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The Cumaean Sibyl: Controlling Her Voice at Rome from Tarquin to Constantine

Suzanne Motte Peronneau Jackson
Bard College

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The Cumaean Sibyl: Controlling Her Voice at Rome from Tarquin to Constantine

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Suzanne Jackson

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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*I will go as far as having to suffer transformation,
and I will be viewed as non-existent,
but still known as a voice:
the fates will bequeath me a voice.*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. Book XIV.
Translated by A.S. Kline.



Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux
Seated Figure in Contrapposto, 1857

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Introduction

Sibylline Legacy

These are the women and men who, down to the present day, are said to have been the mouthpieces through whom a god prophesied. But time is long, and perhaps similar things will occur again.

Pausanias, *Description of Greece*. XII. 8-xiii.

One of the most famous American works of art, “American Progress,” was painted by John Gast in 1872, and depicts a woman leading settlers westward. She is the physical embodiment of the spirit of Manifest Destiny, a term first coined by newspaper editor John O’Sullivan when describing Americans’ tendency to expand and explore. At the time this was painted, the continental United States looked much different than it does now— Colorado, both Dakotas, Montana, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona all had yet to become states. That’s over a third of all the square mileage of American territories today. Clearly, Americans took the concept of Manifest Destiny very seriously, because only forty years later, the last on that list of continental American states would be accepted— Arizona, in 1912. With or without this ethereal figure, those territories would have been settled. But the presence of this woman, dressed in Roman garb to indicate the republican values on which the United States was founded, puts a face to the movement, and serves as a figure by which the

young nation could feel as if it is far older, and far wiser, than its ninety-six years, at the time it was painted.

Figure 1



John Gast, "American Progress." 1872. Oil on canvas.

The culture of patriotism within America is reliant on folk tales, praise of (and firm adherence to) tradition, and, in the case of most government buildings, elements of Neoclassical architecture— all of which further contribute to the feeling that the U.S. is far older, more refined, and mature than her two hundred and forty-three years might imply. Granted, Europeans have been making their way to North America since the early seventeenth century, but even then, four centuries is practically nothing when compared to the duration of Rome. Like the United States, and most other established countries in the modern world, Rome had its folk heroes, its villains, its divine interventions, and its enviable architecture. However, these aspects of Roman culture were wont to change over time and naturally so: from its founding in 753 BCE to its fall in AD 1453, the existence of Rome spans over two millennia. Where other civilizations have failed, and continue to fail, Rome managed to endure for quite an impressive length of time. In this project, I

am interested in one of the mechanisms by which its power was preserved and consolidated– the prophetic voice of the Cumaean Sibyl.

In 1876, the American artist Elihu Vedder likely saw the parallels between Manifest Destiny and the Sibyl, inspiring him to compose the piece, “The Cumaean Sibyl.” Clad in the same flowing robes as Gast’s figure, Vedder also depicts a windswept woman in what appears to be the landscape of the American west. But unlike the figure of Manifest Destiny, the Sibyl struggles against the wind as her sandaled foot takes a labored step forward, leaning on her walking stick. Under her right arm she carries a collection of scrolls– to be delivered to whoever is worthy of the power contained within.

Figure 2



Elihu Vedder, “The Cumaean Sibyl.” 1876. Oil on canvas.

Like the (much more recent) use of Manifest Destiny, the Cumaean Sibyl served Rome by guiding it towards the path most prosperous through the state’s use of the Sibylline Books, a collection of her prophecy acquired by Tarquinius Superbus, would be used throughout the Republic and well into the Empire, as a way to stabilize Rome’s rapidly-expanding borders as it absorbed aspects of foreign culture and religion. Although of foreign origin herself, the

appearance of the Sibyl in Roman legend, “was not just a passing benefit,” observes Dionysius of Halicarnassus, “but one that saved Rome from disasters throughout its whole history” (464. IV.62). By the time Dionysius was writing in the early Empire, Rome was nearing eight hundred years of age– the majority of time in which the Sibylline Books actively participated in avoiding threats both internal and external.

Centuries later, her prophecy would again serve as a vehicle of authority by which a power new and foreign might be perceived as legitimate by the Roman people, but gone were the days of urging Rome to accept and honor foreign deities– plural. The prophecies that had been so esteemed by numerous generations of polytheistic Romans were thus reimagined as having one singular event in mind: the birth of Jesus Christ. Her role became as central to Christian tradition as she once was to Roman tradition. Constantine was surely aware that using her as a means with which to convert Romans to Christianity would make an impact on Roman culture, but what probably did not occur to him was the extent to which she would live on, with her legend flourishing well beyond Rome’s lifetime.

Her story, identity, and authority last for nearly all of Rome’s two thousand years, and lingers another millennium and a half beyond due to her assigned role in Christian prophecy– and yet, through all of this, she herself was not present for any of it. In legend, she was there to greet Aeneas as he stumbled ashore at Cumae, specifically seeking her assistance, and later she was, according to Varro, the woman responsible for hand-delivering her recorded prophecies– the Sibylline Books– to Tarquinius Superbus. After this, however, she ceases to exist. Indeed, Dionysius of Halicarnassus relates that after Tarquin purchased the remaining books, this mysterious woman “disappeared from among men” (464; IV.62.1-4). She did not merely turn

and walk back the direction from which she came, nor did she simply collapse and die; she *disappeared*.

Where her story ends, Rome begins.

Chapter 1

Sibylline Origins

While not the first stop on any modern traveler's Italian itinerary, the site of the ancient city of Cumae held—and continues to hold—a great deal of importance to both Greek and Roman cultures, in large part due to the myth and historical narrative that surround the site's most famous inhabitant: the Cumaean Sibyl. She lived and prophesied from the depths of the earth beneath the temple to Apollo, where she frantically wrote her prophecies on leaves that were then displayed at the cave's entrance. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas veers off course to visit the Sibyl and seek her guidance into the underworld, as Cumae sits next to Lake Avernus, a crater lake formed by an ancient volcano. The toxic fumes emitted by the volcanic waters led to its name—the Latin 'Avernus' derives from the Ancient Greek *αφορνος* (*awornos*), translating into "without birds," indicating the harsh and inhospitable nature of the landscape. According to Virgil, somewhere in the near vicinity of these murky waters was the entrance to the Underworld.

Hundreds of years before Virgil's birth, however, this belief was in the process of development; the coastal landscape that would one day become Cumae roiled with volcanic activity. Watching this chaotic land of smoke and fire churn from the safety of the sea, Mycenaean Greek and Minoan Cretan sailors concocted a world enshrouded with mystery and myth—a world that would, over centuries, become a battleground of the gods and would test the

limits of heroes. Though the subterranean volcanic activity had long since ceased by the time the Greeks made landfall, the settlement of Cumae, like the Sibyl herself, would retain the aura of raw unpredictability and power that was derived almost exclusively from the landscape itself.

Why Cumae?

Before discussing the multitude of myths surrounding the Cumaean Sibyl as they are recounted throughout the Republic and later in the Empire, one must first come to realize how important this coastal town was to the ancient world; just as the Cumaean Sibyl has been filtered through many different cultures and traditions, so has the site of Cumae. Though at times it was not a perceptible power, over the course of its existence Cumae would see extravagant success and crushing defeat. It would host a wide variety of rulers, be subject to invasions, and would be the deciding factor in whether wars were won or lost. Its language, customs, and religion would change multiple times over the course of several centuries. Such a tumultuous existence strongly reflects that of the Sibyl herself; to understand her passage through the ancient world, we must first look at the place where that passage began, where the Greeks first made landfall in Italy.

Around roughly 770 BCE, Chalcidian and Eretrian Greeks from the island of Euboea established the settlement of Pithecusae on an island, now known as Ischia, in the bay of Naples. Strabo records in *Geography* that the two groups prospered in their new home, due to the “fruitfulness of the soil and on account of the gold mines,” and the population grew in wealth and number (457; 5.4.9). At its height, Pithecusae was bustling center of Mediterranean trade, controlling ship routes up and down the Italy’s western coast. Archeological digs into local gravesites that date to before 700 BC has revealed artifacts from Euboea, Corinth, and Athens, as well as items from Northern Syria, Phoenicia, and Egypt (Hornblower et al. 1152). Ultimately,

however, internal struggle between the two founding groups led to a divide within the settlement. According to Strabo, a great many people “forsook the island as a result of a quarrel,” though whether he is referring to one group or a collection of individuals from both is unclear (457; 5.4.9). Whoever chose to remain on the island did not do so for long: “later on they were also driven out of the island by earthquakes, and by eruptions of fire, sea, and hot waters” (457; 5.4.9). The mainland, however, was just as inhospitable.

Cumae sits on the coast in the midst of Campania, a western region of the Italic peninsula bound by the Liris River to the northwest (Fig. 1.1, marked in blue), the Apennines mountains to the northeast (green), and the Sorrentine peninsula to the southeast (red). With abundant rivers feeding to the coast, numerous bays, and some of the most important shoreline in all of Italy, soon Cumae branched off to form neighboring settlements, one of which being Neapolis (Naples). Settlers also found that agriculture flourished due to the mineral-rich soil, and the earth could be mined for copper and other valuable metals. But despite its natural advantages, the geography itself remained unpredictable; Campania was a hotspot for tectonic phenomena. According to Strabo, the entire stretch of western coast from Cumae to Sicily “is full of fire, and has caverns deep down in the earth that form a single whole, connecting not only with one another but also with the mainland” (457; 5.4.9). Cumae itself, positioned on the outskirts of the Phlegraean Fields, was subject to earthquakes and other disturbances that pull from deep within the earth.

The naturally-defensive landscape would prove useful in the following centuries, as conflict and war plagued Cumae. Fortunately for the Cumaeans, anyone wishing to invade the city would have to either climb a mountain, trudge through a swamp, or come by sea— which was

Figure 3



not the subtlest of methods. Cumae had the clear advantage over any potential threats. Even after the city fell into ruin, its strategic significance was not to be wasted; rogue groups of pirates stationed themselves in the remains of the city until the 8th century AD (Hornblower et al. 397).

In 524 BC, Cumae was attacked by the Etruscan army. Despite their outnumbering the Cumaeans, the Etruscans fell victim to the difficult landscape. In the low swamps to the north of the city, they accepted defeat and quickly retreated. The soldier Aristodemus emerged from this battle a hero, and gained massive public favor. In 505 BCE, he once more leads the Cumaeans to victory against the Etruscans at Aricia. The Etruscans would have difficulty

recovering from this blow. Soon after, they lost control of Rome. Aristodemus went on to rule Cumae under a brutal dictatorship for the next twenty years, making several cunning political moves and, despite public disfavor, maintaining the city's economy in a state of constant success. Some speculate that in this period of time, amidst all the wealth and resources, the cave of the Sibyl was constructed. Aristodemus, in an effort to protect his position from any potential rivals, killed off all male members of Cumaean aristocracy and banished their sons to the country, where he intended they be raised with neither an education nor a sense of community. In addition, to further safeguard his status, he individually extended a great deal of diplomacy towards his former Etruscan enemies. In addition to impounding Roman ships and returning the looted Etruscan treasures, he granted asylum in Cumae to Rome's last king, Tarquinius Superbus, after being expelled from Rome in 495 BC.¹

Aristodemus ultimately met his end: the exiled sons of the murdered Cumaean aristocrats banded together and returned to their city, murdering Aristodemus and all of his children. In doing so, however, they also destroyed all reasons for the remaining Etruscans to not attempt to overpower Cumae one final time. In 474 BCE, they did just that. The Cumaeans, heaving learned of this plan prior to the attack, appealed to the Sicilian colony Syracuse for assistance and in return were sent a powerful fleet to aid in Cumaean defense. Diodorus Siculus writes of this collaboration the Sicilian perspective: "The commanders of this squadron sailed to Cumae, where they joined forces with the local inhabitants and fought a naval campaign against the Tyrrhenians [Etruscans], destroying many of their ships and finally defeating them in a great sea battle. Having thus humbled the Tyrrhenians and freed the men of Cumae from their fears, they

¹ This is the same Tarquinius who will cross paths with the Cumaean Sibyl in legend, though such a tale was likely the product of a practical political decision being transformed by the passage of time into folk legend and moralistic myth, as will be further discussed in the following section.

sailed back home to Syracuse” (111; 11.51.2). The Etruscans were defeated once and for all, leaving Cumae uncontested ruler of trade along the western coast of the Italian peninsula— but their good fortune would not last long.

Cumae kept a close eye on the rising threat of the Osci who were battling their way down from the mountains of Campania. The city reinforced their fortifications, but these efforts were in vain. After capturing the weakened Etruscan city of Capua, the Osci gained momentum and, in 421 BCE, Cumae fell under their control (Hornblower et al. 397). Despite the “numerous outrages” the Osacans committed against the surviving Cumaeans, the city never completely lost touch with its Greek roots: “many traces of the Greek decorum and usages are still preserved there” (Strabo 439; 5.4.4). The cult of Apollo remained, as did the Cumaean Sibyl, evidenced by an Oscan inscription in the temple above the Sibyl’s cave.

By 400 BCE, all surrounding cities, including Naples, had been swept into Oscan control. Less than a century later, however, the Osci found themselves vulnerable to both Rome and the neighboring Samnites, and requested an alliance with Rome. In return, Rome protected Oscan territory in the First Samnite War (343-341 BCE), but ensured that these new allies were bound to them with political dependency. While Rome was preoccupied with the Latin War (340-338 BCE), the Osci attempted to loosen the grip with which they were held, but not surprisingly, the plan backfired and cost them what little autonomy they had left. In 338 BC, Oscan Cumae was absorbed into the Roman state as *civitas sine suffragio*. Just as Cumae had retained Greek traits under Campanian rule, so it did under Roman rule as well.

