

VENUS PLAYING WITH ASTRAGALS: EROTIC ORACLES AND PRAYERS IN  
ASTRAGALOMANCY

*La cosa  
è tra Fedra e le Dee. [...]   
ché per la grande generazione  
ond'io son nata, posso  
guardarle in volto e starmi con la mia  
statura contro ognuna,  
e giocare agli astràgali con elle.*  
G. D'Annunzio, *Fedra*, vv. 2450-51, 2456-60<sup>1</sup>.

In Graeco-Roman Antiquity, religious beliefs and predictive systems were closely intertwined. This is particularly evident in astragalomancy, that is, divination by knucklebones (Greek ἀστράγαλοι, Latin *tali*). It was a widely spread method of forecasting the future. It was performed by using the sawed-off knucklebones of a sheep or goat – or imitations of such in bronze, wood, or ivory – as lots (*sortes*)<sup>2</sup>. In fact, astragals were known since the time of the Homeric epics, as the story of Patroclus murdering his adversary at the end of a knucklebones' game vividly proves<sup>3</sup>. In Classical times, the young boy Lysis, the eponymous personage of Plato's dialogue about friendship, was presented as engrossed in watching other pupils of the same age play with

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<sup>1</sup> This is / between Phaedra and the Goddesses [...] Given the great generation / In which I was born, I can look / At them face-to-face and stay against each of them / For my height, / And play with astragals with them.

<sup>2</sup> See HEINEVETTER 1912; EHRENBERG 1927, coll. 1459-1460; GRAF 2005, p. 60; NOLLÉ 1997 and 2007, pp. 7-17; ŞAHİN 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Hom. *Il.* 23.83-90. On this point see also Strab. 9.4.2; [Apollod.] 3.13.8, where Patroclus is Achilles' *eromenos*, see KOUKOULES 1948, p. 169; MORAUX 1965, p. 161; KOUTSOKLENIS 1986, pp. 34-35; SCHÄDLER 1996 and 2013; FASNACHT 1997; BIGNASCA 2000, p. 146; LAZOS 2002, pp. 187-198 and 2010, p. 32; DORIA 2012 and 2014; ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 2013, p. 59; DE GROSSI MAZZORIN-MINNITI 201, p. 372; BIANCHI 2015, pp. 75-79.

astragals at the court of his gymnasium, when Socrates had just arrived<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, Plato states, these children played with astragals in a very special moment, after they had just performed a solemn sacrifice in honor of Hermes on his feast day, the *Hermeia*. We must not forget that Hermes is the patron god of every form of divination essentially marked by fate, *alea*, and/or linked with gambling. Among divinatory items put under the patronage of this god, known as a thief, who clearly shows an eminent personality as a trickster, we include cleromancy and *sortes*, and above all, knucklebones. In ancient times, these little bones were considered a main symbol of childhood<sup>5</sup>. Under this perspective, an epigram of the 5<sup>th</sup> century poet Leonidas of Taranto is very significant, as he counts astragals among the personal toys that Philokles dedicated to Hermes at the very moment of passage from his childhood, when he was ready to enter adulthood<sup>6</sup>.

As we shall see in detail, love affairs were rather relevant for the users of divinatory systems meant as random givers, such as astragals. Subsequently, these bones were commonly used as ludic and divinatory tools as well<sup>7</sup>. The sacredness of games and random agents in the Ancient Greek world is, in general, well attested in the majority of cases<sup>8</sup>.

We should begin by recalling that these items also represented a system with four-sided dice instead of the ordinary cube (κύβος), which had a regular, geometrical body with its six square sides. Indeed, the astragal shows many natural irregularities, since it is oblong and has two rounded sides, while its four sides are more or less polished. In particular, two narrow sides on a knucklebone are opposite to two other broad sides. Furthermore, while one of the narrow sides is flat, the other one is concave, and, likewise, one of the broad sides is concave, and the other is convex. These four sides alone are worth some scores. In particular, the broad convex side (πράνης) is worth four points, while the concave one (ὑπνιος) is worth three. Among the narrow

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<sup>4</sup> See Plat., *Lys.* 206e-207a, with commentaries given by HERMARY 2012, p.422 and p. 424. On knucklebones pulled outside from byssolites, see MEIRANO 2004, pp. 92-95. Philokles dedicated knucklebones together with other tools, which represented his childish pastime.

<sup>5</sup> See GROTTANELLI 2001, pp. 129-137 and. 2005, pp. 129-142; BURKERT 2005, p. 37; JAILLARD 2012. For the link between children and astragals under the astrological remit, see CARÈ 2006, pp. 144-146.

<sup>6</sup> AP 6.309. For the practice of consecrating astragals to a given deity at the moment of passage from childhood to first youth (*ephebia*), see GILMUR 1997, pp. 172-173; LAZOS 2002, p. 191; CARBONE 2005, pp. 58-61.

