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Worlds full of signs: ancient Greek divination in context

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Cover Page



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Part III

The functions of ancient divination

7. Time and divination – divination and time

A complicated interplay between divination and conceptions of time was present in each of the three cultural areas covered by this study. Divination was intertwined with, organized through and restricted by temporal frameworks. Conversely, divination might also tell us something about conceptions of time – laying the foundations for the study of uncertainty in the next chapter.¹

Ancient time is a problematic subject. Geoffrey Lloyd states: 'Quite apart from thinkers of whom we know nothing, there are many for whom the evidence is insufficient for us to speak confidently concerning their ideas on time.'² Nevertheless, the divinatory materials can fill up some of this lacuna because they are an expression of what the ancient man-on-the-street would have deemed 'normal' ideas and conceptions about time. After all, divination is based on

¹ I take into account that there were many different conceptions of time simultaneously within one society, as discussed by P. Burke, who uses the term 'occasionalism' to express this: 'Reflections on the cultural history of time', *Viator* 35 (2004) 617-626, at 626. However, generalization is necessary because the sources do not always allow otherwise.

² G.E.R. Lloyd, 'Views on time in Greek thought' in: L. Gardet *et al.* (eds), *Cultures and time* (Paris 1976) 117-148, at 117.

the idea of a connection between the past, present and future.³

3 The way cultural areas consider these three can be summarized under the headings: time perspectives, time attitude and time orientation (For these headers see J.R. Nuttin, *Future time perspective and motivation: theory and research method* (Leuven 1984 [translated from French]) 11; but see for another – for my purposes useful – way of categorization of the study of time, e.g., B. Adam, *Time and social theory* (Cambridge 1990) 93. Anthropologists consider the length and depth of thinking about time, the way events are distributed along the timescale, the degree of structuring and the level of realism of thinking about time. For an example of an article discussing time perspectives (especially linear and cyclical ones) see N.M. Farriss, 'Remembering the future, anticipating the past: history, time, and cosmology among the Maya of Yucatan', *CSSH* 29 (1987) 566-593). These factors construct, and perhaps even negotiate, ideas about time in every society (see for terminology of 'negotiating time': K. Clarke, *Making time for the past: local history and the polis* (Oxford 2008) vii). An example of a difference to modern Western time perspectives is the way cultures appear to have perceived their own position on a time line: while we may think that we are facing the future and have our backs to the past which is behind us, this can also be perceived as being the other way around. If the future is unknown it cannot be seen, which means we have to have our backs towards it and are facing the known past (see for explorations into this idea with regard to Greece and Mesopotamia A.G.E. Dunkel, 'Prossoo kai opisoo', *ZVS* 96 (1982-83) 66-87; M. Bettini, *Antropologia e cultura romana: parentela, tempo, immagini dell' anima* (Rome 1986) 133-143). As to different time attitudes, people in modern Western societies expect that they will reach a certain, fairly advanced age and live in a certain prosperous state. For several generations this has been almost a fact of life, a near certainty. In the ancient world this was not perceived in this way at all: life

This chapter commences with an exploration of certain chronological aspects of the process of divination itself.⁴ On which days was it possible to divine, and on which days was it better not to? Was there a particular time of the day which was most suitable? On pp.

was subject to many threats. Human ones, such as war, as a consequence of which houses and harvest could be destroyed and people killed or enslaved, but Nature could also be overwhelming. How much time he had left in the future was very uncertain for an ancient individual. The future was a source of constant expectation but also of great anxiety. This is linked to time orientation: is the past, present or the future of particular concern in a particular culture? They were in the ancient world: although a mere moving point on the timescale, the present is central to the relationship between past and future. The past, as expressed in the present, consists of memories. These might be part of a communal memory (history) or personal memory ('my history'). The future, as expressed in the present, has the shape of expectation or anticipation. This includes fear and hope. The individual cannot avoid having thoughts in the present about the, personal or communal, past and future. A note on the above use of 'our modern Western society': I am aware of the fact that this is a generalization and many nuances can be made with respect to every modern culture I refer to as 'our Western culture'. However, in a study of the ancient world I think such a generalization permissible

4 Previous studies have explored time but not from the angle of divination, see, e.g., on time and magic: A. Livingstone, 'The magic of time' in: T. Abusch & K. van der Toorn (eds), *Mesopotamian magic: textual, historical, and interpretative perspectives* (Leiden 1999) 131-137. Such an approach is called for by B. Adam, 'Perceptions of time' in: T. Ingold (ed.), *Companion encyclopedia of anthropology* (London 1994) 503-525, at 522-523.

240-241 it has been noted that time functioned as a context to the sign: this will be discussed here in more detail. In the second part of the investigation, conceptions of time which can be identified in the divinatory materials are discussed. The use of divination for finding 'the right moment' for an undertaking is analysed: if there was a right moment, time cannot have been considered as homogeneous. This chapter delves deeper to show what might have been the time limits to obtaining divinatory knowledge of past and future. Is the time horizon made explicit or left unspecified? Finally, the past can be used to think about the future in the shape of precedent. What does all of this mean for ideas about time in the three cultural areas?

BACKGROUND TO TIME

Debates

Time as a topic is a major theme of discussion in many different subject areas – the literature on time, as time itself, 'has no beginning or end'.⁵ Given restrictions on time and space in this book, only some issues related to experience of time are introduced here.⁶

5 N.D. Munn, 'The cultural anthropology of time: a critical essay', *AntRevAnth* 21 (1992) 93-123, at 93.

6 Historians and ancient historians alike have worked on the topic 'time', which has become a major focus of study since the 19th century. Historians such as K. Marx (*Das Kapital* (Hamburg 1867-1894) chapter 10) and M. Weber ('Die protestantische Ethik und der "Geist" des Kapitalismus',

Despite (or because of) the fact that time is discussed so inten-

ASS 20 & 21 (1904 & 1905) 1-54; 1-110) were concerned with time, as was W. Gent, *Das Problem der Zeit: eine historische und systematische Untersuchung* (Frankfurt 1934). In France, time was studied by such people as H. Hubert (*Étude sommaire de la représentation du temps dans la religion et la magie* (1905), reprinted in: *Mélanges d'Histoire des Religions* (Paris 1909) 189-229); M. Mauss & E. Durkheim, ('De quelques formes primitives de classification: contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives', *AS* 6 (1901-2) 1-72), M. Halbwachs ('La mémoire collective et le temps', *CIS* (1947) 3-31). In the United States: G.H. Mead (see M. Flaherty & G.H. Fine, 'Present, past, and future: conjugating George Herbert Mead's perspective on time', *T&S* 10 (2001) 147-161); P.A. Sorokin & R.K. Merton ('Social time: a methodological and functional analysis', *AJSoc* 42 (1937) 615-629). In the late 1940s, a new generation took up the study: M. Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* (Paris 1949); G. Poulet, *Études sur le temps humain* (Paris 1949); J. Le Goff, 'Merchants' time and church's time in the Middle Ages' in: idem, *Time, work and culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago 1980 [translated from French]); G. Gurevitch, *La multiplicité des temps sociaux* (Paris 1958); R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main 1979); N. Elias, *Über die Zeit: Arbeiten zur Wissenssoziologie II* (Frankfurt 1984) – and these are only the 'big names' who have concerned themselves with this topic. A more extensive bibliography would include many more references. For a more extensive bibliographical overview concerned with time see G. Pronovost, 'Bibliography', *CS* 37.3 (1989) 99-124 and Burke, 'Reflections', 617-626, and the special issue of the journal *Métis* 12-13 (1997-1998). For an overview of the main literature – from an anthropological perspective – dealing with time before 1992 see the bibliography in Munn, 'The cultural anthropology of time', 117-123. The *Altertumswissenschaft*, in the meanwhile, was also concerned with time. See C. von Orelli, *Die hebräischen Synonyma*

sively, there is still no consensus on its nature. Some say time is a dimension, closely linked to space, but it has also been argued that it does not exist in its own right but is a human creation,⁷ and it is this