Over a century later in the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE), many Romanized Oscan territories, still harboring bad feelings towards their Roman captors, sided with Hannibal. Cumae, however, stood firm against their enemy. They went so far as to request assistance from

Roman consul Sempronius Gracchus, who defended Cumae from Hannibal not once, but twice (215 and 214 BCE). Rome lauded Cumae for its loyalty in the face of adversity and in 180 BCE, Cumae was permitted to take Latin as its official language. With most of its bloody history over with, Cumae settled down to become a resort town for the wealthy Roman elite who were drawn to the area because of its unique Greekness (Hornblower et al. 397).

Despite undergoing a massive renovation under Augustus' rule, the city of Cumae would never regain the power it held in its Greek prime. Perhaps because of the upper hand afforded to him by the local military complex, Augustus funded a massive restoration the acropolis, temples of Apollo, and cave of the Sibyl. Yet still the once-thriving city was overshadowed by Naples, and its population and economy dwindled. In an effort to revive the city in the first century AD, Rome sent a colony to settle the vacant houses and fill the empty streets, but the plan failed to stick. After a while, Cumae faded into existence as a mere stop on the way to a more interesting place. Though the cave of the Sibyl remained an attraction, the cult itself was a shadow of what it once was. Eventually, the site gave way to early Christian settlers, who converted the long-deserted temples into churches and used the Sibyl's cave and other subterranean caverns as tombs.

When the barbarians invaded Italy in the fifth century AD, only Cumae and Naples were able to evade capture. Centuries of power struggle between the barbarians, the Byzantine Empire, and the Ostrogoths ensued, leading to the passage of Cumae between various aristocrats before the city eventually fell into the hands of pirates, who used the ruined city as a base from which to plan their Mediterranean attacks. In 1207 AD, the city of Naples stormed the remains of Cumae and leveled what was left of the acropolis. All else that may have remained of the original city, they burned to the ground. Though did succeed in ridding the area of pirates, one

cannot ignore the injustice of such an end; after two thousand years of a unique and varied existence, Cumae was ultimately destroyed by a community it helped to create. This sad sort of irony follows the Sibyl herself, as she is whisked away from Cumae and settled into Roman culture, before being destroyed by the Romans she had served for so many generations, and her identity was stitched back together to become that of an early Christian prophet.

Distinguishing Fact and Myth

Strabo writes that his literary predecessors are responsible for much of the suggested pre-Greek past of Cumae. “The people prior to my time,” he explains, “were wont to make Avernus the setting of the fabulous story of the Homeric ‘Necyia’; and, what is more, writers tell us that there actually was an oracle of the dead here and that Odysseus visited it” (Strabo 441; 5.4.5). Strabo references the writings of Cumaean native Ephorus, an ancient Greek historian who lived and wrote in the fourth century BCE. Of his original work, all that survives are in fragments situated within the texts of other ancient sources. Within Strabo’s text lies Ephorus’ account of the pre-Greek Cumae— the land was occupied by the Cimmerians, who lived underground in a city made up of interconnecting caves and tunnels that weaved through the volcanic rock (445; 5.4.5). Their society too centered around an oracle who prophesied from a cave deep below ground, and those who worship the oracle do not leave the caverns in the daytime— only at night. Thus Strabo records Ephorus as saying of these people: “And never does the shining sun look upon them” (Ephorus qtd. in Strabo, 445; 5.4.5).

While the livelihood of most Cimmerians revolved around mining copper, there were a handful of individuals who held the responsibility of consulting the oracle for matters of the state or public good. This seat of prophecy came to a violent end when mortal will and divine power

clashed: “the Cimmerians were destroyed by a certain king,” Strabo claims, “because the response of the oracle did not turn out in his favor” (445; 5.4.5) This brief but dense description of the Cimmerians and their strange customs is the result of Strabo, like so many other Greek authors and historians, attempting to align fact with fiction– history with legend– to prove this historical race of peoples were the same as those of whom Odysseus speaks in Book 11 of the *Odyssey* when consulting the oracle of the dead:

By night
 our ship ran onward toward the Ocean’s bourne,
 the realm and region of the Men of Winter,
 hidden in mist and cloud. Never the flaming
 eye of Helios lights on those men
 at morning, when he climbs the sky of stars,
 nor in descending earthward out of heaven;
 ruinous night being rove over those wretches (Homer 175-6. line 14-21)

Strabo goes on to include that though the Cimmerians were wiped out, the oracle “still endures, although it has been removed to another place” (445; 5.4.5). Perhaps by including this vague detail, Strabo suggests that oracle visited by Odysseus that was so crudely destroyed by its own people has been saved and preserved by the Greek settlers. Having been “removed to another place” does not necessarily indicate another place geographically, and might instead suggest another place in time, amongst the Cumaean settlers.

The Sibyl’s cave, located beneath the temple of Apollo in the city of Cumae, is both a feat of ancient engineering and a rich archaeological site; over the course of its existence the unique space has served many uses. Most details of the interior have been lost to time and thieves, and perhaps some of them never existed at all and were instead a product of an ancient sources’ hyperbolic description of the site. The basic layout of the cave, however, has remained largely unaffected, with the exception of the floor having been lowered four feet, possibly during

Ostrogoth rule, and the extra ‘window’ added to the roof of the Sibyl’s chamber by an opportunistic medieval farmer, so that he could use the space to store his grain.

Believed to have been constructed in the fifth century BCE, the layout of the cave is not without a hefty amount of symbolism and mystery— only appropriate for the living and working space for the woman who regularly communed with the gods. The construction of the Sibyl’s Cave beneath the Temple of Apollo can likely be attributed to the Greeks, as the architecture matches that of late 5th century BCE Greek style, something that Maiuri, the archaeologist responsible for discovering the site, is quick to point out. While it isn’t difficult to distinguish the detailed and unique construction of the Sibyl’s Cave from later Roman caves in the area, dating the cave purely based on the angle of its walls seems a bit shady. A more reliable way of dating the site can be found in examining the construction: such a task is no small feat, and for a small city like Cumae, such an undertaking would only be possible under the rule of a tyrant.

Indeed, Cumae found itself in the grasp of Aristodemus in the fifth century BCE, and though it was a bloody and paranoid reign, it was also a period of great wealth and success for the city. During this time, it is more than reasonable to assume that there were abundant resources at hand to complete a project of such magnitude. However, even this explanation is merely speculative. Amedeo Maiuri, the Italian archaeologist responsible for locating the Sibyl’s Cave in 1932, makes no record of having found any inscriptions or ex-votos that could possibly lead to identifying the cave’s original purpose or construction (Parke 85). The style of the cave differs entirely from the caves hewn and expanded upon by the Romans, so it cannot be simply written off as just another Roman facsimile of something older and greater.

The cave consists of a passageway, 150 yards in length, running parallel to the rocky cliff out of which it has been dug. The passage is 16 feet in height and 8 feet wide, with the width

tapering to three feet when the walls meet the ceiling, creating a trapezoidal shape. Along the right side of the passage, overlooking the sea, are six openings carved into the rock, placed at regular intervals, through which light and fresh air stream into the darkness. The entire length ends in a room that also features a window cut into its right side, and a doorframe leading deeper into the cave to the left. On either side of the door are benches carved into the rock, on which perhaps sat those who had come to the Sibyl with their anxious enquiries while she herself went alone to commune with Apollo. Additionally, a few windows and doors still hold traces of what may have been sockets in which wooden doors or shutters were hinged, set to spring open at specific moments of prophecy, thus giving credence to Virgil's description of the movement of the "many mouths" in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*: "of their own accord / Those hundred vast tunnel-mouths gapes and give vent to the prophetess' responses" (Parke 83; Virgil 11. 118-120).

When it comes to the actual origin of the Sibyl herself, the myth becomes much more difficult to separate from the truth, if there even is a truth at all. In this case, from where does the Cumaean Sibyl *really* come, if not Cumae? According to the pseudo-Aristotelian collection, *De Mirabilibus Auscultationibus*, compiled at some point in the 3rd century BCE, the Cumaean Sibyl originally hailed from Erythrae. In that text, the author makes mention of the "underground chamber of Sibylla" in Cumae, and notes that the Sibylla herself "was Erythraean, though by some of the inhabitants of Italy called Cumaean" (Pseudo-Aristotle, qtd. in Parke 78). Servius later supports the concept of her Erythraean heritage, and places it within the Roman frame of the curse she receives from Apollo. The god agrees to grant her a long life, but there's a catch: she may never set eyes on her homeland again. So she migrated to Cumae, where her life extended well beyond that of a mortal, but, having overlooked requesting eternal youth as well, her body withered and decayed. When she was reduced to a shell of her former self, a letter

arrived from her homeland— sealed with Erythraean clay. Upon seeing this piece of her native land, the spell was broken and she died. Most other Roman versions of her origin myth will follow this pattern of struggle between the Sibyl and Apollo, though Servius is the only one to include Erythrae. While these sources speak of her physical origin, quite a few others mention another sort of origin entirely: how the Sibylline books— her compiled oracles pertinent to the past, present, and future of Rome— appeared in the city. While Cumae will always home to the Sibyl's body, Rome becomes home to her voice.

Performative Foreignness of the Books in the Early Republic

Prior to the Roman emperor's manufactured connection with the Sibylline Books meticulously cultivated by the *princeps* Augustus, the Roman Republic had its own ties to the Books. Though the contents of the Greek prophetic verse would certainly change under Republican rule, and most definitely beneath Augustus and his successors, the protocol surrounding the consultation of the Books was to remain relatively static for the vast majority of the Books' existence (or, rather, existences). The college of the *quindecemviri sacris faciundis*, as it became known in Augustus' time, consisted of fifteen esteemed Senators deemed trustworthy enough to consult the Sibylline Books given the occurrence of a prodigy. In the early Republic, however, the first mentions of the college indicate that membership was limited to two, hence the original name *duoviri sacris faciundis*, or two men for sacred actions.² The *duoviri*, at the beck and call of the senate, served as protectors of the Sibylline Books both in

² When the number increased to ten in 367 BCE, the name was changed to decemviri, and later, in 51 BCE, with the addition of five more slots for members, to quindecemviri. Even as the membership cutoff continued to increase, *quindecemviri* stuck (Beard, North, and Price. Vol. I. 18).

physical form as well as guarding against unauthorized reproduction or distribution of the prophecies.

Consultation of the Sibylline Books by the *duoviri* was fully incorporated into both Roman political and religious tradition of the early Republic, and later in the combined political-religious sphere of the middle Republic onwards: a perfect instance of foreignness serving two roles. To the average citizen, knowing that these texts are written in Greek verse might perhaps stir interest or further validate their authenticity. But when it comes to actually reading, consulting, and interpreting the oracles, the language barrier serves as a reminder that only those with special knowledge (and higher education) are permitted to engage with the text. The distinctly foreign content of the sacred texts was never overshadowed— from their legendary beginnings, the oracles contained in the books were composed in Greek hexameter, and in Greek hexameter they remained, despite more than a few instances of the books being burned, recompiled, burned again, etc.

The role of the Sibylline Books in the early Republic is of course tied to the shared history between Rome and Etruria, evidence of which can be found in the legend of Tarquinius Superbus, the final Roman king who purchased the Sibylline books. As discussed in the previous section, it is his Etruscan heritage that, rather than alienating him from Roman myth, ultimately validates his realization that the books, regardless of price, were a worthy investment for the Roman people. In the early Republic, the religious practices and traditions of the Etruscans were both highly simplified and romanticized: “For even if modern archaeology has increasingly come to argue that Etruria and Rome were part of a shared common culture on the sixth century B.C. and even later, Roman imagination in the centuries that followed did not see it that way: for them Etruscan religious traditions were different and alien, and sometimes powerful for that very

reason” (Beard, North, and Price, Vol. I. 20). While the definitive Roman qualities of the Sibylline books are easy to distinguish from the standpoint of a citizen in the late Republic, and most definitely the Empire, both of whom would have been well aware of the story of Tarquin, the books did not hold such weight in the early Republic. This is not to say that they were powerless or disposable; on the contrary, they were one of the main channels the senate might go through in order to interpret the occurrence of a prodigy, or any such other event that threatened Rome’s well-being. But unlike the singular power the books will come to hold in Augustan Rome, the books of the early Republic had to compete with other foreign interpretive powers; namely, the Etruscan *haruspices*.

When the senate caught wind of a prodigy, it is entirely possible that they might first request advice of the *haruspices* and, if proven unsuccessful or inconvenient, they would perhaps move on to the suggestion of the *duoviri*, or vice versa. Though they served the same role, the two groupings are recorded as having remarkably different qualities. The groups diverge with the *duoviri* becoming Roman men tasked with serving a foreign text, while the *haruspices* remained “foreign” men tasked with serving Rome itself. Though Roman by birth and breeding, the *haruspex* priest was so well-trained in the foreign skill of Etruscanesque divination that it was speculated that he himself would be considered foreign, in that he was the bearer and performer of a non-Roman religious practice. Livy records an instance when faced with the birth of a hermaphrodite, the state calls for the involvement of both the *haruspex* and the *decemviri*. The *haruspices*, however, were referred to in such a way to truly emphasize their foreignness: “the soothsayers summoned from Etruria said it was a terrible and loathsome portent; it must be removed from Roman territory, far from contact with earth, and drowned in the sea” (359; XXVII.37.6). Whether or not Livy’s account of the import of these diviners is true, it explains

the *haruspices*' lack of Roman organization which, through the intentional failure to conform to the 'college' identity that was typical of religious practice at that time, likely served as an additional measure towards the authenticity of their performative foreignness.

