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Ancient Greek futures: Diminishing uncertainties by means of divination

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes forecasting in the ancient Greek world. Forecasting was practiced by the use of a particular method: that of divination. Divination was the interpretation of signs perceived to have been sent by the supernatural. This practice can be seen as an ancient alternative to risk assessment/analysis and to scenario studies. The study of divination shows that ancient Greeks believed there were multiple futures – and not one predetermined future – from which man attempted to select the best, aided by the flexible tool that divination appears to be. The Greek future is, perhaps, more like our own than it may previously have been assumed. Ideas about how this future should be come to terms with, however, differ significantly. The absence of concepts of risk and probability are one difference, the use of the supernatural to assess uncertainties is another.

1. Introduction [1]

Ancient Greece is regularly referred to in the field of Futures Studies. The important forecasting method called 'Delphi' is an implicit way of referring to one of the most famous oracles of ancient Greece. However, the ancient world is also referred to in a more explicit way: as a counterpoint to the modern world. The most recent major publication dealing with (among other subjects) the future in the past by Barbara Adam and Chris Groves [2] devotes a reasonable amount of space to 'ancient futures'. Lucian Hölscher uses Augustine to argue that ancient futures were thought of as individual futures, while the modern future appears to focus on the collective [3, p. 20]. Anthony Giddens [4] and Peter Bernstein [5] draw a contrast between the modern world and anything which came before by characterizing us as living in a 'risk-society', in which we constantly assess and manage uncertainties of the future, while stating that the ancient Greeks did not do this in the way we do and were less interested in the future.

Yet, the fact that ancient Greeks did not think and deal with the future by means of risk-assessment, does not mean they were not interested in the uncertainties of the future. They, too, wanted to know what their options were and what could be done to influence what was to come. Instead of using scenario's and risk analysis to diminish uncertainties about the future, they had a different tool: divination ('sign-reading'), which served to gain information about past, present and future from the supernatural. This article discusses ancient Greek divination and the ways in which it was used to consider the future (from around 800 BC until the beginning of the Common Era). Ultimately, this article aims to stimulate further comparative use of the ancient Greek world in the field of Futures Studies.

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2. Divination

Ancient individuals used divination to gain some information about possible futures. They perceived occurrences ('signs') in the world around them, which were thought to be sent by the supernatural, and interpreted these, hoping to obtain reliable information. Divination occurred very regularly and in all kinds of situations: it served to address both individual and collective questions and concerns. Its use was also very widespread: everyone in the ancient world – rich or poor, slave or free, man or woman – was a potential user of divination.

Those studying cognitive religion explain that every human brain is wired in such a way to discern causal connections, even if there are none. So, when an occurrence which cannot easily be explained takes place, the *Homo sapiens* thinks there should be someone or something causing the occurrence: anything to 'prove' things do not occur just randomly. If there is no such visible agent around, the *Homo sapiens* in the ancient world is prone to ascribe the occurrence to a supernatural agent which tries to communicate some piece of information [6].

Signs from the supernatural could, then, appear spontaneously: the supernatural was thought to have provided them without having been asked to do so – or they could be asked for by means of a prayer or a sacrifice. The supernatural was perceived to be able to place these signs anywhere in the world around the ancient Greek. Supernatural signs could appear in a person who would speak as a medium. Yet, a medium could also be an animal making particular movements or an object to which something remarkable occurred. There were, then, many different kinds of signs and these differences had to be taken account during their interpretation: this is why there is a great number of divinatory methods. One of these methods was the inspection of the entrails of a sacrificial animal:

> Aegisthus took the entrails in his hands and inspected them. Now the liver had no lobe, while the portal vein and near-by gall-bladder revealed threatening approaches to the one who was observing it.
> ([Euripides, *Electra* 826–829] Translation: E.P. Coleridge, Loeb Classical Library)

Other divinatory methods include: interpreting the fact that a mouse had gnawed through a bag (Theophrastus, *Characters* 16); interpreting sudden occurrences such as the birth of an hermaphrodite or the outbreak of a plague, as in the famous passage from the *Iliad* where the plague rages in the Greek camp at Troy. The famous divinatory expert called Calchas tells the Greeks that the god Apollo has been offended, why this is so and what should be done to appease him (Homer, *Iliad* 1.93-99).

Oracles were another divinatory method and the oracle site at Delphi is probably the most famous Greek divinatory site. A female medium was thought to speak the words of the supernatural while being in a state of 'possession' by the god Apollo. It is very unclear how exactly this 'possession', if any, was caused. At Delphi, the Pythia was supposed to inhale vapours which induced it, or perhaps she drank special waters or chewed on laurel for this purpose–or perhaps she feigned to be 'possessed' [7]. While there are attestations in the sources of what the Pythia was deemed to have said, the exact way this oracle functioned remains shrouded in uncertainty. Yet, the Pythia certainly produced results for her clients. She spoke and her words were, presumably, interpreted by priests at the oracle. The following text is, according to the historian Herodotus 7.141.3-4, an oracle from Delphi warning the Athenians for the arrival of the Persians:

> Yet a wood-built wall will by Zeus all-seeing be granted
> To the Trito-born, a stronghold for you and your children.
> Await not the host of horse and foot coming from Asia,
> Nor be still, but turn your back and withdraw from the foe.
> Truly a day will come when you will meet him face to face.
> Divine Salamis, you will bring death to women's sons
> When the corn is scattered, or the harvest gathered in.
>
> (Translation: A.D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library)

A second important Greek oracle, after Delphi, was that at Dodona. Here, we know even less about how the oracular procedure worked: the signs were perhaps given through the cooing of doves or the rustling of leaves in a particular oak-tree. What makes Dodona interesting to modern researchers is the fact that many small lead tablets which played a practical role in the divinatory process have been found at the site. The published Dodonaic materials now consist of around two hundred questions; more should be published in the future.

Questions to the supernatural have been written on the tablets by the clients of the oracle:

> Whether it will be better for me if I go to Sybaris and if I do these things?
> Will it be better for Agelochos (from Ergetion) if he sets out to be a farmer?
> God. Good fortune. About the price of a slave.
> God. Luck. Leontios asks about his son Leon, whether he will be healthy and (cured) of the disease which has gripped him?
> (All translations: E. Eidinow [8, pp. 75; 96; 103; 105])

Answers were only occasionally written down on the reverse of the tablets:

> Side A: God . . . Good Luck. About possessions and about a place to live: whether (it would be) better for him and his children and his wife in Kroton?
> Side B (probably the response to A): In Kroton.
> (Translation: E. Eidinow [8, p. 76])