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Dominique Briquel

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*Tages Against Jesus:
Etruscan Religion
in Late Roman Empire*

BY DOMINIQUE BRIQUEL

It may seem strange to associate in this way two entities which, at first glance, would seem to have nothing in common. The civilization of the Etruscans, which flourished in Italy during the 1st millennium BC, was extinguished before the birth of Christianity, by which time Etruria had already been absorbed into the larger Roman world in a process called “Romanization.”¹ This process seems to have obliterated the most characteristic traits of this autonomous culture of ancient Tuscany, a culture which may have been kin to that of the Romans, but was not identical to it. As for language, we can suppose that Etruscan, which is not Indo-European in origin and is therefore profoundly different not only to Latin but to all other Italic dialects, fell out of use completely during the period of Augustus.

One cannot, however, claim that all traces of ancient Etruria had disappeared by then. Its contributions to Roman civilization were considerable, above all at the time of that city’s modest beginnings when the Etruscans were not only incontestably the dominant power, but also the most culturally advanced people in central Italy. They had even furnished the *Urbs* with kings. Moreover, this Etruscan influence on Rome was not merely a thing of the past. In the Roman world at the end of the Republic and during the Empire, Etruria continued to exert a profound influence on Rome in one area in particular: that of religion.²

Such a state of affairs stems from the fact that, in their national religious heritage, the Etruscans had at their disposal a collection of ritual and divination practices of which the Romans knew no equivalent. A great many such rites were borrowed by Rome from her northern neighbours, who had developed them long before Rome felt any such need. The most famous of these was the foundation ritual of cities: it was unanimously admitted that when Romulus founded the city, he had recourse to Tuscan specialists. But the inferiority of the *Urbs* was perhaps even more flagrant in the domain of divination: all that has to do with the interpretation of those signs by which the gods supposedly addressed

man, and could make known to him their designs. The Etruscans had developed a body of divinatory knowledge which permitted them, for example, to assign meaning to patterns of lightning (*keraunoscopy*), to decipher the indications contained in the liver or in other organs of sacrificial victims (*hepatoscopy*), and generally to understand why the gods provoked the whole array of unusual phenomena behind which supernatural intervention was perceived, designated by the term “prodigies” (*prodigia*). The Etruscans had carefully studied all of these, and they had devoted to them an entire specialized literature called, quite simply, the “Etruscan books” (*libri Etrusci*). In classical times,³ these were divided into fulgatory books (*libri fulgurales*) treating keraunoscopy, haruspician books (*libri haruspicini*) treating hepatoscopy, and ritual books (*libri rituales*) treating rites as well as certain aspects of divination such as the interpretation of prodigies. The whole formed what was called the *Etrusca disciplina*.⁴ The term “discipline” is important, since it shows that the ancients considered it a veritable science, which is the meaning of the word in Latin, even if it was used specifically in the domain of religion. A specialized personnel put this discipline into practice: the haruspices. In theory, the term refers only to those who studied the liver (hepatoscopy), but in reality it was applied to all those who practiced this Etruscan religious science in any manner whatsoever.

The loss of Etruscan independence and the disappearance of a truly autonomous culture did not lead to the disappearance of the haruspices. On the contrary, they prospered in the Roman world, to such a point that even in the late Empire, St. Augustine had consulted just such a specialist when a student at Carthage.⁵ One could even say that the integration of Tuscany into the Roman Empire, spread over the whole of the Mediterranean world, opened up a new field of application for the Etruscan “discipline” and to the specialists who practiced it. Practically all of the provinces, at least in the western part of the Empire—the Hellenized Orient, habituated as it was to other forms of divination, proved to be relatively impermeable—have yielded inscriptions mentioning haruspices. Those who offered their services to clients for a fee existed almost everywhere, as is also clear from the passage from Augustine already mentioned. Certain practitioners were of a very high status: an epitaph at Poitiers, for example, mentions a Roman knight, called Gaius Flavius Campanus, said to have been “the most remarkable haruspice of his time.”⁶ To cite an example from literary sources, Spurrinna, the haruspice attached to Julius Caesar, who correctly warned of the inauspicious morning of the Ides of March, belonged to one of the most renowned families of the Tuscan aristocracy.⁷ Many, however, were poor individuals whose modest funerary inscriptions signal nothing remarkable apart from the qualification of *haruspex*. In fact fairly frequently one encounters freed slaves.⁸ In sum, not only were haruspices omnipresent geographically, but they were also socially diverse and could be encountered at all levels of society.

