XVIII.—The Neronian Comets [1]

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Concluding his account of the year A.D. 64, Tacitus reports (*Ann.* 15.47): "Fine anni vulgantur prodigia, imminentium malorum nuntia: vis fulgurum non alias crebrior et sidus cometes, sanguine inlustri semper Neroni expiatum; bicipites hominum aliorumve animalium partus . . . ," and more portents follow.

"Sidus cometes sanguine inlustri semper Neroni expiatum." Now only one other comet is recorded in the extant text of the *Annals*, the one which appeared in 60 (14.22). Therefore the commentators duly and dutifully remark upon the "semper" of our passage. The consensus of their remarks is that this use of *semper* is a rhetorical exaggeration, and the occurrence of *saepe* in other Tacitean contexts, where it may literally mean only "twice," is cited as analogous.[2] But actually in Tacitus' narrative the comet of 60 is not followed by an expiation in blood of executions. It is closely associated with Rubellius Plautus and his invitation into

[1] It is a pleasure to acknowledge most gratefully the assistance of two scholars whose friendship it is my good fortune to enjoy. My life-long friend, Dr. Bancroft W. Sitterly, Professor of Physics at American University, kindly answered some questions of astronomy in the early stages of the study, and incidentally provided much stimulus and encouragement. My long-time friend and former colleague, Dr. Homer H. Dubs, Professor of Chinese in Oxford University, most generously made available to me his profound learning; he excerpted and translated from the Chinese historical sources the material on which the list of cometary appearances given below depends. Cf. note 6, below. Certain quotations in the text or notes, identified by his initials, are from his letters to me.

The article, s.v. "Kometen," by W. Gundel in *RE* 11.1143 ff., lists (1188) in our period the comets of 54, 60, and 64 with full citation of classical evidence, but the most exiguous reference to the Chinese. Gundel does not list the appearance of Halley's in 66, though alluding to it under his entry for 69. B. Max Lersch, "Notizen über Kometenerscheinungen in früheren Jahrhunderten," in *SB Wien, Math.-Naturwiss. Cl.* 89.2 (1884) 767–801; 102.2A (1893) 1245–60, omitting the Claudian comet of 54, lists appearances in 60, 62, 64, and 66. J. G. Galle, *Verzeichniss der Elemente der bisher berechneten Cometenbahnen* (Leipzig 1894) is even less interested in antiquity and, in our period, has brief notice only of the appearance in 66 of Halley's comet.

[2] So Furneaux and Constans-Girbal; so, without citation of *saepe*, Nipperdey-Andresen. There used to be a disposition to solve the problem by emendation! Grotius simply deleted *semper*; Ernesti preferred to delete *Neroni*, or else to write *tyrannis* instead.

Asian banishment as a potentially traitorous rival of Nero. But the execution of Plautus occurred only in 62, at considerable remove from the cometary appearance of 60. Thus the explanation of rhetorical exaggeration is not really satisfactory. It were well if a better could be found.

A passage of the elder Pliny presents somewhat similar and rather more acute difficulty. Pliny says (*NH* 2.92), speaking of comets: "terrificum magna ex parte sidus atque non leviter piatum, ut civili motu Octavio consule [43 B.C.] iterumque Pompei et Caesaris bello [49/8], in nostro vero aevo circa veneficium quo Claudius Caesar imperium reliquit Domitio Neroni ac deinde principatu eius adsiduum prope ac saevum."[3] We shall return later to the "saevum"; for the moment we are interested in the "adsiduum prope." Furneaux,[4] annotating Tacitus' report of the comet in 60, says that Pliny "seems to have supposed it to have lasted on till the appearance in . . . A.D. 64." This flies in the face of Pliny's statement, just preceding, that "brevissimum quo cernerentur spatium VII dierum adnotatum est, longissimum [the MSS read] LXXX." The latter figure has usually been emended to CLXXX to accord with Seneca's "six months" for the comet of 60 (below, 241); not, in any case, however, *four years*, which would be astronomically impossible. But on the later Tacitean passage Furneaux[5] comments: "It is possible that there may have been other occasions which Tacitus has omitted to notice, as Pliny speaks of a comet as constantly appearing ('adsiduum prope ac saevum') in the time of Nero." But he instantly abandons the idea for the "more probable" explanation of rhetorical exaggeration. Surely, how-

