Ancient Greek futures: diminishing uncertainties by means of divination
Beerden, K.

Citation
Beerden, K. (2014). Ancient Greek futures: diminishing uncertainties by means of divination. *Futures*, *60*, 23-29. doi:10.1016/j.futures.2014.03.002

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law (Amendment Taverne)
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3280933

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Futures 60 (2014) 23–29

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Futures

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/futures

Ancient Greek futures: Diminishing uncertainties by means of divination

Kim Beerden *

Institute for History, Leiden University, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 18 March 2014

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes forecasting in the ancient Greek world. Forecasting was practiced by the use of a particular method: that of divination. Divination was the interpretation of signs perceived to have been sent by the supernatural. This practice can be seen as an ancient alternative to risk assessment/analysis and to scenario studies. The study of divination shows that ancient Greeks believed there were multiple futures – and not one predetermined future – from which man attempted to select the best, aided by the flexible tool that divination appears to be. The Greek future is, perhaps, more like our own than it may previously have been assumed. Ideas about how this future should be come to terms with, however, differ significantly. The absence of concepts of risk and probability are one difference, the use of the supernatural to assess uncertainties is another.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction [1]

Ancient Greece is regularly referred to in the field of Futures Studies. The important forecasting method called 'Delphi' is an implicit way of referring to one of the most famous oracles of ancient Greece. However, the ancient world is also referred to in a more explicit way: as a counterpoint to the modern world. The most recent major publication dealing with (among other subjects) the future in the past by Barbara Adam and Chris Groves [2] devotes a reasonable amount of space to 'ancient futures'. Lucian Hölscher uses Augustine to argue that ancient futures were thought of as individual futures, while the modern future appears to focus on the collective [3, p. 20]. Anthony Giddens [4] and Peter Bernstein [5] draw a contrast between the modern world and anything which came before by characterizing us as living in a 'risk-society', in which we constantly assess and manage uncertainties of the future, while stating that the ancient Greeks did not do this in the way we do and were less interested in the future.

Yet, the fact that ancient Greeks did not think and deal with the future by means of risk-assessment, does not mean they were not interested in the uncertainties of the future. They, too, wanted to know what their options were and what could be done to influence what was to come. Instead of using scenario's and risk analysis to diminish uncertainties about the future, they had a different tool: divination ('sign-reading'), which served to gain information about past, present and future from the supernatural. This article discusses ancient Greek divination and the ways in which it was used to consider the future (from around 800 BC until the beginning of the Common Era). Ultimately, this article aims to stimulate further comparative use of the ancient Greek world in the field of Futures Studies.

* Correspondence to: Institute for History, Leiden University, PO Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 0715272651.
E-mail address: k.beerden@hum.leidenuniv.nl

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2014.03.002
0016-3287/© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

2. Divination

Ancient individuals used divination to gain some information about possible futures. They perceived occurrences ('signs') in the world around them, which were thought to be sent by the supernatural, and interpreted these, hoping to obtain reliable information. Divination occurred very regularly and in all kinds of situations: it served to address both individual and collective questions and concerns. Its use was also very widespread: everyone in the ancient world – rich or poor, slave or free, man or woman – was a potential user of divination.

Those studying cognitive religion explain that every human brain is wired in such a way to discern causal connections, even if there are none. So, when an occurrence which cannot easily be explained takes place, the *Homo sapiens* thinks there should be someone or something causing the occurrence: anything to 'prove' things do not occur just randomly. If there is no such visible agent around, the *Homo sapiens* in the ancient world is prone to ascribe the occurrence to a supernatural agent which tries to communicate some piece of information [6].