Foreignness serves as a powerful display of the Roman ability to wield foreign power more effectively than the original practice. Rome's borders, while still intended to protect and exclude, were significantly more porous when it came to foreign religious influence. Rome was notorious for importing foreign gods and traditions. Doing so deliberately exemplified to both Roman citizens and enemies of the Republic that the power and influence of Rome extends well past the physical world, so much so that foreign deities, for example, would be willing to abandon their native lands in exchange for an envied spot in the Roman Pantheon: in times of war, the practice of *evocatio* was employed against enemies, and was typically quite a success. Even the gods wanted to be Roman, it seems. In 396 BCE, the Romans absorbed the patron deity of the Etruscan city Veii immediately before attacking. Livy writes that "The inhabitants of Veii were unaware that they had already been abandoned by their own seers and by foreign oracles; unaware too that already some of the gods had been invited to partake of the plunder, while others had been entreated to leave their city and were turning their eyes towards the temples of the enemy for their new homes" (Livy, *History* V.21.1-7 qtd. in Beard, Price, and North. Vol. II. 41-2). When faced with an internal conflict, however, the Roman senate turned to foreign texts in determining how the situation should proceed. While *evocatio* involved citizens as active participants in a foreign deity's transformation into a Roman cult, the manner with which internal conflicts were dealt was private and highly confidential. Thus incorporation of foreignness not only reflected positively on Rome as a superpower, but also serves to maintain

that the ability to truly understand prophetic texts and practices lay in the hands of very few, with ultimate power falling to the senate.

The exoticism and mystery of the Sibylline Books ensures that the power within the grasp of the *duoviri* remains well out of reach from the average citizen, and is instead channeled directly to the Senate to decide whether to regard a prodigy as legitimate, and if so, who to then consult, and finally, whether or not to take the given advice seriously, or rather look to fish for a more convenient interpretation. In this lies the reason why the books went on to serve Rome well into the third century AD, while the *haruspices* quickly became a thing of the past. As focus on prodigies gave way to wars, elections, and even infrastructure, it likely became apparent that the message conveyed by the books was significantly easier to control than the advice of the *haruspex*, who as individual diviners were not anchored to something so malleable as the books. The Sibylline books were safe from rogue interpretation, but perfect for forming a specific message that aligned with the given agenda held by the majority of senators. With the development of the Republic, this use for the books will become increasingly more obvious, and will culminate with Augustus' use of both the books and the Sibyl's identity in the first few decades of the Empire.

In the event that all goes well— an oracle was called for by the senate, chosen by the *decemviri*, and passed back to the Senate where it was deemed relevant and interpreted appropriately— the conclusion of the process was shared with the Roman public either by Senatorial decree or a publication by the *decemviri*. Either would contain a summary of the senate's interpretation, as well as the collective decision of how to proceed. The full text of the oracle was never publicized— the public likely would have deemed it unnecessary, fully trusting the *decemviri* and the senate to make the proper call, and the senate and *decemviri* likely thought

sharing such information with the public would be dangerous, and leaving them open to questions of their authority, or worse. Rarely, if at all, would the Roman public take it upon themselves to worry about a prodigy that had yet to be addressed by the senate; due to the deep ties between the senate and religion by middle Republic, a prodigy wasn't considered a prodigy—and thus something worthy of any special attention—until the Senate identified it as such (Orlin 89).

When it comes to the actual consultation of the Sibylline books, the role of the *decemviri* is relatively certain, but just how the interpretation was carried out is another question entirely. Because the physical consultation of the guarded books was such a remarkably closed affair, very little is known regarding the process of choosing an oracle to present to the senate. How was the correct prophecy chosen? Perhaps the sections were sorted with an index, granting the *decemviri* quick access to relevant advice regarding famine, war, hermaphrodite birth, etc. There is also the possibility that the senate, prior to ordering the *decemviri* to consult the Books, subtly let on as to what kind of oracle they were hoping would result. It's likely that this was simply an unspoken rule of *decemviri* membership; as most members were senators themselves, they would already be well aware of what kind of oracle they were hoping to divine from the texts. With only the *decemviri* and perhaps a few slaves present, cherry-picking through the Greek for a specific message would have been easy.

There are many records of the senate consulting the Books as a first-response to a prodigy or disaster of some sort, such as a plague in 346 BCE: “a pestilence attacked them and the senate was compelled to order the ten commissioners to consult the Sibylline Books” (Livy 449; VII.27). Other consultations did not take place until several years after the initial event, as Livy records was the case in 292 BCE, when plague that raged for over a year before

consultation of the Books was called for: “[the] devastation was now grown portentous, and the Books were consulted to discover what end or what remedy the gods proposed for this misfortune” (541-3; X.47). In this case, oracles provided that the remedy for the plague called for the introduction of Aesculapius, Greek god of medicine and healing.³ Such a suggestion was common— after consultation of the Books, the report back would contain the urgent suggestion that a foreign cult (most often of Greek origin) be brought to Rome. Thus, Roman ambassadors were sent to Epidaurus, the site of Aesculapius’ Greek cult, and were ordered to return to Rome with the statue of the god in tow. As they raised anchor and made for Rome, “they carried off a serpent, which had slipped aboard their ship and which— so it was generally believed— contained the true spirit of the god.” Upon arriving home, the snake is said to have abandoned ship and swam to the nearby Tiber island. It is there that his temple was dedicated in 291 BCE, after the plague had been successfully repressed (Livy, 543; X.47.6-70).

Though consultation of the Sibylline books was not taken lightly, it was not set in stone that the senate ever needed to listen to the Sibyl’s advice. Once, for example, the senate voted to carry through with the building of the Aqua Marcia, despite Sibylline opposition. According to the account given by Frontinus in the text *Aqueducts of Rome*, the aqueduct was approved and ready for construction, when the *decemviri*, “on consulting the Sibylline Books for another purpose,” came across an oracle that conveniently expressed that “it was not right for the Marcian water [...] to be brought to the Capitol” (345; I.7). Perhaps a few senators who opposed Marcian and his aqueduct also conveniently served as members of the *decemviri*, thus leading to the timely discovery of this off-topic and yet strangely specific anti-aqueduct prophecy. There is

³ Such a powerful god was he in the Greek tradition that he is invoked in the opening of the original Hippocratic Oath, second only to Apollo.

no evidence of the argument taken by Marcius and his supporters against this pronouncement, only that it was successful, as the aqueduct was indeed constructed, and portions of it remain standing to this day. Such an event demonstrates that the oracles were not always followed to the letter, and could be subject to internal conflict amongst the senators. Additionally, senatorial tampering with the prophecies must have been something of which all the senators and priests were well aware— if this had been a one-time instance of someone sliding in some lines of Greek that discouraged water transport or the building of any new infrastructure for a given amount of time, surely such an act would warrant some form of punishment, but Frontinus mentions nothing of the sort.

The arrival of the Sibylline Books in Rome is an example of this same strategic blurring of fact and legend in history and tradition. Just as Aesculapius' service to Rome solidifies him as a Roman god, the Cumaean Sibyl, via the *duoviri*, connects the Roman Republic with its legendary past, a past that reaches far beyond Rome's borders. In doing so, the Republic ensures that from the perspective of the Roman citizen, Rome is to be the center of the physical world not only in regards to trade, technology, warfare, etc., but in myth as well. It is in this world where the Cumaean Sibyl, perhaps having seen the greatness Rome will one day accomplish, attempts to aid the cause by selling her prophecies to Tarquinius Superbus. Just as she will later be remembered by the early Christians as one of the first who prophesied the birth of Christ, so did the Romans believe that she was one of the first to believe in the power of the Republic.

Reconstructing and Reimagining the Lost Sibylline Books in the Late Republic

According to legend, it was King Tarquinius Superbus who, before his fall from grace and subsequent expulsion from Rome,⁴ commissioned the construction of the grand temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Despite the clear and defined regal imagery embedded within both the interior and exterior decoration of the temple, it was not harmed in the turmoil and destruction following Rome's transition from Kingdom to Republic.⁵ Since the dedication of the temple in 509 BCE, the Sibylline Books were stored in a subterranean chamber within a stone chest. As it was forbidden to consult the Books upon one's own initiative, regardless of whether or not one was a member of the *duoviri*, the Books were under constant guard. Only by the order of the senate may the Books be consulted in the appropriate circumstance.⁶ By the time the temple was destroyed in a fire in 83 BCE, the original *duoviri* had surpassed the *decemviri* and was now the *quindecimviri*, as membership had grown to fifteen (Orlin 81). The original scrolls were lost in the fire, but Rome was not about to turn its back on the texts considered to be foundational to the success of the Republic. In 76 BCE, the Roman Senate began the process of replacing— as opposed to restoring— the oracles.

Perhaps compiling a collection of the oracles as they were recalled by those who had been in the position to consult them would be too risky, as the oracles were so vague and abstract that the precise meaning of an interpretation could come down to a single word. Instead, the Senate gathered any and all utterances or prophecies floating around Rome, and Roman

⁴ After which, according to [cite], he conveniently relocated to Cumae.

⁵ *Religions of Rome* Vol. 1. 59. See also: Livy II, *Religions of Rome* Vol. 2. [1.9b]

⁶ Romans had a legend for everything, including what would happen if you were to mess around with unauthorized prophecy: M. Atilius/Acilius, one of the first guardians of the books, sneakily copied some of the oracles. When he was found guilty for the crime, he was sewn into a sack and thrown into the sea. (Zonaras 7.11.1.)

territories beyond. The task fell to the *quindecimviri* to determine which of these rogue prophecies originated from the Sibyl, and which were imposters. On one hand, this may indicate that the content of the original scrolls was not as important, but rather that the words came from the Sibyl herself. On the other hand, this easily gave the upper echelons of Roman society the opportunity to rework the oracles to their personal advantage, more so than they had been able to before, when the Books were both heavily guarded and static in their content.

In either case, the way in which the *decemviri* went about what was and wasn't Sibylline was to identify whether a particular oracle was composed as an acrostic. Dionysius of Halicarnassus considers this to be a unique and identifying trait attributed to the Sibyl; following the fire of 83 BCE in which the 'original' Sibylline Books were lost, the senate went about searching for genuine Sibylline prophecy, "being recognized as such by means of the so-called acrostics" (469. IV.62.6). But in this observation lies a bit of a time-paradox, as acrostics only came into fashion during Hellenistic period (c. 323 BCE). If they were in use prior to this period, none survive or have ever been referenced. The only Sibylline oracle that survives from the Roman collection, as recorded by Phlegon of Tralles in the second century CE, dates to about 123 BCE, and indeed follows the acrostic pattern. The Romans were likely unaware that acrostics were not in use before the Hellenistic period, when the original scrolls were said to have originated, so this would not have impacted their perception of the Sibyl's authority. What can be deduced from this inconsistency, however, is that either the new set of oracles compiled by the Senate and the *decemviri* had absolutely no ties to the previous collection that was thought to be the original scrolls sold to Tarquinius Superbus by the Sibyl hundreds of years before. It is even more likely that over the centuries, as the "original" Greek writing faded or pages decayed, that they were replaced with "reproductions," that mimicked the style of the time, and it was

these fabrications passed off as originals that led to the recompiled “original” acrostics to be stylistically impossible by several hundred years.

Whether or not these mistakes, ranging from improper use of acrostics to oddly-specific oracles pertaining to aqueducts, were made intentionally or with purpose, either case suggests that the senate was not the least bit concerned with *how* they reached a decision, but rather *what* decision is expressed to the people with the authority of the Sibyl. Augustus, too, will employ Sibylline authority in order to transition his idealism into reality, but he will take a step beyond the limits of his predecessors: not only will he situate himself firmly in the legend of the Cumaean Sibyl through publication of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, but he will be the first to display her prophecy to the public with such confidence and piety that there would be no question of his sincerity, nor of the legitimacy of the oracles themselves.

Sibylline Regency

Having been raised a Roman citizen, Augustus was well aware of the high regard with which the Roman people, regardless of class or status, held tradition and legend. The beginning of his regime was not without drama; it was one thing to suddenly be at the helm of one of the most powerful civilizations the world has seen. It is another thing entirely to have one's rule prophesied by a higher power. By bringing in the oracles themselves into the equation, Augustus forms a balance of sorts between himself and the Sibyl within his own singular rule: the more power and authority he grants the Sibylline books, the more power and authority the books give back to him. From the very beginning, rather than beginning his rule as *Princeps* with a clean slate, Augustus made the wise decision to further stabilize his power by looking to the past. Having watched his great-uncle Julius Caesar try and fail to wield singular power, Augustus made the move to take his own influence a step further: not only would he be the military and cultural leader of the Roman Empire, but the spiritual one as well, thus fully fleshing out his title of *princeps*: the first Roman citizen. He would be the one the people of Rome would look to not only for issues regarding the State, but also marriage, worship, and recreation. His direct influence on Roman culture and religion was immense, and in no small part due to his reintroduction of the Sibylline Books. By singlehandedly restoring the oracles that had faded

from use and by reestablishing the regular consultation of the Book, Augustus situates himself directly within one of the oldest and most secretive sects of Roman history.

But to what extent did Augustus' oracles resemble those that were supposedly purchased by Tarquinius Superbus, roughly half a century before? Likely, not much. Just as the senate and *decemviri* had done in after the burning of the first collection, Augustus went about collecting new oracles. Suetonius writes that, following the death of Lepidus, Augustus "collected whatever prophetic writings of Greek or Latin origin were in circulation anonymously or under the names of authors of little repute, and burned more than two thousand of them" (*Augustus*. 2.31).

Though the Sibylline books maintained relatively intact, Suetonius records that the princeps and his men picked through the oracles, "making a choice even among those" as for what would stay, and what could go (2.31). Though the Sibylline Books as inherited by Augustus were preserved for the most part, certain prophecies were conveniently lost under his reign and new portions added. Additionally, measures were taken to control prophecy that might compete with those in control of the senate and quindecimviri, as "many apocryphal works circulated under the famous name," meaning, of course, the Sibylline books. Because of the danger posed by a private citizen potentially holding the power to challenge a senatorial decision, Augustus put an end to this threat by organizing "a day within which [the civilian prophecies] were to be delivered to the Urban Praetor, [with] private ownership becoming illegal" (Tacitus. 6.12). Just as the *decemviri* protected the content of the Sibylline Books in the Republic from the Roman citizens, Augustus may have sought only to protect the citizens from the prophecies themselves. He secluded the books to a regulated environment— the new Palatine temple of Apollo. Having aligned himself with Apollo since gaining control of the Roman government, Augustus was quick to establish new footholds for the god within the city of Rome itself. In exchange for victories in the Civil

War, he established the Temple of Apollo on the hill of the Palatine. The Sibylline books remained there throughout the Augustan age and beyond. Under the watchful gaze of his Senate, appropriately interpretation of the prophecies could be controlled by the *quindecimviri*, individuals Augustus himself had deemed worthy.

