Ancient Greek Divination

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WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2008

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this book.

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978–1–4051–1572–8 (hardback)
ISBN: 978–1–4051–1573–5 (paperback)

Set in 9.75/12.5pt Utopia
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Singapore
by Utopia Press Pte Ltd

1 2008

For Fritz Graf

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Acknowledgments

Some of the ideas presented in Chapters 2 and 3 were initially discussed during a graduate seminar at The Ohio State University in 2004; I thank my students for helping me improve both the quality of my ideas and the lucidity with which I presented them. I am particularly grateful to Bridget Buchholz, Norita Dobyns, Kristen Gentile and Adria Haluszka.

A shorter, preliminary version of the sections of Chapter 1 entitled "The History of the History of Divination" and "Divination and Magic" was included in my essay "Divining Divination," which appeared in *Mantikē: Studies in Ancient Divination*, co-edited by myself and Peter T. Struck (Leiden 2005). Different versions of some of the material presented in Chapter 5 have been or soon will be published as articles, as well; these are cited in the bibliography.

I am, as always, grateful to Wendy Watkins, the Curator of Epigraphy at the Center for Epigraphical and Palaeographical Studies at The Ohio State University, for her help with epigraphical and visual materials. Amanda Gluibizzi of the Fine Arts Library at Ohio State helped as well. Credits for art work or illustrations used in the book are given in the figure captions; I thank the artists and museums for their cooperation. Al Bertrand at Blackwell Publishing went beyond the normal helpfulness of a good editor in reading the manuscript and advising me on several important points. I thank my student Stephen Maiullo for preparing the Index Locorum.

Beyond all others I thank the person to whom this book is dedicated, my colleague and husband, Fritz Graf, who has been an ongoing source of scholarly advice and constructive criticism for this project and many others, and who has periodically reminded me – although not often enough – that *neque semper arcum tendit Apollo*.

Abbreviations

Antoninus Liberalis	Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses*
BCH	*Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*
Cicero, *Divination*	*Concerning Divination*
Diodorus Siculus	Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*
Diogenes Laertius	Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*
FD	*Fouilles des Delphes*
FGrH	*Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (ed. F. Jacoby)
Herodotus	Herodotus, *Histories*
Iamblichus, *Mysteries*	*Concerning the Mysteries*
IG	*Inscriptiones Graecae*
Lucan	Lucan, *The Civil War*
Migne, *PG*	J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus, series Graeca*
Paroem. Gr.	E. Leutsch and F.G. Schneidewin, *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum*
Pausanias	Pausanias, *Description of Greece*
PDM	*Papyri Demoticae Magicae* or Demotic magical papyri
PGM	*Papyri Graecae Magicae* or Greek magical papyri
Plutarch, *Obsolescence*	*On the Obsolescence of Oracles*
Plutarch, *Oracles*	*The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse*
SEG	*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*
SIG	*Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecorum*

Sokolowski *LSS*	F. Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées des cités grecques: Supplément*
Strabo	Strabo, *Geography*
Thucydides	Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*

