How to Do Ancient Greek Divination
John Opsopaus, Ph.D.
Invocation

PYTHIAN APOLLO, LORD OF DELPHI, HEAR!
THOU WHO KNOWS THE MIND OF FATHER ZEUS,
HASTENING TO BRING TRUE ORACLES,
HITHER COME TO ME, PROCLAIM PURE WORDS!
TEACH TO US THE DIVINATION ARTS,
THOSE THOU TAUGHT TO HERMES, SKILLED IN WORDS,
LEARNED FROM BEE-NYMPHS IN KÔRÚKION.
PRAY, ACCEPT THIS GIFT IN THANKS TO THEE.
Outline

• Background
• The Alphabet Oracle
• The Astragalos Oracle
• If time permits:
  - other ancient oracles
  - mythological origins
The Oracles of Apollo

- Background & history
- Rituals & techniques
- The Alphabet Oracle
- The Oracle of the Seven Sages
- Website: opsopaus.com
- Book signing: Sunday 9:30
Background

- Personal notes
- Varieties of Ancient Divination
- Neoplatonic Theory of Divination
- Enigmas
“Only sacred divination united with the gods truly gives a share in the divine life, participating in foreknowledge and divine thoughts, and truly makes us divine.”

— Iamblichus (c.250–c.330 CE)
Varieties of Ancient Greek Divination

- Natural vs. artificial
- Inspired prophesy
- Dream interpretation
- Omens accompanying sacrifice
- Divination at sacred springs
- Scrying
- Each of four elements
- Flight & cry of Birds
- Chance utterances
- Numerology
- Pendulums & sieves
- Icons
- Astrology
- Palmistry
- Cleromancy (lots)
Cleromancy
Kinds of Cleromancy

- Pebbles, stones, dice, astragaloi cast into sacred springs, bowls of liquids, or dice trays
- Stones, clay balls, beans, inscribed objects drawn from bowls, jars, etc. or shaken out
- Practiced at many shrines including Delphi

- Bibliomancy
- Homer Oracle
  ✓ 216 throws of 3 dice
- Lots of Astrampsychos
- Praenestine Lots
- Astragalos oracles
- Alphabet oracles
Neoplatonic Theory of Divination

• **Inspired divination** uses symbolic correspondences & vertical sympathies to attune soul to the god’s energy

• Attuning images in individual *nous* (microcosm) to gods in Cosmic *Nous* (macrocosm)

• Objects observed or manipulated in **artificial divination** are symbols sympathetic to gods

• Gods are present, both to guide the fall of the lots and to guide our interpretation

• Objective of divination: happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*)

• “With gnôsis of the gods, there follows a turning toward ourselves and gnôsis of ourselves.” — Iamblichus
Enigmas and Oracles

- Emperor Julian (330–363 CE): the gods make the oracles obscure so that we learn to use our own wits, to inquire into philosophy, and not to trust blindly the opinions of others
- Porphyry (c.234–c.305 CE): oracles are enigmas (*ainigmata*) to hide their meaning from the profane and uninitiated
- Must be read allegorically and symbolically to reveal their true meaning
- Plato (c.428–348 BCE): oracles must be solved, like riddles
- Prior to interpretation, the meaning is open, though constrained by the signs
- Once expressed in words and accepted, the potentials begin to collapse into one possibility
- Once accepted, the oracle and its meaning become talismans
Apollo, Lord, and Hermes, lead the way!
And thou, who wanders, this to thee we say:
Be still; enjoy this oracle’s excellence,
for Phoebos Apollo has given it to us,
this art of divination from our ancestors.
The Alphabet Oracle

- Origin
- Text
- Casting
- Rituals
- Alphabet Lore
- Alphabet Magic
The Wolfe Expeditions to Asia Minor

- Catharine Lorillard Wolfe (1828–1887) supported archaeological expeditions
- Financed expeditions to Asia Minor by Dr. J. R. Sitlington Sterrett (1851–1914) in summers of 1884 & 1885
- Located & recorded inscriptions in unmapped areas of Turkey
- Transcribed the Alphabet and Astragalos Oracles
Location of Oracle Inscriptions

