

Building Atmospheres of (Cosmic) Crisis: Cassius Dio's Use of Omens

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This paper is an early draft of a chapter for an edited collection on religious experience of ancient people/populations that perceived themselves as living in periods shortly before large-scale cataclysmic and transformational events. The aim of the volume is to decenter “eschatology” and “apocalypse” by investigating not “the end” but the articulated experiences of the time just before the end, asking: How did people carry on living while knowing that there was still time left in which something could be done?

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What does it feel like to live in a moment where everything feels like it is falling apart? How does one get to the point that all signs point towards something bigger than what we are experiencing now, and how does one continue living into that gargantuan crisis? Stress, trauma, moments of despair, live on in our bodies—they *feel* in ways that we struggle to describe. Like the creeping of stasis through our limbs, like the tightening of the chest when triggered, unknowingly, by innocuous cues. The heaviness we carry as we trudge through daily labours, never quite shaking the weight of the known unknown to come. Yet we do carry on. We do move through it. We do experience small glimmers of joy, hope, elation, reprieve, before remembering that things felt differently before. How do these effects become slowly routinized in ways that we forget that we felt differently before? How does the new normal of the heaviness set in without us necessarily noticing? We wonder if there is a way to return to the feeling of living without crisis, but the crisis persists and, hopefully, so do we.

My paper does *not* explore a cosmological end per se, but the pebbling of moments that one historian builds to create for his reader the atmosphere of a historical moment of crisis. In fact, it focuses on a series of crises that do not even build to a climactic end but remain a constant in the (ever tumultuous) history of Rome that the historian Cassius Dio narrates. The historical specificity of the accounts this chapter examines, however, and the sometimes personal nature of these anecdotes, do not remove them from the purview of this volume and the view towards a larger scale catastrophe. Rather, this chapter contextualizes such moments as part of a larger story and grounds itself in the fact that the ancients (and many people today) live their lives with an understanding of their entanglement with larger cosmic realities.¹ Small-scale crises are the product of imbalances between humans and deities to be propitiated, just as large-scale crises are representative of large-scale cosmic disruptions that must be rectified.² Cassius Dio—the historian in question—capitalizes on this cosmological outlook in peppering his history with

¹ Selina Stewart, “Imperial Fortunes: Portents, Prodigies and Dio’s Astrology of the State,” in *The Intellectual Climate of Cassius Dio: Greek and Roman Pasts*, ed. Adam Kemezis, Colin Bailey, and Beatrice Poletti, *Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 301–23.

² Jennifer Eyl, “Divinatory Practices and Palpability of the Gods,” in *Signs, Wonders, & Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 46–85.

portents and prophecies that serve as signs for the significance of the events recorded. These small, discrete events are woven together into something that can be read as much more significant, much more pressing, and much, much more alarming, than any single portent on its own. As the individual threads are woven together by Dio they form a tapestry on which a pattern is made visible: they *build* into an atmosphere of crisis that is palpable to its audience. Cassius Dio's use of portents in his *Roman History* suggests a framework for thinking about an experience of cataclysm in antiquity that imagines agents intent on making sense of the myriad events they encounter in relation to an overarching event, drawing together the mundane and the cosmic to encounter crisis as a built atmosphere of smaller, discrete events now interconnected as signs of the times.

A portentous history

Cassius Dio (c.165-235 CE) is best known to us today for his ambitious 80 volume history of Rome from its foundations into the third century CE. He was a meticulous cataloguer of imperial history, especially that of the late second and early third centuries, a period he not only lived through but was intimately familiar with as a member of the political elite. The work itself was written under the patronage of the Severans and bears the marks of the intellectual culture of the time.³ Dio's account weaves together a variety of kinds of source material, from earlier histories, to speeches and eyewitness accounts, as well as portents. A distinctive feature of Dio's work is how signs are employed to presage the direction of history for the reader. As Selina Stewart writes, "Dio's prodigies are agents: They warn, they prompt, they act, and collectively they help to thematize the material of Dio's history over a considerable span of historical time" (Stewart 2022: 301).⁴ Dreams, animals acting oddly, geological events, prophetic pronouncements, astrological events (e.g. eclipses, shooting stars), and extreme weather among other things, frequently precede or accompany significant events in Rome's history such as the death of emperors. Dio narrates the death of Domitian, for example, as preceded by several ominous dreams and prophetic pronouncements that predicted the day of his death, and he prefaces the inclusion of such material with an explanatory note: "Since no event of such magnitude happens unforeseen, various unfavourable omens occurred in the case of Domitian" (67.16.1).⁵

