PART I

BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 1

THE *BRONTOSCOPIC CALENDAR* AND ITS TRANSMISSION

A REMARKABLE DOCUMENT, ALBEIT THIRD-HAND

More than once, an entire culture has been eliminated, or overwhelmed by a conqueror, and its literature and memories lost to posterity. To recover some lost remnant of a people's beliefs and expressions is a rare privilege, and it appears that one such window of opportunity has opened onto the religious teachings for which Etruscans were famed. Preserved in the manuscript of a short book on omens, *De ostentis* (*On Portents*), published by Johannes Lydus ("John the Lydian") in Justinian's Constantinople, is a precious example of Etruscan sacred scripture, even though it is not recorded in the Etruscan language. The (Byzantine) Greek edition, Εφήμερος Βροντοσκοπία, which appears at *De ostentis* 27–38, is the only surviving text of an Etruscan divinatory calendar. It had previously been published in Latin by Publius Nigidius Figulus (fr. 83 in Swoboda 1889), a respected contemporary of Cicero. If its original-language text had survived, it would be the longest coherent Etruscan document extant, because so few Etruscan texts even have complete sentences or multiple lines of comment on the same topic. No trace of the Etruscan original has yet been found, but Lydus, taking his cue from Figulus, implied that it was of great antiquity, a part of the Etruscan religious *disciplina* dictated by the legendary prophet Tages, he himself understood to have lived during the protohistoric Iron Age, probably the ninth to eighth centuries BC. Figulus' Latin translation was available in sixth-century AD Constantinople when Lydus converted it into contemporary Greek language, making it much more accessible to his fellow citizens in the Eastern Empire. Today, only his Byzantine Greek text remains.

Organized into twelve months, beginning in June, the calendar had functioned as a reference table for priests interpreting the phenomenon of "thunder," a loud noise heard in the heavens (with or without storms). Embedded in it is a wealth of social, agricultural, religious, and medical information. The stratified society of the calendar is composed of urban factions that include

"powerful men," nobles, a "band of youth," common people, women, and a servile class that alternately seems to foment rebellion and be stricken by plagues. The *Brontoscopic Calendar* mentions a king, war, onslaughts of various noxious and "harmless" diseases, and a wide array of meteorological conditions. It predicts an abundance or dearth of certain crops, including barley and wheat, fruit and nuts. Herds, flocks, wild birds, and fish of both river and sea are also noted, along with "reptiles" and pests.

Comparative analysis shows that the *Brontoscopic Calendar*'s sources lie in equal parts in the native, emerging Etruscan culture of Iron Age Italy and in the wisdom of Mesopotamia, as known to us from the great cuneiform tablet libraries of Ashur, Nineveh, and Babylon. I suggest that, at the dawn of urbanized history in Tyrrhenian Etruria, the elite groups who were establishing the cities, stratified societies, and centralized governments availed themselves of any tools that came to hand, and one of the best – already known to the Near Eastern kingdoms for millennia – was control of the calendar and the bonding of religion with the state.

THE MATTER OF TRANSMISSION

Those who study Etruscan civilization need to be experts in the culture of the Etruscans' enemies, for the only histories and commentaries that survive are those written by their Greek rivals and Roman conquerors. Fortunately, archaeology is rectifying the picture of Etruscan society and religion, known to have been distorted, albeit not always deliberately, by foreign authors. I hope that my English version will stimulate among twenty-first-century scholars a renewed interest in this text and in its early Etruscan development.

The original Etruscan text was probably composed early in the seventh century BC, if not slightly before, and may have been the product of a single Etruscan devotee or possibly one group of priestly colleagues conversant with native, Italic, and Etruscan religious traditions. The thunder calendar was created after someone had somehow been introduced to the divination literature of the Near East, either on the home ground of Etruria, or possibly in the Levant or some middle ground, such as Cyprus. The transfer could have been accomplished by a single Assyrian or Levantine diplomat-translator or priest, perhaps traveling with an embassy that participated in an economic and political mission to one of the Etruscan chiefs. The Near Eastern visitor then communicated the lore of Akkadian divinatory reference texts to some counterpart priest (or priestess) in Etruria. The "donor" of the divination texts might have been Levantine – Phoenician or Syrian – and the texts recorded not on bulky cuneiform tablets (which have never yet been found in Italy) but in Aramaic or Phoenician on convenient papyri or scrolls. (The courts of Assyria and its neighbors all had multilingual scribes and archives of organic media – and clay.) The creation and transmission of the Etruscan

