
Mithridates and the Oracle of Hystaspes: Some dating issues



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Abstract

The dating of the so-called Oracle of Hystaspes or its Vorlage has for long been a major problem among scholars. This article attempts to articulate some issues present in the Oracle and similar or identical ones known to have been used in Mithridates' VI Eupator propaganda. This can help not only dating the Oracle itself but also solve dating problems in Persian apocalyptic texts, whose dating may be pushed backwards.

I. General remarks and aims of this article

1.1. Problems connected with the sources

The *Oracle of Hystaspes* (OH) 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 quotation by five different authors, although it has also been suggested by scholars that a text of that name never existed¹.

Three different hypotheses have been put forward. According to the first, the OH is a mere fabrication of the different authors who quote it, according to the second we are dealing with scattered generic material simply grouped under the same pseudonym but according to the third hypothesis what the five authors quote constitutes the remains of what was once a complete text (or at least a complete oral tradition put down into written form).²

¹Essentially, what is now called “the *Oracle of Hystaspes*” (henceforth abbreviated as “OH”) 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.

²For practical reasons, I direct the reader to three basic works – Hans Windisch. *Die Orakel des Hystaspes*. (Amsterdam, 1929); John R. Hinnells. “A study of the oracle of Hystaspes” in: Eric J. Sharpe and John R. Hinnells (eds.). *Man and his Salvation: Studies in Memory of S. G. F. Brandon* (Manchester, 1973) and finally David Flusser. “Hystaspes and John of Patmos” in *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem, 1988). The section devoted to Hystaspes might be of interest to the general reader in: Franz Cumont and Joseph Bidez. *Les mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque* (Paris, 2007) (1-volume reprint of the original 2-volume set of 1938). The bibliography on the theme is much bigger but these three or four titles cover the main issues at stake reasonably well as an introduction. As for other abbreviations, I shall use DI for Lactantius' *Divine Institutions*, SibOr for the *Sibylline Oracles*, BY for the *Zand-i Vohuman Yašn* (the late commentary on the *Bahman*

To agree with the first hypothesis looks absurd to me; how could five separate authors (namely Justin, Clement, Lactantius, Lydos, and Aristokritos), ranging from the Second to the Sixth centuries CE come up with different parts of a whole, all of them fabricated and yet somehow coherent?³

The second hypothesis looks more reasonable, especially if we take into account the fact that Sibylline material is also grouped under the simple name of ‘the Sibyl’. Nothing could prevent, *in principle*, the same happening to Hystaspes⁴.

The third one is by far the most important, due to the number and quality of the arguments involved. But again, nobody so far has figured out, no matter how ingeniously the resources, the reconstruction of the OH from what is left⁵. It seems to me that this is due to the fact that it always looks difficult to try to reconstruct a whole text from leftovers; this happens because scholars are, understandably, more comfortable with a whole-matching group of fragments than with a jigsaw puzzle missing many parts and, especially in the field of comparative studies in religion, to mere wishful-thinking.⁶ We may just end up with what we wanted to be in the first place, and no matter how good the scholar, this is not sound procedure.⁷

In any case, what I am arguing about in this article relates to the dating of the OH or of its *Vorlage* – I think it is reasonable to push it backwards a little more than the middle of the First Century CE and go to around 140–90 BCE, to Asia Minor (a location most scholars agree with as probable); in short, to the time of Mithridates VI Eupator, king of Pontus.

It also seems that a relation to Mithridatic propaganda is more sound than to posit than a connection with BCE Zoroastrian sources for the whole OH without further arguments than those regarding a supposed general Eastern hatred for the Romans. The legacy of Eddy (Samuel K. Eddy. *The King is Dead. Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism*

Yašī). GrBd stands for the *Greater Bundahišn* and TY for the *Tištīrya Yašt*. The fragments of Greek historians follow standard usage from Jacoby; the edition used is Felix Jacoby. *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*. Leiden: Brill, 2003. CD-ROM edition; for Old Testament pseudepigrapha, Charlesworth’s edition was used (James H. Charlesworth (ed.). *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. New York: Doubleday, 1983–1985. Vol.1. henceforth OTP 1).

³The same point made by Hinnells – so much knowledge could hardly be mere coincidence on the part of the compilers or users; on the contrary, it betrays the eyes of commentators acquainted with detailed knowledge. Cf. Hinnells, *op.cit.* pp. 139–142. For the OH, I have followed Hinnells’ translations whenever possible, compared to those of Windisch and checked them against my own observations. No complete – i.e. commercial – edition of the OH exists so far, unfortunately.

⁴The point that we are dealing with written material now lost rather than mere oral traditions is made stronger in the testimonies of Clement of Alexandria (who mentions the OH together with the apocryphal *Peter’s Teaching* in his *Stromata* 6.5) and Justin the Martyr (who mentions capital punishment for those who *read the books of Hystaspes, or the Sibyl, or the Prophets* in his *Apologia* 1.44).

⁵This is effectively what was tried by Hinnells in his 1973 chapter quoted above; while on one hand the attempt to group similar material is to be praised (e.g. comparing the remains of the OH to Persian apocalyptic lore), I cannot entirely agree with his conclusions, for the sources available do not appear to be enough of the same kind. We have different qualities and quantities available on each side – maybe too much Persian apocalyptic material on one side and too little testimonies of the OH on the other.

⁶This is the main point emphasised by Flusser. After Windisch’s seminal work in 1929, he claims that scholars forgot to go back to the sources and think for themselves, referring instead to Windisch’s book. Cf. Flusser, *op.cit.* pp. 399–400.