Signs are able to presage events because of the connectivity assumed between the various components of the cosmos and the investment of the gods in the affairs of mortals. Dio's signs connect the series of moments of Roman history that Dio deems important to a larger cosmology: this is not just Rome's history, it is the history of the cosmos. What happens in the heavens happens on earth; crisis permeates the layers. Many ancient authors use signs in this

³ Brandon Jones, "Cassius Dio - Peptideumenos and Politician on Kingship," in *Cassius Dio: Greek Intellectual and Roman Politician*, ed. Carsten Hjort Lange and Jesper Majbom Madsen, *Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 297–315.

⁴ Stewart, "Imperial Fortunes: Portents, Prodigies and Dio's Astrology of the State," 301.

⁵ All quotations of Cassius Dio follow the Loeb edition.

way,⁶ but Dio clusters his signs together in his account. The account of Domitian's death mentioned above receives, in the course of a few short paragraphs, a sequence of two dreams and three verbal prophecies, as well as an accompanying meteorological event (67.16.1-3). In a single, short section, Drusus' death is announced with animals, two meteorological events, and three other-than-human beings, including a *daimon* (55.1). The reader receives signs as a sprinkle or sudden downpour accompanying the lightning of the main event.⁷ While many scholars have commented on the rhetorical function of signs in Dio, both how they are used to substantiate or even lend further gravitas to events, or the way that signs are part and parcel of the genre of history itself,⁸ here I am interested in the way that the clustering of signs creates an *atmosphere*. As Kathleen Stewart defines it, atmospheres "constitute a compositional present, pushing circulating forces into form, texture and density so that they can be felt, imagined, brought to bear or just born."⁹

Dio is engaged in a project of "worlding,"¹⁰ building assemblages of disparate elements to create an atmosphere that his readers can inhabit. The meteorological analogies of atmosphere, precipitation, and electrical events, aim to "emphasize the feeling of situations while also tracking how they become generalizable beyond localized experience through cultural forms, stories, or genres of expression," in this case, through Cassius Dio's rhetorical use of signs within historical narrative.¹¹ Through the clustering of portentous events, Dio brings together the mundane and the cosmic to conjure the collective atmosphere of crisis for living at a time when the world was dramatically transforming.

Pebbles and atmospheres

Pebbling is slang for the act of giving small, seemingly insignificant gifts to people, as some species of penguin (Adelie [*Pygoscelis adeliae*], Gentoo [*Pygoscelis papua*]) gift pebbles to their potential mates as part of courtship practices. More recently, the term has been used to describe

⁶ For example, Plutarch. On Plutarch's use of signs, see Frederick E. Brenk, "Omens and Portents," in *Frederick E. Brenk on Plutarch, Religious Thinker and Biographer*, ed. Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 96–102, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004348776_011.

⁷ The signs themselves are also sometimes ranked by importance by Dio himself with a brief remark about a particular sign surprising him most: ὁ δὲ δὴ μάλιστα διὰ πάντων ἄξιον θαυμάσαι ἐστί (67.16.2); ὁ δὲ δὴ μάλιστα θαυμάσας ἔχω (76.1.7).

⁸ Ricardo Bertolazzi, "Cassius Dio, Julia Maesa and the Omens Fortelling the Rise of Elagabalus and Severus Alexander," in *The Intellectual Climate of Cassius Dio: Greek and Roman Pasts*, ed. Adam Kemezis, Colin Bailey, and Beatrice Poletti, *Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 279–300; David Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, *Revealing Antiquity* 7 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁹ Guy Mackinnon-Little, "In Conversation with Kathleen Stewart | Talks," accessed June 5, 2024, <https://magazine.tank.tv/issue-79/talks/kathleen-stewart>.