<sup>7</sup> Astragals were commonly used in funerary context, given to the link of these gambling tools with early age and Fate, see POPLIN 1984; AMANDRY 1984; ELIA-CARÈ 2004, pp. 87-90; CARÈ 2010, pp. 460-463, 2012 and 2013, p. 56 with respect to founding in necropolises from Lokroi Epizephiroi; DE GROSSI MAZZORIN-MINNITI 2012, p. 218; PAPAICONOMOU-POPLIN 2013, p. 57. The case of Lokroi inspired the definition of “astragalomania” to HAMPE 1951, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> See LOVETT 1901; GRAF 2005, pp. 64-65, with special regard to similar links between a throw by rolling dice and the divinity to be evoked. For interaction between games and divination, see also BEERDEN 2013, pp. 37-40.

sides, the concave (κῶϊος) counts six, while the convex one (χῖος) is worth only one point. Consequently, the opposition between concave and convex sides amounts to a certain knucklebones' combination: the different sides of such items score the numerical values of one, three, four, and six, in a way that the two opposing sides always gives a total of seven (= 1 + 6 or 3 + 4)<sup>9</sup>.

As far as astragals' sides are concerned, we may recall the witness of the second-century AD lexicographer Pollux, who, in his thematic dictionary, *Onomasticon*, describes plays and games drawn from Ancient Greek literary sources:

Τὸ δὲ σχῆμα τοῦ κατὰ τὸν ἀστράγαλον πτώματος ἀριθμοῦ δόξαν εἶχεν, καὶ τὸ μὲν μονάδα δηλοῦν καλεῖται κύων, τὸ δὲ ἀντικείμενον χιάς, καὶ Χῖος οὗτος ὁ βόλος. Δυὰς δὲ καὶ πεντὰς ἐν ἀστραγάλοις, ὥσπερ ἐν κύβοις, οὐκ ἔνεστιν. Οἱ δὲ πλείους τὸν μὲν ἐξίτην Κῶον, τὸν δὲ κύνα Χῖον καλεῖσθαι λέγουσιν.

Depending on the way in which the knucklebone has fallen, each side has its numeric value. The side being worth one point is the “dog” (*kúōn*), the opposed one is *chiás* and this throw is said to be the throw of Chios. In knucklebones, there are no values of two and five at all, as there are in dice. Most people say that the side being worth six takes the name of “Koos” and the one that is called “the dog” takes the name “Chios”<sup>10</sup>.

Beyond any doubt, one would earn more money by rolling an irregular knucklebone than a cubic dice<sup>11</sup>. This method of drawing prognostics by astragals allowed the diviner to establish a full set of oracles, as a great number of inscriptions, generally well preserved, often more or less in their entirety, clearly attests. It is generally matter of monolithic inscriptions, that is, texts inscribed on a single, large block of local stone. All these finds belong to a well-defined area of Asia Minor (Lycia, Pamphylia, Pisidia, Phrygia) corresponding to South-Western Anatolia, and they date back to the second-century A.D.<sup>12</sup>. All 56 known oracular texts are closely related and depend on a

<sup>9</sup> For technical peculiarities of astragals' throws and the names of their sides, cf. the *Scholia* to Plato's *Lys.* 456e; see GRAF 2005, pp. 60-62; COSTANZA 2020-2021.

<sup>10</sup> See Poll. 9.100.

<sup>11</sup> Cic., *Div.* 2.85; Schol. in Pind., *Pyth.* 4.338; *CIG* 4310, 4379, 3956; see KAIBEL 1876, pp. 192-194; HOPFNER 1924b, pp. 52-54; GRAF 2005, pp. 60-66, with special reference to numerical applications of astragals' sides and similar Chinese use by bamboos. For these items, see STRICKMANN 2005, pp. 31-34. In both cases, we note a randomization of divinatory system.

<sup>12</sup> See KAIBEL 1888, pp. 535-537; HOPFNER 1924b, p. 51; GRAF 2005, pp. 82-84, with a full list of epigraphic astragalomantic documents; NOLLÉ 2007, pp. 123-181 and STAAB 2009, p. 176; JOHNSTON 2008, p. 99.

supposed literary or epigraphic source. In Asia Minor, there was surely an astragalomantic *koine*, that is a common source concerning the method of predicting the future through the use of knucklebones. It is undeniable that our documents agree on the underlying technique of consultation. We may infer that the enquirer rolled five astragals with each throw. The user could have obtained several combinations, a series of which started with the lowest number: 5 (= 1 x 5) and ended with the largest, that is, 30 (= 6 x 5)<sup>13</sup>. In these inscriptions, every combination is related to a deity, at least in the majority of our oracles, and it announces a given prognostic for the individual destiny of the enquirer. Once the oracle had rolled the astragals, he had to do nothing but to add up the values assigned to the respective sides and finally search for the explanation given for his throw. The correlation between gods and the throws of the astragals is not perspicuous at any time<sup>14</sup>, apart from evident cases of prayers addressed to the Moirai, the Tychai («Steering Tyche,» «Tyche the Savior,» «still Happy Tyche» or «Bringer of Happiness») and the Nikai («Giving the Victory» and «Joyful Victory»). Other chance deities mentioned in these inscriptions are Daimon, Agathos Daimon, and Nemesis as revenge goddess<sup>15</sup>. Many Greek *Olympian* gods recur, in addition to Aphrodite<sup>16</sup>. Still, some Egyptian theonyms recur in *astragalomanteia*, such as Isis the Savior (Σωτήρα), Sarapis, and Zeus Ammon<sup>17</sup>. This syncretistic set corresponds to the evidence drawn from gods mentioned in contemporary literature on dream-interpretation, with special reference to the *Oneirokritika* written by Artemidorus of Daldi, himself a second century professional and theorist and also a native of Asia Minor, having been born in Ephesus<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> If the same combination was cast as the result of the same sum of throws (for example 14 = 1 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 4; but also = 1 + 1 + 3 + 3 + 6; and still 1 + 1 + 4 + 4 + 4), the oracles prescribe to arrange these combinations according to the astragal's sides, beginning with the concave narrow side (1 point) and ending with the flat broad side (4 points), see GRAF 2005, pp. 62-63.

