Worlds full of signs: ancient Greek divination in context

Beerden, K.

3. Comparison

The analysis undertaken in this study is comparative: to discover what is specific to divination in a particular cultural area, it has to be compared. An examination of ancient divinatory practices by using systematic comparison has hardly been endeavoured yet, although a number of scholars have insisted on the need for a comparative approach and some initial moves have been made.[1] In 1965,

1 Cf. M.J. de Jong and H.M. Barstad who both plead for a comparison of the biblical prophetic books with Assyrian prophecies in order to obtain a better understanding of society and religion of ancient Israel and to compare this with more typological purpose in mind than has been the case before: M.J. de Jong, '"Fear not, o king!" The Assyrian prophecies as a case for a comparative approach', *JEOL* 38 (2003-2004) 113-121; H.M. Barstad, 'Comparare necesse est? Ancient Israelite and ancient Near Eastern prophecy in a comparative perspective' in: M. Nissinen (ed.), *Prophecy in its ancient Near Eastern context* (Atlanta 2000) 3-12. Jean-Pierre Vernant created a rough sketch of a comparative model of religion – but not for the specific purpose of studying divination: Vernant, 'Parole and signes muets', 9-25. See for examples of outlines specifically dealing with divination: J.P. Sørensen, 'On divination. An exercise in comparative method' in: T. Ahlbäck (ed.), *Approaching religion: based on papers read at the symposium on methodology in the study of religions held at Åbo, Finland, on the 4th-7th August 1997* 2 vols (Åbo 1999) Vol. 1, 181-188; and the article by the same

for instance, when Hans Klees produced a comparative study in which one particular source (Herodotos) was used to understand what the author considered to be non-Greek, 'strange', divinatory practices. The author's goal was to improve understanding of Greek practices.[2] However, I feel that this particular approach is too restrictive because its scope is restricted by the source materials and their inevitably emic angle. More recently, Sarah Iles Johnston has edited

author: J.P. Sørensen, 'A comparative approach to divination ancient and modern' in: K. Munk & A. Lisdorf (ed.), *Unveiling the hidden* (forthcoming) 227-261. G.E.R. Lloyd has touched upon the subject in a number of his many publications, most prominently *The revolutions of wisdom: studies in the claims and practice of ancient Greek science* (Berkeley, CA 1987) 38-48; *The ambitions of curiosity: understanding the world in ancient Greece and China* (Cambridge 2002) 21-43. Note that there is no such thing as *the* comparative method, as we shall see below; see also G. Śarana, *The methodology of anthropological comparisons: an analysis of comparative methods in social and cultural anthropology* (Tuscon 1975) vii-viii, 15. Other issues with the term are explained briefly in E.J. Sharpe, 'Comparative religion' in: M. Eliade & L. Jones (eds), *The encyclopedia of religion* vols 16 (1987) Vol. 3, 578-580. For discussions of method and its issues, cf.: R.A. Segal, 'In defense of the comparative method', *Numen* 48 (2001) 339-373; M. Pye, *Comparative religion: an introduction through source materials* (New York 1972); A. Sica, *Comparative methods in the social sciences* vols 1-4 (London 2006); E. McKeown, 'Inside out and in between: comparing the comparativists', *MTSR* 20 (2008) 259-269.

2 H. Klees, *Die Eigenart des griechischen Glaubens an Orakel und Seher: ein Vergleich zwischen griechischer und nichtgriechischer Mantik bei Herodot* (Stuttgart 1965).

a systematic overview of ancient religions, which includes a chapter on the divinatory practices of different Mediterranean civilizations.[3] Although the individual entries are valuable, they do not offer a real comparison or synthesis because of the encyclopaedic nature of the work. There is also no dearth of other poly-cultural studies about divination, but because of their all-encompassing nature, these volumes are not suitable for explicit comparison or cross-cultural analysis. One example is *Divination and oracles* in which divinatory practices in Tibet, China, Rome and Greece, and finally Germany are discussed, each in different chapters by a different author each with his or her own point to make.[4] *La divination: études*, a publication edited by André Caquot and Marcel Leibovici – which has become a standard work of reference on divination in various societies, ancient and modern –, has the same structure, as has the recent volume *Magic and divination in the ancient world*.[5] In the most recent collections of papers on divination this is also the standard approach.[6] Although unquestionably this approach