⁷On such dangers, cf. especially Bruce Metzger. “Considerations of methodology in the study of the mystery religions and early Christianity” in: *Harvard Theological Review* 48, 1955 p.9 – especially what he calls “demonstrative borrowing”, which is catching what fits and leaving behind what does not. Interesting reading on the theme is also Herbert J. Rose. *Concerning Parallels*. Frazer Lecture, (Oxford, 1934) and Günther Klein. “Der Synkretismus als Theologisches Problem” in: *Rekonstruktion und Interpretation*. (München, 1969).

334–31 B.C. (Lincoln, 1961), notwithstanding the scope and quality of his work, seems to work against sound methodology on this specific issue.

1.2. Political issues and the OH

This last observation regarding East–West antagonism was necessary to state that we are left with a lot of fragmentary material whose wholeness cannot be proved (or if it can, this is not the place to discuss it), but nonetheless whose *dating* can be tackled with much more confidence. It is in this sense that the third issue raised at the beginning of this article, namely the political one, is what will be discussed – treating the OH as kind of Sibylline oracle does not have support in any kind of evidence, nor does the idea that it is a mere fabrication of five different authors working at widely varying places in both time and location.

As a tentative hypothesis, the politically turbulent Asia Minor of the Second to First Centuries BCE looks as the most suitable place according to all investigations proceeded so far. The centuries old syncretism, the well-known Persian colonies, the Jewish communities, the story of Alexander as related by Lucian of Samosata and the presence of Sibylline references⁸ all point to Asia Minor as the strongest candidate for a birthplace of the *Vorlage* to the OH, if not to the text itself.

2. Possible place of origin for the OH

2.1. Why Asia Minor?

Among the many uncertainties surrounding the OH the ones related to its birthplace are easier to deal with than those of authorship and date.⁹

The main reasons for that have already been put clearly both by orthodox defenders of the OH as a Zoroastrian product and by the heterodox position of Flusser, ascribing it a Judeo-Christian origin in the form it came down to us, especially in Lactantius' testimony.¹⁰ Scholarship on the OH takes into account, so far, the following aspects of what was left of the text: I will put them forward first and discuss them later on.

First of all, the idea that the OH is to be inserted among other non-clearly defined “resistance” literature can easily turn into a kind of circular argument: the many times that Hystaspes is quoted in our five surviving sources together with the Sibylline oracles are “proof” of that statement, which is, in turn, “proof” that both Hystaspes and the

⁸Cf. Albert de Jong. *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*. (Leiden, 1997), pp. 30–32 for the inscriptions in Commagene displaying many syncretistic features; cf. also Antonin Causse. “La propagande juive et l'hellenisme” in: *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 3, 1923, pp. 399–400 (both taken from Wilhelm Dittenberger's *Aktualisierende Konkordanzen zu Dittenbergers Orientis Graeci inscriptiones selectae (OGIS) und zur dritten Auflage der von ihm begründeten Sylloge inscriptionum graecarum* (new edition by Wilfried Gawantka). (Hildesheim / New York, 1977). Cf. inscriptions 383, 384 and 385; Martin West. “Darius' ascent to Paradise” in: *Indo-Iranian Journal* 45, 2002, pp. 51–57 and as for the Sibyls, at least two of them were ascribed to Asia Minor, namely the Erythrean and the one from Marpeesus. Cf. John J. Collins. “Introduction to the Sibylline Oracles” in: *OTP* 1 p. 317.

⁹Flusser points this out in relation to the references in John of Patmos (Flusser, op.cit. pp. 397; 401; 452); Eddy is closer to the point while we can discard Syria and Egypt. The “Second Wicked King” in DI 7.14 is Syrian – ruling out a Saviour simultaneously fulfilling the role of wicked destroyer coming from the same place would not make any sense.

¹⁰Flusser, op.cit. p. 398.

Sibyl were guises for the “cultural resistance” against Rome.¹¹ And the issue of what exactly “resistance” can mean is a particularly tricky one – are we to understand that each and every reader / hearer of the OH was a potential warrior against Roman domination? Or could it be the other way round – the supernatural promises to be found in texts such as the OH would lead to a sort of “political quietism”, as some have argued?¹² This question is far from resolved and ultimately we would need to know far more than we do about the conditions of reading in Antiquity, both of apocalyptic material and of literature at large.

2.2. *Mithridates VI Eupator*¹³ and the political use of oracles.

Broadly speaking, for several reasons it is reasonable to compare what is in the OH to what we know about the spreading of oracles in Mithridates’ time (all portraying him as an Asiatic avenger against Rome) and to the content of the Sibor. First, Lucian’s testimony is crucial, since it shows that at least *one* “author” in Asia Minor was spreading on an enormous scale oracles of doom throughout the Mediterranean at the *terminus post quem* for the OH.

Second, many issues common to Hystaspes and other apocalyptic material can with some degree of certainty be assigned to Asia Minor; this is especially true of *Revelation* (ascribed to someone in Patmos writing to churches near Ephesus), but also to the oracle-monger Alexander of Abnoteichos as described by Lucian of Samosata (who accordingly had a *bureau* in Rome but his chief office for producing and spreading oracles was in Chalcedon, at Abnoteichos).

Third, besides textual similarities, the existence of big and organised Persian colonies throughout Asia Minor would have also facilitated the exchange of ideas between Zoroastrians (Hystaspes is, after all, a Zoroastrian figure) and other peoples resistant to Greek or Roman dominion.¹⁴

The fourth argument leads to political events: Asia Minor had foremost political and strategic importance, hence the frequent trouble arising there. Examples would be Aristonicus’ role after Attalus III bequeathed his kingdom to Rome in a suspicious will and, more than other events, the immense turmoil caused by Mithridates in his three wars against Rome from 88–63 BCE.

