

Embodying the oracle.

Prophetic and divinatory models, between authority and visionary madness

Interdisciplinary workshop, ENS de Lyon, 21 mars 2025

Seeking to know the future, an anthropological constant running through societies and representations, involves in particular, in the Latin and Greek civilizations and in the Western medieval world that followed them, the intermediary of a prophetic figure. Many such embodiments, either real or literary, easily come to mind : Sibyls or Pythia, Tiresias or Cassandra, Merlin, Bible prophets, fortune-tellers, etc. These emblematic figures tend to define the image of oracular speakers as exceptional beings within their communities, sometimes in contrast to the actual divinatory practices that were common in the areas where these figures circulated. In fact, in Greece, an oracle delivered by the Pythia could just as well be interpreted by a politician like Themistocles as by the soothsayers, and the sources actually support the former (see, for example, Herodotus, VII, 140-144). In Rome, the main officiants of the cult remained the elected magistrates, even in the divinatory context, where religious experts played a supporting role.

How, then, should we interpret these exceptional individuals who have been constantly developed and reshaped by tradition? Should we see them as indicators of a desire to rely on an individual specifically assigned to this religious and social function and who could assume, for the benefit of his or her community, the responsibility of a speech sometimes heavy with consequences? Does the place given to these individuals really derive from the concrete forms taken by the interpretation of the future in ancient or medieval contexts, or is it more of a consequence of the poetic and literary uses made of them?

Indeed, the sources often show a singular being, thereby revealing a form of divine election (whether conceived as a gift or, on the contrary, as a curse) as being best able to provide the transition from a content inaccessible to ordinary mortals (material signs, direct message from a divinity) to a discourse which can be received - if not necessarily understood - by other individuals lacking the abilities or election that characterise(s) the oracular figure. The person who reveals the future thus forms a link between divine and human worlds, which necessarily sets him apart and makes him a prominent figure whose representation, generally through the use of topical characteristics, constitutes not only a religious issue but also a literary and political one.

The workshop organised on 21 March 2025 by the AINIGMA junior research group (Interpreting, Imagining and Meditating on the Future in Ancient Worlds) at the ENS de Lyon will focus on the specific features of the future's interpretation in the ancient West and in its medieval and Renaissance posterity. The aim of this workshop will be to explore the following aspects in particular:

- the evolution of typical figures related to an interpretation of the future, from the ancient polytheistic world to the medieval Christian world, and their recomposition in different typologies (for example by Isidore of Seville or John of Salisbury), which define anew the shifting boundaries between magical, religious, divinatory and exegetical practices, particularly in relation to medieval hagiography; particular attention will also be given to the influence of representations linked to femininity and masculinity in the development of these typologies.

- the interaction between historical figures and fictional, mythological and literary figures that shape representations of the interpretation of the future, given that these two categories constitute two opposite poles of the same continuum rather than a binary dichotomy, in light of a certain number of figures who appear as difficult to categorise (biblical prophets, for example).
- the dialectical relationship between the need for an authoritative speech coming from prophetic and divinatory figures, who are expected to provide an intelligible revelation of the future to clarify current choices, and the turmoil and loss of self-control shown by many prophetic and oracular figures, based on the Delphic model of Pythia.
- following the previous theme, particular attention will be paid to the way prophecy is written, and to the literary and stylistic tools that characterise the erratic style, often on the borders of madness, characteristic of many oracles - while at the same time making it possible to express an auctoritas that guarantees the truth revealed through the discourse.
- the issue of public adherence to the discourse on the future, which is not guaranteed and involves establishing a prophetic or divinatory ethos often questioned, mocked or criticised given the proliferation of instrumentalised discourse on the future, from Cicero's attacks on the haruspices to the Church's attempts to control the multiplication of what André Vauchez has described as 'prophetic ready-to-wear' in the early Middle Ages.

N.B.: this workshop's papers will focus on the Ancient World and its medieval posterity, up to the 16th century; however, contributions wishing to broaden the chronological scope to more recent periods may be considered if their subject justifies it.

Proposals from young researchers are particularly welcome and encouraged.

Paper proposals of approximately 2,000 characters should be sent in French or English, together with a brief CV, by **Monday 13 January 2025**, to :

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