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FLYING SAUCERS OR FLYING SHIELDS

IN THE *De re publica* 1.19.31, Cicero has Laelius scold the young Tubero for being overly interested in a celestial phenomenon which had been reported to the Roman Senate. A second sun¹ had been seen. Laelius reminds Tubero that he should be more interested in the civil disorders occurring in Rome “before his very eyes.”² To emphasize his admonition Laelius had quoted the words of Achilles in the *Iphigenia* of Ennius³ (*De rep.* 1.18.30):

Astrologorum signa in caelo, quid sit observationis,
Cum capra aut nepa aut exoritur nomen
aliquod beluarum,
Quod est ante pedes nemo spectat, caeli
scrutantur plagas.

Seneca in the *Quaestiones naturales* (7.1.1) expresses quite a different attitude toward “sky-watching”:

Nemo usque eo tardus et hebes et demissus
in terram est ut ad divina non erigatur ac
tota mente consurgat, utique ubi novum
aliquod e caelo miraculum fulsit. Nam quam-
diu solita decurrunt, magnitudinem rerum
consuetudo subducit. Ita enim compositi
sumus ut nos cotidiana, etiamsi admiratione
digna sunt, transeant, contra minimarum
quoque rerum, si insolitae prodierunt, spec-
taculum dulce fiat.

According to Seneca, Tubero should have been interested in the “second sun,” the

novum miraculum. Man’s imagination, says Seneca, is dulled by the very repetition of the daily wonders of the universe. If, however, something unusual occurs in the normal order, it becomes a *spectaculum dulce*. How similar this opinion is to that expressed in a question by Edward J. Ruppelt, former head of the United States Air Force Project Blue Book, an operation of the Air Technical Intelligence Center: “Do people look up if they have no reason to do so?”⁴

Today, with more eyes than even Argus possessed, thousands of radar stations constantly scan the skies, looking for the *novum miraculum*, the Unidentified Flying Object, or, as it is more familiarly called, the UFO. Such watchfulness by governments around the world has awakened man’s imagination. The recent novel by Eugene Burdick, *Fail-safe*, about an accidental nuclear war triggered by a UFO, sold thousands of copies. More recently, some two thousand delegates attended the first national convention of the Amalgamated Flying Saucer Clubs of America at the Los Angeles Statler Hilton hotel. People have made sky-watching the *spectaculum dulce* of Seneca.

As evidenced by such writers as Pliny, Seneca, Julius Obsequens, and Joannes Lydus, the Romans, too, Laelius’ admonition notwithstanding, scanned the skies with considerable enthusiasm, and they too saw many unidentified objects.

¹ This phenomenon is discussed by both Pliny and Julius Obsequens. Sometimes as many as three suns were reported. Obsequens records that in 134 B.C. in Amiternum the sun was seen by night and its light appeared for some length of time (*De prodigiis* 27).

² The setting of the dialogue is 129 B.C., a tumultuous year in Roman domestic politics.

³ This passage is usually thus identified.

⁴ Edward J. Ruppelt, *The report on unidentified flying objects* (New York 1956) p.318.

From the numerous examples of contemporary UFO sightings documented by Ruppelt, two shapes emerge: usually the object seen is lens-shaped, but can also be oblong or shaped like a cigar. Some saucer evangelists say that the oblong shape is the "mother space ship" and the round objects are its parasite reconnaissance vehicles.⁵ Both types of UFOs were observed by the Romans.

Both Pliny and Seneca in the sections of their work dealing with celestial phenomena distinguish between the usual types of comets and other lights in the sky, which they place in a different category. In listing the various types of comets, Seneca says (1.15.4):

Horum genera sunt pogoniae et cyparissiae et lampades et alia omnia quorum ignis in exitu sparsus est. Dubium an inter hos ponantur trabes et pithiae raro visi.

He hesitates to classify as comets those more rarely seen lights in the sky which he calls tree-trunks (*trabes*) and barrels (*pithiae*).

Later in the same work Seneca gives a fuller description of these unusual lights (7.20.2):

Alii vero ignes diu manent nec ante discedunt quam consumptum est omne quo pascbantur alimentum. Hoc loco sunt illa a Posidonio scripta miracula, columnae clipeique flagrant aliaeque insigni novitate flammae. Quae non adverterent animos, si ex consuetudine et lege decurrerent, ad haec stupent omnes quae repentinum ex alto ignem eferunt, sive emicuit aliquid et fugit sive compresso aere et in ardorem coacto loco miraculi stetit.

Are the flying columns (*columnae*) and flying shields (*clipei*) of Seneca and Posidonius the same as today's flying cigars and flying saucers?

