



# THE SEER

## IN ANCIENT GREECE

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## ONE • Problems, Methods, and Sources

Surprising as it may seem, the oracle's replies to questions are rarely vague. . . . But I suppose that it would be difficult for any scientific investigation either to prove or disprove conclusively the validity of his pronouncements.

HIS HOLINESS THE 14TH THE DALAI LAMA  
TENZIN GYATSO, *Freedom in Exile*

One of the reasons for this neglect [by Assyriologists] is perhaps the extraordinary monotony of the treatises on divination that make up the principal pieces of the dossier. But I wonder whether the main reason is not that divination is considered, consciously or unconsciously, to be a simple superstition, trivial, outdated, and not really deserving of attention.

JEAN BOTTÉRO, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning,  
and the Gods*

### SETTING THE STAGE

When most of us think of Greek divination, the first thing that comes to mind is the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, where the Pythia, possessed by the god, delivered oracles while seated on her tripod. Yet as famous as Delphi and the Pythia may be, due in part to the large role that Delphi plays both in Greek tragedy and in the historical narrative of Herodotus, neither Delphi nor any other oracular center, nor even all such centers collectively, could have constituted the major access to divination in Greek society. At Delphi, prophecies were given only on the seventh of each month, and not at all during the three winter months when Apollo was away.<sup>1</sup> Thus very few Greeks were in a position to consult Delphi, and any consultations that did occur needed to be planned out well in advance. And even if one appeared on the

1. Eur. *Ion* 93; Plut. *Mor.* 292d.

right day and could afford all of the preliminary sacrifices, there was no guarantee that one would get a turn to put one's question. This depended on the number of inquirers, some of whom may have enjoyed *promanteia* (the right of jumping the line). Yet, as we shall see, divination was a major system of knowledge and belief for the Greeks and was practiced in regard to every sort of important question.

So if the Greeks were not constantly making hasty trips to Delphi, how did they access divine knowledge? There were many less prominent oracular sites in Boeotia; but these would have been denied to Athenians during the long periods of war between them and the Boeotians. Greeks from the Peloponnese would also have found the trek to Delphi expensive and inconvenient. The most authoritative oracle in the Peloponnese was at Olympia, and this would have seen heavy use and long lines, especially at the time of the Olympic games. The oracle of Zeus at Dodona in Epirus was located in a remote part of Greece and, moreover, was far from the sea.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the individual who faced an unexpected decision or the commander in the field who wanted to know whether it was a good day to fight needed a more immediate access to divine knowledge and guidance than oracular consultation could possibly provide. This immediate access was provided by the class of individuals known as seers.<sup>3</sup>

The ancient Greek word for "seer" is *mantis*, and the plural is *manteis*. Rather than attempt to introduce a new word into English usage, I will use the translation "seer" throughout this book. Seers played a fundamental role in Greek culture. In fact, their presence was pervasive. We know the names of about seventy "historical" seers (as opposed to mythical/legendary ones), some of whom were individuals of considerable influence. Many more seers are left anonymous by our sources, even when their presence and contribution were crucial to the matters at hand. This anonymity contributes to the false modern sense that seers merely validated decisions that had already been made by their superiors and employers. Part of my task is to restore the seer to his, and her, appropriate place of prominence in archaic and classical Greek society.

This is intended to be an innovative book, but not in the sense of promoting some outlandish thesis or advancing arguments that are based on either a misuse or a par-

2. Most of the lead tablets from Dodona, on which inquirers wrote their questions, are written in Northwest Greek, although others are in a variety of dialects. See Parke 1967: 101 and Christidis, Dakaris, and Vokotopoulou 1999: 67–68.

3. A point well made by Parker (2005: 118–19).

tial use of evidence. Rather, this study has as its aim to stimulate further discussion and to place the person of the seer in its appropriate historical context. Seers were far more important in Greek society than the scattered evidence explicitly indicates. They are always lurking just beneath the surface of historical texts; they rear their heads only when they are involved in some extraordinary action. The most famous example is arguably Tisamenus of Elis, the seer who helped the Spartans to win their decisive victory over the Persians at Plataea in 479 B.C.<sup>4</sup> It would have been easy enough for Herodotus to narrate the events of that campaign without ever mentioning the name of Tisamenus or the fact that Plataea was merely the first of five famous victories that he won. How many other seers who played prominent roles in the battles of ancient Greece, as well as in other areas of life, went unmentioned? They make their appearance in Herodotus and Xenophon when their actions seemed unusually noteworthy or when the author had a particular literary or rhetorical purpose in mind.

Various aspects of this subject have been dealt with in articles and monographs, but there has never been a book-length study of Greek seers in any language.<sup>5</sup> Nor has there been a comprehensive and synthetic treatment of Greek divination as a whole since the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> This book is about the role and function of seers in Greek society, the techniques of their art, and the system of belief within which they operated. Part of the purpose of this study is to recover as far as possible who seers were and what activities they engaged in. Another purpose, however, is to retrieve the image and representation of the seer. Just as important as what historical seers actually said and did is the way that society imagined the seer and the way in which seers represented themselves. Representation is not always, or even usually, identical with reality, but the relationship between representation and reality can tell us a great deal about a society's values and beliefs. Questions of belief

4. Hdt. 9.33–36.

5. The most thorough studies are Kett 1966 (in German and largely a prosopography), Pritchett 1979: 47–90 (very technical), Roth 1982 (a PhD thesis), and Burkert 1992 (on the archaic age). Two often cited articles dealing with seers are Bremmer 1993 and 1996, although I find myself in disagreement with his views. Dillery (2005) makes many interesting suggestions and observations. Parker (2005: 116–22) gives a succinct account of seers at Athens.