It is not surprising to find the haruspices mentioned by Christian authors, and vilified by them. They figure prominently in the lists, drawn up by Tertullian and by Arnobius,⁹ of the charlatans who take advantage of public credulity by claiming to reveal the mysteries of the future. Arnobius is quite uncharitable, rejoicing in seeing them reduced to misery, since the progress of the Christian religion “causes the haruspices to lose their clientele.”¹⁰ When considering the religiosity of the Roman world under the

Empire, one thinks immediately of the new religions imported from the East. It is there, one would think, that the rivals of Christianity should be sought. For Renan, as we know, if Christ had a rival, it was Mithra! But we cannot completely forget that ancient Etruscan religion, or at least what survived of it through the doctrines and practices of the haruspices, also played a role in this confrontation of mentalities during the diffusion of Christianity. It was still felt necessary to deal with the practitioners of the *Etrusca disciplina*, and with the impact they could have upon the peoples of the Roman world.

However, it was one particular aspect of the practice of the *Etrusca disciplina* that competed directly with Christianity. It had a role to play in private life, but the haruspices did not limit themselves to responding to the demands of the various clients who might solicit them, as did the other types of diviners known in the Roman world and enumerated by the apologists. Instead, haruspicy also played an official role in the functioning of the religion of the Roman *res publica*, a state of affairs which dated back to republican times. Since the conquest, Rome had well understood the ways in which the knowledge of the Tuscan specialists could benefit the state. They could shed light on matters that the national religious traditions, such as the augures, had difficulty explaining satisfactorily. The haruspices were able to decipher the meaning of the prodigies, and to indicate exactly what measures it was appropriate to take. Roman pragmatism led to the formation of an official body of haruspices almost immediately after the conquest of Etruria: the order of the sixty haruspices (*ordo sexaginta haruspicum*),¹¹ which the Senate could consult whenever a prodigy seemed to demand recourse to the learning of the Tuscan discipline.¹² In turn, Rome was imitated by the many cities of its empire. Many created their own municipal organisations of haruspices, which played the same role at their own level as the *Ordo* did for the central bodies of the Empire. The institution was known in Italy at Pisa, Gubbio, Pozzuoli, and Benevento,¹³ but also at Urso in Spain, Nîmes in Gaul, Trier in Belgium, Mainz in Germany, Virunum in Noricum, Oescus in Moesia and even as far as Apulum and Vopisco in distant Dacia.¹⁴ The army, itself another expression of the Roman *res publica*, seems also to have had its own haruspices, apparently from the time of Severus: an epitaph from Lambaesis, in Africa, reveals the existence of the title *haruspex legionis*.¹⁵

The passage from Republic to Empire did not reduce the importance of haruspicy on the state level. On the contrary, in a regime which was more and more monarchic in nature, even if it was reluctant to recognize it, new possibilities opened up to the masters of the Etruscan discipline. As Caesar had done with Spurinna, or earlier, as Sulla with Postumius,¹⁶ the emperor had recourse to a personal haruspice. This *haruspex Augusti*, *haruspex imperatoris* or *haruspex Caesaris*, as the inscriptions identify him,¹⁷ was a high-ranking person within the Empire. One particularly apt example was Umbricius Melior, who exercised his art successively under Galba and Otho,¹⁸ and who went on to a brilliant career under Vespasian.¹⁹ One observes that the uncontested mastery that he had over his discipline allowed him to traverse the troubles of that time much better than others more directly involved in the vicissitudes of political life. But this does not mean that his role was insignificant: he benefited from privileged access to the emperor, and from the possibility of influencing his decisions through that knowledge of the future which his science was believed to provide to him.