[3] Immediately preceding the passage quoted above the text of Pliny reads: "sed cometes numquam in occasura parte caeli est." Rackham (*Loeb Classical Library*) understands this to mean "a comet never appears in the western sky," which of course is not true; so he emends to *nonnumquam*. This will not do; for of the comets instanced by Pliny as examples the Claudian, as Seneca informs us, "a septemtrione in verticem surgens orientem petiit semper obscurior," *NQ* 7.21.3. Rackham annotates: "The MSS. give 'never': Brotier quotes Aristotle *Meteorol.* 343 b 14 [Greek text]. But Pliny is not speaking of the *disappearance* of comets. If the MS. reading is accepted, *terrificum* begins a fresh sentence, and refers to comets in all quarters." Brotier was quite right. Aristotle means to say "comets do not set but simply disappear while still above our horizon," Pliny, whose style is not noted for crystal clarity, says, more briefly, "comets do not set." This statement is true; generalization about non-appearance in the west is not.

[4] *Ad* Tac. *Ann.* 14.22.

[5] *Ad* Tac. *Ann.* 15.47.

ever, the natural and obvious meaning of Pliny's "adsiduum prope" is "comets were so frequent under Nero that it is little exaggeration to describe them as continuous."

What the "semper" of Tacitus and, still more, the "adsiduum prope" of Pliny really require is *more comets*. More comets can readily be provided.

For convenience and a certain expediency we shall include the Claudian comet of 54 and commence our list with it.

Chinese records[6] report the following cometary appearances within the period A.D. 54–68, which presently interests us. We omit the data on the celestial location of each and the astrological interpretations as not pertinent to our inquiry.

[6] My initial acquaintance with the Chinese records was by way of John Williams, *Observations of Comets from* B.C. *611 to* A.D. *1640. Extracted from the Chinese Annals* (London 1871). For our period this is based, according to Williams, on the SHE KE, "better spelled SHZH-JI. But its author, Sz-ma Taien, died about 80 B.C. What Williams apparently means by the 'SHE KE' is the series of Chinese Standard Dynastic Histories, of which this history was the first, as they are summarized in the WEN-HSIEN TUNG-KAO, by Ma Duan-lin (mentioned by Williams), an encyclopaedia of Chinese history sent to the printer in 1322." (H. H. D.) But I became rather distrustful of Williams' book because his list did not contain the Claudian comet of 54, which, it seemed, should be there, since it was known to Seneca, Pliny, Suetonius, and Dio.

There next came under my eye M. Pingré, *Cométographie, ou Traité Historique et Théorique des Comètes*, 2 vols. (Paris 1783, 1784). This work depended, for our period, as regards Chinese sources, on P. Joseph-Anne-Marie de Moyriac de Mailla, *Histoire Générale de la Chine, traduite du Tong-kien-kang-mou* (Paris 1776), and on certain manuscript writings of P. Gaubil (a missionary priest), preserved in the library of the Dépot de la Marine. (These MSS Williams surmised had been destroyed in the early days of the French Revolution.) Pingré utilized also the Roman sources. In Pingré the Claudian comet was listed; but there were discrepancies between Pingré's data and those of Williams; and the then ignorance of the year in which Paterculus and Vopiscus were consuls, as cited by Seneca to date one of the comets, produced no end of chronological confusion.

Thus I was led to appeal to Professor Dubs. Noting that tables of correspondence between Chinese and European dates available to Williams eighty-odd years ago were much less reliable than those of today; that the sources used by Mailla and Williams were only secondary, encyclopaedic, and very late, he informed me that much earlier and original sources were available to the Sinologist. The cometary list which appears below was supplied by him. It is derived from the special *Treatises* (jzh) incorporated in the *History of the Later Han Dynasty*. These treatises "were not written by the author of the present *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, the Standard Dynastic History which treats of the first two centuries A.D., but were taken from an earlier and probably more reliable history with the same name, written by Sz-ma Biao, who lived c. A.D. 240–306." (H. H. D.) The edition cited below (notes 7–13) is that "entitled the *Hou-Han-shu Dzi-jie*, by Wang Sien-chien (1842–1917)." (H. H. D.)

