

## NOTES ON PHLEGON'S HERMAPHRODITE ORACLE AND THE PUBLICATION OF ORACLES IN ROME

Throughout the Roman Republic, the priests in charge of the Sibylline Books seem to have guarded their contents very closely. According to legend, there were severe consequences for divulging the oracles, consequences that were established almost simultaneously with the priesthood itself. When Marcus Atilius, appointed by Tarquinius Superbus as one of the first *duumviri sacris faciundis*, was caught copying oracles from the Books, he was sewn into a sack and thrown into the sea. This punishment, traditionally reserved for the parricide, equated the unsanctioned use or publication of the Sibylline oracles with the most horrific crime imaginable to the Romans.<sup>1</sup>

This legend need not be taken too seriously. In 56 BC, the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*, pressed by C. Porcius Cato, rushed to translate a Sibylline oracle into Latin and divulge it to the populace before the Senate had a chance to intervene. Neither Cato nor any of the priests was thrown into the sea for this crime; in fact, no one seems to have been punished at all.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the story of

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1) For the story of Marcus Atilius (or Acilius), see Dion. Hal. 4,62; Val. Max. 1,1,13; Zonaras 7,11,1.

2) Cato, a plebeian tribune and perhaps also a *quindecimvir sacris faciundis*, wished to apply the Sibylline oracle to particular events of his time. In 58 BC, the Alexandrians, angered by Rome's annexation of Cyprus, forced Ptolemy XII Auletes into exile. After his deposal, Ptolemy went to Rome seeking help in reclaiming his throne. The Senate commissioned P. Lentulus Spinther to lead an army to reinstate Ptolemy, but Ptolemy himself wanted Pompey to have the command. In the midst of this confusion, Cato invoked the Sibylline oracle in order to "render the task [of restoring Ptolemy] unattractive to any man of excessive ambition and above all to Pompeius" (R. Seager, *Pompey the Great: A Political Biography*, Oxford 2002, 111–2). These were the words of the oracle in question, which fortuitously supported Cato's cause: "If the King of Egypt should come requesting aid, do not refuse him friendship, nor assist him with any great multitude; otherwise you will have both struggles and dangers" (Cass. Dio 39,15). Thus, the Sibylline Books advised that the restoration should be confined to diplomacy, not large-scale military action. According to Dio, everyone was shocked that the Sibyl's words were so

Atilius is important as an illustration of a widely recognized ideal – the Sibylline oracles were a state-guarded secret. As a rule, only the priests in charge of the Books would know the actual words of the Sibyl.<sup>3</sup> The results of this secrecy are very evident in our sources: although prodigy and expiation are the best known aspects of Roman republican religion, with numerous prodigy lists recorded by Livy and other authors, we possess only one incomplete oracle from the entire Sibylline collection of the Republic, a collection that was destroyed in the Capitoline fire of 83 BC. This oracle was recorded by Phlegon of Tralles, a freedman of Hadrian who wrote a *Book of Wonders* containing all sorts of fantastic tales.<sup>4</sup> Seventy lines of the oracle's Greek hexameters are preserved, but the text is full of lacunae. The oracle, though incomplete, is arranged in an acrostic, with the first letters of each line duplicating the first line of the oracle (or oracles, as the final oracle seems to be a combination of two separate oracles).<sup>5</sup> Phlegon dates the oracle, which deals with the prodigy of a hermaphrodite birth, to 125 BC.

Sibylline rituals were never private; for most Sibylline oracles, the ritual advice would be summarized in a decree of the Senate, and the people would witness or take part in the very public performance

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relevant to the events of the time. For the role of Pompey in the debate over Ptolemy's restoration, see Cic. ad Fam. 1,1 (Jan. 13, 56 BC). See also H. W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity*, London 1988, 207.

3) In 367 BC, the number of priests in charge of the Sibylline Books was increased from two to ten, and they were given the title *decemviri sacris faciundis*. Under Sulla, the priesthood was increased to fifteen, the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*.

