INTRODUCTION

The power of signs

Let us begin with four vignettes. In 88 BC the sound of a trumpet was heard in the city of Rome. It was a loud, prolonged and shrill note, and no one could tell from whence it came, even though it was a cloudless day. It was regarded as a prodigy, an extraordinary event that was collectively understood as a sign of divine concern or hostility. Its interpretation and ritual expiation were necessary and a well-established process was followed. The Senate entrusted this to a body of expert diviners. The haruspices, a group of Etruscan seers who routinely advised the Roman government on the interpretation and expiation of prodigies, provided an explanation that went beyond a recommendation on matters of ritual. They argued that the prodigy announced the beginning of a new age. They also stated that history was not open-ended, as there were eight ages in the world, each one differing from a cultural point of view. The end of an age was marked by a sign such as the one that had just been reported: a new age was about to begin.[1] The interpretation of the prophecy is problematic, but it is clear that it established a link between political and intellectual developments. It also had a strong diagnostic value. The year 88 was a turning point in late Republican history, with the controversy between Marius and Sulla over the command in the war against King Mithridates and Sulla's decision to end the crisis and reassert his entitlement by marching on Rome with his army and driving his political opponents away. In the same year, just a few months before Sulla's *coup d'état*, a cohort of Etruscan diviners gave a complex prediction on the future course of Roman history to the Senate.

In 57 the king of Egypt Ptolemy XII Auletes fled to Rome after being toppled by a revolt. He was an ally of the Roman people and the Senate considered taking steps to restore him to the throne. There was no consensus, however, on who should be entrusted with the mission. While the

[1] Plut. *Sull.* 7.6–13. See the discussion of this passage in Chapter 4. The fundamental discussion of haruspicy remains Thulin 1905a, 1906a and 1909. See also North 1967: 548–95; Capdeville 1997; Jannot 1998: 20–49; Haack 2003; Martínez-Pinna 2007; Corbeill 2012.

debate was ongoing, at the beginning of 56, a thunderbolt struck the statue of Jupiter on the Alban Mount.[2] The event was regarded as a prodigy. The Senate instructed a college of priests, the *quindecemuiri sacris faciundis*, to consult the Sibylline Books, a collection of prophetic texts that were preserved on the Capitol.[3] The priests singled out a portion of the responses which seemed to bear special relevance to the crisis: if the king of Egypt should come asking for help, he was not to be refused friendship, but he was also not to receive military support. They were struck by the correspondence between the wording of the response and the events of contemporary politics, and the tribune C. Porcius Cato, who was also a *quindecemuir*, used this very argument to persuade the other members of the college not to take any further action. Under normal circumstances, the expectation was that the Senate would authorise the publication of a summary of the response. Cato, however, took an extraordinary step and made it public without seeking permission: he compelled the priests to read out a Latin version of the oracle to the populace. The Senate debated the matter, but no conclusion was reached on who was to be assigned the command. The outcome, after much deliberation, was inaction. Interestingly, none of the options that were discussed at the time included a rejection of the oracles and their authenticity.

In 44 Mark Antony and Julius Caesar held the consulship. When he entered office Caesar, who also held the perpetual dictatorship, expressed the intention to step down from the consulship later in the year in order to launch a campaign against the Parthians. He designated P. Cornelius Dolabella as *consul suffectus*, i.e. his replacement to the consulship. Dolabella happened to be a personal enemy of Antony, who promptly announced that he would do whatever was in his power to prevent his election.[4] Antony was both a consul and a member of the augural college, one of the senior priesthoods of Rome, which was entrusted with the interpretation of divine signs before all important public acts.[5] He had the prerogative to stop a voting assembly by declaring that he had detected a sign of divine opposition, and he had two options available. As a consul, he could prevent the assembly from taking place; in his capacity as augur, he could stop the assembly at any point after its inception. He chose the latter option and

[2] Dio 39.15–16.

[3] Diels 1890: 1–108; Hoffmann 1933; Parke 1988: 136–42, 148–50, 190–220; Caerols 1989; Orlin 1997: 76–115; Scheid 1998b; Buitenwerf 2003: 99–106; Monaca 2005; Takács 2003: 19–24 (= 2008: 64–70, 159–61); Guittard 2007b: 239–75; Satterfield 2008.