¹⁰ Mackinnon-Little.

¹¹ Derek P. McCormack, "The Elements of Affect Theories," in *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell, *ANIMA: Critical Race Studies Otherwise* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 77.

the act of sending, through DMs (direct messages), memes or reels to others. Such communication intones that the content reminds the sender of the person, and the act of forwarding the content constitutes a small act of affection. While this is a small act, the build-up of these small acts is significant. Pebbling does not cost, materially, but it demonstrates to its recipient the various times when they were on the mind of the giver. The build-up of reels in your DMs leaves a feeling of being thought of, remembered, appreciated. The *effect* is achieved through the series of small acts, any single one of which could not produce the same effect. Dio manages something similar with portents and prophecies. The accumulation of signs in Dio's account builds, but in this case, it builds tension: uncertainty, ambiguity, a sense of the unknown to come. Dio's pebbling creates an atmosphere.

We see the building of atmosphere through a series of signs in Dio's account of the revolt against Macrinus following Caracalla's assassination. Prefacing, once more, the recorded signs as indicative of the importance of the events he has deemed worthy of his history, Dio writes:

It seems to me that this also had been indicated in advance as clearly as any event that ever happened. For a very distinct eclipse of the sun occurred just before that time and the comet was seen for a considerable period; also another star, whose tail extended from the west to the east for several nights, caused us [the senators] terrible alarm, so that this verse of Homer's was ever on our lips: "Rang the vast welkin with clarion calls, and Zeus heard the tumult." (79.30.1)

Commenting on this scene, Ricardo Bertolazzi writes that Dio "lingers over a series of prodigies foreshadowing new (negative) epochal events, prodigies which provoked considerable alarm among the senators."¹² We have here a collection of pebbles, but the atmosphere they build is broader *and it is collective*. In this account signs build into an atmosphere of tension within a specific group: the senators. Dio arranges circulating stories, weaving them into a meaningful tapestry through the eyes of the collective; he describes the feelings that coalesce and emerge around and through a group as a product of an interpretive project.

We see a similar description of collective atmosphere building through the interpretation of signs in the account of the civil war between Septimius Severus and Clodius Albinus (196 CE). In this case, Dio opens with the collective project of meaning-making, this time with mixed atmospheric projections:

While, then, the entire world was disturbed by this situation, we senators remained quiet, at least as many of us as did not, by openly inclining to the one or the other, share their dangers and their hopes. The populace, however, could not restrain itself, but indulged in the most open lamentations. (76.1.1)

¹² Bertolazzi, "Cassius Dio, Julia Maesa and the Omens Fortelling the Rise of Elagabalus and Severus Alexander," 280.

The senators and the populace are privy to the same events; the atmosphere is shared but the response varies by group. At the same time, the collective tension builds as more events unfold and are interpreted as connected to the growing historic moment—the metaphorical lightning bolt—in question, heightening the crisis, thickening the atmosphere. One of these thickening omens occurs, according to Dio, during the final horse race before Saturnalia:

There had assembled ... an untold multitude and they had watched the chariots racing, six at a time... without applauding, as was their custom, any of the contestants at all. But when these races were over and the charioteers were about to begin another event, they first enjoined silence upon one another and then suddenly all clapped their hands at the same moment and also joined in a shout, praying for good fortune for the public welfare. This was what they first cried out; then, applying the terms ‘Queen’ and “Immortal” to Rome, they shouted: “How long are we to suffer such things?” and “How long are we to be waging war?” And after making some other remarks of this kind, they finally shouted, “So much for that,” and turned their attention to the horse-race. In all this *they were surely moved by some divine inspiration; for in no other way could so many myriads of men have begun to utter the same shouts at the same time*, like a carefully trained chorus, or have spoken the words without a mistake, just as if they had practiced them. *This demonstration was one thing that increased our apprehensions still more.* (76.1.1-6)