6. The most complete study of Greek divination in its various forms is Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82. Volume 1 deals with the various types of divination in Greece. Bloch 1984 and 1991 are very succinct introductions. Dream interpretation is well surveyed by Näf (2004), who provides a comprehensive bibliography on this topic. Johnston (2005) gives a concise survey of the modern study of Greek and Roman divination.

are also important here because belief conditions perception and the perception of a seer's clients in turn necessarily conditioned his own conception of his role.<sup>7</sup>

I am limiting myself principally to the period 800–300 B.C., for that is where most of the evidence lies. The treatment is synthetic, rather than diachronic. We simply do not have the evidence to write an account of Greek religion that posits a devolution of mantic authority from a time when mantic power and royal power were concentrated in the same person, the king, to later periods when the power of the king was divested into a number of less powerful functionaries.<sup>8</sup>

In my attempt to recover what it meant to be a seer and how a seer might represent himself, the following questions will be especially important: How did seers fashion an image for themselves? What kind of image was important? What was the relationship between image making and actual success in one's career? And given that the rituals of divination constituted a type of public performance, how did the seer go about scripting his own role? Our ancient sources do not address these types of questions directly, and so the answers must be inferred through a close reading of texts. Recent work on the anthropology of divination can provide both a theoretical framework and clues for how to read our sources.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most difficult mental exercises that the study of history requires is to think beyond established questions and even beyond the categories of experience and structures of thought that give rise to such questions. Some of the established questions concerning Greek divination are these: Did the Pythia really compose her own verse oracles, and, whatever forms her pronouncements took, were her consultants guided by them in any significant way? Did generals and statesmen really let their strategy and movements be dictated by omens? Did seers influence decision making, or were they merely pawns in the hands of their employers?

The answers to such questions often reveal more about the cultural assumptions of modern historians than about those of the Greeks. And so it is common to be told that the priests at Delphi, who knew the questions in advance, put into verse the inarticulate ramblings of the Pythia; that generals cynically (or at least consciously)

7. To adapt what McSweeney (1974: 6) says about priesthood.

8. Halliday (1913: 54–98) argues that the *mantis* is the descendant of the primitive medicine man and that the kings of the legendary past were *manteis*. His book was much influenced by the theory of the development of religion from magic in J. G. Frazer's famous, but now methodologically outdated, *Golden Bough* (first published in 1890 in two volumes, and then expanded into twelve volumes between 1906 and 1915).

9. Especially useful are Peek 1991a, LaGamma 2000, and Pemberton 2000, which explore both the social function of divination and the performative aspects of divinatory rituals.

manipulated the omens to suit their strategic needs or to boost the morale of their troops; and that seers told their employers precisely what they thought they wanted to hear. Since divination is a marginal practice in industrialized Western societies, such questions and answers are formed from the viewpoint that divination must have been an encumbrance to the Greeks, something that rational individuals either had to maneuver around or else had to manipulate for their own interests. Above all, to modern sensibilities, a random and irrational system of divination must not be seen as determining what the elite of the Greek world thought and did. In fact, it has been argued that the elite manipulated divination for their own ends, whether to exploit or to assist the uneducated masses. It is easy enough to validate this prejudice by appealing to the more “rational” segment in Greek society; for instance, by quoting isolated expressions of skepticism, such as the famous line attributed to Euripides that “the best seer is the one who guesses well.”<sup>10</sup>

Our own biases can be hard to overcome. As the anthropologist Philip Peek has observed, “the European tradition tends to characterize the diviner as a charismatic charlatan coercing others through clever manipulation of esoteric knowledge granted inappropriate worth by a credulous and anxiety-ridden people.” In reference to divination in sub-Saharan Africa he concludes: “Instead, we have found diviners to be men and women of exceptional wisdom and high personal character.”<sup>11</sup> I am convinced that if we could go back in time and conduct the sort of fieldwork that a contemporary anthropologist is able to engage in, we undoubtedly would find that Peek’s observation would hold true for the Greek seer as well.

The focus of this book is on how divination functioned as a respected access to knowledge both for individuals and for communities in the Greek world, and, in particular, on the role of the seers in making divination a viable and useful social practice. The practitioners, the seers, were not marginal characters on the fringe of Greek society. They were not like the mediums and palm readers in modern Western cities who generally inhabit the fringe both spatially and intellectually, and who ply their trade in the seedy sectors of the urban landscape. Rather, a significant

10. F 973 Kannicht.

11. Peek 1991b: 3. The negative bias of classical scholars is well illustrated by Lateiner (1993), who conflates seers, magicians, sorcerers, healers, and mediums under the general designation “preternaturalists.” His study is further undermined by his transparent personal bias that most, if not all, such individuals were self-consciously fraudulent: he calls them “con-men” who sought to profit from the suffering of the spiritually and physically needy (194). Similarly, many historians have either neglected the historical significance of Native American prophets or dismissed them as sinister charlatans (see Nabokov 2002: 222–23).

proportion of them were educated members of the elite, who were highly paid and well respected. There were, to be sure, practitioners of a lower order; but the seers who attended generals and statesmen were often the wealthy scions of famous families. They were at the center of Greek society.

One question that I cannot address has to do with the objective truth of divination. Yet the questions “Can divination function effectively?” and “Can it accurately predict the future?” are actually quite distinct. A system of divination within a particular system of belief can work very well for its constituency, for divination is “a system of knowledge in action,”<sup>12</sup> which is a different, but not necessarily less valid, way of knowing than that of Western science. So divination can be a useful source of knowledge and a highly effective means of decision making without it also being, in Western scientific terms, an objectively valid system for discovering what is true about the world. In Western intellectual discourse truth is conceived of in terms of knowledge that can be verified by observation.<sup>13</sup> At all cost we must avoid the temptation to call divination “illogical” or “non-rational” simply because it does not adhere to Western positivist scientific principles.<sup>14</sup> The renowned anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard himself shows how easy it is to adapt to other modes of decision making. As he confesses in his seminal study *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*: “I always kept a supply of poison for the use of my household and neighbours and we regulated our affairs in accordance with the oracles’ decisions. I may remark that I found this as satisfactory a way of running my home and affairs as any other I know of.”<sup>15</sup>

There may or may not be supernatural forces that inform the art of the seer; clairvoyance as a psychological attribute may or may not be a characteristic of some individuals. Unfortunately, the truth or falsity of such phenomena cannot be proven. The modern scholar can only reconstruct the claims that seers made for themselves, and what their contemporaries believed about those claims.<sup>16</sup> The famous classical scholar E. R. Dodds, who was in the habit of attending séances,

12. Peek 1991b: 3.

13. Shaw 1991: 137.

14. Peek 1991b: 11. See also Jules-Rosette 1978.

15. 1976: 126 (originally published in 1937).

