

TEXT AND PRACTICE IN ROMAN DIVINATION:
FIVE THEMES FOR A COMPARATIVE DEBATE

A full treatment of the textual dimension of Roman divination could easily take up a whole monograph, which awaits to be written. The discussion that I shall try to sketch in what follows is necessarily selective, and I shall pursue it around five key questions, using them as an opportunity to convey a sense of the complexity and the richness of the problem: how Roman divination is conceptualised and defined in the written sources that do survive; what the main categories of textual evidence are; who the divinatory practitioners were, and how they engaged with the textual dimension of their craft; what techniques they resorted to; and what aspects might be distinctive about the interplay between text and practice in Roman divination. The breadth of these questions is testimony to the need to frame the study of these problems within wider themes of intellectual history and literary culture. It also reflects the ambition to offer a springboard for further work on divination in text cultures in a comparative vein – a debate in which Roman divination, with its complex and diverse evidentiary base, can fairly claim an important and distinctive place.¹

1. CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Divination takes up a considerable part of any textbook treatment of Roman religion. It is a prominent feature of the fabric of the public operation of *religio*, both in the city of Rome and in the polities across the Empire, and is widely attested in private contexts. It is also a very significant theme throughout Latin literature, and indeed in much of the Greek literature that is produced in the Roman context: one could produce monograph-lengthy treatments of divination in Virgil, Seneca, or Silius Italicus, and divinatory and prophetic

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the conference «Deciphering the Uncertain: Sociological & Epistemological Aspects of Divination in Early Text Cultures», which took place at the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities on 24 and 25 June 2019. I am grateful to the participants for their reactions to some of the arguments put forward here, and I am indebted to the organisers, Domenico Giordani and Flaminia Pischedda, for their invitation to take part in a rewarding debate and for the prompt to frame the discussion around the five questions pursued in this paper. I should also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

themes are significant lines of historical narrative and explanations in authors such as Livy, Cassius Dio, or Ammianus Marcellinus; even the relative dearth of references to divination in historians like Sallust or Tacitus is a problem worth reflecting upon. Divination is also a topic worthy of substantive and engaged discussion in its own right: Cicero devoted a philosophical dialogue to it, the *De Divinatione*, which he wrote between 45 and 44 BCE – the Ides of March occurred as its composition was unfolding, and the personal and political trajectory of Julius Caesar sharpened Cicero’s thinking on problems of prediction and predestination even further. In the first book, Cicero’s brother, Quintus, makes the case in favour of divination; in the following one, Cicero sets out the case against the reliability and viability itself of that craft. It should not necessarily be concluded that the viewpoint of Marcus the character fully overlapped with that of Cicero the author;² it is possible (though in my view unlikely) that the two arguments are intended to carry the same weight, and that the key ambition of the dialogue is to articulate in Latin and for the sake of a Roman audience the terms of a discussion on the prediction of the future and the place of divination within that brief.

This important issue is of relative significance to the purposes of the present paper. What is more significant is that Cicero’s project was a novel one only to some extent. Treatises on divination were written in Greek during the Hellenistic period, notably by Philochorus of Athens (ca. 340-ca. 260 BCE), who also wrote a tract on sacrifice, and Posidonius of Apamea (135-51 BCE), possibly the most staggering figure in Hellenistic intellectual life during the first half of the first century BCE, who wrote a *Perí mantikés* in five books, where the Stoic case in favour of divination was strongly articulated: it had a demonstrable influence on the arguments put forward by Quintus.³ There was also, as we shall see in more detail, a distinguished tradition of divinatory writings in Etruscan, which had been making an impact on divinatory practice in Rome, and was also becoming increasingly available in Latin translation by the mid-first century BCE: Aulus Caecina, a friend and political associate of Cicero, was central to that process.⁴ The emphasis on the translation of the discourse on divination from Etruscan into Latin is not merely a formal issue, but has significant conceptual implications. It is a dynamic of appropriation, and belongs within the wider process in which the hegemonic power in the Mediterranean

² For two recent and widely differing readings, cf. SANTANGELO 2013, 10-36 and WYNNE 2019, 182-278, both providing ample bibliography.

³ On Philochorus see FLOWER 2008, 52-53; on Posidonius see WARDLE 2006, 31-36. For a recent reassessment of the notion of «Hellenistic intellectual history» cf. STEVENS 2019, 6-16.

