

Ancient Divination and Experience

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Edited by

LINDSAY G. DRIEDIGER-MURPHY
AND ESTHER EIDINOW

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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First Edition published in 2019

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019934009

ISBN 978-0-19-884454-9

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198844549.001.0001

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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List of Abbreviations

For ancient authors and works, and modern collections of ancient evidence, we have used the abbreviations in S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth, and E. Eidinow (eds.) 2012. *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th edn). Oxford. Additional abbreviations are listed below:

ABL	Harper, R. F. and Waterman, L. 1892–1914. <i>Assyrian and Babylonian Letters Belonging to the Kouyunjik Collection of the British Museum</i> , 14 vols. Chicago.
BBR	Zimmern, H. 1901. <i>Beiträge zur Kenntnis der babylonischen Religion</i> . Leipzig.
Bu 89-4-26	Tablets acquired by Wallace Budge and accessioned by the British Museum on 26 April 1889.
CAD	Oppenheim, A. L., Reiner, E. et al. (eds.) 1956–. <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . Chicago.
Didyma	McCabe, D. F. 1985. <i>Didyma Inscriptions: Texts and List</i> . “The Princeton Project on the Inscriptions of Anatolia”, The Institute for Advanced Study. Princeton. Includes: Rehm, A. 1958. <i>Didyma, II: Die Inschriften</i> . Berlin.
K	Tablets in the Kouyunjik collection of the British Museum.
KAR	Ebeling, E. 1919; 1920. <i>Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts</i> , I/II. Leipzig.
Ki 1904-10-9	Tablets acquired by Leonard King and accessioned by the British Museum on 9 October, 1904.
[Luc.] Amor.	Ps. Lucian, <i>Amores</i> (<i>Affairs of the Heart</i>).
RMA	Thompson, R. C. 1900. <i>The Reports of the Magicians and Astrologers of Nineveh and Babylon</i> . London.
SAA	State Archives of Assyria.
MSL	Landesberger, B. et al. 1937–. <i>Materialien zum sumerischen Lexikon/ Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon</i> . Rome.

A note on spelling: we have adopted Greek spelling for names of people and places, except in those cases where the Latinized form is more familiar, or where it could cause confusion with the abbreviated form.

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Lisa Raphals (瑞麗) studies the cultures of early China and Classical Greece, with interests in comparative philosophy, religion, and history of science. She is Professor of Chinese and Comparative Literature, University of California Riverside, cooperating faculty in the departments of Philosophy and Religious Studies, and serves on faculty of the Tri-Campus PhD program in Classics. She is the author of *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece* (Cornell, 1992), *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (SUNY, 1998), and *Divination and Prediction in Early China and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 2013). Representative scholarly articles include: 'Skeptical Strategies in the Zhuangzi and Theaetetus' (*Philosophy East & West*, 1994), 'Debates about Fate in Early China' (*Études Chinoises*, 2014), 'Sunzi versus Xunzi: Two Views of Deception and Indirection' (*Early China*, 2016), and 'Body and Mind in Early China and Greece' (*Journal of Cognitive Historiography*, 2017).

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Introduction

Lindsay G. Driediger-Murphy and Esther Eidinow

1. ‘You Believe; We Know’

This volume is the result of a conference held in London, in July 2015, on the topic of divination in ancient cultures, with particular focus on Greece and Rome.¹ The conference itself arose from the desire to explore approaches that diverged from the prevailing scholarly functionalist analyses of ancient divination. A recent summary of the state of anthropological research in this area will come as no surprise to classicists: ‘regardless of whether divination is conceived of as a means for providing emotional reassurance, a tool for restoring and sustaining a social structure, an instrument for making decisions, building consensus, and establishing political legitimacy, or an aid for maintaining a cognitive order’, the assumption in most studies has been that ‘divination [is] a derivation from, and representation of, some underlying processes which it serves to control’.²

In scholarship on the ancient world, there is no doubt that such explanations reveal important socio-political dimensions of divinatory practice, but they also run the risk of obscuring from view the very people, ideologies, and experiences that scholars seek to understand. The problems raised by this approach have recently been summarized by the religious studies and anthropology scholar Patrick Curry: it ‘allows the observer-theorist to distance him- or herself from the subject matter and its human subjects, and then to inform them what they are “really” doing. You believe; we know.’³ In contrast, the papers at this conference sought to re-examine what ancient

¹ The editors would like to thank the Institute of Classical Studies for their generous sponsorship of the conference, and the following for their support of this project: Simon Hornblower, Charlotte Loveridge, Georgina Leighton, the production team at OUP, and the contributing authors of this volume. This project (research and volume) was supported by the AHRC, the Leverhulme Trust, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

² Myhre 2006.

³ Curry 2010: 4.

people—primarily those in ancient Greek and Roman communities, but also Mesopotamian and Chinese cultures—thought they were doing through divination, and what this could tell us about the religions and cultures in which divination was practised. Contributors to the 2015 conference were asked to engage with one or more of a set of shared questions:

- What kinds of gods do ancient forms of divination presuppose?
- What beliefs, anxieties, and hopes did divination seek to address?
- What were the limits of human ‘control’ of divination?
- What kinds of human–divine relationships did divination create/sustain?

2. Beyond Functionalism

Previous scholarship on divinatory practices of course comprises many, differentiated fields: the approaches taken by the two disciplines of Greek and Roman history, just as an example, have been intriguingly dissimilar. In research on ancient Greek divination or *mantikē*, scholars, moving beyond the earlier, more descriptive or documentary approaches to ancient divination, have drawn on the resources of anthropology to explore the ways in which a practice that at first sight seems to make little sense, can be viewed as quite ‘rational’ within the cognitive constraints of its own culture.⁴ Although the binary categories of rationality/irrationality are no longer deemed relevant in these discussions,⁵ scholars have, in general pursued a functionalist line of analysis, seeking the socio-political implications of divination.⁶ Thus, it has

⁴ Ethnologists and anthropologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led the way in providing detailed descriptions of divinatory practices and experiences in many cultures. When interpreting this data, however, those studies tended to explain divination’s influence and the experiences it generated as the result of ‘primitive’ or ‘pre-scientific’ worldviews (e.g. Tylor 1871; Frazer 1906–15 [1890]; Lévy-Bruhl 1951 [1910]). Such interpretations have long since been discarded. Descriptive approaches: some examples include Roux 1946; Amandry 1950; Parke 1939, 1967a, 1967b, 1985; Parke and Wormell 1956; Günther 1971; Fontenrose 1978. Rationality: Vernant 1974: 18–19 represents the oracle as a form of rationality that is confronted by the rationality of Greek political structure; cf. Burkert 2005: esp. 30 on rationality vs. irrationality.

⁵ Cf. the more schematic overview of current scholarship in Struck 2016.

⁶ A famous exception to this is Vernant et al. 1974; this is mentioned in Johnston and Struck 2005. Johnston, in the introduction to that volume, raises the way that ‘divination also helps us to understand the mentalities that organize other essential aspects of human existence’ (p. 11). Most recently, Trampedach (2015) has examined divination as a ‘Kommunikationsphänomen’ (p. 14), and explored its role not only in various political structures and in the development of political rationality (p. 564), but also in the relationship that this communicative phenomenon instantiated between men and gods.

generally been agreed that communities consulted oracles because they sought to resolve their internal differences via an unbiased authority, usually located outside the city.⁷ Divination provided a mode of achieving consensus, and, as such it ‘also serves for the scholar, as an indication of where legitimation is most necessary’.⁸ In turn, scholars have argued that individuals sought and found in divination a heightened sense of personal control.⁹ In contrast, although studies of Roman divination have typically engaged less explicitly with the anthropological literature, they too have tended to focus on the social and political functions served by divination. The various forms of public divination at Rome (augury, state-sanctioned haruspicy, and prodigy-interpretation) have attracted particular attention. Such forms of divination are said to have enhanced magisterial, senatorial, or imperial authority; to have calmed panic and validated decisions taken by officials and senate; to have enforced magisterial submission to the senate and priestly bodies (particularly in the Republic); to have strengthened claims to political legitimacy (a phenomenon especially well documented in the Imperial period); to have helped Romans to cope with situations of uncertainty and helplessness; and to have created delay in order to buy ‘breathing-space’ for calmer and more reasoned discussion and/or the application of ‘peer-pressure’.¹⁰ Forms of public divination have also tended to be seen above all as a tool of the elite, employed by the political authorities to bolster their power over the lower orders, by the senate majority to compel individual politicians’ adherence to an emerging consensus, by the individual

⁷ For example, Morgan 1990: esp. 184–5; Parker 2000; Rosenberger 2001 emphasizes cultural behaviours and techniques.

⁸ Johnston 2005: 23.

⁹ Rüpke following Turner (2005b (vol. 3): 1443); Burkert 2005: 30.

¹⁰ A few examples: Vernant 1974: 10 (divination makes decision-making appear more ‘objective’); Liebeschuetz 1979: 8ff.; Wardman 1982: 20, 45; Scheid 1985: 46 (augury legitimated public decisions); Gordon 1990: 192–3 (religion as a ‘veil’ concealing the ‘real-world forces’ [i.e. actions of the elite] that truly shaped events); North 1990: 64–5 (divination could validate public decisions, though note his criticisms of Liebeschuetz’s emphasis on this); Dowden 1992: 35; Orlin 1997: 90–1 (consultations of the Sibylline Books calmed panic and validated senate decisions, though he recognizes that concern about the gods could also play a role); Rosenberger 1998; Rüpke 2005a (divination bought time for the negotiation of elite consensus); Rüpke 2005b: 1443–4 (divination as psychological aid, social process, and symbol), 1450 (divination as ‘Widerspruchsschleifen, die insgesamt den Entscheidungsprozeß in Richtung Konsens optimieren’); Rüpke 2012: 479: divination is ‘une forme de comportement collectif qui, en situation d’incertitude, à l’aide de rôles sociaux définis pour l’interprétation et l’élaboration rituelle de signes standardisés, recherche et articule l’accord et le désaccord.’ Note that the applicability to Rome of the ‘control of helplessness’ theory prominent in studies of Greek divination is questioned by North 1990: 62–4.

magistrate to alter the behaviour of his rivals and opponents, or by the individual claimant to power to bolster his own case.

Our intention is not to dismiss these insights, but to highlight other aspects of ancient divination which such functionalist approaches have tended to overlook. Recent developments in Classics, anthropology, and cognitive science encourage progress in several new aspects of exploration. In the discipline of anthropology, several scholars have offered productive critiques of an excessive reliance on functionalist interpretations of divination,¹¹ criticism with which Classics has not yet fully engaged. In the discipline of cognitive science, studies of brain activity during perceived religious experiences suggest that these can be understood without assuming manipulation, hypocrisy, or deception on the subject's part. Research into ancient Greek and Roman divination is also exploring more and different dimensions than before. For example, scholars of ancient Greek divinatory practices have begun to examine divinatory activities, or discourse concerned with these activities, as ways for human beings to express particular aspects of their relationship and interactions with their environment—an environment that, of course, included the divine.¹² On the Roman side, there is a growing recognition, drawing on critiques of the *polis*-religion model,¹³ that even public religion was not simply the preserve of the elite. For divination to fulfil the functions we typically ascribe to it, it must have dealt in symbols, concerns, and ideas which resonated both with those in power and those (of lower social status) whose support kept them there.¹⁴ There has also been a burst of interest in the diversity of religious experiences and actors in both Greek and Roman contexts: in the religion of families and individuals, in the kinds of emotions produced by religion, and in beliefs and activities which our elite sources may depict as 'fringe' or 'deviant', but which may have played a larger role in the life of the ancients than this characterization suggests (and we have recognized).¹⁵ The essays in this volume engage with these advances to identify and elucidate previously

¹¹ See especially the papers collected in Curry 2010. For an example of how a comparative anthropological approach may be used to consider features of divination across several ancient Mediterranean cultures, see Beerden 2013, with Harrison 2015a and Eidinow 2015.

¹² Eidinow 2007 examines both divination and binding spells as ways of expressing and responding to culturally constructed conceptions of risk; Struck 2016 analyses philosophical texts on divination as reflections on intuitive knowledge; on oracular narratives, see Dougherty 1992, Maurizio 1997, and Kindt 2016.

¹³ E.g. Bendlin 1997; Woolf 1997; Bendlin 2000; Kindt 2012.

¹⁴ Ripat 2006.

¹⁵ Parker 2011: 224–64; Chaniotis 2012; Chaniotis and Ducrey 2013; Rüpke 2013; Scheid 2013 (English edition 2016); Santangelo 2013; Whitmarsh 2015.

understudied aspects of ancient divinatory experience and practice. Special attention is paid to the experiences of non-elites, the theological content of divination, the ways in which divinatory techniques could surprise their users by yielding unexpected or unwanted results, the difficulties of interpretation with which divinatory experts were thought to contend, and the possibility that divination could not just ease, but also exacerbate, anxiety in practitioners and consultants. By analysing these aspects, we suggest, it is possible to examine how ancient divination worked, and explore what this can tell us about what mattered to the individuals and cultures that used it,¹⁶ without adopting uncritically the ‘emic’ perspective of our subjects, or simply describing the experiences of individual users of divination.¹⁷

3. Similarities and Differences

The essays in this volume cover a range of times and places: those on ancient Greek culture examine Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic evidence; those on Roman cultures encompass the Republican to the Imperial periods. The editors elected not to extend into Late Antiquity, since it seems to us that divinatory rituals of that period begin to raise markedly different theological questions. We have, however, included here three essays that are intended to provide productive comparative insights. The coverage of cultures in the volume reflects the expertise of the conference participants. Comparative data from other ancient cultures (e.g. Jewish, Egyptian) would enrich the picture further, and we hope that this volume will inspire further work in all of these areas. Our goal here is not to provide comprehensive treatment of divination in all ancient cultures but to show how new approaches to divination can yield new insights in the study of many ancient peoples. The essays reflect on a broad range of divinatory practices, including not only oracles (Eidinow, Deeley, Maurizio, and Raphals), but also dreams

¹⁶ The place of individual choice in everyday engagement in ancient religions has been emphasized by Jörg Rüpke’s ‘Lived Ancient Religion’ project (University of Erfurt). Some of the participants in that project were also involved in Rosenberger 2014, which considered the role of the individual in ancient Greek divination. The essays in this volume build on this theme to offer some new examples of how divination influenced the lives of individuals (as well as groups and societies) in several ancient cultures.

¹⁷ Emic perspectives: For discussion of the limitations of ‘emic’ approaches to religions, see e.g. Versnel 1991; McCutcheon 1999; Johnston 2003; McCutcheon 2007: ch. 6. On descriptive approaches, see n.4 above.

(Davies and Bowden), epiphanies (Flower), omens, prodigies and portents (Noegel, Santangelo, and Stiles), and sacrifice (Driediger-Murphy). This is a reminder of the variety of mechanisms available for individuals and communities to gain access to (what was perceived as divine) revelation, but it is not intended to be an implicit assertion that these practices are simply the same. Each study acknowledges the specifics of these different activities, in terms of not only the activities involved, but also the contexts in which they occurred and the implications they conveyed in and for those contexts. Indeed, acknowledging that these essays could have been organised in a number of different ways, we have arranged them so as to draw attention to some of these specifics and the resulting questions that they raise for modern scholarship. However, we hope our readers will find other themes across the essays that may suggest different commonalities.

Thus, the four essays in Part I: Expertise and Authority, examine the ways in which ancient societies attributed authority and claimed expertise, in the field of divination. Scott Noegel and Hugh Bowden both seek the diviners' perspectives, elucidating some of the difficulties of interpretation with which divinatory experts were thought to contend. Noegel's chapter takes us to the Near East, examining augury from the practitioner's own social, economic, and cosmological perspectives, and exploring how diviners negotiated two major sources of anxiety—scepticism from others and their own theological principles. Bowden brings us from the Near East to Classical Athens, and the case of Euxenippos, who was sent by the Athenians to consult the oracle of Amphiaraos at Oropos to help to resolve a land dispute—and was prosecuted for his interpretation of his divinatory dream. Bowden challenges the idea that Euxenippos was regarded simply as a private citizen and, with the aid of modern studies of dreams and dreaming, suggests instead that he may have been an 'expert dreamer', challenging categories commonly used in studies of Greek divination.

In turn, Eidinow and Davies focus on the ways in which, on the one hand, trust in authority, and on the other hand, locating (the right) expertise, were challenges for those who consulted divinatory experts. In part, the aim of Eidinow's chapter is to rehabilitate the Lydian king, Kroisos, so often accused of unGreek behaviour because of his so-called 'test of the oracles'. She does this by exploring the role of uncertainty in oracular consultations, and examining the ways in which the Greeks sought to resolve it through the practice of posing multiple questions (serially at one oracle, or simultaneously and successively at different oracles). Davies argues that what has long been seen as ancient debate about whether (all) dreams did or did not count as messages from the gods, can be better understood as an attempt by

each individual, in their specific context and circumstances, to determine *which* dreams were significant, by deploying widely shared strategies of interpretation. Returning to themes raised in, for example, Bowden's chapter, Davies draws attention to the ways in which dreams, while appearing 'to be a private event' were, in terms of their reception, interpretation and response, 'a public transaction, and how one responded to them was emphatically a social, religious and political act'.

These essays raise questions about the meanings attributed to signs, and the control of those interpretations, and this is the theme of the essays in Part II: Signs and Control. Maurizio interrogates the evidence for the argument that the Pythia at Delphi used sortition—and finds it wanting. She explores how anthropological studies suggest that divinatory pronouncements 'extend the reflection instigated by the consultation', a process which is unlikely to lead to a swift resolution of a problem—and which continues the consultant's process of reflection and interpretation, as well as their state of uncertainty. We move from Greece to Rome for the next three essays: first, Stiles explores how the Roman reception and interpretation of signs reported in the past (in this case, *omina imperii*, signs pertaining to the rule of individual emperors) could change over time in response to changing anxieties about the future and the gods' perceived plans for the Roman Empire. He places special emphasis on the often-overlooked role and experiences of non-elites as they created their own interpretations of signs pertaining to those in power. Second, Santangelo explores the fate of prodigy-interpretation under the Empire, challenging the long-held view that Roman emperors discouraged reports of unfavourable signs. He argues instead that the prodigy-system (and its attendant questions about the gods' intentions towards the state) remained a vital part of Rome's negotiation with the divine. Finally, Driediger-Murphy queries the current consensus that Roman divinatory sacrifices generally proceeded until a favourable sign was obtained (*usque ad litationem*). She argues that Roman magistrates took signs from failed sacrifices more seriously than we have often thought, and that this behaviour can be read as evidence that they were anxious about their relationship with their gods. These essays draw attention not only to the importance but also to the diversity of sign-interpretation in the ancient world, stressing the evidence in the ancient sources for the felt need to respond to perceived divine communications, and the anxieties these might provoke.

The essays in Part III build on this question of the nature of interactions with the divine, and focus on evidence for the perception of Divine

Presence. Flower uses divination as a case study for an investigation of ancient religious experience and the idea that the Greeks took for granted ‘the real presence of the divine’. He focuses on the paean of Isyllos, which describes that poet’s experience of a divinatory epiphany by the god Asklepios. Using comparative anthropological studies, he argues that ‘a belief in the real presence of the divine and in the certain efficacy of supernatural power is undoubtedly a cross-cultural phenomenon’. The next two chapters explore this idea: Deeley’s chapter (commissioned for this volume) draws on his work as a consultant psychiatrist to examine experiences in which the sense of control, ownership, and awareness of thoughts, speech, and action are reattributed to another agent. He shows how these phenomena are likely to be commoner and more diverse than scholarship once assumed, and he argues that understanding the forms of experience, attributed significance, and causal processes involved in Apollo’s communication through the Pythia, may transform our approach to the Pythia’s possession by Apollo. Finally, Raphals’ inquiry explores both Chinese and Greek evidence: first, she explores the nature of Chinese ‘mantic questions’, then, the use of Greek oracular responses. Through these inquiries, she examines whether, in each case, divination sought human consensus or divine sanction, and to what extent practitioners sought to keep away from, or to influence, their supernatural informants.

Across the volume, rather than claiming to identify and describe the religious experiences of individuals, each chapter sets out to examine the evidence for the cognitive states of those engaged with these activities—the beliefs, anxieties and hopes of consultants. But they also move beyond consideration of divination as a mechanism, to acknowledge and explore the kinds of human–divine relationships that divination created and sustained: what kinds of supernatural entities did these practices presuppose, what variety of forms of interaction took place with those entities, and how were those interactions structured? As the essays demonstrate, different cultures and contexts adopted different approaches to attempting to communicate with the supernatural forces they saw as being at work in their environment. While Greeks and Romans tended to see divination as made possible by gods, these processes also created room for chance and for uncertainty, both on the level of the divine communication itself, as Eidinow argues, and through practical strategies such as casting lots, as Lisa Maurizio explores in her chapter. In ancient Chinese divination, by contrast, Lisa Raphals argues that the putative role of the divine was less pronounced than the quest for human consensus. The structuring of relationships

between human and divine was also shaped by each culture's and context's understanding of the role of human beings in the divinatory process. From Athens to the ancient Near East (as shown in Hugh Bowden's and Scott Noegel's chapters, respectively), societies that practised divination, especially in public decision-making processes, were forced to ask where the ultimate authority in interpreting divinatory results should lie. Although the exact social status and influence of users of divination may differ from culture to culture, these essays highlight the importance of understanding divination not just in pragmatic or functionalist terms as a tool for building social cohesion and spreading calm, but also as a potential source of anxiety and pressure for those who used it.

4. Divine and Divinatory Interventions

One of the most interesting themes that emerged during the conference discussions, across a wide range of papers, was the extent to which ancient people used divination genuinely to seek information about the future or from the divine. In some ways, this can be seen as one aspect of the puzzling question of the nature of 'religious belief' in ancient cultures, which has relatively recently (re-)emerged as a pressing question in scholarship in Classics.¹⁸ In our conference discussions, the questions that were raised centred on whether ancient users understood the primary aim of divination as making contact with the divine, or, more specifically gathering information from the gods, in contrast to the socio-political functions on which scholars have typically focused.¹⁹

That Greek and Roman texts identify contact with the divine in order to gain information as an ostensible aim of divination is not in doubt: one thinks, for example, of Xenophon's description of divination ('[The gods] know all things, and warn whomsoever they will in sacrifices, in omens, in voices, and in dreams. And we may suppose that they are more ready to counsel those who not only ask what they ought to do in the hour of need,

¹⁸ In 2006, the University of Oxford and Princeton University collaborated in a seminar series on 'Faith in Religions of the Ancient World'; recent publications on Greek and Roman belief include North 2010; Versnel 2011; Harrison 2015b; Champion 2017.

¹⁹ In this context, Lisa Raphals' chapter raises a stimulating point of provocation, since she argues that 'gods' were by and large absent from Chinese mantic practice; nevertheless, the category of 'spirits' that, as it were, take their place, does comprise both gods and ancestors.

but also serve the gods in the days of their prosperity with all their might'); or Cicero's description of the 'prediction and knowledge of future events' made possible by some forms of divination as 'a splendid and helpful thing — if only it exists — since by its mortal nature may approach very near to the power of the gods'.²⁰ The question is how much weight this stated aim actually held in the balance of factors that drove instances of divinatory consultation. Quinton Deeley's chapter reveals how the questions surrounding a sense of divine presence have remained a source of fascination, and, as a result, a focus of scientific study. His conclusions support the other chapters in this volume, which suggest that we should allocate more weight to this factor in our reconstructions of what ancient people thought when performing divination, than we have done heretofore.

On the Greek side, Michael Flower's chapter, for example, reminds us that one goal of divination may have been to experience more intensely the presence of the gods, even if our evidence makes it difficult to reconstruct exactly how that presence was perceived. Esther Eidinow argues that repeated consultations of oracles, or posing the same question to multiple oracles, can be seen not as an attempt to rig the result of the enquiry, but as an attempt to gain more accurate intelligence from the gods in the face of inherent uncertainty. In the field of Roman divination, Federico Santangelo's chapter re-examines the evidence for prodigy-interpretation in the Early Principate, arguing against the traditional assumption that the emperors moved away from this practice when it did not tell them what they wanted to hear. Andrew Stiles approaches the issue from the other side, showing that even sign-stories which look like straightforward attempts at legitimization by aspiring emperors can also be understood as the efforts of those emperors' subjects (both elite and non-elite) to identify and explain the gods' putative role in bringing such men to power.

If there is one overarching conclusion we might draw from the essays in this volume, it seems to us to lie in the emerging fact that Greeks, Romans, Babylonians, and ancient Chinese practitioners were using divination to seek some kind of truth. We may think we 'know' how and why they

²⁰ Xen. *Eq. Mag.* 9.8–9 (trans. Marchant); Cic. *Div.* 1.1. See also *Div.* 2.130, where 'Marcus' invokes Chrysippus' (Stoic) view that the duty (*officium*) of divination is 'to know in advance the disposition of the gods towards men, the manner in which that disposition is shown and by what means the gods may be propitiated and their threatened ills averted' (transl. Falconer). See discussion Flower 2008: 73. Note that predicting the future was not necessarily the aim of many forms of divination in the ancient world (Greek or Roman): on prediction in Roman culture, see Santangelo 2013; on divination as a way of finding out what is hidden, Eidinow 2007: 43–4.

found or failed to find it; we hope that the chapters in this volume may contribute to further debate about what the ancients themselves thought they were doing.

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PART I

EXPERTISE AND AUTHORITY

1

Augur Anxieties in the Ancient Near East

Scott B. Noegel

In recent years, scholars have sought to understand ancient Near Eastern augury by considering the king's propagandistic use of omens and his appropriation of divination for his ideological self-representation.¹ Others have analyzed the social, political, and psychological support afforded to diviners and the influence of augurs upon the royal house.² An alternative approach has been to examine the mechanics and hermeneutics of divination.³ While said scholarship has advanced our understanding significantly, in the main, it has tended to treat divination purely as an institution, often in competition with the royal house. Here, I should like to move in a different direction and examine augury from the practitioner's own social, economic, and cosmological perspectives. It is my contention that such an approach reveals divination to be an enterprise heavily informed by a number of insecurities, and that attention to these sources of anxiety sheds light on Mesopotamian divinatory culture.

I divide my contribution into four parts. In the first, I offer a brief synopsis of Near Eastern divination. In the second, I examine two competing sources of anxiety that diviners negotiated: skepticism from others and their own theological principles. In the third portion, I look at ways that diviners addressed these insecurities. In the final section, I offer a few conclusions based on the combined evidence.

¹ Starr 1996; Sweek 1996 and 2002; Rochberg 2004; Cooley 2014 and 2015.

² Oppenheim 1969: esp. 120; Lieberman 1990: esp. 326–7; Radner 2009; Jean 2010: esp. 271–4 (Pongratz-Leisten 1995: 65 refutes this view).

³ Guinan 1989, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 2002a; Steinkeller 2005; Pearce 2006; Noegel, 2007, 2010; de Zorzi 2011; Pongratz-Leisten 2011; Frahm 2010 and 2011a; Winitzer 2011; Heeßel 2012.

1. Synopsis of Mesopotamian Divination

Divination had a long life in Mesopotamia and it took many forms. It certainly predates our earliest written records and lasts in some forms well into the common era. Virtually anything could constitute a divine sign and omens could be solicited or unsolicited.⁴ Forms of solicited divination include the use of flour, incense, oil, and casting lots or arrows, though extispicy was the most common. One obtained unsolicited omens by way of dreams, malformed births, necromancy, and terrestrial, atmospheric, and celestial phenomena, as well as the sounds and movements of the animal kingdom. Even agricultural, building, and sexual activities could provide omens.⁵

The gods most commonly addressed before divination were the sungod Šamaš and stormgod Adad, who are given the respective epithets “Lord of Judgment” and “Lord of the Inspection.”⁶ Nevertheless, omens could be messages from any god. In celestial divination, stars and planets also could be manifestations of various divinities.

The terms for those who interpret omens are equally varied and include most commonly the *ašipu* (“conjurer, magician, medical practitioner”), *bārû* (“examiner”), *dāgil iššūrē* (“observer of birds”), *kalû* (“singer-chanter”), *mašmaššû* (“exorcist”), and *šā’ilu* (“requester”).⁷ Those most learned among them were called *ummânû* (“masters”). There is evidence for some women diviners, but the majority were men.⁸ Divinatory positions were largely hereditary, especially by the first millennium BCE. Though some individuals could achieve notoriety for expertise in a particular divinatory tradition,⁹ the roles of each of the figures listed above overlapped so much that it is difficult to assign a particular expertise to any one of them, with the

⁴ For a convenient discussion of the omen compendia, see Frahm 2011a: 128–214.

⁵ On the sexual omens, see Guinan 1997 and 2002b; Pangas 1988.

⁶ The two gods also feature in the similar Babylonian oracle queries known as the *tamîtu* texts. See Lambert 2007. According to Jeyes 1991–2, an extispicer would whisper a client’s query into the animal’s ear before sacrificing it to the client’s personal god, who represented him before the divine council, headed by Šamaš. Šamaš then authorized the verdict to be encoded in another animal’s entrails.

⁷ One can find more detailed discussions of the various divinatory professions elsewhere, e.g., Bottéro, 1993; Cryer 1994; Farber 1995; Jeffers 1996; Scurlock 1998; Schmitt 2004; Noegel 2007: 28–34; Jean 2006; Rutz 2013; Gabbay 2014.

⁸ The earliest glyptic evidence (c. twenty-fourth century BCE) for dream interpretation depicts a woman. See Asher-Grève 1987; Reisner 1985: 256; Heimpel 1998.

⁹ Note, e.g., the prestigious title *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*, “scribe of the (astrological omen) series named *Enūma Anu Enlil*.”

possible exceptions of the *āšipu*, who also performs apotropaic rituals to negate the influence of evil omens,¹⁰ and the *bārû*, who usually appears reading animal exta.¹¹ In addition, while the *āšipu*, *kalû*, and *mašmašû* appear to have had connections to the temple, others were connected to the royal court, though some villages also had resident diviners. In general, each figure was interdisciplinary, highly literate in both Sumerian and Akkadian, and derived his interpretive skills from a shared hermeneutic tradition that belongs generally to what we might call the religious establishment.¹² Simo Parola summarizes their expertise:

...the crafts of these scholarly experts were to a large extent *complementary* and...their respective disciplines and fields represented parts of a larger whole, which I, in conformity with the native Mesopotamian terminology, propose to call “wisdom.” In my opinion it is essential to consider these disciplines not in isolation but as integral parts of this larger whole, and to realize that as parts of an integrated system of thought, the different subdisciplines of the “wisdom” were in constant contact and interaction with each other.¹³

Diviners also valued piety and followed detailed rules of ritual purity, many specific to them, including washing of the mouth and hands, donning clean and sometimes special clothing, self-anointing, and fumigation with sulphur.¹⁴ This purity extended to their physical beings: they must be whole in body and have good eyesight; even chipped teeth kept one out of the profession.¹⁵ They also maintained strict rules of etiquette: one must not sneeze, be clumsy, dress too sloppily, or otherwise fidget during a divination. Timing too was important: some days and months were auspicious, others were not. Yet overzealousness was to be avoided; continuously engaging in extispicy was deemed inappropriate.

¹⁰ See Scurlock 1998.

¹¹ However, the *bārû* also appears as a mixer of potions, libanomancer, aleuromancer, augur, and astrologist. See Nougayrol 1963; Pettinato 1966; Finkel 1983. As Bottéro 1974: 129 n. 7, remarks: “Nous verrons du reste que le *bārû*, oblique de procéder souvent à des contre-examens, devait pratiquer plus ou moins toutes les mantiques...”

¹² See the wide range of texts cited as required knowledge in the so-called “magician’s manual” (KAR 44) published by Zimmern 1915–16; and the list of texts in Oppenheim 1974; Cavigneaux 1999.

¹³ Parola 1993: 52. Italics are the author’s.

¹⁴ On the pious practices of the diviner, see Jeyes 1991–2: 29–32.

¹⁵ See Lambert 1998: esp. 144.

In sum, Near Eastern diviners were pious polymaths with hereditary positions, who possessed a commanding knowledge of a vast array of written traditions.

2. Sources of Augur Anxiety

Diviners negotiated two major sources of anxiety—skepticism from others and their own theological principles. Perhaps nowhere is skepticism of the divinatory institution more pronounced than in the figure of the *aluzinnu* (Sumerian = alan.zu), a figure whom Stephanie West has connected with the ἀλαζών in Greek texts.¹⁶ The *aluzinnu* was a male trickster, a quasi-clown, though dressed in women's clothing, whose satire of others during religious festivals was accepted with something of a Mardi Gras spirit.¹⁷ In a lexical list, his title appears alongside the terms for *ākil karši* ("slanderer"), *šarītu* ("farter"), and *naššiḫu* and *tēzû* (both "defecator").¹⁸ One must envision this burlesque character moving alongside the religious procession and its musicians, jugglers, and acrobats, playing the comic for the crowd. At times, the *aluzinnu* toys with pigs and bears.¹⁹ At other times, he balances on a tightrope. Yet always he is satirizing someone. Of particular importance are a number of his taunts that openly deride the divinatory professionals. Since these experts produced all of the learned omen compendia, lexical lists,

¹⁶ There exists no recent or critical edition of the *aluzinnu* text. Nevertheless, see the collation of fragments in Ebeling 1931, No. 2, pp. 9–19; and also Römer 1975–8; Foster 1974: 74–9; Jakob 2003. See also CAD A/2 392, s.v. *aluzinnu*. The text was part of the scribal curriculum in the Neo-Babylonian period. See Veldhuis 2003, who also opines (628 n. 1) that the fragments are not a unified text, and that all but one of the fragments belong to other text types. See also the related "Games" text discussed by Kilmer 1991. Kilmer's study strongly suggests a connection between the figure of the *aluzinnu* and the cult of Ishtar, whose festivities, texts say (14) also "turn a man into a woman, and a woman into a man" and involve "slander, untruthful words, abuse...mockery, causing laughter, (and) being debased." On parallels for the figure in the Mediterranean world, see West 1994, who also notes the observation of Stephanie West (2 n. 8) that the term *aluzinnu* might relate to the Greek ἀλαζών; adopted and expanded by Griffith and Marks 2011.

¹⁷ The *aluzinnu*'s relationship to the cult is vague at best. He is listed among the temple personnel in the Ur III period, and later he appears in texts from Alalakh as a royal wedding performer. See Römer 1975–8: 50–1. He also appears at festivals in Hittite texts dancing, clapping his hands, and making music. See Badali 1984: 45–53 and Güterbock 1964 and 1989: esp. 307–9, the latter of which offers an important corrective to Badali's piece. The *aluzinnu* appears grouped with skilled laborers in the Middle Assyrian records, discussed by Freydank 1976, especially 116–17.

¹⁸ See Civil 1969: 137, ll. 250–2; Meissner 1940: 4–5; Römer 1975–8: 48–9. The titles perhaps reflect the attitudes of the diviners towards the *aluzinnu*.

¹⁹ See Sjöberg 1973: esp. 130 n. 12.

and “literary” texts, the *aluzinnu*’s barbs offer a rare critical voice concerning their craft and standing from outside their inner circle.²⁰

Indeed, from the very start of the text containing his caustic remarks, we hear the *aluzinnu* listing a number of deities and their patron cities in a way that imitates the diviners’ tradition for making lists of gods. However, the gods that are paired do not belong together, and others are assigned to cities in which they were not worshiped. The result is a chaotic and irreverent roster that would have struck a dissonant chord with the diviners.²¹ For the ritual profession, the lists represented more than the codification of knowledge—they were a means of systematically organizing the world, whereby they could control it.²² Thus, the *aluzinnu*’s jumbling of their divine lists represents an affront to the social and cosmic orders.

The *aluzinnu* also satirizes the diviner’s slavish observance of eating or avoiding certain foods during particular months and days, a practice borne out in Babylonian menologies, hemerologies, and omen series.²³ His mockery was not for the timid of ears.

10. *itu Kislīmu mīnu ukultaka*
(During the month of) Kislimu, what is your food?
11. *kabūt sirrimi ina azanni*
You eat the shit of an onager in bitter garlic,
12. *u ilta ša kunāši ina kisimmi tapattan*
And emmer chaff in spoiled milk!
16. *itu Šabātu mīnu ukultaka*
(During the month) of Shabat, what is your food?
17. *akal buḥri šuḥḥu ša imēri zikari*
A hot dish: You stuff the anus of a jackass,

²⁰ They also underscore, as Veldhuis 2006: 496 states, “the importance and prestige of the speculative scholarly omen collections of the time.”

²¹ Foster 1974: 77 observes: “The (*aluzinnu*) text begins (A 1–37, as far as preserved) with a list of deities and cities which in their present form do not correspond. For example, Inšušinak is paired with Ekallāte (line 11). This list may be intended as humorous insofar as it is mixed up, but it may be a quite independent composition.” Römer 1975–8: 54 similarly suggests that the text parodies the lexical lists.

²² Note the comment of Larsen 1987, that the lexical traditions represent an effort “...to present a systematic and ordered picture of the world” (209–12). Westenholz 1998 similarly observes: “On the intellectual level, knowing the organization of the world made it possible to affect the universe by magical means” (453).

²³ Observed by Römer 1975–8: 67. On hemerologies and menologies, see Bottéro 1985; Livingstone 1993, 1998b, 1998c, 2012, and 2013). On hemerologies, menologies, and the omen series *Iqqur Epuš* that deals with (in)auspicious days, see Frahm 2010: 214–18.

18. *zê kalbi zê [n]amṣati tumallāma tapattan*
With dog shit and fly turds and eat it!²⁴

While I feel it safe to say that many, perhaps most in his audience would have laughed as he pilloried his victims with bawdy abandon, I imagine the devout diviners were less amused when he took aim at them. In another passage, he paints the exorcist as a bumbling idiot who burns down a house while trying to fumigate it of demons and dangerous critters.

17. *aluzin mīna telēi*
Aluzinnu, what are your skills?
18. *āšipūta kalama ana qātēyama ul uṣṣi*
All of the exorcist's arts! Nothing's beyond my reach!
19. *aluzin kī āšipūtka*
Aluzinnu, how do you exorcise?
20. *umma bīt rābiṣi ukal agubbā ukân*
I take control of the demonic house, I set up a basin for the holy-water.
21. *maṣhultuppê arakkas*
I bind the scapegoat.
22. *parâ akâṣma tibna umalla*
I flay a mule and pack it with straw.
23. *ṣippata arakkasma iṣāta aqâdma ana libbi anamdīma*
I bind (some) reeds, light a fire, and throw it inside.
24. *itât bīti u saḥirātiṣu ēzib*
The perimeter of the house and its surroundings, I save.
25. *rābiṣu ša bīti šâṣu ṣēru u zuqaqīpūma ul innezib*
But the demon of the house, the serpent, and the scorpion are not saved!

Whether the *aluzinnu* changed costumes to play the diviner is unknown. However, if he remained in drag, one can imagine the diviners, who were mostly men, wincing from a highly gendered Near Eastern code of honor in which emasculation by women brought shame.²⁵

²⁴ The *aluzinnu* text appears to display some knowledge of the actual practices found in the hemerologies. Note that in the month of Tešritu, the text says: "You will eat spoiled oil on onions and plucked chicken feathers in porridge." A hemerology for Tešritu warns the observer not to eat onions on the first day and not to catch a bird on the third day nor eat a bird or onion on the fourth. See also Milano 2004; Casaburi 2000.

²⁵ See Olyan 1996.

Such potshots at their profession might appear unique or occasion specific, were it not for a number of other texts, loosely labeled “proverbs,” which leave similar bite marks.²⁶ Of specific interest are those that satirize the augurs, especially the *kalû*: “If he (the *kalû*) does not sing incantations sweetly, he is one of the better ones!”²⁷ Alluding to the notion that some were eunuchs, one text tells us: “You may be a scribe when viewed from above, but you are not even a man when viewed from below.”²⁸ Even his piety was ridiculed, as we are told: “The *kalû* wipes his anus (and says): ‘One should not excite what belongs to my lady, the Queen of Heaven (i.e., the goddess Inana).’”²⁹ Another scathes: “If a *kalû*’s grain-boat sinks, he will stand on dry land (saying): ‘O Enki! Whatever you are robbing me of, may you take pleasure!’”³⁰ Still another relates: “If a *kalû* slips (and falls), as he is sitting down, (he says): ‘It is a visitation of my lady (the goddess) Inana. Far be it from me that I get up.’”³¹

Skeptical glances also came from within the inner circle. Competition was fierce between the experts, each wanting to elbow more space for himself at the royal table. It bears stressing that this support usually did not make one rich. It might include a small parcel of land, clothing, food, or, in some cases, a mule. Some extispicers appear to have survived on the animals used for the sacrifice and perhaps an additional fee, which varied according to the wealth

²⁶ The existence of similar criticisms in proverbs shows that critical attitudes towards the divinatory professionals extended beyond the events at which the *aluzinnu* performed. Since proverbs also constitute “popular sayings,” the criticisms also likely echo true sentiments among the population. This also makes it unlikely that the *aluzinnu*’s performance served an apotropaic function, like the soldiers’ abusive taunts uttered against the *nobilis* in the context of the Roman triumph. Nor do they serve a protective function like the Roman practice of giving infants “dung” names or soiling them with copronyms to protect them from the evil eye and premature death. On this practice, see Pomeroy 1986; Hobson 1989 (who proposes the apotropaic function with caution). Indeed, I know of no similar use of insults as apotropaia in the ancient Near East, where dysphemism generally enhances polemical invectives.

²⁷ Sumerian: gala-tu₆-tu₆-nu-dùg-ga bàd gala e-ne. Gordon 1959: 254–5 (2.106); Foster 1974: 81; Alster 1997: 67, 372 (2.106).

²⁸ Sumerian: dub-sar an-ta-me-en lú ki-ta-nu-me-en. Gordon 1959: 204–5 (2.44); Foster 1974: 81 n. 34; rendered with nearly opposite sense by Alster 1997: 53, 364 (2.44).

²⁹ Sumerian: gala-e bid-da-ni ha-ba-an-da-zé-er ém ga-ša-an-an-na ga-ša-an-mu ba-ra-zi-zi-dè-en-e-še. Gordon 1959: 248–9 (2.100); Alster 1997: 65, 371 (2.100).

³⁰ Sumerian: gala-á^{gš} má-še-ka-ni ha-ba-da-an-su bar-rim₄-ma ba-e-gub^d am-an-ki [mu-da-a]b-kar-kar-re(?) -na(?) -zu(?) [hè-d]a(?) -húl-[le(?) -e]n(?) -še. With Thorkild Jacobsen in Gordon 1959: 484 (2.103); Foster 1974: 81; rendered differently by Alster 1997: 66, 371–2 (2.103); 191 (11.8).

³¹ With Jacobsen: gala-e tuš-da-ni ha-ba-an-da-zé-er ág-ga ša-an-an-na-ga-ša-an-mu ba-ra-zi-zi-dè-en-e-še, in Gordon 1959: 483 (2.100); Foster 1974: 81 (cited in n. 36 incorrectly as text 2.180); Alster 1997: 65, 371 (2.100).

of their client.³² Thus, the diviner's economic needs were a constant source of concern; even master diviners could, and did, find themselves destitute without patronage.³³ Of course, their skepticism of other diviners did not focus on which means of divination offered more reliable results, though often one form was performed to double-check the findings of another. Instead, it came in the form of accusations of ignorance or dishonesty.

Thus, in one letter sent to the king, a diviner warns that one of his colleagues had misread a celestial omen, mistaking the planet Mercury for Venus. Before correcting the interpretation, he positions himself by citing the following proverb: *lā mudê šipri dayānu ušannaḥ lā mudê amāti ušan-zaqa dannu* ("the ignorant gives a hard time to the judge, the unlearned causes worry to the powerful").³⁴ In another missive, a different diviner declares the work of a colleague to be worthless: *šumu anniu silâte šu LUGAL bēliya UGU ŠĀ-šu lā išakkan* ("this omen is rubbish; the king, my lord, should not lay it to heart").³⁵ Indeed, in some letters, diviners accuse others of outright lying. See, for example, the claims of the astrologer, Nabû-aḫḫe-ēriba:

[He who] wrote to the king, my lord (claiming), "The planet Venus is visible, it is visible [in the month of Ad]ar," is a vile man (*qallulu*), an idiot (*sakkuku*), a liar (*parrišu*)! (And further claiming) "Venus is [...] rising in the constellation A[ries]," [does] not [speak] the truth. Venus is [not] yet visible!³⁶

Of course, the king's suspicion was a serious matter. In one text, known as *The Sin of Sargon*, the Assyrian king Sennacherib describes how he separated diviners into groups of three or four, as he reports, "so they could not ap[proach or speak to one another]" (l. 15), but he had them inspect the same liver to ascertain why his father Sargon had been killed in battle, and why his body had never been found.³⁷ When the diviners all arrived at the same interpretation, namely that Sennacherib's father had elevated Assyrian gods

³² The economics of divination is in need of a detailed study. Very little has been written about the various clientele, types and amounts of payment, and the royal patronage system. For an informative exception, see Luukko 2007: esp. 245–8, who offers insights into the material wealth of some chief temple or palace scribes.

³³ See, e.g., the sad state of affairs of the exorcist Urud-Gala, in Parpola and Reade 1993: 226–7, 231–4, nos. 289, 294.

³⁴ K. 1039 = ABL 37, rev. ll. 3–6, in Parpola 1970: 8–9, no. 12.

³⁵ RMA 235 r. 2, in Parpola 1983: 71.

³⁶ 81–2–4, 420 + 83–1–18, 126 = ABL 1132, in Parpola 1970: 42–3, no. 65.

³⁷ The Akkadian reads: *lā itūma lā idbubū itti aḫamiš*. Tadmor 1958; Landsberger 1965: 22; Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola 1989; Weaver 2004.

over Babylonian ones, he accepted it. Apparently, he sought to eliminate any possibility of collusion.

The king's misgivings were not altogether unwarranted, for some diviners could be coerced. Such was the case for a *bārû* named Kudurru, who reports that several high-ranking officials abducted him and forced him to perform an oil-in-water reading that predicted the chief eunuch would become king.³⁸

No doubt there also existed a number of opportunists. Compare, for example, two interpretations of the same celestial situation in which the moon blocked Jupiter from sight. The first is from a Babylonian diviner, and the second, offered less than a month later, from an Assyrian one:

Babylonian (March 31, 676 BCE)

If Jupiter ent[ers] the moon: there will be famine in the Westland; the king of Elam will die, variant: a noble will rebel against his lord.

If the moon covers Jupiter: the king will capture enemy kings.

[If] on the 14th day the moon and sun are seen together: reliable speech; the land will become happy; the gods will remember Akkad favor[ably]; the cattle of Akkad will lie in the ste[ppe] undisturbed; the harvest-time will last until winter, the winter grass until harvest time; [j]oy among the troops; the king will become happy.

Assyrian (April 27, 676 BCE)

If Jupiter stands inside the moon: in this year the king will die; variant: there will be an eclipse of the moon and the sun; a great king will die.

If Jupiter enters the moon: there will be famine in the Westland; the king of Elam will fall in battle; in Subartu (i.e., Assyria) a noble will revolt against his lord.

If Jupiter enters the moon: business of the land will diminish.

If Jupiter comes out to the back of the moon: there will be hostility in the land.³⁹

Though both experts drew their interpretations from the same stream of exegetical tradition, the Babylonian reading is far more optimistic for the Assyrian king. The Assyrian reading predicts nothing but catastrophe. Since royal support for the Babylonian diviners was less stable than that of the Assyrian experts, it appears that a more positive reading intended to curry the king's favor.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ki 1904–10–9, 169+ = ABL 0755+SAA 10 179, in Parpola and Reade 1993: 142–4, no. 179.

³⁹ Bu 89–4–26,003 = RMA 192, in Hunger 1992: 100, 438.

⁴⁰ Observed by Koch-Westenholz 1995: 70–1.

Indeed, diviners were not above seeking better positions for themselves, as we know from an apotropaic ritual, for *tanatti bārûti amāru u šuma t̃āba leqû* (“achieving renown [lit. a good name] for the diviner”).⁴¹ There is also some evidence that they resorted to sorcery to remove the competition.⁴² They were certainly familiar with the requisite incantations and rituals, as well as their corresponding antidotes. Apparently, even the most accomplished diviners felt that a little magic could not hurt in a meritocracy.

The fact is that no matter how pious they might have appeared, and despite their efforts to cultivate an image of erudition, diviners were never entirely above suspicion. As long as a human hand played a role in the interpretation of divine matters, error and corruption remained possibilities.⁴³ On the other hand, both kings and diviners clearly viewed divination as a trusted means of ascertaining divine will, if done properly. Therefore, the skeptics doubted the practitioners, not the practice. This placed augurs in a position of constant insecurity, since they could prove their abilities only by achieving a reputation for reliable results, and because predicting the future was bound to go wrong at some point.

Indeed, the prayers that experts recite before undertaking divination are revealing for what they say about the fears of failure. In queries recited to the sungod, extispicers list numerous unintended errors and misunderstandings they would like the god to ignore should they occur—from accidental impurities to a mere slip of the tongue. The lists offer a catalogue of perturbations.

Disregard the (formulation) of [to]day’s case, [be it good, be it faulty].

Disregard that a clean or an unclean person [has touched] the sacr[ificial] sheep, [or blocked the way of the sacrificial sheep (on its way to the extispicy)].

Disregard that an unclean man or woma[n has come near the place of the extispicy and made it unclean].

⁴¹ BBR no. 11 r. iii 15 and no. 19 r. 15, in Reiner 1995: 264 n. 266.

⁴² The literary text known as *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* portrays the suffering of a learned exorcist as the result of being forsaken by his personal gods, which elsewhere is described as the result of sorcery. Indeed, sorcery also could be blamed as the ultimate cause for an inability to obtain a clear omen. See, e.g., Abusch 2002: 30. Moreover, other texts presuppose the use of witchcraft against a diviner. Thus, we hear of a ritual for protecting the *bārû*’s magic circle against witchcraft. See Abusch and Schwemer 2011: 14–15. Since a ritual professional would have been required to cast a hex, there likely were situations in which one professional used sorcery against another. See also Schwemer 2007.

⁴³ One might say the same about the priesthood, for which there also is evidence of theft and corruption. See Cole and Machinist 1998: xviii–xix.

Disregard that [an unclean person has performed extispicy] in this place.
 Disregard that the ram (offered) to your great divinity [for the performance of the extispicy is deficient or faulty].

Disregard that he who touches the for[ehead of the sheep (i.e., an assistant) is dressed in his ordinary soiled garments], (or that) he has eat[en, drunk, or anointed himself with anything unclean, (or) has altered or changed the (ritual) proceedings].

Disregard that I, the [*bārû*, your servant, am dressed in my ordinary soiled garments], or (that) [I have made] the oracle query [jumbled and faulty] i[n my mouth]. Let them be taken out [and put aside]!⁴⁴

Yet there was another, more profound source of anxiety that diviners were forced to negotiate: their own theological principles. We have seen this already lurking behind some of the satirical comments, such as the need for diviners to maintain and control the cosmic order by making lists, and their obsequy for calendrical dietary and other rules. Recall also the proverbial wisecrack about the augur who resisted getting up when he fell, because it was a message from on high. In the religious cosmology of the diviners, there can be no coincidence, for the gods determine all things. To be sure, the gods did not determine an absolute, inevitable fate, but rather a conditional one that could be altered through supplication, offerings, and other ritual means.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, there were no accidents and so out-of-the-ordinary occurrences were seen as divine signs. Nothing could be discerned through what is commonplace other than that the universe was functioning properly according to divine principles. Hence, the gods communicated through the peculiar.

Diviners also understood the process of divination as one of divine judgment. Omen texts share in common with legal codes the formula *if x, then y*, and diviners use the word *purussû* (“legal verdict”) to refer to an omen’s interpretation.⁴⁶ Their renderings had to set precedent by way of analogy, and, as I have shown elsewhere, generally had to be in accordance with the legal and theological principle of *lex talionis* (“the law of measure-for-measure retribution”).⁴⁷ Furthermore, diviners understood words and script as vehicles of divine power, and so putting the divine word into written signs constituted a manipulation of the divine sign.⁴⁸ Thus, the

⁴⁴ The translation is that of Starr 1996: no. 3.

⁴⁵ See Rochberg 1982.

⁴⁶ Observed by Rochberg 1999. On the relationship between legal and omen traditions, see also Fincke 2006–7; Maul 1994; Guinan 2014.

⁴⁷ Noegel 2007: 36–45 and 2010.

⁴⁸ See Noegel 2014a.

process of interpretation was not merely a means of explaining or justifying divine judgment, but also a potent illocutionary ritual for pronouncing it.⁴⁹ It was an operation naturally fraught with apprehension, since it placed incredible pressure upon the augur to interpret the divine word correctly.

In sum, a number of external and internal insecurities informed the divinatory enterprise. The external angst came from competition for ritual authority, economic hardship, a constant need to produce accurate results, and the ever-present presumption of possible impropriety. The internal insecurities derived from a theological worldview in which coincidence is impossible and an inherent pressure exists of rendering divine signs into their juridical cuneiform embodiments with consistent accuracy.

3. Negotiating Augur Anxieties

With regard to the external concerns, the diviners adopted several strategies. We have seen that some simply tried to edge others out of the profession by accusing them of lying or incompetence, but the more successful practice was to create a mutually supportive network of diviners.⁵⁰ The figure of the *āšipu* (“conjurer”) was especially important in this regard, since he was connected to the temple and handled the rituals to dispel the evil of bad omens.⁵¹ Thus, if a diviner found an omen to have evil intent, the conjurer could be summoned to release the evil.⁵² Also, in cases when an omen obtained by one method was unfavorable or unclear, another expert might double-check the results with a different method. While one cannot question the motives or integrity of the various experts, a certain amount of codependency appears clear in the records.

Certainly there was a clannish element at work for one often finds an appeal to pedigree to establish authority among the diviners.⁵³ Some augur families could trace their roots back more than a century. However, in the first millennium BCE, when the divinatory establishment burgeoned and saw more prominent roles for prophets and astrologers,⁵⁴ we find diviners

⁴⁹ Divination was not an inspired, inductive process, but a deductive one, based not just on the observation of physical phenomena, but also on the study of words, which the ancients perceived as equally “empirical.” See Noegel 2007: 50–5.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Ossendrijver 2011. ⁵¹ See Maul 1998; Jean 2006: 83–109.

⁵² See Reiner 1960. ⁵³ See Lambert 1962.

⁵⁴ On the growth of prophecy in this period, see Nissinen 1998. On the expansion of divination, especially in the Sargonic era, see Jean 2010.

making even more grandiose claims—ancestral lines that reach back to the gods themselves.⁵⁵ Thus, with increased competition came loftier claims of descent.⁵⁶

Other tactics for dealing with the external anxieties were equally self-serving, but more collective in approach. It was in all the diviners' interests to ensure that they represented the pinnacle of erudition, not just because most kings were illiterate, but also because it kept the inner circle small.⁵⁷ In addition, they made the enterprise far more complex and infrastructural by strict adherence to lucky and unlucky days and months, and by promoting the necessity of a highly integrative system that combined divination with intricate rituals and incantations. This made it impossible for any one group to maintain the system. Illiterate kings were in a rather dependent position with regard to the scholarly collective, and if the correspondence between them in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE is indicative, the diviners were more than willing to underscore the unfathomable complexities of their craft. In one letter, a diviner obtains the opinion of an *ummānu* named Balasi and then advises the king: "He and I should (now) have an audience with (you) the king; we shall instruct the king, our lord, how the ritual will be performed. It is a complicated one, and it is essential that the king listens to what we have to say."⁵⁸ Such missives show how diviners could use their learning to leverage private meetings with the king.

Other letters reveal some of the Assyrian kings to be a rather nervous lot, constantly seeking diviners to ascertain enemy intentions and the loyalties of officials, to decode omens of all kinds, and to perform rituals for demonic infestations. In fact, kings considered it a transgression if diviners withheld omens pertinent to them.⁵⁹ While the existence of evil demons was intrinsic

⁵⁵ See Lambert 1957, 1967 and 1998; Michalowski 1996: esp. 186.

⁵⁶ Jeyes 1991–2: 28–31 observes that extispicer prayers to forgive unintended errors and an increased attention to rules of purity, etiquette, and timing, all represent innovations of the first millennium BCE. I add that the innovations also represent mounting insecurities during a period of increased competition.

⁵⁷ Cf. the omen in *Šummu Ālu* I: 112: "If diviners (LU₂.ĪAL.MEŠ = *bārû*) are numerous in a city; dispersal of the city." Found in Freedman 1998: 34–5. On the inner circle, see Parpola and Reade 1993: xxv–xxvii.

⁵⁸ The Akkadian reads: *anāku šū ina pān LUGAL nīruba dullu ki ša innipašūni ana LUGAL bēlini nušahkim dullu ma'du šū de'iq akī LUGAL ša pini išammūni*. K. 174 = ABL 53, in Parpola 1970: 152–3, no. 205; Parpola and Reade 1993: 216, no. 276, ll. 13–r. 8.

⁵⁹ The king's anxieties derived in part from his role as the gods' viceroy on earth, a position that required piety, cultic purity, and strict observation of divine ordinances. See Parpola and Reade 1993: xv–xvii. Royal angst increased especially during an eclipse, when a commoner would be obtained to replace the king. The ritual included, inter alia, giving the substitute king a young wife and bedecking the couple in royal clothes. After a period of 100–300 days, the

to Mesopotamian religious cosmology, the diviners were in a privileged place to promote both the powers of evil and the erudite means of predicting and dispelling them.

Moreover, diviners cloaked their scholarship in a culture of secrecy.⁶⁰ The profession held especially close the secret readings of omens that were obtained through paronomasia and the polyvalent values of cuneiform signs (both phonetic and logographic).⁶¹ See, for instance, the following sex omen:

If a man (has sex) with a woman (while) drunk, and defecates (ŠĒ) continuously: that man is joyful; he has no intelligence (UMUŠ); grief is kept from him.

Here the cuneiform sign ŠĒ (= Akkadian *zû*) meaning “feces” also holds the value UMUŠ, which permits the diviner to interpret it as “intelligence” (= Akk. *ṭēmu*). Thus, the omen signifies the continuous departure of intelligence from the man’s body. The entry illustrates the diviner’s erudition and reveals that interpreting omens required that one first put them into writing, or at least envision them in written form.

A second example appears in a dream omen.

If (in a dream, someone) has given him *miḥru*-wood; he shall have no rival (*māḥiru*).

This omen derives its interpretation from paronomasia between the words “*miḥru*-wood” and “rival” (*māḥiru*). As such, it represents the sort of homonymic associations that one also finds as an organizing principle in the lexical compendia.⁶²

A third demonstration comes from an extispicy omen that interprets an abnormal feature on a sheep’s liver.

When (the) lobe is like the grapheme (named) *kaškaš*, (then) (the storm god) Adad will inundate (with rain).

substitute king and queen would be ceremonially killed so that they took the evil meant for the real king down to the underworld. On the substitute king ritual, see Bottéro 1992: 138–55.

⁶⁰ Lenzi 2008 and 2013.

⁶¹ Livingstone 1986; Noegel 2007. We find the same techniques employed in commentaries, which presumably were used in school settings. See Frahm 2011a.

⁶² See, e.g., the series SIG₇.ALAN = *nabnitu*, ERIM-ḪUŠ = *anantu*, and AN-TA-GÁL = *šaḳû*. Finkel and Civil 1982; Cavigneaux 1985. Cf. Rofé 1988.

Here the name of the cuneiform sign *kaškaš* paronomastically suggests to the diviner the word *kaškaššu* (“all powerful”), an epithet used of Adad.

This hermeneutic belonged generally to what the scholars called the *amāt niširti* (“hidden words”) and *pirištu ša ilī* (“secret of the gods”).⁶³ It was the task of the diviner to study closely a text’s signs and to apply the learned hermeneutic in order to obtain the divine secrets embedded in them, whether that text was written in the stars, a dream, or on a sheep’s liver. Like the discipline that employed it, the signs could hide in plain sight information that required and reified the role of those who could read them properly.

Dealing with the internal anxieties required different strategies. For one, diviners established a shared set of general exegetical principles, which gave them a checks-and-balances mechanism to ensure consistent practice across time and across the subdisciplines. In a sense, the hermeneutic provided an objective technology for limiting the subjectivity inherent in interpretation. The incantations and ritual purifications that accompanied divination also sought to remove, at least by appearance, any human error or shortcoming. While their hermeneutics and rituals were not immune to creative applications,⁶⁴ they were remarkably consistent over the millennia, helping to make divination a stable institution.⁶⁵ In addition, since diviners held ultimate influence over what a divine sign might mean, divination had the potential to test the limits of human control over the divine. The hermeneutic principles helped to check this potential by regulating the interpretive process.

Diviners controlled the hazards of managing divine words through the ritual of interpretation itself. All omens were menacing, because they were ambiguous. Their potential for predicting imminent evil could not be ignored. The act of interpretation limited the risk of an omen’s import by restricting the parameters of its intent. Thus, the omen cannot now mean anything, but only one thing. We may view similarly the diviners’ collection of omens into compendia. Putting them into writing not only codified the peculiar, but also controlled it by transforming the sublime into the mundane.⁶⁶ Moreover, diviners manipulated not just words, but behavior and

⁶³ Pongratz-Leisten 1999: 289–93, 301–9; Böck 2000: 619; Noegel 2007: 36–88.

⁶⁴ For evidence of celestial diviners bending the hermeneutic rules to meet the king’s needs, see Cooley 2015: 141–5.

⁶⁵ Though it achieved a certain degree of stability, it was not immune to change, especially in the first millennium BCE. See Jeyes 1991–2.

⁶⁶ Consequently, many omen compendia include omens that were never observed, but rather the product of a scholastic endeavor to speculate, extrapolate, and imagine contingencies. Indeed, there is little evidence that the compendia were ever consulted regularly. Thus, the

belief. By deploying their interpretations, they determined a person's fate, and in many cases, even the king's actions. Therefore, we may see the act of interpretation also as a form of social and cosmic control.

As for the anxieties of interpreting the gods' dangerous signs, the diviners again relied upon their erudition. The three omens I cited above illustrate this well. Insofar as the augur's exploitation of polysemy and paronomasia underscores the linguistic tie between the sign and its interpretation, it demonstrates the principle and process of *lex talionis*. Such devices were not literary whimsy, but the very tools by which they affirmed theological and legal principles. Therefore, such interpretations also served to dispel theological insecurities. From this perspective, the ritual of interpretation represents less a preoccupation with an omen's ambiguity, and more of an obsession with rendering ambiguity into a controllable reality.⁶⁷

4. Conclusions: Insecurities and Divinatory Culture

Diviners formed a highly entitative, authoritative, and hierarchical group with a powerful ideological framework that imparted meaning and purpose to life's concerns and daily behavior. Their rules, rituals, and dogmata pervaded their lives and validated their social identity as a group while also providing structure and direction in times of personal or national uncertainty. Psychologists and social scientists have long recognized a close relationship in a wide variety of religious traditions between an ultra-strict adherence to rituals and regulations and existential anxieties.⁶⁸ To wit, the stricter the observance, the greater the anxiety. Insofar as we may extend, with due caution, this observation to Mesopotamian religious practice, we may see the augurs' rather "obsessive-compulsive" practices as a direct reflection of their cosmological fears and insecurities.⁶⁹

compendia represent an "appropriation of the intellectual prestige of the lexical lists . . ." Thus, Veldhuis 1999: 169.

⁶⁷ The ambiguity of omens likely also reflects the inconstant, capricious nature of the Mesopotamian gods.

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Petersen and Roy 1985; Beck 2004; Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg 2010.

⁶⁹ Indeed, it might be fruitful to examine Mesopotamian divinatory beliefs and practices from the perspective of obsessive-compulsive disorders, to which medical professionals have connected some kinds of "magical thinking" or "superstition," categories of thought that are applicable to the divinatory worldview. See Freud 1963; Jahoda 1969; Peterson 1978, Frost *et al.* 1993; Greenberg and Witztum 1994; Tek and Ulug 2001; Einstein and Menzies 2004; Zohar *et al.* 2005.

