Worlds full of signs: ancient Greek divination in context

Beerden, K.

5. Significance of signs

Without the sign, the *homo divinans* would have been out of a job. A divinatory sign was an occurrence which was thought to have been sent by the supernatural and was interpreted by man, who thereby imbued it with meaning. No sign meant no divination: the acceptance of an occurrence as being a sign began the divinatory process.[1]

This is not the place to discuss various semiotic aspects of the sign, linguistic or non-linguistic,[2] nor do I discuss the difference between

1 For a Greek example see Xen. *Oec*. 5.18-5.19; Xen. *Symp*. 4.47-48. The Roman and Mesopotamian evidence indicates the same, e.g., in SAA 10 45 and SAA 10 50 where the astrologers write to the king saying that there are no portents to report; or texts such as SAA 10 151 and SAA 15 5 where the watch for portents was unsuccessful because of the bad weather conditions.

2 It follows that the introduction of the cuneiform sign is not discussed here as such. The bibliography on the topic (and the possible relationship between divination and writing) is vast: see G. Manetti, *Theories of the sign in classical antiquity* (Bloomington IND 1993 [translation from Italian]) 2-5. On divination and writing see the work of J.J. Glassner, especially 'The invention of writing, Old Babylonian schools and the semiology of experts' (Unpublished paper read at the conference 'Origins of early writing systems' at Peking University, Beijing, 5-7 October 2007) and J.J. Glassner, 'Écrire des livres à l'époque paléo-

indexical and communicative signs.[3] I categorize the divinatory sign

babylonienne: le traité d'extispicine', *ZA* 99 (2009) 1-81. Mesopotamian individual omens always consist of a *protasis* and an *apodosis*. The first part of the sentence, in most cases, beginning with 'Šumma' ('if') is the *protasis*; the latter part of the sentence the *apodosis*. The relationship between them is complicated, and can be based on such things as paronomasia, contrast, associations/wordplay, association of ideas, contrast, for example between the right and the left, upper and lower, front and rear. An example of this last category is: 'If there is a hole in the head of the *naplastu*, on the right, someone among the servants in the man's household will die. If there is a hole in the middle of the *naplastu*, on the right, someone among the man's friends will die. If there is a hole in the base of the *naplastu*, on the right, someone in the man's family will die.' (edition can be found in A. Goetze, *Old Babylonian omen texts* (New Haven 1947) 17:49. Translation and a discussion of the texts and the associations in Starr, *Rituals*, 9-12. Cf. Manetti, *Theories of the sign*, 7-13; J. Bilbija, 'Interpreting the interpretation: protasis-apodosis-strings in the physiognomic omen series *Šumma Alamdimmû* 3.76-132' in: R.J. van der Spek (ed.), *Studies in ancient Near Eastern world view and society. Presented to Marten Stol on the occasion of his 65th birthday, 10 November 2005, and his retirement from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* (Bethesda MD 2008) 19-28; F. Rochberg, 'If P, then Q': form and reasoning in Babylonian divination' in: A. Annus (ed.), *Divination and interpretation of signs in the ancient world* (Chicago 2010) 19-27. Greek interpretation also place by, e.g., linking one sign to something else, by analogy or other cultural inventions (Hollmann, *The master of signs*, 65-74).

3 There is an abundance of literature on this subject, for example, the following article and the literature mentioned there: Sørensen, 'Cognitive underpinnings', 314-218.

as communicative and it might have been either linguistic or non-linguistic (the pronouncement of an oracle is a linguistic sign – if provided in human language – while the flight of the birds is a non-linguistic sign). The most important points here are the distinctions that signs were thought to come into being either spontaneously or after evocation, and that they could be observed or took the form of discourse. However, as discussed on pp. 38-39, human 'omen-mindedness' was always essential. It seems easy for humans to imagine occurrences have some purpose or meaning and consequently we assume these occurrences are placed in the world around us by some agent.[4] In the case of divinatory signs, these agents were supernatural beings.

During spontaneous divination the individual recognized an occurrence as an observational or discursive sign, but evoked divination required a preliminary action (often in the form of a ritual) to evoke the sign, after which it still had to be recognized for what it was. However, when a sign was evoked the individual knew what to look for. Both evoked and spontaneous signs could be an extraordinary occurrence which could only be accounted for by interpreting it as a sign from the supernatural – the birth of a hermaphrodite is one instance which springs to mind. However, the sign could also be an occurrence which was usually considered perfectly normal. Despite its apparent normality, the individual detected that the

4 The study of divination and its cognitive foundation is still in the teething stage. However, see further the article by J. Sørensen referred to in the note above; Lisdorf, *The dissemination of divination*.

occurrence was – in his opinion – extraordinary and recognized it as a sign.[5] Only after recognition of the occurrence as a sign did it become significant: this is the first phase of the divinatory process described on pp. 40-42. Although the overarching model of how the divinatory sign was perceived to function was the same in Greece, Rome and Mesopotamia, there were also many differences in the ways signs manifested themselves, the reasons they were thought to be significant and the significance which was attributed to specific contexts in the interpretations of the signs.[6]

This chapter concentrates on examining what similarities and differences in signs are to be found in our three cultural areas and, more importantly, considers the causes and possible implications of these. I will begin by examining emic views concerning the genesis of the sign: where were signs perceived to come from? How could occurrences be recognized as being actual signs from the supernatural? The chapter continues by exploring the validity of the idea that 'everything' could be a sign and the idea that signs could have an inherent meaning. Another apposite question in this context is what happened when an occurrence was not thought to be a sign. An exploration of these issues should provide some insights into the divinatory sign and its role in the divinatory process.

5 As problematized in Cic. *Div.* 2.28.61-29.62.

6 Cf. also on the differences between the ways 'if *p*, then *q*' was perceived in Mesopotamia and Greece: Manetti, *Theories of the sign*, 2; and the article by Rochberg cited above.

In short, the sign will be shown to have been a very particular and significant factor in the divinatory process, requiring specific attention in each cultural area.

A variety of signs

The Greek term *sēmeion* was a general term for the divinatory sign, including the pronouncements of oracles. However, there is a wider vocabulary which should be taken into account. Some of the key terms have been conveniently discussed by Giovanni Manetti and recently by Alexander Hollmann. Manetti distinguishes words such as *oiōnos*, which was used for signs related to the flight of birds and signs in general;[7] *phasma*, which was used for signs from the heav-

7 Augury played a very important role as a divinatory method. For works on divination by means of birds see M. Dillon, 'The importance of *oionomanteia* in Greek divination' in: M. Dillon (ed.), *Religion in the ancient world: new themes and approaches* (Amsterdam 1996) 99-121; J. Defradas, 'La divination en Grèce' in: A. Caquot & M. Leibovici, *La divination: études* 2 vols (Paris 1968) Vol. 1 157-195, at 166-167; Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la divination*, Vol. 1, 127-145; J.R.T. Pollard, *Birds in Greek life and myth* (London 1977) 116-129. Inedible birds which were used were the following: the eagle was a very important sign (e.g., Xen. *An.* 6.1.23; Aesch. *Ag*. 104-139; Aesch. *Pers.* 201-210 – a falcon plays a role here too; Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 33.2-3; Xen. *An*. 6.5.2; Hom. *Il.* 8.247-8.252; Hom. *Il.* 24.315-325; Hom. *Od.* 20.240-243), furthermore there was the hawk (Hom. *Od*. 15.525-536; Hom. *Od*. 15.160-178; Hom. *Od*. 13.87 (pigeons and

ens but also as a more general term and *teras* which indicated an out-of-the-ordinary phenomenon.[8] Other terms include *sumbolon*, *tekmērion* and *marturion*.[9] Even though some distinction can be made between the terms, their meanings also overlapped and changed over time.

In Rome the vocabulary was also varied.[10] The *auspicia* were pro-

geese play a role here, but these are not the birds of ill-omen – only the victims)); the owl (Ar. *Vesp*. 1086; Theophr. *Char*. 16.8 – its hooting was an omen); the swallow (Arr. *Anab*. 1.25.1-9); the crow/raven (Plut. *Vit. Alex*. 73.2; Ael. *NA* 3.9); and many other birds such as kites (Paus. 5.14.1). Exceptions – because they were edible – were partridges (Ath. 656c) and herons (Hom. *Il*. 10.272-277). References mostly from Pollard, *Birds*, 116-129.

8 See for a more detailed study on *teras* I. Chirassi Colombo, '*Teras* ou les modalités du prodige dans le discourse divinatoire grec: une perspective comparatiste' in: S. Georgoudi, R. Koch Piettre & F. Schmidt (eds), *La raison des signes: présages, rites, destin dans les sociétés de la Méditerranée ancienne* (Leiden 2012) 221-251. See Manetti, *Theories of the sign,* xiv-xvi; 14 for a brief overview of the philosophical use of this vocabulary in ancient Greece.

9 Hollmann, *The master of signs*, 9-19.

10 See further on the term *signum*, which is not dealt with here because it was most regularly used for all other kinds of signs except divinatory (although there are instances, such as Cic. *Div*. 2.14): S. Dorothée, 'Signum' to be found online at the website of the CNRS Linguistique Latine project: http://www.linguistique-latine.org/pdf/dictionnaire/signum.pdf [visited 7-4-2011]; S. Dorothée, 'Les employs de signum chez Plaute', *RevPhil* 76 (2002) 33-48; J.P. Brachet, 'Esquisse d'une histoire

duced by the observation of birds by magistrates and *augures*, serving to validate an undertaking.[11] The more generic term *prodigium* designated every spontaneous sign thought to have come from the supernatural. A *prodigium publicum* was acknowledged as such by the Senate.[12] Theoretically, a public sign would have had to have taken place on state-owned land. A private *prodigium* occurred on private land. However, this distinction was not always strictly observed in ancient times and is a difficult one for modern scholars to determine.[13] In addition to the term *prodigium*, there were various, more

de lat. "signum" (Towards a history of lat. "signum")', *RevPhil* 68 (1994) 33-50.