⁴ Cic. *Fam.* 6.6. Works on the Etruscan *disciplina* in Latin: see e.g. *Scholia Veronensia* on the *Aeneid*, 10.198; Plin. *Nat. Index*, Book 2; Amm. Marc. 25.2.7.

equips itself with a literary production in its own language that might compete in range and quality with the Greek literary tradition in that world.⁵

Yet concepts are affected by a degree of change and deformation as they are being translated. In the mid-first century BCE the great Epicurean poet Lucretius famously lamented the poverty of Latin when it came to handling complex philosophical problems.⁶ There are exceptions to that principle. In the opening chapter of the *De Diuinatione*, Cicero – speaking in a narratorial voice – notes that divination, *diuinitio*, is a ubiquitous and most ancient practice, and immediately reaches out for the equivalent Greek term, *mantike*; in the same breath, he notes its etymological connection with *manía* (madness, *furor*), which Plato among others had pointed out: a term that, taken at face value, seems to cast *diuinitio* within the remit of «natural, inspired divination», and does not do justice to the weight of artificial, technical divination.⁷ The Latin word itself, though, deserves close attention. Firstly because of its etymology, which establishes a connection with the gods – it is a craft that involves a conversation with the gods and an engagement with the signs they send, through a variety of methods; the implication is that divination comes from the gods. Secondly, because of what we know about its history: the word is not attested until Cicero's time (although in the opening chapter of the *De Diuinatione* it is made clear that it was coined by «the ancestors»); that is revealing of an intensification of efforts to define and discuss the problem. Thirdly, because of the parameters through which Cicero defines it: the presentiment and knowledge of the future. On the one hand, this preliminary definition places divination at the intersection between intuitive and formalised knowledge, and thus opens it to different possibilities and different modes of discourse. On the other hand, it seems to somewhat limit its scope: it restricts it to the future, without considering the possibility that divination might have a diagnostic value on the nature of past events (e.g. a prodigy) and of current occurrences (e.g. an augural sign). Yet this working definition is

⁵ FEENEY 2016 is essential reading.

⁶ Lucr. 1.139 (*egestatem linguae*), 1.832, 3.260 (*patrii sermonis egestas*).

⁷ Cic. *Div.* 1.1: *uetus opinio est iam usque ab heroicis ducta temporibus, eaque et populi Romani et omnium gentium firmata consensu, uersari quandam inter homines diuinationem, quam Graeci μαντική appellant, id est praesensionem et scientiam rerum futurarum. magna quaedam res et salutaris, si modo est ulla, quaque proxime ad deorum vim natura mortalis possit accedere. itaque ut alia nos melius multa quam Graeci, sic huic praestantissimae rei nomen nostri a diuis, Graeci, ut Plato interpretatur, a furore duxerunt.* («There is an ancient belief, which goes right back to heroic times and which is reinforced by the approbation both of the Roman people and of all peoples, that there is practised among mortals a kind of divination, which the Greeks call μαντική, that is a presentiment and knowledge of future things. It is a noble and beneficial thing, if in fact it exists, and one by which human nature is able to come closest to the power of the gods. So, just as we have done many other things better than the Greeks, so here our ancestors derived the term for this most excellent faculty from the gods (*diui*), but the Greeks, as Plato explains, from madness», Transl. D. Wardle).

further developed in later moments of the dialogue. When Quintus summarises his brief, he describes divination as the exploration of events that are deemed fortuitous, adding a crucial qualification between events which can be traced back to a clear sequence of causation and occurrences that elude a logical explanation (1.9): the implication of this approach is that no event is in fact fortuitous, and that a set of explanations, with varying degrees of strength and plausibility, can credibly be identified. This take on the problem is of course shaped by the Stoic conception of an overarching world order; it is, however, part of a discussion that is not confined to philosophical circles.

Divination and prediction are coterminous, and their boundaries are a matter of debate. Marcus himself comes back to that problem in the second book of *De Divinatione*, allowing for a clear status to crafts that are about the prediction of natural phenomena, such as meteorology, and divination. Their fundamental affinity, notably the reliance on a set of signs, is not directly confronted; the assumption is that the intrinsic value of those signs is different. This is, to be sure, a problem that pertains more broadly to any cultural and political setup in which divination has a central role: debates on what amounts to a genuine sign that deserves close engagement are a major feature of the circuit of consent and compliance that sustains that setup. The debate is not confined between those who support divination and those who do not – the position of Quintus and that of Marcus – but it unfolds first and foremost among those who subscribe to the importance of divination. The closing section of Quintus' case is especially significant in this connection for two key reasons (1.132): it identifies forms of divination that are not deemed acceptable (mostly because they are carried out by unofficially sanctioned practitioners: e.g. astrologers, dream interpreters, followers of the Egyptian goddess Isis), and it records a fundamental disagreement on the divinatory dimension of the augural craft. Some augurs regarded it as a form of prediction of the future, because in asserting the consent of the gods on an envisaged action it also entails a forecast on how it will end; others, like Marcus in *Div. 2*, argued that it has just a diagnostic value, and that it assesses the attitude of the gods at a specific point in time.⁸

2. SOURCES AND TEXTS

Much of the debate on augural matters that unfolded in the first century BCE took place through texts that were drafted by individuals directly involved with the practice of the

⁸ Cic. *Div.* 2.75-77.