The main issue relating to the OH in the context of cultural resistance in Asia Minor has been raised before by other scholars, even if briefly. It seems to start with a fragment by Poseidonius of Apamea, the polymath who lived between 135 BCE – 51 BCE and was born in Apamea, Syria. It reads thus:

¹¹See especially the old but still very useful book by Eddy, *op.cit.* p. 164 and also Harald Fuchs. *Der geistige Widerstand gegen Rom in der antiken Welt* (Berlin, 1938), pp. 2–8; Elemér Kocsis. “Ost-West Gegensatz in den Jüdischen Sibyllinen” in: *Novum Testamentum* 5, pp. 105 ff. 1962 and John J. Collins. *Studies in the Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*, (Missoula, 1974). Quotings of the Sibyl appear twice in Lactantius’ testimony, in DI 16.11 and 16.13.

¹²Cf. Martin Goodman. *A classe dirigente da Judéia. As origens da revolta judaica contra Roma, 66–70 B.C.* (Rio de Janeiro, 1994), p.98 ff.

¹³Although there was a considerable number of kings called “Mithridates” in Asia Minor, I shall henceforth refer to Mithridates VI Eupator simply as “Mithridates” for practical purposes.

¹⁴Cf. among others Norman Cohn. *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come. The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, (New Haven / London, 1993). pp. 157, 166, 223–224. For a generic view and for more specific studies, Stephen Mitchell. *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, (Oxford, 1995) (2 vols.). Vol.1, pp. 11–35; Vol.2, pp.29–30 and Eddy, *op.cit.* p. 16.

Every city agrees to superhuman honours for him and invokes the god-king (or calls him to their aid): on every side oracles and prophecy rule over the inhabited world.¹⁵

The fragment is very important when inserted in two different contexts and shall be our departure point for the present discussion.

3. “Cultural resistance” and Roman penetration in Asia Minor

3.1. the theme of cultural resistance to Rome

To begin with, the theme of cultural resistance to Rome (and Mithridates can be rightfully acknowledged as the greatest champion of the Hellenistic cause against Rome); secondly, because Mithridates himself was involved to a great extent in Persian affairs and at least for propaganda purposes, with Mithraism – he was sometimes hailed as “Mithradates”, “the gift of Mithra”.¹⁶ Incidentally, this use of propagandistic issues may be better studied by looking at the parallels between the fragments on his propaganda agenda and the smallest testimonies to the OH, namely the ones from Lydos and Aristokritos, for they relate the OH more clearly to the use of astrology and thus, to Mithraism itself.¹⁷ So I hope to show how Mithridates could have used material akin to the proposed *Vorlage* of the OH and thus move back the earlier dating proposed until now, as stated at the beginning of this article.

3.2. Dating of the OH

Dating of the OH has so far been understood in the following terms: the OH as it came down to us must be earlier than its oldest witness, Justin (i.e. *circa* 150 CE); from then on backwards things become more challenging to date—by analogy to Rev 11–13, it was written at a time when the Temple still stood up, i.e. 70 CE¹⁸ or earlier. Given then, that highly messianic hopes circulated among the people of Jerusalem from the 37 BCE siege by Herod, onwards; as they did from the 70 CE siege, the theme could well date from that far back.¹⁹ Now, if this reasoning applies to the events in 37 BCE, I see no reason to ignore the possibility of similar behaviour during Pompey’s invasion in 63 BCE; what I am proposing is merely to push further back the speculative dating proposed by Flusser for the OH, to its *Vorlage*, or even to the text as it once was in written form. This would fit not only with Pompey’s final tour in the East but also with the end of the Mithridatic Wars, and could place our sources or appropriation of themes somewhere between the end of the Second Century BCE and the late Seventies BCE.

¹⁵Jacoby FrGH 87F36. So the fragment in Poseidonius: συνέτρεχον οὖν πρὸς τὴν θεάν ταύτην ἄνδρες γυναῖκες παῖδες, τὰ κάλλιστα προσδοκῶντες παρὰ Μιθριδάτου, ὅποτε Ἰσθμίων ὁ πένης καὶ τὰς ἐρανικὰς | ποιησάμενος ἄκροάσεις διὰ τὸν βασιλέα σιληπορδὸν διὰ τῆς χώρας καὶ πόλεως πομπεύει. συνήτησαν δ’ αὐτῷ καὶ οἱ περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον τεχνῖται τὸν ἄγγελον τοῦ νέου Διονύσου καλοῦντες ἐπὶ τὴν κοινὴν ἐστίαν καὶ τὰς περὶ ταύτην εὐχὰς τε καὶ σπονδὰς, [...].

¹⁶For a recent and up-to-date work on Mithridates, cf. Adrienne Mayor. *The Poison King: the Life and Legend of Mithridates, Rome’s Deadliest Enemy*, (Princeton / Oxford, 2010). Since I am using an electronic version of the text, I will quote the “locations” rather than “pages”; this is how content appears in the Kindle reading device. I apologise in advance for any inconvenience caused to readers.

¹⁷Cf. Roger Beck. *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, (New York / Oxford, 2006) and by the same author, *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology*. Blackwell. Electronic source, e-book, 2007.

¹⁸Flusser, op.cit. p.392 ff.

¹⁹Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 14.470 and *Bellum Judaicum* 1.347, according to Flusser’s reasoning.

In other words, many of the themes present in the OH *may* be related to the world of Mithridates and to the syncretistic *milieu* of Asia Minor during his lifetime. And this adds to the discussion not only of the dating of the OH itself, but also to Sibylline material and Persian apocryphal.

And methodologically, even the most skeptical critics of Iranian influence on Jewish literature²⁰ would agree that it is bad scholarship to base one's conclusions *only* according to the dating of the text *as a written object*. The testimonies are late-dated, but this does not preclude them from portraying at least a *Vorlage* of the OH. If scholarship should be based solely on the dating of texts as material artifacts, we would be closer to archaeology than to history – and we are dealing with the *content* of the OH rather than the dating or the material provenance of the sources available.