16. Meier (1994: 509–17) discusses the historian’s proper attitude toward reports of miracles. Johnson (1999) demonstrates that David Hume did not disprove the possibility of miracles or the rational credibility of reports of miracles. Moberly 2006 is a controversial attempt to establish criteria for distinguishing between those individuals who merely claim to speak for God and those who truly do.



wrote in his autobiography that he could not tell if the mediums were pretending to be in a state of trance or really were.<sup>17</sup> Even experts can be easily deceived. In 1932 the 13th Dalai Lama ordered the various oracles in Tibet to undergo a personal test, and a commission was formed for that purpose. One old woman went into a trance, answered all of the questions she was asked, and fooled the commission completely. She then confessed: “You see, this is how I make my living. I wasn’t in trance, I was making it up.”<sup>18</sup> Yet the existence of fake oracles in no way lessened the Tibetan belief in the existence of true ones. In connection with his consultation of the Nechung oracle, the 14th Dalai Lama writes in his autobiography: “Surprising as it may seem, the oracle’s replies to questions are rarely vague. As in the case of my escape from Lhasa, he is often very specific. But I suppose that it would be difficult for any scientific investigation either to prove or disprove conclusively the validity of his pronouncements. The same would surely be true of other areas of Tibetan experience, for example the matter of *tulkus* [reincarnate lamas].”<sup>19</sup>

In 1871 the British ethnographer Henry Callaway asserted in a lecture before the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland that “there is a power of clairvoyance, naturally belonging to the human mind, or, in the words of a native [Zulu] speaking on this subject, ‘there is something which is divination within man.’”<sup>20</sup> Some ancient Greek philosophers, particularly the Peripatetics and Stoics, believed that there was a prophetic element within the human soul that could be stimulated to foresee the future.<sup>21</sup> Such speculations, however, seem to postdate the fifth century B.C. During the archaic and classical periods most Greeks believed that the gods would speak directly through the mouth of a priest or priestess, or else that a religious specialist, who was able to detect and interpret the signs that the gods sent, could ascertain their intentions. Some of those specialists, primarily in myth, were given the gift of second sight, which in some way and to some degree they passed on to their descendants; but no classical author (apart from Plato, who claims

17. 1977: 97–111.

18. Lipsey 2001: 270–71.

19. 1990: 236.

20. 1871–72: 165, 168–69 (for the quotation); cf. Peek 1991b: 23–24. At least one person in the audience, a certain Mr. Dendy, was greatly offended: “The idea of spiritual influence over the true savage was an illusive fallacy, which no man of real science ought for a moment to entertain. . . . The anecdotes of the prophetic clairvoyance of the Kaffirs and the Zulu ought to raise a blush in those who cite them as spiritual phenomena; if we hear nothing from south-eastern Africa more rational, the sooner the district is tabooed the better” (184).

21. Cic. *Div.* 2.100; Plut. *Mor.* 431e–33.

that the liver is the seat of divination) speaks of a prophetic element being present within the soul of every mortal.

Leaving aside the question of its objective validity, can one really know what the majority of Greeks thought about divination? One must say “the majority” because there are always individuals who have views that run counter to popular sentiment. The sixth-century B.C. philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon repudiated divination altogether (Cic. *Div.* 1.3.5), but he generally held radical beliefs about the gods. When one looks at the whole range of sources, both in verse and in prose, the picture that emerges is pretty clear. The vast majority of Greeks believed that the gods desired to communicate with mortals, that they did so through signs of various kinds, and that there were religious experts who could correctly interpret those signs. Divination was a primary means of bridging the gap between the known and unknown, the visible and the invisible, the past and the future, and the human and the divine. There were, to be sure, rival means, but none of them ever replaced or eclipsed the central role of divination. Divination was so vitally important to the Greeks that it was included, second only to medicine, among the *technai* (arts, skills, or crafts) that Prometheus gave to humankind. And thus Prometheus boasts in Aeschylus’s play *Prometheus Bound* (484–99): “I set in order the many ways of the mantic craft.” So too in Euripides’ *Suppliants* (195–213), Theseus lists the capacity of seers to explicate the unknown as among the means that the gods gave to mortals for sustaining life.

On occasion, a piece of eyewitness testimony can tell us a great deal about what people were at least represented as thinking. The following two examples are worth considering, even if they date from the first century B.C. and the first century A.D., respectively. Deiotarus, the tetrarch of Gallograecia and king of Lesser Armenia, once told his guest-friend Quintus Cicero that he had abandoned a journey because of the warning given him by the flight of an eagle. Sure enough, the room in which he would have stayed, had he continued his journey, collapsed the very next night. After that he very often abandoned a journey, even if he had been traveling for many days. And even though he later suffered at the hands of Caesar, he did not regret that the auspices (bird signs) favored his joining Pompey in the Civil War that broke out in 49 B.C. He thought that the birds had counseled well, since glory was more important to him than his possessions (Cic. *Div.* 1.26–27). The story of Deiotarus provides a good example both of a genuine faith in the validity of divination and of how the rites of divination, even when proven wrong in the event, cannot easily be discredited in the eyes of a true believer.