Dio draws this moment out in detail, noting both the size of the crowd and their general demeanour which shifts abruptly from the ordinary. He also provides a specific way to read this event and a justification for the interpretation: it must be divine inspiration as the crowd was too large to have acted synchronously without prior arrangement (76.1.6). In addition, he ties the interpretation of the marvel back to the atmosphere in the Senate: it “increased our apprehensions still more.” *Still more* as it is not the catalyst for the feeling of crisis; no single element is capable, on its own, of populating such a space, rather it is the accumulation of events that Dio recalls as strung together that evoke the collective feeling. He continues to build:

[A]nother was the sudden appearance of such a great fire in the northern sky at night that some supposed the whole city was burning, and others that the very sky was afire. But what I marvelled at most was this: a fine rain resembling silver descended from a clear sky upon the Forum of Augustus. I did not, it is true, see it as it was falling, but noticed it after it had fallen, and by means of it I plated some bronze coins with silver; they retained the same appearance for three days, but by the fourth day all the substance rubbed on them had disappeared. (76.1.7)

Retrospect allows us to take in this moment from a different vantage point, knowing the anxiety of the senate comes not in small part from their approval of Albinus, who will ultimately be defeated in the unfolding civil war of 196. Dio’s scene, then, starts with tension, but builds it through two omens witnessed by a multitude: a public display of collective inspiration and prophetic speech, and an astrological event with material consequences however short lived.

It is noteworthy that in the case of the civil war of 196 CE, Dio's narration of omens does not include an interpretation of the *outcome* of the crisis, but simply the fact that the event is of (cosmic) significance. In other places Dio pebbles catastrophic atmospheres through *ill omens*. Dio narrates the life of Drusus (38 BCE – 9 CE) as a series of negative signs: "omens occurred that were *anything but favourable* to [Drusus]. Many buildings were destroyed by storm and by thunderbolts, among them many temples; even that of Jupiter Capitolinus and the gods worshipped with him was injured" (55.1). Drusus' military advances were belaboured and accompanied by greater losses than should have been necessary in Dio's account and, beyond the setbacks of poor military advance, omens that could not be ignored were also encountered. Upon crossing a river in the Vandalic Mountains Dio writes that: "a woman of superhuman size met him and said: 'Whither, pray, art thou hastening, insatiable Drusus? It is not fated that thou shalt look upon all these lands. But depart; for the end alike of thy labours and of thy life is already at hand.'" While the encounter with this god disguised as a human¹³ is the centerpiece of Dio's account—the clear evidence of tragedy to come—it is not the only sign. The death of Drusus is preceded by numerous portents: "[W]olves were prowling about the camp and howling just before his death; two youths were seen riding through the midst of the camp; a sound as of women lamenting was heard; and there were shooting stars in the sky" (55.1) .

Drusus' pitiable life, in Dio's narration, is comprehensible through the litany of ill omens that accompanied him: the destruction of divine sites through natural (i.e. divine) disaster, prophetic encounters with the divine, strange animal behaviour, ghost sightings, and astrological phenomena, are all arranged by Dio so as to tell their own foreboding story within the shared cosmic economy of signs. Similarly, the death of Commodus (192 CE) is preceded by birds of ill omen and, once more, natural (i.e. divine) disaster that results in the destruction of sacred sites as well as other locations, including those that store public records. In this case, Dio ends with an explicit statement as to the valence and scope (cosmic!) of these events:

[M]any eagles of ill omen soared about the Capitol and moreover uttered screams that boded nothing peaceful, and an owl hooted there; and a fire that began at night in some dwelling leaped to the temple of Pax and spread to the storehouses of Egyptian and Arabian wares, whence the flames, borne aloft, entered the palace and consumed very extensive portions of it, so that nearly all the State records were destroyed. *This, in particular, made it clear that the evil would not be confined to the City, but would extend over the entire civilized world under its sway.* (73.24)

Throughout his history, Dio pebbles signs for his reader in this way, accumulating examples of animals (especially birds!), astronomical oddities (especially stars!), dreams, natural disasters at various scales, and prophetic encounters, that connect the historic event in question to signs of a

¹³ Rick Strelan, "Recognizing the Gods (Acts 14.8–10)," *New Testament Studies* 46, no. 04 (October 2000): 488–503, <https://doi.org/null>.

cosmic imbalance. While the examples are numerous,¹⁴ I hope to have illustrated the point with the few I have chosen here.

