



The Conjunction of May 205 B. C.

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merely for symmetry, to correspond to the same letter at the beginning of the line. This device which I remember to have seen in at least one other Jewish inscription is also to be found in the late Phoenician seal published by me in this JOURNAL, 28 (1907), p. 354.

As far as I am aware, the only attempt to interpret which has been made is that by Diringer, *op. cit.*, p. 342. He is troubled by the reversed *lamedh*, cuts quite loose from it, and conjectures *hē* instead; obtaining a proper name בְּכִיָּה, which he admits to be a strange compound and does not attempt to explain. The lower line is supposed by him to contain the familiar name Shallūm.

If I am not mistaken, this is a jar handle stamp of a new type—the type of inscription ancient enough, to be sure, inasmuch as it carries a good omen. It begins with a feminine imperative; feminine, because these jars were carried by women; and the inscription says, in effect, “Good luck to her who shall handle this jar!” It reads לְבָכִי לְשָׁלָם, “lay hold in peace!” and, since this verb is known to us as only Aramaic, the vocalization is doubtless לְבָכִי לְשָׁלָם. The interpretation seems quite certain, and the legend is an interesting monument of Palestinian life and language. We are perpetually surprised to find how modern the ancients were. This bit of writing, moreover, appears to be the earliest known witness to the adoption of Aramaic as the popular speech in Judea. I hope to return to this subject elsewhere.

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THE *History of the Earlier Han Dynasty*, written by Pan Ku (58-82 A. D.) and others, in chap. I, p. 18b, reads, “In the first year, in the winter, the tenth month (November 14-December 12, 207 B. C.) there was a conjunction of the five planets in (the constellation) *tung-ching*.”

Dr. J. K. Fotheringham of Oxford has very kindly calculated this conjunction. According to his results, this conjunction cannot have been correctly recorded for 207 B. C., inasmuch as at that time, altho the planets were within about 41° of longitude of each other,

“Mercury and Jupiter were on one side of the sun, visible as morning stars, and Venus, Mars, and Saturn were on the other side, visible as evening stars.” In 206 B. C., Mars was far away from Jupiter.

The date of closest approach for these planets was on May 30, 205 B. C., when the planetary longitudes were as follows: Mercury and Jupiter at 88.3° right ascension, Saturn at 90.7° , Mars at 98.4° , and Venus at 111.3° . The total range in right ascension was thus 23° .

But at that time all the planets were not in the constellation *tung-ching*. The right ascensions of the stars in that constellation are calculated for 205 B. C. by Dr. Fotheringham as follows: μ Gemini as 62.8° , ν as 64.9° , ϵ as 67.3° , γ as 67.8° , ξ as 70.5° , ζ as 73.3° , and λ as 77.7° . *Tung-ching* is however stated by Chinese authorities to contain 33 Chinese degrees, which is about 32.5° in European measurement. The next constellation in the Chinese zodiac is *kuei*, whose constituent stars ranged at that date from 95.3° to 98.8° R. A. This constellation is said to contain 4 Chinese degrees (about 3.9° in our measurement). Hence “it is clear from this that the space between one asterism in the list of zodiacal constellations and the next was reckoned to the preceding asterism. At least this was so with *tung-ching*.” Then *tung-ching* extended from 62.8° to 95.3° R. A. Even so, on May 30th, Mars was in *kuei* and Venus in the next constellation, *liu*.

Dr. Fotheringham has however calculated that on May 16th, 205 B. C., when Mercury was first opposite the first star in *tung-ching*, being at 62.8° , the other planets were located as follows: Jupiter at 85.0° , Mars at 88.8° , Saturn at 88.9° , and Venus at 95.9° . They were thus spread over 33.1° of longitude. The first four planets were in *tung-ching*, and Venus was just over in *kuei*. Venus had last been seen in *tung-ching* on May 14th, two evenings previous. But *kuei* is usually mentioned together with *tung-ching* in the *History of the Earlier Han Dynasty*; the two were grouped together as the constellation *shun-shou* (lit., “the head of the quail.”) Chinese astronomers thus had no difficulty in giving “the conjunction the benefit of any doubt.” We may then take the middle of May 205 B. C. as the date of this conjunction.

