

Oracular and Prophetic Activity in the Roman Empire:

Religious Threats to the Political Order

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Rome, with varying degrees of success, either assimilated provincial religious institutions within a Roman religious framework, or attempted to impose her own religious model onto provincials.¹ Nevertheless, the “proliferation of...oracles...[is]...evidence of the limits upon the acceptance by the mass of the population of the...model imposed by the [Romans].”² Especially during the first century AD, prophecy and oracular activity became an effective and troublesome vehicle of social and political disturbance.³ Places like Gaul, Britain, Egypt, and the Greek East were regions in which oracles, prophets and visionaries prospered.⁴ How did the Romans deal with these potential threats? Professor Ripat has recently suggested an explanation concerning Rome’s alleged monitoring of Egyptian oracles and the subsequent demise of Demotic oracle questions.⁵ She has, however, not done enough to explain why the Romans would take such a heavy-handed approach towards Egyptian oracles, nor has she placed Egypt within the context of the rest of Rome’s territory. The goal of this essay is to place Rome’s stance on oracles in Egypt within the broader context of Roman attitudes towards such institutions throughout the empire.

Roman authorities dealt with oracular activity on a contextual basis. They closely monitored and weakened powerful prophetic institutions, forcefully repressed weaker ones, and manipulated and used others for personal gain. While adapting to unique contexts, the Roman authority adopted a coherent approach towards prophetic threats. Experiences in very different parts of the empire influenced the ways in which Rome responded to synonymous religious threats in other parts of her territory. More importantly, Rome’s actions throughout the provinces

¹ This upsets the usual characterization of a religiously *laissez-faire* Roman administration. Gordon, Richard. “Religion in the Roman Empire: The Civic Compromise and Its Limits,” in Mary Beard (ed.), *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World*, (London: Duckworth, 1990), 233, 240 & 243; Ripat, Pauline. “The Language of Oracular Inquiry in Roman Egypt,” *Phoenix* 2006 (60)3-4, 304-328;324.

² Gordon, 240; Potter, David. *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 177.

³ Potter, 15.

⁴ Momigliano, Arnaldo. “Some Preliminary Remarks on the “Religious Opposition” to the Roman Empire,” in Kurt A. Raaflaub (ed.), *Opposition et Resistances a l’Empire d’Auguste a Trajan*, (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1986), 107.

⁵ Ripat, *passim*.

reveal a general attitude and mentality towards oracles and prophets. Indeed, fear, suspicion and paranoia were the pillars of Roman ideas concerning oracular activity. Thus, the not uncommon view that Rome was generally tolerant and accommodating of others' religious views and institutions will also be implicitly reevaluated throughout this paper.

We shall begin with Roman attitudes towards temples and oracles in Egypt. Rome's experiences in Egypt provided her with invaluable experience in fearing, evaluating, monitoring, and managing religious threats not only in Egypt but in the rest of the empire as well. As we shall see, Rome's heavy handed treatment of oracles in Egypt was part of an overall attitude towards oracular activity. Close monitoring of oracles in Egypt began almost immediately after the territory came under Rome's control. Several Roman initiatives contributed to the purposeful weakening of the traditionally powerful Egyptian religious institutions. For example, most sacred land in Egypt was confiscated during Augustus' principate.⁶ Beginning in 4 BC, all temple personnel, their families, and their property were registered with Roman officials.⁷ Temples were also required to give annual reports concerning temple finances and activities to Roman higher officials.⁸ Significantly, such reports have no precedent in the Ptolemaic period.⁹ Temples were also subjected to surprise inspections by a Roman official who was viewed as "a harsh man" by the Egyptian priests.¹⁰ The Romans also kept tight control over the practice of circumcision, thus controlling the process whereby one could become a priest.¹¹ By the reign of Nero, individual priests were being registered.¹² All of these measures should be seen under the

⁶ Gordon, 241.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*; Fewster, Penelope. "Bilingualism in Roman Egypt," in J. N. Adams, Mark Janse, and Simon Swain (eds.), *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Text*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 227; Gilliam, Elizabeth, H. *The Archives of the Temple Soknobraisis at Bacchias*, (New Haven: Yale Classical Studies, 1947), 186.

