

## THE ATTRIBUTION OF THE ORACLE IN ZOSIMUS, *NEW HISTORY* 2. 37

Zosimus, after recording the foundation and immense growth of Constantinople, introduces a digression directed towards his purpose of justifying paganism against Christianity. 'It has often indeed occurred to me to wonder how, when the city of the Byzantines has grown, so that no other can compare with it for prosperity and size, there was no prophecy delivered from the gods of our predecessors about its development to a better fortune. With this thought in mind I have turned over many volumes of histories and collections of oracles, and with difficulty I happened upon one oracle said to be of the Sibyl of Erythrae or of Phaennis of Epirus. (For she is said to have produced oracles when in a state of possession.) Nicomedes, the son of Prusias, put his confidence in this oracle, and interpreting it in an advantageous sense he took up war against his father, Prusias, at the persuasion of Attalus.' Zosimus proceeds to quote twenty-one lines of hexameter verse, which have come down in a rather corrupt state, but of which the general sense is reasonably clear. They consist mainly of an obvious *post eventum* forecast of the Gallic invasion of Asia Minor in the third century B.C.

It is known on the authority of Photius that Zosimus' *New History* was generally an abridged paraphrase of Eunapius' *History*.<sup>1</sup> So modern scholars have differed whether to regard all this digression as copied from his source or to treat it as a personal contribution by Zosimus himself. However, for the present purpose this question can be shelved. It is sufficient to note that whosoever introduced the oracle here not only had some difficulty in unearthing it but also did not know its original source. He offers alternative attributions to the Erythraean Sibyl or to Phaennis. If the verses were to be assigned to any Sibyl, the Erythraean was the obvious choice. Lactantius had quoted two Greek and two Roman authorities for the view that she was 'famous and outstanding beyond the others'.<sup>2</sup> Phaennis was a more sophisticated attribution. Our only other source to mention her independently is Pausanias. At the end of his digression on Sibyls in book ten he appends her together with the Dove Priestesses of Dodona, explaining that none of these women were called Sibyls, but they gave prophecies by divine inspiration.<sup>3</sup> Of Phaennis he states that her date can be fixed and her oracles read, evidently showing that in the second century A.D. there was a book of her utterances in circulation. According to Pausanias she was 'a daughter of a man who had been king among the Chaones', and was dated to the time when 'Antiochus had just come to power after the capture of Demetrius' (i.e. 281 B.C.). (Presumably the statements occurred at some point in her prophecies in the manner of the personal revelations in the Sibylline Oracles.) Later Pausanias mentions

<sup>1</sup> Photius, *Bibl.* II, p. 55 (Budé). For a discussion of the relations between Zosimus and Eunapius, see *Zosime* (Budé) Vol. I, xl–xlii and 109, note 49. W. E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the decline of Rome*, pp. 137 ff. explains the line of Zosimus' argument here. For an earlier undertaking by Zosimus to cite appropriate oracles in connection with the decline of the empire, see I. 58. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Lactant., *De Ira Dei* 22.

<sup>3</sup> Paus. 10. 13. 10 and 15. 2. Phaennis is also mentioned in Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 7. 548 ff., citing lines 1–6 of the oracle in Zosimus, and 9. 820 ff., citing lines 9–11. There is no ground to suppose that Tzetzes had any other source than Zosimus.

Phaennis again, so as to quote seven hexameters foretelling the Gallic invasion of Asia Minor and their later defeat by Attalus I, who is described allusively as 'the dear son of the heaven-born bull'.<sup>4</sup>

