

Methods of Divination Throughout
Ancient Cultures



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Writer's Note: This paper addresses the influential topic of divination. An ancient art of many forms, divination was used by fortune tellers to seek knowledge about the future. From reading coffee grounds in Turkey to palm reading in India, methods of telling the future exist throughout many different cultures. Divination has helped me combat my anxieties about the future, and has helped me gain spiritual knowledge and growth. Whether divination truly works is subjective, and this paper merely explores the concept and practice of fortune telling throughout history.

As a child, I was surrounded by people passionate about personal expression. I grew up feeling comfortable with alternative ways of thinking and being. In my family, it was acceptable to be vulnerable and explore new ways of approaching our world. I have countless memories from childhood of making “potions,” also known as mixing berries and mud from my yard into a sort of sludge and urging my parents to drink it. I collected sparkles, sand, hair from my cat and herbs from the garden, storing them in tiny bottles on my shelf. I grew up reading Harry Potter and Percy Jackson, books where the modern world collides with a transcendental reality. When I was a freshman in high school I received my first tarot deck. Although I had some knowledge of pendulums and astrology, I had never deep dived into the world of divination. First I was drawn in by the art. I loved the playful and bright illustrations. Each card was so intricate and detailed, and seemed to represent an archetype of some sort. It felt like a new language or game, something exciting to explore. Not only was it interesting, it was useful. As I began to learn and understand more about the cards, I was able to achieve great insight into my life and sense of self. It was exciting that something so ancient could be relevant to me and my modern day life. Divination has helped me combat my anxieties about the future, and has helped me gain spiritual knowledge and growth.

As I moved through high school, the world changed rather drastically. The year 2020 was one of the hottest years on record due to the rapid burning of fossil fuels and high amount of greenhouse gasses. Not only was our environment changing, our health was. The coronavirus pandemic was spreading, and self-isolation was mandated. Because of the many hours spent in my room, I was able to become more familiar with my deck. Fear of the unknown was something I already struggled with, and as the world became more precarious my fears escalated. Tarot was a way to make sense of what was happening in my life, both spiritually and physically. Whether I was asking for advice on an issue in my life or just simply trying to connect with my higher self, tarot allowed me to gather my feelings and to further understand my perception of the world around me.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “the practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means.” Divination is a way of learning by using the natural world, psyche and ancient practices. A more complex definition is “Divination is a form of individual acting in situations of uncertainty which identifies and articulates consent and dissent by using certain social roles to interpret standardized signs and to ritually deal with them. In such a performance a specific appropriation of social roles and religious traditions is indicated” (Rupke, 1). It is a way to connect with yourself or a higher being to seek guidance. Human beings are constantly searching for new knowledge and trying to grasp at the unknown. We find comfort and reassurance in knowing about what is to come. This is one of the reasons that divination has occurred in so many separate cultures and regions.

In modern society we are familiar with techniques such as oracle cards and astrology, but many more intricate and elaborate methods have existed throughout history. Evidence of divination dates back 6000 years ago to Mesopotamia, where messages from the gods were

desired. Omens were primarily used for fortune telling, regarding questions of whether to build new temples or health. Annus, a scholar, writes

“The holistic worldview of the ancient Mesopotamians assigned a firm place to every object and event in the universe according to divine will. Thus the incipit of the celestial omen series *Enuma Anu Enlil* suggests that the gods Anu, Enlil, and Ea themselves designed the constellations and measured the year in primeval times, thereby establishing the heavenly signs. Accordingly, Mesopotamian divination was an all embracing semantic system designed to interpret the whole universe (Annus,2).”

Divination soon spread from Mesopotamia and evolved in the classic world through traveling diviners. It became a prominent aspect of ancient Greek culture, where hepatoscopy, fortune telling by examining animal livers, was a main method. Fortune reading was introduced to Italy and adopted by Romans, who, like the Greeks, expanded on the methods and shared their knowledge with Islam and Europe. Fortune telling has also been documented in myths and stories among various cultures. Gods and deities such as the Hindu god Ganesha and goddess Lakshmi, and the Roman Fortuna. In Japan there are seven gods of luck. In Norse mythology Gullveig represents fortune. In Greek mythology, the fates represent the cycle of life and essentially determine the fate of mortals. Known as the Moirai, the three sisters Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos each represented an abstract idea regarding destiny. Clotho determines when someone is born, Lachesis determines the length of their life, and Antropos determines when they die. Divination is prominent in myths and religions throughout the world, and carries on in modern life. What are the methods of divination, and what is the history behind fortune tellers?