Pliny the Younger, writing around A.D. 100, reports in one of his letters (2.20) the

machinations of the legacy hunter M. Aquilius Regulus. On one occasion he convinced a wealthy woman, Verania, that she would recover from a serious illness first by forecasting her horoscope and then by confirming the findings through extispicy (the examination of the entrails of a sacrificed animal). She lived just long enough to add Regulus to her will as a legatee. Despite the fact that Regulus duped this woman, he was nonetheless a genuine believer in divination. He boasted to Pliny that when he performed extispicy in order to discover how soon his fortune would reach 60 million sesterces, he discovered that the victim had a double set of entrails, which portended that he would acquire 120 million. This appears to be a clear case of someone who selfishly and consciously manipulated divinatory rites for his own ends and yet also genuinely believed in the validity of those same rites. Although the example comes from Rome and is from a much later period, the psychology revealed must have been, and surely still is, common enough.

## METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

There are several dangers inherent in a study of this kind. First of all, since the evidence for seers is fragmentary and must be extracted from an extremely wide variety of sources, there is a temptation to ignore the context in which individual references are imbedded. Thus it is crucial not to rip references to seers out of their literary matrix and then stitch them together out of context, for that is merely to create an artificial construct that is likely to be false in its conclusions. While it is useful to construct this type of artificial narrative in order to make sense of and give order to hundreds of discrete pieces of evidence, it is necessary to be aware of an item's context and logic within its original narrative. Nevertheless, it is by bringing disparate pieces of evidence together that the whole becomes greater than the parts and new insights are gained. It obviously requires a good deal of scholarly discretion to strike the right balance between investigating the context of individual passages in detail and combining several such passages in interesting ways.

Second, because there are significant gaps in our evidence for seers, it is tempting to fill those gaps by recourse to historical and anthropological studies of other societies. These range in time and space from China during the Shang dynasty to contemporary sub-Saharan Africa and include all of the types of divination as practiced in Greece, from burning the hides of animals to spirit possession. The danger in misusing such evidence is obvious; but, if handled properly, there are also real benefits. The parallels between the Delphic Pythia and the Chief State Oracle of Tibet are so striking that it should be possible to enhance our understanding of the

former by reference to the fuller documentation for the latter. There are classical scholars who feel uncomfortable with the use of comparative evidence, on the grounds that it is not legitimate to compare the Greeks, who had reached the level of state formation, with so-called primitive peoples who have not. There is an assumption that Greek society was more complex, more sophisticated, and more self-reflective than the societies to which it is compared. Whether that supposition is true or false (and it is surely false when the comparison is with ancient China or twentieth-century Tibet), it does not preclude judicious use of comparative material.<sup>22</sup> I am convinced that ethnographic evidence is relevant precisely because it can be used to flesh out and confirm cultural phenomena that otherwise appear only in a literary context.

Third, it is a commonplace that inquirers into another culture are biased by their own experiences and worldviews, and that this bias inevitably influences both observation and interpretation. In the case of literary texts, and even of monuments, this is not entirely problematic, for texts and monuments have a meaning for each and every reader and viewer that transcends their original meanings. Yet in the study of religion nothing is so pernicious as the projection onto others of one's own beliefs. Ironically, the most perverse form of this is to deny the concept of religious belief altogether to the Greeks by claiming that their religion was exclusively concerned with ritual.<sup>23</sup> Belief was as important an aspect of religion to the ancient Greeks as it is to the adherents of monotheistic religions today—it is just that the Greeks believed in different things.

Belief, of course, is a tricky concept, and competing theories of belief have been, and currently are, held by philosophers.<sup>24</sup> For our purposes, a commonsense

22. I have particularly profited from Evans-Pritchard's classic study of the Azande (1937); the commonly cited abridged edition (1976) is useful for students, but much of interest for the study of Greek seers has been omitted. Peek 1991a is fundamental not only for the study of divination in sub-Saharan Africa, but for anthropological theory on divination in general (with criticisms of Evans-Pritchard's methodology). Two useful surveys of divination in world cultures are Caquot and Leibovici 1968 and Loewe and Blacker 1981. Vernant 1974 is a collection of articles surveying divination in antiquity (his own contribution on Greek divination is reprinted in Vernant 1991).

23. See the excellent discussion by Harrison (2000: 18–22), who criticizes Price (1984: 10–11). Price (1999: 45) claims: "Practice not belief is the key, and to start from questions about faith or personal piety is to impose alien values on ancient Greece." Vernant (2001) argues for the inseparability of belief and practice in Greek religion. For a sophisticated and nuanced discussion, with citation of much recent work in anthropology and sociology, see Feeney 1998: 12–46.

24. Saler (2001) surveys the three basic modern theories of belief: the (classical) mental state theory, the disposition theory, and the cognitivist theory. As he points out, however, the line between

definition should suffice. By “belief” I mean both a person’s conscious statements concerning religion and his or her unconscious presuppositions.<sup>25</sup> It is also the case that when we say that someone believes something, “we are claiming that that person has a tendency or readiness to act, feel, or think in a certain way under appropriate circumstances.”<sup>26</sup> Finally, most of us would surely agree with John Locke that there are degrees of assent: in other words, we hold some beliefs much more strongly than we do others.<sup>27</sup> Yet no matter the precise definition of “belief” that one prefers, it is clear that the Greeks and Romans had strong convictions about the nature and value of divination, and indeed those thinkers who questioned divination’s efficacy attempted to demonstrate that what most people “believed” was foolish.

