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Quintus Curtius' *Novum Sidus* (10.9.3–6)

ABSTRACT: The reference to a *novum sidus* in Quintus Curtius' book 10, commonly applied to the comet seen at the end of Nero's reign, could be related to Claudius as well. Both Claudius and Caligula were named "star", and they sought to appear as the beginners of a new cycle in the history of Rome. Claudius' *ludi saeculares* allegedly meant the starting point of a new time for Rome. Other facets of Claudius' censorship, as the enlargement of the *pomerium* or the Emperor's assumption of the title *pater patriae*, could be interpreted in a similar sense. Likewise, Caligula's death may have been understood as the end of a period in the history of Rome. Thus, Curtius' "new star" could be applied to Claudius, and not necessarily to Vespasian.

One of the most debated passages of Quintus Curtius' *Historiae Alexandri Magni* mentions a ruler who saved Rome during the author's time, appearing as a "new star" which brought light into the darkness: "So it is with justification that the people of Rome acknowledge that they owe their salvation to their emperor, who shone out as a new star in the night that was almost our last. It was his rising, I declare, and not the sun's, that brought light back to a darkened world at a time when its limbs lacked their head, and were out of harmony and in turmoil. How many were the torches he then extinguished! How many the swords he sheathed! How violent the storm he scattered, suddenly clearing the skies! So our empire is not merely recovering, but even flourishes. May I not tempt providence, but the line of this same house will prolong the conditions of this age—for ever, I pray, but at least for a long duration."

This short digression appears as a reflection by Curtius on the struggle for power after Alexander's death². The reference to a new star has been repeatedly used as evidence for dating this biography of the Macedonian ruler. Many specialists consider it an allusion to the comet which was seen coinciding with Nero's death. It would be, therefore, a way to convey a change of dynasty in Rome, and this would confirm the hypothesis dating Curtius' work in the reign of Vespasian³. There

1 Translation J. C. YARDLEY, in: YARDLEY/ATKINSON 2009, 70.

2 See Curt.10.9.3–6: *Proinde iure meritoque populus Romanus salutem se principi suo debere profitetur, qui noctis, quam paene supremam habuimus, novum sidus inluxit. Huius, hercule, non solis ortus lucem caliganti reddidit mundo, cum sine suo capite discordia membra trepidarent. Quot ille tum extinxit faces! quot condidit gladios! quantam tempestatem subita serenitate discussit! Non ergo revirescit solum, sed etiam floret imperium. Absit modo invidia, excipiet huius saeculi tempora eiusdem domus, utinam perpetua, certe diuturna posteritas.* For discussion about the meaning of this passage, see above all ATKINSON 1980, 25–35; BAYNHAM 1998, 201–219; MCKECHNIE 1999, 51–53; YARDLEY/ATKINSON 2009, 204–213.

3 In favour of a Vespasianic date, see, among others, INSTINSKY 1962, 382–383; GRILLI 1976; BARZANÒ 1985; FUGMANN 1995; VON ALBRECHT 1997, 1084–1085; BAYNHAM 1998, 201–219; BOSWORTH 2004, 566. For further references to this and other proposed dates, see ATKINSON 1994, 26–28; ID. 1998, 3451–3455; YARDLEY/ATKINSON 2009, 2–9; POWER 2013; MAHÉ-SIMON/TRINQUIER 2014, 20–25.

have been, however, other proposals interpreting this passage as a reference to Augustus, Galba, Trajan, Severus Alexander or Nero, who manifested himself as a “solar” ruler⁴. All these assumptions refute the widespread hypothesis about the date of Curtius’ work under Claudius, relating the author’s criticism of Alexander with the censure of Caligula’s excesses⁵.

On the other hand, Curtius’ new star could also refer to the change of government which occurred in Rome upon Caligula’s death and Claudius’ coming to power. As we will see in this paper, the reigns of both Emperors could be interpreted as starting points of new cycles in the history of Rome. Regarding the allusion to a “new star”, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* records a definition of *sidus* used by several ancient authors: “Applied by way of flattery to members of the imperial family during their lifetime⁶.” In this sense, we should recall that Caligula was named “star” (*sidus*) and *Neos Helios*⁷. Similarly, Claudius was described as *sidus* by Seneca⁸. Caligula was also compared with Phaeton (Sueton. *Cal.* 11), drawing a parallel between the Emperor and the rise and fall of a star. Actually, the night before his murder, Caligula dreamt that he was on Jupiter’s throne, but the god pulled him down to the Earth (Sueton. *Cal.* 57).

