

Call for Papers: Symposium Peregrinum XI for 2024

L'Università degli Studi della Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli”

Santa Maria Capua Vetere (Capua), Italy

June 11-13, 2024

<https://www.facebook.com/symposium.peregrinum>

History-Changing Prophecies: **Prophecy and Oracles that Did or Would Have Changed History – Real, Fictitious, and Fiction**

Organizers: Francesca Ceci, Patricia A. Johnston, Attilio Mastrocinque,
Claudia Santi, Elena Santagati, and Gaius Stern



Biacca Camillo Miola, *The Oracle*, 1880.



The “cave of the Sibyl,” Cumae

Prophecy in its multifaceted aspects will be the topic of the 2024 Symposium in Capua.

In the ancient Greek and Roman world prophecies influenced the course of history or failed to be influential and, even in this case, consequences ensued, at least in historical and political discourses. Understanding, misunderstanding, or not believing prophecy recurs as a theme in many famous literary and historical accounts, ranging from Cassandra in the Trojan War and in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, Croesus causing a mighty empire to fall when he made war on the Persians, the foretold death of Cambyses in Ecbatana (Syria, Hdt. 3.64), the Theban quest for revenge on Athens (Hdt. 5.79-80), Athenians trusting in wooden walls against Xerxes (while a few fortified the Acropolis with a wooden wall), the people of Velletrae receiving an oracle that one of their citizens would rule the world, so they

repeatedly fought Rome and lost centuries before Augustus was born (Suet. *Div. Aug.* 94.2), Father Liber and Nigidius Figulus on separate occasions telling Gaius Octavius (pr. 62) that his son would rule the world (Suet. *Div. Aug.* 94.5), Celaeno foretelling to the Trojans that hunger would force them to devour their very tables in Italy (*Aen.* 3.251-57), Delphi warning Nero to beware of the 73rd year (Suet. Nero 60.3), to the false and real prophecies of Alexander the Quack-Prophet in Lucian of Samosata and so on. The emotional and tragic style in history writing delighted in exploiting prophecies and in the expectation of their fulfillment. Thucydides and Polybius argued against such an historical style, although it was extremely popular among readers and had its first great model in the *Histories* of Herodotus (see Croesus, Cambyses, and the wooden walls above, but also how the Heraclids should have vengeance on the Mermnadae in five generations in Lydia, 1.13, Chilon of Lacedaemon warning Peisistratus's father not to have a son, 1.59, etc.).

Joseph Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (1978) says that most surviving Delphic oracles were straightforward, but Herodotus has distorted how we think of them. Many true prophecies are known, but so are many *ex eventu* prophecies, i.e. invented prophecies. Political personalities or groups, and numerous historians concocted detailed prophecies pretending that they were uttered before the events, such as the many signs pointing to Augustus and later to Vespasian as rulers of Rome. The stories of vague and ambiguous prophecies, open to different or even antithetic interpretations are better known. And some were unclear in order to give the oracle an escapeway in case of a mistake.

Greek historiography, poetry, and literature generously deal with prophecies at some turning points of history or literary plots, especially in tragedies. The Roman authors followed both the Greek model of “dramatic historiography” and that of “factual historiography” by giving different roles to prophecies. The Romans and Italic peoples had a different approach to prophecy. They resorted rarely to famous Greek oracles, and especially that of Delphi, but often consulted the oracles of *sortes*, based on lot by means of knucklebones and collection of short oracular texts just called *sortes*. The *libri Sibyllini* were often consulted in Rome to obtain pieces of advice by Apollo. The *sortes Praenestinae* were extremely famous but almost every city in Italy had its own collection of *sortes*. We know little of the content of these little prophetic texts and the few preserved *sortes* are mostly ambiguous and simple pieces of advice. The task of interpreting these divine answers fell on experts and priests such as the Roman *decemviri sacris faciundis*.

Lucian of Samosata, in his work *Alexander, the False Prophet*, unveiled the process of creation of an oracle by a clever man, which investigates the creation and spreading of fictitious oracles. The Roman government once organized a meticulous study of the Sybilline Books to cast out spurious prophecies. Phlegon of Tralles collected oracles and

prophecies set up in the Hadrianic period when the reliability of oracles was discussed and questioned. Even later, the emperor Julian (r. 361-63), tried to restore the status of many of the oracles of polytheist Greece and Rome, which had been persecuted under his immediate predecessors.

