

# Macrianus as the “Well-Horned Stag” in the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*

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THE THIRTEENTH SIBYLLINE ORACLE, recently the subject of a detailed commentary by D. S. Potter,<sup>1</sup> is one of our most important sources for the history of the mid-third century, and is the only contemporary narrative to survive from the period, with the exception of the so-called *Res Gestae* of Shapur. The prophetic obscurity and apocalyptic tone of the *Oracle* make it a particularly difficult text to read. Any information that can be gleaned about its background is precious, both for students of Roman history and for those interested in the cultural relations of the Near East in antiquity.

The text clearly breaks into two parts (Potter 151, 328), and both show a local, eastern perspective on the world. The first part (to line 154) ends by celebrating the brilliant victory of a “sun-sent priest” over the Persians that will magnify “the city of the sun.” This refers to the man known to us from his coinage as Uranius Antoninus of Emesa, clearly a member of the family that produced the ‘Syrian’ emperors earlier in the century.<sup>2</sup> It is not the only occasion when the author’s viewpoint is decidedly regional.<sup>3</sup> The second much shorter part of the *Oracle*, an additional section by a new author with no interest in the fate of Antoninus, ends by hailing the rise of Palmyra under its prince Odaenathus. The text is the product of a region where Greek and Semitic culture meet and mix in a

<sup>1</sup> D. S. POTTER, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sybylline Oracle* (Oxford 1990: hereafter ‘Potter’), whose text is used below.

<sup>2</sup> H. R. Baldus, *Uranus Antoninus: Münzprägung und Geschichte* (Bonn 1971); J.-P. Rey-Coquais, “Syrie Romaine, de Pompée à Dioclétien,” *JRS* 68 (1978) 58; F. Millar, “Empire, Community and Culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians, Jews, and Arabs,” *JJS* 38 (1987) 157ff.

<sup>3</sup> For the Syrian angle see lines 33, 59–63, 64–73, 89–100, 108f, 111, and esp. 119–36 (Shapur’s campaign of 252).

fascinating and increasingly competitive way.<sup>4</sup> The local Semitic languages of the region had never been in real danger from the Greek that spread outward from the cities. It is indeed from this time that one of them, the dialect of Aramaic known as Syriac, began from its center in Edessa to rival Greek as the lingua franca of Syria and Mesopotamia in later antiquity. In the period covered by the *Oracle* another Aramaic dialect was being accorded a status equal to Greek in the public inscriptions of Palmyra, or Tadmor as it was known in its native tongue. The present note focuses on the second part of the *Oracle* that finishes with the exaltation of Palmyrene power. The identification of some of the figures mentioned rather obliquely in this part of the text is aided by a passage known to scholars from the Talmudic commentary on the Book of Genesis. With regard to one of these figures, the rebel general Macrianus, some implications of the relationship between the rabbis and the prophet remain to be brought out that touch on the origin of our author and on his expectations.

The main body of the *Oracle* (7–154) is concerned with the history of the Roman Empire from the reign of Gordian III to the repulse of the Persians before Emesa in 253. The *Oracle* enthuses that around "the city of the sun ... Persians will endure the terrible threats of Phoenicians" (150–54). Emesa was famous for its cult of the sun and, though the sixth-century historian John Malalas ('the eloquent') of Antioch attributes the successful halting of Shapur to a priest of Aphrodite called by the dynastic name of Sampsigeramus, the *Oracle* does better in connecting the priest with the major cult, as we see earlier in the figure of the emperor Elagabalus (Hdn. 5.3.3–8, 5.6–10, etc.). From the standpoint of our author the breakdown of Roman power and the assaults of Persia were disastrous for the region, and he signals as especially catastrophic the terrible events of the reign of Trebonianus Gallus (lines 103–44). But, though Syria suffers, the Third-Century Crisis is ultimately a crisis for Rome and not for Emesa and Syria, which are saved by the "sun-sent priest" who comes "last of all." The additional, second part of

<sup>4</sup> A provocative introduction to this subject can be found in P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge 1977) 60–70; see also F. Millar, "Paul of Samosata, Zenobia and Aurelian: The Church, Local Culture and Political Allegiance in Third-Century Syria," *JRS* 61 (1971) 1–17, and (*supra* n.2) 143–64; G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge 1990) 29–40.

