

## The Continuity of Tradition

### On the prophetic song of the Sibyl: *Judicii Signum*

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The hazards of research are sometimes the source of unexpected encounters. I happened once in Gozo, the second largest island of Malta, to discover a set of legends whose heroine was the prestigious Sibyl.<sup>1</sup> These legends, passed on through oral tradition down to a very recent period, are still alive in the memories of older people. They can be grouped in three cycles,<sup>2</sup> reflecting respectively Near Eastern, Roman and Christian influences; a comparative essay is devoted to them in the journal *Fabula* (Galley, 2001).

The presence of these tales in Malta together with their variants noted in Sicily (Pitré, 1888: 127–32; Lo Nigro, 1958: 290–91) and in the Monti Sibillini region of the Apennines (Paolucci 1967) attests to a tradition whose astonishing persistence suggested the urgent need for an in-depth study. The task would require first going back in time to the ancient Greek world in pursuit of the famous priestess of Apollo, then to clearly mark out the pathways by which the tradition spread together with its successive metamorphoses, and to follow the evolution of the prophetic figure which reached its highest artistic representation in the age of the Renaissance. Such was the point of departure for a project which was to lead in unsuspected directions.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, along the way I never lost sight of the initial question relating to the survival of the theme which the still-existing Maltese and Italian legends illustrate in such a striking fashion.

It was thus that I sought to determine whether the Song of the Sibyl, which during the Middle Ages was an integral part of the Christmas liturgy over a wide area of Christian southern Europe, remained a live tradition. This practice was still attested at a relatively recent period in several places where Catalan culture prevailed (Aebischer, 1972). But was this still so today? Was the tradition still alive in Catalan regions? An initial stay in the sanctuary-monastery of Lluc (Majorca)<sup>4</sup> in

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Fig. 1. The Blauets choir of Lluç

1998 enabled me to be present on Christmas Eve and to hear, sung in Catalan at the end of the service of Matins, the *Cant de la Sibyl·la*. This moment remains, as the local press reported it, ‘one of the most anticipated moments (*uno de los momentos más esperados*) for all who take part in the religious celebration at Lluç’ (*Diario de Mallorca*, 19.12.1998). That night they came in large numbers to Lluç from all parts of the island. There were groups made up of whole families, come to be present during the Christmas Vigil, and in particular for the traditional segment during which a young boy, taking the role of the Sibyl, chants a cappella the oracle of the priestess. He sings each verse alternately with the choir<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 1) which responds with the refrain, accompanied by the organ.

The chant originates in an oracular Greek text of 27 hexameters attributed to the celebrated Erythraean Sibyl of Asia Minor; it appears in the form of an acrostic poem where the initial letters of each line form the expression: ‘Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour’. Translated into Latin, this poem figured in St Augustine’s *City of God* in the early 5th century. This indicates that the early Christian Fathers and theologians had incorporated the figure of the Greek priestess, despite her being pagan<sup>6</sup> and that they had, since the 2nd century, perceived her, in the words of Tertullian, as a ‘true prophetess’ (*Sibylla, veri vera vates*) who had foretold the coming of Christianity.

The Sibyl was indeed considered to have prophesied the coming of Christ into the world: she was said to have foretold the birth of a Saviour born of a virgin;<sup>7</sup> in con-

sequence of this she was represented in the Christmas processions of the medieval Church as proclaiming the Nativity alongside the prophets of the Bible (*Ordo Prophetorum*).<sup>8</sup>

The Sibyl was also believed to have announced the Second Coming of Christ prior to the Last Judgement. This is the essence of the Greek poem out of which arose the medieval chant which is the subject of our interest here. Its apocalyptic text enumerated the 'signs' which will prelude God's Last Judgement – whence the Latin name of *Judicii Signum* given to it. The first of the precursor signs, *tellus sudore madescet*, 'the earth will be bathed in sweat', introduces the description of the cosmic upheavals which are a plethora of images of horror and chaos. Notwithstanding these, for souls smitten by the fear of death and the beyond,<sup>9</sup> the Sibylline prophecy was a harbinger of hope because it announced the salvation of the righteous.

What is known of the circumstances in which the prophetic poem of the Sibyl was to be composed and set to music in order to be sung on Christmas Eve in the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages? Here, in broad outline, are the stages of that evolution.

