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Citation

Beerden, K. (2020). Better safe than sorry: nocturnal divinatory signs from a first-century BCE Roman perspective. In J. Ker & A. Wessels (Eds.), *The values of nighttime in classical antiquity: between dusk and dawn* (pp. 257-274). Leiden: Brill.
doi:10.1163/9789004436367_014

Version: Publisher's Version
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3280956>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Better Safe than Sorry: Nocturnal Divinatory Signs from a First-Century BCE Roman Perspective

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1 Introduction

Current studies about the historical night show that apparently clear-cut notions about distinctions between the day as a time of activity and the night as a time of rest are much more complicated and ambiguous than they may appear at first sight. There is ambivalence about night as a space to inhabit: the night is considered to be a fearful place on the one hand, while on the other hand it is filled with a soothing silence.¹ Still, segmented sleep may have allowed for nocturnal activity in pre-industrial societies.² Darkness, it is said, allowed for an inversion of cultural norms, enabling irresponsible merrymaking and aggression³ or providing a time to be alone and focus on work or writing. As for religion, darkness was perceived to facilitate communication between gods and men; yet illicit religious practices could take place at night.⁴ Many of the discussions about night in relation to the day seem to address one central issue: was the Roman night seen as an extension to, or as an inversion of, the day?⁵

In this chapter I propose to reflect on the notions flagged above. This investigation is concerned with ideas about the occurrence of divinatory signs taking place at night in the Roman Republic, through the eyes of first-century BCE authors. Existing literature on the ancient world does not yet use the divinatory sources as a focus for problematizing concepts of, or ideas about, the night as such—although there are in fact quite a few sources that mention nocturnal signs.⁶ We also know that time and timing were very important in ancient reli-

1 Edensor 2015, 422–438.

2 Roger Ekirch 2001, 344.

3 Laes and Strubbe 2014, 138.

4 Grethlein 2003, 18–20.

5 Ker 2004, 217–221.

6 However, it is discussed in passing, for example in Pirenne-Delforge 2018, 146–149. Cf. Chaniotis 2018b, 371. Divinatory methods thought to take place at night have been studied extensively, especially dreams, astrology, and extispicy. Recent literature on the related topic of

gions in general, and in divination in particular.⁷ It must then be assumed that it was seen as significant when signs were thought to have occurred during the night.⁸ What does this show us about first-century BCE ideas about the Roman night?

The second contribution this chapter seeks to make is methodological: it problematizes whether study of the night should include only those instances where the ancient authors explicitly mention the occurrence of signs at night; or also include those instances where a Roman audience may have simply *assumed* a sign took place at night—but run the risk that we are actually using materials that refer to occurrences during the day. These methodological issues are discussed in the context of nocturnal occurrences of divinatory signs, but they are also relevant to study of the historical night in a wider sense: how do we select our source materials?

A third aim of this study is to explore how the ancient study of the night, and the occurrence of divinatory signs in particular, can contribute to larger debates about the (historical) night. It does so by situating the ancient sources in relation to modern literature on the history of nocturnalization, nocturnal literacy, the role of the senses at night, and normative evaluations of the night.

2 Definitions and Restrictions

Divination is the interpretation of a sign that has been perceived to have been sent by the supernatural—either spontaneously or after it had been requested. However, this study will only discuss the nocturnal *occurrence* of divinatory signs. When official recognition of the sign by the Senate was necessary this occurred later, during the daytime; and its interpretation could also take place at a later stage—these two later stages in the divinatory process are not discussed here. In what follows the term ‘signs’ is used as an overarching term to include solicited and unsolicited divinatory signs provided through dreams, extispicy, and auspices, and in the form of *prodigia*. These were all ways in which it was thought the will of the gods could be known.⁹

epiphanies has touched on the theme of the night, where Petridou argues that the night was a time for erotic/sexual epiphanies (Petridou 2015, 235–236).

7 Beerden 2013, 157; 164; 177–178.

8 Others have remarked on the significance of nocturnal ritual (which is, in a strict sense, not dealt with here as this chapter focuses on *occurrence* of the sign), e.g., Haas 1994, 906–907.

9 Much more can be said about the functions of the particular methods. The following publication is a good start: Satterfield 2015, 431–445.

The choice to focus on the first century BCE is related to the relative wealth of source materials about Republican divination. Every nocturnal sign attested by a first-century BCE author can be taken into account to answer the question posed above: when discussed together they show a first-century BCE view on the nocturnal occurrence of signs. Even if a first-century author used earlier sources to base his work on, the information he chose to include reveals his attitude towards the nocturnal occurrence of signs.

