

CRYSTAL ADDEY, *Divination and Knowledge in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. Abingdon – New York: Routledge 2021. 320 pp. – ISBN 978-1-13821299-2 (£120.00)

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Divination is one of the most peculiar aspects of ancient Greece and Rome, but only in the last 60 years has it been considered as a legitimate field of study. Starting from the collective volume by JEAN PIERRE VERNANT, *Divination and Rationalité*, published in 1974, scholars have begun to examine the link between divination and the epistemic value in the Greco-Roman world and in contemporary non-Western cultures. Within the ancient world, it has been noted that divination was strictly related “to systems, discourses and representations of knowledge, to intellectual and social activities, and to the practicalities of daily life”.¹ This emerges from oracular evidence, because consulting an oracle was a process that involved communication and interaction between god, seer and consultant, in order to produce knowledge. We can recall, for example, the aphorism γνῶθι σαυτὸν (“know yourself”), inscribed in the temple of Apollo at Delphi and often interpreted as evidence of oracular wisdom, as Pausanias explains in the Ἑλλάδος περιήγησις.² The maxim possibly highlights a special connection between divination and knowledge exthat is the focus of the collective volume *Divination and Knowledge in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, edited by CRYSTAL ADDEY.

The volume opens with a general introduction on divination and its relationship with knowledge, recognizing also its centrality in religious and ritual traditions in the Greco-Roman antiquity. Retracing the previous studies

1. Cf. CRYSTAL ADDEY, Introduction: Divination and Knowledge in Ancient Greek and Roman Cultures. In: CRYSTAL ADDEY, *Divination and Knowledge in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. Abingdon – New York 2022, p. 3.

2. Paus. X, 24. Cf. UMBERTO BULTRIGHINI – MARIO TORELLI (eds), *Guida della Grecia. Libro X. Delfi e la Focide. Testo greco a fronte (Scrittori greci e latini)*. Milan 2017. For an interpretation of the Delphic oracle, cf. JOSEPH FONTENROSE, *The Delphic Oracle. Its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of Responses*. Berkeley 1994; at p. 294, FONTENROSE highlights the difficulty in understanding this maxim, proposing that it could mean “Know your place in the world,” “Know that you are a human” or “Know your true self”.

on this topic, the themes covered in the book are described in some detail. One of the most remarkable is the cosmological framework of ancient divination. In particular, divination fits the idea that the different elements of the universe are hiddenly connected to each other, generally defined as “cosmic sympathy” (συμπάθεια). Natural elements, entrails of animals or weather patterns could create an invisible association between microcosm and macrocosm, between humans and gods, with different meanings and interpretations.³ In the ancient world, many philosophers tried to understand this framework. For example in Iamblichus’ *De mysteriis* concerns the use of natural elements in theurgic rituals, denoting in this way a link between divination and philosophy. Finally, the introduction explains the structure of the book, which is not divided into sections because the different contributions are interrelated with each other. We can therefore retrace their content and their perspectives on the analysis of the relationship between divination and knowledge.

In the opening essay, “The Enigmatic Divine Voice and the Problem of Human”, JULIA KINDT examines a peculiar aspect of ancient oracles, their ambiguity. This characteristic was often considered as an indicator of lack of authenticity or historicity, whereas it should be interpreted as the typical way in which the gods communicated.⁴ The divine enigmatic voice can be recognized as an expression of gods’ knowledge of the past, present and future, defining at the same time the limits of human cognitive process in the interpretation of an oracle.

Human limits emerge also in the second chapter, “Torch-bearing Plato: Why Reason Without the Divine is not Philosophy After All”. By examining Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Plato’s *Phaedo*, DANIELLE A. LAYNE shows that both Cassandra and Socrates were unbelieved and unheard, despite the clarity of their messages. In this case, the human limit implies a rejection of divine authority, of which both Socrates and Cassandra are emptied. Starting from these considerations, the author discusses the link

3. A particular connection was the one between natural elements and planets, as we can read in some astrological treatises; cf. GIULIA FRENI, *Piante, pietre e animali tra magia e astrologia*. In: *Acme* 73.2 (2020), pp. 53–70. This idea is found in the correspondences of microcosm and macrocosm CHECK: HEINRICH DÖRRIE, *Emanation. Ein unphilosophisches Wort im spätantiken Denken*. In: HEINRICH DÖRRIE, *Platonica Minora*. München 1976, pp. 70–88; FRANCESCA ALESSE, *Il tema dell’emanazione (aporroia) nella letteratura astrologica e non astrologica tra I sec.* In: *MHNH* 3 (2003), pp. 117–134.

