

NERVAL'S DIARY

Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...

Kobersdorf, Austria, and Porec, Croatia, August 11–14, 1999

An Eclipse in Ferragosto

Many cultures observed this phenomenon, some kept meticulous records: the Babylonians, the Greek, the Chinese, the Arabs; others not, e.g. the Egyptians or the Mayas.

For more than 2³/₄ millennia we have written reports. Today an eclipse will take place and will be *total* in parts of Europe. Archilochos mentioned one (presumably of 6 April 648 BC), Thales of Milet is said to have predicted the eclipse of 28 May 585 BC, Pindar sung of another (he lived through four in his area, 493, 488, 478, 463 BC, the latter of 30 April 463 BC being the most likely one, his fragment mentions) [1]. Popes, emperors, kings, generals and ordinary mortals were impressed and/or intimidated by eclipses. For this period of summer 1999, an Austrian professor predicted an apocalyptic scenario with an impact from space, relying on, and interpreting, Nostradamus (Teisha b'Av is not far away, at that). It is in fact a phantastic act of nature to have the sun blackened out from the sky by our celestial satellite. No open-minded person will overlook such a spectacle.

I drove off right into the geometrical center of the *umbra* since my domicile and office are located only within the *penumbral* zone. The approach proved comparably easy despite the chaos several hundred thousands of Austrians created on the main routes into the South-East because I selected a special circumferential route. We were a company of four, my former coauthor of my books and our respective spouses, and myself. By 11.00 AM we reached a point close to the central line of the shadow band and relaxed on a small hilltop between a church and a cemetery. And there I sat in Kobersdorf in the Burgenland, waiting for the solar disc to temporarily disappear. I felt like C Plinius Secundus maior on 23 and 24 August 79 AD in Cap Misenum and in Stabiae of old (he died during the outbreak of Mount Vesuvius). The luno-solar spectacle was really gorgeous and by 12.45 PM the sun was covered totally by the moon, the *corona* beautifully visible and the earth shrouded in darkness. *A truly unforgettable sight and a once-in-a-lifetime experience.*

This phenomenon in the sky ought to remind us of the wonders of 'heavenly' mathematics, at the same time of the genius of the human mind able to recognize and calculate laws of nature, and above all, that 'Heaven is above, the Earth below', as the Scriptures have it. The occasional observer, as is the voyageur enthousiaste, wondered if we are sufficiently humble vis-à-vis the laws of nature and its ecology, awe-inspiring as they are (and awe-conscious as we should be before 'Above').

A millennium draws to a close. It is not important if it is the 31st of December 1999, as publicly taken, or next year's end, which would be more correct mathematically. People's minds are

affected today no less than in not-so-modern times when the normal circadian rhythm of day and night is broken. And ferragosto will leave ample space for speculations, not of the *end of history* but of an end of our cosmic existence by accident or by design.

Immediately after the total solar blackout, I left my wife and my friends and turned south because I was on my way to Istria (Croatia) to visit my present-day coauthor on another volume, Dr. S.F. and her pathologist husband's holiday resort in an ancient coastal city of Croatia. Due to the mobilization of the untold thousands of visitors of the spectacle in the sky, I had to run a criss-cross course between autobahn, mainroads and secondary tracks which exhausted me considerably. All zig-zagging didn't help much and it took me 7 h to reach a spot barely 300 miles away, a frightening record. When I learned next day that my younger son had hardly made it out of the umbral zone in the same time, I felt pity for him but was a bit consoled of the effect of my better knowledge of back-roads and geographical orientation. The peninsula of Istria then displayed all her natural charm and historical treasures, which, together with the Mediterranean spontaneity and warmth of my hosts, let me experience 2 days of holiday and the sight of the wonderful mosaics of the Basilica Euphrasiana in Porec, a cultural heritage protected under the UNESCO rules. (The apsis depicts a Nikopoia-type Madonna, flanked by two angels, bishop Euphrasius and saints.) The sentimental visitor of the Basilica is lulled into a state of calm, yet of transcendent lyrical character, by taped classical music. On the subsequent day, the film festival in the picturesque hilltop town of Motovun proved to be a cultural show of class 'spirited' also by very delicious, dark local Teran and (slightly) tawny Malvasia wine, conferring the palatal delights. The next day I was taken to Pazin in the center of Istria and to Beram, a Marianic pilgrimage place with very impressive freschi from the late fourteen-hundreds, reminding me of Benozzo Gozzoli's in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence (when looking at the Magi of Epiphany), or of Piero della Francesca's when observing the eyes of several of the depicted persons with 'ptotic' upper lids. Given the fact that the Istrian *musei* present many historical documents relating to Austrian history, I felt 'at home' as just anywhere in Central Europe.

Professional discussions finished by Saturday, I returned to Vienna on the Sabbath of the week, richer in *personal, cultural and culinary impressions* and engulfed in a bubble of cordiality and collegiality.

1 Stephenson FR: Historical Eclipses and Earth's Rotation. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, chapter 10, pp 334 ff.

à bientôt,

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