

Porphyry, Steuco and the Journey of Oracles between *Symphony* and Conflict

1. Introduction

In 303 AD, the Emperor Diocletian, uncertain about how to react against the Christians, consulted Apollo's oracle at Didyma, a sanctuary close to Miletus. The pagan god answered, according to Lactantius, as the Christians' enemy (*divinae religionis inimicus*: Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 11, 6-8 ed. Creed). However Lactantius omits the oracular text. Eusebius rhetorically records another oracle from Apollo, probably dating 299 AD and stemming from Daphne near Antioch¹:

Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 2, 50 (ed. Winkelmann, *GCS*)

τὸν Απόλλω τὸ τηνικαῦτα ἔφασαν ἐξ ἄντρου τινὸς καὶ σκοτίου μυχοῦ οὐχὶ
δ' ἐξ οὐρανοῦ χρῆσαι, ὡς ἄρα οἱ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς δίκαιοι ἐμπόδιον εἶεν τοῦ
ἀληθεύειν αὐτόν, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο **ψευδεῖς** τῶν τριπόδων τὰς **μαντείας**
ποιεῖσθαι.

Apollo at the time declared, it was said –from some cavern or dark recess
and not from heaven– that the righteous on earth prevented him from
speaking truly, and that why he was composing **false oracles** from the
tripods.

The term “the righteous on Earth...” is clearly a Christian textual change. Arnobius himself argues that Zeus at Dodona addressed the Christians as *profani* (*Adversus Nationes* 1, 26, 3)². As a result of these oracles, the so-called Great Persecution against Christians began³. In a similar way, some years later, in 313 AD, the oracle of Zeus *Philios*, according to Eusebius' narration (therefore a Christian source), was used against Christians during Maximinus Daia's persecution (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 9, 3 ed. Bardy).

Oracles, as they are known, have been frequently used in response to dangers, employed for political ends or as an arbitrator in disputes; consequently, oracular texts as well as prophecies have been employed to deal with the threat to an established system. In this paper I aim to shed light on the reasons why and how oracular wisdom and knowledge, or what may be better termed as the ancient oracular texts, were employed against a threat. I will focus on two historical phases, namely the IIIrd-IVth and the XVIth c. AD, which were both characterised by the existence of a concrete threat. In the first case, it was the “internal” threat of Christianity menacing a Hellenic/“pagan” world (and the “external” threat of the approaching barbarians); in the second case it was the “internal” threat of the Protestant Reformation which was considered a menace to the Catholic world, while there was also the “external” threat of the infidels, i.e. the Turks endangering the Christian world. Specifically, I will concentrate on symphonic essays as

¹ Elizabeth De Palma Digeser, “Lactantius, Eusebius, Arnobius: Evidence for the Causes of the Great Persecution”, *Studia Patristica* 39 (2006): (33-46) 33-36.

² Pier Franco Beatrice, “Un oracle antichrétien chez Arnobe”, in *Mémorial Dom Jean Gribomont [1920-1986]* (Roma, 1988), 107-129.

³ See Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (Roman Imperial Biographies; New York, 2004).

cultural, but also political, social and emotional responses to threats, by exploring the ways in which oracular texts are used as a defence mechanism against the threat of a new, dangerous system. Some questions arise: for what reasons and in which contexts are oracular texts considered to be useful in demonstrating a cultural *symphony*⁴? How did the perception of oracular texts change across different regions and eras? Are they still seen as a divine or sacred voice? What kinds of strategies are employed to introduce these texts? And, finally, how did oracles work as means of unity, agreement and cohesion in societies risking fragmentation and division? In order to answer these questions, let us begin our journey.

2.1 Porphyry and the *symphony* through oracles

The concept of a *symphony*, or harmony of knowledge has a long history. Concerning Late Antiquity, it suffices here to cite some philosophical concepts typical of the (neo)-Platonic tradition: the philosopher Damascius (VIth c. AD) cites a treatise on the *symphony* between all theologies written by Asclepiades⁵; Syrianus (Vth C. AD) wrote⁶ a (lost) ten-book work (later integrated by Proclus' *scholia*) on the *Agreement between Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and the Chaldaean Oracles* (Συμφωνία Ὀρφέως, Πυθαγόρου, Πλάτωνος πρὸς (ci. Kroll, περὶ mss.) τὰ λόγια)⁷. In this latter case *the Chaldaean Oracles* are inserted into a *symphonic* system within the framework of previous ancient wisdom. The idea is that of the existence of a harmony between theologians and philosophers, a golden chain of knowledge transmission from Orpheus (mystagogy), to Pythagoras (initiation) up to Plato (science)⁸. According to Marinus, the philosopher Proclus (Vth c. AD), in a sort of Dionysiac ecstasy, harmonised barbarian and Greek theology⁹. The idea of a cultural harmony between all Greek and Oriental theologies was, as is well known, the main hermeneutic task of Vth century Neoplatonists. However, the *topos* of the cultural significance of external/barbarian

⁴ For this concept see S. Morlet, *Συμφωνία. La concorde des textes et des doctrines dans la littérature grecque jusqu'à Origène*, Paris 2019.

⁵ Damascius, *Historia philosophica* fr. 72D, 5-7 Athanassiadi (fr. 164, 2-4 Zintzen). Cfr. also Damascius, *De principiis* III p. 167, 22-24 Westerink.

⁶ Dam. *Hist. phil.* fr. 72E Athanassiadi = fr. 93 Zintzen; cfr. anche Dam. *De princ.* III 167, 22-24 Westerink = I 324 Ruelle: καὶ τῇ ἀρξαμένην γράφεσθαι συμφωνία ὑπὸ Ἀσκληπιάδου τῶν Αἰγυπτίων πρὸς τοὺς ἄλλους θεολόγους. Cfr. Henri Dominique Saffrey, Alan Segonds, *Marinus. Proclus ou sur le Bonheur* (Les Belles Lettres; Paris, 2001), 140 note 8 and see also Henri Dominique Saffrey, Leendert Gerritt Westerink, *Proclus. Théologie platonicienne* (Les Belles Lettres; Paris, 1968, vol. 1), 138 note 2 to Proclus, *Theologia Platonica* I 5 p. 25, 24-26 S.-W.

⁷ *Suda* σ 1662 Adler. See Henri Dominique Saffrey, "Accorder entre elles les traditions théologiques : une caractéristique du néoplatonisme athénien", in *On Proclus and his Influence in Medieval Philosophy* (eds. Egbert Peter Bos, Pieter Ane Meijer; *Philosophia antiqua* 53; Leiden, New York, Cologne, 1992), (35-50) = Id., *Le néoplatonisme après Plotin* (Histoire des doctrines de l'Antiquité classique; Paris, 2000), 143-158. The work is attributed to Proclus in *Suda* π 2473: it probably refers to Proclus' commentaries in the margins of the manuscripts of works used by Syrianus.

⁸ Proclus, *Theologia Platonica* I 5 p. 25.24-26.3 S.-W.

