

THE DEATH OF CN. POMPEIUS STRABO

Most of the sources for the death of the father of Pompey the Great are agreed as to its cause: he died as a result of being struck by lightning¹). Modern scholars, however, have been reluctant to accept the veracity of this spectacular end to Strabo's career, and have preferred to attribute his death to the effects of plague²). Mommsen, who was an advocate of this latter explanation³), suggested that the origin of the variant 'lightning' version was to be found in the phrase *afflatus sidere*, which is preserved in Obsequens' account of Strabo's demise⁴): whereas this phrase means 'seized by pestilence', it had been translated erroneously as 'struck by lightning', *afflatus fulmine*⁵), and so gave birth to the sensational story which the surviving sources transmit. This ingenious hypothesis appears to have won general acceptance⁶); and yet an examination of its details may not be without interest, for it is my contention that Mommsen may not be correct, in which case an alternative explanation of the variant accounts must be sought⁷).

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1) Appian, BC 1.68.312 (cf. 1.80.366); Orosius 5.19.18; Plutarch, Pomp. 1.2. Cf. the account of Licinianus (35, p. 17 Criniti).

2) Velleius 2.21.4, *post hoc, cum utrumque exercitum velut parum bello exhaustum laceraret pestilentia, Cn. Pompeius decessit*, is most naturally taken to mean that Strabo died as a result of the *pestilentia*: see further p. 148 below. Orosius 5.19.18 and Licinianus 35, p. 16 Criniti also record the devastating effect of this plague on the armies of Strabo and Octavius. Those who have accepted this *pestilentia* as the cause of Strabo's death include Last (CAH 9.264, n.1), Gelzer (Pompeius [Munich 1949], p. 34), Miltner (RE 21.2.2260-1), Badian (Foreign Clientelae [Oxford 1958], p. 240), and Seager (Pompey, A Political Biography [Oxford 1979], p. 5).

3) A History of Rome, transl. W. P. Dickson (London 1894), vol. IV, p. 64, n. 1 (= Römische Geschichte II [Berlin 1916], p. 310 n. 1).

4) Obsequens 56a: *ipse Pompeius afflatus sidere interit*.

5) Orosius' account of Strabo's death runs *Pompeius fulmine adflatus interit*; this may have given Mommsen the basis for his theory.

6) Cf., e.g., the works cited in note 2 above.

7) Mommsen's theory was called into question as long ago as 1896 by O. Dieckmann, *De Grani Liciniani fontibus et auctoritate* (Berl. Stud. für class. Philol. und Archäol., 16. Band, 3. Heft), p. 91-4. Although it will be apparent

Mommsen cited three 'parallels' for the phrase *afflatus sidere* meaning 'seized by pestilence': Livy 8.9.12; Petronius, Sat. 2.7; Pliny, NH 2.108. These passages are clearly of crucial importance to the argument and thus merit close examination.

(i) Livy 8.9.11–12 (referring to the consul Decius): *Ita omnis terror pavorque cum illo latus signa prima Latinorum turbavit, deinde in totam penitus aciem pervasit. Evidentissimum id fuit, quod quacumque equo invectus est, ibi haud secus quam pestifero sidere icti pavebant.*

Livy describes the Latin forces' panic at the approach of Decius as *haud secus quam pestifero sidere icti*. It appears that Mommsen would have rendered this as 'just as if they had been struck down by pestilence', which would be an odd comparison to use. It is surely more likely that Livy is drawing attention to the paralysing effect of Decius' attacks upon the Latins, which resulted in the latter being unable to put up any resistance to him, yet at the same time being unable to flee. This passage, then, seems very doubtful evidence for Mommsen's hypothesis⁸).

(ii) Petronius, Sat. 2.7: *Nuper ventosa istaec et enormis loquacitas Athenas ex Asia con migravit animosque iuvenum ad magna surgentes veluti pestilenti quodam sidere adflavit, semelque corrupta regula eloquentia stetit et obmutuit.*

The simile used by Petronius would appear to be a more promising item in support of Mommsen; it would be most appropriate to describe the *ventosa ... loquacitas* as a 'pestilence'. But the Latin use of *sidus* need not exclude the possibility that Petronius is here referring to the influence of the stars on human affairs⁹).

