

**Veit Rosenberger (edited by), *Divination in the Ancient World. Religious Options and the Individual*, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013, pp. 177, € 48.00, ISBN 9783515106290**

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The present volume, bearing witness to an ever increasing scholarly interest in divination, originates from a conference held at the University of Erfurt in 2011 entitled “Oracles in the Ancient World: Religious Options and the Individual”. The meeting, organized by the Max-Weber-Kolleg research group “Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective” (Religiöse Individualisierung in historischer Perspektive), gathered international scholars to analyze the interconnections between ancient divinatory practices and religious individuality. The eight contributors integrate their own particular perspectives and methodologies into the general scope of the book, which is clearly stated by Rosenberger in the *Introduction* (p.7): exploring the interrelations between divination and processes of self-definition, occurring on both a societal (individualization) and a personal level (individuation). Such an approach well suits the character of divination, which is a constitutionally dynamic, creative and flexible kind of ritual action, frequently employed to legitimize decisions, solve controversies, or gain distinctiveness (p.7).

The collection is opened by Jörg Rüpke’s contribution, which offers “*New Perspectives on Ancient Divination*”. The Author clarifies the role of divination as an individual action, performed in conditions of uncertainty, and involving social roles, political consent and religious tradition. Rüpke challenges the definition of “ritual” extracted from Roy Rappaport’s *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, analyzing it in its main components. He thus stresses how the divinatory process, constantly adapting to varying contexts, reveals the flexible interaction between institution and individual on the one hand, and tradition and appropriation on the other. In such a framework, the specific content of divination loses its significance in favor of the issues of personal participation and political consent. Rüpke argues that divination leaves ample space for ritual innovations and “invented tradition”, both on a cognitive level and within an intercultural frame. Ritual thus appears as a solid conventional and foundational paradigm, over and beyond the multiple

variations in performance.

In the second essay, dedicated to "*Oracular Consultation, Fate, and the Concept of the Individual*", Esther Eidinow perceptively shows how implicit modern views on the self may influence our approach to, and understanding of, ancient ritual practice. Modern reflection indeed promotes a mainly autonomous conception of the self, as that expressed by Anthony Giddens: individuals reach for a coherent self-identity through a reflexive, dynamic action of "self-mastering", and construct their selves in biographical terms, by recurring to "life planning" and "self actualization" strategies (p.23). In ancient times instead – as Eidinow argues also relying on the case study of the oracular question tablets of Dodona – the collaborative and shared procedures of interrogation and interpretation were part of a collective "cognitive process of deliberation" based on a peculiar "relational" model of the self, showing a strict interdependence with other human and divine beings (p.31). Accordingly, individual fate was conceived as partly placed under personal control, and partly governed by supernatural forces.

Hugh Bowden's contribution focuses on how the paradigm of divination was variable in antiquity and liable to change over time. The Author contrasts the divinatory practices of the classical and imperial ages, seeking for the determining factors of transformation. Although the private inquiries pertaining to the two periods display a high similarity, classical oracles conceptualized authentic uncertainties, whereas their imperial counterparts mainly served the purposes of individual self-display. Bowden clearly highlights how Roman rule played a major part in shaping the religious needs of the Greeks, radicalizing the process of "religious individuation" and the related "increasing individualization": under the empire, prominent individuals promoted religious innovation by sponsoring their own virtues, seeking recognition and visibility, and bypassing the faded authority of the πόλεις.

In the following essay Lisa Maurizio, overcoming the traditional scholarly distinction between authentic and inauthentic oracles (rooted in historical categories), focuses instead on the accuracy of oracles – especially those recorded by Herodotus – drawing our attention to their religious and aesthetic aspects. Maurizio analyzes the features common to oracular utterances and magical kledon, both perceived as authentically divine words,

incomprehensible to the speaker, decipherable by means of similar strategies, and equally attesting to the “pervasiveness of seeking and finding divine guidance in human words” (p.72). Besides having a predictive power, oracles and kledons could practically *create* the future – as confirmed by the “cognitive dissonance” generated by failed predictions, that eventually stimulates new actions and beliefs. Furthermore, the Author interestingly clarifies how individuals and groups adapted oracular responses to their own needs by means of falsification, interpretation, and imputation of ambiguity, while acting in a context of strong social cohesion, dynamically interconnected with the divine realm.

