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Worlds full of signs: ancient Greek divination in context

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8. Dealing with uncertainty

How did ancient individuals deal with their uncertainties about past, present and future? These uncertainties certainly existed in the mind of ancient man, as much as in that of any man. They must have played an important part in daily life, as they are central to most human decisions and actions. What was the ancient day-to-day response to uncertainty? Part of the answer is certainly: using divination.

The following enquiry into the relationship between ancient uncertainties and divination touches upon wider issues of ancient dealings with uncertainty and provides an insight into this function of divination. In its turn, this nuances the way the ancient world is sometimes depicted – as a place whose inhabitants considered themselves to be in the grip of inescapable fate.¹

Conceptions of fate in the ancient world have been a frequent topic of discussion – in both ancient and modern times –, but again:

¹ See, e.g., A. Giddens, *Runaway world: how globalization is reshaping our lives* (London 1999) 40-41. This passage is discussed in more detail in what follows. His statements are not wrong, but it pays to be aware of the ease with which all too stereotypical ideas remain in use.

it is usually philosophers who have left us their ideas on this subject.² The particulars of the relationship between divination and fate have been the subject of much debate by modern scholars. J.N. Lawson explains the apparent paradox as follows: ‘The only way in which one can ‘divine’ what the future holds is for the future to be *predeter-*

2 See on the complementary and clashing roles of the gods and fate in Greece and Rome: Versnel, *Coping with the gods*, 218-220. This is where the question/paradox stated in Lucian *Demon*. 37 is relevant: if a divination expert can change what has been ordained for the future, he should ask a huge amount for his skills. If he cannot, why try to look into the future and pay for it? Some titles on the Graeco-Roman world are W.E. Heitland, *The Roman fate: an essay in interpretation* (Cambridge 1922); idem, *Iterum, a further discussion on Roman fate* (Cambridge 1925); P.E. Eberhard, *Das Schicksal als poetische Idee bei Homer* (Paderborn 1923); E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the irrational* (Berkeley 1951) 2-27; B.C. Dietrich, *Death, fate and the gods: the development of a religious idea in Greek popular belief and in Homer* (London 1965); W.C. Greene, *Moirā: fate, good, and evil in Greek thought* (Cambridge, MA 1944); E. Sarischoulis, *Schicksal, Götter und Handlungsfreiheit in den Epen Homers* (Stuttgart 2008); and see also R.B. Onians, *The origins of European thought: about the body, the mind, the soul, the world, time, and fate* (Cambridge 1951). Focusing on Jews in the Graeco-Roman context is O. Kaiser, ‘Gottesgewißheit und Weltbewußtsein in der frühhellenistischen jüdischen Weisheit’ in: idem, *Der Mensch unter dem Schicksal. Studien zur Geschichte, Theologie und Gegenwartsbedeutung der Weisheit* (Berlin 1985) 122-134. On fate and divination in Mesopotamia see Rochberg-Halton, ‘Fate and divination’, 363-371; but also J.N. Lawson, *The concept of fate in ancient Mesopotamia of the first millennium: toward an understanding of Šimtu* (Wiesbaden 1994); Polonsky, *The rise of the sun god.*

mined. Yet, once one knows what is predetermined in one's future, then there exists the possibility of avoiding or changing it.³ As we shall see, this statement needs to be nuanced: in the three cultural areas the function of divination was not generally to find out what was predetermined. The predictability of the future and of fate are two issues which will recur repeatedly.⁴

Although I have used the word 'uncertainty', current scholarship concerned with assessing the way in which ancient individuals thought about, and dealt with, the future, has a tendency to focus on the concept of 'risk'. In his *Risk and survival in ancient Greece: reconstructing the rural domestic economy*, Thomas Gallant is essentially using the term in an etic sense when he argues that 'Greek peasants developed an extensive but delicate web of risk-management strategies'.⁵ The term has also been used in its etic sense by various other scholars, as among them Peter Garnsey, Jerry Toner and Esther Eidinow.⁶ On account of the modern preoccupation with risk, per-

3 J.N. Lawson, *The concept of fate*, 79.

4 See the difficulties Rochberg-Halton sees when applying the term 'fate' to Mesopotamia. She prefers to use the untranslated term *šimtu*, 'that which has been determined by decree' instead of 'fate' (Rochberg-Halton, 'Fate and divination', 363).

5 T.W. Gallant, *Risk and survival in ancient Greece: reconstructing the rural domestic economy* (Cambridge 1991) ix, *passim*; see for an earlier use of the term risk by Gallant: T.W. Gallant, 'Crisis and response: risk-buffering behaviour in Hellenistic Greek communities', *JIH* 19 (1989) 393-413.

6 P. Garnsey, *Famine and food supply in the Graeco-Roman world: responses to risk and crisis* (Cambridge 1988) *passim*; J. Toner, *Popular*

haps it is not strange that this concept has been introduced into studies of the ancient world. For the purposes of our enquiries, it is essential to determine whether 'risk' really is a useful concept in analysing the role of divination as a tool for thinking about possibilities in the ancient world. This takes us into the field of future studies and related subjects.

RISK?

Uncertainty is created by everything humans do not or cannot know. Humans can thrive on uncertainty because they experience hope and even fear as stimulating emotions. Paradoxically, simultaneously every attempt is made to diminish that same uncertainty because it is necessary to have some idea or conception of the future if one is to make up one's mind about which actions to take.⁷ Therefore, generally speaking, the attitude of most humans towards uncertainty is ambivalent. Even if humans accept the fact that they cannot estimate probabilities, they still want to know. See, for example, Beard, *Life in ancient Rome* (Cambridge 2009) 11-53, especially 12; Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk, passim*, especially 22.

7 It appears that uncertainty is what upsets people most. Research into serious illness has found that, at least in the case of a test to find out whether or not individuals have the gene for Huntington's disease, they were actually less upset when the test indicated that they had the gene than if the test proved inconclusive. See R. Hastie & R.M. Dawes, *Rational choice in an uncertain world: the psychology of judgment and decision making* (London 2010) 331-332.

mate or predict the future by means of rational thought, they will still attempt to do so – anything is better than complete and utter uncertainty.⁸

In modern Western society, risk and uncertainty are inextricably connected:⁹ there are risky uncertainties as well as uncertain risks.¹⁰ Closer inspection reveals that risk is a sub-category of uncertainty. Uncertainty is always present, but some uncertain situations are also risks.¹¹ There are no risks which are not uncertain: death, for example, is not considered a risk – it is a certainty (the only question

8 In a game environment, 'despite feedback through a thousand trials, even when the subjects are explicitly told that only the base rate prediction is relevant – the sequence is random with no repetitive patterns – subjects cannot bring themselves to believe that the situation is one in which they cannot predict.' Hastie & Dawes, *Rational choice*, 323.

9 On risk and uncertainty as two sides of the same coin: M.B.A. van Asselt, *Perspectives on uncertainty and risk: the PRIMA approach to decision support* (Boston 2000) 205; cf. 205-226.

10 See, e.g., M.B.A. van Asselt, 'Onzekere risico's en riskante onzekerheden' in: E. Vos & G. van Calster (eds), *Risico en voorzorg in de rechtsmaatschappij* (Antwerpen 2004) 1-16, at 3; M.B.A. van Asselt & L. Smits, 'Onzekere risico's: de ontdekking van rekenen met kansen' in: J.P.M. Geraedts, M.B.A. van Asselt & L. Koenen (eds), *Leven met onzekerheid: cahier bio-wetenschappen en maatschappij* (Leiden 2008) 5-11, at 8.

11 Cf. WRR rapport, *Onzekere veiligheid: verantwoordelijkheden rond fysieke veiligheid* (Amsterdam 2008) 113-115. On uncertain risks see M.B.A. van Asselt & O. Renn, 'Risk governance', *JRR* 14 (2011) 431-449; G. de Vries, I. Verhoeven & M. Boeckhout, 'Taming uncertainty: the WRR approach to risk governance', *JRR* 14 (2011) 485-499, at 489-491.

is *when* it will happen, not *that* it will happen).¹² Modern man thinks about most uncertainties almost automatically in terms of risk, but this is by no means a standard or natural way of thinking: risk is a human construct.

What does the term 'risk' mean and where does it differ from 'uncertainty'? Whereas uncertainty can be roughly defined as anything yet unknown, risk is usually thought to be *quantified* uncertainty and is used to refer to situations in which the probabilities of the occurrence of an event are known and the consequences of an event can be – or are attempted to be – estimated. These consequences are assessed by societal norms and values and this judgment decides to what degree the risk is considered negative.¹³ When enough is known of the two factors of probability and consequences of the occurrence, uncertainty becomes a calculated risk which can be assessed and managed. In other words: 'risk refers to hazards that are actively assessed in relation to future possibilities'.¹⁴ Risk assess-

12 I am grateful to M.B.A. van Asselt for a stimulating conversation on this topic. In my opinion, religion might be an additional factor: early Christians and those polytheists who believed in an afterlife might have thought differently about this matter. However, everyone can agree that at least the body will die and that this is a certainty – whatever happens afterwards.

13 For a (modern) example of how different people of different gender, age and class can experience risk see the excellent publication by J. Tulloch & D. Lupton, *Risk and everyday life* (London 2003) 17-40.

14 Giddens, *Runaway world*, 40. And in the form of a formula – which goes back to Frank Knight: $\text{risk} = \text{probability}_{\text{event}} \times \text{damage}_{\text{event}}$. Knight's

ment and management are not carried out on an incidental basis: they are a systematic way of dealing with hazards, dangers or chances (and often communally). Having said this, it bears repeating that risk always remains a construct: we quantify uncertainties on an uncertain basis.¹⁵ Uncertainty cannot be completely quantified or

seminal work is: F.H. Knight, *Risk, uncertainty and profit* (Boston 1921). Cf. J.O. Zinn, 'Introduction' in: idem (ed.), *Social theories of risk and uncertainty: an introduction* (Malden, MA 2008) 1-17, at 5. This formula has been rightly criticized because it makes risk assessment look like a simple sum (although the header 'damage' does take a certain subjectivism into account and can, according to many, also consist of 'chances'), which is not the case – although it is often treated like this in practice. For explicit criticism on Knight's formula and its use see M.B.A. van Asselt, *Risk governance: over omgaan met onzekerheid en mogelijke toekomst* (Maastricht 2007) 18-20; Van Asselt & Renn, 'Risk governance', 436-438.