Indeed, divination was an occupation and process heavily informed by insecurities, both professional and existential. It probably could not have thrived without them. As many have argued, diviners indexed and controlled the insecurities of their clients. Yet the evidence gathered here shows that augury also indexed and controlled the cosmological anxieties of the learned. The need to demonstrate that the world was functioning properly according to divine principles was the very engine that drove divination and guided the diviner's hermeneutics. The growth in the status of astrology during the latter part of the second millennium BCE also might be seen in this light. Since it depended on the movements of celestial bodies, it was more predictable, at least mathematically so, and thus it came to be seen as more reliable as a divinatory "science."⁷⁰ While a human element continued to play a role in the interpretation of celestial omens, the regularity of lunar and planetary movements left little doubt as to what constituted a peculiar event. Since astrology was more regular, it was more regulatable, and thus more useful for demonstrating the principles of the cosmic order.

The evidence also provides a window into the religious worldview of the diviners. Above I remarked that the gods communicate through what is peculiar. I submit that the unusual *is* their language, because their very existence is beyond human normalcy. They stand apart from the created world. The prayers and rituals that diviners perform to purify themselves similarly show that divination crossed cosmic boundaries. This makes the media of divination an interstitial space in which diviners engage divinity. The moment of engagement marked a separation from the temporal domain of the mundane and what Graham Cunningham has called "an elision with the divine world."⁷¹ The chasm between humans and gods presupposes a conception of divinity that can communicate to, and manifest in, the world, but not one in which the world or life itself is a manifestation of divinity. The diviners do not appear to have considered the notion that what is peculiar about everyday life *is* everyday life.

Finally, the evidence has implications for the production of Near Eastern "literary" texts that depict divination. Typically, scholars have stressed the propagandistic nature of such texts in legitimating the king and his endeavors. Nevertheless, the bulk of the literary tradition was produced by

⁷⁰ On the relationship between "divination," "empiricism," and "science," see Jeyes 1991–2; Rochberg 1999; Noegel 2007: 50–5.

⁷¹ Cunningham 1998.

the ritual professionals.⁷² Since such texts portray divination with accuracy and legitimacy, they also promote the importance of, and dependency upon, augurs as mediators of divine knowledge. Thus, their transmission and dissemination constitute a propagandistic legitimation of *divinatory* ideologies.⁷³ I submit, therefore, that we should view literary portrayals of divination in support of the king as reflecting the codependency of both parties: the king by way of his need for divine legitimation, and the diviners by way of their need for royal patronage.⁷⁴

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⁷² Perhaps the most famous example is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which we know to have been authored/redacted by a *kalû* named Sin-lēqi-uninni. See Beaulieu 2000. Lambert 1962 originally suggested the reading *mašmaššu* ("exorcist"), though this appears less likely due to the evidence amassed by Beaulieu. The archaeological record also shows that ritual professionals controlled a variety of textual materials, including literary, magical, and lexical texts (e.g., at Ugarit, Emar, and Sultantepe). See, e.g., Courtois 1969; Charpin 1985; Arnaud 1985/87; Lambert 1959: esp. 121–4; Cavigneaux 1999; Olmo Lete 2017. See especially Cavigneaux's comment that "this library, with its diversity, bringing together popular and utilitary texts with higher literature, shows very concretely how Mesopotamian 'holism' coexisted with the intellectual production of the 'hegemonic,' 'theistic' ideology" (257–8). See also Livingstone 1998a: 215–19; Pedersén 1986.

⁷³ See similarly, Noegel 2014a, 2014b, 2016.

⁷⁴ On the relationship between the royal house and the literati in Mesopotamia, see Frahm 2005 and 2011b. For a comparative discussion of the status of diviners in ancient Athens, see Bowden, this volume.

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2

Testing the Oracle?

On the Experience of (Multiple)
Oracular Consultations*Esther Eidinow*

1. The Kroisos Problem

I will begin with one of the most well-known and often quoted oracle stories: the consultation of Delphi by King Kroisos of Lydia. The story begins with Kroisos sending ambassadors to consult multiple oracles. This is the infamous test of the oracles, during which Kroisos asks a question to which he already knows the answer, in order to find out where he should make his crucial enquiry.¹ In the end, two oracles give the correct answer: Delphi and the oracle of Amphiaraos at Oropos, but Delphi receives the majority of attention in the ensuing narrative.² Once he knows which institutions to trust, Kroisos sets out to win the favour of these oracles. Importantly, and as Herodotos makes clear, these two oracular inquiries are linked—the test is only the precursor to his famous inquiry: ‘Shall Kroisos send an army against the Persians: and shall he take to himself any allied host?’³ The answer tells him he will destroy a mighty empire; it turns out, in fact, to be his. Captured by the Persians, the Lydian king is almost immolated on a pyre by King Kyros of the Persians, but is saved, at the last moment, when he cries out to Apollo for help.⁴

The story is clearly one that has evolved over time and through traditions. As Roland Crahay observed, the oracles that Kroisos tests (Delphi, Abai in Phokis, Dodona, and the oracles of Amphiaraos and Trophonios) were those

¹ Testing the oracle: the Greek term used by Herodotos is *peirōmenos* (1.46.3).

² Hdt. 1.46.3–47.1–3.

³ That the test is the precursor to the main inquiry is made clear by Herodotos’ description of Kroisos’ decision-making process at 1.46.2. The translation here is from Godley 2004.

⁴ Hdt. 1.86–7.

that were important in the time of Herodotos not Kroisos: this is not a historical account.⁵ Rather, it may be meant to provide its audience with some kind of instruction: from a variety of perspectives, and focusing on a number of particular aspects of the story, modern commentators have suggested that one of its lessons may have been how and why one should *not* consult an oracle in the manner of the Lydian king. In drawing this conclusion, some draw attention to Kroisos' general attitude towards Delphi, arguing (as an example) that, 'Motivated by the arrogance of his usurped wealth, [Kroisos] thought he could own the sanctuary of the god with his benefactions and he acquired the acquiescence of the oracle'.⁶ Others focus more specifically on Kroisos' test of the oracles. It has been argued that this not only illuminates the arrogant flaw in his character, but also marks him as either foreign and/or somehow irreligious: Herodotos is providing his readers with a clear example of not only how one should not interact with an oracle, but also how one should not behave in interactions with the divine more generally.⁷

However, another approach interprets the story differently. Where some have argued that Kroisos' signal failure to learn—from the instruction of Solon, from the experiences that follow—is a marker of his arrogance, others have observed how the text draws attention to the difficulties of absorbing that learning.⁸ For example, Chris Pelling has argued: 'Learning from experience, one's own or others', is a most delicate business, and communicating that learning is more difficult still: this scene may also suggest the limitations that attend any project of grasping and communicating insight, the limitations within which Herodotos' own text and readers, no less than his characters, have to operate.'⁹ Matthew Christ has observed that those

⁵ Crahay 1956: 195.

⁶ Gagné 2013: 337. Bonnechere (2010: 116) states that 'Kroisos' story is now considered an isolated example of *hubris*'.

⁷ Klees (1965: 46–9 and 95–8), followed by Kirchberg (1965: 17 n. 4) argues that this is a barbarian practice; see also Price 1985: 152. Kindt (2006: 39) claims that it illustrates his 'wrong assumptions about his place in the world in relation to the gods'. Parker (1985: 78) suggests that it is the 'precise enquiry about the present' that would 'seem as irregular to an African as it did to Greeks. Normal questions relate to a limited and conventional range of problems.' Bonnechere (2010: 123 n. 32) argues that the problem is the way in which the question is asked (and alludes in the main text to the initial 'pseudo-question'), not the number of oracles of which it is asked. Dobson (1979: 350 n. 2) states 'it was considered unethical and certainly undiplomatic by the Greeks to consult more than one Oracle'; she describes it as a 'sacrilegious prank'. Cf. also Visser 2000: 23, who sees the King as treating Apollo like a powerful mortal, rather than a god. In this volume, Driediger-Murphy considers the ways in which scholars have emphasized orthopraxy in Roman divinatory practices.

⁸ See Gagné 2013: 337; he cites Pelling 2006 as evidence for his argument that Kroisos fails to learn, but does not discuss Pelling's larger argument.

⁹ Pelling 2006: 146.

who condemn Kroisos for non-Greek behaviour are making an assumption that Herodotos is always disapproving of barbarian *nomoi*—an assumption which, he argues, should not be taken for granted.¹⁰ As for irreligiosity: it may be the case that Herodotos was telling a version of the story that differed from other contemporary versions, which emphasized the piety of Kroisos; nevertheless, in the story, Kroisos is not explicitly charged with irreligiosity or impiety, not even by the god Apollo himself.¹¹

Indeed, these charges of irreligiosity or foreignness do *not* occur in an ancient re-telling of the episode by Xenophon in his *Kyropaidia*—although modern scholars have suggested that this discussion ‘makes it explicit that any such testing would naturally offend a god’.¹² In that text, as voiced by Kroisos himself, the reason why his actions were offensive to the god lies in the lack of trust between gentlemen (*kaloι k’agathoi*) that such a test reveals. Moreover, this is not depicted as causing the god to inflict punishment, but only as a way of disrupting bonds of *philia*: ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄνθρωποι καλοὶ καὶ ἀγαθοί, ἐπειδὴν γινώσκιν ἀπιστοῦμενοι, οὐ φιλοῦσι τοὺς ἀπιστοῦντας.¹³ Although Herodotos’ version seems to have influenced Xenophon’s account, what emerges here is a distillation of Xenophon’s own.¹⁴ In general, the novellas within the *Kyropaidia* have been worked up or invented by Xenophon in order to reinforce the themes of his work. As this then suggests, the agenda of this particular story must be considered within the broader themes of the work. The *philia* between ‘gentlemen’, to which Kroisos alludes, is a quality that plays a significant role in the *Kyropaidia*; in

¹⁰ Christ 1994: 190–1 (cf. Klees 1965: esp. 16–49 and 63–8). Moreover, see Pelling 2006 on the ambiguous foreignness of Lydia (142: ‘on the cusp between East and West’). Christ (1994: 190) observes that Greeks consult the same oracles about the same question, even if they do not consult different oracles; this chapter will develop that observation.

¹¹ Other versions of the story, which emphasize Kroisos’ piety, are evidenced by Bacchylides *Ode* 3 and the ‘Myson amphora’ ARV² 238.1. These are well discussed in Flower 1991, who draws attention to the possibility of numerous traditions and particularly to the role of Delphi (see also Segal 1971; Crane 1996). Pelling (2006: 156 n. 58) observes that there is evidence that Bacchylides may have known a range of versions. That Bacchylides was the source for Herodotos is debated (e.g. see Fehling 1989: 207 and Maehler 2004: 79–83).

¹² Pelling 2006: 161 n. 74. It is worth noting here also that Kroisos’ inquiry does not break the bounds of Sokrates’ overview (as presented by Xenophon in the *Memorabilia* 1.1.9) of the topics on which it is right to consult an oracle: it is difficult to see how the question of whether an oracle is genuine could be answered without asking an oracle.

¹³ Xen. *Cyr.* 7.2.17–18. ‘But indeed, gentlemen, when they discover they are not trusted, they do not befriend those who distrust them.’

¹⁴ As Gera 1993: 272; nevertheless she takes the test as ‘surely meant to contribute to the Herodotean picture of Kroisos as an arrogant and hubristic man who is bound to fall’. Her analysis conflates ‘attempts to tamper with the divine’ with testing it; thus, for example, she regards as equivalent the warnings of Amasis to Polykrates (3.40–3 and 7.15–18) and Artabanus’ attempts to help Xerxes, when these episodes comprise a warning, and an attempt to find out more, respectively.

particular, it is used by Kyros as a force for manipulation of other people.¹⁵ Albeit the account here is about a relationship between mortal and god, the implications of this story concern the ways in which a king's behaviour might be used, more or less effectively, to acquire and exercise influence.

This brief examination suggests that, with regard to the accounts of Herodotos and Xenophon, and other versions of such tales, caution is needed before we take any one of these stories as a direct reflection of attitudes, or activities, relating to everyday oracular practice. This is not to say that there might not have been some contemporaries, of either Herodotos or Xenophon, who agreed with the Kroisos of Xenophon's account; others may have disagreed. It seems likely that, just as there were multiple narrative traditions on which our ancient writers could draw to tell the story of Kroisos, in the same way, there must have been numerous traditions relating to ritual practice and belief. Moreover, it seems likely that the two would interact, the one being used to illustrate and explicate the other; with shifts of emphasis in one prompting changes in the other. Thus, as a recent commentary described it, for some it is possible that 'the idea of testing the oracles must have been pleasing chiefly as a clever trick' in what it identifies as 'an atmosphere of widespread scepticism in Herodotos' time'.¹⁶

In conclusion, and returning to the problem of evaluating Kroisos' action, as recounted by Herodotos, it is simplistic to draw a straightforward inference that Kroisos was perceived as trying to reverse his own position and that of the gods by 'testing' the oracles.¹⁷ If we set the figure of Kroisos in the larger context of the narrative, a more nuanced interpretation of this episode and its protagonist can be elicited, one that illuminates the subtleties of Herodotos' craft. Thus, Matthew Christ identifies Kroisos as a particular Herodotean type, one of the 'inquiring kings', who 'represent for him a powerful, but ambiguous, driving force in the human quest for information and knowledge'.¹⁸ He argues that through his treatment of regal investigators,

¹⁵ Tatum 1989: 71, 199, and 269 n. 14; Nadon 2001: 147–60.

¹⁶ Asheri, Lloyd, and Corcella 2007: 108. In contrast, Fontenrose (1978: 113) suggests that '[N]either Greek nor Lydian would have been so presumptuous and impious', and the storyline exposes the oracle as a counterfeit; he compares Kroisos' behaviour to the Aesopic fable of the man who tried to prove the Delphic Oracle false and the tale of Daphidas who tried to deceive the Pythia by asking when he would be thrown from a horse that he did not possess: L155 and Q239, respectively, in Fontenrose's catalogue.

¹⁷ As Kindt 2006, who argues not only that the episode provides an explanation of Kroisos' downfall, but also that it is a crucial lesson, programmatic in nature, for the whole of the *Histories*.

¹⁸ Christ 1994: 167.

Herodotos is offering a reflection on his own goals, disclosing ‘his own views of the intellectual and ethical principles that should, but often do not, govern human investigations’.¹⁹ In this context, it is significant that far from expressing disapproval of Kroisos’ behaviour, Herodotos in fact seems to be critical of Kroisos’ failure to question the oracles that he receives.²⁰

In what follows, I want to build on this interpretation, but take it in a different direction. My argument is that Kroisos’ activities can be interpreted as evoking what were in fact more familiar, everyday types of multiple oracular consultations, and that these may illuminate current scholarly approaches to the so-called ‘testing’ of oracles. Thus, this chapter will examine literary and epigraphic evidence for dual oracular consultations of three kinds: first, what will be called here ‘serial’ consultations, in which related questions on the same subject are asked, one after another, at the same oracular sanctuary; second, ‘simultaneous’ consultations, where the same question is posed at different oracular sanctuaries; and, finally, ‘successive’ consultations, in which the same question is asked at different oracular sanctuaries in order. While helping us to appreciate the socio-political implications of consulting an oracle, this evidence also draws attention to the ancient perception of the pervasive presence of uncertainty in these interactions, and the need to ‘test’ an oracle’s meaning. By exploring stories about oracular consultation in light of actual practice, and vice versa, this chapter aims not only to nuance our characterization of specific oracle stories and their meanings for their ancient audiences, but also to deepen our understanding of the lived experience of oracular consultation.²¹

2. Multiple Oracular Inquiries

2.1. Serial Inquiries

Seeking compound divine insights—serially or simultaneously—was not a rare event in the ancient world.²² There are numerous examples of serial

¹⁹ Christ 1994: 168. Similarly, Evans (1991: 49) sees the test as demonstrating ‘good sense and diligence’, and argues that Kroisos falls victim to his desire to expand his empire.

²⁰ This is expressed in both his own voice (Hdt. 1.71.1), and that of the god Apollo (Hdt. 1.91.4, cf. 1.91.5), as Christ (1994: 192) observes.

²¹ On examples of patterns of multiple simultaneous divinatory inquiries in other cultures, see Maurizio, this volume.

²² The examples in Bonnechere 2010 illustrate this. However, the evidence is used to argue i) against the idea that oracles were perceived to be manipulated by ‘malevolent clergy’, and ii) for the conclusion that such ‘double consultation suggests not suspicion, but a happy mix of

consultations from both ancient Greek literature and epigraphy showing individuals and city-states consulting the same oracle about the same matter several times in order to gain clarity.²³ The phenomenon of serial consultation cannot be in doubt, but perhaps more interesting is to ask when and why it happened. Leaving aside the complex question of the nature of the ambiguity of oracular responses and the requirement that this created for consultants to check the meaning of the answer that they had received, it appears that second questions were usually focused on what remained hidden; they were concerned with gaining further and better particulars for action.²⁴

An example of this pattern of double consultation is found with regard to questions about the movement of hero bones. The initial response that tells the consultants to move those bones is usually made to a question on another topic (for example, concerning an invasion); consultants respond by asking where they can find these bones. This pattern of questioning occurs in the case of the movement of Hesiod's bones, as well as those of Theseus, and of Orestes.²⁵ In those cases where this second inquiry is not made, the location of the bones is already known, and a cult already exists (examples of this pattern of questioning and concomitant activity occurs in the cases of the bones of Tisamenos, Arkas, Aristomenes, and Hektor).²⁶ Such multiple questions also occur in accounts of oracular consultations relating to the foundations of colonies: there we find that the questions are often about seeking further guidance after a particular pronouncement has

religiosity, traditionalism, and self-promotion'. This appears to conflict with the conclusions of the paper's earlier examination (118–21) of the nature of divination in moments of crisis, when a confluence of signs was required to provide continued reassurance of divine favour. However, the implication of this—that it was considered possible that divine favour might be withdrawn—is not discussed.

²³ See Eidinow 2007: 141. A useful collection of double consultations can be found in Bonnechere 2013. However, that discussion includes both simultaneous and serial consultations, without always distinguishing between the two.

²⁴ Bonnechere 2013 uses the term 'ambiguity' apparently to indicate the response of the recipient of the oracle, not the nature of the oracular message. Thus, this category includes both some riddles (but not all) and oracle pronouncements that the recipients do not understand for other reasons. For example, the riddle of the wooden walls given to the Athenians is discussed as ambiguous (p. 81), alongside the clearly expressed but morally puzzling instruction given to the Kymaians concerning Paktyes; but the riddle given to the Spartans concerning the bones of Orestes at Tegea is classified as unambiguous (p. 82).

²⁵ Hesiod: Paus. 9.38.3; Theseus: Plut. *Thes.* 36.1 and *Cim.* 8.6; and Orestes: Hdt. 1.67.2 and 4.

²⁶ Tisamenos: Hdt. 2.18.6–8, 7.1–8 and Arkas: Hdt. 4.153–159.4. Aristomenes: Paus. 4.32.3 and Hektor: Lyc. *Alex.* 1206–7, Paus. 9.18.5.

‘failed’, and more direction is therefore necessary.²⁷ But such serial inquiries do not only occur in narratives: serial questions by individuals are also suggested by epigraphic evidence. Examples include questions about cult particulars (e.g. Mnesiepes of Paros inquired at Delphi about the establishment of the cult of the poet Archilochos, and the nature of the sacrificial offerings); and as I have noted elsewhere, Dodona offers a number of examples of what appear to be serial consultations.²⁸

2.2. Simultaneous Inquiries

In literary examples, those who ask the same question at the same time at different oracular sanctuaries are usually desperate: for example, in *Prometheus Vincitus*, Io describes how her father tried to help her resolve her frightening dreams by asking both Delphi and Dodona for help; this is likely to have been the same question asked of both oracles.²⁹ Similarly, when Herodotos tells us about the seer Euenios, we learn that the Apollonians, worried by the failure of their sacred ewes to lamb and by crop failures, apparently consulted both Delphi and Dodona.³⁰ The oracles, we are told, respond in unison: ‘for we ourselves’ (they said) ‘sent those wolves, and we will not cease from avenging him until you make him such restitution for what you did as he himself chooses and approves; when that is fully done, we ourselves will give Euenios such a gift as will make many men consider him happy.’ A historical double consultation of Zeus and Apollo, respectively, by Apollonia, relating to its foundation, may be indicated by two dedications, one at Delphi and one at Olympia.³¹

This brings us to historical consultations: according to Demosthenes in *Against Meidias*, concerns at Athens about hymns and prayers to Dionysos at the Dionysia appear to have prompted a double inquiry at Delphi and Dodona.³² And such simultaneous consultations did not only concern religious matters: in Xenophon’s *Ways and Means*, the suggestion is made that such a double oracular inquiry would be an appropriate response to certain proposals about foreign policy.³³ An example of simultaneous consultation about even more pressing political matters seems to be implied by

²⁷ For questions referring to the same place, see Lhôte 2006: 274–5.

²⁸ Mnesiepes of Paros: LSCG 180 (=Fontenrose H74), and see Eidinow 2007: 52–3.

²⁹ Aesch. *PV* 655–62. ³⁰ Hdt. 9.94.

³¹ Plut. *Mor.* 401f; Paus. 5.22.3.

³² Dem. 21.51–54. ³³ Xen. *Poroi* 6.2.

evidence for events on the eve of the Sicilian expedition: different sources provide us with a number of different oracular consultations by the Athenians. This may refer to a single consultation that has been, as it were, misplaced through oral tradition, but it could equally well suggest that on the eve of war, Athens consulted Zeus Ammon, Zeus at Dodona, and Apollo at Delphi.³⁴ Similarly, before the battle of Leuktra, the Thebans appear to have done a similar round-up of oracular consultation: these may have been asked at the same time at different sanctuaries, or they may have made their consultations, asking the same question, in turn at different sanctuaries.³⁵

2.3. Successive Inquiries

This brings us to the kind of oracle consultation that combines the two previous types, in which the same question is asked, in order, at different oracular sanctuaries. In literary sources, Euripides' *Ion* seems to provide an example: Ion asks Kreousa whether Xouthos has gone to Trophonios as a tourist or a consultant, and is told that he has turned aside to learn one word from that shrine and one from that of Phoebus.³⁶ The oracle of Trophonios does give a response, but also hangs back out of respect for Delphi. This sense of oracles working together can also be seen in other literary accounts of one oracle sending a consultant to another oracle for some further help. For example, Pausanias appears to have heard a story about the shield of Aristomenes that he observed hanging at Lebadeia in the sanctuary of Trophonios—that is, that during the Second Messenian War Delphi sent Aristomenes to Lebadeia to find this lost shield, which he afterwards dedicated there.³⁷ These are literary examples, perhaps drawing on oral tales, but

³⁴ Flower 2003: 10; Plut. *Nic.* 13 and 14; Paus. 8.11.12; and Plut. *Mor* 403b and *Nic.* 13, respectively.

³⁵ See Paus. 4.32.5–6. The oracle of Trophonios offers a response in hexameters, which Bonnechere (2010: 124 n. 36) deems unlikely, on the grounds that the consultant entered into direct contact with the god, but it is not clear why this would make hexameters less likely, especially in comparison with evidence for the direct delivery of hexameters by the Pythia.

³⁶ Eur. *Ion* 299–302. Bonnechere (2010: 125) suggests that the visit to Delphi occurs as a result of a referral by the first oracle, but I cannot see evidence for this in the text. Xouthos reports (404–6) that the oracle of Trophonios (trans. Kovacs 1999) 'did not think it right to anticipate the god's prophecy. But he did say this, that neither you nor I would return home from the oracle without children.' (Cf. also Eur. *Ion* 392–4.)

³⁷ Paus. 4.16.7: Delphi sends Aristomenes to Lebadeia. The two oracles working together: Bonnechere 2003: 341–2.

evidence for this kind of relationality between oracular sanctuaries also occurs in epigraphic evidence. For example, in a question tablet text from Dodona, an anonymous consultant asks if he needs to visit another oracle; another from the same site records the question of one Archephon who appears to have been to an oracle of Apollo already, and has now come to Dodona to ask the god to clarify his next steps.³⁸ As I have observed in a previous discussion of the serial questions asked of the oracle at Dodona, it is notable that these questions concern travel and commerce by sea—and this pattern of behaviour may indicate that these activities were a source of particular anxiety.³⁹

Scholars have offered a variety of explanations to explain such double questions in historical literary sources.⁴⁰ The most famous examples emerge from Sparta, and form something of a doublet. The earlier event concerns Agesilaos, and is described by Plutarch. Before setting out for Asia to free the Greeks from Persian rule (c.396/5 BCE), we are told, Agesilaos consulted Dodona and then, on the instruction of the Ephors, he also went to Delphi. The story runs as follows:⁴¹

Desiring to bring about the war against the Persian for the sake of setting free the Greeks living in Asia, he consulted the oracle of Zeus at Dodona, and when the god bade him to go on, he reported the answer to the Ephors. And they bade him go to Delphi and ask the same question. Accordingly he proceeded to the prophetic shrine and put his question in this form: ‘Apollo, are you of the same opinion as your father?’ And Apollo concurring, Agesilaos was chosen, and began the campaign.

If we turn to examine the situation in which such a double consultation took place, the highly militaristic society of Sparta does seem like a context in which a lame general could be understood to need the support of two gods.⁴² However, the story may simply be a topos, which Plutarch could have drawn

³⁸ Dodona: Eidinow 2007: 110–11.

³⁹ Eidinow 2007: 72–3.

⁴⁰ See further pp. 53–54.

⁴¹ Agesilaos: Plut. *Mor.* (*Sayings of Spartans*) 209a (trans. Babbitt 1931). Cf. Arist. *Rhet.* ii.23.12 where the story is, in most manuscripts, attributed to Hegesippos, although some read Agesipolis.

⁴² Bonnechere (2010: 127) states that the Ephors demand the second consultation because ‘they judge the oracle of Agesilaos too close to the one which he had set out to acquire, and they order him to have it reviewed by another oracular deity’. This may have been so, but Plutarch only notes that the Ephors react to the reception of the Olympian oracle by commanding Agesilaos to consult Delphi; Aristotle’s account does not mention the Ephors, but describes Hegesippos/Agesipolis acting alone to confirm the first oracle.

from a famous account by Xenophon about the Spartan general Agesipolis.⁴³ In this case, the general is recruited to lead an invasion into Argos (in 388 BCE), and as the moment of attack looms (the sacrifices are favourable) he consults first Zeus, at Olympia, and then Apollo (the site is not given) about whether he would be acting righteously if he refused to accept the holy truce claimed by the Argives:

After this it seemed to the Lakedaimonians that it was not safe for them to undertake a campaign against the Athenians or against the Boiotians while leaving in their rear a hostile state bordering upon Lakedaimon and one so large as that of the Argives; they accordingly called out the ban against Argos. Now when Agesipolis learned that he was to lead the ban, and when the sacrifices which he offered at the frontier proved favourable, he went to Olympia and consulted the oracle of the god, asking whether it would be consistent with piety if he did not acknowledge the holy truce claimed by the Argives; for, he urged, it was not when the appointed time came, but when the Lakedaimonians were about to invade their territory, that they pleaded the sacred months. And the god signified to him that it was consistent with piety for him not to acknowledge a holy truce which was pleaded unjustly. Then Agesipolis proceeded straight from there to Delphi and asked Apollo in his turn whether he also held the same opinion as his father Zeus in regard to the truce. And Apollo answered that he did hold quite the same opinion.

This version of the double consultation shows Agesipolis offering the gods some reasons for their decision, neatly highlighting for the reader the area of concern. The response Agesipolis receives not only gives him permission for his actions, but also provides a justification. One strand of scholarship has seen in this event the cynical manipulation of the second oracle.⁴⁴ Others have argued that this is unlikely and does not conform to the presentation of Agesipolis elsewhere in this episode.⁴⁵ This may be to create too extreme a dichotomy: as Michael Flower has observed: 'It was perfectly possible,

⁴³ Agesipolis: Xen. *Hell.* 4.7.2 (trans. Brownson 1918) and cf. Arist. *Rhet.* ii.23.12 (see n. 41). However, that there was an existing tradition of comparison between the two generals is suggested by Xen. *Hell.* 4.7.5, which compares Agesipolis' activities to those of Agesilaos.

⁴⁴ Bonnechere (2013) argues that modern scholarship has responded to this event as demonstrating a growing rationality and contempt for oracles, but he only cites Parke and Wormell 1956: 209–10 to support this. Cf. Flower 2008: 151, who states: 'Agesipolis's tactic came very close to being a trick, if not a test, and other Greeks did not follow his example'; cf. Giuliani 2001: 179.

⁴⁵ Bowden 2004: 236–7. esp. n. 4 and 2005: 78–9.

however, to conduct the rites of divination in such a way as to obtain a desired result without compromising religious belief or engaging in what we would call self-conscious manipulation.⁴⁶ Perhaps it is more straightforward to note that not only was it important to do the right thing, it was also important to be seen to do it; and in some situations, this may have been more important than in others. For example, when mortal frailty was known to be able to influence the outcome of a divinatory process—through bribery and corruption or less obvious manipulation—being able to demonstrate the support of both divinities may have made suspicions of underhand dealing less likely.⁴⁷ At other times—for example, when political powers were changing—the approval of a particular oracle may have added significant weight to a decision. One example of this may lie in the double consultation of Delphi and Didyma, apparent in one of the second series of decrees recognizing the *asylia* of the city and country of Teos.⁴⁸ It is possible that

⁴⁶ Flower (2008: 173) illustrates this with a story about Agesilaos' aborted Phrygian campaign of 396 BCE (Xen. *Hell.* 3.4.15); cf. Parker 1985: 79–80.

⁴⁷ Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.7 and Diod. Sic. 15.53. Bribery of Pythia: Hdt. 6.66 (cf. Bonnechere 2010: 129, who observes that there are few cases in the sources). The consultation of the Thebans (Paus. 4.32.5) described above (n. 35) produced an oracle of Trophonios—but Diod. Sic. 15.53.4 and Polyaen. *Strat.* 2.3.8 state that this was a forgery produced by Epaminondas. (It is not clear why Bonnechere 2010: 124 thinks that this is 'a quite dangerous conjecture'.) Moreover, being seen to ignore divine messages could be politically dangerous (see Aesch. *Ctes.* 131, where Aeschines accuses Demosthenes of ignoring unfavourable omens).

⁴⁸ PW348, *ICr* 1.19.2 = SGDI 5184, ll. 7–9; Didyma 20; PSI 4.435 = Rigsby 1996, no. 157.7–9). Bonnechere (2010: 131) suggests that this is a question of two approvals being 'naturally more impressive'; they 'would more easily convince the allied cities to subscribe to the proposed *asylia*'. He notes, rightly, that one need not assume any collusion between Delphi and Didyma. However, these observations do not offer a response to the question of why two oracle responses may have been thought necessary in *this* particular instance of *asylia* (it appears to be unusual). It is notable that reference to the oracular basis for the *asylia* does not occur elsewhere in the second series and is not mentioned in the first series. It is possible that the Teans brought both oracular approvals to Antiochos III in their initial decree of request; but although it seems likely that they invoked the presence and inviolability of the Dionysian artists (see Rigsby 1996: 287, who notes that this is expressly referred to in nos. 132–4, and in the first Tean Decree for Antiochos), the double oracles are not mentioned or alluded to. It seems more likely, then, that the oracles were sought by the ambassadors who requested the second series, as part of their role in reminding cities of the inviolability of Teos. In that case, the second oracular consultation at Didyma may support the theory (as Rigsby 1996: 290) that these decrees were sought in the aftermath of the defeat of Antiochos III and the Treaty of Apamea (188 BCE); this would perhaps indicate that the approval of the oracle at Didyma, now in the territory of the Attalids, would be a persuasive addition to their request. It has been suggested that the requests for *asylia* to the Cretans in the first series are indications that the Teans were suffering from piratical attacks from Crete (Kvist 2003: 207, with Sahin 1994); in turn, the second series, it has been suggested, may have been grants of military aid (see Kvist 2003: 209); cf. discussion in Buraselis 2003: 153–6. Günther (1971) sees this example as demonstrating Didyma's role as secondary to Delphi, her inclusion here simply being confirmatory. Examination of this example offers a reminder that while we tend to discuss attitudes to oracles in general terms,

the reason for adopting this pattern of consultation lies in the defeat of Antiochos III by the Romans, and the change to Attalid dominion over Asia Minor.⁴⁹ The Teans had acquired inviolability from Antiochos even as they had continued to pay taxes to the Attalids.⁵⁰ The imposition of the new regime may have required the ‘refreshment’ of those terms, with the support of an oracular statement from within the Attalid kingdom.

3. Herodotean Narratives: Testing, Testing, Testing

It appears from these epigraphic and literary examples to have been acceptable, even unremarkable, to make several inquiries at one oracle, or to consult several oracles, about the same question or regarding another related question. These processes of multiple questioning can be seen as providing the consultant with a way of ‘testing’ the responses they were given, sometimes through repeated interaction with one oracle, sometimes through comparison with another oracle. With this in mind, I want to return to Herodotos and examine his accounts of serial, successive, and simultaneous consultations, and ask whether we might see these also as ‘tests’ of the oracle.

We start with Amasis, King of Egypt, and his activities before he attained this position; after he becomes king, he seems to use these experiences, in hindsight, as tests of certain oracles.⁵¹

It is said that even when Amasis was a private man he was fond of drinking and joking and was not at all a sober man; and that when his drinking and pleasure-seeking cost him the bare necessities, he would go around stealing. Then when he contradicted those who said that he had their possessions, they would bring him to whatever place of divination was nearby, and sometimes the oracles declared him guilty and sometimes they acquitted him. When he became king, he did not take care of the shrines of the gods who had acquitted him of theft, or give them anything for maintenance, or make it his practice to sacrifice there, for he knew them to be worthless and their oracles false; but he took scrupulous care of the gods

consideration of the specific context in which oracular consultations are conducted is enlightening.

⁴⁹ Livy 37.27–8: the Teans had supplied Antiochos III’s fleet with provisions; in punishment, the Romans ravage the land.

⁵⁰ See Chrubasik 2013: esp. 98–9.

⁵¹ Hdt. 2.174.1–2 (trans. Godley 2004).

who had declared his guilt, considering them to be gods in very deed and their oracles infallible.

The story provides a metonymic depiction of character. It prefaces an account of Amasis as a shrewd, opportunistic (and blessed) ruler: Herodotos tells us that Amasis was wise—he set an example for Solon to follow—and lived a long, fulfilled, and pious life; at the same time, '[I]t is said that in the reign of Amasis Egypt attained to its greatest prosperity.'⁵² He dies with no great misfortune, and has been dead forty-four years by the time Egypt is conquered by the Persians.⁵³ The events after his death may give us pause—Kambyzes desecrates and burns his corpse—but no connection is made in the text between the events in his later life, and his earlier behaviour towards the oracles. On the contrary, Herodotos provides a tantalizing additional comment on the role of oracles in events after his death, which may rather be interpreted as a comment in support of his oracular practice, since it concerns the general gullibility of the general public with regard to oracle stories. The Egyptians' belief contrasts with that of their leader, who was not taken in by appearances.⁵⁴

For their story is that Amasis learned from an oracle what was to be done to him after his death, and so to escape this fate buried this dead man, the one that was scourged, near the door inside his own vault, and ordered his son that he himself should be laid in the farthest corner of the vault. I think that these commands of Amasis, regarding the burial-place and the man, were never given at all, and that the Egyptians believe in them in vain.⁵⁵

The Persian military commander Mardonios is another character who tests oracles. He does this very deliberately, sending one Mys to test as many oracles as he can; Herodotos does not know Mardonios' intent, nor does he know the question that Mys asks (although the description of Mardonios' later choice of allies gives us some idea of the reasons for this activity).⁵⁶ Does Mardonios suffer for this behaviour? We know that he will eventually be killed at the battle of Plataia, but this death is not made to connect to this earlier set of events in any way. In fact, the story seems designed for another

⁵² Hdt. 2.177.1–2.

⁵³ Death: 2.181; desecration: Hdt. 3.16.1.

⁵⁴ Hdt. 3.16.6–7.

⁵⁵ The Greek term used by Herodotos to describe the gullible Egyptians is *semmoun*. Chiasson (2012: 218) notes that this term is also used at 1.95.1 to describe the narratives that Herodotos does not choose to follow, and which falsely exaggerate or magnify Kyros' achievements.

⁵⁶ Hdt. 8.133.1, and see n. 57.

purpose: that is, it offers Herodotos an opportunity to emphasize, as do other famous oracle stories, the importance of the Athenians. The passage is structured in such a way that his own lengthy panegyric (couched in both general opinion, and the assessment of Mardonios) is easy to mistake for the pronouncement of the oracles, which in fact only appear to have suggested that the general should team up with the Athenians.⁵⁷

So far, these stories have included an Egyptian and a Persian: could it be that, as Simon Price has observed, only ‘barbarians’ test the oracles?⁵⁸ A supporting rationale might posit that Greeks already knew which oracle had a reputation for truthfulness, so only foreigners were tempted to perform such tests—and, if we follow the reasoning of some scholars, only they were punished for it.⁵⁹ However, as we have seen, undermining this approach are stories about foreigners testing oracles who are not punished; and, in turn, there are a number of stories about Greeks that test oracles, who are punished.⁶⁰ Aristodikos of Kyme provides a first example.⁶¹ The Kymaians have been instructed by the oracle at Branchidai to give up a suppliant, one Paktyes, to the Persians. Aristodikos, son of Herakleides, does not believe that this oracle can be true, suspecting those who have delivered the message of lying. So the Kymaeans, including Aristodikos, set off to ask the god again. A second inquiry is made: as we have seen, this is not unusual. But what happens next is striking: Aristodikos removes the families of nesting birds from around the temple, and, for this, he is attacked by the god. When Aristodikos answers back, drawing a parallel between his behaviour and that of the god, he learns that this presages the destruction of the Kymaians for their impiety.

This story has been described by some scholars as a successful serial consultation, and/or a test of the oracle: by repeatedly questioning the oracle, Aristodikos manages to identify the truth.⁶² But this is a more

⁵⁷ Hdt. 8.136.2–3: Mardonios sends for Alexander, son of Amyntas so that he could ‘best gain the Athenians for his allies’; the passage describes his knowledge of their reputation, and then notes that his opinion ‘chanced to be the prediction of the oracles which counseled him to make the Athenians his ally’.

⁵⁸ Price 1985: 152.

⁵⁹ There is a story told by Plutarch (*Mor.* 434D–F) that suggests this perspective, concerning a Kilician king who tested Greek oracles—and was persuaded to believe in the oracle of Mopsos. The story notably includes details of the Epicureans who accompany the king, and whose beliefs are thrown into confusion by the veracity of the oracle.

⁶⁰ See Christ 1994, who also makes this observation.

⁶¹ Hdt. 1.158–9.

⁶² Christ (1994: 190) describes how Aristodikos ‘successfully goads the god into giving a clear response’.

complex narrative than this verdict at first sight suggests: the interaction—in particular, the explicit statement of the god—clearly indicates that this is a story about the boundaries of impiety. The Kymaian question should never have been asked in the first place; and the following questions posed by Aristodikos, which repeat the inquiry, only reinforce its impious nature. Herodotos is manipulating familiar tropes of behaviour (serial questions) so as to reveal some deeper insights for the audience of his *History*.

The second example is that of Spartan Glaukos, who famously asks the oracle about returning the money of some Milesians that he was safeguarding—or rather not doing so.⁶³

Glaukos journeyed to Delphi to question the oracle. When he asked the oracle whether he should seize the money under oath, the Pythian priestess threatened him in these verses: ‘Glaukos son of Epikydes, it is more profitable now

To prevail by your oath and seize the money.

Swear, for death awaits even the man who swears true.

But Oath has a son, nameless; he is without hands

Or feet, but he pursues swiftly, until he catches

And destroys all the family and the entire house.

The line of a man who swears true is better later on.’

When Glaukos heard this, he entreated the god to pardon him for what he had said. The priestess answered that to tempt the god (*to peirethenai tou theou*) and to do the deed had the same effect.

When he understands the god’s disapproval of his intention, Glaukos asks the god to forgive him for his question, and the priestess responds: simply by asking the question, Glaukos has in fact committed the offence for which he must be punished. We should pause here and note that while this may seem obvious in hindsight, it was not perhaps so clear to an ancient inquirer: a number of questions inscribed on tablets from Dodona appear to concern the return of money owed by the consultant.⁶⁴ Although the exact

⁶³ Hdt. 6.86γ.

⁶⁴ See Parker 2016: 83. It is possible that Dodona was more relaxed about Delphi concerning ‘issues of financial probity’ as Parker suggests; but, of course, we do not know what kind of response was given to the consultants asking about debt at Dodona. Raising similar issues are those questions from Dodona that may be posed by slaves about escape, if indeed that is what they concern (see Eidinow 2011, but cf. Parker 2016: 85).

mechanism by which this dialogue takes place is not obvious, it appears to have been some kind of a second consultation and so this follows the structure of the Aristodikos inquiry: an impious first question, exacerbated by a second consultation. As the priestess herself makes clear, that first question should be regarded as a test of the oracle: specifically, the Pythia uses the verb *peiraomai* to describe what Glaukos has done by making his inquiry in the first place.⁶⁵

Taking the stories of Aristodikos and Glaukos together, we see some common patterns: a first inquiry that somehow ‘tests’ the oracle, concerning an act that is impious, and a second consultation that exacerbates the situation, and in which the god makes a statement about his response. The act of ‘testing’ the oracle is made explicit in the Glaukos narrative, but the similarities between these two narratives indicate that Aristodikos’ consultation should be considered in the same category: in his case, the ‘test’ is expressed physically, rather than verbalized, through the action of removing the birds’ nests. In turn, these two consultations offer an illuminating, and contrasting, parallel to the Kroisos narrative of consultations. This comprises the same structure—a test, and a second consultation—although the events occur over a longer period of time; indeed, Herodotos uses the same verb, *peiraomai*, to describe Kroisos’ activities in his first consultation of Delphi and the other oracles. And yet, unlike Glaukos, or Aristodikos, Kroisos is never condemned for this test by Apollo. Instead, Apollo tells Kroisos that his omission, which brings him to his downfall, is that he fails to ask enough questions. As Apollo famously tells him:⁶⁶

But as to the oracle that was given to him, Kroisos is wrong to complain concerning it. For Loxias declared to him that if he led an army against the Persians, he would destroy a great empire. Therefore he ought, if he had wanted to plan well, to have sent and asked whether the god spoke of Kroisos’ or of Kyros’ empire. But he did not understand what was spoken, or make further inquiry: for which now let him blame himself.

This theme of the Kroisos narrative occurs once more in the account of Kyros when he puts Kroisos on the pyre: although Christ has argued that Herodotos stops short of marking Kyros ‘definitively as a regal investigator’, he is certainly conducting a test here himself, and one that gains greater significance from the way it echoes the earlier story of Kroisos.⁶⁷ As Segal

⁶⁵ As noted above, the verb used to describe Kroisos’ activities is *peirōmenos* (1.46.3).

⁶⁶ Hdt. 1.91.4. ⁶⁷ Christ 1994: 198.

points out, Kyros' motivations are largely cognitive—'Herodotus repeats words of mental activity especially of knowing and learning'—Kyros wishes to understand what has happened to Kroisos.⁶⁸ And what emerges from this situation is something very like a serial consultation: Kyros, to begin with, does not understand what Kroisos says. He finds him 'unintelligible' or *asēma*. His response to this lack of understanding is to ask Kroisos again—and then the reality of what has occurred is made clear, both for Kyros and for the audience of his story. Kyros is, then, performing the kind of inquiring behaviour at which Kroisos failed, and about which Apollo instructed him; it suggests that Kyros is a different, wiser leader, at least in this respect.

Herodotos offers us a range of examples of ways in which processes of multiple questioning can be seen as providing a consultant with a way of testing the responses they are given, sometimes through repeated interaction with one oracle, sometimes through comparison with another oracle. These accounts, taken as a whole, suggest that this activity was neither non-Greek, nor was it impious per se: it seems to have been perfectly usual to return for a second consultation. In fact, this is one point where Kroisos seems to have failed: he asked too few questions (about a perfectly acceptable matter). But comparing his story with those about Aristodikos and Glaukos suggests a further insight: while the *process* of asking again did not cause divine offence, the motivation of the person asking the question did matter. If Kroisos asked too few questions, Aristodikos and Glaukos asked too many; indeed, as the case of Glaukos illustrates, if you were asking an oracle about an impious act, even one question was too many.

4. A Kaleidoscope of Uncertainty

Examination of the literary examples, in context with evidence for multiple consultations, illuminates our perspective on 'the Kroisos problem', but it also highlights a further crucial aspect of the perception, and experience, of oracular practice: the pervasive presence of uncertainty. This is not simply to restate the truism that oracles were about trying to resolve uncertainty, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which these accounts suggest that uncertainty was both an inherent by-product of oracular consultation, and also shaped that practice. As historical observers, we may have good reason

⁶⁸ Hdt. 1.86.2; Segal 1971: 45 and 48.

to argue for the idea that ‘Each oracular shrine is ultimately only a gateway to the same world of truth’.⁶⁹ But the evidence for multiple consultations indicates that those who consulted oracles may not have felt secure about their journey through that gateway, or the nature of their destination.

Narratives about oracular consultation indicate a number of potential causes of this inherent uncertainty. As we have seen, the first is the presence of mortal frailty, encompassing flawed behaviours ranging from corruption and bribery to the kinds of easily committed mistakes to which even pious mortals may be prone (as demonstrated by the different versions of Kroisos’ consultation by Herodotos and Xenophon). Being human also makes it easy to be confused by an oracle, and this brings us to a second cause of uncertainty: those oracles that seem designed to deceive. This aspect is evoked by Herodotos when, in the account of Kroisos’ consultation, he uses the term *kibdēlos* to describe an oracle as false or at least potentially misleading.⁷⁰ The term relies on a metaphor of coinage, which needs to be tested for its purity. To try to resolve this uncertainty, it is necessary to examine the interpretation that has been made, either by asking others about their interpretation, as the Athenians are famously described as doing on the eve of the Persian invasion of their city, or, as we have seen here, by asking an oracle—the same institution, or another—for a second opinion.

The imagery of false coinage brings us to a further, related, cause of uncertainty. In the passage describing the interaction of Kyros and Kroisos discussed above, what is misunderstood or is not clear is referred to as *asēmos*, a term that is also used of unminted currency.⁷¹ This word is employed twice more by Herodotos: once of the babbling of the pre-verbal children in Psammetichos’ famous experiment about the origins of language, and again to describe oracles about the birth of the tyrant Kypselos, which the Corinthians fail to understand—until they receive a new oracle.⁷² As this last example demonstrates, whereas the previous kind of uncertainty is caused by confusing information, this type of uncertainty is caused by receiving what is, in the context, insufficient information, making it difficult to know how to act, so that a further consultation is required. A dramatic example of this kind of uncertainty is described in the *Anabasis*, when Xenophon and his men are trying to get away from Kalpe and are prevented

⁶⁹ Quotation: Bonnechere 2010: 132. He argues that (133) ‘[t]o dare to put one’s question to two different establishments was rather a demonstration of good faith and piety’, but it also implies a need to verify the statements of the gods, which Bonnechere denies.

⁷⁰ Hdt. 1.66.2–4 and 1.75.2 and 5.91.2 with Kurke 2009: esp. 130–71 (ch. 4).

⁷¹ Hdt. 9.41.2. ⁷² Hdt. 2.2.3 and 5.92b.3.

by a failed sacrifice.⁷³ The interpretation of the divine message is clear to them: they should not move, but they cannot stay as they are and survive. To understand what they should do requires repeated sacrifices. The effect is rather like stop-motion photography, with each sacrifice adding to their understanding of their changing potential for action.

In this context, and, as further evidence indicates, these situations of uncertainty arising from oracular consultation were not unexpected, nor was their occurrence an indication of impiety; but nor was a second consultation necessarily an indication of piety.⁷⁴ Such inquiries were at the most fundamental level about acquiring necessary information: oracles that were puzzling or partial should be explored by posing another question. Indeed, in Herodotos' version of the Kroisos episode, Apollo's criticism of Kroisos makes this very point.⁷⁵ The idea also underpins Sokrates' belated instruction to Xenophon in the *Anabasis*, when he scolds him for not asking the right set of questions. As Sokrates' directive makes clear, Xenophon's respect for the divine will be demonstrated by how he carries out the divine message he has now received.⁷⁶ And yet, as Sokrates' discussion with Xenophon suggests, it was also considered a perfectly understandable and human error to forget to do this—an error that, as the Kroisos story indicates, may not be entirely within mortal control anyway.⁷⁷

It is the potential for these kinds of uncertainty that prompted the need for multiple oracular consultations. This activity was not, I suggest, based on an assumption that the gods would not offer authentic insights: after all, as Apollo tells us in the *Eumenides*, all oracles come from Zeus.⁷⁸ However, different oracles could offer different insights about possible futures. Thus multiple inquiries enabled consultants to find out as much information as

⁷³ Xen. *Anab.* 6.4.12–5.2.

⁷⁴ Bonnechere 2010: 133. Importantly, the emphasis may also have changed over time, in response to specific trends in consultation: see Belayche 2007 on questions at oracles on theological matters during the second sophistic; she highlights (para. 28) in particular the implications for the consultant (individual or community) of the record of asking such questions—and so developing a relationship with the divine.

⁷⁵ Hdt. 1.91.4.

⁷⁶ Xen. *Anab.* 3.1.4–8.

⁷⁷ Coupled with the sparseness of the epigraphic evidence for dual consultation, it may suggest that serial consultations were not frequent: the combination of inconvenience and expense could be given as reasons for putting it out of the reach of most people. Consider, for example, the series of sacrifices that were necessary at Lebadeia before one could even consult the oracle in the first place: there are around seven or eight sacrifices, each one followed by examination of the liver to reveal Trophonios' mood (see Paus. 9.39.5–6). Those willing to pay 10 dr. for the initial expense of consulting at Lebadeia: IG VII 3055.

⁷⁸ Aesch. *Eum.* 19 and 614–18.

possible, in order to bridge the interpretative gap between mortal and divine.⁷⁹ In sum, the experience of oracular consultation can be compared to looking through a kaleidoscope: oracles provided multiple fragments of information, which, as they were added, could come together into different configurations, creating a variety of possible overall pictures of possible futures, depending on how they were interpreted. A double consultation, be it serial, successive, or simultaneous, was a recognized procedure that allowed a consultant to tackle the epistemological uncertainty that was itself a product of consultation. In that context, procedures of multiple consultation can be said to have acted as tests: they allowed the re-examination of an existing oracle and its meaning in light of new information through the consultation, simultaneously or serially, of the same or a different oracular god.⁸⁰

5. Test and/or Topos

In conclusion, the evidence for such practices of oracular inquiry, fictional and historical, indicates that it was not regarded as wrong to ask multiple questions of an oracle. Indeed, the evidence suggests that this approach to oracular consultation was a recognized real-life practice as well as a literary topos. Importantly, it could indicate the caution or wisdom of the consultant, but it need not do this: as we have seen in the cases of Glaukos and Aristodikos, the topos could illustrate different lessons about human behaviour. (Indeed, we see the topos extended beyond the human in an Aesop's fable in which Hermes tests Teiresias: the roles of mortal and divine reversed, and Hermes is surprised when Teiresias reveals that he knows the god stole the cattle.⁸¹) The context of uncertainty that pervaded oracular consultation justified this activity: as we have seen, this uncertainty arose from the gap between mortal and divine knowledge, and the consequent need for mortals to assemble information in order to be sure how to act.

This introduces a further conclusion about our characterization of such multiple inquiries: in the light of the range of evidence, episodes that have been described as 'tests' take on a different hue. 'Testing' one's own interpretation of an oracular response was an activity deemed, in general, to be

⁷⁹ Bonnechere 2010: 123 states that there is no randomization at all in an oracle verified by another oracle 'because the consultant himself conducts the process from beginning to end', but this seems to overlook the processes of consultation in which that randomization would occur.

⁸⁰ Bonnechere 2010: 132.

⁸¹ See Perry 1952: no. 89; Chambry 1925–6: no. 110.

wise; but it also necessitated ‘testing’ the god’s response (or gods’ responses) by building up a range of insights from the god/gods. Different consultations might offer different answers: since divine meaning turned on mortal interpretation, ‘testing’ an oracle meant testing the god as much as oneself. To illustrate this process and the thinking behind it, I end with a striking example from Plato’s *Apology*. Sokrates is regaling the jury at his trial with a story that is intended to demonstrate his piety. A friend, now dead, Khairephon, asks the Delphic oracle if there was anyone wiser than Sokrates, and the Pythia replies that there was no one wiser.⁸²

Now consider why I say these things. It’s because I’m going to tell you where my bad reputation comes from. You see, when I heard of this, I reasoned with myself as follows: ‘Whatever does the god mean? And what on earth is he hinting at? I assure you I’m conscious that I’m not wise in any way great or small. So whatever does he mean by declaring that I am the wisest? I can’t possibly think he’s lying: it wouldn’t be right for him.’ And for a long time I was at a loss as to what he could possibly mean. Then with much hesitation I turned to a search along the following sort of lines. I went to one of the people reputed to be wise to refute the oracular response there if anywhere, and prove (ἐλέγξων) to the oracle that: ‘This man is wiser than I am, but you said I was the wisest.’ So by examining him carefully—there’s no need for me to tell you his name; he was one of the politicians who, when I investigated him, gave me this impression, fellow Athenians—and by engaging him in conversation it seemed to me that this man seemed to be wise both to a lot of other people and above all to himself, but he wasn’t. Then I attempted to demonstrate to him that he thought he was wise, but wasn’t. [He describes a number of such conversations.]... Indeed I must explain my wanderings to you, like one undertaking laborious tasks, only to find that the oracle turned out to be unrefuted (ἀνέλεγκτος ἢ μαντεία γένοιτο).

Sokrates’ response is to test the oracle, and he does this by interrogating others. It has been argued that this consultation is a fiction, and one that inverts in every way typical stories about oracular inquiries concerning ‘who is the most pious/happy/fortunate/wise man’.⁸³ In addition, and in light of the discussion here, I want to suggest that this idea of testing the Delphic pronouncement draws on the topos of the multiple oracular consultation. It

⁸² Pl. *Apol.* 21b–c, 22a; trans Emlyn-Jones and Preddy.

⁸³ Gonzalez 2009: 129–34, who argues for the importance of questioning the divine in Sokrates’ conception of piety.

is, as Sokrates' description indicates, a recognized approach for seeking truth, and Sokrates uses it to illuminate his own piety. In the same way that Kroisos discovers the veracity of Delphi's pronouncements, so does Sokrates. He goes through this process just so that it can be shown, ἀνέλεγκτος ἢ μαντεία γένοιτο, that is, that the oracle is unrefuted.

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3

Euxenippos at Oropos

Dreaming for Athens

Hugh Bowden

In this chapter, I will explore some of the ways in which divination worked in Greece in the classical period through the activities of one man, Euxenippos, probably the son of Ethelokrates, of the deme Lamptraí.¹ He was the target of an *eisangelia* brought by Polyeuktos and Lykourgos some time between 330 and 324 BCE,² and what we know of him comes mostly from the speech in his defence composed by Hypereides. Although Hypereides presents Euxenippos as a private citizen unfairly caught up in a political dispute, there is good reason to see him as rather more than this. His experiences show how seriously the Athenian democracy took the need to establish the divine will accurately through divination, and how important particular individuals could be in this process.

1. Context: Athenian Consultations

Euxenippos was sent by the Athenians to the oracle of Amphiaraos at Oropos, where the method of consultation involved going to sleep in the sanctuary and receiving instructions from the god in a dream. We can be fairly certain that we know what the process involved, thanks to the evidence of Pausanias, albeit that he was writing several centuries later.³ We can supplement this information with evidence drawn from modern studies of dreaming. The application of the results of experimental psychology to the ancient world, and ancient religion, needs to be done carefully, given the great differences in social structures and world-view, but it can offer valuable

¹ Whitehead 2000: 154.² Hansen 1975: 109; Whitehead 2000: 156–7.³ Paus. 1.34.

perspectives.⁴ Dreaming is an area where modern experimental studies can be particularly helpful, because they tend to focus on analysing individual experience, and pay less attention to the wider social context of the dreamer. Since recalling dreams plays an important role in psychotherapy,⁵ there have been a number of studies of how dream recall can be improved, in both frequency and quality of detail. Those consulting oracles that used dream-incubation in ancient Greece, usually at healing sanctuaries, also needed to be able to recall their dreams, so this modern research can be of help in understanding what procedures might have been used then.

Hypereides' defence of Euxenippos gives us a partial view of how one individual was involved in Athenian decisions about consulting Amphiaraos c.330 BCE. He assumes that his audience understands much of what happened, or was informed about it by a previous speaker. To the modern reader, this can be confusing. I want therefore to preface the discussion of Euxenippos with a consideration of an earlier historical episode that shows the workings of divination in Greece, including at the oracle of Amphiaraos. Herodotos tells a story about visits to oracles by an agent of the Persian general Mardonios in the winter of 480/479:

133. The Greeks sailed to Delos, while Mardonios overwintered in Thes-saly. From his headquarters there he sent a man from Europos, called Mys, to visit oracular shrines, commanding him to consult them wherever he was able to put questions. What he was wishing to learn from the oracles when he gave these instructions I cannot say, as there are no reports about it: it seems likely to me that he was consulting about his current circumstances rather than anything else. 134. This Mys appears to have visited Lebadeia where he paid⁶ a local man to descend into the oracle of Trophonios, and also to have visited Abai in Phokis. Certainly he first visited Thebes where he consulted the oracle of Apollo Ismenios; the method of consultation there is through the examination of sacrificial entrails, as at Olympia. Then he paid a man who was not a Theban to spend the night at the sanctuary of Amphiaraos. It is not permitted for any Theban to consult the oracle there for the following reason: Amphiaraos ordered them, through an oracular response to choose which of these two options they wanted, to make use of his powers only as a seer, or only as an ally. They chose to have him as an ally. For this reason it is not permitted for any

⁴ See, for example, Larson 2016.

⁵ Schredl et al. 2000.

⁶ *μισθῶ πείσας* is often translated here as 'bribing' (cf. LSJ sv. *πείθω*), but it does not have to have a pejorative sense (cf. Lys. 21.10), and there is no particular reason to assume one here.

Theban to sleep in the sanctuary there. 135. At this time, according to the Thebans, a miraculous event took place. They say that while Mys of Europos was making his tour of all the oracles he came to the sanctuary of Apollo Ptoios. This place is called the Ptoion, and it belongs to Thebes; it lies above Lake Kopais, by a hill, very close to the city of Akraiphia. When this man called Mys entered the temple, he was accompanied by three men from the town who were chosen by the state to write down whatever was prophesied. Suddenly the prophet started speaking in a non-Greek language. And the Thebans accompanying Mys were amazed to hear words not in Greek but in another language, and they had no idea what he was prophesying about the current circumstances. But Mys of Europos grabbed the writing tablet they had brought with them and wrote down the words of the priest on it, saying that he was speaking Karian. And when he had written everything down, he returned to Thessaly. (Hdt. 8.133–5)

This account is revealing about some of the personnel who might be involved in the consultation of oracles in Greece. Although we are given no information about Mys, beyond his city of origin, the narrative clearly implies that he was selected for his experience and expertise in divination: he is presented as understanding the different rules at the different sanctuaries, and as not being discomfited by the events at the Ptoion. But there are other unnamed individuals in the story. The two men paid to consult the oracles of Trophonios and Amphiaraos should not be assumed to be random individuals. As we will see, some people will have made better dreamers than others, and it seems plausible that there will have been a market for non-Thebans to offer their services to Thebans who wanted to consult Amphiaraos by proxy. Descriptions of the method of consultation of Trophonios make that seem unusually arduous,⁷ so again the use of an experienced local person would be unsurprising. The account of the consultation at the Ptoion describes a different set of personnel: there is the priest of the sanctuary (referred to as both *promantis* and *prophētēs*) who actually speaks the words of Apollo, and there is the group of three amanuenses, whose role is to write down what he says, presumably on behalf of the city of Thebes as much as for the benefit of the consultant. We may also note something about the processes of these oracles. Although Mys did not himself take part in the consultations of Trophonios and Amphiaraos, the men who did were his own agents, not personnel of the sanctuaries. And at the Ptoion, Mys himself heard the

⁷ Ar. *Nub.* 507–8; Paus. 9.39.5–14, where Pausanias claims to have consulted the oracle himself.

words of the priest directly. There was no interpretation by temple servants, and indeed in the story as told, Mys was the only person capable of understanding the god's words.⁸ One more point is worth making. Herodotos tells this story, but admits that he has no idea what the consultations were about.⁹ As we will see, the exact words of oracular responses are not always considered central to accounts of consultations described in the Classical period.

The oracle of Amphiaraos will be the main point of interest in our exploration of the activities of Euxenippos, who consulted it some 150 years after Mys. By then, it appears that the oracle had moved. The sanctuary visited by Mys (and presumably by the agents of Kroisos of Lydia in the mid-sixth century)¹⁰ was at Thebes, but by the fourth century, that oracle appears to have ceased to function, and Amphiaraos was consulted instead at Oropos. In Herodotos' time, the dedication made by Kroisos to Amphiaraos could be seen in the sanctuary of Apollo Ismenios in Thebes,¹¹ not the Amphiareion, suggesting perhaps that the Theban Amphiareion had ceased to function by the 420s. It also appears to have developed a more specific function, since the Amphiareion at Oropos was above all a healing sanctuary.¹²

2. Who was Euxenippos?

Let us now turn to the background to the story of Euxenippos. Either after the Battle of Khaironeia in 338 BCE, or after the sack of Thebes three years

⁸ Plut. *Mor.* 412a reports the story of the Karian response, offering the interpretation that 'it is never possible for non-Greeks to receive a response to their demands in the Greek language'. Cf. Paus. 9.23.6, where Pausanias says that Mys asked the question in Karian. Herodotos' account implies that the oracle's utterance was spontaneous. It is possible that Pausanias' source for the story had adapted Herodotos' story, or even that Pausanias suggested this as logical explanation for the Karian response: cf. Bowden 2007: 77–9 on the potential influence of Herodotos and Pausanias on their informants.

⁹ Plutarch (*Mor.* 412a–b; *Arist.* 19.1–2) provides a more elaborate account of Mys' consultation of Amphiaraos, in which the man he paid to consult the god dreamed that he was threatened by a temple servant, and, when he refused to leave, was struck on the head with a large stone. This dream foreshadowed the death of Mardonios, struck on the head by the Spartan Aemnestos (or Arimnestos) at the battle of Plataia. The story is not reported elsewhere, and Plutarch's accounts are problematic. One version, in *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*, is corrupt and lacunose. The other states that Arimnestos was himself told by the oracle how he would kill Mardonius, but goes on to describe Mys sending a Lydian man to consult Amphiaraos, and noting that it was this Lydian who had the dream.

¹⁰ Hdt. 1.46.2. ¹¹ Hdt. 1.52.