lore. There is ample evidence for the existence of a vast body of writings that were produced in Rome in that period and confronted directly the problem of augury and its connection with auspicial matters, i.e. the rituals that were carried out before an important public action. This body of work, which has almost completely floundered, is part of a wider pattern of debating and writing about problems of public religion that marks this phase of Roman intellectual life.⁹ That is in turn part of a wider body of work in which the terms of any form of human intellectual activity undergo a new degree of critical scrutiny: a process that has alternatively been named as one of rationalisation or birth of critical thinking, and is best understood as the emergence of an increasingly complex and aware intellectual discourse. Cicero is an important and original voice in a considerably wider debate, and it is necessary not to uncritically accept the view that he might be typical of the view and attitudes of his time. His work on divination, however, has the unquestionable merit of drawing attention to the sheer range and complexity of divinatory practice in the first century BCE and of the key aspects of the debate about it, and conveying a sense of the range of options that were open to worshipers in that period. There is not a surviving work that encapsulates the ancient debates on divination and their stakes with comparable clarity and vigour. This presents a number of opportunities, which have partly been charted above, and reflects some underlying limitations: most of the surviving evidence for divinatory practice and discourses in the Roman world derives from literary texts and presents little information on matters of ritual.

The written material from which much of the core of our knowledge derives is also highly fragmentary. Cicero is (as in so many other respects) exceptional: his work on divination (unlike the slightly later dialogue on fate) has survived almost entirely. There are a number of clusters of textual evidence for Roman divination to which we have no access. In principle any public ritual that involved the resort to divination involved the production of a body of writing. Access to those writings was carefully policed: the texts on which the priestly colleges based their decisions were under the control of the college, and their access was – as far as we can tell – precluded to non-members. Yet conversations on matters of priestly technical expertise could and did occur: both in public venues – whether in the Senate or in the hearing of cases before the pontifical college, as in Cicero's speech *De Domo Sua* (delivered in September 57 BCE) – and in informal settings. It is unclear to what extent

⁹ MACRAE 2016, esp. on the notion of «legible religion». Cf. RÜPKE 2012; MOATTI 1995 (Engl. transl. 2015). SCHEID 1994 remains essential reading on priestly books in Rome and on the deep historiographical tradition on the problem, to which the papers collected in the first section of MOATTI 1998 (*Les documents sacerdotaux*) are a major addition.

the literature on divinatory and augural matters that was produced in the late Republican period shed light on that level of knowledge. The careful interplay and balance between secrecy and indiscretion points to a scenario in which divinatory expertise is widely, if unevenly distributed across the political and social elite. That is in keeping with the structure itself of a system of priesthoods that operate as colleges – that is as boards of experts – and with the centrality of divination to the running of the Roman polity, as a key factor in bringing about and establishing the conditions in which public decisions and actions can be taken.

To sketch one possible scenario: if a prodigy was noticed in the territory of an Italian community, it was reported to the Roman Senate, which would discuss it, possibly in some detail, and would then deliberate on appropriate ritual action, which would typically be entrusted to a priestly college, in turn to be tasked with its interpretation and with the decision of how to expiate it. A number of priests would also be members of the Senate, and would take a leading role in the intervening debate; this interaction between Senate and priestly colleges had both an informal dimension and formal one to it, and involved the exchange of written texts to accompany and validate the rituals that are performed. A trace of these transactions survived in the official records of the Senate, and eventually made its way into the historical tradition, which was heavily preoccupied with the running of the Roman polity: much of the historiography that was produced in Republican Rome is historiography of senators, who resort to historical writing as an avenue of explanation for the wider political experience of their time.¹⁰ The most detailed account of how this process operated is in Livy's large-scale history of Rome, the *Ab Urbe condita libri*, written in the Augustan period, between the late first century BCE and the early first century CE, where the involvement of the Senate and the priesthoods in the expiation of prodigies is carefully recorded in the accounts of a number of years. What tends to prevail in Livy's narrative, though, is a summary, rather than a thick description of the rituals that were carried out;¹¹ what interests him is the overview of the handling of religious affairs in the city, through which he develops a wider account of its political and moral welfare.¹² There are important details that elude us: the timing of prodigy expiations, which Livy tends to group in one batch at the start of each year, as a precondition to the running of public affairs; and the historical development of the prodigy system, which in a well-known passage Livy regards

¹⁰ LA PENNA 1978, 43-104.

¹¹ On the unviability of «thick descriptions» in the study of Roman religion cf. CHAMPION 2017, 66, 176.

¹² See the careful and extensive readings in LEVENE 1993 and DAVIES 2004, 21-142.

as a declining practice in the final part of the Republic – although the very loss of his late Republican books prevents us from putting that contention to the test.