11 A magistrate would – sometimes at least– use an augur as in Cic. *Div*. 2.34.71. Cicero also claims that the magistrates in his time could choose not to take the auspices (Cic. *Div*. 2.35.76). See references, one of which to an extensive bibliography by J. Linderski in Rasmussen, *Public portents*, 149 n.236. It should be noted that there is a related divinatory process, the *augurium*: the two terms cannot be separated decisively from one another: it is often uncertain how they differ in meaning. Rasmussen, *Public portents*, 152-153, for a discussion and references.

12 Cf. Rasmussen, *Public portents*, 35.

13 Luterbacher, *Der Prodigienglaube und Prodigienstil der Römer*, 30-31. More recent and more extensive on this topic is Rasmussen, *Public portents*, 219-239 for the argument that, among other points, Th. Mommsen was wrong in using acknowledged signs as indicators of the land on which they were reported being public land belonging to the Roman State. It can be shown that there were signs seen on private property which were still expatiated as public signs. This makes the argument about why signs were discarded more difficult. Rasmussen

specific terms, for instance *portenta* and *ostenta*, denoting signs given to collectives. *Monstra* were those extraordinary occurrences - such as birth deformities – with an inherently negative meaning.[14] This also applies to *dirae*. However, there is uncertainty about the various terms.[15] To give some examples of discussions on this topic: F. B. Kraus indicates that '*prodigium*, *portentum*, and *ostentum* are decidedly synonymous, whereas *omen* and *monstrum* have more specific limitations'.[16] Other scholars support the contention that it is not an easy take to distinguish *portentum*, *ostentum*, *monstrum*, *praesagium* and *miraculum* from one another, and that this is also true of *prodigia* and *omina*.[17]

> At best, we can discern the tendency that in contrast to the *prodigia* that were important in the Republic for the Senate, that could take place at any time within a year, that were frequently considered to apply to the community, and always viewed as an expression of divine displeasure, *omina* occurred directly before an important event and foretold a future development. *Omina* could refer to a group or the

also poses questions about the reliability of the sources which Livy used for 43.13 and rightly queries why signs from *ager peregrinus* were reported at all, if the distinction was so clear and fixed as Mommsen appears to argue it was.

14 F.B. Krauss, *An interpretation of the omens, portents, and prodigies recorded by Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius* (Philadelphia 1930) 31-34.

15 Recently most clearly described by David Engels: Engels, *Das römische Vorzeichenwesen*, 259-282. See also his extensive footnotes.

16 Krauss, *Omens, portents, and prodigies*, 34.

17 Rosenberger, *Gezähmte Götter*, 7-9.

> community (e.g. Liv. 5,55,2) as well as to individuals: In 133 BC, when Ti. Gracchus stepped out of his house on the day of his murder, he bloodied his foot by hitting it against the threshold and ravens threw roof tiles in front of his feet (Plut. Ti. and C. Gracchus 17). Both signs indicated to him that it would be better if he stayed at home.[18]

The Mesopotamian vocabulary is as follows: *ittu* is a general word for sign; *tāmītu* can mean a question asked the supernatural at an oracle, but also the answer – a sign. The word *têrtum* can also be translated as 'sign' – this was primarily used during extispicy but also in a more general sense.[19] Apart from these terms, there is no widely used Akkadian vocabulary for divinatory signs.

It should be noted that there are uncertainties about the terminology of signs in all three cultural areas. However, this does not impede the research: in this chapter all divinatory signs found in the sources (including those which seem to contravene the laws of nature) will be used as evidence. The terminology used in the sources to refer to these signs is not of prime importance because the signs discussed here were all thought to come from the supernatural – otherwise they would not be divinatory signs. In what follows, I shall focus on various questions relating to the generation of perceived divinatory

18 V. Rosenberger, 'Omen' in: H. Cancik & H. Schneider, *Brill's New Pauly Online*. Visited 10-04-2011.

19 See Maul, 'Omina und *Orakel*', 70, and further on terminology S.M. Maul, *Zukunftsbewältigung: eine Untersuchung altorientalischen Denkens anhand der babylonisch-assyrischen Löserituale* (Namburbi) (Mainz am Rhein 1994) 6-7.

signs, underlining fundamental issues related to the functioning of the divinatory sign in the three cultural areas.

Spontaneous versus evoked signs

The occurrence of spontaneous signs was based on an existing reciprocal relationship between the human and the supernatural. The supernatural was thought to provide a sign voluntarily and because it wanted to.[20] Practically everyone enjoyed such a reciprocal relationship with the supernatural: this includes women, slaves and small children. The individual had already established a relationship with the supernatural by giving a gift beforehand, or was going to do so at some point in the future. The pre-existence of these relationships means that everyone could receive a spontaneous sign without giving the supernatural a particular gift in exchange for the sign. This reciprocal relationship ensured the perceived appearance of a spontaneous sign every once in a while: I give now so that you may give later.

In contrast, an evoked sign usually appeared instantaneously after the act of evocation had taken place. Evoking signs was a ritual action through which the individual could give and receive directly. When signs were evoked, a short-term reciprocal relationship between man and supernatural was created: I give now so that you can give now. For example, according to Herodotos, Croesus gift

20 Hymn. Hom. *Merc.* 541-549; Hom. *Od.* 2.143-149.

to the supernatural ensured that he could ask a gift in return, in the shape of a sign:

> When the Lydians came to the places where they were sent, they presented the offerings, and inquired of the oracles, in these words: "Croesus, king of Lydia and other nations, believing that here are the only true places of divination among men, endows you with such gifts as your wisdom deserves. And now he asks you whether he is to send an army against the Persians, and whether he is to add an army of allies."[21]

Modern observers might discern a resemblance between the bestowal of an evoked sign and a market transaction, because both types of negotiation are relatively direct and on a tit-for-tat basis. However, as discussed on pp. 42-48, the sources emphasize the reciprocal nature of these religious 'transactions'.

On receiving and not receiving signs

Ancient thinkers such as Aristotle pondered the question of why signs were given to all people and not just to the supposedly more

21 Hdt. 1.53.2. Translation: A.D. Godley.
Ὡς δὲ ἀπικόμενοι ἐς τὰ ἀπεπέμφθησαν οἱ Λυδοὶ ἀνέθεσαν τὰ ἀναθήματα, ἐχρέωντο τοῖσι χρηστηρίοισι λέγοντες· Κροῖσος ὁ Λυδῶν τε καὶ ἄλλων ἐθνέων βασιλεύς, νομίσας τάδε μαντήια εἶναι μοῦνα ἐν ἀνθρώποισι, ὑμῖν τε ἄξια δῶρα ἔδωκε τῶν ἐξευρημάτων, καὶ νῦν ὑμέας ἐπειρωτᾷ εἰ στρατεύηται ἐπὶ Πέρσας καὶ εἴ τινα στρατὸν ἀνδρῶν προσθέοιτο σύμμαχον.

deserving elite: Aristotle discusses this problem in his *De divinatione per somnum* in which he states that he cannot reconcile the idea of his God or Unmoved Mover with the fact that dreams are sent to just anyone.[22] He explains this problem away in a very intricate manner. A more basic explanation lies in the inseverable tie between man and supernatural referred to above. Every man had a relationship with the supernatural, which could not be rescinded. Hence, the supernatural could send signs to everyone as this action was part and parcel of the gifts the supernatural was perceived to give.

Matters were slightly more complicated when evoked signs were concerned. If a problem arose in the relationship between an individual and the supernatural, the individual would be like a man cast adrift: he would become an outcast in his society because he would be ruled out of participation in the communal feasts and sacrifices. This is a major theme in various tragedies.[23] For instance, a polluted individual was forbidden to approach an oracle site because he could not enter the *temenos*.[24] Despite this prohibition, he could still

22 Arist. *Div. Somn.* 462b19-24.

23 For example, in Soph. *OT* 235-239.

24 Although the judgment of the supernatural was the final word in this: Ael. *VH* 3.44. Angering them was ill-advised and entry into the sanctuary would be denied by the god's wrath: Hdt. 9.65.2. See further the inscription as published in Lupu, *Greek sacred law*, number 12 (= *SEG* 26 524). This is perhaps a regulation stating that 'madmen' could not approach the oracle. Note that the readings of this inscription are disputed, as the references in *SEG* testify.

be the recipient of spontaneous signs (and perhaps even of certain evoked signs, although the sources are unclear in this respect). In other words, although participation in rituals entailing instantaneous give-and-take – for example, evoking signs – was out of the question for these individuals, they could still *receive* from the supernatural. In tragedies it is indicated that, despite being incapable of upholding his part of the bargain, the polluted individual was still not deprived of his chance to receive signs and hence be relieved of his worries and uncertainties: in Sophokles' *Oidipous Kolonos* Oidipous still thought he had received a sign and Orestes was convinced he had received support from Apollo.[25] The Greek supernatural could, and would, still send signs – to everyone, even to those who were polluted or had incurred divine displeasure because, by definition, everyone was in a reciprocal relationship with the supernatural.

Genesis of a sign

From whom?

A divinatory sign was, in the opinion of the ancient individual recognizing the sign as being divinatory, always coming from the super-

25 Soph. *OC* 94-105. Furthermore, apparently there were other prophecies – for instance by the Delphic Oracle - which were made *about* Oidipous (Soph. *OC* 385-420); Aesch. *Eum*. *passim*; Aesch. *Cho. passim*. There was clearly no 'taboo' on this.

natural – otherwise he would not have considered it a divinatory sign (and non-divinatory signs are not dealt with here).[26]

A pertinent question is: when requesting an evoked sign, did the sign have to be requested from one particular member of the supernatural? If a particular member of the supernatural did have to be approached, how would an individual know whether or not he was addressing the right one? At many oracle sites, Apollo and Zeus were responsible for providing the signs – but other oracle sites would have other 'divine patrons'.[27] So far, matters are quite clear-cut but

26 Some individuals, philosophers for example, may have had other thoughts about this – but these views are not taken into account here. There are, of course, different etic types of non-divinatory signs. I have already mentioned that there are linguistic and non-linguistic signs, as well as indexical and communicative signs. A recent publication on signs (in the widest sense of the word) in Herodotos distinguishes divinatory signs, personal names ('[…] a distinctive and special type of linguistic sign'), action, ritual and gesture ('can act as bearers of meaning which call for interpretation […]') and objects which function as signs ('which become meaningful when interpreted according to a certain code'): Hollmann, *The master of signs*, 143, 163, 176.

