

Consultant Editor JOHN MATTHEWS

# The WORLD ATLAS of DIVINATION

Tarot · Ogam · Numerology

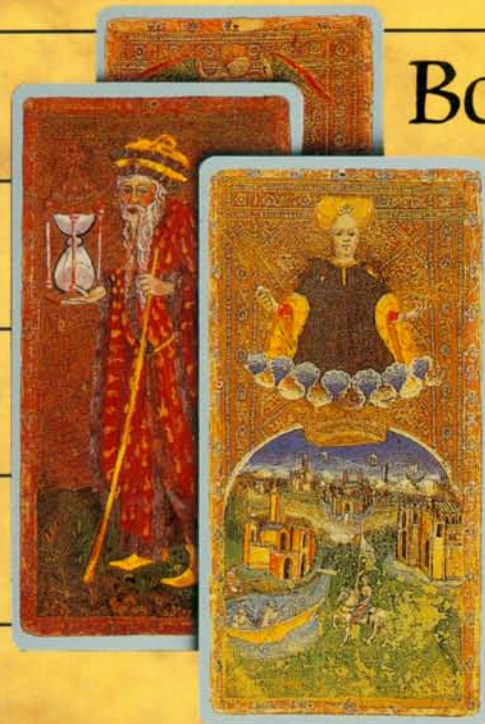
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THE SYSTEMS · WHERE THEY ORIGINATE  
HOW THEY WORK

# CONSULTING THE ORACLES

## The Classic Systems of Greece and Rome

Robert Temple

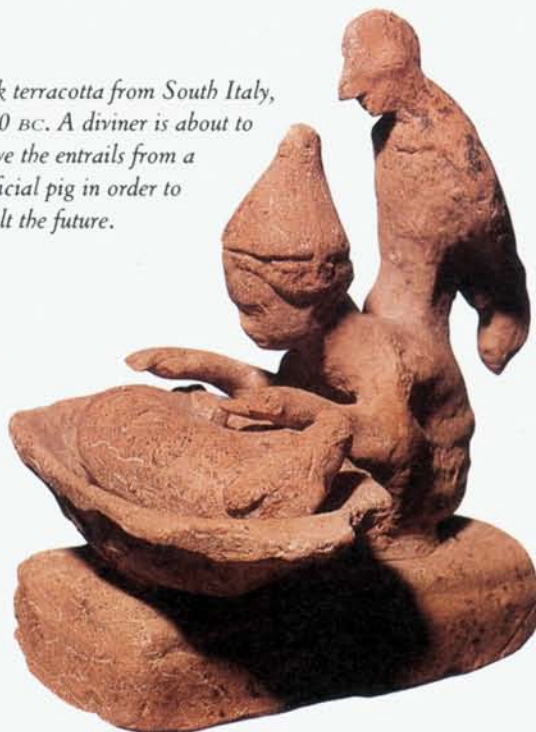
When we think of ancient Greece and Rome we tend to think of the great classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, the supremacy of the intellect and the rule of reason. It is not generally realized that divination was an important part of classical life and was practised on a daily basis. We could even go so far as to say that the whole of classical civilization was based on divination as the foundation of all its actions. No major decision of state, such as going to war, was made without consulting the gods through divination. Few personal undertakings, such as financial investment, getting married or making a journey, were embarked upon without divination. Even the great Socrates consulted the oracle at Delphi.

The classical civilizations had many forms of divination which they used constantly: divination by lightning, by the flights of birds (augury), by the chance words uttered by idiots or passers-by (cledonism), by thunderbolts, by the manner in which chickens pecked at corn, and so on. Divination by lightning and augury by the flights of birds were both very complex systems. The sky was generally divided up into 16 sections: if birds flew from one section to another, that signified one thing; if they then flew from that section to another, it meant something else, and so on. The same applied to streaks of lightning. There were 'textbooks' to consult so that people could look these things up. In a surviving ancient Greek dream book by Artemidorus, there are hundreds of different dreams listed alongside their prophetic meanings.

