



*Astragalomanteion, Sortes Sanctorum, Sortes Monacenses*: stratification of gaming practices and cultural traditions from Early Antiquity to the Middle Ages  
*Astragalomanteion, Sortes Sanctorum, Sortes Monacenses*: estratificació de les pràctiques de joc i tradicions culturals des de l'Antiguitat fins a l'Edat Mitjana  
*Astragalomanteion, Sortes Sanctorum, Sortes Monacenses*: estratificación de las prácticas de juego y las tradiciones culturales desde la Antigüedad hasta la Edad Media

*Astragalomanteion, Sortes Sanctorum, Sortes Monacenses*: estratificação das práticas de jogo e das tradições culturais da Antiguidade à Idade Média

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses the complex relation between board games and divination, and the role those randomizing elements like dice and knucklebones played in it. It presents several literary quotations that show how the tradition of casting lots to take important decisions was diffused. It includes pieces of Sumerian and Akkadian, Hebrew, Greek and Latin literature referred to lots, and especially those related to the use of knucklebones and dice. It also outlines the stratification of divinatory practices based on gaming tools since the antiquity to the late Middle Age. It analyses the *Astragalomanteia* and *Homeromanteia*, and their points of contact with the *Sortes Sanctorum* and the *Sortes Monacenses*.

**Keywords:** *Sortes Sanctorum* – *Astragalomanteia* – *Homeromanteia* – *Sortes Monacenses* – Knucklebones – Astragals – Dice – Ancient divination – Medieval divination – Casting lots – Lots – Oracle.

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza la compleja relación entre los juegos de mesa y la adivinación, y el papel que en ella desempeñaron elementos aleatorios como los dados y los nudillos. Presenta varias citas literarias que muestran cómo se difundió la tradición de echar suertes para tomar decisiones importantes. Incluye fragmentos de literatura sumeria

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y acacia, hebrea, griega y latina referidos a las suertes, y especialmente los relacionados con el uso de nudillos y dados. También esboza la estratificación de las prácticas adivinatorias basadas en instrumentos de juego desde la Antigüedad hasta la Baja Edad Media. Analiza la *Astragalomanteia* y la *Homeromanteia*, y sus puntos de contacto con las *Sortes Sanctorum* y las *Sortes Monacenses*.

**Palabras-clave:** *Sortes Sanctorum* – *Astragalomanteia* – *Homeromanteia* – *Sortes Monacenses* – Knucklebones – Astragals – Dados – Adivinación antigua – Adivinación medieval – Echar suertes – Suertes – Oráculo.

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## **Introduction: board games, rules, logic, imagery, imagination, symbols**

A board game is composed of a material (board and pieces) and an immaterial part (the rules), and the game can take place thanks to a human player that interacts with them. However, this interaction is based on the recognition and understanding of the meanings attributed to the immaterial part like dots and lines, squares and intersections, markings and holes, movements and scores.

This process of decodification can have deep cultural and anthropological implications. Not all the games have the same degree of cultural depth, but some traditional board games have a complex cultural and anthropological background and the nature and shape of the gaming surface and instruments, as well as the game mechanics, can be indicative, explicitly or implicitly, of the collective imagination and style of reasoning of the culture that invented or adopted such games.

So as to be able to play, the player is required to understand the rules and the meaning of the geometries traced on the gaming surface, whether it is an industrial plastic board, a fine carved wooden one, or a series of holes dug into the sand. Briefly, we can say that



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board games are based on the capacity of the human mind to create, refine, and decode symbols, which sometimes have cultural and anthropological meanings.

Some immaterial aspects of board games, some Ludemes, are peculiar to a single culture, while others are shared by more cultures and while sometimes this derives from a cultural transmission and stratification process, other times is determined by the fact that some gaming mechanics appeal to inborn aspects of human behaviour. In fact, several board games that developed independently by cultures that never met with each other, share similar characteristics, like to be played in pairs, to boost agonism, to lead at the elimination of all the enemy pieces, etc.

We can say that, apart from conveying the cultural background of their inventors, board games can also express human behavioural psychology and give a tangible representation of atavistic mental procedures and concepts. This is particularly true in the case of the randomizing elements like dice and knucklebones, that since a very long time express the fascination of the humans for randomness both in game and in life, and were imbued with mystical, religious and magical values, becoming themselves symbols of a great variety of concepts like luck, risk, hazard, probability, or even 'God's will'. In this paper will be presented a series of divinatory practices that involved gaming tools and stratified in the Mediterranean and European tradition.

## **I. Casting lots to decide about life: early evidence and mentions**

It is not clear which, between board games and divination, developed earlier but these two practices shared a lot of aspects along their long history. They relied on the same randomizing instruments, like dice or knucklebones. Such objects were useful for both gaming and divination purposes, not just because of their peculiar use (they were thrown to have random results), but also for their symbolic meaning since in the collective imagery of several ancient cultures they became icons of randomness, Fortune or Fate.

The genesis of this idea could be traced back up to the Neolithic. In several Neolithic sites of the Balkan region were found groups of ovicaprid knucklebones that showed



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traces of use. The exact purpose of their use is not clear. However, after having analysed a group of them with a microscope, Isabelle Sidéra and Andreea Vornicu Terna<sup>2</sup> determined that these traces resulted from soft frictions that scratched the most protruding surfaces, with small scratches oriented in multiple directions. Their final opinion is that this could be indicative of a prolonged use as casting objects of the knucklebones they analysed. Whether for gaming or divinatory purposes, it is hard to say.

The next evidence of the use of knucklebones in context that looks relevant for the purpose of this paper dates to the Bronze Age and seems to point at their possible use as divinatory tools.

An Old Babylonian tablet dated to the II millennia BC reports a list of sheep's body parts. After the title written in Sumerian (UDU, which means 'sheep') at the eight line it reports the Akkadian word *kešallu*, in singular form to indicate the knucklebone:

UDU  
 qá-aq-qá-du  
 ki-ša-a-du  
 na-ap-ša-at UDU  
 ki-im-šum  
 is-rum?  
 [r]u?  
 la-ar-sí-nu  
 [k]i-ša-al-lu<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> SIDÉRA, Isabelle, VORNICU TERNA, Andreea. "The archaeology of games. Playing with knucklebones in the early chalcolithic of the Balkans". In: BACVAROV, K. GLESEK, R. (ed.). *Southeast Europe and Anatolia in prehistory, essays in honor of Vassil Nikolov on his 65th anniversary*. Universitätsforschungen zur prähistorischen Archäologie, Band 293, University of Münster, Bonn, 2016, p. 379-388.

<sup>3</sup> Tablet BM 29663. In: COHEN, Yoram. "An old Babylonian list of sheep body parts (BM 29663)". In: PANAYTOV, S.V. VACIN, L. (ed). *Mesopotamian medicine and magic, series Ancient Magic and Divination*. Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2018, vol. 14, p. 131-148.





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Even in this case, it is not clear if this list had a descriptive and anatomical purpose or if it listed the parts of a sheep's body that could be scrutinized by a diviner. Some terms of this list are indeed mentioned in other tablets that describe divinatory practices, but not the term *kišallu*.

Certainly, in this period and in this geographic area knucklebones were already in use as playing tools and they should have been quite popular since they were the only casting device that received a proper name, and probably were already regarded by the public as icons of randomness.<sup>4</sup>

In the Mesopotamian context, precisely from the Sargonic archive of the Tell El-Suleimah site in Iraq, it is attested also the practice of casting lots to decide about relevant matters (Akk. *isqam nadûm*, Sum. GIŠ-ŠUB-BA). The very first mention of it is contained in a letter, in which six people (named in the firsts six lines of the text) cast the lots:

a-na UDU.ĜI.A is-ga-am i-ti-ú<sup>5</sup>  
 (six persons) have casted the lot concerning the sheep.

And another text from the same archive, dating to the UR III period, reports:

a-šag, giš ba-šub-ba<sup>6</sup>  
 field distributed by lots.

<sup>4</sup> TIBALDINI, Marco. "Talus: etymology of a Ludonym and how the names of an ancient gaming practice could be indicative of processes of cultural transmission and stratification". In: NAGYILLÉS, J. (ed). *Sapiens Ubique Civis*, n° 2, University of Szeged, 2022, p. 69-104.

<sup>5</sup> RASHEED, Fawzi. *The ancient Inscriptions in Himrin Area, no. 6, iv 3*. Ministry of Culture and Information, the State Organization of Antiquities and Heritage, Baghdad, 1981, A40; STEINKELLER, Piotr. "Old akkadian miscellanea". In: *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale*, vol. 78, n° 1, 1984, p. 86; VISICATO, Giuseppe. "The sargonic Archive of Tell el-Suleimah". In: *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, vol. 51, 1999, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> ITT 3, 5247:4= Sollberger, TCS 1, 340.



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While on others tablets it is written:

ì-ba-e-ne gish-shub-ba ì-shub-bu-ne<sup>7</sup>  
 they made the division (of the property) and cast lots (to distribute it).

isqa iddû zîzû<sup>8</sup>  
 they have cast lots, they divided (the property).

Casting lots to decide about important matters was so popular in Mesopotamia that this practice is mentioned also in the myth of Atra-Hasis, where it is written that even the Annunaki, the Mesopotamian gods, casted lots to decide how to divide the universe among them:

is-qá-am id-du-ú i-lu iz-zu-zu<sup>9</sup>  
 had cast lots and had devided (the universe)

Curiously, in this case casting lots doesn't represent the expression of a divine will, since the characters of the story are gods themselves, but it represents another concept that lately will be named as the 'Fate', which is a concept connected with that of goddess and divinity, but somehow independent. It will be developed further during classical time by the stoic philosophers.

In the Bronze Age, casting lots was very common also among the Hittites, who described it in several tablets reporting this divinatory practice as the KIN oracle.<sup>10</sup> Both the Mesopotamian and the Hittite texts don't clarify which objects could or should be thrown.

<sup>7</sup> CAD I 198d.

<sup>8</sup> CAD I 199a.

<sup>9</sup> LAMBERT, Wilfred G., MILLARD, Alan R. *Atra-Hasis, the Babylonian story of the flood*. Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 42. The text starting with: *Inuma ilu awilum*, line 12.

<sup>10</sup> WARBINEK, Livio. *Il sistema mantico ittita KIN*, Firenze University Press, 2020.



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An Assyrian text copied in the VII century BC from an older tablet reports an exorcism ritual in which the exorcist threw two stones, a black hematite and a white alabaster one.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, knucklebones might also be suitable for such kinds of purposes and have been excavated in great numbers on Bronze Age sites in the entire Near Eastern Mediterranean, in Anatolia and even in the Aegean area.<sup>12</sup> While their use as gaming instruments it had been clarified by the Akkadian literature,<sup>13</sup> their use as divinatory tools is suggested by the place of their findings,<sup>14</sup> like in example a group of astragals found in Egypt and engraved with the image of gods,<sup>15</sup> but still have to be confirmed by clear literary evidence.

<sup>11</sup> Assyrian text LKA 137, lines 19-29. In: HOROWITZ, Wayne, HUROWITZ, Victor Avigdor. "Urim and Thummim in light of a psephomancy ritual of Assur (LKA 137)". In: *Janes*, vol. 21, 1992, p. 95-115.

<sup>12</sup> SCHLIEMANN, Heinrich. *Ilios*. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1881, p. 263, 426; BOEHMER, Rainer M. *Die kleinfunde von Bogazköy*, Mann, 1972, p. 35, 181, 203; SPEISER, Ephraim Avigdor. *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1935, p. 33; STARR, Richard F.S. *Nuzi*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1939, p. 378-379, 414, 459; STARR, Richard F. S. *Nuzi*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1939, vol. 2, pl. 117; MUSCARELLA, Oscar W. "The iron age at Dinkha Tepe, Iran". In: *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 9, 1974, p. 80-81, note 21; SCHAEFFER, Claude F. A. *Ugaritica IV*. Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner. Paris, 1962, p. 80-82; TUFNELL, Olga. *Lachisch II*. Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 194; BLEGEN, Carl W., RAUSON, Marion. *The palace of Nestor at Pylos, in Western Messenia. The buildings and their contexts, vol. I, part I: Text*. Princeton University Press, 1966, p. 196, 234, 244, 266; GUY, Philip L. O. *Megiddo tombs*, *Oriental Institute Publication, n°33*. University of Chicago Press, 1938, p. 77, pl. 115:11.

<sup>13</sup> Antagal F 245-46 (MSL 17), CT 19, pl. 30-32, K 04352+, r ii 20: play with counters: *giš-bi-za-šu-tag-ga* = MIN (= *melulu*) *ša pa-si* / play with knucklebones: *zi-in-gi gi-ri-ra* = MIN *ša ta-x-x*.

Further mentions: LANDSBERGER, Benno. "Einige unerkannt gebliebene oder verkannte Nomina des Akkadischen". In: *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, n° 56, 1960, p. 121; FINKEL, Irving Leonard. "On the Rules for the Royal Game of Ur". In: FINKEL, I. L. (ed.). *Ancient Board Games in perspective*. British Museum, 2007, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> The findings of knucklebones in Bronze Age religious contexts are numerous and regard all the Near East. Just a sample referred to the Canaanite region, which has not yet been mentioned in other notes: GILMOUR, Garth H. "The nature and function of astragalus bones from archaeological contexts in the levant and eastern Mediterranean". In: *OJA*, n°16 (2), 1997, p. 167, 168; VENTURI, Fabrizio. "Deux dépôts de fondation d'astragales à Tell Afín (Syrie)". In: *Orient Express: notes et nouvelles d'archéologie orientale*, vol. 1, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> DAVID, Florence N. *Games, gods and gambling*. New York: Dover Publications, 1962, pl. 4.



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## II. Hebrews, Bible, lots and dice

If the previous chapter shed a light on the eventual divinatory use of knucklebones in ancient Near East, this one compares some traditions and accounts dating back to the Iron Age and brings cubic dice into the discussion. The Bible is the largest and best-preserved text of the ancient Near Eastern literature and provides a lot of details about Hebrews daily life that went lost for other cultures of their time. It can give us a very detailed portrait of their society, but since many of their social and cultural habits were common to other cultures, and sometimes the writers of the Bible even quote and report foreign costumes, the reading of the Bible could provide information also on other cultures of the Near eastern Iron Age.

The Bible contains several passages that attest how Hebrews were accustomed to cast lots to take important decisions, specifying that they considered lots as an expression of the divine will. According to the Book of the Exodus, as the Jews arrived in the promised land, Moses ordered to cast the lots to divide it among the twelve tribes.<sup>16</sup> As attested by Akkadian texts, at that time the tradition of casting lots to assign pieces of land was a common habit among the cultures of the Near East for at least a thousand years.