What survives of Livy does not contain any direct quotation from the expert responses that the priestly colleges gave to the Senate: not a single quotation from the Sibylline Books, and not a single extract from the responses produced by the haruspices, the group of diviners that advised the Roman government by resorting to divinatory lore of Etruscan origin, centred around the reading of lightning and of sacrificial techniques. In fact, no ancient source preserves the names of individual haruspices that advised the Roman government in the Republican period; only the names of those who acted on behalf of prominent individuals such as Gaius Gracchus, Sulla, or Julius Caesar, are recorded. The only instance in which part of the ruling of the haruspices on a prodigy survives through a speech of Cicero, the *De haruspicum responso*, delivered in 56 BCE, in which he discusses at some length the interpretation of a prodigy, offering a set of counterarguments to the use that his rival Clodius had made of it. What survives is not a complete text: Cicero extracts the sections of the response that interest him, and of which he provides a unilateral reading.¹³ Three points stand out: the language of the response is densely implicated with the political and intellectual debate of the time, and so are the reactions to it. It is debatable whether it was originally produced in Etruscan or turned into Latin at a later stage; it makes reference to *optimates* and the need for political concord; yet it retains a vagueness that makes it politically contested. The intrinsic value of the haruspical response is not contested. It is the starting point for an argument on its proper interpretation, and competing readings are put forward, and yet another example is given of the need for a wide distribution of expertise and knowledge, which did not implicate just the senatorial order.

An aspect of the expertise of the haruspices had to do with the sky and its phenomena; textual evidence for divinatory craft is sometimes to be sought in surprising places. The Byzantine writer John Lydus preserved a translation of a handbook for the interpretation of thunder on a calendrical basis, the so-called «Brontosopic Calendar»: to each day corresponded a different interpretation of a thunder that was heard on it.¹⁴ This remarkable compilation went back to an Etruscan original, was translated into Latin by P. Nigidius Figulus, a mid-first century BCE senator with remarkably broad intellectual interests, and was eventually turned into a Greek version that met the interest of a number of readers

¹³ What survives of the response has been gathered, translated and discussed in NORTH 2000, 47. In general on the speech and its outlook see CORBEILL 2010; BEARD 2012; SANTANGELO 2013, 98-107; CORBEILL 2018; CAIRO 2020.

¹⁴ Edited, with extensive commentary, in MACINTOSH TURFA 2012.

through Antiquity down to the early Byzantine period.¹⁵ We cannot tell for certain how it may have been used in ritual contexts, but it does shed light upon a level of divinatory activity that relied heavily on a body of text: practitioners had to be taught how to make use of this material, and how to negotiate their margins of freedom with the need to comply with and further validate the long-standing tradition that informed that text. The lore that was enshrined in it was teachable, and for that very reason was open to debate and contestation. Haruspical lore – the *disciplina Etrusca* – was by definition polycentric: that character chimed with the lack of a central political authority in the Etruscan world, and further resonated with the apparent decision of the Roman government not to create an official body of haruspices entrusted with the interactions with Roman authorities. There is no compelling reason to assume that there was only one brontosopic calendar in circulation at any given time. This lack of a single centre of authority also opened up valuable opportunities to extend the range and remit of haruspicy. There is a clear shift in Republican history from mere involvement with the interpretation of prodigies to the production of prophetic responses, and the evidence of the writings of the land-surveyors shows that haruspices could also be involved with the division and assignment of land.¹⁶

A common thread can be identified, though: haruspicy is preoccupied with events that pertain to the sky, notably lightning and thunder, and operates on the working principle that the sky is divided into regions, each one under the control of a god. This cosmological vision is a powerful instance of the lines of contact between divination and astrology – in antiquity the distinction between astrology and astronomy is anachronistic – and also impinges on another major dimension of haruspicy, that of sacrifice. The inscribed bronze that was discovered near Piacenza in 1877 is a model of the liver of a sheep, which the haruspex consulted when he saw anomalies in the shape of the organ of a victim: if a liver had an irregular shape, the model instructed the sacrificer on which god pertained to the affected part, and on that basis suitable ritual action could be recommended or taken. Hepatoscopy is of course attested well beyond Central Italy, and brings together various strands of divinatory practice across the ancient Mediterranean. In Rome it was crucially mediated by the Etruscan experience and by the formalised body of knowledge that it generated, which was largely channelled by a vast body of technical literature. Postulating a straightforward transfer of knowledge from Etruria to Rome, maybe as a result of the Roman conquest, would be simplistic: Etruscan elements are strongly implicated with the

¹⁵ On Nigidius see VOLK 2017, 329-334, 342-347.

¹⁶ Frontin, *De limit.* 8.23-29 Campbell.

early history of Rome. Only a small fraction of what was produced survives, but there is no serious doubt that the bulk of haruspical practice was based on a set of written lore, which was carefully codified and transmitted. That was probably one of the factors that made its integration within the workings of the Roman government so appealing: although it did have a prophetic dimension, it was a far cry from inspired divination and the risks it presented.