A. 54 observed 9 June [with emendation of one word in the text], disappearing 9 July, visible 31 days.[7]
B. 55/6 observed 6 December, disappearing 27 March, visible 113 days.[8]
C. 60 observed 9 August, visible 135 days; and so disappearing 9 December.[9]
D. 61 observed 27 September, visible 70 days; and so disappearing 5 December.[10]
E. 64 observed 3 May, visible 75 days; disappearing, then, 16 July.[11]
F. 65 observed 29 July, visible 56 days; and so disappearing 22 September.[12]
G. 66 observed 20 February, visible 50 days; disappearing, therefore, 10 April.[13]

The last, it is of interest to moderns to note, is rather confidently calculated to have been an appearance of Halley's comet, last seen in 1910.[14]

We have, then, seven comets in the fourteen years, one in the last months of Claudius' reign, six under Nero. Lest anyone consider this total too large for the length of the period, we may quote two brief excerpts from authoritative works on astronomy. "As to brightness, comets differ widely. . . . Fifteen or twenty in a century become so conspicuous that a casual star-gazer could hardly fail to notice them, and a very few (perhaps two in a century, on the average) are visible even in broad daylight when near the sun. . . . Eighteen comets are recorded as having been visible to the naked eye during the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century, and at least six of these were conspicuous. Three of them were magnificent objects: 1901 I (visible only in the southern hemisphere), 1910 I, the great 'daylight comet,' and Halley's comet in 1910." And: "Denning finds that, between 1850 and 1915, 78 comets were

[7] *Treatise* 10, folio page 7b. "Too much value should not be put upon the length of time a comet is declared to have been visible, since it was always likely to have been visible for some days, perhaps weeks, before it was noticed." (H. H. D.)

[8] *Op. cit.* 8a.

[9] *Treatise* 11, page 1a.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Op. cit.* 1b, a note by Liu Jao (c. A.D. 510), quoting the *Gu-jin-ju* (a lost book) by Tsui Bao (c. A.D. 300).

[12] *Ibid.* In a note on this passage Liu Jao, again, quotes the *Gu-jin-ju* (see preceding note) for a comet appearing 31 January, 66. "This may have been the same comet as that noted next, for it had the same general location in the heavens and it is not stated how long it was visible. There is only 21 days' difference in the date." (H. H. D.)

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] J. R. Hind, "On the past history of the Comet of Halley," *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* 10 (1850) 58.

discovered which became visible to the naked eye. Between 1800 and 1850, there appear to have been at least 30 naked-eye comets. It would therefore seem that, on the average, there is at least one naked-eye comet per year. Some years are particularly favoured; thus, in 1911, there were four naked-eye comets. In other years there may be none."[14a]

Which of our seven, we may now consider, do the various Roman sources mention?

The identity of the comet described in the first *Eclogue* of Calpurnius Siculus (1.77 ff.) depends directly on the date to which the poem's composition is assigned. Usually the comet is understood to be the one in 54 and the eclogue is dated accordingly. More recently Miss Toynbee[15] has argued convincingly for dating the poem to A.D. 60, on the occasion of the festival of the *Neronia* then instituted by Nero. The comet will thus be in all probability that then visible in the sky (C in our list).

The younger Seneca has our A and C. He speaks consistently of the *two* comets seen "in our time," one just before the death of Claudius, the other visible "for six months" and appearing in the "consulship of Paterculus and Vopiscus," suffect consuls of the latter half of A.D. 60.[16] It is curious that this author has no reference to the comets of 55/6 and 61 (our B and D), although completion of the *Naturales Quaestiones* perhaps, followed by the author's suicide in 65, would explain the absence of the comets of 64 to 66. But there is little enough indication, surely, that Seneca was himself a very keen observer; he was, rather, a bookish scholar; and the comets of 54 and 60 were for some reason the ones which held interest for him.