3 Aune, 'Divination and prophecy', 370-391.

4 Loewe & Blacker, *Divination and oracles*.

5 Caquot & Leibovici, *La divination*; Ciraolo & Seidel, *Magic and divination*.

6 J.M. Durand & A. Jacquet (eds), *Magie et divination dans les cultures de l'orient: actes du colloque organisé par l'Institut du Proche-Orient ancien du Collège de France, la Société Asiatique et le CNRS (UMR 7192) les 19 mai et 20 juin 2008, Paris* (Paris 2010); Annus, *Divination*; Georgoudi, Koch Piettre & Schmidt, *La raison des signes*.

does raise the reader's awareness of the variety of divinatory practices encountered among various peoples, it is not without serious disadvantages. Each author approaches the topic adopting his own methodology and perspective: the resulting kaleidoscopic picture does not really add to an understanding of the underlying issues. In short, it is time a true comparison should be attempted. Geoffrey Lloyd and Jean-Jacques Glassner have both reflected on questions about a comparison between Chinese and Greek (Lloyd) and Chinese and Mesopotamian (Glassner) divination. These articles provide a thought-provoking summary of, especially, Lloyd's previous attempts to compare Greek to Chinese divination, in which his purpose was – among other goals – to contribute to the typology of divination.[7]

7 The articles are: J.J. Glassner, 'Questions mesopotamiennes sur la divination' and G.E.R. Lloyd, 'Divination: traditions and controversies, Chinese and Greek divination', *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 21 (1999) 147-154 and 155-165 respectively. This is a special issue of this journal, edited by K. Chemla, D. Harper & M. Kalinowski and titled *Divination et rationalité en Chine ancienne*. Forthcoming is: L. Raphals, *Divination and prediction in Early China and ancient Greece* (Cambridge 2013). There seems to be a trend to compare China and Greece as well as China and Rome, also outside the field of divination: on Greece and China see the works of G.E.R. Lloyd more generally but also a work such as S. Shankman & S.W. Durrant (eds), *Early China/Ancient Greece: thinking through comparisons* (Albany, NY 2002); W. Scheidel (ed.), *Rome and China: comparative perspectives on ancient world empires* (Oxford 2009).

Units of comparison

In my own comparative inquiries Neo-Assyrian, Roman and Greek practices are the three units of comparison. What is specific to and what is general about the various divinatory practices? The underlying assumption is that divination, although a nearly universal human phenomenon, is manifested in many different ways and has varied through time and space. These variations are postulated to be related to social and cultural differences. Hence, the study of divination is not only of importance to understanding the phenomenon itself, but it is also a vantage point from which to observe a number of essential features of daily life in the societies discussed.

In my comparison of Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia, Greece and Republican Rome, I do not assume these remained static units throughout time. Indeed, I think of them as dynamic. I also assume that the three units of comparison are composed of culturally distinct areas. Nevertheless, there are enough common denominators to consider the three as units suitable to be used for comparative purposes.

Certainly, the comparison could have involved ancient or modern societies other than these three – the units of a comparison do not need to overlap in time or space for the results to be meaningful - but these three provide enough variety to produce results and they fall into my field of expertise. As far as the Mesopotamian material is concerned, I restrict myself to the Neo-Assyrian period, which

can be dated from 880 to 612, the year of the fall of Nineveh. In this period the great Assyrian kings ruked, in whose reigns most of our divinatory records originated: Sennacherib (688-681), Esarhaddon (680-669) and Assurbanipal (668-ca 610). These kings ordered many extispicies to be taken, and received letters from both Assyrian and Babylonian scholars. Although there are differences between the ways these scholars operated, as a whole these regions will be referred to as 'Mesopotamia'. The sources are drawn from throughout a large area. Many sources have been found in archives such as those in Nineveh, but reports and letters were sent to the king over great distances. Given the relative homogeneity of the materials, the vast majority concerned with public divination, it does not seem necessary to impose geographical restrictions or distinctions here. In addition to the Neo-Assyrian sources, some other texts from earlier periods – especially Old Babylonian texts – will occasionally be used to illustrate certain points.[8]