⁹ Gilliam, 186.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹¹ Gordon, 241.

¹² *Ibid.*

umbrella of Roman fear and paranoia concerning possible threats to Rome's control over Egypt. As Gordon explains, there was in Egypt "a traditional...priesthood used to considerable latitude and privilege [that found] its rights gradually eroded by the occupying power, a power...downright hostile to their activities."¹³

On the surface, the actions taken by the Roman authorities appear to be connected with economic issues. True, the Romans were undoubtedly concerned with monitoring the economic activities of the powerful Egyptian temples in order to raise taxes free from the interference of "an indigenous priesthood [that] might be the focus for resistance...."¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Romans were also concerned with the (non-economic) threat that the Egyptian priesthood posed to their rule of Egypt. Temples and the priestly caste were a powerful and privileged force in Egypt. Thus, contrary to the Ptolemies, the Romans decreased funding of the native temples in order to reduce the independent power and influence of the Egyptian priesthood.¹⁵ The Roman government was primarily concerned with the strict supervision of temples, and the restriction of the power of the Egyptian priests.¹⁶ Despite such efforts, as Gillam explains, there were moments when the priests still exercised some amount of tangible authority: "[The priests] took advantage of the period of unrest in the seventies [AD] when the government feared the spread of revolt among the priesthods to demand and obtain exemption from [liturgies]."¹⁷

Roman opposition stemmed, in large part, from the Egyptian priestly caste's adherence to the "oriental" religious model. This model was one in which religiously powerful individuals and institutions possessed extensive social and economic authority. This authority was often

¹³ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁵ Naphtali, Lewis. "The Demise of the Demotic Document: When and Why," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 79. (1993), 281.

¹⁶ Gillam, 182.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

dangerously independent from political authority.¹⁸ Generally speaking, the subordination of the religious system to the political was one of the defining characteristics of Romanization.¹⁹ Yet, what happened when a religious system did not fit conveniently within this framework? As we shall also see with prophetic forces in the western end of the empire, the Roman approach to Egyptian religious institutions illustrates the outcome of this quandary. From a purely economic standpoint, Roman policies meant that, without their traditional landholdings and other sources of wealth, temples would not have been able to support as large a staff as they previously had.²⁰ From a standpoint of security, the ultimate aim of Roman policy was to monitor and curtail possible threats to Roman rule. As a result, temples suffered a devastating loss of power and wealth with the coming of the Romans.²¹

In many ways, Roman concern was not unwarranted. The temples were, since Pharaonic times, powerful centers of socioeconomic power. They functioned as “the principal repository of Egyptian culture” - a culture that was often hostile to foreign rule.²² At several points throughout the Ptolemaic period, temples functioned as centers of opposition to Ptolemaic rule. Take, for example, the crowning of Haronnophris (205 BC) and Chaonnophris (defeated 186 BC), and the revolts that both lead in the Thebaid. In 131 BC, Harsiesis was also crowned as Pharaoh at Thebes. Even in the Roman period, the first prefect of Egypt was forced to deal with an uprising in the Thebaid.²³ The powerful religious center of Thebes was thus instrumental in legitimizing and popularizing the revolts of prominent figures who were in turn supported by disaffected Egyptians.

¹⁸ Gordon, 244.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

²⁰ Gillam, 186.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Lewis, 291.

²³ Ripat, 314.

It is also true, however, that the temples themselves were sometimes targets of rebel violence in the Ptolemaic period. These attacks may largely be explained by the fact that temples were large centers of economic wealth. Disaffected, overtaxed and hungry Egyptians would have seen these temples as sources of food and other desperately needed goods. Some temples, especially those that were closer to Alexandria and Memphis, were attacked because the clergy there was seen as collaborating with the Ptolemaic regime. Indeed, as the Memphis Decree shows, the religious center of Memphis, which was also the age old rival of Thebes in the south, had become a center of Ptolemaic support.²⁴ Other like-minded decrees that showed the Ptolemies trying to gain the support of the Egyptian clergy (e.g. the Canopus Decree),²⁵ and the temple-led rebellions in the south help prove that the religious element in Egypt was powerful, volatile and potentially very dangerous to foreign rulers. As the next section will help to illustrate, it is reasonable to assume that the Romans were aware of the Ptolemies' experiences in Egypt. While the Ptolemies attempted to gain the favour of receptive elements within the Egyptian clergy, Rome would find other ways of ensuring the surveillance and control of Egyptian temples and oracular centers.