4) See Phlegon, *Mirab.* Ch. 10 = FGrHist 257 F 36 X. The fullest discussion of this oracle remains H. Diels, *Sibyllinische Blätter*, Berlin 1890; but B. MacBain, *Prodigy and Expiation: A Study in Religion and Politics in Republican Rome*, Bruxelles 1982, is also helpful. Phlegon also records the Sibylline oracle that led to the performance of the *Ludi Saeculares* in 17 BC, but since the Books were destroyed in 83 BC, it may be assumed that this oracle was not part of the original Sibylline collection. For the *Ludi Saeculares* oracle, see Phlegon, *Peri Macrobian* 5,2 = FGrHist 257 F 37.

5) John Scheid argues that the *decemviri sacris faciundis* actually created oracles by forming hexametric acrostics based upon one or two lines from the Sibylline collection. See J. Scheid and J. Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric*, Cambridge 2001, 149–50. However, Varro (as cited at Dion. Hal. 4,62,6) sees the acrostic framework as a test of true oracles, applied to verify the texts gathered for the new Sibylline collection assembled after the Capitoline fire of 83 BC. In order for this to be an effective test of these new oracles, they must have been written in acrostics before the *decemviri* consulted them. In other words, the *decemviri* do not seem to be forming the acrostics (and thus the oracles) on their own. For the acrostic framework of the Sibylline oracles, see also Cicero, *de div.* 2,54,112.

of the ceremonies. But the oracles themselves – the actual words of the Sibyl – were almost never made known to any but the priests.<sup>6</sup> How do we explain this oracle's publication by the Senate and thus its transmission to Phlegon?<sup>7</sup> A partial answer may be found in the tumultuous events of 125 BC, one of the most chaotic years of the Gracchan era. At this time the consul M. Fulvius Flaccus, an ally of Gaius Sempronius Gracchus, raised a petition to grant citizenship to individual Italians. The petition, the first of its kind in this troubled period leading up to the Social War, failed when the Senate sent Fulvius to assist Massilia against the Salluvii. As a result of the failure of the petition, Fregellae revolted against Rome. This Latin colony, which had remained staunchly loyal to Rome in the wars against Pyrrhus and Hannibal, was crushed by the Romans in 125 BC.

Thus the year 125 BC was marked by controversy not only among the Roman ruling elite, but also between Rome and an important Latin town. The revolt of Fregellae signaled the instability of Rome's Italian empire and the ultimate ineffectiveness of the Senate's attempts to settle the Italian question. During this time of crisis, the Senate's publication of a Sibylline oracle might have helped to alleviate the concerns of the people by focusing their attention on expiatory ceremonies intended to bring about the renewal of the *pax deorum*. The oracle, which advised rites to Ceres

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6) According to Granius Licinianus, the Senate first published a Sibylline oracle in 87 BC. The oracle legitimated the expulsion of Cinna and six tribunes from Rome: *(Senatui, qui censebat nihil) ipsum facere nisi quod illa suasisse(n)t, placuit, id quod numquam alias pro collegio, quid in libris fatalibus script(um) esset, palam recitare. constabat notari carmine Cinna sexque tribunis patria pulsus tranquillum otium et securitatem futuram* (35,1–2, ed. Criniti). I would argue that he is wrong in claiming that the Sibylline oracle of 87 BC was the first published by the Senate – Phlegon's oracle predates the Cinna oracle – but the text does show clearly how rare such publication was.

7) Since Cato published an oracle without the permission of the Senate, it may be wondered whether the hermaphrodite oracle was also made public without the Senate's approval. However, while Cato's oracle was directed toward a very specific political concern, it is difficult to find any personal motivations for the publication of Phlegon's hermaphrodite oracle in 125 BC. It does contain a prophecy, but a very vague one: "The Trojan will liberate you from your troubles, and simultaneously from the land of Greece" (line 69). As J. North points out, this line is very ambiguous: The Trojan himself may be "from the land of Greece", or he may be freeing the Romans "from the land of Greece". See J. North, *Prophet and Text in the Third Century BC*, in: E. Bispham and C. Smith (eds.), *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome and Italy: Evidence and Experience*, Edinburgh 2000, 104.