(Building towards a) Conclusion

What does it feel like to live in ominous times? It feels like the world is coming apart at the seams and the order of reality cannot hold. For the ancient historian, the task of writing history includes the organizing and cataloguing of moments of oddity that do not add up once they are placed together or, perhaps, that add up perfectly to the world not being quite right anymore. Signs are a crucial part of this task. Describing the tumultuous time of the Late Republic, Katharina Volk writes that, “[t]he spread of astronomical knowledge, philosophical theories, and an aesthetic fascination with the night sky . . . met, and reinforced, a demand for cosmic reassurance and validation in a time of political uncertainty and uproar.”¹⁵ Volk reads the popularity of astrological signs as part of a cultural repertoire of coping mechanisms for dealing with political tension, whereas Dio employs signs to *build* that same tension in his later audience, replicating what he imagines to be the historic atmosphere. On the same premise of cosmic unity, for Dio, creating an atmosphere of tension involves building up the moments where the cosmological disruption erupts into the human sphere and into the mundane spaces where we are carrying on despite crises. The accumulation of small disruptions—Dio’s pebbling of signs—is what creates in the reader the sensation of heightened tension, the bird’s-eye-view of the pattern that we cannot see if we are only holding the individual threads or witnessing one small moment of disruption.

Crisis permeates the history of the Roman Empire as historians (ancient and modern) tell its story. The scale of catastrophe as experienced by those who lived through its various crises, would have felt differently than how we read them, summarized and condensed and sprinkled with signs. One way that Second Temple Jewish authors have conceptualized these crises is in a cosmological crisis of epic and ultimate proportions (*the* apocalypse) and in the genre of a mediated revelation unveiling that knowledge about the end times (apocalyptic).¹⁶ This way of conceptualizing the end has been developed and redeployed as a theological category: notions of *an* apocalypse are coded as Jewish and Christian phenomena and used in relation to these identity categories.¹⁷ Part of the project of contextualizing ancient Jews and Christians in the

¹⁴ See, for example, the portents of ill omen for the consulship of Lucius Veturius and Caecilius Metellus of 206 BCE (Fragment 17, Zonaras 9,11), or the various, lengthy portents presaging the death of Antoninus in 217 CE (79.7.1-7), the latter which includes a jackdaw prophetically hailed as Martialis, slayer of Antoninus.

¹⁵ Katharina Volk, *The Roman Republic of Letters: Scholarship, Philosophy, and Politics in the Age of Cicero and Caesar* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 248.

¹⁶ John J. Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015).

¹⁷ Which is not to say that features of what has come to be considered “apocalyptic” literature are not found in other cultures, but that apocalyptic is built as a biblical category, in part, of course, because the word derives from its use in Second Temple Jewish literature.

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fullness of their ancient environment (the Roman Empire) should be to consider how notions of *an end* and *the end* are conceptualized in the broader cultural literature of the period. Cassius Dio, a member of the provincial elite of Asia Minor, illustrates the contours of epic crisis being built through the gradual but legible impingement of cosmic reality on the mundane. Might Dio aid us to extend our conceptions of the end times, and our category of apocalyptic itself, to consider the ways that “revelation” includes the eruption of the cosmic into the world through a culturally shared cosmic economy of signs? More broadly stated, how can Roman conceptions of times of crisis be factored into the way we understand the experience of anticipating large scale crisis and catastrophe, which has been conceptualized as “apocalypse” only for Christian and Jews in this period? Cassius Dio’s built atmosphere of crisis challenges this silo-ing of cosmological cataclysm by purposefully bridging the cosmic and the mundane through his pebbling of signs around historic moments. Dio’s employment of omens suggests a broader cultural understanding of the integration of cosmic events in understanding (and generating) a feeling of epic impending crisis.