



Review article: Small futures. sortilege, divination and prognostication in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages

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Prognostication in the Medieval World. A Handbook. Edited by Matthias Heiduk, Klaus Herbers and Hans-Christian Lehner. De Gruyter Reference. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter. 2021. 2 volumes. 1027 pp. € 279.

Mittelalterliche Rechtstexte und mantische Praktiken. Edited by Klaus Herbers and Hans-Christian Lehner. Beihefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 94. Vienna, Cologne and Weimar: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage. 2021. 152 pp. €23.99.

Christian Divination in Late Antiquity. By Robert Wiśniewski. Social Worlds of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 2020. 287 pp. €105.

My Lots are in Thy Hands: Sortilege and its Practitioners in Late Antiquity. Edited by Anne-Marie Luijendijk and William E. Klingshirn. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 188. Leiden and Boston: Brill. 2019. 392 pp. €129.

Emperors did it. Church Fathers did it. Educated monks, nuns and priests did it. Throughout the late antique and medieval periods, innumerable lay people from all walks of life did it. Even today, many people do it: they use texts and techniques, sometimes with the help of experts, to reveal what their personal future may hold. The many cultures of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages agreed that the gods, God, Allah or other higher entities shared signs about the future with mankind, and that valuable information could be gained from these signs, with or without the help of specialists who knew how to

observe and interpret them.¹ Such signs could take many shapes and forms: dice thrown or lots drawn with divine assistance provided answers, as did the age of the moon (that is: the number of days counted from the new moon), the signs of the zodiac or the direction from which the thunder was heard. Dreams, too, could indicate what was to come, but like all other signs of the future it mattered that they were observed and interpreted in the right way.

These four recent works about prognostication, divination and sorcery show how interest in such personal futures has a long and extremely rich history, and that the prognostic texts found in Latin manuscripts of the early Middle Ages are part of a much wider, global, phenomenon. For instance, prognostic texts in early medieval Latin manuscripts were mostly translated from the Greek, and often had parallels in a series of other languages such as Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac or Coptic.² Some of these texts had roots going back to the cuneiform cultures of Ancient Mesopotamia of the first millennium BCE, and were reused and re-invented time and again in new religious, political and cultural contexts.³ Many Latin prognostic texts did not lose currency with the advent of the universities and had extremely long and uninterrupted lives. To mention just two remarkable examples: a brontology (thunder-prognostication) first attested in the Etruscan world was printed on candy wrappers in nineteenth-century Russia, and a whole set of well-known late antique and early medieval prognostic texts were included in a nineteenth-century Mandaeen manuscript of secret priestly knowledge, which was still in use in early twentieth-century Iraq.⁴

Prognostic cultures of the Latin late antique and early medieval periods are mostly uncharted territory. It is a field of knowledge traditionally considered to be neither 'real' science or knowledge, nor 'real' religion, and therefore part of the shady world of the superstitious and

¹ There is at present no generally shared definition of prognostication. The most wide-ranging one can be found in the introduction to *Prognostication in the Medieval World*, vol. 1, pp. 1–12, at p. 5, which takes into account all different types of thinking about the future. In this review I will use a more limited definition that centres on the prediction of elements of the future through the interpretation of signs with the help of texts.

² See for instance L. DiTommaso, 'Greek, Latin, and Hebrew Manuscripts of the *Somniale Danielis* and *Lunationes Danielis* in the Vatican Library', *Manuscripta* 47–8 (2004), pp. 1–42.

³ F. Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁴ Brontological prognostication (in Russian: the Gromnik) on candy wrappers: W.F. Ryan, 'Magic and Divination: Old Russian Sources', in B. Glatzer Rosenthal (ed.), *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Ithaca and London, 1997), pp. 35–58, at p. 40. The Mandaeen manuscript has been described and translated by E.S. Drower, *The Book of the Zodiac (Sfar Malwašia)*, Oriental Translation Fund 36 (London, 1949), but who was not aware of the much earlier parallels to these texts.

uneducated. As a result, research about the texts, practices and users of especially early medieval Latin prognostication has been somewhat thin on the ground and fragmented, and such research rarely tries to reach beyond Europe and Latin textual cultures. Several prognostic texts have been studied and edited, as have specific categories of texts, but further-ranging works which interpret them as a widespread and distinctive cultural phenomenon are rare.⁵ A corpus of manuscripts containing prognostic texts in Latin from this period does not exist at all. The four volumes under review are, therefore, each in their own way, pathbreakers. Taken together, these works show how prognostication was everything but a dubious and marginal phenomenon of late antique and early medieval cultures, the occasional grumblings of intellectuals and Church Fathers notwithstanding. They also make it eminently clear that this material offers exciting opportunities for historians interested in the histories of religion, culture, science and knowledge, global aspects included.

