odes Book 1*, Oxford.
- Norden, E. (1927), *Vergilius Aeneis Buch VI*, 3rd ed., Stuttgart & Leipzig.
- North, J. (1998), 'The Books of the Pontifices', *Collection de l'Ecole Française de Rome*, 45-63.
- North, J. (ed.) (2023), *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: the Republican centuries*, Oxford.
- O'Brien, R. & Vervaet, F. (2020), 'Priests and Senators: The Decemviri Sacris Faciendis in the Middle Republic (367-104 BCE)', *Revue des Études Anciennes Année 122/1*, 85-106.
- Obsomer, C. (2017), 'Le dieu Seth à travers quelques documents du IIe Millénaire', in Lebrun, R. & É. Van Quickenberghe (eds), *Dieu de l'Orage Dans l'Antiquité Méditerranéenne*, Brussels.
- Ogden, D. (2002), *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: a sourcebook*, Oxford.
- Ogden, D. (2011), *Alexander the Great: Myth, Genesis and Sexuality*, Exeter.
- Ogden, D. (ed.) (2021), *The Oxford Handbook of Heracles*, New York & Oxford.
- Orlin, E.M. (2002), 'Foreign Cults in Republican Rome: Rethinking the Pomerian Rule', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 47, 1-18.
- Orlin, E. M. (2010), *Foreign cults in Rome: creating a Roman Empire*, Oxford.
- Ottini, L. et al. (2003), 'Possible human sacrifice at the origins of Rome: novel skeletal evidences.', *Medicina nei Secoli*, 15/3, 459.
- Panaino, A. (2014), 'Power and Ritual in the Achaemenian Royalty', in Markham J. Geller (ed.), *Melammu: The Ancient World in an Age of Globalization*, Berlin, 235-239.
- Pancieria, S. (1975-1976), 'Un frammento degli Acta Arvalium ed altre novità epigrafiche romane', *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 48, 290-294.
- Pandey, N. B. (2020), *The Poetics of Power in Augustan Rome: Latin poetic responses to early imperial iconography*, Cambridge.
- Park, A. (2017), 'Thigh wounds in Homer and Vergil: Cultural reality and literary metaphor', in A. Park (ed.), *Resemblance and Reality in Greek Thought*, London, 255-274.

- Palmer, R. E. A. (1974), *Roman Religion and Roman Empire: five essays*, Philadelphia.
- Parker, A. (2018), "'The Bells! The Bells!' Approaching Tintinnabula in Roman Britain and Beyond", in Parker, A. & S. McKie (eds), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic*, Oxford, 57-68.
- Parker, H. (2004), 'Why were the Vestals virgins? Or the chastity of women and the safety of the state', *American Journal of Philology* 125, 563-601.
- Paschall, D. (1936), 'The Origin and Semantic Development of Latin *Vitium*', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 67, 219-231.
- Pellam, G. (2015), 'SACER, SACROSANCTUS, and LEGES SACRATAE', *Classical Antiquity* 34/2, 322-334.
- Peter, H. (1914), *Historicorum Romanorum Reliquiae*, Leipzig.
- Phillips, C. R. (1983), 'Rethinking Augustan Poetry', *Latomus*, 42/4, 780-818.
- Picheta, R. (2024) Lightning strike kills 14 at prayer service in Uganda refugee camp, police say. CNN, 3 November. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/11/03/africa/uganda-lightning-strike-refugee-camp-intl> (Accessed: 25 August 2025).
- Piguet, E. (2017), 'Le Foudroiement d'Asclépios: punition ou élection divine?', in Lebrun, R. & É. Van Quickenberghe (eds), *Dieu de l'Orage Dans l'Antiquité Méditerranéenne*, Brussels.
- Platner, S. B. & Ashby, T. (1929), *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, London.
- Poignault, R. (2016), 'Sur les traces d'une écriture sublime dans la correspondance de Fronton', in Conte, S. & S. Dubel, *L'écriture des traités de rhétorique des origines grecques à la Renaissance. Scripta Antiqua*, 87, Bordeaux, 155-175.
- Pollini, J. (1981), 'Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus and the Ravenna Relief', *Römische Mitteilungen* 88, 117-152.
- Pollini, J. (1993), 'The Gemma Augustea: Ideology, Rhetorical Imagery, and the Creation of a Dynastic Narrative', in P.J. Holliday (ed.), *Narrative and Event in Ancient Art*, Cambridge, 258-98.
- Pollini, J. (2012), *From Republic to Empire: Rhetoric, Religion, and Power in the Visual Culture of Ancient Rome*, Oklahoma.
- Pollitt, J.J. (1986/2006), *Art in the Hellenistic Age*, Cambridge.
- Prescendi, F. (2024), 'Divinités fonctionnelles et indigitamenta: à la recherche des petites divinités et de leurs assemblages', in Prescendi, F. and F. Van Haepere, F. (eds.) *Petits dieux des Romains et leurs voisins : Enquête comparatiste sur les hiérarchies divines dans les cultures romaines, italiennes et grecques*, Turnhout, 21-49.
- Prowse, K.R. (1964), 'Numa and the Pythagoreans: A Curious Incident', *Greece and Rome* 11/1, 36-42.
- Price, M.J. (1982), 'The "Poras" Coinage of Alexander the Great: A Symbol of Concord and

