The Sibylline Books in the Early Roman Empire

The Sibylline Books were one of the most important tools for expiation in the Roman Republic. The oracles, written in Greek and interpreted by elite Roman priests, provided ritual directives for appeasing the gods after a prodigy had occurred. Whether or not the oracles were actually a foreign import, they were certainly considered to be, and as such were a major source of religious innovation during the Roman Republic. They introduced new rites, such as the *Ver Sacrum* and the *Ludi Apollinares*, and new deities, such as Magna Mater and Venus Erycina. But under the emperors, the role of the Sibylline Books changed completely. Our sources record 60 consultations of the Books during the Republic, but only two for the early imperial period: Augustus used the Books to conduct the *Ludi Saeculares* in 17 BCE, and Nero to expiate the fire of 64 CE. In this paper, I will examine the use of the Sibylline Books in the early Roman empire. I will show that each of these consultations was designed to echo Republican ceremonies and Republican ideals. During the imperial period, I will argue, the Books lost much of their innovatory character, and became instead simply a symbol of the Roman Republic.

In examining the use of the Sibylline Books under the emperors, I will also look at Livy's most famous comments about prodigy and expiation. Livy, our main source of information on this subject, provides prodigy lists for almost every year of his extant account of the middle Republic. But he tells us that prodigy reporting had virtually stopped by his own day: "I am not unaware that because of this same negligence that leads men to believe that the gods portend nothing to the people, no prodigies are ever announced in public or recorded in our histories." (Livy 43.13.1) Livy goes on to explain his reasons for including the prodigy lists in his own histories: "Yet not only does my own mind become in some way old-fashioned as I write about these ancient matters, but also a certain reverence keeps me from considering unworthy to write in my history things which those very wise men judged should be undertaken for the common good." (Livy 43.13.2) For Livy, prodigy lists were a reminder of a lost era, a symbol of a better time.

Some scholars maintain that Livy's claim regarding the decline in prodigy reporting was simply rhetorical, meant to set up a contrast between his own time and the "good old days" of the Republic. Rasmussen (2003) 255 argues that, "despite Livy's and Cicero's remarks on, and complaints about, the waning significance of public portents . . . the institution of public portents does not seem to have deteriorated significantly during the Late Republic." Yet I will argue that Livy's claims were accurate, and that prodigy reporting did decline. By examining the use of the Sibylline Books in the early Roman Empire, I will show that not only Livy but also the emperors considered prodigy reporting and expiation to be a hallmark of the Republic.

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