the *Oracle* displays a similar attitude. Roman military disorder and warfare with Persia led to the glorification of another local dynast who triumphs over both. The first reference in this section is to the joint rule of Valerian and Gallienus and the destruction of Valerian by Shapur (lines 155–61). The *Oracle* then speaks of the rise of a “well-horned stag” (ἠυκέρως ἔλαφος, εὐκεράωτ’ ἔλαφον) who “desires to feed his stomach on venom-spitting beasts.” The stag is destroyed by a “sun-sent, dread, terrifying lion breathing much flame,” who also destroys the “great venom-spitting beast” and additionally the “bow-footed goat” (162–69).<sup>5</sup> The conclusion is drawn that, “Fame attends him; he, perfect, unblemished, and awesome, will rule the Romans, and the Persians will be powerless” (169ff). To name these figures we must turn to the Talmudic commentary on Genesis, the *Bereshit Rabbah* (*Genesis Rabbah*)

At *Bereshit Rabbah* 76.6 the rabbinical commentators on Gen. 32:11 (“Save me, I pray, from my brother Esau, for I am afraid that he may come and destroy me, sparing neither mother nor child”) are moved to quote and explain through the figures of recent history the first vision of Daniel from Dan. 7:8 as follows:

‘I considered the horns, and, behold, there came up among them another horn [QRN], a little one’—that is, the son of NSR—‘before which three of the first horns were uprooted’—that is, MQRWS, QRWS, and QRYDWS—‘and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things’—that is, the wicked kingdom which imposes levies on all the nations of the world.<sup>6</sup>

The *Bereshit Rabbah* achieved its final form some time later than 400.<sup>7</sup> But earlier commentators are its foundation and there is, as is familiar, a good deal of interest focused on Rome, whose hostility to Israel the rabbis found conveniently foreshadowed in the biblical conflict between Esau and Jacob.<sup>8</sup> Thus at

<sup>5</sup> The Mss. reading τοξοβάτην τε τράγον adopted by Potter.

<sup>6</sup> J. Theodor and C. Albeck, ed., *Bereshit Rabba* (Berlin 1927) II 903. Freedman’s translation (adapted).

<sup>7</sup> H. L. Strack and G. Stemmer, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh 1991) 304.

<sup>8</sup> On Esau-Edom as Rome in Talmudic and other Jewish texts see H. Fuchs, *Der geistige Widerstand gegen Rom in der antiken Welt* (Berlin 1938) 68–73; N. R. M. de Lange, “Jewish Attitudes to the Roman Empire,” in P. D.

*Bereshit Rabbah* 76 the state labeled the "wicked kingdom" is undoubtedly the Roman Empire. In this context a secure identification of the names given to the four "horns" was made long ago. The "Son of NSR" certainly refers to Odaenathus of Palmyra, who is known from a bilingual Greek and Palmyrene inscription as "son of Hairanos, [son of] Vaballathos, [son of] Nasor."<sup>9</sup> Odaenathus is mentioned several times under this name in Jewish exegetical literature and always critically.<sup>10</sup> The editor of the *Bereshit Rabbah*, Theodor, observed that, given the identity of Odaenathus, the names MQRWS, QRWS, and QRYDWS would be Fulvius Macrianus and his son Junius Quietus, who rebelled in 261 after the defeat and capture of Valerian, and the renegade Antiochene, Kuriades, who was thought to have assisted Shapur in his invasion and sack of Antioch in 252. These three men preceded Odaenathus in their bids for power—it was indeed partly through Odaenathus' intervention against Quietus on behalf of Gallienus that Odaenathus reached his greatest influence (*H.A., Gall.* 3.1f, *Tyr. Trig.* 15.4), and they could thus be said to have been "uprooted" before him.

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A. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker, *Imperialism in the Ancient World* (Cambridge 1978) 269ff; M. Hadas-Lebel, "Jacob et Esaü ou Israël et Rome dans le Talmud et le Midrash," *RevHistRel* 201 (1984) 369–92.

<sup>9</sup> *CIS* II 4202 (J. Cantineau, *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre* VIII [Beirut 1936] no. 55): in the Palmyrene: BR HÿRN WHBLT NSWR, "son of Hairan, Wahab-Allat, Nazor."

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Babylonian Talmud, *Kethuboth* 51b (volume I in Epstein's translation (London 1961): "in comparison with Ahasuerus [the good king] he was a highwayman but in comparison with an ordinary robber he was a king"). On the Jews' hatred of Odaenathus, Odaenathus' destruction of Nehardea in Babylonia (probably in the early 260s, and the rivalry between Palmyrene and Jewish commercial interests in this period, see J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia II: The Early Sassanian Period* (Leiden 1966) 49–52; E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule* (Leiden 1976) 531ff; A. Oppenheimer, B. Isaac, and M. Lecker, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden 1983) 442–45. Why Odaenathus is not called Odaenathus is unclear (a relative has been proposed, but this seems unlikely; see Neusner); perhaps Nazor was preferred as being a more readily understandable Aramaic (nick-)name (meaning 'chirper': M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, etc.* [New York 1903] 930 *s.v.* NSR) in contrast to Odaenathus, which, like the majority of Palmyrene names, is Arabic (though note that the word of which it is a diminutive—*uḡaina* ['ear']—is also found in Aramaic as 'WDN); see J. K. Stark, *Personal Names in the Palmyrene Inscriptions* (Oxford 1971) *s.v.*

