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Part I

An introduction to ancient divination
Divination was omnipresent in the ancient world: ‘If the ancient Mediterranean world was full of gods, it was full of their messages as well.’ The mindset of ancient individuals might even be described as a state of ‘omen-mindedness’, as is testified by the amount and nature of the ancient evidence.² We know that everyone – from king to slave – was a potential user of divination. Public (official) and pri-

1 D.E. Aune et al., ‘Divination and prophecy’ in: S.I. Johnston (ed.), Religions of the ancient world: a guide (Cambridge, MA 2004) 370-391, at 371. ‘[…] it was full of their signs as well’ would be more appropriate. After all, the sign is the occurrence produced by the supernatural, as perceived by man. Cf. below for the crucial role of man in the recognition and interpretation of a sign (which then becomes a message).

2 The term was coined by S. Freedman in: If a city is set on a height: the Akkadian omen series Šumma alu ina mêlê šakin, 2 vols (Philadelphia 1998-2006) Vol. 1, 1. The word ‘omen’ is not used in what follows because I consider the meaning of this word to be too restricted (in Graeco-Roman studies it usually refers to unprovoked signs only) and also too wide (it can refer to a text as well as to a sign in Assyriological studies). Instead, I have opted to use ‘sign’. I have still quoted the expression ‘omen-mindedness’ here because it so neatly captures the state of mind ancient individuals must have been in, in order to perceive the signs from the supernatural (cf. pp. 38-39).
private (unofficial) divination, with or without an expert, was very common. If an expert was used, individuals would consult a local expert or travel great distances in order to satisfy their need for expertise.\(^3\)

The principal focus of this study is divination in Greece and – to a lesser extent – in Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia and the Roman Republic, but modern scholarship covers virtually all areas for which

ancient sources are available.  

Recent additions to the scholarship of ancient divination other than Greek, Roman or Mesopotamian are many and varied. The following serves merely to give an impression: there is a plethora of literature on the subject of Chinese divination, mainly concerned with oracle bones, but also with geomancy and divination by dice. See for example R.J. Smith, *Fortune-tellers and philosophers: divination in traditional Chinese society* (Boulder 1991); D.N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang history: the oracle-bone inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley 1978). On cleromancy see M.E. Lewis, *Dicing and divination in Early China* (Philadelphia 2002). The prophets of the ancient Levant have also been extensively researched. For an interesting comparison between biblical prophets and their non-biblical counterparts: L.L. Grabbe, *Priests, prophets, diviners, sages: a socio-historical study of religious specialists in ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, FA 1995); J. Blenkinsopp, *Sage, priest, prophet: religious and intellectual leadership in ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY 1995); J.G. Gammie & L.G. Perdue (eds), *The sage in Israel and the ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IND 1990). Further studies on ancient Israel and its neighbours: C. Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: a means of revelation in ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IND 1997); F.H. Cryer, *Divination in ancient Israel and its Near Eastern environment: a socio-historical investigation* (Sheffield 1994); A. Jeffers, *Magic and divination in ancient Palestine and Syria* (Leiden 1996). Egyptian divination is an under-developed area of research. However, there is an excellent overview article: A. von Lieven, ‘Divination in Ägypten’, *AoF* 26 (1999) 77-126. One area which has recently been investigated in depth is divination by dreams: K. Szpakowska, *Behind closed eyes: dreams and nightmares in ancient Egypt* (Swansea 2003). Divination among the Hittites became an area of investigation in the latter half of the last century. For a main overview and further references see Th.P.J. van der Hout, ‘Orakel (Oracle). B.
Past Scholarship