It is important to be explicit about one’s methodology, and the methodological stance taken in this study is one common in the anthropology of religion: that is to describe religious beliefs and practices with the minimum of bias and to determine their meaning and social significance.<sup>28</sup> Most important, it is vital to attempt to understand the role of the seer in Greek divination through the culturally determined perceptual filters of the Greeks themselves, especially the filters of those who lived during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.<sup>29</sup>

Ideally, one should endeavor to enter imaginatively into the socioreligious worldview of the Greeks to the extent that the evidence allows. Anthropologists call this approach to the study of religion one of “neutrality.” In this wise, “one approaches religious belief and practice without a specific dogmatic perspective or a concern with the necessary truth of specific manifestations.”<sup>30</sup> Yet it must be admitted that the reality invariably falls short of the ideal. Even the observations of

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these theories is far from sharp. Hahn 1973 is a good introduction to the problem of how to analyze a “belief system.”

25. I have borrowed this definition from Harrison (2000: 20).

26. Saler 2001: 54, summarizing the disposition theory of belief.

27. Sperber, in what have proven to be highly influential studies (1996, 1997), argues that there are two fundamental kinds of beliefs: “intuitive beliefs,” which are implicitly and rigidly held; and “reflective beliefs,” which are explicitly held but with varying degrees of commitment.

28. See, for instance, Evans-Pritchard 1965: 17 and Sharpe 1987: 220–50. Evans-Pritchard 1937 and 1956 and Lienhardt 1961 are justly famous examples of this approach. Bloch (1998) stresses the importance of the anthropologist being a participant observer and of providing an ethnographic account of the conceptualization of a society that makes sense to one’s native informants.

29. Sourvinou-Inwood (2003) successfully uses this method to read Greek tragedy. Some of the problems involved in the study of Greek divination are isolated by Karp (1998).

30. Collins 1978: 8–9.

trained anthropologists who study contemporary societies are by no means free from preconceptions, and that holds true not only for Evans-Pritchard, but also for his successors, even if their cultural and professional biases are different from his.<sup>31</sup>

## MODERN ATTITUDES TOWARD GREEK DIVINATION

Although there are some notable exceptions, modern scholars have generally been skeptical of the role of divination in ancient Greece, and various strategies have evolved aimed at devaluing its importance. One such strategy has been to claim that the status and authority of the seer was greater in archaic than in classical Greece, assuming that the emergence of the sophistic movement and of Hippocratic medicine led, of necessity, to the devaluation of divination and its practitioners. It is certainly true that Hippocratic doctors generally attempted to distance themselves from the seers, but it is not so evident that they did so successfully. For instance, in *Regimen in Acute Diseases* (8) the difference between medicine and divination is stressed; yet the author admits that the art of medicine has a bad reputation among laypeople for the very reason that it might appear to them to resemble divination. Indeed, some of the practices and techniques of the Hippocratic doctors were similar to those used in divination, especially in regard to prognosis.<sup>32</sup>

Texts, inscriptions, and images simply do not support the claim that the importance and influence of divination waned in the classical period. Even Plato, who is generally hostile to nonstatic forms of divination, must admit that “the bearing of the priests and seers is indeed full of pride, and they win a fine reputation because of the magnitude of their undertakings” (*Statesman* 290d). And Aristophanes, although viciously ridiculing the *chrēsmologoi* (the professional collectors and purveyors of oracles), whom his plays depict as being charlatans and frauds, never questions the validity of divination itself. He mocks the oracle books of these men, but he never criticizes oracle centers such as Dodona and Delphi.<sup>33</sup>

Divinatory modes of discourse and ways of thinking existed alongside competing ways of viewing the world. Nonetheless, the evidence is overwhelming that the seers retained their traditional authority throughout the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Skepticism and doubt existed, and are expressed in both tragedy and comedy, but this

31. See Peek 1991b and Fernandez 1991.

32. See Lloyd 2002: 36–38.

33. Smith 1989 is excellent on this point.

is characteristic of all societies that rely on seers. In other words, many Greeks may have questioned the ability or honesty of individual seers, but very few indeed doubted the validity of divination itself. As Evans-Pritchard notes of the Azande, although many of them say that the majority of witch doctors are liars whose sole concern is to acquire wealth, there is no one who does not believe in witchdoctorhood.<sup>34</sup> This type of doubt acts as a kind of escape valve. If a particular diviner was proven wrong, it was because he did not practice his art well: the failure of the individual practitioner does not undermine or disprove the system as a whole.

It is pretty clear that modern attempts to devalue the importance both of divination and of seers are bound up with a teleological view of the development of religion, that somehow divination is a primitive, prerational practice that continued to exist alongside more sophisticated beliefs. It is not essential to my own view of the importance of divination that such a teleological view be abandoned altogether, since different modes of thought, which may correspond to different stages of cognitive development, can coexist both within the same culture and even within the same individual.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, I believe that it is misleading to see divination as primitive.<sup>36</sup> Both its operation and its theoretical underpinning can be very sophisticated, and it can be as successful in helping both states and individuals to make decisions as allegedly more sophisticated methods (such as scientific and economic models that often prove wrong, or the various political ideologies of the last century). Far from being irrational, divination is actually an attempt to extend the range of the rational, to encompass things within our range of knowledge that cannot otherwise be known.<sup>37</sup> Thus there is no contradiction or disjunction here between so-called rational and irrational ways of understanding the world.<sup>38</sup> Rather, in the context of divination, they are sympathetic and supplementary ways of viewing the workings of the world and the place of human experience within it.<sup>39</sup>

34. 1976: 112–13.

35. See esp. Barnes 2000.

36. Nor do I believe that one can draw a distinction between so-called world religions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and primitive or primal religions. For salient objections to such a categorization, see Bowie 2000: 25–28. In any case, divination is present in almost every religious tradition known to us.

37. As Vernant (1991: 308) points out, divination is a technique claiming to apply human reason to the interpretation of signs sent by the gods.

38. See Beattie 1966 and 1967 and especially the seminal study of Horton 1967 (repr. in Horton 1993). Note also Fortes 1987: 15.

