General Introduction

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In a ringing monologue of the *Prometheus Bound* attributed to Aeschylus, the shattered hero inventories his gifts to humankind: architecture, astronomy, mathematics, writing, domestication of animals, seafaring, medicine, metallurgy, divination. The modern lay reader will be startled that a list of clearly technical practices (*tékhnai* [τέχναι]) should not only include divination (*mantikḗ* [μαντική]) but in a sense climax with it, giving it pride of place by devoting nearly as much space to its elaboration as to all the others combined. A different ontological mindset, but not entirely so. An elemental characteristic of civilized humanity is the abiding need for assurance in a world of uncertainty and chanciness that ever defies our drive to tame it to our will. We rely – some more, some less – on our weather forecasts, our investment advisors, our odds-makers, our guidance counselors, our DNA tests, and in lighthearted moments, our horoscopes and fortune cookies. Moreover, cognitive science assures us that humanity harbors an innate tendency toward "hyperactive agency detection" (see Chapter 9, below), a hardwired predisposition to identify a hidden agent, often an intelligent personal agent, where none is apparent. From our modern perspective this tendency seems more pronounced in ancient societies. That is an assessment that may require reexamination.

The papers in this collection draw on new perspectives in their examination of prophecy and other forms of divination among the ancient Greeks.

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1.1 WOODARD

In the first paper, "Greek Divination as the Transformation of an Indo-European Process," Roger Woodard probes the role of the intellect in Greek divinatory practice. He begins with a case study of the Russian sect of the Khlysty, where Roman Jakobson noted that, in regard to their practice of generating divinely inspired speech, the members of this sect described ecstatic utterance as lying outside the realm of *um* 'intellect'. In a Benvenistian study of Sanskrit and Greek vocabulary of sacrificial cult and divination, beginning with Greek *aisthánomai* (αἰσθάνομαι), ultimately cognate with Slavic *um*, Woodard examines the Greek sub-lexicon utilized in expressing the proper response to oracular messages. That right response is one that Woodard characterizes as intellectual engagement with the divinatory signal – a purposeful response of cognitive investment in the oracular message. Woodard argues that while the particular divinatory forms of the Greeks may have been acquired locally, within the Mediterranean, this proper response, and the vocabulary that encodes it, perpetuates more ancient Indo-European cult structures, as preserved most faithfully and revealed most clearly in Vedic Sanskrit texts.

Of particular comparative significance are the Sanskrit verb *śraddhā-* and the corresponding noun *śraddhā́*, terms that Woodard characterizes as describing the Vedic sacrificer's intellectual commitment to the efficacy of sacrifice. Etymologically, the verb *śraddhā-* is a compound that literally denotes 'to place the heart/mind in' (Latin *crēdere,* etc.) and that appears to have its origin in a pre-Indo-European period. Woodard points out that the distinctive, and limited, archaic morphology of this compound is shared by Greek *aisthánomai* (αἰσθάνομαι), literally 'to place perception/cognition in' and argues that the Indo-European etyma of the two verbs, Sanskrit and Greek, would have been synonymous, or nearly so, in Proto-Indo-European and that both belong to the lexicon of Indo-European cult practice. The application of *aisthánomai* to oracular response represents an evolutionary transfer of knowledge, within a structured system, from ancestral sacrificial cult to Greek divinatory practice.

Among the vocabulary critical for revealing the nature of the proper response to a Greek oracular sign is *manthánō* (μανθάνω). This verb, meaning literally 'to place the mind in', matches *aisthánomai* and *śraddhā-* in its antiquity and its formative morphology and semantics. Woodard points out that Greek reflexes of Proto-Indo-European *men- 'to take thought', when used with reference to oracular phenomena, usually give expression to the frenzy typical of Greek divine inspiration,

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notably *mántis* (μάντις) 'seer, diviner', *mainás* (μαινάς) 'maenad', and *maínomai* (μαίνομαι) 'to be mad'. *Manthánō*, in contrast, continues to convey the idea of intelligent response. He attributes this difference to the early grammaticalization of the ancestor of *manthánō* and, in conjunction with that, its continued steady presence in the language of early Indo-European priestly science. Greek *manthánō* thus finds a place in the language of cognitive engagement with oracular signs that parallels the Vedic close coordination of the verb *manya-* (from *men-) with the verb *śraddhā-*, reinforcing the intellectual element of the act described by *śraddhā-*.