Interior forms of divination, lacking in official

sanction and prestige, were practised by wandering fortune-tellers. Farmers had much folklore about what they called 'omens', namely calves born with two heads or even children with webbed fingers, all of which portended various sorts of coming events and disasters. Other methods included an early form of roulette, which was connected with the oracle at Delphi and gave answers to enquiries rather than winners in a gambling game; both lots and dice were also used to consult the future. The Greeks were keen on an early form of crystal-gazing, whereby maidens gazed into pools of water or bowls of liquid and sought visions of the future. The Babylonians had voluminous Omen Books, many fragments of which survive, and much of

*Greek terracotta from South Italy, c. 480 BC. A diviner is about to remove the entrails from a sacrificial pig in order to consult the future.*



that lore entered into folk wisdom, which probably survives in peasant societies today. There is certainly a very strong tradition in modern Greece among the country folk about fairies, the evil eye and prophecy.

### EXTISPICY: AN EXAMINATION OF ENTRAILS

It is often assumed that the main divination system of the Greeks and Romans, as well as of the Assyrians and Babylonians, was astrology. But in fact astrology was a very late technique, and it can be said without the slightest doubt that the main divination system of the classical cultures was extispicy, which is divination by the entrails of sacrificial animals.

Extispicy was a mania with the Greeks, Romans and Etruscans. Of the last, Cicero, who was himself an official Roman augur, said in his book *On Divination*: 'the whole Etruscan nation has gone stark mad on the subject of entrails.' The animal that was sacrificed was usually a lamb, although occasionally oxen were used, especially by the Romans.

Extispicy was in fact the main divination system of Western man for many thousands of years, and because of its remote origins in Stone Age antiquity or earlier, the millennia of its continuous use, and its widespread geographical extent, it can probably be regarded as the main divination system to have been used on this planet during the entire history of humanity.

I re-created the ancient extispicy techniques by going to an abattoir and personally removing the entrails of freshly slaughtered lambs, following the directions of the ancient Babylonian tablets which set the pattern for the later Greeks and Romans. Generally, in the modern age, only butchers can be expected to know much about entrails as they emerge from animals, but I decided it was necessary to re-create the ancient setting in order to see just what it was that the ancients were doing. In this way I was able to resolve many enigmas.

The two main organs used in divination were the liver and the intestines. I discovered that if you pull the liver out of a freshly slaughtered

lamb it will act as a perfect mirror; I could see my face in it clearly for fifteen or twenty minutes, after which it went dull and ceased to act as a reflector. Because the ancients were somewhat literal-minded when they wanted to figure out what internal organs were for, they decided the purpose of the liver in the body was *to act as a mirror* of the divine rays that the gods were thought to be shining down on us continually. The liver was therefore thought to be the seat of the soul. There is plenty in such sources as Plato and Plutarch on this subject to satisfy the most curious. Since the gods have foreknowledge, it follows that the divine rays bring us intimations of the future if we can only discern them. So the premise of extispicy was that if you scrutinize the liver of a sacrificial animal carefully enough, it will yield foreknowledge traces left behind by the divine rays which have streamed into it up until the moment of the sacrifice. The Babylonians divided the lamb's liver up into 55 separate 'zones' where, if marks were found, they portended various things. The Greeks tended to look for broader indicators such as the presence or absence of various main fissures and protrusions. The most important was the 'head', or 'lobe' or 'finger' as the Jews



*This Babylonian baked-clay model of a sheep's liver, c. 2000 BC, would have been used for reference and instruction. Lying across the liver on the right is the gall bladder. The liver is divided into 55 sections for divination purposes and covered with cuneiform texts commenting on the sections.*



### SACRED SITES OF THE ORACLES

The main oracle centres of the Greeks were established at particular geodetic locations, marking latitude lines. Hence Dodona, Delphi and Delos are one degree apart ( $39^{\circ} 30'$ ,  $38^{\circ} 30'$ ,  $37^{\circ} 30'$ ) in succession, and were matched by corresponding Eastern oracle centres on the same latitude lines: Metsamor beside Mount Ararat (see inset map), an oracle near Sardis beside Mount Sipylus, and the Oracle of Apollo at Branchidae/Didyma near Miletus (also  $39^{\circ} 30'$ ,  $38^{\circ} 30'$ , and  $37^{\circ} 30'$ ). The oracle centres preceded the age of classical Greece, and the sacred sites may in turn have preceded any oracular function.



still call it; its absence was a dreadful sign, and it was said to have been absent just before the deaths of both Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. Its anatomical name is the *processus pyramidalis*, and it is shaped like a protruding tetrahedron, which was considered significant by the Pythagoreans and the Platonists, for whom the shape was the elemental particle of fire.