There are, however, some further restrictions on the sources that are used here: this analysis is concerned with, and restricted to, the so-called Historical Republican divinatory signs which have been collected—and commented on—by David Engels.¹⁰ Engels' selection is strict: he only includes the sources when they are concerned with signs which both have a relation to events in Roman Republican history and were also experienced by Romans.¹¹ These restrictions are suitable for current purposes because they ensure a focus on Roman views on Roman experiences. A last methodological comment is that the confusing categories of dusk and dawn have also been excluded—we should be strictly concerned with the night only.¹²

3 Nocturnal Occurrence of the Sign: Better Safe Than Sorry?

If we want to understand *night*-time divination, it may be argued that it should be absolutely certain that the sources refer to nocturnal occurrences. Sometimes the sources are very clear indeed: '[...] the sun was seen for several hours at night';¹³ or: 'In the temple of the Penates the doors opened of their own accord at night [...].'¹⁴ On the other hand, the sources are regularly much less explicit than this, either because the author knew that his readers assumed the sign would have occurred at night or perhaps because he simply did not

10 Engels 2007, 22.

11 References to Greek history are also excluded, as are references to other non-Romans such as Hannibal.

12 While doing so, I acknowledge the problems regarding ancient definitions of the night due in part to the changing length of the seasonal hour, which results in the feature of darkness being inextricably related to the concept of the ancient night. Cf. Hannah 2008, 72–74. In excluding dusk and dawn from my definition, I follow Chaniotis 2018a, 1.

13 166 BCE, *RVW* 196. *Obsequens* (Obs.) 12: [...] *sol per aliquot horas noctis visus* (ed. Weissenborn 1880; trans. Schlesinger).

14 165 BCE, *RVW* 197. Obs. 12: *In aede Penatium valvae nocte sua sponte adapertae* [...] (ed. Weissenborn 1880; trans. Schlesinger).

deem it relevant to say that the sign occurred at night. Should these sources be included? Astronomical phenomena, sleep and dreams, and signs implicitly lasting through a night are the most prominent illustrations of this discussion.

3.1 *Astronomical Phenomena*

In *De divinatione* Cicero relates three instances of possibly nocturnal divinatory signs that occurred in 63 BCE. This passage is part of the speaker's longer quotation in verse from Cicero's own *De consulatu suo* (*Div.* 1.18, trans. Wardle; my italics):¹⁵

For, during your consulship, you too first *observed the swift motions of the heavenly bodies and the menacing conjunction of the stars with glowing heat, when you performed purifying sacrifices on the snowy peaks of the Alban Mount and celebrated the Latin Festival with abundant milk, and you also saw shimmering comets with their bright light.* And you thought that there was much confusion involving a nocturnal massacre because the Latin Festival fell around a time of foreboding, *when the moon hid its clear shape with dulled light and was suddenly removed from the starry sky.* What means the torch of Phoebus, the herald of bitter war, which was climbing towards its zenith with blazing heat, while longing for the western parts of heaven and its setting?¹⁶ Or when a citizen struck by an awesome thunderbolt from a clear sky departs the light of life; or when the earth trembled with its pregnant body? *Then indeed during the night various terrible forms were seen and warned of war and sedition;*¹⁷ seers throughout the lands poured forth prophecies from frenzied breast warning of tragic outcomes.

*Nam primum astrorum volucris te consule motus
concursumque gravis stellarum ardore micantis
tu quoque, cum tumulos Albano in monte nivalis
lustrasti et laeto mactasti lacte Latinas,
vidisti et claro tremulos ardore cometas;*

15 Fr. 2, ed. Giomini 1975. *RVW* 304.1, 63 BCE.

16 This appears to be a diurnal sign; cf. Wardle 2006, 149 and Pease 1920–1923, 108 [266].

17 Pease considers this a reference to ghosts roaming the land (Pease 1920–1923, 110 [268]). Wardle is more cautious and thinks this may refer to ghosts appearing in dreams (or both) (Wardle 2006, 150). On the idea of nocturnal appearances of ghosts see Damon's chapter in this volume.