From the 9th century, the text of the *Judicii Signum* was incorporated into lectionaries associated with the liturgy for the Matins of Christmas. The integral Latin text was sometimes accompanied by a musical notation in neumes, as is the case of a manuscript of the 9th–10th centuries, produced in the monastery of Saint-Martial de Limoges, which constitutes one of the oldest extant musical scripts (Gómez, 1996: 6). The document is important for another reason, in that it presents the poem in the form under which it was to be propagated, that of a refrain (the first line) followed by successive stanzas. In this form it spread over a considerable area, as proven by the thirty-three different versions collected by Higini Anglès (1935); these versions, drawn from lectionaries dating from the 10th to the 13th centuries for the most part, are held in archives in Cordoba, Barcelona, Paris, Monte Cassino, Gerona, Rome, Montpellier and Tarragona. The comparative table which the author presents (p. 295) sets out a melodic pattern which varies only in a few minor details.

The 13th century saw a considerable production of lectionaries, collections of homilies and breviaries; amongst them can be found the Latin text and music for the *Judicii Signum*. In France alone, no fewer than thirty of these breviaries can be documented, coming from all regions – from Marseille as from Bourges or Saintes (Léroquais, 1934). In a general sense, in France as in Castille, Catalonia and in Italy, the use of the Song of the Sibyl increased, in Anglès's words, to 'an unsuspected extent' (*una amplada insospitada*) (id., 294). And it was already beginning to take on a new orientation.

For indeed, from the 13th century on, the *Judicii Signum* began to be sung in the different vernacular languages which were gradually supplanting Latin. The determining factor in this was likely to have been the great popularity of this chant: '*El cant de la Sibilla fou tant amat pel poble senzill que aviat . . . el text vulgar va succeir el text llatí*' [The song of the Sibyl was so loved by the simple people that . . . the vernacular text was to replace the Latin text] (id. 296).<sup>10</sup> Anglès, who is a musicologist, then establishes a new comparative table (Table II, p. 296) from ten versions of diverse origins extending over a period from the 13th to the 16th centuries. The linguistic diversity of these versions – Occitan, Castillian and Catalan – is immediately appar-

ent, as are, in the case of the Catalan versions, certain melismatic variations which are reflected by the musical transcription of the chants.

In the 15th century, the trend was towards polyphony: in various places the refrain was sung in three or four parts.<sup>11</sup> These polyphonic compositions, ornamented to a greater or lesser extent (Sevestre, 1981), are either anonymous works or those of directors of church music, as was the case in Seville, Cordoba or Toledo. In every case, the rule seemed to be the following: the soloist and the choir sang alternately, with the choir responding with the refrain after each stanza sung by the soloist.

It is apparent as well that the rendition of the Sibylline chant was accompanied by a theatrical setting. In the 15th century, the individual who played the role of the Sibyl could be a cleric<sup>12</sup> or a 'child dressed in the costume of a prophetess' (Gómez, 1996: 7). The examples where the role of the Sibyl was given to a woman were rare, except in convents – in Majorca, for example.

The individual assuming the role (most often a child) was, according to the descriptions of the 15th–16th centuries, richly dressed in Near Eastern style, in a female costume of embroidered silk with wide sleeves and sometimes with a train – which suggested, it was said, the appearance of a siren; on the performer's head there was placed a wig in Barcelona, a silver cylindrical bonnet in Tarragona, or a diadem or turban; the character brandished a sword and was accompanied by two or four choirboys, who represented angels (Anglès, 1935: 300). Finally, a characteristic that was particular to the ceremony in León (Spain): the richly apparelled character would enter the church on horseback (Rodríguez, 1947: I, 20).

