



# DIVINATION

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# Introduction



Foretelling the future, interpreting the past, and, in general, discovering hidden truth (by way of clairvoyance, precognition, telepathy, and other such phenomena) was called *divinatio* by the Romans. The noun is derived from the verb *divinare* ‘to predict’, which is no doubt related to *divinus* ‘divine’ in the sense of “pertaining to a god or to the gods.” The linguistic evidence in antiquity shows that the gift of predicting future events or grasping things by extrasensory perception was something that came from the gods, and this is confirmed by myth. According to Aeschylus (*Ag.* 1203ff.), Cassandra had been given her prophetic powers by Apollo to win her love. Similarly, Tiresias was endowed with the gift of prophecy, either by Zeus or by Athena, to compensate him for the curse that had made him blind.

The Greek word for “prophetic power” or “gift of divination” is *manteia*; the word for “prophet” or “prophetess” is *mantis*. The Greeks were probably right in connecting these two words with *mainomai* ‘to be mad’ and *mania* ‘madness’, but of course they were not thinking of permanent insanity; rather, they meant an abnormal state of mind that lasted for a short time. The word *ekstasis* also is used to describe this abnormal state; it means “stepping out of one’s self” and is best understood today as “trance,” though in antiquity it could mean a form of “possession.” The association of prophetic powers with “madness” seems to be a very old idea among the Indo-European tribes, as the etymology shows,<sup>1</sup> and the descriptions of prophetic trance [*nos.* 87 and 90] stress this particular aspect. It should be said, however, that this is only one form of divination; there are forms (e.g., the interpretation of dreams, or astrological forecasts) that do not require—in fact, they preclude—an abnormal state of consciousness.

Something should be said about the original meaning of the words *prophet*, *prophecy*, and the like. In Greek, *prophetes* literally means “a person who speaks for someone else,” and that someone else is usually a god,

though in Delphi the priests who interpreted the obscure utterances of the Pythia were also called *prophetai*. The Pythia was the *mantis*, directly inspired by Apollo, but her message from the god had to be put into comprehensible form, into verse, for those who consulted the oracle. These *prophetai* were not directly in touch with the god; they were one step removed. Plato (*Timaeus* 72A) says that the term *prophetes* should be reserved for those priestly interpreters who translated the frenzied utterances of the ecstatic seer (*mantis*) into intelligible Greek. But, in general, *prophetes* is a person who speaks for a god, or through whom a god speaks and reveals his plans. This is true for the prophets of the Old Testament, for John the Baptist, for Jesus—for anyone who proclaims a divine message with a special sense of mission.

Divination had its roots in Mesopotamia. The gift of prophecy and the status it confers were taken for granted in the Old Testament. Prophets were men of God who had the privilege of seeing him in a vision or hearing his voice, but then it became their duty to bring his message to the community. The prophetic books of the Old Testament, with their magnificent poetry, show that this was by no means an easy job; he who had to spread God's message usually encountered indifference or downright hostility, especially if he denounced heresy and vice and prophesied doom. The Greek myths of Cassandra and Tiresias also show that the gift of prophecy was a blessing and a curse in one.<sup>2</sup>

The Babylonians believed that the decisions of their gods, like those of their kings, were arbitrary, but that mankind could at least guess their will. Any event on earth, even a trivial one, could reflect or foreshadow the intentions of the gods because the universe is a living organism, a whole, and what happens in one part of it might be caused by a happening in some distant part. Here we see a germ of the theory of "cosmic sympathy" formulated by Posidonius, the Stoic. Lists of unusual happenings were kept in Babylonia, and later (perhaps through Etruscan influence) in Rome. These observations could then be matched with events that affected the whole country: the death of a ruler, a famine, a war. Among the techniques practiced, we find astrology, liver divination, and the interpretation of dreams; the birth of freaks and the strange behavior of animals also were thought to have special meaning.

Cicero's work *On Divination* (*De Divinatione*) is the most important ancient text we have. It should be read in conjunction with his treatises *On the Gods* (*De Natura Deorum*) and *On Fate* (*De Fato*), because certain forms of divination were part of religion, and the doctrine that all things are determined or decreed by fate naturally favored the belief that divination was possible. Cicero's three treatises give us a fairly full picture of Hellenistic theology as it was taught in the various philosophical schools.

As far as divination is concerned, Cicero himself remains skeptical, but he borrows a good deal from philosophers who firmly believed in the various methods of predicting the future. One of the leading minds of what is now called Middle Stoicism, Posidonius of Apamea (c. 135–50 B.C.), seems to have written a book in which he tried to show, from the many cases he had collected, that divination actually works. In order to find a philosophical reason for the phenomenon, he established the principle of “cosmic sympathy,” which is at the basis of all occult sciences. Thus we know from Cicero (*Div.* 1.64) how Posidonius explained dreams that came true: in sleep the human soul communicates either with the gods directly or with an “immortal soul” (i.e., one of the many daemons that throng the air beneath the moon). These divine beings know the future, and they often share their knowledge with human souls when they are not encumbered by the body.

### Natural and Artificial Types of Divination Dreams

According to Cicero (*Div.* 1.11; 2.26), who seems to follow Posidonius, there are two main types of divination: natural and artificial.<sup>3</sup> The most obvious form of natural divination is by dreams; we have just seen how Posidonius accounted for dreams that anticipated future events. Dreams are called “the oldest oracle” by Plutarch (*Conv. Sept. Sap.* 159A). Often the dreamer himself understood the meaning of his dream; but sometimes he would consult a professional interpreter. Their lore is preserved in dream books such as Artemidorus’ *Oneirocritica* (*The Art of Judging Dreams*).<sup>4</sup>

A special way of inducing meaningful dreams is known as incubation (in Greek, *enkoimesis* ‘sleeping in a temple’). In certain sanctuaries—for instance, in the temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus—the visitor had to follow an established ritual (fasting, praying, bathing, sacrificing) and then spend the night in the temple. In his sleep he would see the god and receive from him advice about the problem that had brought him there, usually a serious illness. By following the god’s advice, many patients whose doctors had given up on them recovered miraculously, and many of their cures are recorded in inscriptions and in literary works—for example, in the *Speeches* of Aelius Aristides (second century A.D.), who had been healed himself. Hence, this special kind of divination is also called *iatromancy*.

The dream experience seems to have been fairly predictable. The prescribed ritual no doubt conditioned those who sought help; the holy place, the presence of kindly priests, and the records of earlier cures inscribed on the walls to document the reality of divine healing must have heightened their expectations; almost certainly they were also given a

drug, along with hypnosis. For many patients these ancient sanctuaries were a kind of last resort, like Lourdes today.

Physical and mental sickness may be considered borderline conditions that allow the body to release certain powers that it does not normally possess. Aristotle (frag. 12a Ross) tells a story about his friend Eudemus, who during a serious illness had instant knowledge of his recovery and was at the same time able to predict the imminent death of Alexander, king of Pherae. Similarly, Augustine (*De Gen. ad Litt.* 12.17) reports the case of a mentally disturbed person who was regularly visited by a priest and “saw” him during all the phases of his journey between his own house, twelve miles away, and that of the patient.<sup>5</sup>

Like other forms of divination, the interpretation of dreams was practiced at an early date in Mesopotamia.<sup>6</sup> In Egypt this art was in the hands of priests and was so highly regarded that King Esarhaddon of Assyria, when he conquered Egypt in 671 B.C., took a number of these priests back to Assyria with him. The Papyrus Chester Beatty 3 (c. 1800 B.C.) contains an elaborate manual that is similar to the dream book of Artemidorus, which was written two thousand years later: eating donkey meat in a dream is good (it means a promotion); making love to one’s mother is good (“he will be supported by his fellow citizens”); diving into a river is good (“his sins will be taken away from him”); having intercourse with a pig is bad (“he will lose his possessions”). The Egyptians believed that man, in his sleep, had access to a universe that is different from the one we normally inhabit and that, though the body is asleep, the soul is somehow awakened to a new life.

In the Old Testament, dreams are one way in which man communicates with God, though it is admitted that some night visions are meaningless or even misleading. The dreams experienced by kings, priests, and prophets are naturally more significant than those had by others, and kings sometimes slept in holy places if they need help from God: Solomon’s dream at Gibeon (1 Kings 3:4–15; 2 Chronicles 1:3–12) is an incubation dream; Joseph’s dream (Genesis 37.5–11) is one of the oldest dreams of prediction on record; and Pharaoh’s dream (Genesis 41:1–45), which none of the Egyptian “magicians and sages” could interpret, is explained to him by Joseph, because he “has the spirit of God in him.” Because dreams come from God—or from a god—only he who has the divine spirit in him will be able to understand them. Curiously, Pharaoh does not have the authority to interpret his own dream.

The Talmudic tradition also recognizes the value of dreams. According to Rabbi Jochanan, “Three kinds of dreams come true: the dream in the morning, the dream someone [else] has about you, and the dream that is

interpreted by another dream.” Clearly, if a dream needs interpretation, the best interpretation comes from God, in the form of another dream.

The earliest dream in Greek literature is found in Homer’s *Iliad* (2.5ff.). It is a deceitful dream sent by Zeus to Agamemnon, the commander in chief of the Greeks before Troy, “in order to destroy many Achaeans in their camp,” as Homer says, and eventually make the Greeks realize how valuable a fighter Achilles, who has just been insulted by Agamemnon, will prove to be. The dream vision urges Agamemnon to attack the Trojans at once, which is bad advice. Clearly the gods can send false dreams, and in the assembly of elders in which the dream is discussed, Nestor, the wisest of the Greeks, says: “If any other man had told us about this dream, we would declare it false and turn away from it; but now it was he who claims to be by far the greatest among the Achaeans who had the vision.” The fact that the supreme commander experienced the dream and was ready to take it as a good omen seems to exclude any doubt.

In the *Odyssey* (19.562ff.) Penelope develops a kind of theory of misleading and trustworthy dreams. She uses the image of two gates, one made of ivory, one of horn. The deceptive dreams fly through the gates of ivory, and those which accurately predict the future fly through the gates of horn. But it is difficult to distinguish one from the other, and in this particular instance, Penelope’s instinct tells her that her dream is not true, although she would like to believe in it.

According to Hesiod (*Theog.* 211–13), dreams are creatures of the Night, along with Sleep, Doom, Death, and other sinister personifications. It is strange that Hesiod, in the seventh century B.C., seems to ignore pleasant dreams, of which there is no lack in early epic poetry; he thinks only of frightening visions, deceptive dreams, and nightmares.

A powerful religious movement that originated in Greece in the seventh century B.C. is known as Orphism. Some Orphic theories concerning the soul impressed later poets and thinkers such as Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Plato. They taught that, during sleep, the soul was freed and could leave the body in order to communicate with higher beings. While the body is awake, the soul (or “the subconscious,” as we might say) is asleep, but when the body is asleep, the soul is wide awake and acquires what we today would call extrasensory perception. The soul, as Aeschylus says (*Ag.* 178; cf. 975 and Fraenkel’s notes),<sup>7</sup> sits in the heart like a prophetess in her chair and interprets the visions of the blood. This striking image anticipates later philosophical theories.

Similarly, Euripides (*Iphigenia Taurica* 1261ff.) says that dreams are creatures of the Earth. Text and interpretation of this choral passage are controversial, but the playwright seems to compare the dreams with the

visions of the Pythia, who was also believed to receive her insights from the Earth. The chorus, consisting of Greek women, takes it for granted that dreams “tell what happened first, what happened later, and what will happen in the future.”

In Plato’s *Phaedo* (60C–61C) Socrates reminisces in prison about a recurring vision in which the dream figure—always the same—urges him to “make music.” The expression is ambiguous in Greek; it could refer to any of the arts and crafts sacred to the Muses, including what we call “music,” but it might also refer to poetry or philosophy, for Socrates felt that, for many years, he had been “making music” through philosophical discussions. Perhaps we ought to translate the order of the dream figure as “Be creative!” To Socrates the highest form of creativity was philosophical (or scientific) investigation. But after his trial, awaiting execution, he realizes that some supernatural power wants him to write poetry while there is still time, and he does this by versifying some of Aesop’s fables that he knows by heart.

This is obviously the type of dream called *chrematismos* ‘oracular response’ by Artemidorus and *admonitio* ‘command’ by Chalcidius (also fifth century). This type, Macrobius writes, “occurs when in sleep the dreamer’s parent, or some other respected or impressive person, perhaps a priest, or even a god, reveals without symbolism what will or will not happen, what should be done or avoided.”<sup>8</sup>

That Socrates paid attention to the messages delivered by dreams and that he placed them on the same level as the responses given by the established oracles and the “inner voice” that he listened to is clear from a passage in his *Apology* (33C): “God has ordered me to do this, both through oracles and dreams and in all the other ways used by divine providence for giving its commands.”

Xenophon, like Plato a disciple of Socrates, believed that divination through dreams was possible and should not be neglected (*Cyr.* 8.7.21): “It is in sleep that the soul really shows its divine nature; it is in sleep that it enjoys a kind of insight into the future; and this apparently happens, because it is completely free in sleep.”

Plato went one step further when he claimed that we can control our dreams and that such control is, in fact, essential (*Rep.* 571C). Before going to sleep we must awaken our rational powers and concentrate on noble thoughts. If we do not indulge our baser appetites too much and if we are able to free ourselves from passions, we shall see in our dreams the truth; otherwise we will be the victims of absurd visions.<sup>9</sup>

In one of his early dialogues, when he was still under the influence of Plato, his teacher, Aristotle said: “The mind recovers its true nature during sleep” (*On Philosophy*, frag. 12a Ross). In his later writings (*On*

*Sleep, On Dreams, On Divination in Sleep*, all parts of the *Parva Naturalia* [Short Scientific Treatises]) he is more cautious when dealing with dreams. He denies, for instance, that they are sent by a god, for if the gods wished to communicate with men, they could do so in the daytime, and they would show more discrimination in choosing the dreamers.<sup>10</sup> To him, dreams are affections of the central organ of consciousness. The dreamer is sensitive to the slightest disturbances in his organism, and these will affect his dreams. While asleep, he may hear a faint noise and dream of a thunderstorm.

Dreams certainly have their meaning, according to Aristotle, and physicians should tell their patients to pay attention to dreams. The best dream interpreter, he says, is the man who spots analogies and recognizes the true image behind the dream reflection, for the true image is often broken or distorted or changed through the dream process, just as an image reflected in water is distorted by ripples on the surface.

Aristotle recognizes the common origin of the following three phenomena: dreams, the hallucinations of the sick, and the optic illusions of the sane. Although dreams are not divine, they are daemonic, “for Nature is daemonic”<sup>11</sup> (a profound remark). If a dream comes true, it may just be coincidence, but there are two types of dreams that can be taken as predictions: those that disclose foreknowledge of the dreamer’s state of health, and those that initiate their own fulfillment by strongly suggesting to the dreamer a course of action.<sup>12</sup>

We can take it for granted that most of Aristotle’s contemporaries believed in dreams, for we hear of various practices of averting an outcome threatened by bad dreams. People either “told it to the sun” or prayed or took ablutions or offered sacrifices.<sup>13</sup> This was a form of psychotherapy, and even for the fatalist the law of predetermination was not broken, because the prevention of catastrophe, once the warning had been issued in a dream, could easily be predetermined.

The Stoic philosophers were busy collecting case histories of predictions (in dreams, oracles, etc.) that came true, mainly in order to provide an empirical base for their theory of predetermination. Cicero, in his treatise *On Divination*, uses these collections, along with some personal reminiscences, mainly to show that they were open to doubt. Posidonius, a Stoic thinker who had considerable influence on later philosophers, was convinced that divine powers communicate with human beings through dreams, and that they do this in three different ways: (1) the soul, being divine, is allowed to see the future as only gods or daemons see it; (2) the air is full of disembodied souls (daemons), which enter the organism of the dreamer; (3) the gods speak directly to the dreamer.

We have already seen how the Stoics dealt with an argument that was

designed to weaken their doctrine of fate. If dreams effectively warn human beings of impending dangers, the whole irrevocable chain of events becomes problematic. A man dreams of being shipwrecked and consequently cancels the passage on a ship he has reserved. The ship, indeed, goes down with every soul on board, but the man who stayed at home is safe. How does this agree with the Stoic doctrine that no one can escape his fate? Seneca (*Scientific Problems* 2.37–38), probably following Posidonius, offers an answer: “Certain events have been left suspended, as it were, by the immortal gods, so that they may end happily if one addresses prayers to the gods and makes vows. Therefore this [happy outcome] is not against fate: it is, in itself, part of fate.”

Such a reply to the skeptic’s objections looks deceptively simple, but it breaks the wholly impersonal chain of events ruled by fate by introducing a personal power that can be influenced—the power of the gods. The Stoics, however, seem to have been satisfied by this reply. Their need to believe was probably greater than their urge to doubt.

A Greek novel written in the second century A.D. by Achilles Tatius, who, according to tradition, became a Christian and rose (just like Heliodorus, another novelist) to become a bishop, gives a different explanation: “The divine power often wishes to whisper about the future to human beings in the night, not in order to protect them from a tragic event (because fate cannot be controlled), but to help them accept such an event when it occurs. For when disasters come all at once, unexpectedly, they produce a sudden shock and overwhelm us totally, but if people are prepared for them and can think about them beforehand, it dulls a little the sharp edge of pain.”<sup>14</sup>

Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura* 4.749–822, 961–1036) puts the doctrine of Epicurus into Latin verse, and from his poem, written in the first century B.C., we can see that the Epicurean theory of dreams owes more to Aristotle than to Plato. According to Lucretius (i.e., Epicurus), we see in our dreams the things with which we are concerned during our waking hours: lawyers dream of their cases; generals, of their battles; Lucretius himself, of the book that he is planning to write. In short, we dream of the activity that absorbs our main energies, our hopes, and our ambitions. But we also dream of things that give us pleasure, such as music, dancing, plays, and entertainment in general, for sleep is a period of relaxation.

Since Lucretius, following Epicurus, wants the gods to be entirely carefree and blissful, he cannot admit that they are the least bit concerned about human affairs; therefore, they cannot send dreams warning of impending disaster. A purely rational explanation of dreams appealed to the Epicureans, and Aristotle, perhaps following Democritus, had given one, at least tentatively.

But most people continued to believe in the meaning of dreams, as we can see from the existence of dream books. The oldest preserved dream book dates from the second century A.D. Its author, Artemidorus of Daldi, was a professional interpreter of dreams with scientific and didactic interests. Not only did he collect more than three thousand dreams from those who consulted him, but he also took a good look at the people themselves. Thus, though bizarre in many ways, his book is a document of human psychology.

Artemidorus attempts to establish various levels of classification of his dream book. He distinguishes between dreams proper, visions, oracles, fantasies, and apparitions; then again, he separates dreams that forecast events from dreams that are concerned with the present.

Symbolism is the key to understanding the dream mechanism, according to Artemidorus. Some of the symbols are fairly obvious. An abyss means impending danger; a blossoming tree, happiness and prosperity. Bathing in clear water symbolizes good fortune; in muddy water, the opposite. A candle being lighted announces a birth in the family; one already lit hints at success; one burning dimly indicates distress of some kind.

In a sense, Artemidorus already anticipates the Freudian concepts of wish fulfillment and wish substitution; thus he says that the dreamer, if he is in love with a woman, will not see the object of his passion in his dreams, but he will see, for example, a horse, a mirror, a ship, the sea, or a woman's garment (Artem., *Oneirocr.*, preface to Book 4). It is up to the dream interpreter to find out whether his client is in love, and then he will understand the nature of the symbolism. In general, the client's personality, his habits, his profession, his recurrent dreams, have to be considered, for all of these might affect the symbolism of his dreams. Being struck by lightning, for instance, has at least fifteen different meanings, and only a long interview can bring out the specific nuance.

The most famous passage in Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica* is 1.79, which concerns the "dream of Oedipus" [*no.* 97] and its variations. Calmly and in an almost clinical manner, Artemidorus discusses various types of dreams involving sexual intercourse with one's mother. The theme of incest is compounded by bizarre practices (even necrophilia, it seems), and each variation of the theme has its own meaning.

Sometimes Artemidorus' approach is empirical. Among the thousands of dreams he must have listened to in his professional career, he matches some with the experiences the dreamers had afterward, and he draws certain conclusions. The ancient astrologers worked in the same manner, and they, too, used symbolism. Perhaps it is characteristic of all occult sciences that they have a "scientific" or "empirical" basis, but that they also resort

to images, symbols, and analogies that no modern scientist would accept and leave room for instinct, intuition, and “psychic readings.”

Marcus Aurelius, a Stoic who became emperor of Rome in A.D. 161, records in his *Meditations* that he received medical advice in dreams (1.17.20). In a remarkable passage (9.27) he urges the reader, in almost biblical terms, to feel kindly toward those who hate him, and reminds him that even his enemies benefit from dreams and oracles, although for their own, presumably crooked, purposes. But though Marcus Aurelius believes in various forms of divination, he rejects magic, exorcism, and “such things” (1.6). This shows how selective a highly educated Greek or Roman could be: he might accept one of the “occult” sciences but be hostile toward others.

In the first century A.D., mainly in Rome and Alexandria, a new version of the Pythagorean school appeared. Its doctrine was a blend of (presumably) genuine Pythagorean tradition, Platonism, Stoicism, and other philosophies that had been formulated since Pythagoras’ death. Among other things, these late disciples had inherited from Pythagoras an interest in occult phenomena. Apollonius of Tyana, who is usually labeled a Neo-Pythagorean (he is discussed in chapter 1), was a healer, exorcist, and miracle-worker. A later philosopher, Iamblichus, actually a Neoplatonist, wrote a *Life of Pythagoras* (c. A.D. 300) in which he claimed (65, 114) that Pythagoras, like Plato, was convinced that sleep and dreams could be controlled. To fall asleep while listening to soft, soothing music would create a mood in which light, pleasant, and meaningful dreams might be expected. From this point of view, dreaming was considered to be a creative activity that demanded a certain technique and a specific training that might be compared with biofeedback today. The emphasis was definitely on spiritual discipline; any kind of food, drink, or drug that would stupefy body and soul was strictly forbidden. The Neo-Pythagoreans were especially interested in the “admonition” type of dream, called *admonitio* by Chalcidius and *chrematismos* by Artemidorus (*Oneirocr.* 1.2). (The Greek noun is derived from the verb *chrematizo*, which means “to give a revelation, in a dream or an oracle”; it also occurs in the New Testament.)