In other books of the Bible, lots are cast to ask God's advice to find the authors of some crime. In a passage of the Book of Joshua, this procedure ends with the extermination of the whole family of the supposed guilty, including his sons and daughters, the ox, donkey, and sheeps.<sup>17</sup> A similar situation is reported in the Book of Samuel, where the king Saul casted lot to find who contravened at his orders and killed him.<sup>18</sup>

Facing such a punitive use of lots we may figure that ancient Hebrews weren't so eager to cast them, but there are also some other passages of the Bible that look much more

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<sup>16</sup> NUMBERS, 26, 55-56; 34, 13; JOSHUA, 13, 6; 14, 2.

<sup>17</sup> JOSHUA, 7, 10-25.

<sup>18</sup> SAMUEL, I, 14.





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encouraging. In the Book of Jonah, while the prophet is traveling by sea, a storm hits the vessel and the sailors cast lots to establish who should be thrown in the sea to appease the storm, in an apotropaic rite. And the 'lots felt upon Jonah'.<sup>19</sup> Fortunately for him, everything corresponded to a divine project that God had on him. The Hebrews were accustomed to cast lots in a great variety of situations, even religious and rituals, like in appointing the priests in charge of leading a service,<sup>20</sup> the musicians that would have followed them,<sup>21</sup> and the guardians at the gate of the temple.<sup>22</sup> A famous Hebrew ritual that involved lots was the Yom Kippur, in which the scapegoat was chosen by chance.<sup>23</sup>

It is not clear what objects the Hebrews used to cast the lots. In a passage of the Book of Ezekiel it is reported an oracular practice performed by a foreigner king of Babylon, but it doesn't involve gaming tools.<sup>24</sup> In the Exodus is mentioned the use of two sacred casting devices that the highest priest brought in his breastplate and were called Urim and Thummim and it seems that they could give binary answers.<sup>25</sup> But their nature is still a matter of speculation.

Another interesting passage of the Bible reports a ritual that took place at the Persian court and that led to the institution of the Purim, a Hebrews holiday that celebrates the salvation of the Hebrews by the intervention of Esther, that prevented them from being exterminated by a royal decree. In the biblical account the Persian king cast the lots:

ג: בַּחֲדָשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן הוּא חֲדָשׁ נִסָּן בְּשָׁנַת שְׁתַּיִם עֶשְׂרֵה לְמֶלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוּשׁ הַפִּיל פּוּר הוּא הַגּוּרְלָה  
לְפָנָי הַמֶּן מִיּוֹם לַיּוֹם וּמִחֲדָשׁ לְחֲדָשׁ שְׁנָיִם עֶשְׂרֵה הוּא חֲדָשׁ אֲדָר  
כֵּן עַל-כֵּן קָרְאוּ לַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה פּוּרִים, עַל-שֵׁם הַפּוּר

<sup>19</sup> JONAH, I, 1-7.

<sup>20</sup> CHRONICLES, I, 24, 5.

<sup>21</sup> CHRONICLES, I, 25, 8.

<sup>22</sup> CHRONICLES, I, 26, 13.

<sup>23</sup> LEVITICUS, 16, 7-10.

<sup>24</sup> EZEKIEL, 21, 26-27.

<sup>25</sup> EXODUS, 28, 29-30.



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In the first month, Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, the pur, or lot, was cast in Haman's presence to determine the day and the month for the destruction of Mordecai's people on a single day, and the lot fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar.<sup>26</sup> [...] And so these days have been named Purim after the word pur.<sup>27</sup>

The biblical account reports the word Pur and specifies that it means 'lot' (in Jewish, *goral*), clarifying that for the writer it was a foreign word. Because of the collocation of this episode at the Persian court, for a long time it had been supposed to be a Persian term. Actually we know that it is derived from the Akkadian word *pūru* that means 'lot',<sup>28</sup> which came from the Sumerian BURU, that indicated the 'plate' or 'bowl' where the lots were cast.<sup>29</sup> An inscription of Shalmaneser the third reports that in his 31st year of his rule he threw for the second time the *pūru* in front of the gods Assur and Adad<sup>30</sup> and on an inscribed cube of clay preserved at the University of Yale<sup>31</sup> it is reported that the object was defined as *pūru*, was meant to be thrown in front of the statues of Ashur and Adad, and its owner was Yaḥalu, treasurer of Shalmaneser the IIIrd. It is not clear how the Jewish came to know about this practice.

Thanks to Herodotus we know that Persians were accustomed to cast lots, even to decide above capital matters, like when Darius I ascended to the throne.<sup>32</sup> But whether they adopted the Assyrian ritual of the *pūru* or not, is a matter of discussion and it is probable that the author of the Book of Esther simply made confusion between different stories and different foreigner terms and traditions. In any case, thanks to the comparison between the Hebrew account and the Assyrian archaeological evidence, we

<sup>26</sup> ESTHER, 3, 7.

<sup>27</sup> ESTHER, 9, 26.

<sup>28</sup> FINKEL, Irving Leonard, READE, Julian E. "Lots of Eponyms". *In: Iraq*, vol. 57, 1995, p. 167-172.

<sup>29</sup> HALLO, William W. "The First Purim". *In: Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 46.1, 1983, p. 19-27.

<sup>30</sup> A.0.102.14, lines 174-5. *In: GRAYSON, Kirk. Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC, Part II: 858-745 BC, series Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia – Assyrian Periods 3.* University of Toronto Press, 1996, p. 70; CAD K 209a, RIMA 3 A.0.102.14, 175; A.0.102.16, 321'.

<sup>31</sup> N° inv. YBC 7054.

<sup>32</sup> HERODOTUS, III, 80.



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came to know that the *pūru*, the lot, could also have a cubic shape. Curiously, on the site of Tell Dan (Israel), in an archaeological layer dated to the VIII century, and precisely from the internal chamber of a Hebrew temple, has been found a gaming cubic die in blue faience, perfectly preserved, whose numeration counterposes the numbers that summed up make 7.<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately, they aren't clear enough to confirm this hypothesis, but these two last pieces of evidence are the most indicative of the possible use of cubic dice as instruments of divination in the Iron Age. The level of uncertainty in this assumption is acceptable, considering that also the gaming use of cubic dice will be clarified on both, the literary and archaeological level, just starting from the VI century BC.

### III. Casting lots in Greece and Italy: the prominence of knucklebones over dice

In the Aegean area knucklebones were popular already in the Bronze Age, but their first mention in the local literature occurs in the *Iliad*. This poem had been written between the VIII and VII century BC but depicts the Aegean society of the late Bronze Age. In the book XXIII, knucklebones are mentioned as a childish game under the name of *astragaloi*.<sup>34</sup> The *Iliad* reports several situations in which heroes of both sides cast lots to take important decisions,<sup>35</sup> and, as a clear derivation of the aforementioned poem of *Atra-Hasis*, it tells that even Zeus, Poseidon and Hades casted lots to divide among them the universe:

τρεις γάρ τ' ἐκ Κρόνου εἰμὲν ἀδελφοὶ οὗς τέκετο Πῆα  
 Ζεὺς καὶ ἐγώ, τρίτατος δ' Αἴδης ἐνέροισιν ἀνάσσει.  
 τριχθὰ δὲ πάντα δέδασται, ἕκαστος δ' ἔμμορε τιμῆς:  
 190ῆτοι ἐγὼν ἔλαχον πολιὴν ἄλα ναιέμεν αἰεὶ  
 παλλομένων, Αἴδης δ' ἔλαχε ζόφον ἠερόεντα,  
 Ζεὺς δ' ἔλαχ' οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἐν αἰθέρι καὶ νεφέλῃσι:

<sup>33</sup> BIRAN, Avraham. "The Dancer from Dan, the Empty Tomb and the Altar Room". *In: Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 36, n° 3/4, 1986, p. 179-181, img. 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Iliad*, XXIII, 88.

<sup>35</sup> *Iliad*, III, 314-361; VII, 170-177.



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γαῖα δ' ἔτι ζυνὴ πάντων καὶ μακρὸς Ὀλυμπος.<sup>36</sup>

For three brothers are we, begotten of Cronos, and born of Rhea, Zeus, and myself, and the third is Hades, that is lord of the dead below. And in three-fold wise are all things divided, and unto each hath been apportioned his own domain. [190] I verily, when the lots were shaken, won for my portion the grey sea to be my habitation for ever, and Hades won the murky darkness, while Zeus won the broad heaven amid the air and the clouds; but the earth and high Olympus remain yet common to us all.

Curiously, the use of casting lots is mentioned in the *Odyssey* also, when Ulysses must choose who are the fellows who are going to blind Polyphemus together with him.<sup>37</sup> In the V century, Pindar wrote that, according to the myth, also Jason and the argonauts sailed with their vessel just after a positive response from the lots casted by the diviner Mopsus<sup>38</sup> and a scholiast lately glossed:

338α: Ὀρνίχεςσι καὶ κλάυροισι: ταῖς μαντείαις κρησάμενος ὁ Μόψος ἐνεβίβασε τὸν στρατὸν προθύμως. Εἰώθασιν διὰ κλήρων μαντεύεσθαι· οἷον, ἐὰν βάλλοντός μου τόδε ἀναβῆῃ, ἀποτελεσθήσεται τόδε. Ἐὰν δὲ μή, οὐκ ἀποτελεσθήσεται. Καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς ἀστράγαλοι κεῖνται, οἷς διαμαντεύονται βάλλοντες αὐτούς. [...]

338β: Κλάροισιν: ἰστέον ὅτι κλήροις τὸ πρὶν ἐμαντεύοντο, καὶ ἦσαν ἐπὶ τῶν ἱεροῶν τραπεζῶν ἀστράγαλοι, οὓς ῥίπτοντες ἐμαντεύοντο.<sup>39</sup>

338a: Birds and lots: after Mopso had consulted the oracles, he brought the good-hearted army on board. They used to predict the future with 'fates' according to the following pattern: 'If this is the result of my casting, such a thing will happen. If, on the other hand, it is not, it will not happen.' In shrines there were astragals with which predictions were obtained through the throwing of them [...].

<sup>36</sup> *Ilias*, XV, 187-193

<sup>37</sup> *Odyssey*, IX, 331-335.

<sup>38</sup> PINDAR, *Pythian* IV, 190 (=338).

<sup>39</sup> *Scholia ad Pindarum, Pythica, IV, 337-338.*





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338b: Lots: it should be known that in the past they made predictions with lots and there were astragals on sacred tables, with which they predicted the future by throwing them.

Whether this comment is descriptive of a tradition dating to the period in which Pindar wrote this ode, or more suitably of the period in which the scholiast commented on it, still must be defined. The first clear mentions of such a use of knucklebones date to the I century AD: Suetonius reports that the emperor Tiberius casted golden astragals in the spring of Aponus, near Padova (which is now the city of Abano that, like in the roman times, it is renowned for its a thermal baths)<sup>40</sup> and in the following century Pausanias describe the same use of knucklebones by an oracle near the Boura river (actually Vouraikos), in Greece:

καταβάντων δὲ ἐκ Βούρας ὡς ἐπὶ θάλασσαν ποταμός τε Βουραϊκὸς ὀνομαζόμενος καὶ Ἡρακλῆς οὐ μέγας ἐστὶν ἐν σπηλαιῶ: ἐπὶ κλησὶς μὲν καὶ τούτου Βουραϊκός, μαντείας δὲ ἐπὶ πίνακι τε καὶ ἀστραγάλου ἐστὶ λαβεῖν. εὐχεται μὲν γὰρ πρὸ τοῦ ἀγάλματος ὁ τῷ θεῷ χρώμενος, ἐπὶ δὲ τῇ εὐχῇ λαβὼν ἀστραγάλου — οἱ δὲ ἄφθονοι παρὰ τῷ Ἡρακλεῖ κείνται, τέσσαρας ἀφίησιν ἐπὶ τῆς τραπέζης: ἐπὶ δὲ παντὶ ἀστραγάλου σχήματι γεγραμμένα ἐν πίνακι ἐπιτηδες ἐξήγησιν ἔχει τοῦ σχήματος.<sup>41</sup>

On descending from Bura towards the sea you come to a river called Buraicus, and to a small Heracles in a cave. He too is surnamed Buraicus, and here one can divine by means of a tablet and knucklebones. He who inquires of the god offers up a prayer in front of the image, and after the prayer he takes four dice, a plentiful supply of which are placed by Heracles, and throws them upon the table. For every figure made by the dice there is an explanation expressly written on the tablet.

Several other passages of the Greek and Roman literature about oracles make reference or allude to knucklebones,<sup>42</sup> while some others mention them as objects that could be thrown as lots for irrelevant matters like choosing the 'Master of the wine' during a

<sup>40</sup> Suetone, *Tiberius*, XIV.

<sup>41</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, VII, 25, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Cicero, *De Divinatione*, I, 23; II, 48; II, 121.



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banquet.<sup>43</sup> Clearly, for the ancients, these gaming tools were a representation of randomness, chance and fate, and they have been charged with further symbolic meanings.

But the oracular use of knucklebones, for the Italic people should have been just one of the many options available on the market of divination:<sup>44</sup> Apart from the Suetonius' passage that expressly mention the oracular use of knucklebones, it seems that most of the Italian oracles relied on other procedures like in example picking randomly a lead plate with a message inscribed or scratched on it. Here a few samples:

Non sum(us) mendacis quas dixi (dixisti?). Consulis stulte.<sup>45</sup>  
 We are not the liar you said! Ask for advice, you idiot!

Nunc me rogitas, nunc consulis? Tempus abit iam.<sup>46</sup>  
 Are you asking for my advice just now? The time is already gone.

Qur petis postempus consilium? Quod rogas non est.<sup>47</sup>  
 Why are you asking for advice so late? What you are asking doesn't exist.

This procedure is represented in a bas relief entitled to Caius Fulvius Salvius, a professional diviner (aruspex), and now in the archaeological museum of Ostia.<sup>48</sup> It shows Heracles picking a plate from a box and passing it to a child,<sup>49</sup> and behind them it is possible to see a couple of tablets that, we may assume, were related to the lots and remind what has been described by Pausanias in the aforementioned passage. In the

<sup>43</sup> HORACE, *Odes*, II, 7.

<sup>44</sup> APULEIUS provides a disenchanting and funny description of the diviners who administered an oracle, that focused more on their personal gain: *Metamorphoses*, IX, 8. Equally, OENOMAUUS OF GADARA, who lived in the very same period: Fr. 14 in EUSEBIUS, *Preparatio Evangelica*, V, 22.