Under the Republic haruspicy is certainly an elite practice, albeit one with a clear performative dimension.¹⁷ Other forms of divinatory practice in the Roman world also relied on the textual dimension, including some that existed beyond privileged circles. Cleromancy knew a strong development across the Roman world, in a sheer variety of contexts, and relied by its very nature on a body of written material and its proper interpretation. There is evidence for it in Rome: Quintus makes a scathing reference to *sortilegi* that operate in the city and offer their craft for a fee:¹⁸ an attitude that he regards with hostility even before probing its intrinsic value – divinatory knowledge is so valuable that no price can be attached to it. A number of shrines in peninsular Italy offered access to cleromantic advice, and the archaeological evidence sheds light both on the workings of the ritual (a number of *sortes* do survive) and on its reach and success. The most striking case is that of the ancient temple of *Fortuna Primigenia* at Praeneste, which went through a major expansion between second and early first century BCE. Although Marcus claims that by his time only the populace frequented it (2.86), there is little doubt that it was a significant force in the religious landscape of late Hellenistic Italy. The connection between cleromancy and text is even more powerfully apparent in some later material from imperial sanctuaries in Asia Minor, especially south-western Anatolia, such as Kremna, Perge, or Termessos, where remarkable inscriptions list the dozens of responses that were each associated to a specific combination yielded by the ἀστρογάλαοι. The scenarios it points towards speak of the worries and hopes of a broad base of questioners: they provide unmatched insights into the approaches to risk and uncertainty.¹⁹

Divinatory handbooks are attested in a number of contexts in the Roman world; their very existence in the hands of a practitioner must have been an invaluable token of authority. It is quite possible that in a number of cases a handbook would have encouraged independent solutions: the well-known list of the *sortes Astrampsychi* (see *infra*), for

¹⁷ For a recent revisionist discussion see BERTHELET 2020.

¹⁸ Cic. *Div.* 1.132.

¹⁹ See the important discussion in BEARD 2011, 101-104.

example, can be used by anyone who might be familiar with his convoluted, but not especially complex operating rules.

3. PRACTITIONERS

Postulating a neat separation between cleromancy and other forms of divination would be misguided: a relief from Ostia portrays a local notable, C. Fulvius Salvis, as he is performing a cleromantic ritual; yet the title with which he refers to himself is *haruspex*.²⁰ This inscription from the early first century BCE is a rather exceptional occurrence for the Republican period, when the identities and backgrounds of most practitioners of divination are mostly obscured from view. The Principate witnesses a shift in the so-called epigraphic habit: a significantly larger body of inscriptional material is produced across the Roman Empire, and we receive a much more granular knowledge of the divinatory practice, and of its extent and reach. There are attestations of dozens of haruspices and augurs across the provincial communities, especially in the Western part of the empire, and their status is formally regulated in the charters that establish the framework in which those polities work.²¹ Yet we know precious little about the terms of their ritual involvement and of the ways in which they engaged with bodies of pre-existing traditions. We have no way of knowing how the lore of the haruspices was codified in the cities of Cisalpine Gaul or North Africa, nor in what respects Cornelius, the augur of Patavium (modern Padua, Livy's hometown) who predicted the victory of Caesar in the civil war against Pompey was the practitioner of a craft that differed from the augury that was practiced in Rome.²²

In the city of Rome the priesthoods had long been embedded within the institutional framework of the political community. The modalities through which they were included largely elude us, and are embedded within the body of traditions on early Rome. Most of the members of the main priestly colleges (the augurs, the (*quin*)*decemviri s.f.*, the pontiffs) were senators; at a minimum, they belonged to families of senatorial status. The status implications of priestly membership were considerable, not least because of the degree of public visibility it entailed; they were lifetime offices, which were not subject to any real public scrutiny, although they no doubt involved a substantial degree of peer pressure. Their collegiate dimension is fully in keeping with a political model in which power is distributed across the political elite, and its prime reward lies in the ability to block

²⁰ *CIL* 1.3027, with SANTANGELO 2013, 77-79, 268.

²¹ HAACK 2003. On haruspices in the Imperial army see also WHEELER 2008, 189-191.

²² Obs. 65a.

initiatives that may be unwelcome: in a different context, the power of veto of the tribunes of the plebs is a full illustration of this principle. The access to priesthoods, however, undergoes a substantial change between second and first century BCE: it shifts from co-optation to election from a part of the citizen body, and its access is ensured only by a skilful approach to the creation of consensus.²³ As a civil war is building up and the conquest of Gaul has just been brought to completion, in 50 BCE, Julius Caesar finds the time to go to Cisalpine Gaul to campaign for the election to the augurate of his ally Mark Antony.²⁴ Imperial patronage is crucial to the access to priesthoods, and the emperor secures control over the workings of the priestly colleges both by becoming a member and by securing the accession of people who will be loyal to him: yet the colleges remain significantly involved with the running of public ritual. What changes is the nature of the matters on which their views are sought: the control that the emperor has over senatorial debates reduces the margin for the emergence of potentially controversial issues.²⁵