The Greek materials stem from Archaic (roughly 800-478 BC), Classical (478-323 BC), and the Hellenistic world before 146 BC. Materials from the period 146 BC and thereafter will only be used to illuminate the earlier sources. The area considered consists of the entire Greek-speaking world.

8 For overviews of the material/sources (but lacking either in detail or completeness) see F. Mario Fales, *L'impero assiro: storia e amministrazione* (*IX-VII secolo A.C.*) (Rome 2001) 244-283; for unprovoked divination: Rochberg, *The heavenly writing*, 44-97. There are many introductions to specific compendia, e.g,: Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian astrology*, *passim*.

Roman divination is represented by the Republican period. The sources either date from around 509 BC to ca 31 BC, or they are from a later period, but refer to divination in the Republic. It should be noted that most sources are from the first century BC. In my examination of the Roman materials, the scope of my inquiry will be limited to divination in the Italian peninsula itself – divinatory practices outside the peninsula are not taken into account here.

The number of sources from these three cultural areas which deal with divination in some way or the other is enormous. To provide just a glimpse of what kind of sources are available, I would like to draw attention to the fact that valuable information can be found in both tragedy and in the Dodonaic tablets for Greece; in Mesopotamia the evidence includes compendia as well as queries and letters; the Roman historian Livy and many other authors, for example Nigidius Figulus who translated a brontoscopic calendar from Etruscan into Latin, were interested in divination and its outcomes. Divination was central to society and this is reflected in the variety of the divinatory sources. With respect to the later Graeco-Roman sources, here used occasionally to illuminate earlier sources, it is often difficult to argue whether they are 'Roman' or 'Greek'. I have categorized such additional sources which discuss practices in Greece and the Greek-speaking parts of the Roman Empire as 'about Greece' and those discussing Rome as 'about Rome', in so far as this was possible. The place of origin of the author or the language in which he wrote have not been the prime concern. Another issue

regarding the sources is that they restrict our view of private divination – especially for Rome and for Mesopotamia, there is a bias in the sources towards public divination (in which experts were usually involved). For Greece, we have more sources on private divination, which will prove valuable for the purpose of this study.

The sources are categorized below in Table 1. Importantly, Greek and Roman epigraphical sources will be taken into account, bridging part of the gap which has often been thought to exist between Graeco-Roman literary materials and Near Eastern cuneiform tablets. I have made a subcategorization of the sources under another three headings: texts used in the process of divination, second-hand records of the process and explicit reflection (Why did it happen? Why do we do this?). The texts used in the process of divination detail, for example, how a sign could be provoked and how it could be interpreted. The Mesopotamian compendia are the best examples of texts serving the latter purpose. The second-hand records are reports of divination which can be found in the literary sources. Texts in the category of explicit reflections are one step farther removed from the process: these texts relate explicit thinking and opinions about divination. The divisions between the categories are not always clear-cut– does the 'Sin of Sargon' text report on divination or does it also reflect on its practice?