<sup>45</sup> CIL, I2, 2184 = CLE 331,12 = ILLRP 1083.

<sup>46</sup> CIL, I2, 2185.

<sup>47</sup> CIL, I2, 2189 = ILLRP 1084, 1087a.

<sup>48</sup> Museo Archeologico Ostiense, inv. n° 157.

<sup>49</sup> The involvement of children in divinatory practices is reported also by CICERO, *De Divinatione*, II, 86.



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end, it seems that in the Roman Empire divination could be done through knucklebones and they had specific place in the common imagery of the Romans, but it wasn't exclusive and probably it was more commonly practiced with other objects that, like the lead plates, that have been found in Italy on different sites.<sup>50</sup> But what is relevant for our purpose is that in Latin those lead plates, and the lots in general, were commonly called *sortes*.

#### IV. The *Astragalomanteion*, oracle through knucklebones

A place where it seems that the matter was taken much more seriously was central Anatolia. A group of 20 inscriptions were found there, and one more in Cyprus, attesting a peculiar divinatory practice called *Astragalomanteion*. These kinds of oracles were written on walls, and more frequently on pillars, located in public places and easily visible and accessible.<sup>51</sup> They were entitled to Hermes, the god of divination through knucklebones, but also of trade and gambling.<sup>52</sup>

Among the 21 texts referred to the *Astragalomanteion*, 17 are very similar and 13 are almost identical and the probability that they were copied from the same original or from texts derived from it, is very high. Among the others, two texts are also very similar, eventually attesting another literary tradition.

They all should date between the I and the II century AD, according to the dedication written on one of them found near the ancient city of Perge, which was commissioned by a *libertus* whose name was Titus Flavius Onesimos:

**Recto:**

Ἐρμού ἀστραγαλομαντ[εῖον] (?ἀστραγαλομαντείου)  
 [θ]εοῖς Σεβαστοῖς καὶ Ἀρτέμιδι Περ[γιαία]

<sup>50</sup> CHAMPEAUX, Jacqueline. “Sors oraculi: les oracles en Italie sous la République et l'Empire”. In: *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome Année 1990*, vol. 102-1, 1990, p. 271-302.

<sup>51</sup> GRAF, Fritz. “Rolling the dice for an answer”. In: *Mantiké, studies in ancient divination*, vol. 155, ed. Brill, 2005, p. 51-97.

<sup>52</sup> SÜETONE, *Peri Paidios*, 1.11 (Taillardat).



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[καί] Ἑρμεί καί τῷ δῆμῳ Ἱτίος Φλ[άουιος,]  
 [Σεβαστοῦ ἀπελεύθερος, Ὀνήσιμος]

Oracle of Hemes through knucklebones  
 to the divine emperors and Artemis of Perge  
 and Hermes, and to the people (provided by) Titos Flaviouios,  
 imperial Libertus, Onesimos

Verso

Τι[τος Φλ]άουιος, Σεβαστοῦ ἀ[πελεύθερος]  
 [- ]Ὀνήσιμος [- ]  
 Titos Flaviouios, imperial Libertus, Onesimos<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, the name of the Libertus mixed Greek and Latin elements. The latter most probably indicates the name of the emperor who seized the throne when this person achieved his status of *Libertus*, and the personal name Onesimos, means useful in ancient Greek. If this interpretation of the dedicator's name is right, the Anatolian knucklebone oracles must date to the Flavian Dynasty or a little bit later.

The practice of the *astragalomanteion* involved 7 or, more frequently, 5 knucklebones that were thrown by the inquirer, and their result corresponded to an inscribed oracle that could be read at loud voice on the wall or pillar. Most of the texts are fragmentary, but when complete, those referred to the use of 5 knucklebones consisted of 56 oracles that corresponded to every possible combination of them. Each knucklebone can fall on four different sides and if the different sequence of the scores is not taken into consideration, like in example if the five knucklebones are casted all together, the total of the combination is 56.

In the *Astragalomanteion*, every oracle starts with the corresponding scores and the name of a god written in genitive, as an alleged attribution of the oracle to that divinity. The first one, which corresponded to the score of 5, is dedicated to Zeus, the major and first of the gods, from whom everything has to start. The other divinities mentioned in the texts belong to the Greek pantheon as well as to other religious traditions of the

<sup>53</sup> IK Perge 205.





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Ancient Near East. The following is a selection of oracles taken from a text found in Cremna.<sup>54</sup> This was a wealthy Greek colony in Pisidia, later turned into a Roman colony. The lacunes were filled with parts taken from two other texts found in Perge<sup>55</sup> and Termessos<sup>56</sup> and the translation is by Fritz Graf.<sup>57</sup> The footnotes highlight the difference with the edition of Johann Nollé:

[ααααα ε Δι]δς [Ολ]υμ[πίου]  
 [χεῖοι δὲ πέντε πείπτοντες ὁμοῦ τ]άδ[ε φρά]ζει  
 Ζεὺς ἀγαθὴν βουλὴν σαῖσι φρεσίν, ὧ̃ ξένε, δώσει  
 δώσει δ' εὐφροσυνὴν [ἔργοις, ἀνθ' ὧ̃ν σὺ χαρ]ήση [εις]  
 [ἀλλ' Ἀφρ]οδιτη[ν ἰλάσκει καὶ] Μαριάδος υἱόν.

1111, 5, Zeus Olympios

If you see only Chians: Zeus will give good thinking to your mind, stranger: he will grant happiness to your works, for which you will give thanks. But appease Aphrodite and the son of Maia.

[ααααγ ζ] Ἀ[θηνᾶς] Ἀρείας·  
 [χεῖοι τ]έσσαρες [ῶ]ν[τες, τρεῖς] εἰς, τάδε φρά[ζει].  
 [ἔχθραν] καὶ κακότητα φ[υγῶν ἤ]ξεις ποτ' εἰς ἄθλα.  
 [ἤ]ξεις καὶ δώσει σοι<sup>58</sup> θεὰ γ[λαυκ]ῶπι[ς Ἀθ]ήνη·  
 [ἔ]σται σοι πρ[ᾶξι]ς κατ[αθύμιος, ἦν] ἐπιβάλλη.

11113, 7, Athena Areia

If four Chians and one three are cast, the god signals: by avoiding enmity and animosity, you will reach your prize; you will arrive and blue eyes Athena will save you. The activity that you have in mind will turn out as you wish it.

<sup>54</sup> IK Central Pisidia 5 = ed. Nollé oracle n°26. In: NOLLÉ, Johann. *Kleinasiatische Losorakel: Astragal- und Alphabetchresmologien der hochkaiserzeitlichen Orakelrenaissance*, 2007, p. 73.

<sup>55</sup> IK Perge 205. In: ŞAHİN, Sencer. *Die Inschriften von Perge I*, series *Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien*, vol. 54, 1999, p. 243 and followings, n° 205-207.

<sup>56</sup> TAM II 1222.

<sup>57</sup> GRAF, Fritz. "Rolling the dice for an answer". In: JOHNSTON, S. I., STRUCK, P. T. (eds). *Mantiké, studies in ancient divination*, vol. 155, ed. Brill, 2005, p. 51-97.

<sup>58</sup> Nollé: σώσει σε.



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[ααα]γγ θ Άετοῦ [Διός]  
 [εἰ δέ] κε πείπτωσιν δύο τρεῖο[ι, τρεῖς δ' ἅμα] χεῖοι·  
 [αἰετὸς ὑψ]ιπέτης εἰς δεξιὰ χειρὸς ὁδ]εῖταις  
 [ὦν ἐ]πὶ μαντεῖαν ἀγαθ[ὴν σὺν Ζηνὶ Μεγίσ]τω.  
 [τεύ]ξη, ἐφ' ἣν ὀρμ[ᾶ]ς π[ρᾶ]ξιν· μηδὲν δέ] φο[β]ηθῆς.

33111, 9, Zeus' eagle

If two threes and three Chians are cast: A high flying eagle on the right-hand side of the traveller will be a good omen; with the help of Greatest Zeus (Zeus Megistos), you will achieve you goal; do not fear.

ς[αα]αα [ι Δαί]μον[ος Μεγίστ]ου·  
 [ἐξεί]της μὸν[ος καὶ χ]εῖοι τέσσαρ[ες ὄ]ντε[ς].  
 [Δαί]μονι, ἦν[τιν' ἔ]χεις, εὐχ[ὴν ἀ]ποδόντι σο[ι] ἔ[σται]  
 [βέλ]τιον, εἰ μέλλεις πράσσειν κατὰ νοῦν, ἃ μ[ε]ρ[ιμ]νᾶ[ς].  
 [Δη]μήτηρ γάρ σοι καὶ Ζεὺς σωτήρες ἔσο[ντα]ι[ι].

61111, 10, Daimôn Megistos

If one six and four Chians in a row: It will be better to fulfill whatever vow you made to the daimôn, if you intend to perform what you ponder in you mind, Demeter and Zeus will save you.

γγαα ια Νείκης·  
 [εἰ] δέ κε τρ[εῖς τ]ρία πείπ[τωσιν, χεῖοι δέ δύο] δ' ἄλλο[ι].  
 [νι]κήσεις, [λή]μψη δ' ἃ θ[έλε]ις, τὰ δέ πάντα σοι ἔσ[ται].  
 [τι]μητόν σε τιθεῖ [Δαίμων, ἐχθρ]ῶν τε κρατήσε[ις].  
 [βουλή δ'] ἔσ[ται σοι κατ]αθ[ύμιος], ἣν ἐπιβάλλη.

33311, 11, Victory

If three threes are cast, and further two Chians: You will win; you will take what you wish, and you will achieve everything; the daimôn will make you honored, and you will overcome your enemies; the plan that you are about to realize will be according to your desire.

αααςδ ιγ Ἀφροδείτης·  
 [τρ]εῖς χεῖοι [καὶ] [ἐξ]εῖτης, πέμπτος [τέσσαρα πείπτ]ω[ν].  
 [σ]τέλλε, ὅπου χρήσεις· χείρων σὺ δέ οἶκαδ' ἀρί[ζη]



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[ε]ύρωὼν καὶ πρά[ξ]ιας, ὅσσα φρεσὶ σῆσι μενοινᾶς·  
[ἀ]λλ' Ἀφροδείτην εἰλάσκου καὶ Μαϊάδος υἱόν.

11164, 13, Aphrodite

Three Chians and a six and the fifth a four: Sail wherever you wish: you will return full of joy, for you have found and accomplished everything that you ponder in your mind; but pray to Aphrodite and the son of Maia (Hermes).

αγγγδ ἰδ Ποσειδῶνος·  
εἶς χεῖρος καὶ τρία τρεῖς καὶ τέσσαρες εἶ<ς>· θεὸς αὐδᾶ·  
λακτίζεις πρὸς κέντρα, πρὸς ἀντία κύματα μοχθεῖς.  
ἰχθὺν ἐν πελάγει ζητεῖς, μὴ σπεῦδ' ἐπὶ πράξιν·  
[οὔ σοι χρήσι]μόν ἐστι θ[εοὺς βιάσασ]θαι ἀκαίρως.

13334, 14, Poseidon

One Chian, three threes, and one four: The god announces: You kick against the goad, you struggle against the waves, you search for a fish in the sea: do not hasten to do business. It does not help you to force the gods at the wrong time.

ζγγγα ἰς Ἡρακλέους·  
ἐξείτης εἶς, τρεῖς δὲ τρία καὶ πέμπτος ὁ χεῖρος·  
οὔπω καιρὸν ὄρω, σπεύδεις δὲ σύ. μὴ κενὰ μόχθει,  
μηδ' ὥς τίς τε κύων τυφλὴν ἐκύησε λοχείην,  
ἦσυχά βουλεύου, καὶ σοι θεὸς ἡγεμονεύσει.

63331, 16, Herakles

One six, three threes and the fifth a Chian: The moment has not yet arrived, you make too much haste. Do not act in vain, nor like the bitch that has borne a blind puppy. Deliberate calmly, and the god will lead you.

δγγγ ἰς Κρόνου·  
τέσσαρα πείπτων <εἶς>, τρία τέσσαρες ἄλλοι·  
[σ]κορπίοι ἐστᾶσιν καθ' ὁδόν· μὴ σπεῦδ' ἐπὶ πράξι[ν],  
[ῆ]ν μέλλεις, μεῖνον δέ, καὶ ὕστερον ἔσται, ἃ βούλει.  
[οὔ]τε γὰρ ὠνεῖσθαι τόδε λῶιον οὔτ' ἀποδόσθαι.



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43333, 16, Kronos

One four is cast, the other four are threes: Scorpions stand in your way, do not hurry towards the business that you intend, wait, and what you wish will arrive later; neither to buy this nor to sell is better.

ςςααγ ιζ Εἴσιδος Σωτείρης·  
 [δι]σσοὶ δ' ἐξεῖται, δύο χεῖροι, τρεῖς ὁ πέμπτος·  
 [εἰσα]φικοῦ, ἐκ τρίποδος φθόνγον δέχου· ἔσται ὁ καιρὸς  
 [πλ]ήρης καὶ θαλαμῶν, σὺ γαμήσας οἴκαδ' ἀφείξει,  
 [πει]ρανεῖς, ἃ θέλεις πράξας, εὐρῶν δ' ἃ μεριμνᾷς.

66113, 17, Isis the Savior

A double six, two Chians and the fifth a three: Enter and receive the voice from the tripod! The time is also ripe for marriage; you will marry and return home. You will achieve whatever you want in your business, having found the thing about which you are anxious.

δδγγγ ιζ Σεράπιδος·  
 τέσσαρα δ' εἰ πέπτωσιν δύο καὶ οἱ τρε<ι>ς τρεῖοι·  
 θάρσει, ἀγωνίζου, Ζεὺς Κτήσιός ἐστιν ἀρωγός,  
 τόν τε σὺν ἀντίπ[αλ]ον κολάση κ' ὑποχείριον ἔξεις.  
 δώσει δ' εὐφροσ[ύνην] ἔργοις, ἀνθ' ὧν σὺ χαρήση.

44333, 17, Sarapis

If two fours are cast and three threes: Take courage and fight, Zeus the Owner (Ktesios)<sup>59</sup> is your helper. You will punish your opponent and have him under your fist, and he will give happiness to the works for which you will thank him.

ςγγγγ ιη Ἀγαθοῦ Κρόνου·  
 μὴ σπεύσης, Δαίμων ἀντίσ(τα)ται, ἀλλ' ἀνάμει[νον]·  
 μηδ' ὥς τίς τε κύων τυφλὴν ἐκύησε λοχεῖην,  
 ἦσυχά βουλεύου, καὶ σοι χαριέντα τελεῖται.

