Religions of Rome

VOLUME 2

A Sourcebook

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7 Divination and diviners

This chapter is concerned with divination and prophecy: that is, with the ways in which humans ascertained the will of gods and with the ways in which the gods were believed to make known the future. Divination was central in Roman politics and in the traditional religion of the Roman state. So, for example, before engagement in battle or before any meeting of an assembly, the 'auspices' were taken – in other words, the heavens were observed for any signs (such as the particular pattern of a flight of birds) that the gods gave their assent, or otherwise, to the project in hand. But there were many other aspects of divination: some of these (such as astrology) involved specific foretelling of the future; some (such as dream interpretation) were a private, rather than public, affair; some could even be practised as a weapon against the current political order of the state – as when casting an emperor's horoscope foretold his imminent death. The practitioners of divination were as varied as its functions. These ranged from the senior magistrates (who observed the heavens before an assembly) and the state priests (such as the *augures* who advised the magistrates on heavenly signs) to the potentially dangerous astrologers and soothsayers, periodically expelled from the city of Rome (11.7).

The chapter starts with the official divination of the city of Rome: Roman myths about the activity of early diviners (7.1), procedures for the taking of auspices before an election (7.2), the interpretation of 'prodigies' (7.3) and of the entrails of sacrificial animals (7.4), and the role of the so-called 'Sibylline Books', a collection of written oracles kept in Rome (7.5). The second part of the chapter deals with some of the wider aspects of divination and prophecy in Rome and its empire: from private consultation of oracles (7.6) to magic (7.7), astrology (7.8) and dream interpretation (7.9).

See further: R. Bloch (1963) 43–157; Dumézil (1970) 594–610; Vernant (1974); Liebeschuetz (1979) 7–29*; North (1990a)*; Dupont (1992) 181–7.

7.1 Some early prophets

The myths of early Rome include several stories of great seers or prophets, endowed with sometimes miraculous power and enormous religious authority in their own right. These stories contrast markedly with the activity of official Roman priests in the historical period, who – as our sources present them –

enjoyed no such charismatic religious power, did not engage in prophecy of future events and normally did not even conduct divination themselves (but advised the magistrates who did). There was perhaps a chronological development underlying this contrast, with the inspired prophets of early Roman religion gradually becoming 'routinized' within the political structures of the state. But the mere existence of these myths, their continued telling and re-telling, suggests that the image of the Roman diviner was always more complicated than that of a simple 'political' official.

7.1a *The story of Attus Navius*

In this passage Livy tells the story of conflict between King Tarquin (the Elder, who reigned, according to tradition, from 616 to 579 B.C.) and Attus Navius, one of the legendary founders of the college of *augures.* It is a striking example of the power of priestly divination being used *in competition with,* rather than *in the service of* the current political authorities of the state – although ultimately (as the passage makes clear) Navius was upholding the more fundamental political order, as established by Romulus.

See further: Vol. 1, 23–4; Piccaluga (1969) 151–208; Ogilvie (1970) 150–1; Beard (1989) 50–3*.

Livy, *History* 1.36.2–6

King Tarquin, judging that his cavalry was a particular weakness, decided to add new centuries <units> of cavalry to the existing ones – Ramnes, Titienses, Luceres – created by Romulus, to which he would leave the distinction of his own name. Because Romulus had created his three tribes by means of the auguries,[1] a distinguished *augur* at that time, called Attus Navius, declared that no change or innovation could be made to them without the consent of the birds. That moved King Tarquin to anger. To make fun of the *augur*'s art, the story goes, he said to Navius: 'Come then, prophet, divine by your augural art whether it is possible to do what I am thinking of at this moment.' Navius took the auspices and announced that what the King was thinking of would in fact come to pass. 'Well', said Tarquin, 'I was thinking of your cutting a whetstone in half with a razor. Fetch them and perform what your birds declare can be done.' Without delay Navius cut the whetstone in half. A statue of Navius with his head veiled used to stand in the place where this happened – in the *comitium,* on the steps to the left of the senate house.[2] The whetstone was also supposed to have been preserved at the same spot, to provide a memorial for posterity of the miracle. Such great honour was brought to the auguries that no action was taken, in war or in the city, without the auspices: assemblies of the people, levies of the troops, all the greatest affairs would be broken up if the birds did not approve.[3]

1. Romulus had set up a hundred (*centuria*) cavalry for each of his three tribes. Tarquin wanted to add three more centuries, not corresponding to the tribes (and named after himself).