During the past 120 years, ancient historians have produced a large number of studies of Greek and Roman divination – these have been discussed together as well as separately. Their efforts are paralleled by those of many colleagues in the field of Assyriology who have built extensive datasets about Mesopotamian divination since the late 1890s. Nevertheless, the study of the phenomenon in the fields of ancient history and Assyriology has developed in a relatively isolated fashion: interpretations and conceptualizations of divination have only incidentally been passed on from scholars of the Graeco-Roman world to Assyriologists, and vice-versa. Fortunately, there are indications that this is changing. I refer to publications such as A. Annus (ed.), *Divination and interpretation of signs in the ancient world* (Chicago 2010), *passim*. See also K. Beerden, ‘Review of: “Divination and interpretation of signs in the ancient world”’, *BMCR* 2011.01.32 (see http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2011/2011-01-32.html [visited 27-07-2011]).
these fields of research. In what follows I shall offer a brief chronological synthesis of these developments, with the dual aim of highlighting current issues and identifying relatively unexplored roads in the study of divination.

Divination has invited analysis ever since Antiquity. The earliest surviving treatise containing extensive reflections on this topic is Cicero’s *De divinatione*, which is primarily concerned with, what were to him familiar, Roman practices. His influence on the classification of divinatory methods and his reflection on the validity of divination are still clearly visible today. A limited but steady output of scholarly works on divination in the Graeco-Roman world and beyond can be observed throughout the ages, reaching a peak during the Renaissance. A few hundred years later, in a response

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6 I can only mention a small number of works dealing with or referring to divination in the period from Augustine to Auguste Bouché-Leclercq here. Some of these works do not deal specifically with *ancient* divination, but nevertheless are illustrative of a growing interest in the study and discussion of divination in the fifteenth century and thereafter. Augustine, *Confessio*nes, Books 3 and 4 (note especially the foretelling dream God sent to Augustine’s mother in Book 3 and the dismissal of astrology by Augustine in Book 4); G. Savonarola, *Tractato contra li astrologi* (Florence ca. 1495?); L. Daneau, *De veneficis, quos olim sortilegos, nunc autem vulgo sortiarios vocant, dialogus* (Geneva 1574); H. de Pisis, *Fasciculus geomanticus, in quo varia variorum opera geomantica continentur* . (Leiden 1637); K. Peucer, *Commentarius de praecipuis divinationum generibus* (Wittenberg 1553); J. Raunce, *A brief declaration against judicial astrologie or, the diabolical art of astrologie opened, arraigned, and condemned* (London 1650);
to the innovations introduced by nineteenth-century scholarship, the study of divination was reinvigorated and a major publication appeared: Auguste Bouché-Leclercq’s *Histoire de la divination dans l’antiquité*. The aim of this author was to obtain an insight into ancient mindsets by studying divinatory methods and practices in great detail, in the process of which he collected a huge amount of source material, paying particular attention to the experts involved in the divinatory process. In his work, he performed any past and present modern student of divination a great service. In fact, his work has recently been reprinted and can still be considered to be the standard work on Graeco-Roman divination.

Since the very beginnings of the discipline of Assyriology, many of its scholars have occupied themselves with the study of divination. In his *The religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, appearing less than a decade after the *Histoire de la divination*, Morris Jastrow presents one of the first great Assyriological overviews.


M. Jastrow, *The religion of Babylonia and Assyria* (Boston 1898)
One of the 20th-century scholars who followed up on Bouché-Leclercq’s work, William Halliday, approached the topic from a different angle, emphasizing the development of the particular divinatory methods in the contexts of ‘positive magic’ and irrational practices, even though divination was seen to be founded on intelligible foundations: by means of divination, humans struggled against uncertainty. After Halliday, a relative silence fell among ancient historians until the 1950s.

Developments in the field of Assyriology continued: Georges Contenau’s important publication reflects the developments in scholarship in general and more specifically those in Assyriology. The great scholar of the generation after Contenau, A. L. Oppenheim, produced a number of sophisticated, innovative articles in which he both published cuneiform tablets and also contextualized these texts. The early 1960s witnessed a renewed Assyriological interest in 328-407.