Community', in S. Scheers (ed.) *Studia Paulo Naster Oblata I, Orientada Louvaniensia* 12, Leuven, 75-88.

Miller, P. A. (2004), *Subjecting verses: Latin love elegy and the emergence of the real*, Princeton.

Putnam, M.C.J. (2008), *Horace's "Carmen Saeculare": Ritual Magic and the Poet's Art*, New Haven.

Raaflaub, K. & Samsons, L. (1993), 'Opposition to Augustus', in Raaflaub, K. and M. Toher, (eds), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*, Berkeley, 417-454.

Raaflaub, K.A. & Toher, M. (eds) (1993), 'Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate', Berkeley.

Raccenelli, R. (2017) 'Numa a colloquio con Giove Elicio. Per una pragmatica della comunicazione enigmistica', *Paideia* 72, 261-277.

Raimondi A. (ed.) (2021), *God on Earth: Emperor Domitian*, Leiden.

Rakov, V. A. & Uman, M. A. (2006), *Lightning: Physics and Effects*, Cambridge.

Ramage, E.S. (1985), 'Augustus' Treatment of Julius Caesar', *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 34/2), 223-245.

Ramage, E.S. (1991), 'Sulla's Propaganda', *Klio* 73,93-121.

Rampersad, S. (2020), 'PNM MP to help repair Lady of Fatima statue', *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, 11 September. Available at: <https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/pnm-mp-to-help-repair-lady-of-fatima-statue-6.2.1207067.76d0434ce6> (Accessed: 1 September 2025).

Rasmussen, S. W. (2003), *Public Portents in Republican Rome*, Rome.

Rawson, E. (1978), 'Caesar, Etruria and the Disciplina Etrusca', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 68, 132-152.

Rayner, S. (1992), 'Cultural Theory and Risk Analysis', in Krinsky, S. & D. Golding (eds), *Social Theories of Risk*, Westport, 83-115.

Rémy B. (1993), 'Une inscription commémorant la chute de la foudre au Puy, chez les Vellaves', *Revue Archéologique du Centre de la France* 32, 167-169.

Renucci, P. (2012), *Claude, l'empereur inattendu*, Paris.

Richardson, J. S. (1991), 'Imperium Romanum: Empire and the Language of Power', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 811-9.

Richardson, L. (1992), *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, Baltimore.

Rives, J. (1995), 'Human Sacrifice among Pagans and Christians', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 8565-85.

Rives, J.B. (2003), 'Magic in Roman Law: The Reconstruction of a Crime', *Classical Antiquity* 22/2, 313-339.

Robertson, N. (1987), 'The Nones of July and Roman Weather Magic', *Museum Helveticum* 44.1: 8-41.