(iii) Pliny, NH 2.108: *Quin partibus quoque signorum quorundam sua vis inest, ut autumnali aequinoctio brumaeque, cum tempestatibus confici sidus intellegimus, nec imbribus tantum tem-*

from this paper that I find Dieckmann's alternative explanation of the sources implausible, it may be as well to draw attention to his study of the problem, not least because it would appear to have been overlooked by subsequent writers (none of the works cited in note 2 above mentions Dieckmann, and of other authors known to me only Drumann-Groebe, *Geschichte Roms IV* [Leipzig 1908], p. 331 n. 3, and van Ooteghem, *Pompée le grand, bâtisseur d'empire* [Brussels 1954], p. 48 n. 3, appear aware of his work).

8) Cf. in support of the explanation here advanced the passages cited in the OLD, s.v. *sidus*, 6 (b).

9) Cf. OLD, s.v. *sidus*, 6, and the passages there cited.

pestatibusque sed multis et corporum et ruris experimentis. adflantur alii sidere, alii commoventur statis temporibus alvo, nervis, capite, mente.

This passage is the closest of the three to the expression used by Obsequens, in that *sidus* is used without an adjective. Pliny is describing the effect of stars on the health of mortals, and would thus appear to be using the word *sidus* in a way similar to that posited in Petronius. The context makes it unlikely that Pliny is claiming that some people are 'seized by pestilence'; it is more plausible to suppose that he is referring to general debilitation by *adflantur alii sidere*, and contrasting this with the more specific ailments *alvo, nervis* etc.

It seems reasonable to conclude from the evidence provided by Livy, Petronius and Pliny that the grounds for rendering *afflatus sidere* as 'seized by pestilence' are far from strong¹⁰). The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* confirms this, for it offers no example in Latin where *sidus* means 'pestilence', if by 'means' we understand 'provides an exact translation of'. Dieckmann, however, claims that Mommsen could have cited Orosius 5.19.18 to support his case¹¹). Such a claim deserves investigation.

Orosius' text reads as follows: ... *exercitus vero eius [sc. Pompei] pestilentia correptus paene totus absumptus est. Nam undecim milia virorum de castris Pompei mortua, sex milia autem de parte Octavi consulis siderata sunt.* Dieckmann observes that *siderata* is used with reference to the pestilence in the army; the next step in the argument is not explicitly stated, but would appear to be that if *siderata* refers to pestilence, then so could the noun *sidus* in the expression *afflatus sidere*. True, *siderata* in this context does refer to pestilence, but so does *mortua*, a word which here derives its specific meaning of 'dead (as a result of pestilence)' solely from the context. It seems to me that it is quite possible – at any rate, at least as possible as the hypothesis advanced by Dieckmann – that *siderata* (and, indeed, *sidus* too) can be used non-specifically to refer to any strange happening, and that it is only from the context that a more definite meaning can be assigned to it. This passage from Orosius, therefore, can hardly be used to provide a parallel for *sidus* 'meaning' *pestilentia*.

On the other hand, it is clear from the examples in the OLD

10) This was noted by Dieckmann, op. cit. (note 7), p. 91.

11) Op. cit. (note 7), p. 92.

that *sidus* is used of an extra-human influence on the lives of mortals. Martial 7.92.9–10, addressed to a man who is always promising help, but never making his promise good, provides a nice instance of this:

*hoc opus est, subito fias ut sidere mutus,
dicere ne possis, Baccara, 'si quid opus'.*

'Pestilence' is here far from Martial's thoughts; *subito...sidere* means no more than 'by a sudden stroke of fate'. The OLD entry¹²) includes this passage in its list of examples of *sidus* as an agent causing physical paralysis; but that is surely too specific a meaning to give to *sidus* here. True, Martial is hoping for a paralysis of Baccara's vocal chords, but that is indicated not by the use of *subito...sidere* alone, but rather by the addition of *mutus*, which defines more exactly the extent of the 'stroke of fate'¹³).