Furthermore, the so-called "apocalyptic" oracles from the Ptolemaic period were still being read in the Roman era.²⁶ Indeed, "[i]t is of great interest that both the *Oracle of the Potter* and the *Lamb of Boccharis* show that actual Egyptian prophecies were still being read in the imperial period."²⁷ Such oracles are thought to have originated from powerful Egyptian temples. The *Oracle of the Potter* was composed in the Ptolemaic period, and was decidedly anti-Greek

²⁴ OGIS 90 (otherwise known as the Rosetta Stone). The extensive "benefactions" and privileges granted to the priests in the Memphis Decree and the Canopus Decree (mentioned below) show the care taken by Ptolemaic rulers in attempting to conciliate the native population by means of the priesthood.

²⁵ OGIS 56.

²⁶ Momigliano, 112.

²⁷ Potter, David. *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 199.

because it foresaw and hoped for the cessation of Greek rule and the fall of Alexandria.²⁸ It is more than likely that such oracles would have acquired anti-Roman overtones under the Roman regime, both from the Roman and the Egyptian perspective.²⁹ The *Lamb of Boccharis*, which has been dated to AD 4/5, in turn emphasized that the traditional Egyptian gods would return to Egypt and restore goods stolen by “the Assyrians.”³⁰ Again, it is more than likely that both sides would have viewed this reference to the Assyrians as a veiled but effective allusion to the Romans. Like the Assyrians, the Romans were a foreign power that had placed Egypt under its forceful control.³¹ Roman policies towards the temples further meant that the new conquerors were no more popular or accepted among the priestly caste than the Assyrians, Persians, or Greeks had been. It is important to note that the appearance of such anti-imperial, oracular texts continued into the later Roman imperial period. A text entitled *Asclepius* (dated to before the fourth century AD) appears to be inspired by the *Oracle of the Potter* when it says that the Egyptian gods would return to Egypt after the foreigners had been expelled.³²

It is within this context of Roman suspicion and fear that we should understand the strange change from Demotic to Greek in the language of oracular inquiry in Egypt. It is not yet clear how sharp the break is regarding length of time (i.e. the speed of the change) and the quantity of oracles written in Demotic or Greek.³³ The evidence suggests that there is no drastic break with Demotic in 30 BC, and that Greek could very well have only taken hold later on, say AD 50.³⁴ Nevertheless, whatever the abruptness of the change, the change should still somehow

²⁸ P.Oxy. 2332; Momigliano, 112; Potter, 195.

²⁹ Momigliano, 112.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 112

³³ Zauzich, Karl. “Die demotischen Orakelfragen - eine Zwischenbilanz,” in P. J. Franden and K. Ryholt (eds.), *A Miscellany of Demotic Texts and Studies*, (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 1-25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

be accounted for. As examples like the *Oracle of the Potter* show, Demotic, a language intimately connected with oracles and temples, was used to communicate and popularize anti-imperial feelings. As Fewster observes, before the complete loss of Demotic from the historical record, it enjoyed “a vicarious vengeance in the creation of a tendentious, anti-imperial literature....”³⁵ In the Roman period, Greek translations of this oracular literature helped to ensure that the Romans monitored Egyptian temples very closely. Indeed, the one governmental ban on oracular activity and magic in the provinces that has survived from antiquity occurs on a papyrus from Egypt dated to the second century AD.³⁶ The prefect, Q. Aemilius Saturninus, in the context of an imperial visit to Egypt, orders “all people to abstain from this hazardous inquisitiveness” lest anyone involved in such things “be handed over to the extreme penalty.”³⁷ The overall force and gravity of the decree is loud and clear: “let no man through oracles...pretend to know things beyond human ken and profess (to know) the obscurity of things to come....”³⁸ Despite such evidence of Rome’s general hostility toward Egyptian oracles, some may argue, as Clarysse has done, that the peculiar change from Demotic to Greek in the written oracles reflects merely the preference to record records in the Greek language because “both the god and his priests preferred Greek to Demotic for writing purposes.”³⁹ Such arguments deny the possibility that the change in language from incomprehensible (in the eyes of the Romans) Demotic oracles to understandable Greek texts was part of a Roman policy of active surveillance and general paranoia. Ripat, however, has recently shown that this is not necessarily the case.