Much of Sibylline responsibility involved keeping the prophecies under close guard, in order to ensure that only the distinguished *quindecimviri* would be familiar with their contents. There is, however, one instance of a prophecy being shared with the public: in 17 BCE, Augustus' Rome celebrated the *ludi saeculares*, or "secular games," a religious festival called for by none other than the Sibyl herself within a specific prophecy that the priests supposedly happened upon. The oracle was likely not posted all over town, but it also was not hidden from the public, either—thankfully, because of its relative publicity, it survives mostly intact, and will serve as one of three useful texts to the study of the *ludi saeculares* and the undeniably mysterious and seamlessly manufactured connection between the festival and the Sibyl.

Sibylline Prophecy as a Means to Alter Immutable Roman Tradition

The *ludi saeculares* serve to exemplify Augustus' manner of carrying tradition from previous periods of Roman rule into his own regime, with the help of his "new and improved" Sibylline Books. By refusing to start fresh, and instead manipulating the nostalgia held for ancient tradition as well as the hope with which Romans looked towards the future, he established his presence in the past, present, and future of the Roman Empire. Though, as we've noticed by this point, very few— if any— of these 'Roman' traditions originated from Rome itself. The decisions he makes as *princeps* project the appearance that his role has been justified not

only by Julius Caesar claiming him as his heir, but also by something greater, and far more powerful: his rule is assumed to be, in large part, the will of the gods and goddesses he honors within the festival, as was conveyed to him and his supporters by the Sibylline books. Whether the specific oracle was written as a result of orders given by Augustus or if it is indeed quite a bit older is beside the point. What is of the greatest importance to us now, just as it was to Augustus, is the connection between his authority and that of the Sibyl. Augustus' undertaking of religious and cultural renewal in his new Rome lent to the general idea that his acquisition of power was due in large part to the deities he goes about honoring in festival— all of this was recorded in the *Acta*, that the proceedings were “prescribed for [the god] in those books,” indicating the Sibylline scrolls (qtd. in Beard, Vol. II. 140-44).

The origins of the secular games can be traced to the mid-third century BCE, when, according to Varro, the festival was first held in an attempt to raise morale and appease the gods fifteen years into the brutality of the First Punic War. “Since there were many portents,” wrote Varro, in a fragment recorded by Censorinus, “[...] the Council of Fifteen consulted the Sibylline books and announced that the Tarentine Games should be held in the Field of Mars in honor of Father Jupiter and Persephone for three days, and that black animals should be sacrificed, and that the games should be held every hundred years” (*The Birthday Book*. 17.8) It wasn't until later, under Augustus, that these games were dubbed “saeculares” in order to denote that they occurred only once every *saeculum*, or century. Such a gap was intended to ensure that no citizen saw more than one occurrence of the games in their lifetime— a detail that is confirmed within the Sibylline oracle as it came to be known under Augustan rule: “When the longest span of life for

humans passes, / Having journeyed its cycle of a hundred and ten years,” it says, only then should the *ludi saeculares* be held (Hansen 278).⁷

The *ludi saeculares* of the Republic were not identified as such during their time. They were instead celebrated as *ludi Tarentini/Taurii*, depending on the source. A few ancient accounts give an explanation as to how, when, and why these games originated; though the stories vary, the motivation behind their being held remains the same: they serve to protect Rome’s future. According to Valerius Maximus, an historian under Augustus’ successor, Tiberius, the *ludi Tarentini* were inspired by a plague that ripped through Rome’s population. After all three of his children fell ill, a Roman father made a last-ditch effort to cure them and save his legacy. He brought them to the hot springs of Tarentum⁸ in Campus Martius and, after drinking of the water, all three children made a miraculous recovery. Overcome with gratitude to the gods, the father insisted that a festival be held to honor the underworld deities who has spared his offspring (2.4.5). Thus the *ludi Tarentini* were born, with one night of prayer and supplication for each child. Another account of the origin of the games comes from Servius, who connects the festival with Tarquinius Superbus– the very same final Roman King who was responsible for purchasing the Sibylline Books for Rome. This version also begins with a plague, though one with a more specific kind of victim: this illness caused every pregnant woman in Rome to miscarry. The games thus originated as a means to appease the gods into sparing the

⁷ Funnily enough, when Claudius holds the games in 47 CE, the formal announcement of the games “which no one had ever seen nor would ever see again” was met with laughter, as some of the attendees had been alive for the *ludi saeculares* of Augustus, sixty-four years prior. Claudius alleged that the games “had been given too early by Augustus and not reserved for the regular time” (Suetonius, *Claudius*. XXI). It would appear that Augustus was not the only Emperor to want to make his mark via the Sibylline books, regardless of whether or not the calendar aligned.

⁸ Located in the western portion of Campus Martius, the Tarentum was said to encompass the altar to Dis Pater and Proserpina. Evidence of volcanic activity and presence of hot springs gave the location the reputation of being a passage to the underworld, much like Lake Avernus, as discussed in Chapter 1.

next generation of Romans. In three days and three nights of prayer and sacrifice of sterile cows (*taurae*), the illness ceased, and the games became known as the *ludi Taurii* (Smith 716).

Augustus' *ludi saeculares* clearly carry on the legacy of protection over Rome's future. In either origin myth, supplication to the gods was employed by Romans to quite literally ensure that the next generation would not only survive, but be as strong, if not stronger, than themselves. Augustus embraces this concept, as it was certainly convenient for his political agenda at the time— with the implementation of the *Lex Julia* (the infamous Augustan marriage legislation) in 18 BCE, no longer was the family a private sector of public life. As *princeps*, he was not only First Citizen, but self-appointed *paterfamilias* of Rome. Within his hosting of the *ludi saeculares* in 17 BCE, and through his commission of Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*, the record of the events as is carved in stone in the *Acta*, and the extremely rare decision to publicize the Sibylline oracle that inspired it all, Augustus, ever the humble servant to his people and his gods, takes responsibility for each and every Roman in leading them through this sacred festival.

The games of the Republic and the games of the Empire are intrinsically connected due to their common ancestry within Greek tradition— tradition that was delivered to Rome by the Cumaean Sibyl, adopted by the Senate, and upheld by the *decemviri* for centuries. Just as the *decemviri* of the Republic were responsible for organizing and putting on the festival, so were Augustus' *quindecimviri*, of which he himself was a member. Augustus, the pious role model that he was, took it upon himself to perform the religious rituals within the festival, with the assistance of Agrippa. Being a member of the *quindecimviri*, a college that, according to Varro, “sacrifice according to the Greek rite, not the Roman,” granted Augustus a great deal of control over the planning and carrying-out of the *ludi saeculares* (7.88). As membership capped at fifteen, all of whom were likely Senators, ensured that control over the festival would be easy to

concentrate into the hands of a select few. Additionally, their sole duty to interpret the inherently foreign Sibylline books meant that any religious or cultural innovations introduced would quickly be embraced, and not be met with resistance or skepticism as might have been the case if these ideas had originated from any other source. After all, the Books were well into their three-hundredth year of serving Roman interest.

The *ludi saeculares*: What was Done, What was Sung, and What was Prophesied

Augustus' *ludi saeculares* are unusually well known to modern scholars due to the volume of extant primary information that survives regarding the festival. The central source is the *Acta*, a large stone tablet that recounts the events of the festival, from Augustus' opening nocturnal prayer and offering to the Moirai, to the concluding hymn composed by Horace performed before the temple of Apollo Palatine. Prior to the discovery of the *Acta* in 1890, scholars had only Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* and the fragmentary Sibylline oracle that had supposedly inspired Augustus and his fellow *quindecemviri* to hold the festival. Each source provides a unique perspective into the world in which these games were held, and the lasting feeling they were meant to impart on the Roman populous: the memorializing *Acta*, the poetic *Carmen Saeculare*, and the obscure oracle all were intended to serve Rome by serving as a tangible, emotional, and numinous reminder, respectively, of the greatness of Rome's past, present, and future— a feeling of great magnitude intended to endure for the next one hundred and ten years, until the holding of the next *ludi saeculares* by a new generation of Romans.

From these sources, the basics of the *ludi saeculares* are certain: for three days and three nights, Augustus, with occasional assistance from Agrippa, led Rome in prayer and offering to two groups of deities. The diurnal celebration saw offerings and prayers to Jupiter Optimus

Maximus on the first day, Juno Regina on the second, with the third day concluding in celebration of the twin deities Apollo and Diana (Beard. Vol. 1. 203). The focus of the nocturnal offerings, in comparison to the Olympians of daytime tribute, were personified powers far more ancient and entirely Greek, even in the names used to call upon them, despite Latinized names being in use, e.g. Augustus referring to the Fates as the Greek *Moirai*, as opposed to the Roman *Parcae*. Despite their foreign nature, their inclusion would not be seen as out of the ordinary—but, as an added measure of security, Augustus prefaces each prayer to the foreign divinities with the reminder that the following offering was, “prescribed for [the deity] in those books,” a reference to the Sibylline Books that had, by this point in Roman history, been twice destroyed, or lost, and subsequently reconstructed by the *quindecimviri* (*Acta* qtd. in Beard. Vol. 2. 141). The books which Augustus references likely did not at all resemble the ‘original’ Books, but that did not affect the secrecy with which they were consulted and the solemnity with which the prophecies were received.

The specific oracle referenced by Augustus is one of the very few instances of a specific prophecy being known to the public— a rare glimpse into the work of the *quindecimviri*. It is this decision that no doubt set the course for this piece to survive into modernity when so many others have been lost, or deliberately destroyed. The prophecy conveniently touches on just about every aspect of the *ludi saeculares*, including mention of both the Carmen Saeculare as well as a suggestion to, “Remember to keep these injunctions always in mind,” perhaps a not-so-subtle suggestion that all should be recorded in a manner that will outlive them all: the stone inscription of the *Acta* (Hansen. line 166).

This prophecy differs greatly from the supposedly fragmentary and scattered rantings of the Cumaean Sibyl of centuries past, before she became associated with Apollo under the

Augustan reimagining of her legend and voice. Instead, it is quite specific and straightforward in what is expected of Augustus, who, as Rome's *princeps*, seems to be the intended recipient of the Sibyl's message.

The *Acta* begins with Augustus' prayer to the Fates on the night of the 31st of May. The duality that will pervade the *ludi saeculares* takes its first form within Augustus' performance as both *princeps* and priest. Immediately, he gives credit to the Cumaean Sibyl as his inspiration for honoring them so: "Moirai.⁹ As it is [prescribed for]¹⁰ you in those books [...] let sacrifice be made to you" (*Acta* qtd. in Beard. Vol. II. 140). While it is certainly true that he believes it necessary to give credit where credit is due, especially in prayer to the Fates, this moment functions as an announcement to the Roman people that the man standing before them is not only their advocate in things concerning the state, but would too gladly serve them as messenger of the will of the Sibyl, thus positioning himself in a similar prophetic role between the worlds of physical and spirit, despite the fourteen other members of the *quindecimviri*. By reminding his fellow Romans of the Sibyl in addressing her contribution at the beginning of each and every prayer over the course of the three days and three nights of the *ludi saeculares*, he performs a great service to the Sibyl herself. Augustus restores her voice that had in previous generations become fragmented and scattered. The Cumaean Sibyl, who had seen such promise in Rome that she hand-delivered her prophecies to King Tarquinius Superbus, was just as much to thank for the current state of Rome as Augustus himself.

⁹ Not surprisingly, Augustus invokes the Greek name for the Fates: *Μοῖραι*, or "apportioners." The Roman equivalent were the *Parcae*, "the sparing ones".

¹⁰ Square brackets indicate where the stone has been damaged, and thus the exact text must be reconstructed as best it can be through analysis of other extant accounts of the festival.

Horace too employs the voice and authority of the Sibyl in the *Carmen Saeculare*, or *Hymn for a New Age*— commissioned by Augustus, the song was performed by a chorus of twenty-seven boys and twenty-seven girls on the last day of the festival, facing the temple of Apollo Palatine, a relatively new addition to the Palatine, having been dedicated only a few years before in 28 BCE. The intention was to conclude the festival with the energy of hope, progress, and transformation— all of which would come to be through the will of the Sibyl. Horace composed the hymn to carry extra weight when performed by the selected girls and boys. After addressing Apollo and Diana, the children plead for the duo to, “grant our prayers on this holy occasion, when the Sibyl’s verses have commanded that chosen boys and girls of good character should sing a hymn” (Horace. 263). The Sibyl, whose oracles had previously functioned as mere suggestions within the secret dealings of the *quindecimviri* and the Senate, was now capable of *command* in her service to Apollo, Diana, and, as the verse continues, “to [all] the gods who look with favour on the Seven Hills” (263). Included in the Augustan deities honored within the festival are traditionally Greek Ilithyia, who, along with the other deities honored after sundown— the Moirai and Terra Mater— had never before been formally honored within the city of Rome (Feeney 106). Their Greekness is never erased, but rather preceded with their preference for Rome.

The *Carmen Saeculare* fully engages with the nocturnal deities, and in doing so poetically stitches the Roman qualities of the diurnal rites with the Greekness of the nocturnal rites— just as the Sibyl intended. Just as the *Acta* functions as a guide for the practical day-to-day of the *ludi saeculares* as organized by those in positions of power, the *Carmen Saeculare* appeals to the everyday Roman’s relationship to the gods of the festival and the various qualities they represent. Horace thus modifies the Greek deities’ identities to foster a stronger connection

to Rome; for instance, when first addressing Ilithyia, the Greek goddess of childbirth, the chorus provides the Roman audience with the option to associate her with a divinity with whom they were already familiar: “o Ilithyia, or Lucina if you prefer that name” (263). As an epithet for Diana, ‘Lucina’ serves both to further the role of Diana herself in the *ludi saeculares*, who, as the hymn concludes, will be identified as the goddess who “listens to the prayers of the Fifteen Men [*quindecimviri*] and lends gracious ear to the appeals of the children [the chorus],” though this description more firmly resembles the responsibilities of Augustus than the goddess herself (267).