39. Burkert 2005.

Furthermore, even if one is not convinced by this line of argument and insists that it is irrational to resort to divination when faced with uncertainty, it is still the case that the interpretation of oracles and signs is an eminently rational exercise. The interpretation of oracles in particular depends on the application of human intelligence, and the Greeks were in the habit of applying careful and logical arguments in their analysis of an oracle's meaning.<sup>40</sup> Since many Delphic oracles were ambiguous and expressed in metaphorical language, interpretation was difficult and intellectually demanding. An important feature of the Croesus story in Herodotus is that this Lydian king accepted oracles at face value (with disastrous results); the implication is that a Greek inquirer would have, or at least should have, known better. Even the most apparently straightforward oracular predictions require interpretation by the inquirer. In sum, even though divination may seem irrational, the interpretation of signs, omens, and oracles is a rational activity.

## SOURCES

When it comes to sources, the natural temptation is to turn to the historians first, and then to the tragedians. But as we shall see, it is only by making all of the various genres of Greek literature work together, including inscriptions and material evidence, that real progress can be made. The end result should be a symphony in which each instrument makes its own contribution to the overall effect. In most cases there is a complex interplay between the logic of divination and the story logic of our texts. Homer, Herodotus, the tragedians, all manipulate divination so as to make it conform to their own authorial voice and the needs of their story. And so they are not a mirror that exactly reflects the practices of divination and the personae of seers; yet they do refract attitudes and methods that must have had resonance for their audiences. This interplay between representation and reality is subtle and not always easy for us to analyze.

It will cause no surprise that Herodotus's *Histories* is one of the most important sources for the role and function of the Greek seer. Herodotus names six different seers in book 9 alone, as opposed to only four in our other most informative source, Xenophon's *Anabasis*. Herodotus, moreover, tells us a great deal about three of them: Tisamenus of Elis, Hegesistratus (the Greek seer hired by the Persians) also from Elis, and Euenius of Apollonia. Although legendary seers such as Melampus

40. See Price 1985: 184. See further chapter 8.



and Teiresias were more famous, Tisamenus of Elis was arguably the most successful seer of historical times.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the importance of Herodotus, I would place him second to another author. When anthropologists study an alien culture, apart from themselves participating in and observing firsthand various rituals and activities, they consult native informants, individuals who are inside the system and who can at least attempt to explain that system in its own terms. This luxury is obviously denied to those who study cultures that exist only in the past. The closest that we can come to a native informant is the Athenian Xenophon, who describes his own experience of many varieties of divination in his *Anabasis*. In 401 B.C. he accompanied the younger Cyrus in his attempt to become King of Persia, and when he and his fellow mercenaries were stranded in the heart of the Persian Empire, Xenophon became one of the leaders who conducted them back to Asia Minor.

To all appearances Xenophon was a man of conventional, but deep, piety. In his narrative of these events, his *Anabasis*, he recounts his own personal experience of each of the major forms of Greek divination: his consultation of the Delphic oracle, a dream that was sent to him by Zeus, his use of sacrificial divination (extispicy) and of bird signs (augury), and the occurrence of chance omens. No one can report their own experiences without some degree and type of bias, and Xenophon was certainly concerned to justify both the decisions that he made and the actions that he took during the course of the expedition. To be sure, some modern scholars have suspected that Xenophon self-consciously uses divination in order to justify actions that either at the time or later exposed him to various accusations of wrongful conduct.<sup>42</sup> However that may be, for our purposes doubts about Xenophon's motives, or even about what he actually did at the time, do not undermine one central fact—he thought that divination would be a sufficient explanation and justification for his actions in the eyes of his intended audiences.<sup>43</sup>

Nonetheless, Xenophon's piety seems genuine enough, and his experience of the divinatory acts that he reports is firsthand.<sup>44</sup> This is in contrast to the reports of div-

41. A succinct treatment of seers and oracles in Herodotus is given by Lévy (1997). For seers in Herodotus book 9 see Flower and Marincola 2002; and for Tisamenus see further Flower 2008a.

42. So, most emphatically, Dürrbach 1893.

43. As Parker (2004: 137) well observes: "According to Dürrbach, large tracts of the work are little better than self-serving fiction. But to secure whatever apologetic aims he may have had, Xenophon must surely have needed to be at least plausible."

44. On religion in Xenophon, see Nilsson 1967: vol. 1, 787–91; Anderson 1974: 34–40; Dillery 1995: 179–94; Bowden 2004; and Parker 2004.

ination in most of our other historical sources, including Herodotus. All of them surely had personal experience of divination, but they were not always eyewitnesses of the examples that they mention in their texts. By reading and analyzing Xenophon's narrative of his own divinatory experiences we come as close as is now possible to observing a native informant. It is obviously not the same sort of experience as observing a rite of divination for ourselves; nonetheless, we would be much the poorer without Xenophon's vivid testimony.

Sometimes even a chance remark that Xenophon makes can open up a whole vista of possibilities for the imagination. Such is the case when he mentions in the *Anabasis* that when he was traveling from Ephesus to Sardis in 401 to meet up with Cyrus the Younger, he was being escorted by a seer who interpreted for him the omen of an eagle sitting on his right (6.1.23). One wonders, How usual was it for a wealthy Greek to travel with a seer? Was this an idiosyncrasy of the pious Xenophon, or was a seer a regular, if for us usually invisible, member of an aristocrat's entourage? Above all, Xenophon provides confirmation that seers did not merely provide moral support and strengthen a person's resolve to do what he had already decided upon doing. He also confirms for us that through their advice and predictions, seers could significantly influence what people, both collectively and individually, determined to do in the first place.

By contrast with his predecessor Herodotus and his continuator Xenophon, Thucydides had little interest in divination and mentions seers (with the exception of 6.69.2) only when their advice leads to disaster.<sup>45</sup> Thucydides' skepticism comes out most clearly in his statement that the only oracle to have proven true about the Peloponnesian War was that it would last for "thrice nine years" (5.26.3).<sup>46</sup> In the three places where Thucydides uses the word *manteis* (seers), he never deigns to mention a seer by name; they are anonymous and referred to in the plural. This omission is deliberate, since we know from Plutarch that individual seers played prominent roles in the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides, it is essential to realize, and not Herodotus or Xenophon, is the exception that proves the rule.