- Rodríguez-Almeida, E. (1991), 'Tra epigrafia, filologia, storia e topografia urbana: quattro ipotesi', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* 103-2, 529-550.
- Rohmann, D. (2013), 'Book Burning as Conflict Management in the Roman Empire (213 BCE-200 CE)', *Ancient Society* 43, 115-149.
- Rolle, A. (2022), 'Coming Home: Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and the Canonisation of Roman Religion', in Agut-Labordère, D. & M.J. Versluys, M. J. (eds), *Canonisation As Innovation: Anchoring Cultural Formation in the First Millennium BCE*, Leiden, 263-285.
- Romano, D.G., Voyatzis, M.E. (2010), 'Excavating the Birthplace of Zeus: The Mt. Lykaion Excavation and Survey Project', *Expedition* 52/1, Pennsylvania, 11-21.
- Romps, D., Seeley, J., Vollaro, D., Molinari, J. (2014), 'Climate change. Projected increase in lightning strikes in the United States due to global warming', *Science* 346, 851-4.
- Rose, H.J. (1933), 'The Cult of Volkanus at Rome', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 23, 46-63.
- Rosenberger, V. (1998), *Gezähmte Götter: Das Prodigienwesen der römischen Republik*, Stuttgart.
- Rosenberger, V. (2007), 'Republican Nobiles: Controlling the Res Publica' in J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion*, Malden, Mass.
- Rosivach, V.J. (1983), *Mars, the Lustral God*, Latomus, 42/3, 509-521.
- Roskam, G. (2022) *Plutarch. Greece & Rome. New Surveys in the Classics* No. 47, Cambridge.
- Rougier, J., Hill, L., & Sparks, R.S.J. (eds)(2018), *Risk and Uncertainty Assessment for Natural Hazards*, Cambridge.
- Rüpke, J. (2007), *The Religion of the Romans*, Munich.
- Rüpke, J. (2016), *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: superstition or individuality?*, Cambridge.
- Rüpke, J. (2014), 'Historicizing Religion: Varro's *Antiquitates* and History of Religion in the Late Roman Republic', *History of Religions* 53/3, 246-268.
- Rubins, M.A. (1932), 'A New Interpretation of "Jupiter Elicius"', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 10, 85-102.
- Sabbatucci, D. (1988), *La Religione di Roma Antica: dal calendario festivo all'ordine cosmico*, Milan.
- Santangelo, F. (2007), *Sulla, the Elites, and the Empire: a study of Roman policies in Italy and the Greek East*, Leiden.
- Santangelo, F. (2013), *Divination, Prediction and the End of the Roman Republic*, Cambridge.
- Santangelo, F. (2019), 'Prodigies in the Early Principate?', in Driediger-Murphy, L.G. & E. Eidinow (eds), *Ancient Divination and Experience*, Oxford, 154-177.
- Scheid, J. (1985), 'Numa et Jupiter ou les dieux citoyens de Rome', *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 59/1, 41-53.

Schliephake, C. (ed.) (2017), *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*, Lanham, Maryland.

Schliephake, C. (2020), *The Environmental Humanities and the Ancient World: Questions and Perspectives*, Cambridge.

Schultz, P. (2009), 'Divine Images and Royal Ideology in the Philippeion at Olympia', in Jensen, J. T. (ed.), *Aspects of Ancient Greek cult: context, ritual and iconography*, Aarhus, 125-193.

Schultz, C.E. (2010), 'The Romans and Ritual Murder', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78/2, 516-541.

Schultz C.E. (2012), 'On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins', in Bradley M, (ed.), *Rome, Pollution and Propriety: Dirt, Disease and Hygiene in the Eternal City from Antiquity to Modernity*, Cambridge, 122-136.

Schumacher, R.S., & Rasmussen, K.L. (2020), 'The formation, character and changing nature of mesoscale convective systems', *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment* 1, 300-314.

Scott, K. (1933), 'Staius' Adulation of Domitian', *The American Journal of Philology* 54/3 (1933), 247-259.

Scullard, H. H. (1951), *Roman Politics, 220-150 B.C.*, Oxford.

Scullard, H. H. (1982), *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome from 133 B.C. to A.D. 68*, fifth edition, London & New York.

Seidler, S.E. (2024), 'Cato amator: generic hybridity, monstrous transgressions, and elegiac emasculation in Lucan's Libyan tale (Bellum civile 9)', in Schwameis, C. & B. Söllradl (eds) *Gattungstheorie und Dichtungspraxis in neronisch-flavischer Epik*, 69-90.

Simón, F.M. (2010), 'Execrating The Roman Power: Three Defixiones From Emporiae (Ampurias), in *Magical practice in the Latin West: papers from the international conference held at the University of Zaragoza, 30 Sept.-1 Oct. 2005*, 399-425.