<sup>14</sup> On the names of deities mentioned in astragalomantic inscriptions, see the prospectus given by NOLLÉ 2007, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> At this respect, gods of fate like Moirai, Tychai, and personifications like Nemesis (Revenge), Blabe (Damage), Elpis Agathe (Good Hope), Euphrosyne (Joy) have to be summarized together with Horai (Hours), Agathos Chronos, Adrasteia, see NOLLÉ 2007, p. 107 and pp. 109-110.

<sup>16</sup> For occurrences of Greek *Olympian* gods such as Zeus, Poseidon, Ares, Athena, Hermes, Delphian and Pythian Apollo, see NOLLÉ 2007, pp. 107-108. On the contrary, it is noteworthy that Dionysos and Artemis are not mentioned at all.

<sup>17</sup> See NOLLÉ 2007, pp. 106-107: Egyptian gods were assimilated in Imperial Roman times to divine power, whose favor was very helpful.

<sup>18</sup> The occurrence of Egyptian theonyms is also significant, even if not predominant, in dream-interpretation books of Artemidorus (see BLUM 1936, p. 73 and p. 104; BARRIGÓN FUENTES 1994, p. 33). Indeed, no single Egyptian divine name occurs in quiver papyri, that is, palmomantic, texts of 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. AD, but this is not a proof of genuine "Hellenic" religious beliefs in this very syncretistic age (see COSTANZA 2009a, p. 33 and 2015, p. 178).

Prayers to the gods, moreover, were also associated with throws by rolling cubic, six-sided dice<sup>19</sup>. With respect to hilastic, that is, propitiatory prayers, it is noticeable that Aphrodite plays a major role in astragalomantic oracles. In this divinatory system, many prognostics drawn from knucklebones are put under the direct influence of the love goddess. The link, moreover, between erotic sphere and astragals is a long-standing framework in Greek religious thought, as a literary witness of early Hellenistic times, as Apollonius of Rhodes, proves. In the third book of his *Argonautika*, he depicts Eros playing with astragals and finally putting them in the bosom of his powerful mother. The scene portrayed by the Alexandrian poet vividly expresses that astragals were sacred to Aphrodite and that they were commonly associated with erotic imagery. We may read, in particular, vv. 112b-130, 154-155:

Ἡ δὲ καὶ αὐτὴ

βῆ ῥ' ἴμεν Οὐλύμποιο κατὰ πτύχας, εἴ μιν ἐφεύροι.

Εὔρε δὲ τὸν γ' ἀπάνευθε, Διὸς θαλερῆ ἔν ἀλωῇ,

οὐκ οἶον, μετὰ καὶ Γανυμήδεα, τὸν ῥά ποτε Ζεὺς

οὐρανῶ ἐγκατένασεν ἐφέστιον ἀθανάτοισι,

κάλλεος ἱμερθεῖς. Ἄμφ' ἀστραγάλοισι δὲ τῷ γε

χρυσείοις, ἅ τε κοῦροι ὀμήθεες, ἐψιόωντο.

Καὶ ῥ' ὁ μὲν ἤδη πάμπαν ἐνίπλεον ᾧ ὑπὸ μαζῶ

μάργος Ἔρωσ λαιῆς ὑποΐσχανε χειρὸς ἀγοστόν,

ὀρθὸς ἐφεστηώς· γλυκερὸν δὲ οἱ ἀμφὶ παρειᾶς

χροιῆς θάλλειν ἔρευθος. Ὅ δ' ἐγγύθεν ὀκλαδὸν ἦστο

σῖγα κατηφίῳν· δοιῶ δ' ἔχεν, ἄλλον ἔτ' αὐτῶς

ἄλλῳ ἐπιπροιεῖς, κεχόλωτο δὲ καγχαλόωντι.

Καὶ μὴν τοὺς γε παρᾶσσον ἐπὶ προτέροισιν ὀλέσσας,

βῆ κενεαῖς σὺν χερσὶν ἀμήχανος, οὐδ' ἐνόησε

Κύπριν ἐπιπλομένην. Ἡ δ' ἀντίη ἴστατο παιδός,

καὶ μιν ἄφαρ γναθμοῖο κατασχομένη προσέειπε·

«Τίπτ' ἐπιμειδιάς, ἄφατον κακόν; ἦέ μιν αὐτῶς

ἦπαφες οὐδὲ δίκη περιέπλεο, νῆιν ἐόντα;»

[...]

Φῆ· ὁ δ' ἄρ' ἀστραγάλους συναμήσατο, κὰδ δὲ φαινωῶ

μητρὸς ἐῆς, εὖ πάντας ἀριθμήσας, βάλε κόλπῳ.

<sup>19</sup> On criteria for associating the gods with dice throws, see GRAF 2005, pp. 63-64; the rules underlying dice-throws and prayers to deities seem to be different from those which were commonly used in astragalomancy.

