

Divinations

Even a god cannot change the past.

Agathon, born c. 445 B.C.

It has been said that though God cannot alter the past, historians can; it is perhaps because they can be useful to Him in this respect that He tolerates their existence.

Samuel Butler, *Erewhon Revisited*, 1901

Who says there's a past? Show me where it is!

Our pasts leave traces in our memories and records. But do our futures leave any traces in our presents? Can we ever know for sure everything that will happen to us? People who lived in past times had as many varieties and degrees of certainty and uncertainty about their knowledge of the world as we do today. Today we can only work their writings or fragments of them, and with other material traces which have survived up to our present times. Each of us must interpret traces we come in contact with according to our own lights, and reports and interpretations of others likewise. What follows are some of the traces of how people have tried to predict their futures. In this section, a variety of ways are described.

Seneca says in his *Questiones naturales* (c. 62 A.D.) that the Etruscans were consummately skilled in foretelling future events by interpreting lightning. He wrote that Romans think that because clouds collide, lightning is emitted, while Etruscans thought the clouds collide so lightning will be emitted and the gods can send messages to humans about what is destined to happen.

Sometimes visions of the future were read in bowls of water. In an article called "Supernormal Phenomena in Classical Antiquity" in *The Ancient Concept of Progress, and other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief* (1973), E. R. Dodds speaks of future-telling carried out by staring into a translucent or shining object, called a *speculum*, until a moving vision or hallucination is produced which seems to come from within the object. It was said that only a small proportion of people will be able to see such pictures. In modern times, the process is best known as crystal-gazing, but it can be carried out with other objects besides crystal balls.



Crystals don't seem to have been used as specula before Byzantine times, but the practice of scrying is much older. According to A. Delatte (*La catoptromancie grecque et ses dérivés*. 1932), in one ancient method a mirror was used as a speculum. It appears this would guarantee pictures could be seen. *Catoptromancy* is divination using a mirror or other reflecting object.

Dodds speaks of another ancient method, used more frequently as time went on, in which the speculum was simply a bowl of water. This method was known as *lecanomancy*, meaning divination by bowl. The Greeks and Romans appear to have got this method from the Middle East, where it had a long history there. It

seems to have been developed from a method in which events were foretold by spreading oil on water, and interpreting the moving shapes formed by the oil. Evidently prolonged staring at the shapes led to visions in some seers, and eventually the visions in the seers became more important than the shapes in the oil. It was later realized that visions could be induced just by staring into the water, without the oil. However, the oil was sometimes still used, perhaps because it was traditional or because it increased luminosity or was impressive. The Greeks and Romans took up the practice in the 1st century B.C. or earlier, probably importing it from Egypt.

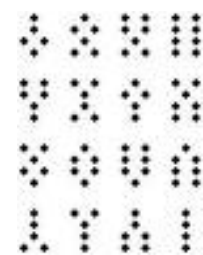


Édouard Dhorme in *Les Religions de Babylonie et d'Assyrie* (1949) describes how among the ancient Babylonians and Assyrians it was believed that sometimes a god appeared in a dream and predicted the future. Sometimes, though, the dream was mysterious, and had to be interpreted. Besides interpretation of dreams, these people had methods of divination based on observations of births of humans, sheep and other animals, especially abnormal and monstrous births. There also were techniques based on observations of involuntary facial movements of people, and on physiognomy, the features of people's faces and skulls. In another popular method, the diviner read the entrails of animals killed or sacrificed.

Specific expectations are linked to specific observations. Signs are recognized. Among humans, signs of future events can be described with languages and symbols, and communicated. In favorable cases, such signs are followed by what is taken to be signified, and believed to indicate events that would or could happen. Failures could be attributed to faulty observation or interpretation of the sign, intervention of external powers, to chance, etc. A preponderance of failures might lead to alteration in interpretation of the signs, or even abandonment of a project to use such signs for predictions.

A method of divination called geomancy has been especially linked to astrology. According to a textbook published on the subject in 1591, geomancy was "none other than astrology" (See J. D. North, *Chaucer's Universe*, 1988). Geomancy

("earth divination") is a method that interprets markings on the ground or patterns formed by taking quantities of soil, rocks, or sand, counting individual objects in these quantities, and in some way systematically reducing the numbers to just 2 categories. For example, one might see if these numbers are odd or even. Any process which has two and only two outcomes would do. Commonly a set of 16 different patterns is formed from the possible outcomes of such a process, and entered into a table as shown to the left, with one mark in a row for one of the outcomes, and two marks for the other outcome. Each of these 16 patterns is associated with some ideas or entities to be used in making predictions. Geomancy also employed astrological houses, usually taken to be 12 in number. This was done by creating what is known as a "shield chart", and using that to form a geomantical "house chart" with 12 entries, each entry of which is assigned to one of the astrological houses. Versions of geomancy are practiced in our time.



