
Ancient Greek Divination by Sarah Iles Johnston

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This book provides an overview of Greek divination as a religious phenomenon. In particular, the author seeks to describe and explain both the details of Greek divinatory practices and how the ancients conceptualized those practices. As the title suggests, the discussion is restricted to divination as practiced in the Greek world, although the author does make abundant use of evidence from a much wider variety of sources and time periods, including Roman and Christian writers. The straightforward writing, logical organization, and absence of footnotes make the book accessible to a general audience; while the erudition, critical approach to prior scholarship, and thorough bibliography accommodate both classicists in general and specialists.

The book contains five chapters: an introduction, two chapters devoted to institutional oracles, and two chapters covering independent diviners (including magicians).

In chapter 1, the author sets out to justify her study in terms of the pervasiveness of divination, not only in ancient times but in modern cultural contexts as well. She points to the desire for divinatory knowledge as a ‘basic human need’ [4]. The difference, however, between moderns and ancients is the degree of theoretical reflection among the latter. The ancients, Johnston argues, were theoretically inclined towards divination because the practice allowed mortals the possibility of conversing with the gods, as opposed to other religious practices, such as prayer or sacrifice, which did not return immediate answers.

An important part of this theoretical interest was the attempt to explain how the gods communicate with mortals and, thus, how mortals might participate in such communication most effectively.

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Johnston surveys several attempts to answer these questions, beginning with such early examples as Hesiod's catalogue of lucky days, Prometheus' list of types of divination in the *Prometheus Bound*, and Plato's distinction between the most preferable form of divination, enthusiastic madness, and the sane, non-divine forms that are less reliable due to the involvement of human judgment in interpreting signs. Johnston notes a precedent here for the later distinction between 'natural' and 'technical' divination, but she emphasizes the artificiality of this distinction given the tendency of diviners to practice both types as circumstances demanded.

Johnston goes on to survey several later, intellectual attempts to explain the mechanics of divination, including Stoic *συμπάθεια*, Neoplatonist 'chains' connecting the higher and lower realms of the cosmos, and the idea of intermediaries (*δαίμονες*) which Plutarch and some Christian fathers used to explain how gods can send messages without contacting the mortal realm themselves. A history and critique of 20th century scholarship concludes the first chapter. The author's main point here is to explain why scholars of the late 1960s and 1970s tended to focus on magic to the exclusion of divination. The reason, she argues, lies in the fashions of the time: scholars saw divination as rational, religious, and inclusive (and, therefore, uninteresting), while magic was seen as an example of the Greeks' darker, irrational side and as one of the ways in which they imposed 'otherness' on outsiders.

Chapter 2 begins the discussion of institutional oracles. Its focus is Delphi and Dodona. After considering the importance of location, the author goes on to investigate how these oracles worked and how inquirers saw them. In the case of Delphi, Johnston discusses several ancient sources that try to explain the Pythia's ability to prophesy. Johnston then goes on to consider the real cause of the phenomenon. She slightly revises the recent theory that geological fault lines beneath the temple caused ethylene to fill the room where the Pythia sat upon her tripod, thus producing in the priestess an altered state of consciousness. In order to explain why witnesses do not seem to have been similarly affected, Johnston suggests that the presence of ethylene was sufficient only to trigger in the Pythia a psychologically altered state rather than to cause one, just as the swinging of a pendulum can trigger hypnosis.

For heuristic reasons, Johnston classifies the Pythia's inspired, but characteristically ambiguous, prophecies as an example of a 'conversational' oracle, according to which the reply is intended to address the specific situation of the inquirer. In contrast, the author also discusses the use of 'binary' forms of divination which used mechanical devices, such as the drawing of lots, in order to provide a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to the inquirer's question. Both of these types of divination, Johnston argues, co-existed at Delphi, despite the lack of archaeological evidence for the latter. The lot oracle, she suggests, provided an economical alternative to enthused prophecy and allowed the inquirer to sidestep the ambiguity for which the oracle was famous.

Johnston's discussion of Dodona concerns the wide assortment of divinatory methods that the ancients attributed to the oracle there: she considers, for instance, divination through prophets (interpreters called *Selloi*), sacred doves (*πέλειαι*) (whether female doves or priestesses called 'Doves'), a talking oak tree, a sacred spring (of which no traces remain today), bronze cauldrons—Christian writers believed that their harmonious ringing was what sent a priestess into a trance—and finally, lead tablets (the only method for which there is archaeological evidence). Johnston argues that the tablets, a form of 'binary' divination, served as an alternative to inspired prophecy as did lot divination at Delphi; but, she continues, 'It is anyone's guess as to how frequently, compared with enthused prophecy, the procedure was used at either place' [72]. The significance here, rather, is that two divinatory methods that scholars tend to separate could in fact work together at the same location.

Continuing the topic of institutional oracles, chapter 3 focuses on Claros and Didyma. The author admits that information on both oracles is scarce, but she does manage to assemble some evidence regarding their foundation myths, formal procedures and prophetic methods, oracular personnel, and the concerns of the surviving oracles themselves (in particular, a growing interest in theological questions). An interesting section on Claros discusses the Cynic philosopher Oenomaus of Gadara, who discovered that the reply which he had received was identical to those delivered to other inquirers and thus set out to debunk the oracle. Against Oenomaus, however, Johnston argues that standard answers were part of the usual process at Claros and that more personalized attention was possible when appropriate.

Noteworthy in the discussion of Didyma are the author's treatment of the foundation myth and her reconstruction of the Hellenistic temple.