Examining these and still other relevant inherited vocabulary, Woodard concludes his chapter by positing a set of provisional conclusions that follow from his thesis that "intellectual engagement is the synchronically expected response to Greek oracles and that this is the diachronic consequence of primitive Indo-European cult practices, as preserved in Vedic India." In sum, he contends, ancestral Indo-European cult structures have been transferred from sacrificial observance to oracular practice.

1.2 CALAME

In *De Divinatione* Cicero makes a distinction between two kinds of divination, a distinction that is endorsed and canonized by Bouché-Leclercq in his monumental *Histoire de la divination dans l'Antiquité* (1879–82). One kind is spontaneous, intuitive, and inspired, the other artificial and inductive. In "On Divinatory Practices and *le raison des signes* in Classical Greece," Claude Calame questions the legitimacy and relevance of this distinction. He begins with a close analysis of the place of divinatory practices (*mantikḗ* [μαντική]) in the list of technical arts (*tékhnai* [τέχναι]) that Prometheus boasts of having bestowed on humankind in his famous monologue in the *Prometheus Bound*. Divination, Calame argues, is not a "supernatural science of the unknown" beyond recourse to reason, as Bouché-Leclercq had maintained, but rather a practical technique, like the other *tékhnai*, which employs methods and intellectual abilities requiring reason (*noûs* [νοῦς], *phrénes* [φρένες]) and judgment (*gnṓmē* [γνώμη]). It involves human interpretation of signs (*sḗmata* [σήματα]), a process independent of divine inspiration.

Calame proceeds to compare the divinatory activity of Calchas in the *Iliad* with interpreters of oracles in Herodotus, to show how, as in the

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famous "wooden wall" prophecy at the Persian War's outset, the political situation of fifth-century Athens puts the need for interpretation in the hands of nonprofessional citizens forced to take control of their own future. (Calame is, like others in the present volume, skeptical that the oracular responses in Herodotus represent actual historical divinatory practice.)

In his examination of divination in Plato, Calame points out that, while the divine, revelatory element comes to a person when he is in a nonrational, altered state of mind, the raw material of that revelation only yields significance to proper reasoning (*logismós* [λογισμός]), to a rational art of decipherment. He goes on to argue that, when it comes to divination, it would be wrong to characterize the transition from the archaic to the classical age as one from divine knowledge to human rationality, from *mythos* to *logos*. Even in Homer, he points out, the seer is placed in the same class with healers and carpenters; they are all (along with bards) *dēmioergoí* (δημιοεργοί), craftsmen. There is no incompatibility between divine inspiration in accessing truth and the practical knowledge of the craftsman. The divine knowledge is always still in need of the technical art of divination.

Calame concludes with a brief discussion of Hippocratic medicine. Although it developed in sanctuaries such as that of Asclepius in Cos and in association with incubation, its emphasis falls heavily on prognosis (*prónoia* [πρόνοια]), the practice of which requires the careful scrutiny and interpretation of signs (*sḗmata* [σήματα]).

I.3 PARKER

Based upon the work of the great anthropologist Evans-Pritchard among the Azande, most students of divination assume that oracles and diviners tend to give their clients news that they want to hear or that they will reasonably expect to hear. In "Oracle and Client," Robert Parker queries this application of living oral cultures to the divinatory practices of a nonliving oral culture such as ancient Greece. He sets as his goal to test a different hypothesis: that fictional diviners (e.g., Calchas in the *Iliad*) never tell clients what they want to hear, whereas in real life *ex hypothesi* they try to do so. He wonders whether this proposition corresponds to actual practice (and if so, why consultants do not see through oracular compliance) and how diviners are able to bring it off. Parker takes on a number of cases from different parts of the Greek world and from

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different periods. He admits that, for the most part, his questions will prove unanswerable, but suggests that this unanswerability will help to clarify the problems besetting our knowledge of ancient divination.

Responses are not always positive. Parker examines so-called lot oracles (such as the *Sortes Astampsychi*), where the responses were mechanical and random and thus not invariably good, though more often good than bad. If bad, they could be retried. In the case of fixed oracular sites, such as Delphi and Dodona, Parker underscores the problem of evidence: the literary sources are unreliable while the epigraphical sources are selective and more likely to preserve in stone only positive responses. He considers implausible Fontenrose's view that Delphi tended to positive responses on the grounds that such predictability would have damaged its credibility.

If diviners generally wished to please their clients, how did they know what those clients wanted? Here is where the limitations show most radically in applying the anthropological literature to ancient Greek oracles. In an anthropological account of a typical divinatory session, the diviner will spend considerable time in discussion with the client and his family and neighbors, getting a good sense of what is wanted before delivering a verdict. Parker follows others in arguing that, to our knowledge, none of this occurred in the Greek oracular situation. After finding no good argument for the sensitivity of diviners to their clients' wishes and expectations, Parker surveys the various conventional forms that questions to an oracle might take.