The privileged influence of the haruspices, and especially of their chief, the personal haruspice of the emperor, acted against the Christians. The testimonies are few but explicit: at the moment of the launching of the Great Persecution of Diocletian, which was without a doubt the gravest crisis that nascent Christianity experienced, the specialists of the Tuscan discipline played a central role. Lactantius describes how they, and particularly their chief, convinced the emperor, who had previously been unworried by the new religion, to take the first measures against the disciples of Christ.²⁰ They were said to have disturbed the proceedings of a haruspicial consultation, thus provoking what was called the *muta exta*: no sign whatsoever could be read in the entrails of the sacrificed animals.²¹ This was a very serious event, a sign that communication between man and the gods had been cut off, a premonition of terrible consequences. The part played by the haruspices in the change in religious politics is confirmed a little later, when Diocletian, determined to undertake an active persecution of the Christians, sought to obtain not only the opinion of men, that is the high-ranking imperial dignitaries whom he consulted on the subject, but also that of the gods through a consultation of the oracle of Apollo at Didyma. The person charged with this delicate mission was, again, a haruspice.²² That a haruspice should play a key role, yet again, in the resumption of anti-Christian policy is not fortuitous: this group acted as jealous guardian of the traditional religion, and so was bound to oppose Christianity. Such an attitude did not, in fact, need to wait until the time of Diocletian to manifest itself. It can be observed already a century earlier, though in circumstances much less dramatic. In his own personal house-sanctuary, his *lararium*, Alexander Severus had juxtaposed the effigies of Abraham and Christ with those of Orpheus or of Apollonius of Tyana.²³ However, when he sought publicly to put this policy of religious toleration into practice with his project of building a temple to Christ, the haruspices prevented him.²⁴ In fact, one might think that the haruspices had perceived the illusory character of this inclusive policy better than the emperor himself: the policy was certainly understandable from the intellectual perspective of certain pagans during the final years of paganism, since it legitimized all religious experiences and all revelations. However, it misunderstood the very nature of Christianity, which could admit only its own truth, only its own revelation.²⁵

The interaction of the haruspices with the Christians is thus markedly hostile, justifying in return the bitterness of the Christians towards the representatives of the Tuscan religious tradition. Moreover, given their position in the Roman *res publica*, the haruspices play a very active role in the defense of the ancestral religious heritage. Even during the Empire, this appears to be one of their essential missions. In 47 AD, when the emperor Claudius undertook to reorganize the old order, dating from republican times, and to give it a new vitality, he imbued it with precisely this function. One of the purposes of his policy, in fact, was to combat the rise of foreign superstitions, *externae superstitiones*.²⁶ The Etruscan tradition, the *Etrusca disciplina*, seemed to him to be the most efficient means available within traditional Roman paganism. In fact, haruspicy was no longer perceived as specifically Etruscan. Promoted to the rank of *vetustissima disciplina Italiae*, it was recognized on a pan-Italian scale. There was no longer any real difference between that which was originally of Tuscan heritage and that which was strictly Roman

or Latin in origin. The careers of the haruspices of the order illustrate this: they were often assigned religious offices associated with the most ancient Latin roots of the *Urbs*, such as those of *Laurens Lavinas*, connected with the oldest metropolis of Latium, Lavinium, or those of *pontifex Albanus* or *dictator Albanus*, or of *sacerdos Cabensis montis Albani*, connected with Alba, the other ancient Roman metropolis. The vitality of haruspicy rendered it better equipped for the defense of the old national traditions against the rise of new religions, better equipped even than the representatives of the more properly Roman priesthoods, most of which were outdated institutions with little grasp of contemporary reality.

We cannot limit the role of haruspicy to the simple defense of the past, however. Its vigour came precisely through what it offered, which was infinitely superior to the other constituents of Roman paganism: a response to the religious expectations of this period. Its divination techniques fulfilled a need which, though no doubt eternal, was nevertheless felt particularly keenly in this period, a situation to which the contemporary success of astrology also bears witness. It was a period in which the prediction of the future seemed to be one of the most important functions of the divine: this, at least, is what the pagan Celsus proclaimed, who was scandalized to see Christians deprecate divination which played so great a role in traditional religion.²⁷

More importantly though, we can observe that the Etruscan tradition offered views of the afterlife and promises of immortality, in a set of specialized books within the *libri rituales*, which carried the name of *libri Acheruntici*, the books of Acheron.²⁸ These books explained how, by means of appropriate sacrifice, one could bring about the transformation of the souls of the dead into gods, called *dei animales*, since they were formed from the soul, the *anima*, of the dead. Likewise, the offerings carried the name *hostiae animales*.²⁹ This means of acquiring immortality, and even resorting to divination, may seem mechanical or even childish to us, but it nevertheless experienced considerable success among the people of Late Antiquity, so preoccupied were they by the question of what was to come after death. For this reason, the Christian authors took it as their target, along with other pagan doctrines on the afterlife, such as those of the Neoplatonists or the Magi.³⁰ It must also be recognized that, in contrast to the representations offered by Roman religion proper, for instance the Lares and Lemures which were of uncertain identification, the Etruscan doctrine presented itself with clarity and solidity. These qualities derive in large measure from the fact that the tradition was based on written texts.