der zeit und Ewigkeit (Leipzig 1871) and a more general study by M. Nilsson, *Primitive time-reckoning: a study in the origins and first development of the art of counting time among the primitive and early culture peoples* (Lund 1920), with pages 362-369 on Greece specifically; E. von Dobschütz, 'Zeit und Raum im denken des Urchristentums', *JBL* 41 (1922) 212-223; H. Fränkel ('Die Zeitauffassung in der frühgriechische Literatur' in: idem, *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens: literarische und philosophiegeschichtliche Studien* (München 1955) 1-22); B. Snell (*Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen* (Hamburg 1946)); I. Myerson ('Le temps, la mémoire, "histoire"', *JP* 53 (1956) 333-354); A.D. Momigliano, 'Time in ancient historiography', *History and the concept of time* (Beiheft *History and Theory*) (Middletown, CON 1966) 1-23; Lloyd, 'Views on time', 117-148. More recent studies are J.P. Vernant & P. Vidal-Naquet, *La Grèce ancienne: l'espace et le temps* (Paris 1992) and B. Stiegler, *La technique et le temps, 1: La faute d'Épiméthée* (Paris 1994). The most recent major contributions are C. Darbo-Peschanski (ed.), *Constructions du temps dans le monde grec ancien* (Paris 2000); B. André Salvini, 'La conscience du temps in Mésopotamie' in: F. Briquel-Chatonnet & H. Lozachmeur (eds), *Proche-Orient ancien, temps vécu, temps pensé: actes de la table-ronde du 15 Novembre 1997* (Paris 1998) 29-37, and see also E. Robson, 'Scholarly conceptions and quantifications of time in Assyria and Babylonia, c. 750-250 BCE' in: R.M. Rosen (ed.), *Time and temporality in the ancient world* (Philadelphia 2004) 45-90.

7 See V. Evans, *The structure of time: language, meaning and temporal cognition* (Amsterdam 2003) for an overview of the phenomenology of time, debate on its existence, as well as the problems related to the experi-

human experience of time which is important to the purpose of this discussion. Time is used in order to structure and measure human experience. Human experiences of time are astronomical and biological, societal and individual-psychological – categories which, in practice, cannot always be separated from each other.⁸

The first two varieties are usually the same for every human being (although their measurement is not because this is culturally defined). Societal time is important to the study of divination because both are cultural constructs which affect one another. Societal time is the way in which time is kept track of, described and measured – and whatever interpretation is put upon it. There have been many attempts to capture recurring patterns in something like a calendar, endeavours which have led to *Verzeitlichung*,⁹ but keeping track of time and time measurement was a relatively primitive affair in the ancient world.¹⁰ One of the main debates with respect

ence of time.

8 I am grateful to Dr F.G. Naerebout for perceptive comments on this topic.

9 For one of the many historical studies of the development of our modern concept of time see the articles in W. Katzinger (ed.), *Zeitbegriff: Zeitmessung und Zeitverständnis im städtischen Kontext* (Linz/Donau 2002). See for a very inspiring publication on the development of time, and *Verzeitlichung*: D.S. Landes, *Revolution in time: clocks and the making of the modern world* (Cambridge, MA 1983).

10 Mostly consisting of watching the sun, moon and stars, and observing nature: migratory birds, for example. Of course, there were sundials and water clocks, and there were calendars as well as very advanced equip-

to societal time in the ancient world is whether time was experienced in a cyclical or linear fashion or both simultaneously. Some have claimed that Greeks saw time as cyclical. This is one of the great contrasts which could – supposedly – be drawn between polytheis-

ment to assist in keeping calendrical time, like the famous Antikythera Mechanism. The studies on this Mechanism are countless. Recent ones are T. Freeth *et al.*, 'Decoding the ancient Greek astronomical calculator known as the Antikythera Mechanism', *Nature* 444 (2006) 587-591; T. Freeth *et al.*, 'Calendars with Olympiad display and eclipse prediction on the Antikythera Mechanism', *Nature* 454 (2008) 614-617. See further the bibliography on the website of the Antikythera Mechanism Research Project: <http://www.antikythera-mechanism.gr/bibliography> [visited 23-01-2010]. The studies on chronology and calendrical time are many – these can be seen as a sub-genre within ancient studies of time – and I shall mention only a few recent publications: D.C. Feeney, *Caesar's calendar: ancient time and the beginnings of history* (Berkeley 2007); R. Hannah, *Greek and Roman calendars: constructions of time in the classical world* (London 2005); D. Lehoux, *Astronomy, weather, and calendars in the ancient world: paraepemata and related texts in Classical and Near Eastern societies* (Cambridge 2007); M. Pasco-Pranger, *Founding the year: Ovid's 'Fasti' and the poetics of the Roman calendar* (Leiden 2006); J. Steele, *Calendars and years: astronomy and time in the ancient Near East* 2 vols (Oxford 2007-2011) Vol. 1. On measuring time also see, also among many others, D. Brown, 'The cuneiform conception of celestial space and time', *CAJ* 10 (2000) 103-122; D. Brown, J. Fermor & C.B.F. Walker, 'The water clock in Mesopotamia', *AfO* 46/47 (1999/2000) 130-148; O. Neugebauer, 'Studies in ancient astronomy 8: the water clock in Babylonian astronomy', *Isis* 37 (1947) 37-43; S.L. Gibbs, *Greek and Roman sundials* (New Haven 1976).

tic cultures and their Judeo-Christian counterparts. However, over forty years ago the work of Arnaldo Momigliano made it clear that a completely cyclical conception of Greek time is an untenable proposition: truly cyclical views were entertained by some philosophers, but in practice were a rare phenomenon.¹¹ If events are really seen to recur in cycles (everything which happens now has happened before and will happen again), these cycles follow one another in a linear progression.¹²

11 Momigliano, 'Time'. As Astrid Möller and Nino Luraghi have written: 'We cannot label one culture cyclical, another linear, because most people perceive time in different ways according to their context or situation, with the result that any one culture is characterised by a range of different perceptions of time'. A. Möller & N. Luraghi, 'Time in the writing of history: perceptions and structures', *Storia della Storiografia* 28 (1995) 3-15, apud Feeney, *Caesar's calendar*, 3. In the same vein, Denis Feeney observes that, 'In any society individuals are liable to inhabit different frames of time, often simultaneously – cyclical or recurrent, linear, seasonal, social, historical'. Feeney, *Caesar's calendar*, 3. For example, calendars with their annual cycles are always of a cyclical nature: a calendar 'mediates and creates continuity between past and present'. M. Beard, 'A complex of times: no more sheep on Romulus' birthday', *PCPhS* n.s. 33 (1987) 1-15 paraphrased by R. Laurence & C. Smith, 'Ritual, time, and power in ancient Rome', *ARP* 6 (1995-1996) 133-151, at 146; for similar thoughts on combinations of cyclical and linear, this time on the basis of Hesiodus/Hesiod: S. Kravaritou, 'La construction d'un "calendrier" en Grèce ancienne: temps du rituel et temps du récit', *Kernos* 15 (2002) 31-40, at 40.

12 See M.H. Hansen, *The triumph of time* (Copenhagen 2002) 47-59 for a concise introduction to various ways of conceptualizing time. For a

The individual-psychological experience of time going by is also important. This includes some of the biorhythms mentioned above, but also a person's lifetime and life span (the two are connected in, for instance, the perceived speeding up of time as a person grows older). Duration of time and the speed of time are the sphere of numerous illusions which are part of the individual-psychological experience of time.¹³

When time and our – societal or biographical – experience of it is analysed in greater detail, new distinctions can be made. People are living in times and places, but those of a different age, gender, or belonging to a different social group might not experience or understand the same thing: their concepts might differ, or they might have different concerns about and ways of expressing these.¹⁴ When it

nuanced view of changes in perception of time see P. Vidal-Naquet, 'Temps des dieux et temps des hommes: essai sur quelques aspects de l'expérience temporelle chez les Grecs', *RHR* 157 (1960) 55-80.

13 D. Draaisma, 'Waarom het leven sneller gaat als je ouder wordt' in: idem, *Waarom het leven sneller gaat als je ouder wordt* (Groningen 2001) 205-229; M.G. Flaherty, *The textures of time: agency and temporal experience* (Philadelphia 2011); M.G. Flaherty, *A watched pot: how we experience time* (New York 1999).