This new version of Pythagoreanism had a strong influence on Neoplatonism. Indeed, it was a Neoplatonist, Synesius (c. A.D. 373–410; he became a Christian bishop in 409 or 410), who theorized in his book *On Dreams* that dreams are preludes to real events and put us in the right mood for what is to come. Synesius argued that since no two people are completely alike, there can be no rules for all dreams; we have to find our own interpretation. This theory seems to have been directed against Artemidorus’ style of dream books, with their vague symbolism and even

vaguer empiricism. Synesius himself found that his dreams helped him in his work: they gave him ideas. Once, when he went hunting, a dream suggested to him a new kind of trap.

To Synesius, dreams could be both revealing and obscure, but even in their obscurity some revelation might abide. He knew people who had no education but who dreamed that they were talking with the Muses and woke up as great poets. "Make your bed on a Delphic tripod," Synesius says, "and you will lead a nobler life. Everyone, woman or man, can do it, because sleep is the most readily available oracle of all. The soul is lucid and mobile only when the body is asleep" (*De Insomniis* 144B).

Christians and pagans alike believed in the meaning of dreams, and dream books continued to be written throughout Byzantine times. Several of them have been preserved, the best known, perhaps, under the name of Achmes.

What has been written on dreams in modern times often seems to echo ancient theories.<sup>15</sup> In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud quotes Aristotle and Artemidorus and follows their clues. According to the school of C. G. Jung, "Many crises in our lives have a long unconscious history. We move toward them step by step, unaware of the dangers that are accumulating."<sup>16</sup> And E. R. Dodds, who has tried to combine psychoanalysis and anthropology with the more traditional methods of classical scholarship, writes that certain dreams (he calls them culture-pattern dreams) are closely related to myth,<sup>17</sup> because, as Jane Harrison once put it, myth is the dream-thinking of the people, just as the dream is the myth of the individual. In other words, we create in dreams our own mythology, but only part of it comes from personal experience, distant or near; some images flow from the "collective unconscious" we have inherited from our ancestors.

It is almost impossible to understand a culture without knowing about its typical dreams and the typical interpretations of them. But the material we have is scanty, and much of it may have been edited or manipulated in some way. Still, since we are all dreamers, we can probably sense the hidden mechanisms that produced certain dreams in ancient times, for more than likely they also give rise to dreams today.

## Oracles as Institutions

Dreams were called "the oldest oracle" by Plutarch, and everyone could have prophetic powers in dreams. But there existed, throughout the ancient world, establishments where predictions were regularly delivered by prophets. Not every prophet was associated with such a sanctuary, however; diviners practiced everywhere, and most did not enjoy the

status of the Delphic Pythia or the Sibyl of Cumae. In fact, these free-lancing diviners were in a sense “shrunk” shamans who had only one gift left, the gift of prophecy, unlike Orpheus or Pythagoras, who controlled a whole range of occult powers.<sup>18</sup>

As early as Homer, divination came under the control of religion and was concentrated in a few shrines that soon became prominent and wealthy. At a very early date, Apollo seems to have been in charge of trance mediumship, while Asclepius, his son, guaranteed true dreams. Some of the ancient divinities, such as Hecate, were still invoked to grant a glimpse into the future.

What is an oracle? The word has three basic meanings: (1) a response given by a priest or priestess at the shrine of a deity; (2) the shrine itself (thus we speak of the Delphic oracle as a sanctuary where oracles were delivered to those who consulted it); and (3) the “real” oracle, the power that inspired the messages that emanated, as it were, from another world and had to be interpreted.<sup>19</sup>

The techniques used to obtain predictions varied from shrine to shrine, and it is difficult to understand them at this distance in time. To dismiss them altogether as fraud, as the philosophers of the Enlightenment did, hardly seems reasonable, however. Bernard de Fontenelle (1657–1757) compared the ancients’ belief in oracles with their belief in the gods, one that he assumed was not very deep: “Act like the others and believe whatever you like.” It was essential to conform publicly, to offer the right sacrifice in the right way; if one did this, one could make fun of it in private. Thus, “You might or might not believe in oracles, but they continued to be consulted for centuries, because custom has a hold on people which need not be reinforced by reason.”<sup>20</sup> Fraud was certainly involved in some cases.

An Egyptian oracle in the oasis of Siwa in the Libyan Desert, that of Ammon, or Amun (“The Hidden One”), may have had some influence on the organization of the sanctuaries at Delphi and Dodona in Greece.<sup>21</sup> Statesmen from Athens and Sparta went there in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., and Alexander the Great consulted it too. We know very little about the method of divination that was practiced there.

Since the Delphic oracle is the most famous institution of its kind in Greece, it might be useful to discuss it first. Phenomena such as prophecy, ecstasy, enthusiasm, clairvoyance, trance, and talking in tongues can perhaps be best illustrated by our knowledge—inadequate as it is—of what happened at Delphi, for at least part of the collective experience of thousands of visitors has been recorded.

Before we discuss the oracles as institutions where prophecy was prac-

ticed, we should say something about prophecy as a form of divination.<sup>22</sup> The foretelling of events as the result of a vision or hearing the voice of a divine being or entering a state of inspiration is well documented in the ancient Near East. We know of prophets (1 Samuel 10:5ff., 19:24) who came before the “canonical” prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, for instance.

The nature of Old Testament prophecy has often been studied<sup>23</sup> and is, strictly speaking, outside the limits of this book. In the New Testament John the Baptist and Jesus are called “prophets” in the Gospels; Jesus was even taken to be one of the ancient prophets come to life again (Mark 8:28, etc.). In the early Church, people who had the special gift of uttering words in trance were called “prophets” (the word is sometimes translated as “charismatists”), for example, in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27, 15:32) and in Antioch (Acts 13:1). In a very early Christian text, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (*Didache*, probably composed c. A.D. 150, but some sections are older), we find references to these “charismatists.” They are distinguished from the “apostles” (or “missioners”) and from the “teachers” (see 1 Corinthians 12:28). Unlike the teachers, the “charismatists” were inspired, and unlike the “speakers in tongues,” their message was intelligible, though they might forget immediately afterward what they had said. The genuine “prophets” were highly regarded by the community, but apparently there were also impostors who faked their gift as an easy way to make a living (*Didache* 11–12).

“Speaking in tongues” (*glossolalia*), a form of inspired ecstatic utterance, is not exclusively a Christian phenomenon; it occurred in various religious contexts of the Hellenistic period,<sup>24</sup> and it is described in an old testimony concerning the Delphic Pythia (Heraclitus, quoted by Plutarch, *De Pyth. Or.*, p. 404D): “She is in trance [*mania* ‘madness’], does not smile, speaks in inarticulate, harsh sounds, but she is in touch with the god.” A much later witness, Lucian (*Alex.*, par. 23), writes that the sibyl’s speech sounds like Hebrew or Phoenician, and that those who do not understand her are amazed. The point, of course, is that it is neither Hebrew nor Phoenician nor any other language known to man (the use of Semitic words in magical Greek formulas is something else), but just a broken, inarticulate, incoherent outpouring of sounds.

In the early Church, being “filled with the spirit” created three spectacular gifts: (1) prophecy; (2) “speaking in tongues”; (3) the power of healing. “Speaking in tongues,” as distinguished from “prophesying,” referred to the unintelligible sounds of ecstatic speech.<sup>25</sup>

Speaking a “foreign” (i.e., unintelligible) language and predicting future events was also taken to be a symptom of possession.<sup>26</sup> This is not surprising, for the trance of the Pythia has also been described as a form of

possession. Apollo takes over, fills her, controls her. The difference lies in the nature of the divine power that “takes over” a human being: a beneficial divine power on the one hand, a malevolent daemon on the other.

Prophetic ecstasy is usually explained as “trance,” a state of consciousness induced by a divine power in which the normal mind is suspended and normal language is often replaced by unintelligible utterances. Galen, a medical authority of the second century A.D., describes it as “a madness that lasts only a short time,” and, indeed, the Greek language itself reflects the connection of *mania* ‘madness’ with *mantis* ‘seer’. The phenomenon has been studied many times,<sup>27</sup> but like related phenomena such as hypnosis, it is not fully understood today.

Prophetic ecstasy is a characteristic of the shaman.<sup>28</sup> It can be brought about by a kind of self-hypnosis—for example, by the monotonous murmuring of prayers or magical formulas, by taking drugs (herbs, mushrooms, toxic substances such as ergot) and inhaling aromatic vapors (from burning an incenselike resin on a bed of coals), or by dancing or engaging in other forms of exercise (the whirling dervishes). A strict ritual preceding the actual trance (fasting, bathing, lack of sleep), the presence of the priests in their robes, the awesome surroundings—all this could prepare (or “program,” as we would say today) the medium. The trance could also be faked, as we know from Lucan (*Phars.* 5.124–61), because the real experience of divine possession was often traumatic and was thought to shorten the medium’s life. But judging from Lucan’s episode, there were signs that gave a faked ecstasy away.

Prophetic visions or insights are described in Homer more than once. Helenus, the Trojan seer (*Il.* 7.44–45), “understood in his mind the decision that the gods in their deliberations had made.” Toward the end of the *Odyssey* (20.345ff.) the suitors who are doomed to die so soon at the hands of Odysseus, the hero who has already returned, eat and drink, laugh and scoff, as usual, but “their laughing jaws are no longer their own, and the meat they eat is defiled with blood, and their minds foretell grief.” They continue to laugh and eat, but somehow they sense that disaster is near. The soothsayer Theoclymenus interprets it for them when he shouts: “Poor wretches! Do you realize what terrible fate will befall you? You heads, your faces, your knees are wrapped in darkness; the sound of wailing has broken out like fire; your cheeks are running with tears! The walls and the beautiful pillars are splashed with blood! The entrance to the court and the court itself are full of ghosts headed toward the underworld, the darkness! The sun has completely gone from the sky, and the mist of evil has spread across it!” The suitors respond with more merry laughter.

It is a remarkable scene: a sense of disaster hangs in the air, and even the

suitors feel it, benighted as they are, but the seer Theoclymenus actually sees it all in a flash. This kind of sudden vision, which can be excruciating<sup>29</sup> for the seer himself and usually is not fully realized by those who are about to suffer, seems typical, and Homer's audience must have recognized it at once as a case of clairvoyance, an authentic phenomenon, not just a literary device.

The ancients also believed that in a state of trance, the soul leaves the body and is granted visions. Such a state can be induced by a ritual.<sup>30</sup> The highest form of ecstasy is the union of the soul with the divinity or the One (Plot., *Enn.* 6.9.11), not as the gift of the One, but as the result of human effort or discipline. This does not appear to be a purely Neoplatonist concept; it is probably connected with the much older Greek idea that man alone—without the help of the gods, and even, like Prometheus, against the gods—can achieve great things. It also seems related to the idea that magic or theurgy can practically compel divine powers to become accessible to human beings, in other words, to make trance possible in the first place. But trance does not always lead to this ultimate experience, though it may open up another world.

It is difficult to understand trance, because the “psychics” who have it are not always articulate. In his *Autobiography*, John Cowper Powys, an English author with Welsh roots, comes close to a description that seems meaningful even to those who have never had such an experience. One day, in San Francisco, he felt stirring within him “that formidable daimon which. . . can be reached somewhere in my nature, and which when it is reached has the Devil's own force. . . . I became aware, more vividly than I had ever been, that the secret of life consists in sharing the madness of God, I mean the power of rousing a peculiar exultation in yourself as you confront the Inanimate, an exultation which is really a cosmic eroticism.”<sup>31</sup>

*Ecstasy* is sometimes distinguished from *enthusiasm*, which means, literally, “being full of God,” but it can also be translated as “possession” or “inspiration.” In their own language the ancients tried to describe an experience that was very real to them, but since they could not find a scientific explanation for it, they had to create an image—that of having a god inside (*enthusiasmos*) or being touched (or filled) by the spirit (*inspiratio*).<sup>32</sup>

Naturally, prophetic ecstasy could occur anywhere, at any time, even outside the great sanctuaries such as Delphi, but the ancients tried to control these irrational phenomena, to keep them under the strict supervision of a body of priests. Perhaps we should substitute the term *clairvoyance* for *prophecy*, for, according to F. W. H. Myers, clairvoyance is “the faculty or art of perceiving, as though visually, with some coincidental

truth, some distant scene,” and such distance could be in time as well as in space. Some ancient seers were no doubt true visionaries.<sup>33</sup> The terms *premonition* and *precognition* also have been used, but they do not explain why and how these experiences occur.<sup>34</sup> The Pythia, the entranced woman at Delphi, can be described as a “medium” or an “automatist,” but these are just labels; at most, they allow comparisons to be drawn with experiments conducted in more recent times.

One distinction should perhaps be made. A prophetic vision may occur spontaneously and out of context, so to speak, like the vision of the seer Theoclymenus in the *Odyssey*, or the vision of Cassandra shortly before she and Agamemnon are murdered. In these cases it almost seems that a certain location is already charged or filled by the vibrations of a terrible event that is about to happen, and a “psychic” picks up these vibrations. Similarly, a “psychic” may pick up from a certain location vibrations of dramatic events that happened in the past: Cassandra had this ability, too (Aesch., *Ag.* 1194ff.).<sup>35</sup> Precognition, retrocognition, and telepathy may be different aspects of the same gift.

On the other hand, one wonders whether the Delphic Pythia and her *prophetai*, who dealt with the questions of visitor after visitor, day after day, can be called “psychic” in the same sense. The inarticulate response of the Pythia meant only one thing to the visitor: the oracle was working; the priestess was in touch with the god. But her answer also had to be interpreted, and at this point all kinds of rational considerations may have entered: politics, economics, diplomacy. The oracle, as delivered to the visitor, was a finished product. At best, it contained a genuine vision, but one that had been filtered through some of the shrewdest minds in all of Greece. An oracular response of this kind clearly differs from the apocalyptic visions of John on the island of Patmos.

*Revelation* means the “disclosure” or “uncovering” (*apocalypsis*) of God’s will through visions and dreams, but primarily through the initiative of God, not through a special technique or concerning one particular religion as a whole or, more narrowly, its mystic doctrine of the Last Things. In one sense Judaism and Christianity are revealed religions; in another sense their eschatology concerns an apocalypse, because it predicts the ultimate conflict between the supreme powers of good and those of evil, with the good prevailing. This type of religious thought may have been accepted by some Jews from Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian state religion (see Porph., *Plot.*, ch.16), and the tradition was continued by the early Christian Church. Hermeticism, on the other hand, is a philosophy that was revealed to mankind by the Egyptian god Thoth, the equivalent of Hermes, and such occult sciences as alchemy and astrology

were considered by their practitioners to be the gift of a god. Thus, in later antiquity, the element of revelation distinguished religion from philosophy, occult science from science.<sup>36</sup>

Sanctuaries where divination was exercised regularly, as part of the cult of a god, are known as oracles (in Latin, *oracula*; in Greek, *manteia* or *chresteria*).<sup>37</sup> But as noted earlier, an oracle is also the response of the god to a question asked by a visitor to the shrine.

The method of divination varied from shrine to shrine.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes the will of the god was explored by the casting or drawing of lots (*kleroi*, *sortes*)—for example, dice or sticks or bones. The word *sortilegus* originally designated a soothsayer who practiced this particular method of divination (*sortes legere* ‘to pick up lots’); later, by extension, it referred to any type of prophecy or sorcery. It must be a very old technique, for it was practiced at Clarus, Praeneste, Antium, and elsewhere. A later variant is the consultation of scrolls or books (bibliomancy) by opening them at random or pricking them with a needle: Homer, Virgil, and the Bible (*sortes Homericae*, *sortes Virgilianae*, and *sortes Biblicae*) were the obvious texts chosen.<sup>39</sup> This do-it-yourself method could easily be carried out at home, but when important decisions were at stake, the great shrines were still visited. One suspects that traveling to a famous oracle—Delphi, for instance, or Antium—was a way of life, like a pilgrimage in the time of Chaucer, and that the actual consultation was only part of a rather complex religious and social experience. Of course, there were certain methods that could not be duplicated anywhere else—the genuine trance of the Pythia at Delphi, for instance, or the rustling of the leaves of the sacred oak at Dodona.

Two collections of oracles might be mentioned here: the *Sibylline Oracles* and the *Chaldean Oracles*. Sibyls were women who, like Cassandra or the Delphic Pythia, prophesied in trance. Ten places in the Mediterranean world are known as residences of Sibyls, although originally there seems to have been only one. The Sibyl of Cumae is known from Book 6 of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and the ecstatic character of her prophecy is made clear by the poet (6.77–102); later she becomes the hero’s guide through the underworld. A collection of prophecies written in Greek hexameters and attributed to various Sibyls was kept in Rome, in the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, for consultation by a special committee at the command of the Senate in times of crisis. This original collection was destroyed in a fire in 83 B.C.; a second collection, drawn from different sources, was destroyed in A.D. 405. What still exists today under the title *Sibylline Oracles* is a forgery,<sup>40</sup> although some genuine Greek oracles are interspersed through it. Part of it is Jewish propaganda against pagan culture

and the beginnings of Roman imperialism (from the second century B.C. on); these texts were later rewritten, interpolated, and enlarged to suit the Christian polemic against paganism and the empire as well.<sup>41</sup>

The *Chaldean Oracles* appear to have been the work of one Julianus, who lived under Marcus Aurelius and is considered the founder of theurgy. Proclus and Iamblichus, the Neoplatonists, wrote commentaries on them. Where these “oracles” originally came from, no one knows. Dodds does not think that Julianus forged them; they remind him more of the trance utterances of modern “spirit guides.”<sup>42</sup> Thus Julianus may have listened to the “revelations” of a visionary or a medium, transcribed them into verse, and supplied explanations. They contain guidelines for a cult of the sun and fire, but they also give instructions on how to conduct theurgical operations—for instance, how to conjure up a god.<sup>43</sup>

The most famous oracle of the ancient world was in Delphi.<sup>44</sup> Its origins probably go back to Minoan times, and for many centuries it must have been a sanctuary of the great earth goddess *Ga*, or *Gaia*. The Greek name *Delphoi* may be connected with *delphys* ‘womb’, since the Pythia in a sense did receive her inspiration from the womb, the inside of the earth. Another clue is given by the *omphalos*, a very old stone that once stood in the adytum of the temple of Apollo and marked or represented the “navel” of the earth, as the inscription *Gas* ‘of the earth’ indicates. The fact that at the oracle the most important function is performed by a woman implies that this was originally the sanctuary of a goddess, not a god. The very nature of the Pythia’s trance suggests the influence of the earth, and her name recalls the ancient Python snake, which was thought to be female and presumably was the cult image under which the great earth goddess was worshiped.

Moreover, as is often the case, Greek mythology seems to have preserved part of the historical truth by making Apollo kill the Python. The oldest version of the myth appears in the *Homeric Hymn to the Pythian Apollo* (perhaps sixth century B.C.). It suggests that toward the end of the second millennium B.C., when Greek-speaking Dorians invaded the pre-Greek world of what is now called Greece, they took over some of the existing sanctuaries and changed their character, at least to a certain extent. Apollo replaced Gaia, and her cult image, the snake, was smashed, but the prophetic ecstasy of the priestess was, with great foresight, preserved as an institution.

How the Pythia’s trance was induced is still a mystery. The most recent archaeological excavations have shown that there was a chasm from which she could have breathed a kind of natural gas.<sup>45</sup> Scholars who chewed large numbers of laurel leaves felt no special effect. Drinking the

holy water or bathing in it can no longer be tested; these may have played a certain role, along with fasting, praying, and staying awake in inducing the trance that led up to the ultimate vision.<sup>46</sup> But the possibility of a psychoactive substance (an “entheogen”), perhaps laurel leaves mixed with hemp or poppy seeds smoldering on a bed of coals, remains an attractive hypothesis. For many Greeks and Romans it was a case of possession, of a god or daemon taking over. In modern terms the Pythia can be described as a “medium” or a “vocal automatist.”<sup>47</sup> Telepathy and clairvoyance cannot be excluded: Tacitus (*Ann.* 4.52) says that the priest at Clarus, another famous oracle, would merely ask for the names of the clients present, then retire to a sacred grotto, drink the sacred water, and give the appropriate answers to questions he had not even heard. Plutarch (*De Garr.*, ch. 20) reports that the Pythia did this in certain cases; this means, perhaps, that certain Pythias did have the gift of clairvoyance, while others did not.

The sanctuary of Apollo at Clarus, near Colophon, seems to have been very old, but the oracle became especially famous during the imperial period.<sup>48</sup> The “prophet,” assisted by a priest and a “thespiode” (i.e., a “singer of prophecies”), followed the procedure described above. Dodds is inclined to attribute this feat to thought-reading, though he also points out that the utterances of the prophet (who was generally uneducated, like the Pythia) were enigmatic and therefore had to be interpreted; this interpretative step appears to have been the function of the “thespiode,” whose contribution to the psychic process is difficult to estimate.<sup>49</sup>

Divination was practiced in many different ways at the oracles of the ancient world. We are especially well informed about the procedure at the oracle of Trophonius, mainly thanks to Pausanias (9.39.2–14), who writes from personal experience. Trophonius was a local deity of chthonian character. Over the centuries, his sanctuary seems to have attracted a steady stream of visitors, including a number of prominent Romans. It is quite different from the oracles of Apollo at Delphi or Clarus or the Oracle of Zeus at Dodona, because it seems to have retained some very ancient features, due to the association of its deity with the earth and the underworld. It deserves a digression.

The consultation of the oracle at Lebadeia was surrounded by a number of complicated taboos and rituals—things you were not allowed to do and things you had to do. For one thing, only those who were seriously in search of an answer to their questions could expect to be admitted. Idle curiosity was actively discouraged, and the whole procedure was such that one really had to be determined to go through with it.

There was a fixed period of preparation, which included ablutions

(only cold water was permitted), fasting (or at least abstention from certain types of food), induction of trance by dancing and possibly flagellation, and various sacrifices offered to Trophonius and other deities.