2. See 4.7.
3. The solution adopted after this incident was to double the number of cavalry within the existing centuries, calling them the 'old' and 'new' (*primores, posteriores*) Ramnes, Titienses and Luceres. This is what they were still called in Livy's day; his story is, in part, explaining the eccentricities of the arrangement.

7.1b *The old man of Veii*

Livy's narrative of the Roman capture of the Etruscan town of Veii in 369 B.C. (see 2.6a) includes this story of an inspired soothsayer. Although there is nothing miraculous here, the story reflects an attitude towards prophecy in which the wisdom of the individual prophet is what counts. Therefore to capture the person is to control the message; see also 7.1c.

See further: Vol. 1, Map 5; Hubaux (1958) 121–49; Ruch (1966); Scullard (1967) 69 and 269*; Ogilvie (1970) 658–63; Dumézil (1975) 25–31.

Livy, *History* V.15.4–11

An interpreter nearer to hand[1] emerged in the person of an old man of Veii, who, while the Roman and Etruscan soldiers were at their stations and posts jeering at one another, burst into a kind of prophetic song and declared that Rome would never take Veii until waters had been drained from the Alban Lake.[2] At first this was treated as a casual joke, but then it became a subject of discussion until one of the Roman soldiers asked one of the townsmen (they were on chatty terms because of the length of the war) who the man was who was making mysterious utterances about the lake. When he heard that he was a *haruspex*,[3] the soldier, a man of some piety, tempted the soothsayer out to speak to him, by pretending that he wanted his advice about how to deal with a private prodigy. The two of them walked off together away from the lines, unarmed and apparently fearlessly; but then the strong young soldier grabbed the weak old man in full view of everybody, and despite the clamour of the Etruscans carried him over to his own side.

(8) The soothsayer was sent on to the general and then to the senate in Rome, where he was asked to explain what he had said about the Alban Lake. He said that the gods must have been angry with Veii when they had put it into his head to give away the fate destined for his country. Therefore, what he had sung then by some divine inspiration he could neither now call back, as if it had never been spoken, nor now suppress, since the gods wanted it published; it would be as wrong to hide what they wanted revealed as to reveal what they wanted hidden. It was handed down in the books of fate and in the lore of the Etruscans[3] that if, when the Alban waters were high, the Romans should draw them off, they would achieve victory over Veii. Until that had occurred, the gods would never abandon the walls of Veii.[4]

1. The Romans had just sent a mission to consult the oracle at Delphi about the miraculous flooding of the Alban Lake – which had overflowed even though there had been no rain, and without any obvious cause.
2. The Alban Lake is about 25 km. south east of Rome, filling a crater in the Alban Mount,

which was one of the great religious centres of the Latins (see 1.5a). The text speaks of 'draining waters from the lake', presumably meaning surplus flood-waters, not all the water of the lake. There are still surviving traces of an overflow tunnel (*emissarium*) from the lake, which might be of this date; but it is quite uncertain whether this should be tied in with the prophecy.
3. See 7.4.
4. Only when the seer's words were confirmed by the response from Delphi (Livy, *History* V.16.8–11, 17.1–5) did the senate follow his advice. He explained to them that the reason for the gods' displeasure (shown by the flood) was a flaw in the election of the magistrates who had proclaimed the Latin Festival; 1.5. After proper expiation, Veii was captured.

