

# Sibyls in the Greek and Roman world

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H. W. PARKE (ed. B. McGING), *SIBYLS AND SIBYLLINE PROPHECY IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY* (Routledge, London 1988). Pp. 236. ISBN 0-415-00343-1.

Interest in sibyls spanned antiquity from the formative period of the Greek city states to the Middle Ages — and, indeed, into the Renaissance when Michelangelo painted them on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and Protestant fanatics read their oracles for information about the impending end of the world. Throughout these many centuries the traditions about sibyls expanded and varied as the intellectual environment of the Mediterranean world changed: her oracles would be read (and revised) both by Christians and Moslems during the Crusades — a sign of the important place that she still occupied in the prophetic imagination.

The sibylline prophetic tradition was certainly among the important ones in the classical world, and one of the most influential in succeeding centuries, but it is more than that. The surviving corpus contains a great deal of material from a class that is rarely heard from. These texts were not written by the great literary figures who dominate the surviving corpus of ancient literature, but rather by the literate stratum of society below them — the sort of people who would have listened to the orations of an Aelius Aristides, or taken Pausanias on a tour. They can offer an insight into the way that such people viewed the world around them. Beyond this, a study of the sibylline traditions in antiquity can offer a paradigm for the study of the different factors that influenced cultural development from the archaic period to the later Roman empire. For this reason, Herbert Parke's last book is most welcome. For this work, which was nearing completion at the time of his death and was seen through the press by Brian McGing, has finally succeeded in rescuing sibyls from the fringes of Judeo-Christian pseudepigrapha where they have been relegated by many scholars, and in placing the development of the sibylline tradition firmly in the classical world.

A glance at the table of contents reveals that Parke had moved well clear of the ordinary realm of sibylline studies in recent years, studies which take their direction from Johannes Geffcken's incisive little book, *Komposition und Entstehungszeit der Oracula Sibyllina*, first published in 1902.<sup>1</sup> Parke's first chapter discusses the characteristics of sibylline verse; the second treats the ancient scholarly sources for sibyls; the next six deal in turn with the sibylline tradition of the Greek east; the tradition at Cumae; the classical and hellenistic periods; the sibylline oracles at Rome; and the sibyl in early Christian literature. This is a real shift away from the emphasis of previous scholars, who have concentrated their attention on the extant collection of sibylline oracles and sought a context for these texts (particularly the Third Sibylline Oracle) in the Near East, especially in Alexandrian Jewish circles of the late Ptolemaic and early imperial periods.<sup>2</sup> The tendency of these studies has been to obscure the essential point: by the end of the 6th c. B.C. (if not before) and throughout the ensuing centuries until the conversion of Constantine, the sibyl was quintessentially a prophetess of the Greek world. The reason that Jews, and, later, Christians, were interested in the sibyl was that she was highly esteemed by the traditional

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1 See J. J. Collins, *The sibylline oracles of Egyptian Judaism* (Missoula 1974); id., "The development of the sibylline tradition," *ANRW* 2.20, 441-46; V. Nikiprowetzky, *La troisième sibylle* (Paris 1970); id., "La sibylle juive et la 'troisième livre' des 'pseudo-oracles sibyllins' depuis Charles Alexandre," *ANRW* 2.20, 460-542. A. Rzach's articles on sibyls and the sibylline oracles in *RE* IIA (1923) cols. 2073-2183 remain extremely important. For the mediaeval tradition see B. McGinn, "Teste David cum Sibylla: the significance of the sibylline tradition in the middle ages," in J. Kirshner and S. F. Wemple, *Women of the medieval world* (Oxford 1985) 7-35. The annotation in this review-discussion is heavy, as the material is widely scattered and the bibliography in Parke is not exhaustive.

2 This is best reflected by the fact that the best recent discussion of collection A (infra n.3) is Martin Goodman's, under the heading "Jewish writings under gentile pseudonyms" in M. Schürer, *The history of the Jewish people in the age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)*<sup>2</sup> (ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman) 3.1, 618-54.