Signs from the supernatural could, then, appear spontaneously: the supernatural was thought to have provided them without having been asked to do so – or they could be asked for by means of a prayer or a sacrifice. The supernatural was perceived to be able to place these signs anywhere in the world around the ancient Greek. Supernatural signs could appear in a person who would speak as a medium. Yet, a medium could also be an animal making particular movements or an object to which something remarkable occurred. There were, then, many different kinds of signs and these differences had to be taken account during their interpretation: this is why there is a great number of divinatory methods. One of these methods was the inspection of the entrails of a sacrificial animal:

> Aegisthus took the entrails in his hands and inspected them. Now the liver had no lobe, while the portal vein and near-by gall-bladder revealed threatening approaches to the one who was observing it.
> ([Euripides, *Electra* 826–829] Translation: E.P. Coleridge, Loeb Classical Library)

Other divinatory methods include: interpreting the fact that a mouse had gnawed through a bag (Theophrastus, *Characters* 16); interpreting sudden occurrences such as the birth of an hermaphrodite or the outbreak of a plague, as in the famous passage from the *Iliad* where the plague rages in the Greek camp at Troy. The famous divinatory expert called Calchas tells the Greeks that the god Apollo has been offended, why this is so and what should be done to appease him (Homer, *Iliad* 1.93-99).

Oracles were another divinatory method and the oracle site at Delphi is probably the most famous Greek divinatory site. A female medium was thought to speak the words of the supernatural while being in a state of 'possession' by the god Apollo. It is very unclear how exactly this 'possession', if any, was caused. At Delphi, the Pythia was supposed to inhale vapours which induced it, or perhaps she drank special waters or chewed on laurel for this purpose–or perhaps she feigned to be 'possessed' [7]. While there are attestations in the sources of what the Pythia was deemed to have said, the exact way this oracle functioned remains shrouded in uncertainty. Yet, the Pythia certainly produced results for her clients. She spoke and her words were, presumably, interpreted by priests at the oracle. The following text is, according to the historian Herodotus 7.141.3-4, an oracle from Delphi warning the Athenians for the arrival of the Persians:

> Yet a wood-built wall will by Zeus all-seeing be granted
> To the Trito-born, a stronghold for you and your children.
> Await not the host of horse and foot coming from Asia,
> Nor be still, but turn your back and withdraw from the foe.
> Truly a day will come when you will meet him face to face.
> Divine Salamis, you will bring death to women's sons
> When the corn is scattered, or the harvest gathered in.
> (Translation: A.D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library)

A second important Greek oracle, after Delphi, was that at Dodona. Here, we know even less about how the oracular procedure worked: the signs were perhaps given through the cooing of doves or the rustling of leaves in a particular oak-tree. What makes Dodona interesting to modern researchers is the fact that many small lead tablets which played a practical role in the divinatory process have been found at the site. The published Dodonaic materials now consist of around two hundred questions; more should be published in the future.

Questions to the supernatural have been written on the tablets by the clients of the oracle:

> Whether it will be better for me if I go to Sybaris and if I do these things?
> Will it be better for Agelochos (from Ergetion) if he sets out to be a farmer?
> God. Good fortune. About the price of a slave.
> God. Luck. Leontios asks about his son Leon, whether he will be healthy and (cured) of the disease which has gripped him?
> (All translations: E. Eidinow [8, pp. 75; 96; 103; 105])

Answers were only occasionally written down on the reverse of the tablets:

> Side A: God ... Good Luck. About possessions and about a place to live: whether (it would be) better for him and his children and his wife in Kroton?
> Side B (probably the response to A): In Kroton.
> (Translation: E. Eidinow [8, p. 76])

The tablets were folded and perhaps laid down in a special place for the supernatural – and after the client had gained his answer they were discarded on the site. The information gained from these tablets will be discussed in what follows.

Whichever kind of sign was interpreted and whichever divinatory method was used, an individual first had to perceive an occurrence as being a sign coming from the supernatural. If one had received a sign at an oracle site this was naturally easier then when a sign occurred spontaneously without the person knowing what he should look for. Then, the individual needed to read and interpret the sign, or he might have called on an expert to do so. Only at this point the sign became imbued with meaning and could it start to signify something. Thus, divination was essentially a human process and does, in this sense, not differ from methods of forecasting we use today. The main difference is that ancient man *thought* the source of the data available for interpretation was the supernatural, whereas modern forecasters do not.