and to Juno, pointed back to rituals performed to Ceres at Enna after the death of Tiberius Gracchus. The ceremonies of 125 BC might have been intended to renew a pact with the goddess formed immediately after Tiberius Gracchus' death.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the turmoil of this year might have contributed to the Senate's publication of this oracle. This would have been a measure of last resort, a means for the Senate to demonstrate publicly that it was still in charge and that it still had the ability to maintain the *pax deorum*. Yet this cannot be a sufficient explanation in itself. For it does not explain why the Senate failed to allow the publication of Sibylline oracles at other times during the Roman Republic. After all, there were many years, particularly after Tiberius Gracchus' death, in which Rome suffered political divisions that might have been alleviated by the publication of such an oracle.

I would argue that it was not simply the events of 125 BC, but also the nature of the hermaphrodite prodigy itself, that led to the publication of the oracle in this year. It is no coincidence, I think, that the birth of a hermaphrodite, the prodigy that Phlegon's oracle addresses, was an exceptional prodigy according to Livy's records. It was exceptional in its standardization; the birth of a hermaphrodite, unlike other prodigies, provoked a fairly routine ritual response – the disposal of the hermaphrodite, and a hymn by 27 maidens. For most prodigies, the expiation was completely unpredictable; prodigies were expiated as a group, by a seemingly random selection of ceremonies. The only other Roman prodigy with a standard response was a rain of stones, which was answered by a nine-day ceremony to Jupiter known as the *Novendialis*. But this expiation, unlike the

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8) For the ceremonies in Sicily, see Cicero, *Verr.* 2,4,108: *Itaque apud patres nostros atroci ac difficili rei publicae tempore, cum Tiberio Graccho occiso magnorum periculorum metus ex ostentis portenderetur, P. Mucio L. Calpurnio consulibus aditum est ad libros Sibyllinos; ex quibus inventum est Cererem antiquissimam placari oportere. Tum ex amplissimo collegio decemviri sacerdotes populi Romani, cum esset in urbe nostra Cereris pulcherrimum et magnificentissimum templum, tamen usque Hennam profecti sunt. Tanta enim erat auctoritas et vetustas illius religionis ut, cum illuc irent, non ad aedem Cereris sed ad ipsam Cererem proficisci viderentur.* Cicero claims that the ceremonies were performed in 133 BC, but surely they did not take place until the following year, after Rome had captured Enna from the rebel slaves. For the rituals performed after Tiberius Gracchus' death, see H. Flower, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture*, Chapel Hill 2006, 72–4 and B. Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres*, Austin 1996, 73–9. For the connection between the rites at Enna and subsequent rituals to Ceres, see MacBain (above, note 4) 134.

maidens' hymn, was not primarily the responsibility of the *decemviri sacris faciundis* and the Sibylline Books; instead, the *Novendialis* was generally expiated by the Senate alone, without consulting any of the experts of expiation (the *decemviri*, the *pontifices*, or the *haruspices*).<sup>9</sup>

According to Livy and his epitomizer Julius Obsequens, the hymn by 27 maidens was first performed in 207 BC. It was subsequently performed in 200, 133, 125, 119, 117, 97, and 92 BC, and perhaps also in other years.<sup>10</sup> The ceremony seems to have changed over time. Livy's description of the rites of 207 BC involves only the goddess Juno Regina, but Phlegon's oracle includes ceremonies to Ceres and Proserpina, along with other deities. Livy's account of the rites of 207 is very detailed and there is no reason to assume that it is incomplete. Thus the ritual seems to have evolved, and the changes were permanent: according to Obsequens, Ceres and Proserpina were worshipped in later expiatory ceremonies in 104, 99, and 92 BC.<sup>11</sup> As was mentioned above, the inclusion of Ceres might have occurred after the death of Tiberius Gracchus, in response to violations against the tribunes, who were sacred to the goddess: the removal of Marcus Octavius from office, and the murder of Tiberius Gracchus himself. Perhaps the rituals at Enna in 132 BC initiated a trend of honoring Ceres in the troubled years after the tribune's death.