[4] Cic. *Phil.* 1.31; 2.79–84. See Appendix.

[5] Linderski 1986a is the reference modern discussion; collection and discussion of the primary sources in Regell 1881, 1882: 12–19 and 1893. See also Humm 2012a: 65–84 and 2012b.

declared his opposition when the election of Dolabella was about to be finalised. By adopting that solution Antony brought the political process to a halt and compelled Dolabella (and indirectly Caesar) to seek his support for the ratification of the election. The events that unfolded a few weeks later, after the Ides of March, confirmed the value of Antony's use of his augural prerogatives. When Dolabella and Antony decided to mend fences and co-operate in the aftermath of Caesar's assassination, Antony's willingness to accept Dolabella's election and set aside his opposition was a central part of the deal. The tactical advantage that he had earned with his handling of Dolabella's election was rooted in his expert knowledge of the complex rules that governed the interaction between politics and religion in the late Republic.

The advent of monarchy led to a narrowing of the range of options available for the exploitation of signs. Augustus' approach to the Sibylline Books is very instructive. In 18 he ordered that the *quindecemuiri* should themselves copy the books by hand, so that 'no one else could read them'.[6] In 12, shortly after his accession to the office of *pontifex maximus*, he took a decision of religious policing: he ordered an end to the circulation of a number of Latin and Greek prophecies that were available in Rome at the time and restated that the Sibylline Books were the only acceptable form of prophecy.[7] The operation was completed by the relocation of the books from the Capitol to the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, in the vicinity of the emperor's residence and under his direct patronage. The temple was also home to the collection of the Etruscan books that dealt with lightning and were part of the haruspical tradition.[8]

These four examples – which we will discuss in greater detail elsewhere in this book – show, in different ways, how divination was an essential feature of the religious landscape of the city of Rome in the last century of the Republic. The haruspical prophecy of 88 shows a group of foreign diviners being consulted by the Senate at a time of great political tension and producing a prophetic response that was based on a wide-ranging interpretation of Roman history. The crisis of 56 shows the disruptive potential of divinatory texts that were used and circulated outside the usual institutional framework. The events of 44 are an example of the unusual situations which the interaction between the contingency of the political situation and the complex rules that governed the workings of Roman public religion could bring about. Augustus' attention to and systematic review of the corpus of the Sibylline Books was a powerful illustration of

[6] Dio 54.17.2. [7] Suet. *Aug.* 31.1. [8] Serv. *ad Aen.* 6.72.

the major shift in the practice of divination with the advent of monarchy. Taken together, these four examples illustrate some of the key concepts of the discussion that will follow in this volume: the plurality and diversity of the forms of divination that were available, on both the public and private levels, in late Republican Rome; the tight integration of the political and the religious dimensions; the political and intellectual issues raised by the control of the sources of divination in Rome and the competition for it.

Divination must be understood not just as a set of techniques for the prediction of the future, but more widely as a strategy for interpreting the signs that the gods send to mankind.[9] It is widely attested throughout the ancient world, well beyond the Mediterranean, at both public and private levels, and it retains considerable (and to some surprising) relevance in our own time.[10] In the Roman world, however, divination had some unique features, which were especially strong under the Republic. It was central in the decision-making strategies of the Roman government: any serious political deliberation, any political process of some consequence was accompanied by the use of divinatory procedures.[11] Divinatory expertise was concentrated and readily available in the city of Rome; oracles from far afield were usually not consulted. It was also spread across several discrete centres, which often worked along with each other, and could enter into competition with one another. The history of these bodies of experts and their gradual inclusion is testimony to their complex and enduring importance.

Divination in Rome was based on some fundamental assumptions: that a relationship between the gods and the community could be secured by the performance of appropriate rituals; that rituals could also enable the exploration of the will of the gods; and that divine anger could be expressed through signs that required interpretation and appropriate action, in order to prevent further difficulties. It was therefore at the centre of religious practice and discourse, and applied to many different contexts. In Republican Rome and Italy it was used and practised by people from all walks of

[9] Koch 2010: 44. Divination, however, does involve the mastery of complex and teachable techniques: Evans-Pritchard 1937: 285; Fortes 1966: 414–15, 421.