27 A site such as Dodona was under auspices of Zeus (e.g., Pind. *Ol.* 8.1-6), while Apollo was in charge of Delphi (e.g., Ael. *VH* 3.1; Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.iv; Eur. *Ion* 5-7; Aesch. *Eum.* 1-18) but also, e.g., of the Trojan oracle in Hom. *Il.* 1.379-382. An example of another supernatural being in charge of an oracle is Trophonius (e.g., Paus. 9.39.1-14 – see further on Trophonius through the eyes of Pausanias V. Pirenne-Delforge, *Retour à la source: Pausanias et la religion grecque* (Liège 2008) 325-331; but in general Bonnechère, *Trophonios de Lébadée*). See on the problematiza-

in the other Greek divinatory sources – not related to oracles – it is often uncertain who was being called upon. The supernatural had to be involved.[28] Either 'the gods' in general or specifically Hermes or Apollo were called upon, or no members of the supernatural at all were entreated (but were left implicit).[29] On other occasions, when inspirational divination was supposed to have occurred, a god such as Dionusos was thought to have been involved.[30] There are other examples of a particular god playing an explicit role in providing man with signs. In the following account, Apollo plays a central role in revealing a plot by means of dreams:

tion of the same gods being patrons of many oracle sites: Lucian *Bis accus.*1.

28 See on this (in my opinion non-existent) anxiety about signs which were not explicitly sent by the gods: Hollmann, *The master of signs*, 55-58.

29 For Apollo and all divination see Hymn. Hom. *Merc.* 471-472; and for Hermes see Hymn. Hom. *Merc.* 527-537; cf. on Hermes but also on the 'three sisters of divination' Hymn. Hom. *Merc.* 550-569; D. Jaillard, 'Hermès et la mantique Grecque' in: S. Georgoudi, R. Koch Piettre & F. Schmidt (eds), *La raison des signes: présages, rites, destin dans les sociétés de la Méditerranée ancienne* (Leiden 2012) 91-107. There were, of course, many other supernatural beings thought to have to do something with divination, e.g., Paus. 9.22.7.

30 Melampos was supposed to have taught the Greeks about Dionusus. He is said to have learned this in Tyre: Hdt. 2.49. Cf., e.g, Eur. *Bacch.* 298-301; Hdt. 7.111.2; explicitly on the relationship between alcohol and divination: Ath. 2.37ef-2.38a. A reference to an oracle of Dionusus can be found in Hdt. 7.111.

> For the fact that I met no such fate I have the gods to thank, who exposed the plot: above all, Apollo, who showed me dreams and also sent me men to interpret them fully.[31]

Roman oracle sites were regularly thought to be under the patronage of a particular goddess: Fortuna. Unquestionably Jupiter played an important part in sending the signs, especially when the *auspices* were taken. However, referring to many other non-oracular signs, texts generally refer to 'the gods' who have given signs or are displeased. The individuals explaining, interpreting and finding a remedy for the sign could find out which particular member of the supernatural was displeased, but not necessarily which of these had sent the signs – the Sibylline Books had to be consulted to discover which member of the supernatural had to be placated by performing rituals.[32]

Mesopotamian gods were also connected to specific oracle sites, most famously the goddess Ištar at Arbela, but some of them were also associated with certain divinatory methods. Šamaš was the god called upon during necromancy, helping to coax the ghost to enter into the skull whence he would then speak truthfully to the person

31 Lucian *Phal.* 1.4.14-16. Translation A.M. Harmon.
τοῦ μὲν δὴ μηδὲν παθεῖν τοιοῦτον οἱ θεοὶ αἴτιοι φωράσαντες τὴν ἐπιβουλήν, καὶ μάλιστά γε ὁ Πύθιος ὀνείρατά τε προδείξας καὶ τοὺς μηνύσοντας ἕκαστα ἐπιπέμπων.

32 For a Greek example see Eur. *Hipp*. 236-238; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.1079-1106.

who had evoked him. A first-millennium Mesopotamian text which is now in the British Museum reads as follows:

> May he bring up a ghost from the darkness for me! May [he put life back(?)] into the dead man's limbs! I call [upon you], O skull of skulls. May he who is within the skull answer [me!] O Shamash, who brings light in (lit: who opens) the darkne[ss!].[33]

The gods Šamaš and Adad were thought to provide the signs during the extispicy ritual. Some have assumed that Šamaš and Adad were the gods of divination in general, but there is no conclusive evidence to bolster this statement. In the extispicy ritual, the evocations were addressed either to both gods or only to Šamaš. The second type of evocation is more regularly attested in Neo-Assyrian times than in earlier periods.[34] These queries to Šamaš can commence as follows:

33 BM 36703 (= 80-6-17, 435) Ob. column II 3'-6'. Edition and translation: Finkel, 'Necromancy', 9. A later edition is by J. Scurlock, *Magical means of dealing with ghosts in ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago 1988) 322.
ᵀGIDIM e-ṭú ᴸti li-š[e-l]a-an-ni UZU.SA UG_7 l[-i-x-x]
gul-gul gul-gul-la-at a-ša-as-[si-ka/ki]
ša ŠÀ gul-gul-la-ta li-pu-ʰla ᴸ[an-ni]
^{d}UTU pe-tu-ú ik-le-t[i (ÉN)]

34 See the discussion (with a special focus on the *tamîtu* texts) in W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian oracle questions* (Winona Lake, IND 2007) 1-10. These two Semitic gods were mentioned in curses underpinning a treaty around 2300 BC, but are only found together more frequently in the Old Babylonian period. All these early references to a duo of deities are in a formal setting (a treaty curse, a political oath, reports of court

"Šamaš, great lord, give me a firm positive answer to what I am asking you!"[35] However, in the *ikribu*, the prayer-rituals of the expert, he evoked both Šamaš and Adad, usually in the opening and the closing lines of his prayer, as part of the ritual of extispicy.[36] In this context, Šamaš is usually called upon, as the 'lord of judgement'; Adad is named 'lord of the inspection' or 'lord of the prayer and inspection'.[37] If a distinction can be made on the basis of these titles (which were probably not as finely drawn in practice), Šamaš' role was that of deciding on which sign would be given, while Adad made sure the inspection by the expert would be a proper one.

This still leaves open the question of why Šamaš, Adad, Jupiter, Zeus, Hermes and Apollo were chosen to be the overseers of particular methods. It has been suggested that from his elevated position Šamaš, the sun god, would have been able to oversee everything which happened on earth, and therefore would have been a good judge of contentious issues – he was also the god of justice, after all.[38] This same line of argument could also be applied to Apollo

cases). They appear as witnesses in court cases. No examples of combined worship can be found.

35 Just one example of many: SAA 4 28 obv. 1 (=83-1-18,540 = AGS 043): ^{d}UTU EN GAL-ú šá a-šal-lu-ka an-[na] GI.NA a-pal-an-[ni].

36 As published by Zimmern, *Beiträge,* 96-121.

37 ^{d}UTU be-el di-nim ^{d}IM be-el ik-ri-bu ù bi-ri-im (lines 1, 133, 126, 139, 141 of the Old Babylonian text YBT XI 23). Translated and transliterated by Starr, *Rituals*, 30-44; see further Lambert, *Oracle questions*, 8.

38 Cf. Démare-Lafont, 'Judicial decision-making', 335.

as the sun god and the patron of important oracles; Zeus was the most powerful god in the Greek world; Hermes the messenger of the supernatural; Jupiter was considered a ruling power determining future occurrences in the Roman world; Fortuna was another very potent deity, concerned with chance, and therefore it would have been wise to have put questions to her.[39]

What form?

In Mesopotamia, divinatory signs were seen to be relatively close to actual language. The supernatural was said to 'write' (*šaṭāru* and *eṣeru*) the sign into the liver, but also into the sky, oil and other substances, as humans would write cuneiform signs on tablets.[40] Consequently, the boundaries between cuneiform and divinatory signs were sometimes fluid: this was explicitly so when experts appear to have looked for actual cuneiform signs – which the super-

39 It was not strange to ascribe qualities (among them those of being all-seeing or all-knowing) to all the gods but simultaneously to one god in particular at one particular time: H.S. Versnel, *Coping with the gods: wayward readings in Greek theology* (Leiden 2011), especially 398-399; 434-436. On Sky gods as all knowing gods see: ibidem, 437.

40 J.J. Glassner, *Écrire à Sumer: l'invention du cunéiforme* (Paris 2000) 258; Bottéro, J., 'Symptômes, signes, écritures en Mésopotamie ancienne' in: J.P. Vernant *et al.*, *Divination et rationalité* (Paris 1974) 70-197, at 159-160; Rochberg, *The heavenly writing*, 48; Manetti, *Theories of the sign*, 5.

natural would have written – inscribed on livers. Jean-Jacques Glassner has even suggested that perhaps 'La divination, la volonté de déchiffrer les présages et de pénétrer le code graphique propre à la sphère divine, jouerait-elle un rôle moteur lors de l'invention [of writing]?'[41] Regardless of the merits of Glassner's speculative suggestion, it appears that, in theory, the Mesopotamian supernatural and educated humans did the same thing: they wrote.[42]

The supernatural in Greece did not normally write (though its representatives could read).[43] This is true of the Olympic gods at least (with the exception of Athena and the Muses, the patrons of

41 Glassner, *Écrire à Sumer*, 258-259. Here Glassner reverses the traditional paradigm in which writing came first and divination was based on it, put forward among other scholars by Manetti, *Theories of the sign*, 2-5.

42 But note the discrepancy between theory and practice as indicated by Glassner: that the cuneiform sign and the ominous sign differed in a number of ways: 'the shape, the texture, the colour, and the position on the medium. The signification of a written sign, once defined in its shape, does not change if its dimensions vary, or if it is written in one or another colour, if it appears in one or another place of the medium. On the contrary, in the case of an omen, all these parameters contribute to change its signification.' Glassner, 'The invention of writing'.