Table 1: sources

	Example Rome	Example Greece	Example Mesopotamia
Observation			
Ritual texts	Nigidius Figulus, *passim*	Melampos, *Peri ekaton tou somatos*	Compendia, e.g., *Šumma alu*
Records	Livy 1.7	Stelae recording pronouncements of oracles	Letters to the King
Explicit reflection	Cicero, *De divinatione*, *passim*	Plato, *Phaedo* 244c	Sin of Sargon
Discourse			
Ritual texts	-	Dodonaïc *lamellae* (if the sign was indeed provided through discourse)	-
Records	Livy 25.12	Euripides, *Ion* 533-538	Letters to the king
Explicit reflection	Cicero, *De divinatione*, *passim*	Plutarch, *De Pythiae Oraculis*; Plato, *Respublica* 4, 427bc	-

This table shows the wide variety of sources dealing with divination. Up to a point, this undermines the widely held view that the Near Eastern sources provide practical outlines on how to perform divination and that the Graeco-Roman materials are more reflexive. The sources from all three societies are rich in their own ways: the evidence from Dodona reveals how divination worked in practice, and the Mesopotamian letters and reports to the king also provide information which is other than practical. It should be noted that, on account of the practical 'man(/king)-in-the-street' perspective I am taking, the more philosophical sources will not be used *in extenso*.

The comparative method discussed

The aims of a historical comparison can be roughly threefold: evolutionary, typological and heuristic. The first task of the researcher is to explore the possibility whether one phenomenon or development could be derived from the other, implying a historical connection.[9] The trend in current research is to argue that many aspects of Greek divination are likely to derive from Mesopotamian divination. This discussion has been greatly advanced by Walter Burkert, Martin West and many other scholars. Theirs, and their critics', main conclusion is that many aspects in Greek culture and religion have come from the Near East, but pinpointing these is another matter. I have not much to add to this discussion, important as it may be.[10]

9 The historical comparison can serve to 'attempt to prove an historical connection between two cultures and to reconstruct the social and cultural history of a certain society, people, or area': M. Malul, *The comparative method in ancient Near Eastern and biblical legal studies* (Kevelaer 1990) 15.

10 Their main focus is on the Archaic period. See W. Burkert, *Die orientalisierende Epoche in der griechischen Religion und Literatur* (Heidelberg 1984); more recently W. Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: eastern contexts of Greek culture* (Cambridge, MA 2004); M.L. West, *The East face of Helicon: West Asiatic elements in Greek poetry and myth* (Oxford 1997); and also R. Lane Fox, *Travelling heroes: Greeks and their myths in the epic age of Homer* (London 2008) for an introduction to the debate. Samples of microstudies are, e.g., P. Högemann & N. Oettinger, 'Die Seuche im Heerlager der Achäer vor Troia. Orakel und magische Rituale im hethiterzeitlichen Kleinasien und im archaischen Griechenland', *Klio* 90 (2008) 7-26; J.

The second purpose of the comparative method is to weigh up two, or more, units of comparison to attempt to reconstruct an unknown third or a 'type'.[11] This typological comparison is 'the study of the variety of life forms of human societies and the construction of a theoretical model for the study of universal human social phenomena'.[12] As Galton's Law explains: 'It is essential that the degree in which the customs compared are independent should be known, for they might be derived from a common source and be duplicate copies of the same original [...]'.[13]

Consequently, in any attempt to make a typological comparison, it is necessary to take examples from societies which are as independent of each other as possible, so as to minimize the risk of the intrusion of intercultural influence. This is an important issue: Rome, Greece and Mesopotamia were too close to one another and too much in contact with each other for this kind of comparison. Some influence (but most probably more rather than less) is bound to have occurred at some point. It is also impossible to rule out the

Scurlock, '"Chaldean" astrology: Sextus Empiricus illustrated by selected cuneiform sources', *Ktèma* 29 (2004) 259-265; J. Jacobs, 'Traces of the omen series Š*umma izbu* in Cicero, *De divinatione*' in: A. Annus (ed.), *Divination and interpretation of signs in the ancient world* (Chicago 2010) 317-339.

11 Cf. on possibilities of the comparative method: A.P. David, *The dance of the muses: choral theory and ancient Greek poetics* (Oxford 2006) 4-7.