⁹ Marinus, *Vita Procli* 22, p. 26, 15-21 Saffrey – Segonds. See Saffrey, "Accorder..." (see note 5), 42 and Elena Gritti, *Il vero nel mito. Teoria esegetica nel commento di Olimpiodoro Alessandrino al "Gorgia"* (Atene e Gerusalemme 4; Roma, 2012), 128 n. 18.

wisdom was widespread since Antiquity (and in the Roman Empire too¹⁰: barbarians were often connected or identified with the Hebrews in Jewish and also Christian authors, Abraham being a Chaldaean in the *Bible*). This concept was not extraneous to the (neo)-Platonic philosopher Porphyry (IIIrd c. AD) who employed this *topos* in a similar strategy. However, if in the Vth century this goal is mostly philosophical, in the IIIrd century the quest for *symphony* has a more distinctive political significance. What I will analyse here is the use of oracular texts as tools in this direction. Porphyry's idea of collecting ancient oracles comes in response to the perception of a threat to the established order and to his cultural roots, this threat being the rise of Christianity. But let us proceed in order. Porphyry deconstructed Christian religion in his *Contra Christianos* (though it was controversial in terms of scholarship and was later censured by Christian authors)¹¹, in which he depicted Christians pejoratively as barbarians,¹² and highlighted the discrepancies in their holy texts and characters, as Irmgard Männlein Robert has demonstrated speaking of an *Angst* or *Kampf-schrift*¹³. The Christians represent a threat to the Hellenic *Wissen* and *Lebens (Welt) Ordnung* in a "Bedrohungszenario", to use Matthias Becker's words¹⁴. Yet Porphyry employs, as a kind of *pars construens*, oracular pagan texts in his famous oracular collection, *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda*, Περὶ τῆς ἐκ λογίων φιλοσοφίας, where the oracular texts are given a theosophical, gnoseological, and soteriological significance¹⁵. I do not intend to deal with all the debates associated with this work (i.e. the question of its dating - whether to the latter half of the IIIrd or the early IVth century - which has been associated with the outbreak of Diocletian's Great Persecution, or of its aims and structure); it suffices to underline the fact that we are dealing with a work transmitted indirectly and that therefore, as in the case of the *Chaldaean Oracles* and of fragmentary texts more generally, oracular texts must be viewed in relation to their quotation contexts, which in this case stem from Porphyry's so-called enemies, the Christians (i.e. Eusebius, but also Augustine, Theodoretus, Firmicus Maternus, John Philoponus and the so-called *Tübingen Theosophy*).

¹⁰ Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity: the Invention of a Ritual Tradition* (Beiträge zur europäischen Religionsgeschichte 1; Göttingen, 2013), 72.

¹¹ Ariane Magny, *Porphyry in Fragments. Reception of an Anti-Christian Text in Late Antiquity* (Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity; Farnham, Burlington, 2014), 14-20. See also the case of Celsus' *True Doctrine* partially attested in order to be deconstructed by Origen's *Against Celsus*, of Hierocles' *Lover of Truth* partially attested by Eusebius' *Against Hierocles*, or of Julian's *Against the Galileans* partially attested by Cyrillus's *Against Julian*. Cf. Magny, *Porphyry in Fragments* (see note 9), 2-9.

¹² Another portrayal of an enemy consists in comparing it to animals/demons.

¹³ Irmgard Männlein-Robert, "Ordnungskonkurrenz: Polemik und Feinbild in konkurrierenden Ordnungen. Der platonische Philosoph Porphyrios und sein Kampf gegen die Christen," in *Aufruhr, Katastrophe, Konkurrenz, Zerfall. Bedrohte Ordnungen als Thema der Kulturwissenschaften Bedrohte Ordnungen?* (eds. Ewald Frie, Misha Meyer, Tübingen, 2014), (117-138), ...; For the meaning of the term 'barbarian' in Porphyry see Matthias Becker, *Porphyrios, Contra Christianos. Neue Sammlung der Fragmente, Testimonien und Dubia mit Einleitung, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen* (Texte und Kommentare 52; Göttingen, 2016), 158-159.

¹⁴ Becker, *Porphyrios, Contra Christianos* (see note 11), 60 and a chapter dedicated to *Porphyrios und die christliche Bedrohung*, 31-85.

¹⁵ Aude Busine, "Porphyry and Traditional Religious Practices," in *Late Antique Epistemology. Other Ways to Truth* (eds. Panayiota Vassilopoulou, Stephen Richard Lyster Clark; Basingstoke, 2009), (21-26).

The sacred oracular texts work in *De philosophia* – I argue – as means of unity, agreement and cohesion in a society and culture risking fragmentation and division. That is the main reason why this collection was strongly attacked by Christians. Porphyry attempts to save and interpret sacred wisdom, and specifically divine wisdom, as a means of salvation in a fading and collapsing world. His oracles are conceived as a new canon of wisdom and salvation, probably in response to the Christian threat (the use of sacred texts like *logia* aimed to respond to the Christian statement that wisdom and truth has to be found in the Bible’s *logia*)¹⁶, in the same way as the *Chaldaean Oracles*, perceived as the “Bible of Neoplatonists” as per Franz Cumont’s famous definition, will be regarded as the most important texts in the world, the only ones, with the *Timaeus*, that should be allowed to circulate, as Proclus states (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 38, p. 44, 15-20 Saffrey – Segonds).

Even if we do not consider Porphyry’s oracular collection as mainly aimed against Christians, it still fosters a Hellenic philosophical vision of the world, and specifically a (neo-)Platonic one, at least implicitly in opposition to a unique (Christian) vision¹⁷. Porphyry is however aware of living in a historical *Wende*, as the oracle on the end of pagan oracular voices shows (fr. 338 Smith *ap.* Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 6, 2, 2 – 3,1). The theme of the end of the oracles as originating from a superior destiny (*heimarmene*) is dealt with. As Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler has emphasised, the terms μοῖρα and αἴσα in this oracle (fr. 338 Smith) evoke “das weite Feld griechischer *Schicksalsvorstellungen*”¹⁸: the end was therefore planned by Destiny; at lines 18-19, the oracular god invites to resistance “though by mighty pain oppressed, / bear with brave souls the counsels of the Fates / that know no change”: ὑμεῖς οὖν καὶ ἄτλητον ἐνὶ φρεσὶν ἄλγος ἔχοντες, / τέτλατε Μοιράων ἀμετάτροπα δῆνεα θυμῷ. In his polemical commentary, the Christian writer Eusebius remarks that pagan gods are therefore not powerful at all if they are subject to destiny (Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* VI 3, 5-4, 3). We can speak here of a deterministic response to an imminent defeat when facing a threat.

The ancient *trope* of gods having abandoned and deserted their own temples – already traceable in Cicero and Plutarch – was indeed re-used by Christians in a polemical fashion, and by pagans with a melancholic and plaintive allure¹⁹. Confronted with the

¹⁶ Aude Busine, “Des *logia* pour philosophie. À propos du titre de la *Philosophie tirée des oracles* de Porphyre,” *Philosophie antique* 4 (2004): (149-166).

¹⁷ See Michael Bland Simmons, “Porphyrian Universalism: a Tripartite Soteriology and Eusebius’ Response,” *Harvard Theological Journal* 102 (2009): (169-192) 172 (note 7).

¹⁸ Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler, “Porphyrios und die Christen in *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda*,” in *Die Christen als Bedrohung? Text, Kontext und Wirking von Porphyrios’ Contra Christianos* (ed. Irmgard Männlein-Robert; Stuttgart, 2017), (137-175) 173.

¹⁹ On the end and silence of the pagan oracular deities cf., for instance, Cyrillus, *Contra Julianum* 6, 20, 9-10 Riedweg (Julianus, *In Galilaeos* fr. 45, 6-9 Masaracchia): φαίνεται δὲ καὶ τὰ αὐτοφυῆ χρηστήρια <σιγήσαι> ταῖς τῶν χρόνων εἰκόνα περιόδιος (cf. δολιχοῖσι χρόνοις in Porphyrius, fr. 338 line 22 Smith). The designation of the Delphic oracle as ἀσίγητος in Nonnus may allude to the polemics on the silence of oracles, cf. Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 4, 289-292: (...) ἔνθα κιχήσας / Δελφὸν ἀσιγήτοιο μεσόμφαλον ἄξονα Πυθοῦς / μαντοσύνην ἐρέεινε, καὶ ἔμφονα Πύθιος ἄξων / κύκλον ἐπ’ αὐτοβόητον ἐθέσπισε κοιλὰδι φωνῆ (cf. also Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 13, 133-134). See Clemens Alexandrinus, *Protrepticus* 2, 11, 1 (cf. Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 2, 3, 2): σεσίγηται γοῦν ἡ Κασταλίας πηγὴ καὶ Κολοφῶνος ἄλλη πηγὴ, καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ὁμοίως τέθνηκενάματα μαντικά καὶ δὴ τοῦ τύφου κενὰ ὄψε μὲν, ὅμως δ’ οὖν διελέγεται τοῖς ἰδίοις συνεκρεύσαντα μύθοις. Cf. also Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* 5, 32, 1-2: οὐκ ἔτι φθέγγεται δρυς· οὐκ ἔτι λέβης μαντεύεται· οὐκ ἔτι Πυθία πληροῦται, οὐκ οἶδ’ ὄντων, πλὴν μύθων καὶ ληρημάτων. πάλιν ἡ Κασταλία σεσίγηται, καὶ σιγᾶ καὶ ὕδωρ ἐστὶν οὐ

approaching Christian divinity, not only silence in the face of a threat, but also (passive) resistance is detectable: a war, or *agon*, of oracles was breaking out²⁰. Porphyry himself quotes two oracular texts concerning the silence of the pagan sanctuaries:

Porphyrius, fr. 322 Smith *ap.* Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 5, 15, 6 - 16, 11

ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐξῆς τούτοις ἄκουε οἷα ὁ αὐτὸς συγγραφεὺς περὶ τοῦ ἐκλειοπέσθαι αὐτῶν τὰ βοώμενα χρηστήρια ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς τίθησι τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον·

“ἀμφὶ δὲ Πυθῶ καὶ Κλαρίην, μαντεύματα Φοῖβου,
αὐδήσει φάτις ἡμετέρη θεμιτώδεσιν ὀμοφαῖς.
μυρία μὲν γαίης μαντήια θέσκελα νώτω
ἐβλύσθη πηγαί τε καὶ ἄσθματα δινήεντα·
5 καὶ τὰ μὲν ἄψ χθονίοισιν ὑπαὶ κόλποισιν ἔδεκτο
αὐτὴ γαῖα χανοῦσα, τὰ δ’ ὄλεσε μυρίος αἰών.
μούνω δ’ Ἡελίῳ φαεσιμβρότῳ εἰσέτ’ ἔασιν
ἐν Διδύμων γυάλοις Μυκαλήϊον ἔνθεον ὕδωρ
Πυθῶνός τ’ ἀνὰ πέζαν ὑπαὶ Παρνάσιον αἶπος
10 καὶ κραναὴ Κλαρίη, τρηχὺ στόμα φοιβάδος ὀμφῆς.

Νικαεῦσι δὲ χρῶν ἔφη·

Πυθῶν δ’ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀναρρῶσαι λάλον ὀμφῆν·
ἤδη γὰρ δολιχοῖσιν ἀμαυρωθεῖσα χρόνοισι
βέβληται κληῖδας ἀμαντεύτοιο σιωπῆς.
ρέξατε δ’ ὡς ἔθος ἐστὶ θεόπροπα θύματα Φοῖβῳ”.

Listen, however, to what statements the same writer makes concerning the cessation of their celebrated oracles:

ματευόμενον, ἀλλὰ γελῶμενον· πάλιν ἀνδριάς, ἄφωνος ὁ Ἀπόλλων, πάλιν ἡ Δάφνη ἐστὶν μῦθος θρηνούμενον κτλ. Cf. also Gregorius Nazianzenus, *carmen* 2, 2, 7, 254 (PG 37, 1571 A): Φοῖβος, μαντεύοιτο **θεῶν μόρον οὐκέτ’ ἐόντων** κτλ and *Theosophia* 16 Erbse.

²⁰ See, for instance, the famous episode of Saint Babylas’ corpse, which would have caused the silence of the Apollonian oracle of Daphne (Julianus, *Misopogon* 361b-c; Ammianus Marcellinus 22, 12, 8; Johannes Chrysostomus, *De Babyla contra Julianum* 80-81 and cf. also *Babylas* 5 Schatkin – Blanc – Gillet). For this event, cf. also Rufinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 10, 36; Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3, 18; Sozomenus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5, 19, 16-19; Theodoretus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3, 10, 1-2; Philostorgius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 8 p. 86-92 Bidez; Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1, 16; Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia* 49, 28 – 50, 23; Zonaras, 13, p. 64, 12 – 65, 9 Büttner-Wobst. See G. Downey, *History of Antioch in Syria. From Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton, 1961), 364 and Béatrice Caseau, “Sacred Landscapes,” in *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World* (eds. Glen Warren Bowersock, Peter Brown, Oleg Grabar; Boston, 1999), (21-59) 36-37. On the burning of the Apollonian temple, probably caused by Christians, see the monody written by Libanius, *Oratio* 60, 5-6 ending with a tragic image: ὅτι δὴ σοι τὰς θυσίας ἡμῶν ἀποδιδόντων καὶ ὅσον ἦν ἀπενεχθὲν ἀντικαθιστάντων προανηπάσθη τὸ τιμώμενον οἷον νυμφίου τινὸς πλεκομένων ἤδη <τῶν> στεφάνων ἀπελθόντος, “since while we were offering sacrifices to you, and were restoring whatever had been purloined from your temple, the object of our worship has been snatched away from us; like a bridegroom who, while the garlands are weaving for his nuptials, dies”. On the ‘pagan’ prophecies concerning the arrival of a Hebrew Child see, for instance, Johannes Malalas, *Chronographia* 10, 5 p. 176, 89-91 Thurn (cf. *Suda* α 4413 Adler; Symeon Logothetes, *Chronicon* 50, 7, 42-44 Wahlgren; Cedrenus 211, 1 p. 344, 6-11 Tartaglia; Nicephorus Callistus Xathopulus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1, 17 = PG 145, 681-684A); Theodorus Scutariota, *Chronica* 2, 13 Tocci. Cf. also the oracle of the *Theosophia* 51 Erbse.

**“Of Pytho and of Claros, sacred shrines
of Phoebus, let my tongue speak reverent words.**
Erewhile ten thousand oracles divine
gush’d forth on earth in flowing streams, and breath of dizzy vapours.
5 Some the earth herself, wide opening her deep bosom, back received,
and some the course of countless time **destroy’d**.
The Sun alone, which lights our mortal life,
hath still his spring in Didyma’s deep vale, where flows the sacred
stream from Mycale:
and still beneath Parnassus’ lofty peaks at the limit of Pytho;
10 mid Clarian rocks still from the cave prophetic voices sound.

But to some people of Nicaea he gave this response:

Nought can restore the **Pythian voice divine**:
enfeebled **by long ages**, it hath laid
the keys **of silence on the oracle**.
yet still to Phoebus bring your prophetic offerings due”.
(Tr. Gifford, revised).

As for the babbling prophetic voice not speaking anymore, we may recall the famous Apollonian oracle speaking to Oribasios about the Emperor Julian²¹:

εἶπατε τῷ βασιλεῖ· χαμαὶ πέσε δαίδαλος αὐλά.
οὐκέτι Φοῖβος ἔχει καλύβαν, οὐ μάντιδα δάφνην,
οὐ παγὰν λαλέουσιν, **ἀπέσβετο καὶ λάλον ὕδωρ**²².

Tell the Emperor that the *Daidalic* hall has fallen.
No longer does Phoebus have his chamber, nor mantic laurel,
nor prophetic spring and the speaking water has been silenced.
(trans. Timothy E. Gregory, “Julian and the Last Oracle in Delphi,” *GRBS* 24
(1983): (355-366) 356).

Even if Porphyry lives in times of suffering, the downfall of the pagan gods being impossible to avoid (see *supra* ἀμετάτροπα δῆνεα), he proposes as one possible solution the insertion of external/barbarian wisdom into an established Greek system, leaving out Christians, who were considered undeserving of belonging to this chain of wisdom. In Porphyry’s commentary to an Apollonian oracle (Porphyrius, fr. 323 Smith *ap.* Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 9, 10, 1-2), there is a different gnoseological

²¹ Philostorgius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7 1C p. 370, 7-9 Bidez; Ioannes Damascenus, *Artemii Passio* 35, 30-32 Kotter; Cedrenus, 320, 2 p. 530, 12-16 Tartaglia. Cf. also *App. Anth.* VI 122 Cougny. On this oracle see Bernadette Cabouret, “Julien et Delphes. La politique religieuse de l’empereur Julien et le ‘dernier’ oracle,” *REA* 99 (1997): (141-158); Augusto Guida, “L’ultimo oracolo di Delfi per Giuliano”, *Rudiae* 10 (1998): (388-413) and Bruno Bleckmann, Markus Stein (eds.), *Philostorgios Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 2 (Paderborn, 2015), 340-343. It is no accident that Julian’s teacher was Maximus of Ephesus charged with use of magic and divination and put to death by Valens in 372 AD (Nicola Zito, “Sull’autore del poemetto attribuito a Massimo di Efeso”, *Eikasmós* 23 (2012): (259-276).

