Worlds full of signs: ancient Greek divination in context

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9. Conclusion

Divination was an omnipresent practice in the ancient world and the cultural areas investigated in this study, Greece, Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia and Republican Rome, were no exception. Signs were thought to come from the supernatural – and, by interpreting these, humans hoped to gain information about the past, present and future. Divination was a way of receiving perceived information from the supernatural which could not, or only with difficulty, be otherwise obtained.

The principal aim of this study has been to determine what is specific to Greek divination and to offer a possible explanation of why this might be so. To discover what is specific requires comparison. Similarities reveal the general features of divination, whereas differences expose variations and specific characteristics. In applying this method, my aim has not been to demonstrate the 'uniqueness' of one of the three cultural areas. I have certainly not tried to outline some sort of evolutionary framework for the 'development' or 'transfer' of divination, but have attempted to shed light on how divination functioned in the three societies investigated.

Divination is considered as an essentially human phenomenon: in an etic sense, the perceived signs were simply occurrences onto

which man projected supernatural origins and purposes. This meant that the divinatory process was a reflection of culturally defined values because, after all, it had been created by man. Therefore, an investigation of the similarities and differences between Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman divination not only enlarges our understanding of divination, it also expands our knowledge of the societies in which it took place. Divination is inseparable from its societal context.

Before embarking on the comparison, an outline of the phenomenon of ancient divination was provided. It has been shown that the process of ancient divination consisted of the human detection, recognition and subsequent interpretation of signs attributed to the supernatural. These signs could be concerned with past, present or future. There are three elements crucial to the functioning of this process: *homo divinans*, sign and text. At the outset of the divinatory process, an individual perceived an occurrence as a divinatory sign because he would, consciously or subconsciously and for whatever reason, judge an occurrence to have been caused by the supernatural. For instance, he might observe the flight of a bird and recognize it as a sign, or might have heard or seen a sign in oral or written discourse (for example, a pronouncement of the Pythia) or perhaps in a vision or a dream. Although most of these signs could be evoked, they could also occur spontaneously. The second step in the process was the interpretation of the sign by a *homo divinans*, either the person who had initially recognized the sign or a *homo divinans* who was called in on the basis of his expertise. The *homo divinans* would

interpret the sign with the aid of 'text' in the widest sense of the word: from a written text such as a Neo-Assyrian compendium to an oral discourse which would have been part and parcel of his professional appurtenances. His interpretation would imbue the sign with meaning – the message having been perceived to be from the supernatural. The strategy adopted in this book has been to compare divinatory practices in Greece, Mesopotamia and Rome by choosing to focus on these three elements of divination – *homo divinans*, sign and text.

The comparison reveals that especially the Mesopotamian but also the Roman experts investigated occupied a position relatively higher up on the socio-economic scale than their Greek counterparts did: the Mesopotamian experts were scions of specific scribal families, which were probably relatively well-off, having benefited from a sound education and enjoying regular employment. Roman (official) experts were born into the elite and were therefore high up the social scale (although this cannot be attributed to them being an expert), but those working in private divination, as most Greek experts, enjoyed no structured education, appointment or so on. Therefore, these latter experts had to assert their authority in different ways than the Roman official experts, who could claim authority on the basis of their descent, or the Mesopotamian experts, whose authority was based on their training. The Greek expert (and the Mesopotamian and Roman unofficial experts) had to find employment and exuded an aura of authority by presenting him-

self to the public as the best expert around. This could bring fame and fortune, but most Greek experts will have remained relatively obscure. Unquestionably, the low degree of institutionalization did create an open and competitive context for Greek divinatory experts to operate in. In contrast, the high socio-economic status of the Mesopotamian and Roman official experts was largely attributable to the level of institutionalization of the environment in which such experts worked. Hence the different degrees of institutionalization lead to the making of an etic distinction between Greek *specialists* on the one hand and Mesopotamian *professionals* on the other – with the Roman experts positioned somewhere in between.

The relatively low level of institutionalization of divination in Greece also affected the expert's position in relation to his client and isolated experts from political power. Since the Greek expert was incidentally employed by his client on the basis of a symbiotic relationship which could be dissolved relatively easily, decision making and divination were not automatically integrated – instead individuals or communities would *choose* to use divination. The higher level of institutionalization would have provided a virtually unassailable guarantee that the Mesopotamian expert would be structurally employed by the king. The relationship between king and experts was both hierarchical and symbiotic. The experts did depend on the king for their salaries but the king could not make important decisions without consulting the experts. King and experts were mutually dependent on one another on a regular basis. In Rome, the most

striking feature is that the official expert was a member of the political elite, so that experts and decision makers were linked by multiple ties. In a nutshell, the institutionalization of divination mattered because it determined the parameters of the interaction between decision maker and *homo divinans*.