4. For oracles and their ambiguity, see also SIMONE BETA, *Il labirinto della parola. Enigmi, oracoli e sogni nella cultura antica* (Saggi 956). Turin 2016, pp. 143–219.

between divination and philosophy, and Plato's perception of philosophy as a spiritual activity and, especially, as a service to the divine. This indicates a complementarity of religious inspiration and rationality, of divine and human agency, which is also the topic of the following essay.⁵

RALPH ANDERSON's contribution, "Work with the God': Military Divination and Rational Battle Planning in Xenophon", deals with the military use of divination as exemplified in Xenophon's works. Omens were strictly connected with the process of defining a certain strategy, as emerges from Clearchus' bad omens after the battle of Cunaxa and Cyrus' death.⁶ This emphasizes the idea that military divination stimulated human agency to confront uncertain circumstances. For this reason, as Socrates' statements in the *Memorabilia* suggest,⁷ men should use divination only for those matters that they cannot understand cognitively. Therefore, divination can be recognized as a useful instrument to make decisions and strategies.

Divine knowledge and human efforts are examined also in the fourth chapter, "Divination and Decumbiture: Katarchic Astrology and Greek Medicine", in which DORIAN GIESELER GREENBAUM investigates the practice of decumbiture. Considered the fourth branch of katarchic astrology, decumbiture was used to identify the best moment (*kairos*) in which a certain illness begins and, consequently, to devise a treatment based on that moment. For example, in the *Prognostica de decubitu ex mathematica scientia*, a treatise attributed to Galen, it is recognized that the best doctor should pay attention to astrology to identify the day and the hour of decumbiture, but at the same time he must keep in mind the cosmic sympathy.⁸

However, the concept of *kairos* also concerns other fields beyond astrology, as we read in the fifth essay, "Divination and the *Kairos* in Ancient Greek Philosophy and Culture" by CRYSTAL ADDEY. Examining the concept of *kairos* in Greek culture, she acknowledges its relationship with divination, especially concerning the topics already covered in the volume: oracles, military divination, katarchic astrology and decumbiture. Moreover, there

5. For the connection between religion and philosophy, JON D. MIKALSON, *Greek Popular Religion in Greek Philosophy*. Oxford 2010.

6. Xen., *An.* II, 2, 3. Cf. FRANCO FERRARI (ed.), *Senofonte, Anabasi*. Milan 1964.

7. Xen., *Mem.* I, 1, 6-9. Cf. LIVIA DE MARTINIS (ed.), *Tutti gli scritti socratici: Apologia di Socrate, Memorabili, Economico, Simposio (Il pensiero occidentale)*. Milan 2013.

8. Gal., vol. XIX, p. 569 (ed. Kühn). KARL G. KÜHN (ed.), *Claudii Galeni Opera Omnia*, 20 volumes. Leipzig 1821-1833.

is a remarkable comparison between the ancient and the modern conception of time, which permits to identify ancient divination as “kairological”: ancient perception of time was qualitative, and *Kairos*, in particular, was a unique moment where several circumstances were combined to facilitate success.⁹ When such considerations were to divination, the importance of time for oracular consultation and theurgic rituals emerges, referring to the help of *daimones* or gods to identify the favorable time.

ELSA GIOVANNA SIMONETTI’s contribution, “The Pythia as Matter: Plutarch’s Scientific Account of Divination”, returns to the connection between divine and human agency. After distinguishing the two kinds of inspired divination exemplified in Plutarch’s works – the one proper of Pythia and oracles, the other practiced by individuals and defined “philosophical”, “independent” and “Socratic” – the focus is the perception of Pythia as matter, that is the material cosmic principle. Identifying the similarities between the two (derangement, purity, resistance and receptivity), the activity of the Pythia can be considered as a component of the demiurge’s design for the cosmos. Therefore, the dynamics of oracular divination depend on the laws of nature and, consequentially, the Pythia was a kind of *medium* for the interaction of material and intelligible principles.¹⁰

The Pythia is also examined by GIULIA PEDRUCCI in the seventh essay, “Divination and Female Sexuality: The Transformation of the Greek Pythia by the Church Fathers”, in this case focusing on the transformation of her role in the early Christian era. Starting from a passage in Plutarch about an incorrect execution of the Delphic oracular ritual,¹¹ she highlights that later Roman Imperial and Christian authors represented the Pythia in a sexualized manner. In particular, several Church Fathers depicted her as frenzied and hysterical, focusing on her performative body and not on her performative voice, as attested in previous Greek evidence. For example, Origen thought that Pythia’s genitals were filled with the spirit of Apollo and produced oracular responses. John Chrysostom talked about

9. For the perception of time in the ancient world, RICHARD SORABJI, *Time, Creation and the Continuum. Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. London 1983; DIETRICH BOSCHUNG, *Kairos as a Figuration of Time: A Case Study (Morphomata lectures Cologne 6)*. Paderborn 2013; KEVIN K. BIRTH, *Time Blind. Problems in Perceiving Other Temporalities*. Cham 2016.

10. For this aspect see also ELSA GIOVANNA SIMONETTI, *A Perfect Medium? Oracular Divination in the Thought of Plutarch (Plutarchea hypomnemata)*. Leuven 2017.