The scrutiny of the intestines also revealed mystical connections. The lamb's intestines, when laid flat for inspection, form a spiralling labyrinth which has been depicted on stones and in clay for millennia as a sacred symbol. The pattern was also connected to the orbital motions of the planets, and the writings of

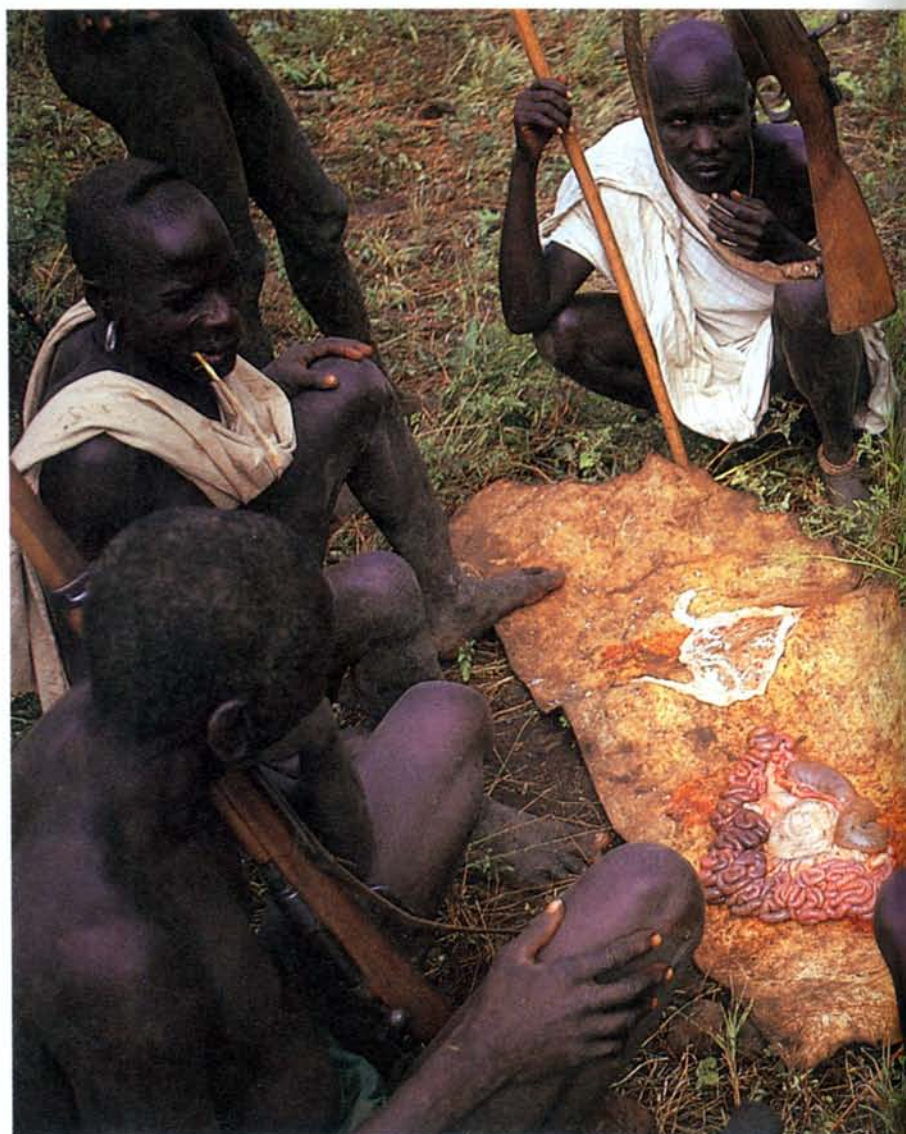
Martianus Capella make this connection explicit. The Etruscans were the ones who, in Roman times, were the experts in extispicy, and they especially drew these connections between celestial motions and the complex pattern of the coiled intestines.

The retrograde motions of Mercury in particular were connected with the twist-and-return pattern of the intestinal spiral; this connection was made as early as 2750 BC by the Sumerians of the Middle East, who based their 'Mask of Huwawa' on intestinal convolutions, and this Mask was also meant to represent the planet Mercury.

Divination by the intestines was based upon a



*The intestines and caecum of an unhealthy lamb. In the centre is the 'spiral colon', which was the part consulted by the Babylonians, Greeks and Romans for prophecy. In this instance a single arc of the spiral colon is inflamed as a result of gastro-enteritis, causing it to become practically invisible. The 'count' of the arcs, which can be plainly seen, is thus an odd number, which was considered an unhappy omen.*



close examination of which arcs of the spiral may have been inflamed by infection, such as in gastro-enteritis. When an arc of intestines is inflamed, as I have personally seen, it goes white and matches the colour of the surrounding intestinal fat, thereby becoming essentially invisible. The 'count' of the arcs then becomes odd rather than even in many cases, which yields an unfavourable prognosis for the future.

