

Projeto de Estudos Judaico-Helenísticos - PEJ

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**"HELLENISTIC POLITICAL PROPAGANDA & ZOROASTRIAN
ORACLES"**

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HIS / UnB



Resumo / abstract



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Introduction

It is well known that in the centuries before and after the beginning of the Christian Era the apocalyptic literary genre was flourishing. As part of this, a number of oracles in Greek, Latin and Zoroastrian sources have survived to the present. My paper proposes to discuss the interaction between Zoroastrianism and Hellenistic oracles and their possible use in political propaganda. In particular, I shall argue that the so-called *Oracle of Hystaspes*, which only survives in quotations by five different Classical authors, was used in anti-Roman propaganda at the time of Mithridates VI Eupator, king of Pontus, and can therefore be dated back to at least the second century before the Christian era.

Division of fragments

The *Oracle of Hyspaspes* is one of the most evasive texts of the Hellenistic period. The text has not survived in its entirety. We know of its existence from quotations by five different authors, although it has also been suggested by scholars that a text of that name never existed.

Essentially, what is now called the *Oracle of Hystaspes* is a group of fragments found in five ancient authors, namely Clement of Alexandria, Justin, Lactantius, Lydos and Aristokritos. Whether these fragments were originally part of a now-lost whole work is disputed.



Division in terms of date

As the remaining fragments stand, they range from the Second Century CE (Justin) to the Sixth Century CE (Aristokritos). Similarities between passages of the *Oracle* and Revelation 11-13 strongly suggest a cultural milieu for the *Oracle* or its *Vorlage* where the Temple still existed (Flusser). Reactions against Rome, or messianic hopes of deliverance can be traced back to parallels in Josephus (Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicarum* 14.470 and *Bellum Judaicum* 1.347) describing both the fall of the Temple in 70 CE and the siege of Jerusalem by Herod in 37 BCE. I suggest that the same reasoning can be applied to the siege by Pompey in 63 BCE and, due to the portents described, to the eventful kingship of Mithridates VI Eupator (134-63 BCE) and his promises of Eastern vengeance upon Rome.

Divisions in themes with apocalyptic overtones

1. Justin Martyr

*The Sibyl and Hystaspes have given out that this whole system of incorruptibles shall be destroyed by fire*¹.

[...]

*But through the agency of evil demons, death was proclaimed against those who read the books of Hystaspes, or the Sibyl, or the Prophets, that they [i.e. the demons] might through fear turn their readers from receiving the knowledge of the good, and keep them slaves to themselves; which in the event they were not able to accomplish*².

2. Clement of Alexandria

He [i.e. God] distinguished the most excellent of the

¹ *Apologia* 1:20. Written between CE 147 and 161, as it was addressed to Roman emperors comprising Antoninus Pius on one end, and Lucius Verus on the other. Here as in the following examples I have based myself on Hinnells' article translations, checked against originals when necessary.

² *Apologia* 1:44.



Greeks from the common herd; in addition to Peter's Preaching the apostle Paul will show, saying, 'Take also the Hellenic books, read the Sibyl, how it is shown that God is one, and how the future is indicated. And taking Hystaspes, read, and you will find much more luminously and distinctly the Son of God described, and how many kings shall draw up their forces against Christ, hating Him, and those that bear His name, and His faithful ones, and His patience, and His coming³.

3. Lydus (in: de Mensibus)

That the Chaldeans of the school of Zoroaster and Hystaspes, and the Egyptians, took the days of the week from the number of the planets⁴.

4. Aristokritos (in: Theosophy, preserved in later references from the 9th century the latest)

In the fourth place [Aristokritos] adduces the oracles of a certain Hystaspes, king of the Persians or Chaldeans, a man of most distinguished birth (he says) and hence a receiver of a revelation of divine mysteries concerning the Saviour's incarnation; at the end of the book he set down a very abbreviated chronology from Adam until the days of Zeno, in which he asserts that the fulfilment would take place after the completion of 6,000 years; for, he says, it is written (Ps 89:4) that a thousand years are with the Lord as one day; in six days God made the universe and rested on the seventh. After the passing of 6,000 years, which are counted as equivalent to six, everything ought to come to a halt⁵.