The elder Pliny, as we have seen, reports the Claudian comet of 54 (A) and beyond that has the significant and illuminating phrase "adsiduum prope" for the subsequent appearances in Nero's reign.

[14a] Russell, Dugan, and Stewart, *Astronomy* (Boston 1926) 1.409 f.; H. S. Jones, *General Astronomy* (London 1923) 266. These I owe to Professor Sitterly.

[15] J. M. C. Toynbee, "Nero *Artifex*: The *Apocolocyntosis* Reconsidered," *CQ* 36 (1942) 83–93.

[16] *NQ* 7.6.1; 23.1 ("two in our time"); 7.17.2; 21.3; 29.3 (Claudian); 7.17.2; 21.3; 28.2 f.; 29.3 (Neronian); 7.21.3; 29.2; cf. 10.1; 12.3 ("six months"); 7.28.2 ("Paterculus and Vopiscus"). The Chinese records give 135 days' visibility for the comet of 60 (above, 240), with which Seneca's "six months" accords ill. Had western observers really noticed this comet *so long* before the Chinese? Cf. note 7, above. It hardly seems likely. Has Seneca given a *very* "round figure"? Has he even, conceivably, transferred to the comet's visibility the duration of the suffect consuls' term?

The *Octavia* represents the year 62 as the time of its action. Thus the comet of the play (231 ff.) should rather be that of the preceding year (D above) than, as is usually supposed, the more familiar one of 60 (C).

Josephus (*BJ* 6.5.3) reports that clear forecast of the destruction of Jerusalem had appeared in a comet which was seen for a whole year (*sic*). This can be only the comet of 66, visible for something over a month and a half four years before the event. Perhaps, therefore, the Jews' failure to recognize this clear prophecy, of which Josephus complains, is venial after all.

Tacitus, most interestingly, has no word of the Claudian comet of 54 (A), though he sets down a considerable list of portents which foretold that Emperor's demise (*Ann.* 12.64). This omission will have some bearing later in the present discussion. The historian has full account of the appearance in 60 and its historical impact (14.22); we shall peruse the passage later. His second comet (15.47), one of the portents which he ascribes to the end of the year 64, falls midway between the actual comets of mid-64 and mid-65; the former seems more probably intended, postdated so as to be grouped with other prodigies, all mentioned together where he chose to insert the record in his narrative of the year's events.

Suetonius mentions the appearance in 54 (*Claud.* 46) and *one* of the Neronian comets (*Nero* 36). He writes: "stella crinita . . . per continuas noctes oriri coeperat . . . nobilissimo cuique exitium destinavit; enimvero multo magis et quasi per iustam causam duabus coniurationibus provulgatis, quarum prior maiorque Pisoniana Romae, posterior Viniciana Beneventi conflata atque detecta est." Now the Pisonian conspiracy finally came to overt action in mid-April of 65 (below, 247) and was betrayed then; the Vinician, which is very obscure to us, belongs to the next year. It seems therefore to follow from Suetonius' language and his association of the comet with the ensuing conspiracies, that the comet here referred to is that which appeared in the middle of 64.

The epitomator of Dio, Xiphilinus, has only A clearly (60.35.1); but under date of A.D. 59 he has reference to some portents in language closely similar to that used by Suetonius in the passage just cited. Thus there may be a corrupt allusion to the comet of 60 in Dio-Xiphilinus (61.18.2).