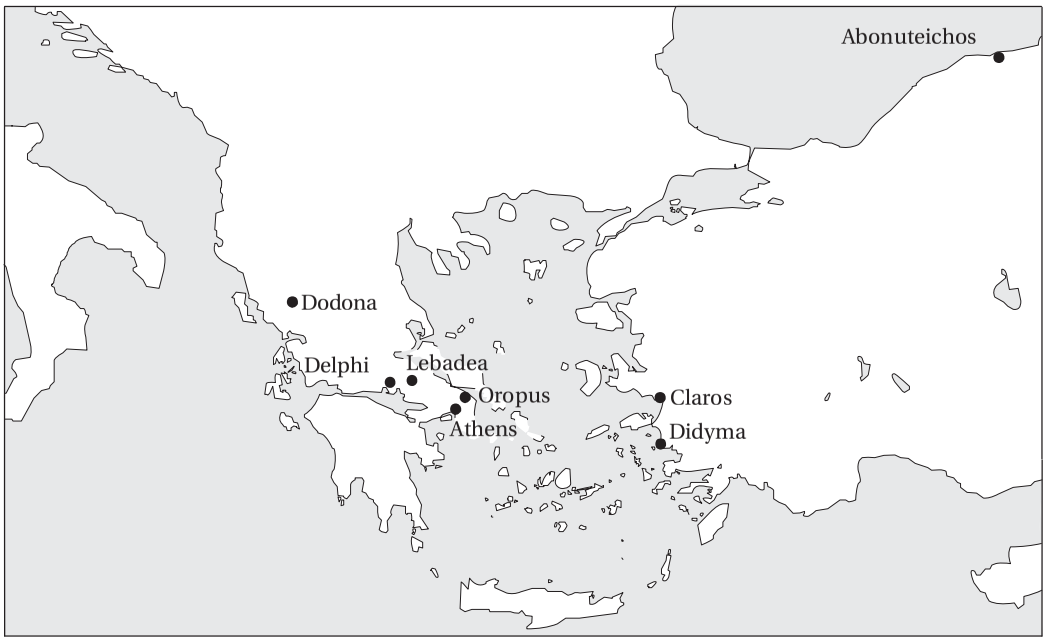

Figure 1 The Greek world, showing the major oracles

CHAPTER 1

Why Divination?

In the town where I live, a few blocks away from the campus where I teach, there is a shop that specializes in providing materials to people who want to foretell the future – and in training them to do it. For a modest fee, a student can enroll in a course that covers the basic techniques of Tarot reading, having first chosen a deck of cards from the many styles that the shop has for sale. Those who don't have time to learn the techniques can arrange for a reading with the shop's proprietor, instead.

The shop is anything but *outré*. It is well lit and inviting, on a street of renovated Victorian brick houses. Nearby are restaurants, a doctors' office and a coffee shop. The proprietor supports the community by awarding scholarships to university students, and encourages customers to bring along their skeptical parents and friends. This is no fusty fortune-teller with a crystal ball, hidden in the backroom of a more respectable business, but an establishment that has woven itself into the fabric of a large, Midwestern American city. At the time that I write, it has occupied its spot for 12 years; there is a demand for what it offers. Nor is my city unusual in having such a shop. If anything, a web-search suggests that we are somewhat underprovided in comparison with our neighbors. Even small towns in my state usually have a place to buy divinatory tools and to have one's future told.

One might still assume, however, that this shop and others like it serve only a small percentage of the American populace. The setting of my own local store – near a large college campus – suggests that interest in things like Tarot cards is transient and age-linked; perhaps playing at divining the future is the kind of thing one does when young. Leaving aside such "scientific" techniques as weather forecasting, twenty-first-century Americans do not believe that they can foresee the future, much less that they can affect it – at least they don't believe that officially. Take horoscopes,

for example, which are probably the most familiar method of prognosticating: in a poll conducted by the National Science Foundation in 2001, only 15 percent of respondents admitted reading their newspaper horoscopes every day or "quite often" (NSF 2002).

And yet we have to wonder how truthfully the respondents were answering. Only a few unassailably serious papers (the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* being prime examples) choose not to run a daily horoscope column. Indeed, most newspapers position the horoscope fairly prominently in a section called "Entertainment," "Arts," "Leisure," or some such thing, alongside the movie listings and the Sudoko puzzle. According to a 2005 survey commissioned by the Newspaper Association of America, this type of section, whatever you call it, is outpaced only by the local and national news sections in readership and, correspondingly, in costliness of advertising rates (NAA 2005). The money-crunchers at the newspapers must think that the average reader cares a lot about horoscopes, if they grant them such a prime position. If you peruse your newspaper electronically rather than in hard copy, you are likely to find the horoscope conveniently clickable on the side-bar menu alongside television programming, lottery numbers, sports results and the other sorts of things to which you might want easy access every day. And if you cruise Amazon.com ratings for books on astrology, you find that they are remarkably high (as are the ratings for books on Tarot reading).