<sup>59</sup> Protector of the house and its treasures.





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63333, 18, Good Time

A six and four threes together; the oracle announces thus: Do not make haste, the daimôn is opposed to you, rather wait and do not act like a dog that gave birth to a blind litter. Take counsel calmly, and things will turn out happily for you.

δδδδδ κ Μοιρῶν Ἀδυσωπητῶν·  
ἠέλιος δὲ δέδυκεν, ἐφέστηκεν δ' ὀλοή νύξ.  
πάντα δ' ἀμαυροῦνται, παῦσαι, περὶ ὧν μ' ἐπερωτᾷς,  
οὔτε γὰρ ὠνεῖσθαι τόδε λῶιον οὔτε ἀποδόσθαι[ι].

44444, 20, The Inexorable Moirai

If all four are cast together in the same way: The sun has gone down, and terrible night has come, everything has become dark. Interrupt the matter about which you ask me; it is neither better to buy nor to sell.

δγγςς κβ Ἄρεω[ς] Θουρίου·  
μὴ βαίνε(ιν ὁδόν), ἦν μέλλεις, ξένε, τήνδε γὰρ οὐδεῖς,  
[αἰθ]ῶν ἐσχώρησε λέων μέγας, ὄ[ν] πεφύλαξαι,  
[δει]νός, ἀπρακτός ὁ χρησμός, ἐπ' ἠσυχίῃ δ' ἀνάμεινον.

43366, 22, Terrible Ares

Four and two threes, two sixes, and he announces this: Do not undertake the travel that you intend, stranger! Nobody will do it. A large fiery lion is about, against whom you have to be on your guard, a terrible one. The oracle is untractable, wait quietly.

ςςδδγ [κγ Εὐφροσύνης]·  
στέλλε, ὅπου σοι θυ[μὸς (ἄνωγε), πάλιν δόμον ἤξεις]  
εὐρῶν καὶ πράξας κατὰ [νοῦν πάντων τε κρατήσεις]  
εὐφροσύνην ὠνεῖσθαι πωλεῖν τε καὶ οὔτως].

66443, 23, Happiness

If two sixes are cast and two fours, and the fifth is a three: Sail, wherever you want, you will return home again, having found and done everything



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according to you wish; you will achieve everything, and thus to buy and to trade is happiness.

ζςςδγ κε Μηνὸς Φωσφόρου·  
 θάρσει, καιρὸν ἔ[χ]εις, πράξεις, ἃ θέλεις, καιροῦ τε ἐπ[ιτεύξῃ].  
 εἰς ὁδὸν ὀρμηθῆναι, ἔχει (ς) καιρὸν τινα μόχθο[ς],  
 ἔργον δ' ἐνχειρεῖν ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἀγῶνα δίκη[ν τε].

46663, 25, Mên<sup>60</sup> Who Brings Light  
 One four being cast, three sixes and the fifth a three: Take courage; you have an opportunity; you achieve what you desire, and you will come upon the right time to begin your travel; it is good to engage in work, competition and litigation.

ζςςςα κε Μητρὸς Θεῶν·  
 ὡς ἀρνῶν κρατέουσι λύκοι κρατε(ρ)οί τε λέοντε[ς]  
 βοῦς ἔλικας, πάντων τούτων δ' ἔ[τ]ι καὶ σὺ κρατήσ[εις],  
 καὶ πάντα ἔσται σοι, ὅσα ἐπερωτᾷ[ς]<sup>61</sup> σὺν Διὸς Ἑρμ[εῖ].

66661, 25, Mother of the Gods  
 Four sixes, the fifth a Chian: he signifies this: As wolves overpower sheep and powerful lions overpower broadhoofed oxen, so you too will master all this, and everything about which you ask will be yours, with the help of Zeus' son Hermes.

## V. Remarks about the Anatolian knucklebone oracles

The similarities between the different versions of the *Astragalomanteion* clearly point at a common origin, which must be attributed to a literate hand, but some elements indicate that the original text must have been an edited collection of heterogeneous materials. The repetition of the same gods' names and the presence of Greek and Anatolian divinities, the repetition of some oracles, the symbols, allegories and images evoked by

<sup>60</sup> God of moon, local deity of western Anatolian.

<sup>61</sup> Nollé: ἐρωτᾷς.



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them are heterogeneous and should derive from other sources that were selected and reorganized in a new way.

It is not clear if the practice of the *Astragalomanteion* was derived from other divinatory traditions, but for sure the *Astragalomanteion* is the output of an editing process that overlapped different cultural traditions, and this is confirmed by the oracles 21 and 32. They quote a proverb attested in the Greek literature since the VII century BC<sup>62</sup> which is mentioned also in the Mesopotamian literature:

n[i]g(!?) [..(?)-.](?)-[e]n(?) -na-**hu**-**hu**-nu ur-tur igi nu-bad.bad-du<sup>63</sup>  
 The [bi]tch(!?) (is) weakened from [...].[..](?); the puppies' eyes will not open(!)

And occurs even in a letter that the Assyrian king Shamshi Adad wrote to his son in the XIX-XVIII century BC:

as-su-ur-ri ki-ma te-el-tim ul-li-tim  
 ša um-ma-a-mi ka-al-ba-tum  
 i-na šu-te-bu-ri- ša **hu**-ub-bu-tù-tim  
 úli - id  
 at-tu-nu i-na-an-na ki-a-am la te-ep-pi- ša<sup>64</sup>

In fact, the situation is exactly like the ancient proverb says: “the bitch, for her haste, gave birth to blind puppies” and now you are doing the same.

In front of such evidence, it is clear that the *Astragalomanteion*, is not a mere expression of a trivial superstition of ancient Greeks, but the complex result of a mixture of traditions. Unfortunately, we don't have the possibility to reconstruct the whole process

<sup>62</sup> MORAN, William L. “An Assyriological Gloss on the New Archilochus Fragment”. In: *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 82, 1978, p. 17-19; MORAN, William L. “Puppies in proverbs – From Šamši-Adad I to Archilochus?”. In: *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies*, vol. 14, 1978, p. 32-37.

<sup>63</sup> GORDON, Edmund I. “Sumerian Animal Proverbs and Fables: ‘Collection Five’”. In: *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, Vol. 12, n° 2, 1958, p. 69, 5.118.

<sup>64</sup> DOSSIN, Georges. *Archives royales de Mari I*, 1950. p. 28-29, Letter 5, lines 10-13 (=ARM I, 5:10-13).



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of cultural transmission, since we have a clear picture of just a single stage of it, the one that is attested by 21 texts written on stone. It is clear that this process evolved also on other more ephemeral supports that are now lost.

## VI. The *Homeromanteia*: divination through Homer and dice

Aside from the *Astragalomanteion*, the Greeks invented another form of divination that involved a gaming tool, and in this case, we are speaking of dice, while the oracles were not taken from different divinatory traditions, but from Homer, the most famous author of antiquity. It is not clear when this tradition was born and when it was codified in a text, but already in Classical and Hellenistic Greece the compositions attributed to Homer were supposed to have divinatory power. Already Aristophanes<sup>65</sup> alludes to it, and the same did Plato<sup>66</sup> and Herodotus<sup>67</sup> and others more.<sup>68</sup>

It is not clear if it is related to the very same practice mentioned by the aforementioned authors, but a divinatory practice called *Homeromanteia* is attested since the II century AD. Curiously, while the *Astragalomanteion* is known just thanks to its epigraphic remains, the *Homeromanteia* is attested by three texts written on papyri. The most ancient among them, and the most damaged one, dates to the II-III century AD.<sup>69</sup>

The intermediate one was found in Oxyrinchus and dates to the III-IV century and consists of a single sheet that originally was part of a small and portable book, made to be easily handled and transported.<sup>70</sup> It consists of just the first 21 lines reporting the introduction to this oracular practice, and the first 18 lines of an oracle written on the back side. Here are reported lines 1-5 that detailed the instructions:

<sup>65</sup> ARISTOPHANES, *Peace*, 1089-1090.

<sup>66</sup> PLATO, *Crito*, 44b.

<sup>67</sup> HERODOTUS, *History*, VII, 6, 2.

<sup>68</sup> PAUSANIAS, *Description of Greece*, I, 22, 7; CASSIUS DIO, *Roman History*, LXXIX, 8, 5-6; LXXIX, 40, 3; PSEUDO-PLUTARCH, *Life of Homer*, II, 218, 4.

<sup>69</sup> P. Bon. 3 (=Suppl. Mag. II. 77). In: MONTEVECCHI, Orsolina, PIGHI, Giovanni Battista. "Prima ricognizione dei papiri dell'Università di Bologna". In: *Aegyptus*, n° 27, 1947, p. 182, 183.

<sup>70</sup> P. Oxy. LVI, 3831.





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πρῶτο(ν) μ(έν) εἰδέναι σε δεῖ τὰς ἡμέρας αἶς [   
 χρῆσθαι τῶι μαντ(είω) β' εὐχόμε(εν)ο(ν) τ(ήν) ἐπωιδ[ήν   
 εἰπεῖν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ εὐξασθαι ἐν σεαυτῶι πρ[   
 ᾧ βούλει. Τρίτο(ν) λαβόντα τὸ(ν) κύβ(ον) ἄ(πο)ρίψαι τρ[ίς   
 καὶ ἄ(πο)ρίψαντα πρ(ὸς) τὸ(ν) ἀριθμὸ(ν) τ(ῶν) τριῶν τ.<sup>71</sup>

Firstly, you should know on which days you may use this oracle. Secondly, you must pray and say this prayer for the god for whatever you want. Thirdly, once you have taken the die, you must throw it three times and throw it for the number of three ciphers.

The text continues with an invocation to Apollo and at line 21 specifies that the name of this practice was *Homeromanteion* or *Akinakes* (Ὀμή(ρου) μαντ(είων) ἢ ἀκινάκης), a short sword of Persian origin. The most recent text is a long papyrus now at the British Museum.<sup>72</sup> It is 2,33 meters long and contains the whole text of the *Homeromanteion*, except for the introduction. Like the other two papyri<sup>73</sup> it includes an invocation to Apollo, who was considered the master of divination, and asks the reader to pray also to Hermès *Kerdémporos*, who 'brings gains to the merchants'.

After the invocation, the papyrus reports a list of oracles. Almost all of them are really taken from Homer, while a few are of unknown origin. According to the instructions provided by the papyrus of Oxyrhynchus, each oracle starts with a series of three numbers between 1 and 6. The text reports the oracles in crescent order, from the one corresponding to 111 to the one corresponding to 666, which makes a total of 216 combinations. Interestingly, the first five lines forms an acrostic with the name of Athena:

<sup>71</sup> lines 1-5. In: COSTANZA, Salvatore. "Rolling dice for divination, gambling and Homeromanteia". In: *Board Game Studies Journal*, vol. 16, 1, 2022, p. 431-447.

<sup>72</sup> PMG VII (=P. Lond. 121). MALTOMINI, Franco. "P. Lond. 121 (=PMG VII), 1-221: Homeromanteion". In: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, vol. 106, 1995, p. 107-122.

<sup>73</sup> The P. Bon. 3 (=Suppl. Mag. II. 77) is just supposed to include such invocation: MONTEVECCHI, Orsolina. *Papyri Bononienses I (1-50)*, Università di Bologna, Milan, 1953.



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ααα	ἄνδρ' ἐπαμύνασθαι ὅτε τις πρότερος χαλεπήνη
ααβ	θαρσῶν νῦν Διόμεδες ἐπὶ Τρῶεσσι μάχεσθαι
ααγ	ἧ ῥά νύ τοι μέγαλων δῶρων ἐπεμαίετο θυμός
ααδ	νίκην καὶ μέγα κῦδος, ἀτὰρ Δαναοῖσι γε πῆμα
ααε	ἀλλ' οὐ πείσονται Τρῶες καὶ Δαρδανίωνες
ααζ	εἰ δ' ἄγε τοι κερφαλῆ κατανεύσομαι ὄφρα πεποιθῆς <sup>74</sup>

Her role in this divinatory practice is unknown. Maybe she is mentioned because was considered as the goddess of divination through counters or pebbles (psephomancy),<sup>75</sup> or maybe because of her role in the Homeric poems, which is always supportive of Achaeans heroes.<sup>76</sup> The three papyri related to the *Homeromanteia* show some differences, but also in this case it is possible to hypothesize that they had a common origin and that a literate person edited this text.

Homer had a prestigious place in the common imagination of the ancients, especially among the Greek speaking communities, and he was considered not as a god, but as a superhuman figure. His poems were regarded as the peak of literary art and worthy of the highest consideration, also in matters of divination. But at the same time in which the aforementioned oracles were written, several people were already quite disillusioned about their efficiency and criticized the diviners for exploiting fears and superstitions of simple people. Different pagan authors regard such practices as blameworthy,<sup>77</sup> but those who opposed them more strongly were the Christians.

<sup>74</sup> MALTOMINI, Franco. "P. Lond. 121 (=PMG VII), 1-221: Homeromanteion". In: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, vol. 106, 1995, p. 107-122.

<sup>75</sup> ZENOBIUS, *Corpus paroemiougraphorum Graecorum*, V, 75: "Ἄλλοι ἐ λέγο σι τὴν Ἄ ηνᾶν εὐρεῖν τὴν ἰὰ τῶν ψήφων μαντικήν.

<sup>76</sup> DUVAL, Nancy. *La divination par les sorts dans le monde oriental méditerranéen du IIe au VIe siècle après J.-C.* Ph.D. theses, 2016, p. 73-74.

<sup>77</sup> APULEIUS, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 8; AULUS GELLIUS, *Noctes Atticae*, XIV, 1, 23-24; OENOMAUS OF GADARA, *fr.* 14.



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## VII. Christians and divinatory practices

Formally, the Church banned divination and sorcery, and forbid any kinds of practices that were considered as magic. Ironically, the same texts that express the prohibition also attest the existence of those practices among the Christians. In example, Austin criticized those who read the Bible seeking indications about future events, which is basically what pagans did with Homer's compositions.<sup>78</sup>

It was in fact quite difficult to push people to abandon their former costumes and traditions especially when they stratified along several millennia. Another aspect that made this prohibition less effective and less attractive to Christians is that Christian sacred texts contain several mentions or allusions to divination.