¹² Paus. 1.34; Petrakos 1968; Terranova 2008.

later, ownership of the territory of Oropos was transferred from Boiotia to Athens. The territory included the sanctuary of Amphiaraos, and some of the other land in the area belonged to the god. The Athenians took the decision to share out the territory (referred to as the mountains) of Oropos not owned by the god between the ten tribes, which were grouped into five pairs for this purpose.¹³ After this process had been carried out, it was claimed that a mountain that had been allocated to Akamantis and Hippothoontis actually belonged to the god.¹⁴ A decree was proposed in the Athenian Assembly by Polyeuktos that the land, and therefore the income from the sale of produce from it, should be returned to the god, and that the other eight tribes pay money to Akamantis and Hippothoontis to make up for their loss. This proposal was rejected, and Polyeuktos was successfully impeached under a *graphē paranomōn*.¹⁵ Three citizens, including Euxenippos, were then sent to the sanctuary of Amphiaraos to find out what the god wanted. Euxenippos duly dreamed a dream, in which the god gave instructions, and he reported this to the Assembly. In reaction to this, Polyeuktos introduced an *eisangelia* against Euxenippos, claiming that the latter had misrepresented the god.¹⁶

The speech from which this information has been gleaned is Hypereides' defence of Euxenippos against the *eisangelia*.¹⁷ It provides us with another significant piece of information about the defendant. At some point before the current trial, Euxenippos had allowed Olympias, the widow of Philip II of Macedon, and mother of Alexander the Great, to dedicate a *phialē* to the statue of Hygieia.¹⁸ This suggests that Euxenippos had some kind of formal position relating to the cult of Hygieia. The statue mentioned was probably the bronze statue of Athena Hygieia on the acropolis dedicated, according to Plutarch, by Perikles;¹⁹ a statue base from the mid-fifth century, inscribed 'from the Athenians to Athena Hygieia' may belong to the same statue.²⁰ Athena Hygieia is mentioned in an inscription concerning the Little Panathenaia, dated to 335–330, about the same time as the trial of Euxenippos, which specifies details of the sacrifice to be made to the goddess.²¹ Significantly for our purposes, the sacrifice was to be funded by income from the Nea—that is, the territory of Oropos in which the Amphiareion stood.²² Another inscribed statue base, this time dedicated to Hygieia, was found at

¹³ Hyp. 4.16. ¹⁴ Papazarkadas 2011: 102–6.

¹⁵ Hyp. 4.16–17. ¹⁶ Hyp. 4.14–15; Whitehead 2000: 201–3.

¹⁷ For detailed commentary, see Whitehead 2000: 151–262.

¹⁹ Plut. *Per.* 13.8.

²⁰ *IG* I³ 506; Stafford 2006: 124.

²¹ *IG* II³ 447.34–6.

²² *IG* II³ 447.43.

¹⁸ Hyp. 4.19.

the Amphiareion: it is dated to 330–324, and the dedication was made by Euxenippos, son of Ethelokrates.²³ The inscription about the Little Panathenaia indicates a direct link in the 330s between the cult of Athena Hygieia on the acropolis and the territory of Oropos. It would be reasonable, therefore, to identify the dedicator of the statue of Hygieia at Oropos with the men who authorized the dedication of the *phialē* to the statue of Hygieia on the acropolis. We can thus see an existing connection between the Euxenippos of the speech and the Amphiareion at Oropos. The precise nature of Euxenippos' role is more difficult to determine. The inscription at the Amphiareion gives only his name and patronymic. In his speech, Hypereides emphasizes that Euxenippos is an *idiōtēs* (a private citizen), and this would be difficult to maintain if he held a formal priesthood.²⁴ It is more likely therefore that what Euxenippos did in 'allowing' Olympias to dedicate her *phialē* was to advise the Assembly (or some other body) in the role of a religious 'expert'.²⁵

We may turn now to the delegation of which Euxenippos was a part. According to Hypereides, 'the Assembly instructed Euxenippos as one of three men to lie down in the sanctuary; he said that he went to sleep and had a dream, which he reported to the Assembly'.²⁶ The phrase used to describe Euxenippos' position in the delegation, '*tritōs autos*', has been the subject of scholarly debate. The consensus is that it does not generally imply that the named person had any greater authority than the other members of a group.²⁷ It would obviously not suit Hypereides' purpose to suggest that Euxenippos did have particular authority, but there is reason to suppose that he was not chosen at random in this instance. The Khalkis decree of the fifth century gives responsibility for consulting the collection of oracles about Euboia, and carrying out the required sacrifices, to a named individual, Hierokles, and three men chosen by lot from the Athenian *Boulē*.²⁸ Hierokles was a recognized religious expert particularly associated with oracle-interpretation.²⁹ Given his connection with the Amphiareion, it would be reasonable to suppose that Euxenippos, too, was chosen to go and sleep at the sanctuary because of his expertise. The alternative, that there was no distinction at all between the three men, and there were no expectations

²³ SEG 15.291.

²⁴ Hyp. 4.13.

²⁵ On religious experts, and the difficulties in using the term, see Flower 2015.

²⁶ Hyp. 4.14: ὁ δῆμος προσέταξεν Εὐξενίππῳ τρίτῳ αὐτῷ ἐγκατακλιθῆναι εἰς τὸ ἱερόν, οὗτος δὲ κομηθεὶς ἐνύπνιον φησὶν ἰδεῖν, ὃ τῷ δήμῳ ἀπαγγεῖλαι.

²⁷ Dover 1960; Hamel 1998: 87–91.

²⁸ IG I³ 40.64–7.

²⁹ Bowden 2003: 266–7.

about who would actually have a dream, would have potentially problematic consequences: if two men had contradictory dreams, how would this help the Assembly determine the will of the god? It seems simpler to accept that the Assembly were expecting what actually transpired: Euxenippos was sent to have the dream, and the other two members of the delegation had a role similar to that of the Thebans who accompanied Mys to the Ptoion—that is, to record the message of the god. As we will see, the practice of describing a dream at the moment of waking was an important aid to recalling and interpreting it.

3. Dream Incubation

We have very little evidence about dream incubation at oracles other than those involved in healing, and consequently modern scholarship has focused overwhelmingly on this aspect.³⁰ Although Herodotos describes consultations of Amphiaraos that are not on matters of health, it is clear that in the fourth century and later, the Amphiareion at Oropos was essentially a healing sanctuary. The fact that on this occasion the Athenians chose to consult the god about a matter of land-ownership can be explained by the fact that the matter involved the land of Amphiaraos himself, so he was the most appropriate god to consult. We have an account of the process of consultation from Pausanias, writing in the second century CE:

It is the custom that those who come to consult Amphiaraos first purify themselves. The method of purification is to sacrifice to the god, and they sacrifice both to him and to all the other divinities whose names are inscribed on the altar. Once these preliminaries have been completed they sacrifice a ram, and spreading out the skin they go to sleep on top of it, and await the revelation of a dream.³¹

The procedure at Oropos appears to have been very similar to that at other healing sanctuaries, of which the one for which we have the most information is the sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidauros.³² From the Classical period we have evidence of consultation in the form of the *iamata*, accounts describing miraculous cures that supposedly occurred at Epidauros, inscribed on

³⁰ E.g. Holowchack 2002; Wickkiser 2008; Bulkeley 2008: 138–66; Oberhelman 2013.

³¹ Paus. 1.34.5. The procedure may have varied a bit in previous centuries: Lupu 2003.

³² Edelstein and Edelstein 1945; LiDonnici 1995. Flower, in this volume, also discusses the *iamata*, focusing on the epiphanies described in them.

a series of *stēlai* that were set up at the entrance to the sanctuary c.320 BCE.³³ The stories have a strong moralizing tone, and the cures they describe are truly miraculous, so they must be treated with considerable caution. However, they can tell us something about the procedures of dream incubation. What is particularly noticeable is the almost complete absence of any reference to priests or other temple attendants in the accounts. Those that are mentioned are engaged in very menial tasks.³⁴ It is never suggested that the patients discussed their dreams with anyone at the sanctuary. As we have seen, Herodotos describes Mys employing his own agent, rather than a temple servant, when he consulted Amphiaraos, and Hypereides' narrative of Euxenippos' visit makes no mention of any involvement of anyone other than the Athenian delegation. The consistent picture we are given is of direct communication between god (Asklepios or Amphiaraos) and the consultant. When a consultant was enquiring on their own behalf, this would have presented no problems. However, when they were enquiring on behalf of others, and in particular on behalf of a city, the process required considerable trust to be placed in the person dreaming, as there was no external means of checking the dream itself. This brings us back to Euxenippos. Clearly not all Athenians were prepared to trust him fully, as Polyeuktos' accusations against him attest,³⁵ but presumably the Assembly had good reasons to choose him to dream on their behalf, and we can consider what these will have been. What particular skills might he have had?

4. Dreams, Interpretation, and Recall

Dreaming, and interpretation of dreams, has become the subject of growing research in recent years.³⁶ The academic journal *Dreaming* was started in 1991, and the introduction to the first issue noted:

We are all fascinated by our dreams and yet dreaming has only intermittently been an object of serious study. Early in this century, the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung led to a heightened interest in the subject of dreams. Then, in the 1950s and 60s, there was a proliferation of laboratory studies of dreaming. More recently still, we have experienced another

³³ IG IV² 1 121.43 Cf. RO 102. Edelstein and Edelstein 1945; LiDonnici 1995.

³⁴ E.g. IG IV² 1 121.43 (a *pais* who carried fire for the god), 114–15 (*therapontēs* who carry a crippled patient).

³⁵ Hyp. 4.15.

³⁶ E.g. most recently Bulkeley 2016.

revival of interest in dreaming—this time from a variety of directions, both academic and popular.³⁷

A significant driver in this renewed interest has been the perception of the therapeutic benefits of dreaming outside Freudian analysis: ‘although dreams have long fascinated people, only recently have researchers begun to empirically investigate dream interpretation. Studies have suggested that dream interpretation sessions are viewed as valuable and as leading to self-understanding and insight.’³⁸ These comments bring out an important contrast between the role of dream interpretation in modern psychiatry and in the ancient world: in antiquity, as the example of Euxenippos makes clear, the aim of dream interpretation was to increase understanding of the world, and in particular the will of the gods, rather than understanding of the dreamers themselves. This reflects an important difference in world-view between the modern subjects of dream experiments and therapy involving dreaming on the one hand, and the inhabitants of ancient Greece on the other. I am taking for granted that those involved in divination accepted the reality of the divine as a feature of the world.³⁹ Nonetheless, there are still important insights into dreaming in the ancient world that can be gained from modern experimental studies.

The idea that there might be individuals who could be described as ‘expert dreamers’ in ancient Greece is supported by modern studies. Dreaming is a universal phenomenon,⁴⁰ but the ability to recall dreams varies between individuals. There have been numerous studies investigating the role of personality types and attitudes to dreaming in determining levels of dream recall.⁴¹ Although experiments have not identified dramatic differences, they do support the common-sense assumption that individuals who have a positive attitude to the value of dreaming are more likely to recall dreams, and that certain cognitive traits also have an effect: having a good visual memory and memory for personal experiences makes dream recall more likely, for example.⁴² Circumstances also come into play: frequent nocturnal awakenings have been demonstrated to increase the frequency of dream recall.⁴³ Archaeological evidence from surviving healing sanctuary sites about the conditions for those incubating dreams there, coupled with

³⁷ Hartmann 1991.

³⁸ Rochlen et al. 1999: 27.

³⁹ Bowden 2005: 26–33.

⁴⁰ Schredl et al. 2003: 145: ‘modern sleep research has found that every person dreams every night.’

⁴¹ E.g. Bernstein and Roberts 1995; Schredl et al. 2003, with references to earlier studies.

⁴² Schredl 1999: 75.

⁴³ Koulack and Goodenough 1976: 977–8.

descriptions of the procedure as found in Pausanias and Aristophanes,⁴⁴ suggests that visitors to these sanctuaries would be unlikely to experience an uninterrupted night's sleep. Thus the likelihood that any visitor to a healing sanctuary would recall their dreams was probably higher than if they had spent the night in their own homes.

Other studies have shown that there are simple techniques available to improve dream recall. Common practices used in experimental and therapeutic work include the keeping of dream diaries, and the use of questionnaires. These have an impact on the frequency of dream recall, although this varies.⁴⁵ For those individuals who are motivated to recall dreams, encouragement in doing this has a positive effect.⁴⁶ The motivation for this kind of experimental work is usually related to supporting the therapeutic power of dreaming, and as a result, the circumstances of the dreamers involved are likely to be rather different from the circumstances of someone in Euxenippos' position. Nonetheless, modern practices suggest that techniques that were in principle available to individuals in fourth-century Athens, involving no more than access to a writing tablet, or to a slave who could attend their waking moments, could have an effect on the frequency and accuracy of dream recall. Aelius Aristides, writing in the second century CE, attests that he recorded his own dreams, at enormous length.⁴⁷ Therefore, skill in dream recall was similar to other mantic skills, in that it could be trained, but at the same time it was something that some individuals were naturally more gifted in than others.⁴⁸

Dream recall is potentially a separate process from dream interpretation. Here too, modern studies suggest that in principle it might be possible to say something about the dreams of ancient Greeks on the basis of modern research. A recent monograph seeks to find meaning in dreams through quantitative study:

First, it will demonstrate an internal coherence or regularity in the dreams of specific groups, such as men, children, or members of hunting and gathering societies. Second, it will show there is consistency in what individuals dream about from year to year and even over decades. Third, it will reveal correspondences between dream content and waking life;

⁴⁴ Ar. *Plut.* 653–747.

⁴⁵ Schredl 2002.

⁴⁶ Halliday 1992; Rochlen et al. 1999.

⁴⁷ Ael. *Arist. Or.* 48.2–3 (referring to a dream-register with 300,000 words), 50.25.

⁴⁸ Flower 2008: 70–1.

more specifically, it will show a direct continuity between dream concerns and waking concerns.⁴⁹

We should expect dreams to be more straightforward than not, and for 'bizarre' aspects of them to be relatively rare; this is something borne out by other studies,⁵⁰ and can be expected to apply in ancient Greece as much as anywhere else. On this basis, we should expect that Euxenippos' dream would have been easy to describe, and although Hypereides' account gives few details of the dream itself, it does suggest that it was not hard to make sense of. According to Hypereides, Euxenippos 'reported what he had seen in the dream to the Assembly' and 'announced to the Athenians what the god had commanded him'.⁵¹ It would appear then, that the dream had been unambiguous and clear, and thus in minimal need of interpretation: his opponent Polyeuktos responded not by offering an alternative interpretation of the dream, but by suggesting that Euxenippos had wrongly reported what he had dreamed.⁵² This suggests that Polyeuktos shared the assumption that a dream from Amphiaraos could be expected to be comprehensible and unambiguous.

There is one more important contribution that modern experimental work can bring to our investigation of Euxenippos' dream. The term 'dream incubation' has been adopted in a fairly recent self-help dream manual and used as a term for 'targeting dreams for specific problem solving'.⁵³ This technique requires 'participants to think of a focal question or concern related to a personal problem, to repeat that problem question over and over while maintaining attention to the question, and then to fall asleep'.⁵⁴ The results of an experimental study suggested that 'Relative to other experimental conditions and to controls, participants in the night incubation condition reported that their focal problem had become more solvable, that it had improved, and that they were less distressed by it'.⁵⁵ There are important differences between divination in ancient Greece and personal problem solving in the modern world, which might make the relevance of this kind of experiment unclear. The experimenters in the study that we are considering 'used a procedure by which participants nominated a specific current problem that they believed was potentially solvable by their own efforts within the time frame of the study'.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Domhoff 2013: 1.

⁵⁰ Maggiolini et al. 2010.

⁵¹ Hyp. 4.14.

⁵² But see Whitehead 2000: 201–3 for other interpretations of the events.

⁵³ Delaney 1996: 27.

⁵⁴ White and Taytroe 2003: 206.

⁵⁵ White and Taytroe 2003: 206.

⁵⁶ White and Taytroe 2003: 195.

We may contrast this with the view expressed by Xenophon's Sokrates, that 'in those matters where the gods have granted us the power to deal with them through application of learning, we should use that learning; in those matters where the answer cannot be seen, we should try to learn from the gods through divination'.⁵⁷ In practice, however, the differences are not so significant. The 'incubation' technique is basically what we would expect to find in any form of Greek divination: a question is put by the enquirer, and then the divinatory ritual takes place. The story of Mys illustrates the more common forms of ritual: either an inspired priest or priestess speaks the god's answer, or the entrails of animals are examined, or the consultant goes to sleep. The reports about dream incubation in the *iamata* do not mention what the patients did immediately before they went to sleep, but they generally do not mention any preliminary ritual either. It is quite likely, however, that Euxenippos, accompanied as he was by two other Athenians, might have put his question to the god aloud in their presence, to make clear that the consultation was under way. We have no evidence that those incubating dreams repeated the question to themselves multiple times, but it is quite possible that this might have occurred, especially if it was found to have a positive effect. The subjects of modern incubation experiments would generally recognize whether or not the process had produced the 'right' answer, because the focus was on a personal problem, and a solution would leave them 'less distressed'.⁵⁸ Euxenippos' question was not obviously personal, and there would be no way of determining whether what he dreamed was the 'right' answer. However, all that was required of the incubation process was that it led to a coherent answer to the question, which should be understood as representing the command of the god. Here, Euxenippos' position as an expert would have had a particular influence. Since, as we have seen, he had some definite association with the cult at the Amphiar-eion, he would have had more knowledge about Amphiaraos, and perhaps about practical aspects of his sanctuary, than most Athenians. Any solution that would have come together in his unconscious mind as he slept would potentially incorporate such knowledge, and thus emerge as a richer dream than others might have had. There is no need to suppose that Euxenippos was able to dredge up from the depth of his memory information that was genuinely relevant to the question he asked: all that is necessary is that he had a dream that gave an answer to his question. There is an important

⁵⁷ Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.9.

⁵⁸ White and Taytroe 2003: 204.

contrast here between dream incubation and oracles like Delphi, where the god's answers were spoken by a priestess or priest. At Delphi it was not important whether the Pythia knew anything about the topics on which she was asked questions, and indeed the Athenians in the fourth century used a method of consultation where the Pythia would not even know what the real question was that the god was being asked.⁵⁹ In contrast, the more the dreamer knew about the subject, the more likely he would be to have a coherent and detailed dream, even while we may still assume that he was not consciously using that knowledge to generate a particular answer to the question.

Bringing all these points together allows us to offer a somewhat clearer image of Euxenippos than the few scraps of ancient evidence might have suggested. He was relatively old at the time of the consultation, and quite rich.⁶⁰ He was someone who had a particular association with the cult of Athena Hygieia on the Athenian acropolis and at Oropos. In this role he may have been an experienced dream-incubator, and he was presumably known well enough to the Athenian Assembly for him to have been considered appropriate to consult the god on their behalf. Arguably he was an expert in one area of religious life—the world of health and healing represented by the sanctuary of Amphiaraos at Oropos—who was deployed to help the Athenians in a rather different area, that of dispute resolution about public land. Although Euxenippos was not an important figure in Athenian politics (especially when contrasted with one of his opponents, Lykourgos),⁶¹ this examination of his role in one event in Athenian history allows us to make some more general points about divination in Athens.

5. Divination in Athens

There are three broad points I want to bring out. First, the fact that the Athenians decided to send a delegation to the Amphiareion at Oropos to ask about a matter that had nothing to do with health and healing reveals something about their understanding of how healing sanctuaries functioned. In order to explain how healing might have happened at sanctuaries in ancient Greece, modern scholars must seek explanations that do not involve

⁵⁹ *IG II³* 292; Bowden 2005: 88–95. For a more complex picture of the role of the Pythia, see Maurizio, this volume.

⁶⁰ *Hyp.* 4.13, 32.

⁶¹ *Hyp.* 4.12.

the actual intervention of gods. Recent examples of explanations for what actually happened at Epidauros have included the therapeutic power of the landscape,⁶² genuine surgery carried out with sleep induction,⁶³ the power of dramatic performances,⁶⁴ the emotive power of healing narratives displayed in sanctuaries,⁶⁵ or activating the placebo effect through the therapeutic use of the self.⁶⁶ In some of these studies, scholars have made claims that the Greek experience might be relevant for modern medicine.⁶⁷ These interpretations, which simply ignore the presence of the god in ancient accounts, also tend to be rather free in their interpretation of ancient evidence.⁶⁸

The power of the god himself is however an important part of the narratives of cures in healing sanctuaries, and this cannot be ignored in explanations, as some scholars have recognized: ‘to think of Asklepios’ cult exclusively in terms of medical techniques, treatments, and procedures which more or less find parallels with contemporary medicinal thought and practice would be to miss the point entirely.’⁶⁹ It is important that our explanations include the fact that the Greeks themselves recognized the power of the god.⁷⁰ The case of Euxenippos’ delegation supports this approach, since here it is Amphiaraos himself alone who is the subject of the consultation. Rather than seeing healing sanctuaries as being *sui generis*, places concerned solely with therapeutic care of sick individuals, the ancient Greeks understood them as sanctuaries of the gods that included oracular functions, where the gods had a particular association with healing.⁷¹ Incubating a dream in order to find cures for illness is a special case of asking the god for instructions through dreaming, and that, in turn, is one of the many divinatory options open to the Greeks.⁷²

⁶² Gessler 1993. ⁶³ Askitopoulou et al. 2002.

⁶⁴ Hartigan 2009. ⁶⁵ Martzavou 2012.

⁶⁶ Collins 2013. ⁶⁷ Gessler 1993; Collins 2013.

⁶⁸ Askitopoulou et al. (2002) take the presence of sculpted poppy flowers in the vault of the *tholos* at Epidauros as evidence for the use of opium there as a soporific; Hartigan (2009: 32), discussing the depiction of the visit to the sanctuary of Asklepios in Aristophanes’ *Plutus*, asserts, with no obvious justification, that ‘Aristophanes clearly indicates that Karion was watching rituals performed by the temple priests and attendants for the patients sleeping in the *abaton*’.

⁶⁹ Petridou 2014: 305.

⁷⁰ Panagiotidou 2016.

⁷¹ Hartigan (2009: vii) asks, ‘why did the Greeks construct theatres as part of a healing sanctuary’ without considering how many sanctuaries that were not concerned with healing had theatres in them.

⁷² Hypereides (4.15) suggested to Polyuktos that if he was unhappy with the outcome of Euxenippos’ consultation, he should have consulted the Delphic oracle to find the truth.

Second, Euxenippos challenges categories commonly used in the study of Greek divination. Distinctions might be made between ‘institutional oracles’ on the one hand, and ‘independent diviners’ on the other,⁷³ or between technical and natural divination.⁷⁴ The assumption is that oracles might be visited by anyone with a question, and it would be the mechanism of the oracular shrine that would generate the god’s answer. Herodotos’ account of Mys’ tour of oracles gives an indication of the variety of the mechanisms, but Mys was clearly looking for answers in identifiable places. In contrast, ‘independent diviners’ would rely on their own skills, often backed up by their personal collections of written texts, and were not associated with any particular place, or indeed any particular divinity. ‘Technical divination’ involved practising skills that could be learned, such as how to interpret entrails, or the flight of birds, while natural divination can be understood to involve ‘possession’ by the god.⁷⁵ These have been seen as useful distinctions, but not absolute ones: ‘there never was, and probably never will be, an easy way to dichotomize where this topic is concerned’.⁷⁶ Euxenippos’ consultation of Amphiaraos cuts clearly across both these distinctions. Euxenippos was a religious expert who appears to have held no formal position, but was nonetheless associated with the sanctuary at Oropos; he was chosen by the Athenians because he could be relied upon to dream the god’s command himself—but a dream, sent directly by a god, is much closer to the idea of possession, and therefore to ‘natural divination’, than it is to ‘technical divination’ such as the interpretation of entrails. The Amphiaraeion (wherever it was located) was clearly recognized as an oracular sanctuary, to be listed alongside Delphi and Didyma,⁷⁷ but it was a place to which it was considered advisable to send an expert.⁷⁸ As we have already noted, there was a very specific reason why the Athenians chose to consult the oracle of Amphiaraos on this occasion: the issue concerned the god directly. It was therefore not a typical consultation of the oracle. It does, however, show the flexibility in the way the Athenians approached divination—it was not a matter of having a single fixed procedure for consulting the gods, or

⁷³ Johnston 2008: 28.

⁷⁴ Flower 2008: 22–4.

⁷⁵ Flower 2008: 24. See Maurizio, this volume, for discussion of the use of technical divination at Delphi.

⁷⁶ Johnston 2015: 480.

⁷⁷ Hdt. 1.46.2.

⁷⁸ Contrast the specific choice of Euxenippos argued for here with the delegation of three men sent to the Delphic oracle to ask about the sacred *orgas*: one man selected from the *Boule* and two from all the Athenians (*IG* II³ 292.42–4).

resolving disputes. Amphiaraos was recognized as a real party in the dispute, and the Athenians took seriously the process of identifying his wishes.⁷⁹

Finally, we must return to the situation that led to Hypereides' speech in defence of Euxenippos being written. Euxenippos was impeached through an *eisangelia* brought by a group that included the most important politician in Athens in this period, Lykourgos. Hypereides' argument that Euxenippos was merely an *idiōtēs* should not disguise the fact that he had advised the Athenian people in the Assembly, and was therefore a *rhētōr*, and open to political charges.⁸⁰ The involvement of Lykourgos, and indeed of Hypereides, indicates that the dispute was not considered to be trivial. The charge against Euxenippos was that 'he spoke against the best interests of the Athenian people, and took money and gifts from those who were acting against the interests of the Athenian people';⁸¹ he did this by misrepresenting the god's instructions.⁸² Euxenippos had alone been made responsible for transmitting to the Athenian people the view of a god, and there was no way for anyone else to check what the god had said. The fact that what he reported led to impeachment suggests that this was considered a great responsibility: to be solely responsible for representing the views of a god was potentially a very powerful position in a society where establishing and following the will of the gods was considered vital. Religious experts like Euxenippos could end up, wittingly or otherwise, as major figures in the Athenian democracy.

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⁷⁹ Cf. Eidinow 2013: 36: 'consultation of a god was not consultation of a disinterested bystander.'

⁸⁰ Whitehead 2000: 158–9; Hansen 1983: 48–9.

⁸¹ Hyp. 4.39.

⁸² Hyp. 4.15.

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4

Whose Dream Is It Anyway?

Navigating the Significance of Dreams
in the Ancient World

Jason P. Davies

At *Iliad* 2.1–47, Zeus deceives Agamemnon with a dream.¹ At *Odyssey* 19.560–9, Penelope talks of the gates of horn and ivory, and the true and false dreams that pass through them. Centuries later, Virgil adapts the image, but still to indicate how treacherous dreams were.² Dreams were not just difficult in epic: Pliny appears to cover every possible contingency when Suetonius dreams about a legal case.³ They must pay attention ‘for dreams descend from Zeus’,⁴ and he asks about Suetonius’ dreaming history in case his dreams typically depict the opposite of actual events, tells him to ‘do the right thing’ (citing *Iliad* 12.243)—and then covers all bases by saying he will try for an adjournment. Dreams are tricky, it seems. However, they were sometimes the medium of choice: Renberg 2015: 245 notes that nearly 450 Greek and Latin inscriptions, from the fifth century BCE to the fourth century CE and across the Roman world, list actions undertaken after instructions in dreams. Further, dreams were the *first* resort of the cult of Asklepios and the use of incubation for divination may well have been more widespread than the record suggests.⁵

How can dreams can be so slippery in one context, routine in others, and *de rigueur* in a popular cult? Exploring the tensions of what made dreams

¹ Recent discussions of dreams: Harrisson 2013; Oberhelman 2013; Scioli and Walde 2010; Harris 2009. All (particularly Harrisson and Harris) include far more sources and discussion than space permits here. See also the 2014 edition of *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*. I must thank Dr Renberg for sending me (ahead of publication) his dream catalogue; I refer only to his published work here.

² *Aen.* 6.893–8: nor was he the last; see Casali 2010.

³ *Ep.* 1.18.

⁴ *Il.* 1.63.

⁵ Renberg 2017: 326. His extraordinarily detailed study of dreams in antiquity regrettably appeared too late for engagement with more than key points of the argument presented here.

suitable (or at least plausible) in different contexts is a chance to glimpse some of the nuances of living in a world teeming with significance.

1. Cultures of Significance

Notwithstanding occasional critiques, for the vast majority in antiquity, the possibility of a significant sign appearing was never entirely absent.⁶ The initial reaction to this of a modern secular reader is that, occasionally, particularly unusual events happened and predictive significance was attached to them. I propose to consider dreams and divination from the assumption that this is the wrong way round: rather, the *possibility* of a significant omen was ever-present because the existence and intervention of the gods was all-pervasive; just as a modern laboratory acts as a lens to detect naturally occurring phenomena, so the *templum* of the augurs, for instance, would be a *locus* to isolate and detect a ‘current’ in reality that was not limited to that designated space.

In other words, life teemed with potential omens and all one had to do was look around—as the Romans did before many routine and/or important actions. This would privilege a discriminating outlook to reduce the number of signs to manageable levels via a range of filters: verificatory (did the phenomena actually happen?); intellectual (knowledge-based ways of discriminating); social (stigma attached to making inappropriate or unexpected claims of divine interest in oneself, aka the ‘who do you think you are?’ effect); practical (can one actually act on the sign?); plausibility-related (does the sign fit with the current situation?) and so on.

This need to manage significance ‘downwards’ would lead to a preference for signs that could be verified, produced on request, and interpreted with some reliability. This would be particularly true of large-scale political institutions like the Roman Republic.

2. Managing Roman Significance

Rome paid attention: the state gave regular opportunities for the gods to communicate (e.g. before meetings and major undertakings, and at regular

⁶ Whitmarsh 2016 has recently reminded us of critique: for contextualization of such philosophical scepticism, see Stowers 2011.

festivals). In addition, there was scope for longer cycles of fate to be factored into their thinking through sources like the Sibylline books; they also acknowledged prodigies, and could treat unexpected setbacks as prodigies in themselves.⁷ This system seems reasonably complete. What need is there for unsolicited and potentially treacherous dreams? Kragelund 2001, after noting the paucity of dreams in the Republic, argues that until Sulla shifted the focus of divine favour to prominent individuals, dreams were too personal to be allowed to affect state business except on very rare occasions.⁸ But what was happening when they did?

I suggest that the contrast is not between dreams *per se* and traditional state divination, but between routinized methods of consulting the gods and an occasionally perceived need to convey detailed and urgent messages.⁹ The Republican examples that we have of dreams being acted on all seem to involve urgency and/or often unexpected detail: they fill a small but logical loophole in the state system of divination.

Livy and others¹⁰ record that the consuls Decius and Manlius Torquatus both dreamed of a superhuman figure who told them that the commander of one army and the opposing army were destined to be a sacrifice to the *Dii Manes* and Mother Earth. After attempted expiation and independent confirmation by the *haruspices*, they make arrangements with their officers. When Decius gets adverse signs at 8.9.1, he asks the *Pontifex Maximus* for the correct recitation, throws himself into battle, and falls at 8.9.12.¹¹ For such an unusual and time-sensitive message, the double dreams seem a good way of getting the consuls' attention, but they (responsibly) sought further verification. This was one that came best direct from a god.¹² Then there is the episode of the ordinary Titus Latinius,¹³ (a *rusticus* in Cicero's account): fearful of ridicule or being misled, he dared not relate to the senate his dream

⁷ Most recently on prodigies (with further bibliography), see Satterfield 2015; Santangelo 2013: esp. 5 n. 12 for previous bibliography. For a brief overview of the Republican process, see Corbeill 2010; for a range of awkward questions and some answers, see Beard 2012; for reconstruction of Livy's senate's process, see Davies 2004: 73–8.

⁸ See most recently on Sulla, Noble 2014.

⁹ *Contra* Corbeill 2010: 101 who diagnoses political crisis, but the omission of the category of *loco prodigii* and *uertere in prodigium* (Davies 2004: 76–9) overly foregrounds the unusualness of dreams.

¹⁰ Livy 8.6.9–14; Val. Max. 1.7.3; Zonar. 7.26.

¹¹ For other multiple dreamers, see Hanson 1980: 1414.

¹² Livy's priests are similarly spared from calling directly for human self-sacrifice (despite reading the signs right) at 7.6.1–3.

¹³ Val. Max. 1.7.4; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 7.68; Livy 2.36; Cic. *Div.* 1.26.55. See Mueller 2002: 90–2 for later reception and brief discussion of the different treatments; Corbeill 2010 elaborates on the sources and features of the account.

of Jupiter complaining of a specific error in his recent *ludi*. It took three dreams and two fulfilled threats (his son's death and his own incapacitation) to persuade him. His immediate recovery convinced the senate.¹⁴ Though we are not told explicitly that the crisis of impending war with the Volsci made this urgent, Jupiter specifically said that unless the games were repeated successfully, the city would be in danger.¹⁵

The aspect of detailed, specific, and/or urgent messages is not exhausted by dreams: the case of *Aius Locutius* seems to belong to the same family.¹⁶ When Marcus Caedicius reported that a voice clearer (*clariorem*) than human bade him warn the senate the Gauls were approaching, his report was discarded because of his low rank and the fact that the distant Gauls were virtually unknown.¹⁷ The Romans later acknowledged their error, setting up a temple to *Aius Locutius*.¹⁸ Like dreams, verbal instructions could provide specific and urgent information—but in the case of *Aius Locutius*, this failed to work in practice. It is tempting to say that the very reason the voice's message was rejected—that the Gauls were hardly known because of their distance—was precisely what necessitated the 'personal' message: traditional methods of divination would not have been able to identify the Gauls as the threat.

Dreams had the edge, it seems. However, if Rome accepted a particular dream, it does not mean that the state had changed 'policy', but rather that the overall logic of epiphany that underpinned their whole divinatory system also created a persistent gap that a dream could occasionally fill. It would need to contain an urgent and specific message, and preferably be verifiable. The next consideration is the dreamer themselves: here we encounter a difficult tension that would have to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. To report that Jupiter had sent you instructions for the state would be socially and politically difficult for anyone. An eminent statesman would

¹⁴ E.g. ridicule: *ne in ora hominum pro ludibrio abiret*, Livy 2.36.3; in Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 7.68.4, he thought it an example of 'many deceiving dreams'. For repeated dreams, see Hanson 1980: 1411.

¹⁵ The fact that in Livy 2.37 the repeat of the Games provides the flashpoint that starts the war is tantalizing, but beyond our scope here. Cicero's account mentions a sudden call to arms (*Div.* 1.55).

¹⁶ I distinguish *intelligible voices* here from *interpretable sounds* (e.g. in Cicero's *On the Haruspical Response*), even if Cicero was trying to collapse the distinction (on which see Beard 2012). For auditory and visual dreams, see Hanson 1980: 1409–12.

¹⁷ 5.32.7. See also the voice on the Alban mount at Livy 1.31.3–4; Silvanus' announcement from the woods at Livy 2.7.2. Beard 2012: 29–30 points out that we focus on *visual* epiphany but it may be that they did too.

¹⁸ Livy 5.50.6.

be suspected of seeking charismatic influence but an ordinary person would be asked ‘why *you*?’: Titus was deterred by the thought of being ridiculed. The essential aspect, I suggest, is that the message must be about the god, not the dreamer: this underpins the association of dreams with healing cult.

3. Asklepios

At Asklepieia, oneiric visitation by the god was entirely normal: the persistence of incubation for more than a millennium suggests a good fit with expectations.¹⁹ Firstly, many shrines were outside the city or on its fringes.²⁰ Apart from the desirability of not having the sick gather in a city centre, this also requires that any visitor is precisely that—a visitor. Thus the risk of the dreamer gaining charismatic status from having been visited by a god is dispensed with: if you travel to a god, and he appears to you on his own turf, it doesn’t make *you* special. Even if we speculate cautiously that a great number of visitors did not dream of the god, the public record of the cult, proclaimed in stone, was that Asklepios attended his own shrine: the system would ineluctably accumulate credit—cures, even dreamless ones, could be attributed to the deity’s intervention, but failures would be understandable. Even Asklepios was said not to have reached medical perfection²¹ and would not violate the lesson that mortals die.²² As Galen put it, some things are naturally impossible and a god attempts only to make the best of what is possible.²³ The limitation also applied to Asklepios: in *De Sanitate Tuenda* 1.12, he offers that there are those with such poor constitution that even under Asklepios’ direct care they would not reach sixty.

Such ‘humanlike’ limits are common when religious ideas are applied to specific contexts, and this is not specific to the classical world. One of the suggestions of cognitive science of religion is that, while divinity is imagined

¹⁹ On Asklepios, Edelstein and Edelstein 1998. For the ritual process at Epidauros, see Ahearne-Kroll 2014; that incubation was rare in the west, see Renberg 2006; on the rise of Asklepiian cult, see Wickkiser 2008. See Nutton 2004: 104–105 on Homeric traditions and cult origins. Renberg 2017 now has a thorough treatment of relevant shrines and practices. On incubation at the shrine of Amphiaraos at Oropos, see Bowden’s paper in this volume.

²⁰ See now Cilliers and Retief 2013: 70–2 on locations.

²¹ Hippocratic *Epistulae* 20 (L IX, 386). See Versnel 2011: 402 for this and similar sentiments.

²² See Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 46–52 for legends and comparisons; see Versnel 2011: 417 n. 127 for the area outside the Asklepieia reserved for the dying. Versnel 2011: 400–4 and 416–20 documents limitations on the god’s perceived abilities when it came to actual scenarios (as opposed to abstract ideas about the power of divinities).

²³ Gal. *De usu partium* (11.14 Helmreich II.159, III.906K).

in the abstract to have unlimited power, in narratives (such as a patient's story), gods are limited (e.g. needing time to travel between locations).²⁴ Galen's statement thus encapsulates the workings of plausibility: sixty is not such a bad life expectancy, and, for the weakest, seems rather a high figure. Such is the power of the divine. If Galen had said thirty, he might have insulted Asklepios; to give a higher figure would risk the reader thinking that this patient could not be *that* sickly or that Asklepios was somehow exceeding the realm of the normal (again). The god could do more than a mortal (thus the 'miracle cures') but not just *anything*.²⁵ All credit went to the divine: no individual could leave thinking that *they* were more important than when they arrived, whatever form the divine intervention had taken, and irrespective of how extraordinary it might have been. Importantly, given the extraordinary accounts, praise of the god would not make his divine peers jealous, since Asklepios' influence was strictly circumscribed in location and function.

What about the plausibility of Asklepios treating patients who were far from a shrine? Actual reports are extremely rare.²⁶ Given the sheer number of people, the reputation of Asklepios and the ubiquity of dreaming, it does not seem unreasonable to posit that, for a higher proportion than we know of, the sick dreamed of Asklepios far from a shrine and then recovered. It seems worth speculating on the reporting, plausibility, and transmission of such accounts. Of course, such a recovery would probably have prompted acknowledgement of the god's intervention (one should not be ungrateful) but just how public this would be, and how far news would travel, would be subject to some interesting tensions and constraints.²⁷ Given that one normally attended a shrine, a divine 'home visit' would require a high level of verification for the story to travel. The chances are that, if one heard such a story, the reaction would have been that *perhaps* it was true

²⁴ As Pyysiäinen 2014: 26 (with further references) puts it, 'God, for example, can answer a prayer only after having finished answering another prayer, although at the explicit level God is reported as knowing everything simultaneously.' See also Norenzayan et al. 2006: 534. The needs of narrative displace theology.

²⁵ For a recent attempt to come to terms with the miracle *iamata*, see Cilliers and Retief 2013: 88–92; sources in Edelstein and Edelstein 1998; LiDonnici 1995.

²⁶ Edelstein and Edelstein 1998 list a few 'epiphanies and dreams in other places' (T443–54) and the vast majority of these are far from being exceptions: 443 is *Stat. Silv.* 3.4.65–71 (i.e. not historical); 444 is aetiological; 445 and 446 are about the exceptional Proclus (*Marinus Vita Procl.* 30–1); 459–454 are hypothetical (though not necessarily untrue) from Artemidorus.

²⁷ Renberg 2017: 27 also suggests that a dream sent by that deity within their own shrine would presumably not be a 'lying' dream, thus strengthening the credibility of cures dreamed at named sites.

(and no surprise that Asklepios had healed) but it seems a *little* implausible that the god made a personal visit; one might hesitate to pass the story on—it doesn't sound quite right. Anyone telling the story would have to field reactionary questions about why the patient had not gone to a shrine; perhaps they did—that must be it. Otherwise it sounds like there's been an error in transmission—perhaps it was a different, local deity? Or it was *near* a shrine? Someone must have misremembered a detail (and so on).²⁸

This is neither 'belief' nor 'disbelief'; it is a story that merits a shrug and then the oblivion of not being repeated very often, and with ever greater qualification, until it dissolves or mutates into a story of someone living *close* to a shrine where Asklepios was generous enough to reach out . . . (etc). Only dream accounts with an unusual level of plausibility or verification could survive. Thus, while such a real-life recovery accompanied by a fervently reported dream would quite possibly merit local celebration and perhaps a grateful sacrifice, it would do little to undermine the orthodoxy that one went to a shrine for healing: and that remains the only useful advice for the sick in the circumstances—only a fool would hope for Asklepios to make a personal visit. Even if one heard of a 'private home visit', it must have happened to someone *important*. What was said over and over was that if you wanted healing, you visited a shrine, or a medic.²⁹

4. Dreams and the Practice of Medicine

Both Galen's *On Diagnosis from Dreams* and the Hippocratic *Regimen IV* note that dreams can be prophetic but also seek to establish that a separate (i.e. non-divinatory) category can be worthy of attention because they reflect the state of the patient's health.³⁰ This is not the eliciting of physical

²⁸ For an unusual epiphany of Asklepios and its significance for its recipient, cf. Flower's paper in this volume.

²⁹ Space does not permit a full comparison of intriguing parallels such as Vespasian's 'miracle cures' (Suet. *Vesp.* 7.2–3), which Luke 2010 argues echo Asklepiian *iamata* and form part of a wider promotion of *omina imperii*. I note that several of the factors highlighted here appear, particularly the need for physical proximity: the sick interrupted the emperor in person to make physical contact (if we include actual spitting). The patients' names are, as my anonymous reviewer points out, long forgotten.

³⁰ See Hulskamp 2013: 42–7 for similarities of *Regimen IV* with the rest of the Hippocratic corpus; 55 for Galen's aside that he has dealt with dreams more in *On Regimen in Health* and the provenance of *Dignot. ex insomn.*; and 66–8 for a survey of Galenic references to dreams in illness. Galen wrote a (now lost) work on 'dreams, birds, omens and the whole of astrology' (*Facult. Natural.* I.12 (Kühn II.29)). *Regimen IV*.87 notes that these have their own interpreters

reactions to dreams such as sweat or tears.³¹ Rather, they indicate symbolically the state of the dreamer's humours. The author of *Regimen* IV systematically establishes that while interpreters might identify 'medical' dreams, they can only then suggest prayer. The medic, however, can advise much more accurately based on his understanding of the functioning of the body: 'while prayer is a good thing, one must help oneself while calling on the gods'.³² He then elaborates a framework mapping dream content to the body's functioning. The text seems promising, exhaustive even: yet if dreams were so good for diagnosis, why did they not become the mainstay of the profession? What would a medic actually *do* if a patient offered a dream while describing their other symptoms, given the wide range of possible categories available? They would surely resort to established and more trustworthy medical techniques (such as taking the pulse) to verify whether the dream was indeed medically symbolic and whether the patient had provided a clue to diagnosis.³³ Since they would presumably be doing these things *anyway*, even a useful dream should align with other diagnostic methods.

Should it, however, lead in a conflicting diagnostic direction from (for instance) the pulse, we would expect the medic to follow the tried-and-trusted art, and discard the dream—it must have been one of the unreliable ones, perhaps following food and wine.³⁴ In a dilemma, the dream will surely lose: and if it fits with the overall picture, it is effectively irrelevant. So what prompted this medical appropriation of dreams? Firstly, *technomachia*: dream interpreters are claiming at least some knowledge of medicine—thus Hulskamp suggests that the author of *Regimen* is carving out a specialism within the *technē* of dream interpretation for medics, but I suggest that the mission is more totalizing.³⁵ To paraphrase Hulskamp, by appropriating

and Galen *Dignot. ex. insomn.* VI.833K that such dreams exist and that they are difficult to distinguish from prophetic ones. See Pearcy 2013 for discussion of medical rivalry with diviners and van Nuffelen 2014 for Galen's treatment of divination as a legitimate art parallel to (and distinct from) medicine.

³¹ Such as Aeneas' tears at dreaming of Hektor's shade (*Aen.* 2.279) or cold sweat in response to a divine dream (3.175).

³² This is not a veiled undermining of the power of the gods; later (90), a suggested remedy is to 'pray to Earth, Hermes and the Heroes' and the text closes with an acknowledgement that the writer has understood medicine as far as a mortal is able, 'with the gods' help' (*sun toisi theoisi*). See further van der Eijk 2004.

³³ Hulskamp 2013: 67, with further references.

³⁴ A common suggestion, e.g. *Pl. Resp.* 9.571c; *Plin. HN* 10.98.

³⁵ Hulskamp 2013: 38.

a subset of dreams, the emerging Hippocratic professionals were staking their claim to *all* medical matters. This meant articulating their own oneir-ology to set alongside that of the diviners in the marketplace, thereby stripping interpreters of any scope for medical advice, outgunning them in interpretative power by requiring an understanding of the humours to interpret such dreams.

Even without considering rivalry with dream interpreters, it was necessary to address dreams to establish the credibility of the art of medicine. *Regimen* was composed when Hippocratic medicine was being articulated and finding its textual feet. The fashioning of a fully fledged medical *technē* had a momentum that led this author to create a complete system of dream analysis, to show how comprehensive the system of medicine was. This was a necessary epistemological exercise if a total system of health were to be developed. To have *no* part of the Hippocratic framework explaining the rich symbolism and reliable irruption of dreams would seem a strange omission when one is explaining human existence and mind. If you cannot explain these strange universal phenomena, what sort of understanding can you claim to have of human existence?³⁶ The only drawback was the difficulty of actually using dreams reliably: thus Galen still maintains the medical claim to dreams, while the likes of Artemidorus are still making incursions³⁷ but are fully aware of the difficulties, emphasizing in *On Diagnosis from Dreams* how difficult it is to distinguish the prophetic from the medical. Though it was epistemologically desirable to have a system of dream interpretation, it seems unlikely that dreams were used much in diagnosis.³⁸

In fact, medics might have occasionally needed to persuade patients that their more interesting dreams were *not* important symbolically as interpretable signs and implicit narratives, but were very much so purely as symptoms. Hulskamp notes that Galen mentions visions in dreams caused by humoral imbalance and that some conditions make the sick *phantasiōdēs*.³⁹ Galen observes that melancholics and phrenetics have vivid dreams, and he prescribed himself wet dressings to avert phrenitis, which did not prevent

³⁶ Space does not permit the exploration of this theme with respect to other ancient world-views (including the various full-scale philosophical frameworks and religious systems), but dreams are mentioned almost ubiquitously in our sources.

³⁷ Even worse, rather like an Empiricist: see Harris-McCoy 2012: 37–8; Artem. 4.22.

³⁸ *Contra* Harris 2009: 212 who concludes that Galen, and other second-century doctors, were better disposed to using dreams than their Hippocratic predecessors.

³⁹ *In Hippocr. Aph.* 3.24 (XVIIb.628K); see also Hulskamp 2013: 61 n. 65.

him being disturbed by *tarachôdē enupnia* for a day and a night: we must assume they were vivid or lurid in some way.⁴⁰ Divinely sent dreams and visions are frequently described as vivid (*enargēs*) throughout antiquity, and a patient would be likely to know this, and potentially consider any emotive dream to be of divine origin.⁴¹ A medic might therefore have a job on their hands with a vividly dreaming patient—but usually with a view to moving *away* from divination towards the medical. As with divination, dreams were almost, but not quite, a distraction from proper business. They might even just be a nuisance, something to be medically suppressed.⁴²

5. Individuals Dreaming

We are not yet done with Galen: thus far we have considered institutional or system-level logic about dreams, but we know that individuals also took dreams seriously in their private lives, and the prolific medic reports several over his lifetime. The first example is by proxy: he mentions more than once that his father Nikon was urged (*protrapeis*) by vivid (*enargeis*) dreams that his son should become a medic.⁴³ Galen also received direct instructions in dreams: a number of these pertain to medicine. At *Cur. Ven. Sect.* 23 (11.314–15K), he says he will explain how he was roused (*hormetheis*) to use arteriotomy before mentioning that his life was saved in his youth by some dreams, of which two were particularly vivid (*enargēs*). He was urged (*protrapeis*) to perform venesection on his hand to relieve abdominal pain. Though he does not initially attribute these dreams to any particular god, Asklepios certainly seems to be involved: almost immediately Galen mentions a similar intervention for a similar complaint prescribed by Asklepios at Pergamon. This is probably the episode ‘from his youth’ when he became a *therapeutēs* of Asklepios.⁴⁴ Galen assumes the god was teaching him medicine: he relays only the relevant medical information, but the repetition

⁴⁰ *Loc. Aff.* 4.2 (VIII.227K). Hulskamp 2013: 64 nn.71–2 has fuller excerpts from *In Hippocr. Prorrh.* 1.1.5 (p.20, 24 = p.21, 2 Diels; XVI.525–6K). See also *Loc. Aff.* 5.4 (VIII.329–330K); Hulskamp 2013: 62–5. There are Hippocratic precedents for the description (e.g. *Prorrh.* 1.5 for phrenitis); see Hulskamp 2013: 52–4.

⁴¹ Used, for instance, of gods manifesting to mortals (*Od.* 7.201; 16.161), and repeatedly by Galen and others of epiphany dreams: see van Lieshout 1980: 18–19.

⁴² E.g. *De Sanit. Tuenda* 1.12 (VI.646K).

⁴³ *Ord. Libr. Propr.* 4 (XIX.59K), *De Meth. Med.* 9.4 (X.609K), *De Praecogn.* II.12 (XI.608K).

⁴⁴ *Libr. Propr.* 2 (XIX.18–19K). Recently on Galen’s dreams, see Tieleman 2013: 14, who resurrects the anachronistic suggestion of Kudlien 1981: 123 that Galen needed ‘psychological’ confirmation.

and the vividness of the dreams convince him that it is a divine communication. He was also reprimanded in a dream while writing *On The Usefulness of the Parts* and went on to include a section he had intended to omit because it might irritate his readers.⁴⁵

If we join with Nutton 1990: 254 and van Nuffelen 2014 in accepting the Galenic authorship of the fragmentary *Commentary on the Hippocratic Oath*, the idea that Asklepios can reveal information through dreams is entirely normal for Galen, since a god originally revealed the art itself that way.⁴⁶ Van Nuffelen argues convincingly that Galen sees himself as restoring a decayed memory of the original art: we should, if anything, be surprised that fewer ‘informative’ dreams are recorded. The partial loss of the medical art would create plenty of dream-sized gaps but Galen is highly discriminating—he is scathing about the careless use of dreams by others.⁴⁷ Once again, we must assume we have only those that survived intense scrutiny, such as the snake-derived drug he adopted after an Asklepiian dream prescription at Pergamon.⁴⁸

Most notoriously, Galen declined Marcus Aurelius’ wish that he join him on campaign: Asklepios had vetoed the idea.⁴⁹ Modern commentators can rarely resist the temptation to file this under ‘dog ate my homework’.⁵⁰ Consider the stakes though: Galen declined a ‘request’ from the *emperor himself*, citing probably the only authority to whom the latter had to yield, a *god*. And this was not just any god, but the *patrios theos*, patron deity of medicine, of whom Galen professed to be a follower (*therapeutēs*). Was Galen really arrogant enough to play a game of bluff with the Roman emperor, simultaneously risking his relationship with the god whose domain he practised in and who saved his life? We see nothing but traditional respect for the gods elsewhere: in *The Usefulness of the Parts*, a work he closes by calling it a hymn of praise, Galen offers that ‘a person calling the

⁴⁵ First mention: 10.12 Helmreich II.93 III.812K; mentioned again twice at 10.14 Helmreich II.109 and 110 (III.835, 837K).

⁴⁶ Van Nuffelen 2014: 346–8, drawing on Rosenthal 1956. Kudlien 1981: 119 offers the circular logic that since the passage does not sound like Galen, it cannot be Galenic. Nutton 1990: 253–6 notes Galen’s complaints at the ubiquity of healing shrines and contingent decline in the status of medicine; it may be that his curious and apparently inconsistent outburst amounts to a denial that the two are sharply divided and—to speculate further—that since Asklepios revealed medicine in the first place, the god wishes it to be practised.

⁴⁷ Kudlien 1981: 121.

⁴⁸ *Subfig. Emp.* 10.

⁴⁹ *Lib. Prop.* 2 (XIX.18–19K).

⁵⁰ E.g. Mattern 2013: 205: ‘desperate to avoid being forced to accompany the emperor to the front, [Galen] invented an excuse not to go’.

gods themselves to witness must speak the truth'.⁵¹ If we say he lied to Marcus, we might as well file his entire *oeuvre* under 'fiction'.

How far Galen was typical of ancient dreamers can be established by comparison with the hundreds of inscriptions examined by Renberg.⁵² In addition to the 450 inscriptions already mentioned which list instructions given in dreams, a further 850 attest divine commands without specifying their source. Renberg is cautious about assuming dreams were necessarily involved in the 850 unspecified divine commands, but the overall impression is that whether the instruction was ordered by a dream or an oracle (etc) made little difference: it's all 'orders from a god'. The difference is that a dream can come and find you: in particular, the divine rebukes ('confession inscriptions') fit neatly with our criteria of 'urgent and/or unexpected details', and it seems that they were rare (probably unique) occurrences for any particular individual.⁵³ In the case of rebukes, opprobrium rather than charisma would be bestowed on the dreamer.

Reminders to fulfil vows obviously keep the focus on the god rather than the dreamer, but not all are rebukes. There is the story of Sekoutilla, for instance, who waited for her husband to return from sea until finally a dream confirmed his death: Renberg 2010: 56–7 offers that such a dream could become 'psychologically necessary' for closure, but we might add that this would also have been a *socially* acceptable way of moving on (after a suitable interval, of course); the dream would have confirmed what most had by then decided was obvious. Renberg's extensive catalogue confirms that receiving instructions or direction from a god about one's personal affairs was rare, but far from unknown.

Galen has rarely seemed so ordinary: though he is seldom accused of modesty, there seems no excess in his mention of dreams. Like those who set up inscriptions, he was willing to be advised by dreams, if they seemed genuine. It may be an accident of his prolixity that we can see a succession of dreams over much of his lifetime, but if Asklepios' interest in his career was unusual, charisma is deflected by his father being one recipient: who could be more appropriate for a teenager's career advice? And if divine insistence on a medical career was unusual, it was borne out: Galen *was* rather successful.

But we must nonetheless acknowledge that we have quite a number of Galenic dreams. How would an unusually successful dreamer fare with their

⁵¹ 10.14 Helmreich 109.

⁵² Renberg 2010.

⁵³ See, for instance, the Syrian farmer: Renberg 2010: 49 n. 41.

peers? Perhaps others viewed him as we would view colleagues who are always up to date with email, run every morning, have low cholesterol, *and* have never had a student fail an exam: all individually plausible. We might not even disbelieve them as they good-naturedly mention these things as if they are all completely normal. When they come to work on a Monday, mentioning a substantial win on the lottery the only time they ever bought a ticket (just to be sociable when friends did, on the Saturday after their football team pulled off a giant-killing result), we might half-jokingly ask to see the ticket, as we find our credulity blowing several fuses. Some might be convinced that much of this is elaborate lies; others would accept it at face value, and what was said publicly might mask some private astonishment. Some would perhaps be volatile in their acceptance, entirely accepting the claims until one day a straw broke the camel's back and then the entire 'back catalogue' of unusual-but-plausible items could become suspect. When dealing with an accumulation of items of difficult credibility, then, each report is important both in its own right but also as part of a larger story. There is no 'fixed quota' of credibility: it is elastic and *can* be stretched, albeit with steadily increasing difficulty—and always with the possibility that it could unexpectedly snap.

'Belief' is too limited for this: there is a spectrum of plausibility that is an amalgam of individual context-sensitive judgements, as well as the whole. If, over a lifetime, someone reported a series of divine dreams, the 'elastic' would 'stretch' slowly; if, instead, we retrospectively encounter the whole of a life's divine interventions in one account, we will apply different kinds of heuristics to make a judgement. Thus even the same life, assessed by the same listener, might evoke a different response depending on how they received the account. Galen's contemporaries, for instance, would have heard of his dreams piecemeal over a long period, as would some of his later readers (depending on the availability of texts and the absence of synthesizing scholarship). Virtually everyone in the modern era is told swiftly and succinctly of nearly all of Galen's dreams in a barely differentiated pile: Harris' passing observation that the majority of scholars conflate his father's multiple dreams into one threatens to be an example of our applying 'plausibility filters' even now, rather than just carelessness.⁵⁴

Each person would have found their own place on this spectrum. Each would be more or less inclined, by temperament and circumstance, to do the

⁵⁴ Harris 2009: 64 n. 216.

interpretative and verificatory work required by dreams. We know of no one in antiquity who did more of this work on their own dreams than Aelius Aristides.

6. Aelius Aristides

The *Hieroi Logoi* of the chronically unwell Aelius Aristides (117–81 CE)⁵⁵ include 163 dreams, of which more than seventy feature Asklepios as healer.⁵⁶ Just as Augustus accumulated *auctoritas* by accumulating traditional powers on an unprecedented scale, so too did Aristides (seek to) appropriate a novel kind of religious charisma as a *theios anēr* via almost entirely traditional deployment of dreams and dream-management. The question is whether he pulled it off.⁵⁷

Aristides, sensitive to credibility issues, ‘shows his working’, including extensive dreamlike details and foregrounding his interpretative strategies (at least early on), noting when doubled or repeated dreams occur, and so on.⁵⁸ He repeatedly and insistently gives credit to the god for his interventions (e.g. 1.23), and the entire account is framed as an act of obedience to Asklepios (1.1–4, 2.2–4, 6.1), particularly the act of recording the dreams (a repeating theme in the cult of the god).⁵⁹ Though some dreams do occur away from Asklepiian shrines, they are frequently set within a temple and the relationship is anchored in Aristides’ frequent and long-standing presence at Pergamum.⁶⁰ Further, though his advice from the god frequently upstages

⁵⁵ Behr 1986: 1–4; Downie 2013: 8 n. 15 for brief biography. Most recently on Aristides: Downie 2014 and 2013; Israelowich 2012; Petsalis-Diomidis 2010 and Harris and Holmes 2008. References are to the *Hieroi Logoi* unless specified.

⁵⁶ Harris 2009: 64.

⁵⁷ Petsalis-Diomidis 2010: *passim* discusses Aristides as *theios anēr*: see also Downie 2013: 19, 21, 30. I distance myself here from the anachronistic judgements of modern commentators about Aristides. Even among broadly favourable scholars, he is ‘our hypochondriac friend’, characterized by ‘vanity’ (Harris 2009: 92, 66, respectively); Downie 2013: 83 suggests he invented dreams. Stephens 2013 lurches to the other extreme of arguing for ‘sincerity’, explicitly disregarding insight into the literary character of the texts in the process.

⁵⁸ E.g. 1.66, 1.69, 2.30, 2.35, 2.48. On his presentation, see Harris 2009: 120–2; Downie 2013: 79–85, 2014: 105–15. The last contrasts the difficulty foregrounded by Artemidorus and the inspired ease that Aristides projects. This aligns with the persona that each wishes to project (Artemidorus the careful expert, Aristides the *theios* master).

⁵⁹ See Ahearne-Kroll 2014 for the role of recording and memory in the cult at Epidauros. For other divine orders to write down miracles, see Versnel 2011: 413 n. 114.

⁶⁰ E.g. 1.30, 1.55.

medics,⁶¹ he claims no specialist medical knowledge: though medics do cure the sick at times, it is Asklepios who best understands the *technē* of healing.⁶² Where Aristides excels is as interpreter and obedient follower, but not exclusively of Asklepios.

The healing god's status is not exalted excessively; for instance, in *Oration* 43, Aristides makes a show of being nervous in addressing Zeus (1–5), thanking the god for saving him, and acknowledging him as 'king and saviour'. Asklepios gets just one line. There are also hymns in his collection to other gods such as Athena and Herakles, and he interacts with other gods in the *Hieroi Logoi*.⁶³ Nevertheless Aristides has, far more than Galen, presented an unusually persistent relationship with the god. There is more: not only does his account aspire to be more than the sum of its parts, it also stretches the plausibility of Asklepios' interest.

The first major anomaly I wish to note is that, in contrast to Asklepios' uncontroversial patronage of the medic Galen, the god intimates at several moments that he is interested in Aristides' oratory, prompting him to make speeches (4.14–31) and safeguarding and promoting his career (4.70–106, 5.36–46). Even if Pergamum had become a renowned centre of learning, this is not the god's traditional domain. Galen could deflect criticism about his benefitting from contagious divine charisma, but the attention paid to Aristides cannot be so easily redirected towards his profession: much more of it will 'stick' to the man.⁶⁴

Aristides might shrug and simply say the dreams were convincing, as his careful account demonstrates: the god's foremost interest is in his follower's health—his success as an orator is part and parcel of his well-being. Who is he to argue? He was just following divine instructions and, like everyone around him, is repeatedly surprised by the god. Like the 'sceptics' cures' at Epidauros, the god has provided amazing proof of his power.⁶⁵ But this line is blurred: Aristides was applauded, as Asklepios so often was, as 'benefactor and saviour' by those around him because of the divine providence that accompanies him (4.36), preventing an earthquake (3.38–43) by his unusual understanding of the divine. He begs Asklepios to save his foster father

⁶¹ 1.57, 1.62–3, 1.67, 1.73, 2.20, 2.34, 2.39, 2.71, 3.8–14, 3.18–20.

⁶² *Or.* II.62–3 (citing Plato), 65: sends a doctor to his foster sister's daughter Philumene, 5.19.

⁶³ E.g. Athena at 2.41, 4.39; Isis, 3.44; Sarapis, 3.47; both together at 4.97; Zeus and Dionysos 4.40; dreams of sacrificing to other gods, e.g. Zeus, Artemis, and others at 5.66.

⁶⁴ For the 'contagiousness' of the sacred in general, see Smith 2004.

⁶⁵ E.g. A 3 (LiDonnici 1995: 87). See e.g. 2.47, where the temple wardens knew of no one who had been operated on so much, or 2.82 where the spectators are surprised at Aristides' obedient taking of a cold bath at Koressos—orders of the god.

Zosimus in a dream and aggressively seizes the god's head and utters the invocation the god has provided (1.69–73); Zosimus lives, thus indicating that Aristides has unusual access to the god's assistance. It was not Aristides' fault that Zosimus later ignored advice (1.75–6). There is also the dream at 4.50 where his identity and that of the god blur: Aristides calls out 'the One',⁶⁶ and the god replies 'it is you'. He is granted a new name (Theodorus) in a dream at 4.53 (reinforced at 4.70, with the curious, tentative addition of 'Asiarch' in 4.53). The life of his foster sister's daughter Philumene is in some way 'swapped out' with Aristides according to a dream and she dies, apparently so he can recover; her brother Hermias also died 'nearly, one might say, instead of me' just as Aristides recovered from a long fever (5.25). We are clearly supposed to think there is 'something about Aristides'.

Notwithstanding his hard work at presenting his dreams credibly, Aristides thus negotiates a position regarding the divine that is distinct from Galen's more modest (!) self-formation. Though it is true that medicine and health are foremost, there is an inconcinnity about Asklepios' professional interest in an orator. By meticulously formulating this relationship primarily through dreams, Aristides has played the oneiric wildcard repeatedly and persistently, stretching the elasticity of plausibility. But did it snap? The real test is not whether *we* find him plausible but what his contemporaries made of him. Though Galen calls him one of 'the most prominent rank of orators' despite his ill-health,⁶⁷ Philostratus is less effusive. We know from his *Life of Apollonius* that dreams could be prophetic, and indeed he has the philosopher say that divination by dreams is the most divine of human faculties (2.37). However, in his *Lives of the Sophists*, after praising the *Hieroi Logoi* as exemplars of 'speaking well on any subject' (VS 581), Philostratus repeatedly emphasizes that though Aristides' studied speeches show talent and application (VS 581–2), his inability to extemporize and his clumsiness mean he cannot be marked out as one of the greats.⁶⁸ It is Aeschines who was *theios* (VS 509). The biographer also evades any discussion of a special relationship with Asklepios, implying it was not relevant to Aristides' oratory. So even if Libanius would later describe Aristides as *theios* and mistake a statue of the

⁶⁶ An exclamation that is 'characteristic . . . of salvation from illness' (Downie 2013: 149 n. 55).

⁶⁷ Gal. *In Plat. Timaeum Comm.* Schröder CMG I 1934: 33, cited by Behr 1968: 162–3 and discussed by Israelowich 2012: 105 n. 382.