When the candidate was deemed to be ready by the priests, he was anointed with a special kind of oil by two boys aged thirteen. Then he had to drink from two springs; first from Lethe, to forget everything he remembered up to that moment; then from Mnemosyne, to remember everything he was about to experience during his (symbolic) visit to the underworld. Then he had to worship a very old wooden idol representing the god. A specific set of garments (white and red) was prescribed; but according to other sources, the postulant had to be naked.

Then he was allowed to begin his ascent to the sanctuary on the top of a hill. It had the shape of an oven. Once he had entered it, he saw a very small opening leading to the *adyton*, the “inner sanctum.” When he squeezed through the opening in the prescribed manner, he found himself in a subterranean cave. He felt a strong current that practically sucked him through the opening. The darkness was almost total; there was only a ray of daylight coming through a tiny window. As a protection against the sacred snakes who lived there, he had to carry honey cakes in both hands. He heard indistinct human voices and a kind of distant bellowing; some reported that they had had a vision of the god himself, perhaps in a dream, which would mean that they had fallen asleep. There are varying reports about the length of time the postulant spent underground: it could have been a few hours; it could have been several days.

He returned to the world above in the same way he had left it, but with his feet first. Then the priests made him sit on the “Throne of Memory” and asked about his experiences, taking notes. Relatives or friends had to be waiting for him to guide him away. It took him a long time to recover and—it is said—to “learn to laugh again”; hence the proverbial comment about one who looked gloomy and lost in thoughts: “He has consulted Trophonius!”

There can be no question that the whole ritual was based on a very good knowledge of human psychology. Over the centuries, the priests had accumulated, thanks to the “Throne of Memory” routine, a great deal of information, which they were able to refine. The ascetic practices are not unlike those that were customary at other sanctuaries, but trance induced by dancing and possibly whipping is unusual. The oil used for anointing may have had psychoactive ingredients, but how the water from the springs had the desired effects is difficult to explain; unless the drinking was accompanied by a form of hypnosis. One thing is certain: the whole experience was overwhelming, unforgettable, a life-changing

event. Obviously, it was not free of charge, but no matter how high the fee might have been, the postulants got their money's worth.

Were the answers to the questions useful? Probably, because the answer to his question was already in the mind of the postulant, but in a latent state. All the oracle did was activate it, and so it become true *for him*. At many oracles the behavior of animals was observed. At Dodona not only was the rustling of the leaves of the sacred oak of Zeus considered meaningful, but so, too, was the flight and cooing of the sacred doves on and around that tree. At the oracle of Apollo at Sura, in Lycia, omens were read from the movements of sacred fish that were kept in a tank. At Epirus, tame snakes were kept in a grove of Apollo, and when the priestess fed them, and their appetite was good, an abundant harvest could be predicted. The behavior of the underground snake of Lanuvium (an ancient city in the Alban hills where Juno was worshiped as Sospita) was interpreted in a similar way. According to Propertius (*Eleg.* 4.8.5ff.), once a year, when the giant snake was heard whistling for food, girls were sent down the "sacred way" into a dark cave. They could see nothing, but they felt the head of the snake as it snatched the food from a basket. If the snake accepted the food, it was a sign that the girls were chaste (though Propertius does not say this explicitly), and the farmers shouted: "The year will be fruitful!"

All these customs reflect a form of animal worship, which predated by centuries the arrival of the Olympian gods in Greece. It is interesting to note that animals representing three realms—earth, water, and air—played a role in divination. Snakes were associated with chthonian deities and with heroes, as we see in Delphi, where the Python represented the earth goddess herself. Birds were even more important. The interpretation of their flight, their cries, and other behavioral patterns was the subject of a special art, augury, a topic we turn to later in this chapter.

### The Rise and Fall of the Oracles

Two questions about the oracles have been asked but have never been answered conclusively: (1) How did oracles, some more than others, gain their enormous prestige and influence in the ancient world? (2) Why did they eventually decline?

To deal with the first question, we ought to consider, as Dodds did, the religion, culture, and social life of Greece in the archaic and classical periods.<sup>50</sup> It is a historical fact that the belief in the authority of the oracle of Delphi was deeply rooted in the minds of the educated and the uneducated, and that this belief could not be shaken by striking proof that the

oracle was fallible and downright subversive—for instance, when it discouraged the Greeks from resisting the might of the Persian Empire in the early fifth century B.C. The advice was terrible; the Greeks ignored it and won, but they soon forgot that the oracle had failed them completely. This can only mean that the Greeks believed in oracles because they needed them. They had neither the divine legacy of Scripture nor an established church, and their feelings of guilt and fear could only be controlled, it seems, by faith in a constantly renewable and more or less dependable divine revelation. The Delphic oracle gave them this and more.

The Delphic priests seem to have developed over the centuries a theology and a moral philosophy that stressed purity in ritual as well as in everyday life. Those who entered the temple were greeted by two large inscriptions: “Know thyself” (i.e., realize how unimportant you are, compared to the gods) and “Nothing in excess” (no idle admonition, for the Greeks, far from being the rational beings they are thought to have been, tended to do things in excess).

Socrates believed in the Delphic oracle, as he believed in his own *daimonion*, and so did his disciples Xenophon<sup>51</sup> and Plato<sup>52</sup> (the latter, perhaps, with certain reservations).

The importance of Delphi in world religion, politics, and economics has been compared with that of the Vatican today, and the comparison, taken with a grain of salt, is helpful. News of anything that happened in that *piccolo mondo antico* must have reached Delphi—which no doubt had a large network of agents and consultants—in record time. Delphi was also a financial center where gifts from kings and city-states to the god Apollo were kept and displayed. In addition, Delphi offered banking facilities: currency could be exchanged, and certain gifts were actually treated as investments. In the period of colonization, which expanded Greek influence beyond the Mediterranean, the advice of the oracle determined the choice of new sites for settlements.<sup>53</sup>

Before the Roman period few doubts concerning the good faith of the priests serving at the oracles were expressed, although the possibility of fraud in certain instances was not rejected. In the Enlightenment, oracles were regarded as a triumph of charlatanism and deceit and as evidence of the strange superstitions of the ancient world. The best-known attempt to discredit all oracles, as mentioned above, is Bernard de Fontenelle’s *Histoire critique des oracles*, which was first published in 1687. Fontenelle, who was neither a historian nor a classical scholar, made two points: (1) oracles could not possibly have been inspired by divine powers; (2) they did not cease with the birth of Christ. The critique stirred up a lively controversy because it was felt to be an attack on the *fable convenue*, on all superstitions and bigotry that had been tolerated and encouraged

by powerful institutions in all ages, not just in antiquity. Among other things, Fontenelle maintained that “custom, which need not be reinforced by reason, has enormous influence on people.” It was, according to him, perfectly possible for a Greek or a Roman to ridicule the Delphic oracle in private, but to go through the motions of traveling there, offering the right kind of sacrifice in the customary way, and consulting the god just for show: “Act like the others, believe whatever you like.” This was certainly true for many educated Greeks and Romans of the Hellenistic and imperial periods, but probably not for earlier centuries.

The second question—Why did the oracles decline and finally disappear?—is discussed by Plutarch in his essay *On the Ceasing of Oracles*.<sup>54</sup> Some of the reasons he offers are social and economic. Oracles can flourish only if they are visited regularly by large crowds that spend considerable sums of money or leave splendid gifts behind. As a result of wars and, later, as a result of Roman rule, the population and prosperity of central Greece had declined in the Hellenistic period. An impoverished Greece could no longer support the oracles. The fact that the ancient city-states had lost their independence was an additional factor. Their rivalry, both political and economic, had no doubt been manipulated and exploited by the great oracles. Under Roman rule this was no longer possible, and Rome itself had no interest in supporting the oracles, though distinguished Romans, out of curiosity, still visited the shrines.

To these explanations, other scholars have added the following: the expanding belief in astrology and similar types of do-it-yourself oracles; the publication of the *Sibylline Oracles* and similar collections; and, above all, the growth of Christianity.

Plutarch’s main argument, however, is theological. Defending the supreme authority of the gods, he claims that they are not responsible for the operation of the oracles dedicated to them. Instead, he says, some very powerful daemons are in charge, but since daemons are mortal, they grow old and eventually die. To illustrate this, he tells the haunting story of the death of Great Pan (which supposedly occurred under Tiberius). As Plutarch interprets it, Great Pan was an important daemon, and the news of his death frightened all the minor daemons because they knew at once that the time of their own deaths had come. There is also a Christian explanation: Christ chased these daemons from the world.<sup>55</sup>

Speculation about the death of Pan continued in the Renaissance and afterward. Rabelais thought that Pan was Christ, for *pan* means “all,” and Christ is mankind’s All.<sup>56</sup> This idea was taken up by Fontenelle in his *Histoire critique des oracles*. The fact that Christ was crucified at about the same time that Great Pan died suggested to him that it was Jesus’ death and resurrection that upset the daemons so much, because they realized that

they could no longer control mankind. But Fontenelle also considered the possibility that Jesus and Great Pan might be “daemons” of approximately the same rank and that the death of one would affect the other.

Even if the story of Great Pan has no foundation whatsoever, it seems to sum up the mood of an entire era, and its historical truth is that of a myth, albeit a late myth. The lifetime of Plutarch (c. A.D. 45–125), who took the myth seriously, coincides with the time in which almost all the books of the New Testament were written.

## Augury

An important form of divination in Greece and Rome was augury (*augurium*), the interpretation of the flight, sound, and manner of feeding of birds. The technique was practiced so commonly that *augur* became the word for any soothsayer, diviner, or prophet. Cicero, who was an augur himself, though he did not take the office very seriously, states that this craft was practiced in the ancient Near East in different cultures.<sup>57</sup> From Greek mythology we know that in the heroic age there were seers who understood the “language of the birds”—Calchas, Melampus, and Tiresias, among others. Moreover, it should be noted that these seers could interpret other phenomena as well. According to Homer (*Il.* 2.308ff.), Calchas understood at once an event that involved a dragon (a huge snake) and nine sparrows. Melampus understood the speech of all creatures, including birds, because snakes had licked his ears (Schol. Hom., *Od.* 11.290). Tiresias, who once observed two snakes coupling (Hyg., *Fab.*, no. 75), was blind when he received his prophetic gift, and thus would have been unable to observe birds flying; yet he, too, is labeled an augur. Strangely enough, we find the same association with birds and snakes in this list of great seers that we noted earlier. This should not be surprising, however, for snakes represent the divine powers of the earth, while birds might be envisaged as being in closer contact with the Olympian gods. The fact that Calchas, Melampus, and Tiresias were not committed to augury alone indicates that the oracles coming from the ancient earth goddess through her messengers, the snakes, had not been completely superseded by the oracles coming from the heavenly gods through their messengers, the birds. As might be expected, Greek mythology describes an age of transition.

In Greek, a bird of omen or augury is called an *oionos*, and a person who “foretells from the flight and cries of birds” is known as an *oionistes*, *oinethetes*, or *oionoskopos*. A whole family of words was built up around this ancient custom. For many centuries, no important decision affecting a country or an army was made without first consulting the birds.

According to Cicero (*Div.* 1.92), this divination technique was known in Asia Minor as well as in Greece. In Rome it was entrusted to a college of *augures*. This college, one of the most distinguished in Rome, originally consisted of three members, but was gradually increased to sixteen. The etymology of *augur* is uncertain, but the traditional derivation *avis* ‘bird’ and *gero* ‘to carry’ seems impossible; it may be an Etruscan word. Strictly speaking, the augurs were not diviners; it was their function to find out, by observing certain signs, whether the gods approved of a certain plan of action. The signs were divided into *oblative* ‘casual ones’<sup>58</sup> and *impetrativa* ‘those one watches for’. In observing wild birds, the augur defined (in words) a specific area of the sky or the land, called *templum*, and only what happened within this area was considered significant.

Alectryomancy was another method by which the Romans explored the will of the gods. It consisted in consulting the sacred chickens that were carried along on military campaigns. If, before a battle, the chickens ate their food so greedily that some of it fell from their beaks, this was considered an excellent omen.

*Auguria* were taken before any important public event, such as elections or a governor’s entrance into a province, and this naturally gave the augurs great power, a power they occasionally misused for political reasons. A synonym or near synonym for *augurium* (the difference in meaning, if any, is not clear) is *auspicium* (probably from *avis* ‘bird’ and an old verb, *specio* ‘to watch’). This term was extended to cover many types of divination, from “the observation of things in heaven” to “frightening portents.” Only certain magistrates had the right to take *auspicia*, and only consuls, praetors, and censors were allowed to perform the more elaborate ritual of the “major auspices.”

### The “Etruscan Art”

The inspection of the entrails of a sacrificial victim, especially of the liver (hepatoscopy) was thought to give a clue to the future. The technique was called *Etrusca disciplina* ‘Etruscan art’, or *haruspicina* (sc. *ars*), or *haruspicium* (analogous to *auspicium*), and its practitioners were known as *haruspices*.<sup>59</sup> The first part of the word, *haru-*, is compared by linguists with the Greek *chorde* ‘guts’, and the second part seems to be derived from the Latin verb *specio* ‘to watch,’ which we have already encountered. The Romans learned this technique from the Etruscans, but the Etruscans apparently brought it with them from the Near East, for we know that it was practiced by the Babylonians and the Hittites.<sup>60</sup>

In Rome, a body of sixty *haruspices*, headed by a chief *haruspex*, became

a threat to the *augures*, a rival group, but the two techniques were practiced side by side for centuries.

The Etruscans apparently created a myth to explain the origin of this form of divination.<sup>61</sup> Cicero tells the story, but not in a very reverent manner (*Div.* 2.50). An Etruscan farmer was plowing his field near the town of Tarquinii, about sixty miles from Rome, when a childlike creature suddenly emerged from one of the deeper furrows. That creature introduced himself as Tages and proceeded to reveal the secrets of *haruspicina* to all the Etruscans who had, in the meantime, assembled around him and were eagerly writing down every word. This marked the beginning of a doctrine that was later expanded, but as Cicero adds, rather sarcastically, “This is what we hear from them [the Etruscans]; this is what *their* writings [the priestly books] preserve; this is the origin of *their* science.”

Cicero talks about the Etruscan diviners the way a Victorian Englishman might talk about the Welsh Druids: they represent a different culture, and he is puzzled (and amused) that this foreign ritual could still have such a hold on the Roman imagination. Elsewhere (*Div.* 2.51) he quotes with approval something that Cato the Elder (c. 200 B.C.) once said: “How can two *haruspices*, upon meeting, not laugh at one another?”<sup>62</sup>

The *haruspices* observed and interpreted three kinds of phenomena: the entrails of animals; unnatural things or events in nature; and lightning (*Cic.*, *Div.* 1.12, 2.26). The Etruscan *haruspex* Arruns, as described by Lucan (*Phars.* 1.584ff.), is probably not historical, but his qualifications would fit any practitioner of the craft: “He knows thoroughly the course of the thunderbolt, the marks on entrails still warm and the messages of winged creatures that fly through the air. He orders . . . the destruction of monsters which nature had produced, as abnormal births [reading *dissors*, with Oudendorp, for the manuscripts’ *discors*] from mixed [reading *mixto*, with Grotius, for *nullo*] seed and gives instructions to burn the abominable offspring of a barren womb with wood from a tree of bad omen.” Just before the outbreak of civil war, he performs a sacrifice (1.609ff.) and observes one horrifying omen after another; the liver, for instance, has two lobes, one of which is limp and flabby, while the other throbs with a hectic rhythm. When he sees this, the *haruspex* knows that a catastrophe is imminent, but he does not have the courage to tell the truth—that a civil war between Caesar and Pompey is unavoidable. The passage from Lucan also shows how we ought to understand “unnatural things or events in nature” (*monstra*). These include teratological, that is, abnormal or monstrous, formations in animals or plants, misshapen organisms of any kind, and strange meteorological phenomena. Such events were normally reported from all parts of Italy, to be analyzed by the experts, and if they

occurred more frequently in one particular year, rumors of an impending crisis began to circulate.

The interpretation of lightning was also part of the “Etruscan science.” It was important to note from which of sixteen sections of the sky the lightning came and what spot or object on earth it hit.

## Other Methods of Divination

There are so many other methods of divination that it is almost impossible to list them, except, perhaps, a few that are labeled with a specific name. Most of them did not require any apparatus or technical expertise and could be practiced almost anywhere. The catalogues compiled by scholars are rather tedious to read, but since this is a chapter of cultural history—and one that provides some curious insights into human psychology—a brief survey seems appropriate. The information we have comes from various sources, many of them late and not very explicit, but it seems that much of the material was originally compiled by Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 B.C.) in Book 41 of his monumental work, *Antiquitates Rerum Humanarum et Divinarum* (*The History of Rome and Its Religion*). Varro was one of the greatest scholars of his time and an authority on Roman religion, and later writers—the Church fathers, for example—used him extensively, but the work as a whole is lost.

The body movements of human beings, especially their involuntary behavior (twitching, sneezing, etc.), provided omens. A visible part of someone’s body might suddenly move spasmodically and give, to the observer, some indication of the future.

The various methods of divining from inanimate objects were divided by Varro into four classes that corresponded to the four elements: geomancy, aeromancy, pyromancy, and hydromancy (*Schol. Dan. Virg. Aen.* 3.359; *Isid., Etym.* 8.9.13). Actually, the phrase *inanimate objects* is misleading, because to the ancient Greeks and Romans, especially to Platonists and Stoics, nothing was wholly inanimate. Divination was possible because there was part of the cosmic soul in everything.

*Geomancy* was the art of divining by means of lines formed by throwing earth on a surface. *Aeromancy* consisted in casting sand or dirt into the wind and studying the shape of the resulting dust cloud; or in throwing seeds into the wind, allowing them to settle on the ground, and interpreting their pattern (though this is also considered a form of *aleuromancy*).<sup>63</sup> The modern method of teacup reading might be compared, even though the element is water rather than air. *Pyromancy* (or *empyromancy*) is divination by fire or signs derived from fire: if incense is placed on fire, we speak of *libanomancy*; if flour is thrown on the flames, this is a form of *aleuro-*

mancy; if an egg is broken over the fire, the term is *oöscopy*.<sup>64</sup> When the shoulder blade of a sheep is heated over the coals, one uses the term *omoplatoscopy* or *scapulomancy*.

All these methods were practiced at one time in one or more parts of the ancient world. The fire and the preferred materials strongly suggest a sacrifice offered to a god—Apollo, for example—because incense and grain were used as offerings, either along with a slaughtered animal or instead of it, from time immemorial. Since the deity was thought to be present at such a ceremony, it was he or she who conveyed the omen, but it may have been the duty of a priest to interpret it. Any sacrifice of this kind could be performed in private, but the more solemn the occasion, the greater the likelihood that more people were present.

The various subdivisions of *hydromancy*, or divination by water, are not always clearly defined.<sup>65</sup> The term *scrying* is used for “crystal gazing,” but, strictly speaking, water or any other translucent or shiny surface could have been substituted for the crystal, which is not attested before Byzantine times.<sup>66</sup> This technique allows the “medium” to see a series of hallucinatory moving pictures “within” the shining object.<sup>67</sup> Not everyone, at least not in modern times, can be a “medium”: F. W. H. Myers, who was a classical scholar and a psychic, estimated that perhaps one man or woman in twenty can experience hallucinations of this kind.<sup>68</sup>

At least two methods of scrying were used in antiquity. In one the translucent object was a mirror—not necessarily in the modern sense of the word, but a highly polished metal surface, a soldier’s shield for instance. This method is called *catoptromancy*. In the other a glass or bowl of water was used, and for this the terms *lecanomancy* (divination by bowl) and *hydromancy* are attested.

*Hydromancy*,<sup>69</sup> like many other methods of divination, seems to have originated in Babylonia and reached the Greco-Roman world via Egypt, in the first century B.C. or earlier.<sup>70</sup> It was fairly popular throughout antiquity and in Byzantine times. In Europe, during the Middle Ages and later, it was associated with witchcraft, and in some countries severe penalties prohibited this seemingly harmless practice.

One ancient method is described by M. P. Nilsson: “Scrying was done by gazing at the surface of water, a method . . . which reminds us of modern crystal-gazing. A medium, an innocent boy, was chosen after he had been tested and found suitable. . . . The medium, with his eyes shut or bandaged, lay on his belly, with his face over a vessel containing water. Thereupon certain ceremonies were gone through which led up to the trance into which the medium passed by staring at the surface of the water, wherein he saw the beings summoned up by the magician, and then gave answers to the questions asked.”<sup>71</sup>

The methods varied according to the nature of the shiny object used and the medium employed; sometimes a pregnant woman was substituted for the “innocent” boy (*innocent* here meaning “lacking sexual experience”). Sometimes the term *gastromancy* (divination by the belly) was used, because the vessel filled with water was called *gastra* ‘belly-shaped vessel’.<sup>72</sup>

Other requisites mentioned are a small altar, a statue of a god, and a lantern (Apul., *Apol.*, ch. 42). A magical papyrus in London (PGM V) describes how to obtain an oracle from Serapis. One needs a bowl, a lamp, a bench, and a young boy. The prescribed ritual involves the invocation of Serapis, pouring the water into the bowl, lighting the lamp (at this point the boy probably stretches out on the bench so that he can look down into the bowl), waiting for visions in the water, a prayer to dismiss the god, and a charm to protect the boy.

We would call the boy a medium. When he sees certain things in the water (a throne carried by four men crowned with olive branches, preceded by a censer bearer, is mentioned), the priest knows that the medium is now in trance. These images can vary from cult to cult, from age to age. In this case we are probably getting a glimpse of a ritual procession in honor of the god Serapis in the late Hellenistic period. In theory, other images could be substituted, but this particular vision has survived for centuries, for we have a remarkably similar account of the same kind of ceremony from an English traveler, E. W. Lane, who visited Egypt in the nineteenth century.<sup>73</sup> The images that the boy-medium sees at the beginning of his trance are also certainly scenes of temple life in Egypt two thousand or more years ago. One possible explanation is that this technique was taught by one generation of magicians to the next for centuries, and that along with the technique a certain way of “programming” the medium was inherited. This programming could have been done when the boy was hypnotized. The long survival of these ancient practices, at least under certain circumstances, is truly astonishing.