As presented in a previous chapter, Hebrews were accustomed to cast lots and the Bible is full of mentions of it. These passages could easily be related to a habit or costume peculiar to Hebrew culture, but what to do with other passages theologically more complex, like the following Psalm? Bringing Christians to abandon their divinatory traditions would have been clearly a long process:

Ego autem in te speravi Domine, dixi Deus meus es tu  
in manibus tuis sortes meae  
eripe me de manu inimicorum meorum  
et a persequentibus me<sup>79</sup>

But I have put my trust in thee, O Lord:  
I said, thou art my God.  
My lots are in thy hands.  
Deliver me out of the hands of my enemies,  
and from them that persecute me.

<sup>78</sup> AUSTIN, *Letters*, 55, 20.37. Other mention in *Confessions*, IV, 3.6.

<sup>79</sup> *Psalm* 30.15-16.



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Prohibiting divination required a lot of efforts by both, Christian intellectuals and regular priests who were in direct touch with the great majority of the believers. But while the firsts were literate, often born in noble families, studied classics and shared the same rational attitude towards knowledge of pagan intellectuals, the latter were more often regular people, whose attitude to knowledge was expressions of the popular culture strongly connected to pre-Christian or even pre-classical traditions.

While an intellectual like Tatian, who lived in Syria during the II century AD wrote against a superstition that attributed to the movement of the planets an influence on human life,<sup>80</sup> three centuries later John Malalas, also Syrian and Christian, still believes it.<sup>81</sup> So, despite the official position of the Church, the situation among the Christians was quite complex.

### **VIII. The *Sortes Sanctorum*: a prohibited divinatory practice**

One of the divinatory practices to which Christians were accustomed and that attracted a lot of attention by the ecclesiastical institutions, was the one reported as *Sortes Sanctorum* (Lots of the Saints). This reminds what the pagans did with Homer: ascribing oracles not to gods, but to super-human figures that could mediate between the human and divine sphere, and Saints suited this role perfectly. The councils of Vannes, held in 462 BC confirmed the prescription of the previous councils (Angers, 453 AD; Tours 461 AD) adding them a new and last canon:

Ac ne id fortasse videatur omissum quod maxime fidem catholicae religionis infestat, quod aliquanti clerici student auguriis et sub nomine confictae religionis quas sanctorum sortes vocant, divinationis scientiam profitentur aut quarumcumque scripturam inspectione futura promittunt, hoc quicumque clericus detectus fuerit vel consulere vel docere ad ecclesia habeatur extraneus.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> TATIAN, *Against the Greeks*, IX.

<sup>81</sup> JOHN MALALAS, *Chronicles*, V.22/103.

<sup>82</sup> *Council of Vannes*, Canon 16.





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So that nothing that could severely harm the catholic faith could be omitted: the clerics that study divination and that, under the false name of 'religion' calls the 'Lots of the Saints' and practice divination, or affirm that they can forecast the future, whoever cleric is found to practice or to teach it, should he be expelled from the Church.

It is interesting that the canon is reprimanding clerics for practicing divination, since they should be the people that should bring others to respect the prohibition. This could be explained by the fact that clerics were literate people with a religious and ritual role, so at the eyes of the Christians they were the figure closer to that of a pagan diviner. Unfortunately for us, the canon doesn't specify in what the *Sortes Sanctorum* consisted of and which kind of divinatory practice they were.

A few years later, but in a context dramatically different, the same prohibition was confirmed by the council of Agathe (506 AD). It was the first council promoted by a barbarian king, Alaric II, king of the Visigoths, a tribe recently converted to Arianism and opposed to Catholics. But at that time, he came to war with the Franks, led by Clovis and recently converted to Catholicism. Alaric was compelled to gather a council to appease his religious policy, since his catholic subjects were more sympathetic to his Frankish opponent. The council was led by Caesarius of Arles, a catholic bishop who wrote a lot of sermons against the pagan traditions of the rural areas of the Gallic region.<sup>83</sup> His writings give a clear picture of the stratification of cultures and traditions of his period and also clarify the reasons why people were accustomed to ask advice at the diviners: they wanted to know if they would have healed from seasonal diseases and flues,<sup>84</sup> find the guilty of a robbery,<sup>85</sup> know if a woman would have given birth to a child,<sup>86</sup> or to protect some beloved ones.<sup>87</sup> Those reasons weren't so different from the ones that pushed ancient Hebrew to cast lots, or that brought the Romans to ask for an oracle, like in the aforementioned oracle:

<sup>83</sup> CAESARIUS OF ARLES, *Sermones*, I.12; XIII.5; LII.1; LII.2; CXCII; CXCIII.

<sup>84</sup> CAESARIUS OF ARLES, *Sermones*, I.

<sup>85</sup> CAESARIUS OF ARLES, *Sermones*, CLXXXIV.4.

<sup>86</sup> CAESARIUS OF ARLES, *Sermones*, LI.1.

<sup>87</sup> CAESARIUS OF ARLES, *Sermones*, LI.5.



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Non sum(us) mendacis quas dixi (dixisti?). Consulis stulte.<sup>88</sup>  
 We are not the liar you said! Ask for advice, you idiot!

Another interesting aspect of Caesarius' work is that he calls the sorcerers with the name “*caragi*”. This word appeared in Latin literature just this period and doesn't seem to have a Latin origin. Eventually, this word has a different etymological background, and perhaps was the Latinization of a Gaulish term.

The Council of Agathe copied the canon of the council of Vannes, just with a small variant: it forbade *Clerici sive laici* (clerics and laics) to practice the *Sortes Sanctorum*.<sup>89</sup> A few years later, after the victory of Clovis over Alaric and of the Franks over the Visigoths, the political situation dramatically changed, and this required a new council under the patronage of the new king. Despite this change at the political and institutional level, the cultural context remained unvaried. The new council was held in Orleans (511 AD), a catholic city just behind the former border of the two kingdoms and recently occupied by the Franks. The council of Orleans forbade once again the practice of the *Sortes Sanctorum*:

Si quis clericus, monachus, saecularis diuinationem uel auguria crediderit obseruanda, uel sortes quas mentiuntur esse sanctorum quibuscumque putauerint intimandas, cum his qui iis crediderint ab ecclesiae comunione pellantur.<sup>90</sup>

Whoever, clerics, monks, laics, respect and believe in divination, and in that lots falsely called ‘of the saints’, and to which nobody should be introduced, together with those who have faith in them must be evicted from the communion with the Church.

At the beginning of the VI century, it was published the *Decretum Gelasianum*:<sup>91</sup> a list of approved and disapproved texts whose original core was written at the time of the Pope Damasus (382 AD). Longley attributed to the Pope Gelasius (492-496 AD), it is now

<sup>88</sup> CIL, I2, 2184 = CLE 331,12 = ILLRP 1083.

<sup>89</sup> *Council of Agathe*, Canon 42.

<sup>90</sup> *Council of Orleans*, Canon 30.

<sup>91</sup> CLP 1676.



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supposed to have been originated in the northern Italy,<sup>92</sup> or southern France<sup>93</sup> of the VI century. It doesn't mention the *Sortes Sanctorum*, but something very similar:

Liber qui appellatur Sortes apostolorum apocryphal,  
 Liber qui appellatur Lusa apostolorum apocryphal.<sup>94</sup>

The book called Lots of the Apostles (is) apocryphal,  
 The book called Game of the Apostles (is) apocryphal.

The definition of it as both a 'book' and a 'game' is quite interesting for the purpose of this paper and this fact will result as crucial, as will be explained in the next paragraphs. At the end of the VI century, another council was held in Auxerre (the date is uncertain, it should be between 561-605AD):

Non licet ad sortilegos vel auguria respicere nec ad caragios nec ad sortes, quas sanctorum vocant [...].<sup>95</sup>

It is forbidden to rely on sorcerers and diviners, and not even on the Caragi or on the lots that they call 'of the Saints' [...].

The following Council of Narbonne, held in 589 AD, prohibited once again the divination through the *Sortes Sanctorum* and added some gender and ethnographical information about those who were worth of being excommunicated:

[...] viros ac mulieres divinatores, quos decunt esse caragios atque sorticularios, in quiscumque domo ghoti, romani, syri, greci uel iudei fuerint inuenti [...].<sup>96</sup>

<sup>92</sup> DOBSCHÜTZ, Ernst von. *Das Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis: in Kritischem Text herausgegeben und untersucht*, J. C. Hinrichs, Leipzig, 1912.

<sup>93</sup> ALTANER, Berthold. *Patrologia*, 1981.

<sup>94</sup> *Decretum Gelasianum*, V (ed. E. von Dobschütz, 1912).

<sup>95</sup> *Council of Auxerre*, Canon 4.

<sup>96</sup> *Council of Narbonne*, Canon 14.



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[...] Men or women that practice divination, that declare to be caragi and diviners though lots, in whichever house of Goths, Romans, Syrians, Greek and Jews they will be discovered [...]

And disapproval for this practice is expressed, in the same terms, also in the Isidore's *Etymologies*<sup>97</sup> and in a *Capitolare Generale* of Charles the Great issued in 789 AD.<sup>98</sup> A text that adds some information relevant to us about the *Sortes Sanctorum* is the penitential of Theodore of Tarsus, bishop of Canterbury in the VIII century:

In tabulis vel codicibus sorte futura non sunt requirenda, et ut nullus in Psalterio vel in evangelio, vel in aliis rebus sortiri presumat, nec divinationes aliquas in aliquibus rebus observare. Quod si fecerit, quadraginta dies peniteat.<sup>99</sup>

Boards and books must not be used to inspect future events, and not in the Psalterium nor in the Gospel, nor in other things, should suppose that it is possible to cast the lots, nor to practice any kinds of divination by observing any kinds of things. If this will be done, 40 days of penitence will follow.

This passage is interesting because it refers to *tabulis* (boards), even if it is not specified if it means board games, or boards in general. Another interesting aspect of this text is that it was quoted in the decrees of Ivo of Chartres at the beginning of the XII century and by Pope Gregory IX in the XIII century. Other prescriptions will follow more or less like those here reported.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *Etymologies*, VIII, 9.28.

<sup>98</sup> *Capitolare Generale* 789, Cap. 4.

<sup>99</sup> THEODORE OF CANTERBURY, quoted by IVO OF CHARTRES, *Decreti*, XI, 52; Pope GREGORY IX, *Decreti*, libro V, titolo XXI *De sortilegis*, 1.

<sup>100</sup> For an in-depth treatise: KLINGSHIRN, William. E. "Defining the Sortes Sanctorum: Gibbon, Du Cange, and Early Christian Lot Divination". *In: Journal of early Christian studies*, 10(1), 2002, p. 77-130.





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## IX. Discovering the *Sortes Sanctorum*

The reiteration of the prohibition of the *Sortes Sanctorum*, which started in the late antiquity and continued in the Middle Age, attest the persistence of this practice but unfortunately doesn't provide any precise information about it. It would have remained unknown to us if the *Sortes Sanctorum* wouldn't have been so popular to be transcribed and translated multiple times during the Middle Age. In the XVI century the French scholar Pierre Pithou found a manuscript dating to the XII century and copied it. His transcription remained unpublished until 1687, when it was printed by François Pithou.<sup>101</sup>

Today, this text is at the *Staatsbibliothek - Preussischer Kulturbesitz* of Berlin<sup>102</sup> and is one of the nine surviving copies of the *Sortes Sanctorum* written in Latin, that span from the IX to the XV/XVI century.<sup>103</sup> All of them are slightly different, but they are clear expressions of the same divinatory tradition and attest that already in the Middle Age the *Sortes Sanctorum* circulated in Europe in multiple copies and versions. In the XIX century two further copies were found, one written in Provençal and one in Old French. Here is the description of the finding of the first one:

M. Louis Prunet a bien voulu me communiquer un document trouvé par lui à Cordes, dans un mur en démolition d'une des curieuses maisons gothiques de cette petite ville; il est rédigé en langue romane et parait dater de la première moitié du XIIIe siècle; il offre

<sup>101</sup> PITHOU, François. *Codex canonum vetus Ecclesiae Romanae*, Paris, 1687, p. 370-373.

<sup>102</sup> MS Phill. 1775, fol. 14r-16v.

<sup>103</sup> All the nine Latin versions of the text in chronological order: **1)** Century IX, Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris, lat. 2796, fol. 107r; **2)** Century X/XI, Biblioteca nacional of Madrid, MS 3307, fol. 34v-35v, 50v, **3)** Century XII, Staatsbibliothek – preussischer Kulturbesitz of Berlin, MS Phill. 1775, fol. 14r-16v, **4)** Century XII, J. Paul Getty Museum of Los Angeles, MS Ludwig XII 5, fol. 48r-50r, **5)** The fol.50r includes a further version copied in the XV century, **6)** Century XIII, British Library of London, Egerton 821, fol. 54v-56r (= Trinity College O. 7.36 1364), **7)** Century XIII, British Library of London, Add. MS 21173, fol. 107r-107v, **8)** Century XIII, Nationalbibliothek of Wien, cod. 2155, fols. 54r-56r, **9)** Century XIV, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole 342 fol. 34b-36, **10)** Century XV/XVI, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana of Venice, MS 6672 fol. 188v-193r (= cod. it. XI 32).



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cette particularité qu'au parchemin sur lequel il est tracé sont attachés cinquante-sept morceaux de fil alternativement rouges et verts, correspondant chacun à une phrase...[...] Le manuscrit des Sortes Des Apotres appartient à M. Louis Prunet, limonadier, café de l'Europe, place Louis-Napoleon, à Toulouse.<sup>104</sup>

Mr. Louis Prunet was glad to let me know about a document that he found in Cordes, inside a wall that was going to be demolished, that was part of one of the curious Gothic houses of this small city. It is written in roman language, and it seems to date at the first half of the XIII century. It has this peculiarity: at the parchment on which it is written, are attached 57 strands that alternate red and green, and each of them correspond to a sentence. [...] the manuscript of the Lots of the Apostles belongs to Mr. Louis Prunet, café owner, Café de l'Europe, Louis Napoleon square, Toulouse.

## X. The initial invocation

The *Sortes Sanctorum* presents itself non just as an oracle, but as a Christian ritual, so as to reassure the user about its legitimacy. The introduction specifies that this ritual is effective just under specific conditions, and just like the *Homeromanteion* it starts with an invocation to God in which a few biblical passages are mentioned. The editors of the *Sortes Sanctorum* didn't miss to mention those occasions in which biblical characters cast lots and rely on them as examples to make this practice look more trustworthy.

The following introduction is taken from the XII century manuscript MS Phill. 1775, *Staatsbibliothek—Preussischer Kulturbesitz*, fols. 14r–16ved:

In nomine Patris, & Filii, & Spiritus Sancti, & in nomine Summae & Individuae Trinitatis. Incipiunt sortes Sanctorum Apostolorum, quae numquam fallentur nec mentientur. In ordine sortium est consuetudo, quod si illas aliquis interrogare voluerit, triduo jejundet cum pane & aqua, & tertia die omne Officium Sanctae Trinitatis psallat, & expleta Missa, cum magna humilitate orando & lachrymando, a sortibus petat quidquid necesse fuerit: Pater noster.