3. Employing an expert [1, pp. 57–63]

If a Greek thought he was capable of interpreting the sign for himself, he was free to do so. There are plenty of sources showing that divine-it-yourself indeed happened regularly: Aegisthus, in the example above [2, Divination], is a king and a warrior but he is nowhere known as a divinatory expert. A passage from Xenophon's *Anabasis* suggests that the leader of the army, in this case Xenophon, could learn about divination by means of observation, although he was not an expert himself. Xenophon has been present at sacrifices to the supernatural, where the intestines of animals were inspected to for signs:

> Now Silanus, the divinatory expert, answered me in respect to the main issue that the omens were favourable (for he knew well enough that I was not unacquainted with divination, from being always present at the sacrifices); but he said that there appeared in the omens a kind of fraud and plot against me, manifestly because he knew that he was himself plotting to traduce me before you. ([Xenophon, *Anabasis* 5.6.29.1-7] Translation: C.L. Brownson, Loeb Classical Library)

A better informed elite-layman will have had more expertise than the average Greek-on-the-street. However, the most important thing was that an individual *felt* he had enough knowledge to interpret a divinatory sign. Whether an expert should be consulted order to secure a correct interpretation of a sign was, then, a subjective matter.

While ancient sources are not definitive about why people would want to consult an expert, anthropologists do see advantages. An expert is presumed to have the skill, expertise and tools to perform a certain method of divination. On account of these claims, the expert is someone who can "[. . .] remove the agency and responsibility for a decision from the actor himself" [9, p. 197]. The expert can also mediate between men in situations in which tensions might be present – an outsider can resolve such tensions in a seemingly unbiased manner. It could be considered dangerous however to have a member of local society, who might have knowledge of a client's family and affairs, perform the divination.

Greek experts were predominantly male, could belong to a 'clan' of divinatory experts and worked on a free-lance basis while travelling around. The education of experts was on an oral basis and most probably took place within a master–pupil relationship, where pupil was a member of the clan of his master. Experts were not normally structurally employed for life. They could work for an employer for a longer time, but the basis on which they were employed remained changeable. This is reflected in examples showing a lack of loyalty between client and expert. The expert Hegesistratus, for example, worked for the Spartans who were dissatisfied with him and put him in prison. Obviously desperate to escape, Hegesistratus managed to free himself by cutting off his foot, after which he began working for the Persian enemy (Herodotus 9.37-41).

Could these men be trusted in providing the correct interpretation? This theme occurs regularly in the sources, reflecting worries about experts divining according to their own interests or without the necessary knowledge. However, as most of the divinatory knowledge was passed from one expert to the other on an oral basis, there was no mantic orthodoxy. Then how could an expert be proved wrong? In practice, this was not possible. Still, this was something people worried about–the reliability of the expert is still a familiar theme in the modern world.

4. What were people concerned about?

About which themes did ancient Greeks want, and thought they could get, information by means of divination? Ancient individuals were uncertain about all sorts of issues but it appears one could not turn to the supernatural to ask 'obvious' questions, the answers to which could be gained in other ways. Joseph Fontenrose's simple distinction of the kinds of questions that were asked is into three categories: *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*) [10, pp. 438–440].