In any case, the repetition of this expiatory ritual, performed in response to the birth of a hermaphrodite, may help to explain the

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9) For examples of the *Novendialis* performed apparently without consulting the Sibylline Books, see Livy 1,31,2; 21,62,5–6; 25,7,7; 26,23,5; 27,37,1; 27,37,5; 30,38,8–9; 34,45,8; 38,36,4; 39,22,3; 44,18,6; for the *Novendialis* performed by the advice of the Sibylline Books, see Livy 35,9,4 and 36,37,3–4. In his prodigy lists, Livy often distinguishes the rain of stones from other prodigies of a given year; at 21,62,4, for example, he tells of various prodigies for which the Senate requested the advice of the *decemviri*, but a shower of stones is intentionally singled out: *Ob cetera prodigia libros adire decemviri iussi; quod autem lapidibus pluvisset in Piceno, novendiale sacrum edictum* ('On account of these other prodigies the *decemviri* were ordered to consult the Sibylline Books; but because it had rained stones in Picenum, a *Novendialis* was proclaimed.')

10) MacBain would have the hymn by 27 maidens performed in a number of other years, including 186, 142, 122, 119, 98, and 95 BC, when the only ritual mentioned by Livy or his epitomizer Obsequens was the disposal of the hermaphrodite; and 104 and 99 BC, years for which Obsequens mentions a hymn by 27 maidens, but fails to note the birth of a hermaphrodite. See MacBain (above, note 4) 128–32. Because Obsequens' prodigy lists are notoriously incomplete, it may be logical to assume this ceremony in these other years.

11) For the ceremonies of 104, 99, and 92 respectively, see Obs. 43, 46, and 53.

publication of the oracle. The hermaphrodite, like the rain of stones, was a special prodigy which had to be addressed independently of any others. The evolution of the expiatory ceremony – the inclusion of Ceres and Proserpina in the later second century BC – might have necessitated the publication of the oracle, as a means of explaining to the people why a familiar ritual had been altered. But even more importantly, the standardization of the ritual might have defused the danger posed by the publication of the oracle, the threat to the State's exclusive control over public religion. After all, the point of keeping an oracle secret was to maintain State control over expiation, and to prevent the public from second-guessing the decemviral response. But if the Sibyl's response were standardized, as was the case for the hermaphrodite prodigy, there was no danger in divulging the oracle to the people.

The Senate's fear of publicly circulated oracles is illustrated by the events of 213 BC. This was a low point for the Romans in the Second Punic War, when each year brought another devastating loss. Desperate for a turn-around, the Roman people resorted to foreign rites as a new means of generating divine assistance. The Senate, disturbed by this distrust of traditional Roman religion (and thus of the Senate itself), ordered the urban praetor Marcus Aemilius to turn the people from their un-Roman ways. Aemilius issued an edict that anyone who possessed written oracles, prayer formulae, or instructions for sacrifice should turn them in to him, and he prohibited sacrifice by foreign ritual, i. e. sacrifice not approved by the Roman Senate, in a public or sacred place.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that private oracles had always circulated in Rome. It was only when these oracles were used publicly, and when the people lost trust in the traditional religious practices of the Roman State, that the Senate became concerned. Oracles published from the Sibylline Books, the most important means of expiation in Republican Rome, could have posed the same sort of danger as the private oracles that Aemilius collected: they would have facilitated alternative interpretations and thus undermined the Senate's exclusive control over the relationship between the Romans and their gods.

The praetor's gathering of oracles in 213 BC was not the end of that story. When the writings were assembled, they were not im-

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12) For the praetor's collection of oracles in 213 BC, see Livy 25,1,6–12.

mediately destroyed; instead, they were examined for true prophecies. Two Marcian oracles were discovered in this collection. These oracles, written in Latin, were purported to be the work of the legendary Italian seer Marcus. Like Phlegon's hermaphrodite oracle, it seems that these oracles were also made public. The first, which Livy claims to paraphrase, prophesied the Roman defeat at Cannae:

*Priore carmine Cannensis praedicta clades in haec fere verba erat: "Am-nem, Troiugena, fuge Cannam, ne te alienigenae cogant in campo Diomedis conserere manus. Sed neque credes tu mihi, donec compleris sanguine campum, multaque milia occisa tua deferet amnis in pontum magnum ex terra frugifera; piscibus atque avibus ferisque quae incolunt terras iis fuit esca caro tua; nam mihi ita Iuppiter fatus est." Et Diomedis Argivi campos et Cannam flumen ii qui militaverant in iis locis iuxta atque ipsam cladem agnoscebant.*

In the first oracle the defeat at Cannae was predicted in more or less these words: "Flee the River Canna, Trojan-born, lest the foreigners force you to arms in the field of Diomedes. But you will not believe me, until you have covered the field with blood, and the river carries off your many dead soldiers from the fruit-bearing land into the great sea; your flesh will be food for the fish and birds and wild animals who live in those lands. For Jupiter tells me it is fated thus." And the men who had fought in those places recognized the plains of the Argive Diomedes, and the River Canna and the defeat itself.<sup>13</sup>

Although discovered three years after the defeat at Cannae, this oracle claimed to foretell this very event. Livy says that the accuracy of this prophecy gave authority to the second *carmen*, which advised games to Apollo:

*Tum alterum carmen recitatum, non eo tantum obscurius quia incertiora futura praeteritis sunt sed perplexius etiam scripturae genere. "Hostes, Romani, si ex agro expellere voltis, vomitum quae gentium venit longe, Apollini votendos censeo ludos qui quotannis comiter Apollini fiant; cum populus dederit ex publico partem, privati uti conferant pro se atque suis; iis ludis faciendis praesit praetor is quis ius populo plebeique dabit summum; decemviri Graeco ritu hostiis sacra faciant. Hoc si recte facietis, gaudebitis semper fietque res vestra melior; nam is deum exstinguet perduelles vestros qui vestros campos pascit placide."*

Then the other oracle was recited, more difficult to understand not just because the future is less clear than the past, but also because it was written in a more confusing style. "Romans, if you wish to expel the enemy from your land, the plague which comes from afar, I advise you to vow games to Apollo to be celebrated for him joyfully each year. When the

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13) Livy 25,12,5–7.

people make donations from public funds, private citizens shall contribute for themselves and their families. The urban praetor, who is in charge of public and plebeian law, will conduct the games. The *decemviri* will perform the sacrifices in the Greek manner. If you will do this correctly, you will be happy always and your state will prosper. For that god who extinguishes your wars will cultivate your fields in peace."<sup>14</sup>

This is certainly not a direct quotation from the oracle, which Livy claims was obscure; it is only a paraphrase, in clearer language, of the words of the oracle. But there is no reason to doubt the implications of Livy's text: this oracle, like Phlegon's, was published.

How can we explain the publication of the *Carmina Marciana* in light of our discussion of the Sibyl's hermaphrodite oracle? After all, Marcius' prophecies were not, as we have argued concerning the Sibylline oracle, so standardized as to be harmless. In fact, Marcius' oracles were very specific, and could hardly be expected to be used again; they involved a terrible defeat at Cannae, and the institution of annual games to Apollo. But the specificity of the *Carmina Marciana* is exactly what links them with the oracle of 125 BC: like the hermaphrodite oracle, Marcius' prophecies posed no danger in the hands of the people, in this case not because they advised a standard response, but because they were too specific to be applied again.

To sum up, the written oracles that were officially published in Rome were either those that involved ceremonies that were standard enough to be already well-known, or those that addressed prodigies and circumstances that were specific enough to be unrepeatable. All of the other oracles were kept secret, for they could potentially be applied to different circumstances, and they might, if published, allow the people to second-guess the *decemviri* and thus undermine their authority.

It is thus no coincidence that the expiation of the hermaphrodite birth, which holds a special place in Livy's narrative as the most standardized of all decemviral responses, is the only oracle that has been passed down to us. Livy is right in singling out this prodigy; the Senate also recognized its peculiarity, which explains its transmission in Phlegon's text. Phlegon's oracle, in other words, is the exception that proves the rule.

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14) Livy 25,12,8–10.