43 Cf. H.S. Versnel, 'Writing mortals and reading gods: appeal to the gods as a dual strategy in social control' in: D. Cohen (ed.), *Demokratie, Recht und soziale Kontrolle im klassischen Athen* (München 2002) 37-77, at 60-63; also the notes in Versnel, *Coping with the gods*, 383 n.13. An exception seems to be the *Himmelsbrief*.

writing).[44] The supernatural was conceived of as simply placing the sign in the world. Hence, given this cultural difference, the conceptions of the genesis and the nature of the divine sign in Greece and in Mesopotamia were different. The Roman world seems to have resembled the Greek world more closely than it did the Mesopotamian: Romans would interpret signs as an expression of the favourable or unfavourable opinion of the supernatural about a plan or the state of affairs, but not as divine writings.

These diverging conceptions of the sign show a fundamental difference which is crucial to our understanding of the process of divination and the role of the *homo divinans*. If the Mesopotamian sign was seen as a linguistic expression, the process of divination was the translation of the written divine language into the written human language. The expert 'read' the signs written by the supernatural and transposed them into human discourse. Therefore, the education of the expert – as discussed on pp. 147-156 – was essential: in the course of his scholarly training he would have obtained an understanding of both the divine and human language necessary to perform the interpretative process of divination. In a sense, the expert was a translator between the written language of the supernatural and man. In Greece, where the sign was not seen as a primarily linguistic phenomenon, the expert did not translate from one language to the

44 A. Henrichs, 'Writing religion: inscribed texts, ritual authority, and the religious discourse of the polis' in: H. Yunis (ed.), *Written texts and the rise of literate culture in ancient Greece* (Cambridge 2003) 38-58, at 38-40.

other – instead, he rendered the sign *into* a language expressed in words.

Preferred mediums

> Before undertaking anything, whether a business transaction, a marriage, or the purchase of food, you consult the birds by reading the omens, and you give this name of omen to all signs that tell of the future. With you a word is an omen, you call a sneeze an omen, a meeting an omen, an unknown sound an omen, a slave or an ass an omen. Is it not clear that we are a prophetic Apollo to you?[45]

Although Aristophanes implies differently, it is an exaggeration to state that 'everything' could potentially be perceived to be a sign, from a sneeze to a slip of a foot to a shout to an encounter and everything in between. The sign was closely related to the object which functioned as carrier of the sign (the medium). Nevertheless, there appear to have been various objects which did *not* function as a medium.

45 Ar. *Av*. 717-722. Translation E. O'Neill Jr.
ἐλθόντες γὰρ πρῶτον ἐπ' ὄρνις οὕτω πρὸς ἅπαντα τρέπεσθε, | πρός τ' ἐμπορίαν, καὶ πρὸς βιότου κτῆσιν, καὶ πρὸς γάμον ἀνδρός. | ὄρνιν τε νομίζετε πάνθ' ὅσαπερ περὶ μαντείας διακρίνει· | φήμη γ' ὑμῖν ὄρνις ἐστί, πταρμόν τ' ὄρνιθα καλεῖτε, | ξύμβολον ὄρνιν, φωνὴν ὄρνιν, θεράποντ' ὄρνιν, ὄνον ὄρνιν. | ἆρ' οὐ φανερῶς ἡμεῖς ὑμῖν ἐσμὲν μαντεῖος Ἀπόλλων;

The preferences for some mediums can be explained by the availability of a particular medium, or geographical and climatological factors. For example, divination using rivers and canals appears to have occurred in Mesopotamia – although perhaps not very frequently – but not in Greece.

In the Greek world, the supernatural would generally provide signs in objects which were considered 'natural' as opposed to 'cultural' (I see natural and cultural – like magic and religion – as the two ends of a sliding scale).[46] In other words, the supernatural would place a sign in the rustling of a tree, the movements of animals, the spontaneous babbling of a child or the chance remark of an adult (if language is considered something natural), but only very rarely in cultural constructs.[47] One exception to this rule were those cultural constructs explicitly associated with the divine, such as cult images.[48] I shall illustrate this argument by examining the use of potentially edible items during the divinatory process: during preparation, foodstuffs move from being a natural to a cultural object. [49]

46 I am aware of Levi-Strauss' ideas about these terms and the problems with them – which I hope to have avoided by using natural and cultural as a sliding scale: there are many grey areas in between.

47 There are, of course, exceptions such as in Hom. *Od*. 12.395-397. However, this passage could also be read as emphasizing the great exceptionality of roasted meat being a sign from the supernatural.

48 In contrast to Mesopotamian cult images, these were not considered to be the living god: W. Burkert, *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche* (Stuttgart 1977) 153.

49 This division between the raw and the cooked is discussed exten-

Fish were suitable mediums for both evoked and spontaneous divination. Pliny reports an extraordinary way of consulting the supernatural at an oracle in Asia Minor, which appears to have represented a Lycian tradition:[50]

> When the fishes seize it [the food] with avidity, the answer is supposed to be favorable; but if, on the other hand, they reject the food, by flapping it with their tails, the response is considered to be unfavorable.[51]

These divinatory fish were clearly alive and part of the natural world: they could function as a medium. Now, Herodotos relates

sively in C. Lévi-Strauss, *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris 1964) *passim*. I do not discuss these theories in greater detail, although there is plenty to say. I merely use it to sketch a contrast which, in my opinion, was present in the Greek world.

50 For other attestations on this Lycian tradition see Polycharmus apud Ath. 8.333d-f; Plin. *NH* 31.18.22; Plin. *NH* 32.8.17 (references from, and see further T.R. Bryce, *The Lycians in literary and epigraphic sources* (Copenhagen 1986) 196-198); R. Lebrun, 'Quelques aspects de la divination en Anatolie du sud-ouest', *Kernos* 3 (1990) 185-195, at 192-195; Artem. 1.70-71. This last attestation also concerns fish – yet, Artemidoros is not concerned with the reading of signs from the fishes' behaviour or movement, but he discusses the fish as an object whose perceived eating could be either a positive or a negative sign when appearing in a dream. It is therefore less relevant to our purpose (and a late source at that).

51 Plin. *NH* 31.18.22.6-7. Translation J. Bostock. Edition: Teubner.
Responsa ab his petunt incolae cibo, quem rapiunt adnuentes, si vero eventum negent, caudis abigunt.

the miraculous movement of dead fish which were in the fire when Artayctes saw them and realized they were an unprovoked omen meant for him:

> It is related by the people of the Chersonese that a marvelous thing happened one of those who guarded Artayctes. He was frying dried fish, and these as they lay over the fire began to leap and writhe as though they had just been caught. The rest gathered around, amazed at the sight, but when Artayctes saw this strange thing, he called the one who was frying the fish and said to him: "Athenian, do not be afraid of this portent, for it is not to you that it has been sent; it is to me that Protesilaus of Elaeus is trying to signify that although he is dead and dry, he has power given him by the god to take vengeance on me, the one who wronged him. Now therefore I offer a ransom, the sum of one hundred talents to the god for the treasure that I took from his temple. I will also pay to the Athenians two hundred talents for myself and my son, if they spare us."[52]

52 Hdt. 9.120.1-15. Translation A. D. Godley.
Καί τεῳ τῶν φυλασσόντων λέγεται ὑπὸ Χερσονησιτέων ταρίχους ὀπτῶντι τέρας γενέσθαι τοιόνδε· οἱ τάριχοι ἐπὶ τῷ πυρὶ κείμενοι ἐπάλλοντό τε καὶ ἤσπαιρον ὅκως περ ἰχθύες νεοάλωτοι. Καὶ οἱ μὲν περιχυθέντες ἐθώμαζον, ὁ δὲ Ἀρταΰκτης, ὡς εἶδε τὸ τέρας, καλέσας τὸν ὀπτῶντα τοὺς ταρίχους ἔφη· Ξεῖνε Ἀθηναῖε, μηδὲν φοβέο τὸ τέρας τοῦτο· οὐ γὰρ σοὶ πέφηνε, ἀλλ' ἐμοὶ σημαίνει ὁ ἐν Ἐλαιοῦντι Πρωτεσίλεως ὅτι καὶ τεθνεὼς καὶ τάριχος ἐὼν δύναμιν πρὸς θεῶν ἔχει τὸν ἀδικέοντα τίνεσθαι. Νῦν ὦν ἄποινά μοι τάδε ἐθέλω ἐπιθεῖναι, ἀντὶ μὲν χρημάτων τῶν ἔλαβον ἐκ τοῦ ἱροῦ ἑκατὸν τάλαντα καταθεῖναι τῷ θεῷ, ἀντὶ δ' ἐμεωυτοῦ καὶ τοῦ παιδὸς ἀποδώσω τάλαντα διηκόσια Ἀθηναίοισι περιγενόμενος.
For other spontaneous signs see Ath. 8.331f; Ath. 8.361e. Fish could appear in oracles as in Hdt. 1.62.4-1.63.3.

These were fish in the process of being prepared for consumption: the borderline is in the cooking. Before the fish were done, they were part of nature and could be used as a medium. When they were ready to be eaten, the product had become a part of the meal – a cultural construct – and was no longer appropriate to serve as a medium for divinatory signs: we have no such attestations in the sources.[53]

This applies to other foodstuffs: I shall examine some doubtful instances of foodstuffs – flour, eggs, cheese and the *splanchna* - used as a divinatory medium, showing that they do not undermine the general rule. My first object is the liver (and the other organs) used during extispicy. The animal would first have to have been ritually slaughtered and its intestines inspected. When this had been completed, a communal meal would have been held at which individuals ate, among other dishes, the *splanchna*, the heart, lungs, liver, spleen and kidneys.[54] Portions were not the prerogative of humans: a god such as Hermes (according to some sources) would have been served his share as well. If divination was performed, this was done when the intestines were raw.

Eggs, too, were, at least in their uncooked state, raw products and could therefore be used to divine with (although it should be noted that divination by means of eggs was a very uncommon practice).[55]

53 E.g., Ath. 8.331f.

54 Arist. *Part. An.* 665a28-672b8. Cf. Van Straten, *Hierà kalá*, 131. See for the best discussion of an eating Hermes: Versnel, *Coping with the gods*, 310-377.

55 Only one reference to divination by means of eggs can be found.

Aleuromanteia and *alphitomanteia* were two ways of divining using flour. Although there were differences in the origin and production of *alphita* and *aleura*, both were a half-finished product which was not ready for consumption.[56] Cheese, on the other hand, *was* an edible product which was used as a medium for signs and therefore an exception to the basic rule. The production of cheese is already attested in Homer's *Odyssey*: the Cyclops makes cheese.[57] It was produced and eaten regularly. Hence, cheese seems to be the only problematic foodstuff, as it was a product made by man and a medium for signs. However, during the period with which I am concerned in this monograph cheese does not seem to have been used to divine with.[58] In a nutshell, the supernatural was not generally considered to chose foodstuffs ready for consumption as a vehicle for signs.

These findings on food and divination are only a part of a larger divinatory reality: a distinction is maintained between the cultural

See the *ovispex* in C.A. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus sive de theologiae mysticae Graecorum causis II. III. Idemque Poetarum Orphicorum dispersas reliquias collegit* 2 vols (Königsberg 1829) Vol. 1, 361. Eggs of other birds were a more luxury food: A. Dalby, *Food in the ancient world from A to Z* (London 2003) s.v. egg.

56 Cf. on *alphita* and *aleura* L.A. Moritz, *Grain-mills and flour in classical antiquity* (Oxford 1958) 149.

57 Hom. *Od*. 9.237-249.

58 Although we have two attestations: Artem. 2.69; Ael. *NA* 8.5. Artemidoros, although late in time, denigrates those who divine by cheese as liars and false prophets, mentioning them in one breath with Pythagoreans, palmists and necromancers.

and natural world. In the Greek world the supernatural only placed signs in the natural world.[59] Why? Perhaps because the natural world could not be influenced by humans, which made it more suitable to divination: the medium in which the sign was placed had to be 'unspoiled' and not susceptible to human influence – which added to its high level of reliability. For example, the Pythia at Delphi was supposed to be unsusceptible to human influence and was therefore generally seen as very reliable.

In Rome, too, 'natural' signs were the most important. The liver and birds, important mediums in Rome, are both 'natural'. From the prodigies listed in Livy and Julius Obsequens, it would seem that Roman prodigies can be assigned to four categories: 1) inanimate in the heavens, 2) inanimate on the land, 3) actions of animals and 4) actions of humans. The first category consists of lightning, thunder, storms, showers of stones, earth, blood, rain and other water portents, the sun, moon, meteors and comets, unusual nocturnal lights and strange manifestations in the sky. The second category, signs in inanimate entities on the land, consists of earthquakes, the subsidence or upthrust of the land, plagues and pestilence, fire, the appearance of blood and trees. Animals which could function as signs included birds, wolves, serpents, bees, wasps, locusts, mice, fish, cows, oxen and bulls, horses, mules and asses, pigs, lambs, goats and domestic fowl. Humans could function as signs when a

59 While there are, of course, always possible exceptions. I have not discussed drinking, only eating in the above. An instance in which the way wine was poured was thought to be an omen is: Ath. 1.13de.

child was born deformed, if a person had a peculiar deformation in form or shape (such as a remarkable mole and so on), if a person made a certain utterance or stumbled and fell. Furthermore dreams, the appearance of ghosts, mysterious voices and sounds, accidental occurrences, the 'behaviour' of statues and images, or the lack of chastity of vestal virgins were all taken to be spontaneous signs. These were all 'natural' mediums – with the exception of the 'behaviour' of statues and images.

In Mesopotamia, the range of mediums in which signs could manifest themselves was much wider: in addition to the signs in natural objects and half finished products, in the compendium *Šumma ālu* signs are also manifested in manmade objects[60] Examples are the way a city or particular houses within that city were laid out; the way the foundations of a house were laid, what a house looked like, the doors of a temple, palace and house, repairs to various buildings and

60 On signs in animals see P.-A. Beaulieu, 'Les animaux dans la divination en Mésopotamie', *Topoi,* suppl. 2 (2000) 351-365. Recently, Stefan Maul has published an article on aleuromancy, a half finished product – see his bibliography for an overview of the primary and secondary literature available: S.M. Maul, 'Aleuromantie: von der Altorientalischen Kunst, mit Hilfe von Opfermehl das Mass Göttlichen Wohlwollens zu ermitteln' in: D. Shehata, F. Weiershäuser & K.V. Zand (eds), *Von Göttern und Menschen: Beiträge zu Literatur und Geschichte des Alten Orients: Festschrift für Brigitte Groneberg* (Leiden 2010) 115-13.

the temple and so on.[61] Other examples include divination by means of artificial light (fire and lamps).[62]

Although some Greeks poked fun at people in their own society who tended to regard 'everything' as a potential medium, few Greeks actually seem to have subscribed to this idea. In complete contrast to this, the idea that signs might manifest themselves in any natural or man-made object or phenomenon was commonplace of Mesopotamia.

Preferred divinatory methods

Not all methods were deemed equally reliable. In Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia two methods were preferred: astrology and extispicy, which were regarded as complementary. It should be noted that, although cultural constructs could be used as mediums, they were not considered the most reliable. Some claim that astrology might have enjoyed a somewhat higher status in the Neo-Assyrian period. They argue that extispicy was the preferred method until the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the first.[63] Celestial

61 Published of *Šumma ālu* are Tablets 1-40 (Freedman, *If a city is set on a height*). The unpublished Tablets 40-53 from the same series are said to contain similar content.

62 *Šumma ālu* Tablets 91-94. Divination by means of 'cultural light' is also come across in the Greek Magical Papyri (which are not discussed further here).

63 Starr, *Rituals*, 4-5.

observation is supposed to have assumed a more important role in the Neo-Assyrian period – although confirmation by extispicy was sometimes still considered necessary.[64] Others argue that extispicy remained the most important method.[65] Wherever the truth lies, the primary positions taken by celestial observation and extispicy are underlined by the fact that other methods, such as dreams, needed to be checked and confirmed using these methods: a dream of Assurbanipal had to be confirmed by extispicy.[66] Both astrology and extispicy are examples of expensive scholarly divination: a professional expert was required and an animal and other offerings were also indispensable in the use of extispicy. These more expensive, and therefore exclusive, methods were also deemed the most reliable.

In Greece, prophecy and oracles – by means of discourse – seem to have been the preferred divinatory methods: the consensus was that these were the most reliable, although there are also many reports of extispicy taking this position in a military context. The primacy of oracles can also be observed in Plato's *Phaedrus*: he argues that inspiration, or *mania*, is a divine gift, whereas non-inspired divination is a human creation.[67] The former was thought much more reliable. A

64 This has been argued many times see, e.g., Farber, 'Witchcraft, magic and divination', 1907; E. Reiner, *Your thwarts in pieces, your mooring rope cut: poetry from Babylonia and Assyria* (Michigan 1985) 9.

65 Robson, 'Empirical scholarship', 610-611; 634-634.

66 For such a dream and its confirmation by means of extispicy see SAA 4 202.

67 Pl. *Phdr*. 244d. See also for the connection between 'mania' and

passage from Euripides' *Elektra* suggests that this view was shared by at least some of his contemporaries: '[…] the oracles of Loxias are sure, but human prophecy I dismiss'.[68] Theoretically, everyone could travel to a famous oracle to ask his or her question, or – if making a long journey was not an option – visit a local oracle. Only an educated guess can be made about the status of the other methods. The wealthy appear to have used provoked ornithomancy and extispicy: these must have been more expensive than other methods because an expert would have been required (who would need to be paid or compensated) and birds and other animals had to be bought or kept.[69] The remaining evidence for cleromancy and similar methods is scant, the exception being that from Roman Asia Minor: but these were probably popular methods of divination for the poor.[70] Given

divination Eur. *Bacch.* 298-299.

68 Eur. *El.* 399-400. Translation E.P. Coleridge. βροτῶν δὲ μαντικὴν here stands for non-inspired methods of divination.

'[…] Λοξίου γὰρ ἔμπεδοι χρησμοί, βροτῶν δὲ μαντικὴν χαίρειν ἐῶ.

Or see, for a mantic dream which is checked by consulting an oracle: Aesch. *PV* 655-662; and for a 'sign in the sky' which is checked by consulting an oracle Dem. *Orat.* 43.66; and Plutarch's ideas about the primacy of oracular practice (Plut. *Mor. De Pyth. or.* 407c).

69 References to ornithomancy by the kings and powerful individuals are abundant (e.g., Hom. *Il.* 24.290-295; Pind. *Isthm.* 6.42-54). See for extispicy used by high-ranking individuals a source such as Eur. *El.* 800-843.

70 Cleromancy is discussed in more detail below. In Artemidoros, we find that some ways of divining (cleromancy, necromancy and so on)

their exclusivity, ornithomancy and extispicy could have enjoyed a higher status than other methods of divination, but they were not as prestigious as oracles.

In Roman divination of the Republican period, the *prodigia* – remarkable occurrences – were most important, influencing the course of daily life in all its aspects. *Prodigia* were extensively recorded by authors such as Livy and Julius Obsequens. When the Senate had decided that a certain occurrence was a *prodigium* and accepted it as such, expiations were usually required. This had consequences for daily business in the city of Rome: trade and politics could be influenced by the measures thought necessary. Other important methods were the inspection of the *exta* – after sacrifice – and the *auspicia* (observation of the behaviour of birds in a limited area) – which were performed before such events as sessions of the Senate, lawsuits, new endeavours and so on, which gave them an important public function. Interpretations of *prodigia* and the inspection of *exta* and *auspicia* were the three preferred forms of divination in Republican Rome. There is no strong or convincing indication that one of these was generally perceived to have been more reliable than the others.

These findings lead to the observation that in Rome and Mesopotamia objects and natural phenomena, here classified in the category of observation, were used as highly esteemed mediums, whereas in Greece oracles, in the category of discourse, and observa-

are dismissed as unreliable: Artem. 2.69.

tion, were most popular.[71] An explanation for these differences must tie in with more general ideas about divination in the three cultural areas. In Mesopotamia, supernatural 'writing' played a very important role, corresponding to the literate nature of Mesopotamian divination. The Greeks seemed to have had a – relative – preference for being contacted by their supernatural by means of spoken words. Hence, it seems logical that words or even non-verbal noises (for example, auditory signs such as the rustling of leaves) uttered or induced by the supernatural were deemed the most reliable way of hearing from them. This assertion fits in with the relatively more generally oral nature of Greek divination. On the other hand, in Rome, the supernatural appears to have manifested itself in visual 'pictures' formed by objects. Might this indicate a relative preference for visual supernatural signs and a visual divinatory culture?[72]

71 Whether they were 'Panhellenic' or 'civic' – a distinction which has not been taken into account enough, as C. Morgan argues: Morgan, 'Divination and society', 18. See further on the early history and foundations of different oracle sites: C. Morgan, *Athletes and oracles: the transformation of Olympia and Delphi in the eighth century BC* (Cambridge 1990) *passim*.