Individual diviners are mostly to be seen in non-public setups. The haruspices are a possible exception: we know of a number of haruspices who appear to have acted by themselves, typically by performing sacrifices on behalf of a Roman magistrate. That aspect of their craft has a clear performative value, and, whilst requiring a considerable degree of expertise, takes place in plain sight: the scope for falsification and fraudulent interpretation is arguably narrower than it would be in matters for which the interpretation of a complex and recondite point of sacred law is required. The critical statement of Quintus Cicero that was mentioned above (*Div.* 1.132) pointedly refers to marginal, if probably intensively frequented contexts: the street corner or the Circus. Among the craftsmen mentioned by Quintus there are astrologers, who are attested in Rome since the second century BCE, and were at the receiving end of ill-attested repressive actions on more than one occasion: they are tellingly referred to as *Chaldaei*, a label that refers to the origins of their lore rather than to their ethnic provenance. Yet it is clear that the rise of astrology at Rome is a by-product of the Empire and of the deep integration of much of the Roman intellectual discourse with the Hellenistic context. A number of members of the senatorial order are known to have taken a keen interest in astrology, including the controversial consul C. Octavius, who lost his life in the civic strife of 87 BCE, and on whom some astrology charts were found.²⁶ Hostility towards astrology in senatorial circles may be justified, rather by generic charges

²³ Evidence and detailed discussion in NORTH 2011.

²⁴ [Caes.] *BG* 8.50.

²⁵ SANTANGELO 2016.

²⁶ Plut. *Mar.* 42.4-5.

of foreignness, by its sheer inconsistency with the bulk of the divinatory processes framed in Roman public religion: it is not about taking ritual action in response to divine signs, whether unsolicited or sought, but it is about drawing up predictions on the future on the basis of a set of conditions that are available to empirical and expert observation – it is intrinsically deterministic and prescriptive, and poses real challenges to the scope of ritual action and human agency. It also puts under barely sustainable stress a political and religious order that is predicated on the sharing of authority and expertise. Unsurprisingly, then, it falls into sharper focus when a number of monarchic options emerge. Astrologers are present at the courts of Augustus and Tiberius; later emperors show an increasingly strong interest in containing the practice of astrology in private contexts, ever mindful of the threats that it could pose to established power narratives.

Matters, however, can be somewhat more complex. The first instance in which astrology emerges as part of the mainstream of the public religious discourse coincides with a major, highly specialised debate on the management of public time emerges: when Julius Caesar, in his capacity as *pontifex maximus*, embarks on research into the reform of the calendar, which will lead to the establishment of a year of fixed duration (365 days and $\frac{1}{4}$), he seeks the advice of the astrologer Sosigenes.²⁷ Moreover, astrology was not the only kind of divination that showed a strong interest in the framing and the overall direction of time. In the first century BCE the haruspices were looking out for signs of the end of an age (*saeculum*) and the beginning of a new one, and in 88 and in 43 BCE (two pivotal years, in so many respects) emphatic public claims were made to that effect.²⁸ They could be read as religious as well as political statements, and presented the very tangible possibility of a not too distant end of the world, but they were couched in the observation of the movement of celestial bodies. Curtailing and harnessing these discourses and their potential was a crucial priority for the new monarchic regime; their abolition, however, was never a viable option.

4. TECHNIQUES

It is possible to speak of Roman divination as a set of formalised and contested techniques: against that background, it is fairly commonplace to draw a distinction between unsolicited and solicited signs, taking up a claim that is already made in some ancient sources. The distinction between natural and artificial divination is also an ancient one, on which Cicero

²⁷ Plin. *Nat.* 18.211-212.

²⁸ Plut. *Sull.* 7.3-5 (88 BCE); Serv. *Ecl.* 9.46-47 (= Augustus, *FRHist* 60 F1).

insists at some length in the *De Divinatione*, but carries limited analytical value.²⁹ The difference between *signa oblatiua* and *impetratiua* may also be effectively deconstructed, but does alert us to the range and complexity of the techniques involved in the reading of divinatory signs. The unsolicited signs that present themselves are fundamentally of two kinds: prodigies, i.e. extraordinary occurrences that are regarded as supernatural and as signs of divine wrath or discontent, which require expiation, or augural signs that are detected when no ritual observation is taking place, and require immediate and appropriate action. Of course the choice of whether to report a prodigy is always the outcome of a relatively complex process of scrutiny and debate, which involves the possibility that an event may not be recognised as a prodigy after all. Once a prodigy is identified as such, it is customary for the Senate to seek the advice of more than one set of religious experts, always in the context of collegiate setups – the Sibylline Books may be opened as the views of the haruspices are also being sought.³⁰ This is the level of Roman divination in which the deployment of text is most prominent and consistent, and the whole set of interactions between Senate and priests takes place through written exchanges.