²² For the babbling water see also Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 41, 222: Πύθιον Απόλλωνι **λάλον** πεφυλαγμένον ὕδωρ; Procopius, *Epistula* 71, 1; *schol. in Euripidis Phoenissas* 222 Dindorff: μυθεύονται δὲ ὅτι καὶ τὸ τῆς Κασταλίας **ὑδωρ λάλον** ἦν, πλασάμενοι τοῦτο οὐκ ἀπὸ τοῦ λαλεῖν ἐκεῖνο.

gradatio: from Oriental people who found the multiple paths in the road to the divine, to Greeks who are lost and disoriented like wanderers, to the ones who held power, probably Christians, and who destroyed everything:

Porphyrius, fr. 324 Smith *ap.* Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 9, 10, 3-5 | 14, 10, 5

χαλκόμετος γὰρ ἡ πρὸς θεοὺς ὁδὸς αἰπεινὴ τε καὶ τραχεῖα, ἧς πολλὰς ἀτραποὺς βάρβαροι μὲν ἐξεῦρον, Ἕλληνες δὲ ἐπλανήθησαν, οἱ δὲ κρατοῦντες ἤδη καὶ διέφθειραν.

The road to the gods is bronze-bound, steep and rugged, whose many paths the barbarians discovered, the Greek lost, and the ones in power already thoroughly destroyed (Transl. Ilina Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy* (see note 8), 71)²³.

What is more important here is Porphyry's acceptance of the different and multiple ways of joining the road to divinity. Nevertheless, Porphyry's perspective is elitist: only a few people could access truth since divine words are riddles (*ainigmata*) to be revealed (fr. 303 Smith *ap.* Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 4, 7, 2, and fr. 305 Smith *ap.* Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 4, 8, 2). The philosopher represents himself as the guardian of a hidden wisdom belonging to a line of philosophical masters such as Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato (Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* 1, 1, 1-3; Proclus, *Theol.* 1, 5, p. 25.24-26.4 Saffrey – Westerink): only the exegete-teacher is able to unlock the doors of truth²⁴.

A similar approach can be detected in an oracular collection dating from the end of the Vth c. AD and preserved in byzantine epitome, the so-called *Tübingen Theosophy*. In the proem to this collection, the Christian redactor, clearly influenced by Neo-platonic thought, represents himself as a guide-teacher/hierophant for the multitude²⁵. Moreover, one oracle in this collection concerns a real *symphony* among three figures, Hermes (Egypt), Moses (Hebrew culture), Apollonius of Tyana (Oriental culture)²⁶. However, in this case the main aim of the Christian collector consists in demonstrating, by using oracular texts, a real *symphony* between two conflicting systems, the pagan and the Christian ones. Porphyry's *symphonic* attempt is instead an attempt to defend a fading world, where barbarian, but not Christian, thought is inserted into Hellenic thought.

2.2 The Renaissance: oracles as means of *symphony*

In the second part of this paper, I analyse how and why oracular texts were inserted into a *symphonic* system in the XVIth c. AD in order to face a threat, that of the Protestant Reformation.

²³ Cf. Pseudo-Justinus, *Cohortatio ad Graecos* 11, 2, 6-7 and 24, 2, 15-16 Pouderon. On Porphyry's oracle see Becker, *Porphyrios, Contra Christianos* (see note 11).

²⁴ See Aaron P. Johnson, "Arbiter of the Oracular: Reading Religion in Porphyry of Tyre," in *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity*, (eds. Andrew Cain, Noel Lenski; Farnham, Burlington 2009), (103-115).

²⁵ *Theosophia* 7 Erbse.

²⁶ *Theosophia* 44 Erbse. Only the Chaldeans and the Hebrews have wisdom, see Steuco I 21 48C.

The idea of cultural *symphony* had an incredible success in the Renaissance. Suffices it to think about Marsilio Ficino's fostering of a *prisca theologia*²⁷ including the idea of a chain of philosophers, the *prisci*, inserted within a Christian and Platonic system. In his majestic work, *Theologia platonica de immortalitate animarum*, published in 1482, Marsilio quoted many oracular texts, not those by pagan gods, but the *Chaldaean Oracles*, which he attributed, following Plethon, to Zoroaster's disciples²⁸. However, Marsilio's aim is quite philosophical and focused on the theme of the immortality of the soul (**vs the Averroistes**). Likewise, a cultural operation is proposed by Francesco Zorzi, in his *De harmonia mundi totius cantica tria*, published in 1525, where not only Christian theology and Platonic philosophy are used but also the *quabbala*. Zorzi quoted, always in Latin translation, the *Zoroastrian/Chaldaean oracles* as well as the pagan oracles drawn from Porphyry's collection (*De harmonia* 1, 1, 1). In this case, he used the (not objective) translation by Greek Humanist Georges Trebisonda of Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica*, published in Rome in 1448, in which many fragments of Porphyry's collection are quoted²⁹. In a first oracle (*de harmonia* 1, 1, 1 cf. Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 9, 10, 1-2 cf. fr. 323 Smith and Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 9, 10, 3-5 cf. fr. 324 Smith), the *gentilium oracula* drawn from Porphyry's collection are regarded as proof of Moses' wisdom (Moses is regarded by Zorzi as the first *sapiens*); a second oracle (*de harmonia* 2, 2, 16, cf. Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 5, 16, 1 cf. Porphyrius, fr. 322 Smith) deals with the end of the oracular pagan deities.

Franciscus Georgius, *de harmonia* 1.2.1

Superfluum, ineptumque esset omnia retexere, quibus sapientes mundi discordantes horrendum strepitum in auditorum aures incutiunt, quod eis evenit, quia ab uno in quem omnes convenire debebant, discesserunt, singuli in viam, et figmentum speculationum suarum abeuntes. Hinc eorum dogmata (quia absque ullo, quod praestat omnibus ut sint, et harmonice convenient) in multitudine confuse fundata, dissoluta sunt. (...) nam consonantia (ut musici docent) est similium, dissimilium vocum in unum redacta concordia. (...) Porphyrius dogmatatum varietate multivagos animos depescit. (...) Quando autem a debitis numeris, et ab illa ex unitate consonantia, unde omnis concentus, recedunt tamquam dissoni, et offendentes nervi, ab omni harmonica consonantia sunt penitus abiciendi.

It would be excessive, and at any rate useless, to report each and every one of the discordances which the wise men of the world fill the ears of their

²⁷ On the *prisca theologia* see Maria Muccillo, *Platonismo ermetismo e prisca theologia: ricerche di storiografia filosofica rinascimentale* (Firenze, 1996).

²⁸ See Ilana Klutstein, "Marsile Ficin et les *Oracles chaldaïques*," in *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone. Studi e documenti* (ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini; Firenze, 1986), (331-338) and Ead., *Marsilio Ficino et la théologie ancienne, Oracles chaldaïques-Hymnes orphiques-Hymnes de Proclus* (Firenze, 1987) 3-18. On Ficino, see Pierre Magnard, *Marsile Ficin. Les Platonismes à la Renaissance* (Paris, 2001) and Stéphane Toussaint, "Ficiniana II. Theophanies neoplatoniciennes," *Momus. Studi Umanistici*, 2 (1994): (50-69).