Crystal gazing, or *crystallomancy*, is not referred to by this name before Byzantine times, but the practice itself seems to be older.<sup>74</sup> The favorite mineral used by the ancient diviners was the beryl, a transparent stone pale green in color and passing into light blue, yellow, and white; the green variety of the transparent beryl is the emerald, while the pale bluish-green variety is the aquamarine. All these stones were used in antiquity, but in modern times “crystal balls” made of clear glass have been substituted.<sup>75</sup>

No doubt many other techniques of divination were known to the ancients but no detailed descriptions have survived. The term *rhabdomancy* appears in a gloss without further explanation. Translated as “divi-

nation by means of a rod or wand,” it is connected with a passage from Herodotus (4.67) in which we are told that the Medes, the Persians, and the Scythians used a stick or rod for divining. How they used it is not known, but it is reasonable to assume that Herodotus was speaking of the “divining rod” used for dowsing or “water witching” to this day.<sup>76</sup> No clear reference is found in any ancient author, though on the strength of Numbers 20:7–11 Moses is sometimes called the first dowser, that is, if the staff with which he struck the rock twice, after speaking to it, was a divining rod, not a magic wand.

According to the historian Ammianus Marcellinus (29.1.25ff.), participants in magical operations involving a kind of Ouija board were brought to trial for high treason.<sup>77</sup> Their instrument, produced as evidence, was a tripod of olive wood that supported a circular metal dish. On the rim of the dish were engraved the twenty-four letters of the Greek alphabet. A ring hanging from a thin linen thread began to swing from letter to letter, spelling out words and arranging the words into hexameters. Then someone asked the crucial question: “Who will be our next emperor?” Slowly the ring began to spell: first a *theta*, then an *epsilon*, then an *omikron*—it could only mean Theodorus, or so they thought. Unfortunately, they were wrong. One of them informed a so-called friend, and soon afterward they were all arrested, tried, and put to death, and Theodorus, though he insisted to the end that he knew nothing of the whole experiment, was put to death also. Had they only been a little more patient, the divination board would have told them the truth. Seven years later the reigning emperor, Valens, was killed, and his successor was—Theodosius.

A board similar to the one described above was excavated at Pergamon,<sup>78</sup> but it is not really a member of the Ouija board family; it is more like a roulette table, for the answers it provides seem to be determined by chance alone.

*Chiromancy*, or palmistry, is mentioned in the second century A.D. by Pollux (2.152), but apparently it was practiced in the Far East at least two thousand years before that. Originally it was based on intuition combined with symbolism, and some of the symbolism was derived from astrology. Lines in the hand forming a triangle (trine, 120° in astrology) were considered a good sign, whereas lines resembling a square (90° in astrology) were interpreted as a bad omen.

Tarot cards, as popular today as they were in the Middle Ages, were possibly created in Egypt as part of the Cabalistic tradition. When they were brought to Spain by Jewish scholars, they were adapted to medieval society; for example, the medieval clergy was symbolized by cups or chalices, the nobility by swords, merchants by pentacles, and peasants by

wands. In subsequent centuries these class distinctions lost their meaning, and the cards were filled with new magical significance as practitioners interpreted the changing social scene. Basically, tarot is a variation of the sortilege technique, for each card represents the elaboration of one symbol.

The preceding survey of the methods used in ancient divination, incomplete as it is, shows that almost anything could be used to predict the future—the human body, the organs of an animal, minerals, artifacts, the four elements, even the stars. Almost anything that could be experienced or observed, anything that attracted attention, anything that could be manipulated—in a simple way or in an elaborate ritual—had some meaning for the individual or the community. Certain techniques were confined to certain places. Some required highly skilled practitioners, but many were devised for the use of the ordinary person. In a universe where supernatural powers were thought to influence every act and thought, ancient divination was essentially a form of psychotherapy. It helped people cope with their worries about the future, and it forced them to reach decisions after all the rational angles had been explored.

The divination techniques described in the following texts are different, but the principle is the same: the participants in these rituals assumed that the future was somehow present, either visible in trance or written in the sky (astrology is treated in chapter 5) or understandable through dreams. Some of these techniques were more elaborate than others. The professional dream interpreter needed his dream books; the professional astrologer, his astrolabe, his ephemerids, and other tools. The Pythia in Delphi prophesied in trance, a state of consciousness that could be induced naturally, by a form of self-hypnosis, or artificially, by psychoactive substances, most likely a kind of incense. Divination often worked because the person who asked the questions already, in the subconscious, knew the answers. This may sound paradoxical, but the evidence of the texts, if read carefully, confirms it.

Essentially, ancient divination was a form of communication between gods and men. The oracles were sanctuaries where gods were thought to reside and be willing to talk to men and women under certain conditions, sometimes through an intermediary (the prophet), sometimes directly (in a dream).

## NOTES

1. See Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 70.
2. See H. Gunkel, *Die Propheten* (Tübingen, 1917).

3. All the basic information is given in A. St. Pease's article in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1970), s.v. "Divination."
4. There is a French translation of Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica*, with valuable notes, by A.-J. Festugière (Paris, 1975) and an English one by R. J. White (Park Ridge, N.J., 1975). Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, ch. 4, is devoted to dreams. See also G. E. V. Grunebaum and R. Caillois, eds., *The Dreams and Human Societies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966). On incubation, see L. Deubner, *De Incubatione* (Giessen, 1900).
5. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, p. 174.
6. The dream book of Ashurbanipal has been published and translated by A. L. Oppenheim in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 46 (1956). The dreams sent by the gods to kings, priests, or wise men were considered self-explanatory, so to speak, because these persons had the authority to interpret them.
7. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is a tragedy about a Greek ruler who won a war and returned with a prophetess, Cassandra, as his captive; she foresaw his and her own doom. E. Fraenkel's monumental commentary (1950) offers insights into the phenomena of ecstasy and prophecy.
8. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 120.
9. According to Plato, prophetic dreams originate in the rational soul but are seen by the irrational soul as images reflected on the smooth surface of the human liver; see the reference to the *Timaeus* in *ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, p. 183.
14. Achilles Tatius, *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon* 1.3.2.
15. See W. O. Stevens, *The Mystery of Dreams* (New York, 1949); and E. Fromm, *The Forgotten Language* (New York, 1959), esp. pp. 47ff., on Freud and Jung. See also A. Faraday, *Dream Power* (New York, 1972).
16. C. G. Jung et al., eds., *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, N.Y., 1964), p. 51.
17. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 104.
18. W. R. Halliday, *Greek Divination* (London, 1913), ch. 3. "Bacis" may have been the name given to a whole group of inspired prophets who were active in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. Another legendary figure, "Musaeus," seems to be related to "Orpheus"; he is a healer as well as a diviner.
19. R. Flacelière, *Greek Oracles*, trans. D. Garman (New York, 1963). F. W. H. Myers' *Essays Classical* (London, 1904) and M. P. Nilsson's *Cults, Myths, Oracles, and Politics in the Ancient World* (Lund, 1951) also are important.
20. Bernard de Fontenelle, *Histoire critique des oracles*, ed. L. Maigron (Paris, 1908), p. 70.
21. See S. A. B. Mercer, *Religion of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1949), pp. 157ff.
22. See A. Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London, 1938).
23. See, e.g., H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord* (Oxford, 1965).
24. See E. Rohde, *Psyche*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen, 1903), 2:18ff.; Reitzenstein, *Hellenistische Mysterienreligionen*, pp. 236ff.

25. See J. Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (1918), s.v. "Tongues, gift of"; A. Mackie, *The Gift of Tongues* (New York, 1922).
26. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, p. 174, quotes from a Byzantine author, Psellus, *How Daemons Work*, ch. 14, and points out that the *Rituale Romanum*, still the official Roman Catholic handbook for exorcists, cites as criteria of possession "the ability to speak or understand an unknown language and to reveal things distant or hidden."
27. Rohde, *Psyche*, 2:18ff.; Oesterreich, *Die Besessenheit*; Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 77ff.
28. See I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (1971; repr., Harmondsworth, 1975).
29. This anguish of prophetic revelation is well attested and may be compared to Jung's "painful process of individuation."
30. See Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, pp. 2ff.
31. John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography* (New York, 1934), p. 531.
32. See R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (New York, 1950).
33. See E. Bevan, *Sibyls and Seers* (London, 1929).
34. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, pp. 176ff., gives a very instructive survey of possible explanations; he distinguishes clairvoyance from precognition, for apparently only the latter is explained by "divine images" (pp. 162, 202). One cannot help feeling that occult phenomena, like religious experiences, may be labeled and classified, but that the labels in themselves are no explanation.
35. On "retrocognition," see *ibid.*, p. 160, n. 3. Sir Wallis Budge, in *By Nile and Tigris* (London, 1922), p. 122, tells us that he once relived in a room a horrible event that had actually taken place a long time ago. He goes on to explain that places can be like phonograph records, and that the psychic is like the needle that brings out the sound (i.e., the experience that is engraved in the place).
36. See S. Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1973), pp. 32ff.
37. See note 19 above.
38. Since the Egyptian oracle Amun, or Ammon was famous in Greece, one may assume that the Greeks inherited this form of divination from an older culture; see Mercer, *Religion of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 157ff.
39. Verses from Homer were written on papyrus, and then one particular verse was selected by throwing dice or pricking the papyrus with a needle; that verse was then interpreted as a response to one's question; see A. Vogliano, in *ACME* 1 (1948): 226ff.
40. An English translation is found in R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1913), vol. 2.
41. See P. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Egypt*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), 1:708ff.
42. Fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* were compiled and edited by W. Kroll (Leipzig, 1894). For Dodds' comments on them, see *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 283ff.
43. See H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*; and the more recent edition by H. Tardieu (Paris, 1978).
44. See H. W. Parke, *Greek Oracles* (London, 1967).

45. Plutarch himself seems to have believed in "prophetic exhalations from the earth"; see *On the Cessation of Oracles*, ch. 44.
46. Cf. G. Luck, in *Gnomon* 25 (1953): 364.
47. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 70ff., 87ff.
48. K. Buresch, *Klaros* (Leipzig, 1899); C. Picard, *Ephèse et Claros* (Paris, 1922).
49. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, pp. 168, 198–99. On Trophonius, see G. Radke, in *RE* 7A (1932), cols. 673ff.; A. Schachter, *Cults of Boeotia*, vol. 3 (London, 1994), 66ff.
50. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 74–75, 93.
51. M. P. Nilsson, *Greek Popular Religion* (New York, 1940), pp. 123–24.
52. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 217–18, 222–23.
53. Nilsson, *Cults, Myths, Oracles, and Politics in the Ancient World*, pp. 95ff.
54. Plutarch, *De Defectu Oraculorum*, ed. R. Flacelière (Paris, 1947).
55. Euseb., *Praep. Evang.* 5.17; see also D. A. Russell, *Plutarch* (New York, 1973), p. 145.
56. Rabelais, *Pantagruel* 4.28, quoted by Flacelière, in his edition of Plutarch's *De Defectu Oraculorum*, p. 79; see also Russell, *Plutarch*, p. 145.
57. Cic., *Div.* 1.92.
58. *Oblativa* were comparable to *enodia*, chance appearances of animals during a walk or a journey. In German folklore, a black cat that crosses one's path means bad luck.
59. See Sir James Frazer's translation of Pausanias' *Description of Greece* (London, 1898), vol. 4; and G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, trans. P. Krapp (Chicago, 1970), vol. 2.
60. Models of the liver of a sacrificial animal—no doubt used for teaching purposes—have been found in Boghazköi (Hittite territory) and in Piacenza (Etruscan territory). This would support the hypothesis that the Etruscans learned this particular technique of prediction from the Babylonians and taught it to the Romans.
61. See Cic., *Div.* 2.50, and Pease's note in his edition.
62. The answer, Cicero implied, is that they know only too well that the ritual is all a fraud.
63. See *The World Almanac Book of the Strange* (New York, 1977), p. 402.
64. The egg could also be broken over water, and the shape that it formed would then be interpreted.
65. The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford, 1975) adds: "or the pretended appearance of spirits therein."
66. *To scry* is apparently a shortened form of *to descry*, i.e., "to discover by observation."
67. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, pp. 186ff.
68. F. W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (London, 1906), 1:237, quoted in Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, pp. 186ff. In ancient times, young boys and girls were used, and their success rate seems to have been rather high.
69. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*, 1:185ff., 339–40.
70. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, p. 188.
71. M. P. Nilsson, *Greek Piety*, trans. H. J. Rose (New York, 1969), pp. 146ff.

On modern methods, see T. Besterman, *Crystal Gazing* (London, 1924); J. Melville, *Crystal Gazing and Clairvoyance* (Wellingsborough, 1970).

72. The term *gastromancy* is ambiguous, for it may also refer to ventriloquism.

73. See E. W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 3 vols. (London, 1846), quoted in Hull, *Hellenistic Magic*, pp. 21–22.

74. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, p. 186, n. 2.

75. For more information on scrying, see *ibid.*, pp. 186ff.; there Dodds tells the story of a conjurer who used a device in order to fake a vision.

76. See W. Barrett and T. Besterman, *The Divining Rod* (New Hyde Park, N.Y., 1968). Minerals, ores, oil, and water have been located by this method. It does not always seem to work, but its success, on the whole, is undisputed; the phenomenon itself remains unexplained.

77. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*, pp. 193–94, tells the story as described by Marcellinus and others.

78. See Wünsch, *Antikes Zaubegerät*.

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## Texts



### 77

Heraclitus, the “obscure philosopher,” lived around 500 B.C., a time when the Delphic oracle already enjoyed its full prestige and prosperity. In this statement he tries to define the “obscurity” of the oracle, which must have perplexed those who wanted clear-cut answers to their questions or explicit guidance in difficult situations. It has often been suspected that the oracles’ ambiguity was deliberate: because several possibilities could be read into a prediction, the god would be right, no matter what happened.

Heraclitus prefers a different explanation. He distinguishes between two different ways of communicating (besides not communicating at all), “to speak out” and “to signify.” The first way is the one we use in everyday conversation; the second is that of the poets, but also of some philosophers, notably Heraclitus himself. The relatively few fragments that are preserved from Heraclitus’ works suggest that he modeled his style on that of the Delphic oracle, always saying too little rather than too much. Perhaps this has been the guiding principle of all great diviners throughout the ages; Nostradamus’ predictions, published in the sixteenth century and still not fully understood today, are a good example of this cryptic style.

Heraclitus, quoted by Plutarch in *The Oracles of the Pythia*, 21, p. 404d

I think you know what Heraclitus said: “The Lord to whom the Delphic oracle belongs does not speak nor does he hide: he signifies.”

### 78

The excerpt from Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (*Recollections of Socrates*) could be discussed under “Daemonology” as well as under “Divination.” It is an attempt, after Socrates’ execution, to absolve him from the charge of

having “introduced strange gods.” Such a charge was indeed serious, for the gods might punish a whole community for the sacrilege committed by one person. Xenophon testifies that his teacher honored all the gods an Athenian was expected to honor, but that he also believed in a “spiritual force” that was, in a way, his own private oracle. It gave him “clues”; like the Delphic oracle, it did not spell things out. Apparently Socrates always knew what this inner voice meant, but when he was asked to give advice to his friends, he did not always want to take full responsibility for it, and so he would send them to one of the established oracles.

In speaking of his teacher, Xenophon also discusses divination in general. Socrates, like most Greeks of his time, including such eminently sensible men as Xenophon himself, firmly believed in divination, not only as a possibility but as a practical necessity. The methods used (augury, prophetic voices, secret tokens, sacrifices) did not matter so much, although Socrates clearly preferred his own method. Divination worked because the gods (or, ultimately, human nature) made it work.

According to Socrates, in order to be successful in life, man needs all the expertise in his field that he can acquire, but he also needs some kind of knowledge of the future. Without this knowledge, he cannot prosper. It is curious that Socrates, who is so often labeled a rationalist, believed so firmly in the influence of irrational forces in our lives.

*Xenophon, Memorabilia, or Recollections of Socrates, 1.1.1–9*

I have often wondered by what arguments Socrates’ prosecutors were able to persuade the Athenians that he deserved to die, according to [the laws of] the city. The indictment against him said in effect: “Socrates is guilty of rejecting the gods that the city worships and of introducing new deities of a different kind; he is also guilty of corrupting the youth.”

First of all, what proof did they offer for his rejecting the gods that the city worshiped? He could often be seen performing sacrifices both at home and at the public altars of the city; he never practiced divination in secret. It was common knowledge that Socrates claimed to be guided by a “spiritual force” [*daimonion*], and this was probably the main reason for the charge that he was introducing new deities. But what he introduced was in no way more unusual than the beliefs of other people in divination by augury, prophetic voices, secret tokens, and sacrifices. For they do not believe that the birds or the people they meet by coincidence actually know something that might help the person who needs an oracle; [they believe] that the gods give us clues through them, and this is what Socrates believed, too. Only, while most people say that they have been dissuaded or encouraged by the birds or those they met by chance, Soc-

rates said exactly what he meant: he said that the “spiritual force” gave him clues. Many of his companions were advised by him to do this and not to do that, just as the “spiritual force” guided him. Those who followed his advice were successful, those who did not, had cause for regret. And yet who would not admit that he did not want to appear as a simpleton or an impostor to his friends? But that is what they would have thought of him, if he had made predictions as if inspired by the god, and then he would have been unmasked as a liar. Obviously, Socrates would not have given this advice if he had not been confident that what he said would come true. And who else could have given him that confidence but a god? And since he had confidence in the gods, how could he possibly not believe in them?

Another way he had of dealing with close friends was this: the things that had to be done he told them to do as best they could. But if the outcome of something was doubtful, he sent his friends to the oracle to find out whether or not this ought to be done. Those who wanted to take good care of their household or of the state, he said, needed divination in addition [to their expertise]. For the carpenter’s craft or that of the smith or the farmer or the ruler of men or the knowledge of dialectics or logic or economics or tactics—all these subjects he thought could be acquired by the human mind, but the most important part of these sciences had been reserved by the gods to themselves, and it was not accessible to men. You may plant a field well, but you do not know who will reap the harvest; you may build a house well, but you do not know who will live in it; you may be a good commander, but you do not know whether you will be successful in your command; you may be a good politician, but you do not know whether your politics will be good for the state; you may marry a beautiful woman, but you do not know whether she will bring you grief; you may gain powerful connections in the state through your marriage, but you do not know whether you will be exiled because of them. If any man thinks that none of these pursuits is controlled by a divine force and that all of them depend on human reason, he must be mad [in the Greek text here there is a play on the words of *daimonion* ‘divine force’ and *daimonon* ‘to be possessed’]. But it would also be mad to seek by divination something that men are allowed by the gods to learn by using their reason, to ask, for example: Is it better to hire an experienced coachman to drive my carriage or one who has no experience? Is it better to hire an experienced sailor to steer my ship or one who has no experience? This applies to everything that can be determined by counting, measuring, or weighing. To put such questions to the gods he considered an act of impiety. He said that we must learn what the gods have

allowed us to achieve by learning, and that we must try to find out from them through divination what we, as human beings, cannot know for certain; the gods will give a clue to those whom they favor.

## 79

The questions people asked the oracle at Dodona were written on thin lead tablets and apparently stored in the archives of the sanctuary. Many of them have been excavated and published. The responses of the oracle seem to have perished. As this selection (mostly from the third century B.C.) clearly shows, some questions were rather trivial in nature.

Dodona, an oracle of Zeus, was situated in the mountains of Epirus in northwestern Greece. We know that it had been established in remote antiquity, for Homer writes of it (*Il.* 16.233–35; *Od.* 14.327–28, 19.296–97). A gigantic oak, the tree of Zeus, formed the center of the cult, and the rustling of its leaves was thought to reveal the will of the god. Zeus was worshiped at Dodona as Zeus Naios, and his consort was not Hera but Dione—actually a feminine form of Zeus, although Homer knows her as one of Zeus’ many mistresses. The priests were called *Selloi* and are described by Homer as “those who do not wash their feet and sleep on the ground” (*Il.* 16.234–35); the priestesses were called “the Old Ladies” or “the Pigeons.” These designations seem to document the long history of the sanctuary, for washing one’s feet and sleeping on beds were relatively modern customs, and the name “Pigeons” reminded visitors of the ancient cult legend according to which a pigeon flying from Thebes in Egypt had lighted on the oak tree and, speaking with a human voice, ordered the institution of the oracle.

The questions asked represent various concerns and worries of individuals and communities. It is difficult for the modern-day reader, reading the query in line 793, to understand why a city-state like the Mondaiaitai would send a special delegation to Dodona just to find out whether a loan to a certain lady would be a safe investment or not. The city fathers probably let a number of similar requests pile up and sent them to the oracle in a batch, and from such a batch only this tablet has survived.

The man Heracleidas, in line 1160, must have been married before, but in his previous marriage(s) he had remained childless. His new wife is not yet pregnant, and he is getting impatient. The man in 1163 whose wife is pregnant worries whether he is the father or not. It is difficult to see how the oracle would answer such a question. Surely the priests were aware of the tragedy they would cause by confirming the husband’s suspicions. An ambiguous answer in the true “oracular” style would not have helped, either.

The query in 1165 concerns another business venture. It seems to involve a switch from one type of farming to another or, possibly, the expansion of a farm operation. On the reverse side of the tablet we read a note that was obviously added by the priest in charge or his clerk; it consists of (1) a brief rubric; (2) the abbreviated name of the petitioner; (3) a number. Since the name is abbreviated almost beyond recognition, we may assume that everyone was given a number and that the combination of rubric and name was meant to exclude any possible error.

### Questions Asked at Dodona

(Dittenberger, *Sylloge*<sup>2</sup> 793; *Sylloge*<sup>3</sup> 1160–61, 1163–65)

793. The state of the Mondaïatai consults Zeus Naios and Dione about the money requested by Themisto, whether she can afford it and whether it is all right to lend it.

1160. Heraclides asks Zeus and Dione for good fortune and wants to know from the god about a child, if he will have one from his wife Aegle, the one he has now.

1161. Nicocrateia would like to know to what god she ought to offer sacrifice in order to get well and feel better and make her illness go away.