4. Miracles, portents and omens regarding Mithridates and the OH

4.1. Mithridates's use of oracles as propaganda

As seen, Mithridates himself appears to have made use of oracles as forms of propaganda; besides, some natural accidents may have come in very handy for his purposes. Some occurred during his reign, some are rightly or wrongly ascribed to his birth.

Taking a closer look at both categories, we have a first group of portents. Mithridates was struck by lightning while young, as a modern author explains:

*The widespread belief in the ancient Near East that heavenly fire or light would announce the birth of a redeemer helps explain another story told about Mithridates. When he was a baby, lightning struck his cradle. Mithridates was unharmed, but the lightning left a distinctive scar-in the shape of a diadem or crown-on his forehead. Some said the lightning strike inspired his nickname, Dionysus, after the Greek god of liberation, change, and new beginnings. Dionysus had been marked for greatness by Zeus's divine lightning while still in the womb.*²¹

Also in his year of birth 135 BCE a comet appeared in the sky, like the star of Bethlehem,²² as stated in Justin's testimony in his *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' History*:

*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.*²³

²⁰E.g. Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin. "Apocalypse juive et apocalypse iranienne" in: Bianchi and Vermaseren, *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell'Impero romano*, p.753 ff.

²¹Mayor, *op.cit.* loc. 502–511. Cf. Athenaeus 5.211–215 (FrGH 87F36): καὶ χειροτονηθεὶς ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀθηναίων πρεσβευτῆς, ὅτε εἰς Μιθριδάτην τὰ πράγματα μετέρρει, ὑποδρομῶν τὸν βασιλέα τῶν φίλων εἰς ἐγένετο, μεγίστης τυχῶν προαγωγῆς, Appian's *Roman History*, "Mithridaic Wars" 3.10 for the reference to Dionysus; and also in the same passage from Poseidonius quoted above. Dionysus would be associated to other revolts against Rome – cf. Barry Strauss. *The Spartacus War*. (New York, 2009), p.73.

²²This is reflected in Mithridates' coinage; on one of his coins there appears Pegasus (related to Mithra in Asia Minor syncretistic traditions and to horses at large), in others the star and the crescent, this last one a traditional symbol in Asia Minor. The star is also associated to Ma, Mithras and Ahuramazda. Cf. Deniz B. Erciyas. *Wealth, Aristocracy and Royal Propaganda under the Hellenistic Kingdom of the Mithradatids in the Central Black Sea Region of Turkey*. (Leiden, 2006), pp. 139–141.

²³Justin, *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus*, 37.2: *Huius futuram magnitudinem etiam caelestia ostenta praedixerant. Nam et eo quo genitus est anno et eo quo regnare primum coepit stella cometes per utrumque tempus septuagenis diebus ita luxit, ut caelum omne conflagrare uideretur.*

And this mysterious announcing of a saviour-King was just the first of many linking Mithridates to well-spread prophecies, and this would all work to his own benefit – in Hellenistic thinking, the more mysterious a thing the more divine it was.²⁴ Falling comets find their place among the signs of the end in DI 7.19: in the SibOr, outstanding passages are 2.34–38: “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 to men who strive in contest”.²⁵ SibOr 3.349 also mentions a “comet” related to signs of dread – but “dread” to whom?

A number of Mithridates’ coins reflected these phenomena – both for Greeks and Romans, falling stars or comets would sound much more like predictions of evil than of good;²⁶ how would Mithridates make use of stars as positive omens? Maybe one should handle them as mere symbols for Asia Minor rather than propagandistic omens.

4.2. Babylonian interpretation

The answer lies partly in the fact that in the Babylonian Near East, contrary to Greco-Roman tradition, comets were sometimes hailed as good omens; here as in many other cases Mithridates would play both Greek-rescuer and Eastern-avenger. According to the more traditional arguments that see apocalyptic literature as a form of resistance against Hellenisation, the use of such items of propaganda by Mithridates poses a formidable puzzle,²⁷ since in Zoroastrianism stars, comets or shooting stars would be associated with cosmic disorder and not with anything good – i.e. not with Ahuramazda. Indeed, to date there is no definite answer regarding the use of a comet as a good omen by Mithridates’ supporters inasmuch as the king was familiarised with Zoroastrianism and had so many Persian-origin subjects to account for and that supported him – i.e. there is no definite explanation on how this omen could have had a good usage for propagandistic purposes.²⁸

²⁴Dieter Georgi. “Forms of religious propaganda” in: Hans-Jürgen Schultz (ed.). *Jesus in His Time*, (Philadelphia, 1971), p.129. It should be pointed out that even if a very-much anti-Mithridates biased historiography has for long thought that the comets were just a rumour spread by Mithridates’ minions to enhance his stature as a leader (and in this case, relating to a theme with strong Persian overtones – cf. *Bundahišn* 30.18), the physical reality of the 135 BCE comet was recognised by astronomers since at least 1783; cf. Mayor, loc.417–425. At least since Reinach’s work of 1890 (*Mithridate Eupator, roi de Pont*. Paris: Firmin-Didot) this view has been more common than not; besides Western astronomers, Han Chinese scholars registered comets in 135 and 119 BCE. It is also worth to take a look at John T. Ramsey. “A catalogue of Greco-Roman comets from 500 B.C. to A.D. 400” in: *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 38:131, 2007, p.179 for comets, historical events related to them and also confirmation by non Western sources (in this respect cf. Ho Peng Yoke. “Ancient and mediaeval observations of comets and novae in Chinese sources” in: *Vistas in Astronomy*, 6, 1962).

