

*Boris de Zirkoff on
the Sibylline Oracles*



Endnote 31 by Boris de Zirkoff, appended to his *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings (THE ESOTERIC CHARACTER OF THE GOSPELS)* VIII pp. 226-29. Frontispiece: Sibyl by Domenichino, Galleria Borghese, c. 1616-17.

THE WHOLE SUBJECT CONCERNING THE SIBYLS of antiquity is shrouded in considerable mystery. They were supposed to be women inspired [227] 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,¹ they were ten in number, one of them being the Erythræan, whom Apollodorus of Erythræ 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.²

According to a well-known Roman legend, one of the Sibyls came to the palace of Tarquinius the Second,³ 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-

¹ [Marcus Terentius Varro, 116–27 B.C., one of ancient Rome's greatest scholars and a prolific author. He is sometimes called Varro Reatinus, to distinguish him from his younger contemporary Varro Atacinus.]

² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIV, 104 *et seq.*; Maurus Servius Honoratus, *In Vergilii Æneidem commentarii*, VI, 321.

³ [Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (died 495 B.C.) was the legendary seventh and final king of Rome, reigning from 535 B.C. until the popular uprising in 509 B.C. that led to the establishment of the Roman Republic. He is commonly known as Tarquin the Proud, from his cognomen Superbus — Latin for “proud, arrogant, lofty.”]

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, Stilicho¹ 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 Erythræan Sibyl, and commented upon by H.P. Blavatsky, is apparently one of these. It is to be found in acrostic² 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 3rd 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 writings⁴ 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*

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.]

³ *Divine Institutes*, Bk. I, ch. vi; Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiæ Coursus Completus*, Ser. Latina, Vol. VI, 140-47.

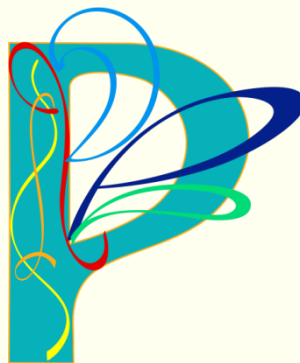
⁴ Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiæ Coursus Completus*, Ser. Græco-Latina, Vol. VI, 309 *et seq.*; M.S. Terry, *The Sibylline Oracles*, has a translation of Migne's Greek text, though its real authorship is uncertain. Augustine (*De civitate dei*, Bk. XVIII, ch. xxiii).

[Lucius Cæcilius Firmianus Lactantius, c. 250–c. 325, was an early Christian author who became an advisor to the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine I, guiding his religious policy as it developed, and a tutor to his son Crispus. His most important work is the *Institutiones Divinæ* (The Divine Institutes), an apologetic treatise intended to establish the reasonableness and truth of Christianity to pagan critics.]

(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:

- G.R.S. Mead, "The Sibyl and her Oracles," *The Theosophical Review*, Vol. XXII, July and August, 1898; and "The Sibyllists and the Sibyllines," *ibid.*, Vol. XXIII, September, October, and November, 1898. Considerable bibliographical information included. [229]
- Milton S. Terry, *The Sibylline Oracles translated from the Greek into English blank Verse*, New York, 1890. Very complete bibliography. New ed., revised after the text of Rzach. New York: Eaton and Mains; Cincinnati: Curts and Jennings, 1899.
- C. Alexandre, *Oracula Sibyllina*, Paris, 1841 and 1853. Also a later ed. of 1869. Greek text.
- A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*. Paris: E. Leroux, 1879–1882. 4-vols; 8-vo. Exhaustive bibliography. Work crowned by the French Academy.
- Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*. Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1903–1954. Fifteen tomes in 30-vols; 8-vo. See long and most valuable article on *Oracles*.
- Charles Daremberg and Edmond Saglio, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1877–1919, etc. Five tomes in 10-vols. See article on *Sibyllæ, Sibyllini libri*.



¹ Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiæ Cursus Completus*, Ser. Græco-Latina, XX, col. 1288-89

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