72 The divinatory materials might seem to suggest another conclusion than many have reached in the past, noting that Romans tended not to visualize their supernatural but preferred to see them as 'powers' (*numina*).

Recognizing a sign

How could a sign be recognized? When a sign was evoked, at least the individual involved already knew what he was looking for. When did an individual judge an occurrence to have been a spontaneous sign sent by the supernatural? This is where *homo divinans* and text come together to consider the sign.

A sign?

The Mesopotamian compendia provide us with a precise indication of what spontaneous signs looked like. Apart from perceived spontaneous movements and appearances of the moon, sun, stars and other celestial and atmospheric phenomena – such as the weather – treated in *Enuma Anu Enlil*, examples of specific spontaneous signs on earth can be found in *Šumma ālu*. Among these are incidents in the home, the people who visited the home, the behaviour of animals (especially snakes, scorpions and other small animals and insects) in the city, the behaviour of domestic animals kept in the vicinity of the home such as sheep, oxen, donkeys and horses, the behaviour of wild animals such as elephants and lions, the way a lamp shone and so on and so forth.[73] All these occurrences, and many more referred to in other compendia, could be recognized as signs. But how?

73 Maul, 'Omina und Orakel', 59-60.

Of course there were signs which were considered monstrous and exceedingly strange – and therefore instantly recognizable. Some of these signs are discussed in the Mesopotamian satirical text *aluz-innu* – translated as 'The Jester'.[74] Unfortunately, this text which deals with 'bizarre omens' has been preserved only in a very fragmentary condition. Roman signs such as the birth of a deformed animal and the Greek moving fish also fall into this category.[75] Therefore, first of all a sign could be anything out of the ordinary. It has been said that 'For the Mesopotamian, in other words, the ominous significance of reality did not lie in the normally functioning universe, but in the deviations from it [...]'.[76] The same has been argued for Roman and Greek signs. However, the occurrence itself was not necessarily an obvious deviation from normality at all – it was the individual who made it so. When an animal crossed the road in a particular way, this did not have to be a deviation from normality as such. In other words, no exceedingly strange thing had to happen for a divinatory sign to occur, but an individual had to notice the occurrence and find it significant: 'significance' was very much in the eye of the beholder.

74 K. 4334; K 9886; K 6392; K 9287; K 8321. See for an up-to-date edition and translation B.R. Foster, 'Humor and cuneiform literature', *JANES* 6 (1974) 69-85, at 74-79; W. Römer, 'Der Spassmacher im alten Zweistromland, zum "Sitz im Leben" altmesopotamischer Texte', *Persica* 7 (1975/1976) 43-68.

75 See on the fish Hdt. 9.120. Deformed animals can be found throughout the literature on *prodigia* and *monstra*.

76 Starr, *Rituals*, 3.

A number of factors might have stimulated the individual to consider an occurrence a sign. Firstly, something could occur which 'in some way relates to a current concern of the agent; secondly, the occurrence might belong to a culturally established catalogue of signs; thirdly, the occurrence might be so attention demanding in itself that it seemed to demand an explanation.'[77] In Cicero's *De divinatione*, it is reported that Lucius Paulus was elected consul for the second time and was also given command of the war against Perseus.[78] When he came home and kissed his daughter Terentia, she was sad because her puppy, Persa, had just died. Lucius Paulus took this to be a positive sign meaning that he would win the war. This is an example of the first way a sign was thought to occur: Lucius Paulus had a current concern and interpreted an occurrence to address it.[79] The second way a sign could be said to have occurred was because 'everyone' recognized it as such because it was embedded in the communal memory. A Roman example is the observation of *dirae aves*, birds thought to be negative signs.[80] An example of a normally positive sign was the hearing of a thunderclap to the

77 Lisdorf, *The dissemination of divination*, 191.

78 Cic. *Div*. 1.46.103; Val. Max. 1.5.3. For a Greek example see the way Thucydides reports the mutilation of the herms: it was thought to be a sign relating to a military expedition (Thuc. 6.27.1-6.27.3).

79 See for a Greek – mythical, but illustrative, example: Apollod. *Epit*. 3.

80 See the birds mentioned as *dirae aves* in Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la divination*, Vol. 4, 199.

left.[81] When a cow spoke, when a four-footed cock was born or when particular objects – such as statues – were struck by lightning, these were thought to be such extraordinary occurrences they needed an explanation, hence fitting into the third category.[82]

The three main categories could also overlap and come into play simultaneously. It could be argued, for instance, that in the ancient world an eclipse was almost always deemed to be a sign from the supernatural, on account of its extraordinary impact on nature and its rarity. Thucydides relates that people were shocked by the fact that certain alarming occurrences such as eclipses took place with such frequency during the Peloponnesian war.[83] Arguably, these eclipses fall into all three categories referred to above: apart from the fact that an eclipse demanded attention and required some explanation, the Greeks were fighting a great war and they were alert to all occurrences which might have come from the supernatural. The

81 Cic. *Div*. 2.35.74. These examples are paraphrased by Lisdorf, *The dissemination of divination,* 192.

82 The examples can be found in Obseq. 53. This paragraph is based on Lisdorf, *The dissemination of divination*, 191-192. For a Greek example see Ael. *VH* 12.57. See also for a more abstract explanation about the reasons an individual would consider an occurrence to be a sign: A. Lisdorf, 'If a dog pricks up its ears like a wolf, it is a bad sign…Omens and their meanings' in: K. Munk & A. Lisdorf (ed.), *Unveiling the hidden* (forthcoming) 346-350.

83 Thuc. 1.23.3. Cf. on eclipses (not exclusively during the Peloponnesian war) Thuc. 2.28.1; Thuc. 2.8.3; Thuc. 7.50.4; Hdt. 5.86.4; Hdt. 9.10.3; Hdt. 8.64.1; Plut. *Vit. Nic.* 23.

eclipse was a standard sign in all catalogues of signs: everyone recognized it and was affected by its perceived consequences - all the Greek soldiers, the Roman legionaries and the king of Assyria too.[84] An example of a Roman sign which fits my second and third categories is the birth of a hermaphrodite, which was both inherently negative and required an explanation as it was so extraordinary. Recognition of Greek, Mesopotamian and Roman signs did, in this sense, not differ much.

When in doubt…

The *homo divinans* always had the option of deciding – on the spot and on whichever basis he had to hand – whether or not he considered an occurrence to be a sign. However, he was also allowed to express doubt. When a potential sign occurred in Mesopotamia there was always a written compendium which could be consulted. This textual basis for divination – in combination with an expert's training – also ensured that an expert would know what to look for when a client consulted him about a potential sign. When the expert had to interpret a sign, he would extract from his compendia those *lemmata* he regarded as potentially relevant or applicable. These

84 The Roman soldiers were told an eclipse would come and that they should not panic because this was, according to their leader, a natural phenomenon (Liv. 44.37.5-9). That the king should not be afraid: SAA 10 57.

would be sent to the king in a letter. He would decide on which lemma he found most appropriate (perhaps by consulting other experts).[85] This leads to the conclusion that it was not a straightforward process for the expert to connect an occurrence to a particular lemma in his compendium: more options were open.[86] This has been called the polyvalence of the sign.

In the Greek world, the question of whether or not an occurrence should be considered to be a sign was even harder to answer. When something occurred there were usually no sets of written textual guidelines (with the exception of a text such as that of Melampos and later in time dream books and guidelines for dice oracles) to help in deciding which occurrence was a sign in those cases in which intuition or experience did not provide the solution.[87] When in doubt, he would call in an expert who would decide either on the basis of his experience or of precedent.

In Rome a number of occurrences were regularly classified as signs. The most obvious were, again, the absolutely extraordinary events.[88] Furthermore, it seems that certain occurrences had to be accepted into the communal discourse as being signs, only after

85 SAA 10 100.

86 As, e.g., in SAA 10 23.

87 For dice oracles see those published in Nollé, *Kleinasiatische Losorakel*. It should be noted that the dice oracles known to us are mainly from the first centuries AD, so rather late for the purposes of this discussion.

88 Pliny gives a number of examples in Plin. *NH* 17.38.244-245.

which it would have been permissible to report them as such. Whenever a precedent had been created (it is still uncertain how this was done – a list of 'recognized' signs would have been a suitable vehicle to assist in such an endeavour, but no such document is known), the first report of a particular sign would be followed by others. This idea is supported by the overview of *prodigia* drawn up by S. Rasmussen.[89] A development can be traced in the acceptance of lightning strikes or thunder as a sign. The earliest reference is found in Livy's account of the year 295 BC:

> This year, so successful in the operations of war, was filled with distress at home, arising from a pestilence, and with anxiety, occasioned by prodigies: for accounts were received that, in many places, showers of earth had fallen; and that very many persons, in the army of Appius Claudius, had been struck by lightning; in consequence of which, the books were consulted.[90]

The thirty-three signs, reported in the years before 295 BC and collected by Livy (and Rasmussen) do not include either lightning or thunder. Although lightning and thunder had probably been interpreted in divinatory fashion – brontoscopy – before, they had not previously been reported and accepted as *prodigia*, as far as we can

89 Rasmussen, *Public portents*, 53-116.

90 Liv. 10.31.8. Translation D. Spillan & C. Evans.
Felix annus bellicis rebus, pestilentia grauis prodigiisque sollicitus; nam et terram multifariam pluuisse et in exercitu Ap. Claudi plerosque fulminibus ictos nuntiatum est; librique ob haec aditi.

tell from the sources. This might be more than a coincidence: after 295 there was never a succession of thirty-three signs in a row of which at least not one consisted of something or someone being struck by lightning or a sign in the rumblings of thunder. This lends support to the theory that 295 BC marks the acceptance into the general discourse of lightning strikes or thunder as a sign, which was something both individuals and experts knew they could report. Precedents ingrained in communal memory seem to have played a major role in the Roman reporting of possible signs by individuals and the acceptance of these as signs by the Senate.