But Cypris herself went down the glens of Olympus to find her son. And she found him off in Zeus' fertile orchard, not alone, but with Ganymede, whom Zeus had once settled in heaven to live with the immortals, smitten with longing for his beauty. The two of them were playing for golden knucklebones, as boys who are playmates do. And by this time greedy Eros was holding the palm of his left hand completely full of them up under his breast, standing upright, and the sweet blush of his complexion bloomed on his cheeks. But the other boy sat crouched nearby, downcast in silence. He had two knucklebones left, which he threw one after the other, still in vain, and was infuriated as the other laughed out loud. And then, immediately after losing these in addition to the others, he went away empty-handed and helpless, nor did he notice that Cypris had approached. She stood in front of her son and at once took hold of his chin and said:

“Why are you gloating, you unspeakable rascal? Is it because you cheated him as usual and unfairly triumphed over that naïve child?” [...]

She spoke, and he gathered up his dice and, after carefully counting all of them, tossed them into his mother's radiant lap<sup>20</sup>.

We may also consider examples drawn from astragals' prophecies, which were directly associated with Aphrodite, as our astragalomantic documents from Asia Minor attest in detail.

First let us quote oracle 11 according to Nollé's edition of this divinatory corpus<sup>21</sup>. This oracle is preserved by *astragalomanteia* from Pisidia<sup>22</sup>, from Termessos/Kitanaura at the Lycian borders<sup>23</sup>, and from Pamphylia<sup>24</sup>:

ααασδ ιγ Ἀφροδείτης  
 τρεῖς χεῖοι καὶ ἐξείτης, πέμπτος τέσσαρα πίπτων·  
 στέλλε, ὅπου χρήζεις χαίρων σὺ γὰρ οἴκαδ' ἀφίξη  
 εὐρών καὶ πράξας, ὅσσα φρεσὶ σῆσὶ μενοινᾶς  
 ἀλλ' Ἀφροδίτην ἰλάσκου καὶ Μαιάδος υἰόν.

<sup>20</sup> Transl. RACE 2008, p. 227 and p. 229. On further considerations about Apollonius' depiction of Eros playing with astragals, see BERKOWITZ 2004, p. 136; COSTANZA 2022.

<sup>21</sup> NOLLÉ 2007, p. 138.

<sup>22</sup> Adada, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, side A, ed. NOLLÉ 2007, pp. 61-67, esp. p. 62; Kremna, age of Hadrian (117-138 AD), ed. HORSLEY-MITCHELL 2000, pp. 22-37 nr. 5, NOLLÉ 2007, pp. 70-77, esp. p. 71, see also 1987, p. 44; Termessos, 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, side B, ed. E. PETERSEN in LANCKOROŃSKI 1892, pp. 51-52 and pp. 220-222 nr. 180; Heberdey 1930; NOLLÉ 2007, pp. 78-84, esp. 80.

<sup>23</sup> Dating back to 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, see side A, ed. NOLLÉ 2007, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Perge/İncik, side A, ed. OMEROD 1912, pp. 270-276; NOLLÉ 2007, p. 98.

[1+ 1+ 1 + 6 + 4 = 13]. Of Aphrodite:

3 throws of Chios, one throw of six, the 5<sup>th</sup> is worth 4,

go where you want, you could come back home and enjoy for this reason,

you will find and do what do you plan in your mind.

Propitiate the favor of Aphrodite and of the son of Maia.

Here, Aphrodite is accompanied by Hermes, who is evoked by his matronymic (Ἀφροδείτης) in a rather solemn tone<sup>25</sup>. As we have noticed, Hermes, the great trickster of the Greek pantheon, was also involved in cleromancy; he especially fostered any sort of lot-oracles, included *astragalomanteia*.

Indeed, the above-mentioned document from Termessos brings a signifying text version at the end of l. 4<sup>26</sup>:

Κύπρις γὰρ φιλέει σε, Διὸς θυγάτηρ φιλομειδή[ς.]

Cypris loves you (= in fact, you have the favor of Cypris), Sweet-Smiling Daughter of Zeus.

Here, the mention of Hermes has been deleted by the engraver (or by his direct source), in order to put a special emphasis on Aphrodite. The person responsible for this text change preferred to add a traditional epithet attributed to the goddess and to invoke her by her patronymic, according to epic formulaic style<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, we find a genuine Homeric sentence at the end of l. 3 in this oracle: ὅσσα φρεσὶ σῆσὶ μενοινᾶς (“what you ponder in your heart”)<sup>28</sup>. This proves how largely the compilers of divinatory texts were familiar with Greek literary epics. They used to draw upon the most revered epics of Hellenic national heritage. These were considered at the time to be divinely inspired books written by Homer, a highly revered hero, who was enshrined in many Greek towns<sup>29</sup>. Given the influence of Hellenic culture, there are many texts within the Greek magical papyri which brought Homeric verses used for divinatory purposes. According to

<sup>25</sup> On cultic association of Hermes with Aphrodite, see PIRENNE-DELFORGE 1994, p. 456-457.

<sup>26</sup> NOLLÉ 2007, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> GRAF 2005, p. 57 n. 29 observes that this drastic change is difficult to be explained. Surely, it is meant to emphasize the role of Aphrodite. NOLLÉ 2007, p. 138 is not sure that the travel at l. 2 corresponds to a sea journey, as Graf proposed.

<sup>28</sup> See NOLLÉ 2007, p. 138 n. 602.

<sup>29</sup> See SCHWENDNER 2002, p. 108.

current techniques of Homeromancy, the inquirer extracted random sentences from selected verses written on papyri in a similar way as happened for users of astragalomantic stone blocks in Asia Minor. For example, PGM VII (= P. Lond. 121) also offers selected verses from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* marked by a number of three ciphers written on the left. We may therefore deduce that readers performed divination by rolling dice three different times<sup>30</sup>.

