



Divination and Omens

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Introduction

Divination is a universal phenomenon; it is found in virtually all cultures, and it was ubiquitous in the ancient world. Written evidence for divination goes back to the early 2nd millennium in Mesopotamia and is attested to throughout the ancient world, primarily the Near East, Egypt, the Levant, Greece, Italy, and China. Divination was forbidden for religious or political reasons in some ancient societies. Primarily for religious reasons, divination was explicitly forbidden in the Tanakh; nevertheless, it was certainly practiced in ancient Palestine, which is also attested in the Hebrew Bible. Despite attempts to forbid certain kinds of divination, specifically astrology because of its potency, divination remained pervasive in the Roman Empire and continued in use after the advance of Christianity. Research into divination blossomed in the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, and many primary sources from Mesopotamia, Greece, and China were published for the first time. The momentum almost ground to a halt after the 1920s, to the extent that many primary sources remain unpublished even in the 2020s. However, interest in the many-faceted phenomenon blossomed again from the late 1980s onward, and an abundance of research as well as the publication of new, and newly discovered, primary sources have since appeared. It was for instance believed that divination was all but nonexistent in ancient Egypt, a picture that has now been thoroughly overturned by the publication of a wealth of new sources from papyri from the Roman period. Increasingly, the traditional boundaries between fields of study have been transcended, and interdisciplinary studies have deepened our understanding both of histories, purposes, and roles of the divination disciplines, and of the complexities of their practice. Divination is a means of gaining knowledge that is not obtainable by normal modes of investigation. It serves to handle uncertainty, it can warn or reassure a person, or a whole people, about what the future will bring, and it can illuminate what happened in the past. Only the supernatural can hold that kind of knowledge; humans cannot investigate the minds of others or see what is hidden by time. “Divination” is the general term for a myriad of different techniques to communicate with the supernatural in order to gain access to that special knowledge. “Omen” is the specific term for signs sent by the god/gods, whereas an “oracle” is the answer to a query. Divination can be divided into “artificial” and “natural” divination, where natural divination refers to prophecy and other kinds of theophany that usually are revealed in plain language or comprehensible visions. Artificial divination always relies on a hermeneutic apparatus; it can be a complex or simple code, sometimes combined with the diviner’s own intuition. In research, divination and prophesy have traditionally been treated as two distinct forms of interaction with the divine, but in the early 21st century there has been a movement toward considering them as two sides of the same coin, in line with Plato and Cicero. Prophecy is left out of consideration here.

General Introductions to Divination in the Ancient World

Divination is a cultural activity that serves multiple purposes and is attested to in a myriad of variations. The history of their manifestations, development, and cross-fertilization in the ancient world is still a work in progress. The first and still most generous introduction is Bouché-Leclercq 1899. For a comparative study of ancient Greek and Near Eastern divination, see Beerden 2013. Cryer 1994 gives a survey of forms of divination attested in Near Eastern sources and in the Hebrew Bible. For the versatility of divination, see Rüpke 2013. Most of the sources for ancient divination are still inaccessible to the nonspecialist. A practical collection of Near Eastern sources can be found in Abusch and Krüger 2008. For a comprehensive study of magic and divination in the Hebrew Bible and in Late Antiquity, see Bohak 2008.

Abusch, I. Tzvi, and Annette Krüger, eds. *Omina, Orakel, Rituale und Beschwörungen. Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments*, n.s. 4. Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008.

Reliable sourcebook with a wide selection of texts from ancient Iran, Iraq, Syria, the Levant, and Egypt.

Beerden, Kim. *Worlds Full of Signs: Ancient Greek Divination in Context*. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 176. Leiden, The Netherlands, and Boston: Brill, 2013.

A comparative study of Greek, Roman, and Mesopotamian forms of divination and their institutions, practitioners, and mechanisms, and a discussion of how and to what extent they helped alleviate anxiety and uncertainty.

Bohak, Gideon. *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

A reliable standard work of reference for magic and divination in pre- and postexilic Judaism.

Bouché-Leclercq, Auguste. *Histoire de la divination dans l'Antiquité*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899.

Still unsurpassed by its scope, its richness in detail, and the erudite references to primary sources.

Cryer, Frederick H. *Divination in Ancient Israel and Its Near Eastern Environment: A Socio-historical Investigation*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, supplement series 142. Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1994.

A useful survey of the practices of divination. The classification of divination as a form of performative action, and hence magic, is too narrow in scope to give a just picture of this many-faceted practice.

Rüpke, Jörg. "New Perspectives on Ancient Divination." In *Divination in the Ancient World: Religious Options and the Individual*. Edited by Veit Rosenberger, 9–10. Potsdamer altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 46. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013.

Divination as rituals that can be adapted to changing social and religious needs.

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