There is a detailed work on history and practice of geomancy by Stephen Skinner, *Terrestrial Astrology, Divination by Geomancy* (1980). Skinner speaks there of astrogeomancy. Traditionally, astrology is used for interpretation of geomantic results. Complex astronomical calculations of the sort made by astrologers make are not directly used in geomancy. Skinner says: "If we had to devise a system of astrology for people born on the surface of the Sun, then the present scientific model of the heliocentric solar system would be a perfect start. However, we are dealing with the relationship of the planets and stars *with the earth*, so it is irrelevant to talk about their orbital relationship with the Sun."

A person who makes investments on stock markets according to hunches (which are kinds of signs) may or may not be gambling in the same way as people who play roulette. If the hunches are based in some way, perhaps unconsciously, on actual economic trends, an investor's chances of profiting may or may not be better than if they are not so based. Inside traders who use information about intended financial transactions read signs which may reduce their chances of loss, at least if they're not caught at it. We can only conjecture about how many important political, military and business decisions are made by flipping a coin or an equivalent.

One motive for wanting to predict the future is removal of anxiety. It's consoling to decide one knows in advance something about future outcomes. Even if the information proves to have been wrong, the previous peace of mind will not be taken away. Nancy Reagan, wife of former U.S. president Ronald Reagan, says in *My Turn, Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (1986) about her use of astrology to make schedules for the president: "Astrology was simply one of the ways I coped with the fear I felt after my husband almost died" [referring to an assassination attempt on March 30, 1981]. Speaking of Joan Quigley, an astrologer she consulted, Nancy says: "Joan's recommendations had nothing to do with policy or politics – ever. Her advice was confined to timing – to Ronnie's schedule, and to what days were good or bad, especially with regard to his out-of-town trips. . . . While I was never certain that Joan's astrological advice was helping to protect Ronnie, the fact is that nothing like March 30 ever happened again. Was astrology one of the reasons? I don't really believe it was, but I don't really believe it wasn't. But I do know this: it didn't hurt, and I'm not sorry I did it."



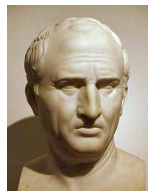
One can have faith in signs of this sort without attributing religious significance to them. But many people did and do. Walter Burkert in his *Greek Religion* (1977, translated 1985) discusses how among the classical Greeks, a specialist in interpreting signs was a seer, a *mantis*, someone who made contact with the gods. The picture shows Branchus, a Priest of Apollo who was a seer. The Greek word for god, *theos*, is closely related to the art of the seer. A seer is a *theopropos*, one able to see or hear the gods. An uninterpreted sign is a *thesphaton*, a saying or command of the gods. What a seer performs is *theiazein* or *entheazein*, an act inspired by the

gods. In the *Iliad*, the seer Kalchas is the son of *Thestor*. In the *Odyssey*, the seer with second sight is *Theoklymenos*, and the people who guard the Oracle of the Dead in Epirus are called *Thesprotoi*, those who see the gods, the see-ers of the gods. A seer may speak in an abnormal state, so a specially endowed interpreter of

the words of a seer, a *prophetes*, might be required. Thus the art of interpretation became a more or less rational technique, even when the words of the seer, hence of the gods, were cryptic.

An unusual occurrence could become a sign for ancient seers: a dream, a sudden sneeze, a stumble, a twitch, a chance encounter, the sound of a name caught in passing, a celestial phenomenon such as a bolt of lightning, a comet, a shooting star, an eclipse of the sun or moon, even a drop of rain. Observations of flights of birds played a special role in Greek prediction. In sacrifices many occurrences were signs: whether an animal goes willingly to be sacrificed or bleeds to death quickly, whether or not the fire used for the sacrifice flares swiftly, what happens when parts of an animal are burned in the fire, how its tail curls and its bladder bursts. The inspection of livers of the victims developed into a special art. At every stage of slaughter, how the various lobes were formed and colored was evaluated. This technique appears to have been transmitted to Greeks from Mesopotamia, probably in the 8th or 7th century B.C. There is an allusion to the practice by Homer. Etruscans obtained their much more detailed *haruspicina* (as these gut omens were called) from the same source, not via the Greeks. The inspection of entrails was the prime task of the seers who accompanied armies into battle. Herds of sacrificial victims were driven along with the armies, although the animals were also used for food. Without favorable signs no battle was joined. Before the battle of Plataea (479 B.C.), the Greeks and Persians stayed encamped opposite each other for ten days because the omens didn't advise either side to attack.