<sup>104</sup> DUSAN, Bruno. "Les sorts des Apotres". In: *Revue Archéologique du midi de la France*, vol. 1, 1866-1867. p. 237



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In the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost, and in name of the Supreme and Unique Trinity. Start the Lots of the Apostles, that will never fail or lie. The consuetude with the lots is, when someone wants to question them, that this person fast for three days with bread and water, and the third day participate to all the services to the Holy Trinity, and at the end of the mass, in great humbleness, praying and crying, asks to the lots about whatever must happens. (say a prayer) Our Father.

Sequitur Oratio.

The pray continues.

Aperi, Domine, dubia quae sunt in cordibus nostris per hanc sortem, & dirige eam cum sicut direxisti sortem nautarum, qui naufragium patiebantur, quando cecidit sors super Jonam, & sicut direxisti sortem Apostolorum tuorum quando cecidit sors super Mathiam: immitte, Domine, Spiritum veracem quem tu misisti per Prophetam tuum qui vidit universum Israelem dispersum sicut oves errantes in montibus. Expelle, Domine, spiritum fallacem quem tu misisti ad decipiendum Acab, quando cecidit cum omni exercitu suo. Dirige, Domine, sortem hanc quam mittam in nomine tuo per merita & orationes Sanctorum Angelorum tuorum, qui sortes amicorum cunctorum regunt, ut haec sors veritatem nobis hujus rei inducat per te, Salvator mundi, qui vivis, &c.

Open, oh Lord, the doubts that we have in our hearts, by means of these lots, and govern them as you governed the lots of the sailors that suffered for the shipwreck and the lots felt upon Jonah, and as you directed the lots of your apostles when they felt upon Mattha: oh Lord, put (in them) your spirit of Truth that you put in your prophet when he saw the people of Israel scattered like sheeps wandering on the mountains. Evict, oh Lord, the misleading spirit that you sent to divert Acab, when he felt with all his army.

Govern, oh Lord, these lots that we cast in your name, for the merits and prayers of your holy angels, that govern the fate of all the friends, so that these lots, about this matter, lead us to the truth through you, saviour of the world, you that live, etc.

Alia oratio

other prayer:



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Oremus ad te Domine Pater, Rex coeli & terrae, qui es Creator omnium regum creaturarum, qui cuncta ex nihilo omnia mundi creasti, & Abraham Patrem nostrum te daturum nobis jurasti, & Moysi in monte Sinai legem dedisti, & Susannam de falso crimine liberasti, & Tobiam de contritione cordis in alacritate mutasti, & nurui suae de magna amaritudine cordis afflictae, & lachrymarum fonte tribuisti dulcedinem: qui exaudisti Jonam de ventre ceti, & deinde prostratum & jacentem & Petrum lachrymantem Domine suscepisti: suscipe, Domine, preces meas, ut de hac re quam peto per has sortes mihi notum facias, qui sciens es per omnia & omnibus, qui in sancta & in perfecta Trinitate vivis & in unitate consistis, per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen.

We pray you, Lord Father, king of the skies and lands, that created everything, that in a moment created the whole world from nothing, and gave us Abraham as a father, and that gave the laws to Moises on the Mount Sinai, and that set Susanna free from a false accusation, and that changed the suffering in the heart of Tobias into joy, and that appeased the heart of his daughter-in-law afflicted by bitterness and source of tears: (you that) extracted Jonah from the womb of the whale, and listened to Peter when he prostrated and laid in tears.

Listen, oh Lord, to my prayers, so that what I'm asking, it could be known to me, you that know all of everything and that live in the holy and perfect Trinity, which consist of a unity, for all the centuries of centuries, amen.

## **XI. The oracles of the *Sortes Sanctorum***

The different copies of the *Sortes Sanctorum*, shows some differences, but in complex they all consisted of the same quantity of oracles, that might be put in different orders, and in the end the contents of the texts are the same. They can be analysed according to different perspectives, for example according to their positive, negative, or intermediate answers. For the aim of this paper, it is relevant to analyse them according to their themes and their iconographic framework. Under this lens, they can be split into two main categories. While most of the oracles provide general answers like:





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6 – 6 – 5

De quo consulis animus tuus [firmus]<sup>105</sup> sit sicut speras, ut possis pertingere ad quod desideras.

About what you are asking, might your mind be determined, and hopeful, so that you can reach what you desire.

Others seem to have a stronger iconographic or literary background, are more elaborated and enrich the answer (with could be basically just 'yes' or 'no') with some allegories or metaphors, like the opening oracle:

6 – 6 – 6

Post solem surgunt stellae, & iterum sol ad claram lucem revertitur, sic & animus tuus, unde dubius esse videris in brevi tempore ad claritatem pervenerit, & veniet tibi, & obtinebis quod cupis Deo adjuvante, age ei gratias.<sup>106</sup>

After the sunrise the stars, and immediately the sun comes back at full light, so is your soul/mind: what seems to be now in doubt, in a very short time will be clear and what you desire will come to you and you will afford it, with the help of God. Be thankful to him.

Reading the *Sortes Sanctorum* it seems that multiple hands worked to the edition of the text, with different levels of literary competence. With a closer look and an in-depth analysis of the metaphors, iconographies and allegories mentioned by some oracles, it is clear that this text wasn't authored by a single person but issued from a process of cultural syncretism that overlapped different traditions.

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<sup>105</sup> Integration taken from: British Library, Add MS 21173, fol. 107r-107v, ed. Montero-Cartelle 2013. XIII century. Starting from this note, this text will be mentioned as: BL, Add MS 21173.

<sup>106</sup> BL, Add MS 21173: *Post solem surgunt stellae, sol iam ad lucem revertitur sic et tuus animus, unde dubius esse videtur, in brevi tempore ad claritatem pervenerit et veniet tibi, Deo adiuvante, et obtinebis quae cupis. Age ei gratias.*



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## **XII. *Astragalomanteion*, *Homeromanteion*, *Sortes Sanctorum*: continuity and discontinuity**

Some of the texts of the *Sortes Sanctorum* are complete, while others have lacunae, more or less extended. However, it seems that all of them originally consisted of 56 oracles (in the Provençal version, one is doubled), the same quantity of the *Astragalomanteion*. In copying his version from the Latin manuscript, Pithou missed a relevant aspect that is common to other versions of the *Sortes Sanctorum* now available: all the sentences are introduced by a series of three numbers between 1 and 6, just like in the *Homeromanteion*. This form of divination was practiced with gaming dice, and this explains why the *Decretum Gelasianum* described it as both a book and a game.

In the *Astragalomanteion*, the quantity of the oracles was determined by the different combination of five astragals, and each of them could fall on four different sides. So, casting five knucklebones together and disregarding the order of the single scores, it derives a total of 56 possible combinations. The *Homeromanteion* demanded to cast a single cubic die three times in a row, and the order of the results was relevant: 1-2-3 corresponded to an oracle different from 2-1-3; 3-2-1; 3-1-2. This makes 216 combinations in total. The *Sortes Sanctorum* required the simultaneous use of three dice and didn't take in consideration the order of the results, and for this reason the total quantity of the oracles is 56 again. This correspondence is not a chance, as it will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

Knucklebones remained in use in Anatolia, where they had been popular until the 1980s and this tradition spread to Central Asia, where they also had a huge fortune.<sup>107</sup> But in western Europe, during the late Roman era, cultural gaming habits shifted from the use

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<sup>107</sup> AND, Metin. "Some Notes on Aspects and Functions of Turkish Folk Games". In: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 92, No. 363, Jan-Mar, American Folklore Society, 1979, p. 59.



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of knucklebones, that until that period were preeminent, to the use of cubic dice<sup>108</sup> that became the most popular randomizing element in board games.

It is curious how in that time of deep and great cultural changes, when the Roman Empire shifted from paganism to Christianity, on one hand people dismissed thousand-year-old religious beliefs, and on the other hand tenaciously kept alive their superstitions and divinatory traditions shifting from Homer to the Bible and from knucklebones to dice. In fact, while the *Sortes Sanctorum* share with the *Homeromanteion* the use of cubic dice and attribute the oracles to superhuman figures very close to the divine wisdom (but not directly to gods, maybe for a superstitious prudence) like Homer and the Saints, the text of the oracles seems to be derived, at least partially, from the *Astragalomanteion*.

Here is a selection of oracles taken from the Latin version of the *Sortes Sanctorum* that are very similar to those reported by knucklebones oracles of Asia Minor and clearly constitute the evidence of cultural stratification:

Astragalomanteion (translation)	Sortes Sanctorum <sup>109</sup>
<p>13334, 14, Poseidon            One Chian, three threes, and one four: The god announces: You kick against the goad, you struggle against the waves, you search for a fish in the sea: do not hasten to do business. It does not help you to force the gods at the wrong time.</p>	<p>4 – 3 – 2            Quid calcas (calcitras) contra stimulum?            Jactare noli temetipsum, quia malum est de quo consulis. Contra sortes noli ire. Moneo te ne velis esse contrarius Deo.            Why do you kick against the goad?            Do not boast for what is in your mind is wrong.            Do not act against the Sortes, I warn you: do not act against God!            —            3 – 2 – 2</p>

<sup>108</sup> TIBALDINI, Marco. “Talus: etymology of a Ludonym and how the names of an ancient gaming practice could be indicative of processes of cultural transmission and stratification”. In: NAGYILLÉS, J. *Sapiens Ubique Civis*, n° 2, University of Szeged, 2022, p. 69-104.

<sup>109</sup> Berlin, Staatsbibliothek—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, XII MS Phill. 1775, fols. 14r–16ved.



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	<p>Quod sollicitus esse videris [in dubium], &amp; [contra] undis maris navigare quaeris, vide &amp; sustine, in brevi tempore invenies, &amp; pertingens ad quod desideras.        Now you seem to be concerned, and you want to sail against the waves of the sea. Evaluate and resist: in a short time you will reach and achieve what you desire.</p>
<p>61111, 10, Daimôn Megistos        If one six and four Chians in a row: It will be better to fulfill whatever vow you made to the daimôn, if you intend to perform what you ponder in your mind, Demeter and Zeus will save you.</p>	<p>4 – 3 – 1        Quid venisti consulere? Deum tuum neglexisti, multum promisisti, &amp; non implevisti: primitus placa Deum, ut propitius sit tibi, quia valde iratus est, &amp; sic veniet ad te.<sup>110</sup>        Why are you asking for advice? You neglected your God, you promised a lot without accomplishing. At first, appease God so that he could be favorable to you, since is tremendously angry, and then will come to you (what you desired)</p>
<p>33311, 11, Victory        If three threes are cast, and further two Chians: You will win; you will take what you wish, and you will achieve everything; the daimôn will make you honoured, and you will overcome your enemies; the plan that you are about to realize will be according to your desire.</p>	<p>4 – 3 – 3        Gaudium magnum de quo petis veniet tibi, &amp; protegat te Deus: inimicos tuos vinces, quia Deus tibi in adiutorium erit; securus est, spem tuam recipies.<sup>111</sup>        About what you are asking, a great joy will come to you and God will protect you: you will win over your enemies because God will be in your help, be sure about it and strengthen your</p>

<sup>110</sup> BL, Add MS 21173: Quid venisti ad nos consulere? Dominum tuum negligis cui multum promisisti et non implevisti. Primum placa Deum ut Propitius sit tibi et quia valde iratus est tibi.

<sup>111</sup> in BL Add MS 21173 the end is slightly different: [...] securus esto. Spem tuam recipies.





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	hope.
<p>63331, 16, Herakles          One six, three threes and the fifth a Chian:          The moment has not yet arrived, you make          too much haste. Do not act in vain, nor like          the bitch that has borne a blind puppy.          Deliberate calmly, and the god will lead you.</p>	<p>5 – 4 – 3          Canis festinando caecos catulos parit, sic &amp;          tuus animus. Improperare noli de quo          postulas: si patiens fueris, veniet tibi ultro in          potestate tua cum magno gaudio.<sup>112</sup>          The hasty bitch has born blind          puppies. So, is your soul. About what          you are asking, don't haste: if you will          be patient, it will come to you by itself          with great joy.</p>
<p>43333, 16, Kronos          One four is cast, the other four are threes:          Scorpions stand in your way, do not hurry          towards the business that you intend, wait,          and what you wish will arrive later; neither to          buy this nor to sell is better.</p>	<p>5 – 4 – 4          In silvam te mittere queris, ubi nullam          semitam invenies, &amp; multae serpentes valida          latent, &amp; ideo moneo te [cautus esto ab hoc          consilio ne]<sup>113</sup> vitam tuam decipiaris dum non          putas.          You want to enter the woods, where          there is no path and several strong          snakes are hidden, and in fact I          inform you: be cautious about this          project so that you don't lose your life          for lack of attention.</p>
<p>66113, 17, Isis the Savior          A double six, two Chians and the fifth a three:          Enter and receive the voice from the tripod!          The time is also ripe for marriage; you will          marry and return home. You will achieve</p>	<p>3 – 1 – 1          Jam tibi introitus est paratus, &amp; aperta janua          potes introire ad quod desideras, ubi hortare          (portare<sup>114</sup>) vel spem tuam, ora Deum, ut          adiutor sit tibi.          Now, an entrance has been prepared</p>

<sup>112</sup> BL, Add MS 21173: Canes festinando caecos catulos pariunt, sic et tuum animum inproperare noli de quo postulas; si sapiens fueris, veniet tibi ultro in potestate tua cum gaudio magno.

<sup>113</sup> BL, Add MS 21173.

<sup>114</sup> BL, Add MS 21173.