*multaque misceri nocturna strage putasti,
 quod ferme dirum in tempus cecidere Latinae,
 cum claram speciem concreto lumine luna
 abdidit et subito stellanti nocte perempta est.
 quid vero Phoebi fax, tristis nuntia belli,
 quae magnum ad columen flammato ardore volabat,
 praecipitis caeli partis obitusque petessens;
 aut cum terribili percussus fulmine civis
 luce serenanti vitalia lumina liquit,
 aut cum se gravido tremefecit corpore tellus.
 iam vero variae nocturno tempore visae
 terribiles formae bellum motusque monebant,
 multaque per terras vates oracla furenti
 pectore fundebant tristis minitancia casus.*

The first sign may, but cannot with complete certainty, be argued to have occurred at night: it has been stated that the sign could be Aurora Borealis, which can occur during dusk and dawn (something the Romans may have known, too).¹⁸ Did the intended audience simply assume this sign took place at night? Perhaps. The timing of the start of the rites related to the *feriae Latinae* is unknown, so circumstantial evidence does not help either.¹⁹ The other two instances (an eclipse of the moon in a starry sky and visions at night) seem convincingly nocturnal.

Meteors and shooting stars can also be seen during dusk and dawn, and in some cases perhaps even during the day. Again, while the cultural connection between these phenomena and the night was strong, it cannot—with certainty—be called exclusive. This means that while ‘At Lanuvium a meteor was seen in the sky by night’ is explicitly nocturnal,²⁰ the following occurrence

18 As commented on by Wardle 2006, 148 and RVW. Pease 1920–1923 notes that *ardore* reflects the idea of light rather than heat. However, in Cic. *Catil.* 3.18 we see a reference to meteors certainly taking place at night, which has been included here as a separate reference.

19 There is much discussion about changes in the number of days for which the festival continued, but not about the time on which the first day started (although it must have been early, as indicated by the existence of accommodation on the Alban Mount; Marco Simón 2011, 125). Cf. Smith 2012, 267–288 for discussions of the festival. Schultz discusses the *Feriae Latinae* in her commentary but acknowledges the uncertainties regarding the timing of the festival: Schultz 2014, 81–82; cf. Pease 1920–1923, 104 [262].

20 166 BCE, RVW 196. Obs. 12: *Lanuvii fax in caelo nocte conspecta* (ed. Weissenborn; trans. Schlesinger).

may—but need not—have been (considered to be) nocturnal: ‘[...] at Anagnia there were at first shooting-stars at intervals and then a great meteor blazed out [...].’²¹

3.2 *Sleep and Dreams*

Second, sleep and dreams: if we want to understand nighttime phenomena better, we can certainly use accounts of dreams.²² Some sources do indeed state that a dream was dreamt at night (or this can be deduced).²³ For example, Cicero recounts the dream of Tarquinius Superbus who dreams of a shepherd, sheep, and an occurrence in the sky: the sun melts. He then wakes up and it becomes morning.²⁴

However, this may not mean that every dream will have been nocturnal, or was necessarily assumed by author or audience to always be so. Although the great majority of dreams will have been dreamt at night, this need not necessarily always be the case; and although, in general, dreams and sleep were strongly associated with the night, we may choose to be cautious and not assume too much. Culturally specific practices related to sleeping patterns imply that segmented nocturnal sleep was usual and that a siesta was part of everyday life—perhaps resulting in daytime sleeping and dreaming.²⁵ The Hippocratics argued certainly that sleep took place during the night and that this was proper, but also that naps were recommended during particular times of

21 203 BCE, *RVW* 136. Liv. 30.2.11: [...] *Anagniae sparsi primum ignes in caelo, dein fax ingens arsit* [...] (ed. Walsh; trans. Schlesinger).

22 A volume such as Scioli and Walde 2010 does discuss dreams as nighttime phenomena, but with an aim to understand dreams better (not the night). See, however, Petridou 2015, 189–190.

23 Through vocabulary, for example: Harrison 2009, 213–215: “In literary texts, *visus/visum* was often used to refer to a dream when accompanied by a phrase denoting sleep or the night, such as *per quietem*, possibly because of the lack of specific dream vocabulary. However, in an inscription, dedicants use the smallest possible number of words, and so the phrase becomes shortened to just *visus/visum/ex viso* and so on.”