³⁵ Fewster, 281.

³⁶ P.CtYBR inv.299 qua; Potter, 176. It is curious that Ripat does not mention this text. This decree appears to be the most direct evidence that we have of Roman supervision of oracular activity in Egypt.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Clarysse, Willy. “Egyptian Scribes Writing Greek,” *ChrEg* 1993, 68: 188.

Oracular language had, for thousands of years, been associated with the Egyptian language. A large part of the authority and respect that such oracles commanded resulted from the fact that they were written in the traditional oracular language.⁴⁰ Oracular language, as a genre, *required* Demotic to infuse oracles with the mystical/magical power and authority that they were supposed to have.⁴¹ The change from Demotic to Greek cannot thus be explained as an “organic” shift of language preference that reflected either the Egyptians’ desire to “modernize” or adhere more closely to the practices of the ruling power. Oracles from all over the Mediterranean, and throughout different time periods, developed their own unique techniques endorsed by long practice: “there was no point in an established shrine’s trying to bring itself into line with other [practices]. It was the reputation of antiquity that [mattered].”⁴² Indeed, the Roman authorities required that Egyptian priests be competent in both Hieratic and Demotic because they understood how intimately connected the Egyptian language was with Egyptian religion and oracles.⁴³ The priests, however, were now not permitted to use Demotic to deliver *oracles*. The change in language ought to be accounted for in terms of Roman efforts to monitor Egyptian oracles. The Roman position in Egypt was initially quite precarious and monitoring oracular activity in this manner would have helped to ensure the stability of the province. This type of surveillance was unique throughout the empire because Egypt itself was a unique case. The Druids in the West and the Greek speakers in the East would also feel the effects of Roman suspicion and fear of their prophetic and oracular activities - but not because of the languages that were used to deliver their prophecies and oracles. Egypt was the one place in the empire

⁴⁰ Ripat, 310.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Potter, 13.

⁴³ Ripat, 310.

where there was a wealthy and influential priesthood that derived much of its power from an arcane religion that was *written* in a way that was incomprehensible to the Romans.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, the Romans had several stereotypes concerning Egypt that did much to contribute to Rome's approach toward Egyptian oracular threats. Rome tended to view Egypt with suspicion, fear and hostility. As a people, the Egyptians were volatile and prone to riotous disturbance, especially when religion played a part.⁴⁵ Although not strictly a prophetic episode, the revolt of the Boukoloï under the priest Isidoros helped prove this principle.⁴⁶ Egypt was the land of strange animal gods, superstition and magic.⁴⁷ Indeed, when confronted by a religion that was so strange and communicated through a "magical" language that was incomprehensible, the Romans labelled the opposing beliefs with the dismissive term *superstitio*.⁴⁸ With this in mind, we can better understand that Egypt, according to the Romans, was a land full of not *religio*, but magic. A quote from Gordon adequately expresses Roman views about magic and foreign superposition. Thus, the following characterizes Roman attitudes toward Egypt and its religion:

[Magic's] purposes are entirely anti-social; [it] destroys decency, custom and law; [it] offends the gods; but most of all [it] threatens the hierarchy of the politico-social order...More insidious, magic offers an escape from 'fate'. It introduces an irrational element into the hierarchy of wealth and power. It creates disorder and confusion in personal relation.⁴⁹

There are also the several episodes in Roman history when Egyptian cults and their practices were suppressed at Rome.⁵⁰ One ought to remember the negative characterization of Egypt during the struggles that took place between Marc Antony and Octavian. There is no

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 314 & 317.

⁴⁶ Dio, Cassius. *Roman History*, 71.4; Gillam, 172-173; Potter, 171.

⁴⁷ Rawson, Elizabeth. *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic*. (London: Duckworth, 1985), 308-309.