Returning to his opening hypothesis, Parker concludes with several qualifications: (1) that oracles always tried to please their consultants is not proven, though it remains likely they may have sought to do so; (2) that it is not clear how oracles could perceive the wishes of their clients; and (3) that most of the epigraphical evidence indicates that many questions were answered by a simple "Yes/No"-lot response. An appendix discusses the relationship and distinction between advice and prediction in divination.

1.4 EIDINOW

At first sight, prophecy and divination among the Greeks, as in any culture that resorts to such instruments, derive from a desire to control the chaos of experience and to offer a more or less secure strategy for action in such a world. But what happens when, as in so many Greek

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narratives, the result of oracular consultation is erroneous, counterproductive, or even destructive? In the face of palpable malfunction, how could the Greeks continue to believe in such instruments? Esther Eidinow takes on this paradox in "Oracular Failure in Ancient Greek Culture." To do this, she calls on anthropological and psychological approaches, chiefly modern theories of cognitive dissonance.

She begins by examining current scholarly approaches to instances of failed oracles. The more sophisticated of them rely on a combination of piety and so-called structural blocks to falsifiability, that is, reasons why an oracle failed, such as neglect to consult in the first place, disobedience, or misunderstanding, which then requires reconstructing the original form of an oracular reply. Finding these explanations less than satisfying, Eidinow turns to contemporary theories of cognitive dissonance to clarify the Greek response to contradiction or inconsistency in their system of belief.

According to the theorists, cognitive dissonance surfaces when one's beliefs, values, or opinions, especially those associated with religious conviction, conflict with one's experience of the real world. Eidinow reviews the steps believers take to reduce this conflict, in particular those taken by certain modern millennialist groups when their prophecies fail. Crucial to the resolution of such conflicts is the overriding importance of cohesion in the believers' group, in the face of which prophetic failure offers no substantial challenge to its social and conceptual organization and may even strengthen it. Eidinow then brings this perspective to bear on ancient Greek instances of oracular failure, training particular focus on those associated with colony and cult foundation.

1.5 NAGY

In "The Dynamism of *Mouvance* in the Pronouncements of the Delphic Oracle," Gregory Nagy applies a concept developed by Paul Zumthor (*Essai de poétique médiévale,* 1972) in his study of the manuscript transmission of a kind of medieval literary production (like the *Chanson de Roland*) that seems more like work in progress than finished pieces. Nagy had already employed this concept in an earlier work (1996), where he compared the lyric traditions of medieval French and Provençal poetry with the lyric and epic traditions of ancient Greece, the results of which he reviews in some detail here. Nagy argues that *mouvance* is the process of recomposition-in-performance as it is recognized by a living oral

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tradition. This notion is then brought to bear on the poetic tradition of the Delphic oracle to show that the verbal medium used by the Pythia in responding to inquirers was a continuation of a living oral tradition. An inventory of passages indicative of *mouvance* is examined to make this case.

Among Nagy's conclusions, he finds himself in disagreement with Fontenrose (1978) on the historical authenticity of the Pythia's pronouncements quoted in Herodotus. Such pronouncements, Nagy argues, should be considered historically valid since they show a history of change characteristic of *mouvance*. Their transmission was not a centripetal process of retracing them back to whatever the Delphic Pythia actually uttered but rather a centrifugal process of ongoing readjustment corresponding to the ever-changing political context of reception by whatever city-state transmitted them. In this context Nagy also clarifies the roles of and relationship between the Pythia herself, the *theōrós* (θεωρός), the *prophḗtēs* (προφήτης), and the *mántis* (μάντις). The *theōrós* ('observer') was an official delegate of a city-state charged with bringing an inquiry to Delphi and transmitting the Pythia's response back home. The term *prophḗtēs* ('spokesman') typically does not presuppose possession of inspired, mantic power but refers rather to the role as spokesman for the Pythia, who herself is directly inspired by Apollo as a *mántis* is. Her *direct* relationship to Apollo makes her his 'spokeswoman' (*prophêtis* [προφῆτις]), while the relationship of the *prophḗtēs* to the god is merely indirect and without inspiration. A corollary of this view, Nagy urges, is that the *prophḗtēs* does not, as some modern interpreters suppose, control the content of the response, which is solely in the hands of the divinely inspired Pythia, nor does he turn prose into verse or convert an unclear utterance into a clear one. The picture that emerges in Nagy's view is a chain of oral reperformances and transmissions: from the Pythia to the *prophḗtai* to the *theōroí* to their communities with the potential thereafter for multiple reperformances within and from them.