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<p>whatever you want in your business, having found the thing about which you are anxious</p>	<p>for you and with the door open you can enter to what you desire, where you want to bring your hope. Pray God that may help you.</p>
<p>44333, 17, Sarapis        If two fours are cast and three threes: Take courage and fight, Zeus the Owner (Ktesios)<sup>115</sup> is your helper. You will punish your opponent and have him under your fist, and he will give happiness to the works for which you will thank him.</p>	<p>5 – 4 – 1        Adversarium te dicis habere, spem tuam dirige, ut tibi in adiutorium sit Deus. Moneo te ne velis esse irreligiosus.        You say you have enemies, so, redirect your hope so that God will give you help. I warn you, might you not be irreligious.</p>
<p>43366, 22, Terrible Ares        Four and two threes, two sixes, and he announces this: Do not undertake the travel that you intend, stranger! Nobody will do it. A large fiery lion is about, against whom you must be on your guard, a terrible one. The oracle is intractable, wait quietly</p>	<p>5 – 2 – 2        Leonem magnum cave qui te nocere cupit. Idea ad Dominum clama, &amp; de malo liberabit te, ne post mortem restitutas dampnum.<sup>116</sup>        Pay attention to the great lion that wants to hurt you. So, pray to God and he will free you from evil, so that you won't have to suffer death.</p>

### XIII. *The Sortes Sanctorum* as a convergence of different oracular traditions

The *Sortes Sanctorum* has several points of contact with the *Astragalomanteion* and a few oracles seem to be directly derived from it, and just changed the names of the pagan gods with the Christian *Dominus*. But the literary style of the different oracles of the *Sortes Sanctorum* is quite varied, while the composition of some responses is more complex and has a clear iconographic background, that of others is more vague and sometimes even hasty. The *Sortes Sanctorum* it is not the exact transposition of the *Astragalomanteion* in the Christian culture. It took some elements from it, but it must

<sup>115</sup> Protector of the house and it's precious.

<sup>116</sup> BL Add MS 21173 is slightly different at the end: [...] ideoque ad Dominum clama et de malo liberabit te ne post mortem restituas ad dampnum.



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have derived its oracles from other traditions too, eventually parallel or alternative to the *Astragalomanteion*.

#### XIV. Convergence of different divinatory and literary traditions

As previously said, in the *Sortes Sanctorum* it is possible to find two kinds of oracles, those that are more poetically and iconographically refined, and those that are more brief, hasty, and thematically vaguer. One could assume that the latter are less valuable, since because of their generalist response their origin is harder to identify. In a certain sense it is true, but on the other hand they attest the convergence, in the *Sortes Sanctorum*, of some popular tradition, or of a popular attitude towards divination that looked for brief, simple and direct answer. Other lists of oracles composed in the classical period share the same literary style. In example, the Latin *sortes* written on lead plates and quoted a few chapters above:

Nunc me rogitas, nunc consulis? Tempus abit iam.<sup>117</sup>  
 Are you asking my advice just now? The time is already gone.

Qur petis postempus consilium? Quod rogas non est.<sup>118</sup>  
 Why are you asking advice so late? What you are asking doesn't exist.

Those reminds very closely the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, another collection of oracles edited after 200 AD,<sup>119</sup> then adapted to the Christian tradition and copied until the Renaissance. It is attested by several fragmented papyri<sup>120</sup> and consists of a series of simple questions and answers. One of them asks:

<sup>117</sup> CIL, I2, 2185.

<sup>118</sup> CIL, I2, 2189 = ILLRP 1084, 1087a.

<sup>119</sup> BROWNE, Gerald M. "Origin and Date of the *Sortes Astrampsychi*". In: *Illinois Classical Studies*, Vol. 1, 1976, p. 56.

<sup>120</sup> In chronological order: III-VI century (Papyri): P. Oxy. XII 1477; P. Oxy. XXXVIII 2832; P. Oxy. XXXVIII 2833; P. Oxy. XLVII 3330; P. Oxy. inv. 63 6B; P. Gent inv. 85; P. Iand. 5.71; P. Rain. I 33; P. Lugd Bat. XXV n.8; P. Berol. 21341 et 21358; XIII century (manuscripts): Ambrosianus A45 sup; Barberinianus 13; Erlangensis 89; Laurentianus CCVIII, 14; Marcianus gr. 324; Parisinus gr. 2494;



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ιγ - εἰ ἔστιν ὥρα τοῦ ἐπιβαλέσθαι [τῷ χρησμῷ]<sup>121</sup>  
 13 - Is this a good moment to consult an oracle?

Both of them are very similar to an oracle in the *Sortes Sanctorum*:

4 – 4 – 3  
 Tu hac hore recede a nobis, qui sortes meae non dant responsa:<sup>122</sup> alia die venies, & observa conditionem tuam.<sup>123</sup>

Do you come to us at this time, when my sortes give no answer? Come another day and observe the conditions required.

Other oracles of the *Sortes Sanctorum* refer to iconographies that must have been quite popular during the antiquity, maybe more than in the Middle Age, like the iconography of the travel by sea:

ιβ - εἰ πλέω ἀκινδύνως<sup>124</sup>  
 12 - Will I sail safely?

To which both the *Astragalomanteion* and the *Sortes Sanctorum* make reference:

αααδ ιγ Ἀφροδείτης·  
 [τ]ρεῖς χεῖροι [κ]αὶ [έξ]είτης, πέμπτος [τέσσαρα πείπτ]ω[ν]·  
 [σ]τέλλε, ὅπου χρήσεις· χαίρων σὺ δὲ οἴκαδ' ἀρί[ξ]η]  
 [ε]ύρων καὶ πρά[ξ]ας, ὅσσα φρεσὶ σῆσι μενοινᾷς·  
 [ἀ]λλ' Ἀφροδείτην εἰλάσκου καὶ Μαϊάδος υἷόν.

11164, 13, Aphrodite

Neapolitanus II. C. 33; Baroccianus 216; Parisinus gr. 2424; Rossianus 986; Bononiensis 3632; Scorialensis II. F. 14; Barberinianus 13.

<sup>121</sup> Ed. BROWNE, Gerald. M. *Sortes Astrampsychi vol. 1 - Ecdosis Prior*, Leipzig, 1983, p. 1.

<sup>122</sup> BL, Add MS 21173: [...] responsum [...].

<sup>123</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, n° 38.

<sup>124</sup> Ed. BROWNE, Gerald. M. *Sortes Astrampsychi vol. 1 - Ecdosis Prior*. Leipzig, 1983, p. 1.





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Three Chians and a six and the fifth a four: Sail wherever you wish: you will return full of joy, for you have found and accomplished everything that you ponder in your mind; but pray to Aphrodite and the son of Maia (Hermes)

6 – 3 – 2

Sicut navis in pelago gubernata fuerit, quod desideras ita tibi veniet. Si jam pervenias ad quod desideras, Deum tuum roga, ut placatus sit tibi. Blandis sermonis te decipere volunt, tu vero caute vide simplicitatem tuam, ne postea incipias poenitere.<sup>125</sup>

As the ship will be governed at sea, what you desire will come to you. Soon you will reach what you desire, ask your God so that he will be favorable towards you. Malicious speeches want to deceive you. You, in fact, try to preserve your simplicity, so that later you won't have to complain.

3 – 2 – 2

Quod sollicitus esse videris, & undis maris navigare quaeris, vide & sustine, in brevi tempore invenies, & pertingens ad quod desideras.<sup>126</sup>

What you seem to be concerned of, and for which you want to sail the waves of the sea: observe and resist, in a short time you will get what you wish.

Oracles of this kind, so vague but also so similar, don't mean that all those compilations were directly connected, but most probably that they included elements of popular culture that were already very common. At that time, in every corner of the Graeco-Roman world, oracles must have provided more or less the same kind of generic answers.

The *Sortes Sanctorum* included many of them, which entering in this compilation have been codified and standardized, passing in the Middle Age from one edition to another. Here is a comparison of the different medieval versions of the *Sortes Sanctorum* in Latin, Provençal and Old French:

<sup>125</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 14.

<sup>126</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 50. BL, Add MS 21173: Quod sollicitus esse videris in dubium et contra undas maris navigare quaeris; vide et sustine, in brevi tempore invenies et pertinges ad quod desideras.



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**Latin:**

6 – 3 – 3: De qua re primum cogitasti & consulis, tuus animus inde magis habebit gloriam magnam.<sup>127</sup>

**Provençal:**

De la cauza que primieirament cosiras e quers coceil, d'aqui auras gran gloria.<sup>128</sup>

**Old French:**

6 – 3 – 3: De chou dont ainschois pensét as grant gloire encore en averas<sup>129</sup>  
 about the thing that you previously thought about, you will have great glory.

Apart from those generic answers, in the *Sortes Sanctorum* there are also others that refer to precise iconographies and are written in a higher literary style. Their presence seems to point at different divinatory traditions that at a certain point were included in this compilation, whether classical or medieval, Mediterranean or barbarian, it is hard to say. Oracles like the following are clear samples of this process.

Mixing gold and lead:

**Latin:**

5 – 4 – 2: Massa plumbea auro mixta est, & est invidiosa,<sup>130</sup> sic & tuus animus invidiam machinat: aliud namque cogita. Hoc quod petis in potestate tua non erit.<sup>131</sup>

a mass of lead has been mixed to gold, and it is an inappropriate thing. So, your soul is envious: think at something else. What you are asking won't come under your control.

<sup>127</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 16.

<sup>128</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 16. (Provençal Version, ed. C. Chabaneau, 1881). Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris, Nouv. acq. fr. 4227.

<sup>129</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 16 (Old French Version, ed. Brandin, 1914) Nationalbibliothek of Wien, MS cod. 12901, fols. 125v-131r.

<sup>130</sup> BL, Add MS 21173: Massa plumbea auro mixta, res invidiosa [...].

<sup>131</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 29.



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**Provençal:**

Masa de plum mescla[da] d' [a]ur. En aisi la cauza que si[s]t non er en tom poder; outra causa venra a tu que non esperas.<sup>132</sup>

mass of lead mixed with gold. And so is the thing that you wish won't come to you. Another thing that you aren't considering will happen to you.

Hunting a deer:

**Latin:**

6 – 5 – 2: Cervo currente cornua tenere cupis in manibus, sed difficile est, quia in silvis moratur, sed revertatur in cubili suo, & ibi capi potest: sic veniet tibi in manibus tuis in quo dubius es.<sup>133</sup>

You want to take with your hands a running deer by his horns, but it is difficult, since it waits in the forest. But when he is returned to his den, there you can capture him. In this way, will come into your hands that for which you are doubtful.

**Provençal:**

De cervi coren cobezejas tener los corns, et el torna c'en e son jadis; en aisi venra a tu so [que] quers.<sup>134</sup>

You want to keep the horns of a running doe, and (when) she will be back to her den, in this way will come to you what you wish.

**Old French:**

6 – 5 – 2: Les cornes viols del chierf tenir, ki fors del bos ne set issir. Nequedent a son lit tourra la u on prendre le porra, einsi venra devens tes mains chou don't n'ies pas encor certains.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>132</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Provençal Version, 28.

<sup>133</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 9. BL, Add MS 21173: Cevo currente cornua tenere cupis in manibus, iam difficile est quia in silvis moratur, sed revertitur in cubili suo ut tibi capi possit, sic veniet in manibus tuis in quo dubius es.

<sup>134</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Provençal, 10.

<sup>135</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Old French, 10.



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You want to keep the horns of a deer that doesn't want to leave the forest. When it will be returned to his den, there you can capture it. In this way will come to your hands that of which you are not yet sure.

Farming:

**Latin:**

5 – 5 – 1: Sicut seminator in terram bonam semen mittit, & fructum in tempore suo restituet, ita ad quod desideras laetus pervenies, & tuam voluntatem facile invenies.<sup>136</sup>

as the seeder put the seed in a good land, and at its time it returns the fruit, so what you desire will come joyful, and will easily come under your will.

**Provençal:**

En aisi la [se]mensa es cemenada e[n] la bona terra et e son temps aporta frug, en aisi tu pervenras a la tua voluntat.<sup>137</sup>

So as the seed is seeded in the good land, and at its time bring fruit, so you will reach what you want.

**Old French:**

5 – 5 – 3: Si com fruis naist de se semence, quant li tans est de se naiscence, si averas, que k'il demeure, ton voloir a tans et a cure.<sup>138</sup>

So as the fruit is born from the seed, when is its birth time, in the same way it will have, whatever will be, what you wish, at its time and hour.

Sailing:

<sup>136</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 26. BL, Add MS 21173: Sicut seminator semen in terram bonam mittens, fructum in tempore suo recipit, ita et tu ad quod desideras laetus pervenies et tuam voluntatem facile invenies.

<sup>137</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Provençal, 24.

<sup>138</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Old French, 24.





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**Latin:**

5 – 3 – 2: Venti sunt, validae tempestates sive procellae, cave ne te velis mittere in pelagum: sustine modicum, & accipies serenitatem, & perveniet ad quod desideras (desiderat) animus tuus.<sup>139</sup>

There are winds, and fierce storms, and squalls. Pay attention, might you not wish to put yourself at sea. Hold on a little and try to be at ease and will come to you what your soul wish.

**Provençal:**

Li vent so suau, garda las tempestatz, not vueilhas me tre en la mar; estai um pauc e recebras aquo que quers.<sup>140</sup>

The winds have raised, watch the storm: may you not want to put yourself at sea! Wait a little and you will get what you wish.

**Old French:**

5 – 4 – 1: En la mer un peu te soustien. Tempies et vens ne doute rien, car tu aras prochainement cho ke desides sens tournment.<sup>141</sup>

At sea you can hold up a little. Don't be concerned of storms and winds, since you will soon have what you wish without torment.

**Time:**

**Latin:**

5 – 2 – 1: Quod annus non dat, dies subditus (subitus) affert. Noli esse sollicitus, quia veniet tibi desiderium tuum bonum, quod recedet ad gaudium magnum.<sup>142</sup>

What a year doesn't give, suddenly is given by a day. Don't be concerned, since the good that you wish, it will come to you, joyfully.

<sup>139</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 32. BL, Add MS 21173: Venti sunt validi, tempestates saevae. Cave ne velis te mittere in pelago. Sustine modicum, et accipies serenitatem, et perveniet ad quod desiderat animus tuus.

<sup>140</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Provençal, 31.

<sup>141</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Old French, 30.

<sup>142</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 35. BL, Add MS 21173: *Quod annus non dat, dies subito affert. Noli esse sollicitus, quia veniet tibi desiderium bonum quod reddet gaudium magnum.*



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**Provençal:**

Aiso que non dona ans tol sopdosamen us dias. No vueilhas esser cosiros, que venra a tu lo teus desiriers.<sup>143</sup>

What is not given by a year, suddenly it is given by a day. Don't be curious and you will reach what you wish.

**Old French:**

5 – 3 – 1: L'aventure c'uns ans n'ainne, Avient un jor en la semaine.  
 Ne soies mie curieus, cho averas dont ies couvoiteus.<sup>144</sup>

The adventure that a year doesn't bring, happens on a day of the week. Don't be curious, what you wish will happen.

Honey and vinegar (the sense is more or less similar to the gold and lead oracle):

**Latin:**

3 – 3 – 2: Mel tenes, & acetum desideras. Vide bonum quod lenius est: nam quod petis non est tibi datum.<sup>145</sup>

You have honey and wish vinegar. You will see which one is sweeter. What you ask is not given to you.