⁴⁸ Gordon, 240.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵⁰ Rawson, 219 & 315.

doubt that Octavian's extensive slandering campaign influenced Roman attitudes towards Egyptian temples and oracles for decades to come. Astrologers, a group very much associated with Egypt and its mysterious religion, also were frequently expelled from Rome. This occurred in AD 16 under Tiberius, 52 under Claudius, 68 under Nero, 69 under Vitellius, and at a few points during the reign of Domitian.⁵¹ Although many of these expulsion edicts can be attributed to particularly troublesome moments of weakness in each emperor's career, Rome's approach towards such "Egyptizing" or "oriental" forms of divination reveal a general hostility toward religious practices that could not easily be assimilated into the Roman religious model. Yet, how did Rome's treatment of temples and oracle centers in Egypt influence her approach to other prophetic equivalencies throughout the provinces? We shall see that Rome's attitudes and approaches were influenced by her experiences in Egypt, and that her actions in the provinces reveal a definite continuity concerning synonymous religious threats in the rest of the empire.

Rome's method of oracular surveillance in Egypt influenced her treatment of other centers of prophecy throughout the provinces. No one geographic area should be seen in isolation since Roman actions reveal a definite continuity concerning Roman attitudes towards oracular activity. Rome's approaches to the oracles and prophets of the empire were the result of a general fear and suspicion concerning such things. This is because, as Bowersock explains,

Wherever there was pagan provincial opposition to Rome in the provinces, it was normally expressed through the traditional cults...[A]t the center of provincial subversion stood the local temples, revealed to have been far more vital than many have thought.⁵²

Rome's apprehension and distrust for oracles extended throughout the Roman empire because religion and prophecy could and did play an important role in revolts against Rome.⁵³ Thus, the

⁵¹ Suetonius. *Vitellius*, 14.4; Potter, 174-176.

⁵² Bowersock, G. W. "The Mechanics of Subversion in the Roman Provinces," in Kurt A. Raaflaub (ed.), *Opposition et Resistances a l'Empire d'Auguste a Trajan*, (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1986), 315.

⁵³ Potter, 202.

Romans were well aware of the potential threat that oracles and prophecy posed to their rule in places other than Egypt: “[p]rophecy and prodigy could help provide an ideological foundation for open rebellion against Rome, and they could play a role in fomenting civil unrest.”⁵⁴

The Druids⁵⁵, who were an oracular equivalency in Gaul, are a prime example. As in Egypt, the Romans perceived the prophetic threat that this group displayed and they took steps to control and eliminate this threat. The Romans claimed that their harsh treatment of the Druids and their eventual banning of Druidism were actions that “protected civilization.”⁵⁶ This sort of high-minded moralizing was synonymous with Augustus’ rhetoric concerning the evils and vices of Egypt. Similarly to the Egyptian paradigm, the Romans viewed the Druids’ practices as “unnatural.” Druidic rituals were nothing more than superstitions that were the result of an irrational, religious fanaticism.⁵⁷ Again, Rome failed or did not care enough to understand a social/religious system that was so different from her own.⁵⁸ She ultimately blamed this failure on the “stubborn and vicious religious sentiments of the inhabitants.”⁵⁹ The Romans also described Druidic customs with magic and *superstitio*.⁶⁰ Unlike Egypt, however, the Romans were able to adopt a much more brutal and direct policy.⁶¹ The Druids, after all, did not control powerful, fortress-like temples with extensive landholdings and numerous staff. (The Druids did not derive their influence from economic power at all.)⁶² This meant both that the Druids were easier to “deal” with, but also that they were much more suited to guerilla type tactics of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁵ Similar to the Druids were the German prophetesses who rallied the Germans against Rome. The most famous among them was Veleda. These prophetesses also faced stiff opposition from Rome. (Tacitus. *Histories*, 4.61-62, 4.65-66 & 5.24-25; Gordon, 243; Potter, 16 & 171.)