The Roman acknowledgement of occurrences as signs was heavily based on communal discourse and precedent; in Mesopotamia it was based on the systematization of written text; in Greece on precedent (something which will be discussed further on pp. 353-357). In the absence of written text, decisions about what was and what was not a sign were made in different ways. The *homo divinans* based his judgement of a sign either on an oral tradition which could not be verified, on his past experience with divine signs or on earlier events preserved in the communal memory whose contents were beyond argument or dispute. Again, this made the Greek *homo divinans* relatively more important in the process of distinguishing ordinary occurrences from signs. The decision was made on the basis of his personal authority, which he would continually have needed to assert by making the 'right' decisions.

Not a sign?

Recognizing an occurrence as a sign was one thing – deciding that an occurrence which could potentially be a sign, was actually not a sign, was something else indeed. There appears to have been a basic difference between the practices in Mesopotamia and Rome, whereas little is known about this aspect of divination in Greece. In Mesopotamia, there was no reason not to acknowledge such an occurrence as a divinatory sign (unless it had not been spotted).[91]

This is in contrast to Roman practice: not every rumble of thunder was necessarily a sign – there was a complicated procedure of acceptance, only some aspects of which are illuminated by the sources. However, it can be stated with confidence that not every occurrence which had previously been declared a sign, would have automatically again been accepted as a sign when it re-occurred. Although previous acceptance was important and lay at the heart of the process, other contextual and procedural factors had to be taken into account. There were a number of stages in this process: *nuntiatio* (announcement of an occurrence as a possible sign), *relatio* (reporting it to the Senate) and *susceptio* (acceptance of the occurrence as a sign by the Senate).[92] For our purposes, the most important stage is the *susceptio*, when the Senate decided whether the occurrence should be considered as a *prodigium publicum* or as *non susceptum*.[93]

91 Which could have been on account of different circumstances, for example, prevailing bad weather conditions. See SAA 15 5.

92 Rosenberger, 'Republican *nobiles*', 293.

93 See, e.g., Liv. 43.13.6 for the use of this term.

If the occurrence was accepted, it would be taken to signify that the *pax deorum* had been disturbed and action would usually have to be taken in the form of expiation.[94] That not all is clear to us in this procedure, especially in the *susceptio* stage, is illustrated by an example discussed in Rosenberger's book on Roman *prodigia*: in 173 BC there was a plague of locusts in the *ager Pomptinus*. This was accepted as a sign and the requisite expiations were performed. One year later, a plague of locusts afflicted Apulia. Although it appears to have been a giant plague, it is nowhere reported in the sources as sign from the supernatural.[95] Since large parts of Apulia had been confiscated after the Hannibalic War, it cannot be argued that the second plague was thought irrelevant because it had occurred outside the *ager Romanus*. We simply do not know why the second plague was (probably) rejected as a *prodigium* (*publicum*).

Certainly, there were a number of formal reasons for not accepting an event as a sign. The first was the criterion of location: the Senate could decide that a sign was not a public sign because it had not taken place on *ager publicus*, but on private property, which would have left it to be dealt with by the individual, should he feel the need.[96] As Rosenberger puts it '[…] Ein Zeichen musste […] in

94 There are, of course, also situations in which the man in command of the army had to acknowledge the sign *ex-officio* and the Senate was not involved: Liv. 38.18.9.

95 Rosenberger, *Gezähmte Götter*, 29. See Liv. 42.2.5-7 and Liv. 42.10.6-7 for the two reports of locusts and the subsequent action taken.

96 Liv. 43.13.6; cf., Rasmussen, *Public portents*, 47.

Verbinding mit einem wichtigen Ort oder einer Person im Rahmen der *res publica* stehen, um als Prodigium angenommen zu werden.'[97] To illustrate this, a passage in Livy shows that two potential prodigies were not acknowledged because one had happened in a place belonging to a private individual, while the other had occurred in a foreign location. The first was the springing up of a palm tree, the second was when a soldier's spear had burned for two hours without being consumed.[98] Both potential portents had occurred before, but then 'on land or places belonging to the state or to persons in the employ of the state'.[99]

The decision about whether or not to accept the sign could also be taken on the basis of other factors:

> In the beginning of this year [193 BC], the consulship of Lucius Cornelius and Quintus Minucius, earthquakes were reported with such frequency that people grew tired, not only of the cause itself, but of the ceremonies prescribed on that account; for the Senate could not be convened nor public business transacted, since the consuls were busy with sacrifices and rites of expiation [...]. Likewise, on the recommendation of the Senate, the consuls proclaimed that on any day on which an earthquake had been reported and rites ordained, no one should report another earthquake.[100]

97 Rosenberger, *Gezähmte Götter*, 28.

98 Liv. 43.13.6. Cf. Rosenberger, *Gezähmte Götter*, 28.

99 Krauss, *Omens, portents, and prodigies*, 32. Cf. Rosenberger, *Gezähmte Götter*, 28-29.

100 Liv. 34.55.1-2; 4. Translation E.T. Sage.
Principio anni quo L. Cornelius Q. Minucius consules fuerunt terrae motus

Livy recounts that there were so many signs – which had to be expiated, with the concomitant public disturbance – that the continuity of public life was actually affected. The Senate set a limit on the maximum number of reports of earthquakes (and hence potentially accepted signs and consequent expiations) which could occur on a single day as a measure to obviate public disturbances. It might be argued that the Senate was trying to tighten the rules governing the recognition of earthquakes as signs. In any way, the absence of reports of these occurrences, the Senate would not have had to acknowledge any signs.

Third, and lastly, the Senate also had to power to discard a possible sign because there were not enough witnesses to the event and the report was therefore not deemed reliable.[101]

In a nutshell, the Roman divinatory system allowed the Senate to decide which occurrence was a sign from the supernatural. This authority gave the Senate enormous power to influence the course of events. The magistrates had similar powers when they took the *auspicia* before an undertaking. Such dominance was unparalleled in Greece and Mesopotamia, where no such decisions about the acknowledgement of an occurrence as a sign could be made by

ita crebri nuntiabantur ut non rei tantum ipsius sed feriarum quoque ob id indictarum homines taederet; nam neque senatus haberi neque res publica administrari poterat sacrificando expiandoque occupatis consulibus. […] Item ex auctoritate senatus consules edixerunt ne quis, quo die terrae motu nuntiato feriae indictae essent, eo die alium terrae motum nuntiaret.

101 Liv. 5.15.1.

those with political power – at least not formally. Those with political clout could perhaps exert some influence on the interpretation – but this was a different matter. Ultimately, the exercise of political power did not lie in the hands of the Greek and Mesopotamian *homines divinantes*. In Rome, on the other hand, those who had political power could also have religious power. To sum up, in Republican Rome authority over the divinatory process had a different location to Greece and Mesopotamia (see also pp. 187-188).[102]

Checking and ignoring a sign

After he had acknowledged an occurrence as a sign, the next step a Greek would have needed to take was to interpret it and make his decision according to what the sign advised.[103] Once the meaning of

102 Cf. Parker, G*reek religion*, 44-46 who agrees that divinatory experts had no power in the process of decision making. I would add that the decision makers had no, or perhaps only occasional, power in the process of divination in Greece. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule – such as the seer Lampon also discussed by Parker. He also refers to M. Beard, 'Priesthood in the Roman Republic' in: M. Beard & J. North (eds), *Pagan priests: religion and power in the ancient world* (London 1990) 19-48, at 42-43 with whom I do not completely agree.

103 Not consulting the supernatural seems to have been against Greek *mores*, at least if we trust Herodotos and Euripides on this: Hdt.

a sign had been found out, ignoring it was certainly unwise.[104] The arrogant leader Anaxibios did ignore the meaning of a sign from the supernatural – and this arrogance led to his death. He acknowledged this mistake at the end of his life:[105]

> Having done all these things he was not disappointed, for Anaxibius did come marching back, even though—at least, as the story ran—his sacrifices on that day had not proved favourable; but despite that fact, filled with disdainful confidence because he was proceeding through a friendly country and to a friendly city, […] "Gentlemen, it is honourable for me to die here, but do you hurry to safety before coming to close engagement with the enemy." Thus he spoke, and taking his shield from his shieldbearer, fell fighting on that spot.[106]

5.42; Eur. *Hipp*. 1055-1059.

104 This can be seen throughout time see, e.g., Hom. *Od*. 20.350-358; Hdt. 3.124-3.125; Hdt. 5.72.4; possibly Hdt. 9.41.4; Plut. *Vit. Alex*. 73.1; Ach. Tat. 5.3-4; in Hdt. 7.139 the Athenians are praised for ignoring an oracle which ordered them to abandon Athens when the Persians came – however, they did not actually ignore the oracle, they just chose to request a new one from the Delphic Oracle (cf. below, 'ignoring signs'). The oracle had to be accepted and acted upon: Eur. *IT* 105.