The proposed names fit those in the text of the commentary fairly well, if one or two changes are taken into account. Kuriades is more usually known in our sources as Mariades (or Mareades).<sup>11</sup> Since the name Mariades is plainly based on the Semitic root MR 'lord' (cf. e.g. the Palmyrene name MRY'), the form 'Kuriades' simply represents a Greek translation of this element,<sup>12</sup> and must have been chosen by the commentators in preference to Mariades in order to make plain the connection with the Hebrew root QRN, 'horn', which occurs in the text of Daniel.<sup>13</sup> The identification of QRWS with Quietus is helped by accepting Lieberman's plausible suggestion that the name was corrupted in the Mss. by a scribe who again wanted to make it conform with QRN.<sup>14</sup> In respect to this desire for conformity Macrianus posed no difficulties (his name had the correct consonants) and the identification of Macrianus with the rabbi's MQRWS is quite certain.<sup>15</sup>

Of the figures mentioned as significant at this time by the rabbinical commentators on Daniel's vision, Kuriades/Mariades is probably referred to in lines 89–100, 111, and 122 of the *Oracle* as the Syrian ληστής who assists the Persians, though there is still room for doubt on this point.<sup>16</sup> Our problem concerns the identity of the characters in the additional second section. The "beasts" are of course Shapur and the Persians. Regarding the others Potter has reargued (340ff) persuasively that the "well-horned stag" must be Macrianus, that the "bow-

<sup>11</sup> Cyriades in *H.A., Tyr. Trig.* 2; Mareades/Mariades: *Amm. Marc.* 23.5.3; Malalas 12 p.295f D.

<sup>12</sup> For such translations cf. e.g. *CIS* II 3971, where the name of Wahab-Allat (the son of Odaenathus) is correctly rendered as Athenodorus. Mariades seems to be a Greek onomastic formation in -αδης on the Semitic form: see Potter 269 n.199, reporting a suggestion of G. W. Bowersock; see further *IGLS* VII 60 n.2; J. Starcky, in D. Schlumberger, *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest* (Paris 1951) 174 no. 79; H. W. Wuthnow, *Die semitischen Menschnamen in griechischen Inschriften und Papyri des vorderen Orients* (Leipzig 1930) 72f.

<sup>13</sup> So S. Lieberman, *JQR* 37 (1947) 38 n.349 (= *Texts and Studies* [New York 1974] 161 n.349).

<sup>14</sup> Variants for QRWS in the Mss. are QSRWS, QWDWS, QYRWS.

<sup>15</sup> Note among other Mss. variants MQRWN.

<sup>16</sup> See Potter 268–73 for a discussion of objections. The persistent memory at Antioch that Mariades was executed there for his treachery (J. F. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* [London 1989] 170f) at least calls into question the report of the *Oracle* that the "brigand" escaped over the Euphrates (97f).

footed goat" is Macrianus' praetorian prefect, Callistus, and that the "sun-sent lion" is Odaenathus. Odaenathus' identification rests on the company he keeps. With reference to Callistus, Potter suggests that the phrase "bow-footed" should be interpreted as a play on his additional cognomen, Ballista. This is intelligible enough, though why he is a goat remains unclear.<sup>17</sup> The "well-horned stag" must be Macrianus, because "the Aramaic *mqrw*=stag."<sup>18</sup> That is not quite right, however, and the play on words between MQRN (the actual Aramaic form in question) and Macrianus calls for one or two observations that have escaped notice.

The trilateral noun QRN 'horn' is common in the Semitic languages (though the relationship with Indo-European words for 'horn' is unclear). Lieberman, however, suggested (*supra* n.13: 37=160) that MQRN was the particular form that facilitated the rabbis' identification of one of the horns of Daniel's dream with Macrianus. This word is attested only in biblical Aramaic at Psalm 69:32, where it describes a calf and signifies not 'stag' but 'horned'/'gehört'. The suggestion that Hebrew MQRN is the basis of the rabbis' conjecture is credible; but it is unlikely that the author of the final section of the *Oracle* made his own pun upon it. If he had done so, he would have been someone at home in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, something that would complement Rzach's belief that the author of the (main body of the) *Oracle* was a Jew.<sup>19</sup> But this cannot be right given the Jews' great hatred at this time for Palmyra in general and for Odaenathus in particular.<sup>20</sup> The *Oracle's* celebration of Odaenathus rules out Jewish authorship of the additional section. What, then, is the meaning of the pun on Macrianus' name? For the answer we should be looking to contemporary spoken

<sup>17</sup> A. Rzach, "Sibyllinische Orakel," *RE* II.A2 (1923) 2160, suggested an emendation to τοξοβόλον τ' ὄναγρον with reference to the common type of ballista called the 'ass' (Amm. Marc. 23.4.4), but Potter (343) is right to reject such a change (though we might translate τοξοβάτην 'bow-legged').