In both the intestines and the liver, disease will have been at work, causing the unfavourable signs. The disease, and therefore the inauspicious signs, will often have come from unwholesomeness of the environment. In very ancient times our nomad ancestors used such

indicators as cues to move on to healthier pastures. This earliest tradition is explicitly preserved in the text of Vitruvius, the Roman architectural writer, for whom the choice of a sound geographical location was the necessary preliminary to building anything at all. Inspection of the entrails of animals thus comes down in the end to using the technique of the autopsy to look for signs of internal disease, which may indicate that things in the environment are not as well as they seem.

### THE ORACLES: SEERS OR FRAUDS?

Amongst the Greeks the form of divination of second importance after extispicy was certainly the use of oracles. Whereas extispicy was revered as of primary value, and practised by most people very frequently indeed, the institutional and formal divinatory establishment was represented by the oracle centres, primary among them being Delphi. Delphi, Dodona and Delos were the primary oracle sites used by the Minoans prior to 1200 BC in Greece proper.

The original purpose of these sites seems not to have been for oracular uses primarily, but rather for geodetic ones, that is, for measuring the Earth. The oracles were founded as sacred expressions of key points established by surveying techniques that marked out latitude lines. For instance, Dodona, Delphi and Delos form a descending scale of geodetic points precisely one degree of latitude apart. The geodetic points seem to have been correlated with musical notes in the heptatonic diatonic scale (which archaeologists have established existed as early as 2500 BC), somewhat in the manner that the later Pythagoreans revered the musical notes and spoke of a 'harmony of the spheres'. It is therefore presumed that the original purpose of the oracle sites was connected with a reverence

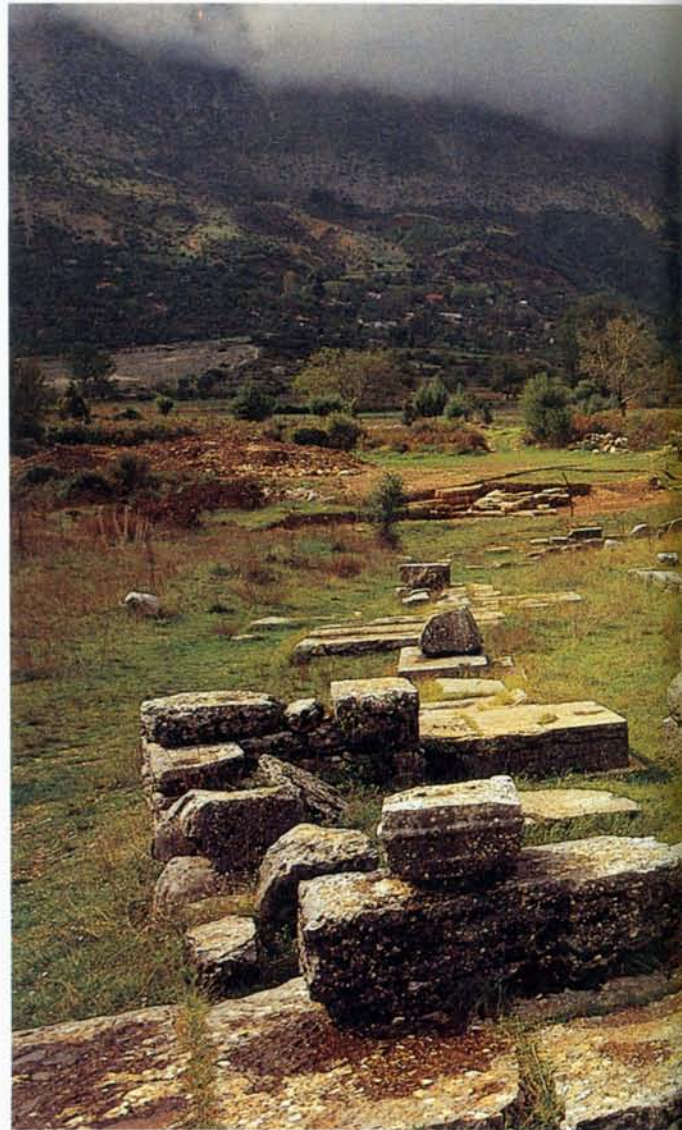


*In contemporary Ethiopia the intestines of animals are still consulted by the native inhabitants as indicators of future events. The Mursi tribe are a cattle tribe, so divination by entrails is easily accessible to them. This is a survival of the ancient practice of extispicy, which has been continuously used for several thousand years, longer than any other form of divination.*