105 Other Greek examples are Hdt. 3.124-3.125; Xen. *Cyr*. 1.6.44; Eur. *Suppl*. 155-158; Eur. *Suppl*. 212-218.

106 Xen. *Hell*. 4.8.36-39. Translation C.L. Brownson.
ταῦτα δὲ ποιήσας οὐκ ἐψεύσθη, ἀλλ' ὁ Ἀναξίβιος ἀπεπορεύετο, ὡς μὲν ἐλέγετο, οὐδὲ τῶν ἱερῶν γεγενημένων αὐτῷ ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ, ἀλλὰ καταφρονήσας, ὅτι διὰ φιλίας τε ἐπορεύετο καὶ εἰς πόλιν φιλίαν […] Ἄνδρες, ἐμοὶ μὲν ἐνθάδε καλὸν ἀποθανεῖν· ὑμεῖς δὲ πρὶν συμμεῖξαι τοῖς πολεμίοις σπεύδετε εἰς τὴν σωτηρίαν. καὶ ταῦτ' ἔλεγε καὶ παρὰ τοῦ ὑπασπιστοῦ λαβὼν τὴν ἀσπίδα ἐν

The same way of dealing with signs can be seen in the Roman world.[107] Individual Romans could reject a potential sign with a prayer or by spitting.[108] Similar rejections of potential signs by the Senate have been discussed above. However, ignoring acknowledged signs was another matter. In 217 BC Flaminius ignored signs which were unfavourable. The first sign was that his horse stumbled and fell in front of a statue of Jupiter (inherently negative) – and then he also defied unfavourable auspices. According to some sources, he was responsible for the defeat of the Roman army at the Trasimene Lake because he had ignored these signs.[109] Another example: there are accounts of Roman *haruspices* consciously ignoring the consequences of the meaning of a sign because it portended the destruction of the *haruspices* themselves.[110] By keeping the interpretation to themselves, they hoped to prevent the – for them – negative outcome. They were, however, found out. In Mesopotamian sources there is a similar account (but of a legendary nature) conveying the

χώρᾳ αὐτοῦ μαχόμενος ἀποθνήσκει.

107 Not performing a ritual correctly, like in Cic. *Div*. 1.17.33, was quite another matter.

108 Rosenberger, 'Omen', *Brill's New Pauly Online*. Visited 11-04-2011.

109 Cic. *Div*. 1.35.77-78. For another example see Obseq. 17 in which the consul Postumius travelled to his province although a number of sacrificial victims were missing the heads of the liver. Other examples of individuals ignoring signs: Cic. *Div*. 1.52.119; Cic. *Div*. 1.16.29 (these two cases are then refuted in Book 2); Liv. 25.16; Liv. 27.26.14-27.2.

110 Obseq. 44. This is something quite different from – consciously or subconsciously – misinterpreting a sign.

message that signs should not be ignored: the 'Cuthean Legend' tells us that the third-millennium King Naram Sin consulted the experts but the extispicy gave him a negative answer about going into battle.[111] He decided to disregard this, after which, according to the legend, his armies of respectively 120,000, 90,000 and 60,700 men were destroyed. Ignoring the signs would inexorably be punished.

Furthermore, there were cases in Mesopotamia – just as there were in the Greek and Roman worlds – of a double check being carried out after an unwanted, negative or uncertain outcome. When the second sign appeared to be positive, ignoring the first sign was regarded as justifiable. This idea is inherent in Mesopotamian extispicy.[112] It can also be found in Greece: when Xenophon received a divinatory outcome which was not to his liking, he had the option of repeating the divinatory process. The most notorious Greek literary occasion on which such a 'second opinion' was sought is that of the Athenians asking the Delphic Oracle what they should do now that the Persians were approaching. The first oracle stated that they should leave the city and save themselves. A number of Athenians did not like this outcome and proceeded to ask for a second oracle:

111 Standard Babylonian recension.

112 For the need of a check-up see, e.g., SAA 4 41 rev. 12 or see the first, second and third extispicy reports in SAA 4 43 rev. 14-24. See for a fundamental analysis of this issue Koch, 'Cognitive theory and the first-millennium extispicy ritual', 43-60. See for a Greek example: Xen. *An*. 6.4.16.

the famous oracle of the wooden walls.[113] As Pierre Bonnechere convincingly argues, this should not be seen as a sign of mistrust but of piety: 'it offered greater protection to the consultant, while clarifying the single truth received and investing it with additional religion [sic] authority.'[114]

In short, although asking for a second sign – and subsequently ignoring the first – can be argued to have been part of asking a second opinion, ignoring a sign as such was a different matter. This was definitely something to be avoided, in Rome, in Greece and in Mesopotamia.

Why was this so? Again, the reciprocal basis of the divinatory process plays an important role. While the supernatural would continue to bestow gifts at all times, man had to accept what was handed out on account of his subordinate position in the asymmetrical relationship. Gift rejection (ignoring a sign or discarding it outright) would not only have been ignoring the supernatural: it would have been a denial of the privileged position of the supernatural in this relation-

113 Hdt. 7.139. Another example in Eur. *Ion* 299-302; 407-409 where the oracle of Trophonius does not want to disclose any information before the oracle at Delphi has done so.

114 P. Bonnechere, 'Oracles and Greek mentalities: the mantic confirmations of mantic revelations' in: J. Dijkstra, J. Kroesen & Y. Kuiper (eds), *Myths, martyrs, and modernity* (Leiden 2010) 115-133, at 133. for examples of the use of more than one divinatory method see Xen. *An*. 6.5.21; Xen. *An.* 6.5.2; Xen. *Cyr*. 3.3.22. Signs seem to have confirmed each other in the following passages: Arr. *Anab*. 7.30; Plut. *Vit. Nic.* 13.

ship and, up to a point, even an attempt to destroy the reciprocal ties between supernatural and man. If the sign were rejected, this would have redefined the relationship between the giver and the recipient and this could only be bad news for man.[115]

Context

Context determined the meaning of the sign in Mesopotamia, where the month in which the sign occurred was considered highly significant, as were other contextual factors such as the exact day on which a sign manifested itself or the direction of the wind, to give just two examples from a much longer list.[116] Moreover, the combination of one sign with another could also be significant. One example is the following: if an animal was born with eyes on its forehead, the prince's brothers should leave both the country and the army. However, if an animal had eyes plus a bump on his forehead, the prince would enjoy a long reign, an apparently positive interpretation which might not have been expected in the light of the previous interpretation.[117] A similar interpretation by context is found in the

115 B. Schwartz, 'The social psychology of the gift' in: A.E. Komter (ed.), *The gift: an interdisciplinary perspective* (Amsterdam 1996) 69-89, at 71; Mauss, 'Essai sur le don', 161-164.

116 As, e.g., in SAA 10 26; SAA 10 79.

117 Tablet 10 44' and 45' in the reconstruction by Leichty, Šumma izbu, 125.

Etruscan brontoscopic calendar (*De Ostensis*), which will have been used in Rome. It ascribed various meanings to thunder depending on the day of the year.[118] Melampos' text on birthmarks also indicates some form of context: the meaning seems to depend on the gender of the person. These examples suggest that contextual elements, including the simultaneous occurrence of various signs, determined the meaning the Mesopotamian sign more so than they did in Greece and Rome. In Mesopotamia, not only did written text or perceived randomization provide some sort of 'objectivity', the context in which the sign appeared counted as well. At least in theory, the Greek expert had the option of ignoring context when interpreting a sign.[119]

Concluding observations

At various points in the preceding discussion, differences between the Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman ways of recognizing, acknowledging and interpreting signs have been noted. These seem to offer

118 For the text of the brontoscopic calendar see J. MacIntosh Turfa, 'The Etruscan brontoscopic calendar' in: N. Thomson de Grummond & E. Simon (eds), *The religion of the Etruscans* (Austin 2006) 173-190. MacIntosch Turfa's latest publication, *Divining the Etruscan world: the brontoscopic calendar and religious practice* (Cambridge 2012) appeared too late to be incorporated in this study.

119 Although, later on, Artemidoros used context at times.

possibilities to probe a little more deeply by enquiring into the backgrounds of these differences.

A synthetic explanation can be achieved with the help of the concept of religious authority. In our modern perception, authority is inextricably linked to institutions. In Rome and Mesopotamia, at least the public part of divination was institutionalized, whereas these matters were organized differently in Greece. In Greek divination the individual was the bearer of authority – in this case the *homo divinans*. In Greece, the *homo divinans* – layman or expert – was the pivotal element in divination – more so than in Rome and decidedly more than in Mesopotamia: the Greek *homo divinans* chose and decided which sign should be interpreted and how. Unquestionably the Roman and Mesopotamian *homo divinans* also played a role in this decision but his part was less pronounced than that of his Greek counterpart. As we have seen, in Rome signs were selected on the basis of precedent and communal memory. Mesopotamian experts could rely on systematized written texts. The Greek *homo divinans* depended on precedent and personal experience.

The importance of the Greek *homo divinans* in the divinatory process is crucial to explaining why signs could manifest themselves in 'everything' in Mesopotamia but not in Greece nor indeed in Rome. The Greek *homo divinans* had a relatively important place in conjunction with a desire for the sign and its interpretation to be 'objective'. The need for 'objectivity' reveals a wish for the sign and divination to exist independently of man, thereby validating the

outcome of divination. However, on account of the weight given to the individual authority of the Greek *homo divinans*, his opinion and experience greatly influenced the interpretation of the sign (a consequence of a lack of written text, as will be discussed *in extenso* in chapter 6) and also affected its recognition and acknowledgement. The idea can be put forward that, in order to ensure the 'objectivity' of divination, the prominent role of the *homo divinans* had to be 'balanced.' [120] In other words, in Greece the 'objectivity' of the process was not ensured at the stage of selection or interpretation of a sign (in which the *homo divinans* was the decisive factor), but depended on where the sign occurred: by way of natural (not man-made) objects. In Rome and Mesopotamia, where divination was more institutionalized, 'objective' standards had been created which meant that the interpretation of the sign was less dependent of the individual authority of the *homo divinans*. In Rome, the communal memory of earlier signs served as a touchstone, but apparently this was not enough: the sign had to occur in a natural medium. In Mesopotamia there was an equal desire for objectivity but the role of the *homo divinans* was more restricted because of the greater role accorded to the written text. This text formed an 'objective' basis of

120 On the added 'objectivity' to the divinatory process by means of using an object, or in this case a text, thereby taking some of the recognition and interpretation of a sign away from the subjective *homo divinans* see J.J. McGraw, 'Initial draft - Mayan divination: ritual techniques of distributed cognition' in: J. Sørensen (ed.), *Religious ritual, cognition, and culture* (forthcoming).

knowledge for interpretation and played a larger role than the personal experience of the *homo divinans*. In Mesopotamia, objectivity was derived partly in the interpretation and partly in the nature of the sign – therefore, it was possible for signs to manifest themselves in the cultural world. Sufficient impartiality was provided by using an 'objective text' during the interpretation of the sign.

The scope of these inferences can be widened by focusing on the importance of context in the interpretation of signs. The fact that the context of the sign did not necessarily have to be taken into account, again, allowed the Greek *homo divinans* greater flexibility when he was interpreting.