⁶⁸ See further Downie 2013: 18–20. Philostratus lists numerous infelicities before (very briefly) stressing his talent once again (VS 583–5).

man for the divinity,⁶⁹ Aristides did not fully convince Philostratus, at least. It seems there is only so much one can do with dreams at this point.

Now that we have established an outer limit of credibility, we can return to individual dreamers in Rome. According to Suetonius' *Life of Augustus* (91), the emperor heeded some of his dreams. He took heed of his doctor Artorius' dream to escape before Philippi,⁷⁰ but ignored the numerous awful (*plurima...formidulosissima*) dreams he had in the spring: perhaps these could be explained away medically as a humoric imbalance during those particular conditions. Dreams during other seasons were fewer and less meaningless (*rariora et minus uana*). He used to sit in a public place once a year as a beggar because of a dream, an instruction that must have resonated with a *princeps* avoiding accusations of aspiring to being *rex*. He also received a personal visit from Capitoline Jupiter, complaining about a loss of visitors to Jupiter *Tonans*. Suetonius compresses a host of considerations into the anecdote. Augustus is sufficiently relevant (as founder and as a frequent visitor to the Thunderer), sufficiently powerful to be visited personally by Capitoline and still sufficiently mortal to be rebuked. His slightly cheeky reply, that he had given the god a *ianitor*, is a brilliant balancing act of his own eminent-yet-mortal status and his being caught between two jealous gods: the Thunderer might struggle to be offended at the claim that he was a doorkeeper when it was to the foremost deity of Rome.⁷¹ Thus Augustus' dreams are noted, filtered, and occasionally heeded: they are not permitted to offset state business (he was not *rex*, after all), but he was shrewd enough not to ignore them completely.

Finally, there is Pliny's advising Suetonius. Rather than haplessly floundering, trying to cover all bases, Pliny is giving Suetonius a crash-course in dream management: the gods *might* be involved; your dreams have to be interpreted with an awareness of your personal idiosyncrasies (which you should therefore endeavour to become familiar with); a dream (or a god) does not absolve you of responsibility; and finally, there is no harm in simply evading a crisis. Pliny will help with the last item (because he can) but leaves Suetonius with the rest as general homework.⁷²

⁶⁹ Downie 2013: 21; Lib. *Ep.* 1534.4.

⁷⁰ Also in Val. Max. 1.7; App. *B Civ.* 4.110; Vell. Pat. 2.70; Plut. *Brut.* 41.7.

⁷¹ Compare the shrewdness of Sabakos' response to a dream, where he outmanoeuvres a divine attempt to prompt his loss of power (Hdt. 2.139.1–3).

⁷² The more detailed analysis of Baraz comes to similar conclusions, that Pliny is exemplifying a sophisticated and unfazed response (Baraz 2012: 105–13).

7. Conclusions: Deductions of the Divine

It will be obvious that hundreds, if not thousands, of dream incidents and a host of dream taxonomies could not be considered here: this is outlined as a starting-point for looking at divination in general. Deductions about significance and signs were set within a complex overlapping matrix of considerations about recipients, veracity, and context.

I suggest there is nothing distinctively ‘religious’ about this kind of thinking.⁷³ Consider a modern middle-aged man suffering some chest pains at the office. If his father had died at the same age of a heart attack, the man will probably drop whatever he is doing and get to a hospital; if he had spent the previous day chopping wood, he might dismiss it. He could ignore it for the sake of a deadline. When he reports it to a colleague, perhaps a little tentatively, the veracity of his account will be scrutinized: if he (or even others in the office) has a history of reporting an endless sequence of aches and pains, he will receive less attention than if he is known for his optimism. Similarly, his role and general standing may affect how seriously people respond. The response of others will also factor in deadlines, workload, and a host of other factors; but, depending on the severity of the symptoms, our subject may be told by his boss with only the slightest hint of impatience to go and get himself checked.

None of this (nor the outcome) has any bearing on whether anyone ‘believes’ in medical practice, as we often say ancient people ‘believed’ (or not) in dreams. Nor, hopefully, would a medic say our middle-aged man was wrong to attend hospital even if he gets a clean bill of health (perhaps the doctor might want to roll their eyes in a busy A and E at an *obviously* minor muscle strain). The list of possible responses mounts up, few of them mutually exclusive. Finally, the medic will have a much fuller range of possibilities for a diagnosis than the average person, perhaps as many as Artemidorus: they might include a non-committal ‘chances are that it’s X or Y, you should do Z’, not unlike Pliny addressing Suetonius. Action does not always require certainty.

What *is* distinctive from the modern world is the axiomatic underpinnings: the gods exist and they interact with mortals, advising, warning,

⁷³ See, for instance, the exposition of rationality by d’Avray 2010. It would be interesting to bring in psychological heuristics such as those outlined in Kahneman 2011, with the caution, as Jenkins 2014: 1 puts it, that ‘[c]ognitive science [and psychology] places the mind inside the head, while anthropology places it outside’.

admonishing, reminding. This underpins all divination, and the creation of regularized systems in turn creates moments when that system needs to be circumvented: dreams, despite a poor noise-to-signal ratio, fitted the bill for a few specific scenarios. They might appear to be a private event but their reception, interpretation, and response comprised a public transaction, and how one responded to them was emphatically a social, religious, and political act. Experts in almost every field of thought and representation had to take account of the odd phenomenon of dreaming, even if it was to downplay its significance; dreams should generally be marginalized but could never be ignored entirely—and just occasionally they presented a golden opportunity.⁷⁴

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⁷⁴ The initial research behind this chapter was supported by the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL between 2000 and 2003: I must also thank Ryan and his guardian angel for reminding me about unexpected luck and Emily for making so much sense.

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PART II

SIGNS AND CONTROL

5

A Reconsideration of the Pythia's Use of Lots

Constraints and Chance in Delphic Divination

Lisa Maurizio

It is a commonplace in scholarship on Delphic divination that Apollo's priestess, the Pythia, offered clients oracles in verse or prose as well as using lots; that is, she shook beans or stones in a bowl, most likely a *phiale*. In Sarah Johnston's book on divination, to cite one example, she argues that in addition to offering lengthy 'conversational' oracles, the Pythia used lots when 'enquirers, consciously or not, wished to actually *restrict* Apollo's latitude of reply' because lots provided binary answers.¹ Here Johnston links lots to an assumed desire on the part of clients: they want simple, clear answers from Apollo and ask simple, clearly stated questions to get them. In his recent book on Delphi, Michael Scott is rather agnostic about the Pythia's use of lots, but nonetheless views Delphic divination as binary, or limited in the way Johnston describes. Scott writes that 'most questions put to the oracle seem to have been in the form of "would it be better and more profitable for me to do X or Y..."'.²

The views of Johnston and Scott, which are representative of much scholarship about lots and divination at Delphi, are coupled with, and indeed depend on, an assumption about how divination works, namely, that clients want clear answers such as lots are imagined to offer to their questions; and an assumption about the goal of divination, namely, that divination is practised to expedite and authorize actions to solve problems and questions. Both assumptions about divination, perhaps because they seem obvious, precede and dictate how modern scholars have taken

¹ Johnson 2008: 52, 54. Italics in original.

² Scott 2014: 27. Scott further reasons that consultants presented options and sought guidance from the Pythia, rather than asking about future events.

recorded Delphic oracles to represent historical practice. For example, of the roughly twenty-five out of 600 or so Delphic oracles with the formula ‘it is better and more profitable’, a little more than half are on inscriptions. Because this inscriptional evidence conforms to assumptions about the manner and goal of divination, this evidence is often and increasingly in scholarship considered the best indicator, perhaps even a transcript, of how questions and answers were exchanged during a divinatory consultation. The reasoning seems to be: remove the ambiguity and verse from Delphic oracles, rely on inscriptions, and you will hear the voice at the centre of the world. This voice says yes or no, and not much else. The Pythia’s putative use of lots both confirms and derives from this view.³

This chapter reviews the visual, material, and written evidence used to argue that the Pythia used lots at Delphi, and collects additional evidence that may bear upon this question. In addition, it queries the notion that a simple and direct question and answer, whether by a lot or conversational oracle, comprised a divinatory session at Delphi that had as its goal a clear resolution of a problem. Anthropologists who consider the complex process of turning a divinatory dialogue into a text suggest that most divinatory texts are necessarily distillations that mask rather than reveal a divinatory mechanism, dialogue, or practice. This anthropological literature draws attention to how accounts of divinatory sessions often recount divinatory product (oracle), not divinatory process. To this end, I turn to anthropological work that examines aleatory binary modes of divination, especially two forms (the rubbing board and poison oracles) studied by Evans-Pritchard, whose work on divination remains a touchstone among anthropologists and classicists. In sum, this essay reconsiders the Pythia’s use of lots at Delphi in view of ancient material evidence not formerly included in such discussions and recent anthropological work.

1. The *Phialē* in Divination and Libation

One common reconstruction of aleatory consultation at Delphi envisages the Pythia as examining lots tossed in a *phialē*. This reconstruction derives

³ Plato (*Phdr.* 244b–c) classified kleromancy—sortition with some type of lot (*klēros*)—as well as other forms of divination that rely on interpreting objects such as entrails, birds, stars, etc. as technical. He distinguished these types of divination from those he labelled as non-technical or intuitive because they depend on divine inspiration. Plato’s distinction has not entered scholarly arguments about the Pythia’s use of lots; its usefulness for understanding how divinatory sessions unfold has been questioned. See Tedlock 2001; Raphals 2013; Struck 2016: 16–8.

from an interpretation of a well-known Attic drinking cup attributed to the Kodros Painter (c.430 BCE). This cup depicts a woman sitting on a tripod, holding a laurel leaf and staring into a *phialē* as a bearded man stands by her side.⁴ The woman is labelled Themis and the man Aigeus, a legendary king of Athens. The names suggest that myths about either figure may offer clues about the nature of their encounter. In Euripides' *Medea*, Aigeus visits Delphi to inquire about his prospects for conceiving children.⁵ Themis, too, is associated with Delphi: she is the goddess who, after inheriting the site from Gaia, either gave it to Phoebe who gave it to Apollo, or gave it directly to Apollo herself.⁶ Since the tripod and laurel branch are associated with Delphi, the image on this cup has been interpreted as a representation of this scene.⁷ And yet, because the goddess Themis does not appear in the story of Aigeus' consultation, the figure on the cup has been interpreted as a generic prophetess of Apollo (so named because oracles are sometimes called *themistēs*), or a historical prophetess, a Pythia, named Themis.⁸ One early investigator, Frank Eggleston Robbins (1916), chose not to identify the figure but nonetheless argued that Themis is shaking lots, such as beans or stones, in her *phialē*.⁹ This explains her rapt attention on her bowl and not Aigeus. He went on to argue, by extension, that the Pythias selected or rattled lots in a *phialē*, in addition to composing oracles, when inspired by Apollo during divinatory consultations at Delphi.¹⁰

The various uses of the *phialē* in Greece—in divinatory rites and for libations—provide a context in which to re-evaluate the image on our cup. In Perachora in Argos, due east of the archaic temple of Hera Akraia, a small artificial pool with some 200 bronze *phialai* was found. Scholars originally thought that the waters of the pool were used for purification and the *phialai* were considered dedications. J. Dunbabin, however, identified the pool and *phialai* as the *manteion* of Hera mentioned, though not described, by Strabo.¹¹ Dunbabin argued that this set-up could be explained as a divinatory device with reference to two other examples: the practice of tossing

⁴ LIMC I.2 Aigeus no. 1, p. 274; Avramidou 2011: 39–40.

⁵ Eur. *Med.* 660–868.

⁶ Aesch. *Eum.* 1–8 and Paus. 20.5.6.

⁷ Shapiro 1993: 221–3.

⁸ Johnston 2008: 56–60.

⁹ Robbins 1916: 279.

¹⁰ No *phialai* marking or recording an oracular consultation have been found at Delphi. Two *phialai* found to the north-east of Apollo's temple, in the 'red house', a structure dating from the end of the seventh century to 585–575 BCE when it was burned down, are not dispositive for determining if the Pythia used one during divinatory sessions. Luce 1992: 697–8 with Scott 2014: 64.

¹¹ Strabo 8.6.22; Dunbabin 1951: 61.

barley cakes into a pool of Ino in Epidauros Limeria;¹² and throwing tablets into a pool of the Palici at Sicily, to see if they floated or sank.¹³ More recently, Strøm, following Tomlinson, has argued that the *phialai* are not mantic implements, but debris from a nearby dining room that was connected to this pool by water channels.¹⁴ But although Dunbabin's hypothesis is now out of favour, nevertheless, tantalizing support for it comes from the cult of Apollo Deiradiotis, founded by Pythaios the son of Apollo, on the hill of Aspidia in the northwest of Argos. There a priestess of Apollo reportedly drank the blood of a sacrificed ewe and prophesied.¹⁵ Several inscriptions from the site mention both male and female prophets, though no ewe's blood. Kadletz suggests that several terracotta *phialai* found in a cistern at the site imply that two types of divination were practised, just as posited at Delphi: an inspired priestess delivered oracles to clients and *phialai* were tossed into water to see if they floated.¹⁶

Three other forms of divination, not explicitly associated specifically with the *phialē*, nonetheless offer an explanation for why Themis is staring into her *phialē* and not at Aigeus: hydromancy (observing water in a bowl); or lekanomancy (observing oil floating on water in a bowl), for which the magical papyri mention the use of a *phialē*;¹⁷ or katoptromancy, wherein one stares into a mirror, here the bottom of an empty *phialē*.¹⁸ Alternatively, since the *phialē* is a drinking vessel, Themis may be about to drink sacred water from the Kastalian or Kassiotis spring as a means of inspiration—drinking water was believed to inspire priests at the oracle of Apollo at Klaros and oracle-seekers at Hysiai in Boiotia.¹⁹ Or, as Leicester Holland proposed, Themis may be about to pour a libation.²⁰ Recent work on libation in Greek art offers two reasons that support Holland's interpretation and explain Themis' downward gaze.

The *phialē* was used more often for libation than for drinking, and often the gods are pictured as pouring libations.²¹ Patton writes that of gods, 'Apollo is the most frequent libation bearer in ancient Greek art' and is

¹² Paus. 3.23.8–9.

¹³ Steph. Byz. s.v. *Palike*; Dunbabin 1951: 65 n. 22.

¹⁴ Strøm 1998 and Tomlinson 1988. ¹⁵ Paus. 2.24.1.

¹⁶ Kadletz 1978: esp. nn. 4 and 11. ¹⁷ PGM 4.162–7; 4.220–32; 5.1.

¹⁸ Taylor 2008: 224 n. 58.

¹⁹ Klaros: Tac. *Ann.* 2.54; Plin. *HN* 2.103, 232. Hysiai: Paus. 9.2.1.

²⁰ Holland (1933: 208, Fig. 6) also discusses a stone found in Apollo's temple. This stone has a channel that runs around several holes. These holes are arranged in a way that suggests a tripod stood on the stone. If a Pythia sat on a tripod, this channel might very well have collected water poured in libation.

²¹ Miller 1997: 136–41.

often shown with a *phialē* in his hand.²² In particular, some vases and coins depict Apollo sitting on an altar or tripod in his temple at Delphi (indicated by laurel crown or branch), and pouring a libation from a *phialē*.²³ The great number of such images suggests that the image of Themis holding a *phialē* on our cup alludes to Apollo doing the same thing, just as her laurel branch alludes to Delphi. Yet, although these comparisons are suggestive, they do not fully explain the direction of Themis' gaze.

Libation bearers who have no connection to Apollo or the Pythia sometimes pour liquid from a jug into a *phialē* before pouring the liquid onto an altar, the ground, or a grave *stēlē*.²⁴ Rabun Taylor purposes that this seemingly unnecessary step—why not just pour the liquid from the jug?—both slowed the process of offering libations, and allowed the liquid to be inspected for impurities and blessed before being poured.²⁵ Similarly, Themis may be staring at her *phialē* to inspect the liquid before she pours it out or drinks it. Further, an examination of scenes of libation on Attic vases of the classical period contemporary with our cup offers a still more compelling reason for the direction of Themis' gaze. Among these vases, recently collected and analysed by Milette Gaifman, a number display two figures, often male and female—whether mother and son, sister and brother, or wife and husband—in the act of pouring a libation on a warrior's shield (as he departs or arrives), or on a grave *stēlē*.²⁶ When the two participants stare at each other, a quiet intimacy is created; in the cases of wife and husband, it has an erotic charge. These scenes are compositionally similar to that on our cup, which avoids any suggestion of impropriety between Aigeus and Themis. Themis stares at the water in her *phialē*, which she will offer as a libation or drink, and thereby maintains a stance that distances her from Aigeus, ritually and erotically. The *phialē* in Themis' hand, then, does not suggest that historical Pythias used lots in a divinatory session at Delphi.²⁷

²² Patton 2009: 60. A precursory look at LIMC II.2 Apollo illustrates Patton's thesis.

²³ For example, see LIMC II.2 Apollo 381 and 382, p. 213; Apollo 384, p. 214; and Apollo 657, p. 237.

²⁴ Examples of libation bearers with jug and *phialē* abound in the images of libation on Attic vases collected in Gaifman 2018.

²⁵ Taylor 2008: 106. Many of the scenes of libation in Gaifman (2018) show figures staring at a *phialē*; see figure 0.6 (Athena stares at the contents of a *phialē*) and figure 0.5 where a woman stares at a *phialē* before a grave *stēlē*.

²⁶ On a shield: Gaifman 2018: figure 0.4, and chapter 2 *passim*, especially figures 2.3 a and b; 29, 2.11, 2.13b. On a *stēlē*: Gaifman 2018: chapter 3 *passim*, especially figures 3.6 and 3.7.

²⁷ To my knowledge, there is no collection of images of the Pythia; the references here offer the beginning of such a project. A few representations of the Pythia occur on vases depicting the opening scene of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. These offer no dispositive evidence about the

Moreover, as I will go on to show, much of the literary evidence for lots, such as beans and stones, tossed in a *phialē* at Delphi is linked with Mt Parnassos, not Apollo's temple.

2. Pebbles and Bones as Aleatory Devices at Delphi

One ancient source explicitly states that the Pythia shook pebbles in a *phialē* to obtain answers to clients' question. It persuaded Robbins that Themis on our cup is looking at lots in her *phialē* and Holland that lots stored in a vessel on a tripod were the earliest form of divination at Delphi. Suidas (s.v. *Pythō*), drawing upon commentaries on sermons of Gregory of Nazianzus, written by Nonnos in the sixth century CE, writes that mantic stones (*mantikas psephous*) were kept in a *phialē* placed over a bronze tripod at Delphi.²⁸ In Nonnos' reconstruction, after a client asks the Pythia a question, Apollo shakes the lots and then the Pythia becomes possessed. Nonnos seems to imply that the shaking of lots was a preliminary step in the divinatory ritual, one that indicated that Apollo was present. He does not clearly indicate that the Pythia used lots herself to answer clients' questions. Suidas offers a somewhat more garbled account: lots were drawn (he does not state by whom) and Pythia, using them or becoming possessed, declared Apollo's answer to clients' questions. Holland took the account in Suidas as an indication that lot divination had once been practised at Delphi, but had gone out of use by the early seventh century BCE.²⁹ He interpreted myths stating that the bones of Dionysos slain by the Titans, or the bones and teeth of Pytho slain by Apollo, were kept in a large cauldron (*lebēs*) on a tripod as

divinatory consultation at Delphi. The Pythia is identified by the key she holds on the following vases: *LIMC* VII.2 Orestes 29, p. 53; *LIMC* VII.2 Orestes 51, p. 54; and *LIMC* VII.1 Orestes 12, p. 72. A vase depicting the death of Neoptolemus at Delphi also shows the Pythia with a key: *LIMC* II.2 Apollo 890, p. 263. On priestesses and temple keys, see Connelly 2007: 92–104. Three other vases depicting the opening scene of the *Eumenides* show a female without a key who may be identified as the Pythia: *LIMC* II.2 Athena 626, p. 765; *LIMC* VII.2 Orestes 18, p. 52; and *LIMC* VII.2 Orestes 19, p. 53. On two vases, the painters have named the Pythia 'Manto' and 'Mantikleia'. Mantikleia: *LIMC* III.2 Erinyes 51, p. 599. Manto: *LIMC* VI.2 Manto 2, p. 180. Since one Greek word for seer is *mantis*, these names allude to the Pythia's divinatory function, not to historical Pythias or mythic female figures, and are the additions of a vase-painter, argues Taplin 2007: 19. Manto is the name of Teiresias' prophetic daughter, who is sent to Delphi; yet no stories connect her and Orestes. On Manto, see Apollod. 3.74; Paus. 7.31 and 9.33. 2; schol. Ap. Rhod. 1.308; Diod. Sic. 4.66.5f; Strabo 14.5.16.

²⁸ Gregory of Nazianus 5.32 and 39.13 with Smith 2002: 79 n. 24 and 102.

²⁹ Holland 1933: 203 n. 5.

explanations of lots in a vessel once used in divination.³⁰ In Holland's view, Themis (and then the Pythias) could sit on the tripod because it no longer held lots.³¹ This reconstruction is open to several criticisms. It relies upon a chain of speculative inferences. The conflation of the myths' *lebēs* and Nonnos' *phialē* is not necessary, nor is the conflation between the myths' bones and Nonnos' pebbles. Moreover, even Nonnos does not say that the lots were inspected by the Pythia herself.

Robbins, on the other hand, found evidence of the type of lots that Themis and the historical Pythias might have tossed about in a *phialē* in references to pebbles (*thriai*) and 'Pebble Maidens', my translation of *Thriai*, the title of the three sisters whom Philochoros describes as 'nymphs who inhabit Parnassos, the nurses of Apollo, called *Thriai* because they were three after whom mantic stones (*psephoi*) are called "*thriai*" and prophesying, "*thriasthai*"'.³² In addition, Apollodoros, alluding to the exchange of goods between Apollo and Hermes at the conclusion of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, states that Hermes learned prophecy with stones (*psephoi*).³³ To Robbins, Apollodoros' remark suggested a link between the Pebble Maidens and the well-known prophetic Bee Maidens (so-called because they are described as eating honey and flying), whom Apollo gives to Hermes in their exchange.³⁴ The *Homeric Hymn* implies that Apollo, as a youth on Parnassos, practised a form of divination associated with the Bee Maidens,³⁵ who are three holy maidens (*treis semnai parthenoi*) and teachers of divination 'apart from Apollo's temple' (*manteis apaneuthe*).³⁶ More recently,

³⁰ Holland 1933: 202–3.

³¹ Holland 1933: 203–4.

³² Translation from Larson 1995: 341 n.2. In his *Hymn to Apollo* (2.44–6), Callimachus writes that pebbles (*thriai*) and prophecy (*manties*) belong to Apollo; the scholion on this passage states that three nymphs found pebbles and thereby offers an etymological explanation of the Pebble Maidens' name. Pherekydes writes that the Pebble Maidens were three in number and the daughters of Zeus, on which see Fowler 2013: 80–3. See also the proverb 'there are many lot throwers (*thrioboloi*), but few prophets (*manteis*)', which Zenobius attributes to the Pythia: PW610. This oracle is not included in the catalogue of Delphic oracles by Fontenrose 1978.

³³ Apollod. 3.10.2.

³⁴ Robbins 1916: 287–8; *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 252–7. It may be that the buzzing sounds or flight patterns of bees were considered prophetic, or that swarming was considered ominous. On bees and Delphi, see Sourvinou-Inwood 1979: 241–2.

³⁵ *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 560–5.

³⁶ On 'apart from Apollo's temple', see Scheinberg 1979: 10; Larson 1995: 347; and Vergados 2012: *ad loc.* Whether the Pebble Maidens ought to be identified with the Bee Maidens because both are associated with Apollo and Hermes on Mt Parnassos is a matter of debate. In his 1806 edition of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, Gottfried emended the word holy (*semnai*) to pebbles (*thriai*) because he made this connection, on which see Fowler 2013: 82 n. 301. Susan Scheinberg (1979: 2–9), on the other hand, has rejected any identification between the two prophetic triads. She ascribes the shared traits of the Bee Maidens and Pebble Maidens (their

Jennifer Larson has identified the Bee Maidens with the Korykian nymphs, who were connected to Hermes and occupied the Korykian cave on Mt Parnassos,³⁷ arguing that the Bee Maidens' honey-inspired prophecy is an allusion to divinatory knucklebones in the nymphs' cave. Thus, Larson draws a connection between tossing pebbles and knucklebones 'apart from Apollo's temple'.³⁸ Excavations of knucklebones found in the cave of the Korykian nymphs provide material evidence for defining one type of divinatory practice on Mt Parnassos. This evidence, which was not available to Robbins or Holland, suggests that myths about pebbles, Pebble Maidens, and Bee Maidens may allude not to the Pythia's use of pebbles in sortition, but to ritual activities on Mt Parnassos.

The Korykian cave, located 5 km northwest of Apollo's temple at 1,250 m above sea level, was linked to Delphi by a processional route, and remains reasonably accessible by foot.³⁹ Excavations of the cave have provided evidence for the practice of kleromancy with knucklebones. The finds date from Neolithic to Byzantine times, with the greatest number of deposits corresponding roughly to Delphi's heyday, from the end of the seventh century to roughly the second century BCE.⁴⁰ Most finds are small objects: cups, clay figures, bronze and iron rings, glass, seashells, and numerous one-litre Attic black-figure lekythoi.⁴¹ A great, indeed astonishing, number of knucklebones has been found in the cave (nearly 23,000). Most of the knucklebones (95 per cent) are from sheep and goats, only 4,000 were shaved or filed, and one was gilded.

Pierre Amandry posited that these knucklebones were offerings from those reaching adolescence or from those who had used them to complete a divinatory ritual.⁴² Irregularly shaped, with four sides corresponding to

number, their nurturing and pedagogical functions, their wild haunts, their association with divination) to traits attributed to nymphs more generally. Similarly, Larson (1995: 342 n. 3) rejects the identification of the Bee Maidens with the Thriai; she also provides a list of those who follow Gottfried.

³⁷ Larson 1995: 348–50.

³⁸ Larson 1995: 351.

³⁹ Volioti 2011: 274 (see also Strabo 9.3.1), McNerney 1997 and Scott 2014: map 3, fig. 0.2.

⁴⁰ Amandry (1984) provides an overview of the findings in the cave. Geometric tableware from Thessaly, Argos, and Corinth, Roman lamps produced in Patras (Partida 2011: 236; Scott 2014: 53) and money from Euboia, Attica, the Peloponnesos, the Ionic islands, and further east (Amandry 1991: 246) suggest that the cave had an international reputation and attracted visitors from afar.

⁴¹ Volioti 2011: 264. These lekythoi were not used in rituals at the cave, but, like the other findings, were dedications. They were 'travel tokens' for 'visitors to the Cave [who] may have wished to express materially their individual journeys'.

⁴² Amandry 1991: 261.

one, three, four, or six, knucklebones were thrown and the numerical patterns they made through several throws were believed to predict the future.⁴³ These throws could correspond to 'prefabricated oracles' that were recorded on stone pillars, although pillars are not necessary for the divinatory use of knucklebones and none has been found in the Korykian cave.⁴⁴ The number of knucklebones, the cave's location near Apollo's temple, and the association of nymphs with divination suggest that these knucklebones were treated as divinatory.⁴⁵ In sum, references to pebbles on Mt Parnassos do not suggest that the Pythia tossed lots in a *phialē*; more likely they allude to this less restricted and less prestigious form of divination. As we shall see in the next section, there are only three accounts of the Pythia herself using lots in Apollo's temple; none involved a *phialē*, bones, or pebbles.

3. Attested Cases of Sortition by the Pythia in Apollo's Temple

Four attested consultations of the Pythia are often cited to support the notion that the Pythia used lots. They differ from one another so greatly that they do not offer a consistent picture of the Pythia's activities. Two of these consultations refer to beans (*kuamoi*) or to roasted beans, where the adjective 'roasted' (*phruktos*) appears without 'bean'.⁴⁶ They are an inscription detailing a treaty between Delphi and Skiathos (350–340 BCE); and a Thessalian consultation regarding who should be king (c. sixth century BCE).⁴⁷ Whether the inscription offers evidence that beans were used as lots in Delphic divination depends on how the phrase *epi phruktō* is

⁴³ Stoneman 2011: 136; Graf 2005: 62.

⁴⁴ Seventeen fragments from such stone pillars dating to the second century CE have been found in south-west Anatolia. These fragments indicate that each stone pillar contained a list with fifty-six entries. These have been collected, reconstructed, and translated in Graf 2005. Pausanias (7.25.10) describes divination with knucklebones and a pillar practised in a cave with a statue of Herakles Buraikos in Bura in Achaia. On the Korykian cave, see Greaves 2012: 189–91. Charikles throws knucklebones for divinatory aims without a pillar in [Luc.] *Amor.* 16. See footnote 89.

⁴⁵ Larson 1995: esp. 350 n. 31.

⁴⁶ Beans (*kuamoi*) and the verb 'to select by beans' (*kuameuō*) are used particularly in fifth-century BCE Athens to describe elections by beans. See, for example, Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 8.1, 22.5, 24.3, and 32.1, with Rhodes 1981: *ad loc.* 8.1.

⁴⁷ Skiathos: *BCH* 63 (1939) 184; Sokolowski 1949 discussed in Fontenrose 1978: 222–3. Thessaly: Plut. *Mor.* 492b with Fontenrose 1978: 407 and PW316; di Salvatore 2001.

interpreted. Amandry takes *phruktō* as a dative dual and argues that it refers to a consultation of *two beans*, and thus is evidence for the use of lots at Delphi.⁴⁸ Sokolowski, taking *phruktō* as a dative singular without an iota subscript, argues this phrase refers to ‘a sacrifice of a bean cake’.⁴⁹ Finally, Fontenrose takes *phruktō* as an accusative dual and translates ‘if he comes for the sacrifice of two cakes’, reasoning that ‘we should notice that everything else in the surviving portion of the treaty concerns charges for the sacrificial cakes and victims’.⁵⁰ To support his argument, Amandry refers to the only other instance of a consultation at Delphi—that of the Thessalians—that involves roasted beans. When the Thessalians approach Delphi, they ask the Pythia to determine the next king by selecting an inscribed roasted bean from among those that they have brought. Notably, however, the Pythia does not use *two beans*—indeed, there is no evidence for a two-bean consultation at Delphi—and she does not supply beans. This evidence makes Fontenrose’s argument that the damaged section of the treaty refers to preliminary sacrifices and not the manner of the Pythia’s prophecy persuasive, and thus leaves only three consultations that might support the Pythia’s use of lots.

In the case of the Thessalians, the clients brought their own lots—in that case, beans. During the two attested consultations that involve lots other than beans, clients also bring their own accoutrements. These two accounts concern Athenians: Kleisthenes consulted Delphi about names for the ten tribes of citizens he had recently established (508/7 BCE) and the Athenians asked whether they should plough the edges of sacred lands in Eleusis (352/1 BCE).⁵¹ Kleisthenes presented the Pythia with a hundred names, from which she was to choose ten. Aristotle, who offers the fullest account of this consultation, does not offer any details about how Kleisthenes presented these names to the Pythia. Were they on a list or did they correspond to marked beans or stones? The only certain detail is that Kleisthenes brought to Delphi whatever accoutrements he asked the Pythia to use.⁵²

⁴⁸ Amandry 1939. Parke and Wormell 1956: 18 follow Amandry, though they note that there is no literary description of a two-bean oracle.

⁴⁹ Sokolowski 1949 in Fontenrose 1978: 223.

⁵⁰ Fontenrose 1978: 223.

⁵¹ Kleisthenes: Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 21.6 = Parke and Wormell 1956: oracle 80. Fontenrose (1978) assigns a letter and number to the oracles in Parke and Wormell’s catalogue. Hereafter the catalogue designation for oracles in each collection will be supplied as PW80/Q145. Sacred land: *IG II²*.204 = PW 262/H21. See Bowden 2005: 88–95 for complete translation and discussion.

⁵² Kleisthenes’ consultation mimics an Athenian two-part sortition process for selecting office-holders, in which names are chosen from a pre-selected list (*klerōsis ek prokritōn*); see Staveley 1972; Hansen 1986; Cordano and Grottanelli 2001; Taylor 2007. Fontenrose 1978: 222 emphasizes that clients brought their own lots to Delphi.

Our final example is the most elaborate recorded Delphic consultation, namely the occasion when the Athenians asked Delphi about the sacred lands in Eleusis. Here the Athenians brought two carefully prepared urns to the Pythia. They began their preparations by writing two questions that begin 'Is it better for us to ...' on two metal sheets and then wrapping each of these in wool, before depositing them both in a bronze urn. After shaking the bronze urn, they removed each wool-wrapped piece of tin and placed one in a silver urn and one in a gold urn. After sealing these urns, three Athenians took them to Delphi, and asked the Pythia to select one. This urn was then opened in Athens in public view.

The time and care that the Athenians deployed suggest that this was a unique approach, or at least one not used very often. However, Bowden in his study of the relationship between Athens and Delphi argues that in Athens, this 'procedure had become standard by the middle of the fourth century and might have been used much earlier'.⁵³ Bowden advances two arguments in support of his assertion. First, Philochoros and Androton omit the details of the urns and inscribed sheets when they refer to this decision.⁵⁴ Bowden reasons that their omission implies that the procedure was well known and thus required no mention.⁵⁵ However, that need not be the only explanation for some ancient authors to omit these details in their discussions of the event. Second, Bowden argues that this procedure be understood in terms of 'the principles of openness and the primacy of the Athenian citizen-body that were central to the working of the Athenian democracy'.⁵⁶ However, these principles would not apply to Delphic divination, and indeed there is no comparable consultation in the corpus of Delphic oracles. Furthermore, the alignment of democratic principles with Delphic divination suggests that the Athenians, not Delphi, devised this procedure for this very fraught moment. The dispute over the edges of the sacred land around Eleusis nearly brought Athens and Megara to war in 430 and 350 BCE.⁵⁷ Thus, in this instance, it seems that Athens contrived an elaborate and unique process and thereby domesticated the Delphic oracle to suit its needs.

In sum, the treaty between Skiathos and Delphi refers to a bean cake, not a two-bean oracle. The three attested consultations of the Thessalians, Kleisthenes, and Athenians suggest that clients could bring their own implements to Delphi and request that the Pythia select one or more in a way that they

⁵³ Bowden 2005: 93.

⁵⁴ Both are quoted by Didymus *On Dem.*: text and trans. in Harding 2006: 91 and 95.

⁵⁵ Bowden 2005: 92.

⁵⁶ Bowden 2005: 93.

⁵⁷ Bowden 2005: 91.

recommended. The small number and varied nature of these consultations do not lead to the conclusion that Delphi supplied materials for sortition or that sortition was a regular feature of consultations in Apollo's temple.

4. Oracular Language and Lots

Recent discussions of sortition at Delphi have relied on vocabulary including the verb 'to take up' (*anairein*) and some variant of an oracular phrase 'better and preferable' (*lōion kai ameionon*). I will explore these in turn. The verb 'to take up' (*anairein*) introduces several Delphic oracles and is therefore often translated as 'to prophesy', though it is not clear how this verb came to have this meaning.⁵⁸ One argument is that the verb denoted the Pythia's selecting a lot. Fontenrose considers the possibility that the verb may have 'acquired the broader meaning of "speak oracularly" from a former practice of divination by lot or from some continued use of lots in the mantic rites at Delphi'.⁵⁹ Fontenrose rejects these possibilities because the verb introduces oracles that do not admit of a yes or no answer, and cannot therefore be linked to the uses of lots, in his estimation.⁶⁰

Two further considerations support Fontenrose's position. If the verb *anairein* had come to mean 'to speak oracularly' because it was once, or sometimes was still, used with lot oracles, this development may have been widespread in Greece and not strictly associated with divination at Delphi. Although the verb is sometimes used with Apollo at Delphi,⁶¹ it is also used for oracles from Dodona and Delphi.⁶² Moreover, the Suda (s.v. *aneilen*) argues that the verb means to take not lots, but the spirit of the god. While there is no room here for a comprehensive survey of uses of *aneirein*, its possible reference to lot oracles at Delphi can be considered alongside Plutarch's essay 'On Oracles No Longer Given in Verse'. Plutarch surveys the change in Delphic oracles from hexameter to prose, and does not mention the use of lots during Delphi's early stages. His omission in this essay and in his other writings about Delphi suggests that lots were not used at Delphi.

⁵⁸ Fontenrose 1978: 220. Suidas (s.v. *aneilen*) writes that the verb refers to taking up the divine spirit (i.e. becoming possessed), taking up or away a person's ignorance, or taking up a question.

⁵⁹ Fontenrose 1978: 220. ⁶⁰ Fontenrose 1978: 224.

⁶¹ Plato uses the verb once with Apollo at Delphi, and twice with 'the god' for which Apollo may be a likely candidate, even if he is not mentioned: Pl. *Leg.* 914a, 642d, and 865d.

⁶² Dem. *Meid.* 51.

The words 'better and preferable' (*lōion kai ameinon*), as our opening quotes of Johnston and Scott indicate, have suggested to scholars that sortition took place at Delphi because sortition could only affirm or deny a petitioner's question, which these words are imagined to solicit or transcribe.⁶³ This view can be traced back to Pierre Amandry, who saw this phrase as indicating that sortition yielding a yes or no answer (or a name) had been used, while oracles that do not use this phrase were the result of composition by the inspired Pythia (or priests). That is, different oracular answers result from different procedures. Accepting Amandry's view that this phrase indicates that sortition was used at Delphi, then, depends on accepting that sortition offered an answer consisting of yes or no. Yet there are no convincing reasons to accept this view of sortition, as the final section of this chapter shows. Moreover, a brief review of oracular questions and answers that use some of form of 'better and preferable...' demonstrates that these words are not linked to a simple oracular affirmation or denial.

The variety of forms and grammatical constructions of 'better and preferable' in oracular questions and answers demonstrates that this phrase may be used to solicit divine predictions of all sorts; it is linked neither to a particular type of divination such as lots, nor to the manner in which a type of divination is conducted. Among the nearly twenty-five accounts of Delphic inquiries that have some form of 'better and preferable', most, dating from the fourth to the second century BCE, are found on inscriptions.⁶⁴

Rebecca Sinos' recent work on one such inscription (mid- to late-third century BCE) named after a certain Mnesiepes, a Parian man who researched and contributed to the local shrine in honour of the poet Archilochos, suggests that these words do not indicate a simple or particular type of divinatory session.⁶⁵ Each of the three Delphic oracles given to Mnesiepes is in indirect discourse: the words 'better and preferable' are followed by an infinitive 'to be' and conditional participles in the dative case. These participles, Sinos argues, repeat the words of the petitioner, Mnesiepes. Two of the oracles continue with 'and (*de kai*)' followed by infinitives that 'express

⁶³ In her discussion of sortition at Delphi, Johnston (2008: 53) tacitly acknowledges there is no ancient evidence for the notion that sortition was binary. 'Presumably (on the model of similar methods in other cultures), the beans or pebbles were marked yes or no or were of two different colors when the question posed was of a yes or no variety.' See also Flower 2008: 86–91.

⁶⁴ On the numbering in the following list, see n. 51 above. PW45/Q30, PW93/Q145, PW124/H2, PW137/H5, PW172/H11, PW219/Q8, PW260/H19, PW262/H21, PW279/H25, PW281/H27, PW283/H29, PW285/H33, PW335/H36, PW341/H38, PW342/H39, PW347/H45, PW379/L164, PW427/H54, PW460/H61, PW466/H66, PW-NA (see Parke 1958)/H74.

⁶⁵ Sinos forthcoming.

divine will'.⁶⁶ In this way, the oracular response contains further instructions that appear to have been added to the god's confirmation of Mnesiepes' initial request, during or after the consultation.

Oracular questions from Dodona, where the mantic mechanism remains unclear, provide further examples of the variety of ways that 'better and preferable' was used.⁶⁷ These both complicate and lend support to Sinos' interpretation of the Mnesiepes inscription and provide further reasons for not connecting these words to a type of divination imagined to provide a simple affirmation or denial. Many oracular requests from Dodona that begin with some form of 'better and preferable' are followed by dative participles (or optatives) describing the petitioner's possible action.⁶⁸ These questions suggest that the petitioner would receive an oracular response such as Mnesiepes did: that is, 'it is better/preferable if you do x; and also...'. Absent any oracular responses, however, this must remain conjecture. Of the many questions from Dodona with these words, the following one cautions against linking these words with a mechanism or type of answer. A petitioner writes, 'And if I will do better by taking a wife (*lambononti*), and whether there will be children for Isodemos, who will take care of him, and if he should live in Athens and become a citizen among the Athenians?'⁶⁹ Here a string of questions is posed to which a simple yes or no would be insufficient.⁷⁰

While a comprehensive survey of 'preferable and better' in oracular questions and answers from Delphi and elsewhere would offer greater clarification of how these words were used,⁷¹ this brief examination suggests that they do not indicate that petitioners used these words simply to receive confirmation or denial, or that oracular responses that included this phrase merely confirmed or denied one request. Thus, these words cannot

⁶⁶ Sinos (forthcoming: n. 72) offers parallels in inscriptional evidence.

⁶⁷ Eidinow 2013: 67–71.

⁶⁸ A wide variety of these can be found in Eidinow 2013. Space does not allow them to be listed here.

⁶⁹ Eidinow 2013: 85 n. 6 (text and translation).

⁷⁰ PW 335/H36 (*AGIBM* 896 = *Rev. Phil.* 15 [1941]). On this contemporary inscription, the oracular answer from Delphi that Poseidonios of Halikarnassos receives begins with 'better and preferable' followed by dative participles and infinitives arranged in the same way as on Mnesiepes' inscription. These, however, are in response to his question 'what is better and preferable for him and his descendants to do and to accomplish', a question requiring more than affirmation or denial.

⁷¹ On Delphic oracles, see Fontenrose 1978: Chapter 1 *passim*, and 166–96 on the phrasing of verse oracles. On the phrasing of individual questions (literary and epigraphic) at Dodona, see Eidinow 2013: 45–50.

be connected to binary forms of divination such as lots are imagined to offer; and thus they do not correlate to a particular type of mantic mechanism at Delphi. Their occurrence in the Delphic corpus of oracles suggests only a correlation with the inscription of oracles on stone in the fourth and third centuries. In sum, the Pythia could be called upon to reach out her hand and select an urn or bean or pebble, if a client so asked, but this is rather different from positing that sortition was regularly used at Delphi, or that a *phialē* with pebbles was available for use in the temple.⁷²

5. Lessons from Anthropology: Binary Lot Oracles

The written record of Delphic divination offers almost no details about the consultation at Delphi, instead emphasizing the oracles Delphi issued. About the session at Delphi, a few tantalizing details suggest that our sources' usual presentation of the interaction as scripted and straightforward may obscure messier realities. The Athenians refuse the first oracle that the Pythia pronounces and demand another.⁷³ The Pythia convulses and eventually dies, in Plutarch's often-quoted description of a consultation he witnessed.⁷⁴ The Pythia perhaps sat on a tripod, when she delivered oracles.⁷⁵ The Pythia could be bribed, and her words or actions could be challenged.⁷⁶ These scant details suggest that although no religious strictures prohibited describing a divinatory session at Delphi, as in the case of the Eleusinian Mysteries, a reticence, and perhaps ignorance, has inhibited ancient authors from providing a narrative account of a divinatory procedure. They write about oracles rather than divinatory dialogues, and emphasize the social context of consultations. For this reason, written accounts of Delphic divination, including the words 'better and preferable', are not reliable guides to the nature of divinatory consultations. This challenge is reinforced by the following examination of Azande divination. Although this comparison does not argue against the use

⁷² Fontenrose (1978: 219–22) also argued that, in the absence of material evidence at Delphi and since only three oracular consultations describe some lot device brought by clients, there was no lot oracle at Delphi. Fontenrose attributed the words 'preferable and better' to the proximity in time between consultation and recording. Fanciful verses, he argued, have accrued to what were once simple prose Delphic oracles that advised the recipient to do or not do something. In his view, then, questions and oracles with some version of the 'preferable and better' do not suggest the use of sortition so much as capture what Fontenrose imagines was a straightforward question and answer session at Delphi.

⁷³ Hdt. 7.140–4. ⁷⁴ Plut. *Mor.* 3.438a. ⁷⁵ Strabo 9.3.5; Diod. Sic. 16.27.1.

⁷⁶ Bribery: Cleomenes (Hdt. 6.75 with Paus. 3.4.6); Alcmaeonids (Hdt. 5.62 and 90, 6.123); Lysander (Diod. Sic. 14.13); Pleistonax (Thuc. 5.16). Challenged: Hdt. 6.86.

of lots at Delphi, it does suggest that caution is necessary in how scholars conceptualize binary lot oracles, as well as the relationship between written text and oral divination.⁷⁷

Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard's transcripts and summaries of three types of oracles (termite, rubbing board, and poison/chicken) offer insight not only into Azande divination, but also into aleatory binary oracles and their recording in writing, the two foci of this brief inquiry.⁷⁸ Among the many cases of oracle consultations that Evans-Pritchard discusses,⁷⁹ three processes are evident. First, consulting a binary oracle almost always consists of multiple questions. Rarely does a client ask only one question, even after receiving a sufficient and clear answer to an initial question. In this way, the client collects more answers to the same questions or more answers to related questions. Additionally, different individuals may consult oracles on the same matter.⁸⁰ Second, different types of oracles may be asked the same question, or one type of oracle may be asked if it is telling the truth. This process often yields contradictory responses that are then debated and resolved.⁸¹ Finally, an initial question may lead to additional questions and answers not solicited by the client, but proposed by the diviner.⁸²

Nearly all of these processes were captured in a documentary on the Azande, filmed nearly fifty years after Evans-Pritchard's work.⁸³ One highlight of the documentary is the plight of a man named Banda, who first asks a termite oracle whether his ill wife will die.⁸⁴ When it tells him that she will

⁷⁷ Deeley in this volume provides an additional perspective, from the discipline of psychiatry, on the importance of considering the 'thought world' in which ancient oracular consultation took place.

⁷⁸ Evans-Pritchard's work remains a touchstone within classics and anthropology because of the wealth of data that he collected—he was the first anthropologist to include transcripts of the speech of Azande in divinatory sessions—and because of the range of approaches that he innovated. See Beidelman 1974 and Douglas 1980 (with caution); Geertz 1988 (on his ethnographic literary realism) and Kuper 1996 offer overviews of his career.

⁷⁹ In his analysis of whether Zande oracles are diagnostic or predictive, Zeitlyn (2012: 258) defines seventy-four case studies in Evans-Pritchard's work (1937) that include séances with witchdoctors as well as consultations of termites, rubbing boards, and poison oracles. I omit séances and offer a summary of only those that use aleatory binary devices. It is significant for my purposes that Zeitlyn does not indicate that multiple 'cases' are often connected to the same individual with a problem. For this reason, I cite individuals and page numbers from Evans-Pritchard in the following footnotes.

⁸⁰ Evans-Pritchard 1937: Kamanga 104, 304, 307, 367; Kisaga 303, 305; Namarusu 303; Bamina 353–4; Ndoruma 307; Zakiri 307.

⁸¹ Evans-Pritchard 1937: Kisaga 308.

⁸² Evans-Pritchard 1937: Kisaga 303–4; Bamina 302–3; Zakiri 307; Oracle Operator 307–8.

⁸³ Singer and Ryle 1981.

⁸⁴ Singer and Ryle 1981: minute 14. This involves inserting two sticks in a termite hole overnight. The answer is derived by examining which stick the termites eat.

live, he then consults the rubbing board oracle. Here the operator, as the diviner is called in the film, rubs a small wet piece of wood against a board held between the operator's toes. After Banda asks if his wife will die, the operator asks the board if she will die *and*, 'Is her illness caused by witchcraft?' The board sticks, indicating a positive answer. Banda then asks, 'Will the illness go if we find the witch?' The board sticks. Although Banda's initial question has been answered, the operator repeats it as he rubs the board and, midway through his question, adds water to it. 'Listen oracle, is this woman going to die? Or when he gets home, will he find her well? Is it nonsense to think she is dying? Your wife won't die. She will be able . . .' Banda completes the sentence: 'to work and go fishing in the rivers again'. Some untranslated dialogue follows and Banda states, 'It's not wise to consult about one's wives because women always bring trouble.' Both men laugh. The conclusion to Banda's question is that Banda's wife will live *and* that a witch is causing her illness.

The next segment in the film shows Banda consulting the poison oracle. An operator holds a chicken between his toes. As Banda taps a stick, he provides the name of his wife, Narwanda, and states that his second wife may have bewitched her. He instructs the operator to ask the oracle (here *Benge*, the poison) to kill the chicken if this is so. The operator asks Banda's question in several different ways. The chicken dies. The film's narrator summarizes that Banda asks the oracle two more questions: should he divorce his second wife—to which the oracle answers 'no' (the chicken dies)—and what action should be taken. The dialogue between Banda and the operator is not translated. The narrator explains that the results are taken to the police to oversee the second wife's purification of the evil within her.⁸⁵ I have summarized Banda's consultations, omitting details (indeed some, perhaps many, were not available) in order to demonstrate that aleatory binary oracles may be as complex, contested, and confusing as verbal oracles from a diviner.

My next example, from James Wilce's work on Bangladeshi divinatory sessions, although not deploying a binary aleatory oracle, also suggests the prevalence of contestation, reflection, and debate in divinatory sessions, and further queries whether transcripts or descriptions of sessions that omit such details, in the interest of recording a question and answer, are adequate guides to understanding divinatory mechanism. In his study of a

⁸⁵ Singer and Ryle 1981: Banda's consultations are at minutes 14–20.

diviner named Delwar Kari, Wilce argues that ‘divinations are interpretative pronouncements’ comprised of ‘the evolution from a monologic declamation to emergent, unscripted dialogue’ that comprises the divinatory session.⁸⁶ These interpretative pronouncements may appear to be endpoints of a session, but they are better understood, Wilce contends, as the attempts of a diviner to keep contingency at bay within and after the session in order to produce ‘social facts’. The social facts derived from divination are what Wilce calls ‘candidate social facts’, because clients may not accept them as true and may ignore them.⁸⁷ Further, although these candidate social facts may seem to solve, in a functionalist way, the problems that the client has presented, most often ‘divination only unfolds its meaningfulness in an interpersonal consultational setting’,⁸⁸ the conclusion of which is often not final; clients must implement, ignore, contemplate, query, and reflect on the divinatory advice. This may extend the reflection instigated by the consultation, thus postponing further any resolution to the matter at hand. Synopses of divinatory sessions (whether by ancients of Delphi or by anthropologists in the field) that state a question and answer (in whatever form), in Wilce’s view, do not capture the intricacies and even combativeness of divinatory practices. Divination by aleatory devices that appear designed to offer a yes or no to a client’s question do not preclude or eliminate these features of divination, or limit the divination to the question(s) of the client, although they are often conceived as so doing.

Divination provokes reflection, and offers a postponement of choice that is a suspension of time, action, and judgement, rather than a swift resolution of a specific question. These notions are evident in Banda’s three consultations over a period of a few days and in the resulting purification of his second wife with official imprimatur of the local authorities. They are also evident in an ancient account of a certain man named Charikles throwing knucklebones, which captures his licence to explore the future, even as it emphasizes how silly such explorations may appear to an observer who does not abstain from scrutiny.

Charicles... would count out four knucklebones of a Libyan gazelle and take a gamble on his expectations. If he made a successful throw and particularly if he was ever blessed with the throw named after the goddess herself, and no dice showed the same face, he would prostrate himself before the goddess, thinking he would gain his desire. But if, as usually happens,

⁸⁶ Wilce 2001: 195.⁸⁷ Wilce 2001: 198.⁸⁸ Graw 2009 : 107.

he made an indifferent throw on to his table, and the dice revealed an unpropitious result, he would curse all Cnidus and show utter dejection as if at an irremediable disaster; but a minute later he would snatch up the dice and try to cure by another throw his earlier lack of success.⁸⁹

As Charikles casts his knucklebones again and again, he appears both absurd and manipulative as he tries to get a positive outcome. A more sympathetic view might emphasize that Charikles' repeated rolls and emotional outbursts indicate he is inordinately anxious, perhaps even desperate. The gods are and are not favourable. Just as one might puzzle over how to interpret the advice given from the above oracle and try out different possible scenarios, Charikles' many throws allow him to do the same sort of imaginative and anxious previewing and forecasting of his future. Both scenarios suggest that divination with knucklebones is not a matter of a straightforward answer to a straightforward question. Charikles' obstinate attempt to get a favourable outcome within a fluid divinatory structure—one with constraints and indeterminacy—emphasizes that communication with the divine is not a matter of obedience, but can be contentious, pleading, and anxious.⁹⁰

Charikles is not duped, deceived, or irrational because he repeatedly tosses knucklebones, although the author of this vignette implies he is. Rather the account of Charikles suggests that any type of divination, whether aleatory and/or binary, can be, to quote Wilce, 'dialogic, interactive, and always potentially unsettling'. It is often an attempt to imagine and then search for solutions during and after the divinatory session.⁹¹ In this view, most forms of divination demand both a suspension of scrutiny of the divinatory mechanism coupled with reflection on proffered oracular outcomes whatever the medium.⁹² Thereby the client obtains the creative freedom to explore the unknown future within an established, tried and true system. Such creative, if also anxiety-ridden, explorations were not hindered by binary forms of aleatory divination.⁹³ These provided a frame and scaffolding for such explorations.

⁸⁹ [Luc.] *Amor.* 16, trans. M. D. MacLeod 1967. See also Grottanelli 2005 on the ancient condemnation of sortition.

⁹⁰ On similar repetitive attempts to get a favourable outcome in Roman religion, see Driediger-Murphy, this volume.

⁹¹ Wilce 2001: 190.

⁹² Jackson 2012: 299. Such susceptibility, Jackson argues, can be 'identified by the willingness to abstain from scrutinizing a state of affairs that would elsewhere or otherwise have appeared preposterous'.

⁹³ The consultation of the Athenians using urns suggests that this elaborate procedure was conceived as a response to the desire to eliminate any discussion.

The surviving accounts of Delphic oracles may be treated as records of brief divinatory exchanges in which a definitive answer to a question was sought, or they may be considered brief summations of lengthy, fraught dialogues. To quote Wilce again, ‘How could we think that any interpretative practice could be reduced to a text, and monologue?’⁹⁴ His question implies that all the recorded Delphic oracles are brief summations. Moreover, his view of divination as dialogue suggests that the differences among types of divination need not dictate how individuals engaged with them. In this view, divinatory consultations in Apollo’s temple were interpretative practices, the goal of which was only nominally an attempt to ascertain the future. Such interpretative practices were designed to allow intuition, reason, even confusion a place to contribute to a decision.⁹⁵ The use of lots would not preclude this possibility.

In sum, this study’s circumspect review of the ancient evidence suggests that the Pythia did not maintain a lot oracle at Delphi. However, its generous interpretation of abbreviated ancient reports of Delphic oracles, suggests that if she did, her divinatory practice at Delphi would most likely not have been a procedure yielding a yes or a no answer. This is based on examination of current anthropological accounts of divination, which suggest that almost all divinatory dialogues are creative and contentious engagements where participants must maintain a ‘vigilant disposition towards the unexpected’, balancing reason with hope, and despair with reflection.⁹⁶

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⁹⁴ Wilce 2001: 198.

⁹⁵ On intuition and divination, see Struck 2016: 15–36; on the uncertainty inherent in oracular consultation, see Eidinow, this volume.

⁹⁶ Jackson 2012: 295.

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6

Making Sense of Chaos

Civil War, Dynasties, and Family Trees

Andrew Stiles

Ancient accounts of some very peculiar portents involving trees, which predicted the fortunes of future *principes* through a kind of arboreal sign language, allow us to examine the wider role that divination played in Roman society during times of crisis and uncertainty.¹ Many of these cases are notable for the fact that they relate not only to the accession of an individual *princeps*, but also to his children, giving them a ‘dynastic’ message.² Tree portents seem particularly ripe for dynastic interpretations (as opposed to thunderbolts, for instance) since the life of a tree very often extends beyond that of a man, and thus the longevity of a tree itself (whether real or fictional) enabled more than one individual’s fate to be predicted through its behaviour, and earlier signs to be reinterpreted in light of later events. Gowers recently observed that many of these arboreal stories cluster around the year 68 CE, which probably reflects the intense uncertainty and anxiety felt among the population at the fall of Nero and the civil war that ensued.³ Similar stories had emerged from the earlier civil wars of the late Republic and the Triumviral period, which suggests that their appearance in 68 CE and shortly thereafter was a revival of a phenomenon that had sprung up a number of times before.

¹ Many thanks to Nicholas Purcell, Kathryn Welch, the anonymous reviewers, and especially the conference organizers, Esther Eidinow and Lindsay Driediger-Murphy, for their comments on an earlier version of this piece—any errors that remain are entirely my own.

² Some of these tree portents have been examined by a small number of modern scholars with varying interests. Particularly worthy of note are articles by Flory and Reeder (concerning Livia’s *Gallina Alba* portent, and the triumphal connotations of laurel), and more recently, Gowers (her primary focus the trees and family trees in the *Aeneid*) and a longer study on sacred trees by Hunt. See Flory 1989; Reeder 1997; Gowers 2011; Santangelo 2013: 259–60; Hunt 2016: 199–223.

³ Gowers 2011: 87–8.

The central case studies examined here concern the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties. The primary Julio-Claudian instance discussed is the comparatively well-known *Gallina Alba* portent, in which an eagle purportedly dropped a white hen, which held a laurel sprig in its beak, into the lap of Livia, the new wife of Octavian, in 38 BCE. The laurel sprig was later planted at her villa and generated a grove, which produced the laurels for the processions of subsequent imperial *triumphatores*. Later Julio-Claudian *principes* are also said to have planted their own sprigs of laurel nearby, creating distinct trees associated with each individual. There are other cases of Julio-Claudian arboreal portents that allegedly occurred during the civil wars of the first century BCE: a withering oak tree that regained its strength upon Octavian's arrival on Capri; a palm tree that sprang up in the pavement outside Augustus' house; and another portentous palm that produced a branch that resembled a tree in and of itself, allegedly observed by Julius Caesar at the battle of Munda in 45 BCE. As we shall see, these examples provide a wider interpretative context, and in some instances particular precedents or models, for later Flavian dynastic *prodigia*, such as an oak that produced a tree-like branch on Vespasian's family estate, and a cypress that fell down and miraculously stood up again.

In fact, there is evidence that authors were compiling instances of tree portents in the Hellenistic period and late Republic, long before the elder Pliny's discussion of arboreal *prodigia*, which is found within his lengthier section on trees.⁴ Pliny notes that Aristander (presumably Aristander of Telmessos, Alexander's seer) compiled a collection of tree omens from Greece, within a work possibly known as *de Portentis*, and that a man named Gaius Epidius likewise collated examples that had occurred in Italy, in his *Commentarii*.⁵ To these two authors we can add Pliny himself in this passage, whose collection represents a similar attempt in the late 70s CE.⁶ These *florilegia* are significant in that they show a pre-existing tradition of observing and interpreting tree portents, often in relation to the fate of a city or army, prior to our examples of the late Republic and the Triumviral period.

⁴ Plin. *HN* 17.241–5. While some examples portend foreign and civil conflict, only one of those that he cites in this particular passage is related to dynasties *per se*: an olive grove that purportedly crossed a road to swap places with other crops following the death of Nero.

⁵ This Gaius Epidius was perhaps a relation of the tribune of 44 BCE, Gaius Epidius Marullus, or of Marcus Epidius, supposedly the tutor of both Antony and Octavian—particularly if the author of our commentary is Gaius Epidius of Nuceria, cf. Suet. *Rhet.* 4. On Aristander and trees, see Nice 2005: 90–3; for the possibility of this author being an 'Aristander of Athens' instead, see King 2004: 82, n.57.

⁶ Cf. Gowers 2011: 88, n.5 on some instances in Pliny.

My reading of these portents involves branching out from a narrow focus on the *principes* in question, and issues of ‘propaganda’ and manipulation, by considering the divinatory worldview of the people involved in the circulation and adaptation of these narratives.⁷ This perspective allows us to make further observations concerning the way in which divination intersected with many other aspects of Roman society, including cultural memory, conceptions of time, and the development of historiography. The approach adopted by Ripat, in her study of omens from earlier in the Republic, is a useful springboard. Her focus on the role of the populace in granting legitimacy to claims of divine support can be carried on into the Principate, and tree portents provide a core sample which enables this to be illustrated quite clearly.⁸ In the examples I discuss, individuals or groups within the wider populace evidently played a similar role in conferring authority on portents relating to generals and *principes* through their acceptance of them, and in fact actively shaped later developments in these narratives—and in some cases even devised them in the first instance, I would suggest, in accordance with their own expectations and religious worldview.⁹

The stories are usually assumed to have been produced by someone near the top of the political hierarchy, and are often imagined to have operated in Roman society by tricking, or at least influencing, the plebs to accept that divine favour was bestowed upon certain leaders, thereby securing popular support. For instance, Flory’s study of the *Gallina Alba* portent aimed ‘to describe the political reasons for the omen, its psychological value to

⁷ Scholarship from the earlier twentieth century placed perhaps the greatest emphasis on the propagandistic value of these stories. Lattimore provides a more nuanced perspective, attributing some of these stories to a general expectation about Vespasian’s success, and others (such as the miracles in Alexandria) to the deliberate invention of Vespasian’s inner circle (Lattimore 1934: 446). A recent study of sacred trees in the Roman world by Hunt (2016) provides the wider arboreal religious context for the particular points made here concerning the ‘dynastic’ tree portents. See especially Hunt 2016: 199–223 on arboreal portents.

⁸ Ripat 2006: 155–6 writes ‘What has received less attention in discussions of prophecy and authority is the role the general population of non-élites played in this ideological system which served the interests of the powerful rich, either collectively or individually, at the expense of the less powerful poor. [...] authority, the expected reward of élite claims of divine favouritism, can be neither universally shared nor coerced. It must be willingly granted to an individual or segment of society by an authority-lacking majority. Where divination is concerned, the identification of an occurrence as a “real” divine message is subjective, and general concession to accept one person’s (or one group’s) claims about divination as true is a concession of real authority. In short, if élite claims of divine favouritism were made to impress the general population, the general population had to be impressed for the claims to be at all meaningful.’

⁹ On the continuing importance of portents to large segments of the Roman population in the Imperial period, see also Santangelo, this volume.

Octavian in shaping public opinion, and, finally, to connect the omen with a famous passage in the *Aeneid*.¹⁰ Elsewhere in her article, there are clear indications of what could be described as a ‘top-down’ model—for example, her conclusion that ‘Augustus understood the gullibility of the unsophisticated and how to capture their loyalty’.¹¹ This approach implies a somewhat simplistic relationship between political power and religious authority and practice that should be called into question.¹² Yet the evidence Flory presents, and indeed some of her own observations about the representation of the *Gallina Alba* story in different sources, point to adaptation over time, by, and for, different audiences, despite her overall emphasis on the uniformity and control of Augustan ideology.¹³ I am not at all proposing that this ‘propagandistic’ element should be discounted altogether, but would suggest that more can be made from this omen and similar examples if we switch the focus onto the receptiveness of the audiences themselves, and the role that such narratives may have played in Roman society more generally. There are a range of possibilities which complicate a ‘top-down’ model; just as honours could be offered to a senator or *princeps* by different individuals and constituencies on their own initiative, both in Rome and in the provinces, so stories could also be told to honour leaders in less official ways.¹⁴ Such stories might stem from communities or groups that sought to explain and

¹⁰ Flory 1989: 344.

¹¹ Flory 1989: 355.