1163. Lysanius wants to know from Zeus Naios and Dione whether the child Annyla is expecting is his or not.

1164. Is it more profitable for me and of much greater advantage to buy the house in the city and the piece of land?

1165. Cleotas asks Zeus and Dione whether it is profitable and to his advantage to raise cattle. [On the reverse:] About cattle. Κ<LE><OYTAS>. No. 5.

## 80

This inscription from the late first century B.C. records a decree of the Senate of the city-state of Anaphe, but it also includes the question that one citizen, Timotheus, submitted to an oracle, as well as the oracle's response.

Timotheus must have been a wealthy man. He was willing to build, for his city, a temple to Aphrodite. Such a gift, seemingly spontaneous, was often a form of taxation, but it also lent a certain amount of prestige to the donor. Officially, this oracle had to be consulted about the whole project and about the specific location of the temple. There is no need for Timotheus to describe the location—the god will know. In the end, the god approves the project and states his preference for one location over the other; he also gives further instructions, which ultimately lead to this record.

On this inscription, see now Eran Lupu, *Greek Sacred Laws: A Collection of New Documents* (Leiden, 2004), 36–37.

Timotheus Wants to Build a Temple  
(Dittenberger, *Sylloge* 977, 25–36 = *IG* XII 3, 248)

Timotheus asked the god whether it would be advantageous and appropriate for him to ask the city to build a temple of Aphrodite in the place he has in mind, in the precinct of Apollo of Asgelata, and let it be public property, or [build] it in the sanctuary of Asclepius, in the place he has in mind.

The god answered that he should ask [the city to have it built] in the precinct of Apollo and, after the completion of the temple, have the decree, the oracle, and the request inscribed on a stone slab. The Senate made a decision on these matters and granted him his request, provided the Assembly would approve of it, too.

## 81

This fragmentary inscription in three pieces was found on a hill near the Pergamene Gulf on the site of the ancient city of Demetrias. According to epigraphers who have studied it, it dates from the first century B.C.

The text of the inscription shows that even minor cities (not well known in history) could have an oracle of their own. In this instance the oracle of Apollo of Corope is called an ancient institution, which in this context probably means not more than “pre-Hellenistic.” In the first century B.C. the great oracles were declining, and an effort was begun in Demetrias to reorganize the whole procedure of oracular consultation and to establish stricter rules. It is clear from the inscription that the secular authorities of the city, including the chief of police, were responsible for parts of the operation. Presumably they had neglected their duties in previous years, and the implication is that complaints had been made against them. But the visitors themselves had not always behaved properly either: they had not always worn their best garments, or they had been drunk and disorderly. Some of them may even have tried to bribe the officials in order to get preferential treatment. The strict rules prescribed represent an effort at reform, an attempt to restore the oracle to its former prestige. About the method of divination employed at the oracle the text says nothing.

On this inscription, see now Eran Lupu, *Greek Sacred Laws*, 10–11.

## Procedure at an Oracle

(Dittenberger, *Sylloge*<sup>3</sup> 1157, 1–69 = IG IX 2, 1109)

During the priesthood of Crino, son of Parmenio, on the tenth of the month of Areius. Proposal of Crino, son of Parmenio of Homole, priest of Zeus Acraeus, of Dionysiodorus, son of Euphraeus of Aeole, prefect of Magnesia, of the commanders Aetolius, son of Demetrius of Pagasae, Cleogenes, son of Amyntas of Halae, Menes, son of Hippias of Eole and of the magistrates Menelaus, son of Philippus of Iolcus, Aenias, son of Nicasibulus, and Alexander, son of Meniscus of Spalautra, and Menander, son of Nicias of Corope:

Whereas our city devoutly worships all gods, especially Apollo of Corope, and honors him with the most signal honors because of the blessings it has received from the god who gives, through his oracle, clear instructions, both in general and individually, concerning health and welfare;

and whereas it is right and appropriate, since the oracle is ancient and has been held in high esteem by our forefathers, and since many foreigners visit the seat of the oracle, that the city should take very careful measures for the proper maintenance of the oracle;

the Council and the People have decreed that whenever an oracular consultation has been completed, the priest of Apollo appointed by the city who happens to be in charge at the time, and one representative of the commanders, the guardians of the law, one delegate from both ruling bodies and one from the prytanies, the treasurer and the secretary of the god, and the speaker [for the god] must attend.

If any one of those mentioned above is sick or out of town, he must send someone else. The commanders and the guardians of the law must enroll staff-bearers from among the citizens, namely, three men under thirty who shall have the authority to punish unruly elements. The staff-bearers shall be paid from the collected contributions an allowance for two days, a drachma a day. If one of the enrolled [staff-bearers] fails to show up, he shall pay a fine of fifty drachmas to the city, after the commanders and the guardians of the law have established his culpability. When those mentioned above are present at the oracle and perform the sacrifice according to tradition, with a favorable result, the secretary of the god shall collect, immediately after the sacrifice, the petitions of those who wish to consult the oracle, write all their names on a white tablet, exhibit the white tablet at once in front of the temple, and lead them in, calling them up according to the order of their names, unless someone may have the privilege of being called ahead of the others. If the person

called up is not present, the secretary shall lead in the following one, until the one called up [before] happens to arrive.

In the sanctuary, the persons entered on the lists shall sit properly, in shining [i.e., festive] garments, crowned with laurel wreaths, clean and sober, and they shall receive the tablets from those who deliver the oracle. When the consultation has been completed, they shall deposit the tablets into a vessel and seal it with the seal of the commanders and the guardians of the law and also with that of the priest, and they shall let it remain in the sanctuary. At dawn the secretary of the god shall bring in the vessel, show the seals to those mentioned before, open them, read from the list the names in their order, and give back to each one the tablet . . . [with] the oracles . . .

The staff-bearers shall take precautions about maintaining order. In the Assembly of the people, in the month of Aphrodision, before everything else, the examiners shall, in the presence of the people, administer to all persons mentioned before the following oath: "I swear by Zeus of Acra and by Apollo of Corope and by Artemis of Iolcus and by all the other gods and goddesses that I have performed all my duties as specified in the decree which was authorized concerning the oracle in the year of the priesthood of Crino, son of Parmenio."

After they have sworn this they shall be released from their responsibility. If anyone does not take this oath, the examiners and any one of the citizens who wishes [to shall be] free to bring a complaint against him on the grounds of every single offense [that he may have committed]. If the examiners do not take any of the actions mentioned before, they will be responsible to their successors in office and to anyone else who wishes [to bring a charge against them]. To make sure that this decree is enforced forever, the ten annually chosen commanders and the guardians of the law shall hand over this decree to the officials who will be elected in the future. Furthermore, a copy of the decree shall be inscribed on a stone slab at the expense of the "Wall Builders" [officials responsible for repairs to the city walls] and is to be set up in the sanctuary of Apollo of Corope.

## 82

Cicero's treatise *On Divination* is essentially an attack on the Stoic doctrine of divination as it was presented by Posidonius. In this passage, Cicero deals with oracles. He argues that oracles flourished only as long as people were naïve and credulous; as soon as the skepticism of the New Academy (i.e., the nondogmatic Platonists with whom Cicero had studied in Athens) had undermined the Stoic position, the oracles began to decline.

Cicero quotes two famous responses of the Delphic oracle. One had been given to Croesus, the last king of Lydia (sixth century B.C.); the other, to Pyrrhus, the last strong king of Epirus (fourth-third century B.C.). In both cases, an ambitious king was planning to attack a foreign power—Croesus, the Persians; Pyrrhus, the Romans. In both cases the god of Delphi was consulted. And in both cases the answer given was ambiguous: Croesus was defeated and thus destroyed his own kingdom; Pyrrhus, although “able” to defeat the Romans, achieved only a “Pyrrhic victory” and had to retire to Greece with about one-third of his army and without the strength needed to strike once more.

Even though the oracle had the last word, Cicero argues that it was misleading in both cases and did not keep its part of the bargain. The truth of the matter is that the oracle was a paid consultant who did not always give the best advice to clients.

Cicero also questions whether the oracular responses are historical. Had not, perhaps, Herodotus made up one, Ennius the other? The second response, not preserved in Greek, sounds especially suspicious: we have only this poetic version in Latin, yet at that time the oracle no longer went to the trouble of putting its responses in verse, and certainly not in Latin verse.

That the prestige of the oracles had declined in Cicero’s time is well attested, and the philosophers came up with various explanations. The Stoic theory that Cicero quotes appears in a slightly modified form in Lucan [*no.* 90] and also in Plutarch [*no.* 92]. The historical or economic reasons are difficult to assess, but there seem to have been three major ones: (1) in the first centuries of our era there was a tendency to move away from the great religious centers, to find a more personal relationship with the deity, a relationship that needed no elaborate apparatus; (2) Greece, like Judea, was incorporated into the Roman Empire, and the Romans did not do a great deal to support the famous old sanctuaries; (3) the countries occupied by the Roman legions were soon impoverished, for, due to the Roman tax system, any wealth that might have gone to Delphi or Dodona went to Rome instead.

Cicero, *On Divination* 2.115–16

A famous oracle was given to the wealthiest ruler of Asia Minor:

When Croesus crosses the Halys, he will destroy a mighty empire.

He thought that he was going to destroy his powerful enemy; [in fact] he lost his own. No matter which of the two events happened, the oracle

would have been right. But why should I believe that this oracle was ever given to Croesus? Why should I believe that Herodotus is more reliable than Ennius? Was Herodotus less likely to make up something about Croesus than Ennius about Pyrrhus? For who ever believed that the oracle of Apollo made the following response to Pyrrhus?

I tell you, descendant of Aeacus, that you are able to conquer the Romans.

First of all, Apollo never answered in Latin. Second, the Greeks never heard of this particular oracle. Moreover, in the time of Pyrrhus, Apollo no longer spoke in verse.

But the main point is this. Why are oracles of this kind [text and sense uncertain] no longer issued at Delphi, not only in our own time, but for some time [text uncertain], so that the oracle has fallen into total neglect [sense uncertain]? When the Stoics are pressed by this argument, they answer that over a long period of time the power of the place from which the breath came—the breath that moved the mind of the Pythia to produce oracles—had become weak. It is as if they were speaking of things like wine or sauces that lose their taste due to age. We are dealing with the power of a place that is not only a natural but actually a divine power. But how can it become weak? “Through age,” you may say. But what kind of age is this that can weaken a divine power? And what can be so divine as a breath coming from the earth, moving the mind (of the Pythia) to such a degree that she not only knows future events long before they happen but also expresses them in metrical form? When did this power disappear? Perhaps after people became less gullible?

## 83

In his treatise *On Divination*, Cicero deals with various aspects of Stoic doctrine as presented by Chrysippus (c. 280–207 B.C.), who defended it vigorously against the doubts of the skeptics (2.130). Cicero is also familiar with Posidonius (c. 135–50 B.C.), who, it seems, had collected a substantial body of evidence to support his thesis that divination worked. But the Stoics, as Cicero shows (1.82), also used purely logical arguments. If, as the Stoics maintained, the gods are omniscient, all-powerful, and concerned for the welfare of mankind, it follows that they know what the future will bring and are willing to share their knowledge with us because it may help us.

In another excerpt (1.72) Cicero distinguishes between “natural” and “technical” divination. Interpreting one’s own dream is an instance of

natural divination, but various other techniques of predicting the future have to be learned.

Divination as a science may be based on statistics (1.109–10). Cicero uses the words “frequency of records,” but that is what we mean by “statistics”; such statistics were probably kept over centuries by the Babylonians and Egyptians, but no doubt also by the Greeks and Romans. The augurs, for instance, might note the behavior of birds at a certain moment and tie their observations to striking events that followed soon afterward. Even respectable historians like Livy listed unusual phenomena that were reported during a given year and worried the people, but he leaves it up to the reader to match these “warnings” with actual events. In a sense, this method is scientific, and it does not require the intervention of a god or a daemon, though practitioners may claim that it was a god who originally revealed these secrets to mankind. An ancient legend may serve as an example: Tages, a divine being who looked like a child, was unearthed by a farmer in a field near Tarquinia and there revealed the secrets of the “Etruscan discipline” of divination to a committee of twelve Etruscans.

In the last excerpt (2.33) Cicero reluctantly admits the validity of the Stoic concept that the universe is a living organism and that all its parts are connected by “cosmic sympathy,” but he rejects the practical application of these principles. A *haruspex* looks at the liver of a freshly slaughtered sheep and tells a person where to dig to find a buried treasure. How does the universe enter into all this?

Cicero, *On Divination*, excerpts from Books 1 and 2

2.130. Chrysippus defines divination as “the power to see, to understand, to interpret the signs that are given to men by the gods.”

1.82. That divination really works is shown by the following Stoic argument: “If the gods exist but do not reveal to men the future, either they do not love men, or they do not know what will happen, or they think that men have no interest in knowing the future, or they consider it beneath their majesty to warn men about the future, or even the gods are unable to warn us of what lies ahead. But they certainly love us, for they mean well and are friendly to mankind; they certainly know what they themselves have planned and established; it is definitely in our interest to know what will happen, for knowing it will make us more careful; it is entirely consistent with their majesty, for nothing is more important [to them] than to do good deeds; and of course they are able to predict the future.”

1.72. Everything that is interpreted by guesses or observed and recorded in specific events belongs to the kind of divination, as I have said above, that is called “technical,” not “natural.” The *haruspices* [interpreters

of internal organs of sacrificial animals, prodigies, lightning], the *coniectores* [soothsayers], and the *augures* [bird watchers] belong to this [category]. This sort of thing is rejected by the Peripatetics but is defended by the Stoics.

1.109–10. Could there be a relatively easy science of technical predictions, but a more hidden one of divine predictions? For events that are foreshadowed in internal organs, in lightning, and in the stars [are interpreted] by a science based on long observation, and a long tradition adds in every subject, through accumulated observations, an incredible amount of knowledge. This kind of knowledge is possible, even without any influence, any impulse from the gods, because statistics [literally, “the frequency of records”] indicate what happens as a result of something else and what it means.

The other type of divination is “natural” and must be, as I have said before, and, as the greatest philosophers thought, theologically speaking, seen in relation to the gods, for we have breathed in, we have imbibed our souls from the gods. Since the universe is filled to the brim with an everlasting sense, with a mind that is divine, it follows logically that the spirits of men are directed by the contact with divine souls.

1.118. The Stoics do not believe that a god is actually present in the dividing lines of livers or in the sounds that birds make, for this is unsuitable for gods, unworthy of them, and simply cannot be imagined. They believe that from the beginning the world was designed in such a way that certain events would follow certain signs—signs in internal organs, in birds, in lightning, in portents, in stars, in dream visions, in the utterances of madmen. Those who really understand these things do not often go wrong; bad guesses and bad interpretations are wrong not because the facts mislead them but because the interpreters are incompetent.

2.33. What relationship do these things [i.e., the entrails from which the seers predict the future] have to the nature [of the universe]? Let us admit that it is held together by one common feeling and that it forms a unit—I see that this is the opinion of the physicists and especially of those who think that the whole universe is one—but what connection is there between the world and the discovery of a treasure?

## 84

Cicero’s treatise *On Divination* is not systematic; he returns to the same questions in different parts of the work.

The argument he makes in 2.41 is directed against the Stoic doctrine that the gods care for us and therefore want us to know the future [see *no.* 83]. Cicero (or his skeptic source) turns this around and says that there can

be no knowledge of the future; hence there are no gods. Whether Cicero himself was an agnostic or a freethinker is a different matter; here he simply wants to show that the Stoic argument does not prove what it is supposed to prove.

Another argument the Stoics were fond of using is the concept of a universal consensus of mankind (2.81)—namely, all nations worship gods; therefore, all nations practice divination. Cicero reduces this argument *ad absurdum* by saying (1) that the Stoics themselves ignore the universal consensus when it does not serve their cause, and (2) that nothing is as universal as stupidity.

Cicero makes another point by asking these questions: Why should the gods give us any clues concerning the future, and, conceding that they actually give them, why are they usually so vague? The gods are supposed to help us because they love us. Why, then, do they make things needlessly difficult for us? Warning us of a disaster is not an act of kindness unless they also tell us how to avoid it. Cicero also mentions catastrophes that occur without warning, noting that, *post factum*, a seer could always claim that he had foretold them.

Finally, he reports a few typical *omina* or *portenta* that to the average Roman could be interpreted only as signs of impending disaster. Here Cicero argues from a strictly philosophical point of view, and it is interesting to see that, for him, philosophy (or science) begins with Thales of Miletus (sixth century B.C.). Science (or philosophy), Thales contended, ought to liberate the human mind from irrational fears and superstitions by showing that everything has a natural cause and that there is no need to invoke supernatural powers. To understand the natural causes does not mean to control them, however, and in a sense, mankind is just as helpless as before science enlightened it.

Cicero, *On Divination*, excerpts from Book 2

2.41. The Stoics actually argue when they are particularly eager [to make their point]: “If there are gods, there is divination; the gods exist; therefore, there is divination.” It would make much more sense to say: “There is no divination; therefore, there are no gods.”

2.81. [The defender of divination objects:] But all kings, peoples, nations, make use of auspices. [Cicero retorts:] As if anything were as universal as the fact that people are stupid! As if you yourself would agree with the majority whenever you form a judgment! How many are there who deny that pleasure is a good? Most people even call it the highest good. Do their numbers shake the Stoics in their conviction? Or do the masses bow before the Stoics’ authority in most matters?

2.54–55. What is this premonition sent by the gods, this so-called

warning of impending disasters? What do the immortal gods have in mind when they give us clues that we cannot understand without interpreters and—this is my second point—against which we are defenseless anyway? No decent human being would do that: predict to a friend an imminent disaster from which there is no way of escape. Physicians often realized the truth, but they never tell the patient that he will die of a certain illness. For the prediction of misfortune is accepted [only] when advice on how to avoid it is joined to the prediction. In what way did portents or their interpreters help the Spartans in the past or, more recently, the Romans? If they are to be considered signs of the gods, why are they so obscure? If the gods really wanted us to know the future, they should have stated it clearly; if they did not want us to know it, they should not even have hinted at it.

*[Prodigies and portents have no hidden significance; they can always be explained by natural causes.]*

2.58. It was reported to the Senate that bloody rain fell, that the river Atratus was flowing with blood, that the statues of the gods had been sweating. Do you think that Thales or Anaxagoras or any other scientist would have believed these reports? There is no blood, no sweat, except from a living body.

2.60. Or does it frighten you when some monstrous birth from a beast or a human being is described? To make it short: all these phenomena have a natural explanation. Whatever is born, no matter what it may be like, must have its origin from nature; therefore, even if it turns out to be abnormal, it cannot exist outside of nature. So by all means investigate the cause of a strange phenomenon, if you can; if you cannot find any, you may take it for granted that nothing could have happened without a cause, and whatever terror [reading *terrorem* with Lambinus for *errorem*] the strangeness of the phenomenon may have given you, the principles of science will drive it away.

## 85

Cicero here reports the doctrine of “natural divination” as formulated by Posidonius who believed that the air around us is full of invisible souls or spirits. Some of them are on the way to being incarnated, some have just left a dead body, some are absenting themselves temporarily from a sleeping person. There must be a certain intercourse, an exchange of ideas, between these mobile spirits and the gods.

It seems that Posidonius had recorded a number of case histories that, to him, proved beyond a doubt that divination was possible, and he devel-

oped this theory to explain the phenomenon. He was also convinced that the dying develop special powers of precognition or have some sort of remote control, and as an explanation he offered the theory that the soul, the divine part of the human personality, leaves the dying body and thereafter is able to use its full powers.

Many such stories were told and believed. One of the reasons why Stoicism was such a popular philosophy in the late republic and early empire was its appeal to popular beliefs and the use it made of them.

Cicero, *On Divination* 1.63–64

When, in sleep, the mind is separated from the companionship of the body and is not in touch with it, it remembers the past, sees the present, foresees the future. The body of the sleeper lies as if he were dead, but his mind is alert and alive. This is true to a much higher degree after death, when the mind has left the body altogether; therefore, when death approaches, the mind is much more divine [or: prophetic]. For those who are seriously, critically ill see the very approach of death; therefore, they very often have visions of the dead, and at this point they are especially anxious to be worthy of praise; but those who have not led the kind of life that one should lead regret their sins deeply. To show that the dying foresee the future, Posidonius quotes the following example. A man on Rhodes was dying and named six of his contemporaries in the order in which they were going to die. Posidonius thinks that there are three ways in which the gods cause dreams in men: first, because the mind foresees the future all by itself; second, because the air is full of immortal spirits on which the seal of truth appears as if it had been imprinted on them; third, because the gods themselves talk with those who are asleep.

## 86

Cicero now criticizes Posidonius' theory of dreams. Experience tells us that not all of our dreams come true; in fact, in a lifetime most dreams offer no clues about the future. To this the Stoic might reply that we seldom remember all the details of a dream, and even if we did remember most of them, we would be unable to interpret all of them properly. It is true that the serious interpreters of dreams—Artemidorus, for instance—insisted on being told all the details of a dream and claimed to know their true meaning.

Cicero dismisses this argument. If this were true, why would the gods, caring and benevolent as they are supposed to be, not spell out the meaning for us? The Stoic might answer: Not everyone has the same kind of

dreams: most people have senseless, incomplete, confusing dreams, and only the wise man dreams in a clear, consistent, and meaningful manner.

Cicero's sarcasm aside, the Stoics were not totally wrong. There are dreamers and there are dreamers, and in antiquity there was even a technique that taught people how to prepare themselves for veridic dreams, through diet, exercise, prayers, meditation, and the like.

Cicero, *On Divination* 2.127–28

Well, who would be bold enough to say that all dreams are true? “Some dreams are true,” says Ennius, “but not necessarily all.” But what kind of distinction is this, anyway? Which does he consider true, which false? And if the true ones are sent by a god, where do the false ones come from? For if they, too, are divine, what could be more inconsistent than the god? And what is sillier than to vex the minds of men with false, deceitful visions? If true visions are divine, and false ones are human, what kind of arbitrary distinction are you proposing? Does this mean that a god makes this, nature that? Should one not rather assume that the god made everything—but this you deny—or nature made everything? But since you deny the former, one must necessarily admit the latter. “Nature” I call the entity that must always fill the mind that is based on activity and movement. When the mind cannot make use of the limbs and the senses because the body is tired, it encounters vague visions of different kinds from residual impressions, as Aristotle says, of things that it did or thought about while awake; when those get out of control, strange kinds of dreams result.