[10] Curry 2010a: 6; cf. e.g. the use of a game of chance to decide a tied council election in Cave Creek, Arizona in 2009 (Heimlich 2010: 143). There was no culture of divination in ancient Egypt (Assmann 1992: 237–8, 250–1, with the important qualifications of Jambon 2012).

[11] This is a clear difference with the practice of the Greek *poleis* in the classical period, which hardly ever resorted to divination on matters of internal politics and legislation (Parker 1985: 310–11). Cf. Bowden 2005, who argues that establishing and enforcing the will of the gods was a central concern to the Athenian democracy in the classical period. A recent, comprehensive overview of Roman divination in Rüpke and Belayche 2005. Johnston 2005: 1–10 and 2008: 17–27 give splendid surveys of recent work on ancient divination. Bouché-Leclerq 1879–82 remains a fundamental reference tool, brilliantly epitomised in Bouché-Leclerq 1892.

life and it was employed by the Roman government in handling a range of important matters, especially through the taking of the auspices and the interpretation of prodigies.[12] However, it took on a particular relevance at a time of political turmoil, when it could be used both to allay deep-seated concerns and as a tool of political control.[13] The pervasiveness of Roman divination is another of its original features. B. Gladigow evocatively spoke of 'collectivisation of fear' (*Kollektivierung der Angst*) to describe the role that divination plays in securing and promoting civic cohesion.[14] Building on some recent work on Greek cultures of prediction, one could also argue, in more neutral terms, for a social distribution of risk.[15] A helpful working hypothesis is that divination – i.e. the consultation of the gods with a view to establishing their will and their position on an envisaged action – is a process that removes tensions and can make the human decision-making process possible. This may be described as the rule, but there are exceptions, or indeed enactments of different rules; moments in which divination is used in order to delegitimise a decision and stop a political process. It is by now a commonplace in religious anthropology that an oracle does not stand in the way of political decisions;[16] as we will see, in Republican Rome divinatory utterances could be used against decisions that had been made or were about to be taken. This book sets out to show that in the disrupted world of the late Republic the uses of divination were strongly contested, and its remit was reshaped and redefined.

[12] The literature on prodigies in the Republic is extensive: Bouché-Leclerq 1882: IV, 15–115, 175–317; Wülker 1903: 6–50; Luterbacher 1904: 18–43; Thulin 1909: 76–130; Wissowa 1912: 390–6, 538–49; Latte 1960: 157–61; Bloch 1963: 112–46; Günther 1964: 209–36; MacBain 1982; Guillaumont 1996; Rosenberger 1998 and 2007: 293–8; North 2000b: 27–9, 38–40; Rasmussen 2003: esp. 35–168; Engels 2007: esp. 724–97 (the catalogue of prodigies is an essential reference tool); Lisdorf 2007: 204–20, 242–76; Février 2009: 125–91; Orlin 2010: 111–36; Pina Polo 2011: 23–30, 251–4; cf. the note of caution in Beard 2012: 25. On how prodigies from outside Rome were reported under the Republic compare and contrast Mommsen 1853 (= 1909: 168–74); Rawson 1971; MacBain 1982: 25–33; Rosenberger 2005; Dart 2012. Cf. the classic discussion of ritual redress in Turner 1968: esp. 1–24, 89–127; cf. also Turner 1967: 361 on divination as a 'form of social analysis'.

[13] Reassurance and manipulation are central themes in several modern discussions of Republican religion: Liebeschuetz 1979: 7–17; Wardman 1982: 42–52, 182–3; Scheid 2001a: 137–40. Meyer 2002: 176, 180–1; Rüpke 2005a: 1448 (= 2005b: 224); and M. Flower 2008: 192–3 persuasively argue that manipulation is not a helpful category for the understanding of divination. Evans-Pritchard 1937: 313–51 remains a classic discussion; Bell 1992: 181 stresses that 'the social control wielded by ritual is more complex than the manipulation of affective states or cognitive categories'.

[14] Gladigow 1979: esp. 70–7. See also Bayet 1969: 51–6; Rosenberger 1998: 91–126; Rüpke 2005a: 1443 ('eine rationale, psychisch stabilisierende Form des Verhaltens bei herrschender Unsicherheit'; cf. 2005b: 219); M. Flower 2008: 74. *Contra* cf. Rasmussen 2003: 29 and Lisdorf 2007: 131–5. Fear in the late Republic: Kneppe 1994: 57–76, 218–29; Osgood 2006. Cf. Maul 1994 on divinatory rituals as stabilising factors in Assyrian society.