Somewhat of interest attaches to the diversity of interpretation

which these Roman sources place upon a cometary appearance.[17] Best-known perhaps is the statement about the comet of 44 B.C. from Augustus' autobiography, as quoted by the elder Pliny (*NH* 2.94): "eo sidere significari vulgus credidit Caesaris animam inter deorum immortalium numina receptam." But Calpurnius Siculus (1.77 ff.) says that his Neronian comet was very different from the one which after Caesar's death foretold the fateful armed strife of wretched civil war. That is to say, by implication, that the comet of 60 was harbinger of the new golden age which the poet and others among his contemporaries saw in the reign of the youthful Nero.[18]

Seneca seems to regard comets as, generally speaking, omens of grave import (*NQ* 7.1.5). But the appearance in 60 had, he says, redeemed comets from their reputed *infamia* (7.17.2). The allusion here is evidently to the idea, which we shall presently encounter more directly expressed, that comets portended the death of great rulers. Whereas this comet of 60 most fortunately had not brought to an end the joyous reign of Nero. The same appearance, however, Seneca states elsewhere, had abundantly fulfilled Aristotle's judgment that the phenomenon forecast great storms, and not for a short time only, but for a whole year; for the aftermath of the comet of 60 had been tumultuous storms and even earthquakes (7.28.1–3).

For the anonymous author of the *Octavia* the comet was an ominous portent (*Oct.* 231 ff.). Pliny reports the general belief that the portent might have specific reference according to the part of the sky in which the phenomenon was seen and its own aspect. He writes: "People think it matters in what direction a comet darts, what star's strength it borrows, what shapes it resembles, and in what places it shines; that if it resembles a pair of flutes it is a portent for the art of music, in the private parts of the constellations it portends immorality, if it forms an equilateral triangle or a rectangular quadrilateral in relation to certain positions of the fixed stars, it portends men of genius and a revival of learning, in the head of the Northern or the Southern Serpent it brings poisonings."[19] More generally, Pliny regards a comet as a terrifying omen not

[17] Fuller discussion in Gundel (note 1, above).

[18] Cf. Toynbee (note 15, above).

[19] *NH* 2.92 f. (Rackham's translation, *Loeb Classical Library*). Lersch (note 1, above), not having read Pliny very carefully at this point, exclaims "Also auch viereckige Kometen!" 772, note 1.

easily expiated. And like Calpurnius Siculus he interprets the one after Caesar's death as forecasting the bloodshed of the civil wars, and as expiated thereby.

For Suetonius and Dio[20] the comet of 54 was clear omen of Claudius' imminent death. Here is in brief expression the idea which is elaborated in Suetonius elsewhere and in Tacitus. Tacitus, narrating the events of the year 60, reports: "inter quae sidus cometes effulsit; de quo vulgi opinio est tamquam mutationem regis portendat" (*Ann.* 14.22.1). And Suetonius writes of the appearance in 64: "stella crinita, quae summis potestatibus exitium portendere vulgo putatur, per continuas noctes oriri coeperat. anxius ea re, ut ex Balbillo astrologo didicit, solere reges talia ostenta caede aliqua illustri expiare atque a semet in capita procerum depellere, nobilissimo cuique exitium destinavit" (*Nero* 36).

Finally Tacitus, in the passage from which we took our original departure, counts the comet of 64 as one among a series of prodigies foretelling of impending disasters, and states that a comet was always expiated by Nero with noble blood (*Ann.* 15.47). This is strongly reminiscent of Pliny the Elder's "a terrifying star usually and not easily expiated," as exemplified by two civil wars, the poisoning of Claudius, and the comet under Nero which was "continuous almost and cruel" (*NH* 2.92).

"Intelligent Chinese in the first century A.D. believed that celestial phenomena were warnings to the Emperor and his government, sent by Heaven, an impersonal yet moral supreme power or Nature. This Nature, by sympathy, was disarranged whenever Man (the government) did not govern properly, that is, when anything wrong was done. Such was the doctrine taught by the great Confucian, Dung Jung-shu, and universally accepted in those days. Consequently, the appearance of a comet, eclipse, earthquake, or the like produced a crop of 'explanations' tracing the event to some governmental failure. A century or two later, however, Confucianism was in eclipse, and Chinese interpretations were more like those of the Romans." (H. H. D.)