It would appear that Zosimus (or his source) had come across these passages in Pausanias, and chose Phaennis as an alternative attribution, because she was shown there to have prophesied about the Galatians. He even reproduced in paraphrase Pausanias' comment that Phaennis, though not a Sibyl, was an inspired woman. It is clear that Zosimus' attribution to Phaennis was conjectural. He had not, like Pausanias, read a book of her oracles containing the verses which he quoted. Instead he had probably found these hexameters in one of the 'collections of oracles', which he mentions. No such collection, in the form which Zosimus could have encountered, is now extant, but the fourteenth book of the Palatine Anthology may convey some notion of the presentation. The oracles follow one another with brief descriptive headings which are sometimes so vague as to consist of a single word such as *χρησμός* or even *ἄλλος*, and the reader is therefore often left to supply the context. A further reason to suppose that this was the form of Zosimus' source is the fact that, as is universally recognised by modern scholars, he has got the context wrong. He writes as if the king addressed in the first line was Nicomedes II (149–125? B.C.), who rebelled against his father, Prusias II, and succeeded with the help of Attalus II. But clearly the 'king of the Thracians' in the first line of the oracle is Nicomedes I (279–250? B.C.), who in 278 had assisted Leonnorius, the leader of the Tolistoagii, to cross the Bosphorus, so as to help him in conquering his brother Ziboetes, the rival claimant to the throne of Bithynia.<sup>5</sup> The 'mighty lion with crooked claws and terrible, who will disturb the treasures of your ancestral land and will seize territory without toil' is Leonnorius. The allegory was partly suggested by his name. Modern scholars usually recognise the other Gallic chieftain, Lutarius of the Trocmi, in 'the wolf of crooked claws and terrible' mentioned a few lines later. (Is it possible that before the historians settled on this form of his name in Greek the popular version was Lykorios?). He crossed the Hellespont independently before ultimately joining up in Anatolia with his compatriots. The lines on the subject are interrupted by a serious lacuna. 'O thrice blessed Hellespont, and the divinely-built walls of men... by divine commands which [city] the dreadful wolf will frighten under mighty compulsion.' This congratulatory exclamation is best explained by the fact that the Gauls failed to occupy Ilion, which was only to suffer panic, as these words imply. That it was Ilion which was intended by the reference to the 'divinely-built walls' is confirmed by the mention of the Hellespont in the same verse. But curiously F. Paschoud in the Budé edition cites a late transfer to Constantinople of the legend of Apollo and Poseidon as the builders, and points out that the feminine relative pronoun in line 14 could refer to that city.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Chaones were one of the three major tribes inhabiting Epirus. They had been dominant in the fifth century B.C., but in the fourth and third centuries the sovereignty over Epirus passed to the Molossi. However, the tribes seem to have survived as subordinate units (cf. N. G. L. Hammond, *Epirus*, p. 685). So Pausanias may be quite correct historically in describing Phaennis as the daughter of a king. But the prophecy of the defeat of the Gauls by Attalus I cannot have been produced before about 238/7 (E. Will, *Histoire politique du monde hellénistique* I, p. 267.)

<sup>5</sup> For the invasion of the Gauls, W. Tarn, *C.A.H.* vii, p. 104. On Nicomedes I, Will, *Histoire* I, p. 219 and on Nicomedes II, id. II, p. 324 and 388.

<sup>6</sup> Paschoud, *Zosime* (Budé) I, p. 240 refers to P.W. II., 1128, 5–18 (J. Miller) for this legend as applied to Byzantium. The only ancient authority is Hesychius Milesius, *FGrHist* 390 F 1, § 12, writing in the sixth century A.D. For the lenient treatment of Ilion by the Gauls, we have the nearly contemporary evidence of Hegesianax, *FGrHist* 45 F 3 = Str. 13. 1. 27. He described the Gauls as having 'gone up into the city (Ilion) in need of a fort, but immediately abandoned it as it was unwall'd'.

It is possible that Zosimus may have taken the words in that sense, but in the third century B.C. the legend could only have suggested Ilion, whose name may have occurred in the lacuna. In its typical epic form *Ἴλιος*, it also was feminine.

The last seven lines of Zosimus' quotation were recognised by L. Mendelssohn as forming a separate oracle, and he proposed a brilliant emendation which supplied a name for the party addressed.<sup>7</sup> 'O you who inhabit the Megarian city which is my shrine, no longer shall I keep my father's thought in silence, but I shall reveal an intelligible song of the immortal oracles to mortals'. Here Mendelssohn and Paschoud see that Apollo is speaking and suppose he is addressing the Byzantines as former colonists of Megara. It is true that this is evidently Apollo declaring the will of his father, Zeus, in a manner familiar from many Delphic oracles. But neither the modern editors nor their Byzantine predecessors seem to have grasped what this implies with regard to the attribution of this prophecy.

It was a standing convention of the Sibylline oracles that the Sibyl, when using the first person, always referred to herself. Though divinely inspired, she was not possessed by the god. This was the great difference between her and the Pythia. When the Pythia said 'I', she meant 'Apollo', and the same principle applied to such references as 'my father' (Zeus) or 'mother' (Leto), whereas the Sibyl in various passages mentioned her own name and parentage.<sup>8</sup> In this instance the obvious implication is that the last seven lines, if they form a separate poem, are an oracular response from an Apolline shrine. If we accept Mendelssohn's emendation, it clearly indicated that the shrine is in a 'Megarian city'. But this should not be Byzantium, but Calchedon, which also was a Megarian colony. Paschoud can call attention to the evidence that there was a temple of Apollo in Byzantium,<sup>9</sup> and in view of the prominence of the Apolline cult in its metropolis, it would be somewhat surprising if there were not. But the Byzantine Apollo had no reputation for prophecy so far as our evidence goes, while the Apollo of Calchedon was actually designated Chresterios – 'the Oracular'. Inscriptions from the last quarter of the third century B.C. confirm that the oracle was certainly operating in the period.<sup>10</sup> Also such evidence as George Bean's discovery of a verse response from the Gryneian Apollo at Caunus shows there is nothing inherently improbable in the use of poetry by local Apolline oracle-centres in Asia Minor in the Hellenistic epoch.<sup>11</sup>