5. Lactantius

Hystaspes also, who was a very ancient king of the Medes, from whom the river which is now called Hydaspes received its name, handed down to the memory of posterity a wonderful dream upon the interpretation of a boy who uttered divinations, announcing, long before the Trojan

³ *Miscellanies* 6:5. Written between CE 190 and 200.

⁴ Lydus, born in Philadelphia, Lydia (490 - 578? CE). *De Mensibus* is likely to have been written before he fell in disgrace with Byzantine imperial officialdom (552 CE). Greek text in: Karl Buresch. *Klaros. Untersuchungen zum Orakelwesen des späteren Altertums*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1889. P.98.

⁵ C. fifth century A.D. The translation follows Franz Cumont and Joseph Bidez. *Les mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque*. Paris: Belles Lettres, 2007. II, P.363.



nation, that the Roman empire and name would be taken from the world⁶.

[...]

For Hystaspes, whom I have named above, having described the iniquity of this last age, says that the pious and faithful, being separated from the wicked, will stretch forth their hands to heaven with weeping and mourning, and will implore the protection of Jupiter; that Jupiter will look down to the earth, and hear the voices of men, and will destroy the wicked. All these things are true except one, that he attributed to Jupiter those things which God will do. This in fact was suppressed by the deceit of the demons, viz. that at that time the Son of God would be sent by the Father, to destroy all the wicked and set free the pious⁷.

[...]

Wherefore since all these things are true and certain, being foretold by the unanimous annunciation of all the prophets, since Trismegistus, Hystaspes, and the Sibyls have all foretold the same things, it cannot be doubted that all hope of life and salvation rests solely in the worship of God⁸.

Parallels in propagandistic themes

Now, basically two issues are to be taken into account when dealing with the OH while trying to push its possible dating to the time and events related to Mithridates VI Eupator: political propaganda and astrological events / omens.

Parallels to Mithridatic propaganda

Miscellaneous sources	Oracle of Hystaspes
Posidonius of Apamea (Jacoby FrGH 87F36)	Lactantius <i>Divine Institutions</i> 7.18
Every city agrees to superhuman honours for him and invokes the god-king (or	Hystaspes also, who was a very ancient king of the Medes, from whom the river

⁶ *Divine Institutions* 7.15. Written between 303 and 311 CE; Lactantius was born in North Africa and lived before 303 (birth-date uncertain) and died after 326 CE (also uncertain).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.18.

⁸ *Epitome of the Divine Institutions*, 73. Written after the *Divine Institutions*, maybe a little later, but they display a deeper knowledge of Christian texts.



<p>calls him to their aid): on every side oracles and prophecy rule over the inhabited world.</p>	<p>which is now called Hydaspes received its name, handed down to the memory of posterity a wonderful dream upon the interpretation of a boy who uttered divinations, announcing, long before the Trojan nation, that the Roman empire and name would be taken from the world.</p>
<p>Athenaeus 5.211-215 (FrGH 87F36) The ambassador of the Athenians, when reported the issues to Mithridates, made them friends and allies [of Mithridates], since he would bring them to great Fortune.</p>	<p>Lactantius Divine Institutions 7.19 Then the middle of heaven shall be laid open in the dead and darkness of the night, that the light of the descending God may be manifest in all the world as lightning [...] There shall suddenly fall from heaven a sword, that the righteous may know that the leader of the sacred warfare is about to descend; and He shall descend with a company of angels to the middle of the earth, and there shall go before Him an unquenchable fire, and the power of the angels shall deliver into the hands of the just that multitude which has surrounded the mountain, and they shall be slain from the third hour until the evening, and blood shall flow like a torrent; and all his forces being destroyed, the wicked one alone shall escape, and his power shall perish from him.</p>
<p>Appian "Mithridatic Wars" 12.21 Finally, at Pergamon, Mithridates poured molten gold down his [Aquillius'] throat, thus rebuking the Romans for their bribe-taking.</p>	<p>Lactantius Divine Institutions 7.21 [...] when He shall have judged the righteous, He will also try them with fire. Then they whose sins shall exceed either in weight or in number shall be</p>



	<i>scorched by the fire and burnt; but they whom full justice and maturity of virtue have imbued will not perceive that fire.</i>
Sibylline Oracles 3.611-618 <i>A great king will come from Asia, a blazing eagle, / who will cover the whole land with infantry and cavalry [and] all handmade works will fall in a flame of fire.</i>	
Sibylline Oracles 3.652-654 <i>And then God will send a King from the Sun / who will stop the entire earth from evil war, / killing some, imposing oaths of loyalty on others [...]</i>	