Having learned from the Chinese that there were seven cometary appearances from the end of Claudius' reign through that of Nero, we may next inquire how close is the coincidence of ensuing executions with this list of comets, that is, how much foundation can be

[20] Suet. *Claud.* 46; Dio 60.35.1.

discovered for Tacitus' allegation that Nero always expiated the phenomenon with noble blood. The reader may be reminded that the comet of 54 had disappeared three whole months before Claudius' death, yet none the less had constituted a clear forecast of that event; and that Seneca asserted the prophetic bearing of a cometary appearance to extend over the whole year (above, 243). It may be said at once, by anticipation, that the coincidence for which we look is not exact throughout the list and the period's history; but quite sufficient coincidence will emerge to justify the Tacitean phrase, granted his point of view and his purposes.

If the death of Claudius which the comet of mid-54 had predicted was not adequate expiation of that appearance, there followed immediately after Nero's accession the assassination of Marcus Junius Silanus, the proconsul of Asia, and the reluctant suicide of Narcissus, the notorious freedman-secretary of Claudius (Tac. *Ann.* 13.1). The former was done without Nero's cognizance, according to Tacitus, and the latter against his will. But while Dio (61.6) agrees with Tacitus in charging Silanus' murder to Agrippina, it is interesting to note that the elder Pliny categorically blames Nero (*NH* 7.58). And the next year saw the assassination of Britannicus (*Ann.* 13.14–17).

The first comet of Nero's reign was seen from December 55 to March 56. Narrative of the year 56, as of 57, is very brief in both Tacitus and Dio. The only person to meet an unhappy end of whom we are informed was Julius Montanus, whose story, with variations in detail, is told by both the historians and by Suetonius as well.[21] It was Nero's pleasure in the hot blood of his youth to range incognito through the night streets brawling. Montanus encountered him thus and thrashed him soundly, blacking both his eyes. Then, having recognized the Emperor, he addressed to Nero a letter of apology. "So," said Nero, "he knew he was striking the Emperor!" Whereupon Montanus committed suicide. Tacitus describes Montanus as of senatorial rank but not yet having held any magistracy, presumably a youth of senatorial family perhaps not much senior to Nero himself. He may therefore hardly qualify really as "sanguis inlustris," but he *was* a senatorial.

Of the comet of 60 Tacitus writes: "Meantime also a comet-star began to shine, which the common people believe portends a change

[21] Tac. *Ann.* 13.25; Dio 61.9.3 f.; Suet. *Nero* 26.2.

of ruler. Therefore, as if Nero were already overthrown, people asked who would be chosen to succeed. And on everyone's lips was Rubellius Plautus' name, whose nobility derived through his mother from the Julian family. Plautus himself maintained the traditions of his forbears, austere bearing, a chaste and reserved household, and the more he withdrew himself because of fear, the more of notoriety he acquired. The gossip was augmented by an equally fatuous interpretation of a lightning stroke. For as Nero reclined at dinner in his villa called Sublaqueum beside the lakes of the Anio, lightning struck the table and scattered all in disorder; and because this occurred in the vicinity of Tibur, from which Plautus' family on his father's side derived, people believed that he was the man destined by the gods' will, and many persons warmly approved, whose eager and usually misguided ambition it is to lead the way in cultivating new and dubious prospects. So Nero, perturbed by all this, addressed a letter to Plautus suggesting that in the interests of the capital's tranquillity he withdraw himself from this malicious gossip; he had estates in Asia inherited from his grandfather where he could enjoy life in security and without causing turmoil" (*Ann.* 14.22). Thus no blood was spilled in expiation of this comet.

Again in the closing months of 61 a comet was seen. And the next year brought the execution of Rubellius Plautus in Asia, and in Gaul of Cornelius Sulla who, as the last descendant of the great dictator, had been equally with Plautus suspect of treasonable designs (*Ann.* 14.57–59). In 62 also died Afranius Burrus, the praetorian prefect who had shared with Seneca the regent ministry of the early years of the reign. Suetonius and Dio (Xiphilinus) assert unhesitatingly that Nero murdered him by poison; only Tacitus allows that Burrus' death may have been natural.[22] But having remarked that the majority of the authorities known to him agreed on the murder, Tacitus is not unlikely himself to have reckoned Burrus among the expiatory victims to the comet of 61.