Though methods of divination are almost countless, a few practices stand out to me in particular. As a society, we tend to associate fortune telling with medieval Europe and ancient Greece. Though practices have emerged in these regions, divination stretches far across the globe

and has been used in thousands of cultures. I chose three continents to focus on in order to give a broader sense and explanation as to where fortune telling has truly been prominent.

I . Europe

Ancient Greece and Italy developed and utilized a multitude of divination techniques. It became a prominent aspect of ancient Greek culture, where hepatoscopy, fortune telling by examining animal livers, was a main method. Fortune reading was introduced to Italy and adopted by Romans, who, like the Greeks, expanded on the methods and shared their knowledge with Islam and Europe. In Greek mythology, a famous fortune telling site is the Oracle of Delphi, located in the mountains of Parnassus in central Greece. It is built around a spring, and was considered to be the center of the world. People traveled far distances to consult the oracle, or Pythia, a priestess who was believed by the Greeks to speak the prophecies of Apollo. She was often consulted about when to plant crops, when to go to war and what the gods desired. Her prophecies came to her as she was in a sort of trance, and she became one of the most powerful women in the classical world.

Two popular forms of divination used in Greece, Turkey (Anatolia) and Rome were haruspicy and augury, the study of animals to tell the future. Those who studied these methods were often part of a priestly group, and were called haruspices and auguries. Haruspicy involved studying the insides of the animals that were sacrificed before important rituals. Fortunes were told by studying the color and shape of the animal's liver. Another job of a haruspices was to study prodigies such as eclipses, two headed animals, thunderbolts and strange noises. Studying prodigies related to what was happening naturally in the world. An augur's job was to study the behavior of birds and interpret their natural signs. When a ruler needed advice he would always consult an augur. An augur would watch for flight or listen to the cry of a bird. The positive or

negative aspect of the reading was based on where the bird appeared in the sky, as well as the height or speed they were moving at. In the Odyssey an eagle appears three times, flying on the right side with a dove in its talons. This signaled the return of Odysseus and the death of the men courting his wife. More divination methods from this region include numerology, oneiromancy, using dreams to divine the future, cleromancy, which is the art of using sheep knucklebones with numbers associated with them, and Limyran oracle dice.

II. Africa

Similarly to Mesopotamian divination, methods of divination in Africa are some of the most ancient forms in the world. In Egyptian mythology the god Heka is symbolically the most important god. Though Heka is the god of magic, he essentially embodies the concept of magic. Although he is not talked about as much as gods such as Osiris, he is thought to be the energy source in each god. The fortune telling method of scrying was a popular practice in Egypt. Scrying is the process of gazing into a smooth reflective object or surface, such as oil, ink, or a crystal ball to see the future. It is also known as seeing or peeping, as it can be an invasive practice. The seer typically interprets the images they see intuitively. Scrying is traditionally up for interpretation by the one practicing based on what they thought, saw and how they felt. A certain scrying method in Egypt included a gold bowl filled with water or ink and was done in candlelight to ensure reflection. A prayer would be said to a god or goddess, and the ritual would begin.

In ancient Africa, those who sought spiritual knowledge visited Kemet, or modern day Egypt. Contrary to popular belief, Astrology originated from Kemet before it was taken over by the Greeks, who translated and modified the art. In this time, astrology and astronomy were interconnected, and astrology was essentially divining the future based on the stars. Astrological

signs or archetypes were derived from rotating constellations in the sky. A manual documented the positions of these constellations in the sky, and 12 compartments were arranged in a circle and in a counterclockwise position. The specific signs and planets in a chart were believed to affect an individual's life in various ways. In Kemetic astrology the 12 signs are gods and goddesses which includes Osiris, energetic and strong, and Bastet, goddess of cats, women and pleasure. Astrology was a highly respected practice, as the sun and the sky were observed and studied meticulously.