for the earth spirit, and that the meticulous measurements were not merely for navigational purposes, but for elucidating the deep mysteries of the measurement of the Earth as a sphere and its cosmic motions, which to the ancients were the profoundest mysteries of all. As the centuries wore on, however, the oracles achieved increasing prominence and the geodetic function was forgotten.

The oracle at Dodona had the official primacy, with Zeus as its patron, but because it was so distant and difficult to reach in the far north-west of Greece, Delphi took on the role of the major arbiter of Greek affairs in classical times. In connection with the manner in which the oracle of Delphi worked, there is much misinformation, some of it purposely circulated by the priests at the time. It was claimed that the sybil, or prophetess, sat on a tripod over a chasm in the earth from which intoxicating fumes (supposed to arise from the rotting corpse of a mythological monster called Python) rose up to send her into a prophetic trance. She would then utter poems which told the enquirer what his future held. In practice, the utterances of the sybil were taken down and systematically rendered in verse by poets resident for the purpose. But as the French excavators discovered earlier this century when they commenced their digs at Delphi, no chasm in the earth existed. In fact the original site of the Delphic oracle was two miles (three kilometres) further up the mountain in a small cavern. The classical site, which had been adopted as easier of access, was a secondary one and not the 'real thing', a fact that its custodians were probably anxious to keep to themselves.

The whole tale was probably invented as a cover-story to explain the strange smell of the intoxicating fumes from burning drug-plants. Inhaling fumes or swallowing drugs can induce states which bring visions of various kinds. Shamans all over the world from the earliest times have done this in order to obtain insights and glimpses of the future. There is much clear archaeological evidence that the Minoans used opium routinely in their religious rituals. The sybil of Delphi was fumigated by drug plants and



possibly swallowed them as well. Iamblichus tells us that the priest of the oracle of Apollo at Colophon drank a drugged potion before prophesying, and that the prophetess of the oracle of Apollo at Branchidae passed out after inhaling drugged fumes from boiling potions, after which she could prophesy in a trance.

There is no doubt that states of trance and self-hypnosis, whether drug-induced or not, were used frequently in connection with many of the ancient oracles. This practise existed in Egypt as well, and the foundation of the main Greek oracles may have been done in connection with the Egyptians, for Herodotus records a tradition that Dodona was founded from Egypt-



*At the dramatic and remote site of the ancient Greek Oracle of Dodona, in the north-west of Greece, the Oracle of Zeus was situated. The original site was probably on the nearby Mount Tomaros. The answers to questions about the future were said to be conveyed by the rustling of the leaves in Zeus's sacred oak trees, and were interpreted by the priests.*

*The Castalian Spring, situated at the entrance to the Castalian Gorge, is one of several springs at Delphi. Although water from it was apparently used in preparing the drugged potions for the prophesying sybil, the Spring of Kassotis above the temple is supposed to have been the actual divinatory spring proper during classical times. But the Castalian Spring takes its name from another spring two miles higher up the mountain, where the original site of the oracle was prior to 1000 BC.*



tian Thebes, and the oracle at Delos is thought to have been founded by the son of Cecrops, an Egyptian who became King of Athens, in 1558 BC. A good deal of evidence survives from Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece about trance inductions. One Hellenistic papyrus from Egypt suggests words that will invariably produce a prophetic trance and advises: 'Say the formula seven times into the man's ear, and right away he will fall down. Sit down on the bricks and make your enquiry, and he will describe everything with truth.' At certain periods in the history of Delphi there were probably sybils who had genuine prophetic visions. The difficulty arose when such a sybil died and could not be replaced; the institution could not simply be shut down, so stronger drugs would be used and eventually organized fraud was the only answer.