Susanne William Rasmussen analyzes Cicero’s consultation of the Pythia (cf. PLUT. *Vit. Cic.* 5, 1), as an emblematic instance of the interaction between society and individuals within the production process of religion. The Author hence reflects on the socio-religious status of the Delphic oracle with regard to the construction of social identity, as well as to the establishment of a lasting cultural, political and cultic continuity throughout time promoted by the institution. Rasmussen explains how Cicero legitimized his own political position by performing a religious act that was common in his time: indeed, consulting the oracle was a matter of prestige, enhancing an individual’s social stature and personal identity. The overall setting was one of a cohesive society, where human and divine forces were constantly in mutual contact. The “social embeddedness” that, according to Charles Taylor, characterizes ancient man, as opposed to “the great disembedding” of modern man (p.88), helps to recognize Cicero’s consultation as a mere “*deceptive dilemma*” (as it is called in the title of the essay), not conflicting, but rather integrating, with the political-philosophical identity of the Arpinas. The Author perceptively underscores the need to interpret the episode in the light of the peculiar character of Roman *religio* as *cultus deorum* (CIC. *Nat. deor.* II 8), excluding any individual commitment, personal faith, and fixed doctrinal body.

Supported by a wonderfully clear corpus of illustrations (pp.122-131), Richard Gordon provides detailed technical insight into the complex field of katarthic astrology, focusing on the elements of “*Uncertainty, authority and narrative*”. The Hellenistic age saw the birth of a new way of relating to the “uncertain” and the “irrational”: astrology, treating the cosmos

as an ordered system, gradually emerged as a “rationalized” explanation of the world and a distinguished method for coping with the uncertainties of human life. By investigating how the heavenly bodies were believed to influence life on Earth, Gordon helps us to understand the role of divinatory systems in shaping anxiety (p.109), while exposing the individual to a wide range of possibilities and risks. Katarthic astrology hence emerges as rooted in solid social conventions, substantiated by the tacit agreement between the client and the astrologer as to “what matters to a man of substance” (p.110). The “conjectural narratives”, along with the narrative projections and negotiations constructed by the astrologer as plausible, coherent, usable stories, offered to the principal the raw material susceptible to further discussion and interpretation at family level, thus fostering the process of individualization and personal creation. Wolfgang Spickermann contributes with a view on how Lucian of Samosata conceived “*Oracles, Magic and Superstition*”, referring mainly to *The lover of lies* and *On astrology*. In the latter, Lucian underlines how divination, unable to change the future, rather helps men to prepare for it (cf. LUC. *Astr.* 29). The Author, presenting numerous other textual evidences, shows how Lucian – who depreciates all “barbarous” religious tendency, as superfluous, harmful, and radically at odds with the Greek παιδεία – is in line with an Epicurean trend highly successful at the time, skeptical of magic, oracles and superstition. Spickermann gives depth to the religious personality of Lucian, showing how he integrated and mitigated such a rationalistic stance with original critical insights and surprising admissions, including those of an astral influence on Earth, or the actual existence of the *di indigetes* (p.150). In the closing paper, the editor of the book Veit Rosenberger explains how the rhetor Ailios Aristeides found in his ongoing divinatory process a way of pursuing his own individuation. Evidence of this comes primarily from the *Sacred Tales*, a daily record of Aristeides’s continuous relationship with the god Asklepios. While acting as a “religious specialist”, and engaging in a constant, lifelong communication with a number of divine and human, real and onirical, past and present figures and networks, Aristeides builds up his self and puts it on stage. The essay interestingly argues that Aristeides’s experience may not be as exceptional and unique as it seems: rather than “the” chosen one, he could simply be “a” chosen one, immersed in a

reality where numerous other men were virtually exposed to similar “extraordinary” close and constant relationships with divine beings.

The category of “individuality”, although difficult to define unequivocally, yet provides a compelling, common theoretical frame for all the contributions, and proves its effectiveness in bringing to light the intellectual, ritual, and sociological aspects of divination as a crucial religious phenomenon in antiquity.

Every paper presents an extremely useful specific bibliography, reflecting the broader context of philosophical, sociological, anthropological, ethnographic references related to the investigated topic. The book is completed by a general *Index*, and is accurately printed, apart from a very few typographical errors (the quote “FOUCAULT 1986”, p.57, n.89, is not mentioned in the bibliography).

The work as a whole, offering a multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach to various processes of definition of the self read through the fascinating prism of divination, stimulates further reflection and research, and represents an excellent resource for scholars and students interested in gaining an accurate and thorough insight into the religious historical dynamics of the Graeco-Roman world.

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