As far as concerns the use of an archaic language, which for most people was very difficult to understand, we may recall a recipe on hydromancy, that is, water-divination, from a contemporary Graeco-Egyptian papyrus (P.S.I. X 1171)<sup>31</sup>. According to this method of divining by liquids, such as water or other shining surfaces, the seers based his deductions upon shapes or images in glittering or distorted reflections of the liquid lying in a bowl<sup>32</sup>. In the papyrus on hydromancy from Florence, the language corresponds to Ionian dialect, even if this writing is not free from Attic forms. This also proves that Ionian Greek was different from the language of the author and of course that of his second AD-century audience.

Epic style is also evident in another remarkable oracle assigned to the Heavenly (Οὐρανία) Aphrodite, namely the 54<sup>th</sup> oracle, according to Nollé's edition of *astragalomanteia*<sup>33</sup>. It is transmitted by inscriptions from Phrygia<sup>34</sup> and Pisidia<sup>35</sup>, as well as another one found at the boundaries between Pisidia and Lycia. It says<sup>36</sup>:

ςςςςγ κζ Ἀφροδίτης Οὐρανίας  
 τέσσαρες ἐξεῖται, πέμπτος τρίτος, τάδε φράζει  
 οὐρανόπαις Ἀφροδείτη, Ἐρώτων πότνι, ἄνασσα<sup>37</sup>,  
 πέμψει μαντείαν ἀγαθήν· δώσει δὲ ὁδόν σοι  
 ἐκφεύξει τε νόσου<sup>38</sup> καὶ φροντίδος ἀλγεσιθύμου.

<sup>30</sup> PGM VII 1-152, 3<sup>rd</sup> c.; see HOPFNER 1924a, p. 213 and 1928, col. 1286; MALTOMINI 1995, p. 107-122; SCHWENDNER 2002, p. 109.

<sup>31</sup> PSI X 1179, l. 30 [ὕδρομαντ[ , l. 23 ὕδρο-, so that the first editor, G. Vitelli, supplied at l. 21 ὕδρο?]μαντή, the title of treatise in following lines, see COSTANZA 2006-2008, pp. 55-57.

<sup>32</sup> See BÖHM 1914, p. 81; COSTANZA 2009b, pp. 99-101.

<sup>33</sup> NOLLÉ 2007, p. 178.

<sup>34</sup> Laodicea at Lykos, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Fr. 2, ed. CORSTEN 1997, pp. 136-140 Nr. 69, substantially revised by Nollé 2007, p. 33; Anabura, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Fr. IV, col. II, ed. STERRETT 1888; NOLLÉ 2007, pp. 36-38.

<sup>35</sup> Adada, side D, NOLLÉ 2007, p. 67 and Kremna, age of Hadrian (117-138 AD), side D, ed. NOLLÉ 2007, p. 76; Termessos, 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, side D, ed. NOLLÉ 2007, p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> Termessos/Kitanaura, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, side C, ed. NOLLÉ 2007, p. 91.

<sup>37</sup> In the inscription from Anabura (NOLLÉ 2007, p. 38) the epiclesis sounds like πόντια σεμνή, that is, noble Lady of Loves.



6 + 6 + 6 + 6 + 3 = 27 from Heavenly Aphrodite:

4 throws being worth 6, the fifth 3, this is the prognostic,  
Aphrodite, Uranos' daughter, the queen of Loves, the great Lady,  
will send thee a favorable prognostic, she will give thou thee life,  
you will avoid illness and pain that grieves thy soul.

Further occurrences in documents concerning astragalomancy confirm the remarkable role played by Aphrodite in this cast of prophecies. We must mention the hilastic, that is, propitiatory prayer in the *astragalomanteion* from Orm in Phrygia (= oracle 1 Nollé)<sup>39</sup>:

[Ἀφρ]οδ[εῖτην εἰλάσκου καὶ Μαιάδος] | υἰόν.

Propitiate Aphrodite and the son of Maia.

There is a still noteworthy prophecy on other side of this last stone<sup>40</sup>:

εἰ δέ κε πείπτωσι[ν]  
[τρεῖς τ]εσσάρειοι καὶ δύο μῶνο[ι]  
[ἡγεμ]ονεύσει σοι Δαίμων ὁδόν,  
[ἦν ἐ]πιβάλλη· πένψει δ' εἰς ἀγα-  
[θό]ν σε φιλομειδῆς Ἀφροδείτη  
[σ]ὺν καρποῖς ὕπαγε καὶ ἀπήμον[ι]  
μοίρη.

If you count three throws being worth  
four points and two only one point,  
the Daimon will direct you through the way  
that you will undertake.  
The sweet smiling Aphrodite will lead you to a

<sup>38</sup> The inscription from Anabura (NOLLÉ 2007, p. 38) says πόνων, that is, release from strain and pain, with no reference to illness. At any rate, the concern of personal health was a major theme for enquirers of divinatory tools.

<sup>39</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, side A, 1-2 (= ed. NOLLÉ 2007, p. 42) = oracle 1, v. 4 (*ibid.*, 123).

<sup>40</sup> = Side B, ll. 4b-10a, ed. NOLLÉ 2007, p. 43.

favorable destiny; proceed with good fruits and a fate without tears.