²⁹ Cf. John Monfasani, "Marsilio Ficino and Eusebius of Caesarea's *Praeparatio evangelica*," in *Renaissance Humanism, from the Middle Ages to Modern Times* (ed. John Monfasani; Variorum Collected Studies Series CS 1057; Farnham, 2015), (3-13); Id., "Prisca Theologia on the Plato-Aristotle Controversy before Ficino," in *Renaissance Humanism, from the Middle Ages to Modern Times* (ed. John Monfasani; Variorum Collected Studies Series CS 1057; Farnham, 2015), (47-59).

listeners with in tremendous **disharmony** This happened because they distanced themselves from the only aim they all **needed to pursue** in accord, each following their path and the output of their own speculations. Thus, their doctrines, entirely lacking what provides each and every thing with the essence and harmonious correspondence, proliferated in a confused multitude and were dissolved. (...) **Indeed, consonance (as musicians teach) is the accord of similar and dissimilar voices leading back to unity (...)** **Porphyry nourishes the wandering minds with the variety of his doctrines (...)**

When instead, like dissonant, unpleasant-sounding chords, they distance themselves from the adequate rhythms and the **consonance** which derives from unity and is the source of all accords, **they must be rejected from any kind of consonance tending towards harmony.**

Ancient wisdom and knowledge are used by Zorzi in terms of *consonantia/symphonia: nam consonantia (ut musici docent) est similitum, dissimilium vocum in unum redacta concordia*, “indeed,” – he says – “consonance (as musicians teach) is the accord of similar and dissimilar voices leading back to unity”. Dissonant voices have therefore to be excluded and rejected from whatever combines into harmony.

In a similar, but more intense way, the humanist Agostino Steuco (1497/98-1548) - who was Zorzi's friend since the time of their studies - used in his major work, *De perenni philosophia*, published in 1540³⁰, various oracular texts as means of defence against an overarching threat, represented this time by the Protestant Reformation and specifically by Erasmus. A Canon of the order of St. Augustine, Agostino (born Guido) Steuco was born in 1497/1498 in Gubbio. In 1525, he was appointed librarian at the library of Sant'Antonio di Castello in Venice, rich in manuscripts by cardinal Domenico Grimani and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola; much more significantly, in October 1538, he was appointed librarian of the Vatican library, under Pope Paul III. Steuco helped in the preparation of the Council of Trent till he died in in 1548. It must be underlined that Steuco was a straightforward opponent of the Protestant Reformation, as his book *Pro religione christiana adversus Lutheranos*, published in Bologna in 1530, shows: in it, Luther and Erasmus are regarded as dangerous for the security of the Venice Republic³¹. Steuco promoted there the political idea of a rule by an élite of wise men from the aristocracy. Moreover, he wrote against Lorenzo Valla's dissertation on the false Donation of Constantine (*Contra Laurentium Valla*, promoting a papal monarchy³²). However, at a certain point of his life, Steuco changes his strategy. In his ten-book work *De perenni philosophia* he does not focus on polemical attacks (*pars destruens*), but he prefers to build a constructive existential system of knowledge (*pars construens*). In this work, Steuco mainly aims to demonstrate the *symphony* existing among pagan philosophy and Christian theology. As a matter of fact, Steuco attempts to construct a new religious historiography, based on the idea of a perennial philosophy (*philosophia*

³⁰ Re-published in 1542, 1577-78, 1591. The work concerns the theme of Trinity, the Union of God, the existence of good and evil demons, the immortality of the soul, the creation and the end of the world. See Mariano Crociata, *Umanesimo e teologia in Agostino Steuco. Neoplatonismo e teologia della creazione del "De perenni philosophia"* (Roma, 1987), 69. For a biography of Steuco see Theobald Freudenberger, *Augustinus Steuchus aus Gubbio* (Aschendorff, 1935).

³¹ Ronald K. Delph, “From Venetian Visitor to Curial Humanist: The Development of Agostino Steuco's ‘Counter’-Reformation Thought,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994): (102-139).

³² Ronald K. Delph, “Valla Grammaticus, Agostino Steuco, and the Donation of Constantine,” *Journal of the History of Idea* 55 (1996): (55-77).

perennis), a perennial source from which many rivers flow (I 7 16C, I 10 24D)³³. Nevertheless, he confesses that, in his era, ancient wisdom is found scattered and disseminated everywhere, due to a sort of fragmentation and dispersion (I 2 6 C *sapientia disiecta*; three historical phases are described, before the flood, after, and the contemporary time). In order to recreate unity, Steuco searches therefore for the traces and relics of ancient truth, the *vestigia veteris sapientiae* (*de perenni* I 1 2E), and inserts them into a Christian (catholic) theological system. In any case, in his optimistic vision, the truth can be reached by everyone, also by those who do not desire it (IV 1 166D). The memories (*monimenta*) of this primordial truth are detectable among Oriental people such as the Chaldaeans, the Armenians, the Babylonians and the Phoenicians (I 1 2D). Theology can be traced either clearly, or in fabulous manners or in a manner contaminated with inventions-*figmenta* (*de perenni* I 1 2D). Christian theology and pagan philosophy are in perfect agreement as they have the same aim: the knowledge and veneration of God. The awareness of an accord between different “sacred” texts is perceived as a sort of mystic revelation: the contemplation of this miraculous³⁴ *symphony*³⁵ between pagan thought and Christian theology (IV 11 192D) and the *Theologia mosaica*³⁶, provokes in Steuco a state of wonder and happiness to the point of tears (*de perenni* I 27, 67A)³⁷.

Not only does Steuco quote texts drawn from ancient philosophers, and specifically from Neo-platonists, such as Proclus, Simplicius and many others but, something I find very interesting, he also resorts repeatedly to oracular texts, e.g. the Sibylline, Theosophical (Apollo, Sarapis, those derived from the *Theosophy*) and Chaldaean oracles. These oracles are, quite simply, multiple revelations, to be associated with Christian ones.

It must be said that Steuco does not often deal with divination in theoretical terms. In book 8 of *de perenni*, he analyses the different typologies of demons. Two questions are addressed: the origin of divination and the status of Apollo as a good or bad demon. In the first case, Steuco rejects the idea that divination derives from earth vapours: each divination is spiritual and stems from a *mens exterius* (*de perenni* VIII 26

³³ For this concept see Wilhlem Schimdt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis. Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Modern Thought* (Dordrecht, 2004); Charles B. Schmitt, “*Prisca theologia e philosophia perennis: due temi del Rinascimento italiano e la loro fortuna*,” in *Il pensiero italiano del Rinascimento e il tempo nostro* (Montepulciano, 1968), (211-236) and Id., “Perennial Philosophy: from Agostino Steuco to Leibniz,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1996): (505-532).

³⁴ Such a *concordia* is a real miracle, but in fact, it is nature, which provides *sua sponte* (*de perenni* X 14 584D): Christian religion is compared to the morning light.

³⁵ The terms used are: *congruentia, consensus, congruere, convenire, consonans*.

³⁶ In the *Cosmopoeia vel de mundano opificio* he shows his interest for a *prisca theologia*, a primordial wisdom, crowned by a Christian-Catholic one, whose relics are among the *prisci*, the wise of Antiquity such as Homer, Hesiod, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Plato, Ovid, Hermes Trismegistus. This vision rejects the vision focused on Moses, proposed by the protestant historiography and aimed at separating the Christian and pagan world. However, in *De perenni* Steuco shows the agreement between Christian and Mosaic theologies proposing a universal agreement of ancient (e.g. St., *de perenni* VI 10 268D).