## 87

This scene from Seneca's *Agamemnon* only remotely resembles any part of Aeschylus' tragedy of the same title, but the story is roughly the same: Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and supreme commander of the Greeks during the Trojan War, returns in triumph to Mycenae after an absence of more than ten years. He brings with him his captive Cassandra, the most beautiful of King Priam's daughters. Apollo, who had fallen in love with her at one time, had bestowed on her the gift of prophecy, but when she disappointed him, he put a curse on her: though her visions of doom would inevitably come true, no one would believe her. This curse plagues her during her whole career as a prophetess. When her brother Paris is born, she predicts that he will some day ruin Troy, but no one wants to hear the truth; she also warns the people against the Wooden Horse, but no one listens.

During the sack of Troy, Ajax, the son of Oileus, had dragged her away from the altar of Athena, where she was seeking refuge. Later, Agamemnon claimed her as his personal property. Now that he has returned, his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus, are planning to murder him as well as his mistress, and that is what Cassandra foresees.

The chorus observes Cassandra entering into a state of trance. For the description, Seneca uses a few details from Virgil's *Aeneid* 6.77–82 and 6.98–102 (the trance of the Sibyl of Cumae). A theme that sometimes occurs in such descriptions [see also *no.* 90] is that of a prophetess who is unwilling to abandon herself to the god who is taking over and seeks to control her. This act of taking possession of the prophetess is often described in almost sexual terms, as a kind of rape. In Seneca's text, part of Cassandra's eccentric behavior is explained as her desperate struggle against the overpowering presence of the god. Also, to have vivid premonitions of disaster without being able to do anything about them was surely a painful experience. In addition, the physical shock of trance was considered traumatic and health-damaging.

With bitter irony Cassandra calls herself a "false prophet," because this is what people have always called her. Now nature seems to change around her: the sun disappears from the sky, darkness descends, there are two suns, two royal palaces of Mycenae. This double vision seems to be characteristic of trance. Then Cassandra sees the queen, ax in hand, and her victim, Agamemnon, in the shape of a lion, about to be killed. She also hears the voices of members of her family, the royal family of Troy, all dead—Priam, Hector, Troilus, Deiphobus. She sees the Furies and other monsters of the underworld, and realizes they are ready to receive new shades, including herself. Although she is doomed, the brutal, humiliating end of the Greek conqueror is a sad triumph for the conquered Trojans, and Cassandra does not fail to make this point.

Seneca, *Agamemnon*, vv. 710–78

CHORUS: Suddenly the priestess of Phoebus is silent. Her cheeks are pale, and her whole body shakes. Her fillets stiffen; her soft hair stands on end; her inner being hisses frantically with a choking sound. Her glance wanders unsteadily in different directions; her eyes seem to twist and turn inward and then again just to stare motionless. Now she lifts her head up into the air, higher than usual, and walks erect. Now she is getting ready to unseal her vocal chords against their will; now she tries to close her lips but cannot keep her words inside. Here is a priestess in ecstasy who fights against her god!

CASSANDRA: Sacred heights of Parnassus! Why do you prick me with

the goads of a new kind of madness? I have lost my mind; why do you sweep me away? Leave me, Phoebus! I am no longer yours. Extinguish the flame that you have kindled deep in my breast! What good does it do if I rush around like mad? Who needs my bacchantic frenzy? Troy has fallen: What is left for me, “the false prophet,” to do? Where am I? The kindly light is gone; deep darkness blinds my sight; heaven, covered with gloom, hides itself from me.

But look! There are two bright suns in the sky; there is a double Argus with two towering palaces!—I can see the groves of Ida where the fateful shepherd sits, appointed to judge between the mighty goddesses.—Kings, beware of incestuous offspring! That country boy shall overturn a royal house!—Who is that madwoman? Why does she carry a naked sword in her hand? She is dressed like a Spartan but carries the ax of the Amazons. Who is the hero she attacks? Now my eyes are focusing on another face—but whose? An African lion, the king of beasts, his neck formerly so proud, lies there, bitten by a vicious tooth, bloodied by the bite of a bold lioness.

Shades of my dear ones, why do you call me? I am the only one still alive. I shall follow you, father, I, the witness of Troy’s funeral. Brother, help of the Trojans, terror of the Greeks, I see you. But I do not see you in your former splendor, your hands still hot from the burning ships! Your body is mangled, your arms bruised by heavy bonds. Troilus, you met Achilles too soon; I shall follow you. Your face, Deiphobus, is unrecognizable—a gift from your new wife.

I am glad to wade through the depth of the Stygian pool, to see the savage dog of Tartarus and the realms of gloomy Dis. Today the ferry of black Phlegethon will carry over two royal souls—one of a conqueror and one of the conquered. Shades, hear my prayer. Water by which the gods swear, hear my prayer. For a short while open the cover from the world of darkness, that the ghostly crowd of Trojans may have a look at Mycenae. Look, wretched souls: the Fates have made a full turn!

The squalid sisters are threatening us. They brandish their bloody whips; they hold half-burned torches in their left hands; their pale cheeks are bloated; black funereal robes gird their emaciated loins. The fearful noises of night come alive. The bones of a huge body, rotten and decayed long ago, lie there in a slimy swamp. Look, Old Tantalus forgets his thirst and no longer tries to drink water that eludes his lips; he is sad because someone will die very soon. But our ancestor Dardanus rejoices and walks around in regal manner.

CHORUS: Her ecstatic rambling has stopped abruptly. She has fallen on her knees in front of the altar like a bull that received a badly aimed stroke on his neck. Let us lift her up.

In this later scene from Seneca's *Agamemnon*, one of Cassandra's predictions [see *no.* 87] comes true: the assassination of Agamemnon. Since the playwright has already dealt with the phenomenon of trance (or ecstasy), he pays little attention to it here, but the words *madness*, *ecstasy*, and *vision* indicate to the audience what is going on. The sun's standing still has nothing to do with Cassandra's vision, however; the sun stops in its course because it is shocked and indignant at what it has seen.

This monologue is more rhetorical than the earlier one and less informative, but it serves an important dramatic function: the violent action does not have to be shown on stage; the audience experiences it not through a messenger's report, not "from the top of the walls" (*teichoskopia*), but literally through the walls of the royal palace, thanks to Cassandra's special gift.

Seneca, *Agamemnon*, vv. 867–908

CASSANDRA: Something momentous is happening within, something comparable with the Ten Years [of the Trojan War]. Ah, ah, what is this? Rise, my soul, and take the prize of your madness. We, the conquered Trojans, are now victorious. All is well, Troy has risen again. When you fell, father, you dragged Mycenae with you. Your conqueror turns to flight. Never before has the ecstasy of my prophetic mind given me such a clear vision. I see it, I am in the midst of it, I am enjoying it! No blurred picture deceives my sight. Let us look at it:

A banquet for many guests is being held in the royal palace, just like that last one we had at Troy. The couches are shining with Trojan purple. They drank their wine from the golden cups that once belonged to ancient Assaracus. In his embroidered robes Agamemnon himself lies on a raised couch, his body draped in the magnificent spoils of Priam. His wife is urging him to take off the garments that belonged to the enemy; she wants him to put on the robes that her faithful hands have woven.

I shudder. My soul trembles. Shall an exile kill a king, an adulterer kill the husband? Yes, the fateful day has come. The end of the banquet will see the murder of my lord. Blood will drip into the wine. The deadly robe, thrown treacherously over him, will tie him up and deliver him to his assassins: the large, impenetrable folds envelop his head and leave no way to his arms. With a shaking hand the weakling stabs at Agamemnon's side but does not manage to thrust the sword in all the way; he stops, dumfounded, in the midst of the act of wounding him. Agamemnon is like a bristling boar deep in the woods, entangled in a net and trying to escape from it, but the more he struggles, the tighter he draws his bonds,

and his rage is in vain. So the king struggles to throw off the folds that move around him on all sides and rob him of his sight, and though he is enmeshed, he still seeks his assailant. But now Clytemnestra, enraged, snatches a double ax. Like a priest at the altar who marks with his eyes the oxen's neck before he strikes with his ax, the ruthless woman aims now this way, now that. He is hit! The deed is done! His head, not yet wholly severed, hangs by a slender thread; blood streams from his trunk; his lips quiver. And yet they will not leave him alone: Aegisthus still attacks the lifeless victim and keeps hacking at the corpse, and Clytemnestra helps him as he stabs. In committing this enormous crime, the two of them show who they are: after all, he is Thyestes' son, and she is Helen's sister. The sun stands still. . . .

## 89

From another drama ascribed to Seneca, *Heracles on Mount Oeta*, comes this brief reference to a prediction the oracles of Delphi and Dodona had made to the hero years ago. Now that he lies dying, Heracles realizes that the prediction is about to be fulfilled. He had killed the Centaur, Nessus, when he tried to rape Deianira, as he carried her through a stream. Heracles killed the Centaur with one of his poisoned arrows from the shore, but before he died, Nessus persuaded Deianira to keep some of his blood as a love potion. A few years later, when Heracles fell in love with another woman, his jealous wife smeared the drug on a garment and gave it to him. As soon as the hero put it on, the poison from his own arrow began to destroy him slowly.

The same story was dramatized by Sophocles in the *Women of Trachis*, and it has a parallel in the myth of Medea.

Heracles, as befitted his stature, consulted two of the most famous oracles of Greece about his death, and their predictions agreed. They were also enigmatic: how could Heracles, the great conqueror who had even come back from the underworld, die at the hands of a man he had already killed?

Seneca, *Heracles on Mount Oeta*, vv. 1472–78

HERACLES: Very well; it is fulfilled. My fate becomes clear: this day is my last. The oracular oak and the grove that shook the temples of Cirrha with a rumbling that came from Parnassus once predicted this destiny to me: "Heracles! You, the conqueror, will fall some day by the hand of a man you have killed. This is the end destined to you after you have traveled all over the earth, the seas, and through the realm of the shades."

In his *Pharsalia*, an unfinished epic on the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, Lucan describes a consultation of the Delphic oracle by a distinguished Roman, Appius, who wishes to know the outcome of the war. This consultation is supposed to have taken place in 49 or 48 B.C., shortly before Caesar's decisive victory at Pharsalus. The scene has a counterpart in a later book of the epic, in which one of Pompey's sons, immediately before the battle, approaches a famous Thessalian witch, Erictho, and asks her the same question [*no. 61*]. The poet's interest in various methods of divination is evident. He addresses himself to a question that was much debated at the time: why the prestige of the great oracles had declined. At the same time, he reintroduces an old theme: Odysseus had conjured up the dead in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, and Aeneas had descended into the underworld in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*; the aim of both had been to learn of future events.

First, Lucan attempts to explore the secret behind the Delphic oracle. As a Stoic, he believes in a divine power that manifests itself in different forms in different parts of the universe. An earlier age had called this power "Apollo." Lucan does not reject the ancient myth, but he offers a more "modern" explanation. He assumes that there is a divine power above and a divine power beneath the earth and that they are the same power.

Lucan acknowledges that the Delphic oracle had declined for political reasons. The Roman emperors (and already the Senate during the late republic) had done their best to undermine the authority of the oracle. Any non-Roman methods of predicting the future had, in principle, become suspect because of the power they gave to the practitioner or the institution involved. This is one of the reasons why astrologers (along with philosophers!) were periodically expelled from Italy. But the very fear of this power shows how firmly rooted the belief in divination was. On this question Lucan probably reflected the views of his uncle, Seneca, who had had a good deal of political experience and knew one emperor, Nero, from close association.

According to Lucan, the Delphic priestesses were not unhappy when fewer and fewer visitors came, because they knew that their health was overtaxed by their duties; to produce one genuine trance after another was hard work. In this instance, the Pythia, who had been recruited in a great hurry and almost at random, it seems, because the priests were not prepared for the visit of such an illustrious Roman, tries to fake an ecstasy but does not get away with it. By telling us what she did not do, Lucan lists

the characteristics of a real trance: inarticulate cries that fill the temple, quivering sounds, whispers, hair standing on end, and, as a sort of subterranean accompaniment, a small earthquake that is felt in the temple. (How this last effect was produced we do not know.) If any of these signs were not in evidence, the visitor, feeling cheated, would insist on the real thing.

Scared into submission, the young woman in Lucan's story goes into a real trance, her very first. The god takes over, fills her with his presence, and literally drives her mad, for a while at least. Apollo "rapes" her and rides her and remains in total control.

The poet makes an effort to understand the nature of the Pythia's vision, and he approaches the problem in terms of the Stoic concept of time. Somehow, in this one moment, the whole past and the whole future of mankind are concentrated, for they are part of a colossal scheme that transcends the human mind. The Pythia is allowed to pick from her grandiose vision only one detail—one that is important to the visitor. Her ecstasy then reaches a new climax and she collapses.

Following this, Lucan inserts a brief diatribe. Why do the gods not reveal such essential information to mankind more willingly? It is the same argument that Cicero used in his treatise *On Divination*. Have the gods not yet decided who is to win the war?

Or do they have an ulterior plan: let Caesar win now in Thessaly, but have him assassinated dramatically four years later in the Senate?

Then there is another description of the visible aspects of trance: rolling eyes, constantly changing expression, flushed face, sighing and moaning.

When the Pythia returns to her normal state of consciousness, she has forgotten everything she saw.

Lucan, *Pharsalia* 5.86–224

Which one of the gods is hidden here? What divine power, exiled from heaven, agrees to live here, locked up in dark caves? What heavenly god supports the weight of the earth, holding all the secrets of the eternal course of events, sharing with the sky knowledge of the future, willing to manifest himself to the nations, suffering the contact of men? He must be great and powerful, no matter whether he merely predicts fate or if everything he proclaims becomes fate. Perhaps a large portion of the main god is embedded in the earth and rules it, supporting the globe that is suspended in empty space, and it may be this part that comes out of the cave of Delphi and can be breathed in, though it belongs to Jupiter in heaven. When this divine power has been received in the heart of the virgin [the priestess], it strikes the human soul of the prophetess with a

sound and opens her lips, as the top of Mount Etna in Sicily boils over from the pressure of the flames and as Typhoeus, trembling under the timeless mass of Inarime where he lies, breathes smoke out of the rocks of Campania.

Such a divine power is, however, accessible to everybody and does not refuse itself to anyone: it only keeps itself from human passions. Here no evil prayers are whispered quietly. The god sings of predetermined events that cannot be changed and leaves no room for human desires. To the just he is kind, and he has often given a new country to the emigrants of entire cities, as to the Tyrians, or he showed people a way to remove the threats of war, as the sea near Salamis remembers; he softened the wrath of the earth by showing how to end its sterility; he also cleaned up pestilential air. The Delphic oracle fell silent when rulers became afraid of the future and stopped the gods from speaking. Our age misses this gift of the gods more than any others. But the priestesses of Delphi are not unhappy that they may no longer speak; in fact they are glad that the oracle has ceased. For if the god enters someone's heart, premature death is the penalty or the reward for having received him; the human organism is battered by the sting and the surge of that ecstasy, and the pounding of the gods shakes up the fragile souls.

Appius comes to find out the final destiny of the Western world and demands an answer from the tripods that have not moved for a long time and the large rock that has remained silent. When the chief priest was ordered to open up the sanctuary and to lead into the presence of the god a frightened prophetess, he seized Phemonoe who was strolling free of cares among the Castalian springs and the distant groves and forced her to rush through the gate of the temple. The priestess of Apollo was afraid to stop at the awesome entrance and tried—in vain—to discourage by deceit the prominent Roman from his ardent desire to know the future.

She said to him: "Roman! What wicked search for truth brings you here? The Parnassus is silent and prevents the god from speaking from the depth. Perhaps the spirit has left those caves and has traveled to the end of the world. Perhaps, when Delphi was burned by the barbarians, ashes flew into the vast underground spaces and barred the passage for Apollo. Perhaps Delphi speaks no longer by the will of the gods, and the predictions of the ancient Sibyl that have been entrusted to the Romans are sufficient to learn the future. But perhaps Apollo who never admitted evildoers to his temples has not, in our time, found anyone who deserves to hear him."

The deceit of the priestess was obvious, and her very fear revealed the fact that she refused herself to the god. A twisted fillet binds her hair in front, and a white headband with a laurel branch from Phocis holds the

locks that flow down her back. She still hesitates and pauses, but the priest pushes her by force into the temple.

Afraid of entering the oracle-giving recess of the inner sanctuary, she stops near the entrance of the temple, pretends that she is possessed by the god, and utters words that she makes up, but her heart remains unmoved. No inarticulate cries or whispers indicate that divine ecstasy inspires her mind. She could do more harm this way to the oracle and to Apollo's reputation than to the important person to whom she gave a false prophecy. Her words do not rush forth with a quivering sound; her voice is unable to fill the expanse of the huge temple; her hair does not bristle and shake off the laurel wreath; the temple floor does not tremble, the trees do not move. These are all signs that she is afraid of entrusting herself to Apollo.

Appius notices that the tripods do not move and cries out in fury: "The gods whom you fake and I will punish you as you deserve, wicked woman, unless you descend at once into the cave! I have come to consult you about a world torn by a great war. Stop giving me your own words!"

Scared at last, the young woman takes refuge by the tripod. She is led into the vast chasm, and there she remains, and now her soul, which has never had this experience before, draws in the divine power that the spirit of the rock, still active after so many centuries, conveys to her. At last Apollo takes over the soul of the Delphic priestess. Never before has he forced his way so fully into the body of a prophetess, driving out her normal consciousness and taking the place of everything that is human in her heart.

Frantically, out of her mind, she runs through the sanctuary. Her neck no longer belongs to her; her bristling hair shakes off the fillets and garlands of Apollo as she whirls, tossing her head, through the empty space of the temple, and as she runs she kicks over the tripods that are in her way. She boils over with a tremendous fire, because she is full of your wrath, Apollo! You do not only use your whip on her and inject fire into her vitals as you goad her; she also feels your curb, and as a prophetess she may not reveal as much as she is allowed to know. All time concentrates in one complex; all the centuries descend on her heart—poor woman!—and the great chain of events lies open; the whole future struggles to come into the light; destinies fight destinies to be expressed in her voice. She sees everything; the first day and the last day of the world, the dimensions of the Ocean, the sum of the sands!

As the Sibyl of Cumae in her cave on Euboea resents the fact that her trance should be of service to many nations and out of this great heap of destinies picks haughtily only the ones affecting Rome, thus Phemonoe, possessed by Phoebus, is troubled and has to search for a long time before

she finds the fate of Appius—the man who has come to consult the god who is hidden in the land of Castalia—concealed among the fates of more important men. When she finds it, madness and ecstasy begin to flow in earnest from her foaming lips. She moans and utters loud, inarticulate cries. Then her wailing rises in the huge temple. Finally, when she is totally overpowered, she shouts these words: “Roman, you will not take part in this crucial battle. You will escape the horrible dangers of war. You alone will dwell in peace in a broad hollow on the coast of Euboea.”

Apollo closes her throat and cuts short any further words.

Oracles! Guardians of destinies! Secrets of the universe! Apollo, master of truth! The [other] gods have not hidden a single day in the future from you. Why are you afraid to reveal the final act in the tragedy of a great nation, the massacre of captains, the death of kings, and the destruction of so many other countries dragged along by the bloodbath, the catastrophe of Rome? Have the gods not yet decided to perpetrate this horrible crime? Are the stars still hesitant to sentence Pompey to death? Are the fates of thousands still held in suspense? Or are you silent so that you can permit Fortune to wield the avenging sword, punish mad ambition, and have a tyrant undergo once more the punishment at the hands of a Brutus?

The priestess throws herself against the temple doors. They open from the impact and she rushes out, driven from the sanctuary. But her frenzy continues, and the god, who has not left her body, is still in control. After all, she has not told the whole truth. Her eyes roll wildly, and her glance roams over the whole sky. The expressions on her face change constantly: now she looks frightened, now fierce and menacing. A fiery flush spreads over her features and colors her pale cheeks, but her pallor does not seem to indicate fear; rather it inspires it. Her heart is overtired but cannot relax; voiceless sighs that sound like the moaning of a turbulent sea after the north wind has ceased to blow still heave her breast.

As she returns to the ordinary light of day from the sacred light that has showed her the future, she is enveloped by darkness. Apollo sends Lethe from Styx into her innermost being to wash away the secrets of the gods. The truth flees from her heart. Knowledge of the future returns to Apollo's tripod. She falls to the ground, barely recovered.

## 91

In chapter 14 of his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul of Tarsus writes of spiritual gifts. Speaking in tongues is one gift, delivering prophecies is another. The two are not the same, according to Paul, though they might seem to be closely related.

The Pythia did not always make sense when she uttered prophecies, and what she uttered had to be translated into normal Greek by the priests.

The early Christian communities were composed of Jews and Gentiles, two groups that had different cultural and religious traditions. The Jews had inherited the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, who spoke in a highly poetic but quite understandable idiom. The Greeks were accustomed to ecstatic outpourings that had to be translated into intelligible Greek by trained interpreters.

Paul seems to want to reconcile both traditions. He concedes that they are both legitimate, but he expresses a preference for the prophetic style of the Old Testament. He is rather diplomatic, but he has not much use for the ecstatic type of utterance unless it is kept under control and translated for the congregation.

It required true genius to reconcile such different traditions within a new religious group, and Paul, though he prefers one, recognizes the validity of the other. Apparently the Corinthians still liked to hear someone speak “in tongues” now and then, for the very fact that the language was unintelligible proved that it emanated from another world.

Paul, First Letter to the Corinthians 14:1–33

Seek love, but strive also after other spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. For he who speaks in tongues is talking with God, not with people, for no one understands him: he speaks mysteries in a state of inspiration. But when someone prophesies, he speaks to people and gives them spiritual strength, encouragement, and comfort. The person who speaks in tongues gives spiritual strength to himself, but the prophet gives spiritual strength to the community. I want all of you to speak in tongues, but I am even more anxious for you to prophesy. The prophet is greater than the one who speaks in tongues—unless he can interpret [himself], so that the congregation may receive spiritual strength.

Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what good shall I do you, unless what I say to you is revelation or knowledge or prophecy or instruction? Inanimate things produce voices, too—a flute, for instance, or a kithara—but all the same, if I do not give their sounds intervals, how can we recognize the melody on the flute or the kithara? Or again, if I blow an indistinct signal on the trumpet, who will prepare for battle? In the same way, if you speak in tongues without giving a clear message, how can anyone understand the meaning of your speech? You will be talking to the wind. It happens that there are many kinds of sound in the world—nothing is soundless—but if I do not understand the mean-

ing of something that is said, I will be a foreigner in the eyes of the speaker, and he will be a foreigner as far as I am concerned. Since you are eager for the gifts of the Spirit, you, too, must work toward the spiritual strengthening of the congregation, in order to excel.

Therefore, the person who speaks in tongues must pray for the gift of interpretation. If I pray in ecstatic language, the spirit in me prays, but my mind is unproductive. What does this mean? I shall have to pray as the Spirit moves me, but I shall also have to pray with my mind; I shall sing hymns as the Spirit moves, but I shall also have to pray with my mind. For if you praise God in ecstatic language, how can the person who occupies the place of the “outsider” know when to say “Amen” to your prayer of thanksgiving, if he does not understand what you are saying? Your prayer of thanksgiving is fine, but the “other person” does not feel uplifted spiritually. Thank God, I speak in tongues more often than all of you, but in the congregation I would rather say five words through my mind than thousands of words in ecstatic language.

Brothers, do not become children in your minds; be childlike, as far as evil is concerned, but be mature in your minds. It is written in the Law: “Through men of foreign tongues and on the lips of foreigners will I speak to this nation, and even so they will not listen to me” [Isaiah 28:11–12; Deuteronomy 28:49], says the Lord. Hence the tongues are meant as a sign not for the believers but for the unbelievers. If the whole congregation is assembled and all are speaking in tongues and some “outsider” or unbeliever walks in, will he not say that you are insane? But if the whole congregation utters prophecies and some unbeliever or “outsider” walks in, he will feel convinced by everyone, search his soul because of everyone. The secrets of his heart are laid bare, and so he will fall on his face and worship God and announce: “Truly, God is among you!”

What does all this mean, brothers? When you get together, each of you has a hymn, has a piece of instruction, has a revelation, has a message in ecstatic language, has an interpretation. All of this must be directed toward spiritual strengthening. If it is a matter of speaking in tongues, let two speak, or at most three, and only one at a time, and one person should interpret. If no interpreter happens to be there, the [ecstatic] speaker should not address the congregation at all, but talk to himself and to God. Only two or three prophets should speak, and the rest should examine [what they say]. If someone else, being seated, has a vision, let the first speaker stop. For all of you can utter prophecies, one by one, so that the whole congregation may receive instruction and comfort. The prophetic spirit is controlled by the prophets, for God is the author of peace, not of disorder.

Plutarch deals with the Delphic oracle in several of his philosophical treatises and dialogues. His interest may be explained by the fact that he held a priesthood there for life, from A.D. 95. His *Pythian Dialogues* seem to be late works; the group includes *On the Ceasing of Oracles*, *On the E at Delphi*, and *On the Oracles of the Pythia*. In them he discusses various problems of daemonology and divination. The explanation of clairvoyance he proposes would have been acceptable to Platonists as well as Stoics; this shows what a strong influence Posidonius had on Middle Platonism. Plutarch states that every soul has the gift of clairvoyance, whether it is embodied or not, but as long as it coexists with the body, this faculty is relatively weak, though it is there nonetheless, more evident in sleep or in trance (“inspiration”) than in our normal state of consciousness.

Plutarch also believes that certain forces are transmitted through the air, or in water, and that these forces somehow enter a body and produce a change in the soul. Plutarch must have spoken to informants who had actually experienced trance and who tried to describe to him what happened to them, how they felt, and so on. Not surprisingly, he has to resort to images in the end.

Plutarch, *On the Ceasing of Oracles* 39–40, pp. 431–32F

If the souls that have been separated from a body or never shared existence with one at all are daemons according to you [i.e., the Platonists] and the divine Hesiod [*Works and Days*, v. 123], “Holy dwellers on earth, guardians of mortal men,” why should we deprive embodied souls of that power, that natural gift, by which daemons foresee and predict the future? It is not likely that any faculty, any dimension, is added to the souls after they leave the body, beyond those that they had before, but they have them always; they are merely weaker as long as the soul is joined to a body. Some are completely imperceptible and hidden, others weak and dim, just as ineffective and slow as people who try to see in a fog or move in water, and they need a great deal of care in restoring their proper function, a period of recovery and a cleansing to remove that which hides it. The sun does not become bright the moment it bursts through the clouds; it is always bright, but to us it appears somber and dim when we see it through mist. In the same way the soul does not acquire the power to prophesy when it has left the body—as if it were emerging from a cloud—but it has that power right now, though it is blinded by its association and cohesion with the mortal element. We should not be in awe or skeptical; all we need to do is look at the faculty of the soul that is the reverse of prophecy, the one called “memory”: what an achievement it

shows by keeping and preserving the past, or rather the present! Nothing that is past has any kind of existence or reality, but as soon as it happens, it is gone, all of it—actions, words, and experiences—for, like a stream, time bears everything away. But this faculty of the soul [i.e., memory] somehow gets hold of things that are not real and invests them with shape and substance. An oracle given to the Thessalians concerning Arne told them to mind “the hearing of the deaf and the sight of the blind.” For us, memory is the hearing of things that cannot speak and the sight of things that are invisible. Therefore, as I have said, it is not astonishing that something that no longer exists can also anticipate many things that have not happened so far. The future fits the soul even more closely and feels the same way: it reaches out toward that which will happen and leaves behind what is in the past, is finished, only remembering it.

It may be that, through heat and expansion [i.e., expansion through heat], certain pores open up and visualize the future, just as the fumes from wine set things in motion and reveal things that are put away and forgotten:

the ecstasy of Bacchus  
and the state of madness have great prophetic powers,

according to Euripides. Whenever the soul warms up and becomes fiery, it rejects the diligence mandated by mortal reasoning, which often disregards and downgrades enthusiasm. [*Another image follows a little later: ecstasy is like a hot steel knife dipped into water.*]

Therefore, all souls have this power [of prophecy]; it is innate, though dim and hardly real, and yet it often fully blossoms and radiates in dreams and sometimes in the hour of death, when the body becomes purified or acquires a disposition suitable for that purpose, a disposition through which the reasoning faculty, the ability to think, is relaxed and released from the present and can turn [reading *epistrephe* phenomenon] to the irrational imaginary range of the future. It is not true, as Euripides says [frag. 973 Nauck<sup>2</sup>], “the best seer is he who makes the best guess”; no, it is the intelligent man who follows the rational part of his soul, the part that leads the way by making reasonable guesses. The prophetic gift is like a writing tablet without writing, both irrational and indeterminate in itself, but capable of images, impressions [reading *kai pathesi*], and presentiments, and it paradoxically grasps the future when the future seems as remote as possible from the present. This remoteness is brought about by a condition, a disposition, of the body that is affected by a change known as “divine inspiration.”

Often the body all by itself attains this condition, and the earth sends

up to human beings the sources of many faculties other than this, some of which produce trance, illness, even death, but others that are helpful, pleasant, and beneficial, as can be seen from the accounts of those who have experienced them. But the flow, the spirit of prophecy is the most divine, the most sacred, whether it spreads all by itself through the air or together with running water, for when it enters the body, it produces in the soul a strange, unusual disposition. It is difficult to describe its character accurately, but a number of analogies offer themselves.

## 93

Once more, Plutarch asserts the universal value of divination. It is a natural activity of the human soul, and one should not be surprised that it exists. Even the term *foretelling* is misleading; one should simply use the word *telling*.

The distinction he makes between an event that happens after having been foretold, and the foretelling of an event that will happen, is hard to grasp, and it looks like one of the subtleties of Stoic logic that Cicero struggled with in his treatise *On Fate*. It also seems strange that Plutarch calls certain predictions “lies,” even though they are confirmed by events. Perhaps what he is saying is this: in the “ocean of time”—that is, during a period of millions of years—all predictions that have ever been made will come true. This may be similar to the modern paradox according to which a million monkeys working at a million typewriters during a million years will eventually produce the works of Shakespeare. But for Plutarch, it seems, the prediction of an event in the very distant future is not a valid prediction. To be useful in human terms, it has to be fulfilled within a reasonably short time.

Plutarch, *On the Oracles of the Pythia* 10, pp. 398–99

Boethus answered: “What kind of event can there be that is not a debt owed by time to nature? Is there anything so strange, so unexpected, on land, on sea, in cities, among men, that it cannot be predicted before it actually happens? And this can hardly even be called ‘foretelling,’ just ‘telling,’ or even better: throwing away and scattering words that have no basis into infinite space. Occasionally chance meets them as they wander around and, of its own accord, coincides with them. There is a real difference, I think, between an event that happens after having been told, and the telling of an event that will happen. For an account concerning things that do not [yet] exist contains in itself an element of error, and it is not fair [to have] to wait for a confirmation that comes by accident, nor should one use as compelling proof of having foretold the event with

[accurate] knowledge the fact that the event happened after having been foretold; infinity brings everything around. No, the ‘good guesser’ whom the proverb recommends as the ‘best seer’ [Eur., frag. 973 Nauck<sup>2</sup>] is more like a man who looks for clues on the ground and explores the future by means of reasonable forecasts. Prophets of the type of the Sibyl or Bacis have tossed and scattered their predictions at random into the ocean of time—words and phrases referring to experiences and events of all kinds—and although some of them actually come true as a result of chance, what is told now is nevertheless a lie, even if it turns out to be true, should the event happen.”

## 94

The strange appearance of the Pythia and the eerie sound of her voice clearly showed how ancient an institution the oracle was. She did not wear fashionable robes, nor was she perfumed, nor did she sing melodiously like a popular music hall entertainer of the period. In some shrines, aromatic and psychoactive essences were burned. At the oracle of Patras, for example, the priestess prayed and burned incense and then gazed into a mirror in a well. It is likely that the incense in combination with a shiny surface (a form of catoptromancy) helped induce trance. But in Delphi, according to Plutarch, the priestess used only laurel leaves and barley groats, the ingredients also used in magical operations [see *no.* 6]. This seems doubtful. Plutarch may have preferred not to divulge the type of “entheogen” that was added to the laurel leaves and the barley groats—unless these were of a special kind or treated in a special way. If this is true, the priests at Delphi—like their colleagues at Eleusis—must have guarded the secret very diligently. In any case, prophesying was a harsh, demanding duty for the medium.

Plutarch, *On the Oracles of the Pythia* 6, pp. 396–97

Sarapion said: “Yes, Boethus, we are sick, as far as our ears and eyes are concerned, for as a result of our soft, luxurious life-style we are accustomed to considering that which is [merely] pleasant as [truly] beautiful and to saying so. Before long we shall criticize the Pythia because she does not chant as melodiously as Glauce, who sings to the kithara, and because she does not wear perfume and purple robes when she descends into the inner shrine, and because she does not burn on the altar cassia or ladanum or frankincense, but only laurel leaves and barley groats. Do you not feel the charm of Sappho’s songs,” he continued, “—how they soothe and bewitch those who listen to them? But the Sibyl, ‘with her ecstatic mouth,’ as Heraclitus says, even though her words are unsmiling, un-

adorned, unperfumed, yet she reaches through the space of a thousand years through the god.”

## 95

Again Plutarch attempts to show, by means of logic rather than empirically, that divination works. This kind of argument often sounds more plausible in Greek than in any translation. Here, as elsewhere, Plutarch operates with the categories of time: past, present, future. He believes in a chain of causes and effects that stretches from the beginnings of time to infinity. What the Pythia sees in one glance, the rational mind—if not the individual, at least the collective mind—ought to discover in due time. Hence the need for statistics as a basis for predictions.

Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi* 6, p. 387 B/C

The god is a prophet, and the art of prophecy concerns the future as it results from the present and the past. There is nothing that comes into being without a cause, nothing that could not reasonably be predicted. Since the present follows the past and the future follows the present very closely, according to a constant process that leads from the beginning to the end, he who understands the natural connections and interrelations of the causes with one another can also declare [Hom., *Il.* 1.70] “the present, the future, and the past.” Homer was right to place the present first, then the future, and then the past, for the syllogism based on a hypothetical proposition has as its base that which is; for instance, “if this is, then this [other thing] has preceded it” or “if this is, then this [other thing] will be.” The technical and rational part of this, as has been said, is the understanding of the consequence, and the argument derives its premises from sense perception. So, even if it is not much of a statement to make, I shall not hesitate to make it: the tripod of truth is the argument that establishes the relationship between a later and an earlier event and then, taking the existence [of something] as a premise, brings the syllogism to its conclusion.

## 96

One of Apollonius’ famous predictions concerned A.D. 69, the year during which Rome saw three successive emperors (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius), each of whom was in power for only a short time. Apollonius’ admiring biographer, Philostratus, tries to defend him from any suspicion of witchcraft. He argues that Apollonius did not claim to be able to change

the course of fate by means of magic. Like Apuleius, who also was accused of practicing magic, Apollonius claimed to be a philosopher, a scientist who simply interpreted certain signs that were there for all to see.

Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 5.12

I have given sufficient proof that Apollonius' foreknowledge of these events was due to supernatural inspiration, and that it would not be reasonable to consider him a magician, but let me add some further arguments. Magicians—and in my opinion they are the most wretched of men—claim to be able to change the course of destiny either by tormenting daemons or by using weird rites, charms, or plasters. Many of those who have been brought to justice have admitted that this was their kind of expertise. Apollonius, on the other hand, accepted the decrees of destiny and predicted only that they must, by necessity, take their course; but his clairvoyance was divine revelation, not magic. When he saw, in India, the “tripods” and the “wine pourers” and all the other automata I have mentioned, he did not want to know how they worked: he admired them but did not wish to make anything like it.

## 97

Artemidorus lived in the second century A.D., mostly in Dardis, Lydia, but he traveled widely in order to collect interpretations of dreams and books on dreams. In addition to his treatise *The Art of Judging Dreams*, he wrote works on augury and palmistry.

In the dedication of his book on dreams he tells us that he learned a great deal from talking to professional dream interpreters in many cities. Although they were despised by most respectable citizens, these men had some valuable information to give. We learn, incidentally, that in any ancient city one could expect to find such dream interpreters in the marketplace; perhaps they had their booths there, like the fortune-tellers of our age. They also traveled around to festivals, hoping to find more customers among the large crowds that these events attracted. Artemidorus does not put himself in the same class as these practitioners, but he respects their experience and their knowledge of human nature. He sounds like a man who is passionately interested in his subject but who also wishes to be of help to his fellow man.

At the beginning of his work, Artemidorus establishes a fundamental distinction between “theorematic” and “allegorical” dreams. The former are self-evident, so to speak: they foreshadow an event more or less correctly. The latter need interpretation.

Artemidorus emphasizes how important it is to remember a dream from beginning to end. More often than not, the interpreter will be tempted to analyze an incomplete dream sequence, but when he does that, he only deceives his client and ultimately hurts his own reputation.

Artemidorus then interprets a few dreams, not in any systematic order, it seems, but perhaps to cite examples of those he considers typical. Many of the dreams seem strange to us; many are about incest, sexual perversions, violence. Perhaps only an interpreter who belonged to the same culture could make sense of them.

From the examples that Artemidorus gives (1.2), we see that then, as now, people were “programmed,” as it were, by certain experiences, and later—sometimes much later—translated their hopes and fears into dreams by means of these experiences, creating thereby a vocabulary for their own dream language.

The dream about being back in school (1.53) does not have a happy meaning, because most people’s school years seem to be unhappy and frustrating.

Dramatic performances had an immediate emotional impact on ancient audiences and a delayed impact in dreams. Since drama was a representation of human experience compressed within a few hours, it served as a symbolic language for emotions that could not be conveyed in any other way.

In 1.78 Artemidorus has something to say about sexual dreams. It seems that people in antiquity often dreamed of sexual intercourse of one kind or another. According to Suetonius’ *Life of Julius Caesar* (ch. 7), Caesar dreamed that he slept with his mother, and though he was disturbed by this, the interpreters assured him that he would rule the world, for one’s mother is a symbol of the earth.

What Artemidorus writes helps us to understand ancient civilization. Husbands were supposed to have control over their wives and expected obedience from them. To be seen entering or leaving a brothel was slightly embarrassing but not a disgrace. The various interpretations of the brothel as symbol are very curious.

As far as the “Oedipus dream” is concerned (1.79), Artemidorus fully agrees with the interpreters of Caesar’s dream almost two centuries earlier.

Crucifixion was widely used in the Greek world as a means of execution, not just in the days of the Roman emperors. To dream of death on the cross is not necessarily bad, Artemidorus points out (2.53), and he advises consideration of the particular person’s circumstances.

In the preface to Book 4 he offers some general advice. He is convinced that people who lead healthy, normal, decent lives will not be troubled by strange, disturbing dreams. To that extent we have control over our

dreams. Dream interpreters, because of their peculiar profession, tend to have dreams that are quite different from those of the average person.

According to Artemidorus, six criteria ought to be applied to any dream: is it in accordance with nature, with law, with custom, with art, with the person's name, and with time? The distinction between "nature" and "law" seems to correspond roughly to the one between "unwritten" and "written" law, while "custom" somehow belongs to both areas. "Art" means the profession of the dreamer, whose "name" also plays a certain role in the interpretation. "Time" apparently designates the period in the dreamer's life; it is not normal, for instance, for middle-aged men to dream that they are going to school again.

In 4.3 Artemidorus briefly deals with magical practices. He compares magic to blackmail, which, in a sense, it is. To try to blackmail a god into doing us a favor would be as absurd as putting pressure on some influential person. On the other hand, to pray for a dream is not magic, and to thank the gods for a favor is simply good manners.

Once more—in 4.59—Artemidorus emphasizes the need for full information about the dreamer and his dream. He rejects astrology as a supporting science. Essentially, the dream itself tells the story.

Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, or *On the Art of Judging Dreams*,  
excerpts from Books 1–4

*Book 1, dedication*

There is no book on the interpretation of dreams that I have not acquired, making this my main ambition. The seers of the marketplace are generally despised, and the respectable-looking citizens, raising their eyebrows, call them charlatans, impostors, clowns [or: parasites]. I paid no attention to this slander but associated with them for many years, in the cities of Greece, at the great festivals, in Asia Minor, in Italy, on the major and more densely populated islands, and I was willing to listen to ancient dreams and the events that followed them; for there is no other way to master this discipline.

*Book 1, ch. 2*

Some dreams are theorematic, some allegorical. Theorematic are those whose fulfillment resembles the vision they offer. A traveler dreamed that he was shipwrecked, and this is what happened. As soon as sleep left him, the ship was sucked down and wrecked, and he, with a few others, saved his life with difficulty. Another man dreamed that he was wounded by a man with whom he had agreed to go hunting the next day. As they left together, he was wounded on the shoulder, just as it had happened in the dream. Someone dreamed that he received money from a friend; the next

morning he accepted ten minas from the friend and kept them as a deposit. There are many other examples of this kind.

Allegorical dreams, on the other hand, signify something through something else; in these dreams the soul, according to certain laws of nature, hints at something in the manner of a riddle.

I believe that I must declare, as far as it is possible, the cause that produces and shapes these dreams and give the true explanation of their name.

First, I propose a general definition of the dream that needs no further explanation, unless I am talking to people who love to quarrel. The dream is a motion or production of the soul that has many forms and indicates good or bad things in the future.

*Book 1, ch. 12*

Let me tell you that dreams that are not remembered completely cannot be interpreted, no matter whether the dreamer has forgotten the middle or the end. For if you want to make sense of a dream [text uncertain] you must explore the point to which the vision leads: only what is remembered from beginning to end can be interpreted.

Just as the seers who offer a sacrifice do not call ambiguous signs untrue—they say only that they do not understand the signs that accompany their sacrifice—thus the interpreter of dreams must not give his opinion or improvise a response concerning things he cannot fully comprehend, for he will lose his prestige, and the dreamer will get hurt.

*Book 1, ch. 53*

Learning to read and write [in a dream], not having learned it before, predicts something good for the dreamer, but it will be preceded by pain and fear, for students are afraid and suffer pain, even though they learn for their own good. If someone who has already learned to read and write learns it again, this must mean something painful and strange, for one gets elementary education in childhood. Therefore, this indicates incompetence as well as fear and pain. Such a dream promises something good only to him who wants a child, for then not he himself but the child that will be born to him will learn to read and write.

If a Roman learns Greek or a Greek learns Latin, it means that the former will associate with Greeks, the latter with Romans. Having had this kind of dream, many Romans married Greek women or Greeks married Roman women. I know a man who dreamed that he was learning Latin: he was condemned to slavery; it never happens that a slave is taught Greek.

*Book 1, ch. 56*

To perform in a tragedy or have tragic roles or masks or listen to tragic actors or recite iambic lines: if one remembers the words, the events will be according to the context; if one does not remember them, there will be wretchedness, slavery, battles, violence, dangers, and even things more terrible and cruel than those; for the tragedies are full of them.

To perform in a comedy or listen to comic actors or have comic masks or roles: if they represent Old Comedy, they indicate ribald jokes and verbal fights; if they represent New Comedy, they anticipate the same things as tragedy but promise a satisfactory, happy ending; for such are the plots of comic pieces.

*Book 1, ch. 76*

To dance in a theater with a made-up face [or: wearing a mask] and the rest of the traditional costume means success and praise; for a poor man it means riches, but they will not last until he is old, for on the stage the actor represents a royal personage and has many servants, but when the play is over, he is left alone.

*Book 1, ch. 78*

In the chapter on sexual intercourse the best division might be the following: (a) intercourse that is both lawful and natural; (b) unlawful intercourse; (c) unnatural intercourse.

First, concerning lawful intercourse, I have this to say. If you make love with your own wife, and she is willing and agreeable and does not offer any resistance, this is fine for everyone; for one's wife means either one's craft or one's profession—an area from which we derive pleasure, over which we command and have control, as we have over a wife. The dream therefore indicates the profit from such things. People enjoy sex, but they also enjoy profit. If the wife resists and does not surrender her body, it means the opposite. The same interpretation applies to one's mistress.