⁵⁶ Goodman, Martin, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of The Jewish Revolt Against Rome, A.D. 66-70*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 241.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 242.

resistance. Furthermore, because Gaullic culture was an oral one and the Druids passed on their teachings by word of mouth, the Romans were not able to monitor the language of their prophecy as they did in Egypt.⁶³ Instead, other methods were tried. The Romans soon established a Romanizing center (Augustodunum) in direct opposition to one of the few Druidic centers (Bibracte).⁶⁴ Diminishing Druidic influence among the Gauls was no doubt part of the agenda. A more forceful solution, however, was needed. At least in Rome's fearful and suspicious eyes, the Druids, like the priests in Egypt, stood together as representatives of ancient authority and tradition, and were "impeccably nationalist and opposed to Roman rule."⁶⁵

The Druids hailed and prophesied about anti-Roman portents including the burning of the Capitol.⁶⁶ The revolt near the beginning of Tiberius' reign (AD 21) saw Tiberius begin a campaign of active suppression against the Druids.⁶⁷ One of the leaders of this revolt was called Sacrovir - a name that likely connected him with the Druids. The policy of suppression can be traced back to Augustus. When leading Gauls first were granted Roman citizenship, Augustus prohibited these Gauls from participating in any Druidic practices.⁶⁸ The suppression of Druidism was continued under Claudius.⁶⁹ Druids were also instrumental in the revolt that took place on the island of Anglesey in AD 60⁷⁰, and a revolt that took place in AD 69.⁷¹ The rebellion of the infamous Boudicca was further supported by the Druids.⁷² Significantly, the Druids were still able to mount an uprising even after the reign of Nero.⁷³ Thus, as we can see,

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 242-244.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 241 & 243.

⁶⁶ Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.54; Momigliano, 109; Potter, 171.

⁶⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, 30.4ff; Suetonius, *Divus Claudius*, 25.5; Bowersock, 299-300; Goodman, 240 & 247; Momigliano, 108.

⁶⁸ Suetonius, *Divus Claudius*, 25; Goodman, 240.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Bowersock, 299.

⁷¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.54; Goodman, 241; Potter, 171.

⁷² Bowersock, 300.

⁷³ Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.54; Bowersock, 300.

the prophetic Druids, the Gaulic equivalent to oracles in Egypt, posed a synonymous oracular threat. The difference was that, because the Druids possessed less concrete examples of institutionalization and were thus “weaker” than their Egyptian counterparts, the Romans were able to eliminate Druidism fairly quickly and effectively. Unfortunately for the Romans, this method was simply impossible to implement in Egypt. Nevertheless, the suspicious and fearful Romans took the Druidic threat seriously and pursued an active and coherent policy of suppression and elimination. As a result, Druidism faded into obscurity.

What about the eastern end of the empire? The oracular centers in the Greek East also caused the Romans much consternation. Before the coming of Rome, the temple estates of Asia Minor were similar to Egyptian temples and the Druids in Gaul because the prophets there occupied a respected place among the society and the local aristocrats.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the “oriental” model of religious figures discussed above was also common in this region.⁷⁵ Simply put, the high priests of these temple estates and the temples themselves were punished or rewarded as they served the interests of Rome.⁷⁶

Following the death of Nero, no less than three so-called false-Neros rose up in the Greek East and assembled surprisingly substantial followings from local temples.⁷⁷ It was during the troubles of the first false-Nero that the Druids in the West supported a rebellion lead by Marriccus who strove to “secure the liberty of Gaul.”⁷⁸ The second of these pseudo-Neros was “foretold in prophetic fashion just after the eruption of Vesuvius” in the fourth Sibylline Oracle.⁷⁹ The surprisingly substantial amount of support that these prophetic figures received from these

⁷⁴ Potter, 96.

⁷⁵ Gordon, 244.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁷⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, 2.8; Bowersock, 309-311.

⁷⁸ Tacitus, *Histories*, 2.61; Bowersock, 311.

⁷⁹ *Fourth Sibylline Oracle*, 4.119-224; Bowersock, 310.

temples appears to have been the result of the practice of *asylum*.⁸⁰ Apollonius of Tyana (d. AD 120) sought the protection of such temples as a base for sending out his philosophical protests against Rome.⁸¹ At these temples, he was confronted with “thieves, pirates, kidnappers, and every criminal and sacrilegious person....”⁸² In AD 22, the emperor Tiberius confronted this problem when he noticed that “the right of asylum in the temples of certain Greek cities had led to concentrations of the worst of the slave population, debtors, and murderers....”⁸³ The situation was dire enough to compel him to order all the cities in the Greek East that had claims to asylum to give formal justifications for those claims.⁸⁴ Tiberius’ experience with the Druidic revolt of Sacrovir in the preceding year most likely compelled him to look to the East for potential sources of rebellion in the shrines and temples.⁸⁵ Thus, oracular/prophetic activity in very different parts of the empire influenced Roman attitudes to synonymous religious threats elsewhere.