14 The most common classification of different experiences of time are: social and cultural time – as discussed above – but also political time, ritual time, spatial and bodily time or gendered time. See E.K. Silverman, 'Time, anthropology of' in: N.J. Smelser & P.B. Baltes (eds), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam 2001) Vol. 23, 15683-15686. For some examples of studies of groups and their perspectives

comes to experiencing and interpreting time, it is fairly obvious that the individuals from the three cultural areas discussed here – not even taking the factors of gender, social group and age into account, simply because the source materials to do this are not available – might have had viewpoints rather different from ours and from one another. Still, in what follows I suggest relationships between ancient divination and perceptions of time can be deduced.

TIME INFLUENCES DIVINATION

Good timing

Practices of divination could be restricted and influenced by existing conceptions of time. Specific times of day might have been thought to facilitate the perceived contact with the supernatural. Anthropological evidence shows that some cultures only divine during the heat of the day, never at night, or only in the early morning.¹⁵ The Greek Magical Papyri – which lie outside the chronological

on time: G. Pronovost, 'Time and social class', *CS* 37.3 (1989) 63-74; Greek time and social differences into account: Darbo-Peschanski, *Constructions du temps, passim*; and also, for an example from a completely different period – Medieval to modern times – in which many different social groups are discussed, the publication by T. Elhlert (ed.) *Zeitkonzeptionen, Zeiterfahrung, Zeitmessung: Stationen ihres Wandels vom Mittelalter bis zur Moderne* (Paderborn 1997).

15 P. Peek, 'African divination systems: non-normal modes of cognition'

boundaries of my enquiries – contain information about the existence of days and hours suitable for divination: on the first of the month divination should take place at dawn, on the second at noon and so forth.¹⁶ Why exactly these times were considered to be good to divine is shrouded in mystery.

The Roman and Greek materials with which I am concerned do not reveal extensive evidence of a preference for divining at a particular time of day. There are examples of oracular sessions being extended over two consecutive days, incorporating a night into the process – receiving questions on the one day and answering them the next. Examples of this practice can be found at such Greek oracles-sites such as Korope and Lucian's fictional account of practices at Abonuteichos (a late example which can still indicate possible practices).¹⁷ Considering Korope, it could (emically) be argued that the inclusion of a night gave the supernatural the opportunity to 'read' the question and answer the next day. Alexander of Abonuteichos is depicted as claiming that he obtained answers overnight. There were also practical reasons why a particular time of day might be thought suitable to perform divination. Daylight was

in: idem, *Ways of knowing: African divination systems* (Bloomington 1991) 191-212, at 197.

16 PGM VII 155-167.

17 See for a discussion on the probability of the following practice at Korope, where the questions were kept in a jar overnight: Robert, 'Apollon Koropaios', 25-26 (with many references).

essential to some divinatory procedures,¹⁸ while some examinations of the skies or evoked oneiromancy probably took place at night. The dreamer needed to be asleep to receive a sign and some phenomena in the skies could only be seen during the night.

More extensive evidence of the necessity of proper timing can be found in Mesopotamia. The practical considerations apply equally to Mesopotamia, and – in addition – there is a very specific Mesopotamian divinatory method for which the time of day at which the procedure took place mattered more for theological reasons: extispicy. This ritual took place during the night and culminated in the perceived production of a sign when the day started again: the *ikribu* prayers show that there were suitable times during the night for specific ritual actions in the performance of extispicy. In the early hours of the morning, a sheep had to be sacrificed; a smoke offering to Šamaš, Adad, Marduk, and so on, had to be made.¹⁹

18 Found in PGM VII 250-244 and 255-259, among others. No explicit examples of this use of light are available from the three cultural areas discussed here, but it is common sense that some procedures would have required clear visibility.

19 See the (at points problematic) edition by Zimmern, *Beiträge*, numbers 1-20 100-101; line 69-75; 104-105, line 127. But also see other times and actions in, e.g., lines 31 (being cleansed before the sun went down), 41 (feed the gods when the stars appear), 55 (start smoke offerings at an unclear time); 101 (offer to the gods when the darkness became lighter(?)), 127 (smoke offerings to gods before sunrise). I thank J. Fincke for first drawing my attention to the importance of time during the divinatory process, especially in the *ikribu*.

Some argue that the whole process was based on the idea that the future was determined when the sun appeared, after the supernatural had met during the night. The council of the gods would decide each case, with Šamaš presiding over the ruling (which might later be 'appealed' against by means of other rituals). This ruling was provided in the shape of a sign at the daily rising of Šamaš.²⁰ Hence, the ritual was conducted on a diurnal basis (although there were also monthly and yearly cycles).²¹ The timing of the ritual can be assumed to have been a theological necessity.

Reasons of a theological nature are less visible in Greece and Rome than in Mesopotamia. Still, in all three cultural areas timing was necessary to facilitate the transmission of the divine sign – which needed to tie in with the timetable of the supernatural or for more practical purposes. In both cases, sign and interpretation needed to be organized into a time frame, which restricted and arranged divination.

20 Cf. Maul, *Zukunftsbewältigung* on how to avoid such a ruling by means of apotropaic ritual.

21 One of the sources is Plut. *Mor. Quaest. Graec.* 292ef in which he explains that, in the past, the one day on which the Delphic oracle was open, in spring was the birthday of Apollo. There are ideas in all three cultural areas about why one particular day would be chosen. For a summary of this argument on Mesopotamia by J. Polonsky see *The rise of the sun god and the determination of destiny in ancient Mesopotamia* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2002) 971-980. See for an argument why in the yearly cycle the New Year and spring were important to Roman oracular practice Champeaux, *Fortuna*, Vol. 1, 60-61.

On which days to divine

Day time and night time appear to have been non-homogeneous because there could be a 'right time' for divination. Continuing this theme, the suitability of particular days for divinatory activity can also be considered.²² In Greece, the evidence is, again, scarce:²³ at Dodona it is not known if there were specific days on which the oracle could be consulted; at Didyma this seems to have been likely;²⁴ with regard to Korope, too, much is uncertain but it is clear that the oracle was available on ὅταν συντελῇται τὸ μαντεῖον ('On the oracular days') – whichever these might have been and with whatever frequency they occurred.²⁵ Only in the case of Delphi do we happen

22 For contemporary comparative evidence see, e.g., PGM VII 155-67 in which the 3rd, 6th, 9th, 16th, 17th, and 25th were unsuitable for divination.

23 For two Mycenaean examples, however, cf. M. Ventris & J. Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (Cambridge 19732) 6.311, number 207. We do know that some days were considered 'good' or 'lucky' but this did not have consequences for divinatory practice and was also not on account of any divinatory findings. For example, in Greece, the sixth of Thargelion was a good day (Ael. *VH* 2.25), but this is not in any way connected to divination.

24 At Didyma it is uncertain how many times the oracle was open each year – Fontenrose puts the maximum number at 52, arguing that the mouthpiece of the god needed to fast for 3 days before pronouncing, the fourth day would be the oracular day, and he seems to assume that normal food would be required for another three days before recommencing the fast (Fontenrose, *Didyma*, 85). However, this is all very speculative.

25 Dittenberger, *Syll.*², 790, I.18; see especially Robert, 'Apollon Koropaios', 17; 21.

to have more detailed information about suitable and unsuitable days for divination. Plutarch says that, in the Archaic age this oracle site was 'open' only one day a year, but at a later date it was used for nine to twelve days every year (the oracle in which a white or black bean was picked probably operated more often, perhaps even continuously).²⁶ These days were spread out more or less evenly throughout the year, corresponding to the Delphic religious calendar designating certain dates as the days of Apollo (in the Athenian calendar this was the seventh of each month).²⁷ It has been stated many times that the number of days the oracle was in business each year could, nevertheless, have only been nine, because the oracle was

26 Other divinatory methods, apart from the oracular pronouncements by the Pythia, seem to have been used at Delphi and we are not aware of any time restrictions related to them: cleromancy using white and dark beans is most famous, but some say ornithomancy, extispicy, empiromancy, aleuromancy and dendromancy also took place at Delphi. See Amandry, *La mantique apollinienne*, 25-40; 57-65.