In spite of what the NSF poll suggests, then, something attracts the average American to divining the future. The cynically-minded might point to the titles of the newspaper sections where the horoscopes are found. "Entertainment," "Leisure" and even "Arts" can be taken to imply that prognostication is nothing more than a diversion (or that this is what people who indulge in it want to tell themselves, anyway). Perhaps it *is* only a diversion for some readers – but even this doesn't mean we can dismiss it, for a game is only fun if you can suspend your disbelief to at least some degree. And for other readers it certainly is not just a game – the lucrative business of casting horoscopes and reading Tarot cards over the phone or internet could not be sustained as well as it is by people seeking idle amusement (let us not forget, either, that Nancy Reagan's penchant for astrology was thought to have a big enough effect on her husband's policies that it made the cover of *Time* magazine in May of 1988). Spirit mediums, to add a third popular form of divination to our list, advertise in the Yellow Pages of every American city – and are held up for admiration as the protagonists of popular television shows and movies. Divining the future, or at least thinking about divining the future, sits just as comfortably alongside computers, the internet, and everything else that we embrace as modern as it once sat alongside the telephone and

telegraph during the Victorian period, when interest in spirit mediums ran extraordinarily high. Indeed, the desire to gain special knowledge has frequently renewed itself by building upon technological advances: the Spiritualist movement of the 1850s modified the speaking trumpet in order to hear angels; Henry David Thoreau and others thought they could hear the music of the spheres humming over the telegraph wires (cf. Schmidt 2000).

This book is not, however, a study of contemporary western attitudes toward foretelling the future – fascinating though that would be. Rather, I have opened a volume entitled *Ancient Greek Divination* with a look at the present and recent past in order to introduce what will be a continuing theme – that is, the very pervasiveness of divination. Even if we think we don't believe in it personally, divination is here, and for whatever reason, as a culture we take some trouble to make the simpler forms of it readily available. Similarly, the Roman author Cicero opened his treatise on the topic with the magisterial statement "I know of no people, whether they be learned and refined or barbaric and ignorant, that does not consider that future things are indicated by signs, and that it is possible for certain people to recognize those signs and predict what will happen" (*Divination* 1.2). It's likely that in antiquity, most people practiced or witnessed some form of divination at least once every few days: divination was always part of offering sacrifices to the gods, usually part of deciding whether to undertake a military maneuver, often part of puzzling out a bewildering dream, sometimes part of diagnosing and treating an illness or choosing a bride, and even, sometimes, part of understanding why your body was twitching or your child was sneezing. Walking through the ancient marketplace, you might glimpse a "belly-talker" who carried a prophetic spirit around inside of herself, an Orphic priest who could tell you what it meant if a weasel had crossed your path, or a state delegation setting out to consult the Delphic Oracle on a matter of public good.

Ancient divination, moreover, adapted itself to different cultures and different technologies just as readily as contemporary divination has. Cicero follows his initial claim with a list of some of the choices available: the Assyrians prefer to divine by looking at the sky because they live on plains, where the heavens are unobstructed by mountains; the Cilicians, Pisidians, Pamphylians prefer bird divination; the Greeks like to consult the Oracles at Delphi and Dodona, and so on (1.2 and cf. 1.91–4). Some degree of variability and adaptability is characteristic of all religious phenomena, but ancient divination was particularly pliant. A relatively straightforward goal – to gain knowledge of what humans would not otherwise know – manifested itself in a variety of ways that combined and

recombined themselves. The myriad means reflect a diversity that is culturally specific, but the underlying persistence of desire for divinatory knowledge reflects a basic human need.

The Ancient Discussions

One thing does distinguish the Greeks and Romans from us, however, and that is their degree of self-reflection about the topic. Already in the mid-fifth century, intellectuals debated whether divination worked or not (Herodotus defends it against unnamed critics at 8.77) and as the centuries rolled on, they composed numerous treatises that took on the questions of whether it worked, how it worked and why the gods (or whatever) had established it. Many of these treatises survive only as titles or at best as summaries in Cicero's own discussion, but we know enough to at least sketch the central issues, which I will do briefly in this section. More detailed treatments of some issues will be found later in this book; the introduction to the first volume of August Bouché-Leclercq's *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité* (1879–82), now nearly 140 years old, is still the most complete discussion available, although it must be supplemented with the many notes in Arthur Stanley Pease's two-volume commentary on Cicero's *Concerning Divination* (1920/3) and now also with David Wardle's (2006) commentary on Book 1 of the same (esp. pp. 28–36).