¹² This is possibly derived from the Polybian view (6.56.6–12) of a cynical elite manipulating the gullible plebs, which has shaped the opinion of numerous modern scholars writing about Roman religion and divination. Particular readings of Cicero (e.g. *Nat. D.* 1.42), Tacitus, and other authors have also contributed to this modern notion of ‘insincerity’ among the upper classes in using divination and religion for political ends. The idea that religion and divination in the Republic were largely manipulated by the elite for their own ends has been challenged by numerous modern scholars including Davies 2004; Johnston 2005; Ripat 2006; and especially Santangelo 2013: 5–7, and Champion 2017: 1–22, the latter providing a synopsis of much recent scholarship that both maintains and, more importantly, challenges this position, alongside a new critique. It is clear that most *principes* attempted to assert some level of control over religious and divinatory practices in Rome, cf. Potter 1994: 174–82; nonetheless, studies of divination in the Principate have been less willing to challenge what Champion calls the ‘elite-instrumentalist’ view, perhaps owing to the assumption that the *princeps* had much greater control over the religious behaviour of the populace than was likely the case. Edicts banning particular prophetic methods and the numerous expulsions of astrologers and diviners point, if anything, to the enduring popularity and diversity of divinatory practice. Cf. Burkert 2005: 43–8, on the issue of control.

¹³ E.g. Flory 1989: 353, where Flory suggests that Dio’s account ‘shows how the story continued as a living legend, subject with time to different explanations’.

¹⁴ Potter 1994: 162 notes the example of Pliny who, when addressing Trajan (*Pan.* 5.3–4), claims he himself witnessed an omen portending Trajan’s future rule. Josephus’ prediction of Vespasian’s accession and his own release is another example of the benefits that might result from projecting favourable omens ‘upward’: Suet. *Vesp.* 5.6–7; Cass. Dio 66.1.4; Joseph. *BJ* 3.399–408.

praise the prominence of an individual, in accordance with a pre-existing model or tradition of portents and omens.¹⁵ For instance, a delegation from Tarraco announced to Augustus that a palm tree had sprung up on their altar dedicated to the *princeps*, to which he replied, ‘it is obvious how often you light fires on it’—probably not the reaction the Tarraconians would have desired.¹⁶ Opportunism on the part of those writing speeches, poems, and other works should also not be dismissed, whether those who composed them were close to the *princeps*, or simply aspired to be. Alternatively, in certain situations, even when a particular leader was *not* favoured by an individual or a particular constituency, these defeated opponents (or those with no preferred candidate) might nevertheless circulate a tale about divine intervention or divinatory confirmation of an individual’s supremacy to explain their own lack of success.¹⁷ The evidence that survives can support an interpretation that modifies the picture formed in much modern scholarship of the relationship between politics and divination during the late Republic, the Triumviral period, and the early Principate.¹⁸

1. Julio-Claudian Tree Portents

The *Gallina Alba* story we have noted is one of the most well-attested dynastic tree omens encountered in the sources, appearing in the works of Pliny, Suetonius, and Dio.¹⁹ In Suetonius and Pliny (but not in Dio), the emperors are also said to have planted their own sprigs of laurel again at the

¹⁵ E.g. Noreña 2011: 271, writing about provincial honorific responses to the *princeps*, notes: ‘The main obstacle to understanding this honorific system has been to see the primary audience of it as external. I would like to suggest that the main audience for these imperial statues and local honors for the emperor was not external but internal—not imperial, but local—and that, over time, these statues, inscriptions, and honors became an important means for provincial communities throughout the Roman West to represent the emperor to themselves in what had become, as a result of official publicity, a familiar symbolic language.’ See also the classic account of the so-called ‘theology of victory’ by Fears 1981.

¹⁶ Quint. *Inst.* 6.3.77. See now Hunt 2016: 217–23, who discusses the afterlife of this story on Tarraconian coinage after 14 BCE, and in an epigram by Philippus of Thessalonica, in which the palm has metamorphosed into a laurel.

¹⁷ An interesting example of this phenomenon are Jewish responses to being conquered or oppressed, which often describe the conquerors (Pompey, Vespasian, et al.) as being the instruments of the Jewish god (at least temporarily), who are used to inflict just punishment on the Jews for their transgressions (e.g. Joseph. *B.J.* 5.369, 5.412). This model may have stemmed from the experience of the Babylonian exile. Cf. de Lange 1978.

¹⁸ On the diversity (and often contestation) of possible interpretations in divinatory processes, see also Maurizio and Davies, in this volume.

¹⁹ There is also a possible allusion to this portent in Velleius Paterculus (2.79.2–3).

same site, producing distinct trees associated with each individual. Flory and Reeder have already explicated the various religious and triumphal connotations of the laurel, the potential use of the chickens for the *tripudium*, and thoroughly examined possible artistic resonances for this omen in Augustan art and architecture.²⁰ For our purposes, the unique aspects of each version are the most important elements. This is because they reveal adaptation and change over time, and demonstrate that interpretations of such signs were contested. We may begin with Pliny's discussion of laurel (*HN* 15.136–7), written in the late 70s CE, which is the earliest extant account.²¹

One of the most significant aspects of the account by Pliny is that the haruspices are consulted about the portent and provide advice on how to expiate it (by planting the laurel and rearing the hen). Haruspices do not appear in the other versions of this story—their identity, and the extent to which their assessment of the portent was deliberately designed to benefit Octavian, cannot be known. Whether the initial portent, in the minds of some Romans, would have fallen into the category of 'private' or 'public' is rather difficult to assess: on the one hand, the portent supposedly occurred on a road (cf. Suet. *Galb.* 1, discussed below), and the haruspices were consulted; on the other, the expiation took place on private land (Livia's villa), and importantly, as far as we know, the senate was not consulted.²² Whatever the case initially, certainly by later phases in the story's reception (including this retelling by Pliny) it would have been considered relevant to the state, in the sense that the *princeps* and his family had become an integral part of the *res publica*.²³ As Pliny observes, subsequent *principes* used the

²⁰ On the role of the hen and subsequent brood in the omen, and their potential use as *pulli* in divination, see Flory 1989: 349–52; Reeder 1997.

²¹ Plin. *HN* 15.136–7: Sunt et circa divum Augustum eventa eius digna memoratu. namque Liviae Drusillae, quae postea Augustam matrimonii nomen accepit, cum pacta esset illa Caesari, gallinam conspicui candoris sedenti aquila ex alto abiecit in gremium inlaesam, intrepideque miranti accessit miraculum, quoniam teneret in rostro laureum ramum onustum suis bacis; conservari alitem et subolem iussere haruspices ramumque eum seri ac rite custodiri: quod factum est in villa Caesarum fluvio Tiberi inposita iuxta nonum lapidem Flaminiae viae, quae ob id vocatur Ad gallinas; mireque silva ea provenit: ex ea triumphans postea Caesar laurum in manu tenuit coronamque capite gessit, ac deinde imperatores Caesares cuncti; traditusque mos est ramos quos tenerant serendi, et durant silvae nominibus suis discretae, fortassis ideo mutatis triumphalibus.

²² On the importance of senatorial consultation for a portent or prodigy to be considered 'public' in the Republic, see Rasmussen 2003: esp. 35, 219. On the personal consultation of haruspices by prominent statesmen in the late Republic, and their eventual integration into Roman state divination (beyond an advisory role) under Claudius, see Potter 1994: 157–8.

²³ Hekster and Rich (2006: 156) state that Augustus' prodigy-inspired Apollo Palatinus and Jupiter Tonans temples differed from Republican prodigial temples, among other reasons, because 'the prodigies were both individual to Octavian/Augustus, bearing on his property

laurel from this grove in their triumphs. The haruspices are also notable in that they provide an external confirmation of the portent, and thus, implicitly, of the story itself.

An interesting parallel scenario, involving a portent concerning Octavian in which the haruspices were consulted, is that of the thunderbolt which occurred only two years afterwards, in 36 BCE.²⁴ It seems that Octavian relied on their consultation in creating a series of positive readings of events which, in some cases, had traditionally been seen as negative or ambiguous portents. Lightning strikes, comets, floods of the Tiber, and so on were all interpreted as positive signs in the early Principate by those in power, despite their being attested as more often negative in earlier Republican instances.²⁵ While there is limited evidence for the particular interpretation of tree portents earlier in the Republic provided by Pliny and Livy, the involvement of the haruspices here, combined with the fact that Octavian sought to have other negative portents assessed in a positive light by the haruspices, suggests that the *Gallina Alba* portent itself may not have been seen as straightforwardly positive by all when initially circulated.²⁶ An indication that this was the case is the reaction of the populace in Dio's account, discussed below.

Suetonius' version of the story differs from Pliny's account in a few significant ways, and perhaps most importantly, provides a more extensive narrative arc (*Galb.* 1):

The race of the Caesars ended with Nero. That this would be so was shown by many portents and especially by two very significant ones. Years before, as Livia was returning to her estate near Veii, immediately after her marriage with Augustus, an eagle which flew by dropped into her lap a white hen, holding in its beak a sprig of laurel, just as the eagle had carried it off. Livia resolved to rear the fowl and plant the sprig, whereupon such a great brood of chickens was hatched that to this day the villa is called Ad

and personal safety'. On the idea that Augustus was in some sense 'superstitious' regarding omens and prodigies, see Levick 2010: 306.

²⁴ See Hekster and Rich 2006.

²⁵ On Caesar's comet, see Gural 1997; on Tiber floods, see Linderski 1993: 63–4; Davies 2004: 163–4; Flory (1989: 355) compares the comet with the *Gallina Alba* portent as examples of Augustus' manipulation of the populace, but I would argue that the interpretations of both portents were contested, possibly from the outset.

²⁶ Cf. tree portents which purportedly occurred in the Republic, which can be positive or negative, depending upon the location and activity of the tree in question—for example, those noted by Plin. *HN* 16.132–3 (positive) and Livy 43.13.5–6 (paired with negative portents).

Gallinas, and such a grove of laurel sprang up that the Caesars gathered their laurels from it when they were going to celebrate triumphs. Moreover, it was the habit of those who triumphed to plant other branches at once in that same place, and it was observed that just before the death of each of them the tree which he had planted withered. Now in Nero's last year the whole grove died from the root up, as well as all the hens. Furthermore, when shortly afterwards the temple of the Caesars was struck by lightning, the heads fell from all the statues at the same time, and his sceptre, too, was dashed from the hand of Augustus.²⁷

A crucial difference in this version is that the haruspices have been replaced by Livia herself in the decision-making role concerning the course of action to take ('Livia resolved to rear the fowl and plant the sprig'). This may point to a later circulation of the tale, when Livia's position in the state had grown in importance, either as the wife of Augustus or, from 14 CE, as the mother of the *princeps*, Tiberius.²⁸ Suetonius also adds new details, stating that the tree planted by each *princeps* was observed to wither before his death, and claiming that in the last year of Nero's reign, the entire grove (as well as the entire brood of hens) died off. These details demonstrate clearly that there was at least one other addition to the story, most likely in the early Flavian period or in the midst of the civil war in 68–9 CE. Yet it is noteworthy that

²⁷ Progenies Caesarum in Nerone defecit: quod futurum compluribus quidem signis, sed vel evidentissimis duobus apparuit. Liviae olim post Augusti statim nuptias Veientanum suum revisenti praetervolans aquila gallinam albam ramulum lauri rostro tenentem, ita ut rapuerat, demisit in gremium; cumque nutrir alitem, pangi ramulum placuisset, tanta pullorum suboles provenit, ut hodieque ea villa 'ad Gallinas' vocetur, tale vero lauretum, ut triumphaturi Caesares inde laureas decerperent; fuitque mos triumphantibus, alias confestim eodem loco pangere; et observatum est sub cuiusque obitum arborem ab ipso institutam elanguisse. Ergo novissimo Neronis anno et silva omnis exaruit radicitus, et quidquid ibi gallinarum erat interiit. Ac subinde tacta de caelo Caesarum aede capita omnibus simul statuīs deciderunt, Augusti etiam sceptrum e manibus excussum est.

²⁸ See Purcell 1986 on the role of Livia as both *exemplum* of a more public womanly virtue, and target of invective, in the emerging autocracy. Purcell writes (1986: 87), 'Livia's position can only be understood through the perception that there was a graded range of activities lying between the totally domestic and the completely public, not a sharply defined boundary. Her role was developed through subtly exploiting a variety of positions in that range, at its most public verging on the male political world, but more often making use of the less sensitive intermediate zones of the range of possibilities.' Livia's role in the *Gallina Alba* story places her precisely in such a range—it is a 'domestic' portent with 'public' ramifications. Purcell also notes (1986: 90), 'The supereminent status of that family made Livia's case an unusually public matter, most of all when it left the realm of the merely human. It had been an estate of Livia which was dignified by the Gods with the signs of the fortune of the dynasty which was to arise from Livia's motherhood, the wonderful miracle of the chickens and bay-trees which gave to her Prima Porta establishment the name *Ad Gallinas Albas*. One interpretation of the omen was that Livia should have the might of Augustus in her complete control.' See also Severy 2003: esp. ch. 9, on the developing role of the family of Augustus, including Livia, in the early Principate.

Pliny, writing in the late 70s CE, does not mention the demise of the grove. If the grove had in fact withered, this may point to the close relationships that Pliny had with Vespasian and Titus, and his desire not to cause offence; alternatively, he may simply have been unaware of the grove's current state.²⁹ A third and perhaps more likely possibility is the explanation that the grove continued to grow at the villa (not exactly a public site, nor particularly easily accessible), while at the same time a rumour was circulated in Rome that it had withered, drawing attention to the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and this rumour was later picked up by Suetonius and Dio.³⁰ If this was the case, then the tale of the grove's demise might indicate an adaptation of the story in line with wider audience expectations, contrary to the physical fact of its continued existence.

Finally, there is Dio's version (48.52.1–53.3), which lumps the *Gallina Alba* narrative together with a range of other portents. This account includes an even greater emphasis on Livia's role than that of Suetonius.³¹ Dio adds that 'Livia was destined to hold in her lap even Caesar's power and to dominate him in everything', reporting that although she herself was pleased with the portent, it 'inspired the rest with dread' and disturbed 'the other people in the city'. Here Livia is presented in a sinister light, which is most likely a development of the later Augustan or Tiberian era.³² This version with its reference to unfavourable reactions from others in Rome also contains more of the original Triumviral political context—a period in

²⁹ While archaeological evidence of laurel has been found at the site of the villa, it is uncertain whether the grove was contained in planter pots (*ollae perforatae*), as Reeder 1997 claims; other species have been found at the villa, and the planters do not suggest the location of the grove by themselves, as noted by Klynne and Liljenstolpe 2000: 127. Klynne 2005: 3 proposes that the grove was located in the villa's 'garden terrace', which he reconstructs as a very large *porticus triplex*.

³⁰ On the influence of rumours (no matter how false) on the course of history, see Gibson 1998.

³¹ Οἱ δὲ ἐν τῇ Πρώμῃ ἐταράττοντο μὲν καὶ ὑπὸ σημείων, ἄλλα τε γὰρ συχνὰ σφισιν ἐσηγγέλθη, καὶ ὅτι δελφῖνες πολλοὶ περὶ τὴν Ἀσπίδα τὴν τῆς Ἀφρικῆς πόλιν ἐμαχέσαντό τε ἀλλήλους καὶ διεφθάρησαν· καὶ τι καὶ αὐτοῦ πρὸς τῷ ἄστει αἶμα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ῥυέν ὄρνιθες διεφόρησαν. ἐπειδὴ τε ἐν τῇ πανηγύρει τῇ τῶν Ρωμαίων οὐδεὶς τῶν βουλευτῶν ἐν τῷ Καπιτωλίῳ, ὥσπερ εἴθιστο, εἰσιτάθη, ἐν τέρατος λόγῳ καὶ τοῦτ' ἔλαβον. τό τε τῇ Λιουῖα συμβᾶν ἐκείνῃ μὲν καθ' ἥδονήν ἐγένετο, τοῖς δ' ἄλλοις δέος ἐνεποίησε· λευκὴν γὰρ ὄρνιθα, κλωνίων δάφνης ἐγκάρπου φέρουσαν, αἰετὸς ἐς τὸν κόλπον αὐτῆς ἐνέβαλε. καὶ ἐδόκει γὰρ οὐ μικρὸν τὸ σημεῖον εἶναι, τὴν τε ὄρνιθα ἐν ἐπιμελείᾳ ἦγε καὶ τὴν δάφνην ἐφύτευσε. καὶ ἡ μὲν ῥιζωθεῖσα ἠῤῥῆσεν ὥστε καὶ τοῖς τὰ ἐπινίκια μετὰ τοῦτο πέμψαι ἐπὶ πλείστον ἐξαρκέσαι, ἡ τε Λιουῖα ἐγκολπώσεσθαι καὶ τὴν τοῦ Καίσαρος ἰσχὺν καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτοῦ κρατήσεων ἐμελλε· τοὺς δὲ δὴ ἄλλους τοὺς ἐν τῇ πόλει ταῦτά τε καὶ αἱ διαλλαγαὶ τῶν ἀρχόντων ἰσχυρῶς ἐτάρασσον· οὐ γὰρ ὅπως οἱ τε ὑπατοὶ καὶ οἱ στρατηγοί, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ ταμίαι ἐπ' ἀλλήλοις ἀντικαθίσταντο, καὶ τοῦτ' ἐπὶ χρόνον ἐγένετο.

³² Flory 1989: 353.

which Octavian's position was extremely volatile.³³ Dio agrees with Suetonius in noting the decline of the laurel grove and brood following Nero's death, though he does this in a separate passage, whereas Suetonius, as we have seen, rolls the original signs and their eventual end into the one account.³⁴ Dio thus preserves more clearly the multiple stages in the story's development, since they are placed within their respective political contexts. Suetonius' arrangement reflects his biographical mode (discussed further below), which decontextualizes various portents and presents them together in a more truncated form.

Thus, the story itself developed prior to these later accounts by Pliny, Suetonius, and Dio, and its meaning was apparently contested both at the time and at later stages, and in this process different details were added or emphasized. In the story's original context in the 30s BCE, perhaps the most important element for its audience would have been the continuity it emphasized between Caesar and his heir, Octavian, rather than between Augustus and his potential successors, seen in the later Suetonian version. This is suggested by the fact that Caesar himself had received a similar omen in 49 BCE.³⁵ Dio reports that a kite dropped a sprig of laurel onto one of Caesar's friends in the Roman forum.³⁶ As Flory notes, a parallel might have been drawn between Caesar defeating the Pompeians in the earlier generation, and Octavian planning to defeat their next generation in Sicily, with a similar indication of divine support.³⁷ The Caesarian association with laurel was to benefit Octavian as he sought to improve his standing in Rome and fend off other claims to Caesar's legacy, during a period in which Italy was blockaded.³⁸ Dio's report of the *Gallina Alba* omen suggests that Rome's populace was unsettled in this period by the effects of war, and as a consequence it may have been intended to reassure the populace of Rome in a time of unrest. Octavian's controversial betrothal to Livia, divorced from Tiberius Claudius Nero and pregnant with the Elder Drusus at the time, is also significant in this early context, since she brought with her political connections to people who had previously been hostile to Octavian—an aspect of Livia's role explored in detail by Welch.³⁹ At the

³³ Barrett 2001. ³⁴ Cass. Dio 49.63.3.

³⁵ Cf. Flory 1989: 344.

³⁶ Cass. Dio 41.39.2; on the association with Caesar and laurel, Suet. *Iul.* 45.2.

³⁷ Flory 1989: 344; Welch 2002, 2012.

³⁸ Octavian was later to develop this association with laurel in a range of triumphal and domestic contexts. See Reeder 1997; Flory 1989; Kellum 1994.

³⁹ Welch 2011: esp. 318 on the *Gallina Alba* portent; Purcell 1986: 82–5; Flory 1989: 352–3.

same time, Octavian's own divorce, from Scribonia, can be seen as a move away from Sextus Pompeius and towards the advantages that Livia's lineage provided, a motivation that probably sat alongside any romantic feelings he may have had for her. In this context, the report that the sign had been sent to Livia might have helped to build her reputation as an upright *matrona* worthy of receiving messages from the gods, despite the Antonian propaganda that sought to cast their marriage in a scandalous light.⁴⁰

After this initial Triumviral context, there was very likely at least one (though probably more than one) intermediate stage in the story's reception prior to the Suetonian account. This is suggested by the role of Livia and her negative portrayal in Dio's later version of the story. She is characterized as dominating Augustus, which suggests that this stems from a reinterpretation of the story in the later Augustan or more likely the Tiberian period, when her public role in the *domus Augusta* became much more significant. A similarly meddling Livia, with the negative literary associations of a stepmother, is found in Tacitus' *Annals*.⁴¹

Finally, we have the reinterpretation of the tale following the death of Nero. At this point, the most important element in the story was the symbolic end to the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Unlike the first potential reading with its focus on Julius Caesar, at this point attention might be turned in the other direction, towards Augustus' successors, their monopoly on triumphs, and the crisis that had engulfed Rome as a consequence of Nero's lack of heir. In the intervening period, the details of the story had been updated to incorporate future generations of Caesars, with different laurel plants withering with the passing of each *princeps*.

Concerning the fate of the *Gallina Alba* portent, Flory argues that the 'abrupt end of the grove on the Via Flaminia suggests an understandable disinterest of emperors after Nero in continuing a family myth which only underscored their own lack of connection with the blood line of Augustus'.⁴² From this, it seems that Flory is referring to the physical maintenance of the grove in Livia's villa, rather than the circulation of the story. If the post-Neronian emperors did lose interest, it seems probable that they would not seek to advertise the demise of this grove, since that story in and of itself would emphasize the discontinuity between the Julio-Claudian dynasty and subsequent *principes*. Yet it is clear that there was an ongoing fascination with the

⁴⁰ Flory 1988: 352–3; Purcell 1986: 80; Barrett 2002: 19–30; Osgood 2006: 231–2.

⁴¹ Watson 1995: 176–92; Barrett 2002: 241–3.

⁴² Flory 1989: 347.

story of the grove, which is likely to have stemmed not from the new *princeps* or his supporters, but rather from those who were watching for predictions about the future, and especially arboreal signs that had been useful in the past. Perhaps the grove continued to thrive, but the associations that had developed between it and the Julio-Claudian *principes* meant that audiences insisted that it must have withered. The population of Rome was evidently on the lookout for such messages from the gods. The variety of stories of ancient or sacred trees that marked the fall of Nero by following suit points to the populace's expectation and desire for confirmation that an event as momentous as the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty was foretold or at least predestined in some way (an idea that may have provided a sense of security).⁴³ Thus a portent that probably began its life as a story that was potentially quite useful to Octavian had outgrown the realm of propaganda and the politics of civil war, and now had a much broader function in Roman society.

2. Flavian Tree Portents

The lack of an obvious successor to Nero resulted in a power vacuum, and appeals to different kinds of authority were made by various interested parties. This problem of what constituted the basis of 'legitimate power' in Rome is one of the main themes explored in the sources that narrate the events of 68–69 CE. Moving beyond the Julio-Claudians was a difficult process for Roman society to undertake, since the ideology that had developed around them had put down deep roots by the time of Nero's death. As extant sources for this period make clear, dynasty was an important consideration for any potential successor to Nero, since it promised a continuation of peace; despite Vespasian's comparatively humble origins for an imperial contender, his ready-made dynasty in the form of Titus and Domitian would have been a significant advantage. Under Vespasian, the problem was not so much with the future, as with his past, which necessitated the difficult process of grafting him onto the 'good' Julio-Claudians as much as was possible (perhaps most strikingly illustrated in the *lex de imperio Vespasiani*). As we shall see in the following Flavian portents, this

⁴³ Not only did the withering of the grove and the death of the brood of chickens signal the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, but the aforementioned olive grove purportedly swapped places with crops on the other side of the road (Plin. *HN* 17.241–5), and a cypress as old as Rome itself also foretold what was to happen to Nero by falling over (*HN* 16.236).

anxiety with Vespasian's ancestry is possibly reflected in the way the arboreal omens that concern him are located temporally, in his youth, and geographically, on his ancestral estates. By considering that the inevitability of his rise to power was revealed in these signs from the gods, one could smooth over the intervening period of disorder and uncertainty, at the same time as making light of the fluctuations in Vespasian's fortunes under earlier *principes*.

The idea that a Roman audience in the post-Neronian era might expect the behaviour of trees to indicate future military victory, and in some cases dynastic succession, is supported by examples in Suetonius' *Augustus*, which bear notable similarities to the stories concerning Vespasian. Suetonius notes that a withering oak tree regained its strength at Octavian's arrival on Capri, which pleased him to the extent that he decided to acquire the island from Naples in exchange for Ischia/Aenaria. In the same passage, he records that a palm tree sprang up in the pavement outside Augustus' house, which Augustus transplanted to his inner courtyard and cultivated beside the Penates.⁴⁴ Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly for our purposes, he notes that in 45 BCE a palm tree at the battle of Munda allegedly produced a shoot which grew into a branch larger than the tree itself (much like a branch of Vespasian's oak, discussed below), and in which doves built their nests, which was interpreted as a dynastic omen by Julius Caesar.⁴⁵ This apparently led Caesar to adopt Octavian, who founded his own dynasty. The latter example is important for several reasons, including the fact that it combines a tree with dynastic connotations with unusual behaviour on the part of birds—and the Suetonian account contends that a dynastic interpretation of these events was made by Caesar himself. A palm tree in and of itself of course connoted victory, but in addition, the 'palm' of the human hand (also *palma*) was a symbol of power in the Roman world—a connection explored by Corbeill.⁴⁶ In the same manner in which the Caesarean precedent of a kite dropping a laurel sprig may have prepared the way for the eagle's air raid on Livia's lap with the laurel-clasping hen, that story, as well as the story of

⁴⁴ Suet. *Aug.* 92.1–2. Livy reports (43.13.5) that in 169 BCE, a palm sprang up in the courtyard of the temple of Fortuna Primigenia. This is an interesting precedent for the palm in Augustus' pavement, since Livy lists it alongside other traditionally negative omens—this may be another example of Octavian/Augustus and others reinterpreting negative or ambiguous portents favourably.

⁴⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 94.11.

⁴⁶ Corbeill 2004: 20–4.

Caesar's dynastic palm tree at Munda, may have provided a precedent for Vespasian's oak tree, which is described by Suetonius:

While Otho and Vitellius were fighting for the throne after the death of Nero and Galba, he began to cherish the hope of imperial dignity, which he had long since conceived because of the following portents. On the suburban estate of the Flavii an old oak tree, which was sacred to Mars, on each of the three occasions when Vespasia was delivered suddenly put forth a branch from its trunk, obvious indications of the destiny of each child. The first was slender and quickly withered, and so too the girl that was born died within the year; the second was very strong and long and portended great success, but the third was the image of a tree. Therefore their father Sabinus, so they say, being further encouraged by an inspection of sacrificial victims, announced to his mother that a grandson had been born to her who would be a Caesar. But she only laughed, marvelling that her son should already be in his dotage, while she was still of strong mind.

(Suet. *Vesp.* 5.1–2)

There are two angles from which we can approach the growth of this story, which may in fact be two sides of the same coin: Vespasian's desire for such a tale to be circulated, or, if we focus on a potential audience in Rome, a locus for expectations which had been established by the various Republican and Julio-Claudian precedents.⁴⁷

The fact that the tree was sacred to Mars possibly relates to the martial context through which Vespasian obtained the supreme power. Another important element is the scepticism of Vespasia, which adds an air of authenticity to the portent, in that its veracity and full importance was not revealed until after Vespasian had succeeded Vitellius as *princeps*, with Titus and Domitian in tow. In the case of this oak tree, the 'dynastic' element appears to have been contained within the original story, perhaps as a consequence of the presence of Titus and Domitian at the point of Vespasian's accession. Unlike both the *Gallina Alba* portent and Vespasian's cypress (discussed below), the story of the oak is only recorded by Suetonius, which may point to it being less widely known by contemporaries.

The rival tale of Vespasian's cypress tree is an indication that an association between trees and dynasties was perhaps more popular than usual in this period. This narrative was no doubt also influenced by Republican precedents of trees that, having fallen over, either stood up again or

⁴⁷ See Levick 1999: 6–7 on Vespasian's family estate, and the oak.

produced shoots when apparently dead, which Pliny informs us were considered to be good omens by those who witnessed them.⁴⁸ Another important symbolic connection that may have linked the life and fortunes of a man to that of a cypress was the more general association between cypresses and funerary contexts in Rome.⁴⁹ Vespasian's cypress tree is also reported by Suetonius, along with the oak:

A cypress tree, also, on his grandfather's farm was torn up by the roots, without the agency of any violent storm, and thrown down, and on the following day rose again greener and stronger than before.

(Suet. *Vesp.* 5.4)

There are other parallel accounts of the cypress, with notable variations, in both Tacitus and Dio.⁵⁰ In Suetonius' version, this cypress is not merely a straightforward omen of empire, as it is in the other accounts, but reappears in his life of Domitian, accompanying the latter's demise. The fact that the narrative has these two 'stages' relating to two *principes* means that it is also 'dynastic', though in a different way from the aforementioned oak:

The tree which had been overthrown when Vespasian was still a private citizen but had sprung up anew then on a sudden fell down again.

(Suet. *Dom.* 15.2)

⁴⁸ Plin. *HN* 16.131–3. The first example is an elm at the grove of Juno at Nocera dated by Pliny to the Cimbrian Wars (113–101 BCE), and concerning the Roman people more generally rather than an individual leader. Yet, notably, while it is not during a period of civil war *per se*, it is nonetheless in a period of war. The second example, while it is not situated temporally, is placed at Philippi, and therefore may well relate to the two battles there in 42 BCE, since the other stories, such as that of Julius Caesar and the palm at Munda noted above, also have a military context.

⁴⁹ See Connors 1992: 1–2. Servius (citing Varro) and Pliny note the association between death and cypresses, its use in funerary contexts, and Pliny its consecration to Dis: Serv. *Aen.* 6.216; Plin. *HN* 16.139. Ash 1999: 131–2 suggests that Tacitus focused on the cypress omen with its funerary connotations to prefigure the eventual fall of the Flavian dynasty at the moment of its inception.

⁵⁰ Tac. *Hist.* 2.78. The Tacitean example has been explored by Morgan 1996, who has argued that it was chosen by Tacitus instead of the aforementioned oak tree primarily for literary reasons, to provide a contrast with Basilides' oracle in the East, which in Tacitus' presentation was more popular with Vespasian's entourage. The Tacitean frame is particularly interesting, since it shows a process in which a reinterpretation of a single portent took place, as events unfolded and revealed its 'true' meaning (albeit in an imagined process—the private thoughts of Vespasian being difficult to access). Cf. Ash 2007: 301–8. Cass. Dio 65.1.2–3. Hunt 2016: 210–12 discusses the different nuances in the various accounts of this tree, when examining the relationship between arboreal portents and unusual but natural features of trees: 'In short, be it Vespasian's invincible cypress or a tree changing from the black to the white variety, there was no simple (or correct) way to read the delicate balance of the natural and the divine when accounting for unexpected arboreal behaviour.'

In this instance, we can observe another narrative which began its life as one of a number of omens portending Vespasian's future rule, rather like Livia's hen and laurel sprig, before being reinterpreted at a later date (after it was of any use to the Flavians), in this case to make sense of the end of another dynasty, and the new transition that was occurring.

3. Historiography, Biography, and the Future

The variety and longevity of these stories points to an ongoing interest in tree portents, and their appropriation in different situations. They played an important role in explaining the rise and fall of particular leaders and the establishment of dynasties by appealing to a pre-existing tradition of portents in the form of extraordinary arboreal behaviour. As we have seen from the examples discussed above, this interest in, and reliance upon, tree omens seems to have been particularly common in times of crisis or uncertainty, such as during civil war. It points to the significance that these narratives possessed in the religious outlook of many in the Roman world.

The use of these stories by historians when shaping their works is another element that challenges a straightforward propagandistic model. It seems clear that these arboreal omens were used as a way of framing, or encapsulating, particular periods of Rome's history, and the dynasties that came to rule Rome in those periods. Suetonius' use of these omens, in particular, reflects such an application. The demise of the *Ad Gallinas* grove has been discussed by Power, who argued against Syme's idea that this episode was displaced, to the beginning of the *Life of Galba*, from the end of Suetonius' *Life of Nero*.⁵¹ He suggested that it serves as an introduction to the three lives of *Galba*, *Otho*, and *Vitellius*, by showing the fall of the dynasty which had brought about their bids for power, which is a consistent theme in the first two chapters of the biography of Galba, with its focus on ancestry. Suetonius' version encapsulates the Julio-Claudian dynasty's rise and fall, acting as a kind of chronological concertina to introduce the post-Neronian era. His use of the story very likely reflects a view that was shared by others in Rome.

The popularity of discussions of *omina imperii* in Roman society in the Triumviral period and early Principate, shown by the variety of examples

⁵¹ Power 2009.

preserved in our sources, coincided with a swing in Roman historiography towards biography, and biographical ways of writing history. Biographical accounts undoubtedly influenced, and were in turn influenced by, a popular conception of the future of Rome's government as a series of *principes*, based upon the model of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Such a conception made the future more 'predictable', and in some ways more 'safe', with these signposts from the gods pointing the way forward. The long duration of the rule of Augustus and his successors, and the manner in which they were woven into the fabric of the traditional institutions of the *res publica*, altered the way in which the future of Rome was imagined. The temporal framework of those in Rome, formerly a more 'annalistic' mindset with a focus on annually elected magistrates (that was also reflected in historiography), was 'stretched out' in various ways once attention was paid to potential successors, which caused a political and religious crisis following the dramatic death of Nero. As a result, a large section of Rome's populace must have been expecting, and hoping for, equivalent forms of *omina imperii*, and particularly those that mapped out a secure future for the *res publica* in the form of a dynasty.

When considering the manner in which Suetonius used such dynastic arboreal omens to frame periods of Rome's history, one might also consider how other people in the Roman world would have received such stories, and the way in which the stories may have been circulated and reinterpreted over time. By shifting attention away from the *principes* themselves, we can see more clearly the role that such omens played in Roman society, as the populace attempted to make sense of the chaos of civil war and the political and religious changes that it brought about—and the hopes that they entertained for a peaceful future. The arboreal omens found in the works of Suetonius and other authors demonstrate how the world of divination could provide signposts towards events in the future, and buttresses to historical narratives, thereby creating a sense of inevitability in a disordered world.

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7

Prodigies in the Early Principate?

Federico Santangelo

The question mark in the title of this chapter reflects a twofold set of concerns. On the one hand, it seeks to problematize the notion of prodigy in the Roman world, and to prompt wider questions on the place of prodigies in Roman public divination and in Roman approaches to the relationship between gods and mankind. On the other hand, it is intended to draw attention to a familiar feature of modern scholarship on prodigies in ancient Rome, which I shall aim to question in what follows. Modern accounts of prodigy and expiation in Roman religion, from the old treatments by L. Wülker and F. Luterbacher to the more recent studies of B. MacBain, S. Rasmussen, and D. Engels, end with the fall of the Republic and do not provide any discussion of prodigies under the Principate.¹ Hence the central question of this paper: can we still speak meaningfully of prodigies for the early Principate?

The view that a substantial change intervened with the advent of monarchy has found many proponents. The fundamental shift is usually identified in the transition from prodigies that affect and pertain to the *res publica* as a whole to portents that affect the person of the emperor, and portend either the beginning of a reign or its imminent, traumatic end.² The transition from public prodigies to private portents is viewed as a symptom of the wider change in the nature of the political regime under which Rome is ruled. Engels has noted that the system of public prodigies can only function in a setup where the Senate is central as the main body of religious authority and can play a leading role in the process of interpretation and expiation. When that morphs into a monarchic regime, prodigies are

¹ Wülker 1903; Luterbacher 1904; MacBain 1982; Rasmussen 2003; Engels 2007.

² See e.g. Liebeschuetz 1979: 57–8, 159–61; Levene 1993: 4; Rosenberger 1998: 240, 241, 244; Rasmussen 2003: 255–6; Damon 2003: 273–4; Davies 2004: 160–2; Santi 2008: 180–8. Driediger-Murphy 2019: 46–7, esp. n. 175 sees a fundamental change in the practice of augury from Republic to Principate; this important problem lies outside the remit of the present discussion.

replaced by private portents and *omina*, which focus on the emperor, and reflect either his own preoccupations or wider concerns about his power.³ Broadly speaking, this account is sound; in what follows, however, I shall try to offer some correctives to it. The starting point must be a closer look at the evidence for prodigy reporting and expiation in the final decades of the Roman Republic.

1. Beyond *neglegentia*: Late Republican Prodigies

There is an increasing range of evidence for events of divinatory import that involve the emperor and are associated with his rise to power or with threats to his rulership, and the sources that show a system of prodigy recording and expiation become considerably less frequent. The trend begins in the late Republican period, and cannot be explained merely with the loss of Livy's account after book 45 (167 BCE). The epitome on prodigies by Julius Obsequens, probably compiled in the fourth or early fifth century CE and heavily reliant on Livy, strongly suggests that the system of prodigy expiation played a far less significant role in the final section of Livy's work than was the case in the central section devoted to the mid-Republican period.⁴ A taster of what is to come is offered by Livy himself in a passage that has served as the cornerstone of many modern accounts of the alleged decline of Roman Republican divination, or indeed of religion as a whole.⁵ As he discusses the events of the year 169 BCE, Livy precedes his overview of the prodigies that were reported and expiated then with a remark that is both a disclaimer and a serious political and intellectual statement:

non sum nescius ab eadem neglegentia, quia nihil deos portendere uulgo nunc credant, neque nuntiari admodum ulla prodigia in publicum neque in annales referri. ceterum et mihi uetustas res scribenti nescio quo pacto anticus fit animus, et quaedam religio tenet, quae illi prudentissimi uiri publice suscipienda censuerint, ea pro indignis habere, quae in meos annales referam.

³ Engels 2007: 796–7. Cf. also Günther 1964: 283. The best modern discussion of imperial portents is Vigourt 2001; see also the imaginative studies of Requena Jiménez 2001, 2003, and 2014.

⁴ Cameron 2011: 225–6 stresses the interpretative difficulties posed by this work and argues that it should be deemed undatable.

⁵ Livy 43.13. See Levene 1993: 22–4, 115–16; Davies 2004: 46–51; Santangelo 2013: 199–203; Satterfield 2016: 331–2.

I am not unaware that, because of the same neglect that has people generally think that the gods do not give warnings of the future, prodigies are nowadays neither announced publicly nor recorded in the annals. Nonetheless, while I write of these days of old, somehow my old spirit becomes ancient, as it were, and keeps me from considering unworthy of inclusion in my annals the things which those exceptionally knowledgeable men judged worthy of acting upon in the public domain.

(transl. J. Davies, slightly modified)

In his view, the dominant trait of his time is widespread negligence in matters religious, based on a novel conception of the gods: in the view of some, they do not give any premonitory signs to mankind. This fundamental rejection of the long-established premise on which divinatory activity rests has two fundamental implications. First, prodigies are no longer discussed in public contexts—they do not inform the political debate and do not receive any attention from the political and religious authorities. Moreover, they are no longer recorded in historical accounts. Livy explicitly takes issue with this (allegedly) dominant approach and makes a point of including prodigies in *his own* historical work, not least because the prudent men of times gone by used to include them at the core of political action. But there are two further implicit connections to his discussion. In Livy's view, prodigies still occur, and the gods do convey signs to mankind. Moreover, his emphasis on the fact that they are no longer discussed in public settings leaves open the possibility that prodigies may still be recognized and interpreted by those who can see and understand them. What is missing is appropriate ritual action on the public level, and such an absence has wide-ranging implications for the relationship between the gods and the city.

Even Livy's bleak assessment of the changed place of prodigies in Roman public religion, therefore, leaves room for a differentiated picture. In his view, there has been not a shift from public prodigies to private portents, but an unwelcome tendency to remove prodigies from the centre of the political discourse. However, the factual accuracy of this statement should not be taken at face value. Subjecting it to a full-blown critique is perhaps somewhat unfair, since no doubt Livy came back to this point and had a chance to qualify his views in a later section of his narrative that no longer survives. On the one hand, it is far from apparent that there was a widespread decline in the reliance on prodigies as tools for predicting the future in the late Republic. On the other, there are, as is well known, clear instances of prodigies that prompted appropriate ritual action during Livy's lifetime.

Some of these are known from the epitome of Julius Obsequens, which records a number of occurrences for the years between 48 and 42 BCE. Obsequens is usually uninterested in supplying detail on the methods through which the expiation of prodigies took place, and the notices for these years are no exception. There is, however, a reference to the interpretation of a prodigy supplied by the haruspices in 42 BCE (70.12). Most of the prodigies recorded by Obsequens are from the city of Rome, and this seems to record a shift in the way in which the system operates. For the best part of the Republican period, prodigy reports had reached the Roman authorities from a broad range of Italian communities.⁶ However, even the brief summary of Obsequens records the flood of the Po river in 44 BCE among the prodigies of that year. The vivid detail with which the escape of a number of vipers from the river is related suggests that it might derive from an official report; Livy will no doubt also have had access to local eyewitness accounts.

An intriguing episode is recorded a few years earlier at Patavium, no doubt reflecting the local interests of the historian.⁷ In 48 BCE, the local 'augur' C. Cornelius read a sign of Caesar's imminent victory in the performance of an ornithomantic ritual. This is not a prodigy report to the Senate, and it is unlikely that the episode was ever noted or debated in Rome at the time. In fact, it is not even a prodigy, or the summary of a prodigy interpretation. It is a fair guess that we know about this incident just because Livy is from Patavium; he is likely to have witnessed it himself. This episode, however, is a remarkable symptom of an important and poorly documented phenomenon: the existence of a local level of divinatory activity that took place in the cities of Roman Italy. The extent to which it intersected with the divinatory practice and discourse at Rome is unclear. It was nonetheless a lively and significant strand of religious action, and could engage with events at Rome. The plethora of augurs and haruspices that are attested across the communities of the Roman West throughout the first two centuries of the Principate should encourage us to take that background seriously.⁸

⁶ Rosenberger 2005; Berthelet 2013.

⁷ Obs. 65a.8. See also Plut. *Caes.* 47.3–6 and Cass. Dio 41.61.4–5; Westall 2017: 56–7 questions Dio's reliance on Livy in this instance.

⁸ As Rüpke 2014: 127–32 makes clear, however, there is no straightforward correspondence between Roman traditional priesthoods and the priesthoods attested in municipal and colonial contexts. North 2000 is a classic discussion of the Italian background of Roman divination in the mid-Republican period.

Obsequens' summary breaks off in 42 BCE, only to resume with two final notices in 17 and 11.⁹ It is unlikely that this is an accurate reflection of the contents of Livy's narrative. Some gaps are filled by Cassius Dio, who shows that several prodigies were put on record and appropriate ritual action was taken in the late Republican period.¹⁰ Even if one does not go so far as to admit that Dio derived the bulk of his material from Livy, it is difficult to argue that Livy could have systematically overlooked or omitted a considerable number of episodes that Dio narrated some two centuries later. Dio's interest in prodigies and portents has long been recognized: the item 'prodigia' in H. Smilda's *Index historicus* takes up nearly nineteen columns.¹¹ At the same time, it has long been recognized that Dio is fundamentally uninterested in providing a detailed analysis of them or the contribution that they could make to the interpretation and understanding of a certain historical period: they should be read as eminently narrative devices.¹²

However, some important historical implications may be drawn from Dio's evidence. One passage in particular conveys a sense of how the system of prodigy reporting and expiation may have come close to imploding in the dying days of the Republic. In book 50, he keenly records a series of portents that took place in 31 BCE, the most important of which is a series of fires affecting major buildings in the city (50.10–11). They were widely regarded to have been caused by freedmen: there is no reference to official expiation directed by the Senate, and Dio says that the events were regarded as prodigies *despite* being widely deemed a conspiracy of the freedmen, who were asked to contribute a fraction of their assets to the treasury. There is no reference to a centralized interpretation, although mention is made of the recording of the fires, surely in an official context (50.10.6: *eseographē*); popular perception, rather than correct ritual interpretation, is the dominant feature at this junction, and Octavian and Antony are said not to have been in any way bothered by the signs. However, such a chaotic state of affairs appears to be exceptional even in the thirties. At 48.43, for example, Dio has a list of prodigies that were reported in 38 BCE, and records the decision to

⁹ On the prodigies of 17 BCE, see Satterfield 2016: 330–45, who argues that they were fabricated in order to provide a suitable background to, and justification for, the *ludi saeculares*.

¹⁰ Syme 1959: 63 (= 1979: 439); MacBain 1982: 104.

¹¹ Smilda 1926: 532–42.

¹² Millar 1964: 77, 179. On Cassius Dio's debt to the annalistic tradition, see Kemezis 2014: 90–149, where the handling of prodigies receives hardly any discussion; Westall 2017 discusses Dio's account of the omens associated with the battle of Pharsalos (53–5) and Philippi (68–70). On Cassius Dio's interest in, and knowledge of, religious matters, see Scheid 2016 (on the Augustan and Julio-Claudian period) and Rüpke and Santangelo 2017: 19–25.

consult the Sibylline Books, which provided a complex set of advice on how to purify a statue of Virtus that had suddenly fallen on its face.

The most significant moment of late Republican history in which a prodigy made a major mark on current political developments occurred in 36 BCE, when a lightning bolt hit a section of Octavian's house on the Palatine and he sought appropriate ritual action; the episode is recorded by Suetonius and Cassius Dio, but not by Obsequens.¹³ On the face of it, that incident was hard not to report—many people in Rome will have taken notice of it—and therefore does not contradict Livy's assessment in 43.13. Unlike the birth of a hermaphrodite child or the appearance of tears on the statue of a god in small-town Italy, it was an episode that occurred in a very prominent location and a natural event that attracted action. It could not be easily or lightly overlooked. The choice to treat it as a prodigy, however, was always a political decision, and could not be taken for granted; a whole host of arguments could be invoked against regarding it as such. The event had indeed occurred on private land, and there were therefore good grounds for not treating it as a public prodigy.¹⁴ Suetonius and Dio record it in passing, and both in a context that is far removed from that of annalistic history: the biographer deals with it in a discussion of the public buildings associated with the *princeps*, while Dio mentions it retrospectively, in the discussion of the honours that the people granted to Octavian, including the dedication of a house on the Palatine. The episode, however, revolves around the use of the system of public reporting and expiation. The prodigy is brought to the attention of the haruspices, who provide a general ritual recommendation, upon which Octavian decides to act.¹⁵ What appears to have changed from established tradition is that the process is tightly policed by the Triumvir, and that the focus of the prodigy is strongly associated to his own person and public role. The prodigy is still brought into the public domain through the customary official channels, *in publicum relatum*, albeit along lines that reflect a different political setup.

¹³ Suet. *Aug.* 29.3; Cass. Dio 49.15.5; cf. Vell. Pat. 2.81.3. See Hekster-Rich 2006: esp. 158–9; Wardle 2014: 228–31. Satterfield 2016: 344 n. 57 explains the lightning strike of 36 BCE as a personal omen.

¹⁴ Cf. the prodigies that are not deemed as such in Livy 43.13.6, with Berthelet 2013: 104–9.

¹⁵ It is unclear whether this consultation took place in a private or public context; it should, at any rate, be read against the background of a trend of increasingly tight monarchic control on Roman public religion (Santangelo 2013: 140–1). Scheid 2016: 789 points out that the *imperium* of Octavian in his capacity as Triumvir entitled him to make public dedications.

2. Prodigies between *Princeps* and Senate

Narrow political readings of Republican *Prodigienwesen* have long been challenged and effectively superseded. The dynamic of prodigy reporting and expiation plays a central role in the established sequence of government activity and has major implications for the ties between Rome and Italy.¹⁶ More importantly, it defines the religious climate across the city and creates the very conditions for the unfolding of the annual cycle of political deliberation and military action through which the Republic operates.¹⁷ Its role in setting the correct psychological and environmental conditions across the city has been effectively established in some important modern discussions.¹⁸ To argue that it was lightly dismissed because of a regime change is to underestimate the long-term importance of the phenomenon.¹⁹ There is a case for looking harder for prodigies—their recording and their expiation in public settings—under the early Principate than has usually been done.

Even on a narrow political reading, there are good arguments for pursuing the matter. The system of public prodigies was strongly linked with the operation of the Senate and its role in the running of public religion. The political role of the Senate in the early Principate has received increasing attention in modern scholarship, and convincing attempts have been made to recognize its continuing significance in a number of areas, including the handling of religious affairs.²⁰ Even under the Principate, the Senate remained home to a considerable reserve of religious knowledge: a number of senators were members of priestly colleges and were in a position to express weighty rulings on aspects of religious significance. Several of them will have been members of colleges that were invested with matters of divinatory significance: the quindecimvirate, the augurate, and, to a lesser extent, the pontificate.²¹ If the Senate retains some significance even under the new regime, its role in the handling of religion is worthy of attention.

At the same time, it is crucial not to lose sight of the political context, and the fundamental change that intervened in Rome after Actium. In the

¹⁶ Rosenberger 2005 explores this issue very effectively.

¹⁷ Satterfield 2012.

¹⁸ Gladigow 1979; Engels 2007: 798–825.

¹⁹ Expiation also retains a place in Seneca's assessment of the limits of divination and prediction, and of their relationship with the natural order: see *Q Nat.* 2.38.4, where the *haruspex* is labelled *fati minister* ('servant of fate'), with Inwood 2000: 40–1 and Williams 2012: 323–4. On Seneca and divination, see also Berno 2003: 225–33.

²⁰ Brunt 1984 (esp. 436–8 on religious matters); see also Potter 1994: 172.

²¹ Scheid 2005.

Republican period, prodigies are an indicator of pluralism and a factor of controversy. They point to the existence of a number of critical fronts in Rome and across the Italian peninsula and are, at the same time, a vector of integration.²² It is doubtful that there ever was an ‘independent system’ of prodigy reporting in the Republic.²³ Prodigy reports were always politically charged matters, and reflected the preoccupations of sectors of Roman and local elites, often in highly competing ways. They always were, in other words, highly embedded affairs. L. Raphals’ recent comparative work on Chinese divination shows that in the Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE), prodigies turned into a powerful means of political communication and rhetoric, which could be used ‘both to control subordinates and to criticize superiors’.²⁴ Similar considerations may be invoked for Rome.²⁵ Recognizing the weight of that dimension does not amount to underestimating the psychological and emotional impact that they had on their recipients, nor does it entail denying that prodigies reflected genuinely and widely held views on the role of the gods in human affairs.²⁶

However, it is hard to escape the conclusion that a substantial change in the way in which prodigies are recorded and acted upon intervenes in the Principate. Their circulation appears to be more tightly controlled by the *princeps*; there is far less strong evidence for prodigies being reported to the Senate from Italy, and the cycle of prodigy reporting and expiation appears to play a far less prominent role than had been the case in the middle and late Republic (I do not think we can make informed judgments on the developments in the early Republican period). This may have to do with the literary choices of the surviving sources, however. Neither Tacitus nor Cassius Dio is interested in reproducing the annalistic framework on which Livy works, and Livy himself strongly suggests that his choice of placing prodigies at the core of his own historical account is at odds with the practice of some of his contemporaries.²⁷ Even so, the surviving ancient narratives suggest a picture of greater complexity than usually envisaged.

²² MacBain 1982: 34–42, 60–81.

²³ Cf. Davies 2004: 194.

²⁴ Raphals 2013: 299–301, esp. 301.

²⁵ Cf. on the Imperial period Potter 1994: 172.

²⁶ On the weight of psychological factors in the public prodigies system, see Loriol 2016; on their role in Roman Republican religion, cf. Champion 2017: esp. 175–221. On the emotions evoked by unfavourable sacrifices (sometimes considered prodigious), see Driediger-Murphy, this volume.

²⁷ Damon 2003: 274–5 points out that in the *Annales* prodigies tend to feature ‘in some of the diminuendo miscellanies at year-end’.

A well-known incident from the first few months of Tiberius' reign (15 CE) is revealing of the nature and scale of the problems involved. As Tacitus relates towards the end of the first book of the *Annales*, a series of rain storms had caused a flood of the Tiber into the flat areas of the city, and in turn caused grave damage to people and buildings (1.76). The historian explicitly refers to a report of the prodigy to the Senate, but mentions the intervention of C. Asinius Gallus (*cos.* 8 BCE), who proposed (*censuit*) to consult the Sibylline Books; the implication is that the flooding is a prodigy that requires appropriate ritual interpretation and action, which can only be decided upon and initiated by the Senate. There is little doubt that Asinius' motion was addressed to the Senate. Asinius was not just an authoritative member of that body; he also sat on the quindecimviral college, which had played a prominent role in the *ludi saeculares* of 17 BCE.²⁸ His proposal to resort to the Books was therefore invested with the ritual expertise that his priestly membership entailed. Tacitus does not state that Asinius' intervention was in any way exceptional. He is keen, on the contrary, to stress the extraordinary response of the emperor. Tiberius intervened and argued that the Books did not have to be consulted. In Tacitus' view, this response was a symptom of the emperor's preference for secrecy in matters human and divine:²⁹ it was, in other words, the exception rather than the default reaction that one could have expected to an event of that sort. Tacitus' emphasis on the behaviour of the emperor suggests that, under normal circumstances, the preferred response would have been to treat an episode of that sort as a prodigy and to seek appropriate redress by bringing the matter into the public domain. There is no intimation that Tiberius shared the *neglegentia* towards prodigies lamented by Livy.³⁰ However, the emphasis on his readiness to conceal prodigies from the public discourse and to dispose with their appropriate expiation is intended to cast doubts on his religious views. While he may regard prodigies to have predictive value, he did not appear to regard their proper expiation as an inescapable necessity. Even an occurrence that cannot possibly be concealed—the flooding of the Tiber—was not recognized as a public prodigy, and was not debated or

²⁸ Rüpke 2005: 785 no. 741. On the interaction between *princeps* and priestly colleges in the early Principate, see Santangelo 2016 (esp. 357–8 on this episode).

²⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 1.76.1: *perinde diuina humanaque obtegens*, 'concealing divine and human things alike'.

³⁰ Cf. Shannon 2018: 237–40, who emphasizes the intertextual links between *Ann.* 1.76.1 and various prodigy notices in Livy, and views them as markers of a deliberate attempt to stress the debasement of Tiberian Rome. See also Shannon-Henderson 2018: 25–27.

expiated in the appropriate manner. As J. Davies has noted, Tiberius' conduct contributes to the breakdown in the transmission and deployment of religious knowledge that Tacitus identifies as a crucial theme of his historical work.³¹

However, on closer inspection, even the *princeps*' decision appears to have clear foundations in established practice. As the list reported by Livy in 43.13 shows (along with other comparable examples), it was not unprecedented for prodigies that were reported to the Senate to be ruled out of consideration on a variety of grounds.³² As W. Liebeschuetz pointed out, societies that rely heavily on divination tend to have within their cultural coordinates a set of arguments that problematize divinatory signs. Such a mindset is not to be confused with wider scepticism towards divination as a practice and as an interpretative framework of reality and of the relationship between men and gods.³³ Moreover, the nature of the event—an occurrence that also requires some direct practical interventions—enabled Tiberius to shift the emphasis from the alleged religious implications of the event to the practical ones. He therefore entrusted two prominent members of the senatorial order with the task of bringing a remedy to the overflowing of the river or of reinforcing its banks.³⁴ Tacitus does not devote any further attention to the episode: Tiberius' intervention must have settled the matter.

The choice not to consult the Books on that occasion marked a further development in an extraordinary trajectory that had begun several decades before. Far from being confined to the realm of obscurity or negligence, the Books had received very close attention from Augustus. Under the right set of conditions, they could be turned into an asset. In 12 BCE, shortly after taking up the highest pontificate, Augustus carried out a comprehensive review of the collections of prophetic texts (*libri fatidici*) in both Greek and Latin that circulated in the city, and salvaged only the Sibylline Books among them. Even within that corpus, he carried out a robust selection, the lines of which are left unclear by Suetonius' brief summary of the episode.³⁵ This operation of religious policing was arguably not the most remarkable step he took on that occasion. The resulting collection was transferred from the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus and moved to the newly dedicated temple of Apollo Palatinus. Such a decision reflected a clear intention to

³¹ Davies 2004: 190–1. On this theme see also Shannon-Henderson 2018: 27–30.

³² See the cases discussed in Davies 2004: 39–41.

³³ Liebeschuetz 1995: 315.

³⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 1.76. See Montero Herrero 2012: 302–7.

³⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 31.1, with Wardle 2014: 246–9.

bring the Books under the control—not just in a political sense, but in a physical one too—of the *princeps*. It is not a symptom, however, of an attempt to remove the Books and their consultation from the picture or to drive them into oblivion: quite the contrary, they are given a renewed, if not altogether desirable centrality. Tiberius' strategy is closely aligned with the Augustan precedent, and takes its underlying logic to its full consequences: precisely because it is so valuable, the access to Sibylline lore is regulated by the *princeps*.³⁶ The decision not to consult the Books in 15 CE has more to do with his own preoccupations with the control of the quindecimviral college than with a wish to make a major feature of Roman public religion redundant or irrelevant. Recognizing the flood of the Tiber as a prodigy that warranted the consultation of the Books was a matter of interpretation, and Tiberius' decision rested on arguments that involved some consideration of the circumstances and an awareness of relevant precedents.³⁷

3. The Survival of Prodigy Reports

Let us turn to the sporadic but clear traces of the survival of the infrastructure that enabled prodigy reports and expiation in the following decades. The first prodigy notice in Tacitus' *Annales* belongs in the narrative of the year 51, at the end of the account of the events in the city of Rome, when a number of prodigies are said to have occurred (12.43).³⁸ These are all events that took place in Rome and could hardly have been overlooked, such as an earthquake and a famine. No mention is made of their expiation, but much is made of the emotional impact they had on the populace: many people died in the stampede that followed the earthquake (cf. also 1.28.2–3, 4.64.1,

³⁶ Cf. also Tiberius's attempt to contain divinatory practice in private contexts (sources and discussion in Buongiorno 2016: 250–4).

³⁷ In January 27 BCE, a flood of the Tiber was regarded as a favourable prodigy: see Cass. Dio 53.20.1, with Santangelo 2013: 243–4. This precedent may conceivably have played a part in informing Tiberius' deliberations, but the view that the flood was a natural event that did not require ritual action may also have had some traction.

³⁸ See Malloch 2009: 120; Shannon-Henderson 2018: 269–71, 311–12. It is of course possible that the lost books of the *Annales* included other prodigy notices: cf. Plin. *HN* 10.35 on a *lustratio* in 43 CE after an eagle-owl had flown into the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus. On Claudius' scrupulousness in religious matters, see Suet. *Claud.* 22; cf. also the notice on the dedication of an altar to *Zeus Alexikakos* ('Jupiter the Averter of Evil') on the Capitol upon the visit to Rome of a maiden who had turned into a man (Phlegon, *Mir.* 6.4). North 1986: 256 stresses that prodigy notices feature only occasionally in Tacitus, while pointing out that '[t]he apparatus of interpretation certainly survives'.

13.17.2). Moreover, there is a brief allusion to how they were received: many viewed them as evidence for divine displeasure with Claudius, and Tacitus refers to ‘whispered complaints’ (*occulti...questus*), which shortly afterwards take the form of a physical attack on the emperor by an angry mob in the Forum. The tendency to regard prodigies as judgments on the rule of an emperor is unsurprising, but it would be reductive to view a shift from public prodigies to private portents that are merely concerned with the position of the emperor.³⁹ The potential for drawing messages of wider importance was still significant. Tacitus alerts his readers to it, without endorsing the views of those who attributed blame to the emperor.

Moreover, the prodigies that are recorded in the following sections of Tacitus’ narrative show that the prodigies that were brought into the public domain were not just events that occurred under everybody’s eyes, and could hardly be ignored or concealed. We also find references to episodes that required the initiative of a group of individuals in order to be reported and brought into the public domain: in 12.64.1 there is a reference to the birth of a hermaphrodite child and of a pig with the talons of a hawk in 54 CE. Moreover, the focus of the prodigy system is not just on events within the city of Rome. Tacitus records the earthquake at Pompeii in 62 CE (15.22.2) and the storm and plague epidemic in Campania (16.13.1–2) in compressed accounts that are strongly reminiscent of the annalistic prodigy lists, although he does not mention any expiation.⁴⁰ That omission may be explained with the need to keep the narrative concise and well paced, but another consideration could also be at play, here and elsewhere: Tacitus may be suggesting that, regardless of what ritual action is being taken, the gods are no longer listening.⁴¹

At the end of *Annales* 13, Tacitus records the ostensible death in 58 CE of the *figus Ruminalis* (13.58), the tree that was said to have served as a shelter for Romulus and Remus in their infancy, and he explicitly states that the event was regarded as a prodigy. No expiation is recorded, and no explanation is given for the later sudden regrowth of the tree.⁴² The presence of this episode in Tacitus’ narrative, however, is explained by the dynamic of his

³⁹ Vigour 2001: 194–5 rightly points out that traditional divinatory rituals were not replaced by rituals for the safety of the *princeps*; she mentions the evidence for the persistence of the *augurium salutis*, but does not discuss prodigies.

⁴⁰ On *Ann.* 15.22.2, cf. Ash 2018: 130, who notes that natural disasters often close years in annalistic history, and Shannon-Henderson 2018: 311–12, 317. On *Ann.* 16.13.1–2 see Shannon-Henderson 2018: 336–38.

⁴¹ Davies 2004: 159–60, 187, 205–6.

⁴² On the significance of trees in Roman divination, see Stiles, this volume.

account, rather than by a sudden revival of interest in divination and prophecy among the inhabitants of Neronian Rome: civil discord and fraternal disputes loom large in the following books of the *Annales*.⁴³ Early in book 14, more prodigies are reported—ostensibly from the city of the Rome—in the aftermath of Agrippina's death. They are listed right after some honours that were decreed to Nero by the Senate, and it is likely that Tacitus's account derives from senatorial records. Tacitus points out that the frequency of prodigies in those years was hollow: had the gods been truly angered, Nero's reign would not have carried on for several years. One is reminded of Livy's comments on *neglegentia*.⁴⁴

In 64 CE, a number of prodigies are reported: among those, the birth in the territory of Placentia, in northern Italy, of a calf with the head attached to its leg stands out.⁴⁵ We are suddenly presented with an isolated instance of a prodigy like many that are attested in the Republican period: a disturbing event in the territory of an Italian community is reported and presented to the attention of the Roman government. The interpretation of the prodigies is entrusted to the haruspices, who in 47 CE had been organized by Claudius into a formal body placed under pontifical (and imperial) supervision.⁴⁶ Imperial patronage did not prevent the diviners from expressing a ruling that was not favourable to the ruler: they viewed the episode as a premonition of the birth of a new head for the world.⁴⁷ As was often the case in the Republican period, they did not respond on the correct expiation of the prodigy, but offered a statement that had a clear prophetic remit.⁴⁸ This prodigy is therefore turned into a premonition of the destiny of the emperor, but is, from a morphological point of view, fully in keeping with the established practice of prodigy reporting and expiation.

⁴³ Malloch 2009: 120.

⁴⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 14.12.2. Cf. Davies 2004: 159 and Shannon-Henderson 2018: 302–3, 346.

⁴⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.47.2. See Ash 2018: 218–19, who draws attention to the birth of a child with the dog head of Anubis near Rome in the following year (Phlegon, *Mir.* 23), and Shannon-Henderson 2018: 324–26. Cf. also the consultation of the Sibylline Books and the subsequent expiation rituals after the fire of Rome (15.44.1); Shannon-Henderson 2018: 321–22 has valuable insights.

⁴⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 11.15; see Shannon-Henderson 2018: 258, 297–98. Tacitus does not record any expiation, but places this intervention of the haruspices right after other instances of prodigies that were reported in official contexts or detected during the performance of sacrifices (*abieci in publicum aut in sacrificiis . . . reperti*); it is likely that the public body of haruspices, rather than a group of independent haruspices, was invested with the Placentia prodigy.

⁴⁷ On this episode, see Davies 2004: 157 and 159.

⁴⁸ See Santangelo 2013: 84–98; for another haruspical intervention, involving a ritual recommendation that the *princeps* seeks and acts upon, in 55 CE, see 13.24.2, with Shannon-Henderson 2018: 289–90 (although this is not the only recorded expiation in what survives of the *Annales*: cf. 15.44.1).

