

BMCR

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

BMCR 2019.09.47

My Lots are in Thy Hands: Sortilege and its Practitioners in Late Antiquity. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 188

AnneMarie Luijendijk, William E. Klingshirn, *My Lots are in Thy Hands: Sortilege and its Practitioners in Late Antiquity. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 188*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018. xvii, 392. ISBN9789004384101 €129,00.

Review by

Joseph E. Sanzo, University of Warwick. Joseph.Sanzo@warwick.ac.uk

Preview

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

In the eighth book of his *Confessions*, Augustine recalls the story of his conversion. According to Augustine's account, he heard a child repeat the phrase, "Pick it up and read" (*tolle lege*) while he was writhing in anguish over his sin. Inspired by the example of St. Antony, who sold all of his possessions after a serendipitous hearing of the tale of the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:21), Augustine randomly opened the Bible to Romans 13:13-14 ("...not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" [NRSV]), which he interpreted as a divine dictum to change his ways. Augustine then became a follower of Jesus, and the rest is history. Augustine's approach to the Bible in this instance situated him within a robust late antique sortilege tradition, which included not only bibliomancy (i.e., the random opening of a [sacred] book to find an answer), but also a wide range of ritual practices, such as ticket oracles, the casting of lots (e.g., dice, knucklebones, and pebbles), books of fate (e.g., the *Sortes Astrampsychi*), and *sortes* books with general answers (e.g., the *Sortes Sanctorum*).

The broad range of late antique *sortes* and the practitioners who made them form the thematic focus of AnneMarie Luijendijk and William E. Klingshirn's important collected volume. This book, which is based on a two-day symposium held at Princeton University in 2011, includes fourteen chapters, an extensive bibliography, and indices of ancient sources, modern authors, and subjects.

The volume begins with a short introduction, which treats, *inter alia*, the various textual and material manifestations of lot divination, their operative “logic,” a brief history of scholarship on lot divination, and suggestions for future research. In Chapter 1, Luijendijk and Klingshirn continue their introductory discussion, offering a preliminary taxonomy of lot divination texts during late antiquity.

The more specialized chapters commence with Klingshirn’s essay, which contends that, although the instrumentality of lot divination (and its concomitant association with marginalized groups and chance) constituted a central flaw of *sortes* for certain writers (e.g., Cicero, *Div.* 2.85), this instrumental dimension could at times serve as a justification for sortilege. Indeed, Augustine, in his early career (largely following Iamblichus), believed that God bridged the divide between the divine and human realms through instrumental forms of revelation/divination. According to Klingshirn, this belief in the willingness of God to communicate his knowledge with humans formed the basis for later Christian forms of lot divination (e.g., *Sortes Sanctorum*). Moving from instruments to the body, Salvatore Costanza details the complex poetics of late antique palmomancy (i.e., the divinatory interpretation of involuntary bodily movements [e.g., twitches, tremors, and shakes]), which was quite widespread both among elites and the broader masses during late antiquity (on account of its low cost).

The following five essays grapple in manifold ways with the relationship between authoritative traditions and lot divination. The respective essays by Kevin Wilkinson and Jeff W. Childers usefully demonstrate that the Greek *hermēneiai* and the Syriac *pushshāqē*—both meaning “interpretations”—were not oracles that were hermeneutically disconnected from their contiguous biblical texts, but were in fact interpretations of those texts (even if the associations are not always perceptible to scholars). Michael Meerson argues that the Homeromanteion (i.e., a lot oracle composed of select verses from Homeric poetry) differed from “self-sufficient” oracles, such as the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, in that readers of the former could not divine oracular answers to their questions without significant intertextual knowledge of Homeric texts. Meerson thus concludes that the Homeromanteion was most likely created by an ancient exegete for an educated client (the likes of Aristarchus).