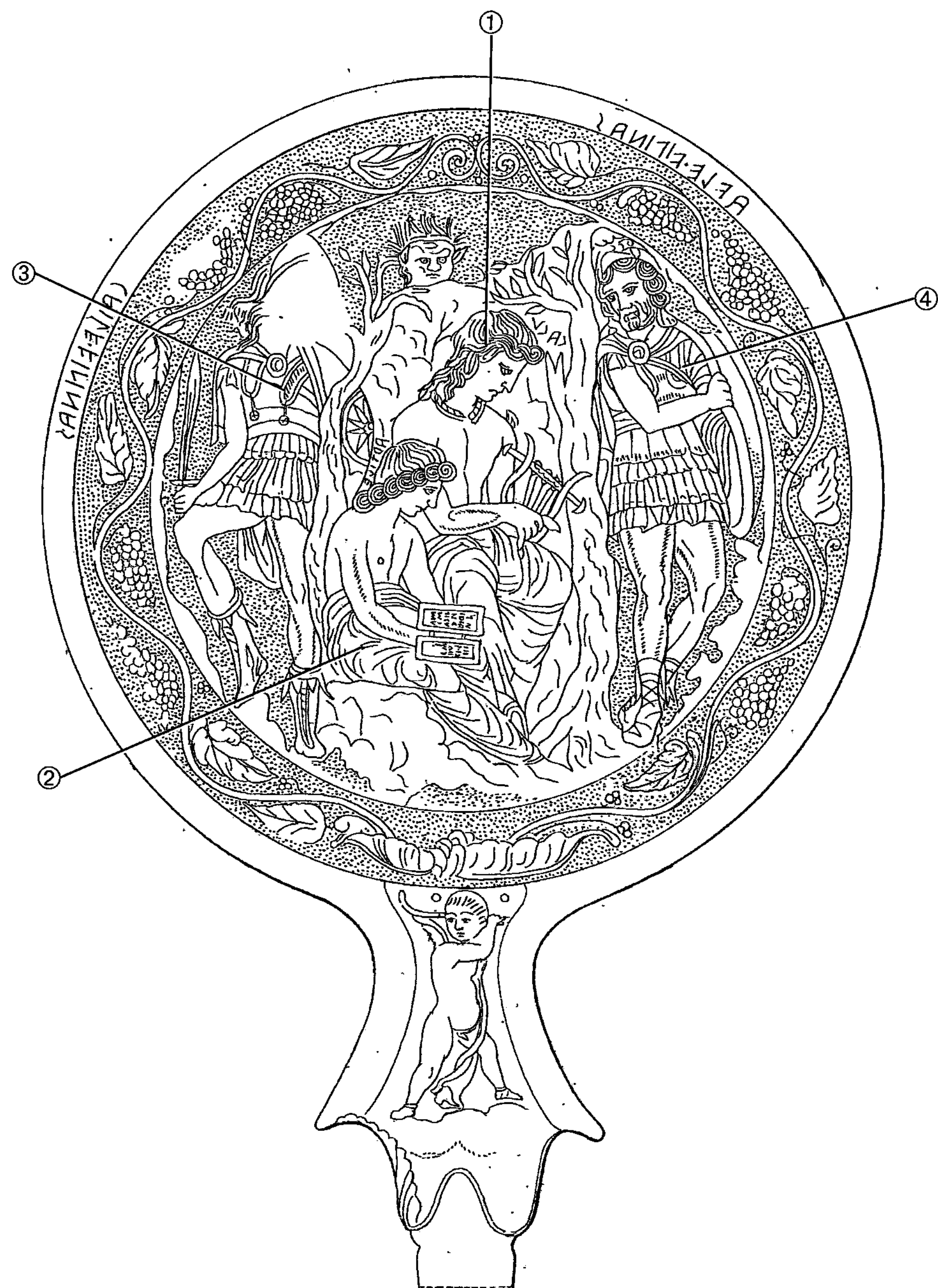
7.1c *Cacu and the Vibennae*

This bronze mirror (diameter 0.15m.) of the late fourth, or early third, century B.C. comes from Bolsena (ancient Volsinii) in Etruria. Four characters are named in Etruscan lettering on the rim above their heads: a fifth face, perhaps that of a satyr, peeps out from behind a rock and watches the action. The named figures are Cacu, shown as a prophet, complete with lyre; a youth Artile who has a tablet, with writing visible on it, open on his lap, and two warriors who are lurking behind the bushes, evidently ready to ambush the prophet and his companion.

The two warriors are named Caile Vipinas and Aule Vipinas, or in Latin, Caelius and Aulus (or Olus) Vibenna. These two are known in connection with stories of early Rome, which mention them togther with the Tarquins, the sixth-century Kings with the strongest Etruscan links; still more tellingly, they are both connected to the naming of specific Roman hills – Caelius to the Caelian Hill, Aulus or Olus to the Capitolium, so called it was said, from caput Oli (i.e. the head of Aulus), which was supposed to have been dug up there. It seems clear that the pair were wandering warrior heroes about whom both Roman and Etruscan stories were told.