27 Plut. *Mor. Quaest. Graec.* 292ef. For an evaluation of Plutarch's ideas about the Delphic oracle see Parke, *Greek oracles*, 80-81. On the days dedicated to Apollo see J.D. Mikalson, *The sacred and civil calendar of the Athenian year* (Princeton 1975) 19, and the 7th of each month on Mikalson's calendar. Although an argumentum ex silentio is naturally not a solid one, it can here be said that the Athenian sacred calendar does not explicitly state that some days would have been more auspicious or positive for divinatory activities. See the absence of divination and oracles in the discussions by L.A. Deubner, *Attische Feste* (Berlin 1932) *passim*; and the volume by Mikalson referred to above.

supposedly closed for three months because Apollo was believed to be in the habit of quitting Delphi during the winter months, temporarily ceding his place to Dionysus.²⁸ Whether there were nine or twelve days of oracular activity each year still leaves a very limited number of days suitable for oracular consultation. The following example, which has sometimes been used to illustrate leeway was possible, is very exceptional (and no real oracle is provided!):²⁹

And now, wishing to consult the god concerning the expedition against Asia, he went to Delphi; and since he chanced to come on one of the inauspicious days, when it is not lawful to deliver oracles, in the first place he sent a summons to the prophetess. And when she refused to perform her office and cited the law in her excuse, he went up himself and tried to drag her to the temple, whereupon, as

28 Amandry, *La mantique apollinienne*, 83. J.E. Fontenrose, basing himself on Plutarch's text which says that the singing of the paian to Apollo stopped for three months – instead dithyrambos in honour of Dionysos were sung – argues that this does not necessarily mean the consultations stopped. See Plut. *Mor. De E apud Delphos* 389c and J.E. Fontenrose, *Python: a study of Delphic myth and its origins* (Berkeley 1959) 379. W. Halliday supports this idea in *The Greek questions of Plutarch* (Oxford 1928); The evidence is discussed in Amandry, *La mantique apollinienne*, 81; for this opinion also see Parke, *Greek oracles*, 105. In A. Salt & E. Boutsikas, 'Knowing when to consult the oracle at Delphi', *Ant* 79 (2005) 564-572, it is shown when Apollo was supposed to return to Delphi each year on the basis of astronomical calculations.

29 See also Champeaux, *Fortuna*, Vol. 1, 59.

if overcome by his ardour, she said: "Thou art invincible, my son!" On hearing this, Alexander said he desired no further prophecy, but had from her the oracle which he wanted.³⁰

In Mesopotamia there were other arrangements in place: divination functioned in a system of 'auspicious days' (*uttuku*) which were formalized into hemerologies, and menologies, for 'auspicious months'.³¹ Almost every month contained five intrinsically bad days.³² The reason particular days were perceived to be intrinsically bad probably was related to the moon and its phases.³³ One Neo-Assyrian source shows that fifteen days in one particular month were suitable for divination.³⁴ The rules set by the hemerologies

30 Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 14.6-7. Translation: B. Perrin. Edition: Teubner.

βουλόμενος δὲ τῷ θεῷ χρήσασθαι περὶ τῆς στρατείας, ἦλθεν εἰς Δελφούς, καὶ κατὰ τύχην ἡμερῶν ἀποφράδων οὐσῶν, ἐν αἷς οὐ νενόμισται θεμιστεύειν, πρῶτον μὲν ἔπεμπε παρακαλῶν τὴν πρόμαντιν. ὥς δ' ἄρνουμένης καὶ προῖσχομένης τὸν νόμον αὐτὸς ἀναβάς βίᾳ πρὸς τὸν ναὸν εἷλκεν αὐτήν, ἣ δ' ὥσπερ ἐξηττημένη τῆς σπουδῆς εἶπεν· „ἀνίκητος εἰ ᾧ παῖ“, τοῦτ' ἀκούσας ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος οὐκέτ' ἔφη χρήζειν ἐτέρου μαντεύματος, ἀλλ' ἔχειν ὃν ἐβούλετο παρ' αὐτῆς χρησμόν.

31 Hemerology is a term which is much broader than this and can be used by ancient authors to refer to texts ranging from a calendar to a diary. It is essentially 'a text arranged according to the days of the year': J. Rüpke, 'Hemerologion' in: H. Cancik & H. Schneider, *Brill's New Pauly Online*. Visited 04-02-2010.

32 And it should be noted that, just to complicate matters, bad days could also be favourable: Robson, 'Scholarly conceptions', 66.

33 Robson, 'Scholarly conceptions', 66.

34 SAA 8 235 obv. 12. Robson, 'Empirical scholarship', 612.

and menologies mattered: they were adhered to – including those regarding divination – and only very few exceptions are known.³⁵

In Roman Italy, it appears that the oracle at Praeneste, as well as other oracles, was open only on a limited number of days every year (including on the first day of the New Year). Why the oracles were open on those particular days is still unknown, but for New Year's day explanations have been sought in the symbolism of com-

35 A. Livingstone, 'The case of hemerologies: official cult, learned formulation and popular practice' in: E. Matsushima (ed.), *Official cult and popular religion in the ancient Near East: papers of the first colloquium on the ancient Near East - the city and its life, held at the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan (Mitaka, Tokyo), March 20-22, 1992* (Heidelberg 1993) 97-113, at 109. Many 'literary menologies' remain unpublished. R. Labat published the series *Iqqur ĩpuš* (*Un calendrier Babylonien des travaux, des signes et des mois (séries Iqqur ĩpuš)* (Paris 1965); R. Labat, *Hémérologies et ménologies d'Assur* (Paris 1939). The ones which have been published in the last-mentioned volume are the 'bread offering' hemerologies (from a number of periods) named after the dominant theme in the prescriptions – see also J.C. Fincke, 'Zu den Akkadischen hemerologien aus Ĥattuša (CTH 546), Teil II: die "Opferbrot-hemerologie"', *JCS* 62 (2010) 127-145. When other texts are published, they will add to our knowledge of Mesopotamian hemerologies: an edition is currently in preparation by A. Livingstone. See for a recent introduction to Neo-Assyrian hemerologies: L. Marti, 'Les hémérologies Néo-Assyriennes' in: J.M. Durand & A. Jaquet (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) 41-60.

mencing the year.³⁶ Moreover, there was a system of favourable and unfavourable days for particular actions – which affected when divination did and did not take place.³⁷ The beginning of new undertakings was regulated by a complicated system of favourable and unfavourable days.³⁸ Divination is not explicitly singled out as permitted or forbidden during any of these days, but is unlikely to have taken place since both public and private religious activities were avoided on *dies atri*.³⁹

Although the means and the way it was institutionalized could differ, there were suitable and unsuitable days for divination in each cultural area. Time served as one of the organizing factors for divinatory practice.

36 This is evidence from the Empire – J. Champeaux takes it as an indication of what might have happened in the Republic. See Champeaux, *Fortuna*, Vol. 1, 58-59. Cicero states that the oracle opens and the lots are drawn when Fortuna wants it (Cic. *Div.* 2.41.86). One theory was that the goddess was supposed to let the people know it was the right time by nodding. This could, of course, have been on suitable days – but not necessarily.

37 See further on the intricate Roman system of days: J. Rüpke, *Kalender und Öffentlichkeit: die Geschichte der Repräsentation und religiösen Qualifikation von Zeit in Rom* (Berlin 1995) 563-566; 580.

38 Rüpke, *Kalender und Öffentlichkeit*, 567-575.

39 A.P. Michels, *The calendar of the Roman republic* (Princeton, NJ 1962) 65-66.

Time as context

Time could also function as a context for the sign, influencing its meaning. Mesopotamian menologies, hemerologies and the Roman brontosopic calendar are evidence that this occurred in two of the three cultural areas. As noted above, I do not consider hemerologies divinatory texts: they were not inherently divinatory but did provide a context of time to the divinatory sign.

In Rome, the inauspicious character of the day on which a particular sign was observed might affect its meaning.⁴⁰ This is confirmed by the brontosopic calendar which shows that the meaning of a sign could vary according to the date on which it occurred. In the following fragment from the brontosopic calendar, in all cases the sign is thunder (perhaps longer or shorter rumbles), phrased in the protasis as follows: 'ἐάν βροντήσῃ' ('if in any way it should thunder') and 'εἰ βροντήσῃ' ('if it thunders'). The apodosis is different for every day of every month. The sign remained the same but the date (the numbers in the fragment below) on which it occurred determined its meaning:

1. If in any way it should thunder, it signifies both a good harvest and good cheer.
2. If in any way it should thunder, there will be discord among the common people.
3. If in any way it should thunder, it signifies heavy rains and war.⁴¹

40 Rüpke, *Kalender und Öffentlichkeit*, 576-582.

41 Nigid. September (30) 1-3. Edition and translation: MacIntosh Turfa, 'Brontosopic calendar', 184.

Although we do not have such unequivocal examples from other divinatory methods, this text indicates that time could be taken into account as a contextual factor in Rome.