Pieter W. van der Horst addresses the question of the origin of the so-called Jewish *sortes biblicae*, which appears only from the third to sixth centuries CE—albeit in a more cledonomantic form than the *sortes biblicae* proper. Although he notes that the evidence for the origin of this practice is scant and refracted by the vicissitudes of textual transmission, van der Horst concludes that the late-antique Jewish *sortes* tradition probably developed independently from non-Jewish influence. Turning from the reception of the Bible to the reception of the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, Randall Stewart argues that the *Sortes Barberiniana*e (found in Codex Barberinianus

Graecus 13) ought to be studied as an oracular composition in its own right and not merely as a textual witness to the *Sortes Astrampsychi*.

The next four essays focus on lot divination in Egypt. Alexander Kocar attempts to situate two fragmentary Coptic oracular miniature codices from Oxyrhynchus within their social, institutional, and religious contexts. His contention that these fifth-to-seventh century CE miniature codices were produced by Christian ritual experts (probably clerics) for visitors to the complex of the church to Philoxenus (perhaps within a secondary structure, which was external to the church itself) dovetails well with David Frankfurter's essay, which frames Egyptian ritual and scribal contexts and the performative objects they engender (e.g., *sortes* and amulets) as mutually reinforcing dynamics in the development of Egyptian Christianity. Indeed, through comparative gesture to the Ethiopian *dābtāra*, Frankfurter reconstructs the late antique Egyptian ritual expert—i.e., the literate monk and/or ecclesiastical functionary—as a creative conduit of scriptural, liturgical, and scribal authority; as a mediator between god and the local anxieties and needs of clients (who also expressed their agency in the rituals); and, by extension, as a kind of catalyst for Egyptian Christianity itself.

Franziska Naether emphasizes the legal dimension of the *Sortes Astrampsychi* and related lot and ticket oracles, tracing the development of this aspect of sortilege in Egypt from the New Kingdom (1550 BCE) to late antiquity. Naether also assesses the heuristic utility of the term “secular” (and its cognates) for pre-modern Egypt, arguing that, despite the intertwinement of the sacred and the secular in ancient and late antique Egypt, certain aspects of pre-modern Egyptian judicial discourse involved modes of thinking that might productively be deemed “quasi-secularized.”

David M. Ratzan examines the relationship between the kinds of oracular questions asked and the shifting social and economic conditions in Roman and Byzantine Egypt. Through a comparative statistical analysis of the positive and negative responses found in the earlier (SA ¹) and later (SA ²) versions of the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, Ratzan contends that economic confidence was stronger and information was more accessible in the earlier Roman period as is evident, *inter alia*, from the relatively greater level of specific and clear responses to the questions asked.

The final two essays reside at the intersection of lot oracles and early Christian texts. Laura Salah Nasrallah grapples with the relationship between *sortes* and anxiety in antiquity. After analyzing an obscure passage in Tatian's *On the Greeks* (11.1), which she contends refers to and rejects *sortes*, Nasrallah brings Tatian to bear on the “the-age-of-anxiety” construct—most famously articulated by E. R. Dodds. Nasrallah argues that, although Tatian stands alongside other authors (e.g., Lucian, *Jupp. conf.* 4–5) in rhetorically presenting an anxious age, he was *prima* rejecting the idea that fate controlled humans, which implicated God in human

wickedness and obscured the human ability to act properly.

AnneMarie Luijendijk traces the development from earlier *sortes*, in which doubt played little or no role, to later Christian sortilege (e.g., the *Gospel of the Lots of Mary*), in which admonitions against doubt served a pivotal function. After noting the two primary ways “doubt” (ΔΙΣΑΔΕΞΕ, διστάζω) or “double-mindedness” (ΖΗΤΕ ΚΝΑΥ, διψυχία) figured into late antique lot books and divination more generally (i.e., as a central feature of the uncertain circumstances and as a guarantee for its reliability, as in, “if you received an inappropriate answer, you must have doubted the lot”), Luijendijk argues that the *Gospel of the Lots of Mary* drew on earlier Christian literary texts (e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas*) in order to place sortilege firmly within “the theology of steadfastness in prayer” (327). The authors of such Christian sortilege thus positioned themselves against certain ecclesiarchs, who condemned *sortes* as unchristian.