²⁵Here as in the translations of the SibOr I have relied on Collins in his edition in OTP 1, and checked it against the Greek text according to the edition of Alfons Kurfess. *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*, (Munich, 1951), pp. 54–56.

²⁶Another good example of a dual use of the omen lies in Josephus’ account of the falling star and comet before the fall of Jerusalem, in *Bellum Judaicum* 6.289. The SibOr also provide a fine catalogue of misfortunes sometimes related to astral phenomena, but then we are dealing with *very* composite sources, involving many layers of redaction.

²⁷For the traditional views, cf. Fuchs, op.cit. and Eddy, op.cit.

²⁸Cf. among others, Antonio Panaino. *Tištrya*. (Rome, 1990–1995) 2 vols.; vol.2. p.19; Simo Parpola. “Mesopotamian astrology and astronomy as domains of the Mesopotamian ‘wisdom’” in: Hannes D. Galter (ed.). *Beiträge zum 3. Grazer Morgenländischen Symposium (23.-27. September 1991)*, (Graz, 1993) (arguments also found to some extent in: David N. MacKenzie. “Zoroastrian astrology in the Bundahišn” in: Carlo G. Cereti and Ludwig Paul (eds.). *Iranica Diversa*. (Rome, 1999), MB 7–10); Hermann Hunger. “Stars, cities and predictions” in: Charles Burnett et alii (eds.). *Studies in the History of the Exact Sciences in Honour of David Pingree*. (Leiden / Boston, 2004), pp.18–28 (dealing with BM 47494 tablet); for the recent and precise confirmation of the observation of the

4.3. *Uncommon astral phenomena*

These are reflected in the OH much the same as in Persian material: examples would be, in the OH fragments of Lactantius, our best witness for the present purposes:²⁹

OH / DI 7:

[...] at that time the Son of God would be sent by the Father, to destroy all the wicked and set free the pious [...] these things are true and certain, being foretold by the unanimous annunciation of all the prophets, since Trimegistus, Hystaspes and the Sibyls have all foretold the same things.³⁰

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 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.³¹

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 light [...] There shall suddenly fall from the heaven a sword, that the righteous may know that the leader of the sacred warfare is about to descend.³²

BY:³³

The year, month and day [will be] shorter.³⁴

The Sun's rays will be very level and much concealed; the Sun will show a melancholy sign.³⁵

The Moon will change her colour, and [there] will be melancholy, darkness and gloom on earth.³⁶

On the night the prince will come to the earth, stars will rain from the sky.³⁷

comet, cf. Christopher B. F. Walker. "Halley's comet in Babylonia" in: *Nature* 314 (18), 1985, pp.576–577 and on the same *Nature* issue, Francis R. Stephenson *et al.* "Records of Halley's comet on Babylonian tablets", pp. 587–592. More bibliography on this theme can be found at the end of this article.

²⁹Although Flusser "is not convinced" by the similarities between Persian apocalyptic lore and the passages in Lactantius (without telling why), Hinnells' comparison is of the foremost importance; the table here used is partially taken from his work. Cf. Flusser, *op.cit.* pp. 399; 442 and Hinnells, *op. cit.*

³⁰DI 7.18.

³¹DI 7.16.

³²DI 7.19.

³³Efforts to reconstruct an Avestic *Bahman Yasht* from the late commentaries we have remain problematic – even if a *zand* is, in theory, a commentary to an Avestic book. The main trouble with this issue here is that so far no Avestic *yašt* on *Vohu Manah*, or *Bahman* ("the Good Thought") was found: for a full discussion of the many dating problems involved, cf. Carlo G. Cereti (ed.). *The Zand i Wahman Yasn: a Zoroastrian Apocalypse* (Rome, 1995), pp.14 ff.

³⁴BY 4:16.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶BY 6:4.

³⁷BY 7:6. This passage is much longer and when put into context it yields to so many arguments that shall be discussed in another, forthcoming paper.

The GrBd 33:30 should be mentioned in passing for dealing with similar omens: there will be a terrific rain of hail and snow out of seasons (GrBd 33.30; this rain is called *malkūsān* in Pahlavi). The sun will stand at the zenith in the sky (GrBd 33.32 and the same theme in 32.34).

4.4. Justice the Sun and Kingship.

In a sense, all this reflected the idea, already old by Mithridates' time (i.e. mainly dating from the Second to the First Centuries BCE) that tied together ideas of justice with the Sun and with kingship.³⁸ It should also be remembered that Dionysus has lore attaching him to Asia, among other things as a conqueror of India – a feat ascribed in some fashion to Alexander as well, one of the role-models for Mithridates.³⁹

Most of all, the resemblance between the reference to the comet in the BY and the lightning in Lactantius appears to fit perfectly with what is described regarding Mithridates' birth; we have seen that it is not possible anymore to get away with the portents regarding his birth as mere fabrication, even if it were some sort of anti-propaganda. The comets actually appeared.⁴⁰

Now, what would be the link between an apocalyptic text that came down to us in manuscripts of a later date (the BY), Lactantius' testimony (also very late, from the Fourth Century CE) and a *possible Vorlage* of the OH running back to Mithridates' time?

The answers are to be found in the reasonings behind the testimonials. First of all, Aristokritos and Lydos both attribute to Hystaspes a role akin to that of Zoroaster in terms of Chaldean magic, wisdom lore and astrology; this was the staple reading of characters in a world where the Greeks remained "solidly monolingual"⁴¹ but at the same time, pseudepigraphy was never randomly used in Antiquity.⁴² The role of Hystaspes as an enlightened prophet in Persian literature may have been more important in his relation to the future overthrow of Rome than anything else.⁴³ The passages of Lydos and Aristokritos read, respectively: "That the Chaldeans of the school of Zoroaster and Hystaspes, and the Egyptians, took the days of the week from the number of the planets"; and

³⁸Anders Hultgård. "Figures messianiques d'Orient comme sauveurs universels dans le monde gréco-romain" in: Ugo Bianchi and Maarten J. Vermaseren. *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell'Impero romano: atti del Colloquio internazionale su la soteriologia dei culti orientali nell'Impero romano, Roma, 24–28 settembre 1979*. (Leiden, 1982), pp.734 ff.