Often a method of predicting the future is called divination, which suggests some god or gods are the source for the predictions. On this, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) says in his *On the Heavens* that there is something beyond bodies on earth, different and separate from them, and the glory of this something grows greater as its distance from our world increases. There is a primary body, the one at the greatest distance from earth, which is eternal and unchanging. For surely there are gods, he says, and they are immortal. They are located in the highest place in the universe. Our senses, he says, tell us that in the past no change has taken place in the outermost heavens. The primary body is something beyond earth, air, fire and water, the elements which make up the things we find on earth. Aristotle calls this primary body the *aether* because it lasts forever, he says. In classical Greek, *aei thein* means “to go on forever.”



Cicero (106–43 B.C.) says in his *De Divinatione* (*On Divination*) that there is an ancient belief handed down from mythical times and established by general agreement of the Roman people and all nations that some kind of divination exists. The Greeks called this *mantike*, foresight and knowledge of future events. By such means people may approach very near to the power of gods. He states that the name “divination” derives from *divi*, a word meaning gods, and that according to Plato in the *Phaedrus*, the Greek name is derived from a word meaning *furor*, that is, frenzy.

Cicero, that is Marcus Cicero, the famous statesman and writer, had a brother Quintus Cicero. In *De Divinatione*, Marcus contrasts his philosophical views with those of Quintus. In one passage, Quintus argues that there really is divination. He says: “If there are gods and they do not make clear to man in advance what the future will be, then they do not love man; or, they themselves do not know what the future will be; or, they think it is of no advantage to man to know what it will be; or, they think it inconsistent with their dignity to give man forewarnings of the future; or, finally, they, though gods, cannot give intelligible signs of future events. But it is not true that the gods do not love us, for they are the friends and benefactors of the human race; nor is it true that they do not know their own decrees and their own plans; nor is it true that it is of no advantage to us to know what is going to happen, since we should be more prudent if we knew; nor is it true that the gods think it inconsistent with their dignity to give forecasts, since there is no more excellent quality than kindness; nor is it true that they have no the power to know the future; therefore it is not true that there are gods and yet that they do not give us signs of the future; but there are gods, therefore they give us such signs; and if they give us such signs, it is not true that they give us no means to understand those signs – otherwise their signs would be useless; and if they give us the means, it is not true that there is no divination; therefore there is divination.”

Walter Burkert speaks in *Ancient Cultures* (1971, translated 1985) about cultures where signs about the future – omens – were often considered to come from gods. The gods used signs, clear or cryptic, to give orders and guidance to men. Among the classical Greeks and Romans, signs were a principal way for gods to communicate with men. Among the Greeks someone who doubted the efficacy of such divinations was liable to be suspected of impiety or godlessness. The Greek gods dispensed signs, especially the leader of them all, Zeus. Interpreting divine signs required special inspirations which were dispensed by Apollo, a son of Zeus.



In classical Greece, seers, priests and priestesses called oracles were attached to particular places where they could be asked to consult with the gods. The localities were also known as oracles, and cults were attached to them. The picture shows remains of the Oracle Temple at Delphi. The gods were especially disposed to give signs in these places. Success in the interpretation of such signs led from the 8th century B.C. onward to the fame of certain places, fame which extended beyond the region of the oracle, sometimes becoming international. The Greeks called a place of this kind a *chresterion*, a place where *chresmos* is performed, where needed answers are provided, or a *manteion*, a place of divination, of contact with gods. The Romans called such a place an *oraculum*. It may be that preservation of oracular utterances was one of the earliest applications of writing in Greece, starting about 750 B.C. In this way, by writing them down, the utterances were freed from the context of question and answer sessions with the gods, and could become important at other places and times. However, about the same time as such sayings began to be recorded, forged sayings also appeared.

Revelations from God are a basis of Biblical prophecy. For many Christians the age of Biblical prophecy doesn't end with the prophets of the Old Testament and the Book of Revelations of the New Testament. Some people claim that they are prophets like those in the Bible. A famous example of a man who did this is Nostradamus (1503-1566), a grandson of two prominent rabbis who converted to Christianity shortly before his birth. In an article in *European History of Ideas* (1984), Richard Popkin describes how Nostradamus claimed that God had revealed future events to him, despite the fact that the prevailing view of the Church in his time was that prophecy of this kind terminated with the death of the apostles. Nostradamus told King Henri II of France that he, Nostradamus, was a member of one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, the Issachar, whose members had been given the gift of prophecy. He became a court physician, astrologer and advisor. At some point he abandoned his stance as a prophet in the Biblical sense, and told his son that God had revealed future events to him by means of astronomical cycles, i.e. by astrology. However, he left no indication of the astrological techniques he used. We only have his predictions in verse form, in his *Centuries* (1555).



