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Sibylline Oracles

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Sibylline Oracles

Oracula Sibyllina

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1. SUMMARY

The *Sibylline Oracles* are a collection of pseudepigraphic prophecies written over centuries by Jews and Christians in Greek hexameters and voiced by the figure of a sibyl. The earliest surviving mention of a sibyl is attributed to Heraclitus by Plutarch. The author describes her as mad and cheerless, but for a thousand years, the sibyls have spoken through a god (*De Pythiae oraculis*, 397A). While initially a sibyl was described as a singular prophetic figure, over time sibyls began to be associated with multiple geo-

graphical locations. Aeneas's famous consultation with the Cumaean sibyl in *Aeneid* 6 illustrates a sibyl as this kind of localized prophet. Sibyls have been the subject of numerous artistic representations throughout history; most famously, Michelangelo interspersed sibyls with prophets on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

The Roman senate was said to be in possession of books of sibylline prophecies; the senate appointed a group of ten men to guard them and consult them on command. Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Gellius narrate an account about how the Romans came to own these books; both tell the story of an old woman who tried to sell books of prophecy to the Roman king Tarquinius. When he did not appreciate their value and refused to meet their price, the women burned portions of the collection and continued to ask the same price for the reduced collection. Eventually the king realized the error of his ways and bought one-third of the books for the woman's original price (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 4.62.1–5; Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 1.19). The Roman sibylline books were housed in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus until they were destroyed by a fire in 83 BCE. According to Dionysius, the sibylline books were then replaced with prophecies from other cities (*Antiquitates Romanae* 4.62.5–6). Suetonius describes the further destruction of some of the sibylline books under Augustus; in a mass burning of Greek and Latin prophetic texts, Augustus saved only some of the sibylline books, placing them at the temple of Palatine Apollo (Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 31.1).

The Jewish-Christian *Sibylline Oracles* blend a traditional trope of sibylline prophecies of doom with a Jewish and then Christian innovation of ethical and theological instruction. While several books of the collection bear resemblances to apocalyptic texts—with universal histories, periodizations of time, and descriptions of eschatological judgment—they are not apocalypses. Instead, the *Sibylline Oracles* are prophecy.

The contents of the collection are deeply composite, both literarily and compositionally. The *Sibylline Oracles* weave together language and/or characters from texts that become biblical (from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament), Greek mythology, Hesiod, Homer, Pseudo-Phocylides, and other Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts to produce new prophecies. In book 3, the sibyl claims priority over Homer, and yet Homeric idioms occur throughout the sibylline collection. In general, the *Sibylline Oracles* retell history, indict various nations, deliver ethical instruction, and predict eschatological judgment. Attitudes towards other nations vary across the collection; some passages take up a hospitable posture towards outsiders, imagining a more universal worship of the writers' god. Other passages envision a violent divine reckoning against other nations, especially the Romans. Some of the sibylline texts envision a complete destruction of the world with fire, sometimes followed by a resurrection from the dead.

With respect to composition, the Jewish-Christian *Sibylline Oracles* date from approximately the 2nd century BCE to the 7th century CE. Some of the *Sibylline Oracles* were probably written in Egypt (books 3 and 5), but it is virtually impossible to locate others geographically. Some sibylline books were created by Jewish writers and editors, and other books by Christian writers and editors. The earliest material in the collection—the majority of book 3, written in the 2nd century BCE—is widely understood to be Jewish, as are books 4–5. Of the Christian books in the collection, several appear to have earlier Jewish layers transformed by later Christian writers, such as Books 1–2 and 8. Books 6 and 7 are understood to be Christian. Portions of books 11–14 are debated, but are most widely understood to be Jewish, with Christian interpolations in books 12–13; these latter two books contain oracles about a succession of Roman political leaders, from Augustus to Odenath.

The *Sibylline Oracles* survive in two major manuscript traditions. The first one contains books numbered 1–8, but subdivides into versions that contain the 6th-century prologue (Class Φ) and versions that do not (Class Ψ); the second contains two books numbered 9 and 10 that reduplicate material in the first tradition, followed by books 11–14 (Class Ω). Modern editions of the *Sibylline Oracles* thus contain books 1–8, and then 11–14.

Named historical figures and characters: Adam (patriarch), Alexander (the Great)*, Cleopatra*, Cronos, Eve (matrarich), Hadrian*, Homer*, Isis, Jesus Christ, Noah, Nero*, Sibyl, Titans, Virgil*, Watchers.

* = character is alluded to, but not explicitly named

Geographical locations: Asia, Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Erythrae, Ethiopia, Gaul, Greece, Jerusalem, Macedonia, Persia, Rome.

2. RESOURCES

2.1 Iconography

Ten sibyls (Persian, Hellespontine, Erythraean, Phrygian, Samian, Delphic, Libyan, Cumaean, Cumana, Tiburtine), aisle floors of Siena Cathedral, 1482–1483.

Sibyls and prophets on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo, 1508–1512.

“A Sibyl Holding a Scroll (Study for the Cimmerian Sibyl),” drawing by Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri), 1638, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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B Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 109, fols. 231^{r}–238^{v} (15th cent.) ~ Bodleian

P Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Monacensis 351 (15th cent.)

S Madrid, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Scorialensis Σ II 7, fols. 285^{v}–324^{r} (15th cent.)

D Rome, Biblioteca Vallicelliana, Vallicellianus graecus 46 (16th cent.)

Class Ψ

F Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florentinus Laurentianus plutei XI 17 (15th cent.)

R Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 2851, fols. 1^{r}–72^{v} (15th cent.)

L Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 2850, fols. 1^{r}–72^{v} (1475)

T Toledo, La Biblioteca del Cabildo de la Santa Iglesia Catedral, Toletanus 8^{0}.99.44 (15th cent.)

Class Ω

M Milan, Biblioteca Pinacoteca Accademia Ambrosiana, E 64 sup., fols. 7^{r}–15^{r} (15th cent.)

Q Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1120 (14th cent.) ~ DigiVatLib

V Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 743, fols. 57^{r}–90^{v} (14th cent.) ~ DigiVatLib

H Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Monacensis 312, fols. 1^{r}–81^{v} (1541)

Z Jerusalem, Patriarchē bibliothēkē, Hagiou Saba 419 (late 14th cent.) ~ LOC

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