(Nollé p. 23)
Final Approach to the Alphabet Oracle

- The Alphabet Oracle copied by Sterrett above the Sigirlik Valley, Turkey
- This is how it looked when archaeologist Johannes Nollé visited it in 1986
- Photo from Nollé (2007, f. 21)
The Alphabet Oracle In Situ

(Nollé, 2007, f. 22a)
Closeup of Inscription

(Nollé, 2007, f. 22b)
The Olympos Alphabet Oracle

(Nollé, 2007, f. 23a)
Beginning of Inscription (A–Θ)

(Nollé, 2007, f. 23b)
The Alphabet Tablet

- 24 verses, one for each letter of alphabet
- Each verse begins with its letter
- Ancient Greeks did not use lowercase letters or spaces between words
A. All these things, he says, you’ll do quite well!
B. Briefly wait; the time’s not right for thee.
Γ. Gaia gives thee ripe fruit from thy work.
Δ. Dodge the dreadful deeds, avoiding harm.
E. Eager art thou for right wedding’s fruits.
Z. Zealously avoid the harmful storm!
H. Helios, all-watcher, watches thee.
Θ. Thou hast gods as comrades and as aides.
I. In all things, thou shalt excel — with sweat!
K. Contests with the waves are hard; endure!
Λ. Leave off grief, and then await delight.
M. Make no haste; in vain you press ahead.
N. Now springs forth the fitting time for all.
Ξ. Xanthic Dêô’s ripened fruit awaits.
O. Out of sight are crops that are not sown.
Π. Passing many tests, you’ll win the crown.
P. Rest awhile; you’ll go more easily.
Σ. “Stay thou, friend,” Apollo plainly says.
T. Take release from present circumstance.
Υ. Useless toil: this wedding isn’t thine!
Φ. Forthwith Plant! For Dêô fosters well.
Χ. “Happily press on!” says Zeus himself.
Ψ. Proper is this judgment from the gods.
Ω. Otiose the fruit that’s plucked unripe.
Example of Interpretive Aids

- Λ (Lambda)
- Leave off grief, and then await delight.
- Make an end of grief {Λύπης}; hereafter expect joy.


- You have grieved long enough. Although you have been sad, you will be happy soon. Stop worrying, and prepare to be pleased. Turn your attention from your pain to the things that give you joy. Pain will yield to happiness. You have been through dark times, but the sun will rise again.
Methods of Casting the Oracle

- Alphabet stones
- Astragaloi
- Dice methods
- Teetotums
- Alphabet tablet
- Coin methods
- Geomantic method
- Bead methods
- Pebble methods
- Mixed dice method
- Three-out-of-four method
Alphabet Stones
## Dice and Astragalois Sums

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# Alphabet Tablet

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Three-out-of-four Method

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The Practice of Divination

- Divination Rituals
- Miscasts
- Repeating Divinations
- Divination Journal
Divination Ritual

Based on Grk. Mag. Pap.

1. Create sacred space, light incense
2. Ground & center
3. Make offering; optionally anoint lips
4. Invoke Apollo
5. Silently ask question
6. Shuffle the lots
7. Charge hands before cast or draw
8. At right time (kairos), cast or draw
9. Speak oracle out loud
10. Interpret after prayer for guidance
11. Thank & release the god
Example Spells

Invocation of Apollo

O Lord Apollôn, come with Paian now. Give answers to my questions, all-wise one. Leave Mount Parnassus and from Delphi fly whenever I have said thy secret name:

AKRAKANARBA
KRAKANARBA
RAKANARBA
AKANARBA
KANARBA
ANARBA
NARBA
ARBA
RBA
BA
A

O Pythian Apollôn, answer me!

Hermeneutic Prayer

Explain thy prophecy in lucid words, reveal all things: both when they will occur and how they will be done. Reveal the truth!