³⁷ Cf. also *de perenni* IV 15 198C: *Quanta igitur est apud omnes sapientes concordia?*; VI 8 258C: *Vides priscam pietatem, naturalem de Deo Philosophiam, celebrem semper, quo magis in priora saecula respicias?*; IX 16 525A: *Quae potest igitur esse maior Philosophorum Theologiae verae concordia?*

481A: *spiritualis enim est omnis divinatio*)³⁸. Moreover, even if Apollo's oracle comes from a bad demon, sometimes God, being good, uses these demons or bad men in order to spread truth (*de perenni* VIII 37 483 B)³⁹. A second remark concerns the term *oraculum*, which, according to Steuco, designated:

- 1) the prophecies that we can detect in the *Sacrae Literae*, i.e. Moses's and the Prophets' sacred, divinely inspired word (I 29 74C; IV 20 205A: *Moses ex oraculo coelesti*; V 4 247A) : it is the sacred word par excellence (*sacri oraculi*) belonging to a holy time (IV 11 192D: *felices nos futuros oracula cum videbimus eum secuti est*);
- 2) the oracles in the history of mankind, even if primordial, as in the case of the Zoroastrian/Chaldaean oracles and those of the Sibyls and later the theosophical oracles of Apollo and Sarapis as bad demons though which god speaks;
- 3) the divine mystery and the obscure enigmatic language (II 4 90D; V 2 242D: *quasi divinum fudit oraculum*; VI 10 265B on Arrianus: *velut oraculum velut Propheta sic divino pectore fatur*). We find some inspired philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Iamblichus⁴⁰, Plutarch⁴¹, Cicero⁴², Seneca,⁴³ who prophesised the Christian truth (*de perenni* I 3 7B).

Steuco quotes, as we said, many *Chaldaean oracles*, which, following Plethon, were considered as Zoroastrian, and he regarded the Chaldaean as a very ancient and wise race (*de perenni* I 3 8C). The Sibyls are central figures associated with the *Zoroastrian* oracles. The *Erythrean* Sibyl is the daughter of a Chaldean man, Berossus (who received the wisdom by Zoroaster), and the *Sambethe* Sibyl, who was Persian or Chaldaean, and belongs to the *genus* of Noe⁴⁴. As for the oracles of the pagan demons, mainly derived from the *Theosophy*, they are presented with an introduction in Latin, a preface (in Greek derived from previous sources), an oracular text (in Greek with a Latin translation, usually in *oratio soluta* due to the difficulty of the subject), and a

³⁸ He quotes Aristoteles, *De mundo* 395b Lorimer; Plutarchus, *De defectu oraculorum* 432D; Cic. *De divinatione*.

³⁹ See also *de perenni* VI 11 269A and the fake oracle of Amphiloque *ap.* Plutarchus, *De sera* 563D mentioned in *de perenni* X 26 604D.

⁴⁰ St., *de perenni* X 2 563B, X 3 566C et X 8 574C.

⁴¹ St., *de perenni* VI 6 254C: *ore divino locutus. Mirabile divinumque prope oraculum apud Platonem...* ; VIII 23 455A.

⁴² St., *de perenni* X 5 563C.

⁴³ St., *De perenni* V 3 245: *a divino spiritu duce* ; IX 12 512C: *a spiritu divino* ; IX 13 515A *divino afflatu* ; IX 13 517A: *ut pene miraculum sit, philosophum profanum velut ex adytis coelestis sapientiae prodeuntem mysteria tanta pectoribus plenis effundere*.

⁴⁴ St., *de perenni* I 1 4D: *Quid Sibyllae, praesertim Sambethe, quae etiam in his ipsis locis, id est Perside, vel Chaldaea nata fertur de genere Noe fuisse*; I 3 8D: *Hinc Sibylla Erythrea qui fertur Chaldaea fuisse, filia Berossi Chaldaei, tum et Sambethe, clara et aperta peneque innumerabilia, cum de omnibus divinis rebus, tum vero, de summi Dei filio edidit oracula, ut quorum similia ac longe plura in arcanis suae gentis, sapientum mysteriis latitent. Dupliciaque sunt Theologiae Chaldaicae, de filio Dei, et ab aeterno genita Mente, testimonia, Magorum et Sibyllarum, literis Graecorum fidelissime comprehensa*; I 21 46C: *Ex Theologia Chaldaeorum apud Sibyllas ... ex Chaldaeorum Theologia sunt etiam Erythrae Sibyllae testimonia quae Chaldaea fuit, filia, ut fama est, Berossi Chaldaei, appellata fortasse Erythrea*; I 22 48D: *Fidele esse Magorum, Sibyllarum testimonium ... haec a Magis, et a Chaldaea Sibylla dicta*; I 22 49B: *et forte idem oraculum eiusdem Sibyllae erat apud Chaldaeos, Babyloniam nanque Sibyllam Erythream fuisse multi autores sunt*.

concordistic exegesis in which Steuco demonstrates the *symphony* between pagan oracular wisdom, Christian theology and pagan thought. The subjects of Apollo's oracles are: the three hypostases, the unity and wisdom of God, the death of pagan demons. Moreover, Steuco goes as far as to quote an Apollonian oracle drawn from Porphyry himself (*de perenni* III 14, 155B l. 1-19 = *Theosophia* 27 Erbse + lines 20-22 = *Theosophia* 29 Erbse = Porphyrius, fr. 325 Smith), whilst introducing him as an enemy of Christians (*de perenni* III 14, 155B: *adducitur hoc oraculum non a Christianis, sed a Porphyrio Christianorum hoste*)⁴⁵. Porphyry is regarded as *sapiens* but at the same time as a *hostis* of Christianity according to previous Christian writers (cf. Augustinus, *de civitate dei* 19, 22 *doctissimus philosophorum quamvis christianorum acerrimus inimicus* cf. Döbler). What I find fascinating is the fact that Steuco's restoration of oracular wisdom responds to an attempt to recreate unity in the face of danger and threat. However, his attempt is not isolated. His re-semanticization and cultural appropriation of 'pagan' wisdom in a Christian perspective was probably inspired by Marsilio Ficino's thought and by Francesco Zorzi. It must be remarked that the significant role of *ancient oracular* texts in the Renaissance was not only dictated by philosophical consideration (see also **Reuchlin**), but can also be detected in the many extant Latin translations of Greek sources concerning oracles⁴⁶ and in miscellanies containing oracular texts⁴⁷. Among this learned production we can mention the first modern theological analysis on the oracles from Antiquity written by Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (*De rerum praenotione libri novem*, Strasbourg 1507), as well as the *Commentarius de praecipuis divinationum generibus* (Wittenberg 1553) by the theologian Caspar Peucer who quoted many ancient sources (e.g. Cicero, Plutarch, Porphyry, Eusebius). Divination is regarded as the output of demons vs Christian prophecies. In this period, we notice also many works on the aetiology and significance of oracles and of pagan magic⁴⁸. However, we find also jokes, like in the case of another friend of Steuco's, Celio Calcagnini, in his Lucian-style dialogue *Oraculorum liber* (published posthumously in 1544).

⁴⁵ In his preamble he quotes the tenth book of the *Philosophia ex oraculis*, as in the Ambrosian codex 569 = N 234 sup., f. 10 (XVIc. AD): ἐκ τοῦ δεκάτου Πορφυρίου εὐλογιῶν φιλοσοφίας. The sources mention only three books (the right version can be found in the *Theosophia* 27 Erbse: ὅτι Πορφύριος ἐν τῷ δευτέρῳ βιβλίῳ τῆς ἐκ λογίων φιλοσοφίας): the mistake probably derives from palaeographical misunderstanding, see Lucia Maddalena Tissi, *Gli oracoli degli dèi greci nella Teosofia di Tübinga. Commento e studio critico dei testi 12-54 Erbse* (Alessandria, 2018), 236-237. Concerning the concept of *concordia* linked to the quotations of pagan oracles see *de perenni* III 15 158C: *haec oraculum Apollinis quo tota fere traditur in aures hominum Theologia* (after *Theosophia* 13 Erbse); IV 15 198C: *quanta igitur est apud omnes sapientes concordia?* (on *Theosophia* 3 Erbse); III 16 162D: *quanta inter utrunque oraculum concordia?* (on *Theosophia* 43 Erbse).

⁴⁶ See the quoted translation of Eusebius' *De Praeparatio evangelica* in 1450 by Georges of Trebizonda (revised in 1470 by Antonio Cornazzano) or also in 1556 Adrien Turnèbe's translation of Plutarchus' *De defectu oraculorum*.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Genialium dierum libri sex* by Alessandro Alessandri (Rome, 1552 and Basel, 1542) and *Lectionum antiquorum libri XXX* of Ludovicus Caelius Rhodiginus = Ludovico Ricchieri (Basel, 1542).