The Mesopotamian hemerological series *Iqqur ippuṣ* shows that the meaning of a particular action depended on the month in which the action took place. Here, too, time provides a context for the sign:

If in Nisannu (Month 1) he builds a temple: its foundations will not be stable
 If in Ayyaru (Month 2), ditto: he will see evil
 If in Simanu (Month 3), ditto: joy
 If in Du'uzu (Month 4), ditto: his temple will last
 If in Abu (Month 5), ditto: his heart will be content⁴²

In Greece, the evidence does not indicate extensive use of time as a contextual factor, and it was not normally written down or systematized as it was in Mesopotamia or Rome. The meaning of the sign was, apparently, not changed by the time on which it occurred.

α. ἐὰν βροντήσῃ, εὐετηρίαν ἄμα καὶ εὐφροσύνην δηλοῖ. | β. ἐὰν βροντήσῃ, διχόνοια τῷ δήμῳ ἔσται. | γ. ἐὰν βροντήσῃ, κατομβρίαν καὶ πόλεμον δηλοῖ.

42 *Iqqur ippuṣ*, paragraph 5, 1-12. Edition: Labat, *Un calendrier Babylonien*, 63. Translation: Robson, 'Scholarly conceptions', 67.

DIŠ ina Nisanni É DÙ-uš SUḪUŠ.BI NU GI.NA

DIŠ ina Aiari MIN ŠÀ. ḪUL IGI-mar

DIŠ ina Simâni (MIN) ŠÀ. ḪÚL.LA (GAR-šu)

DIŠ ina Du'uzi (MIN) É.BI SUMUN-bar

DIŠ ina Abi ŠÀ.BI DÙG.GA

DIVINATION REVEALS CONCEPTIONS OF TIME

Divination in order to discover the right time

One of the functions of divination was to determine the 'right time' to commence an undertaking or perform an action. When the Roman auspices were taken, the supernatural answered the question: should this action be performed and should it be performed now? If the answer was negative, the same question could be asked again at a later time. Taking the auspices in Rome – and in the final decades of the Republic extispicy and astrology also began to take an important place – both served to legitimate an undertaking and to discover the most favourable moment for it.

The standard Greek term for 'the right time' was *kairos* (in Latin: *occasio*).⁴³ The concept of *kairos* was already familiar in Greece in the Archaic period, for example implicitly in Hesiod's *Works and Days*.⁴⁴ Finding the right time was the central concern in the Greek divinatory processes performed before military actions of any kind. If the signs proved unfavourable, the army had to stay put, even if this

43 Cf. B. Schaffner, 'Kairos', *Brill's New Pauly Online*. Visited 18-08-2011.

44 E.g. Hes. *Op.* 694-698. Apart from the meaning 'the right time', *kairos* could also mean: the right season, the right place, due measure, advantage/profit. See for a detailed study of the concept and its uses in the archaic world, medicine, oratory, and politics: M. Trédé, *Kairos: Là-propos et l'occasion (Le mot et la notion, d'Homère à la fin du IVe siècle avant J.-C.)* (Paris 1992); but also M. Kerkhoff, 'Zum antiken Begriff des Kairos', *ZPhF* 27 (1973) 256-274.

was highly inconvenient. Xenophon's army wanted to move, but the signs did not allow it:

When they sacrificed, however, with a view to their departure, the victims would not prove favourable, and they accordingly ceased their offerings for that day.⁴⁵

In Mesopotamia, the queries contained explicit temporal restrictions: if the outcome of a divinatory session was negative, this would continue to be valid for, for example, thirty days' time.⁴⁶ In contrast to what is found in Greek and Roman sources, Mesopotamian queries could clearly be about a 'right time' in the future, tying in with a more fundamental difference which will be discussed later on:

To the king, my lord: your servant Issar-šumu-ereš. Good health to the king, my lord! May Nabû and Marduk bless the king, my lord! The 20th, the 22nd and the 25th are good days for concluding the treaty. We shall undertake (that) they may conclude it whenever the king, my lord, says.⁴⁷

45 Xen. *An.* 6.4.13.4-6.4.14.1.

θυομένοις δὲ ἐπὶ τῇ ἀφώδῳ οὐκ ἐγίγνετο τὰ ἱερά. ταύτην μὲν οὖν τὴν ἡμέραν ἐπαύσαντο.

46 Another way of finding the right time was to resort to hemerologies, as the expert Issar-šumu-ereš attempts in the fragment below. It should be noted that this is a different, non-divinatory, way of finding the right time.

47 Other examples are SAA 10 14 r.1-10; SAA 10 70. The text above is SAA 10 5 r.1-6. Translation: S. Parpola.

a-na LUGAL EN-ia

In all three cultural areas, there was such a thing as a ‘right time’ which could be discovered by means of divination. Again, time is perceived as non-homogeneous – it is not a free-flowing, undifferentiated mass but marked by distinct phases. This is supported by evidence for the dynamism of time in divinatory sources, most clearly in Rome. The Roman calendar was dynamic: a day could even *become* negative if a particularly bad event or sign from the supernatural (or both) happened to occur.⁴⁸ In this way, the appearance of signs affected the Roman calendar: divination could also influence the flow of time.

ARAD-ka m15—MU—KAM-eš

lu šul-mu

a-na LUGAL EN-ia

dAG u dAMAR.UTU

a-na LUGAL EN-ia

lik-ru-bu

UD-20-KAM2

UD-22-KAM2

UD-25-KAM2

a-na ša2-ka-ni

r. ša a-de-e

ṭa-a-ba

im—ma-at LUGAL be-li

i-qab-bu-u-ni

nu-ša2-aš-bi-it

liš-ku-nu

48 Michels, *The calendar of the Roman republic*, 63-64. See for an example Liv. 6.1.11-12.

Scope in time

The duration of time ('time horizons') which can be explored by means of divination differed in the three cultural areas.⁴⁹ One difficulty in the Greek material is that time (and its horizons) are normally left implicit. There are only a few scattered examples in the literary and epigraphical sources in which a moment in time is specified. Questions and answers usually referred to 'somewhere in the near past and future'.

As always there is the exception which proves the rule. There are three small groups of oracle questions at Dodona and Didyma which do specify time albeit to a limited extent. Clients in the first group asked about the situation in the present and about what should be done now. The present is emphasized by the use of νῦν ('now'):

God. ... Luck. Would I fare better in Orikos in the countryside, or as I am living now?⁵⁰

and:

49 See for 'time horizons': S.A. van 't Klooster, *Toekomstverkenning: ambities en de praktijk: een etnografische studie naar de productie van toekomstkennis bij het Ruimtelijk Planbureau (RPB)* (Delft 2007) 125-127.

50 Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk*, 75-76 (number 4). Translation: E. Eidinow.

Θεός . Τύχα . | 'Εν 'Ορικῶι κα | λῶιον πράσοι- | μι κατὰ χῶραν ἐ | ἡῶσπερ νῦν | Φοικέων

For Kleanor, about offspring to inherit, from Gonthe, the wife he has now?⁵¹

Or by describing a situation which is already in existence:

Hermon asks with which god he should reconcile himself in order to beget a useful child from Krètania apart from those he already has.⁵²

The second group refers explicitly to the future by means of, for example, ὕστερον:

[...] if I will be able to sail to Syrakuse, to the colony, later.⁵³

Or by explicitly mentioning 'future time' or 'that which is to be':

[...] and security of things and enjoyment from things to come.⁵⁴

51 Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk*, 89 (number 2). Trans.: E. Eidinow.
Κλεάνορι περὶ γενεᾶς | πατροδόχο ἐκ τάς νῦν | Γόνθας γυναικός

52 Lhôte, *Les lamelles oraculaires*, number 41. Translation E. Lhôte.
Ἡέρμῳδν τίνα | κα θεὸν ποτθέμ- | ενος γενεά F- | οἱ γένοιτο ἐκ K- | ρῆταίλας ὀνά- |
σιμος ποτ τᾷ ἐ- | ἄσσαι;

53 Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk*, 79 (number 17). Trans.: E. Eidinow.
[...] καὶ δυνήσῃ | πλὴν εἰς Συπακοσάς | πρὸς τὴν ἀποικίαν ὕστερο- | ν

54 Eadem, 92 (number 13). Translation: E. Eidinow.
[...] καὶ χρῆμάτων | ἐπιγγ[ύ]ασις καὶ τῶν ἰόντων ὄνασις

Gods. Good luck. Eu[b?]andros and his wife ask Zeus Naïos and Dione by praying to which of the gods or heroes or daimons and sacrificing will they and their household do better both now and for all time.⁵⁵

Another (small) body of exceptions which belong to the second group can be found at Didyma: three questions asked of the oracle – all by the Milesians between 228-225 – which state explicitly: καὶ νῦν καὶ εἰς τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον.⁵⁶

The third group refers explicitly to the past when explaining current signs which need to be dealt with in the present and near future.