Prophecy was a major attribute of the god Apollo in both Greece and Italy. Many events in history, literature, and mythology hinged upon a consultation with the gods to obtain a favorable prophecy governing personal or political decisions. In the *Iliad*, many characters are able to prophesy the destruction of Troy or, in a few cases, the deaths of famous individuals (Calchas, Achilles' talking horse Xanthus, etc.), but several fail to foretell their own deaths in the Trojan War, even as they warn their comrades of their demise (starting with Merops and his sons Adrastus and Amphius, *Il.* 2.830 ff.). Some prophecies fail to come true. Cornelius Lentulus heard that three Corneliis would rule Rome and expected to be the third, after Cinna and Sulla, but Cicero executed him. Hadrian executed two possible rivals "fated to be emperor" (*HSA Hadr.* 23.2). Was Apollo at fault here for failing to prophesy the future correctly, or did mankind find a way to foil destiny? Some other unlikely individuals rose to power, such as Agathocles tyrant of Syracuse (a penniless but talented wretch), Claudius, and Vespasian (both younger brothers). Hermes first told Circe that Odysseus would prove immune to her magic tricks and then, years later, intervened to give his great-grandson *moly* (mandrake) with which he invalidated Circe's spells. Tiberius had heard the prophecy that Galba would rule Rome in his old age, but decided not to execute him because it would happen long after Tiberius had died. Did Apollo change Tiberius's mind to ensure the validity of his own prophecy?

In many stories in epic literature and mythology, hearing a prophecy about parricide or an overthrow, an individual tried to change the future by exposing an infant. The child always survives to fulfill the prophecy (Acrisius, Jason, Oedipus, Paris, Cyrus the Great, Romulus and Remus, etc.), and these prophecies changed history every time. In literature, exposing a newborn never works; in real life, a bear or wolf almost always eats the baby. How do infants of prophecy beat the odds? We are curious to hear your thoughts on prophecies that changed the story (mythological or literary) if fictional or history if it was real. This year we will entertain topics pertinent only to the Greeks, Romans, Etruscans, and peoples that have important relationships with them. The conference proceedings will be published, hopefully in 2025. For those who are unable to come to Italy, there will probably be a Zoom session. If Gaius is unlikely to come to Italy, he will again organize those sessions.

The Symposium 2024 will meet in Santa Maria Capua Vetere at L'Università degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli and may include one session in Caserta, outside

Naples, either in the royal palace or in a seat of the University. Excursions will be organized to visit sites in and near Santa Maria Capua Vetere. Capua is an important archaeological and historical site where an amphitheater, a Mithraeum, and an ancient gate (the Arch of Hadrian) are located. An interesting museum is in Caserta and another two in Capua. Very near are a large range of other Roman sites: Nola is 29 km away; Herculaneum 40 km away, and Pompeii just 55 km.

Deadline: **15 April 2024** midnight CA time. Please send abstracts by 31 March so that we can figure out if we have enough participants to add June 10 for more papers.

All conference papers will be read in English. If you need help translating into English, Gaius and Patricia will help you translate (for free) before the conference. Please do not wait until the last minute to take advantage of this offer. Publications in English now reach a wider audience than in any other language. Therefore, it is wise to publish in English. Please feel free to contact the organizers with questions.

Getting to Santa Maria Capua Vetere:

You can fly into Naples or Rome and take a bus or train to a SMCV. Trains from the Naples airport are about 1 hr 10 min with one change of lines. From the Fiumicino airport, one must ride to Termini and change trains to go to SMCV, the journey is about 2 ½ hrs if one takes the faster train to Termini.

Ciao!

Francesca, Patricia, Attilio, Elena, Claudia, Gaius, Laszlo,

Registration Form

SYMPOSIUM PEREGRINUM 2024

June 11-13, Santa Maria Capua Vetere (Capua, Italy)

Name _____

University affiliation (if applicable) _____

Country _____

Telephone/Fax _____

Email _____

Submission Title _____

Abstracts must be in **English** and should not exceed 350 words / one-half a page.

Mode of Travel to SMCV: car train airplane in _____ airport and _____ to SMCV

Arrival: _____ June Time: _____ please add my arrival to the arrivals webform

We will have an arrival web form so you can see when others are arriving to travel together

Please submit this form online via **website** by 15 April 2024 or mail to all three of us.
Abstracts sent by email to only 1 of us will not be accepted.

<https://www.brandeis.edu/classics-mediterranean-studies/news/symposia-peregrina.html>

Direct questions to

Prof. Patricia A. Johnston, johnston@brandeis.edu

Prof. Gaius Stern, gaius@berkeley.edu

Attilio Mastrocinque, attilio.mastrocinque@univr.it