I would thus maintain that *afflatus sidere* is a non-specific expression, which can be used to describe any 'blow' which can be attributable to supernatural forces. 'Struck down by fate' might be an acceptable translation. But it would also appear that *sidus*, within such a context of planetary influence on human affairs, can, at times, carry a more exact meaning. I have already suggested that Livy 8.9.12 uses *sidus* to indicate an agent of paralysis, and the OLD collects other examples. Not all of these examples seem to me to be cogent (see above), but it seems hard to doubt that paralysis is indicated in the following entertaining poem of Martial (11.85):

*sidere percussa est subito tibi, Zoile, lingua
dum lingis. certe, Zoile, nunc futues.*

With this in mind, let us now examine the passage from Obsequens. As the context is important, I shall quote the passage in full:

*Cinna et Mario per bella civilia crudeliter saevientibus Romae
in castris Gnaei Pompei caelum ruere visum, arma signaque tacta,
milites exanimati. Ipse Pompeius afflatus sidere interiit.*

Those who have followed Mommsen and maintained that Obsequens was not recording a version of the death of Strabo by lightning do not appear to have taken proper account of the con-

12) OLD, s.v. *sidus*, 6 (b).

13) Cf. R.T. Bridge and E.D. Lake, *Select Epigrams of Martial*, books 7–12 (Oxford 1906), ad loc.: 'Any sudden calamity, e.g. a stroke of paralysis etc., might be ascribed to the influence of the stars'.

text in which this death is mentioned¹⁴). Obsequens relates a number of supernatural events, and then mentions the death of Strabo: the clear implication being that Strabo's fate is connected with the strange happenings in his camp. Moreover, the expression *arma signaque tacta* is likely to be a reference to the effects of lightning: what more capable of bringing this about than a thunderbolt from Heaven? In such a context, it would be quite possible for *afflatus sidere*, far from meaning 'seized by pestilence', to indicate that Strabo had been struck by lightning¹⁵). In short, the Obsequens passage seems very poor evidence for Mommsen's hypothesis, at least as that stands. *Afflatus sidere* may, as I have suggested, be a non-specific expression, and so the possibility remains that Obsequens is *alluding* to Strabo's death from plague; but he is surely not mentioning it explicitly, as Mommsen had supposed.

However, it may still be possible to rescue Mommsen's hypothesis, albeit in a slightly revised form. *Sidus*, as we have seen, can indicate an agent of paralysis, and so *afflatus sidere* could mean 'struck down and paralysed'¹⁶). Now, although paralysis can indeed result from being struck by lightning¹⁷), it can also be a symptom of certain infectious diseases, such as cholera and typhoid¹⁸). It thus appears to be possible that Obsequens is referring to the *effect* of the *pestilentia* on Strabo, rather than to the *pe-*

14) The importance of the context of Obsequens 56a was appreciated by Dieckmann, op. cit. (note 7), p. 93.

15) Note that Obsequens is extremely fond of recording the action of lightning, both on animate and inanimate objects: cf. 1; 3; 11; 12; 14; 15; 20; 25; 28; 29; 36; 37; 38; 41; 43; 44; 47; 49; 50; 53; 56b; 61; 63; 68; 71.

16) This was the conclusion of E. Klebs, *De scriptoribus aetatis Sullanae* (diss., Berlin 1876), p. 14–15, citing Scribonius Largus 101 as evidence that the Greeks termed *sideratio παράλυσις*. But as (*pace* Dieckmann, p. 94) paralysis can result from certain infectious diseases as well as from the effects of being struck by lightning (see below, note 18), Klebs' suggestion that Obsequens reflects the 'lightning' version of Strabo's death and that the general was thus killed by a thunderbolt must remain doubtful. See also below, note 25.

