

Today's a big day in the Premier League, and lots of fans are desperate to know how their teams are going to do today. In ancient times, they might have consulted an ORACLE or a SOOTHSAYER to find out what was going to happen. Before going into battle, Roman generals would have a soothsayer kill a chicken, and they would inspect its insides to predict how the battle would go. But for really big decisions you would consult an ORACLE, like the ORACLE AT DELPHI (pronounced 'Dell - fee'): that was the oracle where the priestess said that no one was wiser than SOCRATES).

For example, KING CROESUS (pronounced 'Cree- suss') was thinking about invading PERSIA, but wanted some reassurance that if he did, he would conquer Persia. He sent off to the Oracle at Delphi to be told what would happen and got the response, 'If you cross the river, a great empire will fall.' He thought that meant the Persian Empire would fall, and invaded - but it turned out that it was his own empire that fell as a result of invading Persia, as he was soundly defeated and captured by the Persians. (He was going to be killed, but as he was taken to be executed, he called out 'SOLON' (pronounced 'So - lon') three times. The Persian King CYRUS THE GREAT stopped the execution and had Croesus brought to him, and said, 'What is this Solon you are talking about?' Croesus replied, 'Solon is a very wise man, and when I was king and had everything I wanted, I asked Solon, "Was there any man who was happier than I am?" And Solon told me, "Call no man happy until he dies." I didn't understand him then, but I understand him now - you can only say whether someone is happy when you see how their whole life turns out, and the way things have turned out for me shows just how right he was.' Cyrus was so impressed by this wisdom that he spared Croesus' life, and made Croesus his adviser - and probably the first advice Croesus gave him was to be very careful about tricky prophecies from Delphi. Anyway, on with your story...)

The most famous prophetesses ('prophetess' because they were female) in ancient times were the SIBYLS (pronounced 'sib - ulls') - woman who would set themselves up in various holy places (or SHRINES) around the Mediterranean and Near East and make various prophecies about the future. And the most famous of the Sibyls was the CUMAEAN (pronounced 'Cue - may - an') SIBYL - the priestess of the shrine at CUMAE, which was near Naples, in Italy. And the Cumaean Sibyl was very famous because of the story I am going to tell you about, the story of the SIBYLLINE BOOKS.

The story goes that in the time of the last ever Roman King, TARQUIN THE PROUD (I mentioned him when telling you about JULIUS CAESAR, on May 18), the Cumaean Sibyl, disguised as an old woman, arrived in Rome and offered Tarquin nine books of prophecies about the future of Rome. These were the Sibylline Books. But she asked for a huge price for them - what the price was, we aren't told, but let's assume it was five hundred bars of gold. Tarquin replied, 'I want to buy the books, but that's too much - name me a better price.' And the Sibyl then threw three of the books on a nearby fire, and watched them burn up completely. She then turned back to Tarquin and said, 'Now I am offering you six books - for five hundred bars of gold': the same price she had demanded for nine books! Tarquin was seriously puzzled by this, and said, 'No - I told you, five hundred gold bars was too much. It was too much for nine books, and it's definitely too much for six. Offer me a better price.'



And then the Sibyl took another three books, threw them on the fire, watched them burn up, and turned back to Tarquin and said, 'Now I am offering you three books for five hundred bars of gold' - again, still the same price. This time, Tarquin was seriously sweating: he knew if he said no again, the old woman would burn the remaining three books and he would be left with nothing, when those books might contain priceless clues to the future of Rome. So he gave in, and gave the old woman the five hundred bars of gold she wanted, and the Romans took possession of the three books.

All this happened round about 500 BC, and the Romans consulted the Sibylline Books constantly ever since to know what might happen in the future. The last time they were known to have been consulted was in 363 AD - over 800 years since they were acquired. And I bet every time the Romans looked at the Sibylline Books, they were cursing Tarquin for not paying the price asked for the nine books, with the result that he ended up paying the same price for three books. If only he had paid up, they would have had nine books to consult, and not just three – and they would always be wondering, what were in the other six books?

The Cumaean Sibyl's bargaining strategy was an interesting one - getting the money you want by offering less and less for the same amount of money. Another interesting way of bargaining is to INCREASE the price you are demanding if the other person refuses to pay you what you initially asked for - which makes them think that if they say no again, the price will go up again. But these ways of bargaining only work if the other side knows that if they don't agree, they will get nothing and that you will walk away rather than agree to anything less than what you are asking for. That's why it was so important that the Cumaean Sibyl threw three books on the fire, and then another three books, when Tarquin refused her initial offer. It had to be made clear to him that she would burn all the books if he did not agree. If, when the Sibyl had asked him for five hundred bars of gold for the nine books, and Tarquin had refused, she has said, 'You'd better give me five hundred bars of gold, or I'll burn three of these books', he would probably have thought she was BLUFFING, and that she wouldn't go through with her threat. Instead, to show how serious she was, she didn't even make the threat but simply threw three of the books on the fire. So if you are going to try to make a very good deal, the other side has to know that they will get nothing unless they agree, and that you aren't bluffing when you threaten to walk away and leave them with nothing if they don't agree.

The Cumaean Sibyl is also famous because - as I've already mentioned (on May 22) - the Roman writer VIRGIL quoted the Cumaean Sibyl in his FOURTH ECLOGUE as predicting that a 'Maid' would return and 'a new generation' would descend 'from heavens on high' because of an 'infant' that would bring about the end of the 'age of iron'. And many Christians took that as a prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ. And that's why if you go to the SISTINE CHAPEL, in the VATICAN, in ROME, you will see on the ceiling, among many other famous figures painted by MICHELANGELO (who we should talk about some other time), the Cumaean Sibyl, as well as some other Sibyls - because they were all seen by Christians as having predicted in some way the coming of Jesus Christ.