Somewhat provocatively, it may be suggested that this incident fits the definition of what C. Ginzburg called, in his classic study of the ‘divinatory paradigm’ in modern epistemology, a ‘clue’ (*spia*):⁴⁹ the seemingly marginal, even trivial, detail that does not fit the established narratives and prompts a full reconsideration of a familiar problem. Rather than dismissing the *ager Placentinus* prodigy as a mere anomaly, we should instead consider it as an instance of a line of continuity in Roman public divination that modern treatments have tended to disregard, a line in which prodigies, their reporting, and their expiation keep playing a significant part.⁵⁰ An incident reported from Etruria—the discovery of a talking ox—is included in Tacitus’ *Histories* within the long list of prodigies preceding the clash between Otho and Vitellius in 69 CE (1.86), along with some peculiar occurrences in Rome, and just before another devastating flood of the Tiber. The information on these events comes from a number of sources (*diuersis auctoribus*).⁵¹ This may well be, as C. Damon has argued, a passage in which Tacitus is ‘at his most annalistic’.⁵² Unlike Livy, though, and in keeping with the strategy pursued in the *Annales*, Tacitus makes no reference to the expiation of these prodigies: the focus is on the reaction that they prompted. He has a scathing comment on the inability of the people of Rome to appreciate that the flood was caused by either natural factors or fortuitous circumstances, and complains that the event was being turned ‘into a prodigy and a premonition of imminent defeats’.⁵³ As the debate on the flood of the Tiber under Tiberius shows, there was a degree of choice that may be exercised in regarding a given occurrence as a prodigy, and competing views could be voiced. Far from issuing a declaration of scepticism towards divination, Tacitus here reminds us of the risk of misreading divine signs, or detecting some where there are not any, and of the danger entailed by setting the conversation with the gods on the wrong premises.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ginzburg 1989: 96–125.

⁵⁰ Cf. the popular reaction following the appearance of a comet in 60 CE, which was readily viewed as a sign of the imminent end of Nero’s reign (14.22.1): in that instance, the prodigy is not mediated by the Senate or through official channels. See Shannon-Henderson 2018: 305.

⁵¹ See Damon 2003: 275 on the possibly double-edged implication of this clause (in Livy *auctores* of prodigies are mentioned only when they are questionable). See also Plut. *Otho* 4.4–5; on portents involving Vespasian, Suet. *Vesp.* 5.

⁵² Damon 2003: 275.

⁵³ Tac. *Hist.* 1.86.3: *in prodigium et omen imminantium cladum uertebatur*. Damon 2003: 278 draws attention to the parallel between *Ann.* 1.86 and Livy 30.38.10.

⁵⁴ Davies 2004: 160 issues a valuable caveat against viewing Tacitus as a forerunner of modern scepticism.

His narrative corroborates a familiar principle: under the Principate, prodigies are occurrences that take place first and foremost in Rome and Italy, just as had been the case under the Republic.⁵⁵ However, it is important not to focus exclusively on that context. Prodigies from provincial communities could also require attention and prove deeply divisive. Caesar inserts at a crucial point of his narrative of the civil war the account of prodigies that were reported in Asia Minor after Pharsalos, and which he viewed as a divine endorsement of his rise to power.⁵⁶ Their anomalous position in the *Commentarii* has led some to regard the passage as an interpolation.⁵⁷ There is no cogent reason to accept that solution, and it is far preferable to regard them as a symptom of a political climate that has changed beyond recognition. Just as Caesar's victory becomes apparent, some striking signs of divine favour start coming his way, and powerfully enter a narrative that has until that point been remarkably sparing of references to the religious sphere. Within that new context, there is also scope for taking notice of prodigies that occurred outside Italy and communities of Roman citizens, hence pointing to new levels of connection and integration with a provincial setting.⁵⁸ This openness to reports from regions that used not to be part of the ordinary cycle of reporting is also confirmed by other instances. Cassius Dio states that in 37 BCE, a prodigy was reported to Rome from the city of Aspis in North Africa: some dolphins were seen near the city battling with one another and many of them died.⁵⁹ The prodigy made a deep impression on the people of Rome. Other events were also being reported in the city. The implication of this account is that at a time of great political tension, the Roman populace was acutely sensitive to signs of divine displeasure, and not just from Italy. On at least one other occasion in Roman history, prodigies reported in North Africa, when Gaius Gracchus had set out to found the colony of Junonia near Carthage in 122 BCE, had not failed to make an impact on the political situation in Rome.⁶⁰

Some decades later, in 61 CE, at the other end of the empire, a statue of Victoria at Camulodunum in Britain fell on its back in the temple: the local women readily regarded it as a sign of impending doom, and many soon

⁵⁵ In a similar vein, cf. the evidence for the involvement of the quindecimviral and pontifical colleges with ritual matters in several Italian communities, collected and discussed in Millar 1977: 358–60.

⁵⁶ Caes. *B Civ.* 3.105.3–5.

⁵⁷ Reggi 2002; Wardle 2009: 108.

⁵⁸ Rosenberger 2014: 97–8.

⁵⁹ Cass. Dio 48.52.1. Cf. Ael. NA 16.18.

⁶⁰ Plut. *C. Gracch.* 11.1; App. *B Civ.* 1.24.

regarded the near destruction of the colony as a distinct possibility.⁶¹ Shortly afterwards the ocean by the estuary of the Thames appeared to be red, and that was regarded as a further threat.⁶² Tacitus intriguingly points out that the prodigies were deeply disturbing for the veterans quartered in the region, but were also known to the indigenous population, who instead regarded them with hope. We are here presented with an unusual case in which a prodigy is received in different, and indeed competing, ways by two constituencies of people—as was customarily the case with portents on the rise or fall of emperors. It is safe to assume that these instances were much more frequent than the occasional references in our Rome-centred sources would lead us to believe.⁶³ At any rate, the response to the prodigies reported in Britain is remarkable. According to Tacitus' account, the priority of the Roman recipients of the signs was not to arrange for their expiation, nor to report them to the Senate. The signs were regarded as announcements of imminent danger, and elicited a military response; this, however, proved inadequate and led to defeat. Tacitus does not comment openly on it, but the overall picture that he conveys leaves no doubt that the crisis of religious knowledge should be understood as part of a wider pattern of ineffectiveness in the overall strategy pursued by Rome in Britain.

4. Problems of Periodization

This discussion has so far steered clear from issues of periodization, and from the question of how long the public reporting and expiation of prodigies remained a significant, or at least discernible, element of Roman public religion. Putting forward a clear answer is not unproblematic, but I shall try to address the issue in the final section of this chapter. If one goes through the list of the recorded prodigies, the reign of Trajan stands out as a significant endpoint. After some instances in 69 CE, in the early Flavian period, we hear about an instance of the birth of a two-headed baby in the city of Rome in 112 CE, which received a full expiation on the advice of the 'sacrificing priests' (*hupothēkais tōn thuoskoōn*): the newborn was drowned in the

⁶¹ Tac. *Ann.* 14.32. Overlooked in Requena Jiménez 2014: 225–31.

⁶² Cf. Cic. *Div.* 2.58 for a rationalizing account of the factors that cause water to change colour suddenly.

⁶³ *Hist.* 5.13 provides a partial analogy: Tacitus stresses the contrasting, and ultimately ineffective, reception of some prodigies in Jerusalem at the time of Titus' siege of 70 CE; *superstitio* is central to his account.

Tiber.⁶⁴ This episode is not remarkable just because it shows an instance of expiation at a time for which no other evidence survives, but also because it appears to be very similar to the expiation that was reserved for the births of hermaphrodite children in the Republican period. In addition, it serves as a reminder that general statements in our literary sources on shifts in the interpretation of prodigies should be taken with a degree of caution. About half a century earlier, the Elder Pliny briefly commented on hermaphrodites and their role in the expiation of prodigies (7.34): *gignuntur et utriusque sexus quos hermaphroditos uocamus, olim androgynos uocatos et in prodigiis habitos, nunc uero in deliciis* ('Persons are also born of both sexes combined, whom we call hermaphrodites, once called *androgyni* and classed as prodigies, but now as sources of entertainment'). Pliny states that there has been a shift in the interpretation of these births and that they are no longer treated as episodes that required expiation—an account that may even be regarded as broadly compatible with the trend of *neglegentia* pointed out by Livy. The episode of 112 CE sheds further light upon the process sketched by Pliny: the expiation that used to be applied to hermaphrodite children was not discontinued altogether, but was now applied to babies who were born with deformities.

The prodigy of 112 is recorded by Phlegon of Tralles, an imperial freedman who wrote under Hadrian. The notice that immediately precedes it is equally remarkable, albeit for different reasons: it records the birth of a bundle of snakes to a woman at Tridentum, in northern Italy, in 83 CE.⁶⁵ No reference is made here to the expiation of the prodigy or to its formal reporting at Rome, but its inclusion in the work of a Greek-speaking author from Asia Minor can only be explained by its recording at Rome. This isolated episode is an example of the lasting existence of channels through which prodigies that occurred in communities away from Rome could be conveyed to the Urbs and acted upon by the government.

After Trajan, we have to wait until the late Empire to find instances of the familiar system of prodigy reporting and expiation. The *Historia Augusta* records several striking episodes.⁶⁶ In 241, under Gordian, the Sibylline

⁶⁴ Phlegon, *Mir.* 25; see Montero 2000: 65–7 and Haack 2003: 101–3.

⁶⁵ Phlegon, *Mir.* 24.

⁶⁶ On prodigy reports in *HA* see Liori 2017: 615 ('de manière résiduelle mais notable'). Cf. also the generic reference to expiations in *Hadr.* 21.5–6, where the role of the emperor in the process is stressed (*quae omnia, quantum potuit, procurauit*). Liori 2017 offers a fascinating reading of the prodigy list at *Anton.* 9.1–5, which provides no evidence for expiation, but is not

Books were consulted after a major earthquake, and the subsequent ritual action was deemed to have yielded an appeasement; in 262, under Gallienus, a full set of prodigies was reported across Italy, North Africa, Greece, and Asia Minor, wherein a series of earthquakes was followed by a plague outbreak. The Sibylline Books were again consulted and prescribed a series of sacrifices to Jupiter Salutaris. On this occasion, however, the author does not comment on the degree of success (or relief) that these measures attained.⁶⁷ A consultation of the Sibylline Books is also reported in the *Life of Aurelian* for 271, and to an extraordinary degree of detail.⁶⁸ It is decreed by the Senate, with the strong endorsement of the emperor and the pontifical college, at the beginning of the campaign against the Marcomanni, after some early victories of the enemies had brought about considerable concern in Rome and prompted an act of collective purification. The Books yield valuable ritual recommendations, whose correct performance would secure the victory prospects of Rome. The historicity of this set of events is dubious. However, the picture of earnest debate and well-honed cooperation between Senate, emperor, priests, and magistrates that it conveys may well reflect a state of affairs that did hold true for other times in the Imperial period.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to elicit a coherent account out of such a fragmentary body of evidence. The possibility that other prodigy reports and expiations simply escaped the attention of our surviving sources is very strong.⁶⁹ Indirect confirmation comes from a text of the *Codex Theodosianus*, dating to 320/321, where Constantine instructs the *praefectus urbi* Maximus to refer to the haruspices any instance of lightning striking his

closely related to the predicament of the emperor, and should in fact be read as a sort of ‘inventaire prodigial du monde’ (626); Lorient is fairly confident (621) that a centralized process of reporting and expiation still existed under Antoninus Pius and was enabled by the continued presence in Rome of that emperor.

⁶⁷ The haruspical consultation recorded in Amm. Marc. 23.5.12–13 for the year 363 CE should not be included in a discussion of public prodigies (*contra* MacBain 1982: 106), as it followed an episode that occurred during Julian’s Parthian campaign: military commanders were entitled to expiate such prodigies without investing the Senate with the matter or consulting a priestly college. However, the incident is remarkable for at least two reasons: the level of detail of the reported haruspical interpretation and the mention of the competing advice offered by a group of unnamed *philosophi* who were in the emperor’s retinue (see Montero Herrero 1991: 106–108).

⁶⁸ *HA Aur.* 18.4–20. See Lorient 2017: 628–9.

⁶⁹ Maxentius’ decision to consult the Sibylline Books in 312 CE does not belong within the domain of prodigy expiation. According to Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 44.7–8, he chose to access the Books when the people of Rome expressed the view that Constantine could not be defeated, and he received a suitably vague response; Zos. 2.16.1 gives no background to the consultation.

palace or other public buildings (we learn a few lines below that the Flavian Amphitheatre had recently been hit), so that its predictive meaning (*quid portendat*) may be assessed according to traditional practice (*more ueteris obseruantiae*). Their advice is then to be conveyed to the emperor. Haruspices may also be consulted on the same subject in a private capacity, but domestic sacrifices are strictly forbidden.⁷⁰ Not even in this case does the emperor cast himself as the best interpreter of divine signs, but he carefully polices the flow of the information that the diviners are expected to provide. No mention whatsoever is made of the Senate—and it would be anachronistic to expect any at this time.

5. Conclusions

The working hypothesis from which this discussion stemmed is that the development of the public prodigies system in the early Principate may yield more general insights into divinatory practice and culture in the Roman world. Its central contention is that the practice of prodigy reporting and expiation in public contexts did survive in the Principate to a greater extent than is usually recognized, and that such continuity is an historical fact of some religious and intellectual significance.⁷¹ The handling of prodigies was mostly carried out under the supervision and patronage of the emperor, but still required the involvement of the Senate and the direct input of the priestly colleges.

The surviving literary evidence tends to concentrate on prodigies from the city of Rome. However, there is a reasonably good range of prodigies recorded from several locations in Italy, as is the case for much of the Republican period, and a number of prodigies that apparently did not receive any attention from the Roman government are reported from provincial contexts. Envisaging a mechanical transition from a world full of prodigies, open to genuine political competition, to one full of portents and tightly policed by an autocrat is an unhelpful oversimplification. Although the emperor is central to the concerns of the recipients of divinatory signs, as well as to the fabric of the *res publica* itself, he is not the only

⁷⁰ *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.1. See Fögen 1993: 255–7, 316–17; Lucrezi 1996: 99–102; Hano 2005: 10–11; and Benoist 2009: 45–6.

⁷¹ Cf. Bowden, this volume on the continuing political significance of divination in Athens in the fourth century BCE.

subject or addressee of those signs, nor their prime interpreter. Prodigies, far from being a vestigial presence, are the symptom of a long-term dynamic in Roman divination and of an important level of continuity that was predicated on a familiar assumption: mankind is the recipient of a set of divine signs, which require thoughtful interpretation and appropriate ritual response, lest dire consequences ensue.⁷²

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⁷² I am very grateful to the participants in the London conference for their reactions to a preliminary version of this paper, to Bill Klingshirn and Alessandro Schiesaro for helpful suggestions on important points, and to Lindsay Driediger-Murphy, Romain Lorient, Chris Mowat, Susan Satterfield, and an anonymous referee for their invaluable comments on later drafts.

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8

Unsuccessful Sacrifice in Roman State Divination

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The topic of this paper is sacrifice within Roman state divination, more specifically those animal sacrifices that Romans believed had been unsuccessful in that they had failed to please the gods.¹ The question I wish to explore is what Romans thought they were doing through sacrifice, and, by extension, what this can tell us about Roman conceptions of the relationship between gods and human beings.

Surprisingly, this question has seldom been used to interrogate the Roman material. This is in stark contrast to the situation in the field of Greek religion, where studies of the origin myths, meanings, and theory of animal sacrifice abound.² Though several of the early theories have now been abandoned, and though we now recognize that the significance of sacrifice can never be boiled down to one essential meaning,³ one

¹ On the kinds of animals sacrificed by Romans, see Kadletz 1976, and on the practicalities of sacrifice, see Aldrete 2014.

² Most influentially, the works of Girard (1972), Burkert (1972, 2nd ed. 1997), and Vernant (Detienne and Vernant 1979; Vernant 1981). For overviews of the various theories, see Grottanelli 1988; Petropoulou 2008: 1–15, 20–6; Knust and Várhelyi 2011: 3–31; for more recent theories, see Ullucci 2015: 390–9. For discussion, see Detienne and Vernant 1979; Rudhardt and Reverdin 1981; Grottanelli and Parise 1988; Georgoudi et al. 2005; Knust and Várhelyi 2011; Stowers 2011; Rives 2011; Faraone and Naiden 2012, especially Lincoln 2012 and Graf 2012. Failed sacrifices in Greek religion have recently attracted the attention of Naiden 2006 and 2013. Naiden observes that failed sacrifices have not received the scholarly attention they deserve, and demonstrates convincingly that they were much more common than we typically suppose. However, I am reluctant to accept his view that every failed sacrifice rendered the worshipper a ‘rejected celebrant’. With respect to divinatory sacrifice, a divine ‘no’ received through the entrails could simply mean that the proposed action should not go ahead at that exact time or place; it did not necessarily imply that the gods were angry at, or rejecting, the individual or state offering the sacrifice.

³ The most strongly worded critique of the modern quest for grand theories comes from J. Z. Smith (1987); more recently, the inadequacy of the single term ‘sacrifice’ as a descriptor for diverse religious actions in Greece and Rome is highlighted by the chapters in Faraone and Naiden 2012. In this chapter I will use the term ‘animal sacrifice’ to denote the actions by which Romans offered animal victims to the gods. It is now widely recognized that sacrifice had no one

undisputed contribution of this discussion remains. This is the sense that motives matter, that the reasons that drove someone to sacrifice are at least worth thinking about.

The scholarship on Roman animal sacrifice presents quite a different picture. What we find above all are ritual details, the precise terms for, and descriptions of, each implement, participant, action, and stage of the sacrificial process. One unrivalled exception to this tendency is the work of John Scheid. Yet, as Scheid himself recently regretted, he has been almost alone in the endeavour to understand what it was that sacrifice meant to those Romans who performed it.⁴ Moreover, even Scheid's treatments of the topic have continued to focus on the specific actions of Roman sacrifice. In essence, his method is to infer what was meant from what was done: that is, to start with the action, and to work outward from it (a way of working which embodies his influential principle that at Rome, 'to do, is to believe').⁵ This approach has made an incalculable contribution to the study of Roman religion. One potential drawback of it, however, is that it runs the risk of perpetuating our fixation on implements and actions, at the possible expense of ideas.

The other leading scholarly approach to Roman sacrifice has been to see it as being about ownership, status, and society. Here again the lead was taken by Scheid,⁶ as epitomized in his interpretation of the sacrificial gesture of passing the knife from the forehead to the back of the sacrificial victim before it was killed. In this case we know the gesture (as attested in both literature and art), but not its meaning. Scheid's interpretation, which is generally accepted, is to see this action as marking the transfer of ownership of the animal victim, from the human sacrificant to the deity being sacrificed to.⁷ Despite this apparent human control over the status of the animal victim, however, Scheid rightly insists that one effect of sacrifice was to inculcate in its human performers a sense of their inferiority relative to the

invariable meaning in the ancient world, and that we may not be able to recover all the meanings it did have (e.g. van Straten 2005: 26 [sacrifice is 'a continuous field of overlapping shades of meaning or potential meaning']; also Gordon 1990: 206; Feeney 2004; Ullucci 2015: 390–9, 404–7). For our purposes, what matters is that sacrifice had meanings of some kind, negotiable, contextual, or kaleidoscopic as they may be.

⁴ Scheid 2012b: 84–5.

⁵ Thus the interpretation of sacrifice in e.g. Scheid 1990: 477–676, 751–5; Scheid 2005: 275–84. For the principle of 'faire, c'est croire', see: Linder and Scheid 1993; Scheid 2005.

⁶ On the status of human beings, see Scheid 1988; on (shifting) hierarchies among the gods, see Scheid 1999.

⁷ Scheid 1990: 333–6.

gods: '[E]very time one slaughtered, drank, or harvested, the hierarchy of beings was performatively commemorated, by giving the gods the first place, signifying the inferiority of the mortals, and sometimes even the inferiority of the animals.'⁸ Yet this point has not always been fully grasped by subsequent scholars. Scheid's student Francesca Prescendi echoes him in seeing Roman sacrifice as 'une mise en scène d'un ordre hiérarchique cosmique et social',⁹ but shows less interest in what this might imply for how Romans thought about their gods or the human–divine relationship. Knust and Várhelyi move even further away from the question of belief or meaning:

[Roman sacrifice] serv[ed] to perform and consecrate various forms of power. (...) Roman sacrificial customs (...) appear tightly embedded within a complex system of social and political hierarchies, in which public festivals were largely controlled by members of the elite and religion itself was subject to various disciplinary interventions.¹⁰

What is striking here is the language of control. What we are being told is that humans controlled not just festivals, but 'religion itself'. In this currently dominant vision of Roman sacrifice, the emphasis is on the social and political functions that sacrifice fulfilled by reminding all involved in it (gods, humans of various levels of status, animals) of their place in Roman society. Now, it is undoubtedly true that sacrifice did fulfil these functions. But once again, the question that is seldom asked is whether this is what it was about sacrifice that mattered to Romans. My point is not that one explanation is 'wrong' and the other 'right', but simply that if we focus too much on our own functionalist and pragmatic explanations of what sacrifice was doing, we run the risk of missing what it was that its practitioners found interesting, important, challenging, or inspiring about it.

1. Homing in on Divination: Current Models of the Quest for *Litatio*

One of the best ways in to these questions is to consider the divinatory aspects of Roman sacrifice. For it is in divination that we see Romans working most obviously through the problem of how to interact with the gods.

⁸ Scheid 2012b: 93, also 86; similarly Scheid 1998a and 1998b.

⁹ Prescendi 2007: 253. ¹⁰ Knust and Várhelyi 2011: 14.

All Roman animal or ‘blood’ sacrifices were divinatory in the sense that they were thought to offer indications of the attitude and will of the gods towards the person offering the sacrifice, and/or the proposed human activity for which sanction was sought through sacrifice.¹¹ When the gods were favourably inclined towards the sacrificant or their endeavours, the sacrifice was said to have obtained *litatio*, which we can define as the successful acceptance of a victim by the gods.¹² But if the deity was not pleased with what was on offer, he or she could prevent *litatio*, by sending various signs to indicate that the sacrifice had not been successful (in Latin, *non litare* or *non perlitare*).¹³

Whether *litatio* had been achieved or not was ascertained both by observing the behaviour of the animal while it was alive and walking towards the altar,¹⁴ and by examining the condition of the animal’s entrails (*exta*) once it had been killed.¹⁵ The sources suggest that the entrails could furnish a

¹¹ Scheid 1990: 337; Beard, North, and Price 1998 (vol. 1): 36–7; Santangelo 2013: 109. Many modern works continue to perpetuate supposed distinctions between divinatory and non-divinatory sacrifices—for example, between *hostiae consultatoriae* and *hostiae animales*, between ‘probative’ and ‘divinatory’ sacrifice, and/or between Roman and Etruscan styles of sacrificial divination. For the historical period, these distinctions are untenable. See most of all Schilling 1962 (= 1979); Nasse 1999.

¹² The most accurate modern definition on offer is Schilling’s: ‘faire agréer un sacrifice par la divinité/se faire agréer par la divinité’ (Schilling 1971: 35). Boccali’s more concrete ‘offrire la vittima doppo aver ottenuto presagi favorevoli’ (Boccali 1971: 504) and Ernout and Meillet’s ‘obtenir un présage favorable/donner un présage favorable’ (1967: s.v. *lito*) are also tenable. The definition of Siebert 1999: col. 260 (‘günstigen Verlauf und Abschluß einer Opferhandlung, durch welche die Wirkung auf die Gottheit (*pax deorum*, <<Zustimmung der Götter>>) gesichert ist’) is correct apart from its emphasis on the securability of the *pax deorum*, recently disproved by Santangelo 2011; Satterfield 2015; and Satterfield 2016. It should be noted that *litatio* signified, strictly speaking, only the conclusive acceptance of the victim at the time of consultation; it could thus be seen as increasing, but not guaranteeing, the odds of a successful outcome for the activity to which the sacrifice pertained (rightly, Santangelo 2013: 109 n. 104; cf. Rüpke 2001: 149; Unceta Gómez 2008: 207–9).

¹³ E.g. Cic. *Div.* 2.38; Gell. *NA* 4.6.5–6; Flor. 2.13.94. On the etymology and evolving meaning of the verb *litare*, see recently Moussy 1992; Unceta Gómez 2008.

¹⁴ The traditional view is that sacrificial animals were supposed to go willingly to their deaths: see Prescendi 2007: 99–101. The strongest support comes from numerous passages where the escape or attempted flight of the animal are seen as baleful signs (e.g. Livy 21.63.13–15; Plin. *HN* 8.183; Paul. *Fest.* 351 Lindsay [1930] s.v. *piacularia auspicia*). Servius (*Aen.* 2.134 and 4.518) further insists that the victim must not be bound at the moment of sacrifice, though Servius’ knowledge of the rules of Roman sacrifice is not to be relied upon (Murgia 2003). In practice, animals must have struggled in these moments, as suggested by depictions in art (Fless 1995: 72; Huet 2005), and modern scholarship may have exaggerated the religious significance of their behaviour before death. For the argument with respect to Greek sacrifice, see Peirce 1993: 255–8; van Straten 1995: 100–2; van Straten 2005: 19–21; Georgoudi 2005: 131–4; Naiden 2007; Georgoudi 2008; with respect to Roman sacrifice, see Aldrete 2014.

¹⁵ As illustrated in our only surviving depiction of entrail-inspection in progress, a relief from Trajan’s Forum: fragments in Musée National du Louvre, Paris, MA 978, 1089 and Collection Valentin de Courcel, Paris.

dizzying number of signs indicating either the gods' acceptance or rejection of the sacrifice.¹⁶ The liver seems to have been especially significant, and was examined for the presence or absence of what Romans called its 'head' (*caput*), as well as for indications in other parts of it, the *pars hostilis* and the *pars familiaris*, in addition to the *fibrae* (extremities, perhaps of the liver), and *fissa* (perhaps veins, fissures, or indentations). In addition to the liver, several other parts of the animal were also thought to furnish indications of the gods' attitude, especially the lungs, gall-bladder, and heart. Interestingly, the kinds of signs furnished by these body parts seem to have included not just their own physical condition (e.g. whether the liver was 'smooth, shiny and full' versus 'rough and shrunken'), but also any effects caused by the sacrificial process itself, especially any cuts or incisions made in the internal organs (presumably in the process of removing them).¹⁷

Most of the complexities of the system by which these features were interpreted are lost to us today. But the system was undoubtedly complex.¹⁸ This is confirmed not just by our literary sources but also by Etruscan artistic representations (relevant for us because Romans had adopted Etruscan-style sacrificial divination by the third century BCE).¹⁹ The celebrated Bronze Liver model found near Piacenza, for example, abounds in details that must have been significant, even if they remain well-nigh incomprehensible to us.²⁰ The sarcophagus of Lars Puleas from Tarquinia (end third/early second century BCE),²¹ which depicts him holding an inscribed book roll which proudly proclaims, 'he wrote this book on haruspicy', similarly demonstrates that there was much which could be said in antiquity about entrail-inspection and related disciplines: it would not have been worth writing a whole book on the subject otherwise.

¹⁶ For detailed references for each body part examined, see Thulin 1906a: 20–47.

¹⁷ Livy 8.9.1; Ov. *Met.* 15.795; Sen. *Oed.* 361; Plin. *HN* 11.190 (cuts are unfavourable unless at a time of concern and fear, *sollicitudine ac metu*, because then the cutting removes care, *peremit c<u>ras*).

¹⁸ For an attempt to reconstruct how Greek hepatoscopy might have worked (interesting if speculative), see Collins 2008.

¹⁹ Schilling 1962 = 1979.

²⁰ For a selection of modern attempts at the interpretation of this object, see Thulin 1906b; Pfiffig 1975: 121–7; Maggiani 1982; van der Meer 1987; Morandi 1988; cf. the cautions of Dumézil 1970 (vol. 2): 685–91; Rasmussen 2003: 126–48.

²¹ Now in Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Tarquinia. For the text of the inscription, see: *TLE* 131; Rix et al. 1991 (vol. 2): Ta 1.17 (p. 47); translation in Bonfante and Bonfante 2002: no. 31 (pp. 149–51); context in Boitani 1988: 15–17; Turfa 2006. Haruspicy (*haruspicina*) denoted the Etruscan branches of divination that included entrail-inspection as well as the interpretation of lightning strikes and other celestial signs, and the interpretation of prodigial phenomena: see now Turfa 2012.

In light of this evidence that sacrifice was thought to provide a large quantity of data about the gods' feelings and intentions, we might be forgiven for thinking that Romans must have seen the gods as, firstly, difficult to read, and, secondly, difficult to please. Yet, with some important exceptions to which I will return, this is not the conclusion one will find in the literature. Instead, it is widely held that *litatio* was relatively simple to ascertain, as well as relatively easy to obtain.²² This modern consensus rests on a fundamental premise: that if *litatio* was not obtained with the first victims (*primae hostiae*), it was either obligatory or permissible,²³ and in any case common, for Romans to keep on sacrificing additional victims until *litatio* was obtained. Thus throughout the literature we read that the Romans performed sacrifice *usque ad litationem* ('right up until *litatio*' or 'right up until *litatio* was achieved').

Despite the inherent implausibility of this assumption, it has swept the literature, with significant consequences for our understanding of the nature of Roman sacrificial divination and the relationships it constructed between gods and human beings. For if we accept that any magistrate who received a negative sign from the gods the first time around could simply keep sacrificing until he got the permissive sign he wanted, this would seem to suggest that divinatory sacrifice was not, at its heart, about accessing the will of the gods, but simply about making them amenable to human plans and desires. The implication would be that Roman gods were easy-going types, perhaps a bit refractory on occasion, but generally brought round without too much trouble. And this is indeed the basis for Scheid's influential view of Roman religion, which sees the gods as benevolent 'fellow-citizens' of Rome,²⁴ and Roman divination (including sacrifice) as 'la mise en scène dramatique d'une donnée théologique'.²⁵ In the terms of this volume, such models of

²² Champeaux 2005: 212 is typical: ascertaining *litatio* was a 'procédure simple et rapide [qui] ne va pas au-delà de l'observation commune; et si, sur elle, nous connaissons peu de détails, c'est sans doute parce qu'il y a peu à en connaître et que, elle-même, elle n'en comportait guère'.

²³ E.g. Blecher 1905: 51, 53; Wissowa 1912: 418; Tromp 1921: 63; Wissowa 1927: 741; Krause 1931: 277; Schilling 1969: 472; Scheid 1981: 122–3; Scheid 1987–9: 130–1; Beard, North, and Price 1998 (vol. 1): 36; Rüpke 2001: 149–50; Rasmussen 2003: 121 and n. 144 (rather puzzlingly citing in support cases where *litatio* was not obtained); Huet et al. 2004: 228; Champeaux 2005: 212–13; Scheid 2005: 155 n. 79; Prescendi 2007: 39; Unceta Gómez 2008: 208; Scheid 2012a: 119; Santangelo 2013: 109–10. The same assertion occurs in most textbooks, e.g. North 2000: 45; Turcan 2000: 9; Warrior 2006: 23; Ekroth 2014: 329.

²⁴ Scheid 1985.

²⁵ Scheid 1987–9: 132 (thus 'La consultation des dieux n'est donc, à proprement parler pas un dialogue entre un officiant et un dieu'); also 131 ('le sacrifiant n'a, au fond, pas pour mission de demander respectueusement à la divinité si elle accepte ou non l'offrande, mais de trouver, de révéler, de réaliser cet accord'). The same principle underlies Scheid's more recent remarks on

the quest for *litatio* (and, by extension, Romans' perceived relationships with and experiences of their gods) suppose that divinatory sacrifice was not really a means of communication with the divine, because its result was a foregone conclusion: the gods would always support the Roman state.²⁶ As a result, the scholarship has focused not on the human–divine relationship, but on how this kind of divination helped to negotiate relationships between human beings. When Jörg Rüpke writes of Roman divinatory sacrifice as communication, for example, the communication of which he speaks is between the sacrificant and the other human beings observing him or learning of his behaviour.²⁷ In short, though we are all happy to state blandly that divinatory sacrifice was a 'channel of communication between gods and men',²⁸ the premise that sacrifice could and did continue *usque ad litationem* appears to have discouraged further inquiry into the kind of human–divine relationship posited by this form of divination.

There are some important exceptions to this view. In 1999, David Potter stated in passing that Roman sacrifices would have been postponed after two failed attempts, but he did not provide justification for this suggestion.²⁹ More recently, Federico Santangelo writes that sacrifice *usque ad litationem* was 'the most commonly pursued' option at Rome, but adds that *litatio* 'was never to be taken for granted, and securing it was a divinatory exercise, which required the ability to read through the unpredictable and potentially disruptive choices of the gods'.³⁰ The most detailed objection to the theory of sacrifice *usque ad litationem* has been brought forward by Annie Vigourt.³¹ Although she too accepts that Romans typically repeated sacrifices, Vigourt observes that Imperial writers such as Tacitus and Suetonius seem to regard unsuccessful initial sacrifices as having long-lasting implications for the emperor as sacrificant, even if he went on to offer additional victims (which, in the current model, should have cancelled out any unfavourable

sacrifice, e.g. Scheid 2012a: 119: repeating a sacrifice until it was accepted by the gods was how 'un Romain digne de ce nom se comporte, sans avoir peur, sans douter des dieux'.

²⁶ Note that in Scheid's hands, the model still allows for some divine agency: in his view, repeated sacrifices were necessary because the gods might initially be ill-disposed towards a particular request, and could only be persuaded to change their minds through the offering of additional victims: Scheid 1987–9: 131; also Veyne 2005: 436 and n. 60.

²⁷ The premise here is that the degree to which the sacrificant persisted in trying to obtain *litatio* served to reveal to other human beings the strength of his commitment to the action about which he was sacrificing: Rüpke 2001: 150.

²⁸ Prescendi 2007: 24, 253 ('un canal de communication entre les mondes humain et divin').

²⁹ Potter 1999: 156 = 2010: 180–1.

³⁰ Santangelo 2013: 109–10.

³¹ Vigourt 2001: 190–5.

signs previously received). As Vigourt points out, these misgivings about unfavourable initial signs suggest that some Romans did not consider subsequent offerings as being sufficient to cancel out whatever divine displeasure had been signalled in the original failed sacrifice. On the contrary, even signs received early in the sacrificial process were to be taken seriously as indications of divine disfavour.³² Vigourt's insight opens the way to a different understanding of Roman divination, one in which 'les relations avec les divinités n'avaient rien d'un marché, ni même rien d'automatique; il pouvait y entrer de la colère, de la vanité, de l'amour blessé, ou de défi, tous sentiments dont on ne peut toujours se départir quand on est humain, et pas davantage quand on est dieu'.³³ This is a world in which the communication between humans and gods is not one-way.

What has yet to be undertaken in the scholarship is a thorough exploration of how such an alternative view of the quest for *litatio* might relate to our evidence for, and reconstructions of, Roman sacrificial practice and conventions. If the strategy of sacrificing *usque ad litationem* was possible but not obligatory, how did the Roman sacrificant decide when to pursue it and when to let it go? If an initial failed sacrifice was considered significant regardless of any subsequent *litatio*, could the concept of *usque ad litationem* actually have had any meaning? More fundamentally, how could Roman gods have been seen as having the freedom to reject the sacrifices offered by their worshippers, if sacrifice invariably continued until divine assent had been obtained? To answer these questions, we need comprehensive data on the frequency and circumstances of Roman repetitions of (or refusals to repeat) sacrifice, data that I intend to provide in a separate study. For now, three points may be made. Firstly, comparative data from the ancient Near

³² One of the clearest examples of this trend in divinatory interpretation is the story that an ox sacrificed by Julius Caesar sometime before his death was found to have no heart. The date and the details vary in our surviving sources. Some report only the initial unfavourable sign (Cic. *Div.* 1.119; 2.37; Val. Max. 1.6.13; Plin. *HN* 11.186; *Obsequens* 67); others claim that subsequent sacrifices by Caesar on the same occasion were also unsuccessful (App. *B. Civ.* 2.116, 153; Suet. *Iul.* 81.4, cf. 77); and still others treat the heartless ox and the repeated (but always unfavourable) sacrifices by Caesar on the day of his death as separate incidents (Plut. *Caes.* 63). One reason for this diversity may be that later interpreters disagreed as to whether the result of the first sacrifice was conclusive in itself, or whether its significance could have been changed by subsequent sacrifices. Yet the fact that those sources which do report repetitions describe them all as unsuccessful, indicates that the implications of the first sacrifice (death for Caesar) came to be seen as significant in their own right, no matter how many victims Caesar may or may not have offered subsequently. (My thanks to the reader for OUP for their helpful comments on this point.) For an examination of how such tales about dynasts could be interpreted and reinterpreted by different interest groups and in different circumstances, see Stiles, this volume.

³³ Vigourt 2001: 195.

East, Greece, and ancient China indicates that diviners were typically expected to limit themselves to three attempts (an initial attempt plus two repetitions) to repeat a sacrifice or to pose a divinatory question.³⁴ It seems reasonable to suppose that Romans might have found a similar limit appealing and practical.³⁵ Secondly, when our sources do describe or advise repetitions of sacrifice, they usually mention only one or two repetitions, and sometimes specify that after these repetitions the signs were still deemed unfavourable.³⁶ Of course, this evidence cannot rule out the possibility that additional repetitions were performed subsequently, but it is difficult to see why such low numbers and their failure to secure *litatio* would be mentioned at all, if unproblematic repetition *usque ad litationem* had then occurred. Thirdly, Roman sources sometimes state that a failure to obtain *litatio* caused, or advised, delays of one or more days.³⁷ It is just possible that the individuals involved were repeating sacrifice steadily and continuously during this time, and still failed to receive favourable signs, but delays of such length seem more likely to be explained by pauses after the first (few) unsuccessful attempt(s) on each day.

In the rest of this chapter, I will focus on one of the most important pieces of the puzzle, a crucial passage that has much to tell us about what the Romans thought they were doing through sacrifice. What we will see is that there are good reasons to abandon the modern assumption that *usque ad litationem* was a common or normative part of Roman sacrifice.

³⁴ Near East: Koch 2010. Greece: Szymanski 1908: 77; Parker 2000: 306; Parker 2004: 144. China: Loewe 1994: 175. (My thanks to Professor Scott Noegel for bringing the Near Eastern examples to my attention.) Repeated posing of an unvarying question to the same god with the same technique and in the same context is to be distinguished from posing the same question to different oracles, which Greeks, at least, considered acceptable: see Eidinow, this volume.

³⁵ Although such a limit was probably the norm, it seems that it could occasionally be exceeded. Plutarch claims (*Cor.* 25) that Romans might repeat a sacrifice up to thirty times, and Aemilius Paullus was said to have sacrificed eleven victims to the moon and twenty-one victims to Hercules before Pydna in 168 BCE (Plut. *Aem.* 17). Tromp (1921: 62) suggested that there was a difference between sacrifices repeated due to perceived human error (the case, he thinks, in *Cor.* 25) and sacrifices repeated in response to negative signs thought to have been sent by the gods. This may be right, but evidence is lacking. The highest number of repetitions on record is the ninety-nine unsuccessful repetitions attributed to Julius Caesar on the day of his death by Florus (2.13.94). However, this figure is unlikely to be accurate. No repetitions of sacrifice on this scale are attested elsewhere, and it seems most likely that Florus has simply exaggerated the ‘many’ sacrifices mentioned in Suetonius (see above, n. 32).

³⁶ E.g. for Ti. Sempronius Gracchus in 212 BCE (Livy 25.16; Val. Max. 1.6.8); for M. Claudius Marcellus in 208 BCE (Livy 27.26.13–14; Val. Max. 1.6.9; Plut. *Marc.* 29; Plin. *HN* 11.189); for M. Herennius in 93 BCE (*Obsequens* 52).

³⁷ E.g. Cic. *Div.* 1.85 (advice from a *haruspex*); Livy 23.36.10 (215 BCE); Livy 27.23.4 (208 BCE).

2. Livy 41.14–15: The Limits of Human Control over Divinatory Sacrifice

Livy 41.14–15 describes the official start of the year 176 BCE, as the consuls Cn. Cornelius Scipio Hispallus and Q. Petilius Spurius perform the rituals requisite for the magistrate's entry into office. One of these rituals was a sacrifice to the Capitoline triad and, probably, to the goddess Salus.³⁸ So far, so typical: but in this case all did not go according to plan.³⁹

On the day on which they entered into their magistracy, when the consuls Cn. Cornelius and Q. Petilius were making animal sacrifice to Jupiter with an ox each, as was customary, a head was not found on the liver of the victim with which Petilius had made sacrifice. When he announced this to the senate, he was ordered to obtain *litatio* with an(other?) ox... [The senate continues its debate about the allocation of provinces for the year.] While these matters were being discussed in the senate, Cornelius was summoned out of the meeting by a messenger, and when he had left the site of the meeting, he returned not long after with a troubled expression and explained to the senators that the liver of the *sescenaris* ox⁴⁰ which he had sacrificed had melted away [during cooking]. He said that when his *victimarius*⁴¹ announced this to him he hardly believed it, but he himself ordered the water to be poured out of the pot where the entrails were being cooked, and he had seen that the rest of the entrails were intact, but the whole liver had been consumed by an indescribable wasting-away. To the senators, who were terrified by this prodigy, the other consul brought additional cause for concern, by reporting that he had failed to obtain *litatio* with three oxen,⁴² because the head of the liver had been missing. The senate ordered that sacrifice keep being made with full-grown victims until *litatio* was reached. They say that he obtained *litatio* from the other

³⁸ So Scheid 1990: 300–2. Alternative explanations for Salus' presence in Livy's account have been proposed. Beard, North, and Price 1998 (vol. 2): 178 n. 3 suggest that the senate may have ordered a sacrifice to Salus only when the usual rites went wrong. Weissenborn-Müller 1909 (vol. 9.2) *ad loc* and Briscoe 2012: 87 hold that 'something was found in the entrails which indicated that all was not well in the case of Salus'. In the absence of further evidence, certainty is impossible (Clark 2007: 165).

³⁹ The story is also reported, with less detail, by Obsequens 9.

⁴⁰ *Sescenaris* is a hapax of unknown meaning.

⁴¹ The sacrificial attendant who performed the killing and butchering of the victim: see now Lennon 2015.

⁴² Thus by this point Petilius had made three or four sacrifices (depending on whether we take the unfavourable *tribus bubus* to include, or to be in addition to, the initial victim).

gods, but he did not obtain it from Salus.⁴³ Then the consuls and the praetors drew lots for their provinces.

Cn. Cornelio et Q. Petilio consulibus, quo die magistratum inierunt, immolantibus Iovi singulis bubus, uti solet, in ea hostia, qua Q.⁴⁴ Petilius sacrificavit, in iocinere caput non inventum. Id cum ad senatum rettulisset, bove perlitare iussus. (...) Dum de iis rebus in⁴⁵ senatu agitur, Cn. Cornelius evocatus a viatore, cum templo egressus esset, paulo post rediit⁴⁶ confuso vultu et exposuit patribus conscriptis bovis sescenaris, quem immolavisset, iocur diffluxisse.⁴⁷ Id se victimario nuntianti parum credentem ipsum aquam effundi ex olla, ubi exta coquerentur, iussisse et vidisse ceteram integram partem extorum, iecur omne inenarrabili⁴⁸ tabe absumptum. Territis eo prodigio patribus et alter consul curam adiecit, qui se, quod caput iocineri defuisset, tribus bubus perlitasse negavit. Senatus maioribus hostiis usque ad litationem sacrificari iussit. Ceteris diis perlitatum ferunt; Saluti Petilium perlitasse negant. Inde consules praetoresque provincias sortiti. (emphasis mine)

As indicated in the Latin, this passage is replete with *litatio*-vocabulary. At first glance, this might look like strong support for the traditional view, and indeed this passage is often cited without further comment as an illustration of typical sacrificial procedure, including the *usque ad litationem*. The reality, in my view, is that this passage provides an invaluable glimpse of how much could go wrong in Roman sacrifice.

Firstly, it cannot be overemphasized that this is the only place in all of Latin literature in which the phrase *usque ad litationem* occurs. This fact is seldom acknowledged in modern treatments. At a minimum, it should discourage any attempt to position the *usque ad litationem* procedure at the heart of our reconstructions and understanding of Roman sacrifice.

Secondly, this passage suggests, not that sacrifice *usque ad litationem* was routine, but that it was uncommon. This emerges from the sequence of

⁴³ This passage is sometimes cited as evidence that Roman-style divinatory sacrifice sought a message from one god per victim (Blecher 1905: 233–4; Thulin 1906a: 8; Scheid 1990: 300–2; Scheid 2003: 102). However, there seem to have been exceptions: Roman discussions of Marcellus' attempted dedication of a temple to Honos and Virtus in 208 BCE reveal that certain gods (which ones, we do not know) could share a single victim: Livy 27.25.9 (*neque... duobus nisi certis deis rite una hostia fieri*); Val. Max. 1.1.8 (*nec duobus nisi certis dis una sacrificari solere*); with Prescendi 2007: 39–40. Livy 8.9.1 (the Battle of the Vesperis, 340 BCE) can also speak of a single victim as being acceptable to 'the gods' in the plural (*dis*).

⁴⁴ Following Grynaeus.

⁴⁵ Following Grynaeus.

⁴⁶ Following Briscoe 2012: 86.

⁴⁷ Following Perizonius; see Briscoe 2012: 87.

⁴⁸ Following Kreyssig.

interactions between Petilius and the senate. What we see is that after receiving an unfavourable sign from his first victim, Petilius deems it necessary to report to the senate. The senate then orders him to *perlitare*. After three unfavourable sacrifices, he again reports to the senate. At this point the *patres* order him to continue sacrificing *usque ad litationem*, but even so he cannot obtain *litatio* from Salus.⁴⁹ (This sequence may suggest that there was some difference of meaning between *perlitare* and sacrifice *usque ad litationem*, a difference that is now lost to us.)⁵⁰ In any case, what stands out clearly is that Petilius does not simply assume that he has the right to keep sacrificing until he obtains *litatio*. Instead, he stops (at least temporarily) after his first victims are rejected by the gods, and then he stops again after offering a small number of additional victims. It is only when the collective religious expertise of the senate endorses the *usque ad litationem* that he resorts to this strategy. Evidently, it was not something that could be left to the discretion of individual magistrates.⁵¹

Thirdly, this passage suggests that *litatio* was not always easy to obtain. This emerges from the experiences of both consuls. In Petilius' case, as noted by Davies in an excellent discussion of this passage, the Romans' lingering concern about Salus shows that the 'dissatisfaction of just one god would seem to be dangerous'.⁵² Even the signs of acceptance which Petilius received from 'the rest of the gods' (*ceteris diis*) do not seem to have convinced his contemporaries that his sacrifices could be considered

⁴⁹ Pace Huet et al. 2004: 230; Prescendi 2007: 39 n. 161, who are under the impression that '[e]nfin le sacrifice [of Petilius] fut agréé par tous les dieux'.

⁵⁰ *Perlitare* with respect to sacrifice is itself a rare word. It occurs in six places: 1) A fragment of Valerius Antias quoted at Gell. NA 1.7.10 = Val. Ant. fr. 59 P/F14 Cornell (the quote illustrates a linguistic point and no context is given): 'If those religious observances were performed and *litatio* were correctly obtained, the *haruspices* said that everything would follow as was wished' (*Si eae res divinae factae recteque perlitatae essent, haruspices dixerunt omnia ex sententia processurum esse*) [trans. Cornell et al., lightly modified]; 2) Livy 41.15, discussed above; 3) Livy 7.8.5: 'because *litatio* was not obtained for a long time, the dictator had been held back' (*diu non perlitatum tenuerat dictatorem*); 4) Livy 36.1.3: '*litatio* was obtained with the first victims' (*primisque hostiis perlitatum est*); 5) Flor. 2.13.94: Julius Caesar could not *perlitare* on the day of his death; 6) Zeno Veronensis 1.39: during the Great Persecution, Christians were forced 'to *perlitare* with deadly blood' (*funesto sanguine perlitare*). Since Zeno is unlikely to have accepted that forced sacrifices by Christians could receive favourable signs from 'pagan' gods, it seems most likely that he is using *perlitare* not in its technical sense, but simply to denote the act of sacrificing.

⁵¹ Tromp (1921: 63) recognized this, but tried to dodge the implications by arguing that Petilius here employs Etruscan-style sacrifice, unlike the 'Roman' sacrifice that proceeded *usque ad litationem*. This distinction between 'Roman' and 'Etruscan' sacrifice is untenable (see n. 11), and as a means of avoiding the implications of Petilius' behaviour, it will not do. This is as 'Roman' a case of sacrifice as we can expect to see.

⁵² Davies 2004: 138.

successful overall.⁵³ Equally interesting are the problems encountered by Hispallus, especially since they seem to have occurred in the cooking phase of sacrifice, after the entrails had already been deemed favourable.⁵⁴ Signs from the entrails at this stage of the sacrifice may have been uncommon, as suggested by Hispallus' claim that initially he 'hardly believed' (*parum credentem*) his *victimarius*' report.⁵⁵ It is all the more striking, then, that changes to the entrails during this phase of the sacrifice were still considered to be of divinatory significance, even when the sacrificant himself was not present.⁵⁶ The fact that signs could be produced during this phase of sacrifice tells against the modern vision of Romans performing a quick, perfunctory check for *litatio*. Instead, it adds to the already lengthy list of opportunities for the detection of signs and ritual errors during sacrifice, which we considered in the second section of this paper.⁵⁷

⁵³ The fact that Petilius later presided over elections and departed for his province (Livy 41.16.5; 41.17.5–6) is difficult to interpret. That Livy uses *ferunt* and *negant* to report the ultimate failure of Petilius' sacrifices to Salus might suggest that the information only emerged later, perhaps after his death, as did reports that he had neglected the auspices or caused his own death by an ominous utterance (Livy 41.18; Val. Max. 1.5.9; discussion in n. 58). Given how punctilious Livy's Petilius is in informing the senate of his sacrificial difficulties, however, it seems unlikely that he would not also have told the senators of the end result of his sacrifices. One possibility is that the senate initially deemed the number of his successes 'close enough' to justify his entering his magistracy, but that subsequent disasters were seen as proving that this had been a mistake. On this common Roman method of adapting religious practice and doctrine in the light of experience, see Rosenstein 1990.

⁵⁴ It seems reasonable to suppose, with Scheid (1990: 337), that Romans would only have proceeded to cook the entrails after a favourable initial inspection.

⁵⁵ Though note Prescendi 2007: 156–7 on the proverb *inter caesa et porrecta* (Cic. Att. 5.18.1), which suggests that such last-minute developments in sacrifice were at least imaginable.

⁵⁶ Lübbert 1859: 125; Santini 1988: 296. Hispallus' absence from this phase of the sacrifice has been explained with reference to Varro's definition (*Ling. Lat.* 6.31) of *dies endotercisi/intercisi* (Santini 1988: 294; Prescendi 2007: 44; a similar definition in Macr. Sat. 1.16.3). Varro states that on these days, it was *fas* to act in the time 'between the killing of the victim and the offering of the *exta* on the altar' (*inter hostiam caesam et exta porrecta fas*), which indicates that it was sometimes possible for the sacrificant to see to other business during this stage of sacrifice, and may suggest that it was seen as less sacred than the other stages (Scheid 1990: 337; on the reading of Varro's text here, see Flobert 1985 *ad loc.*). However, it is not certain how far we can generalize from Varro's statement about practice on *dies endotercisi/intercisi* to other days. Livy states that Petilius and Hispallus performed their initial sacrifices on the first day of the consular year, which in the period between the Second Punic War and 153 BCE tended to be (but was not always) the Ides of March (Pina Polo 2011: 13–18; *pace* Scheid 1990: 301 n. 11, who appears to anticipate later practice when he dates our event to 1 January). There were eight *dies intercisi/endotercisi* in the Roman year (including two in January, two in February, and one on 13 March), so it is possible but not certain that Petilius and Hispallus entered office on such a day (on the character of the days, see Michels 1967). The most we can say is that Livy does not seem perturbed by the fact that Hispallus was absent during this stage on this occasion.

⁵⁷ We may compare those Roman references to *litatio* that state that it was obtained only after delay or with difficulty (references in nn. 36–7, and Livy 7.8.5 (above, n. 50)), or that, conversely, consider it noteworthy that *litatio* was achieved with the 'first victims' (*primae*

Fourthly and finally, this passage shows that failing to obtain *litatio* had significant consequences not just for the practicalities of public business and decision-making, but also for the emotional dimension of Romans' religious lives.⁵⁸ To begin with the practicalities, the consuls' difficulties affect not only themselves, but the senate as well. The senate's discussion about provinces is interrupted repeatedly, Petilius is perhaps prevented from attending the meeting altogether, and Hispallus is summoned from the meeting in mid-debate by his *victimarius*.⁵⁹ But Livy describes the event as more than just an inconvenience. He depicts the senators as absolutely 'terrified' (*territi*), not just by Petilius' ongoing difficulties, but specifically in response to the single unfavourable sign reported by Hispallus. That such anxiety could be provoked by even one unsuccessful attempt at sacrifice supports Vigour's observation, discussed in the first section of this chapter, that an unfavourable initial sacrifice might be seen as cause for concern even if repetition of sacrifice was an option. *Terror* is an emotion that we seldom look for in Roman religion, but which recurs again and again in Livy, as in other Roman writers. What our passage suggests is that dealing with the gods at Rome was not necessarily the cosy, comfortable negotiation we have so often imagined.⁶⁰ It involved fear, terror. How would our view of Roman

hostiae: e.g. Livy 36.1.3 (above, n. 50); 38.20.6). Both usages indicate that *litatio* was not always easy to secure.

⁵⁸ This story, combined with the deaths of first Hispallus and then Petilius later in their year, may also have influenced the subsequent ruling by 'experts in religion and public law' (*periti religionum iurisque publici*) that the suffect to Hispallus (who had been elected under Petilius' presidency) could not preside over the elections to replace Petilius, perhaps because the gods were deemed to have repudiated every action taken by that consul (cf. Potter 1999: 130–1 = 2010: 154–5). Unfortunately Livy's text is lost at the crucial point (for what remains, see Livy 41.18.14–16; Linderski 1986: 2185; cf. Briscoe 2012: 99). Similar religious objections to the election of a suffect censor had developed in 392 BCE, according to Livy 5.31.5–6; 9.34.17–22 (my thanks to Mr Brad Jordan [University of Oxford] for the reference). Finally, the story may also have helped Romans to explain the deaths of the consuls (on the details of the tradition, see Linderski 1986: 2173–5; Levene 1993: 105–7; Davies 2004: 110–11; Konrad 2007: 116). However, Briscoe 2012: 87 goes too far in asserting that the failed sacrifices must therefore have been invented *post eventum*. I would say rather that the centrality of failed sacrifice in the Roman attempt at making meaning out of the consuls' death testifies to the seriousness with which Romans regarded *litatio* and its absence.

⁵⁹ I am not as confident as Briscoe (2012: 85) that we can take Livy's *bove perlitare* to mean that Petilius was ordered to continue his sacrifices 'after the meeting of the senate, perhaps on the following day'. To me it sounds more like Petilius is expected to keep sacrificing during the initial senate session.

⁶⁰ Cf. the interpretation of our passage in Schilling 1967–8: 55 as showing the Romans' 'obstination' in the face of unfavourable signs, and the senate's order to persevere *usque ad litationem* as attesting Roman 'confiance dans les dieux'. For comparative data on anxiety as a religious emotion in ancient Near Eastern divination, see Noegel, this volume.

sacrifice and Roman religion change if we were to take such expressions seriously? What kind of relationship would we then see Roman divinatory sacrifice as positing or constructing between gods and human beings? I think it is time for our field to find out.

3. Some Conclusions

With respect to this volume's interest in the control and interpretation of signs, in communication, and in human–divine relationships, what we have seen is that scholarly discussions of Roman divinatory sacrifice have been dominated by the assumption that human control over the divinatory process was great. The implication is that Roman sacrifice was either not really about communicating (so Scheid), or that it was mostly about communicating with other human beings rather than with gods (so Rüpke). Insofar as Roman sacrifice can tell us about Roman conceptions of the divine, the current consensus sees the relationship which sacrifice constructed or imagined between the Romans and their gods, as one in which the gods could be relied upon to come round to Rome's side, even if they occasionally threw a little tantrum first. In her 1966 novel *The Birds Fall Down*, Rebecca West's 'Count Diakonov' memorably summed up Greeks and Romans as follows: 'The Romans had sufficient insensibility to make them happy pagans, from whom nothing can be learned. The Greeks proved themselves greater by being wretched in their paganism.'⁶¹ The Romans imagined in the current consensus view of Roman sacrifice are not far distant from those censured by the Count: happy pagans, secure in their conviction that the gods would always be on their side, insensible to doubt or fear. How did scholars of Roman religion get here?

We got here by focusing, firstly, upon the acts, tools, and gestures of Roman sacrifice, rather than its ideas: by churning out list upon detailed list of the various body parts, and parts of those parts, that were consulted in Roman sacrificial divination, without asking ourselves whether it is plausible that a system that sought so many detailed indications of the divine will could really have been interested in no more than getting a quick and easy 'yes' or 'no' from the gods.⁶² We got here by focusing on the social and

⁶¹ West 1966: 56.

⁶² Cf. Maurizio, this volume on the detailed and complex answers that might be sought in ancient Greek divination.

political functions performed by sacrifice, without asking ourselves whether it is plausible that a practice in which indications of the gods' wrath inspired fear and terror could really have been no more than a means of making sure that everyone knew their place in Roman society. Finally, we got here by constructing, from a single occurrence in Roman literature which is itself open to interpretation, a rule for Roman sacrifice, *usque ad litationem*, and then assuming that this was ubiquitous, and indeed the key to the nature of Roman sacrifice.

To move towards a different understanding of Roman divinatory sacrifice, what we need is, firstly, a more accurate understanding of the norms, protocols, and contextual variations of sacrificial divinatory interpretation, and secondly, an openness to new ways of thinking about Roman divination. What if Roman divinatory sacrifice really was about communicating with the gods? What if the relationship it constructed between humans and gods was fraught, fragile, unpredictable, even dangerous? What better way of exploring these questions than by asking anew not what we see in Roman sacrifice, but what was said by the Romans themselves?⁶³

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⁶³ Earlier treatments of some material in this paper were delivered to the Oxford Philological Society (2012) as well as to the London conference in 2015, and my thanks go out to the participants at both events for their feedback. Thanks are also due to my Research Assistant, Kathrine Bertram (University of Calgary), for her help with bibliography and proof-reading, and to Scott Noegel (University of Washington) and Bradley Jordan (University of Oxford) for helpful suggestions. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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PART III
DIVINE PRESENCE?

9

Divination and the ‘Real Presence’ of the Divine in Ancient Greece

Michael A. Flower

In the introduction to the third edition of his justly famous book, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem*, Robert Orsi, one of the leading scholars of modern American religious experience, observes:

We scholars of religion have become better over the past twenty-five years at approaching the density of practices, objects, gestures, and so on, that constitute religious worlds. We have taken the point of the embodiment of the religious practitioner. But the essential reality of the shrine on 115th Street in the experience of practitioners is that the Madonna is really there, in that church, in her image, on that street; that she and her devout are present to each other; and that she listens and responds to their needs.

Yet, as Orsi points out, this way of understanding the Madonna is at odds with normative modern scholarship, in which ‘absence’ is the dominant assumption: ‘By the persistent logic of modern ways of understanding religion, culture, and history, the Madonna is a symbol, a medium of exchange, and a tool in the hands of people working on their cultural environments. But she is not a real presence.’¹

For many Roman Catholics the ‘real presence’ of the divine in things, such as in the Eucharist, statues, and relics, is not something that is culturally constructed, but is considered to be a numinous causal agent in its own right. This agent is autonomous and independently operative in history. One does not have to accept the strong ontological claim that the numinous power of the Virgin Mary is actually present in her statue in order to accept that for believers this presence is, in fact, based on their own personal experience. The Greeks, of course, may or may not have conceived of the

I would like to thank the editors of this volume, as well as Nathan Arrington, Harriet Flower, and Kathleen Cruz, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ Orsi 2010: xviii–xix. He is especially critical of Steiner 1989: 121, 123, and 228.

relationship between cult statue and divine presence in the same way that some modern Catholics do.² But that is not my concern here. What I am proposing is that we should take real presence seriously, as something that most Greeks took for granted, when investigating the various rites of divination that they practised. Of course, this is not going to be easy, and not just because of the impossibility of doing the sort of anthropological fieldwork in which Robert Orsi is able to engage. It is also difficult because only a handful of sources address the experience of divination in such personal terms. Will a focus on real presence make any difference in the way that we understand Greek religious experience? Orsi addresses this type of question in his introduction (xx–xxi). He asks what it means to think from the assumption of real presences, and concludes:

Its arrival now marks for me the next stage in a theoretical development that has been unfolding through this past quarter century, from ‘popular religion’ to lived religion to what I am now thinking of as ‘abundant history.’ I mean by this an empiricism open to the realness of the gods in the company of men, women, and children in the circumstances of their times.

Orsi himself went on to provide an example of this kind of history in his magisterial study of the experience of ‘real presence’ (including apparitions of the Virgin Mary) in postwar Roman Catholicism.³ What follows is an attempt at writing an ‘abundant history’ of ancient Greek religion.

Now I first want to neutralize what some will assume is a fatal objection to this entire project. It has been argued, and rightly so, that we can never have direct access to another person’s religious experiences. Those experiences, it is claimed, are culturally constructed and only exist in the act of reporting them. As Robert Sharf has expressed it in a highly tendentious essay, ‘I have suggested that it is a mistake to approach literary, artistic, or ritual representations as if they referred back to something other than themselves, to some numinous inner realm.’⁴ Or as Brent Nongbri has more recently asserted in his controversial book *Before Religion: A History of a Modern*

² It does seem safe to say that Greeks believed that a divine figure (a cult statue or even a votive statue) could be a ‘seat’ through which the divinity’s presence became manifest. Athena was not always ‘in’ her cult statue, but could use it as a vehicle of presence. See further, Scheer 2000 and Hölscher 2005.

³ Orsi 2016.

⁴ Sharf 1998: 113. But see Gyatso 1999, who contests his controversial view that meditative experience plays no role in Tibetan Buddhism.

Concept, ‘Strictly speaking, people who claim to study religious experience are actually studying narratives of experiences.’⁵ Yet to me at least, it is far from self-evident that our inability to have direct unmediated access to another’s experience (that is, an access unmediated by language) should stop us from speaking about ‘religious experience’ as a particular category of human experience. After all, we cannot have direct access to another person’s thoughts, but that does not keep us from forming opinions about their motives, beliefs, and plans—all of which are largely, but not exclusively, accessed through language. At the level of material culture, beliefs may be inferred from the objects that people possessed and the rituals in which they engaged.⁶ The many portable images of deities and moveable altars that were kept in Greek houses as well as the dedications made at Greek sanctuaries, especially votive reliefs, may reflect both particular beliefs as well as an overarching worldview.⁷ In other words, religious experience is not so uniquely a subjective, elusive, and remote object of investigation that any attempt to understand it is a fool’s errand.⁸

Investigating religious experience is nonetheless extraordinarily difficult. Yet a good place to look, and arguably one of the best places, is in the ubiquitous practice of divination. For it is in the context of the divinatory ritual that the real presence of the divine was commonly to be experienced.⁹ It was the venue in which the gods were expected either to manifest themselves directly (through dreams and epiphanies) or to make their presence known indirectly (through signs, omens, and ecstatic utterances).

A very succinct, and I assume normative, definition of divination is expressed by Xenophon’s Sokrates in the *Memorabilia*: ‘In so far as we are unable to foresee what is advantageous for the future, the gods themselves work with us, indicating through divination to those who consult them what

⁵ Nongbri 2013: 23 and 166 n. 26 uncritically accepts Sharf’s position.

⁶ Fogelin 2007 surveys different theoretical approaches to the archaeology of ritual.

⁷ See Huysecom-Haxhi and Muller 2015 for an attempt to reconstruct the ritual function and meaning of the terracotta anthropomorphic figurines that were ubiquitous in Greek houses. For votive reliefs, see Platt 2011: 31–50. For the religion of the Greek house, see Boedeker 2008 and Sofroniew 2015.