For two and a half months in the middle of the year 64 another comet was visible. This was the one about which, according to Suetonius, Nero consulted the astrologer Balbillus, following whose advice the Emperor determined to remove all the most eminent men of the State; and in this resolve was shortly confirmed by the Pisonian conspiracy. This great plot, the most dangerous threat

[22] Suet. *Nero* 35.5; Dio 62.13.3; Tac. *Ann.* 14.51.1–3.

to Nero's throne and life before his final overthrow, was discovered in mid-April of 65 (*Ann.* 15.53.1; 54.1;74.1), well within the year after the comet, which Seneca following Aristotle allows the forecast to extend (above, 243). A woman conspirator, Epicharis, who had tried to raise the marines of the naval station at Misenum to revolt, committed suicide (15.51.1–3; 57.3); so also did the titular head of the conspiracy, Calpurnius Piso (15.59.8). Plautius Lateranus, the consul-designate, was executed, and Seneca received a command to take his own life (15.60.1 f.; 61.5,7). Faenius Rufus, the praetorian prefect, and several tribunes and centurions of the Guard were executed (15.66–68.2). The consul Vestinus fell under suspicion of treasonous intent, even though his complicity in the Pisonian conspiracy was not demonstrated, and he too was executed (15.68.3–5). The poet Lucan was ordered to commit suicide. Flavius Scaevinus and Afranius Quintianus, effeminates of senatorial rank, and Claudius Senecio, knight, perished also (15.70.2; cf. 49.4; 50.1 f.). And two army officers who were acquitted, yet committed suicide (15.71.4). Excepting the solitary woman and the military officers, all these qualified eminently as "sanguis inlustris."

Hardly, it would seem, had the executions of the Pisonian conspirators ended, when in the third trimester of 65 another comet appeared. In the last quarter of the year, apparently,[23] occurred the trial for treason of Gaius Cassius Longinus and Lucius Junius Silanus; and Silanus, ostensibly in transport to exile on the island of Naxos, was executed at Bari (16.7–9). Rubellius Plautus' widow, Annia Pollitta, her father, Lucius Antistius Vetus, and the latter's mother-in-law, Sextia, committed suicide in anticipation of certain conviction, apparently on belated charges of complicity in Plautus' treason (16.10 f.).

Finally, in the late winter and early spring of 66, appeared the last of the Neronian comets. And, though Tacitus' *Annals* breaks off in lacuna before his narrative of the year is complete, there is yet a goodly quota of executions. Two senators, Publius Anteius and Ostorius Scapula, the former some-time adherent of Agrippina and governor (though absentee) of Syria, the latter military hero of campaigns in Britain, took their own lives under conviction of

[23] According to Tacitus, the trial followed the death of Poppaea, *Ann.* 16.7.1; Poppaea's death occurred after the *ludicrum*, 16.6.1; the *ludicrum, lustrale certamen*, 16.2.3, probably fell in mid-October to mark the anniversary of Nero's accession. On this and the following trials cf. further *TAPA* 83 (1952) 303–10, 285–95.

treason (16.14 f.). Annaeus Mela, the brother of Seneca, Anicius Cerialis, consul the year before, Rufrius Crispinus, ex-praetorian prefect, and Gaius Petronius, the novelist, all paid by suicide a deferred penalty for complicity in Piso's conspiracy of the preceding year (16.17 ff.). Two Stoics, Thrasea Paetus and Barea Soranus (together with his daughter, Servilia), also convicted of treason, the former perhaps charged with the instigation and encouragement of the Pisonian conspiracy or of Lucius Silanus or both, Soranus, ex-governor of Asia and alleged to have been implicated in Rubellius Plautus' treason, were permitted suicide (16.21–35). Probably we may add Annius Vinicianus who led the conspiracy of this year (Suet. *Nero* 36), of which we have the most meagre information because of the failure of the *Annals*.