The tradition seems thus to have become thoroughly anchored in the cultures that adopted it. However, under the influence of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), it was soon to either fall into disuse in some areas<sup>13</sup> or, on the contrary, to persist more vigorously than ever in others – in particular in Catalonia. The Council of Trent, in its desire to purge the Christmas liturgy of extraneous elements, decided to prohibit the procession of the prophets (*Ordo prophetorum*) mentioned earlier, and hence as well the representation of the Sibyl and of her song.<sup>14</sup> But this directive was not universally obeyed. Among significant examples of reticence towards the demands of the Church hierarchy, we can cite that of the cathedral of Toledo, where the Sibylline chant, simply repositioned to the end of the Matins liturgy, was still sung well into the 18th century. In Majorca, the weight of tradition won out over the prohibitions of 1572 and 1666 and the song of the Sibyl is still today incorporated into the Christmas liturgy. Basing his appeal on what he considered to be 'an authentic expression of piety', the bishop of Palma, Don Rafael Alvarez, made application to Rome in 1967 to obtain approval for the celebration of the chant: the authorization *ad experimentum* 'on an experimental basis' was effectively conceded on the 13th December 1967 (Llabrès Martorell: 54).

The custom thus persists, not only at the cathedral of Palma but also in other churches and in the monasteries of the island. In Palma cathedral, the young boy taking the part of the Sibyl, dressed in a red cape, goes up to the pulpit to proclaim his prophecy (Fig. 2), whereas in Lluç he stands before the high altar, facing the congregation, to chant the Sibylline song (Fig. 3). It is specifically in relation to the sanctuary of Lluç (*Sanctuari de la Mare de Déu de Lluç*) where – as mentioned earlier – I myself had been, that the following description is documented.



Fig. 2. The Song of the Sibyl performed in the Cathedral of Palma



Lluc is situated in the heart of a mountainous region, the Serra de Tramuntana, which extends from the Canal de la Dragonera to the Cap de Formentor. The place-name, Lluc, designates the place as a 'sacred wood' (from the Latin *lucus* = grove, coppice). In effect, the chapel of Santa Maria de Lluc was already the site of a pilgrimage in the 13th century. In the 15th century, a priory was founded whose members, in accordance with the founding statutes, were to become experts in grammar and in religious song. This was the initiative which eventually led to the formation of the 'Blauets' (note 5). The 17th century saw the construction of the superb Renaissance-style basilica, on which was conferred the title of Chapel Royal in 1707 (Fig. 4). Progressively, the Sanctuary added extensive accommodation structures to house the numerous pilgrims drawn to the site (Fig. 5). Today, the missionary priests of the Sacred Heart take charge of all aspects of

Fig. 3. Boy from Lluc in the role of the Sibyl (photo taken from *Lluc. Paroles et Images*, Postales Color Cyp 1987)





Fig. 4. The basilica of the Sanctuary of Lluç (in *Lluç. Paroles et Images*, 1987)



Fig. 5. General view of Lluç (in *Lluç. Paroles et Images*, 1987)



Fig. 6. The 'neules', decorative element of the basilica (1998)



Fig. 7. Preparations in the sacristy (1998)

the upkeep as well as of the general and musical education of their young boarding pupils.

On the evening of the 24th December (1998), the basilica of Lluç stands prepared for the Christmas Vigil. There is a gleam of gilt from all the baroque ornaments decorating the interior. The festive atmosphere is reinforced by the arrangement throughout the sanctuary of bunches of red and white roses and gladioli as well as paper wreaths finely cut out to form geometric figures and designs (Fig. 6) which are gracefully hung from one wall to another. The boy Miguel, who is going to play the role of the Sibyl, is dressed in the sacristy (Fig. 7) by Franciscan nuns who have come especially for this occasion.

The religious ceremony begins with the Matins when the solemn announcement is made that Christ is born. Even before the reading takes place of the texts which foretold his coming into the world, words of welcome and a veritable sermon (*Sermo de la Calenda*) are pronounced by a choirboy dressed in a blue cassock and white surplice. The young preacher is required, by the end of Advent, to be able to recall the significant periods of religious history, from the creation of the world until the incarnation of God made man (Llabrès Martorell: 57–60).

After the boy's sermon,<sup>15</sup> there follow in succession five readings of prophetic texts<sup>16</sup> alternated with the singing of psalms. Then comes the end of the Matins liturgy. It is at this point that, in a gloriously divine moment, the voice of young

Miguel, who intones *El Cant de la Sibil.la*, resounds through the sanctuary, accompanied by those of the choirboys taking up the refrain.

The text generally consists of twelve stanzas in the Catalan versions. At Lluç, the number of stanzas is reduced to five. The following is the integral text in Catalan and in translation.