⁸ See especially Taves 2009, who proposes a new method for studying religious experiences, one that considers religious experiences to be special psychological experiences the interpretation of which depends on their cultural and social context. Bush 2014, on the other hand, contends that religious ‘experience’ (both in the narrow sense of particular episodes of awareness and in the broader sense of the emotional life of practitioners) is an essential theoretical category for the study of religion.

⁹ For a discussion of comparative evidence for this question in ancient Chinese divination, see Raphals, this volume.

is going to happen and teaching them how to obtain the best results.’¹⁰ As Xenophon makes clear both here and in many similar passages, the reason for performing a divinatory ritual is to receive advice and assistance from the gods.¹¹ Nonetheless, as modern anthropological studies have revealed, the divinatory ritual also has consequences that are social, political, and psychological, such as resolving indecision, building consensus, and boosting morale.¹² Although some Greeks, such as military commanders, were fully aware of these secondary functions, one should not conflate or confuse the by-products with the fundamental purpose.¹³ First and foremost, divination is a system of communication.¹⁴ But, like other religious practices, divination also has various direct and indirect consequences, which are, in effect, its secondary functions.

In what follows, I am going to discuss some incidents that give us an ‘indication’ of the presence of the divine. I use the word ‘indication’ deliberately, since we do not have access to actual experience but merely to a verbal, or linguistically coded, representation of it. No single example is completely transparent, but one would have to be very cynical indeed to read all of them as cases of self-interested or literary invention. Of course, the decision of an individual or a community to advertise an encounter with divinity is going to be variously motivated; but these motives do not negate the perceived reality of the divine presence. It is essential to keep in mind that according to the Greeks’ ontological conception of how reality is put together, the gods took an interest in the welfare of human beings and were both willing and able to interact with them.¹⁵

¹⁰ Xen. *Mem.* 4.3.12.

¹¹ Note also *Mem.* 1.6.2–9; *Hipp.* 9.8–9; *Oec.* 5.19–20; *Symp.* 4.46–9; and *Cyr.* 1.6.46. For the central role of divination in Xenophon’s theory of leadership, see Flower 2016.

¹² See, for example, Park 1963: 196 (a classic study) and Fortes 1987: 11. Holbraad 2012: 54–74 critiques the main anthropological approaches to divination.

¹³ For the distinction between ‘what religion is’ and ‘why people do religion’, see especially Smith 2017: 3–4 and 20–76. His definition of ‘what religion is’ seems apt for Greek and Roman polytheism (p. 22): ‘Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad.’

¹⁴ Naiden 2013: 3–38 rightly argues that all forms of sacrifice were seen by the Greeks to be a means of communication between themselves and their gods, even if modern theories of sacrifice usually leave the gods out of the equation, focusing rather on anthropological, sociological, and psychological explanations.

¹⁵ I am not making the strong ontological claim that the Greek gods ‘really’ existed, only the weaker claim that the Greeks interacted with them as if they did. For a nuanced discussion of the ontological turn in the field of anthropology, see Holbraad and Pederson 2017: 1–29.

1. Isyllos of Epidaurus encounters Asklepios

At the end of the fourth century BCE, Isyllos came to the Sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidaurus as a boy hoping for a cure from some illness. This was just at the time when Philip II of Macedon was leading an army against Sparta in 338 BCE.¹⁶ By his own testimony, Isyllos encountered an epiphany of the god Asklepios, who informed him that he was on his way to save the Spartans. Isyllos then took the opportunity thus offered to report this good news to the Spartans himself. Years later, he erected a *stēlē* at Epidaurus, which can still be seen in the museum there.¹⁷ It contains the following elements divided into seven sections, and composed in several different meters, for a total of seventy-nine lines of text. Isyllos first proclaims his allegiance to aristocratic government; next comes his proposal to institute a yearly procession, sacrifice, and prayer to Apollo Maleatas and Asklepios, to be performed by a select group of elite Epidaurians. This is followed by the information that Isyllos had sought approval from the oracle of Apollo at Delphi to inscribe a paean that he had composed for Apollo and Asklepios, and which undoubtedly was intended to be performed during the annual procession and sacrifice. The text of the paean is then given. The final section relates the original epiphany of the god in Isyllos' boyhood. It is in hexameter verse and worth quoting in full (lines 57–79):

καὶ τόδε σῆς ἀρετῆς, Ἀσκληπιέ, τοῦργον ἔδειξας
 ἐγ κείνοισι χρόνοις ὅκα δὴ στρατὸν ἦγε Φίλιππος
 εἰς Σπάρτην, ἐθέλων ἀνελεῖν βασιληίδα τιμὴν.
 τοῖς δ' Ἀσκληπιὸ[ς ἦ]λθε βοαθόος ἐξ Ἐπιδαύρου,
 τιμῶν Ἡρακλέος γενεάν, ἃς φείδετο ἄρα Ζεὺς.
 τουτάκι δ' ἦλθε ὅχ' ὁ παῖς ἐκ Βουσπόρου ἦλθεν κάμνω[ν
 τῶι τύγα π(ρ)οστείχοντι συνάντησας σὺν ὅπλοισιν
 λαμπόμενος χρυσέοις, Ἀσκληπιέ. παῖς δ' ἐσιδὼν σε
 λίσσετο χεῖρ' ὀρέγων ἱκέτηι μύθωι σε προσαντῶν·
 “ἄμμορός εἰμι τεῶν δώρων, Ἀσκληπιέ Παιάν,
 ἀλλὰ μ' ἐποίκτειρον.” τὸ δέ μοι τάδε ἔλεξας ἐναργῆ·
 “θάρσει· καιρῶι γάρ σοι ἀφίξομαι, ἀλλὰ μέν' αὐτεῖ,
 τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις χαλεπὰς ἀπὸ κῆρας ἐρύξας,

¹⁶ Actually, Isyllos does not specify which Philip this was: other possibilities are an invasion by Philip III in 317 or by Philip V in 218. My own preference is for Philip II. See Kolde 2003: 257–301 for the dating.

¹⁷ The best edition is Kolde 2003, which has an excellent facing French translation. See also the discussion by Fantuzzi 2010: 183–9 and LeVen 2014: 317–28.

οὐνεκα τοὺς Φοίβου χρησμοὺς σώιζοντι δικαίως,
οὓς μαντευσάμενος παρέταξε πόλῃ Λυκούργος.”
ὥς ὁ μὲν ὤιχετο ἐπὶ Σπάρτην· ἐμὲ δ’ ὤρσε νόημα
ἀγγεῖλαι Λακεδαιμονίοις ἐλθόντα τὸ θεῖον
πάντα μάλ’ ἐξείας. οἱ δ’ αὐδῆσαντος ἄκουσαν
σώτειραν φήμαν, Ἀσκληπιέ, καί σφε σώωσας.
οἱ δὲ ἐκάρυξαν πάντας ξενίαις σε δέκεσθαι,
σωτῆρ’ εὐρυχόρου Λακεδαίμονος ἀγκαλέοντες.
ταῦτά τοι, ὦ μέγ’ ἄριστε θεῶν, ἀνέθηκεν Ἴσυλλος
τιμῶν σὴν ἀρετῇν, ὧναξ, ὥσπερ τὸ δίκαιον.

And you gave this demonstration of your power, Asklepios, at the time when Philip was leading an army against Sparta, wishing to destroy the royal authority. Asklepios came to them from Epidaurios as a helper, honouring the progeny of Herakles, which Zeus then spared. He came at that time when the boy [i.e. Isyllos], being ill, came from Bousporos [a nearby town]. Shining in your golden armour, you met him as he approached, Asklepios. And when the boy saw you he approached you, and stretching forth his hand, he beseeched you with a suppliant word, ‘I am without share of your gifts, Asklepios Paean, but have pity on me.’ Then you spoke these words to me distinctly, ‘Take courage, for I shall come to you in due time — just wait here — after I have warded off a grievous doom from the Lakedaimonians because they justly preserve the oracles of Apollo, which Lykourgos set in order for the city after he had consulted the oracle.’ And so he went to Sparta. But my mind incited me to report the arrival of the god to the Lakedaimonians, everything in exact order. They listened to me as I spoke the message of safety, Asklepios, and you saved them. They proclaimed that everyone should receive you with hospitality, calling you the saviour of spacious Lakedaimon. Isyllos dedicated these things to you, O far the best of all the gods, honouring your power, as is just.¹⁸

I take this text to be an example of divination in action, since the boy was on his way to Epidaurios to seek a cure from the god and the god, in this roadside epiphany, makes a double prediction. Although the majority of pilgrims to Epidaurios slept in the sanctuary in order to be healed of an illness rather than to be given an oracle per se, Asklepios is not here providing a cure, but delivering advice (‘take courage’), instructions

¹⁸ All translations are my own.

(‘wait here’), and a statement about the future (I will save the Spartans).¹⁹ Now Isyllos was clearly both pious and politically conservative, but he was not a very good writer, and his manner of expression sometimes produces an apparently unintended obscurity.²⁰ In my opinion, the most natural interpretation of the grammar and syntax of his description of events is that the boy (*pais* in Greek) referred to is Isyllos himself (rather than an unnamed boy or a son of Isyllos who had the same name as his father).²¹ In other words, Isyllos first refers to himself in the third person (the boy) and then in the first person (I/me). There is a similar example of someone alternating between the first and third person (even in the same sentence) in the question that a certain Epilytos posed to the oracle of Zeus at Dodona (discussed below).

If this interpretation of the text is correct, Isyllos would have been between seven and fourteen years old at the time when Asklepios appeared to him on the road and promised to cure his malady.²² Obviously, there is a chronological gap between the epiphany and its recoding in this inscription. Yet the question at hand is not whether a supernatural power actually manifested itself to the boy Isyllos, but whether Isyllos himself believed that he had had a direct and personal encounter with a god and how that belief affected his immediate and future actions over a period of many years.

I am going to suggest that we can accept two things as facts, in so far as any event in the past can be so called. First of all, it should have been a matter of public record that Isyllos immediately reported the god’s message at Sparta, even in direct violation of Asklepios’ injunction that he should await his return on the spot. Secondly, many years later, he asked the oracle of Apollo at Delphi for permission to have his *paeon* for Apollo and Asklepios inscribed (lines 32–6). That petition surely indicates that Isyllos

¹⁹ Renberg 2017: 21–30, 115–32 argues for a firm distinction between ‘therapeutic incubation’ (as practised at Epidauros) and ‘divinatory incubation’ (as practised at various other sanctuaries), but he admits (116 n. 2) that three testimonies in the fourth century BCE Epidaurian miracle inscriptions (for which see pp. 210–11) are divinatory in nature: the god shows a father where to find his missing son (LiDonnici 1995: B 4); he hints to a widow where she will find her husband’s hidden treasure (LiDonnici 1995: C 3); and apparently a man sailed from Piraeus and slept at the sanctuary when seeking information about missing gold (LiDonnici 1995: C 20).

²⁰ For example, he has *σώιζοντι* (a dative singular participle) agreeing with *τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις* (a dative plural noun), which, strictly speaking, is ungrammatical. We might have expected *σώιζουσι* (a dative plural participle), especially since it is metrically equivalent to *σώιζοντι*.

²¹ I am here following Kolde 2003: 188–90, as against Kavvadias 1885: 83 (either Isyllos himself or an unnamed boy); Furley and Bremer 2001 (vol. 1): 234–6 (Isyllos’ son); and Schröder 2006 (Isyllos’ son).

²² I am here following the excellent analysis of Kolde 2003: 190.

sincerely believed in the reality of the god's epiphany. Otherwise, in terms of normative Greek religious belief, he took a remarkable gamble in seeking Delphic permission to advertise a lie.

Even apart from the rare circumstance that we are dealing with a first person account of an epiphany, Isyllos' narrative is remarkable for many reasons. As a political statement, it is striking that despite Sparta's devastating military and territorial losses in the aftermath of her defeat at Leuktra in 371, Isyllos can still look to her as the divinely sanctioned and divinely supported model of good government. This is surely because Isyllos is promoting an image of Spartan society that the Spartans themselves self-consciously projected and that served as the ideal model for Isyllos' own aristocratic and oligarchic agenda for his hometown of Epidauros (which is explicitly articulated at the beginning of the inscription, lines 1–26).²³ In his report of the god's words, it is debatable whether the adverb 'distinctly' (ἐναργῆ: a neuter plural used adverbially) refers to their acoustic clarity or to the clarity of their meaning.²⁴ Nonetheless, Isyllos has made a distinctive choice in using this word in reference to something heard rather than to something seen. In the Homeric epics, *enargeis* is used of the gods when they appear to mortals in their own forms.²⁵ By emphasizing the clarity of what was said, Isyllos focuses the reader's attention on the content of Asklepios' message, which is essentially a reaffirmation of the continuing validity of Sparta's divinely sanctioned political and social order as revealed to Lykourgos by Apollo.

From a religious viewpoint, the form that Asklepios took in this epiphany is unique. It has become a commonplace that the way we imagine the gods is culturally constructed.²⁶ Yet this is the only representation of Asklepios, either literary or iconographic, in full armour. Obviously, given the militaristic content of the god's message, this is appropriate in the circumstances. If Asklepios is going to save the Spartans from a Macedonian invasion, then, like the gods who fought at Troy, he will need to be armed. Yet the comparison to the descriptions of Asklepios in the Epidaurian miracle inscriptions, which must have been known to Isyllos, is striking to say the least. The miracle inscriptions were inscribed and put on display at the end of the fourth century BCE. Pausanias mentions six *stēlai*; we have fragments of four, comprising the account of some seventy cures. The *stēlai* were

²³ For Isyllos' political agenda, see Furley and Bremer 2001 (vol. 2): 230–3. For the Spartan context, see Flower 2009b.

²⁴ For different views, see Kolde 2003: 198.

²⁵ Hom. *Il.* 20.131; Hom. *Od.* 16.161, 3.420, 7.201; see Koch Piettre 1996: 124–35.

²⁶ Platt 2011: 1–27.

probably placed in the *abaton* (which took the form of a double stoa) where the pilgrims slept, since a number of grooved *stêlē* bases have been found there. Like Isyllos' inscription, they would have been on display for patients and visitors to read.²⁷

In all but one of those inscriptions, the god appears to the suppliant in a dream. The one exception is the report of an epiphany (LiDonnici 1995: B 5), in which Asklepios, in the guise of a handsome man, operates on a woman suffering from false pregnancy and removes two foot-basins full of creatures from her stomach. As in our story, this epiphany took place on the road, when the woman was being carried back to her home on a litter. But that report is not an eyewitness account—rather, like the other inscribed miracle stories, it has been redacted (from a votive or oral tradition) by the priests in charge of the cult who chose to display them as a group in the sanctuary at Epidauros.

The closest parallel to Isyllos' experience is the epiphany of Pan to the runner Pheidippides, who had been dispatched from Athens to Sparta in 490 BCE to request military assistance against the Persian invaders. According to Herodotos, Pheidippides claimed that when he was in the vicinity of Mt Parthenion in the Peloponnese, Pan encountered him and 'told him to ask the Athenians why they paid him no attention, even though he had goodwill for the Athenians, and had often been useful to them in the past and would again be so in the future.'²⁸ Herodotos then says that the Athenians, when their affairs were in good order (i.e. after the Persians had been repulsed), 'trusted in the truth of this report' (*καὶ ταῦτα μὲν Ἀθηναῖοι... πιστεύσαντες εἶναι ἀληθέα*) and established a shrine for Pan beneath the Acropolis as well as yearly sacrifices and a torch race.²⁹ The archaeological evidence supports Herodotos' testimony that the cult of Pan was introduced to Athens shortly after Marathon.³⁰

I will not go through the various similarities and differences in these two accounts,³¹ except to highlight a few things that are especially relevant in the context of divine presence. A significant difference is that Asklepios' promise of support, unlike that of Pan, was not contingent on receiving cult. A striking similarity is that both the Athenians and Spartans believed in the truth of what Pheidippides and Isyllos had claimed to have seen and heard. For these two communities, so different in their political and social

²⁷ LiDonnici 1995: 18–19.

²⁸ Hdt. 6.105.

²⁹ See Parker 1996: 163–8 on the establishment of the cult.

³⁰ Parker 1996: 164 reaches this conclusion.

³¹ These are discussed by Kolde 2003: 227–9.

organization, there was no difficulty in believing that gods sometimes did appear in bodily form to mortals, and especially at times of extreme crisis.³²

What I want to stress is that Isyllos' epiphany is as close to an unmediated account of a direct encounter with a god as we are ever likely to obtain from Classical Greece. Pheidippides' encounter with Pan, although much more famous than Isyllos', is told to us at third hand (Pheidippides to the Athenians, and then the Athenians to Herodotos). It is Isyllos himself who tells us what he saw and what the god said to him. The propagandistic element in the decision to memorialize this encounter cannot be denied;³³ yet Isyllos' motives should not be allowed to invalidate the nature and quality of his experience. Nor should we modern readers be any more suspicious of the historical content because it is written in verse than we would be of the serious philosophical content of Parmenides' *On Nature*, also written in hexameters (the metre of Homeric epic).

One more remarkable thing needs to be pointed out. Isyllos' testimony has attracted very little attention in modern scholarship. Verity Platt, for example, only mentions it briefly and in passing in what is otherwise a very long book dedicated to the very subject of epiphany and representation.³⁴ So too Georgia Petridou in her book on epiphany in ancient Greece accords Isyllos only a passing mention.³⁵ I suspect that Isyllos' extreme political and social elitism, in conjunction with his unabashed admiration for Sparta, has vitiated against taking his testimony seriously. Needless to say, not all pious Greeks were democrats.

2. More Than What You Bargained For? Strange Responses from the Oracle of Zeus at Dodona

The most authoritative form of divination in the Greek world was that performed by inspired seers at the great oracular sanctuaries, principally

³² As Parker 1996: 164–5 observes, after discussing the archaeological evidence: 'It looks as if the Athenians did indeed introduce Pan in the aftermath of Marathon because they believed that the god himself had ordered them to do so.' Platt 2011: 55–6, on the other hand, seems to imply that Pan's epiphany was invented as a charter myth for the introduction of his cult into Athens, which, in my opinion, is an unwarranted rationalization. More nuanced is Petridou 2015: 13–17, 114, 319–20, who, while not discrediting Pheidippides' account, interprets the epiphany both as an explanation for the introduction of Pan's cult and as a crisis management tool.

³³ Fantuzzi 2010: 187 emphasizes that all sections of the inscription 'form part of an encompassing persuasive strategy to build up Isyllos' political authority through divine inspiration.'

³⁴ Platt 2011: 73. But see now the fuller discussion in Platt 2015: 497–9.

³⁵ Petridou 2015: 33, 39, 176.

Delphi and Dodona. In the study of ecstatic divination, most attention has been paid to the experience and psychological state of the inspired prophetess or prophet who becomes possessed and acts as the god's spokesperson.³⁶ Lisa Maurizio's seminal 1995 article in *JHS* remains the essential study of the Delphic Pythia. Much less attention has been directed at the religious experience of the consultant. That is what I shall now attempt to address.

Over 4,000 oracular inscriptions, inscribed on some 1550 lead tablets called lamellae, have been discovered at the site of the oracle of Zeus at Dodona in northern Greece, and now, after a fashion, fully published. Several hundred additional tablets are still awaiting transcription and publication. The following is a typical form of question: 'X enquires of Zeus Naïos and Dione whether it would be better and more good to do y.' But the word 'typical' is misleading if it implies that the consultants themselves were invariably anticipating a 'yes' or 'no' answer. A few of the lead tablets from Dodona seem to give both question and response, and among them are several remarkable examples.³⁷ I will now discuss three of them, all of which date roughly to the middle of the fourth century BCE. The first example is inscribed:

Side A:

Θεός, τύχα · ἐρωτῇ Λυσίας τ-
ὸν θεὸν ἦ τυγχάνοι κα τᾶς θαλ-
λάσσης ἀντεχόμενος καὶ πε-
δέχων ναός

Side B:

γῇ οὐθὲν δεῖ τελεῖν

On Side A we find 'God. Good Fortune. Lysias asks the god whether he might be successful by sticking with the sea and taking a share of a ship'; and on Side B: 'You should do nothing by land.'³⁸ The single word 'sea' would certainly have been a satisfactory answer, but the god has gone further and

³⁶ See Deeley, this volume, for an analysis of this aspect from a psychiatric perspective. For a cross-cultural comparison, see Flower 2018.

³⁷ There are two recent editions of the previously published tablets: Lhôte 2006 (which comprises 167 questions, with French translation) and Eidinow 2013 (divided into categories, with English translation). A total of 4,216 additional questions (many of which are extremely fragmentary) can be found in the edition of Dakares, Vokotopoulou, and Chrestides 2013 (with modern Greek translation). But see the review by Lhôte 2014, who points out various problems with the edition.

³⁸ SEG 23.475 = Eidinow 2013: 98–9, no. 13 = Lhôte 2006: 205–8, no. 96. I am here accepting Eidinow's text rather than Lhôte's.

directed that Lysias do nothing by land. Considering how risky it was to ‘take a share of a ship’, especially for purposes of sea-borne trade, this is far from being a safe or conservative injunction. One wonders if Lysias had contemplated the possibility that he could be given so restrictive a response, one that effectively eliminated the possibility of economic diversification.

Another tablet gives an even more surprisingly specific and restrictive response.³⁹ The question on Side A is also a very typical one:

Side A:

Θεός[ς· Τύ]χα ἀγαθά· Ἐρ[ωτ]εῖ Ἀντίοχο[ς τὸ]ν Δί(α) καὶ τὰν Διών[α]ν ὑπὲρ
 ὑγίειας [α]ὐτοῦ καὶ πατρὸς καὶ ἀδελφᾶς· τ[ί]να θεῶν ἢ ἥρ[ώω]ν τιμᾶντι
 λ[ώ]ιον καὶ ἄμεινον εἶη

Side B:

Εἰς Ἑρμόνα ὁρμάσα<α>ντι·

God. Good Fortune. Antiochos asks Zeus and Dione about his health and that of his father and sister. By honouring which of the gods or heroes would it be better and more good for him?

According to the expectation of most modern scholars, the answer should have listed the deities to whom Antiochos needed to sacrifice. But instead, we get this response on Side B: ‘For him setting off to Hermione.’ Why is he being instructed to travel to Hermione in the Argolid? We know from Pausanias (2.34.6) that there was a sanctuary there of Demeter Thermasia (the epithet Thermasia probably refers to warm springs that had healing powers). So Zeus and Dione are telling Antiochos and his family where to go in order to obtain a cure, and that entailed a very long journey from Dodona. Depending on where Antiochos’ family was from and the exact nature of their illness, the journey could have been costly, inconvenient, and perhaps damaging to their health. And even so, for reasons that we cannot hope to understand, they are not being sent to the much more famous healing sanctuary not very far from Hermione, that of Asklepios at Epidauros.⁴⁰

The really interesting questions are the ones that we cannot answer. Did it come as a shock or surprise to Antiochos that he was not merely given instructions concerning whom he should sacrifice to? How often did the gods play with one’s expectations? Was there an element of uncertainty in what the god might say, and did this uncertainty cause anxiety in those who

³⁹ *SGDI* 1587a and b = Lhôte 2006: 156, no. 68; Eidinow 2013: 105–6, no. 6.

⁴⁰ Lhôte’s (2006: 157–8) explanation, based on outdated theories about the migrations of Greek tribes at the time of the purported Dorian invasions, is not credible.

consulted oracles? In other words, far from resolving anxiety and doubt, I think that we can fairly speculate that a consultation could actually induce these emotions, because the gods did not always play by the rulebook that modern scholars have written for them. This does not mean that anyone seriously feared receiving an oracle that predicted he would kill his father and marry his mother—but it does mean that the consultant might potentially be told something inconvenient or uncomfortable. The story of Teisamenos of Elis, as told by Herodotos, whether real or fictitious, was probably fairly well known: he went to Delphi to ask about having children and was told instead that he would win the five greatest victories, leading him to train unsuccessfully for the pentathlon and eventually to become a celebrated seer in the service of Sparta.⁴¹ If one thinks with the assumption of the real presence of the divine in the working of oracles, then that opens up the possibility that the gods can give whatever answer they please, and that answer may not be what the inquirer was hoping to hear.

Modern scholarship by and large has domesticated divination by telling us that questions were carefully posed so as to limit the range of possible answers and that responses never caused someone to do something that they really did not want to do. Generally speaking, both of those assumptions seem to be true, but there are some striking exceptions, and those exceptions reveal a great deal about the level of trust that the Greeks placed in their gods. One is a uniquely formulated question dating from the middle of the fourth century BCE. It was written on one of the new lead tablets from Dodona that were published in 2013:⁴²

θεὸς τύχα ἀγαθὰ· Ἐπίλυτος ἐπερωτῇ τὸν Δία τὸν Νάϊον
καὶ τὰν Διώναν τί κα ποιῶν εὐτυχοῖ καὶ τίνι θεῶν θύσας
καὶ πότερα τὰν τέχνην ἣν ἐπαιδεύθην ἐργάζωμαι ἢ ποτ' ἄλ-
λο τι ἠορμάσω καὶ ἢ λαμβῶμαι αἷ κ' ἐπιχηρῇ καὶ πότερα τὰν
Φαινομέναν γυναιῖκα λάβω ἢ ἄλλαν καὶ πότερα καὶ δὴ
λάβω ἢ ποτιμένω

God. Good fortune. Epilytos asks Zeus Naios and Dione by doing what and by sacrificing to which of the gods he would prosper, and whether I should work at the craft in which I had been educated or whether I should begin some other occupation, and whether I will be successful⁴³

⁴¹ Hdt. 9.33–5, with Flower 2008a.

⁴² Dakares et al. 2013 (vol. 2): 34–5, no. 2367.

⁴³ λαμβῶμαι is a Doric contract future of λαμβάνω. Contrary to Dakares, Vokotopoulou, and Chrestides 2013 (citing personal communication with J. Méndez Dosuna; cf. (vol. 1): 58, no.

if he puts his hand to it, and whether I should take the woman who shows up (or, less likely, a woman named Phainomena)⁴⁴ as my wife or another woman, and indeed whether I should take a wife or wait.

Epilytos was amazingly brazen in the number of questions he posed at the same time: perhaps he was trying to save money by paying only one consultation fee and thought that Zeus and Dione could solve all of his personal problems in one go.⁴⁵ The form of the gods' response could have been a series of 'yes' or 'no' answers. But even so, Epilytos was definitely taking a risk that the whole course of his life might be altered: for instance, he might have gone home to a new wife and new profession. The latter is not as unlikely as it may sound. Among the previously published oracle tablets, we have an example of an inquirer named Arizelos asking what occupation he should undertake: no alternatives are given and the question is essentially open-ended: 'Gods. Good fortune. Arizelos asks the god by doing or making what thing, it will be better and more good for him and there will be a good acquisition of property.'⁴⁶ So here we have two Greeks who were willing to let the gods, through the medium of their oracle, direct them to the appropriate profession. If that is not a sure indication of belief in 'real presence', I am not sure what is.

3. A Tale of Two Disasters

So far we have been focusing primarily on individual experience of the divine, but I now want to turn to an example of collective religious experience. Here a comparative example from a different historical period that is better documented may help to bring the issue into sharper focus.

In 415 BCE, the Athenians and their allies set sail for Sicily with a huge armada, which was reinforced a year later. It eventually comprised 207

143A), it is not an aorist subjunctive, since the sigmatic forms are confined to the future, and the inscription itself attests λάβω as the aorist subjunctive. I am indebted to my colleague Timothy Barnes for assistance with this note.

⁴⁴ Dakares, Vokotopoulou, and Chrestides 2013 think this is a woman's name, but it is otherwise only attested for a man in eleven inscriptions dating from the late fourth century BCE to the first century CE, one from Samos and ten from Chios, according to the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*.

⁴⁵ See Eidinow, this volume for discussion of the practice of multiple oracular consultations.

⁴⁶ Parke 1967: 271, no. 25 = Eidinow 2013: 99, no. 14 = Lhôte 2006: 227–9, no. 107; *SEG* 15.405a; *BE* 1956: 143; *PAE* 1952: 305, 21; fourth century BCE: Θεοί · τύχη αγαθή · Ἀρίζηλος ἐπανερωτᾷ τὸν θεὸν ὃ τι δρῶν ἢ ποιῶν λῶον καὶ ἄμεινον ἔσται αὐτῷ καὶ χρημάτων κτήσις αγαθή ἔσται.

triremes (warships) and some 50,000–60,000 men, only a very few of whom returned home alive. In the build-up to this daring enterprise, divine guidance and support was solicited in a number of different forms. The Athenians took the extraordinary step of consulting three of the most authoritative oracles known to them: the oracle of Zeus Ammon at Siwah Oasis in Libya; the oracle of Zeus at Dodona in Epiros; and the oracle of Apollo at Delphi.⁴⁷ Even if the answers as we have them may show signs of subsequent embroidery, the fact of the consultations need not be doubted.⁴⁸ There was nothing unusual in consulting those particular oracles in addition to Delphi, and consulting more than one oracle on the same issue was also not without precedent.⁴⁹ The response from Delphi, at least in its apocryphal form, contained a warning. The Athenians were told to fetch the priestess of Athena from Erythrai (or Klazomenai), and her name turned out to be Hesychia (or ‘Quiet’).

On another, less authoritative level, the seers (*manteis* in Greek) and *chrēsmologoi* (who were collectors and singers of oracles) played a prominent role in bolstering public confidence. Thucydides is silent on this issue, but Plutarch gives us a hint of what that role had been, implying that both Nikias and Alkibiades employed seers who supported their respective positions—Nikias urging caution and Alkibiades predicting victory.⁵⁰ Thucydides, for his part, does explicitly reveal one important thing: those seers and *chrēsmologoi* who supported the expedition had been confident of victory. He tells us this fact retrospectively at the beginning of Book 8:

When the Athenians had recognized the facts [about the destruction of their forces in Sicily], they were harsh to those of the orators who had shared in their enthusiasm for the expedition, and they were angry both with the oracle-collectors (*chrēsmologoi*) and the seers (*manteis*), and with as many others who, through the practice of divination, in some way at that time had caused them to hope that they would capture Sicily. (8.1)

⁴⁷ Zeus Ammon at Siwa, Egypt: Plut. *Nic.* 13 and 14; Zeus at Dodona in Epiros: Paus. 8.11.12; Apollo at Delphi: Plut. *Mor.* 403b; *Nic.* 13.

⁴⁸ See Parke 1967: 136–7, 149 (on Dodona), 216–7 (on Ammon); and Powell 1979: 17–8. Bowden 2005: 116–7, 149 rejects Athenian consultation of Delphi on the implausible grounds that it was not necessary to ask about assisting one’s allies. Flower 2009a maintains that all three consultations are historical.

⁴⁹ E.g. Hdt. 1.49–53 (Kroisos consults Delphi and the oracle of Amphiaraos); Hdt. 9.93 (the Apolloniates consult Dodona and Delphi); Xen. *Hell.* 4.7.2 (Agessipolis consults Olympia and Delphi); Xen. *Poroi* 6.2–3 (recommendation to consult both Delphi and Dodona simultaneously). See further Bonnechere 2013. On these multiple consultations, see Eidinow, this volume.

⁵⁰ Plut. *Nic.* 13.

As a result of the debacle in Sicily, the influence of the *chrēsmologoi* at Athens seems to have suffered a setback from which it never recovered.⁵¹ In fact, references to them in ancient authors are exceedingly rare after the fifth century.⁵² The seers, however, even if they faced immediate recriminations, retained their influence and importance over time. This was perhaps due to the fact that their expertise in performing certain civic sacrifices and in interpreting divine signs was not replaceable. Or, to put it differently, it was an indispensable tool in maintaining the proper relationship between the human and divine spheres. The *chrēsmologoi*, however, were dispensable. They and their collections of oracles had been useful tools in the hands of politicians, but the normative religious life of individual and community did not depend on their expertise.⁵³ The important point, however, and the one that I wish to stress, is the normative role that divination, in three different forms, played in implanting the belief in the Athenians that victory in Sicily was assured. This also may help to explain, among many other factors, why the Athenians at Syracuse were so reluctant to give up the siege.

When the siege of Syracuse was going badly, the Athenian generals Nikias and Demosthenes finally decided to return home. Their plan was to do so as secretly as possible and at a given signal, obviously in order to escape the notice of the Syracusans. But just as the Athenians were on the point of embarking on their ships, there was a total eclipse of the moon.⁵⁴ The date was 27 August, 413 BCE. The historian Thucydides, in his terse account, primarily lays the blame for the Athenian reaction on Nikias:⁵⁵

When everything was ready and they were on the point of sailing away, the moon, which happened to be full, was eclipsed. Most of the Athenians, taking it to heart, urged the generals to wait, and Nikias (who indeed was

⁵¹ So Oliver 1950: 30 and Mikalson 1983: 40; Smith 1989: 155 is more cautious. For Thucydides' attitude towards them, see Zimm 2010, who argues that Thucydides considered them to be politically inconsequential. Perhaps too by the end of the fifth century the transition from oral to written culture had undercut their claims to have exclusive access to collections of oracles (see Flower 2008b: 64–5).

⁵² Xenophon makes numerous references to *manteis*, but only once mentions a *chrēsmologos* (Diopieithes, probably an Athenian, who became involved in the struggle over the royal succession at Sparta in 400 BCE: *Hell.* 3.3.3). Diodorus (15.54.2, probably drawing from the fourth century BCE historian Ephoros of Kyme) records that 'local' Boiotian *chrēsmologoi* approached the Theban general Epaminondas before the battle of Leuktra in 371 BCE.

⁵³ For the respective roles of *manteis* and *chrēsmologoi* in Greek society, see Dillery 2005 and Flower 2008b: 58–65 and 2015.

⁵⁴ A full treatment of this episode is in Flower (2009a) and (2008b: 114–9); for a description of the eclipse, see Stephenson and Fatoohi (2001). Note also Trampedach 2015: 50–63.

⁵⁵ Thuc. 7.50.4.

somewhat too much given to divination and the like) said that he would not even still discuss how the move should be made until they had waited thrice nine days, as the seers were prescribing. For this reason the delay came about for the Athenians who had been about to depart.

As it turned out, the Athenians had just missed their last chance to escape alive. Thucydides leaves it unsaid why the seers and the majority of the soldiers did not wish to depart. Was it due to fear of the eclipse, as the text seems to imply, or was it actually because, despite all of their setbacks, they still were confident of a successful outcome? Did divination have that sort of power over their minds and beliefs? In order to put this question in perspective and to help narrow the range of possibilities, I want to look at a comparable example from more recent history.

The year 1890 witnessed one of the most infamous massacres in American history, even if the numbers involved were comparatively few. At the battle of Wounded Knee in South Dakota, twenty-five US soldiers were killed, many by friendly fire, and between 150 and 300 Lakota Sioux, most of whom were women and children. One of the root causes was a new religious movement called the Ghost Dance and the ghost shirts that were associated with it. Wearers of the ghost shirt, it was believed, would be protected from the soldiers' bullets. The movement began benignly enough. The Northern Paiute spiritual leader Wovoka (renamed Jack Wilson) prophesied that if Native Americans performed a Ghost Dance at regular intervals, their old days of happiness and prosperity would be returned to them. Ironically, his prophecy included an injunction against all forms of violence and predicted a peaceful end to white expansion.

As the Ghost Dance spread across the west from tribe to tribe, it underwent various transformations. The Sioux added the ghost shirt, which they believed would repel bullets. Thanks to eyewitness testimonies of the battle of Wounded Knee, we have a very good idea of how this belief in the spiritual power of the Ghost Dance and ghost shirts was put into practice. The battle broke out when soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry attempted to disarm a group of Lakota Sioux whom they were escorting to the Pine Ridge Reservation. It is debatable whether the Lakota had planned armed resistance in advance; but as soon the soldiers attempted to disarm them, the situation became explosive, and there is little doubt that a Lakota fired the first shot.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Andersson 2008: 92, 296, argues that the Lakotas had not planned any resistance. See also the detailed description of the battle in Greene 2014: 215–46, and 227 for the role of Yellow Bird.

For my purposes, the most important testimony is that of the Native American scout Philip Wells who served as an interpreter for the army. Two weeks later, he told investigators about the provocative behaviour of the medicine man Yellow Bird, who was attempting to incite the assembled Sioux, and especially the younger men, to resist by force rather than hand over their rifles.⁵⁷

During this time a medicine man, gaudily dressed and fantastically painted, executed the manoeuvres of the Ghost Dance, raising and throwing dust into the air. He exclaimed 'Ha! Ha!' as he did so, meaning he was about to do something terrible, and said, 'I have lived long enough,' meaning he would fight until he died. Turning to the young warriors who were squatted together, he said 'Do not fear, but let your hearts be strong. Many soldiers are about us and have many bullets, but I am assured their bullets cannot penetrate us. The prairie is large, and their bullets will fly over the prairies and will not come toward us. If they do come toward us, they will float away like dust in the air.'

Needless to say, Yellow Bird's guarantee of supernatural protection proved false. After the battle, a wounded Sioux warrior stood over the burned body of Yellow Bird and declared, 'If I could be taken to you, I would kill you again.'⁵⁸ An older warrior, by the name of Frog, gave this official testimony to Philip Wells, which includes a conversation the two of them had on the day of the battle:

I raised my head and saw a man standing among the dead, and I asked him if he was the man they called Fox [Wells' Indian name], and he said he was, and I said 'Will you come to me?' And he came to my side. I then asked him who was that man lying there half burned, and he said, 'I understand it is the medicine man', and I threw at him (the medicine man) my most bitter hatred and contempt. I then said to Fox, 'He has caused the death of all our people.'⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Greene 2014: 488 n. 22, and more fully, 'Philip Wells's Interview' in Jensen 2005: 1.128. For Wells's credibility, see Grua 2016: 41–2, 45–9.

⁵⁸ Brown 1998: 345–6.

⁵⁹ For Frog's testimony, which was given to Wells on 7 January 1891, see *Reports and Correspondence Relating to the Army Investigations of the Battle of Wounded Knee and to the Sioux Campaign of 1890–1891* (National Archives, United States), Microfilm 983, Roll 1, pp. 717–18. Wells later provided a longer and more circumstantial account of his exchange with Frog in an interview that he gave to Eli Ricker in 1906 (text in Jensen 2005: 1.130).

The Ghost Dance would not be performed again by the Sioux (not even in secret) until 1973, when it was revived by the medicine man Leonard Crow Dog during the occupation of Wounded Knee led by members of the American Indian Movement; but this time the Ghost Dance had a purely symbolic function and the newly made ghost shirts promised no protection from the bullets of the Federal Agents who were besieging the Sioux occupiers.⁶⁰

Despite all of the risks involved in making such comparisons, I think it fair to say that a similar pattern emerges for the Sioux at Wounded Knee as for the Athenians at Syracuse. A collective belief in prophecy and in the real presence of supernatural forces instilled an assurance of victory. This assurance was then followed by a rejection of the religious specialists who had promoted a positive interpretation of the message and the outcome.⁶¹ Both peoples were driven by a type of desperation—the Athenians to add to their empire after their heavy losses in the Archidamian War (including at least a quarter of the population due to the plague), the Sioux to repair the desperate situation in which they found themselves little more than a decade after their victory at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Although we are dealing with very different cultures, times, and places, a belief in the real presence of the divine and in the certain efficacy of supernatural power is undoubtedly a cross-cultural phenomenon. And that is one of the chief benefits of cross-cultural comparison: it enlightens us as to what people are capable of believing and fortifies us against those who would explain divination, as well as the belief in supernatural powers that divination presupposes, as doing and meaning something other than what the participants themselves supposed.⁶² If there is anachronism and cultural misunderstanding in the study of divination and of lived religion in general, this is one place where it is to be found.

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⁶⁰ Mary Crow Dog provides a vivid description of these events (Crow Dog and Erdoes 1990: 144–55, esp. 153).

⁶¹ On the ambiguous status of religious expertise in Athens, see Bowden, this volume.

⁶² Bloch (1998) stresses the importance of the anthropologist providing an ethnographic account of the conceptualization of a society that makes sense to native informants. To me that means that we should attempt, in the first instance, to explain a society's beliefs and practices in that society's own terms.

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10

The Pythia at Delphi

A Cognitive Reconstruction of Oracular Possession

Quinton Deeley

This chapter explores the use of a range of explicit analogies and explanatory models to interpret the experience of the Pythia at the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, and the broader context within which it occurred. This builds on an established approach to understanding the experience of the Pythia through possession and related phenomena.¹ The inspired oracle at Delphi was a form of possession, in which the oracle was viewed as a vehicle for the god. Nevertheless, uncertainty has surrounded the exact nature of the experience of possession of the Pythia, and what could cause or motivate such experiences.² Attempts to reconstruct the experience of the Pythia have interpreted classical sources in light of changing understandings of religion, and more specifically possession and similar altered states of consciousness. The words of the Pythia have been variously considered as wild and incoherent, deliberately ambiguous, rendered in verse, or simple prose.³ They have been viewed as caused by ethylene intoxication from geological emissions, coached or at least interpreted by priests to further local interests, or as the inspired speech of a woman similar to other cases of mediumship or divinatory possession described by social anthropologists.⁴ Given that the classical sources remain the same, what changes in these varying reconstructions are the models through which particular sources are emphasized and interpreted.

Understanding of the Pythia can also draw on explanatory models that reach beyond the categories of divination and possession. A key focus of this

¹ Dodds 1951: 70–1; Maurizio 1995; Graf 2009.

² Johnston 2009: Chapter 2.

³ E.g. Parke and Wormell 1956: i, 57; Rohde 1925: 289–91; Burkert 1985: 116; Bowden 2005: 21, 49–51.

⁴ de Boer et al. 2001: 707–10; Parke and Wormell 1956: i, 170; Bowden 2005: 22; Dodds 1951: 70–1; Maurizio 1995; Graf 2009.

chapter is the larger category of phenomena to which Apollo's possession of the Pythia belongs—experiences in which the sense of control, ownership, and awareness of thoughts, speech, and action are reattributed to another agent. This not only includes the wider class of revelatory experiences in which supernatural agents (such as God or gods, demons, or spirits) speak or act through humans, but other types of experience involving alterations of the sense of identity and agency, whether they occur in psychopathology or as normal variations in experience. Evolving research across disciplines has shown these phenomena to be commoner and more diverse in their expressions than was thought in nineteenth- and twentieth-century humanities and scientific scholarship. All provide potential insights into the forms of experience, attributed significance, and causal processes involved in Apollo's communication through the Pythia, and make the Pythia's possession by Apollo seem less exotic, improbable, or deviant than it might once have seemed. We will consider these phenomena in turn to help interpret the Pythia—and indeed Apollo.

1. Types of Oracular Possession

The key feature of possession is that an individual's normal identity is seemingly substituted for that of another personality—a god, demon, spirit, ancestor, or other supernatural agent—who now acts in that individual's place.⁵ The Pythia was possessed by Apollo, in the sense that Apollo was seen as the agent of the Pythia's actions. For example, Thucydides writes of the start of the Peloponnesian War:

The decision of the Spartans was that the treaty had been broken, and that the Athenians were in the wrong, and they sent to Delphi to ask the god if it would be better for them to go to war. He replied to them, so it is said, that victory would be theirs if they fought with all their strength, and he said that he would help them whether or not he was asked.⁶

The god, not a woman, was the recognized agent. The oracular or mediumistic possession of the Pythia can nevertheless be distinguished from the more common form of possession by a god or spirit. As the social anthropologist Raymond Firth observed, in spirit possession the possessed person's behaviour does not necessarily 'transmit a particular message to others',

⁵ Osterreich 1974: 26; Rouget 1985: 26.

⁶ Thuc. 1.118.3, trans. Bowden 2005: 148.

whereas in mediumistic possession ‘communication is emphasized’.⁷ This emphasis on communication leads to several features which distinguish oracular possession from the more general form of spirit possession. The latter is typically accompanied by music and dramatic alterations in bodily functioning and behaviour which indicate the presence of the spirit or deity. The possessed individual is unresponsive and cannot be distracted by those around him: ‘It is impossible to attract his attention; if he turns his eyes in your direction he does not see you.’⁸ There are often signs of intense arousal of the autonomic nervous system, which, depending on the tradition can include trembling, shuddering, horripilation (hairs standing on end), protruding eyes, thermal disturbances (icy hands despite heat, or heat despite cold), noisy breathing, as well as yawning and lethargy. Temporary alterations of awareness, movement, and sensation include falling to the ground, convulsions, tics, large extrusions of the tongue, limb paralysis, and insensitivity to pain.⁹ In some traditions, the presence of a supernatural agent is marked by the performance of apparently superhuman feats by the possessed, such as the ability to walk on burning coals without being burnt, pierce flesh without bleeding, speak a language they have never learned, or give acrobatic displays beyond their normal ability.¹⁰ In the ancient Greek world, this type of enthusiastic possession had its own locally distinctive versions among the Korybantes and Bacchantes.¹¹

While these features may be present to varying extents in some instances of oracular possession, it can also occur without such dramatic alterations in behaviour. There are other important differences. As Rouget comments, ‘The spirit responsible for mediumistic possession has something to say to an audience. And obviously when the divinity is speaking through the medium’s mouth, he should be heard clearly. This means there cannot be any music at the same time.’¹² In addition to silence, there are other changes in context and behaviour that allow clear communication. Rouget gives several examples to illustrate this point: ‘In Porto-Novo (Benin), when the priest of Hwonse, a vodun who utters the oracles, prophesies in public or answers questions put to him (something I have witnessed on several occasions), one could have heard a pin drop.’¹³ Where oracular possession is evoked by music or chanting by the medium or others, and the beginning and end of trance accompanied by dramatic behavioural changes, the

⁷ Firth 1969: xi, quoted in Rouget 1985: 133.

⁸ Rouget 1985: 13.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rouget 1985: 206–13.

¹² Rouget 1985: 132.

¹³ Rouget 1985: 133–4.

oracular communication itself is marked by silence and calm: ‘Among the Shona in Zimbabwe... as soon as the climax marking the possession of the medium by the spirit is over, the music stops and the participants all sit down to listen to what he is going to say. Later, when the spirit has left, the music resumes.’¹⁴ The state oracle of Tibet at Drepung monastery manifested dramatic signs of possession to the accompaniment of music, but when he began to prophesy the music stopped.¹⁵ These comparative observations lend weight to the view that the Pythia’s communication was similarly calm and clear, even if music did not form part of the accompanying ritual.¹⁶

The only contemporary visual depiction of a consultation of the Delphic oracle, from an Athenian cup of c.440–430 BCE, supports this view. It shows the mythical Athenian king Aegeus consulting Themis as she sits calmly on the tripod.¹⁷ This depiction of the Pythia is, of course, different from ‘the image of the raging Maenad’ as ‘the dominant model for understanding and imagining the nature of possession and the Pythia’s position at Delphi’.¹⁸ While this image was partly based on Plutarch’s account of a ‘frenzied, speechless, and uncontrollable Pythia’ at an inauspicious consultation in which the Pythia died, this episode is unlikely to have been representative.¹⁹ As an oracle, the practice of the Pythia is likely to have converged on clear communication in keeping with other oracular traditions across societies and periods of history. Here a more general account or model of oracular possession supports inferences about a particular case.

Despite similar features across cultures and periods of history, possession is nevertheless organized by a local ‘logic’ or ‘ideology’—what in cognitive anthropology would be termed a ‘cultural model’ or ‘schema’.²⁰ As the historian MacDonald put it, ‘The signs and significance of possessed behaviour are strongly shaped by the stereotypes of the culture in which the possessed person and the people who observe him [*sic*] live.’²¹ Local influence extends to the changes in experience that accompany possession. A fundamental distinction in types of possession experience was drawn by Oesterreich in his extensive survey of possession narratives in *Possession and Exorcism*.²² In *somnambulistic possession*, the possessed individual completely

¹⁴ Ibid. ¹⁵ Ibid. ¹⁶ Bowden 2005: 27; Maurizio 1995: 69.

¹⁷ Bowden 2005: 27. On the interpretation of this image, see Maurizio, this volume.

¹⁸ Maurizio 1995: 69. ¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Logic: Rouget 1985: 31, 320–1; cultural model or schema: Deeley 2006; used of ancient concepts, Eidinow 2011.

²¹ MacDonald 1991: xxxv.

²² Oesterreich 1974: 26–90.

loses their normal sense of identity and suffers amnesia for the experience; in *lucid possession*, the normal self is aware of the actions of the possessing entity but unable to control or influence them. The use of the word ‘somnambulistic’ reflects the interest of nineteenth-century psychiatrists and psychologists in sleep walking as the prototypic example of unconscious, complex involuntary behaviour.²³ Somnambulistic possession is said to be more common than lucid possession, including in cases of oracular possession.²⁴ Nevertheless, cases of lucid possession show that it is possible for the experience of replacement of normal identity by a supernatural agent to be recalled. A Sudanese informant described the experience of possession by *zar*, a type of red *djinn*, as follows:

when it descends into you, you “go to the limit” until the drumming stops, and then the person stops. When the drums are beating, beating, you hear nothing, you hear from far away, you feel far away. You have left the *midan* (ritual place) the place of the *zar*. And you see, you have a vision. You see through the eyes of the European [ie one of the spirits]. Or you see through the eyes of the West African, whichever spirit it is. You see then as a European does – you see other Europeans, radios, pepsis, televisions, refrigerators, automobiles, a table set with food. You forget who you are, your village, your family, you know nothing from your life. You see with the eyes of the spirit until the drumming stops.²⁵

Dodds observed that ‘of the priestesses of Zeus at Dodona it is definitely reported that they did not remember [Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 45.11]; but for the Pythia we have no decisive statement’.²⁶

First person descriptions suggest more gradations and variations in the experience and practice of possession than might be implied by ‘official’ descriptions. A Tibetan diviner confided to Nebesky-Wokowitz, an ethnographer who knew him well, that he had developed his own method of regulating oracular possession. This case also raises the question of how possession techniques are learned and developed by individuals within a given tradition.²⁷

So far, comparing the Delphic oracle with other forms of possession has drawn attention to some of its likely characteristics at the level of role and practice, and the conformity of local versions of possession to cultural models. This raises the question of how this occurs: in other words, what

²³ Ellenberger 1970: ch. 2.

²⁴ Rouget 1985: 9.

²⁵ Boddy 1989: 350.

²⁶ Dodds 1951: 72.

²⁷ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 437–48, quoted in Rouget 1985: 137.

individual and social processes influence the forms of experience and behaviour through which possession is recognized in a given case? The explanation of possession in general, and Delphi in particular, can be extended by ‘triangulation’ with other source models that share relevant features with possession. These models suggest ways in which experience can potentially vary during possession states, and causal mechanisms for these alterations in experience, given that similar phenomena have similar causes.

2. Alien Control Phenomena

In schizophrenia, ‘passivity phenomena’ or ‘delusions of alien control’ refer to patient reports that certain actions, emotions, or thoughts are generated by some force or entity outside the self. For example: ‘They inserted a computer in my brain. It makes me turn to the left or right.’²⁸ This example of a *made action* represents an abnormal loss of the sense of the self as an agent of action, an ‘I’, controlling action. *Thought insertion* describes the experience that thoughts of an external agent have been introduced into one’s mind, representing a loss of ownership of thought (it is not my thought): ‘A 29 year old housewife said, “I look out of the window and... the thoughts of Eamonn Andrews [TV presenter] come into my mind. There are no other thoughts there, only his... He treats my mind like a screen and flashes his thoughts onto it like you flash a picture.”’²⁹

In the context of schizophrenia, passivity phenomena are considered a type of delusion. Their key feature—that mental contents and movements that are normally accompanied by a sense of control and ownership are experienced as originating outside the self—extends to other psychotic symptoms, such as auditory verbal hallucinations, most commonly voices distinctly heard speaking in the second or third person. ‘Positive’ symptoms of delusions and hallucinations, along with ‘negative’ symptoms (such as lack of initiative) and conceptual disorganization can be variously combined in the diagnosis of schizophrenia.³⁰ A diagnosis of schizophrenia also requires some degree of distress and functional impairment arising from symptoms.

²⁸ Mellor 1970.

²⁹ Mellor 1970: 17.

³⁰ World Health Organization 1992; American Psychiatric Association 2013.

From a purely descriptive point of view, the experience of loss of control of thought, speech, and movement occurring in states of possession and revelation can be described as thought insertion and alien control of speech and movement, respectively, where the ‘alien’ is a supernatural agent such as God or a god, demon, spirit, or ancestor. These types of experience and attribution are in fact commonly described by patients with schizophrenia around the world, although the prevalence and content of specifically religious attributions is influenced by cultural background.³¹ This raises the question of how oracular and other types of possession relate to schizophrenia both at the level of attributions and experience, and causation. Answering this requires further consideration of the nature of schizophrenia itself.

A major tradition of psychiatric thought dating back to the philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers strongly emphasizes the differences between symptoms of psychosis such as delusions and hallucinations and ordinary belief and experience.³² However, a more recent approach locates delusions and ordinary beliefs on a continuum.³³ This has led to the idea of a ‘schizophrenia spectrum’, comprising schizophrenia, related psychoses, and the personality type of schizotypy characterized by a tendency to quasi-psychotic beliefs and experiences.³⁴

Epidemiological research has revealed distributions of psychosis-like beliefs and experiences in the general population.³⁵ The spectrum concept has tended to view symptom ‘severity’ (intensity and frequency) as inherently coupled to greater levels of distress and disability. However, recent research has also identified individuals who share a propensity for radical departures from more usual senses of self and agency, which they interpret in religious or spiritual terms. Their specific alterations in experience overlap with symptoms of psychosis and can be precisely described in the language of descriptive psychopathology, but are not associated with obvious distress or disability.³⁶ These individuals—currently termed the ‘unique’ group in psychosis research—and their attraction to spiritual movements and the paranormal further uncouple the propensity to revelatory experiences from mental illness. The existence of this group adds weight to the notion that

³¹ American Psychiatric Association 2013. ³² Bentall et al. 2001.

³³ Strauss 1969: 581–6.

³⁴ American Psychiatric Association 2013.

³⁵ Freeman and Garety 2014: 1179–89; Linscott and Van Os 2013: 1133–49.

³⁶ Peters et al. 2016: 41–52.

hallucinations and experiences of alien control are less inherently disabling than normative notions of the self assumed in earlier Western scholarship.

This view is reinforced by recent research concerned with the experiences of evangelical Christians in the United States, which shows how readily experiences of thought insertion and auditory verbal hallucinations can be learned in religious contexts.³⁷ The overlap in experience of this much larger group of religiously observant people with patients with psychosis is, however, much less than that of rarer individuals in the ‘unique’ group. Interviews with 128 charismatic Christians in the USA *without* psychosis showed that about one-third had heard God speak audibly at least once. Like the voices heard by patients with psychosis, the voices of God described by Christians were between auditory and thought-like in quality, and the voices were that of an agent: there was a sense of being spoken to. There are differences, though, in the quality of their respective experiences of immaterial agents. Compared to voices heard in religious settings by non-psychotic individuals, voices heard by psychotic patients are more numerous, frequent, extended, and distressing.³⁸

The ability to hear the voice of God, or experience some thoughts as originating from God as direct communication, can be learned. As Luhrmann puts it:

In many charismatic evangelical churches, congregants are invited to understand that God will speak to them in their minds; they are taught to discern which thoughts are generated by God and which are their own. In my work, it was evident that the ability to identify God’s voice among one’s own thoughts was a practice at which people improved over time.³⁹

Luhrmann observes that the ‘voice’ of God includes auditory experiences, even if thought insertion of varying intensity is the predominant way in which divine communication is recognized. The psychological trait of *absorption*—the ability or susceptibility to become attentionally engrossed in mental contents such as imagery or memories, predicts whether ‘charismatic Christians experience God with their senses, whether God is person-like for them, whether they have a back-and-forth relationship with God, and it predicts whether people have unusual sensory experiences and a wide range of spiritual experiences’.⁴⁰

³⁷ Luhrmann 2012; Luhrmann 2017.

³⁸ Luhrmann 2017: 28.

³⁹ Luhrmann 2017: 28.

⁴⁰ Luhrmann 2017: 29.

The relevance of this to understanding oracular possession can be seen by examining how these variations in experience are related. The notion of a 'schizophrenia spectrum' implies a graded distribution of psychotic or psychosis-like experiences in the population. However, as Luhmann comments, psychosis-like experiences are so variable that they are better thought of as a 'cluster of clusters', rather than as lying on a continuum.⁴¹ The fluid internal world, social disconnection, functional impairment, and distress of many patients with schizophrenia suggest that it is not a close analogue of oracular possession or other forms of institutionalized religious experience. At a causal level, the fragility of brain systems involved in action control and selfhood in schizophrenia, in the context of altered neurodevelopment, is unlikely to be present in many of those experiencing revelation and possession who are able to conform to an institutional role. Yet the hallucinations and alien control phenomena originally described in schizophrenia can occur in a wider range of versions and settings than was previously recognized by psychiatrists and related researchers. The neurocognitive characteristics of the 'unique' group have yet to be delineated, although they are likely to be relevant to understanding pathways into specialist roles and sensibilities, such as shaman, prophet, mystic, or visionary. The association of the psychological trait of absorption with experiences of the 'voice of God' in religious settings suggests an 'absorption-dissociation' pathway as a route into alterations in selfhood and agency. This points to dissociation as another major source model that can provide potential insights into the forms of experience, and causal processes, by which the oracular possession of the Pythia occurred.

3. Dissociation

The concept of dissociation was introduced by the French psychiatrist, psychologist, and philosopher Pierre Janet (1859–1947) in the context of attempts to understand 'hysteria'. By the nineteenth century, hysteria had come to mean the presentation of medical symptoms without evidence of tissue pathology that can adequately explain the impairment.⁴² Hysterical symptoms often resembled neurological deficits affecting movement, speech, sensation, awareness, and memory, such as paralyses, aphonia, sensory loss,

⁴¹ Luhmann 2017: 30.

⁴² Bell et al. 2010: 332.

convulsions, and amnesia. They remain common symptoms—the second most common type of symptoms presenting to neurologists in the UK in outpatient settings—and are now generally termed ‘functional neurological disorders’, or, following Janet, ‘dissociative disorders’.⁴³ In a psychiatric setting these symptoms include alteration of identity, termed ‘double consciousness’ or ‘*dédoublement de la personnalité*’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and dissociative identity disorder more recently.⁴⁴ Janet’s views on hysteria were reciprocally influenced by those of his predecessor and colleague at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, the neurologist Jean Martin Charcot (1825–93)⁴⁵. Both considered that their theories were relevant to understanding possession phenomena occurring in religious contexts.⁴⁶ This was based on the observation that in addition to identity change, possession typically includes changes in experience and behaviour (such as paralysis, convulsions, and amnesia) which would be regarded as hysterical if they occurred outside a religious context. Charcot’s work forms the background to Janet’s concept of dissociation. Charcot’s views had been influenced by the English neurologist John Russell Reynolds, who in 1869 had introduced the concept of ‘paralysis dependent on idea’.⁴⁷ As Charcot put it, hysterical paralysis arose when ‘the idea comes to the patient’s mind that he might become paralysed; in one word through autosuggestion, the rudimentary paralysis becomes real’.⁴⁸ Janet, like Charcot, considered both hysteria and hypnosis to operate through the suggestive effects of ideas.⁴⁹ Indeed, Janet felt that suggestion based on ideas was so central to both hysterical and hypnotic phenomena that, without exposure to relevant ideas, the respective effects would not occur.⁵⁰ Against this background, Janet originated the modern notion of dissociation as a ‘contraction of the field of consciousness’, resulting in an abnormal compartmentalization of mental functions that are normally closely associated.⁵¹ Janet viewed dissociative symptoms as influenced by the suggestive effect of ‘fixed ideas’, typically based on unresolved traumatic memories. Suggestibility was defined by Janet as the tendency for a simple idea to develop into chains of association, which then influence mental function and behaviour.⁵² The ‘ideas’ that influence symptoms were not generally accessible to consciousness, but were ‘emancipated’ in hysterical individuals

⁴³ Second commonest type: Stone et al. 2010: 747–51. Current terms: World Health Organization 1992; American Psychiatric Association 2013.

⁴⁴ Ellenberger 1970: ch. 4; Littlewood 2002: 149. ⁴⁵ Ellenberger 1970: ch. 2.

⁴⁶ Charcot and Richer 1887; Janet 1907. ⁴⁷ Reynolds 1869: 483.

⁴⁸ Charcot and Marie 1892: 663. ⁴⁹ Janet 1907: 289, 325. ⁵⁰ Ellenberger 1970.

⁵¹ Janet 1907: ch. 14. ⁵² Halligan and Oakley 2014: 114.

who had an abnormal weakness of will and consciousness. They were not verbally encoded concepts, but ‘systems of images’ relating to movement, viscera, or other aspects of functioning. Hysteric individuals were suggestible, contributing to symptom formation but also rendering them amenable to therapeutic suggestion.⁵³ Janet’s case studies showed how the involuntary behaviour of hysterics, performed without awareness or recollection, reproduced and indirectly expressed earlier traumatic experiences. Janet’s concept of dissociation informs current understanding of psychopathology.⁵⁴ Two types of dissociation are now recognized: *compartmentalization*, in which functional symptoms (paralyses, amnesias, sensory losses, and so on) result from the separation of aspects of cognition from normal subjective awareness or voluntary control; and *derealization-depersonalization*, a sense of unreality attaching to the world and the self, which can occur, for example, in psychological responses to severe trauma.⁵⁵

The concept of dissociation has also been adopted by some anthropologists in their accounts of possession states and other altered states of consciousness in religious settings.⁵⁶ These accounts have drawn attention to the cultural differentiation of dissociative experience in mediumship and spirit possession during individual development. For example, Seligman and Kirmayer speak of a ‘biolooping’ process by which individual cognition is structured by cultural practices and schemata. Their work among mediums in Brazil shows how dissociative symptoms (such as disturbances of awareness and memory) arising in the context of trauma and distress are reappraised as afflictions caused by Candomblé spirits and managed through religious practice. This contributes to locally distinctive styles of experience and attributed significance in the practice of mediumship.⁵⁷ This emphasis on how learning and attributions affect dissociative experience in religious settings recalls Luhrmann’s research on how evangelical Christians learn to hear the voice of God. Current psychiatric concepts of dissociative identity disorder are also influenced by anthropological studies of possession.⁵⁸

⁵³ Janet 1907: ch. 13.

⁵⁴ World Health Organization 1992; American Psychiatric Association 2013.

⁵⁵ Holmes et al. 2005: 1–23.

⁵⁶ E.g. Boddy 1989: 350; Castillo 1994a: 1–21, 1994b: 141–62; Seligman and Kirmayer 2008: 31–64.

⁵⁷ Seligman and Kirmayer 2008: 31–64.

⁵⁸ American Psychiatric Association 2013: 293.

Like psychosis, then, dissociation in psychopathology and anthropological research reveals a human susceptibility to alterations in the experience of selfhood and agency. Charcot and Janet's use of the concept of suggestion and their proposal that dissociation shares cognitive and brain processes with hypnosis raise the question of the nature of hypnosis and suggestion, and their relationship to dissociation and cultural learning. This points to suggestion and hypnosis as a third source model for understanding the oracular possession of the Pythia.

4. Hypnosis and Suggestibility

Although suggestion is employed in hypnosis, it has a broader definition as 'a form or type of communicable belief capable of producing and modifying experiences, thoughts and actions. Suggestions can be (a) intentional/non-intentional, (b) verbal/nonverbal, or (c) hypnotic/nonhypnotic.'⁵⁹ Hypnosis originated in the nineteenth century from animal magnetism, and earlier practices of healing and exorcism, with the growing recognition of suggestion as a psychological process that can be used to produce specific effects.⁶⁰ In one strand of its development, hypnosis maintained a close relationship with possession and otherworldly phenomena. Indeed, the appropriation of hypnosis or suggestive techniques by new religious or spiritual movements and the view that it gives access to special knowledge (such as knowledge of past lives) has continued to the present day.⁶¹ As we have seen in the work of Janet and Charcot, an alternative trajectory saw the adoption of hypnosis by secular medicine and psychology. This can be seen in the contemporary clinical and experimental practice of hypnosis, where verbal suggestions to relax and focus attention, generally administered in a standardized way as a 'formal induction procedure', are used to establish a hypnotic state or 'trance'.