17) French's Index of Differential Diagnosis (Bristol ¹¹1979), p. 619. I am most grateful to Dr. H. R. Dorkins for his bibliographical assistance with this and the following note.

18) Cf. e.g. Butterworth's Medical Dictionary (Butterworth ²1978), s.v. cholera (p. 351) and fever, typhoid (p. 657). For a more detailed study of typhoid, see A. B. Christie, *Infectious Diseases* (London ³1968), p. 137 f.; id., *Infectious Diseases: Epidemiology and Clinical Practice* (Edinburgh ³1980), p. 47–102. Licin. 35 p. 17 Criniti would appear to be recording some sort of recovery in Strabo's condition, followed by a relapse; this would be typical of the effects of typhoid (Butterworth's Medical Dictionary² p. 657; Christie, op. cit. [1980], p. 79).

stilentia itself; and it may well be that the account which Obsequens records was interpreted to mean 'struck down by lightning' because the expression *afflatus sidere* was rather vague, leaving a number of possibilities open. Hostile sources, such as P. Rutilius Rufus¹⁹), would no doubt eagerly seize upon the possibility of divine displeasure with the sinister figure of Strabo.

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Although the variant accounts of the death of Strabo can be accounted for, if not quite in the way Mommsen and those who have followed his explanation have supposed, the hypothesis advanced above remains no more than a possibility. The fact of the matter is that it is very difficult to decide exactly how Strabo did meet his end. Of the surviving sources, Appian, Orosius and Plutarch state that he was killed by lightning²⁰); Appian adds that ἄλλοι τε τῶν ἐπιφανῶν were killed as well²¹). Obsequens, as I have attempted to show, appears to be vague as to the cause of Strabo's death. Velleius does not mention the cause of death explicitly, but does seem to be under the impression that it was caused by the *pestilentia* rife in Strabo's army²²). As Velleius' description of Strabo is a most unflattering one²³), it seems hardly likely that he would be abbreviating a source which contained the 'lightning' story, for thus he would be forfeiting not only a vivid detail, but also a detail which would show Strabo in a very bad light, as a man hated by the gods²⁴). Velleius, then, would appear to be recording a different tradition concerning the death of Strabo from that of Appian, Orosius and Plutarch²⁵).

19) For Rutilius Rufus' unfavourable portrayal of Strabo, see Plutarch, Pomp. 37.4.

20) For the references, see note 1 above.

21) BC 1.68.312.

22) For the text of Velleius, see above, note 2.

23) Note the sentence in Vell. 2.21.4 which follows that quoted in note 2 above: *cuius interitus voluptas amissorum aut gladio aut morbo civium paene damno repensata est, populusque Romanus quam vivo iracundiam debuerat, in corpus mortui contulit*.

24) For lightning as Zeus' weapon against perjurers, see e.g. Arist., Clouds 397, with Dover's note ad loc. The unlikelihood of the omission of the story that Strabo was struck by lightning applies with equal validity if Velleius had simply transcribed a (hostile) source, for such a source would have no reason to omit this detail, if it were known to him.

25) Both Dieckmann (op. cit., p. 93) and Klebs (op. cit., p. 16) gloss over the problem which Velleius presents to their theory that Strabo can be shown to have been killed by lightning; in the light of the observations in the text above, it is not enough, in my opinion, simply to say that Velleius need not refer to *pestilentia*

