MAGIC AND DIVINATION:
TWO APOLLINE ORACLES ON MAGIC

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Introduction

The relationship of magic and divination is a vast topic that has been visited by many scholars over the ages, as has the more specific development that made the two forms of ritual behavior more or less coincide in Christian Late Antiquity, after having been clearly distinct religious phenomena through most of Antiquity. In 1947, Samson Eitrem devoted a seminal book to this topic, identifying the convergence in a pagan desire for personal contact with the divine.¹ Forty-six years and a paradigm-shift later, Marie-Therese Fögen approached it in a very different way, put the blame squarely on the Christians and emphasized the struggle for access to the divine fought by emperors and bishops that led to the disqualification of divination as magic.² There is no need to take up this entire and vast topic again; instead, I will take a closer look at two oracles, one well-known, the other one less so, and try to use them as windows into the much wider general topic.³ The first is an oracle from Clarus given to an unknown town in Western Anatolia and known to us through an inscription found

¹ Samson Eitrem, Orakel und Mysterien am Ausgang der Antike, Albae Vigilae 5 (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1947); he talks about “[das] wachsende Bedürfnis nach persön-lichem Kontakt mit der Gottheit” (p. 17). In the meantime, personal religion has been driven out from most of the study of Greek and Roman religion, perhaps unjustly so, although the one monograph—André-Jean Festugière’s Personal Religion Among the Greeks, Sather Classical Lectures 26 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1944)—certainly shows a Christianocentric understanding of what religion is.


³ See also my Eitrem Lecture of 1997 on “Magic and Divination,” The World of Ancient Magic.
by the Austrian excavators in Ephesus. The second text comes from Porphyry’s *De Philosophia ex Oraculis Haurienda* and is preserved in Eusebius’s *Praeparatio Evangelica* (our main source for this treatise of Porphyry), and has been discussed most recently by Aude Busine in her book on Apolline divination in the Imperial Epoch.

**Oracle One: Plague and Sorcery in Lydia**

The oracle from Ephesus belongs to a well-known series of Clarian oracles advising a specific city on measures against an epidemic that is threatening the city, after its inhabitants sent a delegation to the oracle asking for help. All texts are epigraphical, and they all belong to the second century CE; over the years, I have come to doubt my original assumption that they all dealt with the same event, the Great Plague triggered in 165 CE by the troops of Lucius Verus returning from Mesopotamia. A few years ago, Zsuzsanna Varhélyi discussed them and underscored that the rituals prescribed by the oracle to heal the disease show an intimate knowledge of the local cults of the individual cities. This is an important insight. It helps us to understand how an oracular sanctuary functioned in regional context: we have to imagine mechanisms of communication and information between the Clarian priests and the city and its ambassadors.

The oracle to which I want to return in this paper was given to a town whose name is not preserved; unlike other Clarian texts, it was not inscribed (or not only—but we do not really know) in the town that sent the delegation, but in Ephesus. When I discussed this text after its first publication, I supposed Sardis as the most likely client and addressee, but proof is impossible to gain without new evidence;

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