The case of the flying shields is perhaps the most interesting celestial phenomenon recorded by the ancients. In the *Naturalis*

historia 2.34.100, Pliny says that once "during the consulship of L. Valerius and C. Marius [100 B.C.] at sunset a fiery shield flashed sparking across the sky from west to east."⁶ Julius Obsequens, in his *De prodigiis*, a chronological listing of prodigies from 190 B.C. to 11 B.C., records the following (45) for the year 100 B.C.: "Sub occasu solis orbis clipei similis ab occidente ad orientem visus perferri."⁷

Perhaps it was more natural for the Romans to refer to such a fiery lenslike object as a shield than it is for us to refer to similar objects as flying saucers. For the term "saucer" was originally intended to describe more the movement of the object than its shape. Ruppelt records⁸ the origin of the term "flying saucer." On 24 June 1947, Kenneth Arnold, while searching for a lost Marine Corps C-46,

was looking down at the ground when suddenly he noticed a series of bright flashes off to his left. He looked for the source of the flashes and saw a string of nine very bright disk-shaped objects, which he estimated to be 45 to 50 feet in length. They were traveling from north to south across the nose of his airplane. They were flying in a reversed echelon (i.e., lead object high with the rest stepped down), and as they flew along they weaved in and out between the mountain peaks, once passing behind one of the peaks. Each individual object had a skipping motion described by Arnold as a "saucer skipped across water."

Moreover, the supposed pictures of UFOs which occur periodically in slick-back magazines (such as the August 1966 issue of *Real*) more closely resemble shields than saucers. Obviously the Romans had no cigars and apparently were more inclined to think of their shields than their saucers.

Of the many other UFO incidents reported by the ancients which bear striking similarities to contemporary sightings, one of the most fascinating involves the case of the "green fireballs." Ruppelt quotes a

⁵ The symbolism of UFOs is discussed by C. G. Jung, *Flying saucers, a modern myth of things seen in the skies* (New York 1959). Jung mentions that the ancient symbol of totality and wholeness is an object of circular form. He also indicates that some have found the circle and the oblong shape sexual symbols for female and male.

⁶ "Clipeus ardens ab occasu ad ortum scintillans transcurrit solis occasu L. Valerio C. Mario consulibus."

⁷ A reference to flying shields made by Joannes Lydus is quoted later in this paper.

⁸ Ruppelt, p.27.

news story dated 18 September 1954, the first line of which read: "Thousands of people saw a huge fireball light up dark New Mexico skies tonight." He continues:⁹

The story went on to tell about how a "blinding green" fireball the size of a full moon had silently streaked south-east across Colorado and northern New Mexico at eight-forty that night. Thousands of people had seen the fireball. It had passed right over a crowded football stadium at Santa Fe, New Mexico, and people in Denver said it "turned night into day."

Compare this news report with the following incident described by Pliny (2.35.100):

Scintillam visam e stella cadere et augeri terrae adpropinquantem, at postquam lunae magnitudine facta sit, inluxisse ceu nubilio die, dein, cum in caelum se reciperet, lampadem factam semel unquam proditur Cn. Octavio C. Scribonio consulibus [66 B.C.]. Vidit id Silanus proconsul cum comitatu suo.

There are several interesting points of similarity. The object increases in size until it becomes as large as the moon. The darkness of night is turned into the light of day—at least the light of a cloudy day. The object was seen by a relatively large number of people, although the proconsul's *comitatus* most certainly was not as large as the crowd at the football stadium.

One point about Pliny's report must be especially noted. If Silanus and his entourage regarded the UFO as a falling star, which *scintillam visam e stella cadere* suggests, it would certainly have been a most unusual falling star which, after it had approached the earth, retreated (*se reciperet*) back into the sky where it became a torch (*lampadem*). Once again, however, the familiar shapes of the disk and the cigar are suggested, and in the language of the saucer evangelists perhaps this was a case of the reconnaissance ship returning to the mother ship.

Other ancient writers have recorded similar phenomena. Although Pliny seems to have regarded this as a unique occurrence

(*semel unquam proditur*), Joannes Lydus¹⁰ regarded it as a rather common evil omen (*De ostentis* 6):

Saepe quoque scintilla exigua, e stellis in terram cadere visa, ibique aucta in orbem lunae magnitudine, conglobata illuxit. Id, quod nuper obvenit, haud communium prodigionum casuumque periculum praesignificat.

Julius Obsequens, recording (*De prodigiis* 14) the prodigies for the year 163 B.C., twice mentions daylight at night: *Capuae nocte sol visus . . . nocte species solis Pisauri adfulsit*. Pliny himself refers to these instances of daylight at night and calls them night suns (2.33.100):

Quod plerique appellaverunt soles nocturnos, lumen de caelo noctu visum est C. Caecilio Cn. Papirio consulibus [113 B.C.] et saepe alias, ut diei species nocte luceret.