Turning to the second focal point of my comparative enquiries, signs: an enormous variety of phenomena can be observed which might be recognized as carriers of messages from the supernatural, which is perhaps not surprising. What is more interesting is that certain culturally specific preferences for specific types of sign can be observed. In Greece and in Rome most signs were thought to appear in natural objects, whereas in Mesopotamia they could also appear in, or be, manmade objects. This discrepancy is closely related to the perceived objectivity of the sign. How could ancient man be sure something was a sign from the supernatural and not one contrived or influenced by man? How would he know if it had been interpreted correctly? Often the need for an authority was felt in order to decide what was a sign, what was not and how it should be interpreted. In Greece, the *homo divinans* performed his commissions on the basis of his previous experience, whereas in Mesopotamia written texts and in Rome communal memories were primary factors. As they were semi-independent of man, text and communal memory ensured that both the recognition and the interpretation of a sign were perceived to be more 'objective'. On the other hand, the dearth of Greek written divinatory texts points to the existence of

a predominantly oral divinatory culture. The *homo divinans* attributed meaning to the signs without reference to texts but by relying on his personal skills – so that the recognition and interpretation of signs were dependent on the individual. Some perceived objectivity or randomization was ensured by restricting the appearance of signs chiefly to natural mediums.

There is more to be said about text: the lack of a written text confirmed the relative importance of the Greek *homo divinans* because his personal opinion and experience weighed more heavily. It would also – in Greek perception – leave room for suspicion about the intentions of the expert (if he was asked to interpret the sign). In Rome and Mesopotamia, the interpretations were no clearer or any less unambiguous than they were in Greece – but these two cultural areas resorted to authoritative texts for interpretative purposes, an action which ensured perceived objectivity. This is not to say that written authoritative texts were dogmatic or canonized: in the very few cases in which a Greek guideline did exist, a new written text would be created if the old one was thought no longer efficacious. Thereafter, the two texts would be in competition with one another. The Romans simply tried to add to old texts and in Mesopotamia a new written text would be produced to be used side-by-side with the old text. In Rome and Mesopotamia the use of texts to achieve objectivity depended heavily on systematization, which was, in its turn, linked to a certain degree of institutionalization, even to the existence of a bureaucratic tradition in the field of divination.

Differences appear not just when the three main elements of divination are discussed, they are also clearly revealed in an analysis of the functions of divination. It has been shown that divination worked within a temporal framework, helping to get a grip on past, present and future. This happened in various ways in the three cultural areas. As far as time is concerned, Mesopotamian divination can be described as a device used to consider a relatively distant future which might lie as far as a year ahead: it worked as a 'telescope' in time, from the present into the future. This telescopic view of divination implies that time was seen as something which could be bridged quite easily: time, to an extent, was something permeable. In contrast, Greek and Roman divination worked as a 'looking glass' as far as time is concerned: in these two cultural areas divination served to look upon and analyse the very near future as well as the present and the near past.

These findings about time match the way divination functioned as a tool for dealing with uncertainty. In Mesopotamia, divination worked in a partly advisory and partly indicative sense, but functioned predictively in the majority of queries. By using divination, Mesopotamian individuals could obtain knowledge about what would happen in the future. Hence Mesopotamian uncertainties about the future could be reduced, because it was believed that, through divination, the supernatural could reveal its judgements to mankind: those things which *would* happen. Nevertheless, future events could be changed for the better by rituals: even though this

might appear to be a contradiction, Mesopotamian divination was rooted in the conviction that the future could be both known and changed by ritual manipulations. In Greece and Rome this predictive function of divination was much less important while still uncertainty was reduced. The Greek and Roman supernatural would provide its advice or information, but would not predict: uncertainty was omnipresent in the Greek and Roman worlds. Consequently, in Greece and Rome divination was a tool for revealing and exploring future possibilities, whereas in Mesopotamia divination could divulge a probable future. All in all, analysis of the divinatory materials leads to the idea that Greek futures can be seen as various roads going off in different directions and the seeker as the person standing at a crossroads, attempting to pick the best path to take – the various roads are in competition with one another. The option of divinatory prediction allowed the Mesopotamian future to be seen as one ongoing road which, bit by bit, was made known to the individual (and the individual could influence its direction). Both Greek divination and Greek conceptions of the future appear to have been based on the idea of *choice:* an individual would choose when to use divination, would choose his free-lance expert and would choose his best possible future on the basis of the advice obtained by divination.