¹⁵ On positive risks (related to the subjectivity of risks) see, for example, S. Lyng, *Edgework: the sociology of risk-taking* (London 2005), *passim*; S. Lyng, 'Edgework, risk and uncertainty' in: J.O. Zinn (ed.), *Social theories of risk and uncertainty: an introduction* (Malden, MA 2008) 106-137; P. Slovic, *The feeling of risk: new perspectives on risk perception* (London 2010) as well as the following more specifically historical work about why people took and take chances by buying lottery tickets and so on: R. Brenner & G.A. Brenner, *Gambling and speculation: a theory, a history, and a future of some human decisions* (Cambridge 1990) 19-48. In my view, the best publication on the psychological aspect of risk – on how modern individuals assess and determine dangers, thereby turning them into risks by probabilistic thinking, is G.M. Breakwell, *The psychology of risk* (Cambridge 2007). Cf. Van Asselt, *Perspectives on uncertainty and risk*, 152; I. Starr & C. Whipple, 'Risks

anticipated – otherwise it would become a certainty – and inherent uncertainty is an inherent component of risk (as the world ‘probability’ implies).¹⁶ After the assessment of a risk, its management can commence: risk management is a conscious strategy adopted on the basis of a prior assessment.¹⁷

The way individuals deal with uncertainty has undergone great changes over time.¹⁸ The first developments in the direction of our kind of risk society appeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the Spanish and Portuguese began to use the term which would become the English ‘risk’ in a spatial sense: it meant that a ship was sailing uncharted waters.¹⁹ It was later used in a temporal

of risk decisions’, *Science* 208 (1980) 1114-1119.

16 Van Asselt, *Perspectives on uncertainty and risk*, 81-82; Van Asselt, ‘Onzekere risico’s en riskante onzekerheden’, 1-16.

17 Note that there is no generally accepted definition of risk. Therefore here I shall outline some current approaches. For research into how individuals use the term risk in the modern world, which we shall not pursue further here as it is an investigation of modern Western (subjective) attitudes towards risk and danger – and this is not applicable to the ancient world because ancient man was dealing with completely different circumstances see Tulloch & Lupton, *Risk*, 17-40.

18 For a concise introduction see D. Lupton, *Risk* (New York 1999) 17-35.

19 Giddens, *Runaway world*, 21-23. See for a somewhat earlier date I. Wilkinson, *Anxiety in a risk society* (London 2001) 92. The etymology of the word is disputed. One theory is as follows: ‘ultimately it [the word risk] may be derived from the Arabic word risq which means riches or good fortune. However, where there is also an attempt to recover its origins in the Greek

sense, referring to the quantified uncertainties about the future.²⁰ Anthony Giddens among others says it is this embrace of risk which has created and indeed enabled the modern world – the way man thinks about himself, the globalization of the world and the widespread presence of capitalism. Ulrich Beck and Giddens consider modern society one in which the main aim is to minimize risk, a term which in our world is virtually equated with danger although this is by no means a given (as will be discussed).²¹ The ‘risk society’

word rhiza, meaning ‘cliff’, and the Latin *resicare*, meaning ‘to cut off short’, John Ayto suggests that risk might be understood to have its semantic roots embedded in a classical maritime vocabulary as a term invoking the perils of sailing too close to inshore rocks’ (Wilkinson, *Anxiety*, 91).

20 Giddens, *Runaway world*, 21-23.

21 U. Beck, A. Giddens & S. Lash, *Reflexive modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order* (Cambridge 1994) 45; A. Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age* (London 1991) 109-143. On Beck and Giddens see also Lupton, *Risk*, 58-83. See also the bibliography for some of the prolific writings of Beck and Giddens. Their contributions to the risk debate have been applied in countless studies in different fields. See more generally Wilkinson, *Anxiety*, 93. There is a second approach to the theme of risk, as sketched by Lupton, the so-called ‘governmentality’ paradigm, partly based on ideas of Michel Foucault, which is basically concerned with governmental control of risks for society as a whole. This is the way the concept of risk is used by those who deal with terrorism and other communal threats, concisely explained in Lupton, *Risk*, 84-103 – again, including a useful bibliography for the paradigm. It will appear that a communal way of dealing with threats (whether they are uncertainties or risks) is very particular to the modern world. The

is something which is particular to the modern world.²² The modern use of risk, which is deeply rooted in probabilistic thought, contrasts

third paradigm is that of Mary Douglas, which is usually referred to as 'cultural/symbolic' paradigm. Also according to these thinkers, risk is a modern Western invention. It is supposed to serve as a tool by means of which a particular danger can be managed. An important issue in this paradigm is the emphasis that the idea of risk is culturally defined. For various reasons, every society has cultural conceptions about what is considered a risk, but there are some common themes as well. Douglas argues that pollution, for example, is considered an ambiguity, and therefore a danger in many societies. Ambiguity is seen to be risky to the stability of society. This means that '[...] "risk" may be understood as the cultural response to transgression [...]': (Lupton, *Risk*, 45). The biggest risks in societies are therefore usually moral and political. (For a brief critique on Douglas' theory but also the way it has been used, or misused, by others see Lupton, *Risk*, 56-57). See Douglas, *Risk acceptability*; M. Douglas & A. Wildavsky, *Risk and culture: an essay on the selection of technical and environmental dangers* (Berkeley 1982) 186-198). Lupton states that one of the main problems with this theory is '[...] the idea of risk is transcribed simply as unacceptable danger'. (M. Douglas, *Risk and blame: essays in cultural theory* (London 1992) 39). In this way, the concept of risk has become so general it can no longer be used as a heuristic tool in research.

²² The 'risk society' is a term used by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck ('Risikogesellschaft': U. Beck, *Risikogesellschaft: auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main 1986) *passim*) to qualify modern society. A brief summary and critique can be found in N. Huls, 'Recht en veiligheid in de risicomaatschappij' in: E. Vos & G. van Calster (eds), *Risico en voorzorg in de rechtsmaatschappij* (Antwerpen 2004) 31-43, at 31-33.

markedly with experiences in the ancient world.²³ From an emic angle, ancient risk-vocabulary is non-existent, whereas from an etic angle, quantifications of uncertainty and application of risk-thinking are not present either.²⁴

To illustrate this, first an investigation into theoretical ideas about chance and probability is required. Mesopotamian mathematics was a very well-developed branch of science, but they are innocent of specific calculations of chance or of probability.²⁵ In Greece,

23 A very general article emphasizing this point is M. Adelson, 'Reflections on the past and future of the future', *TFSC* 36 (1989) 27-37; J. Johnson-Hanks, 'When the future decides: uncertainty and intentional action in contemporary Cameroon', *CurrAnthr* 46 (2005) 363-385. These are merely some examples of many publications which could be mentioned here. See for an recent publication in the field of ancient history in which probability is argued not to have existed in the ancient world, but the author still attempts 'to re-create an "embedded" discourse of risk' in the ancient materials: M. Beard, 'Risk and the humanities' in: L. Skinns, M. Scott & T. Cox (eds), *Risk* (Cambridge 2011) 85-108, at 90-91.

24 For example, the Greek word *kindunos* has many times been translated as risk or something similar, but in its strict sense this word means 'danger'. The translation of *kindunos* as risk reveals more about modern ways of thinking about danger than about those in the Greek world.

25 There is no discussion of probabilistic thinking in E. Robson, *Mathematics in ancient Iraq: a social history* (Princeton 2008) and K.R. Nemet-Nejad, *Cuneiform mathematical texts as a reflection of everyday life in Mesopotamia* (New Haven 2003) although, this last work, contains a discussion of the way interest was calculated – but, although thoughts about representing percentages can be seen here, this is not the same as probabi-

some elementary reflections of a probabilistic kind can be found in Aristotle:

To succeed in many things, or many times, is difficult; for instance, to repeat the same throw ten thousand times with the dice would be impossible, whereas to make it once or twice is comparatively easy.²⁶

In Rome we do come across some attempts to think about the future in terms of calculated chance, odds and probability: Cicero (perhaps on the basis of Aristotle!) thought about the problem of certain knowledge and the probability of certainty. He provides ‘calculations on chance’ for dicing, albeit only very basic ones: they express the thought that if one throws the knucklebones a hundred times, it is not possible to obtain the highest throw all the time:

Four dice are cast and a Venus throw results—that is chance; but do you think it would be chance, too, if in one hundred casts you made one hundred Venus throws?²⁷

listic thinking. In a personal communication, E. Robson confirmed the idea that probabilistic thinking was non-existent in Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia (15-09-2011).

²⁶ Arist. *Cael.* 292a28-30. Translation by W.K.C. Guthrie.

Ἔστι δὲ τὸ κατορθοῦν χαλεπὸν ἢ τὸ πολλὰ ἢ τὸ πολλάκις, οἷον μυρίου ἀστραγάλους Χίους βαλεῖν ἀμήχανον, ἀλλ’ ἓνα ἢ δύο ῥᾶρον.

²⁷ Cic. *Div.* 1.13.23. Translation: W.A. Falconer.

Quattuor tali iacti casu Venerium efficiunt; num etiam centum Venerios, si quadringentos talos ieceris, casu futuros putas?

Or in another passage:

Nothing is so uncertain as a cast of dice and yet there is no one who plays often who does not sometimes make a Venus-throw and occasionally twice or thrice in succession.²⁸

It seems unlikely that Cicero was the only person to think about these issues, but no Roman theory of probability has come down to us: ancient man simply did not reason in this way.²⁹ Furthermore, it should be noted that experts in probability theory are disinclined to see the elementary ideas expressed by Aristotle and Cicero as true probability theory in the modern sense.³⁰ For all these reasons it

28 Cic. *Div.* 2.59.121. Translation: W.A. Falconer.

Quid est tam incertum quam talorum iactus? Tamen nemo est quin saepe iactans Venerium iaciat aliquando, non numquam etiam iterum ac tertium.