text would have required only a small coterie of experts: in later centuries, individual (noble) families were recognized as the custodians of cultic lore, and priesthoods characteristically passed from father to son.[1] Their scions, too, were proud of their learning – they continued tradition by writing their own treatises on topics of religion, as proclaimed on Hellenistic monuments, such as the sarcophagus of Lars Pulenas (he names his family and ancestors and claims *ziχ netśrac*, to "have written a work on haruspicy."[2] The precarious time for a rare and privileged religious document would have been the centuries immediately after its creation, but that would have been during the *floruit* of the major Etruscan cities and the heyday of the great families whose names continued to the end of the first millennium BC. It is true that we lack Etruscan literature (as opposed to personal inscriptions) for the Archaic period, and the long texts that have been found are nearly all on nonperishable materials (and nearly all of religious impact – for instance, the gold Pyrgi plaques, the Capua tile, the stone Perugia *cippus*). But the linen book known as the Zagreb Mummy Binding (*Liber linteus*) was preserved in the dry climate of Egypt and is a tantalizing remnant of the religious texts that Etruria once created.

As a written Etruscan text, the *Brontoscopic Calendar* did survive into the early first century BC, when it was made accessible to a Roman statesman and scholar of probable Etruscan ancestry, Figulus. In the days around or just before 50 BC, there were still people in central Italy capable of reading Etruscan (as, later, was Emperor Claudius), but Figulus foresaw the future demise of the Etruscan language and Rome's need for religious inspiration. By then, however, many other texts, of more recent, and questionable, origins were circulating in Ptolemaic Alexandria, in Rome among the literati, and in the Hellenistic East. All of those that survive, however, betray undeniable hallmarks of their post-Assyrian ancestry. Some may even have used the Figulus document as one of their source references (see Chapter 9).

PUBLIUS NIGIDIUS FIGULUS

Whatever form the original Etruscan *Brontoscopic Calendar* took, by the sixth century AD it only survived in the Latin translation of the Roman statesman and scholar, Figulus. He had earned a reputation as a senator, statesman, grammarian, occultist, and natural historian (encyclopedist), yet only the last twenty years of his life are known in any detail. That any information exists is in large part because Figulus was a friend whom Cicero greatly admired (he called him *omnium doctissimo et sanctissimo* ("most learned and pious of all men") in the letter he wrote him in exile in 46 BC (*Ad familiares* 4.13.3)). Integrity seemed to be a hallmark of this scholar, along with a keen intellect;

[1] Cf. Haack 2005 and 2006; Briquel 2002.
[2] *ET* Ta 1.17; Bonfante and Bonfante 2002:149–51, no. 31, 3rd c. BC.

Cicero exclaimed that Figulus was "graced with all the other arts that befit a free man."[3]

Figulus must have been born around 100 BC, to a well-to-do family of plebeian background, probably in Perusia, where Nigidii are attested in epitaphs since the second century BC.[4] Hall suggests that the Nigidii gained favor in Rome during the Second Punic War, and thus they would have maintained a presence in Roman politics from that time.[5] Unwavering integrity and sincerity were Figulus' downfall – and his fame. The friendship with Cicero began around 63, when Figulus participated in the anti-Catilinarian crusade (Cicero *Pro Sulla* 42). He held the magistracy of praetor in 58 BC (the one certain date in his biography), when he was among the *amicissimos et acerrimos civis* ("most friendly and keenest citizens") who supported Cicero (*Epistulae ad Quintum fratrem* 1.2.16). During the Civil War, Nigidius fought with the *optimates* for Pompey at Pharsalos (cf. Cicero *Ad Atticum* 7.24). Figulus, *cui cura deos secretaque caeli nosse fuit* …, "to whom it has been given to know the cultivation of the gods and the secrets of heaven," delivers a speech in Lucan's *De bello civili* (1.639–72), in which he prophesies "that peace of yours comes with a master" (1.670, *cum domino pax ista venit*), but this means that freedom will end. Clearly, for his contemporaries, divination was his most distinguishing pursuit. The inevitable exile followed in 46, and he died a year later, just as Cicero was preparing a speech to deliver on his behalf. It is not certain that Figulus was the subject of a Suetonian biography,[6] but his fame was further transmitted in Suetonius' comment that it was "common knowledge" (*nota ac vulgata res est*) that Figulus had predicted the Civil War and the birth of Augustus (*Augustus* 94.5). Figulus' place in Cicero's *Timaeus* is understood today as a memorial tribute, perhaps crafted from the text the orator had composed for his undelivered speech to petition Caesar for clemency to Figulus.