Invocation adapted from PGM I. 296–9; II. 1, 65.
Prayer adapted from PGM VI. 41–5; II. 79.
Informal Divination Spell

Come hither to thy prophet, haste to sing
divine precepts to me, and to proclaim
pure words, and through these lots to bring
true oracles. Thus I invoke thy name:
Akti Kara Abaiôth (Ahk-tih Kah-rah Ah-buy-oath)
Divination Practice

- Miscasts
- Repeating divinations
- Divination journal
- Confirming or mitigating magic
  - Prayers to governing deity or others mentioned in oracle
  - Talisman with deity name and astragalos numbers
Consecration Ritual

Based on *Greek Magical Papyri*

1. Create sacred space
2. Light incense
3. Invocation of Apollo (e.g.) with libations
4. Purification
5. Invocation of Alphabet Daimons (optional)
6. Potentiation
7. Release and final thanks offerings
### Alphabet Daimons

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The Esoteric Greek Alphabet

- Correspondences with 24 letters ($24 = 12 + 5 + 7$):
  - 12 single consonants = Zodiac
  - 5 double consonants = elements
  - 7 vowels = planets
- According to Plutarch (c.46–c.120 CE) ($24 = 7 + 8 + 9$):
  - 7 voiced (vowels): Apollo (7 is his number)
  - 8 half-voiced (semivowels): Harmonia (wife of Cadmus, inventor of alphabet)
  - 9 unvoiced (consonant): 9 Muses
- 27 letters of archaic alphabet correspond to days of moon’s visibility (lunar phases)
- Isopsephy (“Greek gematria”)
Isopsephy

- 27 archaic Greek letters used as numbers
- *Isopsêphos* = equal pebbles
- Origin of gematria
- Establishes occult connections between words

✓ “The god Apollo” (Ο ΘΕΟΣ ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝ = 1415) ≈ 2 × “The god Hermes” (Ο ΘΕΟΣ ΕΡΜΗΣ = 707)
Example Alphabet Talisman
Folding Instructions

Note: All folds should be to the lines printed on the paper, and not to the actual edges of the page.

1. Start with front page at top left.
2. Fold in halves.
3. Cut at dotted line in center.
4. Fold to opposite ends.
5. Fold in half vertically.
6. Fold in half horizontally.

Done, enjoy!

PocketMod.com © 2005-2006
The Astragalomanteion
(Astragalalos Oracle)

Apollo, Lord, and Hermes, lead the way!
And thou, who wanders, this to thee we say:
Be still; enjoy this oracle’s excellence,
for Phoebos Apollo has given it to us,
this art of divination from our ancestors.
Astragalos Faces

3 Huptios Supinum
4 Pranês Pronum
1 Khîos Planum
6 Kôios Tortuosum
Which is the Dog Face?

- Some authors disagree about which face is Khios (1), also called the Dog (Kuôn).
- But Aristotle (Hist. An. 499b) says “the sides known as Kôios are inside, turned towards each other, the sides known as Khios are outside, and the “horns” are on top.”
- That is, the lateral (concave) surface is the Dog
Ancient and Modern Astragaloi

Clockwise from upper left: two modern natural astragaloi; five modern artificial astragaloi; three ancient astragaloi (bone, stone, lead).
The Astragalos Oracle

- Origin
- Text
- Casting
“I was suffering from the fever at the time and could not bear to lie on my stomach with my head in the hole below me, consequently I have had to rely upon the impression for the body of the inscription on this side. Fortunately it is a good impression.” — J. R. Sitlington Sterrett

(Nollé pl. 8a)
The Anabura Oracle

(Nollé p. 33)
Anabura Oracle, Block IV

(Nollé pl. 2a)
Oracle Column in Situ

Kremna, Turkey.

(Nollé pl. 11b)
The Astragalomanteion

- Five astragaloi are cast
- 56 possible throws (ignoring order)
- For convenience, the oracles are ordered by the sum of the astragaloi
- Each oracle has a sponsoring deity
- Most oracle pillars have same text

(Nollé pl. 11b)
Closeup of Inscription

Oracles for:
4-4-4-1-1 (14) Agathos Daimôn
1-3-3-4-4 (15) Zeus the Savior
1-1-1-6-6 (15) Zeus Ammon
3-3-3-3-3 (15) Tukhê the Savior

Kremna, Turkey.

(Nollé pl. 13)
Example Oracle Inscriptions

- Labeled by sum, astragalos cast, and sponsoring deity
- First line restates the astragalos cast
- Last three lines are the oracle proper
- Ancient Greeks did not use lowercase letters, spaces, or punctuation!
One Chian, triple Sixes, and the fifth a Four: Revere Pallas Athêna, and all will be for thee, all that you wish. All you suppose will be fulfilled. She’ll loosen thee from bonds, and save the sufferer.

Revere: pay honor to, reverence. Wish: desire, will, intend. Suppose: think, imagine, expect. Fulfilled: accomplished, made to arise. Loosen: unbind, unfasten, loosen, release; dissolve, break up, weaken, resolve, solve; undo, eliminate, destroy; ransom, atone for. Bonds: binding, a bond, a band; imprisonment. Save: keep alive, preserve; rescue, bring to safety; keep in mind, remember. Sufferer: one sick in body or mind; insane one; unsound one.

A straight-forward oracle. Everything that you desire, intend, imagine and expect will be fulfilled if you honor and revere the goddess Athena. Pray to her. Vow to give a thanks offering when your intention is fulfilled. The oracle promises moreover that the goddess will release you from some sort of restraint and relieve a sufferer (either someone else or you yourself). This person may be suffering a mental or physical illness.
Example Oracle (2)

(23) 6-6-4-4-3 Euphrosunê

And if two Sixes, double Fours, the fifth a Three:
Set forth where’er your spirit bids; back home you’ll come,
devising deeds as per your mind, and master all,
with merriment this way to purchase and to sell.

*Set forth*: prepare to go. *Spirit*: heart, soul; courage; temper, anger; will, mind. *Bids*: commands, advises, urges, desires. *Back*: again; anew. *Home*: to your house, to your family, to your household; to your room; to the temple. *Come*: return, be present. *Devising*: inventing; getting, procuring, earning; discovering; finding. *Deeds*: actions, doings, transactions, business; results of action or business; repayments, retribution. *Mind*: thought, wits, perception; heart, emotions; will, purpose; *nous*. *Master*: rule over, hold sway over; conquer, prevail over; control, command, become master of. *Merriment*: mirth, good cheer; the goddess Euphrosunê. *Purchase*: buy; bargain for something; buy off someone. *This way*: in this way or manner; therefore. *Sell*: offer for sale; barter, exchange; sell out, betray.

This oracle advises you to set out on a journey of your heart’s desire, which may be either a literal or metaphorical journey. Perhaps you are already planning this journey, or perhaps this oracle will inspire you to cook up a plan. Follow your spirit, intuition, mind, will, or inspiration. You will succeed at whatever clever plans you concoct along the way. You will be happy with the result, especially in regard to any buying or selling.
**Gods and Goddesses**

- Oracles are “spoken” by Pythian Apollo
- Oracle site itself under patronage of Hermes
  - Messenger of gods
  - Patron of lesser forms of divination
  - Lord of luck and chance
  - Patron of travelers and marketplace
- Individual oracles are governed by various deities
  - Guide hand of caster
  - Responsible for the oracle
Casting

• Cast five astragaloi (or one astragalos five times)
  ✓ Add numbers to help find oracle
  ✓ Ignore order when matching casts
• Don’t have astragaloi? Roll an ordinary die
  ✓ Ignore 2s and 5s
  ✓ Continue rolling until you have five numbers
• Throwing sticks (long dice) can be used:
Additional Topics

• The Homer Oracle

• The Oracle of the Seven Sages
  - presented in my *Oracles of Apollo* book

• Mythological Origins
Homeromanteion: The Homer Oracle

How then could we possibly not attribute every virtue to Homer, when those who have come after him have even found in his poetry all the things he did not himself think to include? Some use his poetry for divination, just like the oracles of a god, while others put forth entirely different subjects and ideas and fit the verses to them, transposing them and stringing them together in new ways.

— Pseudo-Plutarch, Life of Homer II, 218, 4
Homeromanteion (Homer Oracle)

- Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were treated as divinely inspired texts and subject to symbolic interpretation
- A kind of bibliomancy
- Three dice are cast to select one of 216 verses from the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*
- The order of the dice matters (216 = 6×6×6)
- Survives in London Magical Papyrus (*PGM VII*) and two other sources
  - All three have same verses in same order, showing it was widely used system of divination
Sources of Homer Oracle

- London Magical Papyrus (PGM VII, 4th cent CE)
  - oracle occupies distinguished position at beginning of scroll
  - almost complete text
Other Sources

Papyrus page from pocket-sized handbook from Oxyrhynchus, Egypt (3rd or 4th cent. CE)

A papyrus codex (2nd or 3rd cent. CE)
To ward away a man, whoever first is wroth

Strength is required to protect yourself from someone (perhaps a superior) who is angry and might be violent. Trust in a stronger protector for aid.


This line occurs in both of Homer’s poems. In the *Iliad*, Priam and his chariot driver are coming to the Greeks by night to ransom the body of Hector. Zeus sends Hermes, disguised as a sympathetic Greek soldier, to guide and protect them. Hermes observes that they need protection:

> Thou art not young, accompanied by one too old
to ward away a man, whoever first is wroth. [Il. 24.369]

Hermes proceeds to guide them safely to their destination. …
The Oracle of the Seven Sages
The Oracle of the Seven Sages

- Origin of the Counsels of the Seven
  - Helen’s Tripod
  - The Delphic Tablet
- Establishing the Text
  - Sosiades’ List
  - Klearkhos’ Pillar
- Modern Use as an Oracle
Helen’s Tripod and the Seven Sages
Sosiades’ Text

- Johannes Stobaeus (5th cent. CE), a Macedonian scholar
- Records “Sosiades’ Counsels of the Seven Sages”
- 147 short maxims probably copied from tablet at Delphi
Klearkhos’ Pillar

- The dedication is on the left
- The five overflow lines are on the right
The Tablet of the Seven Sages

- How they might have looked, engraved in three columns and grouped in heptads
Casting the Oracle of the Seven Sages

• The oracles are organized in
  - three columns, each with
  - seven henads, each with
  - seven oracles

• The divination methods produce three numbers: 1–3, 1–7, and 1–7

• For example, count beads or pebbles by threes, sevens, and sevens

- **Worship**: honor, respect, feel religious awe for, fear, do homage to.

- Continue or increase your devotion to the gods. Worship the gods and make offerings to them. Don’t forget that the gods govern everything in the universe. Don’t neglect the gods. Beware of divine retribution.
Methods for Consulting the Seven Sages

- Bead and pebble methods
- Coin methods
- Dominoes method
- Dice and teetotum methods
Mythological Origins

- The Bee Nymphs of Mount Parnassus
- The Birth of Apollo and Occupation of Delphi
- Hermes and the Thriai
The Corycian Cave
Bee Nymphs and Pebble Divination

- Three Parnassus Bee Nymphs practice pebble divination

- *Thriai* = divinatory pebbles and nymphs who were the first prophets

- Athena practiced *thriai* divination for a time

- The Bee Nymph Daphnis was the first prophetess of Gaia at Delphi

- Pythia was called “the Delphic Bee”
The Birth of Apollo

William Henry Rinehart, Latona and her Children Apollo and Diana
The Pythia or Delphic Bee
The Birth of Hermes
Apollo gives Hermes the divinatory art of the Bee Nymphs

For there are certain Holy Ones, as sisters born, and maidens, who are glorified with rapid wings; they’re three, besprinkled on their heads with barley meal, and dwell in houses down below Parnassos’ folds; they’re teachers of a strange divining, which in youth I practiced, tending herds; my father heeds it not. Then hither thither flying all about from there and eating honeycomb, they bring all things to pass.

When they have eaten yellow honey, they’re inspired, and readily are willing to declare the truth; but if they be deprived the sweet food of the Gods, then shaking all together they indeed tell lies. I give you these; and if precisely you inquire, delight your heart; and if You teach a mortal man, he’ll often hear Thy voice, if he be fortunate.

— Homeric Hymn IV, To Hermes, 552-566 (my transl.)
ACCEPT THIS GIFT, APOLLO, LORD OF LIGHT,
INTENDED TO BE ACCURATE AND RIGHT;
AND IF MY SPEAKING HATH APPEALED TO THEE,
I PRAY THAT KINDLY WOULDEST THOU LOOK ON ME.