It is no surprise, too, that the one particular mortal who is mentioned twice within the hymn— though not by name— is none other than Augustus, he who values Roman interest above all else. His marriage legislation is referenced directly; the children sing praise and thanks to Ilithyia, the goddess of maternity and childbirth: “o Ilithyia, [...] be pleased to rear our young, and to grant success to the Fathers’ edicts on the yoking together of men and women and on the marriage law for raising a new crop of children” (Horace 263). Though only children themselves, they are already aware of their responsibility to one day bring forth a new generation of Roman children, healthy and strong, with the help of Ilithyia. Augustus’ identity as the “Father” enacting the edicts solidifies his dual role as both *princeps* and *paterfamilias* of Rome. The verse continues, with the children expressing a Sibylline glimpse into Rome’s future, that “the unfailling cycle of ten times eleven years may bring round singing and games that are thronged with people three times by daylight and as often in the pleasant time of night” (263). Though unfamiliar to the Roman people, it is clear within both the *Carmen Saeculare* and the *Acta* that the nocturnal ceremonies were intended to be— and indeed were— just as “thronged with people” as the daytime rites, and for good reason. After all, just as the children remind the crowd of

Romans at the end of the festival, it was intended that this spectacle would not be seen again for another one hundred and ten years, well beyond the lifespan of even the youngest Roman present.

The midway point of the poem shifts focus away from the night deities. But before addressing the Olympian gods and goddesses of the daytime rites, Horace has the children reflect on the legendary origin of Rome as founded by “the righteous Aeneas” (265). By this point, Virgil’s *Aeneid* was instilled within the minds and hearts of the people of Rome, and a reference to the legendary founding of Rome would have contributed to the solemnity of the hymn. The portion of the song begins with an overview of Aeneas’ heroic escape from Troy after a Greek victory, during which he “built unscathed through the blazing city a road to freedom” so that his fellow Trojans might follow, “destined, as he was, to give [his people] more than they had left behind” (265). Just as Aeneas was “destined” to become the stuff of legend, so was Augustus—by blood.

Virgil strongly implies within the *Aeneid* that the Julio-Claudians are direct descendants of Aeneas, who was himself the son of Anchises and the goddess Venus. Aeneas’ son, Ascanius, also known as Iulius, was thought to be the individual from whom the Julio-Claudian line descended— a family tree which includes Julius Caesar and his great-nephew, Octavian (Augustus). This portion of the *Carmen Saeculare* expands on this, moving from an awe-inspiring description of Aeneas to an equally awe-inspiring description of Augustus himself, without explicitly naming him. Horace passes over “Augustus,” or “*princeps*” in favor of larger-than-life appellation, “glorious descendant of Anchises and Venus”. For a brief moment, this could still be in reference to Aeneas himself. That is, until the children finish the line: “What the glorious descendant of Anchises and Venus asks of you with white oxen, may he obtain; may he

be victorious in battle over his foes yet merciful once they are down” (265). Augustus, having commissioned the *Carmen Saeculare*, is well aware that he will be the sole performer of all rites and offerings to the gods and goddesses of the *ludi saeculares*. But in this line of the *Carmen Saeculare* lies a discrepancy: according to the *Acta*, Augustus does not carry out a blood sacrifice for Apollo and Diana. In fact, Diana is not mentioned once in the *Acta*, nor is she alluded to within the Sibylline oracle. While it is possible that Horace has taken some artistic liberties when it came to the sacrifice to Apollo, it’s far more likely that he sourced this information directly from the oracle— the very oracle that Augustus and Agrippa and the other *quindecimviri* were using as a model for their *ludi saeculares*. In it is demanded “a sacrifice / Of dark sheep and goats to the all-generating Moirai,” (Hansen. line 139-40), to extend proper offerings to the “childbirth-promoting Eileithyiai,” (line 141), to let “a black sow swollen with piglets be sacrificed to Gaia,” (line 143), and finally, to lead “all-white bulls [...] to the altar of Zeus / By day, not by night, for to the Ouranian gods / Sacrifices are performed in the daylight” (line 144-6). It is likely that there was a last-minute decision to veer from the plan to sacrifice white cows to Apollo. Perhaps a scatterbrained servant left the corral unsecured and they escaped the previous evening, or maybe Augustus simply decided that Apollo would rather prefer the “nine *popana* and nine cakes and nine *phthoes*” that he offers instead, according to the *Acta* (Beard. Vol. 2. 142). In either case, the Cumaean Sibyl failed to foresee some kind of problem regarding the white cows, and the *quindecimviri* had to think on their feet.

The *Carmen Saeculare* concludes with dual exaltations of Apollo and Diana, both of which connect the god and goddess once again with the dealings of the Roman Sibylline Books. In describing Apollo as “the prophet,” Horace calls back to the legendary origin of the Cumaean Sibyl, a story in which Apollo, as discussed previously, is deeply involved. While she was not

formally acknowledged in the rites of the *ludi saeculares*, it is reassuring that Horace includes Diana in the sharing of prophetic responsibility with her twin brother. Apollo may be “the prophet,” or the divine source of the Sibylline Books, but Diana’s assistance was necessary in order that the *quindecimviri* may properly interpret the prophecy.

Remember, Roman: Taming Prophetic Voice in Aeneid 6

Within the *Aeneid*, and in the sixth book in particular, prophecy— including both visions and those with the blessed and/or cursed ability to commune with the spiritual realm themselves— serves as a crucial device to both further the plot and solidify within the minds and hearts of the Roman people the legitimacy of these visions. Due to the importance of the Cumaean Sibyl in Rome’s legendary origins and Augustus’ current revitalization, it is no surprise that Virgil chooses her to aid Aeneas within Book 6 of the *Aeneid*. In addition to serving as the earthly connection between Aeneas and Apollo, she takes on another identity unique to her role in the *Aeneid*: her spiritual existence, though anchored in the physical world, proves so fragmentary and unbound and, in general, out of control.

This view of the Sibyl differs greatly from that which is projected within the *ludi saeculares*, which— though surely in initial stages of planning as Virgil was composing his epic— would not be held until nearly two years after the *Aeneid*’s publication. As discussed in the previous section, Augustus’ preface to each prayer during the *ludi*, as preserved by the *Acta*, reminds his fellow Romans and honored gods alike that the following sacrifice was demanded by the Sibylline Books, and evoke a sense of stability and regularity that the Roman citizen might expect to find within the Sibylline Books, were they permitted to consult them. Horace’s *Carmen*

Saeculare, too, credits the Sibyl for demanding its composition and performance by the chorus of Roman boys and girls. Both the *C.S.* and the ritual and prayer as recorded in the *Acta* credit the specific oracle foreseen by the Sibyl; the straightforward language and structural organization of this oracle differs greatly from the Sibyl of whom Virgil had written only a few years prior. While Augustus' Sibyl is an established prophetess, her words and visions sacred and protected, Virgil's Sibyl is frantic and wild, overwhelmed by her both her power and lack of intention with which she might focus such power. Augustus' Sibyl blesses Rome with her prophecy, while Virgil's Sibyl, on the other hand, is blessed by the arrival of Aeneas, who will give her prophecy a sense of purpose that will ultimately lead to her development into the Sibyl of the *ludi saeculares*.

The Trojan War was believed, first by the Greeks and later by the Romans, to have taken place sometime between the 13th and 12th centuries BCE— with Aeneas and his men coming to Italy at some point within that time frame. Within the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas seeks out the Cumaean Sibyl so that she might safely guide him through the Underworld in order to speak with the ghost of his father, Anchises. While leading a mortal into the Underworld is no small feat, this role that emphasizes the secondary importance of the Sibyl herself within this portion of the *Aeneid*.

The manner in which the Sibyl is initially described by Virgil lends to the idea that she is a mouth, not a voice. Her role as Aeneas' guide to Anchises is a more obvious example of this same concept: after successfully leading Aeneas to his father, she is deprived of delivering what is perhaps the most important prophecy in all of the *Aeneid*. Just as her physical existence serves as a path from the heavens to amplify the voice and will of Apollo, she quite literally forms a path to the spirit Anchises, in order that his voice might reach Aeneas. Within the *Aeneid*, the

voice of the Sibyl that would come to be so active in the festival is merely an echo of a greater authority.

As conduit to the world of gods and spirit, the Sibyl of the *Aeneid* resembles the Sibyl of the *Ludi Saeculares*. In both Virgil's epic poem and the festival, the Sibyl, in both action and word, evokes respect and gratitude from the Roman people. Acknowledged in the festival by Augustus during his prayer, by the children within the *Carmen Saeculare*, and by the publicization of the very oracle that she herself was said to have composed, the voice with which her words were spoken was never her own. While this most definitely serves to signify the authority with which she was considered by the Roman people, there is a distinct separation between the Sibyl as a power and the Sibyl as a tortured being, with the organizers of the *ludi saeculares* clearly favoring the former. Perhaps Virgil anticipated this, and that is why, when the Sibyl steps into frame within the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, the reader is met with the last person they'd expect to be revered in such a way.

Aeneas and his fellow Trojans drop anchor on the shore of Cumae. He knows this strange and foreign land is home to the Sibyl, and hopes that she will agree to lead him into the Underworld so that he might speak with his father, Anchises. Aeneas and his men head straight for the temple of Apollo, under which the rock is riddled with the passages and caverns of the Sibyl's cave. As the Trojans stood admiring the ornate doors of the temple, a man who had been sent ahead to scout the area returns, "accompanied / By the Sibyl, Deiphobe, daughter of Glaucus, priestess / Of Diana and Phoebus" (Virgil. 7. 55-7). She chides them for wasting time gawking at the doors, and suggests to Aeneas that their time would be better spent preparing the sacrifice— seven white bulls and seven sheep, just as were sacrificed to the Olympians in the daytime rites in the *L.S.* Her authority ensures that this suggestion is interpreted by Aeneas' men

more as an order; though speaking to Aeneas herself, she has the full attention of every man present. Instead of rejecting her authority or questioning her legitimacy, they “Are quick to obey her instructions” (7. 63). This immediate reverence speaks to Aeneas’ authority as leader both in war and spirit, as it is he who led his men to a foreign land in order to seek the assistance of the foreign Sibyl. As we have seen, it is this position as mediator and role model that Augustus happily takes on while leading the *L.S.*; such a role is both his responsibility as *princeps*, and, as Aeneas’ direct descendant, his birthright, as confirmed by the Sibyl herself.

At the Sibyl’s behest, Aeneas and his men follow her down into her cave. As soon as they cross the threshold, she demands of the Trojans, urgently, well aware of the transformation she will soon undergo, “Now! Now you must ask what your fate is” (7. 70). After hurriedly announcing the presence of Apollo, her physical demeanor undergoes a violent change:

[...] Her countenance suddenly
 Paled and convulsed, hair got disheveled,
 Breast was aheave, heart beating wilder and wilder.
 Before their eyes she grows tall, something not mortal
 Enters, she is changed by the breath of the god
 Breathing through her. [...] (8. 71-6)

When one recalls her origin myth, her violent reaction takes on darker tone. Apollo, master of unjust curses on naive mortals, took a shine to the mortal Sibyl and offered her anything she wished in turn for her virginity— she suggested an extended life, but ultimately rejected his advances. He granted her wish, but did not include extension of her youth. According to Ovid in Book XIV of the *Metamorphoses*, she encounters Aeneas seven hundred years into her thousand-year sentence: “it is some seven centuries / that I have lived already,” she explains to Aeneas, “and to match / those grains of dust, it is three hundred harvests / and just as many vintages that I / must see” (479). Does she seek to help Aeneas because she sees the glorious future of Rome, as

suggested by Augustus' involvement of her oracle in the *ludi saeculares*, or does she, as captive of Apollo, have no choice in the matter?

In *Aeneid* 6, her role can easily be read as the latter. From the very beginning, Virgil makes it clear that, try as she may, any resistance of Apollo is futile. Surely, she would have learned this after refusing his advances— the choice that led to her curse. Though she holds great authority and is honored and respected by Aeneas and his men, both her mind and body are constantly invaded by Apollo, over which she has no control. It is only when actively carrying out Apollo's orders in leading Aeneas into the Underworld that she is able to take on a semblance of who we can assume she was before the god took hold of her. Even this does not come without its consequence, though: in leading Aeneas to the spirit of Anchises, she sets the stage for the deliverance of the *Aeneid*'s ultimate prophecy, and perhaps Rome's ultimate prophecy, as well. But when the time comes, her role as prophet is replaced by the voice of Anchises, and though she is responsible for everything leading up to Anchises and Aeneas' reunion, she quickly fades into the background, becoming a secondary character within both the story of the *Aeneid* and the story of Rome.

From the first mention of the Sibyl less than a dozen lines into Book 6, the description surrounding her both in setting and physicality serves to temporarily undermine her power— power that will ultimately be legitimized before the Roman audience after it is used to bridge Aeneas to the world of the dead. Like the Roman practice of *evocatio*, it is only after undergoing the transformation from mysterious foreign stranger to helper of Rome within the public eye that Augustus will utilize her voice and authority in order to further propel his agenda.