The stars move according to patterns, accessible to reason. Astrologers of all epochs have realized this, and they believe that the patterns of our lives and the patterns of the stars are related in some way. Arguments in favor of such relationship sometimes run like this: a god or gods rule the stars according to certain laws, and gods rule us according to the same or similar laws.

The philosophical question of how omens, predetermination, and freedom of the will can be reconciled was discussed extensively in Hellenistic times for a number of centuries, starting about the 4th century B.C. Astronomical discoveries acted as a catalyst in this discussion, and at the same time produced new and influential forms of astrology. Earlier, one could try to avoid outcomes predicted by unfavorable signs by waiting and hoping the outcome would not occur after all, by acting in ways which led to circumvention such as performing purifications or praying. But according to some Hellenistic astrological beliefs, outcomes necessarily follow their astrological signs. It was sometimes important that even favorable omens be accepted with an approving vow to the gods so they could achieve their fullest efficacy. However, it was often believed that in the case of astrological signs, appeals were useless whether or not they were of divine origin.



Connections between religions, astronomies, astrologies and predictions are very ancient, no doubt prehistoric. In *The Etruscans Begin to Speak* (1961, translated 1962), Zaharie Mayani describes a relatively late ceremony which unites the three. His description is based on a fresco on the wall of a tomb known as the Tomb of the Augurs which dates from 530 B.C. Two priests are shown marking out the bounds of a holy area consisting of a square in which two medians are marked, one running from north to south and the other from east to west. The quarters of the square are also subdivided, and each resulting section is assigned

to a particular deity. The square is a kind of mirror of the heavens, since the divisions of the square correspond to a conceptual division of the sky. A priest could stand in the center of the square and with the help of a special staff determine in which zone of the square the direction of a celestial omen fell, hence which deity was sending the omen. Thus the holy area or templum constituted an observatory for determining positions of omens which could be used for predicting future events. The observations were a means of learning the will of the gods.

Speaking of the 12th century A.D. temple at Angkor Wat in Cambodia, David Chandler writes in *A History of Cambodia* (2nd edn 1996) that in the mid 1970's, Eleanor Moron began studying the dimensions of the temple in detail. Moron argued that certain measurements can be correlated to the four ages or *yugas*, of Indian thought. The first of these, the *Krita Yuga*, was a golden age, lasting 1,728,000 years. The next three ages lasted for 1,296,000, 864,000, and 432,000 years, respectively. The last age is the Kali Yuga, in which we are living today. It is believed that at the end of this era, the universe will be destroyed and then rebuilt along similar lines, beginning with another golden age. The length of these four eras correlates very closely with particular distances along the east-west axis of Angkor Wat. Chandler says that walking forward and away from the west, which is the direction of death, the visitor moves backward in time, approaching the moment when the Indians proposed that time began.



In her research, Moron also discovered astronomical correlations for ten of the most frequently occurring distances at Angkor Wat. Astronomers working with her found that the siting of the temple was related to the fact that its western gate aligned at sunrise with a small hill to the northeast, Phnom Bok. Moron wrote that at the summer solstice an observer standing just in front of the western entrance can see the sunrise directly over the central tower of Angkor Wat. This day marked the beginning of the solar year for Indian astronomers.

The picture below is taken from a website devoted to describing tours of Egypt. The picture is described this way: "Thoth Hill, a New Kingdom temple to Horus was built on top of a much more ancient temple. Horus was represented by the rising heliacal rising star, Sothis (Sirius). Even though the earlier temple was probably precisely oriented to this star, the later temple was also oriented to the star as well. However, because of the difference in time between the building of the first temple and that of the second, the star's orientation shifted. Therefore, even though the later temple was built atop an earlier temple to the same god, their alignments are slightly different."



Ernst Zimmer reports in his *Die Geschichte der Sternkunde, von den ersten Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (1931) that temples were aligned by ancient Egyptians so they could be used as star clocks. They used sun clocks for daytime measurement and water clocks day and night. They also determined hours of the night by observing when certain constellations reached their highest point in the sky. In order to determine these zeniths, it was necessary to know where the meridian was. Zimmer says: "This presented no difficulty for the Egyptians since the determination of the north-south and east-west directions at the laying of the foundation-stone of a temple was among the most important functions of the king. The process of determining these directions was depicted in exactly the same way on reliefs from the 4th millennium up to the birth of Christ." The measuring apparatus used by the king consisted of an alignment stick bent upward at one end and with a plumb line attached, together with the split rib of a palm leaf. There are tables found in the burial chambers of the Egyptian pharaohs Ramses VI and IX dating from between about 1160 and 1120 B.C. which list what constellations correspond to what hour of the night, and show a picture of a sitting man. The process of observing the passage of the hours of the night required two such observers, aligned along the meridian.