24 Cic. *Div.* 1.44 (*RVW* 28.2).

25 Nissin 2015, 113–121; Nissin 2016, 47–49. As for segmented sleep—we certainly have references that lead us to consider this as an option, e.g., Hp. *Epid.* 5.22. Segmented sleep would have allowed for nighttime activities as was usual in pre-industrial societies, as argued by Roger Ekirch 2001, 344: “Families rose to urinate, smoke tobacco, and even visit close neighbors. Many others made love, prayed, and, most important, historically, reflected on their dreams, a significant source of solace and self-awareness”; cf. 384–385; Roger Ekirch 2015, 153–155. A discussion surrounding the siesta concerns whether people actually slept or just rested: Wiedemann 2003, 125–139.

the year.²⁶ One could sleep after a meal and after early morning walks.²⁷ Galen comments and adds that the rich slept during the day—but he clearly thought this was a bad idea.²⁸ The connection between dreams, sleep, and the night is certainly strong but these sources show that it is not complete.

There are, then, two options: a strict and a more liberal approach. When the strict approach is taken dreams cannot be included without careful examination because they might also have taken place during the day. When a more liberal approach is taken, it could be assumed that Romans considered all dreams to take place at night, so much so that the author did not feel it needed to be mentioned—in which case all dreams would need to be included, without question. This issue will be returned to below.

3.3 *Night as a Central or 'Coincidental' Feature*

Third, should the night be a central feature of the sign? When Livy mentions that the statue of Apollo at Cumae shed tears for three days and three nights, the night is important enough to be mentioned and it changes the length of the sign.²⁹ A similar importance is given to the night when it is stated that the sign lasted for three days and two nights.³⁰ However, if the sign occurred for a long time (implicitly including one or more nights), but the night was not mentioned in the source, should it then be used in research into cultural ideas about the night? To provide an example: when Livy reports there was a shower of stones for three days,³¹ this technically also involves two nights. The night is, however, in this case not a distinguishing feature of the sign. Should the latter source be included or excluded in research into the night?

26 Hulskamp 2008, 74–75: she refers to Hp. *Vict.* 1.35 (156,14–15 Joly-Byl; 6.522 L.); Hp. *Prog.* 10 (205,9–206,2 Alexanderson; 2.134 L.); Hp. *Vict.* 3.68 (200,16–22 Joly-Byl; 6.604 L.).

27 Hulskamp 2008, 83–84 refers to Hp. *Vict.* 3.78 (6.622–624 L.); *Vict.* 2.60 (6.572–574 L.). Of course, there are other sources which explicitly connect sleep with the night, e.g., Cic. *Div.* 2.121. Still, such a source does not exclude that dreams could also take place during the day. On Hippocratic sleep see Rosen's chapter in this volume.

28 Hulskamp 2008, 96; Gal. *In Hipp. Prog.* 2.10 (269,19–270,12 Heeg; 18b. 128–130 K.). For a non-medical source see Hom. *Od.* 4.453 for an (interrupted) nap; Plin. *Ep.* 1.3.1 for bedrooms meant for use during the day; Plin. *Ep.* 9.36.3; Sen. *Ep.* 83.6; D.H. *Ant. Rom.* 4.2.3–4 for sleep around noon; Juv. 1.125–126 for an imaginary wife 'sleeping' in her carriage during the daytime.

29 Liv. 43.13.3–5 (RVW 186, 169 BCE).

30 Liv. 45.16.5/Obs. 11 (RVW 193, 167 BCE).

31 Liv. 39.22.3–4 (RVW 164, 186 BCE).

3.4 *Strict and Liberal Approaches*

Both strict and more liberal approaches have their merits. However, in each of the three cases discussed above I am opting to use only the sources which are explicitly concerned with nocturnal occurrences of signs and where the night is indicated as a distinguishing feature of the sign—I want to be sure, not simply assume, that the signs occurred at night. If there is only the slightest doubt that they did not, it would have consequences for the validity of research into attitudes towards the *night*. Therefore, these certain nocturnal signs are my core sources and I am taking the strict approach. The second group of sources consists of those that, through their assumed nocturnal occurrence, can be used to back up, supplement, or function as a contrast to the core sources.

4 Nocturnal Signs

This study will now proceed to review and analyze signs which explicitly occurred at night—and only at night—as the core of source materials which should certainly be used in an analysis of cultural values of the night. It will then reflect on inclusion of other divinatory occurrences which can (possibly) be assumed to have taken place at night.