Her cave is the first aspect of her existence that is mentioned in Book 6. Situated beneath Apollo's temple at Cumae (note that Augustus does not stray from this positioning when he arranges that the Sibylline Books be kept in a vault underneath the temple of Apollo on the Palatine), it is "a place apart" from the dazzling splendor of the temple (Virgil 3. 14). Within this dark cavern, "the god breathes / Into her, [...] / Opening her eyes to the future" (3. 15-17). This initial description of her power and the way in which it is utilized denies her any ownership or control. Unlike the case of Cassandra, who, after she too rejected Apollo, was cursed with visions of the future that, when shared with others, were never believed, the situation of the Cumaean Sibyl involves extended interference of Apollo for the duration of her dreadfully long life. Additionally, unlike Cassandra, whose view of the future is unlimited and uncontaminated, the Sibyl is only able to see what Apollo wants her to see. Cursed as she was, Cassandra was never deprived of her voice, but rather how her voice was perceived by others. The Sibyl's curse, on the other hand, increases the authority of a voice that is no longer hers and encroaches on her bodily autonomy, as Apollo himself is the one responsible for "Opening her eyes to the future," in perpetuity, or at least until her time has been served.

With that being said, not all words spoken by the Sibyl within the *Aeneid* are those of Apollo, but clearly she has been forced to do his bidding for long enough that there are certain times where she knows what to expect. The first time she speaks, she addresses Aeneas before his men. Her tone is short and her demands concise: "There is no time to be standing here," she scolds, before firmly suggesting that the Trojans make up for lost time by putting together the customary sacrifice (Virgil 7. 58). Why the rush? Perhaps she senses Apollo's impatience. Or maybe she just wants to get the whole thing over with— both in her dealings with Aeneas and her

thousand-year sentence. In either case, Aeneas and his men quickly carry out the demanded sacrifices before being invited “into her high inner sanctum,” her cave (7. 64).

Virgil’s vivid description of the cave from the inside gives the site an identity as eerie and off-putting as the Sibyl herself; first described on line 14 as a “vast scaresome cavern,” as the Trojans physically enter the sacred space, it shifts to a space riddled with “a hundred entrances, a hundred / Wide-open mouths [that] lead in”. These “hundred entrances” serve mainly as exits, as “out of them scramble / A hundred echoing voices, the Sibyl’s responses” (7. 66-8). The echo of voices is perhaps in reference to the Sibyl’s tendency to record her prophecies on leaves, and leave them strewn before her threshold. Whether a small act of defiance, or a manifestation of her immense hopelessness, this habit disturbed Aeneas greatly— like his descendant, Augustus, he would much prefer that she keep them under closer watch.

Before addressing the leaves, however, Aeneas appeals to both Apollo (his voice manifesting through the Sibyl) and the Sibyl herself, as an independent figure worthy of honor. Though first addressing Apollo, he does not overlook his conduit. Turning his attention from Apollo, he shifts his attention to the “Seeress most holy,” and asks that she permit him to find a home in Latium, so that he and his men may finally settle down and properly honor their gods, including a solid marble temple dedicated to Apollo and Diana, under which he promises the Sibyl, “A sanctuary will be established, a vault / Where I shall preserve divinations from lots / And oracles you’ll have vouchsafed to my people; / And in your service I shall ordain chosen men”(9. 96; 11. 104-7). Though the college of the *decemviri* had been in existence for as long as the Sibylline Books had been in Rome, Augustus had only recently constructed the Temple of Apollo Palatine and moved the Books to the vaults below the new temple for safekeeping. Thus, Virgil makes Aeneas’ promise reflect ancient and modern aspects of Roman life and myth,

melding new concepts with traditions already established. While supporting the necessity of the *decemviri*, as such a grouping of esteemed men had been mediators between the Books and the Roman people since the early Republic, Augustus' renewal of old temples and construction of new, and his censorship of rogue oracles and protection over those confirmed to be of Sibylline origin are confirmed to be not merely pet projects of his, but rather a fulfillment of his birthright.

Aeneas concludes his plea to the Sibyl with one request: he begs her “not to inscribe / Your visions in verse on the leaves / In case they go frolicking off / In the wind”. He suggests an alternative: “Chant them yourself, I beseech you” (11. 108). Her following reaction is curious and violent, and escalates very quickly: when Aeneas falls silent, she becomes frenzied, and “storms” through the cave, “Resisting possession” (11. 114). On my reading, the possession which she is so eager to shake that she would struggle directly with a god himself has two layers: she primarily resists Apollo, clearly, but only after perhaps first considering resisting Aeneas, who was so bold as to suggest that she keep hold of every single overwhelming, dreadful, terrifying prophecy, as opposed to scribbling them out and ridding herself of them as quickly as she can. Barking out a firm “No,” to Aeneas would have been much easier than denying Apollo, as Aeneas held no control over the situation—eager for a marble temple and feast days in his honor, Apollo would not have been too keen on that idea. The following violent struggle, in which the Sibyl “froths at the mouth / And contorts,” as the god, “commands her / And makes her his creature,” ultimately results in Apollo overpowering the Sibyl and her losing one of the last fragments of independence (11. 116-8).

Thus, the hundred voices that were previously free to flow from the Sibyl were concentrated into one voice that was to remain within the Sibyl, for the benefit of Aeneas and to the detriment of the Sibyl herself. After uttering a dark warning that Aeneas and his people will

face great hardship, she retreated further into her cave and began to, “[chant] menacing riddles and made the cave echo / With sayings where truths and enigmas were twined / Inextricably, while Apollo reigned in her spasms / And curbed her, or sank the spurs in her ribs” (13. 140-4). Now, she lives an existence in which Apollo dictates not only what she says, but how she says it. One would hope that her guidance of Aeneas into the underworld was not something she was unwilling to do; perhaps it was a relief to be out of Apollo’s reach.

However, the further she and Aeneas stray from the surface, the more her power is reduced. By the time the pair reach the Elysian Fields, the prophetess stops to ask for directions. It is Musaeus, who stands apart from the surrounding crowd of “happy spirits,” towards whom she directs her question: “you, the best of poets, tell us / Where does Anchises lodge, in which quarter?” (69. 905-6). This subtle decrease of her power was a deliberate choice by Virgil: for a prophetess as established at the Sibyl, her need to orient herself within the depths of the underworld conveys to the reader that she has travelled past the scope of her power. In doing so, Virgil sets stage for Anchises, whose memorable speech— delivered in Latin hexameter, no less— will serve as the primary prophecy within book six. Virgil, never one to be subtle, ensures that the very language Anchises will employ within his prophecy will reflect the language present in the Sibyl’s oracle regarding the *ludi saeculares*, and the connection forged between the two prophecies will serve to bolster the legitimacy of one another. The tie between the two is contained within one powerful phrase: *Romane, memento*— “But you, Roman, / Remember” (89. 1155-6). Repetition of this phrase, as well as Virgil’s use of Latin hexameter, intentionally and successfully manipulates the linear passage of time by connecting Anchises and the Sibyl, polar opposites when it comes to the realm in which they function, with language expressing their

solemn loyalty to Rome— an entity so mighty and full of promise that its esteem stretches beyond all boundaries.

Sibylline Salvation

Ye oracles that watch over destiny, ye mysteries of the universe,
and thou, O Paeon, master of truth from whom no day of future
time is hidden by the gods, why is it that thou darest to reveal
the last phase in the collapse of the empire, the fall of captains
and deaths of kings, and the destruction of so many nations
in the carnage of Italy?

Lucan, *Civil War*. Book V.

Figure 4



On the left is a detail of a fresco that survives on the ceiling of a private Roman catacomb dating from the early third century, and is one of the earliest extant depictions of Jesus Christ. He is painted as the 'Good Shepherd,' a concept that stems from the parable he shares with his followers, the overall message pertaining to the forgiveness of sins: "there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:3-7). But the image of the shepherd is far more ancient than

Jesus; the peaceful shepherd was firmly established in pagan culture at the time this tomb was painted, and well before. "Shepherds were common enough as garden figures in pagan villas," notes John Beckwith in a study of Early Christian art, "they represented a romantic ideal of the bucolic way of life and the more solid merit of good husbandry and economy, but they could

equally well be adapted to Christian symbolism” (John Beckwith, "Early Christian and Byzantine Art, Volume 1979." Yale University Press, 1979, p. 21). The connection between this Christian fresco and its pagan roots extends past the comparison drawn between Jesus as shepherd of souls and the pagan shepherd’s comforting bucolucism, however. Under the vessel he extends with his right arm stands a rooster, the typical blood sacrifice made to Asclepius, the pagan god of medicine, who happened to be the son of Apollo. On his deathbed, Socrates asks Crito to make a sacrifice for him to the god, perhaps regretting his decision to ingest the poison: “We owe a cock to Asclepius, discharge this vow for me, and do not forget it” (Plato, *Phaedon*. 178). Following the sacrifice Jesus makes for his followers, however, the offering of a rooster is no longer necessary for healing or eternal salvation.

The involvement of pagan imagery was an important component to early Christian artistic and literary tradition in Rome. These allusions served not to refute the beliefs of their pagan neighbors, but rather to amend the way in which those beliefs were understood. Going about this process was not entirely different from the way Augustus situated himself into the very origins of Rome; any new idea was generally more palatable if it is first grounded in antiquity. Clearly, early Christians were aware of this phenomenon. This is why, for example, early depictions of Christ aligned with the Hellenistic *kalokagathia*, a term used to convey the beautiful, good, or virtuous manner with which a man (or god) conducted himself— a trait that was often ascribed to Apollo. Comparing and contrasting Jesus, the ‘Light of the World,’ with Apollo, the ‘Sun God,’ could simultaneously convey to potential pagan converts that Christianity was new, yes, but it is a faith comprised of concepts, values, and— in the case of the Sibyl— figures who have held divine authority for centuries, if not millennia.

Sibylline Books and Sibylline Oracles: Duality and Divergence

The passage from Lucan at the beginning of this chapter expresses frustration with the Delphic priestess for seemingly withholding the truth and resisting the will of Apollo when asked by a mortal to disclose the future of Rome. She is compared briefly to the Cumaean Sibyl, “in her Euboean cave,” who, after spending so many years “resenting that her inspiration should be at the service of so many nations, chose among them with haughty hand and picked out from the great heap of destiny the fate of Rome” (*Civil War* V. 253). Did it occur to Lucan that the “fate of Rome” might not forever correspond with the fate of the Roman gods, and that one day, the *Paeon* (Apollo) with whom the Sibyls commune might refer to another god entirely? Perhaps he knew about the Sibylline Oracles, a collection of Judaic prophecy originating from all over the ancient world. Living under the reign of Nero, too, Lucan may have realized the end was in sight— not in the Roman Sibylline books, however, but in the Sibylline Oracles.

The new collection of prophecy began to surface as early as the first century CE. The majority of the Sibylline Oracles survives today due to the theologians and scholars of late antiquity (as well as their successors in the Middle Ages and beyond) who found significance and meaning within the enigmatic— and, at times, utterly terrifying— verses. While eventually the oracles will be integrated into Christian tradition, the Sibylline Oracles exist long before the advent of Christianity. The twelve books in the collection of Sibylline Oracles were composed and finalized over approximately seven hundred years: the oldest most likely being Books 11, 1 and 2. Book 11 is the product of a Jewish author at the very beginning of the first century CE, and Books 1 and 2 date from around the same period, preserving prophecy from a Jewish oracle that was possibly active during this time. The “Sibylline Oracles” entry under the section “Apocalyptic Literature” in the *Encyclopedia Biblica* supports this dating, further speculating

that the composition of the Sibylline Oracles were initially inspired by the travels of the Roman Senate in 75 BC, in search of prophecies for the ‘new’ Roman Sibylline Books, following the destruction of the old collection in the temple of Jupiter Optimus fire of 83 BC. The arrival of a group of Roman statesmen may have “further stimulated the inventive faculties of the Alexandrian Jews, and led to the composition of many of the verses in our present collection” (Cheyne 246). The content of Books 3, 4, and 5¹¹– all originally Jewish texts– indicate that they were composed prior to the early second-century CE (in particular, the Bar Kokhba revolt). Books 12-14 are Jewish as well, but date to much later, as does Book 8. Additional Christian elements have been added to Books 1, 2, and 8, as they survive to the present day (Collins, “The Sibylline Oracles.” 357-8). Books 6 and 7 were composed by Christians, perhaps without the intention of being included in the collection at all (Collins, “TSO.” 380).

The Sibylline Oracles of the Judeo-Christian tradition resemble in content very little of what is known about the prophecy of the pagan Cumaean Sibyl, but as for the purpose the two texts (or more, if we are considering the many iterations of the Roman Sibylline books), they are one in the same. First and foremost, both collections serve as religious and political propaganda for those who composed and/or compiled them. But while the Sibylline Oracles function to convince the Roman pagan world to accept the ‘otherness’ of the Judeo-Christians, and thus gain eternal salvation, the Roman Sibylline books, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, served to bring the ‘otherness,’ directly to the Romans, often in the form of a foreign cult or ritual brought to

¹¹ Books 4 and 5, in particular, closely resemble content found within the New Testament; Book 4 emphasizes the significance of baptism on line 214: if prepared to repent, “Wash your whole body in perennial streams,” and ask God for forgiveness, and you will be welcomed into His kingdom. Book 5 as a whole mirrors the Book of Revelation: both compare Rome to Babylon, and make use of Nero’s shameful legacy in order to cut down and weaken Roman authority in the shadow of Rome’s sack of Jerusalem in 70 CE. (Collins, “TSO.” 362)

Rome for military fortune or civic tranquility.¹² The distinction can seem insignificant, but the crux of the difference between the two lies with the fact that the Sibylline books were not apologetic in nature or practice—when the books decreed that a foreign deity or rite was to be implemented in Roman religion, it was not necessary for the senate to publish a defense of the decision. Their message was primarily directed inwards, to Rome itself, addressing one new, powerful force to many. The message of the Sibylline Oracles, on the other hand, connected many to one. The messages within were directed outwards towards pagans that might convert, not only to strengthen their cause, but also to glorify their god (Stone, “Apocalyptic literature.” 422).

To place the voice of the Sibyl as it existed in late antiquity within these two distinct categories, however, would be doing her a great disservice. Just because the Christian Sibyl was gaining ground does not imply that the Roman Sibyl had faded into oblivion; though the Roman oracles were not as central to the government and religious dealings within Rome as they once had been, they continued to serve as an outlet by which the Roman government could appease its people— but, as Nero would learn in 64 CE, this method was not always failsafe.