Sjövall, H. (1931), *Zeus im altgriechischen Hauskult*, Lund.

Skutsch, O. (1956), 'De fulminum appellatione Scipionibus indita et de locis quibusdam Ovidianis', *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica*, 536-540.

Skutsch, O. (1961), 'Enniana IV: Condendae Urbis Auspicia', *Classical Quarterly* 11 (3-4), 252-267.

Skutsch, O. (1985), *The Annals of Q. Ennius*, Oxford.

Slater, T.B. (1998), 'On the Social Setting of the Revelation to John', *New Testament Studies* 44/2, 232-256.

Smith, C. J. (2005), 'The Origo Gentis Romanae: Facts and Fictions', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 48, 97-136.

Smith, C.J. (2011), 'Citizenship and Community: Inventing the Roman Republic', in Terrenato, N. & D. Haggis (eds), *State Formation in Italy and Greece: Questioning the Neoevolutionist Paradigm*, Oxford, 217-230.

- Smith, R. R. R. (1988), *Hellenistic Royal Portraits*, Oxford.
- Smith, R. R. R. (1996), 'Typology and Diversity in the Portraits of Augustus', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 930-47.
- Smith, R.R.R. (2021), 'Maiestas Serena: Roman Court Cameos and Early Imperial Poetry and Panegyric', *Journal of Roman Studies* 111, 75-152.
- Smith, R.S. & Trzaskoma, S.M. (2005), 'Apollodorus 1.9.7: Salmoneus' Thunder-Machine, *Philologus* 149/2, 351-354.
- Smith, W. (ed.) (1875), *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, Cambridge.
- Southern, P. (1997), *Domitian: tragic tyrant*, London.
- Steel, C. (2013), *The End of the Roman Republic 146 to 44 BC: Conquest and Crisis*, Edinburgh.
- Steel C. (2014), 'Rethinking Sulla: The Case of the Roman Senate', *The Classical Quarterly* 64/2, 657-668.
- Steinby, E.M. (1993), *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, Quasar.
- Stem, R. (2007), 'The Exemplary Lessons of Livy's Romulus', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 137/2, 435-471.
- Stephenson, P. (2015), 'A Note on the Constantinian Cameo, now in Leiden', *BABESCH* 90, 237-240.
- Stern, G. (2020), 'Devotio and Human Sacrifice in Archaic Italy and Rome', *Acta Classica*, 363-398.
- Stewart, A. F. (1993), *Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics*, Berkeley.
- Strachan, V. (2026a), 'Lightning, Legitimacy, & Roman Political Power: from Myth to History and Back (3rd-1st c. BCE)', in Korobili, G. & T. Tieleman, (eds), *Meteorology Beyond Borders: Ancient and Modern Reflections*, Leiden & Boston, 257-286.
- Strachan, V. (2026b), 'The Places and Spaces of Lightning in Ancient Roman Architecture', *forthcoming Brepols*.
- Struck, P. T. (2016), *Divination and Human Nature: a cognitive history of intuition in classical antiquity*, Princeton.
- Strunk, T.E. (2013), 'Domitian's lightning bolts and close shaves in Pliny', *The Classical Journal* 109, 88-113.
- Sullivan, J.P. (1972), 'The Politics of Elegy', *Arethusa* 5/1, *Politics and Art In Augustan Literature*, 17-34.
- Suraj M., Singh, R.B., & Huggel, C. (2018), *Climate change, extreme events and disaster risk reduction: towards sustainable development goals*, Cham.
- Syme, R. (1939), *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford.