Sortilege properly emerges from this volume as a complex cluster of ritual, scribal, and textual practices, which formed an important aspect of late antique social existence. Each essay successfully functions as a stand-alone contribution, offering a wealth of information to anyone interested in this important ancient practice. The non-expert will especially benefit from the editors’ introduction and first chapter. Yet, as a collection, the reader both receives valuable insight into the most important *sortes* (e.g., the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, the *hermēneiai*, the *Gospel of the Lots of Mary*) and gains a vivid sense of how sortilege was interwoven into various ancient domains, including law (Naether), economy (Ratzan), ecclesiastical institutions (Kocar, Frankfurter, and Luijendijk), the body (Costanza), and sacred texts (Wilkinson, Childers, Meerson, van der Horst).

In this vein, the volume offers several important correctives to prevailing scholarly biases about *sortes*, especially their relationship to late antique Christianity. Wilkinson and Childers help situate *sortes* firmly within the world of late antique biblical reception. Likewise, Kocar, Frankfurter, and Luijendijk usefully demonstrate that late antique *sortes*, such as ticket oracles, miniature oracular codices, and the *Gospel of the Lots of Mary*, were often inextricably linked to Egyptian Christian institutional, ritual, scribal, and textual cultures.

Of course, any edited volume dedicated to a complex constellation of phenomena, such as ancient sortilege, will have gaps—a point that the editors themselves highlight in their suggestions for future research (15–18). In my estimation, the reader would have especially benefited from a more extensive analysis of the apostolic use of lots (κλήρου) to determine Judas’ successor, Matthias (Acts 1:26). Although the Matthias text is mentioned in passing in the essays of Nasrallah (295) and Luijendijk (316), a more sustained engagement with this passage would yield important insights into taxonomies of licit and illicit rituals of divination in early Christianity. Indeed, the apparent approval of this divinatory practice in the text

stands in marked contrast with the redactor's presentation of the slave girl, whose mantic activities are thoroughly rejected and attributed to her evil "python spirit" (Acts 16:16–16). Moreover, the Matthias story is an interesting test case since it is not only incorporated into the canonical Acts of the Apostles, but, consequently, also figures into subsequent Christian homilies (e.g., Augustine, *Serm.* 12.4) and even sortition texts (e.g., the selection of Matthias is highlighted in a prayer in the ninth-century CE *Sortes Sanctorum*).

Such relatively minor gaps notwithstanding, the editors ought to be congratulated for producing an excellent volume that will certainly serve as an essential guide for future scholarship on late antique sortilege and its practitioners.

Authors and titles

1. AnneMarie Luijendijk and William E. Klingshirn, "The Literature of Lot Divination"
2. William E. Klingshirn, "The Instruments of Lot Divination"
3. Salvatore Costanza, "Fateful Spasms: Palmomancy and Late Antique Lot Divination"
4. Kevin Wilkinson, "*Hermēneiai* in Manuscripts of John's Gospel: An Aid to Bibliomancy"
5. Jeff W. Childers, "Hermeneutics and Divination: A Unique Syriac Biblical Manuscript as an Oracle of Interpretation"
6. Michael Meerson, "Secondhand Homer"
7. Pieter W. van der Horst, "Sortes Biblicae Judaicae"
8. Randall Stewart, "The *Sortes Barberiniana*e within the Tradition of Oracular Texts"
9. Alexander Kocar, "Oxyrhynchus and Oracles in Late Antiquity"
10. David Frankfurter, "*Sortes*, Scribality, and Syncretism: Ritual Experts and the Great Tradition in Byzantine Egypt"
11. Franziska Naether, "Sortilege between Divine Ordeals and 'Secular' Justice: Aspects of Jurisdiction in (Ritual) Texts from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt"
12. David M. Ratzan, "Freakonomika: Oracle as Economic Indicator in Roman Egypt"
13. Laura Salah Nasrallah, "'I Do Not Wish to Be Rich': The 'Barbarian' Christian Tatian Responds to *Sortes*"
14. AnneMarie Luijendijk, "'Only Do Not Be of Two Minds': Doubt in Christian Lot Divination"