12 Malul, *The comparative method,* 15.

13 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The comparative method in social anthropology* (London 1963) 9.

possibility that in some respects the three societies are all 'descendants' of an unknown other culture.[14] If my aim had been to make a typological comparison, it would have been necessary to compare Greek divination to, for example, Chinese divination.[15]

The aim of the comparative method can also be heuristic. An event or phenomenon from one culture can be used to illuminate aspects of a comparable phenomenon in a different culture. Any set of units of comparison can be chosen for this purpose. As Clifford Geertz comments on his purpose in comparing Islam in Morocco and Indonesia: 'At once very alike and very different they form a kind of commentary on one another's character.'[16] In his approach, the comparative method is used to highlight these 'characters'.[17] The aim is to use the two points of comparison in order to 'go beyond the constraints of the immediate context in order to construct a more

14 Cf. R. Naroll, 'Galton's problem: the logic of cross-cultural analysis' in: A. Sica, *Comparative methods in the social sciences* 4 vols (London 2006) Vol. 2, 3-21 (first published in *Social Research* 32 (1965) 428-451).

15 As some have indeed already done, see this chapter, n.7.

16 C. Geertz, *Islam observed: religious development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven 1968) 4.

17 Cf. D.M. Freidenreich, 'Comparisons compared: a methodological survey of comparisons of religion from "a magic dwells" to "a magic still dwells"', *MTSR* 16 (2004) 80-101, at 91-94, and the publication his argument is about: Smith, *Imagining religion*, 19-35, and some of the scholarly reception of this article in: K.C. Patton & B.C. Ray (eds), *A magic still dwells: comparative religion in the postmodern age* (Berkeley, CA 2002).

generally useful frame of understanding."[18] This involves the idea that comparison serves to make particular aspects of phenomena more pronounced, as similarities and differences shed light on each other.[19] The result is a 'recontextualisation [which] facilitates entirely new ways to understand a given subject.'[20] This is exactly the purpose of the comparative exercises in the following chapters: to obtain an understanding of the variety in the phenomenon of divination as practiced in the units of comparison – with a specific focus on Greece.

The advantages of using the comparative method in this way are many: the results of explicit comparisons force the investigator to rethink structures and ideas usually taken for granted. Comparison aids in conceptualizing the variety to be found in a specific phenomenon, in this case divination. The comparison is used to reveal a number of varieties and similarities within one phenomenon: a comparison is rather like a lens, focusing on a number of issues which are then viewed from a different perspective than would

18 Pye, *Comparative religion*, 22. Of course, there are many more ways to make a comparison; cf. the overview in A. A. van den Braembussche, 'Historical explanation and comparative method: towards a theory of the history of society', *H&T* 28 (1989) 1-24. Cf. on thinking about the aims of using the comparative method Evans-Pritchard, *The comparative method*, 21-24.

19 Cf. Geertz, *Islam observed*, 55.

20 Freidenreich, 'Comparisons compared', 99.

normally be the case.[21] The next step is to attempt to explain and interpret the similarities as well as differences and then providing a cultural explanation.[22]

During the course of this study it should be taken into account that 'comparison does not necessarily tell us how things "are" [...]. A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge.'[23] New questions related to meaning, function and development of a phenomenon in a cultural area automatically arise because there is a new set of emic material to be investigated and interpreted. A comparison might demonstrate that there are essential features in divination that every cultural area has in common – the similarities – but also that divination displays endless variability. More importantly, a comparison helps to generate ideas about the how, what and why of the phenomena under consideration.

21 Cf. 'In this model, comparison functions as a lens. Much as a microscope offers new insights even into specimens that can be seen with the naked eye, [...] comparison serves to provide a new perspective on the tradition being examined, to raise new questions or offer new possible ways of understanding the target tradition.' Quote by Freidenreich, 'Comparisons compared', 91.

22 On the importance of explaining differences as well as similarities see Evans-Pritchard, *The comparative method*, 17.

23 J.Z. Smith, *Drudgery divine: on the comparison of early Christianities and the religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago 1990) 52.