From later citations, it is apparent that the lost historians, Ephorus of Cyme,

45. At 6.69.2, when describing a hoplite battle between the Syracusans and Athenians in 415, he merely says: "The seers brought forward the customary *sphagia* [the pre-battle sacrifice]." Thucydides' neglect of religious matters is well discussed by Hornblower (1992). On the controversial question of Thucydides' belief, or lack thereof, in oracles, see Marinatos 1981; Jordan 1986; Dover 1988; Hornblower 1991: 206, 270, 307; and Bowden 2005: 73–77.

46. Cf. 2.47.4; 2.54.1–3; 5.103.2.

Theopompus of Chios, Callisthenes of Olynthus (all writing in the fourth century B.C.), and Timaeus of Tauromenium (late fourth–early third century B.C.) gave prominence to omens and portents, especially at critical moments. As Polybius (12.23.4) said of Timaeus, “his history is full of dreams, portents, and incredible tales.”<sup>47</sup> The same also seems to have been true of the other “fragmentary” historians listed above.<sup>48</sup> It does not follow that these historians simply made up portents and omens as the fancy struck them. Rather, it was the case that they (unlike Thucydides) reflect the tendency to perceive omens in times of crisis that was so pervasive in Greek culture. Yet even if some stories of seers and portents are fictitious embellishments designed to add drama to the events, they still throw light, in the same way that Greek tragedy does, on the image of the seer in Greek thought and imagination. Thus no piece of evidence can be lightly dismissed. These historians are known primarily through paraphrase by later authors, among whom Plutarch and Diodorus Siculus are the ones most often used in this study. Plutarch seems to have taken a particular interest in manifestations of the divine via oracles, omens, portents, dreams, and apparitions.<sup>49</sup> Although Plutarch creatively adapted his source material according to his own interests and purposes, he did not add incidents of his own invention.<sup>50</sup>

Tragedy, by its very nature, is a genre in which calamities befall individuals, and the gods and their oracles play a role in the narrative logic of the play. It should not, therefore, be surprising that the dark, unpredictable, and dangerous side of divination is central in these plays. But this in no way demonstrates that most, or even any, members of a play’s audience felt a significant level of anxiety about the reliance of Greek society on divination. In other words, even though Greek tragedy consciously problematizes Greek divinatory rituals, in every play the seers and oracles are validated, and those who ridicule them are destroyed.

Nonetheless, it is striking that, despite their infallibility, the rituals of divination

47. Or as Pearson (1987: 211–12) has written of Timaeus, he “does not usually let an expedition set out without an omen of success or disaster.” For his religious beliefs, see Schepens 1994.

48. See, for instance, Plut. *Dion* 54.5–7, deriving from Theopompus (*FGrH* 115, F 331) on the signs that appeared to Dion and Dionysius II. For Callisthenes, see Pearson 1960: 33–38; and for Theopompus, Flower 1994: 70–71.

49. A standard treatment of religious themes in Plutarch is Brenk 1977. Plutarch’s attitude toward divination is examined by Opsomer (1996).

50. Pelling 2002 is fundamental for an understanding of Plutarch’s historical method. Bosworth (2003) argues that secondary sources did not add bogus “facts” to the primary sources that they employed in writing their own histories. That is, they did not engage in self-conscious fiction.

are consistently depicted as sinister and destructive. In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Apollo directs Laius, Oedipus, and Jocasta to their deaths.<sup>51</sup> Although it may be true that Thebes, where the action of this play takes place, is represented as a kind of “anti-Athens” in Athenian tragedy,<sup>52</sup> Apollo’s oracle plays no less a dubious role in Aeschylus’s *Libation Bearers*, where Orestes claims (269–84) that Apollo directed him to kill his mother. But to what degree does this reflect popular attitudes toward divination? Does the divination of Greek tragedy bear any relation to the practices and beliefs of real life?

The interpretative difficulty here lies in the fact that one function of tragedy is to destabilize and problematize popular religious beliefs.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, religious exploration is one of the main characteristics of tragedy. If the tragedians’ view of the destructiveness of divination were the dominant one, no one would have had recourse to divination in real life. Greeks would not have gone to Delphi if they thought that there was a realistic chance of being told that they would kill their fathers and bed their mothers. Yet they still could believe, however remote the possibility, that Apollo was capable of delivering that sort of prophecy. The playwrights exploit this anxiety about the supernatural for their own dramatic purposes. This is far from saying that the average theatergoer thought that his own life was similar to that of the characters of tragic myth; but it is to say that divinatory rites could be deemed dangerous in that they had the potential to release forces that could not always be controlled or negotiated. It is dangerous to practice divination because, even though it can extend the range of one’s knowledge, it can also lead one to ruin. There are some things that are better left unknown because once known they cannot be controlled. As paradoxical as it may seem, it is their becoming known that gives them their efficacy. Tisamenus of Elis went to Delphi to ask about having children; he was told that he would win the five greatest “contests” (i.e., “victories”); the first of those victories was over the Persians at Plataea. Would history have been different if Tisamenus had not consulted Delphi in the first place?

Tragedy is cathartic in that one sees one’s worst fears being played out on the stage. In a society in which divination was an integral part of religious experience, the invalidation of divine signs would undermine one’s entire belief in the divine order. It is difficult for us to imagine this because divination in Western society lies

51. On Apollo’s role in bringing destruction to the Theban royal household through his oracles, see Bowden 2005: 53–54.

52. So Zeitlin 1986 and Bowden 2005: 53–54; but note the reservations of Easterling (1989: 11–14).

53. See Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: esp. 1–14.

on the fringe of religious experience; its validity or lack of validity does not affect our view of the relations between the human and the divine. The practice of divination can have unforeseen consequences, but even the fear of such consequences was not as unsettling for the Greeks as the fear of discovering that the whole system was fallacious. That explains the outburst of the chorus in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* when it is faced with the possibility that the oracles given to Laius will prove false (898–910). The chorus is so psychologically invested in its system of religious beliefs and practices that it would rather that Laius had been killed by his own son, as Apollo had long ago predicted that he would be, than by a stranger.