Before this, the Romans were aware of the potential political troubles that oracles and other divine portents could stir up. Episodes from the late Republic also illuminate Rome’s subsequent paranoia towards oracular activity in the imperial period. For example, priests at a temple in Pergamum contrived to have an ominous sound come out of the temple during Pompey’s tour of the region to show their disapproval of his actions.⁸⁶ A similar event in this period saw a prophet announce disaster for Roman troops at Panamara if they did not abandon a campaign.⁸⁷ In the period between Rome’s struggles with Antiochus III (192/191 BC) and

⁸⁰ Bowersock, 309.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁸² Apollonius. *Epistles*, 65; Bowersock, 305-306.

⁸³ Bowersock, 306.

⁸⁴ Tacitus. *Annals*, 3.61-63; Bowersock, 306-307.

⁸⁵ Bowersock, 306-307.

⁸⁶ Potter, 171.

⁸⁷ Bowersock, 295.

Mithridates VI (89/88 BC), there were several other reports of anti-Roman prophecy.⁸⁸ These examples “provide the necessary information for understanding certain miraculous events of the early empire that are associated with provincial opposition to the Roman government at the time when they occurred.”⁸⁹ During one of Augustus’ visits to Athens, for example, the citizens of the city manipulated a statue of Athena to insinuate her divine disapproval.⁹⁰ As we have already seen, it only made sense that disgruntled provincials continued to use divine portents to show their anti-Roman feelings, especially in the first century AD. The use of oracles in this manner continued well past the first century AD, and so did Rome’s heavy handed reaction to them. The emperor Pertinax, for example, put down a rebellion in Africa that had been provoked by prophecies issued forth by the temple of the Carthaginian moon goddess, Caelestis.⁹¹ Ulpian, writing about the second century AD, tells of several emperors banning consultations of oracles altogether.⁹²

There was also some attempt to control and censure oracular activity in and around Rome itself. In AD 11, for example, Augustus forbade the consultation of any oracle alone or concerning a death in the imperial family.⁹³ At one point, he also gathered books of prophecy in the forum and burned them.⁹⁴ Later, in AD 19, Tiberius ordered an investigation of prophetic books that he thought were stirring up the Roman crowds.⁹⁵ Tiberius also received an oracle about the destruction of Rome, and he apparently made efforts to prove it false.⁹⁶ He also attempted to shut down all the oracles near Rome, but abandoned this endeavour for fear of

⁸⁸ Phlegon, *FGrH 257 fr. 36* III.2-3; Potter, 63-64.

⁸⁹ Bowersock, 297.

⁹⁰ Dio, 54.7; Bowersock, 298; Potter, 171.

⁹¹ Momigliano, 111.

⁹² Ulpian, *Mosaicarum et Romanarum Legum Collatio*, 15.2; Potter, 177.

⁹³ Dio, 56.25; Potter, 174.

⁹⁴ Suetonius, *Augustus*, 31; Potter, 95.

⁹⁵ Dio, 57.18; Potter, 95.

⁹⁶ Dio, 57.18; Potter, 100.

Praeneste, a powerful oracular center in Italy.⁹⁷ It seems strange that such paranoia and fear concerning oracles (whether well-founded or not) would have no affect on Roman attitudes to subsequent threats (i.e. in Gaul and the Greek East), or that these actions would not have been the result of previous experiences (i.e. in Egypt).

Despite all the trouble that oracular activity caused, were the Romans able to take advantage of its power and influence? Definitely. Not only did disgruntled provincials use oracles and oracular equivalencies to foster anti-Roman sentiments, but leading Roman figures used oracles to advance their careers and challenge opponents. Once leading Romans became aware of the power that oracles and prophecy had throughout her empire, oracles became an effective tool for political advancement. The following incidences turned the Romans on to the potential dangers of oracles and prophecy just as much as any native religious threat.

