Worlds full of signs: ancient Greek divination in context

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Introduction

A great many people have ambivalent feelings about uncertainty: we need it but try to diminish it at the same time. Uncertainty stimulates individuals to try to obtain the knowledge they feel is necessary to make the right decision in a particular situation. In order to develop this – sometimes perceived – knowledge, which can relate to past, present or future, external input is required. Data and interpretations of those data are needed to make sense of the world. Often, we turn to specialists, such as psychologists, journalists or economists.[1] Their external input allows us to think about ourselves and the situation in which we find ourselves. This facilitates choice in the present: the external input reduces uncertainty because we consider ourselves to have been guided by reliable information about past, present or future. In the ancient world, a large part of this external input was provided by divination. According to my etic definition on p. 30, divination is the interpretation of signs thought to have come from the supernatural, providing man with information. The outcomes of divination induced a sense of certainty, facilitating the decisions which had to be made in daily life.

1 In the end there will always be uncertainty and inconsistency, cf. H.S. Versnel, *TER UNUS: Isis, Dionysos, Hermes: three studies in henotheism* (Leiden 1990) 1-35.

In this study, I address the question of what is specific to the omnipresent phenomenon of Greek divination and why this might be so. My principal strategy will be to place Greek divination in a wider context by comparing it with Republican Rome and Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia. I shall analyse the ways in which divination worked in these three cultural areas, which leads to an insight into the phenomenon, especially in Greece. Although this research set-up is wide ranging, it should be borne in mind that Classical and Hellenistic Greece are the ultimate focus of my explorations.

Choices

The first choice made by the historian is that of subject. Divination is a phenomenon which is worthy of enquiry because it was prevalent in all known ancient societies, and touched upon the daily lives of individuals as diverse as kings, warriors, traders, farmers and slaves. Divination pervaded daily life.

A very usual way for the supernatural to manifest itself, or so it was thought, was by means of divinatory signs. Theoretically, all that was needed was a human interpretation of these supernatural signs, possibly with the aid of text, as a result of which man gained knowledge. Consequently, the divinatory materials are not only revealing about the practices of divination itself, but are among the few materials which reveal the perceived actions of the supernatural. Divination is then among the most important phenomena which are available for the study of ancient religion. My aim is to undertake a systematic

investigation of what divination was and the different ways in which it could function. My chief target is daily experience of divination rather than any philosophical explanations of signs and divinatory practices.

While the choice of subject is the first step, the second decision to be made is the approach. This research is carried out comparatively: there were rich varieties of practices and ideas inherent in divination and simultaneously intimate similarities can be discerned in the three cultural areas under consideration. Comparison requires a degree of decontextualization of the phenomenon: a re-contexualization of divination in Greek society is found in the last chapters and in the conclusion. Although the comparative approach implies a wide geographical scope, it is also restrictive because a comparison is only effective when the framework in which it is conducted is well defined.

Therefore, structure is the historian's third choice. I have chosen to concentrate on the three constitutive elements and on the main functions of divination. I consider the three elements to be the sign, the diviner (*homo divinans*) and the texts used in the divinatory process. The principal functions of divination relate to time and to uncertainty. I must emphasize that my purpose is not to provide a descriptive overview of all divinatory methods in the three cultural areas. Conforming to the approach advocated by Poole, the current work does not seek 'analytic disclosure *in toto* […]. Instead, each case presents […] a partial coherence among its metaphors and analogies

that may tell us something new, interesting, and even theoretically important.'[2] This work is concerned with aspects of the larger phenomenon of divination. I shall problematize some of these aspects and attempt a general explanation in my conclusions.

One final choice which still has to be made is that between a diachronic or synchronic approach. I have adopted a synchronic approach: a certain degree of generalization is necessary to say something about, for example, 'Roman divination'. In adopting this approach, I certainly do not wish to deny the dynamism which was so very prevalent in ancient religions. Nevertheless, a certain amount of generalization is useful to point out a feature of divination in one area in comparison to that in another. Without this leeway, the historian could not discuss anything but the specific. At the same time, this generalization should not go too far. Hence, time and place are restricted here to Republican Rome in its Italian setting; Greece in the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods and Mesopotamia in Neo-Assyrian times (see pp. 81-83 below for a further discussion of the geographical and temporal scope).