29 Why the mathematics of chance were not developed in the ancient world is unknown – there are plenty of theories which ascribe this to an ancient sense of determinism, reliance on the supernatural, a lack of empirical examples and a lack of stimulus from economic developments which would have necessitated probability theories. Whatever the case, no mathematics of chance were developed, reasons for which must be sought in ancient mindsets, as discussed in what follows. Cf. I. Hacking, *The emergence of probability: a philosophical study of early ideas about probability, induction and statistical inference* (Cambridge 1975) 3-5.

30 P.M. Lee, 'History of probability theory' in: T. Rudas (ed.), *Handbook of probability: theory and applications* (Los Angeles 2008) 3-14, at 3-4. See for a very interesting and accessible – to non-mathematicians – publication about modern probabilistic thinking: I. Hacking, *The taming of chance*

seems a safe inference to assume that the idea of risk or its management is not convincingly attested in the three ancient cultural areas under consideration.

Second, practical applications of thinking about future occurrences might be investigated. The redistributive aspect of the Mesopotamian economic system might be seen as contributing in part at least to some form of risk management. For example, the provision of food seems to have been more structurally organized than in Greece or Rome.³¹ At the same time, the supply of water seems to

(Cambridge 1990). Here the mathematics of chance are explained using case studies, to exemplify the developments which took place in the 19th and 20th centuries.

31 See for the supply of food and a comparison between Rome and early Europe and a number of problems related to coping with 'risk' and/or uncertainty in this sense: W. Jongman & R. Dekker, 'Public intervention in the food supply in pre-Industrial Europe' in: P. Halstead & J. O'Shea (eds), *Bad year economics: cultural responses to risk and uncertainty* (Cambridge 1989) 114-122. For more on soldiers' rations see L. Foxhall & H.A. Forbes, 'Sitometreia: the role of grain as a staple food in classical antiquity', *Chiron* 12 (1982) 41-90, *passim*. It should be noted that this article also states (pp. 59-60) that in 2nd century BC Samos citizens would receive rations of grain from the city –whether or not this was because of a crisis is not known. Unquestionably the import of grain was such an important topic in the Athenian assembly in Classical times that the city regulated the import of grain and attempts were made to regulate costs to achieve 'a fair price', especially if there was a shortage of grain. However, when grain was imported it was not redistributed by the polis. See for amounts that would have been imported P. Garnsey, 'Grain for Athens' in: P.A. Cartledge & F.D.

have been subjected to some sort of organization in all three cultural areas.³² Furthermore, all of the areas had systems to spread the costs

Harvey (eds), *Crux: essays presented to G.E.M. de Ste. Croix on his 75th birthday* (Exeter 1985) 62-75. See for other ways of obtaining food Gallant, *Risk and survival*, 179-182. All in all, although some efforts were made, it is hard to speak of a real safeguard for the community. In Rome, mass storage, distribution and price regulation were definitely available – although import was never fully regulated by the State, contracts were handed out to individuals who supplied grain to the city: Garnsey, *Famine and food supply*, 188-268; P. Garnsey, 'Grain for Rome' in: P. Garnsey, K. Hopkins & C.R. Whittaker (eds), *Trade in the ancient economy* (London 1983) 118-130, at 126-128. Before Gaius Gracchus this was as far as it went: '[the grain supplies were] insufficient for the population of the capital as a whole. Only in emergencies was the government prompted to further action, and such action, most obviously the purchasing of additional supplies of grain, was usually ad hoc and not designed to ward off future crises.' Quote from Garnsey, 'Grain for Rome', 126. See also B. Sirks, 'Supplying Rome: safeguarding the system' in: E. Papi (ed.), *Supplying Rome and the Empire: the Proceedings of an International Seminar Held at Siena-Certosa di Pontignano on May 2-4, 2004, on Rome, the Provinces, Production and Distribution* (Portsmouth, RI 2007) 173-178 for a short overview of the changes made during the Principate, mainly by Claudius. Gaius Gracchus ensured that grain could be bought by everyone at a low, regulated price, and after 58 BC, grain became available at no cost.

32 There is a plethora of literature on water and its supply. For Rome see R. Taylor, *Public needs and private pleasures: water distribution, the Tiber river and the urban development of ancient Rome* (Rome 2000); G. de Kleijn-Eijkelestam, *The water supply of ancient Rome: city area, water, and population* (Amsterdam 2001). For Greece see D.P. Crouch, *Water management*

of the investors were a ship or caravan to founder or be robbed.³³

in ancient Greek cities (Oxford 1993) 19-39. For Mesopotamia see RIA s.v. 'ilku' and S.W. Cole & H. Gasche, 'Second- and first-millennium BC rivers in northern Babylonia' in: H. Gasche & M. Tanret (eds), *Changing water-courses in Babylonia: towards a reconstruction of the ancient environment in Lower Mesopotamia* (Ghent 1998) 1-64; Codex Hammurabi 55, 56, 260.

33 Another way of discovering indications of the communal assessment and management of uncertainty is the insurance of trade goods. This practice spreads the uncertainty faced in commercial operations over at least one other person, thereby diminishing it (or at least creating the feeling that has been diminished). An example is the system of the Greek marine insurance loans ('bottomry'), first appearing between 475 and 450 BC. (On maritime trade see C.M. Reed, *Maritime traders in the ancient Greek world* (Cambridge 2003) 41; 73). These insurance loans were a loan to the captain to buy his cargo. If he lost his goods for some reason, he did not have to repay the loan. At least, two or three people involved were in this system: captain, ship-owner (who might also have been the captain) and lender. The shipper would borrow money from the lender, and make an agreement with a ship-owner to use his ship (unless the captain was also the ship owner): L. Casson, *Ancient mariners: seafarers and sea fighters of the Mediterranean in ancient times* (London 1959) 102-103; P. Millett, 'Maritime loans and the structure of credit in fourth-century Athens' in: P. Garnsey, K. Hopkins & C.R. Whittaker (eds), *Trade in the ancient economy* (London 1983) 36-52, at 36. In other words, this transaction worked on the basis of the following assumption: 'if a ship carrying the grain bought with borrowed money did not arrive safely back at Athens, the borrower normally was not obliged to repay the lender': Reed, *Maritime traders*, 34. Otherwise, the lender would have to be paid back – at a high rate of interest: lending money was considered a very precarious occupation. In practice, these sums of money

Flexible interest rates on grain – depending on the season – were also known. Betting was a favourite pastime, above all in Rome. These have been claimed to be the prime examples of the existence of ‘risk’ in the ancient world. Nonetheless, all these expressions of

functioned both as a loan – to enable the borrower to buy cargo and set sail – and an insurance – to spread the damage should disaster strike. See Finley and De Ste. Croix as discussed in Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk*, 17 (and see the references to the primary materials she gives). If the ship were to go down, the shipper (borrower), ship owner and the lender would lose all; if the captain (borrower) survived although the ship and cargo did sink, the captain (borrower) also did not need to pay back the price of the cargo. Consequently, the damage was spread relatively evenly as the chances of surviving shipwreck were naturally relatively small. In Mesopotamia, a similar mechanism was present: during overland trading ventures especially, a few different individuals shared the monetary responsibility, as is well known from the sources (K. Radner, ‘Traders in the Neo-Assyrian empire’ in: J.G. Dercksen (ed.), *Trade and finance in ancient Mesopotamia: proceedings of the first MOS symposium* (Leiden 1997) (Istanbul 1999) 101-126, at 116-118; L. Graslin-Thomé, *Les échanges à longue distance en Mésopotamie au Ier millénaire: une approche économique* (Paris 2009) 405-414). Nevertheless, the idea that this was possible and that it was seen as beneficial to spread the monetary responsibility shows a sense of communal uncertainty management in roughly the same way as this occurred in Greece: the risk was not calculated, but the traders unquestionably were aware that their business was an uncertain one. As a consequence, they had understood that it would be better for every investor to spread his money and invest in more than one caravan. This was not based on the mathematics of chance, but on experience – and hence it was ultimately intuitive.

thinking about the future differ crucially from modern conceptions of risk: there was no calculation of the chances or probabilities of disaster or success.³⁴

If he did not calculate 'risk', how *did* ancient man think about his uncertain future and how might this thinking be explored? Anthony Giddens draws a contrast between the modern world and anything which came before by characterizing the latter as living in the past and using its ideas about the supernatural and fate in order to think about uncertainties in the future – because pre-modern man did not have the concept of risk as a tool for thinking about uncertainties.³⁵ These generalizations are perhaps based upon similar remarks made by scholars of the ancient world, among them the claim that the 'unpredictability of the future [...] makes the past more relevant'.³⁶ Nevertheless, on the basis of the ancient evidence, the first part of Giddens' statement seems especially rash. Ancient man did not live primarily in the past and the future *was* thought about in very explicit ways: apart from a consciousness of time and its components (including the future), the mere existence – let alone the prevalence – of at least partly future-oriented religious phenomena such as divination, curses or sacrifice suggests that the ancient future was thought about pretty intensively. The fact, however, that these religious activities were the strategies used most widely by the

34 Contra Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk*, 17, and see her references. Instead, these bottomry loans were uncertainty management.

35 Giddens, *Runaway world*, 40-41.

36 Grethlein, 'Divine, human and poetic time in Pindar, Pythian 9', 401.

various people of the ancient world to deal with the future does back up the second part of Giddens' statement.³⁷ It confirms that ancient man sought the guidance of the supernatural for these dealings pertaining to the, not necessarily predetermined, future.³⁸ Ancient man wanted to know and influence or 'manage' the uncertain future and, for the first purpose, sought information from the supernatural – especially by means of divination.

37 Excluding the likes of philosophers, some of whom had very specific ideas on these matters.

38 I do not concur with P.L. Bernstein that: 'Although the Egyptians became experts in astronomy and in predicting the times when the Nile would flood or withdraw, managing or influencing the future probably never entered their minds'. This statement is partly based on a quote from H. Frankfort: '[...] the Egyptians had very little sense of history or of past and future. For they conceived their world as essentially static and unchanging. It had gone forth complete from the hands of the Creator. Historical incidents were, consequently, no more than superficial disturbances of the established order, or recurring events of never-changing significance. The past and the future – far from being a matter of concern – were wholly implicit in the present [...]' (H. Frankfort, *The birth of civilization in the Near East* (London 1951) 20-21). Frankfort seems to be discussing a general, philosophical view of the cosmos, but the very existence of such rituals as divination and magical actions seems to imply that real Egyptian individuals were concerned about the future. Bernstein's idea still pervades too many of the publications about a 'history of the future'. This is a good example of how ingrained the idea of risk is in our way of thinking – we cannot imagine a world without risk and without managing risk. Cf. P.L. Bernstein, *Against the gods: the remarkable story of risk* (New York 1996) 29.