I.6 GIANGIULIO

When one looks broadly at the sweep of ancient Greek history, a question arises about the centrality and importance of Delphi in shaping art, culture, religion, colonization, or even politics and constitutional development. Closely associated with this question is another: To what extent must we trust that the predictive oracles attributed to Delphi and

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mentioned by ancient authors, especially Herodotus, were actually created there? Maurizio Giangiulio addresses these issues in "Decentralizing Delphi: Predictive Oracles, Local Knowledge and Social Memory."

Giangiulio first reviews the way in which the modern narrative of ancient Greek history, beginning mainly with Ernst Curtius in the nineteenth century, has placed Delphi at the core of Greek existence. He notes with some accord the dissenting and otherwise unappreciated view of Roland Crahay (1956) that Delphi actually played no part in the production of ambiguous and enigmatic prophecies of the kind that Herodotus and others cite as having their source there but that such prophecies were composed and added to the narrative tradition later. Giangiulio then sets out in what he himself calls "a somewhat unorthodox direction" to demonstrate how and why the predictive oracles must have been composed within a local rather than Delphic narrative context. By an analysis of a number of local foundation narratives, he argues that the presence of predictive oracles in them served to fashion a community's self-identity, giving them an "emic" quality transcending mere factual history and containing, the evidence shows, such elements as to discount their origin in Delphi.

Giangiulio argues that the relationship between oracles and the narratives that contain them has been misread by prevailing scholarship. Such research has swung between two poles: (1) either narrative events predate the oracle, which is inserted later or (2) the narratives incorporate oracles that already exist as autonomous texts. Both views, he insists, are wrong, and he proceeds to investigate how the oracles found their way into the traditions available to writers like Herodotus. He starts with the general observation about prophecy as a narrative device: that it removes randomness from events and endows them with a necessity they would otherwise lack. He follows with a detailed analysis of the correspondences, both textual and of content, between the oracles and their containing narratives, concluding that the oracles cannot have taken shape outside the narratives but are indissolubly linked to them. The result is a body of pre-Herodotean oral traditions giving different locales the sense of a divinely preordained identity, the tales often attributed to Delphi without having emanated therefrom.

1.7 LURAGHI

In "Oracular Tales Before Historiography," Nino Luraghi argues that the *Histories* of Herodotus provides us with evidence for the existence of a body of oral prose narratives that are the basis for reconstructions of

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archaic Greek history. He begins his discussion by addressing a dilemma regarding Greek oracular responses raised by Joseph Fontenrose's monumental study of the Delphic oracle (1978). These responses are of two kinds, dramatically different from one another in both form and content. On the one side are those that are carefully crafted, obscure, and allusive, typically in hexameters, of the kind found in Herodotus and attributed to Delphi. On the other side are unequivocal nonmetrical responses that have to do largely with instructions to be followed to realize some concrete undertaking. Fontenrose and others concluded that the historical practice of Greek oracles, and of Delphi in particular, followed the pattern of the second type. But then what is to be made of the first type so prominent in Herodotus? Is the historicity of such responses to be mistrusted or even rejected?

In recent years a trend in scholarship has emerged that treats the oracular texts in Herodotus and other literary sources as integral components of the narratives in which they are embedded and of the local traditions out of which they are thought to originate. (See, for example, Giangiulio in the present volume.) Luraghi combines this approach with the results of studies of the presumed oral tradition behind the Herodotean narrative.

Luraghi carefully works his way through the problems in transferring the results of fieldwork-based studies of *living* oral traditions to supposed traces of orality accessible only in texts that have suffered centuries of transmission in writing. His examination of epic intertexts in the literary oracles leads him to conclude, with Giangiulio, that the high degree of literary sophistication, in both the active and passive bearers of the tradition, argues against an anonymous collective imagination. As for the oracular responses in this oral tradition, Luraghi finds untenable the position of those who would keep the issue of their authenticity separate from that of their role in the narratives but insists that, though they are fictitious, they never fail to represent the gods as they are characterized elsewhere in Greek religion. He agrees that some kind of cognitive dissonance must be assumed (in the present volume see also, especially, Eidinow) to account for the discrepancy between what Greeks knew of actual oracular practice on the one hand and, on the other, the aesthetic, poetic, ambiguous nature of the oracles in the oral tradition. However, the empirical falsity of the latter was far outweighed by the value of the narratives in which they are embedded as transmitters of self-representation for the political communities that constituted the Greek world.