9  W.R. Halliday, Greek divination: a study of its methods and principles (Chicago 1913).
10  G. Contenau, La divination chez les Assyriens et les Babyloniens (Paris 1940).
divination, culminating in a *Rencontre* on divination held in 1965.\(^{12}\)

It should be noted that during these years, many Assyriologists tended to give priority to the publication of the cuneiform tablets rather than to the analysis of their contents in a social context. Still, as a result of a steady output of publications, transliterations and translations of individual tablets, a solid foundation for the study of divinatory practices was built up in discipline of Assyriology – and the corpus of texts continues to expand each year as there is still an abundance of unpublished materials available.

In the course of the last sixty-five years or so, Greek and Roman epigraphic evidence – for example in the shape of materials from oracle sites – has also become more widely available, thereby providing new possibilities for research.\(^{13}\) Not only have in-depth studies about particular divinatory methods begun to appear, but rather more gen-

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Archiv für Orientforschung series. For an overview of Mesopotamian divination and its materials, one can turn to: S.M. Maul, ‘Omina und Orakel. A. Mesopotamien’, *RLA* 10 (2006) 45-88. In the present work, literature mainly concerned with divination in the Old Babylonian period has not been taken into account, unless it serves to illustrate the practices we find in the Neo-Assyrian period or when it includes analyses of both periods.

12 The publication resulting from the 1965 *Rencontre*, the annual meeting of Assyriologists, is: Nougayrol, *La divination en Mésopotamie ancienne*.

eral works of a systematic and critical nature have also been published. An empirical and evolutionary approach to divination has given way to a more analytical view. Scholars used to see divination as a speculative practice, but they have now begun to perceive it as a rational system: in Jean-Pierre Vernant’s collection of essays titled *Divination et rationalité*, divination was, for the first time, explicitly studied as such by both ancient historians and Assyriologists. The publication of this book marks an important watershed in the study of divination because it heralds a key change in attitude. Whereas divination had generally been considered an ‘irrational’ feature of religious life, which could not be fully understood by modern man, it was now emphatically being seen as a practice inviting rational


15 J.P. Vernant et al. (eds), *Divination et rationalité* (Paris 1974).
analysis. This change in emphasis and approach is striking and has produced a renewed output of publications approaching divination in relation to such topics as ancient philosophy, warfare and politics.

THE PRESENT REVIVAL

In recent years another revival of the study of classical, primarily Greek, divination has been taking shape. This trend is exemplified by the articles brought together by Sarah Iles Johnston and Peter Struck in their publication *Mantikê*.

Johnston’s views on what she considers to be a general dearth of classical scholarship on divination and the reason for the current revitalization, are intriguing because of the shift in views about divination she has deduced. Her argument is that initially divination could not profit from the rising interest in Greek religion because it has often been, and sometimes still is, classified as ‘magic’ (my inverted commas). This classification tied in nicely with the idea which saw divination as an ‘irrational’ practice. Since ‘magic’ did not become a mainstream research area until the 1960s, scholarship on divination remained scarce. Even in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when ‘magic’ became more popular, divi-

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nation remained under-examined because it was not a ‘dark enough’ topic for those interested in ‘magic’. Recently, the view that research into ‘magic’ – and any phenomenon one chooses to classify as such – has to be about ‘dark magic’ has begun to shift. Johnston states that this change in attitude, in conjunction with the novel perception of divination as a rational part of religious systems, is the main driving force behind the present revival: scholars of both magic and of religion now regard divination as a potential object of study.¹⁷

Some issues which have recently been reinvestigated are formalized oracular practices and their role in politics and society. Did divination actually make a difference or was it a mere formality?¹⁸

A connected theme is the study of scepticism about, and manipulation of, divination – which has received ample attention, especially by those concerned with Roman practices. Even now, compared to the formal rituals, the more private and unofficial divinatory practices are still relatively unexplored territory. Nevertheless, there have been a number of recent publications on this topic.


Furthermore, an apparent shift from an emic (‘from the native’s point of view’) to a more ethically orientated (‘from the academic’s point of view’) divinatory model has occurred.\textsuperscript{21} In the emic model, divination is considered to be communication from the supernatural to men.\textsuperscript{22} The models using an etic orientation tend to emphasize colloque ‘Oracles et mantique en Grèce ancienne’) (1990).