In the past, the comparative method has received some bad press.[24] The history of scholarship shows that the method has often been used to point out similarities between two societies while the differences were overlooked. In order to avoid this one-sided approach, it is necessary to focus on both differences and similarities. The similarities might indicate a historical connection or the more universal features of a phenomenon, whereas differences draw attention to aspects which, in many cases, assume a new importance. Both results are equally valuable, but for my purposes the differences are even more illuminating and significant than the similarities.

Another complaint lodged about the comparative method is that it has been used inconsistently and asymmetrically. Inconsistently in the sense that comparative materials are resorted to whenever they seem to come in useful in a study but are otherwise not referred to. The complaint of lack of symmetry has to do with the fact that dur-

24 I should also stress that it is not my intention to prove that a particular religion or culture (in this case the Greek one) is unique. I think all three cultural areas are unique – I merely highlight Greek peculiarities with regard to divination. A very brief discussion of the different aims of different 'schools of comparativism' can be found in I. Strenski, 'The only kind of comparison worth doing: history, epistemology, and the "strong program" of comparative study' in: T.A. Idinopulos, B.C. Wilson & J.C. Hanges (eds), *Comparing religions: possibilities and perils?* (Leiden 2006) 271-292; one of the problems of the comparative method has been that it has served those with a programme of judgementalism ('which religion is better?'), which is avoided here. See also G. Weckman, 'Questions of judgement in comparative religious studies' in: iidem, 17-25.

ing comparison only one of the cultural areas studied is discussed on the basis of primary and secondary sources, but conclusions about the other area(s) are reached by means of secondary literature only. I am aware of this pitfall and aim to avoid it, by making a systematic comparison on a symmetrical basis. It is essential to note that although the research is symmetrical, the results remain deliberately asymmetrical, as I am concerned specifically with Greek divination.[25]

This leads to another point which needs explanation: the source materials. The sources used in this research are taken from different genres, were produced by different cultural systems and originate from different time periods. Do these objections mean that they cannot be compared? I do not think so. Variety in the sources does not invalidate the enquiry as long as we 'take into account the character and goal of each type of evidence'.[26] Differences do not make materials or ideas incomparable: all materials, ideas or data are *always* intrinsically different from each other. Nevertheless, it is always possible to compare any two sets of data as long as it is not argued that they are identical or a historical connection is claimed. Indeed, comparing less similar or equivalent data makes the comparison more interesting because it opens up more opportunities for research and analysis.[27]

25 I thank Prof. Dr J. Duindam for a discussion on this topic (June 2011).

26 Malul, *The comparative method*, 70.

27 Cf. on comparison of units M. Detienne, *Comparer l'incomparable* (Paris 2000) 41-59 or Śaraṇa, A*nthropological comparisons*, 18-33 and for

One final issue which must be addressed is the necessary decontextualization of the phenomenon being compared in the different societies. In my view, this is the heuristic purpose of the comparative method: decontextualization of a phenomenon from a particular society enables comparison with that phenomenon in another society – the comparison can be performed systematically precisely because the phenomenon has been taken out of its context. In other words, instead of taking each and every aspect of Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman divination into account, my comparative enquiries will focus specifically on the *homo divinans*, the sign and the role of text in the divinatory process. Divination will be recontextualized into the various societies in Part III and in the concluding chapter.

a brief overview of the history of the historical comparison P. Borgeaud, 'Réflexions sur la comparaison en histoire des religions antiques', *Métis* n.s. 1-2 (2003-2004) 9-33, at 26-31; and a very good review article dealing with ancient historians comparing Greece with China is J. Tanner, 'Ancient Greece, early China: Sino-Hellenic studies and comparative approaches to the classical word: a review article', *JHS* 129 (2009) 89-109. Cf. about the levels on which comparison is possible J.S. Jensen, 'Universals, general terms and the comparative study of religion', *Numen* 48 (2001) 238-266. He distinguishes between form, function, structure, and 'semantic content'.