Certainly the term 'risk' cannot be found in emic use nor can it be applied to the ancient materials etically. 'Risk' is so ingrained in the probabilistic thinking of modern Western man that, almost by default, he projects this kind of thinking onto the ancient world.³⁹ Nevertheless, ancient man did lessen uncertainty by trying to obtain perceived information from the supernatural. Although the function of both the assessment of risk and divination is to reduce uncertainty, this is done in different ways. An associated issue is that risk is a future-oriented term and, although divination is mainly concerned with the future, explaining the uncertainties of past and present is also an important function of it. The use of the term 'risk' ignores this aspect of divinatory practice. For all these reasons, the term 'risk' should be avoided in the study of divination.

ANCIENT UNCERTAINTY

Uncertainty about what?

Ancient individuals were uncertain about a number of issues: both private matters, political dilemmas and the field of religion have lent themselves to a great number of divinatory enquiries. Still, all sorts of themes occur. When we want to categorize these, we could take Joseph Fontenrose's three simple categories which he used to cre-

39 See for similar thoughts, although by means of different reasoning: Beard, 'Risk and the humanities', 91. I do, however, not agree with Beard's idea that the Romans lived in an aleatory society.

ate order in the Delphic materials. Together, his categories cover all themes: *res divinae* (cult foundation, sacrifices and religious laws), *res publicae* (rulership, legislation, interstate relations and war), *res domesticae et profanae* (birth, marriage, death, careers, actions, *etcetera*).⁴⁰

Yet, we may want to be a bit more specific than that and also focus on the Greek individual (in contrast to the many communal questions known to have been asked at Delphi). Again, the tablets from Dodona are the best corpus from our period in time to find out what the ancient Greek individual was uncertain about. Taking Lhote's edition we find the following categories of uncertainties.⁴¹ First, those of a socio-economic nature: issues are a good harvest, whether bills should be paid, about goods and possessions, which job to choose and whether the person will be successful in that job, about buying and selling.⁴² Second, and connected to the first category, is

40 J.E. Fontenrose, *The Delphic oracle: its responses and operations: with a catalogue of responses* (London 1978) Appendix B II, 438-440.

41 A number of questions need to be omitted here: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6b, 7, 8b, 9, 11, 14 because they are asked by communities (their topics are questions about safety for the community, general prosperity, a good harvest, maintenance of the temple and the possessions of the community). There are also a number of questions that are too fragmentary to use here: 4, 12, 24, 31, 40, 42, 61A, 70, 79, 113?, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 155, 156, 161, 162, 164, 165, 166, 167, 140, 142.

42 A good harvest: 77, 78. Which job to do: 74, 75, 76, 80, 82, 83, 84, 85, 87, 88, 89Aa, 90, 91, 93, 94, 95, 96A, 97?, 98, 99, 100, 102, 103, 105, 106A, 106B, 111, 141 Bb. Gaining results: 17. Should the bill be paid: 96b. Goods and posses-

happiness/success. Individuals ask how they should achieve success, whether they will be happy, if it is a good idea to do something, which road a person should choose, how to gain results, whether an individual should spend energy resolving an issue.⁴³ Another, third, related category is the question of where to settle and live: whether a person should stay or move, or should travel.⁴⁴ Fourth, on love, marriage and children: issues are the good of the family, begetting children, whether the person will be happy in marriage with his wife, whether the person should find another wife, about arranging marriages of his children.⁴⁵ Fifth, dealing with rules and institutions: asking for justice, about requesting civil rights.⁴⁶ Sixth, religion in which category the issues are varied: whether to use a necromancer, to request another oracle, and so forth.⁴⁷ Seventh, on matters of

sions: 28A, 28b, 58B, 65, 115, 116, 117, 118. Buying and selling: 101, 109, 110.

43 Spend energy resolving an issue: 112. Gaining happiness/success: 10b, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22a, 23, 33b, 35a, 37, 49bis, 65, 67, 81, 107A, 108. Unhappiness: 158. Is it good to do something? 163.

44 Where to settle or live? 6b 46Bb, 50B, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58A, 59, 60?, 62, 63, 64, 68B, 92, 130, 131, 132, 133, 157, 160. To travel: 86. Which road to choose: 154

45 The good of the family: 8a. Begetting children: 15, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46a, 47, 48, 49, 50Aa, 51, 52, 140, 141A. Being happy in marriage with their wife: 22 Bb, 22ba, 25, 26, 27, 36A, 52, 53Aa?, 53Bb. Seeking another wife? 29, 30, 32, 33a, 34, 35b, 36Bb. Arranging marriages of children 38, 39, 53Ac.

46 Requesting civil rights: 61B. Justice 16, 141 bis, 159

47 10a, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 141B, 143, 144.

health.⁴⁸ Eight, matters of warfare/military.⁴⁹ And last, about finding out the truth about past and present.⁵⁰

In Mesopotamia most attested questions (the queries from the king to the sun god) would have fitted into Fontenrose's second category, of *res publicae*. The sources provide information about public divination: every question addressed to the sun god was – directly or indirectly – concerned with the well-being of the land. Questions relating to the person of royal individuals also belong in this category because they are concerned with the well-being of the ruler or those close to him, and hence that of his realm. Detailed information about the questions asked during private, unofficial, divination – which would perhaps fall into the other two categories distinguished by Fontenrose – is lacking and speculation on this issue is therefore ruled out: the specific nature of the questions asked during divination was determined by cultural factors.

It is, however, possible to make some more detailed observations about the uncertainties of the king: there are questions about cultic matters, such as whether a statue of Marduk should be made. A very large part of the questions asked by the King revolves around decisions in war. Others are concerned with whom should be appointed in which official role, who should be appointed crown prince, political uprisings, royal marriages, survival of officials on a mission, and the important question whether or not a written plan should be car-

48 46Ba, 50Ab, 65, 66, 68A, 69, 71, 72, 73.

49 127, 128, 129.

50 107B, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 125bis, 126.

ried out. The health of royals is a last important concern. It could, then, be argued that the uncertainties of the king were focused on 'military and political', 'medical', 'religious' and 'administrative'.⁵¹

Roman sources, too, deal mainly with public concerns, of which a glimpse can be gained: the nature of the three main methods of divination shows which uncertainties were diminished by using public divination. First and foremost, the *prodigia* show the fear of the displeasure of the gods. If these gods were not appeased, more bad things would happen and uncertainty about the future would increase. *Prodigia* are a cause for uncertainty and expiation takes the uncertainty away. It should be noted that *prodigia* are, in the end, recognized and acknowledged as such by man and should therefore be seen as markers of existing uncertainties. The *auspicia* show a concern about new endeavors: should a particular action be undertaken and is this the right time for it? The *haruspices* were concerned with finding information about the divine will, especially in a military and sacrificial context: again, an important issue here is to find some sense of certainty that one is doing the right thing in accordance with the will of the gods.

51 Cultic matters: e.g., SAA 4 200. For other cultic matters see , e.g., SAA 4 196; 4 262; war: e.g. SAA 4 11; appointments: e.g. SAA 4 150; 4 275; crown prince: e.g. SAA 4 149; uprisings: e.g. SAA 4 321; marriage: e.g. SAA 4 20; officials on a mission: e.g. SAA 4 71; a written plan: e.g. SAA 4 129; health: e.g. SAA 4 188. Starr, *Queries*, *passim*.

A grip on uncertainty

Humans can attempt to get a grip on their uncertainties. In how far this works out is, naturally, always a subjective issue. There are different ways in which uncertainties can be perceived and, for the ancient world, these can be deduced by analysing the ways humans deal with uncertainty by means of divination. If divination functions on the basis of prediction, gaining knowledge of the future is seen as being possible. An individual thinks he can obtain information and this provides him with a sense of certainty. If, however, divination does not work predictively, the future is not seen as something that can be known, for instance because the future is seen as being based on chance.⁵² Where chance is prevalent, uncertainty can, in the eyes of the individual, only be alleviated up to a certain point. The supernatural can provide advice on what would be the best course to follow. It can do no more than suggest what is the best option at a specific moment. No guarantees are given. If the individual followed such advice and he appeared to be visited by misfortune, he could argue that, had he not followed the advice, things would have been

52 Luck, accident and chance are concepts which are often used interchangeably. Both lucky and accidental events occur on the premise that there is a small chance that the event will take place. Hence, chance is the central concept – events which are perceived to depend on chance can be accidental (and the qualification ‘lucky’ means these accidental events are welcomed). For a discussion of a definition of luck see D. Pritchard, *Epistemic luck* (Oxford 2005) 125-144.

worse.⁵³ In short, uncertainties are everywhere, but it is the cultural mix in dealing with them which can differ from society to society.

If the idea of chance is prevalent in a society, this points towards a different way of thinking about the occurrence of future events than would be in a society in which this idea is absent. If there is some sort of future that is not dependent on chance, this implies a different kind of uncertainty which should be reflected in the divinatory materials. Different ideas about uncertainty are linked to different conceptions of the future and of divination.