In 64 CE, following a massive fire that destroyed two-thirds of Rome, members of the government and citizens alike were suspicious of their gaudy emperor, believing that may have played a part in the destruction. According to Tacitus, in an attempt to settle the rumors and appease (or distract) his subjects, Nero turned to Rome’s oldest form of guidance, and “application was made to the Sibylline books,” in order to unearth what could be done to bring peace to the ruined city and its displaced citizens. The oracles, not surprisingly, ‘suggested’ a series of public prayers, banquets, and “all-night vigils,” none of which were actually productive

¹² The most common of these examples is the importation of the Magna Mater cult at the behest of the Sibylline books during the Second Punic War— leading, of course, to a Roman victory (Ovid, *Fausti*. 4.180-372).

in getting Rome back on its feet. Apparently, it did not take long for tensions to mount: “neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order [from Nero].” The fault of the books, in the case of this consultation, rests with Nero. He consulted them not to ensure the wellbeing of his people, but, as Tacitus implies, to protect himself from negative criticism. Thereby the Roman books lost their magic with which they had served to govern and control for centuries.

Whether or not he was indeed responsible for the fire, Nero was quick to shift the blame towards a more vulnerable victim: a group of Christians. They were arrested en masse and quickly convicted, “not so much on the count of arson,” Tacitus explains, elaborating on the disdain with which Romans held their Christian neighbors, “as for hatred of the human race.” They were executed in the most horrendous ways, as way typical for Nero. While some were dressed in animal hides and torn apart by feral dogs, others were mounted on crucifixes and, “when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.” Though the books had failed to provide for him what he wanted, the sacrifice of Christians in this manner might serve as a version of the sacrifices called for by the books in the time of Augustus, when the Empire was at its strongest. So even though the books were not a part of the decision to blame the Christians, it was perhaps an extension of Sibylline tradition that was set in place by Augustus approximately fifty years prior.

Even if this was the case, and Nero was deliberately trying to appeal for his individual good fortune through the workings of the Sibylline books, he proved unsuccessful. Tacitus writes that many were repulsed by the brutality of the public executions, and “in spite of a guilt which had earned [the Christians] the most exemplary punishment, there arose [from amongst the

Roman people] a sentiment of great pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man” (Tacitus, *Annals*. XV.44).

From Nero’s perspective, the Roman Sibylline books failed him, leading him to take such drastic measures in order to quell the suspicions of his subjects.

If Tacitus’ account is at all true, especially regarding the response of the Roman public (and if there was any truth behind the suspicion that the fire was Nero’s doing), a more accurate analysis could claim that it was rather Nero who failed the books. The Roman collection of Sibylline prophecy would be consulted only three more times before their destruction in 405 CE by the order of Stilicho, after he made some unpopular decisions regarding a sudden influx of Barbarians that were allowed to enter the city; “he burned the fateful books which brought the Sibyl's aid,” perhaps in an attempt to keep the oracles contained within from fueling a coup (Rut. *Namat*. 2.50-6). Despite their best efforts, neither Nero nor Stilicho could stifle the power of the Sibyl that Rome itself had created. During the reign of Nero, and most certainly during the time of Stilicho, the Sibyl’s voice in the ancient world extended far beyond the collection of scrolls belonging to the Roman state.

Resurrecting the Sibyl in *The Shepherd of Hermas*

The Sibyl first appears as a Christian literature in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a second-century text that follows Hermas, a freed Roman slave, as he comes to know and accept the Christian god during his spiritually-motivated wanderings and within his meditative visions, which feature none other than the Sibyl, or a woman intended to embody the spiritual authority of the Sibyl in order to gain pagan following. This question of identity, while difficult to answer, will be the topic of the majority of this section. But what must first be discussed is role this text

played in early Christianity— not a small role, at that. But despite the fact that it was once the most popular non-canonical text before the fourth century, Carolyn Osiek points out in the introduction to her highly informative commentary on the *Shepherd* that the collection has endured a great deal of time outside of the spotlight. As time progressed, the changing world rendered the original purpose it served as an apologetic Christian text unnecessary: “that it is relatively unknown today in the churches either East or West, reflect[s] differing responses to differing needs in differing times” (Osiek, *Intro.* 1). Like the image and voice of the Sibyl herself, the *Shepherd of Hermas* served its intended purpose before becoming an artifact through which scholars of the Middle Ages might catch a fragmentary glimpse of a foreign and largely pre-Christian world.

The role of the Sibyl within the *Shepherd of Hermas* is the topic of debate amongst scholars and theologians. Some align with Martin Dibelius, who interprets the female figure resembling the Sibyl as a means by which the author (who he assumes to be Hermas) has ensured that the text might catch the eye of curious pagans: “Hermas has employed the Sibyl-figure only as a model; what she conveyed has nothing to do with the Sibylline verses; only her exterior is Sibyl-demeanored— and Hermas himself indicates this clearly enough in *Vis.* II.iv.1” (452). I, on the other hand, feel as if this is far too simple an explanation for the presence of the Sibyl. To assume that the author of the text merely used Sibylline characteristics as some way to get a few more readers is to ignore the function that the pagan Sibyl serves in early Christianity. Though it is easy to write her off as a non-necessity now, the world in which this text was conceived was not a world in which Christians held the upper-hand.

While her prophecies will be referenced by generations of Christian writers, her first appearance in the *Shepherd* is the only appearance she makes— that we know of, at least— in

which she takes physical form and interacts, in real-time, with a protagonist, since the *Aeneid* (O'Brien 473). The physical manifestation of the Sibyl (or even the implication that the church is a feminine power, for that matter) was not typical for Christian writing during the time of the *Shepherd*, nor will it ever be; in much the same way the she was employed in the Empire, the Sibyl's new identity as a Christian prophet would emphasize her voice, with particular attention given to the way it echoes through the writings of Christian pseudo-prophet Virgil. The author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* uses the Sibyl to demonstrate to pagans and Christians alike that the power of God transcends linear time, and the figure who the pagans thought was on their side was actually, as will be revealed to Hermas by an angel, a progenitor of "the church" (*Vis.* 2.4.1).

The moment in which the name of the Sibyl is used— it only comes up once within the entirety of the text— comes in the second *Vision*, long after Hermas' first encounter with the mysterious woman, which occurred over a year before he is confronted by the "handsome young man". This attractive figure is an angel come to ask him about the woman from whom he received the book— "who do you think she is?" he asks Hermas, who responds quickly and casually, without hesitation, as if it had never before occurred to him to question her identity: "The sibyl". "Wrong," replies the angel, "that is not who she is" (2.4.1).

In interpreting this response to be in reference to her physical identity, then yes, it makes sense to read this as proof that the woman with whom Hermas has interacted is not the Sibyl, but is instead another figure entirely with a "Sibyl-demeanored" exterior, as Dibelius claims (452). If this is the case, however, what then is the implication of Hermas reply, and the ease with which he gives it? After all, in the second century AD, the Sibyl and her books were no longer centric to the religious or political inner workings of Rome. So, if this was merely a moment in which the author might flex the might of Christianity before a pagan audience, why might he have not

suggested any one of the numbers of female pagan divinities, who never ebbed in power, with which Hermas was surely familiar? It is my interpretation that Hermas' guess that the woman is the pagan Sibyl is not *merely* a guess, but rather a misidentification, and the Shepherd is one of the first instances of in which the pagan Sibyl undergoes transformation into a Christian prophet.

The angel does not stop at “wrong,” but continues with what can be interpreted as a glimpse into her true nature, in the way only an omnipotent God can. The statement of “that is not who she is” signifies that, while Hermas might *know* her as the Sibyl, he is not yet aware that her true role is something far greater: she's not the Sibyl, nor has she ever been. She is, in fact, “the church” (2.4.1). Of course, hinging this interpretation on a single response would be entirely speculative were the text not replete with allusions and comparisons between the woman with whom Hermas interacts, henceforth known as the Sibyl Church, and the pagan Sibyl of Roman legend. It is clear that whosoever composed this text did so with the Cumaean Sibyl in mind, under the assumption that the features and characteristics of the old woman would be easily recognizable to the second-century audience as those of the Sibyl. In both the first and second *Visions*, Hermas encounters his divine messenger as he is en route to Cumae.¹³ The Sibyl Church is described as being old and weathered—reminiscent of the way in which she appears to Tarquinius Superbus, according to Aulus Gellius in *Attic nights*: as “an old woman, a perfect stranger,” she approaches the king, bearing nine books of divine oracles (*Attic Nights*, I.19). With Hermas, she initially shares her prophecy verbally. When he has difficulty, both understanding and remembering her message, she lends him the book—no bargaining or burning,

¹³ However, just how Cumae is alluded to remains unclear. Carolyn Osiek, in *The Shepherd of Hermas: a Commentary*, advises against translating the original Greek into “to Cumae,” suggesting that the more accurate— and the more geographically plausible, when referring to a quick trip from Rome— translation should come out to “to the countryside” (Osiek 43). Other scholars are more willing to accept the inclusion of Cumae, as the connection between the Cumaean Sibyl and the Elderly Woman would have been obvious to a second-century audience, and again, the similarities between the two are simply too obvious to ignore (D.P. O'Brien 474).

this time— in which her singular prophecy is recorded (which Hermas painstakingly copies “letter by letter because I was having trouble separating the syllables” [2.1.4]¹⁴).

We have encountered a similar situation before, regarding voice and transcription of voice, but reversed: Aeneas asks the Sibyl in *Aeneid* 6 “not to inscribe / Your visions in verse on the leaves / In case they go frolicking off / In the wind” (Virg. *Aen.* 6.108-11). As discussed in Chapter 2, the function of this exchange between Aeneas and the Sibyl was to safeguard the Sibylline prophecies for the future use of Rome. In actuality, the “chosen men” (*quindecimviri*) Aeneas swears to ordain in her service do not protect the books *for* the Romans, but *from* the Romans. Early Christianity simply could not afford to rely on secrecy.

The willingness with which the Church Sibyl shares her text with Hermas disengages Christian text from the secrecy of Christian practice which was, at the time, a necessity for a Roman Christian, but not intentionally so; deliberate secrecy of certain Christian practices, such as partaking in the Eucharist (which pagans chose to interpret as literal cannibalism), were kept from their adversaries as a method of self-preservation. But as Christianity gained ground in the second century, they could not afford to be as stingy or secretive with prophetic voice, as the Roman Empire had been. Their rivals included the ancient pagan deities of Rome as well as the established Judaic tradition, which at this point has several ‘Sibyls’ of their own. When up against the ancient rites and sacred texts such powerful cultural and religious forces, one of the greatest advantages of early Christianity was its transparency.

¹⁴ The inclusion of Hermas’ difficulty in working with the text given to him by the mysterious woman is less about his own literacy and more to do with the format and content of the text itself; in *Commentary*, Osiek points out that ancient manuscripts often did not separate words with spaces and instead depended on the reader to interpret meaning. Therefore Hermas’ confusion does not stem from his education (or lack thereof) but rather his “lack of enlightenment about its interpretation” (Osiek 52). Having been raised with a multitude of gods and prophecies, working with the concept of a singular god and singular prophecy must have been difficult for Hermas.

Furthermore, for maximum impact on the pagan audience, the shift in identity from pagan Sibyl to Sibyl Church does not erase or invalidate the multiple centuries during which she served Rome; the way in which the pagan Sibyl can be justified in a Christian context becomes a sort of time-warp paradox. Had she not been present to guide Rome exactly to where it was at the time of the *Shepherd*, perhaps Christianity might never have spread amongst the Romans. Her function prior to Christ, then, does not have to be understood as pagan, but rather a form of coded pre-Christianity, only recognizable in retrospect. Approximately a century after the *Shepherd* starts to circulate, the Roman Emperor Constantine and his advisor, Lactantius, will use Virgil's *Eclogue IV* as another apparent example of pre-Christian prophecy. Through the remnants of her pagan oracles, second, third, and early-fourth century Christian writers would use Sibyl to aid in the defense, development, and stabilization of Christianity.

Constantine, Lactantius, and the *puer* of *Eclogue IV*

Under the rule of Constantine, Christianity was decriminalized in 313 CE, but the city had yet to abandon the collective pagan heritage of polytheists and Christians alike. Therefore, while both Constantine and Lactantius were likely aware of the Judeo-Christian Sibylline Oracles that were in circulation at the time, these apocalyptic texts and their foreign content, while certainly entertaining, would help very little in furthering the acceptance of Christ within Rome. Instead, they chose to examine Sibylline prophecy through her pagan past with blatant consideration of her Christian future— with particular attention given to Virgil's *Eclogue 4*, in which the Cumaean Sibyl tells of a special child who bring about a time of prosperity, a new "Golden Age":

Our crimes are going to be erased at last.
This child will share in the life of the gods and he

Will see and be seen in the company of heroes,
 And he will be the ruler of a world
 Made peaceful by the merits of his father. (Virgil, *Eclogue* IV. 29)

Indeed, much of Virgil's poem features this kind of language that sounds as if he took it directly from the Bible— and he very well could have, due to the similarities in language and allusion between his *Eclogues* and *Georgics* and the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which may have been accessible to Latin and Greek readers as early as the third century BCE (Hejduk 71).

Around the time Constantine saw a flaming cross in the sky, with the words, “Conquer by this,” and was thus thoroughly convinced that the Christian God was the way to go, it is estimated that only one in ten Roman citizens was Christian (Holloway 3). There are theories as to why Constantine latched on to Christianity. If there never was a levitating, flaming crucifix, he might have been motivated to adopt the Christian faith because its small size (in Rome, that is) and lack of organization made it the perfect method through which to rule and manipulate. If this method of control sounds at all familiar, that's because it is almost the exact same process by which the Republican senate and later, Augustus, took reign of the Sibylline books centuries before. As the Sibylline books rooted Republican and Augustan Rome to the melded myth and history of their Roman past, Constantine and Lactantius use convenient remnants of Sibylline prophecy to stabilize the foundations of Christianity within that very same past.