Chapter 3 also discusses several other divinatory methods available at institutional oracles. Foremost is the discussion of incubation, a process during which the inquirer slept in a temple or other sacred place and awaited dream visitations from the gods, typically, although not always, in regard to a medical problem. Some locations discussed here are the Asclepieion at Epidaurus, the Amphiareion at Thebes (or Oropus, depending on the source), and the oracle of Trophonius at Lebadea in western Boeotia. Johnston follows up with brief discussions of empyromancy (interpretation of the flames of a sacrifice) at the oracle of Zeus at Olympia, catoptromancy (divination with mirror reflections) and hydromancy (divination with reflections in water) at the oracle of Demeter in Patrai, and oracular consultation with dice, which various locations offered for the client's convenience. Johnston concludes the chapter with an entertaining discussion of a famous scam reported by the satirist Lucian which involved a certain Alexander who established an oracle for his talking snake at Abonuteichos.

Chapter 4 begins the discussion of independent or 'freelance' diviners. The author begins by considering how one became a diviner (*μάντις*). She discusses several possible methods, including inherited talent, acquired skill, and divine gift; but she concludes that 'there was no single, overarching model for how a *mantis* became a *mantis* and no single concept of what sort of thing mantic ability was...' [112]. For the Greeks, mantic ability, like skill in the medical and magical arts, could come from any or all of these sources. The uniqueness of diviners (*μάντις*), however, was that they were 'much more firmly incorporated into myth' [113]. Johnston explains this characteristic in terms of the extraordinary: almost anyone, she argues, could master medicine, while magic was too extraordinary even for the world of myth. The diviner's art, however, fell in between these two extremes in that it maintained, as do most myths, contact between the divine and human worlds.

The remainder of chapter 4 is devoted to what the *μάντις* did and how he did it. In response to the former question, the author surveys a range of functions, including the resolution of a crisis during battle, the diagnosis of the cause of an illness and the prescription of

a remedy, and the purification of a disease or pollution through magical techniques. In regard to the latter question, Johnston discusses both the practical details as well as the theoretical explanations of prophecies that diviners generated by means of the entrails of a sacrificial animal (especially the liver), birds and other ominous animals, and the involuntary motions of people (i.e., *kleidonomancy*).

One might think that divination through heavenly bodies should enter the discussion here; but, as Johnston points out, prior to the first century BC the Greeks, in contrast to the Babylonians, were not concerned with the systematic observation of the heavens. Johnston attributes this lack of interest to the facts that the level of literacy required for the compilation of detailed records reached Greece relatively late; and that, when it did arrive, the Greeks did not make use of it since there was no scribal culture in place. The chapter concludes with brief discussions of an assortment of diviners, including dream interpreters, oracle collectors (*χρησμολόγοι*) who appealed to previous divinatory responses to resolve new problems, and ‘belly-talkers’ (*ἐγγαστρίμοθοι*) who claimed to host *δαίμονες* within their own bodies.

Chapter 5 concludes the treatment of the independent diviner. In particular, the author focuses on the diviner, his relationship to the magician, and why the ancients often associated the two. The bulk of the evidence here comes from the Greek magical papyri, which the author notes provide uniquely specific information about mantic practices, procedures, and ritual flexibility. In regard to this last issue, Johnston notes that even the ancients saw magic, in contrast to religion, as unusual, despite its essential similarity to the practices of mainstream religion. Any differences, however, were economical: both the priest and the magician sought to gain the cooperation of the gods; but the latter capitalized on oddness and innovation to suit the needs of his clients, and thus to enhance his reputation and earnings.

Following a discussion of the Greek magical papyri as texts and the changes of the times in which they were composed (e.g., greater cultural interaction, the rise of utopian religions, and increased attempts to eradicate diviners and magicians), Johnston proceeds to examine the content of the texts. She argues here that the basic point of the spells was to provide a close encounter (*σύστασις*) with the gods. Certain spells even provided a code of conduct or instructions to allow the magician to sustain the god’s appearance. Among

the methods for achieving encounters that the author covers are the process of leading divine light into the soul (φωταγωγία), lychnomancy (divination by lamp), divinatory statues and symbols, and dream-sending (ὄνειροπομπεία) which was meant to compel someone to do what he or she otherwise would not do, especially in the concerns of Eros.

Chapter 5 ends with a discussion of necromancy, the consultation of the dead. Johnston argues that there is little evidence that the Greeks ever engaged in this practice. She notes that only eight of the 600 spells from the Greek magical papyri advise on how to consult the dead for information. Johnston's explanation of this lack of interest is simple: the dead know nothing. When the Greeks sought prophetic knowledge, rather, they appealed to the gods. At the end of the chapter, Johnston again raises the question of why the ancients often associated divination and magic. In response, she points out that both shared the goals of 'extraordinary knowledge of ritual techniques and the power they could bring', and that both were 'pursuits in which professional specialists could make a living' [177]. Johnston also notes practicality: both diviners and magicians were 'willing to expand their repertoire as their clientele demanded' [177]. Consequently, we should think of both practitioners as selling the 'supplemental religious expertise' that mainstream religion was not willing to provide [177].

Johnston's book has many merits, the most important of which have been summarized in the opening paragraph of this review. The preceding summary of the range and detail of the study should also suffice to demonstrate its value. One should also highlight the author's refusal to impose rigid conceptual schemes upon her subject. It is, in fact, difficult to find fault with this work. But one criticism does come to mind. It is true that the author's intent is to approach Greek divination strictly in terms of myth and religion. One disadvantage of this approach, however, is that it neglects to consider divination in literature. A section on how authors of various genres use divination for their own purposes (whether literary, philosophical, historiographical, rhetorical, moral, and so on) would have been helpful, as would one on how such contexts affect our picture of divination as a historical reality.