(Alexandra, priestess of Demeter Thesmophoros asks:) Since from the time she assumed the office as priestess never have the gods been so manifest through their appearances [...] why is this [...]?⁵⁷

Furthermore, there is an oracle from Delphi stating that the enquirers should finish the work on the temple quickly so that the suppli-

55 Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk*, 111 (number 6). Trans.: E. Eidinow. Θε(ο)ί. Τύχαν ἀγαθάν. Ἐπικοινωνῆται Εὐβαν- | δρος καὶ ἁ γυνὰ τῶι Διεὶ τῶι Νάωι καὶ τῶι Δι- | ὠναι, τίνι κα θεῶν ἢ ἡρώων ἢ δαιμόνων | εὐχόμενοι καὶ φύοντες λῶϊον καὶ ἄμεινο- | ν πράσσοιεν καὶ αὐτοὶ καὶ ἁ οὔκησις καὶ νῦν | καὶ ἰς τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον.

56 And variations on this theme. Fontenrose, *Didyma*, H5 (228/7BC); H6(?) (228/7BC); H8 (225 BC).

57 Didyma, historical response 22 in Fontenrose, *Didyma*.

Ἐπεὶ ἐξότε τὴν ἱερατείαν ἀνελήφεν, οὐ- | δέποτε οὕτως οἱ θεοὶ ἐνφανεῖς δι' ἑπιστάσεων | γεγέννηται | [...] τί τὸ τοιοῦτο [..].

ants can be received in the right month.⁵⁸ Another example is a reply stating that every eight years the Athenians should look towards Harma and that they will see a sign of lightning. When this happens a procession will have to be sent to Delphi and a sacrifice will have to be made.⁵⁹

Despite these exceptions, in the Greek epigraphical materials explicit references to past, present and future are limited. Oracular questions obviously have a sense of time ingrained in them, but this is not formulated more specifically in the sources.⁶⁰ It might still be possible to ask whether there were limits to a predictable future and explainable past – and if so, what? Greek divination certainly tended to be concerned with a very restricted timeframe. In the Dodonaic materials, a suppliant could ask – and receive an answer to – questions about the near future. Clients asked about their children and there is one example in which a father enquires about his son's dis-

58 Fontenrose, *The Delphic oracle*, H 31.

59 Ibidem, H 57.

60 Note that there is one lamella of a person without citizenship who asks the oracle if he should request this citizenship now or in the future, which might be translated more explicitly as E. Eidinow does: 'Shall I request citizenship this year or the next?' Yet, perhaps a more neutral translation is better: 'Shall I request citizenship now at this time or in the coming time?' The *lamella* in question is Lhôte, *Les lamelles oraculaires*, number 61B (= Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk*, 115 (number 1)).

Ἦ αἰτέωμαι τὰν
πολιτείαν ἐπὶ ταῦτ'ι
ἢ τοῦ εἰσιόντος;

ease: whether or not he will get better. While this might theoretically refer to a longer period of time, the father was more probably concerned with a rapid cure.⁶¹ Where time is made explicit, there are no questions or answers referring to a distant future or a distant past. Many of the literary sources mirror this image of short-term concerns: even when Alexander's seer Aristander predicted that Alexander would take the city of Tyre that same month, this prediction was made on the last day of the month – and Alexander duly took the city on that same day.⁶² Propitiousness pronounced during extispicy usually had to do with an action or event which would take place in the very near future. This observation also applies to indications of negative events, such as impending death.⁶³

Literary sources also reveal wider time horizons. The Pythia at Delphi tells Croesus two things after his defeat. The first is that Apollo desired the downfall of Croesus' family – the consequence of a crime committed five generations ago – to occur one generation later, but this turned out to be impossible. The second is that Apollo had managed to postpone the downfall for three years.⁶⁴ Note that this is a retrospective use of divination, explaining the current situation by reference to the past. Ancient authors might have been tempted to employ the aspect of wide time horizons as a literary

61 Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk*, 105 (number 3).

62 Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 25.1-2.

63 See, e.g., also sources such as Arr. *Anab.* 7.18; Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 73.2; Plut. *Vit. Pyr.* 30.3.

64 Hdt. 1.91.1-3.

or rhetorical device, so caution should be taken with these literary materials – especially since epigraphical materials show such limited evidence of ‘seeing into the future or the past’. Time is elusive in the divinatory materials.

Greek divination tends to have a sense of urgency about it. Divination was always about a time which was never far away although this apparently did not even need to be specified. If we say the Greek diviner knows past, present and future, we must in practice be referring to the recent past and near future – with exceptions.

The Roman materials are even more preoccupied with the very near future or the recent past. The *prodigia* required semi-immediate action to make up for a disturbance in the recent past. After having acknowledged a *prodigium* as such, a course of action would need to be set out - whether through consultation of the Sibylline Books or by the intervention of *haruspices* or *pontifices* – and this was executed within a small space of time:

The sky seemed to be all on fire, and other portents were either actually seen, or people in their fright imagined that they saw them. To avert these alarming omens, public intercessions were ordered for three days, during which all the temples were filled with crowds of men and women imploring the protection of the gods.⁶⁵

65 Liv. 3.5.14. Translation: Rev. Canon Roberts. Edition: Teubner.
caelum visum est ardere plurimo igni, portentaque alia aut obversata oculis aut vanas exterritis ostentavere species. his avertendis terroribus in triduum feriae indictae, per quas omnia delubra pacem deum exposcentium virorum mulierumque turba inplebantur.

The two other principal methods of divination in Rome, the *auspicia* and reading the *exta*, revealed the approval or disapproval of the supernatural of present matters (reflecting the idea that it was important to ‘find the right moment’) or those in the near future.⁶⁶ In Rome, the most important methods of divination were concerned with the present and its immediate surroundings but this was normally not indicated very explicitly.

The Mesopotamian compendia are composed in a systematic and almost timeless fashion. In striking contrast to this, many of the queries of which they are composed mention very *specific* timeframes. Experts asked the supernatural a question such as:

[I ask you, Šamaš], great lord, whether fr[om this day, the 28th day of this month, the month ... of t]his [year], to the 27th day of [this month, ... of this year, for 30 days] and nights, the [term] stipulated [for the performance of (this) extispicy] — [(whether) within this stipulated term M]ugallu the Melide[an with his troops will] [...].⁶⁷

66 See also Plut. *Vit. Caes.* 43 where the time limit is 3 days and Plut. *Vit. Sull.* 17 where the limit is within a few days. It must be added that we do see some explicit timelimits here. Still, it must be noted that these are late and literary sources.

67 SAA 4 6 obv. 1-4. Edition and translation: I. Starr.

[a-šal-ka dUTU] EN GAL-ú GIM TA [UD-mu NE-i UD-28-KÁM šá ITI NE-i ITI.x]

[šá MU.AN.NA an]-ni-ti EN UD-27-KÁM šá [ITI NE-i ITI.x šá MU.AN.NA an-ni-ti]

[a-na 30 UD-MEŠ] 30 MI-MEŠ ši-kin [a-dan-ni-ia DÙ-eš-ti ba-ru-ti i-na

The question was framed by time: it was very specifically aimed at what the enemy would do during the next thirty days. The phrase containing the chronological reference describes the time period for which the divination would be valid, proposed to the supernatural by the expert:⁶⁸ ‘From this day, the ..th day of this month MN, until the ..day of the month MN of this year, for a period of X days and X nights, the term stipulated for the performance of extispicy – within this stipulated term.’⁶⁹ There are also tablets on which the timeframe is 100 days, 90 days, 50 days, 40 days, 20 days and 7 days.⁷⁰ It is uncertain on what basis the experts asked the supernatural for a particular timeframe but unquestionably the supernatural was thought to set the definitive timeframe in its reply. This frame could then be discovered by calculations on the basis of findings in the liver.⁷¹

ši-kin]

[a-dan-ni šu-a-tú m]mu-gal-lu KUR.mi-li-[da-a-a x x x x x x x x x x x x]
x] [...].