Similarly, the prognostic given to an oracle (= 16 Nollé) put under the patronage of Agathos Daimon also announces the propitious action exercised by Aphrodite in favor of the enquirer. At l. 3, it is stated:

πέμπψει δ' εἰς ἀγαθόν σε φιλομμειδῆς Ἀφροδίτη

The lovely smiling Aphrodite will lead thee to the best.

We must emphasize other documents of Graeco-Roman divination that confirm the power assigned to the love goddess among current predictive systems. Hilastic, that is, propitiatory prayers are, also, regularly prescribed in papyri on palmomancy, that is on palmomancy, a predictive technique based on involuntary movements of bodily limbs (Greek *palmoi*)<sup>41</sup>. In addition, a preliminary prayer found in the preface of the Homeromantic papyri. It is not unsurprisingly addressed to Apollo of Lycia, the God of poetry and literary writing<sup>42</sup>.

In this respect, we quote the prayer to be addressed to Aphrodite in *P. Ryl. I 28* (= *CPG 2*), ll. 104-110:

κνήμη δεξιὰ ἐὰν ἄλ|ληται, σημαίνει αὐ|τὸν γενέσθαι ἔνδο|ξον·  
γυναϊκὴ δὲ ἐ|παφροδεισίαν δη|λοῖ. Εὖχου Ἀφροδεῖτη | καὶ θύε.

If the right leg quivers, it is sign of a glorious future; for the woman, it denotes erotic power.  
Pray to Aphrodite and perform a sacrifice in her honor.

#### WHY THROW KNUCKLEBONES AND PRAY TO APHRODITE?

As the above-quoted documents attest, it was a widely spread instruction to each enquirer of divinatory predictions to pray to Aphrodite and to duly perform a sacrifice in her honor, in order

<sup>41</sup> On the notion of palmomancy, see DIELS 1908, pp. 9-11; OLIPHANT 1910; HOPFNER 1949; COSTANZA 2019, pp. 78-81. On extant papyri on divinatory method, see ID. 2016.

<sup>42</sup> See MALTOMINI 1991 and 1995, p. 107 n. 3 and p. 110.

to gain heavenly support for his/her own projects. The goddess of love takes her place among the celestial patrons of individual destiny, as our *astragalomanteia* confirm. We may ask why the love goddess plays such a noticeable role in the oracular system founded upon throws of knucklebones. At first, it is significant to stress the link between love affairs, games and *alea*. All these fields are ruled by the fate. The uncertain is a perpetual invitation to play with tools like knucklebones or dice and to arrange the results of throws, in order to enable those consulting this oracle to face the future in an effective manner. Generally said, godlike prescience of the future is a prerequisite for any divinatory attempt<sup>43</sup>. Gaming is also conceived to overcome the uncertain<sup>44</sup>. On the other hand, the Ancients equally meant love as a random activity, whose outcome is uncertain. No one knows in advance how it will play out. A lyric poet such as Anacreon of Teos already focused on erotic passion and madness by developing the metaphor of knucklebones<sup>45</sup>:

ἀστράγαλοι δ' Ἔρωτός εἰσιν  
μανία τε καὶ κυδομοί

Eros' knucklebones mean madness and uproars.

The first-century Greek epigrammatist Meleager of Gadara echoed this motif<sup>46</sup>:

Μητρός ἔτ' ἐν κόλποισιν ὁ νήπιος ὀρθρινὰ παίζων  
ἀστράγαλοισι τοῦμόν πνεῦμα ἐκύβευσεν Ἔρωσ.  
Love, the baby's still in his mother's lap, playing  
with knucklebones in the morning, played my soul away.

The Latin elegiac poet Propertius also used the metaphor of Cupid as a player with astragals<sup>47</sup>:

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<sup>43</sup> Divination is, primarily, a future-orientated system of knowledge, see STRUCK 2016, p. 4. On the link between love and games, see DASEN 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Play and games are so a quest for an order in the attempt of copying the undetermined, as HAMAYON 2016, p. 209 taught us.

<sup>45</sup> Anacr. 398 PMG = 111 GENTILI 1958 = 24 LEO 2015, *ap. Schol.* in Hom. *Il.* 23.88; transl. GENTILI 1958, p. 97, comm. BERNSDORFF 2000, pp. 640-641; PERROTTA ET AL 2007<sup>3</sup>, p. 215. See also GUTZWILLER 2010, p. 79; WEINLICH 2011, pp. 21-49.

<sup>46</sup> See Meleag. Gadara., AP 12.47, transl. PATON 1918, p. 303 revised); see GUTZWILLER 2010, p. 78; WEINLICH 2011, pp. 21-49.

*Sit sors et nobis talorum interprete iactu*

*quem grauibus pennis uerberet ille puer.*

And let an oracle tell us through the cast of knucklebones,  
which that boy strikes with his heavy wings

