



**Between men and gods:  
divine signs and imperial power**

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**Abstract**

The project analyses the representation of Roman emperors as thaumaturgical or divinely related figures through narratives of supernatural and prodigious phenomena such as *omina*, premonitory dreams, divinations and miraculous healings. These episodes, which served to reinforce the power and legitimacy of the sovereign, will be studied from a literary, anthropological and political-religious perspective, focusing on the first three centuries of the Empire. By analysing literary, epigraphic, archaeological and numismatic sources, the project will investigate the propagandistic role of these phenomena and the popular perception of imperial power as sacred. The results aim at a new understanding of the relationship between religion and authority in Rome, based on interdisciplinary and cross-cultural comparisons.

**Project description**

Ancient sources, both historiographic and literary, often attribute miraculous events and thaumaturgical abilities to the emperors, elements that enhanced their charisma and legitimised their power. This narrative heritage of prodigies is a rich source for analysing and understanding the universe of beliefs shared by the inhabitants of the Empire around the figure of their ruler and the concept of his power.

Ancient historiography insists so much on the narration of these episodes that it invites a careful study of their possible adherence to topical and recursive narrative modes in the literary tradition of imperial biographies. The Roman people have always believed in the role of supernatural phenomena as signs of the manifestation of the divine, breaking into the regular, everyday order of things. Roman historiography and its tradition of legends from its earliest days show a certain familiarity with supernatural episodes that proved decisive in the course of events. It is therefore not an innovation of imperial historiography to include such phenomena in the historical narrative, but it is certainly an undeniable fact that in the imperial age these miracles had a significant relationship with the lives of the Roman emperors, giving religious and supernatural significance to the exercise of their rule.

*Omina* were phenomena of various kinds, ranging from atmospheric agents to psychic afflictions (such as hallucinations), the manifestation of which, sometimes contrary to the laws of nature, was interpreted as a sign revealing future events predestined by the divinities. They were



classified according to their nature and the context in which they occurred (*omina oblativa, impetrativa, verbalia, onirica...*) and also according to the quality of the omen they conveyed, either favourable (*omina fausta*) or harmful (*omina infausta*). The *omina* testified to the existence in everyday life of a realm of interaction between the divine and human worlds. Historians such as Suetonius and Cassius Dio offer a rich repertoire of such phenomena to adorn the biographies of Roman emperors, such as omens prophesying their future reign (*omina imperii*) or those foretelling their decline or death (*signa mortis*). Within the *omina*, premonitory dreams (*omina onirica* or *visiones*) play an important role, and their narratives often seem to respond to established literary *topoi*. Oneiric fantasy employed a repertoire of symbols that provided important clues to possible future events: most *omina imperii* manifested themselves in dreamlike form.

There was also a category of miraculous phenomena (*prodigia*) that were not intended to announce future events, but to manifest the displeasure of the gods, the breakdown of the *pax deorum*, or, on the contrary, to materialise their favour, such as the miracle of light that encouraged the Emperor Claudius and his army to land in Britain by showing the route of navigation (Cass. Dio 60, 4); sometimes they intervened decisively in the development of events, such as the miraculous rain that determined the victory of Marcus Aurelius and his army in a battle against the Quadi and the Marcomanni (Cass. Dio 71, 8-10). The emperor's life thus seems to have been marked by a multitude of miraculous manifestations that strengthened his bond with the divine world.

Many emperors resorted to the arts of prophecy and divination as a valuable means of legitimising their power. Many of them were in close contact with authoritative astrologers and prophets, whose answers could guarantee the preservation of their rule or warn them of future threats. Hadrian, for example, was very close to the mysterious Egyptian prophet-magician Pancrates of Memphis, as a passage in the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (PGM IV 2447-2455) attests. Not infrequently, it was the emperors themselves who claimed divinatory powers, an aspect that reinforced their supernatural authority in the eyes of the people.

Prophetic gifts helped to confirm the thaumaturgical image of the emperor, another fundamental aspect that can be observed in historiography. Thaumaturgical actions were a powerful means of reinforcing imperial authority, as they favoured the assimilation of the sovereign to a divine being, capable of intervening in reality by performing miracles beyond the reach of the common man and often contrary to the laws of nature. Among the most famous episodes of imperial thaumaturgy are the miraculous healings, such as those performed by the emperor Vespasian in Alexandria for a blind man and a cripple (Suet. *Vesp.* 7; Tac. *Hist.* 4, 81-82; Cass. Dio 65, 8, 1-2), or those performed by a feverish Hadrian on two blind people (*HA Hadr.* 25, 1-4). These episodes of healing thaumaturgy not only allow us for meaningful comparisons between different cultures, but also lead us to reflect on the influence of other religious traditions, such as the cults of the healing deities Asclepius and Serapis, on the emperor's supernatural construction.