[15] Eidinow 2007 and 2011. Cf. the excellent interdisciplinary discussion of risk in Skinns, Scott and Cox 2011.

[16] Parker 1985: 301–2, 324.

This is a symptom of its enduring vitality. An influential strand of scholarship argued that Roman religion went through a steady decline in the last century of the Republic, caused by political manipulation on the part of the ruling elite and by widespread disregard for religious concerns by the Roman populace in general.[17] This reductionist view of Roman religion has been robustly challenged in the last three decades.[18] It is now widely accepted that divination retained a very important place in the political and intellectual landscape of the late Republic, even at a time of considerable instability. Religious change is not to be interpreted as a symptom of decline.

This book is a study of the role that divination played in the last two centuries of the Roman Republic and in the early Principate. Its central working hypothesis is that divination must be studied in association with the broader problem of how prediction was culturally constructed. In the late Republic, divination and prediction are excellent vantage points for the study of wider cultural developments. The focus of the study lies at the crossroads of political, religious and intellectual history. In Rome none of these categories was understood as independent; on the contrary, they were intimately intertwined. Much of the most thought-provoking recent work on the late Republic focuses on the cultural development of this period and on the paradox of an age in which traumatic political change coexisted with a profound change in the cultural domain. The term 'revolution' has been used, with an implicit reference to the time-honoured concept of 'Roman Revolution', a deep change of a political and constitutional nature.[19] Other studies have referred to the emergence of a new rationalistic trend in Roman culture, which was chiefly – though not exclusively – brought about by the influence of Greek models.[20] The late Republican debate on divination is not part of a wider movement that can be schematically reduced to a

[17] This idea has been dominant for a long time, especially (but not exclusively) in the scholarship on Republican *Prodigienwesen*: e.g. Wülker 1903: 71–5; Luterbacher 1904: 17; Warde Fowler 1911: 304–7, 428–9; Wissowa 1912: 70–2; Taylor 1949: 76–97, 212–16; Latte 1960: 264–93; Bloch 1963: 145–6 and 1968: 226–31; Günther 1964; Bayet 1969: 144–68; MacBain 1982; Burckhardt 1988: 178–209; Novak 1991; Bergemann 1992: 146–7; Fontanella 1997: 499–500, 527; Rosenberger 1998: 210–40; Montero 2006: 13–29.

[18] A selective bibliography: Liebeschuetz 1979: 7–29; Jocelyn 1982–3: 158–61; Wardman 1982: 22–62, 179–84; Troiani 1984: 936–8; North 1990; Scheid 1997, 2001a: 19–22, 119–42 and 2012; Bendlin 1998; Tatum 1999b; Linke 2000; Belayche and Rüpke 2007; Pina Polo 2011: 252–3; Lacam 2012: 19–167.

[19] Wallace-Hadrill 1989 and 2008; Habinek and Schiesaro 1997.

[20] Rawson 1985; Moatti 1997; Rüpke 2007a: 129–33, 2010b; 2012a. Cf., from different angles, Rawson 1978b (= 1991: 324–51); Fuhrmann 1987; Frank 1992. See Rüpke 2012a: 145 on how 'rationality' must be understood in this context: '[t]he validity of religious assumptions is examined on the basis of nonreligious premises and evidence' (cf. also Rüpke 2002: 256, 2007a: 130, 2009b: 139 and 2010b: 41). Cf. Harrison 2006 for the view that rationality is an important category for the understanding of Greek religion. On rationality as a culturally situated concept cf. Geertz 2000: 23–5.

dualism between the concepts of 'rational' and 'irrational'. One can speak, with J. Rüpke, of a process of 'rationalisation' as ordering, systematisation and increasing complexity of the late Republican intellectual life; as the emergence of a set of new *rationes* in a number of different domains.[21] Its outcome is not a process in which divination declines and other, more 'rational', strategies for the prediction of the future emerge, as, for example, in the case of the decline of magic in early modern Britain which has been memorably explored by K. Thomas.[22] On the contrary, the deep structures underlying the Roman approach to divination and the prediction of the future did not change in the period under discussion in this book. In some quarters, however, a more systematic reflection upon the foundations of divination and its practice emerged. It was part of a wider reflection on the role of foresight and the viability of prediction. One of the main factors that prompted such reflection was the very significant and ever-changing role that divination played in Roman society, especially in the political domain, where there was a wide range of different sources of divination and prediction, often in competition with each other.