In recent years there has been an upsurge in scholarly attention to the ways in which medieval individuals and societies thought about the future, and in particular about the questions of how and when this future would be terminated by the Last Judgement and the End of Times.⁶ While different ways of thinking about this most final and daunting of all futures inspired many texts and theories, eschatology is one aspect of a wider phenomenon. Concerns about less intimidating elements of the future, those relevant for individual fates rather than for the future of mankind as a whole, also made people look for expert guidance, consult texts and lose sleep: would the harvest succeed this year? Was a sick friend going to recover? What was the best moment to trade, or to travel? Such questions and uncertainties about what one may call ‘small futures’, part of every human life, were as much part of

⁵ For instance E.A. Matter, ‘The “Revelatio Esdrae” in Latin and English Traditions’, *Revue Bénédictine* 92 (1982), pp. 376–92; D. Juste and H. Chiu, ‘The *De tonitruis* Attributed to Bede: An Early Medieval Treatise on Divination by Thunder Translated from Irish’, *Traditio* 68 (2013), pp. 97–124; E. Svenberg, *De latinska lunaria: text och studier* (Göteborg, 1936). Notable exceptions are two studies of the – relatively late – Anglo-Saxon material: S.L. Chardonnens, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics (900–1100)*, Brill’s Texts and Sources in Intellectual History 153/3 (Leiden and Boston, 2007) and R.M. Liuzza, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics. An Edition and Translation of Texts from London, British Library MS Cotton Tiberius A.iii.* (Woodbridge, 2011).

⁶ For instance J. Palmer, *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2014); F. Schmieider (ed.), *Mittelalterliche Zukunftsgestaltung im Angesicht des Weltendes / Forming the Future, Facing the End of the World in the Middle Ages*, Beihefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 77 (Cologne, 2015); M. Gabriele and J.T. Palmer (eds), *Apocalypse and Reform from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Abingdon, 2019).

late antique and early medieval cultures as they were of other times, places, religious contexts and social groups. Likewise, divination and prognostication, the techniques that helped reveal these small futures, usually with the implicit or explicit assistance of a higher entity, are well-attested throughout cultures from all over the world. Prognostic predictions are always the result of the observation and interpretation (by specialists, or via texts, or both) of specific signs (a rainbow, the flight of birds, the shape of an animal's liver) or of regular patterns (for instance, those observable in the night sky, such as the course of the moon or the signs of the zodiac). Looking for such predictions was, therefore, a way in which people tried to find knowledge about their futures actively instead of just sitting back and waiting for whatever fate or God(s) had in store for them. We may even wonder whether our own tendency to look at a weather app before going for a walk without an umbrella, or reading predictions about the stock market before putting in money is all that different.

The most ambitious of the four works under review is without doubt *Prognostication in the Medieval World. A Handbook*, edited by Matthias Heiduk, Klaus Herbers and Hans-Christian Lehner, a two-volume, one thousand-page overview of traditions, practices and texts attested from c.500 to 1500 in the huge territory that reaches from Scandinavia to North Africa and the Near East, and from Ireland to the Balkans. The work, the first of its kind ever published, is the outcome of a long-standing research project at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities (ICRH), 'Fate, Freedom and Prognostication. Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe' in Erlangen, which ran between 2009 and 2021.

In eighty-nine chapters, the *Handbook* covers every conceivable form of prognostication in its widest definition of 'anticipating the future' (p. 5), which, apart from the texts and practices concerning 'small futures', here includes eschatology, vision literature and medical practices. The first part offers eight introductory surveys which each cover a geographical-linguistic area (e.g. the Celtic world, medieval Jewish culture, the eastern Christian world), after which the second part (thirty-two chapters) tackles nine categories of prognostication (e.g. prophecy, calendrical calculations, dream interpretation), with – where appropriate – separate chapters per category for the eastern and western Christian worlds each, Jewish traditions, and the Islamic world. Throughout these chapters it is strikingly clear how much prognostication was part of everyday life for rich and poor alike, and how many things observed from day to day had prognostic potential. Knowledge about one's personal future could be found by interpreting a bird singing in a tree, the position of a star in the night sky, or a

sneeze. Those with access to books could look up prognostic texts or calendars, or consult specific texts (such as the writings of Homer or the Gospel of John) believed to offer such knowledge to those who opened the book at random. At the same time, the popularity of prognostication went hand in hand with doubt about all attempts to know the future by definition: there were always people who wondered whether such practices were acceptable, or should rather be discarded as pagan, superstitious or plain ignorant. On the other hand, if God created the cosmos and everything in it, how could it be wrong to try and understand parts of His creation in order to learn His will? This tension seems to have existed throughout the late antique and medieval periods in one form or the other: while penitentials and the sermons of, for instance, Caesarius of Arles and Eligius of Noyon condemn divination in no uncertain terms, the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus († 959) did not go on any military campaign without his handbook on the meaning of dreams safely stowed away in his travelling library (p. 396).