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1.8 FLOWER

In Michael A. Flower's "Omens and Portents Foretelling Victory and Defeat: Ontological, Literary, and Cognitive Perspectives," we find two modern complementary theoretical approaches at work. One comes from cognitive science, which sees a universal human disposition toward what has been called "hyperactive agency detection," that is, a hardwired tendency to perceive a hidden agent where none is manifest, which is all the more pronounced in situations of individual and community tension or crisis. The other theoretical perspective, to which Flower gives more prominence, is what has been called the "ontological turn" in anthropology over the last two decades. The ontological turn, what some consider a paradigm shift in anthropology, insists that different cultural perspectives do not represent alternative interpretations of the same, more or less invariant natural world; they are rather alternative realities, alternative worlds, parallel to the one which the outside investigator inhabits. Flower does not discount the intense controversy this theoretical approach has provoked in contemporary philosophy and social theory, nor does he adopt the narrowest form of this method, which insists that in the world of a particular culture its supernatural beings *actually* exist. Flower nonetheless privileges the "emic" perspective, that is the view of the cultural insider. So accordingly, in treating Greek omen stories, he argues that even if some are fictitious embellishments, they nonetheless shed light on Greek norms of thought and experience. What this means is that the investigator's starting position must be that the signs recorded in our sources were actually perceived at the time.

With this theoretical scaffolding in place, Flower proceeds to a detailed analysis of the battle of Leuctra (371 BCE), fought between the Thebans and the Spartans. This is considered an ideal case study because of the uniquely large number of portents reported to have accompanied the event by a number of ancient sources: Xenophon, Diodorus, Callisthenes (as reported by Cicero), Plutarch, and Pausanias. This case study powerfully reveals a culture constantly on the lookout for divine signs, which are either seen before the event or, in retrospect, realized as something that should have been seen. Flower finishes his study with a remarkable modern instance demonstrating the legitimacy of his ontological approach: how, on the eve of the battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 (like the battle of Leuctra utterly unexpected in its outcome), US Cavalry officers and their Native American scouts each perceived wholly different sets of signs they took as omens of Custer's defeat.

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1.9 NAIDEN

Scholarship on Macedonian divination is rare, except for the commonplace that it declined in the Hellenistic period. F. S. Naiden rejects this conclusion and in "The Use of Divination by Macedonian Kings," he explores the variety of divinatory practices used by Macedonian kings, primarily Alexander, in collaboration with seers. Such practices differed from those used by other Greek rulers (e.g., Spartan kings) largely by frequent recourse to Egyptian and Asian divination and were further complicated by the cults of divinized Hellenistic rulers. Naiden begins by examining four basic forms of divination – extispicy and other sacrifices, teratology, oneiromancy, and oracles – and how the role of king and seer might differ in each case. He then turns his focus on divinatory personnel, especially Aristander of Telmessus, the seer most favored by Alexander, and the relation of such individuals to their royal employers, a relation that becomes especially interesting when ruler and seer clash over outcomes. Finally, turning to the deified Hellenistic ruler, Naiden takes us through examples of sacrifices being offered *to* him, sacrifices offered *for* him, and sacrifices with both intentions at the same time. In one instance we see such a ruler interpreting his own dreams and even becoming an oracle himself. All of this prevailed, Naiden points out, leaving other forms of divination pretty much intact, especially those associated with military operations.

1.10 FIELDS

In considering divination, questions of duplicity and rapacity are inevitable. A number of papers in the present collection touch on these questions with varying degrees of emphasis. But in "False Prophets and Fake Prophecies in Lucian," Dana Fields makes them her primary focus as she carries our discussion to the emergence of charismatic holy men in the first and second centuries CE and the satirist Lucian's merciless exposé of two of their more prominent exemplars, Peregrinus of Parium and Alexander of Abonoteichos. Lucian's scathing representation of these men is as charlatans whose bag of fraudulence includes prophecy and divination to augment their authority and ultimately their material gain. But Fields goes a step further to advance the thesis that Lucian's "own use of masks, fictional or historical mouthpieces, and inconsistent narrators with his own name" undermines his own authority, lowering him to the level of his satire's targets. "By using their own techniques against them," Fields

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argues, "Lucian's critiques take on a competitive quality, and the satirist threatens to reveal himself as just another fame-seeker within the agonistic display culture of the high Roman empire ... [H]e becomes a parasite on their fame and thus indirectly implicated in all the deceptive things they do to gain it."

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