It was also a regular practice amongst the Greeks to drug those who came to consult certain of the oracles. This was not the case at Dodona or Delphi, but it was most definitely the case at the oracle of Trophonios at Lebadea, now known as Livadia. Pausanias has left a minute description of this harrowing experience. After fasting and being made to drink mysterious potions, the drugged client was led to a chute down which he slid into the underground chambers where he was assailed on all sides by a mass of serpents. In a state of utter terror and total suggestibility, he would hear someone tell him a prophetic message. Often he would stay underground for days, where cells evidently existed to enable clients to 'sleep it off'. If the client expressed scepticism he might be murdered and never 'reappear from the Underworld'. The actual drugs regularly used were extremely powerful and included henbane, thorn apple, and black and white hellebore. Henbane was so important that Pliny tells us its name was *apollinaris*, named after Apollo, patron god of Delphi and of prophecy in general.

The most eerie and bizarre of all the ancient classical oracle centres was undoubtedly the pre-Roman oracle of the Dead at Baia on the western coast of Italy. It is near the present city of Naples, and was linked with the oracular cave

and sybil of nearby Cuma, which is reputed to have been the earliest of the Greek settlements on the Italian peninsula. In 1967 a retired English engineer named Robert F. Paget rediscovered the fantastic underground sanctuary of the Baian oracle, which was blocked up in the reign of Augustus. The underground complex has never been opened to the public, and only a handful of scholars and archaeologists have ever been allowed access. What is so extraordinary in this artificial underground complex carved a fifth of a mile into the solid rock is that it actually contains an *artificial River Styx* across which clients were rowed in a coracle. They were presumably meant to believe that they were genuinely visiting the Underworld. Seances appear to have been staged in the inner sanctum. The description of the descent into Hades given in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* is in fact a description of the descent into the Baian oracle, near which Virgil lived for some time. The Inner Sanctum has never been fully cleared of the rubble with which it was filled by Agrippa, a henchman of Augustus who had a special hatred for the oracle for some personal reason, and swore that no one would ever use it again.

Much of the oracular set-up in Greece was therefore phoney. A network of carrier-pigeons and carrier-swallows carried secret messages from all over the Mediterranean world to Delphi and the other oracular centres, notifying the priests of the latest events, the results of battles, the deaths of kings, and so forth. These were then 'uttered by the god' as prophecies. The 'prophetic doves' so often used as symbols of the oracle centres were the bird-telegraphy which made accurate political prophecies possible and gave centres such as Delphi immense wealth and political power. Delphi took the side of Sparta against Athens in the Peloponnesian War, and one reason may have been that the Spartans were so conservative in their religious piety that they were easier to fool. But the phoney of the oracular institutions was a peculiar form of pious fraud, which was often perpetrated by intellectuals 'for the good of the masses', and it would be wrong to think that the only motives were



sordid. For after all, one High Priest of Delphi was the author Plutarch, and of him at least we can be quite certain that he was as upright and honest a man as ancient Greece ever produced. Indeed, much of what we know of Delphic lore comes from his profound and learned writings. He lived during Roman times, though he wrote in Greek, and already much of the history of Delphi in the earlier Greek classical era was as remote to him as it is to us.

Oracular responses were often phrased in enigmatic form or posed as riddles. While maintaining arch-conservative positions with regard to cult matters, these responses by the oracles often stretched the minds of the Greeks in creative ways and stimulated fresh modes of thought, even occasionally setting mathematical problems! As the philosopher Aristotle, who made a special study of riddles oracular and otherwise, said of them: 'The thoughts were startling and they did not fit in with the ideas already held.' It is because the Greeks were courageous enough to think fresh thoughts that we still honour them today, and it takes no act of divination to predict that we will continue to do so as long as there are thinking men about.

*Lake Avernus (top), near Cuma and Baia in Italy, is within the crater of an extinct volcano. The ancient Greek geographer, Strabo, wrote of it: 'The inhabitants affirm that birds, flying over the lake, fall into the water, being stifled by the vapours rising from it . . . the oracle of the dead was situated somewhere here. . . .'*

*The cave of the Sybil of Cuma in Italy (middle), not far from the location of the Oracle of the Dead at Baia, was visited by countless enquirers in antiquity. The prophesying Sybil sat in the far niche. Her replies to questions are said to have been written on leaves laid on the floor; when the door was opened, the wind blew the leaves into confusion, symbolizing the state of our knowledge of the future. Cuma was a Greek settlement in Italy, established long before the rise of Rome. This cavern was excavated in 1932.*

*On one side of this Etruscan bronze (left), c. sixth century BC, an augur scans the skies to study the flights of birds for clues to the future. On the other side, a diviner studies the liver of a sacrificial animal to predict the future by the divinatory science of extispicy.*