Here, then, is a tale of comets and of executions which would amply justify Tacitus' "sidus cometes sanguine inlustri semper Neroni expiatum" as his own narrative does not, with its two comets only and the former of those not closely followed by bloodshed.

One of the major historical sources for the period that were available to Tacitus was Pliny's history in continuation of Aufidius Bassus. There is no question that he used it, for he cites it twice and in a third passage has unmistakable reference to it.[24] Pliny, with his insatiable curiosity and keen interest in all the world about him, including its natural phenomena, very probably incorporated in his history mention of the repeated appearances of comets. His phrase in the *Natural History*, "adsiduum prope", makes it indubitable that he knew the frequency of the phenomenon in Nero's time, and that frequency is confirmed by the Chinese records,[25] which lay good claim to reliability.[26] Pliny has called the succession of the

[24] *Ann.* 13.20.3; 15.53.4; and cf. 14.2.4.

[25] Before the comet of 54, the last one recorded in the Chinese annals had appeared in 39; following the last Neronian comet in 66, the next did not come until 71. Out of nine appearances in 33 years, seven fall within 13 years. This assumes that the Chinese list is at this point complete, which it may not be; cf. the next note, *ad fin.*

[26] The Chinese records of eclipses can be verified as those of comets cannot. For the eclipses can be calculated and the actual list compared with the recorded list. H. H. D. finds that "while in the period of 230 years ending in A.D. 23 almost two-thirds of the solar eclipses visible in China were recorded by Chinese astronomers, yet for periods of 50 years all eclipses were recorded, then for some decades only a few were recorded. It appears that at times an imperial astronomer was careful, and at other time another imperial astronomer was not."

Considering the significance to the Chinese of celestial phenomena, the cynical-minded might assume that signs would probably be recorded on occasion whether they actually occurred or not. This does *not*, however, eventuate in the case of the eclipses,

Neronian comets a "cruel thing"; and he describes the phenomenon as "terrificum magna ex parte sidus atque non leviter piatum" as evidenced by the civil wars, the poisoning of Claudius, and the history of Nero's reign (2.92); thus he seems clearly to share with Tacitus the idea of expiation in blood of the appearance of a comet. Among the other authors here concerned this idea appears only in the Suetonian record of the comet of 64 (above, 244).

We suggest, therefore, the following hypothesis: that Tacitus knew from his source Pliny the quite unusual frequency of comets during Nero's years; that he chose, however, to mention only two of them in his own narrative; (we have seen that he omits also the Claudian appearance, of which it is very difficult to believe he did not know, when Seneca, Pliny, Suetonius, and Dio all did); that he retained, however, the *impression* of the reiterated conjunction between comets and executions which was, implicitly or explicitly, related in Pliny's history, and so was led to write "sanguine inlustri semper Neroni expiatum."

Furneaux, as we have seen (above, 238), had a momentary glimmer of this explanation but, being evidently incurious about comets, precipitately rejected it for his preferred rhetorical exaggeration. Interestingly enough, Pingré, who did not write for classical philologists and, in all probability, was not read by them, in 1783 clearly adumbrated the interpretation which we have here implemented. "Tacite," he wrote, "dit en effet que la Comète est un Astre auquel Néron a *toujours* sacrifié le Sang le plus illustre. Cet Astre, selon Pline, s'est presque continuellement montré sous le règne de cet Empereur. Ces expressions autorisent à croire qu'il a paru un grand nombre de Comètes sous l'Empire de Néron."[27]

and the same may of course be presumed for the comets. "Such a record would have been in China a capital offense. In the period of 230 years, only three records of solar eclipses might have been deliberate falsifications, all of them near the beginning of the dynasty." (H. H. D.)

Thus the conclusion is that the Chinese annals give us the truth and nothing but the truth, though not necessarily always the whole truth. Their lists of heavenly appearances are entirely reliable as far as they go, but may sometimes be incomplete.

On the eclipses cf. the forthcoming third volume of H. H. D.'s translation of the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, appendix V.

[27] *Cométographie* (note 8, above) 1.285.