The explicitly nocturnal divinatory signs we encounter range from those given by the voice of the gods in the context of war to sudden light appearing in a Roman city or town—and everything in between (Liv. 2.7.1–4;³² 32.29.1–2³³):

Yet despite the indecisive character of the battle, so great a panic came over Tarquinius and the Etruscans that they gave up the enterprise for lost, and that same night both armies, the Veientine and the Tarquiniensian, marched off every man to his own home. To the story of this fight common report adds a prodigy: that in the silence of the following night a loud voice was heard coming out of the Arsian forest, which was believed to be the voice of Silvanus, and that this was what he said: “The Tuscans have lost one more man in the battle-line; the Romans are conquerors in the war.” At all events the Romans left the field like victors, and the Etruscans like an army that has been defeated.

trans. FOSTER

32 509 BCE, *RVW* 29. On hearing voices of gods, cf. Speyer 1995, 75–95; Levene 1993, 150–151. Ogilvie 1965, 248–250 is much concerned with the credibility of the idea of speaking trees and the relationship between Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

33 197 BCE, *RVW* 145. Cf. Briscoe 1973, 224, who refers to discussions of similar signs.

Ita cum pugnatum esset, tantus terror Tarquinium atque Etruscos incensit, ut omissa inrita re nocte ambo exercitus, Veiens Tarquiniensisque suas quisque abirent domos. adiciunt miracula huic pugnae: silentio proximae noctis ex silva Arsia ingentem editam vocem; Silvani vocem eam creditam; haec dicta: uno plus Tuscorum cecidisse in acie; vincere bello Romanum. Ita certe inde abiere Romani ut victores, Etrusci pro victis.

ed. WEISSENBORN

Before the consuls and praetors left for their provinces, it was decided that expiatory sacrifices should be held for the prodigies. At Rome the temples of Vulcan and Summanus had been struck by lightning, as had a wall and a gate at Fregenae; and at Frusino daylight had appeared in the middle of the night.

trans. YARDLEY

Priusquam consules praetoresque in prouincias proficiscerentur, prodigia procurari placuit, quod aedes Volcani Summanique Romae et quod Fregenis murus et porta de caelo tacta erant, et Frusinone inter noctem lux orta.

ed. BRISCOE

However, when the signs are studied more systematically we come to results that are more conducive to answering the questions posed above. A basic, but important, preliminary observation is that, although many authors have concerned themselves with divination, only a small number—Posidonius of Apamea, Cicero, Oppius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Livy, and Obsequens—explicitly refer to nocturnal occurrence of signs in the strict sense of the word.³⁴

The kinds of nocturnal divinatory signs, based on the vehicle or medium which produced the sign (or out of which the sign consisted/manifested itself) can be categorized as: dreams,³⁵ sounds (animal and human),³⁶ light and fire

34 Authors consulted are: Sulla; Valerius Antias; Cornelius Sisenna; Licinius Macer; Posidonius of Apamea; Nigidius Figulus; Julius Caesar; Oppius; Cicero; Sallustius Crispus; Varro; Diodorus Siculus; Hyginus; Dionysius of Halicarnassus; Augustus; Livy; Livy, *Periochae*; Obsequens (Obs.). When two authors have discussed one occurrence of a particular sign, they have been taken together (where both explicitly discuss the night—if an author has not mentioned the night, I have taken him not to see it as a defining feature of the sign).

35 Liv. 26.41.18–19; Acc. *praet.* 17–28R = 651–662D = Cic. *Div.* 1.44; Liv. 8.6.9–13; Cic. *Div.* 1.18; Cic. *Div.* 1.59.

36 Liv. 2.7.2/D.H. 5.16.2; Liv. 5.32.6/Liv. 5.50.5; Liv. 10.40.2–6 (the way the eating of the chickens sounded was most important); Liv. 31.12.4; Obs. 27; Obs. 63; Obs. 68.

on earth,³⁷ light in the sky (including all astronomical phenomena, but also including storms and sudden light during the night),³⁸ occurrences involving animals—with the exception of sounds,³⁹ blood and tears running in buildings and from statues,⁴⁰ and unexpected movements.⁴¹ None of these categories are exclusively connected to the night or occur only at night.

5 Analysis

What does nocturnal occurrence of signs reveal about cultural constructions and values of the Republican night? In order to answer this question the findings above need to be connected to the other current debates that were briefly raised in the introduction above.

5.1 *The Night as a Time of Activity?*

Some consider the night as a space you can inhabit, do things in, maybe even conquer: we see “ongoing expansion of the legitimate social and symbolic uses of the night.”⁴² The word nocturnalization is especially used for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe because illumination (in the shape of street lights) allowed for ‘proper’ nocturnalization. The literature seems to see nocturnalization as a progressive development increasing through time, an ongoing pursuit to stretch the boundaries of how we can be active and inhabit the night.⁴³ This implies that there would be little or no nocturnalization in antiquity.