But before we go on to that, it's worth thinking a bit more about *why* divination so fascinated ancient intellectuals. In contrast to divination, other religious behaviors were seldom examined very closely. We hear very little about sacrifice, for instance, which was considered one of the defining acts of ancient worship. (Lucian has a short and cynical essay on the topic, and Porphyry has a long treatise on why humans should abstain from animal flesh, which included abstaining from sacrifice, but otherwise, mostly what we have are brief comments that, far from asking how and why sacrifice works, assume that we already know.) Similarly, we seldom find ancient texts discussing prayer in a critical manner. Why then did divination, in contrast, draw so much attention?

Part of the answer is that divination more clearly involves participants in a two-way conversation. When you pray or sacrifice, you usually don't get an immediate response – sometimes you have to wait a few months to see whether the crops come in well or whether you conceive and deliver a healthy baby. When you cast the dice or read the entrails or put a question to the Pythia, you get an answer almost immediately. *Interpreting* it may take you longer, but at least you know that someone has heard you. Divination, then, more than any other religious act,

confirms not only that the gods exist, but that they pay attention to us. The Stoic arguments for the validity of divination were built on this assumption, in fact: if divinity exists, it must be beneficent; if it is beneficent, then it will find a way to communicate with us because it wishes us to steer our lives according to divine will. (And vice versa, of course: if divination can be shown to exist, then so must divinity.) The salient questions then become, how do the gods communicate and how can we most effectively take part in this communication ourselves? These questions lead, in turn, to all kinds of interesting ruminations about how the physical and metaphysical worlds operate. Assuming that the gods communicate with us through the entrails of sacrificial animals, for instance, how does a properly informative liver end up in the specific bull or ram that someone chooses for sacrifice? Debates over divination sat at the tip of a very large iceberg of other questions about how the gods and the universe worked.

The variety of techniques employed in divination inevitably increases the number of questions. Enthused prophecy (prophecy whereby a god speaks through the mouth of a human) prompts consideration of what divinity is, existentially, and how it could ever join itself, even temporarily, to a feeble human body. Plutarch tried to solve this dilemma with a complex picture of the soul of the Pythia coming together with Apollo in a sort of vortex of whirlwinds; Lucan toyed with the possibility that what the Stoics called divine *pneuma*, or "breath," which permeated the world, was inhaled by the Pythia and then struck her soul with prophetic knowledge – as we'll see both below and in Chapter 2, there were other explanations for enthusiastic prophecy on offer, too (Plutarch, *Oracles* 404e–f; Lucan 5.88–99). The Stoics also thought that *pneuma* sustained *sympatheia*, a force that bound together the otherwise disparate parts of the cosmos, and they used *sympatheia* to explain techniques of divination that depended on reading the appearance or behavior of objects in the physical world. The good diviner knew about the sympathetic links between, say, the appearance of a night-owl during the day and political insurrection and could therefore predict what was going to happen when such a bird showed up. But this prompted such questions as how we should distinguish between the art of the diviner and the art of the doctor, the farmer, the sailor or anyone else who made it his business to learn how one thing signified another that was yet to come – is it divination to know that an olive crop will be abundant by looking at blooms early in the season, or is that just good arboriculture? Is it divination to predict rain by looking at a dark cloud, or is that simply the sort of practical meteorology that every reasonably intelligent person picks up the course of life? And what had established *sympatheia* in the first place? Fate? Lurking behind that possibility was the gigantic one of whether humans had free will: if a network of *sympatheia*

had been knit into the cosmos at the beginning of time, setting off complex chains of events, then mortals could scarcely expect to change the future. And if they couldn't change it, then what was the purpose of divination, as Lucian's Demonax pointed out (*Demonax* 37)? Dream interpretation often was explained by assuming that the human soul could disconnect itself from the sleeping body, but this led to questions about the nature of the soul itself, and what, exactly, it was encountering while wandering around. With all of these questions and others to ask, it isn't so surprising, then, that divination prompted more focused thought than other types of religious behavior.