- Szabó, C. (2018), *Sanctuaries in Roman Dacia: materiality and religious experience*, Oxford.
- Taracha, P. (2008), 'The Storm-God and the Hittite Great King', *Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici* 50, 745–751.
- Taub, L. (2003), *Ancient Meteorology*, London & New York.
- Tennyson, T. T. (2022), 'Cicero's Romulus and the Crafting Of Historical Exempla', *History of Political Thought* 43/1, 1–30.
- Thein, A. (2014), 'Capitoline Jupiter and the Historiography of Roman World Rule', *Histos*, 284–319.
- Thein, A. (2014b), 'Reflecting on Sulla's Clemency', *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 63/2, 166–186.
- Thompson, L. (1984), 'Domitianus Dominus: A Gloss on Statius Silvae 1.6.84', *The American Journal of Philology*, 105/4, 469–475.
- Thonemann, P. (2020), *An Ancient Dream Manual: Artemidorus' The Interpretation of Dreams*, Oxford.
- Thulin, C.O. (1905), 'Synonyma quaedam Latina (Prodigium, portentum, ostentum, monstrum)', *Commentationes Philologiae in honorem Iohannis Paulson*, Gothenburg, 194–213.
- Thulin, C. O. (1906), *Die Etruskische Disciplin*, Göteborg.
- Timpanaro, S. (1978), *Contributi di Filologia e di Storia della Lingua Latina*, Rome.
- Timpanaro, S. (1988), *Cicerone. Della Divinazione*, Milan.
- Tomlin, R. S. O. (1986), 'Where the Lightning Struck: R.I.B. 1426', *Antiquaries Journal* 66/1, 124–126.
- Tomassi, G. (2015), 'Tyrants and tyrannicides: Between literary creation and contemporary reality in Greek declamation', in E. Amato, F. Citti and B. Huelsenbeck (eds), *Law and Ethics in Greek and Roman Declamation*, Berlin and Boston, 249–68.
- Toom, T. (2013), 'Was Augustine an Intentionalist? Authorial Intention in Augustine's Hermeneutics', *Studia Patristica* 70/18, 185–93.
- Toorn, K. van der (1999), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. 2nd edition, Leiden.
- Torelli, M. (1982), *Typology & Structure of Roman Historical Reliefs*, Ann Arbor.
- Töyräänvuori, J. (2014), 'Weapons of the Storm God in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Tradition', *Studia Orientalia* 112, 147–180.
- Turcan, R. (2003), 'Liturgies de l'initiation bacchique à l'époque romaine (LIBER). Documentation littéraire, inscrite et figurée', *Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, Paris.

Turfa, J. M. (2012), *Divining the Etruscan World: The Brontoscopic Calendar and Religious Practice*. Cambridge.

Urso, G. (2016), 'Cassius Dio's Sulla: Exemplum of Cruelty and Republican Dictator', in Lange, C. H. & J. M. Madsen, *Cassius Dio: Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician*, Leiden, 11–32.

Usener, H. (1905), 'Zeus Keraunos', *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 60, 1-30. Reprinted in ed. R. Wünsch (1912), *Kleine Schriften IV: Arbeiten zur Relionsgeschichte*, 471-497.

Vădan, P. (2022), 'Foreseeing the Past: Probability and Ancient Greek Decision-Making', *Classica et Mediaevalia* 70, 17-58.

Vahlen, J. (1854), *Ennianae Poesis Reliquiae*, Amsterdam.

Vaidyanathan, R. (2023, 31 December), 'Bangladesh sees dramatic rise in lightning deaths linked to climate change', BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67779223> (Accessed:25.07.2025).

Van der Meer, L. B. (2005), 'Domus Fulminata. The House of the Thunderbolt at Ostia (III, vii, 3-5)', *Babesch. Bulletin Antieke Beschaving*, 8091–112.

Van Andringa, W., Creissen, T., Chevalieri, C. (2010), 'Pompéi: Le fulgur conditum de la maison des Quatre Styles, 1, 8, 17 (campagne 2008)', *Fasti Online*. Available: <https://www.fastionline.org/docs/FOLDER-it-2010-208.pdf> (accessed 29.10.2024).

Van Andringa, w. (2021), 'Fulgur conditum: enterrement de la foudre et savoir religieux local', *Histoire et Archéologie*, 33-61.

Van Haepelen, F. (2007), "Les rites d'accession au pouvoir des consuls romains: une partie intégrante de leur entrée en charge", in Cauchies, J.M. & Fr. Van Haepelen (eds) *Le pouvoir et ses rites d'accession et de confirmation. Actes de la table ronde organisée par le CRHIDI le 9 décembre 2005*, 31-45.

Várhelyi, Z. (2007), 'The Specters of Roman Imperialism: The Live Burials of Gauls and Greeks at Rome', *Classical Antiquity* 26/2, 277–304.

Varner, E.R. (2001), 'Punishment after death: Mutilation of images and corpse abuse in ancient Rome', *Mortality* 6/1, 45-64.