<sup>18</sup> Potter 341 n.413, *cf.* 151. Odaenathus did not of course actually destroy Macrianus (that task fell to Gallienus' general, Aureolus, in Thrace), but his intervention against Macrianus' forces in the East gave the *Oracle* the licence to say he did.

<sup>19</sup> Rzach (*supra* n.17) 2160ff; so recently, J. Geiger, rev. of Potter, *CR* N.S. 42 (1992) 17, arguing, after Rzach, from Χαναναίους in line 56.

<sup>20</sup> Expressed especially in the course of later third-century discussions on whether to admit Palmyrene proselytes (Babylonian Talmud, *Yebamoth* 16a-17a; *Niddah* 56b): see Neusner (*supra* n.10) 52. n.2.

forms of Aramaic. Syriac later offers a clue here in the adverbial formation (on an imagined verbal root) *maqarnâ'it* that bears the metaphorical sense of 'sideways', 'obliquely'.<sup>21</sup> A formation similar to MQRN could easily have existed in other current Aramaic languages such as Jewish or Christian Palestinian or Palmyrene, though none is recorded.<sup>22</sup> Certainly, if we accept the existence of the pun in the *Oracle* (and the identification of Macrianus and the others is really dependent on so doing), we must acknowledge that the author knew Aramaic. It is surely not then impossible that he anticipated at least some of his audience would know it too and would be able to understand the play between Macrianus and the word for 'horned' in their native language. For just as a Syrian background well suits the main author of the *Oracle* and his enthusiasm for Emesa and for its leader Uranius Antoninus, so the second author's knowledge of Aramaic well serves his love for Odaenathus and Palmyra, which is particularly noteworthy for the extensive use it made of Aramaic in its official epigraphy until it was sacked by Aurelian in 272 and then brought firmly under the rule of Rome.

The second author is not affected by the spirit of crisis that worries the first as he grieves over Syria's losses before the rise of her Emesene avenger. In the personal perspective of the second author there is no crisis at all. Life is simple. The Romans will submit to Odaenathus, while the Persians will be rendered powerless. This prediction suits political events from the mid-260s to the early 270s. We must try to see these from an eastern, not a Roman perspective. When the *Oracle* prophesies that Odaenathus "will rule the Romans," he does not mean he will do so as vicegerent of the emperor. Whether or not Odaenathus was appointed by Gallienus *corrector totius orientis*, as some ancient Greco-Roman sources suggest and some moderns have believed on the basis of a Palmyrene inscription toasting him as "restorer of the whole East,"<sup>23</sup> there is no reason to suppose that Odaenathus was restrained by titles

<sup>21</sup> R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford 1901) 3751 *s.v.* (ninth century).

<sup>22</sup> One should note that there is no concrete evidence of a dialect of Aramaic being used in the region of Emesa (which is the viewpoint of the main body of the *Oracle*), though it is highly likely that there was one.

<sup>23</sup> *CIS* II 3946=Cantineau (*supra* n.9) III 19; C. Clermont-Ganneau, *RBibl* 29 (1920) 400, followed among others by Potter 381-94 (Appendix IV).

or that our author thought he was. The Palmyrene inscription was in fact erected in 271 after Odaenathus' death by his old generals during Palmyra's rebellion. It is about the image and the promise of absolute power. Similarly, for our author power resided solely in Odaenathus. He aimed either to encourage the prince during his lifetime or to galvanize his wife and son, Zenobia and Vaballathus, after his death, just as his generals did by recalling their lord as "restorer" and "king of kings." That he appended his remarks to an oracle claiming greatness for Emesa is not hard to understand. Emesa grew rich on the caravan trade coming up through Palmyra and it was probably from there that Vaballathus issued the rare coins staking his claim as Augustus at the apex of Palmyra's glory.<sup>24</sup> For the author of the *Oracle* Emesa's independence was a natural precursor to Palmyra's.<sup>25</sup>

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*August, 1993*

<sup>24</sup> H. Seyrig, "Caractères de l'histoire d'Émèse," *Syria* 36 (1959) 184-92, and *Mélanges Michalowski* (Warsaw 1966) 659-62.

<sup>25</sup> I would like to thank Fergus Millar for his comments on this note.