Solicited signs belong to two fundamental remits, which we have already touched upon in other connections: sacrifice and augury. The reading of the entrails of sacrificial victims is a widely attested practice across the ancient Mediterranean: it is in its own right a form of textual practice, which involves the reading of a set of signs on the basis of a traditional lore and shared intellectual premises. The typical outcome of a ritual of extispicy is a validation of the envisaged action – but the entrails of the victim might fail to yield a clear endorsement, a *litatio*, and a number of sacrifices might be needed before a positive outcome occurs.³¹ The handling of that situation could open a series of outcomes, including the decision to stop the envisaged action; the sacrifice was also a performative experience, albeit one in which a considerable degree of formalised expertise was fed, and the interaction between sacrificer, magistrate, and indeed those who attended the sacrifice was not a foregone conclusion. Moreover, there was the possibility of an opposite scenario: an ordinary sacrifice yielding an outcome that portended great things for the sacrificer. Augury revolved around the scrutiny of a portion of the sky, watching for the flight of some birds or listening for the sounds that they produced at particular moments: those patterns of movement or sound were subject to specific interpretation by a college of priests, who then ruled on whether the action was viable or not. A later development of the augural ritual

²⁹ Cic. *Div.* 1.34, 1.72, 2.26-27.

³⁰ Prodigy reporting and expiation: NORTH 1967, 476-595; ROSENBERGER 2007; SATTERFIELD 2012.

³¹ On *litatio* see DRIEDIGER MURPHY 2019b, 183-186, with ample bibliography.

involved feeding chickens with grain and establishing whether the chicken ate or not, in highly contrived conditions, strongly leading to a foregone outcome. It was a ritual that had built into it the likelihood of an outcome.³²

Augury, however, also involved engaging with signs that presented themselves unexpectedly: under specific circumstances a magistrate could state that he had seen an augural sign in the sky, and require that the envisaged action be postponed to another day. Again, the conclusion of that performative action, which could be based on an appeal to precedent, and could at the same time be regarded as a fraudulent or manipulative initiative, was the outcome of a process that was negotiated and disorderly at the same time, and was open to a range of scenarios. This is arguably the single aspect of Roman divination in which a deep connection with the political dimension is most apparent.³³ Just as augural rituals are central to the running of the Roman polity, their preparation, performance, and reception are matters of political controversy – although they should not primarily be understood through the prism of Roman politics. It is also worth bearing in mind that augural lore is more than the reading of augural signs; it is also about carrying out rituals of consecration that preside over the definition and management of sacred space.

On the fringes of those practices, there are dreams, which hardly ever feature in public divinatory practice, but can sometimes enter the official discourse, most notably in the case of Caecilia Metella in 90 BCE, and can feature prominently in the political discourse (to quote two well-known Republican examples: Gaius Gracchus told his associates about conferring with his brother in his dreams; Sulla wrote of nocturnal visitations from the goddess Bellona).³⁴ They share a superficial similarity with astrology, which revolves in fact on a much more complex set of expertise and knowledge: it typically relies on individual diviners, rather than on experts acting as members of a college, and has a strong performative dimension, which relies on orality, rather than on the production of texts.

5. DISTINCTIVE ASPECTS

Much of the discussion developed in this paper has been concentrating on the public sphere. That is not just a function of space constraints. It is also a reflection of a key original feature

³² The key source is Cic. *Div.* 2.71-74, with DRIEDIGER-MURPHY 2019a, 108-119.

³³ The reference discussion remains LINDERSKI 1986. DRIEDIGER-MURPHY 2019a is an important exploration of the theological underpinnings of the augural lore; cf. BERTHELET 2015 on auspicial matters.

³⁴ Caecilia Metella: Cic. *Div.* 1.104. Gaius Gracchus: *Div.* 1.56 (= Coelius Antipater, *FRHist* 15 F 49). Sulla and Bellona: Plut. *Sull.* 9.7-8, with 27.13 (= *FRHist* 22 F 24); cf. 6.4 on his warning to Lucullus on the importance of heeding the divine instructions conveyed in dreams.

of Roman divination: it is central to the running of the Roman polity, and a significant share of the political elite is directly involved with its management. Without the performance of frequent, consistent, and predictable divinatory rituals, the very cycle on which the governance of the *res publica* is predicated (elections, Senate meetings, censuses, army levies) could not possibly unfold. Moreover, the performance of certain divinatory rituals can actually ground the whole *res publica* to a halt: most notably, augural rituals that yield signs of divine hostility and sacrifices that keep revealing signs of divine hostility or concern. The potential disruptiveness of Roman divination in the political domain is a long-standing feature of Roman history: the fact that it hardly ever brought the political cycle to a halt does not mean that this was not possible, and that this possibility was not acutely felt across Roman society. The centrality of Roman divination to the political process is not a symptom of its marginality or subalternity to politics, or indeed of widespread appetite for its harnessing and manipulation, which betrays a sceptical or cynical outlook: to the contrary, it is a powerful sign of its hegemonic force.