Having made these choices, I can only hope to have fulfilled to some extent the three very ambitious requirements Jonathan Z. Smith considers crucial to a successful study of religion: 'First, that the exemplum has been well and fully understood. This requires a mastery of both the relevant primary material and the history and tradition of its interpretation. Second, that the exemplum be dis-

2 F.J.P. Poole, 'Metaphors and maps: towards comparison in the anthropology of religion', *JAAR* 54 (1986) 411-457, at 433.

played in the service of some important theory, some paradigm, some fundamental question, some central element in the academic imagination of religion. Third, that there be some method for explicitly relating the exemplum to the theory, paradigm, or question and some method for evaluating each in terms of the other.[3] In my attempt to fulfil these three conditions, I use the comparative method to investigate divination – an important subject in itself – and relate it to the context of the societies in which it took place, hoping to give new impetus to ideas about the workings of ancient religion and its place in society.

Outline of this volume

This book is divided into three parts. An introduction to the subject of divination and a methodological background to this study will be provided in Part I (chapters 1-3). In Part II, the comparative method is used as a heuristic tool to impart a better understanding of the elements of divination, while demonstrating its diversity and similarity in three ancient cultures (Part II, chapters 4-6). In Part III (chapters 7-8), the comparative method is used to explore what I see as the central function of divination: obtaining knowledge of past, present or future in order to manage uncertainty.

Part I provides an introduction to the comparative study of divination. In chapter 1, a brief historiographical outline of research into

3 J.Z. Smith, *Imagining religion: from Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago 1982) xi-xii.

divination, both in the field of Classical Studies and Assyriology, is provided. I shall show that the current revival of divination studies revolves around the idea that divination can be used to obtain an understanding of such aspects of daily life as, for example, decision making. Divination is now seen as essentially a human act which tells us about human society. This is an anthropocentric approach which is also pursued throughout the chapters of this volume: according to the definition of divination, as formulated in chapter 2 (p. 30), human individuals have to recognize a sign as such, interpret it (with the aid of oral or written texts) and act on it. chapter 3 discusses arguments in favour of taking a comparative approach and points out the units of comparison used in this study, while drawing attention to the methodological pitfalls which are to be avoided. Building on these considerations, Part I argues that, for the purposes of a comparative enquiry, divination can be usefully conceptualized and analysed as a process consisting of three elements – present in all three cultural areas – *homo divinans*, sign and text.

Part II discusses the three elements of divination identified in the first part of the study. chapter 4 deals with the *homo divinans* and in first instance is concerned with the following question: when was an expert needed and when could an individual divine for himself? However, the major part of the chapter is devoted to what can be said about the role of this expert in the various societies, on the basis of a systematic comparison of the socio-economic status of certain groups of divinatory experts in Greece, Mesopotamia and Rome.

Conclusions about differences and similarities in socio-economic status contribute to an understanding of diversity among experts and consequently to the diversity in the element of the *homo divinans*. The sign is the topic of chapter 5: where were signs perceived to come from? How did an individual obtain a sign? How could these signs be recognized as being actual signs from the supernatural? These questions must be addressed because these are all preliminary stages to the human recognition of a sign, the first – pivotal – step in the divinatory process as outlined in chapter 1. Chapter 6 deals with the texts used in the divinatory ritual. The contents of the text are not discussed as such: instead, texts are analysed as cultural objects which had a function, or various functions, in the divinatory process. Examination of the categories of text contributes to our understanding of what went on during the divinatory process in the three cultural areas, thereby helping us to see more clearly what was specific to Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman divinatory practices.

Part III (chapters 7 and 8) deals with divination in relation to its main function. Divination is discussed in relation to experiences of time (past, present and future) and as a way to deal with uncertainty – two intertwined issues. How was time made explicit in the divinatory sources? How did divination illuminate past, present and future? Divination served as a tool to obtain knowledge about what would occur within a timeframe – but this raises the questions of how long this timeframe might be and what this tells us about divination (chapter 7). Chapter 8 is concerned with uncertainties

and how ancient man dealt with these through divinatory practice. Divination certainly helped to make the decisions which were necessary in daily life. Intriguingly, a comparison shows that uncertainties were dealt with quite differently in Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome.

Taken as a whole, these chapters allow an insight into what was general and what was specific to divination in Greece: while remaining part of one and the same phenomenon, divination developed a different face in each cultural area in which it manifested itself.[4] I am especially concerned with the face of Greek divination and its relation to society: Greek divination was characterized by a striking degree of flexibility on a number of levels, which might have been the outcome of a relative under-institutionalization. What is equally important, however, is that the cultural variations within one and the same phenomenon are shown. While the ancient worlds had much in common, plurality was always present, even within divination: practices of divination are constituted differently every time.

4 I simply use E.B. Tylor's definition of culture: 'The complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (*Primitive culture: researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom* (London 1871) 1).