The remaining source, Licinianus, is the most detailed and interesting of the accounts of Strabo's last days. According to his version, Strabo fell ill from the plague which was ravaging both his army and that of the consul Octavius, and was confined to his tent. A storm arose, and the tent was destroyed by lightning; Strabo was also hit by the lightning and died several days later²⁶). This account has been accepted as accurate in all details, bar the actual striking of Strabo, by Gelzer²⁷) and Seager²⁸). They maintain that if the circumstantial detail contained in Licinianus is true, it would be easy to see how the story of Strabo's death via a thunderbolt could have arisen²⁹). But it seems to me to be slightly perverse to accept all this circumstantial detail of lightning striking Strabo's tent and killing some of his men, whilst rejecting the possibility that Strabo could have been killed in the way which Licinianus describes. The unwritten premise behind Gelzer's and Seager's argumentation appears to be that the death of Strabo resulting from lightning (though not, apparently, the deaths of his men) is so fantastic that it cannot be true. This may be an objection worth consideration, and it is certainly true that such a demise would be an extremely convenient one, to say the least, for sources hostile to Strabo; but it is an objection which is gravely weakened by acceptance of the presence of lightning in the camp at the time of Strabo's death, and of the deaths of some of Strabo's men as a result of being struck by a thunderbolt. It is surely sounder method to accept the account of Licinianus *in toto* if one wishes to use it as evidence for Strabo's death³⁰).

I would like to suggest, however, that what Licinianus contains is not so much a record of an actual historical event, but rather a combination of two separate versions of that event, namely the death of Strabo from *pestilentia* (which we appear to find contained in Velleius), and the death of Strabo from the effects of

as the cause of Strabo's death, and then to pass on. Dieckmann even has recourse to the extremely dubious procedure of citing (with apparent approval) conjectures which 'restore' *de caelo tactus*, *fulmine tactus*, or *ictus* to precede *decessit* in Velleius' text. This tampering with the text is quite arbitrary; nothing should be built on such alleged lacunae.

26) Licin. 35, p. 16–17 Criniti.

27) Kleine Schriften II (Wiesbaden 1963), p. 125.

28) Op. cit. (note 2), p. 5 n. 38.

29) Seager also accepts Appian's claim that there were others who were killed by lightning (BC 1.68.312).

30) As, for example, do Drumann-Groebe, loc. cit. (note 7), Broughton (MRR II.49) and Gabba, *Appiani Bellorum Civilium Liber Primus* (Florence 1967), p. 191.

lightning (which is recorded by Appian, Orosius and Plutarch). Licinianus, or his source³¹), appears to have been aware of both versions, and, rather than rejecting either, combined them in an ingenious hybrid account: the thunderbolt strikes the general, who is already infected by the *pestilentia*; death follows some days later. As for the circumstantial detail about lightning which Licinianus provides, it seems to me quite possible that this is an unhistorical rationalization, designed to furnish a plausible context for the 'blasting' of Strabo³²); the account used by Licinianus (or his source) may merely have mentioned the fact that Strabo was killed by lightning (this bare detail, without such a 'context', is all that Plutarch and Orosius contain, for example).

But although it may be possible to show that Licinianus is recording both versions of the death of Strabo rather than a real event, we are still no nearer to deciding, with any degree of certainty, which of these versions is more likely to afford the true account of Strabo's end. Mommsen provided an explanation of the two traditions, but the grounds on which that explanation rested have been called into question earlier in this paper; and, while it is still possible to account for the variation in the sources – I have suggested one such way – such a resolution is far from being proven beyond all reasonable doubt. Indeed, the fact that, at some stage in the tradition, the two versions of Strabo's death were apparently combined may indicate the difficulty that was felt, even in the ancient world, in deciding between them on grounds of probability. It may, therefore, be no exaggeration to say that, as far as we are concerned, the truth about the death of Strabo may well have died with him*).

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31) Licinianus, like Orosius and Obsequens, is based on the Livian tradition, and it would be tempting to suppose that Livy himself had combined the two versions (or even, perhaps, the source which Livy was using); but the lack of information as to Livy's detailed treatment of this episode renders speculation in this sphere idle. Dieckmann, *op. cit.*, p. 91f., seems too optimistic as to the possibility of extrapolating the version which Livy contained from the surviving sources.

32) A similar rationalization may lie behind the 'falling sky' and *arma signaque tacta* of Obseq. 56a, as well as the ἄλλοι τε τῶν ἐπιφανῶν detail at Appian, BC 1.68.312 (although Gabba, *op. cit. ad loc.*, suggests that Appian is mistaken and that these individuals were carried off by plague).

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