The work's third part, which fills the entire second volume, is dedicated to a broad range of written sources and artefacts. This is at the same time the richest and the most eclectic of the three: it offers (sometimes very short) introductions to (to mention just a few examples) calendars, didactic poems and lotbooks, but also includes hagiography, descriptions of journeys into the Other World, legal sources and biblical commentaries. Historians reading through this part will surely feel as if let loose in a candy shop full of unknown delights: who would not want to know more about practices with exotic names such as lekanomanteia (divination by light refracting in a bowl full of liquid, p. 846), ornithomancy (divination by interpreting bird sounds, p. 893) or scapulomancy (divination by interpreting the patterns on a sheep's shoulder blade, p. 971)? That such a wide array of sources and objects is relevant for the subject shows impressively and convincingly how thinking about the near future, but also prognostication and divination in a somewhat narrower sense, was *everywhere* in the (early) Middle Ages, and that these beliefs and practices merit our attention.

True to the nature of a handbook, these two volumes are not meant to be read from cover to cover. They offer a dazzling panorama of texts and practices, doubts and debates, cross-cultural influences and long traditions. The chapters are mostly compact and to the point, with useful bibliographies of edited sources and literature at the end. *Prognostication in the Medieval World* is most of all a wonderful starting point for research. A thorough subject index (there is one for names and places) is therefore sorely missed. For such an ambitious work,

moreover, it is a pity that copy-editing and language correction did not get more attention.

This brings us to the collective volume *Mittelalterliche Rechtstexte und mantische Praktiken*, the proceedings of a conference held in 2018 by the same Erlangen project that produced the *Handbook*. After the barrage of prognostic texts, practices and artefacts in the *Handbook*, the biggest surprise of this volume is how tiny the corpus of late antique and medieval normative material about divination and the mantic arts turns out to be. It makes one wonder: did all the texts and practices described in the *Handbook* fly under the radar of those compiling normative texts, was the phenomenon considered less relevant or problematic than we think, or is there some other explanation? The book, which consists of an introduction and seven chapters, covers normative texts such as *leges*, collections of *canones* and penitentials from the seventh to the thirteenth century, and offers tentative answers to some of these questions. The main question of the volume is this: how and to what extent did condemnations of predicting the future in normative texts relate to lived practices? Did prohibitions have consequences at all for everyday life or should we read them as *topoi*, and what does the near-endless repetition of the same handful of late antique proscriptions mean? The introduction to the volume, by Klaus Herbers and Hans-Christian Lehner, points out how the corpus of normative material in the *MGH Leges*, *MGH Concilia* and in several important canon law collections (such as those by Regino of Prüm and Burchard of Worms) does not yield a uniform image or present straightforward answers (p. 18).⁷ Even though normative texts contain only limited evidence for the existence of the practices they condemn, they do show continued interest in thinking about mantic arts and divination, and in propagating their negative image.

The core of normative material that rejects and condemns practices such as lot-casting and divination, which remained a continuous source of inspiration for canonists far into the Middle Ages, is mostly late antique. Nearly every normative text or collection discussed in this book features, for instance, canon 24 of the Council of Ancyra (314), which lists rejected practices such as the observation of dreams and signs, and divination *more gentiliūm*. The seventh-century *Collectio Hispana* discussed by Cornelia Scherer contained it (p. 42), and so did Burchard of Worms's *Decretum* a good three centuries later (discussed

⁷ The International Consortium for Research in the Humanities (ICRH) 'Fate, Freedom and Prognostication. Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe' has created a database of this material, which can be accessed on request: <http://www.ikgf.fau.de/publications/databases/>.