How should we see ideas concerning the existence of chance in the three cultural areas? This is pivotal for our understanding of uncertainties. It should first be noted that there is no consistency in these beliefs: in Greece, we encounter the idea of *moira* from the Archaic Age onwards. *Moira* was the 'allotted portion' in the life of an individual. We also know that the earliest Greek horoscope – to

53 These kinds of uncertainty have also been called epistemical and aleatory. Yet, these concepts are intrinsically connected and interlinked in multiple ways. It is therefore unadvisable to use them as binary opposites. Aleatory uncertainty might be based in: the inherent randomness of nature (natural randomness); value diversity (cognitive variety); human behaviour (behavioural variety); social, economic, and cultural dynamics (societal randomness); technological surprises (technological randomness). Epistemical uncertainty can be based on inexactitude, lack of observations or measurements, practicalities of measurement, conflicting evidence, reducible ignorance (unknown unknowns), indeterminacy (issues which will not be known) and irreducible ignorance (issues which cannot be known) (Van Asselt, *Perspectives on uncertainty and risk*, 86-87).

which some idea of fate must be connected – dates from the third century BC. These two pieces of information show that there was a notion of fate.⁵⁴ This statement can also be applied to Republican Rome where the *Parcae* personified the same idea as Greek *moira*.⁵⁵ Despite such concepts, it can be confidently stated that ‘chance’ was a central conception in Classical and (even more so) Hellenistic Greece and also in Roman Italy from mid-Republican times. The sources suggest that in the Archaic period, *moira* occupied a more important place, but even at that time some references to Tuche can be found.⁵⁶

The combined literary, epigraphical and archaeological sources leave no doubt that both Tuche and Fortuna and the ideas they embodied were important in everyday life in Greece and Rome. In the Graeco-Roman world, chance was not only perceived as a force, it was also personified, at least from early Hellenistic times. The goddesses Fortuna and Tuche were powerful deities of chance, on whom depended both positive and negative events. In the first-

54 On how the gods, fate and moira played complementary and clashing roles see the reference to H.S. Versnel n.2 of this chapter.

55 Among so many relevant publications see for an introduction S. Eitrem, ‘Moira’ in: A.F. von Pauly *et al.* (eds), *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart 1894-1997) Vol. 15, 2449-2497; Greene, Moira.

56 On Tyche’s frequent appearance see G. Herzog-Hauser, ‘Tyche’ in: A.F. von Pauly *et al.* (eds), *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart 1894-1997) Vol. 7A, 1643-1689.

century AD, Pliny described the wide-ranging activities of Roman Fortuna as follows:

For all over the world, in all places, and at all times, Fortune is the only god whom every one invokes; she alone is spoken of, she alone is accused and is supposed to be guilty; she alone is in our thoughts, is praised and blamed, and is loaded with reproaches; wavering as she is, conceived by the generality of mankind to be blind, wandering, inconstant, uncertain, variable, and often favouring the unworthy. To her are referred all our losses and all our gains, and in casting up the accounts of mortals she alone balances the two pages of our sheet [...].⁵⁷

The goddesses Tyche and Fortuna were viewed as fickle and changeable/volatile/unpredictable by nature.⁵⁸ Despite such unreliability, in the Republican period Fortuna appears as a positive goddess.⁵⁹

57 Plin. *NH* 2.5(7).22.3-10 Translation: John Bostock. Edition: Teubner. *toto quippe mundo et omnibus locis omnibusque horis omnium vocibus Fortuna sola invocatur ac nominatur, una accusatur, rea una agitur, una cogitatur, sola laudatur, sola arguitur et cum conviciis colitur, volubilis . . . que, a plerisque vero et caeca existimata, vaga, inconstans, incerta, varia indignorumque faulrix. huic omnia expensa, huic feruntur accepta, et in tota ratione mortalium sola utramque paginam facit [...].*

58 An article which discusses this overlap between the two goddesses is G. Herzog-Hauser, 'Tyche und Fortuna', *WSt* 63 (1948) 156-163.

59 F. Graf, 'Fortuna' in: H. Cancik & H. Schneider (eds) *Brill's New Pauly Online*. Visited 20-05-2010. Cf. W. Otto, 'Fortuna' in: A.F. von Pauly *et al.* (eds), *Pauly's Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart 1894-1997) Vol. 7, 12-42.

Her Greek counterpart Tyche appears to have begun to be perceived a little more negatively over time, even though she also gained in importance.⁶⁰ Some have connected this rise to the fact that the structures of the *polis* became weaker towards and in the Hellenistic period, making life more uncertain, hence Tyche was perceived to be a stronger force. However, it would be unwise to rule out the possibility that there were other factors which contributed to Tyche's rise in importance.⁶¹

60 See N. Johannsen, 'Tyche' in: H. Cancik & H. Schneider (eds) *Brill's New Pauly Online*. Visited 20-05-2010. There is a noticeable lack of recent monographs on Tyche and on the idea that luck was regulated by the supernatural. There is a Dutch monograph which, although is outdated still gives an idea of the rather more philosophical ideas about Tyche, but do not exclude day-to-day evidence on this topic: A.A. Buriks, *Peri Tuches: de ontwikkeling van het begrip tyche tot aan de Romeinse tijd, hoofdzakelijk in de filosofie* (Leiden 1948), *passim* (with English summary). Furthermore, there are many articles and monographs on Tyche in various specific authors or in specific places, for example, A. Zimmermann, *Tyche bei Platon* (Bonn 1966) and T. Dohrn, *Die Tyche von Antiochia* (Berlin 1960). For a semantic study of Greek terms for 'happiness', in which eutyches – a related term – plays a part see C. de Heer, *Makar, eudaimōn, olbios, eutychēs: a study of the semantic field denoting happiness in ancient Greek to the end of the 5th century B.C.* (Amsterdam 1968). On Tyche as an abstraction see recently Versnel, *Coping with the gods*, 277-278. See also J.D. Mikalson, *Religion in Hellenistic Athens* (Berkeley 1998) 62-63 and footnotes; P. Green, *Alexander to Actium: the historical evolution of the hellenistic age* (Berkeley 1990) 400-401 and footnotes.

61 Buriks, *Peri Tuches*, 2.

Chance is rather less visible in Mesopotamia – although the concept must have existed. It was not personified in the Mesopotamian pantheon.⁶² Instead, most people in Mesopotamia appear to have believed in the existence of a knowable future which was perceived to have been arranged by the supernatural in its judgement (made known to man through divinatory signs), but susceptible to tweaking by mankind through rituals, in a way which did not leave much room for chance occurrences. There seems to be no Babylonian or Assyrian word for chance, in the sense of a sudden occurrence.⁶³ One apparent exception is the term *egirrû*,⁶⁴ but this word was only used in a divinatory context for something which happened unexpectedly and does not seem to have been a general term for ‘chance’. As we have seen, an important Mesopotamian concept in dealing with the

62 Some secondary literature states that there are ‘lucky’ and ‘unlucky’ days, marked as such in hemerologies. However, these do not have much to do with the presence or absence of chance: they have to do with the idea that a particular day can be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for doing something. This has nothing to do with chance – but with favourability.

63 The words which are usually translated as ‘luck’ refer to luck as in happiness; that good things happen to you (*damiqtu*); that you have or obtain a protective god (*angubbû*, *ilānû*; *lamassu*; *rašû*); experience good fortune because of divine favour (*damâqu*; *dumqu*; *ilu*; *mašru*) – these categories also overlap – or the same but in a negative sense (*tallaktu*; *lemnu*). Chance is not mentioned in the vocabulary (apart from chance in the sense of ‘opportunity’). Even he who suffers does so because his protective god has abandoned him and not ‘by chance’.

64 Cf. *CAD* s.v. *egirrû*.

future was *šimtu*, a complicated concept of which ‘fate’ is the usual, but slightly misleading, translation: *šimtu* could, to some extent, be seen as being similar to the Greek *moira* – there are some matters which cannot be decided on, or influenced by, either man or the supernatural.⁶⁵ *Šimtu* (in a way similar to *moira*) did not imply that the future was completely predetermined, as is also testified by the existence of the *namburbû* ritual. This ritual has been described as ‘measures for the elimination of the evil promised by the omens’.⁶⁶ Individuals could perform such a ritual, asking the supernatural to change events which had been predicted to happen. The *namburbû* ritual was closely connected to divination and was used for individual but above all for the common good. For example, if it had been predicted that something would happen to an individual or to the land, a *namburbû* was performed to avert evil.⁶⁷ Apart from the normal *namburbû* which warded off a specific danger, there were also so-called *Universalnamburbû* which could be used to avert any future danger, even leaving that danger unspecified.⁶⁸ One special

65 The one article on this topic is: Rochberg-Halton, ‘Fate and divination’, 363-371

66 J. Bottéro, Z. Bahrani & M. Van De Mieroop, *Mesopotamia: reading, writing and the gods* (Chicago 1992) 154. Note that it could also be used to ensure the extispicy ritual went well: Koch, ‘Sheep and sky’, 465.

67 Maul, *Zukunftsbewältigung*; R.I. Caplice, *The Akkadian namburbi texts: an introduction* (Los Angeles, 1974). For another example see SAA 10 10 5-rev. 5.

68 See for some examples Maul, *Zukunftsbewältigung*, 467-502.

case is the ritual of the substitute-king. If a negative omen had been observed, a substitute king would be placed on the throne and the evil would be deflected towards this substitute, instead of towards the real king.⁶⁹ As the king was the personification of the land and social order was dependent on the king, this kind of ritual was a tool for averting communal uncertainty. All this results in a very important observation: although the Mesopotamian future had been decided upon by the supernatural, it could still be changed.

Viewing the future as a divine judgement does not leave much room for chance (although it must have existed). Even the dice were sometimes thought to be predictive. Throwing the dice during a game in Mesopotamia, which was theoretically based on chance, could be a throw closely connected to the future:

If the astragals score 2,
the Swallow sits at the head of a rosette (or: at the first rosette).
Should it (then) land on a rosette, a woman will love those who linger
in a tavern;
regarding their pack, well-being falls to them.
If it does not land on a rosette, a woman will reject those who linger
in a tavern; regarding their pack, as a group well-being will not fall to
them.⁷⁰

69 See among many other sources, the brief summary of this ritual practice in: Rochberg, *The heavenly writing*, 78; 222-223. See for a letter telling the king about such issues SAA 10 25.