Even before critical discussions begin to appear in our sources, we see attempts to collect and organize divinatory information. Hesiod, at the end of his *Works and Days*, assembles a list of lucky days that his readers should heed: the eleventh and twelfth days of the month, for example, are good for shearing sheep; the twelfth is also good for setting up a new project on a loom. The twenty-seventh is good for opening a jar of wine. Certain days are good for women to be born on, others are good for men – although the specific day will determine the niceties of a man's personality. Hesiod ends his list of days, and the poem itself, with the remark: "Happy and blessed is he who knows all these things, and does his work without offending the gods – judging the birds and avoiding transgressions" (lines 826–8). The *Works and Days* was, among other things, a poem purporting to scold Hesiod's badly behaved brother, Perses, and tell him how to live properly – thus, it is not surprising that we finish up with something more or less like this statement, but two things are notable. First, having knowledge of "lucky days" counts as part of living properly. Perhaps we wouldn't call this knowledge "divinatory" in the strictest sense of the word, but it comes close: like omen lists or catarchic astrological charts, a list of days and the activities appropriate for each of them foretells what will happen if a certain act occurs at a certain time (indeed, in the ancient Near East, more extended hemerologies – that is, lists of lucky days and unlucky days on which to do things – were recorded in the same style and contexts as other omen lists). That Hesiod could compose a detailed list of these predictions (all but eight days of the month are characterized by him as being good or bad for something) suggests that already in the archaic period, a fair amount of energy had been spent on collecting and organizing this material. We are still nowhere near to the really extensive, detailed lists of omens and astrological patterns that scribes had long been producing in Near Eastern cultures (writing came later to Greece than to the ancient Near East) but the concept is present: collect, organize and then disseminate predicative information.

Also interesting is Hesiod's advice to "judge the birds." The verb I have translated as "judge," "*krinō*," and its cognates are parts of words that signify divination and the experts who perform it: an *oneirokritēs* is a dream interpreter, for example, and an *ornithokritēs* is an interpreter of birds. What Hesiod advises us to do at the end of his poem, then, is not merely to evaluate birds in some casual sense – are they healthy this year? – or even with a farmer's eye – are they the kind that are likely to eat my grain crop? – but to interpret what their appearances portend. Already a little earlier in the poem, when listing lucky days, Hesiod had advised that the fourth of the month was potentially a good day to lead home a wife – but only after the eager bridegroom had judged (*krinas*) the bird signs. It's not surprising that another poetic treatise called the *Ornithomanteia* (*Bird Omens*) was grafted on to the end of Hesiod's *Works and Days* at some point. Already, Apollonius of Rhodes had charged that the *Ornithomanteia* was spurious, but his need to assert this suggests that it was an accepted part of Hesiod's work during the Hellenistic period – lists of birds and their meanings were the sort of thing you expected a famous poet to provide (in this case as in others, the role of the scribe as a provider of religiously important information – so familiar in the Near East – was taken on in Greece by the poet). Throughout Greek antiquity, we hear about other lists of this kind, or treatises that similarly collected and organized such information. In the third century BCE, for example, an author who called himself Melampus, after a famous diviner of myth, composed one treatise on bodily twitches and their meanings and another on birthmarks and their significance. Books on dream interpretation collected types of dreams and paired each with what it signified – the only surviving example is that of Artemidorus, from the second century CE, but we know that others existed far earlier (Apollonius of Rhodes ap. scholiast on Hesiod, *Works and Days* 828 [p. 259.3–5 Pertusi = Hesiod *testimonium* 80]; Artemidorus, *Interpretation of Dreams*).

Another sort of divinatory list comes in a long speech made by Prometheus in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Prometheus, a paradigmatic culture hero, claims to have done many things for mortals, including:

> I devised the many methods of divination (*mantikē*), and I first judged what truth there is in dreams, and I first made known to mortals the meaning of chance utterances, hard to interpret, and of the omens one encounters while on the road; and I defined the flight of crooked-clawed birds – I explained which of them were auspicious or inauspicious by nature, and what their ways of life were and their dislikes and likes of one another and their alliances; and I also taught mortals about the smoothness of entrails and what color the gall ought to have in order to please the gods, and all