Astronomical omens and related problems

<i>Miscellaneous sources</i>	<i>Oracle of Hystaspes</i>
Pompeius Trogus' Universal History (<i>Epitome</i> by Justin 37.2) <i>Again, heavenly prodigies predicted his future greatness. In the year that he [Mithridates] was begotten, and again when he first began to rule, a comet blazed in such a way, on both occasions for seventy days, that the whole sky seemed to be on fire.</i>	Lactantius Divine Institutions 7.19 <i>Then the middle of heaven shall be laid open in the dead and darkness of the night, that the light of the descending God may be manifest in all the world as lightning [...]</i>
Sibylline Oracles 2.34-38 <i>And again God will perform a great sign / for a star will shine like a resplendent crown / resplendent, gleaming from the radiant heaven / for no small number of days, For then he will show / from heaven a crown</i>	Lactantius Divine Institutions 7.16 <i>Wonderful prodigies also in heaven shall confound the minds of men with the greatest terrors, and the trains of comets, and the darkness of the sun, and the colour of the moon, and the gliding of the falling</i>



<p>to men who strive in contest⁹.</p>	<p>stars. Nor, however, will these things take place in the accustomed manner; but there will suddenly appear stars unknown and unseen by the eyes; the sun will be perpetually darkened, so that there will be scarcely any distinction between the night and the day; the moon will now fail, not for three hours only, but, overspread with perpetual blood, will go through extraordinary movements, so that it will not be easy for man to ascertain the courses of the heavenly bodies or the system of the times; for there will either be summer in the winter, or winter in the summer. Then the year will be shortened, and the month diminished, and the day contracted into a short space; and stars shall fall in great numbers, so that all the heavens will appear dark without any lights. The loftiest mountains also will fall, and be levelled with the plains; the sea will be rendered unnavigable.</p>
<p>PASSAGE OF COMETS: a Babylonian tablet found in 1984 in the British Museum confirms, even if briefly, the passage of Halley's comet in 87 BCE. Chinese observations confirm the fact. BM 47494 is quite damaged but confirms what Diodorus said about</p>	<p>This proves to be a puzzle; evidence is to be found in his contemporary Tigranes of Armenia coinage (see slides on presentation), but still would be rendered as bad omens - the explanation for the link between the comets of the 130s BCE and more specifically that of 87 BCE</p>

⁹ Here as in the translations of the *Sibylline Oracles* I have relied on John J. Collins in his edition in James H. Charlesworth (ed.). *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. New York: Doubleday, 1983-1985. Vol.1. Pp.897 ff., and checked it against the Greek text according to the edition of Alfons Kurfess. *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*. München: Heimeren, 1951. Pp.54-56.



Babylonian astrologers' capacity of predicting comets and theirs orbits.	and anti-Roman propaganda remains a mystery. A typical example would be their use by Josephus in <i>Bellum Judaicum</i> 6.289 just before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.
COINAGE: three coins showing the head of Tigranes II the Great of Armenia (140-55 BCE), who was an ally of Mithridates VI Eupator and supported him especially during the First Mithradatic War.	

Conclusion

The passages of the *Oracle*, especially those from Lactantius, display close resemblance, when not identity, to the theme of Eastern vengeance on Rome. This is evident in Clement and Justin Martyr as well, who make use of (alleged) Roman persecution of those who believed in the Christ as Messiah in the terms prophesized by Hystaspes.

Comparing evidence of the *Oracle* on another side we see similar themes emerging from Mithridates' propaganda: this is, in turn, corroborated by astrological data (tablets and Chinese observations on Halley's comet), by coinage (Tigranes' coins, an ally of Mithridates) and more speculatively by comparison to reactions among the Jews during the Roman sieges of 70 CE, 37 BCE and, arguably, 63 BCE.

The relation of all this material to the *Oracle* in the form it came down to us is that it came via Christian authors, who might be using a Jewish text disguised as Pagan. This in turn relates to Jewish sibyllina and the theme of Eastern vengeance, attested by classical authors such as Posidonius and Pompeius Trogus among others.