Knucklebones are closely connected with love. A frightful god such as Eros embodies a highly disruptive power. Indeed, his mother shows a benign and unthreatening face, her worshippers are right to have trust in her intercession, as astragalomantic inscriptions point out. As Anacreon states, the Greeks established an evident link between games and erotic imagery by intertwining playing with knucklebones and outcomes of love story. The whimsical child god overpowers love experience that is controlled by fate. However, Aphrodite grants a good chance for those who faithfully profess her endless power. The authors of divinatory recipes suggest adopting this righteous aptitude. In Roman imperial times, enquirers of *astragalomanteia* were positively inclined towards the love goddess which supervises lucky throws. Undeniably, Aphrodite was meant as a savior deity. It is significant, that the luckiest roll was assigned to her. As we have seen, she is also associated in an oracle with Isis *Soteira* through the use of knucklebones. The soteriological reception of Aphrodite's *numen* is also put in evidence by divinatory prognostics which are listed in astragalomantic inscriptions. If a certain throw with knucklebones was assigned to Aphrodite, it always predicted a good-lucky outcome, related prophecies were invariably positive. Authors of astragalomancy considered Aphrodite as a goddess of fate, which was involved with brilliant success, happiness, joy to await. On these grounds, Venus' throw (*Venerius iactus*) was extremely good-lucky according to Latin sources of Roman Imperial times<sup>48</sup>. In this respect, it would be tempting to add the well-known passage from Plautus' *Curculio* concerning the *basilicus iactus* to these literary attestations. We may explain it as 'queen's throw', with reference to Venus' intervention in human affairs<sup>49</sup>, rather than 'king's throw', as generally

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<sup>47</sup> See Prop. 3.10.27-28, transl. by Canali in FEDELI ET AL. 1987, p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> See examples quoted and discussed by VESPA 2021, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> As proposed by VESPA 2021, pp. 8-10, with no mention of Aphrodisiac prayers in astragalomantic documents.

understood, according to Greco-Roman ludic culture<sup>50</sup>. We also find parallels in modern Greek folklore at respect of king's throw<sup>51</sup>.

Curculio, the parasite and eponymous character of this play, however, is not linked with Aphrodite's world. He wishes to fulfil a *basilicus* throw, in order to satisfy the expectations of the young man Phaedromus who is in love with Planesium, seemingly a slave girl. If we consider models of Roman *palliata*, Menander's contemporary and rival Diphilus provides an interesting parallel of a parasite involved in gambling. In his play *Συνωρίς ἢ Λύχνος* (*Synoris or Lamp*, fr. 74 K.-A.), Diphilus lets a parasite (= character A.) have a dice game with the hetaera Synoris (= character B.)<sup>52</sup>. This one denies the hopes of his rival to win the game by Euripides' throw, because of the supposed misogyny shown by this tragic poet in his verses<sup>53</sup>:

(A.) ἄριστ' ἀπαλλάττεις ἐπὶ τούτου τοῦ κύβου.  
 (B.) ἀστεῖος εἶ. Δραχμὴν ὑπόθεσ. (A.) Κεῖται πάλαι.  
 (B.) Πῶς ἂν βάλοιμ' Εὐριπίδην; (A.) Οὐκ ἂν ποτε  
 Εὐριπίδης γυναῖκα σώσει'. Οὐχ ὄραξ  
 ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαισιν αὐτὰς ὡς στυγεῖ;  
 τοὺς δὲ παρασίτους ἡγάπα.

(A.) You've done nicely with that throw.  
 (B.) You're a clever one. Put down your drachma.  
 (A.) I put it down ages ago.  
 (B.) How could I throw an *Euripides*?  
 (A.) Euripides would never save a woman. Don't you see

<sup>50</sup> Kingship allows to develop a powerful metaphor. Winners were currently identified as kings, as Plato (*Theaet.* 146a) notoriously points out with respect to ballplayers: ὅς δ' ἂν περιγένηται ἀναμάρτητος, βασιλεύσει ἡμῶν καὶ ἐπιτάξει ὅτι ἂν βούληται ἀποκρίνεσθαι. See COSTANZA 2019, pp. 46 and 191 on Plautus' *Curculio*.

<sup>51</sup> A king's throw (βασιλιάς or ρήγας in a certain local variant from Karpathos) is also mentioned in Modern Greek play with knucklebones which is named *vyziris*, see COSTANZA 2018 and 2020-2021.

<sup>52</sup> The throw of Euripides had a strong assonance with εὐ ῥίπτειν (have a lucky roll of the dice). This throw was assigned to Euripides/Heurippides, one among the 40 judges of Attic *demoi*, see Suet. *De lud.* 22 = *Schol. Pl. Lys.* 206e, p. 456 Greene Εἷς γὰρ Εὐριπίδης τῶν τεσσαράκοντα Ἀθήνησι προστατῶν τῶν μετὰ τὴν τῶν ἰ τυχάνων κατάλυσιν κατασταθέντων ("Heurippides, one of the Forty Judges who ruled in Athens after the fall of the Thirty Tyrants"), see TAILLARDAT 1967, pp. 158-159. See KIDD 2017a, pp. 3-6: the outcome of this throw is given by 5 knucklebones, whose highest score is 8 and not 6 points. Sueton's excerpt is here erroneous because Romans used to play with four knucklebones instead of five, as Greeks did.

<sup>53</sup> Fr. 74, 1-6 K.-A. Transl. WILKINS 2000, p. 84 modified. Diphilus exploits, here, parody against Euripides' theatre according to Comic tradition, see *ibid.*; OLSON 2007, p. 439; KNÖBL 2008, p. 61; HANINK 2014, p. 167. At v. 3, the potential optative βάλοιμ(ι) expresses a wish of the speaker, see MASTRONARDE 2002, p. 234 ad Eur. *Med.* 97.

How he hates them in his tragedies?

But he loved parasites.