Verbruggen, H. (1981), *Le Zeus Crétois*, Paris.

Versnel, H. S. (1993), *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion*, Second edition, Leiden.

Versnel, H.S. (2011), *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*, Leiden.

Vigourt, A. (2001), *Les Présages impériaux d'Auguste à Domitien*, Paris.

Vine, B. (1986), 'An Umbrian-Latin Correspondence', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 90, 111-128.

Volk, K. (2019), 'Varro and the Disorder of Things', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 110, 183-212.

- Wainwright, G. A. (1932), 'Letopolis', *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 18/1, 159-172.
- Wainwright, G.A. (1963), 'The Origin of Storm-Gods in Egypt', *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 49, 13-20.
- Walbank, F.W. (1960), 'History and Tragedy', *Historia* 9, 216–34.
- Wallace-Hadrill, A. (1982), 'Civilis Princeps: Between Citizen and King', *Journal of Roman Studies* 72, 32-48.
- Wallace-Hadrill, A. (1985), 'Propaganda and Dissent?', *Klio* 67, 180–184.
- Wallace-Hadrill, A. (1987), 'Time for Augustus: Ovid, Augustus and the Fasti', in M. Whitby, P. Hardie and M. Whitby (eds), *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble*, Bristol.
- Warde Fowler, W. (1899), *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic: an introduction to the study of the religion of the Romans*, Illinois.
- Warde Fowler, W. (1911) *The Religious Experience of the Roman people: from the earliest times to the age of Augustus: the Gifford lectures for 1909-10/delivered in Edinburgh University by W. Warde Fowler*, England
- Warde Fowler, W. (1916), 'Iuppiter and the triumphator', *The Classical Review* 30, 153–7.
- Wardle, D. (1998), *Valerius Maximus' Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, Oxford.
- Wardle, D. (2015), 'Suetonius on the Legislation of Augustus', *Fundamina* 21, 185–204.
- Warrell, D.A., Cox, T.M., Firth, J.D. (2005) *Oxford Textbook of Medicine*, Volume 1 (4th edition), Oxford.
- Watkins, O.D. (1988), 'The Death of Cn. Pompeius Strabo', *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie Neue Folge*, 131. Bd., H. 2, 143-150.
- Watson, A. (1992), *The State, Law, and Religion: Pagan Rome*, Athens & London.
- Weaver R.K. (1986), 'The Politics of Blame Avoidance', *Journal of Public Policy* 6/4, 371-398.
- Weber G. (2015), 'Emotionen in Artemidors Oneirokritika', in *Artemidor von Daldis und die antike Traumdeutung. Texte – Kontexte - Lektüren*, Colloquia Augustana 33, Berlin & Boston, 39-65.
- Weinstock, S. (1946), 'Martianus Capella and the Cosmic System of the Etruscans', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 36/1–2, 101–129.
- Weinstock, S. (1951), 'Libri Fulgurales', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 19, 122–153.
- Weinstock, S. (1971), *Divus Julius*, Oxford.
- Welch, T. S. (2005), *The Elegiac Cityscape Propertius and the Meaning of Roman Monuments*, Columbus.
- West, R. (1933), *Römische Portrait-Plastik*. 2 vols., Munich.