⁴⁸ E.g. Niccolò Leonico Tomeo, *Trophonius, sive de divinatione* in *Dialogi* (Venice, 1524), fols. 3r-18r; Pietro Pomponazzi, *De naturalium effectuum causis, sive De incantationibus opus*, 1520, published posthumously in Basel in 1556 by Guglielmo Gratarolo. A global vision of pagan oracles and divination in the Renaissance can be found now in Anthony Ossa-Richardson, *The Devil's Tabernacle: the Pagan Oracles in Early Modern Thought* (Princeton, 2013).

In any case, Steuco seems to employ a peculiar perspective, insofar as his obsessive research for *symphony* mirrors the historical conflict / *diafonia* among Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century: in this context, he apparently strives to demonstrate the unity between *religio* and *pietas* in the history of mankind, not only in the face of the danger represented by the Reformation but also of that posed by Erasmus. Steuco finds himself living in a period characterised by fear, confusion, and the threat posed to the established *order*: his awareness of these problems is markedly high, as is shown by his biography, which sees him as a participant in the organisation of the Council of Trent.

3. The ‘messianic’ approach as a reaction to threat – other examples of Renaissance oracular texts

Another use of oracles in this period was a political one, and it emerges in oracles related to Charles V, who played a messianic role in a threatened order. In Charles V’s kingdom, on which the sun never set, the Emperor was regarded as the promised political messiah and guarantor of an established order against a real threat. Furthermore, as in the case of Julian, in Charles V’s time too it was claimed that prophecies and oracular utterances played a relevant role. In this case however, a more optimistic vision was conceived. I recall here some significant episodes. In June 1545, an ambassador from Charles V approached the harbour of Ragusa (now *Dubrovnik*) in a Venetian ship bearing three lions on its prow and two eagle heads, as the neo-Latin poet Hugus Favolius narrates in his *Hodoeporicum Byzantinum*, published in Leuven in 1563 (f. 16: *triplices atroci horror leones / et geminas aquilas ...*)⁴⁹. These symbols were recognised by the Rector of the Republic as the fulfilment of ancient prophecies concerning the coming of an imperial personage, who would free the Balkans, Constantinople and Asia minor from the enemies, i.e. the Turks (a magic mountain would have consequently re-appeared) bringing peace, justice and pleasure to the whole empire. This messianic figure was identified as the Emperor Charles V⁵⁰. Five years later, in 1550, the humanist Giovanni Acciaiuoli published a 1000 verse poem in Naples, written in Greek but full of odd archaic terms, concerning the messianic expectations of a universal kingdom promised by the Emperor Charles V. Acciaiuoli, who had taken part in Charles V’s expedition against Tunis in 1535 (cf. the French-Turkish alliance), narrates an episode which occurred during the conquest of *La*

⁴⁹ The Rector of Ragusa, Gospodar, is depicted as a wise man and a philosopher (he had a beard) and as a prophet announcing his interpretation of the imperial *insigna* (*imo / corde premens gemitus, his vocibus ora resolvit, / summis oranti similis, Divosque precanti*). In this speech *Carolus* represents the *metus* of the barbarians and the future ruin of the Turks and Arabs (*Carole Barbaricae metus et certissima gentis / pernicies, Turcisque, Arabisque future ruina*). He says that: *nam veterum nobis, ceu veri praescia, vatum / carmina promittunt aliquem, quod credere certum est / venturum nostris terris hoc nomine tandem / Caesareo insignem titulo, triplicique corona / os, osculosque etc. in imagine vultum / veridici sacro cecinerunt carmina vates*. Charles is said to have helped the empire (f. 16-25): (...) *ruenti / auxilium Imperio ferret, solatiaque* and he is evoked as *o lux illa veni tandem gratissima rerum / o lux, o votis multos optata per annos / qua toto orbe semel penitus tua sub iuga misso, / compositusque; ducum Europae discordibus armis, / te reducem adspiciam, tandem rerumque, potitum / Caroleumque genus toto dominarier orbi*

⁵⁰ The humanist Janus Lascaris had already incited Charles V against the Turks.

Goulette harbour. A Dalmatian eunuch had freed the Christian prisoners who are said to have sung⁵¹:

Giovanni Acciaiuoli, 522-524 Zoras

μεγαλοφώνως ἔκραζον· τοῦ κόσμου τὴν εἰρήνην, ζῆ Βασιλεὺς ὁ
Κάρολος εἰς ἥπειρον καὶ πόντον καὶ κυριεῦσαι τοὺς ἐχθρούς, ὡς τῶν
χρησμῶν εἰπόντων.

They shouted with great voice: for the peace of the universe, long live
the Emperor Charles V, on earth and sea! Subjugate his enemies as the
oracles said.

The oracles mentioned are none other than those attributed to Leo (VI) the Wise. Acciaiuoli provides two examples of these oracles⁵². In a similar way, the well-known Column of Xerolophos in Constantinople, in actual fact erected to commemorate the defeat of the Goths by the Emperor Arcadius in 400/402, was re-interpreted as announcing the Fall of Constantinople and pertaining to a providential plan enacted by the French and Venetians in 1204⁵³ and by the Turks in 1453⁵⁴. Moreover, an oracle by Leo (VI) the Wise was considered to have foretold the Turk invasion as well as the reconquest of Constantinople by a blond man. Another fascinating episode is narrated by Guillaume Postel. In 1536, Francis I, envisaging a Franco-Ottoman alliance with the Ottoman Turks, sent Postel to Constantinople (to the Turkish Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent) in the role of official interpreter at the French Embassy of Jean de La Forêt. However the ambassador was treated (by one of the *baschiats*, governor of C.) as a spy. However, the ambassador was treated (by one of the *baschiats*, governor of C.) as a spy on the basis of the aforementioned prophecy found in the *Alcoran*, the *Book of Prophecies* which was believed to allude to the French nation (Ibn Saphra = *fiis du jaulne*) since French heraldry and standards contain yellow lily flowers. The

⁵¹ André Deisser, “Les oracles des Léon VI le sage, leur origines et leur postérité,” *Kernos* 3 (1990): (135-145).

⁵² (...) λοιπόν, ὡς θεοφρούρατο καὶ εὐαγγελισμένος / παρὰ Κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δεδοξαμένος / καὶ ὡς μέγας κὶ ἀνεπίλητος καὶ βασιλεὺς εἰρήνης, / τῆς πίστεως διοικητῆς καὶ τῆς δικαιοσύνης / ἔχεις κινήσαι σὺν Θεῷ, σὺν τοῦ θεοφρουρήτου / στόλου τῆς Βασιλείας σου ὄνπερ οἱ πάντες φρίττουν, / ἵνα καὶ τὸν Ἀνατολῆς μεγάλης Ἐκκλησίας / λαὸν ἐκ τῶν ἄσεβῶν ῥυστήναι προστασίας.

⁵³ See R. De Clari, *La conquête de Constantinople XCII*, **edition in *Histories et chroniqueurs du Moyen Age*, Paris 1952, 67-68**

⁵⁴ This column was associated in the XIIIth century to Leo the Wise in the *διήγησις θαυμαστὴ καὶ πάνυ ὠραία, ἔτι καὶ ὠφέλιμος περὶ τῆς στήλης τοῦ Ξηρολόφου* on which cf. Gilbert Dagron and Jean Paramelle, *Récit merveilleux, très beau et profitable sur la Colonne du Xerolophos*, in *T&Mbyz* 7 (1979): (491-523). The column refers to Constantinople's siege by Septimius Severus: he questioned an astrologist namely John about the destiny of C. saying that the fortune will arrive till the Antichrist. Septimius is said to have inscribed these prophecies on the column. Later only Leo the Wise is said to have been able to understand, even if only partially, these prophecies, and transcribed them in form of iambic poetry; in 1300, the *Chronicle of Morée* would assign to Leo the role not of a mere transcriber but of the writer of these prophecies. Concerning the abundance of manuscripts of Leo's oracles, especially of the sixteenth century, cf. Cyril Mango, “The Legend of Leo the Wise,” *Zbornik Radova Vizantoloskog Instituta*, 6 (1960): (59-93) 78-82 = repr. in Id., *Byzantium and its Image* (London, 1984), 59-93.

ambassador is said to have persuaded the Turks that the prophecy referred not to the French but to Charles V and his nation, who dressed in yellow: they were the enemy of Turks as well as of French.