CANT DE LA SIBIL.LA (Lluç)

Soloist:	Lo jorn del Judici Parrà qui haurà fet servici. <sup>17</sup>	On the Last Judgement Day Those who have served well will be revealed.
Choir:	Lo jorn del Judici Parrà qui haurà fet servici.	On the Last Judgement Day Those who have served well will be revealed.
Soloist:	Jesucrist, Rei universal Home I ver Déu, eternal. Del cel vindrà per a jutgar I a cada un lo just darà.	Jesus Christ, universal King, True God made Man for eternity, From heaven will come down to judge And give to each his rightful part.
Choir:	Lo jorn del Judici	On the Last Judgement Day
Soloist:	Gran foc del cel davallarà,  Mars, fonts I rius tot cremarà. Los peixos donaràn grans crits Perdent sos naturals delits	A great fire will pour down from heaven, Seas, springs and rivers all will burn, <sup>18</sup> The fish will all cry out aloud, Losing their natural instincts.
Choir:	Lo jorn del Judici	On the Last Judgement Day
Soloist:	Als bons dirà: Fills meus veniu,  Benaventurats posseiu El regne que us tenc aparellat Des de el mon va ser creat.	To the good he will say: come, my children, You, the blessed, take possession of The Kingdom I have made for you Since the world was created.
Choir:	Aj jorn del Judici.	On the Last Judgement Day
Soloist:	Al mals dirà molt agrament: Anau, maleits, al torment. Anau, anau al foc etern Amb vostre princep de lo infern.	To the evil he will say most severely: Be gone, accursed to your torment. Be gone to everlasting fire With your prince of the Underworld.
Choir:	Aj jorn del Judici.	On the Last Judgement Day
Soloist:	Oh, humble Verge, que heu parit Jesús infant en aquesta nit, Vulgueu a vostre Fill pregar Que de l'infern en vulla guardar	O humble Virgin, who brought forth The Child Jesus on this night, May you kindly implore your Son That He might keep us safe from Hell. <sup>19</sup>
Soloist:	Lo jorn del Judici Parrà qui haurà fet servici.	On the Last Judgement Day Those who have served well will be revealed.

We have followed the pathway taken by the acrostic poem attributed to the Sibyl of Erythrae: from the 10th century on, its prophetic message has been integrated into the Christian Christmas liturgy in several Mediterranean regions. There it was sung first in Latin, then three centuries later, in translation in the various vernacular languages. It remains a living tradition today in certain areas of Catalan culture,



notably in Majorca, and most specifically at Lluç on that particular Christmas when I had the opportunity of experiencing it in person.

The spiritual atmosphere that reigns in the sanctuary of Lluç on the night of Christmas, the pure voices of the choir of the Blauets, the beauty of the melody which has been repeated unchanged for centuries, ornamented throughout by graceful melisma, all come together to temper the dramatic character of the ancient prophecy without impairing the deep emotion inspired by its message.

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In conclusion, we may observe that the prophetic song of the Sibyl is a perfect illustration of the continuity of a cultural tradition which has spanned centuries and frontiers, and which still remains very much alive in those places where we have observed it. Such phenomena naturally undergo more or less profound adaptations and successive reactualizations.

In this present case, the most spectacular 'metamorphosis' took place at the emergence of Christianity, when the Sibyl, emerging from the polytheistic world of ancient Greece, was 'elevated' to the same rank as that of the Biblical prophets. In the medieval Church, the song of the Sibyl came to fulfil a function that claimed popular assent and became an essential part of Church ritual in the eyes of the most devoted of the faithful. This evolution was facilitated by a series of adjustments to the text – translated first from Greek into Latin, then set to music, then translated into the various vernacular languages – and to the liturgy.

Other changes occurred spontaneously over time and in response to circumstance, affected by various different influences. From one area to another we have seen how the process of theatrical adaptation and method by which the chant is executed could vary: although remaining essentially constant, the melody has been ornamented, here and there, by complex melismatic elements reflecting a Mozarabic influence. This is so in Majorca, which lived under Arab cultural influence for a long period.

We should recall in closing that we are in the region of the Mediterranean – a zone where cultural contacts have been since time immemorial of exceptional intensity and diversity.