This is a distinctive aspect of Roman divination and its relationship with the wider political and social context. The range of the involvement of the political elite in divinatory practice also stands out as a distinctive feature, which is predicated on a clear understanding of the connection between divination and power, and on an earnest attempt to mitigate the risks that it presents. Recognising the importance of public divination in the Roman world should not overshadow the significance and reach of divinatory practice in private contexts, for which the evidence is both sparser and usually more technically demanding – as it involves making sense of difficult, sometimes fragmentary epigraphical texts or of bemusing compilations like the *sortes Astrampsychi*, which convey instructions to the enquirer on the basis of complex (and ostensibly arbitrary) numerical correlations between written questions and written answers, or the palmomantic handbooks that attribute meanings to the spontaneous twitching of various body parts.³⁵ Yet this complex and diverse body of material intersects with the evidence for public divination in a number of productive ways. Firstly, it corroborates the wider point on the pervasiveness of divination as a strategy for the engagement with the gods, the prediction of the future, and the containment and control of risk; rather than being a more genuine form of religious engagement, private divination belongs in the same background of shared assumptions and practices than the public one.

³⁵ See respectively NAETHER 2010 and COSTANZA 2009.

I would like to put forward, by way of conclusion, three themes that play a distinctive and productive role in Roman divination, and are surely of wider import. The first one is the tension between divination and material gain: that is actually an area in which some discrepancy between private and public practice may be posited. There is a powerful strand of criticism of divinatory activity that is carried out for money; that is most apparent in Cicero's *De Divinatione*, where the need to protect divination from material gain is explicitly asserted.³⁶ On the other hand, we do know that a number of diviners did offer their trade for a fee, and we are equally well informed on the fact that queries on financial matters were frequently presented in private contexts. The fit between divination and wealth is never a fully resolved one: it presents uncomfortable, if not always explicit questions on the value of divinatory knowledge.

The second set of problems stems from recent debates on the nature itself of divinatory knowledge and on some ancient debates about it. In a recent book the relationship between divination and intuition has received close consideration, and the attractive proposal has been made to understand divination in terms of «surplus knowledge»: that is, in P. Struck's terms, the quantum of knowledge that does not arrive via the discursive thought processes of which we are aware, and over which we have self-conscious control».³⁷ On this reading, divination is part of the history of knowledge, or indeed of the attempts to think about the parameters and boundaries of human knowledge. That is undoubtedly an important angle, which does receive attention from Plato, Aristotle, Posidonius, Iamblichus, and other thinkers whose works survive in highly fragmentary form. It sets out to be an all-encompassing line of explanation.

The relationship with divinatory practice, however, is worth probing further: it remains to be seen whether those who engaged in a divinatory ritual had some awareness that they were actually seeking a form of knowledge that was already accessible to them in some way, or whether there existed different levels of awareness among those who carried out those rituals. A possible way forward may come from a possible empirical clue. Etruscan haruspices regarded the growth of a part of the liver of a sheep as a bad sign. A recent study has drawn attention to an empirical, factual circumstance: the anomalies in the shape of a sheep liver are a symptom of the contagion of a gastrointestinal parasite like the *fasciola hepatica*, which affects sheep, then other livestock and cattle, and is then passed on to humans, with a longer incubation period.³⁸ A growth on a sheep liver can therefore be seen

³⁶ Cic. *Div.* 1.92, 1.132, 2.85. On divination and profit in the Roman world see SANTANGELO 2017.

³⁷ STRUCK 2016, 15.

³⁸ MACINTOSH TURFA - GETTYS 2009. Cf. also HARRISON-TURFA 2010.

a sign of an imminent epidemic – and, more generally, of impending disaster. The observation of a liver that shows the symptoms of a parasitic infection is therefore the gateway to a form of surplus knowledge that has very tangible practical rewards. This line of explanation may fairly be regarded as overly deterministic, and is not explicitly corroborated by any ancient source. More importantly, I would maintain that seeking a single explanation for a complex set of practices like divination is hardly a helpful route. Yet there is more than we can learn from the intersections of the study of divination with the study of cognition and with the natural sciences.

Thirdly, on a more positive note, Roman divination exposes us to a problem that must surely be of wider applicability to the study of divination in any historical setting: the textual dimension is an important feature, but is by no means exclusive or necessarily dominant. It presents us with the rough edge of the tension between orthopraxy and belief:³⁹ between the scrupulous performance of established rituals on which there is reasonably well-established consensus and the belief in their fundamental ability to establish a dialogue with the gods and affect their will. This remains the battleground among students of divinatory practice in the Roman world: the problem it entails takes us to the crossroads between the public and the private dimension, between the collective and the individual, the central and the marginal. Roman divination stands out as a powerful illustration of how the wide and deep reach of divination is never decoupled from a widely held consensus on its significance and intrinsic value. The next step of the process is to identify the various layers of assent and engagement that made up that general consensus, and to establish how it was variously determined on geographical, chronological, cultural, or indeed cognitive grounds. Establishing wider connections will always entail going back to specific clusters of evidence and to carefully defined problems. On this level, then, we are faced with an unlikely analogy between the principles of historical research and those of divinatory practice – an avenue that takes us back to the relationship between divination and the past. But that would have to be a different paper altogether.

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³⁹ Cf. SCHEID 2005; ANDO 2009.

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