Boris de Zirkoff on the Sibylline Oracles
HE WHOLE SUBJECT CONCERNING THE SIBYLS of antiquity is shrouded in considerable mystery. They were supposed to be women inspired by influences from higher regions, who were consulted for their prophetic utterances and flourished in different parts of the ancient world. It is likely that they ranged from the mediumistic and sensitive stage to that of true seership. According to Varro, they were ten in number, one of them being the Erythraean, whom Apollodorus of Erythraea claimed as a native of that city, though some considered her of Babylonian origin. She is said to have predicted to the Greeks, when they were sailing for Troy, that this city was destined to perish. The most celebrated Sibyl was the Cumæan, in Italy, spoken of by Nævius, and other Latin writers, especially Virgil. This was the Sibyl that accompanied Æneas to the lower regions.

According to a well-known Roman legend, one of the Sibyls came to the palace of Tarquinius the Second, and offered to sell him nine books which she declared to contain the inspired prophecies of the Sibyl of Cumæ. For these treasures she asked what the monarch regarded as an extravagant price. He refused to purchase the books and dismissed the woman with ridicule. The Sibyl turned aside and burned three of the volumes in the king’s presence. She then offered the remaining six for the same price previously asked for the whole, and when Tarquinius again refused and laughed at her, she burned three more, and offered the remaining three for the same price as before. This strange behaviour produced a great impression upon the monarch. She whom he had ridiculed as mad, he now regarded as inspired. He accordingly purchased what remained of the prophetic treasures, and the Sibyl disappeared and was never seen after.

These books of the so-called Sibylline verses were preserved with great care, a college of priests being appointed to have charge of them, and they were consulted with the greatest solemnity when the state seemed to be in danger, to the end that the will of the gods might be known and the danger averted. When the Capitol was burned during the troubles of Sylla, 83 B.C., the Sibylline books deposited there were destroyed. To repair this loss, commissioners were sent out to different parts of Greece to collect whatever could be found of the inspired writings of the Sibyls, to make a new collec-
tion. As regards the final fate of this second collection, much uncertainty prevails. It would seem, however, according to the best authorities, that the Emperor Honorius issued an order, 399 A.D., to destroy it, in pursuance of which, Stilicho\(^1\) burned all these prophetic writings and demolished the temple of Apollo where they were deposited.

It should be clearly understood that the eight books of Sibylline verses extant today have no definite relation to these early Roman collections. They are oracles, for the most part, of a Judeo-Christian origin. Because of the great vogue enjoyed by the oracles of antiquity, and because of the influence they had in shaping the [228] religious views of the period, the Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria, during the second century B.C., composed verses cast in a similar form, and attributed them to Sibyls, they were circulated among pagans as a means of diffusing Judaism. This custom was continued down into Christian times, and was borrowed by some Christians, so that in the second and third centuries A.D. a new class of oracles emanating from Christian sources came into being. Some of these were adaptations from previous Jewish sources, and others were entirely written by Christians.

It is most likely that these Alexandrian and later collections contained in their text some fragments from the earlier, purely pagan oracles, and the one ascribed to the Erythrean Sibyl, and commented upon by H.P. Blavatsky, is apparently one of these. It is to be found in acrostic\(^2\) form in the initial letters of verses 217-250 of Book VIII of the extant collection of Sibylline Oracles.

The subject of Sibyls and their utterances calls for serious study and elucidation by students of the Esoteric Philosophy, as it throws a flood of light upon the latent powers of man and the mysteries of his psychic and noetic consciousness.

One of the fullest accounts we have of the Sibyls of old is that found in the writings of Firmianus Lactantius.\(^3\) This Latin Father flourished about the close of the 3\(^{rd}\) century A.D.; he refers to Varro as his authority. The Sibyl and her oracles are the subject of the entire ch. xxxvii of a treatise entitled a *Hortatory Address to the Greeks*, usually attributed to Justin the Martyr and published in his writings\(^4\) cites the first 27 lines of the above-mentioned acrostic, in a Latin translation which aims at retaining the acrostic form of the Greek. There is an English translation of Augustine’s Latin version by Marcus Dods in *Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*

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1. Flavius Stilicho, c. 359–408, high-ranking general (magister militum) in the Roman army who, for a time, became the most powerful man in the Western Roman Empire. He was half Vandal and married to the niece of Emperor Theodosius I; his regency for the underage Honorius marked the high point of Germanic advancement in the service of Rome. After many years of victories against a number of enemies, both barbarian and Roman, a series of political and military disasters finally allowed his enemies in the court of Honorius to remove him from power, culminating in his arrest and subsequent execution in 408. Known for his military successes and sense of duty, Stilicho was, in the words of historian Edward Gibbon, “the last of the Roman generals.”

2. [Verse in which certain letters such as the first in each line form a word or message.]


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(quoted by Terry also), where Dods aims to retain in English the acrostic form. The acrostic verses are quoted in full by Eusebius in his report of Constantine’s *Oration to the Assembly of the Saints*, xviii.¹

For the benefit of the serious student we list below certain works and essays which give a great deal of information on the subject of Sibyls, their utterances, and divination in general:


