Cosmology, Magic and Divination 2025

Student Activities

Week 1: Introduction to the Module

Introduction – what is 'divination'?
This course is going to introduce you to ancient divination, magic and cosmology. Of course we do not expect you to know all about these topics before taking this module. But as an exercise before the module begins, we would like you to think about your conception of divination right now (you don't need to Google it – this is an exercise in your impressions). How would you define it? Do you think it is real? Do you think it still exists? Have you ever practised divination? Just jot down some of your thoughts on this topic, and we will discuss them in the first seminar.

Week 2: Divination, Magic and Religion in Antiquity

Magical and Religious Rites: What is magical and what is religious?

Compare and contrast the Christian rite of communion, with a spell in the Greek Magical Papyri. The spell we are asking you to compare with Christian communion is from *PGM* XIII, lines 760-1050. Why and how is the god being invoked? Within the spell you will find different sections, which give instructions for invoking the god, the reasons for the invocation, the methods of invocation and the physical instructions for performing the spell. You may consider all of these in your analysis and comparison with Christian communion.

Questions to consider: why has one procedure been classified as religious, and the other magical? What parameters make them magical or religious? Do you agree with these classifications? Why or why not?

Week 3: Ancient Divination in Egypt and the Near East

Dream Interpretation: Record and analyse a dream
Everyone dreams, and this week one of our discussion topics will be dreams and divination. We are asking this week's volunteer to record a dream and analyse it. What is the content of the dream? What do you think it means? Can you apply it to your life? (It doesn't need to be a 'prophetic' dream; the idea is to think about your personal experience of dreaming, and be able to think about it in relation to ancient records of dreaming.

Week 4: Divination and Oracles in Ancient Tibet

Tibetan oracular and divinatory traditions
Please conduct some preliminary research on Tibetan Buddhist oracular and divinatory traditions and be prepared to discuss the following.

- the role of time and timing in Tibetan oracular traditions and astrology
- the role of the interpreter in Tibetan oracular traditions and in divination
- the role of divination in Tibetan reincarnation lineages and in traditional medicine

These may be presented in your 5-minute presentation.

Week 5: Magic, Medicine, Religion and Divination in ancient Greece

Ars longa, vita brevis
'The art is long, but life is short.' This famous Hippocratic aphorism, well known in both its Latin and English translation, is actually the beginning of a longer quotation in Greek, translated as:
'Life is short, but the art is great, the opportune moment fleeting, experimentation perilous, discernment difficult' (trans. D. G. Greenbaum)

Note: 'art' translates the Greek *techne*, which can also mean 'craft' (and from which our word technology comes). The phrase 'opportune moment' translates the Greek *kairos*. 'Discernment' translates *krisis* (from the verb *krino*, judge, discern, distinguish, decide)

Think about this quotation in regard to divination and medicine. How do medicine, rituals and doing things at the right time relate to the practice of medicine in its physical and spiritual aspects? Is there a spiritual aspect to medicine, or is it purely the physical application of remedy and treatment? What do you think the writer of the aphorism intended

Week 6: Anthropological Perspectives on Divination and Magic

Edward Evans-Pritchard among the Azande and Nuer people
Watch all or part of the BBC Documentary (part of the BBC series *Strange Beliefs*; 52 minutes duration) about Edward Evans-Pritchard and his anthropological and ethnographic fieldwork among the Azande and the Nuer of the Southern Sudan, by copying and pasting the following link into You Tube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q9HyONL_10

Be prepared to give a brief 5 minute presentation during Seminar 8 discussing the following issues:

Who was Edward Evans-Pritchard and when did he undertake his anthropological fieldwork among the Azande and Nuer people? What are the advantages and

disadvantages (or pros and cons) of Evans-Pritchard's methodology and working methods in his fieldwork? In what ways were Evans-Pritchard's views and observations affected by his chronological context (i.e. the time in which he was working) and his own background?

Week 7: Hellenistic Astrology and Its Place within Divinatory Practice

Omens and Astrology

The renowned scholar of astrology, David Pingree, said about the 'science of astrology' and its origins, that astrology depends on:

> "...the notion that the planets, in their eternal rotations about the earth, transmit motion (change) to the four elements and to the assemblages of elements, animate and inanimate, in the sublunar world. This theory is completely different from that of celestial omens, in which the gods, whose physical manifestations are the constellations and planets, send messages concerning their intentions regarding kings and countries by means of celestial phenomena. That these divine intentions can be altered by the use of propitiatory rituals...emphasizes the fundamental conceptual difference between omens and astrology."
>
> --*From Astral Omens to Astrology: From Babylon to Bīkāner*. Rome: Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 1997, pp. 21-22.

- What do you think of Pingree's position? Do you agree or disagree? Using primary sources and secondary scholarship, give *pro* and *contra* evidence for Pingree's assessment.

Week 8: Divination, Theurgy and Tantra

A Brief Introduction to Theurgy

Listen to the lecture by Dr Crystal Addey, 'Theurgy, Magic and Philosophy', which can be found on the Moodle page for Week 8 under 'Student Activity'. Give a short presentation of no more than 10 minutes, identifying seven key aspects of theurgy and outlining them for the class.