- Whitman, C. H. (1970), 'Hera's Anvils', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 74, 37-42.
- Whitmarsh, T. (2018), 'Theomachy and Theology in Early Greek Myth: the case of the Aeolids', *Philosophie Antique* [online] 18.
- Widengren, G. (1955), 'The Sacral Kingship of Iran', in Edsman, C.M. (ed.), *The Sacral Kingship / La Regalità Sacra: Contributions to the Central Theme of the VIIIth International Congress for the History of Religions (Rome, April 1955)*, Leiden & Boston.
- Wildfang, R.L. & Isager, J. (eds.) (1999), *Divination and Portents in the Roman World*, Odense.
- Wildfang, R. L. (2006), *Rome's Vestal Virgins: a study of Rome's Vestal priestesses in the late Republic and early Empire*, London.
- Willi, A. (1998), 'Numa's Dangerous Books: The Exegetic History of a Roman Forgery', *Museum Helveticum* 55/3, 139-172.
- Williams, G. D. (2012), *The Cosmic Viewpoint: a study of Seneca's Natural Questions*, Oxford.
- Winter, N.A. (2005), *Gods walking on the roof: the evolution of terracotta statuary in Archaic Etruscan architecture in light of the kings of Rome*, Cambridge.
- Wiseman, T.P. (1974), 'Legendary Genealogies in Late-Republican Rome', *Greece and Rome* 21/2, 153-164.
- Wiseman, T.P. (1998), *Roman Drama and Roman History*, Exeter.
- Wiseman, T. P. (1995), *Remus: a Roman Myth*, Cambridge.
- Wiseman, T. P. (2008), *Unwritten Rome*, Exeter.
- Wiseman, T.P. (2009), 'Augustus, Sulla, and the Supernatural', in Smith, C. & A. Powell (eds), *The Lost Memoirs of Augustus*, Swansea, 111-123.
- Wiseman, T. P. (2019), *The House of Augustus: a historical detective story*, Princeton.
- Wiseman, T. P. (2026), 'Numa the Pythagorean', *Histos* 20, 1-40.
- Wissowa, G. (1912), *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 2. Aufl., Munich.
- Wissowa, G. (1925), 'Vesta', in Roscher, W.H. (ed.) *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, vol. 6, Leipzig, col. 259.
- Wohl, V. (2002), *Love among the Ruins: The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens*, Princeton.
- Woodman A.J. (2023), 'Myth and History in Livy's Preface', in Kingsley, K.S., Monti, G., & T. Rood (eds), *The Authoritative Historian: Tradition and Innovation in Ancient Historiography*, Cambridge, 82-98.
- Woolf, G. (2008), 'Divinity and Power in Ancient Rome', in Brisch, N. (ed.), *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond* (Oriental Institute Seminars, OIS 4). Chicago, 235-251.

- Woolf, G. (2009), 'World Religion and World Empire in the Ancient Mediterranean', in Cancik, H. & J. Rüpke, (eds), *Die Religion des Imperium Romanum*, Tübingen, 19–35.
- Xinyue, B. (2020), 'Divinization and Didactic Efficacy in Virgil's Georgics', in Xinyue, B. & N. Freer, N. (eds.) *Reflections and New Perspectives on Virgil's Georgics*, London, 129-144.
- Xinyue, B. (2022), *Politics and Divinization in Augustan Poetry*, Oxford.
- Yavetz, Z. (1958), 'The Living Conditions of the Urban Plebs in Republican Rome,' *Latomus*, 17/3, 500–17.
- Yavetz, Z. (1996), 'Caligula, Imperial Madness and Modern Historiography', *Klio* 78/1, 1996, 105-129.
- Yang, J. (2020), 'The sinicization and secularization of some Graeco-Buddhist gods in China', in Rienjang, W. & P. Stewart (eds), *The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art*, Oxford.
- Zanker, P. (1990), *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, Ann Arbor.
- Zanker, G. (2004), *Modes of viewing in Hellenistic Poetry and Art*, Madison.
- Zanker, G. (2023) *Fate and the hero in Virgil's Aeneid: Stoic world fate and human responsibility*, Cambridge.
- Zavaroni, A. (2003), 'Nuove ipotesi sulla bilingue etrusco-latina di Pesaro (CIL, XI, 6363)', *Latomus*, 62/2, 307-310.
- Zavaroni (2006), 'Communitary and Individualistic Gods in German and Roman Religion', *Gerión* 24/1, 287-304.
- Zavaroni, A. (2013), 'Caput Oli, Tarpeia, Summanus et alii', *Latomus*, 72/2, 317-337.
- Zinsmaier, T. (2015), 'Truth by Force? Torture as Evidence in Ancient Rhetoric and Roman Law', in Amato, E. & F. Citti (eds), *Law and Ethics in Greek and Roman Declamation*, Berlin, 201–218.

22:31



Rome
24°

Cloudy
H:30° L:21°

⚠ Severe Weather

Extreme Thunderstorm Warning until 01:59, Thursday 11 September. Additional alerts: Severe Rain Warning, Severe Thunderstorm Warning, Moderate Wind Warning, Modera...

Italian Air Force National Meteorological Service

🕒 HOURLY FORECAST

07	08	09	10	11	12
70%	70%	70%	70%	70%	70%
22°	22°	22°	23°	23°	23°

📅 10-DAY FORECAST