Perceiving the poem to be true prophecy foretelling the birth and reign of Jesus Christ, both Lactantius, in *Divine Institutes*, and Constantine, in his address, “To the Assembly of Saints,” use Virgil's *Eclogue* 4 as a undeniable piece of evidence that the pagan Sibyl— along with her messenger, Virgil— was a prophet of Christianity. Truly, it is amazing how well *Eclogue* 4 aligns with a Christian reading of the verses, but again, I believe this speaks more to Virgil's

familiarity with Jewish texts more so than it may indicate his (or the Sibyl's) status as pre-Christian prophets. But in either case, Constantine and Lactantius were fully convinced, and attempted to share their findings with others, too. Because Constantine and Lactantius worked so closely when it came to religious matters, musings, and theories, it's unclear whether the emperor's "To the Assembly of Saints" was delivered before Lactantius' release of *Divine Institutes*, or vice versa. Due to the fact that Constantine's address practically gives a line-by-line analysis of the Eclogue, I will be discussing his speech before delving into the twenty-fourth chapter of Lactantius' text.

Constantine's speech survives in Eusebius' biography of the emperor, *Life of Constantine* beginning with the nineteenth chapter. In the previous chapter, he identified the Erythraean Sibyl, not the Cumaean Sibyl, as the prophet "through whom [Virgil] spoke obscurely of this Mystery from Fear of the Ruling Powers" (Eusebius 1094). One of the possible origins of the Cumaean Sibyl, though, as discussed in Chapter 1, has her migrating to Cumae from Erythrae. The name is not all that significant, however, as Constantine begins discussion of the first few lines of the poem. After the fifth line, that reads: "The last great age of the Sibyl has come," (Virgil 29), Constantine recognizes that this is a reference to the Cumaean Sibyl, but quickly picks the poem up again, noting that "the poet goes further, as if irresistibly impelled to bear his testimony" (Eusebius 1095). Again, Constantine refers to the belief he holds that Virgil may very well have been a conscious believer in Christ, to whatever extent possible prior to the Savior's actual birth, but that the poet had no other choice but to shield his prophetic beliefs within pagan verse, "from Fear of the Ruling Powers," as the title of the section reads (1094).

The mention of the return of "the Virgin" in line seven astonishes the emperor with its parallel to the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary. Addressing what may have at the time been

a critique of the logic behind Christianity, he expresses that these words were taken as fact by previous generations of Romans, so why, now, “is it impossible that [Mary] who was with child of the Holy Spirit should be, and ever continue to be a virgin?” (1095). The next lines of the *Eclogue* address Lucina, an epithet for Diana, and asks that she “look with favor on this child, / [...] by whom / The Age of Iron gives way to the Golden Age” (Virgil 29. 9-11). In his speech, Constantine omits the next two lines, as they mention both Apollo, the pagan god whom the Sibyl served, and Pollio, the man who may be the *mortal* father of the *mortal* Roman baby (or hypothetical baby) who inspired— or inspired the commission of— Virgil to write the poem. Even in leaving these details out, Constantine struggles with this passage, noting its obstruction of meaning, “though spoken plainly and at the same time darkly, by way of allegory” (Eusebius 1095). Again, Constantine attests to the fact that Virgil had no other choice but to “intentionally [obscure] the truth,” as he may have gotten into very serious trouble, Constantine believes, had he come forward with his groundbreaking prophecy.

Lines seventeen through twenty-one, “Our crimes are going to be erased at last [...] / And he will be the ruler of a world / Made peaceful by the merits of his father” again serve for Constantine to make the point that, beyond all doubt, surely Virgil knew *something*. In the following lines, he emphasizes the mention of “Assyrian spice” (Virgil 31.33), indicating its importance as the Assyrians were the first to follow Christ. A comparison is drawn between the “serpents” of line thirty-one, of which this magical child has abolished, and the serpent in Genesis, “who originally beguiled our first parents, and drew their thoughts from their native innocence” (Eusebius 1096-7).

Line thirty-four begins, looking forward to the day when the child will be old enough to understand the “praise of heroes and your father’s deeds” (Virgil 31), a statement Constantine

interprets to reference not only creation, but the order of creation by which God has put “righteous men” in charge of, as well as “those laws by which God’s beloved church is guided” (Eusebius 1097). Throughout the entirety of his analysis of the Eclogue, this is the only portion that stands out as particularly suspicious, and almost forced. Through the layers of poetry, prophecy, and Christianity, Constantine— a “righteous man,” as he would believe, or something else— shrouds his own desire for control just as he claims Virgil had to hide his pre-Christian thematic tendencies. But he does recognize that life as a Christian, emperor or not, is not an existence free of struggle. His reading of line thirty-nine, “honey will drip like dew from the hard-oak tree,” indicates that he knows well the challenges of being a Christian, and his belief that “they who suffer hardships in the cause of God, shall reap sweet fruits of their own endurance” (1098). Following the next portion of the poem, in which Virgil mentions various Roman figures of legend, including Achilles, Constantine applauds him for his tact: “Cautiously, therefore, and securely, as far as possible, he presents the truth to those who have the faculties to understand it” (1098). In this way, Virgil is taking over the role of prophet from the Sibyl in the eyes of Constantine, just as the poet composed Anchises to step in for the prophetess when it came time to deliver the prophecy of Rome within *Aeneid* VI. The final point on which Constantine rests with the conclusion of the poem is that most of the questions that rise from a detailed reading rest with “those who ascribe him to human origin, and who care not to purify themselves from all evil” to answer, as those who truly believe will have no difficulty leaving the uncertainty up to God, and trusting in Him fully, “for the world itself is his, and all that it contains” (1100).

In *Divine Institutes*, Lactantius too devotes a chapter to the dissection of Eclogue 4.

Though Lactantius’ account is not in such great detail as Constantine’s analysis, the two do share

similar interpretations of particular moments. Lactantius takes it a step beyond that of Constantine, however, by involving direct reference to the Sibylline Oracles, the Judeo-Christian collection of prophecy that grew in content and popularity as the Roman Sibylline Books collected dust. Perhaps by referencing the Oracles, Lactantius tries to double the strength of the stabilization provided now not only by Virgil and a Greek Sibyl, but also through use of ancient Jewish prophecy, and even the involvement of a Jewish Sibyl of equal authority as the Greek. He quotes the Oracles almost immediately, to prove that this prophecy clearly supports the coming of Christ to judge the souls and sins of the living and the dead. The section he includes reads as follows: “In all the earth, then, there shall be confusion of mortals, when the omnipotent one himself shall come before the tribunal to judge the souls of all the living and the dead and the whole world” (*Sibylline Oracles* 8.81-83). His analysis of this oracle produces a prophecy of his own (though it is not as original as he might believe): “When He [has] [...] restored to life those who were just from the beginning, He will stay among men for a thousand years” (530).

Lactantius’ wording is all too similar to a prophecy revealed in Revelation 20:5:

Then I saw thrones and seated on them were those who had been given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. These had not worshiped the beast or his image and had refused to receive his mark on their forehead or hand. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (*New English Translation*)

Does this indicate that Christian scripture was influenced by these enigmatic oracles? Maybe, but maybe not. What it most definitely does indicate, however, is that Lactantius was reading Revelation and was fascinated by the connections between its canon prophecy, and the ‘apocryphal’ prophecy of the Sibylline Oracles.

Lactantius’ own version of the second coming of God does not just resemble the prophecy as it is conveyed in Revelation, but also the prophecy of which Virgil wrote in *Eclogue*

4. He picks up on the point which Constantine makes in his speech, regarding the reaction the natural world might have to the arrival of the Savior. “The world itself will rejoice,” writes Lactantius, “and the nature of all things will be glad, since the dominion of evil [...] will have been broken and cut off from it” (531). The sudden peace amongst all living things will encompass all, to the point that “a child will play with snakes,” (*Sib. Orac.* 3.619-23) alluding to the extinction of sin, and by extension, the Christian triumph over death, which Constantine mentioned.

Having perhaps exhausted his Sibylline resources, Lactantius shifts focus to the fourth *Eclogue* with the claim that all Virgil wrote within it will come to pass when Christ returns. Because the poem indicates, at first glance, that all that is spoken has already occurred, any individual who was not “initiated” to the “revelation” would simply assume that these events had already happened (532). Through the eyes of a Christian, however, it becomes clear that certain occurrences within the poem could not have happened without divine interference. He lists a few of Virgil’s examples, out of order—surprising, due to the delicate complexity of potential meanings within this and other such prophecies. Whereas Constantine’s speech drifted toward singularly crediting Virgil with the creation of the prophecy, Lactantius circles back, giving credit where credit is due. “The poet [Virgil] spoke these things according to the songs of the Cumaean Sibyl” (532). He then records two more prophecies, as spoken by two separate Sibyls, each dealing with “the richness of things” (533). He concludes the chapter with another retrospective-prophetic time warp, when Jesus comes again, “Kings of all nations will come from the ends of the earth with gifts and presents to adore and honor the great King, whose name will be famous and venerable [...] to the kings who will rule on the earth” (533).

Constantine and Lactantius begin a trend— or continue the trend, rather— of situating oneself, or an equally-reliable figure, firmly between the Sibyl and the Divine. It isn't that there has arisen any mistrust of the Sibyl during the time the two Romans were writing— if anything, they so enthusiastically involved themselves directly within her prophecy in order to prevent mistrust from brewing in the first place. The Roman senate held control over the Sibylline Books by keeping them under lock and key, something Christians such as Constantine and Lactantius would never dream of doing to holy texts. However, the way in which the *what* and *how* of the prophecy is never up for debate is, in itself, just as extreme a method of control. Yes, they freed the Sibyl's voice from the Sibylline Books, only to tell her exactly what to say.

Conclusion

Sibylline Liberation

In 1514, the Cumaean Sibyl was depicted in fresco by Raphael in the Santa Maria della Pace, where she and three other Sibyls— Persian, Phrygian, and Tiburtine— are flanked by angels [Fig. 4.1]. She sits to the far right, her head shrouded in golden fabric that flows onto her billowing tunic and skirt, her knees spread and her feet bare. Her left foot rests on a metallic jar, alluding to the way by which her body and spirit was confined by Apollo in ancient myth. On her lap rests a bound codex of her prophecies— a Renaissance update from the scrolls of antiquity. She casually leans her body towards the center of the piece and gazes upwards to an angel who displays to her (and the Phrygian Sibyl, seated on her right) a stone tablet inscribed with Greek lettering.

Figure 5



Raphael chose to diverge from the way the Cumaean Sibyl was typically depicted in other Renaissance works. As her prophecies are of the utmost importance, she is often shown clutching them to her breast, protecting the writing and, by extension, her voice. Raphael, however, paints her in what could almost be a state of relaxation; as she is now a Christian prophet in company of angels and her fellow Sibyls, her prophecies are no longer in danger of manipulation or destruction in the hands of polytheism. Furthermore, the involvement of Greek roots her in antiquity and legitimizes the sacrality of her prophecies. At the same time, the need for Greek translation humbles her in the face of the omnipotent Christian God— though she was blessed by this God in her prophetic abilities, she does not channel her prophecies from Him directly, as she did with Apollo in Roman tradition. The middle-ground falls to the angels who serve as translator and chief communicators of the divine.

Figure 6



In distancing her from the God of Christian tradition, the individual authority she held is weakened, and yet, at the same time, this distancing serves to reinstate her autonomy of which she was deprived when she fell for Apollo's tricks. Raphael expertly displays her triumph over this pagan god, her tormentor for so many centuries, by the simple positioning of her foot atop the metallic urn, intended to signify the same vessel to which she was confined during the darkest period of her existence [Fig. 4.2]. Raphael would be aware of the urn due to its mention in the writings of Pausanias, second-century Greek travel-writer in his guide, *Descriptions of Greece*, and Justin Martyr, (or Pseudo-Justin, as true authorship is up for debate) responsible for the fourth-century Christian work *Exhortation to the Greeks*. Pausanias writes that the Sibyl has no formal resting place, and instead "[the Cumaeans] show a small stone urn in the sanctuary of Apollo, in which they say are placed the bones of the Sibyl" (435; XII.8). Apparently, religious tourism was still a force in the Cumaean economy two hundred years later; the author of *Exhortation to the Greeks* describes the tour he received of the ancient city in detail. In addition to the viewing the places where the Sibyl would receive her divine messages, his guide made sure to point out "a brass casket which was said to have contained her remains" (Pseudo-Justin 421). In the subtle and powerful positioning of her foot quite literally trampling her prison in both life and death, and by extension, her pagan past, Raphael does away with any divine or mortal exploitation of the Cumaean Sibyl. As a Christian prophet in Renaissance art, she commands a greater respect.

Figure 7



Michelangelo included the Cumaean Sibyl on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel sometime between 1508 and 1512 [Fig. 4.3]. Unlike the relaxed posture of Raphael's Cumaean Sibyl, Michelangelo's sits hunched over an open book, her face in profile as she reads. Michelangelo's bold characterization of the Cumaean Sibyl is easily one of the best-known depictions of the prophetess. Her massive frame, Rodinesque in its grotesque musculature, dwarfs the angelic attendants who stand behind her— one clutches the other, in awe, perhaps, of the powerful words that lay before them, bound, like Raphael's, in the form of a codex. With furrowed brow, the Sibyl appears to be deep in thought; her lips part and her jaw clenches as she looks over her prophecies, as if here, for the first time— only a few feet away from God himself— she becomes fully aware of their immense magnitude. After all, as the Pseudo-Justinian author of *Exhortation*

of the Greeks noted, “unlike the poets who, after they have completed their poems, can correct and polish their metre, the Sibyl had the prophetic gift at the time of inspiration, but when that time ended, she lost all remembrance of what she had said” (421).

Figure 8



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