The series of supernatural events associated with the reign of the emperors, which we have just reviewed, offers stimulating avenues of investigation for understanding the sacred conception



of imperial power and the interaction between emperors and deities. Historians such as Suetonius, Tacitus, Cassius Dio, Herodianus and the author of the *Historia Augusta* have left us a remarkable number of accounts, and although they do not always dwell on the interpretation of such events, the decision not to neglect them, but to report them frequently, reveals a desire to include in the historical narrative also news that seemed to correspond to a representation of the sovereign that was clearly widespread in the popular imagination and therefore fundamental to the presentation of the emperor's biographical profile.

The aim of this research project is to analyse these narratives and to study their function from a literary, anthropological and political-religious point of view. In particular, the focus of the research will be limited to the emperors of the first three centuries of the Empire (from Augustus to Diocletian), without considering the Christian emperors, except for possible comparisons, since their study would imply the need to introduce new categories of interpretation concerning the symbolic and cultural universe of Christianity.

### **Status quaestionis**

The proposed theme, in its various declensions, enjoys a remarkable tradition of scholarly research, especially in the second half of the last century. A valuable work for an anthropological understanding of the role of miraculous events in Roman civilisation is R. Bloch's *Les prodiges dans l'Antiquité classique* (1963), which shows how divine signs were an integral part of political and religious communication in antiquity. Related work includes B. MacBain's *Prodigy and Expiation: a Study in Religion and Politics in Republican Rome* (1982) and the research of Wildfang and Isager, who collect and analyse episodes of omens and divinatory practices in *Divination and Portents in the Roman World* (2000). Some of the supernatural aspects associated with the figure of the emperor are discussed in *Religions of Rome* (1998) by Beard, North and Price. These authors offer an overall view of the religious context in which the miracles associated with the emperors were inscribed, linking them to power dynamics. On the same subject, I. Gradel's *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (2002) analyses the cult of the emperors not only as a religious practice but also as a political instrument for consolidating their authority. There have also been some valuable studies, particularly in the twenty years between the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, which have devoted themselves to the study of particular types of miraculous phenomena closely linked to the power of the emperors and which have opened up new avenues of research in this field: on the significance of imperial omens, we must mention *Les Présages impériaux d'Auguste à Domitien* (2001) by A. Vigourt, who insists above all on the propagandistic value; the rich collection of dreams and miraculous visions of the emperor, *Träume und Visionen in Prinzipat und Spätantike* (2000) by G. Weber is remarkable; on *omina imperii*, *El emperador predestinado. Los presagios de poder en época imperial romana* (2002) by M. Requena; on prophetic and divinatory practices, *Prophets and Emperors. Human and divine authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (1994) by D. Potter. Finally, there is no lack of works devoted to the interpretation of famous miraculous episodes, such as the healings of Vespasian (D. Wardle 2012; T.



S. Luke 2010; M. G. Morgan 1996) and the miraculous rain of Marcus Aurelius (I. Israelowich 2008). What is lacking, however, is a work that examines the various supernatural phenomena reported for the Roman emperors as a whole. Therefore, a work that explores and systematises the different types of narrative, which integrates the direct interpretation of ancient sources with the contributions of the most authoritative scientific studies, can produce valuable results for understanding the religious value of imperial power as it was conceptualised and propagated in Roman culture.

### Objectives

The aims of the research project are outlined below:

- To understand the function of supernatural phenomena within historiographical narratives and to study their correspondence with established literary traditions.
- To question the origins of these narratives, and thus to investigate the possible cultural, political and religious contexts in which they took shape.
- To reconstruct from these events the religious beliefs of the inhabitants of the Empire regarding the figure of the emperor and his power, and in particular to analyse Roman society's perception of the relationship between its political leader and the sphere of the divine. This point lends itself to numerous comparisons with the thought systems of other, even historically distant, cultures.
- To investigate the possible propaganda implications of miraculous phenomena, i.e. how they were programmatically used by emperors to assert their authority and confer supernatural legitimacy.

### Sources, methods and organisation of the research

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, it will be appropriate to adopt multiple approaches and thus to use different sources and research tools. The recognition and historical-critical analysis of ancient literature, the texts of which will be systematically treated from a comparative perspective, will be of primary importance.

A great centrality will be attached to the literary analysis of this kind of sources: the study of lexical usage and rhetorical devices, the application of narratological theories, and the identification of topical and recursive motifs in tales of thaumaturgy and miraculous events. In particular, the following will be useful for research

- Historiographical works on the imperial age, which are the primary sources for the present research. Particular attention will be paid to Tacitus' *Annals* and *Histories*, Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*, Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, the imperial biographies of the *Historia Augusta* and Herodian's *History of the Empire after Marcus Aurelius*.