A character called Cacus appears in Virgil's *Aeneid*, VIII.184–279, where he is a monster who lived on the Palatine Hill before the foundation of Rome as a city; he terrorized the local inhabitants, until Hercules passed by in the course of performing his labours; Cacus tried to steal Hercules' cattle and was duly killed. It is not clear whether Roman Cacus and Etruscan Cacu should be identified; but the graceful figure on the mirror can hardly be Virgil's vast, revolting, formless monster and we have no mention in Roman sources of the episode depicted. The theme of the mirror is close to the Roman story of the old man of Veii (7.1b), who is also a prophet captured by force or trickery. It also seems very likely that the book held by Artile is a prophetic text like the Sibylline Books, though perhaps in the Volsinian version. So, perhaps we have the myth of the origin of a written prophetic collection, though no way of knowing the city for which the Vibennae were working at the time.

See further: Small (1982) 3–67, 113 (identifying Cacu with the Roman Cacus); Hardie (1986) 110–18 (on Virgil's Cacus) and on the connection of the Vibennae with the Tarquins, Scullard (1967) 256–8; Cornell (1996) 130–41*.



1. Cacus playing the lyre
2. Artile with an open book on his lap
3. and 4. The brothers Vibenna about to jump out and capture the prophet and his book

7.2 Public auspices

Priestly activity at Rome, after the legendary period of the early city, was technical and specialist rather than inspirational. So, for example, priests acted as arbiters if anything went amiss in the routine consultations of the gods practised by magistrates. In this case, related by Cicero, the problem concerned the conduct of elections, which like other public events at Rome took place at a time and place ritually approved by consultation with the gods. The priests were asked by the senate to judge whether anything had gone wrong or not in the elections of 163 B.C. There has been much discussion on this incident, and on whether the main character, Tiberius Gracchus, was acting from religious or purely political motives. But, either way, the close interplay of priests and politicians and the complexity of the rules governing the procedures are evident.

See further: Vol. 1, 21–3; Valeton (1889–90); Botsford (1909) 100–18; Liebeschuetz (1979) 10–16*; Linderski (1986); on this particular incident, Scullard (1973) 226–7; Linderski (1986) 2168–73.

Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* II.10–12

The disciplines both of our own *augures* and of the Etruscan *haruspices*[1] were historically confirmed in the consulship of Publius Scipio and Gaius Figulus <162 B.C.>. Tiberius Gracchus was creating these two new consuls[2] when the first returning officer (*rogator*), on the very point of announcing the names, suddenly died on the spot. Gracchus completed the elections all the same; but since he realized that the incident raised religious issues for the people, referred it to the senate. The senate referred it on <to the priests> as was their usual practice; so the *haruspices* were brought into the senate and responded that it had been the officer of the assembly (*rogator comitiorum*) who had acted improperly.[3] At this point, Gracchus (it was my father who told me this) completely lost his temper: 'What do you say? that I was the one who acted improperly, while holding the assembly as consul? I, an *augur*, having taken the auspices myself?[4] Do you barbarian Etruscans claim the right to judge the auspices of the Roman people? Are you able to interpret the conduct of our assembly?' So he had them thrown out. Later on, however, he wrote a letter to the college of *augures* from his province, to say that while reading some books, he had realized that his observation-post (*tabernaculum*)[5] at the gardens of Scipio had been vitiated, because after setting it up he had gone back across the city boundary (*pomerium*) to hold the senate, but forgotten to take the auspices again when recrossing the same boundary on his way out.[6] So the consuls had been created improperly. The *augures* referred the matter to the senate; the senate asked the consuls to resign; they did so. What better example could we seek? A most wise Roman, perhaps the greatest of all, preferred to reveal a mistake he could have concealed, rather than let a religious error stand in public life; the consuls laid down the supreme power rather than hold on to it for a moment against religious rule.[7] Great is the authority of the *augures*; is not the art of the *haruspices* a thing divine?

1. In contrast to the Roman college of *augures*, the *haruspices* (though regularly summoned to give advice at Rome) were a group of Etruscan diviners. See 7.4.
2. That is, Tiberius Gracchus, as consul for 162 B.C., was conducting the election for the consuls of the following year.
3. The same word (*rogator*) can be used for the magistrate holding the elections (Gracchus himself) and for the official who reported the voting in the different divisions of the assembly.
4. Gracchus would have taken the auspices as a magistrate; he emphasizes the fact that he was also an *augur* to add extra authority to his claims.
5. That is the post from which he observed the heavens.
6. The elections were held outside the *pomerium* in the Campus Martius. See 4.8.
7. Cicero thus confirms that the religious error did not in itself make the election null and void. The consuls still had to abdicate.

