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Review of: Divination in the Ancient World: Religious Options and the Individual. *Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge*, 46

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Veit Rosenberger (ed.), *Divination in the Ancient World: Religious Options and the Individual. Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge, 46.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013. Pp. 177. ISBN 9783515106290. €48.00 (pb).

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In the last ten years there have been a number of collections of scholarship on ancient divination.¹ This new collection (the outcome of a conference held at Erfurt University in 2011) sets itself apart by focusing on the links between ancient divination and individualization (defined as “a process of change on the societal level”) and individuation (defined as “a development on the personal level”), as explained by the editor Veit Rosenberger in the introduction to the volume (pp. 7-8, at p. 7). The eight articles in the volume are meant to illuminate the topic from various perspectives, with a focus on ancient Greek and Roman sources.

Jörg Rüpke, in “New Perspectives on Ancient Divination” (pp. 9-19), discusses the co-existence of institutional tradition and individual innovation and appropriation in the realm of divination. Rüpke argues that in order to adapt to social realities, divinatory rituals were flexible, and changes were often tolerated and even considered legitimate and necessary. This is shown from a number of examples in Republican Rome, such as the tradition of *obnuntiatio*, in which a magistrate could present his own observation and interpretation of a bad omen (p. 15).

Esther Eidinow, in “Oracular Consultation, Fate, and the Concept of the Individual” (pp. 21-39), examines how stories of oracular divination showcase a particular conception of selfhood. Eidinow contrasts two different conceptions, the subjective-individualist model and the participant-objective model.² In the first model, found in the modern West, the self is conceived as coherent, integrated, and autonomous. In the second model, found in the Pacific Islands and (it is suggested) in ancient Greek society, the self is conceived in relational terms as interdependent upon and inseparable from other people as well as supernatural forces, including divinities and Fate. Eidinow proposes that the latter model is evident in the way that oracles were consulted and interpreted by ancient Greeks, which was not so much through an individual process of self-realization, but rather through inquiry and deliberation which was collaborative, being shared among people and between people and supernatural forces. This is exemplified in the collective effort to understand the “wooden wall” oracle as recounted in Herodotus (7.140-144) (pp. 30-31) and in the manner the question tablets from the oracle at Dodona refer to the consultant in the third person (pp. 34-36).

Hugh Bowden, in “Seeking Certainty and Claiming Authority: The Consultation of Greek Oracles from the Classical to the Roman Imperial Periods” (pp. 41-59), shows that while oracles operated similarly in Greek and Roman times and attracted consultations concerning the same sorts of issues, there were some fundamental changes regarding why people turned to oracles rather than other means of divination. Bowden shows that during the classical and early

Hellenistic periods oracles were relied upon to provide certainty in unclear matters through their divine authority (thus Bowden contests the common idea that they were used to sanction decisions already made). While consultations were made both by individuals and by communities, usually only consultations in the service of the state were recorded in stone inscriptions. By the first century B.C. oracular consultations had declined in importance, as epigraphic evidence attests, and this was explained by Strabo (17.1.43) as due to reliance instead on the Sibylline oracles and Etruscan forms of divination. The support of emperors, such as Augustus and Hadrian, revived the tradition of consultation at the old oracular centers (as is particularly evident at Delphi, Didyma, and Klaros), though these came to be used quite differently, reflecting the individualization characteristic of the times (thus Bowden challenges the notion of the imperial decline of oracles advocated by Plutarch and others). Individuals took up the initiative and the responsibilities of consultation, usually confident of the outcome rather than dealing with a doubtful situation. More importantly, individuals usually erected inscriptions about the consultations which were meant mainly for self-display, that is to advertise their own personal piety as endorsed by divine authority. Thus, while classical Greeks tended to be anxious to gain answers, later Romans were rather anxious to gain prestige.

Lisa Maurizio, in “Interpretative Strategies for Delphic Oracles and Kledon: Prophecy Falsification and Individualism” (pp. 61-79), argues that a certain religious individualism existed in the realm of Greek divination. She notes that both intentional prophetic utterances (such as an oracle issued at Delphi) and unintentional ones (such as a kledon, an utterance taken to be prophetic only by its hearer) were considered not only true in that they accurately (though potentially ambiguously, for instance because of the use of metaphors) foretold the future but were even thought to be the very cause of what was predicted. However, such utterances were considered in need of interpretation and individual consultants or listeners were encouraged to assume the authority to correctly understand the relevance and application of the utterance to their own lives, requiring of them a certain amount of ingenuity and creativity, and to act upon it (and fulfill it) appropriately, all the while guided by their own self-interests. Thus the falsification of oracles was generally due to the response of clients and not a matter of fabrication by diviners or fictionalization by authors like Herodotus, as scholars often state.

Susanne William Rasmussen, in “Cicero and the Pythia – a deceptive Dilemma?” (pp. 81-91), discusses what many have considered Cicero’s dilemma, namely that while he did not have faith he was obliged to participate in and promote religious rituals, for instance when elected augur in 53 B.C. Scholars in the past have either deemed Cicero a hypocrite or have believed that he underwent a personal evolution over time through a conversion to philosophy. Rasmussen however argues that the reality is more complex, showing that it made perfect sense at least to Plutarch (*Vit. Cic.* 5.1) to contend that Cicero consulted the Pythia on his way back to Rome from his philosophical education in Rhodes and Athens. Rasmussen argues that it was possible, without dilemma or hypocrisy, for a Roman like Cicero to simultaneously live in two worlds— a necessary, public religio-political world and a personal, diversionary philosophical world— since faith, feelings, and personal commitment were not part of religion. In the end she convincingly shows that, when it came to religion and divination, it was difficult to disentangle the individual from the societal.