68 Other examples are SAA 4 4 obv. 2-3; 4 5 obv. 2-3; 4 23 obv. 2-4; 4 35 obv. 2-3; 4 45 r. 1-3; 4 46 r. 1-3; 4 47 obv. 2-5; 4 51 obv. 2-3.

69 Starr, *Queries*, xvi-xvii.

70 100 days: SAA 4 43 obv. 2-3; 90 days: SAA 4 139 obv. 2-3; 50 days: SAA 4 124 obv. 2-3; 40 days: SAA 4 44 obv. 4-5. Another example is SAA 4 125; 20 days: SAA 4 203 obv. 2-3. Other examples are SAA 4 28 obv. 2-3; 4 60 obv. 2-3; 7 days: SAA 4 49 obv. 2-3. See also Starr, *Queries*, xvi.

71 Ulla Jeyes suggests that the *adannu* (timeframe as stipulated by the gods) was dependent on particular features of the liver: U. Jeyes, ‘Divination as a science in ancient Mesopotamia’, *JEOL* 32 (1991-1992) 23-41, at 32. For a more detailed study see N.P. Heeßel, ‘The calculation of the stipulated

Mesopotamian divination was obviously directed towards defining the period for which the prediction was valid. The timeframe cannot be argued to have been much wider than the Greek one (although it was most probably more extensive than the Roman one). Nevertheless, it was very specific and precise: as a result of this specificity, the future with which Mesopotamian divination is concerned comes into much sharper focus than the Greek timeframe in which 'now' and 'later' were relatively fluid concepts for something happening either in the present or near future.

There is also a striking difference in social scope and space of divination, mirroring the findings on time. There was a Mesopotamian tendency to focus on the actions of the other as well as on one's own deeds. In Mesopotamia a client could have the expert ask about what *others* (for example, the enemy) would do or achieve. Only a couple of such questions are known from Greece: there, normally, either questions concerning the client himself or more general questions concerned with truth ('who/what caused X') were posed.⁷² A

term in extispicy' in: A. Annus (ed.), *Divination and interpretation of signs in the ancient world* (Chicago 2010) 163-175, at 165-168. He also refers to the fact that the timeframe is calculated differently from the way it was done for extispicy for the interpretation of celestial signs, as shown by Koch-Westenholz, *Babylonian liver omens*, 64.

72 Exceptions are (according to Lhôte's edition): 10b asking whether another person will succeed; 73 about whether or not somebody will be cured. It could be argued for the last question that the individual who was ill, was not able to come himself and therefore someone else would have to ask the question.

certain focus on the individual in the Greek material is to be expected because of the private nature of many oracle questions. However, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that the same pattern reoccurs in questions asked by Greek communities.⁷³ In Greece – and also in Rome – questions were almost without exception about the persons or collectives asking them. In Mesopotamian divination, questions such as the following could be asked: will person X do Y within a specified period of time? The evidence of social scope concurs with the evidence of time scope: an answer to this question would bridge a gap in social dimensions as well as in time.⁷⁴ The Mesopotamian supernatural appeared to know across borders of time and space.

73 Some exceptions: see the catalogue of historical questions by Fontenrose, *The Delphic oracle*, 244-267. Note that some of the questions included in the catalogue are late. Possible exceptions to the rule of asking about the self only are H₃ (individual question, spurious according to Fontenrose), H₁₇ (question about how to deal with a threatening individual); H₃₇ (question appears to be about the status of another individual – unless the one asking the question is also the one the answer is about); H₆₅ (question wanting to know Homer's birthplace and parents); H₆₉ (question about wanting to know where the soul of Plotinus has gone). I have not dealt with the questions Fontenrose does not think are historical here but it appears the frequency of asking questions about the other is about the same in all categories.

74 Terminology from Van 't Klooster, *Toekomstverkenning*, 125-127.

Use of time in divination: precedents

Past interpretations of signs were important when these same signs had to be interpreted again. Memories and experience of the past could be an aid when shaping ideas about the future. For example, looking back to the past could help a suppliant to feel safer in the future, as this Mesopotamian oracle expresses it:

[Like a] skilled pilot [I will st]eer [the ship] into a good port. [The fu]ture [shall] be like the past; [I will go] around you and protect you.⁷⁵

This is shown more explicitly in the following oracle, which attempts to imbue its new pronouncement with authority by reference to the past:

[O Esarhaddon, whos]e bosom [Iš]tar of Arbela has filled with favour!
Could you not rely on the previous utterance which I spoke to you?
Now you can rely on this later one too.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ SAA 9 2.2 i 16-19. Edition and translation S. Parpola.

[a-ki LÚ.M]Á*.LAH4 dam*-qí ina ka-a-ri DÙG.GA

[GIŠ.MÁ ú-k]al-la a-ki šá pa-ni-ti

[lu ina u]r*-ki-ti ina bat-bat-ti-ka

[a-sa-hu]r* ma-šar-ta-ka a*-na-šar.

⁷⁶ SAA 9 1.10 vi 3-12. Edition and translation S. Parpola.

[maš-šur—PAB—AŠ šá] ina DÙG.GA

[d15] šá URU.arba-il

ha-bu-un-šú

tu-mal-lu-u-ni

Precedent is an even more explicit way of using the past to consider the future. A precedent is a past event, or previously ‘proven’ relationship between events, which serves as a guide for present decision making. Present circumstances are considered the same as those in the past: an analogy between past and present can be drawn. It should be noted that the use of a precedent is not necessarily binding; that a precedent is based on reason; although it can be followed, a precedent can be overruled if earlier decisions on which they were based are thought to be unjust. Therefore a precedent is different from experience, customs (although these two can overlap), and rules: experience is a personal or communal but general idea about how something has been done before; a rule (or law) is a standard which is officially organized and usually binding; and a custom derives from a supposedly ancient source. In contrast, a precedent is a particular instance or case from the past which merely provides a guideline about the future in the present.⁷⁷ It can come from an ancient source, but this is not necessary.

da-ba-bu pa-ni-u
 šá a-qa-ba-kan-ni
 ina UGU-hi la ta-zi-zi
 ú-ma-a
 ina UGU ur-ki-i
 ta-za-az-ma

⁷⁷ N. Duxbury, *The nature and authority of precedent* (Cambridge 2008) 1-20.

Using precedents

Precedents were occasionally found in Roman divinatory practice. For example, there is a possible attestation of precedent in Livy 8.18.12.⁷⁸ While it should be taken into account that most of the Sibylline Books are mostly lost, this does not amount to much. An interesting contrast can be found in the materials from Greece and Mesopotamia, which will be the content of the following paragraphs.

From Classical times, use of precedents was common in a number of non-divinatory Greek areas of thought. 'The precedent [...] may have served [...] to provide an aura of consistency to a system that was all too unpredictable.'⁷⁹ Predicting, or prognosticating about,

⁷⁸ Liv. 8.18.11-12: prodigii ea res loco habita captisque magis mentibus quam consceleratis similis uisa; itaque memoria ex annalibus repetita in secessionibus quondam plebis clauum ab dictatore fixum alienatas[que] discordia mentes hominum eo piaculo compotes sui fecisse, dictatorem clauī figendi causa creari placuit.