This is one of the main reasons that Etruscan religion acquired such importance at this time, long after the disappearance of the Etruscan nation. Unlike Latin or even Greek paganism, Etruscan religion drew on a corpus of sacred books, the treatises of the *Etrusca disciplina*. This written tradition conferred on it a seriousness, an appearance of permanence, which the other branches of traditional religion could not offer. Furthermore, these writings were presented as divinely inspired, as having been revealed to prophets who promulgated their teaching at the dawn of Etruscan history. The most famous of these was Tages, a child said to have mysteriously appeared in a furrow in a field which a peasant was plowing in the vicinity of Tarquinia. The revelation which he supposedly delivered to the crowd gathered to see the miracle consisted of the first

principles of the discipline. The crowd duly noted down the child's words, thus giving birth to the first Tuscan sacred books.³¹ Thus, Etruscan religion can appear to be founded on divine revelation, and in this respect it is not surprising to see it conceived in the same manner as the doctrine of Orpheus or Hermes Trismegistus, as that of Plato or Pythagorus, unanimously considered as "godly men,"³² as that of Zoroaster, or even as that of Moses and the other prophets of Israel. Tages is explicitly associated with them.³³ In an era when it was more and more expected that 'truth' appear to emanate from divinity, and be based on revelation rather than mere human knowledge, this is yet another essential distinction of Etruscan religion which distinguishes it from the other religious traditions of classical paganism.

Through this, one can perceive why the Etruscan religion was particularly susceptible to opposition by Christianity, or any other of the *externae superstitiones* which were then invading the Roman world. In theory, as is illustrated by the texts which associate the Etruscan prophet with the figures of other "godly beings" who bear revelations, Tages was merely one representative of the multiple paths toward God of which Symmachus spoke.³⁴ Therefore, he should not necessarily have any more intrinsic worth or importance than Zoroaster, Orpheus—or Jesus. But in practice it was otherwise: Tages was Italian, and may pass as the prophet of the Italians. It is to him therefore that these others must be subordinate in matters of authority and primacy. One observes this in the letter of the pagan priest Longinianus, written to Saint Augustine, in which he sketches out a theory of the spatial distribution of the diverse revelations, according to which each part of the world—Asia, Africa, Europe—would have its own particular prophet. If one may propose Orpheus and Hermes Trismegistus for the other continents, for Europe—or at least that part of it which represents Latin, and not Greek paganism—it is the name of Tages that is advanced. Consequently, the prophet of the Italians and of the Romans is Tages, and thus they ought to have no need to seek an exotic revelation in traditions foreign to them, such as that proposed by the Christian sect regarding a savior born in far off Judea. For the Romans, the Etruscan tradition allowed them to resist the seductions of those foreign religions with a prophet figure of their own, a revelation which belonged properly to them.

Ancient Tuscan religion, which had been perfectly integrated with Roman religious traditions, offered a national alternative to the sacred books and to the prophet figures of the various "eastern religions," and to Christianity in particular. Behind the persecution of the Christians by the haruspices, one does not see merely the reactionism of a group which enjoyed a position of power and privilege in the heart of the Roman world, and who risked losing everything with the rise of the religion of Christ, as Arnobius claimed.³⁵ There is also the conviction that their own tradition was sufficient to satisfy the religious needs of the Roman world. Their tradition represented fidelity to the *mos maiorum*, but also offered the best response to the religious expectations of their contemporaries.³⁶

Dominique Briquel

Université de Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV)