11. Plu., *De def. or.* 438a-c. Cf. EMANUELE LELLI (ed.), *Plutarco. Tutti i Moralia*. Milan 2017.

an evil spirit that filled the Pythia with madness. Moreover, early Christian authors discredit her maternity and interpret her body as malfunctioning and characterized by an irregular pregnancy, one determined by the God to give birth to oracles. This representation seems to decontextualize the previous evidence mentioned in this contribution, especially Plutarch, Lucan¹² and maybe Pseudo-Longinus,¹³ which result the only non-Christian sources that depict the Pythia in a sexualized manner.

In the eight chapter, “‘Ethnic’ Divination in Roman Imperial Literature”, Antti Lampinen deals with Greek and Roman ethnographic discourse on divination of outgroups.¹⁴ Many ancient authors discussed barbarian traditions, for example Herodotus or Caesar, often emphasizing the distance and the oddity of the foreigners’ culture. In the Late Republican and Early Imperial period, the earlier practices of these foreigners were generally abandoned because of the influence of Roman civilization, but at the same time some barbarian practices appear in the ethnographical register. Instead, in the Imperial era more references to barbarian wisdom can be detected, showing a multiplicity and variety of ethnic customs that involve physiognomy and astrology,¹⁵ and some stereotypes are emphasized, for example the Egyptian skills in divination or Celt’s credulity. Therefore, Antti Lampinen recognizes that imperial ideology employed divination as an identity marker, denoting the tendency to interpret outgroups with established ethnic categories.

LEONARDO COSTANTINI’S contribution, “Apuleius on Divination: Platonic Daimonology and Child-Divination,” analyzes Apuleius’ lecture of Socrates’ *daimonion*, highlighting again the connection between divination and philosophy. The Platonic theory on *daimon*, which recognizes the agency of *daimones* for the contact with the divine, is receipted and enriched in Apuleius’ *De Deo Socratis*, which considers *daimones* as in-

12. Lucan., *Pharsalia*, V, 64-236. Cf. LUCA CANALI (ed.), *La guerra civile, o Farsaglia* (BUR poesia). Milan 1981.

13. Ps.-Longinus, *Subl.*, 13, 2. Cf. STEPHEN HALLIWELL – LAURA LULLI (eds), *Sul Sublime* (Scrittori greci e latini). Milan 2021.

14. Concerning ancient ethnography: ERAN ALMAGOR – JOSEPH E. SKINNER (eds), *Ancient Ethnography: New Approaches*. London 2013.

15. On physiognomy and astrology, see TAMSYN BARTON, *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine under the Roman Empire* (The Body, in Theory). Ann Arbor, MI 1994. See also MAX L. GOLDMAN, *Ethnic Bodies. Physiognomy, identity and the environment*. In: REBECCA FUTO KENNEDY – MOLLY JONES-LEWIS (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in the Classical and Medieval Worlds*. London 2016, pp. 62–74.

termediaries. In particular, in the case of Socrates, the study of philosophy seems to imply the cultivation of one's own *daimon*. This suggests the epistemological link between philosophy and divination, which also results from other of Apuleius' works. Based on a passage from *Apologia*, the author describes two uses of children as a *medium* in divinatory rituals: the active and passive child-divination, making some remarkable parallels with Platonists and theurgy.¹⁶

The last essay, "Astral Symbolism in Theurgic Rites", by MAILYNN LAWRENCE, is devoted again to theurgic rituals, referring to their relationship with astrology. She focuses on the use of astrology for initiating the soul, recognizing the influence of planets and stars in the soul's condition. Moreover, Proclus' lecture of the different types of madness defined in Plato's *Phaedrus* is compared with the sublime's theory in his reading of Homer, as well as with the planetary gods described in his *Timaeus* commentary. This last aspect is deepened mentioning the music theorist Aristides Quintilianus and his ideas on initiatory music.¹⁷

In conclusion, this collective volume emphasizes the relationship between divination and knowledge, considering different fields and perspectives: from medicine to astrology, from philosophy to theurgy, the Greek and Roman perception of divination is explored and compared, offering a remarkable overview on this topic. For this reason, the contributions of the book have a double purpose. On the one hand they illustrate the link between divination and knowledge; on the other hand, they show how several branches of knowledge can be related with divination. Since divination has attracted scholarly attention only in the last 60 years, there are many aspects still to be explored. This book sheds new light on this topic and is a starting point for future research.

Keywords

divination; temporality

16. For the connection between divination and theurgy, ERIC R. DODDS, *Theurgy and Its Relationship to Neoplatonism*. In: *The Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947), pp. 55–69; CRYSTAL ADDEY, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods* (Ashgate studies in philosophy & theology in late antiquity). Farnham 2014.

17. Concerning the philosophy of music, SEBASTIAN MORO TORNESE, *Philosophy of Music in the Neoplatonic Tradition: Theories of Music and Harmony in Proclus' Commentaries on Plato's 'Timaeus' and 'Republic'*. London 2010.