Figulus was a prolific writer, and his lengthy *Commentarii grammatici* led to frequent comparison with his contemporary, Varro.[7] A tradition that Figulus revived Pythagoreanism is not supported by his surviving scholarship, fragments of which have been noted by Pliny, Gellius, the scholiasts, and Byzantine authors. The reason for his *cognomen* Figulus, "the Potter," was explained by the scholiast on Lucan (*De bello civili* 1.639) and by Augustine (*De civitate dei* 5.3). When asked how horoscopes for twins could differ, Figulus supposedly demonstrated that in a revolving universe, no two beings can have the same identity or fate, just as two ink splashes on a *potter's* turntable are always distinct from each other.[8]

[3] *In Vatinium* 16, quoted by Barton 1994:37.
[4] Cf. Harris 1971:321–22.
[5] Hall 1996:165n113.
[6] See Della Casa 1962:17–36.
[7] Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 19.14; Servius *Ad Aen.* 10.175.
[8] The possibility of a completely different and Etruscan source of his *cognomen* remains open, however; see Della Casa 1962:9–17.

Titles are known for a number of Figulus' otherwise lost religious and natural historical works, all in Latin:

De diis (*On the Gods*): probably consulted by Cicero for his own *De natura deorum*; cf. Macrobius Saturnalia 3.4.6

De hominum natura (*On the Nature of Men*)

De animalibus (*On Animals*)

De ventis (*On Winds*): contained meteorological, astronomical, and astrological data

Sphaera Graecanica and *Sphaera Barbarica* (*The Dome of the Sky, Greek*, and *The Dome of the Sky, Near Eastern*): discussed names of constellations, astrology, horoscopes

De extis (*On Divination by Organs* [of sacrificed animals])

De augurio privato (*On Private Divination*)

De somniis (*On Dreams*): one quote or paraphrase is preserved in Lydus, *De ostentis* 45

Diarium tonitruale (*Brontoscopic Calendar*): said to be a translation or adaptation of part of the books of Tages

Figulus was distinguished for writing *communes litterae*, in contrast to Varro's reputation for *theologia*, according to Servius (*Ad Aen.* 10.175). Harris suggests that the work cited by Servius, in which Figulus denigrated the reputation of the Ligurians as thieves, was called *De terras* (*de terris*?) and should be considered a separate treatise from the *Sphaera*(*e*) to which it is sometimes attributed.[9] Little is known about the exact timing of his writings, but they cannot have begun "much before the 80s or 70s at the earliest."[10] According to Macfarlane,[11] the output of Figulus the author was "numerous, diverse and certainly at hand" to influence authors and speakers of the Augustan period, but we do not know how long individual treatises circulated after that time: the *Brontoscopic Calendar* is the only work to have survived in near-complete (albeit translated!) form – could that possibly have been influenced by its different, "scriptural" character in contrast to all the personal and philosophical treatises?

Astrology, apart from some popular incidents with the wandering *Chaldei*, "Chaldeans" as Romans called hireling soothsayers, seems only to have been legitimized in Rome during the first century BC, under the aegis of two scholars: Figulus and Tarutius of Firmum (also known to Cicero).[12]

[9] Harris 1971:23.
[10] Harris 1971:182.
[11] Macfarlane 1996:243.
[12] Barton 1994:37.

It seems that Figulus also expressed the Stoic and supposedly Babylonian doctrine of the world's ending in conflagration and of catasterism, the ascension of individual souls to the stars after death (presumably in the *Sphaera Graecanica* and *Sphaera Barbarica*). As so often happens, the public perception of deep philosophical works can reduce them to mere fortune-telling and magic, and so Figulus was credited with having predicted the Civil War between Pompey and Caesar, and also the birth of Augustus (Lucan *De bello civili* 1.649–65). Suetonius said that "everyone believes this story" (*Augustus* 94.5).

Suetonius recorded a portent that obliquely cited lightning and was identified by Figulus as forecasting the greatness of Octavian at the time of his birth in 63 BC. This expressed a long-standing Italic tradition, apparently, for Suetonius adds that "in ancient days, when a part of the wall of Velitrae had been struck by lightning, the prediction was made that a citizen of the town would one day rule the world."[13] On the day of his son's birth, in the midst of the Catilinarian affair, Octavius arrived late at the senate, "then Publius Nigidius, as everyone knows, learning the reason for his tardiness and being informed also of the hour of the birth, declared that the ruler of the world had been born."[14] Figulus' noting the hour of birth sounds more like astrological divination, but the association between divination and ruling power is one that occurs in many cultures.