by Birgit Kynast, p.107). However, such copying was never unreflective and some details were new, which emerges when one looks for the finer points. In his chapter on early medieval penitentials, Ludger Körntgen demonstrates how the old, oft-repeated norms turn up within different frames: where, for instance, in the *Excarpsus Cummeani* the observation of birds, lot-casting and divination all came under the label of non-Christian practices (p. 68), later penitentials fitted the same proscriptions into new categories. The penitential of pseudo-Egbert, for instance, conceptualized mantic practices as something specifically female, while weather magic counted as ‘cupidity’ (*cupiditas*). By investigating what was meant exactly by the categories used in the penitentials, in other words, it is possible to trace shifting interpretations of the same old norms (p. 80). In some cases, moreover, unique material found its way into a text, and may therefore mirror lived reality. Birgit Kynast in her chapter about Burchard’s *Decretum* mentions three *interrogationes* about mantic practices without any known source (pp. 104–5): did people throw grain in the fire to see danger coming? Did people believe that turning over a stone to find if there is some insect underneath helped to foretell whether a sick person would get better? Did anybody believe that a cawing crow crossing your path from left to right ensured safe travel? Such details may indeed tell us something about practices and beliefs current at the time Burchard composed his enormous work. Meanwhile, how we should reconcile a world filled with prognostic practices on the one hand, and on the other, normative texts with only minimal interest in the theme, remains an open question.

It is for issues such as these that one would like to know a lot more about the manuscript traditions of specific prognostic texts – for how obscure or widespread were the texts which reflect all these practices? For instance, given the relative frequency of normative sources condemning the *Sortes sanctorum*, it is surprising that the text survives in just a handful of Latin manuscripts, and that the oldest extant Latin fragment was copied out in a ninth-century compendium for pastoral care.⁸ What do we make of condemnations without texts, of texts without condemnations, and of pastoral manuscripts transmitting

⁸ See E. Montero Cartelle, *Les Sortes sanctorum. Étude, édition critique et traduction*, trans. A. Maïllet, Textes Littéraires du Moyen Âge 27, Série *Divinatoria* 3 (Paris, 2013), pp. 41–60. Even though the overview misses one early manuscript witness with two versions of the *Sortes sanctorum*, namely Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 2723 (s.s.X, Mondsee), a total of four texts from the tenth century or earlier is not a lot. The earliest manuscript, a ninth-century pastoral compendium, contains only the first entries as a slightly later addition: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 2796.

knowledge against which at least some church authorities objected repeatedly?

Robert Wiśniewski's *Christian Divination in Late Antiquity* opens up yet another window on the theme by, on the one hand, focusing on Late Antiquity in the entire (ex-) Roman Empire but, on the other hand, confining his research to those forms of divination explicitly acceptable to Christians. The question at the core of his book is this: how did Christians in Late Antiquity gain legitimate access to divination when many of these practices were considered to be pagan at the time, and therefore out of bounds? (p. 11) In Wiśniewski's view, it was exactly this tension between norms and everyday practice that stimulated the development of forms of divination considered suitable for use by Christians. These texts and methods form the main body of the evidence investigated in order to offer a 'comprehensive portrayal of late antique divination' in a Christian context (p. 15) – surprisingly, the evidence for divination through astronomy/astrology has been left out. Wiśniewski draws on a wide range of papyri, inscriptions, graffiti and manuscripts, and frustratingly fragmentary though this evidence may be, the reader gets a good sense of the frequency and geographical distribution of the surviving material. Piecing together the story of late antique Christian divination and its audiences on the basis of all these bits and pieces is an accomplishment in itself.

One very interesting finding of the book is that Christians did not always have to re-invent the wheel in their attempts to create acceptable methods for divination, quite the contrary. Existing divinatory texts were remarkably flexible and could be turned into forms suitable for Christian consumption without changing all that much. One excellent example of this are the so-called *Sortes sanctorum* (p. 118 ff.), a Christian text that required three dice to find an answer to any question. There are earlier versions attested in Greek, both as inscriptions and on papyri, while the oldest reference to the practice dates to the second century CE and describes how it had to be executed next to a statue of Heracles (p. 121). For safe use by Christians, the *Sortes* acquired prayers or even some liturgy, while outright references to pagan deities disappeared. The user was advised to 'ask God', but otherwise there was not much overtly Christian (nor, for that matter, non-Christian) in the text.

Outright Christian, on the other hand, are the so-called *hermeneia*: explanations or answers added in the margins of biblical books, most often the Gospel of John. This points to a use of such texts as prophetic books, and even if the relation between the biblical texts and the *hermeneia* in the margin is far from clear (p. 137), the fact that they survive in twenty early codices (in some cases as palimpsests) in Greek,

Coptic, Latin, Syriac and Armenian shows how widely known this form of prognostication must have been in Late Antiquity. Interestingly, there is not a single normative text which even mentions it. In the light of these manuscripts, but also of other outright Christian forms of divination, for instance those involving saints, or incubation in Christian holy places (p. 201 ff.), there is no doubt that from halfway through the fourth century onwards, many kinds of prognostic practices were part of Christian daily life. That most of these practices have left no trace at all in normative texts offers an important counterpoint to the corpus discussed in *Mittelalterliche Rechtstexte und mantische Praktiken*: were those practices that did receive attention especially problematic in some way? Could Christians simply prognosticate to their heart's content unless high-ranking ecclesiastics found reasons to object? Were the dissenting voices (which sometimes happened to be authoritative enough to be heard) perhaps the exception rather than the rule? Much of the late antique Christian material discussed in this book made its way into Latin manuscripts in early medieval Europe, and some texts even appear in the very same codices that contain normative texts forbidding divination.⁹ How exactly this transfer of knowledge worked, and how debates and authoritative expressions of disapproval influenced these processes (or failed to do so) is as yet an open question which merits further research.