70 BM33333B rev. i 9-15. Edition and transliteration Finkel, 'On the rules for the royal game of Ur', 20 and 29.

šum4-ma ZI.IN.GI.MEŠ 2 TA.ÀM

At first glance, an important role of chance implies a belief in an empty future in which random and unpredictable events will take place; if chance seems less important, this implies the idea of a future in which events will occur which can be known (and perhaps be changed or manipulated) and a past which can explained. Yet, the two kinds of uncertainty could easily exist side by side: the ordinary Greek, Roman or Mesopotamian individual was generally not concerned about this paradox. From an etic perspective, too, the two categories do not exclude each other but are indeed inextricably linked to one another.⁷¹ What must be emphasized is that each cultural area appears to have had its own specific mix of the ways uncertainty was seen: although chance seems unlikely to have played an important role in Mesopotamia (although it still might have existed), it was prominent in Greece and Rome. Moreover, this contrast grew progressively more pronounced after more emphasis came to be placed on the idea of chance between Archaic and Hellenistic times. This development is reflected in growing concerns about chance occurrences taking place: chance was fickle, could not be relied upon and

it-tab-ku-nim SIM.MUŠEN ina SAG SÙR TUŠ-ab
 SÙR E_{II}-ma MUNUS ina É [KAŠ].TIN.NAM a-šá-bi
 i-ra-mu (sic) [KASKAL].KUR-su-nu šu-lum šá-kin-šu-nu-tu
 šum₄-ma SÙR la E_{II} MUNUS ina É KAŠ.TIN.NAM
 a-šá-bi i-ze-er KASKAL.KUR-su-nu
 I-niš SILIM ul šá-kin-šu-nu-tu

71 See n.53 of this chapter.

could not be controlled. This affected the way individuals attempted to get a grip on their uncertainty.

DIVINATION

How did divination serve to get a grip on uncertainty in the three cultural areas? The exact way the supernatural was questioned differed: asking the supernatural for advice (for example, what is best?) indicates a different basis of uncertainty because it leaves room for chance, whereas asking for a prediction (and hence knowledge of future events, for example, will x happen?) presupposed that the future can be known, as do indicative questions - general questions about the future (for example, 'shall I be happy'), because these contain a predictive element. The third category (for example, 'which god shall I sacrifice to?') in which a specific answer is required is the instructive category, also indicating the existence of an idea that the future could be known and uncertainty taken away - but directed towards the present (as opposed to the future). Information about past occurrences may be asked for ('What have I done wrong?'), but these questions are about the past and are therefore not discussed in this research. The queries about the future reveal the cultural mix of the way individuals tried to get a grip on uncertainties and how divination worked to diminish or even resolve these.

Asking for advice and instructions

For Greece, the starting point of my investigation lies in the oracular questions, especially those contained in the corpora from Delphi and Dodona. The latter collection is important because it is so closely connected to actual divinatory practice; the former because it might help us to confirm or modify conclusions reached on the basis of the Dodonaic materials. Some methodological comments are in order before these corpora can be discussed in more depth. The Dodona materials have been relatively well published. For Delphi, I have based my analysis on the so-called historical questions (for which the criterion is that they were written down within thirty years after they were supposedly pronounced) as identified by Joseph Fontenrose.⁷² I consider both sets of oracular materials to be strong indications of what was and what was not asked in Greek divinatory practice in general.

The first category of questions is illustrated by the following Dodonaic example from Eidinow's catalogue:

Good fortune. Whether I would do better travelling to where it seems good to me, and doing business there, if it seems good, and at the same time practicing this craft.⁷³

72 Fontenrose, *The Delphic oracle*, 39; 440-442.

73 Translation (and bibliography concerning this tablet): Eidinow, *Oracles, curses, and risk*, 97, nr. 9.

Τύχα ἀγαθά. Ἡ τυγχάνοιμί κα ἔμπορευόμενος | ὄπυς κα δοκῆι σύμφορον ἔμειν,
καὶ ἄγων, τῆι κα δοκῆι | ἅμα τᾶι τεχναι χρεύμενος

Will it be better for the questioner if he performs a particular action or makes a particular choice? This question asks for an answer of an advisory nature: the purpose is to ask the supernatural to guide the individual in a decision which needs to be made (rather than to reveal the future to him).

The second category is that of the instructive questions in which the oracle is asked to supply the enquirer with such replies as to which god he should offer or which other specific actions he should perform. These questions differ from the advisory ones in the sense that the supernatural is perceived to give a specific command about what to do. An example of an instructive question is 'Which god should I sacrifice to?' Here we see that uncertainties could be dissolved through the gaining of knowledge, as it is in the next two categories.

Apart from these advisory and instructive questions, there are also other kinds of questions, such as 'Shall I be happy?' and 'Shall I have children?' These questions are concerned with issues about which the individual feels powerless (such as happiness or begetting children). They contain a predictive element but the supernatural is not specifically asked to look into the future: the question is general and the timeframe vague. I therefore categorize these questions as 'indicative'.

The last category in these Greek oracular materials consists of requests for information about the truth in both past and present: 'Who were the parents?' and 'What is the truth about X?' are

examples of such questions. Their purpose is to obtain knowledge. Pertinently, it should be noted that these questions are not about the future: where the Greek past and present are concerned, knowledge is asked for, whereas the more future-oriented questions tend to seek advice and instruction.

Now for a more quantitative analysis, in so far as this is possible. Building on the four categories just defined, the questions are categorized according to whether they are advisory, instructive or predictive. The percentages for Delphi are as follows: Fontenrose has dealt with seventy-five historical oracles.⁷⁴ Of these, thirty-three are of an advisory nature (44%).⁷⁵ Thirty-one are instructive (41.3%).⁷⁶ Only five are indicative (6.6%).⁷⁷ Only two ask for information about both past and present (2.6%),⁷⁸ leaving another four (5.3% which could not be assigned to these categories).⁷⁹

A study of the Delphic historical materials reveals that the Greek gods mainly gave advice and instructions with regard to future

74 These are from different times – the common factor they share is that they were written down relatively soon after they were pronounced, which lowers the chance that they were falsified or twisted for a rhetorical purpose.

75 H 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 13, 17, 19, 20, 21, 25, 27, 29, 32, 33, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 49, 55, 59, 61, 62, 64, 66, 74.

76 H 7, 8, 9, 10?, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16?, 23, 24, 26, 28, 30, 31, 35, 37, 44, 48, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 58, 60, 67, 68, 71.

77 H 4, 18?, 34?, 70, 75.

78 H 65, 69.

79 H 3, 22, 63, 73.

uncertainties. Do the Dodonaic materials show the same pattern? In the Dodonaic materials (in which 187 questions are asked), there are more questions of the indicative type than there are in Delphi (and even some exceptional ones which might be called predictive): thirty-five in total (18.7%).⁸⁰ Instructions are given on thirty-one tablets (16.5%),⁸¹ whereas the great majority of questions is advisory in nature: seventy-three in total (39%).⁸² Two tablets combine prediction and instruction (1.1%).⁸³ The last category consists of questions concerning both past and present, of which there are eleven in the Dodonaic corpus (5.9%).⁸⁴ Another thirty-five cannot be assigned to any category because they are illegible (18.7%).⁸⁵ Although there are more indicative questions at Dodona than at Delphi, the questions most often asked at the oracles are instructive, above all advisory.

80 Lhôte 5; 6A; 10B; 13?; 18; 21; 22Bb; 26; 28B; 33B; 35A; 36A; 37; 39; 43; 44; 45; 46A; 51; 53Bb; 55; 58A; 63; 73; 82; 83; 84; 87; 88; 94; 109?; 118; 131; 140; 141.

81 Lhôte 1; 2; 3; 7; 8A; 17; 19; 20; 22A; 35B; 36Bb; 38; 41; 46Ba; 47; 49bis; 50Aa; 65; 66; 67; 68A; 72; 101; 102; 107A; 110; 116; 131; 138; 143; 157?

82 Lhôte 6B; 8B; 9; 10A; 11; 16; 22Ba; 25; 27; 28A; 29; 30; 31; 33A; 34; 46Bb; 50Ab; 50B; 53Aa; 53Ac; 54; 56; 57; 58B; 60; 61B; 62?; 64?; 68B?; 69; 71?; 74; 75; 77?; 78?; 80; 81; 85; 86; 89; 90; 91; 92; 93; 95; 96A; 97; 98; 100; 103; 105; 106A; 106B; 108?; 111; 112; 114; 115?; 117; 127; 128; 129; 130; 133; 134?; 137; 139; 144; 154; 158; 159; 160; 163.

83 Lhôte 48; 52.

84 Requests for truth and so on. Lhôte 14; 49; 107B; 119; 120; 121; 123; 124; 125; 125bis; 126.

85 Lhôte 4; 12; 15; 21; 23?; 24; 32; 40; 42; 59; 70; 76; 79; 99; 104; 113?; 136a; 142; 145; 146; 147; 148; 149; 150; 151; 152; 153; 155; 156; 161; 162; 164; 165; 166; 167.

The assumption that Greek people tended to use divination to obtain *advice* from the supernatural is confirmed by the evidence relating to the outcome of extispicies. Although we are still rather in the dark about how his questions were phrased, Xenophon's extispicies normally seem to indicate '(un)favourability', but it is often uncertain whether this concerns a particular action he wants to undertake or if he is asking a sign from the supernatural indicating general favourability. It is true that some favourable signs are seen as providing a positive background to specific actions. This connection is exemplified by the following passage: '[...] our sacrificial victims were favourable, the bird-omens auspicious, the omens of the sacrifice most favourable; let us advance upon the enemy. [...].'⁸⁶ Importantly the supernatural does not predict or say that Xenophon will win this battle: it merely advises that it is favourable to advance now. Everything else, including the outcome of battle, is still dependent on other factors, such as chance.

It should be noted that numerous Greek literary sources explicitly indicate predictive divination. One example is the following: Homer relates Penelope's spontaneous dream which was interpreted in such a way that it applied to her situation. She now knew that Odysseus was coming home:

But come now, hear this dream of mine, and interpret it for me.
Twenty geese I have in the house that come forth from the water and
eat wheat, and my heart warms with joy as I watch them. But forth

86 Xen. *An.* 6.21.2-3. Translation C.L. Brownson.

τά τε ἱερά ἡμῖν καλὰ οἳ τε οἰωνοὶ αἴσιοι τὰ τε σφάγια κάλλιστα.

from the mountain there came a great eagle with crooked beak and broke all their necks and killed them; and they lay strewn in a heap in the halls, while he was borne aloft to the bright sky.⁸⁷

In my view, Greek predictive divination did not occur as regularly as the literary sources suggest. It must not be overlooked that predictions from the supernatural were a particularly good literary or rhetorical device. Although heroes were perceived to have been able to procure knowledge of the future, the materials from Dodona and Delphi are, in my opinion, a more trustworthy indication of the advisory way in which Greek divination functioned: advice from the supernatural leaves room for chance – suggesting that a large component of Greek uncertainty was based on the idea that chance played an important role and that the future could not be predicted.