G. Postel, *Thrésor des prophéties de l'univers*, quoted in annexe VIII of G. Weill, *Vie et caractère de Guillaume Postel*, Latin thesis 1892, translated and revised by François Secret (Milan, 1987), 254-255

*Lors l'ambassadeur scacheant comment ils sont grosses gents et du tout ignares de cosmographie, et beaucoup plus des estranges coutumes, leur dict: « O, pour certain vostre profetie est vraye, mais ce n'est pas le roy de France qui est le Ben Saphra, c'est le principal peuple de l'Empereur Charles, qui sont les Allemants Landskenets et aultres dudict pays, **qui tous en leurs chausses miparties portent la couleur jaulne. Et ceux là sont les ennemys de nostre roy, autant comme du vostre.** Je suis venu ici pour enseigner de par mon Roy, le moyen comment nous les destruirons ». Le Bascia adonc prenant son ignorance en paiement, et voyant comment l'ambassadeur disoit tant de mal du plus grand ennemy qu'ils eussent, à scavoir de l'Empereur et du peuple dont ils ont plus de peur que de cognoissance, s'appaisa et nous receut pour amys du Grand Seigneur.*

Afterwards, in 1544, Postel published *De orbis terrae Concordia*, in which he promoted a project of universal (political and religious) *concordia* whose foundations are represented by Christians (vs Coran and Jews). Postel's reaction has to be connected therefore to a concordist and universalist answer in the face of danger and threat. The search for a religious *con-cordia* against a real political and religious *dis-cordia*, although in different ways⁵⁵, was however fruitless: the so-called “age of religious war”, sadly marked by “repression in many spheres and persecution in religious” and lasting between 1550 and 1650, had begun⁵⁶.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, by studying oracular texts, we can observe that, in the face of dangers and threats to an established system, many reactions are possible⁵⁷ – meaning various

⁵⁵ Postel says that he would not follow Steuco, Justinus and Theodoretus on the basis of authority, but that he would use reason and demonstration, *au premier livre j'ai établi, affirmé et confirmé la sainte Trinité, la création du monde ex nihilo, la resurrection et l'immortalité des ames, non pas en m'appuyant sur l'autorité comme Agostino Eugubino, Justin, Théodoret, mais que nul Presque avant moi ne fit, par la raison et la demonstration, parce que ce que certains philosophes rejettent, les Chrétiens le croient lus qu'ils ne comprennent par la raison.*

⁵⁶ Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith. Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge MA, London, 2007), 2.

⁵⁷ Animals react in front of a danger (*i.e.* the risk of being eaten by a bigger animal) in three ways: by escaping, fighting or simulating death with immobility. The same consideration concerns the ethological level. If we analyse a psychological level, the analysis changes since it involves the intricate and more complex “intellectual” sphere. I am thinking about Jean Piaget's consideration about the two ways in which children react to novelty: by assimilation (the child assimilates the new event in an existing system and schema) or by accommodation (the child either modifies an existing schema or forms an entirely new schema to deal with a new object or event).

cultural representations that are not natural and instinctive. Even if proposing a categorisation of potential “cultural” responses to a threat, real or imaginary, is very difficult and risky, we can detect at least four possible responses: 1) Re-semanticisation and a *symphonic* response: ancient wisdom drawn from the past is used against the threat/novelty. This response can be realized in a) an exclusive way (the “novelty/threat” is excluded from the *symphonic* system, we can speak of deconstruction), as in the case of Porphyry’s oracular collection and its inclusion of barbarian culture within Hellenic culture, but with the exclusion of Christian culture, or in b) an inclusive one (the “novelty/threat” is inserted into a *symphonic* system, we can speak of construction): even if Steuco is against Protestant thinking, he seems to be optimistic about the spread of a *symphonic* Catholic system; 2) a messianic (eschatological) response: it involves hope and confidence that a saviour will come and bring salvation from the threat. The case of oracles in the times of Julian and Charles V is representative of this reaction; 3) a deterministic response: the threat and the danger are considered to belong to a providential system (destiny, fortune, nature) or even to chance, and cannot therefore be avoided. This last issue can be also related, at a more psychological level, to the human sense of impotence/lack of power, which leads us to avoid considering ourselves as responsible/guilty, or shifts responsibility to a superior entity; while admitting randomness is more difficult and problematic. This response may be detected in some oracles speaking of destiny in Porphyry’s oracular collection, as well as in Steuco’s providential vision of existence; 4) Another possible reaction, which we have not analysed, consists of responses that are purgative/reactionary (closing/exclusive, like *damnatio memoriae*) and/or revolutionary, for instance the creation of a new and stronger system against the threat (news vs novelty). The act of purging everything is considered dangerous () or in creating a new and stronger system against the threat (news vs new)⁵⁸.

The first and last responses we mentioned involve a rational system whereas the other two mirror an irrational and a-rational one. They can be related, in a different perspective, to the four types of (religious) interaction pointed out by scholarship: coexistence, cooperation, competition and conflict⁵⁹.

Despite living in different historical eras, Porphyry and Steuco – I argue – seem to look for a kind of cultural *symphony* and to return to oracular wisdom as a response to a perceived and real threat. Their responses to the threat show various points of contact: against the risk of oblivion, they re-use and recover pre-fabricated sources of knowledge drawn from the past or the present, in order to address the challenges of their time with the aid of an established, ‘perennial’ theological tradition. While the response provided by Porphyry against threats can be regarded as an elitist and exclusionary project, yet one which includes other wisdom besides that contained in Roman-Greek religion - apart from the enemy’s (Christian) one of course - Steuco proposes, in his *symphonic*

⁵⁸ The first reaction could correspond to indifference (simulated death) in the animal world (cooperation / competition); numbers 2 and 3 could correspond to escape in the animal world (coexistence); the last one is a totally exclusionary approach. It could correspond to fight in the animal world (conflict).

⁵⁹ These 4 responses could correspond somehow to the four ways of categorisation of religious interactions by the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, *i.e.* coexistence, cooperation, competition and conflict. Coexistence = no direct interaction, exclusive (3, 4); cooperation-competition (1a, b), conflict (2). See Wendy Mayer, “Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and theoretical Approaches,” in *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (eds. Wendy Mayer, Bronwen Neil; Berlin, Boston, 2013), (1-19) 3.

and propagandistic system, a real *reductio ad unum* (*una religio, una scientia, unus Deus*)⁶⁰.

To sum up, the use of oracles made by Porphyry and Steuco aims at re-creating a coherence and unity in a scattered and disoriented world. With regard to knowledge, the re-ordering process is therefore a process of both re-creating and grasping a new knowledge based and established voices in an uncertain world. *Symphony* is employed as an adequate concept, and oracular texts are used as suitable tools.

I would like to conclude with a famous episode. In 382 AD, Symmachus, a pagan rhetorician, who participated in the discussion on the removal of the Statue of Victory from the Senate house in Rome, in opposition to Ambrosius, responded to the unique vision of Christian religion in a more comprehensive way, saying the famous words: *uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum*, “by one journey it is not possible to arrive at such a great mystery” (Symmachus, *Relatio* III, 10). This non-exclusive reply mirrors a pluralistic vision of the different facets/paths of reality. In a similar way, different paths and multiple visions can be detected in analysing oracular texts. What I presented here is therefore not a dogmatic response, but one of the various interpretations we can provide in approaching these wandering texts.

⁶⁰ St., *de perenni* I 1A.