The well known animosity between Germanicus and Piso was certainly influenced by oracles. If we accept that the following reports were not created after the fact, we see that oracles were used by leading Romans to harm others' reputations, foster support against them, and undermine opponents' political positions.⁹⁸ As Potter states, “[p]rophecy provided a crucial medium for the description of power in the Roman world...Prophecy had a very real political role...[and] it was open to all sorts of manipulation.”⁹⁹ Indeed, Germanicus received an ominous and unfavourable oracle from the oracle of Apollo at Clarus, and from the Apis bull while in Egypt since the bull refused to eat from his hand.¹⁰⁰ Prior experience in Egypt would help to explain Piso's and his supporters' use of the Egyptian oracle because of the great influence that

⁹⁷ Potter, 174.

⁹⁸ Bowersock, 304.

⁹⁹ Potter, 213.

¹⁰⁰ Tacitus. *Annals*, 2.54; Pliny. *Natural History*, 8.185; Bowersock, 303-304; Potter, 16 & 170; Parke, H. W. *Greek Oracles*. (Hutchinson University Library. London, 1967), 138; Myers, F. W. H. *Essays: Classical*, (London: Macmillan, 1908), 62.

oracles commanded in Egypt. Likewise, in the western part of the empire, oracles were used by leading Romans to contend for the Roman throne.¹⁰¹ In AD 68, Galba the would-be emperor obtained a favourable prophecy from a priestess in Spain.¹⁰² According to Tacitus, such portents had a substantial affect on Nero because “Nero had been dethroned more by rumours and dispatches than by force of arms.”¹⁰³ During the struggle for the throne after the death of Nero, Vespasian orchestrated oracles that circulated in the eastern part of the empire.¹⁰⁴ This part of the empire was, after all, his base of power. The story in Tacitus of Vespasian restoring sight to a blind man while in Egypt should also be seen within the context of proving supernatural support for his bid for the throne.¹⁰⁵ Vespasian’s oracles expressly proved that he was the right man for the job. While at the Serapeum in Alexandria, Vespasian received a favourable oracle that claimed his future ascendancy to the throne.¹⁰⁶ Thus, prophecy was both a vehicle for provincial opposition and a method of political advancement for leading Romans. Oracular activity could spell out disaster for some, but help ensure political success for others. Knowledge and experience of the importance of oracular activity as a method of political and social influence in the provinces encouraged leading Romans to become well versed in the uses of prophecy. Moreover, this type of prophetic manipulation would have been influenced by recent experiences throughout the empire, and would also have informed subsequent approaches to similar situations.

Contrary to the popular *laissez-faire* characterization of Rome’s approach to provincial religious activity, episodes in Roman history display the “conquerors either eradicating

¹⁰¹ Bowersock, 304.

¹⁰² Suetonius. *Galba*, 9.2 & 10.4; Potter, 172-173; Bowersock, 304.

¹⁰³ Tacitus. *Histories*, 1.89; Potter, 173.

¹⁰⁴ Potter, 104 & 173.

¹⁰⁵ Tacitus. *Histories*, 4.54.2; Bowersock, 301.

¹⁰⁶ Bowersock, 301-302.

competing religious alternatives or implanting their own model [over]...religious authority.”¹⁰⁷

This principle is especially true with oracles and oracular equivalencies because, in many parts of the empire, they played a seminal role in fomenting social and political unrest among provincials. The need to manage their empire meant that the Romans were forced to deal with such religious threats on a fairly constant basis. Episodes from late Republican history, Augustus’ early principate and especially the first century AD, taught the Romans to be suspicious and fearful (if not paranoid) about oracular activity in the empire. In this way, experiences throughout the empire certainly influenced the manner in which Rome approached oracles and prophets. Generally, the Romans treated these religious threats with contempt. Nevertheless, based on the particular context, the Romans displayed a nuanced coherency in their treatment of oracles and prophets. The steps ran as follows: monitor and weaken powerful institutions, repress and eliminate weaker ones and manipulate and use others for personal, political advantage. Either way, fear and suspicion permeated all Roman attitudes towards oracular threats to the political order.

¹⁰⁷ Gordon, 240.

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