Very instructive

Because we do not have any corpus of materials susceptible to quantitative analysis, any conclusions about the types of questions most commonly asked in Roman divination must be impressionistic to some extent. Despite this hitch, it seems possible to conclude that,

87 Hom. *Od.* 19.535-540. Translation A.T. Murray.

ἀλλ' ἄγε μοι τὸν ὄνειρον ὑπόκριναι καὶ ἄκουσον. | χῆνές μοι κατὰ οἶκον ἐείκοσι
 πυρὸν ἔδουσιν | ἐξ ὕδατος, καὶ τέ σφιν λαίνομαι εἰσορόωσα· | ἐλθῶν δ' ἐξ ὄρεος
 μέγας αἰετὸς ἀγκυλοχειλῆς | πᾶσι κατ' αὐχέν' ἔαξε καὶ ἔκτανεν· οἱ δ' ἐκέχυντο |
 ἄθροοι ἐν μεγάροισ', ὁ δ' ἐς αἰθέρα διὰν ἀέρθη.

as in Greece, Roman divination was used as a tool to obtain advice but also and above all to ask the supernatural for instructions.

The auspices and *prodigia* provide an interesting combination of functions of Roman divination in getting a grip on uncertainty. The advisory element can be seen in the Roman sources when the auspices are taken:

The consuls were busy with matters pertaining to gods and to men, as they are wont to be on the eve of an engagement, when the envoys from Tarentum approached them to receive their answer; to whom Papirius replied, "Tarentines, the keeper of the chickens reports that the signs are favourable; the sacrifice too has been exceedingly auspicious; as you see, the gods are with us at our going into action." He then commanded to advance the standards, and marshalled his troops, with exclamations on the folly of a nation which, powerless to manage its own affairs, because of domestic strife and discord, presumed to lay down the limits of peace and war for others.⁸⁸

The auspices were taken to ensure that a particular action would be as successful as possible, but this is not to say a definitive out-

88 Liv. 9.14.3-5. Translation B.O. Foster. Edition: Teuber.

agentibus divina humanaque, quae adsolent, cum acie dimicandum est, consulibus Tarentini legati occursare responsum expectantes; quibus Papirius ait: 'auspicia secunda esse, Tarentini, pullarius nuntiat; litatum praeterea est egregie; auctoribus dis, ut videtis, ad rem gerendam proficiscimur'. signa inde ferri iussit et copias eduxit, vanissimam increpans gentem, quae, suarum inpotens rerum prae domesticis seditionibus discordiisque, aliis modum pacis ac belli facere aequum censeret.

Another good example is, e.g., Cic. *Verr.* 2.1.104

come had been decided. Chance played its part. The importance of chance is also revealed at oracle sites at which cleromancy was practised. For example, at the sanctuary of Praeneste, while the lot was apparently drawn by a small child, Fortuna was in charge, allowing for a maximum ‘randomization’.⁸⁹ These cleromantic activities are another illustration of the way Roman man embraced uncertainty on the basis of chance, and how he simultaneously strove to diminish it: ‘dice could be used not only to expose uncertainty, but also to resolve it.’⁹⁰ Using cleromancy under the auspices of the goddess of chance, the individual knowingly increased uncertainty by relying on the goddess to steer the divinatory process – hoping that chance would provide information.

Prodigia served to let the individual and community know what was wrong, for example, that the *pax deorum* had been disturbed: this type of information was instructive. The sign – or rather its interpretation – revealed the existence of an as yet unknown uncertainty or problem because the supernatural had been angered. Expiation of the sign would resolve the previously unknown problem: the supernatural instructed the individual what to do by providing a sign.

89 Tuche appears in the late dice oracle texts see, e.g. Nollé, *Kleinasiatische Losorakel*, 133. It is interesting in this respect that it has been argued that κίνδυνος ‘danger’ and the worst throw of the dice ‘the dog’, are etymologically connected. But according to J. Knobloch, ‘Griech. κίνδυνος m. Gefahr und das Würfelspiel’, *Glotta* 53 (1975) 78-81, the theory should be rejected.

90 Beard, ‘Risk and the humanities’, 99.

A wall and a gate had been struck by lightning; and at Aricia even the temple of Jupiter had been struck by lightning. Other illusions of the eyes and ears were credited as realities. An appearance as of ships had been seen in the river at Tarracina, when there were none there. A clashing of arms was heard in the temple of Jupiter Vicilinus, in the territory of Compsa; and a river at Amiternum had flowed bloody. These prodigies having been expiated according to a decree of the pontiffs, [...].⁹¹

In Rome, taking the auspices served to obtain advice about how to do the right thing at the right time. By taking the auspices one chose the best future, implying the existence of options which remained unknown. By providing advice, divination supplied the certainty that the best option had been chosen or the best possible action had been taken at the best possible time. This transformed fear of uncertainties into hope – without eliminating these uncertainties. Uncertainties also were addressed by asking instructive questions: knowledge of what to do in the present was obtained and this seems to have played a relatively larger role than it did in Greece.

91 Liv. 24.44.8-9. Translation D. Spillan & C. Edmonds.

Murus ac porta Caietae et Ariciae etiam Iouis aedes de caelo tacta fuerat. Et alia ludibria oculorum auriumque credita pro ueris: nauium longarum species in flumine Tarracinae quae nullae erant uisas et in Iouis Vicilini templo, quod in Compsano agro est, arma concrepuisse et flumen Amiterni cruentum fluxisse. His procuratis ex decreto pontificum [...].

Asking for predictions

The Neo-Assyrian queries addressed to the sun god during extispicy show that Mesopotamia differed from Greece and Rome in a remarkable way.⁹² Although advisory and instructive questions are recorded and indicative questions must have existed (second millennium sources show that individuals would ask indicative questions) – these are largely absent from the Neo-Assyrian materials. An overwhelming part of the surviving queries cannot be called anything but explicitly predictive: the gods were asked to provide a ‘judgement’ about what would happen in reply to the question, in the shape of a divinatory sign – in this way the individual would gain perceived knowledge and uncertainties related to the future were eliminated.

At this point, I shall provide an example of a query beginning with a request for advice or instruction which might also have been encountered in Greece or Rome (first part, should Esarhaddon send troops?). Then follows the part of the question asking for a prediction of future events, even within a specified time frame (second part, will the others then band themselves together?):

Should he send men, horses and troops, as he wishes, to Siriš? Is it pleasing to your great divinity?

92 Starr, *Queries*.

If the subject of this query, Esar[haddon], king of Assyria, having planned, sends (them), will the people of Siriš, or the Manneans, or the *Ridaeans*, or any (other) enemy, from this day to the day of my [stipu]lated term, *band themselves together into an army* (against) the army he is sending to [Siriš]?⁹³

This question asks for both advice and a prediction and shows the two main varieties in Mesopotamian questions. If people felt that the gods could say something (semi-) definite about the future, this must have been the preferred option. Therefore, one would not expect large numbers of advisory questions to be found. Questions directed exclusively towards obtaining advice are a real minority and predictive questions assume a much more important place.

It is possible to take a quantitative view, taking into account that the amount of data is not large enough to draw definitive conclusions (and that indicative questions are likely to be under-represented). One hundred and fifty-two queries out of 354 are too fragmentary to provide any indication of what kind of question was

93 SAA 4 28 obv. 8-12. Translation and edition I. Starr.

ERIM-MEŠ ANŠE.KUR.RA-MEŠ A2.KAL mal2 ŠA3-ba-šuz ub-lam a-na KUR.
si-ri-iš liš-p[ur]

UGU DINGIR-ti-ka GAL-ti DUG3-ab GIM ik-p[u-d]u-ma il-tap-ru EN—
MU.MU NE-i mAN.ŠAR2—[ŠEŠ—SUM-na]

LUGAL KUR—AN.ŠÁR TA UD-mu NE-i EN mál UD m[u ši-k]in RI-ia Á.KAL
mál a-na URU.[si-ri-iš]

i-šap-pa-ru lu-ú KUR.si-ri-iš-a-[a lu]-ú LÚ.man-na-a-a lu-ú LÚ.RI!-d[a?-a-a]
lu-ú LÚ.KÚR a-a-um-ma [a-n]a mim-ma Á.K[AL i-kàt]-ti-ru-ni-i lu-ú Š[U x
x x]

asked and what kind of answer was expected.⁹⁴ Of the 202 remaining queries, only thirty (14.85%) ask for advice;⁹⁵ another sixty-six (32.67%) ask for advice and prediction as in the example above;⁹⁶ 106 (52.48%) of the queries are purely predictive.⁹⁷ In short, more than

94 SAA4 13; 25; 26; 27; 46; 52; 54; 55; 70; 97; 106; 109; 112; 120; 121; 123(?); 125; 126; 127; 128; 135; 138; 146; 147; 179; 180; 181; 182; 184; 186; 189; 193; 194; 195; 198; 199; 200; 201; 202; 203; 204; 206; 207; 209; 210; 211; 212; 213; 214; 215; 216; 217; 218; 219; 220; 221; 222; 223; 224; 225; 226; 227; 228; 229; 230; 231; 232; 233; 234; 235; 236; 237; 238; 239; 240; 241; 242; 243; 244; 245; 246; 247; 248; 249; 250; 251; 252; 253; 254; 255; 256; 257; 258; 259; 260; 261; 269; 273; 277; 279; 283; 284; 291; 292; 294; 295; 296; 297; 298; 304; 308; 309; 311; 312; 313; 314; 316; 317; 318; 319; 323; 324; 325; 326; 327; 328; 329; 330; 331; 332; 333; 334; 335; 336; 337; 338; 339; 340; 341; 342; 343; 344; 345; 346; 347; 348; 349; 350; 351; 352; 353; 354.

