

Redivining the *Sortes Vergilianae*

Until very recently, scholars have believed that the phrase *sortes Vergilianae* referred to a divination practice, in which the practitioner would choose a line of Vergil at random and use that to tell his future. Recent scholarship has pointed out that no mention of the *sortes Vergilianae* are found outside of the infamous *Historia Augusta* until the Renaissance period, with the conclusion that the author of the *Historia Augusta* simply made up the practice in order to play a literary game with the reader (Hamilton 1993, Katz 1994, Ekbom 2013). While I certainly do not believe that the *Historia Augusta* is an entirely factual collection of biographies, I do attempt to show that the author did not invent the divination practice in order to play a literary game, and that the phrase does point to a historical belief among Western Romans in Late Antiquity.

In fact, I propose that *sortes Vergilianae* is not a set phrase at all, but only the word *sors* with the adjective *Vergiliana*, pointing to oracles included by Vergil in his poetry. Indeed, the author only uses the phrase *Vergilianas sortes* once, in the life of Hadrian (2.8) and otherwise only uses the phrase *sortibus Vergili* in the life of Alexander (6.808-812). The other times that the so-called *sortes Vergilianae* appears, the phrase is not even mentioned. Every single instance of Vergil's lines being used in an oracular context is tied to passages that are literally oracles in the *Aeneid*. In my interpretation, this points to a practice, not of taking Vergil's lines out of context to apply them to one's life, but to reinterpreting oracles that Vergil had already espoused. This is due to the belief in Vergil's infallibility, which was taught in rhetorical schools and was rampant among pagan circles, but demonstrably evident in Christian circles as well.

Contrary to previous historiographical claims that we find no other references to the *sortes Vergilianae* in Late Antiquity besides the *Historia Augusta*, with this new reinterpretation of the phrase it is now possible to see the practice in action. I present both pagan and Christian interpretations of the *Fourth Eclogue*, where one pagan panegyrist cites the poem as proof that

Constantine will bring about a golden age and where Constantine himself cites the poem to demonstrate that Vergil knew of Christ's coming to earth. In addition, Augustine discusses the phenomenon of finding the *vim sortis* within the pages of a poet. In the West, given Vergil's fame, this reference no doubt includes Vergil within it.

The reinterpretation of the phrase *sortes Vergilianae* also opens the door to new research within medieval studies, if accepted. While it is claimed that no reference to them exists within medieval times, if there exists instances of the reinterpretation of Vergilian prophecy to medieval concerns (such as the belief that the prophecy that Rome will last forever actually belongs to the Roman Church (Thompson 1906)), it is possible to see this as a continuation of the belief in the *sortes Vergilianae*. If such evidence is strong enough to be accepted, this would draw a strong enough line from Late Antiquity, through the Middle Ages, and into the Renaissance where the bibliomantic interpretation of the *sortes Vergilianae* becomes prevalent, thus filling in a large gap in the history of Vergil's reception.

Bibliography

- Ekbom, Moa. "The Sortes Vergilianae: A Philological Study," 2013. Unpublished Dissertation.
Uppsala Universitet.
- Hamilton, Richard. "Fatal Texts." *Classical and Modern Literature* 13 (1992): 309–36.
- Katz, Phyllis. "The Sortes Vergilianae: Fact or Fiction?" *Classical and Modern Literature* 14 (1993): 245–58.
- Thompson, James Westfall. "Vergil in Mediaeval Culture." *The American Journal of Theology* 10, no. 4 (October 1, 1906): 648–62.