Nevertheless, it is significant that the seers of high literature (epic and tragedy), such as Amphiaraus and Teiresias are always proven right, while the seers of comedy are always wrong.<sup>54</sup> At one level of explanation, this reflects a difference in genre. Comedy takes aim at contemporary seers; it seeks to make fun of them just as it makes fun of prominent orators and generals. Such criticism should not be taken too seriously. On the other hand, the fact that the seers of tragedy always prove their detractors wrong and emerge as skilled, knowledgeable, and accurate must also be put into context. Teiresias is attacked by Oedipus in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, by Creon in the *Antigone*, and by Pentheus in the *Bacchae*. The advice of Amphiaraus is ignored, to their loss, by Adrastus in the *Suppliants* and by Tydeus in the *Seven against Thebes*. Yet it has been well observed that criticisms of seers in tragedy “reveal considerably more about how we are to judge the critics than the seers.”<sup>55</sup> Or to put it the other way around, Teiresias and Amphiaraus, by the conventions of Greek myth, were beyond reproach, and any who would doubt them were marked for failure.

Yet the situation is more complicated than this, because literature does not only reflect life in various ways; it can also influence it. The real-life seers of the fifth and fourth centuries, who knew of the seers of high literature, might be expected to model their behavior accordingly. I am suggesting that historical seers modeled themselves on those of epic and tragic poetry, in what we might call a self-characterizing construction of their own personae. Thus at the battle of Plataea Tisamenus of Elis played the part of Calchas, and, a generation earlier, Euenius of Apollonia became a second Teiresias. I think that it would be wrong to assert that it was Herodotus himself who forced them into that mold, because this tendency is confirmed by other types of evidence. And as for the employers of seers, they might not have expected

54. Parker 1983: 15.

55. Mikalson 1991: 100.

to hire someone with the precise skills of Amphiaraus or Melampus, but they might well have believed that somewhere individuals existed who had similar mantic abilities. Indeed, one point in a seer claiming to be a descendant of Iamus or Melampus was that he somehow shared in the abilities of his family's progenitor.

The way that cultural norms are depicted in any given work of literature depends on the conventions of a particular genre as well as on the literary aims and personal beliefs of an individual author.<sup>56</sup> A work of literature, no matter if the genre is poetic or historical, can never give a direct window onto reality. Historical reality is always mediated through, and so necessarily distorted by, the work that represents it. The direct access that Evans-Pritchard had to Zande rituals and attitudes is denied us (and he was not an impartial observer); rather, we must make inferences and draw conclusions from texts that themselves problematize Greek divinatory rituals. Literary texts may reflect social reality in a more or less indirect way, but they also scrutinize it, whether to confirm, challenge, or deconstruct social norms. Even so, it may be asked whether, as a general rule, the relation between representation and actual experience is the same for prose texts as for poetic texts. It is here assumed that the depiction of divination and seers in epic and tragedy is not mere literary convention, and that the seers of poetry were recognizable types to their contemporary audiences. So too for comedy: although comic representation distorts and exaggerates social roles, the exaggeration and distortion must be of a type that has a resonance for the audience. Comedy ridicules seers for characteristics and propensities that most of the audience would have recognized; in other words, the irony, satire, and ridicule require a recognizable type for their target.

In sum, as far as source material is concerned, the greatest challenge facing a study of this kind is that the evidence is to be found in every genre and species of Greek literature: epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric, philosophy, oratory, and history, as well as in inscriptions. Material evidence, in the form of vase painting and sculpted image, also has something important to contribute. Each of these media has its own rules and conventions, each speaks different languages (semantically/linguistically, rhetorically, and visually), and each has different concerns and audiences.<sup>57</sup> It is the

56. See the brief, but excellent, discussion by Parker (1983: 12–17), who notes “the crucial influence of a literary work’s genre in determining the religious emphasis it contains” (15).

57. Mikalson (1991: 88–95) draws a sharp dichotomy between the religion of tragedy and that of “real life” (which is reflected in prose authors), whereas, at the other extreme, Bowden (2003) indiscriminately combines evidence from tragedy and prose authors. Struck (2003: 172) sensibly takes a middle ground, pointing out that even legendary incidents “are reliable evidence for how divination operated in the thought world of the Greeks.”

task of the scholar to engage these genres both individually and collectively, and to tease them into a dialogue with each other. Yet as difficult and problematic as this may seem, there are indeed places where the testimony of tragedy, epic, historical writing, oratory, and inscriptions does coalesce. This is not to say that this agreement necessarily can tell us what the seer was like in real life; but, as we shall see, it does tell us that there were important aspects of the image of the seer that were not genre-specific and that reflect a broad cultural stereotype.

The topic of the Greek *mantis* rests at the cusp of literature and history. This is true for two reasons, one of which is obvious and the other, being more profound, is not. It should be obvious that one must use both verse texts and prose texts in conjunction: that is, tragedies, comedies, and epic poems, as well as histories, orations, and inscriptions. But the more profound reason has to do with the symbiotic relationship between literature on the one hand and real life on the other. The poets who depicted Teiresias and Calchas on stage or in epic had before them the seers of real life; and those seers, in turn, were surely influenced in how they acted and presented themselves by the famous seers of Greek myth. So art imitated life, and life art, and for that reason one can draw no easy distinction between the religious activity of literature and that of everyday life, between literary religion and practiced religion.