- Rhetorical works such as the *Panegyric of Trajan* by Pliny the Younger, other speeches included in the collection of the 12 Latin Panegyrics, or the celebratory speeches written by orators such as Dion Chrysostomos and Aelius Aristides (also useful for analogies with the cult of Asclepius), which can provide important informations on the rhetorical-celebratory devices for the figure of the emperor and the declination of his relationship with the divine.
- Poetic compositions, especially those of an encomiastic nature, which allow us to understand how the glorification of the emperor and his elevation to the divine were constructed in literary terms. The works of the Augustan poets (Virgil, Horace, Propertius, etc.) can be useful in this respect.
- Treatises or didactic works on the nature, function and beliefs of miraculous and supernatural phenomena, such as Cicero's *De divinatione*, Valerius Maximus' *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri*, Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* or Artemidorus of Daldi's *Onirocritica* (on the interpretation of dreams).
- Other historiographical works, either pre-imperial (Hellenistic Greek historiography) or dealing with earlier historical periods (Livy, Diodorus Siculus, Arrian, Appian, etc.). These works can be useful in understanding the recurrence of certain narrative motifs in the divine representation of rulers (such as the Hellenistic kings or Alexander the Great) and in the narration of supernatural phenomena.

In addition to the literary sources mentioned above, there are other primary sources, mainly material evidence, of various types and informative potential:

- epigraphy, which can provide interesting insights into the practices and beliefs of the inhabitants of the empire, including the worship of the sovereign, with particular attention to imperial formulae and titles (e.g. dedicatory or votive inscriptions).
- archaeological and iconographic sources (e.g. celebrative monuments), which are invaluable for studying propaganda aspects, as they were often used by emperors to promote a certain image of themselves and their power (take the case of the miracle of the rain, mentioned above, which is not only narrated in historiographic sources but also depicted in relief on the column of Marcus Aurelius);
- Coinage, which conveyed images and legends containing propaganda messages, often praising the emperor and the miracles that favoured him (e.g. the same miraculous rain was disseminated in coinage under Antoninus Pius, through the issue of denarii depicting Iuppiter Pluvius).

The application of anthropological paradigms of interpretation to the object of research will be fundamental: the use of theories on charismatic and sacred power (e.g. the "holy king" studied by J. Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, or the studies on charismatic power and θεῖοι ἄνδρες by L. Cracco Ruggini 1979 and 1982); the analysis of the magical-religious beliefs of the inhabitants of the Empire (M. Bettini 2015, A. Ovadiah- S. Mucznik 2014, E. De Martino 1973, E. R. Dodds 1951); the analysis



of the narratives of miraculous episodes as instruments to strengthen the bond between the sovereign and the people or to legitimise his authority in moments of crisis. It may also be useful to study these aspects by comparing them, from a diatopic and diachronic point of view, with different cultural realities, such as the medieval monarchies of France and England, studied by Marc Bloch in *The Thaumaturge Kings* (1924), the Egyptian pharaonic monarchy (D. Frankfurter 1998), the rulers of the Chinese Qin and Han dynasties (G. Giardi 2023).

The research and writing work will be organised in such a way that each type of supernatural phenomenon will be given its own specific treatment in order to facilitate a detailed analysis of its morphology and interpretations. The research methodology outlined above will be applied to each category of supernatural manifestation. In the final thesis, each phenomenon will have its own chapter, which will have further internal articulations that can develop its taxonomy and analyse specific aspects. As a guide, the work will deal with the following phenomena in order: *omina* and *prodigia*, prophecy and divination, imperial thaumaturgy.

### Relevance of the project and expected results

The relevance of the project lies in its positioning at the convergence of several areas of interest in the study of classical culture: literary, since it examines the function of supernatural phenomena as topical narrative devices in the narrative of the lives of sovereigns; political-religious, since it allows us to explore the relationship between religion and imperial power through prodigies as instruments of divine justification of the emperor's authority; anthropological, since it allows us to explore the universe of beliefs surrounding the figure of the sovereign and his relationship with the divine.

The expected outcomes include a new understanding of classical sources, focusing on the language and contexts of miraculous phenomena. It will clarify how these narratives served to legitimise the power of emperors at crucial moments, from their accession to the throne to the management of crises, and explore conceptualisations of power. Furthermore, a comparison with other cultural realities will highlight similarities and differences in the mechanisms of sacralising power across human cultures.

As well as making an innovative contribution to the field of classical studies and the history of religions, this work may stimulate contemporary reflection on the construction of charisma and political authority through symbols and narratives.

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