³⁹For the lore around Dionysus and India, cf. Euripides. *Bacchae* 14; Cicero. *De natura deorum* 3.21–3.23; more specific references in Apollodorus, 2.29 and Strabo points that he is not sure whether it was Hercules or Dionysus who built up the "pillars of India", not found by the Macedonians in their wanderings; cf. Strabo, *Geography* 3.5.

⁴⁰The issue regarding the coins as bad omens and associated with Mithridates is three-fold: first, it deals with Tigranes II the Great of Armenia coinage (cf. footnote 49); secondly, we know with near certainty that at least at the time of Mithridates' early successes Halley's comet actually appeared (cf. footnote 27); a third – even if unlikely aspect – is that if the comets are so feared by Romans and Greeks (Seneca's remarks would be a good example), their use by Mithridates may be a kind of threatening image – associating him with the Romans' innermost fears.

⁴¹Arnaldo Momigliano. "The fault of the Greeks" in: *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, (Middletown, 1987), pp. 12–13.

⁴²Just for reference, cf. David G. Meade. *Pseudonymity and Canon: an Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition*, (Grand Rapids, 1987), pp. 1–2; Jeremy Duff, *A Reconsideration of Pseudepigraphy in Early Christianity*. DPhil. Theology Faculty, University of Oxford, 1997. p. 176 and Frederik Torm. "Die Psychologie der Pseudonimität im Hinblick auf die Literatur des Urchristentums" in: Norbert Brox (ed.), *Pseudepigraphie in der Heidenischen und Jüdisch-Christlichen Antike*. (Darmstadt, 1977), p. 112.

⁴³A point rightly emphasised by Flusser, op.cit. p. 394.

In the fourth place [...] he [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 sets down a very abbreviated chronology from Adam until the days of Zeno, in which he asserts that the fulfillment 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 halt.⁴⁴

These two passages are very scarce in information about Hystaspes himself or even to the OH; but they relate “Hystaspes-like wisdom”, so to speak, to a (supposedly) Persian *milieu*, or at least a Hellenised Persian one – the sort of Greek-imagined Zoroastrianism depicted, among others, by Diogenes Laertius.⁴⁵ It is time now to turn back to Persian literature and to the parallels it may provide for us.

5. The remnants of the OH and other apocalyptic texts possibly related to the Mithridaïc Wars

5.1. Persian references to Hystaspes as a prophet

The core passages in Persian literature regarding Hystaspes's role as a prophet are all to be found in some Persian pseudepigraphic texts, where *Vištasp* (the original Persian name of Hystaspes, regardless of the matter whether he was the mythical protector of Zoroaster or the father of Darius I) is used as a synonym to prophetic gifts – this would be of foremost importance in casting him as “hero” of the OH in the Christian or Judaic garb in which it came down to us. In the *Wizirkard i Denig* 19 *Vištasp* appears as a diviner, although only in his sleep, this differs from details in the extant OH.⁴⁶

The question-answer form, as introduced by *Vištasp* in the *Wizirkard i Denig* (“This pure religion, how long will it last?” etc.; *Jamasp* interprets for king *Vištasp* a dream in much the same fashion that Daniel did for Nabucodonosor) is also a point to be taken into consideration regarding the extant OH – traces of its form were, presumably, still to be seen in Jewish mediaeval apocalypses.⁴⁷ In terms of the visionary process itself, we should take note that the sage *Jāmāsp* interprets for king *Vištasp* a dream in much the same fashion that Daniel did for Nebucadnezar.⁴⁸

⁴⁴Aristokritos. *Theosophy*, probably Fifth-Century CE. I follow Hinnells translation, as quoted in Bidez and Cumont, Vol.2 p. 363. A point very much in accordance with Zoroastrian doctrines at large. For more information on the text and commentary, cf. Karl Buresch. *Klaros. Untersuchungen zum Orakelwesen des späteren Altertums*, (Leipzig, 1889), p.95 ff.

⁴⁵*Lives of the Philosophers*, 1.8 cf. Jacoby (FGrH 690F5): Τὴν δὲ γοητικὴν μαγείαν οὐδ' ἔγνωσαν, φησὶν Ἀριστοτέλης ἐν τῷ Μαγικῷ καὶ Δείνων ἐν τῇ πέμπτῃ τῶν Ἱστοριῶν· ὅς καὶ μεθερμηνευόμενον φησὶ τὸν Ζωροάστρη ἀστροθύτην εἶναι· φησὶ δὲ τοῦτο καὶ ὁ Ἐρμόδωρος.

⁴⁶Tord Olsson. “The apocalyptic activity. The case of Jāmāsp Nāmāg” in: Daniel Hellholm. (ed.). *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979*, (Tübingen, 1983), p.32. For the dating, cf. Marijan Molé. *La légende de Zoroastre: selon les textes Pehlevis*, (Paris, 1967), p.9.

⁴⁷A remarkable resemblance to be found in 4 Ezra, and also in a much later one from the seventh century, the *Book of Zorobabel*, dated from 629 CE and where a Persian also plays a very important role – albeit in the form of the “wicked king” Kawad.