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## Notes

1. I owe this discovery to my late-lamented colleague and friend Joseph Cassar-Pullicino.
2. Which could be entitled 'The Sibyl and Solomon', 'The Books of Wisdom' and 'The Sibyl and the Virgin Mary'.
3. This work at the crossroads of several disciplines has led to a projected collective and abundantly illustrated publication currently in the course of elaboration.
4. I am grateful to Padré Guillermo Bauzà for arranging my stay at Lluç and for having very kindly

supplied me with documentation. I wish equally to thank my colleague Antoni Rossell for having passed on to me some very valuable bibliographical information. And my gratitude is also extended to Father Gabriel Seguí i Trobat, who is a specialist in medieval liturgies and is Director of the Archives of Lluc, for his authorization to publish the photographs which accompany this article.

5. The choirboys, trained at the choir school of the Monastery of Lluc, wear blue cassocks, whence the name 'Blauets' by which they are known.
6. 'The Sibyl of Erythrae certainly wrote some things concerning Christ which are quite manifest' said Saint Augustine (*City of God* Book 18: ch. 23). It is this same Sibyl who would later be referred to in the words of the *Dies Irae*: 'Teste David cum Sibilla'.
7. Cf. for example Oracles sibyllins III, 785–788: *La Bible. Ecrits intertestamentaires* (Inter-Testamentary writings).
8. Mention should also be made of the important role conferred on the Sibyl in certain medieval mystery plays. The Sibyls collectively (for their number continued to multiply since Antiquity) came gradually to constitute an exceptional source of inspiration which stimulated much Christian art across the whole of Europe and which found its fullest expression during the Renaissance.
9. Over and above the terrors aroused by the imminent end of the first millennium.
10. The popularity of the Song of the Sibyl in the Iberian peninsula in the 13th century is attested by the fact that one of the songs of the famous Cantigues de Santa Maria of the king Alphonso the Wise was directly inspired by it: Anglès comments: 'no es altra cosa que un contrafactum del cant de la Sibilla.' [*it is nothing other than a counterfeit of the Song of the Sibyl*].
11. Recent commercially available CD recordings follow this tradition. Cf. *El Canto de la Sibilla* under the direction of Jordi Savall, Fontalis 1988 and 1996 and Aliavox 1998; also Barcelona Mass. Song of the Sibyl, under the direction of Emmanuel Bonnardot, Opus 111.
12. Despite interruptions over the course of time, this tradition remains practised in a region of Catalan culture, Alghero in Sardinia, where I was able to observe it at Christmas in 1999.
13. Furthermore, the fact cannot be ignored that religious outlooks were changing during the Renaissance: Christians were coming to view religion with more equanimity, a viewpoint which made them less responsive to the Sibylline message of the Last Judgement.
14. The involvement of the Sibyl and of her song most probably derived from the Procession of the Prophets: she would have been perceived as the 'final echo' of their prophecies (Aebischer 1950: 261).
15. Similarly in Malta, it is a boy (it-Tifel) who, according to tradition, prepares (sometimes with the help of a priest) and learns by heart, in Latin and more recently in Maltese, the Christmas sermon for whose delivery he is responsible.
16. According to the order of proceedings that appears in Llabrès Martorell (s.d.: 67–85).
17. Literally: there will appear he who will have served. In other words: it will be seen who has fulfilled their duty and so will be rewarded.
18. Other versions describe the torrent of fire and brimstone that will sweep over the oceans and dry up the springs and rivers. Whence the terror of the fish evoked in the following lines.
19. It is frequent in the piety of the ordinary people to ask the Virgin to intercede with her Son for the salvation of one's soul. Below is the example taken from the religious poetry of the island of Gozo:

Sliema għalik, Regina Int Regina tad-duluri, Itlob 'ill-Iben tiegħek Halli jsalvini ruħi. (Cassar-Pullicino 1989, 104)	I acknowledge Thee, o Queen Thou, Queen of suffering, Beseech your Son To grant salvation of my soul. (From the French translation by M.G.)
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When the Virgin intercedes, she is provided with arguments drawn from the themes of childbirth, suckling, and the care lavished by the mother on the Divine Child: she begs her son to save sinners 'for the love' (imħabba) 'of the thirty-three years that she has watched over him . . . for the love of the milk with which she nourished him . . . for the love of the Day when she brought him to birth . . .' (ibid., 111).

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