Richard Gordon, in ““Will My Child Have a Big Nose?”: Uncertainty, Authority and Narrative in Katarchic Astrology” (pp. 93-137), turns his attention to a neglected form of divination in the longest contribution in the book. While ancient astrology has been intensely studied, the focus has often been on genethliacal or natal astrology, based on creating a horoscope to determine a person’s entire future. Gordon focuses instead on katarchic astrology, which was employed mainly to help an individual decide upon whether to undertake a defined course of action or else to answer a specific question. The origins of this type of divination are unclear but it seems to have arisen among Greeks by the first century A.D., at which time Dorotheus of Sidon wrote a poem describing its schemes, and it was later taken up by Arabs and Indians. Gordon provides a very useful general introduction not only to the workings of astrology (which can be extremely complicated), but also its growth in the rationalizing Hellenistic period. He shows that in practice astrology was quite mutable to fit the demands of individual clients, who sought not so much perfect predictions as usable (that is coherent and plausible) stories provided by a prestigious and believable source in their quest to manage uncertainty.

Wolfgang Spickermann, in “Lucian of Samosata on Oracles, Magic and Superstition” (pp. 139-151), shows that while Lucian did not deny divination outright, and in fact accepted the influence of stars on people (if in fact *De astrologia* is correctly attributed to him), he attacked oracular divination as playing on people’s fears and exploiting their gullibility. He further argues that, of all divinatory and magical practices and beliefs, he particularly criticized the exotic and foreign, such as the Egyptian oracle of Ammon which he considered fraudulent. This is the only contribution without any overt mention of individualism, individualization, or individuation.

In the final contribution, “Individuation through Divination: The *Hieroi Logoi* of Aelius Aristides” (pp. 153-173), Veit Rosenberger investigates the self-fashioning and self-display of the second-century-A.D. Aelius Aristides in his work *Sacred Tales*, which he characterizes as “an extensive personal (b)log about his relationship with a god” (p. 171). Rosenberger shows how Aristides’s divinatory claim that he was able to communicate with the gods made him stand out, and how in particular he had a very personal and special relationship with Asclepius with whom he was in contact through his dreams. Rosenberger also explores how Aristides distinguished himself through a network of important individuals and as a respected and praised orator and poet. The emphasis again is on how ancient divinatory practices allowed for variations and innovations as they were appropriated by individuals for their own purposes.

The collection as a whole provides many different avenues of thinking about ancient divination and the individual and its index (pp. 175-177) usefully allows for some exploration of particular topics found in a number of the articles (which are not otherwise much cross-referenced). Unfortunately, the proofreading for the volume could have been much more carefully done. Thus letters of words are sometimes missing: e.g. “[a]ppropriation” (p. 10, n. 4), “[I]iad” (p. 27, n. 40 [four times]), “Classical A[t]hens” (p. 37), “[I]ead” (p. 61, n. 1), “[T]aylor” (pp. 87 [three times] and 88), “[W]eber” (p. 88), “[r]eligion” (p. 88 [three times]), “[m]agical” (p. 88), and “[r]eligious” (pp. 88 and 144). Even entire words are sometimes left out: e.g. “only [one] more” (p. 12), “compensated [for] by conceptualizing” (p. 14), “owing [to] his” (p. 142, n. 17), “tour [d]’horizon” (p. 154), and “comments [upon] this remark”. Some bibliographical information is omitted: e.g. entries for Craib 1992 and 2011 (p. 37), Foucault 1986 (p. 58), and Behr 1968 (p. 172). Some infelicities seemingly have arisen from translating from German to English. Thus the

usage of articles causes problems: e.g. “in form of a sickness” (p. 16), “propounding middle position” (p. 140), “into the Hades” (p. 142) and “in the Hades” (p. 144), “marshes of [the] Euphrates” (p. 144), and “leave a mark for the contemporaries” (p. 170). Some German has even crept in: e.g. “*Odysee*” (p. 147, n. 48). Finally, there are various other typographical errors: e.g. “verseverse” (p. 61, n. 1), “quasi-historical” (p. 62, n. 5), and “individuals” (p. 87).

Notes:

1. For instance: S. I. Johnson and P. T. Struck (eds.). *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination*. Leiden: Brill, 2005, reviewed by A. Nice in BMCR [2006.04.10](#); A. Annus (ed.). *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*. Oriental Institute Seminars, no. 6. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010, reviewed by K. Beerden in BMCR [2011.01.32](#); A. Motte and V. Pirenne-Delforge (eds.). *Manteia. Pratiques et imaginaire de la divination grecque antique*. *Kernos* 26: 9-203. Liège, 2013; and M. Kajava (ed.). *Studies in Ancient Oracles and Divination*. Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae, 40. Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2013, reviewed by N. Duval and P. Bonnechere in BMCR [2014.08.27](#).
2. Eidinow borrows these terms from C. Gill. *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.