37 D.H. 5.46.1–3; Liv. 22.1.8; Liv. 27.4.12; Obs. 20 (also: light in the sky); Obs. 38; Obs. 52; Obs. 57.

38 Liv. 28.11.4; Liv. 28.11.6; Liv. 29.14.3; Liv. 32.29.2; Liv. 42.20.1–4; Obs. 12; Obs. 12; Obs. 14; Obs. 14; Obs. 15; Obs. 20 (also: light/fire); Obs. 27; Obs. 29; Posidon. 199 = Plu. *Mar.* 17.4; Obs. 44; Cic. *Catil.* 3.18; Cic. *Div.* 1.18; Obs. 70.

39 Opp. *hist.* F1 = Gel. 6.1.1–5 *FRHist* 40 F1 (= *HRR* 1 F2); Opp. F2 = Gel. 6.1.6 *FRHist* 40 F2 (= *HRR* 1 F3); Liv. 27.37.3; Cic. *Div.* 1.79.

40 Liv. 27.4.14; Liv. 43.13.4; Liv. 45.16.5/Obs. 11.

41 Obs. 13; Obs. 52; Obs. 65a; Obs. 67.

42 Koslofsky 2011, 1.

43 As illustrated by the famous article about ongoing expansion of night as a space: Melbin 1978, 3–22; but also more recently in a study of ‘heroic sleeplessness’ and the effects of electric lighting on labor: Derickson 2014, 1–26; Schivelbusch 1988. A related term is ‘colonization of the night,’ which deals with power relations as expressed (mostly by authorities) by their control of darkness and light: see again Melbin 1978, 3–22 and Melbin 1987, but also more recently Wishnitzer, 2014, 513–531.

While the sources show that signs very often occurred during the day, there is a significant number of occurrences that explicitly occurred during the night—and the number would certainly go up if all dreams and astronomical signs had been included. The sources still show—even when the criteria about which sources to include have been very strict—that plenty of divinatory signs were observed during night. Unless this was in a dream, it was necessary to be awake to see the sign. Many sources report signs, suggesting that the night was a time of activities—perhaps facilitated by segmented sleep patterns. The occurrence of nocturnal signs shows that gods are also envisaged to be active at night because they are the ones thought to provide signs. The night was, then, inhabited in the first century BCE: the existence of the corpus of sources in which we see nocturnal occurrences of signs must lead to a different use of, and provide nuance to, an eighteenth-century watershed of nocturnalization.

5.2 *Nocturnal Literacy?*

The concept of ‘nocturnal literacy’ has been used to argue that people used to have a ‘nocturnal aptitude’ for the night and could ‘read the night.’ This is in contrast to our lack of nocturnal literacy caused by the idea that we control the night by means of light and activity (nocturnalization). This control supposedly erased our understanding of the night; the varieties of its darkness; and our imagination related to it. This also results in a negative understanding of darkness and the night as a threatening environment.⁴⁴ The above is too simplified to be of interest to the historian. However, in the context of ancient divination, the term ‘nocturnal literacy’ may be redefined. When knowledge of the sensory characteristics of the night is available, any special circumstances (such as perceived signs from the supernatural) may be observed. If this knowledge is lacking, it is much harder to discern a nocturnal divinatory sign. If divination is ‘reading the signs,’ then there was certainly such a thing as ‘nocturnal literacy’ in the first century BCE.

5.3 *The Senses*

Perceiving divinatory signs is something that we do through the senses—and mainly through sight during the day.⁴⁵ Darkness was generally thought of as

44 Summers-Bremner 2008, 8–9; on ‘nyctophobia’: Edensor 2015, 422–438.

45 The importance of multi-sensory approach to understand divination is emphasized in Peek and Van Beek 2011, 227. They do this in the context of the visual presence of divinatory objects, but it may be applied to darkness as well.

the essential quality of the night: it was central in the perception of what night was (even if moon and stars could, in practice, be a good source of light).⁴⁶ Livy seems to emphasize the silence of the night, also emphasizing sound—or absence of sound—as a second essential quality.⁴⁷ The sources suggest, however, that—as during the daytime—sight was the most important way to discern a sign.⁴⁸ Every category encountered above, with the exception of the small category of sounds, revolved around visual signs (I include dreams as visual signs). If the implicitly nocturnal signs had been included, many more astronomical phenomena and dreams would have to be taken into account—tipping the balance even more towards sight as the central sense used in nocturnal divination. Many of the signs perceived through sight revolve around unexpected light (in many guises) in the sky or lights and fires on earth, which must have been very visible in a dark environment. Light was an inversion of normality when the night was thought of as, essentially, dark—and was thus a very suitable way for a sign to occur.