However, this categorization emphasizes communal concerns and concerns of leaders. Eric Lhôte's has provided an edition of the divinatory tablets from Dodona. This edition is helpful when taking individual concerns into account [11]. The following categories of uncertainties can be deducted:[1] '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

[1] A number of questions need to be omitted here: Lhôte 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?, 140, 142, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 155, 156, 161, 162, 164, 165, 166, 167.

that job, about buying and selling.[2] Second, and connected to the first category, is 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.[3] A, third, related category is the question of where to settle and live: whether a person should stay or move, or should travel.[4] 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.[5] Fifth, dealing with rules and institutions: asking for justice, about requesting civil rights.[6] Sixth, religion: whether to use a necromancer, to request another oracle, and so forth.[7] Seventh, on matters of health.[8] Eight, matters of warfare/military.[9] While all the previous categories are concerned with the future, there is a last category concerned with finding out 'the truth' about past and present [1, pp. 204–205].'[10]

5. Getting to know ancient futures[11]

Up to this point, I have used the term 'information' to describe what the ancient Greeks hoped to gain from there supernatural. This, however, is a broad term which may include predictions, advice, commands, and so on.

It is a common assumption that divination always served to get to *know* the Greek future: that it was predictive. The implications hereof are that ancient futures would be predestined and that chance, also personified as Tyche in the Greek world, would have played a very small role (otherwise how could the future be predicted?). This assumption is based on Greek literary sources which have gained prominence. One example is the following: Homer (*Odyssey* 19.535-540) relates Penelope's spontaneous dream which was interpreted in such a way that it applied to her situation. This dream was interpreted as signalling the imminent homecoming of her husband Odysseus:

> 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 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. (Translation: A.T. Murray, Loeb Classical Library)

However, Greek predictive divination did in practice not occur as regularly as the literary sources suggest – I suspect that, in literary sources such as these, it was a very good rhetorical device for telling a story. In Greece, chance/Tyche was a central concept, in the Classical but especially in the Hellenistic period [1, pp. 207–208; 12, pp. 39, 45–52].

The starting point of my investigation of actual practice lies in the oracular questions and sayings, especially those contained in (parts of) the sources from Delphi and Dodona because these texts have been recorded during, or shortly after, the divinatory process itself. In what follows, I quantify categories of questions. Although no conclusive statistics can be drawn from such a small amount of source materials, quantification still has its purpose because it shows the relationship between the different kinds of questions asked.

Of the around two hundred questions that have been published, 35 cannot be assigned to any category because the texts are incomplete and can therefore not be understood.[12] Moving on, the first category of questions is illustrated by the following Dodonaic example:

> 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. (Translation: E. Eidinow [8, p. 97])

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 information with which the individual is guided to a particular choice in a decision which needs to be made (rather than to reveal the future to him). This kind of question is asked in 73 questions in total (39%).[13]

---

[2] 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 possessions: 28A, 28b, 58B, 65, 115, 116, 117, 118. Buying and selling: 101, 109, 110.

[3] 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.

[4] 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.

[5] 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.

[6] Requesting civil rights: 61B. Justice: 16, 141bis, 159.

[7] 10a, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 141B, 143, 144.

[8] 46Ba, 50Ab, 65, 66, 68A, 69, 71, 72, 73.

[9] 127, 128, 129.

[10] 107B, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 125bis, 126.

[11] This passage is drawn from chapter 8 of [1].

[12] 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.

[13] 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.

The second category to be found in the Dodonaic materials 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?' Instructions are given on 31 tablets (16.5%).

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'. Two tablets combine indicative and instructive questions (1.1%).[14] The category of indicative counts 35 tablets in total (18.7%).[15]

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. There are eleven of such questions found in the Dodonaic tablets (5.9%).[16] 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.

Do the Delphic materials reveal the same pattern? The percentages for Delphi are as follows: Fontenrose has dealt with seventy-five historical oracles. Of these, 33 are of an advisory nature (44%).[17] Thirty-one are instructive (41.3%).[18] Only five are indicative (6.6%).[19] Only two ask for information about both past and present (2.6%),[20] leaving another four (5.3%) which could not be assigned to these categories).[21]

Advice appears as the most important way in which uncertainties were diminished at oracles. Evidence relating to the outcome of extispicies (inspections of the liver) confirms this: although we are still rather in the dark about how his questions were phrased, Xenophon's extispicies normally seem to indicate '(un)favourability'. This is exemplified by the following passage (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 6.21.2-3): '[. . .] our sacrificial victims were favourable, the bird-omens auspicious, the omens of the sacrifice most favourable; let us advance upon the enemy [. . .]'. (Translation: C.L. Brownson, Loeb Classical Library). 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/Tyche, the supernatural and human skill.