⁴⁸Anders Hultgård. “Forms and origins of Iranian apocalypticism” in: Hellholm, op.cit. p. 401. Flusser sees in the episode another commonplace, for which I found no parallel in Persian literature: according to him, the

5.2. The OH and apocalyptic writing's relationship?

A further issue is the relation that can be established between the OH and other apocalyptic material. This has been abundantly studied; however most of the parallels deal with post BCE texts.⁴⁹ This is easily explained – the latter are more plentiful and thus parallels of any sort are easier to confirm or deny. But for our purposes – namely, to see whether the datings proposed for the OH can actually be stretched back to Mithridates reign, most of these are useless.

A particularly useful passage is SibOr 3.611–618:

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.

And then again 3.652–654:

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 [...]

A more complete description of Mithridates' political career would be difficult to find: the reference to a "King from the Sun" may relate to the East at large, but the eagles appear, interestingly, in coinage of a contemporary of Mithridates and together with a comet;⁵⁰ the Sun-image could also relate to Mithra, or we could be dealing with both issues here.

The reference to a blazing eagle coming from Asia could mean a "burned" or "fired" bird symbolising Rome, especially after Mithridates' early successes and Tigranes' coinage in Armenia. I would say that we have here a superposition of an early *stratum* related to Mithridates as avenger of Asia added to his murderous lore *later* ascribed to Nero – otherwise the whole *Nero redivivus* legend makes very little sense as an Easterner.

Exceptions are SibOr 5.137 and 214 ff; 8.70–71; 12.78 ff., which have so far also been read in connection with the *Nero redivivus* legend (and by inference of Flusser, to Rev 12–13). We saw that SibOr 3 also relates Rome's ruin to omens in the form of a sword-shaped comet.⁵¹

reference to the "boy Vishtasp" was common in "many Persian texts", none of which is quoted, much less cited by Flusser. His idea is, however, that originally *Vištaspa* and the boy in Lactantius', remains of the OH, were one and the same person, "dismembered" in two so as to fit into Danielic lore (e.g. Dn 2). This would be more convincing were the passages with the "boy Vistaspa" to be found anywhere, and if passages of others (including Zoroaster) interpreting dreams were not common in Persian literature.

⁴⁹For a sample of such studies I redirect the reader to the already quoted works by Cumont and Bidez, Eddy, Hinnells and Windisch as the most important and introductory ones.

⁵⁰Vahe G. Gurzadyan and Ruben Vardanyan. "Halley's comet of 87 BC on the coins of Armenian king Tigranes?" in: *Astronomy & Geophysics* 45 (4), 2004, p.6. In a personal communication, Vardanyan concludes that he is also clueless regarding the comet – it is traditionally a bad omen, but we must take into account that we do not know when the coins were minted, either.

⁵¹Something with a vague resemblance is to it is found in SibOr 5.512 ff., but with much less importance to cosmic omens; that the whole legend would find some use to the Parthians themselves is indicative of its credibility in the East. Cf. Tacitus, *History* 2.8 – "About this time Achaia and Asia Minor were terrified by a false report that Nero was at hand. Various rumours were current about his death; and so there were many who pretended and believed that he was still alive. The adventures and enterprises of the other pretenders I shall relate in the regular course of my work. The pretender in this case was a slave from Pontus, or, according to some accounts, a freedman from Italy, a skilful harp-player and singer, accomplishments, which, added to a resemblance in the face, gave a very deceptive plausibility to his pretensions"; *Sub idem tempus Achaia atque Asia falso exterritae velut Nero adventaret, vario super exitu eius rumore eoque pluribus vivere eum fingentibus credentibusque. ceterorum casus conatusque in contextu operis dicemus: tunc servus e Ponto sive, ut alii tradidere, libertinus ex Italia, citharae et cantus peritus, unde illi super similitudinem oris propior ad fallendum fides, adiunctis desertoribus, quos inopia vagos ingentibus promissis corruerat, mare ingreditur [...].* Note

But if there are any relations to be established between the earlier strata of SibOr 8 and the OH, the case for “the murderer of his mother” should be revised in the light of Mithridates’ biography. Here again there is nothing exceptionally new to scholarship, and I propose just a closer look at the “history” of Mithridates early years.

5.2. *Members of Mithridates’s family were assassinated*

Mithridates’s father, Mithridates V, was poisoned probably in 120 BCE and after the event his wife Laodice took charge of Pontus’s affairs; she had Mithridates VI’s brother as a puppet ruler. Mithridates VI Eupator fled while young and, after resorting to military support, took the throne back for himself; one day, probably in 115 BCE, he locked his mother and brother up in their luxury country house and soon after both died, probably poisoned.⁵²

Mithridates was well-known in Antiquity for being supremely versed in poisons and their effects; he may have acquired this knowledge (which is reminiscent of Attalus III’s hobby as a botanist) while he was away from home, afraid of other conspiracies on the part of his own mother who might kill him as well.

If there is any truth in the story, it would place Mithridates in a position almost as prominent as Nero for the title of “mother-killer” displayed in SibOr 8, and may even allow us to go further back in the sources related to the OH. It must be stated, however, that this is an *indirect* assumption that rests on the idea that there are common themes shared between SibOr 8 (in the form that it came down to us in) and with parts of the OH their origins are unknown; this is a highly speculative idea but I see no reason why Nero should deserve the title more than Mithridates besides his insertion in a chronological line (as in SibOr 8). We may be dealing here with an older *stratum* linking matricide to Mithridates before it was linked to Nero, the case is made all the stronger by the Eastern-avenger which is ascribed to both but which appears very strange in Nero’s story.

5.3. *Persian links*

Another point to be taken into consideration is that both for Mithridates and for the *Nero redivivus* legend there is a common ground of Parthian or Persian links – both would come from the East and avenge Eastern lands against Rome. It should be noted that the *Nero redivivus* theme appears – as one should expect in texts so varied as the SibOr – in a different shape from SibOr 5.118 ff. to 142; the reference to Rome is unequivocal.