5.4 *A Negative Time?*

“[A]n activity conducted during the night was treated as something of a marked behaviour.”⁴⁹ In the context of religion the night is often depicted as a time of fear and illegitimacy. Cicero uses the notion of nighttime sacrifices to attack someone;⁵⁰ there is the Bona Dea gone wrong; the Bacchanalia; and *defixiones* which were supposedly deposited at night.⁵¹ There were other religious prac-

46 On effects of darkness and light at night in a modern context see Bille and Flohr Sørensen 2007.

47 See three of the citations from Livy as used in the present study: Liv. 5.32.6 (391 BCE, *RVW* 58); Liv. 2.7.2 (509 BCE, *RVW* 29); Liv. 10.40.2 (293 BCE, *RVW* 75). In the latter case the night is not described as silent, but the way Papirius rises—still, this adds to ideas of quiet night. Cf. Oakley 2005, 8.23.15.

48 The literature on seeing in relation to darkness is limited, but see on the connection between darkness and death; and the idea that seeing and being seen is pivotal to being alive: Squire 2016, 10; Turner 2016, 143–160.

49 Ker 2004, 216; in the context of theft and criminal actions in antiquity see Stanley 2002, 468–486; Africa 1971, 5–9; on the depiction of rape as nocturnal in Terence: Paraskeviotis 2013, 47–59 and in a more general sense Brands, Schwanen and Van Aalst 2015, 439–455; in a biological sense Li et al., 2015, 46–57. See further Joosse’s chapter in this volume on different markers in Plato.

50 Santangelo 2013, 40: “[...] when Cicero depicts the ‘nighttime sacrifices’ (*nocturna sacrificia*) that Sassia allegedly performs to further her horrible crimes, he accuses her of indulging in a *contaminata superstitio* which is in open breach of rightful and licit cultic practice.” However, consider Corbeill 2010, 81–102.

51 Carlà-Uhink 2018, 334–342.

tices with took place at night—sacrifices especially: they were “generally characterized by a high sense of liminality [...] and of subversion of the ‘normal’ order.”⁵²

The divinatory sources lead to nuance of the statements above, because we do not see a particular tendency for secrecy, illegitimacy, or subversion. Before we turn to the sources it should, however, be emphasized that most of the signs occurring at night are *prodigia* which were sanctioned as being signs from the supernatural by the Senate—perhaps this has an effect on our findings. At the same time we do not see instances where the night was a reason not to accept the sign as such. Even when a nocturnal sign is rejected by the Senate, the discussion states that it is not because it was at night, but for other reasons. In the following example, Livy relates the rejection of a voice heard at night as being a divinatory sign to the humble descent of the person who saw it, and not to its nocturnal occurrence (Liv. 5.32.6–7, trans. Foster):⁵³

During the same year, Marcus Caedicius, a plebeian, announced to the tribunes that in the New Street, where the chapel now stands, above the temple of Vesta, he had heard in the silence of the night a voice louder than that of a human being, which ordered the magistrates to be told, that the Gauls were approaching. This, as is usual, was disregarded, on account of the humble station of the author, and also because the nation was a remote one, and therefore the less known. And not only were the warnings of the gods disregarded, fate now impending; but further, the only human aid which was left them, Marcus Furium, they drove away from the city.

Eodem anno M. Caedicius de plebe nuntiavit tribunis se in Nova via, ubi nunc sacellum est supra aedem Vestae, vocem noctis silentio audisse clariorem humana, quae magistratibus dici iuberet Gallos adventare. id, ut fit, propter auctoris humilitatem spreto et quod longinqua eoque ignotior gens erat. Neque deorum modo monita ingruente fato spreto, sed humanam quoque opem, quae una erat, M. Furium ab urbe amovere.