It is not my purpose here to prove that the Romans saw two thousand years ago the same UFOs that men are seeing today. It does seem quite clear, however, that the Romans saw in their skies certain objects which they could not clearly identify and that these objects possessed the currently familiar shapes of the disk and the cigar. What was the Roman attitude toward these UFOs?

Before considering this question we may recall some observations of C. G. Jung in his *Flying saucers: a modern myth of things seen in the skies*. Although he does not overlook apparently authenticated cases in which visual observation has been confirmed by the radar screen, Jung speaks of the saucers as a psychic phenomenon. He speaks of the deep feeling of unrest and tension in the modern world because of the fear of atomic annihilation and because of resentment over the loss of twentieth-century man's individuality. Under such stress, Jung says, humans look for superhuman help from the skies to overcome their difficulties.

¹⁰ The Lydus material quoted in this paper is taken from a Latin translation of Greek fragments, both of which are found in Volume 124 of *Bibliotheca classica Latina sive collectio auctorum classicorum Latinorum* (Paris 1823) 210-55.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.67.

The Romans, too, associated the UFOs with worldly disorders. Such writers as Pliny, Lydus, and Obsequens, however, viewed the phenomena as portents of future evils, not as symptoms of current tension.

Speaking of comets and presumably of other unusual celestial phenomena Pliny says (2.27.97):

Atque ego haec statis temporibus naturae vi ut cetera arbitror existere, non, ut plerique, variis de causis quas ingeniorum acumen excogitat; quippe ingentium malorum fuere praenuntia, sed ea accidisse non quia haec facta sunt arbitror, verum haec ideo facta quia incasura erant illa, raritate autem occultam eorum esse rationem, ideoque non sicut exortus supra dictos defectusque et multa alia nosci.

Pliny's view is, then, that these celestial phenomena were indeed the portents of future evils but not the causes of these evils.

In Chapter 4 of his *De ostentis*, Lydus claims that it is the work of the "philosopher" to consider the natural causes of these portents. He himself is interested in them only in so far as they can foretell the future:

Neque id, ut naturales ostentorum causas, commentationesque super illis exponamus: philosophis id liceat: sed si quid ejus fieri possit, ut ex his de caelo signis rerum futurarum forte praenoscamus eventum.

A good example of the prophetic use that Lydus makes of the UFOs can be found in the same chapter in his report concerning the flying shields:

Saepenumero quoque ardens stella, clypei effigiem referens, ab oriente ad occasum igniculos jaciens transcurrit: ea Parthorum motum portendit. Atque emicantia e primitivis punctis, hoc est ex oriente et occasu, sic oportet intelligi: quae ruunt a septentrione et meridie, non jam barbariei motus significant, sed procellarum vehementiorum coortus. Quod si stella micans e septentrione prosilit, sulcosque igneos efficit per aera, tonitrualia dicitur signa, concretionem aeris et aquilonem truciolem (ut ita dicam) ciere: sin contra rapitur, austrum apporat.

If the flying shield moves from east to west it foretells a future movement of the hated Parthians. If the shield moves from north

to south it is the sign of a thunderstorm and a violent north wind. If the shield moves from south to north it brings the south wind.

It is interesting to again counterpose an attitude expressed in Cicero's *De re publica*. Scipio says to Tubero (1.10.15):

Quo etiam sapienterem Socratem soleo iudicare, qui omnem eius modi curam deposuerit eaque, quae de natura quaererentur, aut maiora, quam hominum ratio consequi possit, aut nihil omnino ad vitam hominum adtinere dixerit.

Quo refers to Panaetius, who, Scipio says, was especially fond of investigating celestial phenomena. Such an attitude, which dismisses problems in natural phenomena as either beyond the understanding of man or of little importance because natural phenomena have nothing to do with human life, was itself dismissed as readily by most of the ancients as it would be today by astrophysicists and psychologists.

As I have stated, it is not my purpose here to show that the objects seen by the Romans were identical with the objects seen by modern saucer observers. If however such a conclusion could be drawn, several modern theories about the origin of the UFOs would have to be discarded. They could no longer be regarded as super-secret weapons of either the United States or Russia. They could not be explained away as the effects of atomic explosions. Moreover, if they were space ships from another planet, would they have been observing the earth for two thousand years without having made their presence and purpose generally known?

A saucer evangelist whose story is quoted by Jung¹¹ and who claims to have communicated with intelligent beings from a flying saucer could answer this last question. For the saucerites supposedly claim that the people of our planet have indeed been under observation for centuries.

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¹¹ Jung, p.156.