Figulus' erudition earned him the respect of his contemporaries and presumably furthered the promising public career that his personal political convictions ultimately ruined. He was one of the most successful (or best documented) of the men who turned their sights from Etruria to seek their futures in Late Republican Rome. Ancient scholars seem not to have questioned the authenticity or validity of his research, and the praise of Cicero, that scathing critic of diviners, registers as particularly sincere about a colleague whose personal ethics were as admirable as his arcane studies.[15]

LYDUS (JOHN THE LYDIAN)

Johannes Laurentius Lydus, "John the Lydian," was born in Philadelphia in Lydia in 490 AD, and he received an excellent Classical education. He came

[13] Suetonius *Augustus* 94.2/Rolfe 1998:287 – *Velitris antiquitus tacta de caelo parte muri responsum est eius oppidi civem quandoque rerum potiturum.*

[14] Suetonius *Augustus* 94.5/Rolfe 1998:289 – *nota ac vulgata res est P. Nigidium comperta morae causa, ut horam quoque partus acceperit, affirmasse dominum terrarum orbi natum.*

[15] For references on Nigidius Figulus, see Schmidt, 2000; Hall 1984:316–17, no. 61.2; Liuzzi 1983; Della Casa 1962 (also see review by Thesleff 1965); Kroll 1936; Legrand 1931, all of which have been superseded by references above; Turfa 2006D:174–75. Texts of surviving fragments are Swoboda 1889 and Hakkert 1964.

to Constantinople in 511, where, after studying philosophy (especially the Neoplatonism popular in previous centuries), he received an appointment to the praetorian prefecture. His next forty years were spent in civil service in Constantinople, where one of his distinctions was his ability to translate Latin documents – apparently by the era of Justinian, few officials were so qualified. Lydus' palace career finished with the prestigious appointment to teach in the Imperial School (ca. 543); he retired in 551, but he continued to write; he died in Constantinople in 560 AD.[16]

In his position in the Byzantine government and the palace school, Lydus must have had access to many manuscripts that are now lost, for although Byzantium treasured many elements of past civilizations, under Justinian there were three waves of persecution of pagans. In 528–29, 545–46, and 562 AD even courtiers, civil servants, scholars, and privileged aristocrats were seized in the purges, and one can only assume that questionable texts were destroyed. Lydus' treatise *De ostentis*, like his others written in the contemporary Greek, made otherwise obscure works by Latin writers accessible to the scholars of his day. It seems, however, to have been published without any of the difficulties – namely, charges of heresy – that accrued to some other experts on pagan topics, for Lydus was honored with the chair of Latin Philology at the palace school. Some of his comments on natural phenomena seem to clarify a Christian viewpoint pleasing to his superiors. For instance, in *De ostentis* 9, noting alarming past solar eclipses, he observes that "there is good reason to honor Divine Providence since for the entire duration of this most blessed reign, there has been no eclipse whatever verified under this sign [the royal triangle Aries-Leo-Sagittarius]." At *De ostentis* 54, he notes tendentiously, "the whole universe is organized according to physical laws but above them is the rule of Divine Providence and of the laws of fate."[17] Though he was not likely a "crypto-pagan," Lydus was certainly a curious scholar inquiring into antique Roman curiosities, and, as Michael Maas puts it, "simply someone whose professional life, culture, and intellectual interests were free of Christian decoration."[18]

The survival of his work shows that his audience believed that he was not a pagan adherent of the old works he translated. It also speaks to the perceived authenticity of the works he transmitted, at least those in *De ostentis*, because there could be no reason to alter them for his own personal beliefs or for political propaganda. His high ultimate rank in the palace bureaucracy must also have guaranteed him access to libraries and archives, which is additional

[16] Sources for his life are his own works and a brief entry in Suidas, s.v. *Joannes Philadelpheus Lydos*; see Klotz 1927:2210.

[17] … προνοία δὲ θεοῦ καὶ λόγῳ σιγῆς. Other references to Providence are *De ostentis* 16 and 22.

[18] Maas 1992:5.

circumstantial evidence for other Byzantine scholars' confidence in the authenticity of the ancient works preserved in the Latin expert's treatises.

As Ilaria Domenici, Erika Maderna, Dominique Briquel, and others have pointed out,[19] Lydus evinced a firm conviction that what one learns from the past can be valid for the present. Like many of his scholarly and political contemporaries, he saw himself as Italian (although born in Asia Minor), and he saw the power of Constantinople as the logical development of Roman civilization – a culture that had itself grown from Etruscan roots. His selection of natural phenomena for divination or analysis may well have seemed to his readers to be confirmed when the comet of 540 AD presaged the destruction of Antioch by "Rome's" enemy, Khosru of Persia, and he and his contemporaries knew of other events to link to past political disasters.

