



HPCA7013 -Cosmology, Magic and Divination

Week 8 – Student Activity

Timing and Divination

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Time and the role of timing in Ancient Greek Divination

- The role of time and timing
- How do the questions posed in divination relate to past, present and future
- Timing and timeframes associated with divination



Chronological aspects of the divination process

- Were there good and bad days on which to divine?
- A particular time of the day?
- Did time function as a context for the 'sign' or 'message'?
- Finding 'the right moment' for divination
 - if there was, time cannot have been considered as homogeneous
- Are there time limits to obtaining knowledge of past and future? Is the timeframe explicit or unspecified?
- If the past can be used to think about the future. What does this mean for ideas about time as seen through the lens of divination?

Ancient time?

- Ancient time is problematic
- Lloyd states: “...the evidence is insufficient for us to speak confidently concerning... ideas on time.”
- But the ancient ‘normal’ person street would have had ideas and conceptions about time.
- As divination is based on the idea that there is a particular connection between the past, present and future, the extant material can provide insight into those ideas

Cultural attitudes?

- Various cultures may have different perspectives
- For example, in regard to position in relation to time
 - do we face the future or have our backs to it?
 - how much time we have in life? (Ancient v modern life spans/threats)
- Time orientation relates to cultural emphasis on past, present or future.
- Ideas like this influence the notion of time in every society.

Notions of time

- Human experiences of time are astronomical and biological, **societal** and **individual-psychological**
- Societal time viz divination important, as both are cultural constructs and influence each other
 - Societal time is the way in which time is monitored, described and measured – scholars have debated whether time seen by Greeks as linear or cyclical (cf. Momigliano's work to show cyclical is not supportable)
 - If time was seen as cyclical, the circles proceeded in a linear fashion
- Individual-psychological experience
 - lifetime and life span (e.g perceived acceleration as a person grows older).
 - Duration/speed of time in the sphere of 'illusions' which are part of experience

Good timing (1)

- Practices could be constrained/influenced by existing social conceptions.
- Specific times of day better to facilitate the divine contact
- Anthropological evidence shows this could be: 'the heat of the day', 'never at night', or only 'in the early morning'.
- Greek magical Papyri contain information about the existence of days and hours suitable for divination: .e.g *PGM VII 155-167 (p.119)* 'on the first of the month, divine at dawn' but reasons why are not forthcoming

Good timing (2)

- Oracular sessions could be over two consecutive days, incorporating a night — receiving questions one day, answering them the next.
- This found at Korope and in Lucian's account of practices at Abonuteichos
- At Korope, did the inclusion of a night give the divine the opportunity to 'read' the question and answer the next day? In Lucian's work Alexandros claims that he obtained answers overnight.
- Practical reasons influence the timing,
 - Light was essential for some – e.g. *PGM VII 250-54 (p.123)* spoken to 'day lamp'
 - Some examinations of skies and oneiromancy needed the dark

Which Days?

- Evidence for suitability of days scarce in Greece
- At Didyma the oracle was open on particular days and at Korope it is clear that the oracle was available on ὅταν συντελῇται τὸ μαντεῖον ('on the oracular days') but where they were in the calendar has not survived
- More information on Delphi
 - Plutarch - in the archaic age the site was 'open' only one day a year, but that **at a later date** it was used for nine to twelve days every year (debate over the notion of Apollo leaving Delphi in the winter months)
 - These days were positioned evenly amongst the Delphic religious calendar designating 'Days of Apollo' (in Athenian terms the seventh of the month)
 - Other divinatory methods, apart from the Pythia oracle, were used, e.g. cleromancy using white and dark beans, and there may have been no time restrictions on that activity
 - Limited number of days to consult via the Pythia, but cf. Plutarch on Alexander

Time as context?

- Time could function as a context for the sign or message
- Character of the day/night or time of the month could affect the meaning the sign and consequent apodosis (conclusion)
- Beerden notes that in Greece, oracular evidence does not point to this; meaning was not changed by the day/time it was given.
- But, in Hellenistic Astrology, time in this sense provided a crucial context, cf. Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* in which the astrologer can: "tell, from the presiding of a given star with another or others around the heavens, whether the divination will be true or false..." *DM III.30 [173.7-10] trans. Clarke/Dillon/Hershbell*,
- It is possible that the *diviner* took this aspect of time into account informally in oracular work

Kairos – the right time

- Divination used to reveal the ‘right time’ to act or do
- Kairos familiar in the Archaic, cf. Hesiod’s *Works and Days*
- Central concern in military matters, if signs proved unfavourable, action was delayed however inconvenient cf. Xenophon and his army in *Anabasis*
- In astrology too, the *katarchē* (a beginning associated with ritual) must be synchronised with kairos, cf. *Valens* “Whence for every *katarchē* one must observe carefully, in putting out a fleet and military command.... Truly, it is useless to sacrifice to god or to consecrate offerings; for prayers will not be answered...”. (V, 2.22, 23)
- **Thus, time is perceived as non-homogenous, there are distinct phases**

Scope - timeframes

- The scope or duration of time (time frame) to which a divination could apply
- Beerden notes that in Greece this is mainly left implicit.
- Oracular questions and answers have a sense of time because they normally imply future action, but the timeframe is, in the main, not stated. ***What about Astrology?***
- A few literary and epigraphic examples highlight reference to near past or future, e.g:
 - At Dodona: " [. . .] if i will be able to sail to Syrakuse, to the colony, later"
 - And this one "and security of things...to come" *Eidinow, Oracles, curses and risk: 79 (no.17) and 92 (no. 13)*
- When made explicit, timeframe is limited to around one year at most – there is urgency and if the Greeks knew past, present and future through divination, it was recent past and near future (concepts which could be fluidic)

Past and Future

- Past interpretations of signs important when these same signs had to be interpreted again.
- Memories/experience of the past could aid the of shaping ideas about the future by means of divination
- Precedent used as an explicit to consider the future
 - A precedent is a past event, or previously 'proven' relationship between events, which acts as a decision-making guide
 - Implies an analogy between past and present
- Use of precedent clearly in other areas of Greek thought, e.g Medicine
- Use in divinatory interpretation only 'proven' from 2nd century AD, cf. *Artemidoros' Prooemium* on dream interpretation which he insisted was based on real dreams he'd collected and studied
- ***Is a birth chart an example of the past being used as precedent to divine the future?***
- Greek use of experience became use of precedent

Conclusions

- Divination was organized and could be restricted by existing conceptions of time.
- Certain activities had to take place at particular times and dates
- Interpretation of signs/messages influenced by conceptions of time:
- A sign/message could have a different meaning, depending when it occurred.
- Divination functioned to find the right time, Kairos
- Time was conceived as non-homogeneous
- Timeframes or horizons are usually implicit and we can only infer their scope (and that on the whole involves 'recent past' and 'near future')



Questions