École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris

NOTES

1. The essential study on this subject is the collective volume *Studies in the Romanization of Etruria* (Rome, 1975), in which the primary aspects of this process are surveyed in some detail.
2. On Etruscan religion in general, see Pfiffig 1975; Jannot 1998.
3. See Cicero, *De divinatione*, I, 72, II, 49.
4. Thulin 1905-1909, though dated, remains the essential reference work; it provides all of the data, and has not been replaced.
5. Aug., *Conf.*, IV, 2, 3.
6. Inscription *CIL*, XIII, 1131.
7. See Torelli 1975, 122 (and *passim* on the Spurinna family, known from the *elogia* of the Tarquiniensia forum, which this work studies); on the personage, see Cicero, *Fam.*, IX, 24; *De div.*, I, 118; Val. Max., VIII, 11, 2; Suet., *Caes.*, 81.
8. For example, inscriptions *CIL*, IX, 3964 (Alba Fucens), 4908 (Trebula Mutuesca), *Année Épigraphique* (1967), no. 297 (Narbonne).
9. See, respectively, *Apol.*, 43, 1-2, *Adv. gent.*, I, 24, 2-3. These lists, incidentally, are inspired by Cicero, *De div.*, I, 132, *De nat. deor.*, I, 55.
10. Arnobius, *Adv. gent.*, I, 46, 9.
11. On the constitution of the order, cf. Cicero, *De div.*, I, 92, and Val. Max., I, 1, 1. On its history, one may now refer to Torelli 1975, 105-135.
12. On the functioning of the institution, see MacBain 1982, and, for the period of Late Antiquity, Montero 1991.
13. See, respectively, *Année épigraphique* 1982, no. 358; *CIL*, XI, 5824; X, 3680-3681; IX, 1540.
14. See, respectively, *CIL*, I², 594; XII, 3254; XIII, 3694; III, 4868; *Inscriptiones Latinae in Bulgaria repertae*, 75; *CIL*, III, 1114-1115; *Année épigraphique*, 1983, no. 805.
15. See *CIL*, VIII, 2809 (cf. also 2567 and 2586).
16. See Cic., *De div.*, I, 72; Plut., *Syl.*, 9, 6; and Aug., *C.D.*, 2, 24.
17. The data are conveniently collected in Torelli 1975, 122-124. The haruspice of the emperor appears to have been at the same time head of the order of the sixty, *haruspex maximus* or *magister haruspicum*.
18. See Tacitus, *Hist.*, I, 27, 1; Plutarch, *Galba*, 24; Pl., X, 6(7), 19, and *indices* of X and XI, referring to treatises *de Etrusca disciplina* that he had used.
19. As the inscription of Tarentum seems to indicate, *Année épigraphique*, 1930, no. 52, which dates to this period.
20. He described it twice: in *Inst.*, IV, 27-32, and in *De mort. pers.*, 10, 1-4.
21. The meaning of the expression is given in Festus, 147 L.
22. The event is reported, with different versions, by Lactantius, *De mort. pers.*, 11, 6-8, and Eusebius, *Vit. Const.*, II, 49-51.
23. See *SHA*, *Alex.*, 29, 2; on this issue, Settis 1972, 237-251.
24. See *SHA*, 43, 6. There is no reason to reject the authenticity of this anecdote; it is entirely coherent with the religious policy of the prince and with his attitude with

- respect to Jews and Christians (cf. also 22, 4; 45, 7; 49, 6; 51, 6). On this question, see, for example, Sordi 1984, 98-102.
25. This radical difference of perspective is well illustrated by the discussion between Symmachus and Saint Augustine. While the former considers that “there is not only one way of arriving at so great a mystery” of God (*Relatio*, 3, 10), the bishop of Hippo responds to him, with the Gospel as support, that Jesus is the sole way (*Epist.*, 18, 8; *Retract.*, I, 4, 3). Even already in the period of Alexander Severus, Origen, in his *Exhortatio ad martyrium*, 46, insists on the unique character of the Judeo-Christian revelation (cf. also *In Cels.*, 1, 25).
 26. See Tacitus, *Annales*, 15, 1-3.
 27. See the passage cited by Origen, *In Cels.*, 4, 88.
 28. These books are cited by Arnobius 2, 62; cf. Servius, *ad Verg.*, *Aen.*, 8, 398, on *sacra Acheruntia*.
 29. On this issue, see Pffig 1975, 173-183; as well as my article, “Regards étrusques sur l’au-delà.” (Briquel 1987).
 30. Arnobius 2, 62; Augustine, *C.D.*, 22, 28; also, within a pagan framework, Martianus Capella, 2, 142. One author in particular appears to have played a pivotal role in fostering this popularity which the doctrine of these Etruscan “books of Acheron” seems to have enjoyed: the philosopher Cornelius Labeo, who must be dated to the second half of the 3rd century. He mixed Neoplatonist elements with a revival of traditional Roman paganism, and to the latter he accorded a privileged place to Etruscan heritage, principally on the issues of speculation on the afterlife and the doctrine of the *dei animales*, to which he consecrated a specialised work (see Servius, *ad Verg.*, *Aen.*, 3, 168). On this personage, see the fundamental work of Mastandrea 1979. See also my article, “Cornelius Labeo, etruskische Tradition und heidnische Apologetik” (Briquel 1995).
 31. On this legend, see, for example, Heurgon 1961. 283-287; and Pffig 1975, 352-355. Other prophet figures exist, such as the nymph Vegoia, of the Chiusi region.
 32. On this notion, see Bieler 1935-1936.
 33. One finds this in the letter written to Saint Augustine by the pagan priest Longinianus, preserved in the former’s correspondence (no. 234); but also in a very late syncretistic text, a scholia said to be of Lactantius Placidus to the *Thebais* of Statius, 4, 516.
 34. See above, footnote 25.
 35. See above, footnote 10.
 36. This study is developed at length and in more detail in my book, *Chrétien et haruspices, la religion étrusque, dernier rempart du paganisme romain*, Paris, 1997.

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