A gory aspect of Mithridates’ rule has also been overlooked so far and is, in my opinion, paralleled both by the OH or its *Vorlage* and Persian apocalypticism: the amazing link

that besides actual resemblance to Nero’s artistic abilities, the imposter came exactly from Pontus in one version of the story, a meaningful link.

⁵²Pompeius Trogus talks about “seven years” of Mithridates’ absence from Sinope, but according to other data available this should be understood as a symbolical, rather than actual number (Justin’s *Epitome* of Pompeius Trogus, 37.2). As for the killing of his mother and brother, among others, cf. Appian, *Roman History*, “Mithridaica Wars” 16.112: “He was bloodthirsty and cruel to all – the slayer of his mother, his brother, three sons, and three daughters”. Cf. also the account by Memnon 22.2 (FrGH 434F1): φονικώτατος δ’ ἐκ παιδὸς ὁ Μιθριδάτης ἦν· τὴν γὰρ ἀρχὴν τρισκαίδεκάτης παραλαβὼν, μετ’ οὐ πολὺ τὴν μητέρα, κοινωνὸν αὐτῷ παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς τῆς βασιλείας καταλειφθεῖσαν, δεσμοτηρίῳ κατασχὼν βίαι καὶ χρόνῳ ἐξανάλωσε· καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἀπέκτεινε.

between Aquillius execution in 88 BCE and the double themes of the final judgment (retributive, in Persian terms) and that of Roman avarice in the administration of the East.⁵³

Not long afterward he [Mithridates] captured Manius Aquilius, one of the ambassadors and the one who was most to blame for this war. Mithridates led him around, bound on an ass, and compelled him to introduce himself to the public as 'maniac'. Finally, at Pergamon, Mithridates poured molten gold down his throat, thus rebuking the Romans for their bribe-taking.

I would like to point out that, given Mithridates' family ties with syncretistic cults in Asia Minor and his acquaintance with Zoroastrianism, it becomes rather difficult to explain the presence of the star as a positive omen in his coinage. On the other hand, the execution of Aquilius by molten metal and not by any other means may be related in a straightforward manner to the final ordeal of Zoroastrianism – where, for the just, molten metal will be like warm milk, but for the evil-doers it will be like true molten metal.⁵⁴

The portents related to the end of time are not only related to cosmological signs, but also to earthly ones. Here again, *ex-eventu* prophecy, real events and even the magnificent expenditures of Mithridates as champion of the Greek cause mingle together: compare the OH in

*Cities shall be utterly overthrown, and shall perish; not only by fire and the sword, but also by continual earthquakes and overflowings of waters.*⁵⁵

With the promises of SibOr 4.129; 140 ff.

Then indeed an earthquake will destroy at once Salamis and Paphos [...] Woe to miserable Cyprus, a broad wave of the sea / will cover you when you have been tossed up by wintry blasts.

Strabo has a lot to say on similar events taking place in Syria and Asia Minor.⁵⁶

All this looks as if the script of the Sibylline passages matches real events still vivid in the memory of a Diaspora Jew (as the author of OrSib 4 likely was) what we can read in the witnesses to the OH and, more importantly, to Mithridates' deeds and propaganda.

6. In conclusion, the evidence discussed in this article suggests that, some elements used in the political propaganda of Mithridates VI Eupator could be related to the Oracle of Hystaspes or its *Vorlage*: My main arguments are: 1. The comparison of portents in the sky to Persian material can be ascribed to a later era, given recent analysis of Babylonian and Chinese observations of Halley's comet; 2. By comparison with events in Mithridates' life that can be paralleled to SibOr 3 and 8; as they come down to us, these are literary products of a later stage, but many *strata* are to be found underneath the text which we

⁵³Eva Sansford. "Contrasting views of the Roman Empire" in: *American Journal of Philology* 58, 1937, pp.437–438 and 443; also by the same author "Roman Avarice in Asia" in: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 9, 1950. The theme of Roman greed is well displayed in SibOr 8.37 ff. and the gruesome story of Aquillius' execution is related by Appian, "Mithridatic Wars" 12.21: "Finally, at Pergamon, Mithridates poured molten gold down his throat, thus rebuking the Romans for their bribe-taking"; Μετ' οὐ πολὺ δὲ καὶ Μάνιον Ἀκύλιον, τὸν τῆσδε τῆς πρεσβείας καὶ τοῦδε τοῦ πολέμου μάλιστ' αἴτιον, ἐλὼν δεδεμένον ἐπὶ ὄνου περιήγετο, κηρύσσοντα τοῖς ὀρώσιν ὅτι Μάνιος εἶη, μέχρι ἐν Περγᾶμω τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ κατεχώνευσε χρυσίον, δωροδοκίαν ἄρα Ῥωμαῖοις ὀνειδίζων. It should be noted that Aquillius' father was even more greedy in his exploitation of the East.

⁵⁴GrBd 36.18–19.

⁵⁵DI 7:16.

⁵⁶Strabo, *Geography* 12.8 speaks of this great catastrophe, and of other convulsions at an earlier period: "[...] for if any other country is subject to earthquakes, Laodiceia is, and so is Carura in the neighbouring country".

have received. This takes us again to the discussion of the relationship between text as content and text as material object, as discussed before.

So, this article aims to point out some similarities between the OH (or for that matter, its *Vorlage*) and other ones related to Mithridatic propaganda. Further support for this view derives from the *Sibylline Oracles*, inasmuch as they persistently present the theme of Asia avenging Rome's misdeeds. The portents regarding Mithridates' birth, crowning and kingship are strikingly similar to some related in what is left of the OH. Such similarities suggest that the Oracle of Hystaspes or its *Vorlage* was already extant in the second century BC as part of the Iranian apocalyptic tradition. <vicente.dobroruka@gmail.com>

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