In Mali, an ethnic group called the Dogon use nature to divine the future. They believed that bush animals, foxes in particular, have great spiritual knowledge. Therefore when they desire insight on a problem regarding marriage, pregnancy, health or harvest a diviner creates images in the dirt using sticks, indentations and lines. They then call upon the fox using a verse and food, and ask it to answer their question. The truth is revealed after the fox has feasted and disassembled the diagram.

III. Asia

Among many, three recognizable and classic forms of divination originated from Asia, specifically China, Japan and India. These methods are palmistry, fortune cookies and tea leaf reading. However, Asian divination stretches across a wide range of topics and considers many aspects, such as philosophy, magic and astronomy. In Japan, omikujji or "sacred lot" is a form of divination found in shrines throughout Japan. Inside the shrine is a wall of boxes containing bamboo sticks. Traditionally, one would take a box and shake it until one of the sticks falls out. They would then read the number on the stick, and a shrine maiden would hand that person a slip of paper based on that number. This slip of paper indicates your luck in multiple aspects such as

love, money and health. This method is still widely popular today, and people often go to the shrines on the new year to receive their fortune.

Early evidence of Chinese divination is the use of oracle bones. This method was very expensive as it included tortoise shells. It was often used amongst the elite or royal. Tortoise shells were prodded and heated over a flame until they broke. After breaking, the patterns that emerged could be analyzed. It was popular to communicate with ancestors using this method. As the method evolved it was used more widely for divining particular events or gaining insight on certain people. Another method is *The Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*, a book that has been consulted in China and East Asia for thousands of years. It contained information on many subjects, and the oracle was often consulted for questions of the future. The diagram for fortune telling consists of 64 hexagrams, which were stacked and accompanied by a small description. In order to consult the *Yijing* yarrow sticks would be cast and then read, and the diagram in the *Yijing* would serve as a guide.

It has been speculated that chiromancy or palm reading originated in India. Palm reading is essentially reading the lines of one's palm to tell their future. It is a powerful form of divination because it does not require external materials and is based on the self. Evidence of palm reading was found in the Vedas, which are some of the oldest scriptures in the world. Palm reading was also found in ancient Chinese medical texts, where the lines of the hand were used to diagnose medical conditions. Fingerprints and palm prints were considered very important, and were used as identification far before the popular use of them in the west.

From India, palm reading spread to Europe and became popularized, and is one of the common forms of divination used today. It was kept alive mainly by the Roma people, who migrated to Europe from northern India. The Roma fortune tellers were always women, known as

the Drabardi. These women were sometimes paid and consulted for palm readings by emperors and people with high social status. Tea leaf reading was also popularized by the Roma people, but originated from China. Tasseomancy is a form of fortune telling using tea leaves or coffee grounds at the bottom of a cup. In Arabic, the word “tassa” means cup and the Greek word “mancy” means divination, so Tasseomancy literally means cup divination. Someone wishing to have their tea leaves read will drink their tea with a question in mind, and leave a small amount in the cup. They will then stir the tea to the left three times. The cup is then tapped three times, and the images formed by the leaves can be read. Different areas of the tea cup signify the times in which events will take place.

IV. Conclusion

Though the art of divination has proven to be controversial due to the question of legitimacy regarding the topic, it is clear that it has influenced different cultures in numerous ways. Through religion, mythology and art it is clear that divination has been prominent in many cultures, and remains influential in modern day. Fortune telling has given people clarity and insight since the beginning of time. The self guided and interpretive qualities of the various methods brings the individual a sense of peace, so in a sense divination is a form of meditation, a connection to the spiritual world and the self. There is an aspect of tranquility in the process of asking the natural world for advice and clarity. Perhaps the resurgence of divination correlates with the uncertainty of our future, and our innate desire to grasp the unknown. The legitimacy of divination has yet to be proven, however it is clear that the ancient practice will influence our lives for years to come.

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