**Provençal:**

Fel e vinagre desiras; vejas qual t'es plus leu, quar aiso que tu quers non es dat a tu.<sup>146</sup>  
 Bitterness<sup>147</sup> and vinegar you wish. You will see which one is sweeter, since what you wish is not given to you.

<sup>143</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Provençal, 34.

<sup>144</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Old French, 33.

<sup>145</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 48. BL, Add MS 21173: *Mel tenes, acetum desideras. Vide bonum illud quod lenius veniet tibi, nam quae petis non sunt tibi data et tamen facile dona dei acceperis, si Deum rogaveris.*

<sup>146</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Provençal, 49.

<sup>147</sup> Literally: bile.



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### Old French:

3 – 3 – 2: Miel as et desires aisil, voie demandes en peril, tel chose couvoites tenir ki a toi ne doit parvenir.<sup>148</sup>

You have honey and wish vinegar, ask for advice when you are in danger, the thing that you wish doesn't have to come to you.

All the aforementioned oracles are dramatically different from other simple and hasty answers included in the *Sortes Sanctorum* like: “Quod postulas bonum est, de quo cogitas in manibus tuis erit”.<sup>149</sup> And for this it is reasonable to think that they have been taken from oracular collections or divinatory traditions other than the *Astragalomanteion*. But, if the *Astragalomanteion* was already available, why didn't the Christians of late antiquity transcribe it in the *Sortes Sanctorum* as it was? Probably at their time the *Astragalomanteion* as we know it, which date between the I and III century, was no more in use, at least not in the form attested by the texts written on the pillars of Asia Minor. In an indefinite moment in late antiquity, it should have mixed with other popular or erudite divinatory traditions that were parallel, prior or posterior to it, and when this compilation of text reached the Latin speaking part of the Roman Empire it was already compromised.

In fact, the *Astragalomanteion* and the *Sortes Sanctorum* seem to be two stages of the same process of cultural stratification, that stratified literary and divinatory traditions, but they aren't the two consecutive steps and so as there must have been something precedent to the *Astragalomanteion*, there must have been something in the middle between it and the *Sortes Sanctorum*. The confirmation of this assumption is given by a couple of oracles:

[ααααδ] η Μοιρ[ῶν].  
 [τέσσ]αρες εἰς πειπ[τωσιν] χεῖροι, τέσσαρ' ὁ πέμπτος]  
 [πρᾶξι]ν ἦν [πράξις, μὴ] πρᾶσσε, οὐ γὰρ ἄμεινον]  
 [ἄμφι] δὲ κ[ά]μνοντα [χαλεπ]ὸν [καὶ ἀμήχανον] ἔσται]

<sup>148</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, Old French, 48.

<sup>149</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 25. 5-5-2: *What you wish is good, what you are thinking about will be in your hands.*



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[εἰ δ' ἀ]πό[δ]ημον ιδέσθαι χρό[νον οὐδὲν κακὸν] ἔσται.<sup>150</sup>

41111, 8, Moirai

If one four and four Chians in a row are cast: don't do the business that you are engaged in; it will not turn out well. It will be difficult and impossible around someone who tires himself out. But if you go abroad for some time, no harm will come from it

δδδδδ κ Μοιρῶν Ἀδυσωπητῶν·  
 ἠέλιος δὲ δέδυκεν, ἐφέστηκεν δ' ὅλοή νύξ.  
 πάντα δ' ἀμαυροῦνται, παῦσαι, περὶ ὧν μ' ἐπερωτᾷς,  
 οὔτε γὰρ ὠνεῖσθαι τόδε λῶιον οὔτε ἀποδόσθαι[ι].<sup>151</sup>

44444, 20, The Inexorable Moirai

If all four are cast together in the same way: The sun has gone down, and a terrible night has come, everything has become dark. Interrupt the matter about which you ask me; it is neither better to buy nor to sell.

The latter is very interesting, not because of its text, but because of the corresponding score. In fact, in the Latin version of the *Sortes Sanctorum*, the oracle corresponding to a triple four says:

**Latin:**

4 – 4 – 4: Tria sunt facta per hominem in hoc saeculo: tres autem Angeli temperant illa, primumque invenies gaudium cum laetitia. Secundo de abundantia rerum temporalium. Tertio de laetitia, & in itinere tuo accipies gaudium.<sup>152</sup>

Three are the facts for humans in this century, and three are the angels that govern them. At first will come joy and delight, as second will come abundance of material things, as third delight, and in your travel, you will have joy.

<sup>150</sup> *Astragalomanteion*, 3.

<sup>151</sup> *Astragalomanteion*, 37.

<sup>152</sup> *Sortes Sanctorum*, 37. BL, Add MS 21173: [...] et in itinere tuo invenies gaudium.





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### Provençal:

Tres causas so per un home; .iij. angils cosiro per te; la primieira causa de que cosiras auras am gauh.

Three are the things for a man: three angels chosed for you. The first thing that you will think will bring you joy.

### Old French:

5 – 2 – 1: Trois choses fist Dieus pour le gent, et pour ses angeles ensemment.  
 Tu troveras joie premiers de cho ke penses et requiers et abondance apries le joie et leeche. Dieus le t'otroie.

Three are the things that God made for people, and equally for his angels. In what you are thinking and desiring, at first you will find joy and abundance, then joy and sweetness. God grants it to you.

As we remarked, some oracles of the *Sortes Sanctorum* seem to have been directly derived by the *Astragalomanteion* and at first sight, these last oracles may seem less connected to the original. In fact, these oracles are probably the most intriguing and indicative of the complex relation that bonds *Astragalomanteion* and *Sortes Sanctorum*. The aforementioned oracles, in the *Astragalomanteion*, were ascribed to the *Fate* which, according to the Greek mythology and religion was threefold and represented by the three *Moirai*.

They are mentioned in the two different oracles as the divinities responsible for this premonition. In some moments during antiquity or late antiquity, all the names of pagan gods were removed from oracular compilation, and so also the name of the *Moirai* was removed, but somehow the oracle corresponding to a full of four remained connected with the Fate. But in the *Sortes Sanctorum* it is written *facta* (facts) and not *fata* (fate). How can we explain this divergence?



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The answer was provided in 2015 by Kevin Wilkinson, when he published the edition of a papyrus that consisted in a single sheet.<sup>153</sup> Its small size is indicative of the fact that it was originally part of a portable handbook.

The most intriguing fact is that part of the text starts with a series of two numbers, and there is space for a third one that went lost for the corruption of the support. After them is reported a sentence that is now familiar to us:

[...] α β [-] τρεῖς εἰσιν μοῖραι κατὰ ἄνθρωπομ ἐν τῷ βίῳ, τρεῖς δὲ καὶ ἀρχαὶ τῶν ἀν(θρώπ)ων, τρεῖς δὲ ἄγγελοι θε(σο)ῦ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις [περὶ σοῦ] μεριμνῶσιν. εὐρήσεις χα[ρὰ]ν καὶ κέρδος, εὐπραξίαν δὲ ἐξ ἀγαθῶν, καὶ τρίτον χαρ[ά]ν ECE καὶ ὁδὸν εὐρ[ή]σεις μεγάλην. μηδὲν οὖν φοβηθῆσ' ἐντάχιον ἦσαι ὅπως πλησθῆς χαρὰν μεγάλην.<sup>154</sup>

1- 2- [?]. There are three fates for each human in life, and also three ruling powers of humans, but three angels of God attend to them in their activities on your behalf. You will discover joy and gain, and (second) profit from material goods, and third you will discover joy (?) and great journey. Therefore, do not be afraid. Take enjoyment at once in order that you might be filled with great joy.

As we can see, this text corresponds almost perfectly to the oracle 4-4-4 of the *Sortes Sanctorum* except for a few passages that we are going to analyse in detail. According to Wilkinson's calligraphic analysis, the papyrus should be posterior to 200 AD and since the text starts with two numbers, it should be indicative of a different divinatory tradition that used gaming dice to derive oracles, but it is not mentioned in the *Astragalomanteion* and might have been part of a parallel compilation of oracles. Considering the style of its composition, it must have been composed by a literate person, just like the *Astragalomanteion* and must have been copied and disseminated. The papyrus edited by Wilkinson is finely written, by a hand used to write, but also contains some grammar faults. Generally, we find these kinds of mistakes in copied texts.

<sup>153</sup> WILKINSON, Kevin W. "A Greek Ancestor of the "Sortes Sanctorum"". In: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 196, 2015, p. 94-102.

<sup>154</sup> P. CtYBR inv. 4640, lines 18-34.



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In terms of cultural and religious evolution, this sheet of papyrus also represents a middle stage between the *Astragalomanteion* and the *Sortes Sanctorum*: it refers to both pagan and Christian elements, the three *Moirai* and the Angels, that allow one to think that the *Theos* (God) mentioned right after them is the christian one, and not Zeus, which was more frequently named as *dios* or *theos*.

This oracle alludes also to travels, gain and material wealth, which might be a reminiscence of its pagan origin: the *Astragalomanteion* also was used by merchants<sup>155</sup> who were interested in knowing if they would have had a gain with their travels or not, and Hermes, to whom the *Astragalomanteion* was appointed, was the god of both gambling and trade:

Πεποιήνται δέ, φησί, καὶ προστάται τοῦ οὕτω παίζειν Ἑρμῆς καὶ Πάν, καθὰ τῆς μουσικῆς  
Ἀπόλλων καὶ Μοῦσαι.<sup>156</sup>

Hermes and Pan were instituted as patrons of this game, just as Apollo and the Muses were the patrons of music.

This oracle must have been originated in the Greek part of the Roman Empire, where the concept of the *Moirai* was more complex, and in the Latin translation it should have become the *Fatus*, which originally indicated a prophecy and then overlapped with the concept of *Moirai*, indicating more or less the destiny or the *sors*. Since the Greek original reported a plural term, *Moirai* is in fact plural, it must have been originally translated with the plural of *Fatus* which is *Fata*, and then, in the process of Christianisation of this divinatory practice, it must have been changed in *Facta* (facts) to remove any connection to its pagan origin.

<sup>155</sup> GRAF, Fritz. "Rolling the dice for an answer". In: JOHNSTON, S. I., STRUCK, P. T. (eds). *Mantikê. Studies in Ancient Divination*, RGRW 155. Leiden – Boston, 2005, p. 51-97.

<sup>156</sup> SUETONE, *Peri Paidion*, ed. Taillardat, 1.11. In: EUSTATHIOS OF THESSALONIKI. *Commentary on Odisey* (ed. Cullhed), 1397, 26.



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## XV. The *Sortes Monacenses*

There is another medieval text that reports a compilation of oracles. It is called the *Sortes Monacenses*,<sup>157</sup> because of its collocation at the national library of Munich. It was copied for the first time by J.H. Harris in 1901<sup>158</sup> and then copied again and corrected by Montero-Cartelle in 2013.<sup>159</sup> The manuscript is dated to the X-XI century and despite its lacunae, it is clear that originally it consisted of a list of 56 oracles corresponding each one to three scores between 1 and 6. Again, is a compilation of oracles that was consulted by casting gaming dice. Its oracles stylistically look less complex than the ones of the *Sortes Sanctorum* and make more reference to Christian iconography. But a few oracles include elements and images common to the *Sortes Sanctorum*:

### VI. VI. I.

Incredibiles es; non oportet; noceris autem; hec enim res de qua cogitas, cave ne decipiaris. Sors iubet te fugere; reversus esto ab hoc consilio, quia multi serpentes validi latent.<sup>160</sup>

6-6-1: You are incredible. It is inappropriate and also damaging. About the thing that you are thinking, pay attention to not be deceived. The lots order you to flee and move away from this idea, since a lot of strong snakes are hidden.

### q. VI. II. I.

Cogitatu magnus animus tuus; vinces opes et pedes; sed requiem cum Deo habebis et oras Deum tuum, ut possi ab ipso defendi; non fit tibi timor, inimici tui cadent et adhuc melior eris.<sup>161</sup>

6-2-1: you thought a lot. You win armies and foot soldiers, but you will be quiet with God and pray to your God, so that you could be defended by him. Have no fear, your enemies will fall and you will be the best one.

<sup>157</sup> Munich, Staatsbibliothek. MS Clm 14846 folio 106-122.

<sup>158</sup> HARRIS, James Rendel. *The Annotators of the Codex Bezae (with Some Notes on Sortes Sanctorum)*, C. J. Clay, 1901, p. 181-184.

<sup>159</sup> MONTERO CARTELLE, Enrique. *Les Sortes Sanctorum. Étude, édition critique et traduction*, ed. Classiques Garnier, 2013, p. 124-131.

<sup>160</sup> *Sortes Monacenses*, ed. Montero-Cartelle, 6.

<sup>161</sup> *Sortes Monacenses*, ed. Montero-Cartelle, 20.





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f. VI. I. I.

Dolor illi vel offensio magna inminet, cui tenetur liber, cave perpetuam vitam; hac hora [?] recede] a sortibus meis, non dant tibi ressonsum.<sup>162</sup>

6-1-1: Pain and great offense threaten that from which (you) have to keep (yourself) free of. Take care of your eternal life. At this hour (are you coming) to my lots, don't give you an answer.

The *Sortes Monacenses* attests a divinatory tradition parallel to the *Sortes Sanctorum*, and eventually a medieval practice newly made and just formally modelled on the pagan tradition, from which it (maybe unconsciously) derived the use of gaming dice, but almost any of the oracles.

## Conclusions

Games and divination shared the same tools and instruments for a very long time, and this was possible because that they give random results and for some reason and superstitious tendencies, plenty of people along human history believed that their result was driven by some divine entity. It is not so hard to understand it: sometimes they gambled for such fortunes that could change their lives and it is reasonable that they felt more convenient to appoint the verdict to some divinity instead of the case.

This twofold particular use of knucklebones and dice contributed to shape them as icons of randomness, and eventually divine will, for several societies and cultures. Curiously, those cultures were conflicting in several aspects of life, like religious or political beliefs, as the pagans and the Christians, but not in the field of games and future telling practice.

While knucklebones became a minoritarian gaming tradition in the western Europe, gaming dice remained in use until today, but just as gaming tools: their use as medium for divination became less relevant after the Renaissance, when another instrument of

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<sup>162</sup> *Sortes Monacenses*, ed. Montero-Cartelle, 21.



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leisure took their place. At that time, playing cards became very popular as a gaming tool, but suddenly someone found how to use them for divinatory purposes. In fact, a kind of cards that were once used to play are now renown as icons of fortune telling: we are speaking about Tarots, but this is another story.

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