7.3 Prodigies

Prodigies were signs from the gods which indicated that relations between gods and men were disrupted. Lists of prodigies, and of the action taken by senate and priests to avert their implied menace, are preserved by Livy, year after year in the republican period. The lists become longer and more appalling than usual in years of disaster, whether because more were reported or because Livy used them in his narrative to help create an atmosphere of nervous expectation and fear.

See further: Vol. 1, 19–20, 37–9; R. Bloch (1963) 77–86, 112–57; Liebeschuetz (1979) 9–10*; MacBain (1982); Levene (1993) 17–37.

7.3a *The prodigies before the disaster at Trasimene, 217 B.C.*

This is one of the most elaborate prodigy lists, placed by Livy before the disastrous battle at Lake Trasimene, at which the Romans suffered a terrible massacre at the hands of the Carthaginian invaders. These extraordinary happenings did not provide the basis for any *prophecy* of future events; instead the priests' advice results in elaborate rituals to restore relations between gods and men.

See further: Walsh (1961) 61–4*; Rawson (1971).

Livy, *History* XXII.1.8–20

Prodigies, reported from several places simultaneously, increased the terror <in Rome>: in Sicily, some arrows caught fire among the soldiers; in Sardinia, as a cavalryman was checking round the guards on the wall, the baton he was holding in his hand also caught fire; the coasts shone out with many fires and two shields sweated blood; some soldiers were struck by lightning and the orb of the sun was seen to diminish; at Praeneste, burning stones fell from the sky; at Arpi, shields were seen in the sky and the sun fighting with the moon; at Capena, two moons were seen to rise; the waters at Caere flowed

mixed with blood and the spring of Hercules itself ran spattered with spots of blood; when they were taking in the harvest at Antium, bloody ears fell into the basket; the sky at Falerii was seen to gape as if with a great hole and, at the point where it lay open, an enormous light shone forth; the lots shrank spontaneously and one fell out giving the message: 'Mars shakes his spear.'[1] At the same time in Rome, the statue of Mars by the Appian Way and the images of the wolves sweated; and at Capua there was the appearance of the sky burning and of the moon falling to earth during a storm.[2] Trust was then placed in lesser prodigies as well: some goats grew wool; a hen turned into a male and a cock into a female. These events were expounded to the senate, just as they had been reported, and those who vouched for them were brought in; then the consul consulted the senators about the ritual implications. Their decree was that the prodigies should be dealt with by sacrifice partly of greater victims, partly of suckling victims;[3] and a three-day supplication should take place at all the couches of the gods.[4] Next, when the *decemviri* had consulted the Books,[5] the gods should be addressed in sacred hymns according to the preferences of each one. By the advice of the *decemviri* the first gift was decreed to Jupiter, a golden thunderbolt fifty pounds in weight, Juno and Minerva were given silver gifts and Juno Regina on the Aventine and Juno Sospita of Lanuvium received sacrifices of greater victims; and the matrons, after the collecting of as much money as each one could bring together appropriately, should carry a gift to Juno on the Aventine and a *lectisternium* should be held <for her>;[6] and that the women ex-slaves should also collect money, according to their ability, to offer a gift to Feronia.[7] When this had all been done, the *decemviri* should sacrifice in the forum at Ardea with greater victims. Finally, it being now December, a sacrifice and a *lectisternium* (the couch being set out by the senators) should be held in the temple of Saturn in Rome, and also a public feast; and that the cry 'Saturnalia' should be kept up through the city for a day and a night and the people bidden to hold it a sacred day and so to keep it in perpetuity.[8]

1. Various towns in Italy had a 'lot' oracle: tablets of wood (or other material) each inscribed with an oracle were drawn at random to give an oracular response. It was a bad omen when the lots shrank.
2. The meaning (and the Latin text) is uncertain here.
3. Greater victims were full-grown; suckling victims, still young.
4. For the gods' statues on couches, see 5.5c.
5. That is, the Sibylline Books; see 7.5 and 1.8.
6. For the *lectisternium*, see 5.5b and c.
7. Feronia was the divine patroness of the women ex-slaves, as Juno was of the matrons.
8. The Saturnalia was an ancient festival (see, e.g., 3.2, where it is marked in large capital letters); so Livy is either here mistakenly thinking it was a new invention in 213 B.C. or he meant to imply that only the day of public feasting was the innovation. See 5.3.

7.3b *Pliny on portents*

It is not always easy to understand why some particular events were seen as prodigies, and others not. Historians, such as Livy, only give us the bald record of a prodigy, not the reasons for that classification. Occasionally, however,