Divination was a tool for individuals to gain a perceived grip on their futures by means of gaining information from the supernatural, mainly in the shape of advice. This has implications for our ideas on the issue how Greeks perceived their future. The divinatory materials show that there appear to have been multiple possible futures originating from a crossroads. Man had to attempt to choose the best direction by means of advice from the supernatural, taking into account that chance/Tyche would still play its part. There was no certain prediction to be gained through divination. Fears about the future were turned into hope by means of divination: man could hope to have made the right choice in a world in which nothing was sure. Greek divination appears as a tool by which to discover a relatively flexible future which appears to have been 'open-but-not-empty' [13, pp. 53–54].

6. Ancient futures[22]

The above [5, Getting to know ancient futures] has implications for the way the ancient world has sometimes been depicted – as a place whose inhabitants considered themselves to be in the grip of inescapable fate [4, pp. 40–41; 2, p. 4]. After all, 'the only way in which one can 'divine' what the future holds is for the future to be *pre*determined. Yet, once one knows what is predetermined in one's future, then there exists the possibility of avoiding or changing it' [14, p. 79]. It has also been stated that ancient futures could be changed 'as an attempt to change pre-existing destiny' [2, p. 11].

However, to judge from the totality of Greek divinatory materials, the ancient man-on-the-street had more 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 Delphi and Dodona allows the conclusion that ancient people were in this respect not so very different from us as it has sometimes been claimed they were [2, p. 18]. The future seems to have been flexible: the supernatural could provide advice about what would be the best decisions, while chance/Tyche remained an important factor.

[14] Lhôte 48; 52.

[15] 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.

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

[17] Fontenrose [9] 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.

[18] 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.

[19] H 4, 18?, 34?, 70, 75.

[20] H 65, 69.

[21] H 3, 22, 63, 73.

[22] The following passages are drawn from chapter 8 of [1].

On top of this, individuals could also attempt to influence futures if the information received was not to their liking. Religious rituals such as prayer, cursing and sacrificing were important ways to persuade or force the gods to influence the course of things.

It follows that Giddens cannot be right in stating that ancient man was focused on the past [4, pp. 40–41]. The prevalence of future-oriented religious phenomena such as divination, as well as the existence of prayers, curses and sacrifice strongly suggests that the ancient future was thought about intensively, as Adam and Groves have already argued [2, pp. 46–47, 61–64; 15, pp. 111–114].

It has also appeared, however, that the ancient individual did not think about the future in the terms that we do: there are no discernable traces of the idea that is central to us when considering the future – risk. Anthony Giddens, among others, says it is the 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 [16, pp. 109–143]. Ulrich Beck and Giddens consider modern society one in which the main aim is to minimize risk [17, p. 45]. I agree: the 'risk society' – in which we attempt to minimize uncertainty by quantifying it – is something which is particular to the modern world. The modern use of risk, which is deeply rooted in probabilistic thought, contrasts markedly with experiences in the ancient world. Ancient risk-vocabulary is non-existent, not are quantifications of uncertainty and application of risk-thinking. In the Greek sources, all that can be found are, some elementary reflections of a probabilistic kind:

> 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. ([Aristotle, *On the heavens* 292a28-30] Translation: W.K.C. Guthrie, Loeb Classical Library)

'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. A much better concept is the overarching concept 'uncertainty', closely related to risk [18, pp. 205–226], but which provides a more useful tool for exploration of the ancient world. Esther Eidinow, in her important work on oracles and curses [8, especially pp. 10–25] argues that risk is a useful concept when discussing the ancient world. However, I see this differently: what risk assessment does for modern man was what divination did for ancient man: both risk assessment and divination are different ways to reduce uncertainty.

