

Astronomy and Superstition in Imperial Rome

C.J. Cunningham

In ancient times, when astronomy and astrology were synonymous, unusual apparitions in the sky were viewed as great portents in the affairs of state. While it may fairly be said that the mass of poorly educated people in the Roman Empire were superstitious, some emperors were equally so. Things don't really change very much, of course, as evidenced by the recent revelations that the timing of all President Ronald Reagan's major activities as head of state was set by a California astrologer!

Both the emperor Septimius Severus (193-211 AD) and his son, the emperor Caracalla (211-217), were fascinated with the heavens. Many anecdotes are told about the devotion of Septimius Severus to astrology. His autobiography dwelt on many dreams which led him to believe he would one day become emperor, and he is said to have chosen his second wife, Julia Domna, because of her imperial horoscope. As the historian Edward Gibbon so eloquently put it, "she deserved all that the stars could promise her".

Twenty years before assuming the purple, Severus consulted an astrologer during a spell of duty in Africa. After the astrologer had computed a horoscope based on Severus' birth, the man was incredulous. He had seen a great future ahead for this young man, but could hardly believe it. "Give me your real horoscope, not someone else's", he told Severus. But he swore that it was indeed his own, and was then told "everything that afterwards came to pass".

When he finally became emperor, Severus built one of the most remarkable structures in Rome, which sadly no longer exists. Known as the Septizonium, it was erected at the corner of the Palatine that faced the Via Appia. More than 30 metres high and 90 metres long, it contained statues of the seven planetary gods (the Sun and Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn). The central statue was the Sun, probably depicted in the likeness of Severus himself, looking south towards Africa. In his palace, the emperor had "the ceilings of the rooms where he heard lawsuits painted with the stars under which he had been born". But the actual configuration of the stars and planets when he was born was kept secret. This vital section was painted in different ways in two different rooms, since he did not want

other people casting his horoscope to see what future lay in store. Several people who played this dangerous game were executed.

His son, Caracalla, was also deeply influenced by the stars. A curious silver coin issued in the later years of his reign has recently been explained as the representation of the supernova of 185 AD (Roger Culver of Colorado State University and David MacDonald of Illinois State University made this connection). The coin depicts the emperor, in the guise of his hero Alexander the Great, holding a shield. On this shield, at eye level with Alexander, is a head with streaming hair, thought to represent the exploded star. Above the head is a horse leaping to the left.

Earlier studies based on Chinese records have revealed the location of the supernova, which shone much brighter than the brightest planet. It was visible for seven or eight months, beginning in December 185, and was probably a naked-eye object when Caracalla was born in April 186. It would have been appropriate, plausible and advantageous to interpret such a spectacular celestial phenomenon as "Caracalla's star". The placement of the figure at eye-level may well indicate the object's actual position near the horizon (as seen from his birthplace of Lyons), eye-level for an observer. The horse on the shield has been identified as a representation of Pegasus, commonly associated with the month of April.