\textsuperscript{21} The terms etic and emic, borrowed from anthropological studies, signify the difference between the language and definitions which the researcher uses (etic) and the language the object of study uses (emic). Etic language and definitions should function as tools with which the researcher can tackle his study in a ‘neutral’ way. Naturally, etic language should remain closely connected to emic experience. See also, among many others, M. Harris, ‘History and significance of the emic/etic distinction’, \textit{AnnRevAnth} 5 (1976) 329-350 and more recently T. Headland, K.L. Pike & M. Harris (eds), \textit{Emics and etics: the insider/outsider debate} (Newbury Park 1990).

\textsuperscript{22} Communication is the transmission of information between two entities or from one to the other. This does not necessarily involve simultaneity. There are a number of approaches to the study of this phenomenon: most prominent are the \textit{process school} and the \textit{semiotics school}. For a concise summary of a number of models of communication see M. Burgoon, F.G. Hunsaker & E.J. Dawson, \textit{Human communication} (Thousand Oaks 1994) 18-34. For some introductions to communication, on the use of communication theory, and theory more generally see D. Holmes, \textit{Communication theory: media, technology, society} (London 2005); J. Fiske, \textit{Introduction to communication studies} (London 1982); on giving meaning to signs within a communicative framework see B. Aubrey Fisher, \textit{Perspectives on human communication} (New York 1978) 266-283; U. Eco, \textit{A theory of semi-}
divination as a religious phenomenon in which the human individual fulfils the central role. In this model, the supernatural does not play an active role in the divinatory process. The shift to stress the important position of human individuals in divinatory practice has paved the way for divination to be incorporated into studies dealing with human mentality and social issues: subjects like risk management and the seer as a religious expert spring to mind. Esther Eidinow, for example, uses two different types of epigraphic sources, oracle tablets (from the sanctuary at Dodona) and curse tablets, in order to illustrate the ways Greek individuals perceived risk, both in the present and the future.\textsuperscript{23} Michael A. Flower takes the Greek divinatory expert as his central figure of research and analyses his role in society and the various themes related to this role, such as his actual influence on Greek warfare. At the same time, the Roman expert receives attention.\textsuperscript{24}

These recent upsurges of interest in Greek and Roman divination have been paralleled by more or less independent developments in the field of Assyriology. Because most Assyriologists are very specialized, scholarly productions in this field tend to take the form of detailed studies discussing one specific method of divination only. Extispicy has received a large amount of attention, as has astrol-

and risk; R. Stoneman; *The ancient oracles: making the gods speak* (New Haven 2011); S. Georgoudi, R. Koch Piettre & F. Schmidt (eds), *La raison des signes: présages, rites, destin dans les sociétés de la Méditerranée ancienne* (Leiden 2012).

1. Historiography


Furthermore, compendia of ominous signs have been published in accessible form.\textsuperscript{28} However, as already noted above, synthesis is lagging behind. To date Jean Bottéro's contribution to Vernant's \textit{Divination et rationalité} remains the most comprehensive synthetic article on Mesopotamian divination.\textsuperscript{29} During the past couple of decades, however, there has been a cautious shift in attitudes: a contextualization of divination in Mesopotamian culture has begun to take place. Scholars have started to explore the influence of extispicy on social and economic aspects, and have generally approached divination more theoretically. Ulla Koch is an excellent example of the latter approach, raising the study of divination to a new level.\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{itemize}
\item See volumes such as E. Leichty, \textit{The omen series Šumma izbu} (Locust Valley, NY 1970); Freedman, \textit{If a city is set on a height}; publications of series such as \textit{Enuma Anu Enlil} have been more scattered.
A publication such as *The heavenly writing* by Francesca Rochberg contains valuable chapters about divination in general.31

All in all, the focus of the study of ancient divination has fundamentally changed character. A progression from systematization and publication of materials towards a more analytical approach to divination can be discerned in both Assyriology and Classical studies. Divination has become a means to obtain a better understanding of human societies.