On the basis of these observations Greek divination can be characterized as a competitive phenomenon but this idea can be taken one step further: divination was a flexible phenomenon, an appropriate instrument to deal with a flexible future. This flexibility is vis-

ible on a number of levels: individuals chose to consult the Greek supernatural, thereby using divination selectively. During the interpretation of a sign, the individual could opt to use an expert or to dispense with his services. If he chose to do so he could call on an expert of his own choice. This expert would interpret the sign, relying on his ideas and experience, as far as we know without the help of either text or communal memory. As a rule, the supernatural gave advice which was, strictly speaking, not binding: the Greek future was not empty, but still open, flexible. While 'ritual is an exercise in the strategy of choice', the choices of 'What to include? What to hear as a message? What to see as a sign? What to perceive to have a double meaning? What to exclude? What to allow to remain as background noise?' were largely systematized in Mesopotamia.[1] Up to a point, the same could be said of Republican Rome. One of the most striking features of Greek divination is that these choices remained individual ones.

Explanations for these differences must be sought in the contexts of the societies in which the divination took place.[2] My findings sug-

1 Quote from Smith, *Imagining religion*, 56.

2 Some have attempted to explain particular aspects of Greek divination by linking divination to its political context. Robin Osborne, for example, argues that divination had to be ambiguous because this would have enabled the democratic process to continue to function, despite the fact the gods had given their opinion (because this opinion could be interpreted according to the will of the majority: '[...] if democratic decisions could be declared wrong by superior authority how could confidence in

gest that institutionalization is a core concept in answering such questions.[3] By institutionalizing divination, the Mesopotamian king and the Roman *nobiles* could claim access to the supernatural and restrict such access for others. Those who were not well connected or well-to-do were condemned to be content with – quite possibly – less well-qualified private experts who would have been consulted on an *ad hoc* basis, in the way divination took place in Greece. In Greece, no such concentration of power existed.[4] In a Greek society

democratic decision-making be maintained?' R. Osborne, *Greece in the making, c. 1200-479 B.C.* (London 1997) 352 as cited in Bowden, *Divination and democracy*, 154-155. A similar idea can be found in Bremmer, 'Prophets, seers, and politics', 157-159. The idea has been critically received by some: Bowden, *Divination and democracy* (Cambridge 2005) 154-159. Robert Parker provides a nuanced view of the relationships between divination and politics in his important article 'Greek states and Greek oracles', esp. 82-101; 102-105.

3 On the importance of institutionalization or a lack thereof on developments in scholarship and more generally, G.E.R.. Lloyd, *Magic, reason and experience: studies in the origin and development of Greek science* (Cambridge 1979) 226-267; Lloyd, *The ambitions of curiosity*, 126-147.

4 Of course, there were those in charge of matters, but, from a relative point of view, power was dispersed: even in Bronze Age Greece, the many kings only exercised power over a small geographical area and the Classical polis ensured a division of power among its citizens. Of course, the powerful monarchs of the Hellenistic kingdoms might have attempted to institutionalize divination by centralizing it at their courts and such a putative centralizing endeavour could have led to a decline in oracles. However, this must remain pure speculation: there is too little evidence to endorse this

where *isonomia* was, at least in theory, at the basis of society, the relative lack of institutionalization and systematization of divination might be attributed to the idea that contact with the supernatural should take place in a way accessible to all and should not have been the prerogative of a few.[5] This ideal was achieved by ensuring that divination was flexible and accessible: theoretically, all should have been able to consult the supernatural. The supernatural was thought to have left individuals relatively free to act on their signs and each individual could choose his future from several options. Hence, divinatory practice had to be and to remain flexible and open to innovation. The institutionalization of divinatory practices – resulting in the systematization of divination – was never prevalent in Greece.

These findings suggest that a more general investigation into levels of institutionalization in Greek religion would be a promising topic for further research. Another topic worth investigating further is ancient thought about the future, change and innovation as

idea. See for the monarchs of the Hellenistic kingdoms Parker, 'Greek states and Greek oracles', 102; and 103-105 on the option of other institutions taking over the roles of oracle.

5 P.J. Rhodes, 'Isonomia', *Brill's New Pauly Online*. Visited 31-10-2011. Cf. P. Cartledge, 'Greek political thought: the historical context' in: C. Rowe & M. Schofield (eds), *The Cambridge history of Greek and Roman political thought* (Cambridge 2000) 11-22, at 15. Cf. M. Ostwald, *Nomos and the beginnings of the Athenian democracy* (Oxford 1969) 96-136. However, see the nuance introduced to the way the concept is used according to Mogens Herman Hansen: in the political sphere only (M.H. Hansen, *The Athenian democracy in the age of Demosthenes* (Cambridge, MA 1991) 81-85).

reflected in sources relating the daily experiences of ancient man. The outcomes of such investigations would not only be of interest to ancient historians, classicists or Assyriologists but also to those from outside these fields of study, such as social scientists.

A fundamental similarity between the three societies examined in this study is that they all used divination to obtain information from the supernatural. Nevertheless, many intriguing differences emerge among their various practices. I have shown how divination can be cast in various forms or shapes in different societies – which had their own views of past, present and future. One of the conclusions which emerge from this study, is that institutionalization, or its lack, is a key concept for those hoping to achieve a better understanding of this variety.