In keeping with the content of typical suggestions in the induction procedure, the hypnotic state is characterized by attentional absorption, disattention to extraneous stimuli, and relaxation.⁶² Induction of the hypnotic state increases responses to further suggestions (e.g. of limb paralysis) although some individuals respond to the same suggestions without a formal

⁵⁹ Halligan and Oakley 2014: 111.

⁶⁰ Binet and Féré 1891; Braid 1843.

⁶¹ Taves 2016: chs. 1 and 7.

⁶² Deeley et al. 2012: 208; Heap et al. 2001.

induction procedure.⁶³ ‘Hypnotizability’ or ‘hypnotic suggestibility’ is typically defined as the number of suggestions that an individual responds to on a standard scale, and is a normally distributed psychological trait. Like Charcot and Janet, contemporary researchers have noted a resemblance between hypnosis and dissociative symptoms at the most basic level of how hypnotic responsiveness is determined; as Kirsch put it, ‘Hypnotized subjects are asked to experience paralysis, amnesia, anaesthesia, involuntary movements and hallucinations. In fact, hypnotizability is measured as the number of conversion and dissociation symptoms that the person is able to display.’⁶⁴

In terms of the logic of analogy in scientific explanation,⁶⁵ the close resemblance of dissociative symptoms and suggested effects justifies the inclusion of both as members of a broader category or ‘supertype’ of *suggestive-dissociative processes*. A supertype based on shared characteristics allows similar transformations of self-experience occurring in revelatory and possession states to be included also.⁶⁶ This overarching category comprises subjectively realistic, involuntary alterations in experience and behaviour that conform to ideas, beliefs, and expectations which may be socially acquired or influenced. Hypnotic and dissociative phenomena and similar revelatory and possession states ‘inherit’ this shared characteristic as members of the category. The similarities mean that each subtype acts as an analogue for the other at the level of phenomenology and causation. To describe this class of phenomena as ‘suggestive-dissociative’ refers not to verbal suggestion in hypnosis alone, but the much wider definition of suggestion as any forms of communicable ideas, beliefs, and expectancies capable of producing and modifying experiences, thoughts and actions.⁶⁷ It is to this broad class of human phenomena that, I argue here, the oracular possession of the Pythia belonged.

5. Experimental Modelling of Revelatory and Possession States

Experimental models represent a special use of analogy in which features of the subject (e.g. revelatory and possession states) are represented and investigated by controlled manipulation of the source model (e.g. suggestion in

⁶³ Braffman and Kirsch 1999.

⁶⁴ Kirsch 1990: 171.

⁶⁵ Harré 2002: ch. 3.

⁶⁶ Deeley 2018: 9–16.

⁶⁷ Halligan and Oakley 2014: 111.

hypnosis) which would be impossible or difficult in the subject itself.⁶⁸ Experiments using suggestion in hypnosis in our research group have modelled a range of alterations in agency and selfhood occurring in neuro-psychiatric as well as non-pathological revelatory and possession states.⁶⁹ They have focused on the phenomenology and brain systems involved in alien control phenomena—including loss of control, ownership, and awareness of thoughts and actions, and the representation of control of thought and action by an alternate agent. The experiments represent and manipulate selected aspects of experience to isolate processes and identify mechanisms. They necessarily simplify the phenomenon to explain some aspects of it. The premise is that suggested changes in experience in highly hypnotically responsive individuals can be used to model dissociative processes occurring in revelatory and possession states because both engage similar cognitive and neural mechanisms.

An initial study modelled spirit possession based on a first-person report of the experience of possession by a *zar* spirit in Northern Sudan (quoted above).⁷⁰ The *zar* spirit was represented by an engineer conducting experiments into limb movement. In the ‘possession’ condition, it was suggested that the engineer had found a way to enter the participant’s body and mind to control her hand movements from within. She was aware of the thoughts, motivations, and feelings of the engineer, but unable to control her movements, which were under the control of the engineer. The participants described vivid, realistic subjective experiences of the intended effects, and significant reductions in feelings of control and ownership of hand movements.⁷¹

Brain activity during possession by the engineer was contrasted with a condition of impersonal control of hand movement (attributed to remote control by a malfunctioning machine). Possession, but not impersonal control, was associated with an increase in functional connectivity between M1 (a movement implementation region) and BA 10 (a prefrontal region supporting the representation of agency).⁷² These findings show that experiences reproducing key characteristics of spirit possession can be elicited by suggestion. Also, brain regions supporting representations of independent agents can be functionally coupled to motor systems—so potentially

⁶⁸ Harré 2002: ch. 3.

⁶⁹ Deeley et al. 2014: 107–19; Deeley et al. 2013a: 1–11; Deeley et al. 2013b: 411–22; Walsh et al. 2014: 24–36; Walsh et al. 2015: 380–93; Walsh et al. 2017: 793–801.

⁷⁰ Boddy 1989: 350.

⁷¹ Deeley et al. 2014: 112–13 and 115.

⁷² Deeley et al. 2014.

explaining at a neural level how it is possible for control of movement to be experienced as reassigned to another agent.

A more complex experimental model examined inspired or automatic writing attributed to an external agent.⁷³ The suggestions were based on the self-reported automatic writing experiences of Mabel Barltrop (Octavia), the founder of the Panacea Society: a Southcottian prophetic movement in Bedford in the early twentieth century (its successor institution, a charity also called the Panacea Society, partly funded the research project).⁷⁴ The engineer inserted thoughts and remotely controlled hand movements as participants engaged in a writing task in the scanner. Thought is different from movement, so, as predicted, loss of control of both the thought and motor components of writing were associated with distinct differences in brain activity. However, both conditions involved reduced activity in a brain region previously known to be involved in the planning and initiation of movement, the supplementary motor area (SMA). This provides evidence that SMA is involved in modulating the sense of control of ownership of both thought and movement. On this interpretation, the sense of loss of control of thought or movement is mediated by reduced activity and altered connectivity of SMA in conformity with the content of the suggestion, in which causation is attributed to an external agent. Also, a ‘mediumistic’ condition, suggesting reduced awareness of both the thought and motor components of writing, was associated with reduced activation in a brain region previously known to be involved in awareness of movement (BA 7)—providing further evidence of a brain mechanism by which the loss of awareness sometimes associated with possession, mediumship, or related experiences may occur.⁷⁵

These experiments have several implications for understanding revelatory and possession states. In contrast to earlier explanations, which view possession states as due to paroxysmal brain changes similar to epileptic seizures, they demonstrate how precisely the content of experience can conform to ideas, beliefs, and expectations.⁷⁶ This in turn raises questions about the social sources of the ideas and expectations influencing revelatory experiences in cultural practitioners—a point I discuss below in relation to the Pythia. The experiments illustrate how easily—at least in hypnotically responsive individuals—vivid experiences of the interventions of alternate selves can be established, and by implication in predisposed cultural

⁷³ Walsh et al. 2014: 24–36; Walsh et al. 2015: 380–93.

⁷⁴ Shaw 2011: 32–4.

⁷⁵ Walsh et al. 2017: 793–801.

⁷⁶ Paroxysmal discharges: Lex 1979: 117–51.

practitioners. They show the changes in regional brain activity immediately associated with a variety of alien control phenomena and dissociations of the normal sense of self. The experiments also show how an experience of altered control, ownership, and awareness can be accompanied by quite different causal attributions, broader subjective experiences, and engagement of brain systems. This cautions against a generic view of ‘religious experience’. There are many ways that experience can vary within religious contexts, which are influenced by local attributions and expectations.

The experiments also raise the question of how they differ from the phenomena they purport to model. The experiments do not entail that possession or revelatory experiences (such as inspired writing or speech) involve hypnosis. One category (such as inspired writing, clinical dissociation, or hypnosis) cannot be reduced to another because all acquire context and tradition-specific meanings, values, and purposes. For example, the presence of strongly held beliefs and authoritative social practices in religious contexts as opposed to temporarily imagined scenarios in hypnotic contexts may affect the threshold for experiencing the respective phenomena, quite apart from any differences in their attributed significance in terms of broader assumptions and systems of ideas.⁷⁷

6. The Power of Belief

These brain imaging studies identify the immediate changes in brain activity underpinning specific changes in experience and behaviour, but raise the question of how we should conceptualize the wider processes leading to these changes. In other words, how *do* ideas, or—in the language of cognitive neuroscience—*mental representations* such as concepts, images, memories, beliefs and expectations, alter brain function to produce alterations in experience in revelatory and possession states, hypnosis, or other dissociative states?

The behavioural neurologist Marcel Mesulam observed how ‘our highly edited subjective version of the world’ is the product of extensive associative elaboration and modulation of sensory information across the processing hierarchy of the brain.⁷⁸ The theory of predictive coding identifies cognitive processes that affect this ‘editing’ of information before its presentation to

⁷⁷ Deeley 2016: 39–54.

⁷⁸ Mesulam 1998: 1013.

conscious awareness as a late stage of processing. The theory links to computational models of how these processes operate at a neuronal level. It has now been applied to perception, dissociative and psychotic symptoms, as well as attributions of supernatural agency.⁷⁹ Predictive coding proposes that during perception the brain approximates a form of statistical modelling called Bayesian inference. Rather than perception being assembled from incoming sensory information alone, perception is instead viewed as a hypothesis testing process in which predictions about the model (percept) that best fits with sensory data are constantly updated.

Perception is based on ‘active inference’ with the aim of constantly reducing the mismatch between predictions and sensory data. The constantly updated ‘model’ chosen to best account for sensory data is represented in consciousness as reality. As an earlier theory put it, ‘perception is a hallucination guided by external reality’. The probability of a given model to account for sense data—the ‘posterior probability’—is given by the likelihood of the sense data assuming that the model is correct. Critically, this likelihood is weighted by the subjective estimate of how likely that model is independent of the sense data—the so-called ‘prior probability’. The priors—assumptions, expectations, and beliefs in psychological terms—include many that are culturally inculcated. Priors exert their greatest influence on perception when the ‘precision’ (reliability or certainty) of sensory information is limited or ambiguous—for example, identifying the contents of a familiar room in the dark.⁸⁰

The content of priors cueing dissociation can have many sources, including past experience, social modelling, cultural representations and practices, and expectations established by the verbal communications of others. They may also assume different forms—for example, imagery-based schemata, verbal representations, episodic memories. In the case of hypnosis, the representational content of suggestions is typically verbally encoded, although many non-verbal features of hypnotic contexts engage expectations that responses will be involuntary.

Andersen suggests that religious teachings and narratives are a source of priors, providing script-sharing for perception (and action) between individuals. Indeed, he suggests that the process of learning to hear the voice of God in one’s own thoughts (whether as auditory verbal hallucination or thought insertion) reflects a process of religiously guided learning.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Fletcher and Frith 2009; Edwards et al. 2012; Andersen 2019; Van den Bergh et al. 2017.

⁸⁰ Andersen 2019: 8–9.

⁸¹ Andersen 2019: 13.

In fact, experiences of thought insertion or auditory verbal hallucinations more fundamentally require that internal cognitive representations (self-generated thoughts) and not just internal or external sensory evidence are reattributed to an external agent.

7. The Pythia and Her World

On this basis, we would expect that the Pythia would have undertaken practices to direct her attention to beliefs and expectations about her possession by Apollo. It was precisely such features that Dodds identified in his account of her oracular possession:

I take it as fairly certain that the Pythia's trance was autosuggestively induced, like mediumistic trance today. It was preceded by a series of ritual acts: she bathed, probably in Castalia, and perhaps drank from a sacred spring; she established contact with the god through his sacred tree, the laurel, either by holding a laurel branch, as her predecessor Themis does in a fifth-century vase painting, or by fumigating herself with burnt laurel leaves, as Plutarch says she did, or perhaps sometimes by chewing the leaves, as Lucian asserts; and finally she seated herself on the tripod, thus creating a further contact with the god by occupying his ritual seat.⁸²

Numerous features of the ideational, temporal, spatial, and sensory structure of the oracle, and a consultation, would enhance their salience. Oracular inspiration occurred within ritually defined locations and practices; as Aune put it, 'the occurrence of oracular inspiration was wholly dependent on the sacred site and the cultic ritual that activated its oracular potencies.'⁸³ This milieu can be analysed in terms of cognitive-symbolic and sensory-affective aspects, but in practice both would have been integrated in cultural forms and the responses that they synergically evoked in local actors.⁸⁴ Consultations were infrequent, much in demand, and strictly controlled, so enhancing their value. The approach to the oracle was visually awe-inspiring. Monuments to the victory of cities recalled the importance of divine favour and pronouncements. Buildings were replete with imagery evoking the world of the gods; as the Chorus says in Euripides' *Ion*: 'Not only in holy

⁸² Dodds 1951: 73. The suggestive processes posited by Dodds would be non-hypnotic, non-intentional (i.e. viewed by local actors as relating to reality rather than as imaginary in some sense), and mostly non-verbal in terms of features of suggestion described here.

⁸³ Aune 1983: 34.

⁸⁴ Deeley 2004: 260–2.

Athens are there beautifully pillared halls of the gods and worship of Apollo of the Streets; here at the shrine of Leto's son Loxias [Apollo] shines the fair eyed beauty of twin facades.⁸⁵

The chorus of Athenian girls visiting Delphi for the first time who sing this go on to describe figures and scenes from mythology that they recognize. As Bowden says, 'At Delphi perhaps more than anywhere else in the Greek world the historical and legendary worlds came together, and their visual representation will have merged together to emphasise the power of the gods, and above all of Apollo, in both.'⁸⁶ The prestige of enquirers themselves—such as embassies from city-states—co-constructed the authority of Apollo and his oracle. The special status of the approach to the god was marked by ritual actions of the petitioner, such as sacrifice of a goat before the massive altar in front of the temple, before the petitioner was finally admitted for the consultation.⁸⁷

The general importance attached to Delphi and the Pythia, ritual, and familiarity with Apollo and the world of the gods are all likely to have informed and motivated her oracular possession. But was more specific training for her role involved? Details of the training of the Pythia are, in fact, unknown.⁸⁸ Apart from the ritual observances described above, it is not known what instructions surrounded the performance of her role, whether she was taught methods to receive the god, or whether she was explicitly told how her subjectivity might alter. In the absence of an account of the interior state of the Pythia, general accounts of possession and its analogues delineate the ways in which her possession could have occurred, and causal mechanisms involved in these various changes. Even in the absence of extensive training, possession cults show how social modelling and implicit expectations are sufficient to motivate and inform possession states in ritual settings. The precise role of oracular divination is likely, however, to have required more guidance and preparation than in general possession cults given the importance for petitioners of the Pythia successfully and convincingly conducting an oracular consultation. The Pythia's own beliefs and expectations about what subjective changes marked possession by Apollo, whether culturally standardized through instruction or more individual, would have constrained those changes. In the absence of direction, there could have been considerable variation in subjectivity. Possibilities include a more typical possession involving complete substitution of her normal self

⁸⁵ Eur. *Ion* 184, trans. Bowden 2005: 20.

⁸⁶ Bowden 2005: 20–1.

⁸⁷ Bowden 2005: 21.

⁸⁸ Bowden 2005: 16.

by Apollo, accompanied by loss of awareness and memory of possession; or identity substitution with awareness and recollection by her normal self (that is, a co-existent trance, as described in the *zar* cult above); more selective perceived control, by Apollo, of her vocal apparatus, and/or thoughts, while she otherwise retained a sense of her own continuing identity and agency; or even a vision of Apollo or the sound of his voice, which she then conveyed. There were occasions when she only pretended that Apollo had spoken through her, such as when the Athenians bribed the Pythia to influence the Spartans.⁸⁹ There may also have been occasions when she failed to perform her role because Apollo was not present. Indeed, the experience of any single Pythia may have evolved in her career, as certain strategies or habitual responses became established and refined, with or without direction and training. Any such variation may not have been a general matter of concern or speculation for petitioners, as long as Apollo was locally recognized as having been present and to have spoken. In this respect, discussion of the nature of the Pythia's relationship to Apollo by ancient authors may have been a topic for more restricted intellectual debate.

The cognitive state of the Pythia would also have been constrained by the form that consultations took. If the oracle's response to a petition was, in general, a 'yes' or 'no', the scope for creativity of response will have been limited. A more restricted cognitive account of alterations in selfhood and agency, rather than the cultural creativity expressed by figures such as prophets, visionaries, and shamans, is relevant. In fact, the role of the oracle in reducing the uncertainty of decisions that were too important to leave to chance is likely to have discouraged any innovation that might jeopardize this function. Cultural innovation, to the extent that it occurred, was arguably more present in the groups who determined what questions should be put to the oracle, and how the oracular responses should be interpreted.⁹⁰

The system of ideas, symbols, practices, social relations, and sensory and material settings within which the Pythia was embedded can be described, following Bateson, as an 'ecology of mind'.⁹¹ Her role, cognition, and subjectivity were presupposed by this system, but in turn the system was influenced by the god who spoke through her. Any individual Pythia was,

⁸⁹ Bowden 2005: 28.

⁹⁰ On the scope for creativity in binary questions, see Maurizio, this volume. On the need for expertise in divinatory interpretation, see Bowden and Davies, this volume.

⁹¹ Bateson 1972: 338–9; Deeley 1999: 109.

after all, a temporary incumbent of a role through which individuals and societies in the Greek world resolved critical questions of salient uncertainty. It was through the oracle, and within this system of relationships, that Apollo became an agent acting in human affairs. This first required that the god was not only a concept but also an object of belief, although his communication through the oracle would have further reinforced his perceived reality, nearness, and power. There is a sense in which Apollo truly existed as an agent, to the extent that as far as the Pythia and her petitioners were concerned, it was Apollo who spoke in response to questions. His existence as an object of encounter and agent was a contingent product of shared belief and practice, but most immediately refracted by the cognition of the Pythia. This is an instance of how an alternate identity can seemingly exist and act autonomously in place of the dominant self.⁹² The Pythia would not have known the fullness of his subjectivity if her awareness or memory formation had been restricted during her possession. Yet it could have been known, to the extent that mortals can know the subjectivity of a god, in co-existent trance, or some other form of selective control of thought, speech, or action had she retained awareness with access to his motives and construal of the world. The dependence of the Pythia's possession on shared belief points to the basis for its decline. As belief in Apollo attenuated in a changing ecology of belief and practice, he would, eventually, have fallen silent.⁹³

8. Conclusion: The Pythia and the Development of Possession

This chapter has explored the use of a range of explicit analogies and explanatory models to constrain and inform interpretation of the experience of the Pythia, and the broader context within which it occurred. Several models were considered. (i) The source model of mediumship and divinatory possession in social anthropology allows the Pythia to 'inherit' characteristics of the broader category of possession. This explanatory model can be extended and refined by 'triangulation' with other source models, which also point to potential causal mechanisms for the Pythia's possession given that similar phenomena have similar causes. For example, (ii) hallucinations

⁹² Deeley 2003: 164.

⁹³ Bowden 2013: 21–39.

and alien control phenomena in schizophrenia reveal a range of possible alterations in the control, ownership, and awareness of thoughts, speech, and action, that can also occur in non-pathological religious experience. (iii) Pierre Janet's concept of dissociation, and its subsequent applications in psychopathology and anthropological research, point to additional examples of alterations of selfhood and agency. Ethnographic examples show the cultural differentiation of dissociative experience in mediumship and possession during individual development, providing potential insights into the formation of oracles such as the Pythia. (iv) Experiments combining suggestion in hypnosis and neuroimaging have modelled a range of alterations in agency and selfhood occurring in revelatory and possession states. It is striking that these source models—ethnographic studies of possession and dissociation; hallucinations and alien control phenomena in religious experience; dissociative psychopathology; and experimental modelling with suggestion—point to the central role of ideas, expectations, and beliefs in influencing dissociations of the sense of self.

At a neurobiological level, an arc of explanation beginning with the neurologist Reynolds in the nineteenth century views dissociative experiences as influenced by ideas operating through effects on brain function. This unifying insight can be accommodated in predictive coding theories of cognition and brain function, which emphasize the role of prior information in constraining experience and behaviour. It also restores the human subject to the social world, and underlines the importance of humanities scholarship in revealing the 'ecology of mind' of ancient people as the basis for differentiating cognition into locally meaningful forms. The reconstruction of the systems of ideas, symbols, practices, social relations, and sensory and material settings within which oracular possession occurs reveals its influences. For oracular possession and the Pythia, several implications follow. The experiments with suggestion, along with the other source models, demonstrate how precisely the content of experience can conform to ideas, beliefs, and expectations. They show how easily experiences of possession can be established in hypnotically responsive individuals, and by implication in cultural practitioners in evocative ritual settings. Gaseous emissions are neither necessary nor even sufficient for possession by Apollo to occur, given the dependency of possession on relevant attributions. The experiments show the changes in regional brain activity immediately associated with a variety of alien control phenomena and dissociations of the normal sense of self, which by analogy may have operated in oracular possession. They also caution against generic notions of 'revelatory experience' or 'possession',

while illustrating potential mechanisms for specific types or instances of such experiences. In fact, it is not necessary or even likely that there was a single canonical possession state of the Pythia over the 1,000 years of the Delphic oracle. There is even likely to have been a development of possession experience within a single Pythia over the course of her career. Perhaps the key enduring feature of the institution was that the communication of Apollo to an enquirer was accompanied by subjective and behavioural changes in the oracle that were locally convincing and so helped to maintain the authority and salience of the god's pronouncements.

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11

Which Gods if Any

Gods, Cosmologies, and Their Implications
for Chinese and Greek Divination*Lisa Raphals*

Until quite recently, most of the comparisons used by Classicists to understand oracular divination have focused on African oracles, and especially on their social roles. With few exceptions, this comparative turn has not extended to China, and this is a lost opportunity.¹ A diverse and rich textual and material history and the existence of ongoing traditions of Chinese divination offer a nuanced comparative context. For example, Lisa Maurizio argues that Plato's distinction between inspired divination and spirit possession cannot be applied to cultures in which diviners combine spirit possession with technical methods such as bird divination (ornithomancy) or casting lots (kleromancy).² She uses contemporary Chinese practices to offer alternatives such as Emily Ahern's focus on the distinction between interpersonal and non-interpersonal divination: the presence or absence of communication within the divination process. In this system, non-interpersonal mantic systems include physiognomy and horoscopes, among others.³ It is noteworthy that early Chinese mantic practices present a wide range of techniques, most of which are non-interpersonal, and do not involve spirit possession.

Another example of the kind of alternatives offered by the Chinese materials is the relative absence of 'gods' in Chinese mantic practices, which, I have argued in a recent book, had significant consequences for both cosmology and mantic practice.⁴ Here I pursue that topic by a closer examination of ways in which Chinese 'spirits' (*shen* 神, a category that importantly includes both gods and ancestors) are addressees of mantic practice, despite a 'cosmological turn' in the conceptualization of Chinese mantic practices. By this, I mean that most Chinese divination was based on

¹ Exceptions are Maurizio 1995; Lloyd 1999 and 2002; Lloyd and Sivin 2002.

² Maurizio 1995: 80–1.

³ Ahern 1981: 51–63.

⁴ Raphals 2013.

the assumption of some kind of comprehensive cosmological system, though it is easy to overstate this by anachronistically applying Han dynasty systematic cosmologies to earlier periods.

Here, I propose to revisit two problems. The first is the “question” question’: namely whether we should understand ‘mantic questions’ as genuine questions (e.g. ‘will it rain within the next ten days?’) or requests (‘let/make it rain within the next ten days’). This issue has been a matter of some controversy in the study of Shang dynasty oracle bone inscriptions. The second is the issue of how Greek oracular responses were used by consultor states, namely the argument that the most important functions of oracles were political and rhetorical. I argue here that Chinese sources have much to contribute to the issue of whether divination sought human consensus or divine sanction. In some cases, the Chinese mantic records differ from their Greek counterparts in a more cosmologically abstract orientation and a greater distance from direct interaction with gods and spirits. In other cases, we see what may be direct attempts to influence higher powers in order to realize the consultors’ desires.

Three methodological notes are appropriate. First, many of my observations start from a Chinese perspective on what I call mantic practices. In a comparative context, I usually avoid the term ‘divination’ precisely because many Chinese practices did not centre on gods and, as Cicero remarked, for there to be divination there must be gods.⁵ Second, this is not an even-handed comparison (even though I usually argue for them) in that it is explicitly China-centred. An even-handed comparison would pursue both sets of evidence independently, and only then attempt comparison. Finally, we see the importance of *early* Chinese texts, including texts recently excavated from tombs, as distinct from studies based on evidence from contemporary or late imperial China. The excavated materials contain information that does not have direct equivalents in the received tradition.

1. Both-And: A Chinese Perspective on the Sociology of Greek Divination

I now turn to the broadly sociological argument that the most important functions of oracles were political and rhetorical: oracles could sanction decisions already taken by community leaders, provide legitimacy and

⁵ Cic. *Div.* 1.6.10.

authority, confer consensus, mollify the powerful, and deflect potential blame. On this view, oracles were sources of consensus whose function was neither to predict future events nor to bestow divine authority on rulers or elites. Their function was to resolve doubt, mediate disputes, establish consensus, and legitimize difficult group decisions that had been made before consultation occurred.⁶

This view was challenged by Hugh Bowden in his study of the role of divination in Athenian democracy. He argued that concern to understand and follow the will of the gods was an important factor in Athenian decisions, and that consultations of the oracle were genuine attempts to ascertain the will of the gods, rather than mere sanctions for human political decisions. He thus took issue with a modern tendency to downplay the effects of oracles on Greek communities, and argued that Greek states consulted oracles on matters of major import that they could not resolve by debate, and made every effort to get, and follow, unambiguous advice.⁷ Like Bowden, I argue for the importance that the early Chinese interlocutors placed on mantic responses, whether direct responses from gods and spirits, or less direct indications of good or ill auspice.

One area of apparent support for a 'sociological' view of oracles comes from the study of African divination. To put this in historical perspective, Jean-Pierre Vernant's key insight that divination must be studied through the dual aspects of intellectual and social operations arose through the study of African divination.⁸ From the evidence of African oracles, it was argued that divination was used to support authority. Community authorities typically formulated desirable solutions before consulting an oracle, which in turn approved their decisions, with social or divine sanctions to preclude improper subjects or modes of inquiry. These comparisons have focused on spirit mediums and 'ordeal' oracles, almost all oral. Comparison between the Delphic oracle and the Azande poison oracle was used to show similar attitudes towards divination and common topics of consultation such as illness, warfare, matters of state, and issues of family welfare.

This use of comparative evidence has been challenged on several fronts. Lisa Maurizio has argued that C. R. Whittaker's initial comparative studies only turned to African evidence after addressing problems in the history of Delphi that had no comparative counterpart. As a result, his African

⁶ E.g. Parke 1967; Morgan 1989 and 1990; Parker 2000.

⁷ Bowden 2005.

⁸ Vernant 1974.

evidence shed no new insight on Delphi; it merely supplied exotic parallels to conclusions already reached.⁹

Maurizio's criticisms of Whittaker are apt. Whether or not Whittaker tried to use cross-cultural comparisons to address questions he could not solve, the problem remains that his comparisons are methodologically problematic for several reasons. They privilege the Greek comparanda, and never establish substantial contexts or bases for comparison. The failure to establish contexts for comparison has consequences. For example, Esther Eidinow has noted that comparisons with the Azande poison oracle fail to address equivalent uses of oracles across cultures because Delphic state consultations are not equivalent to oracles used by individuals.¹⁰

I propose to use Chinese evidence in support of what I might call a 'both-and' rather than an 'either-or' argument about the relations of predetermined desires and divine sanction in matters of mantic consultation. The Chinese evidence suggests that it was considered important to formulate one's own intentions before initiating mantic procedures. On this view, divination was not undertaken to resolve doubt or conflict, but rather to seek divine sanction for goals and desires already formulated. In this sense, such procedures sought both divine sanction and social consensus. However, on this view, divination was not used to resolve doubt or mediate social conflict. Importantly, evidence for this view comes from both state and private consultations.

2. A Chinese Volitional Theory of Divination

Some twenty-five years ago, in a forum on whether oracle bone inscriptions were questions or charges, the great Chinese scholar Jao Tsung-i [Rao Zongyi] 饒宗頤 emphasized the volitional aspect of Chinese mantic practice.¹¹ The context is a debate about whether statements in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions (*jiaguwen* 甲骨文) should be understood as questions, statements, or requests. David S. Nivison has aptly called this debate 'the "Question" Question' in his account of a roundtable of several prominent

⁹ Maurizio 1995: 72; cf. Whittaker 1965: 30.

¹⁰ Eidinow 2007: 239 n. 9; cf. Price 1985: 143.

¹¹ Transliterations of Chinese use the *pinyin* system, except for proper names of authors who do not do so. In these cases, *pinyin* equivalents to their names are given in square brackets. Chinese names are cited according to the Chinese usage of surname followed by given name. For example, Jao Tsung-i's surname is Jao, not Tsung-i.

oracle bone scholars in a 1989 issue of the journal *Early China*. The participants included Fan Yuzhou, 范毓周, Jao Tsung-i, 饒宗頤 [Rao Zongyi], David N. Keightley, Jean A. Lefevre, Li Xueqin 李學勤, Edward L. Shaughnessy, Wang Yuxin 王宇信, and Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭.¹²

As Nivison puts it:

The ‘question’ question is the question whether the ‘charge’ in a Shang oracle inscription — the sentence or sentences following the word *zhen* 貞(貞), if it is present, but not including the prognostication (i.e. *wang zhan yue* 王占曰...) if any, or the verification (i.e. *yun* 允...) if any — is to be construed grammatically as a question, or as a statement, or perhaps sometimes as something else.¹³

To understand this technical debate and its relevance to the present question, some explanation is necessary. The oracle bone inscriptions are the oldest writing in China. They were first discovered in 1898 in Xiaotun 小屯 near Anyang (Henan) in excavations carried out from 1928 through 1937. In 1936, a pit was discovered containing some 17,000 pieces of inscribed turtle plastrons. Excavation was interrupted in 1937 by the Japanese invasion of China. Since then, some 200,000 oracle bone inscriptions on bones and turtle shells have been reproduced and published.¹⁴ Most are from Anyang, and date from the reigns of the last nine kings of the Shang dynasty, but oracle bones have been unearthed throughout China.¹⁵ Figure 11.1, a turtle plastron from Anyang (c.1300–1086), is an example.

The inscriptions reflected the concerns of the courts of the Shang (c.1600–1050 BCE) and Western Zhou (c.1046–771 BCE) dynasties. Modern scholars classify them in five periods on the basis of preferred topics, styles of formulating questions, calligraphy, and other considerations.¹⁶ During divination procedures, the bones or shells were ‘cracked’ by the application of heat. Cracks were then interpreted. There is disagreement over whether the inscriptions associated with the cracks were statements, answers to a question, or requests for a desired result.

¹² Nivison 1989.

¹³ Nivison 1989: 115.

¹⁴ See Bagley 1999: esp. 126–31. For the oracle bone inscriptions, see Keightley 1999a and 1999b.

¹⁵ The last nine Shang kings were Wu Ding 武丁 (1324–1265 BCE) through Di Xin 帝辛 (d. c.1045 BCE). See Keightley 1997: 18 and Keightley 1999b: 240–1.

¹⁶ Periods: Period 1 (to 1180), Period 2 (1180–1151), Period 3 (1150–??), Period 4 (??–1106), Period 5 (1105–1045). For discussion of this periodization, see Keightley 1999b: 240–1, Table 4.1. The notes to the table contain additional references on periodization.

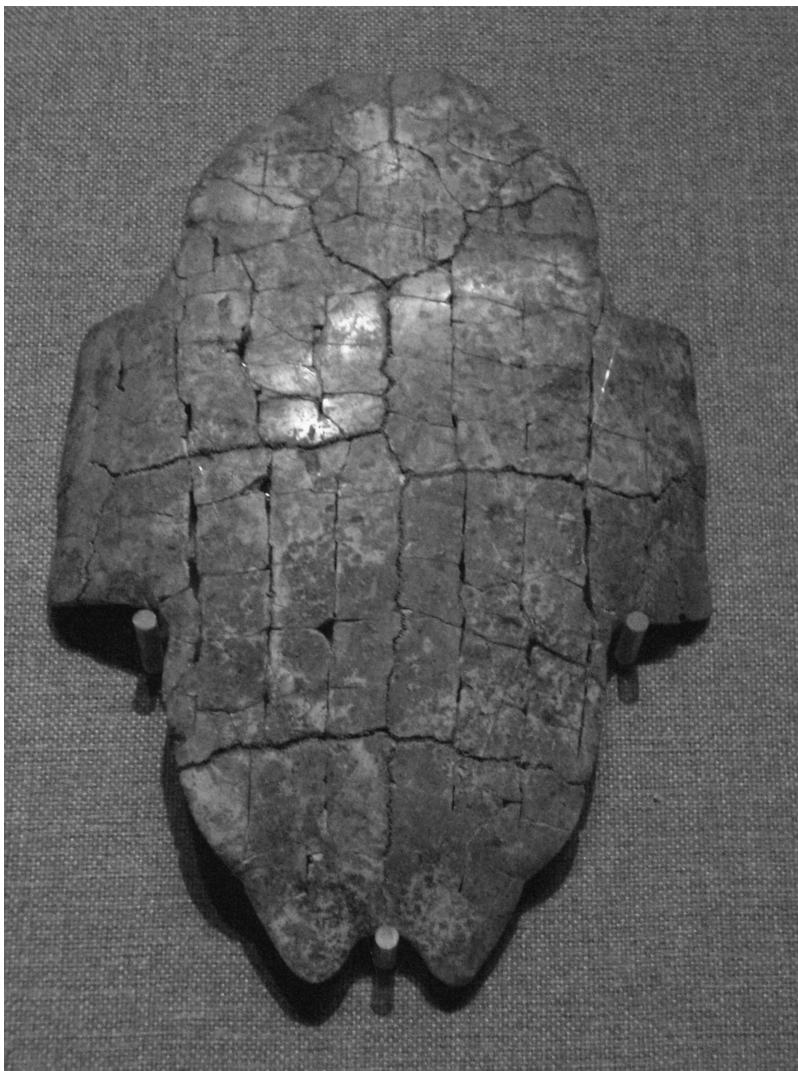


Figure 11.1 Turtle plastron from Anyang (c.1300–1046). Henan Provincial Museum, Zhengzhou.

Photo L. Raphals. This figure is excluded from the terms of the Open Access licence.

Inscriptions on the bones record the time, personnel, question, ‘charge’ (which can be a statement, question, or request), and, at times, verification of the prognostication.¹⁷

They typically contain a preface, naming the date and diviner, a ‘charge’ (*ming ci* 命辭), the subject of the prognostication, a formal prognostication (*zhan ci* 占辭), and sometimes a ‘verification’ (*yan ci* 驗辭) as to what occurred. The following example is an inscription that contains both positive and negative ‘charges’, that is, statements to be verified or falsified. The negative version (X will not happen) appears on the left side, the positive (X will happen) on the right:¹⁸

	Negative, left side (Bingbian 1.4)	Positive, right side (Bingbian 1.3)
Preface	crack-making on <i>guichou</i> 癸丑 day (day 59), Zheng divined	crack-making on <i>guichou</i> 癸丑 day (day 59), Zheng divined
Charge	from today to <i>dingsi</i> 丁巳 (day 54) we will not perhaps harm the Zhou	from today to <i>dingsi</i> 丁巳 (day 54) we will harm the Zhou
Prognostication		The king, reading the cracks, said: ‘(Down to) <i>dingsi</i> 丁巳 (day 54) we should not perhaps harm (them); on the coming <i>jiazi</i> 甲子 (day 1) we will harm (them).’
Verification		On the eleventh day, <i>guihai</i> 癸亥 (day 60), (our) chariots did not harm (them); in the <i>tou</i> period between that evening and <i>jiazi</i> 甲子 (day 1), (we) really harmed (them).

¹⁷ The largest collection is the *Jiaguwen heji*, a thirteen-volume collection edited by Guo Moruo and Hu Houxuan (Guo Moruo and Hu Houxuan 1978–82). The other major collection is Yao Xiaosui and Xiao Ding’s *Xiaotun nan di jiagu* (1985). Additional finds from the 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s include uninscribed bones and shells and inscribed bones and shells from the Western and Eastern Zhou, discovered in Henan and Shandong.

¹⁸ Keightley 1978: 43; Zhang Bingquan 1965: plates 1.3 and 1.4. The days named here refer to the sexagenary cycle of the sixty combinations of the Ten Heaven Stems and Twelve Earth Branches.

The ‘“question” question’ is whether the charge is to be construed grammatically as: (1) a question, (2) a statement, or (3) something else, such as a request. For example, should the charge be construed grammatically as:

- (1) a question: Will it rain?
- (2) a statement: It will rain.
- (3) a request: May it rain.

For many years, most scholars construed the charge as a question, with the notable exceptions of David Keightley and Paul Serruys.¹⁹ The debate partly concerned the understanding of the term *zhen* 貞: whether it meant ‘to ask’, whether it referred to a prognostication that was ‘true’ or ‘false’, or whether it referred to a result that was ‘favourable’ or ‘unfavourable’.²⁰

By contrast, Jao Tsung-i argued that it was crucial that the consultors formulated their intent before oracle-bone, or subsequent methods of, prognostication. To make this argument, Jao Tsung-i turned to the evidence of later texts from the received tradition, noting that oracle bone specialists tend not to look at texts of later provenance than their own period of interest. He went on to give examples of consultors who clearly formulated their intent before engaging in prognostication. His examples come from both the received tradition and excavated texts. He begins with a passage from the ‘Council of Yu the Great’ (*Da Yu mou* 大禹謨) chapter of the *Shang shu* 尚書 (Venerated Documents, also known as the Classic of Documents).

This passage introduces a potential conflict between the results of two mantic methods. Chinese sources often refer to the complementary consultation of two prognostication methods: ‘milfoil and turtle shells’ (*Shigui* 蓍龜). ‘Turtle shells’ refer to the method of crack-making, described above: a method of applying heat to the bones of deer, sheep, cattle and other animals, or to turtle plastrons.²¹ The result was a crack that provided a binary interpretation of an affirmative or negative response to a question.²² The other is ‘stalk casting’ by means of milfoil. ‘Milfoil’ or ‘stalks’ referred to a complex sortition of forty-nine stalks of yarrow (*Achillea millifolium*). The stalks are of uniform length and diameter with even surfaces. Yarrow stalks are thin enough to hold forty-nine easily in one hand, and tough enough not to break during repeated use. The joints or nodes between the branches are long enough to permit the

¹⁹ Keightley 1972; Serruys 1974; Serruys 1986. ²⁰ Nivison 1989: 115–16.

²¹ This term appears in a bibliographic classification from the Han dynasty. See Raphals 2008–9 for detailed discussion of its contents.

²² Keightley 1978 and 2000.

cutting of stalks of adequate length (some eight to twelve inches in length), and the stalks are evenly round and of smooth texture.

In the oldest forms, these manipulations generated series of six numbers.²³ Over a long period, yarrow prognostication evolved into ‘Yi divination’, the association of sequences of six numbers or hexagrams with divination statements in the *Book of Changes* or *Yi jing* 易經.²⁴

This passage advises that in selecting ministers one should first determine one’s own intentions and only then consult the turtle and milfoil methods of prognostication. Their agreement signifies the assent of ghosts and spirits; after this auspicious result, a question should not be repeated.

帝曰：「禹！官占惟先蔽志，昆命于元龜。朕志先定，詢謀僉同，鬼神其依，龜筮協從，卜不習吉。」

The emperor said: Yu, the officer of divination should first make up his mind, and only afterwards refer it to the great turtle shell. Now in this matter my mind was determined in the first place. I consulted and deliberated with all my ministers and people, and they were of one accord with me. The spirits signified their assent, the turtle-shell and milfoil concurred. Divination, when auspicious, should not be repeated.²⁵

This (probably late) passage also emphasizes the need to formulate one’s own intentions before engaging in prognostication.²⁶ Or, as the authors of the *Zuo Transmissions* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳) put it, divination should be reserved for doubtful cases: ‘We divine to resolve doubts. Where we have no doubts, why divine?’²⁷ It is also important to note that this context is explicitly political. Jao Tsung-i emphasized that this passage underscores the need to formulate one’s own intentions before engaging in prognostication:

²³ Prognostications of this kind appear in texts excavated at Tianxingguan 天星觀 (Jiangling, Hubei, c.340), Baoshan 包山 (Jingmen, Hubei, c.316), and Wangshan 望山 (Hubei, c.309–278). See *Baoshan Chu jian* 1991; *Jiangling Wangshan Shazhong Chu mu* 1996; *Jingzhou Tianxingguan er hao Chu mu* 2003 and *Wangshan Chu jian* 1995. For translation of the Baoshan texts, see Cook 2006. For further study of the Chu bamboo texts, see Jao Tsung-i [Rao Zongyi] and Zeng Xiantong 1985.

²⁴ See Loewe 1994; Raphals 2013.

²⁵ *Shang shu* 4.11a (‘Da Yu Mo’ 大禹謨), translation slightly modified from Legge 1885a: 63.

²⁶ This ‘sedimented’ text purports to be from remotest antiquity, but is probably no earlier than the second century BCE, and possibly dates to the fourth century CE (which would be the earliest known version of the text). Nonetheless, it contains astronomical and other information that date at least some 1,400 years earlier. See Nylan 2001: 132–3.

²⁷ *Zuo zhuan*, 131 (Xuan 11.1, cf. Legge 1885b: 56–7). The *Zuo zhuan* abounds with accounts of divinations of all kinds, including divinations about battle, marriage and progeny, dreams, and portents. For dating of this and other pre-Han Chinese texts, see Loewe 1993.

The diviner had first to reach a decision and only thereafter would he make a charge to the great turtle. In performing divination, the ‘will’ was a very important prerequisite. One first had to have a definite idea and only then obtain compliance from the turtle and milfoil. From this it can be seen that in antiquity when the king divined he was not at all completely basing his decisions on the report of the turtle, but was charging the turtle after his own will was first determined. In other words, the human deliberation was primary. The importance of the ‘will’ can be seen in this.²⁸

Another explicitly political passage from the ‘Hongfan’ 洪範 (Great Pattern/Plan) chapter of the *Shu jing* provides more detail:

立時人作卜筮。三人占。則從二人之言。汝則有大疑。謀及乃心。謀及卿士。謀及庶人。謀及卜筮。

Set the time and have them prognosticate by milfoil and turtle shell. Let three people prognosticate; follow the words of two of them. If there is great divergence, take counsel with your own heart, with ministers and officers, with the people, and with turtle shell and milfoil.²⁹

I now turn to several additional examples, not discussed by Jao Tsung-i, that tend to confirm his point of view. These examples also suggest that the purpose of indirect communication with ancestors in Chinese mantic practice was to affirm the acceptability of decisions already taken.

The importance of first marshalling one’s own intention and then asking for confirmation from the ancestors also appears in the *Zhou li* 周禮 (Rites of Zhou).³⁰ The *Zhou li* describes the offices and officials of an idealized Zhou bureaucracy, including an extensive listing of officials concerned with prognostication and ritual. It provides the oldest known classification of these activities. The *Zhou li* locates three mantic offices in the Offices of Spring (*Chun guan* 春官), the bureaucracy concerned with ancestral sacrifice. The Director of Divination (*Taibu* 大卜), the Director of Incantation (*Taizhu* 大祝), and the Director of Astronomy (*Taishi* 大史) worked in conjunction. Diviners (*bu* 卜) prognosticated, incantators (*zhu* 祝) invoked the spirits, and recording officials (*shi* 史) recorded and preserved the

²⁸ Jao Tsung-i 1989: 137; cf. Raphals 2013: 248.

²⁹ *Shang shu* 12.16b–17a (‘Hongfan’ 洪範). For a different translation, see Legge 1885a: 334–5.

³⁰ Considerable controversy surrounds the dating of these three ritual texts. See Loewe 1993 and Raphals 2013: 34 n. 41.

results. Each had a large and complex staff of junior officers, scribes, and assistants.³¹

The Director of Divination was in charge of turtle shell diviners, milfoil specialists, and dream prognosticators. The *Zhou li* specifies eight types of state question that could be addressed by turtle shell divination: (1) military campaigns, (2) anomalies and strange phenomena, (3) conferring gifts, (4) major plans and policies, (5) the success of planned ventures, (6) the arrival of (expected) individuals, (7) rainfall, and (8) illness:³²

以八命者贊三兆 三易三夢之占以觀國家之吉凶以詔救政。凡國大貞
卜立君卜大封則眠高作龜

In addressing the eight kinds of command [addressed to divination], he avails of the divinations provided by the three kinds of cracks, three kinds of change, and the three kinds of dreams, to prognosticate the good and ill auspices of states and lineages to announce to the ruler how to help the government of the state. Whenever he does so, whether he performs the great prognostication on behalf of the state, on the investiture of a prince, or on the creation of a feudatory principality, he considers the higher part and prepares the turtle shell.³³

According to the Han commentator Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (Zheng Sinong 鄭司農, 127–200 CE):

貞問也國有大疑問於蓍龜... 玄謂貞之為問問於正者必先正之乃從問焉易曰師貞丈人吉

Zhen, to ask; when the state has great doubts, it asks of the milfoil and turtle... My saying that *zhen* is to ask is that one who asks about correctness must first make it correct and thereafter ask about it. The *Yi jing* says, “The captain *zhen*’s and the elder is auspicious.”³⁴

This passage refers to the *Yi jing* Hexagram 7, ䷆ The Army (*Shi* 師). The hexagram statement reads:

師貞丈人吉無咎

Determining for an elder is auspicious; there is no trouble.³⁵

³¹ For these, see Raphals 2013: Appendix 4.1.

³² *Zhou li* 24: 10a–18a; Biot 1851 [1975]: 2.72; Loewe 1994: 175.

³³ *Zhou li* 24: 7b (372a), trans. after Biot 1851 [1975]: 2.72–3.

³⁴ *Zhou li* 24.7b (372a), trans. Jao Tsung-i 1989: 135.

³⁵ For this translation, see Shaughnessy 2014: 79.

Jao Tsung-i's point is that, before 'asking', the prognosticator must first 'correct' (*zheng* 正) or 'rectify'. In his view, this means three things. First, the prognosticator 'rectifies' in the sense of correctly placing and physically orienting the turtle shell on the place of divination. Second, the diviner must ethically 'correct' himself by correcting his intentions. Finally, it refers to the correctness of the mantic inquiry, in the sense of divine approval denoted by an 'auspicious' result.³⁶ In other words, the mantic practitioner must first clarify his intentions and desires and only then prognosticate divine approval, indicated by the 'auspicious' crack of the turtle shell. It is worth noting that all three 'corrections' take place before the divination, although the third, the 'correctness' of the mantic inquiry itself, is only verified after the fact.

3. Evidence from Excavated Texts

Jao Tsung-i also quotes a divination record from Tomb 1 Wangshan 望山 (Jiangling 江陵, Hubei), dating from the second half of the fourth century BCE:

志事呂元(其)故, 敝之。己酉之日, 苛(可)寫(禡), 以糶(將)未又(侑)
簋(爵)簋(爵)立(莅), 尚速得事。占之吉。言(亡)怎(作)。又熹(喜)於志,
熹(喜)於事。

Take it up by will and affair according to its cause. On an *jiyou* day, it is proper to offer a horse-sacrifice, since one does not yet have noble rank. If the noble rank is obtained, yet one is still discontented about the affair; prognosticating: auspicious; there is no fault. One will have happiness in the will and happiness in the affair.³⁷

The source for this quotation is not cited, and it does not quite correspond to either of the two published versions of the Wangshan slips. (The differences are discussed in the Appendix.) According to the 1995 transcription of Shang Chengzuo, it reads:

31. [Broken] 己酉之日, 苛愈以糶未又簋立, 尚速得事, 占之吉。言復又喜
於志喜於事 ... 33. [Broken] 志事, 以其故敝之

³⁶ Jao Tsung-i 1989: 136.

³⁷ Jao Tsung-i 1989: 137. I reconstruct his version from other published versions in the Appendix.

On a *jiyou* day Ke Ping divined about [Shao Gao's] not yet having noble rank and whether he would quickly obtain the affair [according to his wishes]. He prognosticated: auspicious; There is no fault. There will be happiness in [his] will and happiness in the affair. Take it up by will and affair according to its cause.³⁸

This text is part of a record of mantic consultations performed on behalf of the tomb's occupant, Shao Gu 邵固. It resembles other mantic records from Baoshan 包山 Tomb 2 (Jingmen 荊門, Hubei, c.316 BCE) and Tianxingguan 天星觀 Tomb 1 (Jiangling 江陵, Hubei, c.340 BCE).³⁹ Records of this kind have no equivalent in the received textual tradition. They used formulaic language and attempted to predict success over a given year, and also to address the illnesses that presumably killed the tombs' occupants.⁴⁰ The Baoshan records are the most extensive and well preserved. The Wangshan bamboo slips cited by Jao Tsung-i in his discussion above were badly preserved, and most are fragmentary. They consist of 1,093 characters on 207 bamboo slips. The records were concerned with two kinds of prognostication: rank or other activities in official service to the king, and about a range of illnesses. The records also included instructions for sacrifice, including the names of divinities or ancestors and the exact sacrifices to be offered: in this case a jade pendant for the King of the East and a white dog, food and wine for the god of the Path.⁴¹ Despite difference in order and transcription, in both versions, the statement that there will be happiness in his will/ambitions and affair(s) (*you xi yu zhi xi yu shi* 又喜於志喜於事) makes it clear that 'the will' (*zhi* 志) is distinguished from 'the affair' (*shi* 事). The interest of this passage is that, unlike the possibly late passage from the *Shu jing*, this record from an excavated text is of undeniable fourth-century (BCE) provenance. Also, unlike the earlier examples, it is not a state prognostication. Rather, it is a mantic question by the tomb's occupant Shao Gu 邵固, apparently about personal concerns.

In summary, taken together, all these examples show a procedure in which determining one's own intentions or will is an explicit prerequisite for a successful prognostication. In the Wangshan tomb records (as in the better-preserved Baoshan records), the tomb's occupant prognosticates repeatedly

³⁸ Shang Chengzuo 1995: 202–3 and 225–6, slips 31 and 33, translation my own. I have consulted Cook 2006: 253, but differ from her on several points. See the Appendix for more detail.

³⁹ See Baoshan *Chu jian* 1991 and *Jingzhou Tianxingguan er hao Chu mu* 2003.

⁴⁰ For a fuller account of this formulaic language, see Li Ling 1990.

⁴¹ Shang Chengzuo 1995: 204 and 226, slip 33.

on avoiding disasters for the ensuing year and on personal illness.⁴² In other words, here we find, in personal as well as in state divination, a clear statement of the consultants' fixed intentions and clear regard for divine response.

4. Which Gods if Any?

Elsewhere I have argued for a strong contrast between Greek and Chinese mantic practices and their relation to the gods.⁴³ I have argued that Greek mantic practices were closely linked to the gods, and their caprices. By contrast, a Chinese tendency towards cosmological speculation and the use of numbers to create abstract models of change distanced the gods from the mantic encounter. I conclude by reviewing and expanding that argument.

Both Chinese and Greek metaphysics assumed the existence of gods or divine powers, and the possibility of communicating with them. Within both traditions, there is disagreement over whether those entities or powers had some benign interest in human affairs. Also in both traditions, there are examples of economies of human–divine relations based on prayer and sacrifice. The ancient practices of Greek bird- and weather-divination and Chinese oracle bone divination offered ways for diviners to negotiate effectively with the gods by means of repeated questions. Both traditions also included ethical frameworks for divination, based on presumed correlations between cosmic and human orders. In addition, both Chinese and Greek philosophers emphasized the ethical role of divination in defining divine concepts of justice and retribution.

But Chinese and Greek understandings of the nature of these interactions were very different. Chinese models of divine–human relations were primarily genetic (gods as royal ancestors) or bureaucratic (gods as hierarchies of rulers and officials). Some Chinese mantic techniques addressed particular gods responsible for specific time periods and modes of activity, but these techniques progressively de-emphasized direct communication or negotiation with divine powers.

By contrast, Greek divination was always closely linked to the gods, either through direct communication, as in oracular divination, or through an understanding of signs as direct communication from them.⁴⁴ Greek texts

⁴² See Cook 2006 and Raphals 2013.

⁴³ Raphals 2013.

⁴⁴ For discussion of assumptions (ancient and modern) about the presence of the divine in ancient Greek divinatory practices, see Flower, this volume.

are explicit about the existence of gods who knew the future and might be persuaded to share their knowledge with humans. For example, several passages in the Homeric poems indicate that the gods know the future, starting with the claim that ‘the plan of Zeus was fulfilled’ in *Iliad* 1.5. In an extended passage at *Iliad* 15.56–77, Zeus outlines the events to come in the remainder of the *Iliad* and parts of the *Odyssey*, including Hektor’s rout of the Greeks, the entry and death of Patroklos, the death of Hektor, and the fall of Troy. In the *Odyssey*, Zeus prophesies the return of Odysseus (5.29–42). On the later view of Cicero (*Div.* 1.5), the gods were also assumed to have some benevolent interest in humanity, and to manifest their will (and eventually ethical notions of justice and retribution) through divination. Mantic communication was lubricated by economies of prayer and sacrifice managed through ritual.⁴⁵

Indeed, Nicholas Denyer argues that technical divination is ‘dotty’ as a science, but makes perfect sense if it is understood as a system of direct communication from the gods.⁴⁶ The same arbitrariness that makes such communications unsatisfactory as science makes them plausible as communications from divine powers. Yet the very characteristics that make them theologically robust make them intellectually unsatisfactory. They do not rely on empirical observation or systematic thought. Cicero emphasizes this point in his defence of divination in the first book of *De Divinatione*.⁴⁷ However, Greek assumptions about the benevolence and interest of the gods in humanity are equivocal. The gods of Greek myth were notoriously fickle; the arbitrariness of human fates and the indifference of the gods are recurring themes from Homeric epic to Attic tragedy.⁴⁸ Later Greek divinatory reflection shifted to the idea that the future was somehow predetermined and thence predictable. One result was a systematic and abstract reflection on problems of cause, necessity, and the logical preconditions that made divination possible and legitimate.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ A pervasive example is the sacrifice of animals whose entrails were used in extispicy. More generally, in the *Phaedrus* (188c), the physician Eryximachos claims that divination, along with sacrifice, governs the association of gods and humans. Seers could also prophecy spontaneously, without ritual mantic consultation. For example, in the *Iliad* (1.62–130), Achilles requests that the Achaeans consult a *mantis* to determine the cause of the plague. Calchas answers directly and explains its cause and remedy.

⁴⁶ Denyer 1985. ⁴⁷ Raphals 2013: 362–4.

⁴⁸ For example the Homeric phrase, ‘it lies on the knees of the gods’ (*Il.* 17.514; 20.435; *Od.* 1.267, 400; 16.129). Examples from tragedy include Eur. *Hipp.* 1104–10; *Hec.* 163f. and 935f.; *Tro.* 1201–6. For discussion, see Greene 1935; Onians 1924; Segal 1989. For a comprehensive listing of relevant passages in Homer, see Nägelsbach 1884: 116–41.

⁴⁹ For some of these arguments, see Bobzien 1998: 87–96; Hankinson 1998; Raphals 2013: 356–9, and Sorabji 1980.

By contrast, a great deal of Chinese mantic practices sought to determine and nuance human place in a cosmos governed by patterns of change, the transformation of *qi* 氣 especially, expressed in complex interactions of yin and yang 陰陽 and the ‘five powers’ (*wu xing* 五行, sometimes mistakenly referred to as ‘elements’) of earth, water, fire, metal, and wood, themselves another system of the yin-yang modulations of *qi*. These patterns were also affected by strong notions of ‘good and ill auspice’ (*ji xiong* 吉凶), governed by the calendar and often expressed in hemerological terms.

Starting in the late Warring States period (475–221 BCE), competing schemata began to link yin and yang (variously described) to phenomena in space (the directions), time (the calendar), notions of good and ill auspice, and the body. Much Chinese divination was based on the assumption of a cosmological system, though it is easy to overstate this by anachronistically applying Han dynasty systematic cosmologies to earlier periods.

Pre-Han ‘systematic’ elements include: (1) the early articulation of a cosmic yin-yang polarity; (2) the abstraction of patterns of change into a discrete number of types, represented by numbers; and (3) the early articulation of the sixty-four hexagrams as a complex and nuanced model of cosmic change, based on the combinatorics of yin and yang. Greek mantic hermeneutics focused, by contrast, on divination as a communication from the gods, with implications for both morality and ritual. The important role of divination as the impetus for Hellenistic debates about causality also arose out of a moral problem: the issue of choice and responsibility.⁵⁰

By the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) a system known as ‘correlative cosmology’ focused on elaborate microcosm-macrocosm correspondences between the three realms of Heaven, Earth, and humanity, and used numbers to express these symbolic correlations. Correlative cosmology also provided ‘natural’ explanations for the establishment and expansion of the Han dynasty. Scholar officials also used correlative cosmology and discourses on omens to define (and circumscribe) royal power through admonition.⁵¹

5. Conclusion

In summary, Greek and Chinese interlocutors addressed mantic queries to divine powers, understood as gods, heroes, and ancestors, among others.

⁵⁰ Raphals 2013: 17–18.

⁵¹ Raphals 2013: 381–2.

However, we can identify two important factors that led to differences in these interactions.

The first was different beliefs about the degree of direct divine involvement. Greek mantic practices consistently address gods directly. Some Chinese mantic methods do so as well, but others are grounded in what can be called cosmological calculation, whether based on the yin-yang cycles of the *Yi jing* or astrocalendric calculations of auspicious days and times for specific activity. Gods were part of those cosmic cycles but they did not control them and could not change them at will. These different Chinese and Greek attitudes towards divine powers had important consequences for several areas of mantic activity, including the classifications of mantic arts, understandings of the nature and origin of mantic gifts, mantic methods, the formulation of mantic questions, and the very different dynamics of the interactions between consultants and practitioners. Finally, they led to very different accounts of divination as a hermeneutic system, with correspondingly different effects of mantic activity and theory on the development of systematic thought.

A second key difference was the Chinese belief in a systematic cosmos, as evidenced by early and ongoing interest in stars and other celestial phenomena, including: (1) systematic empirical observation and record-keeping; (2) early theoretical accounts of the heavens; and (3) hermeneutic correlation with terrestrial geography and events. But that interest did not significantly involve relations with gods, even though spirits were associated with quadrants of the heavens. These Chinese attitudes towards the heavens have significant Mesopotamian, but no Greek, parallels.⁵²

Because of these differences, the question (introduced at the beginning of this essay) of how consultants used mantic responses, and whether mantic inquiry sought human consensus or divine sanction, takes a different form in a Chinese context than in a Greek.

The Chinese evidence supports a ‘both-and’ view of relations of predetermined desires and divine sanction because it presents a clear link between them that can also be applied to Greek divination. The Chinese evidence presents an alternative, which nuances the ‘human consensus vs. divine will’ debate in new ways. In *Yi jing* and astrocalendric divination, divine powers act at a distance through the operation of the abstract cosmic patterns, and without explicitly interpersonal interaction or exchange. But even here,

⁵² On this point, see Lloyd 2002 and Raphals 2013: 137, 146–67.

correct interpretation requires the fine balance of several elements. One is the ‘human consensus’ factor: a clear desire and intention on the part of the questioner. But a successful inquiry *also* requires divine ‘assent’, expressed as a result of ‘good auspice’ (*ji* 吉), indicating conformity to cosmic patterns and the approbation of the divine ‘powers’ (*shen* 神) of gods and ancestors.

Importantly, the Chinese evidence suggests that it was considered important to formulate one’s own intentions before initiating mantic procedures. On this view, the primary purpose of divination was not to resolve doubt or conflict. Ideally consensus preceded divination, and even in cases where it did not (such as the ‘Council of Yu the Great’ example discussed by Jao Tsung-i in section 2), its purpose was to seek divine sanction for goals and desires already formulated. In this sense, such procedures sought both divine sanction and social consensus. However, on this view, divination was not used to resolve doubt or mediate social conflict. Importantly, evidence for this view comes from both state and private consultations.

The latter point is especially relevant to Greek divination. The Chinese context presents a view of mantic questions in which social consensus is a prerequisite to divination and the divine sanction it appeared to seek. This ‘both-and’ view precludes the use of divination as a means to address social conflict because divination would not ‘work’ unless or until social conflicts had been resolved before the fact. This view of divination is very different than the conclusions drawn by some Classicists from African oracles, because it allows social consensus and divine sanction to co-exist seamlessly. It accounts for the problem of social consensus without requiring the perhaps arbitrary view that Greek consultor states did not consider divine sanction important.

Appendix: The Wangshan text

The Wangshan slips were in very bad condition, and most were quite short. Due to these epigraphical problems, there are differences among published transcriptions. Jao Tsung-i’s quotation from the Wangshan slips (section 2.4) can be correlated to the two published versions of Shang Chengzuo (1995) and the Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology (1996, henceforward HWKY) as follows:⁵³

⁵³ See Jao Tsung-i 1989: 137; Shang Chengzuo 1995: 202–3 and 225–6, slips 31–3; and Hubeisheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 1996, slips 11, 23, 27–8. I have subdivided Jao’s text into sections (a)–(d) for purposes of comparison. Translations of Jao’s text are his own. The others are mine, with consultation of Cook 2006. Characters in parenthesis are modern transcriptions of the characters to their left, supplied by the editors of each edition. See also Jao Tsung-i 1997.

Jao Tsung-i: (b) 己酉之日, 苟(可)馬(禡), 以酒(將)

On a *jiyou* day, it is proper to offer a horse sacrifice.

Shang Chengzuo: (31) [Broken] 己酉之日, 苟(以)酒

HWKY: (11) [Broken] 己酉(酉)之日, 苟(以)酒

[Broken] On a *jiyou* day, Ke Ping divined about

Jao Tsung-i: (c) 未又(有)簋(爵)立(莅), 尚速得事. 占之吉. (亡)怎(忤).

[he] does not yet have noble rank. If the noble rank is obtained, yet one is still discontented about the affair; prognosticating: auspicious; there is no fault.

Shang Chengzuo: (31) 未又(有)簋立, 尚速得事, 占之吉. 咎

[he] does not yet have noble rank, (asking) shall he speedily achieve the affair.

Prognosticating: auspicious; there is no fault.

HWKY (23) [Broken] 未又(有)簋立. 尚速得(得)事. 占之吉. 酒(將)導(得)事

[he] does not yet have noble rank, (asking) shall he speedily achieve the affair.

Prognosticating: auspicious, he shall speedily achieve the affair.

Jao Tsung-i: (d) 又(有)惠(喜)於志, 惠(喜)於事.

Shang Chengzuo: (31) 又喜於志喜於事

HWKY: (26) 又(有)惠(喜)於志. [Broken] 27 [Broken] 惠(喜)於事. [Broken]

There will be happiness in the will and happiness in the affair.

Jao Tsung-i: (a) 志事呂(其)故, 斂之.

Shang Chengzuo: (33) [Broken] 志事, 以其故斂之,

HWKY (28) [Broken] 志事, 呂(以)其(其)故, 斂之,

Take it up by will and affair according to its cause [He performed an exorcism to get at its source.]

Aside from slight differences of order and transcription, there are two main areas of difference. One is the reading of the phrase 苟(可)馬(禡) or 苟(以)酒 (Jao Tsung-i (b); Shang Chengzuo (31)). Jao Tsung-i understands this as *ke ma* 可禡, 'it is permissible to perform a horse sacrifice.' By contrast, Constance Cook reads it as the name of the diviner, Ke Ping 苟, prognosticating for the tomb's occupant.

A second issue is whether the graph 𠄎 (Jao Tsung-i (c); Shang Chengzuo (31)) should be read as one character or two, and whether the upper character is *wang* 亡 or *ji* 己. Read as one character, 𠄎 or 𠄎, in Shang and Jao's transcription, respectively, it is the negative in the phrase 'no fault' (亡)怎 (忤 in Jao's transcription, 咎 in Shang's). By contrast, Cook transcribes it as the two characters *ji* 己 and *ri* 日, one above the other: 'on a Ji day' (ji ri 己日).

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