Just as Plautus' Curculio, Diphilus' parasite clearly belongs to the social discourse of the symposium. He shares ludic notions current among the banqueters and cannot act in an independent way<sup>54</sup>. Indeed, this anonymous personage emphasizes his opposition to Aphrodite's world and goddess' protégées such as hetaerae by marking social rivalry in view of competing for better awards. Curculio also wants to gain the favours of Planesium not for himself, but for another man, as we have noticed. Far from being a type of loving man, he embodies the *seruus callidus*, the hidden director of the story, as it usually happens in Plautus' comedies. Considering all this, it is not relevant for Curculio to invoke the special favour of Aphrodite as queen of human hearts by obtaining a throw named after her. Elsewhere, elegiac Latin poet Propertius presents himself as *seruus amoris* and he is, thus, suitable to search to gain by Venus' throw<sup>55</sup>. Gambling and love affairs were also a current matter for Greek comic poets. This topic inspired jokes and humorous scenes which fitted with common mind-sets of their audience<sup>56</sup>. It is interesting to remark that Aphrodite plays with knucklebones on the reverse of early fourth century BC staters from Tarsos in Cilicia<sup>57</sup>. Astragals on Greek coins were clearly used as symbols of good luck and fortune telling devices<sup>58</sup>. Boys were represented at throwing knucklebones in front of a statue of Aphrodite or else Artemis or Apollo, on the reverse type of third century AD coins from Ephesus, Samos, and other towns such as Hierapolis, Hypaipa, Aphrodisias<sup>59</sup>.

Similarly, the association between erotic sphere and chance underlies the eminent role assigned to love goddess in divinatory recipes, such as astragalomantic inscriptions or

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<sup>54</sup> In *fr.* 74, K.-A., the parasite also quotes Euripides' verses at 7 (ἀνὴρ γὰρ ὅστις εὖ βίον κεκτημένος "the man who is well-off" = *Antiope fr.* 187. 1) and 9 (ὄλοιτο, νόστου μή ποτ' εἰς πάτραν τυχῶν "may he perish and never achieve his journey home to his native land" = *IT* 535). He also writes a verse of his own phantasy to self-praise of his activity at 8 (μὴ τοῦλάχιστον τρεῖς ἀσυμβόλους τρέφει "and does not support at least three others without expecting a contribution"). In fact, he uses the reception of Euripides in Old Comedy, see WILKINS 2000, pp. 84-85; KNÖBL 2008, pp. 62-63; HANINK 2014, pp. 168 and 171; FARMER 2017, pp. 61-63.

<sup>55</sup> See Prop. 4.8.45-46: *Me quoque per talos Venerem quaerente secundos / semper damnosi subsiluire canes*. "For me, too, when I'd try for the lucky Venus throw / at knucklebones, the disastrous Dogs kept leaping up." (transl. HEJDUK 2008, p. 183 modified). The Dogs were the worst throw amounted to one point, see WALIN 2010 pp. 137-151.

<sup>56</sup> See KIDD 2017b.

<sup>57</sup> Beyond any doubt, the female figure throwing knucklebones on this side is Aphrodite, as indicates the anemone, the flower behind her, see LEVANTE 1986, p. 64; CASABONNE 2004, p. 126, type K1; TAHBERER 2012, pp. 7, 16, 18, fig. 19; ASHTON 2019, p. 114 and fig. 6.

<sup>58</sup> See TAHBERER 2012, pp. 18-19; ASHTON 2019, p. 115-117, with further parallels on astragals in Greek coinages.

<sup>59</sup> See IMHOFF-BLUMER 1911, pp. 4-7, pl. 1; HÜBNER 2019, pp. 52 and 59-60.

palmomantic papyri. The qualification of her mildness countermarks her prevailing aptitude to help humans as a protective deity. Therefore, astragalomantic inscriptions often refer to goddess' sweet smile, full of blessing towards the enquirers of this chresmology. The funerary use of knucklebones in tombs of children as well of adult people demonstrates the apotropaic value attributed to these items. Knucklebones were conceived not as game pieces, but rather as random givers with regard to afterlife hopes<sup>60</sup>. Games and oracles by throwing knucklebones were related to chance and individual destiny. Marriage was the most relevant step of single life. Aphrodite especially overlooks the transition of young people (*kouroi, parthenoi*) still being under the protection of Artemis, the Virgin goddess, into married people. Subsequently, Aphrodite inspired her seductive *charis* to young girls in marriageable age in order to accompany them to bridal rites<sup>61</sup>. In sum, as astragalomancers pointed out, a destiny put under the sign of Aphrodite is joyful and tearless. On the reverse, good-lucky throws were associated with a helping deity such as Aphrodite.

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#### ABBREVIATIONS

CIG: A. Böck, J. Franz, *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*, III, Berlin 1844.

CPG: COSTANZA 2009a.

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<sup>60</sup> The use of astragals in funerary context, not forcedly only of children/young boys, is also given to this special link with early age and Fate, as they were gambling tools par excellence. See ELIA-CARÈ 2004, pp. 87-90; CARÈ 2010, pp. 460-463 and 2013, p. 56 with respect to findings in necropolises from Lokroi Epizephiroi; DE GROSSI MAZZORIN-MINNITI 2012, p. 218; PAPAICONOMOU-POPLIN 2013, p. 57; TORRE 2015. The case of Lokroi inspired the definition of "astragalomania" to HAMPE 1951, p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> On Aphrodite's *charis* given to the girls on the eve of their marriage opposed to unmaturing *charis* of Artemis, see SAINTILLAN 1996, pp. 315-348.

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