How did this conjunction get dated in November 207 B. C. in the *History*? That date was the result of a misunderstanding on

the part of its author. The earliest extant statement about this conjunction is found in the *Shih chi*, chap. XXVII, p. 40a, "When the Han dynasty triumphed, the five planets appeared in conjunction in (the constellation) *tung-ching*." (Cf. E. Chavannes, *Memoires de Se-ma Ts'ien*, vol. III, p. 407.) Chavannes adds a note that this conjunction happened in 200 B. C., on the authority of Ssu-ma Ch'en's *So yin*. But the *So yin* gives that date, not to this conjunction, but to the event mentioned next, the siege of Kao-tsu at P'ing-ch'eng, for the note comes after the sentence recounting the siege. Elsewhere the *Shih chi* (cf. Chavannes, *ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 389, 390) gives this date for the siege.

The date when "the Han dynasty triumphed" may be variously given. One answer, besides that of the *Han History*, is that the triumph occurred when Han Kao-tsu returned from his virtual banishment to Han by Hsiang Yü and conquered the three states that had been set up by Hsiang Yü to succeed the state of Ch'in—which was June 206 B. C. Kao-tsu however first actually assumed imperial prerogatives when he did away with the Ch'in dynasty's gods of the land and grain and substituted his own gods—which is dated in the *History of the Earlier Han Dynasty* on March 5, 205 B. C. About the time of the conjunction in May 205 B. C., Kao-tsu did triumph over Hsiang Yü, in that he, together with his allies, entered P'eng-ch'eng, Hsiang Yü's capital, but he was severely defeated immediately afterwards. Perhaps this conjunction actually helped him to keep up his courage after that defeat, for the *History* tells that he was not cast down by that annihilating defeat, from which he barely escaped with his own life, and after which his allies all left him, but immediately set on foot new projects to overthrow Hsiang Yü. Hsiang Yü was however not killed until January 202 B. C., and Kao-tsu did not ascend the throne as emperor until February 22, 202 B. C. It was thus quite natural that Kao-tsu's assumption of imperial prerogatives in March 205 B. C. should have been linked with the conjunction in May, and that the conjunction should have been said to have happened when the Han dynasty triumphed.

The astrological interpretation of this conjunction also assisted in bringing about the statement in the *History*. The ancient Chinese allocated the various regions of the sky to various states, just as was the case in the ancient Mediterranean world. Accord-

ing to Cheng Chung (ca. 5 B. C.—83 A. D.), *shun-shou*, which includes *tung-ching* and *kuei*, was allocated to Ch'in. Since Kao-tsu had possessed himself of this territory, it is natural that the conjunction should have been interpreted with reference to his dynasty. Ying Shao (ca. 140-206 A. D.) remarks that this conjunction indicated that a new emperor of a new dynasty would conquer by his righteousness.

Because of this astrological interpretation, when the exact date of the conjunction had been forgotten, it was natural to have put this conjunction at the beginning of the Han dynasty's reign. Liu Hsiang (80-9 B. C.) wrote, "When the Han (dynasty) entered (the region of) Ch'in, the five planets appeared in conjunction in (the constellation) *tung-ching*." In the *Shih chi*, chap. LXXXIX, p. 9b (repeated in the *Han History*, chap. XXXII, pp. 6b, 7a) we find a further detail, "The old gentleman Kan said, 'When the King of Han (Kao-tsu) entered the pass (October 207 B. C.), the five planets appeared in conjunction in (the constellation) *tung-ching*. *Tung-ching* is the portion (of the heavens allocated to) Ch'in. Whoever reaches (that place) first should have been made its king.'"

With the foregoing statements before him, it is quite natural that Pan Ku should have written as he did and dated this conjunction at the official beginning of the Han dynasty in November 207 B. C. He evidently had no exact record of the conjunction except the foregoing passages and was not sorry, in his record, to glorify the dynasty under which he was writing.

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