To have intercourse with prostitutes who are established in brothels indicates a moderate embarrassment and a small expense. For to approach such women means both embarrassment and expense. This dream is favorable to all kinds of enterprises, for these women are called “professionals” by some; they are most accommodating and never say no. It would also seem to be a good sign to enter a brothel and be able to leave it; not being able to get out is bad. I knew someone who dreamed that he went into a brothel and could not leave it; a few days later he was dead. What happened to him corresponded to the dream, for a brothel, like a cemetery, is called a “public place”: the cemetery receives the dead, and

in the brothel there is a great waste of human sperm. So it makes sense that the brothel would be assimilated to death.

*Book 1, ch. 79 (the Oedipus dream)*

The chapter on the mother has many different aspects, parts, and subdivisions unnoticed by many interpreters of dreams so far. It is like this. Sexual intercourse in itself is not sufficient to show the meaning, but the different kinds of embraces and positions of the bodies predict different events. First of all we must talk about the position “body to body,” when the mother is still alive, for it does not mean the same thing if she is dead. If someone had intercourse [in a dream] with his mother, “body to body”—in the position which some call “natural”—and she is still alive, and his father is in good health, it means that his father will hate him, because of the jealousy that exists among men in general. If the father is in poor health, he will die [soon], for the son who has the dream will be in charge of his mother both as her son and as [if he were] her husband. It is a propitious dream for any craftsman and artisan, for it is customary to call one’s trade one’s “mother,” and to have intercourse with one’s mother could not possibly mean anything else but to work full time and to make a living from one’s trade. It is also a good dream for political leaders and politicians, for the mother symbolizes the fatherland. Just as he who has intercourse “according to the rule of Aphrodite” [i.e., in the normal position] has control over the whole body of the woman if she is willing and consents, thus the dreamer will control the politics of his country.

*Book 1, ch. 80*

To have intercourse with a god or a goddess or to be penetrated by a god means death for one who is ill, for the soul, at this point, when it is about to leave the body in which it dwells, foresees that it will meet and associate with the gods; for the others [i.e., those who are not ill], if they enjoy the experience, it means help from those above; if not, fear and trouble.

*Book 2, ch. 53 (dreams about different kinds of death)*

To be crucified is good for all seafarers, for the cross is made of beams and nails, just like a ship, and the mast of a ship looks like a cross. It is good for a poor man, for the victim of crucifixion is high up and feeds many birds. It brings hidden things into the open, for the crucified person is plainly visible. It is bad for the rich, for those who are crucified are naked, and their flesh wastes away. . . . To be crucified in a city means [to hold] an office in that city, corresponding to the place of the cross.

*Book 2, ch. 55*

To descend into Hades and see all the things down there—the things that people believe to be there—means loss of work and loss of income to those who are prosperous and successful, for the inhabitants of Hades are inactive, cold, without motion. For those who are in fear, sorrow, or grief, it means deliverance from cares and worries, for the inhabitants of Hades do not worry and are free from cares. For the others, it means travels—or at any rate it drives them away from the place where they live. Not only did the ancients say of one who went on a long trip that he “went to Hades”—the story itself shows that the inhabitants of Hades are not all in the same place as before.

*Book 3, ch. 56*

Dreaming of a chef in your house is a good sign if you want to get married; you need a chef for a wedding. It is a good sign for the poor as well, for only people who have plenty of food hire cooks. For those who are ill, it predicts irritations and inflammations and a general imbalance in the body juices, which can lead to acidity, according to the experts in these matters. But it also predicts tears, because of the smoke the chef produces. It also brings hidden things and things that were done in secret into the open, for the creations of the chef are brought out into the open and served to the guests and they appear as what they are [i.e., they are as good as they look].

*Book 4, preface*

Remember that those who lead a good and useful life never have any ordinary dreams or any absurd fantasies but always dream visions and mostly theorematic ones. For their soul is not, at the surface, troubled by fear or hope, and they are in control of the pleasures of the body. In short, a good person never has an ordinary dream or an absurd fantasy. Do not deceive yourself: the average person and the competent interpreter of dreams do not have the same dreams, for the average person dreams of the same things that he desires or fears [during the day], but those who know, the experts in these matters, signify only the sort of things they want. If someone who is not an expert has a dream, that dream should be interpreted as an ordinary one, not as a dream vision [text uncertain]. Let us assume that someone who is competent in these matters—either because he has consulted books on the interpretation of dreams, or because he has associated with interpreters of dreams, or because he has a natural talent in this direction—is in love with a woman: he will dream not of the beloved one but of a horse or a mirror or a ship or the sea or a female

animal or a feminine garment or anything else that signifies a woman. If he is getting ready for a trip, he will not dream of carriages or ships or traveling bags or baggage piled up or any other traveling equipment: he will dream of flying or of an earthquake, of a war, of lightning or any other possible symbols for traveling. If he is afraid of someone or wants to run away from him, he will not see that person [in his dream], but he will flee from a wild animal, break bonds, kill criminals, offer a sacrifice to the gods—in short: he will dream of things that other people do in order to free themselves of fear and trouble. That painter in Corinth who often wanted to kill his master happened to dream that the roof of the house in which he lived collapsed and that he himself was decapitated; nevertheless, his master survived and is still alive today. But since he was able to judge such matters, his soul deluded him in a rather sophisticated way; because to any other person, these dreams would have predicted the death of the master.

To make this less confusing for you, let me tell you that many people—in fact, most people, practically everybody—have only ordinary dreams; there are altogether very few, in fact only the interpreters of dreams, who have the other kind of dreams, the one I just mentioned.

*Book 4, ch. 1*

It is a general principle that all dreams that are in accordance with nature or law or custom or art or name or time mean something good, and that all dreams contrary to those [six points] are bad and unprofitable. But remember that this theory is not absolute and universal; it only works most of the time. For many dreams have a good outcome, though they go against the reality of everyday life and are not in accordance with nature or those other points. For example, someone dreamed that he was beating his mother. This is certainly a crime, and yet it brought him success, for he happened to be a potter; we call the earth “mother,” and the potter works with the earth that he beats. So he worked with great success.

*Book 4, ch. 2*

The dreams people have when they worry about some business or other, or when they are moved by some irrational urge or desire, you may consider “worrying dreams.” We also call them “asked-for dreams,” because one asks a god to send a dream concerning some business at hand. But remember: when you ask for a dream, do not burn any incense, and do not say unspeakable names. In short, do not demand anything from the gods that involves magic practices. It would be ridiculous for gods to obey those who demand something with threats, for men of influence refuse the petitions of those who threaten and blackmail them, but grant

favors to those who approach them politely. After having had the dream you should sacrifice and give thanks. Those who impose laws on the gods, you should not take seriously; they say, for example: “Should I do this?” or “Will this be granted to me?” or “May I now see the fruit of Demeter? Or, if not, that of Dionysus?” or “If this is good for me and profitable, may I have it? If not, should I give it?” There is a fundamental error in all of this. . . . You must pray to the god about the things that worry you, but the way in which you phrase your request beforehand you must leave to the god or to your soul.

*Book 4, ch. 59*

You should also first find out about the way of life of the person [who consults you]; I mean, you should inform yourself carefully. And if you cannot get any reliable information from the dreamer, postpone your advice for the moment and ask someone else, lest you make a mistake. . . . Stay away from those who think that dreams must be interpreted according to the horoscope of the dreamer, the good ones as well as the bad ones. They say that the beneficent planets, when they are unable to do something good for you, at least make you feel good in your dreams, and that the maleficent planets, when they are unable to hurt you, at least disturb and frighten you in your dreams. If this were true, no dream would ever be realized; but in fact the good ones and the bad ones are realized, each according to its meaning.

98

As a starting point for his discussion of trance, Iamblichus uses the profound changes that can be observed in the personality of the “medium.” The body no longer has the sensations, the reflexes, that it has in a normal state of consciousness. If the body is not subjected to its usual limitations and affections (e.g., feeling pain), then the mind, Iamblichus argues, also must reach a new level. He notes that no trance is exactly like another, and although his explanation is purely speculative, the observation itself may well be valid. Among other things, he mentions levitation and the manifestation of fire. At the same time, he seems to feel that not every “medium” is able to experience the fullness of the vision or share it with others.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries of Egypt* 3.4–6

You state that there are many who grasp the future by means of divine possession and divine inspiration and that they are awake as far as their ability to act and their sense perceptions are concerned, but not really conscious or not as conscious as before. I also want to show, in this

context, the characteristics of those who are truly possessed by the gods. For if they submit their whole life as a vehicle, as a tool, to the gods who inspire them, they either exchange their human life for a divine life or else they adjust their life to the god and do not act according to their own sense perceptions, nor are they awake like those whose senses are completely awake. They do not perceive the future by themselves, nor do they move like those who act on an impulse. They are not conscious in the way they were before, nor do they concentrate their native intelligence on themselves or manifest any special knowledge.

And here is important proof: many [of those who are in trance] do not get burned, even if they are also close to a fire, for because of the divine inspiration fire does not touch them. When they are actually burned, many do not react, because at this moment they do not live the life of a [normal] creature. Some are pierced by daggers and do not feel [the pain]; others have their backs cut open with hatchets; still others are wounded with knives about their arms and are totally unaware of it. Whatever they do is out of the human sphere. The inaccessible becomes accessible to those who are divinely inspired: they jump into fire and walk through fire; they cross over streams like the priestess in Castaballa. All this goes to show that in their state of divine possession they are no longer in their normal state of consciousness and that they no longer lead the normal life of a person, of a creature, as far as sense perception and volition are concerned. They exchange these for another, more divine kind of life that inspires and possesses them completely.

There are many different kinds of divine trance, and divine inspiration operates in many different ways. It manifests itself through a number of different signs. For one thing, the various gods from whom we receive inspiration produce different kinds of inspiration. For another, the particular kind of divine possession, as it changes, also modifies the nature of the divine inspiration. For either the god takes possession of us, or we become totally part of the god, or else we coordinate our activity with his own. At times we participate in the lowest power of the god, at other times in his intermediate power, and then again in his highest power. Sometimes it is simple participation, sometimes a sharing, sometimes a combination of these types. Either the soul alone enjoys it, or it shares it with the body, or it is the whole person who enjoys it.

As a result, the outward signs of divine possession are manifold as well: movement of the body or of some of its parts, or total lack of any kind of movement; harmonious tunes, dances, melodious voices, or the opposites of these. Bodies have been seen to rise up or grow larger or float in the air, and the opposites of these phenomena also have been observed.

The voice [of the person in trance] seemed to be completely even in volume and in the intervals between sound and silence, and then again there was unevenness. In other instances the sounds swelled and diminished, but occasionally something else happened.

But most importantly, the medium who draws down a divine being sees the spirit descending, sees how great it is, what it is like, and is able to persuade and control it in mysterious ways. The medium sees the shape of the fire before receiving it. Sometimes the fire becomes visible to all who are watching, either as the god descends or as he ascends. Therefore, those who know are able to grasp the real truth, the real power, the real order, that he represents, and they understand in what respect he is qualified to communicate the truth and grant power or maintain it. Those who draw down the spirits without these wonderful experiences are stumbling in the dark, so to speak, and do not know what they are doing, except for certain quite unimportant signs on the body of the person possessed and other trivial manifestations; the full reality of divine inspiration remains hidden to them, and they are without knowledge.

## 99

Like Plutarch and others before him, Iamblichus attempts to explain how oracles function. He singles out three famous ones: Clarus, near Colophon; Didyma (Branchidae), near Miletus; and Delphi. All of them were oracles of Apollo. A prophetess transmitted the message from the god at Delphi and Didyma, whereas at Clarus a male priest presided. At Clarus, water from a sacred spring underneath the temple played a role, which Iamblichus tries to elucidate. According to him, water only induces a certain disposition in the priest; the real illumination must still come from above. Other rituals have to be observed by the priest-prophet, and they also help to prepare him, but they do not, by themselves, produce the vision.

Similarly, the firelike substance that the Pythia inhales serves only as a preparation. The god is not in that substance; he has to come from somewhere else. The ritual at Didyma is different, but it, too, is a kind of prelude—necessary, it would seem, but not the inspiration itself.

Perhaps all these practices were reproduced elsewhere faithfully, but unsuccessfully, by certain theurgists. Hence Iamblichus comes to the conclusion that oracular prophecy is impossible without the divine presence. In fact, he argues, whatever natural conditions there are have to be created by the god at one time, and the god inspires the ritual that surrounds them. Everything thus comes from the god; he is the ultimate source of prophecy.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries of Egypt* 3.11

This phenomenon, therefore, is a kind of possession, and it happens in this way. There is another kind of divination, well known and very impressive. It has many components and is inspired by a god. It is the oracle.

You have this to say concerning it: “There are some who drink water, like the priest of Apollo Clarus at Colophon. Others are sitting near the mouth of a cave, like the priestesses who prophesy at Delphi. Others inhale steam, like the prophetesses of the Branchidae.” You mention these three famous oracles, not because they were the only ones (for there were many more that you did not mention), but because they were more important than the others and because you were able to point out the problem with sufficient clarity. I am thinking of the way in which divination is sent by the gods to mankind. For these reasons you were satisfied with those examples. So I, too, shall discuss only these three, omitting the vast majority of oracles.

First, the oracle at Colophon. Everyone agrees that water is used to prophesy. They say that there is a spring in a subterranean structure and that the priest on certain prescribed nights drinks from it after many preliminary ceremonies have been performed. After having drunk he begins to prophesy; but he remains invisible to the visitors present. This shows clearly that the water must be prophetic, but in what way it is prophetic is not, according to the proverb, “for everyone to know.” It would appear that a kind of prophetic spirit comes through it, but this is actually not true. For the divine does not spread itself in such a partitioned and disjointed way among its partakers but, offering itself from the outside, it illuminates the spring, filling it with its own prophetic power. And yet not the whole inspiration that the god offers comes from the water; [the water] only produces an aptitude and a purification of the luminous spirit in us through which we become capable of receiving the god.

Another presence of the god precedes this one and shines from on high. This one is not far from anyone who, by his affinity, is in touch with it. It comes all of a sudden and uses the prophet as an instrument. He is no longer himself and has no idea of what he says or where he is. As a result, even after having delivered the prophecy, he recovers with difficulty. Before drinking from the water he has fasted for a whole day and a whole night and, going into trance, has withdrawn all by himself into a part of the sanctuary inaccessible to the crowd. By keeping aloof and distant from human preoccupations, he renders himself pure and ready to receive the god. Therefore, he possesses the inspiration of the god that shines into

the pure sanctuary of his soul; the inspiration can take possession without hindrance, and the perfect presence finds no obstacle.

The prophetess at Delphi gives oracles to people through a thin, fire-like spirit that rises from somewhere through a crevice, or she makes predictions sitting in the sanctuary on a bronze tripod or on a four-footed stool that is sacred to the god. In any case she gives herself entirely to a divine spirit, and she shines with a ray from the divine fire. An intense, concentrated fire comes up through the crevice and surrounds her on all sides, filling her with divine radiance. When she takes her place on the seat of the god, she adapts and conforms herself to his firm divinatory power. As a result of both preliminaries she becomes completely the possession of the god. He then appears to her and illuminates her as a separate entity, because he is different from the fire, the spirit, his own seat, and from all the normal and sacred devices that are visible.

The prophetess of the Branchidae also receives the god in herself, whether she is filled with divine radiance as she holds the wand originally handed down by the god, or whether she is seated on an axle, or whether she dips her feet or the border of her garment into water, or whether she breathes in the vapor of the water; by all these [external] things she is prepared to receive the god from the outside and partakes of him.

This is also shown by the large number of sacrifices and by the ritual of the whole ceremony and by all the other acts performed religiously before the delivery of an oracle: the bathing of the prophetess, her fasting for three whole days, her stay in the inner sanctuary, and the fact that she already participates in the light and enjoys it for a long time. All this goes to show that the god is called in prayer to be present and that he comes from outside, and that a marvelous inspiration takes place even before she comes to her accustomed place. It also shows that the god in the spirit rising from the source is separate from the place and more ancient than its present use; that he is in fact the cause of this use and the source of the whole practice of divination.

## 100

In Porphyry's biography of Plotinus, the "psychic" gifts of the master are briefly mentioned: he identified the slave who had stolen a necklace from a lady who lived in his house; he also predicted the future of some children. When Porphyry lapsed into a state of depression (he called it "melancholy") and contemplated suicide, the master sensed it and counseled him.

It is curious to see that the last great philosopher and theologian of paganism, like the early shamans, was credited with supernatural abilities.

A man like Plotinus, whose life is reasonably well documented and whose writings—at least most of them—have survived, is not a shadowy figure like Orpheus. It would not do to dismiss him as a fraud who impressed his naïve disciples with a few occult tricks. If asked whether this was magic, he might have answered, like Apollonius of Tyana: “No, it is something philosophers know about.”

Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, par. 61

Plotinus also had an almost supernatural knowledge of human nature. Chione, a highly respectable widow, lived with her children in his house. One day her precious necklace was stolen. The servants were assembled, and Plotinus looked each of them in the eyes. “This is the thief,” he said, and pointed at one of them. The man was whipped but denied persistently at first; later he confessed, went to get the stolen object, and brought it back. Plotinus also predicted how each of the children who lived with him would turn out. He described what sort of a person Polemon was and said that he would be amorous and not live long, and this is what actually happened. Once he sensed that I, Porphyry, was planning to commit suicide. I happened to be in his house, and all of a sudden he approached me and said that my intention did not have its roots in my mind but in a certain type of gall disease [literally, “melancholy disease”], and he told me to leave the country. I took his advice and went to Sicily, to a well-known man called Probus; I had heard that he lived in Lilybaeum.

This is how I dropped my intention and why I was prevented from staying with Plotinus until his death.

## IOI

Eunapius (fourth–fifth century A.D.) had studied rhetoric, philosophy, and apparently also medicine and earned his living as a “sophist”—a professional lecturer and teacher. He seems to have enjoyed a great reputation, for at one time he exercised a high priestly function, that of “hierophant,” at the mystery cult of Eleusis. His *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* is full of curious anecdotes like this one concerning Sosipatra, a lady of great prestige who was roughly his contemporary. She represents the curious symbiosis of superior philosophical reasoning and astonishing psychic abilities. In the middle of a serious philosophical discussion she has a telepathic experience involving her lover (“cousin” is a term of endearment), Philometor.

One of her three sons, Antoninus, inherited her gifts and became a famous teacher and visionary himself. Among other things, he predicted

the destruction of the great temple of Serapis in Alexandria by the Christians. Antoninus died in A.D. 390, and the temple was destroyed in the following year.

That such a man abstained from theurgy is remarkable, but he may have been afraid, as Eunapius implies, of the strict laws that prohibited the practice of all forms of sorcery. He even refused to discuss theological questions in public.

Eunapius is hostile to the Christians and their cult of martyrs and relics. This, to him, looks suspiciously like witchcraft, for magicians traditionally used parts of corpses and operated with “envoys” from the gods (i.e., daemons). To worship dead bodies in the ancient temple that now served as a church was to desecrate the former pagan sanctuary; to a pagan, death was a pollution, and the presence of a corpse in a temple was unthinkable.

Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* 6.9.11–17; 6.10.6–11.1

Once all her friends met in Sosipatra’s house. Philometor was not present; he stayed in the country. The problem they discussed was the soul. Several theories were suggested, but then Sosipatra began to speak, and soon her proofs disposed of the arguments that had been proposed. Then she entered into a discussion of the descent of the soul and what part of it is subject to punishment, what part immortal. In the midst of her ecstatic, enthusiastic discourse, she fell silent, as though her voice had been cut off, and after a short while she cried out to the whole group: “What is this? There is cousin Philometor, riding in a carriage! The carriage has just been overturned in a rough spot in the road, and both his legs are in danger! But his servants have dragged him out, and he is all right; his elbows and hands are hurt, but even those wounds are harmless. They are carrying him on a stretcher, moaning!” This is what she said, and it was the truth. Everyone realized that Sosipatra was omnipresent, and whenever anything happened, she was there, which is what the philosophers say about the gods.

She died leaving three sons. The names of two of them do not have to be mentioned, but [the third], Antoninus, was worthy of his parents, for he established himself at the Canobic mouth of the Nile and devoted himself completely to the religious rites as they were practiced there and did his best to live up to his mother’s prediction. All the young men who were healthy in mind and thirsted for philosophy studied with him, and the temple was full of candidates for the priesthood. Although he still appeared to be human and spent his time with human beings, he predicted to all his disciples that after his death the sanctuary would no longer exist, that the great, holy temple of Serapis would become a dark, shapeless thing and be transformed into something else, and that a fantas-

tic, hideous gloom would gain control over the most beautiful things on earth. Time confirmed all these prophecies, and the event finally gave him the authority of an oracle.

Antoninus, one of Sosipatra's sons, [as I have said before] went to Alexandria and was impressed by the mouth of the Nile at Canopus and just loved being there; and so he dedicated himself completely to the gods that are worshiped there.

Very soon he reached the affinity with the divine, despised his body, freed himself from the pleasures of the flesh, and applied himself to the wisdom that is unknown to the crowd. Perhaps I ought to say a little more about this. He showed no desire to practice theurgy or anything else that is supernatural, possibly because he was afraid of the imperial policy that was opposed to such practices. But everyone admired his discipline and his strong, inflexible character, and all the students in Alexandria used to see him on the seashore.

For Alexandria, because of the sanctuary of Serapis, was a world of religion all by itself. Those who came there from all parts of the world were equal in number to the local population. After having worshiped the god, they ran to see Antoninus, some—the ones who were in a real hurry—by land, while some were happy to use the river boats that carried them leisurely toward their studies. When they were given an interview, some would propose a scientific problem and would at once be nourished by Plato's philosophy, but those who asked about things divine would "encounter a statue": he would not say a word to any of them, but, fixing his eyes and looking up at the sky, he would sit there without speaking, and he would not give in. No one ever saw him entering easily into a discussion of these things with anyone.

Not so long afterward there was a clear sign that he had some divine element in him. Very soon after he had left the mortal sphere, the cults of Alexandria and the sanctuary of Serapis in particular were completely destroyed—not only the cults, but the buildings as well.