Briquel, noting the proactively Christian tone of Justinian's Constantinople, explains Lydus' lack of heretical rumor by his reputation for esotericism: "En fait, avec en auteur comme Jean le Lydien, c'est simplement d'un goût pour l'ésotérisme, pour les saveurs mystérieux et cachées, qu'il s'agit."[20] Introducing *De ostentis*, Lydus cites a great variety of authors on the topic of divination: among the Greeks, Egyptians, and Near Easterners named were Petosiris, "the divine Ptolemy" (the 2nd-c. AD Alexandrian astronomer and author of the *Tetrabiblion*), and even Zoroaster. It appears that Tages and the Etruscan scriptures offered an Italian parallel for the Eastern material already so familiar to scholars, and they became a focus for Lydus of the wisdom of Rome, to which he and his fellow Constantinopolitans were the logical heirs.[21] Although eloquent in denouncing public figures (like John of Cappadocia) in his work on contemporary bureaucracy, Lydus offers no criticism of ancient paganism, and, apart from the mild references to Divine Providence, he gives little indication of Christian belief having influenced his writing.

For Lydus, the Etruscan *Brontoscopic Calendar* was just one of many pagan documents on the subject of divination that crossed his desk; it appears to be the oldest of the remaining brontoscopies (calendars for divination by thunder) of Classical antiquity that Lydus preserved, embedded in his antiquarian and learned treatises. These held other texts for divination also, using as omens weather, earthquakes, natural or unnatural phenomena, and of course the zodiac, moon, and stars. The rest of the texts had been created in the heady atmosphere of affluence, encyclopedic scholarship, and popular culture that flourished in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East and Egypt, and they continued to be disseminated, at least among scholars, through the entire Byzantine and medieval period (the last of the late brontoscopic manuscripts was hand-copied in the nineteenth century!).

[19] Domenici and Maderna 2007:11–12; Briquel 1997:197–98.
[20] Briquel 1997:197.
[21] Briquel 1997:197–98; Mastandrea 1979:76; Domenici and Maderna 2007:11–12, 18–19.

In the field of ancient religion, Lydus published one other antiquarian work that remains of great importance – *De mensibus* (*On the Months*), on the Roman calendar and holidays – and it includes some pagan festivals still celebrated under Justinian. In the history of Byzantium, Lydus is actually better known for *De magistratibus* (*On the Magistracies*), a complete historical discussion of Roman bureaucracy from its origins to his own day. There, in addition to making strongly political remarks about his contemporaries, he stressed the continuity of ancient developments with the culture of his own day. (References exist to lost works by Lydus, ranging from panegyrics on his contemporaries to straightforward history, and even poetry.)[22]

SURVIVAL AND TRANSMISSION OF THE TEXT

So precarious was the survival of the written works of antiquity that the Etruscan *Brontoscopic Calendar* would not be known to us today if a single Byzantine manuscript (*Codex Caseolinus*) had not been (re-)discovered in 1784 in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. This held the only complete text of *De ostentis* and has been dated to the end of the ninth to the beginning of the tenth century. (Only three fragments were previously known.) The manuscript was originally published in 1823 by Karl Benedikt Hase, with updated editions appearing in 1837 (edited by August Immmanuel Bekker), 1863, and finally in 1897 (the last two edited by Curt Wachsmuth). This antiquarian compendium of curiosities on the topic of divination usually is known by the Latin *De ostentis*, but it was titled by Lydus Περὶ διοσημείων, which has been rendered recently by Italian translators Domenici and Maderna (2007) as *Sui segni celesti*, or *On Signs in the Heavens*.

In addition to the document attributed to Nigidius Figulus, *De ostentis* purports to (and surely does) furnish Greek word-for-word translations of several other texts on divination. The Figulus document is the oldest of them, followed by a treatise attributed to the first-century BC author Fonteius Capito. Introduced with short discussions by Lydus, other brief texts are associated with third-century AD and later Roman authors, such as Labeo and Claudius Tuscus, another name that hints at the Etruscan background of such lore. (See Chapter 9.)

PAST SCHOLARSHIP AND THEORIES ON AUTHENTICITY

Scholarship during the past century has been divided on the topic of the value and/or authenticity of the brontoscopic text preserved by Lydus at *De ostentis*

[22] References on Lydus, including previous bibliography, are Baldwin 1991; Tinnefeld 1999; Jones et al. 1980; Maas 1992:1–11; Turfa 2006D:174; Domenici and Maderna 2007:7–19, 28–33.