⁷⁹ A. Lanni, 'Arguing from "precedent": modern perspectives on Athenian practice' in: E.M. Harris & L. Rubinstein (eds), *The law and the courts in ancient Greece* (London 2004) 159-171, at 167-168. Some Greek words could be translated as 'precedent', most notably *paradeigma*, although this is not usually used in our strict sense of the word as stated above. *Paradeigma* is usually translated as pattern or model, exemplar, precedent, argument, proof from example. What is interesting about the word *paradeigma* is that it is used in literature from the Classical period, and all our examples are from the Classical period. We might find a watershed here, showing a diachronic change in the way the past was used. The orators did use it in 'our way', e.g., Lys. *or.* 25.23; for an example from the

the future was used in the practice of ancient medicine. This calls to mind the method of prognosis favoured by Hippocrates. To practise this method, an ancient Greek doctor needed to be familiar with precedents, in this case previous patients diagnosed with the same illness – past case studies. The use of case studies was one of the innovative aspects of Hippocratic medicine. Non-binding precedent was also used in political or juridical speeches. Past cases would be used to point out similarities – and differences – in comparison to the present case, arguing for a punishment similar to, or different from, that handed down in the case used as a precedent. Lysias states: ‘You ought therefore, gentlemen, to take the events of the past as your example in resolving on the future course of things.’⁸⁰

law courts of ancient Greece see Lycurg. *Contra Leocrates* 9: παρείσθαι δὲ τὴν ὑπὲρ τῶν τοιούτων τιμωρίαν συμβέβηκεν, ὦ ἄνδρες, οὐ διὰ ῥαθυμίας τῶν τότε νομοθετούντων, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ μήτ’ ἐν τοῖς πρότερον χρόνοις γεγενῆσθαι τοιοῦτον μηδὲν μήτ’ ἐν τοῖς μέλλουσιν ἐπίδοξον εἶναι γενήσεσθαι. (‘The reason why the penalty for such offences, gentlemen, has never been recorded is not that the legislators of the past were neglectful; it is that such things had not happened hitherto and were not expected to happen in the future.’ Translation: J.O. Burt.)

80 Lys. *Ap.* 23. Translation W.R.M. Lamb.

χρὴ τοίνυν, ὦ ἄνδρες δικασταί, τοῖς πρότερον γεγεννημένοις παραδείγμασι χρωμένους βουλευέσθαι περὶ τῶν μελλόντων ἔσεσθαι.

Lanni, ‘Arguing from “precedent”’, *passim*; A.P. Dorjahn, ‘Legal precedent in Athenian courts’, *APhA* 58 (1927) xxviii-xxix; Clarke, *Making time for the past*, 274-286.

Use of precedent in divination cannot be explicitly proven in the Greek world until the second century AD, because the sources are not usually explicit about on what basis interpretation took place. Take, for example, the following passage from the *Iliad*: ‘Even as he (Ajax) thus spake, there flew forth a bird upon the right hand, an eagle of lofty flight; and thereat the host of the Achaeans shouted aloud, heartened by the omen.’⁸¹ Interpretation of this sign is, as far as we can tell, based on experience: good was expected to follow this sign. At other times, parallels seem to be at the basis of the interpretation.

Matters are clearer when the work of Artemidoros is considered. He claims that all the dreams he has noted down in his books had actually occurred and that his books have been wholly composed on the basis of precedent: ‘[...] I have patiently listened to old dreams and their consequences. For there was no other possible way in which to get practice in these matters. As a result, from the superabundance of examples, I am able to discuss each individually [more than anyone might have expected] so as to speak the truth without

81 Hom. *Il.* 13.821-823. Translation A.T. Murray.

Ὡς ἄρα οἱ εἰπόντι ἐπέπτατο δεξιὸς ὄρνις | αἰετὸς ὑψιπέτης· ἐπὶ δ’ ἴαχε λαὸς Ἀχαιῶν | θάρσυνος οἰωνῶ· See also Homer *Il.* 24.290-295. Translation A.T. Murray: ἀλλ’ εὐχεο σύ γ’ ἔπειτα κελαινεφέϊ Κρονίῳ | Ἰδαίῳ, ὅς τε Τροίην κατὰ πάσαν ὁράται, | αἵτε δ’ οἰωνὸν ταχὺν ἄγγελον, ὅς τέ οἱ αὐτῶ | φίλτατος οἰωνῶν, καὶ εὖ κράτος ἐστὶ μέγιστον, | δεξιόν, ὄφρα μιν αὐτὸς ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖσι νοήσας | τῶ πίσυνος ἐπὶ νῆας ἴης Δαναῶν ταχυπῶλων.

nonsense [...].⁸² He chose to use those precedents which he had heard first hand: as these were the most reliable ones in his opinion. In Artemidoros' case his purpose was to make the precedents accessible, but simultaneously to formalize them to some extent, thereby providing a guideline for other dream-interpreters to use.

From the examples given above a Greek development towards the use of precedent can be cautiously discerned – bearing in mind the possibility that precedents might have begun to be used some considerable time before the first explicit reference to such a practice – when considering the non-divinatory evidence, it might be that precedent started to be used in Classical times.

The so-called 'historical' omens in Mesopotamia (partly) functioned on the basis of precedent: they indicated particular signs which had announced important occurrences in the past. Cogently, trainee-experts were taught the art of extispicy using model livers which were at least partly constructed on the basis of previous findings. This having been said, the historical omens and liver models were a relatively small body of texts and objects which were used on very particular occasions. Their role in divination was unimportant compared to that of the Neo-Assyrian compendia, the systematic nature of which has been discussed before. This systematization

82 Artem. 1 Prooemium 42-46. Translation: White, *Interpretation of dreams*, 13-14.

οὐ γὰρ ἦν ἄλλως χρῆσασθαι τῇ κατὰ ταῦτα γυμνασίᾳ. ὅθεν μοι περιγέγονεν ἐκ περιουσίας ἔχειν περὶ ἐκάστου λέγειν [πλείονα μὲν ἢ προσδοκῆσαι ἂν τις] οὕτως ὡς αὐτὰ τάληθῇ λέγοντα μὴ φλυαρεῖν.

means that the future in Neo-Assyrian Empire was based on something other than precedents. Precedents could well have been the basis for the very first compendia, but by the first millennium the compendia had evolved into something quite different – a formalized list of every possible sign imaginable.⁸³ The institutionalized position of divination and scholarship in general permitted this formalization and systematization of compendia. Systematization disconnected the prediction of the future from a knowledge of the past: in Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia, prediction became timeless.

Two developments may cautiously be discerned, then: Greek use of experience became use of precedent; Mesopotamian use of precedent became radical systematization. While in the first case the past came to be seen as a reliable basis for a guideline, in the latter case explicit use of the past did not seem to do anymore and theory became a necessity.

83 Although there were exceptions: see the historical omens. But these are special and there are relatively few of them. See further on fate F. Rochberg-Halton, 'Fate and divination in Mesopotamia' in: H. Hirsch & H. Hunger (eds), *Vorträge gehalten auf der 28. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Wien, 6.-10. Juli 1981* (Horn 1982) 363-371; Bottéro, 'Symptômes, signes, écritures', 144-168; Larsen, 'The Mesopotamian lukewarm mind', 212-214.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

This chapter has shown that divination was organized and, to an extent, even restricted by existing conceptions of time. There were certain divinatory activities which needed to take place at a particular time of day or on a specific date. I have discussed how the interpretation of signs observed during divination was influenced by conceptions of time: a sign could have a different meaning, depending on the time of day at which or the date on which it occurred. Divination also illuminates existing conceptions of time. It has been noted that divination functioned to find time: the right time. As we have seen, finding out the right time in a divinatory context is only explicitly seen in Rome, where the supernatural was asked to legitimate the beginning of an undertaking at that particular moment. In a slightly different form, this feature is also found in Greece, where at Dodona both military commanders and individuals asked the supernatural whether or not they should do something *now*. In Mesopotamia, the 'right time' was, to a considerable extent, explicitly determined by means of hemerologies (and not by divination). Implicitly, the specific time horizons in the Mesopotamian queries also reveal a preoccupation with finding the right time. Thus, in all three cultural areas, time was conceived as non-homogeneous.

All in all, Mesopotamian divination can be described as a tool used to consider a relatively distant future which might lie a full year ahead: it could work as a 'telescope' in time, from the present into

the future. The future could be seen through the timeless lens of divination: to some extent time appears to have been made permeable by means of divination. In contrast, Greek and Roman divination worked as a 'looking glass' as far as time was concerned: in Greece and Rome, divination served to analyse a very narrow space of time in close proximity to the individual. The looking glass of Roman divination focused on past and present, while Greek past, present and future were closely connected and could be seen through the divinatory looking glass at one glance.