Just as it would be misguided to speak of a struggle between rational and irrational approaches to divination in late Republican culture, it would also be misleading to depict a neat dualism between a disenchanted, cynical and sophisticated elite, and a credulous and superstitious populace.[23] On the contrary, pluralism and complexity were the rules of the game. A range of different attitudes must have coexisted at all levels; the same people will have had different approaches to the same aspects of divination at different times in different contexts and situations. The concept of 'brain-balkanisation' has been aptly evoked. To use D. Feeney's elegant formulation, the 'educated Greeks and Romans of the post-classical era' were capable of entertaining 'different kinds of assent and criteria of judgement in different contexts, in ways that strike the modern observer as mutually contradictory'; arguably this does not apply only to the educated.[24] Moreover, a range of different experiences and opportunities will have been available, in both public and private contexts. The 'market model' outlined for Republican religion by A. Bendlin becomes especially appropriate when we turn our attention to the practitioners of divination and prediction that were available in Republican Rome, especially because it urges us to look

[21] Rüpke 2012a. [22] Thomas 1971. Cf. Bremmer 1993: 169–72.
[23] It is doubtful that this model can be helpful to the understanding of any aspect of religious (or indeed intellectual) history: see the masterful discussion in Brown 1981: 12–22, 136–9.
[24] Feeney 1998: 14; cf. Veyne 1983: 52–69. *Contra* see Rüpke 2012a: 3. Religious behaviour is never monolithic (Paden 2000: 194–5).

beyond the boundaries of civic religion.[25] Such pluralism is the fundamental rule of the game and that competition was a fundamental part of it is by now uncontroversial. The problem – to pursue Bendlin's metaphor – is to what extent was deregulation essential to the religious pluralism of the middle and late Republic.[26] The extent of such pluralism was considerable and the main concern emerging from the late Republican debate, especially from Cicero's works, was the devising of methods of control and restraint of the range of divinatory experiences that were available, especially those with a prophetic remit. With the fall of the Republic and the advent of monarchy a check was placed on this situation, albeit in ways of which Cicero would not have approved. Augustus' main concern was not to revive piety, despite the claims of his propaganda, nor to repress what did not fall into the fold of traditional divination. His aim was to devise a new model of religious participation that revolved around imperial authority.[27] In this framework, the point was not to organise a repression of what did not comply with the agenda of the *princeps*. In fact, Augustus appears to have been less hostile to cults that did not belong in the framework of public religion than the Senate had been for most of the Republican period.[28] The aim of his interventions on this front was to make sure that all forms of religious experience were placed under the control of the emperor. Within the space of a generation, this aim was attained, although there remained voices that expressed reservations, in more or less open terms, as to the desirability of the Augustan settlement.

Any form of divination engages with a set of signs.[29] The notion of the 'power of signs' has been employed in a recent discussion of the use

[25] Bendlin 2000: esp. 130–5; cf. Bendlin 1998; see also, independently, Slater 2000. Cf. the sympathetic objections in Steuernagel 2007. The concept of 'market' was already evoked in North 1979: 98. Arena 2011: 147–59 rightly notes that the coexistence of different cults in the late Republic is not a symptom of religious liberty. In a convincing critique of the account of the rise of Christianity sketched in Stark 1996 (esp. 191–208), Beck 2006: 242–4 has contested the validity of the concept of 'market' to the study of ancient paganism and has argued that 'exchange' may be a more appropriate category; surely, however, it is appropriate to speak of a 'market' even for contexts to which the laws of classical or neoclassical economics do not apply.

[26] Nice forthcoming. Beck 2006: 242 notes that in ancient paganism the state is not 'the market regulator', because it is 'directly engaged in the business of religion'; the experience of several modern states shows that the two positions are not incompatible. Modern economic terminology (e.g. 'religious firms', 'religious consumers', 'religious goods', etc.) is recurrent in recent debate on the rise of Christianity: Stark 1996 and Beck 2006.