7. To conclude

Isn't the future what it used to be? The Greek future is, perhaps, more like our own than it may previously have been assumed. Ideas about how this future should be come to terms with, however, differ significantly. The absence of risk and probability are one difference, the use of divination to assess uncertainties – with chance/Tyche playing its part – is another.

While I have focused on Greece in the centuries before the Common Era, it should be stated here that, with increasing influences from the Near East, a growing belief in fate in general can be discerned in the first centuries of the Common Era. Both in Romanized Greece and in Rome proper a rise in the use of astrology and horoscopes can be detected.

In the above, a number of issues about Greek ways of dealing with their future(s) have been clarified. It may appear that I am stimulating caution in referring to the Greek world as a point of contrast. This is true. Still, I do not aim to discourage anyone: on the contrary, this article will hopefully stimulate comparison, however brief, by providing knowledge on which basis such a comparison could take place. The historical comparison is an extremely valuable tool which aids to understand past, present and perhaps future developments in the field of Futures Studies.

Acknowledgements

I thank Prof. Dr. Ir. M.B.A. van Asselt for stimulating me to write this paper and the two anonymous referees of *Futures* for their helpful comments.

References

[1] This article is closely based – but partly rewritten for this particular audience – on K. Beerden, Worlds Full of Signs: Ancient Greek Divination in Context, Brill, Leiden, 2013.
[2] B. Adam, C. Groves, Future Matters: Action, Knowledge, Ethics, Brill, Leiden, 2007.
[3] L. Hölscher, Die Entdeckung der Zukunft, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1999.
[4] A. Giddens, Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives, Profile Books, London, 2000.
[5] P.L. Bernstein, Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1996.
[6] U. Koch, Cognitive theory and the first-millennium extispicy ritual, in: A. Annus (Ed.), Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World, Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Chicago, 2010, pp. 43–59;
J.P. Sørensen, Cognitive underpinnings of divinatory practices, in: K. Munk, A. Lisdorf (Eds.), Unveiling the Hidden: Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Divination, Unpublished.
A. Lisdorf, The Dissemination of Divination in Roman Republican Times: A Cognitive Approach, (Ph.D. thesis), University of Copenhagen, 2007.
[7] J. Foster, D. Lehoux, The Delphic Oracle and the ethylene-intoxication hypothesis, Clin. Toxicol. 45 (2007) 85–89.
[8] E. Eidinow, Oracles, curses, and risk among the ancient Greeks, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.
[9] G.K. Park, Divination and its social contexts, J. R. Anthropol. Instit. Great Br. Ireland 93 (1963) 195–209.
[10] J.E. Fontenrose, The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations: With a Catalogue of Responses, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978.
[11] E. Lhôte, Les lamelles oraculaires de Dodone, Droz, Genèva, 2006.

[12] E. Eidinow, Luck, Fate and Fortune: Antiquity and its Legacy, Tauris, London, 2011.
[13] M.B.A. van Asselt, A. Faas, F. van der Molen, S.A. Veenman (Eds.), Uit zicht: toekomstverkennen met beleid, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2010.
[14] J.N. Lawson, The Concept of Fate, Harrasowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1994.
[15] C. Groves, Living in uncertainty: anthropogenic global warning and the limits of 'risk thinking', in: S. Skrimshire (Ed.), Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination, Continuum, London, 2010, pp. 107–126.
[16] A. Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991.
[17] U. Beck, A. Giddens, S. Lash, Reflexive Modernization: Politics Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994.
[18] M.B.A. van Asselt, Perspectives on Uncertainty and Risk: The PRIMA Approach to Decision Support, Springer, Boston, 2000.