The sources indicate that signs spotted during the night were taken as seriously as when they occurred during the day, perhaps with the exception of

52 Carlà-Uhink 2018, 334.

53 Ed. Weissenborn. 391 BCE, *RVW* 58. Cf. Levene 1993, 192, who notes that only Livy gives this reason for the ignoring of the sign. Although it had been rejected and is, as such, only a *potential* divinatory sign, I still include it among the nocturnal signs here.

dreams. Although very important to individual decision-making (also by senior magistrates) these were generally evaluated as ‘fringe divination’ that was not deemed suitable for public purposes.⁵⁴

There is only one possible ‘reversal’ of normal practice (Liv. 10.40.2–6, trans. Foster):⁵⁵

After receiving the reply from his colleague, Papirius rose quietly in the third watch of the night and sent a *pullarius* to observe the omens. There was not a man, whatever his rank or condition, in the camp who was not seized by the passion for battle, the highest and lowest alike were eagerly looking forward to it; the general was watching the excited looks of the men, the men were looking at their general, the universal excitement extended even to those who were engaged in observing the sacred birds. The chickens refused to eat, but the *pullarius* ventured to misrepresent matters, and reported to the consul that they had eaten so greedily that the corn dropped from their mouths on to the ground. The consul, delighted at the news, gave out that the omens could not have been more favourable; they were going to engage the enemy under the guidance and blessing of heaven. He then gave the signal for battle.

Tertia vigilia noctis, iam relatis litteris a collega, Papirius silentio surgit et pullarium in auspicium mittit. Nullum erat genus hominum in castris intactum cupiditate pugnae, summi infimique aequae intenti erant; dux militum, miles ducis ardorem spectabat. Is ardor omnium etiam ad eos qui auspicio intererant pervenit; nam cum pulli non pascerentur, pullarius auspicium mentiri ausus tripudium solistimum consuli nuntiavit. Consul laetus auspicium egregium esse et deis auctoribus rem gesturos pronuntiat signumque pugnae proponit.

The *pullarius* misrepresents the sign and it is emphatically stated in the source that this takes place at night, amplifying the transgression and the ‘wrongness’ of the situation. However, as this is the only true inversion or negative attestation of a divinatory sign occurring at night, it seems reasonable to conclude that nocturnal signs were not considered particularly negative *because* they occurred at night.

54 Santangelo 2013, 70–72.

55 Ed. Weissenborn. 293 BCE, *RVW* 75. Note that the *pullarius* takes the blame for this and that the Romans do win the battle. Cf. Levene 1993, 237–239.

Another issue to be considered is the question whether there are particularly gruesome or horrific nocturnal signs, more so than during the day. There are indeed terrible signs occurring at night, such as death, damage to temples, and statues of gods shedding tears. It seems that nocturnal signs were perceived as striking. However, many signs during the day were, too. The sources show no clear difference between night and day.

On the whole, nocturnal divination is sometimes evaluated ambiguously but is not in any way discussed as especially negative, frightening, or illegitimate in the first-century sources, and this does not contribute to the idea of 'reversal' of normal practice at night, nor to the night as a subversive or dangerous phase or time. Although we do know this theme from other ancient sources, the divinatory signs do nothing to strengthen it.

6 Towards the Study of the Roman Night

One of the contributions this inquiry aimed for was to problematize a methodological issue: the study of the night should proceed with caution where the sources are concerned. Are the sources selected on the basis of an explicit connection to the night or is it enough if they are connected to the night on the basis of cultural assumptions? Here, the working solution has been to select a core group of sources that are explicitly connected to the night and to err on the side of caution—future research may opt to use the second, bigger, group of sources as well to provide contrast to, or to supplement, the core sources.

What does the above show us about first-century BCE ideas about the Roman night? It can be suggested that the Roman first-century BCE night, seen from a divinatory perspective as far as we are speaking about occurrences of signs, is not a particularly subversive phase. Instead, the divinatory sources convey that the night was a canvas to be read and experienced with the senses and that a more advanced notion of nocturnalization is visible than has sometimes been assumed. The night was a time of activity.

The divinatory sources suggest that the night should be seen as an extension of the day, not as an inversion. The idea that ancient night and day were seen to be in stark contrast to one another—in contrast to experiences from industrial societies where boundaries are blurred—is not borne out. Although the above is only one specific case study into nocturnal divinatory signs, it suggests that the night in antiquity seems to have simply been a dark phase in a diurnal cycle. This leads to the notion that day and night should be studied together. The night should always be seen in the context of—and not only in opposi-

tion to—the day, and vice versa. This can offer a holistic way of researching the ancient daily cycle.

Abbreviations

- FRHist* Cornell, T., *The Fragments of the Roman Historians* (Oxford 2013).
HRR Peter, H., *Historicum Romanorum Reliquae* vols. 2 (Leipzig 1906).
RVW Engels, D. *Das römische Vorzeichenwesen (753–27 v. Chr.): Quellen, Terminologie, Kommentar, historische Entwicklung* (Stuttgart 2007).

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