[27] Scheid 2001b: esp. 87–8. Jocelyn 1966: 96 argues that Augustus encouraged the belief that neglect of the gods was a serious political issue of his time; Beck 2006: 251 n. 4 claims that the view was widely shared; *contra* see Galinsky 1996: 290.

[28] Orlin 2008 and 2010: 208–14.

[29] Vernant 1948: 320–5; Manetti 1987: 9–56, 243–7 (= 1993: 1–35, 169–71); Burkert 1996: 156–63. A clarification of the use of the word 'sign' is in order: Cicero uses the word 'sign' (*signum* or *nota*) only when he refers to artificial divination, while he avoids it for natural divination (Allen 2008: 169

of divination by Augustus; the temptation to extend the association suggested by the title of P. Zanker's seminal book, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, to such an important domain as Roman religion is indeed strong.[30] However, signs had been deeply powerful in Rome for several centuries before the advent of the Principate. Their presence was ubiquitous; attempts to use and interpret them were manifold and pervasive. While his approach to the use of iconographic themes was undoubtedly revolutionary, in divinatory matters Augustus normalised and exercised greater control over a set of practices and discourses that was already in existence. This book sets out to explore this hinterland: to study how divination was practised in the last two centuries of the Republic; to account for its success and diversity; to explore the discourses about and around it; and to show in what respects the advent of the Principate marked a discontinuity with the Republican past.

We will be analysing a range of material that testifies to the complexity of the practice of, and of the views about, divination in this period. Of exceptional importance is Cicero's *De diuinatione*, which both testifies to the rich diversity of views and approaches and is a major (arguably the major) contribution in its own right to the debate. The first chapter of this book sets out to offer a reassessment of this work and of its historical significance.

n. 28). Although this study will be predominantly concerned with 'artificial' forms of divination (those most commonly practised in Roman state religion), the focus will be broader, and will be dealing with 'signs' that the Romans would not have necessarily called *signa*, such as dreams. Turner 1968: 5 prefers to use 'symbol' in divinatory contexts instead of 'sign': 'symbols are never simple; only signs, which by convention are restricted to a single referent, are simple'. As it will soon be apparent, the signs that will be discussed in the present study do not quite fit this definition. On the concept of symbol in antiquity see Struck 2004; esp. 90–6 on symbols and omens.

[30] Rosenberger 1998: 233–40. Cf. also Schmid 2005.

CHAPTER 1

The De diuinatione *in context*

In 45 BC Cicero started working on a trilogy of treatises devoted to religious and theological matters.[1] All three took the form of a philosophical dialogue.[2] The first work was the *De natura deorum* ('On the nature of the gods'), in which three characters set out competing approaches to the definition of what the gods do, their attitude to mankind, and how their cult should be understood and practised. The second dialogue, the *De diuinatione* ('On divination'), was devoted to divination, its remit and its reliability, and the third, the *De fato* ('On fate'), which survives only in part, was a discussion on fate and its role in human affairs. That Cicero decided to devote an entire work of this trilogy to divination is a remarkable enough testimony to the importance of this aspect of Roman religion and prompts detailed discussion of its place in late Republican Rome. The framework in which this belonged is telling. Cicero's discussion on the gods and their cult was closely related to the prediction of and control over the future. An important factor that led Cicero to establish this connection was his familiarity with Hellenistic philosophy, in which the debate on divination and fate also had a theological dimension.[3] There was, however, another set of concerns that drove him. Divination consistently played an important role in the decision-making process at the core of Roman government. Precisely for this reason Cicero knew from personal experience that in Rome divination was in many ways intertwined with political foresight.[4]

The agenda of the dialogue

The *De diuinatione* was written between 45 and 44 and was finished only after the death of Caesar. On the surface, the structure of the dialogue is

[1] Cic. *Att.* 13.38.1 (15 August); 13.39.2 (16 August).
[2] MacKendrick 1989: 25 and Schofield 2008: 67 speak of 'dialogue-treatises'.
[3] Magris 1995; Bobzien 1998: 45–7, 87–96, 173–5, 346–9. [4] Cf. Bernett 1995.