The appearance of a comet was related to the advent of a new era, and this could be applied not only to Nero’s death, but also to the end of Caligula, because Claudius aimed to begin a new era in Rome. Leaving aside Halley’s comet, which had been already seen in 87 B. C. shortly after the end of one of the Etruscan *saecula*, we have to consider that the comet which appeared after Caesar’s death (*sidus Iulium*) was also regarded by the Etruscans as the final point of another *saeculum*, that is, the end of a historical period and the beginning of a new one⁹. In this sense, we should bear in mind that certain facets of Claudius’ reign reveal the Emperor’s interest in making his rule be perceived as the starting of a new era in the history of Rome. One of the main indicators of this new period were the *ludi saeculares* organized by the Emperor in 47 A. D. Augustus had celebrated this festival just sixty-three years earlier (that is, less than a *saeculum*), but Claudius established a different method of calculation and alleged that his aim was to commemorate the eight-hundredth year after the foundation of the city. This celebration was presented as a grand festival, unlike any seen before or

4 On Augustus, see MCKECHNIE 1999, 50–51; on Galba, see MILNS 1966; on Nero, see VERDIÈRE 1966; WISEMAN 1982, 67; on Trajan, see BOSWORTH 1983; on Alexander Severus, see STEELE 1915; GRISET 1964, 163; and on the Severan period, see further FEARS 2001.

5 On this date, see ATKINSON 1980, 19–57; ID. 1994, 26–28; YARDLEY/HECKEL 1984, 1–4; YARDLEY/ATKINSON 2009, 2–9 and *passim*. See further CIZEK 1995, 210; ANDRÉ 1998, 26; DION 1998.

6 Oxford Latin Dictionary, Oxford 1968, 1757, s. v. “sidus”.

7 On *sidus*, see Sueton. *Cal.* 13: (*Caligula*) *inter altaria et victimas ardentisque taedas densissimo et laetissimo obviatorum agmine incessit, super fausta nomina “sidus” et “pullum” et “pupum” et “aluminum” appellantium*; D. C. 59.26.6; Phil. *Leg.* 95, 103; WEINSTOCK 1971, 382–384; HURLEY 1993, 38; WARDLE 1994, 150. On *Neos Helios*, see *Syll.* 798 (*IGR* 4.145); Malal. 10, p. 243; AALDERS 1960; ATKINSON 1980, 31.

8 “*Consolatio ad Polybium*” 13.1: *Sidus hoc, quod praecipitato in profundum et demerso in tenebras orbi refulsit, semper luceat!*; WEINSTOCK 1971, 381; ATKINSON 1980, 28–29; YARDLEY/ATKINSON 2009, 207. Some scholars have defended that *sidus* is an allusion to the comet seen at the beginning of Nero’s reign (see above n. 4), but it should be noted that this phenomenon appeared few months before Claudius’ death: for discussion, see ATKINSON 1980, 29; YARDLEY/ATKINSON 2009, 207 (with further bibliography).

9 On the end of the 9th Etruscan *saeculum* in 44 B. C., see Serv. *Ecl.* 9.46; PFIFFIG 1975, 159–161; HALL 1986, 2568 with n. 21; PANDEY 2013, 412–413; SANTANGELO 2013, 115–127. On the end of an Etruscan *saeculum* in 88 B. C. see Plu. *Sull.* 7.6–9; and for other signs announcing a new era in this year see further D. S. 38/39.5; Liv. fr. 15a Loeb (*apud* Sud. s. v. “Σύλλαος”); cf. Varr. *apud* Serv. *Aen.* 8.526; WALTON 1965; BALESTEROS PASTOR 1999. On the Halley’s comet, see LE BOEUFFLE 1987, 386–387.

after¹⁰. In accordance with the primitive meaning of the *ludi saeculares*, Claudius performed ceremonies of purification of the city¹¹. Thus, everything in Rome was renovated to mark the start of a new period in its history.