The last, and most narrowly focused work of the four, *My Lots are in Thy Hands*, zooms in on just one kind of prognostication: lot-casting, or sortilege, in Late Antiquity. Lot-casting included various techniques, for instance with dice, ticket oracles, or randomly opened books, through which a god/God provided answers to a question. The editors of this fascinating book, Annemarie Luijendijk and William Klingshirn, have gathered an introduction and fourteen chapters on 'the simplest, cheapest and most widespread form of divination in antiquity' (p. 1). The decision to include work on all texts of this kind from this period makes a lot of sense: in this way, cross-cultural borrowings, translations and adaptations come into view, perspectives still sorely missing for the (early) medieval material. Even for this single type of divination, the evidence is surprisingly rich given the great age of much of the material: in their first chapter, the editors list twenty different texts, which survive in shapes and forms ranging from antique inscriptions and ostraca, to papyri and early modern manuscript copies. Some of

⁹ A good example is the manuscript El Escorial, Real Biblioteca di San Lorenzo, L III 8. On this manuscript see C. van Rhijn, 'Pastoral Care and Prognostics in the Carolingian Period. The Case of El Escorial, Real biblioteca di San Lorenzo, ms L III 8', *Revue Bénédictine* 127 (2017), pp. 272–97.

these texts, which come in Latin, Greek, Demotic and/or Coptic, are attested in dozens of copies, while others are single, much later survivals. What unites all contributions is that they focus on questions about the way in which people used and thought about these texts and practices. While there is, for instance, a lot of attention for the fluidity and adaptability of the texts, the dimension of norms and debates is virtually absent.

There is, understandably, some overlap with Wiśniewski's book in a general sense, but the focus here is different: the volume situates its research within the much wider context of research about prognostication in general, and this ties it in neatly with the *Handbook* with which we started. According to the editors, seeking the will of God, a god or the gods was (and is) of all times and places, and can therefore be fruitfully approached through global comparison, anthropological study and network theory (pp. 15–18). For the time being, such interesting ideas are clearly something for future research: the book (like the other three) makes it clear how a thorough investigation of texts and practices is only beginning, and how much basic work needs to be done (such as creating modern editions) before such further-reaching approaches become feasible. Nevertheless, the volume offers a varied and interesting palette of studies. Most chapters show in one way or the other how sortilege was a highly flexible practice that could be applied to many different spheres of life, for instance legal procedure, as discussed by Franziska Naether in her article about the *Sortes Astrampsychi* in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt (pp. 232–47). Literate experts were key: these people, who often fulfilled functions both in the religious and the legal spheres, used sortilege to help answer questions, which may help explain why ticket oracles would be stated in highly formalized 'legal' language. A similar phenomenon is discussed by David Frankfurter (pp. 211–31), who shows how these same experts may well have offered sortilege and written curses or blessings on demand. In this way, they were involved in a range of ritual activities that cuts through our modern ideas of religion, magic and superstition. The idea that sortilege, and prognostication in more general, were not practices confined to the privacy of back rooms only, but could be integrated in various spheres of life, is one that merits further investigation.

What should we take home from all of this? No matter what the starting point of research is – be it Latin early medieval, late antique Coptic, Byzantine, pre-Christian Demotic or otherwise – new texts are waiting to be discovered, and material already known is in need of attention via

new research agendas. Prognostic texts and practices, long caught in the historiographical no man's land between 'real' knowledge and 'real' religion on the one hand, and uneducated or pagan superstition on the other, needs to be liberated from these old discourses. After all, we are looking at entire layers of late antique and early medieval culture and belief that have long remained virtually unknown, and at present barely play any role at all in the cultural and religious histories of this period. These four books show how much there is to be gained by studying this material; at the same time, they also demonstrate a great need for basic research tools such as shared definitions and starting points, and for editions and wider explorations of the manuscript evidence. It does not take a clairvoyant to see how much work there is to do; it does not take a lot of optimism to understand immediately how much such research will bring us.

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