95 SAA 4 60; 76; 86(?); 95(?); 100(?); 101; 103; 105; 110; 114; 129; 130; 137; 148; 149; 167; 173; 175; 178; 196; 197; 262; 263; 264; 265(?); 266; 270; 278; 310; 315.

96 SAA 4 8; 16; 24; 28; 30; 34; 51; 57; 58; 62; 63; 64; 65; 71; 78; 79; 81; 82; 83(?); 84; 85; 87; 88; 89; 90; 91; 94(?); 96; 99; 102; 104; 107; 108; 111; 113; 124; 150; 151; 152; 154; 156; 158; 159; 161; 163; 164; 166; 168; 169; 170; 171; 172; 174; 177; 185; 187; 267; 271; 272; 274; 287; 290; 299; 305; 306; 307.

97 I have also included 'requests for truth' in this category (and not provided a separate category as in the Greek materials), as they are primarily directed towards the future – except number 74, which I have indicated by a question mark. SAA 4 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 9; 10; 11; 12; 14; 15(?); 17; 18; 19(?); 20; 21; 22(?); 23; 29; 31; 32; 33; 35; 36; 37; 38; 39; 40; 41; 42; 43; 44; 45; 47; 48; 49; 50; 53(?); 56; 59; 61; 66; 67; 68; 68(?); 72; 73; 74(?); 75; 77; 80; 92; 93; 98; 115; 116; 117; 118; 119; 122; 131; 132; 133; 134; 136; 139; 140; 141; 142; 142; 144; 145; 153; 155; 157; 160; 162; 165; 176; 183; 188; 190; 191; 192; 205; 208(?); 268; 275; 276; 280; 281; 282; 285; 286; 288; 289; 293; 300; 301; 302; 303; 320; 321; 322.

half of the queries are purely predictive, and one-third combines advisory with predictive elements. Even if the exact percentages were subjected to discussion,⁹⁸ these figures clearly demonstrate the prevalence of predictions in the Mesopotamian materials and the relative unimportance of purely advisory questions. In other words (and also throwing the missing indicative questions into the balance), in Mesopotamia, uncertainty based on the idea that chance played a role seems to have been less prevalent than in Greece. The king needed to know if he should order the execution of his plan, yes or no. He needed knowledge and it was thought it was possible to ask whether or not a specific event would occur within a specific timeframe: here the supernatural was asked to provide a predictive answer in the form of a judgement.

Other evidence concurs with the idea that indicative and predictive elements were very important in Mesopotamian divination. The compendia used to interpret signs other than those obtained through extispicy show that a sign was used to predict the future:

If the smell of a man's house is like bitumen, grain and silver will be stolen from him.⁹⁹

98 Criticism of these calculations can arise on account of the fact that some information might have been lost when tablets were broken, I have categorized the queries on the basis of the text which has been published, taking into account Starr's supplements. Other passages are missing but if Starr has not supplemented them, I have not made any assumptions about these.

99 Šumma alu tablet 6.113. Edition and translation: Freedman, *If a city is*

Leaving aside the possibility that events were explained in retrospect with the help of a divinatory text, the predictive goal of this text is clear.

The Mesopotamian tendency to ask for predictions and indications rather than advice can be plausibly connected with the telescopic function of Mesopotamian divination, discussed in earlier sections. A good example of such telescopic thinking about knowledge (and time) is provided by the following question in which the expert asks whether or not the Scythians will perform a particular act, which is specified in great detail:

[From this day, the 22nd day of this month, Sivan (III), to the 21st day of the following month, Tammuz (IV), of this year, for 30 days and nights], the stip[ulated term for the performance of (this) extispicy — within this stipulated term], will the troops of the S[cyth]ia[ns, which have been staying in the district of Mannea and which are (now) moving out from the territory] of Mannea, strive and plan? Will they move out and go through the passes [of Hubuškia] to the city Harrania (and) the city Anisus? Will they take much plunder and heavy booty from the territory of [Assyria]? Does your great divinity [know it]?¹⁰⁰

set on a height, vol. 1. 118-119.

DIŠ e-ri-iš É LÚ GIM ESIR ŠE.IM u KÙ.BABBAR ša-ri-iq-šú

100 SAA 4 23 obv. 2-10. Edition and translation: I. Starr.

[TA UD an-ni-e UD-22-KAM2 ša2 ITI an-ni-e ITI.SIG4 a-di UD-21-KAM2]

[ša2 ITI TU-ba ITI.ŠU ša2 MU.AN.NA an-ni-ti 30 UD-MEŠ 30 MI-MEŠ]

ši-[kin a-dan-ni DU3-ti ba-ru-ti i-na ši-kin a-dan-ni šu-a-tu2]

LU2.ERIM-MEŠ iš-ku-[za-a-a ša2 i-na na-gi-i ša2 KUR.man-na-a-a aš2-bu-ma TA UGU ta-ḫu-me]

This way of questioning the gods implies that there was one particular future known to the supernatural, although this future might be changed by performing rituals, and also that uncertainty about the future existed and could be taken away by means of knowledge of the future gained by divination.

Towards an uncertainty analysis

Before proceeding towards an analysis of the above findings, a repeated *caveat* is in order: inconsistencies abound in the ways notions of chance and fate could exist next to one another. Still, these inconsistencies do not make the contrast between Mesopotamian and Greek and Roman conceptions of uncertainties any less real or less important. It is still possible to produce an analysis. The ways in which future uncertainties were approached in Mesopotamia differ from those in Greece and Rome. The Neo-Assyrian questions known to us are largely of the following type: ‘Will a particular event happen within a particular space of time’ – a question requiring a predictive answer. This is a much more explicit way of asking about the future than the greater part of questions asked in Greece and Rome.¹⁰¹ The

[šaz] KUR.man-na-a-a DU-MEŠ-ku i-šar-ri-mu-u i-ka-pi-du-u2 TA nez-ri-bi

[šaz URU.ḥu-bu-uš-ki-a]

[o] a-na URU.ḥar-ra-a-ni-a a-na URU.a-ni-i-su-us [x x x]

uš-šu-ne2-e DU-MEŠ-ku-ne2-e TA UGU ta-ḥu-me šaz [KUR—aš-šur.KI]

ḥu-ub-tu ma-a'-du NAM.RA ka-bit-tu i-ḥab-ba-[tu-u2]

i-šal-la2-lu-u2 DINGIR-ut-ka GAL-ti [ZU-e]

101 After the completion of this study, D. Zeitlyn published an article in

underlying assumption seems to have been that the Mesopotamian future was decided on by the supernatural, who could choose to inform humans of their decisions: the future could become *known* to man. In Greece, advice (as well as instruction) tended to preponderate, whereas in Rome, divination appears to have been both advisory and instructive. The future remained unknown: man had to make *choices* on the basis of the advice that had been given. He had to make the best of it.

What does this imply for culturally specific ideas about the role of divination in dealing with it uncertainties? In Greece (and to a lesser extent in Rome), the advisory function of divination did not transform uncertainties into certainties but worked as a tool to diminish fear and turn it into hope by providing advice about obtaining the best possible future from a great authority – the supernatural. Uncertainty was diminished, but not taken away. In Mesopotamia, divination was used to obtain advice and instruction but very often also to obtain information about what was going to happen. In other words, Mesopotamian divination was a tool to eliminate uncertainty by obtaining perceived knowledge of the future. This is a real difference in the function of divination between the cultural areas. From the divinatory materials it would seem that Mesopotamian people appear to have believed that there was a future which could be known, shaped and controlled in particular ways, whereas most

which he provides a theoretical basis to his research which contains similarities with my findings. See D. Zeitlyn, 'Divinatory logics: diagnoses and predictions mediating outcomes', *CurrAnthr* 53 (2012) 525-546, at 527.

Greek and Roman futures seem to have come in multiple varieties. Although these could not be made known by means of divination, people could try to steer towards the best future available (whatever that future might have looked like) – by means of choices made on the basis of the outcomes of the divinatory process.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Divination was a tool for individuals to gain some grip on their futures. In Greece, there appears to have been multiple possible futures – from which man needed to choose the best. Fears about the future were turned into hope: man could hope to have made the right choice with the help of the supernatural in a world in which nothing was sure. In Mesopotamia, divination tended to be used to get to know the future (which could still be changed).

The ways ancient futures might have been conceived are not the main focus of this study. Nevertheless, some general conclusions can be drawn on the basis of divinatory materials. It should, first of all, be noted that sweeping statements about inhabitants of the ancient world being ruled by fate and predestination lack nuance.¹⁰²

102 It must be conceded that, owing to the limited space assigned to the ancient world in future studies, nuance is often impossible to provide. For an example of a publication which does devote a reasonable amount of space to ancient futures but does not avoid the pitfalls as laid down above see B. Adam & C. Groves, *Future matters: action, knowledge, ethics* (Leiden

To judge from the divinatory materials, the ancient man-on-the-street had kaleidoscopic ideas about what the future looked like and how it could and should be considered and managed. Ideas about fate were undoubtedly present, but the evidence from the divinatory materials allows the conclusion that ancient people were not so very different from us as it is often said they were: they too usually saw their future(s) as open-but-not-empty.¹⁰³ Of course, there were variations in *how* open and *how* empty that future was. In all ancient cases, something was there. The Greek and Roman individual might attempt to pick the best course in life, whereas the Mesopotamian individual might even have tried to obtain knowledge about what was in store for him – and then change it, if need be. The Mesopotamian future can be seen as one road, of which one section at a time could be made known to man, who could still influence its direction. Greek and Roman futures can be seen as multiple roads originating from a crossroads among which man had to attempt to choose the best direction by means of divination, taking

2007). While I greatly appreciate their theory and their ideas, they are based on rather too general conceptions of what ancient futures were like and how they were handled.

103 This term has been used to describe how modern man sees his future as ‘open, but not empty’ see Van Asselt *et al.*, *Uit zicht*, 53-54; and continuing on this idea, most recently, B. Raessens, *Toekomstonderzoek: van trends naar innovatie* (Den Haag 2011) 17 and *passim*; Adam & Groves, *Future matters*, 17-38.

into account that chance would still play its part. Here, once again, Greek divination appears as a relatively flexible tool by which to discover a relatively flexible future.