In this same year, Claudius held the censorship, an office allegedly established by Romulus and which had been held earlier by Augustus¹². As a censor, Claudius undertook many activities, not only making an important *lectio senatus*, but also restoring buildings, constructing an aqueduct or even modifying the alphabet. In the same way, Claudius enlarged the *pomerium*, the sacred precinct of the city of Rome, which had been marked by Romulus and modified only by Sulla and Augustus.¹³ Besides, Claudius proclaimed himself as “father of the fatherland” (*pater patriae*), a title which had begun to be used in the Late Republic and meant a new foundation, a new time which would start after having overcome great dangers for the state¹⁴. Such was the case of Cicero, who was called *pater patriae* after his success against the Catilinarian conspiracy¹⁵.

Caligula had intended to start a new era in the city as well. According to Suetonius, this ruler ordered that his birthday should be called *Parilia*, like the day of the foundation of Rome¹⁶. Furthermore, the Emperor boasted about his marriage with a married woman, like Romulus and Augustus¹⁷. It is true that Caligula promoted different changes in his attitude as an Emperor and in the conception of the Imperial authority¹⁸. But it is also true that Claudius tried to make his reign be regarded as the starting of a new time of prosperity, in which the Emperor would be acclaimed by the people and the power of Rome would have no rivals, reaching the limits of the Earth¹⁹. This new period could then be considered as the work of a special ruler, a *sidus*: Caligula, like Phaeton, had ascended and fell down, Claudius, on the contrary, shined as a brilliant star.

Caligula's death was preceded by portents which were associated with a change of era. The Capitol of Capua and the temple of Apollo Palatinus were struck by lightning, coinciding with the anniversary of Caesar's murder (Sueton.*Cal.*57). It is not a coincidence that, upon the Emperor's death, the Senate celebrated a meeting in the Capitolium: apart from practical reasons, the choosing of this place had the meaning of a new foundation of the Roman state²⁰.

Obviously, all these considerations do not justify categorically that Curtius' passage alludes specifically to Claudius. This is, nonetheless, an option which cannot be ruled out, dismissing the

10 Plin. *NH* 7.159; OSGOOD 2011, 151–167. On this festival, see BRIND'AMOUR 1978; HALL 1986, 2569–2578 and *passim*. Claudius forced the tradition, establishing five *saecula* of 110 years starting from 504 B. C., when Publicola allegedly celebrated the first festival. Thus, Claudius' *ludi* were excluded from the canonical series (Zosimus 2.4.3): BRIND'AMOUR 1978, 1359–1360; LEVICK 1990, 87, 121; PRICE 1996, 837.

11 OSGOOD 2011, 154–156; cf. HALL 1986, 2569; LINTOTT 1999, 115–120.

12 OSGOOD 2011, 154–167; cf. BRIND'AMOUR 1978, 1365–1366.

13 Tac.*An.*12.23.2–24.2; ILS 244; BOATWRIGHT 1984–1985; LEVICK 1990, 87–88, 107, 121; OSGOOD 2011, 159–161.

14 LEVICK 1990, 41; OSGOOD 2011, 58.

15 See above all ALFÖLDI 1971, 80–83 and *passim*.

16 Sueton.*Cal.*16.4. It is even possible that Caligula's *dies imperii* occurred on April 21st, when allegedly Rome was founded: BARRETT 1989, 71–72; HURLEY 1993, 62; WARDLE 1994, 178.

17 Sueton. *Cal.*25.1; HURLEY 1993, 103–104; WARDLE 1994, 232–233.

18 See above all DONCIU 1989.

19 In general, see PICARD 1998. The conquest of Britannia was interpreted as a victory over the Ocean: BARRETT 2000.

20 Sueton. *Cal.*60; cf. HURLEY 1993, 215–216; WARDLE 1994, 370–371.

chronological value of the *novum sidus* as one of the main arguments in support of a date of the *Historiae Alexandri* under Vespasian or other Roman Emperors.

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