I would suggest with some confidence that the last seven lines of Zosimus' oracle were a response from Apollo Chresterios of Calchedon to his own citizens, who were enquiring at some time of trouble. It may possibly have been at the time of the Gallic invasion, but as there are no specific allusions to Gauls, it might have been during

<sup>7</sup> V. (the only ms.) reads: ὦμε γὰρ εἴ τε. Mendelssohn: ὦ Μεγαρήιον ἄστυ. Paschoud prints Gilles' text: οἱ μὲ γὰρ εἰσαΐν τε, but seems to agree with Mendelssohn's theory of a new oracle starting here.

<sup>8</sup> For Zeus as 'my father' in Pythian responses, e.g. Parke and Wormell, *Delphic Oracle*, 2, no. 154. 2; Leto as 'mother', id. no. 129. 2. For the Sibyl describing her own identity and her ancestry: Paus. 10. 12. 2 and 3. [D.Chr.] 37. 13, Clem. Al. *Str.* 139. 48 (Heraclides Ponticus, fr. 130, Wehrli). This last is peculiar in that the Sibyl identifies herself with Artemis. It was also known by Pausanias l.c. The Sibyl in the *Sibylline Oracles* frequently speaks in the first person and e.g. declares herself to be the daughter-in-law of Noah (1. 288). Aeschylus similarly makes Cassandra in the *Agamemnon* suffer hallucinations inspired by Apollo, but never lose her own personality.

<sup>9</sup> Paschoud, op. cit. 240, citing P. W. 3, 1147, 8–19. Cf. also for references and comments F. Jacoby, *FGrHist* III b, commentary, p. 186.

<sup>10</sup> Ditt. *Syll.*<sup>3</sup> 550 and *S.E.G.* IV, 700. Dionysius of Byzantium (K. Müller, *G.G.M.* II, p. 93, fr. 67) still refers to the oracle with praise as functioning (c. A.D. 250?).

<sup>11</sup> George Bean, *JHS* 74 (1964), 85.

some other dangerous situation. Also in view of the lack of precise allusions it might be a perfectly authentic production of a prophet who wished to convey a serious warning, while not committing himself to the detail of future events.

It is less easy to be positive about the first fourteen lines of Zosimus' quotation. If Nicomedes I had consulted Apollo Chresteros about his future, he might have been supposed to have received this response, though, to say the least, it is rather lacking in respect for royalty. The use of *φημι* (line 4) in the first person is to be found in a number of Pythia's responses.<sup>12</sup> So Apollo may well be expressing himself in this manner, but, though less typical of the Sibyl, it could not be regarded as impossible for her. The fourteen lines are less convincing than the subsequent section which we have already discussed. The references in the future tense to the activities of the Gallic chieftains are evidently meant to convey the idea that this is a forecast by divine prevision, and so give authority to the intimations of danger addressed to the king. This was a favourite method in Sibylline oracles, but obviously could occur in responses concocted at oracle-centres. The one convincing element in favour of the contemporary and local authenticity of this oracle is its one obvious mistake. It foretells a brief reign for Nicomedes I, while actually he ruled for some thirty years, nearly all subsequent to the implied date of the prophecy.

So it would be possible to argue that these fourteen lines, though not an authentic reply to an enquiry from Nicomedes, were circulated from Calchedon immediately after the two detachments of Gauls had crossed into Asia, and were intended to discourage the king (somewhat belatedly) from continuing with his policy of using the Gauls in internal dynastic feuds. Apart from a natural dislike and fear of Gallic ruthlessness, the authorities of Calchedon may have been inclined to favour the rival claimant, Ziboetes, who had based the challenge to Nicomedes on the support of North Eastern Bithynia.

All these events were far distant in time from the rise of Constantinople in the fourth century A.D. In fact the oracular verses had little to do with Hellenistic Byzantium; less even than Zosimus probably grasped. Only the one somewhat corrupt sentence in lines 10 and 11 contained some uncertain threat to the Byzantines. However, Zosimus did what he could to read into the oracle references to the contemporary difficulties under the Christian emperors, and when faced with the objection that there was a long interval between prophecy and fulfilment, he retorted with an argument which even Christians would not dispute – that to an eternal God all time was brief.

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<sup>12</sup> See six instances in the Index Verborum, Parke and Wormell, *Delphic Oracle* II, 256.